

Magritte at the Rodeo: René Magritte in the Menil Collection

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In the late 1940s, John¹ and Dominique (born Schlumberger) de Menil's attention was drawn to the enigmatic images of familiar objects by the Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte. Over the course of the next forty years, the couple established a critically acclaimed collection of paintings, sculpture, and drawings by Magritte in the United States, which are now housed at the museum that bears their name in their chosen home of Houston, Texas. Multifaceted, experimental collectors with strong philosophical inclinations, the de Menils relished Magritte's provocations and his continual questioning of bourgeois convention. In 1993, Dominique described the qualities that attracted her and John to Magritte's work: "He was very serious in dealing with the great problem of who are we? What is the world? What are we doing on earth? What is after life? Is there anything?"² A focused look at the formation of this particular aspect of their holdings allows insight into the ambitious goals that animated the de Menils and reveals the frequent and sometimes unexpected ways in which the networks of surrealism—galleries, collectors, museums, and scholars—intersected and overlapped in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.³

1 Born Jean de Menil, he anglicized his name when he took American citizenship in 1962.

2 Quoted in Susie Kalil, "Magical Magritte Maze at the Menil," *Houston Press*, January 21, 1993, p. 31.

3 For this paper I have consulted in addition to published sources the archives available to me as a curator at the Menil Collection: the object files initiated by John de Menil and added to over the years by researchers and museum staff; interviews given by the de Menils and their dealer Alexander Iolas; and material in the Menil Collection Archives, particularly the documents relating to their involvement in the Hugo and Iolas Galleries, which were restricted until 2013, but are now available to researchers.

Alexander Iolas and the Hugo Gallery

The de Menils married in Paris in 1931, and, a few years later, John joined the growing engineering firm founded by Dominique's father and uncle. John went on to help build the company into what it is now, Schlumberger Oilfield Services, a worldwide provider of equipment and expertise essential to oil and gas discovery. When the Germans occupied Paris during the Second World War, Schlumberger relocated its headquarters to Houston.⁴ John moved to oversee operations there, bringing Dominique and their children with him. The de Menils remained based in Houston but maintained an apartment in New York, where, during the war and in the years following, they socialized amongst a group of displaced Europeans who had also taken refuge in the city, including Maria Hugo—"Donna Maria" as the de Menils called her. Born Princess Maria Ruspoli in 1888, she had married the 11th Duc de Gramont, who died in 1925, leaving her widowed with a large fortune at age thirty-seven. The de Menils knew Hugo from Paris and had visited her estate, Vigoleno, the medieval Italian fortress she inherited from her first husband and where she hosted guests such as Jean Cocteau, Arthur Rubinstein, and Max Ernst.⁵ By the time she moved to New York, she had spent most of her inheritance and had remarried to François Hugo, the also-very-well-connected great grandson of the French author Victor Hugo. In the fall of 1945, backed by Elizabeth Arden and Robert de Rothschild, Maria Hugo opened the Hugo Gallery at 26 East Fifty-Fifth Street in New York. In February 1946, Dominique de Menil, staying alone in New York, wrote a letter to her husband recording her first impression of the Hugo Gallery:

"I loved this gallery and the boldness with which Maria launched herself in the adventure. With only about \$200 in her pocket, Maria rented a little gallery on the sixth floor of a building on Fifty-Fifth Street. The décor is not meant to be sensational, which surprised me. It has three small rooms, perfectly arranged from a technical standpoint to enhance the paintings, with a very sophisticated lighting system that uses small spotlights in the ceiling, pointing in all directions. Every painting, every engraving is lit individually. The picture is bathed in light, and yet the source of the illumination is not immediately clear. The colors of the walls, like the lighting, are very well studied. The effect is like being bathed in warm dusk. Each

4 Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi, eds., *Art and Activism. Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 276.

5 William Middleton, *Double Vision. The Unerring Eye of Art World Avatars Dominique and John de Menil* (New York: Knopf, 2018), pp. 305–306.

part of the wall is a different gray, but all of the tones are harmonious, complementing one another: there is a dark gray with a hint of mauve, a lighter gray, and one that has some blue in it.”⁶

Dominique was impressed not only by the gallery but also by the man Hugo had brought on board to direct the venture. “Maria has associated herself with a Greek, a certain Iolas,” she wrote to John, “I think he’s very much on the same team.”⁷ As Dominique predicted in this early letter, for the next quarter century Iolas and the de Menils became an important team decisively influencing the reception of a number of artists in the United States, none more so than René Magritte.

One of the many colorful characters in the history of twentieth-century art, Alexander Iolas was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in or around 1907. He frequently lied about his age—most sources give his birth year as either 1907 or 1908, but it has been documented as late as 1912,⁸ and one source suggests it may have been up to a decade earlier than he claimed.⁹ His parents named him Konstantinos Koutsoudis, but like the best self-mythologizers Koutsoudis shed this identity and chose a new name for himself. He left Egypt in the 1920s, eventually landing in Paris, where he found success as a ballet dancer. The ballet world introduced Iolas to many prominent figures in Parisian society, Maria Hugo among them.

Outside of his ballet training, Iolas had no formal art education. Rather, he had, as Dominique de Menil described it, “an exceptional flair for art and a talent for selling it.”¹⁰ Iolas moved to New York in 1944, and the following year became the director of the Hugo Gallery, later establishing galleries in his own name. Iolas steered the Hugo Gallery toward surrealism, which he had discovered before the war in Paris. In 1947, the closing of the Julien Levy Gallery left Iolas the chief representative of the movement in America. Dominique credited Iolas with helping her and John overcome their initial skepticism towards

6 Dominique de Menil to Jean de Menil, February 18, 1946. De Menil Family Archives, quoted in Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 5), p. 306.

7 Ibid., p. 307.

8 Eva Fotiadi, “The Myth of the Collector and His Collection. Art Works, Stories, Objects, Relations of Alexander Iolas” (English translation), in Asimi Kaniari and Yorgos Bikos, eds., *Museology, Cultural Politics and Educations*, Athens, 2014, http://www.academia.edu/19580767/Art_works_objects_stories_and_relations_of_Alexander_Iolas_The_legendary_collector_and_the_recollection_of_the_legend_English_translation_of_published_Greek_original_, accessed August 7, 2018.

9 Adrian Dannatt, “Character Study,” in Vincent Fremont and Adrian Dannatt, eds., *Alexander the Great. The Iolas Gallery, 1955–1987*, exh. cat., New York, Paul Kasmin Gallery (New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery, 2014), p. 21.

10 Julia Brown and Bridget Johnson, eds., *The First Show. Painting and Sculpture from Eight Collections, 1940–1980*, exh. cat., Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983), p. 37.

surrealism in general: “At first I resisted surrealism; it was such a strange world, I felt outside of it.”¹¹ More specifically, Iolas introduced them to Magritte’s work: “It was . . . through Iolas that we discovered Magritte.”¹² According to Mrs. de Menil, Iolas anticipated Magritte’s future importance despite the lukewarm reception of his work in the 1940s. She recalled “about Magritte [Iolas] used to say ‘one day the force of these images will appear to everybody, you’ll see.’”¹³

According to the object records created by John de Menil in 1948, Iolas gave the de Menils Magritte’s canvas of the same year, *The Fair Captive* (*La belle captive*). The following year, they exchanged it for *Alphabet of Revelations* (*L’alphabet des révélations*, 1929) (fig. 62), which remains the first Magritte painting acquired by the de Menils still in their collection. Over the next four years, Iolas gave John and Dominique four more works by Magritte: one object and three gouaches.¹⁴ These works were among many others given to the de Menils by Iolas from 1947 through the mid-1950s, including paintings and objects by surrealists like Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, and Yves Tanguy, and other twentieth-century artists like Christian Bérard, Georges Braque, and Fernand Léger.

On the surface, it seems strange that a gallerist in the early stages of establishing his business gave away inventory to a couple not yet known as collectors. The fact is that the works cannot be considered strictly as gifts. The de Menils underwrote a substantial portion of Iolas’s and Hugo’s venture from its earliest days. Upon her first visit to the Hugo Gallery, Mrs. de Menil, although she did not purchase any artwork, gave Maria Hugo one thousand dollars as an investment in the gallery. She explained in a letter to her husband, “Maria had not asked but I thought it was the right thing to do. And that it was something you would have done.”¹⁵ Dominique’s initial thousand-dollar investment was converted into shares in the gallery and followed by two more cash investments the same year. The de Menils literally purchased stock in the Hugo Gallery and by the end of 1946 owned 20 percent of the enterprise. In addition to the stock purchases, the de Menils provided Iolas with travel expenses, advanced him money to buy artworks, and provided him with petty cash.¹⁶ In 1995 Dominique recalled all of this as something of a

¹¹ Ibid., p. 38.

¹² Ibid., p. 39.

¹³ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁴ These were *A Rare Old Vintage Picasso* (*Un Picasso de derrière les fagots*, 1949); *The Smile* (*Le sourire*, 1947); *The Treachery of Images* (*La trahison des images*, 1952); and *The Legend of the Centuries* (*La légende des siècles*, 1952).

¹⁵ Letter from Dominique de Menil to Jean de Menil, February 18, 1946, De Menil Family Archives, quoted in Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 5), p. 307.

¹⁶ The details of these transactions are recorded in ledgers, contracts, and stock certificates in the Alexander Iolas Papers, Folders 12–21, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Menil Archives).



62 René Magritte, *The Alphabet of Revelations*, 1929, oil on canvas, 54.3 × 73.3 cm. Houston, TX, The Menil Collection.

casual arrangement, stating, “We advanced some money to Iolas so he could buy things ... since he had his good eye—and then when he came back, we reimbursed ourselves by keeping this and that. And his profit was for the gallery.”¹⁷ In 1984, Iolas remembered in a little more detail, “Mr. de Menil gave me money, without asking for a receipt. ... [T]hey gave me open credit. ... I came to owe them \$600,000 ... it was a lot of money,” adding, “Jean was a person who had a lot of faith in people. ... I have found very few people in life who have this kind of generosity.”¹⁸

The de Menils rarely spoke publicly of their financial involvement with the gallery, but John de Menil kept detailed accounts of what he and Dominique advanced to Iolas for many years.¹⁹ In addition to pages of John de Menil’s own accounting, there are copies of professionally prepared balance sheets and statements of income and loss. Iolas recalled, “I said [to John] ‘Make an agreement with the accountant, and I will accept whatever you say and whatever he says.’ And that was how it was

17 Transcript of interview with Dominique de Menil by Paul Winkler and Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, September 27, 1995, Audio Tape Number Au95-06.4, Menil Archives.

18 Transcript of interview with Alexander Iolas by Adelaide de Menil, 1984, Box 2, Folder 4, Session I, sound rolls #11 and #12, Menil Archives.

19 See note 16.

done every year, there would be the amount of how much I owed, how much they took, and I never interfered with the bookkeeping because I know nothing about it and if I ever do some bookkeeping, I do it badly rather than well.”²⁰ The details of these ledgers are complicated but nothing close to the \$600,000 figure that Iolas claimed is evident in the accounts. In 1957, for example, more than ten years into their relationship, the CPA’s balance sheet for the Iolas Gallery shows “Loans Payable to John de Menil” equal to just over \$51,000.²¹ (By 1984, when Iolas gave his interview, the value of \$50,000 in 1957 money would be approximately \$189,000. In 2018 the value would be about \$456,000.)²² The documents record a value for merchandise inventory (artworks) as an asset, but even the very early accounting does not show transfers of any inventory to the de Menils in the form of payments. Based on Dominique’s recollection, one assumes that some, if not all, of the “gifts” from Iolas that John de Menil recorded in his object files were in fact their dividends as stockholders, however these remained apart from the official accounting. The de Menils invested enough money that they were motivated to keep track of it, and remained involved financially with Alexander Iolas for years. As a result they had the first choice out of any exhibition or inventory at the Hugo Gallery (and later at the Iolas galleries), not because they were favored clients, but because they were essentially partners.

The case of Magritte

The partnership between the de Menils and Iolas became exceptionally favorable with regard to establishing a Magritte collection because Iolas handled the majority of Magritte’s output beginning around 1950. At the end of 1956, the two agreed that in exchange for an annual retainer Iolas would receive the exclusive rights to represent Magritte both in Europe and the United States (a few exceptions were to be design work or small commissions within Belgium). Although Magritte sometimes found ways around it, he continued to renew their unofficial contract until his death a decade later, indicating that for the most part he found the arrangement beneficial.²³

²⁰ See note 17.

²¹ See note 16.

²² www.usinflationcalculator.com

²³ David Sylvester, ed., *René Magritte. A Catalogue Raisonné; Volume III; Oil Paintings, Objects, and Bronzes* (Houston: Menil Foundation, 1993), pp. 73–74.



63 René Magritte, *Golconda*, 1953, oil on canvas, 80 × 100.3 cm.
Houston, TX, The Menil Collection.

In 1954, taking full advantage of their partnership with Iolas, the de Menils bought nine paintings by Magritte, all of them from the Hugo Gallery (three are no longer in the collection).²⁴ Interestingly, this is the year that they bought both the most unusually abstract Magritte in the collection, *The Good News* (*La bonne nouvelle*, 1928), as well as two that have since become among the most recognizable, *Golconda* (*Golconde*, 1953) (fig. 63) and *The Listening Room* (*La chambre d'écoute*, 1952) (fig. 64). Between 1949 and 1972, the de Menils acquired from Iolas, either by gift or purchase, more than half (thirty-four of fifty-nine) of the works by Magritte in their present-day collection. This figure includes three paintings—*The Listening Room*, 1952 (fig. 64); *Pascal's Coat* (*Le manteau de Pascal*, 1954); and *Memory of a Voyage* (*Souvenir de voyage III*, 1951)—

²⁴ The other Magritte works purchased in 1954 are *Elementary Cosmogony* (*Cosmogonie élémentaire*, 1949), given to a family member in 1954; *The Wasted Footsteps* (*Les pas perdus*, 1950), exchanged in 1964; *Memory of a Voyage* (*Souvenir de voyage III*, 1951); *The Song of the Storm* (*Le chant de l'orage*, 1937); *Manet's Balcony* (*Le balcon de Manet*, 1950), exchanged in 1968; *The Smile* (*Le sourire*, 1947); and *Pascal's Coat* (*Le manteau de Pascal*, 1954), Menil Archives.



64 René Magritte, *The Listening Room*, 1952, oil on canvas, 45.2 × 55.2 cm. Houston, TX, The Menil Collection.

that John and Dominique gave to their children in the 1950s, but which have been donated to the museum since its opening in 1987.

The notable exceptions to the Iolas rule during the 1950s and 1960s are three Magritte paintings the de Menils purchased in 1960 and 1961 directly from André Breton, who was selling work from his collection. These works—*The Law of Gravity* (*La loi de la pesanteur*, 1928); *The Legend of the Guitars* (*La légende des guitares*, 1928); and *Surrender* (*L'abandon*, 1929)—all date from the years that Magritte lived in Paris, when he was in closest contact with Breton, and which were also the most prolific and innovative years of Magritte's career.²⁵ In addition to their sterling provenance, these three canvases added a needed balance of early paintings to the de Menils' collection, which was heavily skewed toward Magritte's postwar production.

25 See Josef Helfenstein and Clare Elliott, "A Lightning Flash Is Smoldering Beneath the Bowler Hats," in Anne Umland, ed., *Magritte. The Mystery of the Ordinary, 1928–1938*, exh. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), pp. 70–87.

After Iolas

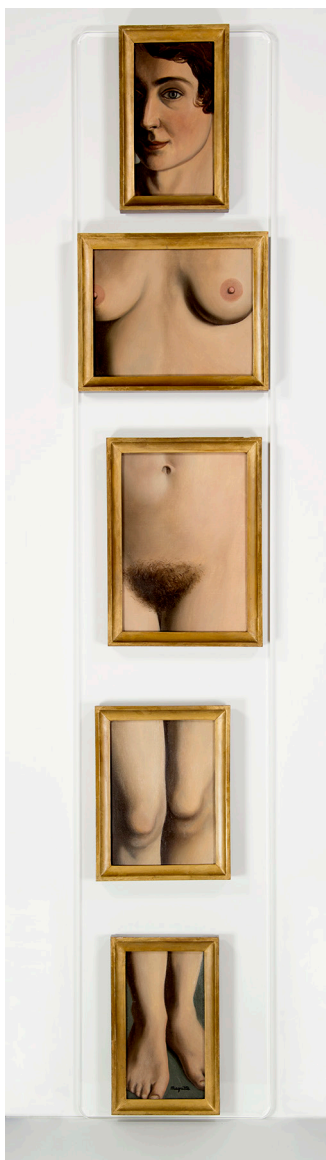
In a broad way, the Magritte acquisitions mirror the rest of the de Menils' collection of twentieth-century art. Generally the 1950s and 1960s and the first few years of the 1970s were a period of intense activity characterized by a large number of purchases, low prices, and an informed, but primarily intuitive, reaction to artworks and artists. This period concluded, approximately, with the death of John de Menil in 1973. When Dominique returned to collecting in the late 1970s and beyond, she made fewer purchases. Because prices tended to be higher, it also served her to be more strategic, consciously strengthening areas where there were weaknesses. Within the Magritte holdings this period is delineated by the influence of the art historian David Sylvester, whom the de Menils engaged in 1969 to edit the catalogue raisonné of Magritte's oeuvre. The catalogue raisonné itself should be understood as a significant investment of both time and money in the de Menils' Magritte collection. Under Sylvester's leadership, the remarkably thorough research and documentation contained in the catalogue raisonné includes extensive biographical information and source material both carefully cross-referenced to each object's entry. The ambitious project took twenty-eight years to complete and remains an indispensable tool for scholars of the artist's work. Collectors and dealers of Magritte, including the de Menils, likewise benefited—the documentation and identification of accepted works making forgeries easier to detect and avoid. The original five volumes, finished in 1997, set what Dawn Ades described as “a new standard for the genre ... far more than an accumulation of data and listings.”²⁶

In 1976, Sylvester left an urgent message for Mrs. de Menil informing her of the chance to acquire both the painting and the drawing of Magritte's famously disturbing *The Rape* (*Le viol*, 1934), an image of a woman's naked body superimposed onto her face. Sylvester took for granted that Dominique understood their importance, stressing instead the fact that the works were underpriced: “You would be crazy not to purchase it. It is the price bargain of the decade. Terrible pity if the foundation²⁷ or you personally don't make the purchase. It is a staggering opportunity.”²⁸ As his work on the catalogue raisonné continued, Sylvester advised all fourteen Magritte purchases made

26 Dawn Ades, “Reviewed Works. René Magritte. Catalogue Raisonné,” *Burlington Magazine*, no. 140/1142 (May 1998), pp. 340–41.

27 Sylvester is referring to the Menil Foundation. The de Menils established a foundation in 1954 through which they funded the Magritte catalogue raisonné, as well as a number of charitable causes. It now serves solely as the governing organization of the Menil Collection. See Helfenstein and Schipsi, *Art and Activism* (note 4), p. 280.

28 David Sylvester, quoted in undated memo (ca. 1976) by Elsian Cozens, object file, 1976–06 DJ, Menil Archives.



65 René Magritte, *The Eternally Obvious*, 1930, oil paint on five separately stretched and framed canvases mounted on Plexiglas, installed: 167.6 × 38.1 × 55.9 cm. Houston, TX, The Menil Collection.

after John de Menil's death. Several came from important collections, such as *This Is a Piece of Cheese* (*Ceci est un morceau de fromage*, 1936 or 1937), acquired from Roland Penrose, co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Penrose had purchased the object from Magritte's solo exhibition at the London Gallery in 1938. Although it was Dominique who requested Sylvester's advice, she nonetheless at times needed urging. A letter from 1980 is worth quoting at length as it reveals Sylvester's role as her unofficial agent, along with Mrs. de Menil's ambivalence. Having undertaken the complex process of

turning her collection into a museum she was committed to enhancing her holdings, but reluctant to spend given the demands on her resources. Sylvester wrote:

“I have vague memories of your gently chiding me on one occasion for not having tried hard enough to persuade you to buy some Magritte or other. Because of that, I am going to call your attention again to the object owned by Roland Penrose. ... You may remember that when you saw it in Brussels you asked me to tell Roland that you would appreciate having first refusal if ever he decided to sell it. When he decided to sell a few months ago, you were not interested. ... So I am mentioning it to you again before Roland puts it in the hands of a dealer.”²⁹

Sylvester’s final remark demonstrates how deeply connected to important museum professionals the de Menils were by 1980. He added, “If you are not interested, you might mention it to Pontus; Beaubourg have not got a Magritte object.”³⁰ Also on Sylvester’s advice, the Menil Foundation purchased several important works from the collection of the painter and collector William Copley: *The Meaning of Night* (*Le sens de la nuit*, 1927);³¹ *The Eternally Obvious* (*L’évidence éternelle*, 1930) (fig. 65);³² and *The Survivor* (*Le survivant*, 1950).³³

Beyond collecting

In addition to essentially partnering in a modern art gallery and assembling their own collection, the de Menils were influential participants in a diverse program of activities that served to cement the reputations of the artists that they collected, none more so than Magritte. The de Menils’ commitment to serious scholarship on Magritte’s work has been discussed in terms of their sponsorship of his catalogue raisonné. Long before he had the idea to launch a catalogue raisonné of Magritte’s work, however, John de Menil assumed an active role as a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where he served for over ten years (nearly twenty, counting his time as a committee member beginning in 1949). He and Dominique were faithful supporters of the foun-

29 Letter from David Sylvester to Dominique de Menil, June 19, 1980, object file, 1980–1409 DJ, Menil Archives.

30 Ibid.

31 Sotheby Parke Bernet, November 5–6, 1979, lot 21.

32 Sotheby Parke Bernet, May 17, 1978, lot 78.

33 Sotheby Parke Bernet, November 5–6, 1979, lot 22.

ding director Alfred H. Barr Jr. and were proactive in establishing their influence at the institution. John clarified the couple's intention to be participants in the acquisition process in a letter to the curator Dorothy Miller in 1964: "When we contribute something to the collection of the Museum, it is for a specific work with which Alfred Barr or you have fallen in love, as well as we have."³⁴

Iolas initiated the couple's first gift to the museum in 1949. That June he wrote to Barr to inform him that the de Menils wished to donate one work each by Victor Brauner, Stanislaw Lepri, and Magritte. Barr accepted the first two gifts, the Brauner and the Lepri, without reservation. Ironically, given Magritte's later prominence in MoMA's collection, it was his work that gave Barr pause. He rejected the three paintings that Iolas initially proposed (Barr was to have chosen one of the three) and replied asking Iolas if "the donor would permit us to look through the shipment of Magrittes which I believe you expect during the course of the next few months."³⁵ Finally at the end of 1950, Barr found at the Hugo Gallery a painting that he, Iolas, and the de Menils approved of, the second version of *The Empire of Light* (*L'Empire des lumières II*, 1950). Barr wrote to the de Menils that the choice was "a picture which we all agree is of extraordinary quality," adding the slightly backhanded editorial, "not only is the canvas beautifully painted, but the paradoxical poetry is much more subtle than is usual in Magritte."³⁶ A few years later, in 1957, James Thrall Soby, then chairman of MoMA's acquisition committee, was at the Hugo Gallery when he spied *Memory of a Voyage* (*Souvenir de voyage*, 1955). The de Menils happily provided the museum with the funds to purchase the painting.³⁷

The exhibitions

The de Menils understood the power of well-designed exhibitions in the public's reception of an artist and so left a legacy of organizing important shows, beginning in 1951 with "Vincent Van Gogh" for the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Magritte was often included in group or thematic exhibitions drawn from their collection in the 1950s and 1960s, such as the 1958 show "Islands Beyond: An Exhibition of Ecclesiastical Sculpture and Modern Paintings" organized and installed

34 Quoted in Ann Temkin, "Sharing a Vision. The de Menils and the Modern," in Marcia Brennan et al., eds., *A Modern Patronage. de Menil Gifts to American and European Museums*, exh. cat., Houston, Menil Foundation (Houston: Menil Foundation, 2007), pp. 63–73, here p. 66.

35 Ibid., p. 66.

36 Ibid., p. 67.

37 Ibid., p. 68.



66 Adelaide de Menil, *René Magritte and Dominique de Menil at the Rodeo, Simonton, Texas, 1965*. Houston, TX, The Menil Collection.

by curator Jermayne MacAgy. A candlelit combination of modern paintings with medieval religious sculpture, “Islands Beyond” exemplified the innovative connections that MacAgy drew between artworks from differing contexts as well as her dramatic style of installation. Dominique de Menil’s later exhibitions, though less theatrical, owed much to MacAgy’s model of unexpected juxtapositions and sensitive exhibition design.

The de Menil family were major lenders to “Magritte in America,” the first solo museum exhibition of Magritte in the United States. Organized by Douglas MacAgy (Jermayne MacAgy’s ex-husband) for the Dallas Museum of Art, the show opened in December 1960 and traveled to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1961, where it was installed by Jermayne. In 1964 Dominique de Menil herself, with the aid of the art department of St. Thomas University and underwriting by Nelson A. Rockefeller, organized a retrospective, “Magritte,” of over one hundred works by the artist for the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock. Although Jermayne MacAgy had passed away suddenly at the beginning of the year, the installation was designed in her aesthetic. A review in the *Houston Chronicle* described the show as “filling gallery after gallery and reaching into cubicles and structural mazes erected

within the center's big rooms. ... Jim Love, an artist in installation who worked closely with Dr. MacAgy hung this show under the direction of Dominique de Menil."³⁸

Testament to the growing importance of Magritte's art in the United States in the 1960s, these two important retrospectives were soon followed in 1965 by a third, organized by MoMA. "Magritte," the first to bring together works from European and American collections, solidified Magritte's prominence in the United States. Not only extremely popular with the public, the exhibition brought a renewed critical appreciation for Magritte both as a precedent for pop art and as a living representative of a historical avant-garde.³⁹ Magritte's attendance at the opening festivities marked the first and only time he came to America. After visiting New York, Magritte traveled with his wife Georgette and their Pomeranian dog Loulou to only one other American city, Houston. John and Dominique de Menil, who despite their growing collection of his work, had never before met Magritte, hosted a reception for the artist at the University of St. Thomas,⁴⁰ installing a number of his works on the campus to mark the occasion. The de Menils also took the Magrittes, including Loulou, to attend a rodeo in Simonton, Texas (approximately forty miles west of Houston), where the artist traded his signature bowler hat for a cowboy hat by the famous designer Stetson (fig. 66).

The de Menils remained committed to Magritte's legacy after his death in 1967, continuing to focus important posthumous exhibitions on his work. October 1976 saw the opening of "Secret Affinities: Words and Images by René Magritte," at Rice Museum, Rice University, Houston.⁴¹ Curated by Dominique de Menil, the relatively small exhibition consisted entirely of works from the de Menils' collection and other private collections in Houston. Her installation design (fig. 67) drew themes and motifs from the paintings themselves to create poetic vignettes, including mirrors, windowed-doors, and curtained interiors, that placed the viewer within Magritte's familiar, yet disturbing, domesticity. When the Menil Collection as a museum opened in 1987, the Magritte works unsurprisingly played a major role in the Surrealism Galleries. Installed by Dominique de Menil, director Walter Hopps, and assistant director Paul Winkler, the galleries, painted in a signature gray

38 Campbell Geeslin, "A Perfect Platform" *Houston Chronicle*, May 24, 1964, p. 6.

39 See Sandra Zalman, *Consuming Surrealism in American Culture: Dissident Modernism* (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2015) (Ashgate Studies in Surrealism), pp. 85–99.

40 St. Thomas is a small Catholic University adjacent to the Menil Collection. The de Menils were important underwriters of the institution from 1956 to 1963. See William Camfield, "Two Museums and Two Universities. Toward the Menil Collection," in Helfenstein and Schipsi, *Art and Activism* (note 4), pp. 49–73.

41 When their involvement with the University of St. Thomas ended, the de Menils shifted their support to another nearby school, Rice University, from 1969–1985. *Ibid.*

67 Hickey & Robertson,
 installation view of the
 exhibition “Secret
 Affinities: Words and
 Images by René Magritte,”
 Houston, TX, Rice
 University, Rice Museum,
 1976, curated by Dominique
 de Menil. Houston, TX,
 The Menil Collection.



color, reiterated some of the impulses of the Rice exhibition. Two paintings were placed in niches in the gallery walls, and an actual window cut into the wall allowed viewers to glimpse a second gallery, where *David's Madame Récamier* (*Madame Récamier de David*, 1967), was displayed on a platform with *The Listening Room*. A selection of Magritte's work has remained on view in the Surrealist Galleries of the Menil Collection ever since.

Although John de Menil had died some twenty years earlier, in the winter of 1992–1993 Dominique celebrated their multi-decade devotion to the work of Magritte by making her museum the site of an important posthumous retrospective. Simply titled “Magritte,” the exhibition, curated by David Sylvester, was timed to accompany the publication of both the first volume of the catalogue raisonné and the monograph that Sylvester simultaneously prepared. The huge exhibition included over 150 works and occupied nearly half of the Menil Collection's public galleries. More than twenty years later, the Menil Collection took up the founders' legacy, co-organizing, with MoMA and the Art Institute of Chicago,

“Magritte: The Mystery of the Ordinary,” the first in-depth exploration of the artist’s breakthrough surrealist period from 1926 to 1938. The Menil Collection was not only the largest lender to the exhibition but, due to the depth of its holdings, was able to mount a separate companion show, “Memories of a Voyage: The Late Works of René Magritte.”

Conclusion

John and Dominique de Menil were passionate collectors of art with a strong humanist belief in its importance to a meaningful life. Teasing apart the Magritte holdings from their collection at large actually exaggerates his importance to the de Menils. Magritte, after all, was only one of many living artists that the de Menils patronized, and modern art was but one of several genres that combine and connect throughout the couple’s diverse collections.⁴² It is nonetheless a constructive exercise yielding as it does a thorough account of the many ways in which the de Menils engaged with the art and artists that so inspired them. Guided by Alexander Iolas, who simultaneously played the role of adviser, dealer, and partner, John and Dominique de Menil saw the power in Magritte’s penetrating images at a crucial moment—at the end of the 1940s, when Magritte’s reputation, along with surrealism itself—was largely overpowered by the dominance of abstract expressionism. Iolas’s exclusive right to represent Magritte just at the time that America emerged as a lucrative market was both cause and effect of the importance of the de Menils’ collection. With privileged access to purchase the best of his work, the de Menils gained renown for their growing collection. Meanwhile their burgeoning reputation as serious collectors reflected well upon Magritte. A program of supporting research, the organization of ambitious exhibitions, and the forging of relationships with museums, most notably the Museum of Modern Art, New York, amplified this mutually reinforcing phenomenon for more than twenty years. Beginning in the 1970s, following the closing of Iolas’s galleries and the deaths of John de Menil and Magritte, Dominique de Menil pursued the projects that she and John had started, now making use of David Sylvester’s expertise to enhance the collection. A close look at the Magritte holdings in the Menil Collection demonstrates the manifold overlaps and connections between galleries, museums, and collectors of surrealism in the twentieth century, as well as the key role played by John and Dominique de Menil within these networks.

⁴² Art itself was only one area to which John and Dominique de Menil directed their energy and resources. See Helfenstein and Schipsi, *Art and Activism* (note 4).