



106 Steve Schapiro,  
*René Magritte and  
Alexander Iolas*, 1965.

## René Magritte in the United States: Reconciling Business and Art

Julie Waseige

After the Second World War, René Magritte embarked on a lengthy correspondence with Alexander Iolas, an art dealer of Greek descent based in New York. At a time when Magritte was gearing up to hand over the rights to the majority of his future paintings to Iolas, the first exchanges between the two men feature a series of negotiations in which Magritte clarifies the terms of their future collaboration. In a letter to Iolas dated March 2, 1950, Magritte stresses the importance of finding a balance between the necessity of meeting market demand and preserving his artistic freedom. The letter was prompted by his indignation at Iolas's request for him to paint a picture of roses in order to gain favor with a certain woman who "could be of great help" to them:<sup>1</sup>

"You sell pictures and I earn my livelihood from my work. Both you and I have chosen these occupations. Like you, I would like to sell a large number of works. But not just anything. I could obviously earn a great deal of money by producing a certain kind of painting for wealthy people with no taste, and you could make more money by selling such atrocities. But we must strike a happy medium: we must reconcile business and art! And if we wish to gain maximum benefit, let us not confuse art and business. This is why you must tell me as accurately as you can which of my works have the greatest chance of being sold, and that does not mean that works which are unsold (such

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<sup>1</sup> The woman in question was Fleur Cowles, founder of *Flair Magazine*, the new leading art journal of the time. Twelve issues of the journal were published between February 1950 and January 1951, with contributors including Jean Cocteau, Tennessee Williams, Simone de Beauvoir, Gloria Swanson, John O'Hara, Eleanor Roosevelt, Bernard Baruch, Gypsy Rose Lee, the Duchess of Windsor, Lucien Freud, Salvador Dalí, Colette, and Saul Steinberg. Letter from Alexander Iolas to René Magritte, February 25, 1950, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston (hereafter cited as Menil Archives).

as the superb gouache *Le bain de cristal*<sup>2</sup>) should be torn up. This way, there will be no misunderstandings that could jeopardize our business dealings and our respective ideas of what is fair.”<sup>3</sup>

These brief words sum up the complex issue of the boundary between art and business which runs through the twenty-one years of correspondence between Magritte and Iolas. Between 1946 and Magritte’s death in 1967, the two men exchanged around four hundred letters—a testimony to the most loyal and enduring business relationship in the painter’s career (fig. 106).<sup>4</sup> In addition to shedding light on the correspondents’ personalities, this collection of handwritten letters provides a counterbalance to the tendency to label Magritte in the postwar period as a “commercial painter.” This tendency is apparent not only in recent readings of history, but also in attitudes expressed at the time. In the late 1950s, Magritte moved into an opulent villa and adopted a bourgeois lifestyle, taking full advantage of the successful sale of his work, first in the United States, then in Belgium. This raised many an eyebrow, particularly in the surrealist milieu, with its deeply anti-bourgeois stance and rejection of the commercialization of art. Magritte was scorned by his surrealist peers, one of whom, Marcel Mariën, produced and distributed a leaflet titled “Grande Baisse” (Great Bargain Sale) at a retrospective of Magritte’s work held at the Knokke Casino in Belgium in 1962. In this spoof announcement signed “René Magritte,” which presented a list of works for sale at cut-rate prices, Mariën attacked Magritte’s habit of turning out numerous repeats of his work in order to satisfy multiple requests, concluding facetiously, “Art lovers are invited to place their orders immediately. Spread the word: there will not be enough mystery for everyone.”<sup>5</sup>

### Status of the variant

The term “variant” was used by Magritte to describe works that revisited earlier themes, while developing them in new ways. For instance, Magritte’s first painting titled *The Empire of Light* (*L’Empire des lumières*)

2 *The Glass Bath* (*Le bain de cristal*, 1949), gouache on paper, 46 × 33 cm.

3 Letter from René Magritte to Alexander Iolas, March 2, 1950, Menil Archives.

4 This essay provides a selection of excerpts from the letters exchanged between René Magritte and Alexander Iolas. (Translator’s note: where possible, stylistic errors in letters written by Iolas have not been corrected in order to remain faithful to the original wording.)

5 The leaflet, measuring 33.9 × 16.4 cm, comprised a text by Marcel Mariën and a photomontage by Leo Dohmen of an image of the Belgian 100-franc banknote in which the head of King Leopold was replaced by that of Magritte. It was distributed during the exhibition “XVe festival belge d’été: L’œuvre de René Magritte” held at the Casino Communal de Knokke, Belgium, in 1962.

of 1949 was followed by twenty-six new variations, or variants, painted in oil or gouache up until 1964. The basic premise of all of these works is the same: an image that evokes both day and night, with a night sky surmounted by a sunlit sky. The variants differed in size and format, the depiction of clouds, vegetation, and houses, and in aspects such as the presence or absence of a lake in the foreground. The focal point of Mariën's criticism of Magritte in "Grande Baisse," this practice of variants did not only develop in response to the American market—Magritte had also explored its possibilities prior to the late 1940s, such as for an exhibition at the Galerie Lou Cosyn in Brussels in 1947, which included a large number of paintings from his *Shéhérazade* series of "woman-pearl objects."<sup>6</sup>

While Magritte's variants clearly had a commercial purpose when produced to satisfy multiple demands for a particular work, they were also central to his philosophy of painting. Indeed, they allowed him to develop and refine ideas implicit in the work that were made visible by the act of painting. Magritte repeatedly stated his need to "correct" his images, and this correction process inevitably led to the creation of series. While the artist occasionally "received" imagery through instantaneous visions,<sup>7</sup> the way in which his ideas took shape most often required numerous sketches and sometimes numerous painted versions, which he saw as more or less successful. Repetition and correction allowed him to finally achieve a result that fulfilled his desire to evoke, in the most powerful way possible, the "mystery of the world"—the only goal he ever professed to pursue. Magritte's correspondence with Iolas, and especially with his family and friends, bears witness to this quest for the "right" image: incorporating drawings and sketches in his letters, he frequently asked his friends for advice, at times retracing the entire process of research that informed his paintings.

Bearing this in mind, it would therefore be a mistake to regard Magritte as no more than a business-minded artist who was content to reproduce endless variations of his work to meet market demand.<sup>8</sup> It is also important to point out that his variants were primarily executed in

6 "Magritte," Brussels, Galerie Lou Cosyn, May 31–June 21, 1947.

7 Magritte claimed to have received "instantaneous visions" that inspired a number of his works, including *Time Transfixed* (*La durée poignardée*, 1938), *Golconda* (*Golconde*, 1953), and *The Wrath of the Gods* (*La colère des dieux*, 1960).

8 It is interesting to note that only one exact copy of a painting by Magritte exists. In 1948, Magritte painted two identical canvases, both titled *The Flavor of Tears* (*La saveur des larmes*). Marcel Mariën, in his text "Le jumeau d'Amérique. Une mystification exemplaire ou l'art de combler les musées," states that Magritte made this copy for an art enthusiast who had seen the original at Magritte's studio, but it had already been sold. Mariën points to Magritte's precarious financial situation as justification for this copy. Marcel Mariën, "Le jumeau d'Amérique. Une mystification exemplaire ou l'art de combler les musées," in Marcel Mariën, *Le radeau de la mémoire* (Brussels: Les Lèvres Nues, 1988), pp. 301–306.

gouache, a quick-drying medium that yields fast results. Yet only one sixth of Magritte's gouaches were produced for Iolas, who had a strong preference for oil paintings as a presentation medium for new, original images. The gouaches that Magritte sent to Iolas were generally commissioned by a client or intended as gifts, and were only very rarely intended to be shown in gallery exhibitions.

While it is undeniable that Magritte followed his dealer's advice in order to please the American market and that this at times led to the production of variants, a study of their correspondence and of Magritte's work in the postwar period reveals a more nuanced picture of the situation. Their letters, the majority of which are conserved in the archives of the Menil Collection,<sup>9</sup> document Magritte's first interactions with Iolas, the planning of one-man shows, the type of works that Magritte sent to the United States in accordance with the tastes of Iolas and his clients, details of sales, shipping, insurance, payment arrangements, contract negotiations, and the ways in which Magritte's work was promoted in cultural spheres through publishing and retrospectives at art museums—in short, a whole set of mechanisms that help us to understand the context in which Magritte's work gained access to the American market and the international success that followed.

In 1965 and 1966, one of the largest retrospectives of Magritte's work held in his lifetime took place in the United States. This traveling exhibition titled "René Magritte" was the first major event to include works from both European and American collections. The choice of New York's Museum of Modern Art for the first leg of the show was a sign of official recognition, especially since no other Belgian painter had ever been honored with a retrospective at this world-famous institution in his own lifetime.<sup>10</sup> For Magritte, however, acknowledgement in the United States was not new. In 1947, Claude Spaak, after a visit to MoMA, stated in the Brussels art journal *Les Arts plastiques*, "It may provoke a smile to learn that not far from two James Ensors, I had the pleasure of discovering a work by René Magritte. No man is a prophet in his own country. ... The Americans accord Magritte an importance that many Belgians still deny him."<sup>11</sup> Not only was Magritte's work

9 More than 300 letters representing approximately three-quarters of the known correspondence between Magritte and Iolas are conserved in the archives of the Menil Foundation in Houston, Texas. This collection was a gift of the estate of Iolas to the Menil Foundation through the intermediary of André Mourgues in January 1979.

10 This retrospective was held at the following art institutions in the United States: the Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 15, 1965–February 27, 1966; Rose Art Museum (Brandeis University), Waltham, April 3–May 1, 1966; Chicago Art Institute, May 30–July 3, 1966; Pasadena Art Museum, August 1–September 4, 1966; and the University Art Museum (University of California), Berkeley, October 1–November 1, 1966.

11 Claude Spaak, "The Museum of Modern Art of New York," *Les Arts plastiques*, August–September, 1947, p. 237.

exhibited at MoMA, but it attracted praise from the American press from the time of his first exhibition at the Hugo Gallery in 1947. In his review of the “René Magritte” show in April 1947, *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell wrote, “The Hugo Gallery performs a service by bringing together so many excellent canvases by René Magritte, whose surrealism is of a high order, imaginatively and with respect to the craftsmanship involved.”<sup>12</sup> In Belgium, however, it was not until 1954 that the artist first gained recognition when a retrospective was held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.<sup>13</sup> Magritte’s success in the United States can be largely attributed to the efforts of Iolas, whom he first met in the aftermath of the Second World War.

### Initial interaction with Alexander Iolas and the first exhibitions at the Hugo Gallery (1946–1948)

In 1946, Magritte faced financial hardship and the rejection of his work. During the war, his struggle to sell his paintings had led him to produce forgeries of works by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Max Ernst, which he sold with the help of his friend Marcel Mariën.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, he embarked on his “Surrealism in Full Sunlight” project—a radical new departure that was stylistically close to impressionism, with a shift to a lighter palette. In this work, Magritte sought to celebrate the joyful side of life in reaction to the stifling atmosphere in Belgium under Nazi occupation. Also known as his “Renoir period,” this new style was not greeted with the expected enthusiasm: on the contrary, Magritte found himself alienated from the majority of his fellow surrealists, including André Breton.<sup>15</sup>

Magritte’s financial and artistic difficulties in the postwar years provide the background for his first dealings with the Hugo Gallery in New York. The artist’s first contact with Alexander Iolas, a great admirer of his work, dates from 1946, when Magritte was virtually unknown

12 Edward Alden Jewell, “Work by Mestrovic: Yugoslav’s Sculpture at Metropolitan. Chagall, Magritte and Others,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1947, p. 10.

13 The retrospective exhibition titled “René Magritte” was held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, May 7–June 1, 1954.

14 The production of forgeries was confirmed in a number of letters exchanged between Magritte and Mariën, published in René Magritte, *La destination: Lettres à Marcel Mariën (1937–1962)* (Brussels: Les Lèvres Nues, 1977).

15 Breton did not condone the new direction in Magritte’s painting style, openly condemning his work during the 1947 “Exposition internationale du Surréalisme” in a text published in the exhibition catalogue: “It is difficult not to equate this gesture with that of a (backward) child, who, wishing to ensure a pleasant day, thinks he can lock the barometer needle at the ‘fair weather’ position.” André Breton, “Devant le rideau,” in *La Clé des champs* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1967), pp. 107–108, p. 10.



in the United States. Not only was he not a member of the group of surrealist émigrés in New York, his work had only rarely been exhibited. Iolas's desire to represent him in the United States thus comes across as a personal challenge. Commenting on Iolas's approach, the artist William Copley observed, "I think he [Iolas] and Julien Levy were the most astute in the sense of being able to recognize talent at an early period."<sup>16</sup> The parallel with Julien Levy is no coincidence, since Levy was the first advocate of surrealism in New York in the interwar period. Levy staged two solo shows of Magritte's work at his gallery in 1936 and 1938—both of which were unsuccessful, putting an end to their collaboration.<sup>17</sup> Looking back, it is clear that Iolas was the first art dealer to have truly championed Magritte's work in the United States and the only one to have supported him over a long period.

Born in Alexandria in around 1908, Iolas trained as a classical ballet dancer in Europe before emigrating to the United States around 1940, when he joined the New York's Ballet Theater Company as a soloist.<sup>18</sup> He was forced to abandon dance in 1944 due to injury, and one year later opened the Hugo Gallery in New York in partnership with his friend Maria Hugo (formerly the Duchesse de Gramont). Iolas had sole control of the gallery's management and his newfound passion for art dealership led him to open his own establishment in New York, the Iolas Gallery, in 1953. In addition to Magritte, his stable included Max Ernst, Roberto Matta, Victor Brauner, William Copley, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Takis, Jannis Kou-nellis, Paul Thek, Ed Ruscha, Les Lalannes, and Andy Warhol, who, incidentally, exhibited his work for the first time with the Hugo Gal-

16 Interview with William N. Copley by Paul Cummings, January 30, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, in *Alexander the Great: The Iolas Gallery, 1955–1987*, exh. cat. (New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery, 2014), p. 57.

17 The exhibition "René Magritte" was Magritte's first one-man show in the United States, organized by Julien Levy at his New York gallery at 602 Madison Avenue, January 3–20, 1936. Around two thirds of the twenty works exhibited were small-format variants executed in oil paint, which greatly disappointed Levy. Magritte had nevertheless endeavored to adapt his work to its destination, both in the visual aspect (such as by using words translated into English in his word paintings) and format. Malcolm Gee explains that the choice of format was not only dictated by the art market, but also by the mode of transportation and the presentation of the works as part of a collection. Malcolm Gee, *Dealers, Critics and Collectors of Modern Painting: Aspects of the Parisian Art Market Between 1910 and 1930* (New York/London: Garland Publishing, 1981), p. 8. Julien Levy held a further exhibition of Magritte's work at his New York gallery in January 1938. The show comprised five paintings he had purchased from the 1936 exhibition and eleven that had originally been sent to New York by E. L. T. Mesens in 1936 for the exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at MoMA, but had not been exhibited.

18 Many important details of Iolas's biography remain unclear, with multiple versions existing of certain events, giving his life a mythic quality. His exact birth date is unknown, but is likely to be between 1907 and 1912.



107 René Magritte, *The Harvest*, 1943, oil on canvas, 60 × 80 cm. Brussels, Musée Magritte.

lery in 1952. This list of names attests to the instrumental role that Iolas played in the promotion of artists who are now household names.<sup>19</sup>

An analysis of the first two Magritte exhibitions at the Hugo Gallery, held in 1947 and 1948, provides a glimpse into a line of approach that would remain in place until December 1956, the date at which Magritte and Iolas signed an exclusivity contract. The earliest record of Magritte's contact with the Hugo Gallery is a telegram he sent on February 27, 1946, in which he suggests holding an exhibition in December of that year. The exchange of letters that followed finalized arrangements for the show, although it was finally postponed until April 1947.<sup>20</sup> Conceived as a retrospective, it mainly featured works from the collections of Claude

19 To highlight the important role played by Alexander Iolas as an art dealer, an exhibition devoted to his work was held in 2014 at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York. The exhibition catalogue offers interesting insights into his personality (see note 16).

20 "René Magritte," New York, Hugo Gallery, April 7–30, 1947.



Spaak and Alex Salkin, two close friends of Magritte.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Magritte had enlisted Salkin to represent him in his dealings with Iolas in New York. To supplement these works, Magritte sent Iolas a group of paintings that had not been sold in Brussels, all recent and executed in the “Surrealism in Full Sunlight” style.<sup>22</sup> But since Magritte was unfamiliar with transatlantic freight procedures, the works were held up at customs. As a result, the paintings exhibited were primarily in his earlier style, with the addition of five works from the “sunlit” period, including *The Harvest* (*La moisson*, fig. 107), which were already on consignment at the gallery.<sup>23</sup>

In May 1947, soon after this initial “test” exhibition, Iolas wrote to Magritte with his own report on the show’s success, providing a list of the works that most appealed to visitors. Mentioning *The Fair Captive* (*La belle captive*), *The Healer* (*Le thérapeute*), *The Red Model* (*Le modèle rouge*, fig. 108), and *Treasure Island* (*L’île au trésor*), he explained in somewhat broken French that “this is the direction that should be followed in subsequent works.”<sup>24</sup> This short phrase with which Iolas sought to steer the work that Magritte produced for the American market is of key importance as it introduced a new dynamic to their correspondence: from that time onward, Iolas would give explicit instructions on the type of paintings he considered “beautiful” and well suited to American tastes.<sup>25</sup> For his part, Magritte clearly understood that if he wished to sell his work he would need to listen to Iolas, who offered valuable guidance in understanding the preferences of his clients. In his reply, Magritte stated, “I think it would be better to wait until your visit so that we can decide together what is most suitable for your clientele and, on this basis, choose the works that you wish to take on.”<sup>26</sup>

21 Their earliest correspondence concerned the planning of this first exhibition at the Hugo Gallery. In his letters, Iolas appears hesitant, unsure as to whether to present only recent work, in line with his aim of developing a future market for Magritte’s work, or to mount a retrospective to show the American public the broad range of his work. He finally chose the second option. Magritte and Iolas asked two Belgian collectors of Magritte’s work, Claude Spaak and Alex Salkin, to loan a number of paintings from their collections and to offer others up for sale. Their agreement enabled Iolas to put together the 1947 show comprising paintings executed between 1926 and 1946.

22 These unsold works came from the exhibition titled “Magritte” held at the Galerie Dietrich in Brussels, November 30–December 11, 1946. For the first two exhibitions at the Hugo Gallery, Magritte sent Iolas works that had not been sold at his Brussels exhibitions. However, the situation was reversed after 1949, with the painter sending the majority of his work to the United States before offering unsold works to the European market.

23 Five of the “sunlit” works had been brought over to the United States for Peggy Guggenheim by an American GI in 1945 or 1946 to be held on consignment at the Hugo Gallery.

24 Letter from Iolas to Magritte, May 5, 1947, Menil Archives.

25 In many of his letters, Iolas specifies the paintings he considers “beautiful,” “sublime,” or “unprecedented” in an effort to encourage Magritte to focus on certain compositions rather than others.

26 Magritte to Iolas, May 21, 1947, Menil Archives.



108 René Magritte, *The Red Model*, 1935, oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 60 × 45 cm. Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne.

On November 12, 1947, following two visits by Iolas to Brussels, Magritte wrote a letter in which he discusses the constant struggle he experienced in his work: the balancing act between art and business. While explaining that by following Iolas's recommendations he was able to “hit the right note” and “meet all of the objectives,” he took care to clarify his position:

“I am not suggesting that it is easy—in my case—as it is impossible for me to focus solely on “commercial” considerations. Indeed, I cannot abandon my main objective: this has always been a search for true poetic density, a certain mental substance that is necessary for mankind living in these times. I can make my point clearer by means of an example: to be able to produce another *Térapeuthe* [*sic*] (fig. 109), I had to find a way of justifying this copy in my own mind. I was able to enrich the original idea: the first *Térapeuthe* [*sic*] seems weak in



109 René Magritte, *The Healer*, 1946, gouache on paper, 47.1 × 34 cm. Private collection.

comparison to the new rendition, which, this time, is titled *Le Libérateur* (fig. 110)... This painting uses dark colors and stark shadows to give the objects represented the greatest possible density. In this way, I believe I can meet all of the objectives we have set ourselves.”<sup>27</sup>

In this excerpt, Magritte touches on a subject that would become a recurrent theme in his letters: the necessity for variants to enrich, even to correct, the original image—otherwise, they had no reason to exist. Magritte was not alone in producing variations of his work; many artists have exploited this practice for commercial purposes. He did, however, take pains on many occasions to justify their importance to him as a way

<sup>27</sup> Magritte to Iolas, November 12, 1947, letter divided into two sections conserved in two separate collections: the Menil Archives and a private collection.





110 René Magritte, *The Liberator*, 1947, oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm.  
Los Angeles, County Museum of Art.

of improving on earlier images. Thus, with *Le Libérateur* (*The Liberator*, 1947), Magritte was offering Iolas a new iteration of *The Healer* (1946) that surpassed the original. Iolas, meanwhile, sought to defend his wish for paintings that were commercially viable. In a letter dated November 21, 1947, he tried to allay Magritte's concerns by explaining that, in his view, only "poetic" painting was saleable:

"My dear friend, in your letter you write that it is difficult to produce commercially oriented paintings. I agree that it is poetic painting you must pursue, and of a very high quality. That alone will sell, and that is the only kind I have asked of you."<sup>28</sup>

28 Iolas to Magritte, November 21, 1947, Menil Archives.

He continues:

“No, you must not worry about the business side of things. I will take care of that for you when I receive paintings of the same standard as *Le modèle rouge*, *L’avenir*, and others like these. I am not asking you to copy earlier paintings, but, rather, not to abandon the poetic and mysterious quality of your earlier paintings, which by their compact style are far more Magritte than those in the Renoiresque technique and coloring, which everyone thinks is outmoded. The word “outmoded” is not exactly the word I wish to use, but as my French is not very good, I hope you will understand the idea I am trying to get across—what I mean is “less Magritte.” In any case, I am sure that the second *Thérapeute* is magnificent and I am pleased to hear that you find it superior to the first.”<sup>29</sup>

In this letter, Iolas asks Magritte to paint more “Magrittes,” a term he equates with a period prior to the 1940s. He mentions *The Red Model* (1935) and *L’avenir* (*The Future*, 1936), two paintings that were shown in the first exhibition in 1947, loaned by Spaak and Salkin. These paintings are rendered in a dark palette dominated by shades of black, brown, and deep blues and greens. Iolas preferred these hues to the “Renoiresque coloring,” by which he meant the use of a lighter and more vibrant palette.

Magritte’s second one-man show at the Hugo Gallery took place in May 1948. This time, he was more successful in targeting the preferences of the American public, as advised by Iolas. On March 11, Magritte had sent Iolas a selection of recent works painted between 1947 and February 1948 that were stylistically similar to his earlier work and bore no trace of the “Surrealism in Full Sunlight” technique, except for the use of a considerably lighter palette. Iolas had made it very clear to Magritte that the “sunlit” paintings would have no chance of finding a buyer in New York. “Most importantly,” he wrote, “do not send me any multicolored works, there is no hope of selling them. It is simply out of the question for me to promote them or to develop a market of potential customers for your Renoiresque works.”<sup>30</sup> Abiding strictly to this request, Magritte even removed *Alice in Wonderland* (*Alice au pays des merveilles*, 1946) from the selection as its style was deemed too similar to the “sunlit” period. With each subsequent exhibition, Iolas kept Magritte informed of the reception of his work and specified the works that he considered “unsaleable.” After the second exhibition, he shipped back to Magritte all of the pain-

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Iolas to Magritte, February 5, 1948, Menil Archives.



tings using the bright palette of the “sunlit” period, as well as all those featuring the “leaf-bird” and anthropomorphic canon motifs.

The second show also gave Magritte the chance to insist on the importance of the exhibition catalogue, a subject that was regularly discussed in their correspondence. His catalogues generally included a list of works, several reproductions, and a text written by a friend or fellow surrealist, with Marcel Duchamp and André Breton among contributors.<sup>31</sup> The catalogue of the second exhibition featured a poem by Paul Éluard, commentaries on each work by Jacques Wergifosse<sup>32</sup> translated into English, and reproductions of six drawings.

Soon after the opening, Iolas wrote to Magritte, “Just a short note to let you know that your exhibition opened with great success and I hope that this will be the beginning of a solid and prosperous collaboration between us.”<sup>33</sup> Adding to Iolas’s enthusiasm were positive reviews in the press, which would continue with subsequent shows. The *New Yorker* wrote, “For the most part, real wit and poetic feeling are behind his work, and, combined with his extraordinary technique, they result in some extremely striking paintings. Certainly, Magritte is a man who deserves to be far better known over here than he is.”<sup>34</sup>

It is intriguing to note that six days after receiving Iolas’s letter confirming the favorable reception of his work in New York, Magritte held his first one-man show in Paris at the Galerie du Faubourg.<sup>35</sup> Now fifty years of age, Magritte had already weathered a number of bad experiences at Paris galleries and the belated recognition of his work in New York left him unimpressed. The previous year, he had been ostracized by André Breton, who had vehemently opposed the “Surrealism in Full Sunlight” project. Appalled by the dramas in the Parisian cultural scene, Magritte had launched into an offbeat painting experiment when invited for the first time to hold a solo show in Paris. In barely two months, he produced seventeen canvases and around a dozen gouaches featuring deliberately vulgar, provocative, and comical subjects intended to shock the Parisian art-going public. These works have become

31 Marcel Duchamp contributed to the exhibition “René Magritte” held at the Iolas Gallery in New York (March 2–28, 1959) with the following statement printed on the invitation to the opening: “Magritte en cher, en hausse, en noir et en c u leurs [*sic*].” (Translator’s note: this phrase employs a series of puns suggesting that Magritte’s works were expensive, the prices were rising, and that Magritte was duping the public.) André Breton wrote the preface to the catalogue of the exhibition “Magritte” held at the Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, May 15–June 30, 1964.

32 Jacques Wergifosse (1928–2006) was a poet from Liège, Belgium, who first met Magritte in 1944 when he was sixteen years old. They became friends, with Wergifosse becoming an ardent defender of Magritte’s work, particularly during his “Surrealism in Full Sunlight” period, which was almost unanimously rejected.

33 Iolas to Magritte, May 5, 1948, Menil Archives.

34 “The Art Galleries: Background Stuff,” *New Yorker*, vol. XXIV/12, May 15, 1948, p. 61.

35 “Magritte: peintures et gouaches,” Paris, Galerie du Faubourg, May 11–June 5, 1948.

known as Magritte's "Vache" period. Unsurprisingly, not a single work was sold and visitors were scandalized, as shown in the many insulting comments left in the gallery's guest book. While the exhibition itself was a surrealist act, it was also highly risky on a professional level, with Magritte even describing it as a form of "suicide."<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, considering the possibilities now offered him by the American market, this exploit may be seen as a way for him to break free from the dictates of Paris at a time when the center of the international art world had begun to shift to New York.<sup>37</sup> Following his Paris exhibition, Magritte wrote to the art collector Pierre Andrieu:

"If another exhibition in Paris brings as little financial reward, I will make no effort in the future to make my painting known in France as, fortunately, I am well provided for by my exhibitions in America, which (thank God!) means that I am not obliged to concern myself with the chicaneries of the Paris art scene."<sup>38</sup>

### *Modus operandi*

The United States now took center stage. The first two exhibitions at the Hugo Gallery laid the foundations for a strategy that would evolve in the years to come. In this period, Iolas insisted on viewing works before purchasing them, either by traveling to Magritte's studio in Brussels or by making his selection once shipments arrived at the gallery. This *modus operandi* soon changed to avoid transportation costs for works that did not appeal to him: he first requested preliminary sketches—allowing him to influence the final result—after which he preferred to receive photographs or postcards for a greater appreciation of colors. Finally, in 1952, Iolas asked Magritte to return to their original arrangement and to send all of his proposed works to New York, realizing that the only reliable way of judging them was to see them with his own eyes.<sup>39</sup>

For the early exhibitions, Magritte shipped his canvases rolled up to facilitate transportation and reduce costs. On arrival in New York, they were mounted on stretchers, framed, and varnished. Magritte informed

36 Stated in a letter from Magritte to Louis Scutenaire, June 7, 1948, quoted in David Sylvester and Sarah Whitfield, *René Magritte. Catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, *Oil Paintings and Objects 1931–1948* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1993), p. 167.

37 The notion of the relocation of the center of the art scene from Paris to New York from 1945 is strongly endorsed by Serge Guilbaut in his book *Comment New York vola l'idée d'art moderne* (Nîmes: Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 1983).

38 René Magritte to Pierre Andrieu, July 18, 1948, Centre Georges Pompidou MNAM-CCI, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris.

39 Stated in a letter from Iolas to Magritte, October 15, 1952, Menil Archives.

Iolas in advance of the number of stretchers required and their dimensions. However, after a number of mishaps, Iolas asked Magritte to send his stretched paintings in packing crates, as rolling the canvas when the paint was not fully dry caused crackling on the picture surface, making the works less attractive and less “saleable.”<sup>40</sup>

As regards the sale of paintings, the two men came to an agreement for the second show that allowed Iolas to purchase works of his choice at fifty percent of the sale price, to be paid in cash in advance. For this show, Iolas purchased thirteen paintings at the “contract price” of one half of the “market price.” The price varied according to the medium (oils were worth more than gouaches) and the size of the works. The obligations of this contract price were to become a source of considerable tension, as Iolas, while promising to purchase paintings outright, did not pay up immediately. The first signs of strain appeared early on, with many of Magritte’s letters expressing his discontent with Iolas’s failure to reply to him within a reasonable time, protesting that he was not paid quickly enough and that Iolas never followed through on his promise to visit him in Brussels. Iolas offered a variety of explanations, ranging from being overburdened with work, suffering from toothache, narrowly escaping an accident with a truck, and being bedridden with the flu. The language barrier complicated the situation: since Magritte did not speak English, Iolas was the only person at the gallery who could reply to his letters in French—another justification for the slow replies.<sup>41</sup> Hearing so little news, Magritte feared that the gallery was experiencing difficulties or had lost interest in his work, or that the art market was in decline. Iolas thus spent much of his time reassuring Magritte of his good intentions, reminding him that he was fighting tooth and nail to promote him, and restating his high opinion of his work and its enthusiastic reception in the United States.

Exchanges of this kind exemplify the tone of their correspondence until at least December 1956, when the exclusivity contract was concluded. Magritte repeatedly emphasized the benefits of establishing an official contract, first endeavoring to convince Iolas that since he already purchased the majority of his works each year, he could effectively take sole control of their sale,<sup>42</sup> then arguing that such a contract

<sup>40</sup> Stated in a letter from Iolas to Magritte, December 28, 1950, Menil Archives.

<sup>41</sup> Stated in a letter from Iolas to Magritte, May 1, 1954, Menil Archives.

<sup>42</sup> In 1949, Magritte shipped all of the oil paintings he had produced that year to Iolas. In contrast to gouaches, Iolas always favored oils. Seeing himself as Magritte’s official agent well before the signing of their exclusivity contract, Iolas felt he had a monopoly on Magritte’s new works. This did not take into account the position of Magritte himself, who sold several major works to other collectors at times when he considered that Iolas lacked responsiveness, or disappointed him. While their contract officially gave Iolas control of all new works, Magritte, unbeknownst

would enable him to give up his bread-and-butter work (portrait painting and commercial illustration) and devote himself entirely to the creation of “masterpieces” for the American market.<sup>43</sup>

### The exclusivity contract and its consequences

Even though Iolas had long resisted the idea of signing a contract, having always worked on the basis of mutual trust, the two men finally came to an agreement, putting together a rough draft of the contract on Christmas Eve 1956. It stipulated that in return for an annual sum of \$4,000 paid in three installments Magritte would send Iolas between twenty and twenty-five paintings.<sup>44</sup> Magritte retained the right to continue his own portrait painting, interior design work, illustrations, and lithographs, and to sell paintings that were not reserved by Iolas to Belgian clients only. He could also sell past works and had the right to ownership of three of his paintings annually after the gallery had made its selection.<sup>45</sup>

From the moment that Magritte and Iolas agreed on a contract, the often strained tone of their letters mellowed as Magritte had at last obtained what he had been seeking for almost ten years. The correspondents frequently complimented each other, with Iolas praising the high quality of Magritte’s painting and Magritte commending Iolas on his efficient management and tireless efforts to promote his work. Their exchanges convey a deep sense of trust, even in financial matters. It is interesting to note that Magritte received far higher remuneration than he had expected, at times receiving up to \$10,000 per year, a considerable increase from the \$3,000 he was paid on average prior to the contract.

Furthermore, once the terms of their deal were set, Iolas began to offer more and more suggestions to guide the direction of Magritte’s

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to Iolas, continued to produce works for other collectors, two of the most important of whom were Barnet Hodes and Harry Torczyner. Magritte made a practice of not dating, or backdating, these works so as not to arouse the suspicion of his dealer. He warned the collectors to use great discretion when loaning the paintings for exhibitions. See, for example, the letter from Magritte to Barnet Hodes, February 4, 1957, Menil Archives; letter from Magritte to Harry Torczyner, November 14, 1960, quoted in Harry Torczyner, *L’ami Magritte. Correspondance et souvenirs* (Antwerp: Bibliothèque des Amis du Fonds Mercator, 1992), p. 172.

43 In several of Magritte’s letters seeking to negotiate a contract, he uses the word “masterpiece” as if trying to convince Iolas of the benefits to be gained. See, for example, his letters to Iolas dated March 9, 1951, and March 29, 1956, Menil Archives.

44 This sum met with Magritte’s expectations. Six years earlier, he had calculated that “according to the cost of living,” he required a minimum annual income of \$3,000 to afford him a decent livelihood, equivalent at the time to around 150,000 Belgian francs, in return for handing over all of his recent works to Iolas. Letter from Magritte to Iolas, June 30, 1950, Menil Archives.

45 Contract signed between Magritte and Iolas, December 24, 1956, Menil Archives.

work. He did not hesitate to list the works he wished to receive, stating his preferred themes for possible variants, as well as their format and dimensions. On November 10, 1958, Iolas wrote, “In addition to the works I reserved on my visit to your studio, I will need in June between six to eight paintings of medium size (40 figures<sup>46</sup>) in portrait and marine format.”<sup>47</sup>

However, when Iolas began to give such specific instructions for Magritte’s future work by ordering paintings, he was met by fierce resistance, with Magritte making it clear that he was only prepared to make variations of his works if that they were not merely copies, but were as good as, or better than, the original. Interestingly, Magritte only complied with Iolas’s demands to a limited extent: as his letters reveal, he had no intention of blindly accepting the *desiderata* of his dealer, maintaining that his freedom of choice was of paramount importance to him. For his part, Iolas was willing to listen to whatever Magritte had to say, provided he gave reasons for refusing his requests. For instance, in September 1957, he informed Iolas that he could only produce three of the five large-scale paintings commissioned, explaining that “if I had to produce these five large paintings it would become a production line, the work of a decorator, and that would put me off painting altogether.”<sup>48</sup>

Once Magritte provided Iolas with a sufficient number of works each year to furnish exhibitions, the exhibitions increased in frequency, with eight shows held between 1957 and 1967 at Iolas’s galleries in New York, Paris, and Geneva.<sup>49</sup> While prior to 1956, Magritte had complained about the irregularity of shows, the new faster pace did not suit him either. Magritte began to sense the limitations of their contract as the pressure to “produce” conflicted with his poetic ambitions. When Iolas informed him that he did not have enough works to put together a “sensational show,” the artist explained his predicament in several important letters from 1959. On January 17, 1959, Magritte made his position plain:

46 “40 figures” corresponds to painting dimensions of 100 × 81 cm or 100 × 73 cm.

47 Iolas to Magritte, November 10, 1958, Menil Archives.

48 Magritte to Iolas, September 25, 1957, Menil Archives.

49 Exhibitions held from 1957 at Iolas’s galleries: “René Magritte,” New York, Iolas Gallery, February 3–28, 1957; “René Magritte,” New York, Iolas Gallery, March 31–April 19, 1958; “René Magritte,” New York, Iolas Gallery, March 2–28, 1959; “René Magritte. Recent Works. 1960–1961–1962,” New York, Iolas Gallery, May 3–26, 1962; “René Magritte,” Geneva, Galerie Alexander Iolas, October 7–31, 1963; “Magritte. Le Sens Propre,” Paris, Galerie Alexander Iolas, November 12–December 7, 1964; “Magritte. Le Sens Propre,” New York, Iolas Gallery, January 11–February 6, 1965; and “Les images en soi,” Paris, Galerie Alexander Iolas, January 10–February 11, 1967.



“It is not possible to hold a major exhibition every year if by major exhibition we mean a large number of new paintings with great poetic force. However, if that means painting numerous variants of past works, it may be achievable. Indeed, it is possible for me to produce a large number of variants of past works every year, but it is impossible to decide in advance whether or not I will be able to create such a large number of new paintings and to guarantee that they are of a high standard.”<sup>50</sup>

When Marcel Mariën distributed his “Grande Baisse” pamphlet, he was publicly denouncing this production of variants that coincided with Magritte’s newfound success:

“What was most problematic was that he was working under the orders of others, and to meet demand he made copies of his most popular works—he who had always detested the idea of painting as a manual job and had once even stated that if ever he became wealthy he would only paint occasional pictures that were of particular importance to him.”<sup>51</sup>

While Mariën’s position seems justified, it is important to place his fierce reaction in a broader context, considering that Magritte was well aware of this unresolved question, as expressed in a letter to Iolas from 1959:

“I think that there are *enough* paintings in the world, to the point that I am even a little disgusted. New paintings are not worth being seen if they do not bring us *necessary ideas*. Moreover, the variants that I can produce of my earlier works must not be simple copies, but creations in their own right, which correct imprecisions or weaknesses in the original work.”<sup>52</sup>

Here we see Magritte pursuing his quest for “necessary ideas.” His poetic and philosophical explorations did not cease once he gained access to the American market, nor did he limit himself to repeating pictures that had already proved successful. He continued to question the representation of the object and to paint new imagery that sought to challenge and disrupt the viewer’s habitual psychological responses. Indeed, Magritte produced some of his pivotal works during his “American period,” such as his first rendition of *The Empire of Light* (fig. 111) in 1949. In the

50 Magritte to Iolas, January 17, 1959, Menil Archives.

51 Marcel Mariën, *Le radeau de la mémoire* (Brussels: Les Lèvres Nues, 1988), p. 178.

52 Magritte to Iolas, October 19, 1959, Menil Archives.



111 René Magritte, *The Empire of Light*, 1949, oil on canvas, 50 × 60 cm. Private collection.

early 1950s, he explored the theme of petrification in a series of works painted in a monochrome palette of grays. In 1952, he pushed the exaggeration of scale to the extreme in a number of masterworks, such as *The Listening Room* (*La chambre d'écoute*) and *Personal Values* (*Les valeurs personnelles*, fig. 112). The same year, he launched *La carte d'après nature*, a series of theoretical publications in which he continued an investigation he had begun in 1933 on the subject of “elective affinities.” In 1956, he embarked on another series titled *A Place in the Sun* (*La place au soleil*), focusing on the superimposition of forms. He continually searched for new ways of making everyday objects strange and unsettling, refining his pictorial vocabulary through the repetition of motifs, such as the man in a bowler hat, which appears in many works that have gained cult status, including *Golconda* (*Golconde*, 1953) and *The Son of Man* (*Le fils de l'homme*, 1964).

Magritte's pictorial technique, developed and honed over several decades, appears to have been enhanced through contact with the American market—or, perhaps, this new audience motivated him to pay greater attention to workmanship. In addition to Iolas's insistent request



112 René Magritte, *Personal Values*, 1952, oil on canvas, 77.5 × 100 cm. San Francisco, Museum of Modern Art.

for works that were “very, very well painted,”<sup>53</sup> Magritte was now able to devote himself full-time to painting. This is by no means insignificant, as summarized by his closest friend Louis Scutenaire: “Magritte is a great painter; Magritte is not a painter.” Magritte was above all a thinker of images who found his medium of expression in painting rather than writing. He often claimed that the act of painting was a dull process of secondary importance, only valuing the image itself. For him, it was enough for the viewer to be able to recognize the compositional elements—consequently, some of his more hastily produced works are lacking in stature.

From the late 1940s, Magritte’s paintings began to reflect his improved living standards brought about by his contract with Iolas, thanks to which his previous yearly income had tripled, sometimes quadrupled. Now able to focus on his own projects, he painted every day at fixed times, always dressed in a suit. The surrealist ethos of the young Magritte, who was ardently opposed to bourgeois values and the commercializa-

53 Stated in a letter from Iolas to Magritte, April 5, 1951, Menil Archives.

tion of art, now had to coexist with that of a man in his fifties who had endured a life of financial hardship and who had finally found a way of making a living from his art while pursuing his poetic aspirations.

Iolas was by no means unaware of Magritte's personal preoccupations. He had championed his work for twenty-one years, encouraging him in many letters to produce only "the best"—according to what Iolas considered to be new, poetic, well-crafted paintings. As the artist William Copley pointed out, Iolas also actively defended other artists such as Max Ernst and Victor Brauner at a time when their work attracted little interest: "It was more a personal loyalty, I think too, and his friendship for them, and his understanding of what they were trying to do."<sup>54</sup> Those who knew Iolas did not describe him as an entrepreneur or a businessman despite the fact that he was at the helm of several galleries. He was, rather, perceived as a man who approached all aspects of his life with passion, seeing art exhibitions as performances and paintings as the cast of the show. His motivation was based on emotional ties—his clients were his friends, their works were his children. André Mourgues, Iolas's companion for twenty-five years, explained that if one wished to buy a painting from him, one had to have eyes rather than ears; speculators were not welcome. Consequently, the circulation of Magritte's work remained limited. Apart from Iolas's family and that of William Copley, the de Menil family were among Iolas's most loyal clients and among the most important collectors of Magritte's work—their archives have been of key importance in ensuring the preservation of his legacy in the United States. The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, houses one of the world's most precious collections of Magritte's work, which began in the late 1940s thanks to Alexander Iolas.<sup>55</sup>

Magritte had many opportunities to change dealers in order to earn a higher income,<sup>56</sup> but he chose to remain loyal to Iolas—it is as if the

54 Interview with William N. Copley by Paul Cummings, January 30, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, quoted in Copley, *Alexander the Great*, exh. cat. (note 16), p. 58.

55 While the aim of this essay is to concentrate on the interaction between Magritte and Iolas, it is interesting to note that in addition to Iolas's clients, other collectors had a significant impact on the American art scene. They include the Chicago lawyer Barnet Hodes and the Belgian lawyer Harry Torczyner, who lived in New York, for whom Magritte produced a large number of works from 1956 onward.

56 One such person who encouraged Magritte to do so was Harry Torczyner, whom he first met in 1957. They soon became friends, with Torczyner remaining a keen supporter of Magritte's work in the United States, taking on the role of intermediary in dealings with Iolas. On many occasions, Torczyner advised Magritte to pull out of the "Iolassian regime," as other dealers were prepared to offer him better conditions, even proposing up to \$15,000 per year at a time when Magritte was earning \$10,000 with Iolas. Despite these offers, Magritte refused to forsake his dealer. In a letter to Torczyner dated October 24, 1960, Magritte clearly expressed his loyalty to Iolas: "I thank you for the new proposal to sign a major contract with a gallery in New York City. However, it would be impossible for me to play such a nasty trick on Iolas, who has promoted my painting (and done so very well) for the past thirty years! Iolas has given me no reason to betray his faith in me (whether or not this is based on self-interest). He would, I believe,

role Iolas played as a dealer without really being one was enough to earn Magritte's trust. In his interaction with the American market, Magritte succeeded in reconciling art and business, in preserving the poetic force of his most important works and remaining a sincere artist while managing to satisfy the demands of his dealer. It was something of a compromise, which allowed Magritte to pursue his pictorial explorations and to continue to translate into images his discoveries that sought to "evoke the mystery of the world."

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accept that 'from time to time' I sell works to individuals in America if he were informed of it, but 'by and large' we honor our respective commitments, within the limits of human possibility (taking into account a great many unforeseeable factors). Nonetheless, perhaps it is possible, in the public interest ('Interest' with a capital 'I'), to organize an official collaboration between Iolas and the gallery that proposes a contract with me? If you consider this aspect of the issue worthy of attention, perhaps we could arrive at a 'rather agreeable' solution?" Harry Torczyner, *L'ami Magritte. Correspondance souvenirs* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1992), p. 167.