



## **CLOCKING IN WITH SALVADOR DALÍ: Salvador Dalí's Melting Watches**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Painted in 1931, *The Persistence of Memory* is one of the most celebrated and recognized paintings of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The three “melting” or “soft” watches placed in the landscape of Dalí’s beloved Port Lligat have become nearly synonymous with Dalí’s name since they first helped to introduce mainstream American audiences to Surrealism in 1932. The painting’s combination of the everyday and the dreamlike, the symbolic and the irrational, nature and technology, and the Dalinian confusion of softness and hardness, accounts in part for its mass appeal, as it seems to both encourage and confound analysis and explanation. The painting’s watches are, as the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York once wrote, “irrational, fantastic, paradoxical, disquieting, baffling, alarming, hypnogogic, nonsensical and mad—but to the surrealist these adjectives are the highest praise” (MOMA, “What Is Modern Painting?”).

Technically exquisite, *The Persistence of Memory* is one of what Dalí called his “hand-painted dream photographs” and can simultaneously be read as a landscape, a still-life, and a self-portrait. The effect of such a tour de force was not lost on Dalí, and from the 1930’s forward, melting watches appear regularly in his artwork—most significantly, perhaps, in a “revision” of the original painting completed in 1954 and titled *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*. Using many of the same elements as the original, *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* represents the significant changes that Dalí’s life and art underwent after World War II. Considering the success of the 1931 painting, it’s not surprising that Dalí should express his “new self” in terms of the old. This is the first time that MOMA has agreed to loan *The Persistence of Memory*; side by side for the first time in history, the two paintings link not only the two halves of Dalí’s career, but the two halves of a century as well.

*The Persistence of Memory* and *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* will be exhibited together March 8 – June 8, 2000. For more information about field trips, teacher resources, museum hours, etc., please visit the web site, call (727) 823-3767, or email [education@salvadordalimuseum.org](mailto:education@salvadordalimuseum.org).

## II. CLASS ACTIVITIES

*Note: The Museum has several other introductory lesson plans available online. Teachers are also encouraged to borrow Get Surreal with Salvador Dalí, a 30-minute video, targeted toward middle school students, that introduces Dalí, Surrealism, surrealist art activities, and the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida.*

1. Compare and contrast *The Persistence of Memory* and *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*. Ask your students to describe each painting, listing the elements of each separately and paying attention to line, shape, color, space, texture, and size. Then ask your students to identify how the two paintings are alike and how they are different. For homework, ask your students to write a short essay about the painting they like best; use both paintings and the class discussion as points of reference to explain why.
2. *The Persistence of Memory* can be read as a landscape, a still life, or a self-portrait. Introduce these terms to your students, provide other examples from art history or Dalí's work, and ask the class to explain how Dalí's painting can fit in each genre.
3. Revise a piece of your own artwork. Just as Dalí returned to *The Persistence of Memory* and changed it into *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, have your students "update" one of their own pieces of artwork; or, encourage students to do variations on each others' pieces of artwork. For homework, or in class, ask your students to write a short essay comparing the two pieces and evaluating the significance of the changes that they made.
4. Schedule a field trip to the Dalí Museum. Before you visit, ask your students to write in a journal what they expect—of Dalí and *The Persistence of Memory*. Then, after the visit, have your students revisit their journal entries and add another entry that explains how their field trip was different than they first imagined.

### III. THE PAINTING

The painting itself is surprisingly small—oil on canvas just 24.1 cm x 33 cm (9 2/5 in x 13 in)—and has been described as “jewel-like” in nature. The famous melting watches are ostensibly set in the landscape of Port Lligat, the town on the Mediterranean coast where Dalí spent much of his life, and a part of the world that he painted throughout his career. This northeast corner of Spain, in the province of Catalonia, is noted for its sheer cliffs and craggy outcroppings of rock. While the cliffs in the painting’s upper right hand corner provide some specific features in the landscape, the absence of other characteristic landmarks is significant, as Robert Radford has noted:

Certainly the bare, hard outline of the cliffs and the crystal light of the sky are there, but the empty, desert-like expanses of the painting are much closer to the topography of the mind, to a dreamscape. The viewer’s anxiety is fermented precisely through the lack of clues of distance, of recognizable landmark, of time of day, of temperature—it could equally be as hot, or as cold, as an unknown planet. We are in an arena of silence, a frozen nightmare, in which nothing moves or makes a noise.” (146)

James Thrall Soby, former curator at MOMA, would probably agree, saying of the painting that “space is manipulated to suggest an infinity against which the drama of his objects and figures is projected” (qtd. Jeffett, 899). While the seascape, cliffs and sky occupy the top third of the painting, the bottom two-thirds feature the famous larger-than-life watches: one melting over the truncated branch of a dead olive tree, one melting over a large step in the painting’s left hand corner, and a third drooping over an amorphous shape that appears to have been washed up onto the beach. The fourth watch is closed, and its cover is swarming with ants.

Dalí called his surrealist paintings “hand-painted dream photographs,” and *The Persistence of Memory* with its clear, crisp details and almost invisible brushwork is no exception. There is little doubt that Dalí—an avowed student of the Dutch artist Jan Vermeer, whose works exhibit a legendary precision and photographic realism—intended the dreamlike scene in *The Persistence of Memory* to seem as real as any other. Indeed, despite some unflattering language which calls the painting “parasitic” in relation to art history, John Canaday still can’t help but admire “its brilliant colour, its small size, its immaculate precision.” Dalí’s debt to early masters of photo-realism is certain, Canady claims, placing the piece:

in the technical tradition of early Flemish and early Venetian painting. . . .The deep distance with its sea and its rocky promontories picked out in golden light is all but a steal from the early Venetian Giovanni Bellini, whose allegories would be Surrealist if their symbolism were morbid instead of poetic. (Secret, 127)

Confirming the technical mastery that brings the unusual images to center stage, *Techniques of the Great Masters of Art* speculates that:

Dalí used a jeweller's glass for particularly close work, small round sable brushes, careful preliminary drawings to achieve the precise counterfeit of a photograph, making the unreal as real as possible; the jewel-like intensity is achieved due to the applications of the paint, careful tonal gradation of the paint layers—from the dark foreground to the yellow glow of the fading light in the background—marks a reaction against the autonomy of color and brushstroke. (420-21)

Dalí Museum curator William Jeffett claims that *The Persistence of Memory* owes a stylistic debt to Giorgio de Chirico and Yves Tanguy, both of whom “explored the use and distortion of perspective in establishing a dream space” (899). More compellingly, perhaps, Jeffett positions what is certainly a landscape painting in a tradition of still-life paintings as well:

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this painting is the ants and the fly which alight atop two of the watches. The presence of the objects and the living insects allude to the tradition of still-life painting. As indicated, the watches symbolize the passing of time, which is distorted, as memory comes to the fore in sleep. But the insects provoke a more subtle reading of the painting in which time reveals the presence of death. Here they symbolize decay just as do the flies in Dutch and Flemish flower paintings and still-lives. . . From this line of argument, *The Persistence of Memory* may be understood as one of the most striking examples of a modern *Memento Mori* or *Vanitas*. (899-900)

According to Ian Gibson, Dalí signed the painting “Olive Salvador Dalí,” making it one of the first—if not *the* first—instances in which Dalí attributed his work to the amalgam that would soon become “Gala-Dalí” (726, note 146).

#### IV. THE WATCHES

*The Persistence of Memory* is filled with interesting and meaningful images—the ants, the fly, the olive tree, the steps, the amorphous shape on the beach—but none are, nor ever have been, as compelling or as plump with significance as the watches themselves. The effect they have on the viewer is twofold: watches are not only potent symbols of “time’s winged chariot hurrying near,” but their content is seemingly contradicted, and made doubly meaningful, by their softness. The resulting effect—that of time and machine coming apart—challenges our belief in a rational, natural, orderly and rule-bound world.

That the watches represent time itself is clear, as many commentators have pointed out. Nathaniel Harris says the painting evokes “the seemingly universal human preoccupation with time and memory,” and Simon Wilson says, “The theme of this truly bizarre and mysterious painting is man’s profound obsession with the nature of time.” Some have even suggested that the painting—in title at least—pays tribute to Marcel Proust’s masterpiece *Remembrance of Things Past* and “acknowledges the power of the unconscious to preserve memories over time” (Fanning, 92). As Leonard Shlain points out, however, this effect is not achieved solely by the watches themselves, as other elements in the painting accentuate their meaning:

In one of his most famous paintings, *The Persistence of Memory*. . . Dalí juxtaposes two ordinary symbols of time: clocks and sand; but in Dalí’s arresting vision the clocks are melting over a vast and lonely beach that resembles the sands of time. To emphasize the painting’s temporal images, he also incorporates a swarm of crawling ants, whose uniquely shaped bodies resemble hourglasses. Sand, hourglasses, and watches all connect below the threshold of awareness till the viewer’s mind swings around to focus on the very nature and meaning of time. . . . This surrealist painting mesmerizes us because it translates an idea into symbols when conventional words and phrases have never been sufficient.” (228)

The fact that the watches are soft—that they appear to be melting like cheese, or wax, or gelatin—seemingly contradicts the significance of time itself, rendering both time and the machine that measures it ineffective and irrelevant. As a result, Dawn Ades says that “The soft watches are an unconscious symbol of the relativity of space and time, a Surrealist meditation on the collapse of our notions of a fixed cosmic order” (145). Her words are echoed by Wilson who says, “The evocation of softness is one of Dalí’s most brilliant and compelling inventions: his soft objects are powerful and disturbing images of entropy—that fundamental physical process by which all things decay in time.” Ferdinand Aliquié agrees. “The soft object,” he says, “is the negation of any machine and, by that, of any process in physics.” The cosmic sense of this is further heightened, as William Jeffett points out, by the fact that “[t]he philosophers of the enlightenment had conceived of the workings of the universe as akin to that of the mechanism of a watch” (899).

There are other approaches one can take to the painting, however, as biographer Meredith Etherington-Smith indicates in recounting how the painting came to be:

Dalí had stayed at home one night with a headache when Gala and other friends went out to the movies after dinner. Musing in the quiet flat, his glance took in the remains of a Camembert and he thought of the philosophy of the ‘super soft’—the hermit crab in his protective shell—and thus of his own psychological makeup, the outer hard shell that had become a necessary fortress protecting the inner hermit crab Dalí from the world. (153)

A more psychoanalytic approach to *The Persistence of Memory* is especially compelling when one views the painting in the larger context of Dalí’s work, and it’s an approach that Robert Lubar takes as well: “Although Dalí does not elaborate on the extended symbolism of the limp watch, it clearly represents a nostalgic return to a state of amorphousness. It was not until a year later [1932], in paintings like *Catalan Bread*, that Dalí’s dialectics of the soft and the hard would specifically be linked to the theme of infantile regression and gender differentiation” (73). Perhaps the most creative (and compelling) of these responses is the one which Marcel Jean forwards in *The History of Surrealist Painting*, where he locates the genesis of Dalí’s painting not in a pile of melting cheese but in a double entendre arising from the French words for “Soft Watches”:

The word *montre* (watch) is a word-image with a double meaning: in French, it is the imperative of the verb *montrer* (to show) and the name of the apparatus (*montrant*) the time. But there is a very common childhood experience: the doctor asks the sick child to “montrer sa langue” (‘show his tongue’), which obviously is soft. The child, we may say, *la montre molle* (shows it soft: with the double sense that in French this phrase can also mean ‘the soft watch’). The irrational and even anguishing nature of this act for the child, in view of the circumstances, could certainly constitute an experience capable of leaving profound impressions in the psyche. Here, then, is a most concrete origin for the image of the soft watches, an origin founded in an authentic childhood memory; this seems to be confirmed by the title of the picture, which may not have been premeditated by the artist but remains far from ‘gratuitous,’ as can be seen. The watches in *The Persistence of Memory* resemble tongues more than anything else. The word-play is untranslatable into Spanish, but the picture was painted in Paris when French had already become Dalí’s second language. A later picture of his, painted in America, with the rather farcical title *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll*, depicts among other things a watch ending in a tongue. In English, the phrase: “Watch your tongue,” while not an equivalent of “montre ta langue,” conveys the same sense of adult supervision of the child’s activity.

It would have been most interesting if the artist had indicated clearly the true explanation, but one can easily understand why, consciously or not, he has preferred to conceal it behind the deceptive symbol of Einsteinian camembert. The image of the soft watch is not only double but multiple: the tongue itself is a symbol, that of a soft penis. Dali has always been haunted by ideas of deficiency.

The great number of crutches and of figures deformed by soft extensions or subtractions, which he has always enjoyed painting, is revealing. The case of Dali provides a good illustration of Adler's theory that anxiety about insufficiency is balanced by compensatory ideas of power: his paintings often include human figures whose heads are fantastically swollen. (218)

If *The Persistence of Memory* can be seen as a landscape and as a still life, the above remarks seem to also position the painting as a self-portrait, a canvas that offers a psychological portrait of the artist even as it engages other artistic genres.

## V. OTHER DALINIAN SYMBOLS

### 1. The Self-Portrait

The center of *The Persistence of Memory* is occupied by a relatively amorphous shape that appears to have been washed onto the beach. This figure—the profile of a distorted face looking down at the bottom of the painting—is recognizable from other of Dalí's paintings as a self-portrait which he called The Great Masturbator and which he developed in “Lorca paintings” such as *The Lugubrious Game* and *Illumined Pleasures*. (For other examples of The Great Masturbator in the museum's permanent collection, see *Profanation of the Host* and *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening—Hope!*) With its closed eye and oversized eyelashes, and with a relative lack of other identifying features, the self-portrait seems to emphasize sleep, positioning the painting's dreamscape as a concrete realization of an unconscious world. William Jeffett writes that “The sleeping figure in the foreground suggests that this landscape is an interior vista, accessible only through sleep. The figure's embryo-like shape suggests Dalí's fascination with the psychoanalytic theme of inter-uterine memories embedded in the unconscious” (Jeffett, 899). Paul Moorhouse takes this line of thought one step further, saying that this “embryo-like shape”:

refers to Dalí's professed memories of intra-uterine life and suggests the trauma of birth. A watch sagging across [it] and another hanging from a plinth evoke the feelings of timelessness associated with the experience of pre-birth. The title of the painting thus refers to prenatal memories and its subject is ‘the horrible traumatism of birth by which we are also expunged from paradise.’ (49)

Meredith Etherington-Smith sees a different significance in this occurrence of the self-portrait, however, as she argues, “In this picture, the amorphous form of the Great Masturbator appears again, but time seems to have conquered him, as he lies prone on the beach.” (142). Despite her identification of defeat, however, commentators on *The Persistence of Memory* seem reluctant to say that the figure in the center of the painting is dead; indeed, Jeffett indicates it's sleeping, and Moorhouse's discussion turns on prenatal memories. Nevertheless, one can't ignore the fact that the limp figure in a wasteland of ants, flies, a dead olive tree and useless clocks has quite possibly seen the end of its days. Perhaps, like the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The French Ambassadors* (1533), the portrait casts a shadow of mortality over the dreamworld Dalí has created, reminding us that, like the melting watches, our time is running out.

### 2. Ants & Flies

As symbols of decay, ants and flies are common in Dalí's work of this time (see, for example, *The First Days of Spring*, *Profanation of the Host*, and *The Font*) and help, as William Jeffett pointed out above, to position *The Persistence of Memory* as a still life in an art historical tradition. Jeffett also comments that “The insects are rendered with such precision that they become almost machine-like,” which is an intriguing twist to a



painting in which machines have in turn assumed the organic properties of living creatures (899).

### 3. The Olive Tree

A traditional symbol of peace, hope, and healing in Western cultures, the olive and the olive tree was a significant image for Dalí as well. A major agricultural product of Catalonia, the olive makes its appearance in early works such as *The Lane to Port Lligat with View of Cap Creus* (1922-23) and *Cadaqués* (1923). Later on, Dalí would nickname Gala “my little olive,” acknowledging the life-nurturing qualities that she brought to their relationship. In *Portrait of Gala* (1932-33)—one of the few non-surreal paintings he did during the early 30’s—Dalí paints his little olive standing in front of an olive tree on a panel of olive wood.

In *The Persistence of Memory*, however, the olive tree is dead, reinforcing the sense of death that one might get from the painting. Kenneth Wach suggests that the “denuded” tree is “in reference to the Spanish Civil War” (100), and alongside the useless and impotent watches, the lifeless self-portrait, the barren beach, the ants and the fly, it helps to create, in some readings, a landscape fraught with despair—not so much a “dreamscape” as a nightmare.

### 4. Steps

The presence of the two “steps”—the large brown one in the lower left-hand corner, and the less prominent blue one at the horizon on the painting’s left side—is one of the more perplexing aspects of *The Persistence of Memory*. In other paintings of the time, like *The First Days of Spring* (1929), *La Main (Les Remords de conscience)* (1930), *Persistence of Fair Weather* (1932-34), and *Average Atmospheroccephalic Bureaucrat in the Act of Milking a Cranial Harp* (1933), Dalí paints steps as part of a visual language of Freudian symbols. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud spells out the signifying nature of steps (Tr. James Strachey. Avon Books, 1965):

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Steps, ladders or staircases, or, as the case may be, walking up or down them, are representations of the sexual act.—Smooth walls over which the dreamer climbs, the facades of houses, down which he lowers himself—often in great anxiety—correspond to erect human bodies, and are probably repeating in the dream recollections of a baby’s climbing up his parents or nurse. The ‘smooth’ walls are men; in his fear the dreamer often clutches hold of ‘projections’ in the facades of houses. (390)

Freud continues in a footnote to this passage:

It is not hard to discover the basis of the comparison: we come to the top in a series of rhythmical movements and with increasing breathlessness and then, with a few rapid leaps, we can get to the bottom again. Thus the rhythmical pattern of

copulation is reproduced in going upstairs. Nor must we omit to bring in the evidence of linguistic usage. It shows us that “mounting” [German “steigen”] is used as a direct equivalent for the sexual act. We speak of a man as a “Steiger” [a “mounter”] and of “nachsteigen” [“to run after,” literally “to climb after”]. In French the steps on a staircase are called “marches” and “un vieux marcheur” has the same meaning as our “ein alter Steiger” [“an old rake”].’ (390)

The step—as explained in the above passages—is appropriate to the painting’s specific dialectic of softness and hardness (with the exception, as Lubar points out, that Dalí didn’t engender these qualities until the following year), and also reinforces the juxtaposition of natural and manmade objects in the landscape. Freud’s sense that smooth walls connote a yearning for childhood is echoed by Jeffett’s and Moorhouse’s comments on the painting’s intra-uterine content (à la *Oeufs sur le Plat sans le Plat* (1932)). One might also pursue a psychoanalytic link between the maleness of the “smooth walls” in Freud’s analysis—and the “projection” of the olive tree?—and Dalí’s relationship with poet Federico Garcia Lorca. However, despite (and perhaps because of) these many possibilities, the functional relationship of sexual intercourse to the rest of the painting’s content strikes one as more obscure and certainly ambiguous.

If the steps in the foreground and background represent sexual intercourse, they might just as easily serve as the bases of monuments as well—as they do in *The Font* (1930), *La Main (Les Remords de conscience)* (1930), *The Old Age of William Tell* (1931), and even *The First Days of Spring* (1929). As a monument has as one of its primary functions the preservation of memory (see 1931’s monument *Memory of the Child-Woman*), this perspective lends a compelling and more pessimistic reading of the painting that seems to contradict its title; in lieu of a grand and public monument, *The Persistence of Memory* substitutes a dead olive tree and dysfunctional watches in an otherwise barren landscape as the object of our focus and even reverence—what is there to remember? Considering the prevalence of the step/wall as a compositional strategy in Dalí’s work of this time (see, for example, *The Ghost of Vermeer of Delft Which Can Be Used as a Table* (1934)), it’s also not out of the question that its purpose in *The Persistence of Memory* is primarily formal rather than thematic.

## VI. EXHIBITION HISTORY

Dalí painted *The Persistence of Memory* in 1931 and showed it, along with 15 other paintings (including *Memory of the Child-Woman* and *Profanation of the Host*), seven pastels and a copper sculpture, at the Pierre Colle Gallery in Paris June 3-15 of that year. American Julien Levy, then on the verge of opening his own gallery in New York, bought *The Persistence of Memory* for \$250—more than he had ever paid for a single painting, describing it as “10 by 14 inches of Dalí dynamite” (Gibson, 339). Striking up a quick friendship, Colle and Levy decided that Levy should be the first person to put on a show by Dalí in New York; America was unaware both of Dalí and most of contemporary European painting (including Surrealism), and Levy was going to be one to help change that.

It took two years for Levy to arrange the first all-Dalí show this side of the Atlantic, but once he brought *The Persistence of Memory* back to the U.S., he kept it on the move. The Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, CT, which had recently done a show featuring “Super Realism,” was not only interested in opening a second, but was interested in including Dalí in a significant way. To these ends, Levy generously agreed to loan the group exhibition (*Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings and Photographs*) that he had been putting together for his own gallery. Greatly impressed both by *The Persistence of Memory* and other of Dalí’s work, the exhibition’s curator, James Thrall Soby titled the resulting show *Newer Super Realism* to help indicate the transformative effect that Dalí was having on the movement. *Newer Super Realism* included 8 paintings (including *The Persistence of Memory*, *Au bord de la mer*, and *Fantasies Diurnes*) and 2 drawings by Dalí and opened November 31, 1931. Despite the fact that the show included pieces by Ernst, Miró, de Chirico, Picasso, Duchamp, Man Ray and others, *The Persistence of Memory* was its indisputable star. Levy’s *Memoir of an Art Gallery* says that “Cartoons of it were in the more lurid tabloids” and “Journalists from coast to coast wrote stories about ‘Limp Watches’” (Gibson, 339).

After the success of *Newer Super Realism*, Levy offered to sell *The Persistence of Memory* to the Wadsworth for \$350, but director Chick Austin didn’t have the money; instead, he spent \$300 on *La Solitude*, making it the first Dalí to enter any museum’s collection. Levy returned to New York with *The Persistence of Memory* and the rest of his collection and opened *Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings and Photographs* which ran January 9-29, 1932. Until it was sold to a Museum of Modern Art trustee, Mrs. Stanley B. Resor (see Etherington-Smith, 153), sometime in the mid 30’s, Levy kept the painting moving. The Slater Memorial Museum included it in *Trends in Twentieth Century Painting* (April, 1932), the Wadsworth borrowed it back from Levy for *An Exhibition of Literature and Poetry in Painting Since 1850* (1933), and then it went on display at the Chicago World Fair (1933-34) (Gibson, 394). By the time that Levy finally realized his goal of hosting the first all-Dalí show this side of Spain (22 works from November 21—December 10, 1934), *The Persistence of Memory*’s melting watches were famous—so famous that André Masson wrote in a 1935 letter that “. . .it is certain that in New York they only have eyes for Dalí. . .” (Jeffett, “Surrealism in America,” 19).

Exactly when and how *The Persistence of Memory* landed in Resor's hands, and then when and how it ended up in MOMA's collection is a bit fuzzy. It's reasonable to assume that by the time MOMA included it in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* in 1936 (the year that Dalí appeared on the cover of *Time*), the piece was in the museum's permanent collection where it has remained ever since.

## VII. WHAT WAS DALI UP TO IN 1931?

Compared to 1929 and 1930, 1931 was a peaceful year for Dalí, and the successes of 1931 can be traced back to what was taking place two years before. Most importantly, perhaps, in 1929 Dalí met and fell in love with Gala Éluard who was ten years his senior and then married to Dalí's friend, the French poet Paul Éluard. The resulting courtship and burgeoning love affair between Dalí and Gala hardly seemed to bother Éluard, who was interested (as some surrealists were) in challenging the shape of personal relationships and the institution of marriage as well as contemporary art, literature, and politics. Dalí's father, on the other hand—a conservative and prominent man in town—was scandalized that his son would take up with a married woman of Gala's age. Dalí's relationship with his father had long been a difficult one, and the relationship with Gala strained it even more.

Dalí, however, was making great strides in his painting; *The First Days of Spring*, *The Lugubrious Game*, *Illumined Pleasures*, *Accommodations of Desire*, *The Great Masturbator*, and *Profanation of the Host*—some of the more challenging works in his *oeuvre*—were completed in 1929, and Dalí had his first one-man show, of eleven works, in Paris. He worked with college and filmmaker friend Luis Buñuel on the sensational, shocking, and surrealist short film *Un Chien Andalou*, and he officially declared himself a surrealist. In November, relations with his father reached a breaking point when Dalí exhibited *Sometimes I Spit With Pleasure on the Portrait of My Mother*. The final straw, Dalí was permanently exiled from the family home—an exile that would last for almost twenty years.

Apparently feeding off of his professional successes and the emotions springing from his tumultuous family life, Dalí made 1930 productive as well, travelling with Gala to Marseille, Cadaqués, Málaga, and living in Paris. He painted *The Invisible Man* and showed *The First Days of Spring* for the first time, and *L'Age D'or*, his second collaboration with Buñuel, hit the theaters. Shocked by the film's apparent blasphemy, theater crowds rioted and the film was subsequently banned for the next 59 years, becoming something of a rallying cry for the surrealist movement in the process.

Nineteen thirty-one, by comparison, was calm, dedicated in a large part to writing and painting and working with his new dealer—the Pierre Colle Gallery in Paris which would eventually show and sell *The Persistence of Memory*. Dalí formulated theories about Surrealist Objects, leading to the conception and creation of the Surrealist Object Functioning Symbolically (e.g., *The Shoe* and *Retrospective Bust of a Woman*) and maintained his position as the no-holds-barred golden child of the surrealist movement. Among the paintings of this time were *The Dream*, *The Old Age of William Tell*, and a series of very moody dream-landscapes like *Au Bord de la Mer*.

In 1932 and 1933, Dalí and Gala would move from Paris and establish a permanent residence in Port Lligat, near Dalí's childhood homes of Figueres and Cadaqués. The formation of the Zodiac Group, a wealthy group of patrons interested in Dalí's work, ensured the couple a certain measure of financial stability as Julien Levy and the

Wadsworth Atheneum were making sure that Dalí's paintings—and specifically *The Persistence of Memory*—were finding an American audience. During these years, Dalí's creativity was again running at full tilt: *Eggs on the Plate without the Plate*, *The Birth of Liquid Desires*, *Memory of the Child-Woman*, *The Enigma of William Tell*, *The Phantom Cart*, *Architectural Angeles of Millet*, *Soft Watches*, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, etc. In 1933, on the occasion of his first one-man show in the U.S., Dalí and Gala visited the United States for the first time—where *The Persistence of Memory* had been displayed at the Chicago World's Fair, where crowds were curious and welcoming, and where Dalí found himself, almost overnight, a celebrity.

## VIII. WHAT DID DALI HAVE TO SAY ABOUT MELTING WATCHES?

In *Conquest of the Irrational* Dalí remarked that “soft watches are nothing else than the tender, extravagant and solitary paranoiac-critical camembert of time and space.” He was just as straightforward with his remarks elsewhere, as well, commenting that “Like fillets of sole, they are destined to be swallowed by the sharks of time.” In his autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, we find the story behind how the painting came into existence:

It was on an evening when I felt tired, and had a slight headache, which is extremely rare with me. We were to go to a moving picture with some friends, and at the last moment I decided not to go. Gala would go with them, and I would stay home and go to bed early. We had topped off our meal with a strong Camembert, and after everybody had gone I remained a long time at the table meditating on the philosophic problems of the ‘super-soft’ which the cheese presented to my mind. I got up and went into my studio, where I lit the light in order to cast a final glance, as is my habit, at the picture I was in the midst of painting. This picture represented a landscape near Port Lligat, whose rocks were lighted by a transparent and melancholy twilight; in the foreground an olive tree with its branches cut, and without leaves. I knew that the atmosphere which I had succeeded in creating with this landscape was to serve as a setting for some idea, for some surprising image, but I did not in the least know what it was going to be. I was about to turn out the light, when instantaneously I ‘saw’ the solution. I saw two soft watches, one of them hanging lamentably on the branches of the olive tree. In spite of the fact that my headache had increased to the point of becoming very painful, I avidly prepared my palette and set to work. When Gala returned from the theater two hours later the picture, which was to become one of my most famous, was completed. I made her sit down in front of it with her eyes shut: ‘One, two, three, open your eyes!’ I looked intently at Gala’s face, and I saw upon it the unmistakable contraction of wonder and astonishment. This convinced me of the effectiveness of my new image, for Gala never errs in judging the authenticity of an enigma. [I asked her, “Do you think that in three years you will have forgotten this image?”

“No one can forget it once he has seen it.”

“Then let’s go and sleep. I have a severe head-ache. I’m going to take a little aspirin. What film did you see? Was it good?”

“I don’t know. . . I can’t remember it any more! (317-318)

In *The Secret Life*, Dalí then writes:

A few days later a bird flown from America bought my picture of “soft watches” which I had baptized *The Persistence of Memory*. This bird had large black wings like those of El Greco’s angels, and which one did not see, and was dressed in a white duck suit and a Panama hat which were quite visible. It was Julien Levy, who was subsequently to be the one to make my art known to the United States. He confessed to me that he considered my work very extraordinary, but

that he was buying it to use as propaganda, and to show it in his own house, for he considered it non-public and “unsalable.” It was nevertheless sold and resold until finally it was hung on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art, and was without doubt the picture which had the most complete “public success.” I saw it recopied several times in the provinces by amateur painters from photographs in black and white—hence with the most fanciful colors. It was also used to attract attention in the windows of vegetable and furniture shops! (318)

According to A. Reynolds Morse, co-founder of the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, Dalí “said that the famous soft watches in the MOMA was one of his quickest works, completed in less than five hours, in fact it was almost all done in the time Gala went to a movie! Simply brush in the sky, add a few details, and it was done, he said, making a brushing motion with his hands.”



## IX. TWENTY YEARS LATER: A REVISION

Between 1931 and 1952, a lot changed in Dalí's life. Displaced by both the Spanish Civil War and World War II, Dalí and Gala spent nearly a decade in exile in the United States where he worked with Disney and Hitchcock and applied his talents to fashion, costume and product design, book illustration, writing, public art, lectures, and to any number of publicity ventures, stunts and shenanigans. Between the end of World War II and the early 1950s, however, with the development of atomic physics and Watson and Crick's discovery of DNA structure, Dalí's sense of what art should do, what the artist should do, and what he should do, underwent significant changes—changes that would radically affect his artwork for the rest of his life.

Dalí returned to Spain in 1948, and it was a move that came at some cost. As Spain's most famous prodigal son, Dalí had to convince his countrymen and, more particularly, Franco's dictatorially Roman Catholic government, that he had mended his ways. This drove Dalí to what Ian Gibson calls "the most outrageous self-publicity campaign of his life" (515). Dalí had an audience with Pope Pius XII in 1949 and subsequently converted to Roman Catholicism, producing *The Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949) and *The Christ of St. John of the Cross* (1950). He was delivering speeches like "Why I was Sacrilegious, why I am a Mystic" (1950) and formulating—out of a desire to "become classic"—what he called his "nuclear mysticism." Nuclear mysticism's mixture of physics, math, science, religion, art history, and Spanish culture was to stress technique, rebirth, faith and tradition. Dalí saw God revealed in the infinitely complex world of atomic matter, in mathematical ratios such as the golden section and golden ratio, and in the golden spirals of the DNA molecule and rhinoceros horn. He increasingly saw himself as following in the tradition of court painters like Diego Velázquez and, combining art history with Spanish culture, he attempted to express his new philosophy in his paintings. Some of these paintings—what would later come to be known as his "masterworks" on the basis of their sheer size—are enormous canvases up to 13 feet high. In his "Anti-Matter Manifesto," Dalí wrote: "In the surrealist period I wanted to create the iconography of the interior world—the world of the marvelous, of my father Freud. I succeeded in doing it. Today the exterior world—that of physics—has transcended the one of psychology. My father today is Dr. Heisenberg."

*The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* is much too small (10 x 13 inches, about the size of the 1931 painting) to be considered a "masterwork," but its content vis-à-vis *The Persistence of Memory* makes it a pivotal painting in Dalí's career. Originally titled *The Corpuscular Persistence of Memory* and then re-titled *The Chromosome of a Highly Colored Fish Eye Starting the Harmonious Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, the painting deconstructs the original only to construct its underlying structure. Robert Lubar explains:

Dalí has dismantled his earlier surrealist masterpiece at the figurative level, pulling back the skin of the distant seascape to reveal a new structure that is meant to visualize quantum mechanics. An elaborate perspectival grid of rectangular blocks—the meticulous work of Dalí's studio assistant, Emilio

Puignau—represents the disintegration and reintegration of matter in relation to the space/time continuum, while the limp watches persist as a reminder of Dalí's earlier conception of the temporal dimension as the expression of desire and the drives. (136)

The overwhelming structure of the painting tends to push some of the original elements of *The Persistence of Memory* to the distance. "The phenomenon of time," Fanning remarks:

. . . is more irrelevant than ever in the new order of time and space ground about by nuclear physics. The psychological realm of the unconscious, and the hallucinatory vision of 'paranoiac-critical activity,' is here merged with Dalí's new enthusiasm for contemporary scientific thought." (92)

Kenneth Wach claims that "The inner world of the subjective mind was now subsumed by the inner world of matter itself" (100). A. Reynolds Morse argues that the painting's scientific content "minimizes its oneiric quality somewhat" (174), and Nathaniel Harris picks up on this as well when he calls what's left of Dalí's self portrait "a transparent, near-extinct version of the self" (70). All things, the painting seems to be saying—even the persistence of memory—are overcome by, or incorporated into, one atomic reality.

At the same time that certain elements of the original painting are "subsumed," *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* compensates for the loss in a variety of ways. One feels a certain forgiveness in the removal of the steps, in the segmentation and levitation of the olive tree, and in the coloration of the self-portrait. Flooded with water, the original painting's ants and flies have been replaced by a fish, and what was once a barren brown beach is now almost glowing with fertile blues, greens and yellows. The still life is no longer still, and even the limp watches don't hang as limply as they do in the original. Indeed, Wach observes, "The small pearl that accompanies Dalí into this submarine world hints at the wisdom to be found in these depths, an apt allusion for an artist who was always proud of having been born on a street named after the inventor of the submarine" (100).

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