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Wadsworth Atheneum Exhibition Examines the Impact of War on Surrealist Imagery

Hartford, Conn. (Aug. 29, 2018) – The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art will present Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s, the first major exhibition to examine how European and American artists depicted their experiences of conflict through monsters and mythic figures. The horrors of war propelled Surrealist artists to pursue these iconographies. The exhibition chronicles the emergence of particular themes that reference the political chaos of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Co-organized with The Baltimore Museum of Art, Monsters and Myths brings together 64 works of art by artists including Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, André Masson, Joan Miró, Wolfgang Paalen, and Yves Tanguy. The exhibition opens Oct. 20, 2018 and continues through Jan. 13, 2019.

“In the 1930s and 1940s, Surrealists saw their worst nightmares become reality,” says Susan Morse Hilles Curator of European Art Oliver Tostmann. “Facing despair, displacement, and destruction, they turned to ancient mythologies to express their anxieties and overcome the turmoil of their time. Images of gods, heroes, and monsters are still an understudied, yet crucial part of the Surrealist imagination.”

Classical mythology offered fertile inspiration for Surrealists to represent their own experience of war and conflict. Some had served as soldiers in World War I and found themselves in a cycle of violence and turmoil with the rise of Hitler and the spread of Fascism in Europe. Many artists
became refugees and fled to safety in the Americas, bringing with them their fascination in gods, heroes, monsters, and the folklore of the past.

Both the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and The Baltimore Museum of Art were at the forefront of promoting Surrealist art in the United States. Upon arriving in America via New York City, some of the Surrealists travelled the country during the war years, attracted by its sheer vastness. Many eventually chose to live and work in rural areas close to New York, such as Litchfield County, Connecticut. In Hartford they found a welcoming institution in the Wadsworth Atheneum, which exhibited them and purchased work for the collection. They found inspiration in the landscape of their new surroundings. Artists like André Masson and Max Ernst combined the mythological with imagery from the American countryside, incorporating images of the animal and plant life they encountered and turning their attention to nature and the cosmos. The work of the displaced European artists influenced young American artists such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Dorothea Tanning, who began experimenting with some of the same subjects and artistic techniques.

“Each age confronts its political and social challenges through the arts,” says Dr. Thomas J. Loughman, Ph.D., Director and CEO of the Wadsworth Atheneum. “In the case of the Surrealists—dissident resisters who became refugees—we see a bold effort to summon the memory of Europe’s founding legends through a radical repurposing of realist forms. This exhibition couldn’t be more timely, and illuminating, given the entropy and anxiety of today.”


Public Program Highlights
Tours of Monsters & Myths are offered Saturdays and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. from Oct. 27, 2018–Jan. 13, 2019. Free lectures include “The Marketing of Surrealism” a look at the advertising and design enterprises of Surrealist artists by Sandra Zalman, professor of art history at the University of Houston, Oct. 25, 5 p.m. reception, 6 p.m. lecture. “Wallace Stevens and Surrealism” by University of Connecticut professor Glen Macleod will explore the influence of Surrealist art on Hartford poet Wallace Stevens, Nov. 14, 3 p.m. at the UConn-Hartford campus in The Hartford Times Building, Room 145. A screening of the silent film Nosferatu with live music performed by Donald Sosin and Joanna Seaton will be presented Nov. 4, 3 p.m., $20/$15 Members. Gallery talks with curator Oliver Tostmann at noon on Oct. 26 and 28. “Surrealism in Exile,” a gallery talk with curators Frauke Josenhans of Yale University Art Gallery and Oliver Tostmann of the Wadsworth takes place on Dec. 13 at noon. Visit thewadsworth.org for a full schedule of programs and events.

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**About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**
Founded in 1842, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is the oldest continuously operating public art museum in the United States. The museum’s nearly 50,000 works of art span 5,000 years, from Greek and Roman antiquities to the first museum collection of American contemporary art. The Wadsworth Atheneum’s five connected buildings—representing architectural styles from Gothic Revival to modern International Style—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Hours: Wednesday–Friday: 11 a.m.–5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday: 10 a.m.–5 p.m. Admission: $5–15; discounts for members, students and seniors. Free admission for Hartford residents with Wadsworth Welcome registration. Free “happy hour” admission 4–5 p.m. Public phone: (860) 278-2670; website: thewadsworth.org.

**Image:** Max Ernst, *Europe After the Rain II*, 1940–42. Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.

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