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# The Clothed, the Naked, and the Exposed Subconscious Sexuality in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Surrealism

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### Abstract

During the twentieth century, Surrealism boomed as one of the central art movements of Europe. Andre Breton and his cohorts became well known and promoted the movement first in literature, and then in artwork. Surrealist artistic endeavors became a catalyst for discussing taboo topics, such as sex, that could not normally be voiced during the early twentieth century. Throughout this time, numerous artists were producing art riddled with the themes of sexuality and desire, and one way that the Surrealists did so was through the use of clothing. For this particular project, Salvador Dali, Meret Oppenheim, and Toyen are used as examples of subconscious sexuality as seen in the representations of clothing in three works: Dali's The Great Masturbator (1929), Oppenheim's My Nurse (1936), and Toyen's Relache (1943). These artists were chosen on their basis of sexuality as case studies: male, female, and un-gendered. All three of these artists came to be interpreted using the theories of Sigmund Freud. Indeed, he became the impetus behind interpreting these works within the context of subconscious manifestations of the artists' internal sexual desires. Also, primary documentation on fashion from the early 1900s is utilized as part of understanding the artists' choices in clothing throughout the artwork, which leads to understanding of their unconscious sexuality. Therefore, the described questions are: does clothing in the work of these three artists reflect their sexual desires, as described in their biographies, whether obvious or not? How do their sexual cravings intertwine with Freudian theory on sexuality? It is argued and concluded from this research that in looking at clothing in the art of these three artists with a Freudian, psychoanalytic lens, that their subconscious desires are revealed in ways not reflected in their biographies.

#### Keywords: Surrealism, Sexuality, Freud

# **1. Introduction**

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Surrealism became a worldwide phenomenon. Surrealist artists were attacking the rationalism of the West<sup>1</sup> by thwarting the ideals of science, progress, comfort, and success for values anchored instead in what the art historians Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood describe as "the underside of modernity, the erotic, bizarre, the unconscious material of mental life."<sup>2</sup> Andre Breton spoke of the idea of "psychic automatism in its pure state" where Surrealists worked towards forcing the unconscious out into the realities of their artwork.<sup>3</sup> Salvador Dali, Meret Oppenheim, and the artist known as Toyen attempted to tap into the subconscious by producing innumerable works of art that expressed a radical, erotic nature. These artists, who are categorized as male, female, and un-gendered, represent three case studies. They masked their own desire with overt references to the theories of Sigmund Freud, and he became the impetus behind interpreting these works as subconscious manifestations of the artists' sexual desires. Through the use of primary sources on clothing as well as Freudian analysis, a dialogue appears about brooding sexuality within these artists. Historically, clothing has been an integral part of society and socio-cultural identity through the modernization and industrialization of Western society. Clothing historian Anne Hollander has noted that "it might seem right to think of clothes as entirely social and

psychological phenomena, as tangible as three-dimensional emotions, manners, or habits."<sup>4</sup> During the time period these artists were working within, European and American fashion were mirroring each other, as a result of globalization. Therefore, using American primary documentation helps in contemplating the fashion being worn in the European countries as well. In looking at clothing within these three case studies, the unseen sexual desires that manifest themselves in artistic expression appear in the way that artists perceive clothing and what that means to the artists themselves. In this context, Surrealist endeavors become a catalyst for speaking about gender and sexuality in a way that otherwise could not be found in the early twentieth century and which still is germane today.

## 2. Salvador Dali's Rape Of Verities

Painted by Dali in 1929, *The Great Masturbator* (Figure 1) features what appears to be a female form, whose own body is covered by an abstract portrait of Dali, which he used in other paintings such as *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). This portrait encapsulates the woman's frame, hiding all of her anatomical body parts. Her face is then gracefully lifting towards the clothed male genitalia, as if about to perform a sexual act. The male figure is clothed in a pair of small underwear, hiding his unerect penis. What does this painting say about Dali's life and sexuality?

Salvador Dali was born in 1904 in Spain and as a young boy, he "began to use his mother's cosmetics...as well as biting his lips to make them appear red."<sup>5</sup> He quite fervently said that he loved women and that they were "miraculously beautiful,"<sup>6</sup> however, his queer persona burst upon the scene when he described his "false memories" in his biography. These memories involved him having relationships with a boy named Buchaques and a girl named Galuchka at a young age. Even throughout his life, Dali had an atypical relationship with his wife, Gala, who he married in 1934. Dali tried to impress her with affection by putting flowers in his hair and painting his entire body with blood and fish glue. Dali even stated that he "became her newborn, her child, her son, her lover."<sup>7</sup> However, Gala was not Dali's only sexual relationship from the world. According to accounts and accusations made by Alain Bosquet, "Lorca was very much in love with [Dali]" and the painter had explicitly said: "one day I gave in to his desires. We tried it…It hurt me and we had to stop."<sup>8</sup> Sex, Surrealism, Dali and Me: The Memoirs of Carlos Lorzano records another homosexual relationship between Dali and Carlos Lorzano, where it stated that Dali "liked to watch. He liked to masturbate. And, sometimes, though not often, he liked to do both at once."<sup>9</sup>

*The Great Masturbator* speaks directly to Dali's described homosexual tendencies in the context of clothing. First of all, this woman is completely clothed in Dali's own portrait, hiding her anatomical body and anything that could be considered sexual about her. She is also covered in Dali's facial portrait, which creates this "woman" figure as being draped in a male countenance. This symbol of a silhouette, according to articles on Dalian symbols, stated that they stand not only for "psychological shadows" but also "inner conflicts and inhibitions, imagination, fantasy, and dreams."<sup>10</sup> The bleeding of the knees, and the locust (which Dali was extremely afraid of) symbolize fear and inhibitions, but not as forcefully as the portrayal of clothing on these figures. However, the clothed aspect that stands out the most is a white pair of shorts, which hides Dali's overtly unerect penis. Dali is not only hiding her body, but shielding himself from sexual contact with her.

Under the identification of the piece of clothing as male underwear, the historic significance becomes relevant. During this time period, men's underwear was being revolutionized from a type of long underwear, to a type of brief that was tighter and more convenient.<sup>11</sup> In 1911, the revolutionary and controversial ad was released created by J.C. Leyendecker of the Cooper Bennington Union suit, which was called "Man on a Bag" (Figure 2). This began to crop up everywhere in advertisements and all over the world as the new way to see men's underwear, as seen in this advertisement (Figure 3), which eventually lead to shorter, smaller briefs for men beginning in the 1910s-1920s. Shaun Cole expressed in his article "Considerations on a Gentleman's Posterior," that advertising in this manner with the male posterior on display raised homosexual fears of over sexualizing the male figure.<sup>12</sup> These advertisements become relevant to the discussion of Dali's piece, which came out 16 years after these revolutionary changes were being made to male undergarments. What, if anything, does this historical information present about Dali and his subconscious?

This painting hints at an inner unconscious sexuality that was being concealed from conventional society. Freud's work itself became part of bashing homosexual desires as well as a criticism of sexuality that was common at the time. Freud even went as far as to say in his work *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory* that these people were "called contrary sexual, or better, inverts; that is there form the actualities of inversion."<sup>13</sup> Part of the early 1900s involved a society that did not accept homosexuality or any stray from "typical" sexuality norms. Freud even said directly in one of his texts that for those who were sexual inverts (homosexuals) "masturbation is quite as frequently their exclusive aim, and it is ever true that restrictions on sexual aim."<sup>14</sup> Masturbation has frequently been

condemned sexually and not discussed as normative. It was "even more strongly condemned than heterosexual excess: it was said to lead to a whole range of diseases, including insanity, not only in the practitioner, but even in his descendants."<sup>15</sup> This appearance of the clothing covering his genitals, coupled with the covering of the female, points to Dali hiding his homosexual lifestyle. Although Dali himself is a difficult character to understand and perceive, his paintings and biographical information released by others, demonstrate these homosexual tendencies.

## 3. Meret Oppenheim's Constroversial Lust

While Dali continued his work with controversial homosexual images, Meret Oppenheim was making ones of her own. The most illuminating of all the pieces she created on sexuality is *My Nurse* (1936), also called *Ma gouvernante* (Figure 4). This image presents two, white women's shoes, which "are tied together and presented like a cooked goose on a platter."<sup>16</sup> These shoes, which sit upside down on the glistening platter, are frozen in time, unable to move. What did this simple sculpture of two shoes say about Oppenheim?

Just like Dali, Meret Oppenheim's obsession with dreams and sexuality was part of her everyday existence, even as a child. Born in Germany in 1913, she "began to keep a record of her more important dreams - a custom she retained throughout her life."<sup>17</sup> Not only was she part of a distinct psychoanalytic tradition, but she was also influenced by her grandmother, a vocal suffragette.<sup>18</sup> In the United States, women were just beginning to gain the right to vote, while women's suffrage in Europe would not be attained until 1971. As her career began in 1936 with the creation of Le dejeuner en fourrure, so did the world's controversial view of her. In the 1930s, Oppenheim was photographed by Man Ray, who challenged her sexuality as a frilly, female creature. The photographs featured Oppenheim "naked beside an etching press in the studio of painter Louis Marcoussis [which bespoke] the double bind of women artists within surrealism."<sup>19</sup> These photographs were released in 1934 as part of this Veiled Erotic series by Man Ray. Oppenheim had created this "blurring of gender boundaries [which] attained heightened visibility in the androgynous icon of the New Woman,"20 emphasizing a type of gender reversal. The most well known of the images, (Figure 5), shows Oppenheim standing behind the cast iron printing press, while "the handle, in particular, arms the female body with a detachable phallus, a pointer to the ways in which the privileged signifier of sexual difference was now 'up for grabs."<sup>21</sup> Surrealism itself had had difficulties in promoting equality, as "its metaphors were erotic, its attitudes misogynist.<sup>22</sup> She hoped that in "playfully avoid[ing] a model that privileged the male gender,"<sup>23</sup> that she had created a new sect in Surrealism that respected the female gender.

*My Nurse*, which is often compared with *The Couple* (1956) (Figure 6), stands as an example of Oppenheim's drive to promote feminist intentions in clothing. The 1920s fashion world, according to Hollander, was well known for its "shoes [that] had higher heels then ever"<sup>24</sup> and the idea that "comfort...in clothing is a mental rather than physical condition."<sup>25</sup> Even in a Sears, Roebuck and Company catalog, this company displayed shoes stating that women could now be "walkers with a youthful flair."<sup>26</sup> The implications of these shoes were that "women are not supposed to move; they should stand still and do what they are told,"<sup>27</sup> which were ironic with the Sears, Roebuck and Company catalog statements that they were "light weight foot freedom." Scholars state that *My Nurse* "seems to work within the framework of fetishism, and to suggest...some form of entrapment."<sup>29</sup>

In 1982, Oppenheim would go on to explain *My Nurse* in her own words, stating "that this object 'evokes for me the association of thighs squeezed together in pleasure. In fact, almost a "proposition."<sup>30</sup> Oppenheim also associated these shoes with a nursemaid she had as a child. However, Oppenheim did not use nurses' shoes to create this piece. Images such as (Figure 7) show images of typical female nurse uniforms from the early 1900s during World War I, and their clunky, awkward shoes. Oppenheim's shoes are dainty and that everyday women of the early 1900s would have worn. She was not attempting to necessarily represent any particular "nurse" or "nursemaid," but to instead evoke and speak to the larger population of women who were under this sexual and fashionable submission.

Within the context of the photos by Man Ray, Oppenheim would be interpreted by Freud as having penis envy, which represented the desire for females to have their own penis and to admit "the superiority of the male and her own inferiority."<sup>31</sup> This, of course, was destroyed when Oppenheim represented herself as having a penis, equalizing herself to her male counterparts. Freud also comes into play with Oppenheim's *My Nurse*. In his 11<sup>th</sup> volume, he writes a section so called "Taboo Virginity." Freud describes a woman who is placed in "sexual bondage," which describes "the phenomenon of a person's acquiring an unusually high degree of dependence and lack of self-reliance in relation to another person with whom he has a sexual relationship."<sup>32</sup> After this person has become part of this "bondage," they lose all "independent will…as far as causing a person to suffer the greatest sacrifices of his own interests."<sup>33</sup> This bondage is represented as the two shoes are tied together. Within this fight for female sexual freedom, Oppenheim promoted a feminist perspective, even as her qualities of beauty, youth, and rebellion "were

stereotyped and stylized not only by the Surrealists but by art critics of the day, who barely gave mention to Oppenheim's work."<sup>34</sup> According to what is known about her personal life, she captivated the male Surrealist artists, such as Albert Giacometti, Man Ray, Kurt Sligmann, and she eventually married Wolfgang La Rouche. However, Oppenheim herself believed that gender was fluid and unstable,<sup>35</sup> which was a theme in her artwork. Oppenheim was part of a discourse that threatened males, and "lesbianism likewise [is] seen as threatening to male superiority because the women who engage in it appear not to need men."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the ability to say that she had lesbian tendencies is still a topic open for further discussion.

#### 4. Toyen's Genderless Deliverance

As Oppenheim grappled with female sexuality during the Surrealist movement, Toyen, a self proclaimed "genderless" individual, produced innumerable works of art that were gender specific such as collages of female clothing (Figure 8) and also *Relache*, painted in 1943 (Figure 9). *Relache* meaning "respite' or 'relax"<sup>37</sup> holds many sparse images. A young girl hangs from a bar, with her body dramatically and unrealistic static in the air. The folds of her skirt hang over her head and her upper body, allowing only her torso and legs to be revealed. This ominous setting with this girl of "pale virginal skin and props (sack and riding crop) frighteningly real and highly evocative of what might be coming."<sup>38</sup> This image expresses a sense of mysterious innocence, especially with her white clothing trimmed in gold. What does this image say about Toyen's sexual expression?

Marie Cerminova, who named herself "Toyen," was born in 1902 in the Czech Republic. "She turned her back on her family while still an adolescent, baptized herself with an obscure and genderless patronymic that may or may not derive from the French word for citizen, *citoyen*, and joined the anarchist milieu in Prague."<sup>39</sup> During this time, the Czech president had "asserted suffrage and equal educational rights for women in 1918 that helped to change the role of women in the Czech…society."<sup>40</sup> Toyen became "the first woman artist who broke into the bastions of maledominated artistic circles."<sup>41</sup> She was fascinated with Surrealism and became part of this movement, dramatically representing female sexuality and taboos. In the Czech Republic, many artists were focused upon "early twentieth-century sex-reformist efforts"<sup>42</sup> in which they had gained interest in sexuality, including "contraception, abortion, venereal diseases, marriage counseling, divorce laws, and rights for unwed mothers and their children and for homosexuals."<sup>43</sup> Toyen, along with this group, were fighting against a European ideal of Surrealism, where Breton "had claimed in 1928 that he opposed homosexuality."<sup>44</sup>

Through this, Toyen's sexuality as a "female" was considered nonexistent. During the artist's early work in 1922, she had "claimed an attraction to women, and was both very popular with and an object of unrequited love among her male peers."<sup>45</sup> However, after a few years, she decided she lacked a gender, "appropriating the gender neutral pseudonym and referring to herself as 'he," the artist often wore men's suits."<sup>46</sup> However, over time numerous scholars have attempted to recreate her heterosexual persona, stating that she was married to her artistic partner Jindrich Styrsky. Nevertheless, the majority still believe in her desire to remain sexless, as she thwarted ideals that sexuality is "natural,' innate, and instinctual."<sup>47</sup> However, "secretive about any actual sexual relationships she may have had with either men or women, she was never secretive about desire itself…Toyen explored themes of sexual fantasy and transgression, presenting viewers with scenes of orgies, lesbian encounters, [and] phallic toys."<sup>48</sup>

In Toyen's day and age, just like Dali's, underwear for women had experienced a drastic change with the appearance of the flapper who could no longer live with the crotchless, baggy underwear of the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries (Figure 10). Therefore, more fitted underwear became part of the new female wardrobe. Corsets made a famous reappearance as they were "simply remodeled; pressure was applied by tough elastic material rather than wholly by steel and canvas."<sup>49</sup> These girdles (Figure 11) would continue to be highly popular until the 1950s and were even ridiculously described by the Sears, Roebuck and Company Catalogue as being "comfortable support plus freedom of action."<sup>50</sup>

In much of Toyen's work during this time period, she was using "female attire...[to] signify the female body and female sexuality"<sup>51</sup> especially with floating garments and "stressing emptiness, fragmentation, and a sense of phantasmatic horror."<sup>52</sup> In *Relache*, Toyen chose to depict one of the less popular pieces of underwear during this time, which was a more simple form of underwear with a loose fitting camisole so that the image of the female," except for the small golden "dainty lingerie details"<sup>53</sup> and flowing lace. So, although female sexuality, even in her choice of more sexless underwear for the time period. In this way, she recombined and re-gendered the figure<sup>54</sup> showing her own sexual idealization.

In this context, Toyen stands as an artist who delved into female and male sexuality, while she avoided defining herself. She took pleasure in all parts of the body, including the phallic object on many occasions, but mostly she focused on the female body. Freud discussed "a woman who has felt herself to be a man, has loved in masculine fashion, will hardly let herself be forced into playing the part of a woman, when she must pay for this transformation, which is not in every way advantageous."<sup>55</sup> For Freud and many of this time period, it was considered perversion or neurosis<sup>56</sup> to be considered outside the gender and Freud described a group of people who had a "kind of inversion [that] lacks the characteristic of exclusiveness."<sup>57</sup> Toyen's sexuality is hidden by these silk garments that promote an ungendered creature lying underneath.

# 5. Discussion And Conclusion

Sexuality within Surrealism is constantly being revealed and revisited as the sexuality of those involved becomes exposed and reinterpreted. Salvador Dali, Toyen, and Meret Oppenheim hid their sexuality in a time when it was difficult to express their true sexual intentions. Dali and his painting *The Great Masturbator* would have been interpreted by Freud as part of the realm of homosexuality and inversion, seen even through early twentieth century advertisements. Meret Oppenheim and *My Nurse* would have been seen by Freud as generally part of female culture fighting against a male dominated artistic field, and specifically as part of lesbian culture. And, finally, Toyen would have been considered by Freud as a genderless being, unwilling to admit her hidden sexuality to others, as seen through her painting *Relache* and many other works of art. These sexualities, as interpreted by Freud, stayed hidden for many years in these paintings derived from pure automatism and the unconscious strokes. In the context of these paintings, clothing itself is a metaphor for the body and inner persona as all of these artists utilized this motif as a way to express their unconscious sexuality, whether obvious to them at the time or not. Surrealism would continue to blossom until the 1950s, when it began to diminish in popularity. Although these artists continued to make works of art, the movement faded from Europe as others took its place. However, Surrealism left its lasting impression on the world and its sexual nature would not be forgotten or ignored.

# 6. Images

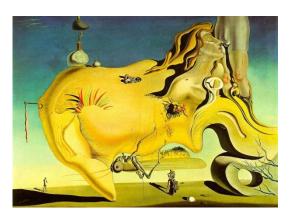


Figure 1. Salvador Dali, *The Great Masturbator*, 1929



Figure 2. J.C. Leyendecker, "Man on a Bag" Advertisement for Copper Benninton Union Suit, 1911



Figure 3. Ad Poroskint Underwear for Chalmers Knitting Clothes, 1910



Figure 4. Meret Oppenheim, My Nurse, 1963



Figure 5. Man Ray Featuring Meret Oppenhim, *Veiled Erotic Series*, 1934



Figure 6. Meret Oppenheim, *The Couple, 1956* 



Figure 7. WW! Nurse's Uniform, with cape



Figure 8. Toyen Clothing Collage



Figure 9. Toyen *Relache*, 1943

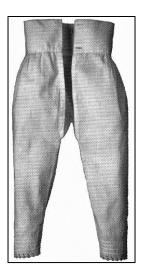




Figure 10. Crotchless Underware, 1800-Early 1900s

Figure 11. Girdle, 1930s

# 7. Notes

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