The birth of Surrealism was inextricably linked to literature. For many surrealist artists, painting and sculpture shared the same nature as prose and poetry, in the way they revealed the deepest emotions and psychological processes. One of the major artists was Joan Miró, whose works in the 1920s exemplified this blurring of the boundaries between drawing and writing and between the visual and the poetic.

Les champs magnetiques, signed by André Breton (1896–1966) and Philippe Soupault (1897–1990) in 1920, was the founding text for the surrealist corpus. In it the authors proposed exploring an uninterrupted form of language, sensing that thought unobstructed by reason in stream-of-consciousness ends up revealing what really wants to be expressed through a kind of magnetic relationship among the imagination’s different creative connections. André Breton elaborated on the importance of this “automatism” in the first surrealist manifesto in 1924, in which he defined poetic surrealism and argued against control exerted by reason. Influenced by Sigmund Freud’s writings, Breton defended the mastery of free, creative associations that operate beyond the immediate control of consciousness.

The birth of Surrealism was highly influenced by literature, demonstrated in these artists’ numerous declarations asserting that painting and sculpting were little more than the material consequences of poetry. The first surrealist exhibition was held in 1925 at the Galerie Pierre in Paris, bringing together artists such as Max Ernst (1891–1976), Jean Arp (1886–1966), André Masson (1896–1987), Paul Klee (1879–1940), Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Joan Miró (1893–1983), among others. Many of them were contributors to the journal Littérature, which published literary works from the movement’s members and included writings by Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Apollinaire and the Count of Lautréamont. These poets constituted one of the greatest points of reference for the French surrealist movement, and their works formed part of bedtime reading for Miró, who participated passionately in debates organized around the journal. Miró held intense exchanges with this group of poets and even affirmed that he was more influenced by their experimentation with poetry than he was by that of other painters.

Although Miró’s work inherits automatism from writing and at times evokes states of hypnosis, its visual and poetic impetus aims at turning painting into a kind of writing formally linked to poetry. For this reason, his oeuvre is what best identifies with the thesis forwarded in The Magnetic Fields as a new proposal for language, communication and meaning. The artist demonstrates this intention by asserting, “I do not differentiate between poetry and painting.”

The works Miró produced from 1923 to 1928 laid down the foundations for his painting’s relationship to poetry. Miró achieved a high degree of poetic and artistic elaboration when developing his works from this period, primarily due to the rewarding contact he maintained in prior years with visual poetry, which supported his convictions that painting is not easily distinguishable from poetry and that his own work could even include poetic words and phrases. Similarly to Breton and Soupault, Miró makes his viewers aware that all representation is nothing more than a form of language, and he shows the mechanisms for which this comes about on his canvases. The paintings are shot through with a question of constructing space that is not conceived in terms of illusion—an illusion that attempts to mask the fact that it is entirely impossible to represent something “just like it is.” By adopting this position, Miró distances painting from the domain of mimesis and moves closer to that of the sign; his paintings turn into colorful fields with a system of juxtaposed signs that, in the painter’s own words, “rhyme” within themselves.
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One of the main media used by the avant-garde between the wars was collage. This room presents a selection of the work of three outstanding representatives of the history of Spanish collage: Benjamín Palencia, Adriano del Valle and Nicolás de Lekuona, who took the language of modernity and cultivated photo-collage in a remarkable way.

Surrealist Photography and Collage in Spain

Together with photography and cinema, collage was one of the primary tools used in modern visual culture and in the new aesthetic of urban societies during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Avant-garde photography began to experiment with new ideas and cultivate different strategies for producing images. Collage and photomontage allowed artists to change the meanings of individual images by juxtaposing them with others, constituting a new visual world that did not lose its representational fragments or narrative intentions.

Photography collage and photomontage experienced their first peak at the core of Dadaism in the interwar period. The fine arts scene in Berlin, which included George Grosz (1893–1959), John Heartfield (1891–1968), Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971), Hannah Höch (1889–1978) and Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), rediscovered these media to explore their potential as a creative format for representing formal-aesthetic proposals and their interests in political propaganda. These media and its genres turned into an effective vehicle within the surrealist project for their equivalence to creative exercises in automatism proposed by André Breton. Ultimately, they fostered Surrealism’s purely experimental spirit, as was the case for Max Ernst (1891–1976).

Avant-garde ideas were assimilated into 1930s Spain, whereby photography ceased to be a medium for objective representation alone and turned into a modern tool of subjective exploration. Photo collage, photomontage and other novel resources in photography were used as political propaganda, as they were in the rest of Europe, as a form of social critique and also for advertising and illustrations. Spanish artists attracted to the new language of photography came from different camps. Photographers like Pere Català Pic (1889–1971), Josep Masana (1894–1979) and Emili Godes (1895–1970) evolved from Pictorialism, while artists coming from other media, such as painting or architecture, decided to experiment with photography. Standing out among painters who added photography to their creative repertoire are Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), Benjamín Palencia (1894–1980), Remedios Varo (1908–1963), Nicolás de Lekuona (1913–1937) and Josep Renau (1907–1982), who continued to develop and perfect photomontage’s potential in subsequent years.

The multifaceted, Sevillian artist and poet Adriano del Valle (1895–1957) is a good example of what became of the Spanish avant-garde in the 1920s and 30s. An admirer of Max Ernst and a pioneer of collage arts in Spain together with Alfonso Buñuel (1915–1961), he would extract images from prints in old catalogs, anatomy books and laboratory materials to combine them with imaginatively expressive components that led him to create surreal, poetic images.

Likewise, Benjamín Palencia approaches the surreal in his collages for their dreamlike content and aesthetic affinities. He was already experimenting with photo collage by the 1920s, even though he achieved his most interesting results in the series he produced for *Cruz y Raya* magazine in 1935. Nevertheless, this endeavor is the least known facet of his work.

A selection of Nicolás de Lekuona’s work is exhibited here—both his straightforward, precise and pure photography and his photo collages—in which viewers can appreciate the signature features of his work. His indebtedness to Dadaism, Russian Constructivism and New Vision photography with influences from Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956) and
László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), are evident in these works, which demonstrate his clear desire for experimental research that breaks away from conventions. The poetic, melancholic and unsettling vein in his photography is also owed to the most avant-garde trends in cinema. Due to unknown motives for barely noticeable reasons, his compositions seduce viewers for both the manner in which they are framed and their chosen subject matters: masks as alter egos, hat blocks, pipes, and bloodied self-portraits. His photographs stand in contrast to his photo collages, generally formed by images cutout of magazines, while some of them were created with fragments of photographs taken with his own camera.

The works exhibited in this room affiliated with the surrealist movement brush against dreamlike fantasy, reflecting these artists’ ability to choose and compose images in line with international photography at the time. Constructed by contrasting forms, unexpected juxtapositions between images, plays on sizing and scale, de-contextualized referents, different points of view and pencil drawings, these images explore an imaginary world and stimulate the unconscious. They are characterized by a heightened ability to convey ideas and relate very different stories than those told by photographs alone.

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