



MAGRITTE

L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES

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Property from The Gillion Crowet Collection

◦ **RENÉ MAGRITTE**

1898 – 1967

L'empire des lumières

signed *Magritte* (lower right);
signed *Magritte* and titled on the reverse
oil on canvas
114.5 by 146cm., 45 by 57½in.

Painted in 1961.

‡ ⓘ Estimate upon request

PROVENANCE

Acquired from the artist in 1961

EXHIBITED

L'Aquila, Castello Spagnolo, *Alternative attuali 2, rassegna internazionale di pittura - scultura - grafica: Omaggio a Magritte: opere 1920-1963*, 1965, illustrated in the catalogue (titled *L'Empire des Lumières (version III)*)
Charleroi, Palais des Beaux-Arts, *Tricentenaire de la ville de Charleroi: peintres et sculpteurs*, 1966, no. 82
Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, *Magritte*, 1998, no. 209, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Barcelona, Fundació Joan Miró, *Magritte*, 1998-99, no. 32, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Santiago, Museo Nacional Bellas Artes, *René Magritte, Paul Nougé, Subversión de las imágenes*, 1999, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Humblebæk, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art; Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery of Art & San Francisco, Museum of Modern Art, *Magritte*, 1999-2000, no. 71 (Humblebæk & Edinburgh), exhibition catalogue published in *Louisiana Revy*, vol. 39, no. 3, August 1999, a detail illustrated in colour on the cover; no. 59 (San Francisco), a detail illustrated in colour on the cover & illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Rome, Complesso del Vittoriano, *Magritte: La storia centrale*, 2001, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Paris, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, *Magritte*, 2003, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Vienna, BA-CA Kunstforum & Basel, Fondation Beyeler, *René Magritte. Der Schlüssel der Träume*, 2005, no. 89, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Como, Villa Olmo, *René Magritte, l'impero delle luci*, 2006, a detail illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Seoul, Seoul Museum of Art, *René Magritte: Empire of Dreams*, 2006-07, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Milan, Palazzo Reale, *Magritte, Il Mistero della natura*, 2008-09, illustrated in colour in the catalogue
Brussels, Musée Magritte (on loan 2009 - 2020)

LITERATURE

Letter from Magritte to Torczyner, 6th February 1961
Letter from Magritte to Torczyner, 10th April 1961
A.M. Hammacher, *René Magritte*, New York, 1973, no. 25, illustrated p. 24 (titled *L'Empire des lumières VII*)
Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, New York, 1977, no. 383, illustrated p. 178
Harry Torczyner, *L'Ami Magritte. Correspondance et souvenirs*, Antwerp, 1992, letters nos. 181 & 185
David Sylvester (ed.), Sarah Whitfield & Michael Raeburn, *René Magritte, Catalogue Raisonné. Oil Paintings, Objects and Bronzes, 1946-1967*, London, 1993, vol. III, no. 929, illustrated p. 344
Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, *Magritte in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels*, Ghent, 2005, illustrated in colour p. 64
Robert Hughes, *The Portable Magritte*, New York, 2006, illustrated in colour p. 367
Michel Draguet, *Magritte: His Work, His Museum*, Paris, 2009, illustrated in colour p. 202



MAGRITTE'S L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES

'I have always felt the greatest interest in night and day,
without however having any preference for one or the other.
This great personal interest in night and day is a feeling of
admiration and astonishment'

RENÉ MAGRITTE

The works from Magritte's *L'empire des lumières* 'series' are among the most iconic images of twentieth century art. With their luminous combination of a bright blue sky set against an inky, dark night-time street, they combine immense visual impact with a profoundly conceptual approach. Alongside Magritte's *La Trahison des images* (*Ceci n'est pas un pipe*) and his bowler-hatted men, they are his most important images with an influence that stretches far beyond Surrealist circles. In them, Magritte achieves his most complex and sophisticated exploration of representation and reality. As the composition evolved through the 1950s and into the early 1960s, it would inspire and parallel developments in Conceptual and Pop Art (fig. 1) as well as becoming an archetypal image of twentieth century visual culture. Painted in 1961, the present work is among the largest and most refined iterations of the subject. It was painted by Magritte for his patron and friend Anne-Marie Gillion Crowet and has been in her collection ever since.

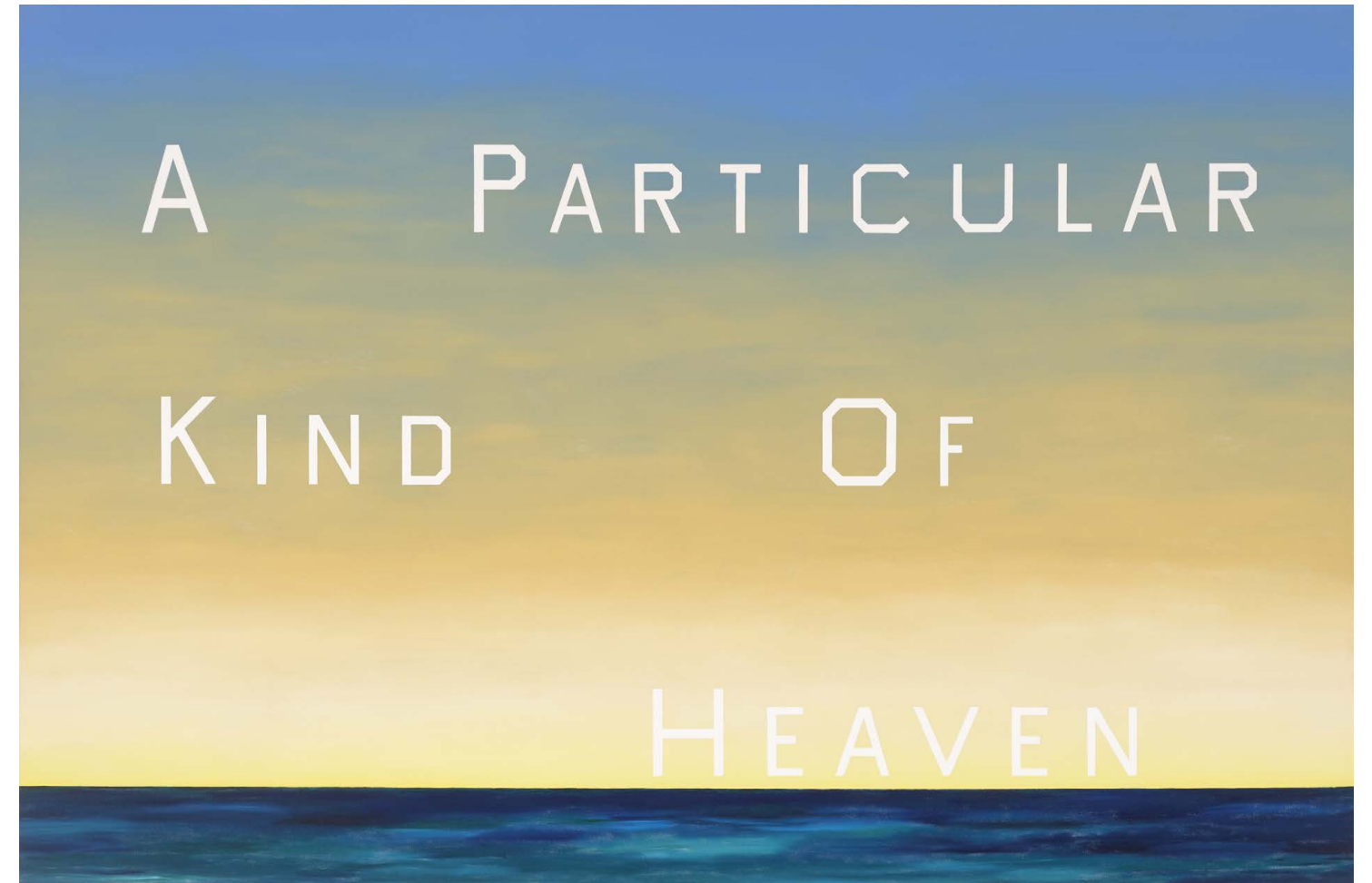


FIG.1

Fig. 1, Ed Ruscha, *A Particular Kind of Heaven*, 1983, oil on canvas, de Young Museum, San Francisco



FIG.2

The origins of this image began with a gouache of 1938-39 in which silhouetted buildings are overlaid with a starry night sky and crescent moon (fig. 2). However, it was not until 1948 that Magritte started to explore the subject more thoroughly, developing and refining the idea over the following decade to produce a group of seventeen oils that constitute his only real attempt to create a 'series' within his painting. From the very outset, Magritte had high expectations of these works. When poet Paul Colinet endeavoured to provide an explanation for the imagery, Magritte complained: 'his attempt to explain it (only in its early stages) is depressing: it appears I am a great mystic, providing consolation (because of the luminous sky) for our miseries (the landscape of houses and black trees). The intention is no doubt good, but all this keeps us on the level of pathetic humanity' (quoted in D. Sylvester (ed.), *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 200). In fact, Magritte's aspirations were much less mundane; his subject was not humankind, but the very nature of reality. As he explained in a television programme recorded in April 1956: '... what is represented in the picture "The dominion of light" are the things I thought of, to be precise, a nocturnal landscape and a skyscape such as can be seen in broad daylight. The landscape suggests night and the skyscape day. This evocation of night and day seems to me to have the power to surprise and delight us. I call this power: poetry' (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 145).

Fig. 2, René Magritte, *Poison*, 1938-39, gouache on paper, Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Opposite: A detail of the present work





FIG.3

It is this poetic and mysterious quality that makes *L'Empire des lumières* one of Magritte's most celebrated and compelling images. The combination of night and day seen in these works was precisely the sort of reconciliation of opposites that was prized by the Surrealists. The idea for this composition may have been inspired by André Breton's poem *L'Aigrette* which had been published in 1923 and which Magritte knew well; the verse opens, 'Si seulement il faisait du soleil cette nuit' ('If only the sun were to come out tonight'). Other Surrealists, from Max Ernst to Salvador Dalí, explored similar ideas in their own paintings (figs. 3 & 4), but it is a visual paradox specifically typical of Magritte's art and one which reaches new levels of sophistication in paintings such as the present work.

As in all of Magritte's best work, the effect is achieved by contrasting the known with the impossible. Here, the setting is typically suburban and recognisable – a quiet street in a Belgian town. In 1954 Magritte had moved to a new home near the Parc Josaphat in Brussels which he later described in specific relation to these paintings: 'In the evenings it's like being in the picture – *the Dominion of Light*. The villa where I live is

Fig. 3, Max Ernst, *Day and Night*, 1941-42, oil on canvas, The Menil Collection, Houston



FIG.4



FIG.5

surrounded by gardens and the houses looking directly onto the boulevard Lambermont stand out against a wide sky' (A letter to Alexander Iolas, 9th January 1956, quoted in *René Magritte. The Fifth Season* (exhibition catalogue), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2018, pp. 45-46).

Siegfried Gohr argues that the very real nature of this scene – which in his words, provides the viewer with a sense of security – in combination with the other reality of a clouded sky, are crucial to the series success: 'In other words, both elements of the composition plausibly derive from the artist's daily experience, a familiarity that has resulted in a perfectly successful translation into painting' (S. Gohr, *Magritte. Attempting the Impossible*, Paris, 2009, p. 223).

Magritte is drawing on other, specifically artistic, familiarities too. Clouds first appear in his work in 1930 in the four-part oil *Celestial Perfections* which strongly recalls the landscapes of the Dutch Golden Age (fig. 5) or later cloud studies. They have an important resonance within his work. His precise reiterations

Fig. 4, Salvador Dalí, *Shades of Night Descending*, 1931, oil on canvas, The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida
Fig. 5, Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Haarlem*, circa 1670, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam





FIG.6

of this motif, conjured in a specific tone of blue have parallels with Yves Klein's development of IKB blue as an 'open window to freedom' inspired by the sky (fig. 6). As with all Magritte's repeated motifs, the sky signals something specific in his work. As he once told a reporter, 'the sky is a form of curtain because it hides something from us. We are surrounded by curtains' (quoted in *Magritte* (exhibition catalogue), Hayward Gallery, London, 1992, note to no. 120). In other words, although the sight of a blue sky with drifting white clouds may seem benign, it alerts us to the ways in which we are unable to see or comprehend ultimate truths.

The counter-force to the vivid blue sky in the present work, is the inky darkness of the night time scene beneath it. Again, Magritte was drawing on precedent, understanding night's inherently magical quality as the opposite of our everyday; the world of lovers, the world of shadows, the world of monsters. It has an

Fig. 6, Yves Klein, *Blue Monochrome*, 1961, dry pigment in synthetic polymer medium on cotton over plywood, The Museum of Modern Art, New York



FIG.7

obvious pull for a Surrealist in the way it makes everything we know strange again, and has an important history in Magritte's œuvre. Yet, this power has a wide appeal and is one that has been harnessed by many great artists, from Van Gogh's nightscapes (fig. 7) to Edward Hopper's work (fig. 8), which in some respects is a natural descendant of Magritte's enigmatic compositions.

In combining the two the Belgian artist deliberately evokes a long painterly tradition of capturing the phenomena of light against dark that goes back as far as medieval gold ground painting and was reimagined with the discovery of *chiaroscuro* in the Renaissance and beyond (perhaps most notably in the work of Caravaggio – fig. 9). Magritte's skill is in realising that as well as a tension between these opposites, there also exists a profound synchronicity. As Gohr suggests, the universal appeal of the image is also rooted in the almost complete balance of strength between the opposing forces of the composition:

Fig. 7, Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night over the Rhône*, 1888, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

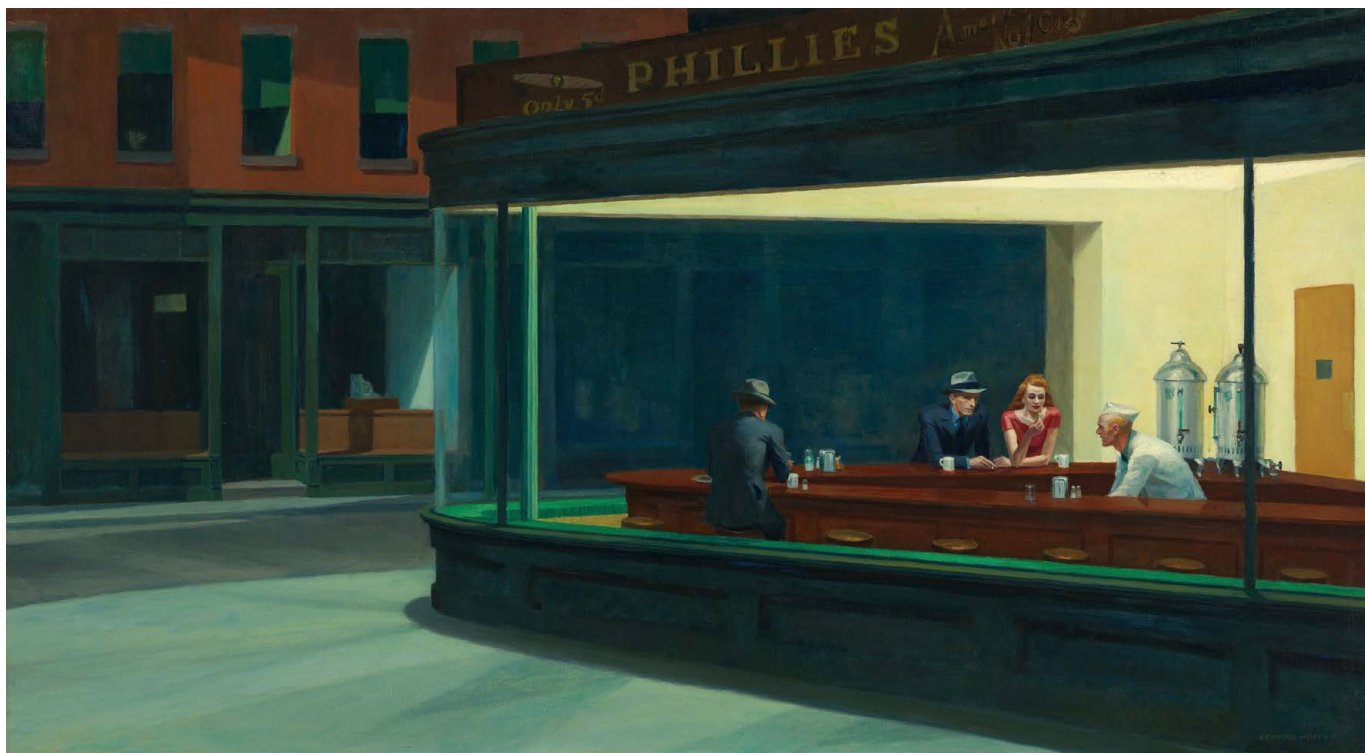


FIG.8

‘Even during the night, bourgeois order is maintained; the incredible confrontation takes place for the viewer’s eye alone, the inhabitants of the picture being oblivious to it’, so that what ultimately takes place is ‘a calm neutralisation of opposites that tames the inherent clash of night and day’ (*ibid.*, pp. 225-226). That is to say, on first sight, the image seems *normal* and it is only when considered more closely that its inherent contradictions make themselves known.

This subtlety marks an important shift in Magritte’s work but also underpins the way this series interrogates traditions of painting. In her discussion of the *L’empire des lumières*, and particularly of the title these paintings share, Sandra Zalman considers the power play elucidated in the composition. Translated accurately, *empire* means *power* or *dominance*; it ‘can reflect nature’s dominance over humanity, humanity’s dominance over nature or the interplay of these forces as expressed by our power of perception’

Fig. 8, Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
Opposite: A detail of the present work





FIG.9

(S. Zalman, 'Otherworldly: Magritte's *L'empire des lumières*', in René Magritte. *The Fifth Season* (exhibition catalogue), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2018, p. 44). As she goes on to add, one way of asserting dominance over a landscape is to paint it, although this act also necessarily 'admits that painting is a representation, secondary to nature itself' (*ibid.*, p. 46). This then returns us to Magritte's sustained consideration of the nature of reality and representation in these works. From Impressionism through into the development of Cubism and Abstraction in the early twentieth century, painting had been moving away from verisimilitude towards a focus on recreating the experience of being or seeing; subject lost ground to effect. Magritte – doubtless deeply satisfied by the anachronism – moves the other way. In the present work, the subject is delineated with crystal clarity but the message is the obverse. Where other painters were saying, we have recreated exactly what you see, Magritte boldly states that you cannot believe anything you see. It is a message that underpins all his work, but finds its most complex and subtle expression in the *L'empire des lumières*.

Fig. 9, Caravaggio, *The Calling of Matthew*, circa 1599-1600, oil on canvas, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

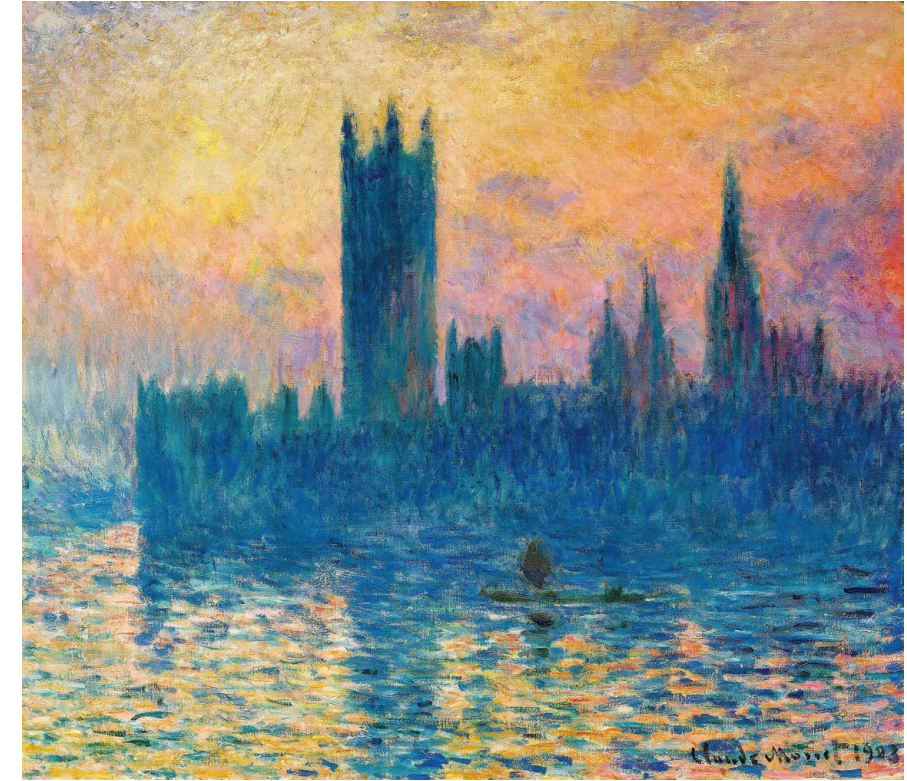


FIG.10

The importance of this group of work within the artist's œuvre cannot be overstated. Whilst Magritte often returned to favourite motifs throughout his career, the consistent titling of the *L'empire des lumières* paintings marks them out as a much more deliberate attempt to work in a series. The specific imagery of these paintings was immediately popular among Magritte's patrons and there was high demand for these pictures, indeed at one point a painting was promised to four different collectors. Yet, Magritte was concerned that the works should evolve artistically rather than as a response to external pressures. As he wrote in a letter to the dealer Alexander Iolas: 'I have to find a way of justifying the replica in my own mind. I managed to enrich the first idea' (quoted in Christoph Grunenberg & Darren Pih (eds.), *Magritte A-Z*, London, 2011, p. 49). This careful process of selection and enrichment can be seen in the way that the compositions evolve over time. Much like the great series of artists such as Monet (fig. 10), the works speak to one another, growing through association: 'The repetition of this particular theme, and its slight variations from painting to painting in the series, expands the poetic patterning, creating rhythms and rhymes amongst them' (Patricia Allmer, in *ibid.*, p. 49).

Fig. 10, Claude Monet, *Parlement, coucher du soleil*, 1903, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



FIG.11



FIG.12

The present work belongs to the group of large-scale compositions painted from the mid-1950s onwards that includes the versions in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels (figs. 11 & 12). There is a remarkable attention to detail and technique, with each leaf of the tree picked out in sharp silhouette and architectural details painstakingly replicated. Indeed, one of the compelling aspects of these works is the balance between their immediate visual impact and the precise detailing of the hinges of the shutters or the railing of the gate that draw the viewer in for a closer look. Important attention is also paid to the structure of the composition which centres on the strong vertical of the tree and the smaller vertical of the streetlight. As a source of light, this latter holds our attention and in the absence of any human presence in these works, its truncated arms and domed top have often been related to the bowler-hatted man that was the artist's alter-ego (fig. 13).

Fig. 11, René Magritte, *L'empire des lumières*, 1953-54, oil on canvas, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York
Fig. 12, René Magritte, *L'empire des lumières*, 1954, oil on canvas, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels



FIG.13

There is a kind of visual joke in this idea that Magritte would probably have enjoyed. The idea of him inhabiting these works makes sense, as they certainly inhabited his own thoughts. As well expressing ideas about our lived reality, for Magritte, this group of paintings also had the power to create ideas. 'After I had painted *L'Empire des lumières*', he told a friend, 'I got the idea that night and day exist together, that they are one. This is reasonable, or at the very least it's in keeping with our knowledge: in the world, night always exists at the same time as day. (Just as sadness always exists in some people at the same time as happiness in others)' (quoted in *Magritte* (exhibition catalogue), Hayward Gallery, London, 1992, note to no. 111). This simultaneity is the real power of the *L'empire des lumières* and underpins its remarkable visual and conceptual impact. For Magritte it became the ultimate combination of opposites, inspiring a series of images that remain among his best-known and most celebrated pictures.

Fig. 13, René Magritte, *Le fils de l'homme*, 1946, oil on canvas, Private Collection

MAGRITTE'S L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES 1948-1965

1.
1949
oil on canvas
48 by 58cm.
Private Collection

2.
1950
oil on canvas
78 by 99cm.
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York

3.
1951
oil on canvas
80 by 65cm.
Private Collection

4.
1952
oil on canvas
100 by 80cm.
Private Collection

5.
1953
oil on canvas
38 by 46cm.
Private Collection

6.
1953
oil on canvas
46 by 38cm.
Private Collection

7.
1953
oil on canvas
38 by 46cm.
Private Collection

8.
1953-54
oil on canvas
195 by 131cm.
The Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation, New York

9.
1954
oil on canvas
144 by 114cm.
Private Collection

10.
1954
oil on canvas
146 by 114cm.
Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts
de Belgique, Brussels

11.
1954
oil on canvas
129 by 94cm.
The Menil Collection, Houston

12.
1956
oil on canvas
50 by 61 cm.
Private Collection

13.
1957
oil on canvas
162 by 130cm.
Private Collection

14.
1958
oil on canvas
50 by 40cm.
Private Collection

15.
1961
oil on canvas
114 by 146cm.
The present work

16.
1948/1962
oil on canvas
100 by 80cm.
Private Collection

17.
1964/1965
oil on canvas
50 by 73cm.
Private Collection





ANNE-MARIE GILLION CROWET AND MAGRITTE

One of the Belgian master's finest works, *L'empire des lumières* was painted by René Magritte in 1961, for Anne-Marie Gillion Crowet, a close family friend.

Magritte's connection with the Crowet family came about when Anne-Marie's father Pierre first encountered the then-unknown artist, whilst studying law at Brussels university in the mid-1920s. A friendship developed as artist and law student realised that not only did they both hail from the same part of the country, they both shared a sense of humour and artistic taste.

This friendship – and the legacy of patronage - would endure into the next generation through Pierre's daughter, Anne-Marie. She was sixteen when she briefly sat for a portrait with Magritte at his home, where he preferred to paint. So striking did Magritte find Anne-Marie's features, he told her that he had been subconsciously painting her face for years before encountering her. That painting eventually became *La Fée Ignorante*, one of Magritte's most powerful portraits.

Not only was the painting of Anne-Marie's face a powerful moment of inspiration for Magritte, but it marked the start of a warm friendship between the artist and his muse, that lasted until Magritte's death in 1967. As with her father, the younger Crowet shared with Magritte a cheerfully absurd sense of humour, a passion for art and an innate appreciation of Surrealism.

In 1960, Magritte painted three works for Anne-Marie, including *L'empire des lumières*. To mark the sale of this work we spoke to Anne-Marie Gillion Crowet about art, life and her memories of friendship with Rene Magritte.

'...it was, for him, like an unexpected gift, that I arrived at that very moment in his life. It was the face he had been looking for!'



Above: A photograph of Anne-Marie in 1956



René Magritte, *Anne-Marie ou le combat*, 1961, oil on canvas, Private Collection

What was Rene Magritte like?

Anne-Marie Gillion Crowet: Magritte was very normal, he was not pompous. He was a simple man and at the same time he was also a real artist, a true Surrealist. I met him a lot, and we spent a lot of time together over the ten years before he died [in 1967]. When we first met, when he painted my portrait [*La Fée Ignorante*], he said he had been searching for my face for years, in a way.

He was obsessed with your face?

AM: He was *obsessed* with it. He told me that for him, it was like an unexpected gift that I arrived at that very moment in his life. It was the face he had been looking for!

What are your earliest memories of experiencing art? Your father was a prolific patron of the arts. Do you remember which paintings made the greatest impression on you?

AM: When I looked at the paintings my parents had, the first one I remember is a Rene Magritte called *Paysage*. And it was hanging on the wall in my father's office. I found it very funny, but I was a young girl and didn't really understand what it meant. Today, I still admire it.

Your father was an early champion of Magritte and the Surrealists, wasn't he?

AM: Yes, he was a real patron of the arts. He helped and supported artists throughout his life, from the late 1920s until his death. He was one of the presidents of the Belgian Art Prize [between 1961-1984]. He really helped me to appreciate art and understand art, as growing up, I was surrounded by it!

We used to live outside Brussels, in Charleroi, where he organised a lot of exhibitions. I would help him hang work. So, that also helped me develop my artistic knowledge, hanging and organising those exhibitions. It really developed my eye and tastes.

‘While it happens that a portrait tries to resemble its model, we could wish that the model could look like the portrait. An inversion.’



Above: René Magritte, *La fée ignorante*, 1956, oil on canvas, Private Collection

When your father first encountered Magritte’s work in the early 1920s, what was it that attracted him to it?

AM: Well, he was studying to be a lawyer here in Brussels, in 1925 and he was friendly with a group of young creatives at the university. Magritte was an unknown artist at the time, who my father discovered and at the same time he launched a small magazine, an arts review, ‘Le Soupirail’ in 1927 and wrote about Magritte. He also found out that Magritte came from the same place as his family did. So, that was another connection for my father, which led to them forming a friendship that would last all Magritte’s life.

What was your father like?

AM: A generous man, very artistic in his way, but as a young man he was expected to follow in the family business and take over their department store. He did not really enjoy that.

It is remarkable for someone of his background and traditional career path to take so strongly to the emerging Surrealist movement – encountering artists like Magritte when they were just starting out.

AM: In his his first lawyer’s office, he hung the Magritte landscape painting *Paysage*. His father didn’t like it at all. He said, if you put that there, no clients will come in!

But when you grew up, it was quite different – you grew up surrounded by Surrealism!

AM: Yes, my father was very much involved in cultural activities in Brussels and Charleroi, he was president of the artistic circle and cultural activities. Our family house became the reference point for artists and writers. It was an amazing place to be.

Magritte famously painted you, when you were 16, for the portrait that would be titled *La Fée Ignorante* in 1956. What do you remember of the experience?

AM: When I met René Magritte for the first time, I was very impressed and a little nervous. It was in his house, he asked me to sit on a little stool in the middle of his living room. He painted where he felt good, so he moved his easel around his house. He looked at me intensely, with a satisfied look, and a slightly mocking air.

He was mocking you?

AM: You know why? I found out later he had seen in my face something that he had been painting for years, even before he'd met me.

So, by becoming his subject, you became a Surrealist too?

AM: By becoming part of the painting! Yes, that was *terribly* Surrealist. There was an interesting thing Magritte said: While it happens that a portrait tries to resemble its model, we could wish that the model could look like the portrait. An inversion. So, we very quickly became friends after that, we found we shared the same way of seeing things. That was the key to our friendship.

How many sittings did he take to paint you?

AM: He told me it's not necessary to come again, I have you in my mind. Only one sitting, but of course, we met many more times after that and we became very close friends.

Magritte didn't have an atelier, he didn't have a studio! He painted where he felt comfortable, was of no importance where he was. He painted in a suit and tie. He was a natural Surrealist, very authentic and true. His way of seeing things, we talked about everything – funny stories, we talked about his paintings, the cinema, cooking. He loved cinema! Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton. I spent evenings with him and his wife, watching these films.

Opposite: René Magritte, *La coquetterie*, autoportrait de René Magritte, 1929, photograph



What do you feel about '*L'empire des lumières*', which was gifted to you by Magritte in 1961?

AM: It's one of his masterpieces, because it exceeds everything that he had done before. It's a very strong work. Different to anything he made before. He was especially proud of this, he attached a lot of importance to it. He told me, from the moment he gave it to me, that I would see with time that the blacks in the trees or shadows, would change or differentiate themselves into various levels of black, over the years. It was an *avant-garde* tableau. In a certain way, he was playing with deepness of colour, more modern than others.

With Magritte, you sense the idea was more dominant than the technique...

AM: For him it was both. He was a poet and he was a Surrealist and a very good painter.

How has the painting changed for you over the years? Has your outlook on it changed since it came into your possession....

AM: It hasn't changed! No, it hasn't changed at all. But's not in my possession, it doesn't belong to anyone.

What is unique about this work in Magritte's canon?

AM: This work has something very unique, in the way Magritte has reached perfection in playing with different tonalities of black, as I was saying, but also showing in this way, on a huge scale, the sum of his genius, the modern construction of this work creates a distinction from this work to the others.



Anne-Marie Gillon Crowet in front of *L'empire des lumières*



'...For Magritte, Surrealism was not a game, but a reality. His work was unique and will never deceive. It will always be a source of beauty for future generations'

How would you compare Magritte with the other Surrealists of the time?

AM: I don't want to compare, he is incomparable. He was sincere, and profoundly Surrealist. There was nothing frivolous about him, he was a very kind and real man. There was only one Magritte and there can never be any other.

Why do you think Magritte's work continues to resonate with people sixty years later?

AM: Because there is only one Magritte and there will never be another. He was totally different to the others. Some have tried to imitate him, but always failed. He treated Surrealism with sincerity, poetry and respect. Unlike for many others, for Magritte, Surrealism was not a game, but a reality. His work was unique and will never deceive. It will always be a source of beauty for future generations.

Opposite: A detail of the present work

MAGRITTE'S EMPIRE IN ALL ITS LIGHTS

BY MICHEL DRAGUET

In the twenty-first century, Magritte emerges as a unique figure in the history of modernity, one that still exerts a powerful influence on the intellectual evolution of our progressive societies: his relativism, his mode of expression that is more interrogative than affirmative, his thirst for freedom, his disregard for the system and its plethora of dictates all ensure that he remains an enduringly modern artist. While recognition was slow in coming, it proved exceptionally durable and never ceased to grow. As early as 1966, Michel Foucault was astonished to discover that his intense philosophical reflections on the deconstruction of the normative nature of language were in fact initiated in 1929 with a simple painting representing a pipe and stating that "This" was not a pipe. It was neither image nor text, not even a combination of the two. Yet Magritte was neither philosopher nor artist-philosopher. He was simply a painter who used images to expose the power of language in order to break free from the obligation to convey information, an imperative imposed by the functionalist fixation of our Western societies.



FIG.1

Fig. 1, René Magritte, *La trahison des images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), 1929, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles



FIG.2

To achieve what? To make it into a fiction conscious of its representational limitations and to harness the capacity to re-enchant the language from this consciousness. And consequently, the world. Taking it back to its original source. Turning it into the place of the encounter – and hence of discovery – of a universe that becomes visible by naming it. Rain, a door, an egg (or perhaps already a bird) or, in *L'empire des lumières*, the fragile equation of day and night thus restore the gaze to that 'impeccable naïveté' of discovery that stirred Baudelaire.

The importance of Magritte's œuvre stems from this point, at first sight anodyne, but which in fact amounts to a rupture. Magritte's painting does not illustrate his relationship to the universe by means of a personal thought process erected as a universal dogma. Magritte does not dictate. Instead, his work complements the materialisation of an idea that reinstates reality in its place of origin: a fact of language that necessitates evidence to confront viewers with something that they are no longer familiar with, but that is nonetheless a cornerstone of the world. Envisaged as impersonal, his research is built on the viewer's relationship

Fig. 2, René Magritte, *Le retour*, 1940, oil on canvas,
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels



FIG.3

with language. Therefore, it forms – in the full sense of the word – a rhetoric that boasts a force of illusion reinforced by the fact that the image is no longer there to 'sell' an idea or to unravel into utilitarian communication. Restored to its original clarity, language becomes a universe in itself, unencumbered by any representation. *Idéal* if not ideal, it is also sensitive and suggests more than it aspires to signify. Whence the freedom given to the spectator – and Magritte himself was the spectator of the ideas gushing from his pencil – to appropriate what is suggested without ever being made explicit. There is no fiction, no passing fad, no subjective projection that would confine the image to a personal vision. Rather, every one of us, notwithstanding culture or origin, is guaranteed to rediscover the primal sensation of inventing the world in the line of sight that simultaneously affirms our presence. Always singular, and therein, universal. Hence the existence of a body of work that does not envision the series as a mere duplication of the same but rather, as a continuous recommencement that translates the presence of a light here and of an object there, incorporated into the equation.

Fig. 3, René Magritte, *La réponse imprévue*, 1933, oil on canvas,
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels



FIG.4

Combined with a form of enchantment through language reinstated in its own poetic dimension, this relativism of thought allowed Magritte to escape the clutches of philosophical or ideological systems. As an avant-garde artist in the early 1920s, he grasped the sociological dogmatism that consumed artistic circles, turning a revolt into a passing fad driven by ‘endless coverage’ and lust for power. Surrealist by convenience of language, he will use collective activism as a means of withdrawing – as much as possible – from the social arena and its unavoidable concessions to function as a free spirit. Or even as a loose cannon, surrounded only by his friends. Magritte played an essential role in the emergence of movements such as Pop Art and Conceptual Art, but his work cannot be relegated to a sociological analysis of the consumer object or to a deconstruction of art as a system of thought. His historical positioning puts him at a more fundamental level. In the same way as Mallarmé in the field of poetry, Magritte exposed the very limits of a language that cannot cover the entire scope of reality. Simultaneously, much like the poet himself, his use of suggestion and evocation reflects the original nature of the sensory experience by which each of us is born into the world.

Fig. 4, René Magritte, *Golconde*, 1953, oil on canvas,
The Menil Collection, Houston



FIG.5

His allusive approach to representation never produces affirmations but prompts viewers to challenge the image as it springs forth. Or, more precisely, to question their utilitarian conception of reality by restoring the initial questioning that comes with the surprise of a discovery. In this way, Magritte releases the image from its affirmative dimension. Nothing is what it seems, but at the same time, the evidence of a consciousness emerges from this negation. The visible is not what one should necessarily believe. This practice of asking questions, which climaxes in *L'empire des lumières* and has been embraced by contemporary philosophy under the erudite term ‘problematology’, conclusively provides the basis for a reassessment of the very function of the image. Beyond any form of representation. In the era of the *metaverse*, Magritte shows that the dematerialisation of the image and its virtualisation in binary language do not preclude the resistance of a meaning, provided that it is poetic. In other words, it must be embedded in the absolute dimension of language. Beyond the immaculate fields of the Matrix returned to its totalitarian origin, Magritte turns every viewer into a ‘Neo’. A grain of sand in the great programming of reality that sets another possibility for things through its consciousness.

Fig. 5, Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, synthetic polymer paint on canvas,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

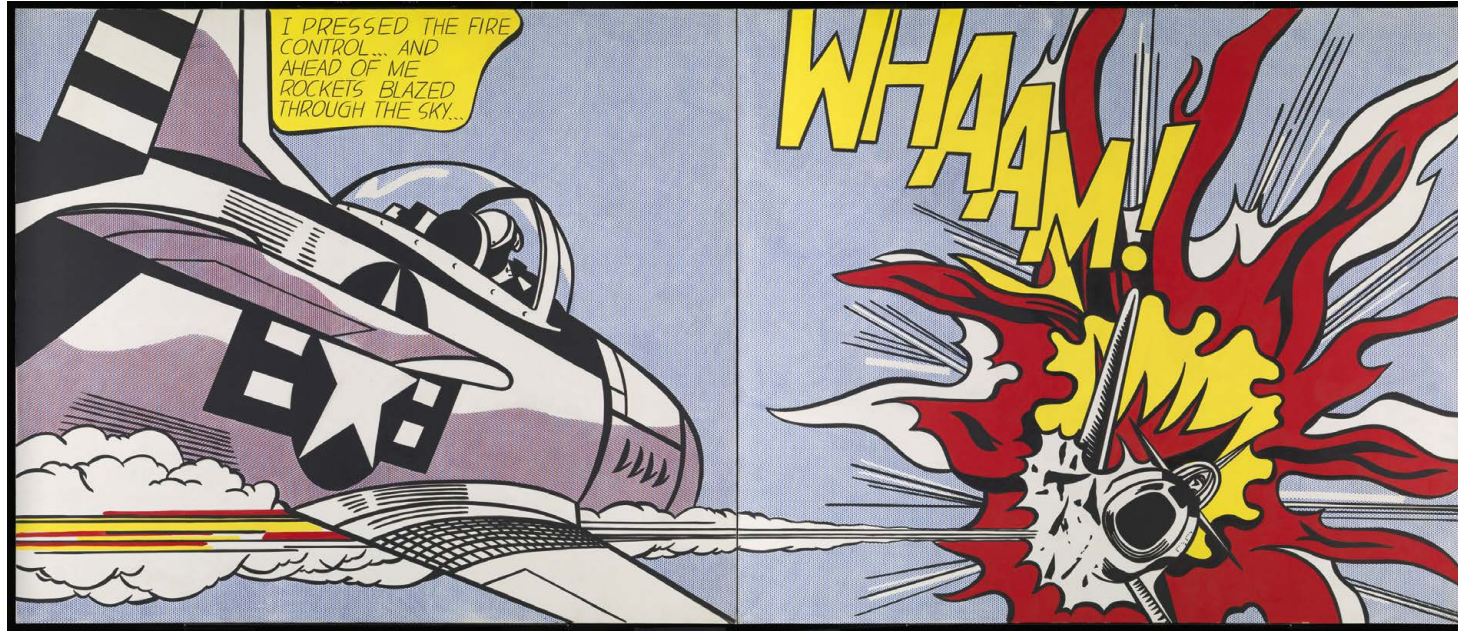


FIG.6

Magritte had his own Trinity, and it is not unreasonable to consider Paul Nougé (the André Breton of Belgian surrealism) as Morpheus' twin. Despite its smooth bourgeois exterior, Magritte's life is as much an inner adventure as that which, in *The Matrix*, drives the hero to break free from the chains of reality. At the end of the road, Magritte gives the spectator the keys to a freedom of thought achieved through language, along with the exhilarating acceptance of a world of sensations and suggestions that the individual will enjoy without having to dominate or possess it. This is both a lesson in philosophy and a redemptive poetic that, through contemplation, accomplishes something very rare that can be encapsulated in one word: happiness.

Fig. 6, Roy Lichtenstein, *Whaam!*, 1963, acrylic and oil paint on canvas, Tate Modern, London
Opposite: A detail of the present work



IN RENÉ MAGRITTE'S NIGHT THE SKY FLOATS OVER US ALL

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PROFESSOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART HISTORY,
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René Magritte's 1961 *L'empire des lumières* was the fifteenth version in oil of this particular image (the first being painted in 1949), and one of three works created by the artist in 1961 for Anne-Marie Gillion Crowet. It unites a number of the motifs and themes Magritte pursued throughout his career, ranging from the reconciliation of opposites – or rather the interrogation of this surrealist concept – to the exploration of absence, and the evocation of poetic and mysterious elements firmly anchored (contrary to French surrealist emphases on the unconscious and the dream) in a tangible reality.

Poetry saturates the painting and its other versions, or 'variations', as Magritte termed them. It is already evident in the title (given by Magritte's friend, the Belgian poet Paul Nougé) which combines word and image into a complete poetic composition. The light-and-dark opposition of the scene – the tension between the overarching natural light of the sky, illuminating the world, and the artificial streetlamp casting its limited aura on the crepuscular street and house – is repeated in the silent house before us, illuminated from within upstairs but with its ground floor shutters tightly closed. The scene is marked by an unsettling absence – devoid of human figures, the painting nevertheless presents the traces of human presence: the house, the lamp, the clean, well-maintained street.

Fig. 1, William Degouve de Nuncques, *La maison aveugle*, 1892, oil on canvas,
Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo

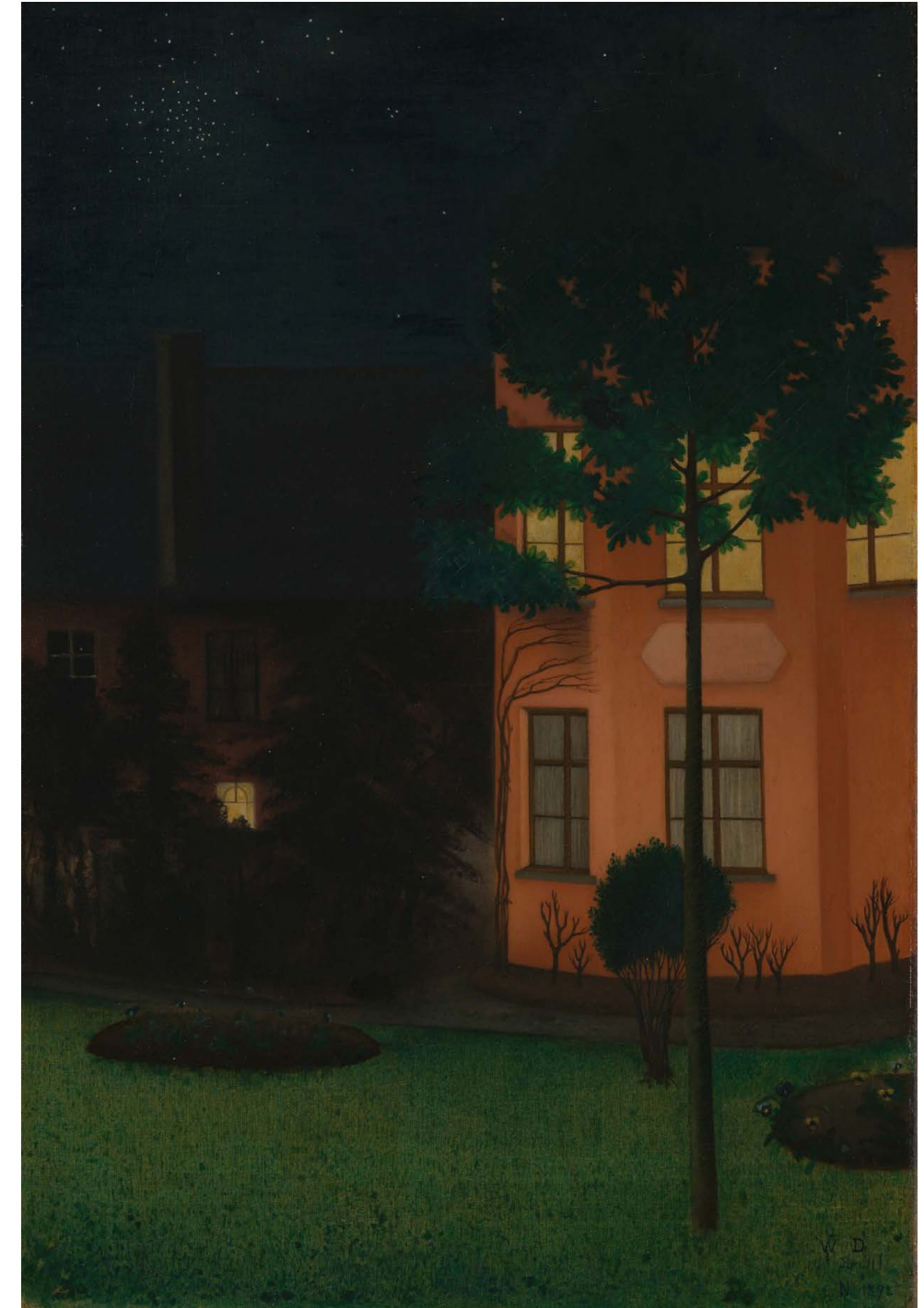


FIG.1



FIG.2

That the poetry of *L'empire des lumières* exists in many variations suggests an analogy with music, another significant concern in Magritte's work. Arnold Schoenberg argued that 'the variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity, on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand – thus elaborating the *idea* of the piece'. Magritte's variations on the same theme invite us to rethink conventional notions of originality, to look more carefully at the details and contrasts between different versions of the painting: we observe the architectural variations of the Belgian houses, the varieties of trees in the foreground, of the streetlamps and their shadows, and of the skylscapes. Some of these paintings are in portrait format, others in landscape; some, like the 1961 version, give the viewer a deeper sense of proximity to or immersion in the scene, while in others the world depicted remains more distant. Together, these variant paintings form an internal system of poetic rhythms and patterns in which cross-references abound, alongside allusions to older Belgian art, most notably *La Maison rose* (1892) by the symbolist William Degouve de Nuncques (fig. 1).

Fig. 2, René Magritte, *Le noctambule*, 1927-28, oil on canvas, Museum Folkwang, Essen



FIG.3

L'empire des lumières also takes motifs from many earlier Magritte works, and is the culmination of a lifelong exploration in art of the relations between day and night. The streetlamp throwing its shadows appears as early as 1928 in *Le Noctambule* (*The Night Owl*; fig. 2), where it stands incongruously in a dining room. Similarly, in early paintings like *A la suite de l'eau, les nuages* (1926, *After the Water, the Clouds*) skies and clouds appear as elements of Magritte's compositions, their airy lightness contrasting with the darker, confined interiors in which they are set. Placing skylscapes within picture-frames or mirrors, or depicting them as seen through windows or draped curtains, suggests Magritte's prevailing set of concerns with exploring, or even collapsing, the relations between inside and outside, container and contained, the natural and the domestic. Even in later paintings where skylscapes and landscapes are elements of exterior scenes, traces of the interior remain. In *L'univers démasqué* (1932, *The Universe Unmasked*; fig. 3) for example, a skyscape looms over a semi-built house set in an empty landscape, but the backdrop consists of large geometric shapes which surround the more natural setting and turn that outside into a kind of interior. It was an idea that Magritte would continue to explore right through into the 1960s.

Fig. 3, René Magritte, *L'univers démasqué*, 1932, oil on canvas, Private Collection

‘Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions’.

ANDRÉ BRETON

L'empire des lumières marks a turning point. It no longer needs the intellectual frisson of the attempt to reconcile inside and outside to invest the painting with poetic significance. Instead, we see an exterior scene with open skies in which the apparent opposition between day and night reveals the continuity of the two in the moment of civil twilight, in which enough light remains for the world to be visible, but the streetlamps are lighting up and people indoors turn on their lights. André Breton, the founder and leader of the French surrealists, wrote in his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930): ‘Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions’. *L'empire des lumières* captures this ‘certain point of the mind’, where the apparent opposition of light and dark, day and night, is revealed as a single continuum along which apparently distinct realities momentarily overlap and blur together, producing the poetic moment we perceive as surreal. This poetry is perhaps clearest when we recognise an evening sky as ‘Magrittean’ and thus realise the continuity between *L'empire des lumières* and our own reality. As the title of a 1958 pamphlet of his work puts it: ‘In René Magritte’s *Night the Sky Floats over us all*’.



FIG.4

Fig. 4, René Magritte, *Les valeurs personnelles*, 1952, oil on canvas, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

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We would like to thank Paula Cook for her translation of Michel Draguet’s essay ‘Magritte’s Empire in all its lights’

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