Kay Sage and Surrealism

How can I identify surrealism? How are surrealist artworks created?

Duration: 45 minutes

Grade Level: 2 to 6

Learning Objectives:

- Compare and contrast the styles that Kay Sage uses and identify differences and similarities between these styles
- Develop an understanding of surrealism and how artists create abstract artworks
- Compare and contrast Kay Sage’s works with that of other surrealists
- Think about ways you can use your imagination

Outcomes:

- Students will be exposed to and learn about an influential female artist
- Students will be introduced to surrealism, abstraction, the use of imagination, color, and writing
- Students will experience the use of several different art media and tools, through projects that encourage creativity, dexterity, and the creation of three-dimensional work

Associated Activities:

- Collage, 45 minutes
Who was Kay Sage?

Kay Sage (b. 1898 – d. 1963) was an artist, active primarily beginning in the late 1930s, associated with the Surrealist movement. Sage was instrumental in helping several members of the European avant-garde escape Europe at the beginning of World War II; these included Tanguy, whom she married shortly after his arrival in New York.

Early works from her student years exemplify Sage’s skillful execution of landscape and portraiture. Transitional drawings show her shift into the world of Surrealism. Influential oil paintings and collages highlight her unique style, and the assemblages and constructions of her later life provide an encompassing collection of work throughout her lifetime.

Kay Sage and the Mattatuck

The Kay Sage collection at the Mattatuck Museum is composed of more than 400 items, including paintings, collages, constructions, drawings, prints, archival records, and personal artifacts. Alongside her work, the museum also houses extensive material on Yves Tanguy and archival materials documenting their life together. Sage served on the Exhibits Committee at the Mattatuck Museum. After Sage’s death, the Kay Sage collection was gifted to the museum through her estate.

Shivering Mountain, 1943, oil on wood panel
What is surrealism?

Surrealism is a cultural and artistic movement that began in Paris in the mid-1920s, inspired by Dadaism (see below). The leader of the group was the French writer and poet André Breton, who was interested in dreams, fantasies, and unconscious thoughts – or thoughts that you do not know you are having. Surrealism tries to combine reality with dreams, or the subconscious, incorporating ideas from the imagination that are impossible, surprising, or dream-like. Realistic elements mixed with impossible or illogical situations create photorealistic images that speak to this philosophical movement and Freudian psychology.

Dadaism was an avant-garde intellectual movement started in Switzerland during World War I. It influenced artists and authors throughout the United States and Europe. The movement was heavily influenced by the war in Europe, rejecting the logic and reason of modern capitalist society. Instead, artists and authors used nonsense and protest in their works. Seen here is one of the more famous Dadaist images by Marcel Duchamp.

Freudian psychology is Sigmund Freud’s theory that emphasized the importance of the unconscious mind. Freud assumed that the unconscious mind governs behavior to a greater degree than people suspect. Surrealists were inspired by this theory and sought to bring the unconscious mind to the forefront through their art. They played games to encourage automatic thought that was free of the constraints of tradition and intellect.

Marcel Duchamp, L.H.O.O.Q., 1919, collotype, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
The Instant

1949. Oil on canvas.

Questions for Viewing:

- What do you see?
- How does this painting make you feel?
- What parts of this painting remind you of things or places that you have seen?
- What parts of this painting are the result of the artist’s imagination?
How did Kay Sage create her artwork?

Painting

Kay Sage developed her own style, repeating motifs and reoccurring themes such as eggs and drapery. Sage refused to exhibit with her husband, as she worked hard to distinguish herself from him and create her own reputation. However, in 1954, both Tanguy and Kay exhibited at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut.

Collage

In her later life, Sage began creating assemblages and constructions made from stone, wire, wood, and everyday objects. One of the pieces in our collection is meant as a game, where the marbles are rolled back and forth within the wooden box.

Activity: Create your own Surrealist collage! See your instructions in your activity packet.

Poetry

Sage also wrote poetry and published five volumes of work. She remains today one of the most influential and prominent women Surrealists in the United States.
L’alarme

20th century. Mixed media construction.

Questions for Viewing:

- What do you see?
- How is this different from the painting *The Instant*?
- How is this collage similar to the painting *The Instant*?
- What parts of this painting are the result of the artist’s imagination?
What was Sage’s relationship with Yves Tanguy?

Yves Tanguy

Until very recently, Sage was often viewed primarily as the wife of Yves Tanguy, rather than as an artist in her own right. Tanguy, a surrealist from Paris, met Sage through her artwork. He saw six of her paintings exhibited at *Le Salon des surindépendants* in Paris in 1938. He voiced his admiration for them—at that point, not knowing from her name whether she was male or female. A mutual friend engineered an introduction between the pair shortly afterwards, and so began their relationship.

Once married Sage and Tanguy bought a farmhouse in Woodbury, Connecticut, which they converted into two artist’s studios. Here, they created their art and entertained several leading artists and prominent people in the art world.

**Think:** Do you see similarities between the art of Kay Sage and those by her husband, Yves Tanguy? What about differences?

Yves Tanguy, *Outre Mer*, 1939, oil on canvas

Yves Tanguy, *Mars*, 1950, lithograph
Who were some other surrealists? What characteristics united their work?

The most well-known Surrealists include Salvador Dali, René Magritte, Max Ernst, and André Breton. Their work utilizes the clean brushstrokes, and dream-like subject matter. But there were many women Surrealists working alongside these men, including Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Dora Maar, and Dorothea Tanning.

Think: What similarities are there between these paintings? What makes them surrealist artworks?

René Magritte, *Golconda*, 1953, oil on canvas, Menil Collection, Houston

Dorothea Tanning, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, 1943, oil paint on canvas, Tate Modern, London
Some characteristics of surrealism include:

- Images that seem impossible, surprising, or dream-like
- Realistic elements mixed with impossible or illogical situations
- Juxtaposition
  - Two things being seen or placed close together, often to compare or contrast or to create an interesting effect
- Absurd scenarios
- Objects that are extreme in size – too big or too small

**Activity:** Take these examples and create your own surrealist masterpiece. Take the opportunity to look closely at the world around you and sketch what you see. What feels like it should be made bigger or smaller? What impossible or surprising things can you incorporate?

**Learn More**

Connecticut Surrealists: [https://www.mattmuseum.org/sage_and_tanguy/](https://www.mattmuseum.org/sage_and_tanguy/)

What is Surrealism: [https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/what-is/surrealism](https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/what-is/surrealism)