



The Great Masturbator, 1929

Oil / canvas, 110 x 150.5 cm

Signed and dated at lower left corner: "Salvador Dalí 1929"

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Dalí Legacy

An iconic work by Salvador Dalí and among the first paintings we may consider as belonging to the painter's surrealist period.

A movement that emerged in France in 1924, surrealism was to influence literature and the plastic arts, being highly important in poetry and painting. Heir to Dadaism, whose taste for provocation it retains, surrealism might also be seen as the spiritual progeny of romanticism and symbolism, whose values, lyricism, melancholy nostalgia and faith in the ability of art to transform the world it conserves. André Breton, who wrote the first surrealist manifesto (1924), was the father of this movement. He proposed mental automatism, the aim of which was to express in speech, writing or in any other manner the true working of thought. Surrealism is based on the world of dreams and the subconscious, thereby linking it with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis.

Going beyond overturning traditions, the surrealists overturn values. They set up their own gallery of forebears, and they reinstate or exalt poets and artists who had been spurned or rejected in the name of good taste. They accord little value to all that is bright, harmonious, well-balanced and purified, and thus glorify all that is hermetic, amazing, hybrid and compound. As we can read in the first manifesto, they therefore drew up their own imaginary genealogical tree for the history of art, in which the main branches are: Hieronymus Bosch, Brueghel the Elder, Arcimboldo and Francisco de Goya. From romanticism, or more accurately from symbolism, they were to rescue marginalised or forgotten poets such as Arthur Rimbaud and the Count of Lautréamont, who were to become the guiding figures of the movement, but also others such as Gérard de Nerval, Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière. They made the German and English romantics known in France. Nor should we forget other painters such as Arnold Böcklin (particularly his work *Island of the Dead*), James Ensor or Odilon Redon. The Gustave Moreau museum became a meeting place for the surrealists, as were to be also the streets in which the old-print and -book shops were to be found alongside tarot-card fortune tellers. They were also to find inspiration in the primitive arts.¹

We may therefore consider *The Great Masturbator* as a work of this period, since Dalí officially joined the movement in 1929, the year of execution of the painting. Created in the summer of 1929, it was exhibited at the painter's first

personal exhibition in Paris at the Goemans gallery, though then under the title *Visage du gran masturbateur*.

Both in this oil painting and in others from that period the various elements are placed around a horizon that divides the space into two unequal halves, in a layout reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's canvases. In the upper part, a sharp blue sky, and in the lower part an arid terrain that in places becomes a beach. We find the face that lends the painting its name at the central part of the canvas. Dalí explains it to us thus: "It represented a large head, yellow like wax, with very red cheeks, long eyelashes and an imposing nose compressed against the ground. This face had no mouth, and in place of the mouth an enormous lobster was hooked. The lobster's belly was decomposing and full of ants. Some of these ants were scurrying through the space that would have been occupied by the non-existent mouth of the great anguished face, whose head ended in 1900-style architecture and ornamentation. The title of the painting was *The Great Masturbator*"².

The end part of the face becomes a piece of 1900-style architecture in which we can see a female bust with closed eyes and part of a masculine body. At the bottom part of the canvas we can see three groups of people. In the foreground there is an embracing couple, in which one of the figures is an anthropomorphic rock; in a second plane is a silhouette that looks like a young man walking towards the horizon. Finally, we can make out a last group in the background, very very small: a child accompanied by an adult. All these figures, which project very clear, sharply outlined shadows onto a greenish-grey surface of dried-out earth, are situated in an ambiguous space, just as Joan Miró was to construct shallow spaces in which, with reference to a horizon, the images appeared to float.³

The face of *The Great Masturbator*, however, stands as no great radical departure from the works created by Dalí up to that moment. The first time he painted it, as Dalí tells us in his *Secret Life*, was in *The First Days of Spring* (1929), while it was to appear also in other works from that same year, such as *The Lugubrious Game*, *The Enigma of Desire*, *Illuminated Pleasures* and *Portrait of Paul Éluard*. But in none of these does the face occupy such a pre-eminent place as in the work we are now discussing, nor does it receive the name of "masturbator".

If we bear in mind the various interpretations that have been made of this work, we find that nearly all agree in identifying its title with the artist, based on the resemblance between the painter and the yellowish face.⁴ Most authors share the idea that Dalí's sexuality, up to the time that Gala appeared in his life, was based almost exclusively on onanism. And if Dalí portrays himself thus, we might well feel that he is representing his own sexuality. In any case, Dalí himself suggests such an identification, since allusions to masturbation are frequent in his autobiography, although at no time does he actually state that the anguished face in this particular oil painting is his own self-portrait.

From a psychoanalytical viewpoint masturbation is directly related with childhood. Of the summer of 1929 he tells us in *Secret Life*: "From the moment I arrived in Cadaqués I was assailed by a resurgence of my childhood period. The six years of secondary school, the three years in Madrid and the trip I had just made to Paris, all totally faded into the background, while all the fantasies and representations of my childhood period came back to take victorious

possession of my mind".⁵ The choice of masturbation as a theme would not be so very strange, then, if we further take into account that in summer 1930 Dalí wrote in Portlligat a homonymous poem which, along with the articles *Love*, *The Sanitary Goat* and *The Rotting Donkey*, he published in his book *The Visible Woman*⁶ dedicated to Gala, his wife and muse. We might even say, then, that this is a habitual motif of that period.

Throughout his life, the painter contended that the morphology of Cap de Creus point had been the model for this anguished face: "In that privileged place, reality and the sublime dimension almost come together. My mystical paradise begins in the plains of the Empordà, is surrounded by the Alberes hills, and reaches plenitude in the bay of Cadaqués. This land is my permanent inspiration. The only place in the world, too, where I feel loved. When I painted that rock that I entitled *The Great Masturbator*, I did nothing more than render homage to one of the promontories of my kingdom, and my painting was a hymn to one of the jewels of my crown."⁷ Recent studies, however, have related it most perspicaciously with Hieronymus Bosch's (c.1450-c.1516) *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a work with which Dalí was very familiar, since he had been able to view it directly for himself at Museo del Prado in Madrid during his student period.⁸

¹ «La révolution surréaliste», *Beaux-Arts Magazine* (hors-série, special edition), Paris, 2002.

² Dalí, S., *La vida secreta de Salvador Dalí*. In: Complete Works, Autobiographical Articles 1. Ediciones Destino / Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation, Barcelona / Figueres, 2003, p. 648

³ Fèlix Fanés, *La pintura y sus sombras. Cuatro estudios sobre Salvador Dalí*. Museo de Teruel, Teruel, 2004, p. 68

⁴ Rafael Santos Torroella, *La miel es más dulce que la sangre*. Barcelona, 1984, p. 55

⁵ Dalí, S., *La vida secreta de Salvador Dalí*. In: Complete Works, Autobiographical Articles 1. Ediciones Destino / Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation, Barcelona / Figueres, 2003, p. 597

⁶ Salvador Dalí, *La femme visible*. Éditions Surrealistes, Paris, 1930

⁷ Dalí, S., *Confessions inconfessables*. In: Complete Works, Autobiographical Articles 2. Ediciones Destino / Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation, Barcelona / Figueres, 2003, p. 463

⁸ Joaquim Yarza, *El jardín de las delicias de El Bosco*. TF Editores, Madrid, 1998, p. 51