ABOUT THE ARTIST

German artist Max Ernst (1891–1976) was an important contributor to Dada and Surrealism during and after World War I. After fleeing Nazi-occupied France during World War II he lived in exile in the United States. A member of the Surrealist movement, which was influenced by Sigmund Freud's writings on dreams and the unconscious, Ernst experimented with different automatic techniques such as decalcomania to remove the mind as much as possible from the act of creating art.

ABOUT L’OEIL DU SILENCE (THE EYE OF SILENCE)

While living in the United States, Ernst traveled around western Arizona and California and executed The Eye of Silence during this exploration of the American West. The painting does not depict an actual place but a fantasy world with grottoes, stalactites and stalagmites, and rock formations containing circular forms resembling eyes. These otherworldly elements alluding to the destruction of Europe can also be seen to illuminate Surrealists ideas about dreams acting as pathways to the mind and the exploration of emotions stored in memory and the unconscious.

At the same time, The Eye of Silence references traditional landscape compositions, with the foreground consisting of small rock formations, a middle ground with a lake, a background of mountains or architectural elements, and a framing device of a reclining female figure.

Discussion Questions

What emotions or memories are evoked by The Eye of Silence? How does the color palette effect these emotions? How does Ernst's landscape compare and contrast with more traditional landscapes? What fantasy elements can you identify? What real elements? Does knowing Ernst painted The Eye of Silence while in exile change your reading of the painting? If so, how? Can you find any elements that are reminiscent of the landscape of the American West?
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Research the Surrealist movement. What are its main tenets? Who were some of the major artists associated with the movement?

Research Surrealist writing and drawing activities and experiment with these in the classroom.

Review the decalcomania video listed in Additional Resources and explore this technique in the classroom.

VOCABULARY

avant-garde – new and radical or experimental ideas, especially in the arts
Dada – early 20th-century movement in art and literature based on deliberate irrationality and negation of traditional artistic values, questioning definitions of art and its place in society
decalcomania – a technique used by some Surrealist artists that involved applying paint to glass or paper and then pressing onto canvas or board
exile artists – artists who have, voluntarily or involuntarily, fled their home, usually for political reasons, and are not allowed to return or are being threatened with prison or death if they do; this term is also often applied to those artists who fled Nazi Germany during World War II
Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) – renowned Austrian neurologist, often referred to as the father of psychoanalysis
Surrealism – a movement in art and literature that flourished in the early to mid-20th century, aimed at expressing imaginative dreams and visions free from conscious, rational control

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Eye of Silence
Sabine Eckmann, “Max Ernst: L’œil du silence (The Eye of Silence),” in Spotlights: Collected by the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, by Sabine Eckmann et al. (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2016), 149–51.
www.kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/node/11286
Max Ernst
www.max-ernst.com/
www.theartstory.org/artist-ernst-max.htm
Decalcomania
www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-H7_uc-GJc
Surrealism
www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/surr/hd_surr.htm
Surrealist drawing games