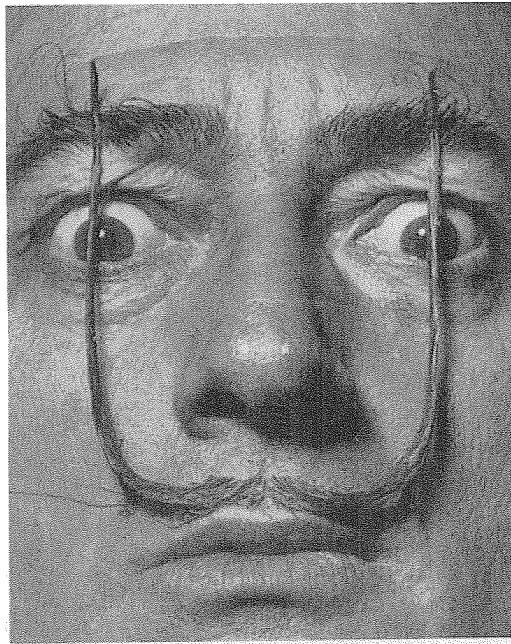


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# **Cubism, Surrealism, Egotism: The Making of Salvador Dali**



**Visual Arts Extended Essay**

**Word Count: 3473**

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## Abstract

Many people associate Salvador Dali with a madman, and relate his artwork to a dreamlike and unrealistic experience. Even though Dali is most notable for his work during his Surrealist years, his egotistical style is also evident through many of his earlier pieces. This essay will explore how his egotistical and eccentric character influenced his artwork, thereby making him the artist we know today. It will also show how Dali moved from his early work with Cubism, to developing and eventually mastering Surrealism, whilst all the time living an eccentric and egotistical lifestyle.

First we give insights into Dali's childhood and the creation of his egotistical personality, and also examine Dali's continuous need to be different from everyone else, showing the first signs of his desire to be unique.

We then discuss his participation in the Cubist movement, closely examining one of his pieces, and exploring how this work reflected his personality.

We conclude by examining his involvement with Surrealism and the development of his character and egotistical ways. In doing so, we will discuss how his character furthered his artwork, and his artwork furthered his character.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the following people:

### *Thank You for the Things You've Done for Me*

*Thank you for the things you've done for me.  
Happiness walks slowly, with a cane.  
Although inside I'm dancing to the moon,  
Nearby many obstacles remain.  
Kind help like yours those thorny thickets prune.*

*You are my willing ear, the peaceful sea  
On which I sail my thoughts, the quiet tune  
Underneath my laughter and my pain.*

By William Byrd

*The biggest mistake we could ever make in our lives is to think we work for anybody but ourselves.*

- Brian Tracy

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## Introduction

Salvador Dali was one of the most accomplished painters of the last century and achieved great recognition for his work during his own lifetime. Salvador Dali, commonly known as Dali, is mostly recognized for his work in the Surrealist movement, but has also explored many other avenues of art. Dali painted from the age of six, until he was seventy-nine years of age, when he was forced to stop due to his failing health. Throughout these years, he explored many different styles of painting, including Cubism, Futurism, Impressionism and his most favored and perfected, Surrealism. Furthermore, Dali's talents also extended to sculpture, writing, design, lecturing and film production (Michael, K, 2002). During Dali's artistic career there were many forces at work causing him to change direction and explore many different and diverse styles.

## The Third Dali

In order to look at these changes, we need to look closely at Dali, his life and the environment in which he was brought up. Born, Salvador Domingo Felipe Dali Domenech in Figueres Spain, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1904, Dali the artist was the third born Salvador in his family. The first was his father, Salvador Dali y Cusi (- 1950), and the second, an elder brother born in 1897 who unfortunately died at the age of only seven. Only nine months after the second Salvador died, Salvador the artist was born. After the death of the first-born Salvador, the second who was to become the famous artist, was told by his parents that he was the reincarnation of his deceased elder brother and throughout his childhood he was treated with great reverence by both his parents and close family (The Early Years, 2003).

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This kind of upbringing is one of the main reasons that Dali developed such a massive ego. Throughout his childhood he was treated as a demigod in his own household, and was always the center of attention amongst his family. During his formative years he could do no wrong, all his actions and early idiosyncrasies were treated with acclaim and wonder by his immediate peers, and what ever he did was readily accepted by his dotting father as “being Dali”. This tolerance probably fueled the further development of his personal and creative ego.

### The Development of Ego

Dali grew up in a female-dominated household, and being the only young male he was constantly spoiled by his mother, grandmother, aunt and nurse. The constant attention they offered seemed to be insufficient for an ever-demanding young Dali, and even appears to *have driven him to seek additional ways to gain yet more attention*. Even the birth of a young sister when he was aged four, failed to take the limelight away from him. His biography records that he frequently threw tantrums and would self-induce coughing fits in his search of evermore attention. In addition to being pampered and the center of attention, Dali was said to be given free reign over his household. It is believed that this is where he developed many of his eccentric habits such as parading around in a blue sailor suit, or more preferably, in an emperor’s costume (The Early Years, 2003).

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*“The black-haired boy king strides through his home, his topaz-studded crown perfectly placed, his ermine cape sweeping majestically behind him. The grand monarch—a slight dark-haired boy named Salvador Dali—rules under a spacious, upper-class apartment in the small Spanish city of Figueres with absolute power. He enforces his will through violent temper tantrums and chronic bed-wetting. He wears his regal costume, a gift from a favorite uncle, most of the time. The king utterly scorns his own childish dreams of the past, when he would tell people he wanted to be a cook. Now he says he wants to be Napoleon”.*

Description of the Dali home, author Unknown.

It can be said that the events that occurred in Dali’s formative years profoundly influenced his psyche and thus, his destiny. This idea is very much in agreement with the Freudian principles of psychoanalysis, which states that the period of childhood is a critical development stage, especially with regards to the influence of parents (The Early Years, 2003).

This type of attention seeking behavior continued throughout his life (See Figure 1). In later life, Dali still demanded the attention of his peers, at the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936; he performed one of his most outrageous publicity stunts. When giving a lecture on “the mysteries of the inner depths of the subconscious”, when he dressed in a deep-sea diving suit and made a dramatic entrance holding two Russian Wolfhounds in one hand and a billiard cue in the other. When on stage, he tried to remove the diving helmet in order to start his speech. Dali found difficulty in releasing the bolts that secured the helmet to the heavy brass collar of the deep sea diving suit (Salvador Dali paintings and biography, 1999). The audience waited patiently whilst he struggled, unaware that he was slowly suffocating. Dali was finally rescued and near death when released, when the audience erupted into applause at what they thought was another of Dali’s humorous exhibitions. During another lecture, Dali described his moustache as an

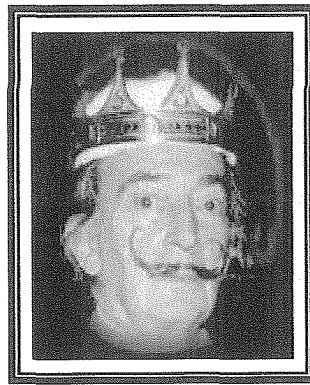


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antenna on which he received messages from outer space, much to the amusement of the audience.

*When Gala enters the room, Dali stands up, snaps his fingers, calls for silence and announces, 'Gala! Y Jesucristu Superstar.' Everybody claps. It's like being with royalty or circus people. That's why I like being with Dali - because it's not like being with an artist, he wouldn't be caught dead in a loft."*

Andy Warhol describing Salvador and Gala Dali.



**Figure 1:** Salvador Dali in a typically egotistical pose, wearing his trademark moustache and an elaborate crown.

Dali was not just unconventional and dramatic; he was often shocking and outrageous. He was an artist who loved to stir up controversy and to instigate scandal and upheaval (Dali, 2001). Dali's attitude and behavior were often reflected in his art – his aim was that it must shock the viewer in the same way that his general behavior did. An example of his artwork being shocking is expressed in the opening image of his Surreal film, “Un Chien Andalou” (1928). It begins with a graphic image of an eye being cut open with a razor (Gorin, Courtney, 1998). By using this image, it is possible that Dali's primary objective was to capture the viewer's attention by shocking them.

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Dali's intention to shock his viewers continued throughout his career, thereby establishing himself as the artist who was always able to keep shocking the world and to keep the public's interest (ArtPodium, 2003).

*“Although the Surrealist movement did not lack clowns, Salvador Dali was perhaps more qualified than some (Morris, C.J, 1972)”*

## **Education and Being Different**

Dali's eccentric behavior had its first public airing when he attended the Municipal Drawing School in 1917, where he received his formal introduction to art from the artist, Professor Juan Nuñez. Here Dali learnt the techniques of chiaroscuro<sup>1</sup> and engraving. Only three years later, Dali believed he had become an accomplished enough artist to be able to open his first exhibition. With the assistance of his father, he set up his first art exhibition in the family home in Figueres, Spain and sold his first pieces. Articles written about Salvador and his exhibition were published with critical acclaim in the local newspapers and at the age of only sixteen the road to fame and fortune was seemed to be laid out before him. The early recognition began feeding his already developing ego.

Two years later, Dali moved to Madrid where he enrolled in the Fernando Academy of Fine Arts. While in the academy, he gained the attention of many of his fellow classmates as being an eccentric, wearing long hair and sideburns, long flowing coats, stockings and knee britches in the fashions of a century before (Wikipedia, 2003). It was here that he developed his interest in Cubism.

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<sup>1</sup> A picture made by using many different shades of the same color.

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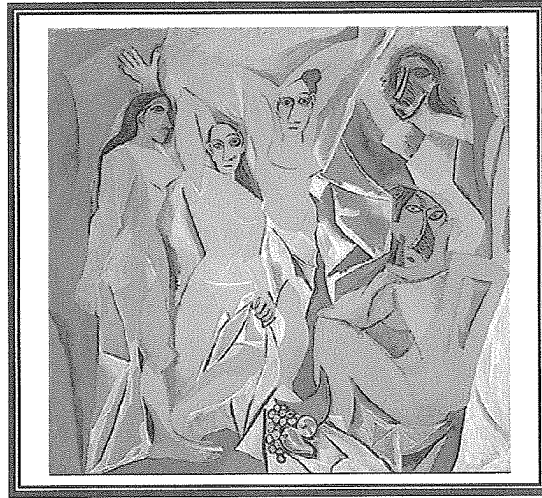
*“I was twenty-two. I was studying at the School of Fine Arts in Madrid. The desire constantly, systematically and to my cost to do just the opposite of what everybody else did pushed me to extravagances that soon became notorious in artistic circles”.*

Salvador Dali.

Here we see Dali’s ego developing as a primary force in both his artwork and his eccentric character. This egotistic and eccentric character continues throughout his life, making Dali in to the artist we know today.

### Early Influences

Dali dabbled with Cubism after seeing the works of Picasso and Braque in past magazines and exhibition brochures. Cubism began in the early twentieth century as a style of painting or sculpture in which the subject is described using geometric shapes without displaying any realistic detail. The artists, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, created this movement in Montmartre, Paris, between 1907 and 1914. The first piece of artwork that was considered Cubist was *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.)* by Pablo Picasso (See Figure 2). It was works of art such as Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.)* that socked the art world of the time and would in the future give direction to a young Dali.



**Figure 2:** Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*. 1907. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Years later when Dali saw Picasso's work he immediately realized that Cubism could be further developed, and decided to explore it in Madrid where it had not been seen before. This "new" style would be a natural choice for an artist wishing to shock his audience.

One of the more notable Cubist pieces that Dali painted while still exploring this style was *Self-portrait with La Publicitat* (See Figure 2). The picture serves to illustrate his interest in the developing style. A close examination of the various ideas expressed in the piece reveal a great deal about the workings of Dali's ego.



**Figure 3:** Salvador Dalí. *Self-Portrait with La Publicitat*. 1923. Gouache and collage on cardboard. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

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## Ego in *Self-Portrait with La Publicitat*

This piece of work is a typical Cubist piece filled with recognizable geometric tonality. Even though we can associate with this style, it is only the superficial clothing for Dali's message. In this piece, we see Dali's figure holding a copy of the newspaper "La Publicitat". The reference to the Barcelona newspaper emphasizes that Dali felt he was still a provincial artist as the publication referred to is a local one to his then home town of Madrid, and shows that he believed he had yet to achieve international acclaim.

The piece is predominantly painted using different shades of blue, the lighter and clearer shades being featured in the center. Due to the center being of a lighter blue, the viewers' attention is drawn inwards, focusing on the three main elements, the newspaper, the smoking pipe, and Dali's self image which takes pride of place in the higher center of the picture. This focus serves to draw the viewer's attention not only to the figure of Dali himself, but also to the perception of his perceived importance of both his own idea and that of the art world. Dali asks the viewer to understand that he is a genius and the presence of the newspaper serves to put a public stamp on this notion.

In addition to blue, one notes the inclusion of different shades of gray and purple. Since such color can hardly be described as happy or positive in nature, their use suggests that Dali may have been depressed at the time of painting the piece. When looking at the events in his life during his life at this time, his depression may have been as a result of his suspension from the Academy of Fine Arts due to his involvement in, and his instigating of rebellious acts against the school. He was most outspoken about the authority of teachers within the school – a further statement of his egotistical nature.

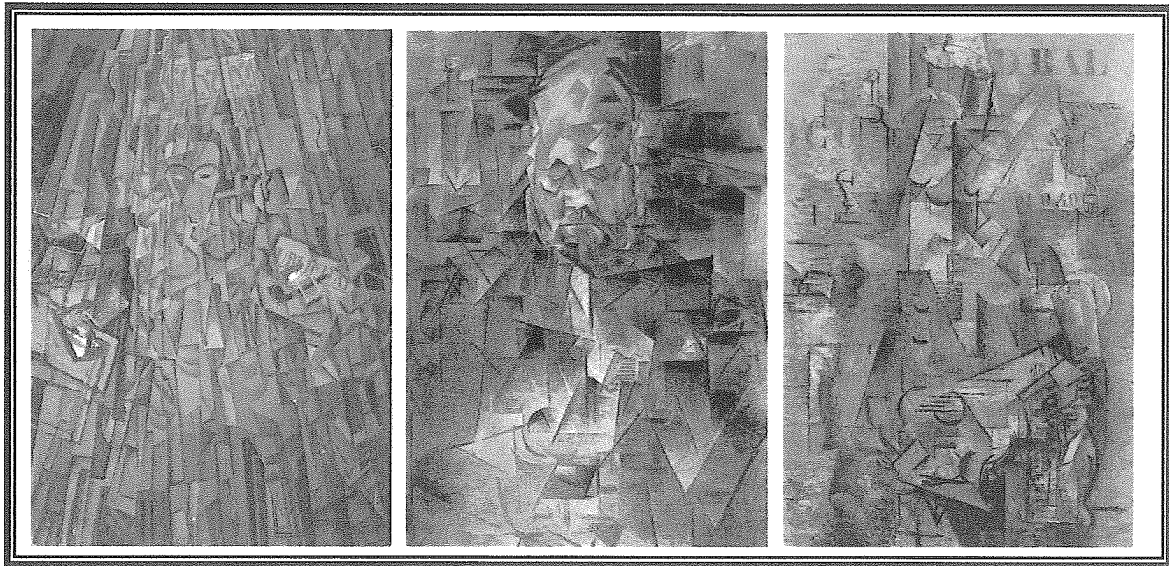
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“Have no fear of perfection - you will never reach it” (ArtQuotes, 2003).  
Salvador Dali.

With this in mind, the *Self-portrait with La Publicitat* can therefore be said to contrast Dali’s state of depression with his recent found fame and recognition from La Publicitat. Due to his obvious egotistical nature, Dali may have painted this picture in order to overcome his depression by emphasizing the highlights of his life, most notably his increasing fame and recognition from the press. This message, in many ways, supercedes the obvious influence of Picasso and Braque, and firmly establishes Dali in the Cubist movement.

When comparing Dali’s *Self-portrait with La Publicitat* with Picasso’s *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard* and Braque’s *The Emigrant*, one can see that Dali was heavily influenced by both Picasso and Braque, although the structure of Dali’s piece is much less complicated and less subtle (Masters, Christopher, 1995). (See Figure 4). This shows that although the work is recognized in its own right, Dali’s interpretation of Cubism is much less developed than either Picasso’s or Braque’s. Thus, this subject matter can be said to have more importance to Dali’s own development than to the development of pure Cubist expression. His ego must overcome the influence of other artists.



**Figure 4:** Left: Salvador Dali. *Self-image with La Publicitat*. 1923. Gouache and collage on cardboard. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.  
Center: Pablo Picasso. *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*. 1910. Oil on canvas. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.  
Right: Georges Braque. *The Emigrant*. 1911-12. Oil on canvas. Kunstmuseum, Basle.

## Feeding the Ego

Despite his egotistical ways, Dali needed and yearned for recognition and the admiration of his peers. Whilst Dali was suspended from the San Fernando Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid, he returned to Figueres to see his former teacher, Nuñez, and used this time to experiment with making prints.

In 1924 Dali was re-instated into the Academy of Fine Arts, and went on to hold his first full scale one-man exhibition in the Dalmau Galleries in Barcelona. Here he showed over fifteen pieces of his artwork, most of them exploring Cubism. Picasso visited this exhibition, and subsequently praised Dali's work.



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The praise from both the media and Picasso elevated Dali's ego to new heights, leading him to believe he was possibly superior to all others.

*"... Each morning when I wake up, I experience an exquisite joy – the joy of being Salvador Dali – and I ask myself in rapture, "What wonderful things is Salvador Dali going to accomplish today?"* (ArtQuotes, 2003)  
Salvador Dali.

*"The most important events which can happen to a contemporary painter are two in number:  
1. To be Spanish.  
2. To be named Gala Salvador Dali"* (Dali, Salvador, 1981).  
Salvador Dali.

In 1926, Dali was finally expelled from the San Fernando Academy of Fine Arts when he publicly declared that no one was properly qualified to assess him for his Theory of Art examination (Microsoft Encarta, 1999).

*"I am very sorry, but I am infinitely more intelligent than these three professors and I therefore refuse to be examined by them. I know this subject much too well"* (Salvador Dali, 1999).  
Salvador Dali.

These statements lead us to believe that Dali felt that none of his peers were accomplished enough to be able to influence or guide him, and all his inspiration had to come from within himself. As in his childhood, he still needed to be the central figure around which both audience and colleagues alike, revolved.

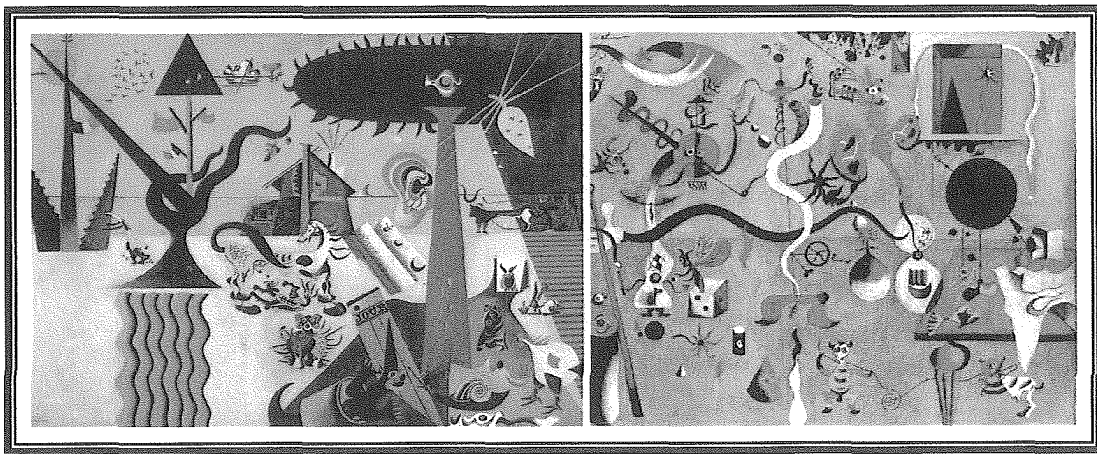
## **Dali's Introduction to Surrealism**

Later in 1926, Dali traveled to Paris where he met with Pablo Picasso and Joan Miro. In 1927, while visiting Spain, Miro visited Dali and convinced him to establish himself back in Paris. In 1928, Dali returned to Paris and was introduced to various artists that were following the Dadaist and Surrealist movements.

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Throughout the following year, Dali developed a number of pieces that were deeply influenced by both Picasso and Miro (See Figure 4). Some time later, in 1934, Dali's relationship with the Surrealist group deteriorated. As a result, they tried to expel him at a "trial" held in Paris (Surrealism Period, 2002). Later when asked about his relationship with the group, Dali stated "The difference between me and the Surrealists is that I am Surrealism".



**Figure 5:** Left: Joan Miro. *The Tilled Field*. 1923. Oil on canvas. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.  
Right: Joan Miro. *The Harlequins Carnival*. 1924. Oil on canvas. Albright – Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.

The above two pieces of work by Miro, are painted in the style of Abstract Surrealism, the only type of Surrealism being explored at that time. Even though Miro had an obvious influence on Dali, Dali tried to distance himself from Miro's style, in order to try and develop his own unique style.

Dali succeeded in his wish to create a completely new and unique style thereby distancing him from all other artists. This new style attributed to Dali, became known as

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Illusionistic Surrealism. An early example of Dali's new found style is *Little Senicitas* (Little Ashes) (See Figure 6). Dali distanced himself from Miro's style of work by making his own paintings more complex. As you can see, Miro's pieces (figure 5) were painted using solid shades of color with no lifelike figures. This contrasted with Dali's work as his contained realistic but deformed figures.



**Figure 6:** Salvador Dalí. *Little Senicitas*. 1928. Oil on panel. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

Dalí's painting features both sexual and scatological<sup>2</sup> forms focused around a predominant and centrally placed figure of a human torso of ambiguous sexuality. Although very different to Miro's work, Miro's influence is still apparent in the forms of the scattered and wispy elements of the picture. Dalí however, managed to significantly

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<sup>2</sup> Dealing with excrement and excretory functions.

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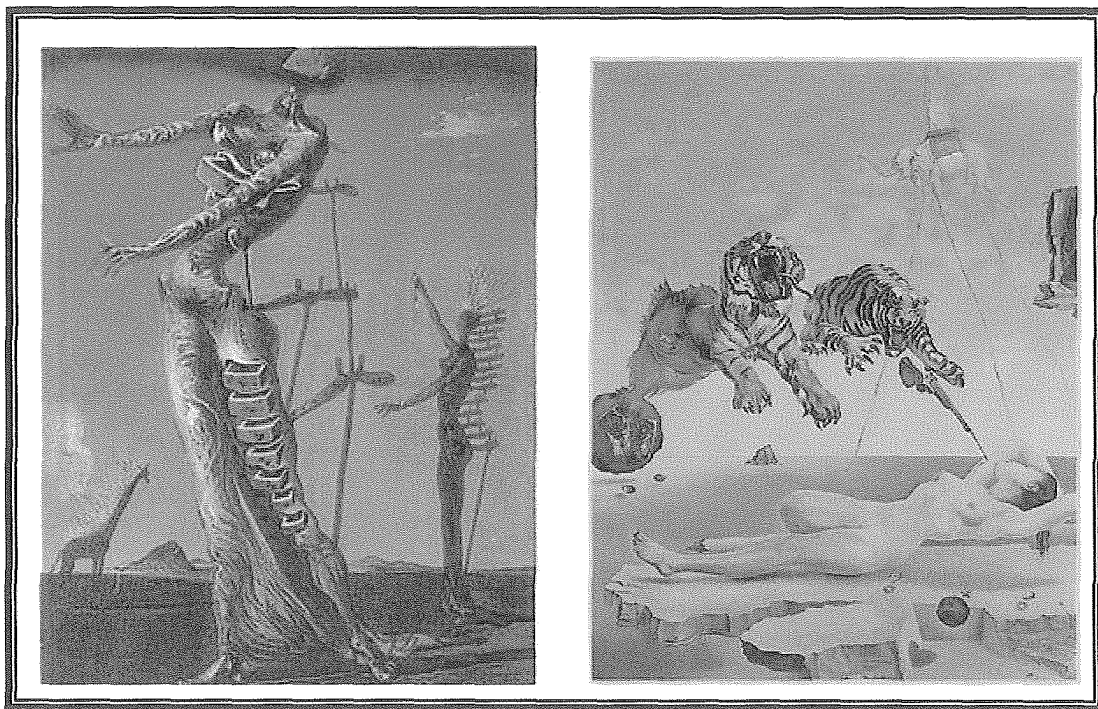
change the style by introducing a large central figure, something that was always missing from Miro's work. Dali's influences are also apparent in the skeletal donkey and other forms that are featured in the scattered elements of the piece.

Even though Miro seemed to have a profound effect on Dali, Dali's *Little Senicitas* has ground-breaking differences to previous Surrealist work. The main difference between Dali's piece is that it includes a figure of human flesh and body parts. This addition adds a shock factor to the piece, thereby making the piece more in-keeping with Dali's ideals. In addition to this, Dali's piece includes tonal development. Miro's work is composed of solid colors with no shading or tonal work, very different to Dali's *Little Senicitas*.

## The Dali We Know Today

Dali's work continued to show tonal development and realistic, but deformed figures. In addition to this, Dali's work continued to shock his viewers. Two examples of Dali's later, but still shocking work include *Giraffe on Fire* and *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate One Second before Awakening* (See Figure 7).

Looking at these pieces, one can see that Dali's technical ability is ever present, if not stronger. In addition, Dali has again chosen subjects that are both shocking and attention seeking, the figure of the giraffe on fire and the tigers coming out of the fish's mouth are examples. Dali has included his own, personal ideas in each of these pieces, whenever you see a person with drawers in (Foreground of *Giraffe on Fire*) or an elephant with long, skinny legs (Background of *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate One Second before Awakening*) you can be sure that your looking at a piece of Dali's work.



**Figure 7:** Left: Salvador Dalí. *Giraffe on Fire*. 1936 - 1937. Oil on canvas. Location Unknown.

Right: Salvador Dalí. *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate One Second before Awakening*. 1944. Oil on canvas. Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

## Conclusion

It is clear that Dalí's eccentric and egotistical character had strong and obvious influences in his artwork. Moreover, his artwork seems to have become a means of expressing, and even extending his ego. This can be seen in the self-absorbed treatment of his earlier Cubist works, such as *Self Portrait with La Publicitat* (1923), and is also evident in his early Surrealist pieces through his style of painting.

His style was both unique and different from any other Surrealist painter past or present, and was generally accepted as being well as being ahead of its time. This unique

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style can be seen in many of his works, including his early piece, *La Senicitas* (1928) and his later Surrealist pieces, *Giraffe on Fire* (1936 -1937) and the strangely entitled *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate One Second before Awakening* (1944).

Linked with considerations of the elements of Dali's enigmatic and very public personality, we are forced to view his work in state of awe; initially shocked by its overall presence and then consumed by its complexity, much like his own personality.

Therefore, we find that Dali's artwork mimics his character and personality, as his character and personality became more outlandish as his career developed, it could be seen in both his artwork and expression during his public appearances. Both are original, need to shock and demand their audience's complete attention. The fact that he achieved such recognition whilst he was still alive possibly fueled his eccentric and egotistical traits.

We therefore find both Dali's character and artwork to be strangely symbiotic, both feeding off of each other, yet both driving each other to new heights of expressionism.

*"I am not strange, I am just not normal."  
- Dali*

*"Right now I'm the greatest. I don't say this out of vanity - it's just that the rest are so bad."  
- Dali*





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