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How Sigmund Freud transformed modern art

The father of psychoanalysis had a profound impact on surrealism and abstract expressionism — and artists today are propelled by the possibilities of a roaming mind

'Good Shooting' (Bien Visé), a 1939 painting by British artist Roland Penrose © Southampton City Art Gallery/DACS

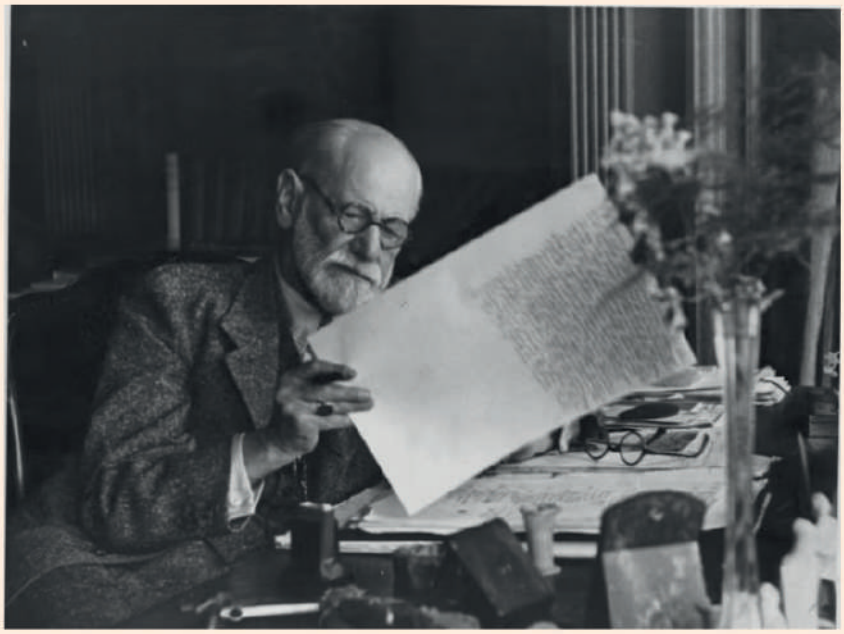
In 1938, Salvador Dalí drew a portrait of his hero, Sigmund Freud. The father of psychoanalysis had recently arrived in London after fleeing Nazi-occupied Vienna; the Spanish artist had spent years trying to meet him, but to no avail. The sitting was organised by the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig, who was present, as was the British surrealist and aristocrat

Edward James, who described the 34-year-old Dalí, his eyes "blazing with excitement", sketching "hastily but accurately into a drawing book". The artist had brought along his new painting *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* to show Freud, but the older man was suspicious of surrealism — he preferred the art of the Renaissance and antiquity. His response to Dalí's observation that "Freud's cranium is a snail! His brain is in the form of a spiral — to be extracted with a needle!" is, sadly, unrecorded.

It's ironic that, despite Freud's ambivalence to modern art, movements such as surrealism and abstract expressionism owe much to his writings on dreams and the uncanny and his pioneering of techniques, such as free association. The founder of surrealism, André Breton, was, initially, wildly enthusiastic about Freud's theories, but in 1921, after arriving uninvited on Freud's doorstep in Vienna and finding the psychoanalyst indifferent to his ideas, Breton wrote he was an "old man without elegance", in a "shabby office, worthy of the neighbourhood GP". No matter: generations of artists embraced Freud's concepts, shifting away from depictions of the external world to mining the creative possibilities of a roaming mind.

There's a current slew of shows in London that pivot on Freud's legacy. In Soho, Norito gallery is showcasing the young Chinese artist Eve Yifan Jiang's intricate ink drawings on silk of otherworldly creatures in mystical landscapes (until July 5). They're inspired by dreams, "urban encounters", the Bible, Greco-Roman myths and the writings of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Lacan, who declared: "It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian," is clearly having a moment. At the new Clerkenwell gallery Interval, London-based artist Simon Moretti recently curated *Scenes From a Divided Subject*, inspired by Lacan's theories on the unconscious. It included a mix of Moretti's neon sculptures; a 1936 poem by Paul Éluard illustrated by Pablo Picasso; a drawing of a spectral face by Joel Wyllie, a piece of armour and a large shell. "The excavation of memory, so central to Freud and the origins of psychoanalysis as a system of knowledge, is intrinsically part of the creative process," Moretti tells me. "Both are attempts to give form to what resists it."



Despite being cited by surrealists and abstract expressionists, Sigmund Freud himself (pictured here in Vienna, 1938, shortly before moving to London) was ambivalent about most modern art © Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

'After Eden (Expulsion)' (2026) by Eve Yifan Jiang © Courtesy the artist and Norito. Photo by Studio Adamson

'Annunciation' (1949) by Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux © Southampton City Art Gallery/DACS

This year's Treasure House Fair is showcasing surrealist works from the Southampton City Art Gallery (June 24-30). It's a celebration of the 90th anniversary of the legendary London International Surrealist Exhibition, which took place at the New Burlington Galleries and included more than 390 works by 71 artists from 14 countries. It also featured performances by Dalí in a deep-sea diving suit; Sheila Legge blinded by flowers; and Welsh poet Dylan Thomas offering guests cups of boiled string, asking, "Do you like it weak or strong?" What surprises are in store at the fair remain under wraps at the time of writing.

In Mayfair, Alison Jacques is showing paintings by the Argentine-British artist Eileen Agar, one of the few women included in the 1936 show. She described the feminine imagination as "womb magic", which she believed would counteract the "rampant hysterical militarism" of the late 1930s. "I have spent my life in revolt against convention," she said, "trying to bring colour and light and a sense of the mysterious to everyday existence."

'Man in Nature' (1972) by Eileen Agar © Courtesy Alison Jacques and the estate of Eileen Agar. Photo by Michal Brezezinski

On view at the Freud Museum is a small, fascinating exhibition: *Leonora Carrington: The Symptomatic Surreal* (until August 10). It includes letters, publications and drawings made by Carrington — an upper-class, British surrealist and writer — at the outbreak of the second world war. The display also includes a small selection of Freud's Egyptian antiquities, objects which would have fascinated Carrington, who had a life-long interest in myth and archetypes.

'Down Below' (1940) by Leonora Carrington © Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco, estate of Leonora Carrington/ARS, NY and DACS, London

When the war broke out, Carrington was living with the surrealist Max Ernst in the south of France. Ernst was interned and Carrington fled to Spain, where her rich father sent the artist's nanny in a gunboat to bring her back to England. She refused, had a nervous breakdown and was committed to an asylum in Santander. (It's apt that the exhibition is touring to a new museum, Faro Santander, on September 8.) Eventually, Carrington managed to get to New York; from there, she moved to Mexico, where she lived for the rest of her long life. The sketches include images of ethereal horses, a galleon, a girl dissolving in light; a tiny figure in a cage dangling from a monster. A painting of fantastical human/animal hybrids is also on view. Made by Carrington during her stay in the asylum, it's the first time it's been exhibited in the UK.

Quite apart from their shared interest in the unconscious, both Freud and Carrington's lives were shaped by displacement and exile, Freud Museum curator Vanessa Boni tells me. She also observes that Freud, like an artist, used objects as "material tools" to help think through the structure of the unconscious. Interestingly, though, while Carrington was in analysis for much of her life, she was no Freudian. When Boni visited her house in Mexico City she noted a shelf of books by her bed: all were by Carl Jung.