

Salvador Dalí: BIOGRAPHY

Introduction

At the age of 37, in 1941, Salvador Dalí finished writing his autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*. The book, published the following year, revealed a web of factual and fictionalized events from the artist's life. Dalí was by this time an international celebrity, a status he enjoyed as much for his art as for his eccentric public image. In the years since, countless biographies have been written, unraveling the mystery Dalí created, telling of the man who became the legend: Salvador Dalí.

Childhood and Family

Salvador Dalí began his life May 11, 1904, the second-born son of Salvador Dalí Cusí and Felipa Domènech Ferrés. Sadly, he never knew his older brother, also named Salvador Dalí, who died in infancy only nine months earlier. In 1908 came the birth of his only sister, Ana María. The family lived in the **Catalan** town of **Figueres**, Spain, but spent the summers in the seaside village of **Cadaqués**. Dalí's father was a notary, a position of political and social power. As a child Dalí feared his father, who was known for his bad temper, and took refuge in the comfort and kindness of his mother and the household servants who spoiled him.

At the age of four, the young Dalí began his formal education at the Escuela Pública (public school) in Figueres. Dalí disliked school, and spent much of his time daydreaming instead of studying. Displeased with Dalí's progress, his father transferred him to a private school where all of his classes were taught in French. Though Dalí spoke Catalan at home and was also learning Spanish, French was to become the language that he used as an artist. Dalí continued to dislike going to school because he hated the feeling of being confined to the classroom. During the school year he would long for the summer months his family spent together in the seaside town of Cadaqués. He enjoyed the freedom of his childhood summers when he could make paintings and drawings of his family and the picturesque coastline. At Cadaqués, Dalí studied painting with a family friend, Ramón Pichot, an artist who painted mostly in the style of the Impressionists, but also experimented with some styles of the Catalan **avant-garde**. Pichot, who lived in Paris and was friends with other artists including **Pablo Picasso**, was a mentor to Dalí throughout his youth, and was eventually successful in persuading

Dalí's reluctant father to allow his son to apply for admission at the San Fernando Academy of Art in Madrid.

Student Years and the Catalan Avant-Garde

In 1922 Dalí gained admission to the Academy. He enjoyed the freedom of self-expression he felt in Madrid, and developed close relationships with several of his fellow students including **Federico García Lorca** and **Luis Buñuel** (two artists he would later collaborate with). Dalí experimented with several avant-garde painting styles, primarily **Cubism, Futurism** and **Purism**, which he learned about through reproductions in art journals. He began showing his work in galleries in Barcelona and Madrid and had two solo exhibitions, as well as showing his work in several other exhibitions with other Catalan modernists. Though he was experiencing success in the Spanish art world, Dalí felt unchallenged by his instructors at the Academy. His tendency to challenge the authority of the Academy and to encourage his peers to do the same, led to disciplinary actions and eventually to his dismissal in 1926. Following his dismissal, Dalí returned to Figueres and devoted himself to painting. He continued to exhibit with the Catalan avant-garde, but his works displayed an increasingly disturbing imagery of mutilation and decay. Even the Catalan art community became more and more horrified by his graphic depictions, and as a result galleries in Madrid and Barcelona began to exclude Dalí from exhibitions.

Dalí and the Surrealists

In 1929, Dalí partnered with his friend, Luis Buñuel, to create a short avant-garde film titled *Un Chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*) consisting of a series of short scenes of unexplained violence and rotting corpses. The widespread acclaim for the film among the European avant-garde elevated the two to international fame and brought Dalí to Paris. In particular, the **Surrealists** took notice of Dalí and Buñuel, welcoming them to their artistic circle. As a member of the Surrealist movement, Dalí was surrounded by artists who accepted his outlandish behavior, and celebrated the bizarre imagery in his art. Besides meeting artists such as René Magritte and Hans Arp, Dalí also made acquaintance with Gala, the wife of the Surrealist writer Paul Eluard. Even though she was nine years his senior and already married, Dalí and Gala quickly became inseparable, and moved to Paris together in the autumn of 1929. Five years later the couple married in a civil ceremony. Gala, who was born in Russia as Elena Dmitrievna

Diakona, became Dalí's muse but also served as his manager. Gala encouraged and at times even drove Dalí in his pursuit of fame and fortune.

Though Dalí was a member of the Surrealist movement, his affiliation was more the result of shared interests than any genuine unity with the group. Like the Surrealists, Dalí found artistic inspiration in **Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic** studies, however he did not embrace the communist social and political ideals of the movement, preferring to be apolitical. Many of Freud's publications began to appear in Spanish translations in the 1920s, and Dalí read them voraciously. He became increasingly obsessed with psychoanalysis and paranoia, and sought ways to include these concepts in his art, leading to his development of the '**paranoic-critical method**' and his introduction of Surrealist objects.

Dalí's relationship with members of the Surrealist movement, particularly with the group's leader and founder, **André Breton**, was strained throughout the 1930s. His self-promoting behavior and unwillingness to conform his own activities and attitudes to the Surrealist agenda created increasing disruption within the group. Though he continued to participate in Surrealist exhibitions and attracted a great deal of attention to the movement, Breton became more openly critical of Dalí's growing celebrity and commercialism, dubbing him with the **anagrammatic** nickname 'Avida Dollars.' By 1939 the rupture was absolute and Dalí broke from the Surrealists. Dalí's departure from the Surrealists marked the end of his affiliation with artistic groups and movements. Through the rest of his life he remained independent as an artist, working in his own style and exploring his own introspective and paranoic avenues.

Dalí in America

The 1940s brought about many changes in Dalí's life and art. The civil war that had devastated Spain in the late 1930s was over, but a new war was on the horizon. As the Nazis prepared to invade France, Dalí and Gala fled to the United States in self-imposed exile, as did many other artists during the Second World War. Dalí was well known by the American public, and very popular with American collectors as well. During the course of the decade Dalí's works were exhibited in important galleries in New York and in major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He also lent his talent to other media, collaborating with Alfred Hitchcock and Walt Disney on film and animation projects.

The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 marked the end of World War II, and the beginning of a new period of artistic exploration for Dalí. He became fascinated with the power of the atom and the advances of modern science, particularly **physics**, and he sought ways to incorporate these elements into his art. At this same time, Dalí's artistic style also became more focused and deliberate in its borrowing from the **classical** style of the Italian Renaissance. His renewed classicism and new scientific interests were accompanied by growing spirituality and dedication to the Catholic Church. Dalí began painting in a style he described as '**Nuclear Mysticism**,' combining mystical and scientific iconography to express what Dalí saw as a unity between the two that was proof of a divine power.

Dalí's Later Years

In the final decades of his life, Dalí painted less and less. He remained an international celebrity, with major exhibitions of his works in cities around the world including Tokyo, London, Paris, Ferrara (Italy) and Moscow. Before his death on January 23, 1989, Dalí even witnessed the inauguration of two museums dedicated to exhibiting his art, The Salvador Dalí Museum in Cleveland, Ohio (now in St. Petersburg, Florida) and his own Teatre-Museu in Figueres, where he is buried.