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June 1998 Vol. 16 No. 6

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# MAGRITTE

## A Deltiologist Views Surreal Genius

by Cynthia Elyce Rubin

Each year I become a more dedicated deltiologist. Amid a flurry of a myriad of activities, I'm always astonished that this particular hobby influences the "how" of viewing what is around me. As an art historian and lecturer, when I look at art my "delti-colored" glasses often come into play.

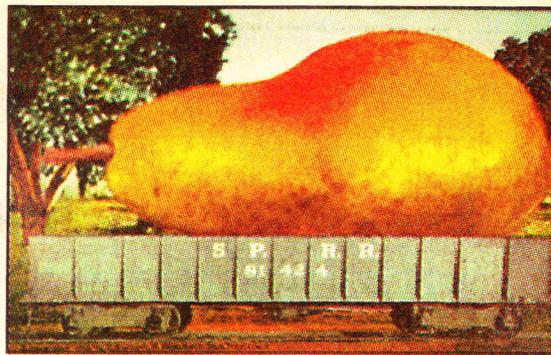
Recently I was honored to be an invited guest at the grand opening of The René Magritte Retrospective organized by the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels. The postcard, like photography, was a European import, and as a devout deltiologist the exhibition took on special meaning for me.

Surrealist Magritte was, above all, an artist, but his love of photography and his play with montage had a very real influence on his unique art. Born in Belgium in 1898, Magritte was 12 years old when he began attending painting classes. He continued in art school making friends with many artists interested in modernity and different European movements. Although schooling was conventional, his early work was considered very original. His links with Dada and Surrealist artists Andre Breton, Max Ernst and Paul Eluard were crucial. Magritte, acknowledging a personal debt to Ernst, between 1925 and 1927 made some 30 collages consisting mainly of shapes cut out from one and the same music score. Somewhat in the style of Dadaist collages, Magritte introduced additional elements into these compositions such as photographs of human body parts. Composed on a watercolor background they already reveal Magritte's pictorial vocabulary. In the 1920s, Magritte was already gaining recognition as an artist of stature among the avant-garde in Brussels. Later on, he would again become interested in collages and use music scores along with various motifs from his oil paintings such as bridges, pipes, leaf trees, apples and the painting within a painting. In 1937 a set of printed post-

cards titled "La Carte Surréaliste" was published. It included cards by Magritte, Duchamp, Max Ernst, Man Ray and others. In addition, Paul Eluard and Salvador Dali were collecting postcards, some depending on the technical manipulation of photographic images.

The art of collage and montage had been successfully used decades earlier by postcard makers of "exaggerated" or "tall-tale" images. A small group of individualistic photographers, most of them living at the geographic crossroads of the Midwest, helped disappointed settlers cope with the trials of inhospitable acres. Walter T. Oxley of Fergus Falls, Minn., an all-around small-town photographer, produced postcards of local interest including hunting and fishing scenes that often depicted the fish that got away. Oxley loved a good yarn and that was by far his favorite theme. By 1908 William Martin, native of Ottawa, Kan., was experimenting with what he called "trick photography" postcards, selling the results throughout the nation. These cards with their visually powerful images were so commercially successful that he sold his photography studio in 1909 to turn full attention to the Martin Post Card Company which was reported to turn out some 10,000 cards a day.

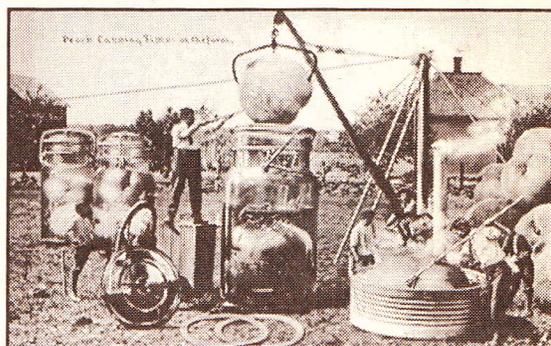
Right: Colossal corn at the County Fair, William Martin.



"A Carload-A Mammoth Pear from -" Edward H. Mitchell postcard, 1910.



How they grow in Watsonville, Cal. Published by Pacific Novelty Co. of San Francisco. Made in Germany.



One of the most action-filled of William Martin's images.

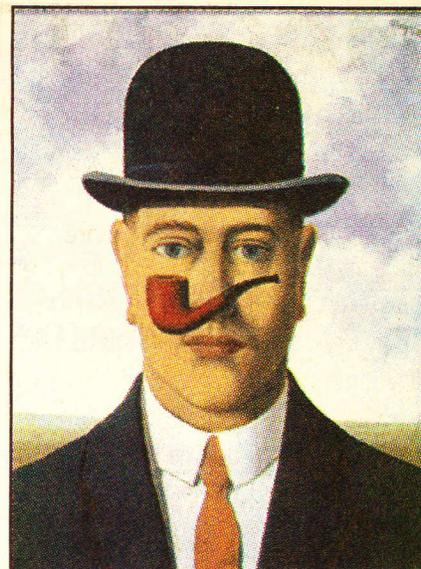




Portrait of Magritte, in Brussels, circa 1965.



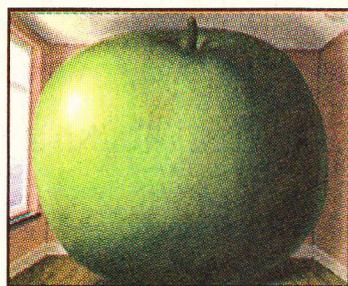
Hot-Air Balloon, Edward H. Mitchell.



René Magritte, the Good Faith.



Postcard extolling "Trew-Luver's Tonic" (to be taken with a Spoon), unidentified, stamp dated 1907. Here image and word have a double meaning.



René Magritte, the Hearing Chamber

In California, Edward H. Mitchell of San Francisco was filling the need for local souvenirs by selling a series of huge colored fruits, vegetables and nuts on flat railroad cars. Although their composition is not as sophisticated as Martin's, the images were popular and thousands of these cards were sold. One wonders if Magritte had ever seen them since his own compositions echo many similarities of these American postcard creators. It's an interesting question without an answer.

But intent was very different. Magritte wanted to establish a disturbing relationship between the world and objects. By placing simple objects in situations which were unfamiliar to the spectator, he would "challenge the real world" by abandoning the plastic qualities of pictorial art in favor of a more remote, colder style that portrayed images from which all aestheticism had to be banished.

A feeling of anxiety, which shows itself in dark tonalities, sad shapes and mysterious juxtapositions of objects invaded a large number of Magritte's works. They became part of a fragmented universe, peopled by cut-out shapes and mysterious ghostly figures laden with mystery and alienation.

On the other hand, the use of freaks of nature for tall-tale materials is associated with the American habit of boasting and exaggerating. In a land where distances and natural resources

could seem endless, sometimes the best way to deal with reality was to make a joke of it. Magritte would challenge the real world, whereas the tall-tale postcard maker dealt with it on a human basis. When crops were poor, an "exaggerated" picture postcard demonstrated the wished-for size of crops grown on the farm and captured the resourcefulness needed to cope with life's misfortunes.

But both Magritte's works and tall-tale postcards demonstrate that in a world that is constantly in motion, creativity and imagination are more important than ever—transcending the mere appearance of people and things. Both types of works, whether humorous or enigmatic, possess a magical power that calls out to us today as loudly as ever. Magritte said, "Nature provides us with a dream state." The association of simple objects and the emotions they arouse can lead us to an expansion of reality. Sometimes it even leads from the surreal to the tall-tale. I find that my "delti-colored" glasses are rose-colored after all!

(All Magritte slides and photographs are courtesy of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. The rest of the slides are courtesy of C.E. Rubin.)

Cynthia Elyce Rubin is a curator, writer and lecturer. She has a Ph.D. in Folk Art and has written numerous articles and books including the text for *Larger than Life: The American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905-1915 with postcards from the collection of Morgan Williams*. Cynthia is currently at work on a new book utilizing postcard images. You may reach her at 20 West 72nd Street, New York, NY 10023-4100 or e-mail at [cynthiaelyce@earthlink.net](mailto:cynthiaelyce@earthlink.net)