

The Persistence of Memory (1931) is one of the most famous Salvador Dali paintings. Without having seen this painting in person (which currently belongs to the Gala-Salvador Dali Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS) museum, New York) one may assume that this painting is bigger than it really is. This minimalist painting's dimensions are merely 9 1/2 by 13" inch (24.1 x 33cm). Rendered in Dali's hallmark faint brown, yellow and blue colors this painting has earned world-wide recognition.

Dali's unquestionable genius lies in his ability to create ideas that are almost disturbing, yet not entirely so. Marilyn Manson, who had admittedly been influenced by the works of Salvador Dali (and Nietzsche, too, such as Dali himself) is known for creating art based on the shock factor. Dali, however, doesn't go over the border to create visions based on disgust and shock value. Dali isn't trying to shock the viewer of his paintings, but to bewilder him. One of the questions those who had shown interest in Dali's work ask is "What is the meaning of these paintings?". Whether there is certain meaning in Dali's work is questionable, Dali himself never explained his works with seriousness, although one can be curious about Dali's influences.

The Persistence of Memory Meaning

What is the meaning of The Persistence of Memory? The painting itself is named adequately, as it is hard to forget the feelings provoked by observing the contents of the painting. The landscapes in many of Dali's paintings, including The Persistence of Memory, resemble Port Lligat, the home of Salvador Dali. More than often Dali uses sandy beaches, corrupted by age sail boats, and other imagery he had been exposed to as a child in his home town.

While the content of this painting is enigmatic and open to interpretation, let's not forget that Dali was also a philosopher, besides being an artist, as most people know him. We also know that Dali had significant interests in science and psychology (He studied the works of Freud and Nietzsche, for example). The painting is nothing more than a collection of ideas, that are to do with the interpretation of dreams, perception of reality, time, birth, death and sexual desire. The ants, seemingly attacking the orange clock positioned on the rectangular table-like object perhaps indicate the anxiety associated with time. And what are the origins of our anxieties associated with time? Is it being too late for work? or is it not having completed or accomplished something before we die? Whether we are aware of it or not, it is reasonable to believe that we all understand, even if only on subconscious level that some day we are going to die. This psychology and understanding of the reality of death may configure our behavior.

Perhaps the images of the melting clocks are nothing more than ideas influenced by the Camembert cheese left for too long of a period of time on the table on a warm sunny day (as Dali had previously described his inspiration for this painting). But remember that Dali would often make up ridiculous explanations for his paintings to purposely mislead people. The Camembert is an example of just that. By doing this Dali not only opened the doors for discussion of multiple interpretations of his art, but also made criticizing his work nearly impossible for people he thought who possessed lesser intellect than that of himself. In a similar way, for example, and with the same intentions, Leonardo DaVinci wrote backwards and upside down in his journals, so that the meaning of his work could only be interpreted when looked at in a mirror's reflection by those who were clever enough to understand it.

Painting Analysis

Another peculiar detail that perhaps is not easy to spot at first glance is the way Dali uses light to communicate ideas of this painting. There are two tiny rocks sitting in the sand on the beach in the background. The rock to the left is in the shadow, and the one to the right is lit. Note that the ants, the three melted clocks and a fetus-like object all reside in the shade as well. Whereas, the mountains and the water are lit by sunlight. Here we can see the difference between soft (uncertain) and hard (certain) objects. You can draw a diagonal line between the shadowed place and the lit areas of this painting. Perhaps the distorted (soft) images that are in the shade are representing subconscious images, and the sun-lit mountain (hard) and water represent consciousness. The painting almost makes the viewer look at consciousness as "the light at the end of the tunnel" from this angle.

How Human Memory Works

You meet someone you had met before, but you don't remember her name. You say hello. Unfortunately she is in a rush and you must part ways without much exchange. The next day you decide to go for a walk down the street. Going through the usual thinking on your way down an alleyway, without any effort, her name pops into your head. About time. Certainly human memory is integrated into the organic fabric of your brain. After all you are not a computer and obviously you don't store memory on a magnetic disk organized such as that you could pull specific memories out precisely at the time you need to and on command. What is memory then?

According to most recent discoveries by scientists, forming memory is a four-step process. It is known that the four main human memory types are sensory memory, working memory, short-term memory and long-term memory. According to one theory, the sensory memory is the persistence of sensations. Dali's paintings are psychologically deep, and perhaps the sensory memory is what influenced the famous "melted clock" painting since it is precisely this type of memory that makes it possible to attach our experiences to something we end up remembering at its deepest level.

Dali often called his paintings "hand-painted dream photographs" because of the technical and visual quality of his work. Certainly, it is one thing to look at this paintings in a magazine, a book or even the Internet. But nothing can match the stunning precision and detail of his work when it is seen in person. The colors are vibrant and the brush stroke artifacts are barely visible.