

The technical examination of Dalí's painting *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* reveals unknown aspects of Dalí's creative process

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The technical examination of paintings allows us to explore and expand our knowledge of the artistic and creative processes of artists. The Fundació Gala - Salvador Dalí focuses on the technical examinations of materials and pictorial procedures as a key element in documenting the collection, and alongside the daily tasks, it develops and promotes research initiatives. We know that close collaboration between conservators, curators and art historians enhances the results of our studies.

Many of the technical examinations carried out at the foundation's Department of Conservation begin when works are loaned for display and therefore have to travel. This is when the paintings are removed from their frames, examined and photographed, especially those on permanent display in the museum galleries, and we carry out documentation and technical investigation of the work's materials and techniques.

The oil on canvas *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love*¹ (Fig. 1), painted in 1940, is an interesting artwork, representative of one specific period in Dalí's career, from the Fundació Gala – Salvador Dalí's collection. It was loaned to the DALI/DUCHAMP exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London from October to January 2018, and the Dalí Museum in Saint Petersburg, Florida, from February to April 2018.

In the case of *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love*, the inspection has highlighted hidden details that provide further insight into the piece and the context of its creation. This paper reflects the brief conference given at the Dalí/Duchamp Symposium, organized by the Royal Academy in London, with regard to the interesting results of our examination.



Fig. 1

Historical context

Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love was painted by Dalí in 1940 in Arcachon, near Bordeaux, where he had escaped from Paris while the Nazi troops were occupying the north-east of France. He chose Arcachon for its location, far away from the capital and closer to the Spanish border, and, as he himself declared, for its succulent cuisine². He set up his studio in a wide colonial-style villa overlooking the Bay, where he and Gala shared the days with Coco Chanel, Duchamp and other friends during the four months before they managed to travel to the United States.

1939 had been an exhausting year for Dalí, “the enervating adventures of our recent voyage to America had exhausted Gala and myself”, as he wrote. He came back from his last trip to the States disgusted with the results of the pavilion *The Dream of Venus* at the New York

World's Fair, long before it was finished; he also missed the opening of the ballet *Bacchanale*, at the Metropolitan Opera of New York in November. When war broke out in September the ballet company had hurriedly left for America before Chanel and Dalí had finished their work on the costumes and decor.³

In 1939 he had officially broken with the Surrealists, and Breton harshly highlighted the separation of the Catalan painter from the movement in his article “Des tendances les plus récentes de la peinture surréaliste” in *Minotaure* “, 12th May 1939.⁴ “He found himself completely alone for the very first time; from then on, Gala would be mainly his sole collaborator. Dalí sought refuge in painting, working tirelessly, as he wrote “Never had I worked so hard, or with such a burning sense of intellectual responsibility, as during this war, at Arcachon”.⁵

Accordingly, the painting is created in a crucial moment of his personal, experiential and artistic career, between the end of his Surrealist period of the 30s and the beginning of a metaphysical realism period that will lead him to Academicism and Classicism.

Description and technical examination

This is the setting in which Dalí painted a broad and uniform ochre plain – maybe inspired by the plains of his native Empordà landscape-, that occupies almost all the surface. It is reminiscent of other paintings done during the Spanish Civil War– *Imperial Violets*, 1938 (Fig. 2), *Spain*, 1938 (Fig. 3), *Visage of the War*, 1940 (Fig 4)⁶-, where the objects are presented on the empty surface of a beach-table that induces meditation and gives a sense of enigmatic essentiality. In addition, the winding profile of the hill of the upper right part is reproduced in almost all the paintings of this period, as for example *The Enigma of Hitler*,

*1939, The Sublime Moment, 1938, or The transparent simulacrum of the feigned image, 1938.*⁷



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

In the centre of the ochre plain Dalí placed three pieces of bread, two on top of one another on the left, and one on the right, some breadcrumbs, and between them, in the middle of the pictorial space, he painted a pawn. According to various interpretations of the work, the two pieces of bread represented Dalí and Gala, and the pawn signified Duchamp. Gala and Duchamp used to play chess during the evenings while he was painting this work, and one day a pawn fell from the chess board onto the still life with bread he was working on⁸. Dalí painted it between the slices of bread, contributing to a certain metaphysical sense. The mystery of the scene has been connected to the Spanish still life tradition, such as the paintings by Zurbarán and Sánchez Cotán.⁹

The importance of the bread in Dalí's iconography is connected to the lifespan/caducity of matter and decomposition, and Pilar Parcerisas also has related the anthropomorphism of the pieces of bread to architectures in ruins, maybe caused by the destruction of the war.¹⁰

In the far upper area of the background two figures are depicted in front of a reduced central landscape: it appears to be a small hill with greenery and a soft valley on the left, under a cloudy sky (Fig. 5). The work is signed and dated lower center: *Gala Salvador Dalí 1940* (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5

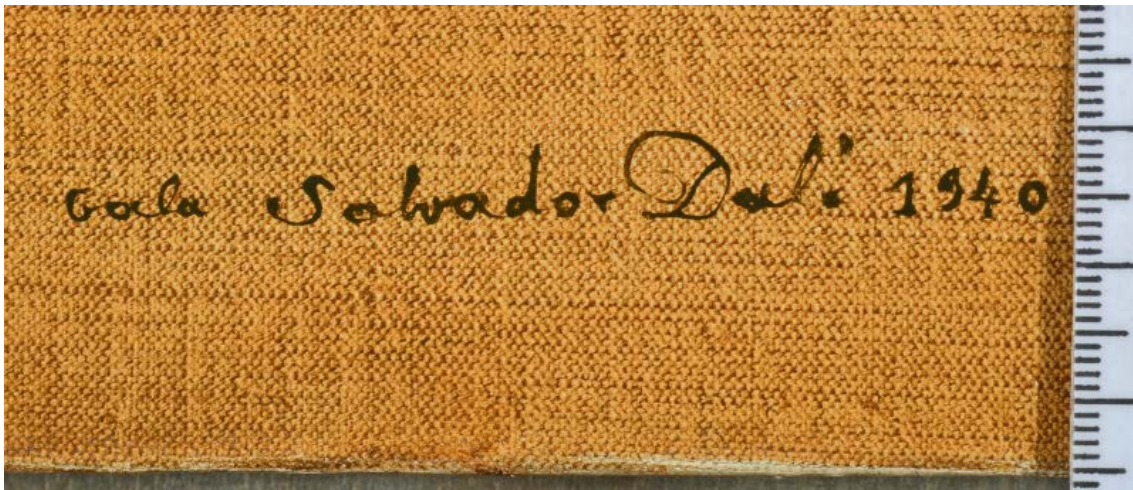


Fig. 6

The technical examinations are based on non-destructive analytical techniques that include the physical and photographic inspection of the works with the help of several sources of light, some visible and some invisible to the naked eye. The examination methods used provide us with different kinds of information: incident light, raking light (that highlights the texture of the surface), reflected light, transmitted light, ultraviolet fluorescence, infrared reflectography, stereomicroscopy. We could then proceed with infrared reflectography, a technique that

reveals underlying preparatory sketches that are usually invisible or require [turn to] X-rays in order to penetrate the deeper layers of paint.

All these analyses provide us with elements that help identify the technical characteristics of the work, the conservation, and the materials and procedures used by the artist: how he made the underlying drawings, how he applied practical solutions to the problems of perspective, how he primed his canvases, and how he applied the layers of paint and colours. The results and comparative analyses with other similar works help us to better understand Dalí's creative process in the broadest sense, and to date the preparatory drawings and other related pieces.

The paint layer of *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* was applied in a diluted and uniform oil layer to the whole surface. It is striking to observe the deliberately differentiated pictorial treatment between the background of the work, the central still life, with the slices of bread and the pawn, and the landscape in the upper area. As Dalí once said, 'I strove to create a very flat surface on which to place a few rough breadcrumbs.'¹¹ The ochre surface is a very uniform and monochromatic background applied in a thin almost transparent layer, which reveals the grain of the texture of the fabric of the canvas.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Whilst the pieces of bread and the breadcrumbs were meticulously painted with Dalí's characteristic short brushstrokes applied precisely within the contours of the crusts and crumbs, perfectly traced in pencil (Figs. 7, 8, 9), the two figures on the horizon and the distant landscape were painted with no preliminary drawing, straight on to the ochre paint layer, with dark, delicate, liberated and spontaneous brushstrokes (Fig. 10, 11). In the far background, we glimpse what appears to be a little village of the idealized Empordà plain.

The colours of the palette used are very uniform: range of ochre throughout the plain, bread and pawn, with gradations of greens in the superior landscape.



Fig. 10

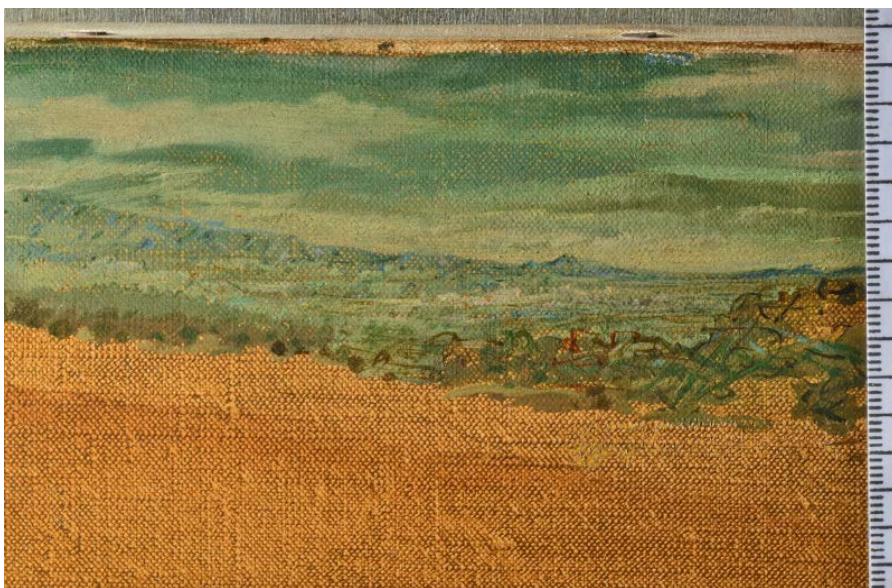


Fig. 11

The painting is from the artist's collection. Although the painting is in very good and stable condition, one of our goals was the inspection and documentation of some old and minor restorations. It appears to have three small holes into the canvas that were consolidated with

small canvas patches, that can be better appreciated through transmitted light (Fig. 12), and the correspondent pictorial retouches, that we better located with UV light (Fig. 13).

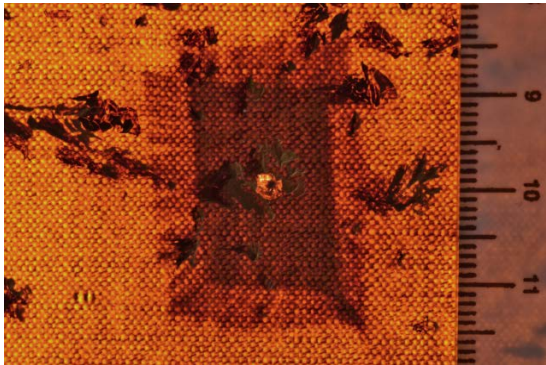


Fig. 12

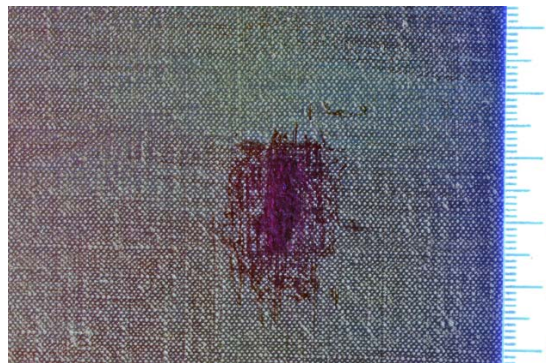


Fig. 13

Working practice

Another important goal for us was to study the preliminary under-drawing that can be glimpsed between the ochre paint layer and the pawn, as well as following the bread slices. Infrared reflectography¹² allowed us to study it and confirmed that the two pieces of bread were transferred using a tracing paper or a similar material (Fig. 14). Unfortunately, we do not conserve this preliminary drawing or preparatory material in the foundation.

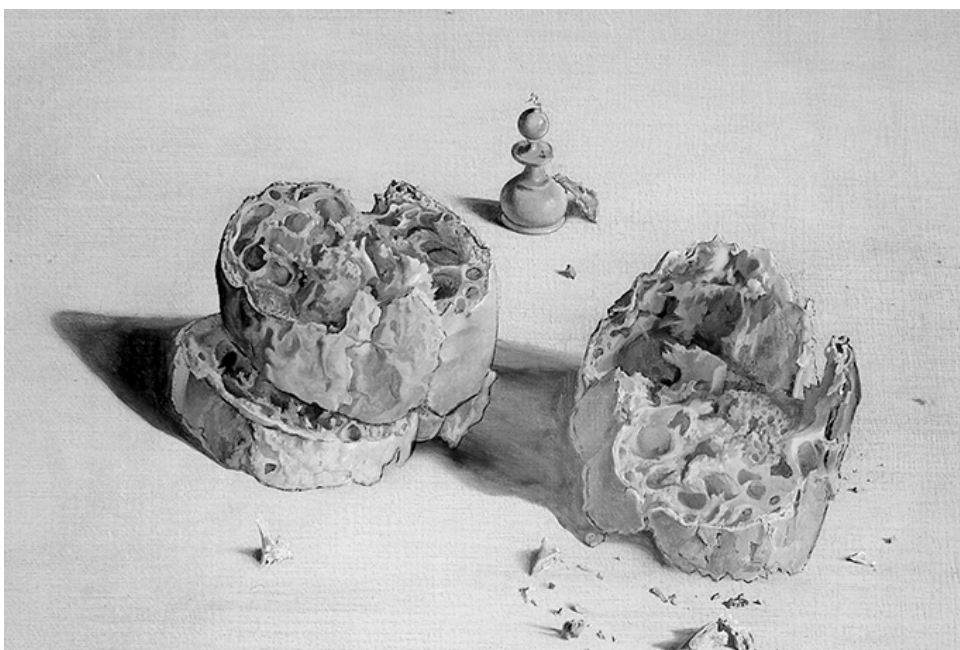


Fig. 14

It is interesting to note the artist's tireless working practice. Starting from preliminary drawings and photographs, Dalí usually undertook an exhaustive preparation of his works making compositional sketches, details of the elements he wanted to depict, figures, objects, etc. Then, in many cases he would trace the drawings and photographs directly onto the canvas by using different materials. The foundation has a large collection of these preparatory sketches and working materials, which is composed of celluloid sheets, transfer papers, incised drawings and photographs, etc. Infrared reflectography helps us to study and compare this kind of preparatory material with the underlying drawings that appear between the canvas surface and the pictorial layers, which are invisible to visible light.

Unrevealing hidden elements

Continuing with our close inspection of the painting, we could better observe the head of a monster-lion like animal with fangs that emerges among the trees, above the two figures in the distance, like a double image. The animal is perfectly camouflaged by the greenery of what appears to be a wood, if it weren't for the eye that is flawlessly spherical and clear (Fig. 15). Even the fangs are disguised, because the scene almost extends beyond the surface of the canvas. Indeed, I haven't been able to find any references to this area of the painting in any of the books or catalogues consulted, aside from remarking the landscape and the two figures.



Fig. 15

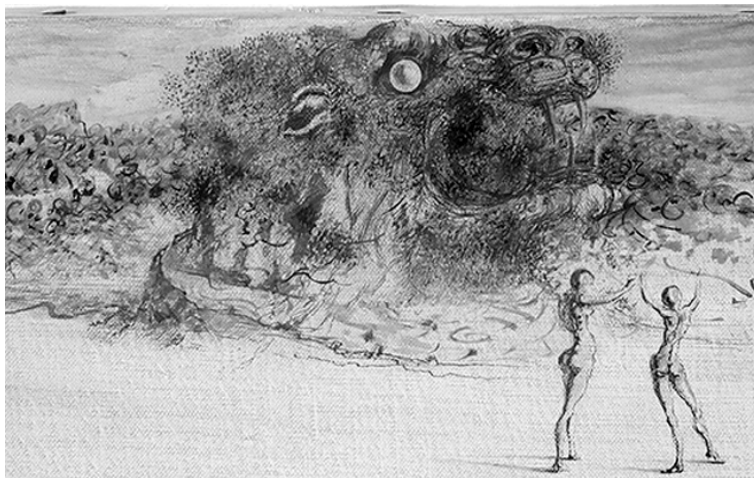


Fig. 16

Through the examination of the surface with infrared reflectography, which renders many of the colours transparent, the animal, a lion, appears clearly visible for the first time: it is possible to see its snout, fangs, head and ear, its tangled mane that we mistook for the foliage, like olive branches (Fig. 16). Several terrifying images of lions' heads in Dalí's works of the years 1929 and 1930 spring to mind, representing desires, sexuality and our deepest fears. The same monster-lion is incessantly repeated in *Accommodations of Desire*, 1929 (Fig. 17), *Portrait de Paul Éluard*, 1929 (Figs. 18, 19), even in *The Great Masturbator*, 1929 (Fig. 20), and *The Memory of the Woman-Child*, 1929.¹³ This time, however, the lion's head is neither a collage nor painted in a perfectionist manner and clearly visible; it's very freely sketched,

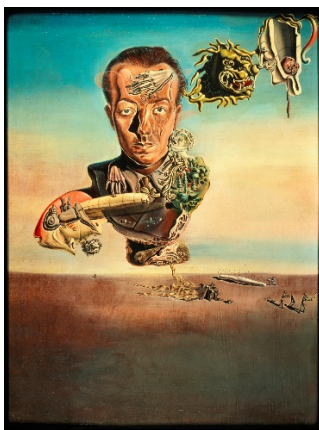
monochromatic, and blends into its surrounding landscape as a double image, hardly visible to the naked eye.



Fig. 17



Fig. 20



Figs. 18, 19

To the left of the lion-monster in the background we glimpse what appears to be a little village of the idealized Empordà plain. And, taking a closer look at the infrared image, we make one last surprising discovery: to the left of the lion-monster, Dalí wrote the word “MERDA” (Catalan for shit), in capital letters (Figs. 20, 21). He did not cover the word, but it is barely visible with the naked eye since it appears well camouflaged with the surrounding brushstrokes of plants. “Merda” is an expression that reminds us of a child's tantrum. Why did Dalí write this word? And why did he do so in this part of the work? Was it the freedom of the brushstroke that prompted the artist to jot down the first thing that came into his mind? Probably, he had at that time several fears and uncertainties that were occupying his mind and his spirit.



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

Further insight

We can imagine that the terrible war ravaging Europe that had led both Duchamp and Dalí to seek refuge in Arcachon, caused him enormous preoccupation. Despite the fact that Dalí wasn't a politically engaged artist at this time, oil paintings such as *Autumnal Cannibalism*, 1936, *Premonition of the Civil War*, 1936, or *Visage of the War*, 1940¹⁴, reveal his emotions with this kind of conflict (Figs. 22, 23).



Fig. 22



Fig 23

On the other hand, Pilar Parcerisas makes reference to Dalí's probable jealousy of Duchamp: "Are the pieces of bread perhaps the king and the queen of the board? Or Gala and Dalí with an intruder, Duchamp, who arouses Dalí's jealousy, as had happened on Duchamp's first trip to Dalí's house in 1933."¹⁵ Parcerisas thoroughly developed this issue in relation with Dalí's text 'Je mange Gala' – I Eat Gala. The lion would represent the *green-eyed monster*, another word for jealousy, placed threateningly over the triangle formed by the two pieces of bread - Gala and Dalí- and the pawn -Duchamp-.? The perfectly round sphere of the animal's eye seems to be repeated in the head of the pawn -Duchamp-, at the centre of the work. Could 'MERDA' be the dissonant word that, together with the aggressive lion, disturbed the peace of the plain and the mysticism of the bread?

Finally, I would also like to suggest another reason for concern that Dalí could have felt in those days: his frenzied search for the most suitable pictorial matter, which culminated in 1948 with his book *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*. As he himself would write in *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*: 'I delivered myself over body and soul to the struggle of technique and of matter. It became alchemy. I was seeking that unfindable thing, the medium to paint it, the exact mixture of amber oil, of gum, of varnish, of imponderable ductility and of super-sensitive materiality by virtue of which the very sensibility of my spirit could at last materialize itself. How many times I have spent a sleepless night because of two drops too many erroneously poured into my painting medium! Gala alone was a witness to my furies, my despairs, my fugitive ecstasies, and my relapses into the bitterest pessimism. She alone knows to what point painting became for me at this period a ferocious reason for living while at the same time it became an even more ferocious and unsatisfied reason for loving her, Gala, for she and she alone was reality'.¹⁶ The fight Dalí was having to find the exact pictorial materials may have been another form of escape from the reality that surrounded him, taking refuge in the one he liked the most: painting.

To conclude, the technical examination of Dalí's painting has made us shift our attention from the two pieces of bread to the landscape in the background, where we discover an animal and a hidden word that introduces new elements into the interpretations, or probably reinforces already existing theories and interpretations.

Notes

- ¹ www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/catalogue-raisonne/obra/498 (consulted February 20, 2018)
- ² Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, Dial Press, New York, 1942, p. 381
- ³ *ibid*, p. 379
- ⁴ *Dalí/Duchamp*, exh. cat., Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2017, p. 200.
- ⁵ *op. cit.*, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, p. 383
- ⁶ www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/catalogue-raisonne/obra/474, 468, 499 (consulted February 26, 2018)
- ⁷ www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/catalogue-raisonne/obra/ 475, 472, 471 (consulted February 26, 2018)
- ⁸ *400 obras de Salvador Dalí de 1914 a 1983*, exh. cat., Obra Cultural de la Caixa de Pensions, Madrid, 1983, p. 148
- ⁹ *El bodegón español: de Zurbarán a Picasso*, exh. cat., Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, Bilbao, 1999, p. 279
- ¹⁰ *Dalí: afinitats electives*, exh. cat., Palau Moja, Barcelona, 2004, p.151
- ¹¹ *op. cit.*, *400 obras de Salvador Dalí de 1914 a 1983*, p. 148
- ¹² (Infrared Images in the 1300 to 1500 nm region)
- ¹³ www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/catalogue-raisonne/obra 239, 233, 235, 236 (consulted February 26, 2018)
- ¹⁴ www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/catalogue-raisonne/obra 447, 446, 499 (consulted March 5th, 2018)
- ¹⁵ *op. cit.*, *Dalí/Duchamp*, p. 51
- ¹⁶ *op. cit.*, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, p. 383

Figures

Fig. 1
Cat. no. 498
Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love, 1940
Oil on canvas
81.5 x 100.5 cm
Signed and dated lower center: Gala Salvador Dalí 1940
Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres.

Fig. 2
Cat. no. 474
Imperial violets , 1938
Oil on canvas
100 x 142.5 cm
Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres

Fig. 3

Cat. no. 468
Spain, 1938
Oil on canvas
92 x 60 cm
Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Fig. 4
Cat. no. 499
Visage of the War , 1940
Oil on canvas
64 x 79 cm
Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Fig. 5
Upper area from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the two figures and the landscape

Fig. 6
Lower center area from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the signature and date

Fig. 7
Detail from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the famous still life

Fig. 8
Detail from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the crumbs of bread meticulously painted

Fig. 9
Detail from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the short brushstrokes applied precisely within the contours of the crusts, fotografied with raking light

Fig. 10
Detail from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the two figures on the horizon which were painted with delicate, liberated and spontaneous brushstrokes

Fig. 11
Detail from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the distant landscape which were painted with spontaneous brushstrokes

Fig. 12
Detail from Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love showing the canvas patch fotografied with transmitted light

Fig. 13

Detail from *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* showing an old inpainting fotografied with UV light

Fig. 14

Detail from *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* showing an IR reflectogram where it appears the preliminary under-drawing of the bread and pawn

Fig. 15

Detail from *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* showing the animal camouflaged by the greenery

Fig. 16

Detail from *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* showing an IR reflectogram where it appears a lion's head.

Fig. 17

Cat. no. 239

Accommodations of Desire, 1929

Oil and collage on cardboard

22.5 x 35 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 18

Cat. no. 233

Portrait of Paul Éluard, 1929

Oil on cardboard

33 x 25 cm

Private collection

Fig. 19

Detail from *Portrait of Paul Éluard* showing the lion's head

Fig. 20

Cat. no. 235

The Great Masturbator, 1929

Oil on canvas

110 x 150 cm

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

Fig. 21

Detail from *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* showing an IR reflectogram of the landscape where it appears the Catalan word MERDA

Fig. 22

Same detail from *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love* showing that the word MERDA is hardly visible with incident light

Fig. 23

Cat. no. 447

Autumnal cannibalism, c. 1936

Oil on canvas

65.07 x 65.07 cm

Tate Modern, London

Fig. 24

Cat. no. 446

Soft construction with boiled apricots (Premonition of Civil War), 1936

Oil on canvas

99.9 x 100 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (Pennsylvania).

Credits

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