

The Surreal Influence on Gender & the Art of Drag

by Kayla Dorsey

Surrealism is one of the most influential artistic and cultural movements of the twentieth century. The movement's manifesto worked towards the liberation of the mind, spirit, and artistic expression. For this very reason, many LGBTQIA+ artists and writers were attracted to Surrealism. Specifically, Salvador Dalí has had a lasting influence and interest within the queer community, particularly in terms of Drag and Drag fashion. Dalí depicts in many of his works the androgynous figure as a vision of beauty and considered his androgynous confidants as mythological. This could be seen as an attempt to question cultural norms, eroticize fashion, or simply shock. There are many interpretations, but the impact is widely spread. Within Dalí's inner circle, there were muses whose gender identity was questioned, were sexually diverse, and were indeed Drag performers. Dalí frequented many Drag clubs in New York which gave the artist visibility in that community. He was no stranger to challenging the boundaries of the fashion industry and that legacy continues today.

Dalí & Androgyny

Dalí was born in 1904 in the Catalan town of Figueras, Spain. He studied art in Madrid and Barcelona, but it was not until the early 1930s that he came to represent the surreal style, creating the defining imagery of the movement. Dalí's use of androgyny in his stylized figures reflects one of the many ideas of Sigmund Freud, a figure who was a primary source of inspiration for the Surrealist group. The idea of an androgynous figure is that this person is neither a woman nor a man, they are not adherent to the strict identity binaries of society. Rather, they are or have become something else; a desirable metamorphosis.



Figure 1. Salvador Dalí, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1937.
Collection of the Tate Modern, London; ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí
(Artists Rights Society), 2023.

As Tate explains from their collection¹, Dalí depicts the androgynous figure as a vision of ideal beauty. The center of *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* is a person in mythology that was so beautiful and obsessed with that beauty that he drowned when he could not tear himself away from his reflection in a pool of water. The massive figures in the forefront do not have necessarily the body of a woman or a man, on the left the figure is not feminine nor masculine, and although Narcissus in the story was a man, narcissism has come to be considered a feminine vice. Dalí has implied with the name of this painting that Narcissus is on the verge of reaching metamorphosis, perhaps not only by his unfortunate demise but also by surpassing gender divisions in an unconscious depiction of androgyny.

Dalí & Fashion

From his student days, Dalí used fashion to set himself apart from his peers. As a young adult, he presented himself as a serious but an eccentric artist by wearing long hair, adorned with a broad-brimmed hat, a cape and a pipe² (while Dalí used these theatrical props, he was not even a smoker). He presented himself in this costume while at college, and many of his fellow students saw him as strange and wanted to join in. Later, he would use his interest in fashion to collaborate with designers.

Elsa Schiaparelli was one of the designers who worked in the same paranoiac-critical vein as Dalí, making the dress and the wearer as one combined strange but alluring image.³ Schiaparelli (1954) believed that women did not have to choose between masculine or feminine; they can embody multiple conflicting identities. Schiaparelli's subversion of fashion is part of the wider Surrealist project to question the notion of a society's unified presentation and identity through an exploration of the subconscious. In the 1930s, Schiaparelli frequently collaborated with Dalí as they were both aiming to accomplish the same mission—to destabilize conventional ideas about beauty.

⁴Evans explains: "The theatricality of all Schiaparelli's work shows an understanding of fashion as performance, or masquerade; the wearer creates herself as spectacle, but the moment she displays herself she also disguises herself."



Figure 2. Collaboration between Elsa Schiaparelli & Salvador Dalí. "Tear Dress," 1938.
Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art⁵

Schiaparelli included in her designs the seeming or deliberate paradox of texture and concept—fabric and flesh, inside and outside—and used trompe l’oeil techniques. These techniques are now commonly seen in Drag fashion, as a way to create an illusion as well as to occasionally point out the illusion out in plain sight with sometimes subtle humor.

Is this not also the essence of the art of Drag? Performance, spectacle, illusions. Either putting oneself on display as a commentary on society’s expectations of traditional gender roles—albeit a hyperbole of those expectations—or putting oneself on display as a reveal of one’s true nature, no longer burdened by society’s expectations.

Drag “Her”Story

Drag is an art form in which a person dresses in clothing and makeup meant to exaggerate a specific gender identity, usually of the opposite sex. While Drag's purpose has been rooted in performance and entertainment, the art of Drag has been used as self-expression and a celebration of LGBTQIA+ community pride. Typically, Drag performers wear elaborate clothing, hair, and makeup and a show can include lip-syncing or dance, acrobatics, individual special talents, mocking or commentary, comedy, and more.

‘Fugate discovered that Drag has deep roots in Western culture, specifically in the theater when women were not allowed to perform on stage. Men would play female character roles, from ancient Greece through Shakespearean times. Drag is now intrinsically tied to the LGBTQIA+ community, a marginalized community considered subversive in many countries, including the United States. Performances became a major aspect of city nightlife, especially in New York City where Dalí and many artist refugees frequented after fleeing persecution in the war in Europe.

Recently, Drag queens have seen a rise in popularity through *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a competition reality show where Drag queens compete for a symbolic crown and title, “America's Next Drag Superstar.” As Campana et al point out, the award-winning show has popularized since its inception in 2009 the phrase by creator RuPaul, “*You're born naked and the rest is Drag.*”⁷ Creating your identity is innate in this phrase; Drag can be the costume you wear to work, the costume you wear with your friends, the costume you wear on social media, and all the other ways you represent yourself to those around you. This phrase also represents how Drag is an important way to see that gender is not inherently natural, but socially constructed through interaction and performance, allowing for an easier way to reach an understanding of how gendered expressions are pliable⁸.



Figure 3. Acid Betty's surreal Drag make-up.⁹

Acid Betty, a legendary Drag queen and designer, is the mastermind behind the LED backdrops for the shows on the renowned Las Vegas Strip. She has built a portfolio that spans both genre and format while continuing to push boundaries. She has stated to Cook in 2017: ¹⁰ *"I want to be like a walking Dalí artwork. I think that's why I've named myself Acid Betty, I want to be a walking trip."*

And then to Nguyen et al in 2020:

¹²In terms of art ... I am obsessed with Surrealist artists, current and dead. Salvador Dalí to Alex Pardee. I want to live in the fashion world of Viktor and Rolf on weekdays and Thierry Mugler on the weekends. I consume the fine arts. From Drag shows to every Haute fashion show via YouTube, and how they constructed every ride and attraction at every Disney theme park weekly. So anything new and exciting in all of those worlds excites me and inspires me completely. Mixing the arts and technology, creating immersive experiences, and reflecting on the past and traditions is what feeds me.

Drag, like any art form, requires skill from both a designing and creating perspective. Drag artists are now featured in Vogue Magazine for their artisanship and invited to the coveted MET Gala, an annual fundraising gala held for the benefit of the Metropolitan

Museum of Art's Costume Institute in New York City that is one of the biggest nights in the fashion industry.

RuPaul's Drag Race has brought many Drag performers to the front of entertainment and with it their talents and curated costumes. Within the last two years, there have been several fashion looks created on the mainstage or on social media that represent or were inspired by Dalí. The show format gives a theme to each episode's runway. An assignment on the *Drag Race Espana* spin-off series was to create a look that was an homage to the world-renowned stars of the art world without corroboration from any other contestants. Three of the five performers chose Salvador Dalí.



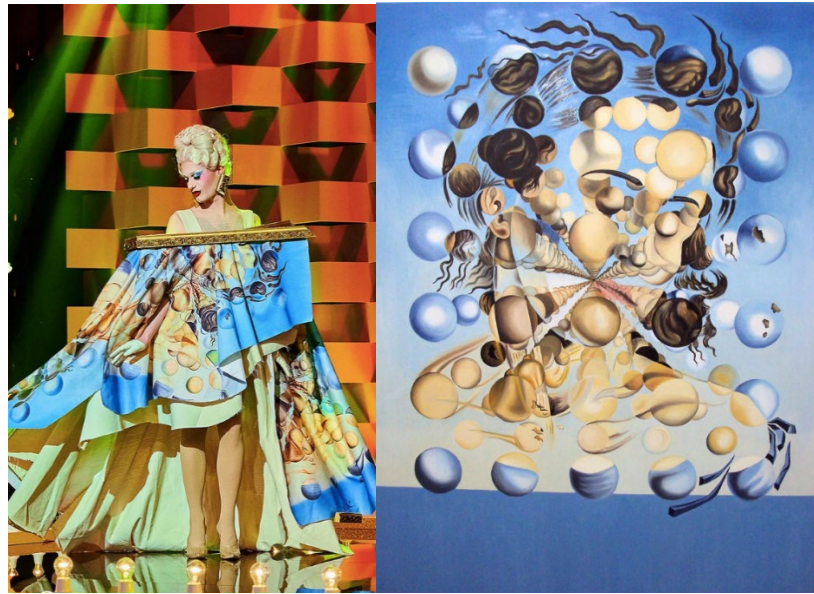
¹³Figure 4. Mo Heart representing Dalí in UK vs. The World in March 2022; Salvador Dalí, *Detail of Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, 1936. Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.



¹⁴Figure 5. Killer Queen representing Salvador Dalí on Drag Race Espana in July 2021.



¹⁵Figure 6. Sagittaria inspired by "Woman with Flower Head" on Drag Race Espana in July 2021. Salvador Dalí, Woman with Head of Roses, 1935. Collection of Kunsthhaus Zürich. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.



¹⁶Figure 7. Dovima Nurmi inspired by "Galatea of the Spheres" on Drag Race Espana in July 2021. Salvador Dalí, *Galatea of the Spheres*, 1952. Collection of Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.



¹⁷Figure 8. [Kimchi](#) on Instagram. "Salvador Dalí and sunset on the water..."



¹⁸Figure 9. “@CherylHoleQueen: I’m a ... LobSTAR...”

Surreal Connection to Drag

Even if not intended to be “Drag,” some Dada and Surrealist works can be interpreted that way as they were challenging and deconstructing rigid social and sexual archetypes. While there is no record of Dalí dressing in Drag himself, several artists who did indulge in the art form were among his contemporaries.



Figure 10. Man Ray, *Rose Sélavy*, 1921 © Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Marcel Duchamp's female alter ego Rose Sélavy first appeared in 1920. The character's name was a pun on "Eros, c'est la vie" meaning "eros, it is life" and she appeared in several portraits taken by Surrealist photographer Man Ray. Sélavy was an expression of Duchamp's love for enigma. ¹⁹ The Norton Simon Museum explains that Marcel Duchamp started this in 1917 when he created his interpretation of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa (*LH00Q*). Duchamp uncovers an ambiguity of gender at the heart of Da Vinci's aesthetic, that Da Vinci sees the masculine form in the feminine body. This kind of hidden self-portrait is what Duchamp discovers in the readymade medium that he originated. ²⁰ Salvador Dalí's response to that readymade came later in 1954 and appeared even more androgynous as the artist "metamorphosed" himself into the Mona Lisa as a self-portrait.



Figure 11. Salvador Dalí and Philippe Halsman, *Self Portrait as Mona Lisa*, 1954.²¹ ©Halsman Archive

Dalí's Inner Circle and Hot Spots

Salvador Dalí was not only famous but had many famous friends who often could be seen accompanying him, entertaining him, and sometimes even paying for his check. As part of the exuberant presence that Dalí presented to the world, so were the household names who would surround him; not only artists, but later, rockstar musicians, models, television personalities, and Drag performers.



Figure 12. Salvador Dalí and Amanda Lear circa 1965. Photograph: Sipa/Shutterstock. ²²

Around 1965, Amanda Lear became a muse to Dalí, whom she considered her spiritual father. She wrote an autobiography in 1985 as a source of information about her and Dalí's relationship, titled *My Life with Dalí*. She accompanied him and his wife Gala on trips to Barcelona, Madrid, New York, and Paris and spent every summer with Dalí at his home in Cadaques in Catalonia. Traveling with Dalí together, Lear discovered the great museums of Europe, Parisian salons, and the fun nightlife of New York bohemia. Dalí was particularly fascinated, perhaps even fixated, on the question of Amanda's gender.

²³“It’s always been the Grecian ideal: the hermaphrodite, the divine being,” he had told her, “everyone will be intrigued by you. You are neither a girl nor a boy. You’re angelic, an archetype.”

Amanda Lear denied these speculations. However, the rumors that Dalí had helped to spread continue even now, most recently revived by the fact that Andreja Pejić, who plays her in the feature film *Daliland*²⁴, is a transgender woman.



Figure 13. *Dali and Chrysis at Dinner.*

Collection of the UCLA Film & Television Archive and The Andrew J. Kuehn Jr. Foundation

Dalí appears in a 1993 documentary titled *Split: Portrait of a Drag Queen*, by filmmakers Ellen Fisher-Turk and Andrew Weeks, starring self-described transgender Drag performer International Chrysis. Chrysis was a Drag celebrity who had performed in national and international major venues, including in Europe. She was also a dear friend and muse of Salvador Dalí. Chrysis socialized and performed with a matter-of-fact tone to her sublime and ridiculous answers. Friends who are interviewed confess that it was sometimes difficult to separate fact from fiction. She took to heart the quote from Dalí: “The difference between

false memories and true ones is the same as for jewels: it is always the false ones that look the most real, the most brilliant.”

Dalí was well known for his invention and eccentric responses and must have appreciated Chrysis' commitment to her crafted persona and way of answering questions about her gender. She stated in *Split Documentary* (1993) that when asked if she was a boy she would state: “I'm the mother of Christ!”

Chrysis describes that she first met Dalí when she was five looking at dollhouses with her mother. Noticing Dalí, she stared at the artist and he stared back while curling his mustache. Later, friends of the two would explain that they met at Studio 54. A confidant explains in an interview in the film that their friendship makes sense, as he was a surrealist and she was quite the surreal character. She would serve as a muse for seven years.

²⁵“Chrysis! Time... is flexible!” She quotes, impersonating Dalí with an exaggerated accent on camera in *Split* (1993). “And I have been collapsing time ever since. You know that was (his) legacy. Not the paintings.”



Figure 14. Pudgy Roberts and Salvador Dalí,
Courtesy of the Louise Lawrence Transgender Archive

A female impersonator, stripper, comedian, author, and magazine editor, prolific “Pudgy” Roberts had a lot to say about the world in general, but in a 1996 interview he gave some insight into how many of the performers viewed Dalí. Pudgy met Dalí while performing at the 82 Club in New York. Many stars came to the 82 once or twice, and were generally accompanied by full groups to indulge in a night of debauchery. This was not the case for Dalí. He was a regular according to Pudgy who states, as recorded by the Louise Lawrence Transgender Archive:

²⁶“He was there with Shelley Winters and Tennessee Williams and I have a picture of them taken all together. He often went to the 82 Club because he liked the bizarreness of men in female attire. He came backstage and got to know people a little bit...Dalí was a doll. Great artist as well.”



Figure 15. ²⁷Dalí with Puerto Rican impersonators Hilmar & Christian Dubois in *Female Mimics*, #11, Winter, 1968.

The 82 Club was a nightclub in Manhattan, New York City. During the early 1950s and 1960s, this Lower East Side venue had been one of the premier hangouts for Drag artistry and performances, though by the early 1970s it had rebranded itself Club 82 and operated as an underground rock club. 82 club as described in the 82 Club archive (2009), featured Drag Kings or women dressed as men as the waiters, as well as Drag Queens or men dressed as women as the nightly showgirls²⁸. The cast performed three Broadway-level productions every night, in glamorous gowns by designer John Wong. Liberace, Burt Lancaster, Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor, Tennessee Williams, and other celebrities frequented the club alongside Salvador Dalí (82 Club, 2009).

Summary

"Research on Sexuality/ Extent of Objectivity, Individual Determinations, Degree of Consciousness," a text Miller²⁹ (2020) uncovered that was published in 1928 in the magazine *La Révolution surréaliste*, recorded meetings held in Paris between male surrealist members who discussed their sexual preferences, experiences, and beliefs. The group's leader, André Breton, who set up the meetings and was editor of the transcript, favored society's heteronormative lifestyle. Yet despite this, a considerable number of queer artists and writers were attracted to the surrealist movement.

At the core of Surrealism, outside of the Paris meetings and outside of Breton's manifesto, was a claim to emancipate human desire. Individuals whose sexuality did not conform to a heterosexual society norm or those that felt subversive in general viewed Surrealism as a freeing haven, a revolutionary perspective, and a validating prerogative. This was particularly the case in the USA, Spain, and other countries where Surrealism took root in the 1930s.

Dalí commanded attention with both his provocative ideas and stunning, sensational works. Dalí's larger-than-life persona and cross-platform artistic skills made him an artist who stuck out to the Drag community. By including Drag artists, along with queer and transgender people in his closest entourage then, he is celebrated by modern performers from that respective community today. Surrealism influenced Drag artists by popularizing the act of questioning what society deems strange or normal. Dalí, specifically, influenced Drag artists historical and new by encouraging everyone to be both authentically and inauthentically themselves.

- ¹ "Metamorphosis of Narcissus', Salvador Dalí, 1937," Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/Dali-metamorphosis-of-narcissus-t02343>.
- ² For reference, see the painting Self Portrait (Figueres), 1921 by Salvador Dalí.
- ³ Schiaparelli, 1954, *Shocking Life: The Autobiography of Elsa Schiaparelli*.
- ⁴ C Evans, 1999. "Masks, Mirrors and Mannequins: Elsa Schiaparelli and the Decentered Subject," 6.
- ⁵ Photography by Steven Le - Thee Photo Ninja. Courtesy of The Dalí, ©2017.
- ⁶ Fugate, Bradley K., D.M.A. *More than Men in Drag: Gender, Sexuality, and the Falsettist in Musical Comedy of Western Civilization*. (2006)
- ⁷ Campana, M., Duffy, K. and Micheli, M.R. (2022), 'We're all Born Naked and the Rest is Drag': Spectacularization of Core Stigma in RuPaul's Drag Race. *J. Manage. Stud.*, 59: 1950-1986.
- ⁸ There has been a spike in the popularity of Drag culture among Generation Z. Performing can provide a space to express themselves fully and unashamedly, taking on a new wardrobe, name, and even identity. "7 Transgender and Non-Binary People Share How Drag Helped Their Mental Health," *Teen Vogue*, 2019.
- ⁹ "Official Website of Acid Betty :: The Fiercest Hybrid Drag Queen in New York City, <https://www.acidbetty.com/>.
- ¹⁰ Michael Cook, "Rupaul's Drag Race Star Acid Betty" (HuffPost, December 7, 2017), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rupauls-drag-race-star-ac_b_9421008.
- ¹¹ Nikki Nguyen, Paisley Dalton, and Blake Jacobs, "Acid Betty on Her Artistry and Creating Led Visual Art for RuPaul's Drag Race Live!," *The WOW Report*, April 23, 2020, https://worldofwonder.net/acid-betty-on-her-artistry-drag-race-live/?fbclid=IwAR1rkf7a531Z2mptfNBSBBf3C0TfYpApMq4jR20lQcz1MDboXQlwo_G4_Q.
- ¹² Mo Heart leaves everyone slack-jawed with a Salvador Dalí look that includes a mask of flowers, which opens to reveal her face. A new take on the same piece that inspired Schiaparelli coming from a Drag performer. *RuPaul's Drag Race UK vs The World, 2022*, https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/mo_heart.
- ¹³ "Killer Queen," *RuPaul's Drag Race Espana, 2021*, https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/Killer_Queen.
- ¹⁴ "Sagittaria," *RuPaul's Drag Race Espana, 2021*, <https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/Sagittaria>.
- ¹⁵ "Dovima Nurmi," *RuPaul's Drag Race Espana, 2021*, https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/es/wiki/dovima_nurmi.
- ¹⁶ April 2018. https://www.instagram.com/p/BhKbeqGhYoz/?utm_source=ig_share_sheet&igshid=u7jcwel89k0z
- ¹⁷ Hole, Cheryl. *Werk of Art*. March 1, 2022. <https://twitter.com/CherylHoleQueen/status/1498776793922289676>.
- ¹⁸ "About the Collection: L.H.O.O.Q. or La Joconde," Norton Simon Museum, <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/P.1969.094>.
- ¹⁹ Phillipe Halsman originally created the photomontage, titled Dalí Mona Lisa, in a collaboration with Dalí in 1954.
- ²⁰ Photographic elements by Philippe Halsman from: Marcel Duchamp, the catalogue of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973, p. 195.
- ²¹ "Amanda Lear: The Androgynous Muse to Dalí Who Made Disco Intellectual," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, June 1, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jun/01/amanda-lear-the-androgynous-muse-to-dali-who-made-disco-intellectual>.
- ²² Amanda Lear, *My Life with Dali* (London: Virgin, 1985).
- ²³ *Daliland* (Magnolia Pictures, 2022), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8399658/>.
- ²⁴ Direct quotes are from the mentioned documentary. *Split: William to Chrysis: Portrait of a Drag Queen*, 1993.
- ²⁵ "Pudgy Roberts and Salvador Dali," Louise Lawrence Transgender Archive, May 13, 2021, <https://ltransarchive.org/pudgy-roberts-and-salvador-dali/>.
- ²⁶ Health Knowledge. "Female Mimics Vol. 1 No. 11." Periodical. 1968. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/bv73c0488>.
- ²⁷ "82 Club," *A Gender Variance Who's Who: 82 Club*, April 13, 2009, bit.ly/3kaHEfx.
- ²⁸ C. F. B. Miller; *Surrealism's Homophobia*. *October* 2020; (173): 207-229.