

RENÉ MAGRITTE

L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES



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RENÉ MAGRITTE (1898 – 1967)

L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES (THE DOMINION OF LIGHT), 1949

signed lower right *Magritte*; dated and titled verso

L'EMPIRE des LUMIÈRES 1949

oil on canvas

50 x 60 cm. (19 ³/₄ x 23 ¹/₂ in.)



PROVENANCE

The Hugo Gallery, New York City, acquired from the artist on 8 Aug. 1949.

Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, acquired from the above on 30 March 1950.

Louise A. Boyer, New York, acquired as a gift from the above in Dec. 1950.

Gordon Robins, New York, by descent from the above.

Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York, 1974.

Private Collection, 1974.

Byron Gallery, New York, by 1978.

Private Collection, USA, acquired from the above in 1981.

LITERATURE

Statement of account from René Magritte to Alexander Iolas, Director of the Hugo Gallery, 8 Aug. 1949.

Letter from René Magritte to Alexander Iolas with a statement of account dated Oct. 1949 enclosed, 2 March 1950.

Letter from Alexander Iolas to René Magritte, 7 April 1950.

L. Scutenaire, *Magritte*, exh. cat., The Hugo Gallery, New York, 1951, no. 8 (illus. back cover).

R. Magritte, commentary on *L'Empire des Lumières*, written for a 1956 television programme, Paris, 1972, p. 118.

H. Michaux, *En Rêvant à Partir de Peintures Énigmatiques*, Paris, 1964, pp. 593-94.

M. Mariën, quoted in 'L'Accent grave: Émission radiophonique de Christian Bussy', *Le Fait accompli*, no. 19-20, Brussels, April 1969.

N. Calas, 'Pearls of Magritte', *Arts Magazine*, New York, April 1972, p. 47.

J. Vovelle, 'Peintres de l'Imaginaire: Symbolistes et Surréalistes Belges', *Cahiers d'histoire de l'art contemporain: Documents II*, Paris, March 1973, p. 34.

D. Sylvester, et al, *Rétrospective Magritte*, exh. cat., Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1978, no. 145 (illus. on cover).

D. Sylvester (ed.), S. Whitfield and M. Raeburn, *René Magritte, Catalogue Raisonné: Oil Paintings, Objects and Bronzes 1949 – 1967*, vol. 3, London, 1993, no. 709 (illus. p. 145).

EXHIBITED

Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, *Rétrospective Magritte*, 27 Oct. – 31 Dec. 1978, no. 145; this exhibition then travelled to Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, 19 Jan. – 9 April 1979.

Milan, Galleria del Milione, *Magritte: Il buon senso e il senso delle cose*, May – June 1984, no. 11.

"ART EVOKES THE MYSTERY
WITHOUT WHICH THE WORLD
WOULD NOT EXIST." (Magritte)



Fig. 1: René Magritte, c. 1965

INTRODUCTION

René Magritte's *L'Empire des lumières* is one of the artist's most enduring and recognisable images: a dimly lit nocturnal street scene, illuminated by the eerie glow of a single street lamp, under a sunlit cerulean sky populated with white clouds. By juxtaposing two paradoxical periods of time – night and day – Magritte disrupts the viewer's expectations and presents an impossible and characteristically surreal landscape. This, the first version of *L'Empire des lumières* proved immediately popular, and, at the urging of his charismatic dealer in New York, Alexander Iolas, Magritte produced sixteen further oil variants and a number of gouache interpretations between 1949 and 1964. Many of these are now in major museum collections around the world. Our version, sold to the great American collector and politician Nelson A. Rockefeller shortly after its execution, represents the artist's original idea, and served as the model for all of the subsequent iterations. Having remained in a private collection for thirty-five years, its reappearance on the market represents a unique opportunity to acquire not only a trophy for collectors of Magritte or Surrealism, but one of the greatest and most instantly identifiable icons of Modern Art.

MAGRITTE AND SURREALISM IN PARIS AND BRUSSELS

Surrealism originated as a literary movement sometime in the early 1920s. It was an offshoot of Dada, which emerged in 1916 as a rebellion against popular notions of artistic taste and observed social conventions. Surrealism was officially consecrated in 1924 in Paris by André Breton with his *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, and the original group included the writers Paul Éluard and Louis Aragon, and the author and critic Philippe Soupault (fig. 2). Their philosophy, derived from Sigmund Freud's theories of psychology and the socialist writings of Karl Marx, was grounded in the belief in a superior state based on dreams and the unconscious. The bizarre, alien landscapes and strange juxtapositions of images found in Surrealist work across all media were celebrated as revelations of an underlying truth, and of a



‘super’ reality that rose above the quotidian nature of our lived experiences. The original collective of writers soon welcomed a number of painters into its circles, including Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Francis Picabia, Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí, among others, united by a shared philosophy rather than by a common visual or literary style.

As the theories espoused by the Surrealists spread, satellite groups formed in other countries; among them was the Belgian group established in Brussels in 1925 (fig. 3). It was to this group that Magritte belonged, along with a number of writers and poets including E.L.T. Mesens, Paul Nougé, Marcel Lecomte, André Souris, Camille Goemans, Paul Colinet and Marcel Mariën (author of the first monograph on Magritte). Although Nougé was nominally the group’s leader, he preferred to remain out of the spotlight, instead allowing Magritte to take centre stage. Magritte, in turn, often relied on his poet friends to nominate titles for his paintings or to annotate his drawings with playful lines of text – it became a sort of game for them. In 1933, Nougé explained the process: ‘Titles play an important part in Magritte’s paintings, but it is not the part one might be tempted to imagine. The title isn’t a programme to be carried out. It comes after the picture. It’s as if it were confirmation, and it often constitutes an exemplary manifestation of the efficacy of the image’ (P. Nougé, quoted in S. Whitfield, *Magritte*, exh. cat., The Hayward Gallery, London, 1992, p. 39). Magritte agreed, feeling

Fig. 2: The Paris Surrealists, 1930 (L-R: Tristan Tzara, Paul Éluard, André Breton, Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, René Crevel, Man Ray)

Fig. 3: The Belgian Surrealists, 1926 (Standing, L-R: E.L.T. Mesens, René Magritte, Louis Scutenaire, André Souris, Paul Nougé. Sitting, L-R: Irène Hamoir, Marthe Nougé, Georgette Magritte)



that ‘the best title for a painting is a poetic one. In other words, a title compatible with the more or less lively emotion which we experience when looking at a painting. I imagine it requires inspiration to find this title... The poetic title has nothing to teach us, it should surprise and enchant us’ (quoted in G. Ollinger-Zinque and F. Leen, eds., *René Magritte 1898 – 1967*, exh. cat., Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, 1998, p. 25). He did not believe it was the role of a title to explain or justify a painting.

In 1927, during a period of radical productivity, Magritte moved to Paris with his wife Georgette, which propelled him into French Surrealist circles. However he was never fully integrated into the group, largely because the commercially-minded artist often failed to see eye-to-eye with the determinedly anti-commercial Breton. For one thing, Magritte did not agree with Breton’s view that the only essential qualities of Surrealism were its message and its elements of chance and the subconscious, believing instead that thought and decision were vital to producing a successful work. As a result, Magritte did not exhibit his work at the Galerie Surréaliste in Paris alongside the other members of the group, instead staging solo shows in his native Belgium. Magritte also objected to the pessimism and darkness he saw in much of the Parisian Surrealism; in Belgium, Surrealism took on a more playful identity. From the mid-1920s onward, Magritte’s images were largely representative rather than abstract, rendered with a flatness and a layering of

forms that Ernst compared to collage. Themes of anonymity and isolation dominated the Belgians' work, leading one member to joke 'Belgium is an absence of identity'. This break from Breton and the Paris group would only become more pronounced after Magritte's return to Brussels in 1930. He briefly adopted a bright palette and painterly manner in 1943-44, which became known as his 'Renoir' or 'Vache' period, as a reaction against the harsh realities of life during the Nazi occupation (fig. 4). In 1946, he and several of his compatriots signed a manifesto called *Le Surréalisme en Plein Soleil*, which amounted to a final break with Breton. Magritte was not invited to participate in the 1947 Paris *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, and in a letter to the collector Pierre Andrieu dated 29 August he observed wryly: 'you may have noticed my exclusion from Breton's group, it apparently would seem that I am childish, and, what's more, retarded'.

Fig. 4: R. Magritte, *L'Incendie*, 1943, oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, S.525



NEW YORK CITY – THE CENTRE OF THE MODERN ART WORLD AFTER THE WAR

While this fracture in the group was taking shape in Europe, other significant forces from across the ocean were at work influencing the development of Magritte's mature style. The outbreak of the War saw the emigration of a number of enormously important artists and dealers, many of them Jewish, to seek refuge in America (fig. 5). By 1942, New York had become the centre of the Modern Art movement, thereby assuming a role that had belonged to Paris since the 19th century. These artists in exile, a group that included Chagall, Léger, Lipchitz, Dalí, Ernst and Mondrian, among others, typically met at the galleries that represented them: that of Pierre Matisse, son of Henri; the Julien Levy Gallery; and Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, 'Art of This Century'. From 1945 onward, The Hugo Gallery also played an important role.

The Hugo Gallery, which opened with a lavish party on 15 November 1945, was initially located at 26 East 55th St., at the corner of Madison Avenue. It boasted an impressive pedigree, founded by Robert Rothschild and the cosmetics magnate Elizabeth Arden, and bearing the name of another founder, Maria dei Principi Ruspoli Hugo, Duchesse de Gramont. It also had financial backing from the collectors John and Dominique de Menil, who fled their native Paris following the outbreak of War and the Nazi occupation of France. The de Menils, whose great legacy is the Renzo-Piano-designed Menil Collection in their adopted home of Houston, Texas, had begun collecting seriously in the 1940s. Over the years, their collection grew from a single Cézanne to encompass masterpieces of modern art across categories: Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism (fig. 6). In Houston, a city that continued to regard modern art with suspicion, one observer called the couple 'pioneer cultural wildcatters'. They became friends with many of the artists whose work they purchased, including Magritte, Victor Brauner, Max Ernst, Jasper Johns, Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg, Dorothea Tanning and Andy Warhol; and they were advised by three major dealers, including the charismatic director of the Hugo Gallery and one of Magritte's greatest champions, Alexander Iolas.

Fig. 5: The Surrealists in exile, New York, 1942 (Front row, L-R: Roberto Matta Echaurren, Ossip Zadkine, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger. Second row, L-R: André Breton, Piet Mondrian, André Masson, Amédée Ozenfant, Jacques Lipchitz, Pavel Tchelitchew, Kurt Seligmann, Eugene Berman)

Fig. 6: John and Dominique de Menil, c. 1963





Fig.7: René Magritte and Alexander Iolas, New York, 1965

Fig. 8: Exhibition of works by René Magritte at the Hugo Gallery, New York, 1947

Fig. 9: René Magritte with *L'Empire des lumières* (S.809), c. 1954



ALEXANDER IOLAS (1907 – 1987)

Born Constantine Koutsoudis in 1907, but taking his name from his native Alexandria, Iolas originally trained as a pianist and ballet dancer. He moved first to Berlin in 1924, before escaping to Paris in the 1930s following Hitler's rise to power and subsequent persecution of homosexuals and Jews. There, the charming and highly social Iolas quickly befriended a group of modern artists, including Magritte, Picasso, Braque, Ernst and Man Ray. He also purchased his first work of art, a painting by Giorgio de Chirico, having by chance met de Chirico on the street and procured an invitation to visit his studio.

At the beginning of 1935, Iolas moved to New York, where an injury in 1944 ended his dancing career. Fortuitously, he was approached to join the newly established Hugo Gallery, ultimately serving as its director for the next decade. This provided him with the platform he needed to introduce American audiences to Surrealism, and throughout his career Iolas championed those artists and works about which he felt most passionate rather than following popular trends. He forged a number of close relationships with both collectors, such as the de Menils, and artists.

MAGRITTE AND IOLAS

At first consideration, the friendship between the bourgeois, business-minded Belgian and the flamboyant, mischievous Greek dealer a decade his junior seemed improbable (fig. 7). Although they had already been introduced in Paris, Iolas was reminded of Magritte's work in 1945 when an agent brought five of the 'Renoir period' paintings into the Hugo Gallery. Eager to promote Surrealism in New York, Iolas reached out to Magritte, who was at that point living in Brussels, in a letter dated 20 February 1946 and offered him a solo exhibition the following year. Magritte was delighted, but critical response to the show, which took place from 7-30 April 1947, was lukewarm (fig. 8). The 'Renoir' paintings did not appeal to collectors it seemed, and Iolas did not hesitate to encourage Magritte to take his work in a different direction. A series of letters exchanged between the two at the end of the year illustrates this development, with Magritte assuring his dealer on December 12th: 'I believe I can state that in due course you will receive a group of pictures of prime importance...I do not mean to say that it is simple – in my case – for it is impossible for me to take only a "commercial" interest. On the contrary, my essential preoccupation has not been abandoned: it is still true poetic density, the search for a certain mental substance that is necessary to a man living in these times.' Iolas in turn quickly responded, on the 21st: 'I agree with you that what is required is poetic painting, and of very fine quality. That alone will sell, and that alone is what I have asked you for...I do not ask you to copy old paintings, but to perpetuate [those paintings'] poetic and mysterious quality, which in their tight technique are much more "Magritte" than those in Renoiresque colour and technique, which everyone thinks are outmoded.' Magritte was able to reassure him on that count, although he defended his earlier stylistic experimentation: 'You will have the works on a par with *The Red Model* and that will please your visitors. The period you call "Renoiresque" is over and the paintings of this period will be much sought after "later".' It was this request, for paintings that were both poetic and mysterious, that led Magritte to produce the first work in the iconic *L'Empire des lumières* series in 1949.



Fig. 10: Hotel Cipriani, Venice, Italy, June 1967 (L-R: Alexander Iolas, Ed Ruscha, René Magritte, Georgette Magritte, Paniotas Skinnas)

"WE MUST NOT FEAR DAYLIGHT JUST BECAUSE
IT ALMOST ALWAYS ILLUMINATES
A MISERABLE WORLD." (Magritte)

L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES (1949)

Taking a seemingly ordinary suburban street as his setting, Magritte has envisaged an extraordinary phenomenon: above a dark street illuminated by a single lamp is a blue sky dotted with clouds, in a temporally impossible reconciliation of night and day. The scene is at once familiar and eerily unsettling, with the idea of a threatening domesticity underscored by the shuttered windows of the house with a red door. By combining these two normally irreconcilable states in *L'Empire des lumières*, Magritte has subverted our expectations and distorted our sense of time and reality. The artist's own hand is all but erased by the fineness of the handling and the smooth finish of the painting's surface, according to Magritte's own beliefs: 'I always try to make sure that the actual painting isn't noticed, that it is as little visible as possible. I work rather like the sort of writer who tries to find the simplest tone, who eschews all stylistic effects, so that the only thing the reader is able to see in his work is the idea he was trying to express. So the act of painting is hidden.'

The original idea may have come from one of a number of sources. Scholars have observed that Breton had specifically expressed his interest in the contrast between night and day as early as 1923, when he wrote longingly: 'If only the sun were to come out tonight' (A. Breton, *L'Aigrette* in *Clair de terre*, 1923, quoted in S. Whitfield, *op. cit.*, 1992, no. 111). For Breton, Magritte's *L'Empire des lumières* embodied this duality, and he praised the painting for its paradoxical vision of reality: 'To [Magritte], inevitably, fell the task of separating the "subtle" from the "dense", without which effort no transmutation is possible. To attack this problem called for all his audacity – to extract simultaneously what is light from the shadow and what is shadow from the light (*L'Empire des lumières*). In this work the violence done to accepted ideas and conventions is such (I have this from Magritte) that most of those who go by quickly think they saw the stars in the daytime sky. In Magritte's entire performance there is present to a high degree what Apollinaire called "genuine good sense", which is, of course, that of the great poets' (A. Breton, 'The Breadth of René Magritte' quoted in W.G.



Ryan, *Magritte*, exh. cat., Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, 1964, n.p.). Alternatively, Magritte may have been thinking of the opening stanza of the poem *The Walrus and the Carpenter* by the author of *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll, whose fantastical writings held a natural appeal for the Surrealist painter: ‘...the sun on the sea was shining / shining with all his might / he did his very best to make / the billows smooth and bright-- / and this was odd, because it was / the middle of the night’.

The title *L’Empire des lumières* was suggested by Magritte’s friend Nougé, and the dual meaning of *l’empire* as both ‘territory’ and ‘dominion’ underscores the ambiguity that was central to Magritte’s Surrealism, with its rejection of a single, straightforward narrative. When Paul Colinet, another member of the Belgian group, suggested an interpretation for the imagery in *L’Empire des lumières*, Magritte wrote to a friend in response: ‘The attempt at an explanation (which is no more than an attempt) is unfortunate: I am supposed to be a great mystic, someone who brings comfort (because of the luminous sky) for unpleasant things (the dark houses and trees in the landscape). It was well intentioned, no doubt, but it leaves us on the level of pathetic humanity’ (quoted in H. Torczyner, *Magritte, Ideas and Images*, New York, 1977, n.p.). For Magritte, this composition rose high above ‘pathetic humanity’, aiming instead to ‘show what the mind can say and which was

“IF ONLY
THE SUN
WERE TO
COME OUT
TONIGHT”

(A. Breton)

Fig. 11: R. Magritte, *Le Banquet*, 1958, oil on canvas, 97.3 x 130.3 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, S.868

Fig. 12: R. Magritte, *La Malédiction*, 1931, oil on canvas, 54 x 73 cm, Private Collection, S.337

hitherto unknown’ (R. Magritte, quoted in S. Whitfield, *op. cit.*, 1992, p. 22). This duality of day and night featured in a number of subsequent paintings, including *Le Banquet* (fig. 11, 1958, S.868; The Art Institute of Chicago). As Magritte explained in an interview given in 1956: ‘The reason why I believe the evocation [of night and day] to have this poetic power is, amongst other things, because I have always felt the greatest interest in night and day, without however having any preference for one or the other. This great personal interest in night and day is a feeling of admiration and astonishment’ (R. Magritte, quoted in D. Sylvester ed., *op. cit.*, p. 145).

While the composition of *L’Empire des lumières* was completely original, the cumulus clouds in the blue daytime sky had appeared in Magritte’s paintings as early as 1928, although his first painting featuring exclusively clouds in a blue sky was painted in 1931 at the request of the artist’s friend Claude Spaak (fig. 12, *La Malédiction*, 1931, S.337; Private Collection). *L’Empire des lumières* was presumably painted in the summer of 1949, as it was one of three works on an account statement of a sale to Iolas, dated 8 August (fig. 13). It was sent to New York on 16 September. A follow-up letter dated 2 March 1950 mentions the painting again in reference to part of the payment Magritte was still waiting to receive (fig. 14).



96(I)
 Recu de la Galerie Hugo, 26 East 58th St,
 New York, U.S.A. les tableaux qui se appartiennent
 meut et se louent par l'intermédiaire de
 M^r Alexandre Iolas, à son arrivée à Bruxelles
 le 8 Août 1949. *Magritte*
 La Terre promise, Le Bon sens, Le colloque sentimental,
 Le monde lucifère, Scherzagaie, Le Garçon à la pipe, L'œuvre
 l'accord parfait, et gouaches:
 Le futur charmant, La fin du jour, Le sommeil, L'été au
 train. *Magritte*
 Aussi gouaches d'Arlequin
 et 2 livres la voie du sang et Scherzagaie
 aussi 2 dessins en couleurs, 2 dessins noirs
 et 2 petites gouaches. *Magritte*
 Vendu à la Galerie Hugo les suivants:
 L'évidence éternelle, L'empire de la réalité, 4 petites gouaches
 et 2 dessins pour 11.000 francs belges, que j'ai reçus. *Magritte*
 Reste à la Galerie le tableau: Les droits de l'homme.
 Vendu à la Galerie, L'Arlequin, L'Empire de
 lumière, La Folie des grandeurs et la voie du sang
 et 3 gouaches pour la somme de \$ 400 -
 et la réception de Mme Sazonoff, l'équivalent de
 \$ 100, le tableau conjugué élémentaire est considéré
 comme vendu.
 Magritte 8 - Août 49.

Fig. 13: Letter from Magritte to Iolas, 8 August 1949

Fig. 14: Letter from Magritte to Iolas, 2 March 1950

THE EVOLUTION OF AN ICONIC THEME

L'Empire des lumières is not only the name of a single painting but also that of a series of works, which arose from the immense popularity of the original composition – indeed, no other image by Magritte sold as well during the artist's lifetime, and it was largely at Iolas's urging that Magritte continued to explore the theme until the end of his life. The various versions he produced were by no means rote copies, but rather different iterations of his original and iconic idea. In total between 1949 and 1964 Magritte painted seventeen oils and at least half a dozen gouache versions of *L'Empire des lumières*, as well as other related works that are not officially considered part of the series.

With the original composition having been sold by Iolas, shortly after its execution, to the great American collector Nelson A. Rockefeller, Magritte revisited the theme the following year, producing a second, slightly larger version, also in a landscape format (S.723). This painting lacks the red doors of the original version, but adds more houses, and a strange, chimney-shaped tower rising above the line of trees. The painting was completed at the end of June, when Magritte wrote to his dealer: 'You will be pleased to hear that *L'Empire des lumières* no. 2 is finished and is very fine – and that I intend to send it off to New York, when it is thoroughly dry, in two weeks' time (with the other pictures, gouaches and bottles).' The painting was sent to Iolas in mid-August and quickly sold to the de Menils, specifically for them to donate to MoMA (fig. 15). Presumably, Iolas had requested this second version from Magritte expressly for the purpose, after the de Menils saw and admired the original version when it was briefly with the Hugo Gallery.

The de Menil donation to MoMA in 1951 met with great acclaim, and, unsurprisingly, Iolas returned to Magritte for yet more versions of the popular composition. He wrote to the artist on 15 July 'to say that after your last exhibition we should concentrate on a few extraordinary pictures in any given year, ones that are as well painted and astonishing as *L'Empire des lumières* ...' In the third version of *L'Empire des lumières*, Magritte relocates the scene to a more rural setting, with a single manor house lit from within rather than by a streetlight, and an enormous tree silhouetted against the sky (S.768).

Lettre Bruxelles le 2 mars 1950
135 rue Ercegheim II 18

Mon cher Tolas,

Je reçois votre lettre du 25 Février. Entantqu'on se vous ai écrit le 28 Février. Je ne comprends rien à votre lettre, je m'en excuse et je vous demande, afin d'obtenir des résultats de préciser, point par point les choses suivantes:

1°) Les jugements que ~~vous~~ portez sur mes travaux dépendent-ils de leur pouvoir à décider un acheteur?

Je vous pose cette question, car jusqu'ici vous m'avez conseillé de ne pas envoyer de tableaux avec des roses, et vous en demandez à présent car une dame aime les roses?

Je vous ferai remarquer que je peux prendre ce point de vue en considération, mais en ce cas il ne s'agit de rien d'autre que de commerce, et il n'est pas question de juger alors mes travaux d'un point de vue artistique. J'ai fait des tableaux CONTRE le goût des acheteurs de tableaux! par exemple le modèle rouge, et l'idée de faire un tel tableau, avec des vieux souliers n'aurait et n'a pas séduit, lorsqu'elle était nouvelle des acheteurs de tableaux. A présent, avec ^{des} souliers, les acheteurs aiment ce tableau (vous en avez rendu assez bien de répliques), mais il ne faut pas croire pour cela que les acheteurs sont plus intelligents à présent qu'il y a quinze ans quand personne ne voulait acheter le premier modèle rouge.

Je tiens compte évidemment de ce facteur dans ce sens: il est inutile d'envoyer en Amérique des tableaux qui sont tous nouveaux. Il en faut quelquesuns car il y a une faible chance qu'ils trouvent acheteurs. Ce qu'il faut surtout, ce sont des répliques de tableaux connus et oligérés.

Ci joint une photo d'un tableau avec des roses. C'est un tableau de 73x50 cm. Je peux vous l'envoyer si vous le desiréz. Si vous êtes acheteur ferme, faites le moi savoir par retour du courrier, je vous le laisse pour 6000 frs. Si vous le prenez en dépôt, je vous le compte 9000 frs. J'attends votre décision à ce sujet.

2°) Vous ne pouvez me retourner les gouaches et tableaux que vous n'avez pas vendus, car ils sont restés en Amérique comme "vendus". Je vous prie de me les rapporter vous-même quand vous viendrez en Europe. A ce sujet, j'estime qu'un tableau comme "La ~~Soupeur des barons~~" ou Le Rendez vous, une gouache comme La Voie du Saug (n°3) ou Le regard intérieur, ou le Domaine d'Arnhem (n°2) ne doivent pas être détruites parcequ'elles n'ont pas trouvé d'acheteurs. Vous m'excusez de ne pas pouvoir traiter ces choses avec anéantissement.

3°) Je ne comprends rien à la question "comptabilité" que vous présentez de manière agréable mais confuse. Ci joint un compte clair que je vous prie de régler au plus tôt:

Mon cher ami, si vous desiréz éviter des complications inutiles et ennuyeuses dans notre correspondance, je vous prie de bien vouloir me répondre avec clarté à chacun des points de ma lettre - et également aux points de ma lettre du 28 Février.

Vous faites le commerce des tableaux et moi je vis de mon travail. Vous comme moi, nous avons choisi ces occupations. Je desiréz comme vous, vendre beaucoup - mais pas n'importe quoi. Il est évident que je pourrais gagner beaucoup d'argent en faisant une centaine de peintures pour les gens riches qui n'ont pas de goût, et vous aussi vous pourriez gagner plus en vendant ce genre d'horreurs. Il faut en prendre notre parti: composer avec le commerce et l'art! Mais afin d'obtenir le maximum de résultats, ne confondons pas l'art et le commerce. Ainsi, dites moi avec le maximum de précision ce qui dans mes travaux a le plus de chance d'être acheté, et que cela ne veuille pas dire que ce qui n'est pas vendu (comme la Sublime gouache Le Bain de Cristal par exemple) doit être détruit. Ainsi il n'y aura pas de malentendu nuisible aux affaires et à nos sentiments de la justice.

J'espère, qu'à partir de maintenant, vous voudrez bien m'écrire vos lettres en 2 parties: une partie amicale à laquelle je tiens beaucoup et où vous me parlez des vos goûts personnels, et une autre partie très claire, où vous me donnez des conseils pour le commerce des tableaux, et pour les questions qui s'y rapportent.

J'attends avec impatience vos réponses à toutes mes questions, afin que je sache où nous en sommes.

Bien amicalement à vous,

Margritte



"THE LANDSCAPE SUGGESTS NIGHT AND
THE SKYSCAPE DAY. THIS EVOCATION
OF NIGHT AND DAY SEEMS



Fig. 15: *L'Empire des Lumières (II)*, 1950, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Gift of Dominique and John de Menil), S.723

TO ME TO HAVE THE POWER TO SURPRISE
AND DELIGHT US. I CALL THIS POWER:
POETRY." (Magritte)

The choice of a vertical rather than a horizontal format further focuses our attention on the single, dollhouse-like residence. This work was painted in August or September and included in a consignment shipped to New York in October.

On 23 June 1952, Iolas again requested a version of *L'Empire des lumières*, this time 'because the de Menils, who have presented your great picture to the Museum of Modern Art and which has been the subject of marvellous critical articles and more substantial than Delvaux's, want a version of *L'Empire des lumières* for themselves.' This, the fourth painting, was executed between July and August, according to the vertical rather than horizontal format (S.781). Once again we are located in an urban setting, with the single streetlight now centred in the composition.

The production of replica variants increased more rapidly from that point on. In 1953, Magritte agreed on 9 May to paint a further two versions, one in landscape format and one upright; these pictures are dated to sometime around August and no later than October, as the upright picture was exhibited at Brussels *Sirène* which opened on the 17th (S.796, S.797). The version in landscape format opens up the vista to a distant horizon at right, which may slightly undermine the ominous proximity of the closed-off street, but changes such as these indicate that Magritte was constantly experimenting with new ideas. Although both of these pictures were destined for Iolas, Magritte sold one of them (S.796) himself, so he painted yet another version – this one taken from a more removed perspective, with a far lower horizon line – towards the end of the year, to be delivered to New York in December (S.803).

1954 saw the completion of no fewer than four versions of *L'Empire des lumières*. A vertical version begun late in 1953 – which, at 195 by 130 cm., is also the largest in the series – was completed by April, in time to be shown at the Venice Biennale (S.804). It was purchased by Peggy Guggenheim on 19 October, but Magritte either forgot or ignored the fact that he had already promised the work to three other collectors. His solution to the

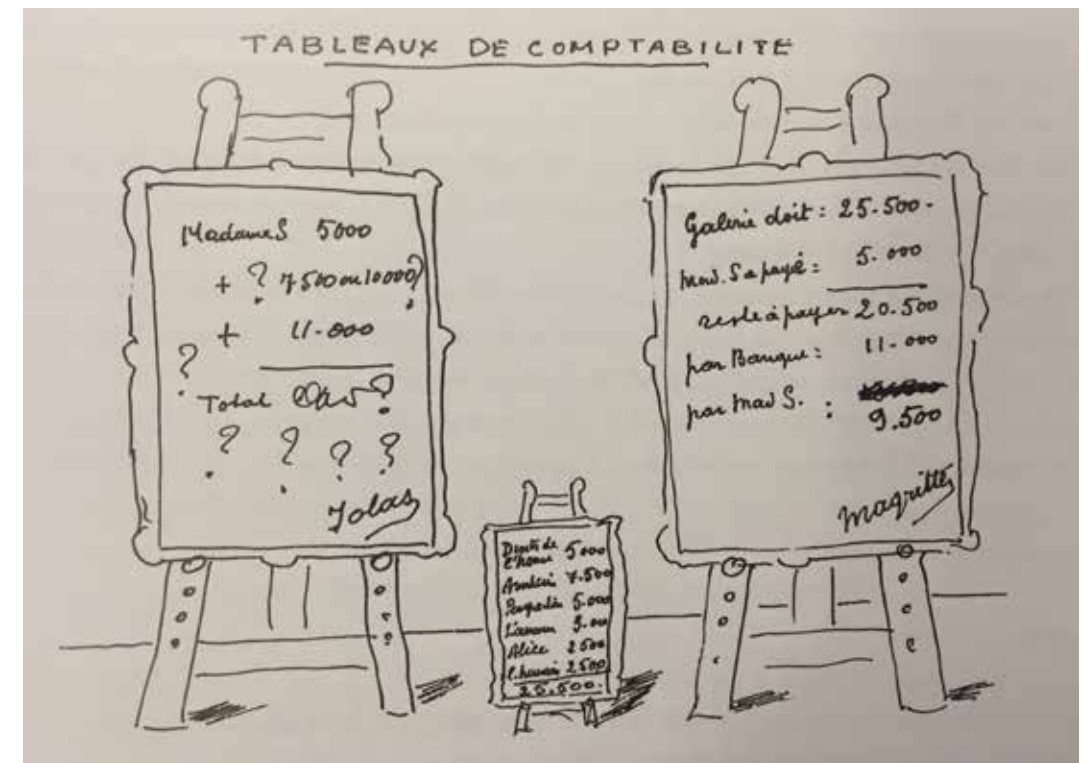
dilemma was to paint three additional versions, for Willy van Hove (S.809), the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels (S.810) and to a collector through Iolas (S.814), respectively. In the Guggenheim version, Magritte reintroduced the towering tree, while the following three also include an entirely new feature: a small pond in the foreground, reflecting the light cast by the windows and street lamp.

After this point, the variants appeared less frequently, with oil examples executed in 1956 (S.842), 1957 (S.858), 1958 (S.880), 1961 (S.929), 1962 (S.954) and 1964/5 (S.1006). Two of these, painted in 1956 and 1962, are inscribed with the date 1948 on the reverse, but we know this to be incorrect given that the earliest work in the series was executed in 1949. Rather, this was Magritte's attempt to bypass his dealer and avoid paying a commission by back-dating his paintings. The 16th version of the composition, from 1962, is additionally interesting because it may have been the first example to be started even though it was one of the latest to be completed. The collector who bought it in 1962 recalled seeing it, partially finished, in Magritte's studio around 1948. He asked Magritte to finish it so he could purchase it, but Magritte was dissatisfied with his efforts, and declined at that time. It was only once he began experimenting with the format of the canvas that he was able to arrive at the ideal compositional solution, which became our example: the original, complete version of *L'Empire des lumières*.



Figs. 16-17: details of signature and inscription

Fig. 18: R. Magritte, cartoon detailing his complaints about the irregular payments by the Hugo Gallery, c. 1950, Private Collection



The 17th and final version of the composition is substantially different, featuring the silhouette of a man wearing the iconic Magritte bowler hat in the foreground. A similar painting, *La Fin du Monde* (1963, S.980; Private Collection), is not considered an official part of the series as it does not include either the daylight sky with scattered clouds or the street lamp. Furthermore, Magritte never stopped thinking about the composition; the last painting he worked on, which remained unfinished on the easel in his studio when he died in August 1967, features a daylight sky above a dark, nocturnal landscape, with a house whose windows are brightly lit.

Magritte's relationship with Iolas continued until the artist's death, although they had regular arguments over financial issues. Iolas claimed he wished to celebrate Magritte's genius, and wrote the artist letters filled with compliments, justifying his attempts to guide the direction of Magritte's painting as part of his scheme to promote Magritte's name to collectors: 'If I attempt to make it clear to you about the American public, it is so that you succeed and make your mark with the next exhibition; it must be sublime and astonishing. And I am more than sure that you will work miracles...' (18 January 1950). He regularly brushed aside Magritte's requests for payment, leading the frustrated Magritte to write at one stage: 'As usual, I do not know what to think of our affairs, is the Hugo gallery still in existence?' and to draw a cartoon illustrating his plight (fig. 18).



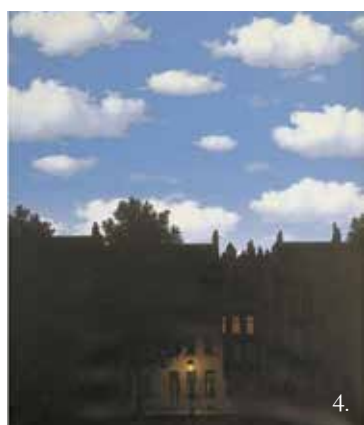
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2.



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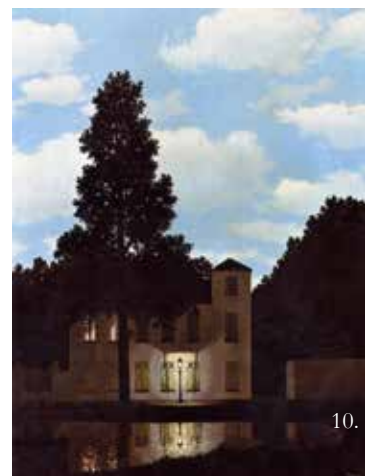
7.



8.



9.



10.



11.



12.



13.



14.



15.



16.



17.

THE L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES SERIES, 1949–1964

1. *L'Empire des lumières (I)*, 1949, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm, Private Collection, S.709.

2. *L'Empire des lumières (II)*, 1950, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Gift of Dominique and John de Menil), S.723

3. *L'Empire des lumières (III)*, 1951, oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm, whereabouts unknown, S.768

4. *L'Empire des lumières (IV)*, 1952, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm, Private Collection, S.781

5. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1953, oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm, Private Collection, S.796

6. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1953, oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm, whereabouts unknown, S.797

7. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1953, oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm, Whereabouts unknown, S.803

8. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1954, oil on canvas, 195 x 130 cm, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, S.804

9. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1954, oil on canvas, 146 x 114 cm, Private Collection, S.809

10. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1954, oil on canvas, 146 x 114 cm, Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, S.810

11. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1954, oil on canvas, 130 x 95 cm, Private Collection, U.S.A., S.814

12. *L'Empire des lumières*, c. 1956, oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cm, Private Collection, S.842

13. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1957, oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm, Private Collection, S.858

14. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1958, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm, Private Collection, S.880

15. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1961, oil on canvas, 114 x 146 cm, Private Collection, S.929

16. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1962, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm, Private Collection, Brussels, S.954

17. *L'Empire des lumières*, 1964 or 1965, oil on canvas, 50 x 73 cm, Private Collection, S.1006

A GREAT AMERICAN COLLECTOR: NELSON A.
ROCKEFELLER (1908 – 1979)

The first owner of *L'Empire des lumières* was Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, 41st Vice President of the United States under President Gerald Ford (1974–77) and one of the most influential collectors of the 20th Century (fig. 19). Rockefeller's association with the arts was perhaps predestined: his mother, Abigail Greene Aldrich Rockefeller, was one of the three founders of New York's Museum of Modern Art in November 1929, and a passionate collector herself. (Rockefeller's father, John Davison Rockefeller, Jr., was also a collector, although his tastes were more traditional.)

Rockefeller began collecting art in 1930 following his graduation from Dartmouth College, the Ivy League university where he studied economics. He worked for various family businesses, and was recruited in 1932 to serve on the Board of Trustees of the new MoMA, which had been established with the aim of reducing the time period between the creation of great works of art and their appreciation and validation by public audiences. Rockefeller subsequently served as Treasurer (1935–39) and President (1939–41 and 1946–53) of the Board. In this capacity, he formed a close friendship with Alfred H. Barr (1902 – 1981), the museum's first director (fig. 20), who once said of Rockefeller 'Nelson needs art more than any man I know. Works of art give him a deep, almost therapeutic delight and refreshment. Yet beyond his private satisfaction there lies a strong desire to share his treasures with others' (quoted in W.S. Lieberman, *op. cit.*, p. 20). Barr shared with Rockefeller a passion for modern art and especially for Surrealism, organising the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* in 1936 to introduce the American public to the movement (fig. 21). This historic show included not only a broad range of historical works, but also examples of very recent work by contemporary Surrealists, including Magritte.

Rockefeller pursued his joint interests in art and politics over the course of the following decades. He was elected Governor of New York, serving a total of four terms between 1959 and 1973, and he sought (without success) the presidential nomination on the Republican Party ticket in 1960, 1964 and 1968. However, Rockefeller was sworn in as the 41st Vice President of the United States on 19 December 1974, nominated by then Vice-President Gerald Ford, who took over the presidency following the resignation of the disgraced Richard Nixon.

"WHAT ATTRACTS ME MOST ABOUT THE ART
OF OUR TIME IS ITS VITALITY – THE WAY IT
EXPLORES NEW POSSIBILITIES AND MAKES USE
OF NEW MATERIALS."

(Radio interview with Nelson A. Rockefeller, May 1939)



Fig. 19: Nelson A. Rockefeller,
c. 1957

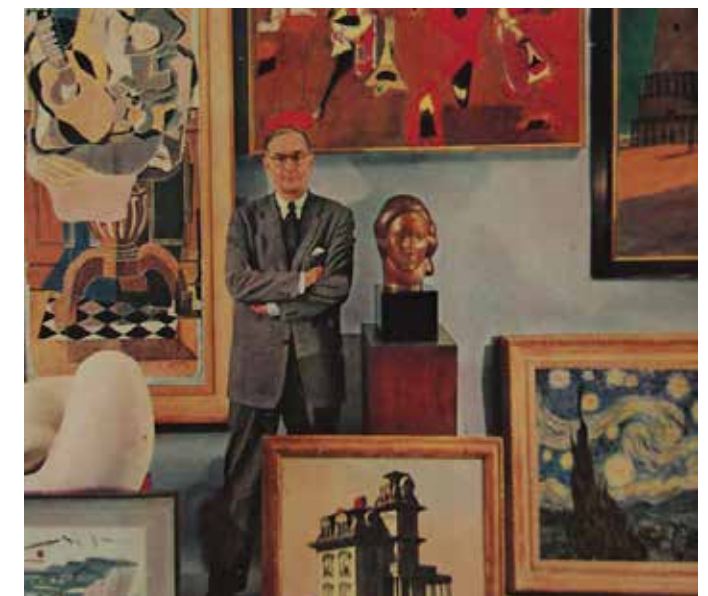


Fig. 20: Alfred H. Barr, c. 1958



The 1978 catalogue of the Nelson A. Rockefeller collection testifies to the almost unparalleled depth and quality of the paintings, drawings and sculpture acquired and enjoyed by Rockefeller over the years. His passion as a collector is evident in the introduction he penned to the book, which was dedicated jointly to his mother and to Barr. Rockefeller wrote: 'Twentieth-century art has been a vital part of my life; in fact, it has become a way of life for me. It has given meaning and value, perspective, and fulfilment to my life, as well as constant joy. It is a current that has run deep and strong in me regardless of the pressures, turmoil, and responsibilities with which I have lived and worked.' (W.S. Lieberman, *The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection: Masterpieces of Modern Art*, New York, 1978, p. 19).

Magritte's *L'Empire des lumières* was purchased by Rockefeller from the Hugo Gallery in 1950. A document in the Rockefeller family archives gives the exact date of purchase as 30 March, for the sum of \$500 (fig. 22, Folder 94, Box 16, Series C.6), and the sale is mentioned in a letter from Iolas to Magritte dated 7 April, in which he writes: 'I have a very nice surprise for you: One of the most important collectors has purchased *L'Empire des lumières* before the exhibition, I am very happy because it means huge publicity, and will cause envy among all the other dealers who hold their noses in the air when I fight on your behalf. I am very happy, and I will bring the money for

Fig. 21: New York, Museum of Modern Art, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, 7 Dec. – 17 Jan. 1937

Fig. 22: Rockefeller Archive, entry for *L'Empire des lumières*, May 1950 (no. 25-48)

Fig. 23: Letter from Iolas to Magritte, 7 April 1950

Fig. 24: Magritte, exh. cat., The Hugo Gallery, 20 March – 11 April 1951 (*L'Empire des lumières* I and II listed as nos. 8 and 9)

Folder 94, Box 16, Series C.6 - Art - Cancelled Photo File, Record Group 4 - Nelson A. Rockefeller - Personal Papers, Rockefeller Family Archive
COLLECTION: NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER NUMBER 25 - 48

PROVENANCE:
DATE: 1949
ARTIST: MAGRITTE, René COUNTRY AND DATES: Belgian, born 1898 -
TITLE (or description): L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES
MEDIUM: Oil on canvas
LOCATION OF SIGNATURE: Lower right "Magritte" (see also Remarks)
DIMENSIONS: H. 19 x W. 23" MAT: FRAME: 20 1/4 x 24 1/4 x 1 3/8" BASE:
PRICE PAID: \$500.00 INSURANCE VALUATION: \$500.00
PHOTOGRAPH NEGATIVE NO.: Burckhardt 37 (Leica)
REMARKS, REFERENCES: Painted on back of canvas "L'Empire des lumières 1949"
HISTORY: Procured directly from the artist by Hugo Gallery. Purchased from Hugo Gallery, March 30, 1950. Given to Mrs. Louise Boyer, Christmas 1950.

LOCATION: 810 Fifth Avenue.
CATALOGED BY...MA & CK.....DATE...May 1950.....
IDENTIFIED BY...MA & CK.....DATE...April 1950.....

New York 7 Avril 1950

Monsieur Rene Magritte
135 Rue Wasseghem
Jette, Bruxelles.
Belgique

Cher ami,

Ci-inclus un cheque pour \$100, cent dollars, j'ai reçu votre lettre, et nous sommes d'accord en tout. J'attends impatientement vos nouvelles que vous avez vu Madame Sasonoff et ceu vous avez conclu avec cette fameuse dame. Je tacherai de venir directement a Bruxelles et ainsi vous apporter votre materiel que je vous garde

J'ai une tres belle surprise pour vous: Un des plus grands collectionneurs a achete l'empire des lumieres avant l'exposition, je suis tres heureux car c'est une tres grande publicite, et ca fera l'envie des tous les autres marchands qui levaient le nez quand je me battais pour vous avec fierte. Je suis tres heureux, et j'apporterai assez d'argent pour tableaux nouveaux avec moi. J'aime assez "La legendes des siecles" et "Le Survivant" et j'espere que vous avez des nouvelles idees et que vous avez fait des gouaches sublimes, et une variation sur "mouvement perpetuel".

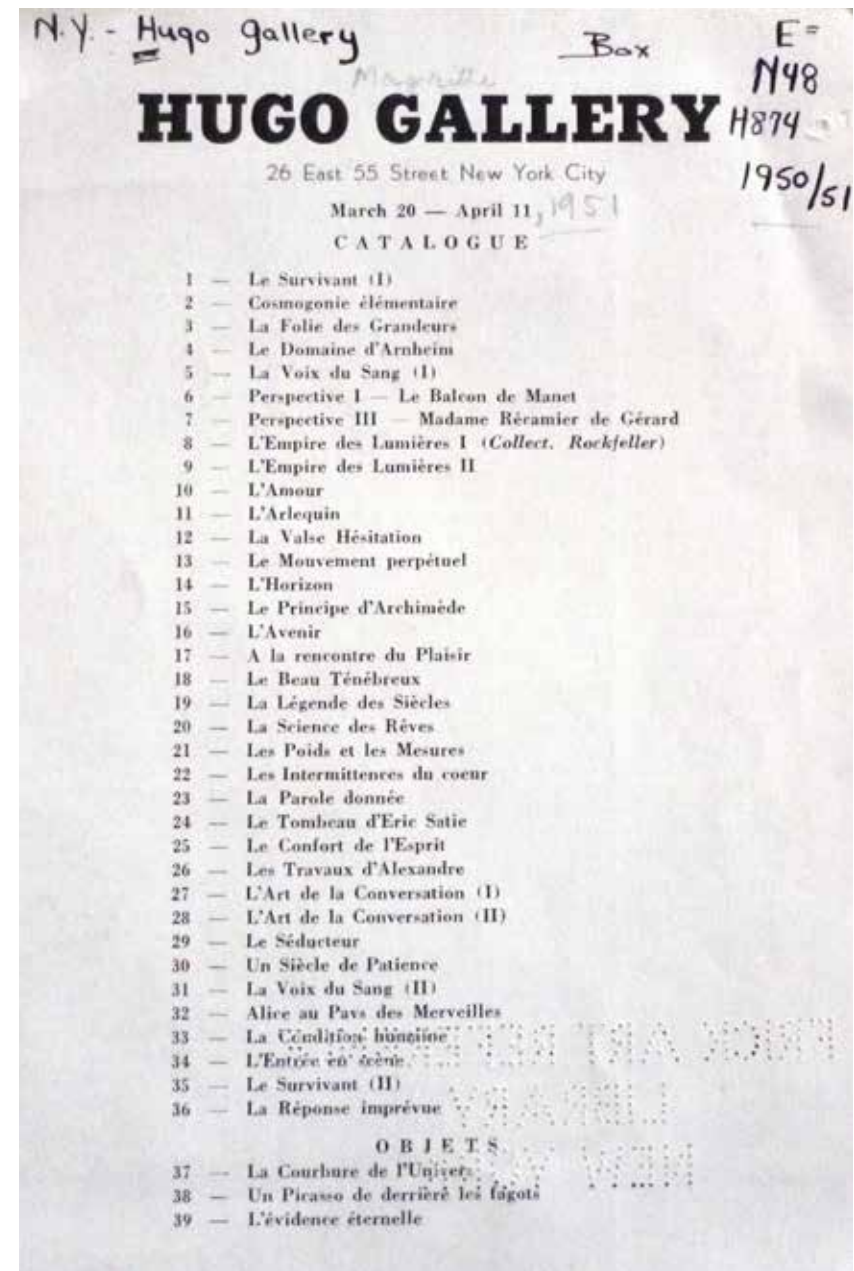
J'attends vos nouvelles impatientement, et je crois que je serai vers la moitie du mois de Juin aen Europe.

Mes amities a Madame, et si madame Sasonoff n'a pas garde sa promesse ecrivez le moi immediatement pour que je fasse le necessaire, et vous envoyer la somme.

Bien amicalement a vous



the new paintings with me' (fig. 23). The Rockefeller archives contain a note detailing correspondence between Harold Stevenson, writing on behalf of Iolas, and Rockefeller, in which the painting is requested for the 1951 Hugo Gallery exhibition and permission is granted. In the end, however, the first version of *L'Empire des lumieres* was not included in the 1951 show, perhaps because at that stage it was no longer owned by Rockefeller: in December 1950, he made a Christmas gift of the painting to his secretary Louise Auchincloss Boyer, who would go on to assist him for nearly thirty years, until her death in 1974 (fig. 24).



Rockefeller himself died of a heart attack in 1979 at age 70. Although initial reports stated that, at the time of his death, Rockefeller was at his office working on a book about his art collection, it subsequently emerged that he had been at his townhouse on West 54th street in the company of his 25-year-old aide Megan Marshack. The gossip columns went wild, with one popular quip asking 'How did Nelson Rockefeller die? Low blood pressure: 70 over 25.' Meanwhile, *L'Empire des lumieres* passed from Boyer to her son Gordon Robins, and eventually to a private collection, where it has remained for the last thirty-five years.



THE LEGACY OF MAGRITTE AND L'EMPIRE DES LUMIÈRES

Magritte's *L'Empire des lumières* has exerted a lasting influence on the work of other artists and on pop culture, in no small part because Magritte's work was widely available to see in New York from the 1950s until his death in 1967, including a major retrospective at MoMA in 1965. Among the modern artists who collected Magritte's work were Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Mark Rothko, who said 'Magritte, of course, is a case apart. But there's a certain quality in his work which I find in all the abstract painting that I like. And I hope that my own painting has that quality.' For some artists, specific works by Magritte exert their influence, while others, draw on a broader and less specific source in Magritte's general *oeuvre*. For example, Roy Lichtenstein's fondness for *trompe l'oeil* imagery in his paintings can be seen to have derived from Magritte's work, and Claes Oldenburg's experimentations with altered and unexpected scale also owe something to Magritte. Ironically, Magritte was no admirer of Pop Art, which he dismissed as a joke, asking "Are we permitted to expect from pop art anything more than sugar-coated Dadaism?"

The philosophy of Magritte's art became even more widely known, and thereby influential, with the 1968 publication of Michael Foucault's essay 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (fig. 25). And this trend has continued even more recently, for instance in a 1996 group exhibition that saw Didier Ottinger invite five contemporary artists (Robert Gober, Sturtevant, Michael Snow, Robert Racine and Joseph Kosuth) to hang their own work alongside a selection of pieces by Magritte. Magritte's scope of influence spread beyond the realm of the visual arts, too: The American singer-songwriter Jackson Browne staged a photographic version of *L'Empire des lumières*, with the addition of a white car, for the cover of his 1974 album 'Late for the Sky' (fig. 26). And one of the scenes from the cult horror movie 'The Exorcist' was allegedly derived from Magritte's imagery as well (fig. 27).

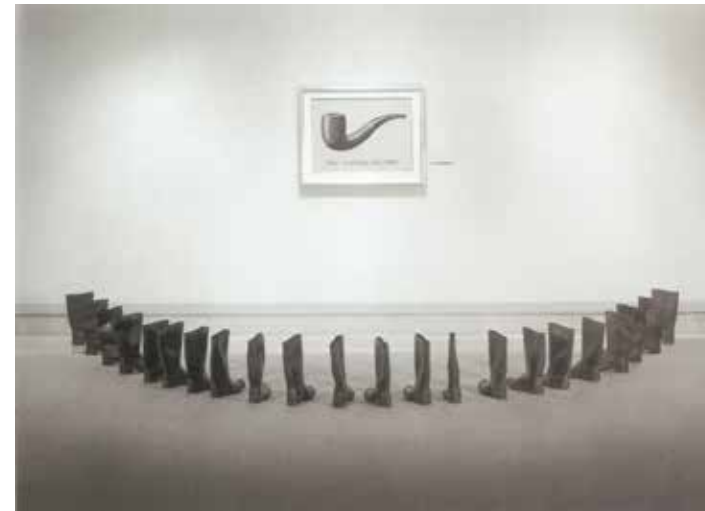


Fig. 25: Eleanor Antin, *This is not 100 BOOTS*, 2002



Fig. 26: Cover of Jackson Brown, *Late for the Sky*, 1974

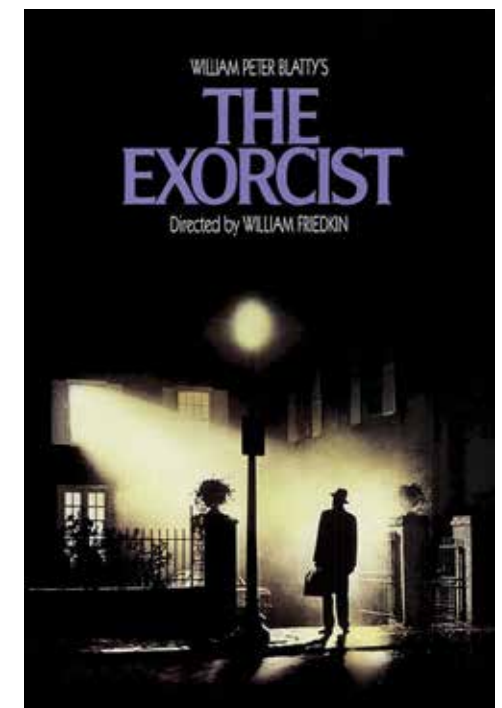


Fig. 27: Poster advertising the movie *The Exorcist*, 1973

CONCLUSION

Perennially evasive and reluctant to explain his paintings, for fear of undermining their visual impact, Magritte came as near as he ever did to an explanation of *L'Empire des lumières* in a letter to fellow Surrealist Mariën written in 1952: 'After I had painted *L'Empire des lumières* I got the idea that night and day exist together, that they are one. This is reasonable, or at the very least it's in keeping with our knowledge: in the world night always exists at the same time as day. (Just as sadness always exists in some people at the same time as happiness in others.) But such ideas are not poetic. What is poetic is the visible image of the picture.' (letter to M. Mariën, 27 July 1952). In this final statement he touches once again on the constant theme of painting as poetry made visible, most memorably in his most iconic image. With its pivotal role in the development of Magritte's most famous series, and its fascinating history involving some of the biggest names in Modern American art history, Alexander Iolas and Nelson A. Rockefeller, this, the prime original version of *L'Empire des lumières*, represents one of the greatest trophies of modern art to remain in private hands.



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Courtesy of The Menil Collection

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Design: Lara Pilkington
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Inside front cover: René
Magritte, c. 1965



