

Sale of Breton archives breaks up legacy of Surrealist movement

Paul Mitchell**6 May 2003**

“Deux mille euros, cinq cent, trois mille, cinq cent, quatre mille, cinq cent ... Two thousand euros, five hundred, three thousand, five hundred, four thousand, five hundred...”

For two weeks phrases of this character rang out, as a Parisian auction house sold off the possessions of one of the most creative individuals of the twentieth century, André Breton. Five thousand lots—including 305 manuscripts, 141 books and 84 works of art by Breton himself—were sold for \$50 million. In the process, the most unique and complete chronicle of the origins, development and disputes within the Surrealist movement has been lost in an act of cultural vandalism.

After Breton’s death in 1966 his wife Elisa and a small group of Surrealist artists fought to keep this priceless heritage intact, but the French cultural establishment, as well as the Stalinist and radical political parties, ignored them.

As the auction progressed the reasons why these organisations did not defend Breton’s legacy became clear. Breton was one of the few intellectuals to condemn the 1936 Moscow trials of former Bolshevik leaders and concluded that Stalin was “the principal enemy of the proletarian revolution”. Breton’s possessions that were sold off one by one charted his development towards socialist revolutionary and internationalist ideas that reached their peak in his collaboration with Leon Trotsky in the late 1930s and the publication of the manifesto, *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*.

The shadow of these great men and their times hung over the auction room. There was a sense of unease that even the frenetic sell-sell-sell and buy-buy-buy could not anaesthetise. Occasionally a French official would use the legal right to snatch back an object for a museum or gallery at the highest bid. This last desperate attempt to prevent an object disappearing into someone’s private collection produced a round of applause.

But for the most part a digital counter flashed prices simultaneously in euros, dollars, pounds and yen as dealers clutched their catalogues, pages turned down at the corners or bristling with slivers of paper marking their intentions.

Oohs and aahs built up when bids burst past the guide prices and crowds gathered round to congratulate those who were responsible. Occasionally the owner of the auction house bestowed his own blessings on the purchaser.

The auctioneer took roughly two minutes to dispatch each object to its new owner, banging down his hammer and shouting “The next lot is number...”

All in all, it was a sad and sordid spectacle.

One only has to look at the photographs of Breton by Sabine Weiss in 1965, such as the one in lot 5329, to see what has been lost.

Breton sits behind the desk in his two-roomed apartment at 42, Rue Fontaine—his home for most of his adult life. We get a sense of the atmosphere of the place. The writer Julien Gracq described how “the profusion of objects of art crowded against the walls everywhere has reduced the space available; one circulates only along precise itineraries created by use, avoiding as one progresses the branches, vines and thorns of a forest trail” (*En lisant en écrivant*).

It took five days to sell Breton’s books and manuscripts. They were divided into 450 lots and include the most important founding documents of the Surrealist movement, Breton’s political speeches and signed first editions.

Amongst the earliest Surrealist documents at the auction were over 500 sheets of paper noting down the utterances emanating from the sessions of hypnotic sleep in 1922 (lot 2026). According to Breton, “One can already say in passing that these dreams and categories of association would constitute almost all Surrealist material at the beginning” (*Entretiens*).

For sale was the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto signed by Breton, Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon. Lot 2119 was an original 1928 edition of *Nadja*, which tackles Surrealist themes on life, love, poetry and chance. It was sold along with letters from the *Nadja*, whom Breton had fallen in love with two years earlier.

The highest price paid for a book at the auction—\$250,000—was for Breton’s 1934 pamphlet *What is Surrealism?* (lot 148). It included the draft designs and

correspondence between Breton and René Magritte—whose famous design adorns the front cover.

The highest price paid for one of Breton's manuscripts—\$750,000—was for *Arcane 17* published in 1944 (lot 2254). In it Breton tries to re-establish Surrealism by drawing on occult themes. It does not have the political power of the documents associated with *Surrealism at the Service of the Revolution* published over a decade earlier.

Lot 2166 contained previously unseen collages made in 1931 by Eluard and Suzanne Muzard and lot 1133 Breton's final designs for *Surrealism at the Service of the Revolution*.

At the auction, the highest number of books by any individual author sold were Breton's own works. Probably the next highest number was for those by or associated with Leon Trotsky. Trotsky signed several of them, including a 1933 first French edition of his *History of the Russian Revolution* (lot 1494) with the words, "To my friends Jacqueline and André Breton with my most sincere and devoted sentiments."

On the walls at rue Fontaine hung paintings by leading artists of the day such as Picasso, Dali, de Chirico, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Jean Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Arshile Gorky, Yves Tanguy and André Masson alongside those by lesser-known contemporary and pre-Surrealist artists. Many were close friends of Breton, an accomplished painter in his own right.

Twenty three million dollars—nearly half the total realised at the auction—came from the sale of these paintings. *Femme* by Arp painted in 1927 (lot 4016) and *Le Piége* by Miró painted in 1924 (lot 4040) both fetched \$2,500,000.

Breton also collected numerous works by pre-Surrealist painters including mystical paintings by Symbolist artist Gustave Moreau (1826-98), brightly coloured and detailed animal paintings by Aloys Zötl (1803-1887) and landscapes by the Irish post-Impressionist Roderic O'Conor (1860-1940).

Many of these works of art appear in Breton's book *Surrealism and Painting*. It was first published in 1928 and updated throughout Breton's life as he chronicled the origins, influences and development of Surrealism. *Surrealism and Painting* gives a hint of the unique experience that would have been preserved had Breton's art collection remained intact.

An important influence on Surrealism was tribal art and folk art. Over a hundred carved wooden and stone objects from tribal societies around the world were auctioned, including Hopi Indian dolls, Inuit masks and African statues (lot 6138).

Amongst Breton's collection of folk art and coins were hundreds of *bénitier*—small porcelain fonts containing holy water. Divorced from their iconoclastic setting in his

bathroom, the solitary *bénitier* now languishing in a collector's cabinet has lost much of its meaning (lot 3210).

To see Breton's photograph collection broken up during the auction was a most moving experience. It was ironic to get such a wonderfully full understanding of the man just as it seemed his life was being atomised.

They included pictures of Breton as a medical orderly in the First World War; "Photomatons"—strips of photo booth portraits of leading Surrealist artists in dreamlike poses; Breton at parties and picnics—relaxed with people who would later become internationally known figures; stunning compositions by all the great early twentieth century photographers such as the mannequins at the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism by Man Ray and Raoul Ubac and the eerily beautiful distorted bodies in Hans Hellmer's *La Poupée* series (lot 5046); several sets of Fritz Bach's photos of Diego Rivera, Trotsky and Breton in Mexico and one particularly poignant set signed by Natalia Trotsky and dated 11 May 1941 Coyoacan, the year after her husband's murder (lot 5420).

Back in 1924 Breton wrote: "I believe it is in to my thought that I put all my daring, all the strength and hope of which I am capable. It possesses me entirely, jealously and makes a mockery of worldly goods."

The introduction to the auction catalogue ends with this quotation, as if to justify the dispersal of Breton's possessions. But to talk of these possessions as simply expressions of worldly goods only confirms a tendency Breton pointed to at the end of his life—"a vertiginous breaking down of the most elementary moral notions (and) the generalised lowering of culture."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact