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Surrealism and the Pacific Northwest Coast: The Circulation of Objects

Surrealism is often associated with bizarre, melting clocks and lobster telephones; however, the connection between surrealism and its fascination with Indigenous cultural objects is not negligible. Surrealism, as an artistic movement, simultaneously participated in the shifting of public views regarding European imperialism, while engaging in extensive accumulations of Indigenous property, namely from African, Oceanic, and North American Indigenous cultures.[1] The main point of exploration in this paper is the role of the surrealist movement in the processes of consumption and circulation of Indigenous cultural objects over the course of the twentieth century. Concerning this relationship, I begin by providing a general explanation of the origins of surrealism and the language of the artistic and theoretical movement.[2] Then I explore the figurehead of surrealism, André Breton, and his collection that contains objects from the Pacific Northwest Coast. The Indigenous cultural contents of his collection reveal how surrealist artistic practices consume not only cultural objects, but also the culture itself, as a subject.[3] Finally, I discuss where Breton's collection is situated today and how acts of repatriation are involved in the process of circulation. By drawing upon critically written histories and an

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analysis of Breton's collection, I hope to reveal the infrequently discussed ramifications of surrealist practices by deconstructing their universalizing tendencies regarding Indigenous cultural objects. Surrealism's language of chance objects, its collection practices, and perhaps its underlying colonialism have led to continuous circulation of Pacific Northwest cultural objects.[4] Present throughout the twentieth century, surrealism and its origins must be discussed in order to understand its connection to the Northwest Coast. The foundations of surrealism were situated primarily in France, during a time of political and social shifts throughout Europe.[5] The First World War had just come to an end, a Marxist revolution had taken over Russia, technological developments continued to progress, and commemorations of imperial power manifested through exhibitions.[6] Artistic and literary movements such as romanticism in the first half of the nineteenth century and Dada in the early twentieth century are known to have inspired André Breton's *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924).[7] Generally, these movements shared a common avant-gardism that positioned the artist to produce art beyond the conventional.[8] Dada and surrealism varied greatly in terms of the styles of individual artists and the kinds of work produced; however, the idea that art could provide viewers with unconventional, multi-sensory, or unconscious experiences were a shared goal between the movements.[9] André Breton, regarded as the founder of the surrealist movement, explains "automatism" in his 1924 *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (Manifesto of Surrealism) as the singular condition for surrealism: an

immediate attempt to express "the actual functioning of thought."[10] In other words, Breton's notion of automatism attempts to describe the swiftness of unconscious thought, which has also been interpreted as a development of Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis.[11] Surrealists began to understand and appreciate the art and worldviews of "primitive" peoples as intertwined in a world of material objects and immaterial subjects and entities, rather than merely admiring the works for their aesthetic qualities.[12] As mentioned by Marie Mauzé in her article "Surrealists and the New York Avant-Garde, 1920–60," the surrealists were responsible for raising "Western sensitivity to Native American art" where members of the movement such as Breton, Paul Éluard, and others signed anti-colonial petitions.[13] Yet, surrealist practices such as the collection and display of Indigenous cultural objects as "chance objects" seemingly perpetuate colonialism and are key in the discussion of the surrealist connection to the Pacific Northwest Coast.[14]

Despite André Breton's anti-colonialist stance, his private collection of Indigenous objects, including ones from the Northwest Coast, poses a contradiction. The collections of Breton relate to specific surrealist notions of collage and chance objects.[15] In Peter Stockwell's book *The Language of Surrealism*, he explores the ways in which the surrealists communicate their "visual techniques" through language."[16] The process of collage is to arbitrarily situate oneself in a location at a random time and note what object is most affective to one's senses.[17] The object that is ultimately determined as the most affective to oneself is an object that is found by chance; thus these "chance objects" are elements that make up collage. The visual technique of collage in a verbal form can be expressed as causing a "dissonant effect of

placing incongruous elements side by side."[18] Repeating this process twice or multiple times situates two or more objects together by chance—ones that may never have combined to form a collage through rational or conscious thinking.[19] For instance, the utilization of chance in collage is demonstrated in a 1936 surrealist exhibition at the Charles Ratton Gallery in Paris, where Marcel Duchamp's *Bottlerack* (1914) is displayed alongside "Eskimo masks."[20] The issue with this kind of chance collage is explained in Breton's own essay "Crisis of the Object," which accompanied the 1936 Ratton exhibition. In the essay, Breton compares objects with humans, noting that they contain "psychological energies" and placing them in "aesthetic collections" represses their "previous lives."[21] However, while Breton's conceptualization in his essay presents an understanding of the cultural contexts of objects, his practice of collage, effectively stripping an object of its original cultural meaning, shows inconsistency in thought and practice. From a postcolonial perspective, Katharine Conley, in her article "Value and Hidden Cost in André Breton's Surrealist Collection," explores this contradiction.[22] Breton's private collection of surrealist objects, also known as *André Breton's Wall*, included several found and bought Pacific Northwest Coast cultural objects, such as a "Pacific Northwest shaman box" and "transformation masks."[23] Breton's motivation, according to Conley, was that the collection serve the purpose of conservation, as the objects would otherwise either be destroyed or neglected by their makers, or would eventually be traded on the art market.[24] Breton's private collection was meant to represent a "global aesthetic," which could transport his mind to various places around the world.[25] Even though Breton publicly criticized the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931, his practices of chance collage and collecting paralleled the exhibition in many ways, unconsciously perpetuating colonialism.

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The critical issue with surrealism is its consumption of culture. It has been argued that surrealist collections led to a more open and global perception of art; however, the loss of context for Indigenous cultural objects has ethical implications, especially in terms of ownership. Alain Badiou's philosophical discussion of the subject and the creation of orthodoxy in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* reinterprets the figure of Saint Paul by examining the event that initiates and defines him as a subject within Christianity.[26] According to Badiou, the historical individual of Saint Paul becomes the concept of Saint Paul in the attempt to establish a Christian truth and to define the Christian person.[27] However, in this process of establishing Saint Paul as an originator, the subject of Paul is almost devoid of any context before the event of his conversion.[28] This process of redefining a subject mirrors the process of Breton's collection of Indigenous objects. *André Breton's Wall* is known as a collection of "surrealist objects." This causes the subject of cultural objects to shift from an Indigenous context to a surrealist one—for example,

Figure 1. André Breton. *Breton's Studio Wall (Mur de l'atelier d'André Breton).* © ADAGP, Paris / SOCAN, Montréal (2021). 1922-66.

displaying a transformation mask as a chance object.[29] Further, Breton's definition of surrealism and its related lexicon act as laws determining what belongs to surrealism. According to those criteria, objects found through chance, taken from Indigenous contexts, are now constituted as art belonging to surrealism.[30] In her article "Dada, Surrealism, Antropofagia: The Consuming Process of the Avant-gardes," Virginie Pouzet-Duzer explains this practice of cultural appropriation by the surrealists in terms of consumerism.[31] Pouzet-Duzer uses certain events and exhibitions as literal and figurative examples to explain why she considers the relationship between various avant-garde movements as "cannibalism."[32] Each movement relies on an alliance with another movement, but the successor movement acts to absorb the previous.[33] For example, the relationship between surrealism and Dadaism started with a mutually beneficial connection; however, this alliance resulted in the absorption of the older movement by its successor. In this way, surrealism retroactively claims Dadaism as its own.[34] Surrealism consumes the cultures of Indigenous peoples in the same way—removing an object from its specific cultural context and situating it in a universalized realm of unconscious experience. In this regard, surrealism is problematic in projecting Western narratives onto Indigenous cultural artifacts and defining these objects based on their relocation to a new aesthetic domain. Cultural appropriation is one of the many issues that arise from the Breton collection and the relocation of Indigenous objects,

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in the way that a new subject overthrows Indigenous meanings.

To further understand the implications of collecting Indigenous objects by non-Indigenous people, we may ask the question: Where is André Breton’s collection now? Some of Breton’s collection was moved from his apartment to the Centre Pompidou for the display *André Breton’s Wall*, while the rest of the collection was auctioned off by his daughter, Aube Breton Elléouët, in 2003.[35] As pointed out by Conley, Breton’s vast collection is available to view on a website dedicated to him and his collection, which was created in 2004.[36] Many details regarding the origins, purpose, exhibitions, and current location of each object are catalogued on the archive, including items that were sold.[37] The price paid for each object at auction and the way in which Breton acquired each object, however, is less explicit. In Breton’s collection, there are two distinct Pacific Northwest Coast objects that took very different paths in terms of relocation. The first of these two objects is thought to be a Tlingit cedar box.[38] The box is dark brown with a reddish tinge and carved in low relief. The digital archive notes that the design carved with an assembly of ovoid and ***U***-shapes may represent Gonaqadet, a sea-monster spirit in Tlingit mythology.[39] How Breton acquired the box is unclear; however, its presence in the collection in Breton’s apartment is documented in films and photographs.[40] The box was relocated to the Pompidou for *André Breton’s Wall*. It is not known where the box now resides, since the display was taken down in 2003.[41] The second Northwest coast object is a ceremonial headdress of the Kwakwaka’wakw cultural group.[42] The headdress is made of wood, abalone, ermine fur, and sea lion whiskers, and is said to have been worn by high-ranking members within the society.[43] This mask was acquired initially by the Museum of the American Indian, now known as the National Museum of the American Indian of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, in 1926.[44] Breton acquired the headdress in 1965, a year before his death.[45] In 2011, the Vancouver Art Gallery held an exhibition titled *The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art*, curated by Dawn Ades.[46] A week after the opening of the exhibition, Marsha Lederman wrote an article for the *Globe and Mail* describing how Ades obtained works for the exhibition.[47] In 2003, André Breton’s daughter had auctioned off much of his collection, though in an act of repatriation, she travelled to Alert Bay, British Columbia, to the U’mista Cultural Centre to return the Kwakwaka’wakw headdress.[48] In 2011, the U’mista Cultural Centre agreed

to loan the headdress to Ades's surrealist exhibition.[49] Though the Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial headdress has made a positive return to its original home, the many other cultural objects in Breton's collection from the Americas, Oceania, and Africa remain in museums, private collections, or have entered the art market through the auction.[50]

The circulation and movement of Indigenous objects has shown to be extensive, just as in the case of André Breton's collection. The movement of these objects benefits the interests of ethnographic museums and the surrealists over Indigenous communities and their original owners. Many museums and galleries with collections of Indigenous objects have functioned similarly to the surrealists in the way cultural objects are acquired and exhibited. In recent years, ethnographic museums have become aware of the unethical sourcing of objects and repatriation initiatives have been implemented according to the specificities of the object and circumstances. The repatriation of cultural objects corresponds to recommendations in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), particularly in assisting the revitalization and freedom to practice Indigenous cultural identity. Having said that, it is important to explore why these objects circulated in the first place, what kinds of narratives were associated, and ultimately why repatriation is important in this discussion. In *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, Paige Raibmon expands our understanding of history by differentiating Western ideologies of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ideologies of themselves.[51] She discusses the ways in which colonial settlers romanticized the notion of Indigenous people as a dying race, connecting them to ancient Greek civilizations that are now in ruins.[52] This particular romanticism refers to the West Coast Indigenous hop farmers.[53] These hop farmers were not seen as part of modern agricultural development in the nineteenth century, but rather as a tourist attraction to exhibit the "natural wonders" of the Pacific Northwest coast.[54] Constructed notions including the "authentic," "rural," and "natural" were placed on Indigenous peoples through Western rhetoric to frame Indigenous peoples and their cultures as disappearing.[55] This narrative was carried back to Europe, which influenced anthropologists and of course, the surrealists. Despite the fact that the surrealists positioned themselves as anti-colonial, their idealized notions of Indigenous people and their cultural objects were

reinforced by colonial practices and thought.[56] The potlatch ban in Canada, which lasted from 1885 to 1951, provided the legal means by which Indigenous objects, regalia, and bodies could be plundered from their original contexts and circulated around the globe.[57] A century of collecting and circulating, void of Indigenous agency in the process, has led to significant losses in Indigenous communities' connection to their cultural identity and property. The lack of Indigenous agency is extended to the realm of historical narratives of Indigenous people and cultures that have been skewed by Western anthropologists, explorers, and artists.[58] In an attempt to reverse this damage, repatriation efforts facilitate the return of cultural objects to Indigenous communities. In the case of the Kwakwaka'wakw headdress, this repatriation was particularly ideal. However, the absence of knowledge pertaining to the origins of objects along with a resistance to repatriate items from museums has made this process difficult in many cases. In her article "The Repatriation of the G'psgolox Totem Pole: A Study of Its Context, Process, and Outcome," Stacey Jessiman highlights the complexity, cost, and protracted nature of the repatriation process. She takes into account the experiences of both the Haisla people involved in Kitimaat and the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, who repatriated a totem pole they once acquired from that BC community.[59] Repatriation often involves the legal systems of different countries where jurisdiction and negotiations can become complicated.[60] After a decade of flights to and from Kitimaat and Sweden, the original G'psgolox pole was raised in Kitimaat in 2006, with a replica raised in Stockholm.[61] This particular case was successful in large part because the Museum of Ethnography understood its role in colonial history as well as its duty to rectify past mistakes. Thus, repatriation is not distinct, but very much involved in the process of circulation with regards to Indigenous intellectual and material property. When discussing the relationship between Indigenous objects and surrealism, the notion of collage through a method of chance, collecting, and the placement of Indigenous objects within a subject of surrealism has consumed Indigenous culture and property. Surrealism's creation of its own vocabulary that is then applied to objects repositions them in the subject of surrealism. This strips the cultural object of its particular Indigenous context and positions it as a product of automatism. This consumption of culture was, perhaps unknowingly, perpetuating the collection practices of colonialism. Members of the surrealist movement such as André Breton protested the hegemony of European colonial powers, but at the same time, held contradictory beliefs that the collection of these objects was justified by protective and impassioned reasons.[62] On the contrary, the repatriation of the Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial headdress marked an important moment within the circulation of cultural objects in terms of Indigenous agency. Despite this positive and successful finalizing relocation, many of the objects in Breton's collection remain in the art market and museums. The repatriation of the headdress leaves us with further questions as to why other objects, assumingly, were not treated in the same manner. The relationship between the history of surrealism and the Pacific Northwest Coast is complex, and in some ways is on a path of reconciliation through collaboration. The circulation of Indigenous property continues and the precedent for positive repatriations have been set, which leaves action to take its course.

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