

## State Hermitage Exhibits “Last Surrealist”

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The exhibition “Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension,” presenting a complete review of the “last Surrealist”’s legacy, virtually unknown in Russia, has opened at two floors of the General Staff building of the State Hermitage.

He earned the status of the “last Surrealist” just by surviving all the others. The colossal space-like landscapes that Roberto Matta (1911–2002) created in 1960–1990s, his early experiments with automated writing, including those he made by fingers, without a brush, his attempts to create a four-dimensional universe, combining time and volume, and the drawings of the WWII era reminding of his Surrealist past, and his *livre d’artiste* works – all this makes up a huge exhibition that is a real discovery to the Russian audience. Because there are no Matta’s works in Russia. His pieces were brought to St. Petersburg from the US, Great Britain, Italy, Israel, Mexico, France and Switzerland.

### **An Artist for Artists**

There were no major exhibitions of Matta in the West after 1980s as well. Matta, who became a phenomenon in art history, a pillar for the American Abstract Impressionism, in the end had to share the limelight with those who followed him. In a sense, he was more of an artist for artists than an artist for the people. “If I had become trendy or if the media had followed me, I would have been doing the same thing all the time. But as no one said a word about my works, I just kept working,” said Matta in 2001 in his interview to Hans-Ulrich Obrist, a famous curator and art historian, recalling mid-1930s. But neither he could stop and reap the benefits of his further success, when his works made it to the world’s largest museums - the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York’s MoMA, the Centre Pompidou. Roberto Matta’s retrospective of 1957 was the first major solo project at MoMa after its reconstruction. Matta’s first retrospective in Europe was at the city museum of Amsterdam in 1964, one more followed at the National Gallery in Berlin in 1970, then at the Centre Pompidou in 1985. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, among other things, features his “cube” – a spatial object that the artist made of his works, a kind of a total installation that one can enter to experience the cosmic space created by Matta.

Given the lack of opportunity to bring the items from the US museums to Russia, the US gallerist Oksana Salamatina (a co-curator of the exhibition along with Dmitry Ozerkov, head of the contemporary arts department of the State Hermitage) gathered Matta's works from 23 private collections and funds. The largest contribution was made by Lucid Art Foundation (California) set up by the family of Gordon Onslow Ford, Matta's closest friend, colleague and almost his coeval. It was Matta who introduced Gordon Onslow Ford to Surrealism. It was in mid-1930s, when both of them were inspired by the ideas of Pyotr Ouspensky who spoke about expansion of visual perception in his book "Tertium Organum" (1912). Ouspensky's ideas enhanced Matta's creativity with that "fourth dimension" that gave the title to the exhibition and to his early works.

And these ideas also pushed Matta out of the Surrealist circle. A Basque by origin and cosmopolitan by nature, Roberto Antonio Sebastian Matta Echaurren, born in Chili, risen to fame in Paris, London and New York, and died in Italy, could never lock himself within the boundaries of any art style and use the same set of tools, as well as give all his life to one woman – and many he had – and one country.

### **Duchamp and Poor People**

With a degree in architecture from the Catholic University of Santiago, he found a job at a merchant ship and made it to Paris. In 1933–1934, he worked for Le Corbusier, making drafts for the latter's "Cité Radieuse." He also made his own sketches, showing an ever-lasting process of everything turning into anything. At some point, he made friends with Federico Garcia Lorca and Salvador Dali, and the latter introduced him to Andre Breton, the father of Surrealism. Having met Matta, Breton said as the latter had left: "The best drawings were brought in by a young man you would least expect them from." Matta was able to participate at the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938 at Georges Wildenstein gallery. But the young man was more impressed with Marcel Duchamp rather than Breton – he was fascinated with the former's quest for "indefinite space" and his scientific approach to anything, including art – on top of that, Duchamp played chess and composed chess problems. For the rest of his life, Matta has been doing scientific fact-checking of his art, making his own discoveries, believing that the creation of non-Euclidian geometry was not just a scientific breakthrough but also a milestone that defined the development of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

And he knew well what he was worth. In the same interview that he gave Obrist one year prior to his death, Matta compared the New York school artist – Pollock, Motherwell etc. – with gleaners, describing them with this derogatory word as people who take "what's left of the rejects on the ground. After the markets, there are still broken eggs, half-opened tomatoes, things like that. There are people coming to take them, aren't there? They're doing what they can with this. Matta believed that these "gleaners" made the New York school of painting. "The New York school is a bunch of gleaners. They took what was left of the 1920s and 1930s and took it down. A little bit of Man Ray, a little bit of Maxence and they are mimicking Warhol's style. That's how we are. Where we are now. The only thing that matters is who creates something."

There and back again

Matta found himself in the US in 1939, fleeing the WWII along with many European artists. In 1948, he had to flee back from the McCarthyist America due to his Communist ideas, like many others, including Charlie Chaplin, to whom Matta always admitted to feel some kind of affinity.

At the same time he was ostracized by the Surrealist for his immoral act – he had an affair with the wife of Arshile Gorky who later (but doubtfully because of that) committed suicide. Gorky had many misfortunes, including cancer and mental illness. His wife let many men seduce her but it was Matta whom Breton was never able to forgive.

Matta would change his style but not his creed. The unsuccessful campaign to pardon the Rosenbergs, accused of giving the US nuclear secrets to the USSR, gave birth to his "Rosenberg Jury" (1952) and "The Murder of the Rosenbergs" (1954), the paintings that depict American justice as a killing machine. He supported the government of Salvador Allende in Chile – his colossal mural in Santiago, painted over by

the Pinochet authorities, was only recently restored after the artist's death. The death of Roberto Matta was a national tragedy for Chile, as the nation mourned him for three days, and he was declared the leading Chilean painter during his lifetime, which confused him a lot. With all his South American expressive style of painting, his art was cosmopolitan too.

Seeking the sources of his creativity, it is worth looking back at Europe. The creepy humanoids of his drawings and paintings of 1940–1950s are not just reflections of his fears of war that he was lucky not to experience first-hand, but also his mind's renditions of the monsters of Picasso's "Guernica" that he could see at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1937. "Guernica" was exhibited in Spanish Republic pavilion and Matta made sketches of that building. In 1936-1939, he worked as an architect with Gropius and Moholy-Nagy, met Alvar Aalto, wrote essays on architecture for the Surrealist magazine "Minotaur." Architecture has always been part of his creative legacy, an element of his visual language in his later monumental works, in the early canvases of the "Psychological morphology" series, and the "Inscapes" of the 1940s where he portrayed his inner world.