

## Roberto Matta's Comeback: Hermitage's Fourth Dimension

April 15, 2019

The exhibition "Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension" has opened at the General Staff building of the State Hermitage. It is dedicated to the artist that lived not so long ago and never joined any artistic trend. Our museum rediscovers this artist and exposes his connection with St. Petersburg.



Photo by Dmitry Sokolov

Matta was born in Chile in a family of Spanish and French origin. He later insisted that it happened exactly on November 11, 1911 – 11.11.11. His parents made him get a degree in architecture in Santiago; later he left for Paris, where he found a job at the architect bureau of famous Le Corbusier. The bureau had projects in various countries, including the USSR. While preparing the exhibition, curators Oksana Salamatina (New York) and Dmitry Ozerkov (State Hermitage) ploughed through Matta's family archive and found a postcard with the Bronze Horseman, allegedly sent from Leningrad in 1936.

However, he was not too interested to make a career as an architect. He approached Surrealists and met Salvador Dali, who would later call the Chilean painter the most profound artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dali recommended Andre Breton, the then leader of the Surrealist movement, to display Matta's works at the Surrealist exhibition in 1938.

But the Surrealist affair was short-lived too. There came one more connection with St. Petersburg. When in London, Matta learned the ideas of Pyotr Ouspensky, the Russian esoteric philosopher who left St. Petersburg after the Russian revolution. Ouspensky's book "The Fourth Dimension" says that remote points of space and time can be in junction. A separate chapter of the book focuses on art that is meant to bring human beings closer to the world of four dimensions.

During the WWII, Matta moved to the US where he made paintings that show “invisible things” and creates huge five-meter canvases – “mindscapes.” In just few years, these works affected Jackson Pollack and other Abstract Expressionists, and now they are popular with sidewalk artists.

Matta returned to Europe after the war, but, unlike many his colleagues, he was not interested in fame or commercial success. He never used simple titles for his pictures and never explained their content. Desmond Morris’ book “The Lives of the Surrealists”, recently published in Russian, quotes Matta saying: “It is only the unknown that interests me. And I work for the only purpose to surprise myself.” Matta died in Italy in 2002 – not quite forgotten, but not quite popular either.

The State Hermitage presents an opportunity to revisit the creative legacy of this artist, with an idea in mind that it is time to pay attention to artists of the 20th century who worked beyond mainstream and fashion. As Matta once said about himself, “I am not an artist. I am someone trying to construct the images that will once help us realize the essence of the verb 'to see'". The exhibition features almost a hundred works from 23 private collections from various countries.

The exhibition is centered around two “landscapes – “Guerilla Interior” and “Liberos.” The war-themed painting has traces of tank caterpillar tracks, and the piece about liberty is dominated by optimistic green hues. The two “landscapes” are surrounded by “Mind Kind,” an exquisite combination of pink and blue, and “The Unthinkable” that clearly references Ouspensky’s “fourth dimension.”

Other halls show detailed collections of Matta’s graphic works he made over the years, including his early Surrealist “Masque” and “Organic Forms”, as well as “Contre la Terreur Sacre” where huge dogs play chess with human figures. Matta was known for his left-wing views.

The exhibition lasts until June 30 and is accompanied by an educational program, meetings with curators and an intellectual “marathon.”

[https://spbculture.ru/ru/kulturnye-sobytiya/culture\\_event\\_details/37649](https://spbculture.ru/ru/kulturnye-sobytiya/culture_event_details/37649)

«ROBERTO MATTA AND THE FOURTH DIMENSION»

The White Hall of the General Staff building will feature the exhibition of painter Roberto Matta (1911-2002). This is the first time the Russian audience gets to see the works of one of the last Surrealists, virtually unknown in Russia. The exhibition will include over 60 works presenting Roberto Matta's unique interpretation of space and the evolution of his artistic style, his own view of the world that he saw from the perspective of the fourth dimension and projected on canvas.

## Roberto Matta and Tesseract

«Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension». The State Hermitage, St. Petersburg. April 10 – June 30, 2019

18/04/2019

By Pavel Gerasimenko

The exhibition "Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension" featured in the General Staff building of the State Hermitage, is not quite a curator-run project but rather a retrospective gathered from private collections that took almost nine years to prepare. It is a hundred of paintings and drawings; an unknown US collector donated \$3 mln to cover their transportation and insurance costs. Without doubt, Matta is a global scale artistic figure and Surrealism is among those parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art history that are understudied in Russia. Still it is quite surprising that this vivid South American color was chosen to fill this "white spot."

Roberto Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren was born in 1911 in Chile, lived in France, Italy, England, the US and Latin America, and was buried in Rome. With this cosmopolitan kind of biography, he is, however, considered a Chilean painter and counts as part of the nation's cultural wealth; the country officially declared mourning when he passed away. Matta joined the ranks of Surrealists as a young man at the age of 26 and died in 2002 soon after his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday; he is among the long-living Surrealists (as well as Gordon Onslow Ford or Dorothea Tanning).

Roberto Matta. Inscape, 1943

Surrealism was the last global artistic style, it took its own from anything, with a specific psychoanalytical interest in ancient and prehistoric cultures. In Latin America, Surrealism joins folklore and is known for extreme vividness of color and fabulous stories. Surrealists also liked the regional unbridled vitality and eroticism. The shapes on Matta's drawings and paintings constantly appear, copulate, breed new ones, with crazy energy and speed, and this is endless. «The burst of images on the Latin American artists' paintings can be embarrassing. They are hieroglyphs of vengeance and insight, knocking on a locked door. These paintings are not metaphysical, not a recognition of the subconscious, not a poetic effort. No, it is something far more primal, coming up from the depths: images, charms, altars, amulets, portraits, likenesses, fetishes – objects to worship and to throw down», – said Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet and essayist close to Surrealism, in 1986.

Roberto Matta, The Unthinkable, 1957

Latin American Surrealists are not just Mexican Frida Kahlo and Cuban Wifredo Lam, but Argentinian Leonor Fini, Spanish Remedios Varo and Esteban Frances, and Europeans settled down in Mexico - Bridget Tichenor, Leonora Carrington, Alice Rahon, Wolfgang Paalen and others. South American natives were, in a similar way, driven to Europe in their nomadic quest.

Roberto Matta arrived in Paris in 1933. At this time, all Surrealists were deeply impressed by the mathematical models from Henry Poincare Institute collection; Man Ray eagerly took pictures of them. In 1937, Paris hosted the International Exposition (*Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*) which included the Palais de la Découverte at the Grand Palais – a scientific museum that featured, among other things, spatial “mathematical objects.” It seemed that the “fourth dimension,” so much talked about, could be seen live: what the eyes could see and perceive from one point of view, turned into imagination from another point of view and was accessible only to the viewer’s mind. Matta used his extraordinary drawing skills working with Le Corbusier who created his

“Temps Nouveaux Pavilion” for the exhibition, and assisted Le Corbusier’s disciples to build the Spanish Republic pavilion. This was the debut exhibition of Picasso’s “Guernica” that had been specifically designed for this space; it was accompanied by works of Joan Miro and Alexander Calder’s “Mercury Fountain” – one of the key Surrealist works.

Spanish Republic’s pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937

Matta described his work at the architect bureau this way: “Since there was absolutely nothing to do, I was designing crazy architectural projects.” Engineering and design drawing had firmly established their place in Surrealist by then: Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp had been inspired by technical drawings since the Dada days. Matta’s miniature drawings astonished his friend Gordon Onslow Ford and then Andre Breton, who made the Chilean artist the youngest member of the Surrealist group. Matta was among the 65 artists who participated in the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme that marked the final recognition of the movement, contributing his drawings – it is known that all drawings there were displayed on rotating doors.

Matta mastered the automatic writing skill and devoted himself to art. Commenting on his art in his interview to Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2001, the old artist said: “I was interested in entering spaces related to non-Euclidean geometry. These constructs do not rest upon the vision of space as we see it. This is a boundless space transformed in time, a mutating space.”

Roberto Matta. *The Couple*. 1950–54

Russian audience has more influential persons that educated it about the “fourth dimension” – first of all, they are Malevich and Khlebnikov, whose art embraced the same ideas that Pyotr Ouspenski described in his *Tertium Organum* in 1911. More than 20 years after the book had been published, the emigrant esoteric had the attention of British aristocrats and French bohème – including Gordon Onslow Ford and Remedios Varo. Surrealism has always had the “Russian trace,” not too obvious but quite strong: Ilya Zdanevich, or “Ilyazd,” a person that belonged both to Russian Futurists and Surrealists; and add Leo Trotsky, who lived a vivid life of a political refugee in Mexico keeping in touch with Diego, Frida and Breton.

Surrealism was the most influential trend in late 1930s but became outdated in just a decade. The years spent in the US were the most significant for Matta: having joined other European refugees of the 1940s in New York, he inspired the spontaneous painting style of Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline and contested Breton for leadership among Surrealists. It is hard to surprise America – Mexican muralists and their US followers had created various size murals for public buildings since early 1930s, but Matta’s colossal canvases combined Rivera’s pathos with the inner psychological life of Surrealism.

«The images of the tunnel and the orifice are also the symbols of Latin American art. The entrance of the tunnel is the place of epiphanies and evanescence. Consciousness steps down the dark steps to the blind realm of elements, to the origin and the beginning, and, on the contrary, the images buried in the depth rise above in search of solar light. Speaking of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art history, Surrealists were most obsessed with images emerging from below. Particularly the two Latin Americans – Matta and Lam, as well as Tamayo, who was close to Surrealism too. All three of them were miracle men, wonderfully resurrecting and calling ghosts,” – wrote Octavio Paz.

Roberto Matta. *Cube Ouvert*, 1977

Of those shapes that the eye is able to discern on Matta’s canvases, one can constantly come across a cube shaped by planes that float in space. It is a tesseract, the “fourth dimension cube” invented in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, where each facet is a cube. Now this word is associated with some magical artifact of a superhero movie – pop culture has learned to quote the figurative discoveries of surrealism and its

artistic language, but Matta's works are there to bring back the original meaning to the notion of the "fourth dimension."

<https://nanevskom.ru/roberto-matta-i-4g/>

## **Roberto Matta and 4G**

Technically, of course, not – Roberto Matta belongs to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was almost its coeval, he grew up and evolved with it, and survived the 20<sup>th</sup> century by two years. But mentally, yes, it is quite possible. The exact title of the famous Abstract Surrealist (or Surrealist Abstractionist) exhibition hosted by the General Staff of the State Hermitage is “Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension,” but it is too long for the website.

**But his colossal nine meter canvases fit the General Staff building just so well.** “It is only the unknown that interests me. And I work for the only purpose to surprise myself” – this was Matta’s motto in art and life. On the one hand, following his urge to surprise himself, the artist created striking visual maps of fields consciousness – maybe, they were new fields. On the other hand, he was so deeply engaged in his pursuit that others received recognition for this. For example, this is the first time Matta’s works are exhibited in Russia. There is no doubt that they were ahead of that time but our epoch has moved further than that.

**When he drew his first extraterrestrial things in 1930s,** the miniatures that look like broken kaleidoscopes, like the Universe getting born right here and now, there was no Stanley Kubrick around. But now in 2019, Matta’s fuzzy systems cannot impress a common person – they are everywhere: in animation, movies, commercials, videos, in contemporary art. In anything that you can see with a microscope or a telescope. But the contemporary versions of this look more complicated than Matta’s repetitive ornaments.

**In 1960s, his work gained sexual implications** (and even explications), simultaneously naturalistic and abstract, and very accurate, but executed with minimal artistic means. His extensive amorous experience helped him still keep himself surprised. By the way, the titles of his works are poetic and obscure, they do not explain his humanoid-like paintings but encode them even more, and the mystery becomes fully invulnerable. Probably his friendship with Federico Garcia Lorca, that helped Matta get to the core of the Surrealist community, paid off.

**But he never settled down firmly – either in art or in life.** A disciple of Le Corbusier, an associate of Breton, Dali, Duchamp, Gropius, a Chilean native who lived in England, France, the US, Russia, Scandinavia, an architect, a designer, a painter, a social humanist and a private anti-humanist. A man of the world for whom the most valued thing was to surprise himself.

**PS** I read the curators’ preface to the exhibition saying that the event fills “the gap” (in our view of art). This is excellent, however, it would have been just “a gap” in 1970s, but now it looks like a chasm, and the past cannot be changed. And the gaps appear in present as well, because I think that now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it makes more sense to exhibit the works of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Probably, the 21<sup>st</sup> century should even be the priority.

<https://artvesti.ru/news/afisha/2019/04/01/roberto-matta-i-chetve-rtoe-izmerenie-s-10-aprelya-po-30-iyunya-2019-goda-v-belom-zale-glavnogo-shtaba-gosudarstvennogo-ermitazha-predstavlena-vystavka-hudozhnika-roberto-matta-1911-2002/>

**«Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension» The White Hall of the General Staff building of the State Hermitage features an exhibition of artist Roberto Matta (1911 – 2002) from April 10 till June 30.**

The works of Roberto Matta, one of the last Surrealists, virtually unknown to the Russian audience, will be displayed in Russia for the first time. The exhibition features over 90 works from 23 private collections, mostly from the US.

Roberto Sebastian Matta was born in 1911 in Santiago, Chile. A cosmopolitan of Spanish, Basque and French descent, the artist lived and worked in South America, France, Mexico, the US, Italy, Spain and England. As his parents believed that art studies were not a serious occupation, Matta had to get a degree in architecture at the Catholic University in Santiago. Working at Le Corbusier's in Paris in 1930s, the artist entered the circle of Surrealists and tried drawing. Andre Breton, who supported the young artist in his quest, wrote that "Matta expresses the need to create a visible representation of the four-dimensional Universe in his own particular way. Nothing in his works is intentional anymore, everything comes from the desire to enter the realm of divine."

Courage, thirst for knowledge, being open to new trends in art, deep insight in psychology and interest in technological advances made Roberto Matta an outstanding person in the world of art. However, he has never fully associated himself with any art trend, experimenting on the edge of art and science, he has never become a complete Surrealist. His urge to reformat the Renaissance visual perspective with the help of the subconscious and the irrational distanced him from Abstract Expressionists as well. Rejecting the formal stylistic boundaries, Roberto Matta has always done a reality check of his art, trying to experience the depths of human nature. Refusing to call himself an artist, Matta would say: «I am not an artist. I am someone trying to construct the images that will once help us realize the essence of the verb 'to see'."

Influenced by the non-Euclidian geometry theories, Matta has tried to put his intellectual ideas into shape, to create a space beyond the conventional, visible perspective.

Having participated in the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme of 1938, Matta started to research what he called "psychological morphologies," largely due to his friendship with the British artist Gordon Onslow Ford. It was Ford who introduced Matta to the works of Pyotr Ouspensky, the Russian philosopher and theorist of the "fourth dimension." Matta shared Ouspensky's ideas that the fourth dimension enhances the third dimension with the feeling of space, movement and time that is needed to realize the ever-going and irreversible process of change in the world, where every new moment is unique.

Ouspensky wrote in his *Tertium Organum* (1912) that the mind subconsciously "corrects" what the eye sees in order to make up for the limitations of human vision. For example, mental concepts help us perceive volumes though we only see the outer surfaces of objects. According to Ouspensky, it is the artist who takes on the role of a visionary who "has to see what others cannot see" and "must possess the gift to open the eyes of others to what they do not see themselves. In order to explain his ideas, Ouspensky would often draw geometric lines, planes, cubes and spheres as metaphoric explanations of human psyche.

Matta took his usage of geometry to describe invisible structures. Overcoming the limitations of human vision, he tried to create the art that can 'see more and further'.

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oil painting at about the same time. He arrived in New York in 1939 and had his first overseas exhibition a year after, at Julien Levy's gallery.

After a while Matta became interested in monumental art. His huge five meter canvases – "mindsapes" – had a strong impact on the new generation of American artists: Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell. Matta experimented a lot with materials and textures and made a series of works with fluorescent paint. He was one of trailblazers of biomorphism, painting natural organisms as parts of functional technical devices..

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The curators of the exhibition are Dmitry Ozerkov, head of the State Hermitage contemporary art department, Ph. D. in Philosophy, and Oksana Salamatina, representing the US Hermitage Fund. An illustrated catalog of the exhibition will be available in both Russian and English.

The exhibition "Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension" was prepared by the contemporary art department of the State Hermitage as part of the "Hermitage 20/21" project aimed at collecting, exhibiting and studying the art of the XX-XXI centuries.

THE PRESS PRESENTATION TAKES PLACE AT 5 PM, APRIL 9

<https://artmoskovia.ru/vystavka-roberto-matta-i-chetvjortoe-izmerenie-otkryvaetsya-v-glavnoy-shtaba-gosudarstvennogo-ermitazha-spb.html>

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