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Dalí and love

Introduction



Before Dalí met Gala, Anna Maria was the pivotal, ideal female form in his life.

A single being has attained a plan of life whose image is comparable to the serene perfection of the Renaissance, Gala, my wife, who I had the miraculous good fortune to choose. Consequently, in all of the great genre paintings, there appears the one and only unique presence, the visible woman, Gala.

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Salvador Dalí's first experience of love was firmly rooted in the strong emotional family relationships of his youth, immortalised in the penetrating, keenly observed, psychological early portraits of his father and sister.

Dalí was born on 11 May 1904 in Figueres, exactly nine months and ten days after the death of his brother at the age of two. His inheritance of the same Christian name as his deceased sibling aroused in him the troubling sense that he was perhaps a substitute son for his parents, although the premature loss of their first child led the family, particularly his mother, grandmother and aunt, to dote on him, wrapping him in affection and allowing him every indulgence.

Dalí learnt early on how to take advantage of this situation, controlling the family home with explosive outbreaks of rage if he was not allowed to get his own way. Felipa Domènech, Dalí's mother, herself a skilled artist who drew competently and crafted exquisite wax figurines out of coloured candles, had a particularly close bond with her son, encouraging his prodigious artistic talent.

While Dalí clearly loved and respected his father, Salvador Dalí Cusí, a local notary (civil lawyer) and influential member of society, whose imposing presence and strong personality dominated the household, Dalí is known to have felt more intimidated by him than anyone else. The strict, authoritarian rules imposed by Dalí senior on his son, whom he believed needed direction and discipline to curb his eccentric and wayward tendencies, led to an increasingly noxious clash of wills, creating tension between them.

Dalí had always enjoyed the company of his sister Anna Maria, who was three years his junior, but following the devastating early death of his adored mother in 1921 when he was sixteen, and his father's subsequent marriage to his mother's sister, Aunt Catalina, Dalí increasingly turned to her as a mother figure and the pivotal, ideal female in his life.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in
United States 1940–48
Portrait of my sister 1925
oil on canvas
92.0 x 65.0 cm
Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,
Figueres (0209)
© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-
Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in
United States 1940–48
Gala's Portrait 1969
pencil on cardboard
55.8 x 42.9 cm
Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,
Figueres (0579)
© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-
Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

Introduction

Gala immediately sensed a common bond with Dalí, which allowed her to accept and help moderate his eccentric behaviours.

Anna Maria was Dalí's only female model until he met his future wife, and she is featured in numerous works including *Girl in the window*, 1925, one of his most famous and reproduced paintings.

At Cadaqués in 1925 Anna Maria was introduced by her brother to Federico García Lorca, a Spanish poet with whom she formed a loyal and tender friendship until his death at the hands of Francisco Franco's fascist troops in 1936. Dalí had first met Lorca during his studies at The Royal Academy of Art in Madrid, along with other radical intellectuals such as Luis Buñuel. The two are sometimes romantically linked, particularly in the light of Lorca's unashamedly devotional portrait of his friend in his poem, *Ode to Salvador Dalí*. Commentators have suggested that they may have had a homosexual relationship as students, but this is unconfirmed.

In the spring of 1929, Dalí, feeling increasingly controlled by his domineering, protective father and uncertain of his future, began displaying concerning traits associated with mental illness. He suffered from uncontrollable fits of hysterical laughter and indulged in attention-seeking activities, such as painting his armpits blue, rubbing his body with goat dung and fish glue and wearing a red geranium over his ear, which concerned those close to him.

It was in this context that Dalí first encountered Helena Diakanoff Devulina, known simply as Gala, a charismatic Russian immigrant who is said to have captivated and inspired many of the Surrealists, and who was to become his life-long partner until her death at the age of eighty-eight.

In 1929, while on holiday in Cadaqués with her husband, renowned French poet, Paul Éluard and their daughter Cécile, Dalí and Gala fell in love. She immediately sensed a common bond with Dalí, which allowed her to accept and help moderate his eccentric behaviours. She intuitively recognised his vision and potential, and following her imminent separation from Éluard she became the single most important figure and stabilising factor in the artist's life.

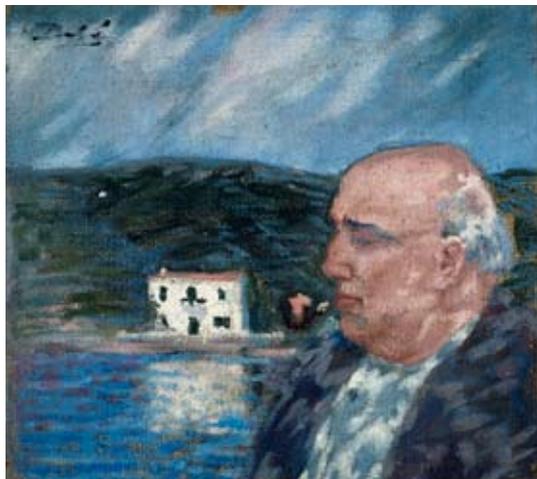
She had a decisive influence on his future career, which she guided to international success, as she took on diverse and multiple roles in their partnership; as his model, wife, companion, adviser, muse and business manager, her presence in Dalí's life was all-consuming.

Dalí referred to Gala as 'my intimate truth, my double, my one', and frequently signed his works Gala Salvador Dalí, a reflection of how united they had become as a couple.

Gala is celebrated so often throughout Dalí's paintings and writings that she is a familiar feature of his iconography, often cast in mythological feminine roles such as the Sphinx, Leda and Gradiva (a Surrealist muse inspired by the neo-Attic Roman bas-relief in the Vatican Museums of a robed woman who lifts the hems of her skirt as she supposedly strides forward through walls).

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Dalí's father and sister were vehemently opposed to his relationship with a woman who was ten years his senior and closely associated with what they perceived as the bizarre and immoral antics of the Surrealists. Family tensions reached a crisis in 1929 when Dalí's father read a Barcelona newspaper report revealing how his son had recently exhibited a drawing, titled *Sacred heart*, which featured the words 'Sometimes I spit with pleasure on the portrait of my mother.' Refusing to recant, Dalí was banished from the family home and it was five years before a meeting between father and son was brokered by Dalí's uncle, which resulted in what has been described as a passionate reconciliation lasting until his father's death in 1950.

However, his sister was not treated so favourably by her brother, who became enraged by her book, *Salvador Dalí as Seen by his Sister*, 1949. He felt betrayed by her descriptions of his childhood as normal and happy, a direct contradiction of the fantastical, bizarre memories he had recounted in his own biography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, 1942.

The once close siblings did not meet again until 1984 when Anna Maria visited Dalí in hospital after he had been badly burnt in his home. Due to differing reports it is uncertain whether they were ever reconciled.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Portrait of my father and the house at Es Llaner c. 1920

oil on canvas

41.5 x 47.0 cm

Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres (0168)

© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Girl's back 1926

oil on wood panel

32.0 x 27.0 cm

The Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida

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In his autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, 1942, Dalí describes how he invented names for his wife to suit her personality traits and physical characteristics:

I call my wife Gala, Galuchka, Gradiva ... Olive (because of the shape of her face and the colour of her skin) I also call her Lionette (Little Lion) because she roars like the MGM lion when she gets angry; Squirrel, Tapir, Little Negus (because she resembles a little forest animal); Bee (because she discovers and brings me all the essences that become converted into the honey of my thought in the busy hive of my brain) ...

The bizarre subject of this painting depicting the oval shape of Gala's face basking peacefully in the sun with a pair of raw lamb chops balanced on her shoulder, is a powerful symbol of Dalí's desire to 'devour' his wife, model and muse, whose soul and intellect are fused in perfect harmony with his own.

This exquisitely detailed, hyper-realistic painting, little bigger than a matchbox in size, is a particularly fine example of Dalí's consummate technical skills, whereby he employs the use of photography as a tool to assist with artistic expression.

Important iconographic elements of the artist's work are clearly visible in this painting: the landscape of Portlligat, glowing in the warm Mediterranean light achieved with a predominance of ochres, complemented with a wide range of colours applied in small, precise brushstrokes; the lonely figure of a child with a hoop, a self-portrait of Dalí gazing at the artist's house; the sumptuous quality of the edible items.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Portrait of Gala with two lamb chops in equilibrium upon her shoulder

c. 1934

oil on wood panel

6.8 x 8.8 cm

Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,

Figueres (0036)

© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-

Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

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During the hours I spent as a model for him, I never tired of looking at that landscape that has now become part of me forever. For he always painted me near some window. And my eyes had time to take in the tiniest details.

Anna Maria Dalí, *Salvador Dalí visto por su hermana*, Ediciones del Cotal, Barcelona, 1983, p. 111.

The monumental scale of Dalí's sister, virtually his sole model in the 1920s, framed against a narrow street leading down to the main bay of *Cadaqués*, establishes the imposing nature of this half-length, frontal portrait. It is one of a series of interesting portraits painted during this period where the artist was experimenting with different styles, and bears a strong resemblance to the stark *Portrait of Luis Buñuel, 1924* (*Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid*). *The haunting, serene, frozen-in-time quality of both paintings, where the background buildings have been pared down to austere, geometric forms, recall the work of Giorgio de Chirico, a leader of the Italian Valori Plastici group of artists, who encouraged the fusing of contemporary art with traditional values.*

Dalí's extraordinary skill as a draughtsman is revealed in his skilful depiction of the strong facial features, the wavy hair and the folds in the dress, using long, fluid brushstrokes. The dramatic composition is characterised by broad swathes of flat colour softened by the gentle, curving lines that outline the figure, and the limited range of colours highlights the bright, velvety blue of the dress, accentuating Anna Maria's majestic presence.

Portrait of my sister was shown in Dalí's first solo exhibition which he held at the age of twenty-one at the Galeries Dalmau in Barcelona in 1925.

Dalí under the microscope



Looking and discussing

- **What are your first thoughts** when you look at this work? What does it make you think about and feel?
- **Describe the expression** on Gala's face and what particular view of her face is pictured.
- What time of day might it be? **Give your reasons** for thinking this.
- Use the zoom tool on this site to carefully examine the painting. **Make a list** of all the objects you can see in the painting and describe each of them using at least three adjectives and/or similes.
- **Describe the colours** Dalí has used to convey the effect of a warm Mediterranean light – try to avoid basic descriptions like yellow, brown and so on, in favour of phrases such as warm ochres or translucent apricot tones.
- What opposite concepts can you find in this painting, such as ugly/beautiful, real/unreal, clear/hazy? **How do they contribute** to the mood and meaning of the painting?
- **Why** might Dalí have painted two lamb chops on Gala's shoulder?
- **Explore the other clues** that may suggest what Dalí wants us to know about Gala and his feelings towards her.
- How has Dalí painted the background? How does it complement or draw attention to Gala. **Consider** the colour, tones and subject matter.
- What aspects of the painting reveal Dalí's use of a camera in his technique? **In what other ways** does the painting show the influence of characteristics associated with photography?
- You may be surprised to learn that this image, painted in oils on wood, is only 6.8 x 8.8 cm! **Use the zoom tool** again to examine the exquisitely fine details that Dalí has achieved by using a paintbrush with only a few fine bristles.
- Dalí has created an illusion of three-dimensional space in the painting. **Give examples** from the painting of:
 - use of tonal modelling
 - perspective
 - relative size of objects in the foreground and background
 - decreasing detail from foreground to background
 - overlapping of objects
- **What questions** would you like to ask Dalí about this painting if he were alive today?
- Consider what problems the curator of the NGV's *Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire* exhibition might encounter when deciding how to display the painting. **Consider the scale** of the work and the high numbers of people visiting the exhibition. How might these problems be resolved?

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

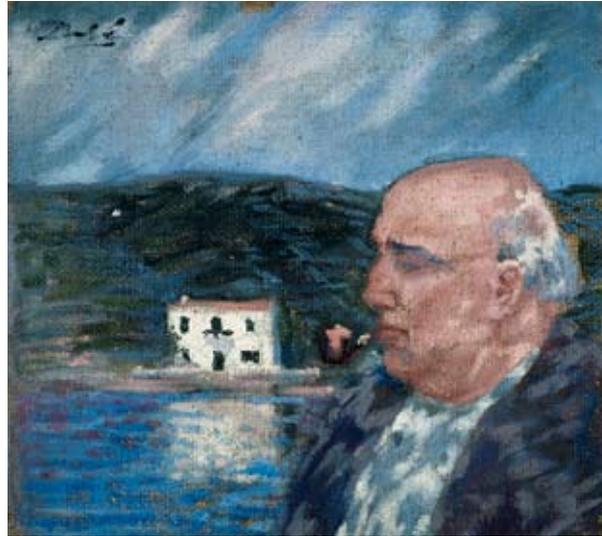
Portrait of Gala with two lamb chops in equilibrium upon her shoulder
c. 1934

oil on wood panel
6.8 x 8.8 cm

Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,
Figueres (0036)

© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

Dalí under the microscope



The language of art

Using material from your discussions above, either:

- Write a story or poem inspired by the many curious features of the painting.
- Write an email to a friend or a blog explaining your reaction to the painting when you saw and discussed it.
- Write a commentary which interprets the artwork. Present your view on what it may mean or is trying to communicate, such as feelings, ideas and visual qualities. Refer to what you see in the artwork as evidence to support your interpretation.

The Bigger Picture – Thinking Beyond

- What is a portrait? What makes a portrait unique compared with other subjects in art? Why might artists make portraits? **Discuss the reasons** with reference to portraits you are familiar with.
- Picture a portrait you admire. **Describe** why you like it.
- Can a visual portrait reveal more about a person than writing about them? **Discuss with reference** to a written description and visual portrait of the same person.
- To what extent should a portrait show a strong physical likeness? **How** else can artists communicate ideas about a person's identity?
- **Discuss** Pablo Picasso's remark: 'The artist loses himself in a futile effort if he wants to be realistic. The work can be beautiful even if it doesn't have a conventional likeness' with reference to a portrait or self-portrait by Dalí, such as *Soft self-portrait with grilled bacon*, 1941, which appears in the **Dalí the man** section of this resource.
- **How** has photography changed or contributed to the art of portraiture?

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Portrait of Gala 1969

pencil on cardboard

55.8 x 42.9 cm

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Figueres (0579)

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Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

I do not paint
a portrait to
look like the
subject, rather
does the
person grow
to look like
his portrait.

– Salvador Dalí

Dalí and love

Dalí under the microscope

- Choose one of the quotations below. **Discuss the meaning** of the quotation with reference to one of the portraits on this site or another Dalí portrait you have located in a book or on the internet.

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.

Oscar Wilde, Irish poet, novelist, dramatist and critic, 1854–1900

I do not paint a portrait to look like the subject, rather does the person grow to look like his portrait.

Salvador Dalí

Every man's work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of himself.

Samuel Butler, novelist, essayist and critic, 1835–1902

I would wish my portraits to be of the people, not like them. Not having a look of the sitter, being them.

Lucian Freud, English painter

I often concentrate on the eyes and lips, they are great indicators of mood and feeling, and I find that I can project character into my portraits by bringing the viewer's attention to these areas.

Robert Ryan, artist

- What is beauty? Can ugliness be beautiful in some circumstances? Is beauty necessary or even desirable in art? **Choose a portrait** on this site and explain with reference to aspects of the portrait whether or not in your opinion it is beautiful.