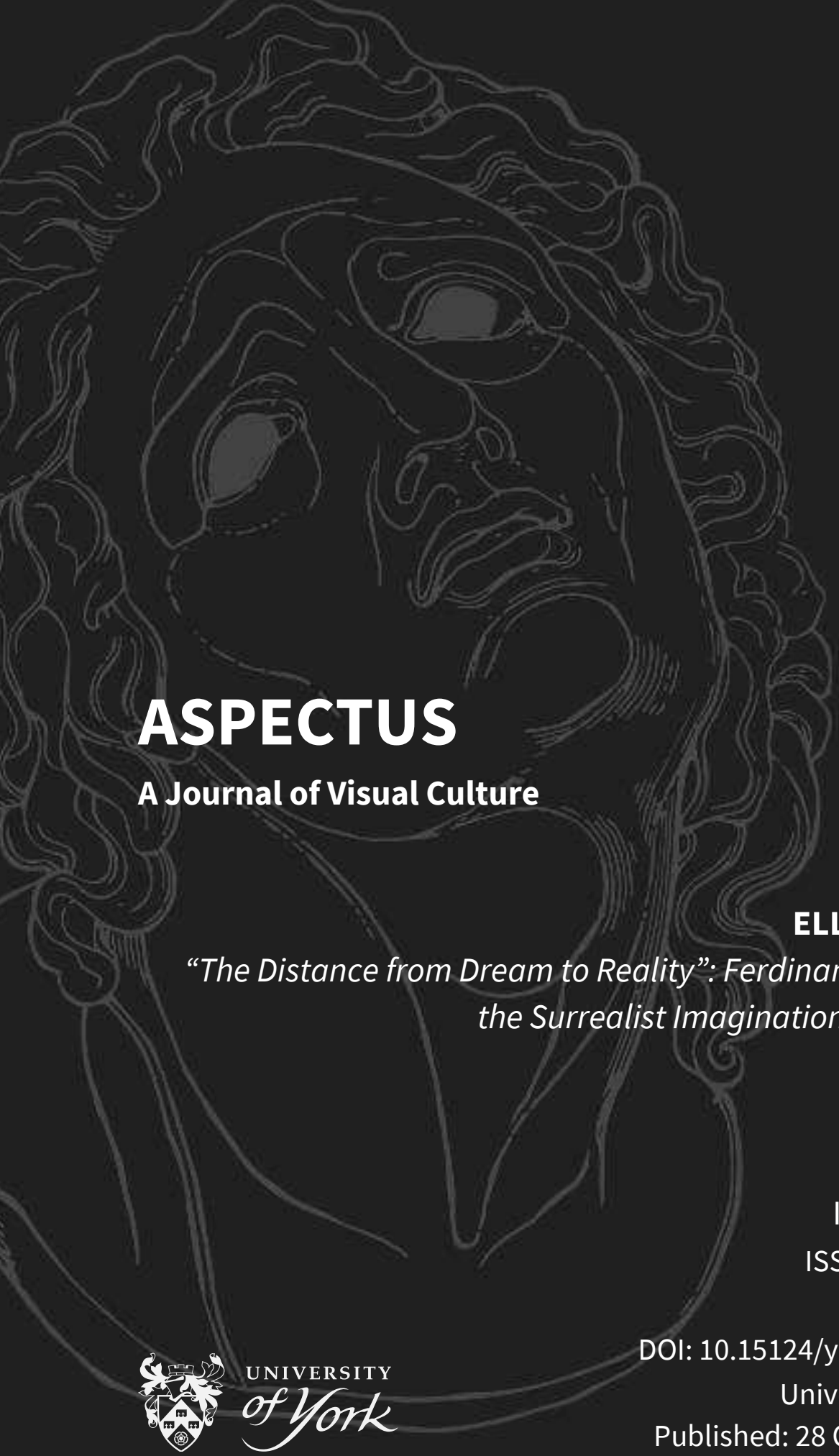

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"The Distance from Dream to Reality": Ferdinand Cheval in the Surrealist Imagination, 1924-1945

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Figure 1. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal ; Façade Nord-Est,* 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Image courtesy of *Médiathèques Valence Romans Agglomération.*

"A peasant's son and a son of my works, I remained a peasant with the firm desire to show you what you can achieve with a strong willpower and sustained work."[1] So begins the autobiography of Ferdinand "Facteur" Cheval, a rural postman who, between 1879 and 1912, constructed the *Palais Idéal,* a complex structure borne from his dreams and a desire to memorialise his life (Fig. 1). 'Discovered' by leading Surrealist André Breton following Cheval's death in 1924, the *Palais* and its creator were quickly assimilated into Surrealist narratives of automatism and the interrelationship of dream and reality. This article assesses the interaction of Cheval with the Surrealists Max Ernst and André Breton, questioning his cannibalisation and mythologisation within their works and his construction as a 'proto-Surrealist.'

THE POSTMAN

Little is known of Cheval's early life. Born in 1836 to farmers in Charmes, a commune in north-eastern France, Cheval notes in his autobiography that he received only a rudimentary education, something he sought to rectify in his adult life.[2] Cheval did not follow his father into the farming profession. By 1855, at the age of nineteen, he was working as an itinerant baker, and at some point in the 1860s he settled in Hauterives, one hundred kilometres south of Lyon.[3] Much has been speculated about this period of Cheval's life. His wife, Rosalie Revol, appears to have spent extended periods living apart from Cheval at her parents' house, and many have suggested that this could have been due to him going abroad to complete military service in Algeria.[4] There is no evidence, however, that Cheval ever left France, and at no point in his autobiography does he mention visiting Algeria despite being keen to list his other achievements. The inclusion of a miniature version of Algiers's Maison Carrée on the *Palais* and other North African architectural elements are frequently cited as evidence for Cheval's military service abroad, yet it is more likely that these were taken from the architectural magazines that influenced other aspects of his design.[5]

After settling in Hauterives Cheval took up his position as a postman, walking a daily thirty-two kilometre route. To alleviate his boredom he built in his imagination a "fairy-like palace… with all that the genius of a humble man could conceive."[6] This palace, in which he aimed to "bring back to life all the ancient architectures and primaeval times" occupied his thoughts for ten years, fading only with the realisation that his lack of building experience would curtail any attempt at construction.[7] During this time his first wife died, and by 1878 he had remarried. John Beardsley describes the following year, 1879, as Cheval's "annus mirabilis," where two events— the discovery of a "bizarre" rock and the birth of his daughter, Alice— would provide the impetus to begin construction of the Palais.[8]

In his autobiography Cheval recalls that during one postal round, just as his "dream was sinking into oblivion," he tripped on a stone whose shape was so strange that it recalled to him the imagined forms of his palace.[9] For the next twenty-seven years he would walk an extra ten kilometres to collect similar stones, piling them up at the side of the road before returning to cart them back to his home in the evening. Initially these stones were used to construct a fountain, which he then surrounded with sculpted cement animals, a project which lasted two years.[10] The original "stumbling block" would eventually be installed on a pedestal within the *Palais*, a move which fulfilled later Surrealist interests in the idea of a chance encounter with an object that "liberates" the artistic imagination.[11]

Anatole Jakovsky identified the second event of 1879, the birth of Cheval's daughter, as a key factor in the decision to build the *Palais*.[12] While the structure was certainly intended to fulfil a memorial function, Alice herself is not referenced in either Cheval's

Figure 2. Ferdinand Cheval, Mausoleum, 1915-1923, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Wikimedia user Wikilug.

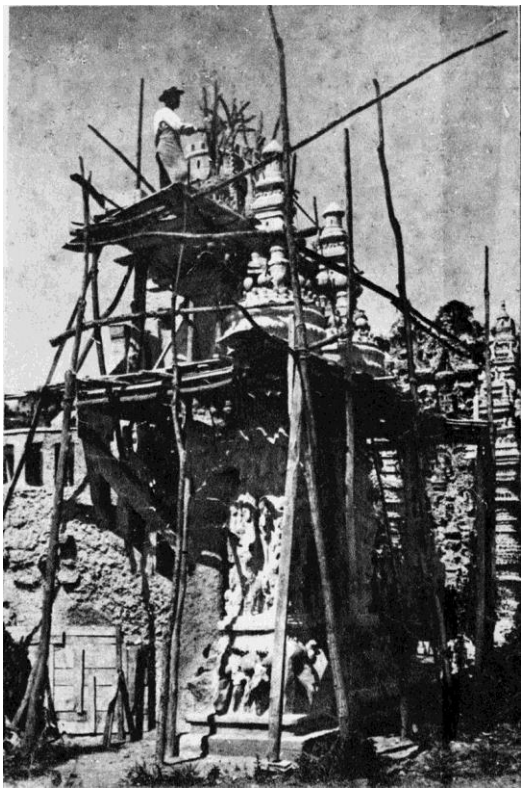

Figure 3. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal: Construction*, 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph courtesy of the Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon.

autobiography or in any of the hundreds of inscriptions on the façade. Instead, these inscriptions largely celebrate Cheval and his achievement in building the *Palais,* noting in one: "Everything you can see, passer-by/ Is the work of one peasant/ Who, out of a dream, created/ The Queen of the world."[13] Cheval originally intended to be buried within his creation, though as the law forbade this only his tools are interred there, while he constructed an elaborate family tomb in the local cemetery (Fig. 2).

Using a rudimentary form of reinforced concrete (Fig. 3) Cheval's *Palais* took on a monumental scale, reaching twenty-six metres in length, fourteen metres in width, and rising to ten metres at its highest point.[14] Within the *Palais* is what Cheval calls the "hecatomb," a long gallery space filled with sculpted plants and animals "rather reminiscent of ancient times" (Fig. 4).[15] Cheval does not elaborate on the inclusion of this reference to ancient Greek sacrificial rites, perhaps using the term "hecatomb" to refer instead to the gathering of various animals. A series of upper terraces, staircases, and an underground burial vault complete the labyrinthine floorplan.

Each façade is heavily ornamented by carved inscriptions, inlaid stone, and concrete moulded over wire skeletons to form sculptures in a range of sizes and forms.[16] The long Eastern façade contains Cheval's most ambitious sculptural works: the three highly textured giants Vercingetorix, Archimedes, and Caesar, and the smaller, smoother, female figures of druidesses Velda and Inizia (Fig. 5). Cheval notes he completed these in the "Egyptian manner," after the large-scale statues of Egypt's Valley of the Kings he saw in illustrated magazines.[17] These giants support the "Barbary Tower," a crenelated turret with sculpted trees, cacti, and exotic animals, again drawing on images found in

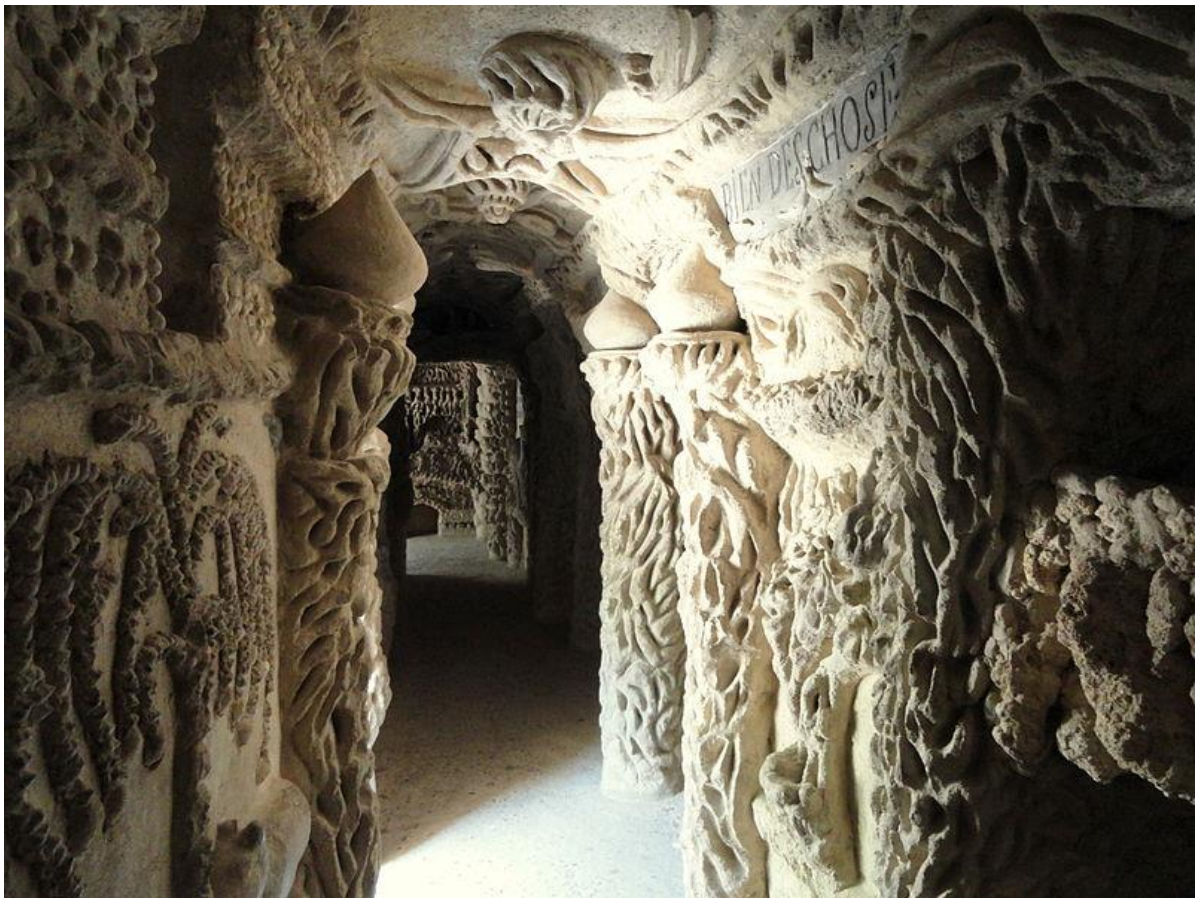

Figure 4. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal : Inner Gallery*, 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Wikimedia user Daderot.

Figure 5. Ferdinand Cheval, Palais Idéal : Eastern Facade, 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Wikimedia user Gzen92.

magazines. The original fountain is also incorporated into this façade, as is a grotto housing Cheval's wheelbarrow and the entrance to his intended tomb. The rich ornamentation continues onto the Northern façade, the most organic with bulbous columns, pendulous fruit- and leaf-like forms, grottoes, and sculpted animals (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal : Northern Facade*, 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Image courtesy of Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval.

The Southern and Western façades, however, are significantly more restrained than their earlier Northern and Eastern counterparts. Distinguished by smooth concrete, Roger Cardinal has speculated that their lack of ornamentation was due to a loss of interest in the project on Cheval's part,[18] though Cheval himself notes that a lack of stones curtailed some of his later plans.[19] The Southern façade is dominated by a Tree of Jesse, contained within a gothic-style framework, alongside an "antediluvian museum" of silexes (flints and quartz) and "stones carved by nature," (Fig. 7).[20] The Western façade is punctuated by a series of niches, into which Cheval set concrete models of buildings from around the world, including a Swiss chalet, Hindu temple, the White House, Algiers's Maison Carrée, and a medieval chateau (Figs. 8a-b).

Walking around the Palais one is pulled alternately from dream to reality and back again, moving from the recognisable forms of the Western façade to the strange, incongruously juxtaposed images of the Eastern. This contrast has drawn both praise and criticism in almost equal measure. In his seminal 1972 work Outsider Art, which introduced the theories of Jean Dubuffet to an English-speaking audience, Cardinal described the Western façade variously as "insipid," "vulgar," and a "let-down."[21] More recently John Beardsley has reinforced Cardinal's judgment, calling the architectural models "crude… disappointingly literal."[22]

These later judgments are heavily influenced by the work of Dubuffet regarding art made beyond the bounds of mainstream culture, which he defined as 'Art Brut,' raw art, in 1945. Dubuffet insisted that creators of Art Brut, such as Cheval, should be without knowledge of or concern for Western cultural structures, and essentially isolated in some way from society. While the Northern and Eastern façades fulfil this

Figure 7. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal : Southern Facade,* 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Eric Bajart.

Figure 8a. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal : Western Facade*, 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Wikimedia user Gzen92.

Figure 8b. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal : Western Façade,* 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Wikimedia user Marine69.

image of the Art Brut creator as a-cultural, working to their own internal logic, the Southern and Western façades demonstrate that not only was Cheval versed in the visual language of the art world, but also sought to recreate its forms. Rather than exposing the true issue at the heart of Dubuffet's definition of Art Brut, that no one can be without culture completely, the Southern and Western façades have been framed as demonstrating the adverse effects of culture upon a 'naïve' creator. Cheval's obvious pride in being able to recreate these forms despite his lack of artistic or architectural training is taken as evidence that, as word of his *Palais* spread, he wanted to mimic popular artistic fashions. In their dismissal of these later façades, commentators who follow Dubuffet perpetuate certain myths about Art Brut and its creators, circumscribing their often sizeable achievements and curating the way in which they are viewed to suit an established narrative.

Prior to Dubuffet's intervention, however, the contrast of one façade with another stood at the centre of cultural interest in the *Palais*. In a 1936 article Jacques Brunius described Cheval's construction as a "monstrous system of imagined memories," an encyclopaedic collection of images gathered from magazines and popular prints and filtered through the imagination of its creator.[23] The resulting contrast of real and imagined elements produced a "hallucinatory migration through times and places …

[stemming] from the same mechanisms of associations and condensations as dreams."[24] Cheval himself was aware of the *Palais'*s de-locating abilities, stating that he wanted to carry visitors into "a fantastic dream with boundaries beyond the scope of imagination."[25] It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Surrealists especially were drawn to the disconcerting geographies of the *Palais,* seeing in Cheval a prophetic figure foreshadowing their own activities. Bridging the "distance from dream to reality" Cheval had transformed his visions into a physically habitable space.[26]

Cheval died in 1924, two days after completing his autobiography and having its contents witnessed as fact by his neighbours, including a local councillor and the band leader.[27] The autobiography, which takes a romanticised view of Cheval's life and work, is an extension of the inscriptions that cover the *Palais.* These guide and at times challenge the viewer, and are often presented in the form of short poems, demonstrating Cheval's literary as well as artistic ambitions. Far from the innocent creator standing as a mere witness to their work, as many 'Art Brut' artists were presented to be, Cheval relished the attention the *Palais* afforded him. In one inscription he announced: "The furrow I painstakingly dug/ In the glorious past of my life/ Will remain engraved/ And well after my last breath/ I shall be living/ For ever and ever."[28] Certainly Cheval achieved this; though the afterlives he and his work were entered into perhaps exceeded even his own expectations.

Figure 9. Louis Charvat, *HAUTERIVES (Drôme) Palais Idéal (Facade Est, no. 1),* 1902(?), photograph. Image courtesy of Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval.

THE PROTO-SURREALIST

The *Palais Idéal* was an attraction even during Cheval's lifetime. In his autobiography he notes that while the residents of Hauterives were wary of the project, visitors from elsewhere were "full of delight and enthusiasm," and christened it the eighth wonder of the world.[29] The increasing popularity of the *Palais* is evident in the numerous souvenir photographs produced by Louis Charvat from 1902, many of which include Cheval in his postman's uniform posing in front of his construction and quotes selected from the carved inscriptions (Fig. 9). The tourist draw of the *Palais* is perhaps what guaranteed its survival; a vast majority of 'Outsider' Environments are lost or deliberately destroyed following the death of their creator, often at the hands of resentful neighbours.[30]

Tourism, and the subsequent production and dissemination of souvenirs, generated widespread interest in the *Palais* in cultured circles. In the years following Cheval's death the site was visited by Pablo Picasso, Leonora Carrington, Paul Eluard and the photographers Lee Miller, Brassaï and Robert Doisneau, almost all of whom produced their own artistic and literary works in response.[31] By the 1960s the *Palais* had drawn international attention, appearing in the writings of Lawrence Durrell. In 1969 it was designated as an Historic Monument by the then Minister of Culture, André Malraux, a rare accolade for an 'Outsider' Environment to be granted.[32]

The reverence with which Cheval's work was treated can be traced back to the Surrealists, who were the first to present the *Palais* as a cultural, artistic work as opposed to a rural oddity. The Surrealist interest in naïve, folk, or primitive works was not unprecedented, either within their own group or in the wider artistic milieu of the early twentieth century. Since the turn of the century the avant-garde had begun to look beyond the western canon of art history to the art of Africa and Oceania, as well as to European Folk Art and the productions of children and psychiatric patients. Presenting a range of new artistic forms, materials, and methods, these works found themselves reflected in works by artists such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Pablo Picasso.

It was while studying at the University of Bonn that Max Ernst developed an interest in psychiatry, visiting asylums and viewing the work produced by the patients.[33] He later considered writing a book on the subject, a project halted by the publication of Hans Prinzhorn's seminal work *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill)* in 1922.[34] Prinzhorn's book, which Ernst is credited as introducing to his fellow Surrealists, would prove influential in both the group's aesthetic and intellectual endeavours, and in turn aided Dubuffet's development of Art Brut.[35] What *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* appeared to confirm was the existence of a 'European Primitivism' at a time when public and artistic interest in the notion of the 'primitive' was at its height. Marc Décimo has noted that for avant-garde artists the work of children and psychiatric patients expressed the "exoticism of their own alter egos," an Otherness within their own society.[36]

For the Surrealists the primitive, in this sense, represented a return to the 'real life' that one is closest to in early childhood, free from cultural and societal pressures.[37] Psychiatric patients, supposedly "unscathed" by culture due to their physical removal from it, offered unmediated access to this "unadulterated self."[38] The Surrealists themselves, however, could not claim to be similarly unscathed, and as such sought to develop and refine techniques that allowed them to disengage from their conscious state.

Surrealist automatism evolved from the Dadaist use of chance and the techniques of psychotherapists, spiritualists, and mediums. Automatic writing and drawing, games such as cadavre exquis (exquisite corpse), and the manipulation of materials in frottage, grattage, and decalcomania were all used to gain access to a concealed consciousness. In the 1924 Surrealist manifesto Breton defined Surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state… the absence of any control exercised by reason," a definition he would continue to rework over the next several decades.[39] He was especially keen to distinguish Surrealist automatism from the previous work of mediums who, due to their supposed lack of education, believed the impulses they responded to came from exterior sources (the spiritual world) as opposed to their unconscious mind.[40] Surrealist automatism, as Katherine Conley has explained, was "a willed passivity," requiring the unification of both the conscious and unconscious minds, melding together dream and reality.[41]

It is within Surrealist texts on automatism that references to Cheval first appear. Although Breton was not to visit the *Palais* until 1931, photographs of it were included alongside works as varied as the output of mediums and British Columbian artists in a 1929 edition of the journal *Variétés*.[42] Presented largely without expository text the juxtaposition of images was intended to simulate for the reader the chance encounter of one or more disparate objects, which the Surrealists saw as an "involuntary act of perception," opening a window onto another world.[43] The resulting revelatory spark, jolt, or shock characterised Breton's concept of convulsive beauty, which he had introduced the previous year in his novel *Nadja.*

As well as working in concert with the other images presented in *Variétés,* for the Surrealists the *Palais Idéal* achieved the jolts and shocks of convulsive beauty on its own. Itself the product of a chance encounter with the "bizarre" rock, the *Palais* offered a "hallucinatory migration through times and places," producing in the visitor a sense of dream-like dislocation that liberated the imagination.[44] What Beardsley has described as the "uncanny appeal" of the *Palais* stemmed largely from its combination of real and imagined elements across the façades, and that it appeared itself like a found object for the Surrealists in an otherwise inconspicuous rural village.[45]

The connection between Cheval's work and Surrealist automatic practices was underlined in 1932, when a photograph of Breton emerging from the *Palais* was included in *Les Vases Communicants*.[46] Here Breton again sought to define Surrealism and its intentions, employing the image of two connected vessels between which

fluids or gases can pass in a scientific experiment. Representing respectively "the exterior world of facts and the interior world of emotions," the unconscious and the conscious, their meeting and ultimate mingling illustrated a key aim of Surrealist activity.[47] Automatic techniques were one way through which this mixing could occur, but here Breton appears to argue that it should be possible to achieve this reconciliation without making use of external tactics.[48]

The inclusion of the *Palais Idéal* in *Les Vases Communicants*, though brief and unacknowledged in the actual text, is nonetheless significant in its demonstration of how Cheval was located within Surrealism. Rather than simply illustrating a concept as he had done in *Variétés,* here Cheval is constructed as a proto-Surrealist and claimed for the group. With the "shackled logic of the dream" the *Palais* bridged distances between architectural styles, geographical locations and time periods with ease.[49] What Breton had sought to illustrate in *Les Vases Communicants,* and what he had attempted to execute in his own literary and artistic practices, Cheval had achieved seemingly by accident. In the image of Breton emerging from the *Palais* Willard Bohn saw "Orpheus returning from his voyage to the underworld… with precious information about the unconscious."[50] Here Cheval is transformed into an oracle of Surrealism, foreshadowing their activities and providing a template for how the divide between dream and reality might be overcome.

The inclusion of Cheval's work in both *Variétés* and *Les Vases Communicants* encapsulates how the *Palais* was co-opted by the Surrealists as not only a physical, but also a theoretical, model for their activities.[51] One of the last major references to Cheval in Surrealist literature appears in Breton's 1933 essay "Le Message Automatique," and in its extended version published a year later. Returning to the subject of automatism and mediumistic art, here Breton is again keen to distinguish Surrealism from Spiritualism and its religious, moral, or stereotyped aspects.[52] In this essay Breton discussed the work of figures on the periphery of Surrealism, or those that he had claimed for the group, including the work of psychiatric patients such as Augustin Lesage, the semi-imaginary Nadja, and Cheval. Together these examples sought to illustrate commonalities between various types of 'automatic' work, establishing a paradigm from which Surrealist activities could develop.

Here Cheval is mentioned within the text, being described by Breton as "the uncontested master of mediumistic architecture and sculpture."[53] As evidence for this Breton claimed that Cheval was "haunted" by the cave systems of the Drôme region around Hauterives which emerged "unbidden" within the *Palais*.[54] While it is true that Cheval drew some of his imagery from his dreams, his identification as a 'mediumistic' creator suggests either intentional communication with the spirit-realm or else a lack of agency, working as if in a trance, guided by unseen forces.[55] Neither is true of Cheval; though it has been claimed that he worked from the drawing of a local medium, Cadier, Cheval is not known to have had any direct involvement with Spiritualism or its practices.[56]

Further, Breton's designation of Cheval as a mediumistic creator is a dubious honour. While he felt drawn to the work of those whose "automatic abilities were unrestrained," as Conley has noted he scorned their "lack of common sense" and belief in external spiritual forces, and distanced himself from them.[57] Falsely identified as engaging in Spiritualist practices, Cheval was frequently "tossed into [a] stew" of other creators with whom he had little affinity, including psychiatric patients.[58] Of this latter association Cheval was aware during his lifetime, writing in his autobiography that his neighbours perceived him to have a "sick imagination," while his interment in a hospital was only prevented by the village's relative tolerance of him.[59] "I knew," Cheval concludes, "that throughout history men who were not understood have been held up to ridicule, even persecuted."[60]

The inclusion of Cheval and his work in "Le Message Automatique" completes his transformation into a proto-Surrealist that had begun in *Variétés* four years previously. Over the course of these publications the *Palais* is subsumed into a larger Surrealist worldview, used as both a guide for their activities and as an embodiment of their ideals. In this process many of Cheval's original intentions have been overlooked or purposely obscured. Cardinal especially took issue with Cheval's inclusion in "Le Message Automatique," arguing that he was "hijacked as a *passe-partout* paradigm for Surrealism," and that his identification as a mediumistic creator was only to allow for Breton to graft "various satellite domains" onto the group.[61]

Cardinal's summation of Breton's relationship to Cheval is accurate, though it overlooks Dubuffet's similar treatment of the *Palais.* Like Dubuffet's relationship to his Art Brut creators fifteen years later, Breton positioned himself as the arbiter of his encounters with the *Palais*, ultimately controlling its image and its history, facilitated, of course, by the fact that Cheval himself was not alive to contribute to debates about his work. Cheval became the Surrealist's puppet, so that even when his own voice was heard in his autobiography and inscriptions, it is distorted. His references to the importance of faith and patriotism, as well as the necessity of living a moral life driven by hard work are ignored by the Surrealists, who could not reconcile such sentiments with their own.[62]

Variétés presented the *Palais* as one of many Surrealist objects, "wrenched out of their contexts of origin and reconfigured into the self-contained, self-referential context of the collection."[63] This de-contextualisation contributed significantly to the establishment of the *Palais* in the Surrealist imagination as a liminal space, existing partway between dream and reality. Within its new context as a precursor to Surrealism, not only were the afterlives of Cheval and his *Palais* dictated by Breton, but so was their history.

Figure 10. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal: Detail of Northern Façade*, 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Wikimedia user Pabix.

THE POET AND THE PARAKEET

The mythical image Cheval acquired in the Surrealist imagination is expressed most clearly in the creative works produced by the group in response to the *Palais.* While the texts addressed above located Cheval within the context of Surrealist activities, André Breton's poem "Facteur Cheval" and the collage of the same name by Max Ernst demonstrate the postman's role as muse, prophet, and model. Both appearing in 1932, the same year as *Les Vases Communicants* was published, the poem and collage complete the apotheosis of Cheval, yet also offer the clearest demonstration of his ultimate separation and subordination to the Surrealists themselves. Though both address Cheval, he himself is not present or given a voice in either, instead becoming a passive witness to Breton and Ernst's own activities.

Published in the collection *Le Revolver à Cheveux Blancs,* Breton's poem appears to be a direct response to his visit to the *Palais* the year before. In an architectural ekphrasis delivered through a series of monologues by a range of speakers, Breton attempts entry into Cheval's dream world in order to graft it onto his own. Bohn, in his book *Marvellous Encounters* (2005), concludes that through the poem Breton sought to proclaim the "superiority of the surrealist vision" and align himself with Cheval.[64] Filled with metaphors and metamorphosis, lacking punctuation and employing "convoluted" syntax, the structure of the poem mimics the complex, labyrinthine forms of the *Palais* itself.[65] Like the *Palais* the structure of Breton's poem houses the

Figure 11. Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal : Eastern Facade Statues*, 1879-1912, concrete, stone, wire, Hauterives, France. Photograph by Wikimedia user Daderot.

waking and dream existence of Cheval, who is present only in the direct address "you" and in the figure of the man asleep.

The image of *l'homme qui dort* appears also in *Les Vases Communicants.* Here the sleeping man is placed alongside his complimentary vessel, the wakeful man, with the intention of developing a symbiosis between these two states, mixing the dream-self into the real-self and vice versa.[66] "Facteur Cheval" can be read as a companion piece to *Les Vases Communicants*, taking as its subject a man who had reconciled the contents of the two vessels, and who demonstrated for Breton "the possibility of abolishing the immemorial opposition between dream and reality."[67]

The action of the poem takes place in this liminal space somewhere between the two, narrated by four separate speakers: a flock of birds, the sighs of a glass statue, exotic plants, and fleshy statues. The metamorphosis of one speaker into another replicates the experience of moving around the *Palais* and encountering its various architectural and ornamental elements. The scenes they describe speak largely of Breton's own desires, while Cheval and his work are reduced to an armature on which to hang them.

The overtly sexual language of the poem is one instance where Breton especially imposes himself, overlooking the moral concerns Cheval expressed in his inscriptions. From references to his fantasy of encountering a naked woman in the street to the physical culmination of this desire between "Cheval" and one of his statues-made-flesh in the final lines, Breton seeks to uncover an eroticism within both the forms of the *Palais* and the dreams that inspired it.[68] This eroticism is, however, almost completely absent in the *Palais,* despite some suggestive sculptural elements (Fig. 10) and the monumental (clothed) human figures (Fig. 11).

Why, then, is Breton so insistent on aligning the *Palais* with the erotic? The answer perhaps lies in the image evoked from lines eight to eleven of a "locomotive consumed by immense barometric roots/ Moaning in the virgin forest."[69] For a number of years Breton had been obsessed by a photograph of a train abandoned in a forest, seeing in it a metaphor for the struggle between the conscious and unconscious.[70] In the closing paragraphs of *Nadja* the image of a train that "ceaselessly roars out of the Gare du Lyon and which… will never leave, which has not left" immediately precedes Breton's declaration that beauty should consist of jolts and shocks.[71] Caught between unstoppable motion and immobility, this train epitomised for Breton his concept of convulsive beauty. The train in "Facteur Cheval" can thus be read as a shorthand reference to convulsive beauty, the experience of which Breton likened to an "erotic shiver" five years later in *L'Amour Fou* (1937).[72] A connection between the two had earlier been suggested by the photographs included within *Variétés.*

For Breton, "Facteur Cheval" acts as a space in which he could explore a number of theories regarding Surrealism and their interaction with one another. Incorporating elements from *Nadja, Variétés,* and *Les Vases Communicants,* the poem is the Surrealist response to the *Palais Idéal* in microcosm. However, in doing so it exposes the disconnect between Cheval's *Palais* and the one constructed in the Surrealist imagination; Cheval himself is almost totally absent, while his work is seen only through the distorting lens of Surrealism.

Cheval and his *Palais* here function as a screen onto which the group could project their own ideas and desires, a role the postman would be given on a number of occasions by a range of other artists, writers, and critics. For the Surrealists, however, Cheval also acted as a mask that they could assume, in the guise of which they could explore elements of their own unconscious. The concept of adopting a mask or persona is not unprecedented in Surrealism or in its related avant-gardes, but these were usually fabricated identities rather than real, historical figures. Masks allowed for the creation of a hybrid identity, encapsulating both the self and the other, with Bohn suggesting that in "Facteur Cheval" the Postman and Breton are almost interchangeable.[73] By inhabiting Cheval and speaking through him, Breton could align him posthumously with their cause and establish a prehistory for their activities, validating them in the process.

Ernst especially was drawn to questions of identity and its conflicts, writing in 1936 "IDENTITY WILL BE CONVUSLIVE OR WILL NOT BE" [original capitalization], mirroring Breton's declaration about convulsive beauty eight years earlier in *Nadja.*[74] In his collage *Loplop Présente: Facteur Cheval* (Fig. 12)[75] Ernst combines the Surrealist construction of Cheval with his own artistic persona, Loplop, Superior of Birds. Ernst claimed that his conflation of bird and man began during his childhood, when his pet parrot died on the same day his sister, Loni, was born.[76] In the late 1920s and early 1930s his avian alter-ego was introduced or, rather, introduced himself, through a series of collages and *papier collés.* Adrienne Dumas describes Loplop as a "mysterious

shamanic figure… part reincarnation of the vulture in Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*… part mask and part avian incarnation of Ernst."[77] A vehicle through which to explore aspects of his childhood and of his subconscious, Loplop is a portrait of both Ernst's real- and dream-self.

In the guise of Loplop, Ernst produced a series of collages in the early 1930s collectively known as *Loplop Présente.* In these Loplop introduced to the audience various subjects, from bunches of flowers to the Surrealists themselves (Fig. 13),[78] often presented within his own body or on a canvas held before him in what Elza Adamowicz calls a "*cadavre exquis.*"[79] *Facteur Cheval* (1932), however, subverts this by removing the showcard format. Here Loplop, present in the bird perched to the left of the collage, is joined by an anthropomorphic figure, identified by a circular head, bowtie, and stocky feet emerging from a blue rectangular body.[80] This figure appears in a number of other Loplop collages, at times merging with the bird and acquiring an avian head. Cheval himself is totally absent, with only the envelope in the lower right hand corner offering any connection to the postman. A small, coral-like form below Loplop acts as a visual shorthand for the *Palais.* Breton described Ernst's collages as "veritable *slits* in time, space, customs and even beliefs" [Breton's original italics], language not unlike that used to describe Cheval's *Palais.*[81] Indeed, the *Palais* itself could be described as a three dimensional collage formed from a selection of disparate objects, materials, and forms.

Ernst's collage expressed similar concerns to Breton's poem, including questions of convulsive beauty and the interaction of dream and reality. Sexualised imagery is also present here, with the inclusion of a postcard showing women in their underclothes emerging from the envelope, and the use of peep-show imagery in the anthropomorphic figure's torso. As both the collage and poem appeared in 1932 it is not too far to suggest that Breton and Ernst exchanged ideas about Cheval and his connection to Surrealism. Read in concert, these works describe the afterlife acquired by Cheval within the Surrealist imagination.

More so than Breton's poem, the collage is largely concerned with automatism and the question of its relationship to both Cheval and Surrealism. Collage, as a medium that inspires the revelatory experience of a chance encounter, was described by Ernst as "the veritable equivalent of automatic writing" in its negation "to an extreme the active part of … the 'author'."[82] Loplop, the "mysterious guide to the underworld of Ernst's unconscious,"[83] acted as a vehicle through which the self could be displaced, decentred, and aligned instead with an "other."[84] This unification with what Arthur Rimbaud had identified as the otherness within the self stood at the centre of the Surrealist definition of automatism, with the aim of fostering an "absolute reality," and ultimately distinguishing it from psychic automatism.[85]

In *Facteur Cheval,* it is Loplop who finds himself physically decentred, sharing the space instead with the anthropomorphic figure with whom he is so frequently merged in other collages. The relationship of Ernst and Loplop, of the self and the other-self,

is thus presented here in the very literal division between bird and man. Where, then, does this leave Cheval, the supposed subject of the collage? The physical absence of the presented subject deviates from the other works within the *Loplop Présente* series, where the showcard format usually framed them at the collage's centre.

Cheval, or rather what Cheval represented for the Surrealists, is nevertheless key to unlocking Ernst's collage. Cheval embodied the communion of conscious and unconscious activity, perfectly illustrating Breton's communicating vessels. The *Palais* existed in a "between world" on the border of the real and imaginary, to which Cheval had gained access seemingly by accident, without making use of the mediating techniques employed by the Surrealists. [86] It was in this space that Ernst sought to make contact with Loplop, and I argue that their physical division in the collage in fact represents their meeting in this 'between space.' Like Loplop, Cheval functioned as a totemic figure within Surrealism, a guide to the underworld of the unconscious with information on how to access it. Cardinal's assertion that the Surrealists 'hijacked' Cheval and his work thus only scratches the surface of their relationship. Rather than simply adopting the postman, Breton and his associates set about transforming him, ultimately transposing Cheval and the *Palais* from concrete reality into a dream.

By 1945 Cheval and his *Palais* had been subsumed into yet another theoretical system, Art Brut, which Breton had been an early advocate of until a schism with Dubuffet, its founder. For Dubuffet, Cheval's *Palais* stood as an example of 'naïve' architecture, created beyond the bounds of and without concern for the mainstream art world. He sought to distance the structure from Surrealism, an association which he saw as detrimental to Art Brut's independence from the "cultural machine."[87] Despite this, Breton would continue to return to Cheval throughout his career, providing the preface for Gilles Ehrmann's 1962 book *Les Inspirés et Leurs Demeures* (*The Inspired and Their Abodes*), which considered the *Palais* within a wider context of visionary environments.[88]

Cheval was the subject of consecutive cannibalisations and deliberate mis-readings of his work that aided later artistic developments. It can be argued that Cheval, too, cannibalised the imagery of other cultures and earlier artists in his *Palais*. Such activities are not uncommon within art history, with chains of influence propelling the narrative forward. Yet the Surrealists went further than most in their relationship to Cheval. Rather than simply citing Cheval and his *Palais* as influential in their artistic and theoretical development, Breton especially sought to *inhabit* Cheval, using him as a mouthpiece for Surrealism to validate their artistic and theoretical activities. In the process Cheval's own intentions have been obscured, and, in words frequently applied to his *Palais*, he has been transformed into a "monstrous system of imagined memories."[89] As art history moves towards a reconsideration of those creators traditionally placed on the margins of modern art's narratives, the time has come to

look beyond the Surrealist's mask of the *Palais*-as-dream and to the reality of Cheval's construction.

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[1] Ferdinand Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," *Raw Vision,* No. 38 (2002), 30.
[2] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 30.
[3] John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 36.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Michel Thévoz, *Art Brut* (New York: Rizzoli, 1976), 25.
[6] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 24.
[7] Ibid., 25.
[8] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 36.
[9] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 25.
[10] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 37.
[11] Ibid., 36.
[12] Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (London: Studio Vista, 1972), 147.
[13] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 30.
[14] Thévoz, *Art Brut*, 25.
[15] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 27.
[16] For an in-depth description of the *Palais,* see Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 35-42.
[17] Cardinal, *Outsider Art,* 149.
[18] Ibid., 150.
[19] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 30.
[20] Ibid., 27.
[21] Cardinal, *Outsider Art,* 150.
[22] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 39.
[23] Ibid., 40.
[24] Thévoz, *Art Brut,* 25.
[25] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 27.
[26] Ibid., 25.
[27] Ibid., 33.
[28] Ibid., 30.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 176.
[31] Alexxa Gotthardt, "In a Sleepy French Town, a Postman Built a Surrealist Palace out of Pebbles," Artsy, 2017, accessed January 29, 2021, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-sleepy-french-town-postman-built-surrealist-palace-pebbles .
[32] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 42.
[33] Sabine Rewald, "Introduction," in *Max Ernst: A Retrospective,* ed. Werner Spies and Sabine Rewald (New York : The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), XIV
[34] Werner Spies, "Nightmares and Deliverance," in *Max Ernst: A Retrospective,* ed. Werner Spies and Sabine Rewald (New York : The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), 7.
[35] Rhodes, *Outsider Art*, 8.
[36] Marc Décimo, "From the Art of the Insane to Art Brut and Beyond: A History of Reception," *Critique d'art,* No. 48 (2017), 2.
[37] Katharine Conley, "Surrealism and Outsider Art: From the 'Automatic Message' to André Breton's Collection," *Yale French Studies,* No. 109 (2006), 135.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 130.
[40] Ibid., 131.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., 133.
[43] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 42.
[44] Thévoz, *Art Brut,* 25.

[45] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 40.
[46] Willard Bohn, *Marvellous Encounters: Surrealist Responses to Film, Art, Poetry, and Architecture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 77.
[47] Mary Ann Caws, "Linkings and Reflections: André Breton and His Communicating Vessels," *Dada/Surrealism,* No. 17 (1988), 91.
[48] Bohn, *Marvellous Encounters,* 77.
[49] Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, 146.
[50] Bohn, *Marvellous Encounters,* 78.
[51] Ibid., 72.
[52] Roger Cardinal, "André Breton and the Automatic Message," in *André Breton: The Power of Language,* ed. Ramona Fotiade (Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 2000), 26.
[53] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 40.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Cardinal, "André Breton," 31.
[56] Cardinal, *Outsider Art,* 151.
[57] Conley, "Surrealism and Outsider Art," 141.
[58] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 40.
[59] Cheval, "The Autobiography of Ferdinand Cheval," 26.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Cardinal, "André Breton," 32.
[62] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 40.
[63] Conley, "Surrealism and Outsider Art," 133.
[64] Bohn, *Marvellous Encounters,* 82.
[65] Ibid., 76.
[66] Caws, "Linkings and Reflections," 91.
[67] Bohn, *Marvellous Encounters,* 77.
[68] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 41.
[69] André Breton, "Facteur Cheval," in *Marvellous Encounters: Surrealist Responses to Film, Art, Poetry, and Architecture,* William Bohn (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 75, lines 9-10.
[70] Bohn, *Marvellous Encounters,* 80.
[71] André Breton, *Nadja,* (London: Penguin, 1999), 160.
[72] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 41.
[73] Bohn, *Marvellous Encounters,* 82.
[74] Elza Adamowicz, "The Surrealist (Self-)Portrait: Convulsive Identities," in *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality,* ed. Silvano Levy (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 31.
[75] Max Ernst, *Loplop Présente : Facteur Cheval,* 1932, paper and fabric collage with pencil, ink, and gouache on paper, 64.3 x 48.9 cm, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Available at: https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/the-postman-cheval/
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[77] Adrienne Dumas, "Max Ernst (1891-1976), Loplop Présente," Christies, 2012, accessed January 26, 2021, https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5532328 .
[78] Max Ernst, *Loplop Introduces Members of the Surrealist Group,* 1931, cut-and-pasted gelatin silver prints, cut-and-pasted printed paper, pencil, and pencil frottage on paper, 50.1 x 33.6 cm, MoMA, New York. Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/35777
[79] Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 147.
[80] Adamowicz, "The Surrealist (Self-)Portrait," 41.
[81] André Breton, "Foreword," in *The Hundred Headless Woman*, Max Ernst (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2017), 8.
[82] Anne LeBaron, "Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics," in *Postmodern Music/ Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (New York: Routledge, 2002), 29.
[83] Dumas, "Max Ernst."
[84] Adamowicz, "The Surrealist (Self-)Portrait," 41.
[85] Conley, "Surrealism and Outsider Art," 131.

[86] Thévoz, *Art Brut,* 26.
[87] Lucienne Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 97.
[88] John Maizels, *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 164.
[89] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation,* 40.