

# WALTER QUIRT, MoMA, & SURREALISM

How The Groundbreaking 1936 Exhibition, *FANTASTIC ART, DADA, SURREALISM*  
Established Walter Quirt As An American Surrealist; A Title He Denied  
But The Influence Of Which He Couldn't Defy.

## THE JULIEN LEVY GALLERY

**W**alter Quirt arrived in New York City in 1929, an auspicious date: In August the Great American Depression had begun and in November the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), opened. The young painter from Iron River, MI, who had already seen his watercolors exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, quickly became integrated into a nascent community of American leftist writers, artists, and intellectuals. After having established a bit of notoriety by 1935 as a pioneering artist of what came to be known as "*social surrealism*", he was offered his first solo show at the JULIEN LEVY GALLERY in March, 1936 - the New York gallery best known at the time for its near exclusive representation of European avant-garde and Surrealism. "*...of all the gallery activity on Fifty-Seventh Street, where everything happened in those days, it was the Julien Levy Gallery that was truly making art history, the place where it was at.*" - Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012)

1936 proved to be an equally auspicious year for both the artist and the New York art community as well. Levy, who at that time was exhibiting only European avant-garde, described the 33 year-old Walter Quirt as "*a radical painter*", and the show was met with critical praise. This "radical" departure from the much favored social realism of the Depression-era Works Project Administration/ Federal Art Project (WPA/ FAP), Social Surrealism by the 32 year-old American, was naturally scorned by some and critically praised by others.

*"Quirt is a transition artist. He is an American with the inherited traditions of European culture. He is at the same time a revolutionary artist who dreams of a new world. He therefore finds himself at the crossroads between two cultures- one directed to the future and the other built on the past. His work is a resume' of painting tradition derived from the Renaissance - a return to the sources of our culture and a demonstration of how these sources have been rejected in essence, while the empty shell has continued to receive lip-service. In taking the old classical form of the Renaissance and imbuing it with new content, Quirt is doing what the Constantinian artists of Rome did in an earlier age: they used the iconography of Roman art to embody in it the new Christian legend, which was in the process of forming itself."* - Charmione Von Weigand, Art Critic, March 1936



Walter Quirt (1902-1968)

*CONFLICT, 1935*

Oil on Panel, 15" x 24"

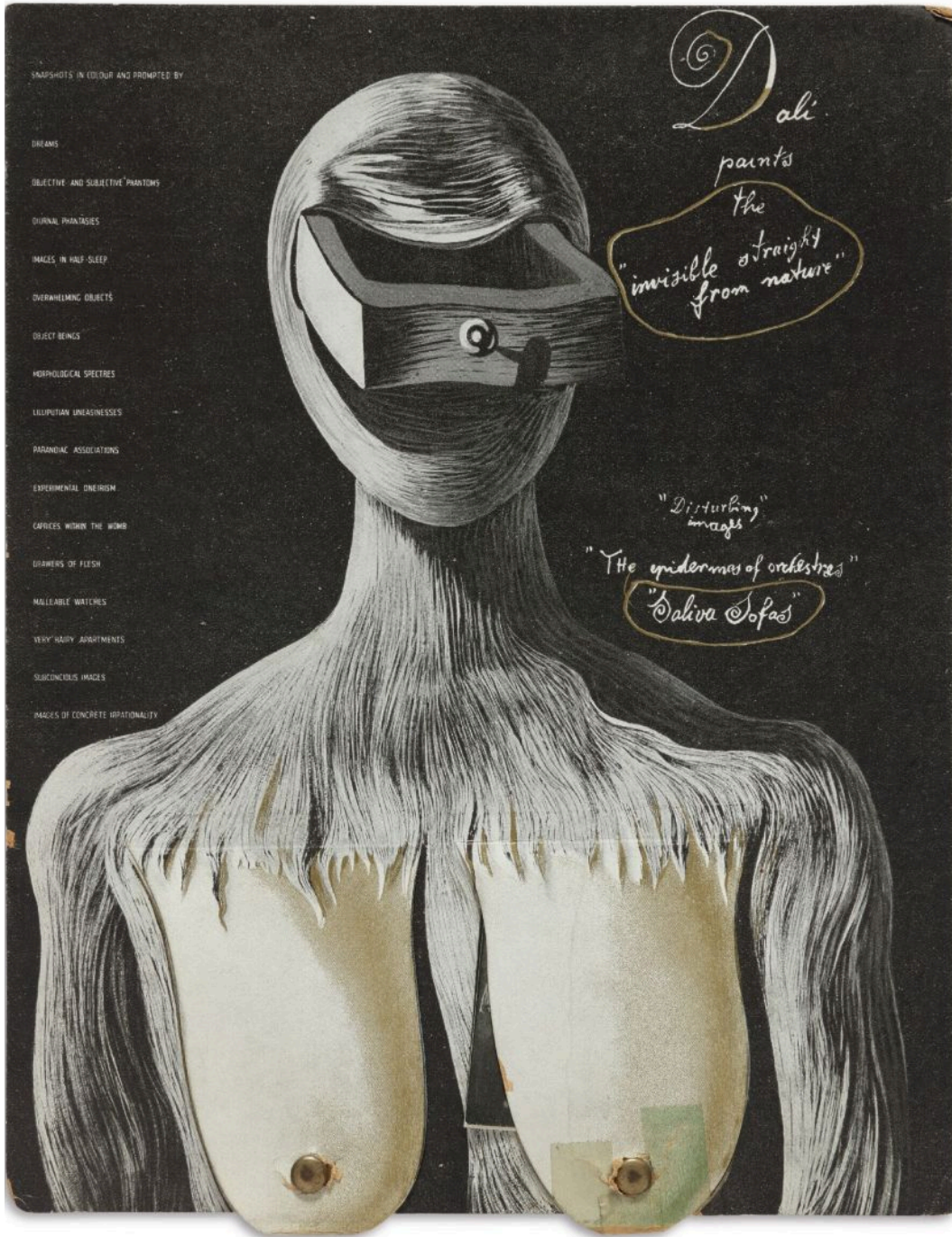
Permanent Public Collection, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Social Surrealism, as practiced by Quirt had met its moment in the mid-1930s and the American Depression in its visual critique of widespread poverty, racism, corrupt capitalism, human rights, and the violent oppression of labor movements. Ironically, the very same socio-political concerns we're engaged with today. This movement also included two other notable contributors, James Guy (1910-1983) and Louis Guglielmi (1906-1956)

Quirt was immediately viewed as an American Surrealist and the inevitable comparisons to Salvador Dali began with many favoring Quirt's deft technical style and ideologically driven narrative to Dali's equally detailed, but often disturbing hallucinogenic dreamscapes.

*"One of the greatest errors made by the critics who reported the exhibition of Walter Quirt's paintings (Julien Levy Galleries) has been to call him a 'revolutionary Dali.' Quirt's unified, logical synthesis compressed into exquisite miniature painting is the antipodes of the irrational, intuitional, nightmare dreams of Surrealism. Quirt and Dali have little in common except a love of meticulous painting on a miniature scale and an ability to see objects realistically in unexpected and novel relationships." - Charmione Von Weigand, March 1936*

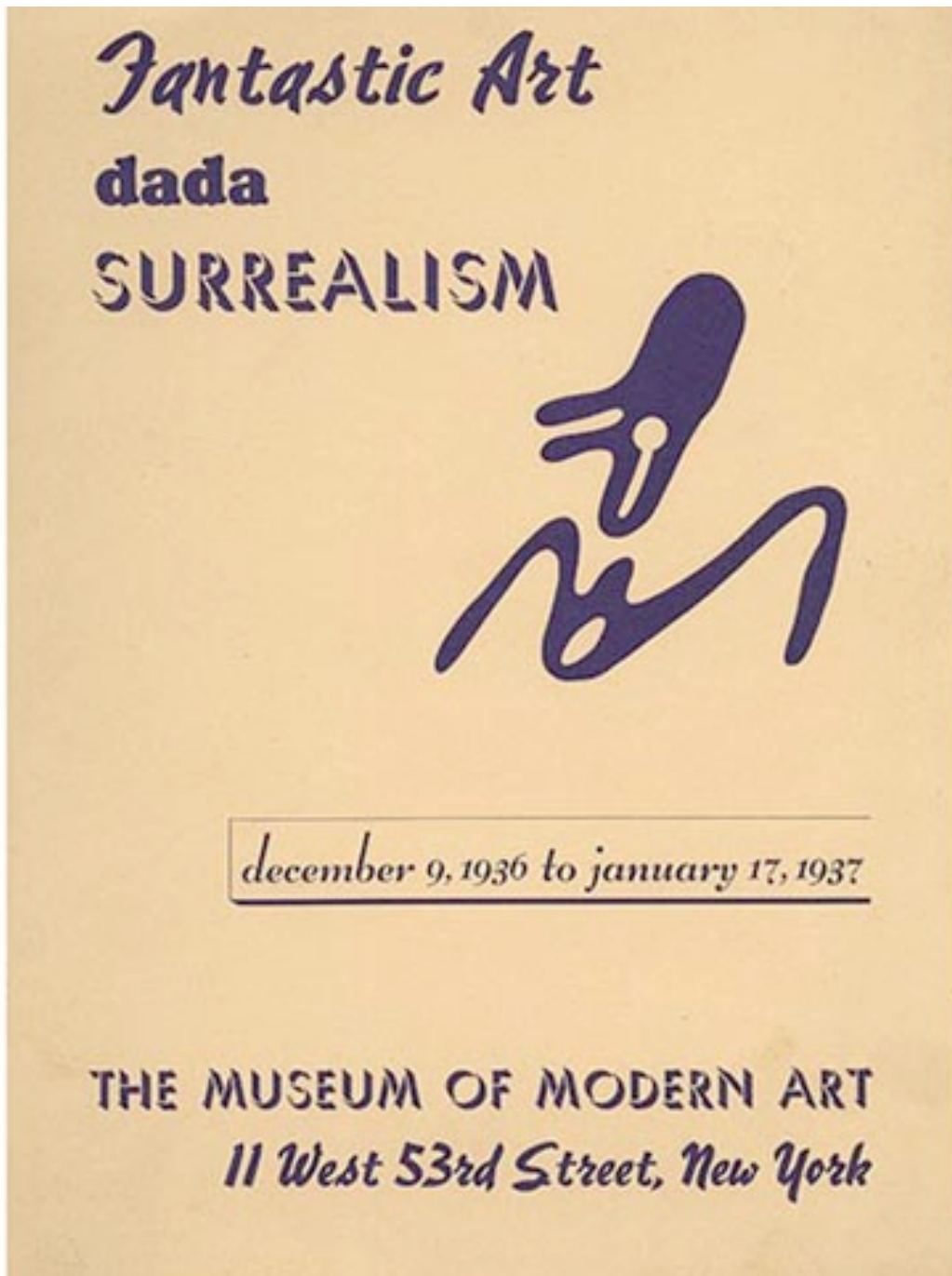
Later that same year, 1936, Dali was also given a solo show at the Julien Levy Gallery, *DALI PAINTS THE INVISIBLE STRAIGHT FROM NATURE*. Dali by this time was dividing his time between New York and the coast of France, where his wife, Gala was residing, to avoid the increasing turmoil of the Spanish Civil War. (Interestingly, Leonor Fini, also had a show of her surrealist paintings, along with those of Max Ernst, at the Levy Gallery in 1936.)



Above Image: Dali-designed cover of the 1936 exhibition catalogue, **DALI PAINTS THE INVISIBLE STRAIGHT FROM NATURE**, featuring "...an image of a hairy figure with an open drawer where the face might be and hairless breast compartments that hang below the bottom edge of the page, with brass snaps that open to release accordion-folded strips, each with six reproductions of Dali works. The construction of the piece itself leaves every surviving example damaged. The verso lists 21 works in the exhibition, and mentions 12 drawings." (Sothebys)

**MoMA: FANTASTIC ART, DADA, SURREALISM:**  
***The Exhibition That Changed Everything.***

**T**hat same year saw the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) groundbreaking exhibition, *CUBISM AND ABSTRACT ART*, March 2-April 19, 1936. The Museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr (1902-1981), had no sooner opened this show than the preparations for an even more ambitiously groundbreaking exhibition began: *FANTASTIC ART, DADA, SURREALISM*, December 9, 1936-January 17, 1937. (It's notable that at this time, the Museum itself, having opened in 1929 was only seven years along in its development.)



This planned exhibition was an extraordinary undertaking and nearly buckled under the weight of its ambition and that of its curator, Barr. Consisting of over 700 paintings, prints, drawings, objet d'art, books, etc it was almost too much to absorb and before the first visitor walked in the door, the exhibition was nearly overwhelmed by petty conflicts between the various movements' intellectual leaders, donors, and board members.

*"The exhibition was rife with controversy and provoked fierce reactions from battling factions among the Dadaists and the Surrealists. For example, Tristan Tzara, a leader of the Dada movement and one of the exhibition's most important lenders, threatened to forbid Barr from exhibiting his loans when he learned that the exhibition's title had been changed from "The Fantastic in Art" to include Surrealism and that the French Surrealist André Breton was to write the catalogue preface.*

*For their part, Breton and French Surrealist poet Paul Éluard disapproved of the final format of the exhibition; they wanted it to be an official Surrealist "manifestation." Critical response to the exhibition was mixed.*

*In 1937, when the show circulated around the country, lender Katherine Dreier withdrew her artworks and feuded with Barr over his inclusion of works by children and "the insane," and A. Conger Goodyear, President of the Museum's board of trustees, requested that other items be removed." (MOMA.org)*

Nonetheless, the exhibition was attended by thousands of people and written about extensively during its run in New York. It's viewed today as an extraordinary accomplishment and seminal moment in America's deeper exposure and familiarity with Surrealism and more broadly, European Modern Art and its influence on an emerging generation of American artists and what would ultimately become the post-war New York School (aka Abstract Expressionism), including Jackson Pollock, Willem deKooning, Gerome Kamrowski, Robert Motherwell, Arshile Gorky, William Baziot, and others.

## THE SPEAKERS SYMPOSIUM

### And Quirt's Elevation To New York's Cultural Hierarchy

**M**any of New York's art collectors and writers were already familiar with Surrealism through the shows produced by Julien Levy Gallery and Pierre Matisse Gallery, or their travels to Paris. But Alfred Barr was determined to reach a broader public and through this show, educate them further on the various aspects of Modern just as had been the intent of the Cubist show or Barr's original mission with the founding of MoMA in 1929. Barr "*persuaded an entire generation...about modern art.*" - American Architect Philip Johnson

So on Sunday, January 9, 1937 the Museum sent out a typewritten press release announcing a speakers symposium to be held the following Wednesday, in cooperation with the American Artists Congress (AAC), a leftist group of intellectuals, artists, & writers. Its members included Quirt, Stuart Davis, Isamu Noguchi, Raphael Soyer, Max Weber, and others affiliated with the emerging American avant-garde. Davis, Walter Quirt's best friend, was then the Secretary of the AAC. (Prior to Quirt's solo show at Julien Levy, the artist had already gained some visibility when Alfred Barr purchased Quirt's tiny gesso on board, "*Burial*" (6.5" x 7.75") in 1935 for the Museum's permanent collection. It's featured in MoMA's comprehensive book, *AMONG OTHERS - BLACKNESS AT MoMA*, 2019)

The press release announced that the two artists speaking would be Salvador Dali and Walter Quirt; though in the first typewritten draft Quirt is mistakenly referred to as "Richard Quirt" for some unknown reason.

But it's notable that Quirt's solo show at Julien Levy had only taken place nine months before. Yet with this critical speakers role, he was immediately elevated in New York as an equal to Dali and representative of an emerging generation of young American artists whom Sidney Janis (1896-1989), in his 1944 book, *ABSTRACT AND SURREALIST ART IN AMERICA* - in which an image of Quirt's "*The Crucified*"(1943) is opposite Jackson Pollock's "*The She-Wolf*" (1943) - Janis would describe as "...maker(s) of a new world."

1737-1

## THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 7-7470

FOR RELEASE Saturday Afternoon or  
Sunday Morning, January 9 or 10, 1937

A Symposium on Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism will be held at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, by the American Artists Congress Wednesday evening, January 13, at 8:30 o'clock. The speakers will be Salvador Dali, Richard Huelsenbeck, Walter Quirt and Meyer Shapiro. Jerome Klein will be chairman of the meeting. As the Museum building has no auditorium, the two temporary walls now in place in the second floor gallery will be removed to accommodate about one hundred twenty-five persons. Tickets are priced at one dollar each and may be obtained either at the Museum or at the headquarters of the American Artists Congress, 100 West 13 Street, New York. They will not be sold at the Museum the night of the Symposium.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Additional Information:

SALVADOR DALI, Catalan, most influential younger painter of the Surrealist group, which he joined about 1929. He claims that the only difference between himself and a madman is that he is not mad; also he says that it is not strange that people do not understand his paintings as he does not understand them himself. Deeply interested in psychoanalysis, which he employs in his paintings. Lives in Paris. Is represented by fourteen works in the Exhibition of Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism current at the Museum of Modern Art.

RICHARD HUELSENBECK, a writer, was one of the founders of the Dada movement, and active in it in Munich and in Berlin. He will speak on Dada.

RICHARD QUIRT is an American artist who had a successful exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1936. Because of his meticulous, non-realistic style Quirt has been called by some critics a surrealist. This Quirt denies, claiming instead the title "revolutionary artist." The object of his speech will be to show that surrealists are falsely posing under the banner of revolution but that they are actually, instead, defeatists.

MEYER SHAPIRO, teacher of art at Columbia University, who has made a profound study of modern art as a manifestation of social and class forces in contemporary society, will talk on "Surrealism and Our Time."

AMERICAN ARTISTS CONGRESS: Secretary, Stuart Davis; has a membership of more than 500 artists of recognized standing, among them Paulanship, Isamu Noguchi, Rockwell Kent, Peter Blume, Alexander Brook, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Max Weber, Ernest Fiene, Raphael Soyer; also writers on art, such as J. J. Sweeney, Lewis Mumford.

\*\*\*\*\*

PLEASE CALL MISS NEWMAYER, CIRCLE  
7-7470 FOR SEAT RESERVATION.



Poster for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library.

### **Symposium on Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism**

The American Artists' Congress has engaged the Museum for a symposium on Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism to be held on Wednesday, January 13, at 8 p.m. Speakers will be Meyer Schapiro of Columbia University, Jerome Klein of *The New York Post*, Walter Quirt, Salvador Dali and others. (The list of speakers was not complete when going to press.) There will be discussion from the floor.

The seating capacity of the Museum is 150. Admission will be \$1.00. No tickets will be sold at the door but reservations may be made at the Museum.

### **The Museum of Modern Art**

#### *Trustees*

*President:* A. Conger Goodyear

*2nd Vice-President:* Mrs. John S. Sheppard

*1st Vice-President:* Nelson A. Rockefeller

*Treasurer:* Samuel A. Lewisohn

Cornelius N. Bliss, Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, Stephen C. Clark, Mrs. W. Murray Crane, The Lord Duveen of Millbank, Marshall Field, Edsel B. Ford, Philip Goodwin, Mrs. Charles S. Payson, Mrs. Stanley Resor, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Beardaley Ruml, Paul J. Sachs, Edward M. M. Warburg, John Hay Whitney. *Honorary Trustees:* Frederic Clay Bartlett, Frank Crowninshield, Duncan Phillips, Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan. *The Museum of Modern Art Film Library:* John E. Abbott, *Director;* Iris Barry, *Curator.*

*Director:* Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

*Executive Director:* Thomas Dabney Mabry, Jr.

Poster for Speakers Symposium:

*FANTASTIC ART, DADA, AND SURREALISM, 1937*

Listing Among Others, Walter Quirt and Salvador Dali as Speakers



## BEYOND SOCIAL SURREALISM

Although by the time of MoMA's exhibition, Quirt had been categorized "by some critics a surrealist", he denied the term; referring to himself as a "revolutionary artist" (see the above press release) as he felt that he and a few of his contemporaries, notably James Guy (1909-1983) and Louis Guglielmi (1906-1956), were engaged in a social revolution. The European Surrealists were engaged in a movement in which its principles and creative practice would bring evolution and growth to human consciousness through introspection of the unconscious, the dream-state, and automatism; whereas Quirt and a few others were calling for social change in America via Socialism. Read More About Social Surrealism Here: <https://frederickholmesandcompany.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Quirt-Archives-of-American-Art-Journal-1982.pdf>

Quirt's role in MoMA's speakers symposium with Dali revolved around its central theme, Surrealism And Its Political Significance. *"Here Quirt voiced his candid socialist views and verbally accosted Dali's political doctrines. Although the mainstream critics were offended, Quirt stood true to his beliefs and once again affirmed his revolutionary tendencies."* (Travis Wilson, *Revolutions Unseen*)

In the short term, Quirt's ideological stand earned the respect of many of his fellow artists, intellectuals, and Socialist sympathizers but it also limited his commercial success over the years. He was clearly an artist of unwavering principle, which some gallery dealers and curators, sensitive to the market's demands, found irritating.

*"In December of 1941 Rose Fried's Pinacotheca Gallery began to publish a series of essays by Quirt, the first of which was 'Wake Over Surrealism: With Due Respect To The Corpse'. Quirt rejected Surrealism while giving proper credit to automatism that Surrealism's founder, Andre Breton had championed as early as 1924 in the first Surrealist Manifesto. Uniquely, Quirt had been one of the first American artists to embrace Surrealism, and by this subsequent declaration, he became one of the first to reject it."* (Travis Wilson, *Revolutions Unseen*)

Quirt's scathingly public rebuke of Surrealism and his later leaving New York in the summer of 1944 to teach, alienated some writers, dealers, and curators. (It was the opinion of some that "teaching" or not residing in the city was somehow antithetical to an artist's sense of conviction.) Still, his name was now firmly established as an artist to be reckoned with and other solo gallery shows followed, as did inclusion in numerous group exhibitions at both MoMA and The Whitney Museum of American Art.

*"There was a relatively small group of well known American painters in New York during World War II and Quirt was one of the most influential."* - Prof. Peter Selz (1919-2019), former MoMA Curator

## **THE TRANSITION**

**I**n the years that followed, Quirt underwent Freudian psychoanalysis which ultimately began to influence his work. Whereas it became less ideologically strident, much of the work became more personal and in many cases by the late 1930s/early 1940s seemed to subtly explore (ironically) the introspection of Surrealism.

There are a few rare and aesthetically unique paintings in the gallery's presentation of this period in the artist's evolution, which I've long described as "transitional". Meaning as Quirt was exploring different facets of himself, his work was transitioning from the visual stridency of social surrealism to something more personal and complex, while still attempting a delicate balance between Surrealism's influence and the social consciousness of his earlier style.

This transition, as facile as Quirt was with brush and paint, didn't manifest itself immediately. There were critically important aesthetic, psychological, and ideological steps along the way. The painting, "*UNTITLED, ca.1939 (Surrealist White Figures With Black Man)*", is one in which the narrative of racism in American society is being examined; albeit more subtly than in the earlier, more literally painted, Social Surrealism work.



**WALTER QUIRT**

*Untitled, ca.1939 (Surrealist White Figures with Black Man)*

Oil on Canvas, 12" x 15"

*More on This Painting and the History of Quirt's Social Surrealism Role Here:*

<https://frederickholmesandcompany.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Quirt-Untitled-1939-Surrealist-White-Figures-w-Black-Man-Essay-PDF.p>

Another is *Romance of the Rocks* ca.1940, which encompasses some of the visual motifs of the earlier social surrealist style, but again, far less ideologically literal. "...figures melding into environments that resembled loops of material and jagged rocks and foliage...related to the early paintings shown at the Julien Levy Gallery, which used dramatically posed figures and backdrops that looked like stage settings." (Mary Towley Swanson, Curator - Retrospective, WALTER QUIRT, (1980) University of Minnesota)

In it's richly painted tableau of multiple figures, we note the two female figures on the right: The standing figure facing the seated, stolid matronly figure, who seems to be receiving them, is comprised of three profiles, while the figure furthest right is

comprised of two; their arms now forming a large profile gazing downward. The male figure standing alone at far left, remains distant and aloof, like a silent invisible observer, his head almost lost in shadow, with what appears to be a shield dropped at his feet. The painting's psychological narrative remains a mystery but the astute viewer can't help but appreciate its compelling visual and emotional complexity.



**WALTER QUIRT**  
*ROMANCE OF THE ROCKS*, ca.1940  
Oil on Panel, 16" x 20"

Walter Quirt, while abandoning socialism and revolution though, never really lost his social consciousness or socially progressive concerns. We see this clearly in the early to mid 1940s in the large, colorful paintings like *Nature's Children* (1942), *The Crucified* (1943), *Shipwrecked* (1943), *Compulsion To Anger* (1944), *The Damned* (1944) and others, in which the artist had created a singularly personal style of Surrealism. Upon seeing Quirt's *The Crucified* (1943) in an exhibition, Robert Coates (1897-1973), arts writer and critic for New Yorker Magazine, proclaimed Quirt as "...one of the most impassioned artists alive today!"



WALTER QUIRT  
*THE CRUCIFIED* (1943)  
Oil on Canvas, 30" x 50"  
(Sold - Private Collection)

Works like "*UNTITLED, ca.1939 (Surrealist White Figures With Black Man)*" and likely "*THE ROMANCE OF THE ROCKS*" (as well as a few others which remain to be rediscovered), preceded the paintings of the early/mid 1940s and were a critically necessary step among many, perhaps the inflection point, ultimately leading to his surrealist forms of the 1940s as evidenced in 1943's "*THE CRUCIFIED*" and others. And finally, with a more liberated command of color, line, and brush, the less technically rendered, but intuitively-driven, surrealism-influenced, figurative expressionism of the early 1950s as we see in "*THE ROAD WITH NO TURN*" (1952).



WALTER QUIRT

*THE ROAD WITH NO TURN* (1952)

Oil on Canvas, 36" x 40"

American Federation of Arts Retrospective: *WALTER QUIRT*  
1960-1962 (AFA Retrospective Catalogue No, 12)

Concurrent with *The Road With No Turn* and other figurative expressionist paintings of the early 1950s, were paintings which were clearly intermittent experiments painted in an abstract-surrealist language of his own creation. These seemed to again draw upon automatism and his growing fascination with linear/curvilinear shapes found in nature; incorporating Miro-like gestural symbols and animated figures seemingly in motion. "... *the line I have developed for my purposes, derived from nature, in particular from the branches of trees, they being dissonant in their aerial gyrations and so structured as to have innumerable points of tension.*" - Walter Quirt, 1959

With the 1943 termination of the federal stipends being paid to WPA artists, and simultaneously learning they were also expecting their first child, Walter and Eleanor Quirt left New York in the summer of 1944. After briefly teaching at the Layton School of Art, Milwaukee and Michigan State University, East Lansing, they settled in Minneapolis, where he'd been offered a teachers position at the University of Minnesota. With his teachers salary he was able to support their growing family (sons Andrew,



WALTER QUIRT  
*UNTITLED, 1951*  
Oil on Canvas, 36" x 50"  
Sold - Private Collection



WALTER QUIRT  
*ABSTRACTION, 1952*  
Oil on Canvas  
Permanent Public Collection, Massillon Museum, OH.

Peter, & Jon) which also freed him from the demands and trends of the marketplace. He was able to move effortlessly between varying styles of painting in his perpetual pursuit of something personally transcendent.

Though now absent from the city and its increasingly market-driven demands, Quirt continued to exhibit in New York's galleries, museums, and throughout the country. By 1959 his work had been included in seven Whitney Museum Annuals, and in 1960 had a traveling retrospective produced by the American Federation of the Arts (AFA), the paintings being exhibited in seventeen cities' museums, universities, and cultural centers between 1960-1962. Robert Coates, long the artist's advocate, wrote the exhibition catalogue's essay, enthusiastically stating Quirt "*...had achieved something close to true monumentality.*"

## **THE LEGACY**

Walter Quirt died in March, 1968 in Minneapolis and shortly thereafter, his grief stricken widow, Eleanor made the fateful decision to keep his work close to her and their family in storage. Although the University of Minnesota produced a retrospective in 1980, the work continued to remain hidden years after Mrs. Quirt's passing in 2009, and ultimately wasn't rediscovered and again in the public eye until 2015. It was a year earlier, then colleague, Travis Wilson came across Sidney Janis' book *ABSTRACT AND SURREALIST ART IN AMERICA* (1944), which featured the previously cited painting, *THE CRUCIFIXION, 1943*. With some research, Mr. Wilson found most of the family and nearly all of Quirt's work still in Minneapolis, agreed to curate a selection of the paintings, and in collaboration we produced the first gallery exhibition in decades, *WALTER QUIRT: REVOLUTIONS UNSEEN, 2015*.

Since the beginning of that "rediscovery" here in Seattle, and the legacy Quirt created through the paintings and drawings throughout his forty year career, we've come to better understand this enigmatic, deeply principled artist and his contributions to American Modern more fully. Quirt seems to have been a restlessly and intellectually curious artist, less interested in maintaining a "signature style" which might have made him more commercially successful in the burgeoning post-war American marketplace, and far more interested in the evolving esoteric art theories of his time. The myriad styles of his painting, while irrefutably Modern, might also easily shift or digress from one canvas to another. But at the heart of each - some more easily read while others seemed nearly impenetrable - was a burning desire to create something which transcended the aesthetic limits of paint and canvas.

*"A basic theoretical problem in art is to so unite the social tempo with Nature's Time that one arrives at the Timeless, a quality in Time that is independent of both."* - Walter Quirt, 1962

Whereas the artist may have disavowed Surrealism in 1936-1937 - at least as he saw it being expressed by the Europeans, and Salvador Dali in particular - and probably

finding the label constrictive of his own ideas, it nevertheless placed him prominently within the canon of an emerging American avant-garde. Surrealism, either in theory or practice, continued to play a profoundly significant influence in all of the artist's conscious self-expression which we, in turn, can feel resonating intuitively in his paintings even now, over half a century after his passing.

*"...in submitting to the disciplines of his calling, the artist often discovers what many seek but seldom find: his individuality."* - Walter Quirt, 1963

---

Frederick R. Holmes, 2024/2025

Frederick Holmes And Company -  
Gallery of Modern & Contemporary Art  
309 Occidental Avenue South  
Seattle, WA 98104