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Simon Wilson finds Belgium, a birthplace of Surrealism, far from boring and discovers a haunted house at the Barbican and new Surrealist friends in deepest Sussex

Weird and wonderful

Boring Belgium? No longer, and indeed in spite of the myth, probably never, certainly in the field of art. In its short history (b.1839) this engaging small country has produced some of the most genuinely weird art and design in the entire western canon. In doing so, it made major contributions to two of the movements of modern art that, once seen as marginal to mainstream modernism, are now increasingly recognised as influential on the later development of art, from Pop to Damien Hirst.

The first was Symbolism, the movement that can be seen as a parallel to Impressionism. Symbolist art continued the Renaissance tradition of illusionism that Impressionism broke with, but imbued it with new psychological elements that reflect – or symbolise – the artist's response to the modern world.

The Musées Royaux in Brussels are currently staging **Symbolism in Belgium** which is a revelation of the wilder shores of the imagination. Thus, while paying full tribute to Fernand Khnopff, the most celebrated of the Belgian Symbolists, it also foregrounds Jean Delville, an artist I suspect previously unknown to most readers of this magazine. The exhibition contains a large group of his works, giving rise to one of the most wonderfully wacky juxtapositions I have ever seen in a museum show. Delville's huge canvas, *Satan's Treasures* (1895) depicting the devil gloating over a writhing mass of bodies of beautiful and nubile young people, confronts an altarpiece-style triptych of the Holy Trinity, painted in 1892 in a style of hysterical religious kitsch by Léon Frédéric. The combination illustrates the way in which the Symbolists, in their reaction to the modern, veered between, and often conflated, the mystical and the erotic.

Symbolism was a precursor of Surrealism, and this is made beautifully explicit at the Musées Royaux since one can now move straight from Symbolism to Surrealism at the new Magritte Museum, which opened in the summer of 2009 and is part of the Musées complex. It has proved a magnet for visitors, who can see a wide range of Magritte's magical and occasionally scabrous work from all phases of his long career.

Not new but recently reopened after two years of restoration, is the **Musée Wiertz**, also part of the Musées Royaux but a little distance away. Antoine Wiertz was Belgium's great but highly eccentric nineteenth-century painter, whose outrageous imaginings have to be seen to be believed. He is the precursor of Symbolism and Surrealism in Belgium and one of his paintings is the first work you see at the start of the Symbolism show. Equally compulsory on this



The Lovers, 1928, by René Magritte, at the Barbican

trail of the Belgian bizarre is the **Musée Horta**, 'locus classicus' of Art Nouveau in Belgium which, naturally, saw the most extreme development of the soft, wiggly, sensual, flowing forms that Dalí had in mind when he acclaimed 'the terrifying and edible beauty of Art Nouveau'. Following 'Symbolism in Belgium' Horta's collaborator, the Symbolist sculptor **Charles Van der Stappen** is exhibiting at the Musées Royaux this summer. The show runs parallel with an exhibition of **Marcel Broodthaers**, Magritte's extraordinary successor who took Surrealism into the realm of Conceptual art.

By serendipitous coincidence Surrealism is in the air in England too. In London the Barbican is staging **The Surreal House**, a literally fantastic exploration of Surrealist architecture and interiors in a labyrinthine setting that is itself surreal. It includes masterpieces by artists such as Dalí and Magritte (above), as well as fascinating objects, models, installations, films and documents. The perfect antidote to Le Corbusier's grim concept of the home as 'a machine for living in'.

The splendid Pallant House Gallery in Chichester has no less than three Surrealist-related exhibitions. Chief of them is **Surreal Friends** which features mini-retrospectives of three female artists – Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna – who found themselves together in Mexico in exile during the Second World War. I have always been a fan of Carrington, who paints strange, mythic scenes peopled by mysterious women. But Varo, who also paints mythic worlds, was unknown to me and I find her work absolutely fascinating – a

real discovery among the under-appreciated ranks of women Surrealists. Likewise, the Hungarian-born photographer Kati Horna. She was a compelling documentary photographer, notably of the Spanish Civil War, and her Surrealism emerges explicitly in series such as the blackly comic *Ode to Necrophilia* (1962). A show not to be missed.

Accompanying 'Surreal Friends' at Pallant House is **Surrealism in Sussex**, which brings together works collected by two great English patrons of Surrealism who lived in Sussex, Roland Penrose (himself a Surrealist artist) and the poet Edward James. There is work by Dalí and Magritte, including the former's *Lobster Telephone* (1936) and *Mae West's Lips* sofa (1938) both made for James's own house. Preceding both of these shows (so you will have to make two trips!) is a centenary exhibition of **Julian Trevelyan**, an Academician who was a member of the English Surrealist group from its foundation in 1936 to the outbreak of the Second World War. After Surrealism his colourful scenes continued to have a quirky, imaginative edge.

So it's off to Chichester, back to the Barbican and then Eurostar to Belgium – where you may be shocked, infuriated or disturbed, but you definitely will not be bored.

Symbolism in Belgium until 27 June, **Charles Van der Stappen** 2 July–26 Sep, **Marcel Broodthaers** 2 July–26 Sep, all at Musées Royaux, Brussels, www.fine-arts-museum.be **Musée Wiertz** Musées Royaux, Brussels, Belgium, www.fine-arts-museum.be **Horta Museum** Brussels, Belgium, www.hortamuseum.be **The Surreal House** Barbican Art Gallery, London, 0845 120 7550, www.barbican.org.uk, 10 June–12 Sep **Julian Trevelyan: Centenary** until 13 June, **Surrealism in Sussex** 29 May–5 Sep, **Surreal Friends** 19 June–12 Sep, all at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 01243 774557, www.pallant.org.uk