

MELBOURNE WINTER MASTERPIECES

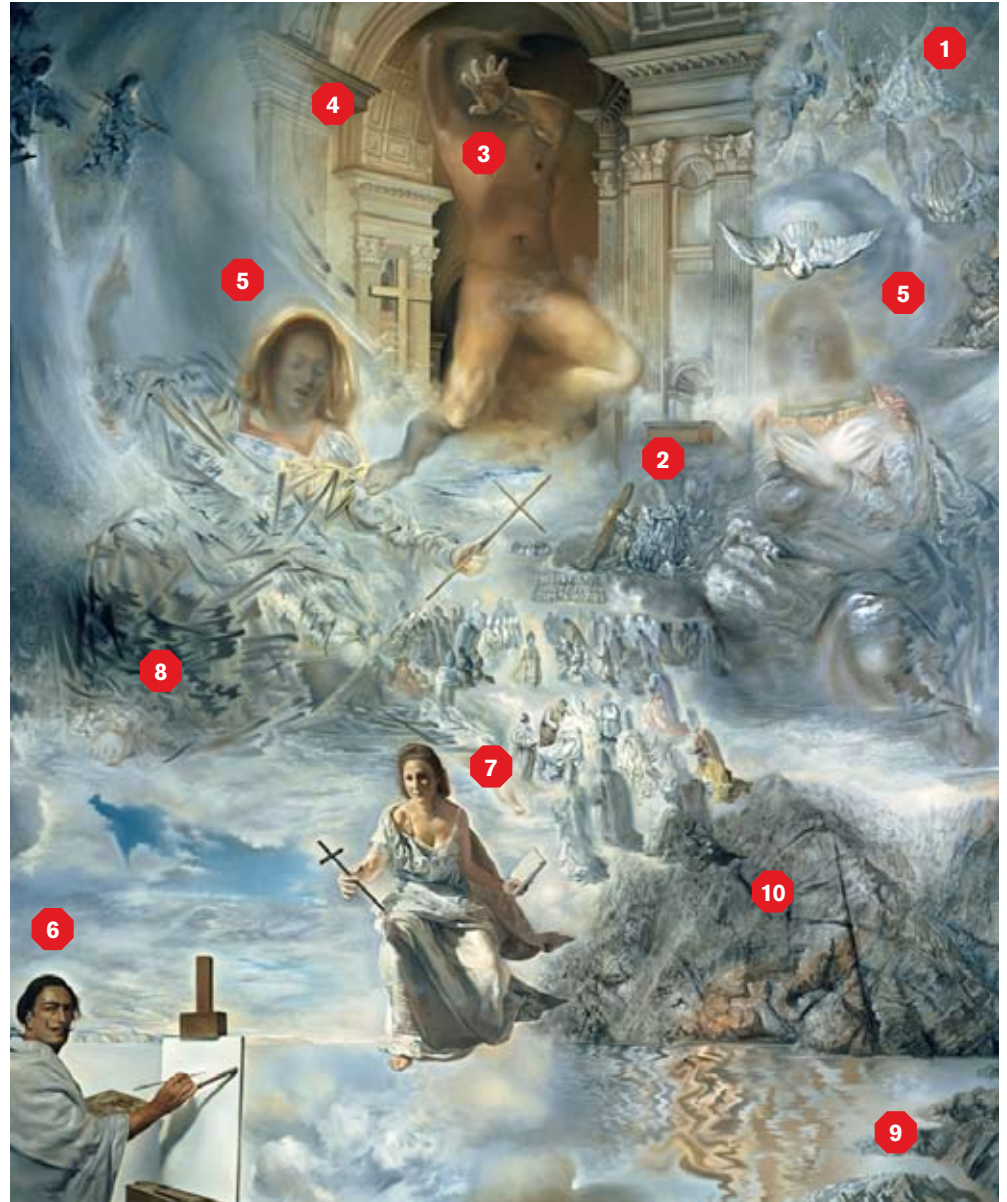
Salvador DALÍ

Liquid Desire

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VCE Art

The Ecumenical Council



Salvador DALÍ

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

The Ecumenical Council 1960
oil on canvas

299.7 x 254.0 cm

The Salvador Dalí Museum, St
Petersburg, Florida

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VISCOPY, 2009.

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The Artist

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Raises
questions
about the
nature of
reality and
illusion

6



The points below illustrate how Dalí's 1960 painting *The Ecumenical Council*, can be interpreted through multiple interpretive frameworks. They relate specifically to the tour stops on the website.

9 10

Cultural

- Dalí's easel overlooks the cliffs of Cap de Creus, which he described as a place 'where the mountains of the Pyrenees dive into the sea in a grandiose, geological, delirium'.¹

The landscape of this region, near Cadaqués, which he loved and where he spent his childhood summers, was an important source of inspiration throughout his life.

ALL

Historical context

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a controversial twentieth-century French Jesuit. A practising paleontologist, biologist and philosopher, he was interested in integrating religion and natural science, particularly Christian theology with theories of evolution. The interconnectedness of all things that Dalí suggests in *The Ecumenical Council* may have been influenced by de Chardin's ideas.

6

Psychoanalysis

The Spanish seventeenth-century painter Velázquez included a portrait of himself in *Las Meninas*, 1656, a complex and puzzling portrait of the Spanish royal family that raises questions about the nature of reality and illusion in the same way as *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960.

(link to *Las Meninas*, Prado)

- Dalí appears to be represented as Velázquez, which may suggest that he perceives himself as part of the grand tradition of Spanish art. His upturned moustache, modelled on Velázquez's portrait of King Philip IV of Spain, was adopted by Spaniards after the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) as a symbol of nationalist pride.
- Dalí replaces his signature with a visual self-image, which may be a reflection of the public persona he worked so hard on developing. Alternatively, he may be conveying the highly personal nature of the mystical vision depicted in the painting.

2 6

Symbolism

- The canvas in front of Dalí appears to be completely blank. This may symbolise the start of a new and groundbreaking story in the history of the Catholic church following the election of Pope John XXIII, or perhaps a desire by Dalí to re-evaluate his views of religion as a result of both scientific advances and this new attitude in the Vatican.

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7



Dalí often
represented
Gala as
a mother
figure

7

Gender

Gala was Dalí's wife and muse, who he sometimes referred to as his 'Divine Twin'. She was the most important person in his life, both personally and professionally.

7

Symbolism

- Gala's real name was Hélène Ivanova Diakonova. In the painting she is represented as Saint Hélène, who is reputed to have discovered the true cross while excavating over the site of Jesus's tomb in Jerusalem in 325 AD.
- Saint Hélène was the mother of Emperor Constantine, who was greatly influenced by her throughout his life. According to legend, Constantine had a prophetic dream in which an angel declared that he would be victorious under the sign of the cross.
- Constantine was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity and he made it the religion of the Empire. Dalí may have painted Gala in the guise of Saint Hélène as a symbol of her faith, inspiration and guidance, qualities which led Constantine to victorious outcomes.
- Dalí often represented Gala as a mother figure and he may have seen parallels between their relationship and that of Hélène and Constantine.
- Hélène also became the patron saint of Port Lligat, the coastal town in Catalonia where Gala and Dalí spent most of their married life.
- The clouds around Gala may also compound the idea that she is a saintly figure in heaven, a communication of the high esteem in which Dalí held her.
- Art historian Robert S. Lubar has suggested that 'As with all of Dalí's later imagery, Gala appears as a kind of inspired magical vessel through which the artist's religious and creative energies are channeled.'²

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Renaissance References

Renaissance references to St Peter's Basilica
and Michelangelo's *Portrait of Christ in Rome*

3



Dalí
criticised
Modern Art,
particularly
Abstraction

4

Historical Context

3

- Renaissance references are evident in:
 - » the architecture of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, painted by Dalí's assistant Isador Bea;
 - » the portrayal of God the Father modelled on Christ in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*. This fresco, executed in 1537–41, spans the entire wall behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel.

▪ Link to *Last Judgement*:

mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/x-Schede/CSNs/CSNs_G_Giud.html - 11k

3

4

- Dalí increasingly referred to the stylistic and conventional attributes of the Renaissance period as a reaction to Modernist art, particularly abstraction. In 1957 he wrote a book entitled *Dalí on Modern Art: The Cuckolds of Antiquated Modern Art*, which argued for 'the revival of academic technique over "barbaric" abstraction that had typified most of the twentieth century since Matisse.'³

Nevertheless, the huge scale of *The Ecumenical Council* may be a reference to the scale of American Abstract Expressionist works being produced at the same time. Perhaps Dalí wanted to challenge the notion that the power of large-scale paintings came from colour and abstraction, not from the detail and hyper-realism?

ALL

- In 1948 Dalí published *50 Secrets of Magic Craftmanship*, a book detailing the traditional painting techniques which he practised rigorously himself and feared were in danger of becoming obsolete. In the dedication he wrote: 'I want to paint a masterpiece and to save Modern Art from chaos and laziness. I will succeed! This book is consecrated to this crusade and I dedicate it to all the young, who have faith in true painting.'⁴

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The election
of Pope John
XXIII led to a
new sense of
hope for the
world.

VCE Art

The Ecumenical Council

2



2

Historical Context

- Dalí was inspired by the election of the Catholic Pope John XXIII, whose leadership was characterised by dialogue with other Christian faiths. *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960, takes its name from the historic conference between this pope and Geoffrey F. Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of the Church of England in 1960, the first meeting of this kind in 426 years.
- The artist may have used this subject to communicate his excitement and hope about the new possibilities within the Catholic church and its wider relationship with the world.
- After the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, many people questioned the existence or relevance of God. Conversely, the election of Pope John XXIII led to a new sense of hope for the world.

Psychoanalysis

- Many of Dalí's artistic heroes, including Raphael, Velázquez and Gaudi, believed in the Catholic doctrine. This may have influenced his desire to explore religious faiths, as suggested by his later works such as *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960.

2

Symbolism

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- The coronation in 1958 of Pope John XXIII is represented three times in the centre of the painting and once in the upper right-hand corner, perhaps suggesting Dalí's enthusiasm for the forward-looking direction in which the new pope was taking the Catholic church.

9

- The rocky mountains below the coronation of the pope may be Dalí's allusion to the founding of the first Catholic church upon the 'rock' of St Peter, the first pope.
- However, they clearly refer to the landscape of Cap de Creus in Catalonia, which was of great personal significance to Dalí.

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The Holy Trinity

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5



Dalí raises questions about the role of religious faith in the atomic age.

5 8

Historical context

- In the late 1940s Dalí became acquainted with the mathematician Matila Ghyka, whose writings concerned the golden section and the harmony and proportion present in both nature and art. The cross held by God the Son forms the apex of a compositional triangle, and the whole composition is a precise geometrical structure based on Ghyka's formulas for harmonic rectangles.
- The figure of Christ in the Holy Trinity appears to be transforming into atomic particles. Dalí was fascinated by the mid-twentieth-century advances taking place in the fields of mathematics and nuclear and atomic physics. This may be an expression of his desire to re-interpret Christian belief through the lens of contemporary science.

8

Symbolism

5

- The Holy Trinity has been depicted to show God the Son on the left, God the Holy Spirit on the right with the dove (symbolic of the Holy Spirit), and God The Father as the central figure within a basilica.

5

- The imposing figures of the Holy Trinity presiding over the pope's coronation may communicate Dalí's belief in the pontiff as God's messenger on earth.

4

- The architecture of St Peter's Basilica in Rome may suggest Dalí's acknowledgment of a new sense of hope through the Vatican under the leadership of John XXIII.

5

- Christ is depicted holding the cross, the symbol of redemption. He is pointing upwards, perhaps symbolic of its spiritual significance.

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A juxtaposition of dream-like images

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Formal Interpretation

Colour

A soft, muted palette of gold and blue painted in subtle gradations of tone create a mystical atmosphere.

Line

Line is used in a variety of ways such as:

- 10 ▪ the fine rendering of line in the mountainous rocky coast to create tone;
- 8 ▪ a flurry of broad, rapidly executed irregular lines in the portrayal of Christ to create a sense of divine energy;
- 5 ▪ the flowing organic lines in the Holy Spirit to create an illusion of form;
- 9 10 ▪ the decorative lines combined with colour and tone in the water under the rocky coast, typical of Dalí's aesthetic at this time.

Composition

- 2 3 ▪ Variation in scale is used to convey concepts such as the importance of God, as seen in the basilica, compared with the earthly figures in the Ecumenical Council who are minute in comparison.
- 5 ▪ Christ holding the cross locates the lateral centre of the painting. The cross forms the apex of a compositional triangle and echoes the triangle in the lower half of the painting.
- Dalí's composition intentionally creates two distinct zones to represent heaven and earth: the heavenly paradise of floating spiritual beings is mysterious and hazy, whereas the earthly realm, including Dalí working at his easel and the rocky cliffs, is suggested by crisp and precise painting.

Perspective

- An illusion of three-dimensional space is created within each of the separate but related 'stories' within the painting. However they are depicted in varying scales raising questions about the notion of reality.

Depiction of space

- 3 4 ▪ The soft tonal modelling of God the Father, based on Michelangelo's depiction of Christ in the *Last Judgement* fresco, contrasts with the straight lines in the detailed rendering of the basilica to create the suggestion that the figure is floating in a spatial void.

Style

- 3 ▪ The figure in the basilica is modelled on Michelangelo's depiction of Christ in the *Last Judgement* fresco in the Sistine Chapel, Rome (executed 1537–41).
- 7 ▪ The figure of Gala in the guise of St Helena is modelled on Michelangelo's marble sculpture of *Moses* (1513–15) in Rome. Because the painting suggests Dalí's enthusiasm for the innovative Catholicism of the newly elected Pope John XXIII, he may be comparing the great religious leader with the genius of Michelangelo, who some regard as the greatest painter of the Catholic church.
- The juxtaposition of dream-like images reveals the continuing influence of Dalí's earlier Surrealist style.
- The diffused light creates an ethereal atmosphere, suggesting the theme of religious mysticism.

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VCE Art

Formal Interpretation

1



Technique

1

Dalí was continually experimenting with new ways of applying paint, including shooting it from a gun and making prints from his own body covered with paint. His technical innovation is revealed in a print of an octopus visible in the top right-hand corner of the painting. He dipped the sea creature into ink before pressing it on to the canvas.

6

The artist has created intricate detail with the use of a fine paintbrush. This is shown in his self-portrait along with a rod known as a maulstick, a tool used by artists since the Middle Ages. It is often covered with calf skin and enables painters to steady their hand as they work on areas of a canvas requiring precision. In his book, *50 Secrets of Magic Craftmanship* (Dial Press, New York, 1948), Dalí describes his own unique version of how to use the maulstick in minute detail. He explains that the thumb and first three fingers of the left hand should support the palette, allowing one end of the maulstick to be suspended from the little finger by a cotton string. The other end of the stick, which touches the canvas, should be held in place by gluing it to the little finger of the right hand with a daub of pitch (tar), thus eliminating the effects of any slight trembling of the hand as it steers the brush. Dalí completes his description by assuring his readers that this method will allow them 'to execute lines of delicacy which to others will appear superhuman'.⁵

2

Form

6 7

Dalí accentuates the importance of some figures by varying form. The formal modelled forms of Dalí and Gala, for example, are more pronounced than the more abstract forms of other figures such as the Christians crowded around the small figure of the new pope.

Suggested further reading

Dalí, Salvador, *50 Secrets of Magic Craftmanship*, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier, Dover Publications, New York, 1992.

Lubar, Robert S., *Dalí: The Salvador Dalí Museum Collection*, Bulfinch Press, Boston, 2000.

Taylor, Michael (ed). *The Dalí Renaissance: New Perspectives on His Life and Art After 1940* (an international symposium), Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale University Press, Philadelphia, 2008.

Wach, Kenneth, *Salvador Dalí 1904–1989: Masterpieces from the Collection of the Salvador Dalí Museum*, St Petersburg, Florida / Harry N. Abrams in association with the Salvador Dalí Museum, 1996.

Suggested websites

www.salvadoralimuseum.org

www.salvador-dali.org/museum/figueres/en_index.html

Notes

1 Frank Weyers,
Salvador Dalí: Life and Work,
Könemann, Cologne, 2000, p. 11.

2 Robert S. Lubar,
*Dalí: The Salvador Dalí Museum
Collection*, Bulfinch Press, Boston,
2000, p. 91.

3 Elliott H. King,
*Dalí Atomicus, or the Prodigious
Adventures of the Lacemaker
and the Rhinoceros*, Society for
Literature and Science, Annual
Meeting, Pasadena, California,
10–13 October 2002.

4 Salvador Dalí, *50 Secrets of Magic
Craftmanship*, trans. Haakon M.
Chevalier, Dover Publications, New
York, 1992, p. 5.

5 *ibid.*, p. 132.

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Many post-
modernist
artists
appropriate
artworks of
the past

The Ecumenical Council

Questions, Activities and Further Research

- **Compare** the contrasting scale in *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960, with the use of scale in Surrealist paintings by Dalí.
- Compare the juxtaposition of the figures of Dalí, Gala, the Holy Spirit and the rocky landscape with the composition of one of Dalí's Surrealist works in which he juxtaposes a variety of objects, often in unexpected ways. **How** do you believe each painting communicates meaning?
- In *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960, Dalí makes visual references to artworks of the past, specifically Michelangelo's depiction of Christ in the *Last Judgement*, 1537–41, in the Sistine Chapel; Michelangelo's sculpture of *Moses*, 1513–15; and Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, 1656.
- Postmodernism refers to the ways in which artists use parody, irony, satire, quotation, appropriation and/or non-traditional art practices and art forms in order to question and challenge traditional understandings of art and its significance.

Many postmodernist artists appropriate artworks of the past in order to question or challenge their significance. **Research the work** of international artists Sigmar Polke, Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura and Australian artists Juan Davila, Gordon Bennett and Imants Tiller.

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How
might the
Australian
Surrealist
artist James
Gleeson
have been
influenced by
Dalí?

Note

1 Ursula Hoff, *European Paintings before 1800 in the National Gallery of Victoria*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1995, p. 286.

Salvador DALÍ

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In search of the fourth dimension

1979

oil on canvas

123.5 x 245.5 cm

Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,

Figueres

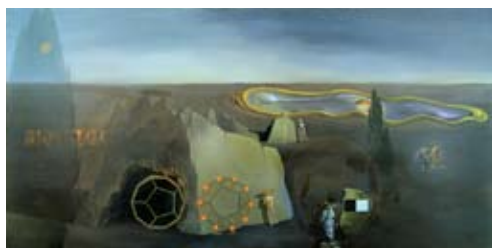
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Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

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- Research Dalí's views on Modernism, Abstraction and Italian Renaissance art to **formulate an informed opinion** about his reasons for referring to the work of Michelangelo and Velazquez in *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960.
- Dalí worked in a range of media including film and 3-D sculptural constructions. Why do you think he chose the traditional medium of oil painting to **explore his views on religion**, the Catholic church and the art of the Renaissance in *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960?
- **Research the history of the making** of the *Last Judgement*, 1537–41, by Michelangelo and the controversies surrounding it. Locate an image of the fresco in a library or on the internet. In what ways is it similar to or different from *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960? **Consider the art elements** such as colour, form, texture and line and the effect of composition and scale. **Compare the intentions** of the artist in each case.
- The basilica in *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960, was painted by Dalí's assistant Isador Bea. To what extent is it acceptable for artists to employ other artists with particular skills to execute specific parts of their own artwork? **Discuss this issue** with reference to the NGV's *The Banquet of Cleopatra*, 1743–44, (available online), by Giambattista Tiepolo in which a specialist, probably Girolamo Mengozzi-Colonna,¹ was employed to paint the architecture, as well as the work of contemporary Australian artist Patricia Piccinini, whose ideas are often constructed by technicians.
- **Research the work** of Australian twentieth-century Surrealist artist James Gleeson. **Compare and contrast** a later painting by Gleeson with *The Ecumenical Council*, 1960. **Consider the ways** in which Gleeson may have been influenced by Dalí.
- Dalí and Leonardo da Vinci were both interested in the study of perspective and proportion as foundations for a science of painting. **Research the golden section** and **prepare an illustrated PowerPoint talk** which includes examples of its application in art from Classical Greek sculpture through to the Renaissance and on to the twentieth century.
- **Research the life and personality** of Salvador Dalí using books and the internet, including film footage and interviews. **Use the zoom tool** to explore the facial expression of Dalí and the direction of his gaze. What might the artist be communicating to the viewer through his expression? Take on the persona of Dalí and write a short monologue describing the experiences and influences which led to the creation of *The Ecumenical Council*, and the techniques he used to execute it.



- **Use the zoom tool** available to examine *In search of the fourth dimension*, 1979, also on this site. **Investigate the artist's techniques**, and how the formal elements of the painting, such as line, shape, texture, colour, movement, surface composition, and the depiction of space, modelling and tonal structure may have contributed to the meanings and messages communicated by Dalí. **Interpret the painting** using one or more interpretive frameworks.