

## Transcription of British Library podcast

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/whatson/downloads/files/btrgasnotebook.mp3>

Curator Candida Ridler talks about the David Gascoyne notebook

Part of the Breaking the Rules Exhibition at the British Library, 9 Nov 2007-30 Mar 2008

For details see <http://www.bl.uk/breakingtherules>

I'm Candida Ridler. I'm a curator in the Department of Modern British Collections, and I'm going to talk about one of a set of three notebooks acquired by the library, written in by David Gascoyne around 1936.

They're just ordinary exercise books, purchased from a stationer's shop. The notebooks have been written in in blue or black ink or in pencil. Some of the pages have doodles with the handwriting, some pages contain just doodles.

The three notebooks are of interest because they form a record of David Gascoyne's ideas about Surrealism and because they have been written by David Gascoyne, who was one of one of the earliest champions of Surrealism, and responsible - with Roland Penrose and Herbert Read - for introducing Surrealism to Britain.

In fact, if it wasn't for these three getting together and forming a group while in Paris, the Surrealist movement may never have come to England from France.

The notebooks include jottings down, doodles, and notes Gascoyne made about exhibitions he had visited; ideas for paintings and poetry; his own poetry; and translations of poetry by Paul Eluard, Picasso, Andre Breton, and others.

The aim of Surrealism was to change the way we live and the world we live in, by increasing our self-awareness and by altering our limited idea of reality. Surrealists sought an element of surprise and absurdity in poetry and in art. A hallmark of Surrealism is strange juxtapositions of objects which create unexpected images; the idea was to shock and to confuse the viewer's gaze.

The notebooks show Gascoyne's enthusiasm for French poetry and the ideas of the most important Surrealists like Andre Breton and Salvador Dali. One can find notes in the notebooks about poetry by other poets and artists, translations of poetry for example, Picasso and Paul Eluard. There are translations of and notes on Andre Breton's What is Surrealism. He outlines film scripts, records dreams; there are notes for lectures he is about to give, and notes on poetry he is going to publish.

Salvador Dali employed Gascoyne to translate his essay Conquest of the Irrational which he had written for a New York exhibition catalogue. Gascoyne worked on it at Dali's apartment in Paris.

Andre Breton's first manifesto of Surrealism had been written in 1924. So it was thirteen years later when Roland Penrose and Gascoyne returned to England in 1935 determined to bring the spirit of Surrealism to England. They formed a group of artists and writers excited and keen to follow these new ideas, including Paul Nash and Eileen Agar, Henry Moore, and the writers Humphrey Jennings and Herbert Read. England was far behind. The art establishment in England were very conservative and not at all open to the Avant Garde ideas that had been spreading over the continent.

The notebook in the exhibition is displayed on a page open at a handwritten list headed 'Objects'. The Surrealist Object is one of the most far reaching of Surrealism's experimental activities and far reaching in its significance and legacies.

Gascoyne's list of objects goes:

- 1) Blinding machine
- 2) Glass foot full of birds and water
- 3) The bird of the bourgeoisie (diver and bucket)
- 4) Football smoking cigarettes
- 5) Bottle shaped catalogue
- 6) Guests with heads in bags
- 7) The 3 pipes

The objects listed are a source of ideas for his paintings and poetry and are typical of those used in Surrealist imagery.

Andre Breton first spoke of making a special kind of Surrealist Object in 1924. He proposed that objects appearing in dreams could be given tangible form making concrete something produced by the unconscious. The objects would also question the value normally placed on utilitarian objects. He created the category the poem-object, that is, a construction incorporating a poem. He wanted Surrealist artists to create objects seen in dreams, a suggestion which bore fruit when the craze for making objects overtook the whole movement in the 1930s.

Dali lists six categories of Surrealist Object: a symbolically functioning object; a transsubstantiated object; an object to project in a physical sense; wrapped objects; machine objects; or mould objects.

1936 was the year of the Surrealist Object, and 1936 was the year that for the first time that the ideas of Surrealism came across from the continent to England.

In June 1936 Gascoyne co-curated the First International Surrealism Exhibition in London, with Roland Penrose and Herbert Read. Many international artists submitted a variety of work including Dali, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Klee, Man Ray, Picasso, Max Ernst and Joan Miro. 392 works were exhibited by 58 international artists from 14 countries. Here again, along with paintings and collages, were many Surrealist Objects including Meret Oppenheim's Cup, *Saucer and Spoon of Fur*, now known as the *Fur Breakfast*.

At the exhibition Dali was giving a lecture on 'Authentic Paranoic Phantom' about a philosophy student who ate a wardrobe, including the mirror, over a six month period. Dali was dressed in a diving suit, with two borzoi dogs on leads in one hand, and a billiard cue in his other hand. His lecture was almost inaudible and after speaking for a few minutes from inside the diver's helmet, he couldn't breathe. David Gascoyne had to go out and look for a spanner to rescue Dali from suffocation.

In the following year London was again the host for another Surrealist exhibition: the Surrealist Objects & Poems exhibition at the London Gallery in Nov 1937. The catalogue accompanying that exhibition is also an exhibit on display in the London case

All the exhibits at the London gallery were classified into Surrealist categories of objects, including natural objects, perturbed objects, found objects, dream objects, objects for everyday use, objects by a schizophrenic lunatic, mobile objects, poem objects, ethnological objects, and constructed objects.

The found object, or *objet trouvé*, played an important role in Surrealist theory. A shell or a pebble or a piece of driftwood could be viewed as a work of art allowing access to subconscious images and desires. British artists like Eileen Agar and Paul Nash became interested in the found object.

The notebooks are of value because of their uniqueness. They are of value to scholars wishing to get inside the mind of a young man impressed with and excited by a group of

artists and writers on the continent. It's a one-off, and I think the Library is very fortunate to have acquired Gascoyne's notebooks .

They provide such a valuable insight into the mind of an artist and poet; his translations of poems of other surrealist artists, jottings down of ideas for poetry or paintings, and his doodlings, all give us an idea of the life of an avant-garde painter and poet. I like the list of objects written by Gascoyne; whoever heard of a football smoking cigarettes?