

RCEWA – Lobster Telephone (White Aphrodisiac), Salvador Dalí and Edward James

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the telephone meets Waverley criteria one, two and three.

Further Information

The 'Note of Case History' is available on the Arts Council Website:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Salvador Dalí (1904-89) and Edward James (1907-84)

Lobster Telephone (White Aphrodisiac), 1938

Painted plaster, metal and Bakelite found object (telephone)

19 x 31.7 x 16 cm

Lobster Telephone (White Aphrodisiac) consists of a plaster lobster attached to the handset of a Bakelite telephone. It is arguably the most successful of the surrealist objects ever produced. The surrealists wanted to generate astonishing new realities by juxtaposing unrelated objects, and the formal similarity of this pairing points up their functional divergence. It was conceived by the Spanish artist Salvador Dalí and his British patron Edward James. Dalí is reported to have made a version as early as 1935, but the work under consideration results directly from James's documented purchase of plaster lobsters in July 1938. This venture was associated with the collaboration between the artist and the collector, in devising extraordinary interiors for James's houses at 35 Wimpole Street in London and Monkton in the grounds of West Dean, the family seat in Sussex.

Alongside the formation of his art collection, James's conception of these domestic environments exemplified his response to surrealism and *Lobster Telephone* represents the quintessential *surrealisation* of an everyday object in this context. The eleven plaster lobsters that he commissioned were either painted red or, as in the *Lobster Telephone (White Aphrodisiac)* under consideration, remained white and were varnished. The red versions were subsequently mounted on black telephones and white versions on white telephones. The resulting assemblages have been widely discussed and exhibited (for literature and exhibition history, see Detailed Case).

In relation to Waverley criterion 1, this is an object that is highly significant to the history of taste in Britain. Surrealist influence was felt most emphatically at the moment of the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* in London in 1936. James, who had become close friends with Dalí in 1934, was – with Roland Penrose and Herbert Read – among the British intellectuals most engaged with its ideas. The *Lobster Telephone* series is emblematic of the collaboration of Dalí and James, which was at its height in 1936-9. The white version of the object has been associated with another friend of James's, the designer Syrie Maugham, who was famous for white interiors.

Surrealism is one of the most influential currents in twentieth-century culture, making such an iconic work of very significant aesthetic value (Waverley 2). The impetus for *Lobster Telephone (White Aphrodisiac)* provided by Dalí reinforces this assessment, as it embodies the flair that marked him out as among the most inventive artists of the century. His ability to conjure astonishment from ordinary situations came to maturity during the period when *Lobster Telephone* was conceived so that, with the closely associated *Mae West Lips Sofa* (also made with James), it came to stand for surrealism.

Lobster Telephone remains of significant scholarly interest to the history of surrealism in Britain (Waverley 3). Much still needs to be uncovered about both Dalí and James, and their collaborations, as well as the production of this particular collaborative work. That this was rooted in Britain has the potential to cast a sharper light on a crucial period locally, nationally and internationally.

DETAILED CASE

Salvador Dalí (1904-89) and Edward James (1907-84)

Lobster Telephone (White Aphrodisiac), 1938

Painted plaster, metal and Bakelite found object (telephone)

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Provenance:

Edward James (for whom made by Green & Abbott, London) 1938;

By descent to the Edward James Foundation, West Dean, West Sussex 1984;

By whom sold (dated '1936') at Christie's, London, 15 December 2016;

Where acquired by the current owner.

Selected literature:

Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, New York 1942, p.271

Dawn Ades, *Dalí*, London 1982, p.43 (red version repr. p.160, fig.131)

Meredith Etherington-Smith, *Dalí*, London 1992, pp.247-8

Robert Descharnes and Gilles Néret, *Salvador Dalí, The Paintings, Part 1, 1904-1946*, Cologne 2001, p.274 (red version repr. p.275, no.618 dated '1936')

Sharon-Michi Kusunoki, 'Breaking Canon: Edward James, His Life and Work', in Nicola Coleby ed., *A Surreal Life: Edward James, 1907-1984*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Pavilion, Brighton 1998, pp.27, 124 (red version repr. p.49)

Robert Descharnes and Nicolas Descharnes, *Dalí, The Hard and the Soft: Sculptures and Objects*, Azay-le-Rideau 2004, p.43 (red version repr. no.84)

Sharon-Michi Kusunoki, 'Lobster Telephone', in Dawn Ades, *Dalí, The Centenary Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Grassi, Venice and Philadelphia Museum of Art 2004, pp.286-9 (white version repr. no.175, p.287)

William Jeffett, *Dalí Doubled; From Surrealism to the Self: A New Critical View of Dalí*, St Petersburg, Florida 2010, pp.101-2 (white version repr. p.100, fig.65)

Selected exhibitions:

Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, Galerie des Beaux-Arts, Paris, January-February 1938, no.19 (earlier version as 'Téléphone aphrodisiac')

Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds: Surrealism in Britain in the Thirties, Leeds City Art Galleries, October-December 1986, no.119 (red version repr. p.94).

Dalí: Cultura de Masas / Dalí: Mass Culture, Caixaforum, Barcelona, January – May 2004, Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, June-August, Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida, October 2004 - January 2005 (red version repr. p.61)

It's All Dalí, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, March-June 2005 (red version repr. p.101)

Dalí, The Centenary Retrospective, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, September 2004 – January 2005, and Philadelphia Museum of Art, February-May 2005, no.175 (red version repr. p.287)

Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, London March-July 2007, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, September 2007- January 2008, and Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, March-September 2008, pp.284-7, 284-5

Dalí and Film, Tate Modern, London, June-September 2007, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, October 2007- January 2008, Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida, February-June, Museum of Modern Art, New York, June-September 2008, no.82 (red version repr. p.136)

Surreal Encounters: Collecting the Marvellous; Works from the Collections of Roland Penrose, Edward James, Gabrielle Keiller and Ulla and Heiner Pietzsch, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, June-September 2016, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, October 2016 - January 2017, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, February-May 2017, no.45 (red version repr. p.78)

Dalí / Duchamp, Royal Academy, London, October 2017- January 2018 and Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida, February-May 2018, no.61 (red version repr. p.101)

The *Lobster Telephone* has been called one of 'surrealism's most iconic images.'¹ In classic surrealist manner, it brings together two apparently unrelated elements in order to create a new reality, to embody the marvellous and to undermine rationalism. The superimposition of the plaster lobster on the handset of a (once functioning) Bakelite telephone, embraces verbal, sensual and sexual connotations. Salvador Dalí, who conceived the juxtaposition, was the major promoter of what he called 'Objects Functioning Symbolically' that are more commonly called surrealist objects and that helped to redefine the movement as it captured the popular imagination in the 1930s. In 1931 he wrote that such objects were 'based on phantoms and representations liable to be provoked by the realisation of unconscious acts.'² Fired by his personal 'paranoid-critical method' (harnessing disguised associations much as experienced by those suffering from paranoid delusions), the practice of surrealist object-making was taken up enthusiastically by others. In 1935 they were the subject of a major theoretical lecture by the surrealists' leader, André Breton,³ and in 1936 Dalí

¹ William Jeffett, *Dalí Doubled; From Surrealism to the Self: A New Critical View of Dalí*, St Petersburg, Florida 2010, p.93.

² Salvador Dalí, 'Objets surréalistes', *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no.3, December 1931, p.16.

³ André Breton, 'Situation surréaliste de l'objet, situation de l'objet surréaliste', lecture, delivered 29 March 1935, Prague, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane as 'Surrealist Situation of the Object, Situation of the Surrealist Object', in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor, Illinois, 1972, pp.255-78.

published 'Honneur à l'objet!'⁴ This anticipated the first group exhibitions of surrealist objects in Paris and London.⁵

Edward James had met the Spanish painter and his wife, Gala, in Cadaqués in Catalonia in 1934, and the two men immediately formed a close friendship. The relationship was mutually stimulating. James's inherited wealth sustained the artist at a time of great difficulty in the art market following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and he encouraged some to the most extraordinary of his projects culminating in the *Dream of Venus Pavilion* which James financed for the New York World's Fair in 1939. Dalí painted some of his greatest paintings for James, including *Autumnal Cannibalism* 1936 and *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* 1937 (both Tate). They joined works by other surrealists, notably by René Magritte and Leonora Carrington, in the fantastic interiors devised for 35 Wimpole Street and for James's Edwin Lutyens-designed shooting lodge, Monkton, undertaken by Hugh Casson and Christopher Nicholson in the mid 1930s. Amongst the furnishings, the London design company Green & Abbott made three versions of the *Mae West Lips Sofa* (one now in Brighton & Hove Museums, Brighton), the design for which was developed from Dalí's collage *Mae West's Face which May be Used as a Surrealist Apartment* 1934-5 (Art Institute of Chicago).

The *Lobster Telephone* was conceived in this period. The idea is first seen in a detail, captioned 'New York Dream – Man Finds Lobster instead of Phone', that Dalí included in his comical drawings for the popular magazine *American Weekly* in 1935 (see Appendix A, fig.1).⁶ In the following year, Breton reported that 'Dalí had exhibited in New York a telephone painted red of which the receiver was made up of a live lobster'.⁷ According to an account held among James's papers (and cited by Sharon-Michi Kusunoki), this physical conjunction was inspired - or reinforced - by an incident in 1936 in which Dalí, James and others were eating lobsters in his London house and a shell tossed aside landed on a telephone.⁸

Although this shows that the origin for the work is difficult to pin-point with precision, Dalí certainly showed a *Téléphone aphrodisiaque* in the *Exposition Internationale du surréalisme* in Paris which opened on 18th January 1938.⁹ A photograph by Raoul Ubac shows that this first version apparently had a real lobster balanced on the receiver of an upright candlestick telephone, the form of which captures Dalí's interest in Art Nouveau designs (Appendix A, fig.2). The title applied to the Parisian object and inherited by the subsequent white version highlights the erotic aspects of lobster which

⁴ Salvador Dalí, 'Honneur à l'objet!', *Cahiers d'art*, vol.11, nos.1-2, 136, p.56.

⁵ *Exposition surréaliste d'objets*, Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris, May 1936 and *Surrealist Objects and Poems*, London Gallery, London, November- December 1937.

⁶ Salvador Dalí, 'New York as Seen by the Super-Realist Artist M. Dalí', *American Weekly*, 17 March 1935, cited in William Jeffett, *Dalí Doubled: From Surrealism to the Self: A New Critical View of Dalí*, St Petersburg, Florida 2010, p.101.

⁷ André Breton, 'Le Cas Dalí', (1936) in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, New York 1946, p.147.

⁸ Sharon-Michi Kusunoki, 'Lobster Telephone', in Dawn Ades, *Dalí, The Centenary Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Grassi, Venice and Philadelphia Museum of Art 2004, pp.286,288 n.2 as 'Edward James, undated fragment (EJA, Box: *Edward James Biographical – undated*)'.

⁹ *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, Galerie des Beaux-Arts, Paris, January-February 1938, no.19 (earlier version as 'Téléphone aphrodisiaque')

particularly activated Dalí's imagination. It should be noted that bronzes related to this Parisian version were cast in 1980 during the proliferation of Dalí's work at the end of his life.

Like the *Mae West Lips Sofa*, the eleven plaster lobsters ordered by James were produced by the London design company Green & Abbott, as indicated by an invoice dated 18 July 1938.¹⁰ Seven white plasters were simply varnished, while four were painted realistically to resemble red lobsters. The specific date at which each of the eleven plasters was attached to its companion telephone has yet to be ascertained. However, Kusunoki has identified the telephone model as 'Siemens 332 which was introduced in 1936', suggesting that the assembly sought to make permanent the chance occurrence that Dalí and James had shared in 1936.¹¹ It is notable that telephones remained the property of the supplying telephone company in that period, giving scope for the lobster to be fixed temporarily to different models over time.

All of the *Lobster Telephones* originated from James's collection (or from the Foundation established in his name) and he himself used funds raised by selling his collection to finance subsequent projects, including the surreal jungle folly that he built at Xilitlá in Mexico. The Tate purchased its red *Lobster Telephone* in 1981, and the Foundation retains another red version. *Lobster Telephone (White Aphrodisiac)* under consideration is now the last of the seven white versions known to remain in the country (see Appendix B and C). Its significance to the, otherwise unlikely, conjunction of avant-garde art practice and the idiosyncratic frontiers of aristocratic furnishings of 1930s in Britain is profound. It is an unusually recognisable object of considerable aesthetic value that has made it instantly recognisable as representing surrealism and opened the field of object-making in a way that transformed the practice of sculpture.

In his flamboyantly unreliable memoir, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, the artist included a sketch of a lobster on a telephone at the opening of the chapter in which he identified the impact of the surrealist object. He suggested that, as a result of this development, 'people were no longer limited to talking about their phobias, manias, feelings and desires, but could now touch them, manipulate and operate them with their own hands.'¹² In relation to *Lobster Telephone*, in particular, the Dalí scholar William Jeffett has concluded:

The success of the *Lobster Telephone* was due to Dalí's understanding that the aim of the Surrealist Object was to dislocate the viewer's false sense of the rational certainty and to thrust him or her into the disorientating realm of enigmatic doubt. The subversive goal of discrediting reality, reaching its paramount example in Dalí's deliberately bizarre objects, captured an essential element of the revolutionary Surrealist project.¹³

¹⁰ Kusunoki, 2004, pp.286, 288.

¹¹ Kusunoki, 2004, p.289, n.7.

¹² Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, New York 1947, pp.286, 312-3.

¹³ Jeffett 2010, p.102.