

RCEWA – Mae West Lips Sofa, Salvador Dalí and Edward James

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

Further Information

The 'Applicant's statement' and the 'Note of Case History' are available on the Arts Council Website:

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item

An upholstered sofa (one of a pair) designed by Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) and Edward James (1907-1984) in 1938 for Monkton House, West Dean, Sussex, James's country house. Probably made by Green & Abbot, London. Felted wool upholstery with decorative appliques and wool fringing over a wooden carcass. Measurements: 79 h. x 202 w. x 92 d. cm.

The upholstery shows very little sign of wear. There are a few scattered stains on the seat and numerous small areas of moth damage throughout. Minor areas of damage to the visible surfaces have been conserved with custom-dyed nylon net. The black fringe trim is in good condition. All materials are consistent with the original date of manufacture and no synthetic textiles are used (including for the stuffing).

2. Context

The sofa is one of two designed specially for Monkton House, a project described as 'a complete Surrealist house'. The sofa can justifiably be called the single most important design for Surrealist furniture in the UK. The form of the sofa, famously based on Dalí's painting *Mae West's Face which May Be Used as a Surrealist Apartment* (1934-35, see appendix A) was suggested by James. The pair of sofas remained at Monkton until James's death and remained in store until the first was sold at Christie's in December 2016, followed by the current example, which was sold at Christie's in February 2017. It is worth pointing out that the current sofa (and its pair) has been very rarely illustrated or lent to exhibitions. Particularly relevant texts and/or illustrations are:

Clive Aslet, 'Monkton House, East Sussex' *Country Life* (12 September 1985), pp. 700-704 (with illustrations of the interior of Monkton)

John Martin Robinson, 'Surrealist dream dies with a sigh', *Sunday Times* (8 June 1986)

Nicola Coleby, ed., *A Surreal Life: Edward James 1907-1984* (Brighton, 1998), *passim*, the sofa illustrated *in situ* on p. 10, and also compared to other versions on p. 50 (see appendix B)

Sharon-Michi Kusunoki, 'Mae West Lips Sofa, 1938' in Dawn Ades, ed., *Dali: The Centenary Retrospective*, (London, 2004), pp. 284-85

Gavin Stamp, 'Surreal Recall', *Apollo* (July 2007), pp. 80-81 (sofa illustrated)

A Surreal Legacy: Selected works of art from The Edward James Foundation, Christie's London, 15 December 2016, Lot 30 (accessible online, see appendix C)

The Art of the Surreal, Christie's London, 28 February 2017, lot 130 (accessible online, see appendix D)

3. Waverley criteria

The object meets criterion 1. The sofa was part of the original furnishing of Monkton House, the only complete Surrealist house ever created in Britain and which still survives in large part today (in private ownership). The idea for it came from Edward James—Dalí's supporter, friend and collaborator. The sofa is so closely associated with a rare and important moment in British cultural history that its departure would be a misfortune.

The object meets criterion 2. The sofa is of outstanding aesthetic importance. The design is the single most important example of Surrealist furniture ever made in Britain. This particular fringed example was very consciously altered by James from the first version of the sofa (which was not made for a particular interior) to make it an integral part of the decoration of his grand project for a Surrealist interior. It was also elongated to give the lips a different appearance.

The object meets criterion 3. The sofa is of outstanding significance to the study of furniture history as well as to the history of design and (Surrealist) art. Its dimensions, textiles and colour differ from other versions. Only with the original object (ideally with its pair, and in comparison to the other different versions of the sofa), can the design and construction of this important object be fully understood. The condition of this sofa and the fact that it is the last one with this upholstery and decoration to come onto the market makes it particularly important that it be retained.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

This sofa was the joint creation of one of the most important and influential artists of the 20th century and his most important British patron. It adds a particularly, even uniquely, British dimension to the story of European Surrealism. Unusually, the impetus for the creation of the sofa came from James rather than from Dalí and the particular decorative elements on this version of the sofa related directly to the decoration of the interior of Monkton House. The house was originally designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens for James's parents in 1902. Its exterior and interior renovation was begun by James by 1935 when, following his divorce from the dancer Tilly Losch and his first meeting with Dalí, James had decided to make Monkton his main residence and immerse himself in (mainly) interior design. Assisted by architect Christopher 'Kit' Nicholson (and Hugh Casson) and decorator Norris Wakefield, James created at Monkton an astounding melange of Victorian, Regency and Surrealist design and decoration overlaid with a distinctly Surrealist atmosphere. Intentionally shocking Surrealist objects and surface treatments filled the spaces and surfaces of the house.

In the Monkton dining room, the pair of black fringed sofas were, on the one hand, designed to fit in with black, crocheted pelmets ('like an old Spanish sacristy') and other black-fringed elements while the red colour was reflected in the (striped) curtains. The fringing was, in James's words, intended 'to look like the embroidery upon the epaulettes of a picador or the breeches and hat of a toreador'.

The initial conception of a Mae West lips sofa may have arisen in 1936 after the completion of Dalí's painting and at a time when James and Dalí began discussing an interior design project. Five in total were made, all in 1938 (see appendix B):

1. A single sofa in pink satin (base and seat in differing tones) matching Elsa Schiaparelli's 'shocking pink' lipstick, which ended up at James's Wimpole Street house but was apparently not made especially for it. In addition, James came to regard this version as 'too flashy to live with' (Edward James Foundation).

2 and 3. A pair in contrasting red (seat) and pink (base) felted wool, which Edward James wrote (24 March 1970) had been made for but not accepted by Elsa Schiaparelli (Brighton Museum and Boijmans Museum, Rotterdam).

4 and 5. The present example and its pair, both made expressly for Monkton (both sold within the last year).

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

The provenance of this sofa, as well as the circumstances of its creation, are exceptional in the annals of modern art and design in Britain. Edward James was Britain's most distinguished supporter of Surrealism (*pace* Roland Penrose). By 1939 James owned 250 works of Surrealist art, some 180 by Dalí (he had signed a contract with Dalí in 1936 to acquire 'virtually his entire production'). A poet, he saw himself as an artistic collaborator with visual artists, some of whom, like Dalí, he generously supported. James was memorably painted by Magritte, among others.

The sofa was not merely a commission by James but was a genuine collaboration between James and Dalí. James, rather than Dalí, suggested the design and was most involved in the making of all of the Mae West lips sofas. While other similar sofas were made at the same time for James, this (and its pair) were the only ones made for Monkton House as part of an attempt to create 'a complete Surrealist house' to a specific decorative programme. While the existence of fringing on the current example has made it seem in retrospect, perhaps, a less pure version of the design, and while this version has been exhibited much less, it relates much more closely to James's idea of the complete Surrealist interior and very much to a British mid-20th-century taste that managed to artfully combine Victorian, Edwardian and Surrealist taste.

James's vision of his Surrealist interior remained intact even after his death until when, despite the objections of English Heritage, the 20th Century Society, SAVE Britain and leading architectural critics, the Edward James Foundation decided to sell Monkton and numerous contents rather than attempt to preserve it. The fact that Monkton was sold does not rule out that this hugely important house could—eventually—be restored and opened to

the public, much in the way that, say, Spencer House or Croome Court have once again become accessible to the public after much longer periods of private ownership and an even more extreme dispersal of their original contents and interior decoration.

The Dalí/James sofa under consideration is one of the most important pieces of modern furniture in the UK. The number of related extant versions or—in Reviewing Committee

terms—the relatively recent date of its creation, must not obscure its significance to the nation.