

Kay Sage



Kay Sage with *Suspension Bridge for the Swallows*, 1957. Photograph by Alexandra Darrow. Estate of Alexandra Darrow.

Kay Sage was born Katherine Linn Sage on June 25, 1898, near Albany, New York, into a wealthy family. After her parents divorced in 1908, Sage spent most of her childhood with her restless mother frequently moving throughout Europe with yearly visits to New York where her father, a state senator, continued to reside. Traveling with her mother allowed her to see the world and inspired her lifelong interest in art, yet her formal education was inconsistent, and she never spent more than three years in one institution. As a youth she loved to paint and draw, and, during World War I, she was sent to the Foxcroft School in Virginia for a year where she illustrated its literary journal. Sage attended the Corcoran School of Art in Washington D.C. from 1919–1920 to pursue formal art training. In June 1920, she moved to Rome where she studied at both the Free School of Fine Arts and the British Academy. Later in life, however, she would describe herself as a self-taught painter and while her artistic education was sporadic and limited, this claim is not entirely accurate. In Rome, Sage integrated herself into the local art scene, and her time painting the Italian countryside proved to be influential for her later artistic career. Sage met her first husband, the Italian nobleman Prince Ranieri di San Faustino, and they married in 1925. During their ten year marriage, Sage kept busy with the many social obligations of a princess and rarely found time to paint. In the mid-1930s, she met American poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972) who introduced her to German sculptor Heinz Henghes (1906–1975). Through her relationship with Pound and Henghes, Sage was encouraged to resume painting. In 1936 she exhibited with Henghes at the avant-garde Galleria del Milione in Milan. The works she showed there were quite different from the Roman landscapes she previously painted. Inspired by Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio di Chirico (1888–1978), Sage's paintings were architectural and abstract in nature, with an emphasis on perspective. Sage followed Henghes' advice and moved to Paris in 1937 to seriously pursue a career as an artist. She became interested in the Surrealist movement in Paris and in the fall of 1938 she exhibited six paintings at the Salon des Surindépendants. Prominent Surrealists, including André Breton (1896–1966) and Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), noticed her work and invited her to officially join the group. Sage and Tanguy quickly

developed a close relationship—not only were the two enamored with each other's work, they also became romantically involved. At the outbreak of World War II in the fall of 1939, Sage escaped to New York City. Once there, she arranged for Tanguy to follow her to safety in the United States by planning a solo show for him at the gallery of Pierre Matisse in December of that year. Many other Surrealist artists would also arrive in New York over the course of the next year with Sage's help. In June of 1940, Sage had her inaugural American solo exposition, also at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. After Sage and Tanguy married, the couple settled in Woodbury, Connecticut, in 1941. The next fourteen years were extremely fulfilling and productive for Sage, as she further developed a signature style. With a sleekness that hides traces of brushwork, her paintings tend to show stiff, austere architectural forms and bleak, wide expanses in muted tones. Her mature surrealist landscapes draw inspiration from everyday scenes and reflect her own personal experiences and emotions. In 1955 Tanguy suffered a fatal stroke; his death devastated Sage, and she sank into a depression. Around that time she developed cataracts, and the combination of her diminishing eyesight and her depression caused her to retreat from society, and she largely stopped painting. Sage turned to making collages and writing poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her poems are often unsettling, mysterious, and address similar themes as her paintings. Sage also diligently worked to catalog Tanguy's work. In January 1963, at the age of 64, Sage committed suicide. In her will, she left instructions for the dispersal of Tanguy's and her paintings. A friend, with the help of gallerist Pierre Matisse, worked to distribute the works, which now belong to museums around the country.



Kay Sage, *Danger, Construction Ahead*, 1940, oil on canvas, 44 x 62 in., Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh J. Chisholm, Jr., B.A., 1936, 1960.63.3

For artists involved in Surrealism, a historical avant-garde movement that peaked in Europe during the interwar years, art was seen as a means to free society from the political and cultural conventions of the time. Drawing inspiration from Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and his use of psychoanalysis, the Surrealists looked to the fantastical realm of the imagination, exploring dreams, desire, and the subconscious in their works. Kay Sage, one of the few female members of the group, painted mysterious and haunting scenes that depict landscapes that are at once recognizable and alien. Sage's work is noticeably different from many of her Surrealist contemporaries. While many of these artists often used bright colors and painted curvilinear and organic shapes, Sage's paintings show the opposite. Her work is the most geometrically oriented imagery in Surrealism, and her detailed works emphasize distance and perspective.

The painting *Men Working*, completed in 1951, is a prime example of Sage's mature style. With precisely drafted forms and a muted palette of grays, greens, blues, and beiges, the painting portrays an eerie yet compelling scene. In the foreground rests an arrangement of geometric objects piled on and next to each other with scraps of draped fabric over a lattice framework. Behind this emerges a monumental architectural form, a single skyscraper-like checkered structure that dominates the patchwork fields that recede deep into the horizon. Minimal and intentionally vague, the scene is both familiar and foreign; it is as if it belongs to a dream world. The fields in the distance are reminiscent of rural scenes from the American heartland, which contrasts sharply with the structures in the foreground that suggest an urban setting. Furthermore, these forms are enigmatic and difficult to decipher. The structures are not identifiable as real buildings, and they appear abandoned and haunting.

Men Working presents a world of juxtapositions—starting with the painting's title. The title “Men Working,” along with the manmade structures in the foreground, suggests human presence in the work and yet, the scene is noticeably devoid of life. It is unclear whether the painting is capturing the dreamlike scene at a quiet moment or whether it is more ominous, the abandoned setting foreshadowing doom. The image simultaneously evokes power and weakness, strength and vulnerability, connection and withdrawal. By creating these tensions, her work is inevitably enticing while remaining mysterious. Ultimately with Sage's paintings, much of the interpretation is left up to the viewer. The intentional ambiguities in her canvases do not lend themselves to one single analysis. Additionally, Sage rarely talked about her paintings, saying “let them speak for themselves.” And while the canvases do “speak” to the viewer, their messages are conflicting and subjective. The power of her artworks comes from their paradoxical nature which allows them to slip between the real and the imaginary.

Discussion Questions

What emotions does *Men Working* evoke?

Could *Men Working* be a real or imagined world? Why?

Do you think the structures in *Men Working* are in the process of being built or a state of decomposition? Why?

How do you think Kay Sage explored dreams and the subconscious in her art?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's academic standards and related lesson plans.



Kay Sage
American, 1898–1963
Men Working
1951
oil on canvas, 45 x 35 in.
Museum purchase, 1994.19

The Poetry of Kay Sage

In addition to painting, Kay Sage wrote poetry throughout her adult life. Despite her friendship with prominent Modernist poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972), who introduced her to other poets, such as T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), there is little evidence that she studied poetry. Thus Sage's claim that she was self-taught, while not entirely applicable to her painting, does apply to her writing. Although her poems have largely been forgotten, she published five volumes of poetry—one in English: *The More I Wonder* (1957); three in French: *Demain, Monsieur Silber* (1957), *Faut dire c'qui est* (1959), and *Mordicus* (1962); and one, a collection of children's poems, in Italian: *Piove in giardino* (1937).

Sage's poems, like her paintings, draw on enigmatic themes and reflect her unique brand of Surrealism. They vary in subject matter and approach; some are more trivial and silly, whereas others are more mysterious. In describing characteristics of Sage's poetry, her biographer Judith Suther writes that there tends to be “a literal subject which quickly becomes metaphorical, stubborn loyalty to the irrational connections between everyday events and the mind's experience of them, and a refusal of all but the leanest devices available to poetic discourse.” Her brittle poems rarely convey emotion, and there is frequently a sense of alienation from the world in them.

Often, Sage's poems reflect a dreamlike or subconscious environment that is typical of the Surrealists. For example, her poem “Some Day” from *The More I Wonder* depicts an image of the poet in an unfamiliar world:

*Sometimes I see the sea as a wall;
the fishing boats are pasted
onto the side of the blue wall
in a most curious manner.*

*Some day, when I am taller
than myself in the mirror,
when I have touched small trees and houses
with my hand
and crushed little people
with one finger,
I shall climb to the top of this blue wall
to see what is on the other side.*

Sage's language is simple and straightforward, yet the scene she describes leaves the reader with more questions than answers. The bizarre proportions, the imagining of the sea as a blue wall, and the suggestion of another world beyond the wall all distort the reality of the poem. Although the use of “I” suggests that Sage is writing about herself, the poem does not offer insight into her emotions. She is merely recounting the scene as a distanced and impersonal observer.

Sage's ability to work as both a poet and a painter reflects her dexterity as an artist. In fact in some cases, her poems and paintings seem to reference each other and work together. This tendency to shift between mediums reaffirms her position in the Parisian Surrealist movement, which blurred the traditionally rigid boundaries between art forms.

Adapted from: Suther, Judith D. “The Poetry of Kay Sage and French Surrealism.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 23.3 (1986): 234–249.

a biography

Timeline

1890

1900

1910

1920

1930

1940

1950

1960

1898 Kay Sage is born on June 25 near Albany, NY

1908 Travels and moves frequently in Europe with her mother, following her parents' divorce

1914 Spends a year at the Foxcroft School in Virginia

1919 Begins her studies at Corcoran School of Art

1920 Moves to Rome

1925 Becomes a princess upon her marriage to Roman nobleman Ranieri di San Faustino

1936 Exhibits with Heinz Henghes at the Galleria del Milione in Milan

1937 Moves to Paris to pursue a career as an artist

1938 Shows six works at the Salon des Surindépendants

1939 Returns to the United States, first settling in New York City

1940 Holds her first solo exhibition at Pierre Matisse Gallery

1947 Exhibits eleven oil paintings in a solo show at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York

1954 Exhibits with Yves Tanguy at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, CT

1956 Paints one of her final artworks, the self-portrait *Le Passage*

1957 Publishes her first two books of poetry, *The More I Wonder* and *Demain, Monsieur Silber*

1963 Sage dies on January 8 in Woodbury, CT

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Kay Sage, Detail, *I Saw Three Cities*, 1944, oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 27 15/16 in., Princeton University Art Museum, Gift of the Estate of Kay Sage Tanguy, y1964-162

Women in Surrealism

As with most prominent historical art movements, men dominated Surrealism. The original Paris Surrealist group, which grew out of Dada in the years following World War I, was made up of artists such as André Breton (1896–1966), Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), Joan Miró (1893–1983), Max Ernst (1891–1976), Jean Arp (1886–1966), and Man Ray (1890–1976). Although none of the group's founding members were women, eventually the Surrealist movement included sixteen women, which was more than any previous artistic movement. The role of women in Surrealism, however, revealed the oppressive gender power structures that functioned even within this movement dedicated to freedom and liberation. Female Surrealists, often overshadowed by their male counterparts, were considered muses first and artists second.

In its quest to liberate art from societal constraints and norms, the Surrealist movement drew inspiration from Freudian psychoanalysis with its emphasis on dreams and the subconscious. The Surrealists believed in unleashing power of the unfettered imagination through their works. In the movement's manifestos and guiding philosophies, which were written by its male members, women were largely portrayed as erotic objects of desire and fascination, instead of fully contributing members of the movement. Male artists viewed women in traditional and dichotomous roles that either romanticized or villainized them. In this way, the female figure regularly portrayed either the child, muse, and lover or the witch, temptress, and victim. These representational roles were limiting and made it difficult for female artists drawn to Surrealism to assert themselves as creative subjects rather than merely objects of masculine desire and fear.

Kay Sage struggled with her position as a female in the Surrealist movement and the treatment she received by her male counterparts. In fact, when Breton, the leader of the Paris group, first saw her paintings at the Salon des Surindépendants in 1938, he assumed they had been painted by a man based on their strength—notably their mechanical forms and precise, hidden brushwork. Sage's romantic involvement with and later marriage to Tanguy, one of the movements' more prominent members, also affected her role and position in the Surrealist group. Sage felt overshadowed by Tanguy, and found it difficult to be recognized as a renowned artist on her own merit. She actively worked to be distinct from her husband and refused to exhibit with him for most of her career. In 1954 the couple had their first and only joint



Dorothea Tanning, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, 1943, oil paint on canvas, 16 x 24 in., Tate, London, Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund and the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, 1997 © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940, oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 18 1/2 in., Harry Ransom Center, © 2009 Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtemoc 06059, Mexico, DF; Méret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1936, Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, 9 3/8 x 2 7/8 in., MoMA, Purchase, 130.1946-a-c, © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Pro Litteris, Zurich

exhibition, during their lifetime, at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut.

Other female Surrealist artists similarly struggled to find their place in the movement and be recognized. In fact, many of these artists have been largely left out of the canon of art history, and they are only recently being rediscovered. The position of women associated with the Paris Surrealists is further complicated by the fact that several of them, in addition to being artists themselves, were intimately connected to men in the movement, either as models, wives, or lovers. Still other female artists worked during this time period in Surrealist styles without being closely associated with the Paris group.

Perhaps the most well-known woman who worked in this style is Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), though she personally rejected the Surrealist label. Drawing inspiration from Mexican folk art, her paintings are frequently self-portraits that incorporate indigenous Mexican and religious symbols. Another Surrealist woman that spent much of her career in Mexico was Remedios Varo (1908–1963), a Spanish-born artist who worked with the group in Paris until she was forced to flee during World War II. Others women involved in the Paris group include Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), who focused on her experiences with female sensuality in her works, Méret Oppenheim (1913–1985), a photographer and artist perhaps known best for her three-dimensional work *Object* (1936), Leonor Fini (1907–1996), an Argentine painter whose feminist works depict young women in empowering scenes, and Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012), an artist known for her early surrealist painting *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943).



KAY SAGE
American, 1898–1963

MEN WORKING
1951, oil on canvas, 45 x 35 in.

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Museum purchase, 1994.19