Kay Sage, American–1963

Men Working

1951

oil on canvas, 45 x 35 in.

Museum purchase, 1994

As with most prominent historical art movements, non-representational art was subdued in the form of the original Paris Surrealist group, which gave way to one in the United States, by the mid-1930s. Kay Sage, along with artists such as André Breton (1896–1966), Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), Joan Miró (1893–1983), and 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 artistic education was sporadic and limited, this claim is not entirely accurate.

With a sleekness that hides traces of brushwork, her paintings tend to show stiff, austere architectural forms and rural scenes from the American heartland, which contrasts sharply with the structures in her later work. Sage’s paintings are 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 most gorgeously imagined in Surrealism, and her detailed and emphasized distortions and perspectives.

The painting Men Working, completed in 1951, is a prime example of Sage’s mature work. With precisely drafted forms and a muted palette, the painting portrays an on-going compelling scene. In the foreground are arranged groups of geometric objects placed on top of each other, and their shapes overlap tightly. Behind them emerges a monumental arched architectural form, a single spire-like structure that suggests the domed shape of a church, receding into the distance. The scene is both familiar and foreign, as it is as if it belongs to a dream world. Men in the distance are reminiscent of those from the American heartland, which contrasts sharply with the simplicity of the figures in the foreground that suggest an urban setting. Furthermore, these figures are reminiscent of real men, and their appearance is abandoned and haunting.

In Men Working, the female figures are scantily clad and viewed from the back; their breasts are visible. The same is true of the men, who are shown from the back, with their buttocks visible.

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 disrepair?

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

The Poetry of Kay Sage

In addition to painting, Kay Sage wrote poetry throughout her adult life. Despite her friendship with many well-known poets, her work was not as well-known. Nevertheless, she published several volumes of poetry—her first, The Bucolic Poems, in 1938, and her last, The Window (1961), in 1960. Sage’s poems are, in most interviews, she claims her greatest work. However, her work is far from being recognized. Her poetry is not as well-known as her paintings, but it is still remarkable. Sage’s poems are remarkable for their simplicity and straightforwardness.

In her later years, Sage turned to making collages and began to work on the poetics of her works. She incorporated the poetics of her works into her paintings, and her paintings became more abstract. Sage’s poetry is notable for its simplicity and straightforwardness, and it is often difficult to decipher. The structures are not identifiable as real buildings, and they appear to be in the process of being built or a state of disrepair.

In her poetry, Sage explores dreams and the subconscious. Her poetry is a way for her to express her feelings and thoughts. Sage’s poetry is often difficult to decipher. The structures are not identifiable as real buildings, and they appear to be in the process of being built or a state of disrepair.

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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 themselves from the political and cultural conventions of the time. Dreaming inspiration from Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and his use of psychoanalysis, the Surrealists looked to the fantastic nature of the imagination, exploring dreams, and the subconscious to create their works. Kay Sage, one of the few female members of the group, painted mysterious and haunting scenes that depicted hand-shaped and otherworldly forms. 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 most gorgeously imagined in Surrealism, and her detailed and emphasized distortions and perspectives.

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American, 1898–1963

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OMAHA, NEBRASKA
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