Dalí-Halsman

A photographic collaboration

A selection of 27 photographs, from the Salvador Dali Museum’s permanent collection, illustrates the collaboration between the master photographer Philippe Halsman and Salvador Dalí. These photographs span the years between 1941 to 1965, capturing some of the most creative images of Dalí on film.

Philippe Halsman, who was born in Riga, Latvia (1906-1979), established himself as the leading portrait photographer in Paris in the 1930s. He remained there until the threat of German invasion became imminent. He chose to emigrate with his wife, Yvonne, and daughter to America where he quickly reestablished his celebrated reputation.

Halsman started photographing celebrities for many of the leading magazines in the 1940s. His work is distinguished by its wit and humor, and his prominence as a great photographer is confirmed by the 97 cover shots he did for Life magazine. In the following years Halsman met and photographed hundreds of celebrities including Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy and many more. His portraits of the great and famous have graced the pages of leading magazines literally hundreds of times, and his work is represented in the permanent collections of many major museums.
However, of all the portraits he took, none are more startling or extraordinary than his photos of Salvador Dalí. A dynamic relationship began in 1941 when Halsman approached Dalí with the idea of photographing the artist as an embryo. The result was a photograph (published in Dalí’s autobiographical *Secret Life*) which graphically portrayed the painter’s obsessions with his prenatal memories. The same year Halsman photographed Dalí posing on a city rooftop with a ballerina dressed in a rooster costume designed by artist which become the “Picture of the Week” for *Life* Magazine.

Each year when Dalí was in New York City, they would collaborate on new ideas. Dalí often had a situation in mind, and Halsman would envision a way of transforming it into a photographic image. The resulting creative friendship would span the next thirty-five years.

In 1954, Halsman published *Dalí’s Mustache*, an entertaining book, which presents a mind-bending assortment of situations that celebrate Dalí’s most distinctive feature, his waxed mustache. Dalí’s mustache is saluted and abused simultaneously, demonstrating just how far the two artists could travel to outdo themselves. In Halsman’s photographs, the mustache, become the horns of a bull, a dollar sign, and the hands of a clock. The mustache pokes through the holes of Swiss cheese, and serves as a statistical line on a graph and even graces the face of the Mona Lisa. This unusual visual interview with quirky questions and enigmatic answers is still available in publication today.

Halsman’s ability in combining technique facility with special effects sets the stage for materialization of many of Dalí’s fantastic visions. In one of Halsman’s noteworthy photographs known as *Dali Atomicus* from 1948, Dalí portrays his interest in molecular suspension. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Dali was
interested in the concept that atoms were made up of smaller moving units such as protons and neutrons that exist with great amounts of space between them. In order to depict the atomic state in this photograph, Halsman suspended the chairs, paintings and easels by wire. He then had four assistants help him arrange the scene by throwing three cats and a bucket of water repeatedly into the air while Dalí jumped with them. There were 26 takes before a suitable version of the shot was found. The result is one of the most unforgettable photographs of the twentieth century.

The theme of dispersion is seen again in the photograph called Dalí Explosion. Here the face of Dalí was projected on a tray of milk, and as stones were thrown into it, Dalí’s face appears to explode giving the viewer a disturbing visual sensation. Tete de Morte and the Leopard Skull are another example of Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method graphically demonstrated by Halsman. In order to create this double image effect, Halsman was able to devise a scaffold to hold models whose nude bodies formed the right proportions for the composition.

Although Halsman died in 1979 and Dalí in 1989, these photographs will forever etch in our minds the shared genius of these two artists whose mutual visions were so unique yet so well matched. It also makes clear that Dalí’s genius could express itself in whatever media he chose.

Joan R. Kropf
Salvador Dali Museum

This image is posted publicly for non-profit educational uses, excluding printed publication.
To cite include the following: The Dali Museum. Collection of The Dali Museum Library and Archives.