

From Dream to Gesture: Freud's Influence on Twentieth-Century Art

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DOI: [10.22178/pos.129-80](https://doi.org/10.22178/pos.129-80)

LCC Subject Category: NX1-820

Received 25.03.2026

Accepted 28.04.2026

Published online 30.04.2026

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Abstract. When Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, he handed artists something they hadn't had before – a framework for taking the irrational seriously. Dreams, slips, and repressed impulses were no longer signs that therapists needed to cure. They were material to work with. This article explores how four artists absorbed Freudian ideas into their practice—not as illustration but as fuel. Giorgio De Chirico was painting dream logic in empty Italian piazzas before surrealism even existed. Max Ernst built techniques – frottage, grattage, collage – specifically designed to knock his own conscious intentions out of the way. Salvador Dalí did the opposite: he faked the unconscious with surgical precision, and it still disturbed. Jackson Pollock abandoned imagery altogether and dragged the whole psychoanalytic inheritance into the body – into the physical act of throwing paint.

The trajectory here moves from dream to gesture, and the argument is simple. Freud's real legacy in art isn't subject matter – not melting clocks or dream symbols. It's permission. The permission to treat what you can't explain as the most serious thing you've got.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud; unconscious; surrealism; dream interpretation; abstract expressionism; artistic method.

INTRODUCTION

In 1900, the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In this work, Freud develops one of the key ideas of psychoanalysis. Within two decades, its central proposition — that beneath our rational, waking life lies an extensive territory of repressed desires, fears, and memories — began to reshape not only psychology, but also artists' understanding of creativity [1].

Freud did not seek to influence art. His interest was clinical: patients suffering from neuroses, trapped between conscious reality and the demands of the unconscious [1]. He developed psychoanalysis as a method of treatment—a way of bringing hidden conflicts to the surface [2]—through free association, dream analysis, and the interpretation of slips and symptoms. Yet the results of his work extended far beyond the consulting room.

If the unconscious truly exists — if behind every rational decision lies a network of drives, symbols, and repressed memories—what does this

mean for the artist? For centuries, people understood Western art as a conscious process. Freud introduced a troubling possibility: that the source of creativity might not be skill or intention, but the unconscious—a region of the psyche that the artist cannot fully control [3]. By the early twentieth century, this idea was taken up by artists, primarily through André Breton.

However, Freud himself remained sceptical of how artists interpreted his ideas. In a letter to Breton, he wrote: "Although I am grateful to you and your friends for your interest in my research, I am not in a position to understand what surrealism wants. Perhaps I cannot grasp it because I am too far removed from art." [3, p. 26]. Freud saw the unconscious as something to be analysed, deciphered, and brought into the light of reason. Artists, by contrast, saw it as something to be released — a source of images, energy, and form that rational thought could never produce.

This article examines the work of four artists who engaged with Freudian thought in different ways. Giorgio de Chirico arrived at dream logic before surrealism had even been named [4]. Max

Ernst transformed Freud's ideas into concrete artistic techniques. Salvador Dalí turned the unconscious into spectacle. And Jackson Pollock carried the psychoanalytic impulse beyond surrealism — into a practice in which gesture itself became the primary site of expression [5].

What unites these artists is not a shared style, but a shared question: how can the artist access what lies beneath conscious intention? Their answers differ radically — and it is precisely in these differences that Freud's true legacy in art becomes visible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sigmund Freud's Theory of the Unconscious. Freud wasn't the first to sense that something operates beneath conscious thought. As far back as ancient Greece, Plato described poetic inspiration as divine madness — the poet creates not through reason but despite it. Later, Friedrich Nietzsche located a similar force in the Dionysian: spontaneous, irrational, breaking through Apollonian order. Sigmund Freud turned these intuitions into science, explaining what lies underneath and how it gets there.

His model divides the psyche into layers. Consciousness is whatever you're aware of right now. Below it, the preconscious holds thoughts retrievable with effort. Deeper still lies the unconscious proper: repressed desires, traumatic residues, forbidden impulses that consciousness works to keep out of sight. Freud compared it to an iceberg, and the comparison stuck because it's accurate: most of what drives us is underwater [1].

The unconscious, though, doesn't stay quiet. It pushes back through dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, and, most relevant here, through acts of creation. Dreams were Freud's primary evidence. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he argued that every dream disguises a repressed wish. The raw unconscious material — what he called latent content — gets distorted before it reaches awareness. Images compress, shift, become symbols. One dream figure may stand in for several people [1]. A trivial object may carry unbearable emotional weight. For Freud, a dream is a text written in a language that demands decoding.

Two mechanisms matter most. Condensation fuses multiple ideas, memories, or figures into a single image. Displacement transfers emotional

charge from something significant onto something apparently trivial. Neither follows logic; both run on association — one image pulling the next not through rational sequence but through emotional gravity.

For artists, this was electrifying. Freud had described a mode of image-making that owed nothing to reason, perspective, or faithful representation. The unconscious thinks in pictures, not propositions. It combines freely, tolerates contradiction, treats time as fluid; this reads less like clinical theory and more like a blueprint for art — if the artist could learn to step aside.

But here lies a crucial difference. Freud wanted to decode the unconscious — to translate its irrational imagery back into rational understanding. The analyst reverses the dream-work, tracing distortion back to its hidden source. Artists wanted the opposite. They wanted to stay inside the distortion. What the unconscious produces interested them far more than what it means. The images themselves — irrational, disquieting, sometimes beautiful — were the point [6].

This gap explains why Freud never truly embraced the art made in his name. And it explains why artists who drew on his ideas never illustrated his theories. They used psychoanalysis as a launching pad — and landed in places Freud himself would barely have recognised.

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, once Freud's closest ally, eventually broke with him over the nature of the unconscious itself. Where Freud's unconscious was personal — built from individual repression and private trauma — Jung proposed something deeper: a collective unconscious shared across humanity. A reservoir of archetypes — primordial images surfacing in myths, dreams, and art across cultures and centuries. For artists, this opened a very different door. Not inward toward personal wound, but outward toward universal symbol [7]. And it is this more Jungian line, not the Freudian one, that would eventually lead to Jackson Pollock.

Giorgio de Chirico: Dream Before Surrealism. Before surrealism emerged as a movement and André Breton published his first manifesto, one Italian artist was already creating paintings that looked like dreams [8]. Giorgio de Chirico did not study Sigmund Freud systematically. His philosophical references were Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. The paintings he produced between 1911 and 1917 — works he called

"metaphysical" — are strikingly close to what Freud described as the logic of dreams.

The recurring elements say it all: empty squares receding toward impossible vanishing points; long shadows cast by invisible sources; classical arcades leading nowhere; trains barely visible in the distance; mannequins replacing human figures. These aren't illustrations of dreams. They are spaces that run on dream logic — where scale lurches without warning and objects that have no business being together share the same frame. The symbols in the work imbue the atmosphere with significance, yet viewers cannot name it.

De Chirico himself spoke about these paintings in a language that resonates with Freud, though it does not directly borrow from him. He described the experience of walking through a city — specifically Turin — and suddenly seeing familiar buildings as if for the first time: stripped of their ordinary meaning and endowed with a mysterious, almost threatening presence. He called this sensation the "enigma" of things [4, p. 14]. Nothing had changed, but nothing looked the same either. The surface of reality became transparent, revealing something else beneath it; this is remarkably close to what Freud described as the uncanny — the disturbing experience of encountering something that is both familiar and strange. Freud published his essay on the uncanny in 1919, but de Chirico had been painting it since 1911. Empty squares, faceless mannequins, shadows without bodies — these images produce precisely the disorientation that Freud would later subject to theoretical analysis.

This is exactly what the surrealists needed from him: he demonstrated that painting could operate according to the logic of dreams without depicting dreams themselves. He did not paint sleeping figures. He did not illustrate narratives. He constructed spaces in which the laws of waking consciousness — causality, proportion, coherence — are suspended and replaced by another order. An order that feels meaningful, yet resists explanation.

Breton immediately recognised this [8]. In the 1924 Manifesto, he named de Chirico as a precursor—and the surrealists treated his paintings as proof that visual art could reach the same domain that Freud had described in words: a domain where repressed material surfaces in disguised form and the ordinary becomes charged with hidden meaning [1, p. 45].

Yet de Chirico himself turned away from this path. By the early 1920s, he returned to classicism, rejected the avant-garde, and declared that true art lay in tradition, in craftsmanship, in the study of the old masters. The surrealists were first puzzled, then outraged. They could not understand how the artist who had opened the door to the unconscious could choose to close it again. The answer might be simpler than that. De Chirico never set out to explore the unconscious. He explored the strangeness of perception itself — those moments when the world ceases to make sense and briefly reveals something hidden beneath it. That this intersected with Freud's territory was, in a sense, accidental. De Chirico arrived at the dream through philosophy. The surrealists approached it through psychoanalysis. They ended up at the same point, but had got there by completely different routes — and wanted different things from it.

Max Ernst: Techniques of the Unconscious. Giorgio de Chirico wandered into dream territory through philosophical intuition; Max Ernst walked in deliberately—and brought tools. He was the most methodical of the surrealists, which is paradoxical, given that surrealism was supposed to be about escaping method. But Ernst understood something the others missed: you can't just decide to be irrational [9]. Consciousness is too fast. It edits and corrects before the hand finishes moving. To actually reach the unconscious, you need a trick — some technique that forces the rational mind out of the room.

Ernst had read Freud. Before the First World War, he studied philosophy and psychology at the University of Bonn, and he absorbed psychoanalysis there. But he never treated Freud as a doctrine to illustrate. He treated him as a problem to solve. If the unconscious generates images through condensation and displacement, could an artist engineer a condition in which similar mechanisms start operating on the canvas?

Collage was his first attempt. In the early 1920s, he began cutting images from old catalogues, encyclopedias, illustrated novels — assembling scenes that looked plausible at first glance but turned deeply wrong the longer you looked. A human body with a bird's head. An anatomical diagram drifting through a living room. It worked because it mimicked Freud's dream-work: incompatible elements were crushed into a single image, producing something at once familiar and disturbing.

But collage still required choosing. Ernst wanted something closer to automatic — a process in which the image appears without the artist deciding what it should be. In 1925, staring at a worn wooden floor, he found it. He laid paper over the boards and rubbed it with a pencil. The wood grain threw up textures and shapes that the eye could develop into figures, forests, and landscapes. He called it frottage — from froter, to rub.

This was a genuine breakthrough. The starting image wasn't the artist's—it belonged to the material. Wood, leaves, fabric, whatever lay beneath the paper. The artist entered only afterwards, recognising forms inside accidental patterns and deciding what to do with them. Ernst compared this directly to Freudian free association. "The artist is present at the birth of his work as a spectator," he wrote [9, p. 21].

He pushed the principle further. Grattage: scraping wet paint over a textured surface beneath the canvas. Decalomania: pressing paint between two surfaces and pulling them apart — generating landscapes that looked geological, almost alive, without anyone having drawn a single line [6]. Every technique introduced a chance that consciousness couldn't fully manage.

What matters here isn't just the techniques but the thinking behind them. Ernst had no interest in pure randomness — a knocked-over paint can isn't art. What he was after was the collaboration between intention and accident. The artist sets up conditions, then responds to what appears. The unconscious in Ernst's studio isn't a well that artists can drain. It's the other voice in a conversation neither side controls.

Freud viewed therapy as a dialogue: the analyst provides the framework, the patient brings their inner material, and meaning emerges somewhere between them. In Ernst's studio, something similar takes place — technique sets the structure, the material behaves unpredictably, and the image appears in the space between intention and chance.

Ernst once said that the artist's task is to project what he sees in himself [9, p. 54]. Not to express, not to represent, but to make visible what is already forming underneath, below the reach of conscious control. No surrealist took this more seriously, or pursued it with sharper discipline.

Salvador Dalí: The Spectacle of the Unconscious. Ernst worked quietly through the process, pa-

tiently waiting for the image to emerge on its own. Salvador Dalí chose a completely different path. He didn't wait for the unconscious. He chased it down loudly and demonstratively, turning it into a spectacle.

Dalí arrived in Paris in 1929, already equipped with both a technique and a persona designed for provocation. Where Ernst sought to minimise conscious control, Dalí developed a method that required an extreme degree of conscious effort directed toward irrational material. He called it the paranoiac-critical method — "a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations."

The language is intentionally overblown — but the idea itself is precise. For Dalí, paranoia isn't about clinical madness. It's about the mind's ability to see connections that aren't really there — like finding a face in a cloud or a body in a rock. Most people experience this from time to time. What Dalí did was take that fleeting moment and turn it into a method: training himself to stay inside that state of vivid, almost hallucinatory perception, while remaining fully aware and in control of what he was doing.

This is where Dalí's relationship to Freud gets complicated. The surrealists, in general, followed the model of André Breton: to weaken rational control and allow the unconscious to speak. Automatic drawing, automatic writing, trance states — all sought to reduce the intervention of consciousness [8, p. 34]. Dalí reversed this equation. He did not want to lose control. He wanted to simulate the products of the unconscious through an act of extreme rational concentration. The paranoiac-critical method was not a rejection of reason in favour of the irrational, but a surgical reconstruction of the irrational.

His paintings of the early 1930s — such as *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) and *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans* (1936) — are executed with astonishing meticulousness. Every melting clock, every distorted body, every impossible landscape is rendered with photographic clarity. This hyperrealism is essential to their effect. The images disturb precisely because Ernst paints them so convincingly. If the technique were loose or abstract, viewers could more easily dismiss it as strange. But Dalí paints the impossible as if it simply exists — observed rather than imagined.

Freud shows up in Dalí's work at a structural level, not just in the imagery. Double images — faces that are simultaneously bodies, landscapes that are simultaneously figures — operate according to the same principle as Freud's condensation [3]. A single visual element carries multiple meanings at once, and the viewer's perception oscillates between them without ever settling. Dalí's famous paranoiac images, in which a group of figures seen from one perspective becomes a unified portrait from another, function as visual demonstrations of how the unconscious compresses meaning.

In 1938, Dalí met Freud. The meeting took place in London, where Freud had fled from Nazi-occupied Vienna. Dalí brought with him the painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* and, during the visit, made a portrait sketch of Freud. Freud's response was, as always, reserved. In a letter to Stefan Zweig, who had arranged the meeting, Freud wrote that it would indeed be very interesting to analyse how such a painting could have come into being.

Even in this moment of partial approval, the gap between Freud and the artist remains clear. Freud would have wanted to analyse the painting — to trace its psychological origins, to decode its symbols. Dalí, by contrast, wanted the symbols to remain unresolved, suspended between meaning and meaninglessness, producing anxiety rather than understanding. For Freud, the unconscious was a problem to be solved. For Dalí, it was a spectacle to be performed.

Ultimately, it was precisely this theatricality that distanced Dalí from the surrealist group. Breton accused him of commercialism, political opportunism, and self-promotion — and there was some truth in these accusations [8]. Yet beneath all the spectacle, Dalí grasped something essential about the relationship between art and the unconscious. The unconscious is not only dark and hidden. It is also bright, excessive, and spectacular. Dreams do not always whisper. Sometimes they scream.

Jackson Pollock: Gesture as Unconscious. With Jackson Pollock, Freud's influence on art takes a different turn. Where the surrealists — each in their own way — used the unconscious to generate images, Pollock did something none of them attempted. He made the act of painting itself the site where the unconscious operates.

Pollock's connection to psychoanalysis was not theoretical, but clinical. In 1939, suffering from severe alcoholism, he began treatment. During these sessions, Pollock produced drawings — free, automatic sketches filled with totemic figures, eyes, spirals, and fragmented bodies. His analysts used these drawings as diagnostic tools, as windows into his psychological state. Pollock, however, used them differently: as evidence that the hand can think without waiting for the mind to take control.

Pollock's analysts were Jungians — more Jung than Freud. Carl Jung had diverged from Sigmund Freud in his understanding of the unconscious, proposing that beneath the personal unconscious lies a deeper collective unconscious—a shared reservoir of archetypes and primordial images common to all humanity. Pollock absorbed this idea, and it is clearly visible in his early works: mythological references, totemic figures, images that feel ancient rather than personal [5].

Yet by the late 1940s, Pollock had moved beyond both Freud and Jung. The drip paintings that brought him fame, emerging around 1947, contain no recognisable imagery. There are no dream symbols, no mythological figures, no double images or melting clocks. What remains is movement: the trace of a body moving around and above a canvas laid on the floor, pouring and dripping paint from sticks, hardened brushes, and cans.

That's a big break. The surrealists used various methods to access the unconscious — automatism, chance, dream recording — but always arrived at images. However strange or irrational, the result remained a representation of something: a landscape, a figure, a scene. Pollock eliminated representation. What remained was the trace of action itself — gesture, rhythm, the physical encounter between body and material.

Freud himself wouldn't have recognised this as his territory. But the logic persists. Freud showed that the unconscious expresses itself through processes that bypass rational intention — through slips, dreams, and free associations. Pollock created a working method in which rational intention becomes structurally impossible. An artist cannot fully plan a drip painting. Paint falls according to gravity, viscosity, speed, and the angle of the hand. The artist initiates the process but cannot fully predict or control the outcome. Each painting becomes a collaboration between intention and chance — between what the body

seeks to do and what the material does on its own.

The famous photographs and film by Hans Namuth, documenting Pollock at work, reveal something crucial: this was a physical practice. Pollock moved around the canvas like a dancer — crouching, stretching, stepping across the surface. These paintings record not thoughts, but movements — the speed of the hand, the pause before the next pour, the moment when rhythm shifts. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing in the same period about embodied knowledge, might well have been describing Pollock's method: the body knows before the mind formulates [10].

Pollock himself resisted interpretation. "When I am in my painting," he famously said, "I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about." [5, p. 11]. This is not mysticism. It is a precise description of a process in which consciousness follows action rather than preceding it. The artist does not decide in advance what the painting will look like. He discovers it afterwards, much like a dreamer only understands the content of a dream upon waking.

Freud developed psychoanalysis as a method for making the unconscious conscious — to bring hidden material into the light of rational understanding [2]. Pollock reversed this direction. He created a method for making the conscious unconscious—to enter a state in which the trained body acts without the intervention of deliberate thought. The goal was not understanding, but production: not to analyse the unconscious, but to allow it to leave its traces directly on the surface.

By 1956, when Pollock died, he'd taken Freud's legacy somewhere Freud couldn't have imagined. Dreams had become gestures. The unconscious wasn't something to decode anymore — it was something you could see, in the dried streams of paint that trace the movement of the artist's body across the canvas.

CONCLUSIONS

This article followed a particular trajectory. There are others, but this one gets at something real about what happened when Freud's ideas hit art.

De Chirico came first, and he came sideways. He never studied Freud properly — his references

were Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. But those empty squares, those mannequins with no faces, those shadows that don't match anything — he was painting the uncanny years before Freud even wrote about it. Which says something important: the unconscious didn't need psychoanalysis to show up in art. It was already there, waiting for someone to notice.

Ernst was the one who asked the uncomfortable question: fine, but how do you actually do this on purpose? You can't just decide to be irrational — your brain won't let you [9]. So he built workarounds: frottage, grattage, collage — each one a trap set for consciousness. Not to eliminate intention, but to force it into a room with chance and see what happens. Sometimes what came out was extraordinary. Sometimes it wasn't. That was the point.

Dalí went the opposite direction, and he knew exactly what he was doing—maximum technical control applied to maximum irrationality. The paranoiac-critical method sounds like nonsense when you read the definition — and Dalí liked that. But the paintings themselves are terrifyingly precise. Every melting clock is rendered like a photograph. He proved you can fake the unconscious with total deliberation, and it still gets under your skin. The surrealists eventually kicked him out, partly for politics, partly for showmanship. But he'd already made his point.

Then Pollock threw all of it away — the symbols, the dream imagery, the theatrical irrationality. What's left in a drip painting? Paint, gravity, the speed of an arm, the rhythm of a body circling a canvas on the floor. No images to decode. Nothing to interpret. Just the physical record of someone working in a state where thinking follows doing, not the other way around. Freud would probably have called it regression. Pollock called it painting.

So what connects de Chirico's deserted piazzas to Pollock's tangled skeins of house paint? Not style, obviously. Not even a method. What connects them is a bet — that there's something beneath the surface of conscious experience worth getting at, and that art might be the way to get there. De Chirico stumbled onto it. Ernst engineered access. Dalí performed it. Pollock became it.

Did Freud cause any of this? Not exactly. He didn't teach artists to paint differently. What he did — and this matters more than any specific technique — was change the status of the irrational.

Before Freud, working from dreams or impulses was seen as a lack of discipline. After Freud, it could look like depth. That shift in permission is enormous, and art is still living inside it.

Freud himself wanted to cure people of their unconscious — to make the irrational rational, to bring the hidden into daylight. Artists took his maps and went in the opposite direction. They weren't interested in the daylight. They wanted to stay down there, in the dark, and bring something back. Not understanding. Not a diagnosis. Just the thing itself — strange, unresolved, alive.

Four decades separate de Chirico's first metaphysical painting from Pollock's death in 1956. That's not much time. But in those years, something fundamental shifted. The unconscious went from being a problem — something to manage, decode, overcome — to being a collaborator. An unpredictable one. The kind that doesn't follow instructions and occasionally wrecks everything. But also the kind that, now and then, makes something no one could have planned.

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