

Donn Fry  
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## Roberto Matta

Roberto Antonio Sebastian Matta Echaurren  
(born: Santiago, Chile, 1911; died: Civitavecchia, Italy, 2002 at 91)

“Entrée de Secours,” oil on canvas, 1987 (78.75 in. x 118 in.)

Roberto Matta was a painter who, throughout his long career, had feet in both Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. Born in Santiago, Chile, to a comfortably well-off family, Matta received a classical Jesuit education, then studied architecture and design at the Catholic University in Santiago. After graduation, a brief stint in the Merchant Marine took him to Europe in 1933, where family contacts led him to a job in the Paris architecture studio of Le Corbusier and subsequently to friendships with leading figures in the Surrealist art movement, in particular Andre Breton and Salvador Dali, who invited Matta into the Surrealist group. He began drawing in the mid-30s, and in 1938 moved into oil painting, his primary medium for the rest of his career.

Matta seems to have been a man who met the right people at the right time. Marcel Duchamp, a friend and mentor in Paris, convinced Matta to move to New York City in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II. As a member of the European émigré art community in New York, Matta had a major influence on some of the young Abstract Expressionists, in particular Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Arshile Gorky. Matta urged them to experiment with “automatism,” a classic Surrealist technique of spontaneous drawing and mark-making that sought to tap into the subconscious mind. Pollock, clearly, was most influenced by Matta’s ideas.

Matta’s own abstract art was about improvisation, spontaneity and chance – or, as one critic said, “Matta believed in the power of accidents to inspire the artist’s imagination.” His early paintings he called “psychological morphologies” or “inscapes” – essentially landscapes of the mind. By the mid-40s, Matta began adding “biomorphic” or organic forms to his art, as well as mechanical imagery reminiscent of architecture, science and technology. As one critic observed, Matta’s “combining of mechanical and biomorphic elements continued as an underlying theme of his work for the remainder of his career.”

“Entrée de Secours” (“Emergency Entry”) shows Matta’s affinity for organic, animal and humanoid forms placed against a backdrop of murky, spontaneous brushstrokes and staining. As Matta himself said, “My paintings have one foot in architecture and one foot in a dream.”

**Suggested questions for docent tours:**

Roberto Matta is most frequently described as a Surrealist? What is surrealism, and what artists do you think of when you hear the term?

Does Matta share many characteristics with other Surrealists? What is different about his art?

Matta is also called an Abstract Expressionist. What is Abstract Expressionism, and what artists do you think of when you hear the term?

What characteristics does Matta share with other Abstract Expressionists?

What do you think about the figures in the painting? Are they human?