

# THE INCOMPARABLE ARTIST

RENAISSANCE PAINTER PAOLO UCCELLO IN SURREALIST  
DISCOURSE AROUND 1930

Tessel M. Bauduin

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1920s the quattrocento Italian painter Paolo Uccello was appropriated as a precursor of Surrealism in the French surrealist discourse, a process that continued and became international in the 1930s. The (positive) reception of Uccello among avant-gardes such as Surrealism was distinctly different from his contemporaneous (rather negative) reception among art historians. In several places the surrealist perception of the artist prefigures post-modern views, not least when it comes to Uccello's playful and experimental attitude to perspective. The standard was set by the surrealist poet Philippe Soupault in 1929 in an art historical treatise inspired upon a surrealist worldview. Reviewing this and other written sources, this article also briefly discusses three examples of artistic responses to Uccellan aesthetics, by Salvador Dalí, George Hugnet and René Magritte.

## KEYWORDS

Surrealism; Paolo Uccello; Philippe Soupault; Avant-garde; Quattrocento; Modern reception of Renaissance art.

Paolo Uccello n'a probablement jamais songé qu'à peindre.  
La profondeur et la puissance de son œuvre demeurent  
envers et contre tous les jugements, malgré le silence.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

In 1929 a modest book about the quattrocento Florentine painter Paolo Uccello (1397–1475) came out in France: *Paolo Uccello*, part of Rieder's didactic series *Maîtres de l'Art Ancien*.<sup>2</sup> Although the first monographic study, it has frequently been ignored, sometimes disparaged, in later studies of Uccello. Usually Wilhelm Boeck's 1939 *Paolo Uccello* is given as the first monograph, occasionally, tellingly, with the adjective "scholarly".<sup>3</sup> This is chiefly due to the fact that the author of *Paolo Uccello* (1929) was Philippe Soupault (1897–1990): a poet and writer primarily associated with Surrealism.

Soupault's writing is indeed quite poetical in places. Nevertheless his book is hardly a surrealist work; on the contrary, it is, certainly in intention, an art history. Apart from appearing in an art series, it aims to chart the oeuvre of the artist and provides visual analyses and aesthetic critique as well as an abundance of illustrations of Uccello's (then known) works, including many details. The author waxes lyrical and at length about Uccello's colours and compositions. In several instances he references Vasari, the godfather of art historical biography and indeed inventor of that genre, besides more contemporary art historical sources.

By the time Soupault's book was published the claiming of Uccello for Surrealism was already underway. Uccello's name was included in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, published in 1924 and written by André Breton (1896–1966), frontman of Surrealism – albeit rather offhandedly and in a footnote.<sup>4</sup> Earlier in 1924 playwright Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), then in his surrealist phase, wrote a mini-play about Uccello, "Paul the Birds", which he followed with "Uccello, the hair", a ruminating essay published in the periodical *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1926, complete with an illustration of an art work by Uccello.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently the same image,

<sup>1</sup>  
Philippe Soupault, *Écrits sur la peinture*, Paris 1980, 63 (hereafter: EP).

<sup>2</sup>  
Philippe Soupault, *Paolo Uccello*, Paris 1929; reprinted in EP, 17–65.

<sup>3</sup>  
Wilhelm Boeck, *Paolo Uccello. Der Florentiner Meister und sein Werk*, Berlin 1939.

<sup>4</sup>  
André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, ed. and trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor, MI 1972, 25.

<sup>5</sup>  
Antonin Artaud, Paul les oiseaux ou la Place de l'amour, in: *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, Paris 1970, 68–71 (hereafter: *Œuvres*); originally part of the collection *L'ombilic des limbes* (1925). Antonin Artaud, Uccello, le poil, in: *La Révolution surréaliste* 8, 1926, 22–23, reprinted in Artaud, *Œuvres* I, 170–172. Sabine Mainberger counts two versions of "Paul les Oiseaux", one from 1924 and one from 1925, as separate texts; in this view, Artaud wrote three pieces

a detail of *The Miracle of the Desecrated Host* (1467–1469), popped up in Breton’s novel *Nadja* (1928). By the end of 1929 Uccello was upgraded to the surrealist pantheon proper, with surrealist poet Robert Desnos (1900–1945) counting him among those with revolutionary, poetic and surrealist vision alongside Bruegel, Blake, Bosch, Ernst and Picasso<sup>6</sup> – an august company, the inclusion amongst which Soupault’s monograph of earlier that year may well be considered the impetus for. Over the next few years Uccello was included in such lists of predecessors time and again, for instance by Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) in 1930, Breton in 1932 and surrealist poet David Gascoyne (1916–2001) in 1935.<sup>7</sup> Also, if we can consider Soupault’s monograph on Uccello a deliberate inroad into the domain of art history, the obverse occurred in 1935, when Georg Pudelko (1905–1972), a German art historian of the Renaissance, wrote an extensively illustrated essay on Uccello for the Surrealism-leaning art periodical *Minotaure*.<sup>8</sup>

This article focusses on the early phase of surrealist appropriation of Uccello and in particular on Soupault’s construction of the artist. It also details several surrealist responses to Uccello’s particular aesthetics, especially his perspectival experiments. Three aspects make Uccello so attractive and apposite to the surrealists. Firstly, his biography: set out originally by Vasari but developed by others, it paints Uccello as a strange, tragic and rather obsessive individual, providing a lot of mythopoetic potential for marvellous and semi-surrealist characterisations of the artist, up to and including Pudelko’s portrayal of him as a Dionysian “lunar” painter in 1935.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it should be noted that in the first few decades of the twentieth century Uccello was hardly a canonical artist; still located in the realm of the archival, his relative obscurity bolstered his attractiveness to the surrealists, who were constantly hunting for little known or forgotten poets, thinkers and artists from history to put on a surrealist pedestal.<sup>10</sup>

about Uccello at this time. Sabine Mainberger, *Paolo Uccello juif* oder Antonin Artaud und der *Hostienfrevle*. Mit Überlegungen zu Philippe Soupault, Stephen Greenblatt und Marcel Schwob, in: *Comparatio* 11, 2, 2019, 229–259, 229–230.

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Robert Desnos, *Écrits sur les peintres*, ed. by Marie-Claire Dumas, Paris 1984, 109, also 250–251.

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Salvador Dalí, The Moral Position of Surrealism [1930], in: *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, ed. by Haim Finkelstein, Cambridge 1998, 219–222, 222; André Breton, Surrealism. Yesterday Today and Tomorrow, in: *This Quarter* 5, 1, 1932, 7–44, 17; David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, Hertford 1936 [1935], 104–105.

8

Georges [sic] Pudelko, Paolo Uccello peintre lunaire, in: *Minotaure* 7, 1935, 32–41.

9

Ibid., 32–34.

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Relevant studies of (French and international) Surrealism’s interactions with history are Kirsten Strom, *Making History. Surrealism and the Invention of a Political Culture*, Lanham, MD 2002; and Simon Baker, *Surrealism, History and Revolution*, Bern 2007.

Thirdly, there are Uccello's rather striking aesthetic choices. As will be discussed, his idiosyncratic use of perspective and line in particular, and (apparent) suppression of conventions of naturalistic representation were aspects several surrealists were especially drawn to. The surrealists were hardly the first to be taken by his work, as in the first two decades of the twentieth century an interest in quattrocento painters was already brewing in selected avant-garde artistic circles. Still, the surrealists focused almost exclusively upon Uccello and would continue to do so. Scattered throughout forty years of French and international surrealist discourse we can find a few offhand references to Giotto and to the late-quattrocento painter Piero di Cosimo;<sup>11</sup> yet overall the interest in Italian Renaissance artists is quite limited. Against that trend Uccello stands out not only as the first but also the most prominent over time, continuously remaining enshrined in the pantheon of surrealist predecessors.

## II. Preludes to Soupault's Uccello

"Uccello has received polarized responses", Javier Berzal de Dios has noted, and artists, significantly enough, "more than art historians, have traditionally been more receptive to his aesthetics".<sup>12</sup> We can see this development already early in the first three decades of the twentieth century, when modernist and avant-gardist artists, especially Italians, turned to Uccello's art for inspiration. Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964), and futurists such as Carlo Carrà (1881–1966) and Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916) are part of what amounts to a modest but significant trend among European modern and avant-garde artists to find inspiration in early Renaissance painters.<sup>13</sup> In the late 1910s and early 1920s there were several points of contact between Futurism and what would

11

Giotto: André Breton, *Autodidacts Called "Naives"* [1942], in: *Surrealism and Painting*, ed. and intr. by Mark Polizzotti, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor, Boston, MA 2002 [1972, 1965], 291–294, 291, possibly in response to Henry Miller, *An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere* [1938], in: *The Cosmological Eye*, Norfolk 1939, 151–196, 181. Piero di Cosimo was brought to the surrealists' attention by none other than Pudelko, who followed up his 1935 essay on Uccello in 1938 with "Piero di Cosimo, peintre bizarre" in *Minotaure* 11, 1938, 19–26. The scattered surrealist references to a later and much more famous Italian artist, Leonardo da Vinci, are not so much based in his art as they are upon Freud's analysis of it.

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Javier Berzal de Dios, *Uccello's Fluttering Monument to Hawkwood*, with Schwob and Artaud, in: *Diacritics* 44, 2, 2016, 86–103, 98.

13

E.g. Carlo Carrà, *Paolo Uccello costruttore*, in: *La Voce* 8, 9, September 1916, 375–384. It followed upon an earlier publication on Giotto, who seems to have acted as a gateway artist to Uccello: Parlata su Giotto, *La Voce* 8, 3, March 1916, 162–174. Uccello was an interest of the Florentine futurists in particular, for obvious reasons. Maria Christina Bandera, Giorgio Morandi. "The Metaphysics of the Most Common Objects", in: Paolo Baldacci (ed.), *De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus. A Look into the Invisible*, Florence 2010, 77–83, 78, 82; Hugh Hudson, *Paolo Uccello. Artist of the Florentine Renaissance Republic*, Saarbrücken 2008, 243–244; Sabine Mainberger, *Paolo Uccellos Mazzocchi*, Marcel Schwob und die Grenzen der Euklidischen Geometrie, in: *Poetica* 46, 3–4, 2014, 359–411, 361; Mauro Minardi, *Paolo Uccello*, Milan 2017, 354–361; Avigdor W. G. Posèq, *A Different View of the Futurists' Belli-cose Imagery*, in: *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 25, 3, 2006, 34–39, 34, 38 n5. Although it cannot be pursued further here, there is an undercurrent of the (fascist) ideology of the

eventually turn into Surrealism, one of them Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) who introduced Breton and Soupault to Futurism in the 1910s.<sup>14</sup> Also, in his art columns Apollinaire included favourable comparisons between Uccello and De Chirico – much admired in and part of the French surrealist group in the 1920s – as well as between Uccello and the late nineteenth-century painter Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), another artist soon to be claimed as a surrealist predecessor.<sup>15</sup> Uccello's name circulated in proto-surrealist circles, in other words.

Rather more directly influential was a publication that showcased the mythopoetic potential of Uccello's life: "Paolo Uccello, peintre", a poetic biography that reinvented Vasari's. Written by the French symbolist writer Marcel Schwob (1876–1905) it appeared first in a newspaper and was published as part of *Vies imaginaires* in 1896.<sup>16</sup> It was popular both in its time and for decades to come and would find its way to André Breton, Philippe Soupault and Antonin Artaud. Indeed, as Sabine Mainberger has pointed out, Schwob's "Paolo Uccello, peintre" can be considered an important turning point for the modern reception of Uccello both in art history and among artists beyond just the surrealists.<sup>17</sup>

Soupault originally encountered Uccello during a summer vacation in the UK in 1914, when he saw the first panel of *The Battle of San Romano* (ca. 1435–1460) in London's National Gallery and Uccello's wonderful night-time scene *The Hunt in the Forest* (c. 1465–1470) [Fig. 1] in Oxford.<sup>18</sup> Yet the critical moment came a

Novecento group to some (Italian) artists' search for the Italian roots of modern art in the quattrocento.

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For the relations between (early) Surrealism and Futurism see Günter Berghaus, *Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism. Some Cross-Fertilisations among the Historical Avant-gardes*, in: id. (ed.), *International Futurism in Arts and Literature*, Berlin 2000, 271–304, passim but esp. 296–302. For instance, there are distinct proto-surrealist overtones to some of Carrà's writings, especially when it comes to early Renaissance artists. In his 1916 essays on Giotto and Uccello (see above) Carrà called the first a "visionary" driven only by "interior necessity" and remarked on the second's "superior wisdom deriving from imagination rather than reason", which are proto-surrealist qualifications of both artists. Karine Martin-Cardini, Carrà, de Chirico et la genèse du Surréalisme, in: François Livi (ed.), *Futurisme et Surréalisme*, Lausanne 2008, 89–109, 98 (NB: my translation of Martin's into French from the original Italian).

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E.g.: Apollinaire writes (partially citing Arsène Alexandre) that Rousseau might have been "the Paolo Uccello of our century" if he had had "technical knowledge", and: De Chirico is "a kind of Paolo Uccello in love with his divine perspective and oblivious to everything that lies outside his beautiful geometry" (citation of Ardengo Soffici); Guillaume Apollinaire, *Apollinaire on Art. Essays and Reviews, 1902–1918*, ed. by LeRoy C. Breunig, New York 1972, 342, 349, 422.

#### 16

Marcel Schwob, Paolo Uccello, peintre, in: *Œuvres*, ed. by Alexandre Gefen, Paris 2002, 402–404. The "imagined lives" appeared in instalments in *Le Journal* throughout 1895.

#### 17

Mainberger, Paolo Uccellos Mazzocchi, 362. More about the reception history of Schwob in French Surrealism in: Marie-Claire Dumas, "Comme dit l'autre". Marcel Schwob chez quelques Surréalistes, in: Christian Berg and Yves Vadé (eds.), *Marcel Schwob, d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, Seyssel 2002, 323–336.

#### 18

Interview with Soupault by Serge Fauchereau, cited in Adelaïde Russo, *La Médiation dans la critique artistique de Philippe Soupault. Paolo Uccello et William Blake*, in: Jacqueline

decade later, when Soupault – as he recounted later – encountered Schwob’s fictionalised biography:<sup>19</sup>

Inspired by reading *Vies imaginaires* by Marcel Schwob, I wanted to get to know the painting of Paolo Uccello and I departed for Florence and Urbino. I was amazed.<sup>20</sup>

Soupault visited the Louvre to see works by the artist before travelling to Italy (in 1925) to see Uccello’s painted predella *The Miracle of the Desecrated Host* (often called *The Profanation of the Host* in surrealist sources) [Fig. 2] in Urbino and various other works by the artist in churches and the Uffizi in Florence.<sup>21</sup> Such a trip does not stand on its own. In 1926 the painter Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola; 1908–2001) – not a surrealist but moving in closely related circles – undertook a journey to Italy to “discover” such Renaissance artists as Piero della Francesca, Masolino and Masaccio.<sup>22</sup> Yet it is still unusual to go to such lengths, and I take Soupault’s trip as indicative of the depth of his interest and seriousness of his endeavour to engage with Uccello and his art.

Soupault’s *Paolo Uccello* was proposed, written and published back to back in 1928–29 with a similar study: *William Blake*.<sup>23</sup> For Soupault it stood to reason to write about Uccello and the British poet and printmaker Blake (1757–1827) in sequence as he saw them as cut from the same cloth:

Il y a dans les destinées de ces deux grands hommes, de ces deux “visionnaires”, une même fatalité et une égale grandeur. Comment ne pas être frappé de leur commune audace,

Chenieux-Gendron (ed.), *Philippe Soupault, le poète*, Paris 1992, 160–182, 170. *The Battle of San Romano*’s second and third part are located in the Louvre and Uffizi respectively.

19

Note that a reprint of Schwob’s *Vies imaginaires* appeared in 1921 (Paris: Crès), while another edition came out in 1927 (Paris: Bernouard); perhaps a factor explaining why, among Shwob’s oeuvre, this book in particular found its way to several surrealists.

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Soupault, EP, 17 (my translation).

21

Keith Aspley, *The Life and Works of Surrealist Philippe Soupault (1897–1990). Parallel Lives*, Lewiston, NY 2001, 46–47; Russo, *La Médiation*, 170. Although it cannot be pursued further here, there is a distinct but under-studied reception history of *The Battle of San Romano* in modern and modernist art (besides Futurism), especially the panels in the Louvre and the Uffizi. See for instance British art historian Kenneth Clark’s later remark regarding the Louvre’s *Battle* as inspirational source for the post-impressionist work *Après-midi à la Grande Jatte* (1884–1886) by Seurat; Kenneth Clark, *Paolo Uccello and Abstract Painting*, in: *The Art of Humanism*, New York 1981, 43–76, 71, 73.

22

Robert Kopp, Balthus. Waiting for the Spectacle, in: Baldacci, De Chirico, 111–119, 112.

23

Philippe Soupault, *William Blake*, Paris 1928, in EP, 85–131. *William Blake* was written second but published first. Russo, *La Médiation*, 169–170.



[Fig. 1]  
Paolo Uccello, *The Hunt in the Forest*, c. 1465–1470, tempera and oil, with traces of gold, on panel, 73.3 × 177 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum (artwork in the public domain, 31.01.2022).





[Fig. 2]  
Paolo Uccello, *The Miracle of the Desecrated Host (Miracolo dell'ostia profanata)*, 1467–1468, tempera on panel, 43 × 351 cm. Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche (artwork in the public domain, 31.01.2022).

comment ne pas s'étonner de l'incompréhension semblable  
qui accueillit leurs œuvres ?<sup>24</sup>

Soupault highlights here some of the aspects that can be considered typical of surrealist predecessors, embodied in this case by Uccello and Blake: they are visionaries, audacious but also doomed artists whose work, furthermore, was (and is) met with incomprehension. In *Paolo Uccello* Soupault emphatically makes a point of that *méconnaissance*: a misjudgement or, here, negative reception in the artist's own time and by subsequent generations. This plays into Surrealism's tendency to curate the past to fit the surrealist present and pick out in particular the outliers, the misunderstood and the radical misfits.

Primarily, the past served the surrealists as a way to position themselves in relation to others. French Surrealism was fascinated with the outmoded, first of all, and Walter Benjamin in particular picked up immediately on the critical and revolutionary potential of the outmoded and the surrealists' recourse to it, as an aesthetic category, for precisely those reasons.<sup>25</sup> But the surrealist engagement with the past went much deeper, chronologically, politically and also archivally. Indeed, decades before the archival turn in post-modern art, the surrealists were already mining the archive (as a treasure trove, a socio-political historical process and conceptually) in and for their art. The surrealists often preferred highly archival – that is to say non-canonical and even anti-canonical, besides generally unknown – figures. Following Assmann, the *archive* refers to “passively stored memory that preserves the past as past”, which society keeps in literal archives, libraries and collections; it stands in contrast to “actively [and publicly] circulated memory that keeps the past present” or the *canon*.<sup>26</sup>

Independent, even contrary, references to the past can be challenges: to the state and its (institutional) mechanisms as much as to domain-specific institutional actors in the cultural sphere, which proscribe what acceptable literature or art is, was and should be. Surrealism combined a radical rejection of institutionally promoted canonical figures with staking claims on a whole host of historical artists, poets and thinkers that individual surrealists dredged up from the archive. Quite contrary, of course, was Surrealism's championing of D.A.F. the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814); another

<sup>24</sup>

Soupault, EP, 128–129.

<sup>25</sup>

Walter Benjamin, Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of European Intelligentsia, trans. by Edmond Jephcott, in: *New Left Review* 1, 108, 1978, 47–56, 50. Also Abigail Susik, Between the Old and the New. The Surrealist Outmoded as a Radical Third Term, in: Sascha Bru, Laurence van Nuijs, Benedikt Hjartarson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ørum and Hubert van den Berg (eds.), *Regarding the Popular. Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, Berlin/Boston, MA 2012, 321–337, 324, 336–337.

<sup>26</sup>

Aleida Assmann, Canon and Archive, in: Astrid Erll (ed.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin 2008, 97–108, 98.

well-known case is that of the Comte de Lautréamont, nom de plume of Isidore Ducasse (1846–1870). The French surrealists prided themselves on rescuing Ducasse from complete obscurity; not quite the case, but not too far off either, and the surrealists' sustained efforts to publish and popularise his work has ensured his fame until today.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the fact that the surrealists succeeded in bringing archival artists to canonical status is, firstly, indicative of their effective sacralisation strategies, but secondly, also a result of the canonisation of Surrealism (as a movement) itself.

In France during the late 1910s and the 1920s neither Uccello nor Blake were completely unknown, but they were hardly famous either and still languished in the realm of archival art history. What they were known for bespeaks their surrealist appeal: personal eccentricity, all-consuming devotion to art, breaking of societal and artistic codes and sacrifice of everything to the realisation of their vision. Both artists were implicated in a discourse about genius and madness, being considered mad or *fou* in their extreme devotion to art.<sup>28</sup> By writing a treatise about them both, in an art series for an audience of non-specialists, Soupault, besides fomenting their association with Surrealism, did put both artists more firmly on the map generally.<sup>29</sup>

### III. Soupault's *Paolo Uccello* as Art History

The Rieder series was didactic and introductory; Soupault's *Paolo Uccello* is accordingly of reasonable length although not necessarily easy. Importantly, it comes complete with an unprecedented sixty black-and-white plates of quite reasonable quality, showing, among many other works, the three panels of *The Battle of San Romano*, *The Hunt in the Forest* and *The Miracle of the Host*, as well as a large selection of details of all the major works.<sup>30</sup> Until 1929 Uccello had

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Andrea S. Thomas, *Lautréamont, Subject to Interpretation*, Amsterdam 2015, 17, 106, 107, 109–110. Strom, *Making History*, 57–69. Such surrealist effort to translate, publish, proclaim, polemicise about and otherwise popularise a certain individual's work can also be seen in the case of, among others, William Blake (see below), Lewis Carroll (undertaken by Louis Aragon in particular) and the Marquis de Sade (especially in the periodical *Mino-taure*).

<sup>28</sup>

Aspley, *The Life*, 215; Russo, *La Médiation*, 180, 182.

<sup>29</sup>

Blake's surrealist reception, which should be seen in concert with Uccello's, dates to the late 1920s and was sponsored by Soupault to a considerable degree. In 1927 he translated *Songs* by Blake into French, together with Marie-Louise Soupault: William Blake, *Chants d'innocence et d'expérience*, trans. by Marie-Louise Soupault and Philippe Soupault, Paris 2007 [1927]. Then there is his book for Rieder: as with the Uccello book, it was extensively illustrated (forty illustrations and sixty-four pages of text) and in fact introduced French audiences to Blake's art and thought for the very first time. Mei-Ying Sung, *William Blake and the Art of Engraving*, London/New York 2016, 33. Aspley, *The Life*, 50–51, 210–211, 215–216.

<sup>30</sup>

Soupault, *Paolo Uccello*, 63–64; plates are *hors-texte* and not paginated. In fact, the plates show *all* works ascribed to Uccello at that time, from his works in churches and stained glass windows to panels, portraits, drawings and sketches; today, not all of them are con-

been the subject of articles and short sections in overview studies only, and Soupault's book was not only the first monograph<sup>31</sup> but also among the first to include so many illustrations of this quality, making it an important resource already on that count. At the time, reception of it was mixed: "incomplete" and "unreliable in its facts", wrote one critic, who nevertheless admitted that Soupault's understanding of his subject Uccello as "difficult" may be a "true reading". The reviewer further praised the book's number and quality of reproductions.<sup>32</sup> By no means a major Uccello study, it is nonetheless frequently mentioned briefly in *catalogues raisonné*, even if only on account of its relatively early date but sometimes also because of its content or Soupault's writing style.<sup>33</sup> It has become part of the historiography of art, that is to say of the discipline of art history.

Soupault would have been pleased: contributing to – even intervening in – art history was undoubtedly his intention, which is made clear from the outset. The author positions his study of Uccello both within and against the discourse of art history, noting the relative dearth of studies of the artist since Vasari and placing his own as an addition to them.<sup>34</sup> More than just remarking on the distinct *méconnaissance* of the artist he perceives in existing sources, he contends that Uccello's oeuvre has been *falsely* interpreted – for instance by modern art historians such as Bernard Berenson.<sup>35</sup>

American connoisseur Berenson (1865–1959) had been one of the first to attribute works to Uccello and he clearly did not like his art much. In *The Florentine Painters of the Italian Renaissance* Berenson praised Uccello's skill in perspective but also called him the father of two practices he strongly disapproves of: "art for dexterity's sake" and "naturalism". In the first case, painting becomes a trick: "A weaker man like Paolo Uccello almost entirely sacrificed what sense of artistic significance he may have started with,

sidered to be by Uccello. Franco Borsi and Stefano Borsi, *Paolo Uccello*, trans. by Elfreda Powell, London 1994, 352 and passim.

31

Cf. also Soupault himself in EP, 17.

32

Anon., Paolo Uccello par Philippe Soupault; Poussin par Gilles de la Tourette, in: *The Connoisseur* 85, 1930, 117.

33

Hudson, Uccello, 249–370. Borsi and Borsi, Paolo Uccello, 284–355, see for instance their entry on *The Hunt* (p. 341) where they note Soupault's "artistic sensitivity" in his description of the work. Recently Minardi qualified Soupault's *Uccello* as a "pamphlet standing between literature and art history"; Minardi, Paolo Uccello, 363.

34

The bibliography of *Paolo Uccello* lists eight titles (nearly all scholarship available at the time): Vasari's *Lives* in French, Crowe and Gavalcaselle's *Storia della pittura Italiana* (1882), Berenson's *Florentine Painters*, and five articles from repertories and reviews: by Loeser (1898), Gronau (1902), Horne (1901), Gamba (1909) and Campari (1910). Soupault, EP, 65.

35

Soupault, EP, 53, 56 n1.

in his eagerness to display his skill and knowledge.”<sup>36</sup> Naturalists, for their part, are men “with a native gift for science who [have] taken to art” but end up derailed by striving for the perfect reproduction of things; “(a)rtistically, then, the naturalists, Uccello and his numerous successors, accomplished nothing.”<sup>37</sup> In “his zeal” towards objective representation of perspective, Berenson continues, Uccello “forgot local colour [...] forgot action, forgot composition, and, it need scarcely be added, significance”.<sup>38</sup>

Assessments such as these find their origin in Vasari, who, centuries earlier, had opened his chapter on the artist with the claim that

Paolo Uccello would have been the most delightful and inventive genius in the history of painting from Giotto’s day to the present, if he had spent as much time working on human figures and animals as he lost to the problems of perspective.<sup>39</sup>

According to Vasari Uccello’s pursuit of perspective, leading to an “overworked” and “arid” style, was “excessive”: he “wasted hour after hour” on it, eventually becoming “solitary, eccentric, melancholy and impoverished” and doing “violence to his nature with fanatical study”.<sup>40</sup> Vasari’s critical but also proto-Romantic characterisations of the painter as an obsessive eccentric dying in poverty aligns well with the surrealist understanding of the poet-visionary or artist-visionary, steeped as that was in nineteenth-century ideals of the artistic genius. This combines with a particular aspect I see more often in the surrealist reception of European artists from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century: qualities that art historians of the time criticise are appreciated, validated and defended by surrealists.<sup>41</sup>

Soupault’s study of Uccello offers several examples of this. The author was clearly up to date with art historical opinion about the

<sup>36</sup>

Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, New York 1903, 37. This second edition already contained more attributions to Uccello than the first from 1896. One of the first modern essays solely about the artist dates from 1898: Charles Loeser, Paolo Uccello, in: *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 21, 1898, 83–94. Hudson, Paolo Uccello, 2, 238.

<sup>37</sup>

Berenson, *The Florentine Painters*, 39–40.

<sup>38</sup>

*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>39</sup>

Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter E. Bondanella, Oxford 1998, 74–83, 74.

<sup>40</sup>

*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>41</sup>

Other instances include the afore-mentioned Piero di Cosimo and Arcimboldo, the sixteenth-century Italian painter of imaginative portraits.

artist and deliberately presented an alternative interpretation. For instance, Soupault cites Berenson reproaching Uccello for making all elements in *The Battle of San Romano* subservient to his overall composition of converging lines. “Absorbé par cette idée fixe” (Soupault quotes Berenson), “il en oubliait tout le reste [...]”. But, Soupault continues, “[C]ette critique me paraît un des plus beaux éloges que l’on puisse adresser à un peintre, et montre avec quelle étrange partialité on juge l’art de Uccello.”<sup>42</sup> An *idée fixe* and the total submission of all painterly requirements to it is just what Soupault admires in Uccello.<sup>43</sup>

At the heart of the matter lies Uccello’s rather dynamic, not to say occasionally radical relation to the conventions of representation. The core of Soupault’s admiration is that Uccello was (in Soupault’s view) an artist who worked entirely from and simultaneously towards the realisation of an inner – rather than outer – model. All was made subservient to this aim: “le dessin, la couleur, les proportions concourent à ce résultat qui émerveille: une peinture dénuée d’artifice”.<sup>44</sup> Painterly effects towards naturalism or an aesthetically pleasing image are absent; Uccello’s “lyricisme est intérieur” and “les lignes qu’il trace, les couleurs qu’il pose, sont prévues”. To sum up, “le lyrisme de Paolo Uccello [...] est un lyrisme de conception”.<sup>45</sup>

Soupault’s Uccello is a “passionate painter of painting”, that is of concept.<sup>46</sup> The underlying concern is the fundamental problem of painting, which Uccello – so Soupault posits<sup>47</sup> – was one of the first to recognise: mimesis and its inevitable failure. This was an urgent issue in the 1920s, as the same problem stalked surrealist art. Naturalist representation was of course out of the question for the surrealist artist, while painterly automatism was quite hard; but then, was “surrealist” painting even possible? Breton wrote a multi-part essay on the subject in which he answered that question affirmatively – providing, however, that the surrealist painter paint only from a “*purely internal model*”.<sup>48</sup> “There is no reality in painting”, Breton

42

Soupault, EP, 54.

43

See also Russo, *La Médiation*, 174.

44

Soupault, EP, 50.

45

Ibid., 51.

46

Ibid., 53.

47

Ibid., 56.

48

Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 4 (emphasis original). This essay was published in instalments in *La Révolution surréaliste* – *LRS* 4 (1925), 6 (1926), 7 (1926) and 9–10 (1927) – before being published as a book in 1928.

admonished later: in surrealist painting, “surreality and not reality will reassume its rights”.<sup>49</sup>

One way to surmount this problem of painting is to disregard one’s ordinary eyes (and hence, academic conventions) and rely on clairvoyant, visionary or seer-like forms of interior vision.<sup>50</sup> Thus a key characteristic of Soupault’s Uccello – as with many a surrealist hero of note – is that he is a seer.<sup>51</sup> This Uccello sees things very clearly and hence executes his work with purity, simplicity and clarity.<sup>52</sup> In an example of his lyrical prose Soupault writes that, in fact, “la clarté d’Uccello était décidément aveuglante”<sup>53</sup> – blinding, that is, to the artist’s contemporaries, to Vasari and his ilk, as well as to his modern critics.

Soupault’s Uccello is inflamed by no other passion than painting, to which he dedicates himself completely.<sup>54</sup> Schwob, following Vasari, had already made an emphatic point of Uccello’s dedication to his art. His story in turn formed the primary hypotext for Antonin Artaud, twenty-five years later, who had developed this further into an Uccello who, in contrast to his fellows Brunelleschi (“completely rooted in the earth”) and Donatello (“the Mind Exalted”), represents “detached Mind”, leaving all quotidian concerns of the body (including sexuality) behind in his quest for something absolute.<sup>55</sup> But where Artaud’s Uccello is less about art and more about state of mind – especially Artaud’s state of mind – Soupault’s Uccello, in contrast, is in fact about the art. This already sets Soupault’s surrealisation of Uccello apart from the kind of appropriation enacted by Artaud. His discursive interactions with Vasari and Berenson and use of (more or less) factual information regarding the artist’s biography, provenance and collections, and art works, do so too, as these clearly communicate the book’s positioning

49

Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 28, 30.

50

Tessel M. Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult. Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton*, Amsterdam 2014, 69–71.

51

“Uccello fut clairvoyant, avec une cruauté tournée vers soi-même. Il peignait sans se faire d’illusion, mais en considérant ses œuvres comme des étapes successives. La *Profanation de l’hostie* [sic] peut être un exemple de cette clairvoyance et de cette cruauté. [...] Uccello possède le don rare pour un peintre de toujours trouver ce répond à ses préoccupations immédiates.” Soupault, EP, 47.

52

This is why his works are so perfectly balanced: the combination of lyrical conception and simple and pure execution, writes Soupault, EP, 51.

53

*Ibid.*, 46.

54

*Ibid.*, 52.

55

Antonin Artaud, Paul the Birds, or The Place of Love, in: *Selected Writings*, ed. and intr. by Susan Sontag, trans. by Helen Weaver, New York 1976, 61–64 and 604, 63. The construction of Artaud’s Uccello is discussed in depth in my forthcoming publication: Paolo Uccello in French Surrealism. Doubling Artaud, in: *RIHA Journal* (forthcoming fall 2022).

within the domain of art history. In line with the Vasarian genre of art biography, Soupault does allow himself sweeping statements regarding the man and his work. Soupault's Uccello couldn't care less about either his critics or the social rules of painting: he refused to be "a slave of opinions".<sup>56</sup> He is painted as a man with vision, a genius, whose unity of will and execution binds his entire oeuvre, its modern fragmentary nature notwithstanding, strongly together.<sup>57</sup>

Art history between the 1890s and 1920s measured Uccello against standards of naturalist representation and unified linear perspective, which closed off other interpretations of his work, such as radical, experimental or witty – these can be found later in art history, yet they were already current among some futurists and certainly the surrealists. Indeed, when drawing parallels between the reception of Uccello among avant-gardes such as Surrealism and among art historians and art critics, it is tempting to highlight that the former appear to often have prefigured views of the latter, sometimes by several decades. For example, in the 1950s Kenneth Clark noted that Uccello's paintings are "not convincing as imitation of the visible world", over twenty years after Soupault argued that Uccello did not aim for mimesis of an external reality.<sup>58</sup> Another point Soupault already made in 1929, namely that Uccello's particular style should be understood as a deliberate artistic choice, is positively post-modern; only in the last couple of decades have art historians come to appreciate (some of) Uccello's works as experimental, that is as "concerned with the artistic possibilities of linear perspective rather than the logical conclusion of [that] technique".<sup>59</sup> It is unfortunate that a book such as Soupault's is generally dismissed; for all the decidedly poetic style, his study can be considered an art historical treatise inspired upon a surrealist worldview. In an analysis of Uccello's *Funerary Monument to Sir John Hawkwood* (1436) Javier Berzal de Dios has recently argued that in texts such as Schwob's – and, in my view, also Soupault's – insights may be found that "can productively inform art historical interpretations of Uccello's art". The surrealist understanding may offer a "mode to understand the pictorial aesthetics" that is not idio-

56

Soupault, EP, 62.

57

Throughout his entire oeuvre there is "une unité de volonté et d'exécution qui est un des plus admirables exemples de certitude accordée par la génie". Ibid., 49.

58

Clark, Paolo Uccello, 54.

59

Berzal de Dios, Uccello's Fluttering Monument, 98, 91–93. Carrà, too (in 1916), understood Uccello's work as experiments with perspective and linearity. See also Randolph Starn and Loren Partridge, *Representing War in the Renaissance. The Shield of Paolo Uccello*, in: *Representations* 5 (1984), 32–65, 42, who note that Uccello was concerned with "the multiple viewpoints available to the exploring eye".



syncratic but in fact opens up a space to reflect on “the paintings’ own qualities”.<sup>60</sup>

#### IV. The Potential of Uccello’s Wit and *Dimonstrazioni*

Here I will nevertheless not undertake a Surrealism-informed analysis of Uccello’s work, however profitable that might potentially be, but rather continue the focus on the reception of Uccello in French Surrealism with a reflection on echoes of and responses to Uccello in surrealist art.

In *Paolo Uccello* Soupault discussed three works in particular as highlights of Uccello’s oeuvre: *The Battle of San Romano*, *The Miracle of the Desecrated Host* and *The Hunt in the Forest*. This view was prescient and influential: these three works are the most frequently referenced in the surrealist discourse, indeed nearly exclusively so. Soupault considered *The Miracle* in particular the apogee and summary of Uccello’s work and in effect a series of painted essays.<sup>61</sup> Breton, for his part, invoked Uccello and his *Battle of San Romano* in the essay *Surrealism and Painting* (1928), which, as it deals with the importance of the internal model as discussed above, indicates the close association of Uccello with this quintessential surrealist notion.<sup>62</sup> *The Battle* would eventually become Breton’s favourite,<sup>63</sup> yet the only work by the artist visually present in the surrealist discourse of the 1920s is *The Miracle of the Host*, or more specifically, a detail of its second scene.

When receiving an image of the art work in a letter, Breton wrote, it appeared to him “full of hidden intentions, and, in all

60

Berzal de Dios, Uccello’s Fluttering Monument, 88, 92.

61

Soupault, EP, 49. As Mainberger also notes (Paolo Uccello juif, 248), the six scenes from the predella are illustrated out of order in the plate section of his book.

62

Breton writes: “Am I to believe then that everything began with myself? There were so many others, heedful of the clash of gold lances under a black sky – but where are Uccello’s Battles? And what is left of them for us?” Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 8. In the later, expanded, reprinted edition an illustration of *The Battle* (the Louvre panel) is reproduced here; note, however, that that was not part of the original publication. *Surrealism and Painting* was written over the period 1925–1927, which is not only the period when the question of surrealist painting was urgently discussed within the group but also the timeframe in which many Uccellan trails coincide: Artaud’s 1924 play, the footnote in the 1924 *Manifesto*, Soupault travelling in Italy and, back in Paris, starting preparations for *Paolo Uccello*, and Artaud’s 1926 essay about Uccello, the hair. Artaud’s portrayal of Uccello as all about concept and about mind over matter laid the groundwork, or so I suspect, for the subsequent characterisation, implicitly by Breton in *Surrealism and Painting* and explicitly by Soupault in his book of 1929, of Uccello as a painter of interior models.

63

If we count the fact that most later references by Breton are to *The Battle* as favouritism. In the 1932 English essay “Surrealism. Yesterday ...” Uccello is designated as surrealist “in the free for all fight”, which I read as a reference to *The Battle of San Romano* and its melee. Breton, *Surrealism. Yesterday*, 17. Apart from including the artist and *The Battle* in his 1957 magnum opus of surrealist art history, *L’art magique*, Breton also paid tribute to it in 1948, in the title of his poem “On the Road to San Romano” that further includes the line “wouldn’t want to frighten the horses” – another probable allusion to *The Battle*. André Breton, *Sur la route de San Romano*, in: *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. III, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet, Étienne-Alain Hubert, Philippe Bernier et al., Paris 1999, 419–421.

## 22 UCCELLO, LE POIL

éprouver. Vivant par l'âme et la matière je n'aurai au jour voulu qu'à lever le doigt pour que ces mirages dérisoires soient balayés avec

les premières épaves, au souffle de l'amour réciproque.

Robert DESNOS.

## UCCELLO, LE POIL

Pour Gènica



LA PROFANATION DE L'HOSTIE (DÉTAIL).

Paolo Uccello

Uccello mon ami, ma chimère, tu vécus avec ce mythe de poils. L'ombre de cette grande main lunaire où tu imprimes les chimères de ton cerveau, n'arrivera jamais jusqu'à la végétation de ton oreille, qui tourne et fourmille à gauche avec tous les vents de ton cœur. À gauche les poils, Uccello, à gauche les rêves, à gauche les ongles, à gauche le cœur. C'est à gauche que toutes les ombres s'ouvrent, des nefs, comme d'orifices humains. La tête couchée sur cette table où l'humanité tout entière chavire, que vois-tu autre chose que l'ombre immense d'un poil. D'un poil comme deux forêts, comme trois ongles, comme un herbage de cils, comme d'un râtelier dans les herbes du ciel. Etranglé le monde, et suspendu, cette table plate où tu inclines ta tête lourde. Et après de toi quand tu interrogues des faces, que vois-tu, qu'une circulation de rameaux, un treillage de veines, la trace minuscule d'une

ride, le ramage d'une mer de cheveux. Tout est tournant, tout est vibratile, et que vaut l'œil dépeuplé de ses cils. Lave, lave les cils, Uccello, lave les lignes, lave la trace tremblante des poils et des rides sur ces visages pendus de morts qui te regardent comme des œufs, et dans ta paume monstrueuse et pleine de lune comme d'un éclairage de fiel, voici encore les trac s augustes de tes poils qui émergent avec leurs lignes fines comme les rêves dans ton cerveau de noyé. D'un poil à un autre, combien de secrets et combien de surfaces. Mais deux poils l'un à côté de l'autre, Uccello. La ligne idéale des poils intraduisiblement fine et deux fois répétée. Il y a des rides qui font le tour des faces et se prolongent jusque dans le cou, mais sous les cheveux aussi il y a des rides, Uccello. Ainsi tu peux faire tout le tour de cet œuf qui poud entre les pierres et les astres, et qui seul possède l'animation double des yeux.

[Fig. 3]

La profanation de l'hostie (detail), in: *La Révolution surréaliste* 8, 1926, 22. Reprod. from André Breton, Pierre Naville and Benjamin Péret, *La Révolution surréaliste 1924-1929* (complete facsimile edition), Paris 1975 (photo: author).

respects, quite difficult to interpret”.<sup>64</sup> Very probably and almost immediately he, being one of the editors of the periodical, included it in *La Révolution surréaliste* 8 (December 1926) as illustration to Artaud’s essay “Uccello, the hair”. Almost the same detail subsequently reappeared in Breton’s anti-novel *Nadja* (1928) [Fig. 3].<sup>65</sup> It is the second panel in a total of six that illustrate an anti-Semitic legend. The significantly cropped reproduction shows the corner of the room, left for the viewer, where a Jewish pawnbroker and his family are anxiously gathered together. As the panel is not reproduced in its entirety, we do not see its right-hand side, which depicts the host in the fire, its blood running over the paved floor and seeping through the wall, while outside guards attempt to break down the door [Fig. 4]. Rather eye-catching overall is the floor, with its “unprecedented off-centre perspective pavement”,<sup>66</sup> an aspect that makes this scene stand out in respect to the five flatter and more foreground-oriented others. This second panel shows the central act of the titular profanation and miracle, yet that part exactly has been cropped out.<sup>67</sup> In typically surrealist manner, the cropped illustration therefore foils any attempt to understand what the act of profanation actually consists of. Furthermore, by focussing on the shock and dismay of the Jewish family, it amplifies Uccello’s implicit resistance against the anti-Semitism of the predella’s underlying legend.<sup>68</sup>

Besides hidden intentions, resistance to interpretation, singular obsession and anti-conventional perspectival experimentation, the surrealists may have seen even more in Uccello’s art and aesthetics. I propose the possibility that the surrealists were drawn to a specific aspect that was to receive no serious scholarly analysis until decades later: the ludic quality of Uccello’s art, its slightly subversive playfulness and wit. As James Elkins has insightfully analysed, one can read several of Uccello’s works as examples of artistic wit – that is as just a bit funny, bordering on parody and quite playful. I

64

André Breton, *Nadja*, rev. ed., Paris 1964 [1928], 109.

65

Ibid., 109. Another convergence of dates: published in 1928, *Nadja* was written in 1927 and detailed events from earlier that year and from 1926. Breton writes (*Nadja*, 109): on the morning of October 8 (1926) he opened a letter from Italy (“by Aragon”, although possibly really by Soupault) that contained an image of a painting by Uccello that he did not know and which he calls *The Profanation of the Host*. In a note he adds he would see the entire work (possibly the complete predella, instead of only one scene) a few months later, when it seemed “full of hidden intentions” etc.

66

Elkins, Uccello, 205.

67

That is exactly the part of the image that Breton, reproducing in *LRS* and (the original edition of) *Nadja* only the specific detail of the shocked family, does *not* show. See also André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet et al., Paris 1999, 703–704.

68

Mainberger, Paolo Uccello juif, 249–251. In Mainberger’s view (244) Artaud himself selected the image.



[Fig. 4]

Paolo Uccello, detail (second panel) from *The Miracle of the Desecrated Host (Miracolo dell'ostia profanata)*, 1467–1468, tempera on panel, 43 × 351 cm. Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche (artwork in the public domain, 31.01.2022).

follow Elkin's view that Uccello "had a more playful, less doctrinaire attitude to perspective" than his contemporaries; this comes to the fore in the perspective games that Uccello plays with the viewer, and with perspective itself as much as with the conventional rules of perspective.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, not only does Uccello seem unconcerned with spatiotemporal unity (which often gives his works a dream-like appearance, something Pudelko also alluded to<sup>70</sup>), the "paradoxes of [his] composition[s]" play with the viewer's expectations: the different vantage points subvert and obstruct the anticipation of an absolute point of view.<sup>71</sup> His overt demonstrations of skill, *dimonstrazioni*, can well be read as subversive and blasphemous: "Uccello is the Renaissance painter whose *dimonstrazioni* go the farthest, occupy the most space in his paintings, and constitute the most dangerous threat to the unfunny foundations of Renaissance religious painting."<sup>72</sup> Soupault's categorisation of this painter who executed a lot of religious scenes as an "enemy of the mystical and religious" prefigures this view.<sup>73</sup>

We can find a riposte, a witty use of Uccellan devices, in Salvador Dalí, who in 1934 returned to Uccello in an essay for *Minotaure* as well as in his art.<sup>74</sup> Rods or lance-like forms, often sharply receding, can be found in paintings such as *Masochistic Instrument* (1933–1934) and *Morning Ossification of the Cypress* (1934).<sup>75</sup> Roger Rothman has argued convincingly that these motifs are references to Uccello's lances from *The Battle of San Romano*.<sup>76</sup> *Morning Ossification of the Cypress* is especially interesting, as it combines two rods/lances with a jumping or galloping horse – potentially, even probably, an Uccellan motif, an association supported by the horse's noticeably round hind-quarters, which Uccello's horses are

69

Elkins, Uccello, 206.

70

Not least in qualifying Uccello as a "lunar" painter and using night as a theme: Pudelko, Uccello, *passim*.

71

Berzal de Dios, Uccello's Fluttering Monument, 97.

72

Elkins, Uccello, 201.

73

Soupault contends (EP, 46) that "Uccello a été consciemment l'ennemi du mystère et du flou", another admirable choice in surrealist eyes, of course.

74

Salvador Dalí, Les Nouvelles couleurs du sex appeal spectral, in: *Minotaure* 5, 1934, 20–22, 21. Roger Rothman, *Tiny Surrealism. Salvador Dalí and the Aesthetics of the Small*, Lincoln, NE 2015, 193–194.

75

See both art works on the website of the Salvador and Gala Dalí Foundation: *Instrument masochiste* (1934) and *Ossification matinale du cyprès* (1934), 21.01.2022. The (potential) lance in *Masochistic Instrument* flies a small pennant, which strengthens the hypothesis that the motif is taken from the *Battle* scenes.

76

Rothman, *Tiny Surrealism*, 192–193.

known for. Cypress trees figure conspicuously in both *Masochistic Instrument* and *Morning Ossification*: this is a motif taken from the nineteenth-century painter Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) and in particular his famous painting *Die Töteninsel* (1883). Dalí perceived *Die Töteninsel* as very flat and “frontal”.<sup>77</sup> By using the cypress-motif and the lance-motif in one painting, he purposefully combined “the emphatic spatial penetration of Uccello with the equally empathic flatness of Böcklin”,<sup>78</sup> in a ludic take on perspective, frontality and classical composition schemes.

A surrealist object by writer and publisher Georges Hugnet (1906–1974) can be taken as another example of a surrealist’s visual response to Uccello’s experimentation and play with perspective: *La profanation de l’hostie* (1935) [Fig. 5], a small vitrine.<sup>79</sup> Among other things such as a shell and small sculpture,<sup>80</sup> it incorporates a dried seahorse superimposed over a photomontage of a nude woman lying on a couch, in front of a montage of a bird-masked knight. Of course this bird-mask already resonates with Paolo as “uccello” or bird. The bird-knight is confronted by a small arrangement of nails and string, which strongly echoes string contraptions used to work out three-dimensional perspective for two-dimensional planes and alludes to artificial perspective.<sup>81</sup> The title clearly communicates that this assemblage is inspired by Uccello, in particular the predella of *The Miracle*, with its prominent and rather unique perspectival play in the second scene. Hugnet’s 1936 essay “L’œil de l’aiguille” (*The eye of the needle*) discusses Uccello in relation to artificial perspective and experimentations with multiple dimensions on a flat plane, which signals that by then Uccello had become enmeshed in the surrealist fascination for non-Euclidian space and the fourth dimension.<sup>82</sup> In a second text by Hugnet from

77

Ibid., 191–192.

78

Ibid., 196. The play with compositional schemes arises out of Dalí’s combination of a motif from a painting the central subject of which occupies almost entirely the middle ground (Böcklin’s island) with one where the middle ground is nearly completely suppressed, since all activity of *The Battle*’s battle takes place in the immediate foreground against a distant background. While most prominently visible in *The Battle*, it recurs throughout Uccello’s oeuvre. The Uccellan echoes in De Chirico’s metaphysical painting also include a strong division between foreground and background with almost total suppression of the middle ground.

79

In 1930 Dalí made a [painting](#) with exactly that title as well (24.01.2022).

80

This is in fact a miniature citation of *Table* by Giacometti (1933).

81

Sylvia Riva, “La septième face du dé” (1936) ou la puissance opérationnelle de la quatrième dimension. Marcel Duchamp et Georges Hugnet à l’écoute des mathématiques, in: *Acme* 63, 1, 2010, 51–73, 263. Mathematical models of all kinds were well known in French Surrealism, not least on account of Man Ray’s and Max Ernst’s fascination with mathematical models by Poincaré and others, captured in photographs, drawings and paintings.

82

Georges Hugnet, L’œil de l’aiguille, in: *Cahiers d’Art* 11, 1–2, 1936, 27–28. Space is lacking here to explore this issue further but suffice to say that in the 1930s a diverse group

the same year Uccello is listed among leading members of the surrealist pantheon such as the Marquis de Sade and Ducasse: he had by then become firmly embedded as a surrealist forefather.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, an integral visual element of *The Miracle* are the rather flat painted columns that separate the six sections. It is habitually overlooked, although not in Surrealism.<sup>84</sup> David Sylvester has made the interesting suggestion that this element in particular was paid tribute to by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte (1898–1967). It may have inspired one of his most favourite motifs: the *bilboquet* or baluster. The *bilboquet* appeared first in *The Lost Jockey* (including studies) from 1926 that Magritte himself considered one of his first successful surrealist paintings.<sup>85</sup> *The Lost Jockey* has distinct Uccellan overtones, as it cites as well *The Hunt in the Forest*, another painting Elkins has analysed as “playful” with perspective.<sup>86</sup> For an artist who sourced many of his works, certainly at this early stage of his career, in popular culture, Magritte’s turn towards an Italian Renaissance artist is notable. The timing – 1926, when Soupault had just been to Italy and Artaud’s Uccellan writing was published – leads me to think that it was the Parisian surrealists’ interest in Uccello that also sparked Magritte’s.

## V. In Conclusion

In the end, surrealist Uccello is unique: even incomparable, writes Soupault, whether it pertains to his choice of topics, his style and composition, the diverse nature of his oeuvre, or his impressive use of mathematical science.<sup>87</sup> Soupault successfully constructed a surrealist Uccello, that is to say, as a visionary artist perceived as a fellow traveller of Surrealism. Notably, while Soupault broke with Breton in 1926 and continued on his own trajectory, his Uccello became firmly ensconced in the surrealist discourse, never to disappear and in fact only to grow in stature as a surrealist predecessor.

Central to the surrealist reception of Uccello and his art is the painter’s obsessive privileging of mental principles of perspective

of surrealist artists and allies explored the (artistic and intellectual) possibilities of mathematical speculation, in particular regarding non-Euclidian space, which was fuelled by Marcel Duchamp’s longer standing interest in those issues. The seminal source about this subject is Linda Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art*, rev. ed., Cambridge, MA 2018. Hugnet in particular connected speculation about and experimentation with three and more dimensions to Uccello and his experimentation with perspective and pictorial space; Riva, *La septième face*, 253–254.

<sup>83</sup>

*La septième face du dé*, discussed in Riva, *La septième face*, 256.

<sup>84</sup>

David Sylvester, *Portraits de Magritte*, in: *Rétrospective Magritte*, Brussels 1978, 63.

<sup>85</sup>

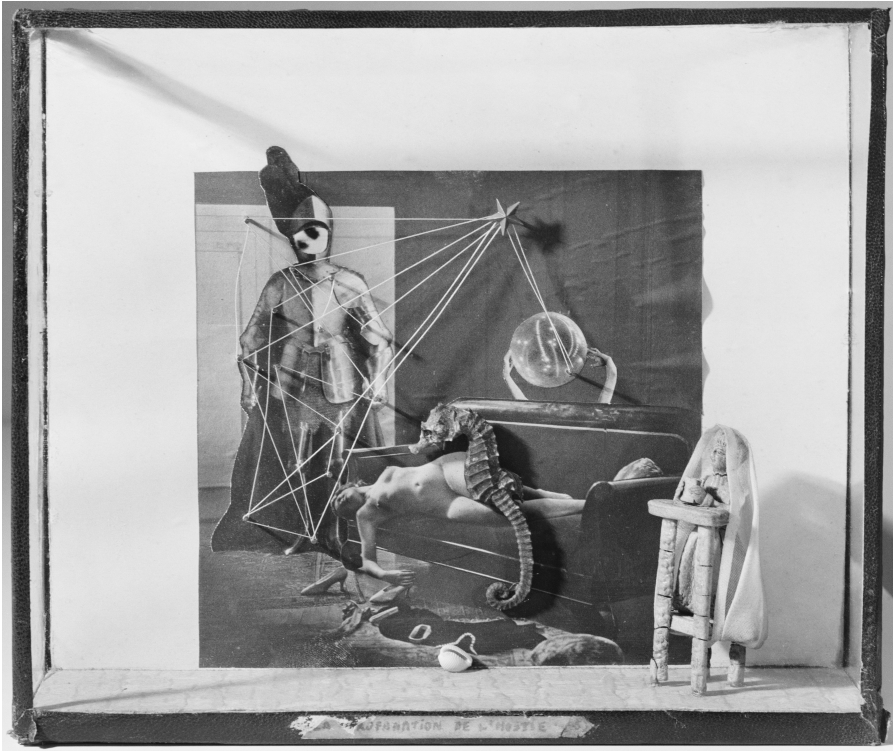
See for instance [one version in the MoMA](#) (07.06.2021). Note: in 1947–1948 Magritte retook this theme in several works with the same title.

<sup>86</sup>

Sylvester, *Portraits*, 47–76, 63; Elkins, *Uccello*, 209, 210.

<sup>87</sup>

Soupault, *EP*, 56–57.



[Fig. 5]

Georges Hugnet, *La Profanation de l'hostie*, 1935, vitrine of wood, cardboard and glass containing an assemblage of different elements, 21.7 × 25.5 × 7 cm. Paris, Centre Pompidou © Musée national d'art modern, Paris. Crédit photo: photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Henri Favre.



over perceptive mimesis, his (implied) rejection of naturalism and the constraints of mimesis, and an experimental, perhaps playful attitude towards perspective. As Schwob had written: “Car Uccello ne se souciait point de la réalité des choses, mais de leur multiplicité et de l’infini des lignes.”<sup>88</sup> Notions such as these were developed within Surrealism to make Uccello part of a select elite of artists who undermined the conventions of reality, realism and observation. He became part of the surrealist prehistory of Surrealism, as David Gascoyne indicated in 1935:

Surrealistic painting is not the *monopoly* [sic] of those artists who have devoted their whole energies to a systematic exploration of surrealist means of expression in the plastic domain [...]; for surrealist art has existed at all times and in all countries. Uccello, Bosch, Breughel [sic], Callot, el Greco, Goya, Blake, certain pre-Raphaelites [...], to mention only a few, may all be regarded as surrealist artists.<sup>89</sup>

The surrealist understanding of Uccello as an artist disdaining the representation of reality meant that his work could be seen as experimental, radical, witty and wondrous, a reception history of the artist that differs significantly from the same’s reception in the art history of the time. Several traces of Vasari’s Uccello remain in surrealist Uccello, most prominently his devotion to art at the exclusion of all else. Then, in the next stage in the process of refinement into surrealist Uccello, Schwob developed this Uccello into an artist who leaves life’s banal concerns behind to pursue essential matters, subsequently defined by Soupault as the painterly pursuit of interior lyricism.<sup>90</sup> In several places Soupault writes about how for Uccello the artistic endeavour was fully integrated with the self; or perhaps this self was entirely subsumed, even dissolved, in the artistic project. Such a fusing of art with life, as also developed in the narratives provided by Vasari, Schwob and Artaud, must have strengthened Uccello’s surrealistisation; we should remember that for the surrealists themselves too Surrealism was a way of life.

In the 1920s Artaud, Breton and Soupault engaged with Uccello, both with the idiosyncratic character as described by Schwob and Vasari and with (some of) his art. Thus hypotexts include Vasari’s *Life* and Schwob’s imagined biography, and, in the case of Soupault’s *Paolo Uccello*, also and quite prominently the art historical studies by Berenson. By the 1930s Uccello was making the rounds among the surrealists, and it should be noted that several were

<sup>88</sup>

Schwob, *Paulo Uccello*, 375.

<sup>89</sup>

Gascoyne, *A Short Survey*, 104–105. Note that Gascoyne does distinguish between “Surrealist” and “surrealist” art further down the page.

<sup>90</sup>

See also Marguerite Bonnet, *André Breton. Naissance de l’aventure surréaliste*, Paris 1988, 61 n68.

introduced to him through other surrealists and/or the surrealist discourse; in other words, interdiscursive transfer within the discourse of Surrealism played a considerable part too. For instance, Pudelko's 1935 illustrated essay in *Minotaure* 7 resonated with surrealist painter Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1955) to such an extent that years later he would describe his memories of a Canadian forest in terms of Uccello's *Battle*.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, both indirectly, through Surrealism's growing fame internationally, and directly, through surrealist publications in English (for instance by Breton in 1932 and Gascoyne in 1935), the idea that Uccello was to be considered a surrealist predecessors became rather widespread. That, by extension, quattrocento art had bearing on surrealist art was subsequently strongly implied publicly by Alfred Barr, Jr. in the 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* that he curated at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).<sup>92</sup> With that show a new phase was reached in the intermingling of the discourse of Surrealism with that of art history of the Renaissance, which with respect to Uccello specifically Soupault had instigated in 1929. Indeed, at least some of the significantly increased attention that was paid to Uccello in the 1930s by art historians may be ascribed to the surrealists; taking note of their rather overt attempt at surrealistisation of this artist, some scholars felt the need to set the record straight.<sup>93</sup> Although one cannot go so far as to put the reception of Uccello in the twentieth century entirely down to the surrealists' intervention, it is clear that their appropriation was quite impactful.

**Tessel Bauduin**, programme director at the Humanities Lab, University of Amsterdam, is a laureate of the Dutch Research Council's VI-programme for Research Excellence. Bauduin has co-edited several special issues, including "The Canonisation of Modernism" in *The Journal of Art Historiography* (2018) and "Modernism in Migration" in *Stedelijk Studies* (2019). Her monograph *Surrealism and the Occult* was published in 2014, and she has co-edited *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics* (2017) and *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature and Cinema* (2018). Bauduin has further published on the avant-garde reception of Hieronymus Bosch, medievalism in surrealist periodicals, Surrealism in the Netherlands, and Hilma af Klint, among other subjects. Her current research projects focus on global Surrealism, postcolonialism and (surrealist) anti-colonialism, especially in relation to collections; and the construction of Renaissance art and artists in the European avant-garde.

91

Elza Adamowicz, Off the Map, in: Elza Adamowicz (ed.), *Surrealism. Crossings/Frontiers*, New York 2006, 197–216, 212.

92

Tessel M. Bauduin, Surrealist Medievalism. A Case Study, in: Karl Fugelso (ed.), *Studies in Medievalism XXVII. Authenticity, Medievalism, Music*, Cambridge 2018, 151–177, 170.

93

Mainberger, Paolo Uccellos Mazzocchi, 361 n8.