



Hello,

Dalí

The surrealist triangle in the Catalonia region of Northwestern Spain reveals Salvador Dalí lives in the details.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO

At the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, the largest collection of its kind in the world, one need only stare at the imagery for a while to unpeel layers of hidden meaning. It's doubtful anyone can fully grasp the inner thoughts of Dalí, whose art is both curious and genius, but to procure a further understanding of his life and inspiration, it is essential to follow in his footsteps through the Catalonia region of Northeastern Spain to the places he loved and painted, and where a whimsical museum stands (bread-encrusted and topped with golden eggs) in testament to the spectacle and self-adulation that was and remains the quintessence of Dalí.

LIFE AS THEATER

About 90 miles north of Barcelona, in the triangle formed by the towns of Figueres, Cadaqués and Púbol, the life of this flamboyant creator reveals itself piece by stunning piece. In front of the old municipal the-

ater in Figueres, Anna Otero glides up with a shy smile and a friendliness that is indigenous to this part of the world. A local of the region, Otero spent two and a half years working as the education coordinator at the Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg before returning to work as the assistant curator here at the Dalí Theater-Museum, which opened in 1974.

"It's important to realize that Dalí was alive during the creation of this museum and he controlled every aspect of it," Otero explains. "It's unusual for any artist to build his own museum and create his own legacy."

The choice of the theater as the museum's main entrance is significant because it is the scene of Dalí's entrance into the art world. At 13, he held his first exhibition in the lobby. The theater also faces the Església de Sant Pere, the church where Dalí was baptized in 1904. A column of visitors has started to stretch down the narrow streets of Figueres. Close to a million visitors



Dalí's sense of humor is evident in the garden at El Castell Gala Dalí, in Púbol, where many of his fanciful sculptures, including this spindly legged elephant, reside.



per year line up to enter the museum, and, Otero says, in the summer, the wait can be more than two hours.

“That amused Dalí very much,” she says, smiling. “He liked looking at all these people waiting to see his work.”

Otero skips the line and steps into the heart of Dalí’s world. The museum presents a survey of the works of an extraordinary artist, but the space itself is a Dalí masterpiece that reveals much about the life and loves of the man.

According to Otero, everything here is significant and nothing is incidental, down to the placement of each piece and the

names of the rooms, and all is connected in some way to Dalí’s life. It’s hard to know where to look first: Up at the semicircular open-air courtyard with its gilded statues reminiscent of Oscars, or at the black 1941 convertible Cadillac in the center of the space. “He was very proud of this car,” says Otero as visitors peer through the windows. “There were only six models ever made, and he had one of them.” (As did Clark Gable and Al Capone.)

The car was a gift to Dalí’s wife and muse, Gala, and the couple drove it coast to coast during their stay in the United States. Dalí transformed the car into a



piece called *Rainy Taxi*. Inside, a steady “rain” drenches three mannequins while music blares from the dashboard. Dalí also made sure to include some escargots from Burgundy, points out Otero, because they are the tastiest.

“Dalí liked to incorporate other artists and objects into the museum. He loved to recycle items and everything here impacted him in some way,” explains Otero, pointing to a dress that Paco Rabanne gave him.

Visitors are also reminded of Dalí’s genius when staring at a painting of the back of a nude Gala looking out at the sea. Squint, or look through a camera lens, and



it becomes a picture of Abraham Lincoln.

“Even those drips of blue paint are intentional,” Otero adds, aiming her finger around the perimeter of the room.

Under the multifaceted cupola looming over the old stage is an unmarked rectangle that is Dalí’s crypt.

Never ignoring his love for his birthplace, Dalí created an opulent room named “The Palace of the Wind,” whose ceiling depicts him and Gala as giants, dancing the local dance, the *sardana*, and showering gold over Catalonia. “The Treasure Room,” designed to resemble the velvety interior of a jewelry box, holds Dalí’s most precious paintings. Here, visitors see some early works, a rare painting of Gala smiling, and his famous *Basket of Bread*. This painting is the second of the same name, painted in 1945 when he was challenged to redo it. The first one is part of the St. Petersburg collection.

“The two museums complement each other tremendously,” says Otero. “St. Petersburg is a collection. Here, it is like Dalí’s personal theme park; a ride through a painter’s mind. To really understand Dalí, you should see them both.”

There is also the “Master Room” that holds Dalí’s own private collection of various artists’ work, the famous “Homage to Mae West” room, and the jewelry exhibit with Dalí-designed pieces.



Clockwise from opposite page, bottom: Dalí’s home in Port Lligat is filled with photos and momentos. The Theater-Museum was Dalí’s personal theme park and an ode to his life’s work and love of theater. The view from the terrace at Port Lligat. The artist keeps a watchful eye over those who visit his museum.



This page, top and right: Views from the Theater-Museum. Above: The ceiling of the Palace of the Wind room depicts Dalí and Gala as giants dancing the *sardana*. Opposite page: Bread and eggs adorn the outside of the Theater-Museum in Figueres.

LIFE AS LOVE

Though the most popular museum by far, the Theater-Museum is only a third of a surrealist triangle for enthusiasts. Dalí spent much of his childhood in the nearby seaside village of Cadaqués (a painting of the same name hangs in the St. Petersburg museum). Just a few miles north is Port Lligat, where visitors discover a labyrinth of fishing shacks cobbled into a house that was Dalí and Gala's main residence from 1930 to the mid-'80s. It is here Dalí created most of his famous works.

"Dalí's homeland, his family and local landscapes were the inspiration for his work," says Otero. "These are his roots."

The small rooms are a kaleidoscope of light from the sea-facing windows and items reflecting the artist's memories and obsessions. It's a perfect lair for a flamboyant surrealist. Outside, the phallic pool is surrounded by gardens with large sculptures, American pop art and more eggs. Dalí's painting studio in the house is remarkable, with a long slit in the floor and accompanying pulley system that allowed Dalí to unfurl canvases as he created his large tableaux, six of which hang in St. Petersburg.

The third location on the Dalí trek is El Castell Gala Dalí (Gala Dalí Castle) in

Púbol, 25 miles from Figueres. Dalí bought the house for his muse, and she spent her summers here. Though more stark than the house in Port Lligat, Gala's castle doesn't hold back its revelations. Dalí painted *trompe l'oeil* radiators on the metal screens Gala used to hide the real radiators, and he added whimsical sculptures of spindly legged elephants to the garden. Gala's tomb is in the basement, below a cross, and next to an empty tomb intended for Dalí.

At the Hotel Durán in Figueres, a few hundred meters from the Theater-Museum, owner Louis Durán points to framed hand-written letters from Dalí, and says he has a private collection of around 30 letters that Dalí wrote to Gala. The hotel is a unique supplement for Dalí seekers, and Durán displays an amazing stash of original sketches and lithographs, and photos of the artist. Durán himself remembers meeting the artist when he was eight years old.

"My father and Dalí were friends," he recalls. "He often came to dine and to celebrate." Durán turns on the lights of a musty, private barrel room next to the main dining room, revealing a table still set for dinner.

"He loved coming here," says Durán. "He was at home here." ♦

