

Matta “Face” “Letter Puzzle” (GAME IN SUISSE)

Hello this is Max again.

We’re looking at a sketch by Roberto “Matta,” that he transformed in a decidedly Surrealist manner.

Matta was a great friend of Gordon and Elisabeth. Gordon was closer with him than with any other artist friend except perhaps Esteban Frances OR Yves Tanguy. Gordon and Matta joined the Surrealist movement together and were the youngest members.

Matta’s caricature is strong, wild and humorous. When I was a child growing up I spent a lot of time looking at the face and trying to figure it out. It reminds me of those portraits constructed of fruits and vegetables that were painted by Italian Renaissance artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo as optical illusions. They play with your sense of “reality” in a very Surrealistic way.

Back then in 1938-39, my mother, the “little sister,” hung out with Matta. Together they shopped the flea markets of Paris, looked at art and architecture and discussed the state of the world. They were buddies, pals, or, as she would say in French: “COPAINS”. She remembered with great pleasure helping him learn English with rhymes, riddles and charades.

He created this work for her in that same spirit of fun. He dis-assembled his sketch by carefully tearing it into random pieces and writing little personal messages here and there, front and back. Just imagine Elisabeth, in England in 1938, receiving a letter from France, full of little scraps of paper. She put them together like a jigsaw puzzle, saw the inner meaning and treasured his joke for a lifetime.

The one “text-message” you can see on the front side says: “do you remember our game in Suisse.” (That’s Switzerland, where Gordon, Matta and Elisabeth and other friends had spent vacation time.)

“Our game” may refer to any number of English parlor games that my mother loved to play. It might also be an old English favourite called “Heads, Bodies and Legs” where you divide a paper in three and, with your companions, sight unseen, create a strange creature, the weirder the better.

The Surrealists had a variation called “Cadavre Exquis” or Exquisite Corpse. It was all about stimulating the imagination, seeing something new appear and having fun. The Surrealists including Tanguy, Sage and Breton loved playing these games.