Champagne standard lamp

Place of origin: London

Date: 1938

Artist/Maker: Dali, Salvador, born 1904 - died 1989 (artist)
James, Edward, born 1907 - died 1984 (patrons)
Green and Abbott

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Art Fund and V&A Members

Museum number: W.1-2019

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description
This pair of standing lamps were commissioned by and made for Surrealist patron, collector, collaborator and poet Edward James. They are a typically Dalí-esque concoction of the unexpected, the improbable and the playful, mixed with a dose of hedonism: a stack of oversized metal champagne coupes standing on a metal tray evocative of Victorian papier mâché, which suggests both an incipient fountain of champagne but also an anthropomorphic spine with a head.

The lamps are of special interest as one of the two pairs made in 1938-39 for the interior of James’s remarkable Monkton House. Monkton was originally designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1902 for James’s parents on their West Dean estate. James moved into Monkton in the mid-1930s and lived there until he moved to Mexico in the 1940s, returning from time to time through the years. In 1935, James set about refurbishing its interior assisted by architect Christopher ‘Kit’ Nicholson (himself assisted by Hugh Casson), as well as decorator Norris Wakefield. James attempted to create ‘a complete Surrealist house’ although the contents mix Victorian, Edwardian and new furniture and decorations, all imbued with a Surrealist atmosphere, with James’s remarkable collection of Surrealist art. The house included other examples of Surrealist furniture by Dalí, specially woven carpets and textiles and outlandish decoration. It was the only such house ever built in Britain.

The lamps were intended to flank the dining room fireplace and were, in turn, flanked by a pair of Mae West Lips sofas, one of which the V&A now owns (W.6-2018).

Descriptive line
A standard lamp of Surrealist design created by Salvador Dalí (or Dali) and Edward James.

Physical description
Standard lamp, formed of a stack of ten equally sized copper alloy champagne coupes. These stand on a low, three-legged tray base of copper alloy painted black, and decorated with ivy and berries rendered in gold paint. A number of the coupe bowls have removable ashtray inserts of the same copper alloy; a numbering system applied to the base of these ashtrays suggests there were more of them at one time.

Dimensions
Height: 160 cm, Width: 40 cm

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Object history note
Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) was the most (in)famous of all Surrealist artists and today remains one of the best known and most popular of modern artists. His unique form of Surrealism, deeply informed by his fascination with the unconscious, the irrational and the poetic, was not restricted to traditional fine art but embraced a wide range of designed objects, some of them useful. In 1935 Dalí met a kindred spirit, the British collector and poet Edward James (1907-84). This led to a deep friendship between James and Dalí, with James becoming both a large-scale collector of Dalí’s work and the pair embarking on various artistic collaborations.

In 1936, James formally agreed to buy all of Dalí’s subsequent work in an effort to give Dalí the ‘security and freedom to work uninterrupted’ (Dawn Ades). At the same time, James was buying the work of René Magritte on a large scale, as well as that of the British artist Leonora Carrington and the Paris-based Surrealist Leonor Fini. James rapidly became Britain’s most distinguished supporter of Surrealism as well as a collaborator with many Surrealist artists. His collection became one of the largest and most important in the world. James was indisputably a key figure in the promotion and international recognition of Surrealism.

The impetus for the creation of the lamps probably came from James rather than Dalí, as it was James who passionately wanted to realise his vision for ‘a complete Surrealist house’ at Monkton.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1468752/champagne-standard-lamp-dali-salvador/