

Salvador Domingo Felipe Jacinto Dalí Domènech (Salvador Dalí)

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Born in: Figueres, Catalonia, Spain



### The Persistence of Memory

The setting for this painting is a rather bleak landscape. We see a sandy beach in the foreground and middle ground that appears dark, like it's in shadow. The beach stretches toward the background, where it eventually reaches a body of still water, probably a lake or ocean. This body of water meets the horizon line. The sky above the horizon is featureless, with no clouds, sun, birds, or anything. On the painting's upper-right side, there are jagged, rocky cliffs extending down into the water. In the left foreground, there is a large rectangular form, like a solid box, serving as a table. In the middle ground, directly in front of us, there is a strange organic form, which at first glance appears to be an animal lying on its side. Then we realize the form doesn't look like anything we've ever seen before. Four pocket watches are placed in this strange scene, three of them appearing to melt into soft, malleable shapes.

The natural illumination in the painting tells us the time of day is either late afternoon around dusk or early morning around dawn. We know this because the band of yellowish light near the horizon line tells us the sun is just below the horizon line. The foreground is relatively dark compared to the distant horizon line. The colors in the painting are dark brown in the foreground sand, yellow in the rocky cliffs and horizon line, and aqua blue in the sky, the thin sliver of water in the background, and three of the four watches.

There are very few objects in this painting. Most of them are quite strange. This strangeness contributes to the mystery of the landscape. Let's consider these objects. First, there's a box-like rectangular form in the lower-left portion of the painting. On top of it are two watches and a dark, dead tree trunk standing straight up. One of the watches drapes over the edge of the box. Part of the watch rests on the top surface of it, and part of it drapes down over the right side. The watch looks as though it's made of melting wax and is beginning to lose its solid form. Another way to describe it is to think of the round pocket watch as a limp pancake hanging over the side of a table. Another watch is placed on the top of the box with its face down. This means we cannot see the numbers or the hands of the face. Instead, we see the gold casing of the back of the watch. This watch is orange, and black ants are crawling over the surface of it. The ants appear to be feeding on the watch as though it's organic and edible.

A third watch is draped over a limb of the dead tree. Like the melting watch on the box, this hanging watch is also pliable and limp. Imagine it as a pancake folded over the limb and hanging down. The watch's face is toward us and its back is to the limb. We can see the numbers three through nine. We can see the hand on the watch and it points to the number six. But we cannot tell whether it's the minute or hour hand.

Behind the tree and near the water's edge is a flat board. It's not clear why the board is there or what it means. In the center of the painting is a large, fleshy, animal-like creature with the fourth watch draped over it. The creature is grayish and seems to be lying on top of a rock. This creature is stretched horizontally across the sand. It's a soft, pliable form. The creature's head is on our left, and its tail is on our right. We see its profile, which faces the painting's lower edge. The head has a human-like nose and long eyelashes. The head appears to be a distorted human profile. We can recognize a tongue, which hangs out of its mouth, eyelashes, and a closed eyelid. The body of the creature appears smooth and featureless, as though it's a cross between a fish, a dolphin, and a human. This animal-like form shows no signs of life. This figure is an example of metamorphosis, a device Dali and other Surrealists used to merge human, vegetal, and animal forms into a single unit. It occurs often in Dali's work.

By Claire McGill