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Manifesting Magic:  
Occultism and Feminism in the Art of  
Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo

By

Margaret Dirschl

A thesis submitted in conformity  
with the requirements for the  
Master's Degree in Art Business  
Sotheby's Institute of Art

2022

13,094 Words

## **ABSTRACT**

The artworks of Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo are replete with symbolism and evocations of the occult, formulating bodies of work that are charged with magic and mysticism. When studied within the context of their male contemporaries of the Surrealist group, it becomes apparent that this use of the occult operates as a compelling and historically based feminist strategy. Immediately stemming from the occult revival of the previous century and the issues for females presented by Surrealism, the foundations of this idea originate much earlier in the pagan traditions of antiquity and the witch hunts of the 15th through 18th centuries. This thesis explores the historical relationship between feminism and occult practice, specifically diving into its manifestation within the artworks of Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo.

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## INTRODUCTION

There has been much attention paid recently to the expansive gaps in the traditional study of art history by the institutions and individuals of the art world. These gaps in study and acknowledgement generally include artists that do not fit into the typical category of being white, male, and of European descent; in contemporary times there has been great effort to shed light on these artists who have been underrepresented within the canon of art history. For example, The Armory Show in New York partnered with the US Open in 2022 to display five sculptural works by artists from a wide range of underrepresented backgrounds at the hugely attended tournament. There are countless other institutions and outlets that are working in similar ways; The Armory Show is but one example of this contemporary mission. In this thesis, I seek to address a very specific gap in the study of art history: the intersection of female artists, occult interests, and feminism in the 20th century. It has been pointed out that “feminist spirituality has always remained on the margins of mainstream culture and academic acceptability,”<sup>1</sup> and I wish to shed light on how these occult interests were employed by female artists as a feminist strategy in response to the late misogyny of their male contemporaries.

Before I begin, it is important to recognize that the female artist, for centuries and even today, has been continually overlooked and overshadowed by her male counterparts. Earlier art can explain this with the excuse that females were “largely barred from artistic professions and training until the 1870s,” but even now works by female artists make up

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<sup>1</sup> Jennie Klein, “Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2009): 578, accessed September 29, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40608393>.

just “a small share of major permanent collections in the U.S. and Europe.”<sup>2</sup> A 1989 poster by the Guerrilla Girls brings up this same idea as well as the sexualization of women in art, posing the question, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?,” and presenting the statistics that “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.”<sup>3</sup> At auction, women’s works sell for far less than those by men, and only “two works by women have ever broken into the top 100 auction sales for paintings, despite women being the subject matter for approximately half of the top 25.”<sup>4</sup> In recent times, there has been a renewed interest in discovering these female artists and contextualizing them within those traditional male art historical narratives.

For a long time, Wassily Kandinsky was considered the first artist to create an abstract work of art. Once Swedish artist Hilma af Klint’s work was rediscovered after decades of being hidden from the public, it was realized that she was creating mature abstract works before Kandinsky. People took note, and her groundbreaking exhibition at the Guggenheim in 2018, *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, drew the highest attendance for a single exhibition in the museum’s history.<sup>5</sup> This exhibition also “served as a reckoning for art history’s blindspots, especially for women artists considered too

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor Whitten Brown, “Why Is Work by Female Artists Still Valued Less than Work by Male Artists?,” *Artsy*, March 8, 2019, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-work-female-artists-valued-work-male-artists>.

<sup>3</sup> Guerrilla Girls, “Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/849438>.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, “Why Is Work by Female Artists Still Valued Less than Work by Male Artists?”

<sup>5</sup> “Hilma Af Klint: Paintings for the Future Most-Visited Exhibition in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's History,” The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/hilma-af-klint-paintings-for-the-future-most-visited-exhibition-in-solomon-r-guggenheim-museums-history>.

‘mystical’ for the conservative art world.”<sup>6</sup> Although her art was hidden at her own wish, rather than being overlooked by the art world, this still serves as a good example of the growing interest in contextualizing the works of female artists from past artistic periods.

Sticking with the example of af Klint, she inspires much fascination because of her spiritual life that inspired her work. She was an avid follower and practitioner of both Spiritualism and Theosophy. Despite the extreme importance of these spiritual traditions to her life and work, it is still often difficult to find any real scholarly commentary regarding the spiritual, and often occult, traditions that shaped many artists’ works. Religion and art have been intertwined since their very beginnings — a visit to almost any museum or place of worship will prove this. If so much scholarly care and attention is paid to the relationship between art and religion, then why is it that non-religious spirituality often becomes a less serious subject in the eyes of art historians? These beliefs and practices that fall outside the scope of traditional religion can be categorized under the umbrella of the occult — a term which often sparks sentiments of frivolity and are often discounted, as they do not conform to traditional belief systems and are instead based heavily on the individual’s personal experience, rather than any established religious system.

These ideas regarding female artists and occult interests have been swirling around in my head for the last six years or so as I have studied Art History, Art Business, and the Contemporary Art Market, and have now matured to comprise the subject of my

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<sup>6</sup> “The Armory Show: Hilma's Ghost: Dannielle Tegeder + Sharmistha Ray,” The Armory Show | Hilma's Ghost: Dannielle Tegeder + Sharmistha Ray – Carrie Secrist Gallery, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.secristgallery.com/exhibitions/2021/the-armory-show-dannielle-tegeder-sharmistha-ray/>.

Master's Thesis. It is my prerogative to explore the relationship between occult interests and feminism through an art historical lens. Fundamentally, this thesis will explore artistic examples of occult interests and traditions, though from a very specific artistic, feminist, and Surrealist angle. This thesis will focus on the incorporation of the occult as a feminist strategy employed by artists Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo in response to the representation of the female within the artistic production of their Surrealist male contemporaries.

I chose to explore the Surrealist period because the female artists associated with the Surrealists were largely preoccupied with finding a new mode of representing the female artistically. With the occult revival also taking place around this time, this artistic and cultural period becomes a wonderful example of an interesting use of the occult as a feminist strategy by some of these artists. Within this period, Carrington and Varo are the most exemplary figures of this idea. They also have interesting biographical similarities, both fostering an interest in the occult, experiencing the tribulations of war and love, earning the respect and admiration of the Surrealists in Paris, and ultimately settling in Mexico City where they found peace in life and freedom in creating, making the juxtaposition of the two especially intriguing.

The first chapter serves as a brief overview of Surrealism, highlighting the issues that it presented for women. The second chapter pivots, discussing the history of the witch and occult practice in modern western Europe, as well as the circumstances leading to the late 19th century occult revival. This chapter provides context for the occult culture of the period in which Carrington and Varo were working, as well as the inherent and

historical ties between the occult and feminism. Then, the focus turns to the life and work of Carrington and Varo. Each artist will have her own chapter, exploring important aspects of her life, association with the Surrealists, occult interests, and the feminist strategies employed through the use of occult elements in her work. A conclusion follows, unifying all of these chapters and highlighting the most important ideas.

## CHAPTER 1: Surrealism

### i. A Brief Introduction to Surrealism

Surrealism is a multidisciplinary movement, primarily spanning literature and the visual arts, that flourished in Europe during the period between World War I and World War II. Although the term Surrealism was coined by French poet Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917, the movement was born in Paris in 1924 with the publishing of André Breton's *Manifesto du Surréalisme*. Preceded by Cubism and Futurism, Surrealism “was born out of Dadism,” a movement focused on producing art with a deliberate aim to defy reason.<sup>7</sup> At its origin, Surrealism was a reaction to the destruction that came from the cultural and political rationalism that had guided Europe for generations, eventually culminating in the horrors of the First World War. This turn away from realism after the First World War was understandable, as “the war had proved that reason is less reasonable than the dream” and artists commenced their “search for a reality deeper than appearances.”<sup>8</sup>

So often we forget that many of these modern artistic movements, such as Surrealism, Futurism, or Dadism, were fundamentally intellectual movements and were not occupied solely by the domain of the visual arts. These were highly mature intellectual movements with manifestoes and newspapers, exhibitions and bureaus, and in the case of Surrealism, group membership and a firm doctrinal allegiance enforced by its leader, poet and critic André Breton. The Surrealists were multi-disciplinary in their output, spanning media such as literature, film, theatre, music, and the visual arts. In the

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<sup>7</sup> Gaston Criel, “Surrealism,” *Books Abroad* 26, no. 4 (1952): 133, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40090932>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

early years, the group was made up only of men, some of the most prominent being leader André Breton, author Tristan Tzara, poet Paul Éluard, writer René Crevel, sculptor Jean Arp, and artists Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, and Man Ray (fig. 1). Women did make their way into the group, albeit usually through their relationships with the men already within the circle. It is important to mention here that there are many women who were either official members of the group or closely associated with it who do not receive enough historical attention within the canon of Surrealism, and a few of them will be discussed later on in the chapter.

André Breton first described the “turn of thought distinctive of Surrealism” in his *Manifesto du Surréalisme* of 1924.<sup>9</sup> Breton explained the Surrealist activity as a “means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in an absolute reality, a surreality.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, Surrealism was far from a simple and deliberate turn from reason; it was a search for truth via the exploration of the subconscious and the imagination.

The Surrealists called upon a number of specific techniques to access the subconscious mind and express it in artistic reality. The most significant and widely used of these activities was that of psychic automatism, the “attempt to record the stream of the uninhibited” subconscious.<sup>11</sup> For those literary Surrealists, this manifested in the

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<sup>9</sup> Charles E. Gauss, “The Theoretical Backgrounds of Surrealism,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2, no. 8 (1943): 37, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/425943>.

<sup>10</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, “Surrealism,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Surrealism>.

<sup>11</sup> Gauss, “The Theoretical Backgrounds of Surrealism,” 39.

individual rapidly writing down an irrational flow of thought without any preconceived intention. The method was also well suited for visual artists, who practiced psychic automatism in the form of subconscious doodling. In his manifesto, Breton in fact defines Surrealism as, “pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express, either verbally, in writing, or by any other manner, the real functioning of thought.”<sup>12</sup> This pure psychic automatism, the recording of “thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic concerns,” was a tool widely used by the Surrealist group to unveil the inner workings of subconscious mind.<sup>13</sup>

Given the Surrealists’ fascination with the mind and its subconscious activity, it should come as no surprise that they also found interest in the work and findings of Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. Breton had admitted his interest in Freudian psychoanalysis by 1924.<sup>14</sup> While Freud’s work was more occupied with how dreams informed daily life, the Surrealists specifically explored the ways in which the dream realm could inform creative practice. Separating the theories from the creator’s therapeutic intentions, the Surrealists attempted to liberate subconscious dreams, desire, and sexuality for the purpose of creative production.<sup>15</sup>

Freud’s theories have a rather notorious male chauvinistic edge to them. A prime example is his view of women being “ultimately restricted by their body.”<sup>16</sup> Freud’s

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<sup>12</sup> André Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 1924.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Gauss, “The Theoretical Backgrounds of Surrealism,” 38.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Public Broadcasting Service, *Young Dr. Freud, Perspectives: Women*, PBS, accessed October 16, 2022, [https://www.pbs.org/youngdrfreud/pages/perspectives\\_women.htm](https://www.pbs.org/youngdrfreud/pages/perspectives_women.htm).



theory of *penis envy* implies that women, in the third stage of psychosexual development around ages 3 to 6, begin to see themselves as inferior to men and are inherently disadvantaged due to their lack of a phallus, and that this impairs their entire psychological and psychosexual development. Freud's *Oedipal complex* implies that young boys in that same stage of psychosexual development begin to experience desire for their mother, which ultimately matures into a strong sexual interest in females. Freud's theories did not come without criticism during his time, though they still reinforced many views of the already patriarchal society.<sup>17</sup> The female body, as interpreted by Freud, was ultimately the object of male sexual desire and the source of female anxiety and disgust, and it was this interpretation of women that was often the central subject of Surrealist art.

## **ii. Portrayal of Women**

Although it would be incorrect to make sweeping generalizations regarding the male Surrealists, it is possible to draw out overarching themes from specific examples. In the act of the Surrealists' psychological liberation, the female body often underwent objectification, disfiguration, and fetishization. There are three distinctive and limiting ways in which the Surrealists viewed and portrayed women: as muse, through erotic violence, and through the idealization of the *femme-enfant*. As a result, many of the male Surrealists such as "René Magritte, Hans Bellmer, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst typically created images of broken, torn, dismembered, mutilated, violated, and punctured female bodies, basing their images on traditional patriarchal and misogynist

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<sup>17</sup> Kendra Cherry, "What are Freud's stages of psychosexual development?," Verywell Mind (July 27, 2022), accessed October 16, 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/freuds-stages-of-psychosexual-development-2795962>.

attitudes about women.”<sup>18</sup> As much as these male artists wanted to create a novel output of work, their representations of women were ultimately and inevitably restricted by these ways of portraying the feminine that have plagued much of the history of art.<sup>19</sup>

The Surrealists believed in women as muse or goddess, placing them high upon a pedestal. Though, in actuality and in practice, their role was often limited to object — whether that be one of desire, inspiration, or aversion. One of the most famous and admittedly stunning works of Surrealist photography is a prime example of this. In Man Ray’s *Le Violon d’Ingres (Ingres’s Violin)* from 1924 (fig. 2), the artist painted the *f*-holes of a violin onto a nude photograph of model Kiki de Montparnasse, transforming the female body into a stringed instrument with but a few brushstrokes. The picture toys with the tension between the appreciation and objectification of the female form.<sup>20</sup> This metamorphosis of the female form into literal object, in this case a violin, is a telling example of the limitations of the Surrealist muse.

Another way in which the Surrealists portrayed the female body was as the target of erotic violence. For example, in that same image by Man Ray, Kiki’s nude torso also appears armless. This is a rather unsettling sight, though it is honestly somewhat subtle in comparison to other cases. One of the most disturbing examples of this erotic violence comes from Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel’s seminal Surrealist film, *Un Chien Andalou (An Andalusian Dog)* (1929). The film’s opening scene shows a man sharpening his

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<sup>18</sup> Deborah J Haynes, “The Art of Remedios Varo: Issues of Gender Ambiguity and Religious Meaning,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1995): 26, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358627>.

<sup>19</sup> Jessica Hundley, *Witchcraft. The Library of Esoterica* (TASCHEN GMBH, 2022), 432.

<sup>20</sup> J. Paul Getty Museum Collection, *Le Violon d’ingres (Ingres’s violin)*, Getty, accessed October 16, 2022, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/104E4A>.

straight razor and then, in a moment of horror, using its freshly sharpened blade to slice open a woman's doll-like eye (fig. 3). Additionally, six minutes into the short film, a man and woman watch from their apartment window as an unknown woman in the street below is run over by a car, and her body then lies motionless in the street. The man from the window takes sadistic pleasure in this sight and begins to grope the breasts of the woman he is with. She appears uncomfortable as he touches her, ultimately pushing him away, only to have him chase after her so as to continue his carnal fantasy. These are only but a few examples of erotic violence and spectatorship in the film. In Buñuel's published preface to the film, he expresses his adherence to "surrealist thought and activity" while creating the film.<sup>21</sup> When paired with the contextualization of Surrealism's aim to express actual thought and subconscious tendency, are these scenes of erotic violence directed towards women not rather concerning?

The last depiction of women by the Surrealists that will be discussed here is the collective ideal of the *femme-enfant*, or the woman-child. It is true that Breton, in his writings, "extolled the special psychic gifts and talents of women," though the "specific type of woman that he admired most was the *femme-enfant*."<sup>22</sup> This idealized woman-child embodied "an innocence, a spontaneity, and a naïveté that put her more easily in touch with the world of the dream, the unconscious, and the realm of the imagination."<sup>23</sup> This idea may not have presented an immediate issue to the women when they first began

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<sup>21</sup> Beatriz Caballero Rodriguez, "Gender as Trauma in Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*," *Strathprints*, January 1, 1970, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/64654/>.

<sup>22</sup> Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism," *The Journal of General Education* 27, no. 1 (1975): 32, accessed September 29, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27796489>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

to associate with the Surrealists, since they were usually young adults who saw the *femme-enfant* reflected in their own personal conceptions of identity. However, as time went on and the women matured, it would undoubtedly become difficult to continue to identify with such an infantilized ideal.

Rudolf E. Kuenzli, Director of the International Dada Archive at the University of Iowa, wraps all of these ideas together nicely in the essay “Surrealism and Misogyny,” contained in a book he co-authored titled *Surrealism and Women*:

Surrealist art and poetry are addressed to men; women are only means to bring about these works. Women is seen by the male Surrealists only in terms of what she can do for them. She is their muse... Women are to the male Surrealists, as in the longstanding traditions of patriarchy, servants, helpers in the forms of child muse, virgin, femme-enfant, angel, celestial creature who is their salvation, or erotic object, model, doll — or she may be the threat of castration. (Rudolf E. Kuenzli, “Surrealism and Misogyny”)

### **iii. Female Artists Associated with Surrealism**

It was in those ways, among various others, that the male Surrealists failed to capture the true identity and complexities of the woman. Thus, it became the duty of the women associated with the movement to “find personal definitions and imagery through which to express themselves as autonomous creative beings.”<sup>24</sup> As a result, the female

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<sup>24</sup> Janet Kaplan, “Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, vol.1, no. 2 (1980): 17, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358078>.

artist's search for a fitting representation of their female identity evolved in various directions as well.

Leonor Fini, for example, was accepted by the Surrealists though she never officially joined the group because of her refusal to sacrifice her independence to Breton's philosophy. Instead, she sought to dissolve gender norms and turn the traditional art historical representation of gender on its head. Her 1942 painting, *Femme assise un homme nu (Woman Seated on a Naked Man)* (fig. 4), has been cited as possibly "the first ever erotic nude portrait of a man painted by a woman."<sup>25</sup> Lee Miller, model and muse of Man Ray turned Surrealist photographer and World War II photojournalist, is a similar example of a female artist commenting on classical nude portraits of females painted by men. On the day of Adolf Hitler's suicide, while she and a colleague were documenting his apartment, she famously took a bath in his tub. Her 1945 photograph in Hitler's tub (fig. 5) has been described not only as "a celebration of the overthrow of a dictator, but also as a subversion of classical nude portraiture; and as an assertion of her own triumph in a male-dominated world."<sup>26</sup>

Méret Oppenheim, member of the Surrealist group and creator of the exceptionally famous Surrealist sculpture, originally titled *Le Déjeuner en fourrure (Luncheon in fur)* though now often referred to simply as *Object* (1936) (fig. 6), experienced a period of self-doubt between 1944 and 1956, leading her artistic

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<sup>25</sup> Shannon Lee, "The Other Art History: The Overlooked Women of Surrealism," Artspace, February 2, 2018, accessed September 29, 2022, [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art\\_101/the\\_big\\_idea/the-other-art-history-the-overlooked-women-of-surrealism-55232](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/the_big_idea/the-other-art-history-the-overlooked-women-of-surrealism-55232).

<sup>26</sup> The Guardian, "Lee Miller: The Model, the Monster and the Mother," Guardian News and Media, April 22, 2013, accessed October 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/apr/22/lee-miller-war-peace-pythons>.

production to decline. She was in her thirties at the time, and the intangible ideal of the *femme-enfant* is suspected by several scholars to have played a role in this period of questioning identity.<sup>27</sup> In the late 1950s, her confidence reemerged and along with it a new artistic symbol: the serpent.<sup>28</sup> The serpent immediately recalls the biblical story of Eve, who along with the serpent, was condemned for poisoning mankind. Bona de Mandiargues, who married surrealist writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues, is another artist who treated themes related to the search for the identity of woman. Her later work explores this especially with her preoccupied use of the spiral, a natural form which she used to reconcile the duality of masculine and female energies.<sup>29</sup>

Other female artists found a way of representing the distinct power possessed by females by calling upon occult practices, esoteric traditions, and the archetypal image of the witch. The occult revival of the late 19th century, encouraged by the rise of Spiritualism and Theosophy, had brought with it a newly romanticized emblem of the witch in both literature and the visual arts. Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*, published in 1862, rewrote the archetype of the witch, reframing her not as the devil's agent, but "arguing that witchcraft was the last surviving vestige of pagan worship, celebrating rites of fertility and nature."<sup>30</sup> It is this powerful feminine archetype — "Woman as the Great Mother, as the Alchemist, as the Scientist, as the Spinner, and Weaver of the destinies of

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<sup>27</sup> Orenstein, "Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism," 44.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>30</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 14.

mankind, and above all, as Creator, Spiritual Guide, and Visionary”<sup>31</sup>—that artists Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo adopted to portray the complex identity of woman. Their incorporation of occult symbols and practices proved to be an extraordinary feminist strategy, portraying the woman in all of her complexities and sensibilities. As the witch herself has a long history of persecution at the hand of religious patriarchy, so her archetypal essence within paintings allowed the Surrealist women to find a true mode of representing the female identity and creative spirit.

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<sup>31</sup> Orenstein, “Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism,” 34-35.

## CHAPTER 2: History of the Witch and the Occult Revival

### i. A Brief History of the Witch

To understand the context and development of occult interests of the time period in which Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo were working, it is necessary to review the history of these themes. I will briefly explore the history of witchcraft, beginning in the Ancient world and tracing its evolution — from pagan origins to religious adaptations, from the trials and persecutions of the 15th and 16th centuries to the intellectual interests and romanticizations of the 19th century — up to the late 19th century occult revival. Understanding the complex histories of the witch herself will help to inform the archetypal use adopted by Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo.

To trace the origins of witchcraft in the Western world is to explore a narrative birthed in ancient mythology and folklore and subsequently expressed through a long and brutal legacy of persecution. That the witch has emerged in modern times as a symbolic emblem of empowerment has been a development of the late 19th century, the result of a seemingly endless battle between ignorance and enlightenment, oppression and catharsis. (Jessica Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 12)

The lineage of the witch can first be traced back to Greek and Roman mythology and the traditions of Egyptian, Germanic, Norse, and Celtic cultures. In these traditions, the divine female — whether referred to as witch, goddess, or something else — is one whose powers are connected to Life, Earth, and Cosmos. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe is a



goddess and witch “with powers inextricably linked to the plant and animal worlds.”<sup>32</sup>

The Egyptian goddess Isis represents rebirth and magic, and has the ability to grant life and resurrect the dead. The Norse goddess Freya has the powers of fertility and divination. The Celtic goddess Brigid rules the hearth and the home, and also serves as a guide to all who are experimenting in the magical arts.

The witch then went on to make appearances in Christian mythology in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Samuel. Most likely written around 560 BCE, a passage in Exodus brutally commands, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”<sup>33</sup> Leviticus expands on this with another demand, that “A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones.”<sup>34</sup> As Christian missionaries made their way into Northern Europe as early as the 8th century CE, “they sought to dismantle deep-seated indigenous belief systems.”<sup>35</sup> To make itself more attractive to these cultures, Christianity adopted some magical elements of pagan traditions and altered them so as to be integrated into Christian myth. For example, the Celtic goddess Brigid was reinterpreted in Christian myth as Saint Brigid, the patroness saint of Ireland.<sup>36</sup> In such manner, the Western world was essentially disenchanting, reframing the magical act as one reserved for God and God alone.

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<sup>32</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Ex 22:17

<sup>34</sup> Lev 20:27

<sup>35</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Catholic Online, “St. Brigid of Ireland - Saints & Angels,” Catholic Online, accessed September 28, 2022, [https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=453](https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=453).

At this point in time, the Church was not threatened by the existence of the witch. In the early 400s CE, Augustine, one of the most significant of the Christian bishops and theologians, argued that the existence of sorcery and witchcraft was simply a fallacy on behalf of the pagans in their belief that there is some other divine power other than the one God. In his reasoning, they need not be feared as their existence in the world is an error of thought, and that the sole practitioner of magic or miracle remains God. This sentiment prevailed for centuries, until power structures shifted and the Church's authority was subject to challenge. The fear of witches was particularly heightened during the Reformation era and the Thirty Years' War.

In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued a declaration regarding the allegations of witchcraft being practiced in Northern Germany. An excerpt of the papal bull is below:

It has recently come to our ears, not without great pain to us, that in some parts of upper Germany, many persons of both sexes, heedless of their own salvation and forsaking the Catholic faith, give themselves over to devils male and female, and by their incantations, charms, and conjurings, and by other abominable superstitions and sortilege, offenses, crimes, misdeeds, ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foal of animals, the products of the earth, the grapes of vines, and the fruits of trees, as well as men and women, cattle and flocks and herds and animals of every kind, vineyards also and orchards, meadows, pastures, harvests, grains, and other fruits of the earth. (Pope Innocent VIII, "Summis desiderantes affectibus (Papal Bull of 1484)")

The papal bull of 1484 incited fear throughout Europe — fear of the monstrosities that witches may wreak on their crops, animals, children, and communities. The next few years saw a rush of publications expanding upon the Pope’s sentiments. In 1487, Heinrich Kramer published *Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches)*, “a book that became the handbook for witch hunters and Inquisitors.”<sup>37</sup> Later, in 1580, French lawyer Jean Bodin published his treatise on witchcraft, *On the Demon-Mania of Sorcerers*, exposing the malevolent beings that were believed to be hidden among the population.<sup>38</sup> Pope Innocent’s declaration and the subsequent rush of publications spurred paranoia and fear throughout early modern Europe. The trials swept through Europe and the British isles in the early 1500s, making their way to Switzerland by 1515, Italy and Denmark a decade later, and into France in the latter half of the century. The most significant area of witch hunting was in southwestern Germany, where the highest concentration of witch trials took place from 1561 to 1670.<sup>39</sup> The fear spread across the Atlantic Ocean to colonial America beginning in 1645, where an infamous slew of witch trials took place in Salem, Massachusetts from February 1692 to May 1693.<sup>40</sup>

Although it is true that “men could be arraigned on the charge of witchcraft and were prosecuted in small numbers,” the craze was undoubtedly aimed at women.<sup>41</sup> Eighty

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<sup>37</sup> The Robbins Collection, “Witch Trials in Early Modern Europe and New England,” Berkeley Law, accessed September 7, 2022, <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/research/the-robbins-collection/exhibitions/witch-trials-in-early-modern-europe-and-new-england/>.

<sup>38</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> The Robbins Collection, “Witch Trials in Early Modern Europe and New England.”

<sup>40</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 17-18.

<sup>41</sup> Anne Llewellyn Barstow, “On Studying Witchcraft as Women’s History: A Historiography of the European Witch Persecutions,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 2 (1988): 9, accessed September 27, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002078>.

percent of the accused and eighty-five percent of those executed were female.

Furthermore, “92 percent of the accused in the English county of Essex were women, and all but two of the female inhabitants of Langedorf in the Rhineland were prosecuted.”<sup>42</sup>

The massive witch panics in southwestern Germany are an especially telling case: in the course of just one day in the towns of Wiesensteig and Quedlinburg, it is recorded that sixty-three and one hundred thirty-three women, respectively, were killed due to accusations of witchcraft. From 1500 to 1660, an estimated 50,000 to upwards of 80,000 suspected witches, many but not all women, were executed in Europe and America.<sup>43</sup>

This “genocide of witches would continue unabated for generations, until the Age of Enlightenment in the late 1680s began to shift perspectives and philosophies.”<sup>44</sup>

It must also be understood that, for the most part, the witch trials were the first time women as a group were subject to criminal persecutions. In many areas of early modern Europe, women had been kept out of the courts because the law saw them as minors. However, once witch allegations came into play, it seems that women were all of a sudden legally responsible for their actions.<sup>45</sup> Even more interesting is that many of the allegations directed at women were related to female sexuality, evidencing the claims by blaming women for “preventing conception, causing miscarriage, abortion, and stillbirth, making men impotent, seducing men, having sex with the devil, [or] giving birth to

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<sup>42</sup> Barstow, “On Studying Witchcraft as Women’s History,” 8.

<sup>43</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Barstow, “On Studying Witchcraft as Women’s History,” 8.

demons.”<sup>46</sup> In this way, it becomes clear that the witch hunts had a decided focus on women, and particularly on female sexuality.

## ii. The Occult Revival

The Church’s foundations were again threatened when Darwin published his Theory of Evolution in 1859.<sup>47</sup> At this time within the Western world, “people were highly receptive to new currents in science and philosophy, and many were becoming unsure about religion and experiencing something of a [spiritual] vacuum.”<sup>48</sup> Occultism seemed to offer “attractive alternatives to religion.”<sup>49</sup> Historian Alex Owen, in *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, argues that “the new occultism” “was attractive partly because it offered a spiritual alternative to religious orthodoxy, but one that ostensibly operated without the requirement of faith.”<sup>50</sup> It is near impossible to offer a simple and succinct definition for a term as enigmatic as the occult, though from an etymological perspective it can be generally viewed as an “attitude toward the world that emphasizes the hidden, or secret, aspects of reality.”<sup>51</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Surrealists were generally interested in the occult as their interests

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<sup>46</sup> Barstow, “On Studying Witchcraft as Women’s History,” 8.

<sup>47</sup> Tom Garner, Ashley P. Taylor, and Ker Than, “What Is Darwin's Theory of Evolution?” Live Science, February 2, 2022, accessed September 18, 2022, <https://www.livescience.com/474-controversy-evolution-works.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Isenberg, “The Future is Now: Hilma af Klint and the Esoteric Imagination,” *Bowdoin Journal of Art*, (2020): 13, accessed September 28, 2022, [https://www.academia.edu/42912233/The\\_Future\\_is\\_Now\\_Hilma\\_af\\_Klint\\_and\\_the\\_Esoteric\\_Imagination](https://www.academia.edu/42912233/The_Future_is_Now_Hilma_af_Klint_and_the_Esoteric_Imagination).

<sup>49</sup> Isenberg, “The Future is Now: Hilma af Klint and the Esoteric Imagination,” 13.

<sup>50</sup> Mark S. Morrisson, “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2007): 2, accessed September 5, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053265>.

<sup>51</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles: 1986): 380.

similarly lay in the unconscious or the unknown.<sup>52</sup> The term has been used relatively interchangeably with others such as psychical, esoteric, paranormal, mystical, magical, and metaphysical, though each refers to its own specific territory. For example, mysticism refers much more specifically to the “direct, transcendent, unitive experience of God or ultimate reality, and the experient’s interpretation of that experience.”<sup>53</sup> In the 16th century, the idea of a category of occult sciences began to develop, which encompassed astrology (the study of the movement and positioning of celestial bodies), alchemy (the art of transmutation), and natural magic (magic dealing with natural forces such as healing through herbs, as opposed to ceremonial magic which tends to deal with the spirits).<sup>54</sup> The growing interest in occult traditions reflects the religious liberalism of the 19th century, a period in which the absolute authority of scripture began to experience rejection as people instead took interest in what was happening within and around.

Around the time of this renewed interest in the occult, 1840 marked the rise of Spiritualism, a belief system founded on the idea that “the human body survives death in some form” and “that it is possible to communicate with the surviving personality, or spirit.”<sup>55</sup> Understanding and coping with death is one of life’s greatest struggles, and has remained one of the major sociological and psychological functions of religion. However, many individuals whose inherited religious explanations for death were no longer

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<sup>52</sup> Susan L. Aberth and Leonora Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Hampshire: Lord Humphries, 2004), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, 376. accessed September 22, 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Broek R van den, and Jean-Pierre Brach, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 887.

<sup>55</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, 384.

working found an attractive alternative in Spiritualism. Spiritualism is best contextually understood as a revolt against Calvinist understandings of death, afterlife, and salvation: particularly the Calvinist idea of predestination. In an era plagued by frequent childhood death, it was inconceivable to many that a newborn baby could be damned to Hell by a loving God. In this way, many people's spiritual, and Spiritualist, lives actually began with the death of a child. The rise of Spiritualism was in fact a rebellion against Christianity by way of rejecting traditional teachings, believing in the after life instead as an arena of continual progression of the souls.

As Spiritualism is the direct communication with the spirits of the dead, central to the practice is the séance: a closed-door ritual in which contact is made with a spirit, usually with the help of a professional medium. One of the most interesting consequences of Spiritualism is that it allowed women to possess great power with its strong feminist undertones. Traditional religious systems are inherently patriarchal, but the growing turn towards spirituality allowed women to challenge the male authority in religion. Some of the very first women to speak with spiritual authority to mixed groups of men and women were in fact mediums. One of the most famous Spiritualist artists is Hilma af Klint, who in 1906 accepted a grand artistic commission from a spirit guide, referred to as a High Master, named Amaliel.<sup>56</sup> Between 1906 and 1915, af Klint created 193 paintings for a yet unrealized temple which would spiral to the heavens, working automatically (without preparatory drawing) and receiving guidance from the spirits.<sup>57</sup> There has been renewed

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<sup>56</sup> Isenberg, "The Future is Now: Hilma af Klint and the Esoteric Imagination," 7.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 8.

interest in af Klint’s life, work, and spirituality thanks to a wonderful exhibition staged by the Guggenheim, bringing together her paintings for the temple. Even more, the Guggenheim truly gave life to af Klint’s commission, as the museum’s spiral architecture much reflected the vision for the unrealized temple meant to house her works. Af Klint, in addition to being a practicing Spiritualist, also held a lifelong interest in Theosophy.

By 1890, Spiritualism was essentially replaced by Theosophy (much due to the prevalence of fraudulent claims made by some spiritualists).<sup>58</sup> The primary aim of theosophical teaching is to “enhance awareness of the relationships between nature and spirit, and thus to enable the individual to achieve direct, intuitive knowledge (wisdom), and personal experience of the spiritual.”<sup>59</sup> Theosophy was founded officially in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott through the foundation of their Theosophical Society in New York, which became the “most widely influential organization for the public promotion of occult teachings in modern times.”<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, many of the artists credited with creating the first abstract paintings were profoundly influenced by Theosophy. Wassily Kandinsky described Theosophy as “one of the greatest spiritual movements,”<sup>61</sup> Piet Mondrian arrived at many of his theories of

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<sup>58</sup> Isenberg, “The Future is Now: Hilma af Klint and the Esoteric Imagination,” 14.

<sup>59</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, 388.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Sixten Ringbom, “Art in ‘The Epoch of the Great Spiritual’: Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 29 (1966): 394, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/750725>.



abstraction through theosophical influence,<sup>62</sup> and Hilma af Klint joined the Swedish branch of the Theosophical society in Stockholm when it was founded in 1889.<sup>63</sup>

The renewed interest in the occult was bubbling and widespread in the 19th century. After modernity had “emptied the world of its magical forces,” the newfound interest in occultism could be seen “as offering a kind of re-enchantment of the modern world.”<sup>64</sup> This occult renaissance brought with it the revived emblem of the witch, a woman who is now understood to embody all of these revived occult interests and beliefs.

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<sup>62</sup> Ringbom, “Art in ‘The Epoch of the Great Spiritual’,” 413.

<sup>63</sup> Isenberg, “The Future is Now: Hilma af Klint and the Esoteric Imagination,” 14.

<sup>64</sup> Morrisson, “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres,” 2.

## CHAPTER 3: Leonora Carrington

### i. Biographical Information

Leonora Carrington was born in 1917 in Lancashire, England to a wealthy Roman Catholic family — her father was a textile tycoon and her mother was the daughter of an Irish doctor.<sup>65</sup> It was through her mother, maternal grandmother, and Irish nanny that Carrington was introduced to Celtic folklore, an important part of her heritage that would become prevalent later in her art. Carrington comments on this, “The stories my grandmother told me were fixed in my mind and they gave me pictures that I would later sketch on paper.”<sup>66</sup> Carrington is said to have been born with a love of animals, especially horses, and to have begun drawing around the age of four. Her love of animals would also become prevalent in her paintings and short stories.

Carrington’s childhood unfolds as a series of her repeated rebellion against expectations set upon her. Her parents had very traditional wishes for their daughter’s future: an excellent education, followed by a *début* in the court of George V, and then a successful marriage. However, Carrington’s rebellious nature was not conducive to familial expectations. She was sent to five different boarding schools, having been expelled from three (she was said to be eccentric and ineducable), dismissed from one because she developed appendicitis, and escaped from the fifth in the middle of the night. When it came time for her London *débutante* season, Carrington informed her family that she instead intended to go to art school. Her family objected, though Carrington’s

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<sup>65</sup> Janice Helland, “Surrealism and Esoteric Feminism in the Paintings of Leonora Carrington,” *RACAR: Revue d’art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 16, no. 1 (1989): 53–104, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42630417>.

<sup>66</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 7.

unwavering will proved strong and in 1935, at the age of 18, she moved to London to study at the Chelsea School of Art.<sup>67</sup> A few years later, between 1937 and 1938, Carrington would write a surrealist short story, *La Débutante*, about a young woman who does not want to attend her débutante ball, and so convinces a hyena to take her place at the ball. At the end, the hyena escapes through a window after the girl's mother discovers their charade. Her *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)*, painted in the same years as she was writing the story, includes references to the girl (Carrington herself), the hyena, and the open window of the story. This painting will be further discussed later on in this chapter as the focus turns towards the occult elements within her work.

After her success at the Chelsea School of Art, she transferred into Amédée Ozenfant's newly opened Ozenfant Academy in London, which would have the most profound impact on her artistic practice. Ozenfant's particular artistic style did not have a great influence on her work, though he did greatly contribute to her education in terms of formal painting technique and a disciplined approach to art production. Ozenfant required "that the students understand the chemistry of everything they used, including the pencil and the paper."<sup>68</sup> Perhaps inspired by the chemical knowledge required by Ozenfant, it was around this time that Carrington became interested in alchemy. It was also around this time that "Leonora's mother gave her a gift of Herbert Read's *Surrealism*, a book that intermittently mentioned alchemy in relation to art production in general and Surrealist

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<sup>67</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 20-22.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

art production in particular.”<sup>69</sup> This introduction to formal art production, alchemy, and Surrealism is what made her time at Ozenfant’s Academy so worthwhile.

Carrington’s life changed in 1937 when she met Max Ernst, twenty-six years her senior and already a famous artist and official member of the Surrealist group. They met at a party in London and fell in love immediately, and “literally overnight, [she] was freed from a lifetime of familial restrictions and was propelled into an artistic community and lifestyle that promised the sorts of freedoms and creative expression she had always longed for.”<sup>70</sup> Though Carrington was already painting, drawing, and writing extensively before she met Ernst, he “gave her the support and impetus to express herself creatively, and provided her entrée into the Parisian Surrealist circle.”<sup>71</sup> The two moved to Paris where Ernst introduced her to the Surrealists, whom she quickly impressed. She was welcomed into the group based on her own talent, not merely because of her association with a significant member.<sup>72</sup> Surrealism offered many women, including Carrington, their “first glimpse of a world in which creative activity and liberation from family-imposed social expectations might exist.”<sup>73</sup> Carrington was included in the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938 in Paris, and André Breton even included her writing in his 1940 collection, *Anthologie de l’humour noir (Anthology of Black Humor)*.

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<sup>69</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>73</sup> Whitney Chadwick, “Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1986): 37, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358235>.

After a short time in Paris, Carrington and Ernst moved to Martin d’Ardèche in the South of France, where they spent just short of two years — a time which Carrington has described as an “era of paradise” — before Carrington’s life was drastically altered yet again. Ernst, a German living in France, was arrested as an enemy alien when World War II began. Carrington, at the time just twenty-three years old, disowned by her family, living alone in a foreign country with an illegal alien who was forced to abandon her, and with a war approaching, understandably began to suffer a nervous breakdown.<sup>74</sup> After fleeing to Spain with an old friend, Carrington was incarcerated in a Spanish mental institution by the order of her family. There, she was classified as “incurably insane,” often experienced forced immobility through medication and restraints,<sup>75</sup> and received distressing Cardiazol injections.<sup>76</sup> She later recounted her traumatizing experiences in a short story titled *Down Below*.<sup>77</sup> Upon her release, her parents arranged to send her to another mental institution in South Africa. Though while en route, Carrington made her escape in Portugal, going directly to the Mexican Embassy where Renato Leduc, an old friend from Paris introduced to her by Pablo Picasso, was an ambassador. They quickly married so that Carrington would be granted immunity as a diplomat’s wife and then set for New York. Coincidentally, Ernst, who had sought asylum with Peggy Guggenheim, was in Lisbon at the same time and left for New York with Guggenheim just days before Carrington and Renato in 1941.

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<sup>74</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> Leonora Carrington and Marina Warner, *Down Below* (New York Review Books: 2017), 77.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>77</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 50.

Not long after arriving in New York, Carrington left for Mexico in 1942, where there was already a significant community of émigré artists. Free from the constraints of her relationship with Ernst and far from the controlling wishes of her family, Carrington was finally free to “develop her creative visions in a manner that would ultimately lead to artistic recognition and success.”<sup>78</sup> Carrington and Renato’s marriage-of-convenience soon came to an end. In Mexico, she met photographer Emerico “Chiki” Weisz whom she married and with whom she bore two children. Carrington died in May of 2011.

## **ii. Occult Themes**

Interested in traditions such as alchemy, astrology, the cabbala, Tibetan Buddhism, the tarot, Celtic mythology, and Mexican healing traditions among others, Carrington “went on to explore a wide range of esoteric themes,” granting each “a significant place in [her] visionary realm.”<sup>79</sup> In the introductory essay to her retrospective exhibition at the Inter-American Relations in New York in 1976, Edward James offers a thoughtful description of Carrington’s imagery:

The paintings of Leonora Carrington are not merely painted, they are brewed. They sometimes seem to have materialized in a cauldron at the stroke of midnight, yet for all this they are no mere illustrations of fairy tales. Hers are not literary paintings, rather they are pictures distilled in the underground caves of libido, vertiginously sublimated. Above all (or below), they belong to the Universal subconscious. (Edward James,

*Leonora Carrington: A Retrospective Exhibition*)

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<sup>78</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 57.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

One of the most referenced occult traditions in Carrington's art is alchemy. As noted earlier, she acquired and read her first books on alchemy in 1936 at Ozenfant Academy, and Ernst's interest in the tradition encouraged her study further.<sup>80</sup> Alchemy, the study of the transmutation of metals, has been present since ancient times in Arabic, Chinese, Hellenistic, Indian, and Western forms.<sup>81</sup> According to the medieval science of alchemy, which can be seen as the forerunner to modern chemistry and material sciences, the "object of the alchemical operation was the creation of the philosopher's stone, whose touch would transmute metals, cure disease, and bestow immortality."<sup>82</sup> But what lies below the surface of this medieval material science is a delicate metaphor for the transcendence of the human spirit and psyche. The metaphorical alchemy decontextualized the practice from its original intention of physical science, instead considering personal and spiritual transmutation. Carl Jung, in whom Carrington was interested, carried on this interpretation of the alchemical operation, describing it as "a projection of the individuation process leading to the development of an integrated personality."<sup>83</sup> Carl Jung spent a large portion of his later career conducting an "extensive survey of alchemy and its relationship to the psychology of the unconscious," exploring this spiritual metaphor of the ancient tradition in some of his key papers including *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry Into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic*

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<sup>80</sup> Chadwick, "Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness," 37.

<sup>81</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, 368.

<sup>82</sup> Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, 368.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

*Opposites in Alchemy*.<sup>84</sup> In this way, alchemy took on a spiritual interpretation in addition to its original material one, with the individual seeking to reach enlightenment or perfection through spiritual transformation. In alchemical texts and imagery, alchemy has adopted the some of its most basic symbols of the egg, the rose, and the colors of black, white, and red. Carrington's paintings use all of these symbols to reference the spiritual alchemical metaphor.

In her 1956 painting, *Ab Eo, Quod (From The Fact That)* (fig. 7), Carrington saturates the canvas with alchemical symbolism, making it one of her most hermetic paintings. The title comes from the phrase inscribed on the tapestry in the painting: "Ab eo, quod nigram caudam habet abstinere terrestrium enim decorum est." This phrase translates to "Abstain from that which has a black tail, for it is fair to the earth," perhaps referring to the creature stirring below the table.<sup>85</sup> In the center of the canvas is a large glowing egg and floating above it is a white rose which drips a milky white liquid upon the egg and table below. The egg, since antiquity, has served as a representation of the alchemical vessel which is also referred to as the "alchemical egg."<sup>86</sup> An earlier example of this symbolism comes from an engraving in Michael Maier's alchemical emblem book *Atalanta fugiens*, first published in Latin in 1617 (fig. 8). Swiss Surrealist painter Kurt Seligmann reprinted this image in his *History of Magic*, and it is well assumed that, given her occult interests and proximity to the Parisian Surrealist center, Carrington would have known this book. Also in this book, Seligmann included an engraving of a delicate rose

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<sup>84</sup> "Alchemical Metaphors in Personal Development," Center for Complex Psychology, September 17, 2018, accessed November 12, 2022, <http://complexpsychology.org/blog/alchemical-metaphors-in-personal-development/>.

<sup>85</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 82.

<sup>86</sup> Haynes, Deborah J. "The Art of Remedios Varo," 29.



situated within the alchemical vessel (fig. 9). Carrington includes this same alchemical rose in *Ab Eo, Quod*, levitating in the air and dripping its essence into the alchemical vessel represented by the egg.<sup>87</sup> Further evidence of Carrington's interest in alchemy and its association with the egg can be seen in her switch to tempera in the late 1940s. Tempera is a type of paint made by mixing color pigments with a binder of egg yolk, and was most popular before the transition to oil paint roughly 500 years ago. It is this ingredient of the egg and its alchemical association, as well as the ritual act of mixing her own paint and the jewel tones achievable by the medium, that was most attractive to Carrington.<sup>88</sup>

The colors within *Ab Eo, Quod* also symbolize the alchemical operation — black, white, and red pertain to the three main phases of alchemical transformation. Black, which can be seen in the shadows and wall drawings in the painting, refers to the first stage of destruction or putrefaction, called blackening (or *nigredo*). In the material practice, this refers to the literal blackening of the material, while the spiritual metaphor relates this to the dissolving of the ego. White, which is apparent in the egg, rose, and table, refers to the second alchemical stage of purification, called whitening (or *albedo*). Materially, this stage entails the repeated cleaning and subsequent whitening of the material. In the spiritual context, this refers to the cleansing of the body and the soul following the destruction of the ego. The final stage of alchemy, reddening (or *rubedo*), produces the philosopher's stone and is symbolized by the color red. This stage entails the “sexual union of alchemy's personified characteristic of physical matter, masculine

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<sup>87</sup> M. E. Warlick, *Leonora Carrington's Esoteric Symbols and their Sources*, 65.

<sup>88</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 47.

Sulphur and feminine Mercury, the Sun and the Moon.”<sup>89</sup> In the spiritual metaphor, this third and final phase is the sublime experience of ultimate transformation. In her painting, Carrington implies that the final stage is imminent with the inclusion of the red wine in glass vessels, as well as the surrounding red walls.

Carrington’s maternal Irish ancestry exposed her to Celtic mythology at an early age. The Celtic goddess Epona is one feminine archetype that Carrington admitted to have become of great importance to her later in life. In 1948, Robert Graves published a study of Celtic mythology titled *The White Goddess*, and Carrington later claimed that reading this book was “the greatest revelation of [her] life.”<sup>90</sup> Epona, protector of horses and goddess of fertility, appeared to her worshippers on a white horse. It is not surprising that Carrington, whose childhood was nourished by Celtic legends and her love of horses, would have had a particular connection to Epona. It is through the goddess’s white horse that Carrington’s Celtic interests make themselves known in two of Carrington’s most intimate paintings.

Carrington’s *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)* (fig. 10), begun in London in 1937 and completed in Paris in 1938, is one of her most wondrous paintings and what some have considered to be her “first truly Surrealist work.”<sup>91</sup> Carrington’s *Self-Portrait* shows evidence of her earliest possible pictorial reference to the Celtic goddess Epona. There are not one, but two white horses depicted in the portrait. One depicted as a rocking horse confined to the inside world, floating above Carrington’s head, while the

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<sup>89</sup> Warlick, *Leonora Carrington’s Esoteric Symbols and their Sources*, 65.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>91</sup> William Grimes, “Leonora Carrington Is Dead at 94; Artist and Author of Surrealist Work,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, May 27, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/arts/design/leonora-carrington-surrealist-dies-at-94.html>.

other is seen through the window, a symbol of freedom having escaped the confinement of the home. Many have interpreted the horses to be additional portraits of Carrington, embodying her love of horses and Celtic ancestry, that touch on her feelings of entrapment within the familial structure and her desire for freedom. Shortly after moving to Paris with Ernst, completing her *Self-Portrait*, and moving to the South of France, the second world war broke out and Ernst was imprisoned by the Nazis. It was at this moment that Carrington created another one of her most celebrated paintings, *Bird Superior, Portrait of Max Ernst* (1939) (fig. 11), that she later “gave to Ernst as a parting gift.”<sup>92</sup> On the canvas of *Bird Superior, Portrait of Max Ernst*, Carrington again paints two white horses, one which is frozen within the landscape behind Ernst and one which is confined within his lantern. The painting’s title and Ernst’s feathered appearance reference his own alter-ego, a bird named Loplop whom he first painted in 1928, and the accompaniment of the white horses only reinforces their position as Carrington’s own alter-ego.<sup>93</sup> The horses, one standing separate from Ernst and one forever carried with him, are sentimental insertions of Carrington herself into Ernst’s portrait. Carrington’s multiple instances of employing the white horse as her alter-ego reflect her interest in Celtic mythology as well as her undying desire for freedom.

Carrington’s *Self-Portrait* also shows evidence of the magical act, another interest of Carrington’s, and is explicitly implied by the gesture of Carrington’s hand. Formed with “the right hand, the index and little fingers are extending the age-old sign of

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<sup>92</sup> Jane Alison and Coralie Malissard, *Modern Couples Art, Intimacy and the Avant-Garde* (London: Barbican, 2018).

<sup>93</sup> Georges Sebbag, “Max Ernst: The Bird, the Cage & the Forest,” Sothebys.com (Sotheby’s, July 18, 2018), <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/max-ernst-the-bird-the-cage-the-forest>.

malediction and thus transforming the image from a fairy-tale-style narrative into something decidedly different.”<sup>94</sup> Following her gesture past the lactating hyena, a symbol of her insatiable curiosity and impure femininity, the eye arrives at a smudged section of paint which casts its own conically shaped shadow. This misty shape is the subject of much mystery, but it is Carrington’s gesture that unlocks the secrets of its nature. As Susan Aberth describes, “What we are witnessing is the magical act of materialisation, the formation of an entity from another realm, conjured forth by the gesture and the combined concentration of a woman and animal.”<sup>95</sup> Carrington’s curious portrait, already brimming with symbolism, now becomes even more evident of her interest in the practice of magic.

Themes of magic and witchcraft make their way into Carrington’s visual realm in other paintings as well. Magic circles, an energetic boundary often used for ritual magic, can be found in paintings such as *Bath of Rabi Loew* (1969) (fig. 12), *The Ancestor* (1968) (fig. 13), and *Grandmother Moorhead’s Aromatic Kitchen* (1975) (fig. 14). In her 1945 painting, *The House Opposite* (fig. 15), one can see the various magical activities going on from the cutaway view of the house. In the upper left, there is a woman whose crown and blue robe recall traditional portrayals of the Virgin Mary, holding a branch or magic wand of sorts and is accompanied by a feline familiar. This woman, with her divine and magical accoutrements, evokes an emblem of the archetypal female power. On the right side, three women are brewing a potion in a transparent cauldron, presumably

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<sup>94</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 33.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

for the feast which is planned to take place at the table which occupies the center of the image.

### **iii. Feminist Consciousness**

One of the most prominent ways in which Carrington's feminist consciousness comes into view in her paintings is through her treatment of traditionally feminine spaces. Once settled in Mexico and after giving birth to her two sons in 1946 and 1948, Carrington found herself "preoccupied in her work with the transformation of the feminine domestic sphere into a site of magical power."<sup>96</sup> Confronted with the realities of managing a family, household, and career simultaneously, it was the reclamation of power within these domestic feminine spaces that came to be of importance to her in her work. In the previously mentioned painting, *The House Opposite*, one can see this idea beginning to blossom. In the liminal house, the witches stir a bubbling cauldron inside of what would otherwise be a normal kitchen. Carrington had always possessed an interest in cooking, not for the joy of cooking for oneself or others, but because of its evocations of ritual and potion-making magic. Unsurprisingly, cooking, in her own life and in her pictorial world, became one of Carrington's primary "avenues for exploration into the occult."<sup>97</sup> Even in later paintings, such as *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen*, the kitchen is a site, not of dull feminine labor, but of liminal space conducive to the practice of magic and exploration of spiritual traditions. Another example of this reinterpretation of traditional feminine spaces can be seen in both *The House Opposite* and *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)*, where Carrington offers a view through a

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<sup>96</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 65.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

window and into the garden occupied by a white horse. Rather than implying the garden as a place requiring tending to and gentle care, the garden is a place of freedom and magical transformation.

Carrington was an active and staunch feminist. Throughout her life, she “repeatedly and adamantly voiced what she perceived as the difficulties and challenges facing women pursuing a career in the arts in terms of securing shows, finding the time to work while raising children and running a household, and in being taken seriously by a patriarchal art world.”<sup>98</sup> In 1946, Carrington wrote a proto-feminist play titled *Penelope*, which is, as many of her plays and stories are, pseudo-autobiographical. The play “revolves around the conflict between a young girl who inhabits the world of the nursery with her magic white rocking horse, Tartar, and the social world downstairs presided over by her patriarchal father, who has prohibited her imaginative play with Tartar.”<sup>99</sup> At the end of the play, Penelope transforms into a white horse and flies into an otherworldly realm, far from the “feeble race of men who have no powers of their own.”<sup>100</sup> The play offers yet another potential narrative regarding the characters in her *Self-Portrait*, which incorporates the same *femme-enfant*, rocking horse, and white horse of the play.

Carrington was also a founding member of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s in Mexico. In 1972, she created a women’s liberation poster, titled *Mujeres conciencia* (fig. 16), which “rejects the traditional biblical interpretation of Eve as born of Adam, because woman’s procreative powers are denied by a myth that renders her

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<sup>98</sup> Aberth and Carrington, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, 63.

<sup>99</sup> Chadwick, “Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness,” 41.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

subordinate and inferior to man.”<sup>101</sup> In the poster, the resurrected goddess is identified with the serpent as the energy rises to the point of illumination. In February of 1986, Carrington was presented with an Honor Award at the Women’s Caucus for Art in New York, where she touched all with her charm, warmth, independence, and political commitment.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Orenstein, “Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism,” 42.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 4: Remedios Varo

### i. Biographical Information

Much of Remedios Varo's (born María de los Remedios Alicia Rodriga Varo y Uranga) life is a mystery to individuals seeking to study it. For starters, the only significant and broad scholarly study of the artist was published in Mexico, where she lived and worked most of her life, and has yet to be translated into English.<sup>103</sup> Even within Mexico, her work only exists in private collections, out of reach from public view or study.<sup>104</sup> For such a beloved artist, these factors make it rather difficult to closely study her life and work. However, there have been smaller studies published along with images of her work, and there is much that we do know about the artist, especially pertaining to her association with the Surrealists and her occult interests. Despite there being relatively little-known about the artist, in 1971 Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art organized her posthumous retrospective after her death in 1963 and the exhibit reportedly drew the largest audience in the museum's history — "larger even than for Mexico's prominent native son muralists, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco."<sup>105</sup>

Varo was born in 1908 in a small town in the province of Girona, Catalonia, Spain. Her father, a hydraulic engineer, taught her the art of technical drawing and introduced her to many of the topics that would become of great importance to her.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions," 13.

<sup>104</sup> Janet A. Kaplan, "Remedios Varo," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1987): 38, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177834>.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>106</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, *Remedios Varo*, Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed October 16, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Remedios-Varo>



Between her Catholic family and the Catholic convent schools which she attended, she spent her early life restrained by the strict customs of Spanish tradition.<sup>107</sup> Similar to Carrington, Varo possessed a rebellious nature from childhood and reportedly rejected the religious ideology of her upbringing even then. By 1924, at age 15, Varo's family had moved to Madrid and there she enrolled in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, an art school which was also attended by Salvador Dalí. It was there that she met Gerardo Lizárraga, whom she would later marry in 1930.<sup>108</sup> Several scholars describe this marriage of Varo's as "a way to legitimize leaving her family" and to exercise her independence.<sup>109</sup> Together, Varo and Lizárraga moved to Barcelona, which, like Paris, was a buzzing center of the artistic avant-garde at the time. There, Varo met Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret, whom she would marry and flee to Paris with a year later to escape the Spanish Civil War. In Paris, Varo settled with the Surrealists after being introduced by Péret, and became acquainted with André Breton and Leonora Carrington among others.

Like the Surrealists, Varo worked from the subconscious and in a "surreal framework in which autobiographical details became the source for her images and symbols."<sup>110</sup> Encouraged by her experience among the Surrealists, Varo increasingly turned towards her interests in dreams, alchemy, astrology, mysticism, magic and the occult, "opening herself to any avenue by which she might explore the unknown in

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<sup>107</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions," 13.

<sup>108</sup> Octavio Gonzalez, "Overlooked No More: Remedios Varo, Spanish Painter of Magic, Mysticism and Science," Gallery Wendi Norris | San Francisco (Gallery Wendi Norris | San Francisco, October 27, 2021), <https://www.gallerywendinorris.com/news-reviews/overlooked-no-more-remedios-varo-spanish-painter-of-magic-mysticism-and-science>.

<sup>109</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions," 14.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

herself and in the universe.”<sup>111</sup> Despite being in the very center of the Surrealist circle during her most formative artistic years in the later 1930s, Varo never believed herself to be a true member of the group.<sup>112</sup> In a 1957 interview, she explained her relationship with Surrealism:

Yes, I attended those meetings where they talked a lot and one learned various things; sometimes I participated with works in their exhibitions; my position was one of a timid and humble listener; I was not old enough nor did I have the aplomb to face up to them, to a Paul Eluard, a Benjamin Péret, or an Andre Breton. I was with an open mouth within this group of brilliant and gifted people. I was together with them because I felt a certain affinity. Today I do not belong to any group; I paint what occurs to me and that is all. (Janet A. Kaplan, “Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions,” 17)

Her days among the Surrealists in Paris were not greatly numbered, as she and Péret were forced to leave France during the Nazi occupation. The couple fled to Mexico City along with many other émigré artists and Surrealists. Varo remained in Mexico for the rest of her life, developing her mature body of work until her death in 1963.

## **ii. Occult Themes**

In her adult life and work, Varo rejected the Catholicism of her youth and embraced traditions that were more unconventional to her upbringing and much more in

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<sup>111</sup> Kaplan, “Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions,” 14.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

line with the interests of her Surrealist contemporaries. Varo's personal library provides us with some of the greatest insight into her interests. Her religious eclecticism can be seen in her wide range of books by authors including the Russian mystic George Gurdjieff as well as some by his followers Peotr Ouspensky and Maurice Nicoll. Also included were works by founder of Theosophy Helena P. Blavatsky, psychoanalysts Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, and books reflecting Hindu and Buddhist spiritualities by writers such as Zen Buddhist teacher D.T. Suzuki, yogi Paramahansa Yogananda, and Tibetan traveler Alexandra David-Neel.<sup>113</sup> In addition to her spiritual collection, she possessed books on topics such as alchemy, Pythagorean numerology and sacred geometry, Platonic philosophy,<sup>114</sup> biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, archaeology, and botany.<sup>115</sup> Unsurprisingly, when taken into consideration her interests and her association with the Surrealists, Varo's work often drew on dreams, alchemy, astrology, magic, and other occult disciplines.<sup>116</sup> By drawing attention to the arcane and the esoteric, Varo indirectly challenged patriarchal religions, especially that of her childhood. Aesthetically, Varo worked "with minute precision and delicacy of touch," showing the influence she drew from illuminated manuscripts, medieval architecture, and the works of early Netherlandish painter Hieronymous Bosch, Greek artist El Greco, the Spanish romantic painter Francisco Goya, as well as her Surrealist friends.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Haynes, "The Art of Remedios Varo," 28.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions," 15.

<sup>116</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo," 40.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 39.

Varo's work often incorporates alchemical symbolism to reference the spiritual "search for the self, enlightenment, and truth."<sup>118</sup> The first example of this can be seen in *La Llamada (The Call)* (1961) (fig. 17), which shows a glowing and visionary woman carefully stepping through a town inhabited by citizens whose solitary and unenlightened life has left them fused with the city's walls. The woman, who has seemingly undergone an apotheosis of sorts and is now physically connected to the cosmos by the ends of her hair, "moves forward swiftly, holding a vial of precious fluid and carrying an alchemist's mortar [and pestle] around her neck."<sup>119</sup> This alchemical mortar and pestle was an indispensable tool of the alchemist, used to grind material into a fine substance for dissolving or extraction. In her right hand, she holds an alembic (alchemical vessel used for distillation) encasing a liquid, which one could interpret as the elixir of life. These tools which she possesses are a clear reference to alchemy, while her glowing stature specifically recontextualizes it as a practice of spiritual alchemy, and her physical connection to the cosmos as a successful transcendence of spirit and psyche. This painting shows the woman's grand spiritual enlightenment, alchemical achievement, and unification with the forces of the universe.

Varo's 1955 painting *The Useless Science or the Alchemist* (fig. 18) shows one of the many magical machines that she has a tendency to invent in her work. In the painting, the checkerboard floor takes on a second role as ensemble, draping itself around a figure in the foreground. The figure slowly and intently turns a pulley which operates the

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<sup>118</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo," 15.

<sup>119</sup> Estella Lauter, "The Creative Woman and the Female Quest: The Paintings of Remedios Varo," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 63, no. 2 (1980): 127, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41178147>.

mechanisms of the towers behind. Within the towers, the essences of the atmosphere are collected and transformed through a series of operations into a liquid which amass in an alembic above the fire before finally filling a small bottle with the precious product. This painting shows not only Varo's interest in alchemy, but her knowledge of science and chemical processes. One could assume that an alchemical operation similar to this is what ultimately created the elixir of life contained within the woman's vial from *La Llamada*.

Another overtly alchemical painting of Varo's is her 1957 *Creation of the Birds* (fig. 19). Within this image, a mystical and beautiful woman/owl hybrid is hard at work creating life. Her alchemical device—its form referencing the philosopher's egg—produces small amounts of blue, yellow, and red pigment from somewhere within the sky.<sup>120</sup> Her paintbrush is actually an extension of the small lyre which rests around her neck. According to ancient Greek mythologies, the “lyre was regarded as the secret symbol of the human constitution, the body of the instrument representing the physical form, the strings the nerves, and the musician the spirit.”<sup>121</sup> This paintbrush, therefore, possesses the forces needed to create life. Her triangular prism which refracts light from the cosmos is the last tool needed in the creation of the birds. As they are painted with alchemical pigment and an energetically charged brush, the refracted cosmic light transforms them into living birds which fly about and explore the laboratory.<sup>122</sup> This painting also gives us insight into her interest in Pythagorean numerology. According to

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<sup>120</sup> Haynes, “The Art of Remedios Varo,” 29.

<sup>121</sup> Manly P. Hall, *An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolic Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, 1977), LXXXI.

<sup>122</sup> Haynes, “The Art of Remedios Varo,” 28.

the doctrine, “one is the number for the unity of all things,” “two signifies matter and duality,” while “three is not necessarily a reference to the trinity” but rather to the “prime or the whole.”<sup>123</sup> In the painting, Varo paints one figure, one stationary bird, one round window, one music box; two arched windows, an alembic constituted of two egg-shaped forms, two vessels interacting on the back walls; three birds in flight, a three-stringed lyre, three legs on the alembic stand, and three cosmically charged pigments. Within Pythagorean doctrine, a primary tenet is “the belief that numbers are the ultimate constituents of reality.”<sup>124</sup> Given Varo’s interest in alchemy and numerology, it is safe to assume that these symbols are not merely coincidental. This painting is not just a vision of alchemical achievement, but also of the artist’s creative power in creating life within a unified image.

Much related to her propensity to depict mystical scientific activities and machines, another interesting aspect of Varo’s work is her repeated invention of imaginative vehicles suited for her characters’ spiritual journeys. Her voyage machines are “often powered by wind and wheels, with sophisticated systems of pulleys, pedals, rudders, and sails that equip them to cross land, water, or air on their journeys of exploration.”<sup>125</sup> Her *Spiral Transit* from 1962 (fig. 20) shows at least ten of these eccentric vehicles, each differing in design and many whose egg-like shape recall the philosopher’s egg. In *The Escape* (1961) (fig. 21), a couple escapes their previous life in

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<sup>123</sup> Haynes, “The Art of Remedios Varo,” 29.

<sup>124</sup> S. K. Heninger Jr., *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1974), 71.

<sup>125</sup> Kaplan, “Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions,” 14.

a fantastic vehicle that looks much like an inverted umbrella. The couple's vestments "billow out behind them," serving as the sails for their vehicle. Varo's vehicles show her affinity for the miraculous, the imaginative, the inventive, and the inspired.

### **iii. Feminist Consciousness**

In comparison to the rather limited role of women in the art of the male Surrealists, Varo's female subjects exist within a world which contains endless possibilities. She administers an assortment of roles to her women: they are explorers, voyagers, cartographers, scientists, alchemists, mystics, musicians, goddesses, and heroines on psychological or spiritual quests.<sup>126</sup> This wide representation of females allowed Varo to resist cultural "stereotypes about female identity and to show these sexual stereotypes as constructions" of centuries of misogynist influence.<sup>127</sup>

Not only did Varo express the female identity in these ways, her use of subtle self-portraiture inserts herself into that community of women, expressing her own identity through her characters. Each of her central female subjects possess a softly contoured heart-shaped face, wide at the brow and narrowing towards the chin, with almond eyes, a long straight nose, and a small mouth — all of which align with Varo's physical appearance, making each character a "symbolic equivalent of Varo herself."<sup>128</sup> In this way, we can read Varo's representation of females within the surreality of her pictorial world as representations of her own self in reality. Varo therefore paints herself in a wide

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<sup>126</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions," 17.

<sup>127</sup> Haynes, "The Art of Remedios Varo," 31.

<sup>128</sup> Kaplan, "Remedios Varo," 39.

variety of roles, reflecting her own knowledge and various interests within these roles, and through that she seeks to represent the identity of the female spirit as a whole.

Varo's characters are graceful and beautiful, though they often do not bear many decidedly feminine characteristics. Their bodies are covered and their hair is often pulled back or absent altogether, eliminating traditional artistic clues of gender. Although the characters do bear a resemblance to Varo herself, they are often presented as androgynes, which holds significant meaning as well. As the terms 'androgyny' and 'hermaphroditism' are often confused or combined, I would like to clarify their meanings. Androgyny is the "reconciliation of male and female within a person without sacrificing gender identity," while hermaphroditism "is the presence of both male and female sex organs and sex characteristics."<sup>129</sup> Varo's characters, without indication of organs or characteristics of both sexes, are in fact androgynous characters. The end purpose of alchemy, the union of opposites which creates the philosopher's stone or spiritually leads to enlightenment, includes with it the union of male and female.<sup>130</sup> Varo's characters display this androgynous gender-ambiguity that can be seen as a union of male and female—again emphasizing the enlightenment and apotheosis of the characters themselves, not just in their activities and interests but in their bodies as well. The physicality of the characters therefore are a symbol of the alchemical achievement—of ultimate unification, transcendence, and enlightenment.

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<sup>129</sup> Haynes, "The Art of Remedios Varo," 31.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.



In Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical writings, she explained that "the androgynous god is universal," that she is brought forth by "the creative power of imagination," and that "the androgynous figure is an image of psychic integration, of the union of opposites."<sup>131</sup> Varo was more interested in changing thought around the feminine, not just by inserting her into different roles or scenes, but by presenting her in a different way altogether, and via a mode of representation that emphasized her universality and not just those traditional feminine characteristics. In this way, Varo was not displaying the feminine identity as overtly female or preoccupied with female activities in the way that Carrington was interested in transforming the traditional female domestic space into a sacred one. Instead, Varo transformed the idea of the feminine into a display of ultimate union and universal power. More than anything, Varo's androgynous characters encapsulate the female creative spirit.

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<sup>131</sup> Haynes, "The Art of Remedios Varo," 31.

## CONCLUSION

### i. Revisiting Surrealism

When the Surrealists began creating their odd and dreamlike works that sought to lift the veil to reveal subconscious thought processes in the 1920s, they looked to many non-traditional teachings and traditions for inspiration, but many were still trapped in the representative ways of the past. At the hands of their male contemporaries, the female was often represented in a misogynist and erotic light, carrying on a tired image rather than attempting to present a new and true representation of the female persona. The men often ushered women into the restrictive roles of subject and muse, even though the actual women behind these representations were dynamic and valued members of the artistic community. Despite being intellectual and artistic equals, when it came to the art, the women often still found their character as secondary to their physicality. Their physical form took center stage often as inspiration in the work of the leading males, but representations of those intangible attributes were excluded.

It was in this way that Surrealism revealed its inclination for misogyny, and so it became the implicit mission of the women to respond to this tendency and create a new narrative for the female subject. This is why a selection of the artistic output made by female Surrealists at the time pursues an accurate representation of “imaginative individuality and fertile, fecund, distinctly female power.”<sup>132</sup> This brings up an interesting question: if the requirements of Surrealism were not inherently misogynist, then why was so much of the artistic output so? An easy inference to make is that it was because it is

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<sup>132</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 26.

easier to carry on the traditions of the past, and it is so well known that much of art history has exhibited similar representations of women. What is much harder, and what Carrington and Varo sought, is to create a new pictorial language that speaks to the modern world. It's interesting that under the umbrella of Surrealism, some of the most disgusting and obscene images of women were created as well as some of the most empowered and transcendent.

## **ii. Revisiting Carrington and Varo**

Carrington and Varo both held intense and lifelong interest in many occult traditions and teachings, and their artistic output makes this visibly clear. Their work attempts to make sense of the spiritual and psychic life with references to traditions like spiritual alchemy, but it also has a dual function. Their choice to permeate their artwork with occult themes is both a personal choice stemming from interests and spiritual practice, as well as a compelling and historical feminist strategy.

In Carrington's artistic universe, she tends to explore her alter-ego as the horse inspired by the Celtic goddess Epona and traditional feminine spaces as the site of magical practice. These themes imbue her work with an occult essence and an intense symbolism which form a canvas brimming with mystery and mysticism. The recurring inclusion of the horse in her paintings makes it glaringly evident that the equine creature holds significant meaning to her. In her written work, specifically *Penelope*, the horse comes to serve as the vehicle that can whisk her away from the patriarchal habits of the common world and into the liberty of a world which favors enchantment and imagination. Carrington's interest in painting traditional feminine spaces, such as

kitchens or gardens, is far from conventional. She chooses to turn these spaces into environments which are not bound by the restrictions of reality, instead turning them into settings conducive to the practices of magic, alchemy, and spirituality. In this way, much of Carrington's oeuvre can be read together as the demonstration of the liberation of the female spirit and the celebration of female spirituality.

Varo's pictorial world is one of striking enchantment; the whimsicality and otherworldliness is immediately apparent. She seems to create a sophisticated narrative of leading female characters whose alchemical prowess, mechanical knowledge, and spiritual transcendence leaves them without an ounce of limitation. They aren't even bound by conventional physical attributes of the female body, often favoring an androgynous appearance as opposed to an explicitly feminine one. At Varo's hand, the female is alchemist, explorer, goddess, scientist, and, perhaps most importantly, she is universal.

Given their close proximity to one another in both Paris and Mexico City and the interests they shared, it should not come as much of a surprise to learn that Carrington and Varo were actually very close friends; their friendship simply makes sense. The two women spent years exploring "numerous magical traditions together with wide-ranging interests, from Mexican witchcraft to Gardnerian Wicca."<sup>133</sup> Not only did they share spiritual and feminist interests, they also had similar backgrounds mingling with the Surrealists, escaping war, and ultimately finding a safe haven in Mexico City where they

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<sup>133</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 437.

“were free to create their own unique pictorial world, placing women at the center.”<sup>134</sup>

Their artistic creations evolved along with one another, and together they “propelled their work into a maturity distinguished by powerful and unique sensibilities newly independent of earlier influences by other Surrealist painters.”<sup>135</sup> They were not building upon earlier models; instead they abandoned precedent altogether and birthed a new pictorial language that actually served the needs of the modern woman. From Carrington and Varo arose some of the most powerful and archetypal images of the ideal of the witch, the woman whose force, intelligence, and ability is far beyond the grasp of her society.

### **iii. Revisiting the Witch**

As discussed in the second chapter, witchcraft and other occult practices have arguably existed as long as recorded human history, with their first known origins dating back to antiquity. It was the rise of religions like Christianity that led to the attempted erasure of these pagan beliefs and the persecution of those suspected of witchcraft. Not only were women the primary target, it was their female sexuality that was often cited as reason for persecution, attributing natural phenomena such as miscarriage, abortion, and seduction as evidence for malicious supernatural practice. It is from these dark origins that the witch has slowly evolved through time into a sort of icon for several groups of feminists.

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<sup>134</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 437.

<sup>135</sup> Chadwick, “Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness,” 39.

As a renewed interest in occult practices and studies grew in the 19th century, it brought with it opportunities to practice spirituality separate from the confines of traditional religious systems; and with that came opportunities for women to occupy positions of authority. Spiritualism's ritual practice of the séance gave way for women to speak with religious authority to groups of men and women. Theosophy, whose co-founder and leading theoretician was a woman, is yet another example. Furthermore, in the 1970s, the feminist spirituality movement, embraced by artists such as Mary Beth Edelson and Anne Healy, placed "its emphasis on the beauty and sacredness of the female body" and the worship of Goddess figures of pagan traditions.<sup>136</sup>

Matilda Joslyn Gage, a feminist activist and founder of the Women's National Liberal Union, is another example of this relationship between feminism and the witch. In 1893, she published her most important work, *Woman, Church, and State*. In this book, she claims: "Witches too often were educated women who challenged existing power structures [...] The witch was in reality the profoundest thinker, the most advanced scientists of those ages [...] No less today than during the darkest period of history, is the church the greatest opponent of woman's education, every advance step for her having found the church antagonistic."<sup>137</sup> Gage was the mother-in-law of L. Frank Baum, who later in 1900 published *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and in doing so created "perhaps one of the most powerful fictional witches in Western culture."<sup>138</sup> Many actually consider Gage to have been the inspiration behind L. Frank Baum's progressive decision to choose

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<sup>136</sup> Klein, "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s," 588.

<sup>137</sup> Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church and State* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002), 243.

<sup>138</sup> Hundley, *Witchcraft*, 23.

a female protagonist (Dorothy), as well as direct inspiration for Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.<sup>139</sup>

#### **iv. Contemporary Concerns**

There are others who are continuing and advancing the contemporary discussion of this topic, which I hope by now has proven its importance within the history of art, the history of spirituality, and the history of feminism. This thesis commenced with a brief mention of an effort by The Armory Show to highlight artists from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, and it will now close with another example that is much more specific to the topic. In 2021, The Armory Show included a booth presented by a gallery whose artist's mission falls very much in line with the goal of this thesis. The presentation was a collaborative drawing project by Hilma's Ghost, a "feminist artist collective" comprised of New York artists Dannielle Tegeder and Sharmistha Ray, with the support of Carrie Secrist Gallery.<sup>140</sup> Together, the artists created 5 paintings and 78 drawings, formulating a complete abstract Tarot deck that reacts to the popular Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot Deck. Hilma's Ghost, named after artist Hilma af Klint, describes their artistic practice as an "experimental pedagogy, transcultural dialogue, and collectivity through the lens of feminism and spirituality to build community and reckon with patriarchal art histories that have excluded women, trans, and nonbinary practitioners."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Zanita E Fenton, "No Witch Is a Bad Witch: A Commentary on the Erasure of Matilda Joslyn Gage," *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 20, no. 1 (2010): pp. 21-38, 22. (page 22)

<sup>140</sup> "The Armory Show: Hilma's Ghost: Dannielle Tegeder + Sharmistha Ray," The Armory Show | Hilma's Ghost: Dannielle Tegeder + Sharmistha Ray – Carrie Secrist Gallery, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.secrisgallery.com/exhibitions/2021/the-armory-show-dannielle-tegeder-sharmistha-ray/>.

<sup>141</sup> "Hilma's Ghost: About," Hilma's Ghost, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.hilmasghost.com/hilmas-ghost>.

I bring up this example in closing to emphasize that this interest in the occult, in feminism, and in the intersection of the two, is not confined to just the Surrealist period in which I focus much of my thesis. This is as much of a contemporary issue as it is a 19th century one, and it is sure to be a future one as well. It is important for art institutions, businesses, galleries, scholars, and students to identify these trends of our artistic history and research them, as most of them have a strong historical tradition and yet little public knowledge. It is for these reasons that it is so important that the historical relation of feminism and the occult are properly explored within the art historical canon.



## ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. *Le groupe surréaliste (The Surrealist Group)*, 1933. Photo by Anna Riwkin-Brick Silver gelatin print. From left to right: Tristan Tzara, Paul Éluard, André Breton, Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, René Crevel and Man Ray.

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/anna-riwkin-brick/groupe-surr%C3%A9aliste-paris-SCTEvARTOcW6YyeIs425vg2>



Fig. 2. Man Ray, *Le Violin d'Ingres (Ingres's Violin)*, 1924. Gelatin silver print. © 2022 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris  
<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6311401>



Fig. 3. Still of a woman's eye just before being sliced by a straight razor from the film, *Un Chien Andalou (An Andalusian Dog)*, by Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel (1924).  
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/303134>



Fig. 4. Leonor Fini, *Femme assise un homme nu* (*Woman Seated on a Naked Man*), 1942. Private collection.  
<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/09/28/leonor-fini-an-artist-who-always-put-herself-on-top-finally-gets-her-due-at-new-yorks-museum-of-sex>



Fig. 5. Photograph of Lee Miller in Hitler's bathtub, 1945. Photographed by David E. Sherman. Courtesy Lee Miller Archives, England 2020. <https://hvmag.com/things-to-do/arts-culture/lee-miller-hitler-bathtub-photo/>



Fig. 6. Méret Oppenheim, *Le Déjeuner en fourrure (Luncheon in fur) (Object)*, 1936. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Pro Litteris, Zurich <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80997>



Fig. 7.

Leonora Carrington, *Ab Eo, Quod (From The Fact That)*, 1956. © Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2021.

<https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonora-carrington/ab-eo-quod-P2EYWSBIRhtYi9MIQUZJYQ2>

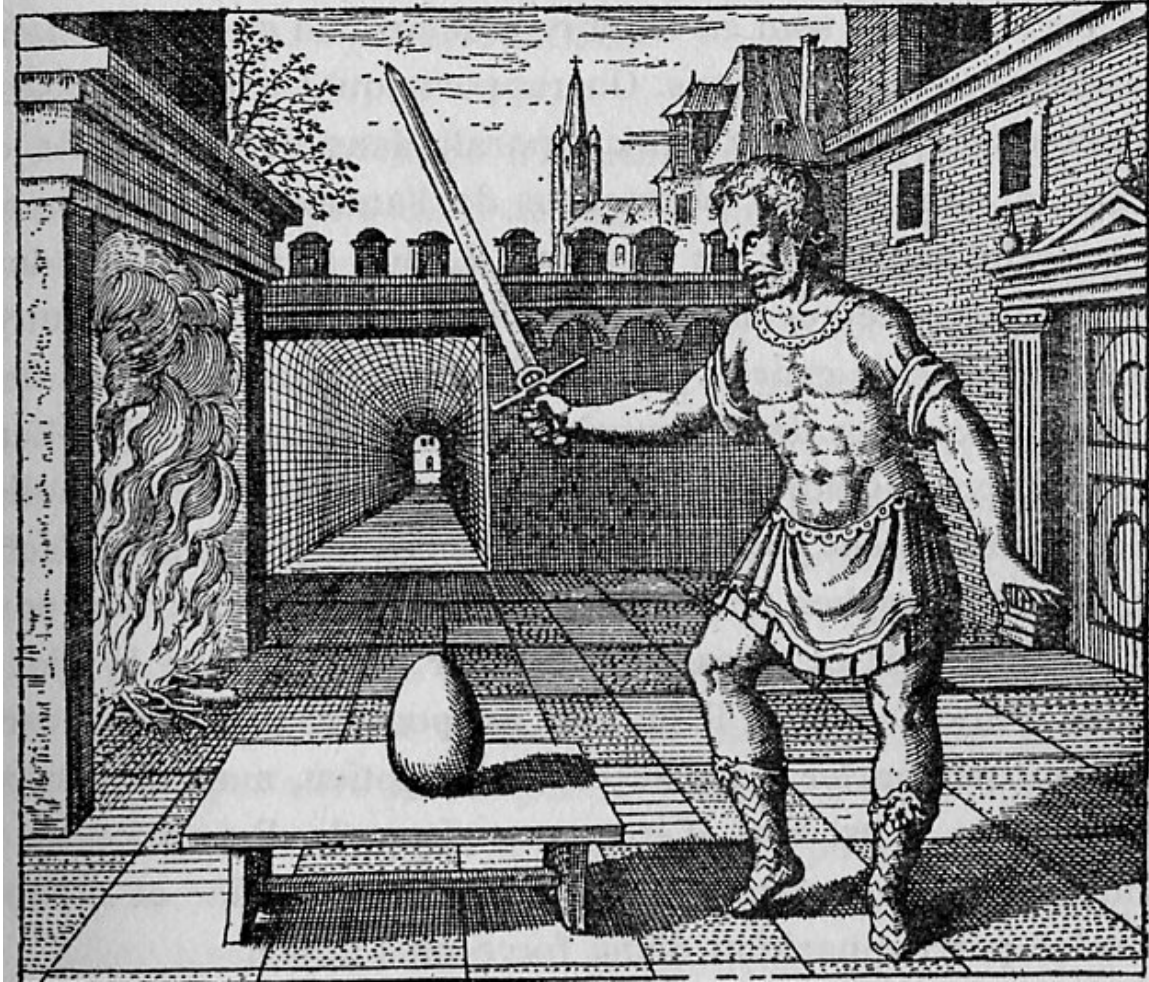


Fig. 8. *Mars and the Philosophic Egg*, reproduced from Kurt Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic*, New York: Pantheon Press, 1948, p. 160. Originally published in 1617 in Michael Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*.



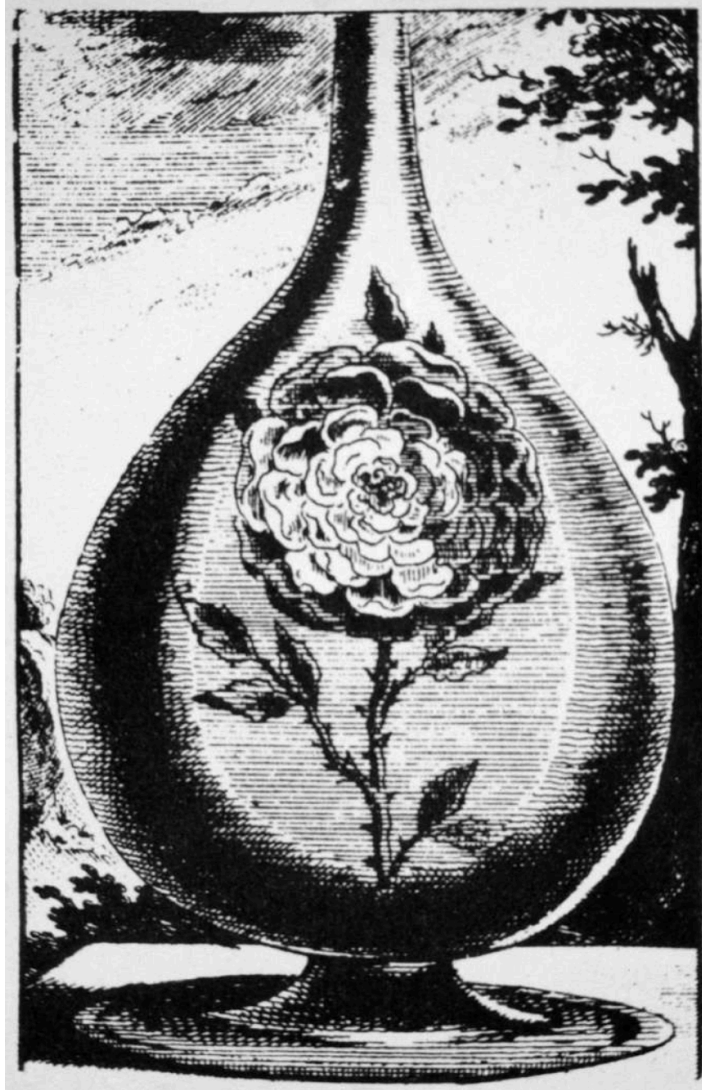


Fig. 9. *The Specter of the Rose*, reproduced from Kurt Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic*, New York: Pantheon Press, 1948, p. 461.



Fig. 10. Leonora Carrington, *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)*, 1937-1938.  
© Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and  
DACS, London 2021.  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/492697>



Fig. 11. Leonora Carrington, *Portrait of Max Ernst*, 1939. © Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2021. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/164061>



Fig. 12. Leonora Carrington, *Bath of Rabi Loew*, 1969. © Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2021. [https://www.artandantiquesmag.com/leonora-carrington/201812\\_carrington\\_01/](https://www.artandantiquesmag.com/leonora-carrington/201812_carrington_01/)



Fig. 13. Leonora Carrington, *The Ancestor*, 1968. © Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2021. <https://www.leonoracarringtonmuseo.org/el-ancestro>



Fig. 14. Leonora Carrington, *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen*, 1975. © Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2021. Image from Jessica Hundley, *Witchcraft. The Library of Esoterica*, page 435.



Fig. 15. Leonora Carrington, *The House Opposite*, 1945. © Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2021. <https://www.theartstory.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-House-Opposite-600x240.png>



Fig. 16. Leonora Carrington, *Mujeres conciencia*, 1972. Guache on cardboard. © Estate of Leonora Carrington. All rights reserved. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2019. <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/blog/2019/07/11/mujeres-conciencia-womens-awareness-leonora-carringtons-agit-prop-by-catriona-mcara-and-jonathan-p-eburne/>





Fig. 17.

Remedios Varo, *La Llamada (The Call)*, 1961. © Estate of Remedios Varo / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Lee Stalworth.  
<https://nmwa.org/art/collection/la-llamada-call/>



Fig. 18. Remedios Varo, *The Useless Science or The Alchemist*, 1955. © Estate of Remedios Varo / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. [https://mexicanartwork.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/useless\\_science.jpg](https://mexicanartwork.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/useless_science.jpg)

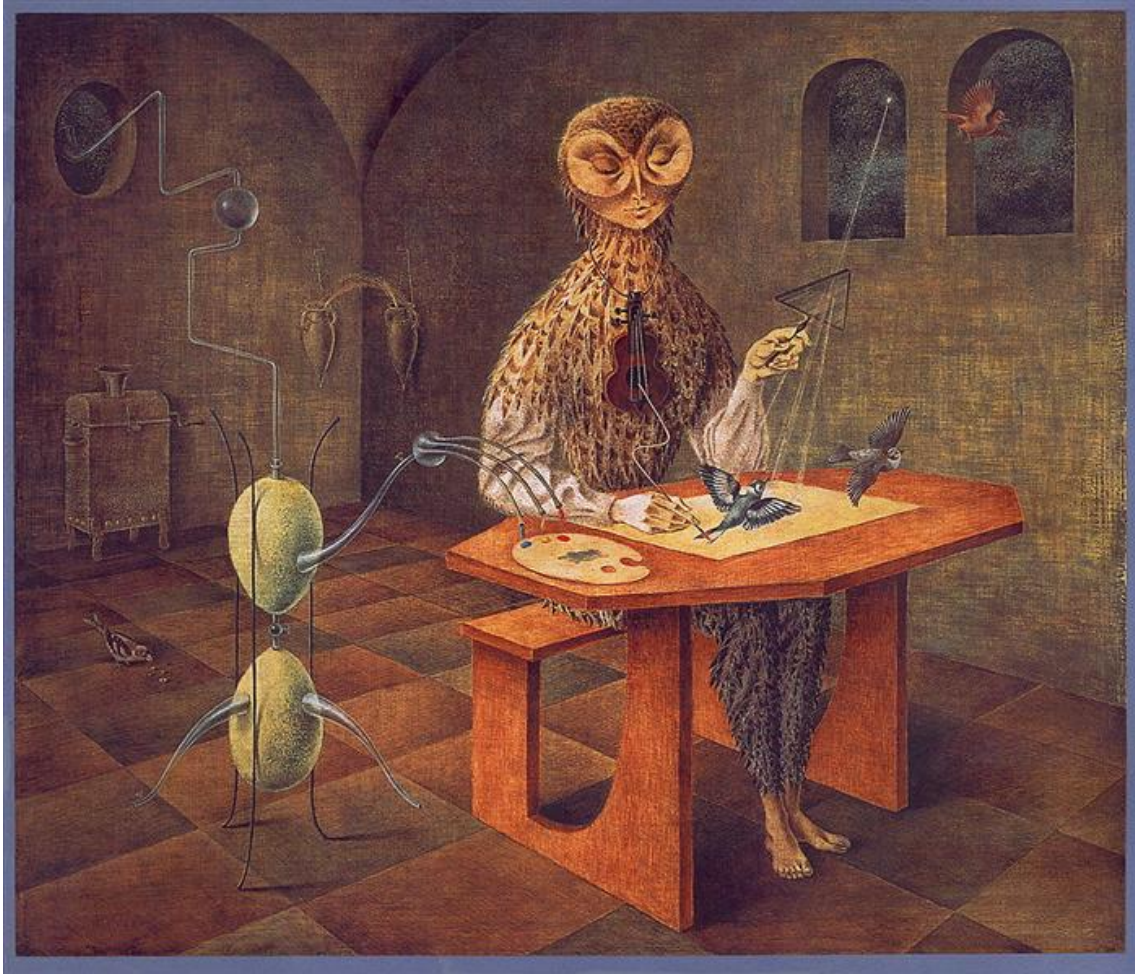


Fig. 19. Remedios Varo, *Creation of the Birds*, 1957. © Estate of Remedios Varo / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/remedios-varo/creation-of-the-birds>



Fig. 20. Remedios Varo, *Spiral Transit*, 1962. © Estate of Remedios Varo / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  
<https://wikioo.org/paintings.php?refarticle=8LT62C&titlepainting=Spiral+transit&artistname=Remedios+Varo>



Fig. 21. Remedios Varo, *The Escape*, 1961. © Estate of Remedios Varo / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  
<https://www.gallerywendinorris.com/news-reviews/remedios-varo>

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