

LEONORA
CARRINGTON

REVELATION

All the individuals that together make up Leonora Carrington (Clayton-le-Woods, Lancashire, 1917 - Mexico City, 2011) are present in this exhibition. A visual artist able to combine the most enigmatic influences and allusions and a writer whose every line from childhood onwards created a unique cosmology and activated a personal struggle to locate herself in the world, Carrington has only recently ceased to be considered a marginal, derivative creator as the challenges of the contemporary world have located her at the centre of its debates.

The concept of metamorphosis was fundamental for the artist and she experienced a series of transformations that defined her life story: alienated from her prosperous family origins in post-Victorian England; associated with Surrealism and unwilling to accept a subordinate role within it; the victim of sexual violence and the stigmatisation of mental illness; a migrant, exile and mother. For Carrington all these episodes constituted different “revelations” which allowed her to “take off and put on at will the mask that would be my shield against the hostility of Conformity.”

Together with these key moments and phases in her life, the exhibition focuses on the motifs that traverse a complex and arcane discourse which will perhaps both fascinate and disconcert visitors: the reinterpretation of trauma; a contemplation of her origins and its founding myths; her connection with ancestral and sacred female figures; an identification with the animal world which made her a paradigm of ecofeminism; an absorption of cultural elements from the places she visited and lived in, from Renaissance painting in Florence to Mesoamerican art in Mexico; and an interest in non-canonical forms of thought and spirituality such as alchemy, magic and the tarot, as well as mythologies erased from history.

This exhibition, the first on the artist to be organised in Spain, returns Leonora Carrington to the country that marked a point of rupture and of no return; a journey towards other worlds. More than one hundred years after her birth, it presents an artist who seems to us a “revelation.”

The debutante

As the daughter of an upwardly-mobile British family, Leonora Carrington rebelled against all the rules and rituals imposed on young girls of her social class. Expelled from various Catholic schools and declared “unteachable”, in 1932 she was sent to Miss Penrose’s academy in Florence, a finishing school for wealthy young English girls. This experience gave her the opportunity to study the work of the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento* artists who would significantly influence her own output. However, these influences would not manifest themselves until later and at this date Carrington’s work reveals a process that would be repeated throughout her career: a way of being in two places at once, or a type of bi-location in which she mentally located herself elsewhere. Although able to see the collections of Italian museums (and later of those in Paris, where she arrived in 1933), her most significant early output comprises a group of watercolours depicting powerful legendary female figures inspired by her childhood and adolescent reading. Alongside them we see the first appearance of animals which function as alters egos, particularly the hyena and the horse. One example is *Hyena in Hyde Park*, a painting that directly relates to her initial production as a writer as it illustrates her early short story “The Debutante”, in which Carrington altered the reality of her presentation at the court of George V to offer a satire of childhood abuse in which the alliance between the writer and the hyena allows them to swap identities.

Encounter: Saint-Martin-d'Ardèche

In the summer of 1936 the first Surrealist exhibition to be held in Britain took place at the New Burlington Galleries in London, entitled *The International Surrealist Exhibition*. The impact it had on the nineteen-year-old Leonora Carrington, then a student at Amédée Ozenfant's art academy, was shortly followed by that of her first meeting with Max Ernst. The two immediately became a couple, which obliged them to run away in order to escape the persecution of Carrington's father. They moved to various places where they took refuge with Surrealist artists: firstly Cornwall in south-west England, then Paris (where Carrington took part in the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* of 1938). The couple finally settled in a small, 17th-century farmhouse in Saint-Martin-d'Ardèche in the south of France. There they embarked on the creation of their own *gesamtkunstwerk*, encompassing the decoration of their house, their respective visual outputs and Carrington's writing.

Inside the house Carrington made use of the doors and windows to fully express her visual repertoire of hybrid and self-referential figures. For his part, Ernst covered the exterior with protective or menacing creatures which echoed his pictorial output of this period. All these figures gave a symbolic meaning to a place that was also a space of encounter, as documented by Lee Miller in a series of photographs which convey the atmosphere of the place and the house at Saint-Martin-d'Ardèche; the swansong of a world which vanished with the war, when Ernst (who was German) was imprisoned as an enemy alien and the two artists' paths separated.

Down Below: Santander

“I returned home and spent the whole night carefully sorting the things I intended taking along with me. All of them got into a suitcase which bore, beneath my name, a small brass plate set into the leather, on which was written the word REVELATION.”

These words describe the start of a journey that began in 1940 in the context of the increasing severity of the war in Europe and the second arrest of Max Ernst, after which Carrington fled towards Spain with the aim of reaching Lisbon and thus embarking for the United States. Her time in Europe, however, lasted longer than expected and became the nightmare that would mark the rest of her life. After she arrived in Madrid Carrington was raped by a group of nationalist militia officers, an ordeal which may have brought on the psychotic episode that led to her being interned —on the orders of her father, whose influence extended as far as Spain— in a psychiatric clinic for upper-class foreigners. Located in Santander, the clinic was run by doctors Mariano and Luis Morales. They employed a powerful drug known as Cardiazol which could produce epileptic fits and temporarily suppress patients’ willpower. “Brain Washing, they say, is the latest method of torture”, Carrington would write years later in her novel *The Hearing Trumpet*.

While the Surrealists had investigated the liminal spaces between dreaming and wakefulness and between lucidity and mental illness, Carrington actually *experienced* those states. She recounted them in *Down Below* and in the numerous drawings she made during her confinement at the clinic. These elements made her work increasingly sombre and hermetic but they also allowed her to give form to an extreme experience and they permanently transformed her visual imagery.

Towards the unknown: New York

In the summer of 1941 the twenty-four-year-old Leonora Carrington disembarked in New York with Renato Leduc, a writer and poet who had close connections with the diplomatic world. They had married in Lisbon, allowing her to escape the influence of her father who had planned to send her to another clinic in South Africa. For Carrington, the transatlantic crossing that represented salvation for many artists and intellectuals meant a flight from many worlds in her past. In New York, however, she re-encountered the now exiled Surrealist community, among which she acquired greater prominence due to her experience in Spain.

In the remarkable pictorial output that Carrington produced in the barely eighteen months she spent in New York on her journey “towards the unknown”, she perfected and consolidated the iconography created in previous years (particularly the one generated in Spain), which now gained in complexity. In a way characteristic of Carrington, in these works she was immersed in the mental elaboration of the previous episode, giving form to and expressing her traumatic experience of war, mental illness and incarceration, experiences now augmented by that of a double exile from both war-torn Europe and her birth family. She renounced the latter in various ways, as in the meaningfully titled drawing *Brothers and Sisters Have I None*, which summarises her rejection of her social class and her displacement.

Memory and origins: Crookhey Hall

This section takes its name from Carrington's family home, the neo-Gothic mansion Crookhey Hall, depicted in the artist's lithograph of that title as a place where various ghosts and childhood fantasies come to life. From 1943 onwards Carrington lived in Mexico City, where following her divorce from Renato Leduc she married the Hungarian photographer Emerico "Chiki" Weisz. She also surrounded herself with a social circle of fellow exiles whose origins lay in Europe, including Kati and José Horna, Remedios Varo and Benjamin Péret.

The experience of motherhood led on to remarkably fruitful creative periods which took the form of regressions to her origins and premonitions of her future. In works influenced by the tones and forms familiar from her studies in Italy (with a use of tempera and horizontal, predella-like formats), Carrington embarked on journeys to a very remote past. These are familiar, pastoral visions charged with a melancholy different to the wounded turbulence of her New York works and ones that seem to refer to a return to origins. A letter from the artist clearly expresses this: "I want to return to England next year [...]. I'm sure it will wear off, as it always does when I feel nostalgic about England."

The other key event was the organisation of Carrington's first solo exhibition, which opened at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1948 with the support of her friend and patron Edward James, a member of the British upper classes and supporter of the Surrealists who lived in Mexico. James wrote: "The paintings of Leonora Carrington are not merely painted, they are brewed. They sometimes seem to have materialised in a cauldron at the stroke of midnight, but despite this they are not mere illustrations to fairy tales. Hers are not literary paintings, they are pictures distilled in the underground caves of libido, vertiginously sublimated. [...] they belong to the universal subconscious."

The White Goddess

As a child, Carrington had access to narratives that subverted what her conventional education was teaching her. Her mother read her the novel *The Crock of Gold* (1912) by the Irish writer James Stephens, a work that deals with the roles of both the patriarch and women in society. Fascinated by the manifestations of female divinity which she encountered in other books from her childhood, Carrington constantly reread these tales in which women take on a sacred and omnipotent aura, among them Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen", to which she repeatedly referred in her fantastical novel *The Hearing Trumpet*.

According to the artist herself, however, the greatest revelation of her life was Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. This extended essay explores the history of lost cults of female goddesses and Graves discovered evidence of a cult of goddesses that extended from Palestine to Ireland but was erased from official accounts although this veneration survived, ingeniously concealed within poems and ancient alphabets of Celtic origin. Graves's text had an enormous impact on Carrington, who shared his fascination with mysteries and riddles. Her encounter with his essay gave a new impulse to her work, and women, heroines and goddesses endowed with powers and prophetic messages are a constant presence in her output from this point onwards. They reveal countless facets of the female, on occasions combined with the image of the androgynous figure seen as the perfect combination of genders. Other manifestations, such as the Triple Goddess, have a directly biographical association: the trio consisting of Carrington, the Spanish painter Remedios Varo and the Hungarian photographer Kati Horna, with whom she shared interests and artistic concerns during their years in Mexico.

Women's awareness: feminism and politics

In the late 1960s Leonora Carrington's life underwent a transformation. This period was influenced by her interest in feminist movements and by the lengthy periods she spent in the United States. In New York she established contacts with a group of women who together founded ecofeminism, a school of thought defined by a feminist critique of decisions concerning the exploitation of natural materials. These circles rediscovered the cult of the goddess and reassessed the role of matriarchy in history.

Carrington's house in Mexico became a meeting place for a small group of women concerned for the inequality of women's situation and their lack of rights. Her painting *Women's Awareness* was used for a poster of that title in 1972, as an expression of the "indignation and anger regarding the situation of women". In this image two women, one black and one white, exchange apples. An inscription on the reverse states: "Eve gives Eve back the fruit of wisdom". Carrington's work of these years frequently questions the biblical accounts in terms of their presentation of Eve and other women as the causes of sin and the justification for their oppression. We also encounter a positive vision of the complementary nature of the sexes, expressed as androgyny.

In parallel to the above, another event led to a radical shift in Carrington's work, moving it into the political realm, namely the Tlatelolco massacre which took place in 1968 in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City where hundreds of protesters were killed during the student uprisings. It inspired works of overtly political content which clearly support non-violence, such as *No!*

Arcane knowledge: alchemy, magic and myth

“*Femme-sorcière*” [sorceress-woman] was how André Breton referred to Leonora Carrington in the years when the patriarch of Surrealism proclaimed magic as the new paradigm for the interpretation of the world and its mysteries. While Carrington attempted to liberate herself from epithets of this type, which Surrealist men applied to women (*femme-sorcière*, *femme-enfant*, etc), her investigations certainly encompassed different forms of occult knowledge, including magic, alchemy and astrology, as well as the tarot and other divinatory arts. She was also interested in mythological accounts associated with the esoteric and mystery currents of the ancient world, which had been forgotten then revived as alternative routes for accessing the subconscious and the mysteries of man, nature and the universe.

For Carrington, magic was a means to recover banned female powers, hence her profound interest in it. At the same time, her early focus on occultism developed further after she read *The Mirror of Magic* (1948) by Kurt Seligmann, which joined her extensive library on arcane subjects that provided her with iconographic sources throughout her life. She had also been interested since childhood in the study of the Kabbalah and following her marriage to “Chiki” Weisz, a Hungarian Jew, she focused on Judaism and its traditions. Finally, she absorbed other trends such as gnosticism, the Rosicrucians and in particular the doctrines of the Russian mystic George Gurdjieff.

Animal being, human being

On one occasion Carrington laconically defined herself as a “female human animal” and the theme of animals, both real and mythological, is the most recurrent one in her work. We encounter the mythological, hybrid and fantastical creatures that she had imagined since childhood, when she invented animals from another planet; creatures which coexist and come to life in a constant process of metamorphosis in her writings and painting. Carrington’s earliest memories relate to animals, to her visits to the zoo and to the riding club and the activity of horse riding, one of the rites of passage of upper-class English girls.

Far from limiting herself to this aspect of animals as indicators of social status or to their heraldry, Carrington established a connection with them which frequently led her to depict herself in the guise of different creatures. At a later date she observed: “There are some faculties which we haven’t admitted or recognised because we’re frightened that somebody might think we’re animals, which we are.” Possessed of a notably advanced ecological vision, Carrington often expressed her indignation at human beings’ predatory attitude and their mistreatment of the ecosystem. Her connections with animals was also one of the reasons for her interest in Buddhism which, in contrast to anthropocentric types of thought, promotes empathy, compassion and reverence towards other life forms and is inspired by the ancient concept of non-duality: the inexistence of frontiers or difference between each individual and the universe.

Other worlds exist: Mexico

Despite the fact that Leonora Carrington spent most of her life in Mexico, research has underestimated the influence of the archaeological remains and living mythologies of Mesoamerica in the formulation of her work. Her interest in magic, which first emerged in Europe, was reignited in the context of a civilisation in which practices and rituals of witchcraft were part of everyday life. Following her arrival at the age of just twenty-five, the country seemed to Carrington a place where everything was new, “from the spirit of the people to the variety of food, plants and animals, the landscape and the contact with the dead.” Rituals on death and beliefs in guardian animals and protective beings found their parallel in the Celtic myths and traditions she had assimilated as a child.

Once in Mexico, Carrington established contacts with a group of exiled Surrealists who shared a fascination with the country’s archaeology and ethnography: the Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen, who collected Pre-Columbian objects and was editor of the magazine *DYN*; Alice Rahon, who reflected the landscape and folk traditions in her poems and paintings; and Benjamin Péret, who translated the Mayan codices of the *Chilam Balam* (from Chumayel) and compiled his *Anthologie des mythes, légendes et contes populaires d’Amérique*. Carrington was also notably close to intellectuals working on Mesoamerican studies, such as the anthropologist Laurette Séjourné. Carrington, Séjourné and Remedios Varo explored remote parts of Mexico, visiting healers, witches and shamans and recording accounts of their ancestral practices which Séjourné subsequently published in a book illustrated by Carrington entitled *Supervivencias de un mundo mágico* [Survivals of a magical world] (1953).