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LEONORA CARRINGTON

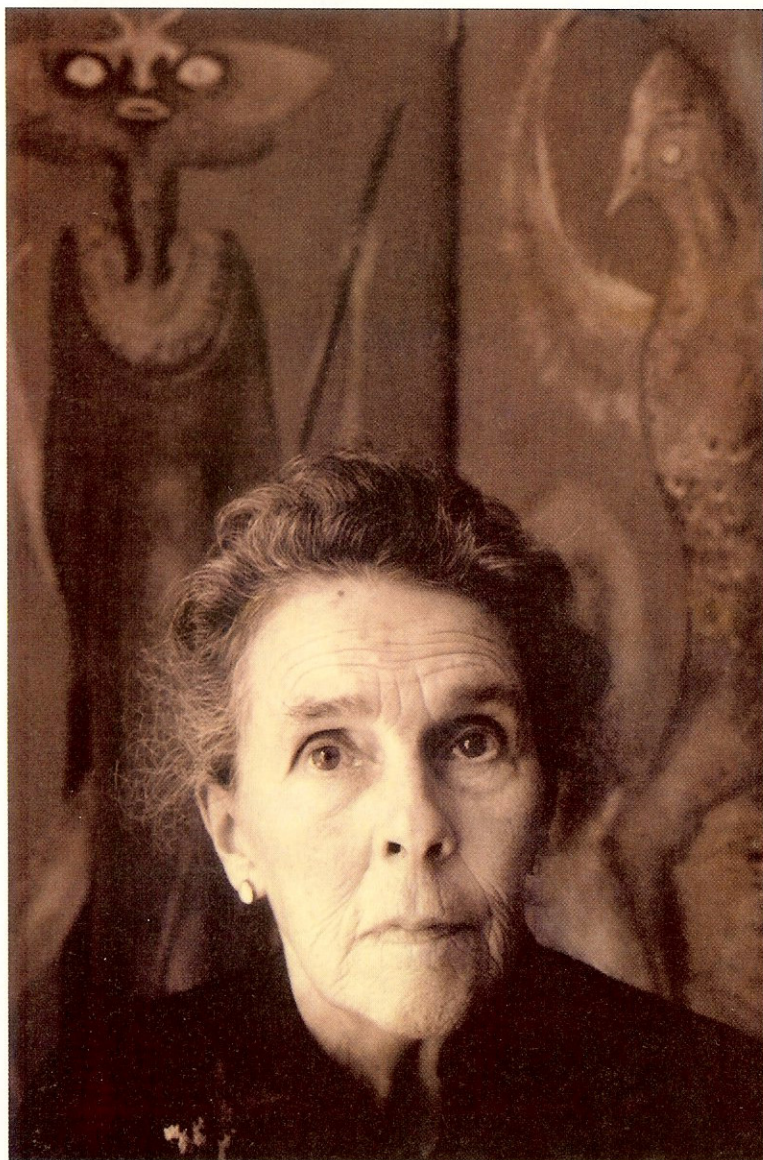


NOBODY'S MUSE

shaken by war,
fascinated by the supernatural
and seduced by Mexico,
the late Leonora Carrington
created some of surrealism's
most distinctive images.

By Edward M. Gómez

“Nobody



could ever be bored with me,” the British-born surrealist artist Leonora Carrington wrote in *The Hearing Trumpet*, her 1974 fantasy novel about an old woman, a kind of alter ego, who is packed off to a rest home filled with eccentric residents. “I have too much soul.”

Throughout her life, Carrington, who died at the age of 94 on May 25, in Mexico City, where she had lived and worked for nearly seven decades, also had a lot of what used to be called pluck. By her mid-20s, she had experienced more privilege, rebelliousness, romance, unforeseen adventure and physical and mental duress than most people do in a lifetime. Now, with her death—obituaries called her “one of the last of the original surrealists”—a long-overdue reassessment of Carrington’s art has begun. Expect historians and curators to start closely examining the work, ideas and legacy of this artist, who herself offered few, if any, explicit interpretations of the strangely self-contained, imaginary world she conjured up in her art. However, in her numerous writings, which include stories, plays and a short memoir that blend fantasy with recollections of her past and references to subjects that intrigued her—ancient civilizations, psychic powers, animals, the occult—Carrington did provide some clues to understanding why she depicted the subjects that appear in her work.

Like many artists, who spend so much time alone in their studios, developing and giving tangible, visible form to their imaginings and ideas, Carrington seemed to live in a world of her own creation. At the same time, though, she was engaged in the real one of which she was an alert and well-informed inhabitant. She was known as someone who was up-to-date on political news and social trends, and in recent years was as deeply concerned about current events in Mexico as she was about “America’s wars,” as she put it in an interview with me, and economic developments at home and abroad. I found out just how intellectually lively Carrington still was in her old age when I had a rare opportunity to visit her in late 2008, while I

was living in Mexico City, just a few blocks away from her house in the architecturally rich Colonia Roma Norte district. My meeting with the reclusive artist, at her home, had been arranged by Eva Marcovich and Rita Alazraki, the directors of the nearby Galería El Estudio, a gallery (now defunct) that had worked with Carrington during the last few years. (Earlier, she had been associated with Mexico City's Galería de Arte Mexicano, a venerable showcase for modern art that was founded in 1935.)

Accompanied by Markovich, I arrived at Carrington's house on a cool, sunny morning; winter in the high-altitude Mexican capital is generally mild. We shuffled through a dark living room, in which some sculpted chairs of the artist's own design, whose backs incorporated animal-shaped motifs, could be seen, into a modest kitchen. Carrington, seated at a table that was the central gathering spot in her home, looked frail. Her gestures were slow, but she greeted us enthusiastically. "At my age, my body cannot keep up with my mind," she explained, apologetically. She instructed her Mexican housekeeper to prepare a pot of black tea and offered us sugar cookies. "Things are still rather English around here, I suppose," she said softly, more to herself than to her guests.

Carrington's dealers had warned me in advance about the strict ground rules that "La Maestra," as they and most Mexicans respectfully called her, had laid down for interviews—no questions about her personal life or even about her art. She would neither analyze nor interpret her works, which, she asserted, spoke for themselves. Nonetheless, she did talk about the sense of discipline and professionalism she had tried to bring to her work, even when she was a young mother back in the 1940s—perhaps especially at that time, since she became well-known for portraying domestic life in her paintings. Art-making, child-rearing, pets, cooking, the environment of the home—all overlapped in her real-world life, so why shouldn't they have coexisted in her art? "Some people said, 'How can you be a mother and an artist?'" Carrington recalled, alluding to past, conventional expectations of a woman, especially those of Mexico's famously family-focused, conservative society. "Well, I did it," she said matter-of-factly.

Later during our talk, however disingenuous—or revealing—it might have sounded, given the mysterious nature of her pictures, she stated simply, as a way of summing up her oeuvre's overall appearance and themes, "I paint people, animals, life. I paint what I see." Carefully avoiding any off-limits topics, I asked Carrington to comment on what I assumed was the more neutral matter of technique—her handling of her materials. She ignored my question or maybe misunderstood it; instead, she answered by referring to the nature of the creative process itself, saying, "Making art is not something you decide to do. It's like getting hungry. It's something you need to do."

After about an hour of conversation, the artist asked



Opening spread: Leonora Carrington, *A Warning to Mother*, 1973, oil on canvas;

Previous page: A portrait of Carrington by Carole Patterson;

This page: *The Giantess*, 1950, oil on canvas.



us if we would accompany her on a short walk around the block. "The sun is out; I would like to step out of this chill," she said, referring to her house's dark, cool atmosphere. With Carrington leaning on my arm on her left side and steadying herself with a cane in her right hand, we set out, followed by Markovich and the housekeeper, who escorted a little dog on a leash. "I've seen so many changes here," Carrington offered, unprompted, "but through it all, much of Mexico has remained the same. I'm as fascinated by this place now as I was when I first arrived here long ago. It nourishes me. It is home. It has become home."

Back at her house, as I packed up my notebook, I asked Carrington if she had thought about her legacy and the unique contributions she had made to the development of modern art. I noted that she had achieved a rare honor: in her lifetime, she had earned an indelible place in the canon of Mexico's own modern-art history. Genuinely or not, she seemed uninterested in the subject, and silently brushed it off. Similarly, as we said goodbye, I asked her if I could shoot her photo-portrait in the soft natural light of her home's enclosed patio. Without hesitating, she declined my

ing that "it's that sense of mystery that continues to attract the public" to her work.

In recent years, before her death, the art market had begun to catch up with the historical significance of Carrington's achievements. Her painting *The Giantess* (circa 1947) sold at auction in New York in 2009 for nearly \$1.5 million. Although the artist never reaped the rewards of such prices herself, a market for her work has held steady for many years. Wendi Norris, co-founder of Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern, a San Francisco gallery that has represented Carrington's work in the U.S., says that, today, prices for her lithographs start around \$7,000; for her drawings, they range from \$15,000 to \$40,000. Prices for her paintings, when they are available, start at around \$175,000.

Despite the artist's reclusiveness toward the end of her life, quite a lot is known about her history; her writings, which mix fact and fantasy, are often autobiographical. Carrington was born in 1917 in Lancashire, England, the daughter of a textile magnate and his Irish wife, a devout Catholic. Leonora grew up in affluence, attended by an Irish nanny and resentful of the freedom her three

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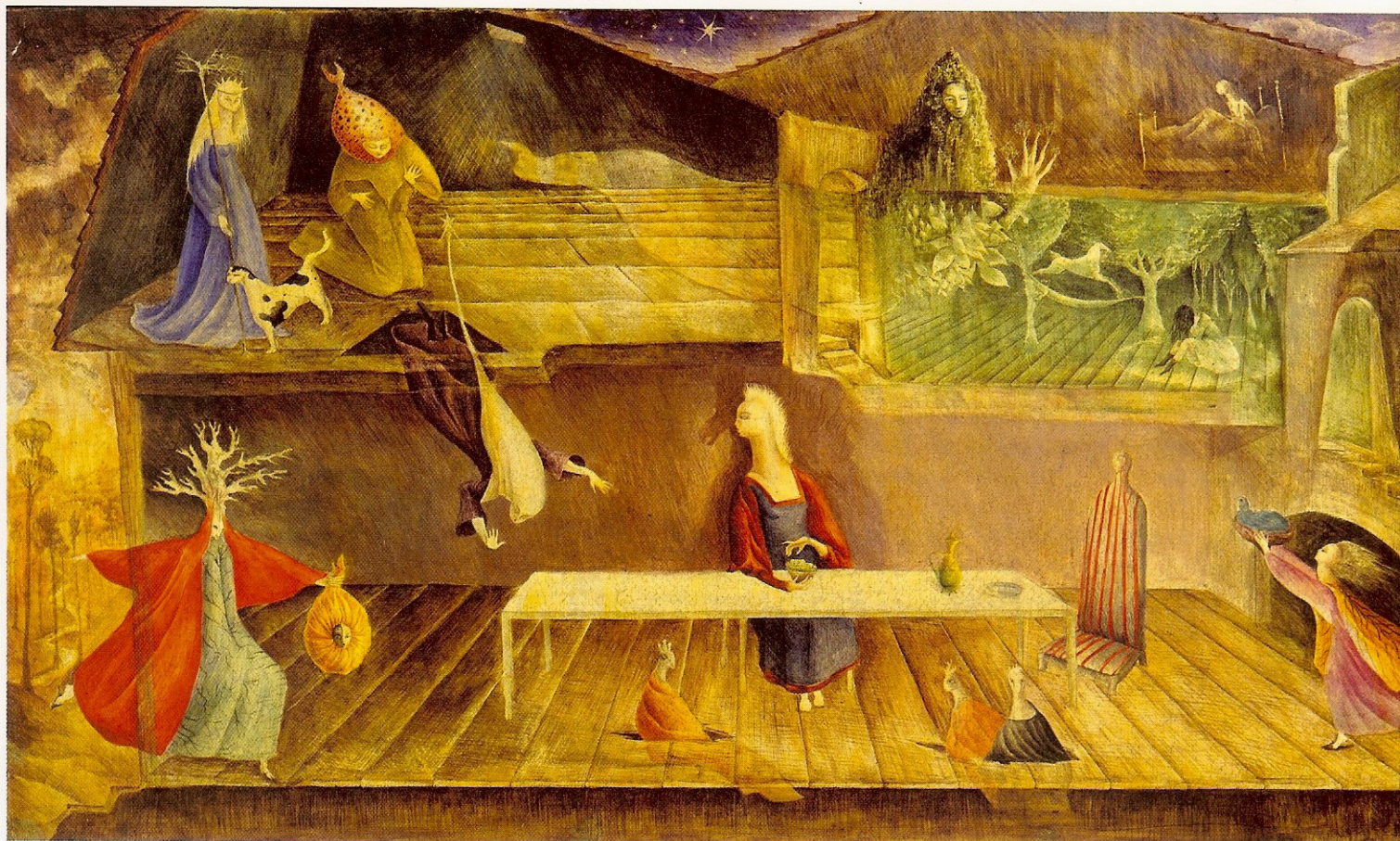
request. "Who would be interested in a picture of this old face?" she retorted, shaking her head dismissively.

The Mexican art historian Teresa Arcq, who has long studied and written about Carrington's life and art, and helped organize exhibitions that have featured her works, notes: "The only other artist who occupies a similar place" in modern art history "is her close friend Remedios Varo, who left behind an equally fascinating body of work." Like Carrington, the Spanish-born Varo, who had supported the Republican side in Spain's Civil War, fled German-occupied France (with her second husband, the French surrealist poet Benjamin Péret) for Mexico, arriving there in 1941. Carrington, Arcq points out, developed "in total freedom," far from the centers of modern art's "tendencies and trends," a collection of "visionary paintings and writings that represent alternative worlds, in which relations of space and time get mixed up, and the line between the real and the imaginary seems to vanish." Arcq says that Carrington, influenced by surrealist thinking, dreams, Mexico's enduring traditions of magic and shamanism, and other esoteric interests, created images that are "full of enigmas," add-

brothers enjoyed while she was expected to begin preparing herself to become "a lady." Instead, she made drawings inspired by the bird-motif architectural details in the family's 19th-century Gothic mansion, which formerly had been owned by a Colonel Bird. Thanks to her independence and impatience with rules, she was expelled from two boarding schools. When she was in her mid-teens, her parents sent her to Miss Penrose's finishing school in Florence, where she soaked up the colors, textures and moods of the classic art that abounded in that Renaissance city's churches and museums; later, those influences would seep into the palettes and visual textures of her own work. Carrington proceeded to a finishing school in Paris; again, she was expelled. Now 17, she reluctantly returned to England, where her parents dolled her up for high society's "season" of young women's coming-out parties. In turn, she herself was presented to King George V at Buckingham Palace.

For Carrington, a path-finding breakthrough occurred when she was sent to London, first for art school, then to classes with the French cubist painter Amédée Ozenfant, who shared with her his

Previous page: *Birdbath*, 1978, acrylic on canvas board.



interest in alchemy. In June 1936, in London, Carrington visited the International Surrealist Exhibition, which had been organized by the British art critic Herbert Read, André Breton (the “father of surrealism”) and other collaborators. There, the young artist saw for the first time, in person, works by such leading surrealists as Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró.

Some time afterward, Carrington met Ernst himself at a party in London. Soon thereafter, they became lovers, even though Ernst was more than twice Carrington’s age and married. In 2006, she told the British journalist Joanna Moorhead (a much younger, distant relative), “I fell in love with Max’s paintings before I fell in love with Max.” Moorhead helped organize “Surreal Friends,” an exhibition that was presented last year at Pallant House Gallery, a museum in Chichester, England. It showcased the work of three remarkable women—Carrington, Varo (1908–63) and the Hungarian-born photographer Kati Horna (1912–2000). In its catalogue, Moorhead wrote that Carrington’s romance with Ernst had provided “a ticket out of the upper-middle-class England that stifled her, and away from the Catholicism whose narrowness she hated.” In an interview decades later, Carrington recalled, “From Max I had my education. I learned about art and literature. He taught me everything.” Some of her best-known paintings date from this period, including a *Self-Portrait* (1937–38) that is now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In 1937, after a summer in southern England full of camarade-

rie with fellow surrealists—including Man Ray, photographer Lee Miller, poet Paul Éluard—Ernst and Carrington met up in Paris, where some of modern art’s most potent new ideas were fermenting. There, the lovers hobnobbed with Breton, Picasso, Marcel Duchamp and Miró; among the group was Ernst’s former lover Leonor Fini, the Franco-Argentine surrealist painter. Among these older, mainly male luminaries, Carrington encountered—but did not easily put up with—the sexism that existed in the free-spirited art world as much as it did in society in general. Once, in Paris, Miró told her to go buy him a pack of cigarettes. Years later, recalling that incident to Moorhead, she said she handed the artist back his coins and advised him that “if he wanted cigarettes, he could bloody well get them himself.”

Leaving Paris, Ernst and Carrington moved into a house near Avignon, in southern France, that she had bought with earnings from her art sales. (For a while, her work sold better than her older partner’s.) They enjoyed their time there, until Ernst was sent to an internment center as an “enemy alien” in 1938. Shortly thereafter, he was released, but after the Germans invaded northern France, he was sent away again, for the Nazis considered his art to be “degenerate.” Unable to help free him, Carrington crossed the Pyrénées with two friends in a tiny car and entered post-Civil War Spain.

There, she suffered a nervous breakdown and landed in a psychiatric hospital, where the mental and physical anguish she expe-



rienced would provide the material for a short memoir, *Down Below* (1944). "Was it a hospital or a concentration camp?" she wrote. Some of Carrington's obituaries reported that, during this period, her Irish nanny headed to Spain in a submarine to track down her erstwhile, youthful charge; in *Down Below*, she travels "in the narrow cabin of a warship," sent, Carrington observes, "by my hostile parents...to take me back to them." While *Down Below* is an ambiguous work in which memoir is wrapped in fantasy, it is considered to be a generally accurate account of what happened to Carrington during this difficult period.

Upon her release from the asylum, Carrington traveled to Madrid and then to Portugal, where, she learned, associates of her father's aimed to send her to a sanitarium in South Africa. In Lisbon, she gave them the slip and raced to Mexico's embassy, where she looked up Renato Leduc, a Mexican-diplomat friend who knew Picasso. (In the chaos of war, Carrington and Ernst had drifted apart.) The two married, effectively securing Carrington's freedom, and headed to the U.S. After a sojourn in New York, Leonora and Leduc moved on to Mexico City, where they amicably divorced, and the next long chapter of Carrington's life began. The year was 1942.



Previous page: *The House Opposite*, 1945, oil on canvas;

This page: *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1947, oil.

After she settled in Mexico, in 1946 she married the Hungarian photographer Emeric ("Chiki") Weisz Schwartz (1911–2007), who had worked as Robert Capa's assistant in Paris, and they had two sons, Gabriel (now a comparative literature professor at Mexico City's leading university) and Pablo (a Virginia-based doctor and visual artist). She also became close friends with Varo, with whom she shared some key interests—Mexico's colorful Day of the Dead celebrations, with their vestiges of ancient, pagan rituals; and Mexican markets, where they found unusual fruits and vegetables, and vendors of powders, talismans, spirit-cleansing candles and herbal remedies that brought a mixture of magic, superstition and the supernatural into the everyday life of the home.

The art historian Susan L. Aberth says that in Mexico, “Carrington developed a woman-centered kind of surrealist imagery that reflected her interests in alchemy and the occult, her psychic connection with and love of animals, British nursery rhymes and the Celtic folk tales her Irish nanny had told her.” In some of her pictures, for example, women stand near big cooking pots or in kitchens; are they preparing food or concocting potions according to magical recipes? Aberth, the head of the art history program at Bard College, in upstate New York, met Carrington several times since 2000 and wrote the definitive monograph, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (2010). She adds, “Mexican Catholicism resonated with her, too; like the Irish Catholicism with which she had grown up, it was the Catholicism of the conquered.”

Aberth notes that, at a time when many women artists worked under the aegis of well-known male artists, Carrington did not. Moreover, Los Angeles County Museum of Art curator Ilene Susan Fort points out, “While the European male surrealists talked about and were inspired by dreams and the subconscious more generally, Carrington and Varo’s dream imagery was personal.” As a result, she says, “The images they created may be seen as symbolic self-portraits.” Along with Arcq, an adjunct curator at Mexico City’s Museo de Arte Moderno, Fort is organizing “In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States.” This exhibition will be seen at LACMA from January 29 through May 6, 2012.

In addition to what Pallant House Gallery director Stefan van Raay calls Carrington’s “very British sense of humor” and her assimilation of 14th-century Italian painting, her blend of sources and influences also included references to paintings by Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder that she had seen at the Prado, in Madrid, before she left Spain. (See, for example, Carrington’s *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1947, some of whose motifs—the saint’s pig, a tipped-over water jug—are variations of those found in Bosch’s version of the same subject.) Meanwhile, her own pictures’ deep-perspective landscapes, her experiments with egg tempera and her interest in alchemy also echoed the practices of Northern Renaissance painters.

Her work attracted admirers who savored its secretiveness and ambiguities. The wealthy British collector Edward James, to whom she was introduced in the 1940s by Varo’s first husband, and who became one of her major patrons, organized a show of her work at Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1948. James, who in the 1930s had helped finance the Paris-based publication *Mino-taure*, a main outlet for the surrealists’ ideas and proclamations, bought some 100 acres in the densely forested highlands of the Sierra Huasteca in northeastern Mexico. There, over many years, he built a new “Garden of Eden” full of orchids and folly constructions based on Gothic, Egyptian and Mesopotamian styles. Carrington visited him there. No stranger to eccentricity, once, after seeing her humble studio at her home, James wrote, appreciatively: “Small in the extreme, it was an ill-furnished and not very well-lighted room....The place was combined kitchen, nursery, bedroom, kennel and junk store. The disorder was apocalyptic.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, Carrington spent time in the U.S., con-



Leonora Carrington, in the late 1940s. Next page: *Le Bon Roi Dagobert*, 1948, oil on canvas.

tinued working in various media and genres—oil, tempera, lithography, fiction, play-writing, theatrical design—and created posters for feminist organizations. Janet A. Kaplan, an art historian at Philadelphia’s Moore College of Art & Design and the author of *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (2000) told *Art & Antiques*, “In 1963, Carrington was commissioned to paint a mural in the Mayan Room of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. She traveled to the Chiapas region in southern Mexico to do her research, which she took very seriously. She read the *Popol Vuh*, the holy book of the ancient Quiché kingdom of what is today western Guatemala.” Carrington felt a deep sense of loss when Varo died that same year. Kaplan says, “They had been very close friends and collaborators.” Stefan van Raay points out that they had both developed bodies of work “in which women”—often older, as mothers, seers, sorceresses or uncertain spirits—“could be seen as powerful, transforming agents.”

In her ground-breaking 1985 book, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, the American art historian Whitney Chadwick for the first time examined in depth female art-makers’ contributions to surrealism. In the catalogue of a 1998 exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center on the same theme that Chadwick





co-curated, she noted that works like Carrington's incorporated "a preoccupation with psychic powers assigned to the feminine," "fabulist narrative" and the projection of the artist's own self in the form of visible "animal surrogates." Horses, dogs, cats, birds and part-human, part-animal hybrid creatures routinely appear in her pictures and sculptures.

All of those characteristics are present in Carrington's 1945 oil painting, *The House Opposite*, which is on view through September 25 in the Vancouver Art Gallery's exhibition, "The Color of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art." Curated by surrealism expert Dawn Ades, this exhibition's catalog offers a clear,

detailed overview of this often hard-to-pin-down movement. With its trio of women cooking in a cauldron, a staircase leading to a room filled with water and apparitions, small animals and phantom females who walk through walls, this canvas is emblematic of Carrington's oeuvre.

In 2008, Frey Norris presented the first major Carrington exhibition since a presentation at London's Serpentine Gallery in 1991, effectively reviving the market up until that time for the artist's rarely seen work. (Last year's Pallant House Gallery exhibition was the latest, most significant showing of a considerable quantity of Carrington's works.) "Once, when I was pre-



This page: *El mundo mágico de los mayas* or *The Magical World of the Maya*, 1963. Opposite: *Cradle*, sculpted by José Horna, painted by Leonora Carrington, 1949.

paring our gallery's show," Norris recalls, "I saw an empty lot full of cats. The image stayed with me for several days, and I started to think, 'I have to call Leonora.'" When the dealer contacted Carrington at her home in Mexico, she learned that the artist recently had fallen and broken her hip. She told Norris: "I knew you would call. You must have received my message." Norris recalls, "It took me a while to realize that she was referring to the cats. Leonora loved cats and believed they were psychic, and that she could communicate with them. Apparently, she could communicate *through* them, too."

When she was buried in Mexico City's British Cemetery in late May, Carrington's coffin was covered with the flag of the adopted country whose naturalized citizen she had become. At the time of her death, the Mexican art historian Teresa del Conde said that the fact that Carrington had spent so much of her life in Mexico had been deeply "enriching" for the country. The Mexican journalist and author Elena Poniatowska, who based her novel *Leonora* (2011) on conversations she had had with Carrington

over the years, told *La Jornada*, a national newspaper, that the painter had "loved Mexico very much." She noted that one of Carrington's sons had said that "Leonora without Mexico would not be Leonora." The artist's sons offered epitaphs. "I will always look into your eyes," Gabriel Weisz Carrington wrote. His brother, Pablo, wrote: "Like a strong, blinding light of imagination, you came and you left us."

Aberth believes that, "given Carrington's English-Irish background and the fact that she spent formative time in and absorbed so much from many different places and cultures—England, Italy, France, Spain, Mexico—she will be recognized as one of modernism's prototypical global artists." For now, though, this creative innovator, who once said, "I didn't have time to be anyone's muse...I was too busy rebelling against my family and learning to be an artist," has taken the secrets of her art with her to her grave. Looking ahead, the fact that some of its most intriguing mysteries may remain forever unsolved might just turn out to be one of the most compelling aspects of her work's allure. 