

Remedios Varo, a magical journey

In the first decade of this century, the dance of the universe formed a constellation under the sign of Sagittarius among its planets and stars.... In 1908, a child cloaked in the magic of the angels and marked by starry paintbrushes as a tireless searcher for hope was born in the city of Angles in the province of Gerona, Spain. Her earthly name: Remedios.... Her definition: creator of paintings, that, like eternal windows, would look out onto the world towards infinity.

During her lifetime, Remedios Varo gathered friends and true loves, but her magic as a weaver of paintings has transcended time and space, creating an embroidery of forget-me-nots that to this day links her loved ones with people interested in her life on this earth.

Thirty years after her death in 1963, the Mexico City Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition on "Remedios Varo: 1908-1963." The 172 paintings make this the largest show of the artist's works to date. Varo's works lead us to unexpected encounters with the wonderful, magical world of our minds. Seeing these encounters captured in meticulously crafted paintings with their unique colors produces indescribable emotions leading viewers to wonder who this woman was, why she painted with such magical skill and beauty, where so much sensitivity emerged from, who accompanied her and whom she loved and was loved by—and how it is that, despite the passage of time, she continues to reveal the fantastic reality of being.

Many of the answers can be found in the books written about Remedios Varo and her works. However, it is now possible to find out much more about her by listening to the thoughts of someone who knew her and shared the last ten years of her life. I am of course referring to her widower, Walter Gruen, who for many years has been involved in the task of making Remedios Varo's work known to new generations.

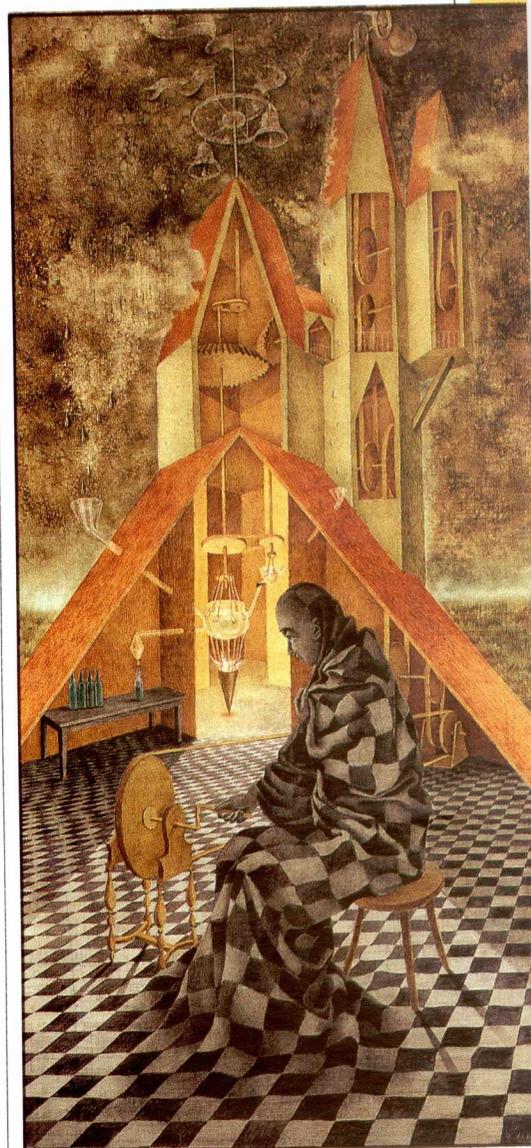
Along the same lines, I also interviewed Janet Kaplan, author of *Viajes inesperados, El arte y la vida de Remedios Varo* (Unexpected Journeys, The Art and Life of Remedios Varo), and Isabel Castells, whose recent publication *Remedios Varo, Cartas, sueños y otros textos* (Remedios Varo, Letters, Dreams and Other Texts) reveals the most intimate thoughts of this much-loved painter.

Before reading the interviews, it is as well to remember that the forties was a decade marked, yet again, by unnecessary violence. The then president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, threw open the country's doors to receive all those seeking refuge in our land, where the sun shone every day and where the flavors and colors of a prosperous Mexico would ease their tormented but dignified souls.

Walter Gruen is a man with a magnetic smile. His gaze reflects the peace acquired after years of experience and his warm, friendly voice, with its Austrian accent, invites conversation.

● How did you manage to get out of Europe alive?

Arturo Piera.



Useless Science or The Alchemist,
oil on masonite, 1955.

■ I've often wondered. I was in the Nazi concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald. They suddenly released a number of people and I was one of them. To this day, I don't really

Arturo Pierra.



Towards the Tower, 1960.

Arturo Pierra.



Embroidering the Earthly Mantle, 1961.

In this triptych one of the embroiderers changes the mantle so as to flee with her beloved.

Arturo Pierra.



The Flight, 1961.

know why they chose me, but I feel fortunate because those who didn't get out then were never able to do so. I left before the Czechoslovakian crisis, before war was declared.

- How did you come to Mexico?

- I had managed to obtain an emergency visa for my wife and myself to go to the United States. But when we went to the American Embassy in Marseille to pick up the visa, we were unable to do so.

The embassy was closed, because it was precisely the day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States entered the Second World War. Months later I was sent a visa for Mexico through the "League for German Culture" which had its headquarters in Mexico, and that was how we were fortunate enough to be able to come to this country.

- In the forties, several areas of culture flourished in Mexico and many of you who arrived as refugees helped to expand the frontiers of knowledge....

- Particularly the great avalanche of Spanish refugees, who were the best that Spain had and did a lot to enrich Mexico's cultural life. They included Remedios Varo and Benjamin Péret, her husband, the French Surrealist poet. Upon settling in Mexico,

although we were very poor, we obtained our freedom and lived in a happy atmosphere. Intellectuals in particular were very much at ease. Remedios often used to say, "This is my adopted country. This is where I feel at home."

- Did you know Remedios Varo when she was married to Benjamin Péret?

- Remedios Varo came to Mexico at the end of 1941 on a Portuguese ship,

Arturo Pierra.



Solar Music, oil on masonite, 1955.

since Portugal had not entered the war.

My first wife and I arrived on the following boat, on March 2, 1942. We disembarked at the port of Veracruz.

There were people like us, of different nationalities and political ideologies. Those of us travelling on those boats felt persecuted not just by Hitler but also by Stalin. Since Europe, we felt a certain spirit of solidarity and made plans to start our new lives together.

The four of us began house-hunting with a couple we knew: he was Spanish and she was French. This couple shared the same political tendencies as Péret and it was through them that we met him and Remedios. She was never politically-minded, but Péret started off as a Communist.

Afterwards, like Bréton, he changed to Trotskyism, and despite the fact that by the time they reached Mexico Trotsky had been assassinated, they became friends with his widow.

Remedios and my wife became good friends. Afterwards, Remedios separated from Péret and went to Venezuela for two years, starting in 1947. During Remedios' absence from Mexico, my wife tried to save a person's life in a storm. She was drowned in the attempt, although I managed to save the other person's

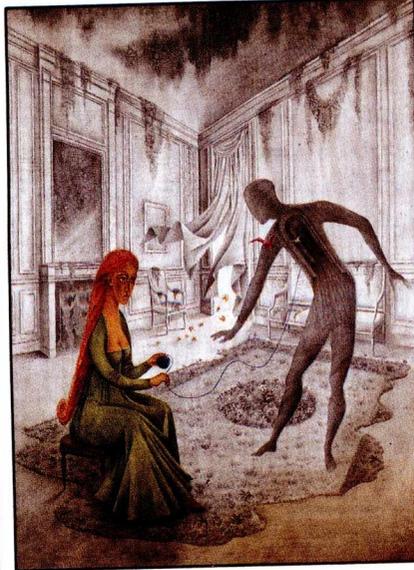
life. When Remedios came back after her long journey, we met up again and eventually decided to marry.

- What was Remedios Varo like as a wife and companion? Why did you love her?

- Remedios was a very attractive woman, beautiful, pleasant and extremely intelligent. She had a very full life, which made life with her very interesting. There was never a dull moment. That is really what filled those ten years we shared, and it was wonderful.

- We know that for years Remedios was unable to devote herself fully to painting for financial reasons, and that when she married you she found the necessary support to be able to dedicate herself to her artistic work free of anguish. How did that transformation really come about?

- Many people think I was a patron of the arts and Remedios was my chosen artist, but that is not true. When I approached Remedios, I had a fairly badly paid job, although it was enough to live on. I tried to persuade her to leave her commercial work and start painting seriously. However, she was extremely independent and refused to be a kept woman. She always insisted on contributing to the household expenses and the upkeep of her cats, since she was used to having to fend



Les Feuilles Mortes, oil on cardboard, 1956.

for herself. I had no option but to accept. Afterwards I was lucky and started a business, but in the beginning, it was a struggle for both of us. So she didn't sell herself to a rich man.

- What did Remedios look for in you?
- She wanted emotional, not financial, security and support. Her anguish went much deeper than material concerns. It came from some other side that I was never fully able to fathom. She used to talk about nocturnal anxiety and nightmares, but she never recounted those dreams to me. One person who must know about them is Leonora Carrington, but she guards her secrets faithfully and never discusses the

matter. I say this because Remedios always regarded Leonora as a twin sister, with whom she had total understanding.

- What things drew you together?

- Perhaps the appreciation I always had for her painting and the security I gave her so that she genuinely felt more sure of herself and was able to paint. Because what she painted was marvelous, right from the start.

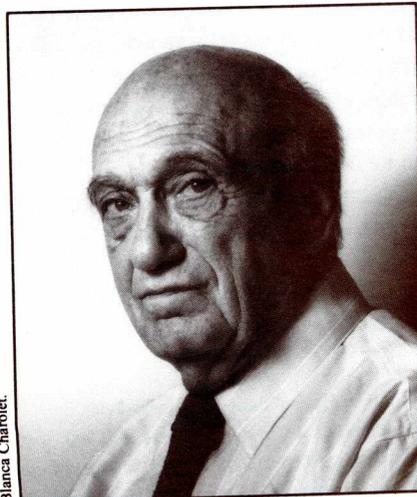
- What did Remedios think when she realized that her works were sought after by collectors and that they were prepared to pay for them, sometimes even before she had painted them?

- It gave her a certain sense of security. She wrote to her mother, "I'm as wealthy as a bull-fighter," but in fact, money didn't impress her, because it had very limited value for her. From her first to her last painting in Mexico, Remedios maintained the same level of quality and perfection. She didn't mind working on a painting for a month or more. I think that in Remedios the search for perfection was a religious ritual. All her paintings were allegorical plays. For example, in her painting *The Great Theater of the World*, she makes it clear that everyone gives a performance for God and God asks each person to fulfil his mission. "Do it well, because that is the way God wants it," and that is precisely how



Bianca Charolet.

Isabel Castells.



Bianca Charolet.

Walter Gruen.



Bianca Charolet.

Janet Kaplan.

Remedios painted. She had no religion or dogma or security in her life because her life was a continual search.

- Did Remedios believe in magic and destiny?

- Absolutely. As far as destiny was concerned, doubt ruled supreme. She painted a picture that expressed determinism, but sometimes thought about free will. In other words, she didn't know where we were but she did know where we wanted to get to.

- How would you describe Remedios Varo's paintings?

- I would say that her world is simply magical. She experienced a sort of magic, good magic or white magic as they call it. In fact, all the magical symbolism she uses in her works is white.

- She made references to Hinduism and the different schools of the occult, especially cabalistic symbolism and alchemy, didn't she?

- Yes indeed. And now that you mention the Cabala, in *El catálogo*

razonado (The Reasoned Catalogue), which is about to be published, there is an article by Dr. Grimber that describes *The Juggler*, using a totally cabalistic interpretation. I find it fascinating because it reveals a facet that is completely new to me.

- How did you manage to get over Remedios' death?

- The shock was so great that I wanted to die right then. Apart from my personal grief, I felt a total failure, because she was so full of ideas and creativity. Her life was cut short and I used to think about all the other things she could have done. Afterwards I devoted myself to promoting her works. We are about to publish *El catálogo razonado* after years of effort and research, but the main achievement has been the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.¹

Alexandra Varsoviano de Gruen listened attentively as her husband was being interviewed. Seeing that she was paying close attention, I asked her:

- What can you tell us about this world that exists between your husband and all of us who approach you to find out more about Remedios Varo's life and works?

- I find it almost a miracle that Remedios' work actually draws us closer together. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to meet wonderful people, and Remedios always seems to conjure up something that makes friendships develop. It's almost magical. I find it very satisfying to promote her work because it deserves to be better known.

- It can't be easy working to promote Remedios Varo's work, given that she was Walter Gruen's previous wife.

- I know some people find this difficult to understand, but I am a

singer and I really appreciate all kinds of art. I always found Remedios' works fascinating, and consider it my duty to do everything in my power so they will gain international recognition.

Remedios' biographer and the most extensive researcher of her work, Janet Kaplan, came to Mexico for the inauguration of the "Remedios Varo: 1908-1963" exhibition and stayed with the Gruen family. I was thus able to interview her.

- Reading the biography of Remedios Varo fills one with enthusiasm for her life and works. How did you become interested in Remedios and how long did it take you to write the book?

- While I was researching another subject, I came across a little book on the works of Remedios Varo. The book impressed and interested me because I realized that her works were very

narrative. Right from the start, I knew there must be a very interesting life behind these works. She was part of destiny. I had to go to Guatemala, but I decided to stop off in Mexico beforehand to find out more about her. When I started to do the research I fell more and more in love with her work. And it wasn't just me, because when people see her works they fall in love with them too. It's quite extraordinary and different. I was able to write the book as a result of the people who knew her and shared their lives with her. I put the pieces together. It wasn't an easy task, but it was certainly very exciting. I worked on the book for eight years, and my research took me to Spain, France, Morocco and Mexico.

- What did you most want the book to express?

- I wanted the book to be very comprehensive and of high quality, because I was sure people wanted to know about Remedios' life, to understand her and find out more about her works. Her paintings are ideal for everyone, for children and adults alike. She uses many scientific and technical illusions. She was a

Arturo Piera.



Disquieting Presence, oil on canvas, 1959.

¹ At the close of this edition (mid-June), the exhibition has drawn more than 169,000 visitors to the museum. In fact, because of the public's enthusiastic response, the exhibition has been extended. (Editor's note.)

person of many different interests. There is a richness and an absolute discipline there. So I wanted the book to make the reader experience the same surprise, anguish and beauty as there were in Remedios' life. When I say high quality, I mean that I wanted the book to be something valuable and lasting for people. It was a great responsibility to write, especially as it is not easy to interpret Remedios Varo, although anyone who knows her work provides his own interpretation and no one can say he doesn't like her works.

● What can you say about the woman within Remedios Varo?

■ I never met her personally, but through her paintings and life I believe she was always recognizable in the women she painted, always expanding something. These women were full of beauty, with no evil in them, and were always connected to a part of life.

● Has the book been translated?

■ Yes. It was originally written in English and has been published in Spanish, German and recently in Japanese. It has been of great interest to the Japanese, because they have discovered something different and marvelous in Remedios' work.

● To conclude, what has been more important for you, Remedios Varo's life or her works?

■ I think it is important to know about both her life and works since both are imbued with sweetness and the difficulty of experiencing life.

Isabel Castells came into the living-room and sat beside me. She seemed to be both nervous and happy, since it was now her turn to talk. She showed me her latest book, published by the University of Tlaxcala and the National Institute of Fine Arts.

● What gave you the idea of compiling this book and writing the introduction?

■ To start with, Remedios Varo is not as well known in Spain as she is in Mexico, but I had the opportunity to



Arturo Pizarro

Rupture, oil on masonite, 1955.

visit an exhibition of her works organized by the Banco Exterior de España and I fell in love with her paintings, as everyone does. A year later, I was given a grant to study the Surrealists in Mexico. During my stay here, I came across Remedios Varo

again. I discovered Janet Kaplan's book, which I devoured. It was precisely in this book that I first found out about Remedios Varo's manuscripts, letters and dreams. I wanted to read them, first out of personal curiosity. But then I realized

how wonderful they were and how they would be the perfect way to complete the picture of Remedios Varo.

- What did you find most striking about the texts and what encouraged you to try to have them published?
- The value of texts that were not intended for publication. As a result, they are intimate, spontaneous, secret and personal, which made them more valuable. Anyone interested in Remedios Varo can fill in his knowledge of her through these texts. But afterwards I realized, when I read them in more detail, that they have an unintentional literary value, which is no less important. The texts are not complete, except for one called "Homo Rodans," the only one to have been published previously.
- When you compiled *Remedios Varo, Cartas, sueños y otros textos*, did you change or correct the texts?
- No, the texts have been reproduced just as they were, complete with grammatical errors, because if Remedios hadn't altered them, I was certainly not going to do so. The entire edition has been left exactly as I found



Tailleur Pour Dames, oil on masonite, 1957.

it and the original texts by Remedios have hardly any corrections, reflecting the perfection there is in her paintings. There are no crossings out, hesitations or unsteadiness. Her thoughts flowed onto the paper.

- Which of Remedios Varo's writings do you prefer, and why?
- I find the part on her dreams most fascinating. When I was reading it for

publication, I felt a sense of remorse, and thought, "What right do I have to go prying into someone else's dreams?" But then I thought that they would have a lot to say to readers, and so I included the letter on dreams. The tenth dream is a marvelous one in which Remedios Varo has achieved perfect knowledge. An executioner says he is going to kill her. She becomes very frightened and he asks her why she is scared, since she has achieved truth and absolute knowledge, and why she is afraid of dying. Remedios asks him for ten minutes to be able to weave her destiny and that of her beloved. She is given ten minutes and creates an egg in which she hides with her beloved. She then tells the executioner she can die now, since she and her beloved are joined for eternity. I chose this dream for the end, since it is the one where Remedios Varo has attained immortality, knowledge and love, and I associate them with the "trptych" in which the protagonist weaves a trap so she can flee with her beloved, and with the painting *Weaving, Space and Time*. I thought it was a symbol of the perfect colophon ✘



The Flautist, oil and inlaid mother-of-pearl on masonite, 1955.

Dinorah Isaak
Staff Writer.