

# Leonora Carrington and Sculpture

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*Crocodile*, 8.5 x 4.8 m, 2000 (bronze).

Leonora Carrington is not really known as a sculptress, even though when asked by researcher Salomón Grimberg about

when sculpture had entered her life, she answered, “When I was very little, about a year old, and playing with mud.”<sup>1</sup> Ah, Leonora, always so straightforward and to the point.

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In 1977 and 1978, Carrington made pieces of object art for the Tane Silver Shop. One is a seated cow paired with the Tin Man from the



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*Godiva in the Jungle*, 93 x 23 x 87 cm, 1995 (bronze).

film *The Wizard of Oz*. In her first years in Mexico, after her arrival in 1942, Carrington had convinced the sketch artist, Spanish refugee José Horna (1909-1963), also part of the surrealist movement, to create a traveling puppet show for which they co-wrote a series of short plays. Horna began to carve large wooden puppets that initially were based on drawings by Carrington. *The Cradle* is a piece of object art done in 1945. It measures 138 x 128.4 x 66 centimeters and was carved in wood by Horna with fabric and thread, and painted by Carrington.

She did some sculpture in cement with fragments of wire. There had been, then, certain interest on her part, but formally she had not decided to work in three dimensions.

Carrington's definitive incursion into sculpture began at the insistence of Isaac Masri, who coordinated the "Freedom in Bronze," promoted by the Agua Tinta nongovernmental organization. Masri picked 13 painters, among them

Leonora, for the project. For him, as a cultural promotor, it was important to invite painters and see the results. She was not easy to convince.

One day, after innumerable, unfruitful phone calls that invariably ended with her hanging up on Masri, opening her door just a crack, she finally accepted a piece of wax. A week later a model was born that would become *Monsieur* (1994), a reclining cat measuring 21 x 62 x 23 centimeters. During the next eight months, the English-born painter would produce eight sculptures.

*Sphinx* (1994), *Ing* (1994), *Nigrum* (1994), *Corrunus* (1995), *Godiva in the Jungle* (1995), *The Virgin of the Cave* (1995), *Lion Moon* (1995) and *Monsieur* were shown in 1995 in Mexico City's Modern Art Museum alongside a Carrington retrospective that included painting and prints. Art critic Luis Carlos Emerich wrote of these pieces once that perhaps because of their physical demands, "They tend to synthesize what has become lyrical in her painting."



*Lion Moon*, 62 x 63.5 x 10 cm, 1995 (bronze).

Art critic Teresa del Conde, director of the Modern Art Museum, asked Carrington how she had felt working on something she knew would be cast. The answer was, “I like changing medium. Working in three dimensions does me good. It’s like a being that exists in space, the space related to its surroundings. So, that space changes because of being three-dimensional. A painting changes the space in a different way, but it always has its own space.”<sup>2</sup>

Faithful to her Celtic roots, where flora and fauna are of great importance, *Sphinx*, like a Madonna, holds a little person in her hand. *Ing*, the largest piece, is “a mysterious personage from the other side of the ocean. Its face is tattooed with horizontal lines corkscrewing down the sides to its chin. *Corrunus* is the Celtic lord of the animals. His name means ‘he who carries horns.’”<sup>3</sup> His own leaf-shaped horns stick out of each temple and his forehead.

Two of these sculptures, *The Virgin of the Cave* and *Nigrum*, were actually created in the

1960s, but were only recently cast. Salomón Grimberg writes that “for about 30 years, *The Virgin of the Cave* has met everyone who entered the Carrington house. The wrinkled face of the old witch is the first thing you see when you walk in the door from the street. Behind her and to one side, is *Nigrum*, with his front paws languidly stretched out like a cat in the Irish myth ‘Kitty in the Corner’. With vacant gaze, *Nigrum* looks fixedly inward; the Celtic tradition believes that cats have powers of the underworld and the gift of second sight.”<sup>4</sup>

*Monsieur*, sometimes called Houdini given his tendency to disappear, is one of the Siamese cats found in the artist’s house. It is covered with a design in the form of a sun rising on its back.

*Lion Moon* mixes the luxuriant growth of a lion’s mane with a round face like a full moon.

*Godiva in the Jungle* is a woman looking backward, mounted on a wild boar with human

Corrunus, 90 x 60 x 22 cm, 1995 (bronze).



legs. The animal's body is decorated with undulating vines, the influence of the plants found in Celtic art. Grimberg adds that Leonora Carrington's art makes up a reality of innumerable superimpositions that no single reading can interpret to the full. "It continues to be a real exponent of her ancestry as can be seen in her sculpture of today."<sup>5</sup>

Isaac Masri, for his part, notes that Carrington's sculptures maintain the surrealists' classic passion for masks that signify absence and death.

From September 1999 on, the eight sculptures were displayed again as part of the open-air exhibit "Freedom in Bronze 2000," mounted—as challenge to the traffic, the smog, the lack of public safety, theft and violence—in the central island along Mexico City's Reforma Avenue, between the Modern Art Museum and the National Museum of Anthropology.

On January 29, 2000, two days before the exhibit was to end, *Corrunus* was stolen. Seemingly the thieves rocked the piece until they could break its upper support. They also tried to take *Lion Moon*, but had to leave it, damaged, on the ground. After repairing its right eyebrow, the nose and the upper part of the piece, *Lion Moon* was put back on its base.

When she heard of the theft of *Corrunus*, Carrington said that the old Celtic god "is a good god. He protects the people near him, but he also punishes violence harshly."<sup>6</sup> To get the piece back, the Agua Tinta group offered a 50,000-peso reward and, as if by magic, *Corrunus* appeared.

On February 2, two policemen turned it over to a well-known television network, and the item was broadcast on a popular evening newscast. Their story was that they had found the mask the day before as they did their morning exercises, covered with dry grass on a curb in a more remote part of Chapultepec Forest.

Despite his divine origin, however, *Corrunus* did not escape unscathed from his odyssey. His base had been damaged; he was scratched; the finish was affected; and he had fissures.

Quickly repaired, the sculpture was put back on display nine days later.

Carrington's association with Agua Tinta did not end there. After seeing the eight pieces she did for "Freedom in Bronze," Masri tried to convince her to do more. He had a hard time understanding that Leonora does not work on commission, that she is not interested in publicity or money and that she only produces when inspired.

"Curiously," says Masri, "after we finished 'Freedom in Bronze' and the exhibition was still on, Leonora called me and invited me for a drink one Monday, just as usual. To my surprise she said to me, 'Before we have our whiskey, let's go upstairs; my stairway is very dangerous.' She took me up a metal spiral staircase to her rooftop, three stories up. There, she opened the door to a room I had never been in and I was facing the piece called *Crocodile*, done completely in paper wrapped in cloth. I became very excited because I had not expected it. The first thing that came into my mind was, 'This has to be in water.' Leonora said, 'Take it to the foundry,' which is exactly what I did and she was delighted with the result."<sup>7</sup>

The reason Masri thought the piece had to be set in water and not on a stand is that *Crocodile* represents an aquatic family scene: a row-boat in the form of a crocodile—who could well be the father—holds five baby crocodiles and is rowed along by an elegant mother crocodile.

The idea of placing *Crocodile* in some part of Mexico City was brought up when discussing an homage to Carrington from the city in which she had chosen to live, where her children were born and raised, and where she has produced most of her work. Although she never agreed that there be such an homage, later, at dinner with then-Mayor Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who put it to her personally, she accepted, all the while insisting that it not be big.

The next step was to find a public space for *Crocodile*. After an ardent search through every corner of the city, Masri stumbled on a



Nigrum, detail, 66 x 20 x 22 cm, 1994 (bronze).



*Sphinx*, 95.5 x 35.5 x 106 cm, 1994 (bronze).

fountain about 30 meters in diameter in the second section of the Chapultepec Forest. Upon examination of its “impressive rigging complete with machinery and pipes, abandoned since the 1960s,”<sup>8</sup> they discovered that its hydraulic works and electrical systems had never been connected. In the conditions they found it in, the place did not comply with their needs.

But, with the blessing of Mexico City’s Institute of Culture, the fountain and the plaza it was in were redesigned. Since it was an area frequented by street gangs, it was lit and the graffiti erased.

On the first day of spring, *Crocodile* headed up a parade that took all five tons of its 8.5-meter length and its 4.8-meter height through the city’s main streets to the heart of the capital, the Zócalo Plaza, past the National Palace.

Its installation in the fountain was even more spectacular. Out of sight of observers, half way through the inauguration, the sculpture appeared on a platform so that the crane could lift it and deposit it in the middle of the recently renovated fountain. After being secured with windlasses, thanks to the 43-meter-high crane, *Crocodile* flew over the tree-tops to its new home.

When it touched down on the water, four men fixed it to its base. Contrary to what some observers might have thought, however, its occupants did not get out of the boat: Mama crocodile and her five attentive babies stayed on board to enjoy the ride, just as did thousands of Mexican families.

Perhaps this hunter of the swamps is a link between Mexicans and Celts, since ancient England was considered the Egypt of the



*The Virgin of the Cave*, 120 x 17 x 48 cm, 1995 (bronze).



*Nigrum*, 67 x 20 x 22 cm, 1994 (bronze).

West. A few decades ago it was very common in Mexico City to see taxis painted with crocodile motifs, and they were nicknamed just that, “crocodiles.” A prestigious jeweler also created a necklace of crocodiles in gold, emeralds, rubies and diamonds for famed Mexican actress María Félix.

For Carrington, *Crocodile* could well have turned out to be a bat, as she said that night in the midst of the homage where she was named “Woman of Distinction” by the city.

Animals dominate her sculptures. From her first visit to the zoo in her native England where she discovered animals as a child, Carrington loved them, both tame and wild, and that love has accompanied her all her life. **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Salomón Grimberg, “Leonora Carrington,” *Libertad en bronce* (Mexico City: Impronta Editores, 1999), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Teresa del Conde et al., *Leonora Carrington. Una retrospectiva. Las estampas. Bronces*. (Mexico City: CNCA-INBA-MAM, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Grimberg, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 2 February 2000, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author, *La Jornada*, 16 March 2000, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.