

# Leonora Carrington

## Telescope and Microscope

Alberto Blanco\*



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*The Birdmen of Burnley*, 45 x 65 cm (oil on canvas).

Amidst the horror of World War II, in the entry dated Tuesday, August 24, 1943, of her extraordinary autobiographical tale, *Down Below*, Leonora Carrington made this surprising statement:

This last sentence, rightfully quoted often, speaks to us of an artist, a human being who did not settle for seeing only part of reality. To the contrary, Leonora Carrington, interested in the Big and the Small —that which in traditional symbolism is known as the Great Mysteries and the Small

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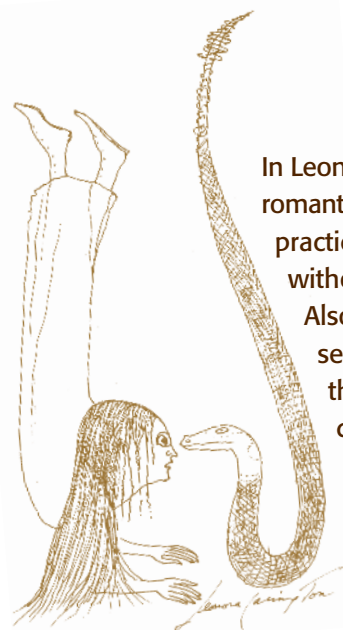
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Mysteries— never wanted to ignore the great scientific or philosophical themes. Throughout her long, intense life, she was just as interested in astronomy as in astrology, in quantum physics as in the mysteries of the psyche; and at the same time, she never turned her back on what could be considered the minutiae and the details of daily life: her family, her home, her beloved objects, her friends, her pets, her plants.

In Leonora Carrington, a profoundly romantic artist —and here, I mean the great English romanticism, that of William Blake, for example— and an eminently practical person coexisted without any contradiction. Also found together were a profound sense of humor —also very English, consisting frequently of talking very seriously about the most absurd topics— and the most serious determination to do work that never admitted of the slightest vacillation and suffered no foolishness at all.

Leonora Carrington was born April 6, 1917, in Clayton Green, Lancashire, under the impetuous sign of Aries. Her father was an industrialist who made a fortune in textiles. She grew up in a big mansion, Crookhey Hall, where her Irish mother began nurturing her on Celtic legends, and her nanny —also Irish— completed this very special facet of her education that would mark her for life. The study of the mystics and the alchemists, of Carl Jung and Tibetan Buddhism, of the Gnostics and the Kabala, of Robert Graves and his white goddess, and of the Popol Vuh would all come later.

Her parents, both Catholics, sent her to religious schools run by nuns, where she was always in trouble because of her



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*Animus maquina*, 81 x 30 cm, 1962 (oil and mixed technique on plywood).

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She knew that in her work, it was also possible to glimpse the future and its fearsome enigmas. Not in vain did this artist look at the world with both eyes, telescope and microscope, looking out and looking in.



*Lepidopterans*, 90 x 90 cm, 1969 (oil on canvas).



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Untitled screen, 114 x 45 cm, 1964 (oil painted on both sides of wood).

rebelliousness. Desperate, her parents saw no option but to send her to study at Mrs. Penrose's Academy of Art in Florence. On her return to England, she enrolled in the art school run by French artist Amédée Ozenfant, who taught her the basic techniques of painting. Her family, particularly her father, opposed her becoming an artist and insisted that at 17, she be presented at the Court of King George V. Her mother, slightly less rigid, committed the "terrible mistake" of giving her a book about surrealism by Herbert Read, published in 1936, whose cover illustration was "a portent" a work by Max Ernst, *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*. What omens!

When I say that this was a portentous moment in the life of Leonora Carrington, I mean it in more than one way: not

only was it an omen of her introduction by André Breton into the very select circle of the surrealists, but it also presaged her passionate, tempestuous relationship with Max Ernst, 26 years her senior. It was enough for her to see the book cover for her to immediately feel a profound affinity with the work and its creator. Without knowing much about surrealism, Leonora already knew it all.

When Max Ernst left his wife, he and Leonora, who had fallen in love like two teenagers, left Paris and went to live on an old farm in the town of St. Martin-d'Ardèche, in Provence, near Avignon. But the outbreak of World War II put an end to their idyll and Paradise on Earth, and opened up the doors of Hell to the young, suffering, talented painter. Ernst went through several detainment camps, and as a result of all this,

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Leonora suffered a nervous collapse in Madrid, which she later narrated in detail in her chilling memoir, *Down Below*.

Leonora Carrington transmuted her horrifying experience and the torment of hospitals, treatments, and doctors, and turned her pain into another source of creativity, demonstrating in her life and her work time and time again how extremes meet and how harmony can come from working with opposites. Convinced that reality is not only much more complex than we imagine, but also than we could possibly

imagine, Leonora Carrington, with her telescope and her microscope melded symbolically in the alchemist's image of the egg (yolk and white, sun and moon, masculine and feminine, night and day at the same time), knew in her soul that in her work it was possible to look to the past and discover a living tradition that dated much further back than her Celtic ancestors to her favorite paintings: the bestiary of the Altamira caves.

At the same time, completely naturally, she knew that in her work, it was also possible to glimpse the future and its fearsome enigmas. Not in vain did this artist look at the world with both eyes—here we return to the aforementioned text: telescope and microscope, looking out and looking in— as she wrote and sketched to the astonishment of all of us who had the great fortune of knowing her and being close to her: with both hands. A truly ambidextrous artist, equally deft with both right and left.

“I did not decide to be a painter,” said Leonora time after time. “Painting decided for me. It picked me and invented



*Sidhe: The White People of Dana tnatha de danann, 78.5 x 59.5 cm, 1954 (oil on canvas).*

© Estate of Leonora Carrington Private collection.



*The House Opposite*, 33 x 82 cm, 1945 (tempera on board).

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me and I simply have done it as best as I have been able.”<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that the Van Eyck brothers signed their masterpieces, like *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* in Ghent, with these same words: “I did the best I could.” Who could doubt that Leonora Carrington did her part as best she could, and that painting and the invisible did their part?

Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington met again several years later, when both were married to other people. Ernst was married to the Guggenheim heiress and Leonora to Mexican writer and diplomat Renato Leduc. She traveled to New York with Leduc, where they lived for a time. That was where she had her first individual exhibitions in the galleries of Pierre Matisse and Peggy Guggenheim.

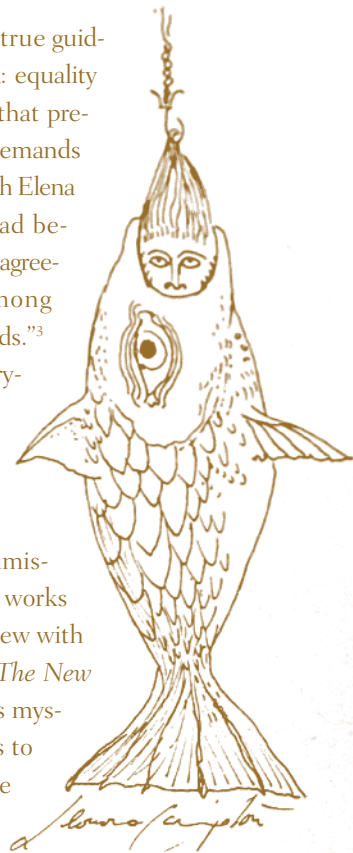
In 1942, Leonora journeyed to Mexico, and after her marriage to Leduc dissolved, she decided to stay and live in her new country. In Mexico, not only did she find peace again, but she also met Emerick Weisz, a Hungarian photographer better known as “Chiki,” who had been the assistant to the great Robert Capa. Leonora married Chiki and they had two sons, Gabriel and Pablo.

The couple lived for more than 50 years in the same house, a building that is not remarkable in the least, one of any number of houses in the Roma neighborhood. And who knows how many of those years Leonora spent in her kitchen, which served as the true spiritual center of her home; a kitchen she often shared with her fellow traveler on her journey of art and initiation, Remedios Varo, another of the muses of surrealism who decided to come down off her pedestal to demand her place as an artist in her own right.

**Leonora Carrington, with her telescope and her microscope melded symbolically in the alchemist’s image of the egg, knew in her soul that in her work it was possible to look to the past and discover a living tradition.**

That was the wish, practice, and a true guiding principle of all of Leonora’s work: equality between men and women. An equality that precedes and surpasses many feminist demands because, as she said in an interview with Elena Poniatowska in 1957, who by then had become famous, “I am in favor of the final agreement between men and women, and among men and women and animals and birds.”<sup>3</sup> In short, among everything and everyone. And it should be noted that, here, the word “agreement” is the key. Men and Women. Inside and Outside. Telescope and microscope.

Leonora Carrington’s vision is unmistakable and laden with mystery. Her works are the proof. As she said in an interview with Elaine Mayers Salkaln, published in *The New York Times* October 13, 2002, “I am as mysterious to myself as I am mysterious to others.” The little girl, the teenager, the young beauty, the woman, the wise





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*Three Characters*, 1962 (oil on canvas).

"I did not decide to be a painter," said Leonora time after time.  
"Painting decided for me. It picked me and invented me and I simply have done  
it as best as I have been able."

woman who lived to 94: she was always the same —mystery— and always different.

A mystery that enveloped her like an aura from her first steps in her green, native Lancashire to the end of her days. Leonora Carrington, with that smile from the soul that, despite everything, never abandoned her, might well be pleased by the verses of another of her countrymen and admirers of the Reverend Lewis Carroll, John Lennon, singing the mystery with his unmistakable voice:

I heard the news today, oh boy!  
 Four thousand holes in Blackburn, Lancashire,  
 And though the holes were rather small,  
 They had to count them all  
 Now they know how many holes  
 It takes to fill the Albert Hall.  
 I'd love to turn you on.<sup>5</sup> **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Leonora Carrington, *Down Below* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 175. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> Cristina Carrillo de Albornoz, "Entrevista con Leonora Carrington," in "El poeta multimedia," [http://www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org/public.php/es/Diario/06\\_11\\_11\\_08.html](http://www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org/public.php/es/Diario/06_11_11_08.html). [Editor's Note.]



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*Ogdoas*, 41.5 x 81 cm, 1964 (oil on playwood).

<sup>3</sup> Mónica Mateos-Vega, "Celebran a Leonora Carrington, autora de 'un arte deslumbrante,'" *La Jornada*, Mexico, October 10, 2007, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/10/10/index.php?section=cultura&article=a04n1c1>. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>4</sup> "The Mystery Woman," <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/13/magazine/the-mystery-woman.html?src=pm>. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>5</sup> John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "A Day in the Life," performed by The Beatles. [Editor's Note.]