

Surreal Feminists: The Mexican Surrealist Painters That Carried a Movement

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Abstract

This research paper explores feminist surrealism by highlighting a selection of three prominent Mexican women surrealist painters: Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, and Leonora Carrington. This study examines the ways in which these artists utilized surreal art to challenge traditional gender norms. Additionally, through a comprehensive examination of their artworks and actions, this research investigates how feminist surrealists crafted narratives that embraced female agency and challenged traditional notions of womanhood and women's roles in patriarchal society. The study also explores the impact of surreal imagery, such as mysticism and the subconscious, in conveying the feminist perspective, revealing the role of these elements in self-discovery and empowerment. Moreover, this paper investigates the historical context in which these artists worked and considers the societal constraints they faced, shedding light on how these were depicted in their artworks. It includes a complex analysis of the meaning behind their artistic expressions and how they significantly contributed to the feminist political movement. Ultimately, this paper argues that surrealism provided a powerful opportunity for feminist artists to challenge and transform prevailing gender stereotypes. By examining the works and experiences of these female artists, we gain a better understanding of the intersection between surrealism and feminism.

Introduction

Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, and Leonora Carrington, three remarkable women artists, challenged societal norms and explored the

depths of the subconscious through their unique contributions to feminist surrealism. Frida Kahlo, hailing from Mexico, defied

physical limitations and emotional turmoil through her art, using her canvas to express her pain and passion. Remedios Varo, originally from Spain and later settling in Mexico, created fantastical worlds infused with alchemy and mysticism, inviting viewers to journey into the mystical and symbolic. Leonora Carrington, a British artist who found her artistic home in Mexico, delved into mythology and the arcane to depict the power of women and the divine feminine. This paper explores how these artists challenged gender norms and societal expectations through their surreal art while analyzing key works that convey their feminist messages, celebrating their enduring impact on art and gender equality.

Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo was born in Coyoacán, Mexico City, in 1907, to a German father and a Mexican mother. Her historical identity was marked by her illness and her physical injuries. At the age of eighteen, she faced an accident where she was left with a crushed pelvis, a broken spine, an impaled pelvis, a severely broken leg, and a mangled foot. She also suffered from spina bifida, a congenital spine disease. Moreover, she was unable to have children until her death. Despite her physical limitations, Kahlo was determined to pursue her passion for art. She began painting while recovering from her injuries, and her work soon gained recognition for its unique style and emotional depth. Her paintings often depicted her own experiences, capturing her physical

pain and emotional turmoil. In 1929, Kahlo married the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, who became a significant influence on her work. Her decision to marry him had much to do with his revolutionary politics: Rivera was the quintessential revolutionary artist. However, Kahlo rejected much of it, especially its masculine bravado. Her narrative was a personalistic narrative rooted not in the Italian Renaissance but in the European traditions of portraiture and in the Mexican tradition of religious folk art. Kahlo came of age in the early 1920s, on the heels of the revolution and at a time when Mexico was forming a new government and reconstituting a new identity by defining the uniqueness and historical authenticity of Mexico and Mexican identity, locating this uniqueness first in the Mexican people - the working class and the ethnically "indigenous." This process of "Mexicanization" appeared in the art world through government-sponsored art programs in which indigenous traditions were integrated into the European "fine arts." It was a process of authentication based on a policy of cultural and racial miscegenation or mestizaje. Although Kahlo was part of the upper-middle class, she was still troubled by the race and class differences presupposed by elite notions of the revolutionary state. One way she demonstrated her discomfort was by decorating her house not with European and American imports but with Mexican artisans. Kahlo's health continued to deteriorate throughout her life, and she

underwent numerous surgeries and medical treatments. She died in 1954 at the age of 47.

Frida Kahlo's rejection of gender norms was evidently demonstrated from her choice of clothing, her relationship with her husband and her political activism throughout her life. From early childhood, Frida was uncomfortable with Mexico's cultural conceptions of gender and with the roles and domains attached to them. She often wore men's clothing, such as suits and pants, which was considered unconventional for women at the time. She also embraced traditional Mexican clothing, such as embroidered dresses and blouses, which was seen as a way of reclaiming Mexican identity in a time of cultural upheaval. In 1926, at the age of nineteen, she wore a suit and tie in a family portrait her father photographed. Kahlo's relationship with Diego Rivera was also unconventional in many ways. They were both artists, and Kahlo refused to be overshadowed by her husband's fame. She was also bisexual and had relationships with both men and women, which was considered taboo at the time. She practiced gender blending by merging half of her face with half of her husband's, creating an androgynous whole, thereby highlighting sexual ambiguity. Kahlo was also an active member of the Mexican Communist Party and believed in the power of collective action and worked to empower marginalized groups, including women. She often exhibited contempt for the status quo that restricted women's behavior in other ways. Hence she

entered the political arena—a male domain by taking to the streets in support of communist revolutionary movements, ignoring the restrictions placed on married Mexican women to remain in the house.

One of her notable paintings, "Henry Ford Hospital," is a self-portrait painted by Kahlo in 1932 and a powerful representation of her personal experiences and feminist perspective. It depicts Kahlo lying on a hospital bed after experiencing a miscarriage. In fact, the context of this painting is based on her personal experience where she lost another baby while she was in Detroit City with her husband, Diego Rivera; it was one of her numerous failed pregnancies. The painting contains various elements that reflect both her physical and emotional pain. Her body is shown with bloody/vein-like umbilical cords extending from her abdomen, which represents her fertility struggles and loss of an unborn child. Hence, she is confronting the emotional and physical toll of reproductive struggles women experience. Furthermore, she portrays herself naked, vulnerable, and surrounded by medical equipment, thereby criticizing the invasive/impersonal nature/aspect of the healthcare system, particularly relating to women's reproductive health. The medical equipment around the bed symbolizes the cold/dehumanizing environment often encountered by women seeking healthcare, delivering an important message to prioritize women's experiences and well-being. Moreover,

her use of symbolic imagery in this painting serves to convey the resilience and endurance of women, even in the face of suffering. The broken column at the center of the composition represents the fractured state of Kahlo's body and her strength in the face of adversity. Also, the blood and tears on her body depict the physical and emotional pain endured by women. Her painting overall effectively demonstrates female pain, reproductive struggles, and the objectification of women. By sharing her personal narrative, she connects with a broader audience and exposes the shared struggles of women, thus creating a political statement that highlights the need for empathy, understanding, and support for women's physical and emotional well-being.



Remedios Varo

Remedios Varo was a Spanish-Mexican surrealist painter who was born on December 16, 1908 in Catalonia, Spain. Her career showcased a mix of influences, personal experiences, a deep interest in esotericism and

mysticism. She spent her childhood surrounded by a family that encouraged her to create art. She studied art at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid and was able to develop her skills in drawing and painting. During this time, she was deeply influenced by other prominent artists such as Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca. The Spanish Civil War broke out in the 1930s, and Varo moved to Paris with her husband to avoid the conflict. In the French capital, she engaged with prominent artists like Max Ernst and André Breton and joined the Surrealist movement. However, she was forced to flee to Mexico because of the outbreak of WWII. In 1941, Varo settled in Mexico City, and stayed for the rest of her life. She witnessed a vibrant art scene in Mexico and was inspired to begin creative expression. Her paintings often captured dreamlike and otherworldly scenarios, filled with symbolic elements and intricate details in themes such as alchemy, magic, science, and the role of women in society. Despite facing personal and financial challenges, Varo continued to create art and significantly contributed to the Mexican art community. She exhibited her work alongside other famous artists like Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. She passed away on October 8, 1963, at the age of 54.



"The Lovers" (1943) painting portrays a couple with their heads covered in large, transparent, globe-like structures. The spheres symbolize the confinement and limitations that society often imposes on women. The artwork can be interpreted as a commentary on the struggle for individuality and autonomy within a relationship. The transparent spheres covering the heads of the couple likely symbolize the societal expectations, norms, and pressures that often influence and constrain individuals within a romantic partnership. This piece can

overall be particularly relevant to women who historically have faced restrictive gender roles and expectations in relationships. The artwork also may suggest the struggle for autonomy and self-expression within the confines of traditional relationships, where individuals, especially women, may feel trapped or obscured by societal norms. It aligns with feminist ideals that advocate for individual agency, freedom of choice, and breaking free from oppressive structures, serving as a commentary on the complexities of love and partnership.



In "Useless Science or The Alchemist" (1955) Varo presents a mesmerizing scene that defies conventional understanding, exploring the connections between human intellect, esoteric knowledge, and the mystical. The alchemist figure in the artwork stands as a symbol of the continuous pursuit of knowledge, which stems from the inherent human desire to unravel the mysteries of existence. The apparatuses surrounding the alchemist mirror represents the intricate inner human mind, reflecting both scientific inquiry and metaphysical exploration. This painting takes the viewer to a realm that exists beyond the confines of reality. The combination of bizarre elements, such as the floating geometric forms and otherworldly creatures, challenges our perceptions of 'the possible'. Varo's manipulation of space and perspective gives off a sense of disorientation, underscoring the blurred boundaries between the conscious and the subconscious. In a feminist perspective, the painting can overall be seen as an embodiment of Varo's own journey, navigating a world fractured by war and displacement. Her choice of title "Useless Science" might allude to the idea that conventional knowledge alone is inadequate in explaining the complexities of existence. Through her art, Varo crafts a dreamscape where the artist, like the alchemist, transcends the limitations of the physical world, delving into the inner recesses of the psyche and unearthing revelations that defy empirical understanding. Ultimately, her painting

challenges viewers to embrace the surreal and the mysterious, inviting them to consider the profound connections between science, mysticism, and the boundless expanses of human imagination.

Another work by Varo "Papilla Estelar (Celestial Pablum)," depicts a towering laboratory with its height reaching the heavens. Inside the tower, a female alchemist employs a machine to capture stars from the night sky, grinding them into a glittering substance that looks like food for a baby. She then spoon-feeds this celestial concoction to a waning crescent moon that is held captive within a birdcage. The lunar cycle, which governs tides and embodies qualities like motherhood, creativity, psychic abilities, dreams, fertility, and female cycles, is a central theme. The painting illustrates the alchemist's ability to manipulate the moon's cycle, symbolizing control over her own cycle as well. The tower image, a recurring motif, is a common location for a moon or sky goddess; in alchemy, the tower is associated with transformation and evolution. The painting therefore depicts a secure psychological space within which a woman has the emotional time and freedom to engage creativity in life. The moon in this painting demonstrates not only a feminine consciousness but also reflects a personal element of Varo's life—her child that was never able to be born. Varo chose to terminate a pregnancy during her marriage to Peret because of her economic circumstances, and this abortion caused her to never be

pregnant again. "Celestial Pablum" portrays this "missing" element in Varo's life—her lost opportunity for motherhood and the complex emotions experienced by childless women regarding infants, encompassing longing, regret, and resignation. Many Surrealist women during Varo's time found it challenging to reject traditional feminine roles. For Varo, the poignant image of a solitary woman feeding a caged infant moon in "Celestial Pablum" stands as her only reference in her body of work to the mother-child relationship. The painting's setting represents a postpartum scene, where a mother feeds her infant, with the tower or temenos serving as a symbol of the womb, its umbilical cord reaching towards the stars. At this juncture in her life, Varo's artistic creativity likely provided a measure of solace in her childless state. Transformation represents a rebirth into greater self-integration. "Celestial Pablum" illustrates Varo's determination to enhance her capacities for exploring future potentialities. By portraying a woman—or herself—as an active participant in a mystical and intellectual endeavor, this painting empowers women and suggests that they are capable of far more than society often expects of them. The dreamlike imagery in the painting can be seen as a way of breaking free from the confines of reality and societal norms, empowering women to explore their inner worlds and desires without restraint. Overall, it empowers women by portraying them as beings with access to higher realms of understanding and

consciousness.



In the painting "El Flautista" from 1955, one tower is placed at the right corner, with dark, jagged, and unfinished stone structure, symbolizing the prevailing sociological paradigm of the world. In contrast, the tower on the upper left is still a work in progress, reaching higher towards the heavens. It is divided into two halves, with one side resembling an engineering schematic and the other crafted from levitated fossils. Its octagonal shape represents the different octaves of music and signifies a new world and a society in the process of transformation. The arrangement of these towers creates a sense of balance within the painting's space. In front of the aging tower on the right, there stands a woman playing the

flute. The artist has employed thick paint, giving the figure an embossed quality and creating a sense of depth between her and the tower. The woman's face is illuminated, emitting a shimmering glow that suggests her enlightenment. Notably, the artist used Mother of Pearl on this part of the painting, resulting in a captivating effect that can be fully appreciated when viewed in person. Delicate, minute, and ethereal brush strokes emanate from the flute, conveying that the music is perfectly harmonized as it swirls around the levitating fossil stones. This imparts a sense of rhythm and upward movement, guiding the viewer's eye from the painting's center, where the fossil stones originate, and leading them to interlock like puzzle pieces as they construct the octagonal tower on the left. Overall, this painting serves as a symbol of a changing world, emphasizing the pivotal role that women play in its evolution. This artwork portrays a solitary female figure diligently working in an isolated setting. Contrary to symbolizing female repression in a patriarchal society, it actually represents liberation from the prevailing norms of her era. Remedio Varo's paintings convey a message of an independent female entity engrossed in the pursuit of higher knowledge. Achieving higher levels of creativity, understanding in science, philosophy, the metaphysical, and even reaching enlightenment, demands dedication and a willingness to lead a somewhat secluded life, as exemplified in Varo's art.



Leonara Carrington

Leonara Carrington was a British-born Mexican artist and writer born on April 6, 1917, in Lancashire, England, into a wealthy family. Her artistic career consisted of her unique and imaginative works that often explored themes of mythology, alchemy, and the subconscious.

Carrington's interest in art developed in childhood, and she later began studying at the Chelsea School of Art in London in 1935. She became acquainted with other Surrealist artists, including Max Ernst, who would become her lover and a significant influence on her work. Her distinctive style developed during this time, which was focused on the use of symbolism, fantastical concepts, and intricate detail. In 1937, Carrington's life took a huge turn when Ernst was arrested by the Nazis in France. Seeking refuge from war, she fled to Spain, but her mental state deteriorated, and she experienced a nervous breakdown.

She was eventually captured by the Spanish and institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. After

a harrowing ordeal, Carrington was able to escape and make her way to Lisbon, Portugal, where she sought assistance from the Mexican embassy. With the help of Renato Leduc, the Mexican ambassador at the time, Carrington secured passage to Mexico in 1940. Mexico became her permanent home, and she found solace and inspiration in its culture. Carrington's work in Mexico continued to evolve, and she began to experiment and embraced new mediums such as sculpture and writing, in addition to painting. Carrington's art often featured mystical and mythological themes, drawing from her interest in Celtic legends and Mexican folklore. Her paintings depicted bizarre and fantastical landscapes populated by hybrid creatures, women, and animals. She used symbolism and vivid colors to explore themes of transformation, the subconscious, and the feminine experience.

"The Giantess" was painted a few years after becoming a Mexican resident. The main figure is a giant woman who stands in a field of wheat with the sea behind her. Her golden hair is also made of wheat and her face resembles the moon. She wears a white cloak and a red dress with outlines of bird-headed people drawn on the front. The human figures below showcase early colonial renditions of the Irish people; the piece overall aligns with an Irish folk aesthetic. In her hands, she holds an egg as geese fly around her and appears from her cape. The egg is, in fact, a recurring motif in Carrington's work, which is the symbol of her own

experiences as well as the past and future history of the universe. However, the egg also universally embodies new life. The way the figure cradles the egg with care demonstrates her protective nature over her identity and her willingness in self-evolution in relation to the universe's guidance. The three women faintly drawn between the Giantess' feet represent a small detail that is seen as to be highly significant. The appearance of three women together appears often in Carrington's work. Triple deity goddesses are a significant characteristic of Celtic Mythology, and the combination of the women plus the Giantess embraces the strength and power of the divine feminine.

"The House Opposite" is filled with fantastical creatures practicing mysticism. In the bottom right corner, three figures stir a cauldron, completing the alchemical process of melting metals down to gold. This procedure was believed by traditional alchemists to have the ability to create the Philosopher's Stone, which gave eternal life to those who drank it. To prevent others from achieving this, alchemists used allegorical language to express their theories. Carrington incorporated her study of alchemy into her artworks. Similarly, Carrington created a depiction of alchemy with surreal imagery that is open to interpretation. In the center, the female figure sits at what appears to be a kitchen table and uses it as her laboratory to concoct an enigmatic creation. Several feminine creatures near her are moving

toward the table and bringing ingredients for her ritual. Beyond depicting the practice of alchemy, this scene illustrates fulfilling women's domestic duties. Carrington found spiritual meaning throughout every arena of her life, mostly in the feminine energy within herself and the women around her. Her belief in occultism and esotericism is manifested in this piece as well. The ritualistic nature of Catholicism always interested her, yet she condemned the misogyny that defined the religion. Through occultism and learning about ancient cultures that praised goddesses, she honored the spirituality of women and associated her work with the power of liberation. By replacing male characters in surrealist art with the presence of strong women, she reclaimed true femininity that had been oppressed by a male-dominated society.

Conclusion

Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, and Leonora Carrington, from diverse but similar Mexican backgrounds, contributed significantly to the feminist surrealism movement. Their art challenged traditional notions of gender roles and explored the realms of the subconscious, where the mystic and the feminist met together. Frida Kahlo's "Henry Ford Hospital" challenged beauty standards and gendered expectations and used her artwork as a tool for self-expression of physical and emotional pain. Remedios Varo used elements of alchemy, magic, and science in "El Flautista," "Papilla Estelar," and "Useless Science in order to

condemn female repression in a patriarchal society and embrace the occupation of women in male-dominated fields. At the same time, Leonora Carrington conveyed her feminist ideas with fantastic creatures and mysticism. The three artists continue to remind us that the surreal can be a powerful tool for self-discovery and societal transformation. As we reveal the empowering achievements of these three remarkable women, we begin to embrace the depths of our own subconscious and challenge the status quo in pursuit of liberty and empowerment.

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