

# The creative impulse of Leonora Carrington

**L**eonora Carrington was born on April 6, 1917, in Clayton Green, Lancashire, England. Her father was a local middle-class Englishman. As a child she wrote stories and made drawings. Years later she was to become one of the most important painters in the Surrealist movement.

She studied drawing and painting at London's Amédée

Ozenfant Academy. The Burlington Gallery in the English capital houses some of the works with which she participated in the First International Surrealist Exposition.

In 1936, while studying painting in London, she met and married the Surrealist Max Ernst, becoming both his wife and disciple. From that time on she was affiliated with the Surrealist movement, participating in many

expositions in Paris and Amsterdam. During the German occupation of France in 1940, Ernst was taken to a concentration camp. Leonora Carrington suffered a breakdown and was interned for six months in a psychiatric hospital in Spain.

After her recovery she traveled to Portugal and took refuge in the Mexican consulate. It was there that she met the Mexican poet Renato



The Meal of Lord Candlestick, oil on canvas, 1938.



The Temptation of St. Anthony, oil on canvas, 1947.

Leduc, who was to become her second husband. They moved to Mexico in 1942, where she lived from then on. Years later, after divorcing Leduc, she married the Hungarian photographer Emérico Weiz.

Her works have been shown in important galleries in the United States, Mexico and Europe. She has produced more than a thousand paintings, hundreds of drawings, watercolors,

tempera paintings, sculptures and tapestries. She is the author of *La dame ovale* (1939)—published by Era in 1965—and *En bas* (1945), as well as the dramatic works *The Flannel Night Shirt* and *Penelope*.

In the most significant retrospective of the artist's work, the critic Luis Carlos Emerich has selected 77 paintings, which were borrowed from 50 private and public

collections in Mexico, the U.S., London and Paris. These paintings represent different productive stages of the painter's work. The retrospective show was recently produced at the Contemporary Art Museum in Monterrey and is now showing at Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art.

Leonora Carrington lives and works in Mexico City's Colonia Roma neighborhood, near a building destroyed in the September 1985 earthquake. At the end of a dark hallway, stairs lead to a modest apartment where you find two armchairs decorated in flower designs, placed perpendicular to two twin beds.

Leonora is late. She enters suddenly. A light and friendly smile and a gesture to sit down accompany the following words: "Excuse me, but I usually don't have visitors...."

- Do you consider yourself a Surrealist?
- No, señor —she responds quickly and categorically. I don't place myself under any definition. There is no definition because there are more important things in life. I believe Surrealism was an important movement because it took into account the intellectual aspect of human beings. It used that part and allowed imagination and dreams to enter. All of the Surrealists, if you know a bit about them, are different; they accomplished very different things.

Leonora Carrington is hard to pin down. It is evident that she can't be subjected to a pre-established list of questions as a tool for the interview. It's not that she tries to evade, mislead, go in circles or block the interviewer's work. She herself *is* the circle.

- What can you tell us about your painting?
- I never have the same opinion about my painting. It changes from one moment to the next. One day you might consider

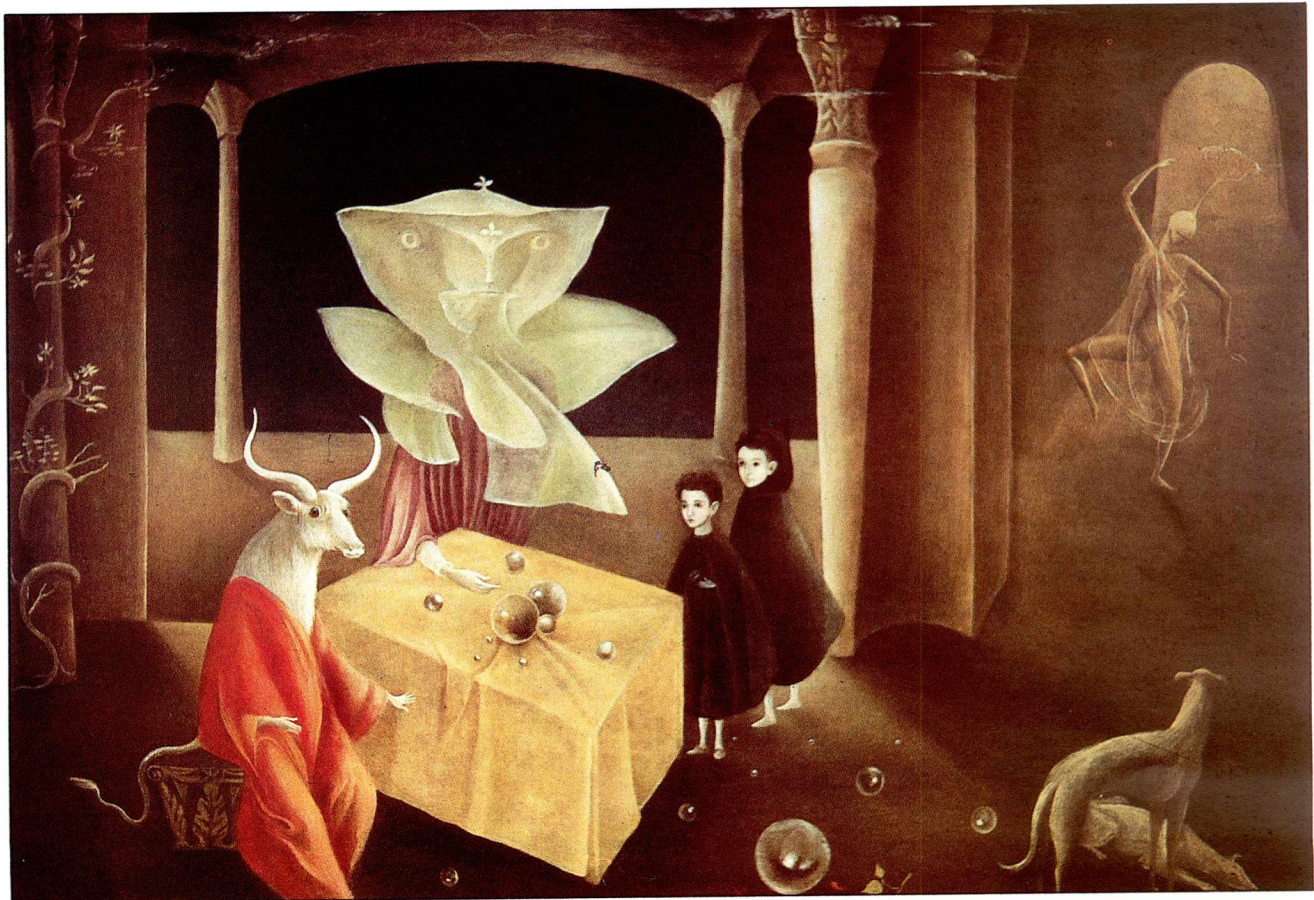
yourself the genius of reporting, and the next moment say: How stupid I am! It's about composition, rhythm, a certain play of color which is impossible to define. But it's true that a certain color is there for a reason. It's something in the world, which isn't easy to describe verbally. It has more to do with sensations, the feeling of heat, cold, fear, pleasure. I think when you paint there is something you know ahead of time, before you know it consciously.

- Where do your dreams and images come from?
- I don't know. Psychoanalysts claim to know where they come from, but they don't know. It would be wonderful if someone discovered where these images

and dreams come from. Sometimes you have an inkling where they come from, but it is always just an inkling. Sometimes an image comes and you can see it on paper or canvas, and it's like a mirror; the image is projected on the mirror, with the changes that occur during the technical transmission. I think that images come in dreams, in blood, in what you eat. They are already there. I think they already exist and the human apparatus is limited by its body and time. Nevertheless, to a certain extent it can open up more. You can start by accepting that what you see is what you are accustomed to seeing. For example, in this room there are many things that exist but which I am unable to see because they

haven't been accepted in my way of seeing. They are not in my paradigm of this room. You have to open up.

- What does open up, break the paradigms mean?
- It means having the courage to say to yourself: I don't know, really I know very little. What I don't know is enormous, but I am open to understanding a little more.
- Regarding your painting, people often speak about a magic or marvelous world, the world of childhood....
- I think this world is fantastic and marvelous. For me everything is marvelous.
- Does that imply a certain way of seeing the world?
- Or a way the world looks at me...or I look at the world...or a mixture of



And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur!, oil on canvas, 1953.

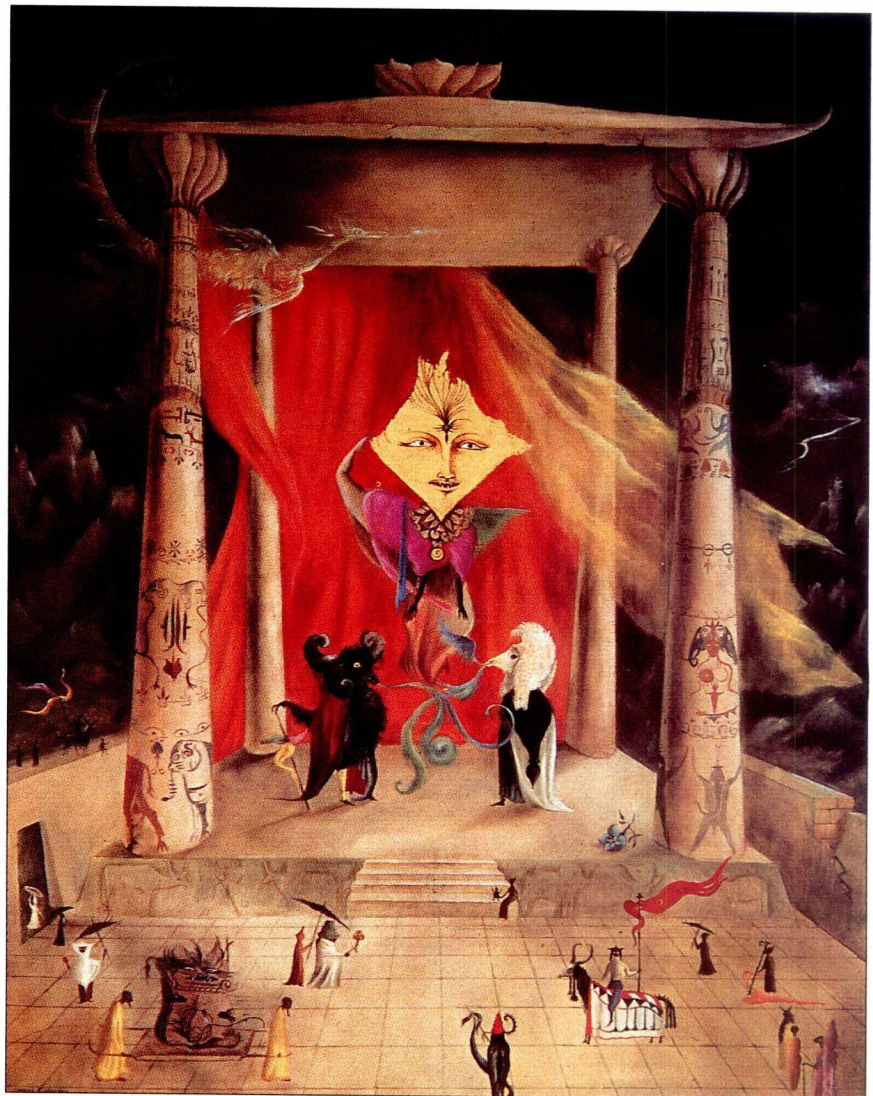
the two. What is outside and what is inside? Where does magic begin and reality end? These borders are now becoming more mobile. One use to refer to the soul, the spirit, the body, the human mind, the animal mind; now it's no longer so clear that animals don't think—we don't even know how we think. Everything was compartmentalized. That's very convenient for institutions' ability to control people. It's easy to control someone who doesn't ask questions, who can't imagine anything.

- Why are the borders being erased, when in reality it's not convenient to erase them?
- It's very mysterious why paradigms change. For example, for hundreds of years it was believed that the world was square, but Columbus crossed the ocean. They thought you would fall over the side. They didn't like it when Galileo said the world was round. I don't know what they did to Galileo—they burned him or something like that. It was a change of paradigm that people didn't want, because control is exercised through paradigms. You can't take a boat and cross to the other side because you'll fall over the edge.
- Have you developed a great sensitivity in order to express your dreams through painting?
- Yes. You can open up...but you must have the inclination, the need, to transmit. And that need must be so big that you continue despite criticism: that this is a bad painting, this is foolishness or copied from I don't know who. You must have a great desire to do it. There are many men who treat women as though they are mentally retarded because they aren't making dinner for their husband or ironing his shirts, but instead are involved in "men's work." Men don't like that, it

scares them, it threatens them. Women are creating a new consciousness within themselves and men are afraid, because they feel they're losing control. Before, the husband would ask: Where were you? Who were you with? And the woman would answer. Now you can maintain your own private life. I dislike the limitations imposed on me by the paradigms of the last thousand years. There are paternalistic paradigms, and I'm trying to see what lies behind them. You always have a struggle inside, the

claim to your own time. Men claim their own time—he comes home from work, he's tired; the whole world pays attention to him, respecting him, although I don't know if this still exists. I've lived this, the traditional things. I married, had two children whom I love dearly, but I've always lived with this great longing to live my own life and to accomplish this inner impulse—to which I cannot give a name **M**

*Maricarmen Velasco Ballesteros*  
Staff Writer.



Temple of the Word, oil and gold leaf on cloth, 1954.