

Leonora Carrington (1917-2011)

Elena Poniatowska*

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On May 26, Leonora Carrington died of pneumonia at what in Mexico we call the English Hospital. It was a great loss and very painful for Mexico because Leonora opened up a door here in your forehead and here in your heart into another world, into another dimension, as the cool kids would say. She took with her our possibilities of going beyond ourselves and entering Westmeath, Ireland, that region of the spirit where the Sidhe teach that you should take life as a merry, magical adventure. The Sidhe are invisible beings that accompanied Leonora much better than her guardian angel, and right now are hugging each other and tiptoeing over her grave in the English Cemetery, on Mexico City's México-Tacuba Boulevard.

A journalist once said that Leonora was Mexico's best kept secret, because this painter hated being on display and avoided intrusions into her daily life. No one was as jealous of her iso-

* Mexican writer, author of the biographical novel *Leonora*, reviewed in this issue.



Leonora Carrington, 1934.

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lation—that thing the English call “privacy”—but no one was as courteous to her visitors, because once you were inside her home, Leonora almost automatically offered, “Tea or tequila?”

In the last few years, any time I proposed anything different from drinking tea at her kitchen table, she would say to me, “I pass.” What she did do was go out to take a turn around the block with her caretaker and her dog Yeti. Álvaro Obregón was her favorite street. Our city's insecurity took her walk away from her. “I wouldn't want them to mug me; I wouldn't want them to snatch my purse,” she used to say fearfully.

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Leonora arrived in Mexico in 1942, almost at the same time that the great wave of Spanish exiles disembarked in Veracruz from the ships the *Sinaí*, the *Marqués de Comillas*, the *Méxique*, exiles who have honored Mexico so much and meant so much in our cultural and social life. If the Spanish exile community enriched us, if Luis Buñuel and Remedios Varo were her friends, the émigré status of the fabulous English painter and the presence of the surrealists who took refuge in Mexico have also been an invaluable contribution for us.

Much of what I relate in the novel *Leonora* had already been written. She described herself at several moments in her life. She just changed her name and Max Ernst's or Joe Bousquet's. In Mexico, she published the short stories "El séptimo caballo" (The Seventh Horse), "La dama oval" (The Oval Lady), "La trompetilla acústica" (The Hearing Trumpet), "La casa del miedo" (The House of Fear), "Memorias de abajo" (Down Below), and the novella "La puerta de piedra" (The Stone Door), and critics and specialists in surrealism have analyzed her extraordinary body of work and life as well. Mexican art critic Lourdes Andrade had the key to many secrets of the alchemy, the Jungian psychoanalysis, and the esotericism that attracted both Remedios Varo and Leonora.

I would like to emphasize two topics about Leonora that have been little touched upon. Her attitude toward Nazism after the Nazis entered France on June 24, 1940, when she denounced Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini on the streets of Madrid is little known. If people called her mad, it was because she was clairvoyant and realized the danger before anyone else.

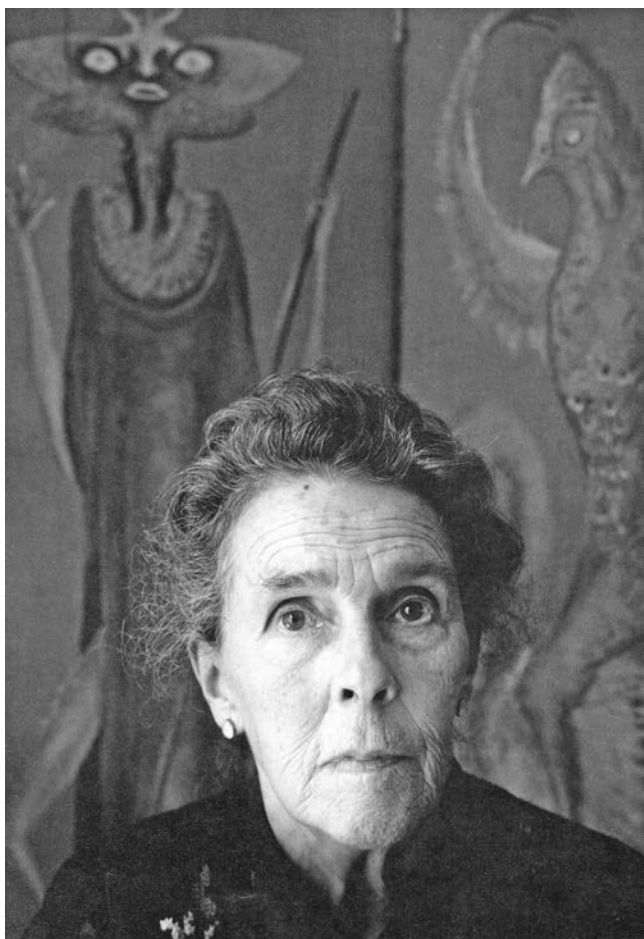
From the moment that, for the second time, two gendarmes took the greatest surrealist painter Max Ernst away to Les Milles, a French concentration camp, Leonora fought against injustice. The invasion of Poland, of Belgium, and of France filled her with rage, and in Madrid, desperate, she requested an interview with Franco to tell him not to ally with Hitler and Mussolini, and passed out leaflets on the streets

asking for a ceasefire. Before many others did, she confronted Hitler and fascism. They called her mad then, when she was actually simply ahead of the immense madness that is war. They locked her up in a madhouse in Santander. Who was normal? The ones who hid their heads like ostriches or Leonora, the visionary, who rose up against the war because she divined the danger?

Another moving aspect of her long life —on April 6 she had her ninety-fourth birthday— was her solidarity with the Jews. The suffering of Chiki, the photographer Emerico Imre Weisz, her husband and the father of her two sons, Gaby and Pablo, is linked to the Spanish Civil War. Chiki was the one who rescued the suitcase of Robert Capa's negatives that surfaced in Mexico more than a year ago and is now the subject of a film and documentary.¹ Leonora, who was not Jewish, became more incensed than any other artist about the treatment received by men and women, the aged and children, who were shut up in boxcars without light or air and shipped to extermination camps. From then on, she never stopped expressing her rejection of one of the great abominations of humanity: the Holocaust.

With *Leonora*, my intent was to pay homage to her, to make a loving tribute. Leonora never sacrificed her true self to what conventional society expected of her; she never accepted the mold into which we are all poured; she never stopped being herself; she chose to live in a creative state that today exalts us and fills us with admiration; she defended her talent from dawn until dusk, first against her father and then against a social class that intended to impose strict laws on her, the same laws that have impeded the flowering and creativity of men and women of talent who finally gave up and returned to conformism. Leonora Carrington never gave in; she never cared about appearances, never had a façade; she lived to paint and for her children, with whom she had a profoundly loving relationship, the closest that can exist between a mother and her sons. The only aim in her life was to defend her vocation as a painter and write texts that no one but she could write, like the story of her confinement in the Santander mental asylum, which she wrote first in French, entitled "En bas" ("Down Below" in English, or "Memorias de abajo" in Spanish).

Little brouhaha was made about her in Mexico because she herself insisted on seclusion, being anonymous, silence, life far from the amplifiers of sound and images alien to her isolation. Her house was finally a retreat and her solitude, voluntary. "Oh, what a bloody nuisance!" she used to exclaim



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Leonora Carrington.

when I asked her for an interview. However, until very recently, she went to all the honors ceremonies because she didn't want to offend anyone and because, within her rebelliousness, Leonora was a person of infinite courtesy.

Oscar Wilde used to say the last thing he wanted was to be understood. Like her brilliant predecessor, Leonora did not seek understanding, or even acceptance; what was essential for her was arriving at a space that very few reached. André Breton used to say that the surrealist cause in art and in life is the cause of liberty. "Sentimentalism," said Leonora, "is a form of weariness." "You can not believe in the magic, but something very strange happens at that same time. Your head has dissolved in the air, and I see rhododendrons in your stomach. It's not that you're dead or anything dramatic like that; it's just that you're simply fading away and I can't even remember your name." Another of her quotes is, "Painting is a necessity, not a choice," and another, "In my opinion, it is not good to admire anyone, including God."

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The Englishman Edward James was the one who believed the most in her art and did the most for her in Mexico. It was rumored that this eccentric personage was interested in the visual arts because he was a painter himself and that he was the illegitimate son of King Edward VII; he never bothered to refute this. Certain rumors can be favorable for the biography of a life.

Was Leonora happy? Who knows? Are we happy? You must be the ones to say. Leonora once stated that she did not have a name for happiness, but she did for rebelliousness, and she rose up against the church, the state, the family. Her imagination went beyond laws, beyond setsquares, beyond what other people think. Her only rite was to pick up a brush or a pen or cook. Once she put the archbishop of Canterbury to boil in green mole sauce, and all her fantasy and her particular sense of our reality burst forth in her plays, *La casa del miedo* (The House of Fear); *Penélope*, staged by Alejandro Jodorowsky in 1957; *La invención del mole* (The Invention of Mole Sauce) in 1960; and *El séptimo caballo* (The Seventh Horse) in 1988.

She destroyed any and all impositions, even that of being a surrealist, with her sense of humor. More than surrealistic, her interior world was Celtic and her work is linked to that of her childhood, a world completely divorced from logic, an unexpected world of poetry, the world of the Sidhes, the gentry, the "little people," who for us Mexicans are the *chaneques* who accompany us, pull on the corner of our mouths to make us smile, and untie our shoelaces. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Robert Capa (born Endre Ernő Friedmann, October 22, 1913-May 25, 1954) was a Hungarian war correspondent and photojournalist who covered five different wars. He also documented the liberation of Paris. In 1947, Capa co-founded Magnum Photos with, among others, Henri Cartier-Bresson. The organization was the first cooperative agency for worldwide freelance photographers. [Editor's Note.]