

FEMALE HUMAN ANIMAL

“Even though you won’t believe me my story is beautiful.”

How a wild child who painted herself as a horse became an artist who wouldn’t be tamed. Myth, esoterica, and the occult: inside Leonora Carrington’s fever dream.

During a visit to the home of writer and artist Leonora Carrington, journalist Elaine Mayers Salkaln noted an unusual object. “On one wall of a large guest room used for watching television is a huge wall-size wool tapestry: giant jewel-crowned snakes, curling upward toward the ceiling. It is embellished with what she says are marijuana leaves, done in sparkling gold thread.”

Carrington’s genius was her ability to weave the unexpected together to form a strange, shimmering whole. Best known for her paintings and fiction, she explored her fascination with myth and occult symbolism throughout works spanning plays, sculpture, and textiles. An instinctive and irrepressibly creative rebel born into English wealth in 1917, Carrington flew in the face of convention right from the start. Steeped in Irish mythology, she was preoccupied with the otherworldly from a young age and expelled from several schools for strange behaviors, like imagining that she was a levitating saint.

At 18, Carrington was presented to the king at Buckingham Palace. She described the tiara “biting into her skull,” and recounts the occasion in “The Debutante”—a subversive short story in which the protagonist switches her place at the ball with a hyena, as if Red Riding Hood had struck a deal with the wolf. This event was one of Carrington’s final concessions to her family. She had drawn and painted since childhood, and after studying art in Paris and Florence, completed her studies in London alongside fellow artist Stella Snead. There she met the surrealist artist Max Ernst at a dinner party, joining him when he returned to Paris, where she sold her first painting to Peggy Guggenheim.

Once Paris had lost its sheen, Carrington and Ernst eloped to the south of France. She bought a small farmhouse the couple drenched in their artwork; murals of unicorns and lizards blazed across walls, a bat mosaic adorned the basement floor, and live peacocks and sculptures of mysterious creatures stood guard outside. Their idyll came to an end as World War II drew closer; Ernst was captured by French authorities while Carrington escaped to Spain. Overwhelmed, Carrington suffered a breakdown and was admitted to a Spanish asylum. *Down Below*, a semi-autobiographical novel that toys with the boundary between sanity and madness, recalls her brutal experiences in the asylum.



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 “People under seventy and over seven are very unreliable if they are not cats.” — Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*

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 “Art is a word that we don’t use much around here. We just make things and that’s it.” — Gabriel Weisz Carrington, speaking about his mother in the short film “Leonora and Gabriel” by Lizet Benrey.

“I didn’t have time to be anyone’s muse... I was too busy rebelling against my family and learning to be an artist.” — Leonora Carrington

Through marriage to a Mexican diplomat, Carrington made her way to Mexico City. She would spend most of the rest of her life there pursuing her interests in alchemy, tarot, and astrology with friends and fellow artists, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna. In the 1970s, she became a founding member of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Mexico, extending her work further beyond the canvas. She continued to write and make art while raising a family, merging her domestic and creative needs to forge an innate and woman-centric variation on surrealism. Words by Tilly Alice. Photography by Anja Charbonneau.