

Nobody's muse: Revisiting the art of Leonora Carrington



 | Daniel Aguilar/Reuters/File

British artist Leonora Carrington sits during an interview with Reuters in her house in Mexico City, Nov. 11, 2000.



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Shape-shifting creatures. Dreamscapes of greenery. Prancing hyenas and noble white horses.

These are just a few of the hallmarks of surrealist Leonora Carrington.

The artist – who was born in 1917 in England and died in 2011 – was once on the periphery of the surrealist movement. But in the decade following her death, Ms. Carrington's work has experienced a revival.

While her adopted homeland of Mexico has long embraced her art, the celebration of Ms. Carrington's legacy has reached a crescendo in other parts of the world in recent years. Her reemergence follows a trend of increased attention to fellow women creators

– including writers Eve Babitz and Lucia Berlin, musician Betty Davis, and abstract artist Hilma af Klint. Many of them dot TikTok lists highlighting “women artists you should know” and “recent obsessions.”

The 100th anniversary of the surrealist movement last year has also brought attention to often overlooked artists, such as Dora Maar and close Carrington friend Remedios Varo.

In the case of Ms. Carrington, her “Les Distractions de Dagobert” (1945) sold for \$28.5 million at Sotheby’s in 2024, cementing her status as the highest-selling female artist in British history. In the past decade, there have been exhibitions in Spain, Denmark, Ireland, England, and Mexico. Her first solo exhibition in New England – at Brandeis University’s Rose Art Museum – is on display until June 1, and then moves to the Katonah Museum of Art in New York. Her first solo museum show in Italy will open in Milan this fall, followed by an exhibition in Paris in 2026. A biopic is in the works, following the artist’s life in 1930s Paris before she fled to Mexico.



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"Pastoral" (1950) is among the works included in "Leonora Carrington: Dream Weaver" at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts.

To those familiar with Ms. Carrington’s work, the increase in interest reflects a renewed attention to the surrealist movement – and to Ms. Carrington’s unique artistic vision.

“What Leonora offers – and what surrealism offers – are alternative ways of understanding the world: not through the capitalist economic system of transactional politics, but tapping into empowerment through the imagination, invisible truths, things that have to do with our subconscious,” says Gannit Ankori, director and chief curator of the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Dr. Ankori curated the museum's exhibit "Leonora Carrington: Dream Weaver." A number of the pieces on display – including works in tempera, gouache, acrylic, oil, pencil, pen, and fiber – have rarely been seen outside private collections.

Ms. Carrington's work, Dr. Ankori suggests, speaks to our times: It's an escape from an often fraught political environment; an antidote to "the conquest of the earth and its minerals, the total exploitation of nature"; a subversion of gender expectations and stereotypes.

In the 1950 painting "Pastoral," water fowl, a giraffe, a hyena, and other animals congregate around an androgynous couple as ethereal animal-human hybrids float above. Ms. Carrington often emphasized the coexistence of humans and animals in her work.

Of particular resonance to Dr. Ankori was Ms. Carrington's love for Mexico.

"The way that Mexico is talked about by the U.S. administration today is the antithesis of Mexico as a welcoming country that embraced and offered safe haven to refugees from war-torn Europe in the 1940s," says Dr. Ankori, a professor of fine arts and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Brandeis. "And these immigrants, many of them intellectuals and artists, resettled in this new, embracing homeland and felt welcome. They built community and developed cultural excellence in the arts and philosophy and literature and more."

Alongside her many paintings, textile works, and sculptures, Ms. Carrington was also a prolific writer. Her 1944 memoir, "Down Below," details her experiences of institutionalization in Spain. Her fictional work includes a wide range of surrealist short stories, plays, and novels.



© Leonora Carrington / Arts Rights Society (ARS), New York
"The Chair: Dagda Tuatha de Danann" (1955)

The New York Review of Books began republishing her written works in 2017, with “The Stone Door” and “Opus Siniestrus: Selected Plays” due in July and October, respectively.

“I didn’t have time to be anyone’s muse”

Born into an upper-class Catholic family in England, Ms. Carrington often rebelled against the societal restrictions imposed on her. She was twice expelled from convent schools, and favored reading Irish fairy tales, Lewis Carroll, and Beatrix Potter over learning how to become the perfect debutante.

A viewing of Max Ernst’s 1924 painting “Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale” and a copy of Herbert Read’s 1936 book “Surrealism” influenced her artistic development, as did her tutelage under the French modernist Amédée Ozenfant.

Women in the surrealist movement were often relegated to the role of the *femme enfant* – often young, beautiful women who were expected to be subservient to male artists.

Ms. Carrington, however, had other plans. “I didn’t have time to be anyone’s muse,” she once said. “I was too busy rebelling against my family and learning to be an artist.”

After meeting Mr. Ernst at a party in 1937, the two began a romantic and collaborative relationship. Their home became host to their surrealist friends, including Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, and André Breton.



© Leonora Carrington / Arts Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Before painting “Night Nursery Everything” (1947), Leonora Carrington made sketches, which are on display at the exhibition at the Rose Art Museum.

Mr. Ernst, who was German, would be arrested by French authorities in the outbreak of World War II, suspected of being a “hostile alien.” Ms. Carrington eventually found her way to Mexico and married Hungarian photographer Emérico “Chiki” Weisz.

There, she encountered a community of European artists who had fled the horrors of World War II, often exhibiting her art in local galleries. She became close friends with fellow émigré and artist Ms. Varo. Together, they studied kabbalah, alchemy, Tibetan Buddhism, and Mayan mystical writings – the ideas of which feature prominently in Ms. Carrington’s art. She went on to become one of the founding members of Mexico’s 1970s feminist movement.

Some say that the artist, with her sense of playfulness and curiosity, was too far ahead of her time.

Veronica and Nat Moonhill are filmmakers who have adapted Ms. Carrington’s short story “The Debutante” into a 2024 film, available on Vimeo. They were drawn to the artist’s “deeply independent spirit and commitment to her own vision,” Ms. Moonhill shared during a virtual event at the Rose Art Museum recently.

“She can be such a guiding light for just saying, ‘Just commit to yourself and what you see,’” she said. “She lived so vibrantly.”

On a journey with the artist

As for visitors to “Leonora Carrington: Dream Weaver,” Dr. Ankori finds that people get lost in the artist’s work – sometimes standing in front of a piece for 30 minutes, sometimes crying, often regularly returning.

“With Leonora, I sense that people feel that there’s an intimate bond with her, as if she’s taking them on a journey,” Dr. Ankori says. “And those who are receptive to that journey learn something deep and new about the world and about themselves.”

“Leonora Carrington: Dream Weaver” is on display at Brandeis University’s Rose Art Museum until June 1. The exhibit will move to the Katonah Museum of Art in Katonah, New York, later this year. Ms. Carrington’s first solo museum show in Italy will open at Milan’s Palazzo Reale in September, on view until January 2026. An exhibition at the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris will be on view from Feb. 18 to July 19, 2026.