

EXHIBITION NOTES FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS



Leonora Carrington: *The Celtic Surrealist*

18 September 2013 – 26 January 2014

Garden Gallery, IMMA, Royal Hospital Kilmainham, Dublin 8

exhibition & background information

Leonora Carrington: *The Celtic Surrealist*

Leonora Carrington: *The Celtic Surrealist* is the first major exhibition in Ireland of this extraordinary artist's work. Presented in the exhibition are fifty paintings, eight sculptures, eight tapestries, and twenty works on paper dating from the 1940s onwards. Her work, which is a complex mix of myths, symbols, fairytales, occult, alchemy, metamorphoses and transformations, was influenced by her lifelong interest in Irish folklore and by Mexican culture – where she lived for the last 60 years of her life. This exhibition seeks to reconnect Carrington with her Celtic roots. Also presented in the exhibition and explored here are her childhood notebooks, where we can see how early on she was creating surreal worlds with magical creatures, rich for the imagination to explore and inhabit.

The Celtic Surrealist is curated by Seán Kissane, Curator: Exhibitions, IMMA.

The exhibition is kindly supported by Brian Ranalow of H&K International; the American Friends of the Arts in Ireland; Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco; Noriega & Escobedo, Mexico; and Roy & Mary Cullen Collection, Texas.

Who was Leonora Carrington?

Carrington was a British born Surrealist painter and writer who spent most of her life in Mexico. She was born on April 6th 1917 in a small town in Lancashire in the North of England to Harold Wilde Carrington an English industrialist and Maureen Moorhead who was from Moate in Co Westmeath. Her eerie childhood home Crookhey Hall, the surrounding woods and growing up with horses were early sources of inspiration for the artist, as were the Celtic stories and Irish folklore told to her by her Irish nanny Ms Mary Kavanaugh.

Carrington did not enjoy the Catholic convent schools that she was sent to as a child, and she was expelled from a few schools before being sent to Mrs Penrose's Academy of Art in Florence in 1932 where she thrived in the artistic environment. In Florence she received her first formal training in painting and had the opportunity to view first-hand Renaissance masterpieces (the influences of which can be seen in her paintings). She was then sent to Paris for finishing school, which was a school that young women were sent to to learn social skills and cultural norms as a preparation for entry into adult society. This entry into society was marked by being presented in court to the King. It was also an opportunity for young girls of marriageable age to be presented to suitable bachelors and their families in the hopes of finding a suitable husband. Carrington was presented at the Court of King George V in 1934, an experience that she was to write about later in her fictional tale *The Debutante* (and not in a positive way).

Despite her father's desires to marry her off, at 18 Carrington left home and moved to London to attend the Chelsea School of Arts. She then moved to the Ozenfat Academy for Art also in London. After visiting two Surrealist exhibitions, including a solo exhibition by the Surrealist artist Max Ernst, Carrington found a connection to her own influences and interests. She met Ernst while he was in London for his exhibition and soon after she moved to Paris with him. In Paris and afterwards in their home in Saint-Martin d'Arche, Carrington became a core member of the Surrealist group.

Ernst was imprisoned by the Nazis during the Second World War. Carrington fled to Spain where she suffered a nervous breakdown and was committed to a mental asylum. Carrington's family intervened and sent a nurse to take her to South Africa to recuperate. While in Lisbon waiting to travel to Africa she fled to the Mexican embassy where she hoped to find Mexican diplomat and Surrealist poet Renato Leduc, whom she knew from her time in Paris. Leduc offered to marry her in order to escape from Europe and they travelled to New York in 1941 and later to Mexico.

Apart from a period of time spent in New York in the 1960s, Carrington spent the rest of her life in Mexico. She divorced Leduc and subsequently married Hungarian photographer Emérico (Chiki) Weisz. They had two children, Gabriel and Pablo and lived happily together for the rest of their lives. In Mexico Carrington was inspired by the pre-Hispanic traditions and magic rituals that were still part of everyday life, she incorporated these influences to her already complex iconography which already included Celtic, Assyrian, Egyptian and other occult references.

Carrington died in 2011 at the age of 94, the last living Surrealist. She achieved much success during her lifetime, with many commissions and exhibitions in places such as Mexico, New York and London. She is less known in her maternal country, Ireland, but this exhibition brings back this fascinating artist and re-contextualises her work within the Celtic tradition that so fascinated her.

Carrington the writer:

As a young woman Carrington read voraciously, and absorbed the many stories and narratives told to her by her mother, her Irish grandmother and her nanny Ms Kavanaugh. Quite often her stories (as do her paintings) reference her life, and this can be seen in *The Debutante*, a fantastical novel in which she satirises her experience of being presented at court as a debutante. The protagonist in the novel dislikes all the balls and lunches that she has to attend and instead prefers to visit the zoo, where she makes friends with an intelligent young hyena. The hyena goes to the ball disguised as the young girl, while she reads Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in her room rather than meeting young men. In her later novel *Down Below* she describes the time that she spent in a mental asylum. Carrington wrote throughout her life and many of her books were published. Included in the exhibition are a number of her books.

What is Surrealism?

Surrealism was an art movement that started in Paris in the early 1920s, and then spread throughout the globe. A number of Surrealist artists moved to New York at the outbreak of World War II because they were deemed a threat by the Nazis. The movement spanned a variety of art forms, including visual art, literature, film and music and the Surrealists had an interest in politics, psychology and sociology. Predominantly Surrealist artists were interested in creating work that came from their unconscious mind, so they tried to lose themselves in making the work and allow their subconscious take over. They were interested in bridging dream worlds and reality, and to support their work they referenced a variety of sources including, mythology, psychology, 'madness' and symbolism.

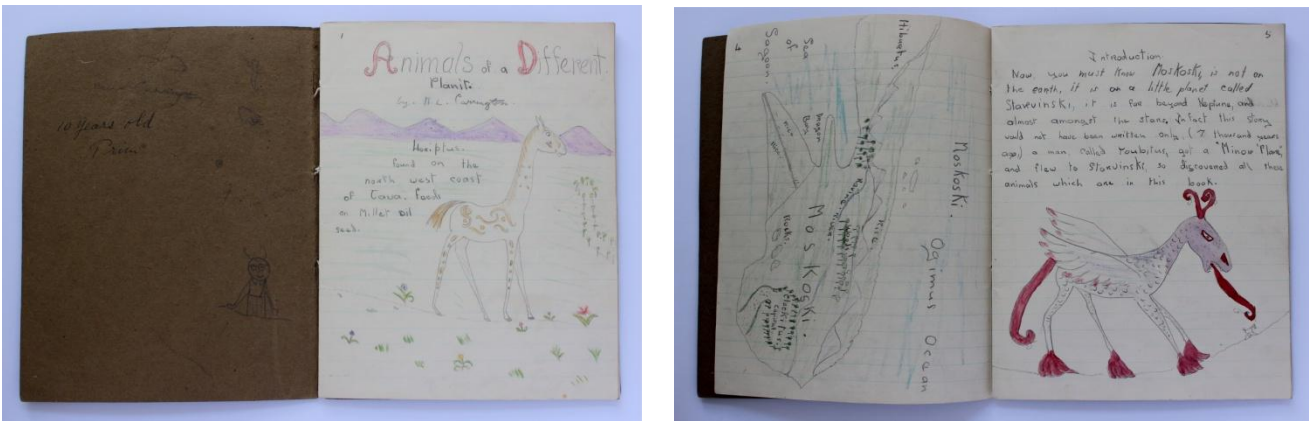
Carrington was the ideal Surrealist artist, as she crossed the boundaries of painter, sculptor, set designer, weaver, writer and mother, and in addition she had experienced being in a mental asylum. Her Irish roots and lifelong interest in referencing Irish literature, history and legends in her work also supported her position as a Surrealist, who in their map of the World located Ireland at its centre, because of our tradition of fairy tales and myths.

notes on selection of artworks:

Please note that a number of the following artworks may be visited during a gallery tour of *The Celtic Surrealist*. However, the particular artworks visited will vary according to circumstances on the day, and additional artworks not covered here will be included.

Carrington herself stated that she did not want to give any information about the meaning of her work, as she wanted people to interpret the work in relation to their own experiences. When you visit the exhibition with your class, remember that there aren't any right answers, so please bring your own ideas and imaginations to the paintings, sculptures and other artworks that you will see.

Childhood imaginations



These drawings come from notebooks made by Carrington when she was about 10 years old. In them she creates imaginary lands, inhabited by fantastical creatures – each of which has a name and description. It is no surprise to see that she was creating imaginary creatures and worlds from an early age. These works can be clearly linked to her later paintings and to her rich body of work as an author. Here is an extract from her notebook *Animals of a Different Planet*:

Horpitus, found on the North West Coast of Tava. Feeds on the Millet oil seeds, and the fact that this book story would not have been written only seven thousand years ago, a man called Youtibus got a Minor Plane and flew to Starvinski so discovered all these animals which are in this book.

Why not create your own magical land. Think about the kind of creatures that live there, the vegetation, the size of the land and whether or not there are humans living there. What do the different animals feed on? Who is the most powerful? Where is this land located?

***The Giantess (The Guardian of the Egg)*, c.1947 (see image on page 1)
Tempera on wood panel, 117 × 68 cm**

The Giantess is one of Carrington's most famous artworks. A towering giantess commands the flora and fauna of the earth, sea and sky. There are many different possible references within the painting, a few are suggested here, but perhaps you might further discuss what other objects and references you think are in the work.

It is thought that *The Giantess* may represent the Mother Goddess who was said to have life giving properties - perhaps the mysterious egg that she holds represents new life. What do you think?

The costume of *The Giantess* reflects traditional Irish dress from the 16th century, which would have been a red and white cloak and her golden hair is also similar to the style worn by women at this time. Why not do some research into 16th century dress and traditions in Ireland and see if you can make any connections with this painting.

Another reference could be to St Brigid, who along with St Patrick, is one of our patron saints. Legend has it that St Brigid was told by the King of Leinster that she could have as much land for her convent as her cloak covered. She asked her nuns to take a hold of the four corners of her cloak and walk away in different directions, as they walked the cloak stretched out for miles and this became her land.

Another possible cultural reference for this painting is the book *Gulliver's Travels* by Irish writer Jonathan Swift. Do you know what the references could be? Here are some clues, one is in relation to the size of *The Giantess* and the other is the egg that she is holding.

What do you notice in this painting? What animals can you see? Where are they placed? Do you think this was intentional by the artist? What kinds of boats can you see in the water?

***Green Tea (La Dame Ovale)*, 1942
Oil on canvas, 61 x 76 cm**



In many of Carrington's works women are presented as witches, a subject matter that the artist was very interested in. To the left of the centre a female figure stands serenely, wrapped in a blanket and placed within a circle. On her hair sits what appears to be two circles of thorns. To her left is some sort of cauldron with antlered animals inside it. The artist could be referencing how historically witches were wrapped in a sheet and hung upside down and swung about until they confessed their crimes.

On the right hand side of the painting there are two horses tied to a tree. Quite often the artist used horses to symbolise herself, so perhaps she is referring to when she was trapped in the mental hospital in the work. Below we see some sort of underworld, where

there are bats, more women wrapped in blankets and a bird protecting its nest. It is thought that these figures in blankets might represent 'Teraphim' from the Hebrew tradition. 'Teraphim' were household gods with protective powers.

Why does she have these thorns crowning her? And why does she appear to be standing within another circle? Is she trapped? What else do you notice in the painting?

Operation Wednesday, 1969
Tempera on Masonite, 60.5 × 44.7 cm



This painting was a reaction by the artist to a historic event in Mexico. On the 2nd October 1968 during a period of social unrest, students and other civilians held a protest in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City. The government reacted and a number of the protesters were killed – some say many hundreds of people, but the number has never been confirmed. This horrific event became known as the Tlatelolco massacre. We know that the artist is referencing this event, as the painting is captioned in Spanish *Don't forget Tlatelolco ... the three cultures ... we don't fear the grave ... military camp number 1*. The reverse of the painting is dedicated to Dr. Fernando Ortiz Monasterio, who was a plastic surgeon in Mexico at the time. In the aftermath of the massacre he worked in the public hospital alongside his private practice repairing the faces of the many injured.

In the painting we can see that the artist shows the surgeon working on someone's face. Like in the work of Leonardo da Vinci the artist has written a number of texts on the floor of the painting in reverse. Can you see what words she has chosen to write forwards in the painting? On the right hand side a skeleton sits inscribing text on a book, again using backwards writing. Above it floats a small colourful butterfly. What do you think he is writing? Many cultures associate butterflies with the spirits of the dead, in Ireland they are supposed to be souls trapped in purgatory, in Mexico the butterfly represents the souls of great dead warriors, and in other cultures they believe that once the butterfly dies the soul dies forever. As we mention above in Carrington's work she wants the viewer to interpret the work themselves, knowing the many symbolic references to butterflies as mentioned here, which do you think the artist might be portraying?

This painting is a political protest by the artist, in relation to a violent event that happened during her lifetime. Can you think of any recent political unrest? What kinds of artwork might you make to represent this event? Would you include symbols, real people or text in it? How do you think you could convey a political message visually?

***Are you Really Syrious*, 1953**
Oil on panel, 53.5 × 91.5 cm



This painting is a wonderful representation of the diverse range of historical and mythical subject matter that Carrington referenced in her work. A young woman sits in the left hand corner focused on sewing or weaving, her head bent in concentration. She is thought to be Anu who traditionally wore white. Anu was a Celtic mother-Goddess and was considered to be an ancestor of the Tuatha dé Dannan, the mythological founders of the Irish race. Carrington's maternal Grandmother claimed their family were descended from them. In the centre of the painting a figure performs a ritual dance in what looks like an Assyrian temple. Assyria was a kingdom in Mesopotamia that existed from late 25th or early-24th century BC until 605 BC, it was located across present day Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq. To the right and left of the dancing character are seated three large cat like figures that resemble those from Egyptian temples and hieroglyphs. It is thought that the film *Pan's Labyrinth* was inspired by this painting.

***How doth the little Crocodile*, c. 1988**
Bronze, 67x 84 x 16.5 cm



This bronze sculpture is based on the Lewis Carroll poem which appears in his novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the poem describes how the creature lures fish into its mouth with a welcoming smile. What is happening in this sculpture? What do you notice? In 2000 a large-scale version of this sculpture was installed in Mexico City, and is popularly known as the *Boat of Crocodiles*.

Here is the poem that it is based on:

*How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale!
How cheerfully he seems to grin,
How neatly spreads his claws,
And welcomes little fishes in
With gently smiling jaws!*

Iguana and Fox, 1948-1958
Tapestry, 241 × 203 cm



The metamorphosis of animals and humans into fantastic creatures was quite common in Carrington's work, as can be seen here by the half man / half iguana figure that stands in profile opposite a female fox, also in profile. Between these two creatures is a tree, laden with fruits or berries. Unlike her paintings, Carrington's tapestries are less busy and focus on the primary figures with a monochromatic background. This is one of many tapestries that Carrington made in Mexico over a period of about ten years when she worked closely with a family of serape weavers, who came from an Aztec village to live with her.

Further Ideas to develop in classroom before and after a visit

Use a large map of the world to mark the different places where Carrington lived and travelled. Then layer into this the many cultures, folklore and traditions that she referenced in her paintings (such as Celtic and Mexican mythology). How far across the world did her interests spread?

Find out more about the Surrealist artists, who were they? What different art forms did they use to express their ideas? Do you think their ideas were interesting?

Try writing a passage of text backwards – how quickly can you do this? Then pass your text to someone else to see how quickly they can read it?

Why not test out the unconscious associations and the interweaving of narratives that the Surrealists used in their artworks and work on a collective text. This is known as *Exquisite Corpse* and is where one person writes a word or sentence on a piece of paper (whatever idea comes into your head without thinking too much about it, just write it down) and then folds the paper and passes it to the next person who does the same and then passes the newly folded page on. Why not try this out in your classroom and see what overarching ideas and story comes out.