

Rebel painter who turned her back on English high society



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Published: June 3 2011 19:36 | Last updated: June 3 2011 19:36



Leonora Carrington ran off to become the lover of Max Ernst, surrealist artist, and became an important artist in her own right

Leonora Carrington, the surrealist painter and sculptor, was intended for a life of comfort and conformity in the higher echelons of English society. Yet her passion for art and her fascination with the unconventional were far too strong to accommodate the plans of her wealthy family.

To her father's horror, she ran off to become the lover of the surrealist painter Max Ernst and, ultimately, an important artist in her own right. Her works command ever higher prices in the international art market. Two years ago one of her canvasses sold at auction for \$1.5m.

Her death at the age of 94 marks the loss of one of the strongest remaining links to 20th-century surrealism. Yet her upbringing had been so conventional. She was born in 1917 to Harold Carrington, a wealthy, workaholic textile manufacturer from Lancashire, who had no appreciation of art. Although Leonora had managed to attend art school in Italy, her father was determined to see her inserted permanently into the upper tier of English society. To that end, he gave her a coming out ball at the Ritz in London and arranged for her to be presented to George V.

Yet she was always headstrong and rebellious. She was expelled from two convent schools, the nuns saying that she would "co-operate neither in work nor play". As a debutante in the royal enclosure at Ascot races, she was so upset that women were not allowed to place their own bets that she turned her back on the horses and read Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* instead.

It was in 1936 at the International Surrealist Exhibition in London that she first saw the surrealist work of Max Ernst, one of the most important and influential artists of the 20th century. The impact on her was immediate. "I fell in love with Max's paintings before I fell in love with Max," she said. Ernst was 46 and she was just 20 when they met at a dinner party a year later. Despite the age gap and the fact that he was married at the time, they fell in love and ran off together – first to a Paris apartment, later, to a farmhouse in the south of France.

Through Ernst, Carrington met the most important artists of the time, including Joan Miró, Man Ray, Salvador Dali, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso and Andre Breton, author of the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto.

Most young, aspiring artists might have been overwhelmed by such a roll call of talent. Carrington was unfazed. Once, when Miró gave her some change and told her to run to the corner for some cigarettes, she gave him a feisty reply. "I gave it back and said if he wanted cigarettes, he could bloody well get them himself," she recalled. "I wasn't daunted by any of them." In a similar vein, she described Picasso as "a typical Spaniard – he thought all women were in love with him".

Yet Ernst occupied a special place in her life. "From Max I had my education," she said years later. "He taught me everything." Little wonder that she suffered a mental breakdown after Ernst, a German, was interned near Aix-en-Provence in 1938. He was released within weeks but arrested again by the Nazis soon after their invasion of France. After months alone, and increasingly depressed, she ended up in a psychiatric hospital in Spain where she was treated with hallucinogenic and powerful, mind-altering drugs.

Concerned about her fate, her parents sent her nanny, reputedly in a submarine, to spirit her away to South Africa for treatment. Carrington managed to slip away from her chaperone, bolting to the Mexican embassy as the first place that came to mind. Married, briefly, to a Mexican diplomat, Renato Leduc, she went with him to Mexico where she was to be based for the rest of her life.

She established herself as an accomplished artist. In a 1948 write-up of a New York exhibition in Time magazine, her works were described as portraying "feathery, hairy, horny, half-luminous creatures merged imperceptibly into birds, animals and plants. Painted with cobweb delicacy, they conspired and paraded before misty landscapes and night skies thick with floating islands."

Ernst played a large part in shaping Carrington's style but there were other influences: the Celtic folk tales that her Irish nanny told her as a child; and even Crookhey Hall, the rambling English mansion where she grew up, and which features in many of her paintings.

Mexico, with its rich cultural history of Aztec and Mayan civilisations, as well as its cult of the dead, was an additional inspiration. It gave her a stability that had been so conspicuously lacking earlier. There, after amicably divorcing her first husband, she married Emerico Weisz, a Polish photojournalist, and had two sons – Gabriel, a poet, and Pablo, an artist and a doctor. Her sons survive her.

For years, her reputation as an artist in her native UK refused to keep pace with her talent – though that is changing. In Mexico, where she has long been considered one of the 20th century's great artists, the government officially declared her artwork "national heritage".

That her adopted country bestowed such honour on her while she was still alive is a fitting tribute to her importance in the surrealist genre and, more generally, the evolution of art in the 20th century.

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