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Leonora Carrington dies at 94; a leading figure of the Surrealist movement

Leonora Carrington painted, drew, made sculptures, and wrote fiction and plays over a career that spanned much of the 20th century. She was part of the vibrant artist community of Mexico City in the 1940s and 1950s.

By Daniel Hernandez, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Mexico City -- She painted eerie rituals with cloaked figures in forests, dancing deer with trees growing from their backs, and breathing buildings that shot planets and stars.

Leonora Carrington, a leading figure of the Surrealist movement and perhaps the last great living Mexican artist, died Wednesday in Mexico City, the government said. She was 94.

Carrington painted, drew, made sculptures, and wrote fiction and plays over a career that spanned much of the 20th century and featured affairs and friendships with some of the greatest artists of her time. Surrealist painter Max Ernst was an early lover in Paris. Remedios Varo was a close friend and fellow female painter in the vibrant artist community of Mexico City in the 1940s and 1950s.


Surrealist Andre Breton and filmmaker Luis Buñuel were also among her acquaintances and contemporaries, and she sometimes brushed up against the tumultuous lives of artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

Carrington's style became recognizable worldwide, a combination of anthropomorphic whimsy and an undercurrent of shadowy darkness. Yet she often rejected the label "Surrealist," insisting instead that she painted what she observed in the magical space between the corporeal world and the subconscious.

Chilean filmmaker and actor Alejandro Jodorowsky, a later Surrealist, wrote of Carrington as one of his "witch" muses, yet she once remarked: "I didn't have time to be anybody's muse; I was too busy rebelling

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against my parents and learning to be an artist."

Carrington was born April 6, 1917, in Lancashire, England, to an upper-class family. She began smoking at age 11 (and appeared never to stop), was expelled from several schools and studied art in London. She moved to Paris in the 1930s and began exhibiting her work, joining the Surrealists. Eventually, as the Nazis marched across Europe, Carrington suffered a nervous breakdown and wound up in a psychiatric ward in Madrid.

In 1941, Carrington met a Mexican diplomat, Renato Leduc, whom she married in Lisbon. They traveled to New York and by 1942 the pair settled in Mexico City, divorcing soon thereafter. Carrington later married a photographer, Emerico Weisz, and with him had two sons, Gabriel and Pablo, both of whom survive her.

Carrington painted and wrote energetically in Mexico, inspired by the country's rich pre-Hispanic civilizations and the mythologies and occult knowledge of cultures from around the world. One of her best-known works is an enormous mural titled "The Magical World of the Maya," commissioned in the early 1960s for the National Museum of Anthropology. Her most famous written work, a 1974 fantastical novel titled "The Hearing Trumpet," includes an account of a feminist uprising in a women's retirement home.

Later in life, Carrington enjoyed accolades that in Mexico are reserved for the country's most admired artists. In 2005, she was awarded the National Prize of Sciences and Arts. [In 2008, an outdoor exhibit of her large-scale sculptures](#) along the stately central boulevard Paseo de la Reforma became hugely popular.

Elena Poniatowska, the Mexican writer and author of a novel based on Carrington's life, said in an interview with CNN's Spanish language service earlier this year that the artist maintained both a British and a Mexican sensibility throughout her life.

"Smoking, drinking English tea — in her kitchen there is a photo of Lady Di — you feel a bit like you're in England when you're with her," Poniatowska said. "But she loves Mexico deeply. Her son Pablo says she wouldn't be who she is without Mexico."

In a 2008 interview with The Times, Carrington responded with a fanciful spell of words at the thought of returning to Europe: "There are places I'd like to return to. But not as I was then but as I am now. 'Cause I'm trying to understand. And I've understood nothing."

The artist added: "One is born, one lives, one dies. What death is, I don't know."

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