

Remedios Varo

A Spanish artist whose elaborately detailed, dreamlike paintings — otherworldly in tone — now fetch high prices.

By JULIA BOZZONE

In the opening of Thomas Pynchon's postmodern novel "The Crying of Lot 49" (1965), tears stream down the face of his protagonist, Oedipa Maas, as she takes in a Surrealist painting of "a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces" who appear to be "prisoners in the top room of a circular tower." The girls are embroidering a kind of tapestry that streams out of the windows.

The scene is fictional but the piece is not: It is "Embroidering the Earth's Mantle" (1961), by Remedios Varo, a Spanish painter who emigrated to Mexico City during World War II.

In elaborately detailed, often allegorical paintings, Varo depicted convent schoolgirls embarking on strange adventures; androgynous, ascetic figures absorbed in scientific, musical or artistic discovery; and solitary women — some of whom resembled the slender, striking Varo herself — having a transcendent experience. Her style was reminiscent of Renaissance art in its exquisite precision, but her dreamlike paintings were otherworldly in tone.

Those works often share a common theme: a quest to reach a higher state of consciousness.

In her biography, "Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo" (1988), the art historian Janet A. Kaplan suggested that much of Varo's power had come from her strength as a storyteller. "Her engaging characters and settings were designed to draw viewers into her curious narratives," she wrote.

Though Varo was successful in her lifetime, it is only now, nearly 60 years after her death, that the fame of this mysterious artist is reaching its zenith. In June 2020, Varo's 1956 painting "Harmony (Suggestive Self-Portrait)" sold at a Sotheby's auction for \$6.2 million, the second highest price ever commanded by a female Latin American artist, according to Sotheby's. (A painting by the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo sold for \$8 million in 2016.)

María de los Remedios Alicia Rodriga Varo y Uranga was born on Dec. 16, 1908, in Anglés, a small town in north-eastern Spain. Her father, Rodrigo Varo y Zejalvo, a hydraulic engineer, taught her mechanical drawing and encouraged her interest in art and science. Her mother, Ignacia Uranga y Bergareche, a devoted Roman Catholic from the

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KATI HORNA, "WOMAN AND MASK," ANA MARÍA NORAH HORNA FERNÁNDEZ, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PHOTO VIA PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM, ART RESOURCE, NY.



REMEDIOS VARO, ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/VEGAP, MADRID, NEW YORK; SOTHEBY'S, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

From left, Remedios Varo in 1957 wearing a headpiece made by her friend the artist Leonora Carrington and "Armonía (Autorretrato Sugerente)" / "Harmony (Suggestive Self-Portrait)" 1956, which sold for \$6.2 million in June 2020.

Basque region, named María for the Virgin of Remedies (the Virgin Mary), and for an older sister who died before Varo was born.

At 8, after her family had moved to Madrid, María was sent to a strict Catholic school for girls, where she escaped into adventure books by Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas. Rigid school routines — prayer sessions, confessions, group sewing and the like — made such an impression on her that they would inform the subject matter of some of her most famous works ("Embroidering Earth's Mantle," the second panel of a triptych, being just one).

Varo made her first paintings at 12. A sketchbook of portraits of her family members showed her skill at capturing a likeness. At 15, she was accepted to enroll in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid, where both Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí had studied. She graduated in 1930.

Over the next decade she lived between Paris and Barcelona, where she moved in bohemian, avant-garde and Surrealist circles. By 1937 her work was appearing in Surrealist publications, then in international exhibitions in London, Tokyo, Paris, Amsterdam and Mexico City.

After the German occupation of Paris in June 1940, she fled to the south of France with her partner at the time, the French Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret, arriving in Marseilles, where other artists and intellectuals had convened.

The couple eventually traveled to Casablanca, in Morocco, and later boarded a crowded Portuguese ocean liner bound for Mexico, where they were accepted as political refugees.

The experience of having to flee was reflected in Varo's paintings of people in transit — sailing in precarious boats, wandering through forests, riding bicycles through town or descending steps — all while wearing contemplative expressions.

"Like other artists who had to live and create under duress, I think her pictorial language is very rich and full of mythology and symbols," Emmanuel Di Donna, an art dealer who included Varo's work in his 2019 show "Surrealism in Mexico," said in a phone interview.

Varo would live in Mexico for the rest of her life, with the exception of a year in Venezuela.

She made her best work — fanciful, haunting, personal and metaphorical — in the 1950s and early '60s in Mexico City. There she formed a circle of exiled artist friends, including the Hungarian Surrealist photographer Kati Horna, the Austrian Surrealist artist Wolfgang Paalen and the British Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington, with whom she found camaraderie and shared ideas.

"Varo and Carrington would see each other almost every day, either in the middle of the day to go to the market or later in the evening for dinner, and they would discuss what they were working

allowed her to tap into her deepest imagination, said Tere Arcq, an independent curator who assembled a 2008 centenary retrospective of Varo's work for the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. Workshop participants might concentrate for six straight hours on an inanimate object, like a wooden chair, focusing on the life that had existed within the object, Arcq said. The wood in the chair, for example, had come from a tree, and the tree had once been alive.

Varo, by then well into her 40s, had her breakthrough with a group exhibition in 1955, showing paintings that dealt with the subconscious, the mystical and the metaphysical; in many, the protagonist looked like Varo.

She was interested in tarot, astrology and alchemy, which she balanced with a lifelong love of science, particularly geology, Arcq said in an interview. Varo's work fused these interests.

"She was trying to find the intersection between the mystical and the scientific," Arcq said.

In Varo's painting "Harmony" (1956), a person (it could be a man or a woman) sits at a desk in a cavernous room, threading objects like crystals, plants, geometric figures and paper scraps of mathematical formulas onto a musical staff that looks like an abacus or a loom. Figures resembling muses appear to be coming out of the walls. The person, Varo wrote in a note addressed to her family, "is trying to find the invisible thread that unites all things."

By this time she was living with Walter Gruen, an exiled Austrian owner of a popular classical music record shop. He believed in Varo's talent and encouraged her to devote herself to painting wholeheartedly.

Varo had her first major solo exhibition in Mexico City in 1956. It was a hit among critics and collectors as well as the celebrated Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who was quoted as saying that Varo was "among the most important women artists in the world." Her second solo show, in 1962, was also successful.

Varo died of a heart attack on Oct. 8, 1963. She was 54. Gruen became a tireless champion of her work and legacy, and a 1971 posthumous retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico drew crowds.

The value of Varo's work has soared in recent years, in no small part because of its rarity, quality and striking imagery.

"It has a magical effect," Norris said. "There is a radiance and a light to her work, much like you see in a great Renaissance painting."

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on," said Wendi Norris, who organized "Indelible Fables," a solo exhibition of Varo's work, at her San Francisco gallery in 2012. "I believe that a lot of their narratives were born out of these conversations that they had."

Norris said that the two had often worked through similar ideas — parsing the theories of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung and the mystic philosophers George Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky — but that they would manifest them in different ways. While Carrington was free in her painting, Varo was exacting.

"Her precision — the single hair brushstrokes and the way that she was thinning the paint to get a lustrous layered effect — is beyond masterful," Norris said by phone.

Varo was interested in proportion and scale, as her father had been, and she would draft preliminary sketches carefully. It sometimes took her months to complete a single small painting.

"She was very deliberate," Norris said, "and, in a way, patient."

Varo participated in consciousness-raising workshops based on the teachings of Gurdjieff, an experience that