All of the artists in the present exhibit were included in major international Surrealist exhibitions of the 1930s and 1940s. In the past thirty years, however, the work of women Surrealists has rarely been shown in the United States. The aim of this exhibit is to introduce a new generation to the work of these extraordinary artists.

We are grateful to The Institute for Research in History and to guest curator, Whitney Chadwick. For their patient assistance we thank Evelyne Jesenof, Diane Zabawski and Dr. Paul LeClerc and his staff, especially Katherine Curtis, Hattie Surgala and Antoine Goupil. Charlotte Mayes of the Jeffrey Hoffeld Gallery, acted as a valuable consultant to the exhibition, as did Mary-Anne Martin and Stephen Miller. Finally, we owe special thanks to the lenders, who have provided expertise and enthusiasm as well as works of art.

Katherine B. Crum
Director, Baruch College Gallery
City University of New York
In 1929 a young American from Poughkeepsie, New York, knocked on the door of the Paris studio of Man Ray and announced that she had come to be his student. Lee Miller and the French painter and illustrator Valentine Hugo, who met the Surrealists around 1928, were the vanguard of an international group of young women attracted to what was then the most radical literary and artistic movement in Europe. Although women have remained active members of Surrealist groups to the present day, the current exhibit focuses on those who discovered Surrealism prior to World War II and who contributed to the international Surrealist exhibitions of the 1930s and 1940s: Eileen Agar, Emmy Bridgewater, Leonora Carrington, Ithell Colquhoun, Leonor Fini, Valentine Hugo, Frida Kahlo, Jacqueline Lamba, Lee Miller, Meret Oppenheim, Alice Rahon (Paalen), Valentine Penrose, Kay Sage, Dorothea Tanning, Toyen, and Remedios Varo.

Committed to nothing less than the complete overthrow of bourgeois values and the reintegration of conscious and unconscious mental powers, Surrealism promised psychic liberation to poets and painters of both sexes. Desire fueled the artistic imagination. Sex became a mode of creativity, and love a means of transcending the duality of the sexes. “between poetic emotion and erotic pleasure the difference is only one of degree,” wrote poet and Surrealist leader André Breton in 1932. No artistic movement since Romanticism has celebrated the idea of woman as passionately as did Surrealism during the 1930s and 1940s, and no early twentieth-century movement enjoyed the participation of as large and active a group of women. Yet the role of the woman artist in the Surrealist movement was a complicated one.

Young women of the 1930s owed their relative freedom to pursue artistic training and independent lives as much to the previous decade’s demand for social and sexual emancipation for women as they did to the Surrealist “revolution.” Indeed, the popular image of the “new woman” was that of a sophisticated, autonomous being who had benefited from the social changes initiated by the women’s suffrage movement and the first World War.

In 1929 Breton defined “the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world as that of woman,” he himself having rejected the image of the “new woman” as too worldly, too tough, too closely associated with the literary establishment against which Surrealism was in revolt. He replaced it with an image of magical, ethereal, and childlike womanhood derived from such diverse sources as Romantic and Symbolist literature, Freudian psychology, and American films. Male Surrealists would remain haunted by an image of woman simultaneously ethereal and yet capable of crystallizing man’s erotic desires, propelling him into a radical creativity that could liberate him from the bonds of reason and logic.
Women artists associated with the movement struggled with the often incompatible roles of muse and artist. They confronted the difficulty of transforming the image of woman from object to subject through artistic conventions established according to male traditions, and the frustration of reconciling their own social and sexual emancipation and the demands of mature creativity with the crippling image of the femme-enfant or woman-child. Breton’s vision of the “free and adored” woman wasn’t much help for the woman painter, Colquhoun later commented.² Other women were equally ambivalent about the true place of women in the Surrealist universe. Fini refused to join the movement officially and submit to Breton’s authority, although she exhibited with the group during the 1930s and 1940s, Kahlo often said that Breton and his circle “thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn’t.”³

Removed from the formulation of Surrealist theory, and younger and more inex-
woman whose own image functioned as a quintessential erotic focus in Surrealism, based her own photographic work on disquieting images of nature. The interaction of nature and human sensibility characterizes the work of members of the English Surrealist group, including Agar, Bridgwater, and Colquhoun. Remarkable for their precision and clarity, works like Fini’s L’Ombrelle and Tanning’s Eine kleine Nachtmusik introduce the principle of metamorphosis that lies at the heart of the Surrealist vision, of nature charged with latent energy. Bleached bones, skeletal umbrellas and dead, dry flowers convey natural cycles of generation and decay.

The work of these artists has a narrative thrust not always evident in the more disjunctive work of their male colleagues, and it is significant that the women associated with Surrealism published plays, novels, short stories or poems as well as producing paintings, photographs and objects. Hugo is well known today as the illustrator of Paul Eluard’s poetry.

Penrose’s collages were originally included in Dans des Féminines, one of her major poetic works. For them the female heroine exists, not as the sexual object of male desire, but as a being possessing magical powers. In the stories and paintings of Carrington, Varo, Fini, Colquhoun and others, women initiate secret rituals, cook magic brews, tend alchemical fires, and oversee the cauldrons of fertility and inspiration. Conceiving of painting as an instrument of alchemical transformation and a means of scientific investigation of the natural world, many of these artists pursued meticulous working methods, building up their surfaces with tiny brushstrokes. Varo often worked on a painting for months at a time. Colquhoun and Lamba, on the other hand, explored the divinatory aspects of automatism.

Out of this commitment to linking the image of the female subject to creative sources located in nature and the unconscious grew a rich vocabulary of images that spoke directly to the artists’ lives as women. Their exploration of the personal sources of artistic creation marks a milestone in the development of twentieth-century painting and has validated the path taken by many women artists in later generations.

Whitney Chadwick

NOTES
2. Interview with Ithell Colquhoun, Cornwall, June 1983.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and Catalogues


Essay by Michel Rémy.
Tøyen. Texts by André Breton, Jindřich Heisler, Benjamin Peret, Paris, 1953.
Articles and Periodicals

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION
Dimensions are given in centimeters (inches), height preceding width.

EILEEN AGAR (b. 1904)
Bacchus and Ariadne, c. 1937
oil on sheet metal, plaster, box, 61 x 91.4 (24 x 32)
Gordon Onslow Ford, Inverness, California

EILEEN AGAR (b. 1904)
Ma Moe, 1936
collage, 13.5 x 20.7 (5 1/2 x 8)
The New Art Centre, London

EILEEN AGAR (b. 1904)
Triumph of the Tree Trunk, 1944
gouache, 25.4 x 33 (10 1/4 x 13)
The New Art Centre, London

EILEEN AGAR (b. 1904)
Wild Birds, c. 1933
metal and wood construction, 36.9 x 12 (14 1/2 x 55/16)
Zabriskie Gallery, New York

EMMY BROOKWATER (b. 1902)
Brave Morning, c. 1947
oil on canvas, 61 x 81.2 (24 x 32)
Blond Fine Art, London

LEONORA CARRINGTON (b. 1917)
The House Opposite, c. 1947
egg tempera on panel, 33 x 82 (13 x 32 1/2)
The Trustees of the Edward James Foundation, Sussex, England

LEONORA CARRINGTON (b. 1917)
Nightgown, Everything, c. 1947
oil on masonite, 58 x 60 (23 x 23 5/8)
Private collection

LEONORA CARRINGTON (b. 1917)
Portrait of Max Ernst. c. 1939
oil on canvas, 50.8 x 25.4 (20 x 10)
Judith Young Mallin

LEONORA CARRINGTON (b. 1917)
Self-Portrait, c. 1937
oil on canvas, 65 x 81.3 (25 x 32)
Collection: Pierre Matisse

LEONORA CARRINGTON (b. 1917)
The Pine Family, 1941
oil on canvas, 46 x 50.5 (18 x 20)
Whitford & Hughes, London

LEONOR FINI (b. 1916)
The Aloe: Interior, c. 1939
oil on canvas, 91.5 x 71 (36 x 27 1/2)
The Trustees of the Edward James Foundation, Sussex, England

LEONOR FINI (b. 1918)
Composition with Figures on a Terrace, 1939
oil on canvas, 99 x 79 (39 x 31)
The Trustees of the Edward James Foundation, Sussex, England

LEONOR FINI (b. 1918)
L’Ombrolie, c. 1947
oil on canvas, 53 x 43.5 (20 1/2 x 17 1/4)
The Trustees of the Edward James Foundation, Sussex, England

LEONOR FINI (b. 1918)
L’Europe, 1939
oil on canvas, 22 x 17.8 (9 x 7)
Isidore Ducasse Fine Arts, New York

VALENTINE HUGO (1897–1968)
Portait du facteur Cheval. c. 1931–2
oil on canvas, 70 x 90 (28 x 35)
Selma and Neshui Ertugre, New York

FRIDA KAHLO (1907–1954)
Frida and the Abortion, 1932
Inkograph, 31.7 x 24.1 (12 1/4 x 9 1/4)
Private collection

FRIDA KAHLO (1907–1954)
Self-Portrait, Very Ugly, 1933
cresco, 27.3 x 22.2 (10 1/2 x 8 3/4)
Private collection

FRIDA KAHLO (1907–1954)
Tree of Hope, 1946
oil on masonite, 56 x 40.5 (22 x 16)
Isidore Ducasse Fine Arts, New York

JACQUELINE LAMBA (BRETON) (b. 1910)
Behind the Sun, 1943
oil on canvas, colored pencil, 61 x 66 (24 x 26)
Private collection; courtesy of Jeffrey Hoffeld & Company

JACQUELINE LAMBA (BRETON) (b. 1910)
In Spirit of Everything, 1942
oil on canvas, 106.7 x 152.4 (42 x 60)
Private collection; courtesy of Jeffrey Hoffeld & Company

LEE MILLER (1906–1977)
Romantica—Cart. B, 1947
photograph exhibition print from original negative, 40.6 x 30.4 (16 x 12)
Lee Miller Archives, England

LEE MILLER (1906–1977)
Egyptian Still Life, c. 1937
photograph exhibition print from original negative, 40.6 x 30.4 (16 x 12)
Lee Miller, England

LEE MILLER (1906–1977)
Nile Flood Plate, E 10778. c. 1937
photograph exhibition print from original negative, 40.6 x 30.4 (16 x 12)
Lee Miller Archives, England

LEE MILLER (1906–1977)
Ministry of Truth, N. 55052. c. 1937
photograph exhibition print from original negative, 40.6 x 30.4 (16 x 12)
Lee Miller Archives, England

VALENTINE PENNOCHE (1898–1978)
Dans les Femmes, c. 1951
collage, 28 x 21.6 (11 x 8 1/4)
Collection of Peter Selz, Berkeley, California

VALENTINE PENNOCHE (1898–1978)
Dans les Femmes, c. 1951
oil on canvas, collage, 81.3 x 65.4 (32 x 25 1/2)
Isidore Ducasse Fine Arts, New York

ALICE RHAM (RALEW) (b. 1916)
La gent de l’Estaque, 1961
oil on canvas, 69.8 x 91.4 (27 5/8 x 36)
Mariann Balter, New York

ROSE DE LAIF, 1944
oil on canvas, 40.6 x 50.8 (16 x 20)
Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Thomas E Howard

TOYEN (MARIE CERDOU) (1902–1980)
La Maison Solitaire, 1937
oil on canvas, 60 x 73 (26 x 28 1/2)
Société Consulta, Paris

TOYEN (MARIE CERDOU) (1902–1980)
Parnis les dieux moutons, 1945
oil on canvas, 50.8 x 88.9 (20 x 35)
Selma and Neshui Ertugre, New York

TOYEN (MARIE CERDOU) (1902–1980)
Illustration from Tis 1939–1940
ink on paper, 28 x 42.5 (11 x 16 3/4)
Société Consulta, Paris

TOYEN (MARIE CERDOU) (1902–1980)
Illustration from Tis 1939–1940
ink on paper, 28 x 42.5 (11 x 16 3/4)
Société Consulta, Paris

REMIEDS VARIO (1908–1963)
Double Agent, 1936
oil on canvas, 20.3 x 16.3 (8 x 6 1/4)
Isidore Ducasse Fine Arts, New York

REMIEDS VARIO (1908–1963)
Collage Matisse, 1962
oil on canvas, 59.7 x 52.2 (23 5/8 x 20 5/8)
Richard J. Woods, San Francisco

Illustrated books and manuscript
Leonora Carrington. Letter dated January 6, 1944. Private collection

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