



# The Old Maids

Leonora Carrington

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## On display

**Title/Description:** The Old Maids

**Artist/Maker:** Leonora Carrington

**Born:** 1917

**Object Type:** Painting

**Materials:** Casein, Gesso panel

**Measurements:** Unframed: (h. 582 x w. 738 x d. 1 mm) Framed: (h. 656 x w. 810 x d. 40 mm)

**Accession Number:** 27

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Mexico

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**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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The image of the kitchen table features throughout Leonora Carrington's work, from which themes of fertility, ageing, the occult, and culinary practice arise. Combining the arcane and the domestic, *Old Maids* has its kitchen table surrounded by ladies sharing high tea with a monkey and five magpies. At the centre of the painting is a small figure wearing a black shroud, with a halo of white spikes protruding from their head, neck and shoulders. This central figure is redolent of Catholic imagery, something that would have surrounded Carrington where she lived in Mexico from the early 1940s. [1] It is a typical example of Carrington's merging of different religious and folkloric signifiers.

Carrington was interested in collapsing the boundaries between humans, animals and food. Her 1974 novel *The Hearing Trumpet* centres around an elderly woman who, in the climactic moments of the story, cooks herself into a broth and eats herself before going on to live in a post-apocalyptic community of other nonagenarians, alongside 'cats, werewolves, bees and goats'. [2] The danger of ontological indistinction presented by the need to eat in both humans and animals, [3] can be interpreted as threatening or disruptive. In much of Carrington's work, ontological boundaries are perpetually under threat, and humans can be seen returning to primal or feral sensibilities in varying degrees of abjection and blasphemy. *Old Maids* on the other hand displays a lightly humorous approach to these boundaries in 'the daintily draped table typical of bourgeois households' which 'has been slyly re-envisioned as a non-hierarchical meeting ground between women, their animal familiars, and the celestial realms'. [4] The kitchen table is thus both a site of middle-class mundanity and hermetic significance.

In the title *Old Maids* - interpreting 'old maid' to mean an unmarried woman or spinster - there is an interesting foreshadowing of the paintings of 'crones' that Carrington would later produce in the 1980s. The figures in this painting are slender and smooth, and dressed in jewel-toned, opulent headwear, while the figures in such paintings as *Kron Flower* (1987) and *The Magdalens* (1986) are wrinkled, hirsute and dressed simply. They do however share a kind of conspiratorial body language, in which small groups of women appear to be gossiping or sharing secrets. By focusing on the archetype of the old maid or the crone throughout her practice, Carrington rejects the 'ideals of youth and beauty that dominate both contemporary culture and most of the history of Western painting'. [5] In the context of the Surrealist movement, of which Carrington was a key artist, and the pervading fixation on the figure of the *femme-enfant* (the child-woman) as muse, [6] this is particularly interesting. Carrington rejects the *femme-enfant* by repeatedly valorising the spinster woman, no longer desired or deemed to be useful by society, in what might be perceived as an act of feminist restoration.

[1] Ali Smith, 'Introduction', in *The Hearing Trumpet* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2005), pp. v-xvi (p. ix).

[2] Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2005), p. 158.

[3] Maria Christou, *Eating Otherwise: The Philosophy of Food in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 9.

[4] Susan Aberth, 'The Alchemical Kitchen: At Home with Leonora Carrington', *Artículos Temáticos* (2012)  
<[http://revistas.iberomexico.mx/arte/articulo\\_detalle.php?id\\_volumen=1&id\\_articulo=8&id\\_seccion=7&activo=6&pagina=16](http://revistas.iberomexico.mx/arte/articulo_detalle.php?id_volumen=1&id_articulo=8&id_seccion=7&activo=6&pagina=16)> [accessed 5 June 2022]

[5] Whitney Chadwick in Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2004), p. 126.

[6] Penelope Rosemont, 'Surrealist Women: An International Anthology' (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. xlv.

#### TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

The English-born Leonora Carrington painted *The Old Maids* in Mexico City, where she was living and working at Alvaro Obregón 174 in July 1947, after having emigrated to Mexico via the United States as a political refugee in 1943. [1] The work forms part of a group of paintings created by the artist for her first solo-exhibition, held at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1948, where it was exhibited under the alternative title *Before the Excursion*. [2]

An archway invites us into a large kitchen with fireplace and dining table. The room is inhabited by the three old maids, a tall woman and mysterious figure, as well as a monkey, and a group of magpies. They all surround an elegantly decked table for tea time and engage in communal eating. The scene, as common for the artist, transforms domestic and everyday occurrences, like food preparation and consumption, into ritualistic and mysterious activities. [3]

The painting combines memories from the artist's childhood in an English country house and references to British children's literature with inspiration drawn from her new home country Mexico and her experience of transit. Susan Aberth has pointed out the resemblance of the curious central figure to colonial robed figurines of the Virgin Mary in Mexico. [4] A halo of stars surrounds its moon-like face, which is echoed in the otherworldly presence manifesting above it near the ceiling. [5] Its small stature in comparison to the other towering figures makes it appear child-like.

The woman to its right holding a pie appears especially tall, her head touching the ceiling. This giantess in the context of the fantastical tea time is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, a figure Carrington and other surrealist artists were particularly fond of. [6] The doorway in the background reveals a corridor leading towards another doorway to the outside. A figure with hat followed by a black cat is determinately walking towards it, carrying a small bag, possibly departing on the

excursion the alternative title is alluding to.

The painting was long thought to be painted in oil. Recent research, however, suggests that the work is executed in casein tempera, a medium the artist used in several works from that year. [7] Casein are milk proteins and the artist's choice of a 'milk medium' resonates with the work's themes of feeding, nourishment and nurturing of the imagination.

Helen Bremm, June 2022

[1] EJA/1/18/19, Edward James Archive, West Dean College.

[2] *Leonora Carrington*, (New York: Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1948).

[3] See Whitney Chadwick, 'El Mundo Mágico: Leonora Carrington's Enchanted Garden', in *Leonora Carrington: The Mexican Years 1943-1985* (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 1991), pp. 9-32. Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004), pp. 64-79. Katharine Conley, 'Carrington's Kitchen', *Papers of Surrealism*, 10 (2013), 1-18.

[4] Susan Aberth, 'The Alchemical Kitchen: At Home with Leonora Carrington', *Nierika*, 1.1 (2012), 1-18 (p. 11).

[5] A preparatory drawing for this central figure was formerly in the collection of Carrington's patron and collector Edward James, and shows the figure feeding a raven, instead of a magpie. Christie's, *The Edward James Collection West Dean Park*, Volume IV, 1986, p. 94.

[6] See *Alice in Wonderland: through the visual arts*, ed. by Gavin Delahunty and Christopher Benjamin Schulz with assistance from Eleanor Clayton (London: Tate, 2011). See also Catriona McAra, 'Surrealism's Curiosity: Lewis Carroll and the Femme-Enfant', *Papers of Surrealism*, 9 (2011), 1-25.

[7] These include, for example, *Crookey Hall* (1947), and other works commonly listed as 'tempera' such as *Saint John's Mule* (1947) or *Neighbourly Advice* (1947).

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Leonora Carrington was the rebellious daughter of a Lancashire textile manufacturer. Her family authorised electroconvulsive therapy following the breakdown she suffered when her then partner, Surrealist painter Max Ernst, was arrested by the Gestapo in wartime France. She took refuge in the Mexican embassy in Lisbon and then in Mexico itself.

Having spent her childhood on a country estate, surrounded by animals and reading fairy tales, Carrington revisited these memories after adult trauma. She created Surrealistic paintings populated with figures and creatures real, imagined and inspired by Celtic mythology, alchemy and magic. But she declined to discuss specific motivation for her arresting paintings, saying only that she painted this strange tea party, and a second oil in the Sainsbury collection, while pregnant.

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Ian Collins, journalist and writer

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## Further Reading

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Aberth, Susan, 'The Alchemical Kitchen: At Home with Leonora Carrington', *Nierika*, 1.1 (2012), 7-15

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McAra, Catriona, 'Leonora Carrington and Children's Literature', *Gramarye: Journal of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy*, 12 (Winter 2017), 35-45

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<https://www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/podcasts-video/podcasts/leonora-carrington-marina-warner-and-chloe-aridjis> [Discussion presented at London Review Bookshop]. 4th April.

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## **Provenance**

Acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1972.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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