



**Today's Masterpiece:** Leonora Carrington, [\*High Priestess\*](#), ca. 1973. Etching and aquatint on paper. Museum purchase with funds provided by Kevin and Tamara Kinsella, 2005.97.

Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Dr. Michael Brown, Curator of European Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is an enigmatic aquatint etching by the British-born Mexican artist, Leonora Carrington, entitled *High Priestess*, printed from an edition of 30 in the early 1970s.

Born to an aristocratic family in England during World War I, Leonora Carrington grew up in the Lancashire countryside, with a keen, whimsical imagination. A true free spirit from an early age, she was an avid reader of Lewis Carroll and Beatrix Potter. Stifled by the formality of debutante society, her Catholic boarding school (from which she was expelled), and an overbearing father (who she called Lord Candlestick), Carrington embraced the freedom and ideas of the Surrealist movement, eventually beginning a relationship with one of its leaders, Max Ernst, and together the two left for Paris in 1937.

Following the Nazi occupation of France and Ernst's arrest by the Gestapo in 1940, a devastated Carrington fled to Spain. Mental illness led to her unwilling custody at a psychiatric facility in Santander, yet following her release Carrington's father had her committed once again to an asylum in South Africa. Carrington escaped *en route* in Lisbon and sought refuge at the Mexican embassy with the help of ambassador Renato Leduc. Meanwhile, Max Ernst had managed to escape to safety in New York with the help of patron Peggy Guggenheim. He and Carrington would never renew their relationship. Apart from several prolonged stays in New York, Carrington would make Mexico and its thriving international art scene her new family's home for the rest of her life.

In Mexico, she was reunited with her artist friend Remedios Varo, who she had met early in her career in Paris. Varo had fled her native Spain during the Civil War, and in Mexico the two embarked on studies together ranging from alchemy to psychoanalysis to the sacred texts of the Maya. They also shared an affinity for the imagery of Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya, especially their fantastical animals and scenes of witchcraft and the occult. The two artists both settled in the Colonia Roma section of the Mexican capital and becoming the leading emigré artists in Mexico. It was a sign of unyielding individualism that both rejected formal membership in the Surrealist movement, though their work was closely associated with it.

Channeling the farm animals, fairy tales, and Irish folklore that helped shape her childhood, Carrington created a highly personal visual world through her art.



Fascinated by a perceived parallel between the syncretism of Mexican Catholicism and that of her Irish ancestors, Carrington often imbued her work with religious undertones, at times with a distinct satirical bite. Here, the “high priestess” is robed but cannot hide her identity as a fantastical, menacing jackal-like creature. The viewer notes the precarious position the human-like figure is in, cupped in the palm of the creature’s paw.

Still, there is hope in the face of this tense standoff: the figurine’s eye burns bright with optimism and resilience, qualities that could easily be applied to the maker of this work.

This has been Michael Brown – thank you for listening here at Virtual SDMA.



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