

TRANSLATING MAGIC: REMEDIOS VARO'S VISUAL
LANGUAGE

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2017

ABSTRACT

Remedios Varo was fascinated by esoteric subject matter. Her studies included alchemy, Russian mysticism, Tarot, and the occult. While her paintings frequently depict a scientist, explorer, or some magical figure in a meticulously rendered setting there is a deeper understanding to be gained through examining what Varo studied and how she used specific iconography and references in her work. Varo created her own personal symbolic language, which, once learned, allows the viewer to read her paintings. Each chapter of this thesis aims to dissect an aspect of Varo's work, or a source of inspiration for her work, in an effort to translate Varo's personal visual language. After the first introductory chapter, the second chapter will look at the symbol of the mountain and its incorporation into Varo's oeuvre. The third chapter discusses Varo's attachment to Hieronymus Bosch and the influence his work had on her. The fourth chapter uses the Tarot, and its iconography, as well as the Surrealist's interpretation of the Tarot and examines where certain visual cues can be seen in her work. Finally, the fifth chapter

investigates Varo's life in Mexico and how other artists in exile with her shaped her practice stylistically as well as addressing the aesthetic of her most recognized later work and how it reflects the various studies she amassed throughout her life. This study situates Varo's paintings in relation to her personal hermetic visual language.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled *Translating Magic: Remedios Varo's Visual Language* presented by Meredith Derks, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In her enchanting artwork, Remedios Varo incorporated theoretical ideas from a multitude of sources. Adapting both ancient esoteric texts and modern science with great acuity, Varo developed her own personal symbolic language. The imagery she created should be read in terms of her attempt to create a modern hermetic visual language. In Varo's works there are elements of alchemy, astrology, occult imagery, Flemish monsters, Tarot, enchanted machinery, and Russian mysticism. Observing how symbols are selected and placed in these paintings can provide significant insight into how they are to be interpreted. Varo created her own world out of a myriad of inspirations, from scientifically practical to metaphysical. Through examining Varo's source material and how she used it, decoding these images becomes easier and a more clear narrative emerges from her paintings. I argue that Varo's research into "secret knowledge" is the driving force in her painting and her personal symbolic language proves this. Varo used occult and esoteric methods to shape not only the content of the images themselves but also to guide her artistic process. Varo's paintings can be seen as much as alchemical constructs as artistic compositions.

An example of how the lost science of alchemy was incorporated by Varo was her studio practice. She used the tradition of an alchemical experiment that allowed her to establish a style that unites her architectural detail with marvelous impossibilities. In her mature work she broke away from any one artistic movement or influence and

established her personal mystic allegories and spells for creating her paintings. These processes and her studies shaped the images shown in Varo's work. For instance, in her work *Creation of the Birds*¹ (Figure 1, 1957) a bird may not simply be a bird but a visual representation of stellar fusion, Newton's color prism, pure alchemical primal matter, and the Tarot card of Temperance all at once. Once all these inspirations are taken into account, the painting offers a glimpse into a new world that is uniquely Varo's, where all the laws of magic and science are both adhered to and put into play.

I am interested in investigating how such an exquisite world as Varo's was brought into existence. Not only her studies but also her original studio practice are fascinating. Varo established a very distinct method of painting. For example, to ensure that her paintings were infused with the correct energies for each specific piece, she planted her paints in certain soils with certain flora and "charged" them in either the moonlight or the sunlight. She would sketch endlessly until an illustration asked to be brought to this world as a painting. She painted with a three-bristled brush so that she could achieve even greater detail. The meticulous settings constructed in her paintings highlight her draftsmanship skills, and reflect her scientific studies, as they are often laboratories or places of experimentation. This examination of her methodology and her areas of study will provide the opportunity for an intimate understanding of the imagery in the marvelous, and at moments absurd, world Varo has constructed.

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¹ In this thesis all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Remedios Varo y Uranga was born on December 16, 1908 while her family was traveling in Anglés, Spain.² Her father, Don Rodrigo Varo y Zejalvo, was an architect and hydraulic engineer, and his work required the family to travel frequently throughout Spain and Morocco. Remedios' mother, Ignacia Uranga y Bergarche, was a conservative woman who impressed upon Remedios the traditions and beliefs of the Catholic Church.³ Both of her parents taught her lessons that are evident in her body of work, specifically in her mature work in Mexico.

In 1917 Varo's family moved to Madrid and finally settled there. During this time Varo's father took her to museums and taught her how to draw. Don Rodrigo, a technical illustrator due to his occupation, taught young Remedios draftsmanship skills. He emphasized detail, scale, the Carpenter Square, perspective and structure. These early drawing lessons were pivotal for Varo as exquisite architectural rendering is one of the hallmarks of her work. Also during this time, she and her father made regular visits to the Prado where she copied Francisco Goya and Hieronymus Bosch, who had a monumental impact on her later works. This is also when she began reading fairy tales, Edgar Allen Poe, Jules Verne, and science fiction/adventure stories that nourished her imagination.

From 1923-1930, Varo attended formal art school: first at the School of Arts and Crafts and then at San Fernando Academy, both in Madrid. While in school she became familiar with the work of the Paris Surrealist group. The city of Madrid welcomed

² Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 11.

³ Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo Catalogo Reazonado* (Mexico City: Ediciones Ers, 1998), 42.

Surrealists in the 1920s through poetry readings, exhibitions, and in 1928, a film screening of *The Andalusian Dog* was shown at the Academy.⁴ In 1930, she married her dear friend, and fellow San Fernando student, Gerardo Lizarraga and the couple lived in Paris for almost two years. They returned to Barcelona in 1932. Once they were back in Spain both worked as graphic artists for advertising agencies; however, with the Surrealist experiences from Paris fresh in her mind, Varo joined the Logicophobiste group in Spain.⁵ The Logicophobistes were a short-lived, pseudo-Surrealist group. They had an exhibition in 1936, in which Varo participated, but then she began to distance herself from the group. That same year the Surrealist poet, and close comrade of André Breton, Benjamin Péret arrived in Barcelona. Péret became Varo's second husband. He and Varo fell in love and she returned to France with him in 1937. There she met Péret's friends, specifically Breton, Max Ernst, and Victor Brauner. This group introduced her to occult studies and various automatic painting techniques, such as decalcomania, which she held onto and used twenty years later.

In the late 1930s Brauner and Breton endeavored to create a new surrealist version of the Marseille Tarot. The Marseille Tarot was developed during the "third phase" of Tarot, when Tarot was being adopted by occultists the Marseille Tarot was the most widespread and one of the last to use "true" medieval symbols.⁶ Breton had a

⁴ Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 30 – 31.

⁵ Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo: Catalogue Raisonne*, 43.

⁶ Emily E. Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks; History, Theory, Aesthetics, Typology* (London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2004), 4-5.

fascination with this deck while living in Marseille along with Varo and others; this will be addressed further in the fourth chapter. Later Varo used the Tarot and created meanings of her own; yet Brauner's influence, and his interpretation of the Marseille Tarot, is unmistakable.⁷ In 1938, she participated in the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris. Her work was also shown in the Surrealism Exhibition in Amsterdam the same year. Her work was exhibited with the Surrealists again in 1940 as part of the Exposition International del Surrealism, which was displayed in Mexico City, San Francisco, New York, and Lima. She fled the devastation of World War Two in 1941, moving to Marseille with Péret.⁸ As tensions escalated it was essential for Péret and Varo to flee war-torn Europe. From Marseille, the couple went to Casablanca and, with the help of Breton, acquired the necessary documentation for asylum in Mexico where President Lázaro Cárdenas allowed automatic citizenship for intellectual refugees.⁹

When Varo arrived in Mexico in 1941, she formed a deep friendship with the artists, and fellow European transplants, Leonora Carrington and Katie Horna. Horna introduced Varo to Russian mysticism and Varo soon began studying the writings of the Russian mystics George Ivanovich Gurdjiff and his student P.D. Ouspensky. She even attended meetings of Gurdjiff's secret society chapter in Mexico City with Horna. While it is unknown if she joined the Gurdjiff secret society officially, as Horna did, it is known

⁷ Sven Dupré, Beat Wismer and M.E Warlick. *Art and Alchemy; The Mystery of Transformation* (Dusseldorf: City of Dusseldorf, 2014), 167.

⁸ Varo and Peret shared a home with Breton in Marseilles.

⁹ Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 85.

that she studied these teachings closely and had copies of every book published by both men in her personal library¹⁰. The philosophy of Gurdjiff centers on The Work, which is a method of attaining higher consciousness. He asserts that most humans move throughout the world in a mobile sleep never fully aware of anything. Gurdjiff attempted to unite several eastern and western schools of thought into his work and he came up with a few methods for attaining higher consciousness. One of these methods is The Fourth Way, which Ouspensky lectures on extensively and expands a selection of Gurdjiff's original teachings.¹¹ The Fourth Way focuses on improving oneself and being more present and focused.

Varo and Peret eventually separated and Peret went back to Europe. From 1947 until 1949 Varo went to South America on a mission with the Ministry of Public Health as a scientific illustrator. These jungle travels inspired several repeated motifs in Varo's own work, specifically *Exploration of the Source of the Orinoco River*, 1959. Varo also worked for Bayer Aspirin and created a 1948 calendar which shows a heavy influence of medieval architecture. Varo returned to Mexico in 1949 and by 1952 she was living with Walter Gruen. Gruen was a former medical student who fled Austria for Mexico where he worked in a tire store before opening a highly successful music shop. This living arrangement allowed for her to paint fulltime without financial worry. Gruen offered the security and companionship that Varo needed in order to survive without having to take odd jobs in advertising. In 1955, in Mexico City, Varo and five other women artists

¹⁰ Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo: Catalogue Raisonne*, 48.

¹¹ P. D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1957), 3.

(including Leonora Carrington) had an exhibition at Galeria Diana where Varo exhibited four paintings. In 1956 she had her first solo exhibition, also at Galeria Diana. In 1960 she participated in the Inter-American Biennial Exhibition in Mexico City. 1962 marked her second solo exhibition at Galeria Juan Martin in Mexico City, which included sixteen works all of which sold out. From then, until her sudden death of a heart attack in 1963, there was a waiting list for works that were not even painted yet.

Since Varo's death few scholars have studied her and her body of work. While her paintings are still highly sought after, only a few museums have her paintings in their permanent collections. The majority of Varo's paintings remain in private collections. Currently the largest public collection of her work is held in the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. It holds 28 paintings that were donated by Walter Gruen and his estate.¹² In current scholarship Varo tends to be associated with female surrealists or Mexican modernism. She is typically mentioned in writings along with Leonora Carrington and Katie Horna. To my knowledge the only comprehensive biography on the artist was by Janet Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, published in 1985. It remains the definitive text on Varo and is the most frequently cited in other articles and publications. In 1994 Walter Gruen and a handful of scholars put together a catalogue raisonné that was revised again in 2008. There have been numerous articles published, particularly in Spanish-speaking countries, by the scholars Tere Arcq, Ines Candenias, and Fernando Martín regarding Varo as a surrealist. Few mention her scholarly pursuits, but almost always in relation to Surrealism. I argue that her studies went beyond the surrealist

¹² Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo: Catalogue Raisonne*, 5.

cannon. Her visual language is specific to her world because her understanding of esoteric teachings and tangible natural sciences was far more expansive compared to orthodox Surrealism.

In order to understand Varo's visual language I will be examining specific symbols, and looking at her sources and individual works as examples of this language in action. The second chapter will focus on the symbolism of the mountain. The mountain is used repeatedly in Varo's body of work, alchemical texts, and the modern esoteric writings that she read. The novella *Mount Analogue*, by René Daumal,¹³ unites many religious interpretations of the mountain and Varo not only read it but used its title and symbolism in her painting *The Ascension of Mount Analogue* (Figure 2, 1960). The mountain is a recurrent symbol that dates back to alchemy's inception. Bosch, whose work profoundly affected Varo, also used the mountain in his work to reference alchemical processes and vessels. Varo took additional visual cues from Bosch and the third chapter will delve into overlaps between the two artists work and the symbolic visual language of alchemy that fascinated both artists. Looking specifically at Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and using Laurinda Dixon's analysis from [Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights](#) (1980) as a starting point for navigating the alchemical imagery. In the fourth chapter I address the Tarot, another source of visual imagery for both Varo and Bosch. The chapter will explore how Varo married her surrealist experience with occult studies and Russian mysticism. The fifth chapter will observe Varo's visual tendencies later in life when she has fully established her esoteric

¹³ Published posthumously in 1952 as Daumal had not finished the book when he died in 1944.

vocabulary. It will also look at her scientific study and the union of rational and magical. This thesis will situate the work of Remedios Varo as a visual language of esoteric symbolism that is wholly original to her.

Remedios Varo was attuned to all things spiritually and scientifically possible. Varo's paintings are not only magical scenes; they are alchemical experiments. One of Varo's many strengths was beautifully adapting all of her influences into one complete narrative. In spite of multiple upheavals and a sudden displacement halfway across the world, Varo flourished in her new country and that stability created a foundation that her past studies and influences could build upon. Her artwork reflects her cumulative studies and the truly lasting lessons from her life. She created a world with enchanted machinery populated with hybrid creatures that held ancient secrets close to their hearts and used extravagant mechanisms to complete whatever task was at hand. She was the architect of a universe that begs to be explored.

CHAPTER 2

THE MOUNTAIN

The symbol of the mountain shows up multiple times in Varo's body of work. Mountains are illustrated as a home, a furnace, or any passageway for transformation. However, Varo did not come up with the symbolic mountain; she borrowed it. When she was young she saw the mountains Hieronymus Bosch painted in his iconic *Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych, and as she grew older she read of how the mountain was used as a metaphor for reaching a spiritual awakening. Her library included writings from many metaphysical authors, including her contemporary René Daumal and the Russian mystics G.I. Gurdjiff and P.D. Ouspensky, all of whom use mountains and transformation through a form of spiritual ascension in their work. Throughout history the mountain has had symbolic and spiritual significance in countless cultures.

In his writings Daumal cites examples such as prophets meeting God in high places in the Old Testament such as Moses at Mount Sinai in the Old Testament or Jesus on the Mount of Golgotha in the New Testament. He also compares the pyramids of Egypt with mountains. He goes on to discuss the many cultures in which mountains play a key role in their faiths such as Hindu and Chinese traditions involving mountains, and Mount Olympus in Geek Mythology.¹ Hundreds of years before Varo or Daumal were alive; Hieronymus Bosch had already recognized the importance of the mountain as a visual representation for spiritual transformation as this is how the mountain is often used

¹ René Daumal, *Mount Analogue* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1944), 31.

in alchemical imagery. Examining the use of the mountain by those who inspired Varo is imperative for the complete understanding of how metaphysical and alchemical symbolism are conceptualized and then physically manifested in her own body of work, reflecting her studies and making her own symbolic code that united ancient and modern visual language in an intimate way.

... The Mountain is the connection between Earth and Sky. Its highest summit touches the sphere of eternity, and its base branches out in manifold foothills into the world of mortals. It is the path by which humanity can raise itself to the divine and the divine reveals itself to humanity.² René Daumal

Mount Analogue; A Tale of Non-Euclidian and Symbolically Authentic

Mountaineering Adventures (1944) was René Daumal's last written work. Unable to complete the novella due to illness, he left notes for his wife that would allow her finish it.³ Daumal had many areas of interest and spent much of his time studying mythology from various cultures and absurdist sciences, primarily pataphysics⁴. He includes these cultural studies in *Mount Analogue*, specifically with respect to the mountain. Writing a novel was a departure from his typical style, since he usually wrote in essay form, yet the novel format was a way for him to combine his poetic prose as well as his philosophical and scientific findings in an allegorical form.⁵

² Ibid. 31.

³ Ibid. 117.

⁴ René Daumal, *Pataphysical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 1929), 7. Alfred Jarry first invented pataphysics as an absurdist humorous approach to metaphysics. It is completely invented science of universes outside of the universe. Daumal's essays were some of the first to expand of Jarry's imagined equations.

⁵ René Daumal, *Mount Analogue*, 2.

On its surface *Mount Analogue* is an approachable, beautiful, and adventurous tale. However, it is more than just a tale of exploration; it is a journey that represents the culmination of Daumal's personal philosophical work as well as representing the broader constant spiritual evolution of human kind, as Daumal understood it. Daumal's two previous novellas start with Man less evolved. He wrote about Man being trapped within himself, his belongings, his ego, and his body in *A Night of Serious Drinking*, Daumal then explored Man's silliness, absurdity, and smallness through *Pataphysical Essays*, which explores various areas of metaphysics and what is beyond the metaphysical. Both of these books act as an introduction to *Mount Analogue*, which is the peak of Man's awakening, reaching a spiritual place of understanding that goes beyond the self and this world. *Mount Analogue* can be seen as the third, and final, installment in a series about Man discovering his highest potential.

At the top of Daumal's mountain there is a Bitter-Rose.⁶ The rose is rumored to give immortality and only the person who does not want it may pick it, meaning only someone truly at peace and satisfied in his current state may move on to the next. In alchemy, it is said, that the philosopher's stone can only be created by someone who did not want to use its properties for himself. The rose also represents enlightenment. You have to reach the top of the Mountain in order to find where the rose grows. The rose, as well as the spiritual and physical work to get to the rose, are reminiscent of spiritual quests from many cultures and time periods.

⁶ Ibid. 74.

Alchemy, which is also known as “The Great Work”, began as a spiritual quest through transformation of the self and then the transformation of the physical world.⁷ For many alchemists the ultimate goal was the creation of the philosopher’s stone which, like the Bitter-Rose, offered immortality and its creation was treated as a quest.⁸ Daumal also uses the colors red, white, and black – the colors of transformation and transmutation a foundation in alchemical laboratories and philosophies.⁹ *Mount Analogue* is about Man and what Man can become when set free, and how humans may be divine or what that means, if anything. It mixes religion, myth, and real and imagined sciences with symbolism. Daumal makes the spiritual journey a literal journey by giving his characters a physical mountain to summit while ascending towards their internal spiritual peak.

This seemingly simple telling of a complicated intermixing of philosophies and studies certainly appealed to Varo. Her painting *The Ascension of Mount Analogue* (Figure 2, 1960) is an example of a rare moment when Varo cites an exact source of inspiration in the title of a painting. After many years of esoteric and metaphysical study, she created *The Ascension of Mount Analogue* as a way of describing a path towards enlightenment that would result in a fulfillment of a higher self. Varo wrote about this piece, “As you can see, this person is riding the current alone upon a very fragile little piece of wood, and his garments serve as sails. This indicates the effort of those

⁷ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 10.

⁸ Ibid. 15.

⁹ Ibid. 40.

attempting to arrive at a higher spiritual level.”¹⁰ The painting depicts a central figure draped in burnt orange fabric, that functions as both clothing and transportation, sailing on choppy waters of a river. The river flows up a winding spiral mountain in the top left hand corner of the painting. The subject precariously balances on a brittle fragment of wood just large enough to hold his feet. The locomotion of the solitary passenger is fueled by the rushing wind into the billowing fabric, which acts as sails. The facial expression is stoic and focused as he looks forward towards the corkscrewed mountain. The figure seems unbothered by neither the sinister environment nor the fragility or difficulty of his journey. In addition to the odious waters, a leafless tree on the right-hand side of the painting extends black, tentacled branches reaching for the voyager. Along the bottom, the grass is composed of clotted paint in a dusty gray-brown enforcing the dead environment. As the river flows upwards it enters into the sky, which is filled with misty clouds. The sky and clouds were the result of a technique Varo employed called *soufflage*, using a straw and blowing wet paint around on the canvas, a technique she learned while living with the surrealists in Paris. The resulting atmosphere is otherworldly.

While Varo used the title of Daumal’s book, she not only references his mountain, but also the spiral of the mountain that indicates that it is alchemical. The alchemical spiral appears in several different forms throughout the history of the lost science.¹¹ One interpretation of the spiral is as a labyrinth/quest, and at the center there is the

¹⁰ Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo; Catalogue Raisonné*, 58.

¹¹ Janet Kaplan, *Remedios Varo; Unexpected Journeys*, 171.

Philosopher's Stone, the ultimate alchemical goal. The stone has several meanings but is representative of mastering The Work: for some it is eternal life; for others the world's secrets and some knowledge of what lies beyond. Both Mount Analog and the alchemical spiral have similar rewards in that whoever can manage a successful quest to either the center or the top will receive a key to hidden knowledge. The exploration and goal of learning more secrets was a constant pursuit of Varo's. Her curiosity drove her to study multiple symbolic avenues, just as Daumal did. The mountain appears in other paintings by Varo and in each painting the interpretation of the narrative is different.

An example of the mountain being used symbolically as something other than spiritual awakening is Varo's painting titled *The Escape* (Figure 3, 1961). *The Escape* shows the mountain as a destination where transformation can take place, or be a simple and safe space to hide, a home. The painting is part of a series describing a semi-autobiographical coming of age story that Varo envisioned as a triptych; *The Escape* would be the third panel.¹² *The Escape* depicts a man and a woman, possibly a couple, floating on orange clouds, or fire, up a mountain, just as in *The Ascension of Mount Analogue*. In this work the travelers have an inverted umbrella as a boat. The man wears a similar burnt orange garment as the androgynous subject of *The Ascension of Mount Analogue*; the excess fabric is again used as sails. The subjects are rising towards the top of the mountain and at the apex we see an opening, possibly to a cave or home. Here is an example of the mountain as a home or *domus*, an alchemical place for transformation usually shown as an egg, furnace, home, tower, or mountain in alchemical texts. The

¹² Ibid 18-22.

transformation symbolism of the mountain is fitting in the narrative of the triptych. When the tree panels are together it tells a semi-autobiographical coming of age story of a girl. *The Escape* shows the final ascent and she is possibly on her way to be transformed into a woman leaving the world of her childhood behind.

Mountains occur in several of Varo's paintings, and even in her commercial work for Bayer Asprin. For example, in *Change of Weather* (Figure 4, 1948) a page from a promotional calendar for Bayer features a mountain as a home where the anonymous tenant is tossing out the rain that falls on the town below. This image is a dramatic example of the mountain as a home, as well as a place where transformation and magic are happening. Alchemical domus, appearing as a mountain in this instance, are repeated throughout Varo's work. The alchemical mountain can be represented by any vessel, or enclosed place where change is occurring. In fact, nearly all of Varo's interiors could be categorized as an alchemical mountain or domus because they frequently illustrated a subject engaged with a magical task that altered an object, or the environment.

Mountains and small homes often symbolize alchemical furnaces in alchemical texts because often the furnaces actually looked like small houses, (Figure 5)¹³. Much of the architecture in Varo's paintings feature simple, blocky rooms with a subject transforming or creating something. The interior of the alchemical domus is where the transmutation, or any of the other twelve alchemical processes would happen. Varo was very familiar with alchemical studies; her personal library included several volumes relating to mystical subjects, and she also owned every book that had been published by

¹³ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*, 23.

Daumal.¹⁴ However, Varo encountered this visual symbol first in her childhood, long before she would have learned about the meaning behind the mountain as home and transformative magic vessel. While Varo traveled with her father she went to museums throughout Europe. She eventually returned to Madrid where she likely first discovered such symbolism, and she certainly studied symbolism further in her adult life. It was Hieronymus Bosch's own mountain as alchemical domus that introduced Varo to alchemical symbolism in art.

The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch contains fantastic imagery much of which would influence not only Varo but also countless artists over hundreds of years. The top portion of the Eden panel, far left panel (Figure 6, 1500-1515), *Garden of Eden*, shows two sets of mountains, each different colors; one blue on yellow. Both sets have different symbolic meaning when looked at through the lens of alchemical symbolism. The golden set contains one dwarfed mountain on the far left hand side of the panel that resembles a hut and one ornate larger mountain situated just behind the hut mountain. These mountains are wonderful examples of alchemical domuses/furnaces. One clue that these are not mere mountains is the black, red, and white birds. Birds are significant in alchemical symbolism. They are used to represent many things, including metals, the transmutation processes, and, in this instance, foul gases being cleansed through distillation.¹⁵ White and red birds gather around the hut mountain; the colors of

¹⁴ Masayo Nonaka, *Remedios Varo: The Mexican Years* (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 14-16.

¹⁵ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*, 23.

the birds and the shape of the mountain indicate the transformation that is occurring in this panel of Bosch's triptych. The black, white, and red birds are symbolic because of their colors in addition to the fact that they are birds¹⁶. Color symbolism in alchemy is incredibly important because it often indicates the step in the transformation process, most commonly the series of steps in the prima material mutation, or the changing of primal matter.¹⁷ For basic transformations, or transmutations, the most common colors are black, red and white. Black is representative of the first stage of transformation, nigredo.¹⁸ That which is to be transformed is usually somehow lesser; primitive, dull, dirty, or in need of redemption. The stage of nigredo breaks down a substance through decomposition or separation in order for the substance to be ready for the next stage. There are conflicting opinions concerning red and white and which color is the most pure form of primal matter, but in the case of Bosch's Eden panel it seems that red is the stage of chemical change, rubedo, because there are fewer red birds, presumably because the birds are red while inside the mountain, and some of the red bird have yellow breasts symbolic of another stage in the transformation process: citrinitas.¹⁹ There are twelve different alchemical process of transformation each with a corresponding planet, metal, zodiac sign, animal and stone. Red can be used of any of the twelve transformation

¹⁶ Ibid. 23.

¹⁷ M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy; A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas, Austin Press, 2001), 85.

¹⁸ Ibid. 87.

¹⁹ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*, 23.

processes. White, albedo, is purity, post transformation. When the substance has turned white it has been purified and is reborn.²⁰ The white birds are exiting the smaller mountain innocent and new, fitting the theme for Bosch's first panel.

The larger mountain is highly stylized with geometric shapes making up the form of the mountain. The base of the mountain consists of golden rocks and a cave from which a flood of black birds fly out, spiraling upwards. The birds then reach an arrangement of spheres, cylinders and points. The birds weave in and out of the circular hole in a large sphere, around the peak of the mountain between the negative spaces in the design, zigzagging into the background. The birds become lighter in color as they recede in the background. Their path turns towards the viewer and they return white in color and enter into the top of the smaller mountain. Laurinda S. Dixon's book, *Alchemical Imagery in the Garden of Delights* has detailed much of the alchemical symbolism in Bosch's painting. Dixon describes the golden mountains in alchemical terms using the birds as representative of gasses and the mountains as alchemical domus. Dixon asserts that the mountains are domus, consistent with alchemical texts that use domus as a synonym for both mountain and house.²¹ Mountains are used as symbols of furnaces as well as vessels that held certain gasses; black birds representing foul gasses and white birds being the cleansed gasses. Dixon explains that Bosch is illustrating "the cleansing of impure vapors in the traditional alchemical matter."²² In addition to the

²⁰ M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy; A Magician in Search of Myth*, 86-87.

²¹ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*, 22.

²² *Ibid.* 23.

representation and symbolism of the mountain as domus Dixon also links the mountains to the symbol of the egg, which connects to the birds as well as the incubation phase of the transmutation process. There is an egg form at the base of the large mountain, which shelters several black birds. The symbols of alchemy are all connected and used allegorically in order to visually produce narratives that would have been familiar to Bosch and his contemporary audiences.

Remedios Varo seems to have understood the narratives of Bosch's work. She first came upon the work of Bosch in her childhood, with her father, and she would sketch and copy his whimsical creatures. Later in life, as a student, she again revisited Bosch and finally, in her mature work, she integrated the same themes and mystical interests. The third chapter will go into detail with respect to Bosch's use of alchemical symbols and instances when Varo employs the same, or eerily similar, symbols. The mountain is only one of the alchemical symbols that Varo adopts to elicit a new narrative using classic symbolism from her esoteric studies. Through her innovative mode of thinking there are many imagined territories to explore using Varo's symbolic language.

CHAPTER 3

BOSCH AND AN ALCHEMICAL INTRODUCTION

“ From her earliest years all Remedios Varo wanted was to look at Bosch, always Bosch”
Walter Gruen, January 1985 interview with Janet Kaplan

Remedios Varo primarily shared with Hieronymus Bosch the tendency to embed the imagined (creatures as well as mechanisms) into familiar settings, which made the products of their imagination seem logical. Both artists relished the absurd and possessed a gift for presenting bizarre images in way that seems playful and possible. In addition to the mountain, Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Figure 7, 1500-1515) has other alchemical symbols, innovative locomotive vessels, and many invented animals. Varo’s entire oeuvre contains wild gadgetry and unexpected combinations from both natural and imagined worlds. Varo did not only draw upon *The Garden of Earthly Delights* but several other Bosch paintings. In this chapter I will discuss the influence of three paintings by Bosch, *The Hermits Saints Triptych (Altarpiece of the Hermit Saints)* (Figure 8, 1493) *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and *The Conjurer* (Figure 9, ca. 1500) had on a selection of paintings by Varo, specifically, *Vagabond* (Figure 10, 1957), *Creation of the World (Study for Cancer Pavilion: Microcosm)*(Figure 11, 1959), and *The Juggler* (Figure 12, 1956). These comparisons provide evidence of how Varo interpreted Bosch, and the elements that directly spoke to her.

Painting saints was a common subject matter for Bosch. He painted Saint Anthony and Saint James repeatedly, Saint Christopher, an altarpiece of Saint Julia and several others. Bosch also depicted Hermit Saints, along with the symbols associated with them.

These hermits are contemplative and devoted to completing the task each of them have at hand. The triptych shows Saint Anthony the Abbot, left panel, Saint Jerome, center panel, and Saint Giles (or James) on the right panel. The left panel is of a dark landscape, with Saint Anthony leaning on his staff as he fills a jug with water and demonic creatures are all around him. One of these demons has a nun's head and two feet protruding where a neck would typically be and a gray owl nesting atop the nun's head. The symbolism surrounding owls is extensive. In this particular work I agree with Larry Silver's assertion that the owl is most likely a positive symbol of "lonely suffering and patient forbearance – appropriate for wilderness sufferings."¹ Taking into account that Saint Anthony suffered in the wilderness and then lived in isolation before emerging with enlightenment and wisdom this seems to be the most fitting interpretation. It also fits with the alchemical symbolism of owls as alchemist's assistants, possessing hidden knowledge that was shared once alchemists were committed to "The Work"; the work refers to the practice of transmutation in alchemy². Saint Jerome is shown with his crucifix, and behind the saint's left hand there is a small depiction of a man attempting to mount a unicorn. The figures appear to be in a display dome. The struggle between man and unicorn symbolizes the struggle between purity and sin or man's attempt to capture virtue.³ In the bottom left-hand corner of the panel there is a cylindrical object with a

¹ Larry Silver, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York, New York, Abbeville Press Publishers, 2006), 218.

² Aaron Cheak, *Alchemical Traditions: From Antiquity to the Avant-Garde* (Melbourne, Australia, Numen Books, 2013), 292.

³ Rudiger Robert Beer, *Einhorn (Unicorn Myth and Reality)* (Munich, Mason/Charter, 1977), 24.

figure worshipping the sun and moon painted on it. This may be representative of Saint Jerome leaving behind a false idol.⁴ The final panel of Saint Giles shows the saint in a cave reading a scroll with an arrow puncturing his chest and a doe at his feet. Saint Giles is known from the Golden Legend that was very popular in medieval times. One version of the story says that Saint Giles was starving and the doe gave him milk, and then he saved the doe from a hunter's arrow by leaping in front of it.⁵ This is symbolic of the saint sacrificing his personal ego in order to be humbled and complete the task bestowed on him. In this case the task for Saint Giles was to pray for the names listed on the scroll in front of him. As a result of his devotion to his task he receives spiritual nourishment. Bosch's *Hermit Saints* all symbolize the path towards enlightenment through isolation, reflection, and fierce determination. The saints strengthened their devotion while alone performing whatever task was asked of them in order to receive a greater understanding.

As saints are a common motif for Bosch, individuals on intellectual journeys are common for Varo. She made several paintings of scientists, adventurers, and sorceresses, all embarking on solo quests for hidden knowledge. *Revelation (The Clockmaker)*, *Unsubmissive Plant*, *Discovery of a Mutant Geologist*, *Exploring the Source of the Orinoco River*, *Harmony*, *The Alchemist*, and several others feature an androgynous person focused on projects that are solemn attempts at reaching a truth but also have fanciful elements. An example of this is her painting *Vagabond* which she was incredibly proud to say in a letter; "... I think this painting is one of my best. Here is a design for a

⁴ Larry Silver, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 211.

⁵ *Ibid.* 211.

vagabond's clothing, but in this case the vagabond is not liberated.⁶ The vagabond is on a journey of discovery in isolation, just as the hermit saints. While the vagabond is free to travel with everything he could need carried on his back, he is not free in the sense of being able to leave the material world behind for the knowledge of a high power, or true independence from materials and attachments.

Vagabond depicts an elongated bearded man on a mission; a mission that we, as viewers, are not privy too. What the viewer observes is the slender man dressed in his home quite literally moving through dense woods along a winding path. His outfit and his house are one in the same: the functional ensemble is also his mode of transportation. Varo was naturally adventurous and highly inventive when creating the machinery in her paintings they are often intricate yet exceptionally practical and, most importantly, functional. The apparatus for motion uses wind technology along with a wheel pulley system. The vagabond's mechanism begins at the top with two pinwheels propelled by the wind which then triggers the momentum of three wheels at the top, connected with silver string which leads vertically in a perfect straight line, reminiscent of a plumb line, down to another set of wheels attached to a walking stick, although more a driving stick in this instance since it has a wheel at the bottom, which is held in the vagabond's right hand. The motion of the vagabond can be halted by lifting the stick. The entire man and home are all balanced with the precision of a ballet dancer on pointed toes on a small wheel at the bottom of the coat. The coat is comprised of compartments that function as rooms of the home. The wooden double doors open to reveal the face of the homeowner,

⁶ Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo Catalogo Razonado*, 55.

the door on the left hand side holding a key, the slender vagabond with a reddish beard and a dusty blue shirt with several buttons fastened all the way up his neck. A sun hat covered with grey fabric provides additional shelter as well as a foundation for one of the propellers. Below the double doors there is a small wooden windowsill. On the vagabond's left breast, on the right-side of the painting, there is a flower pot holding a soft pink rose accompanying two cooking pots. Tucked into the folds of the fabric there is a living room with a bookshelf and a picture of a woman in an oval frame. Below the vagabond's waistline the gray color of the coat gradually shifts to a brownish peach. The coat is open and we see the vagabond's narrow legs and his dark and light gray striped cat curled comfortably around his ankles. Varo emphasized that the outfit was a mobile home but that the vagabond carried memories of perhaps a past home, or a desired home, saying "... you find a portrait and three books. On his breast he is wearing a flower pot with a rose growing in it, a more select and exquisite plant than the ones he encounters in these woods, But he needs the portrait, the rose (symbolizing nostalgia for a little garden in a real house) and his cat; he isn't really free."⁷ Even though the figure in *Vagabond* is at home with everything he needs, he still is going on a physical excursion. Just as Bosch's *Hermit Saints* he is embarking on a path for higher knowledge through the journey of the mind represented through journey of the body.

In addition to the hermit archetype residing in the worlds of both Bosch and Varo, astrology was also a symbolic theme for each artist. Anna Boczkowska has written an excellent analysis regarding astrological symbols in Bosch's paintings. Regarding *The*

⁷ Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo Catalogo Razonado*, 55.

Garden of Earthly Delights she pays special attention to the symbols of the sign of Cancer/the Moon as well as the Sun.⁸ There are both astrological and alchemical symbols in the triptych; the symbol of the mountain addressed in chapter one being just one example. Laurinda Dixon's book, Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights, explores the alchemical symbolism in exemplary detail. While each scholar uses different lenses to analyze Bosch's work, both are useful and both astrological and alchemical visual symbols resonated with Varo. There are countless interpretations of Bosch's work and scholars remain fascinated with his creations. Since 1517 when Antonio de Beatis noted that it was impossible to describe all of the animals and fantastic elements in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* to anyone who has not seen them scholars have attempted to analyze the painting.⁹ With five hundred years of scholarship it is necessary to narrow the focus. In the center of the far left panel, known as the Garden of Eden, there is a pond that holds an ornate pink fountain. This fountain is a simple way to illustrate these varied readings both astrological and alchemical.

The fountain is crowned with lotus-like bloom above a pillar with botanical spouts which water flows through; leaves in the same shade of pink are layered like petals around the bottom of the pillar. At the base is an orb with pale plants bursting through on either side reaching up into shapes that are reminiscent of mollusk shells opening to allow the plant to grow through ending with transparent globes. The orb also has an

⁸ Anna Boczkowka, "The Crab, the Sun, the Moon and Venus: Studies in the Iconology of Hieronymus Bosch's Triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*," Oud Holland, vol. 91, no. 4, 1977, 197.

⁹ Larry Silver, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 21.

opening holding a small dark owl. This owl is one of several in the triptych, some as large as a human and another small enough to perch on a unicorn horn and stretch its wings. The fountain owl peers out of its hollow and looks at the collection of objects that make up the island the fountain sits on. The objects glisten like pieces of polished stone with some glass tubes that other birds perch upon.

Boczkowska asserts that the fountain, which she refers to as The Fountain of Life, is representative of the zodiac sign of Cancer. One obvious reason is that the base of the fountain looks like a crab; the orb as the body and the shell shapes and the pinchers forming the crab that was on astrological coins.¹⁰ Her argument goes beyond that and moves on to include the relationship of the sun and moon to illustrate the astrological meanings represented in Bosch's panel. Cancer's planet is the moon and with the moon being a feminine type, Cancer is also a mother figure in the western zodiac. Cancer is also gifted at growing plants and gardening due to the nurturing qualities it possesses.¹¹ Boczkowska points to the floral nature of the fountain as representing the growing quality of Cancer. The moon is visually shown with the crescent shape on the pillar and the sun, according to Boczkowska, is shown as the hole where the owl is situated.¹² This configuration juxtaposing the sun and moon has ties to both astrology and alchemy. In

¹⁰ Anna Boczkowska, *The Crab, the Sun, the Moon and Venus: Studies in the Iconology of Hieronymus Bosch's Triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 198.

¹¹ Matilde Battistini, translated by Rosanna M. Frongia, *Astrology, Magic, and Alchemy in Art* (Los Angeles, California, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 46.

¹² Anna Boczkowska, *The Crab, the Sun, the Moon and Venus: Studies in the Iconology of Hieronymus Bosch's Triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 197.

alchemy it is the marriage of opposites.¹³ Astrologically Cancer also represents the home and family, as well as marriage and motherhood. The idea that The Fountain of Life is a union of the sun and moon as an astrological union is further established by the biblical union of Adam and Eve in the lower portion of the panel. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* possesses secular and Christian iconography.¹⁴ Each set of symbols affirms the other; visually they are connected by the vertical pink/red of both the fountain and Christ's robes linked down the center line of the panel. The astrological symbolism works with the alchemical symbol as both address the notion of opposites coming together.

It should be noted that Bosch's fountain looks remarkable similar in shape to the Fountain of Science in the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, (Figure 13, 1550). While the *Rosarium Philosophorum* was published after *The Garden of Earthly Delights* many of its illustrations are based on even earlier alchemical treatises such as those written and/or translated by Alibertus Magnus and Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century.¹⁵ Dixon's alchemical reading describes the fountain not as the Fountain of Life but the Fountain of Science claiming that Bosch has used *The Garden of Earthly Delights* to sanctify the science of alchemy.¹⁶ She likens the fountain to a monstrance and asserts that rather than a piece of bread representing the body of Christ, Bosch has placed an owl. The owl

¹³ Arthur Versluis, *Esotericism, Art, and Imagination* (East Lansing, Michigan, Michigan State University Press, 2008), 70.

¹⁴ Anna Boczkowka, *The Crab, the Sun, the Moon and Venus: Studies in the Iconology of Hieronymus Bosch's Triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 227.

¹⁵ Arthur Versluis, *Esotericism, Art, and Imagination*, 72-74.

¹⁶ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*, 20-21.

symbolism is extensive and can be positive, as mentioned with *The Hermit Saints* or within sorcery, as will be discussed in the Tarot chapter. However, Paul Vandebroek and Silver both note that owls have a negative affiliation with sin and folly.¹⁷

Vandebroek claims the owl is representative of seduction or temptation in this instance. Citing the other birds that are gathered around both the island and shore of the pond as being drawn to the owl and it representing the tale of the fall of man, since it is the Eden panel.¹⁸ However, as I will address in the next chapter, the alchemical owl has a more positive symbolic association unique from other birds. The owl is seen as an alchemist's assistant and the keeper of hidden knowledge. Dixon believes the owl is an alchemical owl and that Bosch has included it as an ode to science rather than a symbol of sinfulness. The healing blood of Christ can be seen in the grape vines winding up the dragon palm tree or the red hues in both the fountain and Christ's robes.¹⁹ The relationship the Dixon presents with respect to the Holy Spirit is interesting. Using the notion that the Holy Spirit in Christian philosophy is based in change and transformation she offers a link to the alchemical practice of changing prima materia (primal material) into another substance. In Bosch's painting the primal matter would be the foundational island. Masses of the dark stones appear black, the color of the first stage of the work before transmutation, peppered with gems and the black rot. Alchemy utilizing opposites and balance requires both pure and putrid together for the alchemical process of

¹⁷ Larry Silver, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 49.

¹⁸ Paul Vandebroek, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York, New York, Abrams Publishing, 2001), 72-73.

¹⁹ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*, 20.

conjunction that leads to transformation. In this instance the rot and the precious stones are an example of *massa confusa* which means both base elements and noble elements together before transformation. The transformation results in a substance that is pure, or holy. Early alchemists often used the symbol of the Eucharist as an example of changing a substance from base to noble.²⁰ The melding of Christian symbolism with alchemy is seen throughout Bosch's works.

Varo's *Creation of the World (Study for Cancer Pavilion: Microcosm)*, a study for a mural outside of a cancer pavilion that was never brought to fruition, showcases her talent for working with a multitude of sources. Just as Bosch in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Varo's work is an admixture of alchemy and astrology. *Creation of the World* is a cosmic diagram with the Zodiac signs of Scorpio, Sagittarius, and Capricorn²¹. While Varo was living in Mexico she had expanded her studies of all things esoteric. Varo read from authors Renee Daumal, Carl Jung, George Ivanovich Gurdjiff, P.D. Ouspensky, Gerald Gardner, and Grillo de Givry. This new metaphysical library added to the exposure that Varo had begun to experience through Bosch. Through these studies Varo would have known the alchemical purposes of each Zodiac sign: Scorpio, separation; Sagittarius, incineration; and Capricorn, fermentation.²² Knowing this provides an understanding of what is occurring in this mystic astrological origin story.

²⁰ Ibid. 21.

²¹ Tere Arcq, *Surreal Friends* (Vermont, Lund Humphries and Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 111.

²² M.E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth*, 164.

In the bottom left hand corner we see a calcareous man accompanied by a serpent and a rooster. The white situates him as a symbol of purity. The serpent symbolizes primal matter, matter to be transmuted. Roosters, hens, and their eggs are symbolic of the incubation process within an alembic vessel.²³ This cluster of figures lets the viewer know that a transformation is about to take place. This particular transformation starts in the heavens. At the top of the painting, the three Zodiac figures set about manifesting the world. While these are all powerful cosmic entities, Varo has made it necessary for them to be contained in locomotive vessels that feature assorted mechanical gadgetry that are then maneuvered to funnel heavenly matter down into a temple, or alchemical domus (furnace). Scorpio, on the far left, handles the separation of heavenly matter from the sky and the final separation once the transformation is completed. In the center, Sagittarius is in charge of incineration, the purification process, which is why the creatures are white with ash when they first emerge from the furnace. Capricorn is in charge of fermentation and incubation, which takes place inside the domus. Through funnels, spinning balls, propellers and wheels, these Zodiac signs manage to create the transmutation process that results in beings. The ecclesiastical domus is on an island in the bottom center. It contains four gateways, symbolizing the four cardinal directions or the four seasons, and escaping from the furnace there are white creatures that gain color as they exit. It is also possible that the four are symbolic of quintessence, the union of all four elements. The colors are

²³ M.E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth*, 165.

also symbolic. Blue is traditionally female, yellow is male, and red is the union and finished pure product of an alchemical fusion.²⁴

With alchemy, and many other magical processes, balance is imperative. In order for good health to exist there must also be disease. That negative element here is represented by what Varo describes as a “terrifying vessel.”²⁵ On the far right, there is a vessel sporting an inverted head, revealed by four reddish fleshy sections peeling open. Two ghostly orbs and a propeller power this vessel, which inexplicably has a red lower body and tail. It hovers lower than the Zodiac locomotives and seems to be weighed down by a dark pot that spits out a diseased liquid black matter. This jettisons into turbulent waters where an odious whirlpool spins. This work reminds the viewer of creation and its counterpoint of disease and destruction. In this instance The alchemical symbols of transformation and the Zodiac symbols together create an image of disease turned to healing, fitting imagery for a hospital’s cancer pavilion mural. All of Varo’s works continue to take on an added narrative once the secrets of esoteric knowledge come to light.

Another branch of hermetic knowledge that Varo and Bosch shared was the Tarot. Bosch’s painting *The Conjuror* and Varo’s *Juggler* are both representative of The Magician, card number one in the Tarot deck, although the second card after card zero, The Fool. The Magician is a spiritual guide, a trickster designed to teach you a lesson, a

²⁴ Ibid, 263.

²⁵ Ibid. 142.

way for an individual to manifest their desires, and to explore their personal power.²⁶ Visual traits of The Magician are a robe, usually red and a magical act in progress. Bosch's paintings are often discussed with relation to Tarot and astrology.²⁷ *The Hermit Saints*, and many of Bosch's other Saints, *The Haywain*, and *Death of the Miser* have all been linked to Tarot cards.²⁸ *The Conjuror* depicts a man playing a game with spectators. He holds a ball and the onlookers seem captivated by it. There is, again, an owl present, being carried by the magician in a wicker basket around his waist and a dog at his feet. *The Conjuror* shows that humans can be tricked. Varo's *The Juggler* shows a crowd that also lacks an awareness that they are being tricked, and Varo even places them all in a single shimmering robe with features remarkably similar. They appear to not have any physical independence or independent thought, making them easy prey for deception. Varo too includes an owl as well as a lion, a goat, blue birds, and a woman all in the juggler's carriage. The Magician in the tarot is the first member of the Major Arcana that The Fool visits on his journey to enlightenment. The Fool is gullible and naïve, just as the crowds are. Although the Magician's role is to show The Fool that everything is not as it may initially appear that way The Fool may learn the lesson early and may be guided to be more in tune with the environment both inside and outside himself.²⁹ Tarot also had an

²⁶ Robert E. Mueller and Sandra A. Thomson, *The Heart of The Tarot* (San Francisco, California, Harper Collins, 2000), 43.

²⁷ Matilde Battistini, translated by Rosanna M. Frongia, *Astrology, Magic, and Alchemy in Art* (Los Angeles, California, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 216-218.

²⁸ Bohumil Vurm, *Jheronimus Bosch: His Sources* (Netherlands, The Netherlands Jheronimus Bosch Art Center, 2010), 327.

²⁹ Robert E. Mueller and Sandra A. Thomson, *The Heart of The Tarot*, 43.

impact on Varo and is one of the discoveries she made as she transitioned more formally into the surrealist group. Tarot's mystery has been intriguing for many even those that lived hundreds of years apart such as Varo and Bosch.

CHAPTER 4

TAROT

The history of the Tarot is imprecise. It had been commonly thought that the Tarot was a variant of the Book of Thoh¹. The first deck that resembles the modern Tarot deck is from the late fifteenth century. Tales had been spread of the Tarot's alleged power to reveal secrets and predict the future. The seemingly mysterious origins of the Tarot attracted the attention of occultists and secret societies in the late nineteenth century. Arthur Waite (1857-1942) a member of the British Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn took a particular interest in the practice of reading tarot, and in 1909 he hired Pamela Smith (1878-1951) to illustrate the Rider-Waite deck.² This deck is the most recognizable and is often considered the standard deck that influences contemporary Tarot art. However, game scholars and occultists widely recognize that Tarot history goes beyond the Rider-Waite deck.

The first Tarot deck was a fifteenth century deck of regular numbered playing cards with figurative trump cards added in, known as the Taroco³. The Taroco cards, which are thought to be the first set of cards to use trump cards, cards with figures rather than numbers were most likely the foundation for our modern Tarot deck. Early Taroco decks had 97 cards including the Tarot trump cards as well as cards for all twelve of the

¹ Patrick Lepetit, *The Esoteric Secrets of Surrealism: Origins, Magic, and Secret Societies* (Toronto: Inner Traditions, 2014), 128.

² Sandra A. Thomson and Robert E. Mueller, *The Heart of the Tarot*, 3-4.

³ Emily E. Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks*, 1.

zodiac signs and the three theological virtues. During the early sixteenth century in France the deck that we think of as playing cards was being used with the same suits we have today; heart, diamonds, spades, and clubs. Tarot is thought to be a combination and/or variation of these fifteenth century decks.⁴ The Tarot is traditionally made up of 22 major arcana, trump cards, and 56 minor arcana. The 56 minor arcana are four suits of cards with their own figurative cards. The minor arcana are very close to the deck we have today: king, queen, knight, knave (or page) in each suit with four suits numbered one through ten. The suits are the Wands (clubs), Cups (hearts), Swords (spades), and Pentacles or discs (diamonds).⁵ The Tarot deck of Marseille, from the 1750s, is thought to be the first true Tarot deck. The Tarot of Marseille is the first to use alchemical and metaphysical symbols, and the first to be used for divination.⁶

The Tarot of Marseille was widespread through Europe as a deck of playing cards until Protestant Freemason Antoine Court de Gebelin (1728-1784) related them to Egyptian symbols and came to the conclusion that the Tarot contained ancient secrets and was the Book of Thoh. He invented other conclusions and connections such as linking the 22 major arcana with the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, spreading the cards out in specific arrangements and reading them for the purposes of divination/insight, and published a 22 volume book discussing the Tarot's magic and divine powers.⁷ These

⁴ Ibid. 1-5.

⁵ P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe* (New York: Random House Inc., 1971, second edition), 186-187.

⁶ Emily E. Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks*, 5.

⁷ Ibid. 4-6.

so-called findings were the start of the occult legends of the Tarot that lasted until the late twentieth century when they became seen as playing cards again as well as visual meditation decks. It was the mystery and links to hidden knowledge that made the Tarot so popular with the occult and then with the Surrealists.

André Breton is credited with bringing the Tarot into the surrealist circle by tasking a few members to create a new Tarot of Marseille. World War II was escalating in Europe and many Surrealists were attempting to flee France. In 1940-41 the Villa Air-Bel located in Marseille became a safe haven for artists to await their paper work and secure travel plans in order to escape the devastation of the war.⁸ Breton started his study of Tarot in the municipal library in Marseille. He was diligent in his studies and when he moved to New York he tracked down Kurt Seligmann, a historian, to help him with his research⁹. In 1944 Breton wrote *Arcnum 17* which references card 17 in the major arcana, The Star. From March of 1941 onward many Surrealists made their versions of Tarot cards. In the March 1943 issue of *VVV* artists Roberto Matta and Leonora Carrington published their own concept of the Tarot that they called *The Day is An Attack*. Victor Brauner was an enthusiastic contributor to Breton's Tarot and later he made paintings in the spirit of the cards he contributed to the deck including *The Surrealist* (1947) made to be The Juggler/The Magician, card number one in the major arcana, and *The Lovers*

⁸ Sven Dupré, Beat Wismer and M.E Warlick. *Art and Alchemy; The Mystery of Transformation*, 167.

⁹ Patrick Lepetit, *The Esoteric Secrets of Surrealism: Origins, Magic, and Secret Societies*, 129.

(Figure 14, 1947) made after the card of the same name number six in the major arcana¹⁰. Brauner's interpretation of The Lovers has an overlay of playful esoteric and alchemical symbols something that Varo would do in her paintings of the Tarot.

Varo and Peret were among the artists who lived at Villa Air-Bel. Varo did not create images for Breton's deck however, but she did have her own Tarot deck for which she wrote her own interpretations and suggested readings. She created paintings directly referencing the major arcana in the Marseille Tarot¹¹. These paintings included *The Lovers*, *The Juggler*, *The Hermit*, *To be Reborn*, and *Creation of the Birds*. All of these works were created once Varo was established in Mexico and after she had been studying P.D. Ouspensky. Ouspensky's teachings attempted to unify all occult, religious, and metaphysical knowledge into one model of the universe. In his book, *A New Model of the Universe* (1931), he has a chapter dedicated to the Tarot. It includes a brief history of the Tarot, mathematical/ sacred geometry of Tarot for a Tarot spread using all 78 cards, an assessment of the scholarship surrounding the tarot at the time, and his interpretation¹² of each card's meaning and symbols. Ouspensky's analysis and Brauner's paintings seem to have made an impression on Varo that she would recollect while in her own studio.

¹⁰ Sven Dupré, Beat Wismer and M.E Warlick. *Art and Alchemy; The Mystery of Transformation* (Dusseldorf: Himer Publishers, 2014), 169.

¹¹ Janet Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 161.

¹² P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, 180-92. Ouspensky's interpretations are descriptions of his visions when he sees the card. He is attempting to prove the connection of science and mathematics to a metaphysical intuition. It is part of his universal theory that everything is logically connected if humans can set aside their ego and see clearly in order to reach a higher consciousness. He uses numerology, sacred geometry, and a mix of philosophies as well as his imagination to do this.

Varo's renderings of specific Tarot cards call attention to the interrelatedness of her studies and how they can all complement each other in individual paintings.

Varo paints *The Lovers* (Figure 15, 1963) with two figures shown sitting on a bench deeply absorbed with each other in the pouring rain, unbothered by the rising waters surging up their calves. Raindrops are falling; dull ruby trees are in the distance blocked by a fog of rising steam from the lover's bench. The two clasp hands, each wearing similar modest buttoned-up tops. Each figure has a gilded hand mirror in place of a head and neck with an identical reflection. Despite the hand holding, bodies angled towards one another, and the title of the painting, their expression is disinterested. While the figures are seemingly in complete adoration, plumes of heavy steam rising around them, there is little expression in the dull reflections with simple tight lips and empty eyes.

The Lovers that Varo painted look different than Brauner's, yet both hold true to traditional symbolism associated with the card. The Lovers card, also known as Temptation in some decks, has two figures symbolizing duality; masculine and feminine energies in each person, good and evil, logic and emotion etc. The two figures also represent a partnership. Generally when The Lovers card is pulled it asks that one consider any conflicts or dualities inside ourselves and then look to a partnership to resolve any unbalance¹³. When the card is labeled Temptation it can be seen as a warning, that another will cross our path to tempt us away from our goals or cause us to see our inner balance to be shifted. Ouspensky's interpretation is a mixed meaning of

¹³ Sandra A. Thomson and Robert E. Mueller, *The Heart of the Tarot*, 57.

both the traditional Lovers card meaning and the meaning of the Temptation card. He has the card labeled as Temptation yet cites that it is the essence of equilibrium. He describes the sacred geometry of the card as having two triangles, the two figures, uniting to create a six pointed star, that then bows into two ovals that merge into one eclipse¹⁴. The six pointed star in sacred geometry is a symbol of perfect balance, while the eclipse is oblong and off balance. The morphing of the shapes is indicative of the outcomes of the card; either a person does the spiritual work to become more in balance or they do not and it results in imbalance. This same choice is present in Varo's painting. The figures can break away from each other, stop looking in the mirror, and escape the rain or they can continue indulging their vanity and drown.

Janet Kaplan, Varo's biographer, described *The Lovers* as a portrayal of narcissistic attraction¹⁵. Kaplan asserts that the mirrored lovers are a mockery of romance because of Varo's own romantic history. *The Lovers* is possibly a satire of romantic love if one were to take Kaplan's view. Kaplan argues that Varo "presented the bonds of love as an impediment to true autonomy. Having deferred her artistic development to the demands of several love affairs, she had reason to understand that such relationships could block personal fulfillment."¹⁶ This may be true, although at the time of this painting Varo had been living happily with Walter Gruen for several years. While she may have been illustrating a warning against becoming entangled with someone just

¹⁴ P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, 208.

¹⁵ Janet Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 150 - 151.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 151.

because it would benefit one's primal ego and hinder higher pursuits, it may be simplistic to characterize the painting as an expression of bitterness over past heartache. I argue *The Lovers* is more reflective of what Varo was studying at the time. With the meaning of the Tarot in mind, Ouspensky's interpretation, as well as Varo's personal history these perspectives leave conclusions open-ended. *The Lovers* represent the path to self-discovery, a cautionary tale of letting the ego overtake the mind, and temptation throwing us off balance, and a reminder that we have the power to put ourselves in a position of attaining higher consciousness.

Arguably Varo's most famous work, *Creation of the Birds* (Figure 1, 1957) is an example of how Varo's varied interests come together to create the extraordinary. The interconnection of the Tarot to alchemy, hermetic studies, and natural sciences play together in this fanciful scene, which is more complex than it may initially present. Varo also had an affinity for the sciences, but she believed them to be "hard" since they were callously objective and thought with all the mysteries that science possessed, it should be presented with tenderness akin to that of poetry.¹⁷ *Creation of the Birds* has notable alchemical properties as well. The protagonist is a hybrid of a woman and an owl. She is an animist sketching and then, through illumination via prism and light energy, brings to life these charmingly dainty birds. Her pigments for this task are dolloped onto her palette from tubes connected to an alchemical apparatus. The mechanism has two eggs on top of one another. The top egg is inverted, the bottom egg is upright, and both have curving glass tubes for dispensing the contents. One tube, however, is not for dispensing

¹⁷ Remedios Varo. *De Homo Rodans* (Mexico: Calli-Nova, 1970).

but for collecting. It zig-zags to the vessel from an egg-shaped window collecting stardust, presumably to be transformed into the paint colors. The colors present are the three primaries. Green is the only mixed color on the palette, representative of wisdom and harmony.¹⁸ The wisdom symbolism is reinforced by its pairing with the owl.

Beyond wisdom, owls were associated with night, the moon, and femininity. They were believed to be enchanted in the moonlight, although they were not assigned a transformation process as many other birds in alchemy were. Rather, owls were animal assistants with ancient magic, a good omen for alchemists.¹⁹ However, in Varo's time the Surrealists had given owls another symbolic association. In an issue of the surrealist magazine *Minotaure*, owls are assigned a more menacing meaning, still associated with the moon and femininity: they are portrayed as a bad omen.²⁰ This is possibly because of the volatile air element to which birds are assigned in alchemical studies. It is far more likely, though, that Varo's owl is a wise, powerful, female, creation goddess, closer to Athena than any Surrealist mischaracterization.

The feathered scientist represents the central figure in the Tarot card Temperance. While Varo may have taken her owl from alchemy, the reimagined Tarot card was

¹⁸ M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy; A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas, Austin Press, 2001), 260-265. Citing Marcellin Berthelot, *Les Origins de l'alchimie*, 1885.

¹⁹ Laurinda Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*, 33.

²⁰ M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy; A Magician in Search of Myth*, 164.

borrowed from Brauner.²¹ The typical characteristics of the Temperance card are wings and two vessels passing water, or the elixir of life, back and forth.²² These visual cues are present in *Creation of the Birds*. The angelic feathered hybrid is the main subject and is the winged figure of Temperance. In the back corner of the chamber, there are two mounted golden vessels that toss a shimmering liquid back and forth independently. The meaning behind the Temperance card also fits with *Creation of The Birds*. Temperance means balance. The card asks us to use the waters of eternal truths to gain equilibrium in our lives, and recognize the importance of the spiritual and the material.²³ This message is evident in the owl's face. She is clearly embarking on an important task, yet has a playful quality. The newborn birds tickle the air as they soar out the window. The musical instrument around the owl's neck to which her paintbrush is attached is an element of sonic delight and harmony. The composition marries technical and mechanical with playfulness and joy, which I believe executes the exact softening of science Varo deemed crucial to the field.

There are "hard" sciences presented in *Creation of The Birds* as well. Varo often included advanced scientific ideas in picture form. Ideas such as Einstein's theory of relativity, models of the solar system, mathematical equations, evolution and stellar fusion can all be found in Varo's artworks. In *Creation of the Birds* for instance, the

²¹ Sven Dupré, Beat Wismer and M.E Warlick. *Art and Alchemy; The Mystery of Transformation*, 166.

²² Sandra A. Thomson and Robert E. Mueller, *The Heart of the Tarot*, 78-80.

²³ Ibid.

prism magnifying glass is representative of Newton's Prism, the light and resulting color spectrum provide life and energy - just as it does in our world.²⁴ A more complicated theory tackled in this painting is shown through the stardust collected and transformed into pigments that are then used to create living birds. This illustrates the theory that through stellar fusion, the stars themselves then become molecules, the building blocks of all life on earth.²⁵ The cosmic origin of all matter is depicted through Varo's artistry.

Viewing Varo's work through one lens leads one to miss remarkable moments in her overall narrative. The Tarot is one portion of Varo's cache of hidden knowledge that intersects with alchemy, science, and the influences of the artist. The interaction with other artists, beyond the Surrealists or historical figures such as Bosch, must not be overlooked. The fifth chapter will expand on these influences and delve into the relationship Varo had with Leonora Carrington and Katie Horna, and the areas in Varo's work where their collaboration is most visible.

²⁴ Natalie Angier. "Scientific Epiphanies Celebrated on Canvas," *The New York Times* (New York, New York), April 11, 2000. F5.

²⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

TRANSFORMATION IN MEXICO

When Remedios Varo found sanctuary in Mexico, 1941, her distinctive style emerged, marking a departure from her earlier European paintings. Before relocating to Mexico Varo had been constrained. Despite her freedom of imagination and a seemingly uninhibited sensibility, she was oppressed by circumstance, entrapped by financial troubles, by Peret's shadow, by the war, and by turmoil in Europe. Once in Mexico she was liberated. She made new relationships with other artists who influenced her approach to painting. Varo began subscribing to both traditional science magazines, as well as metaphysical and psychic publications, all of which contributed to paintings that were harmonious with many esoteric subjects. She also found a permanent and stable home and her artwork was no longer enmeshed with outside ideas but was allowed to reach its own form of enlightenment where symbols and personal identity cohabited naturally. It is in Mexico that her past studies and influences begin to coalesce and her stylistic signature was cemented.

Varo's metaphysical practice is a dominant theme throughout her late work. In Mexico, she also quickly made friends with other European transplants, one of whom was Leonora Carrington. Their interest in magic made a soul connection between the two women and their collaboration was significant for both artists. The friendship with Carrington amplified Varo's curiosity and it showed in her paintings. The meticulous rendering of esoteric subjects, such as stars coming to earth to illuminate the protagonist

in *The Call* (Figure 16, 1961) became a staple in her work. Varo's personal relationships had been evident in her early career as well. In Spain Varo had worked closely with Oscar Dominguez, Esteban Francés, and Gerardo Lizarraga. The group made several collages and exquisite corpses together.¹ In 1935 Varo made surreal collages and her painting, *The Crossing* (Figure 17, 1935), is visually closer to ordinary surrealist paintings than with Varo's style once she arrives to Mexico. *The Crossing* depicts the upper body of a bird lying parallel to the bottom of the page with a comic book type speech bubble emerging from its mouth. Yet, in place of text, there is a contained sea with a small boat that holds a donkey, a buttoned-up shirt, and a mast that is topped with a classical statue head. The mixing of unexpected elements in a dreamlike setting is typical of many of the surrealists working in Paris at the time. Varo greatly admired the Surrealists of Paris. In fact, Varo, along with her Spanish circle, sent a few of their drawings and collages to Marcel Jean requesting feedback.² With the exception of a handful of pieces from her school days, Varo's work in Europe had all but mimicked her contemporaries, perhaps intentionally. Her method of working in Mexico changed and incorporated a practice of uniting architectural detail with marvelous impossibilities, and she broke away from any one movement or influence. Mexico helped usher in her mature studio practice and she was fortunate to have the opportunity to start afresh.

Varo was not the only artist to find sanctuary and freedom in Mexico between 1939-1943. As World War II tensions continued to rise leading up to and during the early

¹ Janet A. Kaplan. *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 38.

² *Ibid.* 42.

part of the war, Europe became increasingly dangerous for many artists among them Varo, Carrington, and Hungarian photographer Katie Horna, who would become a close confidant. Later in life, Carrington would say with confidence that if each of them had not managed to flee Europe they would have certainly died, each of them for different reasons.³ Varo was a radical Republican working with the revolution in Spain during the Civil War and lent her artistic skills to create propaganda posters. Carrington was entangled romantically with Max Ernst, an artist labeled a degenerate by the Nazis and taken prisoner in Germany. An event that led to a nervous episode that resulted in a period which Carrington spent in a Spanish sanatorium. Horna was Jewish and a radical Republican photographing the Spanish Civil War.⁴ Europe was becoming increasingly unstable and conflict began to erupt everywhere fleeing became the best option for survival. Horna and her husband Andalusian José Horna, also a Republican and supporter of the Spanish rebellion, escaped first in 1939. The couple went to the United States of America through Ellis Island then made their way to Mexico in October of 1939.⁵ Carrington married the poet Renato Leduc who provided her a passport and they arrived in 1940. André Breton assisted Varo and her husband Benjamin Péret in securing passage

³ Stephan Van Raay, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Katie Horna* (Surrey, UK: Lund Humphries, 2010), 8.

⁴ Stephan Van Raay, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Katie Horna*, 8-19.

⁵ Jeu dePaume, *Katie Horna* (Barcelona, Spain: Fundacion Amparo Museo, 2013), 275.

to Mexico. By the end of the year in 1942, all three women were residing in the Mexico City neighborhood Colonia Roma no more than a few blocks apart.⁶

The president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas offered asylum to any refugee fleeing Europe, specifically those who had supported the Republicans during the revolution. Since the United States was refusing Socialists and Communists, Mexico became the safe haven for many European intellectuals.⁷ This policy shaped the Mexican art community, although the transition was difficult. While the war was devastating for those who could not leave Europe, those fortunate enough to escape had a new trauma to bear. The European refugees left behind their homes and found themselves displaced to the other side of the world. It seems natural that they would form a community while isolated in a foreign land.

For Varo, and her new friends, Mexico was not just a physical safe haven, but a place where each artist was able to enter into a new phase of their art. Their community of exiles was a factor of stability that freed part of Varo's mind from worry and allowed it to focus on creative endeavors. There were several notable Surrealists who made their home in Mexico City: Alice Rohan and her partner Wolfgang Paalen, Chiki Weisz, Eva Sulzer, Gerardo Lizarraga (Varo's first husband), and others.⁸ Horna took many photos, providing snapshots of the residents of the new surrealist community. As the European

⁶ Stephan Van Raay, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Katie Horna*, 14.

⁷ Stephan Van Raay, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Katie Horna*, 11.

⁸ Janet A. Kaplan. *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 149.

Surrealists became more established and accustomed to their new home they began producing work. The mural-centric art scene in Mexico adapted to the refugees impact. Mexican painter Gunther Gerzso joined them for many parties and became close friends with the group. Others were a bit reluctant. Diego Rivera, a world famous mural artist, and Frida Kahlo, the now renowned painter, had reservations about the Europeans. Kahlo, who Horna photographed, is famous for disliking those “European bitches” but perhaps she did not realize how similar they were.⁹ Rivera and Kahlo eventually became friends with Rohan and Paalen, bonding over a shared love of pre-Columbian art. Kahlo, much like Varo and Carrington, had a personal symbolic code that she employed in her work. Kahlo’s was primarily based on color, although she also repeated figures in her work that held a meaning personal to her.¹⁰ Varo participated in the Exposition International del Surrealismo, 1940, at the Galeria Arte Mexicano in Mexico City, which placed a spotlight on non-mural art and was the first European Surrealist art exhibition in Mexico¹¹. The fact that most European’s were primarily easel painters encouraged more Mexican easel painters, such as Maria Izquierdo, and Rufio Tamayo, to exhibit more frequently.¹² The Surrealists had settled in Mexico and made it a home.

⁹ Frida Kahlo letter to Nickolas Muray, February 1939. Letter translated by Raquel Tibol, 2003.

¹⁰ Helga Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo: The Painter and Her Work* (New York, New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2004), 42.

¹¹ Clare Kunny, “Leonora Carrington’s Mexican Vision,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, vol. 22 no. 2 (1996): 170.

¹² *Ibid.* 170.

Overlapping interest in esoteric studies offered another commonality that brought Varo, Carrington, and Horna closer. Together these women expanded their studies into Russian mysticism, occult studies, psychology, and collaborated on many projects ranging from plays and paintings to recipe books and parties. Varo and Carrington's works are deeply intertwined thematically, yet each woman still maintained a distinctive style. Tarot is one theme in which Carrington also had an interest. However, Carrington incorporated visuals from Celtic folklore and pre-Hispanic codices, introduced to her by Peret, in addition to the more classic Tarot themes.¹³ She also made a version of The Magician Tarot card, titled the same as Varo's, Carrington's *El Juglar* (Figure 18, 1954). Similarly to Varo's painting, Carrington's Magician is an androgynous figure with animal assistants performing for a crowd. However, Carrington's Juggler has a white plumed serpent with black argyle detail wrapped around the Juggler's body. The serpent is rising up as the Juggler supports the plumes, arms spread wide, as well as their feet. The Juggler's head is tilted in a bow as though the Juggler is using all of their strength to support the mass of the enchanted serpent. The serpent has roots in alchemy, Celtic mythology, and Aztec legends. Carrington used snakes in other works to represent her Celtic heritage yet *El Juglar* uses the serpent as representative of Quetzalcoatl, an Aztec god that is a white magician and a snake that can fly.¹⁴ Quetzacoatl is the god of wind, arts, and the keeper of knowledge. Just as the traditional Tarot Magician, the plumed

¹³ Tere Arcq, "A World Made of Magic." In *Leonora Carrington*, edited by Sean Kissane (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers, 2013), 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 32.

serpent is a keeper of secrets and has the power to unlock answers. The Juggler's audience is comprised of many nahuals, which are spirit animals or animal hybrids in Aztec myths. Carrington and Varo both had strong beliefs in nahualism, animal spirits or animal guides assigned to help or also allow you to transform into your animal. Carrington adopted both horses and hyenas and Varo had cats and owls that they would use as representative of themselves or as a guide to their personal iconography. Each woman used many animal hybrids throughout their oeuvres. *El Juglar* illustrates just one instance of overlap in theme between the paintings between these two friends.

Varo and Carrington had met one time before in Paris in the 1930s but became fast friends when reunited in Mexico. Carrington, after Varo's death, insisted she was responsible for the transformation in Varo's art.¹⁵ The two women spent hours together and, since they lived close by, saw each other nearly every day. They would spend time in the kitchen creating recipes and spells. They often attempted many "ancient rituals and scientific experiments."¹⁶ This collaboration fostered an imaginative environment perfect for children and the artists occasionally included them in their experiments. Carrington had two children, Gaby and Pablo, and Horna had a daughter Norah, and they would all play together.¹⁷ Varo loved children and not just the children of Carrington and Horna. She grew extremely close to Lazarrga's children Xabiar and Amaya. Xabier remembers

¹⁵ Stephan Van Raay, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Katie Horna*, 18.

¹⁶ Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 160.

¹⁷ Stephan Van Raay, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Katie Horna*, 16.

Varo playing a divination game with him, similar to the Tarot, and she wrote notes on each card explaining the properties so that he could practice telling fortunes.¹⁸

Varo, a bit childlike herself, also enjoyed a good prank. For instance, she had a habit of writing strangers at random from the phone book with invented inquiries. In a letter addressed “Dear Stranger” Varo proceeds to invite the stranger to a party. The letter closes with some assurances that, while important and useful to know, are nontraditional as far as party invitations are concerned, saying, “Don’t be under the illusion that the room will be crossed with aurora borealis, nor by the ectoplasm of your grandmother; neither will it rain hams...I hope you are not a gangster or a drunk. We are almost all non-drinkers and half vegetarians.”¹⁹ Varo’s playfulness was accompanied by serious pursuits as well.

Varo and Horna were both interested in the philosophies of Gurdjiff and when encouraged by Sulzer, attended meetings of the Russian mystic’s secret society where the teachings were discussed. Sulzer was a member and committed to Gurdjiff’s teachings putting his “path to self knowledge” to daily use.²⁰ The philosophy also expanded to psychology and particularly the teachings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. These philosophies echo throughout Varo’s later paintings. It was not one element that caused the shift in Varo’s work from traditional European Surrealist style to using her own

¹⁸ Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 160-161.

¹⁹ Remedios Varo, *Cartas sueños y otros textos* (Mexico City, Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1997), 15.

²⁰ Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 172.

iconography but all of these new sensations and the chance for her to be free for the first time.

Time and stability were also factors contributing to the change in Varo's work. Once she had amassed all of this esoteric knowledge she needed time to work and a stable place to work in. Her romantic relationship with Walter Gruen was instrumental in Varo establishing her own visual style and language. Gruen offered financial stability that allowed Varo to move away from her job in advertising and she devoted herself to her art practice full time. Her mind had taken in such varied intellectual theories and representational systems, ranging from technical drawing to the anatomy of monsters to alchemical formulas, eventually formulating into a new aesthetic that functions as a practical translation of the metaphysical world. Her painting, *The Call* (Figure 17, 1961), is one example of her painstakingly detailed work, resulting in a scene that seems plausible even though it is invented. The painting balances architectural rendering, alchemy, and the quest for knowledge. In this instance a woman is literally enlightened, representing her coming into her own, and preparing to ascend to a higher intellectual plane while drawing on power from forces beyond. The central illuminated figure is surrounded by phantom-like figures emerging from a natural substance, most likely stone or wood.²¹ The figures appear restful with closed eyes, seemingly unaware of the mystic vision crossing in front of them. As the figure crosses in front of them, her shimmering gold and orange coloring stands in sharp contrast to the monochrome figures. The woman's lengthy, levitating hair latches onto a spherical star that has come down to

²¹ Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 167.

earth. This connection serves as a visual representation of her intellectual illumination.²² Gold is the color used in alchemical illustrations to represent the alchemist themselves; therefore it is fitting that Varo would choose gold, rather than a celestial silver or white, as the color for this particular subject. The glow transferred from the star encircles her body as she propels forward, floating, as if set in motion by an otherworldly force. The woman's face shows her eyes wide open in a hypnotic state. On her person are tools that will assist her with the mysterious call she has been chosen to answer. An alchemist mortar and pestle are worn as a necklace and she carries a "magical vessel," possibly an alembic container, holding a bright fuchsia liquid. Although this woman's mission is not as clear, the alchemical elements suggest that the science of alchemy is essential for her to complete her mission. Varo studied alchemy rigorously throughout her life and once she arrived in Mexico her studies intensified. She had a copy of *The Illustrated Anthology of Sorcery, Magic and Alchemy* by Grillo de Givrry.²³ Yet alchemy was just one science that Varo turned to. Along with magic and lost sciences Varo also had an interest in cutting edge modern sciences such as psychology.

Varo married many psychological theories in her art. Once in Mexico her interest in psychology became more present. Sigmund Freud's writings fascinated her, although her psychological readings went beyond Freud. She regularly read and discussed work from Carl Jung and Alfred Adler as well. Her painting, *Woman Leaving the*

²² Janet A. Kaplan, "Remedios Varo: Voyages and Visions" *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 2. (Autumn 1980- Winter 1981). 14.

²³ Tere Arcq. *Mirrors of the Marvelous: Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo* (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 102.

Psychoanalyst (Figure 19, 1960) is an obvious nod to her psychological studies. A woman exits into an expertly drafted geometric courtyard. The door she presumably emerged from is inscribed with “Dr. F.J.A.” In her notes, Varo wrote that the initials stood for Freud, Jung, and Adler.²⁴ Varo had a great interest in Russian Mysticism, specifically the teachings of Gurdjiff and Ouspensky, known as *The Fourth Way*. Although Varo was not officially a member of the Gurdjiff secret society in Mexico, she studied him closely. A large portion of *The Fourth Way* is focused on development of the higher self. Part of this journey is psychological work, observing the four states of consciousness, and self-study.²⁵ Finding one’s true self is the goal of *The Fourth Way*, and in Varo’s painting *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst* this self-discovery is illustrated by a literal removing of layers through psychological work.

As the patient takes her leave, a layer of her cloak floats away with an imprint of her face embedded in the fabric. She holds in her extended hand a disembodied head that she disposes of in a small pool at the center of the courtyard. Her eyes are focused forward, passively as she drops the head, as though she has already left it behind. While no longer emotionally attached to the head, there is a small basket peeking out from her cloak containing what Varo noted as “yet more psychological waste.”²⁶ This patient is on her way to discovering her true higher self, yet, there are more layers to be peeled away

²⁴ Janet A. Kaplan. *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 155.

²⁵ P.D. Ouspensky. *The Fourth Way*, 1-27.

²⁶ Janet A. Kaplan. *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*, 155.

and discarded into the pool. As she continues to engage in self-reflection and follows principles laid out by the psychological minds of the age, the basket will soon be empty and she will be free of all “waste.” Varo’s brilliantly articulated spaces pull the viewer in and offer a place that inspires meditation and reflection for our own psychological work.

Mexico freed Varo and empowered her, and ultimately was the genesis of her mature work. The assistance of Carrington and Horna, and Varo’s Surrealist family in Mexico brought her closer to her quest for a higher self. Her artwork allowed her to explore possibilities of magic as a way of understanding this world. The community in Mexico allowed Varo to embrace her breadth of knowledge and illustrate it.

In conclusion, to have a complete understanding of Varo’s paintings one must understand the complex relationships her intellectual interests had on her and how these studies informed her paintings. I assert that the intensity of esoteric study situated her outside the traditional cannon of Surrealism. By employing visual cues in a thoughtful manner, Varo sets herself apart from other Surrealists that adopted esoteric pursuits but did not use them to build a cohesive environment. This is important because previous scholars have taken a narrow view of Varo’s work and left the general understanding of her paintings superficial, choosing to focus on her surrealist associations more than the concepts that drew her to them. Varo’s paintings are fully developed constructions that depict alchemical and occult symbols intermixed with modern sensibilities. They are a rendering of Varo’s personal invention with additions of alchemical, astrological, and psychological studies. By examining the sources Varo pulled from I have contributed a new perspective of Varo’s paintings that has not been examined in a significant way before. Varo’s paintings are more than fanciful renderings and they deserve thorough

interpretation and attention. The sources of Varo's inspiration are the key to learning her personal symbolic language. Once the visual language is understood it becomes possible to translate the magical narratives created by Varo.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Remedios Varo, *Creation of the Birds*, 1957, oil on Masonite, 54cm x 64cm



Figure 2: Remedios Varo, *The Assentation of Mount Analogue*, 1960, oil on plywood, 67cm x 31cm



Figure 3: Remedios Varo, *The Escape (The Flight)*, 1961, oil on Masonite, 123cm x 98cm

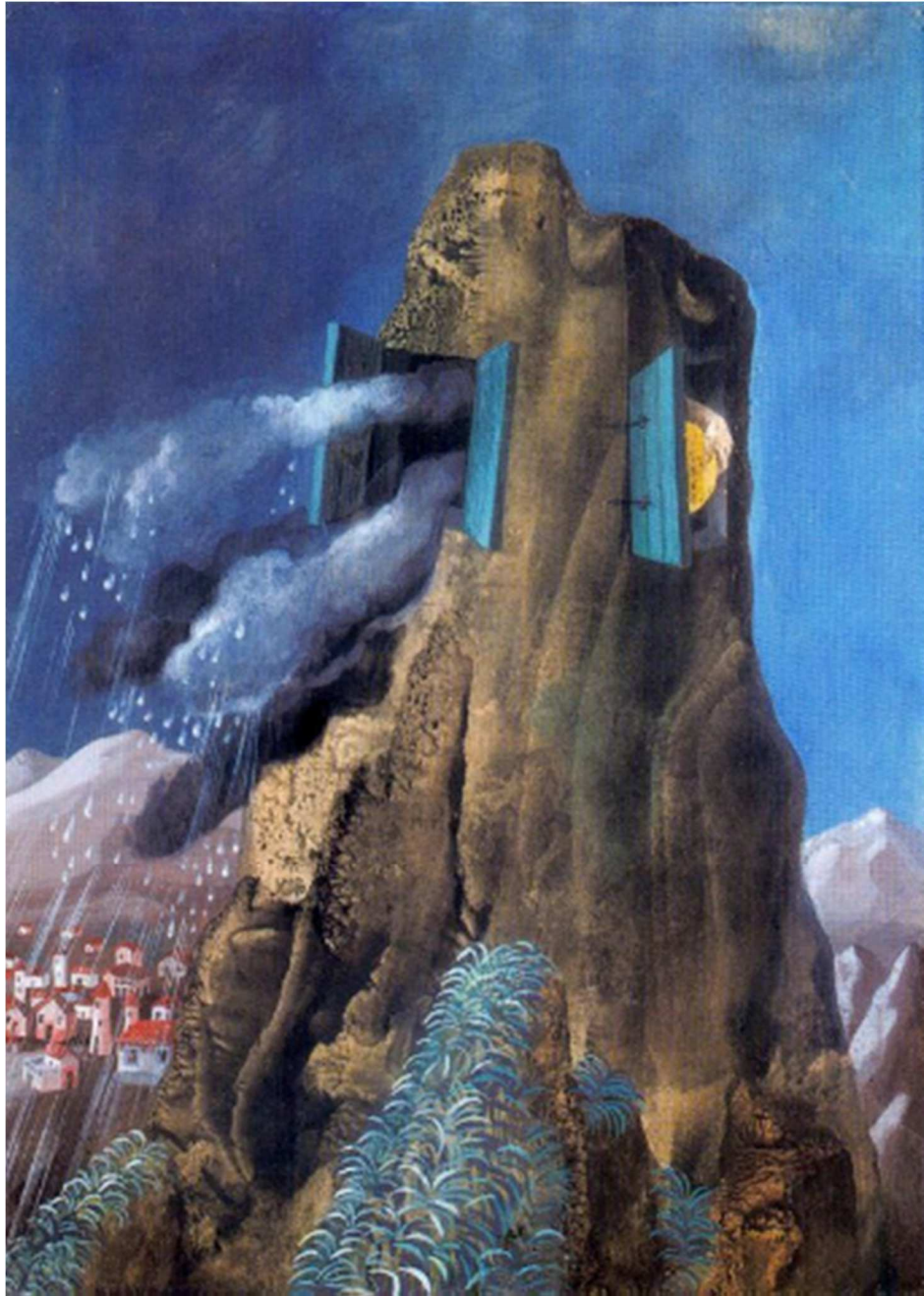


Figure 4: Remedios Varo, *Change of Weather (Coming of Spring)*, calendar page from Bayer Pharmaceutical, 1948, gouache on Bristol board, 28cm x 21cm

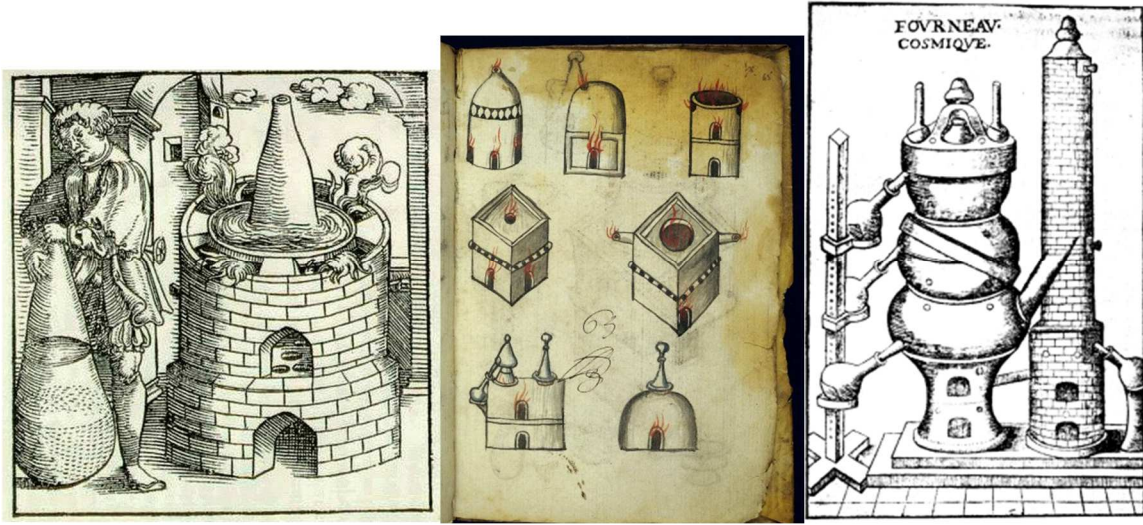


Figure 5: Images of Alchemical Furnaces



Figure 6: Hieronymus Bosch, Detail of *Paradise (Eden)*, left panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1500-1515, oil on panel, 220cm x 390cm



Figure 7: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1500-1515, oil on panel, 220cm x 389cm



Figure 8: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Hermit Saint Triptych*, 1483, oil on panel, 86.5cm x 120cm



Figure 9: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Conjuror*, ca. 1500, oil on panel, 53cm x 65cm



Figure 10: Remedios Varo, *Vagabond*, 1957, oil on Masonite, 55.9cm x 27cm



Figure 11: Remedios Varo, *Creation of the World (Study for Cancer Pavilion, Microcosm)*, 1959, gouache on Bristol board



Figure 12: Remedios Varo, *The Juggler*, 1956, oil and inlaid mother of pearl on Masonite, 91cm x 122cm

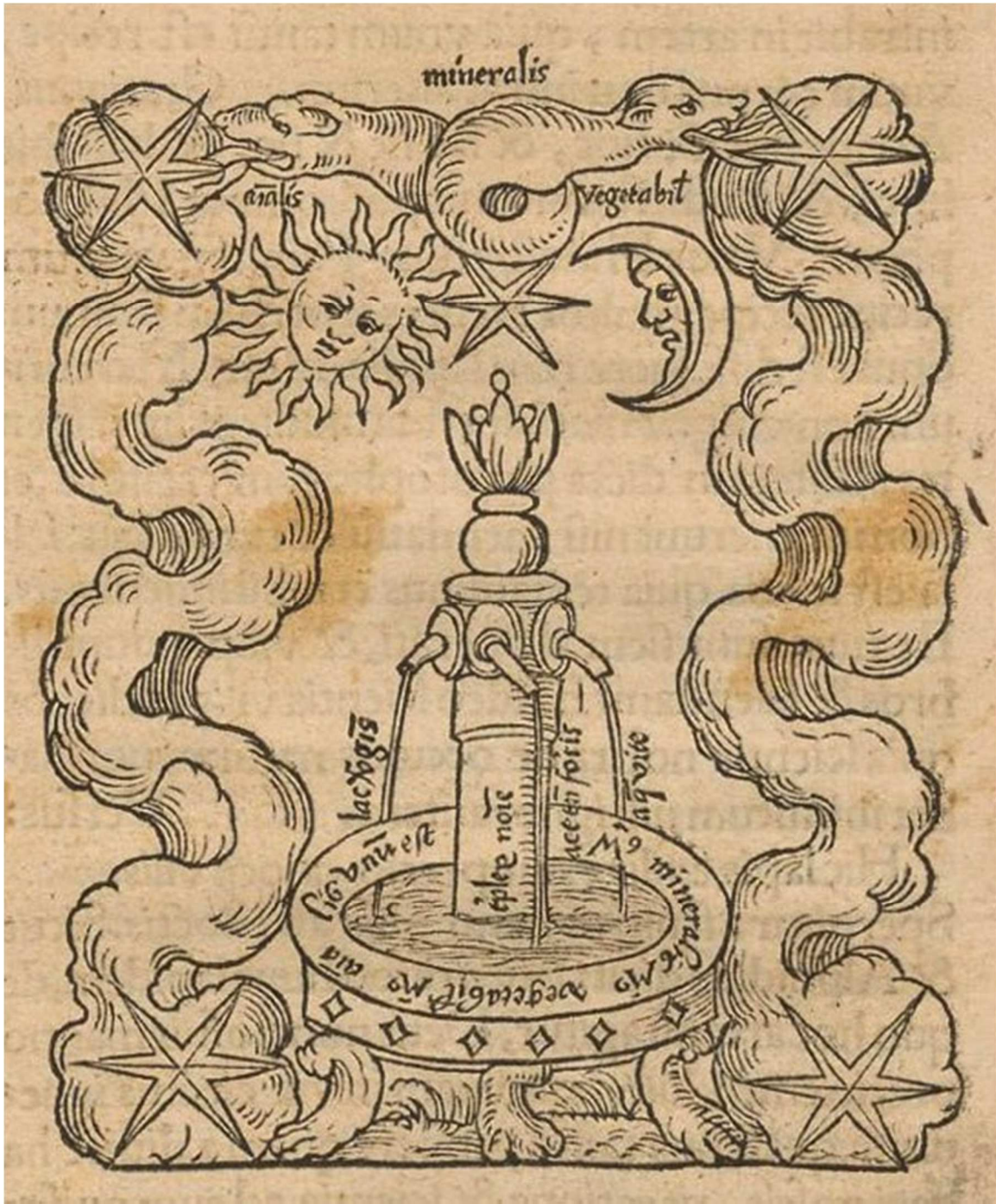


Figure 13: *Rosarium Philisophorum*, 1550, ink on parchment



Figure 14: Victor Brauner, *Les Amoureux (The Lovers)*, 1947, Oil on canvas, 92cm x 73cm



Figure 15: Remedios Varo, *The Lovers*, 1963, mixed media on Bristol board, 29.5 x 11.75"



Figure 16: Remedios Varo, *The Call*, 1961, oil on masonite

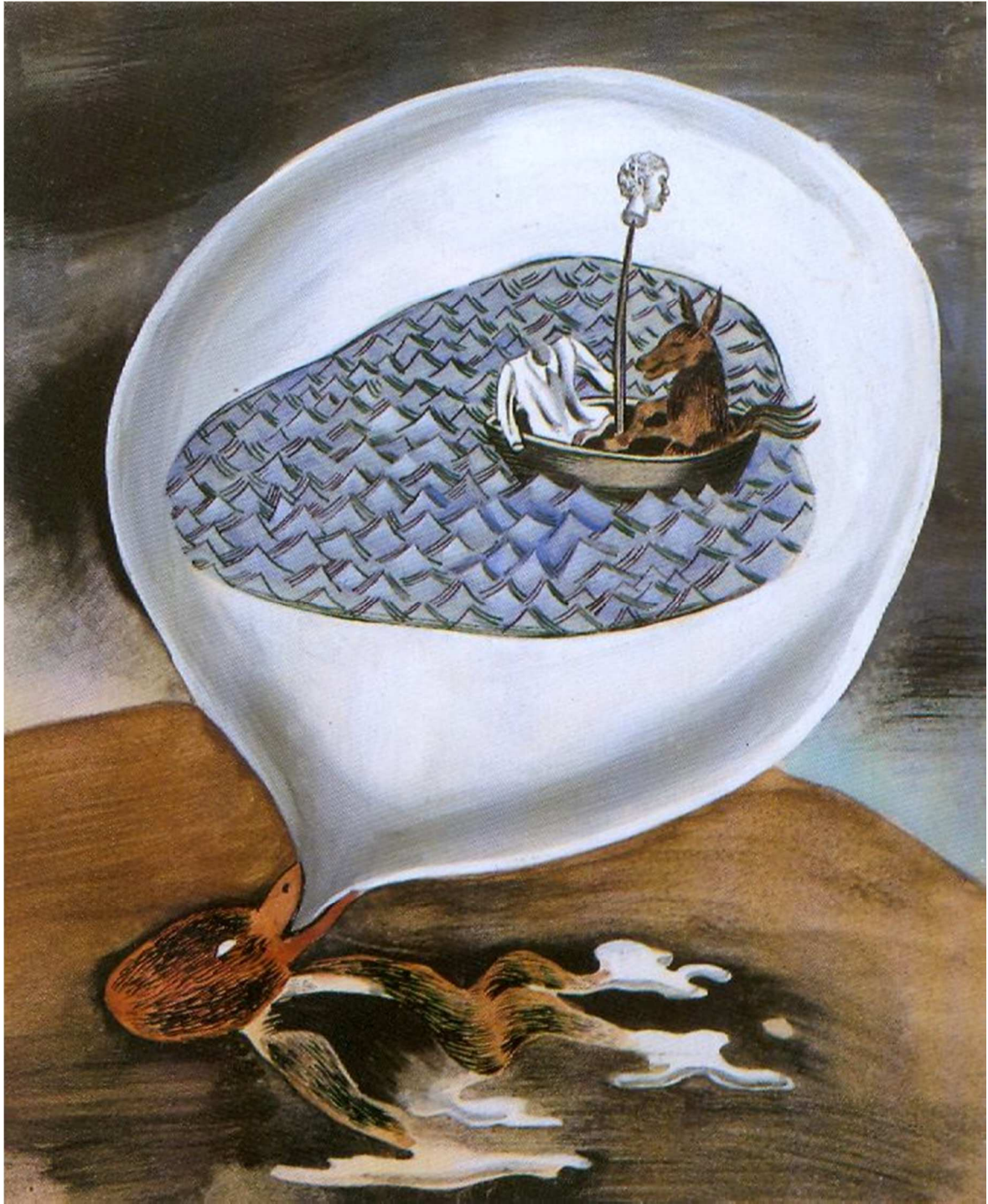


Figure 17: Remedios Varo, *The Crossing*, 1935, mixed media on paper



Figure 18: Leonora Carrington, *El Juglar*, 1954, oil on canvas



Figure 19: Remedios Varo, *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst*, 1960, oil on Masonite

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