Kay Miller – October, 2011 OOM

"Dear Diary – Never Since we Left Prague," Leonora Carrington, 2005.127.2

<u>Questions</u>:

1. What is going on in this painting? How would you describe the figures in it? What are they doing? What aspects of their appearance are most striking?
2. What symbols do you see in the painting? What do they suggest to you?
3. Some of the figures are incomplete. Why might the artist have chosen to portray them this way?
4. Consider the title of the painting. How might it be linked to the book on the floor?
5. There are a number of animals in this painting. What are they? What does their presence suggest to you?
6. What is on the table? What does that suggest to you?
7. Look closely at the draped woman on the right. What is she/he doing? Describe the animal on the pedestal in front of her.
8. What is the setting for this painting? What mood does the place and the depiction of the figures create for you?

Key Points:

1. Leonora Carrington is one of the most recognized and important female Surrealist painters – a woman who developed a distinct style in a creative milieu dominated by men. She produced thousands of paintings, sculptures, collages and tapestries. She was also a prolific writer, poet and playwright.
2. Carrington's paintings depict women and half-human beasts floating in a dreamscape of images drawn from myth, magic, sorcery, folklore, the occult and the ancient religions of the Egyptians, Celts, and South American peoples. Her half-human creatures often became agents of alchemical transformation.
3. Carrington's animals replace male Surrealists' reliance on the image of women as the mediating link between man and the marvelous. Her animals suggest the powerful role played by nature as a source of creative power for the woman artist. The white horse would become her most powerful and personal emblem, appearing famously in her 1938/39 self-portrait [below]. Autobiographical detail fills her work.
4. Her work often defines moments when one plane of consciousness blends with another.
5. She was one of the last living Surrealist painters of her era. In 2005, Christie's auctioned Carrington's "Juggler" [painted a year before the MIA's painting] for $713,000, a new record for the highest price paid at auction for a living Surrealist painter.

"The Juggler," Leonora Carrington, 1955

Surrealism:

In his 1924 Surrealism manifesto, French poet Andre Breton called on writers and artists to explore a world beyond everyday reality. The resulting Surrealism movement influenced many artists in the 1920s and 1030s. Breton's second manifesto would deal with the occult, a tradition that Max Ernst would embrace.

The concept of the unconscious was new at this time. Psychologist Sigmund Freud had recently described mental life as a struggle between the civilized, thinking mind and inner desires that we are not normally aware of. Freud believed that this understanding could help cure mental illness. The Surrealists, however, hoped to bypass the thinking mind and allow the unconscious to express itself, free from the constraints of reason, morality or good taste.

Since the unconscious mind is hidden from awareness, it is hard to know. The best opportunity comes in sleep, hypnosis or madness. Surrealists capitalized on the poetic surprises that came from painting, sculpting or writing about what came to mind – without a filter.

Some Surrealist pictures suggest images from dreams or trances. Unrelated objects and event combine in matter-of-fact ways, often in strange, confusing settings. The Surrealists sometimes used sleep and hypnosis to induce creative images for their work.

Paintings such as "Dear Diary," fall in line with such Surrealists as Rene Magritte, who painted fantastic scenes in a crisp and clear styles meant to make their visions seem believable and real.

Surrealists believed that sexual union would resolve the polarities of male and female into an androgynous creative whole. For Carrington, the horse became a symbol of sexual union.

Carrington Bio: (1917-2011)

Leonora Carrington was born to an upper-middle class family in northern England. Her father was a wealthy textile manufacturer, her mother, the daughter of an Irish country doctor. They lived in a variety of mansions. Her childhood was filled with Bible stories, fairy tales and Celtic legends, many of them told by her mother and Irish nanny. Leonora was a lonely child who cultivated an imaginary relationship with a rocking horse in the corner of her nursery – an image that later appeared in her paintings. The Celtic horse was faster than the wind and could fly through the air. The

mythical Queen of the Horses is the goddess of the Other World and her horse travels through the space of night as an image of death and rebirth.

Carrington's parents were strict Catholics. When Leonora was little, Leonora's mother had given her brushes and watercolors, the first of the faint encouragement she would offer in Leonora's desire to become an artist. When she was just 9 years old, Leonora's parents sent away her to the first in a succession of convent finishing schools, including Newhall, a former palace of Henry VIII. She was a misfit, an outcast, who rebelled against the nuns' strict rules and was repeatedly expelled from various boarding schools for eccentric and rebellious behavior. At wit's end, her parents sent her to Mrs. Penrose's Academy of Art in Florence. On returning to Britain, she enrolled in the London Academy of Art recently established by the French modernist Amédée Ozenfant. Her father was dead set against her becoming an artist and insisted she be presented as a debutante at the court of King George V.

At Ozenfant's academy, she became acquainted with the circle of Surrealists in London, including Max Ernst, whom she met at a party in 1937. The two fell in love and ran off to Paris, where Ernst (who was more than 25 years her senior) left his wife for his new "Bride of the Wind," then just 20. They renovated a group of old buildings in Saint Martin d'Ardèche, a village near Lyon. Ernst painted in the studio, covering the walls with cement casts of birds and mythical animals. Carrington worked in a small upstairs bedroom.

Their collaboration was artistically fruitful for both Carrington and Ernst, who shared a fascination with mythology, folklore and magic. Her paintings from their three idyllic years together were filled with themes and images from her childhood – animals and birds, mystery and fantasy – animal guides that led the way out of a world of men who don't know magic, fear the night and have no mental powers beyond intellect. Her growing artistic vocabulary of magical animals included the white horse.

The onset of World War II shattered their relationship. Many of the Surrealists, including Carrington, joined the Association of Artists (*Kunstler Bund*), an underground group of intellectuals formed to help get Jews and artists who opposed Hitler out of Nazi Germany. Ernst, a German Jewish citizen, was arrested and interned in 1940 first by French authorities, then by the Gestapo. Carrington was labeled an enemy alien. Convinced that she must leave the village or face imprisonment, Carrington had a mental collapse. She set her **pet eagle** free and fled to Spain with friends, abandoning their house filled with their paintings and sculpture. She hoped to procure a visa for Ernst in Madrid. But she and Ernst never reunited.

Paralyzing anxiety and delusions led to a second mental breakdown for which she was hospitalized in a Madrid asylum. There she was given **cardiazol**, a powerful, shock-inducing drug that filled her with images of pain and violence. The drug was administered to many female patients whom doctors diagnosed as suffering from "hysteria." She wrote about this experience in "Down Below." Her parents sent a former nanny to free her. But Carrington discovered they planned to transfer her to an asylum in South Africa. She escaped to Lisbon and sought refuge in the Mexican consulate in Lisbon. At the Lisbon consulate, Renato LeDuc, a Mexican diplomat, writer and friend of Picasso's, offered Carrington a marriage of convenience and a visa.

Carrington had heard nothing about Ernst and feared he had died in internment. Then in 1940, she ran into him and Peggy Guggenheim in a Lisbon market in the company of Peggy Guggenheim. Ernst had been released during the winter of 1940 and returned to St. Martin to discover that Carrington had given up the house and left France. Guggenheim came to his aid, romanced him and arranged passage to New York in 1941. Guggenheim later recalled two months of dreadful complications among the three in Lisbon. She described Carrington as melancholy and unhappy, weakened by mental illness and devastated by the loss of Ernst's love. The impact of these losses can be seen in Carrington's work 1940-44.

She and LeDuc sailed to New York in 1941 on one of the last ships to leave Europe during WWII. In New York, she rejoined the Surrealists – Duchamp, Breton and others – becoming a celebrity virtually overnight. Her first meeting with Ernst in New York occurred by chance at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, where she had a solo show of her work. The meetings caused both of them deep unhappiness. "I don't recall ever again seeing such a strange mixture of desolation and euphoria in my father's face as when he returned from his first meeting with Leonora in New York," Ernst's son, Jimmy, recounted. "One moment he was the man I remembered from Paris – alive, flowing, witty and at peace – and then I saw in his face the dreadful nightmare that so often comes with waking. Each day that he saw her, and it was often, ended the same way." Carrington's image appeared in many of Ernst's major paintings from that era [see "Napoleon in the Wilderness" below.]

Carrington and LeDuc finally arrived in Mexico City in 1942, where she rebuilt a life for herself. Their marriage was short-lived, though they remained friends. In 1946, she married exiled Hungarian photography Emerico "Chiqui' Weisz, with whom she had two sons. She and Weisz were the center of a circle of exiled European and Mexican artists that included Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and Remedios Varo.

Mexico, with its culture of mysticism and folk magic became Carrington's muse. Healers, witches and spiritualists freely practiced their arts. Carrington and Varo, an émigré Spanish artist, formed a close emotional and spiritual relationship. The two had been friends in France. They were the first women to sever their work from male creative models and collaborate in developing a new pictorial language that spoke to their needs as women. Whitney Chadwick called them "fellow travelers on a long and intense journey that led them to explore the deepest resources of their creative lives." They shared dreams and stories, and together studied alchemy, the Kabbalah and the mytho-historical writing *Popol Vuh* from what is now Guatemala. Carrington developed a pictorial vocabulary filled with surreal imagery derived from dreams, fairy tales and the traditions of domestic life. Her women cooked magical potions, tended alchemical fires and oversaw cauldrons of fertility and inspiration.

"For the first time in the history of the collective movement called Surrealism, two women would collaborate in attempting to develop a new pictorial language that spoke more directly to their own needs," Chadwick wrote. Yet, it appears that much of this was for their own satisfaction, not with the expectation of public acclaim. "I painted for myself," Carrington said. "I never believed anyone would exhibit or buy my work."

After the birth of Carrington's first son in 1946 and another in 1947, her work was rooted in a female vision of domestic life. The years between 1946 and the mid-1960s were spent juggling conflicting demands of motherhood and art. Carrington continued to search for enlightenment, spiritual development and a uniquely female visionary language. She used the image of the house and domestic activities as metaphors for woman's consciousness and as a way of rooting psychic awareness in the real world of motherhood – cooking, knitting and tending children.

In the early 1970s, Carrington was one of the founders of the Women's Liberation Movement in Mexico. She insisted on a woman's right to secret powers not shared by men.

Collector Edward James, who consistently supported her art, painted a vivid image of Carrington's disordered Mexican studio:

"Leonora Carrington's studio had everything most conducive to make it the true matrix of true art. Small in the extreme, it was an ill-furnished and not very well-lighted room. It had nothing to endow it with the title of studio at all, save a few almost worn-out paint brushes and a number of gesso panels, set on a dog-and-cat populated floor, leaning face-averted against a white-washed and peeling wall. The place was

combined kitchen, nursery, bedroom, kennel and junk store. The disorder was apocalyptic: The appurtenances [equipment, gear] of the poorest. My hopes and expectations began to swell."

The Painting: "Dear Diary – Never Since We left Prague":

- The title comes from the diary that lies open on the floor in the foreground.
- At the painting's heart is a mysterious gathering of shadowy, enigmatic figures, whose presence hints at a secret ready to be unveiled.
- Ghostly, gothic figures dressed in black are seated around a triangular table in a dimly lit room. They bear a strange, almost familial resemblance to each other with their pale skin and fluffy gray hair.
- All seated figures look at the elder male, who appears to be a patriarch and/or ideological leader. He holds a small ladder being climbed by a snake. (He has the same profile as the bust that is elevated on the pedestal to the right.) They appear as if they are in the middle of some mystical rite. It is partly a game of chance, as signified by the woman who has rolled one die.
- One of the standing figures looks directly at the viewer. She has no body below the shoulders. She and another standing figure may be in some state of demise and disintegration – as they are missing feet and other body parts. They may represent two generations in the cycle of family life – possibly the not-yet-born and the recently deceased.
- The setting is surreal: a mystical chamber with no obvious light source, other than the light emanating from the glowing figures in the room. The room is filled with strange, glowing insects, all in different stages of metamorphosis.
- On the right, a mysterious cloaked woman holding lunettes – possibly a visionary or seer - watches the ritual from behind a pedestal. She seems to be part sorceress and enchantress. One fully developed moth hangs next to the cloaked woman. At her feet are two transparent vessels, each endowed with male and female genitalia, symbolizing procreation.
- The presence of these vessels, the egg motif on the corner of the table and the insects – all in various states of metamorphosis – point to a theme of **fertility, procreation and the cycle of life**.
- An odd structure at the left, resembling a dream-catcher, may be a solar symbol that Carrington used in other paintings in this period.
- The painting is filled with a dramatic and esoteric code outlining the nature of fertility and birth. This is typical of Carrington's oeuvre and

her unique sensibility regarding women's creative powers and the transformative processes of the cycle of life.

- The dark colors are clear, the edges crisp, with imperceptible brushstrokes. It is executed with precision and delicate attention to detail. It demonstrates Carrington's attraction to nature and her affinity for the spiritual, even magical qualities found in the act of transformation.
- The work was ainted by Carrington in Mexico where spent the second, most mature and expressively creative part of her career

Carrington quotes:

"Sentimentality is a form of fatigue"

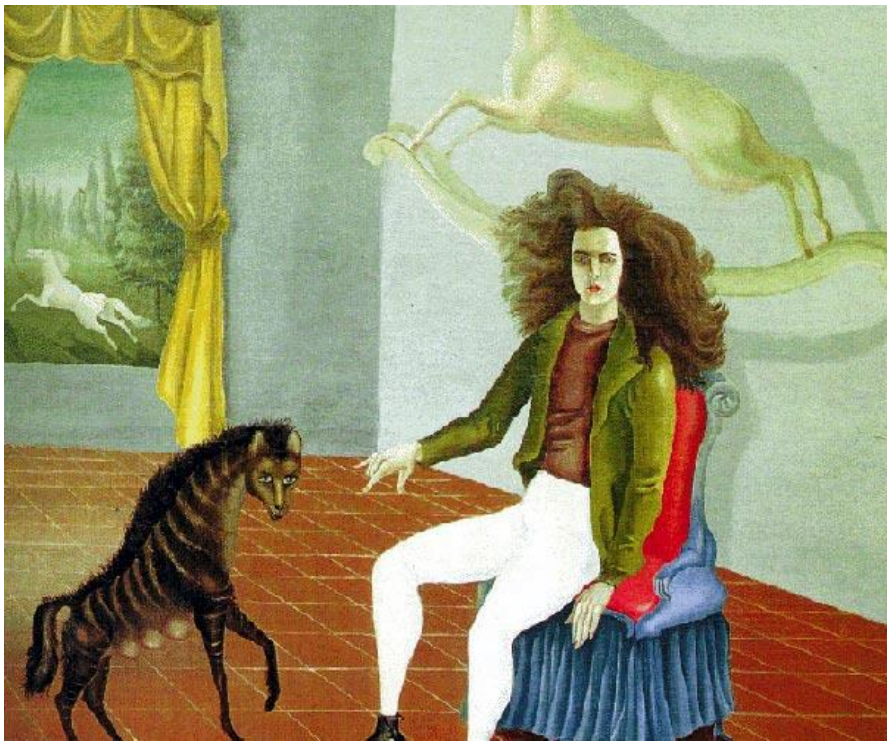
"Painting is a need, not a choice"

"In my opinion it is not good to completely admire anyone, including God"

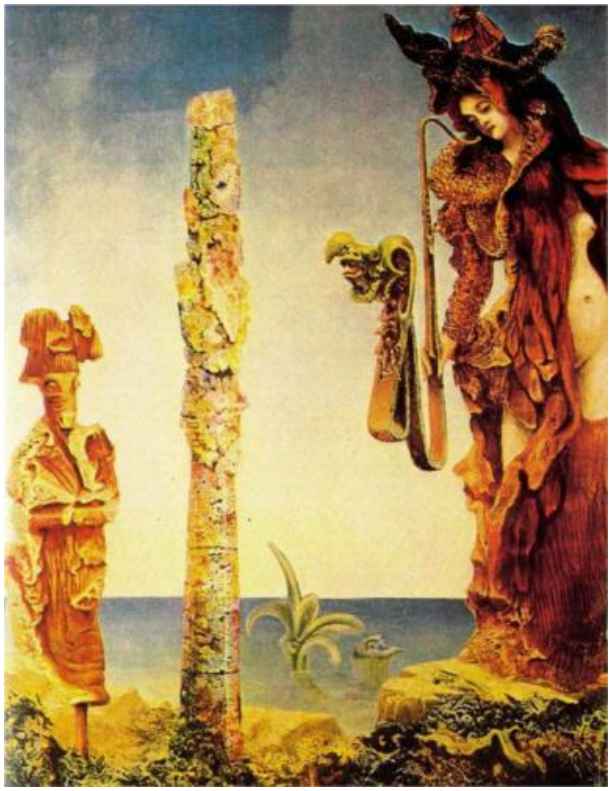
"Above all, the idea of death" (Responding to a question of what she fears most)

"I had no idea what maternal instinct was until I had my children."

"I didn't have time to be anyone's muse...I was too busy rebelling against my family and learning to be an artist."



"The Inn of the Dawn Horse (Self Portrait)," **Leonora Carrington, 1936, Metropolitan Museum of Art**



"Napoleon in the Wilderness," **Max Ernst, 1941, MoMA. Carrington's image appeared in a number of Ernst's paintings, during the years both were exiled in New York.**

Resources:

"A Surrealist Gift," Erika Holmquist-Wall, Arts Magazine, Jan/Feb. 2006.

"Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness," Whitney Chadwick, Woman's Art Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1,Spring/Summer 1986.

"Leonora Carrington is Dead at 94; Artist and Author of Surrealist Work," William Grimes, New York Times, May 26, 2011.

Accessions Committee Presentation, Sue Canterbury, Dec. 13, 2005.

MIA 5 Facts...Surrealism: http://www.artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/pnt-fivefacts.cfm?v=63

"Art and the Conditions of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation," Linda Nochlin, Poetics Today, Vol. 17, No. 3, Duke University Press, Autumn, 1996.