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## ART ESSAY

### REMEDIOS VARO

JANET A. KAPLAN

The painter Remedios Varo (1908-1963) was born in Spain, worked in France, and gained renown after settling in Mexico. She knew many worlds: rural Spain and North Africa, where she traveled with her family as a child; Catholic convent schools and the fine arts academy of Madrid as a young student; the artistic vanguard of Barcelona during the years of the Spanish Republic; the Parisian Surrealist group (including the poet, Benjamin Péret, who became the second of her three husbands), with whom she exhibited early experimental work; the chaos of wartime Marseilles and Casablanca, where she sought to arrange the many documents needed to escape the Nazis; and finally, the hospitable refuge of Mexico, where she created her mature work. Varo's startling and distinctive paintings were greeted with such resounding critical and popular success that from her first solo exhibition in 1955, she had to establish waiting lists for her many eager patrons.

When Varo died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-four, she left a small but innovative legacy of paintings, produced in the short space of ten years, which retains a significant position in twentieth-century Mexican art. Her posthumous retrospective, organized in 1971 in Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art, drew the largest audiences in its history, larger even than for Mexico's preeminent native son muralists, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. That a foreign-born woman, painting intimate, often whimsical pictures scaled to private response, could garner such success is noteworthy.

In intimate tableaux, Varo invites us into a world of her imagination that is not the world we know. It obeys other laws and follows other patterns. It is a reality apart. Here, properties of the

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organic and inorganic, the animal and the vegetable, the natural and the technological, interchange and overlap. Varo's world is peopled by owl artists, insect geologists, wood nymph musicians, and mystic explorers who outwit our arbitrary assumptions about how things ought to work. The world they inhabit is one of permeable membranes in which chair backs can open to reveal human faces, hands may reach out from behind walls, and table-tops peel back to expose organic roots. The inanimate moves, the hard is made pliable, the soft stiffens, bodies and their shadows become interchangeable.

This quality of an idiosyncratic universe of fantastic, yet plausible events is heightened by the extraordinary refinement of Varo's distinctive style. Drawing from a wide range of sources, including illuminated manuscripts, medieval architecture, and the paintings of Bosch, El Greco, and Goya, as well as those of her Surrealist friends, Varo worked with minute precision and delicacy of touch to create paintings that are masterfully rendered and painstakingly executed. She combined a miniaturist's attention to detail with Old Master techniques of glazing and varnishing, perfected through years of rigorous training, to produce jewel-like compositions. Although small in size, her works are monumental in scale with an intense power that seems magically charged.

Varo located herself at the center of her personal universe by endowing the characters who fill her scenes, whether female, male, or androgynous, with her own recognizable features. Placed in a variety of situations—some related to her own experience, others purely invented—these characters with the heart-shaped face, almond eyes, and long nose that mark the artist's identity serve as symbolic equivalents of Varo herself.

Beyond the wit and observant intelligence that friends are quick to recall, they also remember Varo as a very anxious woman on whom the forced deprivations and relocations had left deep and scarring wounds. As a child, she had enjoyed fantasies of adventure and travel; as an adult, however, she suffered the contingencies of war and exile. Themes of the traveler and the journey and ominous encounters with menacing figures can be seen as her way of exorcising the adult terrors while indulging the childhood fantasies. Exiled from her homeland, Varo embarked on a pilgrimage, both psychological and spiritual, to find deeper, more reliable roots.

Varo was fascinated by both mysticism and technology and read avidly of esoteric disciplines and scientific discoveries. She drew on dreams, alchemy, astrology, magic, and the occult, as well as on the newest developments in physics, chemistry, astronomy, archaeology, and engineering, as sources for her images. As a woman of Spanish upbringing and surreal inclination, working in Latin America, she explored the phenomena of this world as she invented its alternatives. Frequently, as the reproductions here demonstrate, Varo approached her subject from a distinctly female perspective.



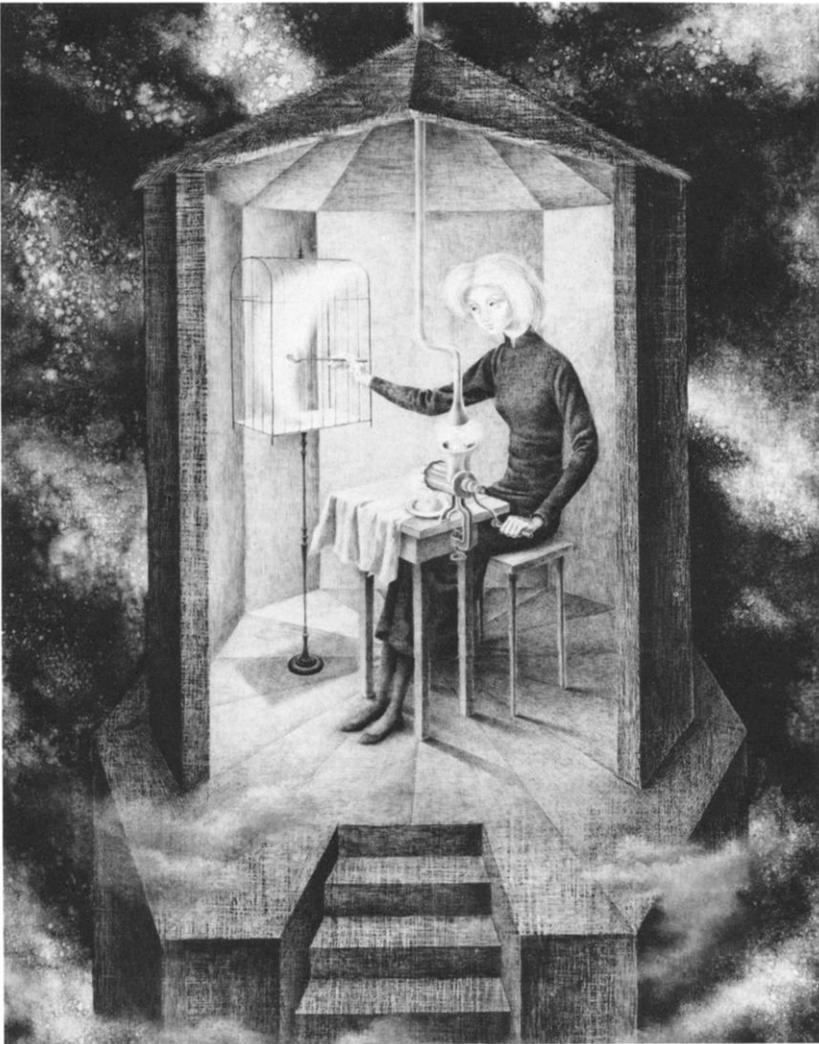
Remedios Varo, *Mimesis*, 1960. Oil on masonite, 47 × 49 centimeters. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

In this powerful study of female passivity, an isolated woman sits immobilized in an armchair, her flesh taking on the pallor of its fleur-de-lis upholstery, her feet and hands turning to wood. Bored by such inactivity, the sitting room furniture becomes animated, playing footsie and rifling through drawers. Although the pet cat seems astonished at this display of domesticated apathy, Varo suggests that such passivity may be a form of "protective coloration" (another definition of "mimesis") for women whose vitality has been enervated by domestic isolation.



Remedios Varo, *Unexpected Presence*, 1959. Oil on masonite. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

In this erotically charged scene, a young woman confronts strange sinewy vines that erupt through a peeled-back tabletop slit to slither across the floor. Amidst this uncontrolled vegetal growth, a man bursts through the chair back to lasciviously lick her neck, causing the fleur-de-lis decorations on the upholstery to hurtle into space as projectile weapons that pierce the wall and floor. Rupture, penetration, sinuous growth—within this mundane domestic setting, the release of such sinister fecund energy is particularly unsettling.



Remedios Varo, *Celestial Pabulum*, 1958. Oil on masonite, 92 × 62 centimeters. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

In a searing depiction of women's potential entrapment, a woman seated in a lonely polygonal tower floating among the clouds grinds star matter into a pabulum that she feeds to a crescent moon held captive in a cage. As the moon is trapped, so is the woman herself, confined in a cramped room, isolated not merely in her home, but in the universe as well. Taking on the traditional nurturant role, she performs the timeless maternal ritual, ministering to the moon as if it were her baby—but a baby in a cage.



Remedios Varo, *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst's Office*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 71 × 41 centimeters. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

Spoofing psychoanalytic theories about women and the process of individuation, Varo presents her heroine as a veiled woman exiting from a door marked with the sign of "Dr. F.J.A." (which Varo explained as a combined reference to Freud, Jung, and Adler). Proceeding to drop the disembodied head of her father into a small circular well, an act Varo described as "correct to do when leaving the psychoanalyst," the woman is able to free herself from one layer of her veil. But, just as her basket holds "yet more psychological waste," so other layers of the veil still remain, covering her mouth and leaving her mute.



Remedios Varo, *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 44 × 39.5 centimeters. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

This image of an intrepid traveler on a journey to find the source exemplifies the multiple levels of association that cohere in Varo's work: autobiographical references to her travels along the flooded banks of Venezuela's Orinoco River where she joined an expedition in search of gold; oneiric images of vest-coat boat and flooded forest that suggest subconscious travel; and alchemical associations with philosopher's gold, the liquid of transformation, here akin to the inexhaustible elixir of ancient mythic legends. Bound by the elaborate network of interlaced cords that tie her to her vessel, Varo's heroine is somehow constrained in the midst of her adventure, a tellingly ambivalent metaphor for psychic exploration.



Remedios Varo, *Solar Music*, 1955. Oil on masonite, 91 × 61 centimeters. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

Reflecting Varo's belief in the union of nature with art, a woodland nymph, who is wrapped in a grassy mantle, plays music on a sunbeam that has restorative powers. The sounds of her solar melody rising into the air release birds trapped in crystalline cocoons, restoring them to flight, to color, and (one imagines) to song. Varo suggests both mythic and personal identification in creating this magical artist, who clearly bears her features, and is so at home in the natural world that she can set animals free through her art.



Remedios Varo, *Harmony*, 1956. Oil on masonite, 74 × 93 centimeters. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

Here, music is the product of an androgynous composer, seated in a medieval study filled with alchemical equipment. Aided by ghostly women who reach out from the peeling walls, this magical musician, again bearing Varo's features, takes objects from a treasure chest—geometric solids, jewels, plants, crystals, handwritten formula—and places them on a treble cleff, creating the order of musical harmony from this chaos of possibilities.



Remedios Varo, *Still Life Reviving*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 110 × 80 centimeters. Courtesy of Walter Gruen.

In this, the last work that Varo completed before her untimely death, a still life tableau has magically come to life, its fruits becoming planets orbiting around a sun symbolically represented by a candle flame. In uneasy orbit, some fruits collide and explode, sending their seeds to the floor where they magically germinate. Enshrined in a chapel-like space capped with Gothic arches, this revival of dead nature (the literal translation of the Spanish "naturaleza muerta") can be seen as a resurrection. For Varo, a woman who experienced the devastation of two wars and the dislocation of two exiles, this final affirmation that destruction can yield to rebirth, stands as a powerful testament to hope and to the future.