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**The Use and Significance of Alchemy in the Work of  
Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini**

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**MPhil**

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## **Abstract**

The connections between alchemy and Surrealism are well known and well documented. However, the academic discussion of these two areas largely seems to marginalise the contributions of certain female artists. As female artists tied to an artistic movement by bonds of sex, love or marriage are sometimes regarded as being in the shadow of their partners, similarities in their works may be mistakenly attributed to mere imitation. In analysing the work of two relatively unknown female Surrealists, namely Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo, this thesis will demonstrate that, far from copying their male contemporaries, female artists use similar imagery to covertly assert their own identities and subvert male Surrealist ideology.

As the male Surrealists moved towards an idealised image of 'Woman', and began to erase references to female powers of procreation, attributing such powers to men instead, female Surrealist artists sought to reclaim these powers. The alchemical iconography employed by Fini and Varo not only reasserts woman's creative abilities, but also depicts an exclusively female reproductive process, which contrasts directly to the exclusively male process portrayed by their male contemporaries. Ultimately, through an in-depth iconographical analysis of their works, this thesis will clearly demonstrate that Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo use alchemical imagery as a surrogate expression of specifically female procreation.

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# Introduction

## Women and Surrealism

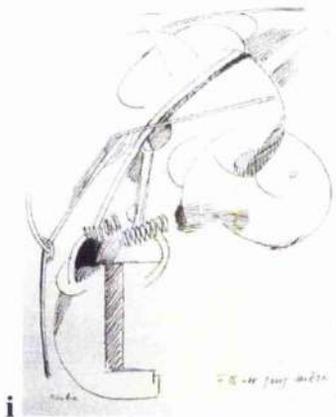
The women of Surrealism have only a marginal place within the movement, standing on the edges of the group. Their ideas and achievements are overshadowed by those of their male contemporaries, whose names are much better known. Though the male Surrealists argued for the social and sexual liberation of woman, they also leant towards a more idealised image of woman: the *femme enfant*. At once both sexually evocative and childishly innocent,<sup>1</sup> the *femme enfant* did not demand sexual satisfaction because she had no need of it. She was subservient to the male artist, acting as his muse. This archetype was applied to lovers of the male Surrealists, such as Gala Eluard, wife of Paul Eluard and later Salvador Dalí, and Leonora Carrington, Max Ernst's lover of the late 1930s.

The alter ego of this Surrealist archetype was the *femme fatale*, dangerous, seductive and sexually demanding. Depicted in Surrealist art through the Freudian image of the vagina dentata and the praying mantis, the *femme fatale* signified the unconscious fear of castration and the loss of masculine virility. It was partially as a result of these fears, that some of the key male Surrealists, such as Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, began to minimalise the woman's role in procreation, preferring the idealised image of woman as the *femme enfant*, or the muse. As Whitney Chadwick states in her essay *Eros and Thanatos: The Surrealist Cult of Love Re-enacted*, a primary concern amongst some male Surrealists was the

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<sup>1</sup> Whitney Chadwick: *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, 1985, p. 33

“symbolic transference of the procreative processes from the female to the male”.<sup>2</sup> This rejection may also be partially due to the Surrealists’ desire to distance themselves from social bourgeois institutions: “Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete nonconformism”.<sup>3</sup> After the Great War, people were encouraged to have children in order to make up for the loss of life that had been sustained. As this policy was sanctioned by the State, the Surrealists rejected it, proclaiming instead their preference for sodomy and the removal of the danger of pregnancy: “I [Breton] prefer sodomy for moral reasons and above all through considerations of nonconformity. No chance of a child with a woman one does not love, and that a woman one does love can abandon herself so seems to me infinitely arousing”.<sup>4</sup>



i Francis Picabia: *Girl Born Without a Mother* 1915, Ink on paper



ii Francis Picabia: *Here, This is Stieglitz* 1915, Ink on paper

An artistic example of this male-only fantasy of reproduction may be noted in Francis Picabia’s *Girl Born Without a Mother* 1915. The conglomeration of machine parts that represent the child’s body in this work has presumably been assembled by

<sup>2</sup> David Hopkins: *Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst: The Bride Shared*, 1998, p. 83. Chadwick’s essay is from *Art Bulletin* Vol. 14, 1975, p. 50

<sup>3</sup> André Breton: *The First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924); *Surrealists on Art* (ed) Lucy R. Lippard, 1970, p. 26

<sup>4</sup> Extract of *Research into Sexuality*, Alastair Brotchie: *A Book of Surrealist Games*, 1991, p. 91

a stereotypically male engineer, who thereby assumes the procreative abilities of a woman. However, this ‘daughter’ is a mechanised woman, able to reproduce mechanically without resorting to biological processes.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Picabia suggests that people can be made rather than born, an assertion that is emphasised by his ‘machine portraits’ of the same period, in which mechanical objects, such as a camera, replace human features. As the world of technology was, and to some extent still is, stereotypically gendered as male, then these mechanised creations have been brought into existence exclusively by men.

The mechanisation of human reproduction is also present in Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* 1915 – 23. The nine mechanised bachelors in the lower half of the glass fail to penetrate the bride, who is also represented by mechanical forms, and is perceived as a “dangerous machine”.<sup>6</sup> Is the bride rendered dangerous by her potential to reproduce? By circumventing sexual interaction with the vagina (and by association the vagina dentata) pregnancy is avoided while masculine virility is maintained. Duchamp may have agreed with this ‘dangerous’ nature of pregnancy as, when he eventually married aged 67, he chose a woman too old to have children, suggesting a desire to disassociate himself from women as biological creators.<sup>7</sup>

The dangerous nature of the sexual woman may also be noted, for example, in the *Dragon’s Court* episode of Ernst’s collage novel *Une semaine de bonté* 1934. The

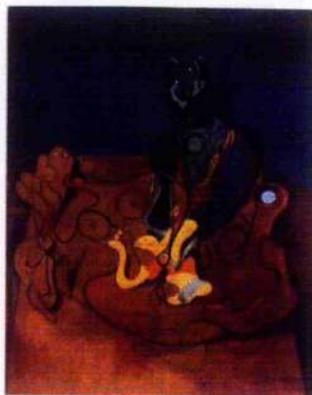
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<sup>5</sup> Hopkins, 1998, p. 75

<sup>6</sup> Chrissie Iles: ‘Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and the Desiring Machine’; *Marcel Duchamp – Man Ray 50 Years of Alchemy*, 2000, p. 23

<sup>7</sup> Hopkins, 1998, p. 78

vampire-like woman that dominates this episode is identified by Robert Storr as a demonisation of the sexually assertive woman.<sup>8</sup> By portraying the sexually active, and therefore potentially procreative woman in this negative manner, Ernst seems to suggest a preference for a more passive kind of woman; an archetypal muse.



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Max Ernst: *A Night of Love* 1927, Oil on canvas  
Private Collection

The reduction of woman's input into procreativity is notable in Max Ernst's *A Night of Love* 1927. In this work we note a dark male creature plucking a bird-like figure, symbolising Ernst, from the centre of two female forms. While this painting has been identified as Ernst's depiction of the violent role he believed his father to have played in his conception,<sup>9</sup> it is also suggestive of the passive role the mother plays. She is not the one with the power to place or remove the bird-Ernst from the womb as the father does; she merely acts as a vessel, thus effectively reducing her participation in the creative process. Similarly, Man Ray's *Man* 1918, an eggbeater, also conveys a negative message regarding female fertility. The egg is a key symbolic image, frequently used by Fini and Varo as well as by alchemists, in

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Storr: 'Past Imperfect, Present Conditional'; *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, (ed.) Werner Spies & Sabine Rewald, 2005, p. 61

<sup>9</sup> "I have been unable to get rid of a clearly unfavourable impression of my father's conduct on the occasion of my conception" (Max Ernst: *Beyond Painting* (1937); *Surrealists on Art* (ed.) Lucy R. Lippard, 1970, p. 119

connection with the womb and reproduction. By depicting man as an entity that destroys this potent image of procreation, Man Ray seems to suggest the elimination of the female aspect of the creative process.

It has been suggested that the Surrealists saw a woman's power to produce a child as a metaphor for the unconscious artistic creative process.<sup>10</sup> This may also suggest a reason why some male Surrealists sought to challenge the role of the female in reproduction: they too wished to be intimately connected with unconscious artistic creation: "...by adapting the frottage process...to the medium of painting...I succeeded in simply attending as a spectator the birth of all my works".<sup>11</sup> This ultimately suggests a trend within Surrealism that sought to negate the female as the creator of life, in favour of the female as a mere aid to artistic creation.

The women artists of Surrealism did not always accept this view. Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo are two artists who turn the tables on this current within Surrealism by using their art to depict a symbolic form of exclusively female procreation, in which male input is dramatically reduced. In practically any text on 'female' art, and not just that connected with Surrealism, emphasis is placed on the creative role of the woman artist, however, this 'creative role' needs to be defined. When Chadwick talks of woman's ability to create,<sup>12</sup> I imagine she means in both an artistic and reproductive sense. Yet it is this reproductive aspect that differentiates a woman's creative abilities from those of a man's, as he too is capable of artistic creation. If we

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<sup>10</sup> Celia Rabinovitch: *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros and the Occult in Modern Art*, 2004, p. 213

<sup>11</sup> Max Ernst: (1937); Lippard, 1970, p. 122

<sup>12</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 211

apply this argument to Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini, it is perhaps possible to uncover a reason for their use of alchemy that has not previously been considered. When we consider that Varo could not have children, and that Fini did not want them, it is possible to argue that they looked for another way to express their ability to create life. Alchemy, the science of creation, provided the imagery with which they could depict this specifically feminine creation in their art.

Despite the recent interest in the connection between alchemy and Surrealism, most of the discussion is reserved for male artists.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in texts on women within Surrealism, few mention alchemy in any great detail, and those that do do not engage in a detailed iconographical analysis, or explore their reasons for using alchemy in depth.<sup>14</sup> Whitney Chadwick in her *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* goes as far as saying that women artists “recognised an affinity between the hermetic tradition and woman’s creative powers, powers that were often disdained or repudiated by male-dominated society”,<sup>15</sup> but does not take this argument further in terms of alchemy as an expression of gendered procreation. Even the key monographs of Fini and Varo (namely Pierre Borgue’s *Leonor Fini ou le Théâtre de l’imaginaire: Mythes et Symboles de l’Univers Finien*, Lettres Modern, 1983, and

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the most recent examples that illustrate the connections between Surrealist artists and alchemy include David Hopkins’ *Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst: The Bride Shared*, Clarendon Press, 1998; M. E. Warlick’s *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of a Myth*, University of Texas Press, 2001; and Susan L. Aberth’s *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, Lund and Humphries, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Such sources include *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* by Whitney Chadwick, Thames and Hudson, 1985; *Surrealist Women: An Anthology*, by Penelope Rosemont, University of Texas Press 1998; *Mirror Images: Women Surrealists and Self-Representation*, (ed.) Chadwick, MIT Press, 1998; *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism*, by Katherine Conley, University of Nebraska Press, 1996; *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art*, by Robert Belton, University of Calgary Press 1995, and *La femme s’entête: la Part du Féminin dans le Surréalisme*, (ed.) Georgiana M. M. Colvil, Lachenal & Ritter, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 190

Janet A. Kaplan's *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1988) fail to engage in the link between alchemy and gendered creation to any great extent.

## Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini



iv

Remedios Varo, Mexico City



v

Leonor Fini, Le Monastère

At first sight Varo and Fini seem to be a rather disparate pair of artists. Though Varo's painting is often discussed in connection to alchemy, it is either discussed in isolation, or alongside the work of Leonora Carrington. By bringing Fini's paintings into my argument, this thesis will push the boundaries of previous criticism, demonstrating that the female artists' use of alchemical imagery, and the reasons behind such usage, is more widespread than formerly thought. This is indicative of a discourse among female Surrealists, suggesting that they formed their own tight-knit group akin to the male Surrealists.

Though the childhoods, personalities and painting styles of Fini and Varo are very different from each other, I will argue that they are inextricably linked through a

desire to express their independence and autonomy through the use of alchemy to portray an exclusively female form of procreation.

Remedios Varo was born in 1908 in Catalonia. She moved to Paris in 1937 with her then-lover, Benjamin Péret to escape the Spanish civil war. She was forced to flee again due to the occupation of France in World War II, this time to Mexico. Though it was only supposed to be a temporary measure, Varo adored her new found home and refused to return to France with Péret. While living in Paris, she and Péret were very poor, sometimes surviving on nothing more than a cup of coffee a day.<sup>16</sup> When she became pregnant, her economic circumstances led her to have an abortion, but it was botched, leaving Varo unable to have children.<sup>17</sup>

Leonor Fini by contrast did not want children, believing that traditional motherhood tied a woman down and held her back: “the humility [of having children] is inconceivable in the modern world”.<sup>18</sup> Born the same year as Varo, Fini was a rebellious child and remained something of a free spirit for the rest of her life, never marrying and engaging in scandalous behaviour. Thus we begin to see that, due to the personal circumstances or beliefs of these women, biological reproduction was not an option. They must find an alternative method of expressing their fertility without being subsumed into the bourgeois figure of a housewife. It was important that they retain their individual identities.

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<sup>16</sup> Janet A. Kaplan: *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, 1988, p. 63

<sup>17</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 131

<sup>18</sup> Xavière Gauthier: *Leonor Fini: Le Musée de Poche*, 1972, p. 74



vi

Meret Oppenheim: *Cannibal Feast* 1959

Many of the works by Fini and Varo under discussion date from the post-World War II period, a time when Surrealism sought to re-affirm itself through a resurgence of interest in automatism and eroticism.<sup>19</sup> This interest is evidenced by works such as Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* 1946 – 66, in which the spectator can peep at an explicitly posed female nude, and Meret Oppenheim's *Cannibal Feast*, whereby a nude woman was gradually revealed as the food placed on top of her was consumed.<sup>20</sup> However, whether this contemporary voyeuristic attitude towards the female body contributed to Fini's and Varo's depiction of female autonomy is debatable, as Fini's entire oeuvre can be considered in terms of the erotic and, though Varo's paintings sometimes reference love and romance, they are very rarely erotic. Therefore it may prove more profitable to largely compare their works with those executed by male Surrealists during the pre-war years, as it was during this period that both Fini and Varo were in close contact with the central Surrealist group.

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Gale: *Dada and Surrealism*, 1997, p. 408

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 409

## Alchemy

As Breton himself states in the *Second Manifesto*: “[t]he Surrealist’s investigations present a remarkable analogy of goal with those of the alchemists”.<sup>21</sup> The link between alchemy and Surrealism perceived by Breton was noted by other artists. Max Ernst, for example, states in his *Beyond Painting*: “What is collage?...It is something like visual alchemy”.<sup>22</sup> The way in which Ernst takes unrelated images and arranges them to create an entirely new picture is analogous to the alchemical process. In other words, the combined aspects of spiritual and material transmutation in the alchemical Great Work can be linked to the Surrealist aim of uniting the dream and the real, specifically expressed in the *Second Manifesto*.

Despite their place on the fringe of the Surrealist group, Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo shared this aim. We may note this through their detailed, realistic portrayal of figures in imaginary settings, or vice versa, thereby demonstrating the desire to combine the dream and reality. Though there is very little documentary evidence to support the argument that Fini and Varo chose alchemy to illustrate their portrayal of fertile woman, the imagery they use is highly suggestive of such a claim.

What sources were available to Fini and Varo to help them cultivate their understanding of alchemy? Anna Balakian cites Eliphas Levi’s *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual* (Rider, 1896) as one key source,<sup>23</sup> while M. E. Warlick states that Grillot de Givry’s *Musée des Sorciers, Mages et Alchimistes*

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<sup>21</sup> André Breton: *The Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929); M. E. Warlick: *Max Ernst: A Magician in Search of a Myth*, 2001, p. 102

<sup>22</sup> Ernst (1937); Lippard, 1970, p. 126

<sup>23</sup> Anna Balakian: *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism*, 1971, p. 35

(Librairie de France, 1929) was of particular interest to the Surrealists, as it contained information on Tarot, astrology and other divinatory methods as well as alchemy.<sup>24</sup> De Givry's book was also extensively illustrated and many of the alchemical texts he used as sources for his illustrations were available in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris during the 1930s. The texts available include Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum Aeternae Sapientiae* 1609; Salomon Trismossin's *Aureum Vellus* 1708; Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* 1652; Johann Daniel Mylius' *Opus Medico-Chemicum* 1618; Andraea Libavius' *Alchemia* 1606 and Barckhausen's *Elementa Chemicæ* 1718, many of which provide parallels to the paintings of Fini and Varo. However, it is unknown whether they consulted these specific texts, though we do know that Fini read *Les Noces Chémiques (The Chemical Wedding)* by Johann Valentin Andreae,<sup>25</sup> and that Varo read widely in occult literature, including the spiritual teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff,<sup>26</sup> the *I-Ching*, sacred geometry, Grail lore and alchemy.<sup>27</sup>

Because alchemy is an ancient discipline handed down the generations, its methodology and imagery changes from one alchemical author to the next. Even a relatively simple matter such as how many stages the material in the alchemical furnace (the athanor) goes through can range from as few as three to as many as twenty-two. However, the following description of the alchemical process, though basic, is accurate, and will suffice for my interpretation of Fini and Varo's works.

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<sup>24</sup> Warlick, 2001, p. 30

<sup>25</sup> Marcel Brion: *Leonor Fini et son Oeuvre*, 1963, n. p.

<sup>26</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff (1866 – 1949) was a Russian philosopher who travelled the world seeking lost knowledge on the true purpose and fulfilment of human life.

([http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/g/gurdjieff\\_g\\_i.html](http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/g/gurdjieff_g_i.html), accessed 22 / 09 / 06)

<sup>27</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 164

Alchemy is both a material quest to create the Philosopher's Stone, which turns base metals to gold and can be used to make the Elixir of Life, and also a spiritual quest whereby the alchemist seeks to purify his soul and become closer to God. If the alchemist fails in his attempt to create the Stone, it is because he is not pure enough. As the alchemist Michael Maier states: "I am convinced that the alchemist would be able to change lead into gold if he were pure enough in his whole life".<sup>28</sup> Before one can start the continuous heating and cooling processes, the alchemist must find *prima materia*: that which contains the elements of the Stone but in a very base manner. In allegorical terms this matter is Man, but in simply material terms it is acknowledged to be a compound of mercury and sulphur.<sup>29</sup> It is then placed in the alembic vessel (a form of crucible) and transferred to the athanor, where it will be subjected to continuous heat. As the material sheds its impure layers in a manner similar to the refinement of crude oil, it passes through three key stages, each one identifiable by a specific colour.

The first of these stages is the Nigredo or black stage. Speaking allegorically, alchemists describe this stage in terms of the sexual union of the King and Queen (sulphur and mercury), the birth and death of their Son, and the 'fixing' of the Bird of Hermes, meaning that the material becomes less volatile. In physical terms it means the melding of mercury and sulphur, which creates a black pulpy mass, and the subsequent evaporation and condensation of mercurial vapours, a process which

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Maier: *Atalanta fugiens: An Edition of the Emblems, Fuges and Epigrams* (translated and edited by Joscelyn Godwin), (1617), 1989, p. 78

<sup>29</sup> Paracelsus includes salt in this compound, insisting that all matter is made up of three ingredients. (*The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus Vol. I: Hermetic Chemistry*, trans. Arthur Edward Waite, 1894, p. 65)

'washes' the material and allows it to progress to the next stage, that of the white Albedo.

This next stage is gendered as feminine,<sup>30</sup> and if the alchemical material is left to congeal at this point in the Great Work, it will form the Luna Stone, which will turn base metals to silver rather than gold.<sup>31</sup> However, if the alchemist continues to apply heat to the material, it will pass into the Rubedo or red stage that signifies the appearance of the Philosopher's Stone. Due to the link between alchemy and Christian spirituality, the Stone is sometimes depicted as the risen Christ, the resurrected Son of the King and Queen. Otherwise it is illustrated as an androgynous figure, the product of combined male sulphur with female mercury. The symbolism and scientific terminology will be explained in more detail as we move through the analysis of Ficinus and Varo's work.



vii

Anonymous: 'The Resurrection'; *The Booke Of the Rosary of Philosophers* 1588



viii

Arnold of Villanova: 'Here is Born the Empress of All Honour'; *Rosarium Philosophorum*, 16<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript, Stadtbibliothek Vadiana, St. Gallen, MS 394a, f. 92

<sup>30</sup> M. E. Warlick: 'Moon Sisters: Women and Alchemical Imagery'; *The Golden Egg: Alchemy in Art and Literature, Leipzig Explorations in Literature and Culture*, (ed.) Alexandra Lemberg & Elmar Schenkel, Vol. 4, 2002, p. 184

<sup>31</sup> Stanton J. Linden: 'Reading the Ripley Scrolls: Iconographic Patterns in Renaissance Alchemy'; *Symbola et Emblemata: Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Symbolism, Vol. 7: European Iconography East and West*, (ed.) György Szönyi & E. J. Brill, 1993, p. 239

The following analysis of alchemical imagery as it is connected to specifically female procreation appears within five thematic strands common to both Fini and Varo's oeuvres. These themes are: sewing and costume, architecture and interiors, journeys and travellers, nature and, finally, gender. As well as a detailed discussion of the alchemical imagery used, each of these themed chapters will also contrast the art of Fini and Varo to that of key male Surrealists to emphasise the shift from specifically male to specifically female forms of procreation, and their search for autonomy and independence.

It is not just the imagery that they use but also the very visual character of the works themselves that demonstrate a link between alchemy and the art of Fini and Varo. As Breton writes in *The Second Manifesto*:

“[Flamel] liked to portray thus ‘a King with a great cutlass who was having a multitude of infants killed before his eyes...whilst the blood of said children was then gathered by other soldiers and put into a large vessel in which the Sun and Moon came to bathe’...Doesn't this sound like *the Surrealist painting?*”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> André Breton: *The Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929); *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (trans Richard Seaver & Helen R. Lane), 1969, p. 175

## Chapter One:

### Women's Work: Sewing, Costume and Alchemy

#### Alchemical Women's Work

For hundreds of years, a woman's contribution to the world of art was seen as being limited to the decorative arts. The gender associations connected with sewing, embroidery, knitting and other such handicrafts are, to this day, closely allied with the feminine.<sup>1</sup> Can it be argued that sewing and costume in the works of Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini can be connected with alchemy? If so, then how does this demonstrate their portrayal of woman's ability to give birth?

Alchemical images of women sewing are relatively rare. One of the few is an image from a 16<sup>th</sup> century manuscript entitled *Traité de la Cabale*, reproduced by C. G. Jung in his book *Psychology and Alchemy*. The title of this manuscript suggests that its author, Thernaud, was exploring the mystical Kabbalah, which, through its use of 'paths' of life and knowledge, is often linked to the alchemist's search for the Philosopher's Stone. From this we may note that, though the image of sewing is not a prevalent one in the alchemical tradition, it can still be identified as part of a larger body of hermetic material that influences and informs alchemical dogma. Much more common are emblematic alchemical images depicting women washing, or cooking, symbolising different stages of the alchemical process. The washing phase is

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<sup>1</sup> Rozsika Parker: *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 1984, p. 1

particularly significant in that it was the process that revealed the Luna, the Stone at its Albedo or white stage, allied with the feminine.



1.1  
Trismossin: Untitled image of women washing; *Aureum Vellus*, 1708



1.2  
Thenaud: 'Maternal figure presiding over the goddesses of Fate'; *Traite de la Cabale*, 16th century manuscript, reproduced in *Psychology and Alchemy*, by C. G. Jung.

The kitchen and the laboratory have a common heritage in alchemical history,<sup>2</sup> a concept particularly applicable to Varo, as she was known for concocting herbal recipes and potions in her kitchen with Leonora Carrington.<sup>3</sup> However, alchemical images do not restrict women to genre scenes of domestic life. In Thurn's *Quinta Essentia* 1574, the allegorised figure of Alchemy is depicted as a woman holding and surrounded by laboratory equipment. This is a nod to the legend that it was women alchemists such as Maria Prophetessa who invented alchemical vessels, in themselves images of creation and birth.<sup>4</sup> Thus we may argue that the female alchemist's role was not limited to cooking and washing.

As emblematic images of washing depict women scrubbing cloths, perhaps the idea of creating the cloth in the first place lends an extra sense of power to woman: she has created the material which needs to be 'washed' in the athanor, she is the

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<sup>2</sup> Warlick, 2002, p. 196

<sup>3</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 201

<sup>4</sup> Warlick, 2002, p. 184

supreme Creator. Perhaps in an effort to identify themselves as a similar creative being, Fini and Varo use sewing images in their works. Indeed, if we consider the imagery surrounding Fini's and Varo's 'needlework' compositions, a connection between sewing and alchemy becomes apparent.



1.3

Varo: *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle* 1961  
Oil on masonite, Private Collection

### **The Seamstress as Supreme Creator**

The central panel of Varo's *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle* depicts one of the clearest relationships between alchemy and sewing in Varo's work. Both Janet Kaplan and the novelist Thomas Pynchon observe that the convent girls working at their embroidery in the medieval scriptorium draw their thread from an alchemical vessel.<sup>5</sup> It is hard to tell exactly which phase of the alchemical process is being enacted here, as the alembic vessel being stirred by the masked adept is generically used in the repeated dissolution and coagulation processes. However, the fact that the girls seem to draw their thread from the upper half of the vessel, containing the purified matter, suggests that it is they who act as a secondary alembic vessel, transforming the purified thread into a living universe stretched out on the cloth

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<sup>5</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 21; <http://www.ottosell.de/pyncheon/varo.htm>, accessed 13 / 09 / 05

before them. This transformation reflects the ultimate evidence of the alchemist's art and purity of soul as it implies the use of the Stone to turn base material, in this instance cloth, into a precious material. Such an interpretation would adhere to the alchemical analogy that the alembic vessel is like a woman's body, as both allow the gestation of their products. How is an embroidered universe similar to an alchemical product, one may ask? Another alchemical analogy was that the creation of the world was an alchemical process, as it required the separation of one element from another. By separating thread from the base material contained in the alembic vessel, and using it to create their own world on cloth, Varo's figures may be re-enacting this alchemical analogy of the world's creation. Therefore, Varo's depiction of the creation of an embroidered universe may be likened to the ultimate creation of the alchemical process.

Varo also fits the role of God-like alchemist, as the 'self-portrait' protagonist in the work has embroidered herself meeting her lover on the edge of the cloth hanging down from the opening in front of her. This personal touch renders the protagonist mistress of the creation, placing her not only in a specifically feminine surrogate role, but also replacing the typically male Creator figure with a female one. This idea is perhaps underlined as we note it is the girls, particularly 'Varo', who do all the creating, the masked and presumably male adepts seems to play no part in it. This motif is repeated in one of Varo's short stories, entitled *Lady Milagra*,<sup>6</sup> in which the

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<sup>6</sup> 'Milagra' may be a feminised version of the Spanish word 'milagro' meaning miracle. This suggests a specifically feminine miracle, which may be connected to ideas of childbirth, which is often referred to as a miracle. Varo may have chosen to 'feminise' the ending of this word to 'agra' instead of using 'agro' as the phonetically similar ending 'agre' is etymologically rooted in the Latin for agriculture, implying a relationship with nature. This has the effect of enhancing the miraculous,

hero has a wealth of knowledge at his disposal, but he is unable to put it to any use without the intervention of the heroine.<sup>7</sup>

Not all of Varo's sewing images are quite so conspicuous in terms of alchemical iconography. In *The Weaver of Verona* 1956, an androgynous knitter sits working in a bare room, as the textile he or she has created takes the shape of a woman and flies out of the window. Meanwhile, a loose thread from the knitter's wool twists upwards to the ceiling where it forms the shape of a crescent moon. The crescent moon is representative of the female principle in alchemical art, and the fact that it comes from the knitter's wool and hovers above them suggests that the knitter, androgynous or otherwise, is under the influence of the female principle, and their creation has been brought into existence by this principle, hence why it is female.



1.4

Varo: *The Weaver of Verona*, 1956, Oil on masonite

Does a female creator lead to a feminine product? In alchemy, the union of the male and the female leads to an androgynous product. In this work, the knitter's product is red, perhaps to symbolise the Rubedo stage of the Great Work, a stage thought of as androgynous. Yet the textile the knitter has created is clearly female, and even bears

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creative power of the woman in question. See also discussion on Fini's *Sphinx Philagrie* in Chapter Four p. 100

<sup>7</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 190 - 1

Varo's facial features. This suggests that alchemy is not just a means through which the female can create, but also be created. It could be argued that the use of a specifically feminine method of alchemical creation, i.e. needlework, yields female results. This reading contrasts with the way in which artists such as Picabia and Duchamp used concepts of procreation; they could strip away the influence of a female creator and still be left with a female result, as in Picabia's *Girl Born Without a Mother* 1915. A male artist could take pride in a female creation because she is suggestive of his inner, unconscious muse, whereas the inclusion of a conscious female creator would detract from his masculine virility.



1.5

Varo: *The Red Weaver*, 1956  
Oil on canvas, Private Collection



1.6

Varo: *Weaver*, 1956, Mixed media on paper, Private Collection

There are two other works that use the theme of the weaver. The first, *The Red Weaver*, is similar to the previous work in that it too depicts a weaver or knitter whose red, feminine textile is flying out of the window. However, in this work the knitter is clearly female and is coloured entirely black. Perhaps this implies the fulfilment of the alchemical process, as the Nigredo knitter's features are reproduced in a Rubedo textile. The lack of anything suggesting the middle Albedo stage in this work appears significant – is Varo saying that the entire process is feminine and so therefore a specifically feminine stage is obsolete? When we consider that the knitter

of *The Weaver of Verona* seems to be composed from a black shapeless mass wrapped in a white blanket, it would appear that Varo still considers the white Albedo stage to be of importance. Therefore, it is perhaps better to argue that the lack of the Albedo phase in *The Red Weaver* is more to allow an emphasis on the shift from base to perfected, rather than a negation of the age-old view of the gendered stages of alchemy. If the theory that *The Red Weaver* emphasises the attainment of a higher spiritual aspect is correct, then we may relate this to Varo's personal goals, as she too wished for spiritual enlightenment and fulfilment. It is the quest for this that is examined in many of her other works.

*The Red Weaver's* greatest difference from *The Weaver of Verona* is Varo's depiction of the use and source of the knitter's yarn. While we cannot see where the knitter gets her thread for the red woman in this work, unlike *The Weaver of Verona*, Varo illustrates thread in other interesting ways. The cat in the foreground plays with a ball of yarn, and, by doing so, unravels his own tail. Similarly, a black thread leads from the night sky itself to become a coil hanging on a hook from the ceiling, while various other hooks and pins seem to hold human shadows. Such imagery would suggest that this black woman, like the knitter or weaver of Verona, is a supreme Creator. Her room is like the workshops found in other paintings by Varo such as *Harmony* 1956 and *The Creation of the Birds* 1957, only as those figures give life with nature's artefacts and paint, the weaver gives life through her thread. This again places the female knitter in the position of Creator, a position that runs parallel to that of the male alchemist, allegorical Creator of the world.

Another work that explores the theme of the weaver in a slightly different way is one simply entitled *Weaver*. In this picture the weaver sits outside a smaller version of the building depicted in *The Weaver of Verona*, and is weaving at a loom, rather than using needles to knit. The cloth she creates twists and floats into the sky while a parallel beam of light falls from the sky onto the loom. On one level, this may be interpreted as cosmic harmony aiding artistic creation, an alchemical analogy which frequently appears in Varo's work, and which we will note elsewhere. However, on another level, this image may be tied in with concepts of specifically feminine creation allied with religious and alchemical allegory.

As Rozsika Parker eloquently demonstrates in her book *The Subversive Stitch*,<sup>8</sup> embroidery, and by association sewing, became increasingly seen as a specifically feminine pastime.<sup>9</sup> This was because it was the names of men, as patriarchs of guilds and cottage industries, which can be predominantly found in the record books of the sewing industry;<sup>10</sup> sewing for pleasure was a woman's occupation. Varo, along with Arp, Tauber and Hoch, to name but a few, inherited this belief.<sup>11</sup> Does the combination of this feminine sewing and alchemical imagery suggest an alternative method of depicting a woman's ability to produce a child?

The concept of cosmic energy is an alchemical concept, whereby the efforts of the adept and the stages of the Great Work are influenced by and mirrored in the Heavens. However, we may also find additional support for an alchemical reading of

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<sup>8</sup> Rozsika Parker: *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, The Woman's Press Ltd., 1984

<sup>9</sup> Parker, 1984, p. 5

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 44

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 190

this work in its religious significance. The apocryphal Gospels contain stories of the Virgin's childhood, such as her education, which included embroidery. The stories surrounding the Virgin's early life were so popular that they were often embroidered on pre-Renaissance clerical garments.<sup>12</sup> As a Catholic brought up primarily in a Catholic nation, it is not unlikely that Varo knew of the stories surrounding the Virgin's childhood and may even have seen one or more of them on an embroidered clerical robe. As Varo read widely in occult literature, she would have been aware that alchemy and religion go hand in hand.<sup>13</sup> For any self-respecting alchemist the Virgin represents the alchemical Queen, she who marries the King (God), and produces the Son (Christ). Thus, such a scene as that reproduced in *Weaver* focuses power on the alchemical female – the fact that her work is shown as returning to the Heavens portrays her as an innate part of the cycle of cosmic energy and the alchemical process. Varo is using the medium of sewing to portray the alchemical female as the ultimate Creator of life, as well as subverting the teachings of her Catholic upbringing by depicting this Creator figure as a woman as opposed to a man. Similarly, the apocryphal Gospels were popular during the superstitious, medieval era of Catholicism, suggesting Varo turns away from modern Catholic rationality, just as Breton advocated in his *Second Manifesto*: "We would not want Surrealism to be at the mercy of this or that group of persons; if it declares that it is

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<sup>12</sup> Parker, 1984, p. 52

<sup>13</sup> This may be noted in alchemical illustrations which reference Christian dogma, such as the Resurrected Christ depicted on page 10. It is also visible through the fact that notable alchemists such as George Ripley and Thomas Aquinas were churchmen. For a fuller discussion of the link between alchemy and Christianity, see Gareth Roberts' *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, The British Library Press, 1994, pp. 78 - 82

able...to uproot thought from an increasingly cruel state of thraldom...then that is enough".<sup>14</sup>

Varo is not alone in her use of sewing and needlework as a metaphor for specifically feminine alchemical creation, it is also visible in the work of Leonor Fini. An example of Fini's representation of needlework occurs in her 'Guardian' phase of approximately 1954 - 1960. The Guardians in themselves are alchemically emblematic, for instance, both *Gardienne à l'œuf Rouge* and *Gardienne des Phénix* depict bald 'women' holding eggs, one red, the other white:



1.7



1.8

Fini: *Gardienne à l'œuf Rouge*, 1955      Fini: *Gardienne des Phénix*, 1954  
Collection of S. Flen

The egg symbolises the Philosopher's Stone's growth in the athanor and, while the red egg implies that it has reached the final stage of its development, the white egg is suggestive of the feminine. The fact that these eggs appear outside the bodies of the Guardians suggests that it has not gestated inside them – it is an alchemical creation removed from feminine biological processes. However, this does not mean that Fini does not identify with the athanor / womb analogy. Her *La Dame Ovale* of 1959

<sup>14</sup> Breton (1929); Lippard, 1970, p. 28

portrays an egg shaped womb; here the egg is a foetus but this woman's facial expression is closed off; her eyes are shut, her features emotionless, unlike the other Guardians. This negative portrayal of *La Dame Ovale* in contrast to that of the Guardians in the works above implies that pregnancy is something to be avoided. Biological procreation entraps a woman, whereas using a surrogate liberates her.<sup>15</sup>

There has been some debate as to whether Fini's Guardians are female or androgynous.<sup>16</sup> Though they have feminine facial features and breasts, it must be remembered that the breasts are mannequin-like: flat and seemingly prosthetic. I think Fini intended them to be a reflection of her own beliefs on sexuality – ambivalent and ambiguous. However, female or otherwise, the fact that they engage in the feminine activity of needlework may help to argue for a reading of alchemy as a reassertion of woman's reproductive powers.



1.9

Fini: *La Couseuse* 1955

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<sup>15</sup> Pierre Borgue: *Leonor Fini, ou le Théâtre de l'Imaginaire*, 1983, p. 193

<sup>16</sup> In her article 'Leonor Fini: Preparing to Meet the Strangers of the New World' (*Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1980, <http://www.jstor.org>, accessed 14 / 11 / 2005) Estelle Lauter refutes Gloria Orenstein's claim that the Guardians are androgynous. Instead, Lauter argues that they act as embodiments of the ancient ideal of the Virgin and therefore are conclusively feminine.

In Fini's *La Couseuse (The Seamstress)*, we note a Guardian figure sewing a shapeless piece of material. Pierre Borgue states that the shaved heads of the Guardians represent *des têtes* heads and / or eggs.<sup>17</sup> If we accept this interpretation, the Guardian is immediately connected to the cyclic notion of life inherent in the alchemical process. Borgue also states that the Guardians link the feminine with cosmic energy, something apparent in *La Couseuse* through the "hieratic" way in which she sews – without prior contemplation or control.<sup>18</sup> In this way she represents the channelling of cosmic energy into one's creative task.<sup>19</sup> This link between the cosmic and needlework perhaps *suggère* a link to the macro / microcosm. If we take this as true, then this needlework parallels the alchemist's Great Work, as both rely on cosmic energy channelled through the relationship of the macro / microcosm. Thus, sewing is not only a metaphor for feminine creation, but also the alchemical process as a whole.

### **Varo and Fini's Alchemical Costumes and Designs**

Very little has been written on the costumes made and designed by Fini and Varo, despite their employment in theatre design, or the numerous photographs of Fini in fancy dress. Kaplan records that Varo had made her own clothes since childhood, as she claimed that tailors had no concept of the female figure. As she became an artist, sewing became "another outlet for her ever-restless creative energy".<sup>20</sup> Thus we may note that, for Varo, sewing is an act of both artistic and surrogate biological creation. Varo's personal love of sewing appears in her oeuvre through her interest in costume and designing.

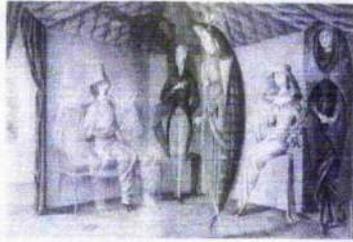
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<sup>17</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 195

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 187

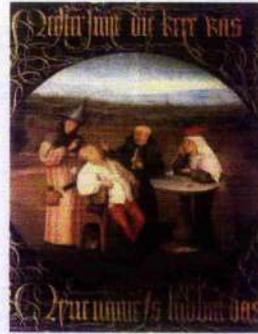
<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 186

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 101



1.10

Varo: *Tailleur Pour Dames*, 1957,  
Oil on masonite



1.11

Hieronymus Bosch: *The Cure of Folly*  
c. 1488, Museo del Prado, Madrid

In her *Tailleur pour Dames* 1957 the three women in the centre and to the right are models showing off the tailor's latest creations. The woman on the far right is a *femme fatale* figure, wearing an outfit designed for a widow: "[The] effervescent cloth [is] like champagne, has a little pocket for carrying poison, and ends in a very becoming reptile's tail".<sup>21</sup> The woman closest to the wall is a socialite as she wears an ensemble that allows her to set down her drink and have a seat at parties.

However, the model at the centre of the composition, and therefore arguably the one Varo intended the viewer to focus upon, is wearing an outfit that doubles as a boat, complete with rudder and a compass.<sup>22</sup> This portrays the woman as a traveller. Varo attached great importance to the idea of the quest and often equates it to the allegorical alchemical quest for the Philosopher's Stone. Thus the red costume of the central woman may be equated to that of an alchemist who has achieved the Stone. Similarly, the cone shaped hat the tailor's customer is wearing is very similar to that worn by another of Varo's figures, which Kaplan rightly compares to Bosch's

<sup>21</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 101

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101

depiction of the incompetent alchemist, in his *Cure of Folly* c.1488.<sup>23</sup> Thus the figure of the alchemist and / or the creator is defined by costume.

Varo and Fini both designed costumes for various theatrical productions. However, while it is certain Varo made these costumes, it is difficult to determine whether Fini brought her designs to life personally. While desperate for money in Mexico, Varo designed and made costumes for Jean Giraudoux's *Madwoman of Chailot*, (with the help of Leonora Carrington), Leonid Massine's ballet *Aleko*, (this time with the help of Chagall), and Pedro Calderon de la Barca's *Gran Teatro del Mundo*, with hats in particular becoming her specialty.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, there is no longer a record of what Varo's original costumes for these productions may have looked like.

Varo also designed costumes for parties. One of the most interesting of these is a costume incorporating a complex headdress. Made from papier-mâché, lace and rope stitching, the triangular hood is stiffened and wimple-like, similar to those Varo knew from the Catalan frescoes of her youth.<sup>25</sup> This style of hood appears in a number of her paintings, including *The Vagabond* 1957 and *Visit to the Past* 1957, in both of which the main protagonist is a traveller, suggesting a connection between costume and travelling, and therefore potentially with the figure of the alchemist, who is also frequently identified as a traveller, as previously noted in *Tailleur pour Dames*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 200

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 98

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 102

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion of the alchemist as a traveller.

This hood also has, on either side of it, a papier-mâché face, recalling the multi-faced pre-Columbian figures Varo used to collect from the Tlatlico area, as well as the three versions of both customer and models in *Tailleur pour Dames*. Tlatlico means “where things are hidden”,<sup>27</sup> perhaps calling to mind a site of secret knowledge. The fact that Varo has chosen to transfer this knowledge via the medium of handicrafts perhaps genders this knowledge as female.

The idea of ‘three’ is alchemically important too, as the three stages of the Great Work reflect the Holy Trinity. The three models in *Tailleur pour Dames* are dressed in black, pearly white and red attire, the red belonging to the important figure of the traveller, thus reflecting the three stages of the alchemical process. The three faces on a triangular hood may also act as a reference to this, thus locating sewing, handicrafts and costume in a tradition of alchemical creation. However, another influence may be that of Greek images of the mythical figure of Hecate, goddess of the moon, the underworld and queen of witches.

Statues of Hecate left at crossroads depict her with three faces.<sup>28</sup> As already noted, Varo read widely in occult literature and it is likely she would have known of such depictions of Hecate. Thus, if Varo is using this triple faced costume to invoke both alchemical doctrine and a figure that exemplifies some of the key symbolic attributes of woman, it can be argued that she is illustrating a connection between alchemy and the female. However, the witch, unlike the alchemist is a destroyer rather than a creator, yet this serves to further identify such female figures with the concept of a

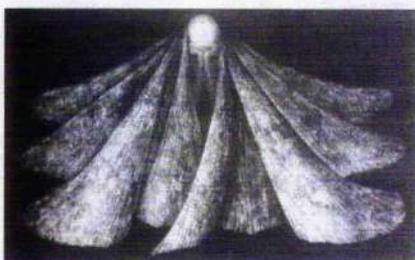
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<sup>27</sup>Kaplan, 1988, p. 104

<sup>28</sup> (ed.) Felix Guirand: *Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology*, (trans. Richard Adlington and Delano Ames), 1959, p. 190

supreme God-like Creator, who has the power to both create and destroy. This double aspect of the female ensures she is not seen as a particular stereotype; she is a more complex creature who cannot be defined in terms of *femme enfant* or *femme fatale*.

By contrast, though Fini certainly designed costumes for *Le Concile d'Amour* by Oscar Panazzi, there is no evidence to say that she made them. In costumes possibly designed for Fini's own use she becomes the personification of her painted characters. For example, the flowery headdress she wears in a photograph with Ernst and Enrico Colombotto recalls the floral attire she gives to the women of her later works. Similarly, this image of Fini at Le Monastère in 1968 is reminiscent of the iridescent wings she gives to Guardian figures such as *L'Enroulement du Silence* 1961. Leonor Fini is identifying with the ambivalent sexuality of the Guardians and she is also emphasising their autonomy by portraying herself as a powerful shaman figure dressed in a similar costume.



**1.12** Fini: *L'Enroulement du Silence*, 1961, Oil on canvas



**1.13** Photograph of Leonor Fini at Le Monastère, 1968

Though most of Fini's costume designs are too revealing to have been intended for theatrical productions, it is still interesting to look at them for their own value. Her

women characters tend to wear flimsy dresses of a gauzy material that only begins below their breasts. This type of clothing appears prominently in her later paintings, particularly those of the *Voyage en Train* series (c. 1960 – 70), suggesting these designs were made at approximately the same time. Borgue interprets the sensual, dreaming figures that appear in Fini's paintings of this period as representing the other, subjective side of the dreaming woman.<sup>29</sup> Could the figures that populate Fini's drawings be representative of her own subconscious? They are often placed in highly sexual poses, or else cavort with Death, both of which are key themes in Fini's oeuvre.

The sexuality of these costume designs is not only inherent in the often transparent, insubstantial garments, but the ways in which Fini uses costume to emphasise certain body parts. In her women, apart from making sure their breasts and genitalia are prominently displayed, she often splits the garment to expose the woman's abdomen – the site of the womb. In some instances the women have slightly rounded stomachs as though they were mid-way through a pregnancy. This costume may have been influenced by the image 'Maternal figure presiding over the goddesses of Fate'.<sup>30</sup> As the Surrealists were familiar with Jung and his work, it is not unreasonable to argue that Fini knew of Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* in which this image was reproduced. The image Jung chooses is an unusual depiction of the Fates as it portrays them sewing rather than cutting threads, they are depicted in the act of creating life rather than destroying it. The Fate to the far right wears garments that emphasise her breasts and stomach in a similar manner to many of Fini's characters,

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<sup>29</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 123

<sup>30</sup> See p. 16

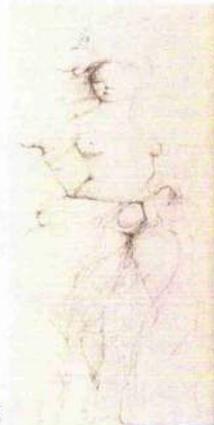
suggesting that Fini is linking her characters with the concept of a supreme Creator, in this case one of the Fates, through the medium of sewing and costume.

This argument may be extended if we note the similarities between Fini's costume designs and the Pre-Hellenistic Great Mother goddess. The Surrealists were well versed in Greek mythology. Masson, for example, uses Gradiva and Pasiphae while de Chirico obsessively returns to the figure of Ariadne in his works.<sup>31</sup> The Great Mother could be depicted in the nude, or in the guise of a Cretan woman. In the latter case, she wore a flounced skirt, and left her chest bare, or else she wore a corsage that covered her chest but left her breasts exposed. Her hair was depicted as either left loose, knotted or put up in a turban decorated with flowers.<sup>32</sup> These details are remarkably similar to the costumes of Fini's figures, and combined with the fact that the Great Goddess primarily symbolised fertility, it seems plausible that Fini is using this specific type of costume to suggest a supreme female Creator.



1.14

Fini: *La Dame Ovale*, 1959



1.15

Detail of untitled and undated drawing illustrated in *Fêtes Secrètes*

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<sup>31</sup> Examples include Masson's *Gradiva*, 1939, and de Chirico's *Melancholy*, 1912.

<sup>32</sup> Guirand, 1959, p. 87

A particularly interesting example of this type of costume, which is comparable to Fini's *La Dame Ovale* is reproduced above. Here we note the characteristic traits of her costume design: the flowing and insubstantial garment is an almost standard feature of these designs. However, the area of belly exposed is smaller than that of other works and egg shaped, just like that of *La Dame Ovale*. This is the only design in the *Fêtes Secrètes* collection in which the facial features have not been completed. Have they purposefully been left blank? If we note that the blank side can be lined up with the position of the exposed stomach then it can be suggested that the two are connected and imply a negative attitude towards this site of biological procreation. Similarly, we may note other women with exposed stomachs are also portrayed negatively, whether it be through their angry facial expressions or through being placed in threatening situations. This may suggest that Fini is using costume to explore the differences between sexuality and fertility: the former is to be celebrated and the latter is to be shunned. She is negating traditional views on feminine sensuality and procreation, suggesting she uses costume to explore a new definition of female fertility.

Despite potentially being of a later period in Fini's career, these costume designs continue her obsession with cycles of life and death that dominate her works of the 1930s and 40s. There are a number of designs that feature at least one skeletal Death figure. The inspiration for this motif may be traced to Hans Baldung Grien's *Death and the Maiden*. Often, the Death figures dance around wearing flowers and similar garments to Fini's other costume designs for women, suggesting the simultaneity of

life, fertility and death. Another image that investigates this relationship is that of a hanged woman.



1.16

Untitled and undated drawing illustrated in *Fêtes Secrètes*



1.17

Untitled and undated drawing illustrated in Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna exhibition catalogue, 1983

The costume this woman wears is much more substantial than most of those of Fini's other designs, which may suggest it was intended for a theatrical production, but without dates and titles on the drawings it is hard to support such a claim. The dress is again made of gauzy material, but it covers the breasts and genitalia. A flower in the woman's hair illustrates the relationship between death and regeneration.

Similarly, in another version of this drawing, the alchemical relationship between life and death is much more apparent, as Fini reverts to the more frequent motif of explicitly exposed stomach and breasts. In this version, this woman is joined by another, also with her stomach left exposed by her costume. Thus it may be possible to read this image as alchemically charged; depicting the putrefication process explored previously in her earlier chaotic nature compositions. These images therefore effectively demonstrate that both Fini and Varo used costume and costume

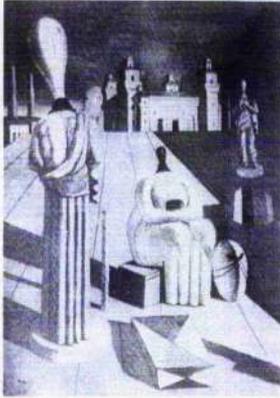
design as an extension of the relationship between alchemy and an alternative form of female childbearing.

### **The Alchemist's Doll: Mannequins in Surrealist Art**

As part of the sewing / handicrafts discussion, it may prove useful to draw attention to an image which further extends the metaphor of sewing, alchemy and creation – that of the mannequin. The first thing to notice about the Surrealist use of mannequins is that it is predominantly men who use them, for instance: Bellmer's *The Doll* series, de Chirico's obsessive use of the mannequin motif in works such as *The Disquieting Muses* 1917, and *Mannequin (Morte del Milione)* 1918, and the 15 mannequins dressed by various members of the Surrealist group for the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*. Moreover, these latter mannequins and those of Bellmer often act as a site for misogyny or complex gender constructions. Masson's gagged and caged mannequin is an often-cited example of misogynist attitudes in Surrealism, while Duchamp's contribution to the street of mannequins is dressed in the artist's clothes, but bears the name Rose Selavy signed across the androgynous genitalia.<sup>33</sup> Why then does Fini choose to use the mannequin, an apparent tool of misogyny and gender confusion, as a model for her Guardians, mistresses of female creation?

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<sup>33</sup> Alyce Mahon: 'Staging Desire'; *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, (ed.) Jennifer Mundy, 2001, p. 280



1.18

Giorgio de Chirico: *The Disquieting Muses*, 1917



1.19

Man Ray: *Coathanger*, 1920

Fini is turning the notion of the mannequin on its head. The male Surrealists seem to have used the mannequin as a passive figure on which to project various concerns and concepts. Instead, Fini portrays the mannequin as an active force; it no longer wears the clothes and fashions forced upon it, but creates them itself, as we may overtly note in Fini's *La Couseuse*. It is no longer at the beck and call of the tailor; it is the tailor. Fini gives the mannequin autonomy, and in doing so, grants autonomy to her sexually ambivalent Guardian figures, thus giving the tasks they perform a greater significance.

This argument is enhanced by the fact that de Chirico often depicted stitched mannequins in his works. That is to say that the stitch marks where the mannequin has been sewn together are made clear to the viewer, as we may note in *The Disquieting Muses* 1917. Similarly, Man Ray's *Coathanger* 1920, which can be compared to a mannequin, reduces the real life female model, hidden behind a jointed cardboard cut-out on a pole, to an object – an object specific to the female domestic sphere. Again, Fini changes the mannequin from the stitched to the stitcher

– the mannequin becomes the site of creation rather than its model, just as the Surrealist woman uses her art to disassociate herself from her role as a muse and become autonomous. In addition to this, the idea of giving life and power to a lifeless object mirrors not only female procreative powers, but also the alchemical idea of reanimating ‘dead’ material. Thus the image of the mannequin in Fini’s art may be said to combine concepts of both alchemy and femininity, implying that the two are connected through sewing and handicraft iconography.

In conclusion, iconography connected with sewing is not unique to female Surrealists, but it is they, specifically Varo and Fini, who explore it and connect it to a surrogate form of creation. Sewing, embroidery and other such handicrafts are arguably feminine art forms, thus providing the most blatant link with a sense of female procreation.

Though sewing and handicrafts were beginning to be reclaimed as an art form in their own right, they could still be equated with the domestic. However, by portraying sewing as a surrogate form of creation, as something that replaces woman’s perceived domestic role of producing children, Varo and Fini rejected traditional interpretations of this activity, thereby encouraging a new reading of the female. In this way they may also be seen as challenging Surrealist views by installing women as creators of both life and art, instead of merely seeing them as destroyers or muses. The fact that they connect their sewing images with alchemical iconography perhaps suggests a challenge to certain male Surrealists in iconological terms, as they too used alchemy as a major source for their imagery. Thus it may be

argued that this challenge is aimed at overturning the male Surrealist's attempt to reclaim creative power from women.

## Chapter Two:

# Domestic Laboratories: The Alchemical Significance of Architecture and Interiors

### Female Space

“Space itself has always been seen as feminine and devalued in relation to the masculine element of time...femininity is connected with chaotic and disorderly space, while logocentric space remains masculine.”<sup>1</sup>

This quotation from Doreen Massey’s *Space, Place and Gender* can be directly applied to the work of Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo. Their crumbling, decayed structures, or untidy, disordered interiors are immediately at odds with all that is logical and clear. By choosing to oppose ordered, logical structures in their depiction of architecture and interiors, Fini and Varo effectively illustrate Massey’s argument; women can indeed be allied with the chaotic.

The arch in itself is interesting as it is often found alongside cave and locked garden symbolism in alchemical images.<sup>2</sup> While the cave is seen as an age-old symbol of feminine fertility,<sup>3</sup> the locked garden is representative of virginity.<sup>4</sup> The curvaceous

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<sup>1</sup> Doreen Massey: *Space, Place and Gender* 1994, p. 258; quoted in ‘Gender Space’; Jane Rendell, *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, (ed.) Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden, 2000, p. 107

<sup>2</sup> For example, Henrich Khunrath’s *Amphitheatrum Æternæ* 1609 contains an image in which a succession of arches lead back through a cave in order to suggest the alchemist’s progress. Similarly, the *Codex de Sphaera* c. 15<sup>th</sup> century uses an image entitled *The Fountain of Youth*, which depicts a walled garden entered via archways.

<sup>3</sup> Rabinovitch, 2004, p. 207

<sup>4</sup> The locked garden, or *hortus conclusus*, carries two associations that allow it to be identified with virginity. Firstly, it is suggestive of the Garden of Eden, the golden age of man when humanity was

shape of the arch amplifies the association of the cave and the locked garden with the feminine. When an alchemist writes of entering the garden through an archway or similar, it is suggestive of sexual penetration, as the vast number of alchemists undergoing this allegorical journey would have been men. This metaphorical act of intercourse mirrors the sexual union of the King and Queen, which, in some alchemical accounts, takes place within the *hortus conclusus*. This chapter will demonstrate that, by focusing on architectural edifices such as arches, doorways, towers and staircases, Fini and Varo are emphasising the femininity of a particular space. As these types of architecture can be linked to alchemy, this again seems to argue for a 'feminine' reading of their use of alchemical imagery.

Similarly, the image of the alchemist at work in an indoor laboratory is also fairly common in alchemical art.<sup>5</sup> Fini's mysterious interior scenes, teeming with ritualistic meaning, and Varo's use of the domestic interior as a site of "transcendent discoveries and magical creations",<sup>6</sup> imply a link with the secret workings of the alchemist's laboratory. The concept of the interior as a site of transformation and creation is also referenced in emblematic images of women washing or cooking, which act as metaphors for stages in the Great Work. Thus, it can be argued that there is a clear tradition in alchemical art surrounding the magical interior, and Fini

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still ignorant of sexual lust. Secondly, the female genitalia are often visually referenced through floral iconography. Thus by locking flora and fauna away, the woman's sexual organs are protected and her virginity is maintained.

<sup>5</sup> Examples include *The True Alchemic Laboratory*, in Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* 1652, and *Chemical Laboratory at Utrecht* in Barckhausen's *Elementa chymiae* 1718. Both were reproduced by Grillot de Givry in his *Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy*, 1929 which M. E. Warlick identifies as a key occult text for the Surrealists in her book *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of a Myth*, 2001, p. 32

<sup>6</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 215

and Varo may well be appropriating this tradition to continue their analogy of alchemy as a form of female surrogate creation.

## Arches and Doorways



2.1

*Servant to the Secret Alchemy*, illustrated in  
*Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* 1652

The archway is most prevalent in the image of the alchemical *hortus conclusus*, though it also appears as a key architectural form in illustrations of the alchemist's laboratory. For instance, in this image from Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* 1652 we note that a rounded archway frames a scene in which the haloed owl, symbolic of wisdom, heralds two angels who preside over an older alchemist in the process of passing his secrets onto a young adept. The plants and naked figures that decorate the archway imply creation, a concept mirrored in the border decoration for this image, which depicts flowers and rabbits, creatures well known for their ability to reproduce quickly. The reason such imagery has been used is to suggest the reproduction of knowledge as it is passed on. Therefore, the arch is vital to this image, as it suggests procreation through its association with the female and its connection to the penetrative connotations of the *hortus conclusus* archway.

Moreover, as the cycle of the Great Work can be compared to the female reproductive cycle, the use of architecture as akin to the vagina or womb emphasises the notion of reproduction. Thus, if the archway can be linked to intercourse and childbirth, it can be argued that Fini and Varo are using it to emphasise the connection between alchemy and female fertility.

The doorway may be substituted for the archway in alchemical iconography. For example, in Herbert Silberer's translation of an anonymous alchemical parable,<sup>7</sup> the protagonist must pass through a door to enter the secret garden beyond. On proceeding through this door, he is confronted with both the garden and a covered passageway "just as if it was in a well built house",<sup>8</sup> which has more locked doors leading from it.<sup>9</sup> The protagonist is confronted with two spaces that are typically gendered as female: the locked garden and the house. Thus the doorway performs the same function as the archway in that both represent the sexual penetration of the female, and the entrance to a feminine location.



2.2

Fini : *La Porte du Convent* 1959, Oil on canvas

<sup>7</sup> See Silberer's *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts* (trans. Smith Ely Jelliffe), Dover Publications, 1971, pages 1 - 18

<sup>8</sup> Silberer: *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts* 1971, p. 6

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6

The arches and doorways that appear in alchemical images are neat and tidy. If we accept Massey's interpretation of female space as being chaotic then these arches suggest a union of masculine space with feminine structure. This union may be allied to that of the alchemical King and Queen, thereby emphasising the most fundamental process of the Great Work. By contrast, Fini's *La Porte du Convent*, 1959, depicts a crumbling, overgrown portal. She combines the curvaceous feminine archway with chaotic feminine space, clearly demonstrating a specifically female presence in this image. This female presence is emphasised by the plant-life that has sprung up around the convent door: leafy vines climb the walls; saplings protrude from cracks in the brickwork, while branches and shrubs litter the threshold. The fact that this convent door is no longer barricaded to the outside world and has been overrun by nature, suggests the breakdown of the virginity that is associated with the structure of the convent.<sup>10</sup> Thus, by allowing nature to intrude and the entrance to fall into disrepair, Fini depicts the decline of convent values; fertility and sexuality have replaced abstinence and purity.

However, there are certain aspects of this work that seem to suggest Fini portrays creation, biological and surrogate, in a negative light. The cracked decaying walls that appear around the arch are also visible in the space beyond, a space that could be interpreted as the *hortus conclusus*, site of gestation. If this ruin-like space were analogous with the alchemical womb then it would seem that Fini is rebelling against ideas of fertility and, instead of using alchemy as a surrogate form of creation, she is subverting its aims to depict creation as an act of destruction and decay. Yet one

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<sup>10</sup> Helen Hills: 'Architecture as Metaphor for the Body: The Case of Female Convents in Early Modern Italy'; *Gender and Architecture*, (ed.) Louise Durning and Richard Wrigley, 2000, p. 78

must remember that destruction and decay are an innate part of the alchemical cycle, one that precludes life. We must also remember that Fini was interested in the cycles of life and often uses images of death and decay to celebrate this cycle.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Fini uses such decay in this work emphasises the alchemical aspect of the creation cycle, suggesting that she is using alchemy as a alternative method for expressing procreation. A similar approach to alchemical surrogacy may also be noted in *Petite Sphinx Ermite* of 1948.



2.3

Fini : *Petite Sphinx Ermite* 1948, Oil on canvas,  
Tate Modern, London

Once again we note the decaying doorway surrounded by creeping plants. In this image, a small sphinx guards the doorway against intruders, preserving the inner sanctuary of the female against the male intruder. The figure of the sphinx is similar to Fini's Guardians due to her bald head and smooth, mannequin-like features. She is crowned with tendrils of ivy, enhancing her connection not only to the feminine through this identification with nature, but also to this female space, as both she and the walls wear this plant. Fini uses sphinxes to celebrate the cycle of life: birth as

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<sup>11</sup> Fini admired the human skeleton as it still remained after the flesh had decayed; it was a mediator between the transitory and the eternal. (Chadwick, 1985, p. 95) She is quoted as saying: "I admired the perfection of skeletons" (*Leonor Fini*, Comune di Ferrara, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderne, catalogue, 1983, p. 17)

well as death, as we may note from their appearance in her chaotic nature paintings of the 30s and 40s. Thus, although the walls and doorframe above this particular sphinx are aged and crumbling, the plant life that surrounds them suggests regeneration and new life. This concept is mirrored in the sphinx herself as she contemplates a bird's skull while wearing a tiara of ivy. The merging of life and death that occurs in this image through the use of the doorway suggests an alchemical parallel with the putrefication stage of the Great Work, i.e. the death of the Son following the union of the King and Queen. Yet what does this image say about the possibility of alchemical creation?

On the ground outside the door lies a broken eggshell and what appears to be part of a pelvic bone. The eggshell evokes the womb or alembic vessel that allows the gestation of the foetus or Stone. The broken shell parallels the state of the doorway and walls as they too suggest the broken shell of an inner sanctum, suggesting a negative attitude towards childbirth.

Inside the doorway, to the left of the sphinx lies a "hermetic text".<sup>12</sup> This text lies in the area of the painting that may be allied with the *hortus conclusus*, the most secret area of a woman's body, and the most fundamental allegorical location in alchemy, thereby creating a strong link between woman's power to create and alchemy. Thus the negative objects on one side of the doorway seem to negate the positive objects on the other, and the sphinx in between acts as a mediator. Though Fini places these two disparate sets of objects in two feminine settings, nature and the interior, she can

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<sup>12</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 189. Marcel Brion states that Fini probably knew of *Les Noces Chimiques* by the Rosicrucian master Jean-Valentine Andreae. Could this be the hermetic text referred to in the painting?

still be said to be using the arch in its original alchemical format: an obstacle to overcome, a rite of passage that must be undertaken in order to enter into secret knowledge. This would argue that Fini is using an image steeped in sexual analogy to suggest an alchemical act of fertilisation, not merely signified by passing through an archway, but also the passage of knowledge, a concept we have previously noted in Ashmole's *Servant to the Secret Alchemy*, and one we may also note in the attributes of the sphinx, as she is symbolically linked with wisdom.



2.4 .

Fini: *The Ceremony*, 1939, Oil on canvas,  
Private Collection

Another painting that Fini uses to explore the relationship between arches and surrogate creation is *The Ceremony* 1939. In this work, two women preside over what appears to be a ritual of some kind. The figures, the activity they perform and the low archway, sometimes taken to be an altar, are all interconnected with ideas of fertility and reproduction. The standing woman on the right is reminiscent of Fini's portrait of Leonora Carrington in *The Alcove* 1939, as both wear an armoured breastplate. Though this breastplate is smaller and of a more rounded shape than that of *The Alcove*, both flatten and shield the chest, thereby disguising the breasts. This has the effect of negating the concept of woman as mother, and instead places her in the arguably masculine role of warrior. The portrayal of this woman as a warrior may

ally her with depictions of Pallas Athene, who is also often depicted wearing a breastplate. This connection is also interesting in terms of surrogacy and female identity. Zeus swallowed Athene's mother Metis, as he feared the boy she was carrying would grow up to kill him. Instead however, Athene sprang forth from his head, fully-grown and a woman, but with a man's attitude and intellect<sup>13</sup> and, considering the replacement of a man with a woman in the context of Fini's work, this may suggest Fini is arguing for woman's superior status as creators. What is perhaps especially interesting is that Athene could never marry or give birth, in some versions of the myth she has not got a womb.<sup>14</sup> This allies Athene with Fini's views on childbirth and motherhood, suggesting Athene would act as the perfect archetypal Woman on which this warrior woman, and the portrait of Carrington could be based.

However, in the dress of this warrior woman, Fini draws attention to the area of the womb by removing a small circle of material in the woman's skirt in a manner similar to that which we have already noted in Fini's costume designs. Thus, as with the two previous works discussed, Fini is both affirming and negating the procreative role of the mother, suggesting the possible use of an alternative means of expressing her reproductive abilities.

Though this archway is square rather than rounded, its chipped and flaky state, coupled with the plant growing on its left corner identifies it as a chaotic and therefore female space, something clearly denoted through the presence of nature, symbolised by the presence of the plant. Again, this familiar relationship between

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Rhys: *Pallas Athene: Goddess of Knowledge and Defensive Warfare*, p. 2, <http://www.thevalkyrie.com/stories/html/athene/index.htm>, 12 / 05 / 06

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4

decaying architecture and flourishing plant life that we have noted in both *La Porte du Convent* and *Petite Sphinx Ermite*, suggests an alchemical parallel to the Great Work's cycle of life and death, particularly the putrefaction process. Thus, the archway's connection with this cycle links it to an alternative process of creation separate from the female.

If this archway can be credited as an altar, why place the offering underneath it instead of on top? The cave and the grotto are powerful earthly manifestations of the female principle, as their shape suggests the womb or genitalia, and they are also linked to the dark and the mysterious, two concepts allied with woman.<sup>15</sup> Many ancient sites of worship for female deities were located in caves, including the Oracle at Delphi.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the underside of the altar, the recess of the archway, becomes a site of worship of the female, perhaps explaining why this offering is made up of flowers; they are another symbolic representation of the feminine.

By placing the offering in the recess of the archway, it is also possible to interpret this structure as a kind of fireplace. Lamps, lights and fires were often a key feature of temples.<sup>17</sup> The annual rekindling of these fires from the light of the Heavens signified a sacred renewal or rebirth, suggesting that these sacred fires may be linked to concepts of reproduction. Similarly, the noted alchemist Paracelsus,<sup>18</sup> in

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<sup>15</sup> Rabinovitch, 2001, p. 207

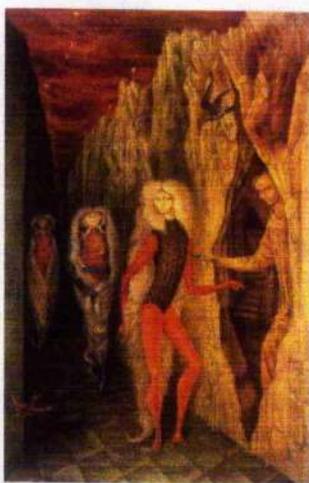
<sup>16</sup> Robert Graves: *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, 1999, p. 99

<sup>17</sup> Examples include the temple of Athena at Troy, the temple of Vesta in Rome, and the temples dedicated to the sacred fire at Delphi and Athens. See Plutarch's *Life of Numa*, referenced in Flavia Anderson's *The Ancient Secret: In Search of the Holy Grail*, 1953 pp. 46 - 48

<sup>18</sup> Paracelsus (c. 1493 – 1541) studied alchemy under Abbot Trimethius, who had also taught the alchemist Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486 – 1535). He wandered throughout Europe practicing medicine and writing numerous treatises on alchemy. His teachings went on to form the foundations

describing the first phases of the alchemical process through using symbolic imagery, states that: “the solution should turn black to indicate the woman is pregnant”, and then goes on to describe further changes to the solution through the application of continuous heat.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the idea of a constant source of heat suggested by the archway’s connection to sacred fire mirrors the constant application of heat to the Stone in the athanor, allegorically representing the womb. Thus it is possible to argue that *The Ceremony* may depict an alchemical analogy for surrogate reproduction through the use of architectural structures.

Though Remedios Varo does not grant the arch or doorway the same overt prominence Fini does in her work, it nevertheless frequently occurs in a vast number of Varo’s compositions, though in a more organic format as crevices and openings in walls. One painting in which these organic openings occur is *Portrait of Dr. Ignacio Chavez* 1957.



2.5

Varo: *Portrait of Dr. Ignacio Chavez* 1957,  
Oil on masonite, Private Collection

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of Rosicrucian doctrine. *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus*, (trans. Arthur Edward Waite), 1894, pp. xi - xiv

<sup>19</sup> Paracelsus: *On the Supreme Mysteries of Nature*, ‘Englished’ by R. Turner, 1656, pp. 24 - 5

Here we see Dr. Chavez stepping through an opening in the wall and using a key to unlock one of his puppet-like patients. The checked floor and staircase, which appear behind the doctor, are both symbols that can be found in a wide variety of alchemical images, immediately suggesting that this work carries an alchemical significance. However, as these symbolic images will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, let us turn our attention to the opening in the wall.

Janet Kaplan has stated that the shape of the opening in this and other works in which this same type of opening appears, is like that of the vagina, complete with labial folds.<sup>20</sup> This gives this aperture the same, if not an even more overt gender distinction as the conventional archway. What is more, the fact that the doctor steps through this altered archway is suggestive of the alchemical penetration of the female archway by the male adept. Similarly, the penetration of the archway by the adept was in the pursuit of knowledge. In this painting, the doctor passes through the archway to attempt to unlock the secret workings of his patients; he too is seeking knowledge. The strings that attach Dr. Chavez's patients to the stars above imply a link to the micro / macrocosm, whereby everything on earth is influenced by the Heavens. Therefore, by unlocking his patients, the doctor is trying to unlock the secrets of the micro / macrocosm, something that the alchemist had to accomplish in order to succeed in the Great Work. Thus, not only is the vaginal archway in this work equated with the more conventional archway present in the works of Fini, but it also acts as an alchemical image representing a substitute form of intercourse through both penetration and the pursuit of knowledge.

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<sup>20</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 167



2.6

Varo: *Born Again*, 1960, Oil on masonite,  
Private Collection

Another painting by Varo that investigates the procreative aspect of the arch or doorway is *Born Again*, also entitled *New Born* 1960. Again we note the vagina-like tear in the wall through which a figure enters the space beyond. This image therefore suggests the very moment of birth that has resulted from the penetrative reproduction implied by the spiny tree branches protruding from the arch shaped window directly across from the opening. However, the figure that is 'born' through the archway is clearly female, and that which is born through the union of male and female in the alchemical process is androgynous, suggesting a greater presence of the female in this work.

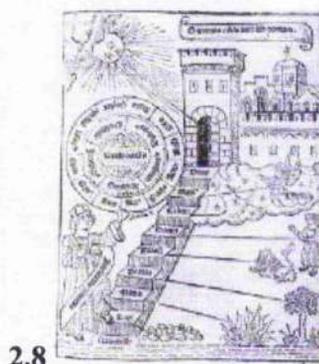
This presence is emphasised through Varo's use of iconographic symbols that represent the female principle. As well as the penetrated and 'birth' archways, there is another arch that acts as an entrance to this room. The fact that stairs lead down from this archway is alchemically suggestive, as stairs are symbolic of the various processes in the Great Work in alchemical art. Therefore, this room represents the culmination of the Great Work, an argument that can be reinforced through the way

in which Varo has chosen to paint this room red, the colour of the final, androgynous stage of the alchemical process and the resulting Stone. In alchemical terms, the conclusion of the Great Work would mean the end of the gestation cycle in the athanor. Therefore, this figure appearing from the wall seems to represent the Stone, which is the final product of this cycle. Such a reading would support the claim that Varo uses alchemy as a substitute for biological processes.

### Towers and Staircases



2.7 *The Mountain of the Adepts*, illustrated in *Cabala*, Michel Spacher, 1654



2.8 Ramon Lull: *True Alchemy: Spiritual Ascent through the Cosmic Spheres to the Celestial City*, c. 12<sup>th</sup> century, Etching

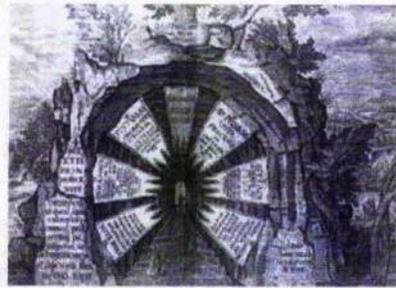
Towers and staircases are prominent architectural features in alchemical art. The tower represents the pinnacle of the alchemist's achievement, while the staircase symbolises the steps of the process that lead to this. These concepts can be found in a number of alchemical images such as *The Mountain of the Adepts* 1654 and the above drawing attributed to Ramon Lull, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic. What is interesting about these images is that the entrances to these towers are arch shaped, or suggestive of caves, an idea particularly noticeable in figure four of Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum* 1609. This suggests that the stairway leads to a structure

that combines male and female aspects, thereby implying a site of alchemical marriage, which sets the perfect location for the androgynous Stone. After all, the nature of the Great Work is cyclic. To create gold the Stone must be paired with a base material and dissolved together, thereby returning once more to the first phases of the alchemical process. Therefore it can be argued that, due to its associations with alchemical marriage and the production of the Stone, the tower may be granted the same symbolic significance as the athanor: a womb in which the Stone may grow. These alchemical concepts are reflected in paintings by Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo which use such structures.



2.9

Fini :*L'Escalier dans la Tour*, 1952, Wild Collection



2.10

Heinrich Khunrath : *Portal to the Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom*; Etching, *Amphitheatrum*, 1609

An interesting work by Fini that uses tower and staircase iconography is *L'Escalier dans la Tour* (*The Staircase in the Tower*) 1952. The fact that we enter this space through the arch, a feminine architectural form suggests that the space beyond should also be gendered as female. However, there are some aspects of this work which suggest a negative view of reproduction in a manner similar to that of *Petite Sphinx Ermite*.

Suspended from the arch by its leg is a white hen. The positioning and the shape of the hen's body mirror that of the unidentified meat hanging from the doorway in *Petite Sphinx Ermite*. Similarly the stairs are littered with broken eggshells, just as we find a broken eggshell in the foreground of *Petite Sphinx Ermite*. The white hen perhaps suggests the female Albedo, and it is possible to argue that, having laid these broken eggs, she represents a mother figure, stranded and tied up in a space connected with the womb and reproduction. The fact that these eggs are smashed may suggest an unsuccessful or abortive reproductive process, which perhaps implies a failed attempt at producing the Stone, hence why the viewer cannot see where the staircase leads. Could these negative viewpoints perhaps be the result of the concept of a penetrative male gaze? If the staircase of *L'Escalier dans la Tour* is a female and vaginal space, then it can be metaphorically penetrated by a male gaze. Therefore, if this negativity is caused by the suggested intrusion of the male gaze, perhaps Fini is arguing for a 'female-only' space. However, whether Fini's views on procreation were negative or positive, it is clear that she is using alchemical imagery to portray the reproductive process.



2.11

Varo: *Icon*, 1945, Oil and encrusted Mother of Pearl on wood, Constantina Collection, Buenos Aires

The images of the tower and the staircase also appear in a number of Varo's paintings. One such example of this is *Icon 1945*. This work forms the painted interior of a small, shallow cabinet one would expect to see in an Orthodox Christian context as the container of a holy image, hence the name of this work. Again we may note the feminine archway intermingling with the masculine phallic tower to denote gender harmony, and this is enhanced through the tower's checked floor, which represents a harmony of opposites. Yet this gender harmony is depicted as being engineered through the power of the female, as the tower is held aloft by mechanisms wrapped around two crescent moons, symbolising the female principle. This has the effect of enhancing the reproductive significance of the tower.



2.12

Varo: *The Flautist*, 1955, Oil and encrusted Mother of Pearl on masonite, Private Collection

In *The Flautist*, Varo combines the tower and the staircase with another alchemical image, that of music. Kaplan has noted that music is a key part of Varo's art, as she uses it to depict the wholeness she sought,<sup>21</sup> a universal harmony and balance, which is at its most overt in *Harmony*.<sup>22</sup> In *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle*, an

<sup>21</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 178

<sup>22</sup> Music also carries importance in alchemical images. Khunrath uses an image in which four musical instruments, (a lute, a fiddle, a harp and a sitar), are placed on the alchemist's table. Similarly, in Barckhausen's *Elementa Chymicæ*, one of the medallions illustrating the Great Work is composed of a putto holding a large sheet of music. Varo could have seen both these images as they too were reproduced in Grillot de Givry's *Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy*.

androgynous flautist sits unheeded at the back of the room, providing a musical accompaniment to the act of creation. In *The Flautist* the relationship between music and creation becomes much more visible, as wisps of vapour issue from the flute and entwine themselves around the fossils on the ground before lifting them up to the tower. The tower itself is octagonal, referencing both the musical octave,<sup>23</sup> and the esoteric value of the number eight, both signifying completion and wholeness.

In middle and upper class society, music, much like sewing, was often defined as a feminine accomplishment. The figure of the flautist, though androgynous, is further allied with the female through the way in which he or she emerges from the grassy rock behind them. The flautist's tunic merges with the rock, while the rock itself seems to wrap fern-like tendrils around the flautist's arm and neck, increasing the connection between the two and suggesting the flautist's link with female nature. Therefore, if a female power, acting through the flautist, creates the tower that acts as a site of alchemical creation and perfection, this suggests that Varo is using the alchemical tower to replace the completed product of pregnancy – a child.

## Interiors

In her book *Discrimination by Design*, Leslie Kaner Weisman refers to the domestic house as a “maternal womb”.<sup>24</sup> The womb acts as the key connective between the alchemical athanor, female biological creation, and architectural and / or interior spaces. As such, Fini and Varo's depiction of domestic interiors may also be important for the discussion on surrogate alchemical reproduction. Though both Fini

<sup>23</sup> Gloria Orenstein: 'Women of Surrealism'; *Feminist Art Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1973. p. 19

<sup>24</sup> Joan Rothschild & Victoria Rosner: 'Feminism and Design: Review Essay'; *Design and Feminism: Revisioning Spaces, Places and Everyday Things*, (ed.) Joan Rothschild, 1999, p. 15

and Varo depict what may be referred to as alchemical interiors, Varo's scenes tend to show the interior as a laboratory, working towards magical discoveries, whereas those of Fini portray the interior as a site for the worship of the female.



2.13  
Varo: *Creation of the Birds*, 1957,  
Oil on masonite, Private Collection



2.14  
Barckhausen: *Laboratory at Utrecht*,  
Etching, 1718, illustrated in *Elementa  
Chymiae*, 1718

Two examples of Varo's work that illustrate the domestic laboratory are *Creation of the Birds* 1957 and *Harmony* 1956, both of which are similar to portrayals of the alchemical laboratory. The sparse workspace of Varo's *Creation of the Birds* allied with Barckhausen's *Laboratory at Utrecht*, and the cluttered and crowded rooms of *Harmony* next to Khunrath's untitled etching, suggest a visual parallel between Varo's interiors and those of the alchemists, though it is the specific imagery used in these paintings that imply a dialogue between alchemy and female fertility.

The first of these paintings depicts an androgynous human-bird hybrid figure using paint distilled from the stars, and the light of a specific star to create and give life to the birds. The alembic vessel that distils the paints is interesting as it consists of two egg-shaped vessels, connected via a thin tube. The use of these egg vessels

immediately connects this interior with the alchemical and biological generation of life.

The figure's workbench is laden with alchemical significance. The octagonal tabletop is suggestive of completion and perfection, as eight, according to Ripley, denotes the revelation of the Stone following the seven stages of the process. In Christian dogma, eight is also a powerful number as it refers to the resurrection of Christ after seven days of torture, crucifixion and entombment. These concepts are combined in alchemical art as the revelation of the Stone is often depicted as Christ rising from the tomb. Therefore, this table represents both completion and new life,<sup>25</sup> which allies it with the production of a child following gestation.

The table is a significant image for Varo, as she uses it as the primary site for creation, and not just in these two works. The table also appears in this context in paintings such as *Sympathy* 1955 and *Still Life Reviving* 1963. The reason for this can perhaps be explained by referring to Ghislaine Hermanuz, who talks of the mythical 'corner of the kitchen table' where gifted women have written novels and solved scientific problems while getting on with the housework.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the table is a site of specifically female artistic creation, which in *Creation of the Birds* is allied with alchemical creation as well.

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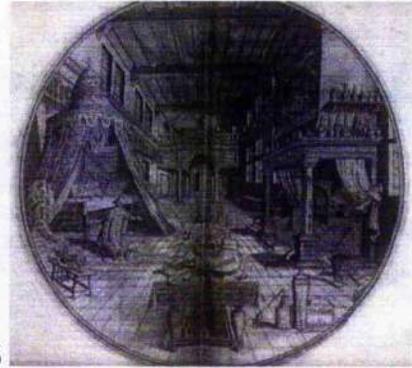
<sup>25</sup> This also links the table with the alchemical uroboros, which is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter. See p. 68

<sup>26</sup> Ghislaine Hermanuz: 'Outgrowing the Corner of the Kitchen Table'; *Design and Feminism*, (ed.) Joan Rothschild, 1999, p. 67



2.15

Varo: *Harmony*, 1956 Oil on masonite,  
Whereabouts unknown



2.16

Heinrich Khunrath: Untitled image of  
the alchemist's laboratory, Etching,  
*Amphitheatrum*, 1609

This reproductive alchemical imagery also occurs in *Harmony*. Eggs and egg shapes are noticeable in the bunk bed on the far wall, the deep tray containing shapes and plants beneath it to the right, and the two small blue eggs in the bird's nest which protrudes from the back of a chair in the right foreground. Indeed, the room itself may be linked with the egg as it is entered via an archway, maintaining the three-fold connection between the womb, the domestic interior and alchemy. Roots, plants and wisps of material grow from under the paving tiles, ultimately suggesting that this space fosters the development of new life. These checked tiles are ubiquitous in Varo's art. Chadwick suggests that her use of these tiles can be traced to the influence of Leonora Carrington,<sup>27</sup> but it seems more likely that both these artists were influenced by the prolific use of these exact same tiles in alchemical art.

As the title of this painting suggests, cosmic harmony, balance and unity are of prime importance, expressed through the medium of music. This links the painting with works such as *Solar Music* 1955 and *Cosmic Energy* 1956. In the latter work, a

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<sup>27</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 201

figure that appears from the wall plays a violin, causing a ray of light to bring forth new life from the moss-covered floor. Similarly, in *Harmony*, mysterious female figures emerge from the walls to help the androgynous protagonist create the perfect music of the spheres. The cosmic harmony and balance generated by music can be allied to the balancing of the four elements, which was thought to be necessary in order to create the Stone. Therefore, it is again possible to argue that this image illustrates one way in which Varo uses alchemy as an expression of female fertility.



2.17

Fini: *The Alcove: An Interior With Three Women* 1939, Oil on canvas, Collection of the Edward James Foundation, Sussex

Turning to discuss Fini's paintings, one work previously mentioned with regard to *The Ceremony* is very interesting in terms of the alchemical interior. *The Alcove: An Interior With Three Women* 1939 depicts the interior as a place of worship. Fini's close friendship with Leonora Carrington led her to include a full-length portrait of Carrington in this work, depicting her as a warrior, "a true revolutionary".<sup>28</sup> The way in which she is positioned suggests she acts as a guard for the two women that occupy the alcove. The alcove itself is curtained and strewn with cushions and sheets, which give it the appearance of a bed, and it is this image of the bed, which is significant in terms of identifying this space as an area of worship.

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<sup>28</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 82

The heroines of Greek myths could be honoured in the same ways as goddesses at sites connected with their myth, such as the location of their *thalamos*, or bedchamber.<sup>29</sup> The bedchamber may be regarded as a central aspect of many a mythic heroine, as their stories almost always concern either childbirth, rape or adultery, therefore suggesting that the bed in this image can be interpreted as a sacred place dedicated to the female and connected to reproduction.

However, the bed also has alchemical significance as it acts as the symbolic location of the union of mercury and sulphur in the run up to creating the Stone. The figures that occupy the bed, despite being acknowledged as female, are relatively androgynous, with flat chests and their hair obscured by the surrounding darkness. Yet, the impending union may possibly be referenced through the way in which the second figure's garments are pulled up around 'her' middle, exposing her abdomen, and thereby the womb. Similarly, the hands of the two figures meet in a fairly intimate gesture on the calf of the first figure. The argument that this image represents an alchemical union may be strengthened when we consider that the protagonist in the alchemical parable translated and interpreted by Herbert Silberer is made to stand on guard outside a chamber in which the personified figures of mercury and sulphur come together.<sup>30</sup> Carrington's depiction as a soldier figure, coupled with the way in which she stands away from the curtained alcove may cast

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<sup>29</sup> Deborah Lyons: *Gender and Immorality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult*, 1997, p. 42

<sup>30</sup> It is possible that it was Max Ernst who brought this parable to Fini's attention during their casual relationship, which spanned from approximately 1937 to 1939. In her essay *An Itinerant Alchemist: Max Ernst in Europe and America*, M. F. Warlick states that Ernst's initial interest in alchemy was probably stirred as early as 1914 by Silberer's *Probleme der mystik und ihrer Symbolik*, which contained this very parable.

her in the role of Silberer's adept, presiding over an alchemical union designed to create new matter. Interestingly, Gloria Orenstein also refers to this work as *La Chambre Noire (The Black Room)*.<sup>31</sup> The alchemical union of mercury and sulphur is the main 'event' in the black, or Nigredo stage of the Great Work, again emphasising the alchemical allegory of creation in this painting.

### Sacred Space



2.18

Varo: *Still Life Reviving*, 1963, Oil on canvas  
Private Collection, Valencia

Thus it is fair to conclude that certain architectural forms and the domestic interiors of Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo are alchemically significant in terms of surrogate procreation. Yet what connects those of Fini with those of Varo? Fini's interiors act as temples dedicated to the female power of procreation, and it is the concept of the interior as a sacred space that links her with Varo. This link can be demonstrated through Varo's use of the table.

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<sup>31</sup> Orenstein, 1973, p. 17

Janet Kaplan states that the architecture in the interior of Varo's *Still Life Reviving* mirrors religious concepts of the creation of the universe and the spreading of the Word, as it recalls that of a chapel, enshrining the table within it.<sup>32</sup> This pattern may also be noted in the scriptorium workshop of *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle* and the cell-like workshops depicted in *Creation of the Birds* and *Harmony*. All these works recall spaces connected with religious institutions, yet enshrine artefacts and activities that are gendered as female. This returns us to the concept of the table as the central celebratory icon of fertility and female creation, suggesting that Varo's architectural structures are used to emphasise artefacts related to both the domestic interior and female reproduction. If the tables in these works by Varo are rendered sacred by virtue of the surrounding architecture, then this links them with Fini's interiors, which act as a site of worship for the power of female reproduction. The connection between the domestic interior, the chapel and the pagan worship of the ancient female possibly suggests a reaction against Varo's and Fini's Catholic upbringing, as well as traditional views of the female.

This reaction is also visible in works such as Varo's *Embroidering the Earth's mantle* triptych, as well as within Fini's sometimes blasphemous behaviour, such as the occasion she arrived at a café wearing a cardinal's robes. Both these examples of rebellious acts are connected to sexuality. Varo's Catholic schoolgirl rebel flees the convent to elope with her lover, while Fini said she wore the robes because she "liked the sacrilegious nature of dressing as a priest...and the experience of being a woman and wearing the clothes of a man who would never know a woman's

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<sup>32</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 183

body".<sup>33</sup> While this unruly behaviour allies them with Surrealist doctrine, it also portrays a type of emancipated, sensual female, free from social conventions, thereby adding to the discourse on the expression of female fertility outside the stereotype of a mere housewife. Therefore, instead of constructing sacred spaces that promote purity and chastity, Fini and Varo ally these spaces with fertility and procreation, using alchemical images, thereby forging an inextricable connection between female spaces, alchemy and surrogate procreation.

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<sup>33</sup> Chadwick, 1980, p. 80

## Chapter Three:

### Journeys and Travellers: The Alchemical Quest

#### The Importance of the Quest



3.1

Michael Maier: *Emblem 12: The Stone that Saturn vomited up... has been placed on Helicon as a monument for mortals; Atalanta fugiens*, 1617



3.2

Salomon Trismossin: *Setting Out On A Journey*, Plate I-2, *The Splendor Solis* 1582

The journey or the quest was of great importance to alchemists, and acts as one of their favourite allegories.<sup>1</sup> The quest for the Philosopher's Stone was just as important, if not more so, than the discovery of the Stone itself, as it exemplifies the alchemist's spiritual progression, without which he could never hope to encounter the Stone. The importance of the alchemical quest is conveyed in alchemical art through

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung: *Psychology and Alchemy* (trans. R. F. C. Hull) 1968, p. 370

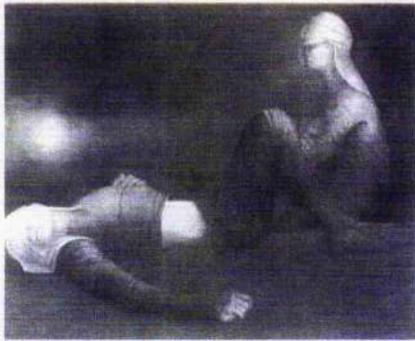
the frequent use of outdoor scenery and roads. In emblematic series such as Trismossin's *Splendor Solis* 1582 and Michael Maier's *Atalanta fugiens* 1617, each symbolic depiction of the stages of the Great Work is set in fields, gardens or on hillsides. Paths cross these outdoor settings, emphasising the importance of travel and the traveller. The concept of the journey or quest is also important within the art of Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo, as both of them use this motif to convey the spiritual progression, or esoteric significance of the traveller as alchemist.<sup>2</sup>

### **Voyages in the Void**

There are a number of works by Leonor Fini that use 'voyaging' as their key theme. One such work is *Voyageurs en Repos*, 1978. In this work we note two figures with cloths draped over or bound around their heads, covering their eyes. The title suggests that these figures are journeying in, or perhaps through, their sleep and their dreams. As psychoanalysis suggests that dreams are the expression of the unconscious, then these women may be travelling through their unconscious. While this suggests a parallel to the way in which Fini painted, allowing images to present themselves to her subconscious, it may also suggest a link with the alchemical journey.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of the spiritual journey or quest is a common one, appearing in cultures across the globe in myths, legends, literature and even history. Though there are some iconographical references in the art of Fini and Varo to the Grail quest, Grail lore is even more complex and muddled than that of alchemy, which is why it is only the alchemical quest that is discussed here.



3.3  
Fini: *Voyageurs en Repos*, 1978



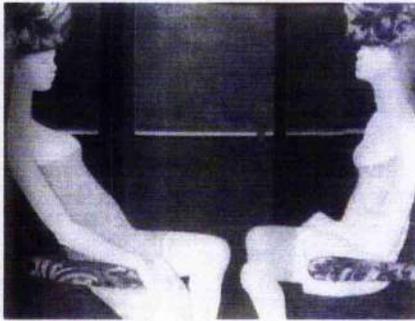
3.4  
*The Ouroboros (sic) in a Greek Alchemical Code*, illustrated in: 'Alchemy, Androgyny and the Visual Arts': Arturo Schwarz, *Leonardo*, Vol. 13, 1980

Both Silberer and Jung saw the alchemist's journey as symbolising the quest to unite conscious and unconscious in order to gain a balanced self.<sup>3</sup> If the two travellers in *Voyageurs en Repos* are indeed travelling through the unconscious, as would be suggested by the fact that their eyes are forced closed to the physical world, then is the aim of the journey to join up with the conscious, or has this point already been reached? The figure lying down has her eyes fully covered, whereas the other figure is sitting upright, her bandages no longer fully covering her eyes. Do these figures represent the unconscious and the conscious respectively? If so, it would suggest that the end of the journey has indeed been reached, as the two figures sit closely together, implying the unconscious and conscious have been united. Yet, because alchemical doctrine held that all things came from and led back to the One in a cyclic motion,<sup>4</sup> there is no final alchemical resolution in this painting, as it may represent a beginning

<sup>3</sup> Jung, 1968, p. 476; Silberer, 1971, p. 110

<sup>4</sup> Jung, 1968, p. 293

or an ending, or even both simultaneously. A common image in alchemical texts symbolising this cycle is the uroboros: a serpent or dragon forming a circle by biting its own tail.<sup>5</sup> If this image can be linked with the cyclic quest of the alchemist, then the fact that Fini chooses to use female voyagers instead of a male alchemist or the uroboros, suggests she is putting a specifically female slant on her alchemical imagery.



3.5  
Fini: *Harmonika Sug*, c. 1970  
Oil on canvas



3.6  
Varo: *Vagabond*, 1957  
Oil on masonite, Private Collection

Another set of travellers are those depicted in Fini's *Voyageurs en Train* series, in which a vast array of scantily clad women with flowery headdresses recline in train carriages in sexually provocative poses. Borgue suggests that travelling by train can be equated with a dream voyage,<sup>6</sup> thereby linking Fini's train travellers with her 'sleep voyagers'. He also argues that the train journey may create the illusion of the voyage, as it compartmentalises the traveller, restricting their space and their

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<sup>5</sup> This image appears in countless alchemical texts. The snake / dragon is symbolic of Mercurius and so by forming a circle it refers to the transformation it undergoes to become the Stone, and aid in further transformations, beginning the cycle all over again. For a more detailed explanation of the uroboros see Lyndy Abraham's *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 207

<sup>6</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 123

movement, an ironic concept in connection to a journey. The older compartment model of the train, as opposed to the more modern 'corridor' layout, is more suggestive of a kind of private space, hence perhaps why the figures in these spaces seem to engage in erotic activities. These private spaces may be equated with the privacy of one's personal thoughts, thereby emphasising the aspect of the dream voyage. However, there is still the sense that the travellers are imprisoned in their carriage, yet what is interesting about this is that the image of the prison, like that of the house, bed or womb, may be equated with the athanor.<sup>7</sup> Thus these imprisoned travellers are perhaps personifications of the materials in the athanor, undertaking an alchemical journey of transformation. For example, in *Harmonika Sug* two women are contained in a compartment which is described as being hermetically sealed,<sup>8</sup> linking the compartment to the alchemical athanor, and the women inside to the materials within it due to be transformed.

However, the fact that Fini uses two women in the majority of her train / athanor compositions is also interesting in terms of surrogate procreation. It may be argued that Remedios Varo also uses the concept of a hermetically sealable container in *Vagabond* 1957. The male figure of the vagabond, an apparently self-sufficient traveller akin to the alchemist, wears a kind of mobile coat, complete with window shutters, which can be closed and buttoned shut, sealing the vagabond inside. The way in which this coat takes on an egg-like shape suggests that it too may act as an

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<sup>7</sup> Silberer, 1971, p. 133

<sup>8</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 119

athanor and the traveller inside is the alchemist who will be moulded and changed by his quest to find the Stone.<sup>9</sup> However this single male figure of Varo's composition contrasts with the pairs of female figures in Fini's works. It could be argued that, while Varo is representing the spiritual transformation of the alchemist, Fini is instead focusing on the physical transformation of the alchemical material, which suggests that her pairs of figures could represent mercury and sulphur. Yet in alchemical art these materials are represented by a male and a female, and often in the act of coitus. Critics such as Gloria Orenstein and Estelle Lauter identify Fini's world as a matriarchy and plant the seeds for the argument that the intensely eroticised women on the train engage in lesbianism.<sup>10</sup> While it may be true that these female travellers are part of a matriarchy, Fini's own ambivalent sexuality suggests that they are not necessarily lesbians. If, however, we are to take Fini's use of pairs of women as alchemical materials, it would seem that she is illustrating an exclusively female procreative process.

Another interesting notion of Borgue's that has alchemical and reproductive ramifications is that the Guardian series constitutes a cycle. Though he does not suggest an order for this cycle, he states that it links the feminine to the void, cosmic energy, sacrifice and death.<sup>11</sup> However, as it is difficult to discern any specific order for the cycle, or indeed, to identify all the concepts Borgue mentions in each work, it

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<sup>9</sup> The shape of the coat is also similar to the narrow oval shape that surrounds Christ in older religious images. This emphasises the connections between Christianity and alchemy, suggesting Christ may be seen as a kind of adept, who passed on his knowledge during a harrowing journey to become closer to God the Father.

<sup>10</sup> Lauter, 1980, p. 44; Orenstein, 1973, p. 16

<sup>11</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 183

is perhaps more accurate to argue that the Guardian series is a group of archetypes that pinpoint aspects of alchemical journeys; both that of the Great Work itself, and the spiritual journey of the alchemist. The paintings that make up these journeys are not painted in a specific order, so that one work is not necessarily chronologically followed by the next in its specific journey. This adheres to Fini's way of working, as it suggests she may not consciously have had the concept of a cycle in her head as she worked on the Guardian series. Gloria Orenstein reports that Fini told her that, although she worked from her unconscious, her intuition led her to archetypal symbols that were alchemically correct.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is possible to discuss the Guardian series in terms of a group of archetypes depicting intertwined alchemical journeys, rather than a single definitive cycle.

*Les Fileuses* 1954, *L'Enroulement du Silence* 1961, *La Gardienne des Phénix* 1954, *La Gardienne à l'œuf Rouge* 1955 and *La Couseuse* 1955 all pick out various aspects of the Great Work from preparation, to the Nigredo, Albedo, Rubedo stages and finally finishing with the seamstress, symbolic of a supreme Creator. The Creator archetype of the seamstress is suggestive of the Stone, as the Stone has the potential to create new life through the elixir, or else new material through interacting with base metals. She may also symbolise the alchemist, the figure who has enabled this process to be possible. This not only suggests a link with another journey, which concerns that of the alchemist (and therefore demonstrating that these paintings act as pointers rather than a cycle) but also demonstrates the replacement of a male

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<sup>12</sup> Orenstein, 1973, p. 16. Unfortunately her article does not give Fini's exact quote.

archetype with a female one. This may be a response to the current of Surrealist thought which eliminated the female procreative input into a work. Instead, in this journey only the female creative input exists, suggesting an exclusively female method of producing a child, engineered through the use of alchemical imagery.

Another journey that can be noted in the Guardian series is that of the adept, a deeply internalised, spiritual process. This journey is represented through *Le Sommeil dans la Grotte*, *Pensierosa* 1954, *Le Voile* 1956, *Le Double* 1955 and *La Dame Ovale* 1959. These works suggest a specifically female archetype that can be applied to a phase in the alchemist's journey. For example, the Guardian in *Le Sommeil dans la Grotte*, (*Sleep in the Grotto*), seems to be made from cloth. The dress she wears has no neckline, it is as though it continues upwards to include her face, leaving only her hands and hairline exposed. This may suggest that the Guardian's face is actually a mask, her true appearance, and that of the adept, will be revealed as they move through the journey.



3.7

Fini: *Sommeil dans la Grotte*



3.8

Alchemical union watched over by the sun and moon, illustrated in *Aureum Vellus*, by Salomon Trismossin, 1708

This painting is also significant in terms of female fertility. It may be argued that there is a connection between the Guardian and the moon due to the way in which the Guardian's hairline circles her head like a skullcap, in a manner very similar to the way in which the moon is portrayed in alchemical art, suggesting a link between alchemy and the feminine in this image. This link is made more overt in Fini's *Lune* of 1982, in which an illuminated female personification of the moon is also depicted with this skullcap.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the grotto alluded to in *Sommeil dans la Grotte* is immediately suggestive of the female principle. It is historically associated with sites of goddess worship, thereby acting as a symbol of the primordial female, a great Mother and Creator figure, while in iconological terms, it is suggestive of the womb.

However, the message conveyed in *Sommeil dans la Grotte* is also present in *La Dame Ovale*, as both feature archetypal mothers or Creators, due to the way in which the latter's dress is cut out to reveal an egg shape to suggest pregnancy. This again negates the idea of a definitive cycle, as Fini seems to create two depictions of the same stage of the alchemist's journey, suggesting the Guardians are more aptly identified as alchemical archetypes. Therefore it is possible to argue that both these paintings use alchemical iconography (the moon and the egg) as well as the concept of the alchemical adept's journey to convey an exclusively female form of procreation. If *Sommeil dans la Grotte* and *La Dame Ovale* reference the beginning of

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter Five, p. 128

the adept's journey then it may be suggested that *Prima Ballerina Assoluta* c. 1960 represents the end.



3.9

Fini: *Prima Ballerina Assoluta*, c. 1960  
Oil on canvas



3.10

*Rebis*, illustrated in *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of a Myth*, M. E. Warlick, 2001

This is an unusual work in Fini's oeuvre as it is on a circular rather than a rectangular canvas. This in itself is significant as the circle is suggestive of the uroboros, the continuing cycle of the process and the journey of the alchemist as the knowledge is passed from adept to apprentice. Similarly, the combination of vertical and horizontal axes in this work, notable in the lines on the Guardian's cloak and the symmetrical arrangement of the figures, suggests the alchemical concept of 'squaring the circle', which is visible in the lower half of the *Rebis* image above. This is the alchemical term for achieving a balance of all four elements so that the creation of the fifth element, the Stone, becomes possible. While this squaring of the circle suggests the end of both material and spiritual journeys portrayed by the Guardian series, this work can also symbolise the beginnings of these journeys, thereby adhering to its uroboros structure. The crown held by the Guardian symbolises the King, masculine

sulphur. In crowning an arguably female figure, we note the combination of masculine and feminine that can symbolise the very beginning of the process, or else an androgynous being that represents its end, or even a usurping female figure that has displaced other genders from power.

The two women attending the Prima Ballerina in the centre have prominent abdomens. The woman on the right is twisted so that special attention may be paid to this area of her body, while the woman on the left appears to be in the early stages of pregnancy. Similarly, the Prima Ballerina's garment is split to reveal her stomach and abdomen, and her genitalia are only saved from being exposed by the rim of a table. This suggests an emphasis on fertility and reproduction, a concept emphasised through the Prima Ballerina's splayed legs, implying either imminent coitus or childbirth. As this painting is so important for either journey, and deals in both alchemical and reproductive symbolism, it is possible to argue that, through the concept of the journey, Fini is using alchemy as a visual expression of her ability to bear children.

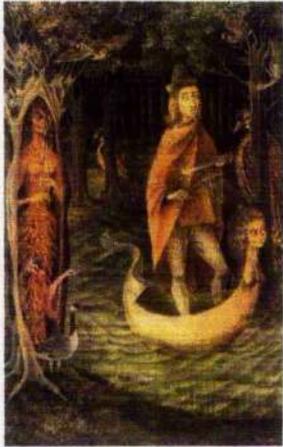
### **Aquatic Journeys**

When discussing Varo's paintings, Janet Kaplan has stated that they all portray journeys to some extent – they represent journeys or discoveries set in the domestic sphere.<sup>14</sup> While this may be true, there are a number of works that depict journeys in a more literal form, and these frequently take the format of sailing along rivers in

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<sup>14</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 148

strange boats, or trundling through forests and fields in wheeled contraptions. While these aquatic and forest journeys can be equated with Varo's various journeys into exile, they also have a deeper significance.



3.11

Varo: *Troubadador* (also known as *Rhapsody*) 1959, Oil on masonite  
Collection of Will Lende Jr., Texas



3.12

*The Mountain of the Adepts*,  
illustrated in *Cabala*, Michael Spacher  
1654

One such image is *Troubadador* 1959. Here a man, wearing a similar hat to the alchemists of *The Mountain of the Adepts*, sails down a woodland river in a boat fashioned into the likeness of a woman. He uses a comb and a bow to play her hair like a lyre, connecting him with the mythical figure of Orpheus. This connection is emphasised by the way in which the birds that hide in the trees are attracted to his music, just as the animals of the forest would listen to Orpheus play his lyre. This Orpheus / alchemist figure is musically accompanied by a female version of Pan, who can be identified as such by her set of twin pipes. These figures look towards each other, suggesting that they are aware of each other's presence, which further implies that they are either competing or harmonising with each other.

As musical harmony is used to signify the unity of the elements in the alchemical process, this work may symbolise the quest to find that harmony. If the two figures can be said to have found this harmony, rather than competing with each other, then perhaps this signifies the end of the journey. This argument is emphasised through Varo's use of birds in this work.

In alchemical iconography, birds can be used to signify volatile matter, i.e. when the material in the athanor has yet to dissolve and incorporate the sulphur. However, the way in which they are attracted to the music, to the extent where they are flying down to its source, suggests that they will be incorporated into the increasing harmony of the transforming material, therefore bringing it closer to completion. Similarly, though it is difficult to determine all the species of bird illustrated in this painting, the black, brown and white bird emerging from Pan's tree in the lower left corner is identifiable as a Canada goose. The goose symbolises fertility as well as eight and infinity,<sup>15</sup> suggesting the end of the Great Work and implying a link between alchemy and female reproduction, as the bird emerges from the vaginal opening in the tree containing the female Pan. The goose is also emblematic of new beginnings,<sup>16</sup> suggesting the end of one cycle of the alchemical process and the imminent start of the next.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.askyewolfe.com/symbolism-birds.html>, accessed 7 / 08 / 06

<sup>16</sup> <http://members.aol.com/ivycleartoes/birds.html>, accessed 7 / 08 / 06

Yet, despite this alchemical union depicted through the intervention of the male traveller, there is a strong female element in this work that is suggestive of exclusively feminine procreation. Firstly, the forest is psychoanalytically symbolic of female genitalia, while water can imply either amniotic fluid, or the alchemical female persona, which is described as 'cold and wet' in contrast to the 'hot and dry' male persona.<sup>17</sup> This implies that this male alchemist or traveller is journeying deeper and deeper into the womb. Alchemically speaking, this is suggestive of the cyclic nature of the Great Work: as harmony is reached he arrives at the location where the gestation process can begin again. In terms of biological reproduction, the male alchemist travelling towards the womb may be seen as a symbolic version of the fertilisation process. However, the replacement of the male Pan, who was the epitome of wild sexuality, with a female Pan increases the focus on female sexuality and procreativity. This argument is emphasised by the way in which the female Pan shelters in a hollow tree, the entrance to which is reminiscent of the vaginal archways discussed in the previous chapter.

Two other paintings by Varo which use similar imagery are *Spiral Transit* 1962, and *Exploring the Sources of the Orinoco River* 1959. Both of these works use egg-shaped boats to propel the traveller(s) to their goal. However, it is *Spiral Transit* that can be most clearly linked to a specific alchemical image.

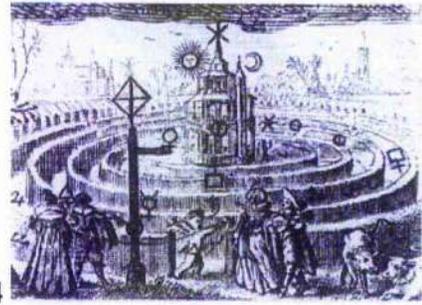
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<sup>17</sup> M. E. Warlick: 'The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems'; *Glasgow Emblem Studies Volume Three: Emblems and Alchemy*, (ed.) Alison Adams & Stanton J. Linden, 1998, p. 30



3.13

Varo: *Spiral Transit* 1962,  
Oil on masonite, Private Collection



3.14

*The Lapis Sanctuary*, illustrated in  
*De Groene Leeuw*, Goosen van  
Vreeswick, 1674

As part of her discussion of *Spiral Transit*, Kaplan includes a potential alchemical source: *The Lapis Sanctuary* from Goosen van Vreeswick's *De Groene Leeuw* 1674. However, one should note that, while van Vreeswick's image is a maze constructed from sculptured hedgerows, Varo's depicts a small village set on a rock and completely surrounded by water. Again, this may add a specifically feminine dimension through the connection of water, i.e. the alchemical female persona and amniotic fluid. This last symbolic connection may be strengthened when we consider that the bird in the centre, presumably representing the prize at the end of the quest, sits on an egg-shaped perch, suggestive of a foetus inside an embryo. Similarly, the goats that graze close to the entrance of the tower are symbolic of Dionysus,<sup>18</sup> god of sexuality, suggesting that this spiralling tower has a procreative significance. Thus, it is possible to claim that, in the same way the traveller of *Troubador* journeys to the alembic womb, these travellers have the same goal in mind.

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<sup>18</sup> Sarah Carr-Gomm: *The Dictionary of Symbols in Western Art*, 1995, p. 103

The egg-shape of the perch is repeated in the majority of vessels that traverse the spiralling waterways that give this village the appearance of an uroboros. Thus, this work does not necessarily represent the metaphorical journey undergone by the materials in the athanor, but that of the alchemist himself, as each traveller's egg symbolises the spiritual furnace that surrounds and transforms him on his journey. This ultimately conveys the importance of the female in this quest for both an alchemical and procreative prize.



3.15

Varo: *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*  
1959, Oil on canvas, Collection of José Luis Martínez, Mexico

There are certain similarities between this painting and *Exploration of the Orinoco River* 1959.<sup>19</sup> Again we note the importance of water transport via an egg-shaped boat, which again suggests that this journey may also symbolise the spiritual journey of the alchemist, encased in this athanor-like boat. This analogy may be emphasised through the fact that, in this work, the boat is fashioned from a waistcoat in a manner

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<sup>19</sup> The title of this work refers to an episode in Varo's life in which, after separating from Péret, she went on a trip to Venezuela with her lover Jean Nicolle, and explored the Llanos plains of the Orinoco River. (Kaplan, 1988, p. 114)

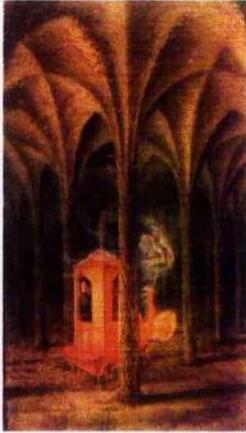
similar to the coat of the vagabond. If both can seal the adept inside then they may be linked to the spiritual alembic vessel or womb that transforms the adept on his journey.

A similarity between this and another 'aquatic journey' painting is the use of the hollowed out tree. In this work Varo cuts an archway and steps into the side of a tree, inside which stands the source of the river: the Grail,<sup>20</sup> or at least an overflowing chalice. In *Troubador* it is the female version of Pan that lies inside the hollow tree, in both cases the thing inside the tree is suggestive of female sexuality and reproduction, as Pan is connected to wild passion and intercourse, while the chalice / Grail is associated with new life and the womb. The use of the tree is also important as the tree can be used to symbolise both the progression of the Great Work and new life. Likewise, if the water flowing from the chalice within the tree can be said to be originating from potent symbols of reproduction, fertility and new life, then it may be interpreted as amniotic fluid. Thus the journey undergone by the explorer in this alembic vessel is not just the spiritual journey of the alchemist, but also that of a potential mother, travelling to the site of fertilisation. This again demonstrates the iconographical links between alchemy and feminine biological reproduction in the art of Varo.

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<sup>20</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 218

## Journeys Over Land



3.16

Varo: *Vegetal Cathedral*, 1957  
Oil on canvas, Private Collection



3.17

Varo: *The Juggler*, 1956, Oil on masonite  
with mother of pearl, Private Collection

Travelling over water is not the only kind of literal journey present in Varo's art; there are also a number of works that suggest an alchemical journey over land. One such painting is *Vegetal Cathedral* 1957. In this work a strange contraption that appears to be some form of wagon-boat hybrid trundles through a forest in which the trees do not form an overhead canopy of leaves, but a seemingly endless vaulted ceiling, similar to that of a cathedral. The hexagonal 'wheeled-tower' aspect of this vehicle is similar to that which appears in *The Juggler* 1956. In this latter work a magician performs tricks for a crowd, but there are certain iconographical images, such as the conical flask and the juggler's star shaped head, that suggest this figure may also be identified as an alchemist. Do the similarities in vehicles suggest that the figure in *Vegetal Cathedral* may also be an alchemist?

The female figure leaning out of the window is not alone in her wagon-boat, there is a faint duplicated figure that can be glimpsed through the other window. Could this possibly be a reference to the idea of journeying to 'find yourself' and the worry that the self you seek is with you all along? This may be linked to both Varo's and the alchemist's spiritual journeys, in which case this hexagonal vehicle may be representative of the athanor, the furnace in which the alchemist is moulded and transformed. This argument may be emphasised by the fact that the vehicle in *The Juggler* has the trappings of an alchemical athanor: the various conical flasks, creatures symbolic of various processes, particularly the lion, and even a woman in blue, who complements the juggler's red to suggest a union between feminine mercury and masculine sulphur. Similarly, the figure in *Vegetal Cathedral* is dressed in black, while the vehicle itself is an orangey-red, perhaps implying that the vehicle is a kind of Philosopher's Stone, pulling the raw, 'Nigredo' alchemist deeper and deeper into the journey of discovery. Indeed, the way in which the 'prow' of this vehicle is shaped like a bird and the fact that it is also orangey-red, suggests that this bird may be identified as the phoenix – symbolic of the Stone, emphasising this argument.

Varo's use of the fleur-de-lis on the flag on top of the wagon-boat, and the forest, are both suggestive in terms of procreation. Though the fleur-de-lis is commonly associated with the heraldic device of the French royal family, its origins are much older. As well as symbolising fecundity and royalty, the fleur-de-lis was also regarded as a sacred plant and representative of the tree of life in Ancient Egypt, Assyria,

Persia and Byzantium.<sup>21</sup> The connection between the fleur-de-lis and life or rebirth implies that Varo's use of it here emphasises the presence of female fertility within this work. Similarly, as previously mentioned, the forest is symbolic of female genitalia and / or the womb, and so, by pulling the alchemist deeper into this forest, this work may symbolise a journey towards pregnancy. What is interesting however, is that the alchemist is female and that this forest is reminiscent of a cathedral – a holy sacred space. If this alchemical vehicle is taking the alchemist towards the site of procreation, then this specific type of space and the gender of the alchemist may suggest that this conception will be a kind of Virgin Birth: reproduction without the assistance of the male, expressed through alchemical iconography.

### **Circles and Spirals**

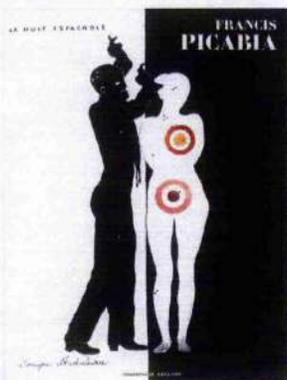
Thus we may note that the concept of the journey in the art of Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo may not only be linked with alchemy, but also with surrogate expressions of procreativity. The prominent image throughout the works of these artists is that of the circle or the spiral, whether through literal depiction, such as Varo's *Spiral Transit*, or a concept implied by the subject of a painting, such as the interlinked journeys of Fini's Guardian series. A reason for this may be found in Jung, who states that: "The spiral emphasises the centre and hence the uterus, which is a synonym frequently employed for the alchemical vessel".<sup>22</sup> This inextricable relationship between the cyclic journey, reproduction and the alchemical quest could be deftly used by female Surrealist artists to assert their identity, as well as thumbing

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Haig: *The Floral Symbolism of the Great Masters*, 1913, p. 149

<sup>22</sup> Jung, 1948, p. 180

their noses at those male Surrealist artists, who may have intentionally overlooked such connections in order to assert their own procreative powers.



3.18

Picabia: *La Nuit Espagnole*  
1922, Ripplon on canvas



3.19

Picabia: *Optophone I*, 1922, Ink and  
watercolour on composition board

Examples of this may be found in what William A. Camfield refers to as Francis Picabia's "figurative and late Dada-machinist" style of the early 1920s. In *La Nuit Espagnole* 1922, we note concentric circles suggestive of targets placed over a female nude's breast and vulva. These targets act as sites connected with sex, and the bullet holes, which "splatter" the female nude,<sup>23</sup> represent the male dancer's attempt to initiate fertilisation in a manner similar to that depicted in Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* 1915 – 23. However, as none of these bullets have managed to hit the 'bullseye' target of the nude's vagina, this attempt at reproduction has been unsuccessful, again similar to *The Large Glass*. Is Picabia implying that this failure is due to the passivity of the female, or else that it is due to the interaction between male and female? Perhaps procreation would have succeeded if it was down to the male figure alone, as in *Girl Born Without a Mother* 1915 in which, as the title suggests,

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<sup>23</sup> William A. Camfield: *Francis Picabia: His Art, Life and Times*, 1979, p. 189

the mass of machine parts that represent the child has been brought into being through the effort of the male engineer, or father, alone. Similarly, Picabia's machine portraits executed at this time imply the mechanisation of humanity: people will be assembled, not born, thereby eliminating the need for female reproductive abilities. They will be obsolete in an unfriendly world of stereotypically male technology: "Man made the machine in his own image. She has limbs which act; lungs which breathe; a heart which beats; a nervous system which runs on electricity...She submits to his will but he must direct her actions".<sup>24</sup>

Though Picabia recognises the link between the spiral and the uterus, he does not grant the female the same kind of autonomous identity we may note in the works of Varo and Fini. *Optophone I* 1922 depicts a female nude inside a series of concentric circles, which may suggest a diagram of either a magnetic energy field, or the solar system.<sup>25</sup> This work's connection to the solar system is alchemically significant, as, if the woman, or rather her genitalia, can be identified as the sun at the centre of the diagram, then each corresponding black band represents the six remaining planets that were used in alchemical doctrine. Similarly, by placing the female reproductive organs at the centre of this circular diagram, Picabia seems to acknowledge the link between the uterus and female procreative power as the central tenet of alchemical theory. However, he calls this woman simply a "charged body",<sup>26</sup> she has no identity,

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Haviland: 'Statement'; 291 no. 7 – 8, Sept. – Oct. quoted in Barabara Zabel's 'The Constructed Self: Gender and Portraiture in Machine-Age America'; *Women in Dada* (ed.) Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, 1998, pp. 24 - 25

<sup>25</sup> Camfield, 1979, p. 193

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 193

unlike the women of Varo and Fini's compositions. Therefore it can be argued that Fini and Varo are using the concept of a cyclic or spiralling alchemical journey to re-establish female identity as a creator in contrast to artists such as Picabia, who try to restrict this identity in their works.

## Chapter Four:

### The Adept in the Wilderness: Alchemy and Nature

#### The Guiding Light of Nature

In *Emblem 42* of his *Atalanta fugiens*, Michael Maier urges the training alchemist to let nature lead him in his search for the Stone: “For him versed in Chemistry, let Nature, Reason, Experience and Reading be his Guide, staff, spectacles and lamp.”<sup>1</sup>



4.1

Michael Maier: *Emblem 42: For him versed in Chemistry...*,  
Etching from *Atalanta fugiens*, 1617

The transmutative processes of alchemy can be glimpsed in nature every day as trees and plants undergo their reproductive cycles, and the true alchemist aimed to imitate this transformative power of the natural world. Some objects in nature, such as trees, water and the moon are imbued with a more specific alchemical meaning, thus natural artefacts and images are alchemically significant in themselves, as well as in a more general context.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Maier, (1617), 1989, p. 189

In Chinese alchemy it was believed that the adept should return to a state of primordial chaos through meditation in order to discover the secrets of creation and regeneration.<sup>2</sup> Could Leonor Fini, Remedios Varo and the other Surrealists be using their art to explore this primordial chaos? The primordial was certainly important to the Surrealists as it epitomised a pre-birth unconscious, an unconscious unsullied by conscious thought.<sup>3</sup> Bataille discusses this pre-birth unconscious in terms of the continuity of being we are only able to experience during moments of erotic thought or interaction: “[W]ith all [types of eroticism] the concern is to substitute for the individual, isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity”.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that sexual aspects of Surrealist art were perhaps a way in which the artists could investigate the primordial and reach the secrets of creation.

In alchemy the concept of the unconscious primordial is signified by the *putrefacto*, or putrefaction stage, at which the matter in the athanor, having been broken down into its constituent elements, begins to congeal into a foul smelling black mass. This is the beginning of the transformation of the matter and is allegorised as the birth, death and resurrection of the Son born to the King and Queen after their union. Therefore, this stage of the alchemical process may be related to concepts of life, fertility and death expressed through nature in the art of Fini and Varo.

Both male and female Surrealists use nature in connection with woman as well as concepts of fertility and death. Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo use nature in their

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<sup>2</sup> Henderson & Sherwood, 2003, p. 7

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Markus: ‘Surrealism’s Preying Mantis and Castrating Woman’; *Women’s Art Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2000, p. 34

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille: *Eroticism* (trans Mary Dalwood), 1987, p. 15

paintings not only to convey alchemical transformations, but also to use such transformations as a way of expressing the creative power of the female. This contrasts with some of their male contemporaries, who use nature to portray this power in a more negative light, as we shall see.

### **Primordial Earth**

Whitney Chadwick has noted the presence of primordial chaos in Leonor Fini's paintings of the disorderly natural world that span the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> This primordial chaos can be connected to the first stages of the alchemical Great Work, in which the materials inside the athanor break down into the black swampy pulp, which is reminiscent of the primordial swamps that fostered the first forms of life aeons ago.

Chadwick also states that Fini's appreciation for the mystical energy stored within decaying plant-life stems from the German Romantics and the Symbolists.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the German Romantics frequently defined landscape imagery in terms of "hieroglyphics",<sup>7</sup> implying a deeper hidden meaning regarding the relationship between nature, God and man. Though the German Romantics were not interested in alchemy, the idea of secret signs regarding nature, which man must imitate to become closer to God, may have appealed to Fini's hermetic interests, as it reflects the alchemist's aims. Similarly, in works such as *L'Ombrelle* 1947, Fini uses Symbolist tree imagery, though possibly with a different aim in mind.

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<sup>5</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 177

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 177

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Mitchell: 'Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Watzmann*: German Romantic Landscape Painting and Historical Geography'; *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 1984, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org), accessed 08 / 08 / 06, p. 459



4.2

Fini: *L' Ombrelle* 1947, Oil on canvas  
Collection of the Edward James  
Foundation, Sussex



4.3

Varo: *The Escape*, 1961, Oil on  
masonite, Museon de Arte Moderno,  
Mexico

The gnarled and twisted branch which presides over the composition of *L'Ombrelle* may be related to works such as Segantini's *The Evil Mothers* 1897, which also uses twisted branches as the focal point of the work. However, in Segantini's painting, they are designed to represent sin and consequent suffering.<sup>8</sup> Can the same be said of Fini's branch? It is perhaps more accurate to argue that Fini uses the twisted branches as part of a discourse between life and death that not only informs much of her work, but also connects it to the putrefaction process of the Great Work, in which these two concepts are at their most potent.

In Lautréamont's famous quote "As beautiful as the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table",<sup>9</sup> the umbrella is the masculine object that contrasts with the feminine sewing machine. However, when the umbrella is opened it can function as a vessel in the same manner as an alembic vessel, or a womb. Indeed, in Remedios Varo's *The Escape* 1961 we note two figures, one

<sup>8</sup> Robert Goldwater: *Symbolism*, 1979, p. 53

<sup>9</sup> Isidore Ducasse, quoted in Gale, 1997, p. 221

female, the other male, correspondingly dressed in blue and red, riding inside an umbrella on a wave of fiery mist towards a high mountain cave. The parallels between this painting and the alchemical process, suggested through the union of male and female, the concept of the journey, the constant source of fire, and the umbrella alembic vessel, suggests that Varo saw the umbrella as a female vessel similar to the womb-like athanor. It may be possible that Fini also saw the umbrella in the same light. The potential femininity of the umbrella in Fini's painting is enhanced by its lacy edge, this is clearly an umbrella meant for a woman. It too is opened out, suggestive of a possible function as a vessel, but it has been ripped and torn so that it is no longer suitable for carrying anything. While this is suggestive of a failed transmutation, it is also indicative of an unsuccessful attempt at reproduction; without the new life that results from the putrefication process, the umbrella womb and surrounding natural artefacts are left in a state of decay.

Another possible reading is that, if this putrefication did indeed result in new life, as it is meant to, then perhaps this painting depicts the debris that has been left behind in its wake: the ripped vessel suggestive of childbirth, the discarded blanket implying swaddling clothes. Such gruesome and even violent imagery in connection with birth and motherhood underlines Fini's refusal to enter into a maternal role. However, as Fini is working from her unconscious, my reading of her imagery suggests that she at least subconsciously recognised her maternal capabilities, even if she did not want to fulfil them physically. Whether positive or negative, Fini is communicating her view of female child bearing through alchemical imagery.

The handle of the umbrella is missing, suggesting that the male element in this post-procreative act has also gone, enhancing the loneliness of the mother, yet also suggesting an exclusively female form of reproduction. This work implies regeneration simply through the 'female' processes of nature, rather than an erotic fusion of male and female via intercourse.<sup>10</sup> If nature is indeed intended to be the alchemist's guide, then the lack of a male alchemist presence in the work circumvents any idea pertaining to nature acting as a mere muse to this man, in the way the male Surrealists viewed the female. The alchemical and biological processes suggested in this work are connected exclusively to the female. Though it may seem a negative perspective of the reproductive processes, they are viewed from a singularly female vantage point: the suggested post-natal depression of the new mother, the infertile woman's despair at being unable to create life and therefore losing her singular identity as a powerful, independent Creator.



4.4

Fini: *Os Ilyaque*, c. 1948, Oil on canvas, Collection of the Edward James Foundation, Sussex

The theme of putrefying nature is also explored in Fani's *Os Ilyaque* c. 1948. In this painting, a portion of pelvic bone lies apparently abandoned amid decaying vegetation. Again, the regenerative abilities of plants is suggestive of the cycle of life

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<sup>10</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 136

and death inherent in the putrefication process, as well as the Great Work as a whole, and the presence of the partial pelvic bone emphasises this connection through its simultaneous symbolic links to both death and decay, and new life, suggested by its protection of the womb. Therefore, it is immediately possible to see the connection between woman and nature. The gendering of nature as female is an ancient one,<sup>11</sup> yet the specific decaying aspect of the nature in Fini's paintings is suggestive of a specific type of female.

Woman can be associated with negative characteristics such as darkness, lust and death, therefore it would seem to intensify the presence of the female by portraying a natural landscape that glorifies in death and decay. In Celtic and Norse mythology it is women who guard the entrance to the Otherworld,<sup>12</sup> and Fini herself stated that she was: "bound to nature as a witch rather than as a priestess",<sup>13</sup> suggesting she puts nature to active use, rather than passively celebrating it. This ultimately implies that the female presence implied by the natural imagery is a dark yet powerful one, who presides over life and death, rather than being bound by it. This contrasts to the views of male Surrealists, who saw woman as being controlled by nature,<sup>14</sup> whereas in Fini's work we note woman in harmony with, or even reigning over nature.

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<sup>11</sup> Ancient personifications of Nature or Mother Earth are frequently female: the Greek Cybele, the Roman Demeter, the Celtic trinity of Maiden, Mother and Crone and the Norse Nerthus are all connected to nature and fertility.

<sup>12</sup> In Celtic myth one of the three aspects of the Mother goddess named the Morrigan stalks battlefields disguised as a crow, dragging dead and dying warriors to the Otherworld. Similarly, in Norse mythology, the underworld is guarded by Hel, who appears to be a normal woman to her waist, but from her hips down her flesh is decayed and decomposing.

<sup>13</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 113

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick, 1985, p. 182

It may be suggested that this powerful female presence can be identified as that of the alchemist, who presides over the allegorical death and rejuvenation of the matter in his alembic vessel. Paracelsus saw the alchemist's task as perfecting nature's mistakes,<sup>15</sup> or at least speeding up natural processes, a view that harmonises with the way in which the female presence may be seen to rule over nature in this work as its superior. However, the fact that Fini seems to gender this 'alchemist' as female emphasises the connections between woman, nature and creation, and presents her as a powerful individual, rather than simply the one-dimensional *femme fatale* or *femme-enfant* of the male Surrealists.



4.5

Max Ernst: *La Joie de Vivre* 1936, Oil on canvas,  
Dean Gallery, Edinburgh

The concept of nature and the *femme fatale* within the art of male Surrealists can be noted in works such as *La Joie de Vivre* 1936 by Max Ernst. In this work the alchemical link between life and death is enacted through insect and plant forms. A copulating couple is visible on the highest stalks of the plants on the far right, while beneath them a hand grasps a flower bud that could be interpreted as a flaccid

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<sup>15</sup> Lyndy Abraham: *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 1998, p. 11

phallus. The broken or withered stalks of the plants that would otherwise tower above the composition, implying a threat to masculine virility, mirror the lack of erection in this flower bud. This threat is primarily conveyed through the presence of the praying mantis in the foreground.

Due to the way in which the female praying mantis attempts to decapitate her partner during intercourse, the male Surrealists identified her with the preying female, the castrating female archetype armed with the *vagina dentata*.<sup>16</sup> In this painting by Ernst it appears that the mantis has successfully decapitated the male, implying the link between fertility and death. However, the drooping and withered plants, as well as the flaccid flower bud may suggest this fertility is short-lived due to the death of the male, thus connecting fertility and procreation with the male rather than the female. This contrasts with the work of Fini, as there are no male figures for her to prey upon, fertility is not dependent upon both sexes, but on the female alone. This allows Fini's female figures and the female presence in her nature compositions to be viewed as an autonomous creative force; they celebrate an exclusively female reproductive power.

### **Queens of Decay**

Another interesting aspect of Fini's depictions of nature with regard to alchemy and procreation is her use of the sphinx. Though the sphinx is not a common alchemical image, her hybrid nature allies her to alchemical creatures such as the Bird of Hermes, the bird-human hybrid (which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter) as they can both be used to symbolise alchemical transformations. While the

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<sup>16</sup> Markus, 2000, p. 34

Bird of Hermes is indicative of the sublimation and ablution stages, during which the Nigredo is purified into the Albedo, the sphinx may be linked to another early stage of the Great Work, that of calcination. The process of calcination refers to the breaking down of a substance into its primal constituents, and rendering it porous so that it may receive the influx of the divine spirit (i. e. the condensing mercurial vapours) more easily.<sup>17</sup> It may be argued that the sphinx represents the breaking down of woman into her *prima materia*, her rational, passive human side and her sexual, aggressive animal side, and on the verge of further transformation. This again depicts the female as both the alchemist, as man (or woman as the case may be) in the primary stage of spiritual development, and the matter inside the athanor, both being changed by the alchemical process. Through this dual identity as alchemist and alchemical matter, she is positioned inside and outside of the womb / athanor as its simultaneous product and nurturer, portraying her as a female creator.



4.6

Fini: *Sphinx Philagrie* 1945  
Oil on canvas, Solan Collection

In this example of Fini's nature compositions that reference the sphinx, *Sphinx Philagrie* 1945, the sphinx acts as the personification of the ruling female presence

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<sup>17</sup> Abraham, 1998, p. 31

felt in *Os Ilyaque*. In *Sphinx Philagrie* we again note the decaying vegetation signalling the putrefaction stage of the Great Work, and the interaction of fertility and death that occupies so much of Fini's art. She is recorded as saying: "There is not a single thought [of mine] in which death does not live",<sup>18</sup> yet in a work such as this one, with its prominent placement of artefacts symbolising death (the skulls, the ~~death's~~ head moth and the dead lizard), it seems as though death is the only thing that lives in this painting; there seems to be no sign of the fertility or new life that would connect it with alchemy. However, these morbid images are less superficial than they may appear at first sight.

Through the lizard's ability to re-grow its tail, and the death's head moth's ability to transform itself from a caterpillar, these creatures symbolise regeneration and transformation respectively, both concepts that place this painting squarely within the realms of alchemy. While both these things inject the concepts of new life and fertility into this seemingly death-ridden composition, it is the image of the skull that is most potent in introducing these concepts.

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<sup>18</sup> Brion, 1963, n. p.



4.7

'The Skull, symbol of the *mortifacio* of Eve, the female aspect of *prima materia*'; *Miscellanea d'alchimia*, 14<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript, illustrated in *Psychology and Alchemy* 1968 by Jung



4.8

'Adam as *prima materia* pierced by the arrow of Mercurius'; *Miscellanea d'alchimia*, 14<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript, illustrated in *Psychology and Alchemy*, 1968 by Jung

In hermetic symbology, the skull is representative of both death and the moon.<sup>19</sup> The moon is a female principle and, though it may be linked with darkness and death, it may also be linked with life, as it is inextricably connected through their shared 28 day phases, to the female menstrual cycle, which is the biological signifier of the potential for pregnancy and therefore the procreative power of woman. This concept appears in alchemical art. For example, in this picture of the 'death of Eve', the skull may at first seem to imply the aspect of death alone, but when we consider that the corresponding 'death of Adam' work does not contain a skull, it would seem that it appears in a specifically female context. Similarly, as the 'death of Eve' corresponds to the first stages of the work, which aim to produce new matter from this death, the skull also holds a promise of life.

<sup>19</sup> Fred Gettings: *The Hidden Art: A Study of Occult Symbolism in Art*, 1978, p. 72

The fact that the image of the skull is repeated several times in *Sphinx Philagrie* is also significant, as it may suggest the death of the materials that have resulted in this putrefying mass. Yet, if this allegorical symbolism is accurate, then this suggests an exclusively female act of creation, due to the connection between the skull, the moon, the female and new life, suggesting that Fini again uses alchemical imagery as a surrogate method of expressing female procreative power. This argument may be emphasised by the title.

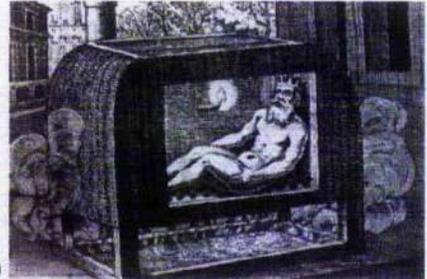
'Philagrie' may be interpreted as 'a lover of agriculture / nature', as the ending 'agrie' may have its etymological roots in 'agre', meaning agriculture. Similarly, 'phil-' is taken to mean 'one who loves', for instance, a philosopher is one who loves wisdom. In this way, it is possible to read the title of this painting as 'Sphinx: a lover of nature'. Whether one interprets this relationship between the sphinx and nature as erotic, platonic, or simply intellectual, it is still a relationship between two female archetypes, both suggestive of fertility through the sexuality of the sphinx and the reproductive capabilities of nature. This serves to enhance the fertile aspect of the work, thereby allying it to the interaction of life and death that characterises the putrefication stage, as well as with female reproduction, arguing for a link between alchemy and specifically female procreation.

## Primordial Water



4.9

Fini: *Le Bout du Monde* 1949, Oil on canvas, Collection of F. Delene, Switzerland



4.10

Michael Maier: *Emblem 28*  
Etching from *Atalanta fugiens* 1617,  
illustrated in *Art and Alchemy*  
2006

The link between alchemy and female procreation is not merely confined to the land based natural world, it also appears in Fini's depictions of large bodies of water. In *Le Bout du Monde* 1949, we again note the presence of skulls and decaying vegetation suggestive of the putrefication process, yet this work may also be linked to another stage of the Great Work, that of ablution. Ablution can be depicted as a drowned, soggy earth,<sup>20</sup> which is certainly applicable here, and refers to the moment at which the matter in the athanor is washed, cleansed and resurrected.<sup>21</sup> This is notable in *Le Bout du Monde* through the way in which the female figure in the centre and the skulls seem to protrude from, rather than float on the water, and also through the fact that all three skulls have eyes, not just eye sockets, implying their imminent resurrection.

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<sup>20</sup> Dixon, 2003, p. 271

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 273

The ablution phase of the Great Work leads from the Nigredo to the Albedo stage, resulting in the Luna stone. Both the Albedo and the Luna stone are gendered as female. The revelation of this stone is also reflected in the painting through the revelation of this pure, cleansed woman in the centre of the composition, who contrasts with her murky reflection, perhaps suggestive of the receding putrefaction / Nigredo stage. Fini's use of the female figure, the move towards the feminine Albedo, and the skulls, with their connection to the moon, imply a clear female aspect to this alchemical material. Similarly, the ablution stage in alchemical art is frequently depicted as a king in a bath being washed with sweat (the condensing mercurial vapours). The fact that Fini has chosen a female figure and a natural lake or sea instead of a male figure and a man-made bath emphasises the specifically female element of this composition, and the femininity of this material is strengthened when we consider the symbolic value of the elements depicted in this painting.

Jung notes that earth is the container for water. Both of these elements act as the two lower halves of the macrocosm, or, in psychoanalytic terms, the unconscious, and both are gendered as female. Therefore the female is the key to the unconscious,<sup>22</sup> she holds the answers to the mystery of creation, portraying her as both an alchemist and a mother figure. Indeed, the way in which the revealed woman of *Le Bout du Monde*, suggestive of the forming Luna stone, is surrounded by both water and earth, symbolised through the leaves, implies that she is gestating in a female athanor.

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<sup>22</sup> Jung, 1968, p. 468



4.11

Fini: *The Bathers* 1959, Oil on canvas

The notion of the Luna female rising from a lake-like bath is also present in Fini's *The Bathers* 1959. One of the few works Borgue recognises as having a potential alchemical significance,<sup>23</sup> this painting depicts a number of women around a serene crowned female head rising from the water, in a similar manner to the female figure from *Le Bout du Monde*. The phases of this process may also be noted through the presence of the background figures. On the far left side of the background there is a bald, almost skeletal figure slumped over the edge of a high sided, coffin-like boat. Just below this figure, a woman with dark hair similar to that of the crowned figure, tentatively leans over her crib shaped boat. These two figures and their boats are immediately suggestive of death and the life that follows in accordance with the putrefication process. What is additionally interesting is that their reflections in the water look like moons, and they form a crescent shape ending in the emerging woman's luminous visage. Thus, once again, the matter that buoys these figures may also be gendered as female, creating a link between alchemy and surrogate female procreation.

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<sup>23</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 273

## Hermetic Forests

Unlike Fini, who mainly uses decaying vegetation in her nature compositions, Varo uses the image of the forest to depict the link between alchemical and feminine creation. Max Ernst, who also sometimes used the forest in an alchemical context, portrays it as sexually androgynous. As M. E. Warlick states: “Male in its components, female in its entity, [the forest] became a private symbol for the night, the unconscious and Mother Nature”.<sup>24</sup>



4.12

Ernst: *The Great Forest* 1927, Oil on canvas  
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel

While the same may be said of Varo's forests, the creativity of the forest can often only be revealed through the intervention of the female. This contrasts to Ernst's forest paintings in which the eclipse features prominently. The union of sun and moon complements the male and female aspects of the forest, thereby emphasising the androgyne and the union of conscious and unconscious.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Varo uses the image of the forest to celebrate female fertility.

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<sup>24</sup> Warlick, 2001, pp. 184 - 185

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 194



4.13

Varo: *Solar Music* 1955, Oil on masonite  
Private Collection



4.14

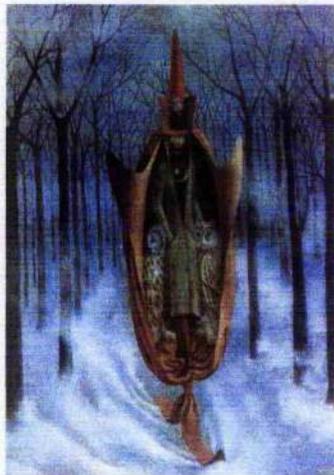
Varo: *Alchemy or The Useless Science*  
1958, Oil on masonite, Collection of the  
late Sir Roland Penrose

The intervention of the female in the creative process is visible in *Solar Music* 1955 through the way in which a female hermit uses a bow to play rays of light like a cello. She wears a cloak of leaves and moss, which writhes up from the forest floor in a manner similar to the seated figure of *Alchemy or the Useless Science*, thereby enhancing her connection with the natural world, even setting her up as a Mother Nature or Creator figure, while suggesting a link to the alchemical adept. Where the light touches her cloak and the forest floor, new green leaves and flowers appear, suggesting a kind of regeneration similar to that of Fini's portrayal of the putrefication process.

Further connections between nature and alchemy may be noted through the way in which wisps of light emerge from the bow and the strings and flow up into the treetops, where they release birds from transparent, crystalline cages. The fact that the caged birds are white and the free ones red suggests a progression from Albedo to Rubedo, yet they are contained within the dark, murky, Nigredo forest, suggesting

that this painting displays all three stages at once. As it is the female hermit who orchestrates these changes, it is possible to identify her as both an alchemist and a Creator figure as she frees the imprisoned birds, bringing them to life.

Varo also uses the forest as a location for learning the secrets of hermetic knowledge. If the forest as an entity can be regarded as female through its symbolic representation of female genitalia, then the secrets it may contain may relate to the secrets of the womb, therefore connecting the forest with biological reproductive processes. One such painting by Varo that explores this relationship is *The Skier* 1960.



4.15

Varo: *The Skier* 1960, Oil on masonite  
Private Collection

*The Skier* depicts an androgynous adept in the wilderness, ready to impart their secrets to those who are worthy. Dressed in a coat apparently made from grass, and accompanied by two owls, the stiffened folds of material under the adept's vehicle allow him or her to ski through the snowy forest.

The grassy coat and the forest surroundings are indicative of femininity through their connection with the natural world. Could this adept be a Mother Nature figure as well as an alchemist? If so the figure, and the secret knowledge they keep, could perhaps be gendered as female, suggesting this figure may allude to female creativity through Mother Nature's role as a Creator, and the 'female' knowledge of how to generate new life. This connection may be emphasised if we note the adept's skiing vehicle. Like the coat of the wanderer in *Vagabond* and the explorer's boat in *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*, the adept's vehicle acts as a kind of coat which can cover him or her. The coat and the space inside is distinctly egg shaped, referring to both the alembic vessel and the womb. Therefore the adept is being kept within the confines of a female space linked to the athanor / womb and therefore undergoing an alchemical yet also symbolically biological development. This suggests that the adept in the wilderness forms part of the discourse between alchemy and feminine reproductive abilities.



4.16

Varo: *The Fern Cat* 1957,  
Oil on masonite, Private Collection



4.17

Arnold of Villanova: 'The Green Lion';  
*Rosarium Philosporum*, 16<sup>th</sup> century,  
illustrated in *Alchemy: The Secret Art* 1973 by  
Stanislas Klossowski de Rola

Another painting by Varo which uses alchemically imbued natural imagery is *The Fern Cat* 1957. Both Fini and Varo had an abiding love of cats, depicting them in numerous paintings and keeping them as pets. Fini is recorded as having said: "I adore cats – they are deeply moving, courageous, magnificent and very exemplary".<sup>26</sup> Fini's use of the cat in her art is to mediate between nature and humanity,<sup>27</sup> while Varo saw cats as personal allies.<sup>28</sup> This would suggest in the case of both artists that the use of the image of cat encourages us to experience a deeper, more primordial relationship with magical events and transformations. Thus it would appear that the cat has a powerful connection with hermeticism and perhaps also nature in the works of Fini and Varo.

<sup>26</sup> *Leonor Fini*, 1983, p. 20

<sup>27</sup> Gauthier, 1972, p. 53

<sup>28</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 123

The two cats in *The Fern Cat* are, as the title suggests, composed of fern leaves. The fern is symbolic of magic,<sup>29</sup> enhancing the cat's connection to both the hermetic and to nature. The fern as a heraldic symbol or emblem is also representative of fecundity,<sup>30</sup> suggesting that the fern cat symbolises fertility. The fern cat's combined connections to nature and fertility arguably gender it as female, and such a gender distinction may be enhanced when we consider that the cat was also traditionally seen as a witch's companion. Both artists kept cats, and Fini went so far as to declare herself a witch in terms of her relationship with nature, while Varo brewed potions in her kitchen. In identifying themselves with the archetype of the witch, Fini and Varo increase their perceived autonomy and independence, as witches act on rules different to those of normal society. In this way, even if the fern cat cannot be considered female in itself, it is certainly connected to two powerful female archetypes: nature and the witch.

Varo's depiction of the fern cat is also alchemically powerful. The green cat is the domesticated version of the alchemical green lion, which represents *prima materia* at the earliest stage of its development.<sup>31</sup> This may explain why Varo has chosen to place this cat at the bottom of a tree. The tree is symbolic of the Great Work, as its topmost foliage is orangey-red, referencing the Rubedo stage and completion of the alchemical process. Similarly, the rain falling onto the fern cat is suggestive of the ablution process, which will cleanse this unclean raw matter.

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<sup>29</sup> [http://www.gardencards.biz/html/flowermeanings\\_1.htm](http://www.gardencards.biz/html/flowermeanings_1.htm), accessed 08 / 06 / 06

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.houseofnames.com/xq/asp/keyword.fern/qx/symbolism\\_details.htm](http://www.houseofnames.com/xq/asp/keyword.fern/qx/symbolism_details.htm), accessed 08 / 06 / 06

<sup>31</sup> Abraham, 1998, p. 92

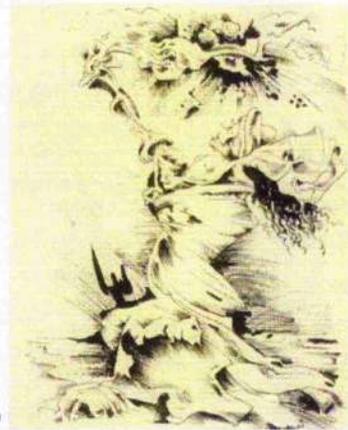
Varo's choice of this domesticated green lion is interesting, as one of the reasons this symbol is known as the *green lion* is that the philosophic mercury extracted from it causes the matter in the athanor to become fertile and grow. In this way the fern cat may be linked with fertility and alchemy as well as female archetypes, thereby indicating a correlation between alchemy and woman's ability to produce a child.

Therefore it can ultimately be argued that nature forms an integral part of the relationship between alchemy and fertility expressed in Fini and Varo's art. Though they are not the only Surrealist artists to use nature as part of a discourse on alchemy and fertility, their usage is less predatory and more positive than that of some male Surrealists. For instance, Kurt Seligmann's illustrations to a collection of poems by Nat Herz entitled *Impossible Landscapes of the Mind*, depicts the natural world and its inhabitants in a negative, even sinister manner.



4.18

Kurt Seligmann: *They Walk in Dripping Gardens (The Wire Men Move Softly)* 1944, Pen and ink on paper, illustrated in *Impossible Landscapes of the Mind*, 1999



4.19

Kurt Seligmann: *Was it His Blood That Filled the Shadows? (Suicide is Not Enough)* 1944, Pen and ink on paper, illustrated in *Impossible Landscapes of the Mind*, 1999

To create the menacing, cyclonic figures of works such as *They Walk in Dripping Gardens (The Wire Men Move Softly)* and *Was it His Blood that Filled the Shadows? (Suicide is Not Enough)*, both of 1944, Seligmann traced the outlines of eerie forms and shapes produced by the images projected by cracked slides. He described them as being: "suggestive of a world in formation".<sup>32</sup> The concept of a still-forming world, a world in a state of transformation, may be linked to the transforming matter in the athanor, allegorised as the creation of the world. Yet Seligmann's world does not hold the same promise of fertility and reproduction as those of Fini and Varo do.

The wire men who stalk the soggy earth, seemingly masters of this domain, alchemists presiding over putrefying earth, take no pleasure in it. They are detached from their world, unlike the alchemist figures of Fini and Varo's nature compositions: "These warm things are not for them. / Their space is empty: / Their wire is cold".<sup>33</sup> Similarly the figure that seems to burst from the earth in *Was it His Blood that Filled the Shadows?* is imprisoned by it. While this may be suggestive of the alchemist's spiritual development in the allegorical athanor, this figure is being pulled down into the earth and the lake, rather than emerging from it, as in Fini's *Le Bout du Monde*.

Thus, as with Ernst's *La Joie de Vivre*, nature here is seen as a predator, something that removes rather than gives life. Due to nature's close symbolic connection with the female, an interpretation such as this would suggest that some male Surrealists were indeed symbolically trying to downplay the female contribution to the creative

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara J. Bloemink: 'Disasters of War'; *Impossible Landscapes of the Mind*, 1999, p. 12

<sup>33</sup> Nat Herz: *The Wire Men* (1944); *Impossible Landscapes of the Mind*, 1999, p. 23

process. Therefore it may be argued that female Surrealists such as Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo used alchemical nature to reclaim their place within this process.

## Chapter Five:

### **Alchemical Bodies: Gender, Hybridity and Androgyny**

Though the symbolic value of the world represented in the art of Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo is, as we have seen, of great importance to an alchemical analysis of their work, the main figures, the protagonists of their paintings, also form a vital part of the investigation into alchemy and substitute forms of specifically female childbearing.

In illustrations to alchemical texts there are numerous figures that are used to signify various stages, elements or forces within the Great Work. These figures can be human, animal, androgynous or a hybrid amalgamation of these. In Trismosin's *Splendor Solis* for example, we note the presence of figures such as the three headed monster and winged women. The symbolism associated with such figures provides information about the alchemical process to the adept. Fini and Varo exploit the symbolic value of their protagonists to convey their own messages regarding female creative power. This is evident in the way they also use human, hybrid and androgynous figures in their art.



5.1

Trismossin: *Die Biette Gleichmus; Splendor Solis*  
1582

## The Female

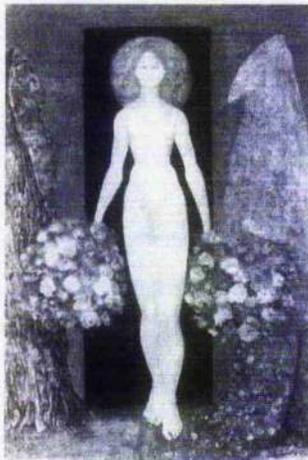
In discussing human protagonists in the art of Fini and Varo it must be noted that it is the female of the species who plays the most prominent role. Men make only a few appearances in Fini's oeuvre and, while men are more common to Varo's paintings, it is her female figures that are often given special, magical powers and characteristics. These female protagonists are grounded, that is to say that their iconographic origins can be traced, to alchemy, Greek mythology and folklore, suggesting that they are to be regarded as ancient, perhaps pre-Christian beings, linking them to figures such as the ancient Earth-Mother, and thereby allying them with concepts of fertility and procreation. It can be argued that this concept of grounding, finding a precedent for one's art, may have been influenced most immediately by the Symbolists, who used their art to pose such questions as: where do we come from; why are we here and where are we going?<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that both artists wish to be identified with ancient female figures, in as much as their female protagonists often have their own facial features, in order to emphasise their

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery W. Howe: *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*, 1982, p. 39

personal, autonomous creative abilities. This contrasts with the way in which certain male Surrealists ground their art.

Hal Foster argues that Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico and Alberto Giacometti all narrate the origin of their art in terms of Freudian fantasies centring around the castration complex.<sup>2</sup> The central position of the castration complex regarding the creation of their art not only suggests a fear for the lack of male virility, but also of female procreative powers due to the Freudian vagina dentata.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps why the female Surrealists felt it necessary to assert their creative abilities through their art to challenge this more negative view. An example of this ancient grounding of female figures may be noted in Fini's *Heliadora* 1964.



5.2

Fini: *Heliadora* 1964

In this work a nude female figure with fiery hair emerges from a doorway holding two flower bouquets. Her name 'Heliadora' makes use of the Greek Helios, or sun god and this aspect may be reflected in her flame coloured hair, which is depicted as

<sup>2</sup> Hal Foster: 'Convulsive Identity'; *October*, Vol. 57, 1991, pp. 21 – 23, <http://www.jstor.org>, accessed 10 / 07 / 06

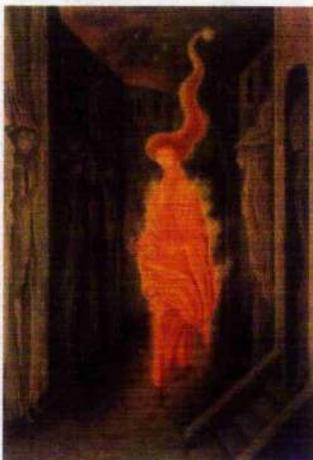
<sup>3</sup> The Freudian castration complex and associated imagery as it appears within Surrealism is a much larger topic than I have the space to discuss here.

framing her head like a circular disc, similar to the sun itself. However, despite this male association in her name, the nude herself is female, perhaps suggesting that Fini has replaced a male figure with a female one, thereby specifically linking the female with the powers of life associated with the sun and therefore suggesting a specifically female creative force.

However, another reading of this image is that the figure personifies the alchemical androgyne, symbolic of the unification of male and female, at the end of the Great Work. This argument may be emphasised through the fact that, though her body is feminine in shape and she has breasts, her genitalia are indistinct thus throwing her gender into doubt. Similarly, the 'a' suffix to her name feminises the masculine 'Helios'. Thus her name combines male and female elements, again implying the union of opposites that characterises the androgyne and the completion of the alchemical process. Yet, in alchemical art the androgyne is frequently portrayed as a two-headed creature, one male one female, of indiscriminate gender. By combining male and female in this figure's name, and using a feminised rather than an entirely sexually ambiguous body, Fini may be placing the creative power of the alchemical androgyne, of the Stone, in the sphere of the female.

It has been argued that the concept of female archetypes is also important in the work of Remedios Varo. Lois Parkinson Zamora states that Varo's figures are not individual women, but archetypes of creative energy that are conceived and depicted

as fundamentally female.<sup>4</sup> While it may not be possible to apply this theory to every work by Varo, as some, such as *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon* 1960, are simply humorous, it is a useful idea with which to consider certain works in terms of alchemical surrogate creation.



5.3

Varo: *The Call* 1961, Oil on masonite  
Private Collection

At first glance one might define the female figure in Varo's *The Call* 1961 as a priestess archetype, however, this woman may also be interpreted as an alchemical adept. Kaplan identifies an "alchemist's mortar" around her neck and a "magical vessel" in her hand.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, she is attached by her hair to a star in the night sky, whose light illuminates her, implying a link to the ideology of the macro / microcosm and astrology; she is inspired by the guiding light of her star. Though Kaplan interprets this painting in terms of the enlightened, emancipated female, it is also possible to read this woman as an adept, armed as she is with alchemical tools, while the light of her star may also suggest an enlightened state of mind, a discovery of key

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<sup>4</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora: "The Magical Tables of Isabel Allende and Remedios Varo", *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1992, <http://pcift.chadwyck.co.uk>, accessed 04 / 11 / 2005, p. 121

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan, 1988, pp. 167 - 168

secrets. Such an argument may be emphasised by the fact that this woman glows yellow-orange, suggestive of the 'citrinous' stage which occurs between the Albedo and Rubedo, implying that she is close to the pinnacle of spiritual enlightenment and fulfilment in completing the Great Work. In addition, the magic vessel she carries in her hand may imply the alembic vessel in which alchemical transformations occur, as its hourglass shape with small tubes is similar to the alembic vessel depicted in *Creation of the Birds*.<sup>6</sup> As this vessel is allied with the womb, it may further be argued that, by holding a vessel allegorising biological creation, Varo depicts this woman as a Creator archetype, thereby implying that Varo uses alchemical imagery to portray woman as a powerful, autonomous creative being.



5.4

Varo: *Magic Flight* 1956, Oil  
Private Collection



5.5

Goya: *A Way of Flying (Disparates no. 13)* 1864, Etching, aquatint and dry point, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Rosenwald Collection

There are two paintings in particular by Varo that are very interesting in terms of an archetypal female that exudes creative energy. These paintings are *Magic Flight* 1956 and *Witch Going to the Sabbath* 1957. Discussing *Magic Flight* first, this work depicts a woman playing a lute-like instrument. The music it creates appears as

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter Two, p. 26

wispy strings, which are attached to the wings of a young boy flying above her. Kaplan identifies Goya's *A Way of Flying* (*Disparates* number 13) 1864 as a possible source for this image,<sup>7</sup> but in Goya's etching the giant wings are operated by the hands and feet of the men flying them, unlike Varo's *Magic Flight* in which the wings are apparently operated by the woman as she plays the lute. This portrays the woman as a magical person, capable of creating flight from music, just as the musicians in *The Flautist* and *Solar Music* create towers and birds with their musical emissions. As the concept of completing the Great Work was allegorised as musical harmony,<sup>8</sup> this woman may also be seen as an alchemical adept.

This female figure is not only an alchemical adept capable of producing musical harmony, but a Creator. She is wrapped up in a cloak decorated with the fleur-de-lis emblem, which is symbolic of fertility. Similarly, the gap in the ruined wall which reveals a series of arches is a device Varo reuses in works depicting hybrid figures such as *Personage* 1958 and *Minotaur* 1959, both of which will be discussed later. If the symbolism of the arch discussed in chapter two is still applicable here, then it can be argued that the chamber this female Creator resides in represents either the beginning or the end of a specifically female rite of passage, as the arches symbolise entry and / or exit from the womb and female genitalia. Because a male counterpart accompanies this female adept, it may be argued that the chamber they are in signifies the womb as male and female aspects unite to conceive new life. However it is clear that it is the female adept who is the dominant aspect and that she represents a unification of alchemical and feminine reproductive imagery.

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<sup>7</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 202

<sup>8</sup> Maier, (1617), 1989, p. 20



5.6

Varo: *Witch Going to the Sabbath* 1957  
Mixed media on paper, Private Collection

The second painting *Witch Going to the Sabbath* is another example of an archetypal female. The female adept of *Magic Flight* may also be identified as an archetypal witch due to her ability to make things fly, though it is her connection with the Creator archetype that best illustrates the procreative powers of the female. The figure of the witch in *Witch Going to the Sabbath* may also be identified as a Creator, as we will see.

At first sight, it appears that the figure of the witch is an allegory of the Great Work, as she seems to consist of three egg-shaped forms; firstly the dark cavity in the centre of her chest, referring to the Nigredo, then her white coat suggestive of the Albedo, and finally her long red hair representing the Rubedo. Yet, it is perhaps more illuminating to consider this figure with regards to witchcraft.

Varo's depiction of this witch is unfamiliar in Western culture, as she uses Mexican beliefs to convey her message. Mexicans believe that there are three types of magic:

black, white and red. *Curanderos*, or shamans as Western culture may call them, practice red and white magic, using plants and the spirit world to heal. *Brujos*, or *Brujas* depending on their gender, practice black magic, which is much more sinister than that of the *Curanderos*. Similarly, while *Curanderos* are bound by the laws of nature and karma to do no harm, *Brujos* follow a “darker creed”.<sup>9</sup> Although Varo calls this figure a *Brujas*, the fact that the witch displays all three colours suggests that she represents an amalgamation of *Curanderos* and *Brujas*: both light and dark. This has the effect of portraying her as a complex creature that cannot be bound by stereotype, as well as a supreme Creator, one who holds life and death in their hands. However, these unifying female figures are not the only kind of protagonists in the art of Fini and Varo who convey such messages. Their use of hybrids is just as prevalent in emphasising female procreative power through alchemical imagery.

### Hybrids<sup>10</sup>

It has been argued that the Surrealists used hybrid figures to portray themselves and their alter egos simultaneously, as is the case with Max Ernst’s Loplop. By identifying with an animal that acts as part of their hybrid alter ego, they become that animal and identify themselves with shaman, enhancing their occult aspirations. The union of the female with the animal provokes the irrational and the sacred at the same time,<sup>11</sup> thereby providing the epitome of the male view of the female:

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<sup>9</sup> Dai Huyuh: ‘Las Tuxtlas: Casting a Spell in Mexico’; *Houston Chronicle*, 1<sup>st</sup> Sept. 2006, [http://www.strangeattractor.co.uk/further/archives/2006/09/witchcraft\\_in\\_m.html](http://www.strangeattractor.co.uk/further/archives/2006/09/witchcraft_in_m.html), accessed 15 / 09 / 06

<sup>10</sup> Hybrids are different to the androgyne in that the hybrid signifies transmutation by combining bird / animal / plant forms with humans, while the androgyne represents the uniting of opposites. (S. Lee Hager, ‘Alchemy, Surrealism and the Northern Renaissance’; <http://www.csuchico.edu/art/contrapposto/Contrapposto97/Pages/Lee1.html>, p. 3 accessed 11 / 05 / 05)

<sup>11</sup> Rabinovitch, 2004, p. 212

simultaneously insane and divine. However, whether the female artists agreed with this view concerning their own hybrids is another matter.

The most frequent and notable hybrid in Fini's work is that of the sphinx. The sphinx in its original incarnation in Egypt was a hybrid man; the sphinx as a hybrid woman was a Greek idea,<sup>12</sup> and probably appealed more to Fini due to both her Symbolist influences (who also often used the image of the female sphinx) and the idea of the female as a keeper of knowledge, as in the Greek Oedipus legend. Fini's sphinxes are predominantly female in gender, suggesting that Fini views the female as the keeper of such wisdom, rather than a catalyst through which wisdom might be found. This argument is emphasised by Chadwick who writes that the sphinx is used in Surrealist art as both the source and destroyer of man,<sup>13</sup> suggesting that the sphinx should be seen as something more than merely a muse. Though there is a definite lack of male figures in Fini's works, it may be argued that the concept of the sphinx as a creator is emphasised in her art more frequently than the view of the sphinx as a destroyer.



5.7

Fini: *Petit Sphinx Gardien* 1948



5.8

Ernst: Illustration from *Une Semaine de Bonté*, Photo-collage, 1934

<sup>12</sup> Gauthier, 1972, p. 47

<sup>13</sup> Whitney Chadwick: *Myth in Surrealist Painting*, 1980, p. 24

Fini's *Petit Sphinx Gardien* 1948 is an example of the Creator female sphinx that guards occult wisdom. The writing on the parchment under the sphinx's paws is a little hard to decipher, but one word clearly stands out: "Lapis". Lapis is the Latin term for a stone, but, surrounded by esoteric objects such as the pyramid, altar and, in particular, the eggs, this simple stone may be interpreted as the Philosopher's Stone. This would suggest that the sphinx is the guardian of specifically alchemical knowledge, rather than simply general occult wisdom. Similarly, she sits on a cracked stone altar with a tree growing from the crack. This image is similar to that of Varo's *Unexpected Presence* 1959, in which a woman nurtures a small sapling growing from her table. This would suggest immediately that the figure of the sphinx might be connected with regeneration and new life, connecting her to the alchemical cycle, as well as portraying her as a creator rather than as a destroyer. However, the broken egg shells suggest the destruction or at least failure of new life connected with alchemical symbolism, in a manner similar to that of *Petit Sphinx Ermite* 1948. Like the latter painting, the broken eggs are separated from the growing tree by the sphinx who therefore appears to be cast in the role as mediator between life and death, implying that she may be identified as a Supreme Creator – the source and destroyer of man.

One could question whether Chadwick was only referring to men when she identified the sphinx as both "source and destroyer of man". This is because Dider Arizieu identifies the victim of the sphinx as "always a young man",<sup>14</sup> yet in this painting the victims are the smashed eggs, which are representative of the female. Fini's sphinx

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<sup>14</sup> Gauthier, 1972, p. 47

thus subverts the views of the male Surrealists surrounding the sphinx as a female principle deadly to men, and portrays her instead as a ruling female force connected to procreativity, or the lack of it, through the alchemically charged image of the egg.



5.9

Fini: *Chthonian Divinity Watching Over the Sleep of a Young Man* 1947, Oil on canvas, Private Collection

Another painting which depicts the sphinx as a Creator figure is *Chthonian Divinity Watching Over the Sleep of a Young Man* 1947.<sup>15</sup> In describing this work Fini states: “She [the sphinx] is black [with] ornaments made from teeth...The moon begins to appear...At the right of the creature [are] six very large eggs covered with a light coat of red fur”.<sup>16</sup> The linking of a black sphinx to a white moon and red eggs is not only suggestive of the alchemical Great Work, but also of female fertility through the symbolic values of the moon and the eggs. At first glance this sphinx would seem to ally with Arizieu’s view of the sphinx which “lies [with] her victim under her (always a young man), paralysing [him] with her claws and takes advantage of him, a pleasure at once sexual and sadistic”.<sup>17</sup> Yet she seems to merely watch over him like a protective mother, a fact reinforced by the title of the work. Thus, once again the

<sup>15</sup> Chthonian refers to the Greek phrase “of the earth”, thus emphasising the sphinx’s connection to life-giving female principles like the Earth-Mother.

<sup>16</sup> Gauthier, 1972 pp. 47 - 53

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 46 - 47

sphinx is subversively presented not as a destroyer of man, but as a protector of them. She is also represented as a creative entity, emphasising female fertility through alchemical iconography.



5.10

Fini: *Dithyrambe* 1972, Lithograph

Perhaps the most intriguing depiction of the sphinx in Fini's oeuvre is that of *Dithyrambe* 1972 in which we note a typical sphinx body and torso surmounted by two heads rather than one. The use of the double head motif in alchemical art is reserved for the depiction of the androgyne, the unification of opposites rather than the on-going act of transmutation. Similarly, one of the androgyne's heads is male to clearly denote the joining of opposing forces. Why has Fini depicted both heads as female? Perhaps this signifies the union of different aspects of the female in a single female principle; perhaps Fini sees the sphinx itself as portraying a union of strictly female opposites. The distortion of the androgyne and the hybrid sphinx into a single body suggests a subversion of the ideologies connected to them. By being connected to a state of completion rather than just transformation, the sphinx is made into a more stable, solid entity, while the idea that perfection entails the union of male and

female is overturned with the implication that only a female union is required. Thus the sphinx as a sexual creator is joined with that which is alchemically created in a female-only context.

The sphinx is not the only hybrid that reoccurs in Fini's art. There are several instances of bird-people in her oeuvre: *Comme Tous les Soirs* 1977 and *Extrême Nuit* 1977. These bird-people may be allied with the alchemical Bird of Hermes, which, when depicted as eating its feathers, signified the condensation of mercurial vapours, stabilising the alchemical material in the athanor.<sup>18</sup> Yet what is particularly interesting is the way in which these bird-human hybrids seem to change gender as her work progresses.

M. E. Warlick has recently begun a pioneering study into the ways in which figures in alchemical manuscripts, notably the Bird of Hermes illustrated in the Ripley Scrolls, changes from female to male,<sup>19</sup> in a similar manner to Fini's bird hybrids. It is unclear whether Fini was aware of the gender shifts in these 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts, but if she were it would immediately cast an alchemical light on these works.

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<sup>18</sup> Abraham, 1998, p. 25

<sup>19</sup> See her essay 'Fluctuating Identities: Gender Reversals in Alchemical Imagery'; *Art and Alchemy* (ed.) Jacob Wamburg, 2006, pp. 103 - 128



5.11

Fini: *Comme Tous les Soirs* 1977,  
Oil on canvas Collection of M. Pieters,  
Belgium



5.12

Fini: *Extrême Nuit* 1977  
Oil on canvas, Collection of M. Pieters,  
Belgium

*Comme Tous les Soirs* depicts a woman whose torso and arms have apparently been replaced with feathers and wings. She seems to be appealing to a second, nude figure, who looks past the hybrid with both hands clasped over her breast in an almost protective gesture, recalling Fernand Khnopff's characteristic depictions of women who look beyond the things of this world.<sup>20</sup> This grouping is mirrored in *Extrême Nuit* with a female human figure on the left pointing accusingly to the now androgynous hybrid on the right, who looks past her into the distance. The reason for the ambivalent and angry attitudes of characters in these paintings may be explained by suggesting a source for Feni's imagery.

Fernand Khnopff's *Sleeping Muse* 1896 also depicts a bird-human hybrid that shares a particular likeness to the hybrid of *Extrême Nuit*. The reason Khnopff's muse appears to be androgynous may be due to the fact that the Symbolists saw the androgyne as a state of perfection, therefore a muse would also be androgynous as it

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<sup>20</sup> Howe, 1982, p. 129

inspires Khnopff to strive for the same status.<sup>21</sup> If these winged hybrids of Fini's paintings may also be representative of muses, this may help to explain the gestures of the human figures.



5.13

Fernand Khnopff: *Sleeping Muse* 1896



5.14

Fini: *Lune* 1982, Oil on canvas

Female Surrealists did not necessarily approve of their being viewed as merely muses; they wanted to be recognised as artists in their own right.<sup>22</sup> This perhaps explains the accusatory gesture of the female figure towards the 'muse' of *Extrême Nuit* and the haughty posture of the female nude in *Comme Tous les Soirs*. The way in which Fini has chosen to illuminate the female nude in *Comme Tous les Soirs* is reminiscent of *Lune* 1982, which suggests that this nude represents the femininity and fertility symbolically associated with the moon and the night. As the night is symbolically considered to be the domain of the female, the way these hybrid muses have intruded on this space may again explain these gestures. Thus it seems that Fini perhaps uses these alchemically influenced hybrids to emphasise the female artist's dislike of being identified with the muse.

<sup>21</sup> Howe, 1982, p. 141

<sup>22</sup> When asked about the Surrealist identification of woman with muse, Leonora Carrington succinctly replied: "Bullshit". (Chadwick, 1985, p. 66)

Varo also used the hybrid in her art to suggest female creativity. Though Kaplan rightly argues that Varo's cyborg and 'monster' creations owe a debt to Bosch and Goya,<sup>23</sup> they also suggest the influence of alchemy. Two of Varo's 'hybrid' paintings are particularly interesting in terms of the dialogue between alchemy and a substitute form of female reproduction.



5.15

Varo: *The Minotaur* 1959, Oil on masonite,  
Private Collection

*The Minotaur* 1959 depicts the hybrid bull-human figure. Yet, instead of the human element being male as is usual in portrayals of the Minotaur, in this work it is clearly female. This is poignant when we consider that the male Surrealists, particularly Masson, attached great importance with the Minotaur. They used the image of the Minotaur to explore the concept of the entrapped mind seeking liberation through the imagination and the union of the conscious and unconscious,<sup>24</sup> though the labyrinth

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<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, 1988, pp. 200 - 201

<sup>24</sup> Chadwick, 1980, pp. 41 - 42

may also be seen as the uteral spiral symbolising the womb and the initiation or completion of the Great Work. In such an interpretation it is perhaps unsurprising that Varo would replace a male Minotaur with a female one.

This female Minotaur seems to have a small moon surrounded by blue fire as a kind of crown on top of her head. The moon reaffirms the reproductive aspect of the figure through its symbolic connections to fertility and the female. The moon is interestingly placed so that it is on either side of the Minotaur's horns and the pointed collar of her robe. This is suggestive of the headdress of the Egyptian female deity Isis, a woman of great magical power who is also associated with life and death.

Isis was also the keeper of hermetic wisdom, in the same manner as a male alchemist. Egyptian legend states that Isis was taught by Thoth, otherwise known as Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary father of alchemy. Isis' identification as an alchemist is alluded to in the work through the way in which the Minotaur holds a key in her hand. The key is to the door behind her, which is apparently made of black clouds. This door is nestled in a gap between two walls, a pictorial image we have previously noted in *Magic Flight*. The fact that this Minotaur holds the key portrays her as a guardian of the unknown world behind the door, just as Isis was a guardian of both knowledge and the dead, thus perhaps linking her to the sphinx, another originally male figure gradually reincarnated as female. However, the fact that she holds the key loosely suggests she is willing to give it to a worthy challenger, just as an adept passes on his knowledge. The checked floor she stands on suggests an equilibrium, a union of opposites, while the black door may suggest the Nigredo

phase, the start of the Great Work. Thus this female figure that has usurped the male, standing at the centre of an allegorical alembic vessel or womb, clearly demonstrates a correlation between alchemy and the creation of new life.



5.16

Varo: *Personage* 1958, Oil on masonite, Private Collection

Another hybrid figure is *Personage* 1958, which depicts a furry, winged and horned female figure running through a gap in a stone wall into a forest. Once again the presence of this opening is significant as it implies a passage of some kind. There are more walls and a smaller opening behind the hybrid, suggesting she has exited from there into this forest. Could it be that the place behind her is a maze, or some other type of enclosed, walled space? If so, then the maze may be connected with the labyrinth and therefore with the journey of the adept, or the womb. Similarly, if this is simply an enclosed, walled space then it may be linked with the image of a house, or a prison, both of which symbolise the alembic vessel, which in turn represents the womb. Thus the passage symbolised by the hybrid's moving through the opening is indicative of both the alchemist's emergence from the maze due to his enlightenment, and being born. However, as the hybrid is 'born' into the female

sphere of the forest, she has moved from one arguably female location to another, thereby not only emphasising the reproductive powers of the female, but also conducting them in an exclusively female setting.

### **The Androgyne**

The androgyne was of great importance to Surrealist belief as it represented the desire to return to a primitive unity or harmony of opposites, which formed the basis of their definition of Sublime Love.<sup>25</sup> However, from a male Surrealist point of view, this androgynous state was hardly one of gender equality. Gérard Legrand states that, in creating the androgyne, woman acts as a “drop of being poured into an already saturated solution that would transform it into crystal”. This would suggest man is near perfection from the start and only in need of a subordinate essence to complete his nature.<sup>26</sup> Therefore it may be possible to argue that female Surrealists, such as Fini and Varo, illustrate the androgyne as being more receptive to the feminine in order to reassert their autonomy and independence.



5.17

*Allegory of the Great Work; Codex Rhénovacensis,  
Early 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Zurich*

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<sup>25</sup> Orenstein, 1973, p. 15

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15

The most overtly androgynous characters in the work of Fini are the Guardians. Interestingly, the alchemical androgyne, apart from clearly depicting a male and a female half, also often holds an object. The object can differ depending on the illustration, but the objects held by either half are frequently specific to the symbology surrounding that gender. The example illustrated depicts the female aspect clutching a bat, representative of the night and the moon (mercury), while the male aspect holds a hare, suggestive of the day and the sun (sulphur).<sup>27</sup> Fini's androgynous Guardians are not split into two halves yet they still hold symbolically significant objects. Though not every Guardian holds an object, the ones that do are suggestive of femininity.

Eggs are held by *Gardienne à l'œuf Rouge*, *Gardienne des Phénix*, and arguably *La Dame Ovale*, though the latter is suggestive of a more internalised concept of holding. In each case, the egg is representative of the alembic vessel and also the womb, which is made particularly explicit in *La Dame Ovale*, creating a strong suggestion of the female procreative process. The fact that only eggs are held by these androgynous figures implies a firm link between the perfected state of man, the alchemist and the Great Work and female reproductive powers, perhaps even suggesting that the female aspect of the androgyne is of greater importance than that of the male. Similarly, both *La Couseuse* and *Les Fileuses* hold objects associated with needlework, which again symbolises a specifically female act of creation. The only faintly male object is the crown held aloft by *Prima Ballerina Assoluta*, yet

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<sup>27</sup> G. F. Hartlaub: 'Alchemic Symbolism at the End of the Middle Ages'; *Graphis*, Vol. 7, no. 38, 1951, p. 450

even this is adorned with flowers, implying a female take on the object. Thus we may note that the alchemical androgyne has been adapted to emphasise the procreative abilities of woman, particularly through the use of eggs, but also to suggest the exclusively female nature of this procreation, and to imply the autonomous nature of woman within the androgyne.



5.18

Fini: *La Femme Lune*

Fini leans towards the ideal state of the androgyne as she was “in favour of a world where there is little or no gender distinction”. However, that does not mean that she downplays the importance of woman, or her individual capabilities as she is also in favour of a world in which “the witch rebels against all the social opacity of men”.<sup>28</sup> Another androgyne painting in which Fini subverts concepts of male virility is that of *La Femme Lune*. Borgue describes this work in terms of a dance, which Fini often uses in her work to suggest sexuality and eroticism.<sup>29</sup> Thus, it may be argued that, as the androgyne in this painting looks straight out at the viewer, her sexual sensuality is targeted at the viewer themselves. Yet, ironically, her vagina is thinly veiled, preventing both visual and sexual penetration. This has the effect of negating the

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<sup>28</sup> Orenstein, 1973, p. 16

<sup>29</sup> Borgue, 1983, p. 44

male / female sexual union that the male Surrealists saw as a vital part of the myth of the androgyne.<sup>30</sup>

The androgynous figure is portrayed with the skullcap formation on its head common to many of Fini's androgynes. As previously noted in chapter three, this skullcap allies the androgyne with alchemical depictions of the female principle of the moon, an argument enhanced by the title of this work, which literally translates as "The Moon-Woman". This has the effect of implying that the androgyne, and the process which created it, are closely linked with the feminine.

Fini and Varo are similar in that they both embrace gender ambiguity in their art. Varo maintained that her figures were not hermaphroditic, but that their gender was ambiguous,<sup>31</sup> suggesting they are androgynous. Varo's use of the androgyne may be symptomatic of her desire to seek out and unify herself, something that may be noted through the fact that the protagonists of works such as *Harmony* and *Revelation, or The Clockmaker* 1955, who are also searching for answers, are androgynous. Indeed, Deborah J. Haynes states that, although Varo's androgynous figures seem to ally with alchemy's goal of uniting the male and female, her imagery is still grounded in the female body and reproduction.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that Varo uses the image of the alchemical androgyne as part of her discourse on substitute methods of female procreation. The confusion over the issue of the hermaphroditic and Haynes'

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<sup>30</sup> Gérard Legrand stated that: "One would be tempted to say that alongside of the androgynous state of complementary partners there is outlined the androgynous state of supplementary partners in the geometrical sense of the term" (Orenstien, 1973, p. 15). The use of term "partners" is suggestive of sexual activity in order to create the androgyne.

<sup>31</sup> Deborah J. Haynes: 'The Art of Remedios Varo: Issues of Gender Ambiguity and Religious Meaning'; *Women's Art Journal* Vol. 16, No. 1 [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org), accessed 1 / 12 / 05, p. 31

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29

arguments over the explicitly female grounding of Varo's imagery are particularly relevant when considering works such as *Personage* 1961.



5.19

Varo: *Personage* 1961  
Oil on masonite, Private Collection

The protagonist of this work is clearly male, but his globular stomach is suggestive of pregnancy. In considering such a figure it is easy to understand why he may have been thought of as a hermaphrodite, as a male pregnancy suggests the presence of both male and female reproductive organs. However, through closer analysis it is possible to note that Haynes is correct in her assertion that Varo grounds her imagery in female reproduction, even in a figure such as this. Though this figure is not an androgyne per se, his actual gender is still suspect, and he also forms a key part of the discourse on female autonomy within Surrealism.

The 'womb' of the male figure in this painting depicts a female figure descending steps towards a checked floor. The checked floor symbolises the equilibrium achieved at the climax of the Great Work and so the figure moving towards it may be interpreted as the alchemist as she closes in on her goal. This returns to the *Lady*

*Milagra* motif in which the male is powerless without the intervention of the female. Indeed, the alembic vessel is symbolised as a womb and the creation of the Stone from it allegorised as a birth. As this female alchemist is one step away from achieving this birth it may be argued that the male figure is just the container of the woman's procreative achievement; a subversion of a patriarchal view on pregnancy in which women are mere vehicles in which to carry the man's seed.



5.20

Varo: *Personage* 1959, Oil on Masonite,  
Private Collection

The theme of the male challenge to the female childbearing role is also visible within Varo's more conventional androgynes. *Personage* 1959 depicts an androgynous figure wearing the cone-shaped hat of Bosch's incompetent alchemist in his *Cure of Folly*.<sup>33</sup> The attire worn by this androgyne is orangey-red, suggestive of both the androgynous Stone and the enlightened adept, and is also covered with fleurs-de-lis, suggestive of fertility, yet they are depicted as furtively placing a woman's head

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<sup>33</sup> See Chapter One pp. 23 - 24 for discussion of Varo's use of Bosch's incompetent alchemist figure

inside their robes.<sup>34</sup> The slyness of this action makes it possible to interpret this gesture in a negative light, suggesting that this figure needs the woman's knowledge in order to have got into this state. This once again tallies with Varo's short story *Lady Milagra*, with the male adept lost without the help of the female. Similarly, such a furtive action may also imply the usurpation of the female role of Creator by male artists, thus emphasising the importance of female autonomy and creative powers.

### **The Necessity of Alchemy**

Ultimately it may be argued that Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo's use of female, androgynous and hybrid protagonists was designed to emphasise a specifically female form of procreation through alchemical iconography. Yet why was utilising alchemy in this instance necessary? All three categories of figure have their own independent connections to concepts of sexuality and reproduction, through either their symbolic or real, biological natures. However, this very fact is that which necessitates the use of alchemy.

Art acts as a forum for the Surrealist artist to express unconscious desires and fears they would otherwise be unable to reveal in normal social circumstances; rape and murder in Giacometti's *Woman with her Throat Cut* for example.<sup>35</sup> The female figures employed by Fini and Varo are frequently 'self-portrait' figures, placing the

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<sup>34</sup> This image may also be found in *Encounter* 1962, in which an androgynous figure holds a hand over the mouth of another head placed in the region of its abdomen. The androgyne appears to be releasing a human-owl hybrid. The owl can symbolise darkness and sin as well as wisdom, so it is unclear whether this figure's quieting gesture is a positive or negative one.

<sup>35</sup> In his *Yesterday, Moving Sands*, Giacometti talks of a comforting dream in which he "raped, after having torn off their dresses, two women... The whole forest resounded with their cries and whimpers. I killed them too, but very slowly". (*Yesterday, Moving Sands*, 1933, trans Lucy R. Lippard, *Surrealists on Art*, 1970, p. 143)

artists themselves in their art, in a manner similar to, though more overt than Ernst's Loplop or Duchamp's *Rrose Selavy*. In doing so, Fini and Varo enter into a discourse with their unconsciousness to better understand themselves, and this may well include an understanding of their potential maternal abilities. As neither one had children as evidence of their procreative abilities, an additional element was perhaps necessary to communicate their nature as Creators. Similarly, to take the example of the sphinx as a hybrid protagonist, though she is representative of sexuality, she also can be used to suggest death and decay, as in Ernst's *Une Semaine du Bonté*, stereotyping her as a *femme fatale*, the castrating woman. Again, alchemy is employed to negate such an image and rectify her position as a Creator. The androgyne, though symbolic of the union of a procreative act, has no power to create itself, as it has no sexual organs. By adding alchemical iconography indicative of female reproductive abilities to the image of the androgyne, Fini and Varo are once again able to emphasise woman's position as an autonomous, independent Creator.

## Conclusion

Despite the lack of documentary evidence, the consistency and sheer volume of alchemical iconography that is used as part of a discourse on specifically female procreation in the works of Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo, suggests that the two are intrinsically connected. Fini and Varo indeed use alchemy as a surrogate method of expressing their reproductive abilities. Their use of eggs, the most potent alchemical image in terms of female fertility as it symbolises the womb, is particularly noticeable throughout their separate oeuvres. This suggests that the egg is an image of great importance to both artists, emphasising the vital role of the female creator, the Earth-Mother archetype, regarding the creative act.

There are, however, a few final yet important questions that must be answered. Why did these two artists use alchemy to signify female procreation, why not some other type of symbolism? If the alchemical representation of female reproduction is so important to Varo then why isn't it more apparent in her earlier works? If Fini was repulsed by the idea of traditional motherhood, why does the expression of reproduction exist within her paintings?

Fini's and Varo's decision to use alchemy as their primary mode of pictorial allegory for female reproduction was, first and foremost, a personal choice. Alchemy is above all an act of transmutation, emphasising changes undergone by both the self and the material in the athanor. Varo's quest for self-discovery was of great importance to

her, and what better way to depict this quest than through alchemy, which shares the same goal of finding the true, united self. Similarly, Fini saw herself in terms of an ever changing cycle, just like the Great Work, and even uses alchemical terminology to describe herself as such: “I am the snake which bites the tail. I am the moon”.<sup>1</sup> Fini also states that she does not invent signs for us to decipher like a Symbolist does,<sup>2</sup> which suggests that she uses signs that are already known – those of alchemy. Yet the meaning of alchemical symbols are known only to a few, and their specific connection to the female further suggests that their meaning may perhaps only be fully realised by women. This implies another reason why Fini and Varo use alchemical iconography in their work: the secret society.

When Breton announced the “profound...occultation of Surrealism”<sup>3</sup> in his *Second Manifesto* of 1929, he did not necessarily mean the increased use of occult ideology and iconography within Surrealist art. At this point in the history of Surrealism, the makeup of the group was changing. Some members, such as André Masson, were cast out for not conforming to Breton’s doctrine of Surrealism, some, like Philippe Soupault, left due to the movement’s complex political relationship with Communism. The concept of a greater occultation was intended to draw the group together, to close its borders to unworthy outsiders in a similar manner to secret societies such as the Freemasons, or the 17<sup>th</sup> century Rosicrucians,<sup>4</sup> both of which

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<sup>1</sup> Gauthier, 1972, p. 72

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>3</sup> André Breton: *The Second Manifesto*, 1929, p. 13; quoted in Warlick, 2001, p. 103

<sup>4</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> century Rosicrucians certainly weren’t secret as the Symbolists held exhibitions under the name *Salon de la Rose + Croix*

were originally formed by alchemists.<sup>5</sup> Though alchemy was not the only way Surrealist artists visually expressed their endorsement of a secret Surrealist society, (mythology and Tarot also played key roles, notably in the art of Masson and Victor Brauner), it was possibly the most consistent, particularly in the work of Duchamp and Ernst.

Does this then suggest that Fini and Varo also used alchemy as an attempt to be recognised as part of this society, to imply their autonomy within the Surrealist group? As Fini refused to be a fully-fledged member of Surrealism, it seems unlikely that acceptance to this Surrealist secret society was her goal. By contrast, Varo felt uncomfortable in the presence of the Surrealist 'inner circle': "I, who could not quickly lose my provincial quality, was trembling, frightened, dazzled",<sup>6</sup> and so perhaps found it difficult to gain acceptance into this society. In either case, their marginal position in the group perhaps encouraged them to subvert the Surrealists' imagery in order to feel accepted elsewhere. Their rejection, for example, of the male reading of the alchemical androgyne as a sexual act in which the male dominates,<sup>7</sup> in favour of the androgyne as a feminine creator, suggests that they put a female spin on the Surrealists' use of alchemy. It may therefore be possible to argue that, through using this feminine alchemy, Fini and Varo are helping to set up a separate secret society; one dominated by women rather than men. Such an argument is overtly illustrated in the art of Fini through her almost exclusive use of female figures in a

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<sup>5</sup> See Silberer 1971, pp. 173 – 189; Madeline Bergman: *Hieronymus Bosch and Alchemy*, 1979, p. 65; Stanislas Klosowski de Rola: *The Golden Game: Alchemical Engravings of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1988, p. 62; Michael Maier: *Themis Aurea: The Laws and the Fraternity of the Rosie Cross*, Cornhill, 1656.

<sup>6</sup> Kaplan, 1988, p. 56

<sup>7</sup> See Gérard Legrand's statement on the androgyne in Chapter Five p. 133

matriarchal society. It is also illustrated, though more subtly, in Varo's works through what may be termed the *Lady Milagra* motif: female figures either making, or providing the key to spiritual discoveries.

This concept of a secret society may also help to explain why alchemical surrogate creation does not appear in Varo's earlier works. Varo describes herself as very much the outsider of the Surrealist circle, despite, or perhaps even because of her relationship with Péret: "My position was the timid and humble one of listener; I was not old enough, nor did I have the aplomb to face up to them, to a Paul Eluard, a Benjamin Péret, or an André Breton".<sup>8</sup> The 1930s was a period of experimentation for Varo,<sup>9</sup> and her works from this decade show the influence of artists such as Dalí and Brauner. It may be suggested that, in an effort to be admitted to the male Surrealist secret circle, she emulated their styles. It was only when she became independent and had contact with a less intimidating artist who shared her passions, namely Leonora Carrington, that she stopped trying to be admitted to their society and collaborated on the creation of a female one instead. The importance of Varo's new found autonomy that is communicated through her mature works of the late 40s to early 60s, helps us to explain Fini's seemingly contradictory placement in a secret society that celebrates woman's procreative abilities through alchemical iconography.

When Fini talks of her dislike of motherhood she uses the term "physical maternity". Does this mean she believes in a different kind of maternity, a spiritual one perhaps? Is it this spiritual maternity which ties her to other women, and is expressed through

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<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, 1988, pp. 55 - 56

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 63

alchemy in her art? Or is it that this spiritual maternity is the act of painting itself? Such a sentiment is shared by Leonora Carrington who stated that, for her, painting was the ultimate creative act.<sup>10</sup> In this way, woman's childbearing abilities may be glimpsed through the lens of artistic creation, and differentiated from the artistic creation of Surrealist men through the use of specifically female alchemical imagery. This method allows woman to be viewed as both an autonomous and independent creator in terms of both art and reproduction.

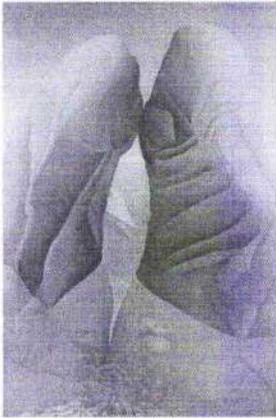
Is it wrong to define women by their ability to procreate? Perhaps so, but we must remember that, in the art of Fini and Varo, this procreative ability is depicted somewhat differently to the accepted norm. Instead of the reproductive partnership between man and woman, in their art it is woman alone who is responsible for creation. This removes their procreative women from the patriarchal sphere whereby women with children are simply housewives and nursemaids, reliant on their husband's income. The women portrayed in the paintings of Fini and Varo are independent beings, whose ability to create new life also acts as a reference to the autonomy of the woman artist and her ability to create art.

Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo are not the only woman artists to which the argument outlined in this thesis may apply. There are a number of other female Surrealists who use, if not always alchemical, then certainly hermetic imagery in their work. Such artists include Leonora Carrington, Valentine Hugo, Ithell Colquhoun, Kay Sage and Dorothea Tanning. Colquhoun and Sage are particularly notable for their use of

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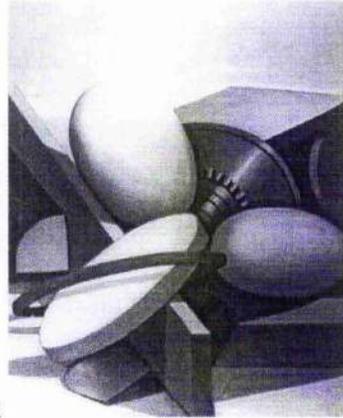
<sup>10</sup> Nan Mulder: 'Leonora Carrington in Mexico'; *Alba*, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1991, p. 6

vaginal openings and eggs, which also appear in Fini and Varo's art, as we may see in Colquhoun's *Scylla* 1938, and Sage's *A Little Later* 1938. This would suggest that the female secret society expressed and spread through alchemical and other hermetic iconography is not just limited to Fini and Varo, but extends to other women artists, possibly even to all women.



ix

Ithell Colquhoun: *Scylla* 1938  
Oil on Canvas, Tate Gallery, London



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Kay Sage: *A Little Later* 1938  
Oil on Canvas, Denver Art Museum,  
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