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*Contributors: Harold Weisz and Chief Curator Patrick Elliott, National Galleries of Scotland*

*Transcript*

00:11

*Patrick Elliott*

Leonora Carrington was born into a wealthy family in Lancashire in 1917. Fiercely independent, she found herself at odds with her upbringing which demanded that she mingle with the aristocracy and marry 'well'. She studied painting in London, and in June 1937 met the Surrealist artist Max Ernst. She went to Paris later than year and moved in with him. With war brewing, they moved to the village of St-Martin d'Ardèche, in the south of France. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, Ernst, who was German, was imprisoned as an enemy alien and Carrington fled France for Spain. Whilst there she suffered a breakdown and ended up in a psychiatric institute in Santander. After her escape – she escaped her guard by climbing through a bathroom window - Carrington fled to New York before settling in Mexico where she started a family and continued to work until her death in 2011.

Carrington's *Portrait of Max Ernst* was probably painted in 1939. It entered the National Galleries of Scotland collection in 2018 thanks to the generous assistance of the Henry and Sula Walton Fund and Art Fund.

I'm curator Patrick Elliott. In this episode of New Arrivals, a series of podcasts introducing the artists behind some of the recent additions to the collection at the National Galleries of Scotland, I find out more about Leonora Carrington's life by speaking with her son Harold Weisz who caught up with me from his home in Mexico.

01:55

You're christened Harold Weisz although you always write under the name Gabriel Weisz. Harold is your mother, Leonora Carrington's father's name, and they had a difficult relationship, which I hope we can discuss. You were born in 1946. You're a professor of comparative literature in Mexico. Your younger brother Pablo works in Richmond, Virginia, I think as a pathologist. I saw the other day again, I've seen it many times, the film about your

mother, *The Lost Surrealist* and I think it was one of her friends who says that you two, her two sons, were by far the most important thing that happened in your mother's life. A lot of the people who listen to this perhaps won't know much about your mother, won't know some of her history. So, some of this will appear maybe second hand to you. It's very familiar. But for people who listen to the recording if you could tell us something about her, her character, her nature, and also the house you lived in, I think it was 194 Cala Chihuahua?

02:59

*Harold Weisz*

Leonora lived in Calle de Chihuahua 194 in Mexico City. She was the kind of person that would get up quite early in the morning to either paint or read or have breakfast or have a coffee. There wasn't a very set schedule for her. She just moved around and sometimes when she got inspired, she did go into the studio and either continue with the painting that she had sort of sketched or sketch something in one of her notebooks or, you know, do some sculpture etc. That was the kind of thing that she would be doing on a daily basis. She was a very avid reader so she would read all sorts of things from mystery novels to, oh, I don't know, philosophy, science, everything that came actually, to her hands, she would open it and she would read it.

*Patrick Elliott*

Fairy tales, magic realism?

*Harold Weisz*

Fairy tales definitely. It was a world that would always fascinate her. Actually, it's interesting that you mention this because when she was working with us she would read stories. And these stories were things that she had created. They were sort of fairy tales except that they were not based on any of the known fairy tales. Magic realism was not there at times.

*Patrick Elliott*

Can you describe the house to us? It's in the centre I think of Mexico City in a fairly busy area. It's a sort of small house.

*Harold Weisz*

The house was in Colonia Roma and Colonia Roma was a place where a lot of intellectuals and artists and so on lived and actually communicated with each other. We had Kati Horna who was a very important photographer near us and we would go visit her or she would come visit us. We had Remedios Varo near us as well, very nearby. So, it was a kind of extended family to that family that most of them lost, you know? Either because of the war or for another reason.

*Patrick Elliott*

And quite a lot of those friends, those close friends would be Europeans. They'll be émigrés who'd been in Europe and come over in the 1930s and 1940s.

*Harold Weisz*

That's right but there were also people like Octavio Paz and many others that were as you know, born in Mexico. So, it was a kind of mixed company. If you see my point. People coming from Europe, people coming from Latin America like César Moro, for example, Wifredo Lam coming from Paris and so on. I mean, people were continuously visiting the house. So, we had these very extraordinary conversations and games going on and I was exposed to all this while very young.

*Patrick Elliott*

Did she encourage you to paint?

*Harold Weisz*

Well, not directly but you know, sometimes I did that only because I wanted to imitate her a bit.

*Patrick Elliott*

Two last questions about the house and studio. Did you speak with her in English?

*Harold Weisz*

Yes, sometimes English, sometimes Spanish. With my father, we would speak in French and they would speak in French.

07:33

*Patrick Elliott*

How fascinating, I didn't know that. Your father didn't speak English?

*Harold Weisz*

He didn't but he read in English a lot. So, he was familiar with whatever was being said and so on but they would prefer to communicate in French actually. That was a kind of meeting ground.

*Patrick Elliott*

Do you think she thought and dreamt in English or French or Spanish?

*Harold Weisz*

I suppose it was mainly English because you know that's the place where she always would go back to. I mean we had these tea sessions in the house and we would either drink tea and have a few little cakes and so on. It was a 5 o'clock you know, afternoon tea. But it was not really a fixed ritual. It was something that happened.

*Patrick Elliott*

And her painting was never done by fixed hours so she wouldn't paint before lunch or after lunch or in the evening. It was at any time that that took her.

*Harold Weisz*

Right. At any time that she was inspired because you know inspiration does not come with a schedule.

*Patrick Elliott*

Did she talk ever about lacking inspiration or needing to find it? Did she have any blockages in that way?

*Harold Weisz*

Often enough. She was sort of desperate that nothing would come and I would tell her, 'listen, you have such an incredible production. Why worry? You know it will come'.

*Patrick Elliott*

That's very interesting because looking at her work it looks like it comes very naturally and easily, that she's got such a fertile imagination, that she's probably got twenty pictures in her head or in sketch books and can get on quickly with them but it wasn't so easy as that.

*Harold Weisz*

No, because we always have this horrible inner policeman that says, 'oh this you've done already' or 'this is boring' and so on and so forth. So, we're the best people to destroy our own work that can be found.

09:57

*Patrick Elliott*

I said I'll just ask you two more questions about Mexico but I've got another one. I know that when journalists were in touch with her, she had a certain resistance to explaining her work. Can you describe that a little? If journalists or critics or museum people came calling, what was her reaction there?

*Harold Weisz*

Well, you know, the problem was that most of the times either, you know, people involved in either criticism or wanting to write an article and so on, they usually don't research what they're going to ask. They come like it's a moment to have a little chat with Leonora and so on. So, she disliked that very much and she didn't she wanted either people asking some very, you know, concrete things or interesting at least. And then, yes, she would engage in conversation.

*Patrick Elliott*

If we could move slightly on to surrealism now and she studied art in France and in London at Ozenfant's academy and then her mother gave her the book by Herbert Reid on surrealism the 1936 book and she went to the New Burlington Galleries to see the great surrealist exhibition there and admired the work of Max Ernst in the book and in the show

and I think she met Roland Penrose who became a great champion. So, it looks as if her imagination was already on overdrive, and she could fall in love with surrealism without a second thought.

*Harold Weisz*

Yes, I think what you say is very true. I mean, *her* surrealism because after all, she managed to create a kind of surrealist language that belonged to Leonora and that is very important because you see, the surrealist group usually had either meetings or some kind of contact between artists and writers and so on. And Leonora did not have that. Remember that Leonora was in Mexico. So, if anything, she could read naturally, you know, the different magazines and so on that the surrealists were publishing and so on. But she had to create her own world. And this seems far easier than done.

*Patrick Elliott*

So we know that through a student friend of hers who was married to the architect [Ernő] Goldfinger, she met Max Ernst in 1937. And fell in love. Did she speak to you about this at all?

*Harold Weisz*

Not in a very direct way. No, because you know, we were sort of exploring other things and especially when I was an adolescent and a young adult, I was able to cover other territories with her. But it is very clear for me at least now that I can admire this painting that you have. The way that there were kind of avatars. That Max has had his 'Loplop' and Leonora had her horses. So, there was a kind of exchange between different elements. One can remember the very famous photograph with Max Ernst riding the kind of hobby horse. Or you know, Leonora sort of dwelling in this kind of peculiar character that she created out of Max Ernst that is actually a bird. It's kind of mixing Max Ernst with the 'Loplop'.

14:45

*Patrick Elliott*

That brings us nicely to our painting by your mother, *Portrait of Max Ernst* that we have acquired. Can you comment on it? It shows Max Ernst dressed as a feathery bird with a tail in this extraordinary red feathery cloak. He's got one stripy yellow sock. Behind him, there's a kind of frozen horse which I think must stand for your mother who saw horses as a kind of avatar for herself, and then in Max Ernst's hand, he's got this green lantern which has got a tiny horse in. And if you read a lot of the literature, particularly the feminist literature, on Carrington, she is sometimes described as the horse and she's leading Max Ernst on as a kind of light inside that green lantern; and also there are other interpretations, that Max Ernst has got her captured in the green lantern. Obviously it could be both. It could be both or it could be neither. What's your view on that?

*Harold Weisz*

I think that that people are free to, you know, to imagine whatever the interpretation most suits them but I think that maybe the most important thing as far as I'm concerned is this kind of inner dialogue between Max and Leonora. It's very difficult to express how this was done. But it was done through the creative entities that they had created like 'Loplop' and like the horse. But the horse that has been modified by dreams and by a kind of totemic imagery and that was something where they did communicate and the painting is somehow showing this very rich communication between two individuals that are creative. It doesn't always happen, because maybe one wants to dominate the other. And this could not happen with Leonora.

*Patrick Elliott*

Very interesting. The painting was made when Leonora was living with Max Ernst in Saint-Martin d'Ardèche in the south of France. This seems by all accounts, at least initially before his arrest, to have been a hugely happy period for her. In the house there decorating it with him just before his arrest by the Gestapo. Did she talk about that period at all?

*Harold Weisz*

Well, only briefly but one could imagine how terrible it was, especially because she had this incredible kind of *entendre* with Max Ernst. There was a bridge that is very difficult to build. I mean, not because one has a relationship. One can build a bridge and they did and it was a creative bridge as well. So that time was something that Leonora was not very keen to visit again and again because it was very painful.

*Patrick Elliott*

Because it gets mixed up with Max being imprisoned and then as an enemy and then by the Gestapo, I think and then taken to Santander and locked up in an institution. Is that something she spoke about, or did she try and bury that?

*Harold Weisz*

No, that actually was something that we did speak about because that was her way of dealing with extreme. With the extreme within, not without. I mean, you know, they were pretty awful but that's something else. The thing is that she had to deal with this incredible amount of anguish, loss and desperation. So, when I was despaired or when I was depressed, I would speak to her and we would understand each other through that kind of terrible, you know, territory of the dark. Of inner darkness.

*Patrick Elliott*

Fascinating. Fascinating. So, she was in Paris for a period with [Joan] Miro and [Salvador] Dalí and Picasso and there are some interesting remarks when Miro tries to get her to buy him cigarettes and this kind of thing. And she tells him where to go. What's your view on her position in the surrealist firmament in Paris in the late 1930s? A really golden period in world art, full stop. Was she aware that she was at the centre of something of momentous importance? I mean she was only twenty-one.

*Harold Weisz*

Yes, but remember that this was the moment of her great liberation, from the sort of bourgeois arrangement, the Victorian arrangement around her, especially with my grandfather and so on and then she found this incredible territory. Artistic, creative, et cetera, and full of new ideas. So, she was experimenting this rebirth in herself.

21:10

*Patrick Elliott*

Your grandfather, Leonora's father, Harold, had very specific ideas about the sort of future his daughter should aspire to, ideas that she refused to entertain. Did she talk much about her father?

*Harold Weisz*

Yes. Well, there was always a very conflictive kind of relationship there. Because well, people think she hated Harold. But then, how did she call me Harold as well? So, you see, it's never black and white and relations with parents are always complex and hers was exactly that. And especially with her father because her father had a very set idea of how a young English lady should behave and the kind of future that she would have to aspire to but that those were not the ideas of Leonora.

*Patrick Elliott*

And her father said, I think 'I don't want you darkening our doors ever again', I think when she went off with Max Ernst and they never saw each other again.

*Harold Weisz*

Yes that's true and I think it must have been very sad, especially for Harold, because he lost her completely. But I think they had different languages and of course different narratives. So, Leonora was following hers.

*Patrick Elliott*

It's interesting that Joanna Moorhead said in her outstanding book - I know her well, she lives in Glasgow - that she sees the Carrington family not really fitting in anywhere, being nouveau riche and not quite working with the aristocracy and this was partly the seed of her rebellion, that she came from a family that didn't fit in.

*Harold Weisz*

I don't know if you can explain away things like that because after all, you know, he was a businessman and he fitted very well with other businessmen. He was very successful, and one can see with the kind of mansions he had and so on that that he was able to communicate with a lot of people and he was accepted in that circle. I don't know if he was accepted by the aristocracy or not. That's another matter. Aristocracy is sort of finicky, if

you see my point. Leonora found her rebellion in a very sort of mysterious place where real rebellion is born.

*Patrick Elliott*

Did she verbalise that? Did she discuss the idea of rebellion or did she just express it in what she did?

*Harold Weisz*

She expressed it with her own personality, whatever she was believing at the moment but she was a very acute believer in what liberty should be and that included women specifically and her fight as a woman artist as well.

25:02

*Patrick Elliott*

Extremely interesting. Can you talk a little about her relationship to the student uprisings in Mexico in the 1960s and 1970s in the feminist movement?

*Harold Weisz*

The thing is that I was involved, politically speaking of course, and she was terrified with all this, but she wanted to understand what was happening, so she got involved with the student movement. But the most important discovery was feminism, I think. Why? Because that's where many of the ideas resonated. And she recognised all this as profoundly true and worth fighting for.

*Patrick Elliott*

I think she read Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch* in fact.

*Harold Weisz*

Yes, among many others. Toril Moy and many, many other of the feminists. Because she was very interested in what was going on, and especially Doris Lessing.

*Patrick Elliott*

Interesting. So, would she go on marches or to meetings? She doesn't somehow strike me as a person who would go on marches or meetings.

*Harold Weisz*

Rarely. No, she would try to have kind of groups and she would discuss her ideas with groups of women and so on. I think she was very influential in that.

*Patrick Elliott*

And would she do that in your house in Mexico?

*Harold Weisz*



Yes, the house and the houses of other women as well. So, I think that's what mainly interested her in a kind of open political manifestation but again, she was very much against fascism and at the time, it was a fascist government here in Mexico, you know?

27:15

*Patrick Elliott*

Do you think that she discovered feminism or became very interested in feminism in the 1960s or was that something, I didn't know if it would have been known by a different word, a different term in the 1930s and 1940s. How do you think her interest in women's art and in women's ideas in the representation of women would have manifested itself in the 1930s and 1940s in her work or in what she said or did?

*Harold Weisz*

Well, she did have a very close friendship with Leonor Fini and with many other you know women artists and I think that's where the ghost of the feminist rebellion was already brewing. Because I think you know Leonor Fini was never 'domesticated', even if Breton tried his best. But you know she refused to belong to the surrealist movement and the why is interesting. The why maybe that was discussed between Leonora and Leonor Fini or many of her other friends.

*Patrick Elliott*

And I know later on in the 1980s, Whitney Chadwick came and visited her and also Marina Warner, I think was a good friend in New York and wrote a couple of exceptionally good essays about her.

*Harold Weisz*

Yes. Well, you see, in contact with all these women you've mentioned, there was, of course, an exchange of feminist ideas but feminist ideas that were already well immersed in art. So, when this happens, then it is modified in a way that can only be understood through art.

*Patrick Elliott*

Do you think she would be happy to be called a woman artist?

*Harold Weisz*

She fought for that, you know, because in Mexico, there was a very heavy presence of the *Muralistas*, who were not very enthusiastic about women artists, even if there was you know, Frida [Kahlo] and many other, you know, artists there but there were not that many if you see my point. There were more male artists and the artistic world was dominated by Mexican chauvinistic males.

*Patrick Elliott*

Doing enormous murals.

*Harold Weisz*

Doing enormous murals and the murals that she got to make were not that big compared to what they were doing. But I think a little better.

30:32

*Patrick Elliott*

It's a very interesting point actually that [David Alfaro] Siqueiros and [Diego] Rivera making huge works with teams of assistants while she was working with the tiniest little brushes as was of course Remedios Varo.

*Harold Weisz*

Yes because you see that's the world of the intimate. It's not the world of the open, huge ego that has to cover walls and walls and walls with their ideas and their presence. So, Remedios also was a miniaturist. As Leonora was as well because they were interested in this small intimate world and how to establish contact with that world. How to inhabit that world. You can't inhabit the mural.

*Patrick Elliott*

Fascinating. So, did she talk at all about her reputation or how she would be seen in the history of art? Was that something that interested her or not?

*Harold Weisz*

No, she was completely uninterested how people would either write about her or think about her art, you know, she was indifferent to all that.

*Patrick Elliott*

Brilliant, well, Harold, we have to end it there. I've loved every minute of it. I wish I could express my thoughts in English as clearly as you can. You've really found the words to capture her character and nature and what she was about. It's sort of precise in its imprecision. That's always important to acknowledge, I think, that artists don't necessarily know what they are doing, they feel their way forward intuitively; they don't have a plan. You can see that your mother is trying to conjure up a whole new world in her work, and the way you have spoken about the portrait of Max Ernst in this very open, unfixed way, and weaved in stories about her character and their relationship, has been magnificent. It's been hugely memorable, thank you so much.

*Harold Weisz*

Thank you so much.

END