

Allegory and Symbol in 20th Century Feminine Surrealism

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Abstract: *The present paper explores the symbolic and allegorical dimensions regarding works of Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Hannah Höch—three key figures of 20th-century feminine surrealist movement. Referencing elements such as myth, dream, and personal symbolism, these artists redefine feminine identity through richly layered visual compositions. Their works challenge patriarchal norms and expose the inner psychological landscape of the female representation. The study reveals a consistent interplay between the real and the imaginary, focusing on a deeply introspective and creative universe. In this present case, symbolism becomes both a tool of self-expression and a method of socio-cultural commentary. The analysis emphasizes on how each artist constructs a timeless, personal approach through the use of surrealist aesthetics. Ultimately, the paper underlines the feminine surrealism as a critical, visionary practice in modern art.*

Keywords: *Surreal art; 20th century art; Symbolism in art; Femininity; Painting medium; Collage;*

Introduction

The present study delves into the revolutionary 1920s-1950s period in which surrealism emerged as a prominent art movement. During this time, surrealist works created by artists such as Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Hannah Höch aimed to delve into and disrupt traditional views on femininity and symbolic representations. Their work consisted of dreamworld imagery, myth, and personal symbolism that addressed the discourse surrounding women's existence and reconfigured women's expectations. Through these artistic expressions, the research highlights how female artists redefined femininity and reflected on the complexities of the human psyche during a time of profound cultural and social change. The aim of this research is to explore how unified visual and fantastic symbolism contributes to the complexity of the creation of a deeply personal and timeless universe in the art of the artists of reference, Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Hannah Höch, three representatives of the artistic currents of avant-garde and surrealism. The analysis proposed in this study will focus on the artistic paths of the artists of reference who, through the transposition of surrealist, oneiric and symbolic elements, challenge the paradigm of feminine identity, psychological introspection and socio-cultural feminist identity. This paper investigates the feminine envisioning in the context of representations of surrealism, including an introspection on the elements of myth, symbol and imaginary.

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1. Methodology

1.1. Context and methods of the research

The present study takes a close, interpretive look at the visual language used through the form of symbolism, regarding three significant female surrealist artists: Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Hannah Höch. The focus is put upon elements such as symbols, colors, and forms within their works; thus, the research explores how each artist expresses their own views on femininity, identity, and inner experience.

The artworks are not analyzed singularly, but within the broader cultural and historical context of 20th-century surrealism art movement. Feminist theory and symbolic interpretation are the elements which provide key tools for understanding the proposed message hidden within each canvas. The method is qualitative, meaning it is based on valuation of depth regarding meaning over numbers or statistics. Comparisons are drawn between the artists to highlight their unique, yet interconnected visions, symbols and techniques. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how surrealist symbolism becomes a powerful form of self-expression whilst engaging towards a broader understanding of specific emotional and symbolic messages.

2. Surrealist movement in the 20th century – feminine representations

The creative universe represents a continuous pendulum between the real and the unreal, between the perceptible and the fantastic imaginary. The work of art is often an idealized representation of the artist's world, but there is also the need to transpose the inner world, which transcends the limits of the real world and takes on a fantastic, imagined form. The image is born as a result of the artist's inner reflection; it is often presented as a result of the artist's foray into the real world. Perceptible reality is filtered and metamorphosed into either an ideal image, which takes on the shape of recognizable elements, or represents a distorted image of the universe containing transfigured elements of the realism into an atypical, surrealist form. Real and imaginary coexist and lead to the definition of an omnipresent universe of the artist. The connection that emerges between the tangible and the imaginary dimensions in the process of the artistic creation, denotes complexity of both imagination and the creative universe. This synergy contributes towards the creation of a unique artistic universe in which the boundaries between the real and the fantastic dissipate, resulting in an all-encompassing and personal vision transposed on the surface of the canvas.

Transforming the tangible into distorted, fantastic or surrealist elements becomes an essential process through which the artist not only exposes a vision of the inner self, but also reconfigures the viewer's perception of the forms within the perceptible reality. Through this creative act, the artist metamorphoses the ordinary into something extraordinary, and the tangible becomes a pretext for exploring deeper, symbolic or even transcendent dimensions. The composition presented is not limited to a faithful imitation of the author's every day and perceptible reality, but acquires a nuanced character that emphasizes the stimulation of the imagination, the arousal of emotions and the power of perception and understanding of the artistic message of the viewer who experiences it visually. The social nature of art is manifested in the ability of the work to create a link between the artist's artistic intention and the viewer's ability to perceive and interpret the intended message, thus giving rise to two meanings: art can be seen as a means of communication or as a means of reflection. „The viewer is being required here to accept a

convention: on the one hand, that he is not in front of the real, but of his image, and on the other hand, that this image itself has been deliberately altered”². The filter applied to the everyday perceptible is transfigured in the complex construction of the artist's inner universe that transposes deeply personal emotions, thoughts and symbols on the surface of the canvas. The symbolism present in the three works under investigation in this article is distinguished by the choice of the symbol itself and the intention of assigning meaning towards it. The presence of a wealth of symbols denotes a search for a wide range of possible perceptible meanings, in terms of the creator's intention as well as the viewer's perceptive capacities.

The fantastic, surrealism „dissociates the shared view of reality and recreates the world according to a subjective index”³, precisely the choice of the three referenced artists leads to the reinforcement of this notion by presenting a distinct, deeply personal and timeless creative universe. Creation takes the form of a complex inner universe. The distinction between the perceptible and the imaginary is explored through the research of three distinct artistic personalities, both in terms of temporal framing and the way of representation of pictorial creations. Although symbolism and the dimension of the unconventional have frequently been associated with the artistic research of the male representatives of the Surrealist art movement, these concepts are reinterpreted and enriched through the contributions of three remarkable personalities, who, although active in distinct periods of art history, their contributions bring an innovative vision regarding this artistic register. What is certain is that „the real world contains an infinity of realities”⁴, each artist translates their own understanding of the perceptible reality and offers a symbolic transposition of their own sensitivity and concerns.

The three artists featured in this study are Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini and Hannah Höch, whose artworks fascinate with a remarkable expressiveness, a deeply symbolic and personally associated symbolic language and a vibrant color palette. Their works reflect a particular compositional complexity, revealing unique insights into the tangible and fantastical world and an extraordinary ability to transform abstract ideas into captivating images. The choice which regards elements such as chromatic and compositional choices are captivating in their originality, creating a unique universe that imbues each of the referenced artist's vision.

Leonora Carrington was a British-born artist which represents a significant figure in the surrealist art movement which took place in Mexico, in the 1930s. Her creative universe knows an abundance of distinct themes, including a preference towards the use of mythological, fantastical and oneiric symbolic references whilst focusing on representing femininity and the feminine archetype. „The link between Carrington and the Surrealists exists in the exploration of an “other” world, a world that is not tangible.”⁵. The work entitled "The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot", painted in 1946, contains a rich universe imbued by the artist's personal symbols and emotions. A careful study of the elements that make up this work reveal a number of important themes, such as Genesis and the concept of sacred space, surreal or dreamlike landscapes, mythological elements, but also hidden symbols that denote a complex artistic message. A number of symbols constitute the object of the research, among them, the garden, the feminine representation, the tree and the animal theme. „The tree of life has the dew of heaven as its sap, and its fruit, when carefully guarded,

² René de Solier. 1978. *Art and the imaginary [Arta și imaginarul]*. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 25.

³ Ion Biberi. 1973. *Surrealist Art [Arta suprarealistă]*. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 29.

⁴ Marcel Brion. 1970. *Fantastic Art [Arta fantastică]*. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 278.

⁵ J. Heland. 1989. „Surrealism and Esoteric Feminism in the Paintings of Leonora Carrington” [Electronic version]. *Journal RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, Volume 16, 1, 53–61.

imparts a touch of immortality”⁶. The whole transposed universe creates a strong analogy that creates a direct connection with the elements of Genesis, enveloping recognizable symbols. Such symbols refer to the tree of the knowledge between good and evil, the Garden of Eden, the richness of the fauna and flora which is strongly represented by a complexity of vegetal forms. The female characters which are found as a common occurrence regarding Leonora Carrington's works are frequently associated with nature and fertility. The women depicted in this work represent the creative force that maintains harmony between the natural and spiritual worlds. The presence of flora and fauna completes the idyllic universe presented by the artist.



Fig. 1. *The Kitchen Garden on the Eyot*, 1946, Leonora Carrington
Source of image: [PS19.031_01_H02-Large-TIFF_4000-pixels-long.jpg \(4000×2423\)](https://www.ps19.031.01.H02-Large-TIFF.4000-pixels-long.jpg)

The appearance of the character embedded in the vegetal which takes the shape of a tree denotes a hidden symbolism, possibly this ethereal element represents the author's consciousness, which is found as an omnipresent element in the many universes presented by the artist.

A symbolic aspect is found in the research of the sacred numbers that are arranged within the presented composition; the characters arranged on the left side are presented in a number of three. From the point of view of the arrangement of the characters present within the artwork of reference, the positioning of the three characters on the left side of the composition is observable, identifying two directions of symbolic understanding, the number 3 and the geometric shape of the triangle pointing upwards. The framing of the characters in a triangular geometric shape contains a particular symbolism that creates a bridge between the real and the spiritual, “The magical number three represents the sacred Trinity. Pointing upward, the triangle stands for ascent to heaven, fire, the active male principle”⁷.

⁶ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant. 1969. *Dictionary of Symbols [Dicționar de Simboluri]*. București: Editura Artemis, p. 126.

⁷ David Fontana. 1993. *The secret language of symbols*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, p. 54.

Leonor Fini was an Argentinian-born artist of the European Surrealist art movement, whose works are distinguished by their particular aesthetics as well as symbolism and mythological imagery that explores female identity⁸.

The artwork named „Donna del Lago or Le Bout du monde II” (Lady of the Lake or The End of the World II) fascinates with its compositional power and symbolism. The sublime mirroring of the character's image denotes a peculiar dualism, an alter ego of the representation of femininity. The artist portrays a powerful image that explores human ambivalence transposing a representation that explores the constructive or destructive power, leading to a certain analogy on the notion of birth and death, of the inevitable beginning and end. The singular presence of the female character denotes a direct link to the artist's solitude and self-sufficiency, an uprooting from the dependent every day patriarchy and a representation of the power and complexity of female representation.



Fig. 2. *Donna del Lago or Le Bout du monde II*, 1953, Leonor Fini

Source of image: [49504b37-9cd3-40bd-b0ca-2dc506ae5369.Jpeg](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leonor-Fini) (1603×2000)

The ensemble of the plant symbol and the egg, fascinates by the symbolic power attributed to it, outlining an ambivalent understanding that concerns life and death. The presence of the symbolic element that takes the form of a broken egg denotes a connection with feminine and creative fragility. The joining of the vegetal elements that rise from the depths of the dark waters

⁸ Naomi Blumberg. 2024, January. "Leonor Fini". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved May 14, 2025, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leonor-Fini>.

represents a state of inner turmoil or emotional conflict of the author. The fragility of the vegetal element that finds itself in a state of decline emphasizes the inevitable end, physical and possibly spiritual death. The presence in the background of three entities fading into the dark waters of the lake draw attention towards the use of a dual symbolism, represented by the numerology element, number 3, and the symbolism of the skull. The depth of the artistic message results from the research of these three elements that mark the stages in the worldly journey of the woman as a child - mother - adulthood and wisdom and the inevitable end. The affirmation is followed by the belief that „After death there is nothing left, the whole cosmos is extinguished as in sleep”⁹. From a chromatic point of view, there is a significant distinction between the previously presented work, regarding the presence of a chiaroscuro effect devoid of chromatic richness. It is precisely this aspect that contributes to the compositional drama and transfiguration of the viewer inside the creative universe.

Hannah Höch was a German-born artist and a significant figure in the Dada art movement¹⁰. Her works enjoy a symbolic complexity and are often surrealistic depictions that resemble fragments of the artist's universe.



Fig. 3. *Der Vater (The Father)*, 1920, Hannah Höch
Source of image: [Kwartler-Hoch_1.jpg \(1160×1381\)](#)

Although her approaches do not have a strictly pictorial foundation, as the artist is recognized for her photographic and photo-collage compositions, the compositional complexity and symbolic message build an artistic universe that explores themes such as identity fragmentation, the dreamlike or absurd universes.

⁹ Tom Chetwynd. 1993. *Dictionary of symbols*. London: Aquarian/Thorsons, p. 114.

¹⁰ Naomi Blumberg. 2024, October. "Hannah Höch". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved May 14, 2025, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hannah-Hoch>.

„Surrealism did not ignore, nor did it exclude, women, but the movement's ideology surrounding them remained ambiguous, and in many cases, contradicted itself. For that reason, women artists were unable to participate in the movement as categorically as their male counterparts”¹¹.

The artwork entitled „Der Vater (The Father)” is imbued by a strong symbolism and meaning. The artist's universe is transfigured as a silent protest against patriarchy and the female role in society. The surrealistic image of the fragmented female body, with an artificially placed male head, holds a powerful symbolic meaning emphasizing the fragility of the female mother, the transfiguration of the feminine into the masculine, the loss of identity linked to the role of women in society and the internal conflict of the artist. The presence of the secondary character in the composition, who is represented by a delicate yet symbolic element can be identified through the image of ballerinas which convey femininity and fragility.

The antithesis regarding the brutal image of a male boxer, who ironically symbolizes male power over human fragility, identified under the representation of the infant element protected by the mother figure, underlines the inequality of the gender roles in society. The composition represents an internal turmoil regarding the acceptance of gender-specific roles, and the conflicting portrayal through which the female is subjected to regarding societal norms. Thus the feminine fragility is encased in an image that portrays the woman as a mother, fighter and protector.

3. Conclusions

The conclusions regarding the research that was proposed within this specific article can be divided into 4 complex directions:

1. Redefining Femininity through Symbolism. Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Hannah Höch are relevant examples of reinterpretation of feminine identity using surreal and mythological symbols, whilst also challenging traditional gender roles and feminine fragility.
2. Fusion of Reality and Imagination. The referenced artworks dissipate the boundaries between the real and the fantastical, reflecting on elements such as inner emotional landscapes and psychological depth.
3. Timeless, Personal Universes. Each of the referenced artist creates a unique symbolic world imbued with personal symbolism and perceptive experience, marked by recurring motifs that convey spiritual, emotional, and existential themes.
4. Art as Expression and Dialogue. The referenced works function as a form of introspective journeys and critical commentaries, inviting viewers to reflect on a broader social and cultural meaning, and the importance of femininity transposed into an artform.

4. References

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¹¹ Lila Pearl Zinner. 2024, May. „Muses, Utilities, and Instruments: The Surrealist Exaltation of the Female Concept”. Retrieved May 14, 2025, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387832816_Muses_Utilities_and_Instruments_The_Surrealist_Exaltation_of_the_Female_Concept.

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