

Dealing death: Leonora Carrington, tarot cards and a very British surrealist obsession

A new book reveals the occult story behind 22 previously unknown paintings by one of Britain's most fantastical 20th-century artists

By [Robert Weinberg](#) 21 January 2021 • 6:00am



The British artist Leonora Carrington in her house in Mexico City in 2000 Credit: Reuters

When art curator Tere Arcq went to see a painting by British Surrealist Leonora Carrington that she hoped to include in a retrospective exhibition, she was astonished at what else its owner, a Mexican collector, had to show her: 22 previously unknown paintings by Carrington based on the characters from tarot cards. “It was incredible,” says Arcq, “I had no idea that she produced a tarot deck.”

The designs – which are published as a book this week by Fulgur Press – are unique among tarot sets, with their square format, unusual symbolic colours, and the use of gold leaf that recalls ancient Egyptian art.

“She was mostly interested in the tarot as a model of the universe, not just for divination, and she incorporated elements from other systems like astrology and the Kabbalah,” says Arcq, who had discussed the occult with the artist before her death in Mexico in 2011.

Carrington's passion for the esoteric did not begin in Mexico, though (“the most Surrealist country in the world,” according to the movement's chief theorist André Breton). Myths and folklore were instilled into her at an early age by her Irish mother and nanny. Born in Lancashire in 1917 into a wealthy Roman Catholic family, the young Leonora was expelled from two convent schools before embarking on her unconventional life as an artist.

In 1936, she was seduced by the paintings of Max Ernst at London's International Surrealist Exhibition, and the following year by the artist himself. He was 26 years older and married, but that didn't stop Carrington heading to Paris to be with him. There, ensconced in the heart of the Surrealist circle, she perfected her own fantastical, dreamlike paintings, often incorporating imagery from the tarot. In a portrait of Ernst, she imagines him as the Hermit card, part bird part fish.

“Depicting someone as a tarot figure [means that] they’re not just a person any more,” says folklore scholar Amy Hale. “They’re now an archetype, greater than life and emblematic of certain traits. They can move between worlds and have the power to act in particular ways.”



One of Carrington's tarot designs Credit: Fulgur Press

Ernst was no doubt a force to be reckoned with, but Carrington was more than capable of holding her own among the generally very male chauvinist Surrealists, and especially found a common ground with them: the occult. Indeed, while their championing of psychoanalysis is well known, the Surrealists’ interest in magic, astronomy and astrology is often overlooked. Carrington enjoyed deep discussions with Breton, who himself consulted clairvoyants and published art by mysteriously named French spirit mediums, such as “Madame Fondrillon”.

Meanwhile, the Swiss painter Kurt Seligmann presided over magic displays, surrounded by candles, cauldrons and skulls, and clasping a wooden staff like an avant-garde Gandalf.

The enchantment was interrupted when Ernst was interned at the outset of the Second World War. Carrington fled to Spain, and finally escaped to Mexico. If Salvador Dalí said he couldn’t stand to be in a country that was more Surrealist than his paintings, a culture where the supernatural was part of everyday life proved the perfect fit for Carrington and her paintings, which look as if Hieronymus Bosch and Lewis Carroll had conceived Shock-headed Peter in Pan’s Labyrinth.

Yet their storybook quality is deceptive. “She uses humour and fun to disguise things that are really serious,” says art historian Susan Aberth, who worked with Carrington for 10 years. “She had a diabolical sense of humour. She’d sneak in a zinger under something fluffy and fun. You look at it and you start laughing and then you really look at it and say, ‘Woah, there’s something heavy going on here’.”



Another of Carrington's tarot designs Credit: Fulgur Press

Carrington also produced designs for murals and tapestries, made sculpture and jewellery, wrote novels, short stories, and even an eco-feminist play, about a rat-borne plague that only wipes out women. “She was so ahead of her time,” says Arcq, “in her environmentalism, her feminism, seeing how occult disciplines fit with science.”

It is perhaps not surprising then that Carrington would have also produced a tarot deck. The Surrealist fascination with chance and game-playing had led the group to produce their own pack in 1940, depicting their heroes, including Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa as the Magus of Wheels and Alice (of Wonderland fame) as the Siren of Stars.

Another tarot was made by British Surrealist Ithell Colquhoun, who adopted the even more mystical moniker Splendidior Vitro. Colquhoun’s completely abstract designs use vivid, enamel paint blotches that resemble nebulae. Even Dalí was commissioned to produce a tarot for the 1974 James Bond outing *Live and Let Die*; although it was not used in the film by Jane Seymour’s psychic character Solitaire, the artist completed the set, depicting himself, not surprisingly, as the Magician and his wife Gala as the Empress.



Another of Carrington's tarot designs Credit: Fulgur Press

The emergence of Carrington's tarot – along with the recent publication of Colquhoun's and Dalí's – reinforces a growing appreciation of the role that the spiritual has played in modern art, especially in the work of previously neglected women artists. The 2018 exhibition of Swedish mystic Hilma af Klint at New York's Guggenheim, for example, attracted 600,000 visitors, the highest for a single show in the museum's history.

“We're going through the annals of art history and it's shocking to see who was left out and why,” says Aberth. “And as we look at these women, we see that they were interested in spiritual traditions that were noncanonical. Because, let's face it, traditional religion is extremely misogynistic and doesn't leave women with many outlets.”

For Carrington and the Surrealists, two World Wars were proof enough that the world did not operate with anything resembling rationality. Amid the turbulence of today, perhaps the revival of interest in her and her tarot deck was always on the cards.

The Tarot of Leonora Carrington, edited by Susan Aberth and Tere Arcq, is published by Fulgur Press (£40 RRP)