

WHERE WERE THE WOMEN OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT?

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29th of April 2025

It's no doubt that the men of the art world are infinitely more well known than their female counterparts, especially in the earlier art movements. While Surrealists like Man Ray, Salvador Dali, and Pablo Picasso dominate search results, few women slip in through the cracks of the front page. In some ways, this creates a false impression about the development and life of the Surrealist movement. Many famous male Surrealists didn't help dissuade people from this conclusion, gaining mass recognition for their works while the women of the Surrealist world were hidden away and almost kept out of the public eye; the sexism of their time creating a lack of ample opportunity for their creations.



Fig 1. Artists in Exile, a Surrealist Group

To explore the women of Surrealism first addressing what Surrealism is and where it came from is a vital necessity. Surrealism is a genre that emerged from the art movement of *Dadaism* (something equally as bizarre and fascinating in its own right), that transitioned into a form of Surrealism in the early 1920s, most notably during 1924 (Gale, 1997) pioneered by André Breton. Surrealism didn't stay contained to itself and bled into its surroundings, within Breton's manifesto on Surrealism he wrote: "Most critical studies and anthologies of Surrealism in English have been presented as contributions to the study of French literature, or as documents of Modern Art," (Breton, 1936, p. 2).

The strange nature of Surrealism poured its influence into other forms; the key characteristics of dreamlike imagery, symbolism, metaphors, and contradictory perspectives (Pinot's Palette, 2024, Online) infested both the word and imagery created by the Surrealists. The Surrealists delighted in this, while other works at the time held onto the paraded post-war safety of conservatism, "Theirs was an assault on the complacency of their audience," (Gale, 1997, p. 5).

One pointed theme was eroticism, this being a recognised fact and touched on in many articles, "Surrealist art frequently delved into themes of human desire, passion, and sexuality, often depicted in unconventional or symbolic ways. This exploration aimed to challenge societal norms and embrace a raw, uninhibited view of human nature." (Pinot's Palette, 2024, Online). While men fill out the books and online results of Surrealism, the work produced by their hands, plastered on pages upon pages, was of their desired form of the female body (no matter how twisted that the women may have appeared). The book *Surrealism and Women* delves into this issue headfirst, "The Surrealists lived in their own masculine world, with their eyes closed, the better to construct their male phantasms of the feminine." (Caws, Kunzeli and Raaberg, 1991, p. 18)

While some women in Surrealism were pictured and portrayed with a careful love and admiration by artists of all identities the common inspirations for women in Surrealist art were drawn from Sigmund Freud's ideas (The Dyás Admin, 2022, Online). Most of these ideas surrounded the belief that the female body is an object of desire,

yet also one of anxiety and fear; “Women thus represent the greatest source of erotic satisfaction, while also inspiring disgust and terror.” (The Dyás Admin, 2022, Online). While this belief was prominent in the Surrealist spheres of the 1900s the idea is especially apparent when simply sparing a passing glance at the artworks of Hans Bellmer; a German artist who is notable for his contributions to the sculpting and photography world of Surrealism.

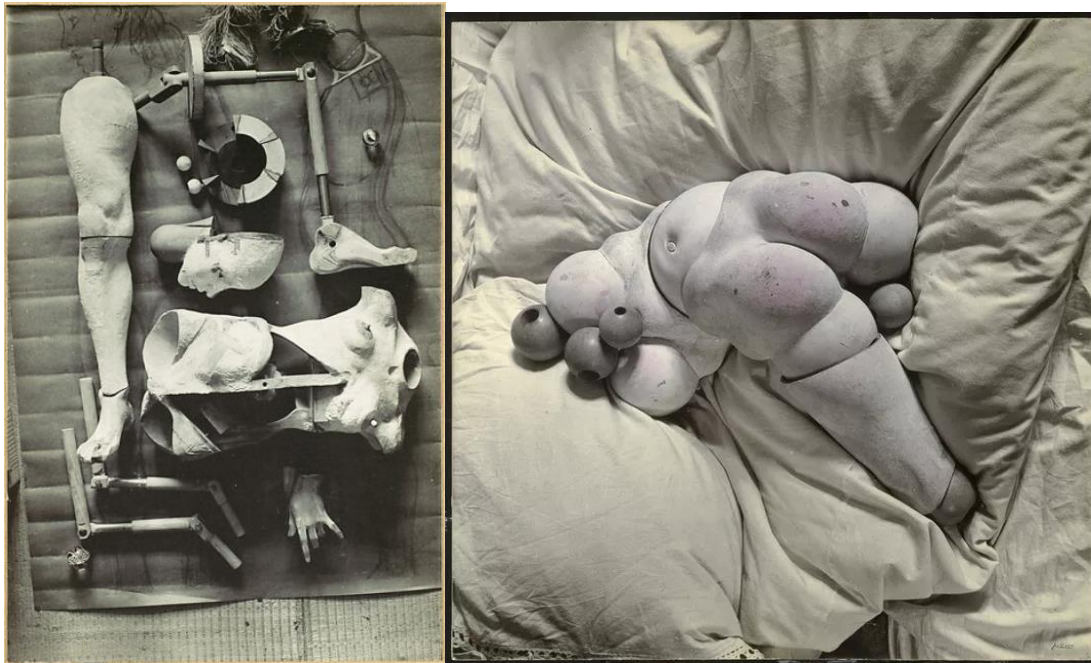


Fig 2/Fig 3. *La Poupée (The Puppet/The Doll)* – Hans Bellmer

He twists the female form in a grotesque manner, breaking his figures down into parts and rearranging them into strange and unsettling shapes before capturing them in silver prints. Bellmer's photographic series *The Doll*, shares his grimly fantastical views on women. While some argue his work came from a time of repression towards artist and that his work was a rebellion of expression, it is also fair to argue back that the story surrounding the censorship of the female body was never his to create and share. How this kind of artwork was viewed then intrinsically became intertwined with how the Surrealists themselves came across, “As Surrealism reached a wider public during the middle 1930s, its politics of liberation and free expression came to be increasingly

associated with the lifestyles of its members.” (Chadwick, 1985, p. 50), further forcing women out of the public eye and Surrealist spheres.

The sadism and desire on display is from the perspective of a man with oppressed sadomasochistic views, not from a woman being punished for her body by the government. He is clearly an artist who viewed women and those feminine more as objects than individuals (The Art Story, n/a, Online). This isn't to say that it is Bellmer's fault that women depicted in Surrealism lacked ample representation, but it is to say that he was one piece in a larger sexualised force.

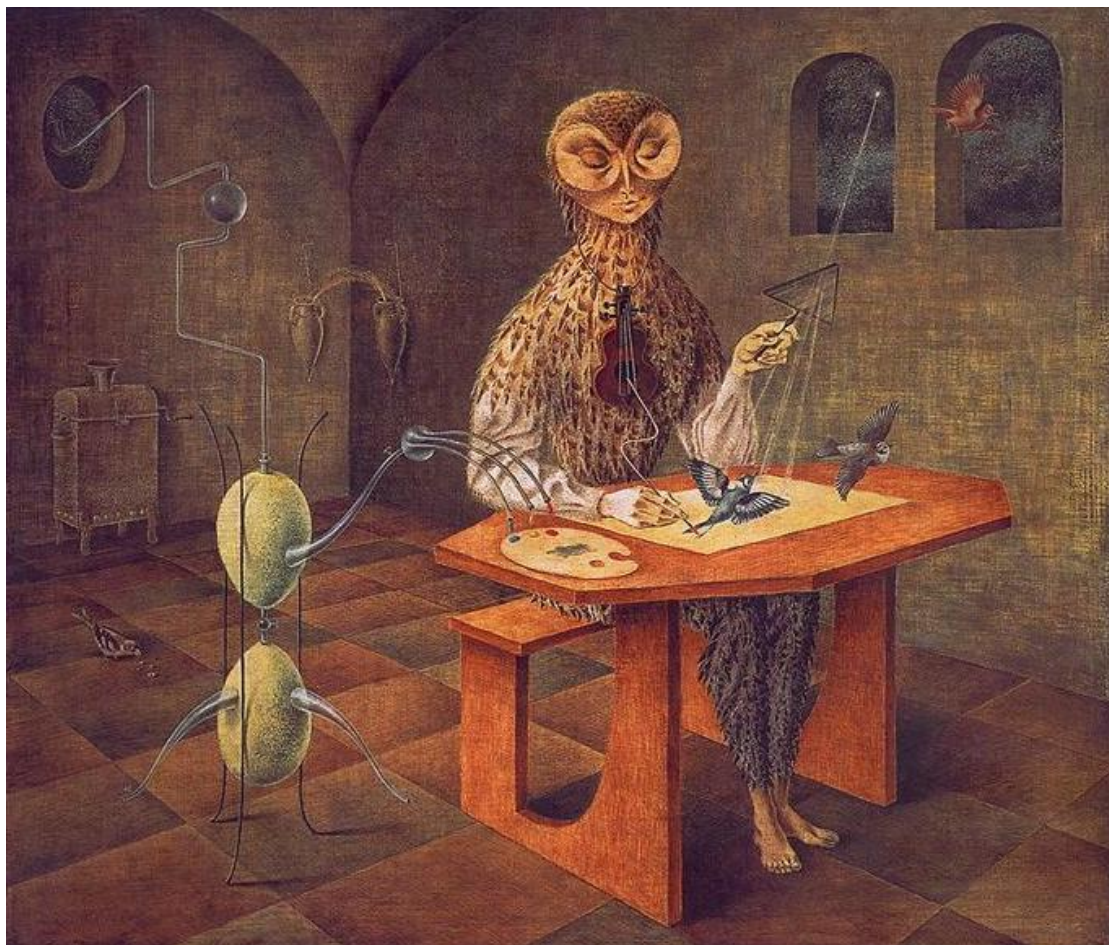


Fig 4. Creation of the Birds – Remedios Varo

“Yet the actual role, or roles, played by women artists in the Surrealist movement has been more difficult to evaluate, for their own histories have often

remained buried under those of male Surrealists who have gained wider public recognition.” (Chadwick, 1985, p. 7)

Many women took to surrealism like a flame to a match. They developed it in unseen ways, recreating what it meant to be a Surrealist as “... some of the works of the women artists with connections to Surrealism redefine it in such a way that they actually leave the movement’s “pioneering exploration of creative waters” behind.” (Caws, Kunzeli and Raaberg, 1991, p. 59).

Many female Surrealists explored the idea of portraying women in Surrealism as another way to show off the dream-like bizarre aesthetics that the movement strived after. The female forms they cut and formed from both paints and clay held an air of strange whimsy. They were no longer objects upon silver prints and canvases but were instead self expressions in some kind of weird and wonderful way.

A Surrealist who practically avoided joining the movement because of the men in it was Leonor Fini. Her work urged others to try and invite her in, but “... her dislike of the authoritarian Breton prevented her from joining the movement.” (Chadwick, 1985, p. 82). Despite this, she did go on to partake in showings and exhibitions with her artworks. (Wood, 2014, p. 272)



Fig 5. The Two Women – Leonor Fini

While many female Surrealists painted characters in a strange and unusual way, some stuck to making their subjects true to life while incorporating those strange and unusual elements. Frida Kahlo is a prime example of this. She painted self-portrait after self-portrait, pouring her soul and feelings onto canvas with faithful renditions of herself in odd and thought-provoking contexts.



Fig 6. The Two Fridas & Frida Kahlo

The result of a divorce, *The Two Fridas* displays Kahlo's heartbreak (FridaKahlo.org, 2009, Online). The two women sit as reflections of each other, hand in hand as though supporting one another through the difficult times the artist suffered through, becoming sisters in arms. While Kahlo holds the title of the most famous female Surrealist artist, that does not mean that the women of the Surrealist world suddenly had all the representation they needed.

Kahlo and Fini did not define themselves as Surrealists despite the nature of their works, and those who did went without much mention in mainstream sources of information without punching in "female artists" into your internet search or keeping your eyes wide for the words on covers of books about the movement. Whole parts of the developments of Surrealism went ignored and glossed over, creating divots where female artists once stood proud with impressive pieces of art. "The problem was obvious: exhibitions and scholarly texts examining the work of the Surrealists had not included the work of women Surrealists..." (Caws, Kunzeli and Raaberg, 1991, p. 1).

The Three Witches of Surrealism were a group of women who grew up in different corners of life but came together as strange sisters in Mexico City. Made up of Remedios Varo, Kati Horna, and Leonora Carrington, the trio delved into photography,

sculpture, writing, and painting. They built an extensive portfolio amongst themselves, with artworks focused on things such as alchemy and magic (Nast, 2023, Online).

A wonderful example of a purely female perspective on Surrealism, The Three Witches are an example of Surrealists unjustly hidden because of the bodies they were born into and the identities they took on, being unapologetically women in a man's world.



Fig 7. Green Tea – Leonora Carrington

Women lacked visibility in Surrealism because they were the victims of early 1900s sexism. The popular imagery of women in Surrealism was mostly created by men who followed the word of Sigmund Freud, leaving this lasting impression that women in Surrealism were nothing more than objects of twisted desire and fear. Odd and unobtainable dreams and nightmares painted and formed from the mind, only to be ogled at.

The attitude of some larger artists also dissuaded many from ever formally recognising themselves as Surrealists, instead becoming independent painters who simply took the movement as something to see go by as they created their own imagery. Despite this there were many female Surrealists who lived and breathed the movement, producing truly thought provoking and breathtaking pieces of art in which they represented both themselves and the impossible.

The women of the Surrealist movement were not hiding, they were hidden.

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