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# Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement

Whitney Chadwick

New in paperback, Whitney Chadwick's groundbreaking study of women in the Surrealist movement.

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Provisional

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& the Surrealist  
Movement*

*Whitney Chadwick*



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Book

# Praise for *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*

‘Presents a wealth of imagery and information about artists who commanded respect from their male contemporaries...as such it will be of great value both in reassessing the history of Surrealism and in illuminating the persistent marginalization of women’s art’

*The Oxford Art Journal*

‘Professor Chadwick’s book has been centrally important and has initiated a vital recentring of the whole Surrealist enterprise’

*Times Higher Education Supplement*

‘Admirable’

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## Key Sales Points

- Available again in B-format paperback after some years out of print.
- Examines the work and careers of Eileen Agar, Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Frida Kahlo, Dorothea Tanning and Kay Sage, all surrealist painters

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## Introduction

“The problem of woman,” André Breton wrote in 1929, “is the most marvelous and disturbing problem in all the world.” No artistic movement since Romanticism has elevated the image of woman to as significant a role in the creative life of man as Surrealism did; no group or movement has ever defined such a revolutionary role for her. And no other movement has had such a large number of active women participants, their presence recorded both in the poetry and art of male Surrealists, and in the catalogues of the international Surrealist exhibitions of 1935 (Copenhagen and Prague), 1936 (London and New York), 1938 (Paris), 1940 (Mexico City), and 1947 (Paris). 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.

When one is reading Surrealist texts, reviews, and memoirs, it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the scarcity of information about actual women with the central position given to discussions of love in Surrealist literature. Although some have argued that woman’s role as muse in Surrealism outweighs her role as artist, the fact that so many women continued active exhibition careers after leaving the Surrealist circle belies this denial of their creative lives. Women were active participants in Surrealist exhibitions after 1929, and the catalogues of their individual exhibitions are filled with introductions by their Surrealist colleagues and friends. While the Surrealist movement did show interest in the question of woman’s liberty, it is nevertheless necessary to keep in mind that the history of her place in Surrealism has not been written by or about real women. That we know more about Kiki of Montparnasse and Nadja than Lee Miller and Valentine Hugo, who succeeded them in Man Ray’s and Breton’s affections, suggests a greater freedom among the Surrealists in discussing women of social classes and milieus other than their own. Fifty years later, while doing the research for



4 The Surrealist group in 1930: (left to right, back to front) Paul Éluard, Jean Arp, Yves Tanguy, René Crevel, (front to back) Tzara, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Man Ray

this book, I was informed more than once by former Surrealists that while the lives of male Surrealists may be considered “history,” attempts to piece together the lives of the women involved constituted a search for mere “gossip.” That Breton’s faith in a concept of “unique love” resulted in three wives and several other romantic liaisons, a contradiction he attempted to explain in *Les Vases Communicants*, only confirms that poetic beliefs and emotional needs are often incompatible. Robert Benayoun has suggested that while Surrealism elevated *la femme*, the Surrealists did not equally revere *les femmes*: “Women should be free and adored,” Breton was fond of remarking, but Nicolas Calas remembers that on the whole Breton disliked the wives of the artists he liked.<sup>4</sup>

### FEMMES-ENFANTS

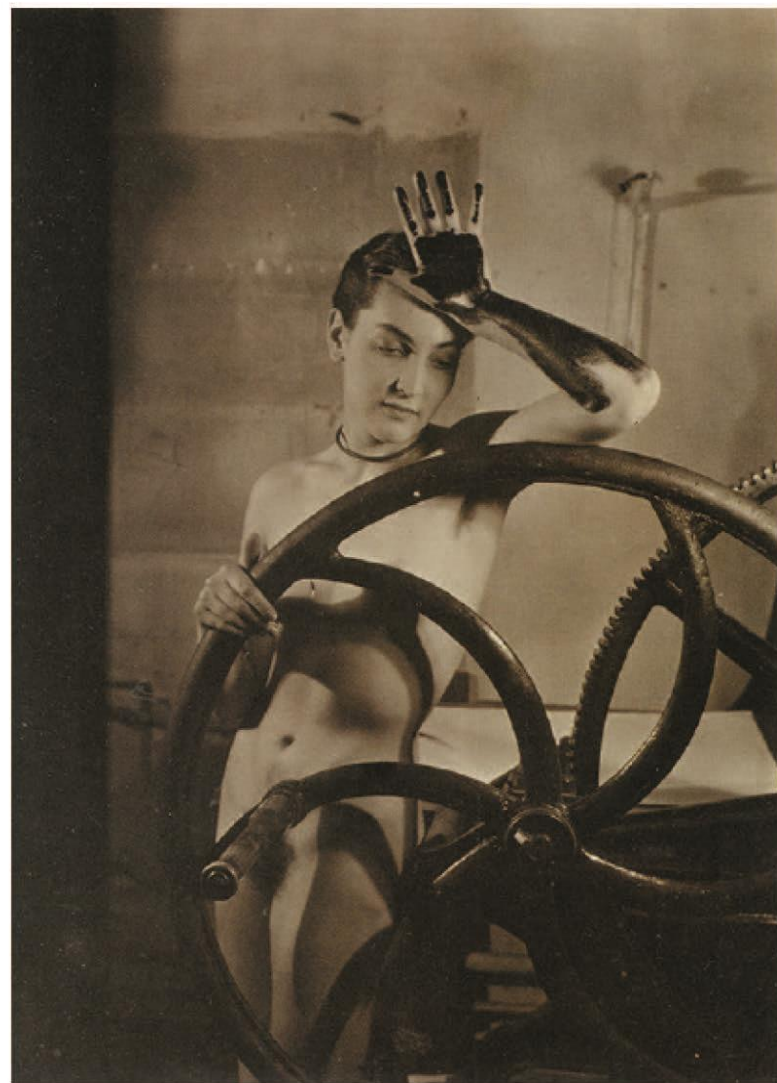
During the 1930s the image of the *femme-enfant* assumed ever greater importance for the Surrealists. A creature of grace and promise, the woman-child was intuitively close to the worlds of the unconscious, the imagination, and the irrational, capable of bewitching the male artist and leading him away from the confining world of the real.



34 Gisèle Prassinos reading her poetry to the Surrealists in 1933: (seated) Breton and Éluard; (standing, left to right) Mario Prassinos, Henri Parisot, Benjamin Péret, and René Char



35 A group of Surrealists photographed in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, during the war. Left to right: Ann Matta, unidentified child, Robert Matta, Aube Breton, unidentified woman, Jacqueline Lamba Breton



36 *Erotique Violée*—Méret Oppenheim photographed by Man Ray in 1933



18 Leonora Carrington, Self-Portrait, c. 1938

which occur in Carrington's later work, because it is faster than the wind and can fly through the air. The horse-headed sticks or "hobbyhorses" ridden by contemporary Morris dancers are a relic of Celtic horse worship, the cockhorse ridden to Banbury Cross to see the goddess make her ritual ride as Lady Godiva. Similar horse-headed sticks appear in the rituals of central Asian shamans, for the horse enables the shaman to fly through the air and reach the heavens. The Celtic Queen of Horses, the goddess who appears in the Welsh *Saga* of Rhiannon riding a pale white horse, is the goddess of the other world, and her horse travels through the space of night as an image of death and rebirth.

Carrington's first published short story, "The House of Fear," written in 1937, contained an introduction and collages by Ernst. It introduces the horse as a psychic guide, a friendly animal who conducts the young heroine into a world marked by mysterious ceremonies and rituals of transformation presided over by the figure of Fear herself. In his introduction to the first



19 Leonora Carrington, Portrait of Max Ernst, c. 1939

### SAGE AND TANGUY

Sage and Tanguy settled in rural Woodbury, Connecticut, in 1940 and set up separate studios in a barn on their property. In 1954 they agreed to a joint exhibition of their work at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, but Sage worried about having her paintings compared with Tanguy's. In fact, both critics and the public could immediately see not only the few similarities but also the many differences in their work.



84 Surrealists chez Tanguy at Woodbury, Connecticut, in 1947



86 Yves Tanguy, *Indefinite Divisibility*, 1942



87 Kay Sage, *Small Portrait*, 1950

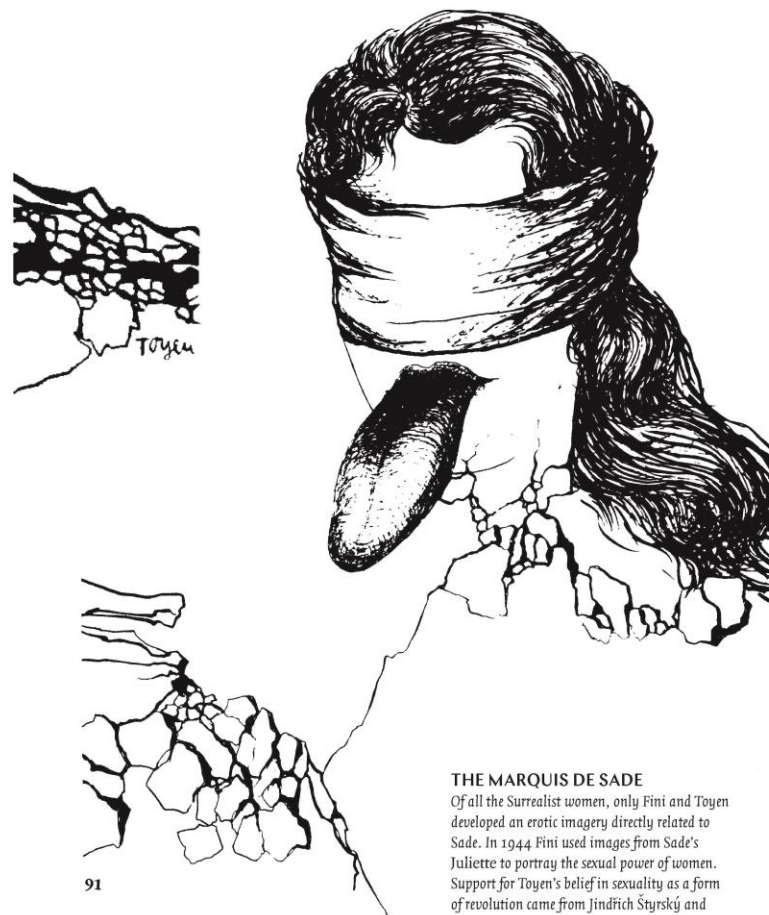


purity, its antithesis—the locating of desire in the notion of the forbidden and the need for transgression—led to images of perverse sexuality.

The erotic violence that Sade viewed as essential to corporeal metamorphosis finds expression in Surrealism in images that isolate, and often objectify, the female body in a manner quite unlike that of Breton's poetic cultivation of woman as subject. Man Ray's photograph *Homage to D.A.F. de Sade*, published in the second issue of *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, imprisons a woman's head in a bell jar; his *Monument to D.A.F. de Sade*, published in the fifth issue of the same review, isolates the cleft in a woman's naked buttocks, the seat of Sadeian pleasure. But it is in Bellmer's *Dolls* that the idea of corporeal metamorphosis and violent attacks on the integrity of the female body find their most concrete and literal expression. Beginning in 1934, and stimulated by the writings of Sade, he arranged the bodies of dolls into frankly erotic reconstructions. The first Doll contained a hollow womb filled with a series of six "scenes," which could be activated by pushing a button on its breast; among them, a boat sinking through the ice of the North Pole, a handkerchief supposedly adorned with the spittle of little girls, and several illuminated pictures. Later versions disassembled the dolls into poses of lewd abandon.

The air of cruel eroticism that permeated Bellmer's drawings and objects finds a parallel among the women only in Fini's illustrations for Sade's *Juliette*. In the Sadeian world of female victims, Juliette is a powerful exception. As an incarnation of feminine desire, her presence rebuts the eighteenth century's image of woman as a being without physical desires, and proves that woman's sexual needs may be even more demanding than man's, her capacity for cruelty and power greater than his.<sup>2</sup> Fini uses Juliette as a vehicle for the frank expression of woman's sexual power and dominance. Wielding the whip, women become in these drawings an active, bestial presence. The lust that transforms their faces into masks of depravity is manifested in a nervous charged line that flickers across the page like the tip of a lash. In the face of woman's power, men become apes with giant engorged phalluses, or skeletal death's heads.

In her life as well as her art, Fini continually advanced the notion of



91

91 Toyen, illustration from *Seules les crécerelles pissent tranquillement sur les Dix Commandements*, by Jindřich Heisler, 1939

#### THE MARQUIS DE SADE

Of all the Surrealist women, only Fini and Toyen developed an erotic imagery directly related to Sade. In 1944 Fini used images from Sade's *Juliette* to portray the sexual power of women. Support for Toyen's belief in sexuality as a form of revolution came from Jindřich Štyrský and other members of the Czech avant-garde. Her ink drawing for *Seules les crécerelles ...* uses a motif also found in Jindřich Heisler's frontispiece for Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*.

## FINI

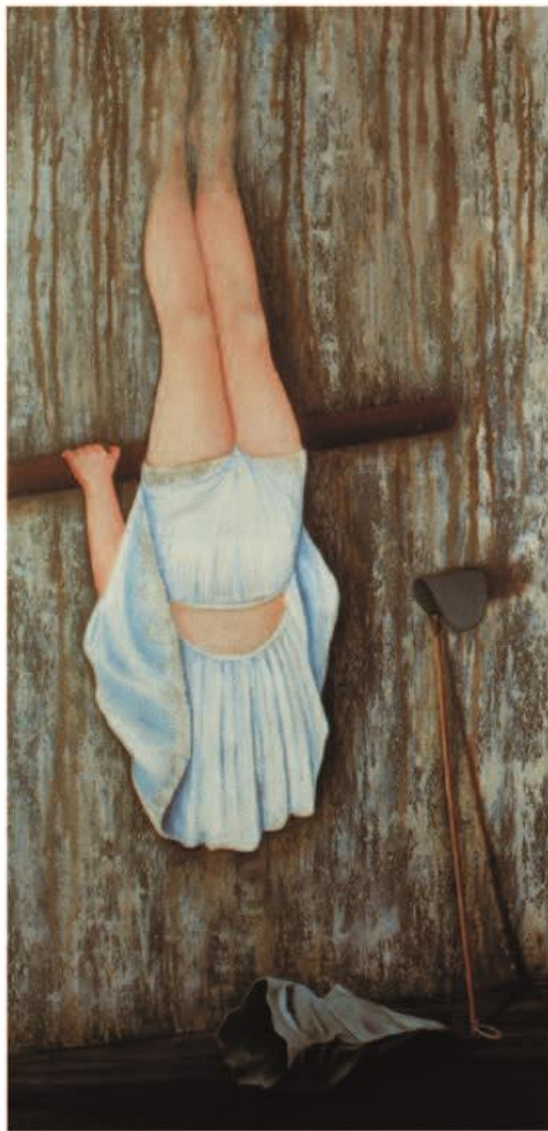
In her life as well as her art, Fini continually advanced the notion of the autonomous, absolute woman: beautiful, imperious, and governed by passion. Committed to life as an artist from adolescence, her independence kept her from ever formally joining the Surrealist movement.



94 Léonor Fini in her studio in 1949



96 Léonor Fini, *Composition with Figures on a Terrace*, 1939



XII Toyen, *Au Château la Coiffe*, 1946

In Štyrský's *L'Homme et la Femme* (1934) the sexes are replaced by symbolic objects—an open seashell and a hard, dark, anatomical mass; in Toyen's *Prometheus* (1934) and *Abandoned Corset* (1937) the images float against fissured and dripping surfaces that recall natural forms. In these spaces of poetic reverie and suggestion, both the barbed wire that binds Prometheus and the pink corset shock because of their specificity and alienation.

Toyen may well be the only Surrealist to have developed an erotic humor, at once charming and playful. In one of a series of erotic drawings executed during the 1930s and published in Štyrský's *Revue Erotique*, the sexual encounter of two women on a bed is all pleasure; in another, gloved fingers milk a penis of its seminal fluid with extraordinary gentleness. For Toyen, as for Hans Bellmer, sexual curiosity was a poetic necessity, a means of gaining access to the hidden side of life, but her work in this genre has none of the lewdness and cruelty of Bellmer's Dolls.

Comparing Toyen's eroticism with the few works by Tanning based on Sadeian themes, we see immediately the skill with which the Czech artist integrated the speculative and philosophical with the personal and



XI Toyen, *Relâche*, 1943