

Three Women Artists

Frances Hodgkins was born in Dunedin, New Zealand in 1869. She is considered one of New Zealand's most prestigious and influential painters, although it is the work from her life in Europe, rather than her home country, on which her reputation rests. She was a painter chiefly of landscape and still life, and for a short period was a designer of textiles.



Feeding the Hens 1890



A Nut Brown Maid c1896

She was born into a prosperous and artistic family, attended the Dunedin School of Art and Design, then becoming a teacher herself, developing a somewhat conventional but highly competent and attractive style of illustrative representation, and exhibited works which owed something to Impressionism and French genre in their spontaneity and the subject matter.

After her father died in 1898 she started saving money to further her training in Europe. In 1901 she sailed to London where she took classes in drawing and sketching, then later in the year visited Paris and Arles, and then Rapallo in Italy.

In 1903, *Fatima*, one of Hodgkins' watercolours from this period, became the first work by a New Zealander to be hung "on the line" at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.



Frances Hodgkins at her Studio, Corfe Castle Village, Dorset c.1945



During the next years she travelled frequently back and forth from New Zealand, with whirlwind visits to England, Italy, the Netherlands, France and Morocco. Her travels would have familiarised her with the developments in modern art, and her style changed radically as a result. In 1909 she became the first woman to be appointed as an instructor at the Académie Colarossi in Paris, where she taught watercolour. At the outbreak of the First World war she was caught in France, bringing an end to her travels. She returned to England and settled in Saint Ives, where later she met and painted alongside Cedric Morris, one of the most progressive of British painters who was to prove influential to her work, and the success of her career in Britain.

Loveday and Ann: Two Women with a Basket of Flowers (1915) gives a good idea of how 'modern' she had become, in

its combination of double portrait and floral still life. The daughters of St Ives fishermen, the two friends are painted in an almost cartoon style, and their. The exaggerated claw-like hands, outlined in silver

suggestive of fish scales, might be intended as an indication of their work in the fishing industry, as did many of the St Ives women.

She rented a studio in Kensington in 1918, and during the war completed a number of portraits. Life was hard during the next ten years. She had little money and fuel was hard to come by, and taught intermittently to make ends meet. She sub let her studio in London and returned to Cornwall

The Edwardians (c. 1918) portrays Edward Skinner and his wife, Edith, who was a regular contributor of poetry to the local paper, featured in their home, Salubrious House, in Salubrious Place in the company of their maid, Elsa. Skinner, who was a good linguist and was keenly interested in music and literature, was well-liked amongst the artistic community for his kindly disposition. He organized in 1917-19, the allotments tended by Arts Club members to alleviate local food shortages. He was first President of the St Ives Literary Society established in 1919.



A breakthrough in public recognition came in 1929 when on the suggestion of Cedric Morris, she was elected to the Seven & Five Society, the leading group of British avant garde artists, exhibiting alongside Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore. Graham Sutherland noted at the time, "She was already speaking the language which gradually spelt freedom in art". Hepworth recollected: "I



always remember, with considerable excitement, my first acquaintance with the painting of Frances Hodgkins...The work had great strength and purity and was so individual it was like discovering some new world". In early 1930, aged 60, Hodgkins signed a contract with St George's Gallery.

Although twenty years her junior Morris and Hodgkins remained lifelong friends, sometimes working together and influencing each other's work through their departure from traditional and twentieth century subjects.

This large (72.5 x 60 cm) portrait in oils, **The Farmer's Daughter (Portrait of Annie Coggan)** (1929), has a simple charm. The browns and greens of the background are picked up in the colouration of Annie and her dress, so that she seems to emerge from and be part of the landscape with its barns and fields.

In 1929 she had begun experimenting with floating objects in the landscape. **Flowers in a Vase** looks like a conventional still life painting, the vase in question sitting on a table in front of a window. But the curtain hangs down from outside the window, adding a surreal quality to the composition. Shortly after painting this work, she gave up the traditional still life format, moving vases and objects onto outside tables. The curtain was retained in mid-air, then evolved into twisting cloth that animated the scene.

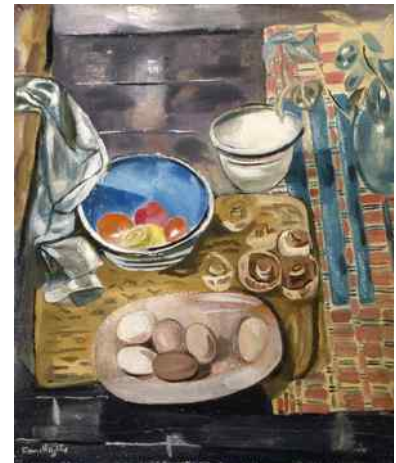




Set on a table top which is tilted up so that we are looking down on its floral pattern, this **Still Life** (c. 1929) pencil drawing conflates different genres and perspectives.. The landscape background indicates that it is either outside in the garden or set in front of a window. The perspective of the jugs and plates is inconsistent if judged by the standard rules of linear perspective. So that, for instance the bowl on the right: we are both looking at it diagonally sideways on and down into it. In these combined views we may see the influence of cubism. It has the effect of emphasising the pattern of shapes and of allowing the eye to drift around the picture, taking it in from a variety of angles.

Einstein's theory of special relativity was published in 1905, changing our understanding of the way the universe is made and our relationship to the material world, compelling artists to combine different viewpoints in the same picture, as in Cubism. In 1899 Sigmund Freud published his *Interpretation of Dreams*. The revelations of psycho-analysis opened up the unconscious workings of the mind to research and permitted artists to explore realms of the irrational and alternative ways of depicting what was presented to their eyes, of expressing their ideas and of constructing their works.

Still Life - Eggs, Tomatoes and Mushrooms, from c. 1929, shows a traditional subject painted in an entirely novel manner. The objects are laid out just as they would have appeared in everyday use: not 'composed' in any way to make a pleasing arrangement. We are above looking almost straight down on them and on the patterned tablecloth, making a succession of circular and oval shapes. The jug on the right edge is presented in a side on view.



In 1929 she had begun experimenting with floating objects in the landscape, as in this **Still Life**. About this time she gave up the traditional still life format, moving vases and objects onto outside tables. Here the table and still life of two dishes on blue and green folded cloths, beside a vase of flowers, are set in a garden. Two girls lie at ease under a tree in the back-ground, diminished in size by the foreground table, with a white garden gate in the distance.

Her portrait, **Cedric Morris (Man with Macaw)**, 1930 shows Morris with his parrot, Ruby, linking him to an exotic Arcadian life, distinct from the hectic, urban whirl of London.

Cedric Morris has been described as one of the most original British artists of the twentieth century. Along with Arthur Lett-Haines, he founded the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing at Dedham, which counted Lucian Freud and Maggie Hambling among its students. As well as painting he had a deep interest in horticulture, and he made a name for himself with decorative paintings of flowers.

Later he held an exhibition of his portraits, painted in a revolutionary and often disturbing style, which aroused much antagonism by the public and amongst his admirers, more used to his decorative flower and bird paintings. They have a simplified force which combines psychological insight with an acute sense of pictorial realism. One of his sitters was so outraged that he slashed his portrait when it was exhibited.





Cedric Morris met Frances Hodgkins in 1917 at Newlyn, Cornwall, where he painted a watercolour portrait of her. Together with his partner, Arthur Lett Haines, he remained a life-long friend. This **Portrait of Frances Hodgkins** dates from August-September 1928, when Hodgkins was living in Bloomsbury, London, a short distance from Morris's home. The combination of colours and surface textures is characteristic of both of their styles between 1927 and 1932. Morris did not seek to flatter his friend, who was twenty years his senior. Rather, Hodgkins is depicted with a double chin, her dyed hair contrasting strongly with her aged complexion.

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Hodgkins painted two versions of **Wings over Water**, (1930) both deriving from the winter spent in Bodinnick, Cornwall, and painted from the same vantage point from her room. In this earlier version, Hodgkins has 'turned' the window so that it faces upstream, shells are arranged on a rumpled cloth on the window ledge. Her landlady's parrot is perched on the fence overlooking the moonlit river.



Curtains enclose the scene on either side. The table in the foreground has objects arranged as a still life and in the distance is an evening landscape of hills, water and sky. The landlady's parrot sits on the fence in the middle view, silhouetted by the River Fowey behind.

Although it is closely based on an elaborate drawing of the same name, areas of texture, overpainting and pentimenti show that she struggled to resolve the image in the oil. Her friend Geoffrey Gorer, who bought the painting, stated that "She didn't [paint] quickly and spontaneously at all. She took tons and tons of notes, small sketches, usually in front of the object ... and then destroyed those and then slowly worked to make a composition in the studio....The version we got was one of the very few pictures with which she expressed herself completely satisfied shortly after completing it - she was usually full of criticism of the failure of her work to achieve what she wanted."

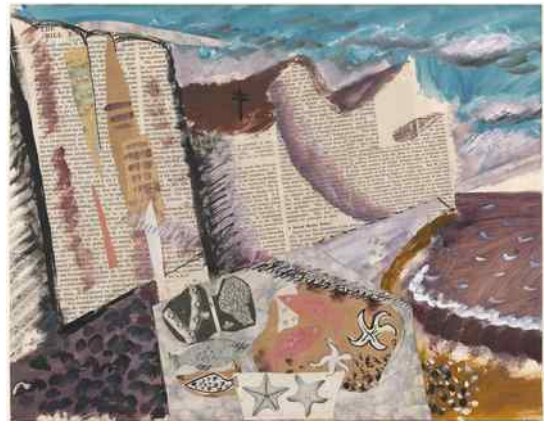
Hodgkins was 62 when she painted the **Wings over Water** but, despite her age, her work was considered innovative and received significant critical acclaim.



The parrot also features in the second version of **Wings over Water** (1930-31). The view is further to the left and includes 'Ferryhouse', the large white house that dominated her view to the sea, which was owned by the actor-manager Sir Gerald du Maurier and where he and his daughter the writer, Daphne, lived. The still life has been moved further into the landscape; gone are the curtains and clear evidence of the interior. One has the sense that the weather has improved since the earlier painting. The green and red parrot swings on a branch above, silhouetted by the glassy green of the river Fowey directly behind. A rather bare intermediate landscape provides the illusion of distance between

the foreground and the white du Maurier house propped on the edge of the water, with ferries docked to one side.

The free floating method of constructing paintings, with an emphasis on the mark making and the combination of still-life elements with landscape, was pursued by a number of artists at this time. This image of a beach and cliffs by John Piper, **Beach with Starfish** (c.1933-34), also incorporates elements of collage.



While we see in Ivon Hitchens's **Autumn Composition (Flowers on a Table)** (1932) that jugs and vases of flowers placed on a table, possibly set against a window, offer him a motif to make what is, rather than an 'accurate' rendering of a still-life arrangement as presented to his eyes, an orchestration of colours, shapes and painterly marks.

While staying at Flatford Mill in 1930, preparing for an exhibition in the Autumn, she painted a number of pictures of the mill, Willy Lott's Cottage and other subjects in the neighbourhood. However, there is no attempt to paint the scene familiar to John Constable. Both versions of **Flatford Mill** are painted from elevated viewpoints, looking down on the mirror-like surface of the water from the treetops. Everything about them is original and innovative.

Painted in muted greens, blues, browns and greys, the vigorous brushwork exploits different directions and variety of marks to create texture and differentiation of forms. This contrasts, for example, with the technique of Cézanne, who used repeating marks, like individual notes of music, to build a composition.



Her friend and collector Geoffrey Gorer said that her achievement was at the cost of 'aesthetic loneliness'. Both stubborn and resolute, Hodgkins was fiercely determined not to imitate others but also knew that the price of success depended on a solitary working life. Yet to those who knew and loved her, it was her kindness, generosity of spirit, wit and curiosity that made her stand out among her peers.

"I am not to be trusted on a railway station - the longing to board the train and be off is irresistible."

This drawing, titled **Sabrina's Garden**, set on the banks of the river Severn in Bridgenorth, was used as the basis of a painting two years later. It was a favourite place for Hodgkins to paint. In 1932, during an uninspiring trip to Norfolk with fellow artist Hannah Ritchie, she wrote: "We have jogged round for 2 days & have decided against staying ...and are leaving Tuesday morning for Bridgenorth my old love ... I am tingling with impatience to get settled - & at work."





Sabrina was the Roman name for the river Severn.

The painting, ***Sabrina's Garden*** (1934), varies in some features from the drawing. It includes two wooden figures, which derived from a drawing made two years earlier and was the inspiration for the painting.

The paintings from this period are said to show the influence of French artists, the "shimmering playfulness and hot piquancy that is more, reminiscent of Raoul Dufy than of the British avant-garde"; including several inspired by the pleasure boats of the river Severn, among them *Sabrina's Garden* and *Blue Barge*.



The watercolour titled ***Pleasure Garden*** (1932) was also painted in Bridgenorth and displays many of the same elements as *Sabrina's Garden*: the table and chairs on a terrace in front of the river, the plants and the wooden carving, and the edge of the awning at the top right.

In 1948, following the artist's death, a sum of money was raised by the New Zealand Canterbury Society of Arts, Christchurch to purchase a number of Hodgkins's paintings, including *Pleasure Garden*, with the assistance of the British Council in London. Her earlier, New Zealand paintings were well known; however, when the selection, made to give a representation of the work made by the artist in Europe, arrived the council of the Canterbury Society decided not to buy them, preferring to "use the funds more wisely." The six paintings were exhibited; but with an unexplained request that the newspapers make no mention of them. A council meeting was held, in which submissions were made advocating the purchase by the city of *Pleasure Garden* for the collection of the proposed Robert

McDougall Gallery of New Zealand art (now the Christchurch Art Gallery), and for which a public subscription had been quickly made to raise the necessary sum of £94/10 shillings. A petition was sent to the mayor, signed by sixty nine professors requesting to display it in their common room. The painting was exhibited in the council chamber on an easel, and a delegation of councillors was treated to a defence of the painting.

Margaret Frankel, who had been to London to help make the original choice of pictures reported: "We pointed out that she was not interested in making a photographic representation of what she saw before her at a given moment, but rather in making an abstraction of the feelings suggested to her sensitive mind by the subject. The subtle colouring and the carefully thought out composition all had to be studied to be appreciated. Exaggerations which might be considered faults of drawing were made purposely to strengthen the form and rhythm. The difficulties of judging one isolated picture without the proper background of knowledge and other paintings for comparison was stressed. We pointed out that virtually no modern art has reached New Zealand. Young artists in this country have no opportunity to study at first hand different lines of thought in painting." To no avail, the council, after closed debate voting, not unanimously, to refuse the painting, deeming it "unworthy" of the artist. Eric Newton, art critic of the *Sunday Times*, was referred to as "a writer of nonsense." Finally the committee quoted a letter to the *New Zealand Listener* from Frances Hodgkins's brother, in which he considers "the exhibition of [his] late sister's more modern work ... both unjust to the artist and to the public." It wasn't until 1951 that the council accepted the gift of the painting. She is now represented in almost all major art institutions in her native country.

The vessel in **Blue Barge** (c. 1932) dominates the right-hand side of this composition, with a glimpse of the River Severn and a cluster of tall and closely packed houses and hills beyond. A distinguishing feature of this watercolour is the artist's change of perspective; whereas the barge itself is depicted obliquely, from the front, a pair of canoes on the river are seen from directly above, as in a bird's-eye view. In this rare 'nocturne' the blue of the barge is mirrored by patches of evening sky, and there are also areas of red, but otherwise the predominant colour is the glistening night time grey of the river and the distant hills. The focus of the painting is the watercraft which occupy the lower two-thirds of the composition. The narrow and steeply-roofed houses of Bridgnorth, beyond the vessels can be seen captured here in an economic and impressionistic manner.



In **Tanks, Barrels and Drums** (1937) humble collection of containers, lying about in a farmyard, become the subject for a colourful composition evocative of evening in the rural place heavily marked by the artefacts of man.

For John Piper, she was "a sensitive painter whose harmonies of colour have their origins in Wiltshire farmyards, Welsh hills and Dorset coves" as well as "backyards and outbuildings with their furnishing of derelict gear". Her preference for 'homely things' was noted, and as John Petts said, "her devoted artistry gave beauty to innumerable subjects which in themselves had little pictorial quality".

Patrick Heron also evoked "the visual music of purely formal relationships" in a discussion of her work, although the source of her imagery is a still recognizable real world. Patrick Heron wrote: "No matter how abstract her rendering becomes, she is still communicating a formal fantasy based on this view of this farm: or of that table by that window in that room. In other words, abstraction in her painting, so far from being an end in itself, comes into existence simply as a vehicle: it is always at the service of a specific object."



For **The Painted Chest** (1938) she uses simple, everyday jugs and vases, in contrast with the exotic shapes of flowers and the painted decoration on the chest. An indeterminate background suggests a decorative tablecloth and maybe a suggestion of landscape or farmland. The 'cubistic' device of reverse perspective brings up the top surface of the chest for greater patterning effect, and tends to flatten the picture space.



George Braque used a similar stratagem of reverse perspective and broken/multiple view-points to flatten the picture space and draw in the eye, so that rather than, in effect, standing outside the picture and looking in at a static scene, as if through a keyhole, the viewer is drawn in and invited to make a journey around the forms and fragments of reality, as in this **Still-Life with Le Jour** (1929); and most typically in his series of studios, in the 1950s. According to the philosophy of modernism, this is greater 'realism' than a 'traditional', illustrative approach to picture making as it offers a real experience of arrangements of colour, form and so on, instead of a mere illusion of reality.

The folding perspective and arrangement of objects around the table are the result of a slow and methodical process by which Braque related the space of the room to the flat surface of the picture.

In 1937 Hodgkins wrote to her art dealer, Duncan MacDonald of the Lefevre Gallery, "I had the happiest long week end with the Wests & have painted 3 quite attractive canvases inspired by objects observed by me out of the corner of my subjective eye, when *really* looking for black berries – you'll see! They are 2 delightful Dears Anthony & Kitty – I loved my visit to them – "

Instead of a photographic likeness for her watercolour, **Portrait of Kitty West** (1939), Hodgkins chose to focus on Kitty's defining features. Her large eyes stare outwardly at the viewer, reinforcing the presence of the sitter. The bold colours and calligraphic strokes are reminiscent of Matisse whose work she had seen exhibited in Paris and London.



While landscape remained her focus, farm objects and animals took the place of earlier still lifes, floating in and out of compositions like oddly suited abstract and surrealist dance partners, yet always somehow rooted in the here and now. Her palette was highly worked; her elusive and powdery tones were built up layer by layer over time.

Cheviot Farm (1938-40) shows a varied collection of objects of different forms in a farmyard.

By 1940, Hodgkins had largely settled in Corfe Castle. The following year her health deteriorated: she had to undergo surgery for stomach ulcers. In 1942, she was granted a

civil list pension, and agreed to be the subject of one of the books in the *Penguin Modern Painters* series, which had been commissioned from Myfanwy Evans, wife of John Piper.

In 1940 she was selected to represent Britain in the Venice Biennale, which unfortunately was overtaken by the war and didn't take place.

However, with a successful solo show at Lefevre Galleries, London that year, Hodgkins' work was favourably reviewed in the press. The British writer and critic, Raymond Mortimer, for example, described her as 'unique', 'personal and original', 'visionary' and "the most inventive colourist in England". M. H. Middleton's review of Hodgkins' 1946 retrospective exhibition simply stated: "she is one of the most remarkable woman painters of our own or any country, of our own or any time."

This late work, **Self Portrait - Still Life** (1941) uses the shapes and colours of patterned table cloths, fruit, flowers and objects to create an almost pure abstract design.



The Weir (1942) is likewise a near a pure abstraction, where the colour and shapes predominate and the subject: water flowing around a bend in the land and over the weir, is a pretext for constructing a surface of colour and form which has emotional impact and references the experience (the atmosphere and rush of noise) rather than attempting a record of the scene as presented to the eye. This is a legacy of the late nineteenth century idea of the 'purity' of art: 'art for art's sake' and the Aesthetic Movement as typified by Whistler.

The Courtyard in Wartime 1944 is a rich symphony of colour emerging from a dark background.

At the end of the war, Hodgkins was seventy-six and her eyesight was failing. She remained at Corfe Castle, escaping only to Wales for a holiday. Her work was exhibited in London, with that of Francis Bacon, Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland. In 1946 she travelled to London for a major retrospective exhibition of her work at the Lefevre Gallery, which was an outstanding success. She grew increasingly frail, and died in Dorchester, Dorset, on 13 May 1947, aged seventy-eight.



Dora Carrington was born in Hereford on 29th March 1893, the daughter of a railway engineer. The family moved to Rothsay Gardens in Bedford. She later recalled that she had "an awful childhood." She adored her father and sketched him often, but according to her brother their mother was prudish and fanatically religious. Church on Sunday was a torment, involving "special clothes, the carrying of prayer books, the kneeling, standing and murmuring of litanies." At school in Bedford she showed a precocious talent for art, if for little else, winning many prizes. As a result her father agreed in 1910 to allow her to attend the Slade School of Art.

This **Self-Portrait** is thought to have been made around 1910 when she entered the Slade so was about seventeen. It was drawn before she cropped her hair, becoming one of the first 'cropheads', as Virginia Woolf called them. She didn't like her name, Dora, and insisted on being known simply as Carrington.

At the time the students included C.R.W. Nevinson, Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer, Paul and John Nash, David Bomberg, and Edward Wadsworth among others. Nevinson commented that the Slade "was full with a crowd of men such as I have never seen before or since." He also wrote that Gertler was "the genius of the place... and the most serious, single-minded artist I have ever come across." One of their tutors, Henry Tonks, who found them too rebellious, later pondered: "What a brood I have raised."

This academic **Standing Female Nude**, a student work of c.1910, shows her early talent at rendering light, correct proportion and anatomy and the texture of flesh. She was a popular student, with very good looks and one of the earliest of the young set to have her hair bobbed. Several of her male friends, competed for her affections. David Garnet found her "powerfully attractive." Mark Gertler, had his marriage proposal rejected and fell out with Nevinson, who he saw as a rival.



Carrington's friend, Frances Marshall, has argued: "She (Carrington) was an attractive and popular figure with her large blue eyes and her shock of thick hair bobbed in the fashion she had set... Moreover, her individual sense of fun and fantasy made her an enchanting companion, though a neurotic strain was also apparent..." Ottoline Morrell, who got to know her during this period, described her as "a wild moorland pony".

Gertler and Carrington nevertheless remained friends for many years, and her early style betrays his influence "in their careful, smooth technique, three-dimensional effect, and dense, rich colour." as we see in her 1913 **Female Figure Standing**.



In 1914 Aldous Huxley also became enamoured of her and put her in his novel *Chrome Yellow*, in the guise of Mary Brace-girdle. At that time her sexual feelings were confused and she told Huxley that she intended to remain a vestal virgin for the rest of her life.

Carrington met Lytton Strachey while staying with Virginia Woolf at Asheham House at Beddingham, near Lewes, which she jointly leased with Leonard Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell and Duncan grant. Vanessa Curtis, the author of *Virginia Woolf's Women*, has pointed out: "Attracted to Carrington from the moment he first laid eyes on her, he had boldly tried to kiss her during a walk across the South Downs, the feeling of his beard prompting an enraged outburst of disgust from the unwilling recipient. According to legend, Carrington plotted frenzied revenge, creeping into Lytton's bedroom during the night with the intention of cutting off the detested beard. Instead, she was mesmerized by his eyes, which opened suddenly and regarded her intently. From that moment on, the two became virtually inseparable."

Although homosexual Lytton Strachey was the great love of Carrington's life, she was mesmerized by his eyes. It should not be surprising, then, that her ***Portrait of Lytton Strachey*** (1916) reveals especial depth and intimacy. The portrait casts Strachey in a fond, flattering light, intently reading a book in bed. His long hands and bushy reddish-brown beard stand out as prominent features. At the time Carrington painted this portrait, Strachey was working on *Eminent Victorians* (1918), a four-part biography of leading figures from the era, a work that would establish his enduring reputation as an important historical biographer.



Jane Hill, the author of *The Art of Dora Carrington* (1994) has commented: "Carrington was petite, several heads shorter than Lytton and had a quirky way of dressing. Lytton was bohemian looking and emaciated. Both together and apart they were stared at in the street. Carrington's hair attracted hostile yells and Lytton's unfashionable beard provoked goat bleatings."



The Mill at Tidmarsh (1918) depicts the quaint home in the English countryside shared by Carrington and Lytton Strachey from 1917 to 1924, to be joined later by Ralph Partridge, who she married in 1921. According to Strachey's biographer Stanford Rosenbaum, they created: "A polygonal ménage that survived the various affairs of both without destroying the deep love that lasted the rest of their lives."

Carrington depicts a tranquil, but lively scene. The house - which was central to Carrington's personal life - takes up most of the canvas, leaving little room for the pastoral fields, water, and trees of the surrounding land-

scape. Carrington's vibrant orange roof contrasts with the vivid greens of the overgrown grass and hedges and blue sky, creating both harmony and dynamism.

On the day she agreed to marry Ralph Partridge she wrote to Strachey, who was in Italy, what has been described as one of the most moving love letters in the English language. She wrote: "I cried last night Lytton, whilst he slept by my side sleeping happily — I cried to think of a savage cynical fate which had made it impossible for my love ever to be used by you." Strachey wrote back: "You do know very well that I love you as something more than a friend, you angelic creature, whose goodness to me has made me happy for years, and whose presence in my life has been and always will be, one of the most important things in my life."

Carrington became friendly with Phillip and Ottoline Morrell, who photographed her in the garden at Garsington Manor near Oxford, which the Morrell's purchased in 1915, and which became a meeting place for left-wing intellectuals. At Garsington she met and became especially close to Katherine Mansfield, with whom she was hoping to set up home. In a letter to Lytton Strachey she wrote: "Except for



Katherine I should not have enjoyed it much.... Katherine and I wore trousers. It was wonderful being alone in the garden. Hearing the music inside, & lighted windows and feeling like two young boys - very eager. The moon shining on the pond, fermenting & covered with warm slime. How I hate being a girl. I must tell you for I have felt it so much lately. More than usual. And that night I forgot for almost half an hour in the garden, and felt other pleasures strange, & so exciting, a feeling of all the world being below me to choose from. Not tied - with female encumbrances, & hanging flesh."



Carrington met **Mrs Box**, a farmer's wife, while on holiday in Cornwall in 1919. Her portrait, which gives an honest depiction of a Cornish working woman, is larger than any other that she painted. Its size reflects the admiration Carrington felt for Mrs Box, as remarked upon in one of her letters: 'Mrs Box is still full of vigour and every day she fetches the cows from the marshes by the cottage and takes them back to the farm, and she is 72!'

The **Farm at Watendlath** depicts Watendlath Farm, near Keswick in the Lake District, where she spent a summer holiday with her husband and their friends in 1921. It was during this trip that Carrington

met the writer Gerald Brenan, who became one of her lovers. Thus, the trip was especially meaningful for Carrington, suggesting the poignancy of this painting.



As in Carrington's other landscape paintings, the image of this small, verdant farm immediately creates a sense of intimacy, and even of pleasant escapism. The identities of the woman and the child dressed in white are not known. Throughout her work Carrington depicted women of different ages, in what seem to be meditations on femininity and what it means to be a woman. Scholars have argued that the two female figures in this image, who are dwarfed by a fertile and hilly landscape, could serve a metaphorical purpose. Just like these small, vulnerable figures who are lost in their large landscape, Carrington was an artist who was overwhelmed by her own struggle with her identity as a woman and artist. This interpretation is plausible, given Carrington's fraught relationship with the social norms of her time.



Gerald Brenan, who had served with Ralph Partridge during the First world War, was a regular visitor to Mill House when he was in England. This second of two portraits of **Gerald Brennan** was painted in 1922 at Larrau in France. Brenan later described an early meeting with Dora: "Carrington came to the door and with one of her sweet, honeyed smiles welcomed me in. She was wearing a long cotton dress with a gathered skirt and her straight yellow hair, now beginning to turn brown, hung in a mop round her head. But the most striking thing about her was her eyes, which were of an intense shade of blue and very long-sighted, so that they took in everything they looked at in an instant."

Rouen Ware (1923) is a unique, colourful depiction of fruits, flowers, and a brightly plumed bird on a brass urn. It is one of what Carrington called her "tinselled pictures," which she often presented as gifts to friends. These were essentially collages on glass, which she created by outlining her overall design in black or deep blue ink on the back of the pane, and then filling in the outline with collage elements composed out of textured foil paper, and covered them with a blend of opaque and transparent paints. The unique technique reveals Carrington's ingenuity as an artist and her willingness to combine old with new traditions.





In 1924 she traveled in Spain, visiting the Andalusia region, which was the inspiration for this painting **Spanish Landscape with Mountains** (1924). She spent much of her visit in the town of Yegen, where her friend and occasional lover Gerald Brenan was living. When she returned home to Tidmarsh Hill, where she completed the painting, she wrote to Brenan, "I am working on the landscape you liked; the round mountains near the gorges. I am trying a new plan, an entire underpainting in brilliant colours, over which I shall glaze green and more transparent colours."

The unnaturally smooth, rolling hills in the foreground contrasting with the jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains in the far distance, create the impression of a surreal, alien landscape, marking a stark contrast to the English landscapes painted in warm greens, blues and creamy or stark whites. The colours are hot, vibrant oranges and yellows suggestive of the Andalusian landscape, as if to highlight the differences between her homeland and the more arid landscape of southern Spain.

Four tiny figures seated on mules traverse a winding road in the distance, emphasising the overpowering scale of the natural world. In a letter to Brenan, Carrington declared that the Spanish landscapes "transport me into another world. I cannot express quite what a relief it is." It has been suggested that "the absence [in her work] of industrial, urban imagery is striking, and perhaps reveals Carrington's own desire to distance herself from the modern world."



Spanish Boy, the Accordion Player was probably painted or at least sketched in 1924 at Gerald Brenan's house at Yegen in Spain. Brenan, often had evening musical gatherings at his home, inviting local musicians to play and sing. In common with her portraits it is painted in a more naturalistic or Impressionistic style than is her landscapes.

The **Portrait of E. M. Forster** (1924-25), although not painted from a live sitting, in its careful attention to detail successfully captures something essential about the author, who was a personal friend. The painter Henry Lamb said of the portrait, "I think there is something so very good about your head of Forster."



Whereas her portrait of Strachey depicted the sitter as absorbed and fascinated, Forster seems pensive, even troubled. Carrington's ability to adjust her style to best convey the character of her sitters is evidence of her great artistic skill and sensitivity.

In 1924, Strachey and Carrington found that their Mill home in Tidmarsh had become cramped and so moved to Ham Spray House, Wiltshire, which Carrington decorated diligently. The house would be the place of Strachey's death from stomach cancer in 1931.

In addition to the works in foil and glass, Carrington also completed a number of domestic art pieces for her friends and intimates, including fireplace tiles, frescoes, signs for inns and pubs, and an intricately decorated gramophone for the Strachey family, such as this **Scene from the Strachey Gramophone** (c.1925). Though many of these pieces are sadly lost to history, those that remain have gained considerable attention in recent years from Carrington scholars, who argue these pieces are a testament to the broad range and skill of this long underappreciated artist.





Flowers in a two-handed vase (c.1925) reveals Carrington's new found love of colour following her trip to Spain.

Back in England, though married to Partridge, living with Strachey and in a long-distance relationship with Brennan, Carrington continued to conduct numerous love affairs with both men and women. Indeed she expressed frustration at not having had more same-sex relationships in her youth, writing in a letter to Alix Strachey, Lytton's niece, that "I feel now regret at being such a blasted fool in the past, to stifle so many lusts in my youth, for various females."

At the time of this letter, Carrington was engaged in a romantic relationship with Henrietta Bingham, an American journalist who she was "much more taken with than I have been for anyone in such a long time".

Bingham sat for Carrington, who, building on the sensuous style she developed at the Slade, continued to paint erotically charged paintings of her female subjects and lovers, often depicting them as reclining nudes. Carrington's bisexuality is frequently glossed over by her biographers, ignored for instance in Christopher Hampton's filmic portrayal of her life, but it is illuminating when regarding her sensual portrayal of women.

The portrait of **Julia Strachey** (1928), a writer and Lytton Strachey's niece, with her guarded expression and steady gaze conveys the impression a woman with a clever wit and critical eye.

The two women had known each other for many years and cultivated a close friendship, which provided Carrington with a confidante. Later, Carrington began to develop romantic feelings for Julia, writing to her in October 1929: "I wish I was a young man and not a hybrid monster, so that I could please you a little in some way, with my affection. You know you move me strangely. . . . You charm me so much." Julia was quite happily married, and the relationship Carrington hoped for never came to pass. Knowing Carrington's romantic feelings for Strachey, and that they remained unrequited may shed some light on this striking portrait, which is at once beautiful and austere.



The Barque Harmony in the ice off the Labrador Coast (c.1929) is a painting on glass. It depicts a boat with black sails, floating on an icy green sea seemingly trapped and doomed to sail forever amongst fantastic sharp edged ice floes; while the sinister shape of a whale prowls beneath with a hard white eye keeps watch.

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Lytton Strachey died of undiagnosed stomach cancer on 21st January 1932. His death made her suicidal and she made several attempts to take her life, being rescued by her husband or friends.

She kept a journal where she tried to communicate with Strachey, On 12th February 1932 Carrington wrote: "They say one should keep your standards & your values of life alive. But how can I when I only kept them for you. Everything was for you. I loved life just because you made it so perfect & now there

is no one left to make jokes with or talk to... I see my paints, & think it is no use for Lytton will never see my pictures now, & I cry. And our happiness was getting so much more. This year there would have been no troubles, no disturbing loves... Everything was designed for this year. Last year we recovered from our emotions, & this autumn we were closer than we had ever been before. Oh darling Lytton you are dead & I can tell you nothing."

On the following March 11th, she shot herself, dying later that day. She was 38.

According to Beatrice Campbell, when Mark Gertler heard the news, "He was so shattered that he felt that nothing but a revolver could end his pain. He went out to buy one, but found it was Saturday afternoon and all the shops were shut." Gertler did later commit suicide in his studio on 23rd June 1939.

Carrington never exhibited during her lifetime and her career was perhaps blighted by the specifically feminine contradictions that faced early twentieth-century women artists. She was expected to occupy a female, domestic role, supporting the men around her yet never taken seriously as an artist, in part due to her 'feminine' decorative work and because the salacious details of her love life detracted from an interest in her artistic abilities and achievements.

"I have spent my whole life in revolt against convention, trying to bring colour and light and a sense of the mysterious to daily existence. One must have a hunger for new colour, new shapes, and new possibilities of discovery."

Eileen Agar was born in Buenos Aires to a Scottish father and American mother. In 1911 the family moved to London on a luxury liner accompanied by a cow and an orchestra. Her wealthy American mother believed that milk and music were essential in a child's development and therefore had made the necessary arrangements so that she wasn't deprived of them on the long ocean voyage. At her second school, in the UK Heathfield School, Ascot, Agar's teacher, Lucy Kemp-Welch, known for her paintings of horses, encouraged her to continue to develop her art.



Self-portrait 1927

During the war she attended the Byam Shaw school of Art, which she found too academic, and from 1921 to 24 part time at the Slade under the tutelage of Henry Tonks, where she met her first husband Robin Bartlett. Agar resisted the wealthy lifestyle she was privy to and pointedly refused to make use of the Rolls-Royce her parents sent to pick her up from the Slade each day. With Bartlett and others, Agar travelled around France and Spain. In 1925, she married Bartlett and, in the same year, she destroyed the majority of her early work. The pair lived together in a house in Dieppe. Agar described Bartlett as "the escape-hatch which freed me from the clutches of my family".



She studied in Paris from 1928 to 1930, (meeting the Surrealists André Breton, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst and Joan Miró, exhibiting with them in England and abroad) along with the Hungarian writer Joseph Bard (1892-1975) with whom she lived, and married in 1940. (She was his third wife).

Agar wrote that **Three Symbols** (1930) was her first imaginative essay into Surrealism. It was painted while she was living in Paris. In this painting she combined three concepts, each represented by architecture. She explained: "In it, a pillar stands for Greek culture, Notre Dame is a symbol of Christianity, and a bridge built by Eiffel ... symbolises modern technology reaching into the future and expressing time to come. It was my first attempt at an imaginative approach to painting."



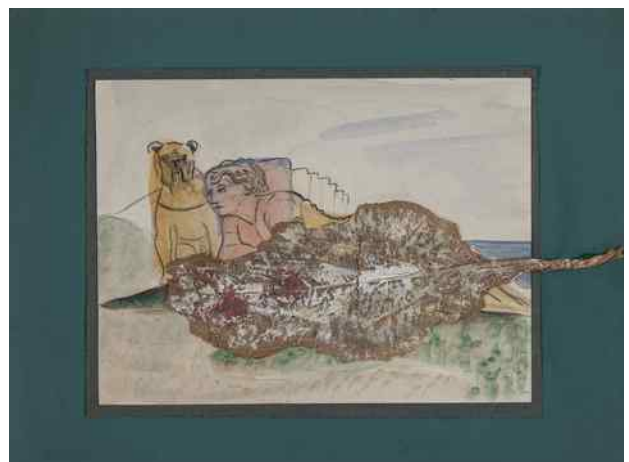
The Autobiography of an Embryo (1934), a complex and multi-coloured composition, is divided into four sections, reminiscent of the arrangement of a classical wall painting, with a decorative border running along the top and bottom of the canvas, and with winged putti on top of the dividing columns. Draped figures, which recall antiques statues, and the geometric patterns echo the decoration on ancient Greek vessels.

Such an array of symbols evokes a cultural heritage. In the second section the head of a African woman resembles African sculptures and a head seen in profile refers to Italian Renaissance portraiture. More specifically, the squat figure who appears twice in the first two sections, represents Ubu, a character in the French play of 1896 by Alfred Jarry. These quotations are combined with modern elements, such as the brick wall in the second section and the graffiti-like head on the far right. Organic and biological forms run through the composition, as do cultural references to Greek and Roman heads and African sculptures. Shells and winged forms are combined with plant-like structures, and circular shapes suggest fossils, cells or embryonic forms.

She said "I was enthralled by fossils, their muted colour and embedded beauty. They reach us as signals in time, isolated objects which take on the importance of a problem resolved at some moment far back beyond the mists of human memory. I learnt about the secrets of animal structure and from there my thoughts led easily to the problem of human structure." This connection was made more concrete when Agar discovered that "human foetuses have gills for about 12 weeks because in the evolution of our species we went through an amphibian stage"

The Autobiography of an Embryo is an evocation of the development of an embryo and a product of Agar's belief in 'womb magic', or reproduction, as an important part of the feminine psyche and mode of expression. In the painting can be found motifs that would linger in Agar's art for the rest of her life – shells, nets, angel fish, classical sculpture and geometric forms, as well as subtle human profiles and open hands. It is a strangely unsettling work, prodding uncomfortably at the edges of consciousness and seeming to touch something hidden beyond.

Self-Portrait with Dandy, West Bay, Dorset (1934) combines drawing with a leaf. The figure seems to emerge from the natural form of the leaf, which echos the curve of her back and the landscape behind. In common with the surrealists she began to introduce found objects into her work. She said: "I surround myself with fantastic bric-a-brac in order to trigger my imagination," She described collage as "a displacement of the banal by the fertile invention of chance or coincidence."



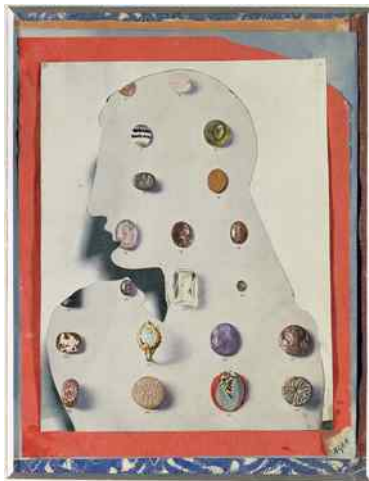


The Shell (1934) is a strange work, painted in a cubistic style. She had encountered cubism when staying in Paris. In 1937 she spent a holiday at Picasso and Dora Maar's home in Mougins, Alpes-Maritimes, along with Paul Éluard, Nusch, Roland Penrose and Lee Miller. By 1940, works by Agar had appeared in surrealist exhibitions in Amsterdam, New York, Paris and Tokyo.

In the mid-1930s Agar and Bard began renting a house for the summer at Swanage in Dorset. Here she met Paul Nash and the two began an intense relationship. In 1935 Nash introduced Agar to the concept of the found object. They collected flotsam from the Dorset beach – rusted anchors, bleached bones, the dried starfish

that feature throughout her work. Together, they collaborated on a number of works, such as *Seashore Monster* at Swanage.

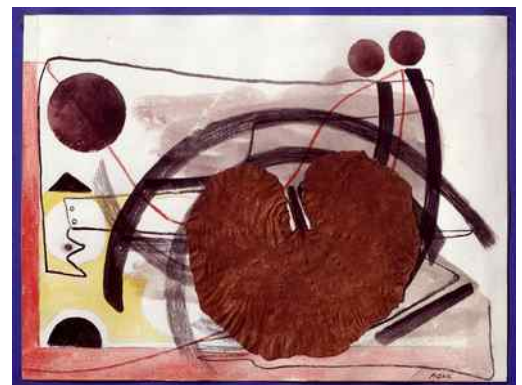
In 1936 she and Bard 'chanced' on Ploumanach in Brittany (popular among British holidaymakers), with its strange rock formations. She bought a camera, "my constant companion for many years", and took many photographs of the seaside rocks, describing them as they look in her images: "enormous prehistoric monsters ... a great buttock ending in a huge thumb, titled **Bum and Thumb Rock**, a foot rearing up". Nature, for her, is anthropomorphic.



Collage was for Agar an essential method of working, from painting to paper, with a marvellous talent for overlay and juxtaposition. **Precious Stones** (1936) presents a cut-out profile of her husband Bard, who was a collector of gems. It appears to be filled with glinting stones and tiny classical cameos, laid over a page of red paper, one corner of which, when folded back, reveals Agar's signature. This is laid on another layer of parchment, and so on. It is almost impossible to see what is uppermost in this collage, perfectly poised between two and three dimensions, between classical frieze and modern graphic art.

The Reaper (1938) is a painting in gouache, to which she has added a leaf. As in her painting *Autobiography of an Embryo*, she was exploring the themes of life, death, the passing of time and seasonal cycles. She uses a single, simple image to encompass a range of universal themes.

The collage shows a mechanical reaper cutting a crop on a farm. She explained the collage in 1978: "The leaf came from a 'dry garden', a book I have which dries and preserves leaves pressed between special paper. It was dead originally when used for the collage, but it was one I must have picked myself. The whole watercolour was intended to suggest a symbolic reaper with the flailing movement of the scythe-like concentric forms. The title indeed relates to time, the seasons and especially death the Great Reaper. The dead leaf being the hub of the whole." Time is expressed more especially by the large black sun, which at the bottom left hand corner is sinking. The little triangle suggests a country roof and the two black spots two people riding the machine. There is also the outline of the back of the cow, with the small forelegs implanted on either side of the stem of the leaf.



The painting is mounted on blue paper and the frame was a 'found' object painted in silver and gold. Although the artist denied that the framing had any 'special significance' she agreed that the mount and frame work with the painting to evoke secondary associations, for example the blue and gold can be linked to the sky and the sun.

Paul Nash recommended her work to Roland Penrose and Herbert Read, the organisers of the 1936 *International Surrealist Exhibition* at the New Burlington Galleries, in London and she became the only British woman to have work, three paintings and five objects, included in that exhibition.



The blindfolded **Angel of Anarchy** (1936-40) is loosely based on an earlier painted plaster head, both of which are casts of her husband's head. Agar stated that with this new work she wanted to create something "totally different, more astonishing, powerful ... more malign". It suggests the foreboding and uncertainty that she felt about the future in the late 1930s. Believing that women are the true Surrealists, Agar wrote: "the importance of the unconscious in all forms of Literature and Art establishes the dominance of a feminine type of imagination over the classical and more masculine order."

After purchasing a new fruit basket in the mid-1930s, Eileen Agar was furious to discover that it was not nearly robust enough to hold her bag of oranges.irate, the celebrated yet reluctant surrealist turned the cork

vessel upside down and declared it a hat, painting it blue and adorning it with shells, coral, a dried lobster and several wooden prawns found at a local fishmonger.

Although very much an art object, **Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse** was all about the wearing. In this photo from Agar's personal archive, she models it proudly in her studio, just as she does in this short **Pathé film**, where she wanders through London, much to the amusement of passers-by. As it aged the piece lost bits of ornamentation, only for them to be replaced with limpets, fish bones and a new cardboard lobster. A large chunk was even reattached with Bostik glue, having fallen off the wearer's head during a night of gin-fuelled dancing.



While this marine bonnet is a marker of Agar's irreverent style, it holds deeper significance. It mimics the style of the enormous hats worn by her strict, status-obsessed mother. The pair had a strained relationship, and at the age of six Agar was sent away from her home in Buenos Aires to a boarding school in England, where she eventually settled for good. The lonely two-week ocean voyages may have fuelled the artist's love of the sea, and this creation serves as a rebellious tribute to the restrictive society life she left behind.



Marine Object (1939) is made from a broken Greek amphora which she acquired from some fishermen that she was watching hauling in their nets in a small fishing port in the south of France. The broken amphora was caught in one of the nets. The crustaceans and flotsam which she applied to the amphora, came from a beach on the Côte d'Azur two years earlier. On the base of the assemblage is a ram's horn that she had picked up in Cumberland. Describing the making of Marine Object as 'short work', Agar added, 'though it took me and the amphora a long time to attempt such a conjunction.'

Fish Circus is a collage made in 1939, when she was on holiday in the Mediterranean. It combines the natural found object of a starfish with prints of fish, drawing of a starfish and coral, contrasted

with geometrical patterns, fabric and pins.

Agar had collected seemingly unremarkable ephemera found on the seashore and in various publications since childhood, but it was only in the mid 1930s that she began to incorporate these objects into her work. The surrealist practice of transformation of found objects through unexpected juxtapositions was for Agar, like collage, "a form of inspired correction, a displacement of the banal by the fertile intervention of chance or coincidence." Discussing the ephemerality of her assemblages and those of other Surrealists, Agar commented that the objects had been found "at the behest of chance and went that way also."





Erotic Landscape (1942) combines abstract patterns with images of fish and a photograph of a nude, who seems to be lying on a beach amongst rocks, seaweed and patterned towels, and with the curve of the water's edge and a line of hills across the bay; while a striped fish drifts across the bottom corner. Some of the shapes are purely abstract, others suggest seaweed or starfish. Agar said "I see nothing incompatible in that. Indeed we walk on two legs, and for me, one is abstract, the other surreal – it is point and counterpoint."

Agar always marched away from convention, and towards the mysterious. Critic Andrew Lambirth wrote: "Above all she wished to avoid the banal....Agar leads us

to a new place, not quite on this earth though very much of it, a world of wonder, play and glory. She gives us access to the kingdom of the imagination."

The divisions between collage, drawing and painting became increasingly blurred in the post war years and she renewed her interest in surrealist techniques including automatism, frottage printing and transfer techniques such as decalcomania.

By the time **Adams Apple** was made in 1949, Agar had exhibited in Surrealist exhibitions all over the world. Here, a worm emerging from an apple recalls John Tenniel's illustration of the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*, a book which was inspirational to the Surrealists. The title offers another reading of the work, connecting it to questions of gender and sexuality. The apple cut in half reveals the alignment of the stalk between two seeds, with overt phallic connotations.



The semi-humorous **Jug of Verse** (1949) shows Agar's sense of fun. A face is formed from the fragmentary shapes, which in turn represent the fragmentary phrases of the poems, which are tumbling out of the up-turned jug.



The accidental manifestation of rocks, pebbles and driftwood were, for her, expressions of fertility. **An Exceptional Occurrence** (1950) suggests a tense choreography between two figures, or maybe sea creatures, and may be a response to curious volcanic rock formations in Tenerife.



Agar painted this small portrait, **Head of Dylan Thomas**, in 1960 seven years after his death, from a sketch she had made more than twenty years earlier. She may have reused another artwork onto which she has dribbled white paint to make the profile.



Automatism is the technique of drawing or painting spontaneously, without preconceptions. It was pioneered by surrealists in an attempt to tap into the unconscious. Ultimately, she said that she found "the process of automatic artistic creation" rather unsatisfactory. She explained, "I am suspicious about the whole idea of working from dreams. I find that daytime dreams can be inspiring, but not night-time ones - they are too confusing. My own method is to put myself in a state of receptivity during the day."

The fluidity of automatic painting seemed to help free Agar from the anxieties that overwhelmed her during the war, and her experiments with spontaneous painting can be seen in *Tree Torso 4* (c.1950), *Head of Dylan Thomas* (1960) and *Pollen*.

This large painting, ***Slow Movement***, (1970) was inspired by the *Throne of Ludovisi*, a Roman marble panel which shows Aphrodite being raised from the sea by two women. Although the painting is very different from the classical sculpture, Agar was interested in the upward movement of the women's arms, and the overall circular movement created in the sculpture.

The painting contains sweeping, interlinking motions throughout. It also suggests a Spanish fan dancer, with arms raised in the air, wearing a dress decorated with spots or stripes. The use of blue recalls an element of the painting's main inspiration - the sea, and also echoes Agar's interest in taking inspiration from nature. In this painting, natural and fantastical forms are combined.



Acolytes (1966) is based on a common motif in Eileen Agar's pictures: the symmetrical presence of two figures engaged in some sort of enigmatic, wordless conversation.

The two figures are both similar and dissimilar, connected by the shapes, both geometrical and organic, from which they are formed. They seem equally engaged in some silent ritual.

Bird Woman (1978) is both a head and shoulders of a woman and a blue bird, the wing being formed from the profile of the face. It has been suggested that her "paintings operate like nets, trawling material out of the subconscious to float in Agar's aquatic colours, the deep blues and



sea greens of her art over 70 years. She was a brilliant colourist, varying her palette to abrupt orange or arsenical green when a scene turned sinister."

However, her visions rarely express the agonised manifestations of other surrealists but are instead overwhelmingly lyrical. The presiding influence is more Matisse than André Breton, Salvador Dalí or Max Ernst.



In ***Rite of Spring*** (1971) two swirling abstracted figures merge in a ritual arabesque of colourful shapes.

Figura (1972) is constructed from a vertical assemblage of geometrical shapes, suggesting a tower or totem pole. Only the addition of an

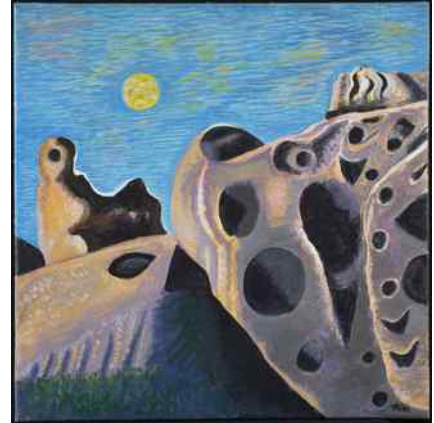


'organic' hand-like form near the bottom, and the juxtaposition of geometrical shapes, with the suggestion of eyes, in the 'head' transform this pure abstraction into the suggestion of a figure. It is reminiscent of Wyndham Lewis's tower-like figures, such as his 1927 ***Bagdad***.



Figures in a Garden (1981) was originally exhibited under the title *October* and later, after some additions were made to the canvas, *The Dark Wood*. It shows two figures dressed in elaborately decorated masquerade costumes. They stand against a dark leafy background and in front of landscape of earthy, autumnal coloured bands. Their brightly coloured bodies are fragmented as though caught in broken shadows of the branches of trees. The colourful patterns on the costumes can also be seen as cutout shapes revealing a green spring-like landscape behind.

Rock 3 (1985) is unusually painted in acrylic on canvas. This fantastic rock formation may be based on the photographs that Agar took of the rocks at Ploumanach in Brittany that she took in the 1930's.



Carousing Computers (1988), a humorous collage, is a late work. She remained a prolific artist to the end.

"I've enjoyed life, and it shows through," Agar once said. "Like a transparent skirt, or something like that."

In 1988 she published her autobiography *A Look At My Life*. In 1990, she was elected as a Royal Academy Associate. She died in London the following year, aged ninety two. She is buried in the Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris.

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