



Fini, Léonor (1908-1996)

by Elizabeth Ashburn

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The work of bisexual artist Léonor Fini resists classification. Although often associated with Surrealism, it is highly personal. It presents a mysterious and evocative world dominated by women.

Born in Buenos Aires in 1908 to parents of Italian, Spanish, and Argentinean descent, Léonor Fini was reared in Trieste, Italy. A largely self-taught artist, as a teenager she studied Renaissance and Mannerist painting in European museums and anatomy at the Trieste morgue.

In her visits to the morgue at the age of thirteen or so, she became intensely interested in the phenomena of life and death, decay and regeneration that were to influence her art profoundly. In her paintings, images of skulls and bones mark the tension between the transitory and the eternal.

Fini's independence and reliance on personal instinct link her with other women artists associated with Surrealism, including her close friend Leonora Carrington and Frida Kahlo.

In her life and art Fini advanced an ideal of the "autonomous, absolute woman," who was beautiful, domineering and "governed by passion." Although she had numerous suitors, she refused to marry. She preferred to live communally, often with two men, and demanded a sexual freedom that included bisexuality.

But she made a clear distinction between choosing a lesbian lifestyle and the desire to experience the love of another woman. In an interview with Whitney Chadwick in 1982, Fini freely acknowledged her experience of same-sex love, but refused to accept a lesbian identity, remarking, "I am a woman and have had the 'feminine experience' but I am not a lesbian."

Fini's strong commitment to sexuality as the connection between internal and external realities aligned her with Surrealists such as Salvador Dalí, André Masson, and Hans Bellmer. In 1936, she exhibited with the Surrealists in Paris and was subsequently associated with them.

Fini shared some of the Surrealists' ideas and a similar interest in shocking behavior and dramatic gestures. For example, when several Surrealists first saw her paintings and asked to meet her in a café, she arrived dressed in a Cardinal's red robes and explained that she liked the sacrilege of a woman wearing clothes of a man who would never know a woman's body.

However, her association with these male artists was largely social rather than substantive. She was hostile toward André Breton's puritanism and the Surrealists' failure to respect the autonomy of women while they "pretended" to liberate men. Moreover, as Chadwick points out, Fini is distinguished from them by her refusal to subordinate her female images to male desire.

Fini's work may in fact be seen as a response to the patriarchal assumptions of Surrealism. Fini places



Léonor Fini in 1936.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, December 14, 1936.
Library of Congress
Prints and Photographs
Division.

herself, or other women, at the center of her paintings as images of female power and autonomy. Her works touch on issues of patriarchy, lesbianism, and androgyny. She typically combines carefully rendered reality and an invented theatrical space dominated by fantasy.

Fini frequently includes in her paintings her personal totem, the cat; and she often depicts women who have magical--often sexual--powers. However, her figures are not necessarily intended to be read as abstract principles of dominant women and submissive men, since she based the paintings on images of specific individuals in her life.

Fini's first solo exhibition was at the Julian Levy Gallery in New York in 1939. During World War II, she lived in Monte Carlo and Rome and continued to work as an illustrator, theater designer, and painter, achieving a considerable reputation in Europe. She died in Paris in 1996.

Bibliography

Chadwick, Whitney. *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1972.

Jelenski, Constantin. *Léonor Fini*. Lausanne: Clairefontaine, 1968.

Léonor Fini. Exhibition Catalogue, with an essay by Luigi Carluccio. Turin: Galatea-Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea, 1966.

Léonor Fini. Exhibition Catalogue, with an introduction by Léonor Fini. Ferrara: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, 1983.

About the Author

Elizabeth Ashburn, Professor and Head of the School of Art in the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales, Australia, is author of *Lesbian Art: An Encounter with Power* and numerous articles. She is co-president of the Australian Center for Gay and Lesbian Research.