

Uncovering a Feminist Spirituality: Christianity as a Visual Framework in Leonora Carrington's Iconography

Leonora Carrington's paintings are rife with symbolic tension—swirling interactions and narratives that seemingly beg to be untangled. According to feminist art historian Susan Aberth, however, in Carrington's work “it is not that certain embedded symbols have no meaning; it is that these symbols cannot and do not ‘illustrate’ ideas in the manner we are accustomed to.” Unlike the biblical images that colored her Catholic upbringing, Carrington's work possesses no legend to reveal the hidden significance of her symbolisms, which serve more aptly as self-portraits than didactic allegories. Carrington spent years struggling to escape her Catholic family, and she pokes fun at crystalized Christian motifs throughout her artistic career by repurposing their traditional narrative language. Carrington utilizes the iconographies as a platform for communicating the widespread spiritual and philosophical influences she has become known for commingling in her work, from occultism and hermeticism to Jungian symbols. The goal of this paper is to trace Carrington's repeated reconstructions of traditional Christian representational frameworks as an evolution parallel with her changing conceptions of masculine and feminine power. The research seeks to capture Christian imagery both as the foundation of Carrington's deliberately indecipherable iconographic language and as a device for subverting patriarchal notions of religion in favor of a revived, yet novel feminine spirituality. The paper will accomplish its aims with a survey of both the specific symbols and techniques that Carrington employs in her painting that indicate deliberate and potentially unintended Christian influence. While the far-reaching codes embedded in Carrington's oeuvre are nearly innumerable, deconstructing her Christian imagery provides insight into the beginnings of a feminist religious iconography for the modern era.

Key Words: surrealism, Christianity, feminism, occult, spirituality, painting