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“Freedom is not gifted, you have to earn it”

She was a rebellious child from a good home and a multitalented artist who defies categorisation. Meret Oppenheim enjoyed international success but remained true to her Basel dialect. The “grande dame” of Swiss modern art would have celebrated her 100th birthday this year, which provides a good opportunity to look back at her life.

By Alice Henkes



Oppenheim's famous "Portrait with Tattoo" from 1980

Meret Oppenheim was just 18 when she left Basel for Paris in May 1932 determined to become an artist. Her friend Irène Zurkinden, who also made a career in art, accompanied her on this great journey. They took a bottle of Pernod with them, which they drank for courage. On arriving, they headed straight for the famous Parisian cafés, which were the gateway to the art world at the time.

Who was this girl with such zest for life? Meret Oppenheim was born on 6 October 1913 in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Her father, Erich Alfons, was a German doctor and her mother, Eva Wenger, was Swiss. Meret lived with her grandparents in Delémont during the First World War before alternating between southern Germany, where her father had a medical practice, and Basel. She became a border

crosser at a young age, distinctively speaking the Basel dialect, which she retained her entire life.

She was named after the beautiful young Meret who did not want to pray in Gottfried Keller's novel "Der Grüne Heinrich". Meret Oppenheim soon demonstrated that she too was a headstrong character. At the age of 16, she drew the nonsensical formula X-hare. This original renunciation of mathematics, which she detested, is regarded as the artist's first surrealist work. Meret Oppenheim received encouragement from an early age, especially from her grandmother, Lisa Wenger. This author of children's books was the first woman to attend the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf during her youth. Her grandfather, Theo Wenger, who was interested in art, and her aunt, Ruth Wenger, who was briefly married to the

writer Hermann Hesse, also encouraged Meret's creative talents.

Sharp observer and the silly goose

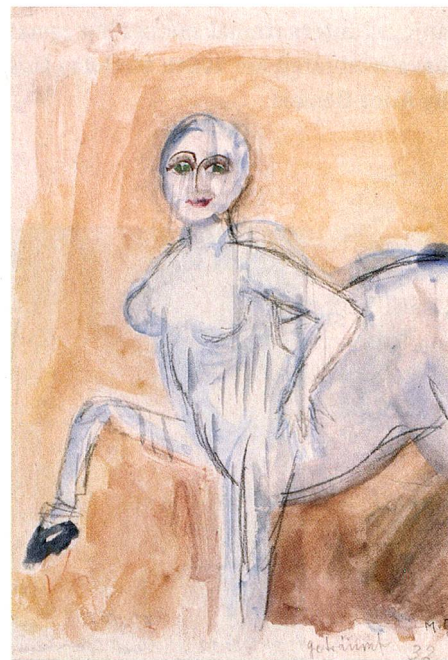
Only her father was unimpressed by his daughter's dreams of becoming an artist. "Women have never achieved anything in art", was his view. Nevertheless, he allowed his eldest child to gain an education in art. Meret wanted to move to Paris to join the surrealists, the most innovative and audacious artistic movement of the 1930s. She enrolled at the Academie de la Grande Chaumière, which she only attended occasionally. She preferred to teach herself. Her first oil painting "Sitzende Figur mit verschränkten Fingern" (Sitting Figure with Folded Hands) from 1933 depicts a silent listener in an imaginary circle and represents the outlook of the artist who is interested in the creations of others but always remains a loner.

Through the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti she became acquainted with André Breton's circle. Breton, the intellectual of the surrealist movement, preached the overthrow of all values and was intrigued by the hidden landscapes of the soul. That appealed to the rebellious young woman, but she had no desire to subject herself to the dogmas of surrealism entirely. As the only female artist in the surrealist circle, she sought the freedom to follow her own path. She tackled female subjects in her early work. "Ma gouvernante, my nurse, mein Kindermädchen" (1936) shows a pair of upturned white pumps on a silver tray. Paper frills adorn the heels. This piece brings to mind a roast chicken or a "silly goose".

It was this determined young Swiss woman of all people who produced surrealism's cult object, the fur teacup, at the age of 23. The idea was born in a Parisian café in 1936. Meret Oppenheim was wearing a fur-coated bangle that she had designed herself. Picasso inspired her to cover other objects with fur. She then produced "Déjeuner en fourrure", which was purchased by the Mu-



"Evening Gown with Bra-Strap Necklace" from 1968



"Centaur on the Seabed" from 1932

seum of Modern Art in New York in the same year.

Success and self-doubt

She could have simply continued to enjoy success as the artist who covered objects, but she wanted to keep her horizons open and to experiment. Man Ray immortalised this androgynous beauty in a series of famous nude photographs. Meret Oppenheim became the idol of the surrealist movement. She took famous artists like Picasso and Max Ernst as her lovers. But the rapid superficial success of the fur teacup and the nude photographs culminated in a feeling of low self-esteem. She suffered a

creative crisis, which lasted until 1954. She continued to work but without achieving any inner satisfaction. The oil painting "Die Steinfrau" (Stone Woman) from 1938, which shows a female figure made from stones, dramatically expresses this sense of paralysis.

In 1937, she returned to Basel, where she attended the School of Art for two years and restored furniture to earn a living. Her parents could no longer support her. Her father was unable to work in Germany because he was half-Jewish and could not work in Switzerland because he was a German. But she soon got back in touch with old friends in Basel and, in 1945, she met

the businessman Wolfgang La Roche, whom she married four years later. The couple moved to Berne and later to Thun and Oberhofen. They stayed together until Wolfgang La Roche's death in 1967.

An avant-gardist once again

Over a year passed before Meret Oppenheim established contact with the Bernese art scene through Arnold Rüdlinger, a dedicated art gallery director. It was primarily young Bernese artists who saw the "grande dame" of Swiss art as a role model. In 1956, Daniel Spoerri asked her to design the costumes for his staging of Picasso's comedy "Desire Caught by the Tail". Meret Oppenheim was once again part of the artistic avant-garde in her early 40s. And, with her new-found creativity, she could hold her own against younger artists.

She had a studio in Berne from 1954. Her work, which is so full of humour, irony and eroticism and is drawn from her rich emotional life, cannot be pigeonholed as any particular style or technique. The carved chair "Läbchuecheglushti" (1967) is provocative with a grotesque face in the backrest sticking out a long red velvet tongue. The oil painting "Ein Abend im Jahr 1910" (An Evening in 1910) from 1972 is reminiscent of Emil Nolde with its expansive painting style. As a more mature artist, she

ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITIONS

The Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim earned herself a place in international art history. The enduring power of her highly distinctive work is revealed by various exhibitions to mark the artist's 100th birthday:

MERET OPPENHEIM. Bank Austria Forum, Vienna. 21.03 to 14.07. The first major retrospective of the artist in Austria will then be exhibited in Berlin: Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin 16.08 to 01.12.

ÜBER DEN BÄUMEN. Sprengel Museum, Hanover. 20.02 to 05.05. First major exhibition on the artist's drawings.

MERETS FUNKEN. Kunstmuseum Bern. Until 10.02. The exhibition outlines the impact of Meret Oppenheim's work on contemporary Swiss artists.

Work by the artist also features in thematic exhibitions:

THE SUPERSURREALISM. Moderna Museet Malmö, until 20.01.

GNADENLOS. Künstlerinnen und das Komische. Städtische Museen Heilbronn, until 24.02.



"Fur Teacup" from 1923



"An Evening in 1910" from 1972

dealt with the work she had produced in her own youth in a critical and ironic way. The "Eichhörnchen" (Squirrel) from 1969, a beer glass with a bushy fur tail, satirised the famous fur teacup. She sprayed a tattoo on her self-portrait using stencils in the "Portrait mit Tätowierung" (Portrait with Tattoo) from 1980, clearly claiming sovereignty over her own image.

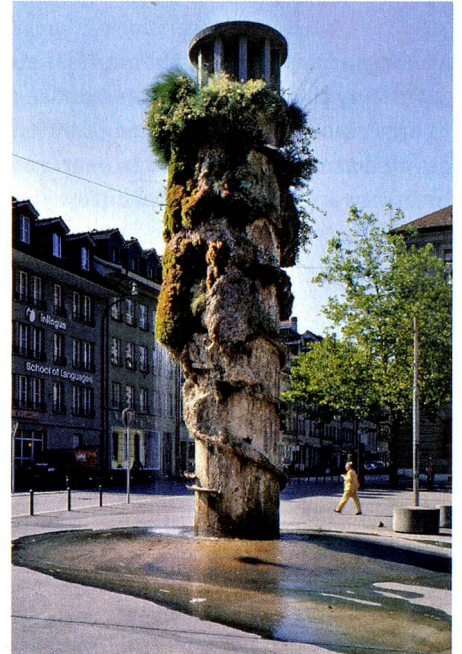
At home in Ticino

Meret Oppenheim focussed frequently on the cloud, that fluffy, ephemeral phenomenon in the sky in which human imagination has been building castles for centuries. She produced well-defined clouds in oil on canvas, in pen and ink, and in the timelessly beautiful bronze work "Sechs Wolken auf einer Brücke" (Six Clouds on a Bridge) from 1975. She continued the theme of femininity

in work such as "Handschuhen" (1985), gloves embroidered with veins.

The Moderna Museet in Stockholm held a Meret Oppenheim retrospective in 1967. This launched her second international career, which is still continuing. She was awarded the City of Basel Art Prize in 1975 and expressed her gratitude with a much-quoted speech about the enduring weak position of women in art. In 1982, she was invited to "documenta 7" in Kassel. A series of poems playing on words was published by Suhrkamp-Verlag shortly afterwards. The world was discovering Meret Oppenheim.

It was only in Berne that her later work was met with incomprehension for a long time. Her fountain sparked controversy when it was displayed in Waisenhausplatz in 1983. But although Berne did not make life easy for her, she demonstrated great generosity towards



The controversial Oppenheim Fountain in Berne

the city. She left a third of her work to the Kunstmuseum Bern. This means that Berne has the artist's greatest body of work, which has featured in various exhibitions even since her death in 1985. Leading museums throughout the world, such as the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago, the Henje Onstad Art Centre in Oslo and the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau, have held retrospective exhibitions on the "grande dame" of Swiss art.

Meret Oppenheim made her breakthrough in Paris as a young girl. She went on long motorbike trips with her husband. But this maverick felt most at home in Carona. The Casa Costanza, the family home in Ticino, was a place of comfort throughout Meret Oppenheim's lifetime. She spent unforgettable summers there as a child with her grandparents. When she was at school, she always had a picture of the house on her desk "as a symbol of great anticipation", as she wrote to her grandmother. The house above Lake Lugano was a convivial meeting place for family and friends and a place of refuge for her parents during the war. At the end of the 1960s, Meret Oppenheim had Casa Costanza redeveloped and turned it into one giant work of art with furniture and lamps she had designed herself, and it has remained like that to this day.

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