

A Surrealist Before the Letter

As a teenager in Basel, Oppenheim was inspired by Gothic fairytales and her dreams, which she recorded and illustrated in diaries. She left high school in 1931 to pursue painting, moving to Paris the following year. There, she became a member of the Surrealists, a literary and artistic circle that experimented with unconventional forms of art making as a means of tapping into the unconscious.

Oppenheim would later say that she had been “doing Surrealism before the letter”—prior to her move to Paris, and without any knowledge of the concept or its practitioners. Yet she credited the Surrealists, who were mostly men, with being her first engaged audience and with encouraging her rebellious attitude and fantastical imagination.

In Paris the self-taught Oppenheim produced a diverse body of work comprising droll doodles, abstract and narrative paintings, collages, and witty object-constructions. A fur-covered tea set and a trussed-up pair of white pumps on a silver platter demonstrate her uncanny ability to make the everyday strange.

A Crisis of Self-Confidence

As the threat of war loomed across Europe, Oppenheim was forced to resume living full-time in Switzerland in 1937. Upon her return, she pursued a formal art education for the first time, attending the Basel School of Design for two years, where she also trained as an art conservator.

Her studies had a noticeable impact on her work. She began to paint using newly acquired technical skills and invented narrative scenes, often dark in tone and populated by otherworldly and mythological figures. The subjects she chose lent themselves to themes of entrapment and isolation.

Living near the German border, Oppenheim acutely felt the “continual tension and atmosphere of war,” as she wrote to a friend in 1941. This fraught historical period also marked the beginning of what the artist later referred to as an eighteen-year personal crisis. “This crisis was actually a crisis of self-confidence,” she reflected. “The whole patriarchal world fell on my neck.” She continued to produce art during these difficult years, much of which she destroyed or left unfinished. This gallery gathers examples of those that she preserved.

The Youngest Swiss Avant-Garde

Almost two decades after her “crisis of self-confidence” had begun, Oppenheim rented a studio in Bern, Switzerland, in 1954, and fully dedicated herself to art making. The paintings, objects, assemblages, and reliefs in this gallery are full of life, reflecting the artist’s creative reawakening. A beer stein sprouts a tail, a snout-like wooden wedge emerges from a clockface, and a pair of shoes produce an egg. Works depicting flora and fauna, as well as those incorporating natural materials like fungi, hint at cycles of growth and decay.

Oppenheim’s approach to object making in the 1950s and ’60s—combining found materials in new arrangements, such that otherwise ordinary items are rendered strange—was consistent with that of her early Paris years. It was also shaped by her new social and artistic circle in Bern, which included the Nouveau Réaliste artists Jean Tinguely and Daniel Spoerri, who recycled objects from the urban environment in their work. Acknowledging these connections, Oppenheim described herself as “both a ‘classic’ of Parisian Surrealism of the 1930s and . . . a representative of the youngest Swiss avant-garde.”

Moons and Clouds

Oppenheim's dream diaries vividly describe clouds that look like chariots, cannons, and ruins, as well as moons that merge to form the wings of a butterfly—yet the artist's visual representations of weather and celestial bodies are resolutely abstract. Oppenheim refuses to satisfy our shared impulse to see familiar things in incidental patterns and forms. Instead, she playfully transforms that which is nebulous and always in motion into angular, sharp-edged silhouettes fixed in paint, bronze, and graphite. Here, as elsewhere in her work, the cosmic, magical, and terrestrial harmoniously coexist.

M.O.: My Exhibition

In December 1983 Oppenheim began work on a set of twelve identically sized, meticulously rendered drawings of more than two hundred objects from her body of work. She intended the drawings, which she organized roughly chronologically, to serve as an open-ended guide for the curators of a traveling retrospective of her work that premiered at the Kunsthalle Bern the following year. On the first drawing, Oppenheim provided the following note: “This ‘Imaginary Exhibition’ is only an example. I had to leave aside many works that for me are no less important.”

In her “Imaginary Exhibition,” Oppenheim occasionally breaks from her chronology to bring together works made at different times that explore similar ideas. These juxtapositions illustrate how she developed concepts over the span of her life. The installation in Bern, which was overseen by the artist and curator Jean-Hubert Martin, took inspiration from the drawings while also freely straying from them. The present exhibition follows the same principle, at times quoting both the drawings and 1984 retrospective, at others improvising.

What Freud Got Wrong

In the 1970s Oppenheim's international reputation grew, and she began to give interviews and speak publicly more frequently. In these conversations and appearances, Oppenheim expressed original ideas about gender that were informed by her struggles and achievements as an artist. "A great work of literature, art, music, philosophy is always the product of a whole person, and every person is both male and female," she asserted in 1975—a theoretical proposition inspired by the writings of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung.

While Oppenheim embraced Jung's psychoanalytic theories, she rejected those of Sigmund Freud, including his interpretation of the serpent as a phallic symbol in dreams and mythologies. "Freud misinterpreted the snake, namely from the patriarchal point of view," she told one interviewer. For the artist's part, she associated the snake, which appears as a recurring motif in her work, with women's agency and the pursuit of knowledge. This gallery gathers examples of these serpentine creations along with other works from the last two decades of her life, which continue her exploration of natural and found materials.

Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985)

“I will die before the first snow,” Oppenheim told friends on her seventy-second birthday in October 1985. She based this conviction on a dream she’d had at age thirty-six, in which a worm-riddled statue of a saint turned over an hourglass. The artist interpreted this to mean she was halfway through her life. Uncannily, her prediction turned out to be true: Oppenheim died a month later, on November 15.

In the last decade of her life, even while she was contemplating her mortality and legacy, Oppenheim continued to make work with vitality. This gallery features small drawings, objects, and collages from this period, as well as the brightly hued *New Stars* (1977–82), one of the artist’s largest paintings. “When art is good,” Oppenheim remarked in 1978, “it can be huge and important or very little, but living.”