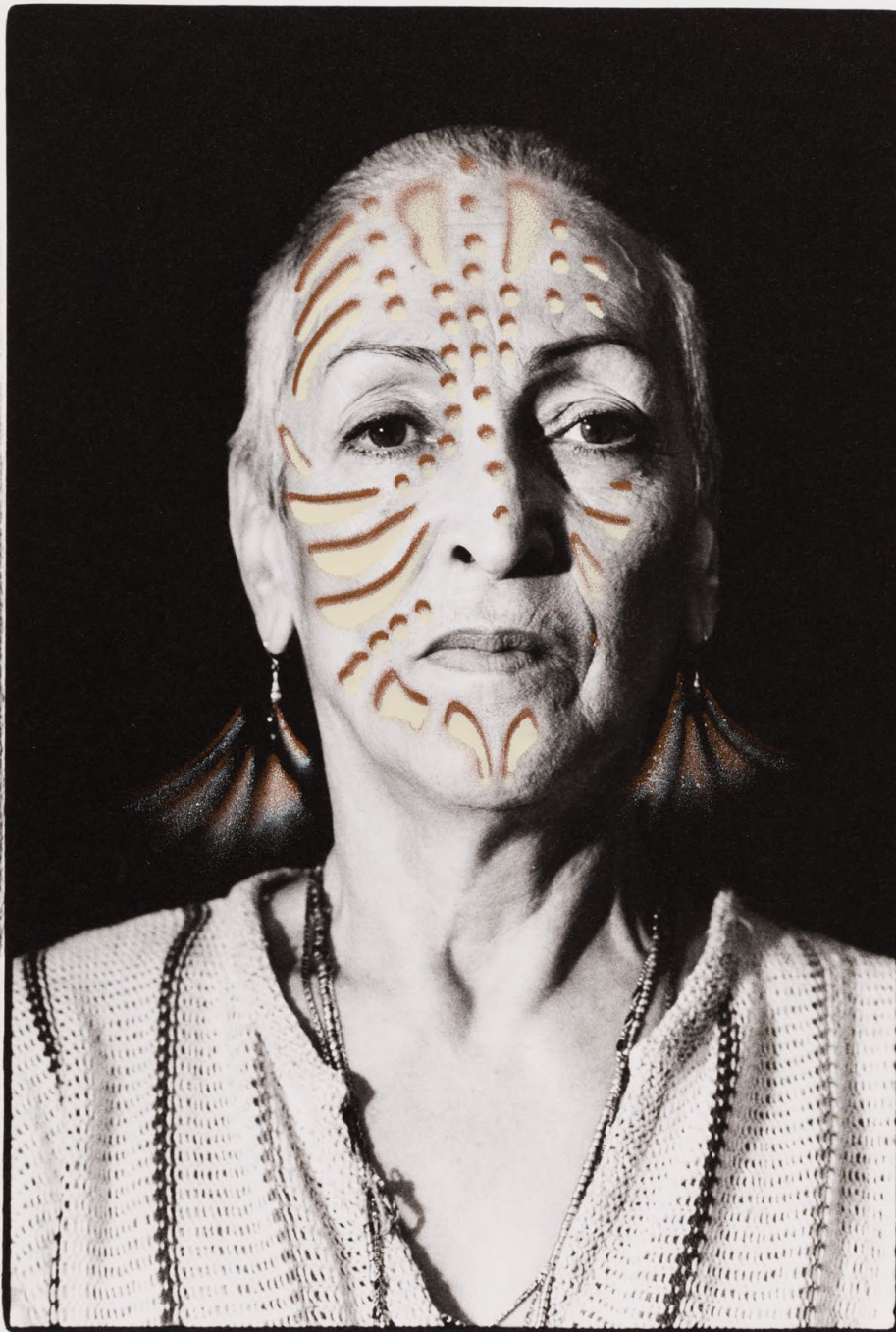


Meret Oppenheim: Every Idea Is Born with Its Own Form

MERET OPPENHEIM, Portrait - photo with tattoo, 1980, photo and spray, 29.5 x 21 cm. Photo by Heinz Günter Mebusch, Düsseldorf, 1978, AD109. Copyright Pro Litteris, Zurich.



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Meret Oppenheim

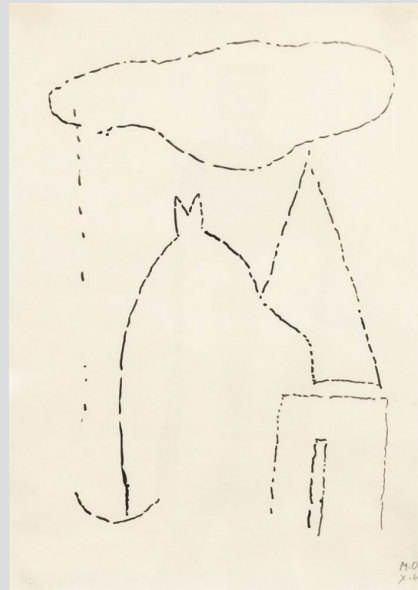


INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

BY MARTINA CORGNATI



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Giacometti's Ear*, 1933/77, bronze, 10×7.5×1.5 cm. Courtesy ProLitteris, Zurich.



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Wolke über Stadt (Cloud over a Town)*, 1960, Indian ink, 29.5×21 cm. Courtesy Burger Collection, Hong Kong.

"Every idea is born together with its own form." This statement provides us with a clue to follow Meret Oppenheim's practice; an interesting one, because the artist is doubtless one of the most prominent of her generation, especially among those who work in Surrealism. Since her youth, and long before her almost mythical encounters with artists Alberto Giacometti and Hans Arp, and, through them, with the Surrealist circle which later fed her creativity with new and unexpected stimuli, the German-Swiss artist firmly refused the traditional idea of art as mastery of a technique, be it painting or drawing or sculpture or anything else. Exploring her own imaginations and dreams, she tried to be constantly surprised by possibilities related to the unseen and the unexpected, each time looking for a way to make them visible. Her fellow German-Swiss artist Paul Klee stated, decades before, "art does not show what is visible; art *makes* it visible."¹

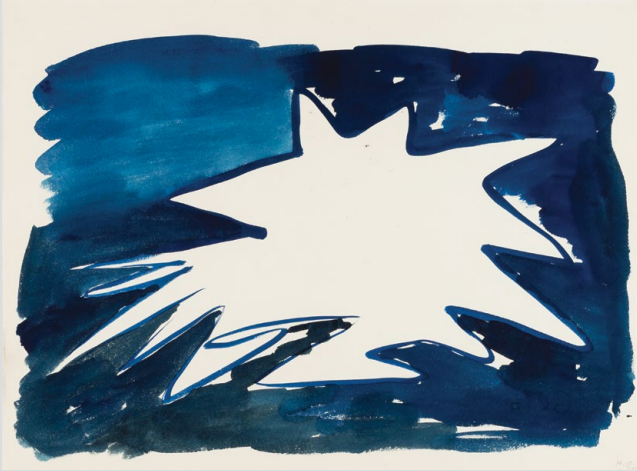
It was not by chance that Oppenheim in her teens and early twenties produced drawings and small sculptures, as well as objects and paintings, with an enormous versatility and freedom that a proper technical education, acquired later, would have further intensified. In Paris, the Berlin-born artist eagerly absorbed the fervid atmosphere created by the much older artists she met. Apart from Giacometti and Arp, there was Max Ernst, with whom she shared a passionate but short relationship, and also Leonor Fini, Dora Maar, Toyen, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Yves Tanguy, among others, in addition to the theoretician André Breton and the poet André Pieyre de Mandiargues.

Her first masterpieces were born then: the bronze cast *Giacometti's Ear* (1933), the sculpture *Primeval Venus* (1933), the oil-on-paperboard *Sitting Figure with Folded Hands* (1933),

and, of course, *Breakfast in Fur* (1936), the world-famous teacup clothed with gazelle fur, shown in 1936 at Paris's Galerie Charles Ratton in the exhibition devoted to the "Surrealist Object." Crucial for the development of this "idea" were the jewelry and the fashion accessories that Oppenheim was producing for fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli at that time, which included a rounded, thick bracelet completely coated by fur.² This exemplifies the cultural and mental flexibility that characterizes the young artist's methods: for her there was no separation among fields of creativity and fashion projects. Conceived mostly in order to face economic difficulties, these too can become pieces of art—objects can become paintings and vice versa.³

In the late 1930s, Oppenheim's previous depression intensified, escalated by Germany's political situation and by her family's economic struggles. Her mother was seen spitting on a portrait of Adolf Hitler, and they had to flee to Switzerland where her father, German by nationality, was forbidden to practice as a doctor. Furthermore, their Jewish surname was increasingly viewed with suspicion even in Switzerland, although both of the artist's parents were Christian by religion.

Oppenheim went to Basel to the School of Applied Arts to improve her technical skills, and remained there during World War II. She produced very little; the pieces she made were mostly paintings characterized by a romantic, fairy-tale-like atmosphere. Her sensitivity for nature increased: she developed a special ability to perceive an inner life of things and to express it in delicate drawings and artworks. These sources of inspiration persisted. Indeed, sensitivity to the secret nature of things is a trait that one can recognize in her oeuvre, even long after she overcame her



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Meerstern (Seastar)*, 1958, gouache, 49 × 63 cm. Copyright Flavio Karrer. Courtesy Burger Collection, Hong Kong.



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Sechs Wolken auf einer Brücke (Six Clouds on a Bridge)*, 1963/75, bronze, 47 × 16 × 51 cm. Courtesy ProLitteris, Zurich.

crippling depression and started working intensively again, which according to her was in 1954.⁴

Some examples of this love for nature are found in the Burger Collection Hong Kong, such as *Meerstern (Seastar)* (1958), an intensely colored gouache, and *Wolke über Stadt (Cloud over a Town)* (1960). The first could be described as a musical solo for a single instrument, namely deep blue, whose different nuances can be appreciated at the corners of the image. The center is empty and white but intensely dynamic, a shape which also portrays a liquid, luminous, and almost threatening energy on the move. Nothing is naturalistic here, of course. Oppenheim's intention has nothing to do with representing nature but with capturing its movements, referring more to a poetic, surrealistic idea of nature. It is worth remembering that to the boneless, sensual, and elastic sea star, Man Ray devoted a short black-and white silent film in 1928, *L'étoile de mer*, based on Robert Desnos's poem,⁵ and that Oppenheim, working on this gouache years later, could have remembered that film, especially the liquid effect and the visual deformities created by her friend and fellow artist Man.

Wolke über Stadt features a different mood, more ironic and rarified. Oppenheim frequently employed clouds in her artworks: she was fascinated by their mobility, density, reactivity to light, and metamorphic appearances. To her, they were perfect, fragile, surrealistic creatures. Her clouds appeared almost plastic, a weight which balances precariously above bridges and landscapes. This is the case of *Six Clouds on a Bridge*, a sculpture molded in 1963 and cast in bronze in 1975. However, in the drawing mentioned here clouds play a similar role to that of a theatrical character. Tapped by the spike of the top of a building, it "responds,"

1 This well-known aphorism was first included in *Creative Confession*, an anthology of short texts published in *Tribune der Kunst und Zeit* in 1920, Erich Reiss, Berlin.

2 Nowadays produced by GEMS and LADDERS https://www.gemsandladders.com/collection/fur_bracelet by license of the artist's estate.

3 Christiane Meyer-Thoss investigates Meret Oppenheim's concept of "applied arts" in *Meret Oppenheim: Book of Ideas: Early Drawings and Sketches for Fashions, Jewelry, and Designs*, Verlag Gachnang & Springer, Zürich, 1996, English version, Art Pub Inc., 1999.

4 About Meret Oppenheim's biographical details cfr., Martina Corgnati, *Meret Oppenheim. Afferrare la vita per la coda*, cit., in Italian. Regarding her depression, pp. 117-258.

5 *L'étoile de mer*, (French, 1928, 17 minutes, black and white, silent, 16 mm), directed by Man Ray.



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Souvenir of Breakfast in Fur*, 1970-71, object, mixed media, 20 × 17.5 cm. Courtesy ProLitteris, Zurich.

dripping a tear that falls in a pod-shaped or anchor-shaped line, closing a cycle in so doing, a circuit from bottom to top and top to bottom.

During the 1960s, Oppenheim's position in the art world changed significantly. Although she rejoined her surrealist friends in Paris and took part in a momentous exhibition in 1959 at Galerie Cordier, "Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme," she still faced difficulties in selling her works, especially in Switzerland where she lived and acquired citizenship in 1949 after her marriage to Wolfgang La Roche. However, in 1967, the one-woman show organized for her by Pontus Hulten in Stockholm's Moderna Museet marked a milestone. This was followed by the travelling exhibition at Solothurn, Winterthur, and Duisburg Museums in 1974. Finally, the 1975 Art Award of the City of Basel assured her a visibility and consideration that she had never enjoyed in her homeland, not even during the epic years of surrealism.⁶

It is worth stressing that success, or at least critical consideration and esteem from some of the most advanced intellectuals of those decades, did not change her practice. She never took on easier ways to make her work more sellable, instead refusing to accept compromises and insisting on adopting a free attitude toward creations, ideas, contents, and techniques. In adopting a surrealistic freedom of thought, she did not share any cliché, not even the surrealistic ones. This is found in *Souvenir of Breakfast in Fur* (1970). Bored by the almost inevitable association of her art with her iconic 1936 piece, she stated her intolerance by creating a kitschy reproduction of *Breakfast in Fur* embedded in a glass ball; a perfect souvenir of herself, or better, of what most people identified her with.

On the other hand, there was at least one surrealist practice that she enjoyed as a creative and, at the same time, as a social activity, especially during holidays with friends in her Carona summer house in Ticino. This was *cadavre exquis*, exquisite corpse, a game born around 1924-25 among the surrealist group in Paris, meant to realize a collective of either poem or image. *Cadavre exquis* works as follows: "each player has a piece of paper in front and draws a head on it (or anything that works as the upper part of a figure), then bends the paper backwards in such a way that the following player could see only two signs at the nape of the neck, and gives it to the person nearby;"⁷ who continues to work on the figure.

Oppenheim loved this game, playing with her friends and Turin artists Roberto Lupo and Anna Boetti, among others. Some of the extraordinary results of this were *Cadavre exquis (Himmelskartoffeln/Pomme-de-ciel)* (*Sky potatoes*) and *Cadavre exquis (Carona cielo uno)* (*Carona, Sky one*); both relatively small drawings attributed to the 1970s or the early '80s, and showing the interventions of three illustrators. *Carona cielo uno* refers to the sky over the place where it was made; sky one, meaning there is also a "two," or maybe more. It depicts a fantastic, anthropomorphic character, with a half-devil and half-human head, and a staves-like torso with thin feet.

Himmelskartoffeln/Pomme-de-ciel looks different. Openly ironic, it presents itself like an upside-down plant, with bright yellow roots in the sky, and a delicate flower at the bottom. Obviously, no one participating in the game could have decided how the final result would look like, but it is worth noting that Oppenheim previously painted an upside-down tree, one of her most intense images, *Paradise is under the Ground* (1940). The trunk of the tree in the painting and that in the drawing somehow appear similar.

Was this the subconscious return of an idea? Throughout her life, Oppenheim firmly believed in the unknown forces that reside innately, either paralyzing one's creative power or making it blossom. In her youth she eagerly read psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung's books, which became a powerful resource against her own depression. She even met Jung once in 1935, thanks to her

6 The speech she pronounced on that occasion, a radical one about the position of a woman-artist, is a famous one, often re-published in several catalogues and languages.

7 Meret Oppenheim, quoted in Id., Dominique Bürgi, *Index of the Artworks*, in Bice Curiger, *Spuren durchstandener Freiheit*, cit., 1989, p.207, n.2.

8 Martina Corgnati, *Meret Oppenheim. Afferrare la vita per la coda*, quoted, p.93.

9 Meret Oppenheim, Acceptance speech, for the 1974 Art Award of the City of Basel, January 1975, in Heike Eipeldauer, Ingrid Brugger, Gereon Sievernich (ed.), *Meret Oppenheim. Retrospective*, cit., pp.270-71.

10 "Mouvements dans l'art contemporain," at Galerie de Seul, Seoul, September 11 to October 10, 1982. The original poster is numbered in the catalogue as AF139.

11 Christiane Meyer-Thoss (ed.), *Meret Oppenheim. Husch, Husch, der schönsten Vokal entleert sich (Gedichte)*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002.

12 Bice Curiger, quoted by Martina Corgnati, *Meret Oppenheim. Afferrare la vita per la coda*, cit., p.465.

father who organized the meeting due to his concerns about her psychological condition. Jung had wise words for her: "There are no neurotic complications . . . The creative temperament and the bewilderment typical of a young age and of those times explain some strange behaviors more than enough."⁸ More than that, Jung provided Oppenheim with a key to overcome her inner bonds. It was not by chance that the "cosmological," or spiritual and psychological system elaborated by Jung became crucial for Oppenheim, allowing her to fine-tune her own idea of persona, especially of any truly creative personality. Years later, she came to such a conclusion: "A great work of literature, art, music, philosophy, is always the product of a whole person. And every person is both male and female. In ancient Greece, men were inspired by the Muses, which means that the female tendency within them shared in their creations, and this still applies today. Conversely, the male tendency is contained in the works of women."⁹

Oppenheim conceived any creative output as masculine and feminine, and considered it essential that a masculine side, the Genius as she called it, be present and active in any creative woman. Similarly, a feminine side, the Muse, is required for a male artist to achieve his full potential. This is the key to understanding why she almost always refused to take part in any women-only exhibition or book, even the most important ones produced in the 1970s by American feminists. She refused to be labeled as a "feminist artist," although she was regarded as an icon of freedom by them, and she showed sympathy for the movement's struggles. But, according to her, there is a price to pay: becoming responsible of one's own life, choices, decisions. Not an easy one.

Oppenheim died of a heart attack on November 15, 1985, one month after she turned 72. She had said several times that she would die more or less at that time, having foresaw this in a dream years before. Her legacy is enormous, and retains its momentum today. First of all, it has to do with creative freedom, with her firm refusal of any recognizable style or fixed language meant to cage the spontaneous flexibility or mutability of ideas and inspiration. This became widespread, almost a rule in the following decades. Secondly, Oppenheim gave right of citizenship to many minor techniques and practices that in the 1980s were not well regarded in the art world, such as collage, assemblage, monotype, fashion design, offset, gouache, and artists' books. Her retouched *portrait* (1980), with post-production stripping and tattoos modifying her features, was considered by her as a work of art and used for the poster of her only solo show in South Korea in 1982, at Galerie de Seul.¹⁰ And, of course, poetry: Oppenheim wrote dozens of poems, partially published during her lifetime,¹¹ which offer an example of her formless and hierarchy-less idea of creativity. According to her, art could be anything, and most important of all, embed life. In her late years, she reflected upon, and granted several interviews, about art and politics including issues such as the urgency of a European Federal State, the relationship between masculine and feminine principles, and that of economy and religion.

She did not fear death. On the contrary, she was convinced that death arrives when one's spiritual energy is ready to be released upon the earth. To interpret her legacy properly, the words of her friend and theoretician, the prominent art critic and curator Bice Curiger, on the occasion of her funeral are still of great significance: "We will miss her . . . By nature, she was always able to create a favorable environment for confrontation . . . her attitude made always clear that she did not place herself at the center of the universe. Instead, possible connections—with nature, human beings, cosmic events. She required always frontal approaches. And now, clues are increasing, according to which she did not let death shoot her in the back."¹²



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Cadavre exquis (Himmelskartoffel/Pomme-de-ciel)*, 1970s-1980s, cadavre exquis, pencil and felt pen on paper, 29.7 × 21 cm. Courtesy Burger Collection, Hong Kong.



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Cadavre exquis (Carona cielo uno)*, 1970s-1980s, cadavre exquis, pencil and felt pen on paper, 29.7 × 21 cm. Courtesy Burger Collection, Hong Kong.



MERET OPPENHEIM, *Paradise is under the Ground*, 1940, collage, gouache, 22×16.5 cm. Courtesy ProLitteris, Zurich, Switzerland.

Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985) was and is one of the most acclaimed women artists of her generation. She was a member of the Surrealist group and, after a Parisian debut in 1933 at the Salon des Surindépendants, continued to be present in its exhibitions until the 1960s. Her *Breakfast in Fur* (1936) was purchased by New York's Museum of Modern Art where it is still on permanent display. Her seminal solo exhibition was held at Stockholm's Moderna Museet in 1967, curated by Pontus Hulten. Oppenheim was awarded the prestigious Art Award of the City of Basel in 1975. In 1982, she was invited by curator and artist Harald Szeemann to participate in Documenta 7. Since her death, her works continue to be shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, and are present in key museum collections worldwide.

Martina Corgnati is an art historian and curator based in Milan, where she teaches art history in Brera Academy of Fine Arts. She is currently chairman in the department of communication and didactic of the arts. She wrote several books on modern and contemporary art, such as *She-Artists* (2004), about female artists from Impressionism to the present, and the first comprehensive biography for Meret Oppenheim, *Grasping life by the tail* (2014). She was also co-editor of Oppenheim's correspondence book, *Worte nicht in giftige Buchstaben entwickeln* (2013). In 1998, she curated the retrospective exhibition "Meret Oppenheim" in Milan, Refettorio delle Stelline, Galleria del Credito Valtellinese (Skira cat).