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Oppenheim, Meret, *Das Frühstück in Pelz*, 1936, Tasse und Teller aus Porzellan sowie ein Löffel, alles mit einem dünnen Pelzchen überzogen (aufgeklebt), Tasse D 11, Teller D 24, Löffel B 20 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Documentation level

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Name

Oppenheim, Meret

Other version/s of name

La Roche-Oppenheim, Meret

Dates of birth and death

* 6.10.1913 Berlin, † 15.11.1985 Basel

Municipality of origin (CH)

Basel

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Malerin, Zeichnerin und Objektkünstlerin. 1932-1937 Aufenthalt in Paris. Vertreterin des französischen Surrealismus, Mitglied der Künstlergruppe Allianz

Fields of activity

Skulptur, Objektkunst, Malerei, Lithographie, Collage, Holzschnitt, Zeichnung, Multiple, Plastik, Schmuck, Fotografie, Brunnen

Lexicon article

Born in Berlin-Charlottenburg as the daughter of a German doctor and a Swiss mother, Meret Oppenheim spent her youth in the Bernese Jura, southern Germany and Basel, where she attended the Rudolf Steiner School. The circles in which her family moved, bourgeois on the one hand, yet open to modern ideas on the other, enabled the girl to frequent artists and literary figures, including emancipated, self-confident women. Her maternal grandparents owned a

house in Carona (Canton of Ticino). Meret's forays in her grandparents' garden and the forests of Ticino were informed by the spirit of her family's illustrious guests, including [Emmy Hennings](#), [Hugo Ball](#) and [Hermann Hesse](#), to whom her aunt Ruth Wenger was briefly married. Oppenheim's father travelled regularly to Zurich to attend the seminars of C.G. Jung, whose doctrine the family also discussed at home. At the age of 14, Meret started to write down her dreams. In 1929, she was impressed by [Paul Klee](#) delicate abstract works in an exhibition devoted to the Bauhaus in Dessau at the Kunsthalle Basel. At 18, she left secondary school (Gymnasium) in order to become an artist. She met the painter [Irene Zurkinden](#) and moved with her to Paris. Oppenheim attended – albeit sporadically – the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, working mostly alone, writing poetry and drawing. She made the acquaintance of artists such as Pablo Picasso and [Alberto Giacometti](#) at the Café du Dôme on Boulevard Montparnasse. In 1934, she had a love affair with Max Ernst that lasted just under a year. Man Ray's famous series of nude photographs of Meret Oppenheim with a copperplate printing press and printer's ink taken in Louis Marcoussis' studio dates from this period. Giacometti and [Jean Arp](#) invited Meret Oppenheim to exhibit with them at the Surrealists' *Salon des surindépendants*. From then on, she took part in the group's exhibitions. The object *Déjeuner en fourrure* (*Breakfast in Fur*), a creative coup, was acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1936. That same year, at her first solo exhibition at the Galerie Marguerite Schulthess in Basel, Meret Oppenheim showed *Ma gouvernante, My nurse, mein Kindermädchen* (1936, Moderna Museet, Stockholm), a pair of white, upturned high-heeled shoes decorated with paper cuffs like a chicken on a silver tray – a symbol of fetishized female beauty.

The young woman was assailed by depression. Her emerging artistic crisis was to last from 1936 until 1954. Meret Oppenheim continued to work during this period, but destroyed many works or left them unfinished. Between 1937 and 1939 she attended the Basel School of Art and Design, established contacts with Gruppe 33 and Allianz, of which she became a member. She attempted to keep her head above water by designing costume jewellery, and learned to restore paintings. Her circumstances improved. In 1943, the Kunstmuseum Basel bought her picture *Krieg und Frieden* (War and Peace). In 1945, Meret Oppenheim met the businessman Wolfgang La Roche, whom she married in 1949. The marriage lasted until his death in 1967. The couple lived in Bern, Thun, Oberhofen and Hünibach. Through Arnold Rüdlinger, director of the Kunsthalle Bern at the time, she gradually made contact with the local art scene.

Having taken part in an exhibition of fantastical furniture together with Max Ernst, Leonor Fini and others in Paris in 1939, it was only in 1950 that Meret Oppenheim was next in

touch with the Surrealists. She was disappointed by the dogmatic approach of these artists, who had grown old. She worked in Bern, where she moved into a studio in 1954. She had survived her long creative crisis. In 1956, for example, her work included designing costumes for [Daniel Spoerri](#) stage production of Picasso's *Desire caught by the tail*, in which she also played the role of a curtain. The same year, she gave a spring party at which the frugal dishes were served on the naked body of a young woman. Breton urged her to repeat the «festin» at the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* at the Galerie Cordier in Paris, held in 1959. It was the last surrealist exhibition in which Meret Oppenheim was to take part.

From the late 1960s, the artist's work was rediscovered at solo and group exhibitions. In 1965, she took a narcotic drug – under medical supervision – and made detailed notes of her experiences. In 1967, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm organised a retrospective. Meret Oppenheim participated in the feminist debates of the 1970s, and in her acceptance speech for the Art Prize of the City of Basel in 1975 voiced her opinion on the problem of the «female artist». Although she took a firm stand for women's rights, she was equally firm in negating the notion of «female» art: «The mind is androgynous» (Meret Oppenheim). This attitude was subsequently to make her a standard bearer for generations of female artists.

In 1981, Oppenheim published poems (1933–1957) and screen prints under the title *Sansibar*. In 1982, she was awarded the Grand Prix of the City of Berlin and invited to exhibit at *documenta 7* in Kassel. In 1983, a fountain sculpture after her designs was inaugurated in Bern on Waisenhausplatz, and met with a controversial reception. Further retrospectives were held at the Kunsthalle Bern and the ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. In 1985, Meret Oppenheim again worked on a fountain sculpture for the Jardins de l'Ancienne Ecole Polytechnique in Paris (*Fontaine de la Spirale*, 1986). She died on 15 November in Basel. At 36, she had dreamt of her life as an hourglass. It was exactly half empty.

Various retrospectives have been staged since her death, such as at the Solomon R. Guggenheim New York in 1996; 1997, Museum of Modern Art Chicago; 1999, Aargauer Kunsthau Aarau (together with Louise Bourgeois and [Ilse Weber](#)); 2004, Moderna Museet Stockholm; 2006, Kunstmuseum Bern; 2007, Henje Onstad Art Centre, Oslo; 2007/08, Städtische Galerie Ravensburg. The film *Imago – Meret Oppenheim* was made by Anselm Spoerri and Pamela Robertson-Pearce in 1988. In 2005, the Meret Oppenheim archives were entrusted to the Kunstmuseum Bern. In 2013, retrospectives for the artist's 100th birthday were shown at the Bank Austria Kunstforum, Vienna and the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin.

Meret Oppenheim's marked sensibility is not only expressed in tender emotions. Nightmares and visions of horror suddenly appear without warning. Macabre themes recur in the artist's early drawings: suicides, acrobatic numbers that end in mutilation. The project drawing for a sculpture executed in 1959 bears the title: *Someone watching someone else die*. The rapid sketches often seem like the crests of black humour on a lugubrious sea of grief. The 1931 drawing *Votivbild (Würgeengel)*, represents the 18-year-old artist's

rejection of motherhood. An aborted child lies in the arms of a winged femme fatale. Visions are translated into drawings, to which are added oil and material paintings, collages and assemblages as well as plaster models for sculptures in the artist's studio in Paris. After 1936, Meret Oppenheim focuses primarily on object art, and creates her best-known work, a breakfast cup with a spoon, both covered in gazelle hide. André Breton christened the object *Déjeuner en fourrure*. Taking an everyday object out of context causes a dreamlike shift in meaning through metamorphosis, and hence an intensification of its symbolic content. Accordingly, Breton's title is an ambiguous reference to Edouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) as well as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novella *Venus im Pelz* (Venus in Fur, 1870). The surrealists' haut goût is an expression of their dégoût for the fetish. The crux of the emblematic fur cup is that it has labelled its creator, pushing all the artist's other works into the background.

In terms of her œuvre, Meret Oppenheim was not concerned with continuity. New ideas rather than her most recently created picture or object dictated her progress. Her imagination roamed through genres, materials, free and applied art. Meret Oppenheim's fashion and jewellery designs of the early 1940s were much more than merely subtle gimmicks: the glove on which the ramifications of veins depict the lines of destiny; the hat as the snarling jaws of a dog; a necklace of gilded ossicles; all these creations are subliminal amulets whose beauty at once refers to and banishes death. Meret Oppenheim's slashed, open pieces of ladies' underwear seem like the chasubles of a sensual mystery play.

Meret Oppenheim was a surrealist who devoted her attention to the subconscious and took delight in astonishing her audience and breaking taboos – but not only. The artist, who set human existence in the context of mythical dimensions, distanced herself on several occasions from the male protagonists of the Surrealist movement, who were 15 to 25 years her senior, by looking into the gap between nature and culture, men and women, portrayal and abstraction, and by continuing to evolve. Meret Oppenheim preferred the crisis of affirmation and placed the creative before any merely stylistic exercises. Only recently has this fact been widely acknowledged in the historiography of art.

Works: Aargauer Kunsthau Aarau; Basel, Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung; Kunstmuseum Bern; Bern, Waisenhausplatz, *Brunnen*, 1983; Houston, The Menil Collection; New York, The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA); Kunstmuseum Olten; Paris, Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art moderne; Paris, Ancienne Ecole Polytechnique, courtyard, *Fontaine de la Spirale*, 1986; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Kunstmuseum Solothurn; Stockholm, Moderna Museet; Ulm, Ulmer Museum; Vienna, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Kunsthau Zürich.

Sources: Kunstmuseum Bern; Bern, Swiss Literary Archives, Erica Pedretti Archives.

Juri Steiner, 1998, updated 2013
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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Archive

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