

Kunstmuseum Bern

«An Enormously Tiny Bit of a Lot»

Meret Oppenheim - Retrospective

June 2 until October 8, 2006

The search for identity – Early works

The first oil painting is the *Sitzende Figur mit verschränkten Fingern (Seated figure with clasped hands)* painted in 1933 in Paris when Meret Oppenheim was tentatively searching for her identity as an artist. Any characteristic pertaining to a personal identity is avoided. Neither age, sex nor form can be determined. In spite of this, the painting is regarded as a cryptic self-portrait. She also sees herself in the role of the silent listener; she, who took part in the discussions of the surrealists without really belonging. The possible feminine as well as masculine connotations of the figure correspond to Oppenheim's view of androgyny as a mental attitude.

Before she painted her first oil painting she had created over fifty, some very spontaneous, drawings that are executed in her linear style and represent the bulk of her early work. Often the drawings are sketches of ideas that she was to return to at a later time. In several she is occupied with biographical elements, with the risks inherent in being alive or in imaginings of death. In these early works there are also a number of subjective watercolours such as the inscrutable *Der Würgeengel (The strangling angel)* in which she casts a satirical eye on motherhood.

Even before her breakthrough in Paris, she had done other paintings that were allied to the repertoire of surrealism – night-time and dream motifs served as an expression of what is incommensurable.

Breakfast in fur and its consequences

In 1936, Meret Oppenheim created what is probably her best-known work in surrealist circles – *Breakfast in fur*. In an exhibition of surrealist objects in the Galerie Ratton in Paris, her *Fur-lined cup* caused a sensation. Shortly thereafter it was bought by Alfred Barr Jr. for the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A myth was born. From now on, Oppenheim was often to be reduced to this object, and she would have to work in its shadow for the rest of her life. She shows this ironically in her *Souvenirs du «Déjeuner en fourrure»*, assemblages with her fur cup in the centre which are reminiscent of cheap souvenirs.

With *Steinfrau (Stone woman)* from 1938, Oppenheim created a painting that is witness to a long-lasting crisis. A numbness had set in, triggered by the reception of *Breakfast in fur* and the burden of expectations that Oppenheim as an artist felt on her shoulders. In the face of this crisis, she made pictures that she called “romantic-anecdotal-illustrative”. Painted in a small format and objectively, they often depict a fairytale, a dream world inhabited by animals.

In the same year as *Breakfast in fur*, a further extraordinary object is created – made up of the typical surrealist combination of disparate elements, such as shoes, paper collars and a metal tray: *Ma gouvernante – my nurse – mein Kindermädchen*.

Witches, spirits and metaphors

In Oppenheim's work, strange creatures and figures repeatedly appear. They pose cryptic riddles – whether they be spirits and wood creatures, totem-like objects or figures created from a mixture of imaginary and realistic objects. The large-format *Octavia* for instance, which might possibly have associations with the erotic novel by Pauline Réage – *The story of O* – in which a woman with masochistic tendencies ultimately loses her “face” and is transformed into an owl. Or the two-piece object *Löffel und Kaminschaufel für*

Hexenküche (Spoon and coal shovel for a witch's kitchen) based on an idea sketch from 1959 and which is associated closely with the record of a trauma in 1956. In her self-aggrandizement, Oppenheim sometimes purposely refers to her rare first name. Her parents were inspired by the girl Meret who was branded as a witch in Gottfried Keller's *Grünem Heinrich (Green Henry)*. One could therefore regard the mysterious **Holz Hexe (Wooden witch)** from 1970 as a coded self-portrait. The closed eye looks inward, the open one gazes out imploringly between wooden strands of hair. In this context, "witch" can be understood as the Old German "Hagazussa", the fence-rider – a flying spirit creature with an affinity to supernatural experiences, who can conjure up artistic ideas from limitless sources.

Masks and bewitchments

Masks and costumes play an important role in Meret Oppenheim's work. In the portrait painted in 1940, Irène Zurkinden has given her a whole series of masks as an attribute (see stairwell). Numerous masks and accompanying costumes, made by herself and which she wore to the Basle carnival or to artists' parties, are to be found among Oppenheim's belongings. She obviously loved role-playing and transformation. Particularly during WWII, carnival and masquerade offered an opportunity to protest and to let off high spirits in the face of threat. The contorted **Unflat** illustrates just this mixture of menace but at the same time humour.

As do dreams, the masks offer a refuge as well as the opportunity to mingle reality with imagination. The masks are assemblages, constructed from various materials such as wire, spangles, feathers, cotton-wool and textiles. Between 1938 and 1939 Meret Oppenheim studied restoration at the Gewerbeschule Basle and was well-acquainted with materials and experimented with them continually.

Snakes, tendrils and spirals

While in the Christian world the snake is generally endowed with the negative connotation of evil, for Meret Oppenheim it was not merely the tempter of Eve but rather an attribute of female deities. In statues of Cretan earth goddesses, priestesses and snake goddesses, it is a symbol of spiritual oneness with the universe, of the primary principle and creative power.

Oppenheim's preoccupation with the archetype and symbol research of the Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung obviously had an effect on the iconography of her work. She has laid claim to certain motifs and forms such as the snake, the spiral, the eye or mandala; shapes that Jung had interpreted with depth psychology. Especially the snake – according to Jung "a splendid symbol of the unconscious" – which appears in representations of dreams and other works from almost all her different periods. Even when it manifests itself in very different forms and materials, it proves to be – as does the spiral – a recurring leitmotif in Oppenheim's work in which the theme of eternal rebirth and the renewing power of nature is evident. This might be the reason why the artist included the snake in her dream vision **Das Geheimnis der Vegetation (The secret of vegetation)**.

And in a wool advertisement it is the Earth snake, a symbol of nature, which is always associated with death but also with renewal, that crawls out of a sack of coal in the picture of a merino sheep. This was the basis for **Alte Schlange Natur (Old snake nature)**. In a very similar way, the spiral-shaped eyes of **Des grünen Zuschauers (Of the green viewer)** express the idea of the eternal recurrence of "becoming"; embodying nature itself, while at the same time are reminiscent of a natural god.

Dreams and metamorphoses

The unconscious makes up the background to the artistic work of Meret Oppenheim, the references to dreaming are numerous. The artist is interested in the analytical psychology of C. G. Jung and his animus-anima theory. In *Aufzeichnungen 1928-1985 (Notes)*, published shortly before her death, she described how intensely she had occupied herself with her dreams. In the 1920s until the 1930s, the Surrealists regularly published protocols of dreams in their publications. During all phases of her life, dreams were for Meret Oppenheim a kind of personal guidance system. With the help of explanatory inscriptions such as that of **Zwei**

Vögel (Two birds), painted in 1933 after a waking dream, she indicates that certain images may have inherent significances that are foreign to our culture and hidden from the consciousness. How important the idea of the image is in this respect is shown by her return to the same motif thirty years later when she was executing a large-format relief. The enigmatic and multi-layered work **Traum von der weissen Marmorschildkröte mit Hufeisen an den Füßen (Dream of the white marble tortoise wearing horseshoes)** from 1975 refers to a dream experience in 1960. Owing to their long life, tortoises symbolize immortality; certain myths accentuate the wisdom of the tortoise, others imbue it with demonic connotations.

The diverse symbolism of the caterpillar-to-butterfly metamorphosis shows that the artist is drawing from a rich fund of knowledge and developing her personal language of imagery. Thus, works dealing with metamorphosis have been created that are difficult to decipher, partially fractured by irony and full of symbolic references that exemplify the rich natural and animal mysticism in the oeuvre of Meret Oppenheim. A hermaphrodite figure between human and butterfly makes up the assemblage **Hm-hm** which depicts a transitional stage in a metamorphosis. The wings, which are similar to those of a peacock butterfly, have three pairs of eyes looking straight at the viewer. Plastic elements contribute greatly to the humanizing of the figure. Here, ancient Greek and Christian concepts of metamorphosis, death and rebirth and transcendence of the immortal soul surely played an important role for Oppenheim.

Stars and planets

In the works dating from the late 1950s until the end of her life, we can find a broad repertoire of astronomical images and visions of stars and planets of varying provenance. They are witness to a fantasy rich in associations. Comets and black discs as well as sunrises and reflections of the moon; cosmic landscapes as well as flying lovers and dogs – multiform visions inhabit this cosmos which offers temporally as well as spatially the possibility of evading all constrictions and of making room for what is mythical. Meret Oppenheim also includes the romantic and picturesque aspects of the night of the full moon and moonlight in her works, culminating in a moon fairytale. Her interest in the stories and motifs of romanticism pervades all her work.

Clouds and wafting mists

One theme that particularly engrossed Meret Oppenheim – especially in the 1960s – was that of clouds. Using different techniques, she drew or painted a variety of cloud pictures that concentrated on sharply defined forms with jagged contours. She further developed this approach in the third dimension by sketching the shapes onto column-like plinths and lending them plastic shape in **Wolke auf Brücke (Cloud on a bridge)**. She varied the composition with **Sechs Wolken auf einer Brücke (Six clouds on a bridge)** which she had cast in bronze six times in 1975.

Clouds – actually incomprehensible, continually changing forms – become solid, crystalline bodies. Dynamism is created by the apparent weightlessness of the individual cloud forms in contrast to their strong anchoring to the bridge.

In numerous works from the 1970s dealing with the mist motif, the artist takes the hidden and the invisible as her theme. From the human figure striding unseen through the fog, to the misty flower, Meret Oppenheim broadens the range of this theme. Finely painted, parallel hatching in tones of grey and restrained colours cover the entire surface of all these works. Out of this all-over hatching emerges the silhouette of a man, a head, or a flower, almost dematerialized – just discernible – but remaining undefined in a dreamlike way. **Verborgenes im Nebel (Hidden in the fog)** goes even further: here, concentrated in the centre of the picture, only a few coloured spots can be conjectured. The concealed and the forgotten, the invisible and the unconscious coalesce into nebulous fantasies.

Genoveva and her echoes

The romantic legend from the eighth century known to us from Ludwig Tieck's drama which narrates the story of Genoveva von Brabant – the theme of the defenceless woman at the mercy of others – who was banished to the woods for having supposedly committed adultery occupied Meret Oppenheim repeatedly over the course of almost thirty years. During a

period of creative crisis she could identify with the woman condemned to inactivity. In 1935, she addressed the topic for the first time in a poem, in 1939 she then painted **Das Leiden der Genoveva (The sufferings of Genoveva)**, the floating woman with broken and “withered” arms – symbol of powerlessness and inability to act. The symbolism of the “amputated” arms emerges again in 1942 in the watercolour sketch for a sculpture which, however, was not executed until much later in 1971: **Genoveva**. By wedging two broken sticks into a torso-shaped board the artist has absolved the motif of rigidity and physical impotence from its literary paradigm and made it strongly abstract. In 1956 she returned to the Genoveva subject matter. In the painting **Genoveva und die vier Echos (Genoveva and the four echoes)**, a dark, amorphous form occupies the centre of the picture. Everything floats and is in flux, no solid ground offers support to the spongy figures.

Two other women, Bettine Brentano and Karoline von Günderode, occupied the thoughts of Oppenheim towards the end of her life – the impulse was supplied by reading their correspondence. Both poets had contributed significantly to German Romanticism. In 1983, Meret Oppenheim dedicated the two large-format paintings **Für Karoline von Günderode** and **Für Bettine Brentano** to them.

Games and humour

A subtle but palpable humour very often flashes out of her work. Her playfulness and her foible for creative inventions are constantly noticeable – from the formerly popular group game which was the basis for **Cadavres exquis** to the designer creations and jewellery or the making of everyday objects and toys, Meret Oppenheim leaves no stone unturned. The procedure of the *Cadavres exquis* also known as a children’s game, was discovered anew by the surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s. One folds a piece of paper so that only a small area is visible at a time, it is then handed from artist to artist to work on. Finally, the artistic end product is unfolded. The strange name, “valuable corpse”, has its origin in an analogue literary game and it taken from the first sentence constructed in a similar “group effort” – “*Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau*”. At the beginning of the 1970s, Meret Oppenheim collaborated with Roberto Lupo and Annamaria Boetti and relaunched the game. A large number of collective works that they called **cadavres exquis nouveaux** were made where the actual number of collaborators remains unclear. Three-dimensional *Cadavres* also belonged to that period of intense collaboration. They seem to be products of chance – to have sprung from the surreal world of fantasy.

Therese Bhattacharya-Stettler/Dominik Imhof

Exhibition: June 2 – October 8, 2006 **Opening times:** Wed – Sun 10am – 5pm | Tues 10am – 9pm | Mon closed **Public tours:** Tuesday, 7pm and Sunday 11am
Supporting programme: see flyer or go to www.kunstmuseumbern.ch

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