

# Important painting acquired by National Galleries of Scotland

National Galleries of Scotland have acquired an important painting by Leonora Carrington who died in 2011.

Her **Portrait of Max Ernst** is regarded as exceptional and is the first of Carrington's works to enter the Scottish national art collection. It is now on display at Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern Two) on Belford Road.

It has been made possible by assistance from the Henry and Sula Walton Fund and Art Fund. The price paid was £560,000 and Art Fund contributed £150,000 with the Walton Fund providing the balance.



Portrait of Max Ernst, c.1939 by Leonora Carrington (1917-2011). © The estate of Leonora Carrington

Speaking of the acquisition, **Simon Groom, Director of Modern**

**and Contemporary Art at the National Galleries of Scotland** said: "The NGS has one of the largest and most significant collections of Surrealist art anywhere in the world, but until now we have not had a painting by Leonora Carrington. This extraordinary portrait of Max Ernst is one of her most celebrated works, and is richly woven with imagery which hints at her complex and ambivalent feelings about her lover and fellow-artist. We are deeply grateful to the Trustees of the Henry and Sula Walton Fund, and Art Fund, for helping us to make this stunning addition to our collection."

**Stephen Deuchar, Director, Art Fund,** said: "Leonora Carrington's striking *Portrait of Max Ernst* is the National Galleries of Scotland's latest addition to their growing collection of important works by women Surrealist artists, joining the recent Art Fund-supported acquisition by Czech artist Toyen. Both are powerful, haunting works by remarkable artists, overlooked for far too long. We're delighted to be supporting bold and imaginative curatorship of this kind."

The painting has an extraordinary history. It depicts the German artist Max Ernst (1891-1976), who became Carrington's lover in 1937, and with whom she escaped a privileged but stifling life in England to join the inner circle of the Surrealist movement in Paris.

The couple met when Carrington had only just turned 20; he was 46 and on his second marriage. Carrington was born in Chorley, Lancashire, the daughter of a wealthy textiles industrialist. A rebellious child, she was twice expelled from school in England, and was sent to Florence and then Paris, where she developed an interest in art. She returned to Britain in 1935, where her family expected her to marry 'well'; fiercely independent, she had other ideas.

While studying painting in London, Carrington met Ernst at a dinner party and they fell in love. She had only just turned 20; he was 46 and on his second marriage. They immediately

started a relationship and when Ernst returned to Paris, Carrington joined him. Their circle in Paris included the artists Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, Leonor Fini and Joan Miró, and in January 1938 Carrington's paintings were shown in a major Surrealist exhibition at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts.

In 1938, with war looming, the couple moved to the south of France, settling in the village of Saint-Martin d'Ardèche, near Avignon. *Portrait of Max Ernst* was painted in Les Alliberts, a derelict farmhouse which they spent the next year decorating with murals, sculpture and mosaics (it still exists, more or less intact).

By December 1942, following a series of upheavals caused by the outbreak of war, Carrington had become estranged from Ernst and was on her way to Mexico, where she spent much of the rest of her life. She and Ernst met in New York, and as a parting gift she presented him with this portrait. In exchange he gave her a painting titled *Leonora in the Morning Light*, which remained in her possession until her death in 2011. They never saw each other again.

Ernst, with his prematurely white hair and piercing blue eyes, is shown in a red robe made of fur or downy feathers, which ends in a fishtail – possibly referencing the mermaid Ernst made in concrete for their garden. In the painting, one of Ernst's feet is clad in a striped yellow sock. In his right hand he is holding a green lantern within which is a tiny horse. He is standing in a frozen landscape, with icy mountains on the horizon. A frozen horse, dripping with icicles, stands behind him.

The painting's meaning is ambiguous, but while Carrington refused to interpret or explain her work, her short stories, several of which were published in the late 1930s and 1940s, offer clues. Horses were important in her writing and her paintings, acting as surrogate self-portraits; it has been argued that her portrait of Ernst captures some of the

ambivalence in their relationship, a sense of being emotionally captive and the need to escape Ernst's shadow.

In 1940 Ernst was imprisoned as an enemy alien, and Carrington was persuaded by a friend to flee France for Spain, where she ended up in a psychiatric hospital. On his release, Ernst was shocked to discover the house had been sold; by night he gained entry and retrieved the few paintings left there, including this work, and later made his way to Lisbon where by chance he met Carrington. She had escaped from the hospital and made a marriage of convenience with a Mexican diplomat, in order to travel to America. Although he had taken a new lover, the American collector Peggy Guggenheim, Ernst was devastated that Carrington had effectively left him. He flew to New York with Peggy, while Carrington went by sea, with most of their possessions.

Following the exchange of paintings in New York, *Portrait of Max Ernst* subsequently passed into the collection of Pegeen Guggenheim, Peggy's daughter. She gave it to her husband, the British artist Ralph Rumney, and it has been in private collections ever since.

This exceptional painting makes a very significant addition to the NGS's world-famous collection of Surrealist art, which already includes a number of important works by Ernst. The NGS has one of the largest and most significant collections of Surrealist art anywhere in the world, but until now has not had a painting by Leonora Carrington. This extraordinary portrait is richly woven with imagery which hints at her complex and ambivalent feelings about her lover and fellow-artist, and is a stunning addition to the collection.

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. In the past five years alone Art Fund has given £34 million to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections.