

SURREALISM AND WOMEN ARTISTS

SURREALISM, A LITERARY AND ARTISTIC MOVEMENT THAT began in Paris in 1924, was soon transported to Mexico and the United States, where it had a lasting impact on women artists. Surrealists wanted to bypass the thinking mind and activate unconscious feelings, which would enable them to render images of suppressed fears and emotions in their art. Surrealist works of art often are characterized by a dreamlike perception of space, incongruous juxtapositions of subject matter, and fantastic imagery.

The story of surrealism in the United States began with two women artists, Lee Miller and Rosa Rolanda, who came from opposite sides of the country (New York and California, respectively) and found themselves in 1920s Paris posing for painter and photographer Man Ray (United States, 1890–1976). Both women were determined to create their own identities, and they used innovative techniques in photography to begin an exploration of their worlds and themselves. While some surrealist women worked in France, it was not necessary to live or travel abroad to encounter surrealism; for example, Helen Lundeberg spent her entire early career in Southern California, only visiting New York once.

Whether women artists went abroad or worked domestically, surrealism offered them a freedom found in no previous aesthetic. It enabled women in Mexico and the United States to construct new identities that demonstrated their independence and imagination. By the end of the 1930s, Mexico City, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and to a lesser extent Chicago had become important centers for surrealism. However, the story goes beyond specific urban centers, for it involves a remarkable network of friends and associates in several countries.

Unwittingly, surrealism became the source of two currents of creativity: the imagined, which arose

from intellect and was created primarily by men, and the intuited, which arose from experience and was generated mostly by women. The women's art visualized the female psyche as it had not been seen before, and it opened a new dialogue that gradually transformed the relationship between the genders.

These curriculum materials explore the works of four twentieth-century women artists who represent different aspects of surrealism. The works and artists examined illustrate the ways in which surrealism became a diverse and viable visual vocabulary: Frida Kahlo's continual reinvention of persona, Helen Lundeberg's classical representations, Lola Alvarez Bravo's concern for social justice, and Rosa Rolanda's lesser-known autobiographical and experimental work.

Art as Identity

Although the male surrealists in Paris during the 1920s explored the unconscious through dreams and induced trances, their paintings did not necessarily express individual personal experiences. In this, the women differed substantially from their male counterparts, as their art often reflected personal traumas and nightmares. For them, surrealism became a means of gaining self-awareness, exploring their inner thoughts and feelings, dealing with their experiences, and locating or constructing their true identities.

The themes that dominated the work of women surrealists in Mexico and the United States reflected the artists' past experiences, present-day situations, fears, hopes, and desires. The feminine dialogue between the self and the other was distinct from male surrealists' outward projection of their desires. Women transformed the female body to a site of resistance, psychic power, and creative energy. They also helped set the stage for the feminist movement by creating art that challenged established social institutions and gender boundaries.

The Role of Portraiture in Surrealism

Because much of the art of women surrealists was self-referential in nature, portraiture was an ideal vehicle for exploring identity. Within that genre, self-portraits were essential, whether they were presented as straightforward depictions, autobiographical or fabricated stories, or symbolic still lifes.

Since the time of the Egyptians, portraits have served as documents that record an individual's likeness at a particular moment in time. While traditional portraiture provided information and clues about the sitter's characteristics, interests, social status, or history, women artists in the surrealist movement approached portraits and self-portraits in a nontraditional manner, as exemplified by the works of Frida Kahlo, Rosa Rolanda, and Helen Lundeberg.

Unlike the male surrealists, women artists and writers sought to reconstruct their identities through the strategy of self-representation, exploring the varieties of self-portraits through painting and through autobiographical narrative. They produced an astonishing number of portraits and self-portraits. According to Museo de Arte Moderno curator Tere Arcq, "This genre became a form of representation 'in which the artist is both subject and object and conceives of how she looks in the sense of how she sees rather than how she appears.'"¹

- Surrealist artists experimented with a variety of visual media such as painting, photography, photogram, collage, and montage. Study the artworks in this curriculum and think about the messages they convey. How does the artist's choice of medium help express this message? Write this message in your own words using a literary medium such as narrative or poetry.

The Role of Photography in Surrealism

The surrealists exploited the ambiguous relationships between photography as document, as technical experiment, and as product of the imagination, and they did so more surely and with greater effect than any other group of artists in the twentieth century.

Processes such as the photogram (cameraless photographs), which could be linked directly to surrealist automatism or automatic writing, had a history independent of the movement. There is no clear demarcation within the huge repertoire of photographic practices between the works of the surrealists and those of other artists, and often it is the context that situates a photograph specifically within a surrealist frame.

Photomontage, or photocollage, had become by the 1930s a relatively widespread technique that was practiced by artists across numerous visual and social movements. It became a popular medium at the end of World War I, when it was used more or less simultaneously by Russian and German modernists. Artists selected the images to be included in the photomontage, and through the artistic device of juxtaposition expressed satire, political views, private fantasies, or dreams of a utopian, technological, and egalitarian future. Practices varied enormously: artists might simply paste a face or other fragment onto an existing image, cut up and recombine photographs in both positive and negative forms, cannibalize newspapers, or add captions and scraps of text. While the surrealists combined unrelated images and fragments to challenge preconceived notions, the technique's capacity to convey a message also captivated the worlds of politics and advertising.

- Consider the ways in which artists, social documentarians such as journalists and photojournalists, and advertisers record contemporary life. Collect a variety of sources, such as magazines, newspapers, and your own photographs. Cut images, headlines, phrases, and even fine print from these sources that catch your eye. Think about how the artistic device of juxtaposition, or placing incongruous imagery in visual conversation, can help convey a message. Arrange the pictures and text by overlapping, underlapping, or placing them side by side to create a composition.

Drawing Photogram, c. LATE 1920S

ROSA ROLANDA (UNITED STATES, 1895–1970, ACTIVE MEXICO)

IN THIS BLACK-AND-WHITE IMAGE, WE SEE THE NUDE FIGURE of a young woman covered by an inverted glass, which becomes her garment. The translucent glass allows the curves of her figure to be seen, but it still provides a modest covering. The shape of the glass is reminiscent of dress styles of the mid-1800s, with a wide hooped skirt and narrow waistline.

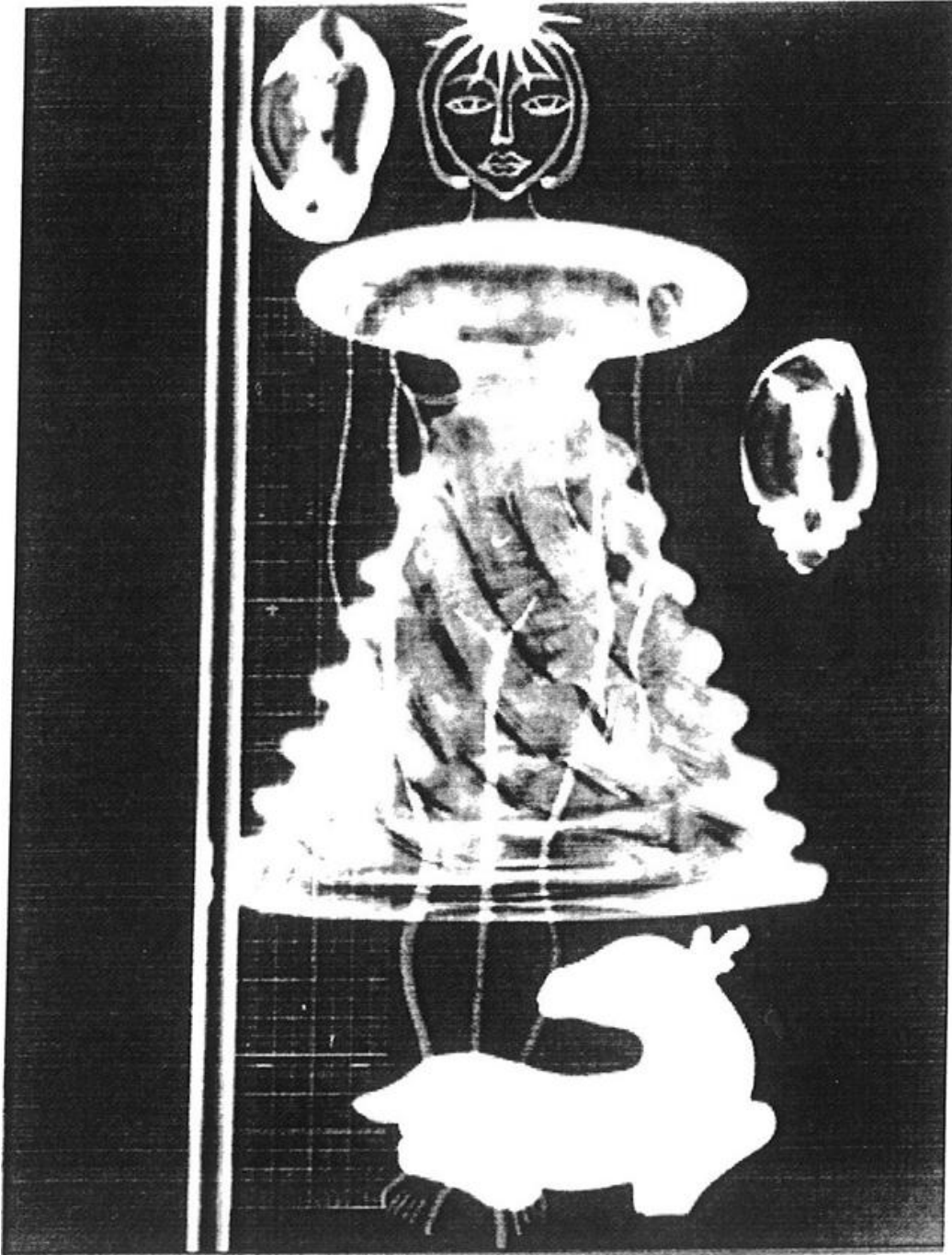
The figure's stylized face can be recognized as that of the artist, Rosa Rolanda, from the self-portraits she produced throughout her artistic career. In fact, her painted self-portraits from 1945 and 1952 depict the same somber persona. The simple style of her features is similar to those found on folkloric images of the sun reproduced in ceramics, wood, and textiles. Here, crowned by the sun, she is surrounded by shells, a deer, and a ruler. We can read this image as if it were a page from an ancient Mesoamerican codex (an illustrated book), telling the history of a great civilization, with Rolanda posed in ceremonial garb with glyphs representing the natural world—fire (sun), water (shells), earth (deer), and a device for measuring distance.

These images have historical or symbolic meaning in pre-conquest Mesoamerica. The deer appeared consistently in Mesoamerican creation myths, most frequently as a metaphor for the sun courting the moon. In ancient Mexico and Guatemala, shells were imported inland from the coast, where they were used by nobles for trade and tribute. Conch shells were also associated with the Aztec rain god Tlaloc. Instead of an Aztec calendar measuring time, there is a ruler, which measures distance. This is an appropriate symbol for Rolanda, who was a young dancer from Azusa, California, and who by age thirty-one had been to New York, Europe, and Mexico. Conversely, the image in the photogram is standing stationary, which is out of character for a dancer.

To make a photogram, objects are placed onto photosensitive paper; direct sunlight develops the imagery. The earliest examples of this experimental technique can be dated to the 1830s and the work of inventor William Henry Fox Talbot (England, 1800–1877). During the 1920s and afterward it was used by Man Ray, whom Rolanda met in Paris.

Rolanda was introduced to the photogram technique—that is, cameraless photographs—in the 1920s, either during her tour as a dancer with the Ziegfeld Follies in 1923, when Man Ray photographed her, or after she and her husband, the artist Miguel Covarrubias (Mexico, 1904–1957), returned to Paris in September, 1926. Man Ray was not the only artist who used Rolanda as a model. The artists and writers who associated with Covarrubias at that time, including photographer Edward Weston (United States, 1886–1958), were actively exploring as well as creating Mexican cultural identity. While Weston was living in Mexico (1923–26), Rolanda posed for him wearing traditional costumes such as a Maya *huipil* and a Mexican Tehuana dress.

- **Image and Identity:** Think about all the ways you can produce a self-portrait—through drawing, painting, photography, even writing. Surrealist artists used a combination of these media to build on a long tradition of portraiture in art. A portrait can not only capture a person's likeness but also his or her personality and interests. Make a list of words that describe your personality, such as your favorite colors, places, and things to do. Include many of these characteristics in a self-portrait that tells us about you. Consider the setting, what you will hold, and what you will wear. Supplement the composition with symbolism and imagery that is important to your heritage or to your family's background or country of origin.



Rosa Rolanda (United States, 1895–1970, active Mexico)
Drawing Photogram, c. late 1920s
Gelatin silver print photogram, 8³/₈ x 6¹/₂ in.
Collection of Adriana Williams
© Rosa Covarrubias. Photo © Courtesy of Historical Design Inc., New York, NY

Las dos Fridas (The Two Fridas), 1939

FRIDA KAHLO (MEXICO, 1907–1954, ACTIVE MEXICO AND UNITED STATES)

Kahlo's self-portraits are beautiful for the same reason as Rembrandt's: They show us the successive identities of a human being who is not yet, but who is becoming.

—Carlos Fuentes²

LAS DOS FRIDAS (THE TWO FRIDAS) IS USUALLY CONSIDERED Kahlo's masterpiece. Exceptionally large in scale, it was painted after her divorce from artist Diego Rivera (Mexico, 1886–1957) in 1939. *Separation* and *identity* are two key words to decipher this painting, the meaning of which has been variously interpreted by many art historians.

Two versions of the same woman are seated on a bench before a stormy sky. The starkness of the composition forces the viewer to focus on the figures. Sitting hand in hand, the women are similar but not identical. Both have an elaborate upswept hairdo, dramatic eyebrows that join in the middle, and a downy mustache accentuated by red lips. Found in the majority of the artist's self-portraits, these features are instantly recognizable as belonging to Frida Kahlo.

- Compare and Contrast: What is similar about these two figures? How are they different? Do you think they represent two separate people or one person? What do you see that makes you say that? Craft an argument using visual characteristics to support your claim.

One Frida is dressed in a feminine, Victorian-style garment, with a lace bodice and embroidery around the flounce hem of the skirt. Her expression is calm and emotionally unreadable. Her gaze does not confront the viewer; she looks down and toward her right. The bodice of her gown is cut open to reveal a heart that has been sliced in half. The surgical clamps, attached to an artery, have not stopped the flow of blood, and it falls onto her white dress.

The other Frida has slight, subtle differences in the coloring of face, her expression, her gaze, and the details of her hairdo. Her hand supports that of the Victorian Frida, and she wears garments that may be

from the same era as her companion but are obviously not of the same culture. The clothing is utilitarian: a blue and orange blouse and a green skirt. Her half of the heart sits exposed outside her blouse. The artery wraps around her arm and ends in a small oval image of a boy, labeled "Diego."

The clothing the two women wear also represents two halves of the whole. The Victorian dress may represent the mestiza Kahlo, who was born to a European father and a Mexican mother. The traditional Mexican dress, which Kahlo used to create her public persona, had cultural references to the matriarchal Tehuana society and to the indigenous movement that gained traction after the Mexican Revolution. In her journal, Kahlo also refers to her personal color code, in which the green color of the skirt refers to ghosts and sadness.

- Color Code: Look at a color wheel and place the colors into warm and cool categories. Warm colors (red, orange) are vivid and energetic, while cool colors (blue, green) inspire calm and tranquility. Make a list of emotions such as joy, sadness, jealousy, and anger, and assign each a color that best captures that feeling. Use your color code to create a monochromatic work that explores the shades of a singular color or emotion.

The anatomically accurate rendering of the heart is another distinguishing characteristic of Kahlo's work. In her youth, she had been involved in a serious traffic accident, and the injuries she sustained required that she have dozens of surgeries throughout her life, making her intimately familiar with the workings of the human body. While Kahlo was bedridden and recovering from the accident, her mother gave her a mirror and paints and she began creating self-portraits.



Frida Kahlo (Mexico, 1907–1954, active Mexico and United States)

Las dos Fridas (The Two Fridas), 1939

Oil on canvas, 68³/₈ x 68¹/₂ in.

Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

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Reproduction of Frida Kahlo governed by Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura.

Photo © Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

- Diptych Portrait: We express different facets of our personality in the various contexts of our lives, whether at school with teachers, at home with family, or with friends. Draw a simple self-portrait with just yourself in the foreground. Make a photocopy of the drawing so that you have two copies. Now think about two different contexts, places, or landscapes. Add a back-

ground to each of your self-portraits that illustrates these places. In the middle ground, include objects and people that depict the action happening in each place. Refer to the color code from the previous activity, and use a color scheme for each scene that captures the feelings you experience in each place. Display the images side by side as a diptych.

Double Portrait of the Artist in Time, 1935

HELEN LUNDEBERG (UNITED STATES, 1908–1999)



Helen Lundeberg (United States, 1908–1999)

Double Portrait of the Artist in Time, 1935

Oil on Masonite, 47¼ x 40 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, museum purchase

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Photo © Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC / Art Resource, NY

IN THESE PAINTINGS HELEN LUNDEBERG, A CALIFORNIA artist and the most important woman surrealist on the West Coast, has presented three self-portraits. A blond toddler is sitting on a small stool next to a table with a piece of paper and a clock on it. Wearing an old-fashioned white dress and black Mary Janes, the child grasps a stem of flower buds in one hand and her skirt in the other. Her gold hair and smiling face are reinforced by the painting's warm tones, which create an inviting domestic scene. A shadow representing the passage of time links the toddler to the adult in the portrait behind her. The framed profile portrait depicts a woman leaning on a table or shelf. Like the child, she holds a flower, but hers is blossoming, and she contemplates a small container representing a globe. (The framed portrait, *Artist, Flowers, and Hemispheres*, 1934, is in the

collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/43>.)

Lundeberg has faithfully reproduced an image from a childhood photograph; the clock, set at quarter past two, indicates the girl's age. According to the artist, she placed the child in front of the portrait, so "the child casts a shadow which is that of an adult who appears in the portrait on the wall . . .".³ Lundeberg has changed the laws of nature by reversing the passage of time. The impossibility of a child casting an adult shadow lies well within the improbability factor of the surrealist vocabulary.

- Compare and contrast this double portrait with the self-portrait by Frida Kahlo on the previous page. What is similar? What is different? How does each artist construct her unique identity?

Self-Portrait (with Landscape), 1944

HELEN LUNDEBERG (UNITED STATES, 1908–1999)



Helen Lundeberg (United States, 1908–1999)
Self-Portrait (with Landscape), 1944
Oil on Masonite, 15¾ x 27¼ in.

Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey
Gift of the Lorser Feitelson and Helen Feitelson Lundeberg Foundation

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IN THIS PAINTING, A YOUNG WOMAN GAZES DIRECTLY AT THE viewer. She appears in front of a painting, with a paintbrush in her left hand and an orb in her right. This choice of a "painting within a painting" was a technique used by other surrealists. Through her art, Lundeberg explores the connection between the cosmos and the self. In *Self-Portrait (with Landscape)*, the representation of deep space in the painting within the painting reflects a concern with universal or metaphysical (the relationship of humans to nature and the universe) themes and recurs in her work, such as *Microcosm and Macrocosm*, 1937 (see the enclosed CD).

- **Snapshots:** In these self-portraits, Lundeberg has provided snapshots of herself at different times in her life. Choose three photographs from your life that you view as defining moments. How do they reflect your interests or passions?

In 1934, Lundeberg and her husband, artist Lorser Feitelson (United States, 1898–1978), issued the first and only surrealist manifesto to originate in

the United States. The publication was titled *New Classicism*, and in it the two artists emphasized that their creative process was conscious and orderly, in contrast to the European surrealists, who denied that there was any conscious intrusion in their aesthetic practices. Lundeberg's innate sense of order and structure, her preference for the rational over the emotional, and her attraction to cosmological relationships are evident in both *Self-Portrait (with Landscape)* and *Double Portrait of the Artist in Time*.

- **Dreams and Reality:** Many surrealists sought to depict the passage of time (for example, Salvador Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, 1931, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art; http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79018). Compare how time passes in the real world with how it passes in dreams. Which parts of Lundeberg's paintings seem realistic, and which parts seem as if they originated in a dream?

Sirenas del aire (Mermaids of the Air)

LOLA ALVAREZ BRAVO (MEXICO, 1907–1993) C. 1935–36, PRINTED C. 1958

WITH *SIRENAS DEL AIRE (MERMAIDS OF THE AIR)*,

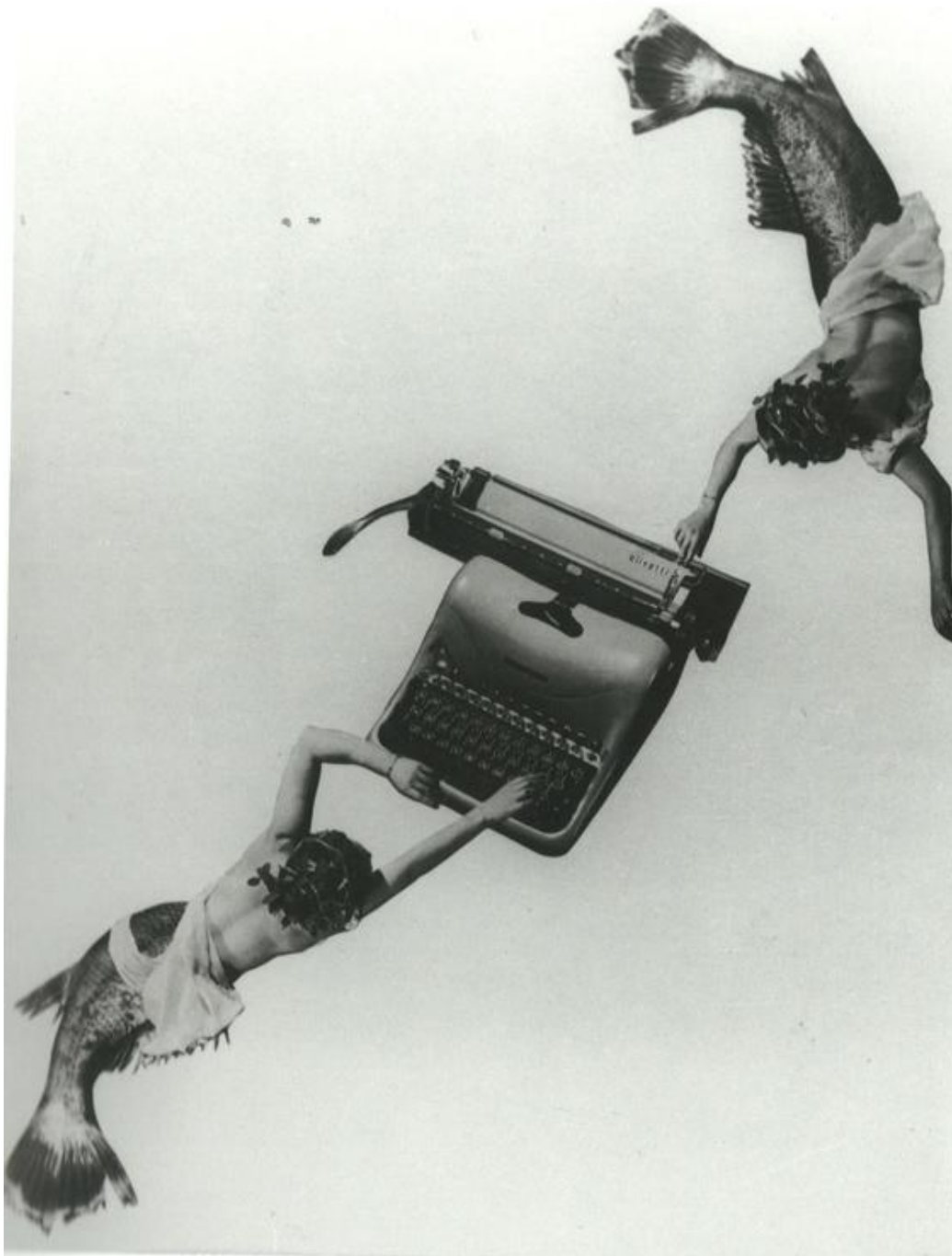
Alvarez Bravo offers a pairing of the modern and the classical world using the surrealist approach of juxtaposing improbable objects. Two mermaids, their backs to the viewer, float on an empty picture plane. These mermaids (or sirens) no longer perform their traditional role of singing to enchant unwary sailors; rather, they have chosen a more modern vehicle to send their messages, the typewriter. The title also demonstrates the surrealist penchant for combining unlikely elements, as mermaids do not claim the sky as habitat.

Although the format of the composition is contained within a rectangular frame, the gentle curves of the mermaids' bodies suggest a circular format. By following the invisible lines formed by their tails, we can imagine a circle bisected by the bodies to create a *taijitu*, the Chinese symbol for yin and yang, complementary opposites that compose a greater whole. While the mermaids are not mirror images of each other, there is a sense of balance and harmony, with the typewriter as the center of a symbolic universe. To underscore this pairing of opposites, Alvarez Bravo brings together images that suggest technology and classicism, fantasy and reality, couched in a dialogue about women's roles. The montage's intentional ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations. The hand of the mermaid in the upper right extends beyond the picture plane, implying that the action continues outside the margins. The emptiness of the background invites the viewer to create a visual and verbal narrative for this image: Where did the mermaids come from? Where are they now? What are they doing?

At the time this photomontage was made in the mid-1930s, the typewriter was a symbol of modernity. It could also be considered a symbol of liberation for women, allowing them to leave their homes, farms, or menial labor jobs for a more professional position in an office.

Alvarez Bravo actively participated in promoting women's rights; this image alludes to her interest in using art to comment on social justice issues. In addition to creating photomontages with strong elements of journalism, she pushed the boundaries of photography beyond pure documentation, working as a photojournalist, a portrait photographer, and an architectural photographer. She was briefly married to photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo (Mexico, 1902–2002) and learned photography by assisting him.

- **Messaging:** The lower mermaid rests her hands on the typewriter as if she is about to strike a key. If she types a message for us, the viewers, what would the message say? What message do you think the artist was trying to convey in 1935–36, when the photomontage was made?
- **Technology:** Today, the typewriter is almost obsolete. Is there a contemporary piece of technology that you would substitute for the typewriter in this artwork? Would your updated version change the artwork's message? How so? Think about the types of technology that you encounter today—computers and the Internet, cell phones, etc. Choose one of these to send a message to students in the future. What would you tell them about your life, your community, and your world today? What do you feel are the major accomplishments of your time and what do you hope these students will see in the future?



Lola Alvarez Bravo (Mexico, 1907–1993)
Sirenas del aire (*Mermaids of the Air*), c. 1935–36, printed c. 1958
Gelatin silver print photomontage, 7¹/₈ x 6 in.
Private collection, courtesy Galería Enrique Guerrero, Mexico City
© 1995 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation.
Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA, by Jorge Pérez de Lara

Notes

¹ Tere Arcq, "In the Land of Convulsive Beauty: Mexico," in *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*, ed. Ilene Susan Fort and Tere Arcq, with Terri Geis (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, DelMonico Books Prestel, 2012), p. 83.

² Carlos Fuentes, introduction to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, by Frida Kahlo (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p.16.

³ Henry J. Seldis, introduction to *Helen Lundeberg: A Retrospective Exhibition* (La Jolla, CA: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971), p.2.


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