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
## The Enduring Allure of Surrealist Leonor Fini

As Surrealism's centennial nears, its dark star Leonor Fini's legend is peaking. Her life was as idiosyncratic as her daring, sensuous work.



Leonor Fini. Photo by Louis Joyeux/INA via Getty Images.

by Adnan Qiblawi (<https://news.artnet.com/about/adnan-qiblawi-39184>) March 1, 2024

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On the 100th anniversary of Surrealism, [Leonor Fini](https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonor-fini/) (1907–1996), the Surrealist woman artist, is finally getting the recognition she deserves. But by her own measure, Fini was neither a Surrealist, nor was she even a woman artist.

“She wanted to identify as an independent artist,” said the Parisian gallerist Arlette Souhami. “‘I am an artist,’ she would say. ‘Not a woman artist, not a man artist, but an artist.’ She refused to show in exhibitions composed of female artists. She hated extremists of any kind. She did not want to be associated with any specific group, be they women, or Surrealists, or whomever else.” Souhami was Fini’s friend and art dealer of almost 20 years and attributes her underappreciation by the art world to her insistence on nonalignment.

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“Leonor was highly intelligent,” she said, “but very difficult.”





Leonor Fini, *Sphinx pour David Barrett* (1954). Image courtesy of Sotheby's.

Fini eschewed categorization. She delved into the natural and the supernatural through a multi-disciplinary practice (through the lens of an haute-couture witch). Her diverse career spanned 70 years. She marked her artworld debut at the age of 22 with her first solo exhibition in Milan in 1929. Yet, the sensual mythologies she explored in her Surrealist paintings are resonating today more than ever.



Leonor Fini, *M5 Black Scarecrow mask*, c. 1960, black thick felt fabric and driftwood tree branch (found in Corsica).  
Courtesy of Galerie Minsky and Kasmin, New York.

Fini was featured in the 2022 Venice Biennale, which headlined female surrealists, but didn't get as much of a profile boost compared to her comrade [Leonora Carrington](https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonora-carrington/) (<https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonora-carrington/>) (1917–2011), who coined the exhibition title, "The Milk of Dreams." Kasmin gallery hosted "[Metamorphosis](https://www.kasmingallery.com/exhibitions/27-leonor-fini-metamorphosis/)" (<https://www.kasmingallery.com/exhibitions/27-leonor-fini-metamorphosis/>), a revelatory solo exhibition last year that combined Fini's paintings, drawings, sculpture, and costumes, further exposing the audiences to her phantasmagorical allure. Kasmin's president Nick Olney believes the surge of renewed interest in her work will continue.

"Leonor has been under-seen in the U.S for many years," he said. "Her work is so multifarious and strong. So much of the dominant conversation of the second half of the 20th century was steering towards aesthetic and conceptual purity, by not treating art that had elements of emotion or magic as serious contemporary work. There is a greater openness now to that kind of power in art, and to truly multidisciplinary artists."



Leonor Fini, *Autoportrait au scorpion* on display during Sotheby's NY press preview of the Impressionist and Modern Art Evening Sale at Sotheby's on May 03, 2021 in New York City. (Photo by Cindy Ord/Getty Images)

Fini reached a market high in 2021 when her austere self-portrait showing a scorpion emerging from her dainty glove sold for three times its estimate at Sotheby's for \$2.3 million. She now has a painting on display at Imagine!, the centennial review of surrealist art at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Belgium opening this week.

A prime articulation of her surrealist oeuvre is *Chthonian Deity Watching over the Sleep of a Young Man* (1946). A shadow-black sphinx, Fini's signature avatar and vessel for feminine divinity, looms over a slumbering man, her gaze downcast at his supple body, naked except for a swath of pink fabric. An expression on the demigoddess's face suggests she is contemplating her ward's beauty—or, rather, considering swallowing him whole. The exposed boy does not appear entirely unaware of his likely fate. Perhaps he invites it? The depiction is a role reversal of the period's sexual dynamics—here, man is muse and snack, woman holds power.





Leonora Fini, *Chtonian Deity Watching over the Sleep of a Young Man* (1946). © Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco and Francis Naumann Gallery, New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020

Despite her growing popularity as a self-taught artist, her relationship with Surrealism was complicated. Surrealism coalesced in 1924 when a band of male European artists united to sign the *Surrealist Manifesto*. Fini became acquainted with the movement's members around a decade later once they took interest in her work. On their very first meeting, Fini arrived at the café rendezvous dressed in the scarlet robes of a Catholic cardinal. She said she wanted to know how it felt to wear the clothes of a man who would never know a woman's body. She became an overnight sensation.

Her biographer, Surrealist [Desmond Morris](https://www.artnet.com/artists/desmond-morris/) (b. 1928), considers Fini an "antagonistic surrealist"—an artist who produced surrealist work while polemically rejecting the official movement's leader, [André Breton](https://www.artnet.com/artists/andr%C3%A9-breton/) (1896–1966), along with his ideals. Fini refused to sign the group's charters, repulsed by Breton's authoritarianism as well as the very notion of treatises and manifestos, which she viewed as symptomatic of a "petit bourgeois" mentality.

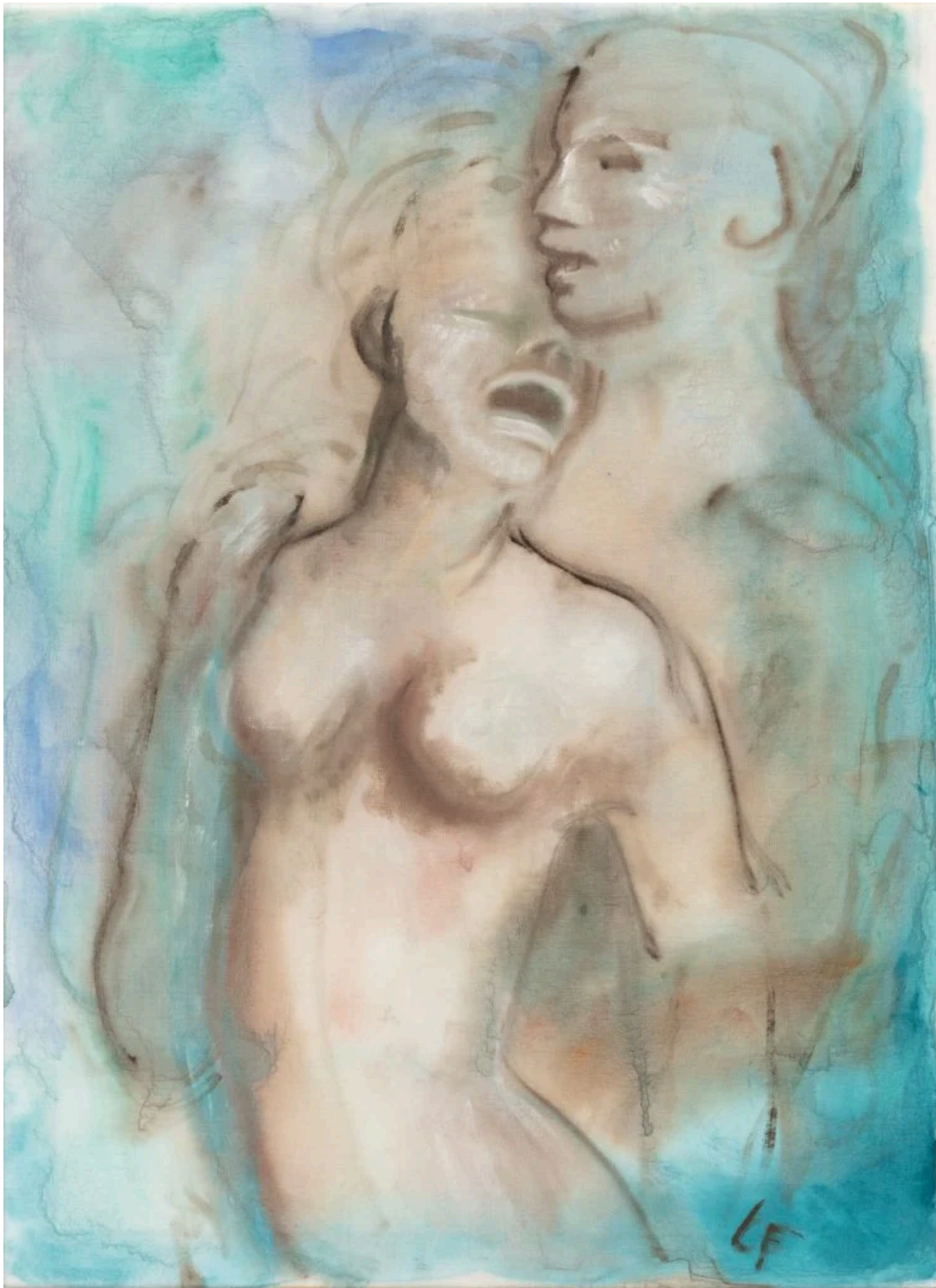


Leonor Fini, *Mise en garde (Petites enseignes pour la Nuit VI)*, 1982. Courtesy of Galerie Minsky and Kasmin, New York.

Even as an independent, she remained friends with many of Paris's great artists. French poet Jean Genet was one of them. In his first foray into art criticism, he published a letter to Fini accusing the painter of withholding. "You seem to me on the edge of metamorphosis," he wrote. "Stop the game of appearances: appear." He elaborated that following his advice might make her "worthy of being presented in that tiny room in the Louvre where they hang two portraits by Dürer."

Though Fini's art explored the erotic with an occult fascination, toying with the immemorial power struggle of the feminine versus the masculine, she categorically rejected the idea that she should be admired or appreciated as a *woman* artist. "They harass me like flies," she said, "I find all these feminists grotesque."





Leonor Fini, *Hero et Léandre*, 1968. Courtesy of Galerie Minsky and Kasmin, New York.

The night they met in 1978, Souhami says Fini turned to her and said “I warn you, you’re cute, but I do not like women.” Souhami retorted “Well neither do I.” She describes the artist as highly feminine, and formidably free, living in a long-term polyamorous relationship with her two male lovers and her 23 cats. The felines were known to have full access to dinner-party tables, winding between guests and partaking of the food. Guests never dared to shoo one away, afraid of incurring Fini’s wrath.

Much of this can be explained by Fini’s extremely unconventional childhood. Her mother absconded with Fini from Argentina to Italy, escaping her tyrannical husband. Fini’s father sent hired henchmen to retrieve her, though the attempts were foiled. Desperate for safety, her mother fled further to the south of Italy where she reimagined her daughter into a son. For six years, to protect her identity, Fini lived and dressed as a boy whenever out in public.





Portrait of artist Leonor Fini. Courtesy of Galerie Minsky and Kasmin, New York.

This period of her life might relate to her insistence on disassociation—to see the prospect of a fixed self as dangerous. Perhaps it also explains her passion for dressing up. She was known to wear extravagant high-fashion gowns, entirely impractical for painting, while working in her studio. In the '40s, she was regularly in magazine gossip columns for the looks she made and wore to costume parties, conflating art and life by often dressing like the chimeras in her work, particularly bird and cat hybrids. Much like her compatriot Frida Kahlo (<https://www.artnet.com/artists/frida-kahlo/>) (1907–1954), Fini also had a penchant for cross-dressing.

In an interview with Peter Webb, art historian and author of *Sphinx: the Life and Art of Leonor Fini*, she notably stated, “I am fascinated by the androgyne, for it seems to me to be the ideal. It unites the thinking aspect of the male with the imaginative side of the female. I would like to think of myself as androgynous.”

Among her many other accomplishments, Fini illustrated the erotic novel *Juliette* by the Marquis de Sade and designed Elsa Schiaparelli's iconic *Shocking* perfume bottle (shaped after Mae West's torso). Fini also designed eccentric furniture, as well as outlandish costumes for film and theater. But her art makes her supernaturally eternal.



Leonor Fini, *Le Ballet des Insectes*, 1960-1965. Courtesy of Galerie Minsky and Kasmin, New York.

A century on, Fini's work resounds as a beacon in a world that does not make sense. "In times of paradigm shift, when we grapple with fears of the present and the future," Olney said, "when we deal with major change in the world, surrealism lets us reimagine how the world can be," he says. "It is about the iconoclastic breaking down of what is being told to us and what is being dictated by greater forces."

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FINE ART

# 'She was a pure creator.' The art world rediscovers Surrealist painter Leonor Fini

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By Greg Allen

5-Minute Listen

TRANSCRIPT



Costume design for «  
*Demoiselles de la nuit* », 1948,  
Leonor Fini, Gouache on paper  
© Estate of Leonor Fini, Courtesy  
Galerie Minsky & Weinstein Gallery

An overlooked female artist is starting to get her due.

Nearly 30 years after her death, Leonor Fini's captivating, often gender-bending images are attracting renewed attention. She is one of

the featured artists at the annual Art Basel fair underway this week in Miami, where many in the art world are gathered. There, San Francisco's [Weinstein Gallery](#) has joined with Paris' [Galerie Minsky](#) to mount a show of some of her most important work.

Fini, who was born in Argentina before moving as a child to Italy, outlived most of her contemporaries, Surrealist artists like Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí and Rene Magritte. She died in 1996 at 89 years old.

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She is now considered part of that movement, but gallery owner Rowland Weinstein says she wasn't just a Surrealist painter. "She was a pure creator. She continually changed... In that essence, I think she was kind of like Picasso. She loved theater, design, costume design. And she was kind of a genius in all of them."





Costume design for « *Le Rêve de Léonor* », 1949, Leonor Fini, Gouache on colored paper

© Estate of Leonor Fini, Courtesy Galerie Minsky & Weinstein Gallery

Although she had no formal training, Fini became an accomplished artist by sketching cadavers at the local morgue. She began her career in Italy and then moved to Paris where she became intimate, artistically and sometimes romantically, with Surrealist artists including Ernst, Dalí, Leonora Carrington and Man Ray.

"He would not have a woman be a Surrealist. In his view, women were muses."

She was also part of the first major Surrealist exhibitions, but Weinstein says the founder of the movement, French writer Andre Breton, didn't accept her as one of them. "If [Breton] said you were a Surrealist, you were," Weinstein says. "If he didn't say you were a Surrealist, you could paint surrealistically, but you weren't a Surrealist. And he would not have a woman be a Surrealist. In his view, women were muses."





Leonor Fini

© Estate of Leonor Fini, Courtesy Galerie Minsky & Weinstein Gallery

Fini was a flamboyant, eccentric and glamorous participant in the Paris art scene, often appearing

at events in costume or dressed like a man. As an artist, she was productive over a remarkable six decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, she became immersed in stage and costume design for theater and opera companies, even contributing costumes for Federico Fellini's film *8½*.



*Black Scarecrow mask*, Leonor Fini, c.1960, Round holes for eyes, black thick felt fabric, mounted on stand of driftwood tree branch (found in Corsica)



Paris gallery owner Arlette Souhami, now 82, first met Leonor Fini in 1978. She found the artist overwhelming, opinionated and fascinating. "I worked all my life for Leonor," she says. Souhami continues her story in a mixture of English and French, interpreted by her friend Victor Picou: "When she met Arlette, Leonor said, 'I don't like women in general' and Arlette said, 'Neither do I.' And she said, 'OK we're going to get along, right,'" Picou laughs.

Souhami became Fini's art dealer and worked with her for the rest of the painter's life. It was an intense relationship. She says Fini called her five times a day.

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For a show in the 1980s, Souhami recalls combing Paris bakeries to find 20 white cakes that surrounded the artist, dressed also in white, for a video and photo shoot.

Fini fascinated the other artists and photographers in her circle. "There was a time" Weinstein says, "when the most expensive photograph ever sold at auction was a piece by [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#) which

was a woman floating naked in the water from the neck down. And it's stunningly beautiful. Nobody knew this at the time but it's Leonor Fini."

Fini's connections played an important role in gaining recognition and acceptance for the emerging Surrealist movement. When her childhood friend, art dealer Leo Castelli opened his first gallery in Paris, she curated his [premier show](#), a Surrealist exhibition. She also created a number of pieces for the show, including an armoire with paintings of herself on its two doors.

Castelli, who moved to New York, became an immensely important art dealer, later also championing the emerging Abstract Expressionist movement. Weinstein says, "Castelli actually said that had he not known Leonor Fini, his life might have been very different."



*Armoire anthropomorphe (Anthropomorphic Wardrobe)*, Leonor Fini, 1939, Oil on wood

© Estate of Leonor Fini, Courtesy Galerie Minsky & Weinstein Gallery

In some ways, Souhami says Fini's personal life was as fantastic as her Surrealist art. For much of her



life, she lived in a relationship with two men, who shared her Paris home. "She was free," Souhami says. "She was the most extraordinary artist... but she was also, neither man nor woman. She was androgynous."

Souhami says Fini's progressive, radical at the time, approach to gender identity stemmed from her childhood. Fini said her mother disguised her as a boy in her early years in an effort to evade attempts by her father to kidnap her in a custody dispute. "You can see that in her painting," Souhami says. "You can see men that look like women and women that look like men in her paintings. So, it's very fluid."



*Dans la tour (In the Tower)/Self-Portrait of Leonor Fini with Constantin Jelenski, 1952, oil on canvas*  
© Estate of Leonor Fini, Courtesy Galerie Minsky & Weinstein Gallery

One of the paintings in the Fini exhibition in Miami shows the artist, fully-dressed, leading her semi-naked male lover. Weinstein says it's a role reversal from paintings that typically show a naked woman reclining before a fully-clad man. Weinstein says that was revolutionary. "She presents herself very strong, very powerful," he says. "Clearly the dominant person in the painting is Leonor Fini."

Interest in Fini has risen in recent years among collectors and museums. One of her [paintings](#) sold last year for \$2.3 million.

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As with other women artists like Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington, some of the fascination with Fini's personal life runs the risk of obscuring her achievements as an artist. According to art historian Tere Arcq, "Sometimes, Leonor Fini has sort of been put in a box of the eroticism in her paintings and how free she was in terms of sexuality. But she was much more than that."

Weinstein quotes the artist. "Her art was Fini and her life was Fini." For her, he says, "it was one and the same."



There are two major Fini exhibitions now in the works. Arcq is curating one next year that will open in Milan and travel to other cities, the other opens in Frankfurt, Germany in 2026.