

CONSUMING SURREALISM IN MODERN MEXICAN ADVERTISING:
REMEDIOS VARO'S PHARMACEUTICAL
ILLUSTRATIONS FOR
CASA BAYER, S.A.

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by
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ABSTRACT

My thesis investigates an interdisciplinary narrative of the transatlantic migration of Surrealism to Mexico during the 1940s. I focus on the ways exiled European Surrealists approached notions of Mexican material culture in a hybrid society where local traditions coexisted with a global modernity. Looking to popular and print culture outlets, I concentrate on how Mexican material culture was perceived, promoted, and marketed through a Surrealist lens. Specifically, I consider the collaboration of the German pharmaceutical company Casa Bayer, S.A. and exiled Spanish-born Surrealist Remedios Varo, who produced a series of medical advertisements during her first decade in Mexico City from 1943 to 1949. Through an examination of Varo's work, my thesis explores the changing boundaries of fine and commercial art that resulted from the efforts of artists who participated in modern mass culture and consumerism. I investigate the significance of her Surrealist advertisements for Casa Bayer as a material culture bound on one side with fine art and the other side with the development of Mexican advertising. This case study supports my argument that Surrealism, as a transnational aesthetic, was one alternative way of demonstrating the new cultural meanings of advertising in an ambiguous, modern Mexican society. Examining Varo's illustrations in light of the movement of western Europeans to Mexico and the country's commitment to modern progress explains why the artist negotiated her past avant-garde sensibilities with her Mexican present.

For my family.
For their endless love, support
and encouragement.

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While the culmination of this project is not meant to be a plug, nor sponsorship for Bayer, A.G., I am grateful for my bottle of Aleve, without which I would not have finished the last stage of my thesis. In an ironic (or perhaps surreal) series of events, I find myself writing these final acknowledgements hunched over my computer suffering from the same painful lumbago that Remedios Varo creatively illustrated in her Mexican advertisements for Casa Bayer, S.A.

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INTRODUCTION

For a company such as Bayer Mexico, it is a point of pride that our history is associated with the life's work of a great Mexican painter (not Mexican by birth but rather by choice and by affection)... We should point out that the artistic freedom given to Remedios Varo in her interpretation of the themes requested by Bayer allowed these pieces to attain the same degree of excellence as the rest of her body of work.¹

Penned by the Mexican division of the German pharmaceutical company Bayer, A.G., this memorandum appears within the front matter of a 2008 project commemorating the centennial of Surrealist Remedios Varo (1908-1963). The publication documents the unique collaboration between the Spanish-born artist who was exiled to Mexico and Casa Bayer, S.A. that launched a series of medical advertisements from 1943 to 1949. After being commissioned to employ her creative agency to illustrate an array of malaises and diseases ranging from arthritis to malaria, Varo designed more than thirty small gouaches, which were reproduced as calendars and pamphlets for public health campaigns in Mexico City.² While the illustrations were significant as a public example of her work and prefigured her mature Surrealist style and the rise of her artistic

¹ "Bayer Mexico," in *Cinco Llaves del Mundo Secreto de Remedios Varo*, ed. Margarita de Orellana (Mexico: Artes de México, 2008), 5. "The firm Química Industrial Bayer Wescott & Cia. was founded in downtown Mexico City on June 23, 1921. Its activities focused primarily on the commercialization of Aspirin and Cafiaspirinia, which was introduced in Mexico during World War I. In the 1930s, the company changed its name to Casa Bayer and built Mexico's first pharmaceutical factory in 1939." Teresa Arcq, "Remedios Varo y la Casa Bayer," in *Cinco Llaves del Mundo Secreto de Remedios Varo*, eds. Margarita de Orellana (Mexico: Artes de México, 2008), 11.

² "After 1941, as part of its cooperation with the United States, the Mexican government confiscated those German companies the United States could not replace through capitalist competition." In 1944, Mexico's Administrative Junta for the Vigilance of Foreign Property gained control of the Bayer Company and its advertising and operations because the company was blacklisted for allegedly making financial contributions to Nazi campaigns. This government control is noted on all of Remedios Varo's pamphlets. The company was returned to its foreign corporate owners in 1955. Julio Moreno, *Yankee Don't Go Home!: Mexican Nationalism, American Business Culture, and the Shaping of Modern Mexico, 1920-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 57.

reputation, their esteem remains tethered to a realm of cultural banality. For this reason, the art world has generally undervalued her illustrations for Casa Bayer.

Surrealism began as a literary movement in Paris following the First World War with the objective of exploring the irrational, the subconscious mind and dreams. It was officially codified in 1924 by the poet and theoretician André Breton (1896-1966), who studied medicine and the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).³ Breton, who was also a devoted Marxist, intended Surrealism to be a political movement that utilized the principle of psychic automatism to liberate human experience from a rational vision of life.⁴ Over the years, Breton's theories attracted artists from around the world that shared his rejection of traditional artistic values. While many developed Breton's theories of releasing the imagination of the subconscious, the emigration of Surrealists to various places of refuge during World War II contributed significantly to the movement's expansion and influence in the Americas. One development was the intersection of Surrealism and commercial culture, which led to its reinvention as a way to appeal to the unconscious desires of consumers.⁵ Yet, because of Surrealism's original objectives that set out to defy bourgeois cultural norms, for years scholarship continued to define it in strict opposition to the rise of consumer culture.⁶ This did not account for

³ André Breton, *Manifestes du Surréalisme* (Gallimard: Collection Idées, 1967), 76-77, quoted in Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003), 12.

⁴ Mark Polizzotti lists the movement's experiments with the unconscious, including "trances, dream notations, and particularly automatic writing, or writing practiced in the absence of any conscious control," in Introduction to *Surrealism*, 1st Ed. (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1995), v.

⁵ Rachel Barron-Duncan provides a comprehensive study of this development in the context of the United States in "Transatlantic Translations: Surrealist Modes of Advertising in France and the United States of America," *Visual Resources* (2017).

⁶ For examples of this scholarship, see Clement Greenberg, "Surrealism," in *Clement Greenberg, the Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986);

the movement's unfixed structure, both physically and ideologically, that characterized the distinctly modern period of cultural history. By contrast, the general focus of my thesis confronts the relationship between Surrealism and modernity during the 1930s and 1940s under the condition of exile, outside of its European context.⁷

It has only been in recent decades that the narratives of exile artists have contributed to an inclusive art history in which mass cultural elements go hand-in-hand with avant-garde sensibilities. Most of these accounts take place within the context of the United States, a key center of modern industrial capitalism.⁸ While I do not deny the importance of such accounts, they subjugate the intersectional narratives of outlier Surrealists like Remedios Varo, who confronted a more ambiguous modernity in Mexico. Through an examination of Varo's work, my thesis seeks to explore the changing boundaries of fine and commercial art that resulted from the efforts of artists who participated in modern mass culture and consumerism. I will investigate the significance of her Surrealist advertisements for Casa Bayer, S.A. as a material culture bound on one side with fine art and the other side with the development of Mexican advertising. This work will be grounded on interdisciplinary studies of cultural exchange that occurred in

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), 299-300; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1977), 52; Jack J. Spector, "Surrealism in Europe," in *Surrealism and American Art 1931-1947*, ed. Jeffrey Wechsler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1976), 9. Rachel Barron-Duncan provides a historiography of the scholarship that posed Surrealism in strict opposition to consumer culture in, "Transatlantic Translations: Surrealist Modes of Advertising in France and the United States of America," 1-5.

⁷ I employ Michele Helene Bogart's definition of modernity as a comprehensive term that suggests the emerging social changes of modernization, such as the rise of mass markets, new print media, urbanization, and immigration, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12.

⁸ A good example of this is the publication: Sabine Eckmann and Lutz P. Koepnick, *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

nations entering modernity in the twentieth century, with an emphasis on the concept of hybridity. As I will demonstrate in Varo's assimilation to Mexico, she adapted Surrealist tenets to incorporate her surroundings, cultivating a transnational aesthetic that furthered the relationship between places and material culture. Her Surrealist advertisements reveal that becoming culturally literate in modern Mexican society encompassed knowing how to develop a visual vocabulary anchored in both an empirical and esoteric world.

For many scholars, myself included, their research on Remedios Varo begins with Janet A. Kaplan's extensive biography, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (1988). Since its publication, it continues to be a cornerstone resource for scholars of Surrealism as well as the starting point for my thesis. The first passage of the biography encapsulates the artist's essence:

Remedios Varo was part of many worlds: the old-fashioned worlds of the Catholic convent school and the art academy, the vanguard worlds of Republican Barcelona and Surrealist Paris, the terrifying worlds of civil war in Spain and Nazi occupation in France, and the welcoming world of Mexico, where she found refuge... In her works Varo presented yet another world, the world of her imagination.⁹

The events that shaped Varo's full life and complex legacy reveal the character of a woman who crossed boundaries and borders, transcended roles, defied conventions, and maneuvered realities.

Although she was born in Anglés, a town in the province of Catalonia, she spent her early years travelling throughout Spain due to her father's profession as a hydraulic

⁹ Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988), 7.

engineer.¹⁰ He taught her the essentials of technical drawing when she was a young girl – techniques that would remain with her throughout her artistic career.¹¹ At the age of sixteen he enrolled her in the famous Academia de San Fernando in Madrid, where Salvador Dalí and Pablo Picasso also had their artistic beginnings.¹² Following her academic training, in order to be able to leave home she married painter Gerardo Lizarraga (1905-1983) in Barcelona where they worked for the Thompson advertising firm. But she promptly left him in pursuit of participating with local avant-garde art circles that promoted Surrealism in Catalonia.¹³ With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), dictator Francisco Franco suspended all practicing forms of Catalonian culture.¹⁴ Amidst this radically unstable political atmosphere in 1937, Varo first met Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret, who was one of many intellectuals and artists from all over Europe that travelled to Spain to support the Republic. As his lover, she moved with him to Paris because of her controversial alliance with the Republican cause.¹⁵

The relationship that they fostered in France granted her privileged access to the inner circle of the movement's leader André Breton (1896-1966).¹⁶ Although not an

¹⁰ Walter Gruen, "Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch," in *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado = Catalogue Raisonné*, eds. Ricardo Ovalle and Walter Gruen (México, D.F: Ediciones Era, 1994), 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ These avant-garde circles included ADLAN (Friends of the New Art), which was founded in Barcelona, and the Logicophobists. Both showed marked affinity with Surrealism, *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ Robert W. Kern, *The Regions of Spain: A Reference Guide to History and Culture* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1995), 143-159.

¹⁵ Gruen, "Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch," 44-45.

¹⁶ Specifically, Varo's associations with Wolfgang Paalen and Leonora Carrington in Mexico will be discussed in subsequent chapters, *Ibid.*, 44-45.

official member (no women were), Varo participated in several group International Exhibitions of Surrealism.¹⁷ Her bohemian lifestyle was interrupted by World War II and Hitler's occupation of Paris, which led to her brief imprisonment in 1939.¹⁸ Like many other artists, Varo and Péret fled to Marseilles where they awaited documents and passage to Mexico. They arrived in Mexico City at the end of 1941 and settled in the historic center Colonia Roma among other artist expatriates including Leonora Carrington, Kati Horna and Wolfgang Paalen.¹⁹ Varo and her friends took on different jobs involving crafts, decoration, design and advertising as ways to earn a living in their new home, which many treated as temporary. During this transitional decade of the 1940s that she accepted the commission of Casa Bayer, S.A. to produce pharmaceutical advertisements for their public health campaign in Mexico City. Concurrently, she left Péret (who returned to Paris) and embarked on a yearlong sojourn to Venezuela in 1947, where she visited her mother and brother. Her brother Rodrigo had gone there to accept the position as chief of epidemiology for the Ministry of Public health in Maracay and he brought his family with him.²⁰ He arranged a temporary job for Varo as a technical illustrator for the Ministry in the malaria-control division. She returned to Mexico City in

¹⁷ "Varo exhibited in the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris and later, in the Galerie Robert in Amsterdam (1939)." This topic will be discussed further in Chapter 3, *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ "Remedios is imprisoned, possibly for having hidden a deserter from the French army. Very little is known about this unfortunate incident because she never spoke about it," *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁹ Joanna Moorhead, "Surreal Friends in Mexico," in *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, eds. Stefan Van Raay, Joanna Moorhead, and Teresa Arcq (Burlington, VT: Ashgate/Lund Humphries, 2010), 72; Gruen, "Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch," 45.

²⁰ It is not known how Varo's brother Rodrigo and his family, including their mother, made it to Venezuela. The brief information on this development has only been published by Janet A. Kaplan in *Unexpected Journeys*, 114.

1948 and continued producing advertisements for Casa Bayer. In 1952 she officially abandoned her commercial work, married Austrian émigré Walter Gruen (1914-2008), devoted herself to painting and resolved to remain in Mexico City for the rest of her life.²¹ It is this decade of productivity that marked the culmination of her artistic career until her sudden death from a heart attack in 1963.

Remedios Varo officially entered the canon of Latin American art when Kaplan published her biography in 1988. Primarily based on research from archives, private collections, and museums in Mexico, the publication lays thorough groundwork for my investigation and will be referenced throughout my thesis. Kaplan is the first to outline the artist's commercial activity during her transitional period in Mexico, which provides my case study for exploring the professional identity of women artists.²² She conducts formal analyses for several of Varo's gouaches for Casa Bayer that considers their iconography as representative of maladies and diseases.²³ While this is one aspect that is vital to understanding the advertisements' function, it is an area that I will expand on in my analysis of the illustrations as also employing experimental marketing elements of effective and engaging commercial culture.

Mexican curator Tere Arcq devotes a chapter to the nature of Remedios Varo's relationship with Casa Bayer in the aforementioned exhibition catalog that documents her

²¹ Gruen, "Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch," 46.

²² Kaplan, *Unexpected*, 97-104, is the first publication to provide an outline of the artist's various sources of income.

²³ *Ibid.*, 105-115. Kaplan's examples include: *Dolor reumático II [Reuma, lumbago, ciática]* (Fig. 2.4), and *Amibiasis [Los vegetales]* (Fig. 2.6). Kaplan applies formal analyses to observe thematic and stylistic developments, drawing biographical parallels to the details of Varo's art.

work in Mexico.²⁴ Arcq's insights provide a point of entry for my research of the history of the company's commercial presence in Mexico and their commitment to promoting Mexican culture. Most notably, the chapter's inclusion of the artworks in their original context as printed ephemera provides visuals for my case study.²⁵ Arcq's analysis demonstrates that Varo's stylistic and iconographic sources stem primarily from her engagement with European medieval and Renaissance art history.²⁶ Yet, this discussion leaves out the works' most significant dialogues with Surrealism and Mexican commercial culture, which my research sets out to remedy. What Arcq does reveal, however, are the unique themes that were specifically requested of Varo by the Mexican advertising firm that commissioned her. I will expand upon Arcq's insights as an additional layer of meaning in relation to Mexican cultural identifiers.

Lastly, I consider cultural studies scholar, Natalya Lusty, who addresses how the critical literature on Varo's Casa Bayer illustrations underplays Surrealism's broader fascination with science.²⁷ Her interdisciplinary reassessment acknowledges Varo's

²⁴ Arcq, "Remedios Varo y la Casa Bayer," 6-10. Both Tere Arcq and Janet Kaplan contributed to this exhibition catalog that documents Remedios Varo's work in Mexico. The exhibition was co-sponsored by the Bayer Company.

²⁵ Ibid., 6-10. So far, Arcq's chapter provides the only known published visuals of the five original Bayer advertisements. Typically, the artworks are presented as divorced from the rest of the advertisement, as in Kaplan's biography.

²⁶ Ibid., 6-10. "Bayer Mexico," 5. A spokesperson from Casa Bayer states that while they asked that the advertisements illustrate subject matter relating to medieval Europe, Remedios Varo was given full artistic freedom with how she interpreted their requested theme.

²⁷ Natalya Frances Lusty claims that critical literature has only viewed the "magical qualities" of Varo's artwork. She addresses the issue in her article, "Art, Science and Exploration: Rereading the Work of Remedios Varo," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 5, no. 1-2 (2011): 55-76. She is one of few scholars who explores Surrealists' shifting interests towards modern science subjects such as: anthropology, psychoanalysis, metaphysics, quantum physics, biology, and epistemology. Another is Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

engagement with themes of the popular and occult sciences and emerging modern theories of natural and social sciences.²⁸ Lusty shifts the context of the artist's work in light of larger scientific questions that drove industrialization of the early twentieth century.²⁹ While this is significant, I expand this discussion to consider how Varo's illustrations as "Surrealist advertising" specifically promoted pharmaceuticals and aided in Mexico's campaign for public health reform.³⁰ Within this vein, I will show what this imagery signified for the wellness of a Mexican public and how it contributed to perceptions of modern healthcare.

My research is grounded on principles of hybridity, cultural identity, and exile regarding cultural exchange. The framework of my analysis will rely upon the hybridization theory of Néstor García Canclini to examine how Remedios Varo addressed a Mexican society that embraced its material culture to bolster modernity.³¹ He defines hybridity as a sociocultural process where the traditional and the modern operate

²⁸ Lusty, "Art, Science and Exploration," 55-62. According to Lusty, popular science incorporates an "eclectic range of influences including the new physics, Jungian and Freudian psychology, the esoteric arts of alchemy and magic, and the pre-Columbian art and culture that saturated everyday life in Mexico." She explains this as a dialectic of old and new themes.

²⁹ Ibid., 56-58. Lusty states that, like many of Varo's Surrealist contemporaries, she was interested in the new relationships that were being drawn between art and science during the first decades of the twentieth century. She justifies her argument with an inventory of Varo's eclectic library, which primarily focuses on scientific subjects.

³⁰ Ibid., 65. Lusty is the first scholar to call Varo's Casa Bayer illustrations "surrealist advertising" due to their use of Surrealist techniques and "ability to convey complex narratives that impart a powerful and effective response."

³¹ Nestor García Canclini and Silvia L. Lopez, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Rosaldo, R. "Foreword," in García Canclini, Nestor and Silvia L. Lopez, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xi-xiii.

simultaneously within Latin America's developing present.³² It derives from transcultural, creative, and economic exchanges, which contribute to new structures of identity, objects, and practices.³³ My chapters will explore Varo's participation within these networks in Mexico by examining the breakdown of the divisions between folk or popular culture and high art as well as how commercial culture can operate as a source of the traditional and the modern.³⁴ I believe that this interdisciplinary approach will examine how the artist came to understand her relationship to Surrealism through the practice of incorporating low and high culture in her advertisements for Casa Bayer's Mexican audience.

By locating hybridity in Varo's illustrations, I will demonstrate how exiled Surrealists reacted to intercultural relations in Mexico. I will borrow the postcolonial principle of cultural hybridity with respect to exiles from theorists Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said.³⁵ They define this as "the result of the continual process of translation

³² Rosaldo, "Foreword," 1-2. Canclini characterizes Latin America as a place where "traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived." Both operate in the present and are difficult to separate. He opposes a chronological, or evolutionary, modernity because Latin American nation-states have not completed their modernization, which began with pre-Columbian civilizations.

³³ *Ibid.*, xv. Transculturation is "the two-way borrowing and lending between cultures." Canclini's theoretical work examines how modernization is understood by artists, migrants, and entrepreneurs who participate in transcultural interactions and cross multiple national boundaries.

³⁴ García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 1-5. This is how Canclini defines the traditional and the modern. He proposes an interdisciplinary approach to testing hybridization, which is broken into three categories, the "cultured, the popular, and mass culture". This involves using the tools of disciplines that are typically studied separately, such as: folklore, anthropology, works on communication, art history, and literature.

³⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990); Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). While I acknowledge that this is a Eurocentric lens that does not typically account for non-Western subjects, my intent is to refrain from establishing a dominant culture in my analysis of the artworks. Jenni Ramone, in *Postcolonial Theories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 116, argues that by using the original theories to analyze colonized subjects outside the western European realm, the scholar can erroneously "re-colonize the postcolonial within western systems of thought."

which is internal to any culture, which in turn stems from an apprehension of cultural difference.”³⁶ In accordance with Said’s theory, Varo’s exile allowed her to experience a contrapuntal perspective of cultural hybridity where past and present connections with nations coexist.³⁷ The inextricable link between nationalism and exile complicates the location of culture, making it difficult to place her identity.³⁸ I will analyze this “in-between-ness” as reflected in the themes of the Casa Bayer advertisements to show how their hybridity makes them a successful, Mexican public health campaign.³⁹ Varo’s image surface transforms into a “third-space,” or an ambiguous and imaginative realm, where cultural signifiers can be blended.⁴⁰ I will enlist semiotics to analyze the layers of her fusion aesthetic.⁴¹

My study will constitute several chapters that parallel the timetable of Remedios Varo’s commercial work for Casa Bayer, S.A. Chapter 1 will begin by exploring the

³⁶ Eleanor Byrne, *Homi K. Bhabha* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 32-34.

³⁷ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, ed. Edward W. Said (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 184. This contrapuntal perspective occurs when an exiled individual becomes displaced between two or more cultures, which allows for a “plurality of vision and awareness of simultaneous dimensions.” Memories of their past home become intertwined with those of their present environment. In this sense, Canclini’s theory derives from Said’s.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁹ Byrne, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 34.

⁴⁰ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 130-131. Bhabha describes the “third-space” as a place of hybridity, communication, and translation that is concerned with the idea of “cultural dislocation” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 25.

⁴¹ Byrne, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 32; Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), quoted in Eleanor Byrne, *Homi K. Bhabha* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 209. Semiotics is the interdisciplinary aspect of postcolonial theory used to relate forms of culture. Through this lens, all cultures are viewed as “symbol forming and subject-constituting interpellative practices.”

artist's earliest advertisements as products of the overlapping realms of an ethnographic Surrealism and the enterprise of Mexican calendar art. Surrealism's relationship with objects during the 1930s in Paris will be revisited, which culminated in the development of the Surrealist object as an integration of avant-garde and bourgeois material culture. Looking to examples of Varo's prior Parisian artworks through an ethnographic lens reveals the methods of collage and collective practices she used to navigate between different forms of material culture. I will discuss ethnographic Surrealism in the context of artists' exile to Mexico, where it took on new significance in its application to pre-Hispanic objects. Lastly, I will align Varo's calendar advertisements for Casa Bayer within the commercial art practice of Mexican calendar art, which appropriated Mexican material culture to promote a modern Mexican national identity. This chapter will demonstrate how Varo's early adoption of Surrealist approaches to material culture made it possible for her to assimilate the practice within a popular form of Mexican advertising.

Chapter 2 will address and deconstruct Varo's shocking and visually unsettling iconography in her pharmaceutical illustrations for Casa Bayer, S.A., which promoted aspirin and others that cautioned against typhoid. I will discuss two theories in an attempt to understand why the artist was asked to represent such melancholic imagery as appropriate for reaching the Mexican consumer audience. The first explores her adoption of the Surrealist hermetic tradition that employed macabre medieval motifs and techniques of a Northern Renaissance past to objectify subjective sensibilities. While used to depict arthritic pain, these illustrations will also suggest an underlying narrative of Varo as an exile – one of anguish, violence, isolation and loss of personal history. The second theory will be discussed in the final part of the chapter which proposes that the

disturbing iconography accommodated a Mexican audience that was perceived as characteristically humorous and fatalistic by Mexican advertising agencies.

Chapter 3 will address how Varo used her problematic Surrealist background as a woman artist to her advantage in her position as a female commercial illustrator in Mexico City. I will discuss shifting notions of artistic and professional identity of women Surrealists as they evolved within commercial culture of the modern period from muse to modern woman. These will be considered in light of Surrealism's interest in French fashion and design of the 1930s that simultaneously legitimized the creative agency of women artists and brought the movement into contact with commodification, establishing Surrealism as an international mode of advertising. Finally, I will situate Remedios Varo in relation to feminism and Surrealism as they matured in Mexico City, which was ultimately mirrored in her Casa Bayer advertisements that promoted Mexican women's sexual wellness.

CHAPTER 1

ARTIFACTS OF SURREALISM

This chapter focuses on Remedios Varo's calendar advertisements for Casa Bayer as products of the overlapping realms of an ethnographic Surrealism and Mexican calendar art that appropriated material culture. In the years leading up to her exile to Mexico in 1941, Varo joined André Breton's (1896-1966) Surrealist circle in Paris, which was disrupting artistic conventions by exploring subjectivity through the world of objects that infiltrated their lives by way of the European market.¹ To critique this consumer culture, artists recast various materials (from commodities to artifacts) as strange, mythical objects to alter consciousness of them and fabricate new meanings. This revolutionary aim produced an avant-garde in the 1930s and 1940s that questioned cultural dichotomies, broadened art's public, and integrated art into the everyday. Concurrently, in the wake of Mexico's Revolution (1910-1920),² Mexican avant-garde movements turned to the material objects of their own culture with the objectives of revitalizing indigenous and pre-Hispanic themes and artifacts, integrating high and low

¹ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 81.

² The Mexican Revolution was a social movement that involved the mobilization of indigenous peoples. One of the results was the adoption of the traditional European idealized image of ancient Mexican civilization by the proponents of *Indigenismo* (a Latin American movement that advocated a sympathetic awareness of the Indian). Martin S. Stabb, "Indigenism and Racism in Mexican Thought: 1857-1911," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 1, no. 4 (Oct, 1959): 405; Keith Jordan, "Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Legacy of Colonialism: The Good, the (Revalued) Bad, and the Ugly," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 2, no. 1 (2008): 41-42.

art, and broadening art's public.³ Urban elites and artists expanded the postrevolutionary campaign of drawing on different facets of Mexican history to embrace a *Mexicanidad*, a Mexican consciousness or nostalgic sense of national identity, that incorporated modernity.⁴ This acted as a catalyst for local and foreign collaborations in cultural projects of varying forms. Despite the nation's history of suspicion towards colonizers, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) opened Mexico's borders to artists and intellectuals from a war-torn Europe in the hope that they would aid in economic and cultural development.⁵ When Remedios Varo settled into Mexico City as one of thousands of political exiles who sought refuge from the Spanish Civil War, she received the opportunity to incorporate her Surrealist foundation into modern representations in Mexico's visual arts through her commercial work for Casa Bayer, S.A.

The intersection of Surrealism and everyday objects has remained an ardently contested topic, a thread that I will continue to pick up in the chapters that follow. To avoid designations of Remedios Varo's calendar illustrations as singular products of either high or low culture, I will look to recent scholarly research regarding Surrealism's relationship with objects. This chapter will demonstrate how Varo's early adoption of

³ Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 1-5; Angela Villalba, *Mexican Calendar Girls: Golden Age of Calendar Art 1930-1960* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2006), 25-26.

⁴ This was championed by José Vasconcelos, the new minister of public education. Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 9-16; Matthew Affron, "Modern Art and Mexico, 1910-1950," in *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950*, 1st ed., eds. Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, Dafne Cruz Porchini, and Renato González Mello (Philadelphia, PA: Yale University Press, 2016), 3.

⁵ Stefan Van Raay, "Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna," in *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, eds. Stefan Van Raay, Joanna Moorhead and Teresa Arcq (Burlington, VT: Ashgate/Lund Humphries, 2010), 13-14.

Surrealist approaches to material culture, like mass-produced products, popular media images, and artifacts, made it possible for her to assimilate the aesthetic within Mexican advertising.⁶ Viewing Surrealism through an ethnographic lens helps explain the methods Varo explored to navigate between different forms of material culture, including the technique of collage, collective practices, and the creation of Surrealist objects. I will show how Parisian Surrealists' investigations into the hidden, imaginary potentials of objects took on new significance among exiled artists in Mexico, where they confronted pre-Hispanic objects rooted in cultural significance. The later part of this chapter aligns Varo's illustrations for Casa Bayer within the commercial art practice of Mexican calendar art to discuss their employment of similar ethnographic practices for advertising products. Commercial artists fabricated a visual vocabulary by juxtaposing indigenous themes with commercial imagery, unveiling alternative motives for the appropriation of material culture. As Surrealist objects in their own right, the importance of Varo's calendar advertisements lies not in their critical reception, but in how they utilize Surrealism's practices to directly engage with the material world.

Surrealist Objects

André Breton's *Second Manifesto*, published in Paris in 1929, helps to explain how mainstream Surrealists started to question the world around them.⁷ He redefined

⁶ This perspective of Surrealism's relationship with commodity culture is theorized by Ulrich Lehmann in "Assimilation: Objects; Commodities; Fashion," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 435-438.

⁷ Breton, *Manifestes du Surréalisme*, 76-77.

Surrealism as a means of transcending the binaries of everyday life, “the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low.”⁸

This call for cultural critique led Surrealists of the 1930s to turn to more varied forms of expression to achieve their goal, fostering a move away from text to a focus on material representation.⁹ Scholar Johanna Malt explains this process:

Instead of relying on objective chance to make the connection between the surrealist subject and the necessary or significant object, it was possible to recreate an object already present in the mind, thereby objectifying directly and deliberately the unconscious manifestation which the dream state had revealed.¹⁰

Objectifying the subjective by anchoring it in their material world provided artists with a tangible medium that entered a third dimension of the “surreal,” existing between the everyday and the imaginary.¹¹ Objects found while wandering the streets of Paris were estranged from their original context and placed in juxtaposing arrangements through fragmentation, displacement and reconfiguration. Artists’ investigations of these constructs, or what came to be known as “Surrealist objects,” were meant to disorient society’s perceptions of reality and modify the conventional classifications of the realms of objects and art.¹² These new designs could represent the complexities and

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ghislaine Wood, “Surreal Things: Making ‘the fantastic real,’” in *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design*, ed. Ghislaine Wood (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 8-9.

¹⁰ Johanna Malt, “Recycling, Contamination and Compulsion: Practices of the Surrealist Object,” in *Surrealism: Crossings/ Frontiers*, ed. Elza Adamowicz (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), 110-111.

¹¹ Ibid., 110-112.

¹² In his call for a “total revolution of the object” in 1936, Breton explained that the terms “found object” and “Surrealist object” were used as alternative labels that signified a change of the role of the original object. André Breton, “Crisis of the Object, 1936,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson

contradictions of modern life, but also critique consumer culture. Over the course of the decade the concept was expanded to include all forms of material that triggered the Surrealist imagination, whether found or reconfigured.¹³ This is particularly evident in the catalog of the 1936 *Exhibition of Surrealist Objects*, which listed a wide range of illogical categories to encompass the abundant amount of material, whether found, made, or non-Western, which was placed on display in vitrines like cabinets of curiosities.¹⁴ These methods have been likened to documenting artists' social research of everyday life.¹⁵ Importantly the assembling of found elements have roots in ethnographic practices and allude to the avant-garde's pastimes of collage and collecting.

In his groundbreaking 1981 essay "On Ethnographic Surrealism," interdisciplinary historian James Clifford explores the Surrealist engagement with ethnography as a way for artists to both question the norms of their own society and interpret other cultures.¹⁶ Ethnography, as it was employed by the Surrealist in the thirties, was a roughly established alternative to anthropology that investigated the

Taylor (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 2002), 280; Malt, "Recycling, Contamination and Compulsion," 112-113.

¹³ This concept was first theorized by Surrealists Salvador Dalí and André Breton. To discern its origins, Johanna Malt provides analyses of concurrent writings by both men in "Practices of the Surrealist Object," 109-113.

¹⁴ Nomenclature included: "Found objects," "Readymades and Assisted readymades," "Interpreted found objects," "Incorporated natural objects," and "American and Oceanic objects." Laurence Madeline, "The Crisis of the Object/ Objects in Crisis: *Exposition surréaliste d'objects* at the Charles Ratton Gallery, 1936," in *Surreal Objects: Three-Dimensional Works from Dalí to Man Ray*, eds. Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 170-172.

¹⁵ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 46.

¹⁶ James Clifford is the first scholar to extensively study this relationship in "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (Oct. 1981): 539-564; Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003); 12-13.

difference between self and “otherness.”¹⁷ As a hybrid activity it appeared in the form of writing, collecting, collages/montages, and cultural critique – all Surrealist practices that have received much consideration from succeeding scholars.¹⁸ The ethnographic attitude and Surrealism share several notable attributes: both encourage participant observation of culture; abandon the distinction between high and low culture; defamiliarize everyday objects via juxtaposition; and realign different cultural realities.¹⁹ Consequently, ethnographic objects and Surrealist objects overlap as well, in that they contain “surreal potential.”²⁰ For the avant-garde, the abundance of manufactured commodities, antiquities, and popular media images that made up the archive of daily European life were already considered strange, sites of the “marvelous.”²¹ By viewing Surrealism through an ethnographic lens, it suggests how artists provoked this othering of the self and the everyday world they inhabited.²² This element of Surrealism that defined the early artistic personality of Remedios Varo, whose work, leading to the advertisements that she illustrated for Casa Bayer in Mexico City, employed the ethnographic technique of collage.

¹⁷ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9-13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-14. Throughout this discussion I will refer to a selection of studies that have revisited Clifford.

¹⁹ Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 87; Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 129-130.

²⁰ James Clifford argues that Surrealists believed that below and beyond ordinary reality there existed another reality, like ethnography, which posited that for every local custom or truth there was a juxtaposing non-Western alternative. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 120-121.

²¹ Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 46-47.

²² Ben Highmore claims that it is important to consider the potential of ethnography as a practice for not only understanding other cultures abroad, but also attending to everyday life at home: Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 57.

Reverberations of André Breton's artistic revolution in Paris reached Remedios Varo while she was living in Barcelona and working as a commercial artist making advertisements for the publicity agent J. Walter Thompson.²³ Little of her artwork from this time is documented. However, it is known that she surrounded herself with the company of practicing Surrealists Marcel Jean (1900-1993), Esteban Francés (1913-1976) and Oscar Dominguez (1906-1957).²⁴ Together, they experimented with French Surrealist practices like the group game of spontaneous associations, *cadavre exquis* (Exquisite Corpse). Originally designed as a word game, it was modified to include drawing, where each player contributed a body part, folded the paper to conceal what had been made, and passed it on to the next person.²⁵ The resulting assemblage was a figure designed by purely subjective chance – a Surrealist moment frozen in view. Varo and her contemporaries introduced their own collage technique to this model and subsequently collaborated on a small series of artworks in July of 1935 that were then circulated in Paris.²⁶ Jean recounts the alliance in a letter that documented the group's artistic activities:

The successive contributions which were to build up the final image were not drawn by hand but we borrowed them, ready-made and in bright colors, from illustrated advertisements in out-dated magazines. We cut out figures of

²³ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 38. So far, no publication on Remedios Varo includes examples of her advertising work for J. Walter Thompson. However, her catalogue raisonné contains one collage work from 1935 titled *Nada temáis, señora* that might be a possible example: Ricardo Ovalle and Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado = Catalogue Raisonné* (México, D.F: Ediciones Era, 1998), 242.

²⁴ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 38-40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

personages, objects, animals, etc., ... The process was rather exciting and we made “cadavres” out of corpses of bygone publicity until our supply of old magazines was reduced to shreds.²⁷

As such, obsolete ephemera were collected as raw data, altered, and presented as art in the form of collage. One example from the series, *Untitled Cadavre Exquis* (Fig. 1.1), superimposes images of various objects with dismembered limbs of women in antiquated outfits, most likely from fashion magazines from the “*belle époque*.”²⁸ Such juxtaposition deconstructs the social conventions surrounding commodified images of both objects and women, a subject that I will explore further in Chapter 3. For now, it is important to consider her early collages as Surrealist objects that altered the consciousness of ephemera from everyday life.

Varo’s aesthetic experimentations facilitated her to transfer of the collage sensibility to her individual paintings, but as a homogenous representation without sutures. Her visually avant-garde work *L’agent Double [El Agente Doble]* (Fig. 1.2), which was made in 1936 in Barcelona, features a grouping of seemingly unrelated objects of varying scale that range from androgynous figures, disembodied appendages, and natural objects. In following the Surrealist style, objects of the everyday are rendered strange by placing them in disorienting contexts and unusual combinations, allowing for new metaphorical meanings. This departure from the status quo of traditional art and a

²⁷ Marcel Jean, “The Rewards of Leisure,” July 5, 1983, typescript, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988), 40.

²⁸ Luis-Martín Lozano, “Deciphering the Magic of Remedios Varo,” in *The Magic of Remedios Varo*, ed. Luis-Martín Lozano, trans. Elizabeth Goldson and Liliana (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2000), 27-29. Lozano studied this collage in person and made this claim from his own observations.

self-critical outlook on material culture that led Varo to move to Paris in 1937 to join the Surrealists before she was forced into exile.²⁹ For her, Surrealism was a rebellious outlet to engage the imagination and explore her own subjectivity, freeing her from previous academic training. She quickly became absorbed within the elite circle through her association with the poet Benjamin Péret (1899-1959), a man highly regarded by Breton. By embracing a non-conformist lifestyle, Varo continued her artistic exploration of juxtaposition as a core tenet of Surrealist practice. In the process, she worked with an assortment of art materials, themes, and objects and rarely strayed from the collage technique that she developed in the early phase of her career. This suggests the fluid nature of collage as an art practice first introduced in the 1910s by Picasso and Braque and an ethnographic Surrealist practice that is not exclusive to the original “cutting and sticking” that is implied by its name.³⁰ Instead, it functions as a conceptual vehicle for moving between forms of culture and cultures themselves, both abroad and in exile, a topic to which I turn next.

Revisiting Ethnographic Surrealism in Mexico

I will not delve into the years leading to Remedios Varo’s escape to Mexico because they are underscored by political complications of the Spanish Civil War and

²⁹ Lozano, “Deciphering the Magic of Remedios Varo,” 55.

³⁰ Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 50-51.

German occupation in France.³¹ Nevertheless, as a Republican of her native Spain, a practicing Surrealist, and lover of left-wing writer Benjamin Péret, she was a Nazi target and Mexico was her only saving grace.³² With help, she attained a visa with the necessary qualifications of an intellectual worthy of Mexico's attention and settled in Mexico City with Péret at the end of 1941. Although the Americas welcomed such an influx of European exiles, they were treated with skepticism. In both Mexico and the United States, Surrealism encountered certain antagonism due to its demand for a revolution in art and politics and its enigmatic compositions, which were often considered inappropriate for public art.³³ Such sentiments can be justified when considering the problematic Surrealist relationship to pre-Hispanic material culture, which reveal the distorting effects of ethnographic practices.

To understand Varo's unique reaction to the indigenous traditions of her new home, I shall trace two tracts of ethnographic thought that infiltrated and perhaps informed her developing philosophy on art and life. The first was instigated by two men who perpetuated the Surrealist paradox, André Breton and Benjamin Péret, who was Varo's new husband. By this I mean they opposed the colonial exploitation of "other" peoples, yet practiced their own manner of colonization by collecting pre-Hispanic

³¹ For detailed accounts of Varo's experiences in Nazi occupied France, see Chapter 3 in Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 55-84.

³² Although Mexican government officials sympathized with political exiles, they were selective in their admittance of specifically Spanish intelligentsia and those of professional classes – those who could afford to relocate. Sebastiaan Faber, *Exile and Cultural Hegemony: Spanish Intellectuals in Mexico, 1939-1975* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 12-16; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 85; Raay, "Surreal Friends," 8-10.

³³ Ilene Susan Fort and Tere Arcq, Introduction to *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States* (New York: Prestel Pub., 2012), 22.

Mexican art objects and projecting Surrealist fantasies onto them.³⁴ Moreover, they disavowed primitivism, a western European term applied to an art movement that appropriated the material culture and imagery of non-European cultures, as the prevailing cultural concept of their time.³⁵ Yet, in its place they developed an equally controversial discourse of “the fantastic, the magical and the mythical.”³⁶ While this method of Surrealist intervention may have been acceptable for treating quotidian objects from their own material culture, Breton and Péret did not realize that their utopian approach did not translate to objects of Mexican society that were of definitive cultural, rather than surreal, significance. To them, Mexico was “the Surrealist place par excellence,” where all opposites were resolved, as espoused in the *Second Manifesto*.³⁷ The mythic aesthetic of ethnographic objects like pre-Columbian artifacts, folk art and handicrafts rendered them pure products of the unconscious, the archetype of the Surrealist object. Natives of France, Breton, while living in the United States, and Péret in Mexico City, promoted a Surrealism in exile that broadened its material focus to encompass the myths and the

³⁴ Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen, Artist and Theorist of the Avant-garde* (London: Praeger, 2003), 72-73. Katharine Conley describes this phenomenon as “intellectual colonialization” in “The Surrealist Collection: Ghosts in the Laboratory,” in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 312.

³⁵ Jordan, “Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica,” 25; Louise Tythacott defines primitivism in this way in *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003), 17.

³⁶ Jordan, “Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica,” 25.

³⁷ André Breton, “Souvenir du Mexique,” *Minotaure*, nos. 12-13 (May 1939): 40, quoted in Ilene Susan Fort and Tere Arcq, Introduction to *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States* (New York: Prestel Pub., 2012), 22; Madeline, “The Crisis of the Object/ Objects in Crisis,” 170.

alchemical and the occult traditions behind the creation of traditional objects.³⁸ However, this Surrealist idealization of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past remained disconnected from its material present.

The second ethnographic tract of thought was developed by Varo's employer and contemporary Wolfgang Paalen (1905-1959), who was born in Austria and moved to Paris, where he became a member of Surrealism's inner circle until his exile to Mexico in 1939.³⁹ Scholar Keith Jordan regards Paalen as the most self-conscious of the Surrealists because of his outward awareness and criticism of the Eurocentric exoticism that obscured the group's understanding of traditional Mexican culture.⁴⁰ As a dissident follower steeped in the collecting practices of Mexican archaeology and anthropology, he sought to blend art and science as a rational alternative to understanding the mythology behind material culture. By providing the latest interpretations of and scientific research on the cultures of western Mexico, Paalen hoped to construct a truer picture of Mexico's traditional reality.⁴¹ This approach was critical of Breton and Péret, who tended to ignore the cultural context of objects and poeticize Mexican reality. Furthermore, generally he viewed Mesoamerican artifacts as a way to connect people of different cultures by observing the universal formal similarities of objects, which he believed could then be

³⁸ Jordan, "Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica," 47.

³⁹ Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen*, xxv.

⁴⁰ Jordan, "Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica," 49.

⁴¹ Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen*, 72; Daniel Garza-Usabiaga, "Anthropology in the Journals *Dyn* and *El hijo pródigo*: A Comparative Analysis of Surrealist Inspiration," in *Surrealism in Latin America: Vivísmo Muerto*, eds. Dawn Ades, Rita Eder and Graciela Speranza (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), 95.

transferred to modern art.⁴² Such findings were disseminated via Paalen's *Dyn*, an eclectic journal that juxtaposed archaeology, ethnography, poetry, and modern art in the hopes that "art would reunite us with our prehistoric past."⁴³ This well-intended early platform for cultural engagement and public exposure in Mexico City, published in both English and French, did not do much to broaden art's public. It is believed that Paalen meant the publication to be more "practical," like a magazine, and provide accessible art reproductions and collapse the art market, a realm in which he ironically participated as a purveyor of Mexican antiquities.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, both tracts of thought struggled with transcending Eurocentric stereotypes, which reveals the extent of cultural uncertainty of the period and the ideological consequences of exile that shaped the Surrealist worldview.

For Remedios Varo Mexico offered a new start and an opportunity for reinvention and individual expression. Nevertheless, she broadened her focus and immersed herself within her new surroundings not only to understand Mexican culture, but also to continue involvement in the daily life of cultural activity, as she had done in Paris. Even while having to work to support herself and Péret, she consolidated her artistic skills and

⁴² This strategy is viewed as a direct attack on theories of scientific racism and evolutionary anthropology, which justified ideas perpetuated by fascism in Europe during the Second World War. For more on this, see Usabiaga, "Anthropology in the Journals *Dyn*," 98.

⁴³ Dawn Ades, Introduction to *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn Circle in Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), 3-6; *Dyn*, nos. 4-5 (1943), n.p. *Dyn* was published from 1942 to 1944.

⁴⁴ Carter Stone was Paalen's alias. Carter Stone and Wolfgang Paalen, "During the Eclipse," *Dyn*, no. 6 (1944): 17, quoted in Daniel Garza-Usabiaga, "Anthropology in the Journals *Dyn* and *El hijo pródigo*: A Comparative Analysis of Surrealist Inspiration," in *Surrealism in Latin America: Vivísimo Muerto*, eds. Dawn Ades, Rita Eder and Graciela Speranza (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), 106.

engaged in production that contributed to Mexico's scene of contemporary material culture, including furniture decoration for Mexico City's most fashionable decorator Claredecor; a seamstress and designer of costumes for the theatrical productions of Jean Giraudoux and Marc Chagall; and restoration of pre-Hispanic ceramics while working for Paalen on archaeological sites.⁴⁵ In true ethnographic Surrealist fashion, Varo developed a substantial personal collection of artifacts from the pre-Hispanic village Tlatilco and frequented the old markets of Mexico City in search of chance encounters with objects, which she used to decorate her home.⁴⁶ Her reality in Mexico was a mosaic of juxtaposing Surrealist objects, where magic and the marvelous was part of her everyday life. However, unlike that of her aforementioned male contemporaries, Varo's activities do not reveal a manipulation or decontextualization of pre-Hispanic art and indigenous material culture as she had exhibited with Parisian imagery in her collages (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). This is notable as I move forward in my analysis of her calendar illustrations for Casa Bayer, as she does not employ the formal qualities or myths/ legends of pre-Hispanic and indigenous cultural artifacts in her artwork – a point that is emphasized by her third husband Walter Gruen in her official catalogue raisonné.⁴⁷ Instead, it is the

⁴⁵ “Varo and Esteban Francés collaborated with Marc Chagall on the costume designs for the ballet *Aleko*, which premiered in Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts.” Gruen, “Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch,” 45; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 98.

⁴⁶ Varo and Péret's home was filled with cats, birds in cages, drawings by fellow Surrealists, stones, shells, quartz crystals, and pre-Hispanic artifacts – very similar to the cabinets of curiosities showcased at the *Exhibition of Surrealist Objects* in Paris years prior. *Ibid.*, 90, 104.

⁴⁷ See Varo's condensed biography by her third husband, Walter Gruen, who states “Nevertheless, it is true that, despite her immense admiration for pre-Columbian art and the wisdom contained in Mexican legends and myths, she never actually used them as sources of inspiration for her art.” Gruen, “Remedios Varo: A Biographical Sketch,” 45.

“traditional expression of a magical mentality” and contiguous inclusion within Mexico’s material present of her calendar pages that made her question her perception of the objects of her own mundane reality.⁴⁸ These she realized she could transform by viewing them through a surreal lens.

Varo and the Enterprise of Mexican Calendar Art

In 1943 when Remedios Varo began working as a freelance commercial artist making advertisements for Casa Bayer’s public health campaign in Mexico City, she was initially asked to design a calendar.⁴⁹ At the time, calendar advertisements were a popular publicity trend for major companies and commercial establishments to advertise products like cigarettes, tires, liquor, soap, or medicines by depicting them in exclusive calendars. The model was a practical object, easily reproducible as a graphic print, in an accessible style, and a dispensable art form. But because of this, many calendar images were not made with the intention of lasting over time, which is why so many do not exist today.⁵⁰ So far, scholars only know of two calendar pages by Varo that exist as autonomous gouaches in small intimate formats, but more may materialize if research on them

⁴⁸ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 130.

⁴⁹ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 108; Ricardo Ovalle and Walter Gruen, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado = Catalogue Raisonné* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1998), 251. There is a discrepancy between Janet Kaplan and Varo’s *Catalogue Raisonné* as to when the calendar pages were made. Therefore, they have a date range of 1943 to 1947.

⁵⁰ Héctor Palhares Meza and Minerva Mogollán García. Presentación to *Calendarios Mexicanos/ Mexican Calendars*. 1st ed, eds. Héctor Palhares Meza and Minerva Mogollán García (Mexico, D.F.: Fundación Carlos Slim, A.C., 2014), 272; Angela Villalba, *Mexican Calendar Girls: Golden Age of Calendar Art 1930-1960* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2006), 20.

continues.⁵¹ While Mexican calendar art was one significant moment in Mexico's cultural history, unfortunately much of the ephemera has been lost to time and can only be found in the collective memory of the people of Mexico. Nevertheless, Varo's calendar illustrations incorporate Surrealist visual language as part of a trendy form of modern Mexican commercial culture.

For each calendar page, Varo, rather than promoting Casa Bayer's pharmaceuticals, takes a very literal approach by illustrating seasonal changes and the dynamic meteorology of Mexico's climate and landscape. Yet, the apparently natural and ordinary world is transformed into a site of amusing secrets and transcendent creation. The swift coming of winter is seen in *Frío (Invierno)* (Fig. 1.3), which depicts a bird-human hybrid creature that rides atop a crystalline cloud and empties a bag filled with snow onto a wooded village below. Varo's technical focus on line and form, rather than color and tone (which are neutral and earthy), demonstrates her rational and analytical approach to art.⁵² The image's precise clarity resembles scientific documentation of the everyday, but is used to transcribe the supernatural world. Such fantasy is recognized at the top of the picture. At first glance, the spectral being gives the impression of a feathered god rooted in pre-Hispanic mythology or indigenous Mexican folklore. However, a concrete association of this kind would render Varo's imagery a product of a

⁵¹ Janet Kaplan is the first scholar to mention Remedios Varo's calendar pages for Casa Bayer. She does not provide any additional information on them other than the fact that they are calendar pages. These two illustrations are not discussed in any other publication. Therefore, I can only speculate on their ephemeral context and function. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 108.

⁵² Teresa Arcq, trans. Michelle Suderman, "Remedios Varo," in *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, eds. Stefan Van Raay, Joanna Moorhead, and Teresa Arcq, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate/Lund Humphries, 2010), 44-46.

multiplicity of cultural references based purely on similarities of other visual sources.

Instead, with Surrealist imagery one must ask, to what extent did Varo make things up?⁵³

The second calendar page illustration *Cambio de Tiempo* (Fig. 1.4), functions as another window into Varo's consciousness and how she views hidden myths of natural objects. Here, spring's arrival is signified by clouds that materialize out of a mountain and rain upon a town situated in a valley. The change in weather is orchestrated by an individual, whose arm extends from a shuttered window that is set into the cliff face. Varo explores these anthropomorphic character types, which are a continuous theme that Varo explores throughout both her personal and commercial work. Other Surrealist object-beings appear in earlier pieces like *Espíritus de la Montaña* (Fig. 1.5) (which translates to "Souls of the Mountains") where mountains possess human attributes, a possible inspiration for the spring calendar page. Moreover, later commissioned works, such as her theatrical designs for the Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón, integrate animal traits and natural objects with human forms in three-dimensional headdresses.⁵⁴ For example, the illustration *El Mundo* (Fig. 1.6) is a collage-like anthropomorphic embodiment of "the world." While Varo's calendar advertisements promoted a Surrealist truth where mundane objects of nature are transformed into marvelous, godlike acts of creation, contemporaneous Mexican calendar artists illustrated what they, and the Mexican public, embraced as heroic emblems of Mexican culture.

⁵³ "Undoubtedly, Varo made things up to a greater extent than we would be willing to admit," Teresa Del Conde, "Los Psicoanalistas y Remedios = Psychoanalysts and Remedios," in *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado = Catalogue Raisonné*, eds. Ricardo Ovalle and Walter Gruen (México, D.F: Ediciones Era, 1998), 20. For similar examples of Varo's imaginative bird-human creatures, see her sketches *Pájaro humano* (1943) and *Personaje pájaro* (1945) in Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catalogue Raisonné*, 246, 248.

⁵⁴ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 98-100.

From 1930 to 1960, calendar art in Mexico City developed into such a ubiquitous form of popular culture, that Remedios Varo is likely to have encountered its captivating imagery hanging in most businesses and homes (despite her unfamiliarity with authentic calendar art practices). Calendar advertisements reinforced people's optimism towards a modern way of life, could indicate how businesses supported Mexican culture, and participated in the nationalist campaign to exalt a unified Mexican identity via the marketplace.⁵⁵ As such, the industry grew with the help of government-funded programs that allowed artists and intellectuals to travel to remote regions and archaeological sites and record the material culture of the country's various indigenous groups.⁵⁶ Calendar artists inserted these ethnographic discoveries into picturesque landscapes and appropriated them into romantic heroic illustrations of Mexico's history, which became the stock-in-trade themes of the industry. Most Mexican calendar artists were illustrators and designers who accepted a range of commercial commissions to make a living, were regarded with disdain by contemporaneous fine art circles, and were typically not well-known or loyal to a vanguard style.⁵⁷ They were either freelance artists or worked on commission for printing workshops like Galas de Mexico. Galas was the largest printing workshop in downtown Mexico City. While it is likely that Varo's illustrations were

⁵⁵ Villalba, *Mexican Calendar Girls*, 12.

⁵⁶ "During Cárdenas's presidency, the government for the first time devoted vast resources toward archaeological excavation and anthropological and historical studies of the country's various indigenous groups," Fort, Introduction, 22; Villalba, *Mexican Calendar Girls*, 24.

⁵⁷ Palhares Meza, "Galas de México," 292.

printed there, there were only four women artists out of the 100 painters that Galas employed from 1930 up to the 1970s.⁵⁸

Galas de Mexico printed the works of freelance commercial artists like Jesús Helguera (1910-1971), who was hired by Cigarrera la Moderna to make calendars for their tobacco company.⁵⁹ His mention in this section serves as an example of what conventional Mexican calendar art looked like in comparison to Varo's Surrealist approach and her position as a fine artist in Mexico's commercial art realm. Helguera was an illustrator for the entirety of his artistic career and achieved popularity as the first well-known calendar painter by applying his academic art training to the nationalistic fashion of his day.⁶⁰ He portrayed Mexico's history in idealized heroic narratives, as seen in his infamous works *Cuauhtémoc* (Fig. 1.7) and *La Leyenda de Los Volcanes* (Fig. 1.8), which is why he became a recognizable and beloved style of Mexico.⁶¹ Helguera's selected imagery, like that of the post-Revolutionary art style *Mexicanidad*, includes traditional clothing, mountainous landscapes, flora and fauna, artifacts, architecture, and idealized god-like figures, which are seamlessly combined into grand history montages and then mechanically reproduced as vibrant chromolithograph prints.⁶² Despite the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 292.

⁵⁹ Gabriela Huerta Tamayo, "Cromos y nacionalismo," in *Calendarios Mexicanos/ Mexican Calendars*, eds. Héctor Palhares Meza and Minerva Mogollán García (Mexico, D.F.: Fundación Carlos Slim, A.C., 2014), 308-310.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 308.

⁶¹ Villalba, *Mexican Calendar Girls*, 17. These works are based on myths and folklore, like the legend of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl (Fig. 1.8).

⁶² Tamayo, "Cromos y nacionalismo," 310-311; Villalba, *Mexican Calendar Girls*, 23.

traditional style, most Mexican calendar artists worked in anonymity because commercial graphic design was not considered “real art” worthy of recognition.⁶³ On this matter,

historian Elia Espinosa notes:

Remember that the art of the marginalized, of those who painted alongside the recognized artists, offers another face of history: the non-official face that is also the basis for reconstructing the milestones of a possible history of everyday life where, with Helguera’s work accompanying the steam and sizzle of the kitchen... everything was experienced in closer contact.⁶⁴

This acknowledges a dialectical materialism, where calendar art not only silently marked time as Mexicans experienced social and cultural changes, but also recorded a visually legible history of everyday material culture.⁶⁵ Mexico’s material past and present are remolded and arranged into dream images by the subjective hand of the calendar artist to glorify the nation’s history and forge new experiences that incorporate modernity and mass visual culture.

As can be seen, Remedios Varo’s early calendar advertisements for the pharmaceutical company Casa Bayer are part of broader social and ideological currents. Like her fellow Surrealists transplanted to the unfamiliar setting of Mexico City, she looked to various outlets of Mexican cultural activity and became fluent in a new vernacular. By understanding how to treat different forms of material culture, she learned

⁶³ Villalba, *Mexican Calendar Girls*, 13.

⁶⁴ This is one translation by Elia Espinosa in *Jesús Helguera su Pintura, Una Reflexión* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, n.d.), 17, quoted in Meza, Héctor Palhares and Minerva Mogollán García. Presentación to *Calendarios Mexicanos/ Mexican Calendars*. eds. Héctor Palhares Meza and Minerva Mogollán García (Mexico, D.F.: Fundación Carlos Slim, A.C., 2014), 32, 282.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin is revisited in by Ben Highmore in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 71-72. “What Benjamin is aiming at is a collage practice that can arrange the materiality of modernity into a design that awakens it from its dreamscape and opens it out on to history (the awakening that he finds missing in Surrealism in general).

how to move seamlessly between them. Her approach to Mexican advertising incorporates the legacy of Surrealism with an ethnographic approach to everyday life. This reveals a conscious awareness that does not isolate Mexican culture to its pre-Hispanic past, but looks to its hybridized modern present where both forms continuously cross over. This signifies the beginning of Varo's Casa Bayer advertisements as Surrealist objects of culture and commodity.

CHAPTER 2
SURREALIST SENSIBILITIES OF HEALTH
AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

This chapter is devoted to select designs of Remedios Varo's pharmaceutical literature and public health announcements for Casa Bayer, S.A. that address maladies of the human condition. The creation of Mexico's Ministry of Health in 1943 marked the beginning of the country's modern health system that conducted localized research and provided public care, which Casa Bayer contributed with its marketing efforts.⁶⁶ By 1948, Casa Bayer had expanded its primary commercialization of over-the-counter pain medication and fully established themselves as the local manufacturer of a wide variety of pharmaceuticals in downtown Mexico City.⁶⁷ In covering such a vast range of individual products, its advertising style was not standardized and required a great deal of health expertise and creativity to reference a myriad of sources. At this point, Casa Bayer's advertising agency, Abastecedora de Impresos, reached out to Remedios Varo again in the hope that she would continue to take charge of all their publicity artwork and produce pamphlets.⁶⁸ Although she embarked on her yearlong sojourn to Venezuela in 1947 and took on a temporary position as a technical illustrator for epidemiological

⁶⁶ Carol Holtz, *Global Health Care: Issues and Policies*, 3rd ed. (Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2017), 586.

⁶⁷ Arcq, "Remedios Varo y la Casa Bayer," 11.

⁶⁸ Abastecedora de Impresos to Remedios Varo, February, 21, 1948, in Teresa Arcq, "Remedios Varo y la Casa Bayer," in *Cinco Llaves del Mundo Secreto de Remedios Varo*, ed. Margarita de Orellana (Mexico: Artes de México, 2008), 7. Arcq notes that at the time of this letter, Varo was already receiving checks for her work on the Casa Bayer calendars.

studies for the Ministry of Public Health in Maracay, Varo continued to produce advertisements for Casa Bayer's public health campaign.⁶⁹ A laundry list of requests appears in a letter, dated July 2, 1948, addressed to the artist by the Mexican advertising firm Abastecedora de Impresos:

1. Malaria: (representing jungles, swamps, fog, fantasy),
2. Pain: (Inquisition, torture, Middle Ages),
3. Vitamins: (oiling machines, etc.),
4. Rheumatism: (Sanctuary of Lourdes, representing crutches, objects pertaining to invalids, etc.),
5. Anesthesia: (old-fashioned, African witchcraft, Negroes drugged with smoke, etc.).⁷⁰

Without additional evidence aside from this brief letter, I can only speculate as to why the firm specifically requested such strange and violent subject matter as appropriate advertising imagery for a Mexican public. Nevertheless, Varo honored their requests, but exercised interpretative freedom.

As has been noted, Remedios Varo employed an ethnographic approach to her early calendar commissions for Casa Bayer to objectify the subjectivity of her own Surrealist perspective of the everyday. Now I will shift this focus to her medical illustrations of the corporeal as Surrealist conceptions of the human condition – a subjectivity that goes beyond the boundaries of the self. Scholars have not discussed many of the artworks that I will consider and the few that have are not recognized as signs connected to a larger context. For each illustration, I will look to supplementary conceptual and aesthetic constellations that address signifiers of the body or its maladies

⁶⁹ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 114.

⁷⁰ For one translation of this see: Abastecedora de Impresos to Remedios Varo, July 2, 1948, in Teresa Arcq, "Remedios Varo and Casa Bayer," in *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo*, ed. Margarita de Orellana, trans. Michelle Suderman (Mexico: Artes de México, 2008), 11.

and determine what they meant for Casa Bayer's public health reform campaign. This chapter will demonstrate how Varo employs Surrealism to address taboo health and hygiene topics, like pain and disease, for the public arena of Mexican advertising. I argue that the artist's pamphlets are multi-referential in incorporating the subjects solicited by the Mexican advertising firm Abastecedora de Impresos, enlisting stylistic devices, themes and motifs from a usable material past and present. Accordingly, I will analyze the shocking and melancholic iconography of Varo's *Dolor* series that references macabre medieval motifs to address the consumer's right to eliminate pain from rheumatoid arthritis. The second part of this chapter will explore Varo's adoption of the Surrealist hermetic tradition that appropriated the aesthetic of the Northern Renaissance to transfer her subjective visions of corporeal pain to the material sphere. Finally, I will address the disturbing surreal imagery of the artist's public service announcements for typhoid that accommodated a Mexican audience, which was perceived by Mexican publicity representatives as characteristically humorous and fatalistic. Given these points, Remedios Varo's Surrealist approach to taboo subjects furthered Casa Bayer's health care marketing effort of the twentieth century to effectuate positive behavioral change in Mexico City.

Surreal Martyrs of Modern Mexican Healthcare

The illustrations of Remedios Varo's pain series are the most visually upsetting of her advertisements and their iconography employs signs of the subject matter that Abastecedora de Impresos requested. These advertisements promoted Casa Bayer's

analgesic drugs Neo-melubrina, a stronger form of aspirin sold in Mexico often referred to as the “Mexican aspirin,” and Compral (Fig. 2.1).⁷¹ As essential parts of the company’s cultural heritage, whose Bayer name remains synonymous with alleviating pain to this day, it is no coincidence that Varo dedicated three artworks (Figs. 2.2, 2.3, 2.4) to these medications.⁷² The iconography of pain presents a creative challenge to the artist of the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, society had since developed a health culture that generalized privilege of the freedom from pain and regarded it like a disease that must be eradicated.⁷³ As such, the elimination of pain was a modern sensibility on which international pharmaceutical corporations like Bayer, A.G capitalized. From this cultural perspective, its advertising campaign in Mexico City appropriated the trope of the medieval that actively pursued physical suffering to control an individual’s behavior.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Lori Taylor, et al., “Use of Neo-Melubrina, a Banned Antipyretic Drug, in San Diego, California: A Survey of Patients and Providers,” *Western Journal of Medicine* 175, no. 3 (2001): 159.

⁷² Erik Verg, Gottfried Plumpe and Heinz Schultheis, *Milestones: The Bayer Story* (Leverkusen: Bayer AG, 1988), 134.

⁷³ Esther Cohen, “The Expression of Pain in the Later Middle Ages: Deliverance, Acceptance and Infamy,” in *Bodily Extremities: Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, ed. Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 195.

⁷⁴ While imagery of pain also permeates Catholic iconography and 95 percent of Mexicans were Catholic by 1945, tensions persisted between the church and state in Mexico City throughout the 1940s when Varo produced her Casa Bayer illustrations. Julio Moreno argues that a problematic discourse existed between the traditional and conservative values that the Catholic Church promoted and modernity, industrialization, and urbanity that was backed by the Mexican government, in *Yankee Don’t Go Home!*, 140, 172-173. “Church representatives in Mexico City did not openly reject industrial and commercial growth, but they did challenge the changes that modern industrial capitalism brought to Mexican society and they criticized its corruption of moral values brought about by consumption (‘antimodernism’), Moreno, *Yankee Don’t Go Home!*, 208-209. Avoiding this problematic discourse is one possible reason why the Mexican agency that produced Casa Bayer’s publicity requested medieval imagery rather than blatant Catholic subject matter in their letter to Remedios Varo.

Varo appropriates signifiers of pain from general iconography of medieval corporeal punishment to engage with the sensibilities of consumers afflicted with chronic pain, specifically rheumatoid arthritis. The series illustrates pain in increasing degrees of severity, which can be indicated by the advertisements' interchangeable titles that are accompanied by a roman numeral. It begins with *Dolor* (Pain) (Fig. 2.2) that features breaking the body on a wheel, which was a common sight in the Middle Ages.⁷⁵ The sadistic act is generally recognized by the body pulled taught in an "X" shape with restrained arms and legs.⁷⁶ Varo positions her male figure in this rigid manner, in turn exposing his vulnerability and helplessness, comparable to the physically debilitating joint stiffness symptomatic of arthritis.

The second illustration *Dolor Reumático I* (Rheumatic Pain) (Fig. 2.3) can be viewed as the second degree of pain in the series. It calls attention to the form of a woman who has been pinned to a rigid column by a knife through her back. While the shackles around her wrists and knife in her shoulder elicit horror from the viewer, these objects also strategically pinpoint the specific areas of the body most affected by rheumatic pain.⁷⁷ The female figure hangs her head defeatedly, indicative of a broken body enduring unbearable suffering that has succumbed to its fate.

Lastly, the third and most dynamic illustration of the series *Dolor Reumático II [Reuma, Lumbago, Ciática]* (Rheumatic Pain II [Rheumatism, Lumbago, Sciatica]) (Fig.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the various sources of the torture wheel, see Chapter 6 in Mitchell B. Merbeck, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press), 158-159.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

2.4) presents the most severe degree of rheumatic pain. This advertisement accompanied the following text: “As if sharp nails are being driven into the flesh... into the joints, into the bones, into the nerves...!!! These are the sensations that one can suffer.

Rheumatism... lumbago... sciatica..!!”⁷⁸ The body is bound from neck to ankle, pierced by nails or pins, and suspended.⁷⁹ The body’s arched back, head thrown back, splayed tense limbs, bent knees and sagging arms are suggestive of *crurifragium*, a merciless process where the individual struggles to be released.⁸⁰ In a way, Varo provided the viewer with a literal representation of the prickling sensation of pins-and-needles that is felt by those afflicted with arthritis or sciatica nerve pain.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Bayer promotional brochure, Gruen archive, quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988), 104.

⁷⁹ While there might be Catholic undertones to Varo’s *Dolor* series for Casa Bayer that include references to the crucifixion, saints, martyrs, and corporeal punishment for sins, I do not discuss these connections in this section for several reasons. First, Remedios Varo rejected the Catholicism of her early training because she was deeply affected by her father, who was more of an agnostic than a devout Catholic. She is quoted from an interview in Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 164, 224, as adamantly rejecting Catholicism and she does not explore this subject matter in her artwork until the end of her life and oeuvre. Secondly, I have chosen to primarily focus on the specific subject matter that was requested by the Mexican advertising agency and the accompanying text, which do not consider blatant signifiers of Catholic iconography. Lastly, Julio Moreno argues that “typically, American advertising agents and business executives in the 1940s (that did not fully understand Mexican culture) employed Mexico’s Catholicism and the country’s nationalist and revolutionary heritage as a marketing tool.” He provides an example of a Palmolive soap advertisement from 1945 that was circulated in Mexico City which employed an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This publicity decision angered conservative Mexican Catholic consumers and led to a boycott of the product, Moreno, *Yankee, Don’t Go Home!*, 130, 172-173. During this time, Casa Bayer was under the control of the Mexican government, that was cognizant of this problematic discourse and possessed more insights for appropriate publicity for a Mexican audience that did not exploit their religious values and beliefs.

⁸⁰ Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 118-119.

⁸¹ Janet A. Kaplan compares this image to Frida Kahlo’s work *Broken Column* (1944), which presents the artist in a state of pain with her body bound and pierced by nails. It was publicly known throughout Mexico City that Kahlo had suffered from continual pain caused by an accident that had crushed her pelvis and fractured her spine – imagery that she explicitly revisited in her paintings, Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 106-107.

Given these signifiers, the artist's intense spectacles of metaphorical brokenness utilized Surrealism to present a subjective and subconscious understanding of pain that science and reason alone cannot elucidate. Overall, these advertisements contributed to a developing modern perception of pain, catered to the desires of a consumer audience that sought alleviation from it, and translated what many endured into a visual form. As deeply personal and immersive imagery they also exploited a persuasive mechanism of advertising culture, where each tortured body becomes the viewer's body as well. Without realizing it, the consumer projects herself emotionally into each surreal image, triggering what is known as "imaginative empathy or an empathic imagination."⁸² However, this explanation alone does not justify the illustrations' melancholic and disturbing imagery. This begs the question, why does Varo's iconography of several of her Casa Bayer illustrations push the sensible consumer audience's capacity for shock to its limits and why was it not only publicly acceptable, but encouraged by the advertising firm that employed her? In an attempt to answer this, I present two theories.

Varo and Tradition

The Surrealist practice of referencing a usable material past is one strategy that Varo employed to illustrate the relationship between the corporeal and symptoms of malaise. The artist's commercial work for Casa Bayer is the first instance in her oeuvre where she engages with the history of art. Most often, the resemblance is not a direct quotation but rather due to a similarity of the creative process. Her treatment of medical

⁸² Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 30-31.

phenomena, containing elements such as checkerboard floors, atmospheric perspective and hybrid creatures, suggests general affinities with Northern Renaissance art.

Remedios Varo's interest in "primitive painters" began long before her commercial work for Casa Bayer.⁸³ The collaboration provided the opportunity to tap the imagery of her mental museum composed of bygone artworks that she admired since childhood. The artist's biographer, Janet Kaplan, claims that as a young girl and art student, the artist frequented the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid and was entranced by the works of Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516) that were pivotal to Spain's cultural heritage.⁸⁴ Quotations from such primary sources found their way into the Casa Bayer illustrations and subsequent pieces as filtered through her mature consciousness, which demonstrates their everlasting impression on her oeuvre and life. Varo's formative years were particularly dominated by admiration for the "proto-surreal" Northern Renaissance painter, Bosch, with whom she shares several technical devices including: drawing from everyday observation, meticulous control of surface, sharp focus of all objects in the picture, and miniaturist execution.⁸⁵ The artist's revival of this aesthetic to illustrate her dream-like imagery within her Aspirin pamphlets grants even her most outlandish images an air of plausibility and authenticity – a meeting of the real and the unreal.

⁸³ As an Academy-trained European, "primitive painters" referred to Renaissance masters. Luis Islas García, "Remedios Varo: En pintura me interesa lo místico, lo misterioso," interview in uncited newspaper, n.d., n.p., quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988), 191.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁸⁵ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 191-192; Celia Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 61; Rosa Berland, "Remedios Varo's Mexican Drawings," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 4, no. 1 (2010): 38.

For many Surrealists like Varo, Bosch's visionary art provided historical context, an encyclopedia of psychologically disturbing images, and unconventional sources of inspiration.⁸⁶ Indeed, by the 1930s, the Northern Renaissance master (and by extension Peter Bruegel the Elder [1525-1569]) had already been incorporated into the Surrealist canon.⁸⁷ Their paintings were hailed as precursors of Surrealism's investigations of the irrational and nonsensical and served as model methods of disrupting and dismantling societal conventions.⁸⁸ Surrealist scholar Celia Rabinovitch supports this declaration in her claim that, "In Bosch, the Surrealists found a grotesque and secret iconography that was, by definition, a Surrealist form of painting."⁸⁹ Of those Surrealists who also found an affinity with Northern Renaissance art, Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) is the most notable within the context of this research. Not only was she an exile in Mexico City, but she was also Remedios Varo's closest friend – so much so, that Ara H. Merjian credits Varo's artistic quotations of Bosch as filtered through Carrington's precedent.⁹⁰ Like her friend, Carrington had also traveled through Spain and gone to the Prado, where she was

⁸⁶ For noteworthy examples that are repeatedly referenced by Surrealists, see Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1480-1490) and *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (c.1490); Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 60-61.

⁸⁷ This was evidenced by "Alfred Barr's landmark 1936 *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* exhibition (and widely circulated catalogue) that included three works attributed to Bosch and his school, an inclusion that cemented Breton's assimilation of Northern Renaissance imagery to Surrealist ends," Ara H. Merjian, "'Genealogical gestation': Leonora Carrington Between Modernism and Art History," in *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde*, eds. Jonathan P. Eburne and Catriona McAra (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 47.

⁸⁸ Merjian, "'Genealogical gestation,'" 48.

⁸⁹ Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 61.

⁹⁰ Merjian, "'Genealogical gestation,'" 48.

deeply impressed by the works of Bosch and Bruegel.⁹¹ As such, her oeuvre confirms that she developed an ability to seamlessly blend their techniques of Northern Renaissance painting with surreal imagery.⁹²

Art historian Whitney Chadwick refers to this Surrealist crafting of historicism and exploration of medieval and Renaissance styles as the “hermetic tradition,” which was typically exhibited by women Surrealists.⁹³ This is evidence in Varo’s pain series, where Romanesque and Gothic architectural spaces house her afflicted figures. In *Dolor* (Fig. 2.2), looming towers with conical roofs representative of medieval battlements surround the male figure.⁹⁴ Similar towers protect a castle that is sharply silhouetted against an expanse of land and sky in *Dolor Reumático II* (Fig. 2.4).⁹⁵ Of equal importance is her miniaturist technique of the Gothic canopy of ribbed groin vaults, pointed arches, and checkered floor that frames the cathedral-like hollow space in *Dolor Reumático I* (Fig. 2.3).⁹⁶ At the same time, these recognizable art historical motifs, which

⁹¹ Ara H. Marjian believes that Carrington’s exchanges with Max Ernst also fueled her interest in the Northern Renaissance and its legacies, both in terms of painting and the practices of alchemy: Ibid, 44-48.

⁹² Merjian, “Genealogical gestation,” 48.

⁹³ Ghislaine Wood, *The Surreal Body: Fetish and Fashion* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 51; Whitney Chadwick includes Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington in her discussion of this tradition in *Women Artists and the Surrealism Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson), 177.

⁹⁴ Marilyn Stokstad, *Medieval Castles* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 44-45.

⁹⁵ An additional Casa Bayer advertisement of a castle/ fortress shooting projectiles from its towers is *La Batalla* (1947) in Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 96; Stokstad, *Medieval Castles*, 44-45.

⁹⁶ Varo revisits this exact architectural setting in a later work titled *Vegetal Cathedral* (1957). For a discussion of it see Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 188-190.

Varo would repeatedly revisit in later works, satisfied the advertising agency's request for depictions of the "Middle Ages" and the "Sanctuary of Lourdes."

In utilizing the same visual equation in each advertisement – a singular tortured figure that inhabits an architectural setting of silence and immobility within a foreboding psychic desert – one wonders if the artist's strange and melancholic imagery inadvertently reveals an underlying narrative that was also inherent to exile. Anguish, violence, isolation, and loss that connect to a world of turmoil, dislocation, and war. If these artistic quotations from her past show Varo at her most characteristically Surrealist, then perhaps they also function as poetic recollections of a personal history disturbed by exile. Her pain series exemplifies exile in its broadest definition that distinguishes it as a constant shift of memories and experiences of the past, real and imagined, with a consciousness of the present.⁹⁷

Raising Mexican Public Health Awareness with Black Humor

For my second argument, I propose that Remedios Varo's macabre surreal imagery simultaneously accommodated an intrinsically humorous and fatalist Mexican culture, as it was perceived by Mexican advertising agents. This discussion employs Russell Maddicks' definition of fatalism as, "a resignation that the worst will probably happen, that some inevitable doom is just around the corner, and that life is hard and

⁹⁷ Francois Forster-Hahn, "Max Beckmann in California: Exile, Memory, and Renewal," in *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture*, eds. Sabine Eckmann and Lutz P. Koepnick (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 18.

pleasure fleeting.”⁹⁸ While this fatalistic outlook is believed to have derived from Mexico’s violent past, specifically regarding pre-Hispanic Aztec society, it was reanimated within the context of modern Mexican consumer culture.⁹⁹ During the 1940s, discussions of national identity prompted Mexican advertising firms to project values and ideals that were uniquely Mexican in national advertising.¹⁰⁰ Publicity representatives like Fernando Carrillo believed that the “Mexican experience” blended struggle, humor, and fatalism, a national character type that was concurrently introduced in the Mexican literature of writers like Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, avant-garde artists in Mexico discovered this for themselves through their interest in Aztec culture.

While Remedios Varo’s pain series illustrated fatalism bereft of humor, her public service announcements for Casa Bayer’s campaign against the spread of disease is representative of the seamless blending of humor and fatalism. The two examples that I will discuss were created while Varo was employed as a technical illustrator in the malaria-control division for the Ministry of Public Health in Venezuela, where she learned about disease and its effects on the local populations. She applied her scientific knowledge of disease to Casa Bayer’s own public health reform campaign in Mexico and

⁹⁸ Russell Maddicks, *Mexico – Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture* (London: Kuperard, 2017), 61.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ “This was also a response to criticism that Mexican advertising had lost its unique character as a result of the changes it experienced in the 1940s... and in its efforts to ‘catch up’ with international advertising,” Moreno, *Yankee Don’t Go Home!*, 109-110.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

aided in lending severity to the issue of pandemics that were sweeping Mexico City at the time.

Death is explicitly personified in the illustration *El Hombre de la Guadaña* [*Muerte en el Mercado*] [*Tifoidea*] (The Man of the Scythe [Death in the Market] [Typhoid]) (Fig. 2.5).¹⁰² This public service announcement warned of the origin and fatal consequence of typhoid, a bacterial disease spread by contaminated food and water. Death is presented as a disguised skeletal figure wielding a scythe who occupies a popular Mexican public space – an open-air market. Fittingly, the figure is placed amidst fruit and vegetable stands, akin to those that filled the old markets Varo would frequent in Mexico City.¹⁰³ In this context, the image partakes in a tradition of animated, humorous *calaveras* (skeletons) as a prolific icon of modern Mexican culture that derived from the aesthetic lineage of Mexican illustrator José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913).¹⁰⁴ Renowned artists in Mexico City like Diego Rivera, who was Varo's contemporary, reinterpreted Posada's costumed *calaveras* as aligned with the Aztec appreciation of death.¹⁰⁵ Scholar Joseph Defalco Lamperez claims that to restore and integrate this

¹⁰² It is noted that icons of death are perpetuated by culture. My discussion of death is not an exhaustive exploration of the topic, but rather one that focuses on a prominent example of it in popular culture. There are no known scholars who have discussed this artwork, therefore much remains to be discussed that exceeds the parameters of this research.

¹⁰³ Moorhead, "Surreal Friends in Mexico," 80-82.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Defalco Lamperez argues that "Posada's skeletons provided the aesthetic link between modern art, pre-Columbian art, and popular art." For more on his influence on modern art, see Joseph Defalco Lamperez, "The Aztecs and Urban Form in Georges Bataille, Diego Rivera, and J.G. Posada," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 49, no. 4 (December 2016): 145-166.

¹⁰⁵ Rivera's reading of Posada parallels the efforts of Mexican bureaucrats who wanted to form a state-sponsored model of cultural hybridity that incorporated the practices and beliefs of their European colonizers and indigenous populations. However, Posada's own contemporaries did not make this same

sensibility within the modern public consciousness, Rivera incorporated his reading of Posada in the popular Mexican celebration *Día de los Muertos* with the objective of cultivating a respect for and discussion of death as one's inevitable fate.¹⁰⁶ Surely Varo was familiar with the *calaveras* of the hybrid holiday that commemorated All Soul's Day.¹⁰⁷ Her composite illustration of death as both dreadful reaper and animated *calavera* juxtaposes popular iconography that encourages associations with typhoid in the collective imagination. The sign was intended to strike the consciousness of the public before the illness did. Moreover, the pamphlet exemplifies Casa Bayer's health care marketing effort by communicating the uncertain and often unforeseeable danger of everyday foods and water and their potential to cause bodily harm.

The second and most discussed example in scholarship on Remedios Varo is *Amibiasis [Los Vegetales] [Tifoidea, paratifoidea]* (Amoebiasis [The Vegetables] [Typhoid, paratyphoid]) (Fig. 2.6). The pamphlet also alerted the public about how fruit and vegetables contaminated by infected water could cause typhoid, paratyphoid and dysentery. Accordingly, the image adapts the classic genre of traditional still life painting to illustrate a detailed observational study of tainted produce.¹⁰⁸ Close examination

connection to his works, Lamperez, "The Aztecs and Urban Form," 146-147; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 133.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Defalco Lamperez provides two mural examples by Rivera that are located in Mexico City where he incorporated death (by depicting a *calavera*) in a public space to restore an experience of and respect for death that had been lost to the modern era. These examples include *Día de Lost Muertos* (1924) and *Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central* (1946-1947), Lamperez, "The Aztecs and Urban Form," 146-147.

¹⁰⁷ According to Lamperez, it was during the early twentieth century that *Día de los Muertos* developed into a hybrid tradition of European and indigenous practices, *Ibid.*, 146-153.

¹⁰⁸ Tere Arcq compares this still life to those popular in sixteenth-century Spain in "Remedios Varo," 8.

reveals anthropomorphized microbes that command attention by waving scythes and machetes used to debase the produce.¹⁰⁹ The swarm of spiny-skinned parasites is equally evocative of Varo's personal fear of insects and disease.¹¹⁰ But rather than shy away from these inescapable subjects, the artist simultaneously confronted and exorcised her fears through her work, which she typically addressed with this characteristic humor.¹¹¹ As such, the microscopic bacteria in *Amibiasis* are given corporeal forms, allowing them to enter the macroscopic realm and magnifying a health anxiety to an unavoidable danger: "Typhoid, paratyphoid, dysentery – they hide in fruits and vegetables of such seductive appearance."¹¹² Although Varo had the ability to illustrate expertly and accurately epidemiological studies related to her job at the Ministry, she instead chose this comical approach that enlists macabre surreal juxtaposition. Lusty attributes this to Varo's Surrealist sense of black humor, where food is both vital for life, but also a threat.¹¹³ The injection of whimsical fantasy contrasts with the use of a traditionally mimetic aesthetic to address a serious issue and promote vaccines for the prevention of diseases, which appears in the illustration's textual context (Fig. 2.7).

¹⁰⁹ Scholar Natalya Frances Lusty connects this work to the artist's personal copy of the popular book on microbiology, *Microbe Hunters* (1926) in "Art, Science and Exploration," 65.

¹¹⁰ Varo returns to images of insects and insect-human hybrids in many of her subsequent works, Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 114; Other Surrealists also favored this subject and sought deep psychological readings in insects. For one comparable example, see Gene Kritsky, et. al, "Surreal Entomology: The Insect Imagery of Salvador Dalí," *American Entomologist* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 28-37.

¹¹¹ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 114.

¹¹² Bayer promotional brochure, Gruen archive, quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988), 114.

¹¹³ Lusty, "Art, Science and Exploration," 63-64.

In my analysis of Remedios Varo's pharmaceutical advertisements for Casa Bayer, I try to offer a more layered reading of their artistic intent and social purpose. There is no better example of Surrealist art where a fascination with the spectacle of violence erupts into an understanding of the everyday world. The illustrations become even more striking in the context of modern public health reform and cutting-edge medical research that was conducted in South America because they address the subjective understanding of malaise and disease that science and reason alone cannot elucidate. Varo employed Surrealism to visually translate abstract sensibilities of pain and objectify disease into something more tangible, making it easier for Mexican viewers to conceive of the reality of their condition. Her advertisements provided an aesthetic experience of the human condition in a commodified age that syncretizes a deep understanding of art history and modern health reform of the twentieth century. Indeed, the illustrations were informed as much by her indelible experiences in Mexico City as by her ties to Surrealism.

Varo represents mimetic situations just as she represents the whimsical objects and creatures that inhabit them – with the same clinical clarity and attention to detail. At the same time, there are undertones of black humor that make light of taboo subjects.¹¹⁴ In a way, this approach simultaneously appealed and communicated messages to a Mexican community that was defined by a humorous and fatalistic character through the lens of consumerism. Collectively, the illustrations succeed in transmitting advisories,

¹¹⁴ Jonathan P. Eburne attributes the employment of black humor in artwork to Varo's very close friend and contemporary, Leonora Carrington in "Leonora Carrington, Mexico, and the Culture of Death," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 5, no. 1-2 (2011): 19-32; Lusty, "Art, Science and Exploration," 63-64.

raising health awareness, diffusing information, and advocating consumer behavior and public attitudes toward social issues. Having examined how Remedios Varo set new aesthetic standards for pharmaceutical advertising that emphasized the imagination and usable material culture as valid and effective sources, we can now turn to the question of how she negotiated her artistic identity in the commercial world.

CHAPTER 3
SURREALIST ADVERTISING: A CATALYST FOR
FEMALE CREATIVE AGENCY

This chapter deviates from biographical chronology to retroactively place Remedios Varo's illustrative work for Casa Bayer, S.A. within the broader context of the shifting roles of women Surrealists, which intersected with the realm of advertising. Mexico's survival in modern industrial capitalism relied upon developments at both global and local levels. The 1940s marked a time when Mexican government officials focused their efforts to make the country a modern consumer society in an international market, viewing advertising as the driving force behind commercial growth.¹¹⁵ Respectively, advertising became synonymous with service to the Mexican nation and those within the commercial realm of publicity contributed to national narratives.¹¹⁶ Amidst a world of emerging networks of globalization, Mexican advertising agencies looked outward to adapt successful models of the culture industries and advertising strategies of Europe and the United States.¹¹⁷ In their research agenda, Mexican publicity agents must have been aware of Surrealism as a trending modernist sensibility used in Western publicity, especially following a decade of transatlantic voyages of European

¹¹⁵ Moreno, *Yankee Don't Go Home!*, 16-25.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-25.

exiles and their modernisms to the Americas.¹¹⁸ As such, it was not coincidental that those Surrealists who primarily settled in Mexico City possessed immigration papers instructing them “to pursue remunerative activities” with few restrictions.¹¹⁹ Under the condition of exile, the language of Surrealism became easily translatable as a mode of Mexican commodification when a small handful of advertising campaigns commissioned women Surrealists, including Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) and Kati Horna (1912-2000), as commercial illustrators. Comparable to the French circles of Surrealism, it was unusual for women to actively participate within a predominantly male domain. As educated, white European women who settled in a commune of women exiles in Mexico City, they were simultaneously marginalized and privileged as being outsiders from convention, which allowed them to pursue such non-traditional professions.¹²⁰ Their careers denote an era when not only did the power of the female

¹¹⁸ Rachel Barron-Duncan references countless examples of Surrealism as it was employed in both European and American advertising throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Notable European images include, Advertisement for Salubra et Tekko, *Vogue* [Paris] (October 1929): 149; Advertisement for Le Pirate, Forêt Vierge, Lotus d’Or, and Asphodèle perfumes by Lenthéric. *Vogue* [Paris] (Mars-Juin 1929), which are featured in Barron-Duncan, “Transatlantic Translations,” 1-33. Additional examples, specifically by Salvador Dalí that were circulated in the United States, include Advertisement for Bryans (stockings), 1948 among others featured in Barry Hoffman, *Irreverent, Irrepressible, Irresistibly Ironic: The Fine Art of Advertising* (New York, NY: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2002). Furthermore, see Alfred Schulze’s photographs taken of the Pavillon de l’Elegance at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne de Paris* (1937) that were published in the fashion magazines *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Femina*, and *Vogue*, which are featured in Wood, *The Surreal Body*, 18-25.

¹¹⁹ Varo’s immigration papers, Gruen archive, quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press), 85.

¹²⁰ Accounts of Mexican women who developed professional careers in advertising during the 1930s and 1940s are rare. However, Julio Moreno argues that “capitalist development in Mexico City ‘liberated’ women from traditional domestic roles.” He presents the success story of Juanita Guerra Rangel, who made her way as a leading advertising representative in Mexico City for the Nestle corporation. While she did not work as a commercial illustrator like Varo, she gained national and international recognition as the first woman president of the Asociación Nacional de Publicidad in 1943. Moreno, *Yankee Don’t Go Home!*, 82-83, 111. Moorhead, “Surreal Friends in Mexico,” 76.

consumer come into focus, but also creative women plunged into the stigmatized zones of the avant-garde and advertising.

Despite the cultural banality associated with the advertising industry, for many women Surrealists it was a means to support themselves, expand their roles in society, and inspire their creative pursuits. To understand Remedios Varo's Surrealist challenges to Mexican advertising, so far, I have looked at how she located the surreal in everyday material culture and employed it to speak to the unconscious of the consumer. This final chapter examines how Varo used her problematic background as a woman Surrealist to her advantage in her position as a female commercial illustrator. While scholarship presents the lives of exiled women Surrealists who achieved upward social mobility and female agency in Mexico as progressive, the concurrent restrictions they encountered in both bourgeois and consumer culture, notably the conflicting conventions of modern womanhood, should not be overlooked. This chapter addresses these polarized roles of the emerging New Woman, dictated by outmoded (traditional) and vanguard (modern) cultural trends. I argue that the advertising industry enabled Remedios Varo to occupy a cultural middle ground that syncretized both of these coexistent gender roles within Mexican culture, which she visually perpetuated in her publicity illustrations for Casa Bayer, S. A. This chapter will demonstrate shifting notions of artistic and professional identity of women Surrealists as they evolved within the commercial culture that characterized the modern period of twentieth century history. Accordingly, I will explore the limited roles of women artists as icons of the Surrealist feminine within the movement's original canon and the alternative outlets they entered that allowed them to

break from these roles. The second part of this chapter will investigate how the Surrealist interest in French design and fashion of the 1930s legitimized the creative agency of women artists, brought the movement into a direct relationship with commodification, and established Surrealism as an international mode of advertising. Finally, I will situate Remedios Varo in relation to feminism and Surrealism as they matured in Mexico City and address her pharmaceutical illustrations of women as examples of the conflicting female duality of modern Mexican womanhood. In pursuing professional opportunities to break from their Parisian pasts, exiled women Surrealists simultaneously found ways to translate modern European sensibilities into viable commercial forms of Mexican commodification and comment on woman's roles in an industrial society.

From Muse to Modern Woman

Women Surrealists, many of whom joined André Breton's circle in Paris in the 1930s when it was in decline, were fully cognizant of the polarized position they held within the group.¹²¹ As seen with Remedios Varo, not only love drew women artists who became partners of the male Surrealists into the movement, but also the chance to have personal freedom.¹²² Extensive literature has been devoted to understanding this conflict between romantic dependency and revolutionary autonomy, shedding light on the various

¹²¹ Annette Shandler Levitt, *The Genres and Genders of Surrealism* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 68.

¹²² Salomon Grimberg, "Guided by the Invisible: The Psyche of Women Surrealists," in *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*, eds. Ilene Susan Fort, Teresa Arcq and Dawn Ades (New York, NY: Prestel Pub., 2012), 200-205.

ways in which women Surrealists renegotiated their appointed roles.¹²³ The important work on feminism and surrealism by Whitney Chadwick continues to remain relevant regarding the objectified positions of these women by their male counterparts. Chadwick argues that in their early careers the Surrealist woman took on many guises: muse, virgin, and *femme-enfant*, on the one hand, and sorceress, *cadavre exquis*, *femme fatale*, and erotic object, on the other.¹²⁴ In addition to struggling against family-imposed social conventions of the times and male-dominated bourgeois culture, women artists also had to circumvent the limited roles placed on them by the movement, which denied them creative agency and a sense of self.¹²⁵

Within the imagination of Breton and other men in the group (including Benjamin Péret), one icon of the Surrealist feminine was the *femme-enfant* – “a volatile mix of sexual awareness and childlike ingenuousness.”¹²⁶ Through her compliant passivity and naïveté, this “woman-child” possessed a spontaneous innocence that brought her into closer contact with the irrational, an artistic source for the male Surrealists.¹²⁷ As scholars Ilene Susan Fort and Teresa Arcq concisely conclude, “woman thus became the agency

¹²³ For studies that explore this view, see Gloria Feman Orenstein, “Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism,” *The Journal of General Education* 27, no. 1 (1975): 31; Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Gloria Gwen Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

¹²⁴ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 13, 458.

¹²⁵ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 56-57.

¹²⁶ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 74.

¹²⁷ Fort and Arcq, Introduction to *In Wonderland*, 19; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 56-57.

by which male Surrealists created.”¹²⁸ Their invention of woman as muse, who was sanctioned as the only being capable of translating the reality that lied beyond consciousness, was an abstract principle that personified the female as other in relation to their male selves.¹²⁹ Because Surrealism was formed only by men, and no women appear on the lists of original members, it is not surprising that its women followers brought different perspectives and new dialogues that would gradually expand and mature the movement.¹³⁰

The objectives of ethnographic Surrealism discussed in Chapter 1 apply to male artists who also employed this same approach for investigating otherness to attempt to understand their female contemporaries. Through this lens, they exalted woman as a “Surrealist discovery,” or the elusive tangible evidence (living proof) that was encountered when the marvelous erupted into the world of everyday reality.¹³¹ By taking a position among the varying categories of Surrealist objects, including the collages of dismembered female bodies in *Exquisite Corpses* (see Chapter 1), women artists became object-beings holding surreal potential. As ethereal mediators and sexually charged sorceresses they could reveal the power of the imagination, but they also inhabited a plane that was out of touch with real women of the modern world. In defiance of gender marginalization that rendered them other rather than self, women Surrealists rejected the

¹²⁸ Fort, Introduction to *In Wonderland*, 19.

¹²⁹ Inés Ferrero Cándenas, “Reconfiguring the Surrealist Gaze: Remedios Varo's Images of Women,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 88, no. 4 (2011): 456-458.

¹³⁰ Grimberg, “Guided by the Invisible,” 201.

¹³¹ Ferrero Cándenas, “Reconfiguring the Surrealist Gaze,” 458.

canon's metaphorical assemblage of woman and set out to reclaim their identities as subject, not fetishized object.¹³²

In light of this, how did women Surrealists of the 1930s expand the established parameters of the movement to include their perspective? Chadwick argues that only after leaving the Surrealist circle could women break out of these roles to become creators in their own right.¹³³ While exile to the Americas might provide this rupture, there are several additional outlets to consider. First and foremost, isolation from the ideology that informed the work of their male counterparts led women artists to turn to their personal experiences for inspiration.¹³⁴ Many adapted Surrealist principles to gain self-awareness, reflect on traumas and nightmares, and explore inner thoughts and feelings.¹³⁵ Through this self-representation the muse could transition to that of the creator. Women often defined their relationship to Surrealism by the meaningful friendships, networks of close-knit bonds, and support systems they established within the larger group.¹³⁶ They matured both artistically and domestically, taking charge of their careers while caring for their families, which effectively broke the spell of the eternally youthful *femme-enfant*. Intriguingly, the most reactionary development of Surrealism that accommodated women, both outside and within the movement, was its role in international fashion,

¹³² Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender Politics and the Avant-Garde* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 26.

¹³³ Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "Surrealism and Misogyny," in *Surrealism and Women*, eds. Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Gloria Gwen Raaberg (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 19.

¹³⁴ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 95.

¹³⁵ Fort, Introduction to *In Wonderland*, 27.

¹³⁶ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 55-56.

which defied the beliefs of Breton and led to the excommunication of more than one member.¹³⁷

Surrealism á la mode

Throughout the 1930s, the Surrealist interest in French design and fashion helped to legitimize the presence of women artists in its ranks and bring the movement into a direct relationship with commodification and consumption. This pursuit was a lesser-discussed result of calls to political action and for women's rights, which simultaneously occurred at different rates in other countries competing on the global stage, like the United States and Mexico. Western European women emerged from the prior decade having aided in the efforts of the First World War, marched to demand better job opportunities, and demanded suffrage.¹³⁸ A "New Woman" dominated the popular imagination – autonomous, independent, and liberated from the stifling domestic captivity of late Victorian culture.¹³⁹ In turn, one of her ultimate commitments to modernity was adapting to growing consumer culture, which was accomplished in two ways: through her power to shape and adorn her body and to purchase goods.¹⁴⁰ In 1931, a study conducted by the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, which employed

¹³⁷ Angela Miller, "'With Eyes Wide Open:' The American Reception of Surrealism," in *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture*, eds. Sabine Eckmann and Lutz P. Koepnick (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 68.

¹³⁸ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 14-16.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴⁰ Dara Persis Murray, "The Entangled Politics of Feminists, Feminism, Advertising, and Beauty: A Historical Perspective," in *Feminists, Feminisms, and Advertising*, eds. Kim Golombisky and Peggy J. Kreshel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 72-73.

Remedios Varo as an illustrator when she had lived in Paris, found that 85% of advertised products were purchased by women.¹⁴¹ Over the course of the decade, advertisers commissioned women artists to reach this new, more complex female consumer, enlisting Surrealism as a stylistic tool.

Surrealism's revolutionary beginnings as a movement that sought to defy bourgeois cultural norms coincided with the appearance of regular contributions to fashion magazines made by male Surrealist artists, like Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) and Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978).¹⁴² As an artistic mode that seemed to speak to the subconscious, advertising agencies exploited the style's use of psychology as an apparent means to access the unconscious desires of consumers, grab attention, and harness the power of suggestion.¹⁴³ By the same token, when the Surrealist object (as discussed in Chapter 1) became essential to Surrealist expression during the 1930s as the ideal synthesis of theory and practice, it concurrently irrupted into the industry of fashion and jewelry.¹⁴⁴ One way that women Surrealist's gained entry into mass media and popular culture was through their reclamation of the Surrealist object as derivative of female products (i.e. fashion accessories, household items, jewelry) that play on feminine attributes. This complemented their identities as active subjects and signified a work of art made by a woman. They excelled at creatively manipulating female products into Surrealist objects, incorporating handicraft skills that were essential to every girl's

¹⁴¹ Barron-Duncan, "Transatlantic Translations," 26.

¹⁴² Ibid., 1-3.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 21-22.

¹⁴⁴ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 118.

upbringing that were honed in careers as freelance designers in the fashion industry.¹⁴⁵

Advertising was a new genre, like photography, film and design, part of the changing

sociocultural climate and not steeped in centuries-old male tradition.¹⁴⁶ Women

Surrealists who accepted commissions as publicity illustrators possessed an advantage as

both producer and primary consumer. As artists who explored inner psychology, women

surrealists were hired with the belief that they could tap into the desires of the female

consumer.¹⁴⁷

In 1936, the French fashion magazine *Vogue* and American fashion magazine

Harper's Bazaar predicted that Surrealism would infiltrate culture everywhere – a

development, that I argue, in part was aided by the efforts of women Surrealists who

straddled the worlds of commercial and fine art and expertly synthesized the objectives of

both.¹⁴⁸ As confirmation of the movement's growing global significance and flexible

integration within the commercial sector, *International Exhibitions of Surrealism* took

place in the cultural capitals of London (1936), Tokyo (1937), Amsterdam (1938), Paris

(1938), Mexico City (1940) and New York (1942).¹⁴⁹ Each included artwork, Surrealist

objects, Exquisite Corpses, and fashion and jewelry designs by women artists among

¹⁴⁵ Dilys Blum, "Fashion and Surrealism," in *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design*, ed. Ghislaine Wood (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 141; Angela Lampe, "'Prenez garde aux objets domestiques' or Female Home Advantage in Surrealism," in *Surreal Objects: Three-Dimensional Works from Dalí to Man Ray*, eds. Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 80-81.

¹⁴⁶ Lampe, "Female Home Advantage in Surrealism," 81.

¹⁴⁷ Jackie Dickenson, *Australian Women in Advertising in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

¹⁴⁸ Blum, "Fashion and Surrealism," 156-159.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

those of their male contemporaries. While the group exhibitions demonstrate that Surrealists began to see their female counterparts as capable of revolutionary action, it serves as a sobering reminder that only after the mid-1930s did women begin to exhibit with the movement. Remedios Varo was one of the minority who infiltrated Surrealism's gender barriers and participated in four of the international exhibitions.¹⁵⁰ Specifically, I call attention to her gouache *Recuerdo de la Walkyria* (Memory of the Valkyrie [Imprisoned Ivory] [Wild Ivory]) (Fig. 3.1) that debuted in the show in Mexico City at the Galería de Arte Mexicano in 1940. Not only was this Mexico's first contact with the Surrealist movement, but, as Arcq points out, "it was one of the first times that pieces directly confronting gender roles were exhibited in Mexico."¹⁵¹ The artwork references the Scandinavian legend of the Valkyries – notoriously beautiful women warriors of prestige and power who donned splendid armor.¹⁵² However, Varo illustrates the precursor to their armor as an outmoded, confining corset, a memento of womanhood that the Valkyries long abandoned in order to become warriors. Varo's decision to exhibit this metaphorical piece as representative of her work shows her self-awareness about the true placement of women in society and Surrealism.

¹⁵⁰ Remedios Varo's catalogue raisonné reveals that she exhibited at least one artwork in each *International Exhibition of Surrealism* in Tokyo (1937), Paris (1938), Amsterdam (1938), and Mexico City (1940). Her *L'agent Double* [*El Agente Doble*] (Fig. 1.2) debuted in Amsterdam. Ovalle, *Remedios Varo: Catálogo Razonado*, 320.

¹⁵¹ Teresa Arcq, "In the Land of Convulsive Beauty: Mexico," in *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*, eds. Ilene Susan Fort, Teresa Arcq and Dawn Ades (New York, NY: Prestel Pub., 2012), 68.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

Female Duality in Mexico's Surrealist Advertisements

The general developments regarding women artists' shifting roles and entrance into consumer culture help to situate Remedios Varo and her pharmaceutical illustrations for Casa Bayer in relation to both feminism and Surrealism in Mexico. Exile was the final and literal secession of women artists from the heart of the Surrealist movement to its margins. After residing in Mexico City for almost a decade, Varo developed deeply personal affinities and established female support systems with other exiled artists, Leonora Carrington and Kati Horna. They shared ideas around one another's kitchen tables, looked after the clan's children, and spent countless hours discussing their views on life.¹⁵³ By pursuing commercial work they were each able to provide for their families and support their artistic endeavors. In addition to illustrating advertisements, Varo decorated furniture and was a seamstress and designer of theater costumes; Carrington had forays in theater, book and poster design; and Horna earned her living as a magazine photographer.¹⁵⁴ As educated, white European women, they had the privilege to cultivate their own autonomy within a region where the New Woman's rights were less forthcoming and more ambiguous.¹⁵⁵

Scholars generally refer to two models when discussing Mexican women of the 1940s. One model, the traditional discourse, suggests that Mexican women were nurturing mothers, "guardians of public life and the nation," morally responsible, and

¹⁵³ Van Raay, "Surreal Friends," 16-17.

¹⁵⁴ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 98; Raay, "Surreal Friends," 20-22; Moorhead, "Surreal Friends in Mexico," 80-82.

¹⁵⁵ It was 1947 before Mexican women could vote in all municipal elections and full suffrage was not received until 1953. Fort, Introduction to *In Wonderland*, 24.

pure (like the Virgin of Guadalupe).¹⁵⁶ The other model emerged with modern capitalism and portrayed women as *femme fatales* who lacked moral standards and betrayed traditional Mexican society by indulging in consumer culture, particularly fashion.¹⁵⁷ This narrow definition of femininity applied to other aspects of society, most notably healthcare. In this realm, health officials determined that female identity was centered on either motherhood or virginity, where women's roles were responsible for shaping new healthy generations and deterring the spread of transmissible diseases.¹⁵⁸ Those women who fit neither role were deemed the principle transmitters of disease and poor health.¹⁵⁹ In Mexico's determination to join the international market, Mexican advertising agencies considered these ambiguous roles of their primary female consumers and maneuvered them by constructing a "middle ground."¹⁶⁰ Historian Julio Moreno argues that, "This middle ground allowed advertisers to market to different audiences at a time when values, beliefs, and practices were in constant flux as a result of Mexico's modern industrial

¹⁵⁶ Julio Moreno claims that this discourse echoed pre-existing trends from Mexico City's colonial period, in *Yankee Don't Go Home!*, 141-142.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ This ideology was developed and overseen in the early 1920s by Mexico's health minister Dr. Bernardo Gastélum. Kathryn E. O'Rourke states that much like Mexico's methods of health reform, it persisted from the 1920s to 1950, in "Science and Sex in Diego Rivera's Health Ministry Murals," *Public Art Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (2014): 18.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ "Mexican women and servants were responsible for performing domestic and family duties, which included raising and educating children, cooking, cleaning, and shopping." This was considered basic information to Mexican advertising agents. Moreno, *Yankee Don't Go Home!*, 165.

capitalism.”¹⁶¹ As such, this strategy is best exemplified in Remedios Varo’s Casa Bayer, S. A. illustrations to promote sexual wellness.

Varo defined modern Mexican womanhood through her revision of the Surrealist gaze that she experienced in Europe – a double otherness. Her illustration *Dama de la Rosa* (Fig. 3.2) employs signifiers of traditional Mexican womanhood. The image was commissioned for a campaign to raise public awareness of syphilis and promote Casa Bayer’s Salvarsan as an effective treatment.¹⁶² The artist was asked to treat the subject with “delicacy and elegance” and to “portray the delicate profile of the *Lady of the Rose* against the gloomy background of a storm cloud.”¹⁶³ This request was in accordance with the Health Ministry’s efforts to control the spread of disease by focusing on women’s virtue.¹⁶⁴ It is possible that the portrait was meant to reference the Virgin of Guadalupe. However, Varo took a metaphorical approach and centered a rose in her figure’s grasp as a symbol of female sexuality. The identification of woman and nature, especially comparing their sexual organs to flowers and surrounding them with flora, was consistently employed by male Surrealists.¹⁶⁵ Likewise, the sitter’s luxuriant head of red hair that is entwined with flowering vines doubles as a signifier of femininity and sexual

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 142.

¹⁶² Arcq, “Remedios Varo y la Casa Bayer,” 8-9.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ O’Rourke, “Science and Sex,” 14-18.

¹⁶⁵ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 141.

energy.¹⁶⁶ The illustration fails to address men – the actual principle transmitters of disease – about changing their behavior and instead exploits female sexuality as the sounding board for the campaign. Regarding style, art historian Tere Arcq claims that the artist appears to have been inspired by works of the Italian Renaissance.¹⁶⁷ While this may be true, I consider that Varo may have instead been influenced by Giorgio de Chirico’s quotations of Italian masters.¹⁶⁸ Not only did his easily identifiable style become the “stock-in-trade of sophisticated advertising” in Europe and the United States, but to earn money, Varo expertly produced paintings faked in his style.¹⁶⁹ Kaplan argues that some of these aspects made appearances in her mature work.¹⁷⁰

Next, I call attention to Varo’s second illustration *Vanidad* (Vanity) (Fig. 3.3), which employs signifiers of modern womanhood. The image was featured in a pamphlet for Casa Bayer’s Devegan, a medication used to treat sexually transmissible diseases. *Vanidad* (vice or the bad woman) functions like a sister artwork to *Dama de la Rosa* (virtue or the good woman) because it features the same figure, but as a *femme fatale* in modern dress (high-collared blouses and sack dresses) typically donned by Europe’s New

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 95.

¹⁶⁷ Arcq, “Remedios Varo,” 8-9.

¹⁶⁸ The works of Giorgio de Chirico that closely parallel Varo’s Casa Bayer illustration include his profiled portraits, such as *Portrait of Andrea, Brother of the Artist* (1910), *Portrait of Artist’s Mother* (1911), and *Portrait of Senora Gartzzen* (1913). Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981* (Philadelphia, PA: Art Alliance Press, 1982), 47-48.

¹⁶⁹ Miller, ““With Eyes Wide Open,”” 67-68; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 64.

¹⁷⁰ One example of Varo’s mature paintings that bears striking similarity to Giorgio de Chirico, specifically his work *Anxious Journey* (1913), is *Farewell* (1958). Varo includes the arcaded architecture and maze-like corridors that frequently appear in Chirico’s paintings. Janet A. Kaplan makes this comparison in *Unexpected Journeys*, 208.

Woman.¹⁷¹ She concentrates on her reflection in a mirror, which was typically employed in modern advertising as a reminder that a modern woman possessed an inescapable duty to attend to her appearance.¹⁷² Moreover, the woman's body is "grotesquely modern" with fantastical proportions, elongated limbs, and obscenely thin waist – the physique of a high-fashion woman that was physically unattainable outside of a surreality distorted by desire.¹⁷³ Unlike her sister image, the tree branches engulfing her body are blanched and dead, which can signify a loss of sexuality or perhaps even fertility. Furthermore, her cubist-inspired lower torso, which was another vanguard style that was appropriated in advertising, presents her as a Surrealist fetishized object-being that is part woman, part crystalline structure.¹⁷⁴

Remedios Varo's Casa Bayer illustrations for sexual wellness display her self-awareness of the female duality that emerged with the construction of modern gender roles in European and Mexican societies. Across these two cultures with which she closely identified, the New Woman of modernity was empowered, yet remained ambiguous and undefined as she struggled to break from the traditions of a gender marginalized past. As such, the women in Varo's advertisements do not coincide with her

¹⁷¹ Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 16.

¹⁷² It is possible that Varo's inclusion of the mirror in her illustration can reference a myriad of sources. However, unlike iconography that appears in her other illustrations, scholars have currently not found evidence of what she may have specifically referenced. I present a general reading of the mirror (as more than a reference to vanity) as it was employed in contemporary modern advertising for the woman consumer. Dara Persis Murray provides this perspective in, "The Entangled Politics of Feminists," 72.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Michele Helene Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 137-138.

personal vision of female agency, but rather function as types of femininity. They are conjured personae that inhabited the psychic reality of the public imagination, informed by real, personal experiences of her European past and Mexican present. As the only scholar to shed light on these two illustrations, Arcq provides evidence for this plurality of vision of the sexes as experienced in Mexico City in a reference to a passage from Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) that was published contemporaneously:

A woman is the best part of any man! A woman is the worst part of any man!... Woman is another being who lives apart and is therefore an enigmatic figure. She attracts and repels like men of an alien race or nationality. It would be better to say that she is the Enigma. She is an image of both fecundity and death.¹⁷⁵

Paz's description of the character types of Mexican women aligns with the way Varo presents the female figures of her pharmaceutical illustrations. Interestingly enough, Paz revisited this same passage in a personal letter to Varo in 1959, where he states, "It is marvelous, after all, to have friends like you and Leonora. Better said: to have women friends. Women – some women, some hearts of women – reconcile me with life and also – why not – with the idea of death."¹⁷⁶

In the commercial realm, Remedios Varo employed a refined Surrealist style to confront the contradictions ingrained within modern Mexican culture by showing the female consumer how to maneuver through them – to be obedient daughters and wives, while advising them how to be popular, attain beauty, and conquer men. This was a

¹⁷⁵ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1985), quoted in Teresa Arcq, "Remedios Varo y la Casa Bayer," in *Cinco Llaves del Mundo Secreto de Remedios Varo*, ed. Margarita de Orellana (Mexico: Artes de México, 2008), 10.

¹⁷⁶ Octavio Paz, Octavio Paz to Remedios Varo, September 24, 1959, quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1988), 215.

position that Varo had learned to navigate through her own experiences. Ironically, in casting off the social expectations of a movement that failed to give female artists their due and confined them to gendered roles, women used Surrealism as an instrument for attaining prominence as artists and spreading their creative agency to all sectors of society.

CONCLUSION

Remedios Varo was a woman who crossed boundaries and borders, transcended roles, defied conventions, and maneuvered realities. Her legacy illuminates not only the intersections between European and Mexican material culture and the realms of fine and commercial art, but also negotiations of the past and present that were necessary to navigate modernity. By investigating the significance of her Surrealist advertisements for Casa Bayer, S.A., I tried to demonstrate how the intersections between these fields can be expansive rather than restrictive to art history's understanding of Surrealism and exile as one agent of its commodification and consumption. Varo's commercial activity in exile sheds light on the integration of art into life and reconciliation of high and low art forms. For the artist, Surrealism doubled as a state of mind and an approach to life where it began to concern itself with the shifting demands of the present rather than with simply distinguishing itself as an artistic movement.

The scholarly literature dedicated to Varo's work has some limitations. As revealing as they may be, her commercial illustrations for Casa Bayer have been somewhat neglected. In the long run, the advertisements are the creative culmination of an exile's reflective and refractive negotiations of the past and present. Each image, like each chapter of this paper, juxtaposes Varo's past and present and examines how Surrealism in exile led to a dialogue with contemporary Mexican culture. As such, the ethnographic lens that informed Surrealism's treatment of material culture of all forms and cultural contexts took on new significance for those exiled artists who continued to

employ it in Mexico. Varo adapted ethnographic Surrealism to navigate between and understand different forms of Mexican culture, instead of using it to project the surreal onto Mexican material culture as had her contemporaries. The artist revisited the Surrealist hermetic tradition that quoted macabre and melancholic motifs from a usable art history and her own personal past. In doing so, she confronted the bleaker perspective of exile, but accessed such emotions to connect to her fatalistic Mexican audience. Furthermore, her identity and role as both a woman and a practicing Surrealist bore resemblances to the equally polarizing position of women in Mexico. With her newly acquired creative agency away from the periphery of Surrealism, she confronted and exposed this polarizing view of modern womanhood in her advertisements for female consumers. In this light, Remedios Varo reveals much about the nature of an international Surrealism in that it demanded persistent reflection on the shifting conditions of modern life.

In 1959, almost a decade after completing her series of pharmaceutical advertisements and illustrations for Casa Bayer, S.A.'s public health campaign, Remedios Varo accepted one final commercial commission: to paint a mural for the Ministry of Health's new Cancer Pavilion of the Medical Center in Mexico City.¹⁷⁷ In Mexico, where the mural was then still the most prominent form of public imagery, this was the highest honor that an artist could receive – let alone an artist who was also a foreigner, a Surrealist, an easel painter, and most surprising of all, a woman.¹⁷⁸ “According to

¹⁷⁷ Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 140.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Fernando Gamboa, former director of the Museo de Arte Moderna, who arranged for the commission, by 1959 Varo was a celebrity in Mexico and her interest in scientific imagery made her a natural choice for the mural.”¹⁷⁹ Unfortunately, she had to withdraw from the commission and it was left unfulfilled, a decision that Kaplan regards as having deprived Mexico of a public example of her work. But ultimately, Varo did leave behind a legacy of public works – her Surrealist advertisements, which bore her signature even in circulation. While this is not the conventional legacy that art history typically seeks out, it is one that should be recognized because it contributed to Mexico’s treatment of her works as national treasures and led to her classification as a Mexican artist.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 140.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1.1 Remedios Varo, *Untitled Cadavre Exquis* (Exquisite Corpse), July 1935. Collage on paper, 10 1/5 x 7 2/3 in. Private collection, Paris



Fig. 1.2 Remedios Varo, L'agent Double [El Agente Doble], 1936. Oil on copper, 8 1/4 x 6 3/8 in. Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris



Fig. 1.3 Remedios Varo, Frío [Invierno], 1943-1947.
Gouache on board, 13 x 9 ¾ in. Casa Bayer, S.A., Mexico



Fig. 1.4 Remedios Varo, Cambio de Tiempo, 1943-1947. Gouache on board, 11 x 8 ¼ in. Casa Bayer, S.A., Mexico



Fig. 1.5 Remedios Varo, *Espíritus de la Montaña*, 1938. Oil on plywood, 29 ½ x 20 in. Private collection, Paris



Fig. 1.6 Remedios Varo, *El Mundo*, 1958. Gouache on paper/ masonite, 7 ½ x 7 ½ in. Private collection, Mexico



Fig. 1.7 *Jesús de la Helguera, Cuauhtémoc, 1930-1950. Oil on linen, 51 ½ x 43 ¾ in. Private collection, Mexico*



Fig. 1.8 *Jesús de la Helguera, La Leyenda de Los Volcanes (detail), 1940. Mixed media on paper, 32 ¾ x 25 ¾ in. Private collection, Mexico*

ENVASES ORIGINALES:

NEO - MELUBRINA

Tubos con 10 tabletas de 0.5 g
Caja con 5 ampollitas de 1, 2 y 5 cm³
Caja con 10 ampollitas de 2 cm³

COMPRAL

Tubo con 10 tabletas de 0.5 g

Regs. Núms. 5909, 7309 y 11001 S.S.A.


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Fig. 2.1 Neo-Melubrina/ Compral, Casa Bayer, S.A.. “Dolor Reumático II [Reuma, Lumbago, Ciática].” Advertisement/ Promotional Brochure. 1948-1949



Fig. 2.2 Remedios Varo, Dolor, 1948. Gouache on board, 9 ½ x 8 in. Casa Bayer, S.A., Mexico



Fig. 2.3 Remedios Varo, Dolor Reumático I [Dolor Reumático], 1948. Gouache on board, 9 3/4 x 7 1/2 in. Casa Bayer, S.A., Mexico



Fig. 2.4 Remedios Varo, Dolor Reumático II [Reuma, Lumbago, Ciática], 1948. Gouache on board, 9 3/4 x 8 1/4 in. Casa Bayer, S.A., Mexico

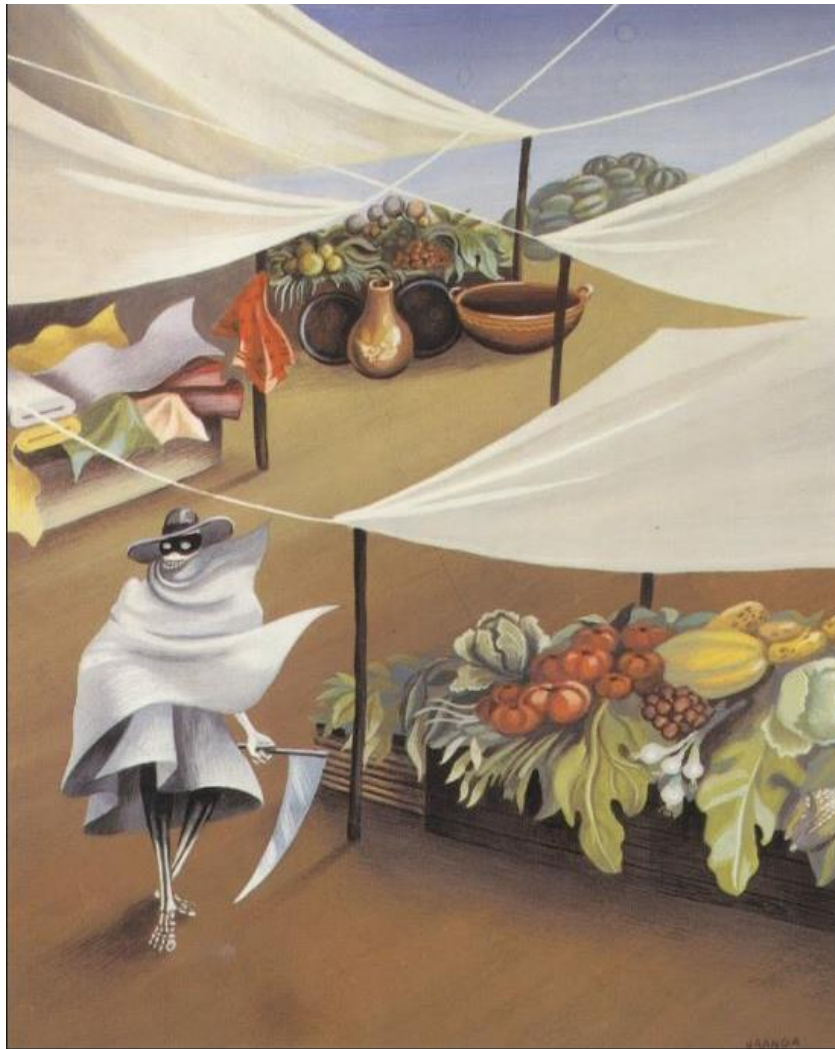


Fig. 2.5 Remedios Varo, El Hombre de la Guadaña [Muerte en el Mercado] [Tifoidea], 1947. Gouache on board, 9 3/4 x 7 3/4 in. Casa Bayer, S.A., Mexico



Fig. 2.6 Remedios Varo, Amibiasis [Los Vegetales] [Tifoidea, Paratifoidea], 1947. Gouache on board, 10 ³/₄ x 14 ³/₄ in. Casa Bayer, S.A., Mexico

ENVASES ORIGINALES

COLI ENTEROGENA
Caja con 5 ampollitas de 2 cm³.


VACUNA ANTITIFOIDICA
Caja con 3 ampollitas de 1 cm³.

VACUNA ANTITIFOIDICA PARATIFOIDICA TAB
Caja con 3 ampollitas de 1 cm³.

VACUNA TIFOIDEA - PARATIFOIDEA CB
Caja con 3 ampollitas de 1 cm³.

VACUNA DISENTERICA
Fresco con 5 cm³.

Rev. N^{os}. 19637, 12940, 14712, 14713 - 1948, S.A.



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Fig. 2.7 Envases Originales/ Vacuna Antitifoidea, Casa Bayer, S.A. “Amibiasis [Los Vegetales] [Tifoidea, paratifoidea].” Advertisement/ Promotional Brochure. 1948-1949



Fig. 3.1 Remedios Varo, *Recuerdo de la Walkyria [Hiedra Aprisionada] [Hiedra Salvaje]*, 1948. *Gouache on plywood, 15 x 12 ½ in. Private collection, Mexico*



*Fig. 3.2 Remedios Varo, Dama de la Rosa, 1948-1949.
Gouache on board, 9 ½ x 8 in. Casa Bayer, S. A., Mexico*



Fig. 3.2 Devegan, Casa Bayer, S. A. “Vanidad.” Advertisement/ Promotional Brochure, 1948-1949



Fig. 3.3 Devegán, Casa Bayer, S. A. “Vanidad” (detail).
Advertisement/ Promotional Brochure, 1948-1949