

# Meret Oppenheim

*My Exhibition*



FROM HER ARTISTIC BEGINNINGS in 1930s Paris through her postwar career in Switzerland, Meret Oppenheim created art that defied neat categorizations of medium, style, and historical movement. At the time of her death at age 72, her output included object constructions, narrative paintings, hard-edge abstractions, witty drawings, collages and assemblages, and much more. Oppenheim (1913–1985) pursued a dynamic, innovative art practice held together by the force of her creative vision. This retrospective exhibition, organized chronologically, surveys the sweep of her remarkably original artwork.

### *The Surrealist Years*

In 1932, at age 18, Oppenheim moved to Paris to become an artist. The city was a hub of avant-garde activities, none more exciting than Surrealism, an art movement launched there in the mid-1920s. She quickly abandoned her scholastic pursuits to forge connections with the Surrealists, regularly exhibiting and publishing her work alongside that of the older, more established, and predominantly male artists. Oppenheim made dozens of ink drawings, often revealing flashes of her droll sense of humor, as in *Why I Love My Shoes*, 1934. Working in a small, dark hotel room, she created her first oil painting, *Sitting Figure with Folded Hands*, 1933.

The year 1936 proved pivotal for the artist. In advance of her first solo show, she constructed *Ma gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen* (front), 1936/1967: a pair of upside-down white pumps tied together and displayed on a silver platter, heels capped with white frills. Referencing a trussed chicken, the work presents an acerbic commentary on the strictures of femininity. In 1936, Oppenheim also fashioned *Object* (fig. 1), covering an inexpensive teacup, saucer, and spoon with scraps of animal fur. This artwork, on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, cemented her association with the Surrealists and proved an absolute sensation in the press. These boundary-breaking objects illuminate Oppenheim's appetite for experimental, nontraditional materials, and her ability to seize upon familiar, everyday items and transform them into something spectacularly other.

### *World War II*

With the threat of war looming, Oppenheim returned to her native Switzerland in 1937. Over the next several years, her oil painting practice flourished. She drew inspiration from mythology and folklore, including the Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne and the

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*Fig. 1* Archival image of Meret Oppenheim's *Object*, 1936. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. © AP Photo/John Lindsay

*Fig. 2* Meret Oppenheim, *The Suffering of Genevieve*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 19 ½ × 28 ⅞ in. (49.4 × 71.5 cm). Kunstmuseum Bern. Meret Oppenheim Bequest

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Fig. 3 Meret Oppenheim, *The Green Spectator*, 1959. Oil on limewood with copper sheet, 65 3/8 x 19 1/4 x 5 7/8 in. (166 x 49 x 15 cm). Kunstmuseum Bern

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Fig. 4 Meret Oppenheim, *Miss Gardenia*, 1962. Plaster in metal frame with metallic paint, 11 x 6 1/4 x 2 in. (28 x 16 x 5 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Helen Crocker Russell Memorial Fund purchase

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Germanic legend of the Erl-King, altering those familiar stories. The tale of the medieval French heroine Genevieve of Brabant, who was wrongly accused of adultery and exiled to the forest, proved an enduring theme for Oppenheim, who would devote numerous paintings to Genevieve over the course of her career (fig. 2). Oppenheim found her to be a sympathetic figure, discerning a parallel between her exile and the artist's own retreat to the smaller, artistically conservative city of Basel.

### *Return to Experimentation*

*The Green Spectator* (fig. 3), 1959, stands as a powerful emblem of Oppenheim's postwar art practice. She had drawn preparatory sketches for this sculpture in Paris in 1933. More than two decades later, she was finally able to execute the project in three dimensions. The artist often worked in this way, recuperating and realizing an earlier idea many years after its initial appearance.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Oppenheim's penchant for using unconventional materials increased. She produced several sculptures based on picture frames, augmenting these found objects with inset plaster forms that range from demure to grotesque, as in *Miss Gardenia* (fig. 4), 1962, and *A Distant Relative*, 1966. In *Animal-Headed Demon*, 1961, she inserted a piece of painted wood into a neoclassical clock, giving the object an anthropomorphic presence. Newly based in Bern, she began to participate in the cultural life of the Swiss capital. Many works from these years reveal her familiarity with Nouveau Réalisme and Pop Art, two postwar art movements that embraced everyday consumer goods in an effort to dismantle the precious aura surrounding fine art.

### *Into the Clouds*

In the early 1960s, Oppenheim created a group of sculptures and paintings dedicated to the theme of clouds, drawing upon her long-time interest in the natural world. Rather than rendering them as ethereal, transitory bodies, she transformed clouds into hard-edged, strangely humanoid abstractions. In *Three Clouds above Continent*, 1964, she played on the idea of a natural landscape, remaking the stereotypically green ground, blue sky, and white clouds into pointed shapes. Her cloud-inspired sculptures share similarly scooped, angular curves, extending from the "boat" or "bridge" over which they supposedly hover. These skylscapes and cloud studies pulse with a playful, investigative spirit. In exploring a single motif, Oppenheim gave full range to her creative powers of transformation.

## *Enchanted Nature*

Oppenheim long nurtured parallel interests in nature and enchantment. In the late 1960s and into the '70s, these intensified and overlapped. *Forest Interior with Dryads*, 1967, includes real tree bark and three sculptural forms painted to imitate marble—elements that serve as stand-ins for the woodland spirits of the title. She worked prolifically in these years, diving into the possibilities of assemblage as she integrated quotidian stuff into ever more elaborate artworks. Two objects from 1969 exemplify this idea: *Hm-bm* (fig. 5), with its tree bark and applied gold leaf, and *Oktavia*, with its imitation wood-grain paper and foxtail saw. They not only speak to Oppenheim's facility with unorthodox materials, but also highlight her ability to infuse the resultant creatures with anthropomorphic liveliness. In *Squirrel*, 1960/1970, Oppenheim joined a bushy tail to a foamy beer stein, creating a hilariously improbable object that marries her twin pursuits of material experimentation and thematic transformation.

## *The 1970s and Beyond*

In the mid-1970s, she created a distinct group of near-monochrome fog paintings, like *Flower of Fog*, 1974, with which she sought to transcend the boundaries between visible and invisible, reality and imagination. She transformed scenes from the natural world into sharply defined geometric abstractions, as in *Pond in a Park*, 1975, and *New Stars*, 1977–82. Oppenheim also continued her practice of realizing much earlier ideas, as with the monumental *Hand (Tower)*, 1964–82, first drawn in 1933.

In 1983, Oppenheim completed another project: twelve drawings showing more than two hundred of her artworks that she wished to include in what she called "My Exhibition." Meticulously detailed and precisely scaled, the drawings amount to a remarkable conceptual exploration of her own oeuvre. At the same time, Oppenheim insisted on the open-endedness of her selection, noting on the first sheet: "This 'Imaginary Exhibition' is only an example. I had to leave aside many works that for me are no less important." From her roots in Surrealism to her imaginary exhibition, Oppenheim embraced freedom in all aspects of her work. In 1975, she remarked on this exact idea, offering a powerful summation of her own free-wheeling and boldly imaginative career: "Nobody will give you freedom; you have to take it."



*Fig. 5* Meret Oppenheim, *Hm-bm*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas; oil and gold leaf on wood; bark; and carved wood, 6 ft. 6  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.  $\times$  37  $\frac{3}{8}$   $\times$  3  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (200  $\times$  95  $\times$  9 cm). Private collection, Bern

*Meret Oppenheim: My Exhibition* is organized by The Menil Collection, Houston; Kunstmuseum Bern; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

It is cocurated by Natalie Dupêcher, Associate Curator of Modern Art, The Menil Collection; Nina Zimmer, Director, Kunstmuseum Bern / Zentrum Paul Klee; and Anne Umland, The Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art.

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*Public Programs*

In Conversation:

Natalie Dupêcher and Lisa Wenger on her aunt, Meret Oppenheim  
Wednesday, March 30, 7 p.m.  
Main Building

Curator Talk:

Natalie Dupêcher on Meret Oppenheim's Surrealist Work  
Sunday, July 10, 3 p.m.  
Main Building

Inprint Writing Workout

Saturday, July 16, 11 a.m.  
Main Building

Outdoor film screening in conjunction with the exhibition

Friday, August 26, 8 p.m.  
West Main Green

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*Exhibition Dates*

March 25–September 18, 2022

All works by Meret Oppenheim © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Pro Litteris, Zurich

*Front* Meret Oppenheim, *Ma gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936/1967. Metal plate, shoes, string, and paper, 5 ½ × 13 × 8 ¼ in. (14 × 33 × 21 cm). Moderna Museet, Stockholm