

Exhibitions

female artists from its collection and from the Dresden Kupferstichkabinett, including a group of pastels by Theresa von Maron, the sister of Anton Raphael Mengs (12th May–20th August 2023).³

1 See N. Jeffares: 'Pastels in the pandemic', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 164 (2022), pp.780–87.

2 Catalogue: *Rosalba Carriera: Perfektion in Pastell*. Edited by Roland Enke and Stephan Koja. 280 pp. incl. 203 col. + 58 b. & w. ills. (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, and Sandstein Verlag, Dresden, 2023), €44. ISBN 978-3-95498-757-3.

3 See S. Koja and I.Y. Wagner, eds: exh. cat. *Aus dem Schatten: Künstlerinnen vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*, Dresden (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister) 2023.

Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick ME
6th April–17th September

by MARY ANN CAWS

In 1917 a reporter profiled Mina Loy (1882–1966) for the *New York Sun*, describing her as a woman 'half-way through the door into To-morrow [sic]' (p.39).¹ Indeed, as a tireless traverser of continents, Loy carried out her multitudinous activities across London, Paris, Florence, New York, Mexico and Aspen. Although she is best known for her poetry, Loy was a highly regarded visual artist, showing her paintings, watercolours and collages at the Salon d'Automne, Paris, in 1905; the First Free Futurist International Exhibition in Rome, in 1914; the New York Society of Independent Artists in 1917; the Julien Levy Gallery, New York, in 1933; and the Bodley Gallery, New York, in 1959. She was also a painter, actor, fashion designer and inventor. Loy spent much time salvaging items from flea markets and streets for her constructions, many of which are displayed in this remarkable and revelatory exhibition.

This is the first monographic presentation of Loy's work, and includes over eighty of her paintings, drawings and constructions, which she also referred to as 'Refusées', alongside a wealth of archival material. The exhibition, which will travel

to the Arts Club of Chicago (6th March–8th June 2024), is organised chronologically, with eight sections highlighting important moments and commitments – both personal and professional – in the artist's career, as it unfolded across Europe and the United States, especially in Paris (1900–07 and 1923–36), Florence (1907–16), New York (1916–17 and 1936–53) and Aspen (1953–66). The works on display are drawn largely from the archives and collection of Loy's editor, the poet and scholar Roger Conover, who has been the primary collector of her work for decades, and without whose efforts most of the work would not have survived and this exhibition would not exist.

Particularly striking are the collages *Christ on a clothesline* and *Communal cot* (Fig.12), both made in 1949.² The title of the latter refers to the huddled figures of the down-and-out denizens sleeping on the sidewalks of Manhattan's Lower East Side, where Loy lived in the 1940s. These figures are also recurrent personae in her poems, animating, for example, 'Hot Cross Bum', wherein the word play deepens and widens the visual experience. As Ezra Pound wrote,



11. *Devant le miroir*, by Mina Loy. c.1905. Graphite on brown paper mounted on cardboard, 40.6 by 33 cm. (Private collection; exh. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick ME).

Opposite
12. *Communal cot*, by Mina Loy. 1949. Cut-paper and mixed-media collage mounted on board, 69.2 by 118.1 cm. (Private collection; exh. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick ME).

Loy was the exemplar par excellence of *logopoeia*, 'a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas' (p.31). Loy's poems, a few of which are reproduced on wall panels in the exhibition, are as radical today as when they first appeared in the pages of leading avant-garde magazines, such as the *Dial*, the *Little Review*, *Rogue* and *Camera Work*.

Loy did not only invent words, but also objects, including knitting needles with measurements (1946), an alphabet toy with 'magnetic letters' and instructions to 'build your own alphabet' (1940; Yale University Library, New Haven) as well as a design for an aeroplane curtain (c.1945). Drawings and documents relating to the garments, hats and lampshades she designed are showcased in eleven elegantly assembled vitrines in two spacious galleries. *Design for dress material, with Victory "V"* (1941), and *Fashion sketches* (1941; Yale University Library) are among the examples of her forays into fashion, which were intended to finance her life and that of her daughters. Such ideas were prompted by her own experiences, as were many of the multifarious items shown here.

The exhibition includes a number of Loy's captivating portraits and self-portraits, including the unsmiling and aloof *Devant le miroir* (Fig.11), which she completed shortly after her one-year-old daughter Oda died of meningitis. The expression on Loy's face is impassive, an expression that the writer Natalie Clifford Barney once described as 'a blind gaze [. . .] as though she has contemplated the Gorgon – a look as if struck with indifference' (p.13). Also on display is Loy's drawing of Man Ray, which is inscribed with the phrase 'Never say I don't love you' (c.1925). Together with a rich assortment of publications, photographs and ephemera, never before assembled, the show includes facsimiles of lost portraits of James Joyce (1922), which was reproduced in *Vanity Fair*; Jules Pascin (c.1923); Sigmund Freud, whom she met in the spring of 1922; and Constantin Brâncuși (c.1924). Brâncuși appears a number of times in the extensive archival material: in a photograph dating from c.1922–23, taken by an

unknown photographer, of the artist with his dog, Polaire, Loy and two unidentified woman; and in another magnificent group photograph, taken at his studio in Paris in the early 1920s, which includes Loy, the poet and artist Tristan Tzara, the photographer Berenice Abbott and the editors of the *Little Review*, Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson. Additional photographs document Loy with a host of celebrated artists and writers, including Lee Miller, Alice Prin (known as Kiki de Montparnasse), Man Ray, Ezra Pound, Djuna Barnes and Jean Cocteau. There is even Peggy Guggenheim – at whose villa in Provence Loy made a fresco in 1925, following the success of their lampshade shop in Paris. The lampshades themselves are lost, but some of her original designs are included, as well as photographic documentation, again exemplifying the intensive research that underpins this unprecedented exhibition.

On display in vitrines are important letters written to Loy, including ones from Abbott, who photographed many of Loy's constructions, Frances Steloff, Kay Boyle and – most unexpectedly – the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Most meaningful of all are those she exchanged with Joseph Cornell, with whom she shared an intense belief in Christian Science. They were both devoted to the colour blue, and in one letter Cornell refers to a reflection

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on the side of a passing truck, which reminded him of ‘the indelible impression of your sky-blue paintings’ (p.92). Also displayed is one of Cornell’s construction boxes, entitled ‘Imperious jewelry of the universe’ (*Lunar baedeker*): *Portrait of Mina Loy, daguerreotype-object* (1938; Philadelphia Museum of Art), an assemblage of shards of blue-tinted glass with Man Ray’s photograph of Loy at its heavenly centre. Among the warmest of Loy’s personal photographs is one of her with her daughters, Joella

and Fabienne, at the Paris Carnival c.1926, and – even more intimate – Loy and Joella sitting on her bed in Paris in 1929, exuding the complexity of a relationship that persisted until Mina’s death in 1966. Nothing better transmits Loy’s performative presence than the photographs taken of her by Miller, Man Ray, Carl Van Vechten and George Platt Lynes.

Loy excelled in so many different ventures, both verbal and visual, that visitors to the exhibition will

13. *Untitled (surreal scene)*, by Mina Loy. c.1935. Gouache with collage on panel, 52.7 by 42.5 cm. (Private collection; exh. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick ME).

likely leave as impressed as those who visited the final exhibition of her work, at the Bodley Gallery in 1959, which was curated by her friend and artistic ally Marcel Duchamp. To this reviewer, Duchamp’s presence haunts the exhibition, his likeness appearing in several of Loy’s mixed media collages and constructions. One of her most complex compositions is *Untitled (surreal scene)* (Fig.13), which is populated with a variety of figures and symbols; the body of the foregrounded figure contains an intricate arrangement of icons, including the wheat sheafs of Persephone, lotus blossoms and a chalice of communal wine that seems to promise the blood of the risen Christ. Nearby, whale ribs encase the heart of Jesus and a man and a woman, whose embracing bodies evoke the entwined destinies of Loy and her poet-boxer husband Arthur Cravan (né Fabian Lloyd), who disappeared when Loy was six months pregnant with Fabienne. The exhibition also includes many of the paintings that were first shown at the Julien Levy Gallery, which depict heavenly heads suspended against a blue sky, with moons and stars and angels rendered in *fresco vero* – a mixture of gesso, sand and plaster. On adjoining walls are three astonishing paintings, which have not been exhibited before, representing Hermes, Venus and a Butterfly Woman – the only surviving examples from a series entitled *Drift of chaos* (1933). The works in this exhibition plot the development of an artist moving from Symbolist to Futurist to Dada and Surrealist to Conceptualist experiments, the feeling and form of which are unlike the work of any artist of her time. It is a fittingly incomplete conclusion to the ‘tomorrow-ness’ of Loy. Although she was born in London, her work has not been shown in the United Kingdom for well over a century; a major exhibition of her work there is long overdue.

¹ Catalogue: *Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable*. Edited by Jennifer R. Gross with contributions by Ann Lauterbach, Roger L. Conover and Dawn Ades. 232 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Princeton University Press, 2023), £42. ISBN 978-0-691-23984-2.

² Unless otherwise stated, all works mentioned are in private collections.