

COLNAGHI



Leonor Fini
Squellette, ca. 1975

Leonor Fini
New York
Ramon Soler

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LEONOR FINI

(Buenos Aires 1907 – Paris 1996)

SQUELETTE, ca. 1975

Pen, ink, and watercolour on paper

32.7 x 25.2 cm.; 12 7/8 x 9 7/8 in.

Signed and dedicated lower right: "*Leonor Fini pour Roman Soloy*"

Provenance

Private collection;

Sotheby's, London, 4 May 2022, lot 52;

Private collection, Italy.

Literature

L. Fini, *Ds grosse Bilderbuch*, Munich, 1975, p. 132 (ill.)

Illustration for *Leonor Fini: La Vie idéale*.

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A single attenuated figure stands in three-quarter profile on the bare white sheet, without ground or setting. The head is a bare skull (“squelette” meaning “skeleton” in French), drawn with cool anatomical precision and set within an immense fluted ruff that radiates behind it like a halo, bursting at its upper edge into small floral and coralline growths. Below, the body is emphatically that of a living young woman, slender, high-breasted, arms drawn across the chest, sheathed in a fluted gown that sweeps into a trailing court train. Along one contour the fabric dissolves into feathery, root-like filaments, as though decomposing and germinating at once.

The technique is characteristic of Fini’s mature graphic work: a fine, continuous pen line in warm brown-black ink over thin veils of ochre and grey-green watercolour, with large areas of paper left untouched, so that the white ground reads simultaneously as light, air and the pallor of bone. Iconographically the drawing is a compressed vanitas, fusing three distinct motifs often kept apart: the *memento mori* skull, the fashion plate, and the Symbolist femme fatale. The result is not a warning about death but rather its portrait: Death dressed for a ball, elegant, feminine, self-possessed. The gigantic ruff evokes late sixteenth-century court dress (and, behind it, Fini’s own decades of theatrical costume design), while the flowering, decaying hem places the figure in the cycle of organic transformation that preoccupied her throughout her career.

The inscription “*Leonor Fini pour Roman Soloy*” identifies the sheet as a presentation drawing made or given as a personal gift rather than for the market. Fini dedicated a considerable number of drawings in this way to friends, lovers, writers, collectors and members of her Parisian circle, and such inscriptions are a normal and desirable feature of her works on paper, although the dedicatee “Roman Soloy” has not yet been identified in the published literature or in accessible archival sources. Several closely comparable Fini sheets have appeared under near-identical titles, which underscores that this was a motif she returned to repeatedly.

Born Eleonora Fini in Buenos Aires on 30 August 1907, she was taken as an infant to Trieste by her mother, fleeing a tyrannical husband. To foil his kidnapping attempts, Leonor was dressed as a boy whenever she left the house, an early experience of enforced disguise usually linked to her lifelong obsessions with costume and with the instability of gender. From about the age of thirteen she made regular visits to the public mortuary in Trieste, sitting among and drawing the laid-out dead, where she was struck by how beautifully they were dressed, flowered and cushioned. She later said her interest shifted to the perfection of skeletons, the most resistant corporeal element to decay. At sixteen, an ocular illness confined her to a darkened room with both eyes bandaged for two months, where she learned to construct elaborate images purely in the mind, and it was on emerging that she resolved to become an artist.

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Largely self-taught, she absorbed the Flemish primitives and above all the Italian Mannerists, whose elongation and cool eroticism marked her permanently. In 1928 her uncle financed a period of study in Milan. There she met Giorgio de Chirico, exhibited with the Novecento Italiano group, met Sironi and Carrà, and studied under Achille Funi, whose neoclassicism informed her early, Renaissance-inflected portraits. Repelled by the Fascist atmosphere of the city, she travelled to Paris with Arturo Tosi, and settled there permanently around 1931. Max Jacob showed her paintings to Christian Dior, then directing the Galerie Bonjean, who gave her a solo exhibition in 1932 and then introduced her to Elsa Schiaparelli. At a garden party of the couturier Jacques Heim, she met Max Ernst, who became her lover and her entrée to the Surrealist circle so that by 1935, she was already exhibiting alongside de Chirico, Dalí, Ernst, Miró, Picasso and Tanguy in the Surrealist drawing exhibitions at the Galerie des Quatre Chemins. Despite these associations, Fini famously refused to submit to André Breton's authority and openly despised the movement's fixation on the *femme-enfant*, likewise rejecting the label "woman artist."

Around that time, she gained immense international recognition, holding her first major solo exhibition in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1936, and appearing later that year, in MoMA's landmark *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show. She returned to Paris in 1946, after a period in Rome, where her painting entered its so-called "mineral period," inspired by the underwater world she discovered in Corsica. Settling first with the painter Stanislao Lepri and, from 1952, the Polish writer Constantin "Kot" Jelenski, she then turned to writing, publishing three novels in the 1970s. She died in Paris on 18 January 1996 and was buried at Saint-Dyé-sur-Loire beside Lepri and Jelenski.

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