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Leonor Fini
Sketches for mask designs

Leonor Fini

LEONOR FINI

(Buenos Aires 1907 – Paris 1996)

SKETCHES FOR MASK DESIGNS

Pen and ink on laid paper, highlighted with colour
36.5 x 27.5 cm.; 14.3 x 10.8 in.

Signed: "Leonor Fini" (lower right)

Numbered: "218" (upper left)

Provenance

Private collection, South of France

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Leonor Fini's work stands out as one of the most individual and compelling expressions of Surrealism, conveying the voluptuous refinement and subtle transgression that shaped her extraordinary life across the XXth century.

Born from a Jewish background in Argentina in 1907, Fini moved as a child to Trieste (in northern Italy) where she was drawn to art from an early age, inspired and nurtured by the city's cosmopolitan and cultivated society (Trieste was part of the Austrian Empire until 1920 and its intellectual circles were characterized by a mitteleuropean feel with strong links to Vienna).

She later moved to Milan where she held her first exhibition in 1929, coming in contact with the literary and artistic avant-garde and key figures of its dynamic context, such as Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978) – creator of the *Matafisica* movement - Mario Sironi (1885-1961) and Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), among the most prominent Italian figurative painters between the two World Wars.

In 1931 she eventually arrived in Paris and was swiftly embraced by its aristocratic, bohemian and intellectual élites. In this vibrant milieu she became not only an increasingly international artist, but also a legendary presence, celebrated for her imaginative power, mastery of self-disguise and a life woven from art, costume and performance.

In the late 1930s, Leonor Fini developed a deep fascination with portraiture, a genre that would not only produce some of her most striking works, but also become a reliable and important source of income. Among her most important works of the time are *Self-Portrait with the Scorpion*, 1938 (fig.1), *Self-Portrait with Stanislaw Lepri*, 1942 (fig. 2) and the *Portrait of Mrs. Hasselter*, 1942 (fig. 3).

As Fini continued to explore portraiture, she gradually expanded the genre, blending it with elements drawn from her theatrical imagination: masks, elaborate costumes and meticulously staged poses entered her compositions, showing how naturally her interest in performance merged into her work (figs. 4-6). As her production grew more refined and stylized, she never abandoned the surrealist sensibility that defined her early years: small, carefully placed details such as an unexpected animal, a symbolic plant or the hint of an arcane ritual anchored her portraits in the realms of fantasy, mythology and dream. For Fini, portraiture was never about likeness, but rather a means of revealing the hidden psychological abyss of her subjects.

In this context, the drawing here discussed finds its place within Fini's world of extravagantly surreal and elegant portraiture, where self-representation unfolds through a fluid interplay of nudity and disguise. Her line, continuous and unbroken, moves freely across the surface, generating volume and depth with effortless

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precision. This distinctive graphic language resonates in the *Studies of Masks* where the line becomes a vehicle for Fini's intimate, inward experience of creation.

In her art, Fini was both a Muse and a Master and it is most certain that these *Masks' sketches* were tried out by the artist herself, together with elaborate attires for the *Bals* and *soirées* she attended in Paris after World-War II. As a matter of fact, in 1951 she published with her former partner André Pieyre de Mandiargues and photographer André Ostier *Les Masques de Leonor* where we find many preparatory drawings for her creations. The present drawing must date from this period, as Fini was fully embracing the postwar "revival" of Parisian high society while transforming her own appearance into a form of living art. Highly sought after at these gatherings, she captivated hosts and guests altogether and journalists delighted whenever she appeared. In the same year (1951) She attended the highly mundane and prestigious *Bal Oriental* also known as the *Bal du Siècle* at Palazzo Labia in Venice held by her friend Charles de Beistegui.

Her charisma and style also drew her into the world of fashion, where she befriended leading figures such as Christian Dior, Elsa Schiaparelli and Jacques Heim, moving effortlessly between the avant-garde art scene and the *haute couture* society.

This free, creative approach resonated with her broader intellectual and artistic circle, including Leonora Carrington, Stanislao Lepri, Eugène Berman, Domenico Gnoli, Fabrizio Clerici, Pavel Tchelitchew, writers and patrons such as André Pieyre de Mandiargues, the Parisian Surrealists and the De Noailles family.

Among the surrealists Fini's younger, often apolitical and highly cultivated generation painted and drew rather for pleasure, for theatres and fashion designers, than for politics (as had been the case for the founders of the movement in the 1920's-40's), seeking a more refined and free way of creating, made possible by their highly educated patrons, friends and partners.

The 1940 exhibition she held at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York introduced Leonor Fini to an American audience, cementing her place among the most sophisticated, cosmopolitan and visionary figures of the European Surrealist movement.

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Fig.1. Leonor Fini, *Autoportrait au Scorpion* (Self-portrait with Scorpion), 1938, oil on canvas, 80.3 x 59.8 cm, Sotheby's New York, 2021.



Fig. 2. Leonor Fini, *Portrait of Mrs Hasellter*, 1942, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 67.3 cm, Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco.

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Fig. 3. Leonor Fini, *Self-Portrait with Stanislao Lepri*, 1942, oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm, Frieze Masters, Naumann, New York.



Fig. 4. Leonor Fini wearing a costume for the *Bal de la Nuit du Pré Catelan*, Paris, June 1946

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Fig. 5. André Ostier, *Leonor Fini wearing costume for the Bal de la Voilette*, Paris, 1948.



Fig. 6. André Ostier, *Leonor Fini from Les Masques de Leonor Fini*, 1951.

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