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Leonor Fini

A dance and a flying creature

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LEONOR FINI

(Buenos Aires 1907 – Paris 1996)

UNTITLED (A DANCE AND A FLYING CREATURE)

Ink on paper

20.5 x 18 cm (8 1/8 x 7 1/8 in.)

Signed lower centre: "*Leonor Fini*"

Provenance

Leonor Fini Estate, Paris;
Private collection, New York;
Private collection, Italy.

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The present sheet is organised in two registers. Above, an apparition hovers with its wings outstretched almost the full width of the sheet, less a single body than a composite one, assembled from heads: a frontal face crowned with a flaring, flame-like mane at the centre, a smaller masked visage suspended beneath it, and two further heads set in profile along the leading edge of each wing, one looking out to the left, the other to the right. The creature is a *chimera* in the most literal sense, a being made of numerous faces, and it belongs to the same family as the sphinxes, guardians and hybrids that populate Fini's painting throughout her career. Below, three figures move in a rapid, interlocking dance, striding and turning across the lower half of the sheet. Drapery flicks out at their feet; hands reach across the group. The subject reads at once as a *ronde* or *farandole*, as a *bacchanal*, and as a *sabbath*: the dancers turn beneath an apparition that is either presiding over them or conjured by them. The device of the epiphany suspended above earthly figures is an old one, borrowed from altarpiece and ceiling painting, and Fini puts it to entirely profane use.

The drawing is executed with continuous and unbroken pen lines moving freely across the surface, generating volume and depth with effortless precision, with only the briefest passages of hatching to model a cheek or a wing. Although a small and swiftly made sheet, swiftly it nevertheless has the character of invention caught at the moment of its occurrence. This kind of rapid notation stands between Fini's theatrical maquettes and her finished works on paper, and in which her graphic imagination can be seen operating at its freest.

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.

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

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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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