Defense Mechanisms of a Female Artist:
humor in the work of Meret Oppenheim

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Abstract

Analysis of Meret Oppenheim’s work is most often done through the lens of feminism and omits the psychoanalytic aspects of humor. This research studies the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung as applied to Oppenheim’s life and work through the lens of feminism to form an analysis of how humor was used as a defense mechanism. This paper argues that the use of humor evidences the contradictions and challenges Oppenheim faced as an artist and as muse.

During Oppenheim’s early years in Paris, her relationship with the predominantly male circle of Surrealists was as lover or muse, which is demonstrated by her posing nude for artist Man Ray. Oppenheim’s interviews reveal her despair over being a woman in a patriarchal society. Study of her biography and letters gives insight into the growing conflict she felt as an artist. The cultural milieu which surrounded Oppenheim, when viewed with the lens of feminism, exposes a society that marginalized and objectified women. Freudian theories of wit and humor affirm the use of these mechanisms to cope with anger. The Jungian theory of archetypes and the concept of play, which Oppenheim studied, can help explain her belief system; therefore, it will be argued these theories acted as another basis for her conflict and anger.

Oppenheim’s biography affirms her challenge as a female Surrealist artist. Psychoanalytic theories reveal unconscious motivations for the use of humor in Oppenheim’s work. Feminist analysis of Oppenheim’s objects in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory and biographical information evidence that humor as an unconscious defense mechanism was used in their creation.
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Oppenheim: Rebel, Muse and Artist

According to Meret Oppenheim, her creative ideas came from her unconscious.¹ When asked about where her ideas come from, Oppenheim remarked,

The ideas simply ‘come’. Or rather they are already there some-where. And like one sets nets for birds, traps for animals, one gives them thoughts, words, canvases, paper or other materials on which they can alight. The process is inexplicable.²

Critics address a variety of ideas and themes from different viewpoints when discussing Oppenheim’s work, but the use of humor as a defense mechanism has been omitted. Oppenheim’s need for a defense mechanism was instigated by her fierce independence of character in a patriarchal society. Humor acted as a psychic defense against the ramifications of marginalization and objectification.

Research into Oppenheim’s biography and the cultural context that surrounded her reveals that her strong, independent personality was at odds with the anti-feminist culture of the 1930s which framed her as a muse rather than an artist. Oppenheim’s interviews bring to light her conflicted emotions and her anger at the inequality she experienced. Oppenheim’s biography reveals critical information that shows her penchant for freedom and rebellion, highlighting her emphasis on feminist values. Oppenheim’s frustration at the unequal treatment of women is substantiated by personal interviews with the artist and examination of cultural context.

The prevailing analysis of Oppenheim’s works Object, My Nurse, Stone Woman, The Couple and Spring Banquet is anchored in a sexualized interpretation fostered by the patriarchy of Surrealism (figs. 2-6). Not only was Oppenheim influenced by the Dadaists, but she also


adhered to a different psychoanalytic framework from that of the Surrealists, which provided her with an alternative narrative for her work. Oppenheim acknowledged elements of sexuality and fetishism in her work, but this does not and should not limit our perception of her work as purely fetishistic or sexual, especially when we consider other factual evidence and other (lesser known and acknowledged) quotes from the artist herself, quotes not just about her experiences, but about her work itself. A comprehensive look at key works from her oeuvre reveals a common thread: humor.

The long-standing sexualized interpretation of Oppenheim’s work is due in part to the renaming of her work by André Breton, the acknowledged leader of Surrealism and author of its manifestos. By renaming her works, Breton influenced public perception of her work in a manner that removed Oppenheim’s own voice. Indeed, some of her works had intentional fetishistic undertones, but Breton’s new, sexualized and fetishistic titles had a lasting impact, so much so that his titles are what endure, not the voice of the artist herself. Many historians and critics analyze Oppenheim’s work with Breton’s narrative, overriding Oppenheim’s initial and multi-layered intention. Breton’s titles have had lasting influence as even today most people remember Oppenheim’s work based on his titles, not hers.

The multilayered meaning intended by Oppenheim partly resides in the innocuous titles she gives her work. Not only does Oppenheim use these layered meanings to provoke viewers to create their own interpretation, but she powerfully manipulates the meaning by leaving some ambiguity.

Many feminist interpretations of Oppenheim’s work are based on Breton’s sexualized titles which disregard the perspective of Oppenheim herself. By examining Breton’s Manifestos of Surrealism, the reader may expose the contradictions between the Surrealist ideology of
freedom and their actual practice of chauvinism. In his *First Manifesto of Surrealism* Breton asks for “complete nonconformism” in order to gain freedom of thought and rebel against the bourgeois ideals which surrounded the Surrealist members. However, Breton directed his message of freedom towards men, not women. Regarding the Surrealist notion of the female attribute of hysteria, Breton wrote “The problem with women is the most wonderful and disturbing problem in the world.” Breton viewed women as objects of lust and desire and praised them for their ability to inspire the male Surrealist artists.

Humor was perhaps the only tool with which Oppenheim could defend her sanity while ensconced in the Surrealist circle of men. By associating herself and her work with the Surrealists, her work received a level of validation that would have been impossible had she struck out on her own. Though Surrealists claimed to rebel against the status quo, they perpetuated the gender roles and power imbalances between the sexes that typified the period.

Oppenheim was creating out of rebellion and pursuing freedom before she was hindered by the bourgeois attitudes towards women. Women who did not assume traditional roles were portrayed as insane or criminal, and this perception undermined Oppenheim psychologically. Oppenheim believed that men and women are equal, proclaiming that “Women have never been accepted in spirit by men, but we all have the same brains, principle, and love. Spirituality is the only real value in the world, and it has no sex.” The conflict between Oppenheim’s personal ideology of equality of the sexes and that of the culture which surrounded her would have caused a pain and anger difficult to endure.

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2. Ibid., 180.
Study of Freud’s theories of wit and humor as mechanisms for releasing pain substantiate that Oppenheim’s use of humor in her works of art could have served as a defense mechanism and offered her psychological relief. Oppenheim may have unconsciously used humor as a defense mechanism to cope with the patriarchal society that surrounded her and the difficulty of reconciling her two roles as muse and artist.

Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936), *My Nurse* (1936), *Stone Woman* (1938), *The Couple* (1956), and *Spring Banquet* (1959), when analyzed chronologically from the perspective of biography, psychoanalytic theory, and feminism and examined in relation to other critical texts, reveal the omission of the analysis of humor and the importance of its use as a defense mechanism. Research of the biographical and cultural context surrounding Oppenheim in the 1930s reveals the conflict and challenges she faced due to her dual roles as *femme-enfant* and muse to the older male Surrealist artists and as a female artist.

Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of wit and humor give insight into the use of humor displacement by Oppenheim as a defense mechanism to cope with pain. Carl Jung’s theory of creation and play, as well as his theories of archetypes, which were studied by Oppenheim, also give insight into the humor veiled in *Object, My Nurse, The Couple* and *Spring Banquet*. Review and analysis of feminist literature leads to the conclusion that Oppenheim used humor in her work as a defense mechanism to cope with the patriarchal framework of Surrealism.
**Influence and Constraints: Paris, Surrealism, Patriarchy**

Born in 1913, Oppenheim grew up in Switzerland and was profoundly influenced by her mother and grandmother, a suffragette, who supported and encouraged her to grow into an independent, strong woman. Oppenheim’s grandmother was one of the first women to study painting at the art academy of Düsseldorf, and in 1945 she illustrated a widely known children’s book, *Jonny Should Go and Shake the Pears*. While visiting at her grandmother’s home in Carona, Switzerland, throughout her childhood, Oppenheim met diverse intellectual artists such as Dadaists Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, as well as writer Hermann Hesse, who was married to her aunt, Ruth Wenger. Oppenheim was also exposed to the psychoanalytic theories of Carl Jung at a young age due to her father, a Swiss physician, who was Jung’s friend and attended his lectures. Discussion of Jung’s theories regularly took place in Oppenheim’s home, and as a result she began to write down her dreams because she understood that it was “artists who do society’s dreaming.” Later in life, Oppenheim revealed that during difficult times, dreams acted as her counsel.

Poetry and painting held much more fascination for Oppenheim than school, and from an early age she exhibited a dark sense of humor within her work which was likely incited by the

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2. Ibid., 9.

3. Ibid., 10.


5. Ibid.

constraints of a patriarchal society that oppressed women who desired freedom. In an interview, Oppenheim stated,

At age 17, I understood that women have always been a commodity since the dawn of time, that they were kept dependent on men (in the patriarchal family), who refused them material means in order to force them into marriage, and that their only value was their virginity, I was scandalized.

Oppenheim resisted the bourgeois conventions which held women in a place of subservience and at a young age realized she would choose to pursue a life of freedom and equality.

In 1932, at the age of 18, Oppenheim moved to Paris to pursue an artist’s life attending the Académie de la Grande Chaumiére. Oppenheim’s desire to be free led her to Paris and to the Surrealists, whose ideologies were based in rebellion against societal norms. Not long after her arrival in Paris, Oppenheim befriended Surrealist sculptor Alberto Giacometti. After a visit to Giacometti’s studio, Oppenheim wrote, “I loved what I saw there and found everything wonderful.” Oppenheim and Giacometti worked together and exchanged ideas, and their friendship opened the door to other Surrealist liaisons such as Man Ray, Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst and René Magritte.

By 1933, Oppenheim was fully entrenched in the Parisian avant-garde circle of Surrealists, who admired her beauty, independence, intelligence and sophistication.

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12 Ibid., 15.
13 Ibid., 12.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 21-30.
18 Bice Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 17.
and Hans Arp included Oppenheim’s work in exhibitions, and she met Man Ray who employed her as his muse and model. In a letter dated March 1933, Oppenheim wrote to her mother of her affection for Giacometti and that rather than having one teacher, she was influenced by many.  

Oppenheim’s friendships with the leading Surrealists had a lasting impact on her work.

During 1934, Oppenheim began an affair with Max Ernst, which she ended after a year when she realized that although she was madly in love with him, Ernst’s strong personality and fame would have overshadowed her own creative growth and evolution as an artist. An example of Oppenheim’s marginalization by Ernst is evident in his quote on an invitation to Oppenheim’s first solo show: “In a word, she is a living example of the ancient tenet WOMAN IS A BUN SPREAD WITH WHITE MARBLE. Who covers the soup spoons with precious fur? Little Meret. Who has outgrown us? Little Meret.” By describing Oppenheim as “Little Meret” Ernst diminished her capacity as an artist and clearly chose to view her as femme-enfant rather than as an equal.

Man Ray introduced Marcel Duchamp to Oppenheim in 1935, which resulted in a powerful love affair between the two lasting until 1942. Contrasted with her relationship with Ernst, in which she felt overshadowed as an artist, Oppenheim’s relationship with Duchamp was based on autonomy, and they deliberately chose to keep some distance to maintain independence. Later in an interview, Oppenheim commented on her fascination with Duchamp

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5 Ibid.
and the “humor and mentality” of his work. Elements of Duchamp’s pioneering work with “readymade” objects, which traded beauty and aesthetic for intellect and meaning, are revealed in Oppenheim’s work. The relationship Oppenheim had with each of these artists and the many others she came in contact with would have a profound impact on her work and life.

Also in 1935, the contradictions that Oppenheim felt as an artist and her role as the object of desire for prominent male Surrealists began to take its toll on her psyche; therefore, at the request of her father she met with Carl Jung himself. After meeting with Oppenheim, Jung wrote her father on September 16, 1935, concerning his diagnosis.

Dear colleague,
As you know, I saw your daughter in between. I do not think the case is too bad. She seems to have learned a lot from the clash with the elves, and it is hard to see why this knowledge should not deepen considerably over time, and I do not have the impression that there is any neurotic complication artistic temperament on the one hand, and the youthful disorientation of an age, which make up for the rationality of the nineteenth century muse, are well enough explanation for the unconventional nature of the point of view. I have the impression that the struggle with the realities in the natural intelligence of your daughter in few years will bring a seriousness, which makes hope for a sufficient adaptation to the power of reality.
Yours sincerely,
Yours faithfully
C. G. Jung.

Not only does the letter reveal the close personal relationship of Jung to Oppenheim and her father, it also affirms her role as a muse, her intelligence, and the contradictions she felt. Jung’s diagnosis substantiates that Oppenheim was not suffering from any neurosis, but rather her “clash with the elves” or male Surrealists, and her position as muse at a young age would be the cause for her anxiety. Jung proposed that time and maturity would alleviate Oppenheim’s stress.

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Interestingly, Jung’s diagnosis of Oppenheim materialized as she matured and as her creative process gained momentum.

Oppenheim’s *Object*, created in 1936 and subsequently purchased by the Museum of Modern Art that same year, threw Oppenheim into the spotlight as an artist, and prompted her first solo show in Basel (fig. 2). Also in 1936, due to the rise of the Nazi Party, Oppenheim’s father was forced to end his practice in Germany because of his Jewish heritage. No longer able to receive monetary support from her father, Oppenheim was forced to return to Basel where she attended the School of Arts and Crafts in order to train as a conservator as it would allow her to earn an income. The psychological stress of impending war and failure to support herself in Paris were elements which initiated the onset of a severe depression beginning in 1937 and lasting until 1954. In 1938 Oppenheim produced *Stone Woman*, a painting which demonstrated her dark mood (fig. 4).

Although Oppenheim continued to exhibit with other Surrealists, early in 1939, after the outbreak of World War II, many Surrealists went into exile, changing the landscape of the Parisian art scene. The war had a profound effect on the daily lives and the emotional existence of those it touched.

Oppenheim married businessman Wolfgang La Roche in 1949, an act she considered to be her compromise with societal norms. During the 1950s, as Oppenheim exited her depression, she met again with Surrealists in Paris but was disillusioned with the stagnation of the movement

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*[28] Ibid.*

*[29] Ibid.*


*[31] Ibid.*

*[32] Ibid., 293.*
and how dogmatic it had become. "The Couple" (1956) and "Spring Banquet" (1959) were created in the late 1950s after she had fully recovered from her crisis of depression and, as a consequence, Oppenheim’s career gained momentum (figs. 5-6). By the 1960s Oppenheim had earned international fame; in 1975, she was awarded the City of Basel Art Prize, and in 1982 she received the Grand Prize of the City of Berlin. In her 1975 acceptance speech for the City of Basel Art Prize, Oppenheim discusses the difficulties of being a woman artist.

Men, as artists, can live as they please without provoking censure, but people look disdainfully at a woman who claims the same privilege. This and much more is a woman’s lot. I think it is the duty of a woman to lead a life that expresses her disbelief in the validity of the taboos that have been imposed upon her kind for thousands of years. Freedom is not given to you, you have to take it.

In her speech, Oppenheim reflects on her frustration at the inability of women to be as free as men. The speech also reveals how Oppenheim strove to live a life as free as possible without conforming to societal expectations. Oppenheim struggled to combat gender inequality her entire life while expressing her pain in her art and poetry.

On November 15, 1985, Oppenheim died of a heart attack and was buried near her family home in Carona. Posthumous recognition followed Oppenheim’s death, and as feminist theory has evolved and women are included in the discourse of art history, her oeuvre is continually analyzed and reevaluated.

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"Curiger, Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 61.


Patriarchy and Pain

It is reasonable to conclude that the disconnection of being a creator and existing under the shadow of older, established artists would have caused psychological stress for Oppenheim. The perception throughout history of Oppenheim as an artist was subsumed by her role as muse to the older male Surrealists. Oppehheim endured conflict because of the patriarchy perpetuated and instigated by André Breton and the male-dominated movement of Surrealism which viewed women not as independent and active artists, but rather as erotic sources of unconscious desire. The dichotomies inherent in the contradiction of being both artist and muse caused Oppenheim a great deal of conflict and pain. Oppenheim desired to live a life of freedom, reacting against the constraints of the bourgeoisie, and her primary desire was to be accepted and validated for the way she chose to live. Oppenheim’s anti-establishment attitude agreed with what Breton laid out in the First Manifesto of Surrealism, in which he called for “complete nonconformism,” and although women were included in Surrealism, they were not regarded as equals. Breton writes to an audience of men in the First Manifesto of Surrealism; his directives are listed as “Man” and “he” throughout, and when he cites his friends and fellow artists, they are all male. Oppenheim perhaps experienced the dichotomy of how Breton’s writings were meant to incite rebellion as opposed to how they upheld the status quo in regard to the role of women. The continued subjugation of women which perpetuated bourgeois ideals undermined the revolutionary aspects of Breton’s Manifesto of Surrealism. One can only imagine the frustration and pain Oppenheim

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Ibid., 287.


experienced as an intelligent artist marginalized by Breton’s words, which spoke of revolution but were meant to free men, not women.

The paradox of a movement which hoped to incite change against bourgeois traditional values yet regarded women as a source of desire conflicted with Oppenheim’s own value system. Oppenheim’s own rebellion led her to the circle of the male Surrealists who were much older but they regarded her as a source of delight and inspiration rather than as an equal.° The sublimated frustration and anger at the perception of her as only a source of desire rather than a brilliant artist would have caused Oppenheim a great deal of pain.

Oppenheim never conformed to cultural expectations and rebelled against authority and any preconceived notions of how she should behave. Oppenheim chose to live a life without bearing children, purposely freeing herself from bourgeois societal norms.° The bourgeois opinions of a woman’s place within society during the 1930s was inherently traditional. In 1934, Dr. Robert Teutsch of the Parisian Medical Society published a compilation of opinions about women from a wide range of social commentators, journalists, and doctors in *Le Féminisme*, which attempted to understand the ramifications of feminism on French morality and society.° This group of opinions has been widely cited and criticized by contemporary scholars as indicative of the 1930s bourgeois attitudes toward feminism. Teutsch felt that women who did not adhere to traditional values and live as dutiful wives and mothers should be punished and

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imprisoned to save society from their immorality.`` Teutsch paints non-conforming women as insane or criminal.

Bourgeois notions of female madness were similar to the Surrealist valorization of hysteria, the mentally unstable title character of Breton’s novel Nadja (1928) being a prime example. Nadja is Breton’s record of an affair with an erratic woman who professes that her desire for him has “complete power over her.” Breton’s obsession with Nadja is not based in reality but is a reflection of his ego and fixation on her as his muse. Surrealist artists’ representations of hysteria are exclusively female and only further the common bourgeois perception of women.`` The Surrealist ideas of madness and insanity as applied to the concept of female hysteria marginalized the female Surrealist artists and further reinforced the concept of women as “other.” The medical establishment used pseudo-scientific reasons to validate their opinions of women as hysteric and insane, and the Surrealists used these perceptions to validate their own opinions. Oppenheim identified with the Surrealists, but she must have been subjected to the sexual discrimination espoused in Breton’s writings and the work of the other male Surrealists.

A Parisian contemporary of Oppenheim, Simone de Beauvoir, author of a seminal feminist text, The Second Sex, (1949) argued that men were subjugating women. Beauvoir wrote about the perception that man is human and woman is considered as “other” which holds women in enslavement.`` This enslavement was felt equally by Oppenheim and demonstrates the beginning of the outspoken rejection of the patriarchal power in which these women were

`` Ibid., 64.
involved in Paris during the 1930s. Also, by writing about André Breton in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir gives us an alternate primary source of feminist opinion about him and the traditional Surrealist exultation of women as objects of desire.48 Regarding Breton, Beauvoir writes that he continues to exalt women only in relationship to men, thereby continuing to relegate women as “other.”49 Beauvoir’s criticism of Breton’s objectification of women demonstrates the difficult cultural climate in which Oppenheim existed.

Historians and scholars concur that the cultural context of Paris in the 1930s including the male Surrealists was anti-feminist in sentiment. Robert Belton aptly critiques the male Surrealists in his book *Beribboned Bomb*, arguing that Surrealism was indifferent toward women’s equality, refusing to mention women’s rights within Surrealist literature.50 Oppenheim left for Paris desiring freedom, joining the Surrealists for their promise of retaliation against bourgeois societal norms, but their inherent cultural patriarchy marginalized her. Perhaps Oppenheim’s role as muse undermined respect for her as an artist; however, other women Surrealist artists who exhibited with their male peers also failed to be esteemed in Surrealist publications. Female artists were included in Surrealist exhibitions merely for producing shock value and were regarded with ambivalence and as objects of curiosity for their perceived connection with hysteria.51 The contradiction of Surrealist ideology of promoting freedom from the constraints of the moral code of the bourgeoisie while continuing to marginalize women would have caused conflicting emotional pain for Oppenheim.

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48 Ibid., 249.
49 Ibid., 208.
51 Ibid., 255.
Érotique Voilée: Veiled objectification

Analysis of Oppenheim’s position as model and muse in Man Ray’s photograph Érotique Voilée gives insight into the paradox of her rebellious freedom as a self-deception and the reality of her objectification (fig.1).

One of the most famous images of Oppenheim is a photograph, Érotique Voilée (Veiled Erotic), by Man Ray. This black and white image consists of Oppenheim, nude, behind a printer’s wheel. Her left arm is covered in ink and rests atop the wheel with her hand open against her forehead, partially covering Oppenheim’s boyish closely cropped hair. She wears a black circlet around her neck and gazes downward with a slight smile, her right hand grasping the wheel. The handle of the wheel protrudes towards the viewer above her pubic hair, and shadows cast by the spokes of the wheel onto Oppenheim’s body accentuate her curves but also hide her breasts. The photograph demonstrates the ambiguity of Oppenheim’s gender. Her androgynous haircut, hidden breasts and protruding phallus/handle suggest Oppenheim is male, whereas the hint of her nipple above the wheel and placement of her pubic hair along with the shadowy curves suggest she is female.

Oppenheim remembers how she had a difficult time suppressing her laughter during the photo shoot. She stated, “Man Ray had taken me to Marcoussis’s studio and I don’t remember if he just wanted to take pictures of a nude next to an engraving press or if he already had the idea of the arm coated in printing ink.” When Man Ray asked Oppenheim if he could publish the image in the Surrealist magazine Minotaure, Oppenheim consented, but she later had some misgivings when her parents were told she was having her photo taken “for magazines

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Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 23.

Oppenheim, “Interview by Alain Jouffery,” 15.

Ibid., 15-16.
Oppenheim professes that it was her “rebellious nature” and her freedom of spirit that moved her to model nude.«

Oppenheim chose to live a life in Paris relying on her own power of choice. Attesting to Oppenheim’s free-thinking personality and rebellious nature, Man Ray remarked,

Meret was one of the most uninhibited women I have ever met. She posed for me in the nude, her hands smeared with the black ink of an etching press in Marcoussis’s studio. This was a bit scabrous for the deluxe art magazine for which it was intended; Meret alone, leaning on the press was used. Still it was very disturbing, a perfect example of the Surrealist tendency toward scandal.»

Oppenheim denied any artistic influence on Ray’s photograph and stressed that it was his work not hers, though many scholars argue that the ink stain on her arm acts as a symbol of her agency.« Oppenheim’s stance in the photograph with its implied androgyny as well as her suppressed laughter, as evident in her recounting the experience, indicate not only complicity but active participation in Ray’s artistic process. It is also worth noting that androgyny is a recurring motif and theme in Oppenheim’s work and an integral part of her personal philosophy.

The Surrealist practice of fragmentation and framing evidenced in Ray’s photograph of Oppenheim’s body provides ample opportunity for analysis. Mary Ann Caws argues in her essay “Ladies Shot and Painted” that Érotique Voilée is emblematic of the double reading of Surrealism’s celebrations of blasons or separate body parts “because the spokes of the printing wheel cut Oppenheim’s body into pieces.”» At the heart of Caw’s analysis is a double meaning,

« Ibid.


» Ibid., 38.

one that gives Oppenheim agency where she operates a metaphorical spinning wheel of which she has control versus a reading of the image as a sadistic torture wheel with the ability to inflict the pain in perpetuity by printing the image over and over. Both readings of Caw’s are of merit and perhaps could be considered as a blend of both opinions, Oppenheim with agency and participation but in control of the machine, which expresses her modernity and androgyny.

Man Ray captured many images of Oppenheim during 1933-1934; however, Érotique Voilée embodies the overt eroticism and perception by Surrealists that women were their link to the unconscious and to nature, an impetus of desire, inspiration and a symbol of the revolt against the establishment. Ultimately the image reveals that Oppenheim was a muse of Man Ray and manipulated as an object of desire. Oppenheim’s suppressed laughter while posing for Érotique Voilée is indicative of her use of humor to cope with an uncomfortable situation. As Oppenheim gained notoriety for her own work, her role as a muse began to contradict with her role as an artist. The conflict of Oppenheim’s dual role within the Surrealist circle as muse/lover and artist ignited frustration and despair.

**Oppenheim’s Object: A furry icon**

In 1936, Oppenheim created and exhibited Object, the work for which she is best known (fig. 2). Oppenheim achieved notoriety and fame for Object when it was purchased by Alfred Barr, Jr., for the Museum of Modern Art. The acquisition of Object by Barr positioned Oppenheim as a competitor and equal to the male artists of Surrealism.

Oppenheim was inspired to create Object during a chance encounter at a café. It began with a casual discussion: Pablo Picasso remarked upon the fur-covered bracelet Oppenheim was

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*Ibid., 278-279.*


*Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 40.*
wearing, and the ensuing banter resulted in laughter at the irony that they could cover anything in fur.\textsuperscript{63} Later, at the request of André Breton to make an object for an upcoming exhibition, Oppenheim purchased a teacup, saucer, and spoon at a local store and covered them in gazelle fur.\textsuperscript{64} As a result of her chance encounter with Picasso, characterized by frivolity and fun, Oppenheim’s creation of a fur-covered teacup, saucer, and spoon became one of the most famous of all Surrealist objects.\textsuperscript{65} Breton changed the title of Oppenheim’s \textit{Object} to \textit{Le déjeuner en fourrure}, (Object, The Luncheon in Fur) as a reference to Manet’s \textit{Luncheon On the Grass}, purposefully implicating fetishism and sexual content that were not overtly implicated by the artist.\textsuperscript{66} When asked about Breton’s changing the name of her work, she commented, “the word-games of critics, the power struggles of men! Part of its scandalous appeal was not invented by me. It was a fluke.”\textsuperscript{67} By renaming \textit{Object}, Breton asserted his power over Oppenheim and changed the meaning of her work. Breton’s metaphorical associations subsumed the literal aspects of Oppenheim’s creation, and because of this subjugation this paper uses the title \textit{Object} to reclaim and honor Oppenheim’s original intent.

Some scholars argue that perhaps Oppenheim relinquished her own meaning for that of the dominant male view because she may have thought no one would listen anyway.\textsuperscript{68} Would \textit{Object} have been famous if it had not been for Breton’s attention and redirection of its meaning? A similar question, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in an essay written by

\begin{itemize}
  \item Oppenheim, “Interview by Alain Jouffery,” 15.
  \item Ibid., 15.
  \item Curiger, \textit{Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom}, 39.
  \item Belton, “Androgyny: Interview with Meret Oppenheim,” 68.
\end{itemize}
Linda Nochlin, argues that artists and their art do not live in a vacuum but are influenced by the social institutions and culture which surround them. Women artists have not received the notoriety of their male counterparts because it was impossible for them to achieve based on their traditionally limited access to education and the patriarchal power over those institutions that would revere them. The institutionalized male provocation of desire maintained control over female Surrealist artists such as Oppenheim. This control is demonstrated in Breton’s fetishizing of Object and retitling it as Le déjeuner en fourrure. Such an act should be reanalyzed with the lens of feminism.

Scholars also argue that there is no way to be objective about the context of a woman living as a Surrealist artist, which highlights the difficulty of interpreting Oppenheim’s work. The phallocentric lens by which Object is examined exacerbates the difficulty of its interpretation. Critical analysis of Object is from a predominately male perspective based on Breton’s subversion of Oppenheim’s original title. Even today, the enigmatic cup is referenced as Luncheon in Fur and is discussed in relation to Breton’s title. The fur cup has been fetishized and sexualized with no mention of humor. The paradox of women understanding her work through a male lens would have isolated Oppenheim. The fame Oppenheim achieved due to the male understanding of Object would have felt inauthentic and false.

A longtime student of Carl Jung’s theories, Oppenheim would have been aware of Jung’s claim that “the creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect, but by the play

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* Belton, The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist, 256.

instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the object it loves.”

Oppenheim was creating art in her own playful and instinctual way. Oppenheim, rather than being concerned specifically with the psychological aspects of her creation, was creating objects with freedom, openness and a sense of fun. The whimsical quality of a cup covered in fur instigated by a light-hearted conversation with friends at a café demonstrates the concept of play.

Oppenheim also believed in the androgynous nature of Jung’s theory of animus/anima and the equality it offers. The anima and animus, Jung taught, were the primary archetypes of the collective unconscious which represent the male and female aspects inside each human. Oppenheim’s Object is androgynous, imbued with both male and female qualities. The teacup and saucer are indicative of the civilized and feminine act of having tea. The dainty porcelain is perhaps another metaphor for a delicate woman. When covered with fur the cup becomes feral and masculine, and the implication of putting the fur between one’s lips perhaps suggests to the viewer erotic pleasure and a blending of male and female. Regarding Object, historian Heike Eipeldauer argues that it has an underlying element of fetishism and ironic humor which mirrors the use of irony in Duchamp’s ready-mades objects and his implied comment on art as a fetish commodity. Surrealist’s use of Freudian theory to understand their process encompassed Freud’s notions of fetish which he describes as an “unnatural substitute for a sexual object.” Freud writes that fur is used as a fetish because of its associations with the hairiness of a

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2 Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 34.


5 Heike Eipeldauer, “Ça Continue: Meret Oppenheim and Marcel Duchamp,” 36.

woman’s pubic area. Breton’s renaming of Object to Luncheon in Fur thereby centers the sole importance of its meaning as fetish and strong-arms the viewer to imagine they are not having tea but rather engaging in oral sex. Oppenheim’s transformation of a readymade into Object has a much deeper and nuanced meaning than merely overt sexuality. Oppenheim’s use of irony seems to have acted as humorous commentary against the self-importance and ego of the older male Surrealists.

While the Surrealists’ conception of the unconscious was founded in Freudian repression, Oppenheim adhered to the Jungian concept that her creations were borne out of the collective unconscious, not intellect. Perhaps a seed of her unconscious creation of Object was planted in her 1933 poem Zanzibar which portends not only the ironic use of fur but also the impending loneliness of her depression.

Zanzibar
Because he turns his back
He Loses
Over the Chimneys
Little red corners
Little red vixen-
All live in loneliness
They endure the longest
They eat their fur.

In Zanzibar, Oppenheim writes of a man losing because he has turned his back in rejection or abandonment of someone and she also writes of vixen, lonely and existing in a terminal pain who “eat their fur” suggesting perhaps self-pleasure or cunnilingus. Poetry was another creative outlet for Oppenheim which allowed her to express her humor and pain. Her mastery of words and language as image offered Oppenheim’s art additional substance. Oppenheim’s skill with

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words carried over to the titles of her work and imbued them with irony and multilayered meaning.

Oppenheim was also influenced by her relationship with Dadaists Ball and Hennings. The Dada influence of Ball is best illuminated in his *Dada Fragments*, in which he writes of the importance of the absurd, laughter, and revolution as the basis of an art which rejects the status quo. Ball’s ideology of art stressed the importance of concept over technical mastery, which is evidenced in the creation of the art objects like Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades.” The Jungian concept of play argues that creation comes from laughter and fun rather than seriousness. These Dada and Jungian concepts, which greatly influenced Oppenheim, also contradicted the seriousness of the Surrealists and their Freudian ideologies. The Surrealists used Freudian theory to tap into the unconscious mind for ego driven self-actualization whereas the Dadaists strove to negate meaning and, like the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious, erase the self. The contradictions of Dadaism and Surrealism and Jung and Freud could have contributed to Oppenheim’s own contradictions.

The nuanced implications of Oppenheim’s *Object* have been largely neglected in existing scholarship. Art historians, critics and scholars predominantly focus on the fetishism and erotic aspects of *Object* by interpreting the concave fur-lined cup solely as vaginal and the fur-covered spoon as phallic, thus reinforcing Breton’s exploitation of Oppenheim’s work. The insinuation

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of eroticism, as proposed by Breton’s title, consumes most of the discussion regarding Object, whereas humor as a coping mechanism for Oppenheim is not addressed.

Few contemporary scholars recognize humor in Oppenheim’s work although they omit its use as a defense mechanism. Scholar Kathleen Bühler notes that Oppenheim’s use of “wit and irony leads to deeper insights” and that her “approach was grounded on a desire to displace the persistent functionalization of the female body in art as well as the hidden dynamics of power and violence between the sexes.” Buhler’s argument is well-founded in that Oppenheim’s use of humor acts to displace the frustration and pain she felt at being marginalized. Historian Bice Curiger attests to Oppenheim’s humor as an integral part of her daily life and that her “playful subversion” used “humour as an act of grace to make wisdom bearable.” While this analysis attests to Oppenheim’s use of humor as subversion, it does not go as far as to state that humor was a defense mechanism Oppenheim employed to displace her frustration with the patriarchal institution which surrounded her. This defense mechanism is clearly manifest not only in her art but in quotations from the artist herself.

The viewer of Object experiences the duality of its physical and conceptual meaning. The feminine is juxtaposed with the masculine and cultured with the uncivilized. Oppenheim’s spontaneity of creation was founded in her extreme intellect, and the reading of Object must be deeper and more nuanced than the thin veneer of sexualized perception Breton imposed. The first display of Object was at the behest of Breton for the 1936 Exposition of Surrealist Objects at the Charles Ratton Gallery in Paris. Displayed behind glass in a curio cabinet on the bottom shelf, Object’s viewer would have been placed as voyeur and witness to the patriarchal confinement

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85 Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 81.
and perhaps underestimation of the importance of Oppenheim’s cup. Also, after a ten-year hiatus Duchamp exhibited a work in the same curio on the middle shelf and was centered directly above Oppenheim’s cup. The Gallery’s curatorial decision of the placement of the objects within the curio cabinet may have been influenced by Breton. After this exhibition Breton promoted the artistic object as the utmost form of Surrealist theory. Armed with the knowledge of Duchamp and Oppenheim’s relationship, the viewer might surmise that he also exerted a power and importance over her in that his readymade object sits front and center directly over her cup. *Object* subverts a feminine, dainty teacup by covering it in feral, savage animal fur, perhaps suggesting a power play between the sexes. Created on the heels of her objectification as *femme-enfant* by older male Surrealists, the creation of the fur cup was mischievous and fun, and perhaps by anchoring her work in play Oppenheim subverted the chauvinism of the male Surrealists who would not take her seriously as an artist.

Since Oppenheim relinquished her creation to the unconscious, she created without the burden of having to micro-analyze her work. Revealing her own sense of humor, Oppenheim said, “I made the teacup to amuse myself, not to shock the bourgeoisie. It was a joke. In the same year, I made an object which I think is just as important: *Ma gouvernante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen.*”

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1 Heike Eipeldauer, “Ça continue: Meret Oppenheim and Marcel Duchamp,” 34.
2 Ibid., 33.
Oppenheim’s *My Nurse*: a subversive platter

Oppenheim’s object *My Nurse* consists of two white heeled pumps upturned on a silver platter, bound in twine with two frills capping the heels, evocative of those used on a meat platter (fig. 3). The shoes, trussed up and tied, belonged to Max Ernst’s wife, Marie-Berthe Aurenche, who later destroyed *My Nurse* after seeing it in an exhibition. Oppenheim later recalled in an interview that Aurenche had destroyed her artwork out of jealousy over Oppenheim’s tumultuous affair with Ernst.

Oppenheim noted that the decorations of *My Nurse* were “like ones used to decorate geese or lamb,” and that what it “invokes in me is the association of thighs squeezed together in pleasure and of my nursemaid, dressed in white who exuded a sensuality of which I was unconsciously aware.” Some scholars have observed that Oppenheim’s use of the empty space between the heels invoke female labia. The view from above the heels can be seen as buttocks with the heels as upturned legs, inviting the viewer into the female sex represented by the empty space. The overt sexuality of the space can be read both as lesbian and as heterosexual.

Again, the viewer is placed outside the work of art as voyeur with only the ability to observe the bondage and immobility of the shoes. From the perspective of a female viewer observing a female artist’s work, the question arises: Did Oppenheim suggest that the shoes are powerless because they were tied up by a man, or did Oppenheim suggest she was deriving some kind of pleasure from pain?

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Some scholars argue that the frills and string evoke cannibalization and fetish; however, there is also an underlying humor in *My Nurse*. *Object’s* subliminal and playful humor differs from *My Nurse*’s ironic and satirical wit. Oppenheim’s use of humor in *My Nurse* demonstrates a provocation perhaps intended for Ernst’s wife. Traditional philosophy of humor provides insight into how the humor of *Object* is unconscious and personal, whereas the irony of *My Nurse* is overt and provocative.

Poking fun at her lover’s wife in an intentional yet subversive way reveals the use of black humor and irony by Oppenheim. Historians Jacqueline Burckhardt and Bice Curiger concur that Oppenheim’s use of eroticism and humor are purposeful and steeped in meaning “covering a wide range including black humor and macabre.”* L’humour noir or black humor was an important Surrealist concept evidenced in Breton’s all male author compilation the *Anthology of Black Humor*. Breton acknowledged the Freudian theory of humor as a way to release pain and cites humor as a “superior revolt of the mind” to be used as a mechanism to rebel against bourgeois conventions. Oppenheim was just as aware of this phenomenon as the male Surrealist artists in Breton’s anthology, and just like them she employed black humor consciously. Breton felt that black humor was an important aspect of art and poetry. Breton’s acknowledgement of humor as a release of pain as well as its use to rebel against the bourgeois, when compared to Oppenheim’s use of black humor in *My Nurse* as a defense mechanism and as a mechanism to revolt against Surrealist patriarchy, is ironic.

Historian Bice Curiger, a close friend of Oppenheim’s, attests that she used humor as

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a “weapon to offset the stultifying effect of her own high standards.” The idea that humor was used as a weapon further validates it as a mechanism to offset Oppenheim’s pain and frustration.

Conscious use of humor by Oppenheim could reveal her pain at being marginalized as a mistress without the validity of being known as Ernst’s wife. My Nurse uses a feminine white high heel to convey bondage, sexual fetish and powerlessness. Alternately, the Freudian theory of the use of wit to rebel against authority could be implied because of the powerlessness that Oppenheim may have felt as a woman artist dominated by the male gaze. Perhaps Oppenheim felt both she and Aurenche were bound and handed over on a silver platter to Ernst.

**Stone Woman**

Contrasted with Object, My Nurse, The Couple and Spring Banquet, Oppenheim’s Stone Woman conveys an absence of humor and heaviness of spirit (fig. 4). Oppenheim painted Stone Woman in 1938 at the onset of her crisis period, indicating that the stone was a metaphor for her inability to create. Oppenheim revealed, “In 1937 I began questioning my work amid all of these artists. I lost faith in myself.” The dark mood of Stone Woman conveys a lack of hope. Also in 1937 Oppenheim wrote, “I felt as if a millennia of discrimination against women were resting on my shoulders…as if embodied in my feelings of inferiority.” Oppenheim’s loss of faith in herself petrified her spirit and creativity, rendering her frozen and immobile like the stones she painted.

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*Bice Curiger, Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 81.*


*Belton, “Androgyny Interview with Meret Oppenheim,” 72.*


*Ibid., 69.*
Rather than capitalizing on the popularity of *Object*, Oppenheim continued to work according to her own inner directive. This choice for freedom of expression, however, came at a financial cost. After the period of initial recognition of her work due to *Object’s* fame, Oppenheim fell into a long depression which she said was caused by “the psychological problem of being a woman.” Oppenheim’s later claim of the stress and ensuing depression attests to the disconnection she would have felt working as an artist and as a muse.

Written in 1936, Oppenheim’s poem “Forsaken, Forgotten” forewarns of her impending crisis and foreshadows the creation of *Stone Woman*.

*Forsaken, Forgotten*

Forsaken, forgotten-
So black at the harbor shore
I do not want to measure the time
That devised this pain.

The yellow waves break
The new net in two,
They come, go, and say:
The poor farrago.

“Forsaken, Forgotten” reveals the increasing pain and sadness Oppenheim felt as she became more and more disconcerted at her reality. The “poor farrago” is indicative of how unsettled Oppenheim may have felt at her increasing notoriety as an artist and her position as muse.

*Stone Woman* consists of a simple background with a central pile of gray and muted colored stones stacked in a human like form at the edge of a body of water. The stone form has feet which are submerged in the edge of the water which Oppenheim said, “represent a connection to the unconscious.” The stones, heavy and immobile, point to the elements of

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bondage found in her other works, but without the presence of humor they become dark and solemn. Also absent is the subliminal eroticism present in the other works analyzed. Stone Woman is devoid of sexuality and freedom, with only a glimpse of humanity in the feet beneath the water.

Surrealists relied on Freudian theory to explore the unconscious as part of their creative process. An ego defense mechanism is defined by Freud as a psychic process which guards against emotional pain. Oppenheim’s frustration incited by her objectification as a muse and marginalization as a female artist resulted in emotional pain. Repression of emotional feelings can instigate the unconscious use of humor; however, Freud also argues that when repressed the defense can be harmful unless it moves to conscious thought. Oppenheim’s repression of her feelings regarding her inequality could have resulted in the depression evident in Stone Woman.

Although Stone Woman embodies Oppenheim’s feelings of inferiority and lack of faith, it also demonstrates the disunion of elements present in her other work. Art historian Thomas McEvilley notes the dichotomies in Oppenheim’s work such as nature/culture, male/female, and representation/abstraction. The abstraction of the body represented by stones is juxtaposed with the literal portrayal of human feet under the water. The stones represent nature and the feet culture. The dualities revealed in Stone Woman are imbued with other nuanced messages such as what other scholars describe as a “visual metamorphosis.” The duality experienced in Oppenheim’s work has a liberating effect and transcends a specific literal meaning.

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“Sigmund Freud, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, 801.

“ Ibid.


Perhaps the biform aspects of *Stone Woman* are also meant to express the concept of “otherness.” One can perceive that the form is crawling out onto the beach to become petrified and die or that the stone body is falling back into the water to reanimate and come to life. The latter of these two motions in which the stones penetrate the water to awaken and become alive offers the viewer a glimmer of hope amidst despair.

Oppenheim’s ability to transform meaning and subvert expectation is a common thread throughout her oeuvre. Scholarly opinions vary; some argue that Oppenheim’s work is a direct reflection of her biography, while others assert that *Stone Woman* has nothing to do with Oppenheim’s crisis. Neither addresses the possibility that the absence of humor in *Stone Woman* indicates Oppenheim’s lack of a defense mechanism to protect herself from not only her disillusionment with the patriarchal culture surrounding her, but also from the strangulation she may have felt losing her freedom to live in Paris due to the looming war and resulting financial stress. Without the mechanism of humor to alleviate pain, *Stone Woman* reveals Oppenheim’s despair and frustration.

**The Couple**

Oppenheim overcame her crisis in 1954, and in 1956 she created *Das Paar/The Couple*, her first object since 1936 (fig. 5). Oppenheim and other artists from Bern were asked to create works for an opening held in a theater lobby prior to the screening of Picasso’s play *Desire Caught by the Tail*. *The Couple* consists of a pair of women’s brown lace up boots which Oppenheim glued together after cutting the toes off from each. Oppenheim described the boots

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*Bice Curiger, Defiance in the Face of Freedom*, 42.

as an “odd, unisex pair: two shoes, unobserved at night, doing ‘forbidden’ things.” The boots’
toes are locked in a metaphorical kiss and rendered useless to wear, similar to the bondage of the
white pumps of My Nurse. Oppenheim’s inference of marriage as bondage by her given title The
Couple relays to the viewer a woman’s lack of freedom. Once again Oppenheim’s work was
renamed by Breton, as Oppenheim attests,

When I gave the photographer (The Couple), the boots were unlaced as if someone
had just taken them off. Without asking me, he laced them up again and sent the picture
to André Breton. I was furious but since the catalogue for the exhibition at Daniel
Cordier’s had to go to press right away, Breton titled the work A délacer (undressing).

Again, Breton altered Oppenheim’s meaning by adding a fetishized and sexualized meaning
more overt than she intended. The irony of the title The Couple represents Oppenheim’s word
play in which she inferred a physical concept with an abstract idea. By destabilizing the boots,
Oppenheim used humor to convey her message. Historian Bühler agrees that Oppenheim’s
wordplay and the irony of her titles was provocative and humorous. Everyday objects, boots,
conjugated in the night in a metaphorical tying of the knot, which humorously attests to
Oppenheim’s capacity to subvert meaning with incongruity.

The incongruity theory of humor is demonstrated when we experience humor because the
object perceived disrupts our preconceived notion and expectation. The conjugation of the two
boots disrupts the preconceived notions of how boots should behave. As is obvious, these boots
could not serve their original function because of the changes that Oppenheim has made.
Oppenheim’s inspiration was often spontaneous, arising out of playful and fun experiences rather
than serious deliberation, and it is her gift of sensually abstracting the perception of everyday

111 Jean-Christophe Ammann, “For Meret Oppenheim” in Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom, edited by Bice Curiger, Meret
Oppenheim, Christiane Meyer-Thoss, Jean-Christophe Ammann, Rudolf Schmitz, Andre Pieyre de Mandiargues and Lisa Liebmann, (New York:

112 Ibid., 117.

objects such as shoes which provokes incongruity and makes us laugh. The perceived incongruity of the physical characteristics of Oppenheim’s works, such as the fur-covered cup or high-heels on a platter, sparks an element of humor in the viewer’s psyche. Contemporary theorists such as John Morreall argue that the psychological shift that takes place during laughter acts as relief. When viewers of an object perceive an incongruity, the resulting laughter acts as a relief mechanism and stimulates within them a positive psychological shift. The incongruity experienced when viewing Oppenheim’s objects is prompted not only by her use of materials but also by her titles.

Many scholars analyze The Couple in terms of the message of bondage. Historian McEvilley writes that the implications of The Couple suggest “women should not move; they should stand still and do what they are told such as Chinese foot binding.” The reading of enslavement and bondage inherent in The Couple resonates with Oppenheim’s feminist views, and her referring to the boots as an “odd unisex pair” hints at her Jungian concepts of androgyny. The Couple was created in 1956, eight years into her marriage to Wolfgang La Roche, and is perhaps a metaphor for their relationship. La Roche and Oppenheim’s relationship, though built on mutual respect, allowed an open marriage; La Roche had numerous affairs, some long lasting, and Oppenheim discovered her love for women. Oppenheim’s discovery of her desire for women might infer that The Couple signifies both the confines of her marriage, as can

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" Ibid., 135-137.
" Ammann, “For Meret Oppenheim,” 117.
" Christiane Meyer-Thoss, Book of Ideas, 108.
be seen in the boots being bound together and rendered useless, as well as her own homosexual inclinations.

Additional meaning discussed by historians refers to the importance of Oppenheim’s comment which associates the boots with the seen and unseen. The seen and unseen could be a metaphor for conscious and unconscious desire or perhaps represent a power struggle acted out in the dark of night which binds the two boots. Oppenheim’s literal representations become flooded with the viewer’s unconscious interpretations just as Breton’s renaming of Oppenheim’s work subverts its meaning by fetishizing and objectifying her intent rather than highlighting the nuanced messages of intellect and humor.

The subliminal humor the viewer senses in Object and My Nurse returns in The Couple as perhaps evidence of Oppenheim’s healing. Lisa Wenger, Oppenheim’s niece, remarked that Oppenheim had felt confined and restricted by the notoriety of Object, and it was not until Oppenheim was able to view the cup with a sense of humor that she could escape her crisis. The Couple projects the playfulness associated with her earlier creations. The viewer is witness to the result of a pair of naughty boots caught in the act, reminiscent of the joke of people who have sex getting stuck and having to go to the hospital or contemporary teenagers getting their braces stuck in a kiss. The boots are stuck, and the humor is slapstick which provides the viewer with comic relief. The slapstick element seems to make fun of the seriousness of the Surrealists and their perceived self-importance. Although she had passed her crisis, the return of the playful humor evidenced in Object did not resurface in full until Oppenheim’s performance of Spring Banquet.

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Spring Banquet

One evening at dinner with friends conversing about fantastic food presentations, Oppenheim remarked that one could “serve a meal on a naked woman.” Oppenheim, intrigued with the thought, proceeded to organize Spring Banquet (Le Festin) in April of 1959 in Bern (fig. 6). Oppenheim found a slender blonde model who agreed to perform as the naked woman, and the performance was held in a friend’s studio. The woman was laid out on a table with a white cloth and surrounded by candles and flowers. Oppenheim painted the woman with gold infused cream and artfully laid out edibles over her body. Five guests, three men and three women including the model, were present. The guests dined on the array of food from steak lobster to whipped cream and ladyfingers eaten off the model’s body. After the performance, the model ate some of the food Oppenheim had reserved. The inclusion of the model as a diner indicates to the viewer that rather than observing her as an object, we should view her as a participant.

After hearing about the banquet, André Breton asked Oppenheim to recreate the feast for the December 1959 Exposition Internationale du Surréallisme, or EROS, at the Galerie Cordier in Paris. Once again Breton changed the name and intention of Oppenheim’s work; Spring Banquet became Cannibal Feast, and a private performance became a public spectacle. Oppenheim regretted the decision to allow Breton to recreate her piece for EROS because he

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“Meret Oppenheim, Meret Oppenheim: Retrospective, 244.

“Ibid.

“Ibid.

“Ibid., 245.

“Ibid., 244.

“Ibid., 245.

“Bice Curiger, Defiance in the Face of Freedom, 70.

“Jaqueline Burkhardt and Bice Curiger, Meret Oppenheim: Beyond the Teacup, 162.
subverted her intent and she felt he did a poor reenactment. Oppenheim wrote that the banquet “wasn’t meant to represent the woman as sex object for men but rather a spring banquet or fertility rite.” Why did Breton subvert Oppenheim’s titles? Perhaps Breton’s habit of overriding Oppenheim’s original intent suggests his assumption of proprietorship.

Although the inspiration of *Object* and *Spring Banquet* was born of the playful repartee of friendship and revelry, it was imbued with deliberate meaning. The humor of *Spring Banquet* is the result of its incongruity, the preposterous notion that a woman could be a plate. The performance was created at a time during which Oppenheim began to separate herself from the Surrealists, wishing not to be categorized with them. This disassociation marks a crucial turning point and demonstrates that Oppenheim had relinquished her role as muse and developed her autonomy as an artist. In the context of Oppenheim’s life, *Spring Banquet* acts to confront male superiority and reveal women as active participants in their own sexuality.

Most analysis concerning *Spring Banquet* is affected by Breton’s reworking of it into *Cannibal Feast*, which gave the performance an overt sexual tone. Breton’s reenactment subverted the joy and humor of the original and converted it to a dark fetishized sacrifice. Rather than creating a sacrificial rite, Oppenheim was anointing the body with food and decoration to exalt womanhood. Oppenheim remarked, “instead of being a simple spring festival, the EROS reenactment was yet another woman taken as a source of male pleasure.” Breton’s performance placed the woman as an object to be “eaten” and available for public consumption to satisfy cravings for food and sex. Breton’s subversion of Oppenheim’s titles undoes her literal

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“Ibid., 162.


Belton, “Androgyny Interview with Meret Oppenheim,” 70.
meaning. Because of Breton’s renaming of Oppenheim’s works, one cannot help but perceive the homoeroticism/cunnilingus implied by Object, My Nurse, The Couple and Spring Banquet.

The difference between Oppenheim’s original intent and Breton’s renaming is gaze and agency. Who is doing the looking and who is the creator? The viewer of the photograph which documents the performance of Spring Banquet is once again relegated to voyeur, while the gender of the one who gazes is invited to form his/her own unconscious reactions. Viewers are invited by these works to form their own unconscious reaction. Oppenheim’s titles could be interpreted as being intentionally vague/innocuous in order to enable viewers to create their own interpretations and meanings. However, through photo documentation, the meaning of the work is once again changed to reflect Breton’s own intentions. Historian Rosalind Krauss also recognizes the importance of incongruity as an element of the Surrealist object and the “metaphoric connections of disparate entities” which prompts viewers to project their own unconscious meanings onto the object. The viewers’ sense of amusement at the incongruities demonstrated in Object, My Nurse, The Couple and Spring Banquet evidence not only the Surrealist ideology but also Oppenheim’s intent to perhaps highlight the incongruity of freedom versus patriarchy.

With Spring Banquet Oppenheim came full circle back to the light-hearted uncanny magic which inspired Object. Spring Banquet also returns to the “oral eroticism” which Rosalind Krauss so aptly defines as “shrouded in the temporality of fantasy” which is inherent in Object and My Nurse. The commonality of the humor in these works perhaps indicates the complete eradication of the self-doubt and hardship of Oppenheim’s crisis period.

Edward Powers, ”Bodies at Rest: or, the object of Surrealism,” 241.


Ibid., 23.
Oppenheim’s mature self-confidence that arose from her crisis period also provided her with the resolve to distance herself from the Surrealists, which was instigated by her distaste for Breton’s reenactment of *Spring Banquet.* Oppenheim’s refusal to be categorized with the Surrealists after the EROS reenactment marked the end of her power struggle with Breton.

The use of humor in Oppenheim’s work is multifaceted; her fun-loving spirit as well as her wit, irony and incongruity are captured in *Object, My Nurse, The Couple* and *Spring Banquet.* Frivolity, perhaps seen as a light-hearted exchange with friends, provided the impetus for *Object* and *Spring Banquet;* however, along with her other works these are rife with serious connotations. Psychoanalytic theory allows the understanding of not only Oppenheim’s creative method but also the use of humor to defend herself.

**Jungian Types and Freudian Defense**

As a student of Jung, Oppenheim was intuitive and relied on her unconscious to provide her with the impetus for her creations. Creativity, sensitivity and intuition were examined in a research study which compared Jungian psychological types with Freudian ego defense mechanisms.

This study determined that creative imagination is an asset in that it heightens an individual’s ability to overcome emotional pain through the artistic process. The study also demonstrated that Jungian psychological types, such as those of intuition, sensitivity and creativity, correlate with the use of Freudian defense mechanisms of humor. Oppenheim herself

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138 Ibid.
was highly creative and extremely intuitive, which in light of the study indicates why she would have used humor as a defense mechanism.

Contemporary humor theorists such as Mike Martin explore aesthetic enjoyment of incongruities, arguing that the idea of aesthetic enjoyment has to do strictly with our “senses or contemplation, rather than with purely economic, moral, religious, sexual or self-interested considerations.” Martin’s analysis that the amusement of an incongruity is devoid of ulterior motives substantiates the element of Oppenheim’s creative process as Jungian “play.” The viewer enjoys the incongruity of Oppenheim’s work in the spark of the initial flash of amusement, which is true to her original intent. The black humor associated with Oppenheim’s work is associated with Breton’s subversion of their meaning and the viewer’s own projections. Martin’s theory allows for amusement as a sense of play without any ulterior motives. By degrading the pure form of Oppenheim’s humor, Breton’s power play further compounded the frustrations Oppenheim would have felt as an artist.

Morreall also argues that the perception of incongruity is intellectually sophisticated because of the numerous comparisons and concepts of mental representations the viewer processes. Also inherent in the incongruity theory of humor, Morreall argues, is that it must “operate with its concepts in a non-practical, non-theoretical, playful, way, so that the violation of its conceptual patterns won’t evoke negative emotion.” By using humor in her art to alleviate pain and frustration, Oppenheim inspires the viewer to experience the psychic process of humor as relief. Morreall also concludes that the use of humor implies cognitive superiority

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11 Ibid.
because one must have a highly developed imagination to look at things critically and create “incongruous fictions.” Oppenheim was highly imaginative and creative, which combined with her sense of fun and rebellious attitude to create highly sophisticated works of art.

Both the conscious and unconscious humor found in Oppenheim’s work is nuanced and runs deeply within her art. Carolyn Lachner, a curator for the Modern Museum of Art, aptly recognizes that “humor pervades Oppenheim’s work; ironic, irritated, sharp-eyed, it flickers like an electric filament across her art and illuminates even her most searching reflections on the predicament of being a female and an artist.” Although scholars concur that humor is present in Oppenheim’s work, they have not addressed more serious matters such as the “psychological problem of being a woman” and do not fully acknowledge Oppenheim’s use of humor as a defense.

**Oppenheim’s Defense: humor vs. marginalization**

While Oppenheim was not as familiar with Freud’s work as she was with Jung’s, Freud’s theory of wit and humor nonetheless offer another lens through which to analyze the use of humor in her work. The foundation of Surrealist ideology was largely based on Freud’s psychoanalytic theories; these ideas are thus important in the critical analysis of all Surrealist art. The purpose of humor in Oppenheim’s *Object, My Nurse, The Couple* and *Spring Banquet* can be explained by Freud’s theories. Oppenheim would have been influenced by the Surrealist attachment to Freudian theory due to her relationships with the leaders of Surrealist thought.

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*Ibid., 203.*


*Mifflin, “An Interview with Meret Oppenheim,” 32.*
Surrealists were enamored with Freud’s concept of the unconscious and the release of creativity not bound by the intellect.¹⁴⁵

Freud contends that dreams act as a mechanism to guard against pain, and that wit serves the purpose of releasing pleasure.¹⁴⁶ Oppenheim’s intellectual analysis of her dreams intersects with the use of wit in her artwork to perhaps guard against the pain of marginalization. Oppenheim’s use of humor as a possible tool to displace pain is supported by Freud’s determination that humor, used as a defense mechanism, acts as taskmaster to help guard against pain and to transform the pain into pleasure.¹⁴⁷ Freud argued that humor liberated pleasure from sources of repression.¹⁴⁸ Repression, Freud concludes, is a “stage intermediate between the defense reflex and condemnation.”¹⁴⁹ Was humor used to liberate Oppenheim from the repressed anger she felt? Humor may have given Oppenheim the opportunity to release the contradiction of her belief in equality while living in an unequal world.

The psychoanalytic term of a “defense mechanism” is understood as an unconscious action people take to protect themselves from instinctual danger, conflict or anxiety. Anna Freud’s theory in The Ego and The Mechanisms of Defence proposes that an adult’s “conflicts between opposite tendencies, such as homosexuality and heterosexuality” or in Oppenheim’s case her conflict between muse/artist and object/creator resulted in pain, anxiety and other negative emotions.¹⁵⁰ The unconscious defense mechanism assists the instinctual human reaction to pain. The mechanism of humor acts to liberate one from traditional norms which are

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¹⁴⁶ Freud, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, 761.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 801-802.
¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 723.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 757.
contradictory with personal belief. The use of humor allowed Oppenheim to cope with contradictions she felt as a muse and as an artist. Chronological examination of five works of art by Oppenheim, *Object*, *My Nurse*, *Stone Woman*, *The Couple* and *Spring Banquet*, indicates her use of various types of humor as a coping mechanism, while the absence of humor in *Stone Woman* reveals Oppenheim’s lack of coping ability and depression. Recognition of the humor in Oppenheim’s work demonstrates the applicability of the incongruity theory. The humor of incongruity is activated when reality and human logic are at odds with one another. Elements of perceived humor in Oppenheim’s works such as incongruity, irony and satire are indicators of her changing personality and coping skills.

**Conclusion**

Many critics have focused upon Meret Oppenheim’s works of art through the lens of feminism, but few have analyzed the psychoanalytic aspect of humor, whether conscious or unconscious, as a mechanism for coping with the frustration and pain derived from objectification and marginalization as a female artist. Furthermore, understanding the motivations for the use of humor in Oppenheim’s work as a psychological defense mechanism reveals the conflict and challenges she faced as a female artist within the male-dominated movement of Surrealism.

Meret Oppenheim’s diverse roles as both artist and muse created an inner conflict that was expressed through her artwork. Analysis of Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) and *Magouvrante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen* (1936) *Stone Woman* (1938), *The Couple* (1956) and *Spring Banquet* (1959) with a psychoanalytic lens reveals the use of humor as a defense mechanism.

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Meret Oppenheim’s use of humor in two works, *Object* and *My Nurse*, was an unconscious defense mechanism used to release the pain she felt as a female artist and muse during the Surrealist movement of 1930s Paris. The absence of humor in *Stone Woman* (1938) signifies the onset of Oppenheim’s battle with depression or “crisis.” Oppenheim used humor as a coping mechanism as validated by Freudian and Jungian theory. The anxiety of existing as a woman within a patriarchy is substantiated by biographical information and a study of the cultural context of the 1930s. The reintroduction of humor in Oppenheim’s later works *The Couple* (1956) and *Spring Banquet* (1959) marks Oppenheim’s exit from her crisis. Examination of *Object, My Nurse, Stone Woman, The Couple* and *Spring Banquet* affirms the conflict Oppenheim felt as an artist juxtaposed with her role as muse as well as the integral aspect of humor as a coping mechanism. Observations made through the lens of feminism combined with psychoanalytic theories validate an understanding of humor as a means of releasing anger in these works.

Artists, scholars, and historians continue to study early twentieth-century avant-garde movements considering new feminist dialogue and insight. Oppenheim’s work deserves further study particularly regarding the psychoanalytic aspects of humor because these theories offer a depth of understanding vital to feminist art history.

Connecting the use of humor as a feminist mechanism by women artists gives new insight into art-historical methods but could also be extended to other fields of cultural production. The study of humor as a mechanism to release pain and rebel against the injustice of inequality could reveal new tools for critical interpretation. Humor, whether satire or parody, conscious or unconscious, offers an important tool for women artists working against and
subverting many of the patriarchal and institutional structures they still face in the art world and beyond.
Bibliography


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Figure 1

Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitzky)
Érotique-Voilée
1933
Gelatin silver print
The Museum of Fine Arts Houston
Figure 2

Meret Oppenheim

*Object*

1936

Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon

Modern Museum of Art, New York.

Photo: Modern Museum of Art, New York
Figure 3

Meret Oppenheim
*Ma gouvernante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen*
1936/1967
Metal plate, shoes, string, paper
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Figure 4

Meret Oppenheim
*Stone Woman/ Steinfrau*
1938
Oil on Cardboard
Private Collection
Photo: ©ProLitteris, Zürich
Figure 5

Meret Oppenheim
*The Couple*
1956
Object
Private Collection
Photo: Artists Rights Society, New York/ Pro Litteris, Zurich
Figure 6

Meret Oppenheim

*Spring Banquet*

1959

Photo: Roger Van Hecke, for E.R.O.S. Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris