Feathers, flowers, and flux: artifice in the costumes of Leonor Fini

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Additional Information:

- This is a chapter from the book Intersections: Women / Surrealism / Modernism, published by Manchester University Press. http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9780719096488/.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/20413

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Manchester University Press

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On a biographical level, Leonor Fini is a rather difficult artist to write about in a feminist context. Though the world of powerful women and female hybrids that Fini depicts has been likened to a matriarchal society and viewed as feminist, she tried to disassociate herself from such a label: ‘I am not a feminist. I hate being claimed as a feminist ... I am a painter, not a woman painter’. Indeed, she was uncomfortable about being included in Whitney Chadwick's seminal work *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* because she felt that being discussed in isolation from her male contemporaries would only widen the gulf between male and female artists. However, though Fini disavowed a feminist identity for herself, she nevertheless uses strategies in her work that speak to recent ideas in gender studies regarding identity formulation.

One such idea is that of embodiment. Marsha Meskimmon has described embodiment as a negotiation; an exchange between corporeal entities that create our identities. She states that embodiment refutes the split of mind / body; instead, identity is created through interaction with other bodies. As such, embodied subjectivity implies a self that is constantly being made and re-made; it exists in a state of flux. Moreover, the “bodies” necessary for this interactive development of self do not have to be physical bodies, they can be art works.

Fini’s oeuvre is populated by women who share her feline eyes and unruly hair, suggesting a continual, fluctuating interaction between the different “bodies” of Fini. She
herself seemed aware of this as she stated: ‘In a sense my painting has always been my autobiography. A revealing autobiography because my paintings do not interpret either my conscious development or my experiences; rather they “unmask” a being inside of me (often with strange projections into the future).’6 This “unmasking” of an internal, prophetic being suggests an awareness of a manifold, developing self.

Much of my work on Fini to date discusses how she creates an ambiguous identity by blurring the boundaries between the binary poles of femininity, encapsulated in the Surrealist dichotomy of *femme enfant* versus *femme fatale*.7 Fini herself engages in this ambiguity through creating a carefully constructed self-image: her facial features are worn by numerous different “types” of women in her painting, she carefully posed for her photographs, and choreographed her appearances at social events. The way in which Fini uses her body as both a locus for herself and a tool for artistic creation enables her body to become an ambiguous, malleable entity.8 The subjectivity that Fini reveals and explores in her work is therefore a fluctuating embodiment of self; a constructed artifice. I will return to this latter idea shortly; first I wish to examine the connections between Fini’s embodied subjectivity with surrealism and modernism.

In repeating herself differently throughout her different works, Fini creates a series of reflections, repeating specific fragments that enable her to reiterate her body without confining her identity to a single “type”.9 Interaction with a reflection is another process of embodiment, but, in using a series of slightly different repetitions, where only specific fragments (like the eyes) remain relatively constant, the reflection is different each time.10 In doing so, Fini creates a series of self-portraits which reveal any
notion of an individual, “true” self as a masquerade; her identity has shifted each time, multiplying to the extent that finding a single self is highly problematic. This self-portraiture can be viewed as a form of mimicry, which is a key theme within surrealism. David Lomas has noted that such mimicry has been used by female surrealists as a strategy for subverting cultural and social codes of identity. He argues that works such as Remedios Varo’s *Mimicry* (1960), in which a woman imitates the chair she’s sitting in, explore the potential of protective camouflage as a strategy of resistance as, in hiding away, chaos disrupts the domestic space. However, Fini does not engage in the “natural” mimicry of camouflage. Hers is a mimicry of bodies; are her “self-portraits” mimicking other female entities, or are they mimicking her?

This mimicry is also interesting in terms of Fini’s engagement with surrealism. The female bodies of the male-oriented canon of surrealist art are invisible; they are merely types (the *femme-enfant* and the *femme-fatale*) without autonomy, and used to reflect the male artist’s creativity or anxieties back at himself. In mimicking numerous “types” of female bodies (or having them mimic her), Fini articulates a place for herself within the surrealist lexicon of femininity without reducing herself to a one-dimensional type. This suggests a desire not to be categorised or labelled and thus Fini cannot be contained within the male discourse of surrealism. However, her use of the surrealist strategy of mimicry – her repeated reflections – to explore an unfixed identity defies any notion of a single, authentic self. In doing so she shares in the surrealist challenge against authenticity and thus against modernism, which uses authenticity as a cornerstone for defining the nature of art and the artist.
Of all the surrealists to use mimicry, Fini is perhaps closest in her approach to that of Dalí. In his *The Secret Life*, Dalí discusses his passion for disguise and the way in which it can create a fictional, performative sense of identity. Similarly, Fini stated:

To dress up, it is to change dimension, species, space. It is to be able to feel gigantic, to dive into vegetation, to become animal until one feels invulnerable and timeless, to meet, obscurely, in forgotten rituals. To dress up, to cross-dress, is an act of creativity. And in applying this to oneself, one becomes other characters or one's proper character. It is to be driven to invent, to be matched [but] also changing and multiple...It is one – or many – representations of the self, it is the exteriorisation in excess of the phantasms which one carries within their self, it is a creative expression of the raw state.

Though Fini notes the possibility of a "proper" character, she states that the self can be represented in multiple ways, suggesting that subjectivity is not fixed but fluid, not singular but manifold.

These various strategies – the malleability of self through embodiment, the differentiated repetition of fragments of identity through self-portraiture, and the use of mimicry – can all be understood as aspects of artifice. I do not use this term to mean something false, but rather something which is consciously constructed and which is other than what it seems. The way in which Fini uses the above methods to create ambiguous identities that defy singular meaning clearly evidences her use of artifice. This analysis will delve further into these issues by focusing on Fini's theatrical designs, as the theatre is perhaps the best medium for artifice and, as Fini stated in the previous
quote, she viewed the use of costuming, of performing, as a way of expressing a 
fluctuating identity. Using two case studies drawn from the staggering twelve different 
ballets, thirty-five separate theatrical productions, five operas, eight films and/or 
television productions, not to mention the numerous costumes for exclusive fancy-dress 
balls and other private parties that Fini designed, we will examine the ways in which 
Fini’s designs function as pieces of artifice, and how they present a malleable, unfixed 
subjectivity.

The first group of costumes to be used as a case study are those from the 1949 
ballet *Le Rêve de Leonor*, for which Fini did not just design the set and costumes, but 
created the very story of the ballet. Though never as successful as her designs for the 
1948 ballet *Demoiselles de la Nuit*, the costumes of *Rêve*, which one critic described as 
‘fabulous in their fantasy, the last word in boudoir Satanism’, provide an intriguing 
example of the manifold, ambiguous identities created through performance and 
artifice. In the programme for the ballet, Fini explained the story as follows:

Leonor is asleep in a nocturnal landscape surrounded by her monsters, 
mandragors, and favourite animals. She dreams about a bald young girl – perhaps 
herself – who chases a beautiful blonde wig. She lets herself be captured by 
voluptuous and mocking hairy beings.

She remembers having been Proserpine one evening at a costume ball; a 
pomegranate sends her back to the Underworld; she is tempted by gluttony in the 
form of the King of Nougat and his whipped creams...She dreams that, becoming a 
white owl, she plays games with beautiful feathered beings who help her escape
from a seducing black bird and to finally kill him, after which the dawn arrives and
she awakes.19

For the second case study we will focus on a specific aspect of one of Fini’s later
projects: the floral motifs connected with Fini’s designs for the 1969 production of
Oscar Panizza’s The Love Council, or as it was titled in French, Le Concile d’Amour.
Originally published in 1894, the play landed Panizza in court for its highly
blasphemous and erotic content. Set in 1495 during the papacy of Alexander VI, the
corrupt Borgia pope, it presents the first known outbreak of syphilis as a divine
punishment for the sexual excesses of Alexander’s court. Though the play was printed
several times in Panizza’s lifetime, it was lost from view for much of the twentieth
century until a French translation by Jean Bréjoux appeared in 1960, which contained a
preface by none other than André Breton.20 The 1969 production, directed by Jorge
Lavelli, was staged at the Théâtre de Paris. As this was the first time that Le Concile d’
Amour had appeared on a major stage, it is often mistaken as the world premiere of the
piece.21 Fini provided lavish (and often highly eroticised) costumes that emphasised the
decadent sensuality of the papal court.22

These case studies are particularly pertinent because they weave threads
between Fini’s costume designs, painting, and her fancy-dress performances to such a
close extent that they create characters with multiple identities and give the overall
piece an ambiguous meaning. Moreover, because Fini appears in different guises across
these works, she becomes both the subject and the object, oscillating between these
different positions. However, because the body Fini “wears” in other contexts is also
worn by the dancer or actress, this oscillation is not just between two poles but between
multiple bodies, demonstrating an embodied subjectivity. Thus, constructed, artificial identities performed through specific, repeated costume motifs undermine concepts of a singular, static subjectivity.

Let us begin with the bald girl who may possibly represent Fini (figure 1). Though bald women feature much more prominently in Fini’s œuvre from the 1950s onwards, one of the earliest appearances of a bald female figure in her art occurs in 1948 – just a year prior to Rêve – in the painting Little Hermit Sphinx. The mythical figure of the sphinx is a guardian of secret knowledge, as she killed those unable to answer her riddles. This aspect of the sphinx is perhaps invoked here as Fini’s sphinx sits in a doorway, barring the interior from view. Moreover, Fini repeatedly uses her own likeness in her images of sphinxes, heightening the connection between the bald girl of Rêve, the sphinx, and Fini. Yet what is the significance of the wig?

Wigs of feathers and other natural materials appear in Fini’s portraits, but hair wigs seem to only be used in an important way in her 1935-6 canvas Intermission of Apotheosis. Though painted over ten years previously, I believe it provides an important source for demonstrating the performative nature of the bald girl. The background figures of the work pull at their hair and skin, as though trying to cast it off, while the young woman in the foreground pulls a wig over her knee while two other wigs lie on the ground, suggesting that they represent the putting and/or casting off of an identity. These women have been interpreted as witches who enact a fluctuating identity.23 Thus, if the bald girl chasing a wig in Rêve is Fini, is this Fini acting as a sphinx, or as a guardian, or as a witch? These interconnected figures demonstrate an embodied subjectivity; a self built from interactions between these bodies. This in itself suggests
construction; that the subjectivity built through these interacting figures can be understood as an artifice. This is also expressed in the figure of Proserpine (figure 2).

Proserpine’s costume depicts a woman in a red tutu with a feather-trimmed bodice and long, feather-trimmed gloves, plus a headdress featuring a crown and horns. This costume is incredibly similar to Fini’s Persephone, Goddess of the Underworld costume, which she wore to the Ball of Kings and Queens – an exclusive fancy-dress party given by Comettesse Etienne de Beaumont in 1949 – the same year as Rêve. This link is underscored by the fact that, just as Proserpine is tempted by the King of Nougat in the ballet, Fini’s lover Sforzino attended the Ball as the King of Sweets, wearing a crown of nougat. Yet, what is perhaps unusual about this costume is the inclusion of horns.

Fini was familiar with the iconography of the Christian Devil. In her designs for a later, unstaged ballet entitled The Witches, we find costumes that reflect early-modern conceptions of the Devil: goat-headed figures with huge horns and dancers who, when they stood on their heads, revealed a second face on their buttocks. The most likely source for this is Grillot de Givry’s 1929 text Le Musée des Sorciers, Mages et Alchimistes, which includes accounts and images of witches kissing the Devil’s posterior as a sign of loyalty. Webb states that Fini owned a copy of this text, and it was known to the Surrealists more generally, as demonstrated by Michel Leiris’ review of the book in the May 1929 edition of Documents. Equally, given Fini’s vociferous reading habits, and her friendship with Leonora Carrington, who was interested in Celtic myth, it seems reasonable to assume that she was additionally aware of pagan horned deities. These deities, while also predominantly masculine, refer to the life and fertility of the earthly
realm, effectively combining male/female, above/below, life/death in one figure through a single motif. Thus the inclusion of horns in the depiction of Proserpine, both on stage and off, represents an identity constructed through an engagement with other bodies. The repetition of horns allows these bodies to remain interconnected, merging Fini and the dancer’s identities with those of both Christian and pagan male figures, culminating in an artificial identity; it is constructed from multiple parts and is “other” than what it simply purports to be.

The way in which ‘Leonor’ metamorphoses from the bald girl, to Proserpine, to the white owl demonstrates both her belief in the multiplicity afforded by dressing up, and her engagement with the concept of continually fluctuating self as later articulated by Meskimmon and others. That these fracture lines zig-zag through a range of media perhaps suggests a degree of unity, but it is not one that can be “authentically” quantified and categorised, as there is no fixed point of origin. The performance of identity emblematised by these costumes is made up of interweaving threads, emphasising multiplicity and ambiguity over the singular and fixed, emphasising an embodied subjectivity. Furthermore, this does not just pertain to the identities that Fini crafted for her own body, but those she concocted for others as well.

The design for the black bird’s costume has the name ‘Briansky’ written underneath it – referring to Oleg Briansky and thus indicating that the black bird was to be played by a male dancer (figure 3). Interestingly, Fini used black feathers in constructed images of both herself and other people. For instance, Fini uses a wig of black feathers in her paintings Portrait of Comte Borromeo, 1944, and Woman in Armour I, 1938 (ostensibly a self-portrait), as well as in two photographs of herself: one in her
studio, and another in which she paints while dressed in stockings and suspenders. Furthermore, in a mirror image of the seductive relationship between the white owl and the black bird, she and her lover Sforza went to the 1948 Ball of the Birds wearing white owl and black bird masks respectively.27

On the one hand, the juxtaposition of white owl against black bird may be read as the contrast between good and evil forces, as is perhaps epitomised by the bird imagery of Swan Lake. However, given that the owl can also symbolically be aligned with the witch, night, and evil,28 the white owl of Rêve neither performs a purely good nor a purely evil identity.29 Similarly, Fini has used black feathers in contexts that suggest defence as well as attack (Woman in Armour I), and artistic creativity (the studio photographs). As such, by reading Fini’s use of black feathers across her oeuvre as a series of interactions, the figures that wear these feathers break down generic categories of male and female, as well as seduction and creativity. The feathers act as a focal point for this ambiguous subjectivity, and this is enhanced by the way in which they are repeated differently each time.

Let us now turn from feathers to flowers in order to examine how this multiplicitous subjectivity is explored further through the same ideas of embodiment in Fini’s designs for the women of Panizza’s papal court. For these female characters, a group composed of Alexander’s mistresses and their children, including Lucrezia Borgia, Fini designed dresses of sheer fabric, some of which also exposed the breasts of the actress, topped with large floral headdresses (figure 4). These attributes are mirrored by the figures appearing in Fini’s paintings of this same period, such as La
Belle Dame Sans Merci (1969), and The Lock (1965), which Lauter has identified as evocation of the Great Mother Goddess.30

The mythic figure of the Great Mother Goddess appears in numerous cultures as an ambivalent creator: one who is just as capable of destroying life as she is of bestowing it. By unifying the Great Mother Goddess and the mistress (who may also be viewed as a courtesan or a prostitute) through costume, Fini unites the physical/intangible, goddess/whore cultural paradigms to increase the ambiguity and multiplicity of identity produced by these characters. Though this blurring of identities destabilises the possibility of a single, original identity for these characters, it still operates within the positive/negative binary of patriarchal culture. Yet, this instability of identity is developed further if we look into how these costumes enact a carefully constructed self.

Many aspects of Fini’s designs for Concile are rather over-the-top – not just the outsized hats and headdresses, but also the grotesquely large phalluses worn by the entertainers of the papal court. This over-the-top style has been discussed by Butler in relation to drag performance as a method of undermining fixed gender identities; it makes the performance of gender so obvious that we notice it has been constructed rather than simply accepting it as an innate quality, thus enabling the viewer to question the “naturalness” of gender identity.31 The exaggerated aspects of Fini’s designs can be viewed in a similar way; they make the association with a particular gender so obviously constructed that it becomes a made thing – an artifice.
However, in the case of the floral headdresses, is this referring only to the construction of the mistress, or also to that of the Great Mother Goddess? If both identities are revealed as artifices then the patriarchal polarities of goddess/whore are not just merged but broken down. The identity created through the repeated device of the floral headdress is developed through the interaction of different female “bodies”, not only the Great Mother Goddess and the whore, but also the bodies of the actresses and the female bodies of Fini’s paintings who wear similar attire. This suggests that this costume functions as a piece of artifice; the wearer is other than what she seems, but this “otherness” is not tied to any specific identity, removing her from any stable, “authentic” self, ultimately emphasising an ambiguous, multiple subjectivity.

The (de)construction of a single “authentic” self, enacted through the floral headdresses, is continued when we consider Fini’s own performances. In 1957 Fini acquired a ruined monastery at Nonza in northern Corsica as her summer home. The legends about the monastery included a tale that, although founded by St Francis of Assisi, the moral standing of the monks declined to the point that the Pope ordered them to be disciplined, only to have his representative thrown out by the monks. Here, Fini and her guests swam, ate, and invented performances together. Fini’s activities are indicative of the rather wealthy, elite circles in which she moved. Such circles arguably offered a degree of social and sexual freedom, which may also have furthered Fini’s conception of a “freer” identity; one which is not static. However, it could also be argued that, because only a select group of Fini’s friends and colleagues would be aware of the overlap between the different areas of her work and her individual performances, an appreciation of the artifice of these works would likewise be limited to a select few. Therefore, the understanding of the subjectivity conveyed by these works will be
different between those in, and those out of the know, which perhaps further enhances
the fluctuating nature of identity in Fini’s work.

To return to Nonza, a number of the photographs taken of Fini at Nonza during
the mid-60s show her wearing floral headdresses. While one could argue that the uses
of these headdresses here and in Concile are simply different manifestations of Fini’s
interest in the motif, I would counter that the location of these photographs is highly
significant. Fini referred to the ruins of Nonza as being ‘as intelligent as the most
beautiful theatre scenery’, which perhaps suggests that the papal court of the play is
mirrored by the events at Nonza. Moreover, Fini later wrote that the entertainments
at Nonza were ‘invented in an apparently gratuitous void, an absurd explosion of
passion’, and compared them to parties thrown by the Emperor Heliogabalus and
Catherine de’ Medici, among others. Thus, although it would be known only to Fini and
an intimate group of her friends, the iconographic link between Nonza and the papal
court suggests that the latter’s engagement in erotic revels is better read as an act of
liberation and freedom of expression that has the potential to dismay the powers-that-
be. The events hosted by Alexander VI and at Nonza can therefore be interpreted in the
context of Fini’s works as another strand of embodiment, contributing to artifice, as the
constructed ‘other’ meaning of these events is created through their interaction with
each other. This enables a range of readings, defying the call for an authentic, single
identity.

The various strands of embodiment between costume, art, and “real life” are
perhaps brought together most effectively in the figure of Heliodora, 1964, which Fini
used for the poster of the Parisian production of Concile five years later. The canvas was
painted during Fini’s 1964 summer visit to Nonza, and was intended to invoke the return of one of her cats, Heliodoro, who had gone missing only to reappear the day she finished the painting. Both their names seem to derive from ‘Helios’, the ancient Greek sun god who later became Apollo. She is surrounded by three brightly coloured robes, perhaps suggesting a link to Fini herself and her practice of dressing up. This is potentially amplified by the fact that we may detect floral patterns in her red halo, referring once again to the flower headdresses. Equally, the bouquets she carries hints at Fini’s interest in painting the flowers around the monastery. But why choose this work as the poster for *Concile*?

In order to punish the sinful sexuality displayed by Alexander and his entourage, the Virgin Mary enlists the help of the Devil, who creates the Woman (his daughter by Salome) to seduce and destroy anyone she comes into contact with. Panizza’s original stage directions describe the entry of the Woman into the papal court thus: ‘[T]he Woman has suddenly stepped onto the threshold of the rear portal … She has the same naively enchanting bearing as up in Heaven, and is wearing the same youthfully modest white gown as before, from which there seems to emanate a brightness that is independent of the candlelight’. After the Woman is noticed by the court, Panizza’s stage directions continue: ‘Now all leave their seats and press towards the door … In the semi-darkness … where the Woman radiates as if magically illuminated, one can still see how the men wildly lunge toward the bright figure.’ Fini’s original *Heliodora* painting depicts the figure entering from a dark portal, while her connection to the sun god implies her ability to radiate light. This is amplified in the poster as the figure of Heliodora is transferred onto a purely black background. Thus, Heliodora is specifically linked to the character of the Woman, yet her name invokes a God(dess). Equally, her
association with floral motifs links her to the women of the papal court and to Fini herself. Therefore, within the context of Concile, Heliodora enacts an embodied subjectivity. Through the repetition of the floral motif she has no single identity and is a construction of multiple personas. The maze of overlapping layers in just one aspect of Fini’s costume design for Le Concile d’Amour demonstrates how limiting concepts of the singular and the original are. To understand and appreciate their full significance we must explore them as an example of artifice, utilising embodiment and repetition to construct a manifold identity.

Fini’s engagement with strategies of artifice seems to confirm the position of Lomas and Stubbs on the surrealist challenge to authenticity, though Fini is focusing less on the authentic voice of the unconscious and more on the fallacy of an authentic identity. Given that concepts of authenticity and the individual are vital to modernism, Fini participates in a subversion of these principles, suggesting that she cannot be contained within male-oriented modernist discourse. 40 However, if she also cannot be contained in surrealist discourse due to her rejection of the femme enfant and femme fatale tropes, how are we to speak of Fini at all? This suggests that an intervention is needed in these various discourses; one which emphasises ambiguity, overlap, and multiplicity. Fini is thus in the vanguard of an embodied discourse that enshrines the constructed artifice rather than the authentic “truth”, which has become an obstacle to art historical critique.

**Bibliography**


Irigaray, Luce This Sex Which is Not One Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1985).


Notes


11 Ibid., 95-9.


14 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.


17 Leonor Fini, ‘Mes Théâtres’, *Corps écrit*, 10 (1984), 31. ‘Se costumer, se travestir, est un acte de créativité. Et cela s’applique à soi-même qui devient d’autres personnages, ou son propre personnage. Il s’agit de s’inventer d’être mué, d’être apparemment aussi changeant et multiple qu’on peut se sentir intérieurement. C’est une – ou plusieurs – représentation de soi, c’est l’extériorisation en excès de fantasmes qu’on porte en soi, c’est une expression créatrice à l’état brut’.

19 Leonor Fini, in Webb, *Sphinx*, 147. ‘Leonor endormie dans un paysage nocturne don’t elle fait partie, entourée de ses monstres, mandragores et animaux prefere. Elle reÆve d’une jeune fille chauve – authe elle-même peut-être – qui poursuit une grande chevelure blonde. Elle se laisse captive par des velus voluptueux et moqueurs. Elle se souveint d’avoir été Proserpine un soir de bal; une pomme-grenade la fit retourner aux enfers; c’est la gourmandise qui la tente avec ce roi-nougat, cette crême fouettée où elle s’enfonce. Elle rêve que, devenue hibou blanc, elle joue et s’amuse avec des êtres emplumés et ravissants qui l’aident à se libérer d’un oiseau noir séduecteur à le tuer enfin, avant que l’aube arrive pour la réveiller.’


29 I discuss the relationship between the white owl and the witch in more detail in Grew, ‘States of transition’. However, in that article the focus is on the photographs Fini posed for in her studio wearing her costume for the Ball of the Birds, rather than the resulting ballet costume.

30 Lauter, *Women As Mythmakers*, 117-22. I have previously extended Lauter’s analysis through noting that Fini displays a clear familiarity with the iconography of the Great Mother Goddess, and also that these attributes are not merely limited to her work of the 1960s and 70s as Lauter contends, but extend through from the 1950s to the 1980s. For more details see Grew, *Sphinxes, witches, and little girls*, and Grew, *The Evolution of the Alchemical Androgyne in Symbolist and Surrealist Art*, 236-8.


Heliogabalus, or Elagabalus, was the nickname of Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antonius (r. 218-22), derived from his previous position of high priest of the sun god. He was known for his debauchery and cruelty, and was eventually murdered by the Praetorian Guard. J.J. Cooper (ed.), *Brewer’s Book of Myth and Legend*, (Oxford: Helicon Publishing, 1992), 87.


40 Jones has noted the continued importance of the individual within reproductive and technological media. See Jones, *Self/Image*, 6.