Spring 2021

Architecture Obscura: The Metaphysical World of Remedios Varo

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Architecture Obscura: The Metaphysical World of Remedios Varo

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2021
I would like to thank my wonderful advisor Katherine Boivin for her invaluable knowledge, guidance, and encouragement throughout this process. Katherine’s teaching vastly broadened my interests within the realm of art history over the course of my time at Bard, causing me to look for connections beneath the surface. The idea for this project would not have taken shape without her.

Another enormous thank you to Susan Aberth, who introduced me to Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, and the world of magic, alchemy, and esotericism. These ideas and the way Susan taught them changed my life, completely reframing the way I thought about the world, and especially, of course, art. Susan’s dedication to bringing these women into the spotlight is truly inspiring.

Thank you to my friends and family for all their support, especially my parents, Patrick, Mary, and Ayla.

Lastly, I would like to recognize my quarantine pal Beatrice the betta fish. You kept me company while I labored over this project for hours on end-- I look forward to many more girls’ nights in.
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INTRODUCTION

The following biographical information is gathered from Janet Kaplan’s *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys* (1988).

Remedios Varo y Uranga was born in 1908 in the village of Anglés, Spain to Rodrigo Varo y Zejalbo, a hydraulics engineer, and Ignacia Uranga y Bergareche, a devout Catholic of Basque heritage. As a girl, her talent manifested in copying engineering diagrams for her father, an agnostic man of worldly interests who, though overbearing, nurtured her potential through rigorous training and exposure to art museums. While Varo shared her father’s liberal imagination, she was closer with her mother, a conservative woman who wanted a Catholic education for her daughter. The family was transient due to Rodrigo’s work, which required them to travel to engineering sites. When they finally settled in Madrid, Remedios was sent to a Catholic convent school, a stifling experience which would fuel her rebellion against the religion, but also steeped her in a culture of vivid rituals and images.

After convent school, Varo’s father sent her to two art schools in Madrid, and in 1924 she was accepted at the prestigious and highly selective Academia de San Fernando. The traditional artistic training she received left little room for experimentation, but provided a strong technical foundation for the development of her own style and sensibility. Varo met her first husband, Gerardo Lizzaraga, at the Academia. Soon after graduation, the couple fled rising political tensions in Madrid, going first to Paris and then to Barcelona where a small Surrealist enclave attracted their interest. Several years after joining the group, Varo left Lizzaraga for another one
of its members, the poet Benjamin Péret, and accompanied him back to Paris at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

In Paris, Remedios was fully integrated into the Surrealist circle, or at least as integrated as a woman could be. Surrealism was more welcoming to women than any other European movement at the time, however, its male gatekeepers’ preoccupation with sexuality and the female form was alienating. For this reason, women tended to remain on the margins of the group, branching out from Surrealism in its strictest sense. Nevertheless, Péret introduced Varo to André Breton, and she attended the group’s meetings and parties. She became acquainted with the British artist Leonora Carrington, a lifelong friend, and encountered the teachings of the Russian mystic Georges Gurdjieff, a lifelong influence who conducted meetings in Paris beginning in 1936. Varo’s work during this period was experimental, ranging from figurative to more abstract, and began to incorporate a Surrealist visual vocabulary of uncanny objects, mythological allusions, ironic juxtaposition, and biological forms. Counterintuitively, it was not until her severance from the movement by the Paris occupation of 1940 that she would artistically come into her own, an event that would significantly alter the course of her life.

By this point, Remedios had already suffered significant tragedy in her life. Her younger brother, Luis, had died in the Spanish Civil War, and Franco had closed Spain’s borders to anyone with anti-fascist affiliations, separating her from her family forever. Earlier the same year, she had been imprisoned for her relationship with Péret, an outspoken communist. The devastation continued with the Nazi invasion, forcing Varo and most of her peers into exile. At first she and Péret took refuge in Marseilles, hoping to stay in France, but as the situation

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worsened they had no choice but to leave Europe. In 1941 they fled to Mexico City, where a group of artists including Leonora Carrington had emigrated.

Varo worked odd jobs in Mexico, from making war dioramas for the British antifascist propaganda office, to illustrating advertisements for the Bayer pharmaceutical company, to designing costumes for a ballet with Marc Chagall, whom she had met in Marseilles. She developed a close friendship and intellectual bond with Carrington, who shared her artistic sensibility. Both women were interested in alchemy and the occult, themes Varo increasingly explored in her paintings from the period. Also during this time, she studied Gurdjieff intensely and engaged with a branch of his disciples in South America, finding a wealth of inspiration in their system of spiritual growth. Certain Surrealist activities were resumed by the exiled artists, like the party game Cadavre Exquis, but the absence of Breton’s tyranny ultimately freed the community to evolve in new directions. Varo’s mature work is therefore adjacent to, rather than defined by the movement, more narrative and deliberate than the Surrealism of automatic drawing and decalcomania, although she did employ the latter technique to texturize precisely drawn scenes. Her paintings throughout the late forties and fifties are marked by this precision, a mastery of perspective, and a warm depth of color that seems to glow from within. As for subject matter, her later work investigates Gurdjieff’s ideas, female sources of power, artistic creation as spiritual pursuit, and concepts of magic from both the Old and New World.

Péret eventually returned to France, but Varo stayed in Mexico, having made it her home. Water Gruen, an Austrian refugee and owner of a successful music store in Mexico City, became her companion in the early fifties, and the two stayed together until Remedios’ sudden death in

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2 Ibid., 88.
3 These were techniques the Surrealists used to harness chance in their work. Automatic drawing was done randomly on a surface without looking, and the resulting lines dictated the shape of the piece. Decalcomania involved covering a textured material with fresh paint and rubbing it on a surface to create random forms.
4 Varo collected pre-Columbian art, and both she and Carrington were interested in the animistic religion and shamanic practices of indigenous American cultures.
1963. Greatly impressed by her work, Gruen supported her financially until her first exhibition in 1955, after which she drew much success in Mexico. Although not as popular as Muralism and the Mexicanidad movement cultivated by native artists, her shows were critically acclaimed, and she received both private and public commissions. Remedios was generous, writing and sending money regularly to her family in Spain, and covering the medical expenses of an ex-partner injured in a plane crash. In fact, she remained friends with all her past lovers, and enjoyed spending time with the children of Lizzaraga and his wife, who also sought refuge in Mexico. Finding the religion more hospitable in Mexico, she reclaimed her Catholic roots toward the end of her life, making retirement plans to join a convent near Cordoba, Spain that had been founded by one of her ancestors. However, the convent would not allow her, and Remedios’s life was cut tragically short by a heart attack at the age of fifty four. Recognition of her work continued to rise after her death, resulting in several retrospective exhibitions and permanent fame in Mexico.

Scholarship on Varo has identified her influences and highlighted her feminist contribution to Surrealism alongside other women artists. In the 1980s, Whitney Chadwick’s groundbreaking study of women Surrealists examined their role in the movement, diverging from their male colleagues in style and subject matter. Male Surrealists tended to confine women to the role of muse, pigeon-holing them as either the *femme-enfant* or *femme-fatale*, and depicted them as objects of male desire rather than self-complete subjects.\(^5\) Eschewing this pattern, women in the movement portrayed themselves as creative beings and protagonists. In Varo’s 1957 painting *Creation of the Birds* (fig. 1.1), a female artist, likely an avatar of Remedios herself, uses an alchemical alembic to transmute stardust into paint. In her analysis of the piece, Chadwick describes how “woman/creator creates life as well as art, without the need for the inspiration of the muse or the Surrealist intervention of the loved one, for she herself possesses

the secret of all creation.”  

Although not the focus of this project, women’s introspection and creative power are central to Varo’s work, themes which scholars continue to mine.

Educated under the strict tutelage of Spanish convent school, scholarship has also noted that Varo’s works are often satirical of the religion and its traditions. The triptych comprising Toward the Tower (fig. 1.2), Embroidering Earth’s Mantle (fig. 1.3), and The Escape (fig. 1.4) parodies this world of stern nuns, monastic labor, suppressed daydreams and forbidden romance. The three semi-autobiographical paintings tell the story of escape from convent school, beginning humorously with a group of identical, hive-minded school girls on bicycles processing out from a multi-gabled convent reminiscent of honey comb. While Varo rejected the oppressive religion of her youth, it is important to note along with scholar Luis-Martin Lozano that “she [did] not submit to the rigors of religion nor [did] she allow new theosophies to lead her down dead-end paths.” She learned from many traditions, and while deeply critical of Christianity’s restrictive and patriarchal practices, synthesized elements of its visual culture with esoteric and occult imagery.

Alchemical, esoteric, and occult themes have been excavated in Varo’s painting alongside the work of Leonora Carrington, with whom she met almost daily for years. Susan Aberth discusses Carrington’s use of feminine domestic activities, especially cooking, as alchemical allegory: “the transit of food from the kitchen to the table to consumption was, in particular, likened to alchemical processes of distillation and transformation, which in turn led to

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6 Ibid., 202.
8 Ibid., 18.
associations involving art production.” Varo was extremely influenced by Carrington and vice versa, often painting domestic scenes of dining, sewing, and encounters with cats, familiars of which she had many. In Mexico, the two discovered a version of Catholicism that had merged with pre-Columbian religion, more welcoming to magic and matriarchal values. Responding to this well of inspiration, they developed a symbolic language that synthesized Catholic ideas with imagery of witchcraft and the like, satirizing orthodox religion while also exploring its magical potential.

The motif of the journey also permeates Varo’s work, a theme which Janet Kaplan has related to the artist’s transient life as a result of her father’s career, war, and exile. Varo often pictures her characters travelling aboard strange vessels, embarking on voyages both physical and spiritual. Remedios sought freedom, first from the oppressive environment of Catholic school, and second from the dire political situation in Europe, but struggled psychologically to escape these traumas all her life; hence she never returned to Spain, even after some of the country’s fascist policies were relaxed. The theme of the voyage therefore reflects a process of psychic development and healing which Varo found in Jungian psychology, alchemy, and the Gurdjieff’s spiritual teachings, collectively called the Fourth Way. While intended as a metaphor, the motif relies on depictions of physical space and bodily relationships to architecture, interesting precisely because of their physicality.

Varo’s representation of architecture functions as both a framing device and focal point in itself. Kaplan and Peter Engel have discussed the medieval quality of her canvases, suggesting

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11 Ibid., 66.
12 Ibid., 60.
13 Ibid., 38.
14 Ibid., 68.
16 Ibid., 113.
17 Ibid., 148.
that, like the empty arcades in a de Chirico painting, Varo’s Romanesque and Gothic structures make up a familiar, mythological backdrop against which dreams unfold. While the architecture appears secondary to the characters and activities shown inside it, Engel observes that “occasionally, pure delight in the power of architecture seems to be the point of the painting.” He notes her repeated use of circles, squares, hexagons, and octagons in the floor plans of buildings, and the prevalence of these forms in religious architecture and symbolism around the world. More specifically, Tere Arcq has identified polygonal and spiral shaped structures with the teachings of Gurdjieff and his student, Pyotr Ouspensky. Varo draws these forms from the Gurdjieffian motifs of the spiral and the enneagram, the latter a nine-pointed figure inscribed within a circle, and both of which denote perpetual motion and evolution of consciousness within the Fourth Way. She incorporates these shapes to illustrate the Fourth Way process of development in which a person, through a series of stages, evolves beyond a passive, machinated existence and into greater awareness of self and the cosmos. Gurdjieff taught that arts like weaving, dancing, music, and painting play a vital role in this transformation, as they hone the artist’s motor skills and concentration. Varo’s frequent depictions of such activities are therefore not just allegories of spiritual work, but real images of the work in progress.

Architecture is an extension of this motif. For example, in The Flutist (1955) (fig. 1.5), the titular musician constructs an octagonal tower embodying Gurdjieff’s Law of Octaves with the sound of his flute, suggesting creative activity as a means of raising consciousness. While the force of

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19 Ibid., 94.
20 Ibid., 103.
22 Ibid., 40-47.
23 Ibid., 39-40.
24 The form of the enneagram is based on the Law of Octaves, a rhythm by which Gurdjieff proposed everything in the universe functions. It is often described in terms of the seven-stepped solfège musical scale.
music constructs the tower within the painting’s narrative, it is Varo’s precise draftsmanship that literally brings its image into being, revealing the importance of her own rigorous practice on the path to higher consciousness. Working like an architect,25 her study of proportion, harmony, and spatial logic bespeaks an interest in the optics and the underlying physics of the world, fundamental laws of our reality which, in the sur-reality, become distorted and inverted. Varo’s architecture is more than a medieval backdrop. It is a device through which these universal building blocks are destabilized and reimagined according to a different set of rules-- those of the mind, or of another universe altogether.

This project picks up on the architectural thread of scholarship, seriously considering what Peter Engel describes as Varo’s delight in the power of architecture. Architecture itself is a powerful frame which mediates the viewer’s interaction with her work, a phenomenon that goes beyond specific references to the doctrines she studied. Rather, its total power comes from ambiguity of symbolic references, inversion of scale, and the tension experienced in encountering a pictorial representation of architecture as opposed to real building. Each of these elements is the subject of one of the following chapters. Chapter I will examine the stylistic, geometric, and numerological traditions Varo merges to create an impression of archetypal sacred space. Chapter II will discuss scale, specifically the miniaturization of architecture, as a tactic which paradoxically expands the viewer’s psychological horizons, making comparisons to the medieval motif of microarchitecture, religious stories and imagery, and alchemy. Chapter III will explore the phenomenology of pictorial architecture as a gateway we can never pass through, relating this to esotericism and medieval microarchitectural shrines.

Seeking to analyze Varo’s architecture in light of medieval art, this methodology is premised in part on an argument made by Kaplan, who notes similarities between the painting *Spiral Transit* and a Renaissance alchemical drawing of the Lapis Sanctuary. She writes: “although it is possible that Varo might have come across a reproduction of this seventeenth-century Dutch rendering in her alchemical reading, it is more likely that such congruence of imagery (as with her visualizations of scientific speculations) reflects her intuitive understanding or (in terms closer to Varo’s way of thinking) her magic envisioning of a phenomenon never seen.”

Similarly, this project argues that the intrigue of Varo’s architecture lies partially in visual principles it shares with the medieval material considered, microarchitecture being something Varo certainly would have encountered in the chapels of Catholic school, the museums of Paris, and the cathedrals of Madrid and Mexico City. While she may not have seen the specific objects discussed here, they were part of her consciousness, as were all Catholic image traditions, along with the unorthodox subjects she studied. Chapter II therefore understands microarchitecture (and specifically Spanish examples when possible) not necessarily as an intentional allusion, but as a means to explain how architecture functions in Varo’s work. This point of reference addresses the question of architectural scale, a subtle factor in the psychological impact of Varo’s paintings often overlooked by scholars.

The arguments presented in the following pages draw varyingly from scholarship on Varo, medieval architecture, and microarchitecture, as well as from the writings of Carl Jung and Gaston Bachelard. Leonora Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet*, a Surrealist novel in which Varo appears as a character, is also consulted to shed light on the subject. These sources offer visual and psychological comparisons serving to elucidate Varo’s architectural riddles, best understood

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through overlapping fields of artistic, literary, and psychological reference which open up complex psychological spaces for the viewer.
CHAPTER 1

Ambiguities and Archetypes

Varo’s universe is populated by human-animal hybrids, mischievous school girls, androgynous alchemists, and travelers on spiritual quests, many of whom pursue their endeavors in relation to some kind of architectural space. Her characters are framed variously within temple-like structures, magical towers, and enchanted interiors, spaces which intuitively read as having sacred significance. This observation prompts a series of questions: why do Varo’s buildings read this way? What constitutes a “magical tower?” Answers can perhaps be found in the artist’s lifelong travels, during which she encountered a spectacular range of architecture from the European Gothic and Romanesque, to the Moorish designs of Spain and North Africa, to the pre-Columbian ruins of Mexico, to the secret structures built by Gurdjieff followers in line with his esoteric doctrine. In light of her exposure to this scope of sacred monuments, it is no wonder that architecture plays a central role in her work, drawing on a series of traditions in a multi-layered fashion to communicate a concept of the sacred. It is necessary to look beyond one-to-one correlations between Varo’s buildings and real world architecture in order to understand the complexity of symbolism responsible for their “magical” aesthetic. Rather, synthesis and overlap of symbolism are the reason for the impression Varo’s architecture leaves on viewers although singular references must be identified before their intersection can be discussed. It is this field of ambiguity and potential signification that this chapter aims to dissect, tracing how specific allusions are muddled and intertwined to create a more powerful psychological impact.

Beginning with a more familiar point of reference, much of Varo’s architecture is clearly based on medieval Romanesque architecture found across Europe, the backdrop of her youth in
Catalan Spain. Consider the second installment of her convent school series, *Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle* (1961) (Fig. 1.3). In the painting, a group of school girls are trapped inside a tower where they weave a fabric which, billowing down from their work stations to the ground, becomes the mantle of the Earth. The girls are instructed by a cloaked figure tending an alchemical vessel out of which their thread is generated. In the background, a robed figure playing the flute appears to guard the tower’s exit. On the left, one of the girls has defiantly sewn an image of herself and her lover upside down into the fabric, creating the means by which escapes in the final painting of the series. The tower has definitive Romanesque attributes, resembling, for example, the towers on the north side of the Monastery of Santa Maria in Ripoll, Catalonia (Fig. 2.1): a polygonal roof and floor plan, a rounded archway, and Lombard bands. The villages on the ground below the tower are also made up of Romanesque structures, these with round or square bases and steep roofs more typical of French and German styles-- see, for example, Trier Cathedral in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany (Fig. 2.2). On one level, these Romanesque features are highly specific satirical references, meant to evoke real architectural examples. On another level, however, the ubiquity of Romanesque architecture in Europe makes the buildings non-specific, more emblematic of a medieval aesthetic and monastic way of life than correlating exactly to any one building.

This non-specificity is heightened by the absence of context and certain details, as well as a reduction of the architecture to its most iconic components. The masonry usually visible on such a structure in real life is unarticulated on Varo’s tower, so finely textured that the walls look like smooth plaster or clay. As a whole, there is little regional specificity in the painting’s architecture, as some elements, like the steep roofs of the buildings on the ground, are more characteristic of French or German Romanesque, while others, like the relatively flat polygonal

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roof of the small tower in the foreground, are more characteristic of the Spanish or Italian variety. Furthermore, most of the towers on the ground appear to be free-standing rather than incorporated into larger structures, giving them a decontextualized ambiguity. The uncertainty continues with regard to the relationship between the main tower and the smaller, windowless tower beneath it. A single visible step indicates that a staircase descends from one into the other, but whatever building or complex they both arise from is cropped out of the frame, giving the impression of a staircase to nowhere (one of Varo’s favorite tricks). The resulting sense of confinement is integral to the narrative of the painting, but there are many ways this could have been brought into effect. The fact that Varo represents the emotion through a spatial paradox exemplifies the metaphysics at play in her work— the means by which a physical reality communicates a subjective one, or is shaped by psychological projection. More than alluding to real buildings and autobiographical locations, her architecture is symbolic and illogical in a way that provokes emotional and intellectual responses in the viewer. Although the piece is satirical in tone, it earnestly explores a connection between architectural space and the unseen workings of mind and cosmos. Architecture not only reflects emotion, but is implicated as a locus of divine creation, the workshop at the center of the universe.

A very different architectural reference is present in The Flutist (1955) (Fig. 1.5), this time to a particular building constructed according to Gurdjieffian geometry, although the correlations are fairly indirect. In the painting, a ghostly, androgynous figure plays the flute, standing up against a rock formation. Music materializes from the end of the instrument in a wispy stream, travelling to the ground where it wraps around stones and hoists them to construct an octagonal tower. The musician’s face is inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a sign of raised consciousness and creative capability.28 The stones forming the tower contain fossils of

prehistoric organisms--a trilobite, a mollusc shell, and a dragonfly, underscoring the evolution of consciousness taking place. Only one side of the tower has been concretized in stone, the rest sketched transparently like a blueprint, which Varo explained as indicatting its existence in the imagination of the builder.29 The musician’s consciousness ascends along with the tower, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between an artist and their creation: bringing something into being, they are nurtured in return by the discipline of their work and its fruition. This exchange is crucial in Gurdjieff’s system of the Fourth Way, wherein spiritual work consists of various art forms, especially music and dance, as they require the convergence of intellect, body, and emotion.30 The tower was inspired by a planetarium outside Mexico City built by Rodney Collin, a student of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, which Remedios visited the same year she painted The Flutist.31 Nicknamed “Divine Providence,” the planetarium was modeled on the form of the enneagram (fig. 2.3), and in turn corresponded to Gurdjieff’s Law of Octaves, a seven-stepped vibrational path dictating the progression of tasks, the transformation of consciousness, and the development of the entire universe.32 A mosaic of red, beige, and gray stone lined the interior of the multi-chambered underground building, depicting the evolution of life and consciousness on Earth from primitive, fossilized organisms to modern man.33 The mosaic was marked at various enneagrammatic “shock points,” intervals at which a process changes course due to shifts in vibrational direction and speed.34 The stones on Varo’s tower are similarly fossilized and earthen

31 Ibid., 67.
There are no photographs of Collin’s planetarium, but it is described in his writings.
32 Ibid., 66.
33 Ibid., 68.
34 Ibid.
colored, and the construction of the tower alludes to the evolutionary process through an architectural metaphor of gradual assembly.\textsuperscript{35}

Varo intended the octagonal form of the tower as an allusion to the Law of Octaves, but admitted in her explanation of the piece that this reference is somewhat vague,\textsuperscript{36} a statement which begins to suggest the nebulous confluence of symbolism really at work in her architecture. The Law of Octaves is also commonly referred to as the Law of Seven, since there are seven intervals between the eight fixed points of a musical octave, including the final note, which is equivalent in pitch to the first note at twice the frequency. While the “Law of Octaves” and “Law of Seven” are merely two different names for the same concept, their superficial variation creates some ambiguity in how the concept is visualized and understood. This difficulty is evident in Varo’s representation of the principle through an octagonal tower, which alludes abstractly to the concept in its prioritization of the number eight, but does not precisely correspond to enneagrammatic geometry or the expression of the concept within a musical octave. The octagon is certainly evocative of the enneagram’s “star” figure, whose nine points (also an important number, but for different reasons) can be connected to form eight sides, but this does not form a closed octagon. Furthermore, if we imagine the angles of a polygon as notes and the sides of a polygon as intervals between notes, an octagon with eight angles and eight sides does not properly correlate to an octave with eight notes and seven intervals. Since the final note of an octave is also the beginning note of another, the concept would be more precisely visualized as a septagon in which the first angle or “note” is counted twice, serving as both the beginning and end point, yielding a count of eight angles with seven intervals between them. Appearing not

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{36} Varo, Remedios. \textit{Letters, Dreams & Other Writings}. Translated by Margaret Carson. Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2018, 98.
only in *The Flutist* but in many other works by Varo, octagonal buildings are symbolic approximations of the enneagram and its laws which, in their ambiguity, lend themselves to other associations and interpretations.

The most obvious of these alternate associations are the polygonal structures in medieval architecture, particularly the octagonal towers found commonly on churches and monasteries, and stand-alone octagonal buildings like baptisteries. As already observed, Varo explicitly represents such a tower in *Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle*. The architecture in this painting can therefore be understood to contain both the Gurdjieffian significance of the Law of Octaves, and the medieval Christian significance of the number eight. These numerologies are fairly similar: in Christianity, eight is associated with death and new beginnings due to the seven day cycle of God’s creation of the universe. God is renewed on the eighth day after the seventh day of rest, hence the octagonal shape of baptisteries, tombs, and fonts.⁷ According to the Law of Octaves, the eighth step in any process marks both its end and the beginning of a new process, also signifying a cyclic death and rebirth. This congruence is explained by the fact that Gurdjieff considered the Fourth Way System a version of “esoteric Christianity,” by which he meant a school that developed true “Chrisitan” virtues within individuals, virtues which he believed were taught in Egypt under a different name than Christianity millenia before Christ, and which had been forsaken by the modern church institution built on violent persecutions and external conformity to modes of “paganism.”³⁸ The complexity of this subject cannot be fully explored here, but it is important to grasp Gurdjieff’s general attitude toward Christianity in order to understand the interrelatedness of these traditions in Varo’s work.

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Of course, the numerology of eight (or seven, again depending on how one thinks of an octave) is not unique to Christianity or the Fourth Way. It is important in music and in spiritual traditions all over the world; Gurdjieff seems to have learned of the principle through his study of alchemy and eastern religions, especially Islam and Buddhism. Christianity gets the seven day period of creation from the Hebrew Bible, which in turn draws from ancient Mesopotamian religion. While Varo’s most intentional numerological allusions are to Gurdjieff’s system, the non-figural nature of her architectural symbolism ultimately broadens its potential for meaning beyond her deliberate references. This is the reason her structures read as sacred or magical, containing self-admittedly vague numerological and geometric references which a general audience, likely unacquainted with Gurdjieff, perceives as occult or esoteric in some way, but also identifies with a range of spiritual architecture around the world. Branching out from Europe, the tower in The Flutist may even suggest something of a Mayan pyramid, resembling the steep temples at Tikal in Guatemala with their tiered construction, exposed masonry, and soaring frontal staircases (fig. 2.4). The convergence of these possible associations communicates an archetypal concept of the sacred, even more elusive and tantalizing than usual in the fact of being difficult to pin down.

The enchanting effect of Varo’s symbolic confluence can be further investigated through the work of Richard Krautheimer, who discusses a similar overlap in the geometric symbolism of medieval church architecture due to a fundamental difference in the way medieval people understood the relationship between architectural copies and prototypes. Many churches constructed between the fifth and seventeenth centuries are recorded to have been designed as “copies” of famous prototypes like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the defining

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feature of which is the Anastasis Rotunda surrounding the alleged tomb of Christ. To the modern eye, however, these copies bear more differences than similarities to this model as well as to each other, claiming to imitate the rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre varyingly through round and octagonal ground plans, different numbers of support columns, and different numbers of auxiliary chapels radiating from the central room. To account for these inconsistencies, Krautheimer demonstrates that the replicas were understood to symbolically reference models rather than imitate them through one-to-one architectural correlations. Essentially, different geometric forms which communicated similar principles of harmony, balance, and otherwise were not distinguished from each other in the way they are today: an octagon was merely “a circle with eight angles,” making the two symbolically interchangeable, allowing polygonal building plans to claim relation to round prototypes like the original Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The octagonal Dome of the Rock was considered to have “a circular edifice” as late as 1322. On the other hand, numerology could be an important mode of transmitting the identity of the prototype to the copy. Frustrating to modern scholars, medieval descriptions of important buildings often prioritize counts of columns, windows, and other such factors over clues as to the general construction and appearance of the space. Numbers and configurations were powerful conveyors of sacred power and identity. We may think of Varo’s geometric and numerological symbolism as functioning in a comparable way to what Krautheimer observes here, made even more relevant by the fact that most of his examples are Romanesque churches, baptisteries, and mausoleums. Strange as it may sound, Varo’s eight-sided buildings really contain the significance of the number seven as dictated by the Law of Octaves, but also the

41 Ibid., 3.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 5-6.
45 Ibid., 6
46 Ibid., 8.
significance of eight as it is conflated with seven in this matter (and as previously discussed, also in matters of Christian theology) and made a magic number in its own right. Her structures numerologically reference these spiritual cycles, and, as Peter Engel suggests, use the medieval aesthetic to create a whimsical backdrop, a visual marker of a time when rituals, miracles, and magic held greater credence in European society.\textsuperscript{47} The potential for meaning continues in further ambiguities of Varo’s geometric symbolism. Round towers and other kinds of polygonal structures representing various enneagrammatic stages of development also appear in her work,\textsuperscript{48} which to a general audience seem to carry an interchangeable spiritual weight. In a sense, these circular, octagonal, and hexagonal buildings all accomplish the same job, projecting a spiritual, occult, or cosmological significance through a broad and ancient web of associations.

Varo’s most explicitly Gurdjieffian piece, \textit{Icon} (fig. 2.5), commissioned in 1945 by the head of a Gurdjieff chapter in South America, depicts a round, crenelated tower supported by a wheeled contraption, underneath a night sky filled with stars, planets, birds, and an enneagram above all of these. The same spiritual charge inhabits this circular tower as it does Varo’s polygonal towers, demonstrating the symbolic overlap between these forms, and their belonging to an old and widespread visual code of spiritual concepts. The richness of Varo’s architecture lies in this non-specificity, with facades that are simultaneously church-like, observatory-like, and three-dimensional incarnations of a mystical seal-- note that the enneagram bears a relationship to other, more commonly known magical symbols like the Seal of Solomon, or the pentagram.\textsuperscript{49} On account of one of Gurdjieff’s lectures, it becomes clear why the circle, the octagon, the hexagon, the pentagon, and even the triangle all carry spiritual connotations. Like various star shaped symbols, regular polygons contain an implicit principle of “one-ness” or

\textsuperscript{47} Engel, Peter. “The Architectural Key: Places of the Unconscious,” 100.
\textsuperscript{48} Arcq, Tere. “The Esoteric Key: In Search of the Miraculous,” 64.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 64.
unity in form, a secret cosmic order only apparent to the initiated. Gurdjieff describes how “searches [for the path to knowledge of unity] radiate to the path just as the radii of a circle join at the center, getting closer into contact with each other the nearer they get to the center.” This idea not only explains how circles and regular polygons lend themselves to spiritual thought, but also, perhaps, the convergence of spiritual traditions in Varo’s architecture. Mirroring Gurdjieff’s observation, Krautheimer distills Saint Augustine’s argument about the circle (which by extension of his logic, also applies to regular polygons), “pre-eminent among all other geometrical figures and comparable to virtue because of the conformity and concordance of its essentials, its ‘congruentia rationum atque concordia.’” As different theologies and spiritual pursuits seek to uncover higher truths, they often resemble one another in modes of thought and core principles underlying varied means of expression. Witnessing a great diversity of art, architecture, and corresponding religious beliefs in her travels, Varo was clearly interested in synthesizing what she encountered, evidenced not only by the symbolic ambiguities in her architecture but by her study of Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way in the first place. The fundamental mission of the system is to integrate three traditional modes of spiritual expression: the way of the monk, the way of the fakir, and the way of the yogi, none of which, Gurdjieff believed, cultivated equal mastery of mind, body, and emotion on their own. Hence the development of a Fourth Way, “the way of the sly man,” which unified these approaches in a comprehensive


51 Ibid.

52 Krautheimer, Richard. “Introduction to an "Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture."” p. 9


54 Ouspensky, P.D. In Search of the Miraculous, 50.

For Gurdjieff, the fakir masters the physical body, the monk the emotional core, and the yogi the intellectual sphere, but none of them masters all three.

54 Ibid.
discipline based on dance, music, and other art forms requiring a harmony of physical, intellectual, and emotional faculties.

Krautheimer’s insight sheds light on the specific issue of Varo’s round and polygonal building plans communicating the same essential importance to the viewer, but also applies more broadly to the way she condenses many kinds of religious architecture, not just Romanesque towers, into singular spaces. The painting *Vegetal Cathedral* (1957) (fig. 2.6) again displays architectural elements, this time Gothic, that are crucial to the narrative of the scene. In the piece, a sail-powered carriage navigates a forest in which the trees grow into a canopy of pointed arches and ribbed vaulting. These features, especially as Varo renders them in a muted gray-green tone, reference Gothic interiors like that of the Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona (fig. 2.7) with its stone columns, pointed arches, and vaulted ceilings. The woman in the carriage is accompanied by a ghostly doppelganger, both of whom look like Varo, suggesting an autobiographical dimension to the work. Venturing apprehensively through the dark maze of columns, the self-sufficient magical vessel offers safe passage through an endless and imposing religious landscape, reflective of Varo’s childhood and education within the Catholic culture of Spain. Even as a girl, she embraced magic and alternative spiritual doctrines as an escape from this culture, reading fantasy novels, mystical literature, and Eastern philosophy during her time in convent school.55 A purely autobiographical interpretation of the painting, however, falls short of explaining it entirely. As the title indicates, the setting is not a real cathedral, but a forest which takes on the form of one as if under an enchantment. The severe geometry of the architecture is tempered by its soft vegetal texture, and an unseen light source casts a mysterious glow upon the scene. These factors, along with the shape shifting ability of the forest in the first place, create an

air of mischievous magic at play rather than a truly oppressive or malevolent force. Using Gothic architecture as a framework for this otherworldly dimension, Varo embraces one of the most powerful aspects of Catholic visual culture for her own purposes while remaining critical of the religion itself.

Arguably, this painting not only references the Gothic, but evokes other kinds of religious architecture, leading back to Krautheimer’s thesis about symbolic ambiguity. There is nothing definitively Gothic about the columns themselves; in fact, their configuration and seemingly infinite repetition into the background is more reminiscent of a hypostyle Muslim prayer hall than a cathedral. Consider, for example, the interior of the Vakil Mosque in Shiraz, Iran (fig. 2.8), in which the hypostyle pillars are decorated with a twisting, vegetal motif. Although Remedios never travelled to the Middle East, as a Spaniard she was certainly familiar with Islamic architecture, and integrates something of its sensibility into the notion of a cathedral here. In close proximity to Varo, the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba is a real architectural example of one religious tradition being superimposed over another. Due to a long history of successive conquests, the complex contains both an elaborate hypostyle hall (fig. 2.9) and a Gothic nave and transept (fig 2.10). Adding to this sense of overlap, botanical motifs appear not only in Islamic architecture, but also in Gothic tracery, related to ideas about the origins of architecture in nature. Varo also synthesizes Christian and Islamic attributes in an earlier piece, Rheumatic Pain (1948) (fig. 2.11): a black and white checkered floor as seen in Notre Dame or Saint Paul’s Cathedral (Gothic and Baroque, respectively) (fig. 2.12), a labyrinth of columns and arches that could belong to either Islamic or Christian tradition, and vaulting with...

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57 The black and white “chessboard” pattern also reflects alchemical ideas about the union of opposites. In addition to religious architecture, it can be found in alchemical imagery and Masonic lodges.
three-dimensional geometric patterns reminiscent of muqarnas, a distinctly Islamic style of ornamentation (fig. 2.13). What does it mean for these elements to be compounded in the same space? Returning to the argument that a synthesis of traditions, or non-specificity, is the source of richness in Varo’s architectural spaces, one can see how this stylistic ambiguity functions alongside geometric or numerological ambiguity to produce a magical effect, abstracting a range of spiritual concepts and architecture into condensed, archetypal environments.

Here, Varo’s interests in Gurdjieff and sacred geometry as they relate to architecture begin to intersect with psychoanalytic ideas, particularly those of Jung, whom she studied in addition to the mystical teachings of the Fourth Way.58 Jung’s theory of individuation, a process of psychic maturation in which an individual’s consciousness becomes differentiated from the collective unconscious,59 maps onto Gurdjieff’s concept of “awakening,” or the elevation of one’s consciousness to a higher state. While in Gurdjieff’s system this elevation occurs through engagement in a variety of individual and group activities, especially sacred dance movements designed to channel cosmological truths, in Jung’s theory it occurs through integration of unconscious knowledge into conscious awareness. This unconscious knowledge manifests itself in myths, dreams, and fantasies which impart wisdom in the form of archetypal stories and images.60 While the specifics of these manifestations are culturally determined, their underlying principles are cross-culturally and trans-temporally consistent, leading Jung to formulate them as components of a collective human unconscious.61 A comparison might be drawn between the non-specific, intuited power of Jungian archetypes and the ambiguous, symbolic charge of Varo’s architecture. Her buildings are archetypal in that their non-specificity generates a wealth

58 Kaplan, Janet. Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys, 152.
61 Ibid., 228.
of potential meaning, conveying a spiritual significance that seems to transcend any one set of teachings, and giving form an unseen, abstract order beneath the surface of reality.

This characterization can be made of Varo’s paintings in general, depicting entire alternate realities or moments of inter-dimensional rift in which magical entities reveal themselves by peeling out of the wallpaper, or through the backrest of a chair. In regards to the argument at hand, what is interesting about this is the way these dimensions, or the gateways to them, are conceived in an architectural manner. More than a reflection of Surrealist interests in general, which by definition concern such unseen realities, the motif reflects Varo’s fascination with sacred geometry and ideas of universal order, a kind of cosmic architecture, perhaps stemming back to the engineering diagrams from which she first learned to draw. Executing scenes with mathematical precision, she plays the role of divine draftsman, casting metaphysical logic in physical form. Her structures are therefore symbolic on two levels: first, as archetypal spiritual sites in their multiplicitous references to worldly spiritual architecture, and second, as representing the cosmic order by nature of simply being architecture, the product of intelligent design.

In summation, the magic tower effect, or the general sense of magically charged space in Varo’s work is the result of a universal, archetypal appeal, in turn the product of her collapsing of a range of authoritative architectural models and spiritual concepts. Examining architecture as a central feature of Varo’s magical aesthetic, this chapter has attempted to qualify this aesthetic in a more precise way, demonstrating how it draws on a complex web of visual, theological and esoteric associations. Enmeshed together, these associations project an air of transcendent secrets, strengthened by the fact of being vague or enigmatic. This is not the only way Varo’s architecture acts upon the viewer to communicate spiritual meaning: next, her miniaturization of
architectural forms will be considered as a means by which she explores the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, equally informed by esoteric traditions and more widely familiar Catholic modes of expression.
CHAPTER 2

Interior Worlds: The Paradox of the Miniature

A mysterious island temple harbors all the world’s creatures, human and animal alike, spilling out from its doors as if in infinite supply behind the walls of its half-scale facade. Overhead, creatures in flying chariots (three equally cramped architectural vessels) funnel a magical substance through the roof of the building, where it is transformed into this multitude of creatures. The painting is Varo’s *Microcosm* (1959) (fig. 3.1), a culmination of her interest in esoteric subjects and reflection of her lifelong proximity to Catholic visual traditions. Note that the central piece of architecture is characterized by the ambiguity of symbolism described in the previous chapter: its truncated steeple and narrow, arched windows are vaguely church-like, yet it resembles no real church precisely, seeming rather to embody an abstract cosmological principle in its centralized, octagonal ground plan, and the mystical process it facilitates. Equally important to communicating this magical significance is the building’s diminished stature, which heightens the symbolic nature of the image through a powerful sense of compression.

This chapter explores the role of miniaturization within Varo’s painting, demonstrating the psychological impact of compressed space as it relates to abstract ideas within the religious, esoteric, and alchemical parameters of her lifelong studies. Each of these ideas constructs a relationship between earthly and heavenly realms, or the microcosm and macrocosm, investing condensed physical space with profound, paradoxical power. Varo’s downscaling of architecture to an impractical size will first be examined through aspects of Catholic material culture lending themselves to mystical reinterpretation: microarchitecture, referring to a broad category of miniature architectural church furnishings intended to evoke the heavenly city, the legend and iconography of Saint Barbara, and biblical accounts of Noah’s ark and the Ark of the Covenant
(more of interest for Varo’s purposes in the context of Jewish mysticism than Catholicism, although she would have encountered these stories through the lens of both). The final part of the chapter will show how all of these concepts translate into an alchemical mode of thinking, considering Varo’s miniature architecture as a vessel for spiritual transformation.

I. Microarchitecture

The role of miniaturized architecture in Varo’s paintings can be understood as an extension of the tradition of Medieval Christian microarchitecture, a term which traditionally refers to miniature architectural features found commonly on monuments, altarpieces, reliquaries, and various kinds of church adornments, particularly in the Gothic style. François Bucher describes the phenomenon as originating in “a definition of the ideal Gothic structure through the use of small monuments of architecture usually classified within the “minor” arts.” Hyperspecific as this concept may seem, it encapsulates a wide variety of objects and sculptural representations ranging from the very concrete (a reliquary made to look like a miniature cathedral) to the more abstract (an altarpiece framed with Gothic tracery). These objects were popularized in the medieval period, and are mostly (but not exclusively) found today in Catholic churches, especially famous pilgrimage sites where such architectural shrines contain relics and sacraments. Prominent examples of these furnishings in situ include the Monstrance of Arfe in the Toledo Cathedral (Fig. 3.2), and the Shrine of the Three Kings in the Cathedral of Cologne (Fig. 3.3). Very old examples dating from as early as the twelfth century are more often held in museum collections, like the series of French chasse style reliquaries on display at the Metropolitan (Fig. 3.4), at the Louvre, or at the Musée National du Moyen Âge in Paris. Varo’s paintings do not cite specific examples of medieval microarchitecture, but operate in a parallel

way to provoke an imaginative response in the viewer, an argument which further qualifies the
allure of her architecture given her familiarity with Catholic image traditions and interest in
medieval material.

Lavishly gilded and elaborately decorated, most medieval microarchitecture can be
understood in some respect to reference the Heavenly Jerusalem, the saintly realm described in
the Book of Revelation as being made of “pure gold, clear as glass” 63 and “adorned with every
jewel.” 64 As Laurence Stookey has argued, a theological association with the image of this
heavenly city was at the core of the significance of the Gothic cathedral in the Middle Ages. 65
While cathedrals evoke this grand vision through vastness of scale, engulfing a person in the
sense of divine majesty, microarchitecture inspires the same feeling through an infinite depth or
complexity of the small. The association made between microarchitecture and the saintly
paradise seems to have been even stronger than that implied in full scale architecture, as
miniatures could be less expensively decorated with precious materials, and therefore exhibited
luxury in a more concentrated and impressive way. 66 The effect of these objects has been
described by Bucher and others as the feeling of a great mystical potential, or a sense that the
small object in fact contains something infinite. 67 These impressions are the direct result of
miniaturization, or symbolic condensing of features. In concentrating the power of a prototype
into a smaller space, the symbol or miniature acquires a charge akin to the potential energy of a
balloon filled with compressed air. Often, an impractical density of ornamentation contributes to
the magical air of these objects, along with their smallness in itself: Painstaking intricacy can be
overwhelming and even stressful for the viewer- the Arfe Monstrance, with its awe-inducing, yet

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63 Rev. 21:18
64 Ibid., 21:19
67 Ibid, 71.
visually excruciating level of detail is a perfect example. So much detail confined to a small surface area both wildly impresses and instills fear through the implied magnificence of God. As Bucher concludes, “It is in these [microarchitectural] objects that the idea of Gothic is found in its essence, and it was given to them to physically enclose the greatest mysteries of Christianity.”

Paradoxically, their smallness opens a vast imaginative expanse within the viewer.

Varo’s architecture can hardly be characterized as lavishly or intricately adorned; instead, its starkness works in the opposite direction to the same end of an abstract, symbolic quality. The temple structure in Microcosm is pared-down in both size and decoration, reduced to essential geometric forms and the same flat, unarticulated walls as the tower in Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle (fig. 1.3). As the title of the piece suggests, the structure is the nexus of a compressed, mystical force expanding outward from its windows and four doorways, arranged perpendicularly as if representing the cardinal directions, or any number of systematic, world-abbreviating concepts related to the number four: the Aristotelian elements used in alchemy (earth, air, water, and fire (or light) are all components of the scene), with which Varo was certainly familiar, or the four spiritual “ways” proposed by Gurdjieff. Returning briefly to a discussion of numeric symbolism, it is perhaps worth mentioning that Jung identifies an ambiguity in the quaternity of alchemical elements, wherein one of the four is sometimes distinguished as superior to the other three, having been derived from the unity of these, which comprises a separate trinity. Some confusion therefore arises regarding the essential threeness or fourness of alchemy. The significance of this debate for Jung’s purposes is beyond the scope of this project, but the issue mirrors observations made previously about the conflation of the

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principles of seven and eight within Varo’s octagonal structures. Observe that the initial actors in *Microcosm* are the three creatures in the chariots,\(^{70}\) whose substrate is funnelled through the building with four main apertures. Just as the eightheness of the octagonal structure contains the significance of the Law of Seven, the fourness of the temple is built upon a unity of threeness. The piece as a whole collapses all of these numerological principles, concentrating them within an architectural space of diminished scale, evidenced by its small proportion relative to the animal and humanoid figures coming out of it. Emerging illogically from the depths of the shrunken facade, these figures implicate the temple as a divine portal channeling an infinite, generative power. The building communicates this significance through the same spatial paradox apparent in microarchitecture-- but what does it mean for “architecture” to exist that is too small to physically enter? As Jung writes, “the paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions … Non-ambiguity and non-contradiction are one-sided and thus unsuited to express the incomprehensible.”\(^{71}\) The crux of the comparison between medieval microarchitecture and Varo’s architecture, much of which is shrunken in scale like the temple in *Microcosm*, is that both operate counterintuitively to project an imagined interior expanse into the mind of the viewer. This imagined realm is larger than any real, physical space could possibly be. In the case of microarchitecture, the intended evocation is the heavenly city, but in the case of Varo it could be any number of alternate realities, perhaps one of the six dimensions proposed by Gurdjieff in his *New Model of the Universe*. According to this model, the fourth dimension (note the additional significance of four) “lies as much in the realm as very large magnitudes as in the realm of very small magnitudes; as much in the realm of what is actually infinity as in the realm of what is actually zero.”\(^{72}\)

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\(^{70}\) The creatures are personifications of the zodiac signs Scorpio, Sagittarius, and Capricorn, from left to right.


\(^{72}\) Ouspensky, P.D. *In Search of the Miraculous,* 1949, 212.
Varo presents another microcosm in the 1962 piece *Spiral Transit* (Fig. 3.5), this time, as indicated by Luis-Martin Lozano, directly based on pictorial medieval imagery of Celestial Jerusalem.73 The piece depicts a medieval village constructed along a spiral shaped island in the middle of the ocean. Water flows into the space between walls, forming canals through which travelers sail in strange, egg-shaped vessels. At its center, the spiral culminates in a tiered polygonal tower. This formation again expresses Gurdjieffian motifs, now the spiral in addition to the octagonal tower. Like the enneagram, the spiral is suggestive of perpetual motion, expansion, and destination, all potential allusions to the Fourth Way or the work of alchemy; Janet Kaplan relates the work to an alchemical drawing of the Lapis Sanctuary (1674) (Fig. 3.6) in which a tower at the center of a spiral maze contains the philosopher’s stone.74 The city carries an equally strong visual resonance with medieval depictions of heavenly Jerusalem, which often depict buildings arranged along a ring or grouped together in a circular mass. See, for example, an illumination from the *Liber Floridus*, a twelfth century encyclopedia which recounts Biblical events in its chronology of the universe (Fig. 3.7). *Spiral Transit* mimics this configuration, and wields additional spiritual power in its diminished scale. The people in the canals are half the height of the towers, creating a spatial paradox again enacting what might be termed the psycho-symbolic effect of microarchitecture, or the way in which such illogically small buildings seem to compress the total power of something large and abstract behind the scenes. The central tower embodies an infinitely generative capacity similar to that of the temple in *Microcosm*, although this is visualized differently in the form of the spiral emanating from it. The whole length of the city almost seems to have unfurled from within this building, containing invisible

multitudes which the travellers seek in their journey to its center. Another fascinating comparison can be made between the configuration of the city and several twelfth century gilt copper wheel chandeliers, which represent the Heavenly Jerusalem as a series of miniature towers and gatehouses arranged along a ring. The Hezilo chandelier (Fig. 3.8) at Hildesheim Cathedral in Germany is the largest of these examples, its form and gleaming copper materiality bearing a striking conceptual resemblance to Varo’s amber-colored city, glowing with the illuminated warmth of her masterful technique. Remedios probably never saw the Hezilo chandelier, but the similarity of her composition reflects her knowledge of this type of imagery, as well as her intuitive sense of unseen, spiritual phenomena upon which Kaplan remarks. Importantly, although the painting is modeled on Christian imagery, it uses the motif of Celestial Jerusalem to esoteric ends. Recalling that Gurdjieff conceived of his system as a version of esoteric Christianity, the spiral form here can be understood as a Gurdjieffian modification of the typically circular plan. While the circle is self-complete, the spiral facilitates a path of self-advancement.

Regarding the connections of Microcosm and Spiral Transit to microarchitectural representations of the heavenly city, there is a final point to be made about the manner in which alchemical, and more broadly occult thinking maps onto this particular concept within the Bible. Derived from the Emerald Tablet, the mantra “as above, so below” describes a sympathetic relationship between different cosmic planes, the precondition for fields like astrology and alchemy in which macrocosmic forces direct activity in the microcosm of Earth, and vice versa. A copy of earthly Jerusalem in the celestial sphere, the concept of the Heavenly Jerusalem

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75 Ibid.
76 Ouspensky, P.D. In Search of the Miraculous,” 1949, 74, 302.
constitutes a similar mirroring of realms-- it seems that Varo was interested in this correspondence so far as it implicates a mystical vision of the universe and its mechanics. Mining the esoteric potential of traditional religious subject matter, she brings the principle of microarchitecture to its illogical conclusion.

II. Saint Barbara’s Tower

Another link between Varo’s architecture and medieval image traditions is found in the iconography of Saint Barbara, a legendary third century martyr whose compiled hagiography reports the following: locked away in a tower by her over-protective pagan father, Barbara secretly converted to Christianity and altered the plans for a bathhouse he had commissioned, instructing that a third window be added to represent the trinity. Upon his return, her father was angered and, according to some accounts, executed her on the spot. According to others, however, his attempt was thwarted by the miraculous opening of a hole in the tower floor which led out onto a mountain peak. Barbara escaped, and took refuge in the mountains until a shepherd betrayed her location, allowing her father to take her back to the city where she was then tortured and executed. Barbara’s saintly attribute is therefore a miniature Romanesque tower, often held in her hand as seen in this fifteenth century Castilian painting at the Museu Nacional D’Art Catalunya (Fig. 3.9).

A fascinating connection between Varo’s architectural imagery and Barbara’s legend can be found in Leonora Carrington’s surrealist novel The Hearing Trumpet, completed in 1950 during their period of close friendship in Mexico, although not published until 1976. Carrington based one of the novel’s characters, Carmella Velasquez, the protagonist’s best friend, on Varo,

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79 Aberth, Susan. Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art, 60.
and parodied Gurdjieff in the character of Dr. Gambit, a charlatan guru. Importantly, both Carrington and Varo engaged with Gurdjieff’s teachings but rejected his cult of personality, considering them separately from the man himself. The novel contains a story within a story, the biography of the fictional Spanish nun Doña Rosalinda della Cueva, abbess of the Convent of Santa Barbara of Tartarus. The abbess spends much of her time at the convent secluded in an octagonal tower, which she converts into an observatory for studying witchcraft and communing with celestial bodies. She meets a terrible end when, after a secretive journey to Ireland, she returns to the tower where her body swells to an enormous size, turns “coal black” and violently explodes, producing strange fumes and a “luminously white” winged boy—details that will be important for later. Needless to say, a Spanish Catholic nun turned occult practitioner evokes something of Varo, regardless of the fact that she is more explicitly embodied in another character. Carrington’s exploding, tower-confined abbess (of the Convent of Santa Barbara), Saint Barbara’s miraculous passage of escape from her prison, and Varo’s mystically compressed Romanesque buildings all demonstrate architecture, specifically the Romanesque tower, as a site of rupture or transformation. Note the dynamism of Barbara’s miracle in many descriptions, the floor literally “[breaking] away beneath her,” transporting her to another place. Kaplan relates that as a child, Remedios wrote secret stories which she hid beneath the floor stones of her bedroom—“thus began her preoccupation with an imagined subterranean life lived secretly under floors, behind walls, and within furniture.”

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81 O’Rawe, Ricki “Should We Try to Self Remember While Playing Snakes and Ladders?” 190.
82 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 126.
Illuminated by this episode in Carrington’s novel, Varo’s treatment of architecture as the container of cosmic mysteries takes Saint Barbara’s story and runs, further exploring the mystical dimensions of Christian subject matter. Returning to the fifteenth century Castilian painting of Barbara (Fig. 3.9), the dynamic forces of compression and expansion suggested in Varo’s reduced-scale architecture can also be found in this Medieval rendering of the martyr. The piece depicts three female saints, one in the center who is unidentified, and Saints Agnes and Barbara on the left and right, respectively. Barbara holds a miniature octagonal tower in one hand, gesturing cryptically toward it with the other, a hint of mischief in her expression conveying the potential presence of a secret inside. Much like Varo’s compressed Romanesque buildings, the tower’s miniature form, a symbolic condensation of Barbara’s myth, gives the impression of a magical charge as if shrunken down by an enchantment. The three saints are set against a gilded backdrop and framed by a microarchitectural pattern of arches and tracery, an indication that they are in the heavenly city.86 Two forms of symbolic architecture are therefore present in the composition: one that is contained within the scene, and one that is implied to extend beyond it, abstracting the vastness of heavenly Jerusalem through a motif of repeating bars and arches. The scale relationship between these two architectures enacts a complex visual dynamic of compression and expansion in which the tower, condensing physical space through miniaturization, is encompassed by a broad, outward-expanding architectural frame. This concentric layering of space evokes a sequence of radiation that works in both an inward and outward direction. A sense of straightforward progression, however, is complicated by a paradox of detail and abstraction: the little unornamented tower is a complete space, while the overarching, heavily ornamented architectural frame is merely a fragment of something larger. It

is as if we have zoomed in and out at the same time-- remember Gurdjieff’s concept of four dimensional space. The piece radiates with compacted potential, summarizing a psychic interplay between large and small. While it is impossible to know whether Varo saw this particular example, there are many others like it in which the saint both holds a tower and is framed by microarchitectural detailing. The motif of the miniature Romanesque building is also not unique to Barbara; it appears for different reasons in the hands of Saint Jerome and Thomas Aquinas, a widespread device within the visual vocabulary of Christian art.

III. The Ark

In his study of microarchitecture, Paul Binski cites an illustrative thirteenth century poem describing Henry III’s admiration for the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Captivated by the royal chapel with its large expanse of stained-glass windows and intricate Gothic vocabulary, the king expressed a desire to “roll it off to London in a cart, as if it were an ark.” 87 This comparison is productive in illustrating the imagined capacity of the miniature to contain the large, again summarizable as the psycho-symbolic effect of microarchitecture. Henry speaks of the chapel as if of the ark of the covenant, an object “of portable scale, but huge specific gravity.” 88 The throne of God on Earth, this gilded acacia wood chest is transported from place to place throughout the nomadic period of the Hebrew Bible, revered as a container of immense and volatile power. In one instance, it kills a man at the mere touch of a hand. 89 The ark typifies the power of compression: God, in all infinite potential, is contained within a box roughly four feet long by three feet tall 90 -- no wonder its mishandling yields explosive reactions. Such a highly

88 Binski, Gothic Wonder, 126.
89 2 Sam. 6:7
90 Ex. 25:10
concentrated divine locus requires shelter and proper infrastructure to protect against its capacity for destruction; hence, the origin of the temple. A conceptual similarity is evident between the ark, microarchitecture, and Varo’s condensed, miniature buildings, strengthened by the fact that more than one medieval image reinterprets the chest as a microarchitectural shrine (Fig. 3.10). Relating more closely to the original conception of the ark, Varo also uses the concept of the bottomless chest, the focus of the painting *Encounter* (1959) (Fig. 3.11). A figure shrouded in billowing blue fabric sits at a table in a dark and nearly empty room. Opening a chest on the table, she is met with a face identical to her own peering out from inside. The two selves are connected by the blue fabric, which trails around the seated figure’s legs and up into the chest, where it wraps around the face of her doppleganger. The difference between the mysterious contents of this chest and the ark of the covenant, however, is that Varo depicts its internal dimension literally through another spatial paradox, implicating the opening as a portal into (or out of) another place. A further mystical suggestion is made in the physical link between the two characters, illustrating a sympathetic tie between cosmic planes.

Varo’s mystically compressed spaces are also potentially evocative of Noah’s ark, a microcosm which encyclopedically harbors one pair of every animal, and structurally replicates the tripartite division of the universe in its three floors: Earth, heaven, and underworld. 91 Looking again at *Microcosm* (fig. 3.1), the painting reimagines the sacred vessel that populates the world, its menagerie of creatures bursting onto the island refuge like Noah and his animals at the omen of receding waters. In this case, however, the rebirth is spiritual and psychological. Varo described the figures as “wrapped in a shared white vestment, by way of celestial placenta, [who] as they become individuals ... take on color.” 92  

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seafaring crafts can be found in Varo’s work, often exhibiting an illogical internal depth, as in the paintings *The World Beyond* (1955) (fig. 3.12) and *Discovery* (1956) (fig. 3.13). Both pieces portray fantastical, solitary vessels exploring the waters of magical realms. Although attention is directed to the mysteries of the external world surrounding the boats—a group of portal-like whirlpools offering glimpses of human limbs, or a tiny orb of ethereal light beaconing from shore— one is equally curious about the ships’ interiors, emitting a supernatural light and containing doorways and staircases to nowhere. These microcosmic crafts hide multitudes beneath their surface, self-sufficient worlds within a larger, ever unfolding universe beyond the frame.

The resonance between the ark principle and the properties of these built spaces is no coincidence. Remedios studied Jewish mysticism, a tradition encompassing a series of schools and enormous range of thought, the relevant portion of which here concerns the Ark of the Covenant as a cultic representation of the Chariot Throne of God, and correlations between the measurements of such objects and divine architecture.93 The connection between the two arks lies in the fact that both are wooden objects whose construction and dimensions are directly prescribed by God to man. Hebrew has different words for each, using *teivah* for both Noah’s ark and Moses’s basket, another water-bound vessel, and *aron* for the Ark of the Covenant, specifically a box or chest; however, the words are often used interchangeably in Rabbinic literature.94 Therefore in Latin, they translated as one and the same concept: *arca*, meaning chest, gaining the similar, expanded connotation of a place of storage, safety, or refuge.95 Either way,

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95 Ibid.
the conceptual link between these objects in their embodiment of sacred measurements and proportions is easily made between Varo’s preoccupation with exactly the same matter.

From a literary angle, Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet* makes the explicit association between Noah’s ark and condensed power or space. In the novel, the characters Marlborough and Anubeth travel in a sled called the Ark, described by the narrator as “a most impressive sight … It was mounted on runners like a sledge, but otherwise looked like a Renaissance version of Noah’s Ark, gilded, carved and painted in gorgeous colors, like a painting by a mad Venetian master.”  

The Ark is powered by an “atom-propelled” engine which “fits within a rock crystal case no bigger than a hen’s egg,” and its interior is luxuriously decorated with “perfume sprays shaped like exotic feathered birds, lamps like praying mantises with moveable eyes, [...] sofas mounted on prostrate werewomen beautifully sculptured in rare woods and ivory [and] all sorts of mummified creatures hung from the roof, molded in such skillful gestures that they seemed alive.” This wonderfully bizarre satire unites the concept of a magically compressed power source with a mobile dwelling of ambiguous size. Mounted on runners, one imagines it as a sort of carriage-sized vehicle, although its outer proportions are not directly confirmed by the text.

All of this is to explain that Varo’s paradoxical spaces have religious prototypes with which she engaged in orthodox, esoteric, and satirical contexts throughout her life, introduced to her via the religion of her childhood and continuously reinterpreted through the lenses of Surrealism and mysticism. A more in depth discussion of theoretical space in relation to the ark(s) will follow in the final chapter of this project.

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97 Ibid., 190.  
98 Ibid., 193.
IV. The Athanor

In the language and symbolic visuals of vessels, compression, and expansion, we may begin to think of alembics, distillation, and sublimation, or the real work and apparati of alchemy. Recall the color symbolism in the explosion of Carrington’s abbess, a scene which occurs inside an octagonal convent tower that might as well be one of Varo’s. As it swells and erupts, the nun’s body turns the color of coal, leaving behind “a morsel of damp, black skin and yielding “a boy, no bigger than a barn owl, luminously white and winged, that flutter[s] near the ceiling.” 99 The explosion is an allegory of the nigredo (black) and albedo (white) stages of the creation of the philosopher’s stone. In the nigredo stage, a substance is broken down or putrefied by fire, turning it black in the process of reducing it to prima materia.100 The substance is then purified in the albedo stage by dividing the prima materia out from other products of the cooking.101 Varo explicitly represents an alchemical process in Microcosm, on which she elucidated that “the celestial substances fall down to that sort of temple, where after sufficient seething and boiling and chemical transformation, the various creatures are produced which leave and are distributed around the world.”102 The colors of the figures emerging from the temple potentially correlate to other alchemical phases, yellow representing citrinitas, the combining of the purified substance with another ingredient (represented as a union of opposites like the sun and moon, hence the yellow stage follows the white), and red representing rubedo, the final phase in which this union is stabilized, resulting in the red powder of philosopher’s stone.103

99 Ibid., p. 126
101 Ibid., 214.
Varo’s buildings are especially evocative of one type of alchemical apparatus: the athanor, also known as the “tower furnace” and the “house of the chick” (fig. 3.14). Designed to maintain heat for long periods of time, the athanor is a furnace with a domed or conical roof and a series of openings, usually square or round-arched, for ventilation and access to the flame. These features cause it to look like a miniature Romanesque tower, a visual which, for reasons related to the phenomenon of microarchitecture, inevitably enhanced the mystical connotations of its use. The instrument is often to a house and to an egg or womb (hence the second nickname), both of which indicate the transformation of inhabitants as opposed to mere contents, a powerful idea which begins to suggest the psychological dimension of alchemy.

Varo equates buildings with alchemical vessels, sites of transformation in which substances are distilled and diluted, condensed and dispersed. One reason for the comparison is likely the interpretive shift pioneered by Jung that made alchemy of interest to the Surrealists, reviving the Great Work as a potent metaphor for psychological development and the perfection of the individual. Jung reads the person, or the alchemist, as the prima materia shaped in the alchemical process, as according to many texts, the spiritual and intellectual preparations of the alchemist are as essential to the work as the chemical reactions themselves. Alchemy thus conforms to his theory of individuation as well as the consciousness-raising pursuits of the Fourth Way in which Varo participated. If people are the matter of alchemy, it only follows that the vessel must be something into which they can go. Varo’s use of architecture as a container for mystical phenomena brings these ideas into the realm of human experience and phenomenology.

As absurd and unreal as her imagery seems, it depicts things that are real in the inner,

104 Chambers, Ephraim. “Athanor.” Cyclopaedia, 1728. https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/chambers-cyclopaedia
psychological sense, especially as our impressions form in response to the external order of the world.

Looking to both orthodox religion and traditions of alchemy and mysticism, these comparisons explore the significance of miniaturized architecture in Varo’s compositions from multiple angles, all operating along a shared line of abstract thinking. Once again, meaning becomes apparent through a network of ancient and arcane associations which, in probing the outward mysteries of universal structure and matter, also delve into psychological dimensions of imagined experience. Varo’s compression of architectural space works in tandem with her condensing of styles and symbolism, creating talismanic buildings that perpetually allure in their potentiality. The next chapter will turn to a final visual cue through which Varo communicates this potential, concerning walls, windows, and the nature of spiritual thought.
CHAPTER 3

Behind Closed Doors: Not Seeing is Believing

“Obscurum per obscurius, ignotum per ignotius” (the obscure by the more obscure, the unknown by the more unknown).¹⁰⁷ Thus Jung introduces the philosophy of alchemy, a discipline infamous for the deliberate obfuscation of its own methods and goals through inscrutable layers of symbolism and allegory. A third and crucial property of Varo’s architecture is the way it mediates the viewer’s insight through literal dynamics of seeing and not-seeing, or inclusion and exclusion via the physical barriers of built spaces. Her paintings set inside architectural spaces are very different from those showing only architectural exteriors, and in turn are different from those offering mere glimpses through windows and vanishing walls into the workings behind the facade. Using architecture to selectively conceal and reveal, these compositions are powerful in that they use the human phenomenological standpoint to perpetually tantalize the viewer with secrets that are never fully divulged. Whatever is concealed within the magic tower is arguably less psychologically important than the sense of it being concealed in the first place. Varo’s works thus investigate the nature of spiritual and esoteric thought, an exploration which at times borders on the satirical, recognizing the centrality of secretiveness and exclusivity within these subjects. The following investigation will first analyze several paintings in light of this dynamic, then consider them in regards to Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1957), and finally compare Varo’s buildings once again to medieval microarchitectural shrines, this time focusing on the aspect of interior visibility.

An especially cryptic piece that combines all three of the architectural principles addressed in this project, *School in the Bush* (1962) (fig. 4.1) is the ultimate tease. A stark,

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simplified Romanesque tower seems to have materialized out of nowhere in the middle of a snowy forest. It is either six or eight sided (only the front is visible), containing an ambiguous multiplicity of geometric and numerological symbolism, which a general viewer perceives as occult or religious in some way, but can’t immediately explain. Its proportions are shrunken and illogical, an effect enhanced by the disproportionately large owl peering through the window, a magical sage at least half the height of the boy standing on the ground. Were he to accept the invitation up, it is hard to imagine that the boy would even fit inside the top room of the tower with the animals-- the whole structure must be an illusion which, upon entrance, reveals a hidden realm. This conclusion leads into a final observation that the boy serves as an avatar for the viewer, offered initiation by way of an open doorway and staircase. This invitation, however, goes unfulfilled. We, along with the boy, are in a perpetual state of being summoned or presented with an intriguing possibility, only to be shut out by the surface of the painting and the walls of the tower. In a single composition, Varo summarizes what is so compelling and yet so dubious about esotericism through an architectural allegory, effective in its visual theatrics of entrance, initiation, and enclosure.

On the one hand, the fact that we are only given a narrow window into the tower expands the possibilities of its contents. Behind the fox and owl, the room inside is a black pit, home to who knows what else. To quote again from Jung, “Everything unknown and empty is filled with psychological projection; it is as if the investigator’s own psychic background were mirrored in the darkness.”108 Because we cannot see, we imagine all the more. On the other hand, the deliberate enigma impedes understanding, hiding the transcendent reality behind sturdy, Romanesque walls. Architecture always beckons to the spectator, as its fundamental purpose is

108 Ibid., 228.
shelter; Varo uses this principle to create a visual riddle in which the viewer is summoned but cannot cross the threshold. The paradox is a double-edged sword, both communicating something true about our inability to comprehend the nature of the universe, and implicating skepticism toward those who claim to comprehend, but shroud their wisdom in secrecy. Therefore as previously mentioned, it was the methods and teachings of Gurdjieff, not his cult, that attracted Varo and Carrington, and which they integrated with a variety of other influences. Furthermore, although concepts of the Fourth Way sound mysterious upon introduction, they are not particularly secret (or at least not as secret as some), evidenced by the fact that Gurdjieff allowed Ouspensky to publish them in *In Search of the Miraculous*.

The 1958 painting *Caravan* (fig. 4.2) exhibits the same tension between concealment and revelation, enacted through an inversion of the dynamic in *School in the Bush*. A wind powered carriage steered by a blue-robed coachman is foregrounded against a misty, decalcomania landscape. This is no ordinary wagon: the front wall of the structure is rendered invisible, revealing an illogical interior space tunneling infinitely back through a series of overlapping walls and oddly shaped doorways. The pianist inside the space alludes to the importance of music in the Fourth Way, and represents the supreme faculty of will within the metaphor of the carriage, Gurdjieff’s way of describing interrelations between the physical, emotional, and intellectual centers of man.109 Central to the argument at hand, however, is the carriage’s exposure of the interior puzzle we imagine all of Varo’s structures to contain, and which perhaps we would see in *School in the Bush* if the walls of that tower were invisible as well. Architecture, or built space, is a front for what looks like a cubist metaphysical reality in which multiple

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109 Arcq, Tere. “The Esoteric Key: In Search of the Miraculous,” 50. Gurdjieff describes the carriage itself as the physical body, the horse (which Varo replaces with wind power) as the emotional force, and the coachman as intellect, all of which are governed by a central, conscious will.
perspectives can be seen at once, a depiction of fourth-dimensional logic as proposed by Ouspensky and Gurdjieff.\textsuperscript{110}

Here, it is essential to note the influence of Giorgio de Chirico, the proto-surrealist who created Metaphysical Painting in the years leading up to the First World War. De Chirico’s best known works are deeply enigmatic, depicting empty Italian piazzas in a skewed perspective, lined with Roman arcades that look flat and papery despite the thickness of their walls. Architecture appears as an artifice, concealing an unpictured transcendent reality (fig. 4.3). Both children of engineers who worked periodically in theater, and whose lives were forever altered by war, Varo and de Chirico also shared a sensibility in their treatment of architecture as facade.\textsuperscript{111} Their artistic similarities are further explained by the fact that Remedios and fellow Surrealist Oscar Dominguez created de Chirico forgeries for a time while destitute in Paris, a desperate measure through which she became familiar with his style and technique.\textsuperscript{112} It is not surprising, then, that some of her paintings quote the Metaphysical school. Two rounded archways straight out of a de Chirico make a cameo in \textit{Caravan}, visible through the door to the left inside the vehicle. The allusion is clever given the irony of the piece: once the outer wall is removed, finally granting a look into the hidden depths, we are only met with further walls and thresholds to cross. Varo wraps de Chirico’s metaphysical riddle inside her own, creating a labyrinth so impenetrable that it might as well remain concealed. The barrier is not removed, only pushed further down the corridor like the fruit of Tantalus; the closer we get, the further away it moves. \textit{Caravan} is not just a Gurdjieffian allegory, but a reflection on the quest for understanding through any number of traditions—recall that the physical, intellectual, and emotional centers represented in the metaphor of the carriage each correlate to a different (and in

\textsuperscript{110} Ouspensky, P.D. \textit{In Search of the Miraculous},” 1949, 210.
\textsuperscript{111} Kaplan, Janet. \textit{Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys}, 208.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 64.
Gurdjieff’s view fruitless) spiritual practice. Although the painting suggests futility in this sense, it is more ambiguous than pessimistic in tone, as the multiplication of doorways and paths seems to increase the likelihood of eventually discovering something. Were we to venture into this maze, there is a feeling that the paths would further multiply through every doorway, an exponentially expanding interior universe which, like the mind, knows no bounds.

One of Varo’s best known works, *The Useless Science or the Alchemist* (1955) (fig. 4.4) addresses this concept more explicitly, satirizing the view of alchemy which disregards it as pseudo-science, failing to recognize the psychological dimension of the work as its true significance.\(^\text{113}\) This is largely mediated through architecture: a figure shrouded in a checkered fabric, which morphs down into a floor the same pattern, turns a belt wheel connected to an enormous mechanical contraption housed within an architectural shell. The shell is made up of three conjoined tower-like structures displaying pieces of the elaborate system of gears and pulleys through a missing wall and several smaller windows. All of the machinery is attached to a single alembic, which performs the ludicrously simple task of distilling rainwater “drop by drop”\(^\text{114}\) to fill a row of little green bottles. The absurdity of the process mocks popular conceptions of alchemy as a futile endeavor requiring complicated instruments and the patience to decipher (or compose) elaborately encoded instructions which, in the end, accomplishes little of scientific worth.\(^\text{115}\) Varo knew, however, that science is not the only measure of value. Within the landscape of this fruitless experiment, architecture serves as an extension of the human being, or the alchemist, a psychic space inside of which all the cogs and wheels are finally rendered visible. The whole scene emerges from the figure’s head, the skin of their scalp fading gradually into the checkered pattern of their robe, which becomes the floor on which the contraption is

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{114}\) Ibid.
\(^{115}\) Ibid.
situated. Notice also that at first glance, the belt wheel almost resembles a spinning wheel, an impression enhanced by the way the figure’s posture and the sumptuous fabric they are wearing. Varo’s interest in weaving as an ancient and predominantly feminine artistic practice\textsuperscript{116} is too large of a subject to cover here, but it is significant to this piece as another way in which the figure --artist and alchemist-- is implicated as the generative agent.

Focusing in on the matter of concealing and revealing through architecture, \textit{The Useless Science} satisfies some curiosity about the contents of Varo’s towers and temples, but conveys them selectively. The machine is not completely exposed; rather, we feel as though we are being let in on a secret. We can only see inside because the building has been cross-sected like an engineering diagram, giving intentional views through the windows and vanishing wall while leaving some things hidden. Not until encountering a piece set on the interior of a building like \textit{Creation of the Birds} (1956) (fig. 1.1) does a full revelation seem to occur, although there is a potential problem with assuming that these paintings correspond with the exterior structures this chapter has discussed so far. At least as seen from the outside, Varo’s buildings are not “real” architecture, but vessels for psychological projection (and the less we see, the truer this becomes). Like de Chirico’s arcades, they are vacant and papery, containing only what we imagine. Or, more than just buildings, they are portals leading to other dimensions entirely. Either way, the relationship between Varo’s interior and exterior architecture is not as straightforward as one might think. According to the laws of her universe, it seems more likely that one would find themselves inside a monastic cell like the one shown in \textit{Creation of the Birds} after falling through a crack in the ground than by entering a tower in which this room would make sense. There is, however, a logical sequence in the way interior spaces tend to show magic

in action, visualizing the inconceivable miracles we can only imagine in response to opaque architectural facades. Although not a hard and fast rule, this is one way of navigating architecture as it varyingly appears in Varo’s work, sometimes surrounding us, and other times confronting us from the outside. Her architectural facades are linked to her interior spaces, but they also inhabit a role of their own in their ability to selectively reveal information, something outside the self to be accessed (or not) and projected upon.

Continuing along this line, it is useful to think again about the function of miniaturization in relation to that of concealment. It has already been observed that the diminished stature of Varo’s architecture produces what might be called a talismanic charge. In miniature form, her structures become objects in the same way a microarchitectural shrine is really a chest or receptacle of some sort, not a real building. The phenomenology of real architecture, which is that of entering and moving through space, thus merges with the phenomenology of the small, secret container, a magic box or closed shrine (a reversal of this can be seen in Islam, in which the Kaaba, literally “the cube,” appears as a kind of ritual box inflated to the size of a building). This conflation is best explained using Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, an examination of the psychological relationship between people and the spaces they inhabit, extracted from poetry and literature. Bachelard’s thesis, that built environments carry metaphysical meaning in the ways we relate to them through mind and body, applies here in that Varo draws on exactly these kinds of relationships, visualizing them on canvas. The dual phenomenology of her structures, extending an invitation which is then denied through the practical limit of scale and psychological barrier of walls, combines two of Bachelard’s spatial types: the house, for obvious reasons, and the chest, drawer or wardrobe, “the hiding-places in which human beings, great

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The house, extrapolated here to include architecture in general, is fundamentally an inhabited space, a refuge derived from the earliest forms of shelter. In addition to inhabiting architecture physically, we navigate it psychically as a space in which dimensions, large and small, horizontal and vertical, give meaning to experience and vice versa-- our memories shape our perceptions of it. Architecture is a place of dynamic relationships, not only within itself, but in opposition to the outside world; it is a haven into which we travel seeking a specific encounter. The buildings Varo presents us with at first fulfill this role, permeated with doors and windows inviting exploration, and displaying hallways and staircases implicating forward and upward motion. However, realizing that their contents will never be fully on display, and considering their size relative to us, they become more like ritual vessels or sacred compartments, akin to “wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms,” all “veritable organs of the secret psychological life.” Indeed, Varo’s architecture functions in much the same way as the chest in Encounter, or a wardrobe in the 1957 piece Mimicry (fig. 4.5)-- effectively false-bottomed, a shrunken receptacle housing more than meets the eye. The temple in Microcosm looks hollow and fragile like a stage prop, a little decorative shrine that our hands could pry open. Its secrecy is a psychological trick. Such objects “[are] not merely a matter of keeping a possession well guarded. The lock [or box, or building] doesn’t exist that could resist absolute violence, and all locks are an invitation to thieves. A lock is a psychological threshold.” The structures are effectively locked, storing their mysteries out of sight, but to open them up would destroy the allure-- the obscurity which draws us to them in the first place.

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118 Ibid., 74.
119 Ibid., 2-4.
120 Ibid., xxiii.
121 Ibid., 78.
122 Ibid., 81.
The comparison to a chest or box justifies further examination of the Ark of the Covenant which, as the earthly locus or “throne” of God, is a chest functioning as inhabited space: a box, a seat, and a house all in one. As Bachelard writes, “Sometimes, a lovingly fashioned casket has interior perspectives that change constantly as a result of daydream. We open it and discover that it is a dwelling-place, that a house is hidden in it.”\textsuperscript{123} Made of precious materials and carried on rods like a litter, the ark is the most carefully fashioned casket of all, fulfilling God’s command to Moses: “have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them.”\textsuperscript{124} This concept is transferred onto the tabernacle and the temple, spaces which translate more easily into the notion of divine sanctuary, but it originates with the chest that these structures were intended to house. Rarely opened, the physical contents of the ark --the tablets of the Ten Commandments and, according to the New Testament, a pot of manna and Aaron’s rod\textsuperscript{125}-- seem to matter less than their protective vessel, which while closed harbors not just these mundane objects, but a secret divine presence. Examining a poem in which the speaker contemplates a finely crafted marquetry box, Bachelard remarks that “there will always be more things in a closed, than in an open, box. To verify images kills them, and it is always more enriching to \textit{imagine} than to \textit{experience}.”\textsuperscript{126}

Architecture in Varo is like the ark, both a dwelling place and cultic vessel, a duality which circles back to microarchitecture. The previous chapter made comparisons of scale between her miniature structures and microarchitectural church furnishings, an analogy which extends to the access or lack thereof to the insides of these shrines, and how this dynamic further informs our reading of Varo as a medieval and distinctly Catholic point of reference. The relevant categories of microarchitecture are in this case reliquaries and monstrances (or

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{124} Ex. 25:8
\textsuperscript{125} Heb. 9:4
\textsuperscript{126} Bachelard, Gaston. \textit{The Poetics of Space}, 1969, 88.
tabernacles), terms which refer respectively to containers for relics, and display vessels for the eucharist, although reliquaries can also be called monstrances if their contents are displayed in glass or crystal compartments.127 Both types yield comparisons to Varo’s architecture in the similar psychological effects they produce by way of displaying or concealing the miraculous substances they hold. Our response to a windowless, casket type reliquary is fundamentally different from our experience of a container that shows us its relic. Opaque vessels provoke a stronger imaginative reaction, seeming like a doll or fairy house in response to which we wonder, “who lives here?” Meanwhile, windowed containers have a stronger revelatory effect, a kind of object agency in the choice they make to clue us in. Compare the temple in Microcosm to a twelfth century German tabernacle at the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig 4.6), a miniature gilded church with portals radiating around a central axis, each framing the figure of a prophet. Although the two are different in architectural style and ornament, their forms are generally similar, making it easier to isolate the variable of sight. In Varo’s piece, there is a way out of the temple but no way in. We see creatures leaving the building, but wonder what is happening inside, unable to observe the alchemical reaction converting the celestial substance into life. Comparably, the figures on the tabernacle are carved in relief against the door frames as if they could suddenly break free and walk out, but we can’t see past them through the doors, which are walled in with decorative enamelwork. The tabernacle’s concealment of the eucharist creates an air of mystery, prompting us to contemplate the powers within and envision the divine accommodations implied by its outer architectural form. Returning to Bachelard’s observation about locks, such shrines are almost always closed with one, a practical measure of protection that adds to their mystique. Speaking of the eucharist, a further equivalence can be made

127 It is worth noting that reliquaries without such windows, like the style of French chasse (meaning box or casket) held at the Metropolitan Museum, tend to date earlier than monstrances, as the required glass technology was not developed until the later Middle Ages.
between alchemical transmutation and transubstantiation, the miracle of the bread transforming into the flesh of Christ. Both processes constitute a magical transformation of prima materia into the extraordinary— and as Microcosm specifically portrays, the living.

In another work, Celestial Pablum (1958) (fig. 4.7), a figure is shown in a small room at the top of a tower, funneling stardust through the roof and grinding it in a machine to feed to a crescent moon in a cage. We may be reminded of the tower in Carrington’s novel, wherein the top room is converted to an observatory. The piece depicts a literal encounter with a celestial body; it is mystical, but also demystifying in the way it pictures a concrete, physical relationship between earthly and heavenly beings. Nothing is hidden except for greater context, as most of the tower is cropped out of the frame, and the lower portion, from what we can see, is shrouded in mist. Celestial Pablum is unique in that it gives a clear, frontal view of the magical act in progress, but it is not a full interior like Secret of the Birds. Instead, we are positioned outside the architectural compartment looking in. This visual experience evokes the second type of container, a style of monstrance like this sixteenth century Italian vessel at the Metropolitan (fig 4.8) on which the compartment for the relic, shaped like a Romanesque tower room with windows and a roof, sits at the top of a tall, candlestick-like base. The comparison here lies not only in the revealing of contents through an architectural contrivance, but also in the suspended decontextualization of the relic compartment. Both the room on top of Varo’s tower and the reliquary have to be accessed from the outside; the staircase in Celestial Pablum is on the exterior of the structure, making it less of a building and more of a pedestal or giant display case, a configuration which may also evoke a pre-Columbian temple as hinted in The Flutist.

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In identifying these corresponding visual dynamics, Varo’s understanding of the psychology of religion and magic alike becomes clear, using the theatrics of architecture, shrines, concealment, and revelation to facilitate spiritual or mystical experiences. She does not directly reference the tradition of microarchitecture so much as synthesize the impulse it represents with the other components this project has described, inventing a visual vocabulary in which a wealth of traditions produces the ultimate effect. Just as the miniature gives way to an imagined immensity, artifice implicates invisible realities and forces at work beneath the surface. While the specific nature of such external realities depends on the tradition or school of thought, in many ways Varo transcends these particulars, exploring the ontological problem at the root of them all. A chest can contain anything until you open it-- how do you know a closed wardrobe still contains your clothes, and not a wispy trail of clouds? What if things as we know them only behave when we are looking? Conversely, if we imagine such things to be so, are they not, in a sense, real? These are just some of the questions Varo probes using the logic of constructed space, physically manifesting the psychological realities we engage with every day.

The final element of Varo’s architecture this project addresses, visual access to space completes the trinity of ways in which constructed environments mediate our impression of her work. Varo’s buildings convey meaning through style, scale, and the fact of being differentiated space, confronting us with walls, halls, windows, and doors, each with their own connotations. The aim of this paper has been to read these aspects in depth, observing how they facilitate engagement with Varo’s work on an intuitive level, thus opening her resonance to abstract horizons of interpretation. Her characters and iconography are integrated into a three-dimensional world in which space itself, and the relationships within it, communicate meaning to the viewer.
EPILOGUE

While much has been written about Surrealist symbolism, how exactly these symbols are established and viscerally received by viewers remains largely unexplored as a means by which these works perpetually allure. Remedios Varo’s architecture is a symbol to which every viewer brings something different, and which fills a different role in every painting. Marrying elements of medieval visual culture with esoteric philosophies, her structures open an ambiguity of signification which contributes to the enchanting, symbolic character of her work, thus enticing even the least informed observer. Her architecture is rich, in a sense, precisely because it is vague and emblematic. Esoteric geometry merges with the medieval Romanesque, an arcane aesthetic of imprecise references, some more familiar than others. Interestingly, although Gurdjieff’s teachings are central to Varo’s work, a general audience is likely unaware of them; nonetheless, the magical aura of her paintings is unmistakable, transmitted just the same through their medievalism. Varo’s relative obscurity also contributes to the mystery of her work. Like other women Surrealists, she is not widely displayed, and her art is therefore often encountered online with little information, or glossed over in Surrealism survey courses which prioritize European men (even though many, like her, sought refuge in the Americas at the outbreak of the Second World War). Fortunately, recent scholarship is changing this, doing proper justice to these long neglected artists.

While more scholarship is needed to demystify the life and work of Remedios, it is also the case that the appeal of her art is directly linked to its cryptic nature, as is the case for all of Surrealism. The movement’s interest in mysterious workings of the unconscious, in processes that may never be fully unravelled, is what makes it so compelling. This is especially true for an
artist like Varo, whose imagery is less a passive depiction of such phenomena and more a conscious engagement with the inner psychological life, portraying characters who create and transform their reality at will. We are transfixed not only by the evasive symbolism characteristic of Surrealism, but also by the suggestion of secret powers and wise actors who know how to use them. However, as much as it feels like these characters are divulging their knowledge, a significant amount of information is required to decipher what they are showing us in regards to Varo’s esoteric interests. She and Carrington truly did speak a secret pictorial language only immediately legible to each other. Still, much can be intuited from Varo’s paintings about the philosophies she entertained, having much to do, as this project has argued, with architecture and spatial logic. Stylistically enigmatic and appearing to conceal important information, the viewer might project onto her architecture any number of associations, whether she intended them or not. To most, the predominant Romanesque influence of her buildings conjures an image of medieval Christendom before anything else, a backdrop sometimes intertwined with her satire of Catholicism, but other times seemingly separate, a setting for mischief and magic rather than gruelling monastic work. A subject of growing scholarly interest, the Middle Ages are as much associated in popular imagination with austere religiosity as they are with various kinds of magic and folk beliefs, even though alchemy as we know it was not a fascination in western Europe until the Renaissance, and witchcraft paranoia was similarly an Early Modern phenomenon. Condensing these elements, there is no stable relationship between religion, magic, and mysticism in Varo’s world. They certainly do not seem to mutually exclude one another, even if the latter two are often used to satirize the former.

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Returning to Peter Engel’s note about “pure delight in the power of architecture,” Varo’s interest in the physical nature of the world is the basis of a profound inquiry regarding the connections between internal and external realities, will, and transcendent belief. The hope is that this project has (literally) opened the door to understanding not only how she conceived of these connections, but how, in turn, they speak to an audience whose points of reference vary widely, a discussion with great potential in regards to Surrealism at large. One thing is for sure: whatever the viewer knows or not about Remedios is secondary to the visceral impact of her art, manifesting the worlds we know but can’t see.

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FIGURES


1.3 Varo, *Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle*, 1961

1.5 Varo, *The Flutist*, 1955
2.1 The Monastery of Santa Maria de Ripoll, Spain, 11th century.

2.2 Trier Cathedral, Germany, 11th century.
2.3 The Fourth Way Enneagram.

2.4 Temple at Tikal, Guatemala, ca. 200 A.D.
2.5 Varo, *Icon*, 1945.

2.6 Varo, *Vegetal Cathedral*, 1957.
2.7 The Santa Maria del Mar, Spain, 14th century.

2.8 Vakil Mosque, Iran, 18th century.
2.9 Hypostyle hall at the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba, 10th century.

2.10 Gothic nave at the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba, 17th century.

2.13 Muquarnas, Pakistan, 17th century.
3.2 The Arfe Monstrance, Toledo Cathedral, Spain, 16th century.

3.3 The Shrine of the Three Kings, Cologne Cathedral, Germany, 12th century.
3.4 Reliquary Chasse, French, 12th century.

3.6 Drawing of the Lapis Sanctuary, 17th century.

3.7 Illumination of the Heavenly Jerusalem, from the *Liber Floridus*, 12th century.
3.8 The Hezilo Chandelier, Germany, 12th century

3.9 (from left to right) Saint Agnes, an unidentified saint, and Saint Barabara, Spanish, 15th century.
3.10 Depiction of the Ark of the Covenant from the *Bible Historiale*, French, 12th century.


3.13 Varo, *Discovery*, 1956
3.14 Image of an athanor from *Alchemiae Gebri Arabis Libri*, 1545.

4.3 De Chirico, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914.

4.6 Tabernacle, German, twelfth century.
4.8 Monstrance, Italian, sixteenth century.
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