

Remedios Varo

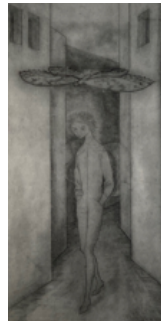
Niño y mariposa (Niño triste)

By Tere Arcq, Art Historian and Independent Curator

Niño y mariposa (Boy and Butterfly), 1961, is an iconic painting from Remedios Varo's "marvelous decade," a period of the greatest developments in her oeuvre. This work exemplifies Varo's craftsmanship in oil painting and particularly the exquisiteness of her works on masonite. She studied at the San Fernando Academy of Art in Madrid, where she met fellow student, Gerardo Lizarraga. The young couple married and immediately left for Paris, in hopes of immersing themselves in the avant-garde movements taking place in the city. Her visits to the Louvre Museum, where she was able to see a work by Leonardo da Vinci for the first time, only increased her admiration for the great masters, and specially the Flemish painters she had avidly studied at El Prado, such as Jan van Eyck and Hieronymus Bosch (El Bosco), whose magnificent *The Garden of Earthly Delights* was Varo's favorite work of art.

The mutual admiration for the old masters and the interest in their techniques lead to Varo's longtime friendship with the Mexican artist Gunther Gerzso, whose library had phenomenal volumes on the masters' techniques, mostly from the Medieval and Renaissance periods, as well as profusely illustrated monographs of their paintings. They spent time discussing and experimenting, both working on masonite boards instead of the wooden boards used in the past, covering the soft side with duco (the modern version of the classical gesso) to develop a highly polished, porcelain-like surface that Varo would later scratch and cover with a diluted layer of oil paint that penetrated into the incisions to add depth and texture.

Varo's artistic practice usually followed the same methodology. Her paintings were carefully thought out and planned in order to communicate a precise idea, emotion, and feeling. She started with a few sketches in notebooks and then a preliminary drawing that was transferred onto the prepared panel.



Niño y mariposa, preparatory drawing, 1961

Often Varo used her friends as models, and sometimes the iconography in her work was based on personal stories, dreams, memories, or even her own fears. *Niño y mariposa* is a symbolic portrait of Xabier Lizarraga, the son of her

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first husband, who also found exile in Mexico and married the photographer Ikerne Cruchaga. They had two children, Amaya and Xabier, who became like Varo's own children. She used to design their costumes for holidays and parties, take them to their doctor appointments and even simple walks in the park. The boy had a keen interest in art, and Varo saw that he was truly gifted, so she became his mentor and gave him a special privilege: he was one of the few people allowed to enter her studio while she was working. She often worried about Xabier, who at the time she painted *Niño y mariposa* was about thirteen years old. She told him sometimes he looked so melancholic as if he had a black butterfly over him.¹



Remedios Varo with Xabier and Amaya Lizarraga

In the painting she depicted a young man, walking through an alley in a medieval-like architectural setting, coming out of a beautifully illuminated background. He is wearing a green suit looking as if it is covered with moss, a reference perhaps to the Western association of the color green to the spring rituals for youth and the green garments worn during the May 1st festivities, associated with courtly love and fertility.² An immense black butterfly, finely painted, is literally over his head.

Varo had always been afraid of insects, butterflies among them. Benjamin Péret, the Surrealist poet and writer who became her partner after she separated from Lizarraga in 1936, recalls a vision he had during a brief imprisonment in the French city of Rennes: a charming fairy – representing Varo – was gracefully throwing butterflies upwards with her hands. In his writings, he recalled the day at the Gare de Montparnasse when he was boarding the train towards the prison: “all the black ideas,” “the black butterflies” that haunted him, disappeared with the sight of his beloved fairy. He often joked with her: “If we ever go to Mexico, what will become of you? In tropical countries there are sometimes real clouds of butterflies in the countryside.”³ Péret was right, not only are there thousands of butterfly species in this country, but specifically, the “black butterflies” are among the most important insects within pre-Hispanic mythology. In ancient Mexico, nature was considered sacred; animals and plants were sometimes adored as true divinities. The ancient cultures, mainly in Teotihuacán and Oaxaca, distinguished the black butterfly, *tlilpapatl* (tlilli, meaning “black,” and papatli “butterfly”). This particular specimen was related to the goddess

¹ Interview of the author with Xabier Lizarraga, April 5, 2021.

² Kassia St. Clair, *Las vidas secretas del color*, (Ediciones Urano: Barcelona, 2017) 209-210.

³ Benjamin Péret, “Introduction,” in *Anthologie des mythes, légendes et contes populaires d’Amérique*, (Paris: Bibliothèque Albin Michel, 1960) 19-20. Translation by the author.

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Itzapálotl, “the obsidian butterfly,” to whom the famous Mexican writer and poet, Octavio Paz, a close friend of Varo, dedicated an extraordinary poem under the same title, “Mariposa de obsidiana.” There are multiple representations of this deity in the pre-Hispanic codices and also in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s accounts of his findings in the Mexican territory.



Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of Things in the New Spain* book 11: “The Natural Things” in *The Florentine Codex*.

The black butterfly is a nocturnal specimen (*Rothschildia orizbaba*) and often related to obsidian because of its color. For the pre-Hispanic people, the color of its wings was a symbol of the night, and they believed it had the power to render people invisible and invincible. It had two contradictory qualities: it simultaneously represented protection from evil and a malefic spirit.⁴ The goddess Itzapapálotl was also a mother goddess, a figure of protection. Perhaps what Varo was trying to create in this painting, something found in her artistic practice, was a magical spell to protect her dear boy from any evil influences, a simultaneous intent to look over Xabier and a posthumous homage in remembrance of her beloved Benjamin Péret.

⁴ See, Doris Heyden and Carolyn Baus Czitrom, “Los insectos en el arte prehispánico” en *Artes de México*, no. 11.