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## Special Article

### Fibromyalgia's main features, widespread pain, and insomnia in the paintings of Remedios Varo



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#### ABSTRACT

The sensitivity of plastic artists to human suffering has been expressed in different ways. This article recounts the circumstances that led the Spanish-Mexican surrealist painter, Remedios Varo, to depict in an original way the two cardinal manifestations of fibromyalgia; widespread pain and insomnia.

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### Las manifestaciones primordiales de la fibromialgia, dolor generalizado e insomnio, en la pintura de Remedios Varo

#### RESUMEN

La sensibilidad de las artistas plásticas ante el sufrimiento humano ha quedado plasmada de diversas maneras. Este artículo relata las circunstancias que llevaron a la pintora surrealista hispano-mexicana, Remedios Varo, a representar en forma original las dos manifestaciones cardinales de la fibromialgia; dolor generalizado e insomnio.

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#### Introduction

Fibromyalgia is a highly common disease which most affects women and is characterised by widespread chronic pain and other discomforting symptoms such as insomnia, fatigue and cognitive alterations. It is now known that fibromyalgia pain is neuropathic in origin, which is why it is accompanied by externalised “paraesthesias” such as prickling, tingling and/or cramps.<sup>1</sup>

The sensitivity of women artists to pain has been expressed in many different ways. An iconic case is Frida Kahlo, who transferred her own illness to canvas. When talking about her suffering, Frida

said “pain is not part of life, it can become life itself”. A meticulous study of Frida’s biography and medical history indicates that fibromyalgia was the cause of her chronic pain.<sup>2</sup> From an entirely different perspective and setting, another painter contemporary to Frida, the artist Remedios Varo, used part of her commercial and advertising creative work to illustrate the primary symptoms of fibromyalgia: widespread pain and insomnia.

The aim of this article is to review the circumstances which led Remedios Varo to interpret the principal symptoms of fibromyalgia into a top-quality creative work of art with communicative sensitivity. With the appropriate licences, this article reproduces two works by Remedios Varo appropriate entitled “Dolor reumático II” (*Rheumatic pain II*) and “Insomnio I” (*Insomnia 1*) in which the painter interprets the main discomforts of people suffering from fibromyalgia in an original and dramatic manner.

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## Biography

María de los Remedios Alicia Rodriga Varo y Uranga was born on 16th December 1908 in Anglés, in the province of Gerona, España. From a very young age she travelled to several places in Spain and North Africa, accompanying her father who was a hydraulic engineer. These trips introduced her to different cultures, and her father also who introduced her to technical drawing and encouraged her in her interest in literature.

Remedios was one of the first women to enter the San Fernando Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid, obtaining a master's degree in drawing in 1930. Years later, in Barcelona, she joined the logico-phobic group that sought to unite surrealism with spiritualism. In 1937, as a result of the Spanish Civil War, she went into exile in Paris, where she joined a surrealist circle close to André Breton.

The Second World War drew this avant-garde artist onto the Mexican beaches along with a plethora of European freethinkers. Remedios arrived in Veracruz in 1941. To subsist in her new reality, she took on various commercial jobs, including decorating furniture and musical instruments and designing costumes for plays. From 1947 to 1949 she travelled to Venezuela as part of a French scientific expedition and also to be reunited with her family, then living in the country. There she worked as a draughtswoman for the Ministry of Health, devoting herself to scientific drawing, in particular the graphic recording of insect specimens as part of a social communication campaign against malaria. She also worked on various advertising commissions for the Mexican pharmaceutical company Bayer, including the two works that are the subject of this article.

In 1952, now back in Mexico, she began a relationship with the Austrian refugee Walter Gruen. The support of this music-loving businessman enabled Remedios to devote herself entirely to painting and to enter the most fruitful period of her artistic career. Remedios Varo died in Mexico City on 8 October 1963 of a heart attack.<sup>3</sup>

## Artistic interpretation of impalpable human suffering

In the late 1940s, the pharmaceutical company Bayer de México, through Abastecedora de Impresos S.A., commissioned Remedios Varo to produce a series of paintings to illustrate various symptoms that were the therapeutic targets of the medicines produced by the laboratory. Documents held in the Remedios Varo Art Fund at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City show the themes suggested by the company (malaria, vitamins, pain, anaesthesia, rheumatism, women's internal hygiene, vaginal discharge, among others), together with a series of ideas and concepts to be developed for their representation. For example, for pain they proposed: "inquisition, tortures, middle ages"; for rheumatism: "sanctuary of Lourdes, representing crutches, objects of invalids, etc.". Bayer, however, gave Remedios complete freedom to interpret various pathologies. These commissioned paintings were signed with the artist's maternal surname "Uranga". These early works helped the young painter to find her own style<sup>4</sup> and have ceased to be considered a minor work, not only because they mark a stage of transition from surrealist influence to an artistic language of her own, but also because of the depth with which she was able to express the subjective perception of pain and the exhausting experience of insomnia.

It should be noted that the case of Remedios Varo is not exceptional in the Mexican artistic field. Other artists such as José Horna, also a Spanish exile and a close friend of the painter's, worked commercially as a means of subsistence or alternative employment. What is remarkable, however, is Varo's ability to combine the need for information and effective communication in advertising with a



**Figure 1.** Rheumatic pain II. Gouache/paperboard, 1948. Reproduced with permission of the Visual Entidad de Gestión de Artistas Plásticos de España and the Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas. D.R. © Remedios Varo/VEGAP/SOMAAP/Mexico/2023.

refined formal display, compositional technique and artistic execution.

## Rheumatic pain II. Gouache/paperboard, 1948

Fig. 1 shows a woman with a rictus of pain; her foreshortened body is arched by suffering and covered with bandages that both convey illness and reaffirm her anatomy at the same time. The twisted hands corroborate the suffering. The woman levitates on a thorny wasteland, enduring the pricks of multiple nails and also of the spikes that emerge from the earth. A stormy sky dramatises the scene. Rheumatic pain II communicates suffering, generalised pain and paraesthesia.

*Rheumatic pain II* advertised the drug Neo-melubrin (metamizole), which was used at the time to relieve various types of musculoskeletal pain. In the advertising leaflet given to doctors, the following text accompanied the image: "It's as if sharp nails were sinking into the flesh, the joints, the bones, the nerves! Such are the sensations suffered by those who suffer from rheumatism, lumbago, sciatica!"<sup>4</sup>

## Insomnia I. Gouache/paperboard, 1947

In Fig. 2, from the distant darkness, a sequence of tired female gazes can be seen passing through several desolate rooms. They reflect, perhaps, the inability to fall asleep as the inhospitable night hours pass. An austere window allows a glimpse of the darkness of the night. In front, the light of a candlestick attracts insects with crystalline wings. *Insomnia I* advertised several barbiturate





**Figure 2.** *Insomnia I*. Gouache/paperboard, 1947. Reproduced with permission of the Visual Entidad de Gestión de Artistas Plásticos de España and the Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas. D.R. © Remedios Varo/VEGAP/SOMAAP/México/2023.

drugs, including Evipan (sodium hexobarbital) and Abasin (acecarbromal), which have been discontinued due to their various adverse effects.

In a pamphlet kept in the Remedios Varo art collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, the following interpretation of *Insomnio I* reads: “They have the impression that someone is watching them and it is they who open their tired eyelids, scrutinising the nocturnal shadows! Indefinite anguish fills the solitude of these dark, dry rooms, devoid of warmth. The solemn silence sharpens the desire to hear, and from one’s own entrails the noise of the beating of the cardiac cycle systoles and diastoles is born and grows bigger. . . *Insomnia*. . . Father of worries; forger of concerns. . .!!!!!! Artist who paints in purple tones, dark circles of fatigue..”

## Commentary

The inclusion of original, avant-garde works of art such as those produced by Remedios Varo in the advertising of medicines is unparalleled in pharmacological marketing. The leaflets distributed to doctors contained the visual representation of the symptom, together with the name of the pills recommended for its relief. The works produced for Bayer allowed Remedios to define a series of formal and compositional elements that were the basis of her later work, such as the anatomy of the figures, the spatiality, the settings, the iconographic and thematic repertoire.<sup>3</sup> These early works also show the artist’s keenness to understand the environment of commercial advertising aimed at doctors. Varo was able to transcend the mere commercial purpose of the commission to create scenes of great empathy and narrative force.

There is no reason to think that Remedios Varo had any notion of the concept of fibromyalgia, or fibrositis, as the disease was called at the time. Nor is there any evidence that she suffered from chronic pain, although in a letter to her friend Kati Horna she mentioned that she suffered from tiredness and “rheumatism”.<sup>5</sup> At that time fibromyalgia as a clinical entity was virtually unknown to the medical community. People suffering from this syndrome were labelled with pejorative diagnoses such as hysteria, neurosis or hypochondria. The medical misogyny of that time, which still survives today, somehow blamed patients for their own suffering.<sup>1</sup>

What is certain is that these 2 works by Remedios Varo represent in a dramatic and original way the fundamental and most discomforting manifestations of fibromyalgia. Although the symptoms cannot be read as a reflection of the artist’s personal condition, they do open a bridge where art can provide tools to translate, narrate or express physical and psychological states for which verbal expression is not enough.

## Conflict of interests

All the authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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