

# Introduction

During the decades following the solar eclipse of 1919, which “proved” Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity, theoretical cosmology flourished. Theories of an everchanging, evolving, and expanding universe were proposed during the 1920s by a Russian meteorologist-mathematician, Alexander Friedmann, and a Belgian cleric, Abbé Georges Lemaître, and confirmed by American astronomer Edwin P. Hubbel at Mount Wilson Observatory. Lemaître’s cosmology, relatively unknown until the 1930s, proposed that the universe began as a “primeval atom” or “cosmic egg,” containing all matter. Its disintegration marked the beginning of time and space.<sup>1</sup> His formulation anticipated the Big Bang theory, posited by George Gamow of George Washington University in the late 1940s. Rather than “cosmic egg,” Gamow used the archaic English word *ylem*, meaning the primordial, elemental substance of all things, to describe the contracted state of matter prior to the initial event, the “bang,” that created the universe.<sup>2</sup> Faced with overwhelming evidence that refuted his own view of the cosmos as static and finite, Einstein abandoned his initial views in 1930 and subsequently adopted a complex theory of an alternately expanding and contracting universe.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, the cosmological models constructed by twentieth-century scientists and theorists bore striking resemblances to medieval ones. William Ralph Inge, the Anglican prelate and dean of St. Paul’s in London, noted with joy Einstein’s acceptance of the theory of cosmic expansion and contraction. Inge, who was instrumental in reviving an interest in the works of the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, was comforted by Einstein’s “return

xvi | to the old theory of cosmic cycles.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the investigations being made by particle accelerators, to transmute one element into another, led many to associate these scientists’ activities to those of the medieval alchemists and their successors. Making gold from lead did not seem so farfetched an idea anymore.

Irene

Rice

Pereira

One person who found these issues compelling—so much so that she called herself a “cosmologist” late in life<sup>5</sup>—was the American artist Irene Rice Pereira. Neither her paintings nor her philosophical writings are well known now, even by specialists. Yet she shared with Loren MacIver the honor of being the second woman, after Georgia O’Keeffe, to be given a retrospective at a major New York museum when, in 1953, the Whitney Museum of American Art showcased their works in a joint exhibition. Such an honor must indicate that she had made significant contributions to modernist art, but, if so, why is so little known about her now? What factors led to her relative invisibility in the histories of the period? How is it that, five years after her death in 1971, at the time of the last major exhibition of her work, *New York Times* critic John Russell could make a trivia guessing game of her name and reputation?<sup>6</sup> More to the point, does she merit recovery? If so, why?

It is not my purpose to write a romantic biography about Irene Rice Pereira, to celebrate her overcoming all odds to reach the pinnacle of success. That would certainly have been the book that Pereira herself would have preferred. Yet to do so would reproduce what Griselda Pollock has identified as one of the central myths of art history, that of the heroic artist-individualist, and I do not believe that such a program serves women well.<sup>7</sup> It is also not my purpose to demonstrate that Pereira deserved greater recognition during her lifetime. After all, she had a distinguished exhibition record comparable to or exceeding that of most artists of the period, male or female. Certainly, her contribution to American art has been undervalued since the time of her Whitney retrospective, but this study is not intended solely as a corrective. It is more important—and herein lies the answer to the last question above—to locate the artist and her works within a matrix of ideas and the forces that propelled them, and to examine the choices she was given and those she made in order to survive within the art world during her productive period of 1930 to 1971. Such a study provides more information about the nature of modernism in the United States during this period, as well as how women artists such as Pereira negotiated their ways into the modernist discourse and contributed their own voices to its direction. Furthermore, while the primacy of the authorial voice of the artist

has justly been challenged by critics in recent years, it seems reckless to disregard the artist altogether. Thus, some effort has been made to examine selected examples of Pereira's work within different contexts and from different vantages, to resist any single interpretation, whether hers or my own.

As Elaine Showalter said of women writers, women artists work both inside and outside patriarchal traditions simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is not only important to indicate how Pereira's interests dovetailed with those of male colleagues, but also how she tried to inscribe "difference" into forms heavily promoted as "universal," to privilege her own sociopolitical position. One must also examine the major sources for the philosophical essays she began to publish in 1951 and how these writings were perceived by others within the art community. Although Pereira was also a poet, that body of work is left for others to analyze.

This study follows a loosely chronological path, with each chapter structured around a central theme. The reader is provided with some signposts regarding Pereira's personal life, particularly in the first chapter, but, ultimately, this is not a traditional biography. As there has been no major study of her work prior to this, and because much of the information that has been published is erroneous, a chronology of significant events in her life and a list of the major exhibitions in which she participated are appended to assist those who might wish further biographical information.

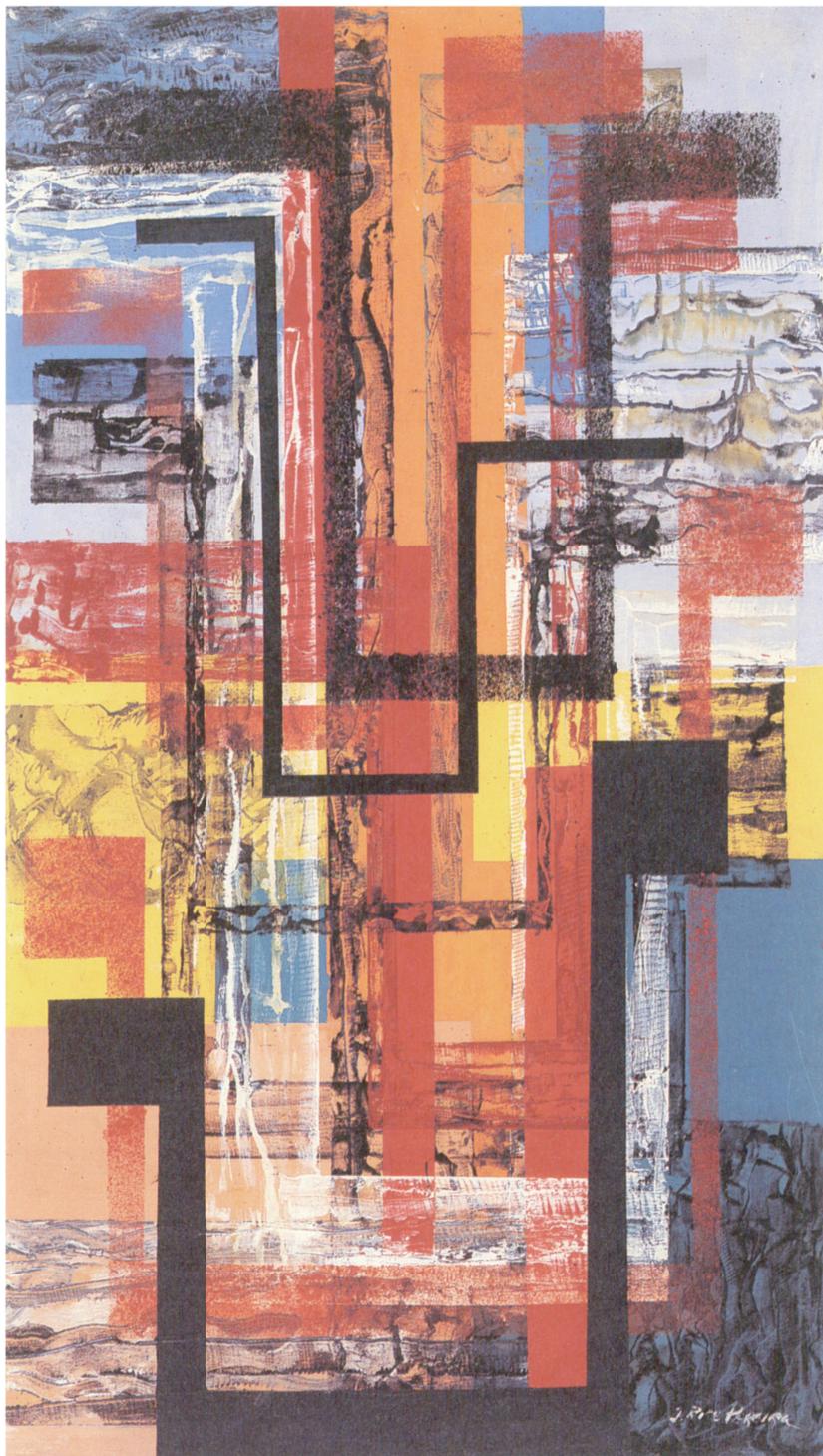
Throughout this work, I have placed the words *masculine* and *feminine* in quotations where the usage is implied to refer to some set of characteristics presumed to be linked innately with being biologically male or female. My own view is that gender roles are social constructs and that there are no essentially "masculine" or "feminine" characteristics. However, Pereira, and several of the other figures who enter my study, particularly Carl G. Jung, believed in and employed these stereotypes. The reader should be able to determine which biases are mine and which are theirs.

Pereira used the professional signature "I. Rice Pereira." Apparently, no one recorded her reason for hiding the "Irene" behind the "I"—the invisible woman behind the personal pronoun. Many of those who knew her assumed that this was a strategy by which she might insist that her work be judged, not her gender. It would be difficult to argue otherwise, although, as I mention without elaboration in the first chapter of this study, on at least one occasion she elided the "Irene" in her signature before becoming an artist. Whether this was an isolated instance or standard practice is unknown due to lack of extant documentation. However, she did experiment briefly in 1932 with a hyphenated

“Rice-Pereira” as her signature. With respect to how she wished to be addressed in professional encounters, she preferred “Pereira.”<sup>9</sup>

Researching Pereira’s life and work involves surmounting numerous barriers, the primary one being a lack of extant documentation concerning her early years. While she kept a scrapbook of clippings beginning in 1930, she did not save correspondence in any systematic way until about 1951. Furthermore, it was not until that year that she began to keep carbon copies of her own letters to others.<sup>10</sup> While there are several boxes of notes and manuscripts in her archive, most of the material is dated 1962 or later. Very few documents survive from the 1930s and 1940s. While natural attrition undoubtedly accounts for most of what has been lost, it is also likely that the artist herself “edited” her papers: In 1964, in a fit of despondency over the death of John F. Kennedy and what she feared would be a backlash against those artists and intellectuals who advanced spiritual values, she declared that she was going to have to keep her materials “cleared up” at all times.<sup>11</sup> She may have destroyed a quantity of her papers at this time. Furthermore, following her separation from George Reavey in 1956, she demanded that he return her letters for fear that they might fall into the wrong hands.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, Reavey did not comply. As a result, one of the most important troves of information about her is not her own archive but his. Because of their intimacy, she felt greater freedom to share with him the results of her psychoanalysis, the titles of some of the books she was reading, as well as her nascent ideas concerning her philosophy. Without this cache of letters, for instance, one would not know the extent of her knowledge of alchemy nor, in 1950, the significance to her of Richard Wilhelm’s translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* with Jung’s commentary. Only a handful of references to this important book appear in the notes in her archive, and these are dated 1962.

These difficulties aside, one further comment is necessary regarding this book. To prevent confusion with omitted passages, the ellipses Pereira used to separate thoughts in her writing have been replaced with dashes in quotations throughout. Otherwise, all punctuation appears here as in the original sources. Her spelling and typographical errors have been corrected in quotations.



IRENE  
RICE  
PEREIRA

*Pillar of Fire*, 1955,  
oil on canvas,  
50 × 30 in.  
Courtesy,  
Andre Zarre  
Gallery,  
New York City.

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