

Christina Oiticica

# WHEN THE LAKE WIELDS THE BRUSH

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*From time immemorial, nature has influenced art. And 'eco art' is positively trendy. But the globally successful artist Christina Oiticica takes things even further: she only creates half of a work – and lets nature do the rest.*

We find ourselves on the roof terrace of a penthouse apartment, high above Geneva's elegant Champel district. On one side appear the majestic Alps, on the other the peaks of the Jura. In between are residential buildings, parks and Lake Geneva. But when we let our gaze linger on the terrace, we at once notice a somewhat crumpled, painted canvas lying on the floor. The contours of Venus are gently outlined on it, reminding one of the famous painting The Birth of Venus by the Renaissance master Sandro Botticelli. In some places the colours seem to have peeled off, in others they are obscured with sand.

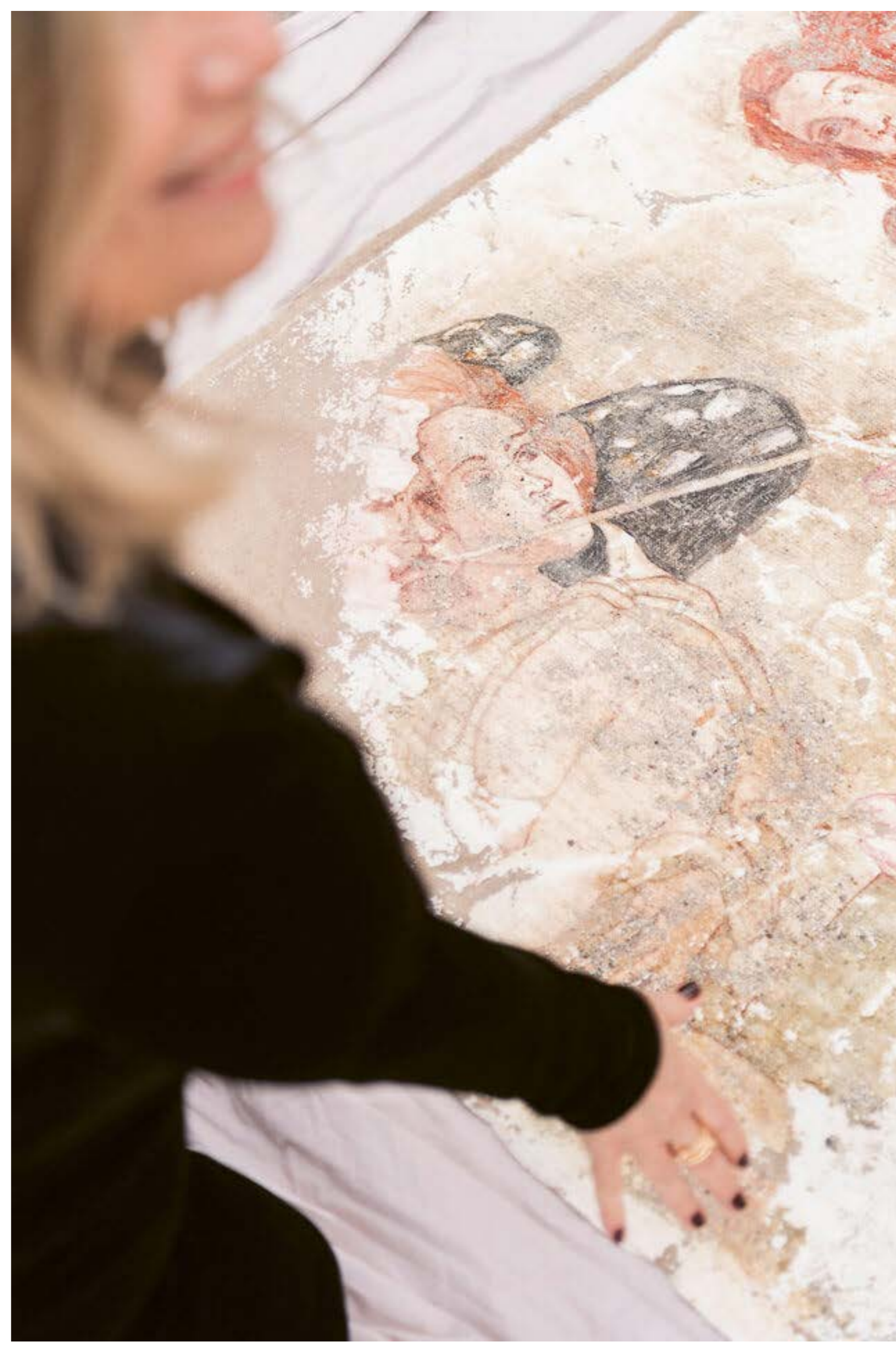
This painting is not a 500-year-old art relic, but a recent work from the Venus series by Christina Oiticica. It is painted in natural colours – tea, coffee, aniline. Christina Oiticica studied art in her hometown of Rio de Janeiro in the early 1970s, and has since presented her works in galleries and exhibitions all over the world. Along the way, she has accompanied bestselling author Paulo Coelho – who has sold more books than any living writer – as his wife, muse and sparring partner for over 40 years. But what on earth is a painting doing on the terrace floor?

#### The Venus of Lake Geneva

Christina Oiticica laughs at her visitors: "The sun is shining today. I wanted to let the painting dry in the fresh air." Not before time, either. Christina Oiticica is probably the only artist who does not use just water to dilute paint, but entrusts her paintings entirely to water. In the present case, she immersed her work in Lake Geneva. Not a task for a sensitive lady, one more suited to a fighter like Joan of Arc – who is one of Oiticica's role models. Winds blow on the shores of the lake, and the water is cold in winter. On top of that, the picture had to be fixed with heavy stones so that the waves would not carry it away.

In the light-flooded studio, which is surrounded by the roof terrace, another Venus stands on the easel, this one with roses floating around it. Symbols of the feminine run like a golden thread through Christina Oiticica's works. Other Venus pictures, temporarily stored in another room, have been decorated with threads, gold, sequins and pearls. Off and on she has even thought of painting a Venus with a smartphone – "It is an extension of the human arm, after all" – but in the end she decided against it.

"Each Venus embodies a woman with dignity who has an intense relationship with water and nature," says Christina Oiticica. And each one is due to enter the water in a different place to be completed. Some dark depictions of Venus catch our eye. "Quilombolas, the descendants of escaped black slaves in Brazil, are strong women. They often take care of numerous children, struggle to provide for their families – and many of them still wash by hand." That is why Christina Oiticica is donating a black Venus to Bahia. But first the work will be entrusted to the waters around Ilha de Maré in Bahia, to receive the final touches.



#### It started with a 'coincidence'

Over the past 20 years, Christina Oiticica has worked with all four elements. While the focus is currently on water, previously it was air, fire and – again and again – earth. "Yes, I entered into a partnership with nature," the artist explains, "but it all began with an accident." Over 20 years ago, she spent a few months with her husband Paulo Coelho in a small hotel in the French Pyrenees, near the pilgrimage town of Lourdes. There she was preparing for an exhibition in Paris. Wanting to fill up the space, she painted a ten metre long canvas in the woods. Until evening came. "What was I going to do? I didn't want to mess up the hotel room; not to mention that the smell of paint can be quite unpleasant," says Oiticica: "Because the atmosphere in nature was so peaceful, I decided simply to leave the painting outside."

The next morning she was surprised to find that leaves and insects had fallen onto the picture. Her first thought was: "My work is ruined". Then she thought better of it. She had always identified as a pilgrim. Now she felt that she should take her work out of the four enclosing walls and into the open air. "After all, it is a wonderful, divine act to work with the forces of nature." At the same time, she says, it requires humility, because you are allowing nature to intervene in your own actions. Even as a child in Rio de Janeiro, she loved the sandy beaches, the sea and the surrounding mountains. And the water and the mountains ultimately tipped the scales in favour of Christina Oiticica and Paulo Coelho choosing to settle in Geneva about ten years ago. "The city is a mixture of the Pyrenees and Paris. We're in the right place here. The four seasons inspire me."

#### The rosary as a guiding thread

Nature, the feminine and 'the sacred' fascinate Christina Oiticica and drive her on. But her studio also contains a computer and an open Bible. Both are tools for her. She uses the computer to create patterns, and is active on Instagram; she draws wisdom from the Bible. "I wouldn't know how to live if I didn't have faith. Faith gives me strength," Christina Oiticica says. That's why she prays a lot, she tells us – the rosary, for instance. Every Monday, she meets up with a group of friends to pray together – even if at the moment it is only by video conference.

Already as a child, she was attracted to the 'Heart of Jesus as the source of love', as she puts it. Her family was Catholic, but never pressured her to go to Mass. Christina Oiticica did it of her own free will. "When my nanny took me to the park, I always wanted to go to the nearby church." Besides Catholicism, she learned about Protestantism at an early age. She attended a Protestant school. "In Catholicism, I appreciate the ritualistic, the sanctifying aspects. In contrast, Protestant pastors are good at preaching with words."

#### A miracle called Paulo Coelho

Of course, sometimes doubts would arise. And not all things in life turn out as desired. But she still believes that everything is for the best, says Christina Oiticica. After all, she has already experienced many miracles. For example, she says, it was not by chance that she met her husband Paulo Coelho. Their paths had admittedly crossed when they were children. And Coelho's sister was married to Christina Oiticica's uncle. The two liked each other, but both had other partners.

If anyone ever went through a time of turbulence, it was Paulo Coelho. In his youth, he was spared hardly any experience. Because he refused to train as an engineer, his father put him in a straitjacket and had him committed. Later on he took drugs, experimented with black magic and worked as a rocker and songwriter. Once when Coelho escaped from the psychiatric institution, he wandered the streets of Salvador, hungry and with empty pockets, and fetched up in front of the aid organisation of Sister Dulce, who became the first Brazilian woman to be canonised two years ago. Suddenly the hippy youth found himself face to face with the nun. "She didn't give him any money, just handed him a voucher so he could go home and eat something," says Christina Oiticica.

At the time, however, Christina Oiticica knew hardly anything about Paulo Coelho's wild lifestyle. The two only met again at a christening. Paulo Coelho was to be a godparent to his sister's first daughter, as were Christina Oiticica's parents. As the result of a vow the baptism took place in Baependi, where the Brazilian Blessed Nhá Chica had once worked to alleviate the plight of the poorest of the poor. "When I am in a new place, I like to seek out the silence of cathedrals," says Christina Oiticica. So she entered the sanctuary of the Nhá Chica – and was amazed: "I saw Paulo kneeling there." She had no idea that Coelho was praying that he would become a successful writer. The sight of the praying man also triggered a wish in Oiticica: "I prayed that I would marry a man like Paulo." He himself was taboo for her, not least because he was already married at the time.

On the way back, disaster struck: a bus stopped abruptly in the middle of heavy traffic. The car behind Christina Oiticica and Paulo Coelho burst into flames. They were able to avoid it and were spared. Dozens of people died that day. "We gave thanks for our protection," says Christina Oiticica. Back in Rio de Janeiro, the two said goodbye. They did not see each other again until a few years had passed, when they met again at a Christmas party. Paulo Coelho had divorced in the meantime. Christina Oiticica says: "From then on we were inseparable, which was a miracle come true for me." ☺



What begins in Christina Oiticica's studio can be admired at Gallery Elle in Zurich and St. Moritz, for example.

#### The Way of St James – a seminal experience

Paulo Coelho had to wait a little longer. And he needed support from his wife. He had already written texts for theatre and songs, but not a real book as yet. "You want to be a writer? So write a book! You must dare to take the first steps towards your goal," Christina encouraged her husband. So at the age of 39, Paulo Coelho processed his spiritual experiences on the Way of St. James and published his first book: "The Way of St. James – Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela." His breakthrough came two years later with "The Alchemist".

"Even as a child, I drew in every free minute," Christina Oiticica states. But after studying the arts, she first worked in architecture, founded a poetry book publishing company and set up a cultural centre. "That helped me understand the whole value chain of the cultural industry, from the idea through to the launching of a work on the market." Painting had taken a back seat. A turning point for her too was the Way of St. James, which she set out to walk in 1990. She processed the impressions of her pilgrimage visually, and her pictures made waves on the art scene.

#### Support for 450 children

Coelho and his wife still have an abiding connection today with Saint Dulce of the Poor and Nhá Chica. "Of course we returned to both places," says Oiticica. Paulo Coelho left three roses at the altar of Nhá Chica in gratitude. In Baependi there is now an orphanage; in Salvador there are other institutions of Saint Dulce's, including a hospital. It is some time since the couple set up the Instituto Paulo Coelho foundation, with a view to helping children in Brazil, as well as older people, to reach their full potential. At the time when Christina Oiticica started supporting the 'meninos de luz' [children of light] project in the Pavao-Pavaozinho favela of Rio de Janeiro, just 80 children came to the day care centre. "Now 450 children and adolescents get fed here and are given support for their daily lives. That's why I believe in miracles," says Christina Oiticica, as she puts Saint Dulce's popular painttone down on the table.

When she speaks, it is striking how often she mentions her husband. "It's not a problem for me if people pay a lot of attention to him," Christina Oiticica explains. "When you love someone, you are happy that the other person is doing well." Regardless of whether she buries her works in the Amazon, in Japan, Spain, Sicily or even in the snow of St. Moritz, Christina Oiticica is always in search of truth and beauty through art. "And the most beautiful and truest thing in the world is definitely love."

As tangible evidence of this, a gigantic, brightly coloured heart hangs in the entrance to her luxury apartment to welcome visitors. Christina Oiticica has woven it from fitinhas – lucky ribbons made by the 'good Lord of Bonfim' in Bahia. Each ribbon contains three knots. And when it comes loose and falls off, wishes are said to come true – so the legend goes. Chances are good that Christina Oiticica and nature will still have some surprises in store for us.



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shares with Christina Oiticica a predilection for pão de queijo (cheese rolls) from Brazil, as well as being fond of walks in nature.

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