

1893

Jean Varda, of mixed Greek and French parentage (and by some accounts a descendant of David, the great classical painter) is born in Smyrna, then a part of Greece (now Izmir, in Turkey) on September 11. Spends boyhood in Smyrna, Alexandria, and Athens.

1905 (about)

Known as a child prodigy, Varda begins receiving receiving commissions for portraits. As a teenager in Athens he paints innumerable portraits of fashionable Athenians.

1913 (about)

Goes to Paris to study art at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts. Shares studio with Georges Braque; Picasso lives down the street. When shown Varda's work, Picasso is said to have remarked, "You are an academic painter. You are not a contemporary painter." Varda quickly decides to shed his academic style for something more au courant and drops out of school, dabbling in surrealism and Dada.

1914 (about)

Moves to London

1914-1918 (about)

Dances with one or more ballet companies in England.

1920 (about) Varda and his friend Rodker jointly publish "A Bestiary for Roald Kristian," a set of 17 woodcut prints created by a Norwegian artist named Roald Kristian,

1922 (about)

Varda returns to painting in Paris; begins experimenting with cubist forms; continuing exploration of Dada and surrealism.

1922 (about)

First one-man show in London, reportedly "a great success." From that time on, Varda lives mainly off his paintings.

1922 (about)

Returns to Paris

1922

Becomes acquainted with Roland Penrose, from a wealthy Quaker banking family and a recent graduate of Cambridge, who had come to Paris to study art.

1923

Varda and Penrose find a small house called Villa Les Mimosas in Cassis, a fishing village and an emerging art colony near Marseilles After a year and a half, Penrose marries. Varda apparently continues to use the house, or part of it, for a number of years, although on occasion it is also rented to others, including various members of the Bloomsbury Group. The house is sold in 1930.

1925 (about)

Varda marries a woman named Dorothy, who appeared in a variety show at the London Pavilion. Although the marriage only lasts a few months, they have a daughter, Dominica.

Mid -1920s -1938

Varda generally spends his winters in London.

1930-1938.

Caretaker for a house in Cassis called La Campagne du Petit Jésus that "constantly overflowed with indigent artists." Always hard up for cash Varda works as a boat painter during these years. On at least one occasion he sublets the house to Braque and Miro and spends the summer in a friend's studio in order to make enough money to pay back a loan from a friend.

1930's

Meets and becomes friends with Julian Trevelyan, who later becomes known as one of the English surrealist painters.

Has shows in London and Paris at least once a year; becomes well known in Europe as a flamboyant and innovative artist, a wit and a storyteller, and as someone who makes an art out of living his life.

By 1931, at the latest, Varda begins experimenting with what later came to be known as "mosaics" or mirror paintings. The technique involved embedding mirrors on boards that had been covered with gesso after scratching the backs of the mirrors and adding paint in the scratches, so that paint could be seen from the front.

1935 (February-March)

Exhibition of Mosaics at Beaux Arts Gallery in London.

1936

Roland Penrose and Herbert Read organize First International Surrealist Exhibition in London. According to one report Varda's work was included in this exhibition.

1938

Exhibit at the Storrans Gallery in London. A reviewer describes Varda's work as "sway[ing] nowadays between Surrealism and mosaic, [and] include pieces of glass in their composition, the glass at times being used in a ship's sails and at other times as human apparel. His pictures, as also his manifesto on the catalogue, are destined to prove that 'woman's algebraical equation is the spiral.'" Reviews are generally favorable, e.g.:

"Mr. Varda's mosaics share with his prose the quality of iridescence." *Manchester Guardian*, London, 1938; "He has a very fine sense of color and an extraordinary feeling

for the material in which he works. His work is subtle as well as ingenious, intellectual as well as ornamental." *New Statesman and Nation*, London 1938.

1939

Travels to New York on a visitor's visa for an exhibit of his mosaics at the Neumann-Willard Gallery. Upon arriving in New York, with 22 examples of his work, customs officials decide that his work, whatever else it might be, is not art, and charge him \$254 in duty (which is subsequently returned to him after a group of friends submit a petition in support of Varda). Exhibit is a success, with many sales of his work.

1939-1940

Lives in New York, except when traveling for exhibits in other parts of the United States. Makes additional money designing interiors for various wealthy people in New York.

1939

Visits San Francisco for a showing of his work at the Courvoisier Galleries. On a visit to Big Sur in 1939 he decides he would like to live there. When immigration authorities attempt to deport him, Jay McEvoy, the owner of the Courvoisier Galleries, retains an attorney who successfully represents him and obtains a work visa for him.

1940

Travels south to Hollywood for an exhibit of his work at the Hollywood branch of Walker Galleries.

Has an exhibit of his mosaics in Chicago at the Arts Club of Chicago, where he encounters an organization called Sanity in Art.

Returns to New York, where he lives in a cottage on Long Island borrowed from one of the owners of the Neumann Willard Gallery.

Moves to Anderson Creek, in Big Sur, California, where he lives in a cabin, without electricity or telephone, owned by Helen Hooper Brown, the wife of New York Senator Lathrop Brown. The cabin is one of several that had been built to house convicts who were building the Pacific Coast Highway during the 1920s and 1930s.

Meets a 24-year-old textile designer named Virginia Barclay at the World's Fair at Treasure Island while participating in an Art in Action show at the World's Fair.
Marries Virginia.

1941 May

Exhibit of Mosaics and Collages at Willard Gallery in New York.

1942-1946

Varda and Virginia move to an old red barn in Monterey, above the canneries.

Virginia works at a fish-canning factory. For a time, Varda is a cook on a Yugoslavian sardine boat. Designs shop windows for music stores in Monterey and Carmel. Visitors, invited and uninvited, pour into the Varda home in Monterey. During this period Varda gradually shifts from mosaics to collages, the medium which he continues to favor for the remainder of his life. He often manages two one-man shows a year. At some point in this period Varda teaches art classes at Monterey Peninsula College and at Seven Arts Center in Carmel.

1943

Exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Fine Art.

Meets Henry Miller. Takes Miller to Big Sur and assists Miller in finding a place to live at Anderson Creek, in Big Sur.

1944

Varda: The Master Builder, Henry Miller's homage to his friend, is published in Circle Magazine, an avant-garde periodical published in Berkeley, California.

Meets writer Anais Nin through Henry Miller.

Exhibit at Raymond and Raymond Gallery in San Francisco.

Collage sent to Anais Nin is reproduced in color on front of every Swallow edition of Nin's book *The Seduction of the Minotaur*. Another is on the back cover of the original editions of *Ladder to Fire*, *The Four Chambered Heart*, and *A Spy in the House of Love*. One other collage appears on the front wrapper of original Swallow edition of *Collages*.

Accepts commission to build a restaurant out of an old warehouse on Cannery Row in Monterey. When completed, Angelo's Restaurant, which was painted pink, black, orange, green, and purple, provokes an outcry. Friends rally to Varda's defense and the structure remains in place.

1945-1946

Exhibit at UCLA.

Teaches a summer session at Black Mountain College in North Carolina.

A daughter, Vagadu, is born to Varda and Virginia.

On his way back to California after the end of the summer session at Black Mountain College, Varda stops for a month at Frieda Lawrence's ranch in Taos, has an exhibit at the art gallery of the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and lectures to the students there about Black Mountain. Shortly after his return Varda has an exhibit of collages and mosaics at the Pat Wall Gallery in Monterey.

1947-1952

Part time instructor at California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

1948

Varda and Virginia, who have been living apart for much of the preceding two or three years, are divorced.

1947 or 1948

Comes upon a 120-foot long iron-hull ferryboat, called the Vallejo, tied up in Sausalito and ready to be broken up for scrap. Dating back to the early 1870's, the boat had been used to transfer shipyard workers and military personnel between Mare Island and Vallejo during World War II. Varda shows the old ferry boat to Onslow-Ford and an architect named Forrest Wright, whom Varda had met at Black Mountain College. Onslow-Ford makes a \$500 down payment and agrees to pay \$60 a month for the ferry. He obtains vague agreements from Varda and Wright to repay him as they are able. Soon Forrest Wright moves on, leaving his third of the ferry-boat to Onslow-Ford. The boat is towed to a berth at the northern edge of Sausalito city limits next to an area known as Marinship, which had been a major shipbuilding operation during World War II.

The original plan had been for Varda to have the side of the ferryboat that was next to the land, but Varda ultimately ends up with the end of the boat that faces the water, and Onslow-Ford and Varda begin remodeling their respective quarters.

1949

Teaches a five-week course to twenty-three nuns at Marylhurst College in Oregon.

Exhibits at first Outdoor Art Show in Sausalito.

Teaches summer session at California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland (now the California College of Arts) and at California Labor School in San Francisco

1950

Housewarming party on the Vallejo

Exhibit of work done by Varda's students at Marylhurst at Bern Porter's Contemporary Gallery in Sausalito. Show attracts more than a thousand visitors.

Teaches classes in art expression at the Contemporary Gallery in Sausalito.

Judge at an exhibit of art by prisoners at San Quentin. Teaches at Pond Farms Artist Colony in Guerneville.

Exhibit of 15 of Varda's paintings and collages at San Francisco Museum of Art (now MOMA, then at Civic Center). Artwork based on Varda's theory of "chlorophyllia in women".

Work included in American Painting Today exhibit at Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

1951

Appears, along with several other Sausalito artists, on a KGO TV show about Sausalito Art. Shows 2 collages and comments upon them.

Work included in Fifth Annual Festival at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, the California State Fair in Sacramento, and at an exhibit at the Marin Art and Garden Center in Ross, in Marin County.

The Sausalito News reports that Varda is building a boat. The public is warned: "Don't run for the fire department if you see clouds of smoke billowing from the craft-it features a barbecue pit."

Appears as Proteus, the God of the Sea, in a "masque," (the term Varda and his friends use to describe their occasional original theatrical performances) performed in the garden of Sausalito artist Elizabeth Enquist and later repeated on the Vallejo.

Sausalito Nursery School hosts an exhibit of Varda's work. Varda designs and parents build a play structure at the school.

1952

Varda teaches at Sausalito Arts Center.

At the Alta Mira Artists' Ball in Sausalito, a benefit for the Sausalito Arts Center, Varda is on hand "to convert anyone arriving in civvies to a reasonable facsimile of a character from a modern French painting."

Exhibit at Fresno State College.

1953

One of the prime movers for the 1953 Sausalito Art Festival. Masque at Sausalito Art Festival features Varda as King Neptune.

Appears on San Francisco TV station KPIX to discuss his art.

Joint exhibit with sculptor Ruth Asawa at the Tin Angel nightclub in San Francisco. Varda had first met Asawa at Black Mountain College. Artist Peggy Tolk-Watkins, who, with Sally Stanford, was the co-owner of the Tin Angel, had also attended Black Mountain College.

1954

Helps establish the Harry Partch Trust Fund, to benefit work being done by innovative musical composer Harry Partch. Partch, who Varda had first met in Big Sur in 1940, has

moved to Sausalito. Partch's production of Oedipus is the highlight of the 1954 Sausalito Art festival.

Exhibit at De Young.

Meets and becomes friends with Maya Angelou, who at the time is a singer at the Purple Onion nightclub in the North Beach section of San Francisco. Angelou later writes of their friendship in *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry like Christmas*.

Goes to New York, before sailing to London, then traveling through France, Italy, and Greece, where he meets and falls in love with a Greek woman named Chryssa Varea. Returns to United States.

1955

Exhibit in Los Angeles

Designs the costumes and sets for a play, *The Magical History of Dr. Faustus*, written by his friend George Hitchcock and performed by the San Francisco Interplayers Theater.

Exhibits in New York at the Boissevain Gallery and in London at the Beaux Arts Gallery. Receives enthusiastic reviews for both shows.

Exhibit at the Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris.

Marries Chryssa Varea in Paris. They travel to Spain, where Varda becomes ill and undergoes surgery.

Returns to Sausalito and the Vallejo with Chryssa.

1958

Onslow-Ford rents his side of the boat to David Cole for an art gallery and moves his studio and his home to Inverness.

1958-1959

Teaches at the Pratt Institute in New York.

Appears on \$64,000 Question. Loses to jockey Billie Pearson after selecting Renaissance art as his subject

Varda and Chryssa separate.

1959

Exhibit at Oakland Art Museum and at San Francisco Museum of Rental Art Gallery.

1959 (about)

Builds a house for his friends Jo and Walter Landor in the Kenwood region of Sonoma for \$3000.

1961

Exhibit at the Ankrum Gallery in Los Angeles.

Conducts a workshop retreat with mosaicist Louisa Jenkins at St. Andrew's Priory in Valyermo, a Benedictine monastery in the desert, east of Los Angeles.

One man shows in San Francisco and Santa Barbara

Alan Watts and his wife Juno move on to the ferryboat Vallejo, taking over the space that Gordon Onslow-Ford previously used as a studio.

Along with fellow Sausalito artists Enid Foster and Serge Trubach, appointed by the Sausalito City manager to review art offered for show at City Hall in Sausalito.

1961 1965

Litho prints of a Varda collage go on sale. An edition of 375 was printed.

Exhibit at New Arts Gallery in Houston, Texas.

Contributes recipes to *Artists' and Writers' Cookbook*, published in Sausalito by Contact Editions.

Exhibit at The Tides Bookstore in Sausalito.

Exhibit in St. Louis at Martin Schweig Gallery.

On screening committee for submissions for Sausalito Woman's Club Art show; serves as a judge for 1962 and 1965 shows.

Varda's friends put on a masque in his honor, called *The Brave and the Beat – The Passion of Valentine*. Herb Caen develops a column to the event in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Exhibits at UCLA and in Palo Alto, at Room at the Top Gallery.

Exhibit at the Martin Schweg Gallery in St. Louis.

Exhibit at the Souza Gallery in Mexico.

Exhibits and receives award at Sausalito Woman's Club.

Exhibit Stanford University.

Exhibit at Milberry Union, UCSF.

Varda collages used as a cover illustrations for Anais Nin's *Collages*.

Creates a set of 22 collages that he calls *The Celestial Cities*. Some describe the *Celestial Cities*, which are characterized by lavish use of gold paint, fabric and paper, as the best work Varda has ever done.

Sidney Huttner works on a 16mm color documentary film on Varda. Part of the sound comes from interviews with Varda, some from a class Varda is teaching in San Francisco (the YWCA), and a few sequences from parties on the Vallejo.

One-man show at Brand Library in Glendale, California.

1965

Visits New York on his way to Europe, staying at the Soho apartment of his friend, artist Bernard Pfriem. Craig Claiborne's article about Varda's cooking and a picture of Varda standing in front of Pfriem's antique stove appear in the cooking section of the *New York Times*.

1965 -1966

Travels in Greece, Italy, Spain and France, Yugoslavia, and Tangier with Jacqueline McFarland. Shortly after returning home, Varda's home is ransacked. Drawings he made in Europe are stolen but subsequently recovered.

1966

Kayak Press, owned and operated by Varda's friend George Hitchcock, publishes *Twenty Six Lithographs* by Jean Varda (a collection of reproductions of the work Varda had done while in Europe). Sets of lithographs are sold for \$10 each.

Friends produce masque in Varda's honor, entitled *The Return of the Patriarch from Constantinople*.

Wayne Thiebaud and Patrick Dullanty make 16 mm color film: *Collages of Varda*.

Begins working on his last sailboat, the *Cythera*. Tim Rose, one of the artists involved in building the boat, later reports that Varda's only specifications were that the boat must be large enough to hold a grand piano and five dancers. Varda often takes as many as 40 people out on the *Cythera* on his regular Sunday sails.

1967

Retrospective in the UCSF Medical Building in San Francisco.

Exhibit at Casa Manana in Monterey.

Varda's niece, Agnes Varda, shoots a documentary film about Varda called *Uncle Yanko*.. An accomplished filmmaker, she is known as "the grandmother of French New Wave."

Varda participates in James Broughton's film *The Bed*.

1968

Kayak Press publishes Selected Poems by Yvan Goll, with drawings by Jean Varda.

Creates overall design for Sausalito Art Festival & Festival of the Phoenix. Festival directed by Sausalito artist Al Garvey.

More than 300 guests attend Varda's 75th birthday on a dry dock in the middle of Richardson Bay.

1968-1969

Exhibit at California School of Fine Arts.

Exhibit and lecture at Tides Book Store in Sausalito: The Joyous Architecture

Exhibit at Villa Montalvo in Saratoga, CA

Testifies at a trial in Marin County Superior Court on the question of whether a houseboat owned by Sausalito waterfront resident Chris Roberts is subject to the building codes or whether it qualifies as art and should be exempt.

Late 1960s

Designs mosaic for Villa Roma Motel in Fisherman's Wharf. Mosaic executed by Varda's friend Alfonso Pardenas. Friends raise funds to save mosaic from wrecking crew when hotel demolished during early 1980s. Mosaic permanently installed in Sausalito park in 1987.

1970

Celebration of Varda's 77th birthday at Strawberry Point in Marin County. The theme of the party is "Roi de Boheme". Guests come dressed with beads, bells, baubles, feathers and leather jerkins, wild-colored silks and satins. Varda arrives aboard the Cythera with a score of friends.

Clara Wiles gives a show of Varda's work at her home in San Francisco.

Varda completes designs for mosaics for the Union City BART station. Mosaics are executed by Alfonso Pardenas.

Varda flies to La Paz, in Baja California, to spend the winter in a rented home.

January 1971

Varda suffers a heart attack and dies as he disembarks from a plane in Mexico City after a flight from La Paz. His friend Ruth Costello flies to Mexico to pick up the ashes.