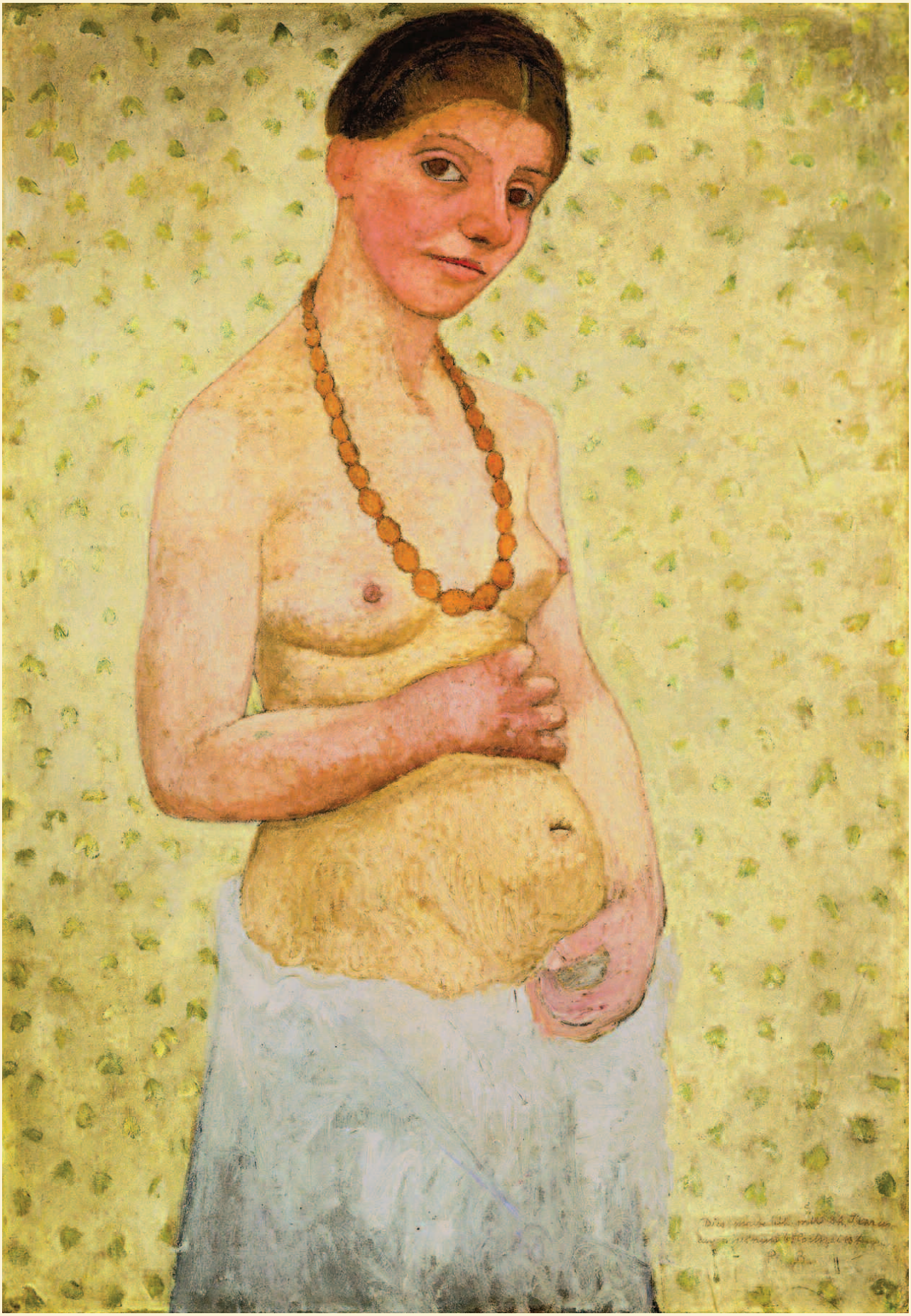
# Woman's Art Journal

FALL / WINTER 2009 VOLUME 30, NUMBER 2 $13.00





(on the cover):
Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*, (25 May 1906), on cardboard, 40 1/16" x 27 5/8". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/ Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.


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# Woman's Art Journal


FALL / WINTER 2009 VOLUME 30, NUMBER 2



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For this special issue devoted to Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907), we are pleased to offer several papers presented in a session on the artist at the 2009 College Art Association conference. Diane Radycki, who chaired the session entitled "Paula Modersohn-Becker: Art, Risk, and Fame," is the author of our first article, a stellar contribution to new scholarship on this subject. Originally written for the catalogue of a major exhibition celebrating the artist, Radycki's essay, "Pictures of Flesh": Modersohn-Becker and the Nude," focuses on her startling self-portraits, nude representations of children, and her unique interpretations of the mother and child theme. When the exhibition, which was to be shown in several American cities, became a casualty of the economic downturn, both Radycki and Anne Higonnet agreed to publish their catalogue essays in *WAJ*. We are delighted to have their groundbreaking insights into the work of a German artist who deserves greater attention for her remarkable artistic innovations. Anne Higonnet's "Making Babies, Painting Bodies: Women, Art, and Paula Modersohn-Becker's Productivity" concerns representations of pregnancy in the history of art, and features Modersohn-Becker as providing a compelling transition into twentieth-century images of the pregnant nude.

Considering the artist's untimely death in 1907, "at the threshold of modernism," her paintings and drawings are nothing short of "revolutionary," according to Radycki. Thus her CAAsession was intended to "investigate the ideological context and milieus of modernism in Europe and America, and offer a dialogue on the work of a painter who remains relevant and challenging."

In the following excerpts from her introduction to the CAA session, Radycki touched on some of the issues and articles—by Rainer Stamm, Michelle Vangen, and Monica Strauss—presented in these pages.

> …Paula Modersohn-Becker has been part of avant-garde discourse ever since the publication of her writings in 1920 by the prestigious Expressionist publishing house, Kurt Wolff Verlag. Yet she has always resonated differently from Expressionism: she is not sexy—she is *dangerous*. Her painting was dangerous, for example, to National Socialism—Hitler had it included in the 1937 Degenerate Art exhibition. But even before her death, her vision and her life were transgressive for her German colleagues. She risked all for art, her friend the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said, and what she risked was her place at the threshold of modernism. That place was promoted by the gallerists Alfred Flechtheim and J.B. Neumann, and by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
>
> The threat of upset created by her "misunderstood genius" is why Modersohn-Becker hung beside Egon Schiele in 2006 in London and why Modersohn-Becker needs to be looked at seriously here in America. What new is being said by European and American scholars on this pioneering Expressionist? Why has so little been said by American postmodernists? Feminists? Formalists? Has her work simply perplexed or exhausted these approaches?
>
> The body is Modersohn-Becker's most notorious, as well as among her most consequential work. In addition to the bodies of mother and child, is the nude body of the artist herself. [In his essay]… Rainer Stamm explored the impact of the first nude self-portrait by a woman in the history of art. Modersohn-Becker opened doors in 1906 through which would pass Suzanne Valadon, Amrita Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo, Hannah Wilke, Valie Export, Ana Mendieta, et al. Stamm argues for *Self-portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* as a landmark of modernity.
>
> …Michelle Vangen's paper on the artist's reception during the 1920s grew out of her research on images of maternity and motherhood from the Weimar Republic and their significance in the German social consciousness. She found them to be "entwined with theories of German nationalism." Vangen discusses this now transformed and gendered subject by comparing Modersohn-Becker with two male colleagues from the era of the New Objectivity. Adecade later Hitler would condemn the images of mothers by Modersohn-Becker. "Cretins," he would term them.
>
> …It was during the course of the 1920s that Modersohn-Becker became identified with the avant-garde, a fate that was responsible in the 1930s for taking her to the U.S. As early as 1931 she was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where "German Painting and Sculpture" was organized by Alfred Barr and meant to offer the American audience an appreciation of "the foremost artists of contemporary Germany."…
>
> Following World War II, German art continued to be shown at MoMA…and promoted by gallerists who had come here as refugees from Central Europe…. As early as 1971—the year Linda Nochlin was asking her provocative question of art history—Helen Serger was featuring the work of Modersohn-Becker and women artists of the European avant-garde in museum-quality shows in her gallery off storied Madison Avenue…. Monica Strauss offers a biographical picture of this pioneer dealer …. …Strauss also asks questions, equally provocative to the one asked by Nochlin in 1971, but directed to the media…. Were gallerists who risked introducing unfamiliar artists from the early modern period granted critical support from the media? And what was the impact on the fortunes of women artists in the art trade?
>
> Modersohn-Becker's support has ever been strong among artists, from her friends—poet Rainer Maria Rilke and sculptor Clara Westhoff-Rilke—to contemporary poet Adrienne Rich and contemporary artists, such as conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. Holzer's electronic-text piece, *Mother and Child*, was installed in the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in Bremen in 2002. "I became aware of Modersohn-Becker when I was young," explained Holzer of her connection to the artist, "and loved the work for its subject, its gravity, and its success. I was encouraged and frightened by her story. Not many women were serious artists, as well as mothers. Not many artists treated motherhood without sentimentality, or without showing a mother and infant in the service of religion. I suspect I had Modersohn-Becker in the back of my mind when I began the *Mother and Child* text for the Venice Biennale (1990)." (interview with Holzer, in *For Paula Modersohn-Becker* [Bremen: Modersohn-Becker Museum, 2005], 22).

To all artists and feminists admiring Paula Modersohn-Becker, we dedicate this special issue.

***Joan Marter and Margaret Barlow, co-editors***

*Note: Our thanks to the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, for providing many color images for this issue.*

# "Pictures of Flesh": Modersohn-Becker and the Nude

By Diane Radycki

"Now that I'm free, I will make something of myself. I almost believe, by this year.... I'm painting life-size nudes and still lifes with faith in God and in myself."[1] That year was 1906, and those paintings by which Paula Modersohn-Becker was to make something of herself are unprecedented in the history of art (Pl. 1). In 1906 she turned thirty. It was the year she committed herself to significant risks. The artist left her husband and home in Worpswede, an art colony in the north German moors, ran off to Paris alone (secretly, in the dead of night), and worked feverishly. Rapidly, she absorbed Degas, Cézanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh. She kept an eye on the competition, on the Salon des Indépendants, and on the careers of other women artists. By 1907 she was there, at the threshold of modernism.

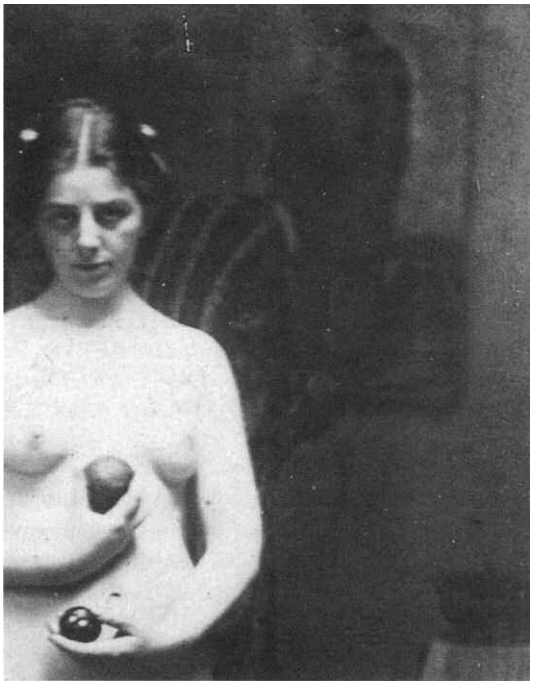


Fig. 1. Paula Modersohn-Becker, in a pose for *Self-Portrait, Standing Nude*, Paris (1906), photograph (detail). Paula Modersohn-Becker Foundation, Bremen.

The nude is the picture of big ambition. Matisse and Picasso would herald twentieth-century modernism in 1907 with *The Blue Nude* and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* respectively. In her brief career, Modersohn-Becker painted over fifty nudes, more than half during 1906-07. The artist identified these paintings as a coherent and most important body of work, yet by and large they have escaped attention in the art literature. Instead of being grouped together, under "Nude," they have been scattered under the minor genres of figure painting, where it is still startling, over a century later, to see full frontal nudity: "Child(ren)," "Mother and Child," and "Self-portrait."

Modersohn-Becker continues to be known by those categories assigned to her in the 1919 paintings catalogue compiled by museum director Gustav Pauli.[2] They were—in this order—"Self-portraits," "Figure(s)," "Still Life," and "Landscape." Pride of place was given to self-portraits, which the artist painted throughout her career. The catchall "Figure(s)" is the largest category, and includes portraits. "Still Life" and "Landscape," subject matters not in the scope of this essay, are surprising for their monumentality.[3]

Modersohn-Becker's preferred figures are female, all ages, from young girl to old woman.[4] Girls range from child to adolescent. The artist paints them from the beginning of her career to its end. She poses girls alone and in pairs, out-of-doors and inside the studio, clothed and nude, in rural Worpswede and in urban Paris. Women also run the gamut in age. While there are some single figures (including nudes), young women appear most often in compositions of mother and child. Old women are a subject matter restricted to Worpswede, and are always heavily clothed and often behatted. As for female portraits, they are of family (her younger sister, her step-daughter) and friends (Clara Westhoff, Lee Hoetger).

Modersohn-Becker is well known as a painter of the figure, but she has garnered little, if any, recognition as a painter of the nude. The difference hits hard on what constitutes the full meaning of her work, originality, and contribution to modernism. The nude is no accidental subject matter, nor sub-category. Modersohn-Becker was going for it in 1906, and she was willing to risk everything. Her ambition was manifest not only in her choices of subject matter and scale, but also quality of materials and extent of preparation. Even though her finances were precarious, Modersohn-Becker spent money on models' fees and large canvases, as well as time in preparatory studies executed on paper, cardboard, and plywood, and with photographs (Fig. 1). These paintings—girls nude, mothers

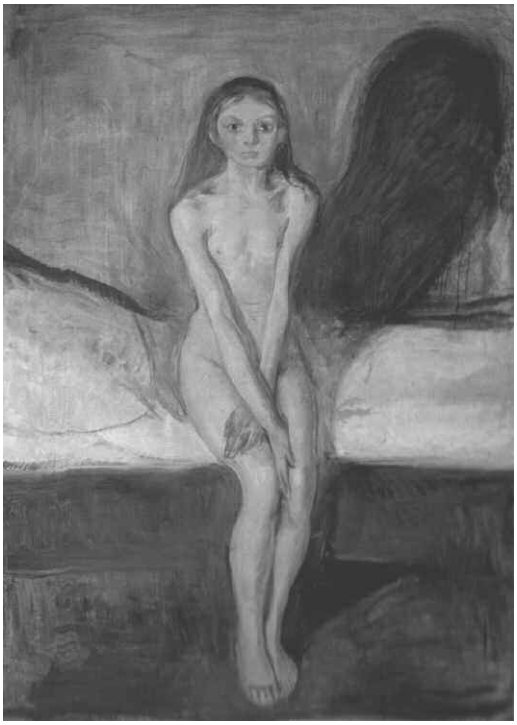


Fig. 2. Edvard Munch, *Puberty* (1895), oil on canvas, 59 5/8" x 43 1/4". National Gallery, Oslo.

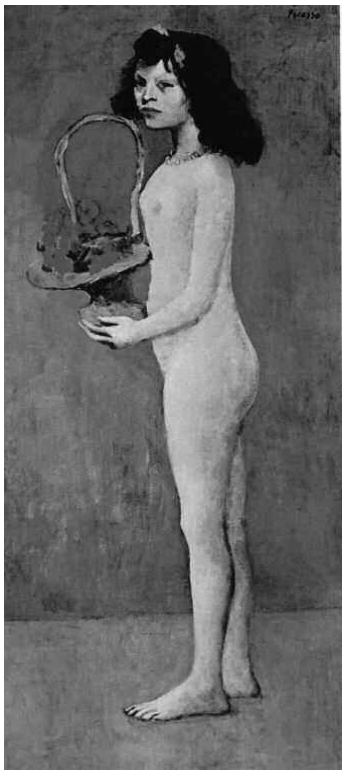


Fig. 3. Pablo Picasso, *Young Girl with a Basket of Flowers* (1905), oil on canvas, 60" x 26". David Rockefeller Collection, New York.

nude, self-portraits nude—are revolutionary. What, then, accounts for the absence of "Nude" in the discourse on Modersohn-Becker?

It is commonplace that at its onset artistic innovation is hard to recognize. Today, post Guerilla Girls and post modernism, Modersohn-Becker's epochal originality can escape us, used as we are to frank sexual images. On the one hand, her simplicity and economy of form easily secure Modersohn-Becker a place in art history between Post-Impressionism and Expressionism. On the other hand, her choice of models nonplusses. The female bodies she paints nude seriously challenge age-old conventions of "Nude"; at the same time, they destabilize "Mother and Child" and "Child(ren)" as minor genres in the hierarchy of painting categories. She had begun shifting paradigms that, over the course of the twentieth century, would continue to implode with the person and practice of the woman artist.

Modersohn-Becker removes "Nude" from its Renaissance origins and its later academic conventions, and finds for modernism a nude that reflects her experience of the symbol-making system of the world in which she lives. A nude by Modersohn-Becker, I argue, is entirely authentic to the artist's own time, gender, and artistic risks, and by this means stymies conventional desire (as does *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*). Under her brush the nude is a representation of fundamental and existential being. Modersohn-Becker's nudes are "pictures of flesh" (to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf [5]). This essay focuses on their development and meaning, as well as on the ambition behind them.

What did Modersohn-Becker know of the "Nude" and its conventions? Paula Becker (1876-1907) was born and grew up in Dresden, a city so beautiful it was known as the Florence on the Elbe. Classicizing sculpture could be seen throughout the city, embellishing architecture, cemeteries, and squares. A well-known sculptor and academician, Adolf von Donndorf, was a family friend.[6] In 1888 the Beckers moved from Saxony north to Bremen (when Paula was twelve years old); and in 1892 (when she was sixteen), while on an extended visit to family in London, she first attended art school.

The training in London was professional, traditional, and co-ed. The aim of her preparatory school was gaining students admission to the school of the Royal Academy of Art. "In the studio we are both ladies and gentlemen, fifty to seventy, and most are training to become artists," she reported. "I am, I think, the youngest, and I think I don't fit in well among these talents. But it still is good to see how far I can get, knowing I'm the farthest behind. It spurs my ambition."[7] Students were introduced to the figure with oversized plaster casts of anatomical parts of ancient sculpture. It was only later, in Berlin (1896-98), that Becker drew from live models and from the nude at the women's art school run by the Union of Women Artists.[8]

Between and after school terms in Berlin, Becker studied with the figurative painter Fritz Mackensen. In 1889 Mackensen and painter Otto Modersohn, in revolt against academic training, founded an art colony in Worpswede, a moorland village near Bremen. They wanted to paint from nature and en plein air. Worpswede, then, should be understood as a choice that Becker made in a pursuit of something more, something other than that to which she had been exposed in Dresden or had learned in London and Berlin. Even so, Becker was already chafing at the bit, arguing with Mackensen and frustrated by the attitude she encountered when she wanted her models to pose nude.

> When I told her she should undress completely, the spirited little one answered, "Nope, I ain't doin' that." I did get her to undress halfway, then yesterday, by giving her a mark, I mollified her completely. But I blushed inside and hated myself, the tempter. She's a little knock-kneed creature, and yet I am happy to be studying a nude in my spare time once more.[9]

Being able to draw and paint from the nude would be the artist's crucible.

Midnight, January 1, 1900, Paula Becker was on the train to Paris. She enrolled in life classes at Académie Colarossi, attended anatomy lectures at the École des Beaux-Arts, sketched in the Louvre, and went to galleries, exhibitions, and

the World's Fair. She knew what she wanted from this regime:

> In class everyone works diligently. Critiques seem objective and good. One doesn't work life-size, but in the Berlin format. I hope to learn a lot, especially from the marvelous anatomy lessons—given free at the École des Beaux-Arts—that will fill the gaps in my deficient knowledge of anatomy. Yesterday the knee was explained to us in a clear way using specimens and schematic blackboard drawings. We girls are offered something here as nowhere else.[10]

This "something" was an advance over the instruction received only a decade earlier by Käthe Kollwitz, in whose day anatomy lessons consisted of a box full of bones that the teacher passed around among the students. Women studied the bones without any instruction as to how they fit together in the skeleton.[11] It bears repeating that figure painting depends not only on study of the nude, but also on knowledge of anatomy. Deprived of both, Kollwitz concentrated her figural work on expressive heads and hands, displacing beneath heavy folds of indeterminate garments a phantom anatomy; whereas, among French women artists—for example, Suzanne Valadon (1867-1938), born the same year as Kollwitz (1867-1945)—we find a familiarity with the nude and with anatomy. A full generation earlier than Valadon, Berthe Morisot (1841-95), Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), and Eva Gonzalès (1849-83) were accomplished painters of the female figure, although not necessarily the nude.



Fig. 4. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Large Standing Girl Nude* (1905/ 06), on canvas, 53 1/3" x 20". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/ Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

For six months, in the halls of Louvre, in the studios of the Académie Colarossi, and in the art exhibitions of the 1900 World's Fair, Paula Becker followed the trajectory of the nude through art history. At Vollard's gallery on rue Lafitte she saw it arc into modernism with Cézanne. He hit her, she said, like a thunderbolt. When Becker returned to Worpswede, she started painting her own bathers: boys nude, always out-of-doors, usually caught in full sunlight (1901; Pl. 2). In 1901 Becker married Otto Modersohn and settled permanently in the art colony. The same year her Worpswede friends Clara Westhoff and Rainer Maria Rilke married and made their way together to Paris. Westhoff went to study sculpture with Rodin; and Rilke eventually became his secretary.

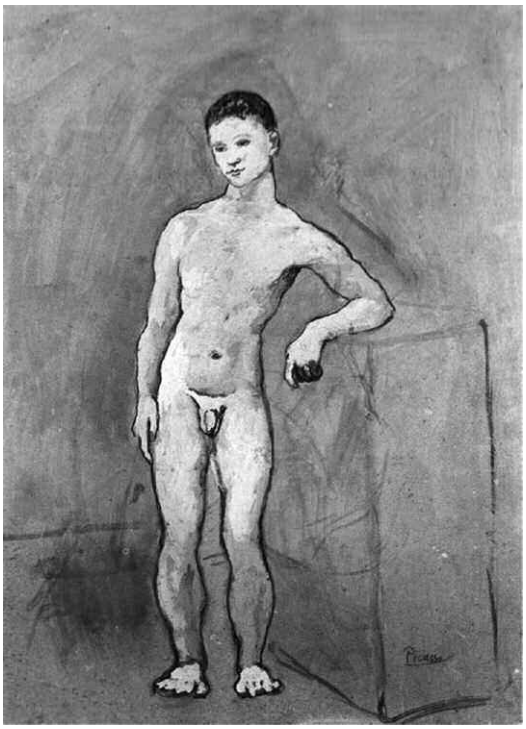
When Modersohn-Becker went to Paris for six weeks in February – March 1903, Rilke arranged for her to visit Rodin's studio, where she was struck by the spontaneity of the great sculptor's wash drawings of the nude.[12] Back home in Worpswede in 1903 and 1904, Modersohn-Becker began painting girl nudes, in the studio only. They stand holding a cloth discreetly in front of them, or lie on a bed or sit on the floor with their knees drawn up demurely. There are no more boy nudes. In February 1905, she returned to Paris for eight weeks—a trip timed to the Salon des Indépendants.

The new century was turning away from the sexual miasmas of Symbolism and into the age of Freud, for whom adolescence was the crux of the intersection of sexuality and identity. For some early Expressionists who painted pubescents, such as Edvard Munch (1895; Fig. 2), sexuality was dominant, as it remained a decade later for Picasso (1905; Fig. 3).[13] For the Brücke Expressionists, twelve-year-old girls would index a baldly predatory sexual appetite.[14] Their paintings shock, but they do not perplex. To perplex, sexuality has to intersect with the conflicts and confrontations of identity.

On the precipice of adolescence, girl signifies both meaning and modernity for Modersohn-Becker (1905-06; Pl. 3 and Fig. 4). Modersohn-Becker's girls are self-referential by gender, as are Picasso's boys (1906; Fig. 5). According to his biographer John Richardson, Picasso's paintings of nude boys are a "puzzling feature" of the Rose Period.[15] In metaphoric terms, the Rose Period was the adolescence of Cubism, Picasso's stylistic maturity. In Modersohn-Becker's work (c.1906; Fig. 6), girl is an icon of self-awareness, transition, and change. It is the subject matter that ushered in her artistic revolution.

Girl is also a haunted subject matter for the artist, so attests this ruminative letter to her confidant Rilke:

> When she was eleven years old, Maidli's older sister was playing with six other children—I was one of them—and was buried alive in a large sand pit near Dresden. We were able to save ourselves. This child was the first event in my life. Her name was Cora and she grew up in Java. We got to know each other when we were nine, and we loved each other very much. She was very mature and



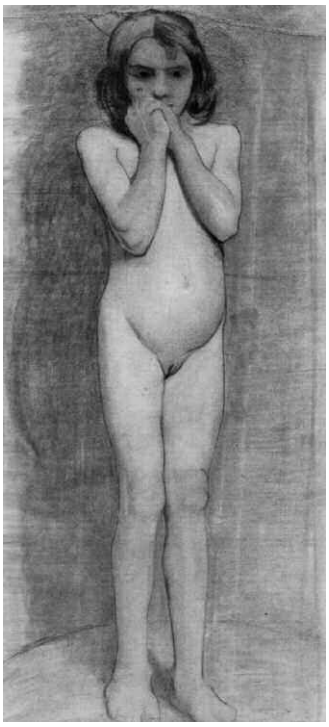


Fig. 5 (left). Pablo Picasso, *Nude Boy in a Leaning Stance* (1906), gouache on cardboard, 26 3/4" x 20 1/2". Hermitage Museum, Leningrad.

Fig. 6 (right). Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Standing Girl Nude* (c.1906), charcoal and pastel, 24" x 11 1/2". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

> intelligent. *With her the first glimmer of self-awareness came into my life* [emphasis added]. At the moment of her death, Maid and I hid our heads deep in the sand in order not to see the terrible thing we knew was happening. I said to her then, "You are my legacy." And so she has remained.[16]

While we can never know with certainty, we read early childhood closely to search the workings that give shape to artistic imagination. Critics in the 1920s, for example, attempted psychological explanations of Oskar Kokoschka's portraits based on his first experience with death—that of his brother when Oskar was five years old.[17] Youthful tragedies were also salient for Munch, judging by the images he created of his tubercular adolescent sister Sophie. He explained: "It is not my intention precisely to reconstruct my life. Rather it is my intention to search for the hidden forces of life, to draw them out, to reorganize them, to intensify them in order to demonstrate most clearly the effects of these forces on the machinery that is known as a human life, and in its conflicts with other human lives."[18]

What is it like for a ten-year-old to watch another child being buried alive in an avalanche of sand? To witness the grand indifference of nature to an innocent body? At the final aching moment, young Paula removed her gaze, and when she finally looked up, she reclaimed her own destiny in the younger Maidli. Did the visual memory of what she saw, and then saw no more of, manifest in her images of girl alone and girls in pairs? Alone, her girl can be a blunt body, the youngest of Eves. Ceremonially both altar and offering, girl is not presented as a being in possession of sexual knowledge; instead, girl owns a different order of self-knowledge (both 1906-07; Pls. 4 and 5). Like Manet's notorious harbinger of modernity, Modersohn-Becker's girl does not flinch. Olympia looked her viewers/ clients in the eye; girl looks straight past them.

In twos, entwined in protective pairs—one older, one younger—in a simplicity of palette and monumentality of shape, girls were as particular in 1906 to Modersohn-Becker (Pls. 6 and 7) as were boys in 1906 to Picasso. I do not claim that Modersohn-Becker painted girls because she focused on this as a modern subject. I assume she gravitated to girls with no more nor less deliberation than did Picasso to boys. Picasso scholars have found prototypes for the Rose Period boys in kouros statues in the Louvre, in Cézanne's male bathers, in Puvis de Chavannes, and in the cast of a Javanese figure installed at the Lapin Agile.[19] These same influences (including Javanese art[20]) were at work on Modersohn-Becker too. They were part of the contemporary discourse on childhood.

In the spring of 1901 the Petit Palais hosted a large exhibition, "L'Enfant travers les Âges" (The Child through the Ages). It was organized by Henri Rollet, who later became presiding judge of the children's court and whose secretary was poet Max Jacob. Jacob and Picasso met that year and later became roommates. In Modersohn-Becker's circle in Paris at the time, by way of Rilke, was Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist writer and socialist, whose writings chiefly concerned women and children. Key's fame was made in Germany when her controversial *The Century of the Child* was translated in 1902. A sample of chapters from this volume outlines Key's revolutionary position: "The Right of the Child to Choose His Parents," "The Unborn Race and Woman's Work," "Soul Murder in the Schools," and "Child Labor and the Crimes of Children."[21] Paris at the turn of the century was fertile ground for Key's message.

In 1903 when Key was in Paris on a lecture tour, she and Rilke became good friends, and he dedicated his *Stories of God* to her. At Modersohn-Becker's request, Rilke introduced them, and in 1906 Modersohn-Becker, Rilke, and Key socialized together. Regardless of ever knowing what they talked about at dinner or on outings, it is a startling meeting of original talents with a clear focus: Key, the radical champion of childhood; Rilke, its exquisite poet; and Modersohn-Becker, its most original painter. The awkward adolescent, the unfinished age; the awkward form, the crude finish: these are of a piece in Modersohn-Becker. Today, when the adolescent is legitimate artistic terrain (witness the photographs of Rineke Dijkstra of girls on the brink of puberty [1992; Fig. 7]),[22] her nude body remains a virgin territory that art rarely trespasses.

Modersohn-Becker's remarkable production of 1906 requires that we look carefully at the period preceding. When the artist was in Paris in 1905, the Rilkes were not there, and she was on her own. She again enrolled in life classes and again frequented the Louvre. The first order of her day, however, was "the most, most modern" galleries and artists.[23] During the course of February–March 1905 some exciting artists were showing in Paris: Pierre Bonnard, Matisse, and Edouard Vuillard, in their first exhibition as Intimistes (all had works in the Salon as well, where Matisse showed *Lux, calme et volupté*); Francis Picabia, in a solo show at Galerie Hausmann; Picasso, with thirty-four works (including eight Saltimbanques) in a three-person show on Boulevard Hausmann; Raoul Dufy, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and Kees van Dongen together in a group show; and, finally, in the Salon des Indépendants, over four thousand artworks. Among those exhibiting in the Salon whom Modersohn-Becker had the opportunity to see were the Nabis painters Maurice Denis, Émile Bernard, and Paul Serusier; the Fauves André Derain and Maurice deVlaminck; the somber Georges Rouault and Munch; and the naïve Henri Rousseau. Finally, together in their own space were forty-five paintings and drawings, including self-portraits, in a retrospective of van Gogh.[24]

Salt Gauguin into this mix, and you have an idea of what of the avant garde Modersohn-Becker digested, and all that would keep eating away at her once she was back home. Of her three visits to Paris, this one in 1905 most fueled her ambition. Whereas years intervened between her previous trips to Paris, seven months were not out before the artist was secretly planning to return. Her aim was to compete in the Salon des Indépendants.

Nineteen hundred five was a heady time to be an artist in Paris—and to be a woman artist? Well, Kollwitz was there, a rare female presence in the Salon; Virginie Demont-Breton too, by way of an homage paid to the painter and feminist by van Gogh, in his painting *Seaman*, identified as "inspiré du tableau de Mme Demont-Breton" (after the painting by Mme Demont-Breton). Demont-Breton (1859-1935) was a highly regarded and regularly exhibiting artist, known for paintings of fisherfolk and motherhood. The daughter of painter Jules Breton and author of the four-volume art-world chronicle *Les Maisons que j'ai connue* (1926), Demont-Breton was the second president of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, and she worked determinedly to gain the admittance of women to the École des Beaux-Arts.

Would Demont-Breton's virtual presence in the Salon or Kollwitz's actual one have mattered to Modersohn-Becker? One clue to her sensitivity to the accomplishments of the women who were her contemporaries is found in a letter, written to her during her pregnancy in fall 1907 from her friend Westhoff. "[Rilke] said to tell you that there are 56 Cézannes, 174 pictures and drawings by Berthe Morisot, and 16 by Eva Gonzalès in the Salon d'Automne. I believe he relays these numbers so unfeelingly because he really does not know how impossible it would be for you to come right now."[25] It bears saying that after so many years together, Rilke (and Westhoff) knew what would get the attention of their dear friend.

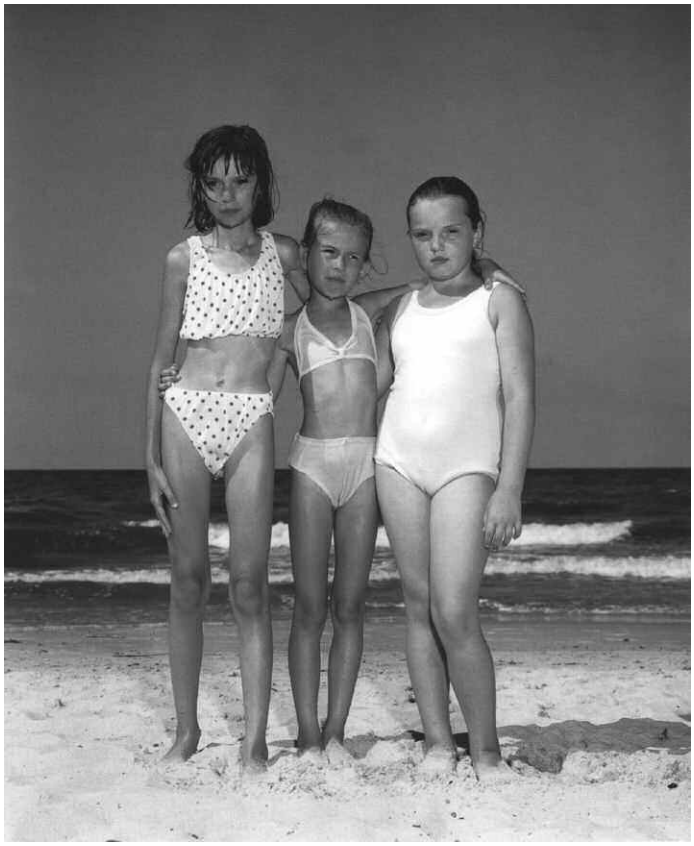


Fig. 7. Rineke Dijkstra, *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 23, 1992*, chromogenic print , 14" x 11". Collection of the artist.

Modersohn-Becker herself does not say who it was that had her attention, other than "the most, most modern" artists. With the exception of Degas, whose work she looked at (and quarreled with) each time she was in Paris, she was seldom specific about who or what affected her work. Her reminiscence about the enormity of first seeing Cézannes in 1900 was written seven years after the fact. What we know of her seeing Gauguins in the collection of Gustave Fayet in 1905 and in the great retrospective in the Salon d'Automne in 1906 is thanks to those who accompanied her.[26] What she wrote about was having seen two Bonnards in the Intimistes exhibition at Galeries Henry Graves in 1905; and, in the same letter, she said she intended to make studio visits to Vuillard and Denis. But we know no more, not only of 1905, but also of 1906-07.

Instead, we rely on her paintings for clues. Rilke wrote that his friend had entered a new stage in 1905: "painting ruthlessly and boldly things which were Worpswede-like and yet had never been seen or painted before. And in this totally original way, strangely touching on van Gogh and his direction."[27] Her signature work of 1905, however, is an icon of compositional imprisonment: *Worpswede Child Sitting on a Chair* (Pl. 8).[28] Regardless, by the end of the year Modersohn-Becker was painting life-size nudes.[29]

Only one of these life-size nudes, however, is an adult woman. She reclines, with eyes open, breasts and pubic hair, or pubes, on display (1905; Pl. 9). Behind her hangs a drape decorated with enormous French fleur-de-lis: a battle flag, if

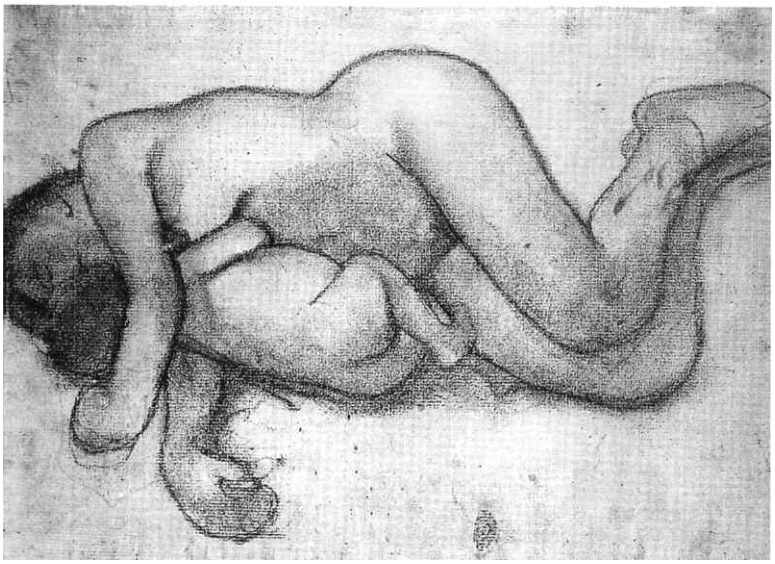


Fig. 8. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Mother and Child*, c.1906, charcoal, 9" x 12 1/4". Kunsthalle Bremen.

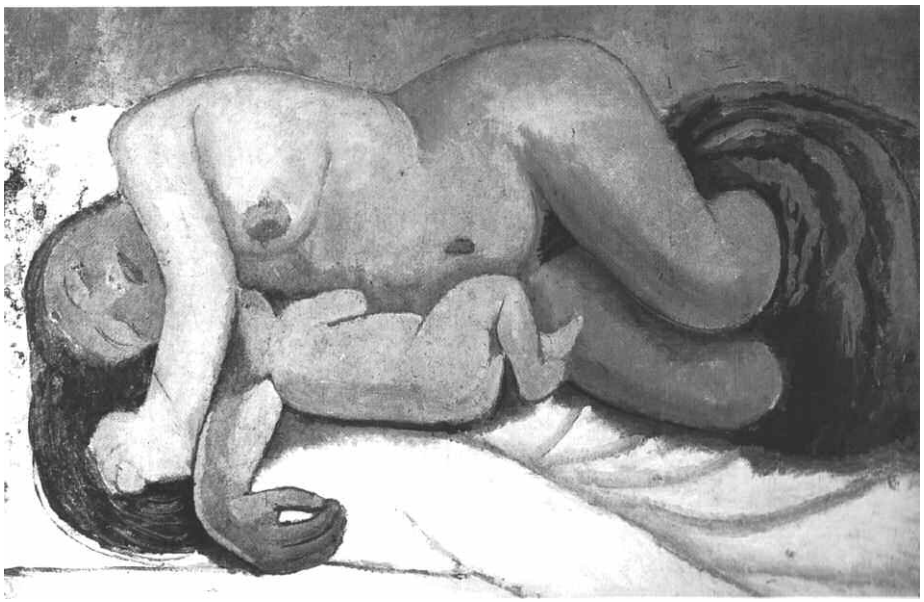


Fig. 9. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Reclining Mother with Child* (1906), on cardboard, 30 1/4" x 48". Destroyed in World War II.

ever Modersohn-Becker waved one. Under the brush of artists from Giorgione and Titian to Cabanel and Manet, the reclining female nude for *public display* had a strategically placed hand or was a hairless classical ideal. As Courbet's practice confirmed, pubic hair was for *private viewing*. Modersohn-Becker was the first woman artist—indeed, she may well be the first artist—to transgress these boundaries. Under her brush, display of the female body—of any age—resists pornography and eroticism and coyness.

*Reclining Female Nude* was Modersohn-Becker's first step. Next, the artist arranged the reclining female nude together with a child nude that was not a putto, and thereby morphed traditional subject matters into something revolutionary. It was a breakthrough—and she knew it.

"I am becoming something," Modersohn-Becker exclaimed in early May 1906, in a note to her married sister asking for money to pay for models.[30] To judge by the dated sketches, *Reclining Mother and Child Nude* (Pl. 1) was what was exciting the artist. This is an ambitious and carefully planned painting. Not only do drawings and watercolors precede the large oil on canvas, but there are also two large oil studies (now lost) related to the composition. By comparing the preparatory studies we are able to follow the artist's creative process as she constructs this unheralded painted nude.

Modersohn-Becker began by sketching from life. More than a dozen drawings and watercolors show a mother and child in various positions sitting and lying together and apart. On all but one sheet are both figures nude; so it seems that the artist settled early on this feature of the composition. Four drawings close to the finished painting show the adult reclining—so this pose seems to be what the artist decided next. What she continued to redraw was the child. In two drawings, child sits in front of mother's pubes; in another two, child lies down and mother's pubes is exposed. The difference between the latter two drawings is the exposure of the female's breast and the child's activity.

In the drawing in the Bremen Kunsthalle (1906; Fig. 8), the female is curvaceous, long-legged, and relaxed. Her pubes is fully exposed, her breast and nipple only partially so. There is a faint navel. One arm embraces the child around the neck, as they nuzzle face to face. There are only summary markings for her facial features. The child's body is substantial. Together the figures form a wedge that narrows at their snuggling heads—the meeting point of physical and emotional contact—and that widens at the girth of their hips, as the child presses a foot into the mother's thigh.

After the drawings come two studies in oil on cardboard—one in brown and the other in lilac-gray—recto and verso of the same board, missing today. We know about their existence from entries in Pauli's catalogue and from an early reproduction of one of the studies (1906; Fig. 9). The published study differs from the Bremen drawing in regards to certain sexual markers. Now the female has long hair and a pretty face, with curved brows and lips; a fully exposed breast; and an emphatic navel. There are heavy folds of drapery around her lower limbs and beneath her thigh. These changes, more appropriate to a reclining nude than to a mother-and-child composition, bear scrutiny.

In the lilac-gray study, the adult's face is visible because the child's head has been moved down the body of its mother, where it is assumed to be suckling on the (unseen) right breast, with its toes curled in pleasure. Consequently, the female's expression can be read for her *jouissance* in nursing. But while the child's

head has been moved, its body has not. Moving a body of the substantial proportions of the child portrayed in the Bremen drawing would have obscured the mother's pubes—something apparently the artist refused to do. The solution was to make the child's body smaller, because full display of the female body is what is at stake here.

A second repositioning, this time of the female figure, makes this point more emphatically: the artist exposes the female's unsuckled breast. In order to display the large left breast, the artist rolls back the nude's torso. This shift can only be sustained by buttressing the large torso with the female's left arm. This arm that now strains against the floor to keep the torso steady was originally, in the Bremen drawing, curved in embrace around the child's neck. While the literal position of the arm has not changed, its logic has. The same form has transformed from relaxation to tension, from an emotional marker into an architecture. Gone thereby is the gracefully sloping tripartite line of hip, back, and shoulder seen in the Bremen drawing. Now the great body is a bifurcated block of two hills of flesh, from shoulder to waist and from waist to hip.

Such is how Modersohn-Becker proceeds: un-self-conscious repose is transformed into tension; and what is spontaneous is rewrit large in formal characters. Themes of intimacy are deliberately shifted and puzzled. The exposed body of the reclining nude, with its panoply of erotic display, is carefully constructed in the lilac-gray study. Yet, the artist had other goals for the oil painting. There we find she abandoned many, though not all, of the sexual markers: gone are hair, drape, folds, and pleasured expression. What remains are exposed breast and stressed navel—those parts of the anatomy that constructed a painting of a nude out of a drawing of a mother. The geography of the nude, which first sloped curvaceously in the drawing and then was ordered in two fleshy hills in the oil study, undulates even less in the oil painting. There is visible still the track of the brush that painted down the rising hip. It is a monolithic body, made even larger by the sense of being squeezed, knees bent and feet tensed, into a width of four feet.

Modersohn-Becker did not, after removing the drape from around the female's calves, return to the relaxed posture of the legs in the Bremen drawing. Instead, for *Reclining Mother and Child Nude* she made the legs, knees, and feet taut—and thereby balanced on the right side the tension of the straining, angled arm on the left. These straining and shortened limbs, coupled with an unreadable facial expression, return our gaze to the great torso, as if it were some default setting for this painting. From charcoal drawing to oil study to final canvas, we watch Modersohn-Becker conflating depictions of woman traditionally at odds with each other—sacred mother and profane nude—to give us Mother Nude. And at the very center of this painting is her navel. Here is *l'origine du monde*, life-size and in gendered perspective, pointed to, like some editor's caret, by the child's bent knee.

*Reclining Mother and Child Nude* is an image of primal originality. With rare exception (Dürer's woodcuts of the temptation of St. John Christendom, Giorgione's *Tempest*, Gustav Klimt's *Mother and Child* [*Three Ages of Woman*], and several of Picasso's drawings from 1902), in the Western



Fig. 10. Fritz Mackensen, *Madonna of the Moors* (1892), oil on canvas, 71" x 55". Kunsthalle Bremen.

tradition maternity is not a pretext for the nude. Even so, mother by Dürer et al is upright, not reclining horizontally. For all of Gauguin's championing of unfettered sexuality, he too shied away when imaging a nude as a mother. When Gauguin twice depicted mother and child undressed, he decorously painted a towel over her pubes.[31]

The sight of mother nude is postulated as the site of (male) primal trauma. Psycho-sexual identity begins its construction here, be it the Freudian castrated mother or the Lacanian phallic one. In this particular order of things, mother nude concretizes an absence. In the case of Modersohn-Becker, as concerns her status as a painter of the nude, this absence, I argue, has boomeranged from the revolutionary image to the revolutionary artist. Art historians, from the formalist Gustav Pauli at one end of the century to the feminist Linda Nochlin at the other, have yet to address this mother's total nudity. Pauli instead cites the female's biblical simplicity and monumentality.[32] Nochlin sees an earthy peasant: "It is within this context of the peasant woman envisioned as a natural principle of generation and nurturance, that Paula Modersohn-Becker's somewhat later imagery of maternity assumes its proper position."[33]

The context Nochlin submits as proper is a nineteenth-century one: Teofilo Patini, Cassatt, Giovanni Segantini, and Mackensen—all of whom precede Modersohn-Becker by decade(s). Even Cassatt, who is more than twenty years

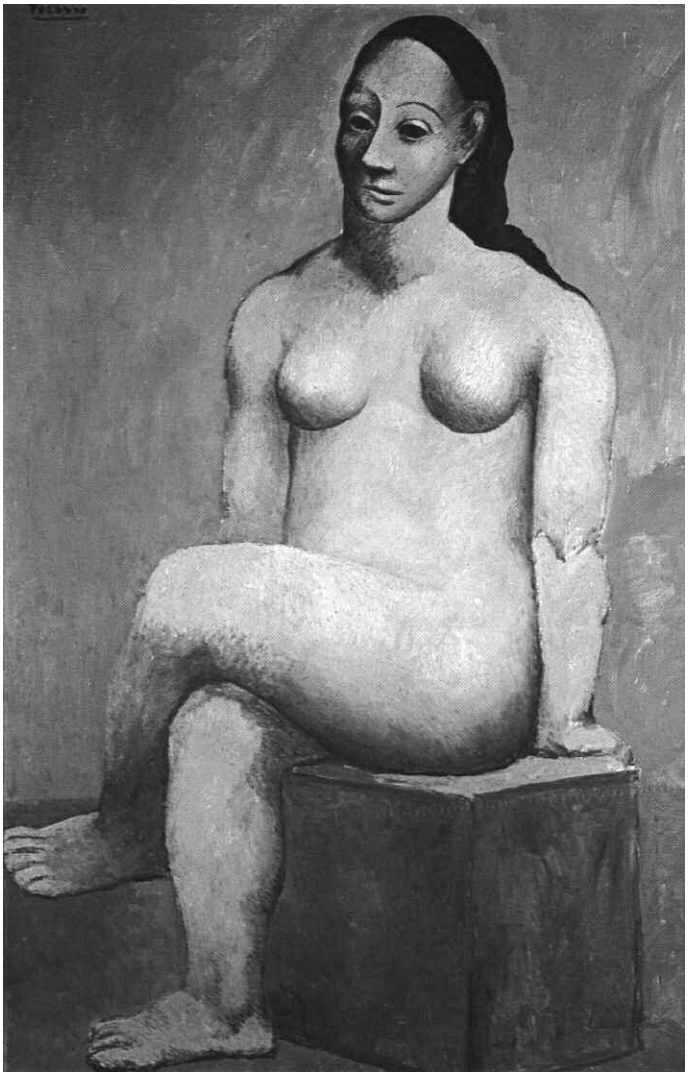


Fig. 11. Pablo Picasso, *Female Nude Seated with Her Legs Crossed* (1906), oil on canvas, 59 1/2" x 39 1/3". National Gallery, Prague.

Modersohn-Becker's senior, is dated company for one whose ambition was the modern. Nochlin continues: "all are simply final distillations and intensifications of a generic motif of her time, relieved of its naturalistic appurtenances, freed from the constrictions of historicity or contextual definition to function purely in the realm of the archetypal." Maternities by Mackensen (1892; Fig. 10) were idealized, with class indexed by costume and setting and then countermanded by a varnished smooth paint skin.[34] What Nochlin sees when looking at the Modersohn-Becker is not a female nude, but an ideological assumption of class based on body type and a paint skin that is heavily worked.

The lack of costume and setting sets Modersohn-Becker's figures apart from nineteenth-century images of maternity, as much as does her impasto from the academic manner. No smooth, alabaster-like flesh for her; as with Cézanne's *passage*, as with Picasso's ropey Blue-Period mothers, Modersohn-Becker's system of mark making weds visual sensation and tactility. Of skin, in particular, she was after something akin to the roughened surface of marble that had been exposed to the weather (Pl. 1A). Dissatisfied with the shiny surface produced by oil paint, she experimented: with a thick oil tempera that did not need to be varnished; or with absorbing the oil from a fresh layer of paint by pressing a sheet of paper into it. She utilized a curled and crimped stroke to express a gentle vibration, a "strange aura of expectation" that she observed hovering "over opaque things (skin ... fabrics, flowers)."[35]

Her motif is an early twentieth-century one: the *femme nouvelle*, the New Woman, that threat to the imagery of maternity, envisioned by the bourgeoisie alternately as an emaciated figure or as a gargantuan *amazone*.[36] Analyses such as Pauli's and Nochlin's grope for metaphors that inscribe both the fertile and the sacred on the monumental nude. In truth, if you were to upright Modersohn-Becker's reclining female, you would not have Mackensen's *Madonna of the Moors*, you would have Picasso's colossal nude of 1906 (Fig. 11). Modersohn-Becker is not the end of any hallowed nineteenth-century tradition; she is the beginning of a radical twentieth-century female imagery. She is the pioneer of the female body of interrupting subject matters of fecundity, maternity, and spectacle. Hers is a legacy that stretches through Suzanne Valadon, Frida Kahlo, Alice Neel, Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman, and others, including conceptualist Jenny Holzer (2005; Fig. 12).

Modersohn-Becker did upright her reclining nude mother in *Kneeling Mother with Child at Her Breast* (1906; Pl. 10). This painting too was preceded by an oil study that reveals the artist's trials. The oil study shows a half nude decorated with jewelry and flowers, painted with a sweet palette and small brushstrokes that distract from the faceless mother and a child whose features are virtually smashed into its mother's breast (1906; Pl. 11). These are eliminated in the Berlin canvas, where the female is a full nude, seen kneeling on a round rug on the floor in a studio decorated with potted plants and round fruits. While this position may literally enshrine motherhood, it does so at the expense of naturalism. This is a position no woman has ever assumed for nursing.

Natasha Staller, in her remarkable study of Picasso and the creation of Cubism, observed: "The contest for the supremacy of the avant-garde was being fought in the arena of the female nude—painted large in scale, painted aggressively, painted in a resolutely androgynous or anti-feminine manner."[37] There was little that was coquettish about the nudes of modernism, even before *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Nevertheless, from Manet to Degas to Picasso, these nudes remain in the sexual economy. They may not be conventional; nevertheless, the male viewer's gaze remains their purpose. The female model—the object of exchange between the male artist and the male viewer—is for sale. Reverse genders, and you invert the who with the what. When painter as well as model is female, different levels of participation and exclusion interlock, with the male viewer the outsider. Objectivity becomes increasingly subjective, such that the object, contends Simone de Beauvoir, is now "paradoxically endued with subjectivity."[38] Break the bond between male artist and male viewer, and male authority risks becoming irrelevant, and Modersohn-Becker's nudes meet an inarticulate disconnect.

Perhaps the painting by which Modersohn-Becker is best known is the singular nude self-portrait inscribed: "I painted this, at age 30, on my sixth wedding day. P.B."[39] (1906; front cover). In the literature the title is often shortened to *Self-Portrait on Her 6th Wedding Day* (that is, her fifth wedding anniversary, 25 May 1906). This short title dispenses altogether with the secondary term of the inscription, "Age 30" (as well as with her initialed signature "P.B.") and privileges, instead, a tertiary term of ironic value for the artist at the time. I prefer as a short title, *Self-Portrait, Age 30*, as a more accurate index of what was important to Modersohn-Becker. It is her summa on being a woman artist.

The factual and emotional biography bearing on this painting is known from correspondence. Letters record growing professional and personal disturbances in the field. She had outgrown the art colony, and she wanted more from married life. She had reached a deadline. "Being 30 will give her something to think about, she had set it as a goal for her painting," chastened her younger sister, unawares, the day before the artist absconded.[40] Reaching age thirty had also amplified the ticking of her biological clock. Her marriage had gone unconsummated for nearly all of its five years; and when, at her insistence, marital relations finally did ensue, she found it disillusioning.[41]

The artist decided to abandon Worpswede and go to Paris, plans she confided only to Westhoff while she was painting her portrait in November 1905. She also started thinking about having a child on her own. Westhoff, who had already borne one child, was astonished and told Rilke she thought their friend courageous to consider doing so alone. Westhoff was not convinced, however, that the plan would survive in Paris. She also suspected that Rilke would be disappointed in their friend for even harboring such a desire. Modersohn-Becker wanted her freedom, not to live by Rilke's credo of sacrificing everything for art (including his wife and daughter), but to live on her own greedy, gargantuan terms. She wanted it all.

On February 8, 1906, Modersohn-Becker turned thirty, privately consulted a lawyer about divorce, and contemplated her identity. Before she left, she wrote Rilke: "And now I don't even know how I should sign my name. I am not Modersohn and I am also not Paula Becker any more. I am I, and this I hope to become ever more so. It is really the end goal of all our struggles."[42] Thereafter, Rilke addressed his correspondence to "Paula Becker," and she replied signing "Paula Becker" and "Paula?." Then, on the dark and stormy night of February 23rd, after her widowed mother was safely on her way to Italy, after the International Art Exhibition (Cézanne, Munch, Nolde, Picabia, van Gogh, et al) opened in Bremen,[43] and one day after her husband celebrated his forty-first birthday, she left. "Paula, all the chests and cases, all the drawers are empty—oh, what a discovery! ... That I was so blind!"[44] Otto had not noticed her slipping away.

At Gare du Nord the next morning Rilke was there to meet her with flowers in his hands and the loan of a hundred D-marks. Almost immediately he left on a lecture tour, and did not return for over a month. In early March Modersohn-Becker found a studio in Montparnasse and began painting furiously.[45] By early April Westhoff's doubt about her friend's resolve concerning motherhood proved true, at least as concerned her estranged husband: "And I do not want to have a child by you *now* at all."[46] Meanwhile, she found company in the Marxist economist and womanizer Werner Sombart, whom, to judge from the neon red-orange she used to contour his portrait, she found electrifying (1906; Pl. 12). Rilke returned to Paris and, after being dismissed from his secretarial post by Rodin, he began sitting for Modersohn-Becker (1906; Pl. 13).



Fig. 12. Jenny Holzer, *Mother and Child (for Paula Modersohn-Becker)*, 2005, double-sided LED column with blue diodes, encased in rust-free steel, 39 1/2′ x 5 1/2″ x 5 1/2″. Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

It was during those weeks in late May, while she was painting the poet's portrait, that Rilke in all likelihood saw *Self-Portrait, Age 30*, the painting that would haunt his *Requiem*. This is a large painting, 3 1/3′ x 2 1/3′, made using a mirror, not a photograph. It is executed on cardboard and, as with other of her works on this type of support, was probably a first idea. Then, on a slightly larger cardboard, Modersohn-Becker inserted her self-portrait into an allegorical composition with two other figures. However, the trail stops here. There is extant only one related work on canvas: a small portrait bust of the artist wearing the telltale chaplet and double-strand necklace of amber.[47] Perhaps there was a painting that was destroyed or lost, or perhaps this was an idea that the artist took no further.

At first glance, the allegory seems unrelated to *Self-Portrait, Age 30*—that is until one realizes that the pictorial emphasis that the artist gave her belly did not record any real pregnancy. So, the question is, what does she mean here? Admittedly, this picture teases the viewer, even as does Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*. Yet images of pregnancy in art history are not the context for *Self-Portrait, Age 30*; for Modersohn-Becker the issue was not a woman's physical condition, but her psychic state as a modern artist. Before joining the modernist fray in 1906, Modersohn-Becker did not paint herself nude; and once she left Paris in Spring 1907, her portraits are clothed (including those she painted while she was pregnant).[48]

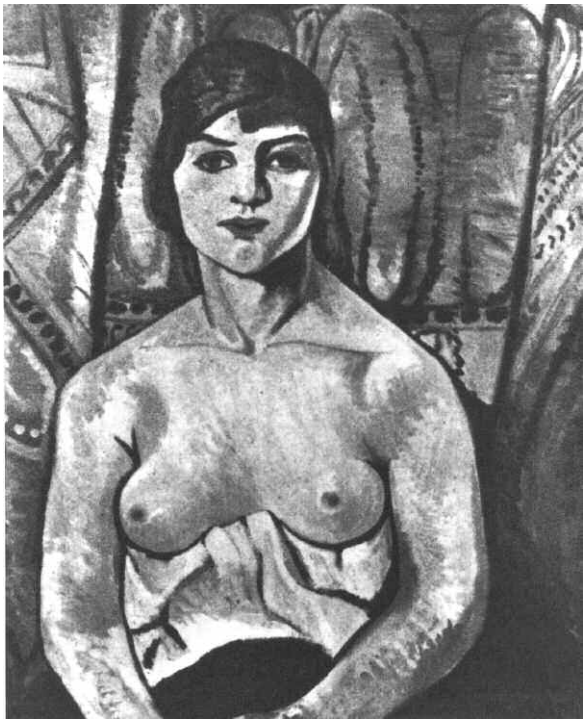


Fig. 13. Suzanne Valadon, *Nude with Bare Breast* (1917), oil on canvas, 25 5/8" x 19 3/8". Private collection.



Fig. 14. *Venus de Milo* (130-120 BCE), marble, 6' 7". Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In the course of her ten-year career Modersohn-Becker painted herself numerous times—twenty-four by Gustav Pauli's count. Before 1906, however, she did so generally once or twice a year. In 1906 she painted herself some sixteen times. Most atypical of the genre are her half-dozen nude self-portraits, from bust to full figure (Pl. 14). The venerable tradition of self-portrait is a clothed one. Even in modernism nude self-portraits are rare. Among her female contemporaries, Valadon comes to mind (1917; Fig. 13), but her nude busts postdate Modersohn-Becker. Among her male contemporaries are Munch and Picasso. In 1903 Munch tormented his flesh in the fires of hell; Picasso went no further in the summer of 1906 than to bare his torso.

*Self-Portrait, Age 30* is Modersohn-Becker's only self-portrait to make reference to herself as a painter, even if only in inscription: "I painted this." When "P.B." painted "this" she had just finished *Reclining Mother and Child Nude* and she was in the middle of painting a Piero-esque portrait of her ally the poet, singing in silent song. Her visceral excitement and confidence after having painted her masterpiece has been overlooked, in favor of reading the curved line of her belly as "fate."[49] However, art history offers other interpretations of a teeming body. In Northern painting, according to Kenneth Clark in *The Nude*, round-bellied female nudes define an alternate convention of beauty.[50] In Italian painting, the heavy belly of a nude, especially in allegorical painting, signals fecundity, spring, and renewal, as in Botticelli's *Primavera*.

But Modersohn-Becker was not in Renaissance Germany or Italy, she was in contemporary Paris. If art historical precedent is wanted, then look to the Louvre, where painters and poets alike wandered. If for Rilke it was the headless archaic torso of Apollo whose gaze the poet could imagine and whose centered virility he could discern smiling,[51] then for Modersohn-Becker make it the *Venus de Milo* (Fig. 14), with a decorous drape knotted just so, beneath a glistening marble belly, whose absent arms the painter could imagine encircling its female vitality. Certainly May 25, 1906, was Modersohn-Becker's spring of artistic fecundity and personal renewal. *Self-Portrait, Age 30* is the artist as goddess and creatrix: the immediate embodiment of talent and the immemorial embodiment of progeny.

A week later, June 2, 1906, things took a drastic turn, and Rilke was there to witness it. Westhoff remembered him telling her that:

> suddenly there was a knock on the studio door.... The painter went to the curtain that served as a "windbreak," looked out—and gave a start. Then she pulled the curtain closed again, turned quickly back into the room, and whispered to Rilke: "It's Modersohn...." On that day she painted no further.[52]

If this time he noticed what was going on around him, Modersohn would have seen the nudes (including the self-portrait with its manifesto of maiden-name initials), the portrait of Sombart with its charged outline, and the one of Rilke that Modersohn-Becker was in the process of painting. It too has traces of a vibrant red-orange contour. (It is a color the artist uses as an accent and as a highlight, including on the pubes in the later, life-size, standing nude self-portrait [Pl. 14].) For whatever reason, after Modersohn's arrival, Rilke refused further portrait sittings.

Modersohn stayed in Paris for one tense week, unsuccessfully entreating his wife to return to him and Worpswede. After he left, Modersohn-Becker immediately wrote the mutual friend who had introduced her and Sombart: "Otto Modersohn was here. He asked me about Sombart. I said 'no.'" She was asking the friend to keep silent about her affair. As she explained, "OM is a person who does not want and does not tolerate the truth."[53] Modersohn returned to Paris in the fall, and by the end of the year husband and wife did reconcile—on her terms, which included being free to go back and forth to Paris. Then in early 1907 Modersohn-Becker became pregnant.

*Self-Portrait, Age 30* finds the artist at an uncharted and gendered frontier giving herself pictorial shape as a modern woman artist. We do not know when Modersohn-Becker painted her allegory based on this self-portrait (Fig. 15). Her

early cataloguer Gustav Pauli ascribes it to the following year, 1907, which would mean this reworking was painted when the artist was pregnant. The artist flanks her self-portrait with two female figures, and rearranges the position of her hands. Instead of encircling her belly, one hand holds up, between her breasts, a bowl with two fruits (talent and progeny?). Now in the domain of allegory she adorns herself with a chaplet and a necklace (much as she adorned her young oblation in *Sitting Girl Nude with Vases of Flowers* [Pl. 4]). The two parenthetic figures hold a fruit and a flower, respectively, and lift their free arms in ritualized gestures. The importuning figure at the left also raises anxious, beseeching eyes to the heavens. The artist's gaze out at us has not wavered.

"I'm not afraid of anything," Modersohn-Becker wrote in her last letter, "everything will go well, only death, now there is the ghost that frightens me, that is the one true misfortune."[54] The artist, age 31, died in Worpswede in November 1907, three weeks after giving birth to a daughter.

Paula Modersohn-Becker's pictures do not betray her, as Virginia Woolf said of Vanessa Bell's nudes after scrutinizing them for clues to the artist's biography. They are, instead, expressive statements of desire and risk. Women's desire, observes British art historian Griselda Pollock, "has yet to be recognized in representations by women painters of a certain critical moment in the conjunctural histories of feminism and modernism."[55] For want of the nail of such recognition of her painting of the nude, I have been arguing, Modersohn-Becker's most ambitious and unique contribution is lost in these "conjunctural histories."

Across the span of the twentieth century, women artists have been redrawing the cultural map. There is a growing interest in Modersohn-Becker worldwide, as documented most recently in large exhibitions in Scotland, London, and Japan, and in contemporary art studios in New York and in Europe.[56] At the National Gallery in London, Modersohn-Becker was the climax in the exhibition "Rebels & Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century" (2006). There were rebels before her, but the exhibition argued for Modersohn-Becker as the first woman artist martyred by her misunderstood genius, and exhibited her *Self-Portrait, Age 30* to make this point.

In "Rebels & Martyrs" Modersohn-Becker and Egon Schiele were paired as markers of "Creativity & Sexuality." At first glance, they seem an odd couple: her work resonates differently from his. But, in fact, both are threatening. His nudes were judged obscene, hers dangerous. Her painting was dangerous, for example, to the Third Reich—it was she and not Schiele who was hung in the Degenerate Art exhibition (1938). Decades before this infamous exhibition, both her life and her vision were transgressive of conventions regarding women, women artists, and the female nude. In 1906 Modersohn-Becker claimed a pivotal place in the emergence and development of modernism. It has taken over a century for us to be able to see, let alone articulate, her genius. ●

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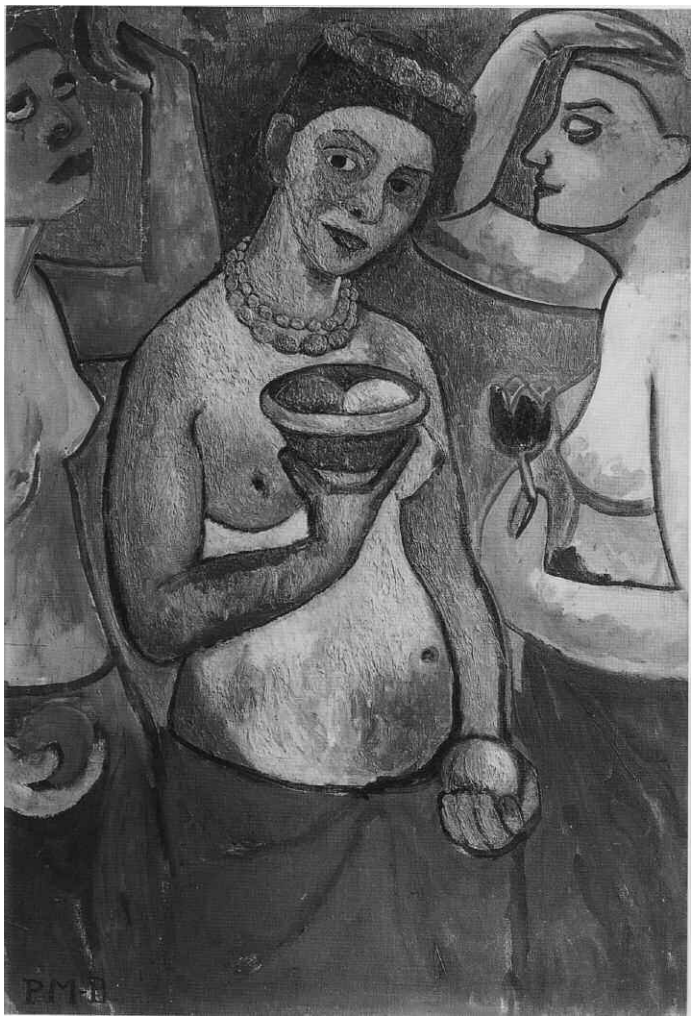


Fig. 15. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Composition with Three Female Figures* (middle figure, a self-portrait) (1906/ 07), on cardboard, 43 1/3" x 29 1/2". Destroyed in WorldWar II.

## Notes

1. *Paula Modersohn-Becker in Briefen und Tagebüchern* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1979), 449 (Letter to Martha Vogeler, 21 May 1906). Hereafter cited as M-B/ Fischer 1979. All translations are by the author.
2. Gustav Pauli, *Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1919). An expanded second edition was published in 1922, and a further expanded third edition in 1934.
3. For a comparison of landscapes by Modersohn-Becker and Georgia O'Keeffe, see my "American Women Artists in Munich, or *Die Frauen ohne Schatten*" in *American Artists in Munich: Artistic Migration and Cultural Exchange Processes*, eds. Christian Fuhrmeister, Hubertus Kohle, Veerle Thielemans (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009).
4. There are only a handful of paintings of males, including boys bathing nude in moor canals, the odd peasant, and portrait heads of members of her family (her husband, her brothers) and intimates (Rainer Maria Rilke, Werner Sombart). Her one adult male nude is the product of her French *académie* training.

5. Virginia Woolf, "Foreword," in *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*, exhibition checklist (The London Artists' Association, Feb. 4-Mar. 8, 1930).
6. There is a sculptural group of a mother and children by Donndorf (1835-1916) in New York City: the James Fountain, 1875-81, in Union Square Park.
7. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 45 (Letter to her parents, 21 October 1892).
8. Zeichen- und Malschule des Vereins der Künstlerinnen in Berlin.
9. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 141 (Journal, 11 November 1898).
10. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 188 (Letter to her parents, 11 January 1900).
11. Beate Bonus Jeep, *Sechzig Jahre Freundschaft mit Käthe Kollwitz* (Boppard: Karl Rauch Verlag, 1949), 7.
12. M-B Fischer 1979, 347 (Letter to Otto Modersohn, 2 March, 1903).
13. John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), see especially chapter six, "Visualizing Adolescence."
14. See, for example, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Marzella* (1909-10), Moderna Museet, Stockholm.
15. John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, vol. I: 1881-1906 (New York: Random House, 1991), 471.
16. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 240 (Letter to Rainer Maria Rilke, 25 October 1900).
17. The writers were Paul Westheim, Hans Heilmaier, and Leopold Zahn. Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1957), 165.
18. Quoted in Reinhold Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work* (London: John Murray, 1984), 15.
19. Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 426.
20. Sent to her by the family of her cousins Cora and Maidli Parizot, who lived in Java.
21. An English translation appeared in 1909. Ellen Sofia Carolina Key, *The Century of the Child,* trans. Marie Franzos (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909).
22. See the exhibition catalogue *Rineke Dijkstra. Paula Modersohn-Becker. Portraits* (Bremen: Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, 2003).
23. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 357 (Letter to Otto Modersohn, 10 March 1905).
24. See Donald Gordon, *Modern Art Exhibitions 1900-1916*, vol. II (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1974). Additionally, according to Josep Palau i Fabre, Picasso's *Two Acrobats with a Dog* (1905) was also on exhibit. See his *Picasso: The Early Years 1881-1907* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), 400.
25. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 576-77 (Letter from Clara Rilke-Westhoff, 18 October 1907).
26. M-B/ Fisher, 342, 531.
27. *Rainer Maria Rilke Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906* (Leipzig: Im Insel-Verlag, 1930), 291 (Letter to Karl von der Heydt, 16 January 1906).
28. This painting was the frontispiece for all illustrated editions of the artist's letters and journals reprinted by Kurt Wolff Verlag in the 1930s. (Editions reprinted in the 1920s used a self-portrait or a photograph.) This particular image thrived at a time when the political climate put all her representations of the figure into question. In the Third Reich her art was declared ugly and insulting to German physical beauty.
29. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 427 (Diary of Otto Modersohn, 11 December, 1905).
30. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 445 (Letter to Milly Rohland-Becker, May 1906).
31. As would even Egon Schiele. See his *The Family (Squatting Couple)* (1917-18), Osterreichische Galerie, Vienna.
32. Pauli, *Paula Modersohn-Becker*, 22.
33. Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 133-34.
34. For a nineteenth-century forerunner, Gauguin is the better candidate. See Wendy Slatkin, "Maternity and Sexuality in the 1890s," *Woman's Art Journal* (Spring/ Summer 1980): 11-19.
35. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 344 (Journal, 20 February 1903).
36. See Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), especially chapter 4, "*Amazone, Femme Nouvelle*, and the Threat to the Bourgeois Family."
37. Natasha Staller, *A Sum of Destructions: Picasso's Cultures & The Creation of Cubism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 318.
38. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1952), 676.
39. "Dies malte ich mit 30 Jahren an meinem 6. Hochzeitstage P. B."
40. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 434 (Letter from Herma Becker to her mother, 22 February 1906).
41. Letter from Clara Rilke-Westhoff to Rainer Maria Rilke, 8 February 1906, quoted in Renate Berger, *Malerinnen auf dem Weg ins 20. Jahrhundert: Kunstgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1982), 318-19.
42. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 434 (Letter to Rainer Maria Rilke, 17 February 1906).
43. Gordon, *Modern Art Exhibitions*, 149.
44. Letter from Otto Modersohn, 2 March 1906, quoted in Marina Bohlmann-Modersohn, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Eine Biographie mit Briefen* (Berlin: Der Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1995), 240-41.
45. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 444 (Letter from Herma Becker to Otto Modersohn, 6 May 1906).
46. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 440 (Letter to Otto Modersohn, 9 April 1906).
47. 20" x 18", *Paula Modersohn-Becker 1876-1907: Werkverzeichnis der Gemälde,* eds. Günter Busch, Milena Schicketanz, Wolfgang Werner (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1998), vol. II, no. 680.
48. It seems unlikely that her own nudity, or the image of it, would be an issue for her personally. Modersohn-Becker was an advocate of "air bathing" nude outdoors, and she posed nude outdoors for a painting by her husband (causing a scandal in Worpswede).
49. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Requiem (For a Friend)*, trans. Lilly Engler and Adrienne Rich, in *The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker*, trans. and ed. J. Diane Radycki (Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1980), 322.
50. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), see especially chapter VIII, "The Alternative Convention."
51. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," in his collection *New Poems* (1907 and 1908).
52. Clara Rilke-Westhoff quoted in H.W. Petzet, *Das Bildnis des Dichters* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Taschenbuch, 1977), 112.
53. *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen* (Leipzig und Weimar: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1982), 289 (Letter to Carl Hauptmann, 10 June 1906).
54. M-B/ Fischer 1979, 478 (Letter to Herma Becker from her mother, 4 December 1907).
55. Griselda Pollock, "The Case of the Missing Women" in *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*, eds. Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer (New York: Continuum, 1994), 98.
56. The National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh ("The Naked Portrait: 1900-2007"); The National Gallery in London ("Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century," 2006); The Mayagi Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, Hayama, and Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts in Japan ("Paula Modersohn-Becker," 2005-06).

# Making Babies, Painting Bodies

## Women, Art, and Paula Modersohn-Becker's Productivity

By Anne Higonnet

Laborious and decisive, strokes of paint analyze the weight and shape of a woman's pregnant body. Each stroke has been left to look like paint tracked by a brush, thick oil paste pushed and spread by brush bristles. Each stroke is dedicated to one color, separating the sensation of sight into its constituent elements, understanding one image as its distinct parts. Together the marks add up to a picture of physical mass. Every bead, every background leaf, petal, or wallpaper ornament is translated by paint into an echo of dense, round, shadowed belly, navel, breast, and nipples. To this day, Paula Modersohn-Becker's paintings remain exceptional images of one of the most fundamental human experiences.

Pregnancy, the care and feeding of babies, small children—these might seem to be the most natural subjects in the world. Superficially, Modersohn-Becker's paintings celebrate what is natural, primitive, even animal, about the female birth cycle. Naked, kneeling in landscapes, embracing their babies, revealing gravid torsos, Modersohn-Becker's women appear to exist apart from, or prior to, culture. And yet, once examined, Modersohn-Becker's paintings suggest the opposite. Her handling of oil paint, her treatment of color, light, and volume demand attention simultaneously to the material of her work and to the transformation of that material into representational marks. Modersohn-Becker's paintings ask us to notice a transaction between experience and the signs of that experience. To make that transaction represent the work of birth is to connect the natural creation of babies with the artistic creation of paintings. No one before Paula Modersohn-Becker had dared to make such an assertion. Even now, a hundred years later, when the condition of women in the first world has improved significantly, her assertion is still radical.

For the most natural subject in the world, birth-work has been strangely invisible. Though art dealt heroically with physical subjects like death, disease, torture, resurrection, and battle combat, it produced virtually no images of what it feels like to be pregnant, give birth, or protect and feed a tiny infant. Needless to say, the survival of the human race depends on women doing that work, and yet somehow it did not become an artistic subject.

Common sense suggests several explanations. Though the birth cycle is universal and endlessly repeated, it causes bodies to change with disconcerting speed. A pregnant woman's body looks different from one week to the next, as does a newborn baby's. How to study the sight of such unnerving change with steady care? How to translate such a temporary subject into a permanent work of art? The people, moreover, who most care about representing the subject, because they have experienced it, are the same people who are deprived of the opportunity to represent it, because of that very experience. Before the era of birth control, a woman could spend her whole adult life, day and night, year after year, being pregnant and caring for completely dependent children. Learning to paint takes years, and painting well requires long stretches of time. For hundreds of years, society insisted that women shouldn't devote time to anything but their children and households. Women probably couldn't be artists anyway, men furthermore claimed, because the very qualities that made women good mothers were the antithesis of what made men artists. Maternity vs. genius: to each gender his or her own kind of creation.

Those who did have the opportunity to represent the subject were alienated from it, if not repelled by it. From a masculine perspective, the cycle of birth has traditionally looked ugly. Paula Modersohn-Becker's husband Otto, for instance, said she was attracted to ugly subjects. The cosmetic ideals that rendered women attractive to men did not include pregnant bellies, let alone the mess and sagging flesh of after-birth. Once the baby was on its way to independence, chubby and attuned to the outside world, artists looked again. The Madonna and Child was, of course, one of the favorite subjects of western art from the middle-ages through the seventeenth century, and secular versions of the Madonna persisted well into the twentieth century. Madonna and Child images, however, were not about the mother's experience of her maternity. It presented a divine boy-child to the worshipping world.[1] Since the 1980s, feminist theory has delved into all these issues.[2] Much deeper than simple logistic objections to women making art, feminist art historians have shown, are the structures of culture which position women as the subjects of a controlling (and admiring) masculine gaze. It was feminist art historians who first saw the beauties of Modersohn-Becker's work and situated it within an alternative, hidden, and unrecognized history of art by women.[3]

Theory aside, does it make any human difference for a subject to be represented or not? Those who are accustomed to having their experiences raised to the level of art and represented as social examples tend to dismiss the effects of being invisible. Western women across the ages may or may not have cherished a personal belief in the power and value of



Fig. 1. Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del parto* (1467), detached fresco, 80" x 80". Santa Maria a Nomentana, Monterchi..

their experience of the birth cycle. Their societies did not translate those beliefs into collective form or give them the social status of art. Nor was it simply enough for some woman, any woman, to gain access to the making of art. Women did begin to enter into art careers in increasing numbers in the course of the nineteenth century. Yet they did not automatically paint or sculpt the biological dramas of women's lives. Even when one is trained to make art and has the time and means to pursue an artistic career, one does not necessarily make art out of any or all of one's experiences. Social approval and artistic models are both essential, and history had produced neither. Even women with very similar circumstances did not work on identical subjects. Modersohn-Becker's peer, Gabriele Münter, for example, did not make pictures of pregnancy and early maternity the way Modersohn-Becker did, nor did Käthe Kollwitz, another peer, whose powerful images of mothers and children are more indictments of social systems than explorations of what it feels like to be inside a female body (see for example p. 27, Fig. 3). Having an experience is one thing. Translating it into art is quite another.

Modersohn-Becker had few examples to emulate, which makes her work all the more momentous. Those she did have are well worth looking at in comparison with her paintings, because they show where her work came from, and, more strikingly, how far she had to go by herself.

Within her own artistic tradition, the tradition of western painting, where could Modersohn-Becker have looked? Could she, for instance, have known Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* (1467; Fig. 1)? The late-nineteenth-century revival of interest in quattrocento Italian painting had been particularly kind to Piero's reputation. Geometrically and majestically calm, Piero's Madonna draws attention to her own pregnancy. Her tapered fingers slip into a slit in her dress, pointing to her womb. No flesh can be seen within the slit, but the white fabric of her shift contrasts so vividly with the blue of her outer dress that it is as if Mary were gesturing to what is happening inside her body. Lest we not notice the significance of Mary's gesture, Piero has painted two angels parting patterned curtains to show their white lining, and Mary within, repeating Mary's gesture. This corporal imagery, paired with an explicit title, make Piero's *Madonna del Parto* an exceptional image in the history of art. Yet late medieval and Renaissance scenes of a visibly pregnant Mary and an equally pregnant Saint Elizabeth greeting each other, sometimes tenderly touching each other's bellies, were not uncommon, nor were scenes of the moments just after birth—the birth of Mary, notably—when the new mother rests in bed while female attendants or companions tend to the many tasks of after-birth. Such paintings described the social and theological significance of their subjects more than they expressed the physical experience of the birth cycle, but they were much better than nothing.

Modersohn-Becker knew the work of some French Impressionists, Monet among them. It is not impossible, though extremely unlikely, that she saw a pioneer image of pregnancy by the French woman among the Impressionists. Whether or not she did know Morisot's 1871 portrait of her sister Edma (Fig. 2), when Modersohn-Becker made her pilgrimages to Paris, the nerve-center of modernist painting, she was drawn by the assertion of individualism which had made the picture possible. Charles Baudelaire, famously, had urged young male artists to represent their experience of contemporary values in his 1863 "The Painter of Modern Life."[4] He had not anticipated that women, too, might have a modern experience to express.

In her portrait, Berthe Morisot merged her attitude toward her subject with her skill at the latest formal innovations. Edouard Manet, rethinking the seventeenth century painting of Diego Velasquez, had shown his colleagues how much shape could be laconically implied by subtle modulations of almost flat black. Morisot used Manet's trick for a new purpose. Women were not supposed to show themselves in public when they were noticeably pregnant. Morisot cannily allows a first glance to find its social expectation met. That glance is occupied by the strong contrast between the modulated realism of face and hands, and abstract, colorful, treatment of the floral upholstery on the sofa and curtains. A more careful look, however, shows what is supposed to be unseen. By deciphering the black expanse, by understanding it in relation to the position of the hands, an astute observer realizes that Edma is close to delivery. The hands have been arched to hint at a high round volume below them. The first joints of her two right fingers and thumb, a triply firm alternation of light bars and dark lines, angle downward, marking the shelf that only the taut stretch over a near-term infant raises. Above, a delicate parting of relaxed left fingers flows from a wedding-ring, flesh-beige against soot black. Located not at, but just next to, the dynamic compositional

intersection of the picture's diagonals, the crossed hands displace and articulate the picture's sexuality. As do so many great Impressionist pictures, Morisot's portrait allows us to see easily, to see conventionally, and also allows us to be more challenged if we are willing to look harder.

If Modersohn-Becker almost certainly did not know Morisot's work, she at least had an inkling of Gustav Klimt's. The Austrian Secession movement, with Klimt in the lead, was the analogue of the German Worpswede movement to which Modersohn-Becker belonged. Comparing his 1903 *Hope I* (Fig. 3) with her 1906 *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* (front cover and Fig. 4) brings out some crucial ways in which Modersohn-Becker's paintings belonged to a central European, early-twentieth-century avant-garde. Building on the scandalous successes of Manet and the Impressionists, the Post-Impressionists marketed shock, and the movements all over Europe which were inspired by the Post-Impressionists even more so. *Epater le bourgeois* (shock the bourgeoisie) became a standard move, though one which had to be constantly escalated to keep on succeeding.

Klimt's and Modersohn-Becker's paintings of a pregnant female nude were undoubtedly intended to provoke scandal. As part of a pattern of subject-matter, Klimt's *Hope I* is only one among many forbidden sexual subjects the artist painted or drew in order to maintain his reputation for wild genius. (Not a subject he dared often, however—already by *Hope II* [1907-08], he represented pregnancy covered in a mantle of completely flat pattern.) Klimt's elongated as well as swollen white nude, with its flaming red head and pubic hair, is juxtaposed both with arcing flat areas of tessellated ornament, and with a frieze of heads symbolizing the cycle of male life: mask of suffering, grim reaper, skull, handsome youth. The pregnant body is thus both one among several daringly novel experiments in the flattening of form, and the dominant element in a message about the eternal renewal of (male) life. Forcefully interrupting the sharp boundary between a flat black area speckled with orange and a flat night-blue area embellished with misty flags and gold sparks, the swell of the round belly echoes the abstract curve of a decorative striated black and red shape. Luxuriantly expanded by ripples of red-gold tresses, the woman's elfin face and direct sapphire gaze compensates for the stark row of male heads above. Either way, the painting is not about the woman's experience, but rather about the painter's ideas about his own art and life.

Klimt's painting and Modersohn-Becker's do have something else important in common besides their subject. Although *Hope I* is elegant and sophisticated, and its body parts are rendered with a finely-crafted illusionism, it is also primitivist. Like all subscribers to avant-garde principles, Klimt was inspired by art traditions which most of western culture had scorned since it encountered them. *Hope I*, like Klimt's other work at the time, shows the influence of Japanese prints, Egyptian art, and Byzantine mosaics. Travel, museums, and publications had made archaic and non-western artistic traditions (including Italian "primitives" like Piero della Francesca's) visually available. Their simplified or abstract forms, their use of geometry and pattern refreshed the styles of ambitious young



Fig. 2. Berthe Morisot, *Portrait of Edma Pontillon* (1871), pastel on paper, 32" x 25 1/2". Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

painters, as well as providing further opportunities to shock staid middle-class philistines. Both Klimt and Modersohn-Becker must have seen any number of bulbous ancient fertility figures, as well as women in Ukiyo-e prints whose frank comfort with their bodies flouted all rules of middle-class decorum.

Modersohn-Becker's primitivism is more immediately evident than Klimt's, and closer to home. She said quite openly that her heavy forms, thick lines, flat colors, as well as her associations between naked bodies and nature, were all inspired by what she perceived as the essential, eternal, primitive truths of local peasants and German earth. In an artistic climate which identified the esthetically authentic with what had been previously dismissed as uncivilized or improperly carnal, the "ugly" subjects of the birth cycle could suddenly qualify as art, albeit marginally.

A second important historical condition of possibility for Modersohn-Becker's work was what I would call the phenomenological moment. Her education and career occurred at a high point in the credibility of a dialectical exchange between an individual's optical perception of a work of art and an embodied individual experience of what the work of art represented. In another time and place, an artist might not have felt it was appropriate for art to represent an intimate physical experience, nor would an audience for art have felt that understanding the artist's experience was a worthwhile activity. More specifically, the power of an artist's personal handling of paint to register meaning is a cultural



Fig. 3. Gustav Klimt, *Hope I* (1903), oil on canvas, 74 1/2" x 26 1/2". National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

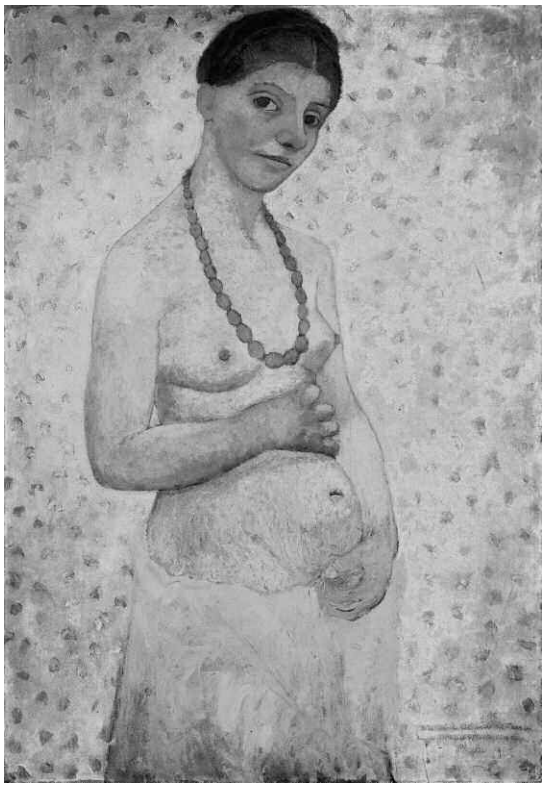


Fig. 4. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* (25 May 1906), on cardboard, 40" x 27 5/8". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

convention both artists and audiences have to agree to accept, however unconsciously. The agreement was strong enough to be still taken for granted by the great phenomenological theorists of the middle of the twentieth century. What matters here is that their writing, notably Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, used as its chief examples exactly the same kind of Post-Impressionist oil painting that most directly inspired Modersohn-Becker, namely the painting of Paul Cézanne.[5] Merleau-Ponty assumed that an artist's personal style could amplify the meaning of the actual experience he represented, which Cézanne himself no doubt believed, as did Modersohn-Becker, who modeled her aspirations on Cézanne's work. The belief became a self-fulfilling prophecy when it caused artists to invest their meanings in their style. The meaning of Modersohn-Becker's work cannot only be understood in terms of its subject matter, no matter how unprecedented and courageous her subject matter was. The meaning of her work depends on the relationship between her subject and the way she used the raw materials with which she represented the subject. Our perception of her subjects should be mediated by the form with which she mediated her subjects.

Modersohn-Becker's crucial apprenticeship in the painting of women's bodies was her painting of children. The subject of children had been increasingly relegated to women since the invention of the modern, Romantic, child in the middle of the eighteenth century, both in the fine and in the applied arts.[6] Childhood, moreover, had been radically redefined visually since the middle of the eighteenth century to imagine children as blank and innocent creatures whose bodies were usually represented as insubstantially as possible. The ideal child was a fairy child with barely any physical body at all.

Meanwhile, a counter-current in the representation of children persisted, which was notably strong in Germany. Robert Rosenblum has drawn our attention to the exceptionally sturdy, moody, almost ugly children in the work of the German Romantics, Runge for instance.[7] The children painted by Modersohn-Becker belong to that lineage. Represented as if from very close up, they occupy by far the largest surface of Modersohn-Becker's canvases, and their solid colors, rough outlines, and thick proportions match the steadiness of their gazes and their attachment to the rural places they seem to be rooted in (c. 1904; Pl. 15, also Pl. 8). Though Modersohn-Becker's primitivism threatens to make her figures of children appear almost like brute creatures, it does give them the physical presence usually denied to children.

Modersohn-Becker pushed against convention even further with her pictures of mothers holding newborn children (see for example Pls. 1, 10 and 11). Her babies are not the usual tiny lifeless dolls. They have weight and mass, a material existence with needs and cries. They are emphatically naked bodies, painted as if they were still a part of their mother's bodies, maternal bodies which Modersohn-Becker renders with equal blunt force. Painted with the same color and held within one outline, Modersohn-Becker represents a moment of transition in which the baby has not yet fully separated from the mother, in which it exists outside the its mother's body but cannot survive without its mother's body. Both mother and baby are oblivious to anything but their mutual embrace. Modersohn-Becker's paintings are of their physical experience of each other

While representing someone else's maternity does not necessarily entail representing one's own pregnancy, in Modersohn-Becker's case one subject did lead to the other. Her representations of embodied childhood and maternity preceded her representations of an embodied pregnancy, and perhaps prepared them. She was working through the birth cycle in reverse, by using her self-portraits to show an audience the physical beginning of maternity, the start of maternity within herself. The beginning, her image shows us, though invisible to others, is as much a tangible physical experience as what others can see once a baby is born.

To understand how she expressed her subject as no one had before, we can go back to the comparisons with Klimt, Piero, and Morisot. Modersohn-Becker's self-portrait crosses the nudity of Klimt's female body with Piero's monumental dignity. She does

not expose her body as audaciously as Klimt does his model's. Klimt dared his audience to look at red pubic hair beneath a hugely swollen belly, whereas Modersohn-Becker more modestly draped a pale cloth around her hips. The cloth, however, with its broad rhythmic swings and curves, acts pictorially like Piero's geometric repetitions, to give ample quiet mass to the body. Like Piero, Modersohn-Becker makes the body the image's solid, still core. Everything else is incidental.

Like Morisot, Modersohn-Becker used the latest innovations of avant-garde painting style to further express her meaning, or rather, to insist on meaning itself. But whereas Morisot used an expanse of black to play on the social convention of the pregnant body's invisibility, Modersohn-Becker used the flat thick application of solid strokes of oil paint to assert the visibility of the pregnant body. Instead of the disappearance of the belly in a powdery black pastel void, we have instead an analytical examination of its color and shape. Touches of flat color set side by side explore the relationship between sight and touch, between light and volume. If Cézanne made us see the matter of an apple exist in real space as we never had before, because of its translation into representation, Modersohn-Becker did the same to something rather more important than an apple. Her use of oil paint helped us feel the presence of one body within another, the miracle of one life growing within another, acquiring its mass and weight by forcing maternal form outward, distending a surface of skin so that it signifies a child within. Modersohn-Becker represented physical reproduction intellectually. She used the sign-making essence of painting to stand for the natural making of babies. She made her paintings, as it were, pregnant with meaning. This is one explanation for the fact that Modersohn-Becker represented herself as if she were pregnant in her Wedding Self-Portrait even though she was not, actually, physically pregnant at that moment. Among several plausible possibilities, (such as a traditional association between marriage and fertility), whose variety could have over-determined Modersohn-Becker's choice, I would argue she was imagining how all her creative ambitions could become one.

The women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s caught up with some of what Modersohn-Becker had accomplished. As Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler have shown in their essential book, *Pregnant Pictures* (2000), a feminist reappraisal of women's rights revolutionized the photographic representation of pregnancy.[8] Many women artists tackled the physical issues of conception, pregnancy, miscarriage, birth, and post-partum turmoil. Meanwhile, women with no aspirations to professional art were taking or posing for home-photographs of pregnancy and birth. The list of what to take to the hospital for a baby's birth began to include a camera. As if a flood held back by the social dike of genteel femininity, these photographs, both professional and amateur, reveal the extent of the need Modersohn-Becker had tapped into decades earlier.

And yet, still, a century after Modersohn-Becker's pioneering paintings, we have barely met their challenges.[9] Consider two more comparisons, one in the domain of popular culture, and the other in the world of high art.

*Vanity Fair* published a photograph of the naked and very pregnant film star Demi Moore (Fig. 5) on the cover of its August 1991 issue. The image, which quickly became notorious, was reviled and censored. Some stores refused to carry the issue, and all newsstands except those in New York City sold it with Moore's body concealed by a piece of white paper. Negative letters to the editor poured in. The scandal was itself, of course, a condition of its success. Moore and the photographer Annie Leibovitz had together constructed an image which reconciled the recognition of pregnancy with glamour. Hair precisely gelled and tousled, skin gleaming, sparkling gems by her face and on her hand, Moore projects the signs of femininity, wealth, and power in the upper half of her portrait. With a spiral motion worthy of baroque sculpture, Moore's commanding gaze faces in one direction, her emphatic yet protective hands in another, and the globe of her belly in a third. Social ideals and physical realities are at once distinguished from each other and made into parts of one whole. The cover inspired endless imitations or parodies. Its impact signaled the acceptance of advanced pregnancy into the canons of cosmetic beauty. By 1991, the commodification of reproductive technologies, combined with the independent purchasing of women, had created a market for a new vision of pregnancy. Consumer culture had finally caught up with Modersohn-Becker.

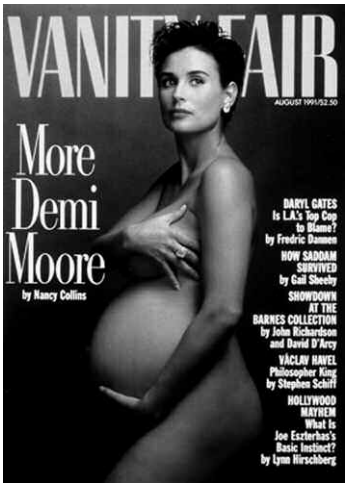


Fig. 5. Annie Leibowitz and Demi Moore, cover of *Vanity Fair*, August 1991.

But was Modersohn-Becker's purpose simply to make herself into an attractive object of desire, or was she trying something deeper and more difficult? The very glamour of the Moore-Leibovitz portrait draws attention by contrast to the dignity of Modersohn-Becker's paintings. The shine of the Moore portrait is all on the surface and about surfaces. The ideals it conveys are very much the social ideals of lovely things—of women who shine like jewels and are just as ornamental. Look at the string of yellow beads in Modersohn-Becker's paintings (1906; Pls. 14 and 16). They are a concentrated idea of feminine ornament, not indicators of a luxury market value which exists outside the photograph. The yellow beads are there to rhyme with other circular forms, to be form unto itself, color for the sake of color, which proposes the inherent beauty of a woman's pregnant body, rather than its objectification or transformation into an expensive bauble. Leibovitz's photograph is an image intended to make you admire and covet what it represents, not engage with it. It shows you what you already think you want to see, rather than asking you what it is you might want to see and why. It does not try to change your mind. And why should it? The function of magazine covers is to sell magazines, not call into question what you assume about the world you live in.



Fig. 6. Rineke Dijkstra, *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16, 1994*, C-print, 24 3/8" x 20 1/2". Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

By the 1990s, it was possible for a photograph to make pregnancy look gorgeous. It was also possible to do in photography what Modersohn-Becker had done in painting. It is not surprising, therefore, that a comparison with Rineke Dijkstra(b. 1959) has already been made.[10] Because the comparison really does help see Modersohn-Becker's work more clearly in the light of our own time, and because it has been made so far only in German, I want to make it again, somewhat differently.

Like Modersohn-Becker, Rineke Dijkstra uses her medium in the densest, materially thickest way possible to make us feel the conceptual gravity of her project. Many people, including myself at first, I have to admit, assume that Dijkstra's photographs are digitally produced. Their scale is so large, and the optical information they provide is so dense, that it is easy to assume they are made with megapixels and have been digitally altered to perfect their compositions or color. In fact, they are analogue photographs. Like Modersohn-Becker, Dijkstra uses a traditional, almost archaic medium because it can load an image with so much pictorial information and endow its subject with such material substance. In most of Dijkstra's photographs, the figure stands full-length, centered, looking directly at us. These are not figures one can casually ignore or brush past. In many of her photographs, moreover, Dijkstra has chosen a space for her figure to stand on whose lines or forms extend toward our space, suggesting her figures, though alone within in their pictorial space, are not isolated from ours. In *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16, 1994* (Fig. 6), for instance, the spreading lines of the floorboards reach toward us.

The grand scale and iconic frontality of her children, moreover, does the opposite of what the miniaturization all too common in images of children does. By endowing children with physical presence through sheer surface area, Dijkstra refutes one of the most common visual tricks with which children are represented only in order to reduce and diminish them, in every sense of those words. At the end of the twentieth century, Dijkstra still had to deal with pictorial stereotypes and conventions which Modersohn-Becker rebelled against while they were at the height of their persuasive power.

Dijkstra is most famous for her portraits of children posed on beaches or in forests (see for example, page 7, Fig. 7). (Some of them are distinctly adolescent, which, importantly, differentiates them one from the other, and denies the legal fiction that all young people are children until suddenly they aren't. Legally speaking, however, Dijkstra's beach figures can all be called children.) The obvious association is of children with nature. Dijkstra, however, while appealing to us with the obvious association, also contradicts it. Dijkstra, like Modersohn-Becker, works in a critical zone where nature meets culture. The children could have been nude, or the swimsuits could have been relatively timeless in their style or inconspicuous in their design. Without making any glaring statement, Dijkstra has decided otherwise. Her children wear historically dateable, ordinarily commercial swimsuits, which are at the center of her photographs, and often the brightest and most optically complicated parts of her images. Their effect is subtle, all the more so because of their banality, yet they signify a moment in social time, or a social occasion. Without being aware of how pictures in the last two hundred years have emptied out the subject of the child, leaving behind only the sugary surface of cute, it could be difficult to see how Dijkstra ultimately insists that children's bodies are neither the innocent blanks nor the commercial objects to which even her own photographs refer.

Like Modersohn-Becker, Dijkstra seems to have been moved by her representation of a childhood at the boundary between the natural and the social, to explore that same boundary within maternity. In 1994, Dijkstra made a series on mothers in the days immediately following birth, which is the least well known of all her series, though I believe it is extremely important, in ways Modersohn-Becker's paintings help us understand. In this series, Dijkstra went back to Modersohn-Becker's daring project, and sought to make a natural subject legible, to make us perceive a physical experience through a careful perception of signs.

Take *Tecla, Amsterdam*, for instance. Monumental though vulnerable, stalwart though exposed, the figure of the new mother controls the space of the photograph and meets our gaze. Dijkstra has put the signs of her subject having just given birth at the center of her photograph: the belly still distended, but in an empty way, the characteristically pregnant dark line from navel to public hair still visible, and most telling of all, the trickle of post-partum blood running down the inside of one leg. In another, slightly more obvious photograph in the series, the new mother wears the standard paper-fabric underpants and pad to staunch the blood which all mothers try to forget as soon as possible. The signs are not easy to understand for anyone who has not given birth or who does not know someone intimately who has just given birth, or for

someone who does not care.[11] But for those who do, the signs are unmistakably visible on the women's bodies. Dijkstra asks us to recognize a critical moment of maternity by decoding signs, signs which are as close as they can be to marks of the visceral: blood, stretched skin, genitals. They are, moreover, the organizing axis of Dijkstra's composition. In *Tecla, Amsterdam,* the line of blood, though wavering, continues the faint pigment track down from the navel which extends into the barely perceptible fold between the woman's labia. If we wondered whether the signs of maternity, or the possibility that maternity, and the reading of signs, are important to Dijkstra's idea of maternity, the crucial compositional work they do in her photographs should eliminate our doubts. Like Modersohn-Becker, Dijkstra is making sign meet matter, making art meet maternity.

Balancing the verticality of the signs belonging to the mother's bodies is another set of signs, the knot of form created by the tiny red infant body and the awkward, tentative grasp which holds that body. Dijkstra is not afraid to make us see how ugly and minuscule and wrinkled a newborn infant is, and how difficult it is for a mother to learn how to hold such a thing, let alone to love it, as a Madonna would. These are the moments in which pregnancy and labor become maternity, in which one kind of physical work becomes another. Mother and baby knew each other in the most intimate possible way, as parts of each other's bodies. In the composition of Dijkstra's photographs, the mothers' bodies still surround their babies' bodies. In *Tecla, Amsterdam*, even when the baby's limb protrudes into space, it extends no farther than its mother's jutting elbow. The moment of Dijkstra's photographs is the moment in which mother and baby have to renegotiate a relationship apart from each other, in the outer world. Dijkstra makes us feel this confrontation with the external, with the world outside the mother's body, by the way the mothers she pictures face the camera, and in facing the camera, confront every unforeseeable future. The baby's life depends on it. In Dijkstra's images, the infant has no other protection but its mother's body.

The mother's life is also at stake. Alone in their hour of transformation, Dijkstra's mothers hover between one identity and another, still bleeding from the work of labor, their uterus cramping back to its former size, breasts distended and nipples cracking from the arrival of milk and the baby's first feedings. The passage Dijkstra represents is a terrifying one for all women. Besides the pain, exhaustion, fear, and doubt it recalls, all women know this is a moment of mortal danger. No matter what progress modern medicine has made, no mother ever forgets that labor and the first weeks after birth have historically been deadly, and still can be. The moment Dijkstra represents as being so brave, that she represents with such bravery, is the moment that killed Modersohn-Becker. Modersohn-Becker died within three weeks of giving birth, at the age of thirty-one. ●

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## Notes

1. The classic work on the theological character of the Madonna and Child is Leo Steinberg's *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion (*Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983).
2. For a thorough analysis of this heroic work, see: Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 69 (September 1987*)*: 326-57.
3. Essential reading on Modersohn-Becker and her place in the history of art by women includes: the work on Modersohn-Becker by Diane Radyicki; Alessandra Comini, "Gender or Genius? The Women Artists of German Expressionism," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History, Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 271-92; Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists 1550-1950* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), and the entry on Modersohn-Becker, 273-79; Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), see especially 269-74.
4. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *Le Figaro* (series of essays publ. Nov. 26, 29 and Dec. 3, 1863).
5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader: Philosophy and Painting,* ed. Galen Jones (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1993), 121-49.
6. See for example my *Pictures of Innocence; the Invention and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998).
7. Robert Rosenblum. *The Romantic Child from Runge to Sendak* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988).
8. Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler, *Pregnant Pictures* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).
9. An exception might be the powerful portraits of pregnant nude women by Alice Neel. And yet, it seems to me that Neel was not so much investigating the relationship between sign-making and child-making as bravely accepting pregnancy among other less than cosmetically ideal features of her subjects. Important work has been done on Neel's female nudes, especially Pamela Allara, '"Mater' of Fact: Alice Neel's Pregnant Nudes," *American Art*, 8:2 (Spring 1994): 6-31; and Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Female Nudes" *Woman's Art Journal*, 15:2 (Fall 1994-Winter 1995): 21-30.
10. Kathrin Golka, *Rineke Dijkstra. Paula Modersohn-Becker. Portraits* (Bremen: Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, 2003).
11. See for example Julian Stallabrass, "What's In A Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography," *October*, 122 (Fall 2007): 71-90. He has written an essay, mostly about Dijkstra's photographs, which neither knows nor cares. He deems Dijkstra's photographs "ethnographic" and therefore objectifying. He argues that Dijkstra pretends her subjects are "normal" and therefore like their audience, only to reduce both subjects and audience to consumer commodities, to images, in a "neo-liberal" world. "The identification between subject and viewer," he writes, "takes place at the level of the image, and in a visual engagement with an isolated subject: it is not dialogic, communicative, or developmental, but instantaneous and instinctive" (p. 86). This might appear to be true to someone who knows nothing about the history of the image of childhood, and nothing about the signs of the different stages of maternity, and therefore cannot perceive the signs of those historical or social conditions, let alone decode them. It is also curious that Stallabrass's essay, like others of its type, bemoans the loss of individual identity at the very historical moment at which women and people who are not white accede to such an identity (by, for example, becoming extremely successful women artists). Is the supposedly pre-neo-liberal society he mourns actually the regime of his own gendered, class, and race privilege?

# Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Body in Art

By Rainer Stamm

On the 25th of May 1906, in her Paris studio in a backyard off the Avenue du Maine, Paula Modersohn-Becker finished one of her most important paintings: *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* (front cover and Fig. 1). It is the only painting she marked with an inscription, thus presenting us with the exact date of origin. With her brush she scratched into the fresh color: "This I painted at age 30 on my 6th wedding day. P.B." [1] As if to prove her confidence, Modersohn-Becker smiles cautiously into the face of the spectator. Her expression is brisk yet questioning.

This *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* is as peculiar as the life of the artist, and it brings up many questions: Why is the painter eager to point out her wedding day, at a point in her life when she just separated from her husband? Is not the inscription coupled with her signature using her maiden initials (P.B.) an affront? Does she intend to point out to herself, as well as to her descendants, her achievement to "become somebody" (as she had planned for herself for her "thirtieth year"[2]) despite her marriage?

"I am becoming somebody—I'm living the most intensely happy period of my life,"[3] she writes to her sister Milly during those days. And to her mother, who is shocked by the recent developments in her daughter's marriage, she writes full of courage and confidence: "I am beginning a new life now. Don't interfere with me; just let me be. It is so wonderfully beautiful. I lived the past week in such a state of excitement. I believe I have accomplished something good."[4]

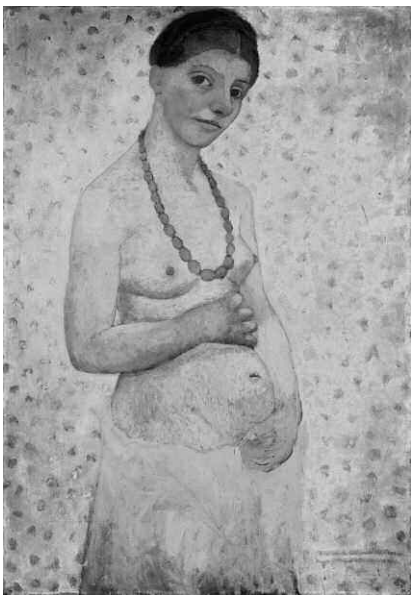


Fig. 1. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* (25 May 1906), on cardboard, 40" x 27 5/8". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.



Fig. 2. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait of the Sick Dürer* (c.1512/ 13), pen and ink with watercolor on paper, 4 5/8" x 4 1/4". Kunsthalle Bremen. © Kunsthalle Bremen – Der Kunstverein, Bremen.

As is characteristic of her Paris paintings, the background does not show a specific setting but is *peinture pure*. It is of a citrine radiance that is freckled with green. Her arms encircle her stomach, which has often been interpreted as a hint at pregnancy. But the gesture is to be seen rather as a metaphor, one that points out Modersohn-Becker's twofold creative power as a woman *and* as an artist. She alone is able to give birth *and* be creative in an artistic sense. In this case the odd gesture very likely alludes to the artist's personal fate: being a woman but—even on her sixth wedding day—still not being a mother.

In art history the painting is sensational for yet another reason: it is the first naked self-portrait by a woman. In *imitatio Christi* Albrecht Dürer sketched a naked self-portrait, *Self-Portrait of the Sick Dürer,* (c. 1512/13; Fig. 2), showing himself as an invalid pointing to a wound in his side, while directing his gaze at the viewer. This sketch, which belongs to the Kunsthalle Bremen, was undoubtedly known by Modersohn-Becker, who lived in Bremen from the age of twelve. Dürer, as a pioneer of a new artist's self-concept, explored himself in this drawing and stated the exposed position of the artist in society.

Around 1829 Victor Emil Janssen painted himself half-naked, questioning himself while at the same time using himself as the cheapest model available. In this *Self-Portrait at the Easel* (c. 1829; Fig. 3), which also is set against a gleaming fade-green background, he glares at the spectator just as Modersohn-

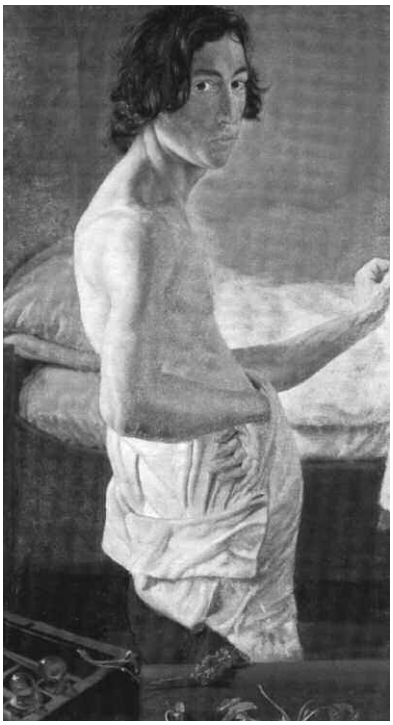


Fig. 3. Victor Emil Janssen, *Self-Portrait at the Easel* (c.1829), oil on paper on canvas, 13" x 22". Kunsthalle, Hamburg,

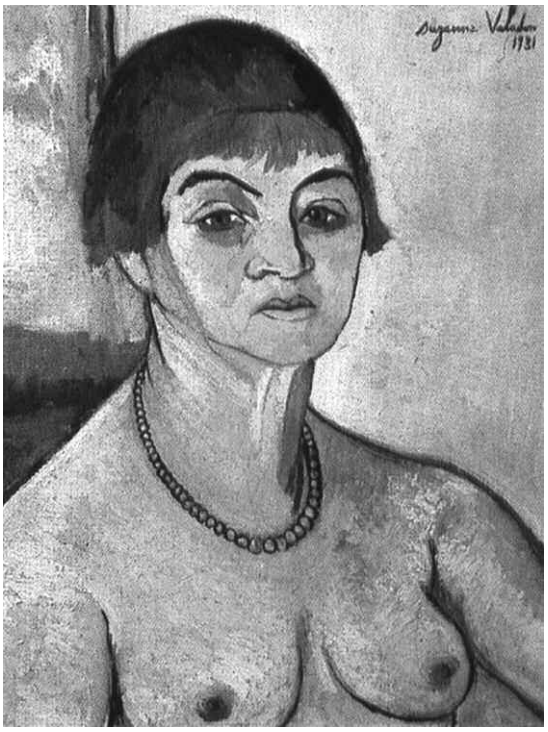



Fig. 4. Suzanne Valadon, *Self-Portrait with Bare Breasts* (1931), oil on canvas. Private Collection, Paris.

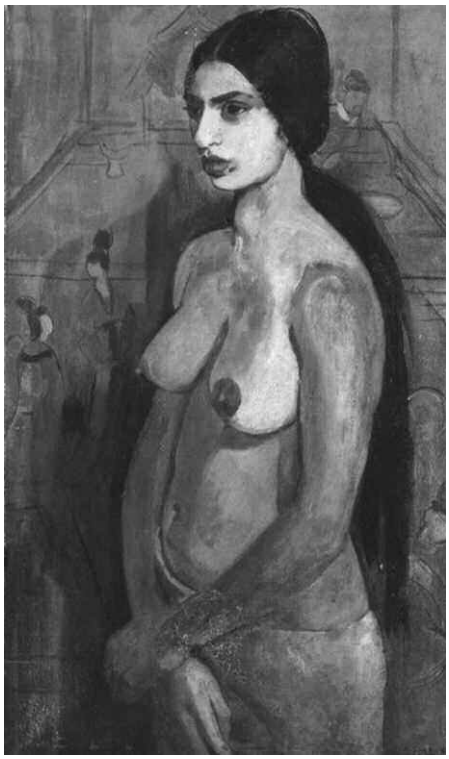


Fig. 5. Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* (1934), oil on canvas, 34 1/2" X 22". Collection Vivan and Navina Sundaram, New Delhi.

Becker does. Just as she, who could have seen his painting when she was in Berlin in early 1906, he is stripped to the waist. His crinkled shirt is knotted around his hip suggesting a loincloth.

A woman painting herself as a life-size nude was simply unthinkable before 1906. The naked woman was until then the model, the object of study, and the engendering muse for male artists. Modersohn-Becker broke with this rule. Having to decide between art and family, Paris and Worpswede, at the border of the nineteenth century and the modern avant-garde, she paints herself confident, the embodiment of the new woman: the female artist.

The beauty of the painting, the fine, in parts almost plastic, way of working the paint, can only be transmitted by the original. For the era in Paris around 1906 the picture is emblematic. In the same year, between his Pink Period and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Picasso too created a self-portrait in which he is stripped to the waist.

Also at this time the artists representing modernism in Vienna start to present themselves in naked self portraits as sufferers and martyrs. Richard Gerstl, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, and Max Oppenheimer were exponents of this development.

It is highly probable that during her lifetime no one but Modersohn-Becker herself saw the picture. Nevertheless she continued creating naked self-portraits in the summer of the same year in Paris. Best known is *Self-Portrait Half Nude with Amber Necklace)* (1906; Pl. 16). In this painting the artist continues to examine the presence of her physicality. She has transposed the nude into a stylized Arcadian landscape that surely was influenced by the artist's visit to the studio of Le Douanier Henri Rousseau.

The acceptance of Modersohn-Becker's naked self-portraits did not begin until after her death in November 1907, once her body of work was viewed. Her friend, the Worpswede painter and graphic artist Heinrich Vogeler, was one of the first to see her bequest. Even in his Moscow exile in 1938, he remembered her *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*: "Paula Modersohn-Becker liked to paint her own physicality. There is especially one naked portrait: gleaming lightly on a soft yellow-green ground."[5]

Rainer Maria Rilke, her closest companion in Paris during the creation of this painting, could only find words for the greatness and importance of her works after her death. One year after her death and his encounter with the works of Cézanne in the Paris Salon d'Automne 1907, he wrote his *Requiem (for a Friend)*. In the poem he puts into words the power and wonderful oddness of her paintings:

> For that you understood: the fruits in their ripeness.
> You set them in bowls before you,
> balanced out their heaviness with color. . . .
> And last of all you saw yourself like fruit,
> peeled yourself out of your clothes, carried yourself
> to the mirror, entered into it.
> Only your looking stayed outside, large,
> and did not say: This is me; but This is.[6]



Fig. 6. Ana Mendieta, *Arbol de la vida - Tree of Life (from Silueta)* (1976), color coupler print, 20" x 13". Estate of Ana Mendieta.

Paula Modersohn-Becker created in her *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* a landmark of emancipation. With regard to the self-portrait as a traditional category of painting, she ushered in a new era, and with her naked self-portraits she founded a new genre of portraits. Artists such as Suzanne Valadon (1931; Fig. 4), Claude Cahun, Amrita Sher-Gil (1934; Fig. 5), Frida Kahlo, and Dorothea Tanning followed her path and made their own bodies the subject of their pictures. Frida Kahlo is an especially significant example; her tragic miscarriage in 1932 was the starting point of a series of paintings in which Kahlo presents her own body.

These pioneers of the avant-garde opened up new possibilities for the following generation, and beginning in the late sixties, the female post-war avant-garde artists went one step beyond. Not only do they *display* their own body but they make it the *medium* of their art.

Valie Export made her body a piece of 'public space' in 1968 with *Tapp und Tast-Kino* [Touch Cinema]. At the same time her work is influenced by the tradition of the classic half-nude and the naked self-portraits of female artists. More recently, Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta (1976; Fig. 6), Francesca Woodman, Tracey Emin, and Natacha Merritt have used their own body not just as the subject but as the material for their art.

In 1906 Paula Modersohn-Becker foreshadowed this development in her first naked self-portrait.●

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## Notes

1. The sixth wedding day is equivalent to the fifth wedding anniversary. Thus, she made this painting May 25, 1906, five years after the artist married Otto Modersohn on May 25, 1901.
2. "Paula seems to have given it up for now. Being in her thirtieth year will give her a good deal to think about; she had set thirty as her deadline for her painting." Herma Becker (sister of the artist) to her mother, letter of February 22, 1906, in: *Paula Modersohn-Becker. The Letters and Journals.* Günter Busch and Liselotte von Reinken, eds., Arthur S. Wensinger and Carole Clew Hoey, eds. and trans. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1983), 384.
3. Paula Modersohn-Becker to Milly Rohland-Becker (sister of the artist), letter of May 1906, in ibid, 395.
4. Paula Modersohn-Becker to her mother, letter of May 10, 1906, in ibid, 397. For the full biographic context, see my "*Ein kurzes intensives Fest": Paula Modersohn-Becker, Eine Biographie* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2007).
5. Heinrich Vogeler, "Paula Modersohn-Becker. Zum Gedächtnis einer Frühverstorbenen," *Das Wort*: *Literarische Monatsschrift, Moskau* (November 1938): 115-28.
6. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Requiem (for a Friend)*, 1908, trans. Lily Engler and Adrienne Rich, in *The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker*, J. Diane Radycki, trans. and annotator (Metuchen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 321.

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# Left and Right: Politics and Images of Motherhood in Weimar Germany

By Michelle Vangen

At the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of motherhood was gaining increasing importance in the German social consciousness. Entwined with theories of German nationalism and linked to contemporary population debates, politics, and concerns over women's changing social roles, the subject came to hold great political, social and cultural significance by the time of the Weimar Republic. Paralleling this growing public concern during the opening decades of the twentieth century was the burgeoning interest the subject was afforded in the visual arts. Representations of mothers and children appeared frequently in the work of artists active during the Weimar period, between 1918 and 1933. Despite displaying a great diversity of style and intent, many of these artists had in common a tendency to use the figure of the mother as a means to address a variety of issues, so that during the 1920s, it became the bearer of multiple political and social meanings that were often contradictory.

During the years of the Weimar Republic, the image of the mother was appropriated by both the political left and right. Left-leaning artists such as Otto Dix and Georg Schrimpf used the trope of the mother as a tool to engage with contemporary social and political issues, while Paula Modersohn-Becker's earlier representations of motherhood were appropriated by some on the political right to promote a nationalist cultural agenda. This discussion expands upon an issue within the Weimar discourse on which little has been written.[1]

The focus on motherhood during the opening decades of the twentieth century was in part the result of an upsurge of nationalistic sentiment following Germany's unification in 1871. Entwined with this sense of nationalism was the concept of the "health of the nation," which depended in large part upon a steady production of newborns to increase the population.[2] The effects of industrialization as well as the increasing availability of contraceptive devices had caused Germany to experience a declining birth rate. Seen together with the high death tolls of first the Franco-Prussian War and then later World War I, this decline was viewed by many as a serious threat, a "population crisis." So deep was the concern, that attempts were made to bring motherhood under state control and to encourage women to bear multiple children.[3]

The issue of motherhood was also intricately intertwined with debates on women's changing social roles. By the 1920s women had made major advances toward greater equality. Throughout the war years women had infiltrated the work force in great numbers and, with the establishment of the Weimar Republic they were given the right to vote. Inevitably, their increasing public presence called into question the traditional domestic order which placed women in the private roles of wife and mother. As many women began to advocate their belief that motherhood was a choice and not their natural purpose in life, there was widespread public reaction and debate.

During the Weimar era motherhood became highly politicized. Polarized by issues such as the population crisis and the need for welfare and child care services, political parties of all stripes appropriated the figure of the mother for their own ends. The parties on the right, believing in the need to battle against their perceived notion of the sexual "immorality" of the times, championed the image of the mother as preserver of morality and the family. For those on the left, it provided a useful tool in their battle for improved welfare services as well as in their critique of the capitalist system.[4]

Rife with political and social significance and a multiplicity of meanings, the trope of the mother proved well suited to the art being produced during the Weimar years, when the predominant artistic trend was a return to figuration after years of experimentation with abstraction. Much of this representational art has been grouped together under the blanket term *Neue Sachlichkeit* (most commonly translated as The New Objectivity), coined by the art critic and director Gustav Hartlaub for the 1925 exhibition bearing that name. He went on to divide the *Neue Sachlichkeit* into two main categories—a right-wing classical branch consisting of works devoted to timeless imagery, and a left-wing or verist branch consisting of political and socio-critical art.[5]

Clearly, several of the artists included in the first *Neue Sachlichkeit* exhibition were interested in various left-wing concerns. In their hands the trope of the mother became a political tool used to address many of the social issues that dominated the Weimar years. Otto Dix, one of the most prolific producers of images of mothers in the early twenties, is often placed within this left-wing branch. Although his specific politics are still widely debated by scholars (he never joined a political party), he was involved with a number of revolutionary art groups, including Berlin Dada with its strong

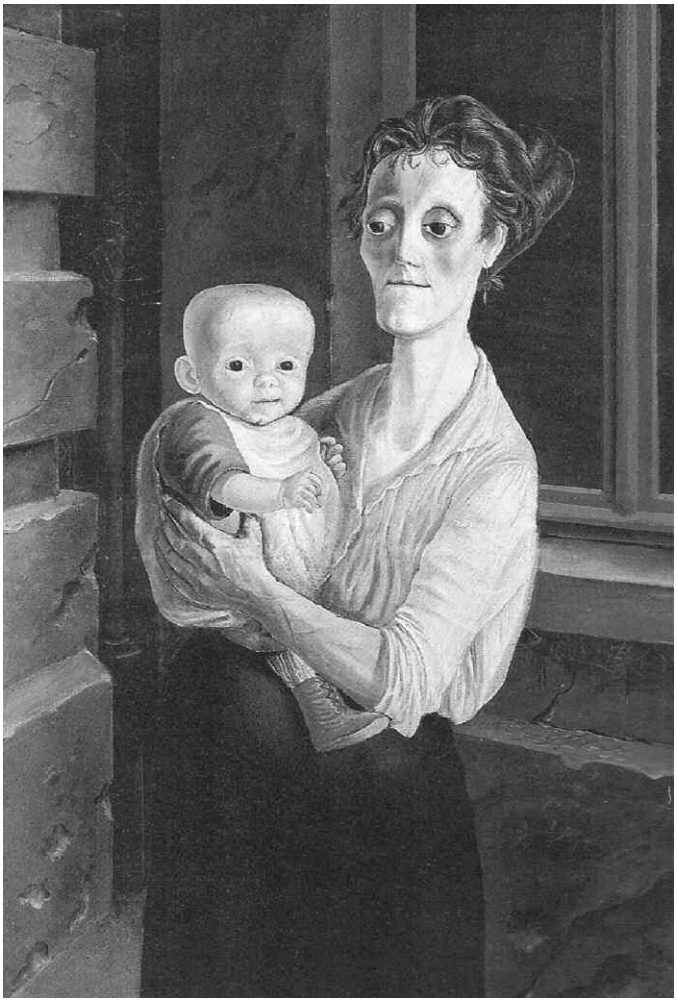


Fig. 1. Otto Dix, *Mother and Child* (1921), oil on canvas, 47" x 32". Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

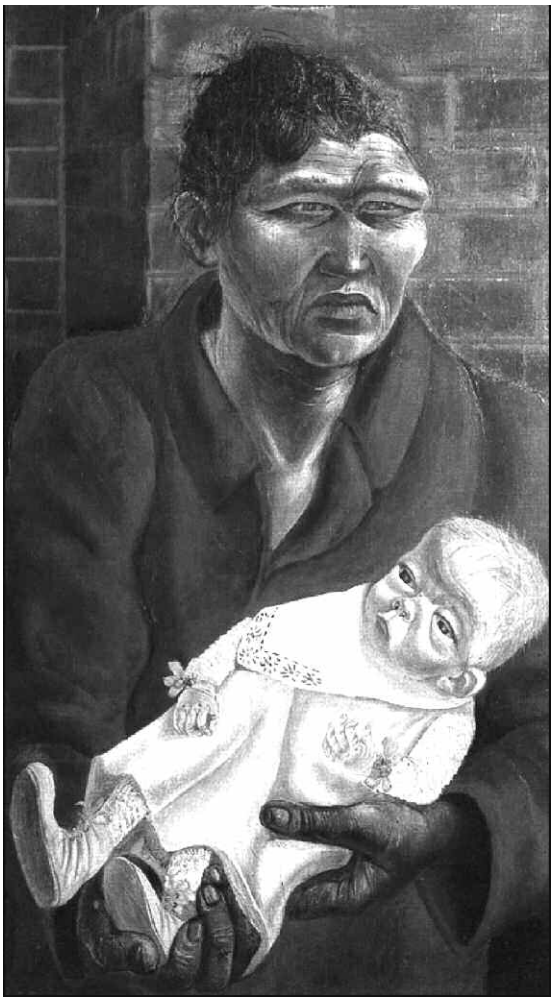


Fig. 2. Otto Dix, *Mother and Child* (1923), oil on plywood, 31 3/4" x18". Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart.

ties to anarcho-Communism, and many of his paintings from this time deal with left-wing subject matter and were intended as critical commentaries on life in the Weimar Republic.[6] Two paintings titled *Mother and Child* (1921; Fig. 1, and 1923; Fig. 2) can be viewed in this light.[7] Although both works take maternity as their subject matter, the greater issue is a critical examination of the economic inequality suffered by many during the Weimar years.

The critical edge to both of these works is immediately apparent through an analysis of the type of mother Dix portrayed. Their simple clothing and the industrial settings proclaim their status as members of the poor, urban working class. Both are haggard and sickly and stare off into the distance with vacant expressions. Neither painting extols the bliss of motherhood. Rather, these mothers appear worn out by the physical hardships of working class life and exhausted by the stress of raising children in such dire circumstances.

Such portrayals were not uncommon during the years of the Republic. By the early twenties the suffering, working class mother was a standard trope frequently used by the German Communist Party (KPD) to symbolize the repression of the proletariat. Following the idea that such women were doomed to suffer under a tyranny of childbearing (denied as they were the contraceptive devices and medical information and procedures available to women of the middle class), these images symbolized class repression and the inhumanity of capitalism. They were employed by many artists, including Käthe Kollwitz (1924: Fig. 3) and Rudolf Schlichter, to create political propaganda, often for the KPD's fight against the abortion laws that existed during the Republic.[8]

While Communist artists used images of motherhood for the straightforward political purpose of attacking capitalism, Dix's mothers were intended to draw attention to the living conditions of the urban, working class poor. The difference can be seen in their manner of representation. Artists such as Schlichter tended to create generalized images of poor mothers in non-specific settings whose power was derived chiefly through the contrast between the proletarian mother and her bourgeois oppressors. Dix, on the other hand, drew the subjects for his two paintings from actual working class women. According to one of his students, the artist preferred to base his paintings on real people, particularly those who were "marked by their lot in life."[9] Additionally, Dix has placed them in specific settings, with run-down buildings.

Thus the two works appear as actual portrayals of the experience of being a destitute mother in one of Weimar Germany's many big cities.

Dix's intention to create social criticism rather than matter-of-fact transcriptions of reality is made evident by his characteristic use of exaggeration to draw attention to these mothers' plight. In both works the figures are ghastly, with unnatural coloring, furrowed skin, protruding veins, and shriveled bodies. The artist's exaggeration of detail causes every physical defect and sign of malnutrition and poverty to command the viewer's attention. Dix also has altered the physical characteristics of his figures somewhat to emphasize particular qualities. An initial pencil sketch for the 1921 *Mother and Child* shows a short, squat woman, obviously pregnant and exhausted. In the final painting, however, Dix lengthened the woman's body, giving her a more painfully malnourished look, and added a child on top of her pregnant belly, thus rendering her situation even more desperate. In these works Dix used the trope of the mother as social criticism: the exhausted, downtrodden mother serves to symbolize the poor urban working class and the terrible conditions of their life.

Georg Schrimpf, whose art appears to have been aimed more at creating romantic, timeless imagery than at directly engaging with politics, is often placed within the right wing or classical branch of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Still, Schrimpf was a member of the German Communist Party and one of the founders of the Action Committee, a group of revolutionary artists established in Munich in 1919.[10] Much of his post-1919 work appears to engage the contemporary political and social theory of Gustav Landauer, whose *Call to Socialism*, first printed in 1911 and republished in 1919, called for a pacifist revolution through spiritual and economic renewal, for society to escape the evils of modern capitalism and to attain the state of an agrarian utopia.[11] Many of Schrimpf's works of the twenties and thirties repeat the mother-and-child motif, intended to symbolize the peace and contentment possible in Landauer's vision of rural working class bliss.

Schrimpf's depictions of motherhood, as seen in *Midday Rest* (1922; Fig. 4) are idyllic. A mother and child lie in a loving embrace, sleeping peacefully in a serene, idealized landscape. From the tranquil figures and napping dog to the sunny skies and meandering stream, the work exudes a sense of calm and contentment. Humanity and nature coexist in harmony reflecting an agrarian utopia founded in part upon Landauer's theories.[12] This becomes more apparent through the emphasis on the issue of class. The mother in *Midday Rest* wears a simple peasant dress and headscarf. Such attributes are readily apparent in many of Schrimpf's mother-and-child images from the twenties, which sometimes include barns and other rural buildings in the background.[13]

Analyzed in the context of Germany's increasing urbanization, works such as *Midday Rest* can be seen as illustrating the possibility of an alternative Germany, one favoring agriculture and rural living over industry and urban life. Using the trope of the mother to symbolize the bliss of an agrarian utopia, Schrimpf did not draw upon actual experiences of maternity as Dix did in his paintings. Rather, he developed a type of mother and child—




Fig. 3. Käthe Kollwitz, *Down with the Abortion Paragraph* (1924), lithograph poster made for the German Communist Party.

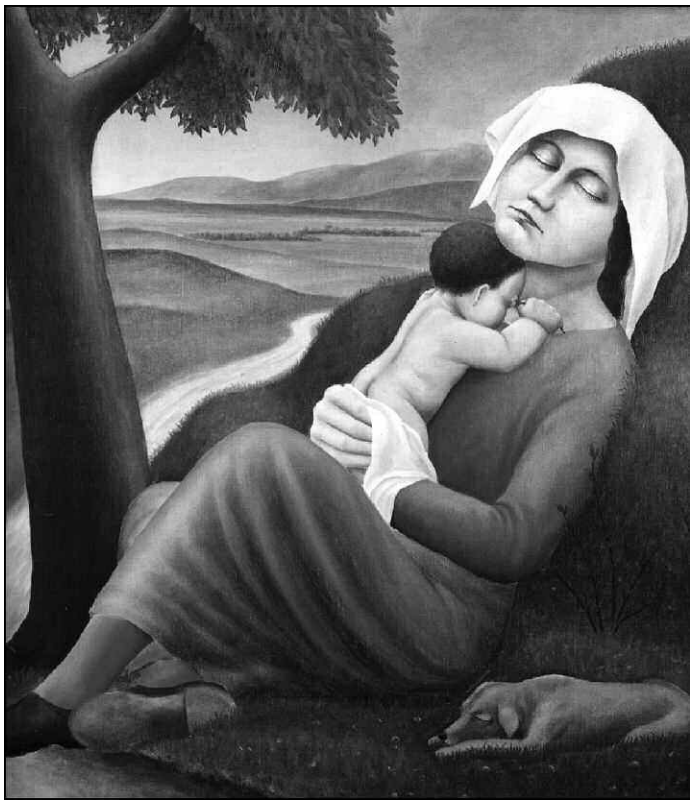


Fig. 4. Georg Schrimpf, *Midday Rest* (1922), oil on canvas, 24" x 21 3/4". Kunstmuseum im Ehrenfeld, Düsseldorf.

characterized by plump, healthy bodies, idealized features, sweet expressions, and an air of contentment—whose appearance varies little throughout his work. As artists such as Dix and Schrimpf explored the political and social potential of the figure

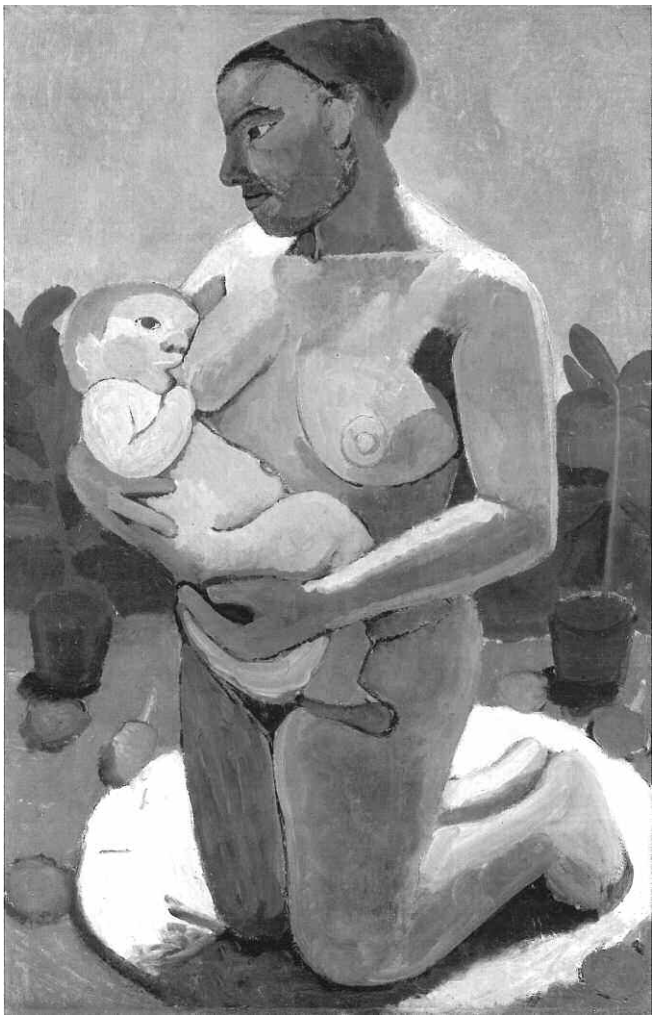


Fig. 5. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Kneeling Mother with Child at Her Breast* (1906), on canvas, 44 1/2" x 29". Nationalgalerie Berlin.

of the mother, art critics and collectors also became interested in the subject. The Weimar years saw a renewed interest in earlier representations of motherhood, which critics then reexamined within a contemporary context in an attempt to imbue them with new cultural meanings. One artist whose work was reinterpreted in this manner was Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907).

Modersohn-Becker, a member of the artists' colony at Worpswede, died at a young age, and her art appears to have received little critical response until the 1920s. Ironically, Modersohn-Becker was first known for her writing rather than as a painter—her letters and journals were published posthumously, in 1917, in book form.[14] Their immense popularity was partly responsible for the renewed interest in her art. By the midyears of the Weimar Republic, Modersohn-Becker's work had become quite well known. She was acknowledged as one of Germany's pioneering modernists, and her work was promoted by important art dealers such as J.B. Neumann and Alfred Flechtheim.

Throughout her brief career Modersohn-Becker was a prolific producer of images of mothers and children, and it was these representations that were most frequently singled out for examination during the Weimar years.[15] Walter Müller-Wulckow, in the introduction to his 1927 catalogue of Modersohn-Becker's work, wrote that, although the artist's subjects ranged from still lives to landscapes, her true power lay in her depictions of people, particularly women and children. It was these works that offered the viewer the most intense expression of the artist's psychological richness.[16]

Some critics attempted to read Modersohn-Becker's mother and child images within the context of the contemporary debates on motherhood. Specifically, much of these writings aligned her and her work with the belief that motherhood was women's natural role and highest purpose in life.[17] Her paintings, they wrote, revealed "the fervor of motherly love" and expressed a "deep womanly quality."[18] Critics tended to dwell upon what they saw as Modersohn-Becker's fascination with motherhood and her tragic death in childbirth, letting such biographical information color their readings of her work.[19] The artist, thus, "fulfilled her fate as a woman when she gave birth to her daughter," and her work possessed "womanly-motherly" qualities.[20]

The most extreme reinterpretation of Modersohn-Becker's work at this time, however, had little to do with the issue of motherhood but, rather, was the result of the nationalist cultural theories of the entrepreneur and art enthusiast Ludwig Roselius,[21] whose interest in art stemmed in part from his personal cultural vision. An extreme nationalist and later a Nazi sympathizer, he believed in the superiority of the Germanic civilization and culture.[22] In the wake of Germany's humiliating defeat in 1918, it became Roselius' lifelong goal to bring about a renewal of the German people and to reignite their sense of cultural and spiritual superiority. In particular, he wished to reinvigorate the Nordic artistic tradition and to initiate a renaissance of "authentic" German culture, one free from foreign corruption. Toward this goal, he engaged in a major architectural and cultural project in the city of Bremen during the 1920s. He purchased all of the buildings along the medieval Böttcherstrasse, turning many into artist workshops and museums intended to display his collections of German art and artifacts. The street was converted into a cultural center and propaganda set piece intended to acquaint the public with his nationalistic cultural vision.[23]

Among the museums on the Böttcherstrasse was the Paula Becker-Modersohn Haus, which opened in June of 1927. According to recent accounts, Roselius began collecting Modersohn-Becker's work around 1920.[24] Most likely he was initially drawn to the artist for her involvement with the Worpswede artists' colony and her depictions of the north German peasantry. He may have been influenced by Bernhard Hoetger, an expressionist sculptor and architect who collaborated with Roselius on the Böttcherstrasse project and who had been a personal friend of the late artist. The museum promoted Modersohn-Becker as the creator of a new kind of art. Roselius praised her stylistic innovations, particularly her use of simplicity to create monumental imagery. While other critics of the time also focused on Modersohn-Becker's stylistic achievements, calling her one of Germany's pioneering modernists, Roselius had different interests in line with his nationalistic intentions. Through a series of public talks and publications, he held up Modersohn-Becker as an example of a

true Nordic artist, one whose work represented the beginning of a new and superior Germanic artistic tradition.[25] His message of the dawn of a new era of German art was further conveyed through the design of the museum itself. From its cast-iron railings to its decorative brickwork, the building was covered in disks representative of the sun whose light was meant to symbolize the cultural renaissance of Germany.

Within this context, Modersohn-Becker's images of mothers, among the best-known of her works at this time (and already linked to a conservative agenda) took on new meaning. Although Roselius himself never singled these works out for discussion, he owned several of the artist's most innovative representations of motherhood, including *Reclining Mother and Child* of 1906 (Pl. 1) and *Kneeling Mother with Child at Her Breast* (1907; Pl. 10 and Fig. 5).[26]

*Kneeling Mother and Child* lent itself particularly well to reinterpretation according to Roselius's cultural theories. Although not a direct reference to the German people, the innovative painting could be read as an example of a new direction in German art. With its lack of detail, limited use of modeling, and flat planes of color, the painting stylistically broke free from past artistic traditions. More importantly, Modersohn-Becker's manner of depicting motherhood was itself highly unconventional at the time she created the work. Unlike a more traditional painting of the subject, such as Fritz Mackensen's *Madonna of the Moors* of 1892 (See p. 9, Fig. 10) with its peasant mother and child posed in a manner reminiscent of the Virgin and Child, Modersohn-Becker's painting presents figures who are blatantly naked, entirely lacking in Christian significance, and possess a more anonymous, timeless quality. Regardless of what the artist herself had originally intended with such works, in Roselius's hands her images of mothers became powerful symbols of a new direction in Nordic art, signifying the reinvigoration of the Germanic cultural tradition.

The very fact that Modersohn-Becker's representations of motherhood were used as propaganda to promote nationalism while those of Dix and Schrimpf functioned as a form of leftist social commentary is indicative of the political, social, and cultural significance these images came to acquire during the years of the Weimar Republic. As artists and critics on the political left and right actively explored the potential of the subject in visual culture, it became the bearer of a multiplicity of meanings. The trend continued into the National Socialist era, where Nazi art abounded with images of buxom, blond-haired, blue-eyed mothers and their children as symbols of Aryan racial superiority. Ironically, by 1935 Modersohn-Becker's mothers, once championed as examples of a new Nordic art, were derided as lacking a "sensitive, maternal-womanly quality"[27] and were lowered to the status of "degenerate" art, thus exemplifying the constant re-interpretation of representations of motherhood. ●

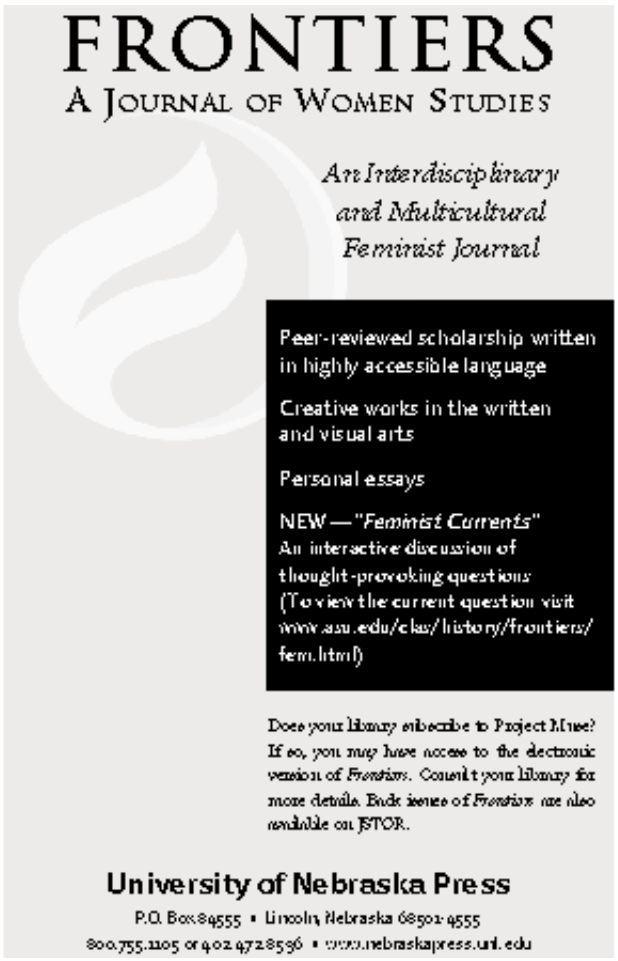
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## Notes

1. The most thorough examination of the trope of the mother in Weimar art can be found in Marsha Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 75-119. Meskimmon's discussion, however, focuses on women artists and thus ignores representations of motherhood by male artists of the day.
2. According to Cornelie Usborne "At this time national fertility became the yardstick by which the Wilhelmine authorities measured national health and vitality." Cornelie Usborne, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany: Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992), xii.
3. It is important to note that during the Weimar era, quality, not just quantity, was emphasized in government population policies, compared with earlier Wilhelmine policies, which were aimed at increasing the birth rate.
4. Such a division into left- vs. right-wing attitudes is, of course, greatly simplified. In some instances, approaches to the concept of motherhood varied within individual political parties, and at times attitudes on the left and right might even converge.
5. See G. F. Hartlaub, "Zum Geleit," *Neue Sachlichkeit: Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1925); trans. and quoted in Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993): 290-92. The term *Neue Sachlichkeit* remains a source of scholarly contention, as does Hartlaub's classification of artists and their work. Some Marxist scholars have associated *Neue Sachlichkeit* art with the acceptance of a ruthless capitalism as well as the rise of fascism in the thirties. One of the most thorough discussions can be found in Dennis Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1999), 1-6.
6. Beginning with Hartlaub, Dix has been considered a leading member of the left wing branch of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. The problem that so many scholars have grappled with, then, is not Dix's classification as a verist, but rather how his work relates to party politics. His lack of membership in the Communist party as well as his professed disdain for party politics have led scholars such as Linda McGreevy, in *The Life and Works of Otto Dix: German Critical Realist* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981) to discuss Dix as a "critical realist" whose work reveals an *ethical—not* a political—outrage. This stands in contrast to the image of Dix as a politically radical artist. Further complicating the issue is Dix's somewhat conservative approach to the craft of painting during the twenties. See Frank Whitford, "The Revolutionary Reactionary," in *Otto Dix: 1891-1969* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1992), 11-23.
7. Scholarly interpretations of these two works differ in regard to political vs. sociocritical intent. A discussion of the 1921 *Mother and Child* in the Tate Gallery catalogue for the 1992 Dix retrospective presents the painting as a "biting political statement"; see *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*, 106. Brigitte Reinhardt describes the 1923 *Mother and Child* as realistically characterizing the situation of the socially disadvantaged, in her, "Dix—A Painter of Facts," in *Otto Dix: Bestandskatalog/Inventory Catalogue* (Stuttgart: Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, 1989), 36.
8. Atina Grossman, "Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign against Paragraph 218 in Germany," *New German Critique* 14 (Spring, 1978): 119-37; Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough*, 106-112; Usborne, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany*, 156-201.
9. *Otto Dix: 1891-1969*, 106.
10. Schrimpf's interest in alternative modes of living and a new social order led to his involvement with the Life Reform Movement, centered in Ascona, Switzerland, and to his membership in groups

such as the anarchist Gruppe Tat and the Action Committee. It is through these activities that he would have become aware of Landauer's theories. See Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism*, 98-104; and Ulrich Gerster, "Kontinuität und Bruch. Georg Schrimpf zwischen Räterepublik und NS-Herrschaft," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 63 (2000): 532-35.

11. For more on Landauer, see Eugene Lunn, *Prophet of Community: The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1973).
12. A recent interpretation reads the painting as showing the impossibility of the unity of man and nature, i.e., the formal separation of the monolithic form of the woman from the miniaturized landscape setting reveals that the idyllic harmony of man with nature is a construction and is no longer possible. See Gerster, "Kontinuität und Bruch," 540-41.
13. That more apparent markers of class appeared in Schrimpf's work of the twenties may reflect a shift from a more general desire for social change to one more firmly grounded in Landauer's concept of an agrarian utopia. His *Maria's Dream/The Miracle* (1917) depicts a naked woman and child in a generalized tropical paradise, while *Woman and Children with a Bird* (1922) portrays a peasant family, as indicated by the clothing and rural setting.
14. Excerpts from Modersohn-Becker's letters and journals were initially published in the periodical *Die Güldenkammer*, appearing in five different issues between January and May of 1913. They were published in book form beginning in 1917, with the expanded and definitive edition, edited by Sophie Dorothea Gallwitz, appearing in 1920. The 1920 edition became a bestseller and went through numerous printings during the following decade.



15. Gillian Perry, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1979), 62.
16. Walter Müller-Wulckow, *Die Paula Becker-Modersohn-Sammlung des Ludwig Roselius in der Böttcherstrasse in Bremen* (Bremen: Angelsachsen-Verlag, 1927), 17.
17. This may have been in part due to the publication and subsequent popularity of Modersohn-Becker's letters and journals. Adina Lerner has argued in her thesis "Profiting from the Legacy of Paula Modersohn-Becker: the Paula Becker-Modersohn Haus on the Böttcherstrasse" (MA thesis, Univ. of Michigan, 1990) that the first few published versions of Modersohn-Becker's letters and journals were highly abridged and carefully edited in order to present an image of Modersohn-Becker as a patriotic and dutiful wife and mother. According to Lerner, in a time when traditional notions of motherhood were under attack, the conservative editor of the letters and journals, Sophie Dorothea Gallwitz, purposefully shaped Modersohn-Becker's writings to focus on her thoughts about children and her longing for motherhood, and deleted references to her marital troubles in order to create a personality who reflected the "proper" role of a young German woman. As the letters and journals were responsible for the interest Modersohn-Becker's art received during the twenties, it is not surprising that art critics presented a similar image of Modersohn-Becker as a more traditional woman who lovingly created images of mothers and children.
18. "The fervor of motherly love" was used by Müller-Wulckow in his introduction to the 1927 Böttcherstrasse catalogue, and "deep womanly quality" was used by Oscar Schürer in "Paula Modersohn-Becker," *Der Cicerone* (1923).
19. Schürer even opened his article on Modersohn-Becker with a few comments on her death in childbirth.
20. Müller-Wulckow, *Die Paula Becker-Modersohn-Sammlung*, 18; Ludwig Justi, *Von Corinth bis Klee* (Berlin: Verlag von Julius Bard, 1931), 96.
21. The wealthy Roselius, founder of Kaffee Hag, developed the first patented process for decaffeinating coffee.
22. Although not a member of the National Socialist Party; Roselius openly supported its leader, Adolf Hitler, and its nationalist agenda.
23. The Böttcherstrasse project also served Roselius's international business interests—his Kaffee Hag headquarters as well as a branch of the German-American Bank were located on the street. See Susan Henderson, "Böttcherstrasse: The Corporatist Vision of Ludwig Roselius and Bernhard Hoetger," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20 (1994): 165-81.
24. It is not known exactly when Roselius started collecting Modersohn-Becker's work, though 1920 is the date suggested by Maria Anczykowski in her essay "Ludwig Roselius, das Paula-Becker-Modersohn Haus und seine Sammlung," in *Paula Modersohn-Becker in Bremen: Die Gemälde aus den Sammlungen der Kunsthalle Bremen, der Paula-Modersohn-Becker Stiftung, und der Kunstsammlung Böttcherstrasse* (Bremen: Paula Modersohn-Becker Stiftung, 1996), 20-29.
25. See Ludwig Roselius, "Rede zur Einweihung des Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Hauses," in *Reden und Schriften zur Böttcherstrasse in Bremen* (Bremen: Verlag G.A. v. Halem, 1932), 41-53.
26. Roselius financed several publications on the Paula Becker-Modersohn Haus, written by Walter Müller-Wulckow, who discussed Modersohn-Becker and her work as maternal and essentially feminine. Installation photographs reveal that the exhibition layout also focused attention on her representations of mothers and children. Works such as *Kneeling Mother and Child* and *Self-Portrait on Her 6th Wedding Day* (which Müller-Wulckow interpreted as revealing the artist's longing for motherhood) were isolated in niches and lit dramatically by overhead lighting.
27. *Das Schwarze Korps*, (21 August, 1935).

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# Helen Serger's Galerie La Boetie: Paula Modersohn-Becker on Madison Avenue

By Monica J. Strauss

Helen Serger, my father's older sister, ran the gallery La Boetie, first on, and then just off, Madison Avenue in New York City, from 1965 (when she turned 64) until her death in 1989 (Fig. 1). What Helen Serger attempted was very neatly encapsulated in Hilton Kramer's review of her memorial exhibition published in *The New York Observer* in January 1990:

> What always gave a special distinction to the exhibitions at La Boetie was their emphasis on quality combined with a sense of history—the history of a period in which modernist art found itself the victim of political developments outside its control.... Mrs. Serger knew at first-hand the fate that the modern movement in Europe had suffered as the result of the campaign that Hitler and Stalin had waged against it and the civilization that produced it. There was about all the activities at La Boetie an element of reclamation—an attempt to rescue and reconstitute the achievements of a European culture that history had shattered.[1]

Art galleries are the spaces in which "amateurs"—collectors, connoisseurs, passionate viewers—can establish a place in the art world and bring their own histories and enthusiasms to it. Helen Serger was neither art historian nor artist, but she had a unique background. She was born Helen Spitzer in 1901, the daughter of the owner of a flourishing tannery in the small town of Skoczòw, Silesia, part of Austria at the time and reverting to Poland in 1918. Family legend has it that her enlightened father gave her a training in business equal to her younger brother's. In 1927 she married Frederick Sinaiberger, a painter and industrialist, born in Ivancice, Moravia. Until then music had been her passion, but he drew her into the art world of Central Europe. Frederick moved to Skoczòw, invested in the tannery, and set himself up as an independent painter in his wife's hometown. They traveled regularly to Italy, to Vienna, and, particularly, to Paris, where Sinaiberger participated in several group shows and had his first one-man show at Galerie Bernheim Jeune in 1936.

In 1933, to stay in touch with Vienna (which continued to be the cultural capital for Silesia and Moravia even after they became part of Poland and Czechoslovakia, respectively), the Sinaibergers commissioned Josef Hoffmann, a founder of the Vienna Secession, to design a villa for them on a hillside above the river. Among their artist friends who were invited to spend their summers there was the architect Jacques Groag, a student of Adolf Loos, and Groag's wife, Jacqueline, a Wiener Werkstätte-trained textile designer. (Groag eventually designed my father's house just next door on the same hillside—an uneasy coupling of the Loos and Hoffmann schools.) Sinaiberger was a patron for the younger Viennese painter Sergius Pauser, and the two artists often worked together in the summers painting the same motif.



Fig. 1. Frederick Serger, *Portrait of Helen Serger* (1936), oil on canvas, 36" x 28". Rose Museum of Art, Brandeis University.

That life was left behind in 1939, when the Sinaibergers fled first to England, and from there in June 1940, just at the time of the fall of France, to Central America to await their American visa. The freighter on which they took the perilous, three-week, wartime journey came close to being attacked by a U-boat and, in fact, sank on its return voyage to England. The couple arrived in New York in the spring of 1941, and the last words in Helen's diary of the voyage that had taken her so far from her family could have summed up the initial mood of many refugees. "I've survived," she wrote. "So why can't I find within myself a spark of joy?"[2]

The Sinaibergers shortened their name to Serger and began to find their way in the New York art scene. They settled in a duplex studio apartment on West 57th Street, bought a country house in the upstate New York art colony of Woodstock, and soon Frederick was having shows at the Lilienfeld-Van Diemen Gallery. Helen became an interior decorator and after the war would bring home ceramics, Venetian glass, and inlaid-marble tables for her clients from the couple's annual trips to Europe. Most important they became collectors of the artists that had inspired Frederick in Paris. Paintings by Georges Rouault, Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Pierre Bonnard, even a small Cézanne *Bather* moved with them to a new apartment on East 82nd Street in 1959, when galleries began to cluster uptown. (Their collection was eventually donated to several museums, including the Rose Museum at Brandeis University, but that is another story.)

That move inspired Helen to open a gallery of her own, and La Boetie made its appearance in 1965. Named for the street in Paris with connections to Picasso and his circle in the 1920s, it was meant to indicate an intended French orientation. Frederick Serger died soon after, but Helen had the health, energy, and means to pursue her new career. She joined the ranks of other dealers from abroad—Otto Kallir and Leonard Hutton—and was soon followed by Dorothy Carus and Serge Sabarsky in 1968.

For the first few years the gallery did not break new ground. The shows of the late 1960s mixed the French artists she was familiar with—Matisse, Rouault, and the Cubists—with exhibits of some contemporary women sculptors (her penchant for showing women already in evidence), such as Rhys Caparn (1909-97) and Irma Rothstein (1896-1971). In the early 1970s, however, she began to make her mark when she turned to her own cultural background and featured work from Germany and Austria. In 1971 she presented the exhibition "Egon Schiele and His Circle," followed by "Art and Design in Vienna," one of the earliest shows in the United States on the Wiener Werkstätte. After an exhibition of Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, in December 1971-January 1972, she opened the first of La Boetie's shows featuring Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) since the artist's Madison Avenue debut in 1958 at Kallir's Galerie St. Etienne. What follows is a chronology of Modersohn-Becker's presentation in New York by these two galleries until 1989 (the year of Helen Serger's death), and the response of the press to the exhibits. In the process, I will pinpoint the problems that have stood in the way of a broader recognition of Modersohn-Becker's place in modernism's canon.

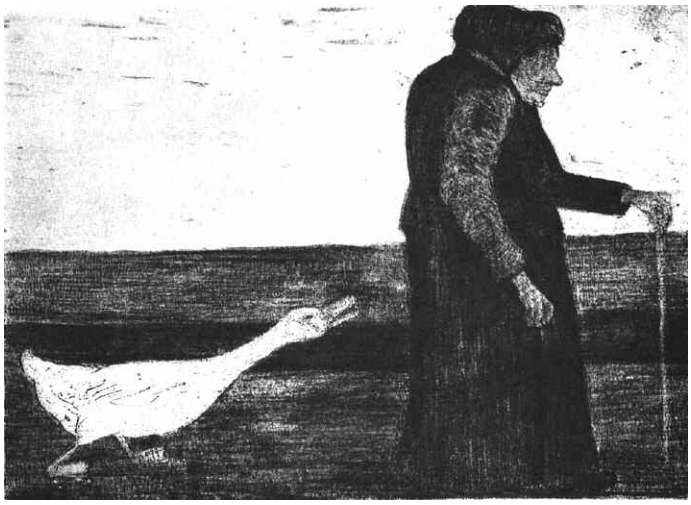


Fig. 2. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Woman with Goose* (1902), etching with aquatint and roulette, 5" x 7". Diane Radycki Collection.

In 1958, shipping pictures from Europe to the United States was prohibitive, and Otto Kallir relied on American sources for the St. Etienne exhibition, showing pieces belonging to refugees who had been able to bring their Modersohn-Beckers with them. (Among the lenders was Trude Krautheimer, the wife of the eminent art historian Richard Krautheimer.) With this limitation he was still able to exhibit nineteen oils, four drawings, and three etchings. Among the oils were *Three Boys Bathing in the Canal* (1901; Pl. 2), *Shooting Party in Worpswede* (1904), and *Poorhouse Resident* (1903). The show followed the 1957 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "German Art of the 20th Century," where many critics had seen Modersohn-Becker's work for the first time. They recognized her debt to van Gogh and Gauguin, but praised her "individuality." Nevertheless, in the late 1950s women artists were inevitably pigeonholed. The *New York Times* critic wrote that "at a superficial glance, Modersohn-Becker could be dismissed as a proletarian Mary Cassatt who never saw the Seine," but then went on to admit that the pictures glowed with "ardent feeling."[3]

The Modersohn-Becker show at La Boetie in 1971-72 was far less ambitious but exhibited all twelve of her etchings, executed between 1899 and 1902, for the first time (Fig. 2). The press release spoke of her as an early independent exponent of German Expressionism, a label that, early on, tended to cloud perceptions of her work. Two reviews appeared in the *New York Times*. James Mellow, already then, pushed for a well-selected retrospective. John Canaday, on the other hand, still felt the need to focus on gender. He wrote of Modersohn-Becker's "masculinization of sensitivities that she seems to have mistrusted as too gentle." This might not have been read as criticism if he had not added, "In her drawings, her special sensitivities, which are for the gentle and exquisite perceptions that we think of as feminine, come through unblemished."[4] Whether or not the exhibition and the prominent reviews in the *Times* inspired them, two lengthy discussions of Modersohn-Becker's life and work appeared in feminist publications soon after. Martha Davidson, in the winter 1973-



Fig. 3. Liubov Popova, *Still Life with Basket of Fruit* (1907-08), oil on canvas, 27 3/4" x 21". State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.

74 issue of the *Feminist Art Journal,* pointed out how Modersohn-Becker pre-dated *Die Brücke* and *Blaue Reiter* and created something uniquely her own. The complaint at the end of her piece: "her works are of considerable significance in the development of modern painting, yet few, if any of her paintings appear in major museums in the United States or anywhere else outside of Germany,"[5] still applies today more than a quarter of a century later.

In 1978 La Boetie showed Modersohn-Becker again, this time as a member of the Worpswede community in an exhibition titled "Three German Artists' Colonies: Worpswede, Moritzburg, and Murnau." Although all three groups sought a lost simplicity in their rural retreats, each had a different focus. The grouping was to Modersohn-Becker's disadvantage. Not only was she thrust back into the provincial environment she had tried to escape, but her work, hanging in the same show with artists who had only begun to flourish after her death, made for a false comparison. Members of the Brücke imagined they were establishing a sexual utopia, while the circle around Kandinsky was inspired by local art rather than local life. On the other hand, had La Boetie been able to present some of Modersohn-Becker's great late paintings alongside the work of the other women artists featured in the show, the power of her uncompromising vision would have come through.

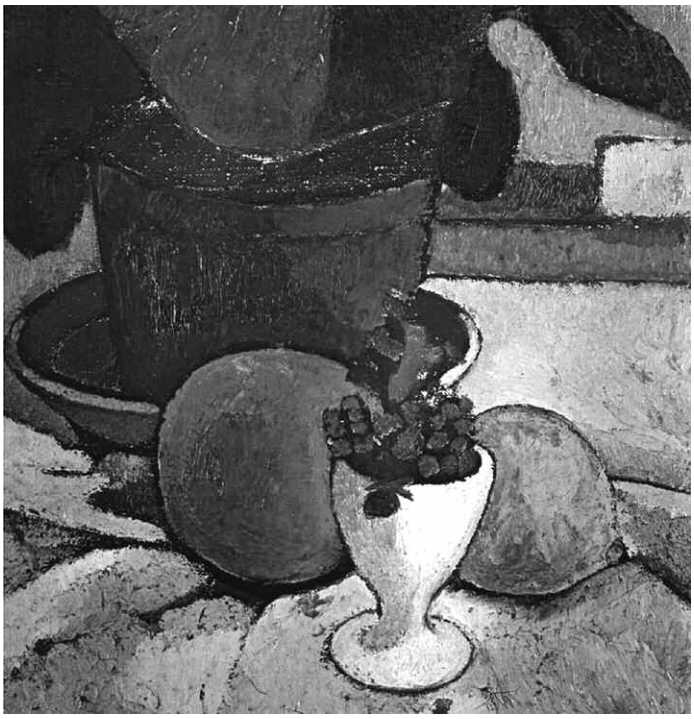


Fig. 4. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Still Life with Leaf Plant and Egg Cup* (1905), oil on canvas, 10" x 9 1/2". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/ Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

Two books about Modersohn-Becker were published soon after. Diane Radycki's translation of the letters and journals included an introduction by Alessandra Comini, as well as Adrienne Rich's translation of Rilke's *Requiem*, and an original poem by Rich, herself, entitled "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff." Gillian Perry's biography of Modersohn-Becker, the first in English, elicited a sensitive review in the *New York Times* by Mark Stevens, who wrote that Modersohn-Becker was "one of those rare artists whose painting is muscular, even harsh in form, but delicate in spirit."[6]

La Boetie included three 1906 drawings by Modersohn-Becker in the show "Pioneering Women Artists," which Serger launched in 1980. The works of the women on display included contributions from twenty-three Europeans, six Russians, and sixteen Americans.[7] It was a dazzling compendium of the known and the unknown, but it is in such company that Modersohn-Becker gets lost. Having passed away in 1907, at the moment when Cubism radically changed the art of picture-making, she cannot stand out when placed beside the Russians, for instance. In another kind of exhibition, a comparison between a 1907-08 still life (Fig. 3) by Liubov Popova (1889-1924) and an earlier one by Modersohn-Becker (1905; Fig. 4) would reveal the latter's early absorption of the lessons of Cézanne.

If there ever was a Modersohn-Becker year, it was 1984. St. Etienne presented a major Modersohn-Becker exhibition with the loan of many oils from the major collections in Bremen accompanied by a catalog with an excellent introductory essay by Jane Kallir.[8] The cover had a detail of the 1906-07 *Self-Portrait with Lemon* (Pl. 17), showing the artist's interest in

Egyptian Fayum burial portraits. That same year the expanded German edition of the artist's letters and journals was published in an English translation and received a front-page review by Helene Yglesias in the *New York Times Book Review,* with a large detail of the *Self-Portrait with Lemon*.[9]

A shocking response, and one that revealed that misogyny was by no means dead and gone in 1984, was Dan Hofstadter's extraordinarily nasty (and incredibly long considering its focus on the negative) review of both Modersohn-Becker's painting and prose in the April 1984 issue of *The New Criterion*. A few quotes will suggest the tone of the piece. Hofstadter writes of Modersohn-Becker's "semi-creative opportunism," "a rapid and barbaric switching of allegiances," and her "audacious impertinent portraits." She appears in terrifying guises as "the tallest girl in the class, who made frightening faces," "Madame Blavatsky on the Nile," "an Edwardian coquette," and a "wahine who has taken up painting." Even when praising her painting of *The Good Samaritan* (1907), he cannot resist putting in parentheses: "symbolic, I suspect, of the artist's learning to take pity on herself."[10]

Following up on the success of the 1984 exhibition, St. Etienne put together a two-woman traveling show of Modersohn-Becker and Käthe Kollwitz. The pairing was justified in Jane Kallir's words, "perhaps because they were women, both existed outside the mainstream of contemporary European art, and rather than simply accepting established styles, forged ahead alone, paving the way for those who came later."[11] The show traveled to six venues, in Arizona, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Maine.

In 1988, the year before her death, Helen Serger once again gathered a salute to women in the exhibition "Women Artists of the Avant-Garde, 1900-1940." Modersohn-Becker was part of a company that included photo-collagist Marianne Brandt (1893-1983), the sculptor Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), the designer Eileen Gray (1878-1976), and the painter Erika Giovanna Klien (1900-57), among many others.[12]

In the last two decades there have been major Modersohn-Becker exhibitions in museums in Germany, the Netherlands, and Japan, and her work has been seen and well-documented in the United States. Still Modersohn-Becker's work suffers from disadvantages that do not apply to other artists. To begin with, for most of the last century, there was a prejudice against women artists—the license given to Hofstadter to write as he did in a serious periodical suggests its unfortunate continuity. Modersohn-Becker's paintings focused on the feminine with a particular honesty, and it is precisely there that her originality lies. Children are not idealized (Pl. 18), motherhood is given its animal due (Pl. 1) , and the nude becomes an exploration of a personal, intimate, sexual reality in her self-portraits such as *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* (front cover) and *Self-Portrait Half Nude with Amber Necklace* (Pl. 16).

Second, she cannot be pigeonholed—the mix of French and German sources is unique to her. An attempt to link her to German Expressionism, the need to put her back in her native context, is only confusing. Third, she died too soon, at exactly the moment that Cubism changed painting completely, and it became her fate to be shown with those who had been privileged to absorb that drastic shift. She belonged to no school; rather, because of her circumstances, she had to go it alone. Hers was a career in which the personal cannot be separated out—not the most comfortable situation for art historians who like to compare and align. Galerie St. Etienne and La Boetie did the groundwork, and now it is time their efforts were crowned by public establishments in the United Sates giving Modersohn-Becker the attention she deserves. •

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## Notes

1. Hilton Kramer, "Memorial Exhibit Pays Tribute to N.Y. Dealer," *New York Observer* (January 22, 1990): 21.
2. Helen Serger, personal diary, 1941.
3. Stuart Preston, "Transatlantic Exchanges in Art," *New York Times* (March 16, 1958).
4. James R. Mellow, "Nature Served Them Both Well," *New York Times* (January 16, 1972); John Canaday, "Art: An Adventurous Woman's Works," *New York Times* (January 1, 1972).
5. Martha Davidson, "Paula Modersohn-Becker: Struggle Between Life and Art," *Feminist Art Journal* (Winter 1973-74): 5. See also Lucia Vernarelli, "Paula Modersohn-Becker," *Women & Art (*Summer/Fall, 1972): 10.
6. *The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker*. J. Diane Radycki, trans. and annotator, (Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow Press, 1980), with introduction by Alessandra Comini, Rainer Maria Rilke's, *Requiem (for a Friend)* (1908), trans. Lily Engler and Adrienne Rich, and Adrienne Rich, "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff" (1975-76); Gillian Perry, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); and Mark Stephens, "Mainly Women and Children," *New York Times Book Review* (January 13, 1980): 1.
7. Among the artists shown were Sonia Delaunay (1865-1979), Hannah Höch (1889-1978), Jeanne Mammen (1890-1976), Alexandra Exter (1882-1949), Kay Sage (1898-1963), and Elsie Driggs (1898-1992).
8. Jane Kallir, *Paula Modersohn-Becker* (New York: Galerie St. Etienne, 1983), n.p.
9. Helen Yglesias, "Gifted and Desperate," *New York Times Book Review* (February 26, 1984): 1.
10. Dan Hofstadter, "Paula Modersohn-Becker," *New Criterion* (April 1984): 35, 41-6.
11. Jane Kallir, *Käthe Kollwitz/ Paula Modersohn-Becker* (New York: Galerie St. Etienne, 1983): n.p.
12. The show included, among others, Maria Siniakova (1898-1989), Gabriella Muenter (1877-1962), Rosalind Bengelsdorf-Brown (1916-1979) and Annie Albers (1899-1994).

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## The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth Century Paris

edited by Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough
Manchester University Press, 2006

## Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting

by Ruth E. Iskin
Cambridge University Press, 2007

## Women in Impressionism: From Mythical Feminine to Modern Woman

edited by Sidsel Maria Søndergaard
Skira, 2007

**Reviewed by Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell**

Just as the Impressionists were "painting between friends" as well as for the public, the authors of three recent books on women and Impressionism can be said to be writing between friends, if publishing for a wider readership. Like modern-day flâneurs strolling the same broad boulevards, their books—an essay collection, a monograph, and an exhibition catalogue—cover well-traveled territory (flânerie, the gaze, studio practice, consumerism, urbanity) and revisit familiar images with fresh eyes, approaching closely related subjects from differing perspectives.

For *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth Century Paris,* part of the Critical Perspectives in Art History series, editors Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough collected ten essays responding to Janet Wolff's 1985 essay "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity" (originally published in *Theory, Culture, & Society*).[1] In *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting,* Ruth E. Iskin investigates the relationship between avant-garde painting and consumer culture, broadly defined as not just shopping but other activities including reading newspapers and visiting tourist resorts and fairs. *Women in Impressionism: From Mythical Feminine to Modern Woman*, the largest and most lavishly illustrated of the books, is the catalogue of an exhibition at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen. Editor Sidsel Maria Søndergaard's substantial introduction weaves together major themes explored in more depth in essays on themes including reading, motherhood, the toilette, and the nude.

Ruth Iskin's dazzling intellect enlivens all three books, and all owe a debt to Griselda Pollock's 1988 essay "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" (in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*) as well as Wolff's.[2] Their authors challenge the problematic notion of "separate spheres" embraced by Wolff and Pollock, without denying "the particular social limitations placed on art's producers, and women generally, by their specific gender and class identities at a given historical moment"(*The Invisible Flâneuse* 9, hereafter *TIF*). Instead, the authors attempt to reconcile these earlier works with a new and more complex view of women's experience and public interactions in nineteenth-century Paris, reassessing the concept of modernity in Impressionism in light of the past two decades of scholarship. The books are "between friends" on another level, too: aimed at feminist art historians, they sometimes seem to be preaching to the converted, assuming the reader's complicity in their revisionist agendas.

The Paris of the 1880s gave birth to the "New Woman" as well as the "New Painting," as Impressionism was called. In 1871, in the wake of the catastrophic Paris Commune, the weekly newspaper *Les Droits des Femmes* changed its name to the more politically neutral *L'Avenir des Femmes*, a pointed attempt to distance itself from socialism. The conservative government that took office in 1873 emphasized moral order. Alarmed by the high casualty count in the Prussian wars and the declining birth rate, "the regime set its focus on women, on their capabilities for giving birth to children and on their role as mothers and the centres of the home" (*Women in Impressionism* 53, hereafter *WII*). Though denied the right to vote, women were increasingly seen as politically powerful, exerting influence on their husbands and children. The 1880s was the decade when, after many years of sustained pressure, conditions for women of the middle class came eventually to be improved, if only moderately; in addition to the reforms connected with girls' access to schooling and higher education, women were granted the right to apply for divorce in 1884" (*WII* 83). In reality, these progressive new laws affected very few women, but they had a powerful symbolic effect.

The physical transformation of Paris by Napoleon III and his master planner Baron Haussmann between 1852 and 1870 mirrored and accelerated the changes taking place in society. New boulevards, bridges, and public buildings expensively and drastically modernized the medieval city into a gleaming metropolis, with profound social repercussions—some intentional, some not. Women were at the eye of this maelstrom of dust and destruction—not only that chic stereotype, the Parisienne, but also the ragpicker, the artist's model, and the prostitute. "Women in Impressionism ... had many faces" (*WII* 21).

Baudelaire's seminal essay, "The Painter of Modern Life," immortalized the flâneur, the bourgeois man of the world, strolling the newly laid out boulevards with a detached urbanity—an archetype that seemed to redefine modernity even as it excluded women from that definition. Baudelaire's flâneur was not just any man, but a poet or artist "with a special capacity of metropolitan and sexually charged vision" (*TIF* 34), as Greg M. Thomas explains in "Women in public: the display of femininity in the parks of Paris." The broad sidewalks of the boulevards were the flâneur's spiritual home, though, as the authors of these books show, women walked them, too. For women, however, the boulevards had a darker side: prostitutes roamed there, and any woman walking the street risked being mistaken for one of them, particularly if she appeared to have no apparent destination. Haussmann was indirectly responsible for the perceived prostitution problem, as the high rents in the new city center pushed them onto the streets.

*The Invisible Flâneuse?* proposes an alternative kind of female streetwalker. Many of the authors affirm the existence of female flânerie by attacking the notion that the flâneur was necessarily male. The book opens with "Gender and the haunting of cities (or the retirement of the *flâneur)*" by Janet Wolff, in which she revisits her earlier work, questioning not just whether the flâneuse exists, but whether the flâneur is an accurate representation of male experience. Tom Gretton, in "Not the *flâneur* again: reading magazines and living in the metropolis around 1880," suggests that flânerie was a state of being—not a gender or class category, but one that anyone could temporarily occupy. Ting Chang's essay, "Disorienting Orient: Duret and Guimet, anxious *flâneurs* in Asia," examines what happened when the flâneur was removed from Paris, analyzing accounts of trips to Japan by collectors. As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson suggested in her 1994 essay "The *Flâneur:* The City and its Discontents" (in *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City*), flânerie may have been less a reality than a literary device allowing writers to negotiate the increasingly complicated city.[3] Gretton points out that the illustrated newspapers mimicked the experience of the flâneur, wandering the streets and commenting on events.

Wolff, however, concludes that there is no tradition of female flânerie simply because male activities have been foregrounded in cultural theory and social history. Women's exclusion from public life, she writes, "is compounded by later twentieth-century approaches which gave priority to the street and the public arenas in the very definition of modernity" (*TIF* 20). Wolff ends her essay with a brief discussion of female "hauntings" in the early twentieth-century novel—a subject that deserves a fuller treatment elsewhere, but seems tacked on here.

Though most of the essays in *The Invisible Flâneuse?* form a cohesive conversation "between friends," some may strike the reader as friends-of-friends that do not quite fit in with this erudite, urbane crowd. Simon Leung's script of a performance piece regarding public restrooms as sites for homosexual encounters has plenty of modern resonance but little to say about nineteenth-century flâneurs, much less flâneuses. Similarly, Helen Scalway's first-person account of walking in modern-day London is a misconceived attempt to illustrate the impossibility of a woman simply walking. Linda Nochlin's study of public monuments by modern women artists is equally out of place.

Iskin here contributes an essay on advertising images of modern women in Paris, which "played an important role in portraying middle- and upper-class women as fashionable *flâneuses,*" their target audience (*TIF* 113). "To understand late nineteenth-century posters, it is crucial to consider their overall advertising role and specific goal of addressing targeted consumers. This perspective has been largely absent from art historical studies that tend to focus on posters as art" rather than considering them as *publicité,* the contemporary term for the emerging fields of advertising, publicity, and marketing (*TIF* 116). On a purely mechanical level, these fin-de-siècle posters were designed to target walkers and flâneurs in a pre-automobile culture (*TIF* 115). Appropriately, many advertised bicycles, and thus "tapped into late nineteenth-century discourses on women's new freedoms" (*TIF* 119).

In her own book, too, Iskin pays close attention to advertising images, particularly color posters. "Although posters reached their heyday in the 1890s, they had already been seen on walls in Paris before and during the Impressionist decades" *(Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* 17, hereafter *MW*). Indeed, Paris was a perpetual construction site plastered with posters. Department stores were disproportionately represented in these advertisements, because they could afford to promote themselves citywide. "Commentators recognized the spread of *publicité* as representing changes associated with modernity" (*MW* 135). Artists long before Toulouse-Lautrec engaged in a sophisticated dialogue with this thoroughly modern medium.

Posters feature prominently in all three books' discussions of consumption and its instruments: "storefronts, shop signs, shop displays, and various advertisements (*publicité*)" (*MW* 115). Impressionist painting and Parisian consumer culture developed simultaneously from the 1860s onwards. Using Charles Baudelaire's 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life" and Émile Zola's 1883 novel *Au bonheur des dames* as starting points, the books delve into the complex and not always comfortable relationship between consumerism and Impressionism. Edgar Degas referred to his paintings as "articles de Paris," a phrase that usually denoted gloves, hats, and other fashion items. Iskin calls his use of thicker paint and visible brushstrokes on the hats in these paintings a "double entendre involved in the artist's hand transforming the display of fashionable goods into his own artistic 'articles'" (*MW* 95). Significantly, "the initial reception of the work of Édouard Manet and the Impressionists in nineteenth-century Paris was replete with the perception that paintings of modern life and cheap signs of consumer culture were all too closely connected" (*MW* 8). When Gustave Caillebotte exhibited *A Rainy Day* (1877), which Iskin examines in detail, it was the umbrellas that drew comment; their uniformity declares their mass production and mass distribution. Caillebotte portrayed these classic department-store purchases with as much care as their owners, on the scale of a history painting.

In Zola's conception, Søndergaard notes, "there was apparently no *flâneuse.* Perhaps it might be said that what came into being instead was a *consumeuse,* incarnate in the age's chic Parisienne, whose personality was intimately conjoined with the dress and with fashion—a concept that was in itself a product of the modern culture" (*WII* 39). "Parisienne" was "a blanket term for the well-dressed woman of the metropolis, applied to both the elegant ladies of the bourgeoisie and the chic *demimonde* who might be wearing a sensational dress" (*WII* 39). While Søndergaard describes the Parisienne as being "right in between the *petit bourgeois* housewife from a small town on the one side, and the kept woman of the metropolis on the other" (*WII* 37), Iskin points out that the

Parisienne "became a brand that promoted the French fashion industry and supported French colonial ambitions and claims of international superiority" (*MW* 7). Department store advertisements "aimed to attract their female clientele by featuring the fashionable Parisienne, representing her full-length, with her regalia of up-to-date fashion and accessories" (*MW* 185). Of course, "to be truly effective, the mythology of the chic Parisienne had to make the paradoxical claim that the Parisienne was wholly French, but that women outside France could become Parisiennes" (*MW* 192). So key was this figure to France's image and identity that she was immortalized in Paul Moreau-Vauthier's monumental statue installed at the entrance to the 1900 Exposition Universelle.

Baudelaire called for art that reflected its own time by portraying the stuff of modern life. He recognized fashion, Søndergaard writes, as "a wonderful materialization of human creative force and contemporaneity" (*WII* 39). Women, with their fleeting fashions and controversial new behaviors, instantly "modernized" a painting. In both Salon and avant-garde paintings, "woman and her universe were characterized by an exquisitely detailed dress.... Enclosing one's era in the painting in this referential manner became, in the course of just a few decades, an established formula for modernity.... A stylish hat, a beautiful fan, a tapering book and last but not least, the sophisticated dresses came to be conventional visual cursors for Modernity, in which a conversant public could mirror itself, read and locate itself" (*WII* 41-42). For Baudelaire, "the elegant and powdered woman was... one of the specific signs of Modernism.... The message was clear: The man is a beholder and the woman is a vision" (*WII* 18).

Shopping emerges as a strong potential candidate for a female form of flânerie. Iskin sees a female version of Baudelaire's male flâneur inscribed in Zola's novel. "Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century offered numerous sites for women's viewing, browsing, and shopping. Women's visibility in visual representations of the period suggests that their presence in public was far more extensive than the oft-cited doctrine of separate spheres would have us believe" (*MW* 47). As Iskin suggests, "if the prohibitions against women venturing out into public space were loosened at the end of the century, it was under pressure from the needs of an ever-expanding marketplace: an ideology of confinement, in other words, was replaced with an ideology of consumption" (*TIF* 13). The department store Au Bon Marché opened its doors in the 1850s; La Samaritaine and Au Printemps followed in the 1860s. But Wolff counters that shopping in a department store is not the same as strolling the boulevards, "not only because it is an enclosed and circumscribed space, but, more importantly, because shopping is a pre-defined and purposeful activity" (*TIF* 21). Indeed, D'Souza suggests that shopping was an exclusively female pastime, impossible for the bourgeois man, in an essay provocatively titled "Why the Impressionists Never Painted the Department Store."



Fig. 1. Berthe Morisot, Woman at her Toilette (Jeune fille de dos à sa toilette) (c. 1876-80), oil on canvas, 23 3/4" x 31 3/4". The Art Institute of Chicago, The Stickney Fund.

Or did they? Iskin demonstrates that some Impressionist paintings of milliners may actually be depicting mini-shops within the *grands magasins*. Degas was obsessed with milliners, who shared a somewhat ambiguous social space with his other great obsessions: jockeys, ballerinas, and, indeed, artists' models. By the early 1890s, Degas had turned his attention from consumers and displays to the artistry of the modiste, perhaps expressing "the kind of disillusionment with the culture of commodities that became common during the fin-de-siècle" (*MW* 105). His late works depict a quieter world, emphasizing artisanal production over display and consumption—a "turn inward, away from the allure of the consumer world of fashionable goods" (*MW* 112). Iskin subjects the millinery business to similarly close scrutiny, with stunning results.

Iskin hypothesizes that Manet may have seen a Degas pastel of two customers seated behind an elaborate display of hats as he was working on *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1882), which inspired him to include the bottles on the bar as an elaborate display, not present in the sketch. Equally persuasively, she links Manet's painting to contemporary liquor advertisements, which "similarly positioned the bottles close to the spectator and next to an

attractive woman" (*MW* 41) Manet himself designed lithographs for advertising posters. Karl Marx may have been thinking of these elaborate commodity displays when he commented on the fetishism of the commodity, Iskin suggests (*MW* 100).

In *Women in Impressionism*, Iskin's essay "Was There a New Woman in Impressionist Painting?" reminds us that "consumption was not limited to the purchase or display of fashionable outfits and other goods, it included reading novels, newspapers and journals, attending entertainment events at the Opéra, theatre or café-concert, eating in restaurants, or stopping for refreshments in a patisserie or café" (*WII* 198). As in her own book, Iskin draws upon a dizzyingly diverse body of visual evidence, including but not limited to caricature, loge scenes, ballerinas, cafés, croquet, and gardens. If anything, her bravura analysis packs even more punch distilled into a short essay.

Iskin identifies a new genre of images representing fashionable bourgeois women exercising their gazes by looking through opera glasses or lorgnettes. She observes that Mary Cassatt was unique among the Impressionists—including Berthe Morisot—in depicting women looking through binoculars at the theatre (*WII* 195). For other artists, binoculars are merely props, fashionable accessories carried rather than used. But Cassatt is careful to depict sideways glances only, in keeping with etiquette, and in contrast to Degas's portrayals of bolder, possibly transgressive women at the races. Cassatt's women "are fashionable and respectable, expressing a certain independence and agency yet, unlike the caricatures of *la femme nouvelle* they are not characterized as unfeminine or as transgressing the parameters of bourgeois mores" (*WII* 197).

Contrasting Renoir's *The Theatre Box (La Loge)* (1874) with Cassatt's *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge* (1879), Iskin writes: "Cassatt's response to Renoir in this painting was to depict an elegant woman as active, triumphant, and enjoying herself, while also being on display in her bare-shouldered evening attire. In other words, Cassatt represents this woman not only from the viewpoint of how she might look to the eyes of the spectators around her, but also suggests the woman's experiences of herself on this evening out in the theatre" (*WII* 194). While Renoir's picture is about "the exchange of glances, about seeing and being seen," Cassatt's subject "is not presented as a passive object to the gazes of the spectators of the painting, but is shown as if she is interacting with them" (*WII* 35). *The Theatre Box (La Loge)* was the centerpiece of a 2008 exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery, which unites it with other Impressionist paintings of elegant Parisians on display in their loges.

*Women in Impressionism*, an exhibition catalogue, includes an unusually detailed checklist of exhibited works dating from 1862 to the 1890s, loaned by institutions including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the National Gallery of Art, and Copenhagen's Statens Museum for Kunst. The list is heavy on portraits, many of which have transcended their highly personal origins and become iconic images of Impressionism, like Claude Monet's portrait of his wife and son, titled *Woman with a Parasol* (1875).

The art critic Camille Mauclair, writing in *La Nouvelle Revue* in 1899, summed up the gender differences in art of the previous century: "A man's portrait was a psychological document subject to analysis and moral evaluation... A feminine portrait was.... always a decorative work."[4] It wasn't until the end of the century that critics could see the emergence of a new type of female portrait, one that flourished with the Impressionists but also infiltrated Salon painting.

In *Women in Impressionism*, Susan Strauber's beautifully focused essay on Manet's unfinished *Portrait of Jeanne Duval: Baudelaire's Mistress Reclining* (1862), another star of the exhibition, emphasizes that Manet made the most impact in the portrait genre, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* notwithstanding. The bourgeois portrait of the day was rooted in verisimilitude, and until the 1860s portraiture ranked rather low in the artistic hierarchy. Led by Manet, the Impressionists took the portrait from the specific to the universal, "a forum where the personal could be transgressed for the sake of presenting a general statement about an age and its types," writes Søndergaard (*WII* 28). The Impressionists introduced what Strauber calls "double portraits": twofold commentaries, which are both portraits and aesthetic statements (*WII* 103). This new emphasis on portraiture led the critic Zacharie Astruc to declare that portraiture had become more important than history painting. (Fittingly, in the same catalogue, Therese Dolan examines Manet's portrait of Astruc, in which the device of a *chambre double* or double room manages to reference both Titian and the artist's own iconic *Olympia*.)

The *Portrait of Jeanne Duval* has long been the subject of speculation about the date, production, and sitter's identity—all questions now conclusively resolved. Strauber sharply and methodically unpacks many of the initially puzzling features of the painting: the figure's stiffness, the awkward pose, the mask-like face, and the curious strip of brown paint on the far left edge of the canvas—barely visible, frequently cropped out of reproductions, and often mistaken for an easel—which Strauber convincingly identifies as "the frame of a tall, freestanding mirror" (*WII* 110). By positioning Duval opposite a mirror, Manet casts the paralytic mulatto as a modern-day Venus in crinolines, evoking classical references as well as his hero Velasquez's *Las meninas*. "In the 1870s and 1880s art, the mirror is a key component of modernity and of femininity across the artistic map, from avant-garde to conservative painting, and across the range of media, from painting to fashion plates to mass media erotica," Strauber writes (*WII* 112). But Manet gives no indication of whether the mirror is in use, whether it is placed front or back to the subject.

Duval is one of many women in white Manet depicted, picking up the gauntlet thrown down by Whistler with *The White Girl* of the previous year. Jeanne Duval's white gown dwarfs her stiff, awkward body; "although the canvas is loosely painted with broad, open, irregular brush strokes, details of gesture, jewellery and fabric are nevertheless quite legible" (*WII* 99). For

Strauber, the portrait also evokes Franz Xavier Winterhalter's *The Empress Eugénie with her Ladies-in-Waiting*, painted just seven years earlier.

The portrait employs the ubiquitous "reclining woman" pose of 1870s portraiture, with its "informality, casualness and intimacy of an astounding degree" (*WII* 107). Strauber relates it to Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Madame Monet Reading* (c. 1873), which "is just as much a portrait of a sofa and a dress as it is a portrait of a lady" (*WII* 76). As technically ambitious as its more polished Salon counterparts, the portrait also reclaims the reclining woman from the erotic odalisque tradition and brings the figure "into the present day, where she re-emerges as a woman of exotic tastes in the privacy of a contemporary home" (*WII* 76).

The *grande horizontale* was only one of many canonical genres the Impressionists tackled and, in doing so, reinvented; another is the eighteenth-century toilette scene, itself a reinvention of the vanitas tradition. Søndergaard and Tea Baark Mairey's essay on Morisot shows that her toilette scenes constructed femininity from the inside out, giving a uniquely female, highly personal perspective on a well worn trope; one of them even includes the headboard of the artist's own bed (*WII* 252). Morisot painted seven toilette scenes in a short time, between 1876 and 1880 (Fig. 1). In them, she "updated the traditional *vanitas* motif into the situational context of her own day and transformed it into an integral part of the contemporary Impressionist endeavour" (*WII* 242). The elaborate toilette of the period lent itself to performance, but Morisot's scenes are truly private, with no male spectator, explicit or implied. She is less interested in the erotic aspects of the subject than creating a meditation on femininity. But, ironically, although Morisot had greater access to the private world of women, she had less freedom to depict it, compared with her male peers.

The authors contrast Morisot's toilette scenes with versions of the same subject by male artists; Monet, who abstained from toilette scenes altogether, is notable for his absence. Manet's *Nana* (1877), rejected by the Salon, went on display in a shop window at Giroux's on the Boulevard des Capucines, bringing "the seemingly private character of the *toilette* … openly in to the public space" (*WII* 245). *Nana* "moved directly into the visual culture of the street, where the lower ranking representatives of her type really belonged, anyway. Thus she was exhibited as an item of bric-a-brac... among the other ornamental articles. It was all 'for sale,' in both the literal and the figurative senses of the phrase" (*WII* 245). Nana's silk undergarments mark her as not just a prostitute, but an expensive one. The presence of real undergarments in the backgrounds and dark corners of Impressionist toilette scenes reminds us that these are not academic studies of nude models but episodes in erotic narratives.

While Nana and other Manet models boldly meet the viewer's gaze, Degas's models turn their backs on us, oblivious to our presence. "This imparts to the works an even more private character and gives the viewer an experience of some insight into the most routine aspects of contemporary feminine existence" (*WII* 44). The device of the mirror multiplied those gazes, especially in the ostensibly private toilette scenes.

Women's fashions mediated between the public and private spheres. In 1874, the critic Charles Blanc described the parasol as both the epitome of female coquetry and the perfect prop for achieving effects of light and shadow, a description that also applies to veils (*WII* 95). Marni Kessler's essay in *The Invisible Flâneuse?*, "Dusting the surface, or the *bourgeoise,* the veil, and Haussmann's Paris" brilliantly synthesizes social history, fashion, and urban planning to address one of the chief impediments to flânerie: dust.

Significantly, "the popularity of veils in Haussmann's Paris was only tenuously linked to fashion"; though veils can be seen in many contemporary images of Parisiennes, they were less a fashion statement than a necessary prophylactic (*TIF* 52). "While dust had always proliferated in Paris, the transformation of large sections of the city between 1852 and 1870 by Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann raised even more," Kessler writes. "This dust was actually directly related to limiting bourgeois women's engagment with aspects of urban life and culture," as it necessitated the use of garments that altered women's view, and the way they themselves were viewed (*TIF* 49). Dust was regarded as a health hazard and "must have induced considerable alarm, worsening already significant anxieties over the health of the city's inhabitants," although Kessler does not provide much evidence of alarm and anxiety (*TIF* 53).

Haussman's characteristic balconies were not just architectural flourishes but attempts to access fresh air; they also permitted a kind of flânerie, by which the bourgeoisie—male and female—could observe city life without being contaminated by it. While Haussmann opened up the city, letting in light and air and setting up views, veils increasingly confined women's already limited views. Furthermore, the ubiquitous veil (combined with the advent of mass-produced clothing) made women as homogeneous as the new buildings rising up around them. But just as mass-produced clothing was erasing class difference, veils helped to distinguish the respectable woman from the prostitute, who eschewed them. Elite fashion magazines advocated veils for reasons of health if not style, making them the province of the wealthy and literate. Ironically, the veil became so tied to class that it did not protect the women who needed it most: lower class workers like laundresses who breathed the poison air daily. But its health benefits were, in the end, dubious. By the 1890s, doctors concluded that veils obstructed the wearer's vision, especially the popular dotted veils seen in so many Impressionist street scenes. If there was a flâneuse, her view of the city may yet have been a partial, imperfect one.

The three books under review all have their own limitations and imperfections, yet each also has much to offer readers. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, the hefty exhibition catalogue, *Women in Impressionism,* entices both the coffee-table browser and the serious art historian with its generous complement of color illustrations. *The Invisible*

*Flâneuse?* is narrower in every sense, yet essential reading for those following the flâneur/flâneuse debate. But Iskin's book is the one that lifts the veil on the full range of women's experience in fin-de-siècle France, and thoroughly reinterprets Impressionist paintings according to the social changes surrounding the much-debated *femme nouvelle*. ●

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### Notes

1. Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2, no. 3 (1985): 37-46.
2. Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).
3. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, "The *Flâneur:* The City and its Discontents," in *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994).
4. Camille Mauclair, "La femme devant les peintres modernes," in *La Nouvelle Revue* I, 2d series, 1899.

## The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth Century America

by Charmaine Nelson
University of Minnesota Press, 2007

**Reviewed by Lisa E. Farrington**

This rigorous examination of American Neoclassicism has a surprising twist: the book questions the validity of white marble as a medium in the depiction of black bodies. Using a revisionist angle of vision—that of a black feminist art historian—Charmaine Nelson begins her interrogation in an introductory chapter entitled appropriately, "Toward a Black Feminist Art History." Restating bell hooks's critique of mainstream white feminist scholars as unwilling to address issues of race within the context of gender discourse, Nelson sets out to remedy this oversight.[1] In order to critique the inherent "whiteness" of both the players (neoclassical artists) and their medium (white marble), Nelson foregrounds the black female body as a sculptural subject, and adroitly pieces together a mostly uncharted narrative. In doing so, she taps an array of rare and unpublished primary source documents that detail the lives and works of American neoclassical sculptors abroad.

Early in the text, the reader's attention is directed to the "white marmorean flock" of American expatriate women artists who lived and worked in Rome during the mid-nineteenth century. Italy offered substantial relief from the social strictures of American provincial society and was thus an attractive destination for the "flock"—a group of mostly single, white (and in certain instances lesbian) sculptors that included, among others, Harriet Hosmer, Emma Stebbins, and Anne Whitney. In order to provide a context for the group and for the metaphoric and literal whiteness embodied in their nickname, Nelson identifies the origin of the moniker, which was assigned to the group by writer Henry James (who wrote exhaustively on the American expatriate experience). In 1903, James described these women as a "strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who at one time settled upon the seven hills in a white marmorean flock."[2] Nelson finds the double emphasis on whiteness—skin and marble—in James's sobriquet especially telling precisely because its racial significance has been mostly ignored in scholarly examinations of the member artists. This concept of double whiteness provides the book's leitmotif—the exploration of the symbolic relationships between Eurocentric whiteness, African blackness, and the medium of white stone.

Nelson approaches the "strange sisterhood" from the point of view of the clique's one non-white member, the African- and Native-American sculptor Edmonia Lewis. Born on the East Coast, educated at Oberlin, and apprenticed in Boston, Lewis relocated to Rome and became affiliated with the "flock" in 1866. Nelson provides an informative review of the literature on the artist's somewhat privileged affiliation with the Rome colony; on her racial self- and other-identity; and on her unique location within the neoclassical context. Of particular interest is the bond between Lewis and her most resolute patron, abolitionist Lydia Marie Child, which the author accesses meticulously by way of Child's personal letters. Nelson outlines the peculiar love-hate relationship that existed between Lewis and Child, who vacillated between admiration and disdain for Lewis's skill, and between attraction and revulsion vis-à-vis Lewis's blackness.

Nelson initiates her study in earnest in Chapter 1, "Dismembering the Flock: Difference and the 'Lady Artists,'" which focuses on the disparity between Lewis and the other members of the "flock." The author explains that a veritable chasm existed between Lewis and her compatriots, ethnically, socially, and financially. In particular, Nelson details Lewis's inability to match the finances of her upper class acquaintances, as she found the cost of living, maintaining a studio, and purchasing marble prohibitive. While Lewis's financial troubles have been well documented by scholars, Nelson's contextualization of this information is insightful in that it foregrounds a socioeconomic disparity that allowed Lewis's compatriots to take for granted their own privileged status while treating Lewis with condescension. One such elitist described Lewis as a having the appearance of a "southern cook," finding it impossible to see past her race and her proletariat social standing (24).

Chapter 2, "Taste and the Practice of Cultural Tourism: Vision, Proximity, and Commemoration," offers readers a review of the abundant nineteenth century travel essays written, published, and consumed by the Americans who annually embarked on The Grand Tour. The intent of the chapter is to account for Lewis's popularity among travelers from the U.S. who visited her studio in Rome

after reading in travel brochures and essays about the exotic "Colored Sculptor." Chapters 3 and 4, "So Pure and Celestial Light: Sculpture, Marble, and Whiteness as a Privileged Racial Signifier" and "White Slaves and Black Masters: Appropriation and Disavowal in Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*," get to the meat of the book's premise, and are devoted to a discourse on the "racialized" nature of white marble and to the theoretical correlation between the medium and the white artists who used it. Nelson argues effectively here that the unbridled use of white marble by American neoclassicists served not only to undermine the representation of blacks but also to marginalize the African slave experience.

Centering her attention on Hiram Powers's infamous *Greek Slave* (1848-69), Nelson reasons that this sculpture was a major signifier of the unwillingness of white Americans to fully acknowledge the victimization of black slaves, preferring instead to lavish acclaim on representations of white slavery. Powers, the most highly regarded of the American neoclassical sculptors, produced no less than six full-scale versions of *Greek Slave* and numerous smaller replicas in response to public and private demand for the motif. Exhibited most notably at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, as well as at numerous major U.S. venues, the sculpture featured a standing nude female figure in chains whose pristine form (emulating antique Greco-Roman Venuses) inspired countless essays and impassioned poems by the likes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.[3] The work drew international attention to the subjugation of Greek women during the Turkish War of Independence (1821-30). By comparison, Nelson explains, the wretchedness of African enslavement in America seemed of secondary concern to the "dominantly white bourgeois Victorian" art-going public (82). In this chapter, Nelson thoroughly evaluates the scholarly literature on this phenomenon, much of which attributes the public's fascination with *Greek Slave* to the psychic transformation it effected, of the African slave into a white woman, and of the white slave master into a dark-skinned Turk. Hence, in a classic case of Freudian projection and displacement, *Greek Slave* managed to demonize blacks as prosecutorial slave masters, while situating whites as enslaved victims in the American psyche. The Victorian desire to invert white and black within the context of the slave-master relationship is explored further in chapter 5, "The Color of Slavery: Degrees of Blackness and the Bodies of Female Slaves." Here, Nelson draws attention to the routine practice of portraying black women as racially ambiguous in order to engage the widest possible public in the abolition crusade. A victim of slavery whose appearance was not "too black" was more likely to garner public sympathy than an authentically African depiction.



Fig. 1. Edmonia Lewis, *Death of Cleopatra* (1876) marble, 63" x 31 1/4" x 46". Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Historical Society of Forest Park, IL.

In chapters 6 and 7, Nelson investigates representations of one of the era's most popular African women icons, Cleopatra. Nelson compares two significant neoclassical sculptures of the monarch—one by renowned expatriate sculptor, William Wetmore Story, and the other by Edmonia Lewis (1876; Fig. 1). These two *Cleopatras* have often been the subject of scholarly comparisons, because both were completed within a few years of each other, and both were exceedingly popular with the American public, as demonstrated by their exhibition at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, where an unparalleled 20 percent of the American population (10 million people) had the opportunity to view the two works. Motivating comparisons of these two sculptures is the fact that, despite their surface affinities, Lewis's rendering departs radically from Story's—a circumstance which Nelson, in the main, attributes to Lewis's racial identity.

Underscoring the significance of Lewis's ethnicity to the configuration of her *Cleopatra*, Nelson pairs photographs of the two artists on facing pages. One photo portrays the stern, white-bearded elder William Story, replete with artist's beret. The other shows a youthful, wistful, dark-skinned Lewis draped in velvet and wearing a pillbox hat. Not provided, however, is a visual coupling of the sculptures themselves—which, regrettably, are separated in the book by some hundred pages. The reader is therefore at a disadvantage when trying to assess the formal discrepancies between the two works. For example, unlike Story's slender and feminine Cleopatra who sits meditating on her impending suicide, Lewis's monarch appears quite dead. The ponderous weight of her body is slumped on her throne; her left arm dangles heavily alongside the armrest; and her knees sag apart. The directness and candor of Lewis's portrayal, which brought the artist both critical acclaim and censure, set this sculpture apart from virtually any other of its period.[4] However, while asserting that Lewis's racial identity is the motivation for this unique representation of Cleopatra, the author does not convincingly link race with the physical characteristics of the pharaoh—in particular her facial fea-

tures, which are as European in configuration as those of Story's sculpture. The reader is left to ponder whether indeed it is not Lewis's racial identity but her identity as an independent and perhaps lesbian woman, living alone abroad (a metaphor for Cleopatra's identity as a descendant of Greeks living in Egypt) which informed the portrayal.

In the conclusion of *The Color of Stone*, Nelson returns to the book's premise—the assertion that white marble, by its very nature, subverts representations of Africans. Frustrating, however, is the fact that this argument is directly contradicted by works discussed in the text, such as Lewis's *Forever Free* and Thomas Ball's *Lincoln Memorial*—both of which depict convincing African male figures in marble. Nelson's examples of marble sculptures of Africans who don't look black are mostly portrayals of women, suggesting, yet again, that gender rather than race is at the core of the "color of stone" conundrum. The western psyche has long accepted African features in its conception of the idealized black male. The same cannot be said, however, of the ideal black female, whose beauty has been most often associated (at least in the U.S.) with fair skin and straight hair. Except for a brief moment during the age of Black Power in the 1970s, African-American women have long straightened their hair, and today spend millions of dollars annually on hair-lengthening weaves and other processes to conform to expected western ideals of beauty—something black men do not do. In fine arts and popular culture, the ideal black male continues to be darker in complexion, with short curly hair, and African features such as a full mouth. Nelson's argument—that white marble results in Europeanized depictions of blacks—only bears out when those depictions are of women.

Race-gender question aside, *The Color of Stone* functions most effectively as a collection of well-documented essays. Divided into three discrete sections—"Artists/Environs/Aesthetics" (chapters 1 to 3); "From Slavery to Freedom" (chapters 4 and 5); and "Two Cleopatras" (chapters 6 and 7), the subdivisions function independently more so than as integrated components of a larger discussion. Their discontinuity is amplified by the use of a great many lengthy subtitles within each chapter, which tend to obfuscate transitions from one discussion to the next. The book also depends heavily upon quotations to make its central points. This is particularly conspicuous in Chapter 6, which boasts lengthy quotes on nearly every page. While these primary source excerpts do, indeed, help to contextualize and strengthen Nelson's various arguments, their abundant use has the simultaneous effect of stifling the author's voice. Without question, *The Color of Stone* is an exceptionally well-researched text; and its premise is an intriguing one, to say the least. If the author's voice is occasionally muted; and if her reasoning is intermittently flawed, these missteps do not—and I cannot emphasize this enough—detract from Nelson's ability to see an old story in a brand new light. •

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### Notes

1. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
2. Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1903), 257.
3. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote "Hiram Powers' 'Greek Slave'" in 1851. *The Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Frederick Warne, 1893), 434.
4. J.S. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition* (Philadelphia: Hubbard, 1876), 372; Walter J. Clark, Jr., *Great American Sculptors* (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Barrie, 1878), 141-42.

## Professional Pursuits, Women and the American Arts and Crafts Movement

by Catherine W. Zipf
University of Tennessee Press, 2007

**Reviewed by Pamela H. Simpson**

Much has been published on women in the late nineteenth-century decorative arts field, mostly focused on England, and often portraying women's role as reinforcing "dominant Victorian patriarchal ideology" by confining them to the domestic realm (15). That is true enough, but Catherine Zipf believes the situation is more complex. Her basic premise in this study of women working within the American Arts and Crafts Movement is that they had advantages that others outside of it did not. She further asserts that women not only benefited from this network of support, but also contributed to it by opening up opportunities for others.

In her introduction, Zipf lays out the background for the movement and the standard treatment of it as originating in England in the 1850s and 1860s with the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris, and then coming to America in the late nineteenth century and finding its most obvious expression in the work of men such as Gustav Stickley, Elbert Hubbard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Bernard Maybeck. By contrast, she argues that the American movement actually started with the 1876 Centennial and developed as a grass roots movement, led by women, which took place in schools, clubs and organizations. Moreover, she asserts that women shaped the movement for nearly twenty years before the better-known men took up the ideals. The basic tenets of the American Arts and Crafts Movement were favorable to women's participation—art in a local context, made for a home environment, tinged with social reform, and valuing a hand-made craft—these were things women could not only identify with, but also participate in without too obviously challenging traditional patriarchy. Zipf offers a new way of looking at Arts and Crafts women in the

1876-1914 period by showing how the movement helped them cross over social barriers.

In five chapters, Zipf lays out case studies of exactly how this happened. Hazel Wood Waterman (1865-1948), for example, a young widow with three small children, used her art training and connections to the San Diego arts community to become a practicing architect in the 1910s. A protégé of Irving Gill, she trained in his office and became his chief "draftsman." He, in turn, served as the architect of record for her early commissions and gave her a flexible schedule that allowed her to work at home. Her commissions came largely from women she had met at several local arts clubs. This network made it possible for her to enter the profession by a side door. In this, as in every chapter, Zipf starts by laying out an overview of the professional situation for women. Her survey summarizes the difficulties that professionally trained women architects such as Sophia Hayden and Julia Morgan faced, and she uses these difficulties as a contrast to the route that Waterman took. The Arts and Crafts network made it much easier for her.

In the second chapter on women inventors, Zipf explores the art pottery movement that began after the Centennial, and especially the experience of Mary Louise McLaughlin (1847-1939), one of the founders of the Cincinnati Pottery Club, who is often thought of as the "grandmother of art pottery in America" (60). McLaughlin not only invented new underglaze and porcelain production techniques (Fig. 1), she also wrote some seven books on the subject and became a well-known authority on ceramic decoration. Art pottery is probably the area where women are best known. Besides McLaughlin, there is also Maria Longworth Nichols, who founded the Rookwood Pottery company in 1880. One of her employees was Laura Ann Fry, who invented the airbrush technique for applying glazes. Her experience is a good illustration of Zipf's main thesis about Arts and Crafts support. Fry did her experiments at the company's studio, on company time, and with its blessing. The company also allowed her to take out her own individual patents on the process. She was able to learn chemistry and physics as part of a communal work environment, and the domestic nature of the product made all this seem acceptable for a woman. As Zipf concludes, though the Arts and Crafts Movement could not erase the obstacles facing women inventors, nevertheless, it helped Fry mitigate the disadvantages she faced.

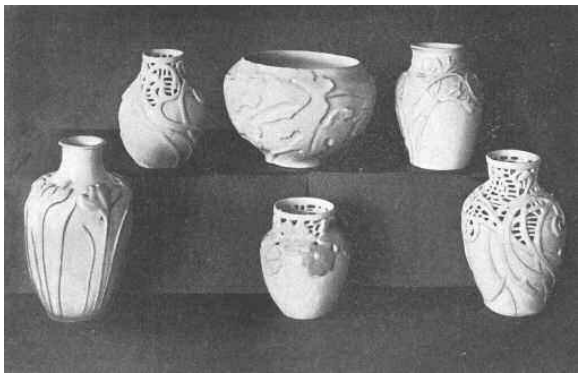


Fig. 1. Mary Louise McLaughlin, Losanti Vases (c. 1899-1903), porcelain. From Irene Sargent, "Some Potters and their Products," *The Craftsman*, August 1903, Photo: Catherine W. Zipf.

Zipf's third chapter examines women as business executives, and here she contrasts the experience of women such as Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to open a brokerage firm in 1870, and Candace Wheeler (1827-1922), who managed to found and run four successful businesses in her career as an embroidery and textile designer. Where Woodhull faced constant resistance and survived only because of her thick skin and determined perseverance, Wheeler was never criticized for running her own businesses. The difference was that she was working in an area defined as feminine and she had the support of a network of understanding artists and philanthropists. Her first effort, in the year following the Centennial, was to found the New York Society of Decorative Arts (NYSDA), which attempted to help destitute women by training them as needle workers and then marketed their goods. This was followed in 1878 by the Women's Exchange, an attempt to broaden the effort to all crafts. In 1879 Wheeler joined Louis Comfort Tiffany and the Associated Artists in an interior design firm where she managed the textile and needlework section. When the group dissolved in 1883, she kept the name Associated Artists and continued the textile work. Probably her most important commission was the interior of the Women's Building at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. In the 1890s she turned her attention to writing and completed nine books.

The fourth example Zipf explores is the role of women as editors. Here there were plenty of precedents, but she sees the Arts and Crafts Movement as providing a special niche and cites the example of Adelaide Alsop Robineau (1865-1929), the editor and publisher of *Keramic Studio* from 1899 to 1929. Art pottery was an area dominated by women, but Robineau was unusual in that in her own work, she not only decorated but also made the ceramic bodies. That was a role more often played by men. She knew the art pottery scene thoroughly and used her magazine to give advice and keep her readers current on new techniques from all over the world.

Zipf's final example is Irene Sargent (1852-1932), best known as an editor for her work on Gustav Stickley's *Craftsman* magazine from 1901 to 1905. A privately educated scholar, she taught languages, history, and the fine arts at Syracuse University for many years. She also found time to publish some 155 articles and was one of the intellectuals who helped shape Arts and Crafts ideas. Reading about her amazing life, it is no wonder that her students started a rumor that she had promised her brain to Harvard and was living off the proceeds. She was one of the most influential Arts and Crafts thinkers in America.

Zipf's five examples document the ways that women in the Arts and Crafts Movement both discovered an environment of support and helped create that environment for others. They all benefited from Arts and Crafts ideas about handicraft and domestic decoration. The movement provided a middle ground between home and work where their

roles as artists, managers, owners, and intelligentsia could be disguised in non-threatening ways. But as she notes, it was not a one-way street. They benefited, but they also gave back, especially through education; and in doing so they helped shape the movement in America.

Catherine Zipf has indeed given us a new way of looking at the Arts and Crafts Movement in bringing to light the careers of these five fascinating women. If there are criticisms to be made, they would be minor, but two come to mind. One is that, in her reliance on secondary sources for her broad overviews to each chapter, Zipf sometimes overgeneralizes and, in at least one case, makes the mistake of repeating a misinterpretation. Her description of Caroline Brooks as a female inventor who at the Centennial had the "misfortune" to have her butter sculpture of the *Dreaming Iolanthe* take precedent over her invention of a technique for making plaster casts, is a total misreading of Brooks' intentions and experiences,[1] although it is not something Zipf would likely have known unless she were an expert on the subject. It is one of the problems of trying to summarize a vast body of reading—one doesn't always know what has been superseded by subsequent scholarship.

The second problem is the way Zipf sometimes discusses the Arts and Crafts Movement as if it were a time period or a sort of club with rules, rather than the very loose collection of independent groups that it was. Once Zipf gets beyond her introductory sections and considers the specific case studies, this is not a problem. Those specific experiences are presented accurately and convincingly, and the reward is in the details of her case studies. They alone make this a must-read for anyone interested in this period. •

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NOTES

1. See my article "Caroline Shawk Brooks: The 'Centennial Butter Sculptress,'" *WAJ* 28:1 (2007): 29-36.

## Bessie Potter Vonnoh: Sculptor of Women

by Julie Aronson
Ohio University Press/Cincinnati Art Museum, 2008

**Reviewed by Roberta K. Tarbell**

This indispensable resource on the American artist Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955) served as the catalogue for a traveling retrospective exhibition of her sculpture.[1] Vonnoh's work—although well-received in her day—has been underrepresented in exhibitions and scholarly literature.

Julie Aronson's monograph reflects the extensive recent scholarship on American and European women's art, artists, and material culture contemporary to Vonnoh, and her theoretical stances include traditional connoisseurship, iconography, stylistic analysis, and biography updated with sensitivity to gender issues and technical aspects of sculpture. Of nine roughly chronological chapters, the three longest (3, 4, and 6) are devoted to Vonnoh's signature genre works modeled between 1895 and 1910.[2] Photographs document historic exhibitions and the artist at work in numerous studios, and Aronson presents images of comparative works by her contemporaries. Since sketching was not part of Vonnoh's creative process, no drawings are included (250, note 43).[3]

In his Preface, Aaron Betsky, Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, where the exhibition originated, establishes his institution's early connection with Vonnoh (the 1904 purchase of two sculptures), and notes the parallel between Vonnoh's use of shimmering surfaces and the treatment of light in American Impressionist paintings (ix-x).

Aronson notes in her Introduction that, by 1913, although she "dwelt on the themes of American women and children found in abundant contemporary paintings, Vonnoh was recognized as the first in the nation to render such everyday themes in sculpture and was thought to have brought to them her own exquisitely sensitive approach" (2).

Many would agree with Aronson that after the 1910s the "veneration of the avant-garde spelled the neglect of the American bronze in the annals of art history" (2). However, as Albert Elsen has pointed out, "More modern sculptures between the two world wars were modeled in clay, cast in bronze and carved in stone than were created through assemblage or welding."[4] Thus, despite the surge of abstraction and construction, modeled figurative sculpture remained seminal in the twentieth century and cannot account for the lack of interest in Vonnoh.

Bessie Onahotema Potter was born in St. Louis and grew up in Chicago, where she studied at the Art Institute of Chicago with Lorado Taft, beginning in 1887. There, and in the ateliers of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the sculptor's life in art begin in earnest. Aronson expands our awareness of how Taft mentored the careers of Vonnoh and many other female sculptors, and presents newly found images of women working at the 1893 fair.

Because of "pressing financial needs" (29), in 1894 Vonnoh opened her own studio in Chicago, where she invented a new type of portrait: small plaster statuettes of genteel women. She created about a hundred of these, many of which she tinted or polychromed (33). Because these subjects were upper middle class women with extensive leisure time, critics assume that Vonnoh was one of them. But Vonnoh's widowed mother had to work, and from the age of twenty-two, the artist supported herself.

The following year, with her mother, Taft, and his sister, the sculptor Zulime Taft, she made her first trip abroad, visiting the Paris studios of Auguste Rodin, Jules Dalou, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Thereafter, her oeuvre displays

an understanding of the art of these master sculptors.[5] Her experiences in Paris and in London expanded her repertoire of representational strategies, including the vigorous modeling of Rodin, Camille Claudel, and Dalou, as well as Dalou's genre compositions and iconography.

In 1899, a year after settling in New York, Vonnoh completed two major commissions—a colossal bust of Major-General S. W. Crawford for the Smith Memorial in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia,[6] and *American Girl*, a life-size portrait of the actress Maud Adams for the upcoming Exposition Universelle in Paris. That year she married the American Impressionist painter Robert W. Vonnoh, and they exhibited together in dozens of two-artist shows over the next thirty years. For the first half of that period, Bessie Vonnoh's career continued its upward trajectory. She exhibited her sculpture in major international venues such as the Exposition Universelle (1900, bronze medal); Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo (1901); Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis (1904, gold medal); Armory Show, New York (1913);[7] and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco (1915, silver medal). During the same period, her small-scale genre sculptures entered museum collections, including those of her alma mater the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum. The Corcoran Gallery of Art, which staged her first major one-woman exhibition in 1910, holds the largest collection of her work, thanks in large part to the artist's bequest (221).

Vonnoh benefited from many opportunities denied to earlier women artists. She had access to excellent academic training in Chicago, which was more open-minded toward women artists than New York. As an incipient sculptor, she was given large-scale commissions for the World's Columbian Exposition and competed for and won prizes and medals typically awarded to men. She did not, however, continue to receive major commissions, nor did she seek positions of leadership on behalf of women artists as did her contemporary,



Fig. 1. Bessie Potter Vonnoh, *Girl Dancing* (1897; cast 1906), bronze, 14 3/4" x 9 3/4" x 8 1/2". Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. Photo: Ed Pollard.

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875-1942). For example, although she exhibited with the National Association of Women Artists in 1920, she did not champion the organization, which was founded in 1889 to "promote culture and education in the visual arts through exhibition of its members' work, scholarships to needy and talented women artists."[8] Vonnoh and her subjects were more feminine than feminist. Except very briefly, she did not extend her influence via teaching; her contribution is her sculpture.

Shifting away from academic, figurative subjects of women and children based on mythology, Christianity, and allegory, Vonnoh instead modeled genre interpretations of dignified women. Although most of her women were from the leisured middle class, her models for *Motherhood* and *Enthroned*, for example, were the wife and children of the local village barber. Vonnoh downplayed the role of women as workers and did not depict the kind of physical fatigue and drudgery embodied in the grim laborers of Mahonri Young's *Workman with Wheelbarrow* (1915), Chester Beach's *The Stoker* (1912), or George Grey Barnard's *The Hewer* (1902). Vonnoh did not advocate political or social change like her contemporary, Abastenia St. Leger Eberle (1878–1942), a woman sculptor with whom Vonnoh often was compared. Eberle exploited the aesthetic possibilities of urban immigrant life and marched with the suffragettes. Whereas Eberle's *Ragpicker* (1911) illuminated the arduous life of homeless or destitute—but independent—women, Vonnoh's sculptures evoked the quiet, genteel aspects of married women's caretaker role.

*Daydreams* (1903) suggests Vonnoh's multivalent approaches to her works (92-96). She depicted sisters enjoying their leisure time in her signature style which combines freshly observed realism and virtuosity in modeling clay. In 1899 a critic described her painted plaster sculptures as "finished and tinted *à la grecque*," probably referring to the Hellenistic polychrome terracotta figurines of fashionable Greek women that were frequently published and exhibited in Paris and New York after being shown at the 1878 World's Fair.[9] The seated and reclining goddesses from the East Pediment of the Parthenon are a more likely Greek precedent for Vonnoh's composition and use of fabric, as in her *Grecian Drapery* (1913). Like them, her women depict intimate familial relationships. In Victorian times sisters and female friends typically slept in one bed and shared the same pillow. They touched, hugged, and kissed each other, and, as we see here, cuddled together to share romantic dreams of their futures, and no one considered them homosexual. In her history of American lesbianism, Lillian Faderman points out that "love between females was considered the norm."[10] Probing further the socio-political, socio-economic and gender implications of Vonnoh's oeuvre could yield some interesting insights.

Vonnoh confidently portrays elemental human emotions in her genre sculptures created between 1895 and 1913 to a greater degree than in her later fountain

and garden figures. These later commissioned life-sized sculptures appear hackneyed, as if modeled on preconceived formulae.

This is the first published biography and substantial aesthetic analysis of Vonnoh's sculpture.[11] Julie Aronson, Curator of American Painting and Sculpture at the Cincinnati Art Museum since 1999, researched her subject diligently for twenty years, and appends forty pages of back material, including expanded endnotes, archival resources, an extensive bibliography, and an index. Forty-eight color photographs allow readers, for the first time, to assess the scope and nature of Vonnoh's technically excellent bronze sculptures. The artist published little autobiography or aesthetic philosophy, and Aronson has had to construct them from other sources.[12] Although Aronson has included substantial technical data concerning Vonnoh's work, this also is an area where more is needed. She delivers new insight to the artist's pioneering choice of terra cotta as a medium (149-51), and her inclusion of Janis Conner's excellent comparative analysis of *Young Mother* (1896) and *Girl Dancing* (1897/1906; Fig. 1.), each cast by three foundries, is laudable. While a catalogue raisonné probably is not possible because so many unique sculptures are lost, Aronson might publish full documentation of some thirty extant small bronzes: what is known about unauthorized casts, and more about the scientific authentication of the artist's works.[13] Aronson also missed an opportunity to discuss the phenomenon of the Alva Museum Reproductions of some of Vonnoh's best loved small sculptures. She laments that "some museums today offer reproductions in their shops while the sculptures themselves languish in storerooms" (4) without explaining the history and importance of museum-sanctioned appropriation which implies the appeal of Vonnoh's works. Even so, this book succeeds because of the quality of the work of this artist and the author's scholarship. •

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## NOTES

1. The exhibition was organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum (June 6 – Sept. 6, 2009). It opened at the Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut (Oct. 11, 2008 – Jan. 11, 2009), and traveled to the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Alabama (Feb. 7 – May 10, 2009). The exhibition and book were funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Women's Committee of the Cincinnati Art Museum. The exhibition is the first retrospective for Vonnoh since 1930. The artist and her husband lived in Lyme.
2. Aronson uses the artist's maiden name, Bessie Potter, in Chapters 1 through 5 and her married name, Bessie Potter Vonnoh thereafter.
3. In a telephone interview, the author stated, "I never have seen a drawing by Vonnoh" (June 3, 2009).
4. Albert E. Elsen, "What Isn't Modern Sculpture," *Art News* (January 1987): 147.
5. She did not study with a master sculptor in Paris and could not attend the École des Beaux-Arts, which did not accept women until 1897. Unlike Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Malvina Hoffman, who enjoyed critiques and long conversations with Rodin, Vonnoh was not fluent in French and he did not speak English.
6. See Lewis Sharp, "The Smith Memorial," in *Sculpture of a City: Philadelphia's Treasures in Bronze and Stone* (Philadelphia: Fairmount Park Art Association, and New York; Walker Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 168-79.
7. This landmark exhibition probably was ignored by both the artist and the author because of the greater importance of the retrospective exhibition of Vonnoh's sculpture at the Brooklyn Institute at the same time.
8. Ronald G. Pisano, *A Centennial Celebration of the National Association of Women Artists* (Roslyn Harbor, NY: Nassau County Museum of Art, 1988). See also the organization's excellent website.
9. Pauline King, "American Women Sculptors," *Harper's Bazaar* 32 (March 4, 1899):180.
10. Federman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991, and Penguin Books, 1992), 11.
11. The book is based on the author's Ph.D dissertation, "Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955) and Small Bronze Sculpture in America," (Univ. of Delaware, 1995).
12. The most extensive autobiographical publication is Bessie Potter Vonnoh, "Tears and Laughter Caught in Bronze," *Delineator* 107 (October 1925): 8-9, 78, 80, 82.
13. See also "Bessie Potter Vonnoh," in Conner and Joel Rosenkranz, *Rediscoveries in American Sculpture: Studio Works, 1893-1939* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1989): 161-68; Caterina Y. Pierre, "Bessie Potter Vonnoh: A Sculptor's Legacy in New York," *Fine Art Connoisseur* (July-August 2008): 42-45; and Janis Conner and Thayer Tolles, "Double Take: A Closer Look at American Bronze Sculpture," *The Magazine Antiques* (November 2006): 156-61.

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## Modernism and the Feminine Voice: O'Keeffe and the Women of the Stieglitz Circle

by Kathleen Pyne.
University of California Press, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, High Museum of Art, 2007

**Reviewed by Karen A. Bearor**

> "Sleeping, then, this woman is your thing. You are the showman, here, boasting of her faculty. More—you are the watchman standing with a club before the gate of her life, guarding and prolonging so long as you may endure, the unconsciousness within her" (224)[1]

Mabel Dodge Luhan's words, written at an embittered Georgia O'Keeffe's request, sum up the role of Alfred Stieglitz in the lives of the women he championed. He selected those whose art he thought revealed the essential woman within, molded them (or tried to) according to his own evolving vision of the woman modernist, and promoted each until he found someone whose feminine "unconsciousness" fulfilled his needs even better. These women were Gertrude Käsebier (1852-1934), Pamela Colman Smith (1878-1951), Anne Brigman (1869-1950), and Katharine

Nash Rhoades (1885-1965). O'Keeffe (1887-1986), who compliantly became his woman modernist, based upon the attributes he had culled from her predecessors, was his legendary success. This is the central thesis of Kathleen Pyne's provocative book.

Pyne wrote early sections of this book during her period as scholar-in-residence at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center in Santa Fe. These inspired the exhibition *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Women of the Stieglitz Circle*, for which the book served as an accompaniment. The volume is liberally illustrated with 97 high-quality color illustrations and 69 black-and-white photographs, many of which are full-page reproductions. The exhibition traveled from the O'Keeffe Museum, to the High Museum in Atlanta, to the San Diego Museum of Art, where it closed in the fall of 2008.

O'Keeffe's life and career have spawned innumerable books, articles, exhibition catalogues, dissertations, and master's theses. Her promotion by Stieglitz is also familiar territory. Pyne offers, instead, an examination of the roots of the woman modernist identity Stieglitz created for O'Keeffe, culminating in a woman-child persona, "possessed of an adult sexuality, yet energized by innocence" (xxxii). The author resuscitates the identities of lesser-known women who preceded O'Keeffe in Stieglitz's circle, but only as they contributed to this identity's development. She is selective, so photographer Eva Watson-Schütze (1867-1935) and painter Marion Beckett (1886-1949), for instance, merit isolated comments only. Yet, because their work is subservient to Pyne's overarching thesis, Käsebier, Smith, Brigman, and Rhoades remain eclipsed by O'Keeffe. She ultimately takes shape, in both Stieglitz's promotional efforts and Pyne's text, "as much more than the sum of her female antecedents" (xxxiii).

For Pyne, Käsebier's pictorialist photographs of mothers and children taught Stieglitz one means of representing femininity. James McNeill Whistler had provided Photo-Secessionists with the trope of the "white girl," whose chaste body was divested of sexuality and imbued with the powers of the mystic. Countering the prevailing leitmotif of femmes fatales in European paintings, she also moved Photo-Secessionists toward photography as an art form. Käsebier's luminous, white-draped mothers set against light backgrounds were Whistlerian in their spiritual purity and refinement. Yet they were also totally devoted to their children, thus becoming emblematic of women's experience. Unfortunately, Käsebier was an easy target of rebuke when Stieglitz began to move away from pictorialism. Indeed, she represented the ideas of femininity against which he would position his modernism. But, as Pyne indicates, "that modernism sought, not to discard these feminine paradigms, but to reinvent them and recuperate their displaced sexuality in the image of the child," ultimately to reveal the child concealed within the woman (61).



Fig. 1. Anne Brigman, *Finis* (1912), photogravure on silk paper, 5 1/4" x 9 1/2". The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame.

To Pamela Colman Smith, for whom Pyne dedicates little space, Stieglitz granted the first woman's one-artist show at 291. Her watercolors, reflective of her work in theater and her interest in spiritualism, appeared childlike to her contemporaries and reflective of the inner self in an age becoming obsessed with the "subconscious." Pyne sees Smith, in her celebration of the child within, as a touchstone for Stieglitz's image of the modern artist. Yet, her paintings lacked a focus on the sexualized female form, on which he subsequently depended in his espousal of a liberated modernism.

Smith's contemporary, Anne Brigman, offered Stieglitz the female form in her photography, and he assiduously crafted her public presentation based on it. Despite her varied interests, she became known solely for her photographs of female nudes in primitive landscapes, their bodies harmonizing with clefts in rocks and the trunks of gnarled trees (1912; Fig. 1). Stieglitz showcased her work contemporaneously with that by Rodin, requiring her nudes to be allegorized. Pyne writes,

> At stake in Stieglitz's promotion of the nude at 291, whether in Brigman's photographs or in the works of European artists, was his entire modernist program, in which the body's freedom and desires were made to stand for the social freedoms of the individual (76).

Brigman thus became the new face of the Photo-Secession, replacing Käsebier. As Pyne asserts, her nudes showed Stieglitz how a woman's art might uncover the hidden "truths" of feminine sexuality, when psychoanalysis described the depths of the primitive self as constituent of the modern psyche. Yet her work was too concerned with women's empowerment, rather than free love and sexual pleasure, toward which mod-

ernists were gravitating. Nevertheless, Brigman taught Stieglitz, according to Pyne, how the artist might make herself present in the work, both physically and psychically, becoming "the paradigmatic act of modernist self-revelation" (112).

Katharine Nash Rhoades presented Stieglitz with what Pyne calls his dress rehearsal for O'Keeffe (189), yet Rhoades was unable to become the woman-child he wanted her to be. Neither was she willing to consent to his repeated demands for physical consummation of their relationship, to achieve self-realization, in his view. In the 1920s, he shamelessly made a public example of her as a failed woman-child. Yet, he did not give up on her until he realized, in 1917, that O'Keeffe was the better candidate.

O'Keeffe initially accepted the identity of the woman-child to gain Stieglitz's approval, but also to find a visual vocabulary allowing her to externalize her inner feelings. Yet, Pyne writes that "she steadfastly refused this interpretation in various ways over the course of her career" (183), and she provides a number of examples of these in her final chapter. In her discussion of the intimate portraits Stieglitz began to make in 1918, however, Pyne pulls together the strands of the identity she has been reconstructing throughout her text. In one photograph, O'Keeffe appears in a white kimono against a white background, her hair loose around her shoulders. Pyne compares this image to Käsebier's photographs, while also arguing that O'Keeffe's loosened hair recalls the "informal style of girl children" (221). An image of O'Keeffe with her arms stretched over her head, appearing entwined with the forms of her painting behind her, Pyne compares to Brigman's photographs.

Pyne's book makes an important contribution to the literature on Stieglitz in seeking to trace the evolution of his thought from the first years of the Photo-Secession through the early years of his marriage to O'Keeffe. It is based upon extensive archival research at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center and with the Alfred Stieglitz Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Yet Pyne's thesis, brilliant in its originality, is not always convincing. Many times as I read along I wanted more concrete evidence from Stieglitz himself to substantiate her claims. As if in anticipation of such complaint, she offered the following disclaimer: "If at times in my account the women speak more than Stieglitz, they do so partly because of an asymmetry in the extant archival materials and partly because of my conviction that Stieglitz has already aired his views in his own vehicles of publicity and in the works of an army of biographers, scribes, and critics" (xxxii). The asymmetry in archival materials is an unfortunate consequence of history. But this book was about the evolution of Stieglitz's thought. Borrowing from existing literature to help anchor her thesis does not seem unreasonable in bolstering her arguments.

Occasionally Pyne presupposes what her subjects thought. Obviously, the nature of her narrative imposes on her the task of digesting and interpreting letters and diaries, and I have no reason to assume her interpretations are untrustworthy. But pointless speculation weakens the text. For example, Pyne proposes that O'Keeffe's omission of a 1919 photograph from a "key set" of Stieglitz's photographs was perhaps due to the "theatrics" of the photograph, which she characterized as "not simply passé but clearly over the top" (229). Many possible reasons come to mind for rejecting prints for a "key set," and I wondered what point this supposition served.

These criticisms should not be seen as diminishing Pyne's overall accomplishment here. The book opens up the Stieglitz-O'Keeffe scholarship to new possibilities. Further, it reinforces our understanding of Stieglitz's need to invent himself as a visionary transcending "the rules of bourgeois materialism and bourgeois masculinity and femininity" (xxxii), if only at the expense, particularly in Rhoades's case, of a woman's freedom to pursue her own goals. While I read, so much feminist writing on the arts kept echoing in my head. Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon stated the issue quite succinctly: "The female nude, then, is more than just a formal site of modernity.... [I]t is the very site on which male fears, fantasies and projections are played out."[2] Pyne's book allows us to see in nuanced ways the very nature of this process, while also bringing into greater focus the interrelationships of the women in Stieglitz's circle and their work.

**Karen A. Bearor** is an associate professor of art history at Florida State University. She is writing a book on the impact of progressive education on the development of modernism during the first half of the twentieth century. •

### Notes

1. Pyne is quoting Mabel Dodge Luhan, "The Art of Georgia O'Keeffe," undated MS (1926–27?).
2. Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon. *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 102.

## Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field

by Anne Whiston Spirn
University of Chicago Press, 2008

**Reviewed by Mariea Caudill Dennison**

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) is best known as a photographer who recorded dire conditions in the United States as she worked on government assignments documenting agricultural workers during the Great Depression. Author Anne Whiston Spirn publishes about 150 of Lange's photographs along with the associated field notes that she produced for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1939. Lange's depictions of sparse living and working environments contribute to her moving photographs of the rural poor. Quality reproductions often show multiple images of one location and give the reader a depth of visual information not found in general surveys of Lange's

work. Likewise, the previously unpublished field notes presented alongside the corresponding photographs add another dimension to many of her well-known images. Readers also may benefit from a chronology of Lange's life, an appendix, and a sizeable index. In her essays. In her essays, Spirn details Lange's development as an artist and notes that she is widely known for her 1936 photograph *Migrant Mother* (Nepomo, California).

At the end of one long day in 1936, Lange wrote to her boss, Roy Stryker, that she was tired, and "there are all those notes and explanations, essays on the social scene in California is what they should be—still to be done" (21). In conjunction with her 1939 FSA photography assignments, Lange produced many individual captions along with extensive general captions, also known as field notes, that expound on the people and places that she photographed. Her modest images and captions from California and more substantial ones from North Carolina are published here. The book is dominated, however, by Lange's work from the Pacific Northwest, which is subdivided by Spirn's essays with titles such as "The Cutover Land" and "The Irrigated Desert." Lange often describes agricultural conditions and quotes those she photographed. A portion of one caption states: "Farmer and his wife, in field, digging sweet potatoes. They have a small irrigated farm on reclaimed land" (235). Another from Oregon (1939; Fig. 1) reads; "Mr. Roberts is a native of Kansas, brought up on a farm, but 'turned himself into a boilermaker and steamfitter.' Worked for 18 months on the catwalk of the Golden Gate Bridge" (258).

Lange's words and images form the heart of the book, but Spirn's introductions to the three geographic regions provide background information. The author's five-page essay on North Carolina, for example, assists the reader in understanding the thirty-five pages devoted to Lange's 1939 work in the state. Considerable space is given to FSA internal politics that influenced Lange's



Fig. 1. Dorothea Lange, *Mr. Roberts, October 12, 1939. Malheur County, Oregon.* FSA-OWI Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

North Carolina assignment, and regional history is also discussed. In various essays the author, a photographer and professor of landscape architecture, demonstrates her interest in the interaction between people and their environment. She notes that Lange's photographs are "in the moment" and focus "on present conditions rather than causes and origins" (269). Spirn, on the other hand, takes a much longer view and discusses Spanish land grants, the Oregon Trail, ditch riders, and twenty-first century agricultural practices, topics that are well beyond Lange's photographs and field notes.

In her closing essay, Spirn provides a personal account of her own travels through the areas that Lange photographed in 1939. Almost seventy years after the FSA assignments ended, the author found descendants of people that Lange had photographed, farms that had returned to forests, stores that were demolished, and churches that had been altered or abandoned. In places, roads or urban development encroached on what had been rural landscape. Spirn publishes a handful of her own photographs of these twenty-first century people and places, and she includes brief but engaging oral histories that she solicited from individuals who grew up in the regions that Lange photographed.

Spirn surrounds Lange's work with a frame carved from the concerns of the socially conscious and gilded with the enthusiasm of one artist for the work of another. Lively words like "nonsense" and "preposterous" are used to characterize statements by a critic. Job discrimination against Lange is discussed as is evidence that photography was classified as a lesser art form during much of the twentieth century. In the preface, the reader is informed that Lange's texts are not "explanatory footnotes to the images" and are "coequal" with the photographs (xi). Spirn consistently displays an interest in the relationship between words and images. This stress on the importance of Lange's written field reports is unusual in the larger body of literature on the California-based photographer. Equally striking is the emphasis on Lange's landscapes. The author finds that Lange "photographed landscape in the original and most profound sense of the word, the mutual shaping of people and place" (14).

"This book is a story of discovery and recovery of what has been lost or overlooked or misinterpreted, a process of retrieving and recapturing Lange," writes Spirn (9). She also expresses concern that the photographer is unknown, worries about a decline in her reputation (55), and asks: "Why do so many critics and scholars disparage her work or ignore it?"(xii). The author's characterization of Lange and her work is unnecessarily dramatic. Many of the artist's photographs have not been published because of her prolific production. Spirn herself reproduces only 150 of the 3000 FSA images that Lange made in 1939, and FSA photographs are available through the Library of Congress's public Web site. Over the past twenty years, Lange's work has been featured in many exhibition catalogues and books. Spirn's own "Essay on Sources" lists three 1994 works devoted to Lange: a book, an

exhibition catalogue, and a film; and it cites important essays published later in the decade. In 2002, two significant publications on Lange appeared, and in 2005 one of Lange's photographs sold for over $800,000. With Spirn's work, the steady stream of books, essays, and articles devoted to Lange continues, and her reputation seems assured. •

**Mariea Caudill Dennison** is an art historian who specializes in early twentieth-century American art. She has published articles on Stuart Davis and John Sloan in *The Burlington Magazine* and *Print Quarterly*, and her research on American women artists has appeared in *WAJ*.

## Eileen Gray

By Caroline Constant
Phaidon, 2000. Reprint 2007

**Reviewed by Ricki Sablove**

More than three decades after her death, the Irish-born designer and architect Eileen Gray (1878-1976) remains difficult to categorize. Self-effacing but assertive, she was a generous collaborator, but never a joiner. She exhibited with the Union des Artistes Modernes and in the Salon des Artistes Decorateurs, but never became enmeshed with any one movement. She knew the Ballets Russes, Le Corbusier, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus, but while she shared many of their concerns and was influenced by their formal ideas, she never espoused a single philosophy of design. Gray used what she liked and what she believed made sense, and the results were both like and unlike everything going on around her.

While she was something of a maverick, Gray was not a rebel. Perhaps it was the similarities, more easily recognized than the more nuanced differences between her and her peers, that caused her to be overshadowed by her mostly-male counterparts. Too broad of perspective, too independent of spirit, and too analytical of mind to become identified with any school that came along—or went away—during the first half of the twentieth century, she never really found her true place in the history or historiography of modernism. Recent works on Gray, notably the biography by her friend Peter Adam (1988) and the monograph by Philippe Garner (2007), have provided much information about her personal life and oeuvre.

It is, however, Caroline Constant's volume, now in a paperback edition, that best contextualizes Gray properly vis-à-vis her contemporaries. While gender was certainly an issue in establishing her reputation, Constant's analysis makes it clear that Gray's case is more complex than a matter of sexual politics. Constant, professor of architecture at the University of Michigan, places more emphasis on Gray's architecture than on her work in the decorative arts.

Gray's story unfolds not just against the backdrop of the social and cultural atmosphere of her time, but is interwoven through it. Kathleen Eileen Moray Smith was born in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, in August 1878. The family name was changed to Gray when her mother, granddaughter of the tenth Earl of Moray, inherited a peerage and the title of Baroness Gray. In 1901, Eileen Gray enrolled in the Slade School of Fine Arts, where she learned drawing and painting, and in London she discovered the art form that would change the trajectory of her career: Asian lacquerwork. In 1902, she moved to Paris, and remained in France for most of her life.

In 1906, she put herself under the tutelage of the Japanese lacquer master Seizo Sugawara, who came to Paris for the Exposition Universelle of 1900. This labor-intensive and somewhat hazardous endeavor occupied most of Gray's energies, and she set up a lacquer workshop for herself and her teacher. She was at the same time developing her interest in rug design, and established a weaving workshop with the American Evelyn Wyld.

Gray's love for these crafts seemed to place her squarely in the tradition of the decorative arts, and in 1912, she exhibited her lacquer work in the Salon des Artistes Decorateurs. She began to generate interest among important patrons, including the fashion designer Jean Doucet, who was discarding his collection of eighteenth-century antiques. For Doucet, she created some of the iconic pieces of her early career, including the red lacquer "Charioteer" table and "Le Destin," a four-panel screen. It is the latter piece that manifests the ongoing dialectic between what Constant calls the practicality and sensuousness in Gray's work: one side depicts rather static figures; the other, dynamic abstract forms. In fact, her work was to become more and more abstract over the years, although she continued to eschew the theories of the avant-garde, calling them "lacking in heart" (71). As Gray designed the Paris apartment of Madame Mathieu-Levy, the lines between decoration and architecture were starting to blur.

In 1921, Gray met Jean Badovici, the Rumanian architect who became her friend, collaborator, and sometime lover. Their written "dialogues" differed considerably from the strident manifestoes of the Futurists, the pedantic *Kindergarten Chats* of Louis Sullivan, or the comical rants of Adolf Loos. In an appendix, Constant includes excerpts from one of the dialogues, "Maison en bord de mer" (House by the sea), which was first published in *L'Architecture Vivante* (winter, 1929). This passage elucidates the fluidity of thought that characterizes Gray's work:

> In short, you mean to rediscover emotion.
>
> Yes, but a purified emotion that can be expressed in a thousand ways. It is not necessary to return to old complexities. Sometimes all that is required is the choice of a beautiful material worked with sincere simplicity. It is necessary to reconstruct an idea that is able to satisfy the most general modern consciousness while guarding against all excesses, but without neglecting individual pleasures.

> So you advocate a return to feelings, to emotionalism!
>
> Yes, but once again to an emotion that is purified by knowledge and enriched by ideas and does not exclude the knowledge and appreciation of scientific ideas. (Appendix IV, 238)

Here, Gray was not equivocating; rather, she was asserting the artist's obligation to be sensitive to the mutability of human sensory experience. It was perhaps this flexibility that made her a sort of odd woman out, both during her extremely long life and since.

With Badovici's assistance, Gray opened Jean Desert, a shop on the Rue du Faubourg-St. Honoré in Paris, which became a showcase for her furniture and rugs. With him she also designed her most important house, E1027 (the name derived from their initials: E for Eileen; 10 for J, the tenth letter in the alphabet; 2 for B; and 7 for G), about which Constant provides a thorough history and painstakingly detailed description (92-125).

The villa (Fig. 1), located in Roquebrune-Cap Martin in France, offers a comparison of Gray to Le Corbusier. As Constant points out, the relationship between the two architects was complex and contentious. Gray both admired his work and challenged it. For example, Constant points out that

> Le Corbusier's use of mathematical ordering principles—the geometric grids that govern his plans and the regulating lines that establish proportional relationships in his facades—similarly contrasts with Gray's methods, which lack the quality of an order imposed from without and instead originate from the perspective of human experience (111).

Constant goes on to say that "Where Le Corbusier used curved forms to represent contact with the body... Gray relied on materials to suggest degrees of bodily contact, from chromium handrails to fur bed throws" (113). Gray also responded to Le Corbusier's canonical tenets, for example, his use of the strip window, reinterpreting this feature at E1027: "In contrast to Le Corbusier's sharp delineation of the strip window, Gray articulated hers as a layered membrane" (107). Instead of his signature *brises soleil*, she installed pivoting shutters against the Mediterranean sun. She even used *pilotis*, Le Corbusier's reinforced concrete stilts, though selectively.



Fig. 1. Eileen Gray (with Jean Badovici), *E1027* (1926-29), Roquebrune Cap-Martin (view from the sea).

For his part, Le Corbusier took every opportunity to demean Gray's work. After she left Badovici and the house behind, the Swiss architect painted murals on the walls of E1027, with the consent of Badovici. Gray called this "an act of vandalism" (122). It was, however, a destructive maneuver that could only have been carried out by someone who felt the urge to put his mark on a work of art for which he could not otherwise take credit. Le Corbusier wrote, "They (the murals) are not painted on the best walls of the villa. On the contrary, they burst out from dull, sad walls where 'nothing is happening.' Meaningful paintings on indifferent walls and all the fine white walls are preserved" (122). Surely he could have found other white walls for his canvases.

While these exchanges may arguably represent juicy tidbits of gossip, they point to the fact that Gray was more like Le Corbusier than not. She shared similarities and differences with others as well. For example, Constant contrasts her with the Bauhaus and De Stijl, in that Gray did not share their ideas about "total design." Although she designed furniture and built-ins, she wrote that designers and architects had to "take into account their (the owners') human need to discover, in the places where they live, certain characteristics that express their individual personalities and their own taste" (132). In this, Gray was more like Loos, but again Constant highlights their differences, saying that, "she repudiated the polarity of art and daily life that Loos espoused" (74).

Constant provides equally comprehensive analyses of Gray's other houses, Tempe a Pailla and Lou Perou. One of the most fascinating chapters of the book, however, deals with Gray's change of focus from private houses for an elite clientele to domestic spaces for the masses. While most architects proposed collective housing, Gray saw the private house as the solution. Privacy was also a consideration in her designs for a Vacation and Leisure Center, which grew out of legislation for paid workers' vacations. These are aspects of Gray's oeuvre that are often overlooked.

While the book itself is indeed a handsome object, as discreetly elegant as Gray herself, its very design lacks what Constant calls "Gray's concern for practical exigencies of comfort" (119). The text is set in a light-face, sans-serif type that strains the eyes. Captions are set in a small, white type that is reversed on colored blocks; they are difficult to read and could easily be missed altogether. Most building plans are too small to be legible. And the copious end notes are arranged by chapter number, even though the chapters themselves are not numbered within the text.

These faults, however, are minor compared to Constant's considerable achievement. She has written a book rich in detail and description. And she has succeeded in finally positioning Gray as a true original who forged her own path within, outside of, and around the modernist movement.

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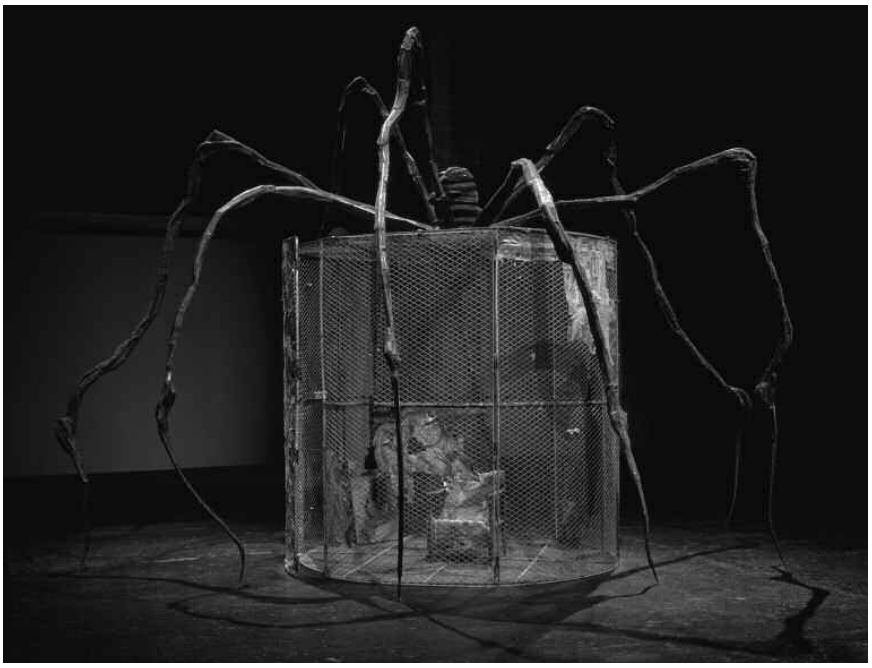


Fig. 1. Louise Bourgeois, *Spider* (1997), steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold, and bone, 175" x 262" x 204". Private collection.

## Louise Bourgeois

edited by Frances Morris and
Marie-Laure Bernadac
Rizzoli, 2008

**Reviewed by Rachel Epp Buller**

The latest exhibition catalogue of the work of Louise Bourgeois raises a number of questions. Is it A) a monograph, B) a critical examination of the artist's career, C) a laudatory retrospective, or D) all of the above? (Answer: D) This beautifully illustrated compendium accompanied a traveling exhibition of the artist's work, organized by the Tate Modern Museum in London and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Conceived largely as a retrospective as Bourgeois (b. 1911) approaches her centenary mark, the exhibition and catalogue depart from the chronological format that typify such endeavors. Focusing instead on the people, places, and subjects that have informed Bourgeois's life and art, the catalogue takes as its overarching theme the title of Bourgeois's mixed-media installation from 1999-2000, "I Do, I Undo, I Redo," examining how and why certain themes recur in varied forms throughout the course of her career.

By far the greatest element of the catalogue is its innovative layout. While the exhibition is organized around coherent bodies of work (early paintings, Personages, latex sculpture, etc.), the catalogue is designed as a glossary of sorts. The text reads as a series of alphabetically arranged entries, from "Abandonment" and "Abstraction" to "Words" and "Writings." Glossary categories range from names of family members and friends, and titles of specific works, to expansive themes in Bourgeois's life and art. This unexpected format allows for a diversity of approaches, where a brief quote from the artist on one concept is juxtaposed with a multi-page art historical exposition on another. This diversity makes for a text with broad appeal, rendering it accessible and inviting to both specialists and the general public.

Part of the catalogue's novel format, however, also works to its detriment. Throughout, the text's contributors focus heavily on Bourgeois's biography and on her own words. A photograph of Bourgeois with her 1970 sculpture *Eye to Eye* graces the glossy front cover and immediately suggests the dual focus on her life and art; her own words, meanwhile, adorn the back cover. Granted, some discussion of the artist's biography is to be expected, particularly in the case of such an unusual figure as Bourgeois. Born and raised in France, Bourgeois emigrated to the United States in 1938, upon her marriage to Robert Goldwater, the American art historian. Moving in overlapping circles to a variety of avant-garde movements, such as Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, Bourgeois remained largely free from any singular association. A breakthrough of critical recognition came in 1966, with her inclusion in Lucy Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction* show. In 1982, Bourgeois was the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art; rather than mark the capitulation of her career, however, the exhibition proved more of a jumping-off point, as demonstrated by Bourgeois's ensuing and continuing ascendancy in the art world.

However, too much focus on biography can be complicated. Nanette Salomon has examined the staid art historical tendency to look to biography to explicate the artist's work. Based on the Renaissance writings of Giorgio Vasari, this methodology functions to exceptionalize and heroicize the male artist-genius. For female artists, Salomon argues, the introduction of biography more often results in the reduction of their work to a mere visualization of personal life and positions them as exceptions to the rule in a patriarchal system.[1] Is it problematic, then, that the authors interpret so much of Bourgeois's work only through the lens of biography? Many years ago now, Linda Nochlin excoriated "the naïve idea that art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms. Art is almost never that, great art never is."[2] It would seem that the authors do Bourgeois a disservice in some cases when they overlook universalizing themes present in her work in favor of personal ones.

Bourgeois herself leads the authors this way, however. Under the entry on "Childhood," Bourgeois clearly states that her entire lifetime's oeuvre can be traced in inspiration to her formative years, and particularly to the perceived

double betrayal in the open affair of Bourgeois's father and nanny (81). Of the theme of "Spiders" that recurs in her work, she draws a parallel between the work of the arachnid and the work of her own mother, a weaver and repairer of tapestries (272). She incorporates fragments of tapestry into *Spider* (1997; Fig. 1) and even titles a large spider-sculpture *Maman* (1999). Bourgeois time and again leads her interviewers to biographical interpretations of her work, yet she is a consummate storyteller who, even in recent years, presides over enraptured audiences at the Sunday salons at her brownstone in Chelsea. At what point, then, does a dependence on Bourgeois's words become unwise? Bernard Marcadé notes Bourgeois's paradoxical position, one time vociferously denying and another time wholeheartedly embracing the role of eroticism in her work, though he attempts to explain away these opposing positions by proposing a more nuanced function and definition of eroticism (115-16). Similarly, Elisabeth Lebovici devotes a lengthy essay to Bourgeois's contradictory relationship to and statements about feminism. As explanation, Lebovici situates Bourgeois's contradictions within a career in which "she does, she undoes and she redoes" (131). From the outset, in the catalogue, Frances Morris argues that Bourgeois's entire artistic output addresses a series of negotiations and re-negotiations of relationships with others (11)—and, by extension, of recurring themes—immediately laying the groundwork for the impending reliance on Bourgeois's contradictory positions. By continually looking to the artist for explication, the authors weaken the critical impact of their analyses.

Perhaps the biographical emphasis is a given, since the catalogue is, at least in part, a laudatory retrospective of Bourgeois's life and work (answer C, above). Better not to be too critical of the one being celebrated. Several of the contributors to the volume attempt to negotiate between biographical and critical approaches. Robert Storr's essay on Bourgeois's abstraction, for example, begins with a candid discussion of her forceful personality and of the ways in which biography has come to dominate the writing on her work. However, because these celebratory approaches "have come to restrict deeper inquiry," Storr's subsequent discussion of the shifting multivalence in Bourgeois's abstraction ("done in the hope that the artist and the art can be rescued from her enthralled admirers") is particularly welcome (26). Storr asserts that, "Virtually never do any of [Bourgeois's abstractions] stand unmistakably for one thing," implicitly returning to the recurrent theme of doing, undoing, and re-doing (32). Varying the biographical reading, Linda Nochlin inserts her own biography rather than the artist's into her discussion of Bourgeois's late works. She juxtaposes Bourgeois's "soft work" with her 2002 architectural model of *The Institute,* the site of much of Nochlin's academic career. Mignon Nixon's essay presents a psychoanalytic reading, specifically interpreting the Personages as surrogates in Bourgeois's life. Nixon suggests that the Personages fulfill a social ritual of mourning, standing in for Bourgeois's family and friends left behind in France. Julia Kristeva, too, grounds her reading in the life of the artist, presenting a metaphorical narrative in which Bourgeois frees herself—from family, from landscape, from language, from home—through sculpture. Donald Kuspit examines the artist's diaries, an ever more intimate connection to Bourgeois's life. Of all the essayists, Alex Potts relies the least on Bourgeois's life for his discussion of what he terms "hybrid sculpture," work "in which staged interactions between viewer and sculpture played a key role" (264).

Despite the too-heavy biographical focus, the catalogue is a feat of scholarship, for it does in fact function simultaneously as a monograph, a critical examination (Answers A and B, respectively), as well as a retrospective of Louise Bourgeois's life and work. This 320-page volume brings together not only amazing reproductions of the artist's work in a single space, with a huge number of color plates not found elsewhere, but also a powerful group of intellects. The list of contributors reads like a *Who's Who* of art and cultural historians. Like Bourgeois's 1982 MoMA retrospective, this exhibition and catalogue will not mark the end of her career or the end of the discussion surrounding her art. Rather, this multifaceted compendium surely lays the groundwork for continuing critical analysis of the diverse oeuvre produced over the course of nearly a century. •

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## NOTES

1. Nanette Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission" (1991), reprinted in Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 351.
2. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971), reprinted in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Oxford: Westview, 1988), 149.

## Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting

by Alison Rowley,
I. B. Taurus, 2007

**Reviewed by Ingrid Steffensen**

Reading this book, I was reminded of origami, the Japanese art of paper folding. It is a marvel to see what complex figures can emerge from a single, uncut sheet of paper, and one often wonders what subtlety of mind can have imagined and created such an extraordinary idea from such a simple object. Unfold a completed figure, and one can see the indexical marks of the folding: the carefully creased geometric lines, the creation of an undulating series of ridges and furrows, resembling nothing so much as a landscape reduced to its angular essence. Observing these many seemingly unrelated polygonal



Fig. 1. Helen Frankenthaler, *Eden* (1956), oil on canvas, 103" x 117". Private Collection. © Helen Frankenthaler. Image courtesy Geoffrey Clements/Corbis.

shapes and contemplating the relation of one shape to another that, if folded back together again, would create one single, unified whole—a crane, a peacock, a lily—is a mental exercise in graceful paper gymnastics.

So it is with Alison Rowley's *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting*, a compact paperback, which takes as its point of departure Frankenthaler's iconic 1952 masterpiece, *Mountains and Sea*. Illustrated with both black and white and a selection of color images, and accompanied by a comprehensive bibliography, the book is a small encyclopedia on the artist and her time. From a highly nuanced engagement with a single painting, the author folds an intricate, complex, highly articulated argument of myriad and divergent angles, each bending away from the other, yet ultimately converging back upon that single object, the painting itself. There are times when, contemplating an individual facet or angle, one has difficulty identifying where in the final figure that particular angle will fit, yet following the intertwining of the various facets is a satisfying and challenging mental exercise.

That we are not about to embark upon a traditional exegesis of the single masterpiece monograph is apparent from the outset. Rowley, Senior Lecturer in Critical, Historical and Theoretical Studies at the University of Ulster, trained as a painter, states in her preface that the book emerged from two provocative assertions: "first, that the painting made by the character Lily Briscoe at the end of Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* is Helen Frankenthaler's 1952 painting *Mountains and Sea*, and second that the mountain in *Mountains and Sea* is Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire*" (xiii). Thus the gauntlet is thrown down at the very beginning, and the reader is subsequently drawn into the extended contemplation of the possibilities of meaning inherent in one single masterpiece.

The story begins with Frankenthaler's visit to Nova Scotia and the single burst of creative activity that occurred on the 29th of October, 1952, when she poured thinned paint from coffee cans while standing on a stepladder suspended over her canvas. In the more than half-century since its inception, the resultant painting has been celebrated in its own right as well as in its role as the inspiration for a change in direction for contemporary American painters such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. As Louis famously later said of *Mountains and Sea*, it served as "the bridge between Pollock and what was possible." Rowley needs no apologia for the painting *qua* masterpiece, but she searches for meaning beyond the conventional utterances on offer in most histories of Abstract Expressionism and Frankenthaler's oeuvre.

Her starting point is Cézanne, and in her first chapter she weaves a convincing argument for the importance of the French master to Frankenthaler's development—as important as Pollock, if not more so. Rowley's command of the minutiae of the New York art world in the 1950s is impressive, and from a widely cast net she weaves a convincing argument for the omnipresence of Cézanne in 1952. This is the seminal year of the momentous trip to Canada, and Rowley argues that the landscape of Nova Scotia bears an uncanny resemblance to the landscapes depicted in *Mont Sainte-Victoire* in Aix-en-Provence, with craggy grey mountains diving dramatically into the water. Several times she quotes a telling remark made by Frankenthaler about those Canadian landscapes: "I came back and did the 'Mountains and Sea' painting and I know the landscapes were in my arms as I did it" ( 46). The affinity for Cézanne goes beyond the obvious resemblance of the French to the Canadian terrain, and I was particularly convinced by the author's observations of Cézanne's working technique in his series of Mont Sainte-Victoire—that his loose, fluid brushwork and frequent and revolutionary exposure of the bare canvas support bears a remarkable familial resemblance to Frankenthaler's work; she goes so far as to say that particular marks on the canvas are "dialogues" with Cézanne (19).

From Cézanne, Rowley veers off into Virginia Woolf's semi-autobiographical novel *To the Lighthouse*, in which the central relationship that unfurls in the pages is that between a young woman painter,

Lily Briscoe, and a family romance she has with the Ramsays, particularly the *materfamilias* Mrs. Ramsay, with whose death Lily must cope. Rowley unearths marvelous passages about the process of Lily Briscoe's painting at the seaside in the novel, and she asserts that these paintings are, in fact, Cézannes, "with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across" (27, from *To the Lighthouse*, 191) . The internalized and one-sided love affair between Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay perhaps inevitably leads to Freud, and since Woolf was interested in psychoanalysis, this is a not entirely unexpected turn to take. Rowley argues that Lily's struggles with her paintings in *To the Lighthouse* embody a psychologically charged longing for the absent mother and lover as represented by Mrs. Ramsay, and the embodiment of the Freudian *fort/da* duality.

In the following two chapters, "A Spatial Feeling Connected with Landscapes" and "Something New in Terms of Nature," Rowley turns to increasingly philosophical and theoretical material. She introduces the French writer and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's musings on Cézanne and the relationship of the body to the landscape, looping this back to Frankenthaler's own experience of landscape and painting.

Subsequently, employing feminist theory, the author works on integrating Frankenthaler's approach to painting ("I know the landscapes were in my arms") as the "matrixial fantasy" of the return to the womb (69). Color, too, is engaged by these theories, as Frankenthaler moves between color itself as a drawing medium, color as a reference to the physical landscape, and color as an index of the relationship between the artist and Cézanne.

It is in this middle portion of the book that a strange shift occurs in the author's voice. Rowley asserts that this (occasional) shift from third-person narrative to a direct, second-person address to feminist scholar Griselda Pollock is her way of upending and exposing the patriarchal structure of scholarly mentorship. She acknowledges that this shift may be startling or even objectionable to some readers, and I cannot deny that I found it disconcerting, as if the book were no longer interested in engaging me as a reader, but was instead quite literally a discourse between the author and an audience of one. Some of the passages directed at Ms. Pollock employ a highly specialized language and syntax perhaps only to be understood by that singular audience, as, for example, the following sentence:

> Metramorphosis [sic] as the figure for a continual asymmetrical subjectivising process of adjustments of 'distance-in-proximity' in 'relations-without-relating' between *partial I(s)* and unknown *non I(s)* constituting a matrixial complex of fantasy, therefore *differences* (to use your term) inter-subjective relations between discrete individuals known to one another (91).

Even within the context of the methodologies employed throughout the book, such passages can be dense to the point of impenetrability, and the one-sided conversation with Pollock feels exclusionary and at times distracts from the ostensible theme. The above passage is an excerpt from "A Painting from the Rosenberg Era," a chapter that discusses the political context of the era. Surely the highly publicized trial and execution (1950-53) of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for espionage, and most especially the demonizing of Ethel Rosenberg as a woman, must have been disturbing for the artist, a Jewish woman living in New York. Despite Frankenthaler's own insistence that she forswore politics within the context of her art, Rowley's investigation into the imagery and discourse of the Rosenberg trial is illuminating, and the notion of "matrixial transference," a kind of telepathy between suffering people, has resonance (92). Rowley continues to spiral ever outward in her cultural and historical references, past, present, and future, ensnaring Andy Warhol's Disaster series, Morris Louis's Charred Journal: Firewritten series, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the contemporary work of artist Martha Rosler, and a letter written by Dwight Eisenhower to his son.

As the book winds down, the spirals of allusion swing ever farther out, both geographically and historically, to encompass Herman Wouk's 1955 novel *Marjorie Morningstar*, Erwin Panofsky's landmark *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955), its coverage of Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, and the possibility of Frankenthaler's *Hôtel du Quai Voltaire* and *Eden* (Fig. 1) (both 1956) as personal memento mori of Jackson Pollock's violent demise in August of that year. Whereas some passages in this multi-faceted work confound, the descriptive passage on *Eden* is limpid and evocative:

> [The composition is the] result of its dominant technical resource, drawing with fluid colour, by means of which an equally balanced, open relation between figure and ground is maintained with great skill and economy. The relationship between the size of the canvas and the scale and disposition of its pictorial elements is finely judged to achieve a sense of immense spatial expansion, both in width and in depth, beyond the actual dimensions of the frame. Translucent pale yellows, browns and reds combine with off-white, untouched, unprimed ground to create an environment of air and light. The painting breathes (113).

This is a passage so vividly written that I felt that the text itself was breathing at this point. Ultimately, this is a book whose engagement with its subject is profound, and it is clear that Alison Rowley thought long and probingly about Helen Frankenthaler's existence within the larger world of art history and twentieth-century America. I applaud the many thought-provoking social, cultural, and historical references that made this signal painting resonate so meaningfully with its milieu. It will doubtless remain an important contribution to the body of Frankenthaler literature. •

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## Technologies of Intuition

edited by Jennifer Fisher
YYZBOOKS, Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA), and DisplayCult (2006)

**Reviewed by Bojana Videkanic**

Perhaps the best way to start a review of *Technologies of Intuition*, an anthology of twenty-four illustrated essays, is to summon the spirit of Henri Bergson, who so many decades ago called for the use of methodologies of intuition as a way to understand "things in themselves." Bergson's spirit is effectively conjured up by a diversity of perspectives offered in *Technologies,* which bring together the cognitive, discursive and the intuitive. It is this idea of crossing the thresholds of human experience through theorizing intuition that stands as a guiding light in reviewing this timely anthology.

Jennifer Fisher, in her Introduction, brings up several important ideas related to the notion of intuition in art. First, artists have always used their intuitive capacities to conjure up creation. Secondly, this conjuring up is also a political stance—especially for many feminist artists and scholars. Finally, intuition is a theoretical and a methodological tool which offers a new approach to thinking about art and, perhaps, a new methodology of theory itself. In that sense, technologies of intuition offer a wide ranging palette of artistic and creative tools, but are also methodologies that enable theorizing about art in meaningful and profound ways.

*Technologies of Intuition* includes a variety of voices from artists of every stripe, art historians, critics, and others wishing to shine some light on this often marginalized field. In two dozen essays on various forms and uses of intuition, the book lays out a new terrain of thinking about art and the art object which emphasizes the power of the unconscious, the sensuous, the affective, and the metaphysical. Creative work is understood in the matrix of vectors that flow from the artworks to artists, theorists, and audiences. But these vectors are often hidden, imperceptible to the inattentive eye, consequently generating the need to conjure up, in these essays, apparitions, ghosts, the senses, and the intuitive.

Theodor Adorno once wrote that good art always produces a shudder. The shudder in this sense is an experience of art that is not only cognitive or discursive, but also bodily or embodied. More often than not, discussions of art take on a more discursive turn under the influence of structuralist, poststructuralist, and other late-twentieth-century theoretical strands, which emphasize critical and political readings of art and its role in society. Although this theoretical turn over the past thirty years was an important move in terms of art theory, very often, as the essayists in *Technologies* imply, intuition, the senses, and related notions of unconsciousness and affect are seen as "unprofessional," as "touchy-feely," implying that such art and theory are less than serious. What many of the artists' projects laid out in the book prove is that art cannot in effect be understood without considering intuition and the senses. Further, artists Marina Abramovic, Susan Hiller, Linda Montano or Carolee Schneemann not only speak about the power of intuition in terms of its aesthetic, methodological, and creative possibilities but as a political tool. As such, intuition as a methodology can bring to light those who are marginalized—as in Alexandra Kokoli's essay titled "Susan Hiller's Paraconceptualism," or Zoe Beloff's reconstructions of spiritual projections in "Two Women Visionaries"—or the importance of the history of spiritualism and its relationship to the nascent feminist movement in the West, as described by Serena Keshavjee in "The Enactment of the Supernatural in French Symbolist Culture."

Theater director Jade McCutcheon starts her essay, "Intuition as the Receptive Other," by referring to intuition as a method of opening up to an unknown other.

> I have developed a method, *the receptive other*, for theatrical training that involves conscious entry into states where intuition can thrive in non-predetermined ways, where actors attend to the emergence of patterns, voices, images and stories (204).

Her method suggests this other to be an ungendered *space* in which the actor is "possessed" and able to experience states beyond consciousness. This kind of creative methodology is echoed by other *Technologies* authors and artists, including Carolee Schneemann in "On Intuition," and "Chrysanne Stathacos: The Aura Project." Like McCutcheon's, most of these accounts of intuitive surrender in the creative act similarly involve the artist's submission to a force beyond her power, shattering the standard subject-object relationship in which the artist acts *upon* the material she is working, and forging a different kind of a relationship in the process. In "Fear, Shame, Ecstasy and Self-Transformation: Marina Abramovic," an interview with the artist by Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick, Abramovic talks about the moments of risk and surrender in her performances as she "feeds" off the audience. She says:

> Performance is not the thing, but rather a tool for that message. The body is like a car that's being driven. Then the public has to be drawn inside the mental and physical construction the performer builds (144-45).

These moments when the artist, the work, and the audience enter a different realm of possibilities through the artist's engagement with intuition break traditional Western identitarian (subject/object, mind/body, male/ female, etc.) relationships and forge new ones, as when audience members stop being part of an audience and become performers themselves, intimately involved with the act of conjuring intuition. As described by Schneemann, Abramovic, Montano in "Seven Paths to Reclaiming our Intuition" and Jennifer Fisher's "The Chakra Cycles of Linda M. Montano," and others, intuitive work takes form as forces, flows of energies, and vectors of intensities. Valerie Lamontagne, in "Spiritualist Embrace," for example, traces the forging of such forces in her performances, which literally become séances as a professional medium summons creative potential along with various spirits. For Lamontagne these works also stand as historical markers

because of the relationship between the rise of the suffragette and spiritualist movements at the turn of the last century—both marginalized movements led by women—which she wedges into her performance, for which there is no audience, only participants. Participants risk being inhabited by the spirits of women who represented a new voice in the West—one in opposition to the public positioning of women as silent followers of male-dominated society, or benevolent, well-behaved mistresses of the domestic sphere.

Keshavjee, Beloff, Schneemann, and Bev Pike in "The Tarot of Organizing Women," like Lamontagne, outline methodologies of art production that connect women's past and present. These artists describe a long history of intuition as an aesthetic methodology (for female and male artists alike), and as a vehicle of political subversion. The texts show us how women in the West have used intuition to challenge or evade strict, rational, and repressive religious and political structures. Jo Applin's "Towards a Haunted Art History" and Carolyn Bell Farrell's "Curating as a Divining Process" speak to the idea that art and art history theory need to be transformed through intuitive relationships. In fact, throughout the *Technologies* anthology, authors offer methodologies in which intuition brings a potential for the creation of new kinds of aesthetic, political, and social relationships. Intuition, too often frowned upon and marginalized, can be an invaluable tool for communication and collaboration between artists and audience participants, as in McCutcheon's theater workshops, which break the boundaries of the so-called 'fourth wall.' Paula Thomson, in "Are Muses Real?," goes further and establishes a direct link between inspiration, neuropsychology, and creativity, making a statement about both intellectual and biological processes involved in using intuition as a methodology.

Carolyn Bell Ferrell opens the door to curating the imperceptible, in effect, opening her practice to the forces beyond discourse, or even physicality, writing about her awareness "that the art object is a host to invisible sensibilities, ranging from psychological motivations to spiritual revelations" (240). For curators used to being around objects, documents, or traces of artists' works, it is an important step to relinquish the seen and surrender to a force. Ferrell claims that "curatorial intuition necessitates a degree of faith in an unseen order" (241). It is this very moment of surrender on the part of the curator, with faith in some sort of a divination to occur, that allows for the politics of the margin, of reconstituting the field of artistic production and reception.

By working with sometimes obscure psycho-physical landscapes, artists and art historians can offer alternative views of art which are, more often than not, as Applin argues, quite precarious and unstable, but also more powerful than what the typical art historical narrative allows. Applin talks about the forgotten contexts in which artists such as Jean Follett, Mary Bauermeister, and others who were "secret artists," as Applin calls them, became marginalized in the canon of art history. Moreover, knowing the history of feminists challenging and recreating the canon through the "classic" texts of Linda Nochlin or Griselda Pollock, Applin is interested in the spaces in-between art movements and stable categorizations. By conjuring the periphery, haunted spaces, and apparitions, she unveils the politics of the margin.

Jennifer Fisher, in her Introduction, calls our attention to the ways in which the margins can be called to the fore, and it is in these spaces that this collection of texts speaks most potently to the importance of intuition as a technology for creation, reception, and theorization of art. All of the essayists are careful not to fall into an existentialist trap that would somehow bestow intuitive powers to women only. However, as McCutcheon writes, the terminology should address "'*the receptive other*' as an alternative to the polarity of the 'feminine'" (204), because intuition is not gendered, although it seems that feminists could benefit from these methodologies of intuition and should not shy away from them.

*Technologies of Intuition* offers a range of positions on the role of intuition in art, ranging from artist statements to examinations of the changed nature of art history. As well as offering insights into the ways in which artists think about their work, this anthology is set against the historical backdrop of the feminist movement and its long history of struggle for political and artistic freedom and equality. In this beautifully produced paperback, filled with high-quality color and black and white images, the themes of intuition, spirituality, phantoms, and apparitions appear as anything but marginal. They are shown to be gateways to an exciting contemporary women's artistic production. •

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## Liliana Porter and the Art of Simulation

by Florencia Bazzano-Nelson
Ashgate, 2008

**Reviewed By Nina Gara Bozicnik**

Over the last several decades the growth of English-language texts on Latin American art and artists has greatly benefitted art history, cultural studies, and other humanities-related disciplines, effecting a richer, more nuanced and complex field of literature and discourse on the history of cultural production. Florencia Bazzano-Nelson, Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art in Latin America at Tulane University, has contributed to this expansion with her primary focus on female subjects, helping to rupture the traditional conception and reduction of female Latin American artists to mere melodrama and sensationalism (10). *Liliana Porter and the Art of Simulation* builds on the author's 1989 master's thesis and results from a long relationship with the Argentine-born, New York-based artist. The text directly references correspondence between the author and the artist as it expounds on a single theme Bazzano-Nelson identifies as continually present and at play in Porter's prints and installations from the 1960s through to her recent films from the late 1990s. At the heart of Porter's work is this investigation into the nature of visual representation as a site where reality, illusion, and simulacrum are always in tension (Fig. l).

Bazzano-Nelson is not the first to identify the perception of reality as a pervasive theme in Porter's work, and she appropriately peppers references to other scholars throughout her text, including Mari Carmen Ramirez and Gerardo Mosquera. On the other hand, she fails to include Edward Sullivan's discussion of Porter's work in his 2007 *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas*. Like Bazzano-Nelson, Sullivan identifies Porter's constant appropriation of René Magritte imagery, interest in language and syntax, allusion to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and reference to the modern Argentine writer Jorges Luis Borges as indicative of the



Fig. 1. Liliana Porter, *Red with Dog* (2005), duraflex (photograph mounted in aluminum and laminated), 32 1/2" x 26". © Liliana Porter. Photo: Courtesy Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago.

artist's interrogation of "concrete reality."[1] This unfortunate omission points to the lack of a comprehensive literature review in the *Art of Simulation*, which somewhat isolates the author's otherwise theoretically rich and compelling monograph.

Structured chronologically, the *Art of Simulation* includes chapters denoted by what Bazzano-Nelson identifies as "subtle transformations" in Porter's ever-evolving, creative process and choice of subjects (96). For the author these "transformations" are variations on a theme and together represent a linear progression that reaches a "logical conclusion" in the films *Para usted/For you* (1999) and *Solo de tambor/Drum solo* (2000) (115). Subsequently, Bazzano-Nelson attests that rather than a comprehensive "retrospective vision" of Porter's forty-plus year art practice, the *Art of Simulation* is a focused study of the strategies and forms the artist has engaged, transformed, and developed to question perception and reality's constant occlusion (2).

Ironically, Bazzano-Nelson's linear framework contrasts with her tendency to compare Porter's work to Borges's philosophy of ambiguous reality and his labyrinth-like texts. Porter's visual language, like Borges's writing, says the author, defies finite meaning and reveals its depth through multiple and layered readings (54). As such, Porter's work also resonates with the theories of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard—Porter's contemporaries, whom Bazzano-Nelson references to contextualize the artist. Nevertheless, the *Art of Simulation* focuses on and applies a single interpretive thread to Porter's expansive career as a means to view and discuss the artist's oeuvre.

Bazzano-Nelson acknowledges the limits of her analysis rooted in psychoanalysis and postmodern, primarily French, critical theory, and invites viewers, as "interpretive collaborators," to engage and explore other latent meanings in Porter's work (123). In the chapters on the artist's photographs and films, Bazzano-Nelson seems to follow her own suggestion as she broadens her interpretive tools to unravel more overt Argentine history and vernacular culture references—for example, toy figurines modeled as *gauchos*, a type of Argentine cowboy, and Spanish-language tango ballads. Remaining faithful to her thesis, however, the author privileges these allusions as strategies evolved from Porter's ever-present investigation into the nature of perception.

Because the *Art of Simulation* develops a single theme in Porter's work, the text features only select examples from her oeuvre with little attention given to the socially and politically motivated aspects of the artist's involvement with the New York Graphic Workshop active in the 1960s, her collaborative projects from 2005 with Uruguayan-born artist and friend Ana Tiscornia, and her most recent play with sculptural tableaus. The suggested similarity between Porter's photographs and films, which Bazzano-Nelson characterizes as laden with social critique, and the artist's earlier involvement with the radical, and socially motivated Graphic Workshop, creates an alternative thread of continuity in Porter's art that is underrepresented in the *Art of Simulation* (125). Additionally, the lack of attention to the collaborative work is unfortunate, given the repeated references to interviews and dialogues

between Porter and Tiscornia.[2] And while social implications, collaboration, and the artist's recent return to a sculpture-based practice are peripheral to Bazzano-Nelson's present study, these tendencies in Porter's work undoubtedly add complexity and threaten to unravel a single, linear explanatory narrative. Given the scope of the *Art of Simulation*, such investigations are subjects for other scholars and future texts.

Bazzano-Nelson grounds her monograph in Porter's personal "journey," but positions the artist within the contexts of conceptualism, minimalism, language-based practices, and postmodern modes of appropriation indicative of art practice in both the United States and Argentina during the second half of the twentieth century (9). She situates the artist in both a global and local frame that honors reference to personal history, Argentine-specific traditions, and global art discourse, considerations which suggest the multiple layers present in Porter's work. Bazzano-Nelson's text serves to subvert a reductive, regionalist or identity-based reading of Porter's art. For example, in her analysis of the artist's first film *For you/Para usted*, the author describes various cinematic vignettes that reference multiple sources and situate Porter in dialogue with a range of contexts. She identifies the opening quote in the film as a personal reference to *Sinbad, the sailor*—a book about home and adventure and an important fixture in Porter's memory of childhood (119). Bazzano-Nelson also identifies specific Spanish-language and Argentine cultural allusions present in the same film; Porter's choice of a female vocalist to sing the lyrics of a traditionally misogynistic tango challenges normative gender roles (123). As the author explains, Sinbad's search for foreign lands is universal, and for non-Spanish speaking viewers, the tango's romantic melody underscores the sexual content in the film to create a scenario that complicates the relationship among the film's characters and ultimately shrouds the scene in ambiguity.

Although the *Art of Simulation* lacks comparative images, the publication is user friendly, with representative illustrations of Porter's work, a choice selection of color plates, a well-organized bibliography, and an index. Bazzano-Nelson's concise and clear writing make *Liliana Porter and the Art of Simulation* an enjoyable read. Despite some documentation and references this reviewer found lacking, it makes an important contribution to the field and provides a portal into the complex and layered iconography and references present throughout Porter's oeuvre. Its theory-rich analysis paired with its mindful consideration of the matrix of references and allusions present in Porter's work situate the artist in conversation with global art practices. •

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### Notes

1. Edward Sullivan, *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 252-61.
2. See for example, Ana Tiscornia, "A Rabbit that Escapes: Interview with Liliana Porter," in *Liliana Porter: Fotografia y ficción*, trans. Jane Brodie (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Recoleta, 2004), 210.

## Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s

by Carrie Lambert-Beatty
MIT Press / October Books, 2008

**Reviewed by Karen Kurczynski**

This serious exploration of the performance-based art of Yvonne Rainer reframes our contemporary understanding of Rainer's role in the multimedia experiments of the 1960s as interrogations of the relationship between bodily presence and technological mediation in live performance. It includes about 85 black-and-white figures, providing ample visual material for in-depth analysis while encouraging the reader, since most images are film or dance stills, to seek out recordings and contemporary restagings of the work.

Author Carrie Lambert-Beatty locates us cannily in the present. Her account eschews all nostalgia for a lost sixties experimental spirit in favor of an informed and lucid consideration of Rainer's practices as available to us only through their documentation, but also as actions which internalized the problem of their mediation within their very structure. Lambert-Beatty properly addresses Rainer's work not simply as a landmark moment in dance innovation but more significantly in the interdisciplinary artistic context of the early development of happenings and Fluxus events, the legacy of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and the onset of minimalism and the political engagements of the later 1960s.

In the case of performance, the spectrum of early 1960s live art emphasized the singular bodily presence of the performer in practices such as eating or somersaulting, which highlighted the body's ordinary physicality. They also disrupted audience passivity in works that either forced audiences into participation or otherwise refused the demonstration of bodily virtuosity for a group of seated observers so highly codified in the professional performing arts. Lambert-Beatty interrogates the oft-stated assumption that these movements were primarily about presence, though, examining the multiple references to mediation they incorporated to foreground the fundamental relationship between the idea of liveness and that of mediation. She breaks into refreshingly direct first-person narratives to dramatize the problem of comprehending past experience on which her account hinges, such as her description of experiencing Ay-O's Fluxus *Finger Box* (1964) in the Getty archives, which she calls a "piece of 1960s live art that I could live" (28). She observes that like all Fluxus activities, Ay-O's box incorporates a productive tension between irreproducible live experience and the mediation of that experience through packaging and design. Lambert-Beatty identifies Rainer's work




Fig. 1. Yvonne Rainer rehearsing *Ordinary Dance* (1962) at KQED television in San Francisco. Photo: Warner Jepson. © Warner Jepson.

as a "crux" between high modernist medium specificity and the postmodern emphasis on reception (just as Hal Foster describes minimalism as such a crux in object-based art) (38). Her account elucidates the specific ways Rainer's choreography of "task-based" bodily movement as well as her control of its reception through careful attention to the performer's reaction to the spectators brought the social and technological situations of mediation directly into the experience of the work.

A brief preface frames the issue through a description of composer Warner Jepson's photographs of Rainer rehearsing *Ordinary Dance* before for the KQED TV camera in 1962 (Fig. 1). Her movements of submission or defiance toward the camera demonstrate an early understanding of its central role in defining the performance. The introduction describes the situation of "seeing difficulty," Lambert-Beatty's term for Rainer's dramatization of the inherent difficulty of visualizing dance outside the sequential moments of performance captured on film. "Seeing difficulty" also signals that social and technological visibility, and not just presence, everyday life, or spontaneity, was at issue. For a monographic study, the long first chapter on "Judson Dance Theater in Hindsight" situates Rainer's work firmly within its historical context, first in relation to Happenings and Fluxus, and then to the early experiments of the Judson workshop. Rainer figures here as one among others, not a figure of "greatness" whose stature the author aims to augment, but a social entity shaped through dialogue with her peers and with key historical developments of her time. The book eschews Rainer's biography completely in favor of a detailed theoretical and historical analysis, which brings the reader more directly to the social and aesthetic meaning of her work—in direct response to Rainer's own 1974 question, "How to use the performer as a medium rather than persona?" (167). Lambert-Beatty makes frequent reference to key social interpretations of the 1960s such as Marshall McLuhan's 1964 *Understanding Media*.[1] While Rainer herself found McLuhan overblown, he was a strong influence on the Judson artists, his techno-utopianism a relevant foil to Rainer's desublimatory work.

Lambert-Beatty's account of works like *The Bells* (1961), in which Rainer performed a set choreographic sequence four times facing four different directions, examines its relationship to the aesthetics of the minimalist object. While both attempted to incorporate the viewer's experience of the work into the work's primary aesthetic, only performance could incorporate the simultaneously spatial and temporal relationship between spectator and work. While minimalism may be more accessible in the sense that the contemporary viewer could experience the object much as it was experienced in the 1960s, the Judson Dance Theater experiments appear more complex and more elusive. As Lambert-Beatty demonstrates (following the lead of earlier theorists like Peggy Phelan), the visual elusiveness of performance became a virtue for artists attempting to circumvent the growing power of the spectacular media.[2] The impossibility of gaining full access to the once-live event serves as a significant reminder of the limitations of simplistic notions of access and participation which the Judson works in fact directly critiqued. At the same time, Lambert-Beatty frames liveness not as a protest against mediation, but rather a concept the Judson artists problematized by setting it in direct relation to reproduction.

The text turns to Rainer's work proper in the second chapter, "Sections and Chunks: Serial Time," on her 1965 performance *Parts of Some Sextets*. Lambert-Beatty argues that Peter Moore's "photo-documentations" of the performance not only capture a lost moment of the live event, but also record in the dancer's various poses a

visible sequence of past actions accessible within the still image. This chapter elucidates the way Rainer's work regularized the passage of time in a manner inherently resistant to capitalist efficiency and the emotional absorption of the passive audience. The work's composition, derived from a grid of thirty-second intervals featuring unrelated actions like "mattress pile" and "racing walk," estranged the understated actions performed therein, revealing their subjection to a regulation of time which sociologists and philosophers in the 1960s framed as capitalist and technocratic. At the same time, this sequential regulation demonstrated the contingency and unpredictable irregularity of human actions within a rational framework. The elucidation of Rainer's composition as "chronophotographic" in the stop-motion sense of Eadward Muybridge's human locomotion studies presents a fascinating new take on Rainer's visualization of actions in time. Her performances were equally resistant to, on the one hand, the illusion of unbroken time so important to the growing entertainment industry, and on the other, montage, a standard tactic of the filmic avant-garde of the 1960s (which is mostly not addressed here). Montage, Lambert-Beatty explains, was already recuperated by industry since the days of early Hollywood cinema when it turned away from the short, task-oriented sequences or "actualités" of early film.

*Being Watched* reframes the dominant understanding of 1960s American intermedia practices from one guided by the Duchampian concept of the readymade to an acknowledgement of their fundamental investigation of mediation. The book considers the use of readymade images, text, and objects in Judson Dance Theater projects, like the use of photographs from the newspaper in early compositions, as active incorporation of the world of "spectacle" (the Situationist term for the increasingly ubiquitous presence of mediated images that tend to reinforce our passivity as receivers of propagandized mediations of reality). In the *Duet Section* of Rainer's 1963 work *Terrain,* she and Trisha Brown froze repeatedly in pinup poses. Lambert-Beatty observes that the photographic references not only provided the readymade's critique of modernist artistry by fusing ordinary content and premade form, but also dramatized the photograph's inherent condition of belatedness, ushering the simultaneous presence and absence of the past into the current moment (49). Unfortunately, however, she mostly refrains from examining the pointedly gendered content in such early Rainer works.

Chapter 3, "Mediating *Trio A*," discusses the ways Rainer conceived her most well-known work in direct antagonism toward the spectacular tendencies of dance photography to freeze the most climactic movements, a selective aggrandizement inexorably also at work in the publicized images of *Trio A* itself. Lambert-Beatty describes the choreography of *Trio A*, with its steady and subdued motions, gender neutrality, and emotional tonelessness in dialogue with minimalist aesthetics, as "a sort of run-on sentence testing the role of phrasing in the production of meaning" (134). She also reads its insistent neutrality and anti-climactic structure explicitly as a foil to and protest against the spectacularization of the body as victim of war in photojournalism and television during the Vietnam War, and the subsequent numbing and indifference it fostered for the American TV audience.

Chapter 4, "Other Solutions," explores the five less well-known short films Rainer made between 1966–69, before her more well-known turn to postmodern feminist explorations of narrative structures in works like the 1974 *Film About a Woman Who....* In these restrained and seemingly anti-humanist works, Rainer breaks with the aesthetic of minimalism in exploring the ultimate impossibility of representing objects like a hand or a volleyball as objective facts, given our perceptive tendency to respond emotionally to them. These films register Rainer's break with the neutral embodiment so predominant in the 1960s avant-garde, toward a more overt engagement with gender difference and the body as object of the gaze.

Chapter 5, "Performance Demonstration," charts Rainer's turn to more explicitly political work and open-ended performances such as the 1970 Whitney Museum manifestation of her *Continuous Project—Altered Daily* (a title borrowed from a Robert Morris work of the same name). Rainer eventually allowed dancers to add their own components, despite her initial reluctance to relinquish creative control, thus fulfilling to some extent the democratic promise of the earlier Judson Dance Theater. At a time when even mainstream theater was experimenting with audience participation to an unprecedented degree, Rainer's work incorporated it with careful restrictions that not only ultimately avoided the coercive aspects of such experiments, but also made the conditions of participation versus spectatorship explicit. This chapter also explores the active tensions between overt political art and the more abstract symbolism of events like the 1970 *Street Action*, a slow group walk through the streets of Soho with straight legs, linked arms, and downturned gazes that was a response to recent events like the National Guard shootings at Kent State. The piece seems much less urgent and overtly symbolic than concurrent street theater protests, but Lambert-Beatty convincingly suggests that it was ultimately just as remarkable, and perhaps more profound and evocative in its broader symbolism.

The conclusion, "Taking Sides," discusses Rainer's turn to film in her first full-length film project, *Lives of Performers* (1972). *Being Watched* demonstrates that this turn was in fact anticipated in the artist's examination of the problem of spectatorship versus physicality in the 1960s. Even more, the medium of film provided Rainer with "an intersubjective experience fostered despite the unavailability there of the live" (263), precisely because her films reveal the potential within the passivity of film viewing of social connection through the emotional reactions film provokes.

*Being Watched* subtly shifts our retrospective understanding of Rainer's work from one that emphasized singular presence and the readymade to one that encompasses the social meanings of serial time, mediation, and

spectatorship. It is also a reminder that the dominant story of American art history about the 1960s is focused on a decidedly masculine, and in many cases authoritative and didactic, set of individuals—Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Joseph Kosuth. Lambert-Beatty locates this story, and its central issues of seriality, anti-humanism, activated spectatorship, media technologies, and politics, in a much more explicitly open-ended laboratory of intermedia practitioners whose work stands for a democratic, inclusive, exploratory, and anti-spectacular model of artistic practice. This group of artists evolved from an unusually progressive gender neutrality to an explicit gender consciousness over the course of a decade. Rainer's work continues to stand out among them for its unique investigation of the gendered body as mediated by technology, history, socialization, and emotion.

**Karen Kurzcynski** teaches modern and contemporary art history at Northeastern University and Massachusetts College of Art. She has published articles on Asger Jorn and the Situationist International, is a regular reviewer for *WAJ*, and is writing a study of drawing in contemporary art. •

## Notes

1. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).
2. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

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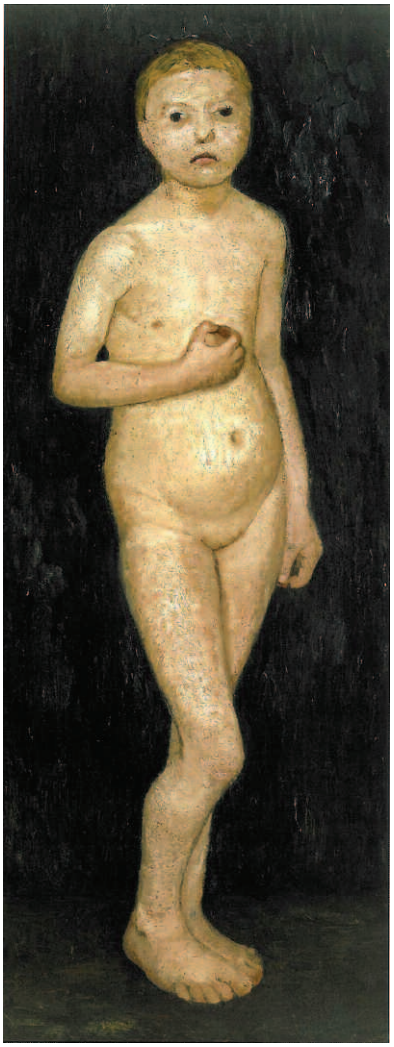

Pl. 1. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Reclining Mother and Child Nude* (1906), on canvas, 32 5/8" x 49". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.



Pl. 1A. Paula Modersohn-Becker, detail (shoulder) of *Reclining Mother and Child Nude* (1906).



Pl. 2. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Three Boys Bathing in the Canal* (1901), on cardboard, 21 1/3" x 15 1/2". Private collection.



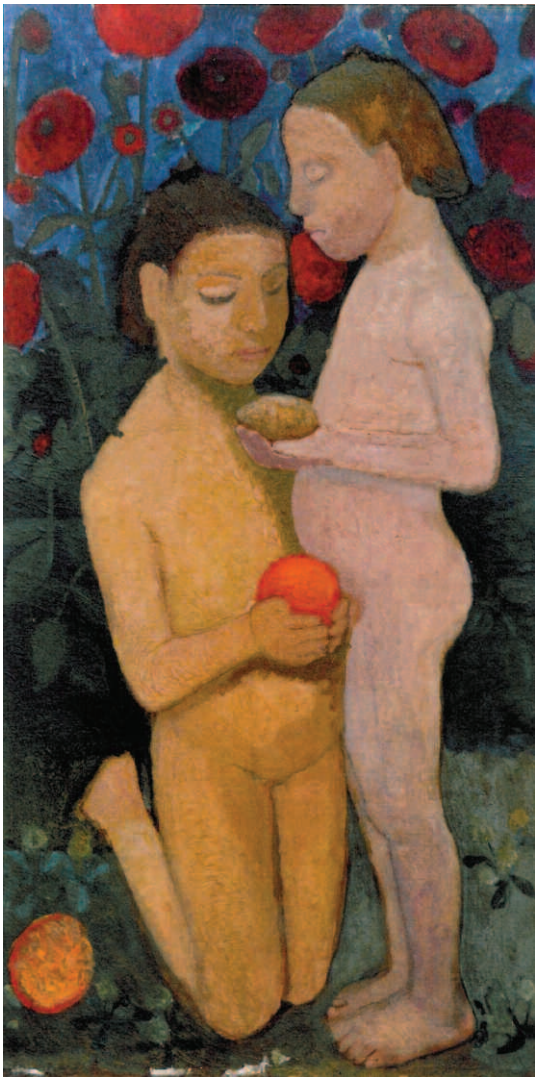
Pl. 3. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Large Standing Girl Nude* (1905/ 06), on canvas, 53 1/3" x 20". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse / Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.



Pl. 4. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Sitting Girl Nude with Vases of Flowers* (1906/ 07), on canvas, 35" x 43". Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal.



Pl. 5. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Standing Child Nude with Goldfish Bowl* (1906/ 07), on canvas, 41 1/2" x 21 1/2". Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich.





*Above, left to right*

Pl. 6. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Standing and Kneeling Girls in Front of Poppies* (1906), on canvas, 41 3/4" x 22". Private collection.

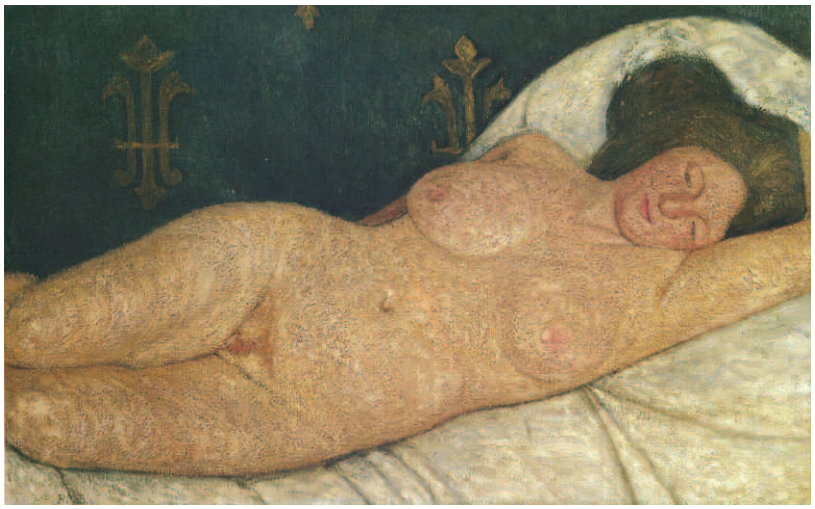
Pl. 7. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Sitting Girl in White Shirt and Standing Girl Nude* (1906), on cardboard, 37 3/4" x 25". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/ Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.

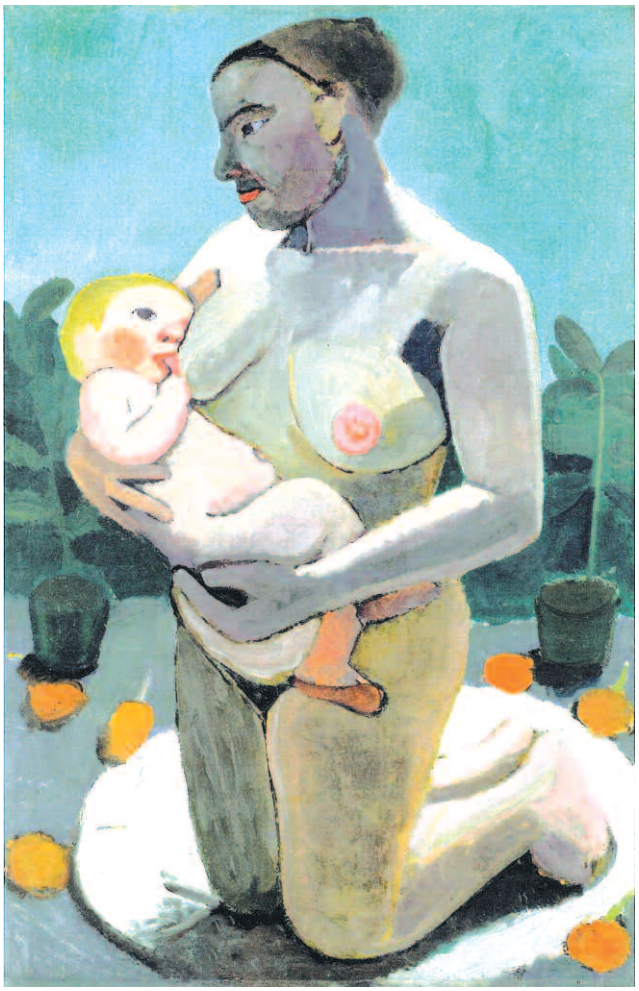
*Below, left to right*

Pl. 8. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Worpswede Child Sitting on a Chair* (1905), on canvas, 35 1/2" x 23 1/2". Kunsthalle Bremen.

Pl. 9. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Reclining Female Nude* (1905/ 06), on canvas, 27 1/2" x 44". Private collection.







Pl. 10. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Kneeling Mother with Child at Her Breast* (1906), on canvas, 44 1/2" x 29". Nationalgalerie Berlin.



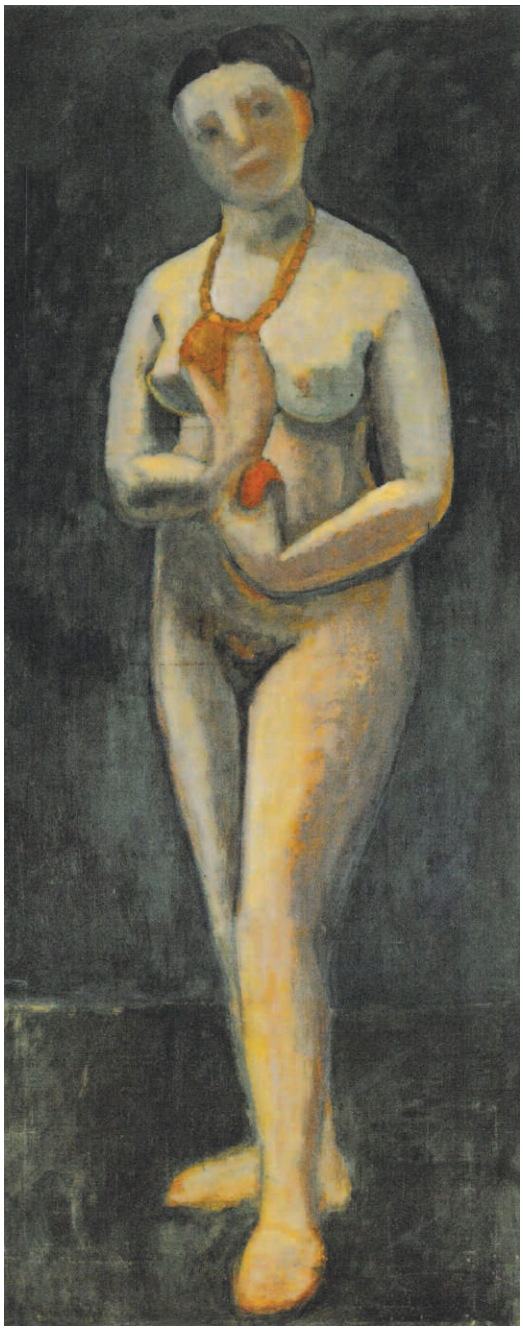
Pl. 11. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Mother with Child at Her Breast, Half Nude* (1906), on cardboard, 29 1/3" x 20 1/2". Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal.



Pl. 12. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Portrait of Werner Sombart* (1906), on canvas, 19 1/2" x 18". Kunsthalle Bremen.



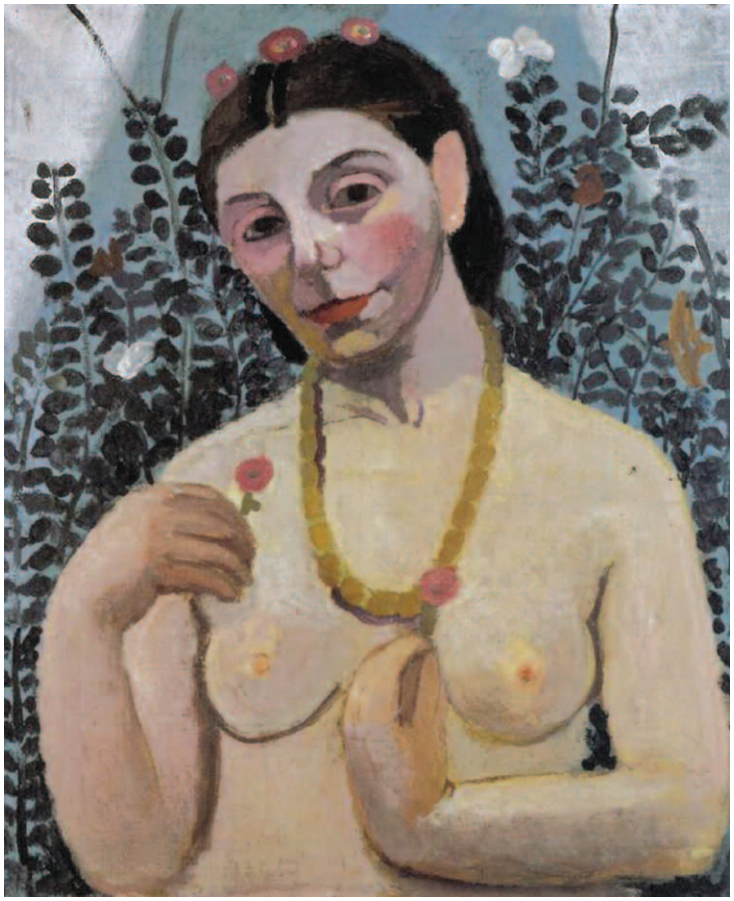
Pl. 13. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Portrait of Rainer Maria Rilke* (1906), on cardboard, 12 3/4" x 10". Private collection.



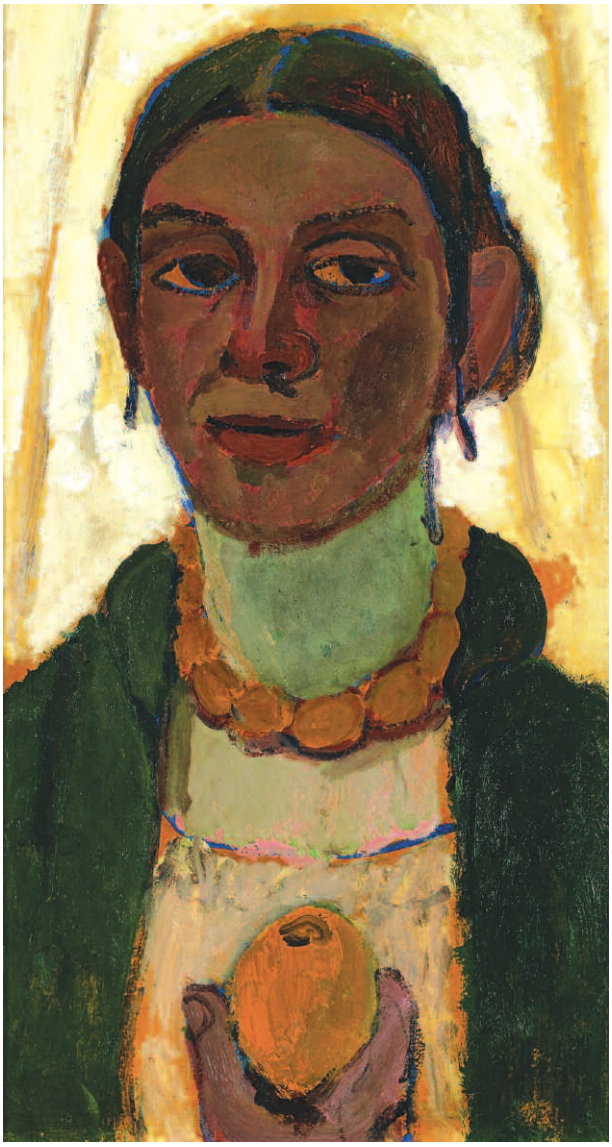
Pl. 14. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Standing Nude* (1906), on canvas, 66 1/2" x 27 3/4". Private collection.



Pl. 15. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Girl with Cat in Birch Forest* (c.1904), on canvas, 39" x 32". Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse / Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen.



Pl. 16. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Half Nude, with Amber Necklace* II (1906), on canvas, 24" x 19 1/2". Kunstmuseum, Basel.



Pl. 17. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Lemon* (1906/ 07), on cardboard, 19 1/2" x 10 3/4". Private collection.



Pl. 18. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Half Figure of a Girl with Her Arm Around a Child* (1904), on canvas, 15" x 19 3/4". Rut and Klaus Bahlsen Foundation, Hannover.

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