



Abbéma, Louise (1858-1927)

by Carla Williams

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



A self-portrait by Louise Abbéma (1898).
Northwestern University
Library Art Collection.

A painter in the Impressionist style, as well as an engraver, sculptor, and writer, Louise Abbéma was one of the most successful women artists of her day. Her media were etching, pastel, and particularly watercolor; as a writer, she collaborated with the journals *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and *L'Art*. She is best remembered for her portraits and genre scenes, and for her relationship with Sarah Bernhardt, but Abbéma also painted flowers again and again. They appear throughout her oeuvre--women hold them in bunches, they fill vases, and they are the subjects of her still-lives.

Abbéma was born in Etampes, France, the great granddaughter of actress Mlle Contat and Comte Louis de Narbonne. Through her aristocratic family, she had an early introduction to the arts. Tellingly, however, in 1903, Abbéma wrote that it was lesbian painter Rosa Bonheur who "...decided me to become an artist."

Abbéma began studying art at an early age. By twelve she had begun to paint, making genre scenes of her hometown. In 1873 she went to Paris to study with painter Charles Chaplin and the following year with Carolus-Duran. At this time it was still somewhat unusual for women to be accepted in the art academies. She later studied with Jean-Jacques Henner.

In 1876 at age 18, Abbéma painted a portrait of her good friend, lesbian actress Sarah Bernhardt, whom she met five years earlier. The portrait was exhibited at the Paris Salon des Artistes Français of 1876 (at Carolus-Duran's suggestion, she had begun showing work in the Salon the previous year.) *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt* was an immediate success for the young painter, and Abbéma became Bernhardt's official portraitist.

Soon after this success, Abbéma made a bronze medallion of Bernhardt (the only known sculpture by her), which she exhibited at the Salon in 1878. In turn Bernhardt, herself a sometime sculptor, exhibited a marble bust of Abbéma at the same Salon. Abbéma later made drawings after both sculptures. Abbéma and Bernhardt maintained a close friendship throughout their lives.

Abbéma's long relationship with Bernhardt, coupled with the fact that she never married, has been the basis for the widespread assumption that she was a lesbian.

In addition to painting Bernhardt, Abbéma also made portraits of her instructor Carolus-Duran; Charles Garnier, architect of the Paris Opéra; and Ferdinand de Lesseps, among many others. One of her most esteemed works is the painting *Déjeuner dans la serre* (owned by the Museum of Pay, France), which may most fully declare her affinities with the Impressionists.

Like many artists, Abbéma enhanced her reputation by regularly exhibiting at the Salon. She received an honorable mention from the Salon in 1881 and continued to show there until 1926. An artist of international reputation, she also exhibited work in the Women's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Among Abbéma's surviving works are mural sketches she made for the Columbian Exposition and large decorative panels for the Town Halls of Paris and the 7th, 10th, and 20th arrondissements; the Hôtel de Ville; the Musée de l'Armée; the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt; and the French National Horticultural Society. Her international work includes decorative panels for the Palace of the Governor of Dakar in Senegal, Africa.

In 1900 Abbéma exhibited work at the Exposition Universelle in Paris and was awarded a bronze medal. She was nominated as official painter of the Third Republic and in 1906 she was awarded the Cross of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.

Abbéma died in 1927, aged sixty-nine, having had a long and successful career.

Bibliography

Bénézit, E. *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs dessinateurs et graveurs*. Vol. 1. Paris: Librairie Grund, 1976.

Garfinkle, Charlene G. "Louise Abbema and the Transatlantic Nature of Her Columbian Exposition Mural Sketches." Lecture, Ohio State University, 1999.

Fusco, Peter, and H.W. Janson, eds. *The Romantics to Rodin: French Nineteenth Century Sculpture from North American Collections*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with George Braziller, 1980.

www.comenosfinearts.com/european/abbema_bio.htm

About the Author

Carla Williams is a writer and photographer from Los Angeles, who lives and works in Santa Fe. Her writings and images can be found on her website at www.carlagirl.net.