



Berber, Anita (1899-1928)

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Anita Berber in 1918.

Expressionist exotic dancer and actress in German silent movies, Anita Berber epitomized for many the decadence of Weimar-era Berlin (1918-1933). However, recent scholars have re-evaluated her as an icon of unfettered sexuality and a precursor of modern-day performance artists.

Berber was born on June 10, 1899, probably in Leipzig, the daughter of a classical violinist and a cabaret singer. Although family disruptions resulted in an unstable home life, she managed to undertake serious dance studies in her teens under ballet teacher Rita Sacchetto and founder of rhythmic gymnastics Emile Jacques-Dalcroze.

Berber began dancing professionally in 1917, when she also began modeling for the women's magazines *Die Dame* and *Elegante Welte*. Between 1918 and 1925, she also appeared in more than 20 silent movies, including Richard Oswald's sex education films and his 1919 thriller *Sinister Tales*. She also had minor but significant roles in Fritz Lang's "Dr. Mabuse" films (1922).

It was as a dancer that Berber plied her most celebrated skills and incurred her greatest notoriety. She brought flamboyant eroticism, exotic costuming, and grotesque imagery to performances danced to the music of composers such as Debussy, Strauss, Delibes, and Saint-Saëns. A pioneer of modern expressive dance, Berber was at first taken seriously as an artist, but soon became better known for her scandalous personal and professional life.

Berber is probably the first performer to dance naked onstage. Her doing so instigated controversy over whether her act constituted elaborate striptease or serious art, and it cultivated for her a reputation for off-stage scandal that overstepped even Berlin's anything-goes ambience.

Over time Berber's performances grew increasingly macabre, as if intended purely for shock value. Having come to be considered vulgar by sophisticates, the dancer increasingly socialized in gay circles and with a rough crowd that included boxers and prostitutes. She was also friends with sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld.

Berber's cocaine addiction and bisexuality were matters of public chatter. Her short-lived 1919 marriage to a wealthy acquaintance was preceded and followed by publicly-known lesbian relationships.

In 1922, Berber married Sebastian Droste, a writer and dancer connected with the gay and underworld subcultures. She and Droste performed fantasias with titles such as "Suicide," "Morphium," and "Mad House." In 1923, they published a book of poetry, photographs, and drawings called *Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* (Dances of Vice, Horror, and Ecstasy), based on their performance of the same name. Full of Expressionist imagery, the book offers a glimpse into the angst and cynicism shadowing their artistic and personal existences.

Berber's marriage to Droste ended in 1923. The following year, she married American dancer Henri Chatin-

Hoffman, also rumored to be gay. She toured Europe with him, continually generating tabloid reports of lesbianism, drug use, and hotel orgies. After a tour of The Netherlands in 1926, Berber collapsed physically and sought refuge with Hirschfeld.

In a famous portrait of her made about this time by Otto Dix, Berber is depicted as a strikingly erotic, almost vampire-like, drug-addicted "Scarlet Whore of Berlin," far older than her mid-twenties. This portrait, perhaps more than any other image of Berber, has solidified her reputation as the epitome of Weimar-era decadence.

On a 1928 performing tour of Middle Eastern nightclubs, Berber contracted tuberculosis and collapsed. Friends raised funds to return her to Berlin, where she died on November 10, 1928, aged 29.

Anita Berber inhabited the low-brow margins of society as well as its high-strung artistic scene. At her funeral members of both groups rubbed shoulders in what was perhaps Berber's final transgression of boundaries.

Much of the image later generations have of Berber stems from a 1929 biography by Leo Lania, which dwelled on the sensationalistic aspects of her life. The 1996 biography by Lothar Fischer is somewhat more balanced. Rosa Von Praunheim's 1987 film *Anita, Dances of Vice* (about an elderly woman's claim to be Anita Berber) and Mel Gordon's 1994 stage production *The Seven Dances of Lust* are highly fictionalized narratives based on the Lania book.

More recently, scholars have attempted to understand Berber and her achievement from various artistic and historical contexts. These studies have led to increased recognition of the significance of her artistry and even her propensity toward scandal.

For example, Karl Toepfer places Berber in the context of her era's attitude towards nudity, as exemplified by the German "physical culture" movement ("Nacktkultur") that elevated the nude body to a symbol of fitness and beauty. He contrasts this idealism with the alienated style in Berber's work that he sees as an attempt to "aestheticize" her "sickness," while also noting the considerable dance skills she employed. In Droste/Berber's portrayals of addiction, horror, narcissism, ecstasy, and morbidity, Toepfer sees a challenge to modernity's claim to authenticity and even a macabre mysticism.

Susan Funkenstein offers a dispassionate examination of the famous portraits of Berber created by Dix and Charlotte Berend-Corinth and the role scandal played in cultivating Berber's persona. She views Berber's notoriety as a performance, and the acceptance of such imagery as part of a cultural shift toward acknowledging women's freedom of movement. From this perspective, Berber's art is seen as a significant forerunner of contemporary performance art.

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