



Cahun, Claude (1894-1954)

by Tee A. Corinne

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Photographer, photo collagist, writer, and translator Claude Cahun is known today primarily for creating images, including self-portraits, that play with concepts of gender.

Cahun was born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob on October 25, 1894 in Nantes, France, into a prominent French Jewish literary family. She studied at Oxford (1907-1908) and the Sorbonne (1914).

Intensely literary, Cahun wrote about Oscar Wilde and in 1929 translated into French the writing of sexologist Havelock Ellis. Ellis entertained the theory of homosexuals as a third sex, neither masculine nor feminine, but uniting characteristics of both. This theory has been thought by some to have influenced Cahun's photographic imagemaking.

When Cahun was 12, her divorced father married a woman whose daughter, Suzanne Malherbe, would become Cahun's lover, co-creator, and lifelong companion. They lived in Paris during the 1920s and most of the 1930s.

Cahun wrote for a number of publications including *L'Amitié*, a homosexual review magazine. Her feminism can be seen in a 1925 manuscript (not published until 1999) entitled "Heroines" in which she writes of Sappho, of Ulysses as a cuckold, and of Cinderella's prince as a foot fetishist.

Cahun was independently wealthy and never had to seek employment. Hence, she was able to pursue her photography independent of economic considerations.

Cahun photographed, among others, Sylvia Beach, prominent lesbian expatriate and owner of the English-language Paris bookstore Shakespeare and Company. She also produced self-portraits from 1912 until her death in 1954, many playing with, bending, or distorting gender and sometimes race. Her images were printed scrapbook size and circulated among friends. Most were not exhibited in her lifetime.

In some of her self-portraits Cahun appears as a man, in others as an androgyne, as Buddha, as a figure with shaved head, and sometimes in a dress and wig. In one she sleeps on a shelf in a cupboard. Cahun was active in avant-garde theater and some of her self-portraits show her in roles she played. Later, she recycled her self-portraits into collages.

Collaborating with Malherbe (who used the pseudonym Marcel Moore), Cahun created *Aveux non avenue* (sometimes translated as *Canceled Confessions*): meditations, aphorisms, personal philosophical ideas, and collaged images published as a book under the imprint of Editions du Carrefour in Paris in 1930.

In the late 1930s, Cahun was active in the Surrealist movement, published in Surrealist journals, and contributed sculptural-objects to Surrealist exhibitions. Her photographs also illustrated Lise Deharme's poems for children in *Le Coeur de pic* (*The Pick-Axe Heart*, 1937).

Cahun and Malherbe moved to the British Isle of Jersey in 1937. The Germans occupied the island in 1940, and the couple, who had worked with anti-fascist political groups in the period between the world wars, practiced covert forms of resistance.

In 1944, the Gestapo raided their home, finding and destroying nude self-portraits and erotic photographs that Cahun had made of herself with Malherbe. They were sentenced to death. However, in February 1945, they were rescued by Allied forces. Cahun remained on the Isle of Jersey until her death on December 8, 1954.

Cahun's work was rediscovered in the 1990s when it gained immediate popularity because of its relevance to current discussions about the fluidity of gender and the construction of identity.

Bibliography

Kline, Katy. "In or Out of the Picture: Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman." *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*. Whitney Chadwick, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998. 66-81.

Krauss, Rosalind. *Bachelors*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999.

Leperlier, François. *Claude Cahun: l'écart et la métamorphose*. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992.

Lichtenstein, Therese. "A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun." *Artforum* 30.8 (1992): 64-67.

Rice, Shelley, ed. *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999.

About the Author

Tee A. Corinne was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.