



Carrington, Dora (1893-1932)

by Ray Anne Lockard

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



Dora Carrington with
Lytton Strachey.

Dora de Houghton Carrington was an English painter, designer and decorative artist whose life and relationships were complex. She is best known for her deep attachment to the homosexual writer Lytton Strachey, but she had affairs with both men and women.

Carrington painted only for her own pleasure, did not sign her works, and rarely exhibited them, hence she was not well known as a painter during her lifetime. Even though she was a founding member of the Omega Workshop with Roger Fry, her decorative art also remained unknown to the public until the late 1960s.

Born in Hereford, England on March 29, 1893, Dora Carrington was the fourth child of Samuel Carrington and Charlotte Houghton. When Dora was ten years old the family moved to Bedford where she attended a girls' high school and took extra art classes. Seven years later, in 1910, Dora won a scholarship to the Slade School of Art in London where she studied with Henry Tonks and Fred Brown until 1914.

During her years at Slade, the artist dropped her first name, becoming known simply as Carrington, and cut her hair into a bowl cut. She was a successful student at the Slade School and was awarded several prizes during her years there.

When Carrington was eighteen she met Mark Gertler (1897-1939), a fellow artist who had the most influence on her early years. Thus began the first of several complex and tense friendships or love affairs that Carrington was to have during her life. She enjoyed Gertler's friendship and a brief affair, but she rebelled against the prevailing standard that a woman be subservient to a man. Carrington painted Gertler's portrait in 1911.

Through Gertler, Carrington became friends with several members of the Bloomsbury Group. She met celebrated writer Lytton Strachey (1880-1932) at one of the Bloomsbury gatherings. They became great friends and, even though Strachey was unabashedly homosexual, vowed to share their lives.

One of Carrington's most famous paintings is the *Portrait of Lytton Strachey* (1916). During 1917, Strachey rented the mill house near Tidmarsh Mill in Panbourn, Berkshire. Carrington shared the lodging with him. The same year, the artist created woodcuts for Leonard and Virginia Woolf's *Two Stories*, published by the Hogarth Press.

Carrington's father died in 1918 leaving her a small inheritance that allowed her to feel more independent. In the same year she met Ralph Partridge, an Oxford friend of her brother Noel, who assisted Leonard Woolf at the Hogarth Press. Both Strachey and Carrington fell in love with the heterosexual Partridge, who accepted the fact that she would never leave Strachey.

Carrington and Partridge married in 1921. They honeymooned in Venice with Strachey, and the three lived together in a *ménage à trois*. The following year Carrington had the first of her two extra-marital love affairs with men.

Carrington's first lover was Gerald Brenan, an Army officer and friend of Partridge's who was a writer and critic. He had moved to Yegen, Spain in 1919. Partridge, Carrington, and Strachey visited him there in 1920, after which Carrington developed a lengthy correspondence with him and painted his portrait. They had a brief affair in 1922 and Carrington's oil painting *Mountain Range at Yegen, Andalusia* was painted in 1924.

Carrington's sexual feelings toward women were awakened in 1923 when she met Henrietta Bingham, the daughter of the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Carrington actively pursued Henrietta and they became lovers.

Carrington privately began to identify herself as a lesbian. During her brief time with Henrietta, she created a pen and ink drawing of her lover, the artist's first erotic drawing of a woman. The relationship was also another *ménage à trois*. Henrietta had been Strachey's lover and was a comrade of Carrington's friend Stephen Tomlin.

The following year Strachey and Partridge purchased the lease to Ham Spray House near Hungerford in Wiltshire. Carrington, Strachey, and Partridge lived there from 1924 until 1932.

Carrington's role at Ham Spray House was to take care of the domestic chores, care for Strachey, and execute a decorative scheme. Her decision to devote her life to Strachey and to be responsible for household chores is ironic given her early rebellion against traditional roles for women in her day. The decision also robbed her of time for her own art.

During 1925, Carrington met Julia Strachey, Lytton's niece and a novelist who had once been a Parisian model and an art student at the Slade. Julia, who frequently visited Ham Spray, was married to Stephen Tomlin but briefly became one of Carrington's lovers. The artist painted an oil *Portrait of Julia Strachey* (1925). The artist's more private pencil drawing of Julia illustrated the sexual passion Carrington felt toward her.

The year 1926 marked the beginning of mounting sadness in Carrington's brief life. Partridge had begun to live openly in London with Frances Marshall while spending only weekends at Ham Spray.

In 1928 Carrington met Bernard Penrose, a sailor and Partridge's best friend. She experienced renewed creativity while she was with "Beakus" and her letters from that period are profusely illustrated. Penrose, however, wanted Carrington to make an exclusive commitment to him, a demand Carrington refused because she could not end her relationship with Strachey. The affair, her last one with a man, ended badly when Carrington became pregnant and had an abortion.

Strachey became violently ill in November 1931 with what doctors thought was either typhoid fever or ulcerative colitis. He grew worse by the day and Carrington, who suffered from depressive episodes, attempted to asphyxiate herself in the garage at Ham Spray the following month, but was rescued by Partridge.

Strachey, who had been Carrington's companion for seventeen years, died at the age of 52 on January 21, 1932. Carrington's depression increased even as friends tried to keep her occupied. Six weeks after Strachey's death she borrowed a gun from a neighbor to shoot rabbits in the garden. She shot herself on March 11, 1932 and died shortly before her 39th birthday.

Dora Carrington painted the people and places she loved the most during her life. Her paintings include *The Mill at Tidmarsh* (1918), a *Portrait of Jane Maria Grant*, *Lady Strachey* (1920), a *Portrait of Annie Stiles* (1921), as well as the others mentioned previously.

Carrington's decorative arts projects included fireplace tiles, bookplates, and inn signs such as that for the

Black Swan (1917). She also made quilts, marbled papers for bookbinding, discovered a new technique for patterning on leather, and even ventured into filmmaking.

Much of Carrington's creative energy went into decorative treatments for her friends as well as at Tidmarsh and Ham Spray. Her last painting was a *trompe l'oeil* work on the front of her neighbors Brian and Diana Guinness's house in May 1931.

Carrington lacked confidence in her own work and undervalued it. She was a perfectionist whose work never met her expectations. While some people in her life criticized Carrington for spending too much time illustrating her correspondence, the illustrations were themselves an art form, as became apparent when her letters were published in 1970. The people who denigrated her decorative projects during her lifetime failed to recognize her talent as a designer.

There were no exhibitions of Carrington's work during her lifetime. The first exhibition was held at the Upper Grosvenor Galleries in London in 1970. A second exhibition was held at the Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford in 1978. Curated by Noel, Carrington's brother, it was more comprehensive in coverage and included Carrington's paintings, drawings, and decorative works.

Most recently, there was a retrospective of Carrington's work at the Barbican Art Gallery in London during 1995. Despite the posthumous recognition that she has gained, she remains the most neglected serious painter of her generation.

Bibliography

Blythe, Ronald. *First Friends: Paul and Bunty, John and Christine--and Carrington*. London: Viking Press, 1999.

Bradshaw, Tony. *The Bloomsbury Artists: Prints and Book Design*. James Beechey, intro. Angelica Garnett, foreword. Aldershot: Scolar, 1999.

Carrington, Dora. *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*. David Garnett, ed. Noel Carrington, biographical note. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. Rev. ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

Carrington, Noel. *Carrington: Paintings, Drawings, and Decorations*. Sir John Rothenstein, foreword. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

Caws, Mary Ann. *Carrington and Lytton: Alone Together*. London: Cecil Woolf, 1996.

_____. *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa and Carrington*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Gerzina, Gretchen Holbrook. *Carrington: A Life*. New York: Norton, 1989.

Hill, Jane. *The Art of Dora Carrington*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

About the Author

Ray Anne Lockard is Head of the Frick Fine Arts Library at the University of Pittsburgh. Active in the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA), she was a founding member and the first chairperson of the Gay and Lesbian Interests Round Table of ARLIS/NA. She has also served as co-chair of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the College Art Association.