



Lili Elbe.

Elbe, Lili (1886-1931)

by Teresa Theophano

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For most of her life, Lili Elbe was better known as Einar Wegener, a male Danish painter of some renown who specialized in landscapes and paintings of Paris. Indeed, it was not until well into adulthood, after she was both a successful artist and husband, that she began her transition to living full-time as female. Her series of sexual reassignment surgeries in the early twentieth century was a remarkable and pioneering feat, making her one of the world's first post-operative male-to-female transsexuals.

Einar was born in Denmark in 1886. He first met Gerda Wegener at art school in Copenhagen. The two budding artists fell in love at first sight. They married when Elbe was approximately twenty years old, and before she had any inkling of her true gender identity. Lili Elbe was "born" one day while filling in for Gerda's absentee model; Gerda asked Einar to wear stockings and heels so that she could substitute Einar's legs for those of her model. Einar felt surprisingly comfortable in the get-up.

Later the intended model showed up unexpectedly and dubbed Einar "Lili." Elbe, who later decided on her last name in tribute to the river she loved, continued to model for Gerda on a regular basis, and Gerda's numerous paintings of Elbe gained quite a bit of popularity in Copenhagen. Gerda was later invited to Paris to exhibit her works featuring Elbe, whom she introduced as Einar's sister. Gerda is still recognized as a significant Art Deco artist.

After Elbe's series of surgeries--she traveled from Copenhagen to Berlin and Dresden for four operations--she was able to obtain a passport issued under her female name and to have her marriage annulled by the King of Denmark himself. Two doctors had diagnosed Elbe as a homosexual before her surgeon in Dresden, a well-known German doctor who had suspected Elbe of being intersexed, claimed to discern the presence of rudimentary ovaries. Elbe's male sex organs were removed and then an ovarian tissue transplant was performed. The surgeries took their toll on Elbe, whose health began to decline.

Because Elbe felt that she and Einar were entirely different entities, she stopped painting altogether once she began her transition. Soon after the annulment of her marriage to Elbe, Gerda Wegener married a man who had been a mutual friend of hers and Einar's; Elbe herself accepted a proposal of marriage from another male friend of the former couple.

Elbe had intended to get married after undergoing a final operation to complete her transition; she hoped to become a mother at some point, and it appears that her doctor believed this was biologically possible through surgery. However, Elbe died of heart problems before the intended surgery and wedding, though not before her case had become a sensation in the pages of German and Danish newspapers in 1931.

Following Elbe's death, Ernst Ludwig Hathorn Jacobson, under the pseudonym Niels Hoyer, compiled a book, *Man into Woman* (1933), based on the painter's life, using her letters and diary entries. The work is important as one of the earliest popular works to make a distinction between homosexuality and transsexuality, or, in contemporary theory, between sexual orientation and gender identity. It brought to the attention of many transsexuals the possibility of gender reassignment surgery, a process that was then

in its infancy.

Elbe is also the subject of the award-winning novel *The Danish Girl* by David Ebershoff, which was published in early 2000; a screen adaptation is in the works.

Bibliography

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