



## Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein) (1895-1978)

by Ray Anne Lockard

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British artist Hannah Gluckstein defied the conventional roles expected of young women of her class and time. She left her family to become an artist, insisted on being known only as "Gluck," dressed in male attire, and lived openly with women throughout her life. Gluck painted landscapes, floral pieces and portraits of her friends, family, and lovers.

Hannah Gluckstein was born to a wealthy Jewish family on August 13, 1895. Her father, Joseph Gluckstein, owned the J. Lyons & Co. Coffee House and catering empire in London and her mother, Francesca Halle, was an American opera singer. The parents were not supportive of their daughter's artistic pursuits, but Hannah received her only systematic art training at their expense at St. John Wood School of Art in London from 1913 to 1916.

The dynamic young woman then traveled to Lamorna, Cornwall where she worked with other artists of the "Newlyn School," a group of landscape painters who formed an artists' colony at Newlyn, Cornwall. On her twenty-first birthday, Gluck's father gave her a trust fund that allowed her to pursue an independent life. By that time, Hannah had cropped her hair, shortened her name to "Gluck," and dressed exclusively in male attire.

Using a portion of her trust funds, Gluck bought a studio in Cornwall. It was there in 1923 that she met the American expatriate artist Romaine Brooks. The two women painted each other's portrait in Gluck's studio.

Brooks' famous portrait of Gluck, *Peter (a Young English Girl)*, was executed between 1923 and 1924. During 1925, Gluck painted a daring self-portrait in which she depicted herself wearing a shirt, tie, suspenders, and beret, while smoking a cigarette. The same year Brooks' portrait of Gluck dressed in male attire was shown in solo exhibitions in Paris, London, and New York.

At the end of the 1920s, Gluck's father increased her capital, allowing her to purchase a larger home, named Bolton House, in Hampstead. Shortly after she was established in Bolton House, she met the decorator and society florist, Constance Spry.

Spry's talents as a decorator and florist were in high demand among the aristocracy and the wealthy. She and Gluck were together from 1932 to 1936. During this time, Gluck painted several floral paintings inspired by Spry's arrangements.

Spry decorated the Fine Arts Society galleries for Gluck's third exhibition in 1932. The walls were paneled in white, modern furniture was added, and each room featured one of Spry's floral arrangements. All of the paintings were hung in the "Gluck frame" that the artist designed and patented. The frame was a triple-tiered design that made her paintings an integral part of the gallery's architecture.

The relationship between the two women not only influenced the subject of Gluck's work, but the contacts made through Spry's society connections also furthered the artist's career. Many of Spry's clients

commissioned and bought Gluck's floral paintings.

Spry also influenced Gluck's attire, turning her androgynous look into haute couture with fashion designs by Victor Stribel and Elsa Schiaparelli. While the two women enjoyed each other's company, many of Spry's clients found Gluck to be fussy and irritating.

In 1936, Spry broke off her relationship with Gluck, but by then the artist had already met and begun to fall in love with Nesta Obermer (Ella Ernestine Sawyer), a socialite who was involved in a marriage of convenience to the American businessman Seymour Obermer. The two women enjoyed concerts, poetry readings, and the theater together.

Although Nesta later systematically destroyed all evidence of her relationship with Gluck, a visual record of Gluck's feelings for Nesta exists in the double portrait she painted entitled *Medallion*.

This work was painted in celebration of what Gluck called her marriage to Nesta on May 25, 1936. The visual statement of two lovers merging into one being expressed an ideal that proved impossible for the women to sustain. The couple was together until 1944, when Nesta decided that she had to break off their relationship because Gluck had become too demanding and possessive.

Soon after England declared war against Germany in 1939, the Auxiliary Fire Service commandeered Bolton House. The War Artists Commission turned down Gluck's application for enlistment. Given the losses she had experienced and the rejection she felt, Gluck understandably began to sink into a deep depression.

Her suffering is already evident in a self-portrait she painted in 1942, two years before she and Nesta parted company. The artist depicted herself with her head tilted back, looking grimly down on the viewer with a defiant and combative expression.

Gluck could not bear to be alone and, after the break-up of her relationship with Nesta Obermer, she immediately pursued Edith Shackleton Heald, the first female reporter in Britain's House of Lords. The women had met at an exhibition of Gluck's work held for Plumpton villagers in February 1944.

The relationship soon developed into one of mutual need, and Edith invited Gluck to live with her and her sister Norma on her family estate, Chantry House, in Steyning, Sussex. When Gluck moved in on October 6, 1944, neither woman realized that it would begin a troubled thirty-year companionship.

The triangular living arrangement caused a permanent rift between Edith and her sister, who moved out two years after Gluck joined the household. The relationship between Gluck and Edith also soon soured. Edith allowed Gluck's economic and emotional needs to dominate her home; and since Edith did not have enough money to purchase a new home, the disharmony led her to travel frequently with friends.

Gluck never recovered from losing Nesta or from the war's devastation. A permanent rift between her and the brother who managed her trust fund also developed after her mother died in 1958. In addition, both Edith and Gluck began to suffer from a variety of illnesses as they aged.

During the years Gluck was with Edith, she allowed her painting to suffer and she faded from the public eye. She did, however, become a life member of the Royal Society of Arts and was commissioned to paint some portraits of judges between 1955 and 1968, including one of her second cousin, Sir Cyril Salmon (1957-1960).

While Gluck was depressed and relatively inactive during her years at Chantry House, she did indulge her love of quality painting materials. Long frustrated with the quality of paints and canvases, Gluck began a decade-long battle with the British Board of Trade and commercial paint manufacturers. Fortunately, the

Arts Council of Great Britain, British Colour Manufacturers Association, and two important museums backed her efforts.

Gluck's tireless work resulted in the formation of the British Standards Institution Technical Committee on Artists' Materials. For the first time, there were published standards regarding the naming and defining of pigments, cold-pressed linseed oil, and canvas.

The artist finally returned to her easel during her old age and one of her works from this period, a painting of a dead fish head, its flesh mostly eaten away, was a great success. The title *Rage, Rage against the Dying of the Light* (1970-1973) was taken from the poem Dylan Thomas wrote about his dying father. The artist knew that she was painting death, the loss of love, and the loss of years that had been wasted.

In 1970 Gluck decided to have another exhibition of her work. The three-year process of organizing the exhibition was hard work, and Gluck suffered a heart attack in November 1972. The exhibition at the Fine Arts Society in London opened six months later and was a great success. The fifty-two pieces that Gluck included in the exhibition were highly praised and also sold well. It was, however, to be the last exhibition of Gluck's lifetime.

Gluck and Edith both declined in health during the 1970s. Edith died in a nursing home on November 5, 1976. Gluck had a second heart attack two weeks later. The artist suffered a stroke the following year and died at the age of eighty-two on January 10, 1978.

Gluck was a woman of many contradictions and a person who inspired both great love and profound dislike. She deserves credit for designing the "Gluck frame" and for her efforts to improve the quality of artists' materials. In addition, she served as an early role model for other women-identified women artists.

Most significantly, however, she merits attention as an artist who left her mark on the history of modern art in England. While she exhibited her work in only a few solo exhibitions, all of them were met with critical praise.

A highly successful memorial retrospective exhibition of Gluck's work was held at the Fine Arts Society in London during 1978.

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