



Lempicka, Tamara de (1898?-1980)

by Elizabeth Ashburn

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Tamara de Lempicka achieved notoriety and fame several times during her life and remains popular today for her highly sexualized art deco portraits. Her painting *Autoportrait* (1929), an image of herself at the wheel of her automobile, mixes cold, hard textures with luxurious, decadent sensual imagery. It is an excellent example of French art deco and high camp.

De Lempicka was born around 1898 in Poland, the child of Boris Gurwik-Gorski, a lawyer, and Malvina Decler, from a wealthy Polish family. She was encouraged by her Decler grandmother to think of herself as exceptional. She became enamored of Italian Renaissance painting in her teens.

Around 1912 she met, and in 1916 married, Tadeusz Lempicki, a lawyer. Soon after their marriage their daughter Kizette was born. In 1918, the family moved to Paris, where women artists found better opportunities than in any other city. Tamara studied painting with Maurice Denis and André Lhote and attended the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

De Lempicka was a very physical person. Her first lesbian affair was with a wealthy redhead, probably Ira Perrot, who modeled for her and took her to Italy, paying all expenses.

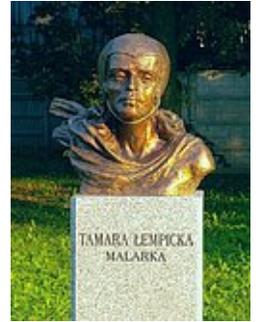
In Italy, the artist discovered the paintings of Botticelli and Messina and attended lesbian parties. At one such gathering she arranged food tastefully on the body of a nude woman and then slowly ate "her midnight meal." In her trips to Italy, she became part of a circle that included Violette Trefusis--the lover of Vita Sackville-West--and Colette.

These women appreciated bisexual behavior and had numerous affairs with individuals of both sexes. In 1933, de Lempicka began an affair with a singer at the Boîte de Nuit, Suzy Solidar, a friendship that lasted several decades.

Generally, however, the artist pursued older men as social companions but slept with younger and handsome ones. Sophisticated, fashionable, and beautiful, she was often seen caressing a working-class boy one night and a woman the next. Eventually, Tadeusz refused to return to her and in 1928 they were divorced.

By the mid 1930s de Lempicka's work was extremely well received, although it has never fit neatly within stylistic boundaries. Her stylized and sleekly androgynous art deco portraits and compositions softened cubism into a decadent lushness. She sought the crispness of the old masters and rejected the Impressionists, whom she characterized as "dirty" and "not neat." But she also worked within the modernist tradition of concentrating on the surfaces of paintings.

While her portraits from 1920 to 1940 can be located within the French art deco school, her later work touches on other traditions, including Surrealism and still life. Among the unique aspects of her style is the



A memorial to Tamara de Lempicka in Celebrity Alley in Kielce, Poland. Photograph by Paweł Cieślak Staszek Szybki Jest. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License 1.2.

overt lesbianism that informs it, especially in her female nudes.

In 1934, de Lempicka married Baron Raoul Kuffner, who held title to the largest single estate in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He had asked her in 1928 to paint his mistress, the famous Andalusian dancer Nana de Herrera. The portrait has been seen as something of an assassination, since it makes the graceful dancer appear gauche and awkward. The portraitist soon replaced de Herrera as the baron's mistress.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, de Lempicka and her husband emigrated to America. After a successful one-woman show in Paul Reinhart's Gallery in Los Angeles, de Lempicka and her husband took up residence in director King Vidor's former home in Beverly Hills.

She was soon the "Favorite Artist of the Hollywood Stars." Greta Garbo, Dolores del Rio, and Tyrone Power visited her studio. Even today Lempicka's connection with Hollywood continues, as the most avid contemporary collectors of her paintings are Madonna and Jack Nicholson.

De Lempicka died in her sleep in 1980. A play based on her life, *Tamara*, opened in Hollywood in 1985 with Anjelica Huston and had a long run. Although Lempicka's work was out of favor for many years, it has recently enjoyed a new appreciation, ironically for those very qualities of decadence and hedonism that caused critics of the 1960s and 1970s to dismiss her.

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