



Mammen, Jeanne (1890-1976)

by Andres Mario Zervigon

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Jeanne Mammen was one of the most talented artists and illustrators to emerge from Germany's Weimar epoch (1919-1933), the period following World War I that culminated in the rise to power of the Nazis.

At a time when the predominant style was a frequently harsh and unflattering realism, Mammen dedicated her art to the gently satirical, sometimes sympathetic, representation of Berlin's diverse constituencies, particularly the newly visible lesbian.

As a lesbian herself, Mammen produced images of gay women almost completely lacking in the sensationalism her artist contemporaries preferred. Whether in dance clubs, shops, or beds, Mammen's women demonstrate an affection for each other so palpable that their tenderness, rather than their sexuality, becomes the subject of representation.

Mammen was born in 1890 in Berlin to a liberal and prosperous family that encouraged her artistic talents from an early age. Though German by origin, Mammen spent most of her youth in Paris, where her family moved for business reasons in 1900.

At the age of sixteen, she enrolled with her younger sister in Paris's Académie Julian for a two year course in art. Like Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker, who also studied at this academy, Mammen proved an excellent student. She and her sister extended their studies a further two years at Brussels' Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique and Rome's Villa Medici Accademia di Francia.

Both women returned to Paris in 1912 where they rented a studio together and began their careers. At the age of 22 in 1912, Jeanne began exhibiting in important Parisian and Brussels salons and rapidly won recognition among critics.

Unfortunately, World War I interrupted the beginning of a successful career in Paris. As a German family on the wrong side of the front, the Mammens were forced to flee France and to abandon their glass-blowing business and savings as war compensation. They ultimately returned to Berlin in near destitution, a situation that pressured Jeanne to make money from her talents in any way possible.

These are the conditions that led her to the magazine and book illustrations for which she is now famous. Her charge most often consisted in representing the social types who defined Berlin's growing excitement and notoriety.

Because Mammen effectively arrived in Berlin as a French woman, she observed her subjects with a critical distance that was typical of the Weimar era's "New Objectivity." But unlike her colleagues who often expressed a troubling ambivalence about their subjects, Mammen largely signaled a jovial affection for them.

Whether fashionable night revelers, as in *Grosstadt (Metropolis, 1927)*, conservative bourgeois men, as in

Derby (ca 1927), or financially self-sufficient women, as in *Beim Pferderennen* (*At the Horse Track*, ca 1929), her characters are represented with a distinct humanity. Indeed, her work satirically highlights the traits that make her subjects human.

In the case of her lesbian subjects, however, Mammen often suspended her distance and humor. For example, the series of seven lithographs she originally intended as illustrations for Pierre Louÿs's *Songs of Bilitis* features semi-clad women in tender embraces. Their half-closed eyes, pecks on cheeks, and gentle embraces (as in *Freundinnen* [*Girlfriends*] and *Am Morgen* [*In the Morning*]) signify the women's deep contentedness with each other.

Other more dramatic works in this series take on subjects such as jealousy, relationships between women of vastly different ages, and the ambience of a lesbian bar. But even in this last image, *Damenbar* [*Lesbian Bar*], Mammen softens the distinct male and female look adopted by the central dancing couple, focusing instead on their gentle embrace.

These and the many other lesbian images Mammen created in the Weimar period constitute some of the earliest and most sympathetic representations of lesbians since Sappho.

When the Nazis rose to power, Mammen had to adopt more conservative subject matter, but she survived unnoticed by fascism, making cubist-inspired painting and sculpture well into the 1970s. Toward the end of her life, Mammen became a near cult figure among members of Berlin's post-1968 feminist movement.

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Andres Mario Zervigon earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and now teaches at Rutgers University. He specializes in the art and design of Germany's Weimar period and in the painting of Britain's post-World War II era.