



TAMARA DE LEMPICKA: THE MODERN WOMAN PERSONIFIED

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In 1918 Tamara de Lempicka was among many artists who fled the tumultuous Bolshevik Revolution for a new life in Paris. The ambitious daughter of an affluent Polish mother and Russian merchant father, she dreamed from her early days of a glamorous life in the center stage as both liberated *femme moderne* and fashionable portraitist of the European social elite. She developed her early attraction to painting after discovering the Renaissance masters during a childhood trip to Italy. Soon afterward she enrolled in formal art school in St. Petersburg. De Lempicka's greatest artistic achievement ultimately was her unique ability to construct a public persona as both a serious painter and alluring modern woman in the decadent climate of interwar Paris.¹ This essay will explore how some of de Lempicka's most provocative painted portraits and nudes make an original contribution to the visual representation of modernity, sexuality and consumerism from a female perspective.

¹ See Laura Claridge, *Tamara de Lempicka: A Life of Deco and Decadence* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1999) for a biographical account of how de Lempicka fashioned herself as a society portraitist of French and White Russian aristocracy in Paris in the 1920s. The artist's daughter offers a first-hand account in Baroness Kizette de Lempicka-Foxhall and Charles Phillips, *Passion By Design: The Art and Times of Tamara de Lempicka* (New York: Abbeville, 1987). The literature on de Lempicka is vast, and only partially cited in this essay. For more on de Lempicka and her female colleagues in Paris, see Paula J. Birnbaum, *Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011); Paula J. Birnbaum, "Painting the Perverse: Tamara de Lempicka and the Modern Woman Artist," in *The Modern Woman Revisited*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Tirza Latimer (Rutgers University Press, September 2003), 95–107. See also Alain Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka: Catalogue Raisonné 1921–1979* (Lausanne and Paris: Editions Acatos, 1999); Suzanne Tise-Isoré, ed. *Lempicka* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006); *Tamara de Lempicka: Art Deco Icon* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2004).

From the time she set foot on French soil, de Lempicka was driven to advance herself both professionally and socially. She arranged to study in the ateliers of prominent French painters Maurice Denis and André Lhote, and soon after began to exhibit and sell her paintings at the local salons and galleries. By 1925 she had her first solo exhibition in Milan, and the avant-garde writers Jean Cocteau, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and F. T. Marinetti were among her new friends and acquaintances. She was part of an elite and socially progressive Parisian artistic circle, as evidenced by her attendance at several of the American expatriot Nathalie Barney's literary salons in the mid-1920s.² There she described sniffing cocaine with the likes of André Gide, as well as making connections with a host of prospective patrons. She was known to have indulged regularly in sexual liaisons with women and men whom she met at such gatherings, as anyone who was professionally useful became an interesting prospect.

By 1928 de Lempicka divorced her husband, Tadeusz Lempicki, and soon afterward sent her young daughter to boarding school to accommodate her busy social and professional life. The following year she chose to paint herself in the driver's seat of a shiny, green Bugatti sports-car, perhaps symbolic of her new-found freedom from family obligations (**Figure 35**).³ Now an iconic image in the history of modernism, the artist appears clad in a fashionable racing cap, leather gloves and billowing gray scarf. Her *Self-Portrait* gives visual representation to the emergence of the Parisian modern woman or *garçonne* (bachelor girl), a new social and literary category epitomized by the mass media's promotion of images of young, ostensibly emancipated and economically independent women.⁴ Much has been written about the new freedoms of European women (and, in particular, women artists and writers) during the *Années Folles*. In these years, mythologized as a utopian age of opportunity, increasing numbers of expatriate modern women converged on Paris as the center of cultural production and the capital of sexual tolerance. It is commonplace that World War I had redefined gender relations in France.⁵ With roughly 1.4 million men killed and 4.3

² See Claridge, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 94, 96–97; Suzanne Rodriguez, *Wild Heart: A Life: Natalie Clifford Barney and the Decadence of Literary Paris* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003); Diana Souhami, *Wild Girls: Paris, Sappho, and Art—the Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney* (New York: Macmillan, 2005).

³ See Alain Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka: Catalogue Raisoné 1921–1979*, 196–197 (catalogue number B.115). All of Lempicka's paintings discussed in this essay will be referenced with the Blondel catalogue number as cited above. See also Alain Blondel's website that accompanies the catalogue raisonné: <http://www.en.lempickacatalogue.com>.

⁴ See *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars*, eds. Whitney Chadwick and Tirza Latimer; Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919–1939: Expanded Social Roles for the New Woman Following the First World War*, eds. Paula Birnbaum and Anna Novakov (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

⁵ The literature on French feminism between the World Wars is vast and cannot be fully cited here. Among the secondary sources consulted: Christine Bard, *Les filles de Marianne: histoire des féminismes 1914–1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1995); Laurence Klejman and Florence Rochefort, *L'égalité en marche: le féminisme sous la Troisième République* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques : Des femmes, 1989); Sian Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996); Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

million wounded, French demographics were radically altered for decades.⁶ A large population of widowed and unmarried women joined the workforce both during and after the Great War, challenging popular expectations of bourgeois femininity in the modern French family structure.

In her *Self Portrait* of 1929 de Lempicka is indeed staking a claim to a specific kind of female modernity through her appropriation of imagery that nonetheless connotes the wealth and power that remained inaccessible to most real working women.⁷ She pays homage to the machine-based modernist aesthetic of the Italian futurist Filippo Marinetti, whom she met in Paris in 1924, some fifteen years after his famous Futurist manifesto celebrated “the beauty of speed” and birth of a revolutionary movement from his position in the driver’s seat of car.⁸ The metallic-colored leather cap, single leather glove and arresting scarf adorning the artist appear to be adapted from men’s racing or flying clothes, suggesting her choice to connect herself to fashionable images of affluent women who could afford to enjoy male-dominated pastimes. She depicts her own facial features as mannequin-like; the large, heavily-lidded eyes, thinly arched brows, straight nose and bright red lips promote the look of modern femininity typical of fashion advertising of the period.⁹ By choosing to represent herself in the driver’s seat of a car, de Lempicka played to the link between the elite *garçonne* image and the new consumer culture.¹⁰ The painting was in fact commissioned by a female editor of the popular German fashion magazine, *Die Dame*, after she apparently encountered the nearly divorced Lempicka behind the wheel of what was actually a yellow Renault while vacationing in Monte Carlo.¹¹ It appeared on the cover of the magazine in 1929 to promote the German ideal of the modern woman, who in this case happened to be a professional painter.¹²

A closer look at the formal composition of de Lempicka’s self-image reinforces the conflicted nature of this fashionable fantasy of female agency and mobility. While the shiny, green facade of the vehicle provides a clear pictorial frame with screws neatly in place, the cloistered interior space offers a confusing array of bodily imagery. The artist’s head is crammed into the upper corner of the composition, while her body is compressed and fragmented within the narrow cavity of the vehicle. Her prominent, gloved hand looks artificial and fetishized, severed from the rest of her arm by the

⁶ Roger Price, *A Concise History of France* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 219. Almost eight million men had been mobilized and 1,322,100 (16.6 percent) of them killed. In addition, the mobilization of so many young men caused a drastic fall in the birth rate during the four years of the war.

⁷ See Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 128–129.

⁸ See F. T. Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” trans. R.W. Flint, *Marinetti’s Selected Writings* (London, 1971), reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 145–149. For more on Lempicka’s encounters with Marinetti see Claridge, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 106.

⁹ Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 196, cites André Kertész’s cover photograph for the popular weekly magazine, *Vu*, 3 October 1928, of a woman seated behind the steering wheel dressed in apparel by the popular couturier Hermès as a possible source of inspiration for Lempicka’s 1929 *Self-Portrait*.

¹⁰ Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 78.

¹¹ *Die Dame* (Berlin, July 1929), cover image. For more on this anecdote see Claridge, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 149, and Lempicka-Foxhall and Philips, *Passion By Design*, 76.

¹² The editors of *Die Dame* regularly commissioned female artists, including Hannah Höch, to contribute illustrations that would appeal to their targeted readership of modern career women.

green vertical strip of the car frame. And what are we to make of the thick appendages of steel-colored material that rise so unnaturally from the artist's neckline? It seems unclear as to whether this is actually a continuation of her scarf, or a mechanized part of the vehicle's interior pressing in upon her. For all of the seductive qualities of this image of female modernity, Lempicka's 1929 *Self-Portrait* also conveys a strong sense of physical containment and repression that leave the viewer questioning the ultimate message. Interestingly, the deformation of the female body in this painting appears to be an integral part of the artist's commodification of the *garçonne* image in an age of rising industrialism.

While de Lempicka made portraits as a means to explore fashionable forms of social and sexual identity, the theme of the female nude offered her a more explicit vehicle from which to confront active sexual desire. Painting the nude presented her with a means for proclaiming a professional identity within the patriarchal codes of Western art history, as well as for evoking female agency on her own terms. Her nudes reveal her investment in pushing the limits of naturalism as a way of challenging associations between sexuality, deformity, and the female body. I am particularly interested in exploring how the voluptuousness of Lempicka's imagery suggests her own erotic contemplation and spectatorial pleasure in women's bodies, rather than making larger claims about her identity and/or sexual practices.

We can begin to address some of these issues by analyzing *La Belle Rafaela* of 1927 (**Figure 36**), de Lempicka's painting of a voluptuous female bather, which strategically plays to the Western conventions of the *odalisque*, or languidly reclining and sexually available inhabitant of a harem. Originally exhibited at the 1927 *Salon d'Automne*, this work stands as one of the artist's best-known paintings of the female nude and offers a venue for deeper analysis of the complicated politics of spectatorship at play in her work.¹³ With eyes closed, full red lips parted, and one arm posed provocatively behind her head, the model solicits our gaze even while she appears fully self-absorbed. De Lempicka confronts her viewer with a close-up image of the subject's full-figured form. A bright white light illuminates the rounded contours of flesh stretched diagonally across the canvas.

While the lighting accentuates the figure's distended face, neck, breasts, and abdomen, a shadow is cast horizontally across the lower midriff, strategically obscuring the pubic area from view. To heighten the viewer's experience of her model's curvaceous physique, de Lempicka has reduced the background composition to basic geometric planes of black, gray, and red tones. She has chosen to crop her subject further by concealing the model's lower calves, ankles, and feet with a plush red blanket whose color echoes the shade of lipstick that covers her swollen upper lip. The alluring red fabric disappears behind the model's right calf, reemerging in the awkwardly painted space between her right hand and illuminated breast. Here, in a gesture of self-absorbed pleasure, the model awkwardly extends two thick fingers to graze the top portion of her breast. Close scrutiny reveals that both breasts are void of nipples, and her arms and legs are oddly out of proportion with the rest of her body. In fact, the closer one looks at this painting, the stranger the body appears; its exaggerated deformity is reinforced by the lack of expected detail in some places and the greater detail in others (such as the fingers that seem to walk across the heavily abstracted breast).

¹³ Monsieur Baudry purchased *La Belle Rafaela* following its exhibition at the Parisian Salon des Indépendants in 1927. See Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 164–65 (catalogue number B.87).

De Lempicka's visual strategies become clear if we compare *Belle Rafaela* to Manet's canonical image of modernity, *Olympia* of 1863. While Manet invites us to look at Olympia's body from the side, de Lempicka presents her reclining nude from a rotated, foreshortened perspective. She angles her model's legs so as to give the viewer access to her pubic area. It is as if the viewer were in the process of moving directly onto of the nude's ample body, confronting her, dead-on and from the same level, in a sexually charged manner. De Lempicka uses perspective here to claim explicitly the fantasy of sexual control from a female perspective. She appears to have invited her viewers, female or male of whatever sexual orientation, into bed with her model, Rafaela.

In her biography of her mother, Kizette de Lempicka-Foxhall describes de Lempicka's infatuation with Rafaela, identified as a prostitute whom she first sighted while exercising in the Bois de Boulogne.¹⁴ Rafaela sat for de Lempicka for over a year. De Lempicka portrayed her in at least four large-scale paintings of the nude. These works reframe the relationship described by Manet between heterosexual male artist/viewer and the object of his gaze—the female prostitute. They offer an explicitly female artist's (and viewer's) perspective on desire for the female model and potential lover.

Theorists of female spectatorship differ on how the dynamics of sexual desire and preference play out when women produce or contemplate images of other women that they identify as erotic.¹⁵ But it seems that the voluptuousness of de Lempicka's imagery in *Belle Rafaela* is informed by her own erotic contemplation and voyeuristic pleasure in women's bodies. De Lempicka's representations of the female body speak of an interaction between her identification with her subject matter and her sexual desire and pleasure in objectifying her models.

This concept of a shifting female gaze permits speculation about the artist's individual dynamics of spectatorship, but also about those of her intended audience and patrons, who ranged from wealthy heterosexual male industrialists to openly lesbian Parisian aesthetes. Included among this latter group were two women whom de Lempicka painted in provocative portraiture: the Duchess Marika de la Salle, 1924 (**Figure 37**) and Suzy Solidor, 1933, a popular chanteuse and owner of a lesbian nightclub who orchestrated her own self-representation by commissioning over one hundred painted portraits of herself.¹⁶ Recent scholarship has suggested that there was an existing, if elite, market for lesbian and bisexual art among affluent female artists and patrons who traveled in the circle of the American expatriate painter Romaine

¹⁴ Lempicka-Foxhall, *Passion By Design*, 82. See novelist Ellis Avery's fictionalized account of the relationship between de Lempicka and her model, Rafaela, and the resulting nude portraits in *The Last Nude* (New York: Riverhead, 2012).

¹⁵ Tricia Laughlin describes an iconography of lesbian desire at play in Lempicka's practice in "Tamara de Lempicka's Women," *Art Criticism* 13, no. 1 (1998): 97–106. See also Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gammen "The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing," in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, eds. Paul Burstyn and Colin Richardson (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), 32–27.

¹⁶ See de Lempicka's *Portrait of the Duchess de la Salle* (1925, oil on canvas, 161.3 × 95.9 cm, private collection), reproduced in Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 148–49 (B.72); and *Portrait of Suzy Solidor* (1933, oil on panel, 46 × 33 cm, Cagnes, Château Musée de Cagnes) (B.173) and Suzy Solidor, *Cent peintres – un modèle* (Paris: La Nef de Paris, 1970), 95. See Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*, 105–35 on Solidor's self-fashioning in this and other portraits she commissioned in this period.

Brooks and her lover, Natalie Barney.¹⁷ Given her range of clientele, de Lempicka likely aimed to produce a large body of female imagery that evoked different subcultural meanings depending upon the audience.

It is open to speculation whether de Lempicka was overtly commenting on her own life in a painting like *Belle Rafaela* or simply playing to her understanding of the art market. While her biography offers an image of the modern woman artist who remained class conscious, her reputation as a society portraitist and painter of the nude became all the more fashionable in certain circles because of her bisexuality and rejection of bourgeois values of domesticity. In only a few years time, de Lempicka enjoyed a widespread reputation as an alluring female artist who painted cubist-inspired portraits and sensual nudes in a stylized manner that emphasized the social status of her sitters. Notable Parisian couturiers became patrons, and she soon possessed a magnificent wardrobe comprised of gifts from her new clients. De Lempicka commissioned the French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886–1945) to design her sleek, modernist studio in 1929 at 7 rue Méchain in the fourteenth arrondissement of Paris, and the artist's sister, architect Adrienne Gorska (1899–1969), designed the iron and chrome-filled entrance hall.¹⁸ Photographs of her decadent studio parties regularly graced the society pages of magazines and newspapers. Journalists actively promoted her identity as *femme fatale* in a series of Hollywood-style photographic portraits set in the studio in the 1930s. Critics relished her Greta Garbo looks of “sumptuous blond hair” and “exquisite hands, adorned with blood-red fingernails,” calling to mind de Lempicka's own seductive paintings of women. Another described her long nine-hour workdays in her studio, with interruptions in portrait sittings allowed only for “champagne, bath, and massage.” De Lempicka traveled extensively and led a privileged life, setting herself apart from the more bohemian and experimental aesthetics and politics of some of her avant-garde Parisian colleagues. While she remained politically disengaged, the artist's work aligned with fascist ideologies that were prevalent in Europe in the 1930s.¹⁹

Many Parisian art critics during the interwar years were preoccupied with the ways in which de Lempicka's work attempted to both modernize and critique canonical images of the female nude. Arsène Alexandre, the regular art critic for *Le Figaro*, championed de Lempicka's oeuvre as embodying all the contradictions inherent in

¹⁷ See Joe Lucchesi, “An Apparition in a Black Flowing Cloak: Romaine Brooks's Portraits of Ida Rubinstein,” *Amazons in the Drawing Room: The Art of Romaine Brooks*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 73–87; Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*.

¹⁸ See Georges Ramon, “Architectures modernes—L'atelier de Mme. de Lempicka,” in *Mobilier et Décoration* (January 1931) for a detailed account of de Lempicka's studio, including 15 photographs by Grivot. See also Tag Gronberg, “‘Le Peintre installé par la femme’; Femininity and the Woman Painter,” in *Tamara de Lempicka: Art Deco Icon*, 47–56.

¹⁹ While I cannot fully explore the subtle intersection between modernism and fascism at play in de Lempicka's practice in this article, her work was patronized by a dying class of wealthy European and White Russian nobility who followed Action Française, a right-wing, supposedly royalist group led by Charles Maurras. For more on the intersection between modernism and fascism among female modernist writers and artists of the period see: Erin G. Carlstrom, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Nancy Locke, “Valentine de Saint-Point and the Fascist Construction of Woman,” in *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, eds. Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 73–100; Chadwick, *Amazons in the Drawing Room*, 13 and 39, n.13.

what he called her “perverse Ingrism.”²⁰ For Alexandre, works like *Belle Rafaela*, offering a sensualized form of classicism in vogue in Paris during the 1920s, called to mind Ingres’s famous *Grand Odalisque* of 1814. However, de Lempicka’s identity as a female artist who painted explicitly erotic, and at times distorted, images of women challenged Ingres in terms of the traditional sexual politics of spectatorship. Ingres’s famous odalisque, with her small and exquisitely painted face and head attached to strangely elongated limbs, was regarded as scandalous when the painting was first exhibited in 1819. While one can imagine such a response to the excessively swollen quality of de Lempicka’s nude *Rafaela*, we must bear in mind that Alexandre’s “perverse Ingres” epithet spread among the Parisian art world in the post–World War I years, a time when the backlash of right-wing politics had caused a number of critics to overlook such distortions in favor of a post-cubist return to order.²¹

Eight years earlier, in 1921, Alexandre himself celebrated Ingres as a kind of postwar panacea: “the personification of French attributes of neatness, clarity, luminous enthusiasm, of intelligent good—all qualities that allowed the French to annihilate the enterprises of brutality and arrogance.”²² For many critics invested in a classical revival, naturalistic images of the female body became a foundation upon which cultural rejuvenation and national stability could be imagined. Alexandre praised de Lempicka for her appropriation of Ingres’s aesthetic, with its allusions to clarity, purity, and chastity, for her own aim—what he described as an “impression of modernity”—while alluding to the potentially erotic and untamed characteristics of the female body.²³

By dubbing de Lempicka the “perverse Ingres” of her day, Alexandre expressed a contemporary awareness that paintings such as *Belle Rafaela* did in fact offer something different to the viewing public—its obvious departure from Greco-Latin form and perspective was disturbing, its bold, erotic treatment of the female nude sensually arousing. Alexandre’s language evokes Freud’s classic 1905 theories of perversion, which suggested that sexual drives from fetishism to “inversion” and masturbation were in fact the primordial erotic tendencies from which “normal” reproductive heterosexuality evolved.²⁴ Whereas Freudian theory normalizes what was

²⁰ Arsène Alexandre, “Le Salon d’Automne,” *Le Figaro*, November 3, 1928, 2. Alexandre elaborated on what he intended by “perverse Ingrism” in “Tamara de Lempicka,” *La Renaissance de l’Art Français et des industries de Luxe* (July 1929): 331–37. *La Renaissance* was a politically conservative interwar art journal, edited by Alexandre, that sought to preserve the ideals of a “pure” and nationalist French aesthetic during the Reconstruction period.

²¹ See Kirsten Hoving Powell, “Le Violon d’Ingres: Man Ray’s Variations on Ingres, Deformation, Desire, and de Sade,” *Art History* 23, no. 5 (December 2000): 772–99. Powell elucidates how Ingres’s art experienced a complicated revival among both conservative and avant-garde artists and writers following World War I. Note that the painter André Lhote—whose 1921 essays on Ingres are thoughtfully analyzed by Powell—became de Lempicka’s teacher in Paris in 1922 and is known to have inspired in her a deep admiration for his aesthetic. See André Lhote, *La Peinture, Le Coeur et l’esprit* (Paris: Les Editions Denoel et Steele, 1933, first published in 1921).

²² Cited in Powell, “Le Violon d’Ingres,” 774 and n.5; Arsène Alexandre, “Comprendre Ingres, c’est comprendre la Grèce et la France,” *La Renaissance de l’Art Français et des industries de Luxe* 4 (May 1921): 201.

²³ Alexandre, “Tamara de Lempicka,” *La Renaissance de l’Art*, 331.

²⁴ See Sigmund Freud’s theory of infantile “polymorphous perversity” in *Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz describes Freud’s definition of perversion as: “a deviation from an instinctual activity, the insinuation of a gap between a drive

once considered sexual deviation, de Lempicka's work flaunts the varied pleasures of active female sexual desire in a way that critics like Alexandre may have found shocking. "Perverse" is a term that recurs throughout the criticism of the works of female artists of this period in response to imagery of the female body. Alexandre—by evoking a theory much popularized in France by the late 1920s—suggested to his readers that works like *Belle Rafaela* opened up a space for non-normative or non-heterosexual spectatorship, a space where a female artist dares to express her palpable desire for a female model.²⁵

De Lempicka joined a group called the *Société des Femmes Artistes Modernes* in 1931, a vibrant women's art collective in Paris that attracted many painters and sculptors engaged with the depiction of modern womanhood, including her Polish colleagues Olga Boznanska (1865–1940), Alice Halicka (1884–1975) and Mela Muter (1876–1967).²⁶ Publicly identified by its initials of FAM, the group organized annual exhibitions throughout the 1930s featuring the work of female artists from various points of origin and historical moments. FAM regularly staged exhibitions of both contemporary and deceased women artists. These exhibits helped to construct and transmit a more inclusive history of art and raise public awareness of the work of previously marginalized women of different social classes, as well as national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. During the 1930s FAM was known as an ambitious and prominent group, was reviewed regularly in the press and thought by many to challenge prior stereotypes of "women's art" in France. De Lempicka was among the group's most prominent members, and she often competed for prime exhibition space with French painters Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938) and Marie Laurencin (1883–1956).

One way that FAM constructed a history of women artists and the nude by taking on recognizable biblical and mythological themes from the history of Western art. For women artists throughout history, taking on such classic themes offered an obvious pretext to tackle the subject matter of the nude and sexuality in a context that was deemed acceptable for their respective audience. De Lempicka was one of several FAM artists who painted the biblical theme of *Adam and Eve* (**Figure 38**) as a means to challenge historical narratives about female sexuality. The fundamental Judeo-Christian creation myth offered a powerful iconography of heterosexual desire, fertility, and the creation of the world that was available to her for revision. She exhibited her *Adam and Eve* with FAM on three separate occasions: first in 1933 at the Maison de France, located on the commercial Champs-Élysées (following its original exhibition at the Salon des Indépendants in 1932); a second time in 1937 at the Exhibition Pavilion of

and its aims and objects, then all sexuality is a deviation, all desire perverse, all pleasure an amalgam of heterogeneous component drives that refuse any simple subordination to genital and reproductive functions." See Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 160.

²⁵ For many feminist theorists, the domain of perverse desire offers a model for lesbian or "queer" subjectivity that lies outside the realm of biological reproduction and allows for a more fluid exploration of shifting sexualities and pleasures. See Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1994).

²⁶ See Paula Birnbaum, *Women Artists in Interwar France*, for a full account of FAM. See also the following related publications: Paula Birnbaum, "Constructing a Matrilineal History of Art in Interwar France," in *Aurora: the Journal of the History of Art* v. 4 (2003), 155–73; Paula Birnbaum, "Alice Halicka's Self-Effacement," in *Diaspora and Modern Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2000), 207–223.

the Esplanade des Invalides; and a third time in Prague in 1937, at the historic Obecní dům, when the group joined forces with another organization known as the Circle of Czech Women Artists.²⁷

De Lempicka's *Adam and Eve* refuses a history of pastoral representations of Eden and radically modernizes the biblical theme. She positions her nude figures in a physical embrace before a steel-colored, post-cubist cityscape. Adam's muscular forearm wraps around Eve's ribcage and grazes the underside of her breast. A flesh-toned apple in Eve's elevated hand is the only remnant of paradise here—its spherical shape echoed in the single breast exposed below—suggesting the implicit connection between Eve's sexuality and the fruit of knowledge. De Lempicka strategically employs a close-up perspective that suggests that the sexual energy inspired by her figures' youthful bodies can hardly be contained by the parameters of the picture plane. Their smooth, athletic-looking physiques are carefully modeled and brightly illuminated to emphasize the physical attractiveness they offer to each other as well as to the viewer. The rippling musculature of Adam's back, buttocks, thighs, and upper arm swells with vitality and power, suggesting de Lempicka intent to eroticize his body.

De Lempicka's *Adam and Eve* was commissioned originally to serve as the poster image advertising the contemporary French film *Sexualism*.²⁸ While no trace of this film or synopsis of its content has been identified to date, the artist's own records indicate that the Préfecture de Police censored her painting as an inappropriate advertisement for the film. De Lempicka chooses to turn Adam's back to the viewer and avoid representation of his genitals, while still eroticizing his body through the exaggeration of musculature. The artist also poses Eve seductively; bright frontal lighting draws attention to her single exposed breast with erect red nipple at its center, its spherical shape evocative of modern machinery. Her arm appears plumply sensuous and lacks the muscular definition of Adam's, whereas her fingers are carefully delineated by the application of bright-red nail polish that echoes the color of her painted lips and exposed nipple. De Lempicka often applied bright red paint to highlight the lips, breasts, and fingernails of her female nudes—perhaps as a means to titillate her viewers with the look of modern femininity.

De Lempicka was fond of repeating certain anecdotes about the creation of *Adam and Eve* and other paintings, many of which are recounted in the first-person in Kizette de Lempicka-Foxhall's biography of her mother, *Passion by Design*. According to de Lempicka-Foxhall, the inspiration behind *Adam and Eve* came when one of her mother's regular professional female models took a break from posing nude to eat an apple from a still life basket of fruit that was set up in the artist's studio. De Lempicka-Foxhall then describes her mother setting out into the streets, where she apparently found a policeman making his rounds. When she invited him to pose, he apparently replied that he, too, was an artist and would be happy to oblige. The account that a policeman posed as Adam of course adds to the irony that the Préfecture de Police ultimately censored the painting as a source for the poster image for the film entitled *Sexualism*.

²⁷ After that the painting passed through the hands of a series of private collectors. The exhibition history of Tamara de Lempicka's *Adam and Eve* is offered in Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 236. See in particular those exhibitions held prior to the Second World War: Paris, Salon des Indépendants (2332), 1932; Paris, Salon des Femmes Artistes Modernes (87), 1933; Paris, Salon des Femmes Artistes Modernes (55), 1937.

²⁸ See Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 236 and I. Zaslawska, "Tamara de Lempicka," *Kobieta Współczesna (The Modern Woman)*, 20 July 1932.

In spite of the official rejection of De Lempicka's seductive *Adam and Eve* as public advertisement, its repeated inclusion in FAM exhibitions offered the artist a means to proclaim her professional identity and evoke female sexual and artistic agency on her own terms. If the bible tells us that Eve was condemned to painful childbearing as punishment for her sin, here de Lempicka chooses to emphasize the mutual sexual pleasure that can result in biological reproduction. By cropping the image just below the figures' knees and at the top of Adam's head, she creates a claustrophobic sense of compositional space that emphasizes their nudity and skin-to-skin contact. The immediacy of the bodies and sense of tactility between them encourages the viewer's fantasy of participation, rather than evoking moral judgment—as in prior art-historical examples.

When asked much later in her life to comment on this painting, de Lempicka stressed her intention that Eve symbolize the modern woman of the period:

I was struck with the vision of a modern Eve biting into the forbidden fruit—Eve liberated, her hair crimped in the style of our own emancipated times, naked, yet chaste in her nudity, and therefore all the more desirable. To provide her with a partner seemed to be the next natural step, and Adam was created, in reversal of the divine order. His body is that of a modern sun-bronzed athlete, although his features already bear the traces of human frailty. And behind their intertwined bodies loom the skyscrapers, casting their menacing shadows, threatening to engulf, but never quite destroying, this divine moment of Paradise.²⁹

De Lempicka's biographer Laura Claridge speculates that this account most likely was written by the artist's daughter, Kizette de Lempicka-Foxhall, and then approved by her elderly mother prior to publication.³⁰ Even if this is true, the description suggests that de Lempicka conveyed to her daughter her own desire to produce an image of Eve as a modern, sexually liberated woman. Her account connects this painting to de Lempicka's larger contemporary project in portraiture and self-portraiture that gave visual representation to the emergence of the new social and literary category of the Parisian modern woman. The mass media promoted images of young, ostensibly emancipated and economically independent women that epitomized this type. In contrast to the earthy naturalism of the *Adam and Eve* painted earlier by her FAM colleague Suzanne Valadon (1909; Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou), de Lempicka depicts Eve's facial features as mannequin-like: the almond-shaped eyelids, long, straight nose, and bright red lips promote the commodified look of modern femininity typical of fashion advertising of the period and are indebted to the aesthetic return to order. While her idealized face is illuminated and Adam's remains veiled in shadow, both are void of expression and treated as decorative masks that refuse any hint of emotion. Since the painting was originally commissioned to serve as a poster advertisement for a film, de Lempicka played to the link between the image of the elite modern woman and the new consumer culture. De Lempicka's account of Eve as "chaste in her nudity, and therefore all the more desirable," is interesting in its inherent contradiction and class implications. On the one hand, the artist stresses the notion of the modern woman's innocence and virginity, qualities associated with generations of academic paintings of the female nude intended to convey the image of bourgeois femininity; on the other, it is precisely this notion of

²⁹ See Claridge, *Tamara de Lempicka*, 81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Eve's sexual purity that is meant to entice the viewer's experience of sexual fantasy and control.

What is most jarring about de Lempicka's *Adam and Eve* is the artist's decision to position such carefully modeled, curvaceous bodies against a contrasting backdrop of hard-angled, steely-gray skyscrapers. The juxtaposition of bodies and buildings in this and other paintings has been attributed to the artist's 1929 visit to Manhattan, but similar metropolitan-skyline backgrounds appear repeatedly in her female nudes and portraits as early as 1925. While de Lempicka's visit to New York certainly had an impact on her work, she was responding more generally to trends in modernist painting that explored the effects of rapid industrialization on female identity and the formation of subjectivity. The dramatic contrast between sensually modeled bodies and fragmented urban spaces in *Adam and Eve* can be viewed as part of a larger project to produce an aesthetic of the nude within the context of a modern metropolis that offered new possibilities to women willing and able to explore it.

Even if most middle-class European women could not afford the look of modernity that Tamara de Lempicka's work espoused, perhaps she hoped that her visual practice would prompt her public to think more openly about the possibilities of female sexual agency and fantasy at a time of rapid industrialization. By stressing the commercial look of the modern woman as both empowered subject and fragmented object of desire, her portraits and nudes make a deliberate claim about the conflicted nature of female subjectivity at this particular cultural moment. It seems unlikely that de Lempicka could have accomplished as much without the ambition and resulting financial possibilities that allowed her to take on sexuality and consumerism so explicitly in her visual practice. She was focused on producing images of modern femininity that would sell, given the appeal her work held for a variety of critics and wealthy art collectors of her day. Ironically, this public consumption of de Lempicka as a kind of perverse or decadent female painter continues today, as Hollywood types from Madonna to Jack Nicholson and Barbra Streisand have collected her work precisely because of its ability to confront sexual fantasy and desire from multiple perspectives.

TAMARA DE ŁEMPICKA — UOSOBNIENIE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ KOBIETY

Tamara de Łempicka (1898–1980) często jest opisywana jako uosobienie współczesnej paryskiej artystki lat międzywojennych. Była polską emigrantką, która malowała portrety oraz akty wykorzystując je jako środki do eksplorowania popularnych form tożsamości seksualnej. Była jedną z wielu kobiet zajmujących się sztuką, które w pierwszych dekadach XX wieku zwały do siebie Paryż — centrum nie tylko sztuki współczesnej, ale także modernizmu. Wielu historyków odnotowało zjawisko, że pierwsza wojna światowa zachwiała tradycyjnymi strukturami społecznymi i rozszerzyła świadomość kulturową oraz szanse kobiet różnych narodowości. W eseju poddano analizie sławny autoportret z 1929 roku — *Tamara w zielonym bugatti* — oraz niektóre z aktów, de Łempickiej, by zbadać, jak artystka radziła sobie z motywami nowoczesności i pożądania seksualnego z perspektywy kobiety. Podczas gdy de Łempicka w swoim słynnym autoportrecie zgłębiała komodyfikację wizerunku kobiety współczesnej w epoce rozkwitającego industrializmu, w eseju podkreślono, iż tworząc akty malarka zyskała środek umożliwiający jej manifestację swojej profesjonalnej tożsamości w zachodniej historii sztuki opartej na patriarchalnych wzorcach oraz przywołanie kobiecości na swoich własnych warunkach.

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm; nowoczesność; kobieta współczesna, *femme moderne*; *garçonne*; Paryż; autoportret; perwersja.