

Tamara de Lempicka 1898-1980

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Tamara de Lempicka's fusion of artistic influences from 16th & 17th century Italy with the exuberant modernity of 1920's Parisian society made her a leading figure in the world of Art Deco's painters. Lempicka's accomplishments and renown came from a mixture of innate design skills, her study of art and the inventiveness of her vision. She always claimed that her success resulted from the clarity and clean-lines of her paintings, but this is only one aspect of her work. In a sketch of around 1915, when art was still a hobby to her, she captured the likeness of a Michelangelo precisely and precociously for a 17 year old with, as yet, no formal training. Moreover, in around 1920 she produced a fashion illustration that resembled a highly polished Klimt or Schiele. She excelled in adopting and adapting the trends of the day, absorbing what she needed from the avant-garde and from her two teachers Maurice Denis and Andre Lhote. The Italian development of the *ligne serpentina* was never absent from her work, as she fused the modern with the legacy of classical form, from the Renaissance to Ingres, to create her own Art Deco style. However, consideration of Art Deco has tended to be overwhelmed by poster art and thus the significance of painting, such as Lempicka's, deserves reassessment. As her popularity escalates on the commercial market, the time is ripe for reconsideration of Lempicka's work¹ and, at an academic level, the importance of Art Deco painting.

In order to adequately assess her significance, it is important to understand how Lempicka, a Polish artist, came to be in France. Born into an upper middle class family, Lempicka moved in high social circles in Warsaw and Moscow, speaking French, taking dancing lessons, going to art classes. She arrived in Paris in 1918, fleeing the revolution like so many other Russian and Slavic artists, such as Diaghilev and Goncharova. Lempicka would have been aware of Goncharova's work as well as that of the Russian Constructivists, but while she followed the same geographical path, her art followed a more classical one, inspired by the Renaissance, late Mannerists and Ingres. Hoping to earn herself a respected position among the elite, she first infiltrated French art circles by painting in the most modern manner of the day: cubist, with heavy Italianate influences. Driven by the need to sustain her family financially, Lempicka attended art classes by day and painted by night in order to improve enough to sell her works for a living.

From 1925 to 1934, Lempicka painted what are arguably her best and certainly her most memorable works. The epitome of this period was undoubtedly *Auto Portrait*, 1929, painted as a special commission for the cover of the illustrious *Die Dame* magazine in Germany.² The self-portrait reminds us of Diana the Huntress, now transformed to a modern hunter, sitting behind the wheel of an automobile, hand

nonchalantly resting on the steering wheel. Lempicka is dressed in a modern lady's driving outfit and helmet. The image has sensuously, lazy, heavy-lidded eyes, sultry mouth and although the work is small in scale, shows intensity of character. It sums up the Jazz Age, the Modern Age and Paris of the 1920s. It represents the emancipation of women, the mechanisation of the times and – as the French word for car takes the feminine form – a celebration of the female form and aesthetic presentation. There is a pun on the words auto and portrait, with 'auto' being an increasingly important word in the new world of independence provided by the mechanised, self-driven car. Like most of the work she produced in this period it does not quite fit into the art historical category of 'cubist', which is thought to be the 'important' art movement of the period, but it does show the rapid development of her personal style.

Lempicka's reputation quickly became established in France and Italy, based on the society portraits she executed. In these compositions futuristic and geometric designs surround the untouchable and invincible personalities of her sitters, who were set against sharply defined and violently painted skyscrapers. She was soon in a position to choose sitters from the international elite. If the charming, elegant Slav émigré aristocrats with jewel-laden arms and sable coats considered one respectable enough for her to paint, one could consider oneself '*arrives*'. International business owners and the European aristocracy were among those who queued for Lempicka's time and paid whatever sum she demanded. Determined to be successful, Lempicka also glorified and exaggerated her own intensely cultivated image. She painted many self-portraits, blatant exercises in public relations, presenting herself as ultimately composed and sleek, playing on her strong resemblance to Greta Garbo. She also bought an apartment by Mallet-Stevens, one of the three most important modernist architects in France, and hired him to decorate it, including the obligatory monogram woven into all the fabrics. She aligned herself with all that he represented: the new, the modern, and all that was vital in the decorative arts.³

Her appeal to the members of high society, on whom her career success relied, rested upon her ability to modernise their image perfectly and brazenly. Undoubtedly a propagandist for the rich and the elite, she managed to convey her sitters' innate inability to be anything other than powerful and successful. The fading aristocracy, including the Duchess de Valmy, the Marquis d'Afflitto and the Grand Duke Gabriel Constantinovich, paid highly to be immortalised by her, while the nouveaux riches paid to be socially sanctified by her. Lempicka's portraits glorified the modern achievements of eminent personages like Dr Boucard, scientist and inventor of medicines; Rufus Bush of the New York Terminal and Suzy Solidor, a rich Parisian night-club owner and Lempicka's lover for a while. Her portraits emphasised all that was large and powerful in her sitters, both in physique and in character.

Lempicka distended her portrait images to exaggerate the grace, elegance and the arrogance of her subjects and freely transformed, even deformed her sitters' silhouettes for artistic effect. To achieve the effects of simultaneity, speed and movement hinted at in the background of her works, she experimented with Lhote's plastic rhyming: the reappearance of one element in a painting echoed at an opposite, often diagonal position somewhere else on the canvas. In this way Lempicka pushed the late-Cubist techniques of multiple planes and stylisations of light and shade to the limit. Her portraits are elegant, statuesque friezes with a stony quality that causes the flesh to assume a hard, dehumanised, sculptured appearance. These steely, architectonic shapes fitted the values of the new age perfectly and this degree of shaping and reflecting the cultural tenor of an age should not be overlooked, even if it cannot be easily situated in the canons of avant-garde development. Lempicka was acutely aware of the trends and impulses of the men and women who dominated the age and tuned her art to their inclinations. In *L'écharpe Bleu* (1930), Lempicka's sitter has a modern, cropped hairstyle, wears bright red lipstick and thinly waxed eyebrows. She sports a smart beret and is posed in front of a luxury sea-vessel. Arlette Boucard's portrait is shown against a background of cruise-liners and foreign shores, the *dolce vite* enjoyed by the rich in the 1920s.

A contrast to this brittle, polished world can be found in the smouldering sensuality of her nudes, such as *Les Deux Amies* (1930), *Myrto* (1929) or *L'esclave* (1929).⁴ In many ways they are an overt expression of that which is suggested in the licentious fleshy lips and sultry regards of her society portraits. She alternately painted clothed portraits, then female nudes: the violence of character and attitude versus the voluptuousness of the flesh. It was perhaps the strictly coded representations of her sitters in portraiture that prompted Lempicka to express unrestrained sexuality in her large nudes, a balance of sensation and intellect, such as is found in the paintings of Ingres, Michelangelo and Bronzino. Lhote apparently attributed emotion in Ingres' nudes as a response to erotic desire. This is also apparent in the nudes of Lempicka, though she was also undoubtedly aware of the need to make the nudes as erotically desirable as possible for them to be commercially successful.

The roots of Lempicka's successful fusion of the contemporary trends of modernism with late Mannerist inspirations, lie in her artistic training in Paris. Her first teacher in Paris was Maurice Denis, part of the Nabi Symbolists alongside Bonnard, Serusier and Vuillard. The group sustained a curious and progressive mix of influences: the very modern and the very established. For Lempicka, who studied art in Italy and adored the late Renaissance period in particular, Denis may have appealed to her because 'it was leading Symbolist artists, particularly Maurice Denis and his circle, who sustained the avant-garde interest in early Renaissance painting.'⁵ Through the early stages of her career under Denis, she experimented with stylisation, vaguely influenced by

the avant-gardes of the day, overlaid with a strong Italianate flavour. Her adoption of Leger's 'tubism' in hairstyles and material folds of clothes melded with the influence of Rosso Fiorentino. Influenced by the anti-realism of the Fauves her brush strokes were often visible and physical. American historian Laura Claridge writes of Lempicka's association with Denis that: '[he] flattened mass and lifted horizons' as Lempicka would do and that Lempicka's: 'lifelong choice of brilliant pigments echoed Denis's palette.'⁶ It would be more accurate to say that, although mute tones predominate, Lempicka wielded colour to great dramatic artistic affect. This is evident, for example, in *Portrait du Madame Boucard* (1931), with its striking gash of crimson and glowing silvers or in the saturation of the blue scarf in *Portrait du Madame M* (1932).⁷

This use of colour also owes much to her most influential teacher, Andre Lhote, in particular Lhote's manner of placing a spot of localised colour on his canvas to lead the eye to an area of importance. Lempicka believed that whereas Denis was strong in design and pencil drawings, Lhote would be the man to help her develop a wider understanding of painterly techniques. He fervently believed that the new century did not want evening shadows and sentiment, but concrete and steel; it wanted mechanisation.⁸ As her teacher he may have passed on these strongly held views to Lempicka, who often included motifs of new automobiles and early tall buildings in her work. Painted backgrounds of sea-ports, or towering constructions and the newly mechanised world were not unusual in the works of Gleizes and Delauney, but only Lempicka captured the monumentality of the two creations that would become so influential all over the world: cars and sky-scrapers; in 'Adam et Eve' 1931, she set her impossibly tall figures against a background of equally tall towers. The only trees for them are modern, steel and concrete ones. The 'steely-eyed goddess of the auto age' had arrived.⁹

Lhote's greatest legacy to Lempicka was his deep admiration of Ingres: 'We rediscover Ingres and we see that he was the first inventor of abstract form, the apostle of architectural design that, when it needs to, sacrifices passing truth for plastic truth.'¹⁰ Lhote extolled the virtues of ideal clarity and of Ingres' hard and shiny colours. In 1921 a large exhibition of the drawings and paintings of Ingres was held to raise money for war veterans, so it is likely that Lempicka saw the works of Ingres at first-hand. The influence of Ingres' compositions is apparent particularly in her nudes, which reflect Ingres' efforts at realism versus impossible anatomy. This is evident in the awkward hands and broken knuckles found in *Kizette en rose* (1926) and the *Portrait of Mrs Bush* (1929).¹¹ Lempicka's enameled surfaces were perhaps also born from this Ingres-inspiration and can be seen in Lempicka's work after 1925. With Denis she had painted in the manner of the early Renaissance, whilst in the early stages of her relationship with Lhote she worked in the revised style of the Picasso/Braque School, her work still trying to conform to cubist rigours of the day. But after 1925 her work gained a

freedom and a sense of release, as can be seen in *Portrait of the Duchess of La Salle* (1925), *Kizette in Pink* (1926) and *Nana de Herrera* (1928/9). As her cubist compositions weaken, her individuality and character explorations increase. This freedom and confidence came from the sense of achievement she felt as her career advanced. She had shown in six major French art shows, among them the *Salon des Tuilleries*, *Salon d'Automne* and the *Salon des Femmes Peintres*, before having her first solo show in Milan in 1925, organised by Count Emanuel de Castelbarco. She became acquainted with Severini and other Italian artists; she knew and understood their visions of contemporary art movements and held her place in Italian society with as much ease as she did in France. Once Castelbarco had 'launched' her she continued to achieve a phenomenal success. Her work was on the cover of *Harpers Bazaar*, greatly admired by American fashion magazines and the German fashion industry. The *Die Dame* magazine commissioned several paintings from her for reproduction on their covers.

Despite this success Lempicka is largely regarded as a minor painter in the problematic, ill-defined area of Art Deco. Art Deco is dismissed as a decorative style made up of numerous influences, plundered from a diversity of sources. Lempicka's oeuvre has been disregarded because she did not fit neatly into any category. She cannot be classed within the revolutionary avant-garde, Cubism, Orphism, Futurism, nor within design movements such as Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, or Bauhaus. She worked in the heyday of Paris' adoration of frippery and femininity in Paris, a time when the fetish of the female was uppermost in the public's attention. The success of the 1925 *arts decoratifs* exhibition and subsequent fashion mania, exploded the myth that every French heart was thinking only of war and patriotism, supportive of the near-revolutionary anger and rebellion of Dubuffet and Picasso. As Lempicka's life-style fitted these Parisian mores, her work has been considered similarly frothy and insubstantial; its classical and Renaissance influences ignored. Lempicka has been deigned a socialite, a society portraitist, an artist with a disturbing taste for money, not martyrdom.

Art historians appear to have agreed with Peter Plagens, art critic for Newsweek U.S.A., who wrote in 1994 that Lempicka was: 'the end product, not the producer of art that influences.' In one regard he is right: she was the result of contemporary thoughts on Modernism, French Cubism, Italian Futurism, Parisian Orphism et al. Plagens, however, appears to accord no value to the inventiveness of Lempicka's work, for example, the nudes with classical compositions and neo-cubist influence redrawn in her own spectacular style. Similarly he does not regard the modern qualities of her portraits in which her subjects echoed the styles of all that was glamorous and contemporary at the time. Her masterly technique, the sheen of her colours and her invisible brushstrokes, or the challenging characterisations of her subjects, are accorded no value. The constant

influence of Mannerism within her work, seen in her predilection for bulging and gnarled muscles and faces deeply lined with arrogant expressions, indicates she brought her own artistic judgment to bear when selecting from visual sources.

However, the 21st century world loves the bold, the brave and the brash - everything Lempicka's work is. Perhaps Lempicka shares an element of the greatness that allows the work of some artists to remain utterly contemporary long after they were created. Sightings of reproductions of her work are increasing in the UK: at a breakfast bar in Euston Station, at a drinks bar at Milton Keynes, in tea-salons and restaurants across London. A shop in Brighton has been dealing for years in original oil copies of her works and has even started to produce new compositions that conform entirely to Lempickesque themes. Interest in her work is growing. In 2000 the National Portraits Gallery's 'Painting the Century' included her *Auto-Portrait*. In 2002 the Royal Academy held the show: 'Paris, Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968' and Lempicka's *Portrait of the Duchess of La Salle* was included.

This article does not herald Lempicka as one of the 'female Michelangelo's' Nochlin implored us *not* to try and recover from the annals of history.¹² She was, however, an extraordinary artist, both modern and adventurous. Lempicka's style of society portraits and nudes were easily described as valiant, heroic, intrepid or, to use today's vocabulary, rich with modernity, dazzling and glamorous. No-one has described her work more aptly than Alain Blondel who calls her style: 'a highly original, and effective, synthesis of Mannerism and toned down Neo-Cubism ... this style was so well matched to the era that, in retrospect, it can be termed as emblematic of it.'¹³ Lempicka was not a mere dilettante bringing tawdry, licentious glamour to art books, but a serious artist of her time who merits deeper consideration.

¹ Notable texts which give Lempicka due consideration are A. Blondel, *Lempicka, Catalogue Raisonné 1921-1979*, Lausanne 1999; Germain Bazin, *Tamara de Lempicka*, Japan 1980.

² *Auto Portrait* (1929), oil on canvas, 35x27cm, private collection.

³ Mallet-Stevens, like Lempicka, was fast acquiring fame - in 1927 a street in the wealthy 16th-*arrondissement* of Paris was named after him. Just as his architecture provided an aesthetic backdrop and accorded modernity to a photo shoot of Sonia Delauney's fashion models, working from the rue Mechain apartment did the same for Lempicka in her role of society portraitist. The design, which would have easily delighted Modernists, was an elegant showcase for her works.

⁴ *Les Deux Amies* (1930), 73x38cm, private collection; *Myrto* (1929), stolen work; *L'esclave* (1929), 100x65cm, private collection.

⁵ J. Lee, *Derain*, Oxford 1990, 11.

⁶ L. Claridge, *Tamara de Lempicka, A Life of Deco and Decadence*, Great Britain 2000, 74.

⁷ *Portrait du Mme Boucard* (1931), 135x75cm, private collection; *Portrait du Mme M* (1932), 100x65cm, private collection.

⁸ Jakovsky, *André Lhote*, #13.

⁹ Unknown art writer, *New York Times*, 1978.

¹⁰ "On redécouvre Ingres et on reconnaît en lui le premier inventeur de formes abstraites, l'apôtre du dessin architectural qui, lorsqu'il le faut, sacrifie la vérité épisodique à la vérité plastique." Jakovsky, *André Lhote*, #20.

¹¹ *Kizette en Rose* (1926), 116x73cm, Musée de Beaux-Arts de Nantes; *Portrait of Mrs Bush* (1929), 122x66cm, private collection.

¹² Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971) reproduced in T. B. Hess & E. C. Baker (eds), *Art & Sexual Politics*, London and New York, 1973.

¹³ A. Blondel, *Lempicka, Catalogue Raisonné 1921-1979*, 487.