

## GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM FROM THE “OTHER” SIDE: PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER AND KÄTHE KOLLWITZ

Among the explanations for the turn to primitive “roots,” we have noted that it is possible to see primitivism in art as a form of anti-modernism. In this context, anti-modernism is not simply referring to modern developments in art. Was anti-modernism a form of opposition to industrialism, capitalism and urbanization?

Anti-modernism in Germany (and elsewhere) was fed by a nationalist current. As we noted in the



examples of the Russian artists, the turn to the primitive was part of a search for national roots. The urge to find the key to a national identity leads to folk culture, which is seen as indigenous or something which emerges spontaneously, and is therefore able to say something unique and national about a country. The role of “realism” (as the antithesis of the modern) in this artistic argument is to support the belief that the image in the painting (an image of the folk, the people, or the peasants) is true to how they looked. The same motive operated in Russian realism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and may have contributed to the more exaggeratedly idealized movements of socialist realism in both Russia and Germany in the 1920s and 30s.

*Fig. 1. P. Modersohn-Becker, Self-Portrait, 1898*

Paula Modersohn-Becker (for an early impressionist-influenced self-portrait, see Figure 1) came out of a realist tradition associated with a group of artists who worked in Worpswede, a region in Germany. Because she did not adhere to the “objective” realism which the other Worpswede artists were using, her peasant subject matter was not implicitly representative of the “volk.” Nor was her style in many cases readily meaningful to the German viewer because of its eventual combination of impressionist and Gauguin-esque influences. Adding to the complexity of her work is the fact that her transformation of

the female figure was not consistent with the type of transformation or meaning which the female assumed in symbolist paintings. In other words, Modersohn-Becker's nudes, which could be understood as symbols of fertility, could not be understood as symbols of sexuality. And her peasants did not seem to represent a generalized understanding of the "people." To this, we need to add one more complication. Unlike other artists who turned to ideas about the primitive, Modersohn-Becker did not go to Asia or Africa; nor is it at all clear that Modersohn-Becker was trying to position herself as a primitive in the way that Gauguin was. She has an ambiguous relationship not only to primitivism but to expressionism, the movement with which she is often associated. In the end, we have to question on some level the assertion that she is part of the cult of the primitive, and if she is, to ask what her intentions were. Does she relate to the recourse to primitivism as a form of "going-away" from the urban and apocalyptic realities of pre-WWI Germany?<sup>1</sup>

In the sense that her images of mothers and children do not conform to the *Virgin and Child* icon of western art, she does seem to "go away," and in the sense that her paintings do not approach the ideal caress of motherhood endowed by Mary Cassatt on her images of mothers and children, they also depart from western tradition. But perhaps the primary claim to a form of primitivism in her art comes from the fact that her images of mothers are images of nudes – two traditions of painting the female which are not generally united. Women representing nude women and women representing themselves as artists were both departures from the usual subject matter of women artists, and they raise immediate questions for both the artist and the viewer. If "woman" signified something to be looked at,



whether sexual object or nature, and man signified the looker, the intellect, the creator, then how does a woman create an image of woman? Or more particularly, of herself? Given that Modersohn-Becker's short life consisted of a dialectic between fulfilling social expectations of women and asserting her gifts as an artist, we almost have to accept that her choice of subject was an extended answer to the question of how a female artist should BE a female artist.

Becker's serious training as an artist began in Worpswede, in 1897, where she studied with Fritz Mackensen (see Figure 2) in part because his emphasis on the human figure appealed to her (In Figure 3 we see a painting which shares Mackensen's subject matter but already begins to depart from his more impressionist style. Her self-portrait of 1898, figure 1, is closer to his work in terms of style).

Fig. 2: F. Mackensen, *Girl at the Garden Gate*, 1897

Fig. 3: Modersohn-Becker, *Elsbeth*, 1902

Although Worpswede seemed to function as a home base for her, Becker also studied in Paris, making at least three trips there. She always returned to the Worpswede environment and its peasant population for her subjects, most of whom were women. Because Becker's relationship to the feminist movement was ambiguous, it's not clear that her choice of women as subjects was intended as an ideological statement. Nonetheless, the subject of the female nude by a female artist has to be understood as a different statement than that made when a male artist paints the female nude.



Becker worked in two distinct styles or modes: her Worpswede, sketchier and more impressionist mode, and a style which suggests greater affinities with the synthetist style of Gauguin. For examples in this direction, we find, among many others, her *Old Woman with Poppies*, 1906, with its peasant subject, and her *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace*, also of 1906 (Figures 4 and 5). Note, however, that we cannot identify a pure Gauguin influence in either of these. The peasant woman shares his interest in saturated color and heavy outlining, and the self-portrait might seem to relate to his interest in the exotic Tahitian nude. But this, of course, is the artist herself and not an exotic Tahitian woman.



Fig. 4: *Old Woman with Poppies*, 1906

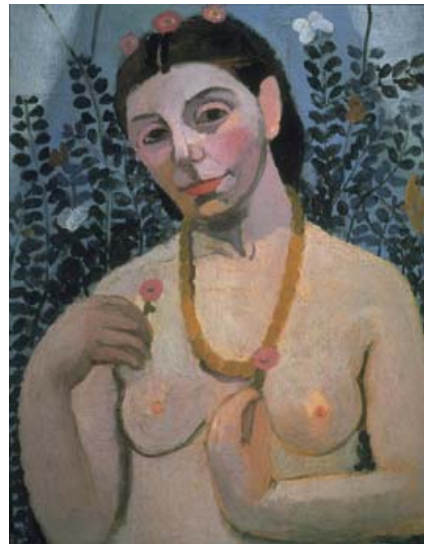


Fig. 5: *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace*

Yet, we might note the suggestion of an exotic aura to the self-portrait and a Cézanne-esque treatment of the face, even as we question the intention of the artist in depicting herself this way. Finally, we should note that in both paintings, there is a degree of volume and shading which is quite unlike

Gauguin in his synthetist paintings. Becker did keep diaries about her goals in painting, so we know from her own words that one of her goals as a painter was that of achieving a “great simplicity of form,” a “coarser” style and a style in which “personal feeling is the main thing.” Her representations of children, peasants, and mothers exude an inner preoccupation but one which often eludes words, and perhaps deliberately so, as the artist tried to reach a timeless essence. Or perhaps it was less the search for a timeless essence and more the realization that the conflicts of being a female artist in Germany at that time and in her life situation precluded the image of the artist as mother if that image is seen as existing in real social space.

Becker’s painting of herself on her sixth wedding anniversary ( Figure 6), and named for that day, was ironically painted at a time when she was separated from her husband. Her separation was voluntarily chosen in order to pursue her dream of being an artist, and the image of pregnancy, rather than referring presciently to her future pregnancy, may have been intended metaphorically as an image of the artist giving birth to herself as an independent artist. It is fraught with contradictions: a female artist painting herself nude and pregnant suggests that the mirror image, the image which generally gives coherence to the person looking in the mirror, was not an entirely coherent image.



*Fig. 6: Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Day 1906*

She wasn’t pregnant and although she wanted to bear children, certainly the desire to be a mother was a conflicted desire for a woman who wanted to be an artist and wanted to end her marriage. We might also note that this image makes a slight return to the brushier, more impressionistic style associated with her Worpswede paintings, making her body less substantial than that of the bodies of women in many of her other paintings. But should we see that insubstantiality as a spiritual representation, the maternal virgin body in which inside and outside fluidly interact? Such that Becker, by being pregnant in

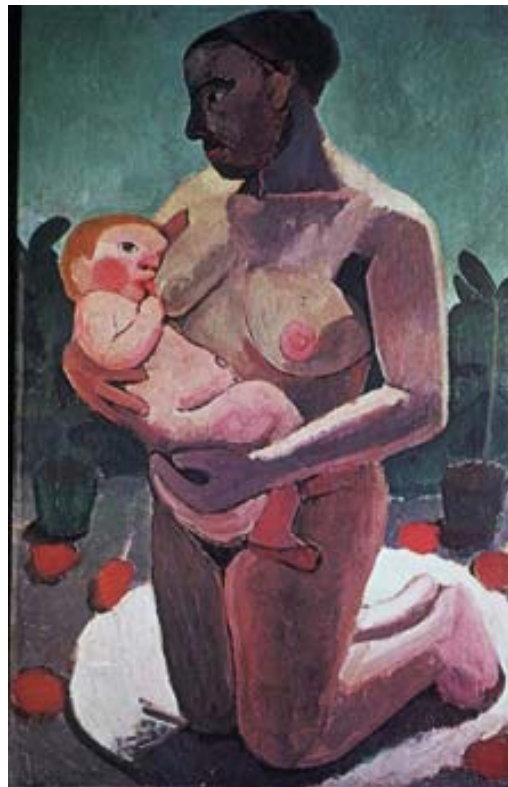
an immaculate state, is herself and in this world more than any woman who is carrying another body insider her own would be?

If Becker has any relationship to primitivism, I would argue that it is not a primitivism which translates as “going-away.” My reading of her is that in her case, it is the opposite—a “going to” in order to find solace in the image of the earth mother which becomes metaphorically the female creatrix. In some respects, it is Paula Modersohn-Becker, of all artists, who may be the progenitor of Frida Kahlo’s images of herself being nursed by an indigenous nursing woman and showing herself as part of the scorched earth which feeds Mexico. (See Figures 7 and 8 for two paintings which might be antecedents for Kahlo’s work.)

In the end, we might say that like Gauguin and Cézanne, Modersohn-Becker chose a path that let her establish art as something “found” and “created” – found in the image of the mother, created in her reformulation of the meaning of the icon and in her reconstruction of the style she found in Gauguin. The contradictions of Gauguin’s primitivism do inhabit her work as well, although not in the same way. Maybe the point is that “female primitivism” is not the same as “male primitivism.” And likewise, perhaps “female expressionism” is not the same as that produced by male artists.<sup>2</sup>



*Fig. 7: Reclining Mother and Child, 1906*



*Fig. 8: Kneeling Mother and Child, 1907*

Käthe Kollwitz also made women her predominant subject, although the women in her engravings, drawings, and sculpture are remarkably different from Becker's. One notable study of the role of the mother in the work of both Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker suggests that three attitudes dominated Kollwitz's work: the woman who is protecting another life, generally that of a child; a woman who is reaching out or embracing someone although not necessarily for the purpose of protection; and a woman who is shielding herself.<sup>3</sup> Yet sometimes this female figure is the figure of death itself. Kollwitz ultimately gives us the mother as monster, as threat, and as protectress, sometimes united in one figure. How should we understand the central female figure in *The Survivors* of 1923? (Figure 9)



Fig. 9: Kollwitz, *The Survivors*, 1923

Kollwitz, as did Modersohn-Becker, used the metaphor of mothering as a metaphor of creating, but her vision is one which is darkened by World War I and the loss of her son. All the same, although a biographical explanation seems to exist for her thematic focus, it doesn't explain why this conflicted maternal image is so exceedingly dominant in her body of her work and why it existed before Peter's death. Unlike Modersohn-Becker, Kollwitz does not resolve the expressionist ambiguity in a manner which is hopeful. In this respect, she is truer to the expressionist tendency to offer contradictory and self-cancelling answers. And in this respect, the mothers in her work coalesce into a single image: a mother who nurtures even as she withdraws or denies. Perhaps that is the only kind of mother who could exist when at a time when mothers were sending their children to war.

In *Death and a Woman* (1910; see figure 10), the three figures are inextricably joined in a womb-like space. Death grabs the mother while the child clings desperately to her. The figures almost cannot be separated. The faint leg of the child and the clinging pose suggest that the child will not survive if separated. The pose of the mother and death had been used by Kollwitz in an earlier etching called *Love Scene* but here it is reversed. When the two are seen together, the image of death becomes the mirror image of love. Even without the *Love Scene*, we have the sensuality of the mother/child connection mirrored in the convulsive grasp of death. We also have a darker version of the earlier 1903

work, *Woman with a Dead Child* (figure 11) where the mother has unbearably become the figure of Death, in this case not clutching a woman who struggles to live but a child who has already died. The question we might ask is whether we diminish the work if we recognize the possibility of a particularly female metaphor with the child as a sign of the artist's creative powers such that the 1910 etching is one which says that the woman is struggling toward the child as a means of asserting or embracing her creative powers, that the etching is about the association of the maternal state with the creativity of the artist and that without it, the artist is dead. Yet, as tempting as such an interpretation is, we should not lose sight of the fact that Kollwitz was a political woman, she embraced art as a means of supporting her political positions, and by 1933, although her life was not immediately endangered, she was no longer allowed to teach art in Germany. Within two more years, she was not allowed to exhibit her work which was then removed from museums and galleries.



Fig. 10: *Death and a Woman*, 1910



Fig. 11: *Woman with a Dead Child*, 1903

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1. I refer here to the writing of Gill Perry, "Primitivism and the 'Modern'," who talks about the idea of primitivism as a form of "going away." In Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 9 - 45.
  2. For a more complete study of the work of Modersohn-Becker, see Gillian Perry, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).
  3. Rosemary Betterton, "Mother figures: the maternal nude in the work of Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker," in Griselda Pollock, ed., *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts* (London: Routledge, 1996), 159-179.