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Skyscrapers, Silks and Sirens: The High Society of Tamara de Lempicka

If art is a mirror to life, then the decorative, hyper-realist paintings of Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980) embody her passion for glamour and success, with her works from the 1920s and '30s reminiscent of perfectly constructed film stills from the epitome of the movie age.

Tamara de Lempicka, *The Blue Hour*, 1931, oil on canvas, 55 x 38 cm, private collection.

<http://www.delempicka.org/artwork/1930-1933.html>

One of the mythic anecdotes which has structured the account of the life of Tamara de Lempicka, is her apparent frustration, aged twelve, of having her portrait done, from which the experience and the final work were not to her taste. Born Tamara Gorska, from a wealthy Russian-Polish family, she lived in St Petersburg prior to the tumult of the 1917 Russian revolution. From this privileged background, Tamara Gorska decided to challenge the painter's portrait of her, by instead proving that she could paint a portrait of her sister. From this experience, reminiscent of a scene from a film, the suggestion of her later success as a star artist is sown.

Indeed, the parallel of Tamara's life with the movie age in which her most well-known work was created is fantastically apparent: she captivated a presence similar to a Hollywood film star, with her life and her art perfectly constructed to convey a glamorous spectacle of high

society and decadent living, whilst simultaneously exposing these as a hollow façade. Her work of the 1920s and '30s has been caught in a Modernist crossfire of criticism on the one hand for being a shallow, superficial realisation of the decorative appeal of Art Deco; yet on the other, a masterly representation of neo-Cubist and Classical form capturing the aesthetic of the Jazz Age.

The comparison of the life of de Lempicka to a film is evident by her fluctuating fortunes. From her time in St Petersburg during WW1, de Lempicka grew accustomed to a life of luxury at odds with the harsh reality of the lives of a majority of the Russian people, and as such her identification with the aristocracy, and bourgeois values positioned her world against the socialist defeat of the Tsars. De Lempicka's marriage in 1916 to the lawyer Tadeusz Lempicki, was later threatened after the Bolshevik rebellion in October 1917, when Lempicki was captured and imprisoned by the Secret Police; in this trauma, de Lempicka had to secure her husband's release. This turmoil of political change provoked the couple's emigration, firstly to Copenhagen, and then to Paris. In this reversal of fortune, de Lempicka found herself as the sole provider for her husband and daughter in post-war Paris, and determined by her lowered position to accumulate her previous privilege, decided to earn her living by painting.

Tamara de Lempicka, *Seated Woman, Cubist*, 1922, crayon on paper, 18.5 x 13 cm, Collection of Anna Gardner Luce. <http://www.delempicka.org/artwork/1918-1922.html>

In Paris, de Lempicka sought art instruction from Maurice Denis (1870-1943) at the Académie Ranson, and latterly from André Lhote (1885-1962). Maurice Denis had been a member of the Nabis group, which had practiced a style consisting of a preference for Impressionism, but with a focus on strong design. Denis instructed de Lempicka to concentrate on the solid construction of form and colour, in combination with an emphasis on contouring. De Lempicka's strong contrasts of light and shade, and her precise, exact style clearly reflect Denis's ideas, with the artist herself claiming:

‘A painting must be clear and clean. I was the first woman to paint clearly and cleanly-and that was the reason for my success.’

This doctrine of clear form in de Lempicka's work can be further explained by her influence from Lhote, who practiced a form of conservative Cubism, which combined traditional, academic subject matter with the innovations in Cubist form exemplified by Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and Georges Braque. Thus, in uniting the radical formal experiments of the Cubists with conventional genres, such as the nude and the portrait, de Lempicka produced a synthesis which found popular approval amongst her bourgeois clientele of 1920s Paris, of whose tastes she ultimately aimed her pure, clear style towards. Further stylistic comparisons have been noted of the neo-Classicism of Ingres (1780-1867) upon de Lempicka's work, which reflected the wider rejuvenation of Classicism in the 1920s. Another influence can also be seen of the master Bronzino (1503-1572) in de Lempicka's portraits, which share a similar crystalized coldness in the depiction of the human form. Henceforth, de Lempicka's use of neo-Classicism enabled her to cultivate her patrons to commission impressive portraits, for example the pharmaceutical millionaire Pierre Boucard, of whom de Lempicka painted, as well as his wife, and daughter Arlette. In uniting her style with a clever sense of commercialism, de Lempicka refused to be the stereotype of the starving artist.

Tamara de Lempicka, *Portrait of Arlette Boucard*, 1928, oil on canvas, 70 x 130 cm, private collection.

<http://www.delempicka.org/artwork/1927-1929.html>

De Lempicka created an ideal of modernity aligned with a timeless, classicised view of the power of the human form. The sharpness and clarity of her forms signalled her position as the Art Deco painter, with her glamour of aesthetics representing and shaping the style of the elite world she depicted, and the life of which she strove to emulate. De Lempicka's desire to display her success, as well as to assimilate the life of her wealthy clients, was manifested in her apartment and studio in Paris on the Rue Méchain, which was designed by the film designer and architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886-1945) to resemble an Art Deco vision of perfect form in glass and chrome, and where de Lempicka hosted parties for an array of distinguished names. From within the cultural milieu of Jazz Age Paris, de Lempicka's paintings repeatedly address the theme of the portrait of the distinguished, cultivated individual at the centre of modern life and advancement, portrayed by the contrast of motifs of skyscrapers and metropolises of the backgrounds, with the crystalline, flowing forms of her sitters' dresses and suits; a comparison in painted textures and shapes, definitive of the decadence and industrialisation that post-war capitalism created, and which would implode in the 1929 Wall Street Crash.

Tamara de Lempicka, *Portrait of Mrs Allan Bott*, 1930, oil on canvas, 162 x 97 cm, private collection.

<http://www.delempicka.org/artwork/1930-1933.html>

One painting of de Lempicka's oeuvre which exemplifies the collision of machine aesthetic and 1920s decadence is the iconic *Autoportrait (Tamara in the Green Bugatti)*, commissioned for the fashion magazine *Die Dame*. In this self-portrait, de Lempicka combines femininity with modernity, in a closely-cropped composition reminiscent of a film star's publicity shot. The painting suggests the contradiction that modernity could be a liberating force for woman's identity, whilst also demonstrating the emptiness to this construction of identity based upon consumerism, portrayed by the isolation of the car and de Lempicka in abstracted, ambiguous space.

Tamara de Lempicka, *Autoportrait (Tamara in the Green Bugatti)*, 1929, oil on wood panel, 35 x 27 cm, private collection. <http://www.delempicka.org/artwork/1927-1929.html>

De Lempicka's emigration in 1939 to America due to the rising threat of Nazi Germany, with her second husband, the Baron Raoul Kuffner, witnessed a change in her art from the power of her Art Deco style of the '20s and '30s, to include experiments with religious themes and latterly, Abstract Expressionism. De Lempicka continued to have major international exhibitions throughout the rest of her career, including the 1972 Galerie du Luxembourg retrospective in Paris, which displayed her work from the 1925-35 era, suggesting the prominence that this body of work has in the popular conception of de Lempicka's identity as an artist of the hedonism and decline of the 'Roaring Twenties' and its repercussions. De Lempicka can be seen as the prototype of the modern artist, for realising the need to create a public persona in order to promote her work, and for shaping her style to the demands of her clients. Her portraits of the 1920s and '30s convey a romanticised, perfected view of a high society, and in this will always be captivating for their promise of a cultural nostalgia.

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