



Amazons in the Drawing Room: The Art of Romaine Brooks

Whitney Chadwick

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Amazons in the Drawing Room presents a comprehensive and definitive analysis of the life and art of Romaine Brooks, reproducing for the first time in color thirty-four of the forty nudes and portraits she painted, as well as thirty-seven automatic pen-and-ink drawings. The first female painter since Artemisia Gentileschi in the seventeenth century to portray an ideal of heroic femininity, Romaine Brooks (1874-1970), like her contemporary Gwen John, shaped an image of the androgynous New Woman for the twentieth century.

An American born in Rome, Brooks spent most of her life in Paris. After a brief but passionate romance with the poet Gabriel D'Annunzio, with whom she maintained a lifelong friendship, she turned to relationships with women and to art to express her emerging self. For many years the companion of Natalie Barney, whom the artist depicted as *L'Amazone* in one of her most famous portraits, Brooks belonged to the international lesbian community that included Compton and Faith MacKenzie, Renée Vivien, Radclyffe Hall (who immortalized Brooks as the barely fictionalized American painter Venetia Ford in *The Forge*), and Una, Lady Troubridge.

The milieu Brooks chose was the privileged, often eccentric demi-monde of wealthy aristocrats and expatriate writers, artists, intellectuals, and performers who gathered in Rome, London, Capri, Paris, and Florence. The social circles she traveled in included Somerset Maugham, Norman Douglas, Charles Freer, Count Robert de Montesquiou, Jean Cocteau, Augustus John, Carl Van Vechten, and Ida Rubenstein, several of whom were subjects for Brooks's portraits.

Amazons in the Drawing Room, published in conjunction with a major traveling exhibition of Brooks's work--the first since 1971--opening at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in June 2000, provides a fresh context to view Brooks's haunting and compelling art. Whitney Chadwick's overview of Brooks's life and artistic focus and Joe Luchesi's examination of Brooks's portraits and photographs of Russian dancer Ida Rubenstein bring into sharp focus the complex artistic, literary, and political influences that shaped Brooks's sensibility and approach to portraiture.

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