



1898 - 1980

TAMARA DE LEMPICKA

The Japan Times

online

Friday, April 9, 2010

The blond ambition of Tamara de Lempicka

Unconventional and scandalous, Lempicka's glamorous lifestyle brought her as much fame as her paintings did

By MARIUS GOMBRICH, Special to The Japan Times

I'm not sure what Lady Gaga — who arrives in Japan shortly — has in her art collection, but given time (and the millions produced by her phenomenal success) I think it is highly likely that a lady of her strong aesthetic drives will get round to emulating her model Madonna by acquiring paintings by Tamara de Lempicka, the Art Deco diva whose works have cropped up in several of Madonna's music videos, most notably "Vogue."

Now the subject of an impressive major retrospective at Shibuya's Bunkamura Museum of Art, Lempicka epitomized the cool glamour of the 1920s and '30s, a time when forces as disparate as feminism and fascism worked their way into the weft of the period's dominant Art Deco aesthetic.

Emphasizing geometric stylization, exulting in industrial processes and striving for awe-inspiring grandeur, Art Deco had an inhuman, fascistic element — something apparent in the set designs for Fritz Lang's movie "Metropolis" and the great skyscrapers that characterized the period. But the aesthetic also had a strong sense of luxury and sensuality — mediated through a frosty insouciance — that expressed the new power enjoyed by women of a certain class in the decades following the slaughter of millions of young men in the trench warfare of World War I.



1898 - 1980

TAMARA DE LEMPICKA

Influenced by artistic movements like Purism, which was itself an attempt to reintroduce elements of Neoclassicism into modern art, and her Cubist art teacher, Andre Lhote, Lempicka developed a style that perfectly exemplified the Art Deco aesthetic on canvas.

Her portraits employ streamlined, geometric shapes and clean, metallic surfaces to depict cool, sophisticated subjects with a detached aura of superiority. "Portrait of a Young Girl in a Green Dress" (1930) and "Portrait of Tadeusz de Lempicki" (1928) are beautiful works, but with their fascinating interplay of compositional effects, angular lines, and shading — as well as their skillful depiction of stylishly fluted or folded fabrics — they tend to engage the eye rather than the heart.

In other words, the sex is very good, but rather empty; one almost feels inclined to reach for a cigarette!

This leads us to perhaps another reason why Lempicka's art resonates strongly with the "blondly ambitious." Just as Madonna and Lady Gaga are much more than mere musicians, Lempicka in her heyday was more than a mere brush pusher. With a high public profile and a then scandalous lifestyle — she was an open bisexual with many lovers — Lempicka was very much the Lady Gaga of her day: a stand out celebrity who fascinated and repelled in equal measure.

Lempicka's persona was no doubt influenced by her background — an uprooted aristocrat from a broken home. Born into a prominent Polish family in 1898, her parents divorced when she was 14, and she went to St. Petersburg to live with an aunt. It was here she met and married her first husband Tadeusz de Lempicki, a playboy attracted by her dowry. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, however, the young couple found themselves part of the flood of upper-class emigres to the West, and they settled in Paris where Lempicka soon turned her hand to painting.

Visitors can get a taste of the milieu in which she circulated from the faces in her paintings. "The Russian Dancer" (1924), a somber painting of a sad-eyed "ethnic dancer" of the kind who could be found in Parisian cafes of the 1920s, shows one of the other options open to unlucky emigres. Perhaps this is why this painting remained unfinished — the subject being too painful for the still insecure Lempicka, burdened with a work-shy husband and a newborn daughter.



1898 - 1980

TAMARA DE LEMPICKA

With the success of her first major show in 1925 and commissions from fashion magazines, plus successful networking within bohemian and noble circles, Lempicka was able to establish herself as a successful artist and resume the lifestyle of privilege she had been born into. In the years that followed, this increasingly became a life of luxury and decadence. Under their cool veneers, "Portrait of Marjorie Ferry" (1932), a well-known burlesque dancer, and "Portrait of Suzy Solidor" (1933) are works infused with lesbian lust, while other lovers also peer out from the walls of the Bunkamura.

Lempicka's desire, however, burned with a flame that shed more light than warmth. Her chief concern was status. After Tadeusz divorced her in 1928 — the very year she painted his portrait — she soon found another nobleman, Baron Raoul Kuffner, to give her the requisite sense of importance without impinging too much on her lifestyle.

In addition to her works, the exhibition encourages us to take a close look at the artist herself. The many photos and a video reveal a woman of limited physical attractiveness, who — by a sheer effort of will, styling and a lot of fur and jewelry — was able to pass herself off as a charming Garbo-esque figure. This aspect of image and reinvention is just one more factor that makes Tamara de Lempicka the ideal artist for other mousy brunettes driven by blond ambition.

"Tamara de Lempicka's Seduction of Elegance" at Bunkamura ran from March 6th till May 9th , 2010 www.bunkamura.co.jp