

PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER

OCTOBER 8, 2021 – FEBRUARY 6, 2022

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

INTRODUCTION

“To see how far one can go without worrying about public opinion.”

The artist once wrote this about Rodin, but in truth she was describing herself as well.

Paula Modersohn-Becker participated in just two exhibitions during her lifetime and sold a maximum of four paintings to friends. Only after her early death in 1907 did success set in, and the "myth" around the artist, which continues to this day, developed. Her work still stirs and surprises; it is direct, rigorous, and timelessly modern. The artist worked alternately in the Worpswede artists' colony near Bremen and the then capital of art, Paris. Despite her brief life, she left behind a diverse and extensive oeuvre of some 734 paintings and about 1500 works on paper that clearly reflect the influences of both places. Based on 116 works and divided into thematic rooms, the exhibition aims to provide a comprehensive overview of this pioneer of modernism. In doing so, the question arises again and again, as to what about Modersohn-Becker's work fascinates, but also provokes audiences to this day.

SELF-PORTRAITS

Paula Modersohn-Becker painted or drew a total of around 60 self-portraits throughout all creative phases between 1893 until shortly before her death in 1907. Like many other artists who received little public recognition, for Modersohn-Becker the self-portrait was a continual act of self-questioning and reflection on her own role as an artist. Early on, Modersohn-Becker framed the images close to the viewer, often with a frontal composition, creating a high degree of directness and immediacy. Most of her self-portraits were created from 1906, now principally as nudes, when she was alone in Paris and finding her way as an independent artist there. If we look at historical photographs of Modersohn-Becker, there is for the most part little resemblance between the artist and her self-portraits. Only the nude photographs, probably taken by her sister Herma, show a deliberate self-dramatization similar to some of the paintings, with stylized hand postures, flowers, fruits and amber necklace. In these last works Modersohn-Becker found timeless, symbolic representations that go far beyond any representational likeness.

PORTRAITS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Modersohn-Becker portrayed a number of people from her personal circle, but she did so without a commission and usually with no prospect of being able to sell the portraits. She painted these individuals from an inner impulse and – as usual – without taking into account the conventions or expectations of her environment. The works were mostly small-format and not particularly representative, as in the paintings of the sleeping Otto Modersohn or her friend, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The latter was apparently dissatisfied with his portrait, as he never spoke of it. The artist often attempted to depict inner traits and characteristics, as with Rilke's open mouth, or the pensive and distant demeanor of the sculptor Clara Rilke-Westhoff. The portraits of Lee Hoetger, wife of the sculptor Bernhard Hoetger, whom Modersohn-Becker met in Paris in 1906 and who became one of her first important supporters, were particularly experimental in color and composition.

IMAGES OF CHILDREN

"Paula hates the conventional [...] Hands like spoons, noses like bulbs, mouths like wounds, expression like cretins ... and then children." (Otto Modersohn's journal, October 1, 1902)

The depiction of children and young people, principally girls, makes up a large part of Modersohn-Becker's oeuvre, encompassing about 400 paintings. Most of the works were created in Worpswede, where Modersohn-Becker sought out models in her immediate surroundings. The subject was popular among many painters of the period, but was consistently intended for a middle-class audience, and usually presented a highly idealized form of childhood in the countryside: The hard physical labor of housework and farming, from which only very young children were exempt, was masked by an emphasis on the sitter's innocence and closeness to nature. The almost universal renunciation of "cuteness" seems particularly radical in this group of Modersohn-Becker's works. The same unmistakable mixture of proximity and distance, of naturalism and symbolism that characterizes most of the artist's figure paintings applies to the pictures of children as a whole.

MOTHER AND CHILD

Modersohn-Becker painted a series of seated and reclining mothers with children, in particular during her last stay in Paris in 1906/7, which count among her central major works. The subject had already preoccupied the artist in early drawings and in Worpswede, where she chose local models but also cited postures and attributes of various depictions of the Madonna from art history. The late seated or kneeling mothers with children were often combined with symbols such as flowers and fruits and demonstrate an iconic statuesqueness. In terms of color and composition, influences can be read here from the Fauves, from Paul Gauguin, as well as from the masks from the Louvre. Something entirely new emerged with the three large-format versions of the *Reclining Mother with Child*, two of which were destroyed during the Second World War. The closed outline seems sculptural, the posture intimate, a kind of landscape of bodies emerges, close up and at the same time supra-individual and distant. In this abstracted and monumental composition, the artist saw embodied not only an individual mother-child relationship, but the – for her – universal idea of "Mother Earth" and a pantheistic worldview.

LIFE DRAWING

Despite her short life and working period, Modersohn-Becker left behind an enormous body of around 1500 works on paper. She drew copiously in all phases, for instance as a student of Fritz Mackensen in Worpswede the two life-size nudes in charcoal. During her four stays in Paris, she also took regular classes in nude drawing at the Colarossi and Julian academies, which were open to women. There, the female models were completely nude, even in the men's classes, whereas the male models usually posed before the artists in loincloths. Modersohn-Becker, who sympathized with the *Lebensreform* movement and was wholly accepting of the naked body, often drew unclothed men as well as women, despite external strictures. She chose unusual poses and even in her early work exhibited her independent, idiosyncratic view and her departure from the academic conventions of her contemporaries.

PARIS DRAWINGS

Paula Modersohn-Becker stayed in Paris around four times and spent a period of about two years there in total between 1900 and 1907. She strolled across the bridges over the Seine, along the quays, and keenly observed the arches of bridges, the streets, groups of people, and the architecture of the city. The lively street life made a great impression on Modersohn-Becker. From 1905, she began to record her impressions in precise charcoal drawings. These often

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

feature strong contours, various perspectives, summary pictorial compositions, body rotations and views that testify to the fleeting nature of the moment. Modersohn-Becker also visited the studios of the Nabis, observing similar subjects in the work of Maurice Denis or Édouard Vuillard and finding confirmation of her own working method. Comparatively few of these drawings, which number about forty works, were made in Paris itself. Nevertheless, her Parisian cityscapes were an attempt to capture the tectonics of the city and demonstrate her feeling for pictorial composition.

PEASANTS IN WORPSWEDE

"She had a fine sense for everything strange and original." (Otto Modersohn)

When the Worpswede painters' colony, consisting of Fritz Mackensen, Otto Modersohn, Hans am Ende, Carl Vinnen, and Heinrich Vogeler, settled in the small town on the edge of the former "Teufelsmoor" (Devil's Moor) from around 1889, they wanted to depict the "original" life of the rural population and the expressive landscape in the tradition of the French Barbizon School. In doing so, the artists encountered a counter-world of peat cutters, farmers, and day laborers – people whose lives were characterized by hard physical labor and a constant struggle for survival. As an escape from the pressures of modern industrialized life and the hustle and bustle of the big city, the painters idealized and romanticized rural life, largely ignoring the "realism" of daily life in the village. Unlike her teacher Fritz Mackensen, Modersohn-Becker usually left out not only the rural surroundings but also the respective activities, when she looked for her models among the often elderly farmers, peasants, and women from the poorhouse. Although the artist could not pay her sitters much, she treated them with particular respect. Painted between 1903 and 1907, the highly varied portraits of the "Armenhäuslerin" always show a particular person, called "Mother Schröder" or in the local dialect the "Dreebeen", as she always moved around with a walking stick as her "third leg". The series clearly shows Modersohn-Becker's working method, her various painterly experiments, but also her tendency to transform the everyday and the actual into something supra-temporal and universal.

LANDSCAPE

"I don't think one should think so much about nature when painting, at least not with regard to the conception of the picture." (Diary, October 1, 1902)

Modersohn-Becker's courage to create unusual, sometimes austere and incongruous compositions is evident in her reduced and abstracted conception of landscape. The paths running to the horizon, the dead-straight canals cutting through the former moor, and the high sky were the perfect setting for her artistic vision. Modersohn-Becker always sought to summarize and simplify, coupled with a low-contrast palette that intensifies to almost monochrome surfaces of color, especially in the nocturnal moonscapes. Like Otto Modersohn, the artist was fascinated by Japanese scroll paintings and, especially for her paintings of birch trees, chose tall narrow formats with close-cropped motifs, creating tension. Only rarely did Modersohn-Becker paint cityscapes and houses; here, too, the pictorial structure and overall composition were more important to her than likeness.

CLOSE-UPS

Modersohn-Becker often visually brought the subjects of her paintings into extremely close view and also cut motifs. This technique strongly directs the eye and creates a great immediacy in the experience of the works. Some compositions even seem like details from a larger painting, such as the cat cradled in a girl's arm or the two hands holding a flower. Yet these are not details, but rather works in their own right. This form of the "close-up" makes one think of the photographic

"zoom," despite the fact that photography around 1900 was not yet that technically advanced. Modersohn-Becker's approach in these examples must be considered a peculiarity in the artist's oeuvre, one with no parallel in the work of her contemporaries at that time.

STILL LIFES

Static, built, monumental – many of the characteristics that apply to Modersohn-Becker's figure paintings are also characteristic of her seventy or so still lifes, about fifty of which were created between 1905 and 1907. Already in Worpswede, the artist collected "rare glasses, plates and cups, necklaces and rings, finely colored fabrics and blankets for still lifes, original picture frames, mirrors, candlesticks, books in old bindings ..." as Otto Modersohn recounted. The painter had a great sense of peasant craftsmanship and for the structure and texture of materials and surfaces in general. The genre served as a favorite field of experimentation in the French avant-garde. A parallel is repeatedly drawn between Modersohn-Becker and Cézanne, but the still lifes are distinguished not least by Modersohn-Becker's dense, material painting style. After her death, these works in particular were purchased and exhibited by private collectors and museums early on.