

**WITH A COMPREHENSIVE RETROSPECTIVE, THE SCHIRN SHEDS LIGHT ON HOW PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER ANTICIPATED KEY TRENDS OF MODERNISM**

## **PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER**

**OCTOBER 8, 2021 – FEBRUARY 6, 2022**

**PRESS PREVIEW: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2021, 11:00 AM**

No other woman artist of the classical modern period in Germany has achieved such legendary status in the public eye as Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907). In her short lifetime, she created a comprehensive and multifaceted oeuvre that became a projection surface for over 100 years and continues to fascinate to this day. From October 8, 2021 to February 6, 2022, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is providing an overview of the complete works of Paula Modersohn-Becker, demonstrating in a comprehensive retrospective how resolutely she defied the social and artistic conventions of her time and anticipated key trends of modernism. The exhibition in Frankfurt brings together 116 of her paintings and drawings from all creative phases, including major works that are now considered icons of art history, such as *Self-Portrait on the Sixth Wedding Day* (1906). The exhibition presents a current view of the oeuvre of this early representative of the avant-garde. In the presentation, which is structured according to striking series and individual motifs, the focus is also on Modersohn-Becker's extraordinary painting style and artistic methods, which have contributed to the diverse reception of her work.

From 1898 onwards, Paula Modersohn-Becker lived in the artists' colony in Worpswede, interrupted by four longer stays in Paris. Her extensive oeuvre of some 734 paintings and roughly 1,500 works on paper clearly reflects the influence of these two contrasting places. Despite the lack of female role models and while married to the Worpswede-based landscape painter Otto Modersohn, she pursued her independent artistic development with great discipline. Her works were created in often solitary confrontation with older art history and current artistic trends, which she studied in the French metropolis. In large series of works, she circled around a recurring repertoire of pictorial motifs, with a special focus on portraits and self-portraits; further central work complexes include portraits of children, depictions of mothers and their children, peasants, nudes, and landscapes from Worpswede and Paris, as well as still lifes. In the process, she found her way to timeless, universally resonant images and independent representations. Her works are rigorous and at times radically different from those of her contemporaries. The artist's own high standards are contrasted by her complete lack of external success during her own lifetime. Only after her death was her work celebrated as a discovery, collected, and exhibited, and often appropriated due to its ambivalence.

The exhibition "Paula Modersohn-Becker" is generously supported by the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne and the Dr. Marschner Foundation.

Philipp Demandt, Director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, explains: "Paula Modersohn-Becker continues to fascinate to this day. While some appreciate her as a popular painter of portraits of children, mothers, and farmers, as well of northern German landscapes, others celebrate her as an exceptional modernist artist and place her alongside Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso. It is precisely this polyphonic reception that prompted the Schirn to invite our audience to take a new look at her work in its entirety in Frankfurt am Main."

Ingrid Pfeiffer, curator of the exhibition, emphasizes: "Paul Modersohn-Becker's astonishing oeuvre, which was created in just under ten years of her short life, seems like a burning lens directed at the formal and thematic debates of her time, especially at the art of a female painter in an extremely difficult era for women. Time and again, one is surprised by her artistic independence and her courage to paint motifs that were practically impossible to exhibit, because they would have overwhelmed her environment."

Peter Gatzemeier, Chairman of the Dr. Marschner Foundation, states: "Although Paula Modersohn-Becker is well known among the general public, her work is full of unusual aspects. In a magnificent presentation, the Schirn sheds light on and elucidates these. The Dr. Marschner Foundation is pleased to once again support a very ambitious project of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. We have supported this exhibition highlight in particular to show that we continue to stand behind the cultural scene of our city, even in these difficult times."

## THEMES AND WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

A particular focus of Paula Modersohn-Becker's artistic work is the depiction of the human being, the portrait. In particular, her self-portraits are one of her most important fields of artistic experimentation and form the starting point of the exhibition at the Schirn. On view is a selection of this group of works, which is highly diverse—both painterly and stylistically—thus reflecting her entire development as an artist and serving as an ongoing act of artistic self-assurance. Already manifest in the early *Self-Portrait* from c. 1898 is a central artistic device: the close-up view. The pictorial field is completely filled by bringing the artist's face up close. During her second stay in Paris in 1903, Modersohn-Becker found in the frontality of Roman-Egyptian mummy portraits in the Louvre a form of generalization which, in the combination of direct proximity and timeless elements, corresponded to her artistic aspirations and which she took up in, among others, *Self-Portrait with White Pearl Necklace* (1906), *Self-Portrait with Red Floral Wreath and Necklace* (1906/07) and *Self-Portrait with Lemon* (1906/07). Modersohn-Becker's work was also influenced by the impasto painting style of the antique models, which were executed in the technique of encaustic applied with a palette knife. From 1898 and increasingly from 1902 onwards, she preferred a particularly matte tempera technique and occasionally worked with the brush handle on the surface. More than half of her self-portraits were painted in 1906/07, when she was in Paris, separated from Otto Modersohn and seeking her own path as an artist. Seven show the painter half or completely undressed. In this context, *Self-Portrait on the Sixth Wedding Day* (1906), the first known nude self-portrait by a female artist and not exhibitable at the time of its creation, takes on a special role. This complex work provides numerous allusions to art historical precursors, which it reinterprets into an extremely daring self-portrait around the turn of the twentieth century. Nude and with implied pregnancy, Modersohn-Becker presents herself confidently and femininely—doubly potent as both an artist and as a woman.

In addition to the self-portraits, the exhibition also presents portraits of individuals from the artist's personal environment in both Worpswede and Paris, including Otto Modersohn, Rainer Maria Rilke (one of the few and important supporters of the artist during her own lifetime), the sculptress Clara Rilke-Westhoff, and her friend Lee Hoetger.

Many of Paula Modersohn-Becker's figure paintings are characterized by an unmistakable mixture of closeness and distance, of naturalism and symbolism, with which they are elevated to the level of the timeless and universal. This mode of representation also characterizes her unique portraits of children, as well as her mother-and-child motifs. With altogether more than 400 works depicting mostly peasant children, this is the largest group within Modersohn-Becker's oeuvre. The selection of children's portraits in the Schirn pays testimony to the great intensity with which the artist devoted herself to this subject, which was popular in the late nineteenth century, especially among the bourgeois public. Nevertheless, Paula Modersohn-Becker completely refrained from the trivializing depiction that was common at the time. Her children appear as autonomous individuals, alien and removed, present and intimate in close-up details. In the last years of her life and work, they become timeless symbols and, cast with attributes such as fruits and flowers, appear in fantastic pictorial spaces as representatives of a comprehensive mysticism of nature. This stylization reached a peak in *Nude Girl with Flower Vases* (1906/07), which was influenced by Paul Gauguin's Tahiti motifs.

# SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

With her depictions of mothers and their children, Modersohn-Becker dealt with a motif that had hardly been systematically worked on before her and developed numerous variants. Realistic elaborations were later followed by simplification and monumentalization. Against the background of the “Lebensreform” (Life Reform) movement and nudism, which the artist also practiced, the naked body, as in the self-portraits, became the bearer of a pantheistic and matriarchal world of ideas, which, as in *Mother with Child in Her Arms, Half-length Nude II* (autumn 1906), is combined with an iconic statuesqueness.

Modersohn-Becker drew throughout all phases of her creative work and left behind an extensive body of drawings. The in some cases sketchy Parisian cityscapes with typical motifs such as the bridges over the Seine, Notre-Dame cathedral, and groups of people bear witness to the routine she acquired through years of practice. In Paris, she regularly took lessons in nude drawing at the Académie Colarossi and the Académie Julian, which were open to women. Working against academic conventions and restrictions for women artists, she frequently drew unclothed men and women, chose unusual poses, and demonstrated her idiosyncratic way of viewing the world even in her early works. As early as 1898 in Worpswede, she created the two life-size nudes in charcoal: *Standing Female Nude in Profile, Turned to the Right* and *Standing Male Nude, Turned to the Left*.

A special feature of Modersohn-Becker’s work are the portraits of villagers in Worpswede, among whom the artist often chose elderly peasants as models, in addition to children and mothers. Unlike the other artists of the Worpswede painters’ colony—founded in 1889 and consisting of Fritz Mackensen, Otto Modersohn, Hans am Ende, Carl Vinnen, and Heinrich Vogeler—who favored genre-like depictions, Modersohn-Becker allowed the rural surroundings and activities to recede into the background in favor of a timeless, symbolic representation. In doing so, she lent her sitters a high degree of dignity without either concealing or glorifying their age, coarseness, and poverty. Between 1903 and 1907, she created a series of mostly large-format pictures depicting women from the poorhouse, which are among her major monumental works. Time and again, she resorted to the same subjects, in particular “Mother Schröder,” as in *Old Pauper* (c. 1905) and *Woman from the Poorhouse* (1906). Heavy, static, timeless, and with huge hands, she appears like a goddess from a distant pre-Christian culture. As a special loan from the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Schirn is also showing the major work *Old Peasant Woman* (1907), which is remarkable for its unusual color composition and was shown five years after her death in 1912 in the first major avant-garde exhibition in Germany alongside works by Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin.

In addition to the human figure, Modersohn-Becker also devoted herself to landscapes and still life motifs. Her reduced and abstracted conception of the landscape reveals her artistic concept, as well as her courage to be “unobliging” and “severe.” Despite the scathing criticism of the conservative painter Arthur Fitger who reviewed her first exhibition in 1899 at the Kunsthalle Bremen, where she presented a number of landscapes, Modersohn-Becker continued undeterred in her unique vision and painting style. During the first years of her marriage, she still shared preferences with Otto Modersohn, such as the narrow cropping of birch trees in vertical format, reminiscent of Japanese scroll paintings. However, in the rigorous simplification and the low-contrast color palette, which, especially in the nocturnal moonscapes, as in *Moon over Landscape* (1900), increases to almost monochrome color surfaces, she went far beyond contemporary representations. Thus, unlike Otto Modersohn and Fritz Overbeck in Worpswede and Walter Leistikow in Berlin, she dispensed with all details, internal structures, and light effects and, through the tempera technique, achieved a dull colorfulness and matte surfaces.

# SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

With her still lifes, most of which were painted between 1905 and 1907, Modersohn-Becker turned to a favorite avant-garde experimental field of Gustave Courbet, Odilon Redon, Paul Cézanne, and Henri Matisse, which was taken up in Worpswede only sporadically by Heinrich Vogeler. Like Cézanne, the artist chose a repetitive repertoire of objects. But her statically monumental compositions, such as *Still Life with Pumpkin* (c. 1905), are clearly distinguished by her dense material painting style. As neutral, innocuous motifs, they are among the initially most collected and exhibited works after her premature death.

Paula Modersohn-Becker developed an unusual method, unprecedented in the contemporary art of the time, through extreme close-up and the cropping of her pictorial motifs. The exhibition brings together works such as *Hand with Flower Bouquet* (c. 1902), *Cat in a Child's Arm* (c. 1903), and *Infant, Breastfeeding* (c. 1904), in which this close-up view is almost reminiscent of a photographic “zoom”—although photography was not yet that technically advanced around 1900—thus developing an effect of immediacy and narrative potential.

**CATALOG PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER**, edited by Ingrid Pfeiffer, with a preface by Philipp Demandt and essays by Simone Ewald, Anna Havemann, Inge Herold, Ingrid Pfeiffer, Karin Schick, Rainer Stamm, and Wolfgang Werner. Separate German and English editions, each with 220 pages and 180 illustrations, 24 x 29 cm, hardcover, Hirmer Verlag, Munich, ISBN 978-3-7774-3722-4 (German, ISBN 978-3-7774-3723-1 (English), 35 € (SCHIRN), 45 € (bookstores).

**VENUE** SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main  
**DURATION** October 8, 2021 – February 6, 2022 **INFORMATION** [www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de) **E-MAIL** [welcome@schirn.de](mailto:welcome@schirn.de) **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49.69.29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION** 12 €, reduced 10 €; free entrance for children under 8 years **ONLINE TICKETS** Time-slot tickets for the exhibition are available for purchase in the online shop at [www.schirn.de/tickets](http://www.schirn.de/tickets) **SAFETY AND SANITARY MEASURES** In order to make visiting the exhibition safe during the corona pandemic, comprehensive protection and hygiene measures have been developed in coordination with the relevant authorities. Further information at [www.schirn.de/en/visit](http://www.schirn.de/en/visit) **MEDIA PARTNER** Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, VGF **CULTURE PARTNER** HR2 **CURATOR** Ingrid Pfeiffer **CURATORIAL ASSISTANT** Anna Huber **SUPPORTED BY** Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne and the Dr. Marschner Foundation

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