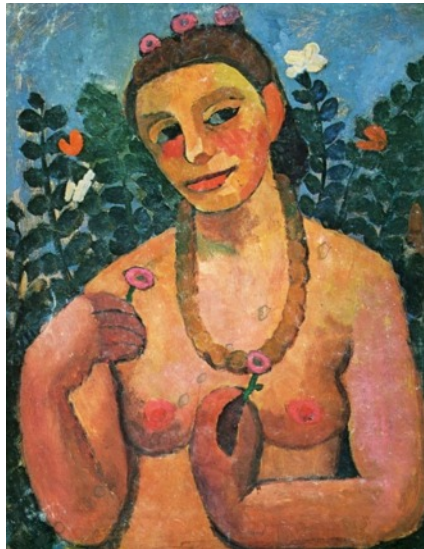


## Why Secondary? Women Artists and the Expressionist Movement

### *Background Notes*

Monica Bohm-Duchen - 7 December 2016



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self portrait semi-nude with amber necklace and flowers II*, 1906

“Women’s art accompanies men’s art. It is the secondary melodic part in the orchestra, takes up the themes from the primary melody, modifies them, gives them new, individual colouring, but it resounds and lives by virtue of the other.”

Hans Hildebrandt, *Die Frau als Künstlerin*  
(*The Woman as Artist*), 1928



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### **And some other quotations to ponder...**

“What we women of the nineteenth century demand is that we be freely given all the good gifts of life... so that we, as well as the men... can climb the heights of art and science, that we too can enjoy maximum individual development and perfect personal freedom.” [Anon. (Mrs. Ernest Hart?) in journal *Kunst für Alle*, 1894-5]

“One life is far too little for all the things I feel within myself, and I invent other lives within and outside myself for them. A whirling crowd of invented beings surrounds me and prevents me from seeing reality. Colour bites at my heart.” [Marianne von Werefkin]

“Paula is certainly gifted; I am astonished at her progress. But if only this were joined by more humane virtues. It must be the most difficult thing for a woman to be highly developed spiritually and to be intelligent, and still be completely feminine.” [Otto Modersohn (husband of Paula Modersohn-Becker), Journal entry, 1902]

Käthe Kollwitz, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Gabriele Münter, Marianne von Werefkin – these names have become more or less accepted into the canon of modern western art and accounts of the early twentieth century Expressionist movement in particular. But who, even today, has heard of names such as Helene Schjerfbeck, Sigrid Hjertén, Vera Nilsson, Jeanne Mammen, Jacoba van Heemskerck and Erma Bossi? This illustrated seminar will examine the achievements of all these women artists, both in their own right and in relation to their better-known male contemporaries – as well as the complex yet all too familiar reasons for their neglect.

### **Artists' Biographies**

#### **Erma Bossi, also known as Erma Barrera-Bossi (1882 or 1885-1952 or 1960)**

Born Erminia Bosich in Pola near Trieste, she moved to Munich in around 1905, where she probably trained at the Damenakademie des Künstlerinnenvereins (Ladies' Academy Affiliated with the Ladies' Art Association). In 1909 she joined the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (NKVM). During this period of her career, Bossi was close friends with Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter. By 1910 she was living in Paris, travelling to Europe and returning regularly to Munich and Murnau. Invitations to show work at the annual Salons des Indépendants and Salons d'Automne in Paris as well as the NKVM exhibitions in Munich brought her into contact with the international avant-garde. Bossi spent the First World War in Milan and Paris. In the early 1920s she showed work at the New Munich Secession exhibition; in 1926 and 1929 she participated in the Novecento exhibitions in Milan and subsequently exhibited at the 1930 and 1935 Venice Biennales. She died in Milan in either 1952 or 1960 (many of her biographical details remain unverified).

## Jacoba van Heemskerck (1876-1923)

Trained initially at the Royal Academy in The Hague. Back in The Hague after a formative period in Paris, where she trained under symbolist painter Eugène Carrière, she became affiliated with Piet Mondrian, and was to spend the rest of her life working in The Hague and in Domburg, where she and her life-time companion Marie Tak van Poortvliet built a house and had extensive contact with the Dutch avant-garde. Like Mondrian, Heemskerck was inspired by the anthroposophical teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Her work was received enthusiastically especially in German Expressionist circles and was shown at Galerie Der Sturm in Berlin every year from 1913 until her death. Van Heemskerck was almost forgotten until, in 1982, her reputation was revived by an exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. Her work can be found in the archives of Museum *Boijmans van Beuningen*, Rotterdam; the Archives of the United Workshops for Mosaic and Stained Glass Puhl & Wagner, Gottfried Heinersdorff; and MoMA in New York.



Erma Bossi, *Dancer*, 1909



Sigrid Hjerten, *Studio Interior*, 1916

## Sigrid Hjertén (1885-1945)

Born in 1885 in Sundsvall, a town in the north of Sweden. She originally studied textile art in Stockholm but in 1910 went to Paris to study painting with Henri Matisse. She married fellow Swedish painter Isaac Grünewald in 1911 and lived in Paris during the 1920s and early 1930s. In the late 1920s she started to suffer from mental illness. She returned to Stockholm in 1932, but collapsed and was hospitalized with symptoms of schizophrenia. In 1936 she finally had a breakthrough with a solo show at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts in Stockholm and started to gain recognition as a painter. Ironically, she stopped painting in the same year. In 1938 she and Isaac got divorced and her mental state deteriorated. In 1948 she was lobotomised and died from complications of the operation.

### **Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945)**

Kollwitz initially trained as a painter, but by 1890 had turned to printmaking as her preferred vehicle for social comment. Married to a physician working in a proletarian district of Berlin, she felt a deep admiration for the working classes and dedicated her art to the poor and oppressed, especially women and children. Devastated by the death of her younger son, Peter, in combat in 1914, she embraced pacifism and concentrated increasingly on themes of sacrifice and mourning. She produced a total of 275 prints, nearly all black and white, focussing on etching until about 1911, then turning increasingly to lithography, capitalizing on its directness and immediacy, especially for posters supporting post-war humanitarian causes. Inspired by Ernst Barlach, in 1920 she adopted the woodcut technique. In 1919 she became the first woman to be elected to Prussian Academy of Arts; from 1933 the Nazis prohibited her from exhibiting but nevertheless appropriated her images for their own propaganda. During World War II her Berlin apartment was destroyed, along with much of her work. Kollwitz died two weeks before the German surrender.

### **Jeanne Mammen (1890-1976)**

Raised in Paris, Mammen studied art in Paris, Brussels, and Rome from 1906 until 1911. As a German citizen, she was forced to flee France with her family at the outbreak of World War I and lost all her possessions. Impoverished, she settled in Berlin in 1916, where she eventually earned a living making illustrations for fashion magazines and posters for Universum-Film AG (UFA). After 1924 she frequently published drawings and watercolours in major satirical periodicals such as *Ulk* and *Simplicissimus*. Enjoying growing commercial and critical success, in 1930 she had first solo exhibition at Galerie Gurlitt in Berlin. At publisher Wolfgang Gurlitt's behest, she made lithographs illustrating a book of erotic Sapphic poetry, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, in 1931–32, which was banned by the Nazis. She remained in Germany during the Third Reich, but lived in a state of "inner emigration", refusing to exhibit or publish, and turning increasingly to painting in Cubist and Expressionist styles out of solidarity with the artists whom the Nazis defamed as "degenerate".

### **Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907)**

Born in Dresden in 1876, she moved to Bremen with her family in 1888. After completing her studies at a teacher training college, she studied at the Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen (Union of Berlin Female Artists). In 1898 she joined the artists' colony at Worpswede, a village north of Bremen, to continue her education under painter Fritz Mackensen. Here she also met Heinrich Vogeler, Clara Westhoff, Rainer Maria Rilke (who became a lifelong friend) and Otto Modersohn, whom she married in

1901. Travelled to Paris in 1899 and studied at the Académie Colarossi, the first of four extended visits, in the course of which she got to know, among others, Rodin, Cézanne, Gauguin, Douanier Rousseau, Picasso and Matisse. After one such stay, between February 1906 and March 1907, she returned to Worpswede, where aged thirty-one, she died of an embolism in November 1907, following the birth of her daughter. A number of her paintings were included in the "Degenerate Art" exhibition organised by the Nazis in Munich in 1937. The Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in Bremen, opened in 1927, was the first museum in the world to be devoted to the work of a female painter.

### **Gabriele Münter (1877-1962)**

Münter was born in Berlin to upper-middle-class Protestant parents; she attended Munich's progressive new Phalanx School, where she studied sculpture and woodcut techniques. In 1902, Münter began a twelve-year professional and personal relationship with the Phalanx School's director, Wassily Kandinsky. They travelled together and in 1908 discovered the Bavarian village of Murnau, where Münter later bought a house. Münter helped establish the Munich-based avant-garde group Neue Künstlervereinigung (New Artists' Association) in 1909, and in 1911 she, Kandinsky, and several other artists left that group to form Der Blaue Reiter (the Blue Rider). During World War I, Münter and Kandinsky went to Switzerland, but due to his Russian nationality, Kandinsky was considered an enemy alien, and returned to Moscow in 1914. Shortly thereafter, Kandinsky obtained a long-sought divorce from his first wife—but wed another woman instead of Münter. After a period of relative artistic inactivity during the war, Münter returned to Murnau, where she led a secluded life and started painting again seriously in the late 1920s.

### **Vera Nilsson (1888-1979)**

Vera Nilsson was born and grew up in Jönköping, a town in southern Sweden. She trained as a drawing teacher at a technical school in Stockholm between 1906-09, and in 1910 studied with Carl Wilhelmson at Valand College of Art in Gothenburg. In 1910 she went to France, where she remained until 1914, studying between 1911-12 under the Cubist painter Henri Le Fauconnier at the Académie de la Palette in Paris, as well as travelling to Brittany. She spent the war years in Copenhagen, where her first exhibition took place in 1917; her work was first shown in Sweden in 1918. She lived in Spain in 1919-20; gave birth to a daughter in 1922; and in the early 1920s worked both in Paris and in Öland (an island off the southeast coast of Sweden). Many more trips to both Europe and Africa followed. Examples of Nilsson's work can be found at the National Museum, Stockholm, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, and Gothenburg Museum of Art. In 1954, she was made a member of the Swedish Royal Academy of Fine Arts, the first woman to be thus honoured since 1889.



Gabriele Münter, *Portrait of Marianne von Werefkin*, 1909



Käthe Kollwitz, *The Widow I*, 1923

### **Helene Schjerfbeck (1862-1946)**

Born in Helsinki to Swedish parents, she showed talent at an early age, and by the time she was eleven was enrolled at the Finnish Art Society Drawing School; she continued her education at a private academy run by Adolf von Becker. In 1879, at the age of seventeen, Schjerfbeck won third prize in a competition organised by the Finnish Art Society, which enabled her to move to France, studying at the Académie Colarossi in Paris, and spending time in Meudon and Concarneau, Brittany. In 1887 she travelled to St. Ives in Cornwall. In the 1890s Schjerfbeck started teaching regularly in Finland at the Art Society Drawing School in Helsinki, but in 1902 illness forced her to resign and move to Hyvinkää. In 1913 Schjerfbeck met the art-dealer, Gösta Stenman, who thereafter did much to promote her work. In 1917 Stenman organised her first solo exhibition; and in that year Einar Reuter (alias H. Ahtela) published the first monograph on her. As the years passed, Schjerfbeck travelled less, spending most of her later years in Ekenäs, before ill-health forced her to move first into a nursing home, then to a sanatorium. In 1944 she moved into the Saltsjöbaden spa hotel in Sweden, where she lived until her death.

## **Marianne von Werefkin (1860-1938)**

Born in Russia into an ancient aristocratic family, she became a student of the famous realist painter, Ilya Repin in 1886, when her family moved to St. Petersburg, having already attracted a great deal of attention with her portraits, painted in an atmospheric naturalist style. She started working with Alexej Jawlensky in 1891, and in 1896, the two moved to Munich, where Werefkin gave up painting for almost ten years in order to devote herself to nurturing Jawlensky's talents, although she also put much energy into studies of painterly technique and discussions of art theory. Their son was born in 1902. It was only in 1906/7 that Werefkin returned to painting. The summer of 1908 was spent working with Jawlensky and their friends in Murnau. Previously involved with the formation of the Neue Künstlervereinigung München, she began exhibiting with the Blauer Reiter in 1913. She moved to Switzerland with Jawlensky in 1914. Another move in 1919 took the couple to Ascona where she joined the artist group Großer Bär. She and Jawlensky separated two years later. Marianne von Werefkin died in Ascona on 6 February 1938.

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Jacoba van Heemskerck, *Painting 124*, c. 1920

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