

= Romaine Brooks =

Romaine Brooks , born Beatrice Romaine Goddard (May 1 , 1874 ? December 7 , 1970) , was an American painter who worked mostly in Paris and Capri . She specialized in portraiture and used a subdued palette dominated by the color gray . Brooks ignored contemporary artistic trends such as Cubism and Fauvism , drawing instead on the Symbolist and Aesthetic movements of the 19th century , especially the works of James McNeill Whistler . Her subjects ranged from anonymous models to titled aristocrats . She is best known for her images of women in androgynous or masculine dress , including her self @-@ portrait of 1923 , which is her most widely reproduced work .

Brooks had an unhappy childhood after her father abandoned the family ; her mother was emotionally abusive and her brother mentally ill . By her own account , her childhood cast a shadow over her whole life . She spent several years in Italy and France as a poor art student , then inherited a fortune upon her mother 's death in 1902 . Wealth gave her the freedom to choose her own subjects . She often painted people close to her , such as the Italian writer and politician Gabriele D 'Annunzio , the Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein , and her partner of more than 50 years , the writer Natalie Barney .

Although she lived until 1970 , she painted very little after 1925 . She made a series of line drawings during the early 1930s , using an " unpremeditated " technique resembling automatic drawing , then virtually abandoned art , completing only a single portrait after World War II .

= = Life and career = =

= = = Early life and education = = =

Beatrice Romaine Goddard was born in Rome , Italy , the youngest of three children of wealthy Americans Ella Waterman Goddard and Major Henry Goddard ; her maternal grandfather was the multi @-@ millionaire Isaac S. Waterman , Jr . Her parents divorced when she was small , and her father abandoned the family . Beatrice was raised by her mother , who was unstable and abused her emotionally while doting on her mentally ill brother , St. Mar. They lived mostly in New York , where from an early age Goddard had to tend to St. Mar because he attacked anyone else who came near him . According to her memoir , when she was seven , her mother fostered her to a poor family living in a New York City tenement , then disappeared and stopped making the agreed @-@ upon payments . The family continued to care for Beatrice , although they sank further into poverty . She did not tell them where her grandfather lived for fear of being returned to her mother .

After the foster family located her grandfather on their own , Beatrice was sent to study at St. Mary 's Hall (now : Doane Academy) an Episcopal boarding school for several years . Later she attended a convent school , in between times spent with her mother , who moved around Europe constantly , although the stress of travel made St. Mar harder to control . In adulthood Goddard Brooks referred to herself as having been a " child @-@ martyr " .

In 1893 at the age of 19 , Goddard left her family and went to Paris . She extracted a meager allowance from her mother , took voice lessons , and for a time sang in a cabaret , then travelled to Rome to study art . As the only female student in her life class , as it was unusual for women to work from nude models , Goddard encountered what would now be called sexual harassment . When a fellow student left a book open on her stool with pornographic passages underlined , she picked it up and hit him in the face with it , and was not bothered again .

In the summer of 1899 Goddard rented a studio in the poorest part of the island of Capri , which was a very inexpensive place to live . She studied art briefly in Paris , but her funds were insufficient . After several months of near starvation , she suffered a physical breakdown . In 1901 her brother St. Mar died . She returned home to help care for her grief @-@ stricken mother , who died less than a year later from complications of advanced diabetes . She was 28 when she and her sister inherited the large estate their grandfather had left , which made them independently wealthy .

= = Marriage and family = =

On 13 June 1903 Goddard married her friend John Ellingham Brooks , an unsuccessful pianist and translator who was in deep financial difficulty . He was homosexual , and the bisexual Goddard never revealed exactly why she married him . Her biographer Meryle Secrest suggests that she was motivated by concern for him and a desire for companionship , rather than the need for a marriage of convenience . They quarrelled almost immediately when she cut her hair and ordered men 's clothes for a planned walking tour of England ; he refused to be seen in public with her dressed that way . Chafing at his desire for outward propriety , she left him after only a year and moved to London . He frightened her because he kept making references to " our " money . Brooks spent the rest of his life on Capri (where he died in 1929) and , for a while , lived there with E. F. Benson , author of the Mapp and Lucia novels .

= = Career = =

In 1904 Romaine Brooks , the name she preferred , became dissatisfied with her work , and in particular with the bright color schemes that she had used in her early paintings . She travelled to St. Ives on the Cornish coast , rented a small studio , and began learning to create finer gradations of gray . When a group of local artists asked her to give an informal show of her work , she displayed only some pieces of cardboard on which she had dabbed her experiments with gray paint . From then on , nearly all her paintings were dominated by gray , white , and black , sometimes with ochre or umber . She had found the palette she would use her whole career .

= = = First exhibition = = =

Brooks left St. Ives and moved to Paris . As painters such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse were reinventing art in the Bohemian districts of Montparnasse and Montmartre , Brooks took an apartment in the fashionable 16th arrondissement , mingled in elite social circles , and painted portraits of wealthy and titled women . This included her current lover , the Princess de Polignac .

In 1910 she had her first solo show at the prestigious Gallery Durand @-@ Ruel , displaying thirteen paintings , almost all of women or young girls . Some were portraits ; others showed anonymous models in interior scenes or against monochromatic backgrounds , often with pensive or withdrawn expressions . The paintings were generally naturalistic , showing an attentive eye for the details of Belle Époque fashion , with parasols , veils , and elaborate bonnets on display .

Brooks included two nude studies in this first exhibition ? a provocative choice for a woman artist in 1910 . In one , *The Red Jacket* , a young woman stands in front of a large folding screen , wearing only a small open jacket , with her hands behind her back . She is so frail , and her downcast face looks so forlorn that one contemporary reviewer referred to her as a consumptive ; Brooks described her simply as " a poor girl who was cold " . The other , *White Azaleas* , is a more sexually charged nude study of a woman reclining on a couch in Brooks 's studio . Contemporary reviews compared it to Francisco de Goya 's *La maja desnuda* and Édouard Manet 's *Olympia* . Unlike the women in those paintings , the subject of *White Azaleas* looks away from the viewer , with a distinctly forbidding expression .

The exhibition established Brooks 's reputation as an artist . Reviews were effusive , and the poet Robert de Montesquiou wrote an appreciation calling her " the thief of souls . " The restrained , almost monochromatic decor of her home also attracted attention ; she was often asked to give advice on interior design , and sometimes did , though she did not relish the role of decorator . She became more and more disillusioned with Parisian high society , finding the conversation dull and feeling that people were whispering about her . Despite her artistic success , she described herself as a *lapidé* ? literally , a victim of stoning .

= = = Gabriele D 'Annunzio and Ida Rubinstein = = =

In 1909 Brooks met Gabriele D 'Annunzio , an Italian writer and politician who had come to France to escape his debts . She saw him as a martyred artist , another lapidé ; he wrote poems based on her works and called her " the most profound and wise orchestrator of grays in modern painting " . They spent the summer of 1910 in a villa on the coast of France , in a romantic interlude that was disrupted when D 'Annunzio 's jealous ex @-@ mistress arrived in town . Their friendship remained strong throughout D 'Annunzio 's life .

In 1911 Brooks became romantically involved with Ida Rubinstein , an actress and dancer formerly with Serge Diaghilev 's Ballets Russes . D 'Annunzio had an obsessive but unrequited attraction to her as well . Rubinstein was deeply in love with Brooks ; she wanted to buy a farm in the country where they could live alone together ? a mode of life in which Brooks had no interest . Although they broke up in 1914 , Brooks painted Rubinstein more often than any other subject ; for Brooks , Rubinstein 's " fragile and androgynous beauty " represented an aesthetic ideal . The earliest of these paintings are a series of allegorical nudes . In *The Crossing* (also exhibited as *The Dead Woman*) , Rubinstein appears as a corpse , stretched on a white bed or bier against a black void ; in *Spring* , she strews flowers on the ground in a grassy meadow . When Rubinstein starred in D 'Annunzio 's play *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* , Brooks painted her as Saint Sebastian ? tied to a post , being shot with an arrow by a masked dwarf standing on a table . The dwarf is thought to represent D 'Annunzio .

At the beginning of World War I , Brooks painted *The Cross of France* , a symbolic image of France at war , showing a Red Cross nurse looking off to the side with a resolute expression while Ypres burns in the distance behind her . Although it is not a portrait of Ida Rubinstein , it does resemble her , and she may have modelled for it . It was exhibited along with a poem by D 'Annunzio calling for courage and resolution in wartime , and later reproduced in a booklet sold to raise funds for the Red Cross . After the war , Brooks received the cross of the Legion of Honor for her fundraising efforts .

The political imagery of *The Cross of France* has been compared to Eugène Delacroix 's painting *Liberty Leading the People* , in which a woman personifying Liberty holds up a flag against the background of a burning city . Delacroix 's Liberty leads a group of Parisians who have taken up arms , while the subject of *The Cross of France* stands alone . Brooks used this romantic image of a figure in heroic isolation several times ; a 1912 portrait of D 'Annunzio , a 1914 self @-@ portrait , and a portrait of Rubinstein completed in 1917 all show their subjects wrapped in dark cloaks and isolated against seascapes .

During the war , D 'Annunzio became a national hero as leader of a fighter squadron . During the Paris Peace Conference , he led a group of nationalist irregulars who seized and held the city of Fiume to prevent Italy from ceding it to Croatia . He briefly set up a government , the Italian Regency of Carnaro , with himself as Duce . Although he was never part of Benito Mussolini 's government , he is regarded as a precursor of Fascism . The details of Brooks 's own politics are unclear , but she was evidently sympathetic to Italian Fascism . The romantic individualism of her paintings may have been influenced by D 'Annunzio 's ideologies ? an idea that has troubled some viewers otherwise attracted to the imagery of Brooks 's portraits .

Brooks painted Rubinstein one last time in *The Weeping Venus* (1916 ? 17) , a nude based on a photograph taken during their relationship . According to her unpublished memoir , the painting represents " the passing away of familiar gods " as a result of World War I. She said she tried to repaint Venus 's features many times , but Rubinstein 's face somehow kept returning : " It fixes itself in the mind . "

= = = Natalie Barney and Left Bank portraits = = =

The longest and most important relationship of Brooks 's life was with Natalie Clifford Barney , whom she met around the start of World War I. Barney was an American @-@ born writer who hosted a literary salon on Paris 's Left Bank . She was avowedly nonmonogamous ; when they met she was already in a close long @-@ term relationship with Duchess Elisabeth de Clermont @-@ Tonnerre , which would last until the Duchess ' death in 1954 . She had many other relationships of

varying length and devotion as well .

Brooks tolerated Barney 's casual affairs well enough to tease her about them , and had a few of her own over the years , but could become jealous when a new love became serious . Usually she simply left town , but at one point she gave Barney an ultimatum to choose between her and Dolly Wilde ? relenting once Barney had given in . At the same time , while Brooks was devoted to Barney , she did not want to live with her full @-@ time , as she disliked Paris , disdained Barney 's friends , and hated the constant socializing on which Barney thrived . She felt most fully herself when alone . To accommodate Brooks 's need for solitude , they built a summer home consisting of two separate wings joined by a dining room , which they called Villa Trait d 'Union , the " hyphenated villa " . Brooks spent part of each year in Italy or travelling elsewhere in Europe , away from Barney . The relationship lasted for more than 50 years .

Brooks 's portrait of Barney has a softer look than her other paintings of the 1920s . Barney sits , swathed in a fur coat , in the house at 20 Rue Jacob where she lived and held her salon . In the window behind her , the courtyard is dusted with snow . Brooks often included animals or models of animals in her compositions to represent the personalities of her sitters ; she painted Barney with a small sculpture of a horse , alluding to the love of riding that had led Remy de Gourmont to nickname her " the Amazon " . The paper on which the horse stands may be one of Barney 's manuscripts .

From 1920 to 1924 , most of Brooks 's subjects were of women who were in Barney 's social circle or who visited her salon . Truman Capote , who toured Brooks 's studio in the late 1940s , may have been exaggerating when he called it " the all @-@ time ultimate gallery of all the famous dykes from 1880 to 1935 or thereabouts " , but she did paint Elisabeth de Clermont @-@ Tonnerre ; Barney 's lover Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux ; her own lover Renata Borgatti ; Una , Lady Troubridge , the partner of Radclyffe Hall ; and the artist Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein) . Another of Brooks 's lovers was the wildly eccentric Marchesa Luisa Casati , whose portrait she painted while on Capri in 1920 .

Several of these paintings depict women who had adopted some aspects of male dress . While in 1903 Brooks had shocked her husband by cutting her hair short and ordering a suit of men 's clothes from a tailor , by the mid @-@ 1920s bobbed and cropped hairstyles were in and wearing tailored jackets ? usually with a skirt ? was a recognized fashion , discussed in magazines as the " severely masculine " look . Women like Gluck , Troubridge , and Brooks used variations of the masculine mode , not to pass as men , but as a signal ? a way of making their sexuality visible to others . At the time these paintings were made , however , it was a code that only a select few knew how to read . To a mainstream audience , the women in these paintings probably just looked fashionable .

Gluck , an English artist whom Brooks painted around 1923 , was noted in the contemporary press as much for her style of dress as for her art . She pushed the masculine style further than most by wearing trousers on all occasions , which was not considered acceptable in the 1920s . Articles about her presented her cross @-@ dressing as an artistic eccentricity or as a sign that she was ultra @-@ modern . Brooks 's portrait shows Gluck in a starched white shirt , a silk tie , and a long black belted coat that she designed and had made by a " mad dressmaker " ; her right hand , at her waist , holds a man 's hat . Brooks painted these masculine accoutrements with the same attention she had once given to the parasols and ostrich plumes of La Belle Époque . But while many of her early paintings show sad and withdrawn figures " consumed by petticoats , veiled hats and other period trappings of femininity " , Gluck is self @-@ possessed and quietly intense ? an artist who insists on being taken seriously . Her appearance is so androgynous that it would be difficult to identify her as a woman without help from the title , and the title itself ? Peter , a Young English Girl ? underscores the gender ambiguity of the image .

Brooks 's 1923 self @-@ portrait has a grimmer tone . Brooks ? who also designed her own clothes ? painted herself in a tailored riding coat , gloves , and top hat . Behind her is a ruined building rendered in gray and black , underneath a slate @-@ colored sky . The only spots of strong color are her lipstick and the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor that she wears on her lapel , recalling the Red Cross insignia in The Cross of France . Her eyes are shaded by the brim of her hat , so that , according to one critic , " she 's watching you before you get close enough to look at her . She 's not

passively inviting your approach ; she 's deciding whether you 're worth bothering with . "

= = = Literary portraits of Brooks = = =

In 1925 Brooks had solo exhibitions in Paris , London , and New York . After that year she produced only four more paintings , including portraits of Carl Van Vechten in 1936 and Muriel Draper in 1938 . At the same time that her artwork diminished , she became the subject of literary portraits by three writers . Each portrayed her as part of lesbian social circles in Paris and Capri .

Brooks was the model for the painter Venetia Ford in Radclyffe Hall 's first novel , *The Forge* (1924) . The protagonist , Susan Brent , first encounters Ford among a group of women at a masquerade ball in Paris ; the descriptions of these women correspond closely to Brooks 's portraits , particularly those of Elisabeth de Gramont and Una Troubridge . Brent decides to leave her husband and pursue art after seeing the painting *The Weeping Venus* . Brooks also appeared in Compton Mackenzie 's *Extraordinary Women* (1928) , a novel about a group of lesbians on Capri during World War I , as the composer Olympia Leigh . Although the novel is satirical , Mackenzie treats Brooks with more dignity than the rest of the characters , portraying her as a detached observer of the others ' jealous intrigues ? even those of which she is the focus . In Djuna Barnes 's *Ladies Almanack* (1928) , a roman à clef of Natalie Barney 's circle in Paris , she makes a brief appearance as Cynic Sal , who " dresse [s] like a coachman of the period of Pecksniff " ? a reference to the style of dress seen in her 1923 self @-@ portrait .

= = = Drawings and later life = = =

In 1930 , while laid up with a sprained leg , Brooks began a series of more than 100 drawings of humans , angels , demons , animals , and monsters , all formed out of continuous curved lines . She said that when she started a line she did not know where it would go , and that the drawings " evolve [d] from the subconscious ... [w] ithout premeditation . " Brooks was writing her unpublished memoir *No Pleasant Memories* at the same time she began this series of drawings . Critics have interpreted them as exploring the continuing effect of her childhood on her ? a theme expressed even in the symbol she used to sign them , a wing tethered with a rope or chain . Decades later , at 85 , she said " My dead mother gets between me and life . "

Brooks stopped drawing around 1935 . She moved from Paris to a villa outside Florence , Italy in 1937 , and in 1940 ? fleeing the invasion of France by Germany ? Barney joined her there . After World War II ended , Brooks declined to move back to Paris with Barney , saying she wanted to " get back to [her] painting and painter 's life " , but in fact she virtually abandoned art after the war . She lost interest in promoting her own work , leaving it to Barney to arrange gallery placements of her paintings . She became increasingly reclusive , and while Barney continued to visit her frequently , by the mid @-@ 1950s she had to stay in a hotel , meeting Brooks only for lunch . Brooks spent weeks at a time in a darkened room , believing she was losing her eyesight . She became paranoid , fearing that someone was stealing her drawings and that her chauffeur planned to poison her . In a 1965 letter she cautioned Barney not to lie down on the benches in her garden , lest the plants feed on her life force : " Trees especially are our enemies and would suck us dry . " In the last year of her life , she stopped communicating with Barney entirely , leaving letters unanswered and refusing to open the door when Barney came to visit . She died in Nice , France , in 1970 at the age of 96 .

= = Influences = =

Brooks kept aloof from the artistic trends and movements of her time , " act [ing] as if the Fauvists , the Cubists , and the Abstract Expressionists did not exist . " However , critics have identified the influence of Aubrey Beardsley 's illustrations and of Symbolism , particularly in her paintings of Ida Rubinstein . The imagery of the 1930s drawings suggests Surrealism , and Brooks 's use of " unpremeditated " drawing as a route to the subconscious resembles the experiments with automatic

drawing made by Surrealists such as André Masson .

The most widely observed influence on Brooks 's painting is that of James McNeill Whistler , whose subdued palette probably inspired her use of the color gray . She may have been introduced to Whistler 's work by the art collector Charles Lang Freer , whom she met on Capri around 1899 , and who bought one of her early works . Brooks said she " wondered at the magic subtlety of [Whistler 's] tones " but thought his ' symphonies ' lacked corresponding subtlety of expression . One 1920 portrait may take its composition from a painting by Whistler . While the poses are almost identical , Brooks removes the little girl and all the details of Whistler 's domestic scene , leaving only Borgatti and her piano ? an image of an artist completely focused on her art .

= = Legacy and modern criticism = =

Brooks 's conservative style led many art critics to dismiss her , and by the 1960s her work was largely forgotten . The revival of figurative painting since the 1980s , and new interest in the exploration of gender and sexuality through art have led to a reassessment of her work . She is now seen as a precursor of present @-@ day artists whose works depict cross @-@ dressing and transgender themes . Critics have described her portraits of the 1920s as a " sly celebration of gender @-@ bending as a kind of heroic act " and as creating " the first visible Sapphic stars in the history of modernism . "

More generally , Brooks 's portraits starting with *The Cross of France* have been interpreted as creating new images of strong women . The portraits of the 1920s in particular ? cross @-@ dressed and otherwise ? portray their subjects as powerful , self @-@ confident , and fearless . One critic compared them to the faces on Mount Rushmore . Brooks seems to have seen her portraits in this light . According to a memoir by Natalie Barney , one woman complained , upon seeing her portrait , " You haven 't beautified me " , to which Brooks replied , " I have ennobled you . "

Yet Brooks did not always ennoble her subjects . Inherited wealth freed her from the need to sell her paintings ; she did not care whether she pleased her sitters or not , and her wit , when unleashed , could be devastating . A striking example is her 1914 ? 15 portrait of Elsie de Wolfe , an interior designer whom she felt had copied her monochromatic color schemes . Brooks painted de Wolfe porcelain @-@ pale , in an off @-@ white dress and a bonnet resembling a shower cap ; a white ceramic goat placed on a table at her elbow seems to mimic her simpering expression .

One of Brooks 's most analyzed paintings , a 1924 portrait of Una , Lady Troubridge , has been seen as everything from an image of female self @-@ empowerment to a caricature . Art critic Michael Duncan sees the painting as making fun of Troubridge 's " dandified appearance " , while for Meryle Secrest it is " a tour de force of ironic commentary " . Laura Doan , pointing out newspaper and magazine articles from 1924 in which high collars , tailored satin jackets , and watch fobs are described as the latest in women 's wear , describes Troubridge as having a " keen fashion sense and an eye for sartorial detail " . But , these British fashions may not have been favored in Paris ; Natalie Barney and others in her circle considered Troubridge 's outfits ridiculous . Brooks expressed her own view in a letter to Barney : " Una is funny to paint . Her get @-@ up is remarkable . She will live perhaps and cause future generations to smile . "