

PORTRAITS: THE SELF ILLUMINATED

What is a portrait?

A portrait is a drawn, painted, or carved picture of something.

A portrait is a representation of a person, especially the face.

A portrait is a description or dramatic portrayal of a person.¹

Portraits exist as objects, representations, and descriptions; they are (or can be) simultaneously tactile, linguistic, and visual. As a musician, however, it seems to me that a category of portraiture is absent from this list. What occurs when sonic elements are added to this already-defined scope of portraiture? Can music and musical text setting also represent a person as “a description or a dramatic portrayal”? How is the experience of listening to or watching a musical representation of an individual different? How is it the same?

In *Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Cynthia Freeland discusses how the ever-changing nature of portraiture, across locale and era, reflects ““what it is to be a person.”” She defines the portrait artist as “an alchemist who seeks to make inert physical material ‘live’ and show us a person, an actual individual whose physical embodiment reveals psychological awareness, consciousness, and an inner emotional life.”² One of the more striking features of a portrait is its ability to capture the “essence” of a person, if only for a specific moment in time. While this momentary “essence” of an individual is elusive and highly susceptible to interpretation, portraiture remains a fascinating portal into the body, mind, and emotional life of another person. Arguably, portraits illuminate some aspect of “the self,” be it us or the self of another.

Along with considering portraiture a representation of some facet of a subject’s “inner life,” Freeland also details another important element: “the ability to pose or present oneself to be depicted in a representation.”³ As a singer, this struck me deeply - the self-awareness of posing both vocally and physically, of putting oneself forward to represent or be represented, of revealing some part of “the self” (either my own self, or an imagined character in a poem or libretto) through sound. It made me wonder – did most of my creative work as a singer involve “painting” portraits with my body, vocal sounds, and words? Often, I have felt the tension of being both the painter and the sitter. While I express interpretive agency through my performance, the audience’s gaze nevertheless maintains my position as an object to be viewed and perceived.

Portraits: The Self Illuminated explores the intersection of these tactile, linguistic, visual and sonic portraits. I have consciously paired each musical work with a visual portrait, some of which are known to have directly influenced the musical composition, while others are linked purely through my own imagination. Within this tapestry of portrait-like elements, can they melt into one another to bring “the self” momentarily to the surface, creating that ever-elusive glimpse at the inner life of a human being?

¹ “Portrait (American English).” In *Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 4th Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. Accessed November 16, 2019. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/portrait>.

² Freeland, Cynthia. *Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, 1.

³ Freeland, *Portraits and Persons*, 74.

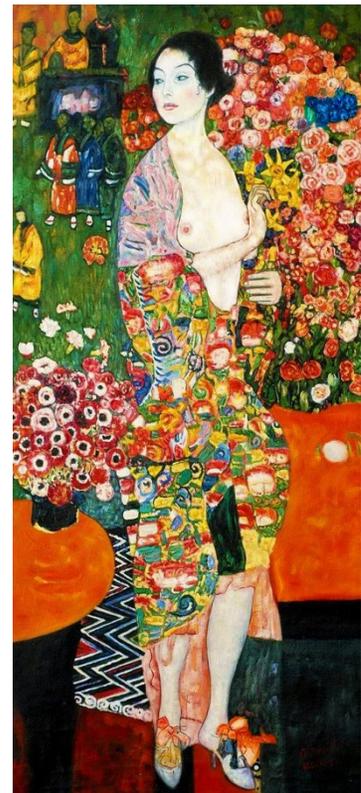
MARIA 'RIA' MUNK & MARIA 'MIZZI' ZIMMERMANN: THE WOMEN "WITHIN" THE PORTRAITS



Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) was an Austrian painter and leader of the Vienna Secession, a collective of artists who rebelled against what they viewed as nineteenth-century historicism in favor of an Art Nouveau style. With Klimt, the Art Nouveau style manifested itself in colorful, mosaic-like canvases, often populated by human figures, intertwined with one another in fluid and erotic positions. Although the Viennese establishment was scandalized by his "risqué" paintings and public murals, Klimt financed his career as a portrait painter of the Viennese elite. Within his vibrant interiors, his portrait subjects peer out through the canvas, expressing elements of their personalities and desires, but always through Klimt's "exoticizing" lens. He was

particularly interested in women as the subjects of his portraits, claiming, "I am less interested in myself as a subject for painting than I am in other people, above all women."⁴ These "interests" were often romantic or sexual, and he had numerous relationships with the models of his works. It is claimed that, while he remained unmarried, Klimt fathered 14 children with his partners.

At 24 years of age, **Maria ("Ria") Munk (1887-1911)** committed suicide on December 28, 1911, after the poet and writer Hanns Heinz Ewers broke off their engagement. Her mother, Aranka Pulitzer Munk, wished to commission a death-bed portrait of her deceased daughter, a genre that was *en vogue* in turn-of-the-century Vienna. Since Ria's sister, Serena Lederer, was a patron of Gustav Klimt, she arranged for him to paint the portrait. *Ria Munk am Totenbett (Ria Munk I)*, or *Ria Munk on her Deathbed*, was finished in 1912 and subsequently rejected by Aranka Munk. She found the portrait too realistic and, therefore, very upsetting to view. She decided that her daughter should be depicted as she was when alive with a sense of joy and a reflection of her beauty. *Die Tänzerin (Ria Munk II)*, or *The Dancer*, followed, but was also rejected by the family. Although their exact reasoning has never been revealed, if Klimt did present a portrait of their deceased daughter with her breasts exposed, it is possible that the Munk



⁴ Gotthardt, Alexxa. "What You Need to Know about Gustav Klimt." *Artsy.net*. March 26, 2018. Accessed on November 20, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-gustav-klimt>.



family found the portrait inappropriate. It is more likely, however, that Klimt altered the original painting after its rejection to resemble Johanna Jusl, a dancer at the Vienna Hofoper and an artist's model. Ria Munk's final portrait, *Frauenbildnis (Ria Munk III)*, or *Woman's Portrait*, was left unfinished due to Klimt's sudden death in 1917. In *Ria Munk III*, Ria is presented in profile, smiling, her cheeks slightly flushed, her body enveloped by the lush, patchwork interior behind her. Bouquets of flowers, akin to her death-bed portrait, still frame her face.

The life of *Ria Munk III*, however, does not end with Klimt's passing. Aranka Munk hung her daughter's portrait at her villa, Bad Aussee, until her assets were seized by the Nazis in 1942. The Munk family was Jewish, and Aranka was ultimately deported to Lodz, a concentration camp in Poland, where she was murdered in 1942. That same year, Ria's sister, Lola, was murdered at Chelmno in Poland. *Frauenbildnis (Ria Munk III)* was eventually passed to art collector and dealer William Gurlitt, who sold the painting in 1953 to the Lentos Museum in Linz, Austria. The painting remained at the museum until 2009, when the city council of Linz finally voted to return *Ria Munk III* to its rightful owners, the descendants of the Munk family.



NYC-based composer and singer **Lacy Rose (b. 1990)** describes the narrative flow of her composition *Ria*, (with text that she herself wrote): “The first movement begins inside the painting, *Ria Munk I*, with *Ria* asking her bereavers to ‘close and coin her eyes.’ In the second movement, inspired by *Ria Munk II* (also known as ‘The Dancer’), the woman ‘who holds the marigolds with swan-soft hands’ asks the spectator to ponder her double identity and origin of inspiration. For the third movement, the unfinished figure in *Ria Munk III* exclaims that she ‘begins and ends in death’.”⁵

⁵ Rose, Lacy. Liner Notes to *Mizzi*. Released by Lacy Rose. 2017.

Maria “Mizzi” Zimmermann (1879-1975) was an artist’s model and romantic partner of Gustav Klimt. In 1887, at 18 years old, she first met Klimt, then 35 years old, in passing on the street, and their professional and romantic relationship began soon afterwards. She posed for many of his paintings as a model, a less



“visible” role in the artistic process than Klimt’s wealthier, female portrait subjects, since she often appeared as an unnamed representation. In Klimt’s *Schubert at the Piano*, a painting commissioned by Greek industrialist Nikolaus Dumba in 1898, we find Mizzi standing at the far left of the canvas, illuminated by candlelight, intently watching Franz Schubert, Klimt’s favorite composer.

Zimmermann and Klimt had two sons together, Gustav (1889-1976) and Otto, who was born in 1902, and died within the same year. While Klimt lived a modest lifestyle as a freelance artist, he rented Mizzi and their children a small apartment. When their relationship ended, he provided financially for his son, Gustav, until his death. Klimt left Maria Zimmerman a small sum in his will, but he did not legally identify any of his children as heirs. Although she lived to be 96 years old, Mizzi never owned a single painting by Klimt or benefitted from the sale of his works posthumously, even though her body and likeness were frequently represented.⁶

Her relationship to *Hope I* (1903), however, is not as direct as the painting may suggest. Indeed, Mizzi was not the actual model for this painting, although she was heavily pregnant and gave birth to Otto during the period that Klimt painted the work. Instead, Herma, who is known to history only by her first name, represents Hope with the promise of new life within her. Mizzi’s “essence,” though, pervades the painting through historical speculation. Originally, Klimt sketched a male figure in the painting, comforting Hope. After Otto’s death, he re-configured the painting, removing the male figure. Instead, Hope stands alone with her baby, still surrounded by a halo of light, but now menaced by the skeletons and ghouls behind her. Hope, however, does not seem to be afraid, or perhaps, she cannot yet see the deathly forces beside her.

⁶ Markus, Georg. „Sensationeller Fund: Klimts Geliebte spricht“ *Kurier*. January 1, 2018. Accessed November 21, 2019. <https://kurier.at/kultur/klimts-geliebte-spricht/307.523.783>.

Rose writes of her impetus to compose the cycle *Hope I*, “Mizzi represents so many of the women in the paintings whose names and lives are lost to time but whose images are immortalized by the painters, often male painters whose names we still remember. For me, I felt it my duty to help Mizzi reclaim her personhood... This is the story of Maria ‘Mizzi’ Zimmermann. The first movement shows Mizzi as an old lady after the passing of Gustav Klimt and rediscovering the painting she helped inspire. The second movement is written from her perspective inside the painting as Mizzi describes what she sees. And the third movement is Mizzi seeing the spectator and asking the viewer to take her out of the painting.”⁷

BARBARA STROZZI: PORTRAIT AS GOSSIP, RUMOR & INNUENDO

What occurs when a person’s legacy is heavily informed by a portrait? What if said portrait becomes the singular image to validate their appearance, and therefore partly, their existence? And what if their existence, or certain details of it, were defined by the fact that their breast was partly exposed?

Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677) was a Venetian singer, composer, and lutenist. Probably the illegitimate child



of Giulio Strozzi, a poet and member of the Accademia degli Incogniti, an exclusive society of all-male Venetian intellectuals, Barbara was well-educated and excelled in music, studying composition with Francesco Cavalli. Her father supported and publicly promoted her work. In 1637, he founded the Accademia degli Unisoni, a society dedicated to music at the Strozzi home. At the Accademia’s meetings, Barbara would often premiere new works, performing them herself. From 1644 to 1664, she published eight volumes of compositions. Notably, Barbara published under her own name, which was highly unusual for a woman of her day. Most of her compositions, such as *È giungerà pur mai* (1664), were written for female voice(s) with continuo and occasional obbligato instruments. She was particularly adept at illustrating the emotional drama of her texts, often highlighting specific words with highly dissonant harmonies and unexpected harmonic progressions. In *È giungerà pur mai*, Strozzi sets text by Giuseppe Artale, who employs a playful rhetorical device. Is the object of the narrator’s

affections... *Barbara?* The miserable narrator of Artale’s poem, rejected in love, claims “Troppo Barbara

⁷ Rose, Lacy. Liner Notes to *Ria*. Released by Lacy Rose. 2018.

e crudele,” translated as “Too barbarous and cruel” or “Too cruel is Barbara.” Later, the narrator states, “Anco Barbara t’adoro,” translated as “Even barbarous, I adore you,” or “Yet I adore you, Barbara.” These wonderful double meanings are further highlighted by the fact that Strozzi may have performed this piece herself, ensuring that the allusion was not lost on her audience.

Why, though, does Bernardo Strozzi’s portrait, *Female Musician with Viola da Gamba* (1635-1639), which is believed to be a likeness of Barbara Strozzi, matter? Unfortunately, it has shaped the public perception of her life, sometimes overshadowing aspects of her work. Due to Barbara’s public role as a scholar, composer and musician, satires were circulated, accusing Strozzi of being a courtesan, with statements such as, “It is a fine thing to distribute the flowers after having already surrendered the fruit.”⁸ Although there is no historical evidence to prove these claims, historians have seemed eager to interpret them as valid. *Female Musician with Viola da Gamba* (1635-1639) depicts a young woman with flowers in her hair, a musical score resting next to her elbow, and a viola da gamba and bow in hand. She seems to be on the verge of making music. One of her breasts, however, is exposed from her dress. This semi-nudity provided “proof” of her status as courtesan, although representations of women’s breasts contain a myriad of cultural meanings, including fertility and abundance. A newer, less sexualized interpretation suggests that Strozzi embodies Flora, the Roman goddess of nature, flowers, spring, and fertility.⁹ Strozzi’s status as an unmarried woman with four children, probably from a long-time relationship with Giovanni Paolo Vidman, further strengthened the “Strozzi as courtesan” rumors. These rumors began circulating in 1630-s Venice and remain pervasive to this day.

As I visited the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden last year, I came upon this portrait, unaware that it was part of the collection. I instantly recognized Barbara Strozzi, not due to the viola da gamba and her musical score, but rather due to her exposed breast. I realized that this narrative about her sexuality, based on rumor, gossip and innuendo, had entered my consciousness. It seems absurd to be pursued through time by a representation of one’s breast, a fact which in and of itself, is a larger reflection of the historic judgments placed on women who dared to be creative in public settings.

SEMELE: DEPICTING A MYTHOLOGICAL WOMAN

Although various versions of the myth of Semele exist, they follow a similar narrative trajectory:

Semele was a Theban princess. One day, Jupiter encountered her and instantly fell in love with her. Since Semele is characterized as the object of Jupiter’s desire, her initial feelings are rarely elucidated. When Jupiter’s wife, Juno, learned of their relationship, she schemed to punish Semele. Juno disguised herself as Semele’s nurse, Beroë, who Semele easily confided in, telling her that Jupiter, the ruler of the Olympian gods, was her lover. Beroë questioned Jupiter’s honesty – was he truly immortal and so powerful? With these seeds of doubt planted in Semele’s mind, she asked Jupiter



for a favor. Swearing on the River Styx, he promised to grant *any* request that Semele asked of him. Semele demanded that Jupiter reveal himself in his immortal glory to prove that he was truly a god. Jupiter pleaded

⁸ Magner, Candace A. “A Short History of Barbara Strozzi.” In *È giungerà pur mai*. Cor Donato Editions, 2015.

⁹ Magner, Candace A. “A Short History of Barbara Strozzi.”

with her to take back her request, but Semele insisted. Bound to his oath, Jupiter revealed himself in immense clouds, thunder, and lightning. Semele, being mortal, could not endure the intensity of the heat, and she was tragically, almost instantaneously, immolated by the bolts.



Although the anonymous author of the libretto set by **Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre (1665-1729)** ends Semele's tale here, her mythological narrative continues. At the exact moment of Semele's lethal request, she is also pregnant. As flames engulf her, Jupiter saves their unborn child, "sewing" the fetus into his thigh. After Semele's death and descent into the underworld, the baby is born, and he becomes Dionysus, the god of wine, theater, and fertility. Later, Dionysus rescues his mother from Hades, and Semele becomes immortal as Thyone, the goddess who resides over Dionysus's court on Mount Olympus. The anonymous librettist of *Semelé*, however, freezes Semele's "portrait" at the precise moment of her death, followed by an *air*, or aria, with a pointed moralistic tone. The librettist writes, "When

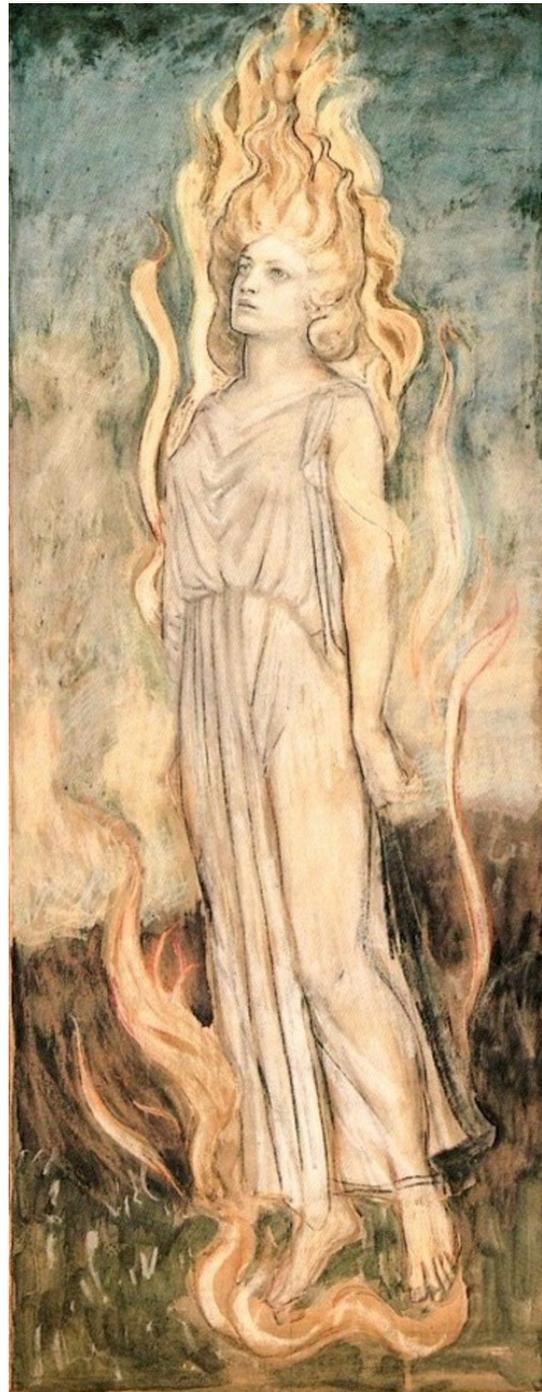
Love enchains us...let us not mix with his fire/ The desire of vainglory... It is in a tender bond/ That one finds the greatest happiness;/ Glamour, supreme grandeur/ Should count for nothing."¹⁰ Despite the fact that Semele was manipulated by Juno and that Jupiter inexplicably cannot transcend his oath, even though he is the greatest god in all the universe, Semele is to blame for her own demise. *Semelé*'s narrator claims that her mortal vanity, evident in her need to prove that she was loved by an all-powerful god, is truly her undoing. If she had been satisfied with the love of Jupiter and unquestioning in her faithfulness, she might have survived. The tendency to conclude with a "moral" lesson was common in French cantatas at the beginning of the eighteenth-century. *Airs* often reflected upon past events or shed light on a specific emotion of a character within the drama.

Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre published *Semelé*, dedicated to the Elector of Bavaria, in 1715, as part of her collection of secular cantatas. *Semelé* is an extension of the seventeenth-century Italian "cantata," meaning "sung," a genre that designated a piece of music written for voice(s) and accompanying instruments (*basse continue*). By de La Guerre's time, cantatas were often comprised of several movements, alternating between recitative passages and arias, marked by tempo and key changes. Cantatas were performed at Versailles and other royal residences, as well as in salon concerts at the homes of French nobles. De La Guerre navigated the complex relationship between nobility and artists throughout her lifetime. Educated in Louis XIV's court as a child, de La Guerre learned to sing, compose, and play the organ and harpsichord. At 15 years old, she was placed in the retinue of Madame de Montespan, a patron of the arts and mistress of the king, who socialized with leading intellectual and cultural figures of the day,

¹⁰ Cyr, Mary. "Texts and Translations." In *The Collected Works – Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre*. New York : Broude Trust, 2005, 39.

such as Racine and Quinault.¹¹ In 1684, de La Guerre left the service of the court due to her marriage to organist Marin de La Guerre, continuing to compose, perform, and publish as a freelance musician, always seeking financial support through noble patronage. Throughout her career, de La Guerre published under her own name in a variety of genres, including sacred vocal music, instrumental works, ballet, and opera, or *tragédie en musique*. She is credited with composing the first opera written by a woman in France, *Céphale et Procris*.¹²

I have chosen three images to depict Semele, creating a portrait-timeline that culminates in this tragic and deeply unjust moment in her story. The first is the work of Jan-Erasmus Quellinus (1634-1715), a Flemish painter from a family of famous artists, who specialized in history and portrait painting. *Jupiter, Semele, und Juno* depicts Jupiter's pursuit of Semele, as Juno peers from the clouds above. Cupids, nestled in the left-hand corner of the work, point to the couple, as if to reveal their relationship. Jupiter's body language is ominous and overpowering, while Semele appears to run from him. Our second image was painted by Pietro della Vecchia (1603-1678), a Venetian painter, who painted in a variety of genres, such as altar pieces and portraits. *Jupiter and Semele* depicts the moment when Jupiter reveals to Semele the extent of his immortal powers. Semele's face is frozen in fear and pain while Jupiter's lightning bolts rise above her. The image is disturbing, especially due to Jupiter's imposing form, which aggressively looms over Semele's reclined body. Our last image is *Semele* by John Duncan (1866-1945), a Scottish painter and illustrator, best known as a proponent of the Celtic Revival in Scottish art. It depicts the titular figure in death, consumed by flames. It is important to note, however, that in this portrait, Semele is finally depicted as an individual. In my research, I often found it common to find images of Semele in relation to Jupiter: in a state of sexual rapture beside him, being pursued by him, or being killed by him. Rarely did I find Semele depicted as a person, an individual, alone. Duncan's image is powerful in that Semele does not appear to be in pain, but rather illuminated. The flames do not harm her body, but seemingly expand her presence. Although Duncan's portrait still represents her demise, I find Semele's stare unsettling, as if to assert: *I will not be consumed*.



¹¹ Cyr, Mary. "Introduction." In *The Collected Works – Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre*. New York : Broude Trust, 2005, 13-15.

¹² Cypess, Rebecca. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. "Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre." Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 2019. Accessed on November 24, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elisabeth-Claude-Jacquet-de-la-Guerre>.

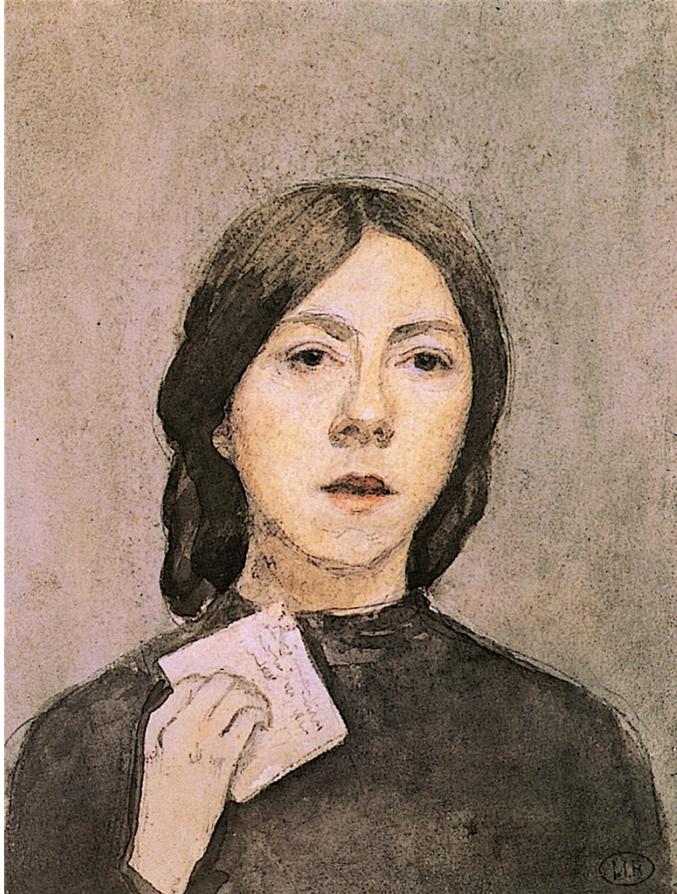
LOUISE DE VILMORIN & GWEN JOHN: SELF-PORTRAITS



Louise de Vilmorin (1902-1969), the French heir to a seed fortune dating back to the reign of Louis XIV, had a private life which in the public eye often eclipsed her recognition as a poet, novelist, and journalist between the 1930's and the 1960's. Vilmorin seems to be remembered more for her string of high-profile marriages and lovers, as well as her chic fashion sense, than the impact of her writing. She had well-documented affairs with a number of powerful men: author of *The Little Prince* and pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, actor and filmmaker Orson Welles, aristocrat Count Paul Esterházy de Galántha, British ambassador Duff Cooper, and French Cultural Affairs Minister and author André Malraux. She also married Las Vegas real-estate heir Henry Leigh Hunt and Hungarian playboy Count Paul Pálffy ab Erdöd. Carrying herself with a slight limp due to childhood tuberculosis of the hip and dressed in the designs of Azzedine Alaïa, Jeanne Lanvin, and Christian Lacroix, Vilmorin epitomized a certain French aristocratic charm, elegance, and razor-sharp wit. Vilmorin was a complicated figure; although she believed feminists to be a “herd of vain she-asses,” questioned why young women would wear pants, and thought women who rejected using their ‘feminine’ charms in society as “worryingly pretentious,” she applied the same bruising commentary to her relationships with men, stating “I have no faith in my fidelity.”¹³

¹³ Petkanas, Christopher. “Chichi Devil.” *The New York Times*. February 19, 2009. Accessed November 21, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/style/tmagazine/22vilmorin.html>.

In her thirties, she began to write, publishing her first novel *Sainte-Unefois* in 1934. In all, Vilmorin published 15 works of fiction, five poetry collections, and a series of society and culture articles for the magazine *Le Promeneur*. As a poet, she was encouraged in her writing by composer **Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)**, who read *Aux Officiers de la Garde Blanche* in 1935, after Vilmorin gifted the poem to their mutual friend, French soprano Marie-Blanche de Polignac. Poulenc insisted that Vilmorin compose more poems, and their interaction resulted in the texts for Poulenc's *Trois Poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin*, which he set in 1937. Comparing Vilmorin to the likes of Paul Éluard and Max Jacob, both celebrated poets in the Symbolist and Surrealist movements, Poulenc wrote, "Few people move me as much as Louise de Vilmorin: ...because she writes French of an innate purity, because her name evokes flowers and vegetables, because she loves her brothers like a lover and her lovers like a sister. Her beautiful face recalls the seventeenth century, as does the sound of her name."¹⁴ I recall Vilmorin's long list of relationships because I find in *Trois Poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin* a potential self-portrait of the poet herself: an addict to the spontaneity of desire, to the somewhat-may attitude, she will always dive in head first despite the glaring pitfalls.

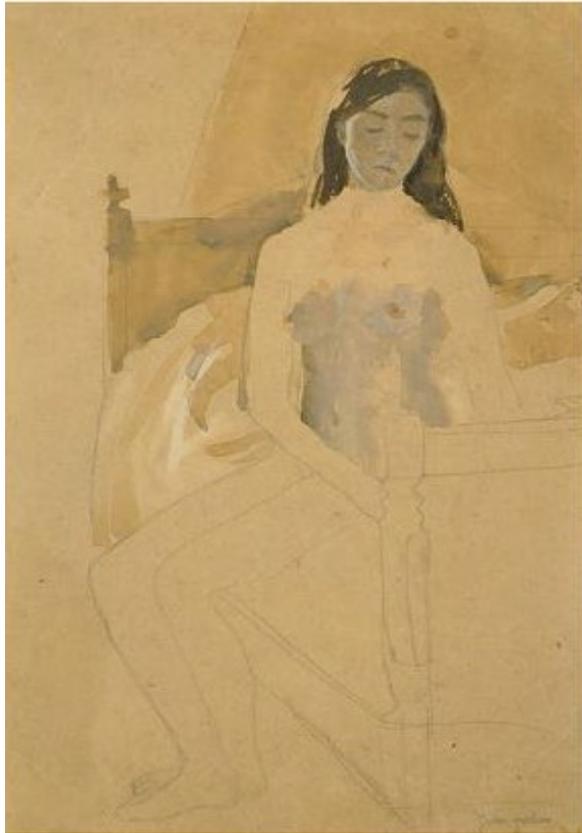


Who is **Gwen John (1876-1936)**, and how does she figure in the poetry of Louise de Vilmorin? Although they have no direct connection, except in my imagination, I find that intersections exist between John, Vilmorin, and the other portrait subjects on this program. John was born in Wales, and later moved to London in 1895 to study at the Slade School of Fine Art with her younger brother, Augustus, who developed into the pre-eminent portrait painter of Western Europe after World War I. His creative output and public career significantly overshadowed Gwen's work throughout her lifetime. In 1899, she relocated to Paris, studying with James Whistler at his Académie Carmen. Her self-portrait, *Gwen John* (the first image presented in these notes) is a product of this period, as she stares dryly, even defiantly, from the canvas, her hand on her hip. John returned to London, where she presented a joint exhibition with her brother at the Carfax Gallery; he showed 45 paintings, while Gwen showed three. In 1904, she moved to France permanently, settling in Paris, where she supported her artistic work by modeling for other artists, such as



¹⁴ Johnson, Graham. Liner notes to *Francis Poulenc: The Complete Songs*, Hyperion Records, CD (2012).

sculptor Auguste Rodin. They fell in love, and their affair lasted for more than a decade. Attracted to both men and women, Gwen was passionate in her relationships, producing 2,000 fervent letters to Rodin. As



their relationship dwindled in 1913, she converted, also ardently, to Roman Catholicism, painting portraits of the nuns at the local convent in Meudon, the suburb of Paris where she lived. Since Gwen financed her career through the sale of her paintings, she was able to forego modelling. American art collector John Quinn first met her in Paris, and from 1910 until his death in 1924, he purchased every work that she produced for sale. After Quinn's death, however, Gwen suffered financially, and her artistic output decreased significantly. With the reputation of a recluse, she lived alone, producing self-portraits, portraits of women and girls, still lifes and occasional landscapes. Considered a post-Impressionist, John used a muted, earth tone palette, creating small, square canvases, where her subjects often sat with their hands in their laps at a three-quarter profile. Gwen died in obscurity in Dieppe, France, and her grave was not identified until 2014. Over the past ten years, there has been a significant resurgence of interest in her life and a recontextualization of the unique and eccentric qualities of her paintings, apart from her relationships with Augustus John and Auguste Rodin. Gwen John wrote to painter Ursula Tyrwhitt, "As to whether I have anything worth expressing, that is apart from the question. I may never have anything to express, except this desire for a more interior life."¹⁵

For me, Gwen John and Louise de Vilmorin share a kinship, since the historical narratives about women have focused on their affairs and social associations, instead of on their personal expressions of an "inner life." Both artists fiercely sought self-expression, although in drastically different ways. Vilmorin was an aristocrat and socialite, while John was a religious recluse. As we weave Vilmorin's words through John's self-portraits, a woman appears. She displays a bold and unflinching gaze; she is both the observer and the observed. She will mold her body in the world; she will devise representations of her own image; she will attempt to capture her own desires.

The paintings exhibited in this program are as follows: *Gwen John* (1909), *Self Portrait with Letter* (1909), *Self Portrait* (1907-1909), *Self Portrait Naked*, and *Self Portrait* (1903).



¹⁵ Tamboukou, Maria. "Mapping Gwen John." In *Nomadic Narrative, Visual Forces: Gwen John's Letters and Paintings*. (London: Peter Lang, 2010), 2.