



Brooks, Romaine (1874-1970)

by Ray Anne Lockard

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American artist Romaine Brooks created a body of work unique to the history of modern art. Her life-sized female nudes and portraits of cross-dressed women made her lesbian identity and desire visible to the world.



A self portrait by Romaine Brooks.

The third and youngest child of Major Henry Goddard and Ella Mary Waterman, Beatrice Romaine Goddard was born on May 1, 1874 while her mother was traveling in Rome. She was the newest addition to a wealthy but severely dysfunctional family from Philadelphia. The child's father abandoned the family shortly after her birth.

The artist's mother was a cruel narcissist and an erratic parent who left her infant daughter with a family laundress in the United States while she traveled throughout Europe with her other children. The oldest child, St. Mar, suffered from a debilitating mental illness that caused him to exhibit disruptive and violent behavior. Very little is known about Brooks's sister, Mary Aimée (Maya), the middle child.

Brooks was finally allowed to join her mother, brother, and sister in Europe when she was twelve years old. She was, however, educated in private girls' schools while her mother continued her travels. Such an early life experience would lead any child to feel that she was a mere inconvenience.

Brooks's adolescent years consisted of attempts to appease both the needs of her ill brother and her emotionally unstable mother. She was, however, finally able to convince Ella to allow her to study voice near Paris from 1896 to 1898. Although she was given only a tiny allowance and suffered financial hardships, she was highly motivated and dedicated to the voice lessons. But she ultimately decided that her true calling was to the visual arts.

Brooks traveled to Rome in 1898 and began to take free painting classes at the La Scuola Nazionale during the day while also studying at Circolo Artistico at night. In 1899, she vacationed in Capri, where she met a cadre of expatriate American and English artists and writers, many of whom were involved in same-sex relationships.

Brooks later described that first trip to Capri as the happiest time of her life. During the following year, Brooks continued to study painting at Académie Colarossi in Paris.

Soon after the turn of the century, Brooks's fortune improved. St. Mar died in 1901 and her mother died of diabetes the following year. Much to her surprise, the artist had inherited, at the age of twenty-eight, the entire family fortune. Her new financial independence allowed her artistic freedom and provided entrée to the salons and homes of the European social and intellectual elite.

The artist moved to London in 1902 and agreed to a marriage of convenience with John Ellingham Brooks, an impoverished, but socially prominent, gay pianist. They separated after three months, and Brooks continued to support him the rest of his life. She further reinvented her identity by dropping the feminine

name Beatrice and keeping her married surname. She was now known by the androgynous name of Romaine Brooks.

Having gained social status and artistic respectability through her marriage, Brooks rented a studio in Chelsea across Tite Street from the studio in which James McNeil Whistler (1834-1903) had worked. Whistler's subdued palette would soon influence Brooks's work.

By 1905, when she was thirty-one, Brooks had resettled in Paris, acquired a large studio on the Left Bank, and briefly studied art with Gustave Courtois.

During 1910 Brooks began to paint the works for which she became renowned--life-sized nudes and portraits of Parisian illuminati. Her first female nude was *The Red Jacket*, painted in that same year, soon followed by an erotic odalisque entitled *White Azaleas*.

Brooks's first one-woman exhibition was shown from May 2 to May 18, 1910 at the prestigious Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris. It was a breakthrough exhibition in which Brooks exhibited thirteen portraits and nudes that made her lesbian identity public.

She received critical acclaim from Robert de Montesquiou (1855-1921), the aristocratic dandy on whom Proust based the character of the homosexual Baron de Charlus in *Remembrance of Things Past*. He was to serve as the artist's principal mentor. Brooks sent the entire exhibition plus additional works to the Goupil Gallery in London the following year.

In 1911 Brooks not only created numerous artistic works, but she also met Ida Rubenstein (1885-1960), a Russian ballerina who performed with the Ballets Russes. The dancer quickly became Brooks's lover and the subject of her most important early portraits and nudes such as *The Crossing* (1911).

Brooks soon earned a reputation as an accomplished portraitist. Wealthy and renowned individuals began to request sittings. She first painted the influential Italian poet as *Gabriel D'Annunzio, the Poet in Exile* (1863-1938) in 1912. After he had become a national hero in World War I, she painted a second portrait of him entitled *Gabriel D'Annunzio, Il Commandante* (1916).

Brooks also painted a portrait of Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) before his rise to fame as a poet, novelist, critic, playwright, and artist.

The Cross of France, a portrait of Ida Rubenstein, was executed near the beginning of World War I and exhibited at Georges Bernheim's gallery in 1915 as part of a benefit that D'Annunzio and Brooks organized for the Red Cross. In 1920, the artist received the Chevalier medal from the French Legion of Honor for this and other efforts on behalf of France.

Brooks met the woman who would soon become most important in her life in 1915 when she was forty-one. Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972), an American expatriate writer who had moved to Paris in 1902, was thirty-nine when the two women met. The daughter of painter Alice Pike Barney, she was already a brilliant conversationalist and would soon become the muse of a weekly literary salon that lasted from 1919 until 1968.

Even though Brooks did not enjoy such salons and Barney had numerous sexual relationships with other women, the women's relationship lasted for nearly fifty years.

Brooks benefited from Barney's salons in that she painted many of the people who frequented them. Her famous portrait *Natalie Barney, L'Amazone* (1915) depicts the author in feminine attire. A porcelain horse is included in the portrait as a reference to Barney's riding skills.

The author is described in the portrait's title as an Amazon, or woman warrior, for her efforts to re-establish the cult of Sappho in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth century. The painting is a daring declaration of Barney's sexual interests and a bold attempt to link the subject with lesbian history.

Brooks painted one more nude of Ida Rubenstein during 1916 and 1917. Entitled *Weeping Venus*, it appears to be a commentary on the loss of their relationship. Within three years Brooks painted a cross-dressed woman for the first time. In *Renata Borgatti at the Piano* (ca 1920), one of Brooks's lovers is shown as an androgynous person who deliberately invokes the cultural signs of "deviant" sexuality.

Three years later, Brooks painted her two most famous works. In her *Self-Portrait* (1923) she is cross-dressed, wearing a top hat that is too large and equestrian attire, with the emblem of the Legion of Honor flashing on her lapel. She blatantly and subversively appears as an aristocratic male dandy. In making this portrait the centerpiece of her 1925 exhibition, Brooks demonstrated her refusal to become an object of the heterosexual male gaze.

Her *Self-Portrait* was followed in the same year by her portrait entitled simply *Una, Lady Troubridge* (1923). Una Vincenzo Troubridge (1887-1963) had recently left her husband for Radclyffe Hall, who was to become the author of the most famous lesbian novel of the twentieth century, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).

In this portrait, another depiction of a cross-dressed woman, Brooks uses the model of the male dandy, including bobbed hair, and a large monocle. The pose and eye-piece offer a humorous commentary on gender roles and also alludes to a lesbian bar in Paris named "L'Monocle."

Both Brooks's *Self-Portrait* and her portrait of Lady Troubridge were created as three-quarter length portraits. Visually one assumes that the two women who are portrayed in the paintings are wearing men's slacks, but in reality they usually wore tailored skirts. Exactly what the two women wore in their portraits is left to the viewer's imagination.

From 1923 to 1924, while Brooks was in England, she and the British artist Gluck (1895-1978) painted each other's portraits. Gluck, only twenty-eight at the time and still experimenting with her own identity, painted the older artist's portrait first.

Brooks did not care for the younger artist's work so it was never exhibited. Her portrait of Gluck, entitled *Peter, a Young English Girl* (1923-1924), however, was a success. The younger artist, who went by the name Peter before she used the name Gluck, cropped her hair and wore men's clothing. Brooks's portrait of "Peter" depicts a fine looking young person of indeterminate gender who sports a handsome suit, smart cravat, crisp white collar, and holds a man's hat in her right hand.

After painting Peter's portrait, Brooks built a house with Natalie Barney at Beauvallon, France, near St. Tropez. To preserve their independence, the structure consisted of two wings that were united by a dining room.

Brooks's career reached its zenith in 1925 with three exhibitions of her work. The first was in Paris at the Galerie Jean Charpentier from March through April. The show traveled to the R. B. L'Alpine Club Gallery in London during June and ended in December at the Wildenstein Galleries in New York.

While the exhibitions of 1925 were successful, Brooks painted few works after this time. She did, however, create two illustrations for Barney's book entitled *The One Who Is Legion; or, A. D.'s After-Life*. The book, about one person who had several different identities, was privately published in a limited edition of 450 copies in London during 1930.

During the same time, the artist began an autobiographical manuscript entitled *No Pleasant Memories* that,

although composed over the next twenty years, was never published. One exhibition of Brooks's oeuvre was held at Galerie Théodore Briant in Paris during May 1931.

In the early 1930s, Brooks was haunted by childhood memories that led her to draw more than one hundred pen and ink works. These curious pieces consist of an intertwined single line that seems to symbolize Brooks's dependency and separation issues.

In the drawing, *Caught* (1930), for example, all the figures are entangled. Another drawing entitled *The Impeders* (1930) depicts a figure attempting to escape from enmeshed individuals. *What the Saint Heard and Saw* (1930) appears to illustrate the voices heard and visions seen by the artist's mentally ill brother.

A series of Brooks's drawings were exhibited at the Arts Club of Chicago in January 1935. Brooks traveled to America for the show and in 1936 rented a studio in Carnegie Hall, New York City, where she executed a portrait of the bisexual novelist and photographer, *Carl Van Vechten* (1880-1964). A portrait of the internationally known society hostess, lecturer, and writer *Muriel Draper* (b. 1886) followed two years later.

In 1939, as World War II began in Europe, Brooks returned to France to live with Barney in Villa Beauvallon. When the house burned in 1940, Brooks retreated to Italy, where she purchased Villa Sant'Agnes outside Florence. She wrote another unpublished memoir about these years entitled *A War Interlude, or On the Hills of Florence during the War*.

After World War II, Brooks faded from public life. Her artistic output ceased and she lived in isolation. She purchased the smaller Villa Gaia in Fiesole, where she remained until 1967. Amazingly, Brooks took up her brush again at the age of eighty-seven to paint a portrait of Umberto Strozzi (1961), a descendent of the famous Renaissance family.

In 1967, Brooks took a studio apartment in Nice. Within two years, Natalie Barney confessed that she had had an affair with another woman for the past seven years. This confession devastated Brooks, who could no longer cope with the hurt and jealousy she felt toward Barney, so she ended their long relationship.

Having grown increasingly eccentric while living in isolation, Brooks died alone at the age of ninety-six on December 7, 1970. Natalie Barney died two years later in Paris, having also reached the age of ninety-six.

Brooks's artistic legacy was honored with a retrospective exhibition entitled *Romaine Brooks, Thief of Souls* in 1971 at the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the National Museum of American Art). She had given her collection and private papers to the museum before her death. The same exhibition traveled again in 1980 under the title *Romaine Brooks, 1874-1970*. Individual works by Romaine Brooks were also included in numerous group exhibitions as art began to be studied through a feminist lens in the 1980s.

Most recently, in 2001, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. devoted a one-woman exhibition to Brooks's work entitled *Amazons in the Drawing Room*. It was the first time that a museum publication examined Brooks's lesbianism in relation to her art. At last, scholars are willing to see what Brooks made visible in life-sized paintings as long ago as the turn of the last century.

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