



Laurençin, Marie (1883-1956)

by Elizabeth Ashburn

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Marie Laurençin in 1949
(top) and her painting
Group D'Artistes.

Photograph by Carl van
Vechten, October 6,
1949.

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Group D'Artistes
courtesy McCormick
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Collections,
Northwestern University.

French painter, portrait artist, and set designer, Marie Laurençin had a number of affairs with men, including fellow cubist painter Guillaume Apollinaire, but she also had close friendships and affairs with women.

An illegitimate child, Marie Laurençin was born in Paris in 1883 to a Creole mother who worked as a seamstress. She began her art career as a porcelain painter at the Sèvres factory and studied with the flower painter Madeleine Lemaire. She attended the Académie Humbert where she met George Braque. Through Braque, she soon became part of a group that included Picasso.

In 1907 Laurençin exhibited her paintings at the Salon des Indépendants and was introduced to Guillaume Apollinaire. The two artists began a tumultuous affair that lasted until 1913. They strongly influenced each other's vision. Apollinaire referred to Laurençin as a female version of himself. He undoubtedly influenced her dreamy imagery and the symbolism of her work.

Laurençin is the best known of the women associated with the cubist movement. Certainly, her paintings dating from around 1910 are strongly cubist. However, she said modestly that, although the experiments of cubism fascinated her, she never became a cubist painter because she was not capable of it.

Her modesty notwithstanding, Laurençin is probably generally omitted from the list of pioneering modernists because of gender prejudice rather than lack of accomplishment.

In 1914 Laurençin married Baron Otto von Wätjen. For the duration of World War I, she and her husband took refuge in Spain. In 1921 she returned to Paris and divorced von Wätjen.

While Laurençin had a succession of male lovers, she also had close female friendships and lesbian relationships. She became part of the female expatriate community in Paris that sought both artistic and sexual liberation. Lesbianism, for many of these women, was a crucial element of their resistance to bourgeois social conventions.

The first American who befriended Laurençin and bought her paintings was Gertrude Stein. Laurençin soon became part of the Stein salon on rue de Fleurus, where artists, writers, and intellectuals met for conversation and inspiration.

Laurençin remained in contact with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas until Stein's death in 1946 and continued to see Toklas until her own death. She also met Natalie Barney during these early years in Paris and corresponded with her during the period 1940 to 1950. As another expression of her interest in lesbianism, late in her career Laurençin illustrated Sappho's poetry, in a translation by Edith de Beaumont that was suppressed by the Nazis.

Laurençin's 1921 exhibition at Rosenberg's Gallery in Paris re-established her reputation after World War I. She became known particularly as a portraitist, especially of celebrities such as Coco Chanel.

She also established herself as a set and costume designer by collaborating with Francis Poulenc in designing the set and costumes for *Les Biches* (1924) for the Ballets Russes. Her work during this productive period is characterized by the use of strong pastel colors and by the evocation of a fantasy world of quintessential femininity.

Laurençin's work gained important recognition in North America and Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. She was nominated for *Vanity Fair's* Hall of Fame in 1927 and named chevalier of the Légion d'honneur in 1937.

During World War II, Laurençin remained in Paris even after her apartment was requisitioned by the Germans. After the war she designed the sets and costumes for *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1945) for Roland Petit's Ballet des Champs-Elysées and *La Belle au bois dormant* (1947) for the Ballets de Monte Carlo.

She died in 1956 and was buried in Père Lachaise cemetery.

Since her death, the responses to her feminine aesthetic--characterized by a palette of pastel colors and feminine subject matter--have been varied. Some critics make unflattering comparisons of her work with that of her male cubist contemporaries, while other critics defend her aesthetic choices as prompted by her need to differentiate herself from strong male artists such as Picasso and Braque.

In 1983, the Marie Laurençin Museum in Nagano-Ken, Japan was inaugurated to celebrate the centenary of her birth.

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