

The New York Times

The Art and Times of Tamara de Lempicka

By John Gross
September 4, 1987

TAMARA DE LEMPICKA -you may not recognize her name, but there is a fair chance that you have seen her face. It gazes out from one of her most frequently reproduced paintings, the "Auto-Portrait" of 1925, also known as "Tamara in the Green Bugatti." The young blond driver sits at the wheel of her car, with full red lips and sensuous eyes, gloved and helmeted like an aviator (though the helmet looks curiously metallic) -the perfect image of modernity, 1925 vintage, and the embodied spirit of Art Deco.

During the 1920's and 30's, while she was living in Paris, Tamara de Lempicka established herself as the quintessential Art Deco painter. No one who has seen them could readily forget the stylized portraits and nudes that she painted at that time, with their dramatic shadows and frozen drapery, their sub-Cubist backgrounds of planes and angles and skyscrapers. They have a hard, chrome and enamel feel to them, and yet they contrive to be full of individual character, too.

By the time she left for America, shortly before World War II, Lempicka's reputation was in decline. The dealers lost interest in her, and for many years her work, when it attracted attention at all, looked hopelessly dated.

Then, in the late 1960's, she began to share in the revived fortunes of Art Deco in general, and by the end of the 70's she had once more come into her own. A retrospective exhibition was held in Paris in 1972; a deluxe book about her, edited by Franco Maria Ricci, was published in 1977; since then the prices paid for her paintings have risen sharply, and there has even been a play about her ("Tamara," which was first produced in Hollywood in 1984 and will be coming to New York in the fall).

In spite of this she has remained an elusive, somewhat mysterious figure, and there was certainly room for a more extended study of her life than the two or three sketches that are all that has been available up until now. "Passion by Design" sets out to fill the gap; it also offers a handsome selection of the paintings (most of them reproduced in color) and photographs taken from Lempicka's own albums.

The text has an unusual history. After Lempicka died in 1980 her daughter, the Baroness Kizette de Lempicka-Foxhall, began to collect her letters and papers and start making notes of her own. Her relationship with her mother had been a difficult one; she was anxious to set down the story in a way that would, in the words of Charles Phillips, "banish the ghost," and at the same time do Lempicka justice - to produce a book without any trace of "Mommie Dearest," as it were.

In 1986 she met Mr. Phillips, and they agreed to collaborate. Mr. Phillips, as he explains, took down the Baroness's story, edited it and recast it in the third person; he has also supplemented it with his own research and material drawn from interviews with Lempicka's friends and acquaintances.

There is no reason in principle why such a method shouldn't have worked, but in practice the results are not very satisfactory. For much of its length, the book provides no more than a trickle of information, bulked out with feeble anecdotes and historical "background" of the most banal variety. The Jazz Age is summed up as "the decade between the last machine gun burst in the trenches on the Marne and the first splat of bone and blood on the sidewalks of Wall Street"; the 1930's are ushered in with the news that "before long a strange little man who looked remarkably like Charlie Chaplin would play on the turmoil of worldwide depression to get himself elected ruler of Germany."

Still, let us be thankful for those hard facts about Lempicka that we are given - about her years in Paris in particular. She arrived there with her husband in 1918, both of them refugees from the Russian Revolution (Tamara herself was Polish); her life in exile felt empty, and she turned to painting at the suggestion of her sister, enrolling as a student with the painters Maurice Denis and Andre Lhote.

Her subsequent success brought her into contact with many leading artists and writers of the time (she painted a striking portrait of Andre Gide, for example), but she also kept one foot firmly in the world of smart society. The list of the friends she painted reads like a random dip into the Almanach de Gotha - the Marquis d'Afflitto, the Duchesse de la Salle, Count Furstenburg-Hendringen, the Grand Duke Gabriel Constantinovich - though a glance at their portraits will confirm that she was no mere flatterer.

One of the most oddly contorted and powerful of her portraits was of a Spanish dancer, Nana de Herrera. It was commissioned by Nana de Herrera's lover, a wealthy Hungarian called Baron Kuffner, and the authors describe it as "something of an assassination"; shortly after it was finished Lempicka replaced the dancer as Kuffner's mistress. He was only one of her many conquests, but the most enduring of them: it was as Baroness Kuffner (they had been married in 1933) that she sailed with him to America in 1939.

The American years were spent in Hollywood, in New York and then, after Kuffner's death in 1962, in Houston. Apart from Hollywood, where Lempicka made a certain splash, they sound like a prolonged anticlimax, and by the time she moved to Mexico, in 1978, she had plainly become an impossible mother, and a fairly impossible person. But she did achieve one last grand gesture, asking for her ashes to be scattered from the air over the volcano Popocatepetl. Her request was honored. A book with its share of colorful moments, then; but on the whole it is the pictures that are its justification. And not all of them, either - a few are pure kitsch; but the best of them have an electrifying impact.