



Tamara De Lempicka: A Life of Deco and Decadence

By Laura Claridge

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Born in 1899 to Russian aristocrats, Tamara de Lempicka escaped the Bolsheviks by exchanging her body for freedom, dramatically beginning a sexual career that included most of the influential men and women she painted. After burning brightly at the centre of Paris's artistic circle, she made her way to America in the late 1930s, where she dazzled and seduced the rich and famous of a new continent. Her paintings, like the artist herself, glow with beauty and sexuality. Contemporary critics, however, dismissed her gorgeously stylised portraits and condemned her scandalous lifestyle. A resurgence of interest in her work occurred in the 1980's, spurred by such celebrity collectors as Jack Nicholson, Barbra Streisand, and Madonna. In this meticulously researched, absorbing biography, Laura Claridge explores Lempicka's artistic accomplishments, her amorous adventures, and the critical judgements that at first excluded her from artistic recognition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

With her couture clothes and movie-star good looks (she was frequently mistaken for Greta Garbo), Tamara de Lempicka seemed too glamorous to be a serious painter. Even in the years of her greatest success, 1925 to 1935, the luscious colors and highly wrought finishes of her portraits--a suspect genre in any case to high modernists--linked Lempicka more closely to the Italian Renaissance painters she revered than to her cubist contemporaries. She was labeled an "Art Deco artist," someone whose work was more decorative than substantive. Feminist scholar Laura Claridge, a good guide despite her overuse of the phrase "gender politics," enhances readers' appreciation of Lempicka's work without scanting her enjoyably lurid personal life. Born (around 1895) in Russia of Polish and Jewish descent, Lempicka fled the revolution to set up shop in Paris during its avant-garde heyday; the Nazi threat sent her to America, where Hollywood proved a natural setting. Two husbands, one daughter, male and female lovers, manic-depressive illness--nothing ever really cramped her style or her dedication to art. She died in 1980, a venerable survivor still looking forward rather than back. Blending art history with psychological analysis, Claridge helps readers understand why this gifted painter, although commercially successful, has not enjoyed the critical respect she deserves. --
Wendy Smith

From Publishers Weekly

Even a reader with doubts about de Lempicka's artistic output will be charmed by the eccentricities described in this feminist-flavored, engrossing account of the bawdy and amusing painter whose work Claridge sees as an "early protest against the denial of female sexuality." Born into a Polish family in Russia, de Lempicka (1898-1980) was raised in an atmosphere of luxurious frivolity. At 16, she caught the eye of Tadeusz Lempicka by appearing at a St. Petersburg ball with two geese in tow, and her pursuit of the handsome but spineless playboy culminated in an ill-fated marriage. After the Russian Revolution, the couple arrived penniless in Paris, where de Lempicka was encouraged by her family to take up art as a means of support. She threw herself with gusto into the debaucheries of '20s Paris, having numerous affairs with both men and women while the unhappy Tadeusz languished. Her garishly exuberant portraits and nudes were extremely successful in no small part because of her flair for publicity and her high society connections. After she moved to the U.S. in 1939 with her second husband, Baron Kuffner, the press focused increasingly on her extravagance and dinner parties rather than on her paintings, and she began having difficulties with her work, though the decorative sensuality of her early paintings has made her fashionable again among contemporary collectors. The book's final chapters are affecting, as Claridge adeptly shows de Lempicka's decline into a cantankerous society lady, color coordinating her clothes with her car, tormenting her daughter and granddaughters and painting her houses lavender. (Oct.)
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From Library Journal

De Lempicka (1898-1980) was one of the few painters who worked in the style of art deco, and her arresting, mannered, provocative, sensual, and hard-edged figurative paintings are now coming into their own. In the past, however, little has been known about Polish-born de Lempicka's life in Europe, Russia, Mexico, and the United States. Claridge rectifies this with an astonishingly thorough examination of Tamara's adventures and accomplishments; her passions, affairs, and marriages; the details of the lives of her daughter and grandchildren; and even some commentary on her portraits and flower paintings. This biography is meticulously researched. Almost any question to be asked about her life is covered. The single regret being that there is only one 16-page, color insert of her work. Happily, a more image-based catalog by Alan

Blondel is forthcoming. This excellent academic study of an independent woman artist is highly recommended for public and academic libraries. A Mary Hamel-Schwulst, Towson Univ., MD
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Users Review

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