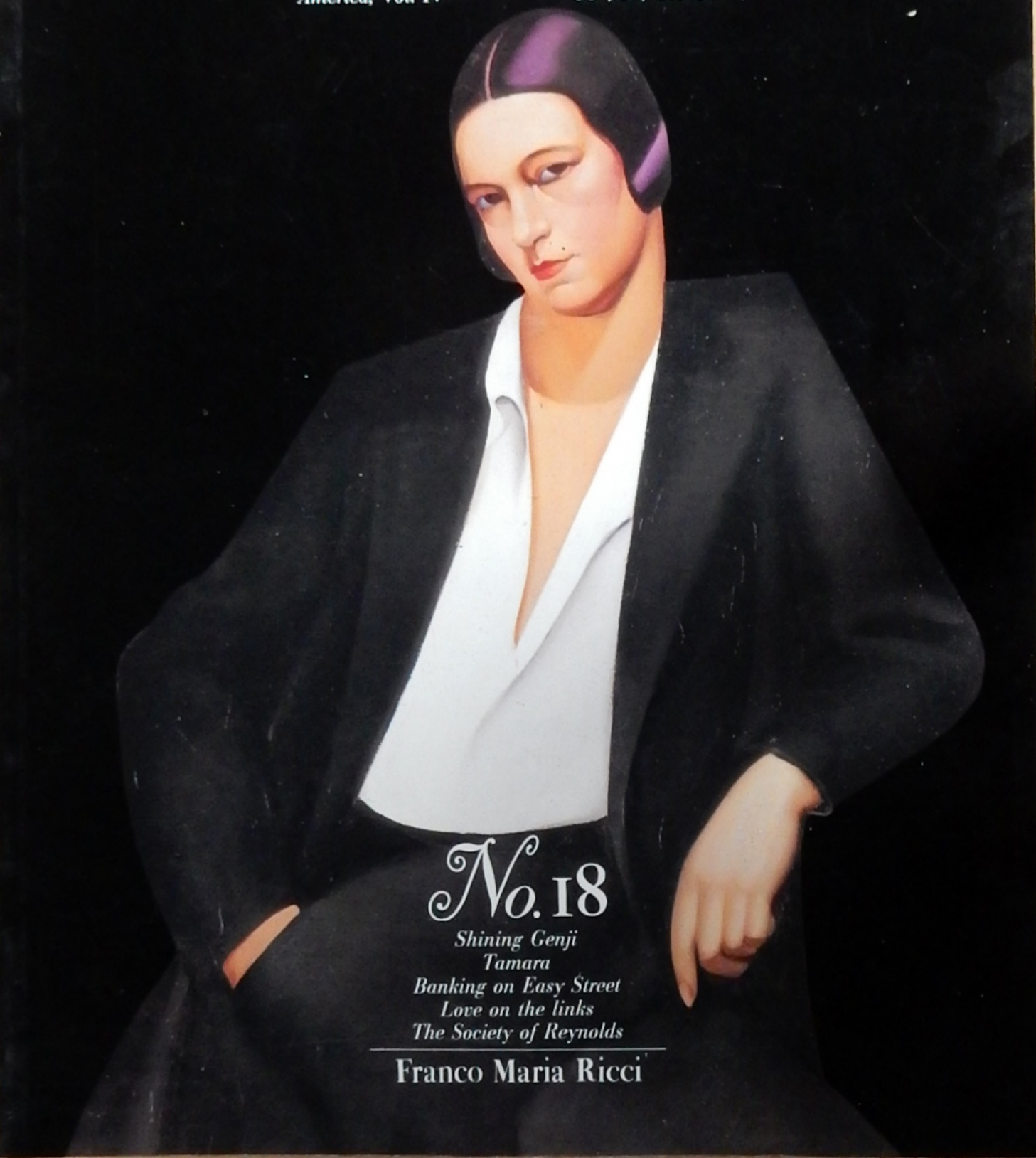
FMR

America, Vol. IV *US $10, UK £6*



No. 18

Shining Genji
Tamara
Banking on Easy Street
Love on the links
The Society of Reynolds

Franco Maria Ricci

Tamara

by Giancarlo Marmori, Alberto Arbasino

Tamara

Painting the beau monde

by
Giancarlo Marmori

In society columns of the 1930s and 1940s Tamara de Lempicka appeared as a languid, marabou-draped jetsetter with the agreeable title of "baroness"; at her soirées titled Europeans mingled with Hollywood stars. Her beauty was famous, as was her unprecedented refusal of the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio's advances. Today she continues to merit our attention – as a painter of portraits and nude studies whose bold, enamel-like colors and mannerist elongations form a fascinating chapter in the history of art deco. In his book *Tamara de Lempicka* (1977), Franco Maria Ricci first rediscovered this nearly forgotten artist. Her renewed popularity is evidenced by the play based on her life, *Tamara*, currently showing in New York.

In July 1972, when the Galerie du Luxembourg in Paris opened a Tamara de Lempicka retrospective, no one knew or had ever known who she was, this painter who had been in fashion at the time of the couturier Paquin, a woman with a mysterious, doubtless Slavic name, possibly taken from the sophisticated repertoire of art nouveau pseudonyms. Basic biographical and bibliographical data were lacking (and still are), and all that circulated were rumors about this once famous and now rediscovered artist of the 1920s and 1930s, who was said to commute between her American residence in Houston, a palace in Monte Carlo, and the everlasting Ritz in the Place Vendôme. It was whispered, among other things, that she had had an encounter, or rather a clash, with the Gabriele d'Annunzio of the Libro Segreto*; that she was remarried to a certain Baron Kuffner (hence her title of baroness); and that she had been temporarily converted to abstract art, she who had always had a preference for the representational, in fact for Pontormo. Here then was a cultural figure of uncertain background, with only a few photos that bore witness to a radiant beauty approaching the preeminence of Garbo and the Comtesse Greffulhe.*

This ignorance of the artist's past existence and the lack of any meaningful analysis of her work furnish, in any case, additional proof of the barbarous iconoclasm to which for almost half a century a great many artists who did not play the game of the School of Paris avant-garde were subjected – roughly ninety percent of them being thus stripped of legitimacy – worse than in the time of that acknowledged foe of images, the Byzantine emperor Leo III. Anyway Lempicka has been reevaluated, or at least brought once more to the public's attention, but everything or almost everything remains to be rediscovered, since of her total production only crumbs have emerged – no drawings, none of the paintings of unspecified date executed with the palette knife. Seen again have been forty-eight astonishing oils from the years 1925-1935, which have been exhibited at the Galerie du Luxembourg, but which were chosen in such a way as to form a partial anthology of art deco. Other works can possibly be traced to museums and private collections. One would have to seek them out, for instance, in the Orléans museum or at the home of Rufus Bush-Vandercook in New York, in the Petit Palais in Geneva, or the Baron Kapp-Herr collection in Paris, the Saint-Denis museum, the Sierpski-Lidorikis collection in Athens, or the Grassi collection in Egypt, to mention a few of the innumerable patrons and galleries that contended for Lempicka's works (and those of Romaine Brooks, Ignacio Zuloaga, and Ferdinand Hodler) before the abstractionist reign of terror. It is still possible to convey a certain amount of information on the life of Tamara de Lempicka, though there are difficulties. One is apt to stumble and lose one's way, depending as one must largely on black-and-white reproductions, many of them out of focus, disappointing old catalogues, and a labyrinthine, somewhat frivolous scrapbook in which extravagant praise for the painter's skill is combined with glorification of her incomparable beauty and elegance.

What is striking in her paintings, those put back in circulation, is the cerebral and immediate physical presence of the figures, or rather a daring synthesis of Logos and Eros, of ice and fire, suggesting lofty

Title page
Portrait of Man in Overcoat (Mr. Lempicki), *1928, oil on canvas, 126 x 82 cm (49.6 x 32.3 in.). Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.*

Portrait of the Duchess de La Salle, *c. 1925?, oil on canvas*
161 x 96 cm (63.4 x 37.8 in.), Collection Galerie du Luxembourg, Paris

comparisons with Ingres, the mannerist pupils of Raphael, and some of the more polished proto-romantics. The singular quality of Lempicka's nudes and portraits (anthropomorphism is a mania with her, not to say a torment), by which they are immediately and eloquently revealed, is obtained primarily through immobility and bodily amplification (elongated and expanded limbs, statuesque poses), with the use of a few clear, bright, contrasting tones, brilliant as lacquer, and a paucity of such details as would otherwise detract from the instantaneous effect. The series of portraits presents us with a kind of poster display of the haute bourgeoisie, *with glimpses of the aristocracy, between the two wars, in a manner not indifferent to the influence of advertisements for the refinements and conceits of the period. One can smell the aroma of any number of Chanel perfumes, and divine the glow from lampshades; one is aware of the presence of James, the stoical butler in Jean Sablon's song. And here we might mention a second characteristic of these portraits, their insistence on showing figures from society or from the demimonde, elevated to social status by ephemeral fashions. The few accessories in this gallery indicate a setting of* luxe, calme et volupté. *One glimpses skyscrapers, subdued draperies, staircases and balconies of private mansions in the modernist neoclassical style, and resort landscapes for the few, such as the snows of Saint Moritz. The men wear well-tailored suits, tuxedoes, and even full-dress uniforms; the women flaunt low necklines and wear evening gloves or wide garden-party hats. The posterlike assertiveness of these paintings, the flashy rigidity they share, does not however mean uniformity. The Marquis d'Aflitto has a lunar aspect, Arlette Boucard is medusan, while Doctor Boucard, the inventor of Lactéol, positively exudes intelligence. Some dream hopelessly like Ira P.; others seem almost Olympian in their detachment, like Marjorie Ferry, the* Femme au gant, *and Madame M. The Duchesse de La Salle, in her riding habit, is clearly in an evil mood. This psychological variety within the apparent monotony of stylistic design distinguishes the portraits.*

*As for the nudes (which exist in abundance), one can only be astonished at the tangible way in which they reveal themselves to the utmost to the penetrating gaze of the artist. They are almost all of giantesses reduced to their sexual quality, though a naive decorative consistency is urged upon them (*Tais-toi et sois belle!*). The frankest examples of this reduction to carnality are undoubtedly* La Belle Rafaela, *the monumental sleeper who, in her fleshiness and languor, could lie amid the many polished concubines of Ingres's* Bain turc, *or else the* Nu allongé *and the* Dormeuse. *When these models do not simply idle about – watched, one might say, by shameless eyes, they seem to be suffering outrage, like the sluggish* Andromède *and the no less abused girl in* L'Heure bleue, *who poses with uplifted arms.*

Lempicka's nudes, unlike the many stylized glacial beauties of the time, often seem pressed to the point of surrender, like heroines of comedies or dramas of chastity. Such is the case of Le Modèle, *who advances tragically toward whoever is threatening her, and of* Suzanne au bain, *who jumps up in surprise. Lempicka's preferences for her models would seem to run to glowing physical health and wholesomeness combined with mental vacuity.*

Conspicuous in this regard are the Nu assis, *a pyramid of limbs topped by a blank face, the limpid maiden of* A l'Opéra, *and the great dolt in* La Colombe. *In contrast to this harem of adorable imbeciles, there is the series of dynamic figures, some of them ambiguous, others overbearing. Among these we find the self-portrait of the painter at the wheel of a racing car, the equestrienne Duchesse de la Salle, the fortune teller in* La Joueuse de Cartes, *and finally* Nana de Herrera, *Andalusian dancer, an electrifying allegory of Hispanic wantonness.*

Phantasms of this kind certainly did not appear on the canvas simply through the mechanics of form. For Lempicka, her subjects were not mere pretexts for stylistic eccentricities. Had they not been nourished by the cult of the eternal feminine, the elective affinity between artist and model, these nudes would be in no way disturbing, and would remain masks, suggestions, inert shapes. This is revealed by the episode of the chance discovery of a model for Rythme *(that is, for one of the six Parisian odalisques that so enraptured d'Annunzio when he saw reproductions of them at the Vittoriale), which took place in the foyer of the Théâtre de Paris between the two wars. Having admired the shoulders of an unknown woman in the audience seated in front of her, Lempicka approached her during the interval and anxiously asked her if she would consent to pose. The stranger agreed, presented herself at the studio next day, and for five days posed nude. But she did not divulge her name or supply the artist with any hint of her identity. She vanished forever, having left with Lempicka the evidence of her anonymous and as it were official immodesty.* Rythme *is not the only picture inspired by the mysteries of the gynaeceum. Under the even more anodyne title of* Groupe de Nus, *Lempicka painted another disturbing composition, in which four female figures are condemned to wail*

Portrait of H.I.H. Grand Duke Gabriel, *date unknown, oil on canvas 116 x 65 cm (45.7 x 25.6 in.), Collection Galerie du Luxembourg, Paris*


T.DE LEMPITZKI
1925.

and writhe in the toils of voluptuousness.
Another episode, as though to prove the authenticity of this passion, took place years later on the West Coast of the United States. It was then that the artist carried out the rather spectacular idea of holding a contest in which the first prize would be the honor of posing as Susanna in the bath, for a painting of the same title. The competition was announced to the female student body of the University of California in Los Angeles, and about a hundred candidates responded. The winner was a certain Cecilia Meyer, a Susanna blossoming from the opulent society of America.
It must be remembered that Lempicka did not produce only worldly or amorous works. She also indulged herself in a parallel oleographic vein, which, on the formal level, turns out to be less genuine than the sensuous one. We are accordingly led to wonder about the reasons for this inspiration, and to ask ourselves if so many "proper" works were not painted to create an alibi, to set up in opposition to her authentic and profane works an equally unrestrained line of sacred and pietistic ones. It would seem that she intended to balance Suzy Solidor and La Belle Rafaela with La Mère Supérieure weeping glycerine tears and Saint Antoine praying, or else with little girls transfixed in the ecstasy of prayer. So much for the religious vein, but that is not all. To the high life of the sixteenth arrondissement, and later of Beverly Hills, she counterpoised at a certain point the rectitude of the humble (Vieillard, La Bretonne, Jeune Hollandaise), to the delights of Rythme, the desolation of Réfugiés, and to Eros as an end in itself the joys of Christian motherhood (Mère et Enfant, Maternité). Or could it be, on the contrary, that she used this parade of innocence and devotion the better to lay emphasis on its opposite, the practice of atheistic hedonism by the elite. As Oscar Wilde observed, sacred things are the only ones worth profaning.
These paintings, so often fluid in content but always solid in structure, this liquid voluptas congealed in diamonds, did not emerge from the void but from the confluence of various circumstances. First of all, one recognizes a dim echo of the style of Lempicka's first teacher, Maurice Denis, though she seems to have studied with him for only a very short time. Denis was then one of the most popular instructors at the Académie Ranson, which had been founded by Paul Ranson in 1908 and after his death was run by his widow, France, nicknamed "la lumière du temple." It was from Denis, that angelic yet diabolical painter and extoller of Parisian neo-traditionalism, that Lempicka at least learned how to paint, for he was an intransigent and very methodical teacher. And it was only thanks to a patient apprenticeship that she was later able to execute such finished pictures and obtain from her paints the light and solidity of enamels. Denis made his pupils start by depicting still life from nature, without applying themselves immediately to nudes, and work humbly at sketching and drawing before taking up oils. He required them to study and copy the classics, to become familiar with every artistic genre and technique, and to learn how to enumerate all the tones of a color in order to know its infinite qualities and shades. But the influence of Maurice Denis is of little importance compared with the much more decisive one of André Lhote, the pioneer of synthetic cubism who, by reconciling the iconography of the salons with the avant-garde experiments of a Braque or a Gris, set up the claim to a synthesis of "plastic metaphor." The formula is unfortunately nebulous, but if we turn to Lhote's work in an attempt to elucidate it, what emerges is a cubism applied to traditional subjects, and conversely a sumptuous verism subjected to a cautious if disintegrative geometric treatment. From this derives a series of anatomies corrupted by circles, triangles, rectangles, and other figures; a volumetric mania that was fairly common in the Paris studios of the time.
Lempicka thus assimilated the techniques and theories of this simultaneously progressive and traditional style, which in the meantime was spreading from France all over the world. For example, in Femme au Col de Fourrure she applied the notion of "plastic rhyming," meaning that the shoulders of the lady (Baroness Renata Treves) harmonize with the back of the armchair and the collar of the fur coat by a precise repetition of line. In Andromède she worked out a contrast of planes, setting the roundness of the virgin figure against the angles and straight lines of the urban scene depicted in the background. Then there are innumerable "stylizations of light," as on the forehead, hands, and shirtfront of the introverted Marquis d'Afflitto. Finally, she used the idea of colored geometrical shapes when she gave her Eve a perfectly spherical breast. The idea of painting Adam and Eve occurred to her on seeing a model walk about the studio, take an apple from a fruit dish, and place it on her shoulder. She painted it as a joke, a trifle, with perhaps just enough archetypical inspiration as was needed to stimulate artistic

Preceding pages
Portrait of Marquis d'Afflitto, *1925, oil on canvas. 82 x 130 cm (32.3 x 51.2 in.). Private collection.*

Following pages
Woman in Yellow, *date unknown, oil on canvas. 78 x 118 cm (27.5 x 45.5 in.). Private collection, Paris.*

Self-portrait, *1925, cover for the magazine* **Die Dame,** *oil on wood*
35 x 26 cm (13.8 x 10.2 in.), private collection, Paris

Adam and Eve, *c. 1932?*, *oil on cardboard*
118 x 74 cm (45.5 x 29.1 in.), Musée d'Art Moderne, Petit Palais, Geneva

invention and show her sensitivity in the presence of feminine grace. Lhote's teaching was not confined to precepts of a practical order. It also involved the elevation of Ingres as the inventor of cold yet turbid classicizing nudes, a subject on which the post-cubist artist wrote enthusiastically, as when he praised the exaggerated back of La Grande Odalisque and the sinuous arm of Teti in L'Apothéose d'Homère. Owing perhaps to a natural predisposition or else to her receptivity as a pupil, Lempicka was certainly affected by this praise of Ingres's work, for its admirable fusion of the abstract and the palpable, stasis and inquietude, light and darkness, to the point where everything converges in hallucination. Fashionable cubism combined with the influence of Ingres gave way to a stylization that, depending on the dosage (too much geometry or an excess of academicism), developed on the one hand into so-called art deco and on the other into the final, desperate neoclassicism of the 1930s, which was later to be overwhelmed by abstractionism.

Artists situated at the crossroads of these two trends, or engaged in applying one or the other, proliferated in the West before being consigned to hell by avant-garde eschatology. During the Third Reich, art deco painters like Amorback, Peiner, and Scholz appeared in Germany, along with such latter-day Ingresists, or followers of Feuerback and Hofmann, as Ziegler and Saliger. In the United States, Bellows profited by cubist techniques in the 1920s to structure the impact of his Dempsey and Firpo, while in Great Britain, which was at that time rather slow to respond to the revolutionary excitement of the Continent, Forster Wilson and Duncan prolonged the neoclassical tradition and Wyndham Lewis adapted the cubist-Ingres manner to British taste. This essentially ornamental neoclassicism, reduced to cold tinsel, became moreover the rage in every area of aesthetic expression, with the tenuous and perverse classicizing of Pierre Louys, the archaeology of the novelist Pierre Mille, and Giraudoux's affable Trojan War, while translators and illustrators tirelessly exhumed fables and lyrics by Sappho, Anacreon, and Longus.

But the scope of Lempicka's work goes well beyond the confines of post-cubism and classical art deco. The psychic and somatic intensity of her figures, their anatomical transformations, as well as the tics and rictuses often crystallized in their faces, introduce into her formula the unmistakable outrance of the Germanic Neue Sächlichkeit. Outrance and cafard. Here we are not in the presence of elegant anthropomorphic friezes, of murals painted for the Normandie or the Palais de Chaillot, but of creatures more than alive, sometimes caught by surprise in some of their innermost expressions. A hair-raising flash of arrogance explodes in the gaze of S.A.I. le Grand Duc Gabriel Constantinovitch, a demented gleam not to be found in the society portraits of contemporary Frenchmen. The hypochondriac Marquis d'Afflitto, painted this time in a blue double-breasted suit, surely resembles Peter Lorre. Comte Fürstenberg Herdringen looks like a Mephisto from the Berlin of the years of Klaus Mann. The nudes exude carnality, coming close to kitsch or at least to the bounds of the permissible, as do those being painted at the same time by the American Paul Cadmus.

Any attempt to place Tamara de Lempicka in a biographical context seems a futile enterprise; in any case it can scarcely be achieved. The artist prefers to remain in the shadows, and so one is obliged to work with what little one can gather from documents, rumors, and even indiscretions. It is like examining possibly apocryphal fragments of a life, and losing oneself among the gaps and silences, the crossings out and endless alterations. It is like poring over a palimpsest.

The meager official biography of Lempicka, née Gorska, only begins in 1923, the year in which, according to the mimeographed account, the sixteen-year-old painter was living in Paris. This would mean that she was born in 1907 and not in 1898 or 1902, as the discordant entries concerning her in certain universal art encyclopedias maintain. The official account also fails to mention her place of birth or where she spent her childhood and adolescence, but if the encyclopedias are reliable on this point, she was born in Warsaw (which seems likely) and later attended courses at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg (this the artist denies). It is certain, however, that she fled with her husband (Lempicki) to Paris, along with the flood of emigrés from Bolshevik Russia, and that she attended the art schools of Denis and Lhote, as well as the Grande Chaumière.

The Montparnasse years, as the artist recalls them (she lived in an upper-class neighborhood, rue Maupassant in Auteuil), are marked by moods and incidents from the most traditional and even hagiographical Parisian vie de bohème of the early decades of our century. They take the form of adventure imperiled by hunger and exhilarated by outbursts of genius and recklessness. This is shown by two anecdotes, drawn, one supposes, from an inexhaustible repertoire. The first is an apology, intended to illustrate the conflict between the ardor of the spirit and the crude requirements of the instincts. Having dashed out to a pastry shop to buy a box of religieuses, those round pastries filled with cream, Tamara returned to her studio and arranged them in front of her easel in

The Musician, *1929, cover for the magazine* **Die Dame**, *April, 1930*
Oil on canvas, 116 x 75 cm (45.7 x 29.5 in.), private collection, Paris

Portrait of Marjorie Ferry, *c. 1932?, oil on canvas*
99 x 65 cm (39 x 25.6 in.), private collection, Paris

such a way as to form a still life. She began to draw them on the canvas but the sight of them soon turned into craving. She was hungry, and being unable to resist, she took the pastries and ate them all. From the same period she tells another moralité legendaire, perhaps as though to prove the insurmountable gap between intellectual impulses and the unexpectedness of mere contingency. One night, at La Coupole in Montparnasse, the futurist poet F. T. Marinetti invited her, along with other people seated at his table, to go and set fire to the Louvre, a mausoleum of traditionalism. They all followed him excitedly out into the street, but Lempicka's automobile, in which the poet was to ride, was nowhere to be seen. The upshot was that she and Marinetti went together to the police station to report the theft, their terrorist enthusiasm having quite suddenly and miserably spent itself. This period of bohemianism, or anonymity, was doubtless a fleeting one, since Lempicka was still young when she attained the success she deserved. A number of Third Republic salons welcomed her works, and certain national museums were quick to add them to their collections (the museum of Nantes and that reliable gallery of contemporary art, the now defunct and lamented Musée du Luxembourg). One-woman shows, group shows, and honors now followed one after another in the artist's curriculum vitae, beginning with her debut in Milan at Count Emanuele di Castelbarco's Bottega di Poesia (1925). Then came a one-woman show at Colette Weill's (1926), first prize at the Exposition Internationale des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux (1927), a one-woman show at Zak's (1928), a bronze medal at the International Exhibition of Poznan (1929), a showing at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh (1930), group shows at the Galerie du Cygne (1934), Bernheim Jeune (1935-36), Jeu de Paume and Musée des Invalides (1937), and finally at the Charpentier (1938), before leaving Paris and landing in New York.

Her career as painter – assuming it is worthwhile following up the human waywardness of an artist – was accompanied by a day-to-day chronology that is more difficult to establish. We know that she was married to a certain Lempicki, perhaps in Saint Petersburg, by whom she had a daughter, Kizette, and whose name she kept. We know besides that from 1933 until her departure for the United States, having in the meantime married her second husband, the Hungarian Baron Raoul Kuffner, she lived in a three-storey villa in the rue Méchain, a stone's throw from the Observatoire. Newspaper reports of the time dwell at length on the twentieth-century structure and furnishings of this house, designed by Mallet-Stevens, once the architect for Poiret and the Comtesse de Noailles. They speak of gray tones, of chromium fittings, of an American bar, of wainscoting and beige draperies. The artist's bedroom, according to one reporter, was bathed in a green subaqueous light. The painter received the high society of Paris, and her parties were duly reported in the newspapers. In 1937, for instance, she entertained the ambassadors of Greece and Peru, Van Dongen and the Princess Gagarin, Kisling and Doctor Voronoff, the Duchess Villarosa and Lady Chamberlain, her old teacher André Lhote, and the two Clemenceaus. Lempicka's beauty and elegance, her fame as an artist, made her the hub of a vast, rotating coterie. They revolved around her like planets large and small, shining and spent.

One reporter after another was enraptured by the sight of her (d'Annunzio had nicknamed her "la donna d'oro"), and marveled at her hands, her long thick hair, her wardrobe. A certain Fernand Vallon, who went to see her in the period of Andromède, found her "in cardinal's purple, wearing emeralds deep as lakes." Blonde, "splendidly blonde," she shifted large canvases "resembling gray velvet, the same as the curtains" with "delicate hands with blood-red fingernails." The Monterey Herald, interviewing her in 1941, gushed over this "slender little [sic] thing" with golden red hair falling to her shoulders. All were amazed and had recourse to hyperbole, as did the unsigned reporter for the periodical These Women, watching her recline on a blue sofa in a white satin dress trimmed with marabou. This one wrote that Tamara was tall (as she actually is), slender, and "round in the right places." All this at the beginning of the Second World War, when Lempicka was making her appearance on the American scene. Vittorio Foschini, who met her later on Capri in 1951, was likewise unable to resist the spell of those "slowly gesticulating" hands. He added that they gave the impression that they were "always caressing," and went so far as to imagine these caresses as "very sweet and numbing." Other glimpses of her are more affected ("tall, soft, and harmonious in her movements," according to Luigi Chiarelli, "glowing with life, her face illuminated by large, rather artificial eyes, and with an easily smiling mouth reddened by costly Parisian lip-rouge"). Yet others preferred to dwell on her attire, such as (to quote at random) a "white satin evening gown with a dark red sash and short sable jacket," or a "beige yellow whipcord coat, trimmed in black,

Following pages
Rafaela the Beautiful, *c. 1927?*, oil on canvas.
64 x 91 cm (25.2 x 35.8 in.).
Private collection, Paris.

Portrait of Dr. Boucard, *c. 1929?*, *oil on canvas*
135 x 75 cm (53.1 x 29.5 in.), private collection, Paris


TAMARA DE LEMPICKA

Andromeda, *c. 1929?, oil on canvas*
99 x 65 cm (39 x 25.6 in.), private collection, Paris

designed by Creed." Lempicka's beauty could not have failed to tempt the unabated desire for women that wracked the mind and senses of the aging Gabriele d'Annunzio. It was a superb beauty, as in her portraits of women, and comparable to that of Mallarmé's Herodias. But the fact is that Tamara did not submit to the old man.

Lempicka has described some incidents, markedly d'Annunzian in atmosphere, from their brief and stormy encounter at the Vittoriale in 1927, motivated on the painter's side by her wish to paint the poet's portrait (it was never executed; no one knows if it was even sketched), and on his side by the hope of seducing his foreign visitor. Reluctant to pose, d'Annunzio immediately laid siege to her by well-tested techniques.

First of all, he put her up in the Leda Room, the bedchamber from which no woman had so far emerged unscathed. It was a room overflowing with chinoiserie, embossed with gold filigree, draped with the skins of wild animals and oriental carpets. It was saturated by an intense aroma given out by little scent bottles, and a large bed, strewn with cushions, held the stage. Then the poet subjected her to the test of luxury, attempting to appeal to her vanity and tempt her to play the courtesan by throwing at her feet an exotic profusion of more or less costly clothing and jewelry. But out of all that lace, velvet, and crêpe de Chine, the painter chose only a pair of silk stockings. In short, she showed positive restraint and self-control.

The Commandant even had cannons fired in her honor from the ship Puglia, *exclaiming at each salvo: "For you! For Poland! For your art! For your beauty!" It was no use, Tamara did not yield.*

One morning, losing patience, he sent her a letter announcing he would pay her a visit that same night. Receiving no answer, he sent a second missive in the afternoon, then as she still made no sign, a note with these peremptory words: "I'll be with you tonight whether you like it or not." And so it was. He stepped across the threshold of the Leda Room around three a.m., while the guest was sleeping (the doors of the Vittoriale were not provided with locks). She had no time to react – as Foschini writes, having interviewed Lempicka in Capri – before d'Annunzio burst into "a torrent of words." Caresses and supplications obtained no result. D'Annunzio bewailed his old age, and as soon as he left her alone, Tamara fled the Vittoriale to Gardone, where she took the first train for Brescia.

All this in 1927. We know that one year later the painter broke with her husband, since Lempicki's portrait bears the date of 1928 and his left hand remained unfinished due to the probably unforeseen rupture. As already mentioned, she later (1934, in Switzerland) married Baron Raoul Kuffner, a wealthy individual who was well-known in cosmopolitan high society in both the Old and the New Worlds.

While Tamara pursued her career as artist and portrait painter (one-woman shows at Paul Reinhardt's and Julien Levy's, at the Courvoisier Galleries and the Milwaukee Art Institute), on the borders of the arrogant and, in the final analysis, aberrant Parisian art world, husband and wife moved from place to place, sometimes living, sometimes merely visiting. They are known to have traveled for two years between New York, Chicago, Santa Fe, and the Rocky Mountains where they lived on a ranch.

Tamara in the meantime was providing society gossip. People talked about her rustic cottage in Beverly Hills, which had once belonged to King Vidor, and about her spectacular arrival in a New York railroad station, followed by a line of porters. Habitués at her studio were enumerated (Dolores del Rio, Tyrone Power and Annabella, and even Garbo), and the guests at her colossal soirées (Vicki Baum and Juan Romero, Luigi Filiasi and Theda Bara, Conchita Pignatelli and Lorna Hearst). All this did not keep her from making a patriotic contribution to the war effort while the Second World War was raging in Europe. She donated a painting to the association Freedom Speaks (1940), and in the same year organized a benefit for the British-American Ambulance Corps. The above has been gleaned from the artist's voluminous and sometimes bewildering scrapbook, where she more often appears and is applauded as Baroness Kuffner than as Tamara de Lempicka, one of the most gifted pupils of André Lhote. With the passage of time, and in corroboration of the rejection of any artistic item that did not bear the label of the avant-garde, Tamara's art was also thrown, temporarily, in the poubelles de l'histoire *of international painting. We shall never know how many undaunted figurative artists ended up in the same dustbin, Balthus and Deineka, Edward Hopper and Anton Räderscheidt, Paul Delvaux, Raphaël Soyer, and Alberto Martini, along with every individual, fact, and object of a grand apostate illusion. The result of this damnation is that we know very little about Lempicka, apart from the documents of her imposing beauty, the gossip that haunted her footsteps in Europe and America, and the stupendous oils of the art deco period. The rest remains a labyrinth, full of whispers and reverberations.*

Giancarlo Marmori

Giancarlo Marmori (d. 1981), Italian journalist and novelist, was for many years the Paris correspondent for the Italian journal L'Espresso.

Portrait of Ira P., *c. 1933?*, *oil on wood*
99 x 65 cm (39 x 25.6 in.), private collection, Paris

Tamara

Tamara in Hollywood

by Alberto Arbasino

A remarkable d'Annunzian spectacle, Tamara, *based on Tamara de Lempicka's visits to Gabriele d'Annunzio's Vittoriale, was recently staged in Hollywood and reviewed by Alberto Arbasino. The following article appeared in the Italian journal* La Repubblica, *12 September 1985.*

Hollywood. It is an old villa, standing alongside the stream of cars flowing out to the Hollywood Bowl – tonight Aznavour is singing, tomorrow Ashkenazy plays – and it looks just like the famous Steinhof church built in Vienna by Otto Wagner. The same Byzantine cupola on a square base, with small bell towers likewise quadrangular and adorned with stone steps and triumphal trophies of gilded metal now turning green. But outside is a cannon, next to a white De Soto coupe. Here hundreds of performances have been given of the remarkable d'Annunzian spectacle entitled Tamara, imaginatively derived from the book about the aerodynamic painter Tamara de Lempicka, published by Franco Maria Ricci with the journal of Aélis, the poet's chief waiting woman in the Vittoriale. Tamara was born in Warsaw in 1898, and in later life lived in Houston for many years. Celebrated from Milan to Paris for her art deco portraits of women, particularly women in male attire like Marlene Dietrich, she is said to possess "monumental plastic-tectonic (plastisch-tektonisch) vigor" in the catalogue of the extraordinary exhibition "Tendencies of the Twenties" held in Berlin in 1977, where she was represented by three works hanging alongside Picasso, de Chirico, Max Ernst, and Dix. Her self-portrait at the wheel of a car, from a Swiss collection, was also included last year in the show "Automobile and Culture," organized by Pontus Hulten at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles for the Olympics.

Her visit to the Vittoriale (the poet, in his licentiousness, was quelled amid a huge household uproar) is the subject of this theatrical spectacle written and directed by twenty-three-year-old John Krizanc and Richard Rose, both of them Canadian like the production. It is the most extraordinary development of the Ronconi Method since Orlando Furioso (and after those "room-to-room" events by Ronconi himself based on texts by Wilcock). The basilican interior of the villa – which belongs to the American Legion and is vast – is filled with knick-knacks and gewgaws like the Vittoriale itself, displaying real genius in the stage props, their choice and quantity. Whole warehouses and storerooms of Warner Bros. and Paramount must have been emptied in here, with results that correspond exactly to the aesthetic views of the Commandant: the guest is forever tempted to look for the number of the auction sale under the wrought iron and majolica.

Here are fringes, bows, spangles, machine guns, big and little gilt stars, flags, banners, armchairs with claw feet, batteries of muskets, velvet opera seats, a statue of Augustus with purple bangs, antique bindings, guest book, "Memento Audere Semper," 78-rpm records, medal collections, breviaries. Fortuny-style fabrics hang from the walls and from the second-floor balconies, where there are alcoves of different colors and styles (quattrocento, Moorish, Franciscan, art deco, Pre-Raphaelite), much larger than in the real Vittoriale and with a different aroma in each; tuberose, tobacco, vetiver, patchouli. Peony petals scattered everywhere; a cupid dangling amid the festoons of Tiepolesque roses frescoed inside the cupola. Victories of Samothrace. Awards, decorations. A dining room with monumental table and chairs, colossal chandelier, centerpieces and wall lamps as in Dinner at Eight. Violets, lilacs, boots, night-lights, and incense.

At the entrance, an old footman, unctuous and servile in striped jacket and slippers, says buona sera to all the arrivals, but an arrogant Blackshirt, black as the Franco Maria Ricci volumes in the showcase behind him, stamps their passports valid only for 10 February 1927, and rudely warns them not to open doors or drawers and not to disturb the Commandant – while a flock of waitresses in white caps circulates with trays offering sparkling house wine.

Variegated audience. Several groups of stout and lively women. Debussy, Chopin, fox-trot. Goblets and glasses everywhere, "thank you," "don't mention it," "settees," "how do you do?" With all these cushions it looks like an animated old-fashioned reception in the lobby of a small hotel in Cortina. With a beard à la Dino Grandi and the gestures of a gloomy skeptic, an elegant pianist with grizzled hair plays piano-bar in a tuxedo, while on the second floor a little ballerina in a tutu practices the Dying Swan.

The servants and staff have given the guests a guided tour and instructed them to show respect for the Poet; they have looked them over and warned them in police fashion that they had better behave. They themselves, however, behave dreadfully, and hurl themselves into frightful intrigues, forgetting almost immediately that the Vittoriale is full of people.

So here is a Luisa Baccara, tiny and vivacious as a child, not the silent and austere old woman who used to be seen at the Volpi balls in Venice. The dancer Carlotta would do anything to obtain a recommendation to Diaghilev. The maid Emilia has long fingers and nervous outbursts: and the old valet is a former gondolier

Tamara

who has seen them all and understands everything, but is fed up and cleans with a feather duster, insolently, amid an odor of food that soon mixes with the jasmine.
There would seem to be some mystery: the fascist cop is named Finzi, the new chauffeur rummages in all the drawers and copies the torn-up letters in the wastebasket, the "decayed dandy" Gian Francesco plays soft background music and drinks huge glasses of cognac, but looks like a viveur *capable of vigorously blackmailing everyone. Every so often someone emerges from the bathroom with flaming nostrils and a sudden discharge of gaiety. But the best of all is undoubtedly Aélis – a combination of Gloria Swanson, Maria Melato, and Joan Collins – the supreme housekeeper-manager-confidante of a d'Annunzio who, on the other hand, is completely wrong for the part; a botched conception somewhere between Antonio Gandusio and Louis de Funès, highly excitable in white bush jacket and the medals and decorations of a South American colonel.*
The fine costumes are by Gianfranco Ferré. Furnishings and settings by Robert Checchi. The originality of this "live film" lies in the fact that six-seven-eight actions are paced in extreme rapidity and animation, and unfold simultaneously in all the rooms and even in a kitchen that opens out in the cellar, with impressive sets of copper pans and jugs of the period and Po Valley vegetables. As well as in a gigantic church in the back, with its naves of prie-dieux, its early main altar, its rococo pulpit, and its Michelangelesque mausoleum prepared in advance for the Poet: altars and pianos and safes and beds and baths and ovens always violently employed in support of the plot.
And so it goes on: excited powwows, flirtations, macho swagger, snacks, altercations, drawers and doors flung open, secrets shared, explosions of rage, affectionate massages, catastrophic seductions, threats at pistol point, orations to the crowd from the pulpit with only a few spectators, and, in contrast, feminine intimacies that are heavily attended . . . Pearls, feather dusters, slippers, spies, gunshots. And all of it keeps rushing on madly. Thus beyond the usual involvement and their ability to choose among several possibilities, each making up his own chance itinerary (as in music after 1950), the spectators function as intrusive, invisible witnesses of riotous scenes in other people's houses. And so, up and down, and down and up they go, always at a gallop, in a wild chase after cops and pianists and maids, rapidly informing each other what has happened in the bedrooms or the porter's lodge, while downstairs in the kitchen the Poet, in a foul mood, prepares himself a zucchini omelet and eats the whole thing himself, burning his tongue and arguing with Aélis over whether or not it is too salty.
During the intermission, the spectators eat too (the price of admission is quite high), in a legionnaires' mess catered by the renowned restaurant Ma Maison *– hence French cheeses, the sole gaffe. And one must also hurry outside into the garden, because Luisa Baccara runs away in the car and later returns in shreds: accordingly great bustle around the De Soto, with suitcases, hatboxes, and train. And in all of this Tamara herself is little more than a pretext: a tall, beautiful woman, the very image of Angelica Huston, but insipid (actually she was extremely likable, according to Wally Toscanini), in diadem and sequins. She makes a grand entrance with an enormous quantity of luggage in the first act, and has a violent scene with the intruding Poet in a boudoir, with screens and lamps overturned, and Chinese vases thrown at his head. Considerable, not to say tiring, movement. Shouts, gunshots, incongruous sounds, trampling in the adjoining rooms, crashes upstairs, a stink from below, pursuits in fur coats with suitcases flying open and underwear spilling out. Scenes of fervent passion in hallways. Servants insulting their employers. Doors slammed and skirts flung in people's faces. At times it all seems like a dream of Visconti come true, or Italy as seen by Muriel Spark. One could also spend one evening in the women's quarters, a second in the reception hall, and so on. There is even a murder: whodunit? "Shut the doors!" thunders Aélis. And everyone flees.*

Alberto Arbasino

Tamara

A play based on the life of Tamara de Lempicka.
Tamara *is currently playing at the Armory, Park Avenue and 67th Street, New York City.*

Written by John Krizanc
Directed by Richard Rose
Conceived by Richard Rose and John Krizanc
Produced by Moses Znaimer (executive producer) and Barrie Wexler (producer)
Production design by Robert Checchi
Original music by William Schallert