



Tamara de Lempicka: A Life of Deco and Decadence

Laura Claridge

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An icon of the Jazz Age, Art Deco painter Tamara de Lempicka lived a life well worth recording. Until now, however, no one has written the story of this woman of extraordinary talent and notoriety. She was a great beauty, an aristocratic refugee of the Russian Revolution, and a frankly erotic painter who insisted upon Renaissance aesthetics, figuration, and painterly craft in modern art. The sky-high prices attached to her canvases in recent years have still not dispelled the suspicions that a woman of Lempicka's glamour and fame could be a truly serious artist. Yet the reviews of the early twentieth century tell a different story: her work was routinely singled out as competing with major figures of the School of Paris, including Léger, Laurençin, Kisling, and Picasso.

In this first critical biography, Laura Claridge draws upon her exclusive access to Lempicka's family, friends, and archives to re-create the life that the painter carefully withheld even from her own daughter: the truth of her birth; her escape from Bolshevik Russia; her determination to become a New Woman; her lifelong bouts of depression; her numerous affairs with the women and men she painted; her flight from Nazi Europe via Havana; and her years in Hollywood and New York as the "Baroness with a brush," all informed by the artistic integrity and social anachronism that condemned her to being written out of the canons of modern art.

Emblematic of '20s excess and indulgence, Tamara de Lempicka's life of great wealth, indiscriminate sexuality, and endless intrigue makes for a fascinating narrative. But her paintings have inspired fierce disagreements over issues of class, wealth, and gender in modern art, making her work ripe for critical re-evaluation. In *Tamara de Lempicka: A Life of Deco and Decadence*, Laura Claridge has succeeded brilliantly on both counts, bringing to light the contradictions that fueled the life and work of this provocative painter.

Though Paris in the early twenties certainly earned its bohemian reputation, Tamara was playing the game hard by anyone's standards. It seemed to her that she could have it all: respect, money, and sexual gratification on the side. She had arrived at the Gare du Nord only four years earlier, gifted with a painter's talent and a family history of feminine power. Encountering a cultural climate that affirmed art as a remunerative career for women, she also felt freed personally by the Modernist mantra to "make it new" that underwrote every aspect--trivial and profound--of daily life. She was determined to embody that icon of the age, the new woman.

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