
Tamara de Lempicka: A Life of Deco and Decadence by *Laura Claridge* (1999), 436 pages.



A casual reader of Polish painting in the 20th century may have only a limited idea of Tamara Lempicka's life and her contribution to the Deco history of the 20s and 30s, and thus this excellent biography will be a revelation. Her prominence was primarily recognized in Western Europe and America, where she spent most of her creative life. Firstly, there is her irrepressible individuality that fascinates. She was an “*artiste*” to the core, and it is often difficult to figure out the dividing line between reality (read: facts) and legend (read: Tamara's fantasies.) Was she born in Warsaw or in Moscow? Perhaps in 1898 but, maybe in 1896 or some other year. We know very little about her father, Boris Gurwik Gorski; her mother was Malwina Dekler, a well-to-do Pole of French descent. Her teen years were certainly exciting, as she divided her time between the French Riviera chic and the splendors of St. Petersburg salons, where she met the handsome Tadeusz Lempicki; she fell hopelessly in love and married him just before the Revolution overtook Russia. Their escape with the baby to France was a true odyssey. And here, in Paris, her career began.

Unquestionably she had a formidable talent for painting and also amazing energy. Her erotic works are not to everybody's liking, but her portraits are stunning. Soon she was in the forefront of Deco art, which marked a world event in architecture as well as other art forms. Secondly, she showed stamina when fighting against odds facing any painter. This was evident when she escaped from France via Portugal to America in 1940 and had to start from scratch. Amazingly, she moved to Hollywood and became star-struck. Soon Tamara was the talk of the town. A musician can earn his living by playing every night to a different audience or an actor by moving from town to town. But a painter depends entirely on admirers' who buy specific works. Fortunately for Tamara, she had some outside resources, but one suspects she would have succeeded even without them.

Post-war years brought various experiences to this exceptional woman. At one point the Deco style was considered “*passé*”; Tamara was getting old, and an adjustment to new realities was not easy. Her ultimate retirement to lovely Cuernavaca south of Mexico City was probably a blessing for her.

There were many aspects of Tamara. Her escapades in Paris were not particularly ennobling, to put it mildly. Her affair with the celebrated Italian poet d'Annunzio may be perhaps excused, as the old rascal obviously took advantage of her. She parted from her first husband Lempicki who went to Poland while she retained his name in her painting career. She then married a rich Hungarian baron who became a refugee in the U.S. but still with substantial means. One wishes that she had treated her devoted daughter better.

Here is an interesting footnote; eight years ago a popular book entitled *Glass Mountain* was published and the cover contained a photomontage of two paintings that were obviously done by Lempicka but without proper credit to the artist. This serious oversight was spotted by alert Mrs. Alina Żerańska, the Editor of our *Newsletter*. The resulting commotion caused sharp exchanges between various Polish organizations and American media. However, it also indirectly made the reading and viewing public aware of the painter's importance on both sides of the Atlantic as an outstanding representative of deco art, The exhibition of Tamara's paintings along with other woman artists in Washington D.C. that took place at the same time became a noted event.

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