NEGOTIATING THE GENDERED MARGINS OF MODERNITY:
TAMARA DE LEMPICKA AND HER ICONIC FEMALE FORMS

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INTRODUCTION

There is a mode of vital experience - experience of space and time, of the self and others...I will call this body of experience "modernity."¹

-Marshall Berman

I live life in the margins of society. And the rules of normal society don’t apply in the margins.²

-Tamara de Lempicka

In its entirety, the vibrant life of Tamara de Lempicka reads like a screenplay for a major motion picture produced during the Golden Years of Hollywood. This script reads so extravagantly because Lempicka worked diligently and meticulously to construct her high-profile public persona as a modern, independent woman. She formed herself into a chic hyper-feminine personality which closely resembled the “costumed” women of her images and the cover girls of popular fashion magazines. Her personal anecdotes from this particular historical period recount her experiences as the physical embodiment of the quintessential New Woman of the interwar years. In this role, Lempicka independently maneuvered through a variety of public spaces in modern Paris to stage her own melodrama full of intrigue, sex, and complete excess.


As a Russian expatriate living in Paris in the 1920s and 30s, Lempicka circulated through a variety of social spaces within the city. In her own Montparnasse apartment designed by modernist architect Mallet-Stevens, she hosted the most glamorous parties for an international elite. Here Lempicka provided a social space where famous avant-garde artists such as Moïse Kisling, Kees Van Dongen, and her mentor André Lhote, mixed and mingled with art critics, collectors, and European aristocrats. In the early 1920s Lempicka frequented the artist-centered Parisian cafés such as Deux Magots and Café Rotonde, and for a short time in 1923, she even attended the Friday afternoon literary salon of the American lesbian poet Natalie Barney at Barney’s Left-Bank home on the Rue Jacob. In these spaces she became acquainted with even more high-profile literary and artistic characters, for example, Jean Cocteau, Paul Poiret, Isadora Duncan, and Colette, while also engaging nightly with Paris’s established lesbian and bisexual community in seedy nightclubs along the Seine. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Lempicka left the European stage in exchange for the skyline of Manhattan which had come to dominate her portraits since 1929. In 1931 she headed west towards the glitter of Hollywood, where she continued in her position as portraitist to the rich and famous.³

Lempicka’s own life was one of performance – of personifying a contemporary social character fundamental to her particular modernist culture. Once out of that culture, however, her character seemingly lost all relevance. With the advent of World War II she became nothing more than a flamboyant female representative of the “Lost

³ Laura Claridge, *Tamara de Lempicka: A life of Deco and Decadence* (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1990). At this time, Claridge provides the most recent and detailed biography of the artist. In contrast to previous accounts which cited Warsaw as Lempicka’s birthplace, Claridge has traced her birth to Moscow. Documenting Lempicka’s life-story proves difficult because much of her history is derived from the provocative and decadent tales she herself created to conceal the reality of her childhood.
Generation,” a poster-girl for the materialism and decadence which flourished in society during the inter-war years of the 1920s and 1930s. A recent critic asserted that Lempicka’s work is “hopelessly out of date and none of it was very good to begin with. The real work of art is de Lempicka’s life.” Lempicka’s performance of an exaggerated cultural type overshadowed the ability of her art to exist freely on its own as critics often focused on the glamorous persona of the artist and the equally decorative nature of her metallicized Art Deco painted surfaces.

Lempicka justified a reluctance to answer questions about her past by claiming that her art was all that mattered. It becomes difficult, however, to separate Lempicka’s person from her productions, as it is their unarguable intertwining which allows her work to represent the period of its creation in such an intense, intimate way. This thesis, then, seeks to devote due attention to both her life and work by spotlighting one chapter of Lempicka’s elaborate story – the height of her artistic popularity in the mid 1920s and 1930s. In this period, Lempicka depicted Art Deco icons of modernity, fashioning her women into immense, decorated bodies situated in modern, yet ambiguous spaces of femininity. Working within and around this framework of constructed spaces, I argue for an appreciation of Tamara de Lempicka as a successful modern artist who, through both her images of modern women and her life as a bisexual public figure, contributed significantly to the discourse of gender in modernity.

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4 Claridge notes that Lempicka’s performance of the exaggerated public persona she constructed throughout her life almost erased her place in the history of modern art because “by leveling the real drama of her life into a calcified catalog of stories, Tamara reduced herself to a caricature.” Claridge, 9.


6 Images begin on page 39.
The development and expansion of gender studies has led scholars to take a more in-depth look at Lempicka’s eroticized imagery of women. This thesis continues along the trajectory of this recent scholarship in order to evaluate Lempicka’s art as a bold personal statement about what it meant to be a New Woman during the interim years between the great world wars. I argue that Lempicka created her vision of gender to respond to the flux of gender identities at this historical moment. In her life she similarly refused to be restricted to a binary system of gender classification. In an effort to allow Lempicka’s art to have the first word, a formal analysis of her images of female figures sets the stage for further exploration of modern femininity presented by the artist in her work and life. My argument then expands these formal elements outward and contextualizes them within both a historical and theoretical discourse.

When examining the stylized paintings Tamara de Lempicka produced at the height of her career in the mid 1920s and early 1930s, one is immediately confronted by the spatially aggressive female figures which dominate her canvases. Through the combined use of robust curves and soft angularity, Lempicka’s large iconic female bodies consume the pictorial space by asserting themselves boldly through mannerist-inspired form and color. She developed her interest in Italian masters such as Michelangelo,

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8 In the early years of the 1920s, the period during which Lempicka began her career as an artist, Mannerism re-emerged in the discourse of art, undergoing a critical re-evaluation. In The History of Art as the History of Ideas (1921), Dvořák interpreted Mannerism as a European response to the political, intellectual, and religious identity crisis which followed the Renaissance and Protestant Reformation. Understood by Dvořák as a style of inward expression and response to a chaotic confusion of identity, it seems fitting that the re-emergence of Mannerism corresponds to the period following World War I, the interwar years. Friedlaender further developed this discourse in his seminal work, Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting (1925). Instead of interpreting Mannerism as an artistic decline, Friedlaender regarded it as a new form of artistic feeling. He cited artists Rosso Fiorentino, Jacopo da
Botticelli, and most notably Pontormo, in 1911 when she first accompanied her grandmother on an extended tour of Italy. During this visit Lempicka “discovered Italy as a child,” recounting years later that it was her grandmother’s “painstaking guidance that opened my eyes to the glories of the Italian masters of the Quattrocento and the Renaissance.”

Similar to the statues and paintings by Michelangelo which Lempicka copied diligently during another visit to Italy in 1925, many of her statuesque female figures express a masculinized muscularity that, while obvious in the nude figures, becomes evident even beneath the fabrics of the clothed women. The undulating fabrics, clinging closely to the human forms, move the eye over the body in a sweeping motion. This movement is echoed by Lempicka’s tight brushwork, a technique that emphasizes a metallic smoothness in her highly finished surfaces. Her brilliant use of chiaroscuro infuses these images with a theatrical flair, evoking a sense of drama similar to that of early twentieth-century fashion photographs and cinematic stills (Fig. 1). Imbued with this fixation on the mechanical, Lempicka’s art engages ideas advocated by the Italian Filippo Marinetti, whom she met in Paris in 1924. In their Futurist Manifesto of 1909, Marinetti and his followers stated that “the splendor of the world has become enriched with a new beauty: the beauty of speed.”

Lempicka’s distinctive ability to blend Pontormo, and Parmigianino as key figures in the movement, emphasizing their interest in: the unnatural elongation of form, tension, emotionalism, strained poses, and vivid colors. Lempicka translated these ideas into her own work.

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10 See figures 3 as an example.

11 This, the fourth tenet of _The Manifesto of Futurism_, is quoted in Lempicka-Foxhall, 45.
tradition with innovation moved the critic Arsène Alexandre in 1929 to ask, “By what singular and happy paradoxes does she contrive to give the impression of modernity – and in my view a modernity of huge intensity – while using the resources of classicism in its purest form?” 12

Creating a unique style, Lempicka combined her passion for Renaissance form with an emphasis on aerodynamic mechanics and the humanized cubism of her mentor André Lhote as she subjected the sensuality of the human body to geometric disintegration. This fusion of styles came to represent the style of Art Deco, which according to biographer Charles Phillips “sported cold, hard textures and colors on the one hand, and luxurious decadent sensual imagery and detail on the other, drawn at the same time to metal and flesh, to the automobile and the naked body.” 13 The artist softened this cold, stream-lined hardening of her masculinized female bodies by adorning these women with the most current fashionable costumes and decorating figures with the staples of contemporary cosmetics – bright red lipstick, painted nails, and heavy eye shadows. These adornments work to diffuse the “strange” tension created by the mixing of masculine and feminine attributes. 14

Initially, the magnitude of the female figures disturbs and overpowers the viewer’s protective distance. Lempicka emphasized the immensity of these bodies by thrusting her figures outwards to the margins of the painted surface. These women are so large that they cannot be fully contained within the space allotted them by the canvas.

12 Blondel, 18.
13 Lempicka-Foxhall, 45.
The proportion of the figures in relation to their backdrops upsets the balance of the composition. It is this lack of balance which initiates an immediate encounter between the viewer and Lempicka’s luscious female bodies.

While Lempicka’s technique of painting to the margins of the picture space allows her to depict such immense bodies, this consumption of space also serves to limit and harness the freedom of her forms. The tight framing technique exacts great pressure on the figures, compressing the bodies within the pictorial space. Lempicka fragments these women’s bodies by extending legs, ankles, and the tops of heads beyond the frames’ boundaries, or by covering over sections of the body with visual obstacles such as fabric, manufactured objects, and heavy shadows. Through this fragmentation and compression, Lempicka plays with the concept of space as both constructive and restrictive, thereby generating tension through spatial ambiguity. It is from the analytical perspective of Lempicka’s spatial tensions that this thesis explores issues of gender in modernity. This exploration will take place on multiple levels, looking at Lempicka as a woman and an artist, in addition to the historical situation of women in this particular interwar period.

Just as the geometricized figures in her paintings represent the body as a compilation of multiple aspects, the figure of Lempicka as a modern woman and artist is a complex one that must be approached from a variety of angles. Lempicka’s art is able to evoke a specific time and place so vividly, precisely because it encapsulates themes of its transforming modernity – mechanization, commercialization, and fluid gender identity in the concise form of the female body. As a member of chic Parisian society Lempicka painted the portraits of her fellow socialites, models, and lovers which have come to
represent the drama and excitement of a particular era. To be a modern artist, according to Charles Baudelaire, the nineteenth-century poet and critic who defined modernity, the artist must capture the conditions of his or her own existence. While he admitted there is much to be gained from the study of a generalized and antique beauty, Baudelaire desired the “particular beauty, the beauty of circumstance.”

This thesis begins Chapter One by evaluating the ways in which Lempicka captured the particular beauty of the interwar years as a New Woman actively engaging with the city around her. I parallel Lempicka’s artistic practices with Charles Baudelaire’s fictional nineteenth-century flâneur in an attempt to portray Lempicka as a twentieth-century embodiment of the flâneuse, a figure nonexistent in Baudelaire’s and German sociologist Georg Simmel’s foundational texts on male-centered modernity. This alternative characterization situates Lempicka in the discourse of cultural politics and gendered modernity by examining her freedom to move within the margins of normative modern space as a bisexual woman. In Lempicka’s self-empowerment to inhabit this free space, she created in her own image a subversive figure of feminine desire which serves as the vehicle for her entrance into the discourse of modern gender.

It becomes clear that, as an embodiment of the modern woman, Lempicka conceived of herself as a marginal figure that refused simplistic and one-dimensional classification dictated by socially accepted codes of behavior for her gender as tied to her sexuality. She acted the part of la garçonne, a twentieth-century cultural figure conceptualized as freely embodying a combination of previously dichotomous feminine and masculine qualities in both physical appearance and behavior. Lempicka reflected

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this gender complexity in both her life and her painted depictions of modern women. Chapter Two then examines the complex notions of modern gender engaged by the artist in her work, as well as the tensions which exist between gender, sexual freedom, and identity in modernity. This section is grounded in a formal analysis of the spatial tension Lempicka created in a selection of her portraits and nudes, and in an historical discussion of the cultural politics and anxieties surrounding the emergence of the New Woman of the interwar years.

Similar to the women depicted in her paintings, Lempicka performed a hyper-feminine public persona which emphasized her beauty and fashion. As a modern woman artist, however, Lempicka appropriated aspects of masculinity – primarily the voyeuristic, eroticizing gaze with which she confronted her nude models. The final chapter attempts to reconcile Lempicka’s staunch belief in her existence as a mobile, marginal figure, with her appropriation of a hyper-feminine public persona which garnered her praise as a definably modern woman. Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Joan Rivière’s essay “Womanliness as Masquerade” provide the theoretical context for this chapter discussion. Both of these theories are founded in the idea of performing a gender through the projection of culturally coded attributes of either the feminine or the masculine. I argue that Lempicka’s dual identities, as an extreme feminine type and as a modern artist subverting the traditional notions of gendered space, illuminate the performative aspect of gender, thereby revealing gender in modernity as malleable and in flux.
CHAPTER ONE:

FEMINIZING THE STAGE OF MODERNITY

When Tamara de Lempicka immigrated to Paris with her husband and young daughter in 1918, she became part of an international set of cultural leaders who had made their way to the literary and artistic capital of the West in search of creative potential. This possibility was to be discovered and fulfilled through both the unexpected inspiration and the artistic freedom provided by the city itself. In the twenties and thirties the Parisian street acted as “the sparkling theatre of modern life” where consumer culture flourished. Following the war, leisure thrived as a commodity people could buy. Movie theatres, cabarets, and department stores provided the backdrop for the modern Parisian’s daily life. For many of the artists and writers who made their way to Paris during the first quarter of the twentieth century, the active city played a central role in the experiences they attempted to capture in their images and stories. As a modern space, the city provided relentless inspiration in many forms to an artist like Lempicka who circulated through this space. This chapter begins our discussion of Lempicka’s unique navigation through the gendered spaces of the modern city where she encountered and interacted with a variety of characters.

Paris began its development into a modern city during the second half of the nineteenth century under Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s direction. The expansion of the city’s narrow, medieval streets into wide, open boulevards transformed Paris into an urban center of mass culture. It is here, in the boulevards, that Charles Baudelaire located his protagonist of the modern city, the painter-illustrator Constantine Guys. As a detached observer strolling through the Paris streets, Guy functioned as the flâneur. Social theorist Janet Wolff states that the flâneur is the modern hero because his experience is based in a freedom to move freely about the city, the ability to control his subjective position within the spaces around him. Amidst the crowds, the flâneur was both an active participant in the world around him and at the same time outside of this world. Protected by the anonymity of the crowd, the flâneur functions “on the margins of society.”

Considering herself a sexually and spatially liberated modern woman, Lempicka once stated, “I live life in the margins of society. And the rules of normal society don’t apply in the margins.” As a figure working in the margins, the ambiguous, liminal space existing between two definable boundaries, Lempicka personified a new female type of Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century flâneur, the flâneuse. In contrast to Baudelaire’s construction of modern subjectivity as masculine, Wolff asserts that “the work of women modernists in art and literature is just as much an expression of and response to the modern experience.”

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18 Lempicka-Foxhall, 43.

19 Ibid., 3
visualize her unique experience of being a New Woman in the particular historical moment of the interwar years.

At the turn of the century a new stage for modernity had been set, one that included, and in fact, emphasized women, at least in aristocratic and artistic circles. Paris in 1900 became a haven for lesbian artists and writers, many of them émigrés from America. These women created an independent subculture, a separate space within the city of Paris located on the Left Bank of the Seine. This newly converted space can be described as a queer city. Dianne Chisholm explains:

> Queer city demarcates a historical, demographic, geographic, and poetic reconceptualization of the city that places queer – lesbian and gay, homosexual and transsexual – experience and exchange at the center and margins of urbanization.

By participating in this marginalized lesbian space, Lempicka managed to transcend both physical and metaphorical boundaries in the city. A bisexual herself, Lempicka navigated the metaphorical space of binary gender codes by engaging in numerous trysts with both male and female lovers throughout her life. She often found these erotic encounters in the dark corners and spaces of the lesbian nightclubs dotting the margins of the Seine’s Left Bank. These spaces of sexual activity provided Lempicka with artistic inspiration for imagining the bodies of the women who acted as her models. It is here that we can most visibly locate Lempicka as flâneuse and contrast this marginalized lesbian subculture with traditionally male-centered modernity.

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20 Shari, Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). Benstock provides a detailed study of the lesbian community of female writers and poets that occupied this space from the turn of the century to WWII, and aims to analyze these women’s experiences and contributions to Modernism.

In her evaluation of “Women and the Literature of Modernity,” Janet Wolff emphasizes that the literature of modernity describes the experience of men. German sociologist Georg Simmel elaborated on the position of women in, or more appropriately, outside of the developing discourse of modernity, defining modernity as the experience of the male city-dweller. In the city, man finds himself lost amidst the fragments of modern experience. He conceived of femininity, however, as existing outside the bounds of modern progression. Woman instead became even further equated with the idea of origin and mythic nature. Instead of existing in modernity, the female provides a refuge of maternal comfort and wholeness in contrast to this modernized fragmentation.

In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski discusses this theory of woman as the pre-modern, an idea which pervaded nineteenth-century sociological discourse. She traces this phenomenon of nostalgia for the feminine in the Romantic art of the nineteenth century, such as that of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, who evoked this notion of feminine origin with their large iconic female bodies. Such iconic forms also appear in the work of Tamara de Lempicka, for example, in her personified and mythological figures of *The Slave* (Fig. 2) or *The Musician* (Fig. 3). These female bodies, amplified in scale, consume the canvas, demanding the attention of the viewer. Like Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s depictions of decorative female bodies, these two paintings offer archetypes of the feminine as their soft curves resonate with the ideal female form, “nourished by the cult of the eternal feminine.”

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23 Ibid., 37.
Lempicka’s images, however, differ radically from Pre-Raphaelite depictions of an indefinite nostalgia. In contrast to the timelessness of the Pre-Raphaelites, Lempicka subverts the use of the female body by placing her figures, like *The Slave* (Fig. 2) and *The Musician* (Fig. 3) in modern spaces. Woman no longer embodies a point of mythological origin, but has become seemingly modern. Through her use of geometricizing, she abstracts the bodies, fragmenting them. This fragmentation can be related to the male experience of modernity as described by Simmel.

As in many of her portraits and nudes Lempicka set these figures against the backdrop of a modern city skyline. Her early works depict a European city full of angular buildings, chimneys, and rooftops. After a 1929 visit to New York to complete a portrait commission for a wealthy American businessman, Lempicka began depicting the towering skyscrapers characteristic of the modern American cities of this particular moment. Baudelaire asserted the distinction of modern beauty and modern art to be its fleetingness, its ability to capture the present moment. By modernity, Baudelaire meant “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent.” This Baudelarian idea of the fleeting nature of modernity, which Lempicka so clearly captured in her work, provides an interesting tangential point for a discussion of gender in modernity.

While essentialist theories of gender rely on fixed, standard identities of the male and female, gender in modernity becomes closely tied to notions of constructed gender.

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25 Although I have chosen to focus on Lempicka’s images of women, she did paint several portraits of men during her career. While many of the portraits offer depictions of her sitters which emphasize manliness, some of the images offer an effeminate masculinity conveyed through both pose and form. For examples of this gender hybridity see *Portrait of Marquis Sommi, Portrait of Marquis of d’Afflito*, and *Portrait of His Imperial Highness Grand Duke Gabriel* in Alain Blondel, *Tamara de Lempicka: Catalogue Raisonné 1921-1979*, trans, Margie Mounier (Lausanne: Acatos, 1999).

identity which changes and transforms over time depending on the society producing the specific attributes of the identity. Given women’s new freedoms in the interwar years, gender identity in modernity began to fluctuate between essentialist and constructed concepts, as both essentialist and constructed definitions have continued to coexist in the twentieth century. In her work, Lempicka represents this gender fluidity as she takes on the traditionally masculine genre of the nude which objectifies and eroticizes its traditional female body.

Lempicka’s approach to the traditional nude form can be understood as a means of apprehending her own bisexual desire. Although Lempicka takes on a masculine gaze in her depiction of the female nude, she appropriates this gaze within her own bisexual desire, thereby completely rupturing the conventional understanding of rigid masculinity and femininity. In one of her most famous nudes, *La Belle Rafaela* (Fig. 4) of 1927, Lempicka painted her model Rafaela whom she first encountered walking through the park, the Bois de Boulogne, during the winter of 1927. Lempicka recounted this discovery to interviewers saying,

> I become aware of a woman walking at some distance in front of me. As she walks, everyone coming in the opposite direction stops and looks at her...Then I see why everyone stops. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen – huge black eyes, beautiful sensuous mouth, beautiful body. I stop her and say to her, ‘Mademoiselle, I’m a painter, and I would like you to pose for me.’

As the quintessential flâneuse maneuvering through the city spaces with heightened awareness, Lempicka relentlessly grabbed hold of artistic inspiration as it came to her.

In *La Belle Rafaela*, Lempicka plays on the Western conventions of the voluptuous odalisque, adopting elements from the nudes of Ingres, Manet, and Courbet.

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27 Lempicka-Foxhall, 80.
This reclining figure again consumes the entire space of the canvas, but in this image the body represents the painter’s pure carnal desire. Lempicka emphasizes the model’s physique by juxtaposing the rounded forms against the basic geometric planes of the background. She plays a visual game of erotic hide and seek with the viewer, as a bright light illuminates the neck and breasts, but casts a strategic shadow over the pubic area. In this image Lempicka evokes the sensation of touch with the rich red fabric which disappears beneath the model’s right leg, but then reemerges as if held in her hand, and also in the body itself, the forms of which press toward the viewer and against the picture plane. Through the foreshortening of the model’s figure, Lempikca creates closeness between viewer and visualized body. Unlike the distance placed between the confrontational gaze of Manet’s Olympia (Fig. 5) and her viewer, Lempicka erases that spatial gap as she offers the model’s body directly to the viewer in a tactile way. As Paula Birnbaum states, “It is as if we are in the process of moving directly on top of her ample body…in a sexually charged manner.” In this way, Lempicka claims sexual control over her figure from her female perspective. In response to this erotic treatment of the female nude from an embodied female perspective, contemporary critic Arsène Alexandre dubbed Lempicka’s style as “perverse Ingrism,” in 1928. By utilizing the word “perverse” to describe Lempicka’s oeuvre, Alexandre reveals an underlying sense of disturbance experienced in relation to Lempicka’s art. Considering the application of


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.
the word perverse to Lempicka’s imagery, Italian scholar Giancarlo Marmori emphasized that “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.”

Lempicka’s identity as a woman artist who painted erotic images of women posed a challenge to the critic Alexandre and many others in light of traditional sexual politics of spectatorship.

While *La Belle Rafaela* represents the voyeuristic consumption of pure carnality and sexual availability, Lempicka painted other portraits of her model which offer a more subtle eroticism. These images, therefore, call the full appropriation of the masculine position into question. Lempicka’s relationship with Rafaela lasted for over a year, the two collaborating on at least three portraits. While working together, Lempicka and Rafaela fell into a daily routine in which they took a fifteen-minute break every hour to allow Rafael to refresh after an extended period of stillness. During this time, the two women spoke with one another openly about Rafaela’s difficult childhood and life as a prostitute. In her interviews about Rafaela, Lempicka never discusses a sexual relationship with her model, instead emphasizing these private moments of conversation. The emotional intimacy shared by Lempicka and Rafaela transcended the traditional boundaries of the artist/model relationship.

One of these intimate portraits, entitled *The Dream* (Fig. 6), depicts Rafaela with a vulnerable and sincere gaze. Still working within an ambiguous background which serves to emphasize the curves of the female body, Lempicka creates a coy flirtatiousness which differs significantly from the blatant sexuality of *La Belle Rafaela* (Fig. 4). In The

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31 Marmori, 19.
Dream, Lempicka depicts her model with crossed arms which work to conceal the breasts. The model’s gaze is directed outwards, but not in the traditional form of a beckoning to the viewer to enter her space. She casts her head to the side, gently resting her chin along her shoulder, conveying the feeling of a lulling quiet or pause in activity. If she is inviting the viewer in, it is not for an animalistic erotic encounter like that depicted in *La Belle Rafaela*. Perhaps that encounter had already occurred, and now we view Rafaela still nude, but enveloped by the ruffled sheets of the bed on which she lies. In either case, this image conveys a level of emotional affection for the sitter.

In her depictions of her model Rafaela, Lempicka utilized a variety of gazes to translate her desire. While she initially appropriates a gaze associated with masculine mastery, she pushes beyond these limits to create a relation to the subject defined by tenderness. So, her work is not completely detached. This emotional engagement allows Lempicka to be related to the cruising flâneur discussed in Dianne Chisholm’s book *Queer Constellations*.

Unlike the classical flâneur, famed for his aloof observations, the cruising flâneur loses composure with exposure to the city’s erotic spectacles. The former documents his travels with empirical positivism, whereas the latter documents his – or hers – with emotional, if not abject, acuity. This plurality of gazes Lempicka utilizes as the cruising flâneuse not only subverts the tradition of the male gaze, but transcends its limitations to the voyeuristic. Lempicka constructs an independent position which combines elements of the masculine with her own bisexual desire, thereby creating a gendered viewing space which resides outside of the binary gender classification.

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32 Chisholm, 46.
In both her life and her images, Lempicka aggressively moved through each of these gendered spaces according to her own desires, refusing to be classified as one gender or the other. She conveyed this hybridity in her 1929 *My Portrait* (Fig. 7). In this image, Lempicka chose to depict herself at the wheel of a shiny sports car, looking fashionable in her stylish racing cap, leather gloves, and billowing gray scarf. By appropriating the male-dominated pastime of the joy-ride and possessing the mechanical speed of the automobile while still managing to look chic, Lempicka breaks through the gendered barriers restricting space and movement without taking on a completely masculine identity in her portrait.

Although this woman is now free, she is not necessarily threatening. Her cool, “steely-eyed” glance is tempered by her heavy eyelids and long lashes – a feminine convention of the cinema and fashion magazines of the period – along with her bright red lipstick and the curls of her blond bob which peak out from under her riding cap as she sets off on her course.33 By combining elements of the masculine and feminine, Lempicka’s self-portrait supplies a multifaceted transition through which to explore the complex historical construction of modern femininity in the interwar years and the cultural politics surrounding this new gender typology.

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CHAPTER TWO

DEFINING THE MODERN FEMININE

In 1929 Lempicka produced a bold visual assertion of herself as a modern woman in *My Portrait* (Fig. 7). This image was commissioned for the cover of the German women’s magazine *Die Dame*. In the 1974 edition of the French magazine *Auto-Journal*, a writer referred to the portrait as follows,

The self portrait of Tamara de Lempicka is the real image of the independent woman who asserts herself. Her hands are gloved, she is helmeted, and inaccessible; a cold and disturbing Beauty [through which] pierces a formidable being – this woman is free.\(^{34}\)

Depicting herself in an automobile, the symbol of complete freedom and mobility, Lempicka embodied the figure of the modern or New Woman of the twentieth century. This liberated woman is mobile – her freedom associated with her ability to move about space. In contrast to the immobility of women in the nineteenth century, women in the years following World War I attained a significant amount of freedom to move about, and exist in urban spaces. Even changes in fashion began to reflect this greater mobility as designers like Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel departed from the rigid corset frame in order to create boxier, loose-fitting styles intended for more comfort.\(^{35}\) Historian Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer note that *Femme Moderne* was “literally

\(^{34}\) Lempicka-Foxhall, 77.

\(^{35}\) Benstock, 74.
going places” as she was “in control, self-assured, capable, aggressive, adventurous, [and] independent.”

The New Woman that emerged in the interwar years in European and American culture transcended the rigid confines of feminine sexuality in order to fashion herself as a gendered body in flux. This idea of the new femininity was about bridging the gap between the two extremes of the gender spectrum. This modern woman capitalized on feminizing the masculine and vice versa. Represented by the media in print publications like the German Die Dame, and in reality by popular public figures like the socialite Nancy Cunard, Coco Chanel, and Lempicka, the New Woman defied the essentialist notions of gender as embedded in biological sexuality.

The debate over gender as essential or constructed became heated during the inter-war period due to the emergence of the modern woman type, a figure similar to Lempicka’s fashioning in her 1929 self-portrait. The woman depicted in that image provides a visual representation of the Parisian modern woman or garçonne, a new social and literary category promoted by the mass media’s proliferation of images of young and economically independent women in the 1920s and 1930s. The etymological foundations of the word la garçonne provide an interesting point of entry for exploring conceptions of femininity in the interwar period. Although the word was created to describe a female type, no part of the word meaning girl appears in the construction of la garçonne. In fact, le garçon is the French word for boy. La garçonne then acts as a hybrid of the feminine pronoun la and suffix –nne, with the word for boy. The word is


37 Ibid., 4.
both masculine and feminine at the same time. The masculine becomes dressed in the feminine, or rather, embedded within the feminine. This etymological relationship reflects the idea of the new feminine gender of the interwar years as a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics.

The *garçonne* type developed out of Victor Margueritte’s best-selling 1922 novel by the same name. The novel narrated the story of Monique Lerbier, a young woman who abandons middle-class family life in favor of sexual exploits and self-discovery. She breaks out of the bourgeois mold by cropping her hair short, then liberates herself from her unfaithful fiancé by experimenting with both male and female lovers, and eventually gives birth to an illegitimate child.\(^{38}\) The heroine of *La Garçonne* suggested a complex understanding of modern femininity as newly liberated and active.

Whitney Chadwick notes, however, that the liberated view of life offered by images of the modern woman was in fact a blend of fact and fiction because

\[\ldots\text{despite much rhetoric about the rights and liberation of women, and despite a coherent visual imagery celebrating the sexually free working woman, no fundamental changes in women’s traditional roles are evident in Weimar Germany. And, in France, the New Woman may have been sexually liberated, but she did not win the right to vote until 1946.}\]^{39}\]

The modern woman had become free to act as a player on the stage of modernity, yet the role remained limited by traditional expectations of female sexuality and feminine gender. Let us now return to Lempicka’s *My Portrait* of 1929 (Fig. 7), an image thought to symbolize the presence of this New Woman in modernity, as our starting point for an

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\(^{38}\) Chadwick and Latimer, 4.

examination of female freedom in relation to feminine gender identity in the interwar years.

As previously mentioned, this image graced the cover of the German magazine *Die Dame*. One of the magazine’s editors commissioned the cover after she spotted the stylish Lempicka behind the wheel of a yellow Renault while vacationing in Monte Carlo. To the editor, Lempicka embodied the spirit of the modern, mobile, and intelligent woman. A closer examination of the image, however, reveals subtle contradictions in the relationship between a “fashionable fantasy of female agency and actual mobility,” thereby illuminating an inherent ambiguity of meaning present in much of Lempicka’s work.40

In contrast to the idealized concept of the modern woman as completely free and mobile, Lempicka provides an image of a woman whose actual mobility remains in question. The self-portrait is almost claustrophobic as the woman’s head becomes compressed between the pictorial frame and the edges of the car. The exterior frame of the vehicle in *My Portrait* covers over and segments the female body, creating a disembodied, fragmented form. The only piece of her body left intact is her heavily made-up face, a component which reinforces her as a “feminine” woman despite her presence in this masculine setting. Mary Louise Roberts notes that the excessive preparation time necessary for applying make-up, and the constant dieting necessary to fit into the latest fashions, proved restrictive for women, and provided only an illusory

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40 Birnbaum, 96.
freedom for the feminine.\textsuperscript{41} Although possessing more mobility, this woman remains restricted visually in Lempicka’s compressed image, as well as in real life by the donning of a time-consuming feminine costume. Her freedom is expressed in emblems and conventionalizing rituals that in turn limit and trap her within another set of boundaries.

The strong sense of containment Lempicka conveyed in \textit{My Portrait} – a sense of repression which leaves the viewer questioning the extent of this new found female “freedom” – is also present in her 1928 \textit{The Slave} (Fig. 2). As previously discussed, Lempicka sets her iconic female form amidst the backdrop of a modern city. The idealized female body rises up from the bottom of the frame in a vertical gesture which parallels the movement of the city behind her. The soft fleshiness of the breasts and thighs, however, contrasts greatly with the hard-edged structures of the background. Lempicka places her voluptuous nude at the center of the canvas, her hands bound by shackles, her vulnerability expressed by her upward gaze. She is trapped, awaiting rescue. What is it that holds her captive?

This woman initially appears to be enslaved by the modern city instead of freed by it. Upon closer analysis, however, it becomes apparent that the woman’s hands are bound only to one another. Like the self-portrait, this woman is heavily made-up, her face surrounded by flowing blond hair and decorated with a rich hue of red lipstick. Perhaps we can apply Roberts’ sense of fashion-induced repression to both this figure and the self-portrait in order to propose that these women remain bound and restricted by their gendered sexuality. Both \textit{My Portrait} and \textit{The Slave} push the viewer to question the

degree of women’s freedom in modern culture, when they are still bound to an explicitly female gender identity.

The images of the modern woman produced during this period are deeply embedded in the trends and conventions of the fashion and beauty industry which boomed in the 1920s. This glamorous figure of feminine modernity emphasized woman’s youth and sexuality. In the early decades of the twentieth century beauty became a technical science. Innovators invented machines to slim the body, curl the hair, and iron out wrinkles. After World War I the role of the beauty technician became mainstream. Manicurists, hairdressers, and perfumers opened shops across the city of Paris. Popular magazines like *Marie Claire*, *Modes et Travaux*, and *Confidences* condensed clothing, make-up, and life-style into a system of fashion and style that was simultaneously influenced by and determined social acceptability.\(^{42}\)

Over the course of the 1920s, the stereotypical image of the modern woman, the *garçonne*, underwent many changes. In the beginning of the decade modern women took on an almost androgynous identity with their short haircuts and masculine attire of pants and suits. This androgynous identity was easily conflated with lesbian identity as well-known lesbians of the period such as Romaine Brooks and the Duchess de La Salle (Fig. 8) dressed in men’s clothing. This modern masculinized female type graced the covers of numerous international magazines like *Die Dame*, a publication which actively promoted the image of this ideal modern woman. As a contrast to the masculinized female figures depicted on its pages, *Die Dame* depicted feminized males who lacked the physical attributes often associated with masculine identity. The representation of gender identity

\(^{42}\) Mann, 121.
in a magazine like *Die Dame* encouraged a vision of gender as fluid and oscillating between masculine and feminine extremes, and therefore as performed, not essential.

This fluidity of gender, however, was met by harsh criticism from the sections of society which wished to maintain the rigid essentialist gender identities of masculine and feminine and which viewed their maintenance as a means to increase the birthrate during the interwar years. The newly destabilized femininity portrayed in *Die Dame* appeared aggressive and threatening to sections of society. Aggression was attributed to the image of the lesbian *Amazone*, a type represented in Lempicka’s *Portrait of the Duchess de La Salle* (Fig. 8). Lempicka met the Duchess de La Salle late one evening at a lesbian nightclub in the early 1920s. After Lempicka complimented the Duchess on her elegant black tuxedo, the two became lasting acquaintances, a relationship which resulted in the 1925 *Portrait*.

In this portrait Lempicka depicts the Duchess as a formidable being, asserting her identity as a public lesbian. Her stance is strong, she appears immoveable like the classical column to her left. Lempicka deemphasizes this figure’s identifying female attribute of the breasts, instead foregrounding her male attire. This masculine costume conveys a sense of strength and power, echoed by the inclusion of the column and emphasized by the Duchess’s polished riding boots. The inclusion of theatrical elements such as the curtain, and the red carpet, fashion this lesbian figure into a significant character on the stage of modernity. These elements of grandeur – the heavily draped curtain, the lush carpet, and the huge column to the left of de La Salle – are traditional props of aristocratic portraiture. They appear regularly, for example, in the work of Anthony Van Dyck, the famous Flemish portraitist and English court painter of the
seventeenth century. In his portrait of *Marchesa Elena Grimaldi* (Fig. 9) Van Dyck utilizes the classical column as a visual representation of his sitters’ nobility. In contrast to Van Dyck, however, Lempicka’s inclusion of these portrait props actually works to subvert the tradition of aristocratic portraiture. The Duchess de La Salle was not, in fact, a real duchess, but a character created by the famous lesbian depicted in Lempicka’s portrait. The image of the Duchess de La Salle reveals, then, an extreme flexibility in the production of identity, as this character becomes performed and constructed through a variety of signifying codes or symbols.

Often conflated with this new femininity, the image of the lesbian was constructed in both literature and life around notions of illness, perversion, inversion and paranoia.\(^{43}\) Sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, writing in the late nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century, along with Havelock Ellis, working extensively in the first three decades of the twentieth century, argued against this negative characterization of homosexuality in their treatises on “sexual inversion.” In his *Psychology of Sex*, Havelock Ellis traced the development of German scientists’ theories on homosexuality as “congenital and not acquired, so that it could not be termed a vice, and was, also, though neurotic elements were present, not a case of insanity.”\(^{44}\) He noted that Krafft-Ebing “was content to look on inversion as an anomaly and not a disease or a ‘degeneration’.”\(^{45}\) Both of these statements reveal an understanding of human sexuality as marked by variation, and reflect a widening of the sexual discourse which took place

\(^{43}\) Benstock, 11.


\(^{45}\) Ibid., 224
in the early twentieth century. Despite the work of these sexologists, however, lesbianism remained marginalized from codes of socially acceptable sexual identity. Same-sex relationships opposed the natural order of women as mothers.

According to Chadwick and Latimer, the postwar period called for a return to the traditional social hierarchy of gendered behavior. Many women were forced out of the jobs they held during the war and were expected to return to their natural roles as mothers in the home. The social frenzy caused by the emergence of the modern woman reflects society’s desire in the postwar era to reposition women back into a structure of acceptable binary gender codes. Women, like publicly-known lesbians, who existed outside of these codes became dangerous threats to societal balance. While men could exist freely in modern society, modern women upset the natural order and progression of events. This strong association between women, the home, and motherhood reflects the notion of an essential feminine gender identity, as opposed to the idea of gender as constructed, and reflects Simmel’s notion of women as outside of the modern experience discussed in Chapter One. This biological disposition to reproduction relegated women to a position separate from modernity, as other to the normalized male subject.

The new dress of the modern woman was even targeted by natalist groups advocating a return to feminine motherhood. Natalist rhetoric advocated for an increase in the national birthrate. These groups characterized the fashion of Coco Chanel as an unnatural affront to the female body which symbolized the deterioration of feminine virtue. The natalist doctor François Fouveau de Courmelles denounced the new styles

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46 Chadwick and Latimer, 4.

47 Benstock, 74.
as “the fashion of non-motherhood.” In the late 1920s fashion returned to an emphasis on the female form. The feminine waistline reappeared and the short angularity of the bob was replaced by soft curls which framed the perfectly decorated faces of modern women. The representation of gender identity in magazines like Die Dame began to change in the 1930s as they emphasized this excessive femininity, as well as the glorification of motherhood.

Lempicka produced an image of motherhood which reflects these interwar concerns over the relationship between the New Woman and her natural role as a mother. In Maternity (Fig. 10) of 1928, Lempicka utilizes the conventional structure of the Virgin and Child dyad to depict a mother nursing her infant. The relationship between mother and child, however, lacks any real intense emotional connection. The mother appears to be going through the motion of feeding her child. Her glance is directed away from her baby, and her hand appears unengaged with helping the child receive the life-sustaining milk from her breast. Lempicka juxtaposes the traditional handmade blanket of the child’s layette with the luxurious fabric of the mother’s shawl. Her shawl, along with her large pearl earrings, cosmeticized mask-like face, and short hair emphasize that this is an image of a modern mother who is totally immersed in the world of fashion. This image visualizes the fears and anxieties of social groups like the natalists who demanded women return to the traditional and comfortable model of motherhood. This woman’s artificiality is held in tension with her natural biological role. Thus Lempicka seems to acknowledge the tension in the role of the modern mother, a tension she experienced in

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48 Roberts, 75.

her own life as a woman trying to balance the roles of wife, mother, and artist. Lempicka proved unsuccessful in this pursuit, dedicating herself so fully to her career that she lost her husband in divorce and experienced a tenuous relationship with her daughter, Kizette. Supported by this image of Lempicka’s mother and child, along with her own experiences of imbalance, we can argue that modern femininity and motherhood seemed mutually exclusive to Lempicka at this point in time, as is suggested in the unfeeling and detached gaze of this modern woman.

Despite having the freedom to exist in modernity, the figure of the New Woman of the interwar years faced a contradictory existence of liberation regulated by restriction. Her hybrid gender conflicted with traditional expectations of women’s roles in society. In her images, Lempicka presents women trying to have it both ways, but it remains unclear whether or not this was a real option for the historical women of the interwar period. While their hyper-feminine fashionable appearance softened their appropriation of the masculine, it also bound them to an explicitly female sexuality. Could/can these restrictions be subverted? Did/does the donning of the feminine always limit one’s ability to move freely through the metaphorical gendered spaces of modernity? Lempicka provides a multi-faceted figure through which to explore these questions in her construction of a complex personal identity as a modern woman.
In the twentieth century the physical and theoretical spaces of femininity and female sexuality expanded. Sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebbing created a new typology for feminine sexuality which allowed for deviations from a norm. By rewriting the model to include bisexuality, the sexologists emphasized the plurality of human sexuality. Ellis noted that “when we go beyond this simple and elementary classification we encounter an endless number of individual variations but they do not easily admit of being arranged in definite groups.” This developing sexual variation was embodied by the New Woman whose sexual liberation provided an extreme contrast to the domestic ideal of mother and wife. Her supposed freedom and mobility destroyed the traditional, rigid notions of masculinity and femininity and allowed her to inhabit a space in the margins between the binary extremes.

In reality, however, the New Woman remained deeply tied to an identity markedly feminine, bound to the realm of fashion, beauty, and motherhood. This tension has already been examined in the visual representation of the masculinized female forms.

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\(^{50}\) Along with Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, the work of Iwan Bloch, Albert Moll, and Charles Feré contributed to the development of the scientific study of sexual pathology which began in Europe in the late 1870s and early 1880s; Felski, 180.

\(^{51}\) Ellis, 229.
Lempicka painted during the 1920s and 1930s. Although Lempicka imbued her figures with a confrontational immensity, she softened the threat by costuming her women with traditional female traits.

Like the women in her paintings, Lempicka created her own elaborate personality deeply entrenched in the fashionable femininity of her time (Fig. 11). That Lempicka chose to develop her public persona as a highly feminized woman may at first seem contradictory to her mantra of living in the margins of society where normal rules did not apply. Art historian Tricia Laughlin has attempted to explain Lempicka’s use of an extreme feminine through the lens of Lempicka’s contemporary Joan Rivière and her study of “Womanliness as Masquerade,” first published in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1929. In this essay, Rivière attempted “to show that women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men.” Rivière worked out of the psychoanalytic tradition, founding her analysis in the theory of the “bisexually inherent in us all” put forth by her mentors Ernest Jones and Sigmund Freud.

In her study, Rivière focuses on “a particular type of intellectual woman,” noting that “not long ago intellectual pursuits for women were associated almost exclusively with an overtly masculine type of woman.” We have already discussed Lempicka in this context, as a woman pursuing success in a traditionally male-dominated artistic arena. Rivière asserts that “of all the women engaged in professional work today, it would be hard to say whether the greater number are more feminine or masculine in their mode of

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life.” In contrast to Rivière’s generalized category of modern women, Lempicka did not find it easy to balance her roles as a successful professional woman and a loving wife and mother. Overwhelmed by this push and pull of desires, Lempicka represents a woman unbalanced, similar to the particular patient Rivière focused on in her case study.

Rivière describes a highly successful, intelligent, professional woman who, immediately following a successful demonstration of her abilities, felt compelled to attract sexual attention from male colleagues. Similarly, Lempicka once stated,

I had innamorato, always. For my inspiration, I liked to go out in the evenings and have a good-looking man tell me how beautiful I am or how great an artist I am – and he touches my hand… I loved it! I needed that. And I had many, many.

This need for praise and recognition of beauty experienced by Lempicka evokes the situation of Rivière’s patient. In traditional Freudian terms, Rivière determined that the woman suffered anxiety due to the fear of retribution from the father for exhibiting masculine qualities. Acting coquettish and flippant in the presence of her male colleagues “was chiefly to make sure of safety by masquerading as guiltless and innocent,” as it was a compulsive reversal of her intellectual performance.

In his biography of the artist, Charles Phillips recounts the hyperbolic language of the contemporary reporters who encountered Lempicka. Fernand Vallon visited her in 1927 and found her “in cardinal’s purple, wearing emeralds as deep as lakes.” She was

53 Rivière, 35.
54 Lempicka-Foxhall, 58-59.
55 Rivière, 38.
56 Lempicka-Foxhall, 84.
“splendidly blonde” with “delicate hands [and] blood-red fingernails.” The Italian playwright Luigi Chiarelli envisioned her as “tall, soft, harmonious in her movements” with her face “glowing with life…illuminated by large, rather artificial eyes, and with an easily smiling mouth reddened by costly Parisian lip-rouge.” Others concentrated on the elegant fashions she wore, her “white satin gown with a dark red sash and short sable jacket” or “a beige yellow whipcord coat, trimmed in black, designed by Creed.” Emphasizing her fashion and appearance, all of these acquaintances gave precedence to Lempicka as the ideal woman of fashion of the interwar years.

In her discussion of “Tamara de Lempicka’s Women,” Laughlin notes that “whether Lempicka was conscious of this strategic masquerade or not, it seems to have operated…to the artist’s advantage.” By performing the feminine, Lempicka created a socially acceptable mask for her transgressive behavior as a bisexual woman artist who created an active visual space of feminine desire in her paintings. Laughlin’s conclusion, however, remains fixed in Rivière’s notion of women’s compulsory adoption of the mask. In Rivière’s analysis, this intellectual woman lost her freedom to maneuver between the masculine and the feminine by remaining bound in her attachment to the feminine as a strategy to diffuse her threat of masculine authority.

I would like to move beyond Laughlin’s hypothesis regarding Lempicka’s development of a feminine persona as a manipulative technique, and instead explore Lempicka’s extreme femininity as the means through which Lempicka actively contributed to the discourse of gender in modernity. Marsha Meskimmon notes that in their lives and work, modernist women artists reflected larger political concerns

57 Laughlin, 99.
regarding the ‘woman question.’”

That women choose to be artists is a political statement in itself because “in art, women can challenge the representations of power, party-political and otherwise.”

Through her creation of a feminine erotic space in her images, Lempicka worked against the sexual politics of the interwar years which attempted to keep women restricted to traditional roles. Instead of reading Lempicka’s femininity as a mask, I regard her appropriation of a highly-feminine public persona as a move to emphasize the subversive nature of her imagery. By allying extreme femininity with the traditionally male-dominated profession of artist, Lempicka took on some of the dominant characteristics associated with both genders and blatantly subverted the binary gender system.

Despite her hyper-feminine persona, Lempicka worked diligently to identify herself as a legitimate artist. She trained with well-known instructors and found inspiration in the classical rules of the Renaissance masters. She sacrificed her first marriage and a close relationship with her daughter in exchange for the liberated life of a flâneuse on the move. Believing in her own talent as an artist and as an original mind, Lempicka had herself photographed in her studio hard at work on a portrait of her husband (Fig. 12). In this image, Lempicka is unadorned by her usual feminine costume. Instead, she is an almost neutral figure, as it is the painter’s smock and brushes in her hands which imply her artistic role. This image provides an obvious contrast to the more


59 Ibid., 17.

60 Upon arrival in Paris, Lempicka began training with Maurice Denis, a leader of the avant-garde, at the Académie Ranson. Later in life, Lempicka attempted to lessen her associations with Denis, and instead emphasized her training under André Lhote, the mentor and friend she first encountered at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière; Claridge, 73.
common glamour shots Lempicka had taken of herself by famous photographers of the day (Fig. 11). These contrasting visions of Lempicka emphasize her strategic performance of gender. She visualized her identity as a woman to her critics and interviewers through her physical appearance, the “costume” she wore on a given day. This costuming reflects the tenets of gender performativity, a theory put forth by gender theorist Judith Butler.

According to Butler, there is no core self that is biologically engendered by sexuality. Instead, gender and sexuality are both a collection of codes, generated outside the self but appropriated by each individual in different ways. There is no unitary definition of man or woman, masculine or feminine gender, but instead only a collection of accepted identifying codes. In this theory, gender is not essential to the body or anything else, but a choice, self-consciously made or not. The individual chooses to articulate the self through a style, a collection of behaviors, mannerisms, and visual codes. Within this theory of self and culturally-generated gender identity, individuals become activated in their decisions to either perform or not perform within the culturally established discourses of masculinity and femininity.

To ground Butler’s theory of performance in our discussion of the twentieth-century art world, I will briefly mention several other women artists working in Europe at this time. Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), a painter of the female nude, was described as masculine and virile by her critics, and so separated from her femininity by those who did not know how to accept her female subjectivity of the eroticized nude. In contrast to the virility assigned to Valadon, Marie Laurencin (1883-1956), like Lempicka, promoted a

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hyper-feminine persona which matched her delicate pastel paintings of women. For Laurencin, it was her femininity which became the guide to evaluating her art. Whereas Valadon was divorced from her femininity, Laurencin was intimately bound to it.

Romaine Brooks (1874-1970), the lesbian partner of Natalie Barney, chose to dress in men’s clothing, performing the masculine gender through self-adornment. Each of these modernist artists performed gender in a unique way and represent variants in the modernist typology of the woman artist.62

This emphasis on unique self-conscious performative choice elucidates Lempicka’s maneuvers of gender constructs in life and art. She once stated, “I do what I want to do and hate to do what I have to do…My life was never conventional…I’m not the ‘classic’ type of person.”63 Lempicka very much claimed her femininity, but refused to be limited by it or defined by it in terms of her behavior and sexuality. So despite the hyper-feminine public persona accepted by many to be the defining characteristic of Lempicka’s life as a modern artist, it is her deployment of the masculine and feminine combined which distinguishes her within her historical moment, and initiated her visualization of a unique space of desire. In the end it is her work and her life which matter as each reflexively contributes to an understanding of the other.

So, then what kind of contribution does Lempicka offer to the discourse of feminine gender in modernity? With Lempicka it seems that we are forced to reconsider the use of monolithic category of woman, a process of deconstruction which began in the early decades of the twentieth century. In modernity, woman becomes pluralized, each understood as a multi-faceted figure like the geometricized bodies Lempicka depicted in

62 Chadwick, Women, 300-305.
63 Claridge 96.
her paintings. These figures are hard, they are soft. They are masculine, yet feminine. They possess control over the viewer’s attention, yet hide coyly behind their idealized femininity. Their immensity proves liberating, yet restricting at the same time. These figures remain ambiguous, caught in a tension between extremes, recalling Marshall Berman’s description of the experience of modernity as “a unity of disunity: it turns us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegrations and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.”

Similar to the female forms in her paintings, Lempicka became iconic through her performance of the variety of modernity. As an example of a self-declared modern woman Lempicka, like others of her generation, refused to choose one part or another of the binary as she rejected a pre-established constrictive category. Locating herself in the margins, she existed in between, not within the norm. There, in the margins of modernity, Tamara de Lempicka performed aspects of both genders – offering an entirely new performance – one that was still being scripted.

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64 Berman quoted in Wolff, 35.
APPENDIX

FIGURES

Figure 1. *Portrait of Romana de La Salle*, 1928, oil on panel, unknown collection
Figure 2. *The Slave*, 1929, oil on canvas, private collection
Figure 3. *The Musician*, 1929, oil on canvas, Frisia Museum
Figure 4. *La Belle Rafaela*, 1927, oil on canvas, private collection
Figure 5. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1836, oil on canvas, Musée d’Orsay
Figure 6. *The Dream*, 1927, oil on canvas, private collection
Figure 7. *My Portrait*, 1929, oil on panel, private collection
Figure 8. Portrait of the Duchess de La Salle, 1925, oil on canvas, Wolfgang Joop Collection
Figure 9. Van Dyck, *Marchesa Elena Grimaldi*, 1623, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington
Figure 10. *Maternity*, 1928, oil on panel, private collection
Figure 11. Camuzzi, *Lempicka with a Cigarette*, ca. 1934-1937, black and white photograph on paper, private collection
Figure 12. Bonney, *Lempicka Before the Portrait of Tadeusz*, ca. 1928, black and white photograph on paper, Alain and Michèle Blondel Collection
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