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GERDA WEGENER
1914

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GERDA WEGENER
1886 - 1940

TWO WOMEN IN A LANDSCAPE WITH A PEACOCK
1917

Ink and watercolour on paper, signed 'Gerda Wegener/ 1917'
In an elaborate 19th century tramp frame
38 x 28.5cm. (15 x 11 1/4 in.) the sight edge
75 x 65 cm. (29 1/2 x 25 1/2 in) the frame

PROVENANCE

Sotheby's London, 21 November 1996, lot 702;
Ann and Gordon Getty collection;
Sold at Stair, New York, The Collection of Ann and Gordon Getty, 29 February 2024, lot 23.

The Hollywood film the *Danish Girl* tells the story of the painter Einar Wegener, who had the world's first gender-affirming surgery and became Lili Elbe. But her wife, Gerda, had a fascinating life and career of her own (fig.1). Through her work, Gerda challenged traditional depictions of women in art - typically seen through the male gaze - and painted strong, beautiful women with admiration and identification - as conscious subjects rather than as passive objects. However, with her playful nudes, she also explored the more risqué theme of eroticism and, in particular - as with the present drawing - her anti-war ideology.

Gerda Gottlieb was born in the coastal town of Grenaa, rural Jutland, in 1886. Despite a conservative upbringing as a minister's daughter, she persuaded her family to let her leave home for Copenhagen as a teenager to study at the newly opened women's college of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. There she met Einar Wegener, a student at the adjoining college, and married him when she was just 19. Living among artists, actors and dancers in Denmark's capital, Gerda was inspired by the idea of performance and painted stylised, long-limbed, made-up figures.

Gerda became interested in gender as a performance and in 1904, when one of her models failed to turn up for a sitting, asked her husband to pose instead. He agreed, adopting the alter ego of 'Lili', who soon became Gerda's favourite model. Lili started to dominate Einar's life, too, and he eventually transitioned to become a woman. This first decade of the 1900s brought Gerda early notoriety in Denmark. Her 1907 portrait of *Ellen von Kohl* sparked the Peasant Painter Feud: a national debate enacted in the pages of the Danish newspaper *Politiken* over 'distasteful' paintings of excess, at a time when the prevailing taste for realism favoured representations of 'ordinary people in the countryside'. The debate saw her work rejected by the Kunsthal Charlottenborg, the official gallery of the Royal Danish Academy of Art, as well as Den Frie, the gallery founded by the Association of Danish Artists. Nevertheless, in 1908 she entered - and won - a competition to draw 'Copenhagen Woman' for *Politiken*, after which she joined their staff as a regular contributor and established herself as a capable cartoonist. Though perhaps too risqué for the conservative tastes of Copenhagen, her paintings and illustrations from this time attracted commentators and collectors in Paris, who welcomed her salacious style when she and Lili eventually moved there in 1912.

From then on, Gerda's art became much more daring and provocative. Her output included paintings, illustrations and advertisements featuring modern women, anti-German satire and morale-boosting depictions of French troops, as well as erotic illustrations of uninhibited lesbian pleasure and sexual encounters between ambiguously gendered individuals. It also put her on the map of the fashion industry as her works suddenly made their way into popular magazines like *Vogue* and *La Vie Parisienne*, as well as the elite *Journal des Dames et des Modes*, a realm that was normally reserved for the likes of fine artists and intellectuals.

The present, lavishly rendered and highly refined, watercolour is an exceptional example of her works created for publication: in this instance, it served as the prototype for the front cover of Louis Delluc's novel *La Guerre est Morte*, dating from 1917, the same year Gerda executed the present work. Despite the gravity of the book's - and the image's - subject matter, as well as Gerda's committed anti-war stance, the image is rendered with her trademark style and composition: the sitter is an elegant, bejewelled, beautiful woman with her head dramatically



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pulled back by her left hand. Nonetheless, the image is filled with a pervasive melancholy seen in the sitter's heavy, darkened eyelids and her lugubrious expression. The four silhouetted planes above her head act as a careful reminder of the horrors of World War I that was still raging in Europe and (especially) in northeastern France.

Gerda thrived amidst the boiling controversy surrounding her - and her relationship with Lili - however, the controversy and fame came at a price: as the couple became increasingly popular and provocative, their same-sexed union came to the attention of the King of Denmark, Christian X, who ultimately annulled their marriage.¹

It was precisely at this time that Lili undertook their four gender-affirming surgeries - paid for by Gerda - and that, as her transition progressed, she began to cut ties with their old life. The fifth and final operation - believed to have been an attempt to create a working uterus - which she hid from Gerda, ultimately led to her premature death in 1931.

Gerda eventually remarried Fernando Porta - an Italian officer, aviator, and diplomat ten years her junior - and moved with him to Marrakech. However, with the changing tastes of the 1930s she struggled to work with same level of success and when her husband lost his job, she returned to Copenhagen dying in poverty in 1940.

Buried in Solbjerg Park cemetery in Copenhagen, Gerda remained in relative obscurity until the release of Tom Hooper's Oscar-winning film *The Danish Girl* in 2015 and the contemporaneous, expansive exhibition *GERDA WEGENER* at the Arken Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen (7 November 2015 - 16 May 2016 - extended until 8 January 2017), which also celebrated the 100th anniversary of Danish women's suffrage.

¹<https://www.widewalls.ch/artists/gerda-wegener>



Fig.1

Gerda and Einar Wegener in front of Gerda's painting *Sur la route d'Anacapri* at an exhibition in 1924. Photograph, the Royal Library, Denmark

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Fig.2 (top left)
Gerda Wegener, *At the mirror*, 1931-1936
Watercolour

Fig.3 (top right)
Gerda Wegener, *Queen of Hearts (Lili)*,
1928
Oil on canvas

Fig.4 (left)
Gerda Wegener, *Carnival*, 1925
Watercolour