CHAPTER 12

Elisabeth Epstein: Moscow–Munich–Paris–Geneva, Waystations of a Painter and Mediator of the French-German Cultural Transfer

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Abstract

The artist Elisabeth Epstein is usually mentioned as a participant in the first Blaue Reiter exhibition in 1911 and the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon in 1913. Living in Munich after 1898, Epstein studied with Anton Ažbe, Wassily Kandinsky, and Alexei Jawlensky and participated in Werefkin's salon. She had already begun exhibiting her work in Paris in 1906 and, after her move there in 1908, she became the main facilitator of the artistic exchange between the Blue Rider artists and Sonia and Robert Delaunay. In the 1920s and 1930s she was active both in Geneva and Paris. This essay discusses the life and work of this Russian-Swiss painter who has remained a peripheral figure despite her crucial role as a mediator of the French-German cultural transfer.

Moscow and Munich (1895–1908)

The special attraction that Munich and Paris exerted at the beginning of the twentieth century on female Russian painters such as Alexandra Exter, Sonia Delaunay, Natalia Goncharova, and Olga Meerson likewise characterizes the biography of the artist Elisabeth Epstein née Hefter, the daughter of a doctor, born in Zhytomir/Ukraine on February 27, 1879. After the family's move to Moscow, she began her studies, which continued from 1895 to 1897, with the then highly esteemed impressionist figure painter Leonid Pasternak.1

Hefter's marriage, in April 1898, to the Russian doctor Miezyslaw (Max) Epstein, who had a practice in Munich, and the birth of her only child, Alexander, in March 1899, are the most significant personal events of her ten-year period in Bavaria's capital. After seven years of marriage, however, the couple separated, in 1905; divorce followed in 1911.

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1 Elisabeth Epstein, Lebenslauf [Curriculum vitae], handwritten manuscript of October 29, 1941, Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, Zurich.
Epstein continued her studies until 1904 in the private schools of Anton Ažbe and Wassily Kandinsky, in Schwabing, as well as in Alexei Jawlensky’s painting class. It was in Marianne Werefkin’s salon in the Giselstraße that Epstein most likely became acquainted with members of the Russian colony in Munich as well as representatives of the artistic avant-garde. Her circle of friends included the Ukrainian dancer Alexander Sacharoff, the Prague painter Eugen von Kahler, the Moscow painter Olga Meerzon, and Gabriele Münter. Remarkably, there is no reference to Marianne Werefkin anywhere in the Epstein correspondence, but both Jawlensky and his son Andrei are mentioned. A close personal relationship between these two painters of a very different nature apparently never arose—quite in contrast to Gabriele Münter.

Paris and Geneva (1908–1914)

In 1908, Epstein felt the urge to “go west” even more strongly than she had when she moved, in 1898, from Moscow to Munich. Private disappointments, but also artistic ambition, may well have played the decisive role in her move to Montparnasse, the heart of European cultural activities, in Paris (fig. 12.1).

FIGURE 12.1
Elisabeth Epstein sitting in the garden, anonymous photographer
GABRIELE MÜNTER—UND JOHANNES EICHERN-STIFTUNG, MUNICH
Epstein had begun preparations for a personal as well as artistic new start in Paris already in 1906 and 1907 with her participation in the Salon d’Automne and her acquaintance with the painter and publisher of the art periodical *Les Tendances Nouvelles*, Alexis Mérodack-Jeaneau, who published works by Epstein in 1906. At the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, she practiced her skills in *croquis* drawing. The early years in Paris were initially overshadowed by depression and artist’s block. During this time, while restructuring her life and establishing herself in Paris, her son remained with his father in Munich. The move, in 1912, from the center of Paris to the quiet northern suburb of Montmorency brought an apparent improvement in her living conditions. She supported herself in part by painting reproductions in the Louvre. The connection to her Munich friends held strong and, until 1914, Münter and Kandinsky proved to be her two most important ties to the Bavarian art scene. Kandinsky, in particular, remained her most reliable artistic advisor and mentor, but the events of war, however, led to an interruption of these connections that lasted almost two decades.

**Epstein and the French–German Cultural Transfer**

Just how helpful Epstein’s familiarity with the Paris art scene could be for Kandinsky and Franz Marc became apparent in October 1911. Epstein, who had been friends with Sonia Delaunay since their student days in Paris, sent Kandinsky and Marc, who at the time were busy with preparations for the first *Blaue Reiter* (Blue Rider) exhibition, photographs of Robert Delaunay’s work and thus established the contact between *Der Blaue Reiter* and this French artist with whom they were previously unfamiliar. Thanks to Epstein’s intercession, five works by Delaunay subsequently became part of the *Blaue Reiter* exhibition that travelled around Germany and Europe. Epstein’s credit for arranging this French-German art transfer and thus Delaunay’s artistic breakthrough in Germany is well deserved. Sonia Delaunay repeatedly expressed her gratitude for her friend’s efforts to see Delaunay included in the *Blaue Reiter*. Epstein herself was represented by the paintings *Porträt* (Portrait, c. 1911) and *Stilleben mit Hut* (Still Life with Hat, c. 1911).3 *Porträt*, no longer extant, was acquired by Kandinsky for his private collection.

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2 *Erste Ausstellung der Redaktion „Der Blaue Reiter“* (First Exhibition of the Editors of the Blue Rider), Munich: Moderne Galerie Heinrich Thannhauser, December 18, 1911—March 3, 1912.
3 Elisabeth Epstein, *Porträt* (Portrait), c. 1911, formerly Collection Wassily Kandinsky, technical data and disposition unknown, reproduced in *Erste Ausstellung der Redaktion „Der Blaue Reiter“* (First Exhibition of the Editors of the Blue Rider), exh. cat. (Munich: Moderne Galerie
Of Epstein’s early work from Munich and the first years in Paris only a few original works and reproductions can be accounted for. Numerous works were likely lost as a consequence of the war and endless relocation. Possibly the earliest extant work is the portrait of her approximately four-year-old son, *Alexander Epstein (Shura)* (c. 1903, fig. 12.2). The frontal portrait shows the young boy in a pristine white Russian smock with a large round summer hat. The work *Stilleben (mit Orangen)* [Still Life (With Oranges)], a formally reduced composition in bright impasto colors, originated in Munich in 1905.5

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The exhibition catalogues of the Salon d'Automne from 1906 and 1907, as well as the reproductions in *Les Tendances Nouvelles* from 1906, establish that around 1910 Epstein's color-intensive, sculptural figure paintings of the early period were replaced by a more sharply contoured visualization.

A visit to Epstein in Montmorency by August Macke and Franz Marc and his wife in October 1912 documents not only the friendly relationships among the *Blaue Reiter* exhibition colleagues. Marc's written report to Kandinsky conveys a concrete impression of Epstein's solitary lifestyle and work in the northern suburb of Paris:

Surrounded by her silent pictures hanging on the walls, Frau Epstein lives, a melancholy life in this provincial little town that in the twilight reminds me of Murnau and Tölz... The portrait of Kahler once again strongly impressed me, and also a portrait that she had painted of her boy...

Macke sketched his artistic colleague during the brief hours they visited: Marc's sketchbooks contain two pencil drawings that were apparently quickly set down on paper in Montmorency by Macke: *Kopfstudie Elisabeth Epstein* (Head Study Elisabeth Epstein) and *Bildnisstudie Elisabeth Epstein* (Portrait...
Study Elisabeth Epstein). In Herwarth Walden, owner of the Sturm Galerie in Berlin, Epstein found a dedicated advocate for her art. He showed two of her works in the 1912 *Blaue Reiter* exhibition and two in the 1913 *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon* (First German Autumn Salon). Additionally, he offered the polyglot painter the opportunity to publish two German-language essays in his art and literary magazine *Der Sturm*: the 1912 essay *Einige Gedanken über Bildentstehung* (Some Thoughts on How an Image Arises) and the 1913 essay *Das Lächerlichsein* (Being Ridiculous).

**Geneva and Paris (1914–1956)**

The onset of the First World War forced Epstein to relocate to Geneva, and her son, who because of his Russian nationality was viewed in Munich as an “undesirable alien,” soon followed. In Geneva, Epstein made contact with the Austrian writer Walter Serner, publisher of the magazine *Sirius*, and the German painter Christian Schad, who twice painted Epstein and once her son. The close personal and artistic relationship with Schad led in 1918 to the double exhibition *Elisabeth Epstein – Christian Schad* in Geneva.

Although Epstein was already living in Geneva as of 1914, in the 1920s and 1930s she alternated regularly between Switzerland and Paris and participated in numerous exhibitions in both countries. Labelled a “savage” and “cubist” by the Geneva press, she preferred living in Paris, where numerous painters cultivated the Cubist stylistic vocabulary. Her work from the 1920s and 1930s consisted largely of Swiss and southern French landscapes, e.g., *Waldinneres mit Ausblick* (Forest Interior with View, 1929, fig. 12.3), and Parisian rooftops, and also purely abstract works. Other works included interiors as well as a series of

11 August Macke, *Kopfstudie Elisabeth Epstein* (Head Study Elisabeth Epstein) and *Bildnirstudie Elisabeth Epstein* (Portrait Study Elisabeth Epstein), 1912, pencil, in Franz Marc, *Skizzenbücher*, Hz. 6381, sheets 38 and 39, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg.
12 The Berlin gallery *Der Sturm* showed the exhibition *Der Blaue Reiter, Franz Flaum, Oskar Kokoschka, Expressionisten* from March 12 to April 10, 1912.
13 The Berlin gallery *Der Sturm* showed the *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon* from September 29 to December 1, 1913. Epstein, *Porträt eines jungen Mädchens* (Portrait of a Young Girl), inscribed lower right: E. Epstein, cat. no. 127 (ill.), and *Porträt*, cat. no. 128, technical data and disposition of both works unknown.
15 *Waldinneres mit Ausblick* (Forest Interior with View), 1929, oil on cardboard, 48 × 37.6 cm, inscribed upper left: E. Epstein 29, private collection, Munich.
tabletop still lifes (indoor plants, glass and ceramic vessels) in a richly colored, cubist-abstract style (fig. 12.4). In 1930, the then very prominent Rive Gauche Galerie Zak organized Epstein's first solo exhibition in Paris; at the same time her membership in the Paris artists' group Les Sur/Indépendants (1930–38), in whose presentations she was involved on several occasions, encouraged her in her cubist-constructivist approach. The year 1934 brought a reunion with the Kandinskys, who had settled in Neuilly-sur-Seine the year before.

Despite the remarkable exhibition successes that she enjoyed in the early 1930s, sales of her work were less favorable; her material and financial means during this period of her life were most likely quite modest. Epstein's son was studying medicine in Geneva, and she regularly returned there to provide him with emotional and financial support. The obtainment of citizenship in Geneva, in 1929, secured her legal status as a Swiss citizen, though at this time it was not yet possible to foresee just how important this would be for her future in Europe. As a woman of Jewish heritage, the Swiss citizenship undoubtedly protected her from the National Socialists and saved her life.

In light of the looming Second World War, Epstein gave up her studio in Paris in 1939 and subsequently remained in Geneva until her death in 1956. From the 1920s onward, her artistic activities were repeatedly interrupted by health problems and illness. In 1946, her son, by then a renowned pulmonary specialist, died of an affliction incurred while treating a patient. Epstein, being largely homebound, presumably as a consequence of foot problems, focused in her later work (1939–52) above all on tabletop still lifes in mystic, glowing, and later dusky colors, in which the contours of the depicted objects become increasingly less apparent.

The death of her son, her sorrow over the fate of Jewish relatives and friends, personal frailty, financial insecurity following many lean years and the collapse of the art market during the war—all of these were possible reasons why Epstein, becoming ever more isolated, fell into silence and even broke off contact with Sonia Delaunay for about two years. What appears to be the last letter Delaunay received from Epstein, weary in tone, appears to have been written in June 1953. Epstein writes of her physical and financial difficulties, her yearning to once more visit Sonia Delaunay in Paris, and her memories of their years together as students in Paris. Then Epstein asks her friend whether she is still working with abstraction, which, she is convinced, is “not a beginning but

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16 Stillleben Nr. 67 (Still-Life No. 67), 1929, oil on canvas, 55 × 45.7 cm, inscribed upper left: E. Epstein 29, Sammlung Würth, Inv. 3213, copyright: Museum Würth, Künzelsau and Verlag Paul Swiridoff, Künzelsau.
rather a possible goal.”17 “After a long and difficult illness,” notes the obituary, Elisabeth Epstein passed away on January 22, 1956, in Geneva. Mourned by “her family in Israel and her friends,” she was laid to rest alongside her son in the Jewish cemetery in Veyrier.18

Exhibitions, Reception, and Historical Impact

At the end of the 1930s, Epstein succeeded in retaining Geneva gallery owner Georges Moos to represent her work. Moos, a proven supporter of classic

modernism, included Epstein's work during the period from 1940 to 1946 in several group exhibitions and organized solo exhibitions for her in 1944 and 1946. The critical response to these exhibitions was overwhelmingly positive; critics emphasized that Epstein had managed to translate the cubist use of form she had learned in Paris into her own individual artistic vocabulary and that her understanding of how to deal with light and volume was especially masterful. Among Epstein's close circle of friends in Geneva was the publisher Michel Slatkine. Epstein appointed him as trustee of her personal estate and the art dealer Georges Moos as trustee of her body of artistic work. Epstein bequeathed the remaining artworks in her possession to her sister, the painter Fanny Hefter, who was living in Israel in June 1956. In 1964, eight years after Epstein's death, Hefter convinced the art dealer Eleonore (Nora) Wilenska, who owned the Nora Art Gallery in Jerusalem, to hold the first solo exhibition of Epstein's work in Israel. After Wilenska's death in 1980, her daughter and successor Dina Hanoch campaigned for artistic recognition in Israel not only for Epstein but also her sister Fanny Hefter. A double exhibition, Epstein-Hefter, in 1983, was followed by a solo exhibition of Epstein's work in September 1986. Hanoch continued to exhibit works by Epstein in numerous group exhibitions until 1992.

Today Epstein's body of work from the middle and later years is largely to be found in the Galleria Sacchetti, in Ascona; the Nora Gallery, in Jerusalem; in various European, Israeli and American private collections; and also the Geneva Musée d'Art et d'Histoire and in the Musée National d'Art Moderne, in the Centre Pompidou. In 1989, the Galleria Sacchetti organized an Epstein exhibition, followed by an exhibition organized by the Kunstverein Wolfsburg in 1990 for which the exhibition catalogue was produced by Bernd Fäthke. The Museo Comunale d'Arte Moderna, in Ascona, dedicated its 1997 double exhibition to the two fellow champions of the expressionistic Moderne: Marianne von Werefkin—Elisabeth i. Epstein.
Epstein’s work and her role in introducing Delaunay to the Munich artists’ group are more or less well documented in almost all publications on the Blaue Reiter. In Blaue Reiter exhibitions to date, Epstein has always been represented, even if merely as a peripheral figure, and her affiliation with the Munich art scene at the turn of the century, particularly with the Munich group associated with Marianne Werefkin, was the subject of a 2014 exhibition in Bietigheim-Bissingen and then in Bremen, which was accompanied by the international conference Grenzüberschreitungen: Marianne Werefkin und die kosmopolitischen Künstlerinnen in ihrem Umfeld. Munich’s attraction for numerous artists around 1900, including Epstein, was explored by the Münchner Stadtmuseum in an exhibition in 2014/15. The initial scholarly and journalistic re-appraisal of Epstein’s work, as well as her inclusion in retrospective Der Blaue Reiter and Der Sturm exhibitions, is ultimately the result of Epstein’s affiliation with the Munich and Berlin avant-garde on the eve of the First World War—an affiliation in need of further research and exhibitions.

23 Marianne Werefkin. Vom Blauen Reiter zum Großen Bären (Marianne Werefkin: From the Blue Rider to the Great Bear), Bietigheim-Bissingen: Städtische Galerie, April 12 to July 6, 2014 and Bremen: Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, July 20 to October 6, 2014.

24 Ab nach München! Künstlerinnen um 1900 (Off to Munich. Women Artists Around 1900), Munich: Stadtmuseum, September 12, 2014 to February 8, 2015.