CHAPTER 4

Exile, the Avant-Garde, and Dada: Women Artists Active in Switzerland during the First World War

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Abstract

The outbreak of World War I led to the exile of many artists and intellectuals from Germany. Marianne Werefkin and Alexei Jawlensky went to Switzerland. In Zurich, Werefkin came into contact with the artists associated with the Cabaret Voltaire, and in Ascona with the community of Monte Verità. The women artists with whom she was in touch during the war years included the performer and poet Emmy Hennings, the writer and journalist Claire Goll, the dancer and artist Sophie Taeuber, the dancer Clotilde von Derp as well as the artists and future promoters of modernist art in the United States, Hilla Rebay and Emmy Scheyer. The essay sheds new light on the émigré artists’ circles active in Switzerland during World War I by highlighting the relationships between these women.

The outbreak of World War I forced many artists and intellectuals living in Germany into exile, among them the cabaret performer Emmy Hennings, the writer Claire Goll, and the painter Marianne Werefkin. In this essay, I explore the situation of these women artists in exile and the conditions under which they attempted to continue their artistic careers, specifically the influence of their interpersonal relationships, which were often intensely close as well as competitive, both personally and professionally, and the importance of their networking and support systems.

Marianne Werefkin and Alexei Jawlensky, living together in Munich in 1914, were classified as enemy aliens and forced to leave Germany immediately at the outbreak of the war. Escorted by police to the border in Lindau, they crossed into Switzerland, leaving behind most of their possessions. With the assistance of Alexander von Chruschtschoff, a Russian nobleman who had a chalet in Lausanne, they were able to rent a small apartment on Rue du Motty in St. Prex, a small fishermen’s village on Lake Geneva.¹ There they lived a


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rather seclusive but artistically productive life despite the European situation at large and an increasing tension in their relationship. Werefkin reported to Herwarth Walden on May 28, 1915: "We are living out in the country, in a place so tiny one can hardly turn around."

One of their mutual friends was the dancer, painter, and choreographer Alexander Sacharoff. Sacharoff and Werefkin knew each other from Munich, where Sacharoff had been a member of the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists’ Association Munich) and worked with Wassily Kandinsky and Thomas von Hartmann on combining music, drawing, and dance into a synthetic work of art. Both Werefkin and Jawlensky had made sketches of his remarkable dance performances and also painted him. Sacharoff, who had been on holiday with his mother in Switzerland, became stranded there at the outbreak of the war. Not being allowed to return to Germany, he found himself in an involuntary "artists' colony" in Lausanne. In 1916, Sacharoff’s dance partner Clothilde von Derp (1892–1974) joined him. She remembered:

Almost the entire Russian Munich colony was in Switzerland. Alexander had settled in Lausanne. Marianne Werefkin and Jawlensky were in St. Prex. Strawinsky lived in Morges…. Alexander met Strawinsky and Diaghilew at Jacques-Delcroze’s in Geneva. Diaghilew convened his ballet company in Lausanne. They were waiting for Massine, who was coming from Russia and would travel on with the company to America. The famous ballet master Enrico Cecchetti was preparing the group for its tour. Marianne Werefkin knew Diaghilew well and told him about me. He immediately agreed that Cecchetti should also look after me.

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