

“Between us sleeps our child—art”: Creativity, Identity, and the Maternal in the Works of Marianne von Werefkin and Her Contemporaries

Dorothy Price

Abstract

This essay explores the interstices between creativity, procreativity, motherhood, and identity in the works of Marianne Werefkin and some of her contemporaries within German modernism. For the artists Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker, artistic creation and motherhood were twin concerns in their self-constructed identities as artists. For Werefkin and Gabriele Münter, the poles of creativity and procreativity were more complexly figured. Whilst mothers and children feature as predominant subject matter in the works of Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker, and to some extent in the works of Münter, the subject is virtually absent in the works of Werefkin, for whom “art” is the child who sublimates her erotic desire.

One day I happened to assist a doctor at a gynecological examination. When the speculum was in place, the doctor showed me the bottom of the diseased womb. She was a woman in childbed, she had just bled in order to give life; after giving birth she had unexpected complications. The horror... a nauseating odor rose to my nose; the linens stained with blood and pus moved my heart... I cared for the sick woman, approaching her each time with a retch. On the third day this woman cried out to me in sorrow that her husband ‘took’ her that very night. Since then physical love has been a monster to me... For four years we have slept side by side. I have remained virgin, he has become virgin again. Between us sleeps our child—art...¹

1 “Il m’est arrivé un jour d’assister un médecin dans une auscultation gynécologique. Le miroir placé, le médecin m’a montré le fond de la matrice malade. C’était une accouchée, elle venait de saigner pour donner la vie; après l’avoir donnée, elle pourrissait des complications survenues. L’horreur...une nauséabonde odeur me montait au nez, les linges maculés de sang et pus me tournaient le cœur...Je soignais la malade, chaque fois l’approchant avec un haut le cœur. Au troisième jour, cette femme me criait en hurlant de douleur que son mari l’avait possédée cette nuit même. L’amour physique m’est depuis un monstre.... Il y a quatre

The third letter of the first volume of Marianne Werefkin's diaries opens with this visceral account of the aftermath of childbirth and the horrors of postpartum copulation that prompted her early decision to replace physical sexual contact with the nurturing of "the illusory and the artistic," "the beautiful" and "the chaste love" of art.² Although the interstices between creativity, procreativity, gendered and sexual identity are frequently rehearsed tropes within feminist analyses of women's artwork, very little comparative research in English has been undertaken of the variety of discursive frameworks around women, identity, and creativity in the work of women artists associated with German modernism. Whilst for both Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) and Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907), artistic creation and motherhood were twin concerns in their self-constructed identities as artists, for Marianne Werefkin (1860–1938) and Gabriele Münter (1877–1962) both of whom remained childless, the poles of creativity and procreation were more complexly figured.

Public political discourse in late nineteenth-century Europe had structured the ideal image of the maternal as the stabilizing force of social order. Ideal mothers were the bedrock of conservative tradition in an age of political uncertainty and change. However, as the century came to a close, widespread cultural interest in aspects of childhood and youth, as twin pillars of innocence and renewal on the one hand, and dangerous but alluring liminal sexuality on the other, began to characterize a shift in consciousness. As childhood historian, Philippe Ariès has observed, if "youth is the privileged age of the seventeenth century, childhood of the nineteenth", then it is "adolescence" in the twentieth.³ As such, the transition from fin-de-siècle to early twentieth century offers a significant historical context for a comparative consideration of Modersohn-Becker's, Kollwitz's, Münter's, and Werefkin's potentially disruptive practices within normative understandings of the pre-First World War German avant-garde.⁴ All four artists began their careers across

ans que nous dormons côte à côte. Je suis restée vierge, lui l'est redevenu. Entre nous dort notre enfant—l'art..." Marianne Werefkin, *Lettres à un Inconnu: Aux sources l'expressionnisme* (Letters to an Unknown. Expressionist Sources), ed. by Gabrielle Durour-Kowalska, (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999), 72–75.

2 Ibid., 75.

3 Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962).

4 See for example David Ehrenpreis, "The Figure of the Backfisch: Representing Puberty in Wilhelmine Germany," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* (Journal of Art History), 67 (2004) 4: 479–508; Diane Radycki "Pictures of the Flesh': Modersohn-Becker and the Nude," *Women's Art Journal* (Fall/Winter 2009): 3–14; John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence*