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.

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 Meerson, 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).