

Paula Modersohn Becker

Paula Modersohn-Becker was a determined woman caught up in the pursuit of art. At first glance one may perceive her as being caught up in her own isolation, seeming unhappy with herself and the world around her. This is a common misconception. Paula Becker lived out a determined life. She is known for her tragic story of a premature death, but foremost for her original painting and drawing style. Today she is seen as the “tragic heroine” who died too soon and could not enjoy what she wanted most, her own daughter. With a closer look at Paula Becker’s works and life, one may see that she was not one to fixate upon death, but to live out her life fully in creating art. It took Paula Modersohn-Becker her whole art career to fully develop her artistic style. In this ten-year time frame of her short career as an artist, she was fully engulfed in art with little time for anything else, she was even mysterious to her own husband. Paula Modersohn-Becker’s life works were all dedicated to the pursuit of originality, which she finally achieved shortly before her death.

General Information

Paula Becker was born in Dresden on February 8, 1876 the middle child in a family of seven kids. (Perry 2) At an early age Paula showed promising talent in drawing. From the age of 12, her parents had her apprenticed to local painters and take numerous classes in the arts. Paula’s parents knew that an occupation as an artist, especially as a female, was highly improbable. Her parents still supported her pursuit of an occupation in art in hopes that she would take up a position as a governess. (2) Her parent’s dreams were shattered when Paula moved away to a town called Worpswede where she began her career as an artist at the age of 22. (24)

Mentors/Influences

At the age of 20 Paula had already developed her own style of drawing with the help of her teacher Hausmann. The style of drawing resembled “Both harsh outlines and heavy shadows.” (Perry 43) To achieve this “she takes pains over the contours and outlines.” (Perry 43) These techniques Paula developed can be seen in her charcoal drawings *Seated Peasant* and *Peasant with Cap*.



Seated Peasant Woman 1899



Peasant with Cap 1899

From 1898 to 1903 Paula Becker studied closely with her mentors Fritz Mackensen and Otto Modersohn, her future husband, in Worpswede. One can see the reflections of Mackensen in Paula's work from 1897-1900 in her charcoal, chalk, and pencil drawings. As time passed Paula grew disenchanted with Mackensen's artistic style. She felt his style resembled that of a "postcard" not personal to the artist or viewer. (44) Paula knew that if she were to stay in Worpswede she would never grow out of the picturesque style of Mackensen's art. She moved to France to visually analyze the masters. The Louvre was Paula's primary source of education in her stay in France. She was instantly inspired by the ancient Egyptian paintings she came upon in the Louvre. (Perry 58) This simplified style of the Egyptian painters appeared in many of Paula's later works as she continually grew apart from Mackensen's style of teaching.

Paula was not only inspired by the primitive Egyptian works of art but also equally inspired by Rembrandt's works. In a letter she wrote to her husband, Paula wrote highly about Rembrandt's artwork and how interesting the texture is in the paintings. (Perry 51) This was increasingly important to Paula's artwork as she matured. In the painting called *Old Woman With Headscarf* we see the rough texture vividly and uses heavy brush marks. The piece called *Trumpeting girl* also shows Paula's experimentation with heavy texture and brush marks inspired by Rembrandt.



Old Woman With Headscarf 1904-1905



Trumpeting Girl in the Birch Woods 1903-1905

Symbols

As Paula got closer to her ideal style she wanted in her paintings, one can see a repetition in images portrayed and symbols used. As seen in the painting called *Self Portrait with Amber* we see her most prevalent symbol, nakedness. “Nakedness becomes a metaphor for honesty and openness.” (Perry 54) One primarily sees this symbol in her self-portraits and her portraits of children in Worpswede. Fruits also become a symbol in Paula’s work that represent growth and fertility. (Perry 54) Fruits can be seen in the painting *Girl with Stork*.



Self Portrait With Amber 1906

Four Themes

Four different themes also become prevalent in Paula’s artwork, mother and child, children, peasants, and self-portraits. Mother and child portraits were one of her favorites. This painting called *Reclining Mother and Child* displays this common theme. This theme symbolizes “a powerful yet mysterious life flow, and a gesture of self-sacrifice.” (Perry 57) The gesture of self-sacrifice becomes more prevalent to the viewer in her depictions of mother and child nursing, as the mother sacrifices herself to her child.



Reclining Mother and Child, oil, 1906

Children are also a common theme in Paula’s paintings. Paula’s piece’s *Girl with Stork* follows this theme. The beauty of the piece lies in its symmetry of the painting that is broken by the branch that the little girl holds. (Perry 134) Paula had deep envy for the children of Worpswede for their innocence and other personal reasons. Her portraits of children do not always resemble her envy, but show the loss of innocence, growth, and the molding that society takes on children. (70) One can also presume that her fascination with children comes from her long life wish to have one of her own, but hesitant to do so after the death of her stepdaughter.



Girl With Stork, oil, 1906

Paula's first developed theme came from her early interest in the peasants of Worpswede. Paula felt that the peasants had a "heroic, timeless quality, which seems to set them above change." (Perry 93) In her painting *Old Woman with Headscarf* one can see her depiction of a peasant woman. It is common to see darker tones in her paintings, and even more so her drawings, of peasants. The dark tones that Paula uses help to emphasize the hard life of poverty. (Perry 97) In this piece one can strongly see her influences from Rembrandt's works at the Louvre. The old peasant woman is depicted with punctuated brush marks giving the piece a rough text similar to that of Rembrandt.

The last major theme one may come upon in Paula's artwork is her self-portraits. Paula mainly used herself portraits as a tool for experimentation and as a tool to understand herself. (Perry 136) In most of Paula's self-portraits she surrounds herself with symbols by portraying herself naked, holding fruits, or with flowers. In her self-portrait called *Self Portrait on Sixth Wedding Anniversary* one may see the symbols she uses. In this piece it is significant that she holds her stomach in the manner she is. Paula has portrayed this gesture in many other paintings of pregnant women. This gesture is used to "denote the sacred nature of this part of her body." (Perry 54) By looking at this painting one can tell that this is one of her last few art pieces she will ever do.



Self Portrait on Sixth Wedding Anniversary 1906

End of Career

In 1906 Paula decides to come back to Worpswede with her husband Otto to have a child of her own and live out her life's dream. (Perry138) Paula's pregnancy however brings her work

to a slow pace. In 1907 Paula gives birth to her child and dies from a heart attack several days later. (138) Paula was an artist unknown to anyone outside of the town of Worpswede. Even her closest friends did not know the extent of her work. It was not until Otto went to Paula's studio long after her death that anyone had ever known the extent of her work.