STÄDEL MUSEUM

WALL TEXTS

SELF. DETERMINED: THE PAINTER OTTILIE W. ROEDERSTEIN

20 JULY TO 19 OCTOBER 2022
Exhibition annex

Introduction

The German-Swiss painter Ottilie W. Roederstein (1859–1937) was one of the outstanding women artists of the period around 1900. She was firmly established in the male-dominated art world and gained recognition for her work in numerous exhibitions in Germany and abroad.

Roederstein produced a multifaceted oeuvre mirroring many of the stylistic trends of early modernism in art: from academic painting to symbolist and impressionist means of expression to a reductive, objective approach. She never ventured into the realm of abstraction, however, but remained indebted to reality as her model.

As a freelance artist, Roederstein deliberately disregarded the societal norms of her time, which left women no scope for personal or professional development. The self-portraits she executed in great number throughout her long career testify to her critical stance on traditional gender roles.

From 1891 onwards, after training in Zurich, Berlin, and Paris, Roederstein lived with her partner, the physician Elisabeth Winterhalter, in Frankfurt am Main. The painter was well connected in local artist circles and cultivated extensive contact to many leading Frankfurt families whose members she portrayed prolifically. Roederstein's work is closely intertwined with the history of the Städel Museum and the city of Frankfurt. Her studio in the Städelsche Kunstschule was just a few steps away from the museum, which she visited regularly, its collection being an important source of inspiration for her art.

In 1909, Roederstein and Winterhalter moved to the neighbouring town of Hofheim am Taunus. There, towards the end of her career, the painter was able to devote herself to new artistic experiments in her own studio building and found her way to her *'eigene Handschrift'*, as she called it: her own personal style. The exhibition retraces Roederstein's stylistic development and her exceptional and successful career.

Paris

In 1882, after her early years of training with the portrait painter Karl Gussow in Berlin, Roederstein went to Paris. In those days, the city was the centre of artistic life and its liberal social structures drew women artists from all over the world.

As in most European countries, women were denied access to the state art academy there, but they did have the option of studying painting in numerous privately run academies and studios. Roederstein decided in favour of the ‘ladies’ studio’ of Emile Auguste Carolus-Duran and Jean-Jacques Henner. The two successful artists were known for their elegant full-length likenesses of ladies masterfully executed in a loose painting mode. They cultivated a style that – neither rigorously academic nor overly avant-gardist – met with widespread appreciation.

Their influence is still clearly evident in Roederstein’s large-scale portrait of the pianist *Miss Mosher*, a work which also bears witness to her great talent as regards the nuanced colouration of her compositions. With works of this kind, Roederstein managed to establish herself as a successful portrait painter. Examples of her art were on display in the city’s most important exhibitions from as early as 1883 and repeatedly earned her awards and distinctions.

Roederstein completed her training in 1887 and returned briefly to her native Zurich. She retained a studio in Paris, however, until the outbreak of World War I. This arrangement enabled her to work there several months of every year, cultivate her contacts to notable artists, and take inspiration from the cultural life that thrived in the city on the Seine.

The Roederstein-Jughenn Archive

Roederstein left a wide array of historical photographs, letters, and documents behind that today enable us to rediscover the biography and oeuvre of a long-forgotten artist. The material moreover paints a very private picture of her and her partner, the physician Elisabeth H. Winterhalter. The two had met in 1885 in Zurich, where Winterhalter had gone to study medicine as women were still denied access to the universities in Germany. Their friendship developed into a lifelong partnership in which they supported one another in attaining professional success.

Yet Roederstein and Winterhalter led an exceedingly emancipated and modern life outside their professional careers as well: they hiked in the Swiss Alps and travelled by donkey, camel, and desert jeep in North Africa and the Middle East. Both were moreover well connected in Frankfurt society and beyond—a circumstance mirrored by their rich correspondence with numerous figures in the realms of science, culture, and business.

Thanks to Winterhalter's farsightedness and the work of Hermann Jughenn, a neighbour and friend of Roederstein's, these unique testimonies have survived to the present. A railway official by profession and a mountain climber by passion, Jughenn moreover had a keen artistic instinct and was active as a local historian. After Roederstein's death, Winterhalter therefore entrusted him with the task of drawing up a catalogue raisonné and biography of the artist. He worked on them for more than twenty years, supplementing Roederstein's documents with his own comprehensive notes. By way of a generous gift, the entire collection of material passed into the possession of the Städel Museum in 2019 as the 'Roederstein-Jughenn Archive'.

Self-Portraits

Roederstein portrayed herself repeatedly throughout her career. The numerous likenesses document how her outward appearance changed over the five decades in which she was active as an artist. Yet they also testify to her mastery of various styles and modes of painting. The panorama of self-portraits on view here mirrors the various influences on her work – from the fine-painterly approach of the Old Masters and the loose brushwork of Impressionism to the solidification of form in her late phase.

Independently of stylistic orientation, Roederstein consistently depicted herself as a serious and self-assured artist. Most of her self-likenesses show her in masculine clothing, striking a robust pose and gazing intently at the beholder. In them, she strongly dissociated herself from gender-specific stereotypes. The works are expressions of her selfconception as a self-determined artist who successfully asserted her place in the art world.

Frankfurt am Main

Roederstein and Winterhalter came to Frankfurt am Main in 1891. In those days, the city was not among the major German art centres, but it was distinguished by an upper class whose members engaged in trade throughout Europe and had money to spend on art as a way of calling attention to their status. What is more, it was open to positive developments as regarded the acceptance of gainful employment for women: female painters had had the opportunity to study in the so-called ladies' class at the Städelsche Kunstschule since as far back as 1869. At the same time, various women's associations championed the cause of women's rights. Winterhalter, for example, was able to take over a gynaecological office here as a physician and Germany's first woman surgeon.

Roederstein, for her part, received numerous portrait commissions and became the most sought-after woman painter in town. Her paintings were highly appreciated for their ‘elegant colour effect’, loose style, and brilliant execution. Norbert Schrödl, an influential Frankfurt painter, was one of those to have himself portrayed by his younger colleague. He would prove to be an important contact for Roederstein, who would soon be well integrated in the local artists’ milieu.
Roederstein took up occupancy of a studio at the Städelsche Kunstschule in 1892 and until 1911 taught painting and drawing there – primarily but not exclusively to young women. The majority of her pupils were daughters of the city’s well-known upper-class families, among them Mathilde Battenberg, Hanna Bekker vom Rath, Lilly Hauck, and Pauline Kowarzik.

Renaissance Revival and Tempera

Roederstein’s portrait painting underwent a distinct transformation in the mid-1890s. The elegant and virtuoso style she had acquired in Paris now gave way to rigorously executed Renaissance-type compositions with an emphasis on contours. Taking her cue from such artists as Hans Holbein the Younger and Sandro Botticelli, Roederstein began carrying out half-length portraits of her subjects in strict or threequarter profile before landscape backgrounds. She included inscriptions and accessories such as a painter’s beret or a cap to underscore the timeless quality of the likenesses. In works like *The Three Ages*, the portrait character recedes in favour of an allegoric depiction, here of the three phases of a human life.
The artist also took orientation from the painting techniques of the Old Masters, whose works she studied in depth. Inspired by her studio neighbour at the Städelsche Kunstschule, the artist Karl von Pidoll, she switched from oil paints to egg-tempera. The medium common in the Italian Renaissance, tempera had only been rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century, when Renaissance art gained renewed notice in general. The graphically structured application of the tempera paints and their semi-matt surface effect contrasted starkly with the shiny varnished products of academic painting. With her idealizing Renaissancestyle works, Roederstein struck a chord among her contemporaries and received wide recognition not only in Germany.

Religious Painting & Nudes

As she was reliant on commissions to earn a living, portraiture made up a large proportion of Roederstein’s oeuvre. Yet she also devoted herself to various other genres, for example religious painting. One of her most ambitious compositions is the large-scale *Pietà*, a noncommissioned work which she exhibited on several

occasions. Combining a religious theme with a depiction of a nude, it testifies to the breadth of her skill. She painted it to demonstrate her determination to work on an equal footing with her male colleagues. In the nineteenth-century, biblical scenes of this kind were an unusual choice of themes for women artists. They were reserved for men because, under the pretext of propriety, women had little opportunity to study male nudes. Roederstein, however, refused to accept such limitations, and devoted herself repeatedly to nude depictions of women and men alike from the earliest stages of her career.

Still Lifes

In terms of quantity, still lifes come second in Roederstein's oeuvre after portraits. This initially seems to confirm the convictions of her male colleagues that women painters should stick to the less prestigious genres of portraiture and still life. Yet it was not until the peak of her career – after 1900 – that Roederstein devoted herself more intently to flower still lifes and arrangements of fruit and vases. One of the earliest surviving examples is the *Still Life with Pears and Casserole*. Here she concentrated on reproducing various textures and surfaces in the manner of the French still-life tradition, whose chief exponent was Jean-Siméon Chardin, an artist she greatly admired.

In later years, floral still lifes frequently served her as a medium in which to test her artistic 'signature' and experiment freely with different styles. In these works, she ventured new compositional structures and vivid colour harmonies. In her manner of applying the paint, Roederstein looked both to the French Impressionists and to the clearly contoured, objective formal language of the interwar years. Because they sold well on the art market, still lifes moreover helped her secure her livelihood even in financially difficult times. The concentrated selection of works on view here demonstrates the astonishing stylistic diversity of Roederstein's compositions. Yet it also shows that her artistic development was anything but linear. On the contrary, she often worked in different painting styles simultaneously.

Women's Education

Roederstein and Winterhalter both espoused the cause of better educational opportunities for girls and young women in Frankfurt am Main. Elisabeth Winterhalter was especially active in this respect. She and her friends Countess Gabriele von Wartensleben, Anna Edinger and the social policy expert Meta Quarck-Hammerschlag campaigned for the establishment of a girls' *Gymnasium* that would

give its students the opportunity to qualify for higher education and, in turn, access to universities.
Roederstein, for her part, supported young women painters in many ways – as a teacher and adviser, by helping to facilitate the inclusion of their works in exhibitions, and by purchasing their works for her own art collection. She also set an example to her pupils with her independent and self-determined lifestyle and her professional success. In 1913, she became a member of the main board of the newly founded Frauenkunstverband. This women artist's association advocated for giving women the same artistic training opportunities as men, and in particular for admitting them to art academies – a goal that would not be reached, however, until 1919, when women were granted equality before the law.

Network

Roederstein and Winterhalter were highly respected in Frankfurt for their professionalism and their dedication to social causes, and accordingly well connected in the local society. For the artist, this meant an abundance of commissions. She portrayed the who's who of the city: influential figures in banking and industry such as the Haucks, von Bethmanns, von Guaitas, von Metzlers, and von Schnitzler. Through Winterhalter's practice as a physician, the couple were also acquainted with many of the scientists of the Dr. Senckenbergisches Institut.
A considerable number of Roederstein's portraits of leading Frankfurters, for example the former Städel director Georg Swarzenski, have since been lost. Many of her customers were, like Swarzenski, of Jewish descent. After the Nazis came to power, they were subjected to persecution and robbed of their livelihoods. If they had not already given away their art collections, the works in their holdings were confiscated and destroyed. Although Roederstein was deeply shaken by the political developments, she did not take an active stance against the Nazi regime. She remained in contact and corresponded extensively with her Jewish friends until her death in 1937.

Late Work

Roederstein moved to Hofheim am Taunus in 1909 and set up shop in her new studio there soon afterward – a transition that went hand in hand with a new stylistic orientation in her work. Particularly in the difficult years of World War I, when she had no commissions and painting materials were hard to come by, the artist began to take more liberties and experiment with different painting styles. Now she cultivated an increasingly simplified pictorial language borne by the heightened effect of the

colours. In one phase, inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, she produced a series of decorative portraits. She also devoted herself to symbolic depictions, among them allegories of pain, anguish, and sorrow. Demonstrating an impressive spectrum of different modes of painterly expression, these works bear witness to her great technical skill.

A distinctive feature of Roederstein's artistic approach was her openness to new – and in many cases disparate – trends. Reality nevertheless remained her chief inspiration throughout her career. Conceptually speaking, she had her artistic roots in nineteenth-century tradition and did not pursue the ideas of abstraction that emerged in the early twentieth century. The diversity and quality of her art became especially evident in an exhibition the Frankfurter Kunstverein mounted in her memory after her death in 1937. Subsequently, however, her oeuvre was to disappear from the public eye for decades.