





PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER

ICH BIN ICH / I AM ME

Edited by Jay A. Clarke and Jill Lloyd

With preface by Ronald S. Lauder, foreword by Renée Price and James Rondeau,
and essays by Jay A. Clarke and Jill Lloyd

With contributions by Rebecca Duckwitz, Felipe Villada Ruiz, and Wolfgang Werner

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PREFACE

When my wonderful friend Serge Sabarsky and I were first drawing up plans for the Neue Galerie New York, we gave a great deal of thought to what the museum's mission should be. We knew, of course, that we wanted to focus on German and Austrian art and design of the early twentieth century for a number of reasons.

First of all, we were both drawn to this material because it represented a unique time and place in history. That shared interest—I'd even call it fascination—led us to gather extensive collections of this work. But there was another reason as well. We felt that German and Austrian art was often overlooked in most museums and it deserved to be presented in all its glory.

That actually created a problem. Because of its underrepresentation, we realized our museum would be showing a number of artists who were not well known to American audiences. Yes, visitors would be familiar with the significant artists of the era like Gustav Klimt or Max Beckmann. But there were many others, all very important, who would be getting their first major presentations in this country through the Neue Galerie. Serge and I decided to push forward and embrace this challenge.

Paula Modersohn-Becker is exactly that kind of artist. Many people may have encountered the occasional work by her in other museums or gallery settings, but no one has ever seen a full presentation of her art in this country. I would guess that some people have never even heard her name, but that will no longer be the case.

By presenting this exhibition at the Neue Galerie New York and with our partner for the project, the Art Institute of Chicago, we are pleased to offer the most wide-ranging exhibition ever devoted to this artist in the United States. We've done this in the past with great success in presenting other lesser-known artists, such as Dagobert Peche and Alfred Kubin.

Paula Modersohn-Becker certainly deserves to be better known. Although she died at the tragically young age of 31, she produced more than 700 paintings and almost 1,400 drawings during her brief lifetime. Her treatment of the subject of motherhood was groundbreaking, and she was a major contributor to the field of German Expressionism. In 2017, I was proud to participate in the Neue Galerie and The Museum of Modern Art jointly acquiring a great painting by Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in Her Raised Left Hand* (1907). That work is included in this show, along with more than 70 other key drawings and paintings by this fascinating and gifted artist.

Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Girl Blowing a Flute in the Birch Forest*, 1905, oil tempera on canvas. Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen. Photo: © Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung, Bremen

We are so pleased to have the Art Institute of Chicago as our partner for this project. My thanks go to that museum's superb director, James Rondeau, and the wonderful staff for helping to mount this important exhibition. The curators, Jill Lloyd and Jay A. Clarke, have assembled a fantastic group of loans that allow us to really experience the art of Paula Modersohn-Becker, and their contributions to the catalogue help us understand her better in the context of her time—something I believe is crucial in appreciating her work.

Of course, I also want to extend my gratitude to the entire Neue Galerie staff, led by Director Renée Price. They have all contributed to realizing this exhibition, and their efforts on behalf of the Neue Galerie continue to make me very proud.

I promise you this: you will not be disappointed at all in coming to know Paula Modersohn-Becker.

RONALD S. LAUDER

President, Neue Galerie New York

Paula Modersohn-Becker and Elsbeth,
Worpswede, ca. 1903. Photo: © Paula-
Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung, Bremen





FOREWORD

During her short life, Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) radically charted her own path, exploring the intimate and singular aspects of the feminine experience in a bold style that foreshadowed Expressionism. Among her prolific output—comprising more than 700 paintings, almost 1,400 drawings, and 11 prints—her most striking works are frank portrayals of childhood and images of the lived bodily experience of motherhood, pregnancy, and old age. Modersohn-Becker is acclaimed for her many self-portraits, including the first nude self-portraits known to have been made by a woman. Ranging across landscape, monumental figure drawings and paintings, portraiture, and still-life, Modersohn-Becker's innovative approach to both subject and style challenges the traditional boundaries of artistic genres.

A major figure in the history of German art, Modersohn-Becker has achieved wide acclaim in her native country; in 1927 the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in her hometown of Bremen was the first museum in the world established to honor a female artist. Yet despite her importance to art history and her posthumous place as a feminist icon, Modersohn-Becker has never been the subject of a museum retrospective in the United States. This historic occasion marks her first full-scale museum presentation in this country.

Modersohn-Becker initially became known in part through her letters and diaries, published in 1919, including correspondence with her close friend, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In 1906 Modersohn-Becker wrote to Rilke: "I don't even know how I should sign my name. I'm not Modersohn and I'm not Paula Becker anymore either. I am Me, and I hope to become Me more and more." (*Und nun weiss ich gar nicht, wie ich mich unterschreiben soll. Ich bin nicht Modersohn und ich bin auch nicht mehr Paula Becker, Ich bin Ich, und hoffe es immer mehr zu werden.*) This landmark statement of self-determination—*Ich bin Ich* (I am Me)—written at the moment when she left her husband and attempted to forge an independent career, provides the subtitle for our exhibition and a window into the artist's formidable sense of identity.

"Paula Modersohn-Becker: Ich bin Ich / I Am Me" is the first collaboration between the Neue Galerie New York and the Art Institute of Chicago. Both institutions are known for deep holdings of European works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Neue Galerie is distinguished by its focus on Germanic art, and the Art Institute has a grand history of collecting and presenting French art, so in a sense this exhibition may be said to honor the dual traditions to which Modersohn-Becker is indebted, as her training took place primarily in Berlin, Worpswede, and Paris. Both museums have acquired important work by the artist, with the Neue Galerie

Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait on Sixth Wedding (Anniversary) Day*, 1906, oil tempera on cardboard mounted on wood. Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen. Photo: © Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung, Bremen

sharing ownership with the Museum of Modern Art of her *Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in Her Raised Left Hand* (1907), and the Art Institute having acquired in the 1960s and 1970s drawings selected by German-born curator Harold Joachim, and, most recently, a number of her etchings.

We wish to thank the lenders who helped make this exhibition possible. Special mention must be made to the Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung and its director, Wolfgang Werner, who supported this project from the outset. The presentation at the Art Institute was made possible through the generosity of an anonymous donor. Our esteemed curators, Jill Lloyd for Neue Galerie New York and Jay A. Clarke, Rothman Family Curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, have created a superb survey of Modersohn-Becker's work, demonstrating the true scale of her accomplishments. In particular, we wish to thank the staffs of the Neue Galerie and the Art Institute for their dedication in organizing this exhibition and catalogue, with special mention of Neue Galerie President and Co-Founder, Ronald S. Lauder, for his early and vocal support of the project. It is an honor for our two institutions to present this exhibition, and to bring the work of Paula Modersohn-Becker to a wider audience.

RENÉE PRICE

Director, Neue Galerie New York

JAMES RONDEAU

President and Eloise W. Martin Director, the Art Institute of Chicago

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JILL LLOYD

Paula Modersohn-Becker: Becoming Me

Paula Modersohn-Becker's focus on issues of identity makes her work particularly resonant in our own time. Like many artists today, Modersohn-Becker was on a voyage of self-discovery, determined to explore the boundaries of her own identity—as a woman and a human being, but first and foremost as an artist. It was a highly personal journey, concerned, above all, with the desire—one might say compulsion—to realize her full potential. Modersohn-Becker rushed headlong into her future. Given her tragically short lifespan it seems, in retrospect, that she was caught in a race against time: “I’m breathless,” she wrote in her diary in 1898, the year she began to paint. “I want to go further and further; I can hardly wait until I’m a real artist.”¹ Eight years later, in the year before her death, she addressed her mother in a letter: “This constant rush towards the goal is the most beautiful thing in life. Nothing else comes close to it. I ask you to bear in mind that, when I occasionally appear to be lacking in love, I am racing towards my own goal, always, incessantly, only occasionally resting in order to race again towards that goal. It is a concentration of my energies on that one thing.”² In the brief span between these two instances of self-reflection, Modersohn-Becker worked with incredible dedication and energy, leaving behind 734 paintings and almost 1,400 works on paper when she died in 1907, at the age of thirty-one.

In her rush towards self-realization, Modersohn-Becker sought to anchor her sense of identity in family and community, in the places that meant the most to her, in the faces that she observed around her or saw reflected in the mirror, and in her recognition of the awe-inspiring creative potential of the female body. In the last year of her life, she took a bold leap into the unknown, transgressing both personal and artistic boundaries to achieve the freedom she needed to make her best, most original work. Issues of identity shaped the artist's entire worldview. For what Modersohn-Becker sought above all was a kernel of authenticity in everything that she painted, whether a person, a nude, a jug, or a tree. Acutely aware of the passage of time as she hurtled towards her destiny, she wanted to capture the breath of life, or what she called “the gentle vibration of things.”³ This, she explained in a letter to her husband, the artist Otto Modersohn, was a quality of nature, of very existence, that she considered vital to art: “There must be [. . .] a breath, a presentiment, and a strangeness, like there is in nature as it appears to us in moments when our gaze is focused, sincere and clear, on the singular essence of things.”⁴ As her life and art unfolded, Modersohn-Becker became increasingly aware that the core sense of identity she sought in herself and the world around her—that “singular essence of things”—had to combine the particular

1

Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Hat and Veil*, 1906–07, oil tempera on canvas. Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Photo: © Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung, Bremen

and the universal, the temporal and the eternal, in order for it to endure and be conveyed through art to future generations. Without sacrificing the “gentle vibration” of life, the artistic peers she most admired (especially Paul Cézanne⁵) could, like the great artists of the past, elevate simple objects and imbue them with immortality. Interweaving and balancing these opposing elements—time and eternity, the particular and the universal, life and death—Modersohn-Becker embarked on a ten-year odyssey to become herself.

Families and Communities

Modersohn-Becker's sister Herma underlined her sibling's “extreme individualism.”⁶ Although she often felt misunderstood by those close to her, Modersohn-Becker, like most young people, found her bearings from her interactions with others. Her liberal parents broadened their daughter's horizons by sending her to stay with relatives in London and Berlin, where she took classes at private art academies. Indeed, she belonged to the first generation of women artists given access to professional training and life classes, although German state art academies remained closed to women until 1919, when they finally gained the right to vote. Modersohn-Becker's father regarded her studies as preparation for earning her living as a teacher, which was one of the few professions that had recently opened to women. Although Modersohn-Becker showed no great interest in the collective women's movement,⁷ the fight for women's rights at the turn of the twentieth century is without question the backdrop to her personal journey. Her father took a keen interest in these developments, writing in 1896 to his daughter in London about the “curse” of inadequate education for women in Germany: “In this regard” he wrote, “English women are superior to those in this country; they have enthusiastically taken up the battle for existence against their men and I do believe that they will be the first to establish themselves a new domain of influence and a new future.”⁸ Modersohn-Becker's attitudes were shaped by her liberal background; her strong belief in equality for herself and the women close to her was part of her family heritage.

But Modersohn-Becker also sought other communities and families. In 1895, she was deeply impressed by an exhibition she saw at the Bremen Kunsthalle of the Worpswede artists' colony, which had been established in 1889; the romantic landscape paintings of her future husband, Otto Modersohn, particularly caught her attention. In 1897 she spent the summer months in Worpswede, and the following year, when she finished her training in Berlin, she settled in the village, which is situated to the north of Bremen in a flat landscape punctuated by silver birch trees on the edge of the “Devil's Moor.” Several women artists went to Worpswede to continue their education, including Maria Franck (who studied under Otto Modersohn and later married the Blaue Reiter artist Franz Marc), the painter Otilie Reylaender, the sculptress Clara Westhoff, and Modersohn-Becker, who all joined life drawing classes offered by Fritz Mackensen, another key member of the artist's group.

Although Modersohn-Becker quickly tired of the “genre-like” realism of Mackensen and other Worpswede artists,⁹ she was drawn to certain members of the community: Westhoff became her close friend, and she was attracted both by Modersohn's gentle personality and his

evocative, atmospheric paintings of the landscape and local people. Both belonged to the more progressive, liberal-minded wing of the Worpswede colony that gathered in Heinrich Vogeler's Jugendstil-inspired villa named Barkenhoff, near the center of the village. Several period photographs show Modersohn-Becker at Barkenhoff [Fig. 2], while a painting by Vogeler [Fig. 3] shows the group that came to be known as “the Family” posing in the manicured garden, which was planted with rose bushes and silver birch trees. Vogeler invited writers and musicians to visit this creative community and organized weekly concerts and poetry readings in the villa's music room. Modersohn-Becker met the playwright Carl Hauptmann (brother of Gerhart) at Barkenhoff, and—most importantly—the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who arrived in Worpswede in August 1900. Although Rilke knew little or nothing of Modersohn-Becker's work at the time, they quickly entered into a lively dialogue, and something of an *amitié amoureuse*, which lasted, despite a period of estrangement following Rilke's marriage to Westhoff, until the artist's death.

Modersohn-Becker's other important intellectual partner was Modersohn. The long hours she spent in his studio discussing art was the basis of their relationship, and shortly after Modersohn's first wife died in 1900, Paula Becker accepted his proposal of marriage. Rather than pursue a teaching career, she decided that marriage to a successful artist eleven years her senior would provide her with a secure basis to develop her own art, free of financial worries. This is not to say that she was not deeply attached to Modersohn and his young daughter, Elsbeth, from his prior marriage. Their correspondence attests to their mutual love. It was agreed that Modersohn-Becker would keep her own studio, separate from the household; and at the outset she was optimistic that she could successfully combine the roles of wife, mother, and artist. She wrote to her mother in November 1900: “Just because I'm getting married is no reason for my turning into a nothing.”¹⁰



2
Otto, Elsbeth, and Paula Modersohn in the garden at Barkenhoff, Worpswede, ca. 1904. Photograph by Ernst Portig. Photo: © Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung, Bremen



3
Heinrich Vogeler, *Summer Evening (The Concert)*, 1903–05, oil on canvas. Große Kunstschau Worpswede. Photo: Alamy Stock Photo