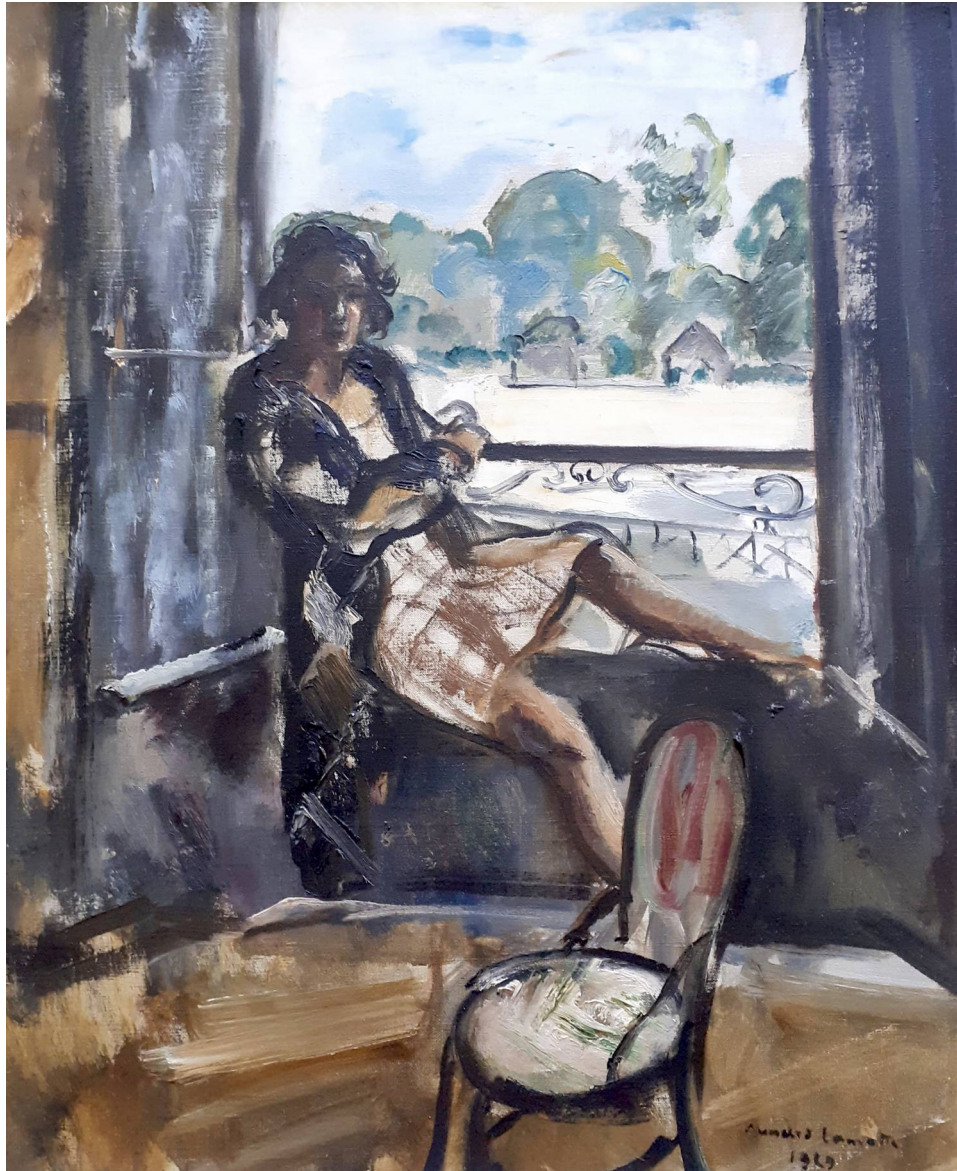


The Modern Girl: Women painters of the early 20th Century (Chapter 1)



Bernard Lamotte (1903-1983) The Modern Girl, oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm, signed and dated 1929 £2000/€2300/USD2775

So here I am, beginning the my newsletter on “Women Painters of the early 20th Century” with a work by a male artist! Call it a tribute: I wanted to start with an image of feminine cool, because cool is exactly the term for the women I shall be writing about. Woman artists, by definition, were fearless, unconventional, adventurous: they needed to be, to carve out their place in a still male-dominated world.

The girl depicted in the painting above has been my heroine ever since I first laid eyes on her. To me, she epitomises the “Modern Girl”: confident, perfectly at ease, sitting on a window sill, with her legs probably a little further apart than her her mum would have liked her to.

Her hair is cropped short. Her clothes, the short dress and the long chequered coat - gosh! I dressed just like this in the 1990s, and I thought *I* was cool, then. But *this* modern girl had the look a good 60 years before me – in 1929.

Artist Bernard Lamotte was 26 years old when he painted her. He was a cool kid, too. I imagine him, along with Modern Girl - who was certainly a friend – and Antoine de Saint Exupéry in Paris Jazz clubs, putting the world to rights in animated discussions.

Bernard Lamotte and Antoine de Saint Exupéry met at art school in 1920, and had become best friends. There are anecdotes of the two young men living it up in night clubs during those *Années Folles*, with Lamotte sketching Antoine as the latter was writing.

There is a story of both of them speeding in de Saint Exupéry's Bugatti: "I learnt that day what it was like to be flying" said Lamotte later about the experience.

Yet don't be fooled – Bernard was an immensely gifted, sensitive artist. I love the way the Modern Girl's face is a little obscured, because she is seated against the light. I love the fleeting, in-the-moment feeling created by rapid brushstrokes: the picture was clearly painted in one session, on the spot. Look at the floorboards, so quickly sketched, and yet you can almost feel them creaking.

Bernard Lamotte moved to New York in 1936, and within one year of his arrival received several mural commissions including and exhibitions including a solo exhibition at the Wildenstein Gallery.

Other shows included the Art Institute of Chicago in 1941, the Carstairs Gallery in New York City annually from 1941–1950s, and a solo exhibition at the Palm Beach Gallery in 1965. Like Pierre Sicard and Grigory Gluckmann, Lamotte was represented by the Dalzell-Hatfield Gallery in Los Angeles.

Lamotte's atelier was located above the *La Grenouille* restaurant, where fellow expatriate French artists and famed New York personalities congregated, including Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin, and Marlene Dietrich. His studio became a bohemian haven and was nicknamed *Le Bocal* ("The Fishbowl"). The Fishbowl was one of the places where Saint-Exupéry worked on *Le Petit Prince*. In fact: de Saint Exupéry nearly commissioned his friend Lamotte to do the illustrations for *The Little Prince*, but eventually decided to do them himself.



Bernard Lamotte with Marlene Dietrich

I was so pleased when I noticed that a painting by one of the women artists I wanted to present *also* dates from 1929! It is a lyrical interior by Anne Chérie Charles, who signed her work *Chériane*.



Chériane (1898-1990) Interior with a table laden with fruit, oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm signed and dated 1929 £680/€790/USD 950

Chériane's father was a journalist, and her mother was an aviator, so she certainly had a progressive upbringing.

She studied at the Paris School and the Académie Julien, exhibiting at the Salon des Indépendants from 1921, and at the Salon d'Automne from 1925. She exhibited at the Salon des Tuileries from the year of its founding, showing her art successfully internationally in Prague, New York and Vienna.

She also undertook significant public commissions, including a monumental painting entitled 'Music' for the 1937 Universal Exposition in Paris.

Our painting has lovely provenance: it was exhibited at the Théophile Briant Gallery in the very year it was created! Théophile Briant, had opened his Paris gallery in 1920, and exhibited notably the surrealist Francis Picabia. A poet as well as a society figure prior to his retreat from the world, Briant was friends with literary figures such as Céline and Max Jacob.

Chériane's favoured subjects included female figurative works and nudes, as well as landscapes of Provence. Her art is light, feminine warm and musical, with lovely little details such as the heart on the plate which decorates the wall, and the pretty lady on the candlestick.



Chériane, Interior – a detail from the painting, and its label from the Galerie Théophile Bruant at the verso

I admit I knew almost nothing of the woman who painted the artwork that follows, Marthe Alers-Abran, and it was exciting to put together pieces of the puzzle. Born in Paris in 1867, Marthe died tragically young in the same City, aged only 41, in 1908. She had married Charles Alers, an engineer, in 1897, and taught drawing, like many female artists at the time.

Unlike many woman artists in her time, she gained entry to the exclusive Salon des Artistes Français, obtaining an honourable mention in 1893 and a medal in 1896.

What intrigued me about the painting by her was that there was nothing Parisian, or even French about the scene it depicts. How did she come to paint it?



Marthe Alers-Abran (1867-1908) *Evening Prayers*, oil on canvas, 58 x 71 cm, circa 1905, signed lower left. Price on application

I think I found the answer. Marthe was not only a painter, but also a sculptor – and a very good one at that, too. I have not been able to establish to what extent she worked and studied with Rodin, but she certainly had a connection to his, her name appearing in his studio archives. And it was certainly in Rodin's studio that she met, and became friends with, fellow sculptor Sophie Postolska, a French woman of Polish origin, who was exactly the same age as she.

Like Camille Claudel before her, Marthe's friend Sophie was not only Rodin's student, but also his muse and lover.

When Rodin broke up with her in 1904, Sophie tried to kill herself with Mercury Chloride, was admitted to the *Hôpital Broussais*. Once released, she started travelling, spending time in Krakow, Vienna...and Zakopane, a town at the foot of the Tatra Mountains, with a thriving artistic community.

This is where Marthe came to visit, and where she painted this beautiful, jewel coloured scene depicting local women at evening prayer in the fields.



Marthe Alers-Abran, Evening Prayers (the Angelus at Zakopane) – a detail

For me, this painting evokes memories of witnessing unfamiliar scenes in distant countries: that strange feeling of being present-yet-detached at the same time, of discovery. (*Friends, one day we will be able to travel again.*)

With her immense talent, I wonder how famous Marthe might have become if she had lived longer. She was well on her way – in the year before her death, she exhibited

paintings both at the Chateau de Rohan in Strasburg, and in an exhibition of French art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Stuttgart.

She featured in Walter Shaw Sparrow's book *Women Painters of the World*, an overview of prominent women painters from 1413 to 1905, the year of publication.

The purpose of the book was to prove wrong the statement that 'the achievements of women painters have been second-rate'- which I suppose was an almost radical cause at the time.

Marthe's work may well be gaining traction again. The Museum of Toulouse holds a work by her, and her painting "Tigers in the Jungle" features in the more recent reference work on woman artists by Dr Sara Gray.

Do let's hope that further women artists will be rediscovered. I shall try to do my bit.

For further paintings, please view <http://www.sellingantiques.co.uk/skippingsfinearts/>
New paintings are added regularly. And if you would like some more reading straight away, do have a look at the [Moby Dick Special](#)

Stay safe, look after yourself, and enjoy the spring!

Tamara

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Bernard Lamotte: *The Modern Girl*, framed in a wood carved 'Montparnasse' frame (framed size: 82 x 71 cm)



Chériane, Interior (framed size: 70 x 58 cm)



Marthe Alers Abrams *The Angelus at Zakopane* in its hand carved wooden frame (framed size: 80 x 92 cm)