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FOUR AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS PAINT WOMEN

by

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In the art of portraiture the subtle talents of the artist become seismographic recorders of social position registering even the slightest psychological tremors. "Women have. . . been encouraged, if not coerced, into making responsiveness to the moods, attentiveness to the character-traits (and not always the most attractive ones) of others into a lifetime's occupation."<sup>1</sup> What then better qualifies the female as a natural in the genre of portraiture? Here the sensitivities and receptivities long touted as feminine virtues become the perfunctory tools of the female portraitist.

Within this genre the artist acts as a mediator rather than dictator or inventor<sup>2</sup> necessitating an openness, almost a vulnerability to the artist's self as well as the sitter. Likewise the sitter is often emotionally stripped naked leaving the soul bared to the bone and unhidden from the scavaging eye of the artist. It is within this context that the concerns of the woman portraitist are most sensitive especially when her sitter is of like gender.

"The number of women painters for whom the portrait and self-portrait have been important or even major concerns within the last hundred years is large. . ."<sup>3</sup> within their ranks are included four American artists; Lilly Martin Spencer, Romaine Brooks, Isabel Bishop and Alice Neel. These four women span a time of more than a hundred years of portraiture. Each began their artist's career at an early age and continued to produce or, in the case of Bishop and Neel, are still producing well into their seventies and eighties.

Though no one of these artists concerned herself exclusively with the painting of women, upon seeing their body of work one becomes keenly aware that women were more than casual subjects. Each artist had or has her own explanation for painting women, none of them necessarily shared except for the one of relating to another woman no matter how diverse or similar the lifestyles.

Spencer and Bishop paint the common, the kitchen maid, the working girl. Brooks painted the elite. Neel paints women from all walks of contemporary life from the slum, to business executives, to her painting of Isabel Bishop (Fig. 20). Yet one must be forewarned against reading feminine or feminist attitudes in, or into, these works.<sup>4</sup> It is only Alice Neel who is forthright in her feminist interpretations. Yet, beyond a doubt, each of these artists sensed and painted their women subjects as more than psychically locked into a particular role.

The portraiture of Spencer, Brooks, Bishop and Neel reflects much more than the desire to create a likeness in paint. If only a perfect image or painting suitable for the parlor was sought after, these artists have failed miserably. Within the faces, the hands, the postures of their subjects one cannot miss the intent to expose these women as real people projecting attitudes and emotions, strengths and weaknesses inherent to human nature.

Born Angelique Marie Martine in Exeter, England, Lilly Martin Spencer, as she came to be known, immigrated at the age of eight with her French parents to New York City in 1830 and settled in Marietta, Ohio in 1833.

At seventeen or eighteen years of age she began drawing life-sized charcoal portraits of her family on the plaster walls of the house. Her first show in the rectory, brought her to the attention of Nicholas

Longworth an influential patron of the arts from Cincinnati. Upon seeing Lilly's work, including a ten by twenty foot mural, A Tale of the Crusade, he wrote to his protégé, sculptor Hiram Powers: "a new genius has sprung up at Marietta or rather within five miles of it. . ."<sup>5</sup> Longworth offered to send Lilly Martin to Europe for seven year's study, but she refused, choosing rather to set up shop in Cincinnati and, it would not be the last time she refused study in Europe. Having been offered that opportunity several more times, she repeatedly declined.

In Cincinnati she studied with James Beard, the animal painter, married Benjamin Rush Spencer and by 1825 had become one of the leading artists of the midwest.<sup>6</sup> Her friends feared marriage would halt or interfere severely with her painting, but her husband took over household chores, including thirteen children enabling his wife to pursue her work. In the mid-1800's such a state of marital affairs was virtually unheard of.

She, with husband and children in tow, moved to New York City in 1849 and to Newark, New Jersey, in 1858. Of New York she said it "is so much larger and richer than Cincinnati, and there seems to be so much greater taste for pictures."<sup>7</sup> By the time the Spencers moved to New York, it was mutually agreed that Lilly's career held more promise than Ben Spencer's, and she became the principal breadwinner,<sup>8</sup> accepting the financial pressure on her to produce as much and as quickly as possible. When she died in 1902 at eighty years, she is thought to have painted nearly one thousand canvases.<sup>9</sup>

Lilly Martin Spencer wrote to her mother in July of 1847 that she aspired to "become a Michel Angelo, if I possibly can, and I mean to try to make my painting have a tendency towards moral improvement."<sup>10</sup> Though

she did not reach the historical stature of Michaelangelo, her paintings did succeed within the realm of "moral improvement." She painted portraits when she had to, and much more often towards the end of her career, but preferred genre paintings of pretty, sentimental and anecdotal subjects. Her main patronage was by the middle class whose preference was for scenes with which they could identify. "The life Mrs. Spencer chose to portray is simple and devoid of serious consequences. . . in accordance with a contemporary periodical's concept of the role of art: 'to search out and demonstrate the worth of the present moment and this very place.'"<sup>11</sup>

The antithesis in character of Lilly Martin Spencer is Romaine Brooks, born in Rome of an extremely wealthy but eccentric American mother. That is only the beginning of the countless dissimilarities between these two artists.

Romaine Brooks led a rather bizarre and strangely misguided life as recounted in her unpublished memoirs, No Pleasant Memories, which sounds like a farfetched Gothic novel.<sup>12</sup> Whether fact or fantasy finds its way into her memoirs, it is nevertheless true that the artist's adult life was hauntingly affected by the trauma of her youth.

Romaine was kept in a state of terror by her mother and mad brother, St. Mar, seven years her senior, of whom she had unwilling charge. At the age of six or seven she was apparently deserted by her mother and left in the care of their laundry maid who took her to the slums of New York where Romaine lived and sold newspapers in the street. It is, according to Brooks herself, during this period that she discovered the consolation of drawing.<sup>13</sup> She was rescued from her situation by her grandfather's secretary and sent to schools in New Jersey, Italy, and Geneva.

Later, having prevailed upon her mother, Brooks received a monthly allowance which afforded her more independence. From 1896 to 1897 she studied art in Rome at the Circolo Artistico and the Scuola Nazionale. In the summer of 1899 she took a studio on the island of Capri which was then a refuge for a rather elite, artistically and sexually liberated group.<sup>14</sup>

With the death of both her brother and mother in 1902, Romaine Brooks inherited a fortune, but still could not buy relief from her tormenting memories. She married an avowed homosexual from Capri. The marriage itself, being a matter of appearances, was short lived. Romaine continued to paint in London and Cornwall, then in Paris where she became a part of the "haut monde", rubbing shoulders and much more with the European intelligentsia, writers, performers and artists alike. Here she lived her life as an artist and lesbian among the celebrated names of the decadent epoch that ended with the rise of Hitler and the Second World War.

During the war Romaine and her companion, Natalie Barney, lived in Florence, Italy, and then settled for a time in Fiesole. Romaine continued her work until 1961, when at the age of 87, she painted her last portrait. Nine years later she died in Nice sadly unknown as the American artist she was.

After fifteen years of work Romaine had her first exhibition in Paris at the Galeries Durand-Ruel in May, 1910. It was this show which prompted author, Gabriele D'Annunzio, to write that Romaine Brooks was "the most profound and wise orchestrator of grays in modern painting."<sup>15</sup> It is this characteristic use of grays by Brooks which alludes to the influence Whistler had on Romaine's work.<sup>16</sup> She must have studied his

juxtapositions of closely related tones and his use of neutral backgrounds to provide a dramatic setting for a small area of strong color. As important was her knowledge of Whistler's use of subdued light to flatten rather than round out his portraits which coincided with his painterly rather than literary attitude.

Romaine's portraits were at once very strong and very cold, but clearly indicative of her intense interest in her subjects. Whether she painted women, when she is said to have been at her best, or the male of the species, Romaine triumphed, in the words of Robert de Montesquiou, as a "Thief of Souls."<sup>17</sup>

As Romaine Brooks is a thief of souls, so may Isabel Bishop be characterized as a "translator of genre."<sup>18</sup> The figures of her canvases are drawn from the environs of lower Manhattan. Neither romanticized nor understated, they are sensitively presented in their natural milieu.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1902, and raised in Detroit, Ms. Bishop began Saturday art classes at twelve years old. When she graduated from high school, she moved to New York to continue her studies in art. Isabel's intention was to study with Max Weber who was then working in a post-Cubist idiom. However, his antipathy to her continued interest in drawing from the nude predisposed that relationship to failure. Bishop's next choice was to study with Kenneth Hayes Miller also of the New York Art Student's League. She worked under his tutelage until becoming ill at ease with his ideas of the detachment and anonymity of the artist.<sup>19</sup> Isabel Bishop's artistic disposition demanded a more personal approach to the representation of contemporary life.

Nonetheless, for Ms. Bishop, her subjects, shop girls, subway riders and the like, are neither symbols nor abstract patterns with socio-political

intent. To her they are merely subjects to paint, aids in her studies of form and space. Bishop attempts to portray human vitality, capturing impressions of movement as related to compositional problems.

Bishop's most successful paintings are of women subjects.<sup>20</sup> The subtle blending of colors, beautifully modeled figures and accuracy with which she characterizes casual attitudes, belies her acute powers of observation. She combines precise draftsmanship and loose brushwork in a style uniquely individual from the trends of the time. She cannot accurately be placed within any one particular school of thought or practice, but did show tendencies towards Social Realism.

It is a Baroque philosophy Isabel Bishop seeks to embody in her work. To quote the artist "It is at once all life and all art. It has a severe order but looks as casual as a snapshot."<sup>21</sup> It is within this reference that Bishop sights the work of Fragonard where form and content seem united by magic, or at least by accident. Form is fluid and moving. Stance and gesture is of profound importance.

The "ballet" of people simply walking the streets entrances Isabel Bishop. Her people linger for a moment looking into shop windows, eating lunches or snacks, drinking at a water fountain, then move on. Bishop holds up bits of life for an instant, examines them in minute detail, imbues them with an obvious sensitivity for feminine themes, and makes meticulous recordings of them without even slightly jeopardizing their continuum in time and space.

Psychological nuances seem merely incidental if one takes Isabel Bishop at her word. They are components of particular compositional problems as one would consider line and color. Contrary to that notion is the work and philosophy of Alice Neel. Ms. Neel, described as a



"painter of people"<sup>22</sup> and "teller of truth"<sup>23</sup> is preoccupied with describing the head trips of her sitters as they are made visible in their characteristic gestures and grimaces.

In the year 1900, Alice Neel was born in Merion Square, Pennsylvania. She attended the Philadelphia School of Design for Women completing her studies there in 1925. Accompanied by her new Cuban husband, Neel moved to New York City in 1927. In the course of the following five years, various personal disasters gripped the life of the artist. She was deserted by her husband, lost custody of her infant daughter and suffered a nervous breakdown. Neel recovered after a year and returned to New York in 1932 to take up permanent residence.

Throughout several turbulent relationships with various men, and the birth of her two sons, Alice continued to paint. For two years she was affiliated with the New Deal Public Works of Art Project and the W.P.A. easel project. In 1938, she moved to Spanish Harlem where she stayed for twenty five years. Inhabitants of Spanish Harlem and people she met on the W.P.A. were the subjects of her paintings during the forties.

Of herself Alice Neel says, "I am a collector of souls."<sup>24</sup> She chose to paint a human comedy, literally caging on canvas the neurotic, the mad, the miserable and others including some "squares." Her early portraits, for the most part, are somber projections of city tenement life that smoldered all around her.

Due to increasing recognition as an artist in the sixties, life began to lighten for Alice Neel. She received a Longview Foundation prize in 1962 and began to exhibit regularly at the Graham Gallery from 1963 onward. During this time and up to the present, Alice's colors moved from the slum grays and browns to brighter more vibrant colors. Her line

became freer and more personal and the paint less thick and heavily applied. Neel began to allow herself the breadth of experimentation.

"Neel seeks to describe the fears, pressures, harassments that plague mankind as they affect the human figure. Tension shows up on her canvases in rigid backs and talon-like fingers; anxiety in twisted lips and tight, furrowed brows."<sup>25</sup> Ms. Neel acts as a sensor probing deep within the psyche of her sitters pinpointing psychological truths yet does not compromise the aesthetic importance of a painting. Her spontaneous approach accounts for a certain intensity and vitality of the final painting. The use of strong blues or blacks to outline figures grabs and holds the viewer's attention demanding more than a cursory inspection.

The Feminist Movement finds a strong supporter in Alice Neel yet she has never stopped believing women and men alike are the mirror of all things. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this attitude, the women Neel chooses to paint remain individuals each dealing with her life in her own particular way. The courage and enduring will of her women, all women, is hardly deniable when Alice Neel paints a kindred spirit as is true with Spencer, Brooks, and Bishops.

As defined by Webster's New World Dictionary, "woman is the female human being as distinguished from man," and a portrait is "a picture of a person, especially of his face, drawn, painted, photographed, etc. from life." Together, these two components blended with large measures of energy, talent and sensitivity comprise a major portion of the works by Lilly Martin Spencer, Romaine Brooks, Isabel Bishop and Alice Neel.

Though times and lifestyles of these artists were diverse, each came to her easel with that special set of qualifiers making her a woman and

with the express intent of creating a human likeness on canvas. This likeness, to be one of spirit as well as body, had to become as plausibly real as the sitter herself. It may well be the collective consciousness between women that makes these portraits as hauntingly and spiritually alive as they are.

In the realm of genre painting Spencer and Bishop were masters, having exhausted much time at the task of depicting everyday life. As with all their work, there is a believability to the kitchen scenes of Ms. Spencer and the work day scenes of Ms. Bishop.

Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses (Fig. 1) is one example of a Spencer kitchen scene. The spirit of a rather amused young woman seems to engage the viewer as she cocks her head and makes direct eye contact. One is drawn into the painting having established a mute communication of sorts with the sassy lass. As soft and fleshy as she appears, so are the kitchen trappings touchable. Every object is part of a highly finished, beautifully rendered still life.

Having the same imagination, vitality and winsome character is Spencer's painting Shake Hands? (Fig. 2) of a maid as she interrupts her breadmaking to offer a friendly, if flour covered, hand to the viewer. This is yet another version of Ms. Spencer's humorous kitchen genre that would and does evoke a smile even today.

Spencer found many possibilities for amusement in the household, but especially the kitchen, as is evident. Both settings were probably in the artist's own kitchen as the table, chair and floor covering are almost identical. Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses painted two years after Shake Hands? shows a marked improvement in the artist's control of expression, gesture and still life arrangements. Kiss Me and You'll



Fig. 1. Lilly Martin Spencer, Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses, 1856, (The Brooklyn Museum).



Fig. 2. Lilly Martin Spencer, Shake Hands?, 1854, (Ohio Historical Center).

Kiss the 'Lasses is less contrived and generally more relaxed than Shake Hands?. The first painting is considered Spencer's finest kitchen piece and one of her most accomplished paintings.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless it was Shake Hands? that established her reputation as a sympathetic, humorous and accurate observer of familiar domestic routine.<sup>27</sup>

Peeling Onions (Fig. 3) breaks from the overt humor of Spencer's paintings, but still remarks on the realness of the scene. It is consistent with the artist's kitchen genre as a woman is portrayed peeling an onion and toiling with daily food preparation. One's eyes almost begin to burn and water as the viewer relates to the woman's discomfort. It was Lilly Martin Spencer's talent for isolating a familiar and characteristic moment with its anecdotal associations in these domestic scenes that was the basis for their growing popularity.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 3. Lilly Martin Spencer,  
Peeling Onions, 1852, (Brooklyn  
Art Association).

Opposite the extroverted nature of Spencer's kitchen genre are the introspective portraits of Isabel Bishop. Bishop, the champion of the working girl, painted these women as she observed them immersed in their daily lives. Combing Hair (Fig. 4) is indicative of Bishop's usual attitude with her models. The young woman is engrossed in her preening and yet a distance is created between her thoughts and her actual activities. Unlike Spencer's blatant involvement of the viewer Bishop makes one feel almost a peeping tom.

The woman in Snack Bar (Fig. 5) has the same air of complete oblivion to what is happening around her. She quietly eats as her thoughts wander beyond the noisy diner, beyond another day's labor. There is no glamour in Bishop's handling of the unheroic yet they share a dreamlike solemnity and detachment that is seldom found on the street.



Fig. 4. Isabel Bishop, Combing Hair, 1932



Fig. 5. Isabel Bishop, Snack Bar, 1954, (Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts).

The genre of Romaine Brooks is neither to be found in the kitchen nor in the street. Rather, for her it is to be found in the salons of Europe and on the battle ground of World War I.

Renata Borgatti au Piano (Fig. 6) is painted with the subtle marriage of subject and mood. The limited palette, strong line, somber mood and Whistlerian pared-down composition all contribute to the heaviness--both physically and psychologically. Borgatti sits at the keyboard profoundly lost in thought, her strong black form commanding as much of a response from the viewer as from the piano she plays.

Symbolic in nature yet still Brooks' special brand of genre is La France Croisée (Fig. 7). A Red Cross nurse, symbolizing France at war, stands three-quarter face ready for whatever horrors lie ahead. Unlike Isabel Bishop, Romaine Brooks often painted the heroic and

always in heroic terms. Her use of strong lights and darks, clarified solid shapes and emphatic line gave ever her meekest sitter a bold presence.



Fig. 6. Romaine Brooks, Renata Borgatti au Piano, c. 1920, (National Collection of Fine Arts).



Fig. 7. Romaine Brooks, La France Croisée, 1914, (National Collection of Fine Arts).

Shown in Ms. Brooks' first exhibition, Jeune Fille Anglaise, Yeux et Rubans Verts (Fig. 8) is an instance of the artist's meek to mighty. Hands anxiously clutched in her lap, the young girl sympathetically, but solidly, is portrayed, her strength uncompromised by her obvious apprehension. Hardly meek in stature, yet painted as sympathetically and not devoid of the same emotional impact, is the portrait Madame Legrand au Champ de Courses (Fig. 9) of the same year. Madame Legrand was wealthy, fortunate and much loved yet her wistful melancholy expression captured in paint by Ms. Brooks betrays a less than happy existence.



Fig. 8. Romaine Brooks, Jeune Fille Anglaise, Yeux et Rubans Verts, 1910, (National Collection of Fine Arts).



Fig. 9. Romaine Brooks, Madame Legrand au Champ de Courses, 1910, (Musée du Petit Palais, Paris).

The moods Romaine Brooks portrayed most successfully, as with Jeune Fille Anglaise and Madame Legrand were a reflection of her own inner state. These were the psyches with which she was in harmony. Romaine saw her subjects filtered through a pervasive melancholy which never completely left her.

Unlike Spencer, Bishop or Neel, Romaine Brooks chose to caricature a number of her sitters. One such caricature is Elsie de Wolfe (Fig. 10), a decorator whom Romaine painted in an absurd bonnet in juxtaposition with a white china goat. It is in damning mockery of de Wolfe's simpering expression which Brooks must have encountered often as the two were rival decorators.

The second more notable caricature by Brooks is Una, Lady Troubridge (Fig. 11). Described by Sir Harold Acton as "a short-haired elderly dame in masculine attire. . ." <sup>29</sup> Lady Troubridge was the lover of Radclyffe



Hall who gave an account of their life together in The Well of Loneliness, the most famous lesbian novel of modern times.



Fig. 10. Romaine Brooks, Elsie de Wolfe, 1920, (National Collection of Fine arts).



Fig. 11. Romaine Brooks, Una, Lady Troubridge, 1924, (National Collection of Fine Arts).

Romaine wrote "Una is funny to paint. Her get-up is remarkable."<sup>30</sup> Whether you were a lesbian or not, if you made yourself look ridiculous, Romaine considered you fair game!

Each of the four artists, Spencer, Bishop, Brooks and Neel considered their subjects fair game not in the sense of caricature necessarily, but as interpretable source material for their work. With portraiture it is easy to concern oneself with faces, de-emphasizing the importance of gesture and stance. However, these women were intimately aware of the power of the whole body as a tool of expression and used it as such.

With the fewest possible strokes Alice Neel captures not only the veins and joints of a hand but also the tensions of the entire body. Priscilla Johnson (Fig. 12) is quickly recognized as being bored. The fingers of her right hand restlessly pick at each other as she almost begins to squirm before the viewer's eyes. Christie White (Fig. 13) clutches nervously and insecurely at the arms of the chair in which she sits making one instantly empathize with her obvious discomfort.



Fig. 12. Alice Neel,  
Priscilla Johnson, 1966.



Fig. 13. Alice Neel,  
Christie White, 1957.

Ms. Neel poses her sitters on particular and carefully chosen pieces of furniture, usually a chair. The chair becomes a prop, but hardly an incidental one. It is used to reinforce an attitude or idea Neel will paint as defined in her sitter. Also in many paintings as with Diane Cochrane (Fig. 14), Neel leaves areas of the canvas

unfinished. The reason for this intentional neglect is two fold. First the bare bones of the cursory sketch are frequently allowed to bear witness to the artistic process. Secondly, Ms. Neel has the discipline to stop before refinement of the subject conceals the essential, the essence of her sitter's character.



Fig. 14. Alice Neel, Diane Cochrane, 1973.

Though situated in a less contrived atmosphere, the postures and gestures of Isabel Bishop's women are as deliberate and as strong as those of Alice Neel's. Bishop is very astute and tender at using the body as a means of expression. Young Woman (Fig. 15) is a gentle image of a working girl bound up in the 14th Street existence. Social mobility plays little part in her life but neither does that seem to disturb her. She stands casually as if waiting for a street light to change, her clothing shaped by her body and characterized by long use as well. She is soft by comparison to Neel's women, but she is no less strikingly individualistic and believably real.



Fig. 15. Isabel Bishop, Young Woman, 1938, (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts).

Commandingly, feminine as the times dictated, Lilly Martin Spencer's women were perhaps less predictably posed from portrait to portrait yet not without careful consideration to body English. This is apparent in Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses (Fig. 1), and Shake Hands? (Fig. 2). In both instances posture and gesture connote a light-hearted attitude.

Less amusing, but as telling, are Spencer's Young Woman in a Seventeenth Century Costume (Fig. 16) and We Both Must Fade (Fig. 17). The pair of young women contemplate roses consistent with the Victorian revival of the poetic theme, evanescence of youth. The fading beauty of the flower is paralleled with that of a young subject. The flowers are

held most gently yet still must wilt and die. No matter the delicacy with which one lives, age and death are inevitable, an attitude that is accepted and conveyed by the artist with the soulful tilt of heads and submissive postures.



Fig. 16. Lilly Martin Spencer, Young Woman in a 17th Century Costume, 1845, (Collection of Mary Abrams).



Fig. 17. Lilly Martin Spencer, We Both Must Fade, 1869, (National Collection of Fine Arts).

Romaine Brooks was more inclined to make facial expression the focal point of her portraits. Still the sheer mass and weight of her figures by virtue of the darks and lights mentioned previously, must be read as well. Though not with the frequency of Alice Neel, Brooks did paint the hands of some of her subjects as a means of revealing emotions as in Jeune Fille Anglaise (Fig. 8). Romaine also used hands as a compositional device. Such is the case in La Baronne Émile d'Erlanger (Fig. 18). The Baroness' left hand reiterates the strong

diagonal in the background shadow, and the direction of her thumb guides one's eye to the cat whose features, it was said, resembled the Baroness' husband.



Fig. 18., Romaine Brooks, La Baronne Emile d'Erlanger, c. 1925.

Youth is a fine model for the artist who seeks to describe nearly untouched beauty, innocence and that certain expectancy of the young. Age is a reflective model where one can see the image of what must be for all. Lilly Martin Spencer spent much time at the task of painting young subjects, but she did not limit herself thusly. Ms. Spencer painted the portraits of the aged as well.

One such portrait is that of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Fig. 19). An early and prominent supporter of temperance, abolition of slavery and women's rights, Ms. Stanton was president of the National Woman Suffrage Association for twenty one years. It is disappointing that the association of two such strong and resourceful women did not produce a more interesting portrait. However, it is a late painting by Spencer

whose work in her declining years lacked the bold, clear impact of her earlier style.



Fig. 19. Lilly Martin Spencer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1902, (Collection of Donald R. Gates).



Fig. 20. Alice Neel, Isabel Bishop, 1974, (Graham Gallery).

At the age of seventy four, when Alice Neel painted the portrait of Isabel Bishop (Fig. 20), she maintained the same intensity and force that she had achieved fifteen years earlier in The Baron's Aunt (Fig. 21) and twenty eight years earlier in My Mother (Fig. 22). By 1974, when Neel painted Isabel Bishop's portrait, she had limited her visual space greatly by almost denuding her background completely and by making her central figure bear nearly all the paint of the canvas. Nonetheless, all three of these portraits testify to Neel's profound talent for passionate expression and psychological insight. The furrowed brows and

hollowed cheeks created by deep shadow paint the features of age upon these women as an inescapable truth. Their eyes, asking and answering, look to a future of counted days and countless memories.



Fig. 21. Alice Neel, The Baron's Aunt, 1959.



Fig. 22. Alice Neel, My Mother, 1946, (Collection of Paul Gardner).

To be naked is to be deprived of clothes, but the nude is not a subject, but rather an art form which was invented by the Greeks in the 4th century. The nude portrait is a sub-category of portraiture that appealed, in greater or lesser degree, to Brooks, Bishop and Neel.

The female nudes of Romaine Brooks are impressively eerie and suggest a kind of icy eroticism.<sup>31</sup> Ida Rubinstein, the probable model for several of Brooks' nude portraits, seemed to Romaine "like some heraldic bird delicately knit together by the finest of bone structure,



giving flexibility to curveless lines."<sup>32</sup> She was Romaine's idea of female beauty and it haunted her for years. Brooks only painted nudes during the period of her friendship with Ida, abandoning the form once that was ended.

Azalées Blanches (Fig. 23) is of a woman who reclines the width of the canvas, silhouetted against a kind of black wing, which throws an enormous pot of white azaleas into sharp relief. It is an image of sensuality-refined with distinct references to the sleek delicateness of Chinese porcelains which had long influenced Brooks' work.

Romaine's nude study of Ida Rubinstein, Le Trajet (Fig. 24), focuses on the theme of the mingling of death and eroticism, a favored motif in both art and literature of the turn of the century symbolist movement.<sup>33</sup> A woman is lying full length with a stylized sweep of black hair hanging down over a couch again creating a wing shape. The illusion, however, is of the nude not on a couch at all, but floating on a large white wing surrounded by boundless black.<sup>34</sup> The painting is a powerful visual representation of Romaine's state of mind after her mother died, when she felt suspended in limbo between life and death, an agony from which she finally freed herself.



Fig. 23. Romaine Brooks, Azalées Blanches, 1910, (National Collection of fine Arts).



Fig. 24. Romaine Brooks, Le Trajet, c.1911, (Collection of Charles Philips).

Contrasted with the ideal nude of Romaine Brooks, the female nudes of Isabel Bishop defy any chic sense of feminine beauty. They tend often to corpulence and are always ordinary people in keeping with Bishop's 14th Street motifs. Nevertheless, there is a beauty that emanates from the artist's delicate draftsmanship and the atmospheric bathing of her nudes. "They are splendid renditions of individuals less than splendid as physical entities: art triumphs over life."<sup>35</sup>

One of Bishop's earliest nudes, simply titled Nude (Fig. 25), incorporates many of the sensuous, baroque qualities that she admired in the works of Rubens, Rembrandt, Watteau and Renoir. With attention to twisting forms, movement and proportions this figure takes its place in the art historical context of the grand manner.

Bishop found the nude a fascinating subject selecting models who she felt had a "kind of animality that seemed real."<sup>36</sup> As with Bishop's previously mentioned Combing Hair and Snack Bar, Nude and Nude #2 (Fig. 26), capture the air of self absorption and activity that the artist strives for.



Fig. 25. Isabel Bishop, Nude, 1934, (Whitney Museum of American Art).



Fig. 26. Isabel Bishop, Nude #2, 1954, (Des Moines Art Center).

There is a feeling of the potential for change both in active poses and brush technique which typifies Isabel Bishop's on-going concern with movement and mobility.

The nude is somehow supposed to be timeless, ageless and above all, anonymous, not someone you might meet on the street, shake hands with or bump into at a cocktail party. Alice Neel has challenged that tradition. She has painted nude portraits of people of note as well as the anonymous, both male and female.

As a rule in the past, Neel did not paint nude females unless they were pregnant or nursing mothers. According to Neel she does not paint pregnant women especially, but as a part of the human experience. Modern painters have shied away from such subject matter because women were often done as sex objects. A pregnant woman has a claim staked out; she's not for sale.<sup>37</sup> Neel's portraits of pregnant women such as Maria, (Fig. 27), deny nothing. There is nothing coy about them. Ballooning, brown-lined bellies and distended nipples forego the pretense of the comforting mystique of childbearing.



Fig. 27. Alice Neel, Maria, 1962, (Graham Gallery).

Having painted two portraits of Lida Moser, Lida Moser (Fig. 28) and, breaking with her general rule, Lida Moser Nude (Fig. 29), Neel has presented the opportunity for an interesting comparison.<sup>38</sup> The clothed Ms. Moser is a pleasant, comfortable and affable businesswoman whose quiet attractiveness is betrayed only by the skeletal hand twisted up in front of her. Naked, she is someone else; very formidable, solid, with history solidly against her. She is strength and fierce determination externalized. She is the heroic nude of modern times.



Fig. 28. Alice Neel, Lida Moser, 1962.



Fig. 29. Alice Neel, Lida Moser Nude, 1962.

Exposure or self-exposure has been one of the motivations behind an even more specialized sub-category of portraiture: the self portrait. Of the four artists whose portraits of women have been examined here, three are represented by self-portraits.

In her Self-Portrait (Fig. 30), painted during her first years in Cincinnati, Lilly Martin Spencer shows her talent as a sophisticated portraitist. There is an originality in the intimate frontal

confrontation between the viewer and the subject. A dark curl is placed romantically over one eye without veiling the artist's intense gaze. The viewer is drawn into the painting as is in keeping with that quality of aforementioned works. Did Ms. Spencer see herself as a temptress or an innocent? That is difficult to discern from her self-portrait which hints at a provocative combination of both.

Romaine Brooks was harsher to herself than to anyone else she had painted. Her Self-Portrait (Fig. 31), is of and by a woman who was completely disabused by most of the illusions life had to offer. Set against a background of ruins, there is an overpowering air of human isolation and haunting inner life. Her dark eyes glinting in the shadow of a masculine top hat, gloved hand tucked into her coat and her open-necked shirt clarify the honesty and power of Romaine's self-evaluation. These, including the hard edged cynicism, were the accouterments of this artist's life.



Fig. 30. Lilly Martin Spencer, Self-Portrait, 1841, (Ohio Historical Center, Columbus).



Fig. 31. Romaine Brooks, Self-Portrait, 1923, (National Collection of Fine Arts).

Contemplative in nature, Isabel Bishop's Self-Portrait (Fig. 32), confronts the viewer as does Spencer's, but with more of a searching attitude. Does she ask something of the viewer or something of herself? Her eyes are focused intently outward but the realm of her thoughts, like that of her young women, is closely guarded personal domain.



Fig. 32. Isabel Bishop, Self-Portrait, 1927, (Collection of Lenore O. Miller).

Lilly Martin Spencer painted pertinent to moral betterment choosing anecdotal subject matter as visual fables. Romaine Brooks painted the "haut monde" looking to free her own tormented spirit. Isabel Bishop sought solutions to problems inherent in movement and is said to have chosen the common working girl as her subject because of metaphoric references to social mobility. Alice Neel portrays a human comedy such as Balzac had done in literature.

Each of these women artists painted women and brought to such portraits a knowing sensitivity beyond the skills learned in art school, beyond simply seeing a face and body. Spencer, Brooks, Bishop and Neel, each in their own way and time, captured on canvas that which is so illusive, the hearts and souls of their women.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists, Painters of the Figure," Arts Magazine, May 1974, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists: Part I," Arts Magazine, February 1974, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>"The Joys of Sentiment," Apollo, October 1973, p. 313.

<sup>6</sup>"Prolific American Artist," The Connoisseur, July 1972, p. 229.

<sup>7</sup>"The Joys of Sentiment," p. 313.

<sup>8</sup>Josephine Withers, "Artistic Women and Women Artists," Art Journal, Summer 1976, p. 332.

<sup>9</sup>"Prolific American Artist," p. 229.

<sup>10</sup>Withers, "Artistic Women and Women Artists," p. 332.

<sup>11</sup>Robin Boltin-Smith, "The Sentimental Paintings of Lilly Martin Spencer," Antiques, July 1973, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup>Linda Nochlin and Ann Harris, Women Artists 1550-1950 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 268.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Meryle Secrest, Between Me and Life (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1974), p. 193.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>18</sup>"Isabel Bishop," Art News, May 1960, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup>Nochlin and Harris, Women Artists 1550-1950, p. 325.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.



<sup>21</sup>Isabel Bishop, "Isabel Bishop Discusses Genre Drawings," American Artist, June 1953, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup>"Alice Neel," Art Digest, January 1, 1951, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup>Georgia Museum of Art, Alice Neel the Woman and Her Work (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Printing Department, 1975), p. 6.

<sup>24</sup>Hubert Crehan, "Introducing the Portraits of Alice Neel," Art News, October 1962, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup>Diane Cochrane, "Alice Neel: Collector of Souls," American Artist, September 1973, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup>Robin Boltin-Smith, ed., Lilly Martin Spencer: The Joys of Sentiment (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), p. 149.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>29</sup>Secret, Between Me and Life, p. 290.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>32</sup>Mahonri Sharp Young, "Thief of Souls," Apollo, May 1971, p. 427.

<sup>33</sup>Nochlin and Harris, Women Artists 1550-1950, p. 269.

<sup>34</sup>Although I have not found any direct references concerning the influences of Edvard Munch on Brooks' work one can recognize distinct similarities between Brooks' Le Trajet and Munch's Puberty.

<sup>35</sup>Sheldon Reich, "Isabel Bishop: The 'Ballet' of Everyday Life," Art News, September 1975, p. 93.

<sup>36</sup>Nochlin and Harris, Women Artists 1550-1950, p. 326.

<sup>37</sup>Piri Halasz, "Alice Neel: 'I have this obsession with life,'" Art News, January 1974, p. 49.

<sup>38</sup>This is not the first time a clothed and nude portrait was done of the same model. An earlier example of this is Goya's Maja clothed and nude.

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