

Self-ish Portrait (Romaine Brooks)

by Kit/Christopher Keith-Reeves

The use of blue and red to create the main shape of the painting is at first what drew me to the portrait of Romaine Brooks. The colours reminded me of blood, as well as the fact that the subject was dressed in what I at first thought to be possibly Victorian attire or earlier. The short hair and hat of indistinguishable height made me think of a young man possibly to the likes of romantic poets. Romaine, as I have found out, is a French female name meaning 'of Rome', the male variant being Romanus. In the first viewing of Andrew's portrait of Romaine Brooks before I researched, I first mistook her for a man, possibly from the 1800s. However, the open collar with the lack of a cravat made me curious about the actual time period.

Romaine Brooks Self-Portrait, 1923, features the neutral tones which she settled on using for most of her career.(1) Shades of grey are the main ingredient of the piece, and the use of red in drawing attention to her face. Her gaze partly obfuscated by the shadow from the brim of her male riding hat. Her exploration of gender and sexuality in her art led to a renewed interest of her works in the 1980s, after her death in 1970.

Romaine Brooks (Born Beatrice Romaine Goddard) b.1874, was an American painter born in Rome. Coming from a dysfunctional home with an emotionally abusive mother who cared for their mentally ill brother, Brooks was sent to a poor foster family in New York. She did not tell where the rest of her family were in fear of being sent back. The family found her grandfather, who arranged for her to be sent to study at St. Mary's Hall in New Jersey.(2)

At the the age of 19, Goddard left for Paris, took voice lessons, and sang in cabaret until she found herself pregnant. Placing the infant in convent care, Romaine travelled to Rome to study art but was the only woman in her class. After experiencing sexual harassment and stalking, she ran to Capri after experiencing further advances from another student.

Renting a studio in Capri, albeit the poorest area, her funds were too low until the passing of her Mother and brother in 1901, to which she and her sister inherited the large estate of the grandfather, giving her more than enough of the funds she needed to pursue her career in art.

Brooks married her friend, John Ellingham Brooks, Despite the fact she was a lesbian and he a gay man. Romaine had helped him out of a difficult financial spot, as he was an unsuccessful pianist and translator, but they divorced a year later in 1904 after his concerning behaviour towards her style of dress (Cutting her hair short and ordering men's clothes) and his sudden possessiveness over her money. After divorcing, Brooks was still given a £300 allowance a year until his death from liver cancer in 1929.

Romaine Brooks' expressed herself with a crafted androgynous style, wearing her hair short and dressing in masculine clothes. Her art used many monochrome and

neutral tones, which at the time was not seen as fashionable compared to other fellow budding bohemian artists such as Picasso and Matisse. Many of her portraits were of people whom she was close to, including Russian Dancer Ida Rubinstein, and Brooks' partner of 50+ years, American writer Natalie Clifford Barney.

Kit/Christopher Keith-Reeves is an artist who was born 12/01/2000 (A really cool birthdate) technically in St. Albans, although he considers himself a person from Lincoln, even though technically now lives in Nottinghamshire. He has got used to using acrylics and uses them to create pieces where the body is twisted and contorted. Even though he doesn't like using acrylics. When not doing that, he likes to make digital art from his iPad using textures he found and made. He also finds cities make too much noise and fumes, preferring more rural areas. And speaking in third person for his artist bio.

1- Meryle Secrest (1976). *Between me and life : a biography of Romaine Brooks*. London: Macdonald And Jane's.

2- Chadwick, W., Brooks, R., Lucchesi, J., National Museum of Women in the Arts (U.S.), Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and Internet Archive (2000). *Amazons in the drawing room : the art of Romaine Brooks*. [online] Internet Archive. Chesterfield, Mass. : Chameleon Books ; Berkeley : University of California Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/amazonsindrawing0000chad> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2024].