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Book Review: Gluck

Biography of the 19th Century English Artist

reviewed by Tracie O'Keefe

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This is a book to own as much for the pictures within as for the story that it tells.

Tracie wasn't previously aware of this nineteenth century artist's work, but confesses to having been converted to admiring the work of Gluck, born Hanna Gluckstein in 1895 yet dressed as a man sporting an Eton crop and male clothes throughout the 1920s and '30s.

This biography of the English nineteenth century artist Gluck, is finely crafted and contains many pictures of the wonderful scope of artworks that were painted by this unusual person.

Gluck

by Diana Souhami
Sterling Publishing (2001)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1842121962

This biography of the English nineteenth century artist Gluck, is finely crafted and contains many pictures of the wonderful scope of artworks that were painted by this unusual person. It is a compelling book in so far as the author

pays an obsessive attention to detail when recording Gluck's life and works. From a reader's point of view it is enjoyable in as much as Souhami has obviously done her detective work in tracking down the endless sources of information needed to write this biography.

Gluck was born Hanna Gluckstein in 1895 into the family that founded J. Lyons & Co Catering Company. They were wealthy Jewish people who took great care of all the members of their clan. Gluck was a daughter who dressed as a man sporting an Eton crop and male clothes throughout the 1920s and '30s. The family kept her in a comfortable lifestyle that meant she never had to do a day's work. This afforded the often temperamental Gluck the opportunity to pursue her lifelong love of painting.

Although Gluck is often overlooked in English art, the diversity of her works are extraordinary, ranging from still life to portraits and landscapes. Through her family connections, even Queen Mary possessed one of Gluck's pieces called Tulips, a study of flowers in a vase.

As an 'out' and very public lesbian in the early twentieth century it was her family wealth that allowed her to move unhindered among the aristocracy and intelligentsia. Her friends and contemporaries included Virginia Woolf, Radcliffe Hall, Somerset Morgham, Noel Coward and many other gifted artists and philanthropists.

During one of her many love affairs with a wealthy married woman, Gluck referred to herself as the husband and her lover as the eternal wife.

Although we have no record that she identified as a transsexual or transgendered person there is the possibility that she might have done if she had been born much later. We must, however, be very careful in the trans community not to steal this possibly dyke-identified hero of the early English lesbian and gay movement.

Having read the book and not previously been aware of Gluck's work, I am now seeking out places to view her pictures and working out ways to sell the furniture so that perhaps I might be able to buy one. Yes, you have guessed it, I have been converted - I am a born-again groupie of a yesteryear célèbre extraordinaire. I probably won't have enough money though, as since her death in the late 1970s the price of her work has soared. Nevertheless I will continue to check around a few museums and disappear for a good many Sunday afternoons.

This is a book to own as much for the pictures within as for the story that it tells.

Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein)

From Wikipedia:  Gluck was born into a wealthy Jewish family, the child of Joseph Gluckstein, whose brothers Isidore and Montague had founded J. Lyons and Co., a British coffee house and catering empire. Gluck's American-born mother, Francesca Halle, was an opera singer. Gluck's brother, Sir Louis Gluckstein, was a Conservative politician.

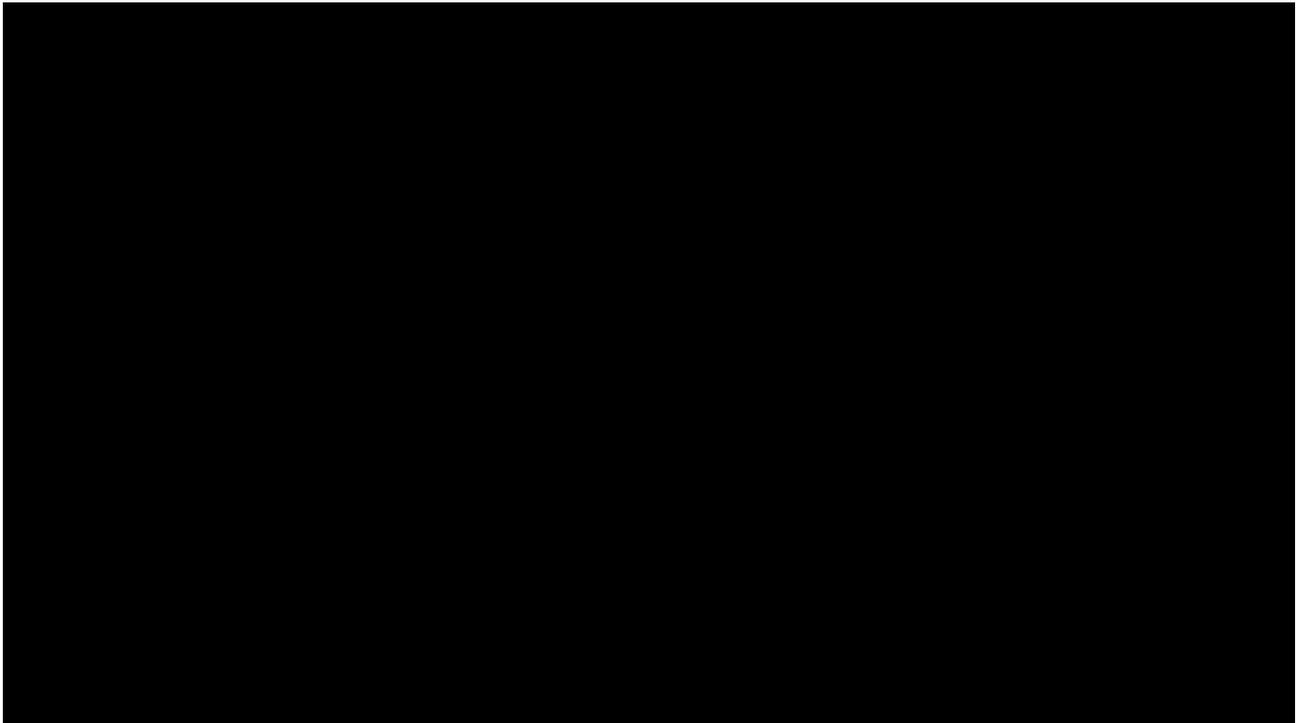


In the 1920s and 30s Gluck became known for portraits and floral paintings; the latter were favoured by the interior decorator Syrie Maugham. Gluck insisted on being known only as Gluck, "no prefix, suffix, or quotes", and when an art society of which Gluck was vice president identified Gluck as "Miss Gluck" on its letterhead, Gluck resigned. Gluck identified with no artistic school or movement and showed Gluck's work only in solo exhibitions, where they were displayed in a special frame Gluck invented and patented. This Gluck-frame rose from the wall in three tiers; painted or papered to match the wall on which it hung, it made the artist's paintings look like part of the architecture of the room.

One of Gluck's best-known paintings, Medallion, is a dual portrait of Gluck and Gluck's lover Nesta Obermer, inspired by a night in 1936 when they attended a Fritz Busch production of Mozart's Don Giovanni. According to Gluck's biographer Diana Souhami, "They sat in the third row and she felt the intensity of the music fused them into one person and matched their love". Gluck referred to it as the "YouWe" picture. It was later used as the cover of a Virago Press edition of *The Well of Loneliness*. Gluck also had a romantic relationship with the British floral designer Constance Spry, whose work informed the artist's paintings.

In 1944 Gluck moved to Chantry House in Steyning, Sussex, living with lover Edith Shackleton Heald until her death. In the 1950s Gluck became dissatisfied with the artist's paints available and began a "paint war" to increase their quality. Ultimately, Gluck persuaded the British Standards Institution to create a new standard for oil paints; however, the campaign consumed Gluck's time and energy to the exclusion of painting for more than a decade.

In Gluck's seventies, using special hand-made paints supplied free by a manufacturer who had taken Gluck's exacting standards as a challenge, Gluck returned to painting and had another well-received solo show. It was Gluck's first since 1937, and Gluck's last: Gluck died in 1978. Gluck's last major work was a painting of a decomposing fish head on the beach entitled *Rage, Rage against the Dying of the Light*.



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