

GLUCK (HANNAH GLUCKSTEIN)

1895–1978

PROFILE PORTRAIT

Pencil

17 x 15 ¼ inches; 432 x 386 mm

Signed and dated 'GLUCK/1943' (lower left)



Collections: Private Collection, UK;
Bonhams, 9th September 2024, lot. 39;
Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd.

This severe profile head appears to relate to a series of designs the artist Gluck made of herself during the war years. Gluck is one of the most fascinating artistic figures of the mid-twentieth century. Born Hannah Gluckstein, she cut her hair short, wore tailored men's clothes and changed her name to: 'Gluck, no prefix, no suffix, or quotes'. Encouraged initially by Laura Knight, Gluck produced a series of beautiful still lifes, landscapes and allegorical paintings which she showed at the Fine Art Society in a series of one-man shows. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Gluck was in relationships with women, including the celebrated floral designer Constance Spry and through Spry she was commissioned to paint works for the interior designer Syrie Maugham and Molly Mount Temple. Gluck's androgenous self-portraiture has long been recognised as pioneering and this drawing offers important evidence for this evolving self-fashioning.

Gluck was born into a highly successful Jewish family who had created J. Lyons & Co, the catering empire. The family operated an innovative partnership system, whereby the capital of the extended family was pooled in a family fund. The fund, in turn, paid for everything: houses, healthcare, education, carriages and servants. When a member of the family died their wealth reverted to the fund. The extended family worshiped together, dined together, lived in the same neighbourhood and ultimately intermarried. The expectation was that Hannah Gluckstein would remain within the orbit of this prescribed existence. At St Paul's Girls' School Gluck discovered a passion for painting. She spent time at St John's Wood Art School and from there travelled to Lamorna in Cornwall where she received encouragement from Alfred Munnings and Laura Knight.

In 1924 she held her first solo exhibition at the Dorien Leigh Gallery in South Kensington and her second in 1926 at the Fine Art Society. In this period Gluck completed her self-fashioning, wearing her hair in a masculine style and adopting male clothing. In 1931 she commissioned the architect Edward Maufe to convert an outbuilding in the grounds of her Hampstead home into a model studio. Gluck developed an idiosyncratic painting style, she eschewed all the major impulses of contemporary Continental painting, her art remaining avowedly representational and never portraying a hint of Cubism, Vorticism or abstraction. Despite this individualism, Gluck's best work is inflected by an economic use of line and strong sense of design which recalls the best of contemporary Art Deco. Gluck had considerable success in the decade before the

war. Her relationship with the society florist Constance Spry brought patronage from a wide range of designers and collectors. Gluck in turn painted a series of beguiling floral still lifes which capture the sculptural beauty of Spry's floral arrangements. Gluck's androgynous clothes were designed by Elsa Schiaparelli and Victor Steibel, she designed and patented her own frames, consisting of three symmetrically stepped panels.

In 1936 Gluck ended her relationship with Spry, entering into 'marriage' with Nesta Obermer, the wife of wealthy American. As Gluck's biographer Diana Souhami has described: 'Gluck's love for Nesta Obermer – obsessive, jealous and without clear context- was the sort that come to grief.'¹ The obsessive aspect prompted Gluck to produce a remarkable double portrait showing Gluck and Obermer in profile, fused like joint rulers on the face of a coin. Gluck called the painting variously *YouWe* and *Medallion*, using lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* to describe the work:

'And all who heard should see them there
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise.'

A remarkable celebration of a lesbian relationship, made less than a decade after Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness* about a lesbian relationship had been convicted of obscenity and destroyed. *YouWe* would eventually appear on the cover of the 1982 Virago imprint of *The Well of Loneliness*. Gluck made a further *Self-Portrait* in 1942, the small, intense portrait is now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London. The present drawing was made the following year, it shows a head drawn in severe profile, features modelled in graphite. The cropped hair, swept back from the face and fine features recall Gluck's own, the use of profile precisely accords with Gluck's careful personal iconography. A number of studio portraits of Gluck survive – by Angus McBean, Emil Otto Hoppé – show her in profile and Romaine Brooks's 1923 portrait of Gluck, now in the Smithsonian Art Museum, show her similarly posed. Some of these images, such as Howard Coster's studio portrait, are lit in such a way as to emphasise the masculinity of her aesthetic: Coster makes the shadow fall on her neck to give the appearance of an Adam's Apple. Gluck made society portraits throughout her career; these tend to be more or less conventional depictions of the sitter. The present drawing eschews many of the conventions of commissioned portraiture. Gluck abbreviates the sitter's features, concentrating purely on profile, producing a work that is closer to a silhouette than a commercial likeness. Whilst this drawing does not relate directly to a known self-portrait made by Gluck and has not been published as a self-portrait, it clearly belongs to a moment when Gluck was preoccupied with her own life and the end of her relationship with Nesta Obermer. Gluck was one of the most singular and remarkable lesbian artists working in mid-twentieth century Britain, her careful self-fashioning and androgenous aesthetic make her a significant figure in histories of gender non-conformity.

¹ Eds. Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel, *Gluck Art and Identity*, New Haven and London, 2017, p.50.



Gluck
by Gluck
Oil on canvas, 1942
12 x 10 inches; 306 x 254 mm
NPG 6462
© National Portrait Gallery, London



E.O. Hoppé
Gluck
Platinum palladium print, 1924; printed 2020
NPG x201392
National Portrait Gallery, London
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Howard Coster
Gluck, ca. 1932
10 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches; 277 x 200 mm
Private collection