

HYPERALLERGIC

BOOKS

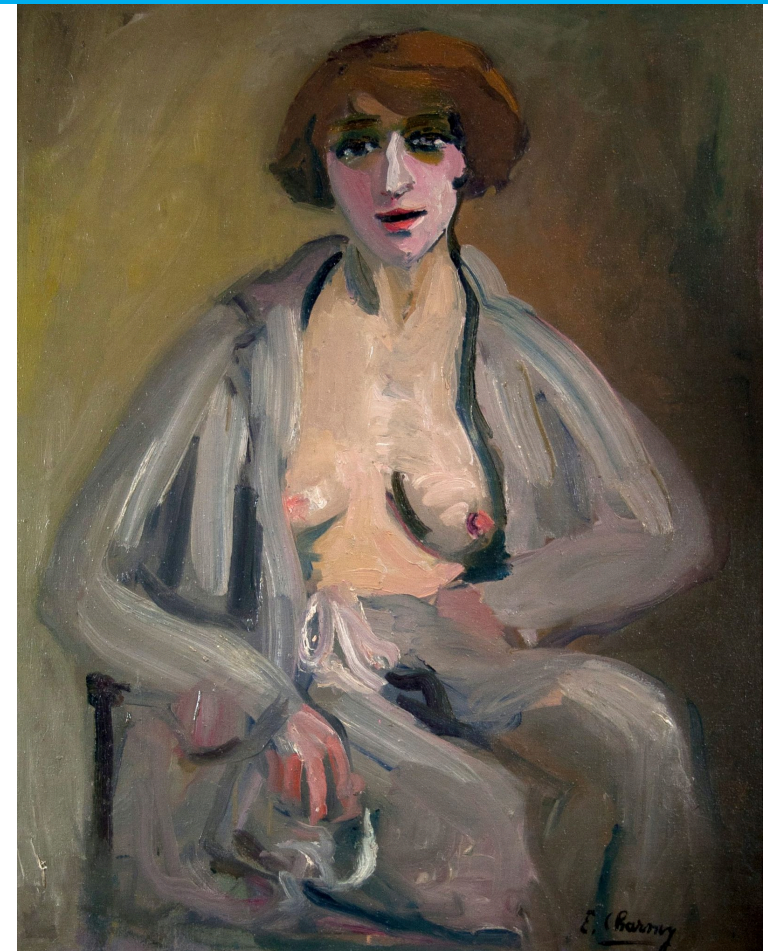
Three Modernist Women Who Reclaimed the Nude

Painting Her Pleasure delves into the work of three women artists whose own engagement with the nude was prescient and groundbreaking



Bridget Quinn

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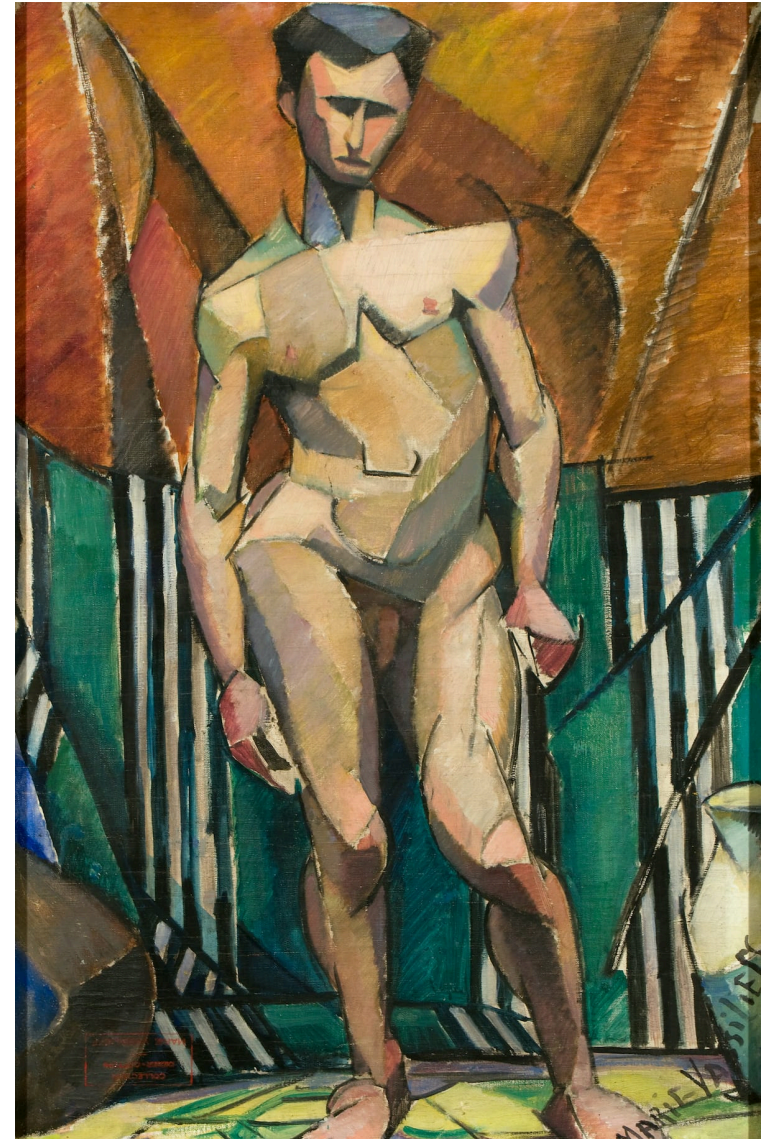


Émilie Charmy, "Autoportrait au peignoir ouvert" (Self-Portrait in an Open Dressing Gown) (c. 1916–18), oil on canvas, Fralin Museum, University of Virginia (© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2023)

In *Painting Her Pleasure: Three Women Artists and the Nude in Avant-Garde Paris*, author and art historian Lauren Jimerson cleanly dismantles one of the enduring myths of 20th-century modernism: that ground zero in advancing the

avant-garde was the female nude — as painted in Paris by two men. As the foundational tale goes, after Fauve Henri Matisse showed his “Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra),” an unclothed woman in the odalisque tradition (reclining, orientalizing) reduced to disjointed line and color in the spring of 1907, Pablo Picasso answered by painting “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.),” a brothel scene credited with ushering in Cubism. From there, the traditional story of modern painting is relentlessly male, at least so far as the artists, rather than models, go.

Jimerson quotes Griselda Pollock’s observation that “museum curators and art historians produced a heroic and exclusively masculine legend of the avant-garde,” then delves into the work of three women artists active in Paris before and after World War I whose own engagement with the nude was prescient and groundbreaking. While Jimerson acknowledges that these three artists did not share much stylistically, they all “spurned bourgeois mores and unhinged normative conceptions of womanhood.” It’s a felicitous turn of phrase, one that aptly captures the world they had to navigate, both within and outside of the avant-garde.



Marie Vassilieff, "Homme et femme" (Man and Woman) (1911–14), oil on canvas (double sided), private collection (© the estate of Marie Vassilieff 2023 represented by Cyril Debrailly, reproduced by permission)

Two of the three artists whose work Jimerson examines are not well known today: Marie Vassilieff (1884–1957), a Russian émigré to Paris who trained with Matisse, became a Cubist, and founded her own art academy in 1912; and Émilie Charmy (1878–1974), who was connected with Fauvism, was one of only 15 women to exhibit at the New York Armory Show in 1913, and was dubbed “the Colette of painting” for her intimate, self-referencing work. The third artist is far better known today: Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938), who began as a (sometimes nude) model for significant artists like Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre-August Renoir, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, but would become the first woman painter admitted to the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1894, and whose first major American exhibition opened at the Barnes collection in 2021 (to which the author contributed).

All three artists worked in Paris alongside some of the best-known men of modernism. All three were also single mothers (Valadon’s son, Maurice Utrillo, became an artist himself). They all have bodies of work devoted to the modern nude, and all achieved success and recognition in their lifetimes, but were overlooked after. They knew each other, but did not collaborate or necessarily support one another’s work. They were, as women artists, loners in the same place at the same time.



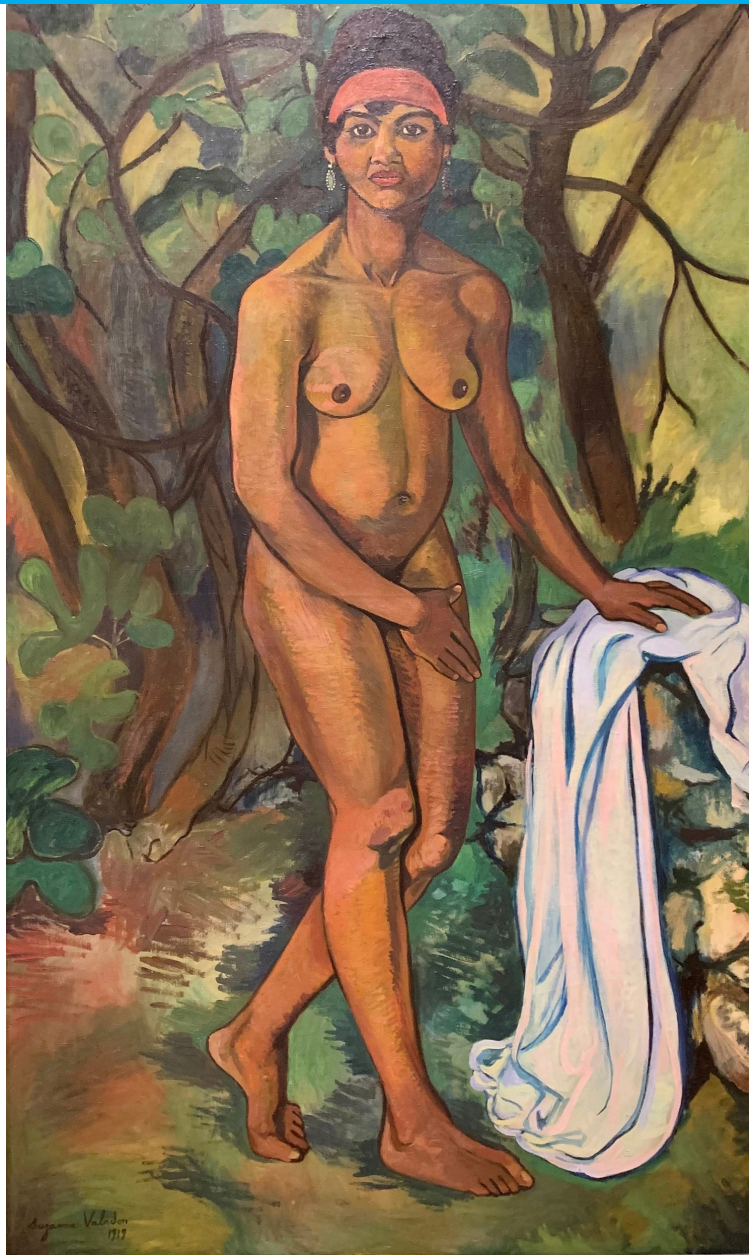
Suzanne Valadon, "La chambre bleue" (The Blue Room), 1923, oil on canvas, Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou (via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The author is quick to assert that these artists were not feminists in any contemporary sense — they were not even necessarily supportive of other women artists. Jimerson writes that Valadon actually claimed to dislike “women’s art.” But they were feminist in seizing the gaze and the nude subject for themselves. That subject included “the male body, the Black female nude and the nude self-portrait, a genre which few artists, male or female, dared to tackle until the latter half of the twentieth century.” That such subjects were shocking and groundbreaking even in avant-garde Paris can hardly be overstated.

Vassilieff, who described herself in her memoir as “ni homme, ni femme” (neither man, nor woman), created “Homme et femme” (1911–14), a Cubist

work painted on both sides of the canvas, depicting a somewhat darker male nude on one side, with a lighter female nude on the other. Since Vassilieff sometimes posed Black men and White women together in her academy, Jimerson theorizes that, potentially, “*Homme* is a rare Black male Cubist nude.” For her part, Charmy also explored new arenas for the nude, specifically in her pregnant nude self-portraits, among the first known of the type, two of which Jimerson discovered while researching her book. And in Valadon’s “*Vénus noire*” (Black Venus, 1919), the author describes “one of the earliest known examples of a single, idealized Black female nude in Western European painting.” While Valadon’s “*Vénus noire*” is not distorted or primitivized, she also has no name of her own. Jimerson is quick to acknowledge the recent critical dialogue around this painting, one that also pertains to artworks done by Vassilieff and Charmy: “*Black Venus* cannot be read simply as an ennobling image. ... Like the other artists discussed in this book, Valadon was a white woman who was immersed in a rapidly evolving, yet doggedly unequal, imperialist and patriarchal French world.”

Such a world is likely why it was the male nude, when depicted by female artists, that most shocked their contemporaries. In Valadon’s first male nude, “Adam and Eve” (1909) she portrayed herself as Eve alongside fellow artist and future husband André Utter as Adam. Valadon later covered Utter’s genitals with fig leaves so that it could be exhibited, while her pubic hair remains on full display.



Suzanne Valadon, "Vénus noire" (Black Venus) (1919), oil on canvas, Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou (photo by Lauren Jimerson)

Even under threat of censorship, Valadon continued to paint Utter nude, inserting her vision into the history of art. Her painting "Le Lancement du filet" (1914) depicts him as a kind of fisherman bather in three views (referencing the "Three Graces" trope often used in images of female nudes). His genitals are obscured, but she leaves nothing else to the imagination. Utter is part of nature the way female nudes so often are, his form rhyming with the landscape, his idealized body graceful, even sexy. But while male avant-garde artists utilized the female nude to advance the cause of modernism via all kinds of sexualized poses and places, a male critic wrote of "Le Lancement": "Suzanne Valadon knows well the little recipes, but to simplify is not to make simple, old slut!"

Sexist criticism or not, Valadon carried on. According to Jimerson, among her documented self-portraits as an older artist are three nudes "from the mature phase of her career" — up to the age of 66. To paraphrase Artemisia Gentileschi — "I'll show you what a woman can do" — Valadon showed what an old woman can do. That is, like each of the artists in *Painting Her Pleasure*, shock the avant-garde along with the bourgeoisie.

[Painting Her Pleasure: Three Women Artists and the Nude in Avant-Garde Paris](#) by Lauren Jimerson (2023) is published by Manchester University Press and is available online and in bookstores.

Painting Her Pleasure: Three Women Artists and the Nude in Avant-Garde Paris. By LAUREN JIMERSON. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. 228 pp., ill.

In 2022, the Musée du Luxembourg exhibition, *Pionnières*, focused on female-identified and non-binary artists in 'le Paris des années folles'. It included some of the works Lauren Jimerson presents here, including Suzanne Valadon's *Vénus noire* (1919) and paintings by Émilie Charmy, and recalling this exhibition made the prospect of this book yet more thrilling for me. *Painting Her Pleasure* is a rare treat, offering scholarship on three artists (Marie Vassilieff is the third) who have not before been considered together, and who each offer new images of nudity and pleasure. As Jimerson avows, these artists do not 'constitute a homogenous unit' (p. 4) but each in their own way confronted issues of sexuality. Valadon has been in the public eye, her reclining image *La Chambre bleue* (1923) in particular, but Vassilieff's naked images of male adolescents and the self-pleasuring pictures of Charmy, 'the Colette of painting' (p. 101), have been far less exposed. Jimerson adds substantially to discussions about the representation of the nude in the twentieth century and female-identified artists' contribution to this, in the form of nude self-portraits, images of nude women at different ages, and pregnancy images also. She shows the attention of Vassilieff and Valadon to the 'Black female nude', arguing that if Vassilieff 'primitivizes the Black body in her Cubist work' (p. 7), Valadon does not. Yet, through engagement with a discussion between Denise Murrell and others from 2021, Jimerson retains ambivalence about Valadon's work with Black models. The book as a whole offers a picture of a period, while each chapter offers immersion into the world of an individual artist, Jimerson offering a delicious abundance of detail about lived experiences and context. Her apprehension of the individual artworks is particularly vivid, giving the impression that she cherishes the works discussed. She explores Vassilieff's uncanny dolls, made of satin, leather, and enamels, looking at how they 'bespeak a multi-faceted and unfixed identity' (p. 69). Her discussions of tactility, possession, and female eroticism in Charmy, in particular her *Nu tenant son sein* (1920–25), are high points of the book. Jimerson observes that in this self-portrait '[t]he breast is given full plasticity' (p. 113) while the painting as a whole seems rapidly executed. Through comparison with Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Rape of Persephone* (1621–22) and Henri Matisse's *Carmelina* (1903), she shows that Charmy's 'private nudes do not imply possession' (p. 118). By contrast, the chapter on Valadon offers a revelatory discussion of the artist's work with her model and muse André Utter whom she paints sleeping, 'his availability and vulnerability highlighted' (p. 185). The volume depends on archival work, Jimerson even coming across a lock of Valadon's hair, and also the careful piecing together of stories where evidence has been missing. She brings the artworks wonderfully into the light in the beautiful colour illustrations at the centre of the book and through her own prose. Discussions of Colette, through Charmy, will be of interest to literary scholars, while the book as a whole adds considerably to current thinking on representations of female pleasure.

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Painting Her Pleasure: Three Women Artists and the Nude in Avant-Garde Paris

By Lauren Jimerson
Manchester University Press, 2023

Reviewed by Damon Reed

It is nearly impossible to write about or teach the history of art without acknowledging the politics of representing the nude form. For centuries, the nude has been used to privilege the work of male artists while simultaneously marginalizing and excluding the production of women. In response, Lauren Jimerson's study sets out to expose and remedy some by now canonized fallacies by foregrounding modern women artists who depicted the nude on their own terms: Marie Vassilieff (1884–1947), Émilie Charmy (1878–1974), and Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938). Organized in reverse chronological order, Jimerson prioritizes Vassilieff and Charmy, those most notably neglected from the narratives of modern art history, and concludes with Valadon, the most thoroughly researched of the three. It is worth mentioning, however, that the writing on her compared to the male modernists is still quite sparse, and as such, Jimerson's contribution is a welcomed addition to the study of modernist art history.

Jimerson's introduction does well to set up the sociocultural conditions that provide a backdrop upon which the careers of these three women come into relief. Although the three women artists examined here depicted the nude form in unique ways, they nevertheless have similarities. Indeed, these women lived and worked in similar circles, at times even exhibiting their works at the same venues. Primarily, despite the nude being considered a particularly masculine genre, Vassilieff, Charmy, and Valadon alike created an impressive corpus of modern nude paintings, drawings, and sculptures. Because it would have been considered indecorous for women to study the nude form in academies, these women were primarily self-taught—though all had figures who mentored

them and helped them develop their individual styles. One of the ways that their nudes differ from that of contemporary male artists, is the references to pleasure defined by and for women, rather than the heterosexual male gaze, despite those terms being unavailable to them at the time. While their employment of the nude was certainly a departure from traditional cultural norms, they expressed other subject positions—working woman, single parent, divorcee—which were counter to bourgeois sensibilities. While readings of their works certainly invite feminist interpretations today, they never proclaimed to be feminist in their lifetime, and Valadon's antagonism towards "women's art" led to her refusal to exhibit at the Salon des Femmes Artistes Modernes (Salon of Modern Women Artists) until 1933, only after being persuaded to do so by a friend (3). While these three figures are distinct in many ways, they are rare in their commitment to living in ways that they found to be authentic, their expression of female sexuality, and their success in staking a claim in modernist art history.

The opening chapter traces the career of Marie Vassilieff, a woman who, with the patronage of the Russian Imperial family, specifically the Tsarina, was able to come to Paris and pursue a career as an artist. Studying at the academy of Henri Matisse, Vassilieff gained access to French avant-garde circles. Here, Jimerson argues that because Matisse was as much her friend as her mentor, Vassilieff was able to immerse herself in the Parisian avant-garde. Yet, despite this proximity, she remained on the margins due to her subject position as a woman artist. At various points in her career, Jimerson notes, Vassilieff ran art academies, founding her own Académie Marie Vassilieff in 1912, which gave women access to academic study or canteens that supported artistic communities both during and after World War I. Although her work embraces some of the stylistic concerns of Salon Cubism, her post-cubist experimentations and practice resist the movement's masculinist ideologies. Throughout her career, Vassilieff distinctively depicted both male and female bodies as gender fluid or androgynous, which resisted the binary



Fig. 1. Émilie Charmy, *Autoportrait au peignoir ouvert* (Self-Portrait in an Open Dressing Gown) (c. 1916–18), oil on canvas, 36 1/8" x 28 7/8". Fralin Museum of Art, University of Virginia.

views of gender that dominated avant-garde conventions of nude representation. By eschewing the gender binary that was common to her contemporaries, she forged a visual language that unsettled prevailing assumptions about the body and desire within modernist visual practices. Jimerson analyzes Vassilieff's sculptural works that take the form of a type of modernist doll, the *poupée portrait* (portrait doll). Importantly, Jimerson demonstrates the ways that these sculptural works participate in the visual language of European primitivism. As a result, while Vassilieff was progressive in her thinking about gender and sexuality, she nevertheless was a product of her own time, a time when modern artists were turning to African cultural practices for aesthetic inspiration. Jimerson's analysis of these modernist dolls highlights the way in which they are both self-referential as well as vehicles for self-transformation. Deviating from traditional portraiture conventions that prioritize mimesis, Vassilieff employs abstraction to blend her physical traits with that of the doll as well as the African cultures on which they are based to create a complex dialogue of self/other.

Jimerson's second chapter focuses on the career of Émilie Charmy, of the three the figure with the fewest archival materials available, and consequently, a mas-

terful reading of Charmy's works dependent on detailed and nuanced visual analyses and an evaluation of the gendered conditions of Paris during that period. Jimerson draws upon feminist philosophers, most importantly here Luce Irigaray, to argue that Charmy's thick application of paint is fundamental to a depiction of feminine *jouissance* (pleasure). Jimerson notes that by producing private nudes and nude self-portraits, often pregnant, Charmy's works collapse the positions of self/other and subject/object to create conditions that seemingly prioritized a female viewership and autoerotic pleasure decades before feminist academics had theorized the heterosexual masculine gaze. One of the ways that Charmy achieved this was through her pregnant female nudes, an intervention within this genre. Charmy's *Autoportrait au peignoir ouvert* (Self-Portrait in an Open Dressing Gown) (c. 1916–1918; Fig. 1 and on cover) presents the artist as an unabashed subject of her own pleasure. In a non-descriptive environment composed of thick, loose brushwork that builds on the stylistic conventions of Impressionism and Fauvism, Charmy appears seated, draped in an unfastened dressing gown of mottled greys and blues, the fabric falling open to expose her breasts. Her short, modern haircut frames a face flushed with a deep, almost fervent pink. Her lips part slightly, suggesting a breath drawn in either anticipation or release. In one hand, she holds a cigarette, the ember indicated by a swirl of smoke-like paint that blurs into the surrounding air, merging gesture with atmosphere. Her other hand reaches beneath a mass of fabric that covers her groin, an action that insinuates but does not expose a moment of sexual self-gratification. This also positions Charmy as the agent of her own erotic pleasure, rather than a passive figure to be consumed by the viewer's gaze. In addition to her careful analysis of Charmy's visual materials, Jimerson makes an extended comparison between Charmy and the author Colette (1873–1954) to highlight how literature presented women with opportunities to express non-heterosexual ways of living still stifled in the visual arts. Consequently, Colette was a use-

ful point of comparison. In the same way that Colette's autofiction facilitated the discussion of female sexuality, Charmy's self-portraits became sites of self-exploration and female pleasure.

Concluding Jimerson's three case studies is an examination of works by the model-turned-artist Suzanne Valadon and her employment of the white male nude and Black female nude. Her practice employed the nude as a "vehicle of disruption" (135) and visually expresses the constructed nature of gender. Avoiding some of the more commonly explored aspects of Valadon's work, mainly those that align her with the male artists for whom she modeled, this chapter examines some of her most unconventional and understudied works. Her painterly subjects range from bathers to nude self-portraits, and from Black female nudes to white male nudes, revealing Valadon as a singular figure who crafted images that pushed the boundaries of representation—not only for women artists, but for male artists as well. Jimerson keenly spotlights how Valadon was both revolutionary and inconsistent, at times breaking from and at other moments perpetuating traditional conventions, sometimes, perhaps, unintentionally. In addition to Valadon's friendship with Edgar Degas and his influence on and her departures from his bathers, this chapter excels in investigating Valadon's depiction of the male nude (a continuation of Jimerson's research from her 2019 article, "Defying Gender: Suzanne Valadon and the Male Nude"), and the subject of the Black female nude.¹ This chapter explores the racist and imperialist conditions of Paris during the period and closely appraises Valadon's *Vénus noir*, one of five Black female nudes that she created that year. Valadon's rendering of the Black nude is one of the instances where she both conforms to and complicates the conventions of depicting the Black body in Western art. Jimerson argues that while this is one of the first non-primitivizing depictions of a single Black female nude, it is still complex and problematic in various ways due to the sociocultural conditions that frame it. By interrogating the sociohistorical challenges with this work as well its compositional arrangement, Jimerson considers how much more care the Black

nude received from Valadon compared to many of her white nudes, thus contributing to an important dialogue about race and modern art history—an area that deserves more attention from the discipline as a whole.

Painting Her Pleasure is an important contribution to the study of modern art, particularly the position of women artists in relation to the European avant-garde. Jimerson's book is thoroughly researched, laden with endnotes, a useful bibliography, and lavish illustrations—featuring thirty-three black and white figures and twenty-seven colored plates—many of which are not often seen outside of their private collections or museum storage. Addressing the many barriers that women artists faced in accessing systems of production, patronage, and promotion, Jimerson builds on generations of feminist art history and theoretical discourse. For example, she hypothesizes that one reason for their absence from the canon is due to the limited number of archival sources about their lives and practice. Rather than shy away from such an ambitious and understudied topic, given their lack of records compounded by decades of scholarly neglect, Jimerson brings their contributions to the fore. Throughout, Jimerson compares Vassilieff, Charmy, and Valadon with their contemporaries. In this study, comparisons are more fully articulated when a female artist is compared with a male artist (apart from her chapter on Charmy). This tendency, I suggest, reflects the fact that the female figures raised as points of comparison are themselves frequently understudied. Such disciplinary patterns raise a critical question: What new interpretive possibilities might emerge if the male artists were removed from the narrative of feminine achievement? Could this kind of analysis be possible by engaging solely with the trajectories of women's careers, independent of male reference? Above all, Jimerson's book models a way to study such complex figures with varying degrees of archival materials vis-à-vis common artistic subjects and offers new and exciting conclusions about the gendered experiences of the Parisian art world. This book will be of

great use to art historians and admirers of modern art, bringing novel figures and research methods to the foreground. Specifically, its methodologies will inspire future art historical research, as Jimerson provides an innovative framework to discuss figures drawing from scant archival content. While this book

and its many significant contributions will be of great use to scholars of modern art, it was also a *pleasure* to read. •

Damon Reed is a Ph.D. student in art history at the University of Florida, where he specializes in European Modernism, feminist and queer art

histories, and the intersections of art and totalitarianism. His dissertation project will focus on the work of Tamara de Lempicka (1894–1980).

Notes

1. Lauren Jimerson, "Defying Gender: Suzanne Valadon and the Male Nude," *Woman's Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (2019): 3–12.

Sculpting a Life: Chana Orloff between Paris and Tel Aviv

By Paula J. Birnbaum
Brandeis University Press, 2022

Reviewed by Lauren Jimerson

In this first monograph dedicated to the artist Chana Orloff (1888–1968), Paula Birnbaum offers a meticulously researched and deeply insightful biography of a Jewish sculptor whose life and work bridged the tumultuous cultural and political landscapes of the twentieth century. Through a career marked by migration, resilience, and innovation, Orloff emerges, with over five hundred documented sculptures, as a significant yet underappreciated figure in the canon of modern art. Birnbaum's account situates Orloff's contributions within a global context, foregrounding her dual identity as a cosmopolitan artist and a Jewish émigré navigating intersecting histories of displacement, gender, and nationalism.

Sculpting a Life: Chana Orloff between Paris and Tel Aviv reflects a clear chronological structure and geographically coherent organization. Contextualizing Orloff's artistic output across the phases of her life and corresponding socio-political and cultural frameworks, each chapter traces key periods, beginning with her formative years in Ukraine and her family's migration to Palestine, followed by her pivotal move to Paris to pursue artistic training. The narrative transitions through her integration into the Montparnasse avant-garde, her artistic development during World War I, and her establishment as a leading portraitist and sculptor of Montparnasse. The book continues by exploring Orloff's transatlantic travels, her role in building artistic

communities, and her navigation of the Jewish art world during the 1930s.

The chapters dedicated to World War II detail her forced migration, exile, and eventual return, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability that defined her *métier*. The final chapters examine her dual identity as an Israeli artist with ties to the École de Paris and her legacy that extended across France and Israel. By combining a chronological approach with thematic insights—such as Orloff's role in the Zionist movement, her experience of displacement, and her contributions to avant-garde art—the book provides a comprehensive portrait of the artist while highlighting how each transitional stage informed her generative creative expression. The book spans four hundred forty pages and features sixteen color plates and ninety-six halftones, providing rich visual context for Orloff's extensive body of work.

From her origins in Ukraine to her final years traveling between Paris and Tel Aviv, Orloff's biography is one of continual reinvention. Birnbaum introduces her early life in Kamenka, also known by the name of Tsaraconstantinovka, then part of the Pale of Settlement (the region designated by the Russian Imperial government to confine Jewish communities), where she witnessed pogroms and systemic antisemitism that spurred her family's emigration to Palestine in 1905. This migration, shaped by the rising influence of the Zionist movement in their region of Ukraine, became a defining moment for Orloff and laid the foundation for her lifelong exploration of Jewish identity. Inspired by local Zionist leaders like Haim Bograshov and Benzion Mosinson, Orloff and her sisters defied societal norms by actively participating in Zionist seminars, an unusual role for young

women at the time. Supported by their progressive parents, Orloff's formative years were steeped in the ideals of cultural renewal and national aspiration that would profoundly influence her artistic and personal journey.

In Palestine, Orloff continued to challenge social convention by resisting early marriage and working as a seamstress to gain financial independence. Driven by dissatisfaction with its limited opportunities, her decision to leave for Paris in 1910 constituted a pivotal turning point and migration encapsulating themes of agency and displacement that permeate her life's work. Initially pursuing a diploma in fashion design, she faced significant challenges, including linguistic barriers, financial struggles, and societal discrimination as a Jewish émigré, which Birnbaum brings to light in a fascinating manner. Despite these obstacles, Orloff excelled, securing an apprenticeship at the prestigious haute couture house Jeanne Paquin, where she impressed her instructors with her design skills.

Encouraged by her talent for drawing, Orloff pivoted to fine art, gaining admission to the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs—a notable achievement for a woman and immigrant at the time, as Birnbaum points out. However, formal training in sculpture remained difficult to access due to restrictive gender norms surrounding nudity, anatomy, and manual labor. Orloff began experimenting with sculpture informally, supported by mentors and peers who recognized her talent. Her early works, characterized by classical influences and bold, structured forms, began to attract attention and laid the foundation for her eventual success as a sculptor despite institutional and societal barriers. This period marked her transformation from seamstress to pioneering artist, over-