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Lotte Laserstein (Preussisch Holland, Germany
1898 – 1993 Kalmar, Sweden)

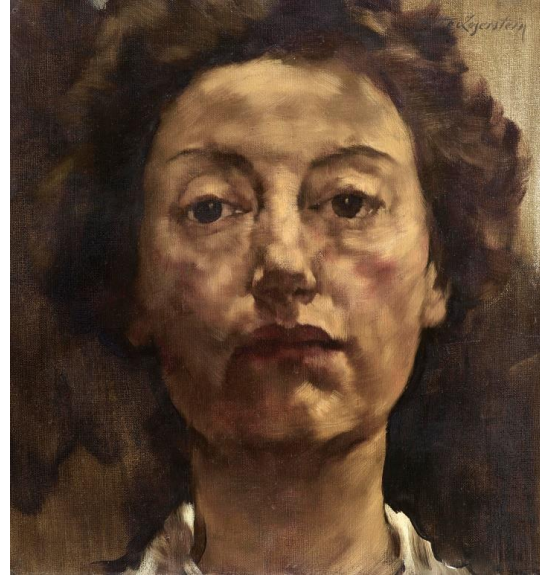
Portrait of the artist

Signed (upper right): 'Lotte Laserstein'

Oil on unlined canvas

13 x 12 ¼ in. (33 x 31cm.)

Painted 1934-35



Provenance

The artist, until sold by Agnew's in 1987 (see under Exhibited below) to Suzanne Eva, until 2020.

Literature

Anna-Carola Krause, *Lotte Laserstein: Leben und Werk*, (catalogue raisonné), Berlin, 2006, p. 207, fig. 150, illustrated.

Exhibited

London, Thos. Agnew & Sons and The Belgrave Gallery, *Lotte Laserstein, Paintings and Drawings from Germany and Sweden*, 1920- 1970, 1987, p.29, no.29, illustrated on p.18.

Berlin, Das Verborgene Museum in collaboration with Stiftung Stadtmuseum, Museum Ephraim-Palais, *Lotte Laserstein: meine einzige Wirklichkeit*, 7 November 2003 – 1 February 2004, pp. 202-07, illustrated plate 150, and p.360, no.150, as painted circa 1933.

Frankfurt am Main, Stadel Museum and Berlin, Berlinische Galerie, *Lotte Laserstein: Face to Face*, 19 September 2018 – 12 August 2019, pp.114-15, no.26, full page colour illustration p.115, as painted circa 1933.

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“She can paint. She has a pronounced sense of the earnestness of beauty. One feels it down to one’s fingertips” Anonymous, 1930 (quoted in *Lotte Laserstein: Face to Face, op. cit.*)

The German-Swedish painter Lotte Laserstein (1898–1993) can rightly be considered one of the great women artists of the 20th Century, whose skill and reputation have unjustly been forgotten.

In the Weimar Republic she was celebrated as a shining talent, and art critics at the time predicted a brilliant ascent capped by her winning the Academy’s gold medal in 1925. However, the promising career came to an abrupt end when the Nazis ceased power and declared Lotte a “three-quarter Jew”. In 1937 she emigrated to Sweden, where she stayed for the rest of her life, and with her forced displacement Laserstein also vanished from the art historical map and our collective consciousness. Those works in public collections which might have recalled her existence and her creativity fell prey to the Nazi iconoclasm; and art historians anxious to rehabilitate disgraced artists in post-war decades were too preoccupied by the Abstract to take note of a Realist’s impressive oeuvre. In the war years and later she managed to scrape a living by painting portraits. Like many other exiled artists of her generation, she never succeeded in regaining the international recognition she had once had, until a pioneering exhibition at Agnew’s in London in 1987 led to a rediscovery of her oeuvre. Numerous exhibitions at museums and galleries followed, and German museums now hold important examples of her work: in 2010 the Nationalgalerie in Berlin acquired what she considered her *magnum opus*, *Evening over Potsdam* and more recently the Städel in Frankfurt purchased *Russian Girl with Compact*. Four of her paintings were included in the recent exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, *Splendor and Misery in the Weimar Republic*; and a major retrospective her work was hosted by the Städel, Frankfurt in 2018/19. Today Laserstein is quite rightly regarded as one of the most important figurative painters of the first half of the 20th century.

Ostracized: living and working under the Nazis:

The Nazi racial laws “made a Jew” of Lotte Laserstein. Until that moment she had attached no particular importance to Jewish religion or culture and for generations the Lasersteins had lived assimilated lives in Germany. They were not only non-practicing, but no longer thought of themselves as Jewish. However, the label not only destroyed her professionally, it ultimately threatened to destroy her life, and soon after

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the Nazis seized power in 1933, Lotte and her sister Käte began to experience the discrimination and defamation of government incited anti-Semitism.

In April 1933 the Nazi government organized a one-day boycott of all Jewish-owned businesses in Germany and days later, laws were proclaimed to remove German Jews from various occupations. By September that year a letter from the National Socialist League of German Students requested that “schools of drawing run by Jewish entrepreneurs [advertised] on the porch notice board be removed... The following are to be regarded as Jewish firms: Müller-Mela School of Painting, Hans Licht School of Art, Lotte Laserstein School of Art , Eugen Herrsch School of Art, Marga Stein School of Dressmaking”. It was not long before Laserstein was barred from exhibiting in public, the last time seeming to be in the spring of 1934 at Galerie Nierendorf, where she participated in a group show entitled *A Cross Section of 20th-Century Women's Art*. Her only refuge for artistic activity was the Jewish Cultural Association, through which she took part in an exhibition of German Jewish artists at Parson's Galleries in London in 1934 and a private show in Berlin at the home of Gertrude Weil, wife of composer Hermann Weil, in 1935.

The same year, in 1935, Lotte Laserstein was obliged to relinquish her studio in Nachodstrasse and she moved to a small flat which provided no room for an atelier at 3 Jenaer Strasse, also in the Wilmersdorf district, where she lived until she fled Germany. In a sworn affidavit about her professional status during the Nazi years, Lotte Laserstein stated that “From 1933 onwards I was banned from exhibiting. My membership of art associations was terminated and only Jews studying art were permitted to attend my classes....I was not allowed to sell my works”. Laserstein's membership of the *Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen* ended in 1935, the year when she was also banned from exercising her profession. From 1935 onwards it was compulsory to demonstrate membership of the *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Chamber of Culture) in order to engage in professional activity, and this she could not do. Like others, she would have received a rejection to her application which would have ended with the customary wording: “In accordance....with the First Ordinance Implementing the Reichskulturkammer Act of 1 November 1933.....I refuse you admission to the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts and order you to desist from using the professional title....and continuing to exercise this profession.” Laserstein would subsequently have had trouble procuring materials since paint and art equipment could only be purchased by showing a membership card. As such, Laserstein was rarely painting on canvas by the mid-thirties, instead perfecting the oil on paper technique taught to her by Erich Wolfsfeld. The thin build-up and monochromatic range

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of her works from this period are likely at least in part to be a response to her difficulty in acquiring the necessary painting materials.

Laserstein was obliged to close her private school in 1935 as a result on even tougher sanctions against Jews. She continued tutoring pupils in private, but it would have place severe financial constraints on her. She was not permitted to either sell her art or accept commissions, and so she took a job as an art teacher in a Jewish private school run by Helene Zickel where her sister was already teaching. During this period Laserstein tried to place work in exhibitions abroad, for example, in 1937 at the *Salon d'automne* in Paris. At this exhibition she showed works painted at an earlier date such as *In my Studio* (1928) and *I and my Model* (1929/30).

One work which we do know that Laserstein painted after 1933 is the present remarkable self-portrait, as described by Dr. Anna Anna-Carola Krause in the first comprehensive retrospective of Laserstein's work at the Museum Ephraim-Palais, Berlin in 2003/4 "Economic in its use of colour and virtuoso in its execution it focuses less on the professional painter than on Lotte Laserstein as a private individual. There are stronger signs here than in other self-portraits that she is exploring her face to mirror her soul. The head has been placed with strict symmetry, emphasized by a light which emanates from the darkness without betraying its source, and viewed from a slightly upward perspective, [a] compositional ruse which elevates the self-portrait from the viewer's standpoint and makes it look as though the artist is looking down on herself. Humiliation and pride go hand in hand. The dark monochromatic hues lend this small format a material intensity and an inner force which appears to radiate from the frame-filling subject. Nevertheless, the facial expression is ambivalent and ultimately hard to define. It is this state that defies precise description which suggests the conflict Laserstein must have experienced in her new enforced Jewish identity" (A.-C. Krause, *loc. cit.*).

Laserstein's life in Germany was becoming untenable. In 1937 the Nazis proclaimed their "ethnic" art policy and launched a propagandistic satellite road show on "degenerate art" In December of that year, Laserstein was extended an invitation to exhibit at the Galerie Moderne in Stockholm, Sweden, and she used this as an excuse to flee Germany with some of her most important works, as a result of which a sizeable portion of her Berlin oeuvre was saved. Tragically, it proved far harder, and ultimately impossible, to bring her mother and her sister to Sweden. Her sister Käte went underground in 1942

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surviving the war in hiding in Berlin, but their mother Meta was arrested and murdered at Ravensbrück concentration camp in January 1943. After these devastating events an “aversion” prevented Laserstein from returning to Germany after the war and she was never to return, describing her life as having been torn in two. Much later in the 1980s she wrote a short passage describing this huge rift in her life and the part that her art played in it “Reality? To me, that has always been my work, ever since I was a child. My life was carved into two chunks of almost equal size: childhood, youth, training, my first independent work and leaving Germany. Then a new laborious start in Sweden. If I had not had my own reality in my paint box, that little case that led me from Skane via Stockholm to Jamtland, I could not have borne those years when everything was taken from me: family, friends and home. I retrieved some of it thanks to “my only reality” (quoted in A.-C. Krausse, *loc. cit.*). Today, the work from her Berlin period is seen as the peak of almost eighty creative years.