

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Elena Luksch-Makowsky
(St Petersburg 1878 – 1967 Hamburg)

Self-Portrait of the artist during pregnancy

Signed, dated and located lower left: *Elena Luksch-Makowsky . 1901 . Wien*
Gouache and pencil on paper
54.5 x 35.1 cm. (21 ½ x 13 ¾ in.)

Provenance:

From the artist's estate;

Thence by descent in the artist's family, Switzerland, until 2023.

Literature:

Athina Chadzis, *The painter and sculptress Elena Luksch-Makowsky (1878-1967)*, University of Hamburg 2000, pp. 118-119, reproduced no. 30;

Alexander Klee, *City of Women. Female Artists in Vienna 1900-1938*, exhibition catalogue, Vienna 2019, p. 121.



Elena Luksch-Makowsky's 1901 pregnant self-portrait marks the beginning of the artist's long and very personal confrontation with the relationship between identity as an artist and the role of motherhood. Beyond this, it is one of the earliest known self-portraits during full pregnancy, perhaps even the earliest, predating Paula Modersohn-Becker's famous image (fig. 1) by five years. In this respect, it is not just a fundamental work within Luksch-Makowsky's career but also a very significant portrait within the context of the artist's time and, even, we can go as far as saying, within art history.

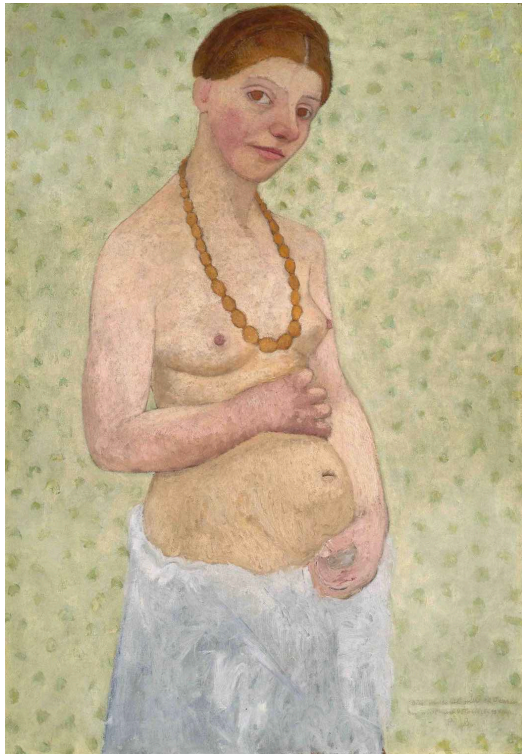


Fig. 1, Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-portrait of the sixth wedding anniversary*, 1906, oil on canvas, 102 x 70 cm., Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen



Fig. 2, Elena Luksch-Makowsky, *Pregnant Self-Portrait*, 1901, ceramic, 35 x 18.5 x 18 cm., Private Collection

After much hesitation and inner conflict, Luksch-Makowsky had married her husband, the Austrian painter, Richard Luksch in June of 1900. Her 'hesitation was due, in part, to her close bond with her family, her circle of friends, and her intimate acquaintance with Russian culture, which marriage would have meant giving up'.¹ At the same time, she was concerned that in the role of married woman, and possibly by extension in the role of mother, she would lose her independence as an artist. There 'remains an extensive correspondence in French in which she repeatedly returns to her misgivings with respect to Luksch. In the end, she obtains from her future husband the written promise that after the wedding she would be able to visit Russia at any time – with or without his approval – and that the two of them would continue to work as independent artists of equal standing'.²

¹ S. Ewald, 'The Artist Elena Luskch-Makowsky: Between St Peterburg, Munich, Vienna and Hamburg' in *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle*, Leiden 2017, p. 179.

² S. Ewald, *ibid.*, p. 180.

Luksch-Makowsky, carrying her eldest son Peter, depicts herself coming towards the end of her term, dating the gouache to the opening months of 1901.³ She presents herself as both artist, sketch-book in hand, and, with her enlarged circumference, as mother-to-be. This is to the contrary of a related ceramic (fig. 2), which emphasises only her maternal role. Warm earth-tones predominate, as they tend to do in most of Luksch-Makowsky's work from the turn of the 20th century (fig. 3), from her chestnut hair to her reddish clothes, to the screen in the background, whose angularity offsets the otherwise more rounded forms.

With her sketchbook in her left hand, the artist turns her head, either to engage with the viewer or perhaps simply to examine her own reflection in a mirror. With her upright posture, Luksch-Makowsky projects confidence, perhaps even defiance, silencing the doubts in her own mind or in those of others, though her features seem to betray a certain anxiety. Newly arrived in Vienna, the artist was embarking on new chapters in both her life and her art: marriage and motherhood on the one hand; rejection of the realistic, narrative paintings of her Russian upbringing, to focus instead on work 'that touched upon the essence and stirred people's emotions'.⁴ Surely a time of both hope and apprehension.

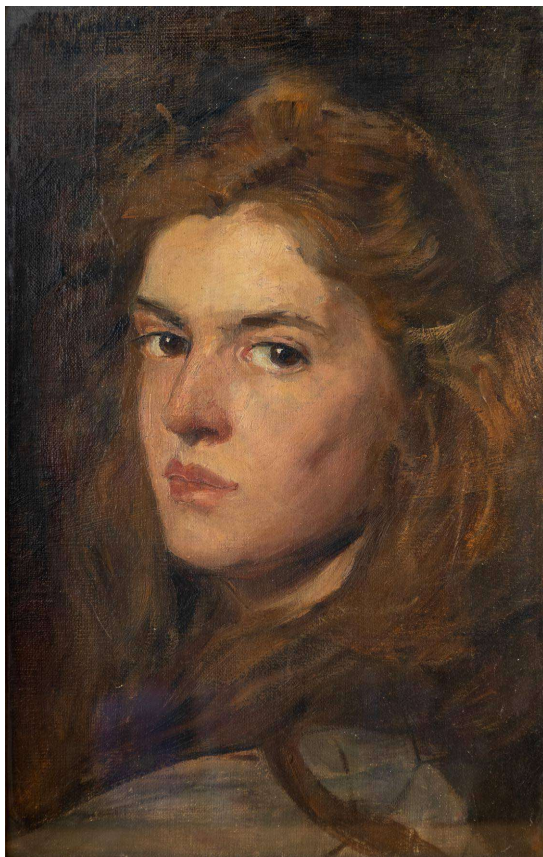


Fig. 3, Elena Luksch-Makowsky, *Self-Portrait*, 1896, oil on board, 41 x 26.5 cm., Private Collection

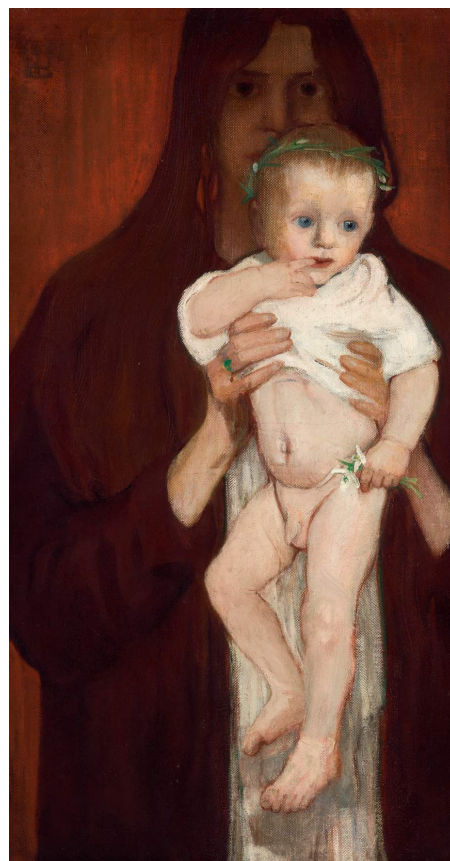


Fig. 4, Elena Luksch-Makowsky, *Ver Sacrum*, 1901, oil on canvas, 94.5 x 52 cm., Belvedere

³ As Peter was born in May, the gouache might date to March or April.

⁴ A. Klee, *City of Women. Female Artists in Vienna 1900-1938*, exhibition catalogue, Vienna 2019, p. 120., and A. Chadzis, *The painter and sculptress Elena Luksch-Makowsky (1878-1967)*, University of Hamburg 2000, p. 54, quoting the artist.

Is it possible to be both a mother and artist? Although ‘motherhood had never been part of her vision of an artistic career’,⁵ and although much contemporary literature and thought would say otherwise, Luksch-Makowsky, with this gouache as a starting-point, set out to answer this question with a resounding affirmative. Following up from the pregnant self-portrait, in 1902 Luksch-Makowsky exhibited a Symbolist self-portrait with the newly born Peter (fig. 4). Shown in her second Secessionist exhibition, the painting was entitled *Ver Sacrum*, thus referring to an ancient Italic rite whereby those born in Spring were sent away to found new settlements.⁶ Indeed, the artist, in the guise of a priestess, solemnly lifts the small boy, supporting and protecting him, yet also offering him to the viewer.

Luksch-Makowsky would continue to engage with her maternal role through her art, using it as both a means of self-reflection and a way to connect with her three sons, culminating in her sculpture *Women’s Fate* (fig. 5), a white faience group from 1910/12 depicting a female figure at whose feet three children seek refuge. The artist was clearly very close to her children, as attested by contemporary photographs (fig. 6), not to mention her own numerous portraits of them as they developed from childhood to young adults.

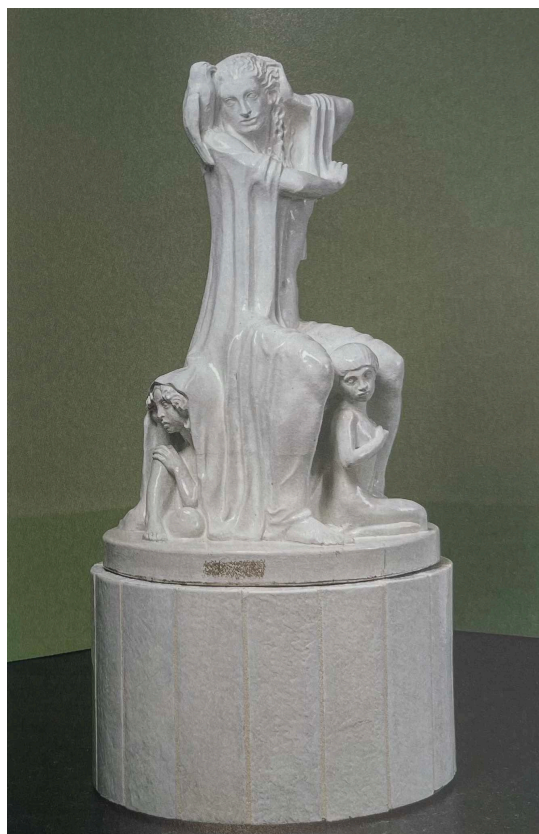


Fig. 5, Elena Luksch-Makowsky, *Woman’s Fate*, 1910/12, glazed ceramic, 202 x 103 x 103 cm., Hamburger Kunsthalle



Fig. 6, Elena Luksch-Makowsky with her sons Peter and Andreas, 1910

⁵ A. Klee, *op. cit.*, p. 121, and Chadzis, *op. cit.*, p. 86. The latter, discussing the pre-marital correspondence between Luksch-Makowsky and Richard Luksch, notes that ‘she does not comment at any point on any possible plans to have children or even a family life’.

⁶ *Ver Sacrum*, meaning ‘Sacred Spring’, was also the name of the official Secessionist magazine, published between 1898 and 1903.