

## Obituary

### Gluck (1895-1978)

This obituary has started three times. The first time I attempted to categorise Gluck's life by her relationships. The second time I reflected on the homes and studios she lived and worked in. And the third time I considered her legacy the Gluck Frame she patented (Patent GB402567: Improvements in or relating to picture frames or the like) and the results of her 20-year *Paint War* project in which time she hounded the four leading artist's colourmen of the time (Windsor & Newton, Robersons, Rowney and Reeves) to improve the quality and to create a British Standard for painting equipment.

The reason for these false starts could be because Gluck is uncategorisable, much like the art she produced. She was difficult, uncompromising, and unique. She defined herself by her own standards and was totally unlike the women of her day, although, as she herself claimed: 'It used to annoy me when I was younger to be told continually how "original" I was. What is there so original in just being oneself and speaking one's mind?'

She had her hair cropped short into an Eton cut by a Truefitt gentlemen's hairdressers in Old Bond Street. She purchased her shirts from Jermyn Street and her shoes from John Lobb's the Royal bootmakers. She would pull the corks in bottles of wine (a task at the time reserved for men), and blow her nose on large linen handkerchiefs monogrammed with a 'G'. She associated herself with no particular artistic school or movement, and only showed her work in solo exhibitions. Of which she had just five, at the Dorien Leigh Gallery in South Kensington in 1924, and at the Fine Art Society, London in 1926, 1933, 1937 and 1973.

Gluck was born Hannah Gluckstein in London, August 1895, to a wealthy Jewish family. Her father, Joseph Gluckstein, was the co-owner of the J Lyons and Co catering company and her mother, Francesca Gluckstein (née Halle), an opera singer. It was on her 21st birthday that she came into a trust fund that allowed her to pursue an independent life. She left London during the First World War for Cornwall, with half a crown in her pocket and no ration card. It was there she met the Newlyn School of painters, including Alfred Munnings and Lamorna Birch. Their experience and advice encouraged Gluck to have her first exhibition, in which all of the 57 works exhibited sold. It



Hannah Gluckstein  
Gluck 1942

also propelled Gluck into high society, where she met society florist Constance Spry.

The women Gluck became close to always influenced her paintings. During her relationship with Spry she worked on detailed paintings of cut-flowers. They would collaborate on works, and most notably on her first exhibition at the Fine Art Society in 1933. After finding the heavy gold frames of the day out of place in modern rooms, it was here she debuted the Gluck Frame. The frame consisted of steps, appearing like a panelled effect for setting pictures in a wall, painted the precise shade of the room in which they were hung. Her aim was to fuse pictures and settings, so the whole interior of the room would become hers. This striking exhibition was hugely successful and there was even a request from Macy's of New York to take the whole exhibition and installation to reconstruct in the store.

Gluck's most well-known painting was probably *Medallion (YOUWE)*, 1936, a dual portrait of Gluck and her then partner, Nesta Obermer. The painting depicts them sitting together, with their profiles fusing together, at a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Gluck felt that 'the intensity of the music fused them into one person and matched their love'.

She loved passionately and intensely but could be possessive and demanding. When the British government commandeered Gluck's home for use during the Second World War, the strain and upset to Gluck resulted in Nesta leaving her. This departure made her wilt as a person and as a painter, and after beginning a tumultuous relationship with Edith Shackleton Heald she all but

stopped painting.

Private income meant Gluck was never driven to earn her living from her work. She only ever painted what she chose. She sometimes spent three years on a picture only to destroy it if she felt it was no good. Despite wanting the prestige of selling her paintings at her exhibitions, she would later contact the buyers to attempt to buy them back, as she she felt as though the people who purchased them were not worthy of the work.

In 1953, after years of dissatisfaction with the quality of the materials she was (by then, rarely) using, she began her battle with the British Standards Institution. She wanted to establish standards for the naming and defining of pigments, oils and canvases. This battle consumed Gluck and, despite her eventual success, it was at the cost of the time and energy needed to produce works.

Her last painting, *Rage, Rage against the dying of the light*, 1970, is of a decomposing fish head, found on the beach near where she then lived in Sussex. She borrowed the title from Dylan Thomas's poem about his dying father. Gluck sensed that death was nearby. She found the fish head on the beach and had to work swiftly in her studio before it completely decomposed. The brushstrokes are looser than previous works, and represent a letting-go and a looseness not seen since her early paintings of the countryside in Cornwall.

On 10 January 1978, Gluck died from a stroke. She was 82. Her works are in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. She is survived by her younger brother, Colonel Sir Louis Halle Gluckstein.

**Rosa Tyhurst**