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Kees van Dongen: Caricature of Women as an Avant-Garde Mechanism

With just a glance at Dutch artist Kees van Dongen's work, it is evident that he has a particular affinity for painting women. Save for a few series of portraits,¹ most of van Dongen's work consist of spindly figures with "striking smoky eyes"² and "a definite haughtiness."³ However, these weren't pictures of women capable of introspection, but rather, I argue, caricatures of French society. This conclusion is able to be made by looking at his stylistic approaches to portraiture and by analyzing his personal views, both as an anarchist and a Fauve. A close analysis will be made by looking at his 1912 painting, *La donna in bianco (Woman in White)*, which is currently on display at the GNAM in Rome.

La donna in bianco consists of a slender red-headed woman with a monochromatic white skirt and blouse, white-ribboned heels, and a black high-fashion hat. She's pretty devoid of color except for her striking red bob, crimson lips, overly-roughed cheeks, kohl-rimmed eyes, and her small jeweled necklace or brooch. Her skin is a slightly-sickly pale blue-ish green, and has some Fauve influences. We see some evidence of what inspired critic André Salmon to comment that

¹ See: *The Wrestlers* (1897).

² Herens, Elodie, Catherine Defeyt, Philippe Walter, and David Strivay. "Discovery of a Woman Portrait Behind La Violoniste by Kees van Dongen through Hyperspectral Imaging." *Heritage Science* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-017-0127-4>.

³ Tahourdin, Adrian. "An Anarchist in the Ballroom." *TLS, the Times Literary Supplement*. London: Times Supplements Ltd, 2011.

in the rendering of his women, he “confused the artist's box of colors with the prostitute's box of makeup.”⁴

A geometric background of pale yellow, off-white, and varying shades of black give the subject of *La donna in bianco* a sense of depth in her non-existent environment. She reminds us of a paper doll; she exists to be dressed up and observed, and she doesn't even have arms. This isn't a portrait of a real woman in a particular space, but rather seems like a fictitious subject due to her non expressive gaze devoid of any particular features. Despite this, what draws us to this woman is her mysteriously sultry gaze and apparition-like appearance.

Made during van Dongen's Fauve period, Russell T. Clement writes that these years were “marked by the recurring image of a woman with immense eyes and flaming hair, her skin streaked with vibrant yellows, greens, blues, and vermillions.” He adds that van Dongen's figures of this period tend to sacrifice “psychological depth and intellectuality, an intense sensuality emanates from every painting.”

Though created a few years prior to the generation of what Clement calls the “Van Dongen type” of the 1920s and 1930s, we still see evidence of *La donna in bianco* as a “half princess of the international set and half drawing-room prostitute, thing pallid, with red lips and spindly arms, adorned with sparkling jewels, and veiled in silk or tulle, or stripped cynically and impudently nude.” Stuart Preston describes van Dongen's figures as “satanic odalisques mindlessly advertising their charms.”⁵ *La donna in bianco* too remains a mindless, waif-like doll.

⁴ Beechey, James. The Burlington Magazine 150, no. 1262 (2008): 340–340. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20073096>.

⁵ Preston, Stuart. “Kees Van Dongen. Paris.” The Burlington Magazine 132, no. 1047 (1990): 429–429. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/884336>.

Interestingly, this lack of individuality in his figures is a deliberate artistic choice for van Dongen. He concedes his rather soulless portraits and comments, “I exteriorize my desires... by expressing them in pictures. I love anything that glitters, precious stones that sparkle, fabrics that shimmer, beautiful women who arouse carnal desire... paintings let me possess this almost fully.”⁶ In another interview, he commented, “The essential thing is to elongate the women and to make them slim... after that it just remains to enlarge their jewels. They are ravished.” This is a far jump from van Dongen’s early works, which focused on the red-light district workers of his native Rotterdam.

Scholars have noted that for some portraits, it’s fairly evident that van Dongen is deliberately making a mockery out of his high-society subjects. A portrait of Anna de Noailles, a French poet and novelist, depicts her standing in a silver gown with an exposed shoulder, her hand clutching a string of pearls, and wearing “a strikingly large Légion d’honneur,”⁷ which would have not been awarded to women at the time.

So why does van Dongen decide to create these works of surface-level beauty that seem to mock his subjects? I suggest that van Dongen intentionally created these portraits as caricatures of French high society that highlighted divisions and social inequality.

In a time in which outcry against the government would have been punishable by law, avant-garde artists used other means to critique the Parisian political landscape. One of the ways

⁶ M. Giry, *Fauvism*, Fribourg, 1981, (pp. 224-226)

⁷ Tahourdin, 2011.

artists attempted to do this was by publishing caricatures in satirical magazines, such as van Dongen who illustrated satirical magazines such as *L'assiette au beurre* in an effort to “denounce inequality.”⁸ Modernist painters such as Camille Pissaro, Pablo Picasso, and Kees Van Dongen “incorporated anarchist critiques of wealth inequality, despoliation of nature, and colonialism into paintings intended for bourgeois galleries and into satirical cartoons published in anarchist newspapers.”⁹ Van Dongen was a known anarchist who worked closely with Félix Fénéon. In 1898, he wrote, “I had met a curious gentleman named Félix Fénéon. I had met him because he was an anarchist. We were all anarchists without throwing bombs, we had those kinds of ideas.”¹⁰

While different types of anarchism of the French early 20th century, including anarchist-communism and anarchist-individualism, the artists that followed the movement all focused on a particular thing: to “expose the follies and iniquities of the present to the masses and convey what a just order would look like.”¹¹

According to Cubist Jacques Villon, submitting works in satirical journals also allowed painting to become “liberated from academicism more rapidly,”¹² thus advancing the avant-garde. “I paint

⁸ Herens, Elodie, et al., 2017.

⁹ Patricia Leighten. “The World Turned Upside Down: Modernism and Anarchist Strategies of Inversion in *L'Assiette Au Beurre*.” *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013): 133–70. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jmodeperistud.4.2.0133>.

¹⁰ Jones, Dafydd W. “To Be an American in Paris.” In *The Fictions of Arthur Cravan: Poetry, Boxing and Revolution*, 1st ed., 70–106. Manchester University Press, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvnb7qjm.9>.

¹¹ Leighten, 2013.

¹² Dora Vallier, Jacques Villon, *Oeuvres de 1897 à 1956* (Paris: Éditions “Cahiers d’art,” 1957), 37, cited in Leighten, 2013.

what I see,”¹³ van Dongen has said. Through his illustrations in these magazines, he was able to critique the societal status quo.¹⁴

While van Dongen moved on from publishing in satirical papers throughout his career to focus on images of high-society women, I argue that his foundation as a satirical illustrator served as a vital predecessor for his later work such as *La donna in bianco*. However, some critics disagree that Kees van Dongen was making a political statement when painting his female sitters and is rather just objectifying and over-sexualizing them. After all, van Dongen and Picasso both shared a interest in “the provocative and barbaric elegance of women,”¹⁵ and many of his nude portraits of sex workers shared the same sensual yet blank expressions that his high society women had.¹⁶ Thus questions still remain—is he making a caricature out of women in general? Are scholars reading too much into his portraits? Or should we divorce the artist from his early politics altogether?

¹³ Michaelides, Chris. “Schmalzigaug; Delvaux; Van Dongen: Brussels, Rotterdam and Paris.” *The Burlington Magazine* 153, no. 1296 (2011): 201–3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23055961>.

¹⁴ Leighten, 2013.

¹⁵ “Kees Van Dongen .” Museo Picasso. Ajuntament de Barcelona, June 11, 2009. <http://www.bcn.cat/museopicasso/en/exhibitions/temporals/van-dongen/dossier.pdf>.

¹⁶ See: *Femme Fatale*, 1905



Kees van Dongen

La donna in bianco (Woman in White)

1912

Approx. 97 cm x 128 cm

Oil on canvas

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome