

Dodo: the queen of Berlin bohemia

Dörte Wolff (aka Dodo) charted the decadence of pre-Nazi Germany in between dealing with her complex love life

By Julia Weiner, June 22, 2012



Theatre Box Logic, an illustration for the Berlin satirical magazine ULK, drawn in 1929

A new exhibition at the Ben Uri Gallery highlights the work of the German Jewish émigré artist Dodo Burgner. Do not worry if you have not heard of her because the exhibition, which has come from the National Museum of Berlin, is the first ever show of her work to take place in the UK. Indeed, her name was unknown in the art world before 2009 when examples of her images came up at auction.

Born Dörte Wolff in Berlin in 1907, Dodo (as she was always known) studied art and then worked as a freelance fashion designer and illustrator. The rise of Nazism limited her opportunities for employment, though she did produce a number of illustrations for Jewish magazines. She came to London in 1936 and occasionally worked as an illustrator, but there is nothing like the same intensity of output that marks her Berlin years before 1933.

The driving force behind the rediscovery of Dodo is Dr Renate Krümmer, a Hamburg-based collector with an interest in German art of the 1920s.

"I was looking for a piece of silver on the website of an auctioneer in Salisbury," she recalls. "Images of other sale items flashed across the screen, including one of a cafe scene by Dodo. When I saw it I thought it must be German, it must be Berlin and it must be the 1920s. I'd never heard of Dodo. I could not find anything about her. So I started to buy her works, and began to research."



Dodo

Krümmer found that Dodo had some work in the National Museum of Berlin. She was also able to trace Dodo's family. "I found out her daughter's name and on the internet found someone with the same name in Edinburgh. I knew it might not be the same person but sent an email anyway and her daughter Anja responded within an hour. I flew to Edinburgh to meet her as I wanted to know more."

The works that Krümmer bought at auction were mostly illustrations made for the satirical magazine ULK. What was it about them that was so attractive? "The quality of the work was very obvious. It is just what you think about when you think of Germany in the late 1920s — the exuberance, the decadence, the glamour, the satirical connotations, the irony."

Krümmer's discovery caused a stir in Germany where a number of museums were keen to organise the first retrospective of Dodo's work. However, she felt the exhibition should take place in Berlin, the city where Dodo was born and grew up, and earlier this year, a display was held at the National Museum.

Dodo's daughter Anja Amsel is astonished at the huge amount of interest in her mother's work. She was aware that her mother was a talented artist and they even collaborated at one point. "I was writing a teaching manual and asked her to illustrate it and she did it quite effortlessly," she says. However, Dodo did not like to be described as an artist and "if anyone suggested she had talent, her standard response was a dismissive shrug".

Krümmer points out that Dodo's personal life was the stuff of melodrama. A very attractive woman, she married Hans Burgner who was 25 years her senior and had two children before leaving him for her second husband Gerhard Adler. When that marriage broke down, she and Burgner remarried.

Among the works on show at the Ben Uri are a series of intensely personal drawings made while Dodo, who died in 1998, was undergoing psychoanalysis in Zurich after having abandoned her family. In these she explores her feelings at having had an abortion as well as having been involved in a ménage à trois. How does her daughter feel about having such revelatory works on show?

"I don't like those pictures" Amsel admits. "But Dodo was always a let-it-all-hang-out person." Krümmer thinks that this series of works are significant. "Psychoanalysis was highly fashionable at the time. These works, which show her emotional state, are very important to German art history."

Dodo Rediscovered: Berlin to London 1907-1998 is at the Ben Uri Gallery, London NW8 until September 9. www.benuri.org.uk