

Dodo's return

By [James Conway](#) / [May 27, 2012](#) / [Berlin](#), [Glamour](#), [London](#) / [7 Comments](#)



<http://strangeflowers.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/dodo.jpg>

Dodo is possibly the most interesting artist of Berlin's 1920s apogee you've never heard of. Forgotten for decades, she provided illustrations for some of Weimar Germany's most

progressive magazines, produced troubled drawings while undergoing Jungian analysis and lived out a tumultuous, soap-operatic personal life in the shadow of the Holocaust and the Second World War. All of that would be reason enough to probe deeper. And then there's that photo...



(<http://strangeflowers.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/dodo-billboard.jpg>)

Dörte Clara Wolff was born in 1907 to a middle-class Jewish family in Berlin; she carried her childhood name "Dodo" throughout both her private and professional lives. As child and adolescent Dodo constantly drew, her racy subject matter prompting her mother to consult a paediatrician who commented that "Dodo was only drawing what other girls were thinking".

Dodo attended art school and her first published drawings appeared in 1926, a time when she began exploring Weimar Berlin's nightlife. Taking a job as a fashion illustrator, she flaunted her new-found independence, smoking cigarettes which she had specially printed with her name, stepping out in a monocle and brandishing a cane ([Anita Berber](http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_la4m7zH9F51qacxk2o1_500.jpg) (http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_la4m7zH9F51qacxk2o1_500.jpg) rocked a similar look around this time).



(<http://strangeflowers.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/der-held-1928.jpg>) The highpoint of Dodo's career came in the late 1920s as she provided illustrations for the satirical magazine *ULK*. While they bear a surface glamour, her images are both jaded and jaundiced, as if attempting to market the Expressionists' brand of caustic cynicism to blasé sophisticates as a desirable lifestyle option. She depicts a milieu equal parts mondaine and mundane where bakelite-hearted men and inscrutable women pursue brittle pleasures and vie for each other's inattention.

In 1928 Dodo was commissioned to design costumes for a cabaret number which would turn out to be one of the major gay girl come-ons of the '20s, *Wenn die beste Freundin...* (<http://www.cabaret-berlin.com/?p=58>), sung by Margo Lion and an as-yet undiscovered Marlene Dietrich. The following year Dodo married a lawyer around 20 years her senior, Hans Bürgner. The bride wore red silk taffeta and the newly married couple's apartment was designed by Ernst Freud (son of Sigmund, father of Lucian). Commissions from *ULK* dried up with the stock market crash; in any case Dodo's time was monopolised by a daughter and son who arrived in quick succession.

After Hitler came to power in 1933, Dodo's sole outlet was the Jewish print media. The same year she began an affair with a handsome Jungian psychiatrist named Gerhard Adler, following him to Zurich where Jung himself suggested that Dodo consult with Toni Wolff, *his* lover. Dodo's drawings from this time are true postcards from the edge, blazing with nightmarish intensity and oozing with erotic regret. Subjects include a pregnant prostitute, an abortion clinic, a bride shadowed by a skull, a couple copulating under the gaze of a nun, a severed erect penis ejaculating semen at one end and blood at the other...I think it's fair to say Dodo had *issues*.

Nonetheless the therapy helped to establish a fragile ménage à trois (much as Jung and Toni



(<http://strangeflowers.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/ohne-titel-dodo-und-gerhard-adler-1933.jpg>)

A self-portrait with Gerhard Adler

Wolff conducted with Jung's wife). But with repression worsening in Germany, Dodo emigrated to London in 1936. Dodo's friend and one-time lover, educator and writer Tami Oelfken, brought the children over. The following year Hans and Dodo divorced and Dodo married Gerhard, who was already having an affair with another woman, and then *they* divorced the following year. No longer able to practice law in Germany, Hans moved to London in 1938, remaining active in an organisation which helped thousands of Jewish children to flee.

In London Dodo received occasional commissions for greeting cards. Throughout the war she and Hans lived in strange pseudo-marital circumstances; they remained in London during the Blitz, crouched down with the children as their countrymen's bombs rained down. It was evidently a (re-)bonding experience, as they made their union official (again) when hostilities ceased, Hans working on restitution claims for Holocaust survivors until his death in 1974. Dodo returned to painting in the 1950s; embarking on a refresher art course, she turned up on the first day to discover a familiar face among her classmates: Gerhard Adler (anyone else thinking this really should be a movie?). That was their last encounter, although she attended his funeral in 1988. A decade to the day later, Dodo herself died.

It was only a few years ago, when Hamburg gallerist Renate Krümmer (<http://www.kruemmer.com/#/en/dodo/>) discovered one of Dodo's 1920s drawings at

auction and started investigating, that her life and work were reevaluated. And only now, 14 years after Dodo's death and many decades since she lapsed into obscurity, is an exhibition dedicated to her work. It finishes tomorrow in Berlin and will continue at the London Jewish Museum of Art's Ben Uri Gallery (<http://www.benuri.org.uk/Current.htm>) throughout the summer; the bilingual catalogue (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Dodo-Life-Work-Renate-Krummer/dp/3775732748/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1337932821&sr=8-2) (the source of the biographical outline above) is highly recommended.

Tags: C.G. Jung (<http://strangeflowers.wordpress.com/tag/c-g-jung/>), Dörte Clara Wolff (<http://strangeflowers.wordpress.com/tag/dorte-clara-wolff/>), Dodo (<http://strangeflowers.wordpress.com/tag/dodo/>), Gerhard Adler (<http://strangeflowers.wordpress.com/tag/gerhard-adler/>), Hans Bürgner (<http://strangeflowers.wordpress.com/tag/hans-burgner/>)

7 Comments

1. *Lindfa Hollander*

May 27, 2012 at 17:24

Reply

James, this would make a FABULOUS movie...fictionalized or not! It is so amazing to me that the film industry spend bazillions of dollars making CRAP, with story lines that Cecil B. de Mille would have rejected as trite, and so few that have anything to do with an adulthood that ranges past post-adolescence...I think that says a lot right there, not to mention the boy network!

And then, when something terrific comes out, it is a smash...I'm thinking of "The King's Speech", but fill in the balnk, most recently the Hotel Marigold movie, which is quite charming if predictable, and with really terrific turns by Bill Nighy and Tom Wilkinson.

Ah, well...a little old lady on a fixed income can dream.

Linda

◦ *James Conway*

May 27, 2012 at 21:10

Reply

I see so many of the people I write about here in little movies in my mind's eye, but Dodo's story really seems to come with a fully formed narrative arc. And if it looked like her illustrations it would be amazing!

2. Pingback: Dodo | illustrations « Strange Flowers

3. *butterscotchclouds*

May 29, 2012 at 18:20

Reply

Who took that portrait?! It looks for all the world like a Man Ray, but I don't see how it could be.

◦ *James Conway*

May 29, 2012 at 21:52

Reply

Unidentified, according to the catalogue. In the exhibition the original print is not much bigger than a postcard. But what a look!

4. *Steven Burgner*

June 5, 2012 at 18:39

Reply

Hi James, one of Dodo's grandchildren here. I appreciate the post, but you've got one important factual detail wrong: Dodo and Hans did live together again, happily and quietly in North London, after they re-married in 1946 – until my grandfather's death in 1974 (at the age of 91, not 92 as a typo in the catalogue states). I hope you agree that doesn't make her story any less interesting; is there any chance of a correction to that sentence in your piece please?

Your link to the Ben Uri exhibition in London seems to have expired, so here's the new one <http://www.benuri.org.uk/Current.htm>

All the best, Steven Burgner

◦ *James Conway*

June 5, 2012 at 20:05

Reply

Hi Steven,

Thanks very much for the comment, and for the corrections. I've changed the relevant references in the post.

How wonderful to have had such a fascinating woman in your family!

James

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