

JONG HOLLAND

Carry van Biema (1881-1942) Portrait of a German artist

Francisca van Vloten

During the interbellum Carry van Biema (1881-1942) was active in artistic circles in both Germany and Holland. Her letters and diary entries, as well as an unpublished autobiographical novel, provide a detailed impression of her thoughts, her activities and the people she met. As a visual artist, Van Biema appeared to be more inclined towards the applied arts than the autonomous visual arts. She tended to apply what had been developed by others, placing her own stamp on it, and in comparison with the avant-garde of the day, her work displayed a moderate and cautious modernity. She was much praised for her technical skills, her sense of harmony, and her affinity with the decorative arts. Van Biema was also a talented poet and writer. Her - as yet unpublished - Bildungsroman *Oramuro* is the story of a female artist living in Hannover in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

It is as a pedagogue that Van Biema has been most influential. Her textbook *Farben und Formen als lebendige Kräfte* (1930) was all but sold out shortly after it was published and is experiencing a new surge of popularity following its reissue in 1997. In the early twenties she did much to introduce the theories of Adolf Hölzel into art circles in the Netherlands, a country to which she was closely related by ties of blood and friendship. In the summer of 1921, Van Biema took part in one of the famous Domburg Exhibitions (1911-1921) and from autumn 1921 to early 1922, she taught courses in The Hague, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. It was thanks to her that Jacoba van Heemskerck (1876-1923) became interested in Hölzels's colour theories. Thus during a period when the contacts with Herwarth Walden (*Der Sturm*) tapered off, Van Heemskerck was able to explore new paths for herself in Germany. Thanks to her ultramodern, German-oriented artistic endeavours, she occupied a special place within the Dutch art world. With the support of her friend and maecenas Marie Tak van Poortvliet (1871-1936), she was able to develop her talents and devote herself to the realization of her ambitions.

Carry van Biema did not have the benefit of such support. The Gedok Hannover (Gemeinschaft Deutscher und Österreichischer Künstlerinnenvereine aller Kunstgattungen Ortsgruppe Hannover) made it possible for her to develop within the existing structures, which were well suited to her talents and ambitions. Her courses were highly regarded and many of her pupils were also friends, and yet even with them she never fully succeeded in throwing off the sense of utter loneliness which had plagued her since childhood. She felt that that loneliness was an inherent part of being an artist, and all her life she hoped to meet kindred spirits. In this she was ultimately disappointed, despite a number of close friendships. She strived to give her melancholy ('Ich leide, leide um mein eigen Wesen') a place in her life: 'Wir müssen uns selber retten, oder untergehen.' It was this which led her to create her own inner world of beauty. Looking back, the painter, writer, journalist and photographer Käte Steinitz (1889-1975) characterized her as follows: 'Sie ruhte in sich selbst, und wenn sie auch 1933 die Heimat verlassen musste, konnten die äusseren Ereignisse nicht die innere Ruhe zerstören und ihr eigentliches Wesen berühren. Sie träumte, anstatt auf der Hut zu sein. Sie wurde in Holland ein Opfer der Nazis. Verschleppt und verschollen!' From 1933 on Van Biema spent more and more time abroad, and in 1938 she moved to Holland. In August 1942 she was transported from the concentration camp in Westerbork to Auschwitz; she died in the gas chamber shortly after her arrival.

The main character in *Oramuro* had had the same dream since childhood: again and again she walked through an endless room without doors or windows, hearing only the

echo of her own footsteps and a dull thumping and scuffling sound under her feet. Then the floor opened in front of her and a number of ghostly grey, grinning figures with long, hairy arms arose out of the darkness and, wrapping their icy-cold hands around her feet, knees and hips, dragged her into the depths. Then everything went dark and quiet: she was all alone deep within the earth - until the same empty room again opened up before her. Carry van Biema saw the dream as a prophetic symbol of the humiliation and ruin which constantly threatened the soul of the artist.