

## Discourses of Dualism on Marginality

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Summary

**Abstract:** This article examines the issues of identity and reflections on crossing the gender spheres in the mundanity-related work of Lydia and Natalie Mei in the 1920s. The article focuses on analyses of Lydia Mei's paintings 'Woman with Cigarette', 'Still life with Top Hat', and 'Still life with Snowdrops' and Natalie Mei's drawing 'Petrograd' and collage 'Portrait of a Man'.

**Keywords:** modernism, marginalisation, dichotomy, women artist.

Lydia Mei and Natalie Mei are a part of the older generation of modern Estonian art. Their upbringing in intellectual families and their lives in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg just before they started their artistic careers greatly encouraged the sisters to become radical artists. Over the subsequent 20 or so years they produced various works that did not correspond to the ideas of the women's art of their time. Despite the growing emancipation in the 1920s, a woman artist still found herself doubly marginal: both in society and in the local art world.

The oeuvre of the two Mei sisters can be interpreted in various ways. This article analyses Lydia Mei's paintings 'Woman with Cigarette', 'Still life with Top Hat', and 'Still life with Snowdrops' and Natalie Mei's drawing 'Petrograd' and collage 'Portrait of a Man'. The main topic is the woman artist at a time when the 'liberal' modern period had started. What emerges here is the simultaneous opposition and blending of femininity-masculinity that appeared along with modernism, or the continuing paradox of dualism on different levels that was typical of the

period. The analysis tackles several clashing features characteristic of the era and of radical social processes.

The pictorial situations of the examined works of art, firstly, reflect confrontation in a big modern city, with its glimpses of gender-related traditions. Secondly, there are the issues of self-portrait and identity, containing parallels with the avant-garde and German expressionism, but primarily this means visualising the perception of the marginal. Thirdly, I tackle collage and message based on technique and content. Lastly, I examine still-lives from the perspective of genre and the items in the composition, the meanings of which change and depend on the context.

The central focus of the analysis is on details and fragments that cannot be interpreted in just one way. Several of them contain dichotomously symbolic meanings. Details in different contexts – both temporal and gender-related – acquire new contextual meanings. It is impossible to specify what precisely was topical when the artists and their works were born, but it can be interpreted on the basis of general treatments prevailing at the time. Freudian and Jungian psychoanalyses offer their own solutions, examining the visual expression of a split personality (here a marginal woman artist) on the basis of gender or myths surviving for centuries.

The works of Natalie and Lydia Mei reflect the modernisation of society primarily via representations of high society. Contrary to Western art trends, this topic was relatively rare in the oeuvre of Estonian women artists. By the 1920s, the image of the New Woman had become prevalent in big cities. This had many forms of expression, among which was the image of the masculine woman most closely associated with women artists. A woman displaying masculine attributes can be regarded as an extension of the

dandy but, on the other hand, she can also be seen as hiding behind masculinity in order to prove her artistic worth in patriarchal and chauvinistic (art) societies. The fashionable manifestation of the New Woman coincided, and partly blended, with the issues of the marginality of women artists and their self-portraiture, including the question of acceptance. The principles of the avant-garde concurred with the depiction of 'unsuitable' things in art, therefore violating the rules of elitism. The problem of 'self' and a 'splitting in two' are not directly evident in the works, but can be assumed. The mannish woman and feminine man in the Meis' works are typically presented via visual similarities and fragmentary allusions.

The Meis' works depict not one sex but always both. One is usually in the shadow of the other, and the second masks the first. The background is the general trend of following male-dominated art tendencies. At the same time, the stress on external qualities is related to the glamour and aura of the dandy, who has crossed the border between the sexes. The symbolic message of items of clothing and other superficial details becomes prevalent.

The ignoring of the official or approved women's art is best seen in Natalie Mei's collage 'Portrait of a Man'. Technically, the work can be associated with the visual expression of Dadaists, who were a part of the avant-garde at the time. This meant shattering the notion of traditional art, on several levels, and re-assembling the fragments.

The personal approach of the Mei sisters to art is also reflected in the still-life, which is generally regarded as a lifeless genre. Instead of the usual, mundane objects, Lydia Mei constructed her compositions on the basis of feminine attributes, especially when the topic was high society. With items of femi-

nine clothing, such as undergarments or some intimate objects, Lydia overthrows the traditional idea of the still-life as timeless and unidentifiable, and reveals what is concealed. The items chosen for the composition, intentionally or unintentionally, and the ways of depicting them refer to both the author and the examined period and its prevailing ideas.

The dualism on different levels in the Meis' works was consistent with the position of the woman artist as modernism spread. The increase in liberties was still deceptive, and this was reflected in the women's work. Making contradictory situations public required radical thinking on the part of women, breaking the traditions and adapting the 'male-isms' according to their own needs.

Experiments in the Mei sisters' oeuvre, introducing various dualisms on different levels, and ignoring middle-class principles of art point to the avant-garde ideas of liberating art and the latter's specific connections with life.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir*

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