

## Clara Westhoff: Art and Community

By Pat Aubé Gray

Edited By Lauren Harris

Clara Henriette Sophie Westhoff Rilke was born September 21, 1878 in Bremen, Germany. At seventeen, Clara Westhoff began her artistic education at the private Munich *Damenakademie*, one of three art schools in Germany at the time for women artists. Until the early twentieth century, women were officially barred from traditional government fine art academies in Germany, an obstacle that Clara and her contemporaries circumvented by seeking instruction in other artists' studios and abroad.



At the conclusion of her formal education at the *Damenakademie* in 1898, Clara moved to Worpswede, a small town north of Bremen and the recently founded artist colony there that took its name. While seeking instruction in the studios of other Worpswede artists, Clara was

encouraged by Fritz Mackenson, the award-winning German Lyrical painter, to expand her artistic study to include sculpture, a medium which quickly became her primary form of artistic expression.

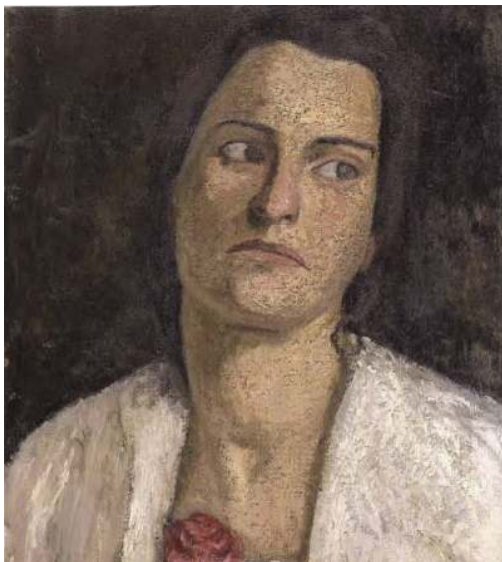


Worpswede welcomed artists from a variety of traditions, many rejecting the conservatism at the Munich and Dusseldorf Academies. Among the artists who joined the Worpswede community were Clara's future husband, Rainer Maria Rilke, and close friend and painter, Paula Modersohn-Becker. Clara Westhoff and Paula Modersohn-Becker maintained a strong creative bond and devoted friendship throughout their lives, sitting for and working along side one another, travelling together and maintaining correspondence from which we understand many thoughts and experiences of both artists. In fact one of the best known images of Clara Westhoff is her portrait by Paula Modersohn-Becker.

In 1899, Clara Westhoff and Paula Modersohn-Becker with Marie Bock, another Worpswede artist, showed their work in exhibits at the Bremen Kunsthalle which were scathingly denounced in reviews by critic, Arthur Fitger. Contemporary voices offer an explanation for Fitger's harsh reaction as an understandable reaction to art that was both "modern" and particularly executed by women. Despite critical venom, other artists praised Clara's work, including the painter and founding Worpswede artist, Heinrich Vogeler and Auguste Rodin, Clara's mentor. Even as she was being denounced by Fitger, Clara was seeking further education by studying with Max Klinger and Carl Seffner in Leipzig. Paula both visited and wrote to Clara during her tenure there.

In early 1900, Clara and Paula Modersohn-Becker traveled to Paris to continue their studies. While her friend attended the Academie Colarossi, the Louvre, and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Clara joined the celebrated Auguste Rodin's atelier in Paris. At the time, Rodin and his work were garnering international acclaim at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*, an event attended by more than 50 million people. Some time after Paula's death, Clara wrote about their experience in Paris in 1900, particularly on their mutual discovery of Cezanne's work. For both artists, the opportunities Paris afforded were invaluable.

In the spring of 1901, Clara Westhoff returned to Worpswede and married Ranier Maria Rilke, establishing a home there. In the same year Paula married Otto Modersohn, a mutual friend of Paula, Clara and Ranier Maria. The Rilkes had a daughter, Ruth, in early 1902, but within six months they agreed to live apart in order to better pursue their art. Though there were brief reunions and a lifelong cordial relationship between them, the family never remained together. Westhoff remained in Worpswede until 1919, when she moved to Fischerhude. She died in Fischerhude in 1954, and her home and studio stand today as the Café Rilke.



Among Clara Westhoff's surviving works are her 1901 *Portrait Bust of Ranier Maria Rilke* (gypsum on gypsum base), a 1902 bust of Heinrich Vogeler and an unsigned bronze bust of

author, Ricarda Huch, from 1912. Perhaps the most expressive of her existing works is the *Bust of Paula Modersohn-Becker*, seen today as a symbol of their friendship and shared passion in art. The *Bust of Paula Modersohn-Becker* is in the collection of the Kunsthalle in Bremen.