

# DORA CARRINGTON: A BLOOMSBURY ARTIST IN BLOOM

A REVIEW BY CHARLES WHALEY

## The Art of Dora Carrington

By Jane Hill  
Thames and Hudson  
144 pp., \$24

The reviewer, a former *Courier-Journal* education editor, recently retired as a public relations executive.

**B**ORN IN 1893 but unknown to the general public until the end of the 1960s, and cavalierly dubbed "a Sunday painter" in 1970 at the first retrospective of her work in London, the magical, waif-like Dora Carrington now seems on the verge of a breakthrough into the mass consciousness.

Coming soon is a major motion picture in which Academy Award-winning actress Emma Thompson will play her opposite Jonathan Pryce as *Eminent Victorians* author Lytton Strachey, the homosexual genius so platonically loved by Carrington that she married a man Strachey loved, lived with both of them in the same house, and shot herself to death when Strachey at 52 succumbed to stomach cancer in 1932. She was 18 days short of her 39th birthday.

Carrington, as she wished to be called, has appeared in numerous books about the Bloomsbury set of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Clive and Vanessa Bell, John Maynard Keynes, and Duncan Grant as an intriguing "satellite" character.

Novelists have made her a minor fictional character in at least five books; she was Greta Morrison in Gilbert Cannan's *Mendel*, Minette Darrington in D. H. Lawrence's *Women In Love*, Mary Bracegirdle in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*, the doll-woman Betty Blyth in Wyndham Lewis' *The Apes of God*, and painter-photographer Anna Cory in Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets*.

A selection by David Garnett of her delightful letters and diary excerpts, with her

amusing and insightful drawings that illustrated them, was published five years ago. In 1980, Noel Carrington published a selection of his sister's paintings, drawings, and decorations.

But Jane Hill's marvelous new book, scrupulously analyzing and documenting Carrington's output and achievements, is the most thorough study to date of her art. The book is profusely illustrated, the color reproductions of her paintings being particularly fine.

For this unabashed Carrington admirer, it was a privilege to provide Hill with two of the illustrations.

Though the Kentucky connection is not mentioned, the author pays special attention to a drawing, now in the collection of the Duke of Devonshire, that Carrington did of the late Henrietta Bingham.

An account of the friendship of the two women when Judge Robert Worth Bingham, Henrietta's father and owner of *The Courier-Journal*, was the American ambassador in London can be found in the David Garnett volume of Carrington's letters.

Hill notes that although Carrington had relationships with men — among them Gerald Brenan, Mark Gertler, and Beakus Penrose — she was divided over her sexuality "and was perhaps more Sapphic than not."

"As she grew older she felt less inhibited about following her inclinations and experienced ecstasy, without shame, with at least one woman: Henrietta Bingham," Hill writes.

Henrietta, Carrington wrote a friend, had "the face of a Giotto Madonna," adding: "I am very much more taken with Henrietta than I have been with anyone for a long time. I feel now regret at being such a blasted fool in the past, to stifle so many lusts I had in my youth, for various females."

"Carrington made two frankly erotic, sensual drawings of women in the mid-1920s, which are completely winning," Hill writes. "In pen and ink, using a very fine nib, like the hardest pencil, Carrington drew Henrietta in a most revealing and unselfconscious stance. The attitude of her right arm is beautifully



Samuel Carrington, as painted in oil by his daughter, Dora, in 1915. Her work is only now gaining full appreciation.

drawn and the fetishistic addition of shoes makes her nudity nakedness."

The other erotic drawing was of Lytton Strachey's niece, Julia Strachey, for whose novel *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding* Carrington was commissioned by Leonard and Virginia Woolf to do the illustrations.

In his foreword, Lytton Strachey's biographer, Michael Holroyd, notes that Carrington was principally an autobiographical artist

who painted the people and places she loved.

There was a wide diversity to her work: public-house signboards, rococo tiles, tinsel-glass pictures, drawings, decorations, sketchboards, woodcuts, and illustrated letters. As for the latter, David Garnett considered her one of the great letter writers of her time. Virginia Woolf also relished Carrington's letters written in purple ink "tearing like a may-fly up and down the page," the letters themselves "completely unlike anything else in the habitable globe."

Hill says Carrington must have spent hours, almost daily, writing letters:

"To some extent they were a thief upon her painting time but they were also a way of focusing her ideas for pictures and calligraphic work, full of illustrations capturing the absurdities of her everyday life, for which we are the richer."

Carrington's most famous portrait, now in a private collection, is of Lytton Strachey, done in 1916. "With her portrait of Lytton," Hill, "Carrington established her voice as uniquely, identifiably her own."

Sir John Rothenstein said, however, that during his period as director of the Tate Gallery, from 1938 to 1964, he had never been shown an example of Carrington's work or heard an intelligent allusion to it. (The Tate now has one Carrington painting, "Farm at Watendlath," given by her brother Noel in 1987.)

When he later got a chance to examine the pictures he judged her to be "the most serious neglected painter of her time."

While showing the importance of Carrington's art as a contribution to modern painting, Jane Hill concludes that "although she had the makings of a great painter, Carrington was too gently made and seemingly has no desire for posterity through progeny (pregnant at 36 by Beakus Penrose, her last lover, she had an abortion) or paint."

But, oh, what a life she had and what joy she took — and we can take — in her work.

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