



Short Notice

A Portrait by Marie Bashkirtseff: Rediscovery and Reception

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A work unknown to many has been hanging in the nineteenth-century rooms since March 2022. The portrait of Alexandrine Patchenko, painted in 1881 by her sister-in-law Marie Bashkirtseff, is a painting that pleasantly surprises many a modern-day visitor (fig. 1). In the Rijksmuseum's collection since 1902, it had been on display in the museum until 1916, when it was relegated to the depot. Now on show again in the gallery it deserves more attention, and not just because the spotlight is increasingly being turned on work by female artists. The presentation of this work in a museum over time provides a salient view of the history of the appreciation of nineteenth-century paintings by foreign artists in the Rijksmuseum.

Marie Constantine Bashkirtseff
Marie Bashkirtseff (1858-1884) painted the portrait when she was twenty-three (fig. 2). She was born Maria Konstantinovna Basjkirtseva in Poltava, near Charkov in Ukraine, at that time part of the Russian Empire. The family belonged to the Russian landed nobility. Her parents divorced when she was ten, and after a year spent travelling through Europe with her mother, younger brother and members of her mother's family, she ended up in Nice, at that time the favoured port of call for European

< Fig. 1
MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF,
*Portrait of Alexandrine
Patchenko, the Painter's
Sister-in-Law*, 1881.
Oil on canvas,
92.5 x 73 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-1988;
gift of M. Bashkirtseff-
Bananine, Nice.

aristocracy.¹ In the years that followed, this restlessness was to continue and Bashkirtseff spent time on her own or *en famille* in Poltava and Charkov, Rome, Naples, Florence and various spas in Northern Europe.²

From an early age Bashkirtseff showed great literacy and language skills and also proved to be very talented in music and drawing. In themselves, these were the usual ingredients of the education of a young lady of standing at that time, but young Marie stood out because of her virtually unbridled ambition, which went beyond the desire to make a good marriage. This can all be found in the candid journal she kept from the age of twelve.³ The overpowering desire to be famous became even more urgent when it was found that she was suffering from tuberculosis. That fact, too, makes her journal a moving and poignant document. Bashkirtseff would eventually die on 31 October 1884, at the age of twenty-five.

Throat complaints, probably a forerunner of tuberculosis, put paid to her original dream of becoming a singer and forced Bashkirtseff to go down a different route. In 1877 she opted for painting. At that time, the Académie Julian in the Passage Panorama in Paris was the only institution in all of France that offered women the opportunity to work from nude models (male and



female), so the family moved to the capital.⁴ The Académie Julian's unique position attracted students from all over the world to the women's class; Bashkirtseff's classmates included Sarah Purser from Ireland, Louise Breslau from Switzerland and Alice Brisbane from the United States.⁵ The latter can be seen front and centre in Bashkirtseff's first large successful painting, *L'Atelier de Julian*, exhibited at the Salon of 1881 (fig. 3).⁶ During that period Bashkirtseff also painted Brisbane or another fellow student in the typical dress of female artists (fig. 4).⁷

The women were taught by the founder Rodolphe Julian and the painter Tony Robert-Fleury. They both recognized Bashkirtseff's talent and encouraged her to pursue a professional career, an unusual move in her wealthy, aristocratic circle. In 1883 Bashkirtseff exhibited *Un Meeting*, one of her best-known works, painted in the naturalistic style of Jules Bastien-

^ Fig. 2
 Reproduction after O. WALERY, *Portrait of Marie Bashkirtseff*, in William Thomas Stead, *Portraits and Autographs: An Album for the People*, London 1891 (original photograph August 1875, see exh. cat. Nice 1995 (note 1), yellow page 3). Autotype, photo-mechanical print. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-F-2001-7-67-108; purchased with the support of the Mondriaan Stichting, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, the vsbfonds, the Paul Huf Fonds/ Rijksmuseum Fonds and the Egbert Kunstfonds.



Fig. 4

MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF,
Portrait of a Lady,
 c. 1881.
 Oil on canvas,
 63 x 59 cm. Athens,
 National Gallery –
 Alexander Soutzos
 Museum, inv. no.
 П.267 (p. 267); donated
 by M. Bashkirtseff-
 Bananine.



< Fig. 3

MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF,
L'Atelier Julian, 1881.
 Oil on canvas,
 154 x 188 cm.
 Dnipro (Ukraine),
 Dnipropetrovsk
 Museum of Fine Arts.
 Photo: Archivah /
 Alamy Stock Photo

Lepage, a painter of rustic life, whose work she admired. Unlike him, she situated her scenes of everyday life in the city (fig. 5).

In December 1881, Alexandrine Patchenko visited her in-laws in Paris. She had married Marie's brother Paul Bashkirtseff two years earlier; the couple lived on the parental country estate of Polana in Ukraine. The portrait in the Rijksmuseum was created on 29 and 31 December (fig. 1).⁸ Patchenko is portrayed seated, dressed in a fur-trimmed housecoat, facing left, so that her profile stands out beautifully

against the floral pattern of the sofa and the folding screen behind it. She has a piece of paper or a letter in her hand and gazes into the distance. The informal setting is emphasized by the sketchy character of the painting; the bottom section was left unfinished. On 31 December Bashkirtseff wrote: 'Enfin, je vais ... chez Tony et lui montre l'esquisse du portrait de la femme du Paul' (Finally, I go ... to Tony and show him the sketch of the portrait of Paul's wife). Robert-Fleury is enthusiastic: 'Il la trouvée très originale, très originale d'arrangement et bien partie' (He found



Fig. 5
MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF,
Un Meeting, 1884.
Oil on canvas,
195 x 177 cm.
Paris, Musée d'Orsay,
inv. no. RF 442.
Photo: Musée d'Orsay,
Dist. RMN-Grand
Palais / Patrice Schmidt

it very original, very original in composition and very well done).⁹ It is unclear here whether this does actually refer to a preliminary study or to the final work, but Robert-Fleury evidently regarded it as a good start. Even though the painting was unfinished it was eventually signed; in the years that followed, this incompleteness, like the broad brushstrokes, became characteristic of many of Bashkirtseff's portraits (e.g. fig. 6). The feeling conveyed by the portrait can be described as aloof rather than affective, in contrast to a genre work like *Un Meeting*. The

artist's main objective in the portrait was to control the expression of colour and material. The result is a strikingly mature painting for a twenty-three-year-old.

Posthumous Fame

In the last months before her death, when the dream of making a name for herself with her painting had faded, Bashkirtseff tried to get someone to publish her journals, which she had written in French. Although she had never embarked on it as a literary project, the enormous depth and

breadth of her reading made her realize its unique value. However, requests to famous authors like Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola and Edmond de Goncourt, asking them to read and recommend the journals to publishers, fell on deaf ears. After Bashkirtseff's death her mother took over the mission and succeeded in having the journals edited and published in censored form by the poet and novelist André Theuriet (1887). They were a great success, as the writer herself had foreseen. For the

first time, the outspoken voice of an adolescent woman could be heard, full of unabashed ambition. The success is also why Bashkirtseff became known under the French version of her name: Marie Constantine.

The publication of the journals also brought the painter into focus. *Un Meeting* was purchased by the French State in 1885 and placed in the Musée du Luxembourg, then the museum for contemporary art.¹⁰ In that same year the Union des Femmes Peintres & Sculpteurs staged a retrospective in

Fig. 6

MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF,
*Portrait of a Young
Woman*, 1884.
Pastel, 560 x 465 mm.
Paris, Musée d'Orsay,
inv. no. RF 1565.
Photo: Musée d'Orsay,
Dist. RMN-Grand
Palais / Patrice Schmidt



Paris. The illustrated catalogue contained entries from the journal and reviews of Bashkirtseff's exhibits at the Salon. The exhibition also attracted attention in the Netherlands. The foreword by the poet and essayist François Coppée was translated and quoted in newspaper articles that reported on the young painter's death.¹¹ The interest was so great that in January 1887 the Internationale Kunstvereniging exhibited a selection of the works shown in Paris in a venue on Amsterdam's Herengracht.¹² From the many newspaper articles that were devoted to that exhibition it is obvious that Bashkirtseff was not unknown in the Netherlands, even before her journals were translated into Dutch in 1890.¹³ Of course, no one could fail to notice the tragic romance of that life, but the quality of her work was also praised by more critical reviewers. A small selection of the reviews: 'An unusual, very versatile and cultured talent speaks from the exhibited work. The artist preferred to take her subjects from real life; it is actually impossible to portray a street urchin more favourably and more accurately than in the painting "Jean et Jacques", or a Parisian workman's family than in "Dressing the Choirboy".'¹⁴ "The Young Woman Reading" and the two portraits of women may also be called excellent studies. The large landscape, in which there is a seated figure of a woman, may perhaps be still a little rough, but cannot be denied great naturalness and strength of colour and breadth of execution. In a word: each painting has its idiosyncrasy; originality of view reigns in all.'¹⁵

The Gift in 1902

Madame Bashkirtseff-Bananine not only arranged for her daughter's journal to be published, she promoted her art through many donations: Bashkirtseff's work found its way into the Musée de Petit Palais in Paris, Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nice, the Hermitage

in St Petersburg and a number of other museums.

Bashkirtseff's mother was also present during the installation and opening of the exhibition on Herengracht.¹⁶ On that occasion she gifted the catalogue of the Paris exhibition to the just completed Rijksmuseum on Stadhouderskade.¹⁷ At that time contacts were undoubtedly made that led to the gift in January 1902 of *Portrait of Alexandrine Patchenko, the Painter's Sister-in-Law*, which was illustrated in the 1887 catalogue.¹⁸ The donation received a lot of attention in the press. By 1902, there was every opportunity to make a direct connection with the journal. For instance, the *Algemeen Handelsblad* wrote about the acquisition: 'It is a portrait of a woman, not entirely finished, but nevertheless very interesting. It was undoubtedly painted with talent; the best is actually the hand, which holds a piece of paper, with what is around it. But the pose is good too, the shadows on the face somewhat sharp, all of it – the woman sitting in a fashionable interior, with cushions, plants etc. – good in colour. However, there is not much expression in the face. As for that well-painted hand, it is not strange, that on 19 January 1883 Marie Bashkirtseff wrote in her journal: 'I force myself to do one hand very well and it almost makes me ill'.¹⁹ That reference was not correct nonetheless, because, as we have seen, Bashkirtseff was working on the portrait at the end of December 1881.

The painting was placed in Room 342, surrounded by works by Dutch and some French artists from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Bashkirtseff's portrait shared the public's attention with works by the Hague School, Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Study of a Young Woman* (now *Mary Magdalene*), *Old Jewish Woman* by Meijer de Haan, *A Young Woman, Life's Eventide* and *Still-Life with Oriental Slippers* by August Allebé,

a still-life by Sientje Mesdag-van Houten and the painting *Puck* by Thérèse Schwartz, now known as *Young Italian Woman with Puck the Dog*.²⁰ Realism predominated in this ensemble, but there was also clearly a feminine element.

In 1907 the selection was rehung. The collection of works by the Hague School, acquired by Jean Charles Joseph Drucker and his wife Mary Lydia Fraser, had now found its way into Room 342. One wall was left for the paintings that were not part of that collection, among them Bashkirtseff's. It found itself, rather surprisingly, among George Hendrik Breitner's *Rain and Wind*, Charles-François Daubigny's *Landscape on the Oise*, Johan Hendrik Weissenbruch's *Wooded View near Barbizon*, Albert Neuhuys's *Visservrijage*, Maria Bilders-van Bosse's *Avenue of Oaks* and Adriana Haanen's flower still-life *The Summer*.²¹ In 1910 Bashkirtseff's portrait was accompanied on one side by two portraits of men, one by Léon Bonnat and one by Johann Georg Schwartz, and on the other by *Hunting Companions*, a portrait of two dogs by Conradijn Cunaeus.²² It is clear that the museum curators struggled with the placement of those works, and this is why they can no longer be found in the 1916 guide.

Reputation and Role Model

The reason for this is two-fold: in 1916 the collection of works from the Hague and Amsterdam schools, amassed by the Drucker-Frasers, had been expanded enormously. It was a promised gift to the Rijksmuseum, on condition that a new wing was built to house the collection, the 'Drucker Annexe' – now the Philips Wing. By 1916, interest in the Dutch painting schools had grown at the expense of nineteenth-century foreign works in the collection, a process that was not reversed until 2013.²³ In this period the Rijksmuseum also received the loan of

a large collection of modern paintings from the heirs of Cornelis Hoogendijk and from Vincent Willem van Gogh, the painter's nephew.²⁴ These included three paintings by Vincent van Gogh, two by Georges Braque and a landscape and the portrait of Van Gogh painting sunflowers by Paul Gauguin.²⁵ In 1917 this selection was supplemented with loans from the European avant-garde, including work by Jan Toorop, Floris Verster, Piet Mondrian, Henri Le Fauconnier, Leo Gestel, Félicien Rops, Jan Sluijters and even Pablo Picasso.²⁶

As always, contemporary taste influenced the view of art history and, like many of her neighbours on the wall, Bashkirtseff had to make way for it. But that did not apply to her published journal; this became a classic and has been published – abridged or in full – in many languages and editions.²⁷ On specific occasions interest in the young author actually revived, for example after the death of Mme Bashkirtseff-Bananine in 1922, when previously unknown texts by her daughter were found, and a year later when some of her heirs tried to transfer Marie's remains from the cemetery in Passy to Nice, on the publication of her first biography in 1926, or even in 1977 when Dutch author Theun de Vries published a novel about her correspondence with Guy de Maupassant.²⁸ The longest-lasting tribute was a very popular film by the Austrian-Czech director Hermann Kosterlitz (1936), which was screened in Dutch cinemas from the spring of 1937 and ran for at least a year.²⁹

Would Marie Bashkirtseff's art have become known without her journal? Most likely not. Without being aware of her great ambition, art historians would in all probability have dismissed her as an amateur because of her femininity and her aristocratic origins. But the journal contradicts that idea, and her drive and zest for work have

made her into the role model for many young women that she still is to this day. Her early death prevented her artistic oeuvre from growing, either in size or in depth. She herself was very aware of that; hidden behind the painting of her sister-in-law there is a world of both determination and deception.

Her genre paintings are too sentimental for us now, but it is the portraits that show Bashkirtseff's talent. She portrayed fashionable beauties as well as young women who, like her, wanted to make a name for themselves in the art world. A more contemplative image such as the portrait of Alexandrine Patchenko is also convincing. In a short time Bashkirtseff created a recognizable,

modern hand, departing from the academic *finito*. Her journal and her artworks together form a monument to her willpower and ambition, qualities that were not normally to be expressed by a young woman at that time.

NOTES

- 1 Dominique Rochay, Jean Forneris and Jean-Paul Potron, *Marie Bashkirtseff: Peintre et Sculpteur & Ecrivain et Témoin de son Temps*, exh. cat. Nice (Musée des Beaux-Arts Jule Chéret/Palais Masséna, Bibliothèque du Chevalier de Cessole) 1995, pp. 11-12.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.
- 3 There are many versions of the journal. The first version from 1887 was put together by André Theuriet and was severely censored. The complete and uncensored version was published between 1995 and 2005 by the Cercle des Amis de Marie Bashkirtseff and comprises 16 volumes (4,500 pages). In this article I refer to the 1890 version: *Journal de Marie Bashkirtseff*, Paris (Charpentier et Cie) 1890, 2 vols., <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9735080x?rk=21459;2#> and <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9735565z#>. This edition has also been translated into English: Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds.), *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, London 1985.
- 4 *Journal* 1890 (note 3), vol. 2, p. 3 (2 October 1877).
- 5 *Ibid.*, for example pp. 13 (13 October 1877), 18 (20 October 1877), 338 (18 December 1881) and 447 (1 April 1883).
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 254-55 (9 and 14 February 1881).
- 7 Exh. cat. Nice 1995 (note 1), p. 19. The likeness of Brisbane in *L'Atelier de Julian* with a later portrait by John Singer Sargent (private collection) is large, see www.wikiart.org/en/john-singer-sargent/portrait-of-mrs-alice-brisbane-thursby-1898 and www.newarkmuseumedu.org/learningcenter/activities/new-woman-cassatt-sargent-gibson (both consulted 12 December 2022).
- 8 *Journal* 1890 (note 3), vol. 2, pp. 340-41 (29 and 31 December).
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 340 (31 December).
- 10 See www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/un-meeting-54 (consulted 8 December 2022); *De Maasbode*, 3 February 1887.
- 11 For example, 'Marie Bashkirtseff door François Coppée', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 16 January 1887; Anonymous, 'Kunst en Letteren', *De Avondpost*, 2 February 1887; 'Een Russische schilderes', *Delftsche Courant*, 30 March 1890 [text by François Coppée]. All newspaper articles have been consulted via www.delpher.nl.
- 12 Anonymous, 'Kunst en Letteren', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 11 December 1886.
- 13 *De Gids* immediately devoted considerable attention to the publication of the first edition of the journal in 1887. J.N. van Hall, 'Het Dagboek van Marie Bashkirtseff. Journal de Marie Bashkirtseff. Avec un portrait. 2 vols. Paris G. Charpentier et Cie 1887', *De Gids* 51 (1887), pp. 348-73.
- 14 'Een ongewoon, zeer veelzijdig ontwikkeld talent spreekt uit het tentoongestelde. Aan

- het volle leven ontleende de schilderes het liefst hare onderwerpen; gunstiger en meer waar een straatjongen voor te stellen dan in het schilderij “Jean et Jacques”, of een Parijsch werkmansgezin dan in “Het kleeden van den kooraknaap” is wel niet mogelijk’, Anonymous, ‘Laatste berichten’, *De Standaard*, 26 January 1887.
- 15 ‘Ook “Delezende jonge vrouw” en de beide vrouwen-portretten mogen uitmuntende studiën genoemd worden. Het groote landschap, waarin een zittend vrouwen-figuur, moge misschien nog een weinig rauw zijn, groote natuurlijkheid en sterkte van kleur en breedheid van uitvoering kan men er niet aan ontzeggen. In één woord: elke schilderij heeft hare eigenaardigheid; oorspronkelijkheid van opvatting heerscht in allen.’ D.v.d.K.jr [David van der Kellen Jr], ‘Kunstnieuws’, *Het Nieuws van den Dag: Kleine Courant*, 12 February 1887.
- 16 ‘Kunst en Letter nieuws’, *Het Vaderland*, 22 January 1887: ‘Naar wij vernemen zal de moeder van Marie Bashkirtseff tegenwoordig zijn bij de opening der tentoonstelling van de werken der op jeugdigen leeftijd overleden schilderes, in de Internationale Kunstvereeniging te Amsterdam, a.s. Maandag.’ (We are informed that Marie Bashkirtseff’s mother will be present at the opening of the exhibition of the works of the painter, who died young, in the Internationale Kunstvereeniging in Amsterdam, next Monday.)
- 17 *Catalogue des oeuvres des Mlle Bashkirtseff, Union des Femmes Peintres & Sculpteurs*, Paris 1887. A note on the flyleaf: Geschenk van Mevrouw de Bashkirtseff, 63 Rue Prony Parijs (Febr. 1887). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Research Library, inv. no. 1621, place number 66 B 24.
- 18 *Catalogue* 1887 (previous note), p. 73, as Portrait. See for the donation ‘Inventarisboek schilderijen SK-A-1936 t/m SK-A-3474’, Rijksmuseum Archives, and *Verslagen omtrent ’s Rijks Verzamelingen van Geschiedenis en Kunst* 25 (1902), The Hague 1904, p. 12.
- 19 ‘Het is een vrouwenportret, niet geheel af, maar niettemin zeer interessant. Het is zonder twijfel met talent geschilderd, het best is wel de hand, die een stuk papier vasthoudt, met wat er omheen is. Maar ook de houding is goed, de schaduwen op het gezicht wat scherp, het geheel – de vrouw zit in een mondain interieur, met kussens, planten enz. – goed van kleur. Veel uitdrukking is er in het gezicht evenwel niet. Wat die goed geschilderde hand aangaat, is het niet eigenaardig, dat Marie Bashkirtseff op 19 Januari schreef: “Je me force a faire très bien une main et ça me rend presque malade”.’ Anonymous, ‘Kunsten en Wetenschappen’, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 17 October 1902.
- 20 Respectively SK-A-2289 (Alma-Tadema), SK-A-1987 (De Haan), SK-A-1730, 1731 and 1729 (Allebé), SK-A-192 (Mesdag-van Houten) and SK-A-1703 (Schwartz). *Beknopte Gids door het Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 1902, p. 72.
- 21 W.P. Brons (ed.), *Beknopte Gids door het Rijksmuseum*, 2nd edition, Amsterdam 1907, p. 82.
- 22 W.P. Brons, *Wegwijzer door ’s Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 1910, p. 72.
- 23 E.P. Engel, ‘Het ontstaan van de verzamelende Drucker-Fraser in het Rijksmuseum’, *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 13 (1965), no. 2, pp. 45-66. In the nineteen-nineties a large number of works by nineteenth-century French painters in the Rijksmuseum’s collection were actually loaned to the Van Gogh Museum. See Ineke Middag (ed.), *Van Gogh Museum: Acquisitions 1986-1991*, Zwolle 1991.
- 24 On the Dutch reception of these artists see Marjan van Heteren and Chris Stolwijk (eds.), *Van Gogh, Cézanne, Le Fauconnier & the Bergen School*, exh. cat. Alkmaar (Stedelijk Museum) 2023, *passim*.
- 25 J. Vlieger, *Illustrated Guide through the Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 1916, p. 33.
- 26 J. Vlieger, *Geïllustreerde gids door het RijksMuseum*, Amsterdam 1917, pp. 45-46.
- 27 For an overview of the role that the journal continues to play in Dutch literature I refer to the sources list at www.dbnl.org. The search term Bashkirtseff gets 93 hits, from 1887 to 2015.
- 28 *De Telegraaf*, 2 May 1922; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 17 May 1922; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 8 December 1923; Albéric Cahuet, *Moussia: ou, La vie et la mort de Marie Bashkirtseff*, Paris 1926, discussed in *Het Vaderland*, 21 May 1926, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 26 September 1926 and *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 2 October 1926; Theun de Vries, *De vrouweneter*, Amsterdam 1976, discussed in *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 10 December 1976, *Leeuwarder Courant*, 31 December 1976, *Trouw*, 11 December 1976 and *Het Vrije Volk*, 15 January 1977.
- 29 *Het dagboek van Maria Bashkirtseff*, directed by Hermann Kosterlitz, 1936. First Dutch mention in *De Avondpost*, 30 March 1936, last mention in *de Volkskrant*, 7 July 1938.