

REVIEW ESSAY

Archipelago Toyen: New Work on the Czech Avant-Garde Artist

Huebner, Karla. *Magnetic Woman: Toyen and the Surrealist Erotic*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. Pp. 408.

Toyen: Snící rebelka/Toyen: The Dreaming Rebel. Curated by Anna Pravdová, Annie Le Brun, and Annabelle Görgen-Lammers. 9 Apr.–22 Aug. 2021, National Gallery Prague.

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Toyen (1902–80, born Marie Čermínová), a Czech avant-garde artist who spent most of her life and career in France, associated with a multitude of art groups that were dominated by the ideas of surrealism. She was a seeker and traveler who enjoyed collaboration with friends of any gender, nationality, or identity as a vehicle for her individual creativity. Toyen's fascinating and extensive body of work in a variety of media, ranging from painting to printing and design; her profound and lasting associations with more commonly known and often male artists, such as André Breton, Paul Éluard, or Benjamin Péret; as well as her charismatic, sexually ambivalent personality have increasingly become the focus of study. This no doubt has and will attract a growing number of sophisticated and high-quality research projects by scholars from different backgrounds working in a variety of languages. Two examples of such recent works are briefly examined in this review: Karla Huebner's monograph *Magnetic Woman: Toyen and the Surrealist Erotic* and the international exhibition *Toyen: The Dreaming Rebel* and its accompanying catalog.

Huebner's wide-ranging study claims to be in part an art book and in part a biography of the artist. Indeed, this is the impression the reader receives. The book is divided into seven sections, plus an introduction, conclusion, bibliographical essay, bibliography, and index. In the chapters, the author deals with the artist's formative influences in Prague, Paris, and elsewhere, as well as Toyen's visual language and her own mythology. Huebner compiles these topics into a critical reading of the Toyen "legend."¹ The author presents in detail the life of a female artist who made an impact in the male dominated avant-garde art world of Czechoslovakia and beyond.² The focus on surrealism and its imagination sheds more light on the interwar years, but the book covers the entire span of Toyen's career, which continued until the 1970s. It is abundantly illustrated with often hard-to-find images from the publications of the Czech avant-garde; it is written with great care and is a testament to the author's extensive transnational research. Huebner quite rightly claims that "Toyen's work ... can be only understood in its complex cultural context, which is both Czech and French, artistic and social," and accordingly she makes especially prominent the context of the Czech avant-garde to ensure the general reader's understanding of the artist's circumstances.³ While reading the book,

¹Karla Huebner, *Magnetic Woman: Toyen and the Surrealist Erotic* (Pittsburgh, 2020), xix.

²Ibid., 15.

³Ibid., xvii.

however, this emphasis at times left me feeling disconnected from Toyen and, paradoxically, from her need to stay connected and to create.

Of the range of surrealist interests, the erotic imagination and subjects enjoy a special interest in connection to Toyen's work, as suggested in Huebner's title. Other scholars also consider Toyen's concern with erotic imagination to be a fundamental theme of her work and regard her ambiguous sexuality as worth interpreting within the art-historical analysis of her oeuvre.⁴ Milena Bartlová has suggested using Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity in reference to Toyen.⁵ Ladislav Zikmund-Lender notes in his review of the current state of research on Toyen—with a special focus on the exhibit *The Dreaming Rebel*—that feminism and queer discourses and Toyen are inseparable.⁶ Huebner interprets the artist's interest in male fashion and cross-dressing "as a mutable signifier for Toyen."⁷ As part of the analysis of Toyen's formative environment that impacted her queer behavior, Huebner analyzes the state of Czech feminism and the conditions for female artists of the time. In the predominantly male environment, women seemed to be either supporters of men or they became members of a kind of isolated women's group. Huebner here draws a fascinating parallel between Toyen and Natalia Goncharova in terms of their status. It would be most interesting to expand upon this suggestion beyond the single line devoted to it in the book.⁸

The book is an exciting read about a fascinating artist and her life. Nevertheless, it is somewhat overburdened with a Czech avant-garde context that does not always feel well connected with the story of the artist, who is ultimately portrayed as alone and disconnected. It is therefore unsurprising, regardless of the in-depth context and thorough historical overview, that Huebner closes her book with the following vision of an artist working in her studio:

The artist at work in her studio, savoring the sensation of her paint-laden brush moving across the canvas of her fine-tipped pen or sharp pencil across the paper as she stroked and prodded these surfaces into yielding sexual yet mysterious images, then planting the surprising and slightly mocking kiss of a red collaged mouth upon the wet, sticky, receptive surface.⁹

It may not be a coincidence that we leave the artist in the conclusion of this thoroughly researched, academic book, which aims to introduce and contextualize Toyen for international audiences, at the very moment that may be related to what Karel Srp claimed to be the first significant mention of Toyen in the international press: Hans Richter's reference to her red lip prints that constitute the work *Un baiser par T.S.F., Chef d'oeuvre de Mademoiselle Toyen*.¹⁰ Toyen, with her characteristically straight yet full lips covered in red lipstick, planted a couple of prints on stationery of the avant-garde magazine *Disk*, mimicking the method used by artificialists and surrealists of imprinting palms on their works. The prints came out as two bold red ridges lined with a red flash like a couple of vulvas, a common theme and element in her works.

The exhibition *Toyen: The Dreaming Rebel* was curated by three experts from three different countries: Anna Pravdová (Czechia), Annabelle Gørgen-Lammers (Germany), and Annie Le Brun (France), who is counted among the closest friends of Toyen. Perhaps it is here that the main theme of the newest project examining Toyen begins—the accent on collaborations and friendships, which are analogized in the catalog essays as a group of islands, an archipelago.

⁴Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, "I am not your lesbo! K diskurzu o soukromí 'sníci rebelky,'" 14 June 2021, <https://artalk.cz/2021/06/14/i-am-not-your-lesbo-k-diskurzu-o-soukromi-snici-rebelky/>.

⁵Milena Bartlová, "Ten-Ta-Toyen: Obrazy toho, o čem se mlčí," in *Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury*, ed. Martin C. Putna (Prague, 2011), 355.

⁶Zikmund-Lender, "I am not your lesbo!"

⁷Huebner, *Magnetic Woman*, 12.

⁸Ibid., 36–37.

⁹Ibid., 288.

¹⁰Karel Srp, "Un Baiser par T.S.F." in *Toyen, sníci rebelka*, ed. Anna Pravdová, Annie Le Brun, and Annabelle Gørgen-Lammers (Prague, 2021), 32. Hans Richter, "Prag," *G*, no. 3 (1924), 28.

Like the book by Huebner, the exhibition and its catalog presents a new, extensive, multilingual study and a detailed chronicle of Toyen's life. It is a significant contribution to the ongoing and growing research into the artist, as well as to its international dimensions. Here, I review the exhibition in Prague, which will subsequently be set in two other institutions. In each it will differ in terms of the works displayed and the exhibition design.

The Prague exhibition was executed as a dark grid of small rooms. The walls and their composition had a machine-like quality, like a constellation of dark nets, alluding to a feeling of being inside a mechanical body or a cage. The acid green benches (the black and acid green color scheme taken from Toyen's work was also used in the catalog) and the compact scale of the rooms invited the visitor to enjoy an intimate experience of the works. Innocence and intimacy and the experience of these two qualities permeated the show as a detectable interpretative approach to the artist.

The exhibition's chronological layout provided the curators with an axis for dividing the show into stages with related works, granting viewers easy and intimate access to Toyen's life and travel, her searching and friendships. The rooms were abundantly illustrated with seemingly every photograph of Toyen ever taken, many of them shown here for the very first time. Following the timeline, the viewers move from the early stage of her career, when Toyen was associated with avant-garde group Devětsil, to her visit to Paris and her collaboration with Jindřich Štyrský (1899–1942) and the surrealists in the pre- and postwar periods. A separate room on the first floor contained the work she created during World War II; her erotic-themed work, book illustrations, and further fruits of collaborations with fellow artists were located on the second floor. The erotic work of the young Toyen was delicate and in many ways cute rather than shocking and vulgar. It comes as a surprise that this work was, according to Jean Jacques Lebel, censored by the “managers of the culture industry” until 1982, when it resurfaced in the work and curation of Le Brun.¹¹

Although Toyen is presented in the photographs on the walls in a variety of outfits and situations, Karla Huebner notes in her review of the exhibition that “[i]n recent years, Toyen has also become a figure of interest for the international trans community, due to the artist's gender-ambiguous self-styling.” It is therefore disappointing, Huebner concludes, that the gender aspect of Toyen's persona receives so little attention in this retrospective. Huebner's review is generally quite positive, but it notes among the exhibition's drawbacks its traditional approach to the curatorial concept and the lack of “friends' works” that would manifest the connections and collaborations emphasized in the catalog essays.¹² Huebner's work does this quite effectively, using illustrations of the works of other, related artists to contextualize Toyen's own work.¹³

The exhibition catalog contains five chapters, each of which includes several essays by experts, texts written about or to Toyen, unpublished letters, and other rare material. The work opens with an essay by Le Brun, “Toyen, an Absolute Deviation.”¹⁴ The publication has all the parameters of a scholarly book—as the trend goes these days—with footnotes, a selected bibliography, and the catalog of exhibited works.

Albeit using conservative curatorial methods, the project's ambition was to present Toyen as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century and accent the innovativeness of her work. Key topics identified by the authors and curators are revolt, eroticism, problems in depiction, evocations, analogy, and alchemy. The texts prominently argue for the importance of collaboration, friendship, associations, and camaraderie for Toyen and her work. Le Brun writes that, for Toyen, friendship was “the bastion of revolt.”¹⁵ Bertrand Schmitt notes the analogy of an archipelago, so important for Toyen overall, but in his text it stands as a metaphor for her friendship with the Parisian surrealist

¹¹Jean-Jacques Lebel, “Baronka přichází!,” in Pravdová et al., *Toyen, snící rebelka*, 251.

¹²Karla Huebner, “Toyen: *The Dreaming Rebel*: Exhibition Review,” 11 Aug. 2021, <https://craace.com/2021/08/11/toyen-the-dreaming-rebel-exhibition-review/>.

¹³For example, Adolf Hoffmeister's sketches appear throughout the book; Toyen's collaboration with Štyrský is examined in pp. 35–48 (Huebner, *Magnetic Woman*).

¹⁴Annie Le Brun, “Toyen, absolutní odchylka,” in Anna Pravdová et al., *Toyen, snící rebelka*, 12–16.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

group between 1947 and 1957.¹⁶ Görden-Lammers calls Toyen “a treasure seeker,” a title related to her favorite childhood book, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, and to her both figurative and literal fascination with the island, islands, and the archipelago.¹⁷ Another compelling topic is that of Toyen’s politics, explored in two essays: Barbora Bartůňková undertakes the interwar period and Bertrand Schmitt examines the postwar era.¹⁸ The oeuvre created by Toyen during World War II is highlighted in a separate room in the exhibition and is characterized by Fabrice Hergott in the catalog as a “unique depiction of the great upheaval of the last century.”¹⁹

In his review of the exhibition, Ladislav Zikmund-Lender calls for a clear identification and analysis of subversive themes in Toyen’s work. He believes in art historians’ potential to interpret her work with encoded nonnormative experiences and to proactively uncover new networks related to her queer socializing.²⁰ I echo his concerns and search for a balanced approach to artists and issues; yet what I find critically important and positive in both Huebner’s book and the Prague exhibition is the clarity of intent and method that is flagged by the scholars and meticulously articulated and evidenced in the writing. This applies to the issue of Toyen’s ambiguous sexuality and its significance, which, for the reasons stated by the authors, is greatly elaborated upon in the book, on the one hand, and is lacking in the catalog, on the other.

In 2009, Toyen’s work appeared in the show *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* at the Manchester Art Gallery, which started making waves among English speaking curators and audiences, who for the first time in the age of social media and the empowered internet engaged Toyen on her own terms. In her review of the exhibition, Kate Kelleway notes of Toyen:

The dreamy oddity of Toyen ... might charm a writer too. I enjoyed her pseudo-Victorian engraving (1930–40) in which a damsel in—or perhaps past—distress lies on a seashore with closed eyes, a peculiar stopwatch beside her, in a seascape dominated by three old-fashioned perambulators, two trundling on the horizon and one wheel-deep in the sea—time’s hooded chariots.²¹

This quote, with its shallow and superficial comments alone, illustrates how far the research and recognition of Toyen has progressed in just over a decade. Like Hilma af Klint in 2018, Toyen has become a firm part of the canon of internationally recognized artists who matter and who will be researched by an international body of scholars.

To conclude, both projects—the book and the exhibition/catalog—have succeeded in their ambitious goals. Although each looks at Toyen through different lenses, using different methods and approaches, the high-quality, intriguingly written scholarship is in the public domain to be engaged with and enjoyed by everyone. Hopefully, this will encourage the production of many more or less speculative, provocative, or conservative interpretations of this remarkable artist.

¹⁶Bertrand Schmitt, “Přátelství jako souostroví. Toyen a pařížská surrealistická skupina v letech 1947–1957,” in Pravidová et al., *Toyen, snící rebelka*, 229–48.

¹⁷Annabelle Görden-Lammers, “Setkání teorií, osobností a děl. Historické okolnosti sblížení se surrealismem,” in: Anna Pravidová et al (eds.), *Toyen, snící rebelka*, 110.

¹⁸See Barbora Bartůňková, “Toyen a strašidla obcházející meziválečnou Evropou,” in Pravidová et al., *Toyen, snící rebelka*, 155–58; and Bertrand Schmitt, “Úvodní rozchody. Toyen a politika po druhé světové válce,” in Pravidová et al., *Toyen, snící rebelka*, 221–25.

¹⁹Fabrice Hergott, “Toyen a válečná léta,” in Pravidová et al., *Toyen, snící rebelka*, 169–88.

²⁰Zikmund-Lender, “I am not your lesbo!”

²¹Kate Kelleway, “Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism,” *Observer Art*, 27 Sept. 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/sep/27/angels-anarchy-surrealism-women-artists>.