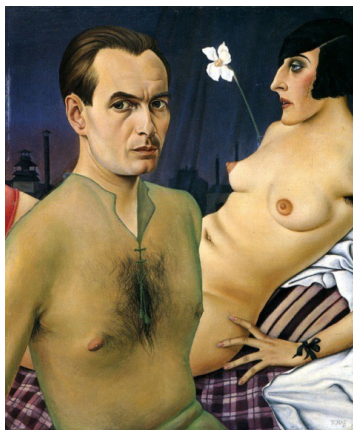


## The Woman in the Portrait

*Juliet Jacques*



Christian Schad

*Self-Portrait with Model (1927)*

Good evening ladies, gentlemen and everyone else, and welcome to the Tate Modern. The image you see is *Self-Portrait with Model* by German artist Christian Schad, known as ‘the painter with the scalpel’ for the cutting, forensic nature of his work, and it is on loan from a private collector. The son of a wealthy Bavarian lawyer, Schad was born in 1894 and fled to Switzerland in 1915 to avoid military service. There, he became involved with the Dadaists, attending their legendary Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, before moving to Italy and adopting the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) style that replaced Expressionism as Germany’s dominant Modernist form in the mid-1920s.

Painted in 1927, the *Self-Portrait* is Schad’s most famous work. It is noted for his suspicion and hostility, and the disconnection between him and his ‘model’, but her identity has long been a mystery. It is not his then-wife, Marcella Arcangeli, an Italian medical professor’s daughter who he married in 1923. Schad claimed that he saw her in a stationery shop in Vienna, where he lived from 1925 to 1927, but the remarkable find of two diaries from 1926 and 1927, by a ‘transvestite’ known only as

Heike, a hostess in Berlin's El Dorado nightclub who worked as a maid at Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexual Science, has radically changed perceptions of Schad's work.<sup>1</sup> They were recovered from an attic in Nice, near Hirschfeld's home after his exile from Germany. Along with Schad's letters to Dadaist friends, recently discovered by art scholars, they explain how Heike came to be the woman in the portrait, and provide a fascinating insight into gender-variant life in the Weimar Republic.

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On Friday 4 February 1927, Heike went to the El Dorado, a gay club in Berlin which had just moved to Schöneberg, opposite the Scala Variety Theatre. The following day, she wrote:

*At the El Dorado last night, with Dora and the girls.<sup>2</sup> I got my hair done like Asta Nielsen in Joyless Street, and I wore my long black dress with the beads that Marie got for my birthday. Conrad [Veidt] was there, getting drunk with Marlene [Dietrich] before her act.*

*I went on stage and introduced Marlene. A man at the front kept staring at me. I saw him go to the bar and buy some chips for a dance. As I stepped down, he grabbed my hands, told me he'd just moved to Berlin, took me to the bar and bought a bottle of absinthe. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen", he told me. "Listen," I said, "I'm the third sex."*

*"That might be Dr Hirschfeld's line," he yelled, "but you transcend sex!" He invited me to his studio in Vienna to model for him. I said I wanted to be in the movies but Conrad told me it could never happen. "Ignore that two-bit somnambulist! Once they see my portrait, no director could resist you! As far as the pictures are concerned – you are a woman!"*

*We danced. He kept staring into my eyes, smiling. I tried to kiss him.*

*"I'm married," he said. He gave me a card with his address, told me to write to him and then left. Dora asked what happened. "Nothing", I said.*

\*

After work on Friday 25 February, Heike arranged to meet Schad. She thought they would go for dinner and then to the theatre, with her diaries detailing her dreams of leaving her domestic service to become an actress, but Schad's note to Richard Huelsenbeck, posted earlier that week, suggests that he never intended to meet her in public.<sup>3</sup>

*Welt-Dada,*

*Went to El Dorado to find The Model – Heike. She – he – is Uranian – an invert – but thinks I'll make her the new Pola Negri – will take her to a hotel – see what transpires.*

\*

Heike's diary for Tuesday 1 March gives her side of their encounter in Berlin's Hotel Adlon.

*I got to the Adlon at 5pm. From Morning to Midnight by Georg Kaiser was on at the Neues Schauspielhaus, and I asked if we could go. "I need the time to paint you," said Christian. I saw that his easel was already set up. He drew the curtains. "Take off your clothes and lie on the bed", he told me. "Would anyone cast me if I was famous for being naked?" I asked.*

*"How do you think Garbo got on Joyless Street?" he replied, laughing. "Take off your clothes and lie down." He glared at me as I removed my hat. He stared at my hairline, then caught my eyes. I turned around and took off my blouse, and then my shoes and skirt, and started to*

*pull down my stockings. "Keep them on", he said. I turned back to him. "Just the stockings." I took off my bra and the inserts, and he just stared at me as I put them on the floor. Then I removed my drawers and lay on the bed.*

*He looked at my penis. I thought he was going to be one of those men who vomit, but he just stood there, breathing heavily. "I thought you said we transcend sex." Silence. "The Doctor says we're more beautiful than other women, because we have to-" He threw me onto the bed. "Enough about Hirschfeld!" He kissed me. I thought he was going to kill me, he was so coarse and so rough – he just wouldn't stop. Finally, he got tired.*

*"I know what you're thinking," he said, looking at my sex again. "I can't."*

*"Why not?"*

*"They'll send me to prison!" He looked into my eyes. "I'm not an invert!"*

*"No, you're not," I said. "I'm a woman, and as soon as Dr Abraham gets there with Dora, I'll be complete." <sup>4</sup> He laughed. "You're all the same, aren't you? Hirschfeld, Abraham – you just let them own you!" I stroked his hand. "Are you jealous of them?" I said. He turned me over and screwed me harder than I'd ever been screwed. I screamed. "Be quiet," he whispered, "someone might hear." Then he stopped and shoved my face into the pillow. I sat up and looked at him. He slapped me hard on the cheek. He sat with his back to me.*

*"My wife ... my son ..."*

*I stared at the wall.*

*"I'm sorry," he said.*

*"I'll talk to Conrad and Marlene", I replied. "They'll introduce me to Pabst and Lang. I'll start with bit parts but they'll see, and once they*

*do, I'll pay for your art, I'll-*

*"Shut up, you idiot!" he said. "They might make films about freaks but they don't cast them!"*

*"I thought you liked freaks," I said, reminding him that Marie had seen him at the Onkel Pelle.<sup>5</sup>*

*"Not when they seduce me!" he yelled. He stood over me. "Should I leave?" I asked. He nodded. "I'll go," I said, "just don't hit me again." He didn't move. "I'll put on my clothes, just let me out!"*

*Silence.*

*"What about the portrait?" I asked.*

*"I can do it from memory," he said.*

*He went and stood by the window. I got dressed and went to the door. "Goodbye, then." He looked at me and then turned back. I heard him open the curtains as I left.*

\*

Soon after, Schad painted his Self-Portrait. It was premiered in a group exhibition of *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists at the Neues Haus des Vereins Berliner Künstler, although we know that Heike was not invited. Schad sent her a letter, dated Monday 3 October 1927, quoted in Heike's diary two days later.

*Heike,*

*The exhibition opened at the Neues Haus tonight – sorry you weren't there, and about the Adlon, but nobody can know that you were the woman in the portrait – I hope you understand. Marcella and I are finished – perhaps I will see you at the El Dorado.*

*Christian.*

\*

The *Self-Portrait* immediately caught the attention of critics, who cited it as one of Schad's most arresting works. In one of his first pieces for influential politics and arts periodical *Die Weltbühne*, journalist and psychologist Rudolf Arnheim drew a comparison with another of Schad's works, which has assumed a new dimension since the discovery of Heike's diaries.

*The Self-Portrait with Model is outstanding, with Christian Schad including himself amongst the dilettantes, bohemians, degenerates and freaks who populate his world. With the decadent city as a backdrop, Schad is in the foreground, wearing just a transparent shirt which serves only to highlight his nakedness. The artist stares at the viewer, as if he has personally intruded on Schad's clandestine moment of intimacy, his face filled with revulsion, heightened by the narcissus that points towards him, coming from the near-naked woman behind him. He blocks her midriff, perhaps protecting her modesty, or maybe hiding something from the intruder. Unwomanly despite her round breasts, she wears nothing but a black ribbon around her wrist and a red stocking, looking away from the artist, stunned if not scared. They both look alone: there are just a few inches, yet the distance is huge, and it is impossible not to wonder if Schad's self-disgust and the scar on her cheek are connected.*

*The 'model' is unnamed, but she bears a striking resemblance to the transvestite in Count St. Genois d'Anneaucourt, which depicts an aristocrat caught between his public image and his desires, and between virtue and vice. The Count stands in the centre, ambivalent, seemingly hoping that the viewer will help solve his dilemma: the demure, respectable woman to his right, or the tall invert to his left, his cheeks plastered in rouge, his huge frame barely covered by the transparent red dress that exposes his backside? Either way, the transvestite's*

*resemblance to the 'woman' in the Self-Portrait is noticeable, although Schad claims that the model was chosen through a chance encounter in Vienna.*

\*

Heike saw the *Self-Portrait* later that week, recording her thoughts in the final entry of the recovered diaries.

*Went to the Neues Haus to see Christian's exhibition. I was alone – none of the girls could make it – and as soon as I got there, a group of society women stared at me, and then went back to the paintings. Of course they were fawning over the one of the dandy who wants to have sex with the hostess from the El Dorado but can't because it's not respectable. "So brave!" they kept saying. "So bold!"*

*I decided to find the picture of me, even though Dora told me not to. I should have listened to her. I'd tried not to expect anything, but hoped he might have tried to bring out something of me – something to show Marlene or Conrad, or even the girls – but then I saw the Self-Portrait with Model.*

*I stared at it. Some woman glanced at me like I was dirt, looked back at the painting and then walked away. He'd made a very good likeness of himself, but he'd brought my hairline down and changed the style, made my nose bigger and given me breasts. He knew how much I wish mine were like that! Of course, they were there because he doesn't want anyone to find out how much he likes the third sex, and in the picture, he was blocking me from the waist down. He remembered my stocking though – he was so desperate for me to keep it on – and he added a flower. The gallery attendant said "It's a narcissus, it represents vanity." Then I noticed the scar on my cheek – the attendant just shook his head when I asked what it meant. A man said they were common in southern Italy – jealous husbands put them on their wives.*

*I could feel the tears coming. I ran back to the Institute and wept, and told Dora that I never want to see Christian or his painting again.*

\*

In summer 1932, Schad had another encounter with Heike – almost certainly his last. We know this from another letter to Huelsenbeck, dated Sunday 7 August.

*Welt-Dada,*

*I promised myself I'd never go again, but last night I found myself in the El Dorado. It's been five years, but I'd only been there ten minutes when who comes on stage but Heike, from my Portrait. She wore this glittering red dress, almost transparent, and I felt scared. As she got down, I called her. She recognised me and tried to run to the bar. I grabbed her wrist.*

*"I won't hurt you."*

*She looked at me, trembling. A couple of the inverts came over. "I'm fine," she said, and sat with me. I thought about when you said that being with her would be the perfect Dada gesture because she was so spectacularly ugly in the Portrait, but I was stunned at how good she looked – just like when I first met her.*

*"You look incredible," I told her. She thanked me. "I can't believe that Marlene is in Hollywood and you're still here."*

*"You were right," she said, "they don't cast freaks."*

*Silence.*

*"Did Dr Hirschfeld ..."*



*"Dr Abraham got there with Dora," she said. "I'm fourth in line. Next year, they hope, if things calm down."*

*"Which things?"*

*"Adolf Hitler says that Dr Hirschfeld is the most dangerous man in Germany," she told me, "and if he gets in ..."*

*"My career is finished," I said.*

*"Your career and my life!" she shouted. "The club, the surgery, the Institute, everything!" Silence. "I might die on the operating table, anyway, like Lili."<sup>6</sup> She took a draw on a cigarette. "That might not be so bad."*

*"You don't need surgery," I said, "you're beautiful as it is."*

*"If that's so, why did you cover me?" she asked. "It wasn't a mistake – I could tell from that scar you put on my face."*

*"I was breaking up with Marcella," I told her. "I didn't want to hurt her any more by letting her know I'd been with you."*

*"The Count's shameful secret," she said. "Your shameful secret."*

*"She's dead," I said. "Drowned. There's no need to stay here. Come away with me."*

*"Where can I go?"*

*She started crying. I held her hand and I was sorry. She went back to her friends. I doubt I'll ever see her again. Will paint to work out how I feel about this. Let's talk soon.*

*Christian.*

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In October 1932, Franz von Papen, the right-wing Chancellor of the Republic, banned same-sex couples from dancing together in public, effectively killing the clubs in which Heike worked. The Nazis came to power three months later, and as well as stepping up the attacks on Germany's

LGBT population, they resolved to destroy its Modernist culture.

Perhaps surprisingly, Schad was not targeted, and unlike many of his Dadaist associates and Neue Sachlichkeit contemporaries whose works featured in the notorious Degenerate Art exhibition, he stayed in Berlin, being allowed to submit to the Great German Exhibition of 1934. He remarried in 1947, five years after meeting the young actress Bettina Mittelstadt. In 1943, his studio was destroyed in a bombing raid, and when he resumed painting in the 1950s, his style had become kitsch. He died in Stuttgart in 1982, aged 87.

After Schad's letter, we know no more about Heike. The Nazis raided Hirschfeld's Institute on 6 May 1933, seizing its records and burning its library before repurposing the building and making the El Dorado into the SA's headquarters. Dora Richter had already tried to flee Germany but failed, and was never seen again after the attack. We can only assume that Heike disappeared with her.

## Notes

1) Hirschfeld popularised the term in his ground-breaking book *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1910). Despite his title, 'transvestite' did not exclusively refer to people who found sexual fulfilment in wearing the clothes of the opposite sex, being closer to the modern 'transgender' or 'trans'.

2) Dora Richter, who was castrated in 1922 by Dr Erwin Gohrbandt before undergoing the first ever sex reassignment surgery in 1931. She tried to remove her male genitalia aged six; as an adult, she worked as a waiter in the summer and lived as a woman off-season, for which she was repeatedly arrested and sent to a men's prison. Hirschfeld got permission for her to wear women's clothes and employed her at the Institute as a domestic servant and demonstration patient. 'The girls' most likely refers to the other maids at the Institute.

3) Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974) – Dadaist poet and co-founder of the Cabaret Voltaire. 'Welt-Dada' was his nickname within the post-war Berlin group, and translates as 'World-Dada'.

4) Dr Felix Abraham (1901-c.1938) performed the world's first sex reassignment surgery on Dora Richter in 1931. This was documented in his book, *Genital Reassignment of Two Male Transvestites*, published later that year.

5) A fairground in the Wedding area of Berlin, frequented by Schad. His painting *Agosta the Winged-Man and Rasha the Black Dove* (1929) featured two performers from its sideshows.

6) Lili Elbe (1882-1931) – Danish artist, intersex person and one of the first recipients of sex reassignment surgery. In 1931, Dr Erwin Gohrbandt performed a castration and penectomy on Elbe, who then had an operation to transplant ovaries from a 26-year old woman. These were removed in two further surgeries due to serious complications. She died of transplant rejection after an attempt to insert a uterus into her body.