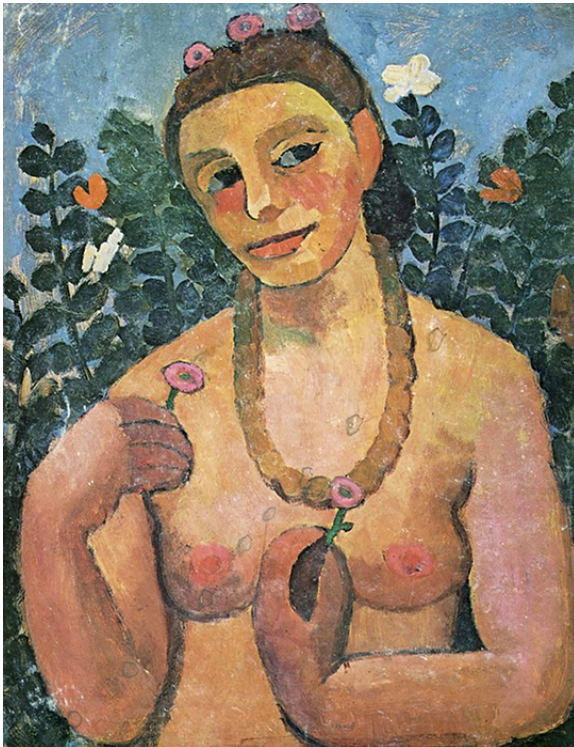


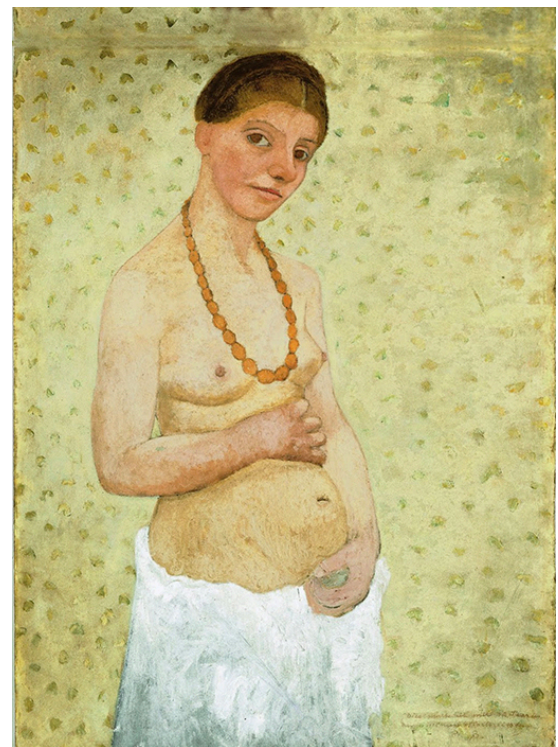
**Paula Modersohn Becker (1876-1907)**

**Self Portraits (1906): *Self-Portrait Nude with Amber Necklace*, and *Self-portrait on the Sixth Wedding Anniversary 25<sup>th</sup> May***

- **Nationality:** German
- **Location:** Museen Böttcherstraße, Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen
- **Scope of work for Pearson A Level:** Art & Identity



Oil on cardboard, 62.2 x 48.2 cm



Oil and tempera on cardboard 101.8 x 70.2 cm

## ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Subject Matter:** Both paintings radically combine the traditional genre of the self-portrait, with the female nude subject. They are recognisable self-portraits with Modersohn-Becker's distinctive features and large eyes staring confidently at the viewer, in both she stands and wears a favourite necklace. *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* (A) is frontal half-length unclothed, while *Self-Portrait on the Sixth Wedding Anniversary 25<sup>th</sup> May* (B) at the age of 30, is three-quarter length and three-quarter view clothed from the hips down. The paintings represent a woman's perspective on the relationship between her own female body, fertility, and developments in the representation of women as modernism emerged. Her multiple self-portraits reflect Modersohn-Becker's ambiguous attitude to motherhood. Painted a few months before she became pregnant with her only child, (B) is a symbolic representation of pregnancy, and what it means to Becker to fantasise about being a mother. It is not a commemorative image. These paintings are thought to be the first modern naked self-portraits in oil of a woman, additionally, these paintings are also the first modern pregnant self-portraits - a further dimension to the power of Becker's paintings.

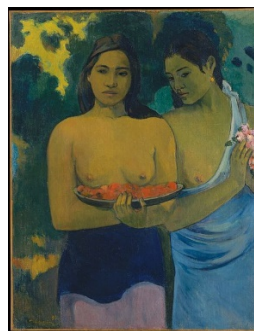
Parker and Pollock wrote that in (A): '*she ties together two threads...the identity of the artist represented by the self-portrait and the signification of woman represented by the*

*female nude. She exposes the contradictions facing women when they attempt to represent themselves in art and as artists.*'<sup>1</sup> She places herself against a screen of plants, holding and wearing flowers - associated with femininity - connecting with the convention of painting the female nude in European art and the association of women and nature, yet exploring it afresh. Chadwick described it as '*archetypal imagery of female abundance*'.<sup>2</sup> The butterflies in the background symbolise change whilst the flowers on the crown of her head suggest a halo effect or a 'Flora-reminiscent, Spring-like crown' suggesting she 'respects nature above all and believes in the cycles that it creates'.<sup>3</sup>

This is suggestive of a female understanding of her own body as a natural state, and its connections to nature itself, yet her favourite amber necklace as a foil to her natural body suggests culture and adornment. She does not depict herself as an artist. In (B) which was painted earlier, she locates herself in a domestic interior. She rarely signed or dated her work, but this is inscribed '*I painted this at age 30 on my sixth wedding day P.B.*' - in other words she did not include her married initial, but painted the portrait as though pregnant at the moment she rejected the identity of wife and mother in her life.

### Visual Analysis:

The figure in (A) is positioned in the centre of the canvas, covering most of the pictorial plane with her body. Nude from the waist up, she denies the viewer complete range over her body whilst her full-frontal position is confrontational, emphasised by the monumental size of her body. This suggests an assertive female physicality that is inescapable to the viewer's eye. The closed composition and close viewpoint of painting (A), based on a photograph in the studio, shows how Becker carefully posed the awkward gesture of her arms. The artificial nature of the reference photograph is juxtaposed with the final painting composition. It reveals a tension in her personal negotiation of painting tradition through a point of difference from masculinised tradition through a simultaneous adherence and disavowal of the use of live models in portraiture. By creating an image of herself, she creates an indirect relationship with her own body that allows her to partake in the masculinist tradition of looking at the body in order to evaluate her own gaze. She negotiates and reconstructs the tradition of the pose through self-referential direction and rebellion against traditional feminine positioning of the female form. She has simplified and flattened her form by making it more frontal and solid with paw-like hands. Details such as her ear become flat shapes rather than decorative details, and the flower in her hand mirrors her nipples. Stronger shadows sculpt the form and flatten her nose but her hypnotic stare and slightly mysterious smile remain.



Albrecht Durer *Self Portrait at the age of 28* 1500 oil on panel 67.1 cm × 48.9 cm Alte Pinakothek, Munich  
 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Photo study for Nude with Amber Necklace*, 1906, photograph, Bremen.  
 Paul Gauguin, *Two Tahitian Women*, 1899, oil on canvas 94 x 72 cm Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

<sup>1</sup> Parker, Rozsika & Pollock, Griselda *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* 1981 London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd p.121

<sup>2</sup> Chadwick, Whitney *Women, Art and Society* 1990 London: Thames & Hudson p. 272

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/modersohn-becker-paula/>



It has been suggested by Linda Nochlin that the distinctive hand gesture (distantly related to a modest *Venus pudica*) in fact references German artist 'Albrecht Dürer's self-aggrandizing gesture'<sup>4</sup> as a way of suggesting 'her profession' and in fact her national and ethnic heritage. The viewer's eye is thus drawn away from her body and towards the gaze of the artist herself. This suggests the power of Becker's self-expression, and her own gaze as both woman and artist. The strong highlights, clear outlines and colourful background all suggest the influence of the Nabis and Gauguin's style (whose work she had seen in Paris), but with greater monumentality and without his eroticism. The rounded shapes of her body echo that of the rounded leaves behind her. The repetition of curves associates the body biologically and physically with nature. The dark green of nature contrasted with the soft, varying hues of pink flesh. Instead of letting the figure fuse into the background in line with the archetype of the earthmother, she re-configures her anatomical and metaphorical relationship to nature.

Her amber necklace adorns her neck in both paintings, in juxtaposition with the natural nakedness of each composition. The warmth of the tone of paint draws in the spectator's eye. Amber is suggestive of the power of a fossil, which holds once living things, it was believed amber possessed the essence of life itself. By placing amber in a position of such prominence in her works, it has been suggested that Becker elevates herself to goddess status, and through her imaginary pregnancy grants herself a certain power that is absent in female nudes painted by male artists. On the other hand, it might be argued that her corporeality, in size, composition and surface texture, expels traditional associations of the Eternal Feminine. As with so many women artists she used herself as a vehicle for technical and stylistic experimentation to create a style that does not conform to mainstream movements.



Piero della Francesca *Madonna del Parto* 1460 fresco.

Marcus Gheeraerts II, *Portrait of a Woman in Red*, 1620 Tate Britain

In (B) the observational elements of working from a mirror become clear. Despite the simplified outline and archetypal protective gesture cradling and outlining her belly she has noted the tanned areas of her face and right arm - the result of exposure to the harsh winds painting outside in Worpswede. The form of her body suggests longing for a future child, but the direct outward gaze implies consideration of the implications. There are strong shadows defining her body yet the light casts no shadow against the pattern of the wallpaper which compliments the paler flesh tones of her left arm. Art historians have associated her work with both the proto-Cubism of Picasso's primitivist work, and considered her to be an independent German Expressionist, but her paintings do not all conform to a particular style. She experimented with different styles that she had encountered in both

<sup>4</sup> Nochlin, Linda 'Women Artist Then and Now: Painting, Sculpture, and the Image of Self' 2007 in *Women Artists The Linda Nochlin Reader* 2015 p. 346

Worpswede and in Paris. She negotiated her position as a part of the avant-garde whilst simultaneously existing as different to the avant-garde, as a woman.

## CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS



Paula Becker was born in Dresden in 1876 into a comfortable middle-class German family and moved to Bremen in 1888. In 1896 she attended the Berlin school for women artists where she studied the female nude. From 1897 she visited and then lived in the Worpswede artistic colony in northern Germany which rejected academic traditions and industrial city life in favour of returning to a simple life in a rural environment. There she studied with figure painter Fritz Makensen but aspired to travel and work in Paris.

She first visited Paris in 1901 when she met Rodin and Emil Nolde and saw the work of Cezanne. The lack of financial independence available for women at this time made it difficult for her to stay there. She married Otto Modersohn, a widower with a daughter, in 1901, but found both married and rural life difficult: *'It is my experience that marriage does not make one happier. It destroys the illusion that has been the essence of one's previous existence, that there existed something like a soulmate.'*<sup>5</sup> The fast-evolving artistic scene in Paris contrasted drastically with the slower, more traditional painting in Worpswede, which often focused on North German landscape and peasantry. Her diaries reveal she had read Nietzsche, which had given her a *'sense of superiority...in her personal determination to continue painting'*<sup>6</sup> and became friends with Clara Westhoff and her partner the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

In 1902 she visited Paris again and sketched Egyptian Coptic mummy portraits in the Louvre, and in 1903 when she became interested in the Syntheticism of Gauguin and Bernard at Pont Avon and work of van Gogh. On her 1906 visit (after leaving Otto) she saw Gauguin's retrospective at the Salon d'Automne and it is possible she saw the work of Picasso and Matisse. On 8<sup>th</sup> May 1906 she wrote to her mother about her new identity as an independent artist *'Now I am beginning a new life. Don't interfere, just let me be. It's so beautiful. This last week I've been living in ecstasy. I feel I've accomplished something good.'* Unlike her contemporary Käthe Kollwitz her painting did not directly address social or political issues.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Both images were painted in her Paris studio rather than in rural Worpswede, (B) in May 1906 and (A) in August 1906. Both were painted on cardboard, a cheaper option than wood or canvas, as she struggled to make a living. Using oneself as a model was also common for women artists for the same reason. The rough application of paint, emphasised by the thick impasto drawn across the canvas in short, fast movements, suggests a sense rapid production of the image - as evidenced in the cracks on the surface and visible ground, as opposed to the planned composition of the reference photograph for (A). She painted the image looking at herself in the mirror with thick broad brushstrokes which flatten her face and make the viewer conscious of paint and surface. This creates a physical tension in the composition as well as presenting a modernised, metaphorical subversion of the Earth-Mother archetype. Such application of paint has been described as 'primitive' and links to her interest in 'volk art' as well as French Post-Impressionist work and early Expressionist

<sup>5</sup> Perry, Gill *Paula Modersohn-Becker* 1979 London: The Women's Press p.26

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.8

application seen in the Fauves. Unlike her Worpswede works she does not scratch into the surface of the paint.

## WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

For many years Paula Modersohn-Becker's work was largely unknown outside of Bremen, except by those who read her diaries. Her close friend, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, published 'Requiem for a Friend' in 1909<sup>7</sup> but wrote it after her early death only a few days after giving birth to her child Mathilde. The exaggeration of gendered language in Sophie Gallwitz's 1917 publication on Becker greatly influenced the discourse towards her womanly-maternal qualities, so she was positioned within a critical genre of woman's art, aligning her within a feminine creativity as a 'primitive' artist, rather than as a pioneer of modernist painting. Even in 1990 Chadwick placed her work *'within conventions that work to universalise the female nude as a transcendent image'*<sup>8</sup>. It was Peter Selz's first comprehensive study - *German Expressionist Painting* of 1957 - that acknowledged her stylistic role, noting she was *'considerably in advance, chronologically speaking, of the insipient expressionism in her native city of Dresden... Her steady simplification of form and search for the essence of matter created a style close to that of expressionism. Often she is considered one of the significant precursors of the expressionist movement... was the first German painter to evolve a new, vital style under the inspiration of Cezanne and Gauguin.'*<sup>9</sup>

Second Wave Feminism offered a new approach and in 1979 art historian Gill Perry had noted *'Paula's own ambiguous attitude to motherhood'*<sup>10</sup>. By 1996 Rosemary Betterton pointed out that in (A) Becker *'was employing one of the few tropes available to a woman of her class at a time when the representation of female sexuality was problematic for a bourgeois woman artist. We may see her work ... as a strategy with which to address the absence of a visual language of the body available to women artists in the 1900s ... it was the product of a profound cultural rupture between the role of the artist and the role of the mother in the period ... the self both as artist and as woman.'* Writing of (B) she suggests *'Becker is not representing motherhood as a natural state but as a metaphor ... Becker confronts her own image as pregnant Other - that which she both desires and has refused - in order to maintain her separate identity as an 'artist'.*

By 2013 art historian Diane Radycki has returned to a biographical reading as she suggested that *'there's no way to understand what she's doing, given the language of art history at the time. The two dealers who present her, when they exhibit that first nude self-portrait, it was without a title. There was no way to say "Nude Self-Portrait."'*

The Modersohn Becker Museum in Bremen was founded in 1927 and was the first one dedicated to the work of an individual woman; in 1988 it was nationalised.

## FURTHER READING

Betterton, Rosemary, 'Mother figures: the maternal nude in the work of Kathe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn Becker', in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, (London: Routledge, 1996) pp.159-180

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.paratheatrical.com/requiemtext.html> for text of poem in English

<sup>8</sup> Chadwick, Whitney *Women, Art and Society* 1990 p. 289

<sup>9</sup> Selz, Peter *German Expressionist Painting* 1957 University of California Press p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Perry 1979 p.59



Colapinto, John, 'Paula Modersohn-Becker: Modern Painting's Missing Piece' <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/paula-modersohn-becker-modern-paintings-missing-piece>

Perry, Gill *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work* (London: The Women's Press, 1979)

Radycki, Diane, *Paula Modersohn Becker: The First Modern Woman Artist*, (London: Yale University Press, 2013)

Reder, Hilary, 'Paula Modersohn Becker' <https://www.moma.org/artists/4037>

<https://www.museen-boettcherstrasse.de/english>

<https://smarthistory.org/paula-modersohn-becker-self-portrait-nude-amber-necklace/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/paula-modersohn-becker-modern-paintings-missing-piece>

<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/modersohn-becker-paula/>

## RELATED WORKS



Modersohn-Becker *Reclining Mother and Child II* 1906; Käthe Kollwitz *Woman with Dead Child* 1903; Jacob Epstein *Genesis* 1929-31 marble H 162.5 x W 83.8 x D 78.7 cm