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**Marie Laurencin**

an exhibition organized by Jelena Kristic  
5 March – 23 May 2020

exhibition guide with annotations by Jelena Kristic

Gallery 1:



**Autoportrait (Self-Portrait), 1908** is one of Marie Laurencin's earliest paintings. The brown tones, and flattened, intentionally naïve stylization recall Rousseau, but also the graphic language used by prints or book illustration and the mask-like faces of 16th century portraits of queens and royal mistresses. Laurencin writes of her childhood history lessons, by way of explaining her painting practice, "I discovered the queens and heroines of French history. They were the only ones that interested me and I looked for their portraits. Their little name followed by the great name of their country sounded exquisite to me. I called this the music of queens." *Le Carnet des nuits*, Brussels, Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Belgique (1942), p. 49.



The 1908 self-portrait is followed by a row of Laurencin's earliest works, starting with her first print, **Chanson de Bilitis (Song of Bilitis), 1904**, titled after Pierre Louys' 1894 erotic text infamous for its portrayal of Sapphic love. Following is **Portrait de femme (Portrait of a Woman), 1905**, a portrait of her mother, Pauline Laurencin, and three self-portraits. Pauline Laurencin worked as an embroiderer and had Laurencin after an affair with a married Parisian government official. Laurencin lived with her mother until her mother's death in 1913.



“Portrait de femme (Portrait of a Woman)”, 1905

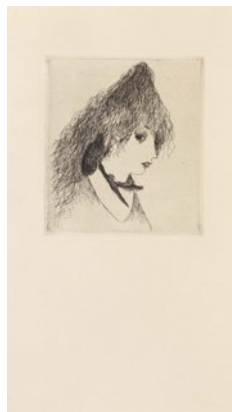
I remember reading [Baudelaire’s] “Flowers of Evil” for the first time at twenty, the book belonged to my mother, I understood nothing, especially nothing of the condemned women and Lesbos, but all the same I was amazed and it left me dreaming, I opened all the doors of the apartment and one day I wrote my first poems which, naturally, I read to my mother and which made no sense. As everything is strangely connected, fateful, I cannot think of Baudelaire without remembering my mother giving me the tales of Edgar Poe to read when I was fifteen and as a child she read “[A Descent into the] Maelstrom” to me aloud and dictated it to me on Sundays.

– Marie Laurencin, *Le Carnet des nuits*, Geneva, Pierre Cailler (1956), p. 12

The round format of these early portraits recalls historical portrait miniatures and Laurencin’s initial training as a porcelain painter. Laurencin would use the round format in future decorative arts collaborations and commissions.



Across the row of early self-portraits is a series of ten **prints from 1921 that Laurencin made for Eventail (The Fan)** (Vitrine I), a collection of poems and texts written by ten poets and writers in homage to her and her return to Paris after World War I. In 1914, Laurencin married a German nobleman and artist, Baron Otto van Waetjen, and was forced to live in Spain during the war and later in Germany, during which time the marriage deteriorated. In 1921, she was able to return to Paris and obtain a divorce without needing to claim alimony because of the money received from a number of sales of her work, brokered by Paul Rosenberg, to John Quinn, a major modern art collector in New York. A different print illustrated each author's text on Laurencin ("The Abbess," "The Nymph," "The Ambiguous Pallas Athena"...), a self-portrait of each of her alter egos.



"Olga", 1921, an illustration for Max Jacob's text in "Eventail"

The vitrine underneath displays first edition copies of Eventail, early reviews and publications on Laurencin's art, and two publications authored by "**Louise Lalanne**", another alter ego of Laurencin and her boyfriend at the time, Guillaume Apollinaire. "Louise Lalanne" submitted texts and poems for Montfort's critical journal "Les Marges" in 1909 (which was later compiled in "**Apollinaire travesti**", or "**Apollinaire the Transvestite**", in 1948, see Vitrine I), and three poems to be set to music by Georges Poulenc (Vitrine I), who composed "Les Biches," a one-act ballet for which he commissioned Laurencin to design the costumes and sets (see Vitrine II).





Laurencin's romantic and artistic collaboration with Apollinaire took place roughly from 1908 to 1912.

**Le Pont de Passy (The Passy Bridge)**, 1912, has been interpreted as portraying her romantic break with Apollinaire (who himself wrote a breakup poem, "Le Pont Mirabeau," published in 1912).



"Le Pont de Passy (The Passy Bridge)", 1912

But it can also be seen as an early legend of motifs Laurencin would repeatedly use throughout her practice: the boat and bridge as enclosing and framing devices, here separating the man from the beasts and herself in the Seine, her hand producing a fan, the 19th century feminine accessory most notably used by the Nabis and Impressionists.

The outdoor mise-en-scene of **Le Pont de Passy** is followed by the built domestic setting of **La Maison meublée**, a large painting she made the same year.



"La Maison meublée", 1912

“Maison meublée” was a term used to describe both a furnished apartment for rent and a brothel. Laurencin identifies the moment she saw these brothels from the tram as an impetus to start painting:

Confidentially speaking, I sneaked out on July 14 to the bals populaires [19th century popular dances held outdoors] and I believe the idea of painting came to me on the horse-drawn tram. ‘Auteuil-Saint-Sulpice.’ One passed very close to the houses, the maison meublées presenting through their windows undressed women and men in the shadow playing the banjo....a life so far from mine that I never tired of looking at it lovingly, climbing up the tram.

– Le Carnet des nuits (1942), p. 53

The woman on the left balcony resembles Laurencin and the half-clothed woman on the right faces a man in a harlequin suit smoking a pipe, widely understood to represent Pablo Picasso. Laurencin coopts the brothel – a space traditionally portrayed by the male flâneur Impressionist – and encloses it and herself in gray walls, pink curtains, and scrawled writing. **La Maison meublée** can be seen as a pointed response to the modernist painting canon developed and maintained by Picasso (*Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907), *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912)).



“La Femme-cheval,” 1918

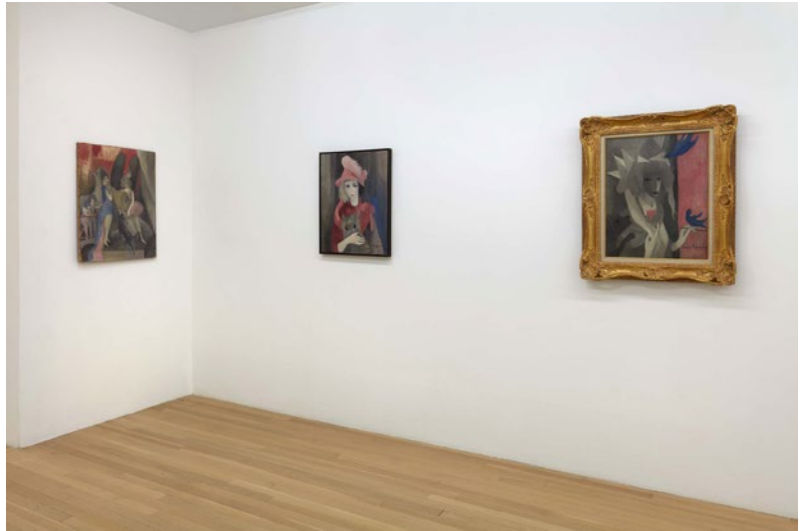


“Woman with a Dog (portrait),” 1924

Mirrored across **La Maison meublée** are two portraits. **La Femme-cheval (The Woman-Horse)**, 1918, a self-portrait of the female artist, is rendered in gray and pink, an idiosyncratic color palette Laurencin primarily used while she was living in exile during World War I. The “horse” is insinuated by the title, not made visible, suggesting both centaur-like legs below the bottom of the canvas and a transformative transcription of the term “woman painter.” **La Femme-cheval** participates in Laurencin’s recurrent depiction of the *amazone*, the well-dressed 19th century horsewoman named after the ancient tribe of female warriors that invented the cavalry. “The Amazon” was also the nickname of Natalie Barney, a close friend who lived openly as lesbian and garnered fame for her literary salons and writing. **La Femme-cheval** is juxtaposed with **Woman with a Dog (portrait)**, 1924, a more staid, likely commissioned, portrait which activates the sitter in a similarly ambiguous way, by an uncertain gesture, by portraying her hand over the dog’s mouth, either holding or muzzling. “She makes money painting portraits, but says that from now on she wants to paint only the gullible, that is, her special favorites, the people idiotic enough to discover resemblance where there isn’t any.” (René Gimpel, *Diary of an Art Dealer*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1966), p. 243).

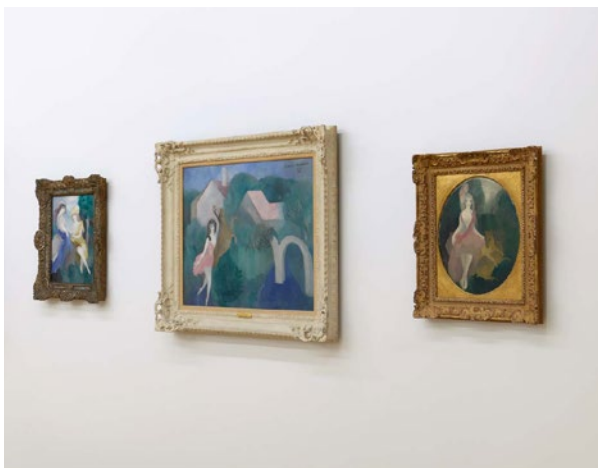


"The Circus", 1920



**The Circus, 1920**, is the last painting of the first gallery and hung next to the doorway, for it can be seen as a passageway, linking Laurencin's early interest in staging and the woman-beast (the tableaux vivant of *Chanson de Bilitis*, the performative self-portrait, the theatrical framing of *La Maison meublée* and *Le Pont de Passy*) to the work of the 1920s which builds upon these themes in a more stylized manner.

## Gallery 2:



This grouping highlights Laurencin's use of theater tropes (undifferentiated architectures and artificial wilderness of set design, curtains, themes from "*Les Biches*") and the work of Kate Greenaway and Katherine Mansfield as framing devices in her work of the 1920s, which occurred simultaneous to her commissioned society portraits and work in costume and set design.





“Fête champêtre”, 1928

Laurencin takes the *fête champêtre*, an 18th century aristocratic leisure activity and painting genre mostly famously explored by Watteau, and transforms it into a garden party of youth rooted in popular 19th century Kate Greenaway children’s book illustrations (see Vitrine III) and “The Garden Party,” a 1922 short story by Katherine Mansfield (see Vitrine II).



One of Laurencin’s illustrations for Katherine Mansfield, “The Garden Party and Other Stories” (1939) (Vitrine II)

A pink curtain of the right reveals a bridge in the distance and a dollhouse of a castle, with young girls and children dancing in the round while others play with each other and animals. If traditional *fête champêtre* painting embraced the theatrical elements of its construction, with its noble participants dressed in masquerade ball attire amongst characters of the *commedia dell’arte*, Laurencin emphasizes the staged elements of children’s stories and the Victorian cult of the child – a complex mixture of purity-worship, educational reform, nostalgia for a pre-Industrial age, and eroticization, especially of the young girl as the ideal romantic partner. The ethereal washes of bright colors and the mannered stylization of figures echoes the carefully constructed sentimental language of both Mansfield’s and Laurencin’s writing.



“The teacher spoke of water to the children and made them love it. So they did not forget to demand from their narrator that part of the castle was reflected on a small, clear lake and also a balcony window where two small brunette girls presented themselves, one in red and the other in blue.”

– from “The Spring of Little Girls” in *Le Carnet des nuits* (1942), p. 11-12

“And after all, the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer...As for the roses, you could not help feeling they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people at garden parties; the only flowers that everybody is certain of knowing.”

– from *The Garden Party and Other Stories* by Katherine Mansfield (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922), p. 59

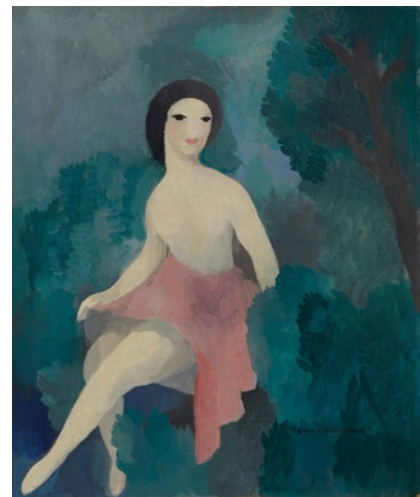
The mirror frame is original. During this time she also collaborated with decorative arts designers such as André Groult, who designed custom mirror frames for her work for the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs.



“Diane,” 1921



“Femme aux deux biches,” 1921

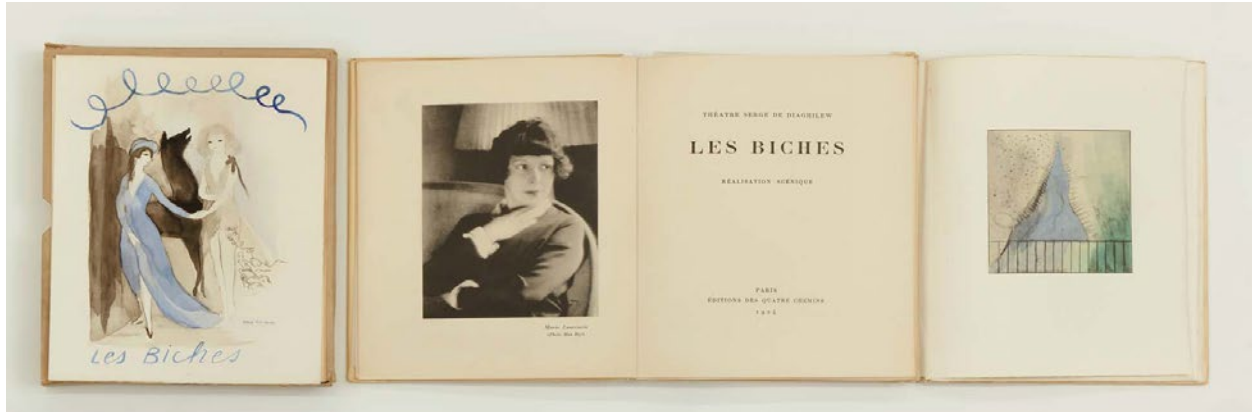


“Seated Ballerina,” 1926

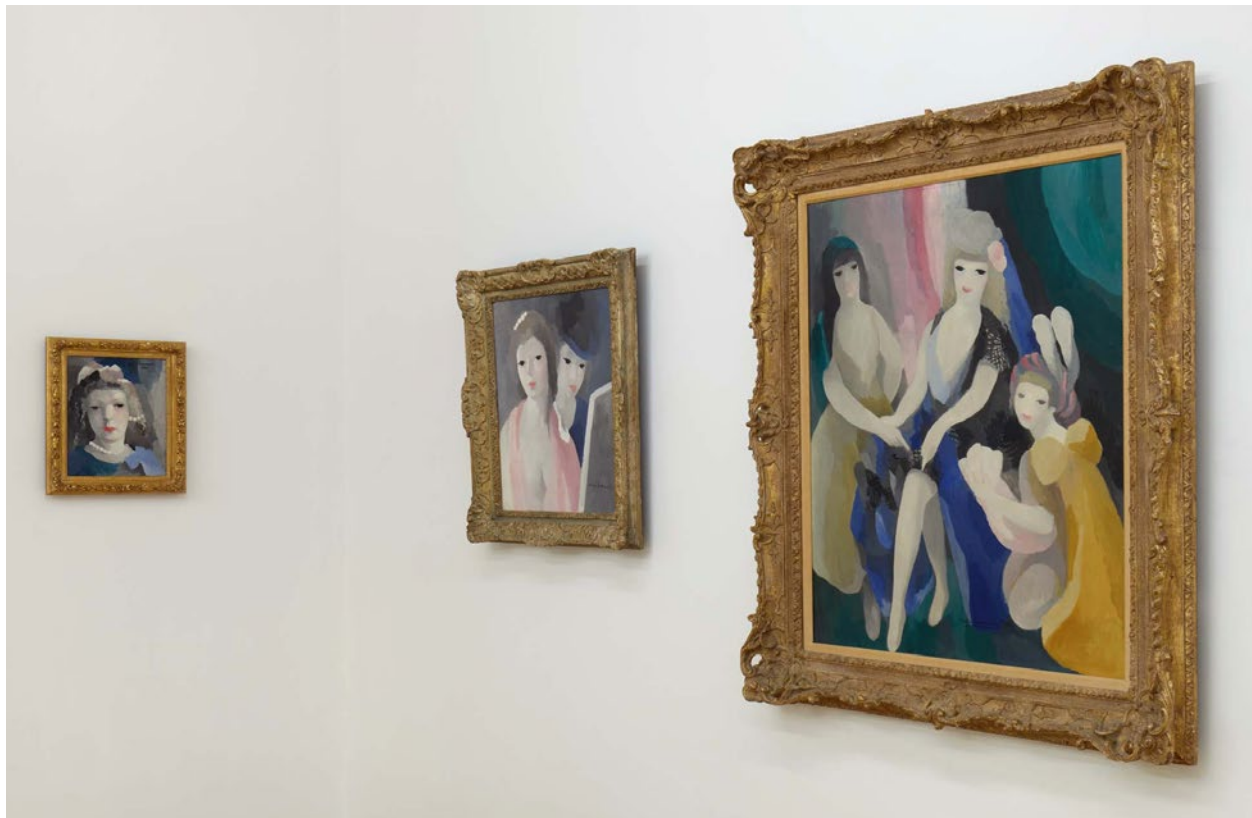
Laurencin dresses Diana, the Roman goddess of the wilderness, hunt, and procreation, an anonymous woman with two “biches” or does, and an androgynous ballerina all in flowing pink gowns in set-like, non-descript forest landscapes. These works perhaps most clearly relate to themes motivating Laurencin’s set and costume design for the Ballet Russes one-act ballet, “Les Biches,” which premiered in 1924. Laurencin was significantly involved in the creation of the ballet with its composer, Georges Poulenc. “Les biches” referred to two female deer, was slang for coquettish girls or those – male or female – with “deviant” sexual preferences, and was also word play on “lesbich”, the German word for lesbian. Laurencin’s costume designs for the ballet dancers mirrored the appearance of her painting subjects. Laurencin coopted the spaces auxiliary to modernist (male) painting – decorative arts, theater, design, society commissions – to stamp her artistic signature on it – her *jeunes filles* were her artistic commodities and represented her artistic brand. As René Gimpel recalled:

Mme Laurencin has painted pretty sets for *Les Biches*, and the whole ballet comes to look like the figures she paints. In the corridor I heard a woman say to a man: ‘Look around the house, all the women look as though they were by Marie Laurencin; she has fashioned a type just as [Giovanni] Boldini created the eel look fifteen years ago.’

– Gimpel, 260



“Les Biches” in Vitrine II (from left to right): lithograph by Laurencin, a photograph of Laurencin by Man Ray (c. 1924), and an illustration of the stage backdrop she designed.



Laurencin’s **Marie de Medicis (1926)** resembles a scene of 1920s costumed ballet dancers waiting in the curtained wings rather than a portrait of the 17th century French queen and her ladies in waiting. Laurencin’s admiration of Goya’s portraits of female royalty is relevant here:

Handsome puppets made of steel – in the way he painted them Goya was not their fool. He gave them a good eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth: the cold and haughty gaze of the Duchess of Alba, the ugliness of Queen Maria-Luisa. They do not lose an inch of their height standing so straight, and pose their ravishing feet not as goddesses but as confident and domineering Eves.... the portera, the muchacha, the Signora, they resemble each other like sisters: the same black eyes and the same language and, in all, an ancestral cunning. The woman and the puppet.

– Le Carnet des nuits (1942), p. 51-2



"Self-portrait with Pearls in Blue", 1930

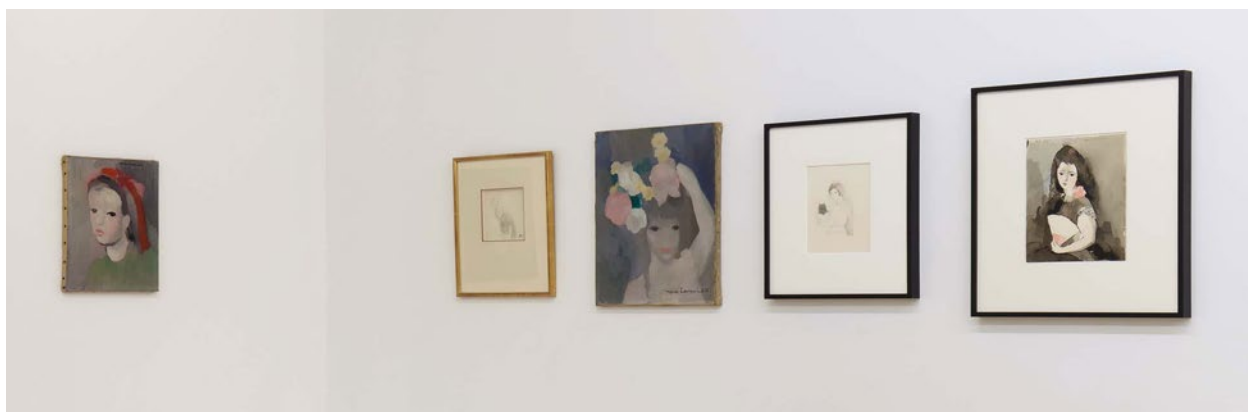


"Two Friends", 1928



"Marie de Medicis", 1926

The resemblance of Marie de Medici to her ladies in waiting and indeed any other "Marie Laurencin" jeune fille is a conceit further elaborated by **Two Friends (1928)** and her **Self-portrait with Pearls in Blue (1930)**. In the late 1920s and throughout the 30s, Laurencin started adorning her subjects with pearls: "Pearls, pearls, I prefer you. These daughters of the sea are right to be pitied, their beauty makes one imprison them around the necks and on the bodies of women. All the same, I would like to be in Paris." (from "De Biarritz, 1925" in *Le Carnet des Nuits* (1956), p. 31).



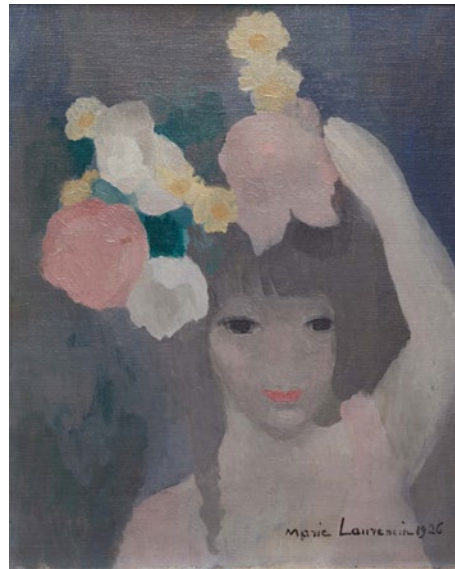
**Young Girl with Ribbons in Her Hair**, an undated painting likely from 1940s, along with the row of works on paper beside it, are examples of Laurencin's interest in female adornment – hair ribbons, flowers, pets, pearls, and the fan. An excerpt from *Le Carnet des nuits*:

Rose bushes have roses. –  
It is always the same one that I see.  
A rose it's something.  
Life for women is so difficult.  
We frolic with colors and fabrics, a pale flower on a ribbon.  
– *Le Carnet des nuits* (1956), p. 29





Untitled, n.d.



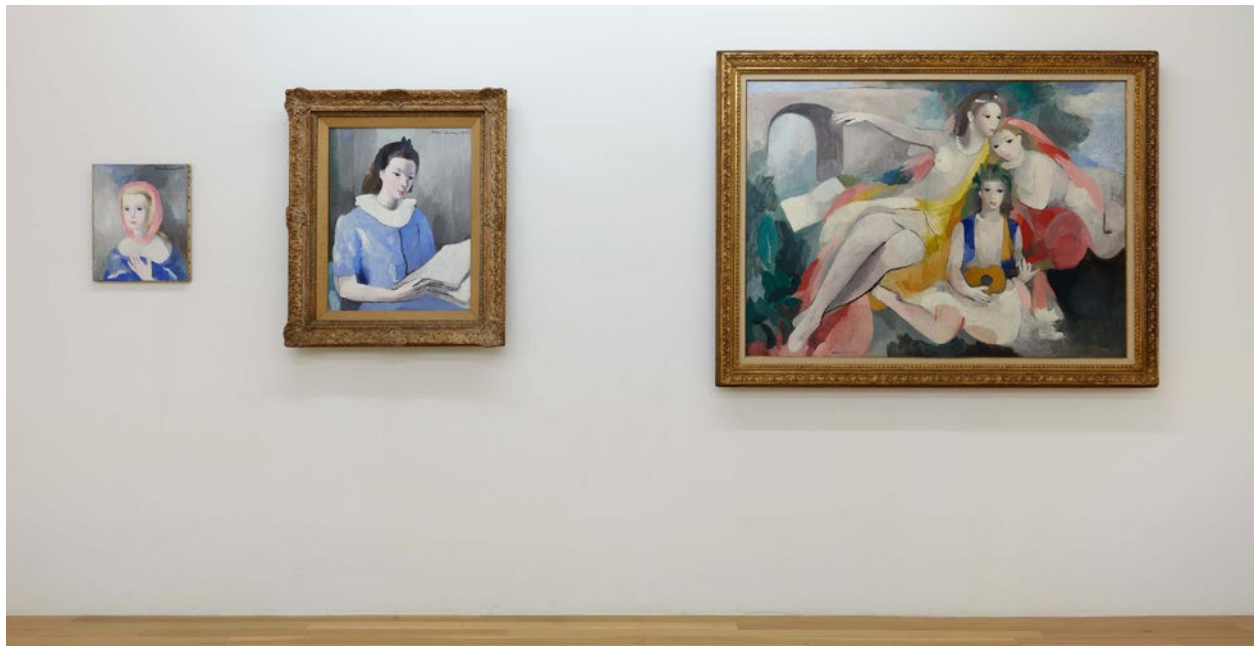
"Little Girl Wearing Flowers," 1926

On the adjoining wall is a portrait of a man, Marcel Arland, a writer and good friend of Laurencin's. She produced etchings for his novel *Antarès* (1932). The few times Laurencin would paint a male sitter, he would never be anonymous but a close acquaintance – a poet, writer, patron or dealer, or the son of such men.



"Marcel Arland", n.d.





The far left wall displays two portraits of related sitters, **Simone Moreau (1939)** and **Suzanne Moreau (in blue) (1940)**. Laurencin titled a number of works portraying two anonymous girls or women as “Two Sisters.” In the 1930s, together with Jean-Emile Laboureur, she started an art school for women, and was a member of the Femmes Artistes Modernes, a society of women artists, from 1931 until its disbandment in 1938. After she attempted to persuade the German embassy to release her friend Max Jacob from the Drancy internment camp, Laurencin’s apartment was requisitioned by the Vichy government on the basis that it was too large for a single woman. Laurencin thus spent significant time in the last decade of her life in retreats at Catholic convents throughout France.



“Simone Moreau”, 1939

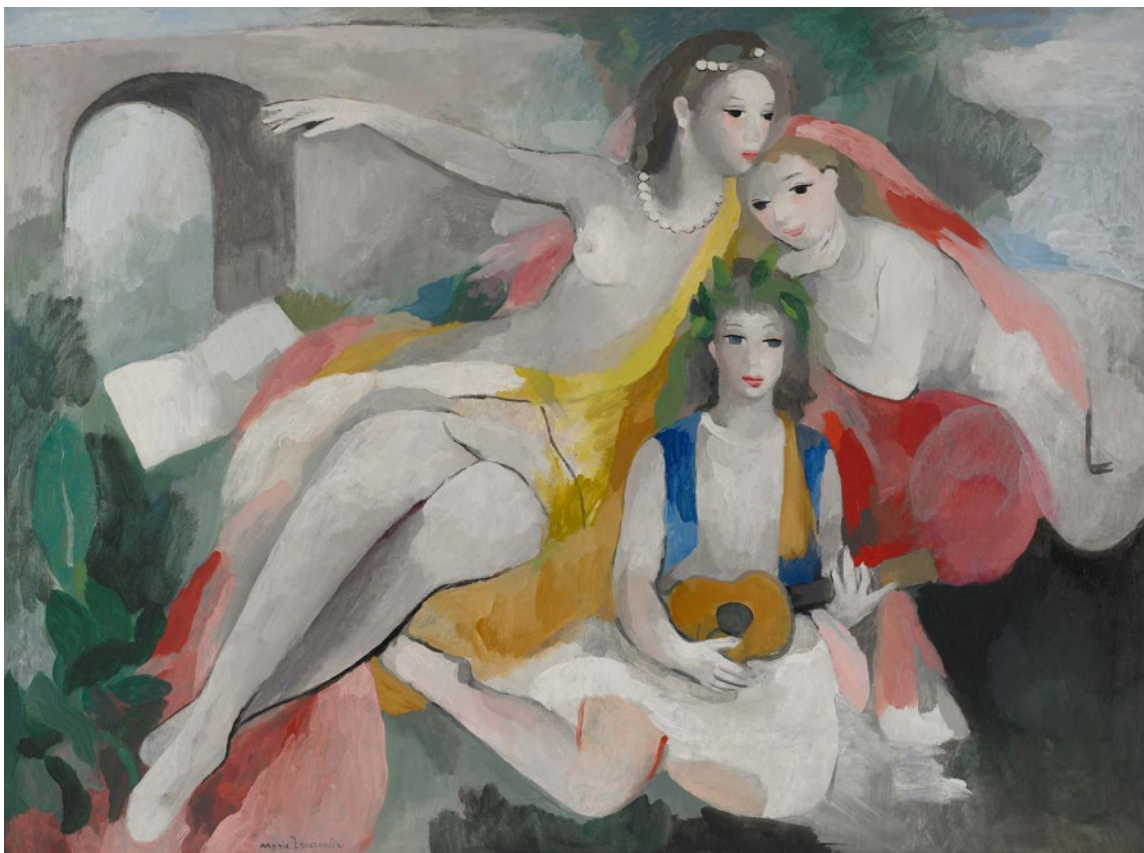


“Suzanne Moreau (in Blue)”, 1940

She would speak of her works as her children: “From time to time I make myself some children; I need children. Often it’s a little girl, and these children are very much my own.” (Gimpel, 2006). **Suzanne Moreau (in blue)** shows Laurencin’s longtime housekeeper, and later adopted daughter and heir, looking at a stack of papers pictured without text. The motif reappears thirteen years later in Laurencin’s last large-format work, **Three Young Women (1953)**, blank pages placed under an undifferentiated bridge archway.

Do you know this sweet pleasure, the night in shadows, to feel detested?  
Good-looking Harlequins make you dream. Children, your mother will put you to bed.  
There are women so bitter that they sob in their sleep.  
These two had invented a small tricky dance step that made men angry.  
Guitar. Guitar. t

– from “The Little Sisters’ Days” in *Le Carnet des nuits* (1942), p.17



“Three Young Girls,” 1953

Laurencin’s later paintings are marked by a heavy, rougher brushstroke, molding her figures by layers of thick paint, in contrast to the polished, doll-like works of the 1920s.

## Wall of prints



Printmaking was a central feature of Laurencin's practice, and she produced about 300 engravings, etchings, and lithographs from 1904 until her death. The subject and style mirrored that of her paintings but reworked through an adroit awareness of the medium. Laurencin closely collaborated with Jean-Emile Laboureur, a prominent French printmaker who founded the Association of Painter-Engravers in 1923 to educate modern artists on using various and innovative forms of printmaking in their practices.



"Portrait of the Artist", 1927



"Two Spanish Women", 1924



"La Créole [self-portrait]", 1924



A large number of Laurencin's prints were made for book illustrations, as she illustrated approximately eighty publications, ranging from single frontispiece portraits to more extensive collaborations with authors.



**Jacques De Lacretelle's *Pressentiments (Presentiments)* (1930)** (left) consists of six short texts profiling a different female persona, for which Laurencin made six illustrations. Laurencin's illustration displayed here was made for a text entitled “*Rêverie de Marie*,” ruminating on a painful love relationship with a man: “If I loved you as Marthe or Jeanne love their friends, you would always see me happy. Before this day, etched in my memory, I looked like them.” This special edition included two suites of signed, loose lithographs of the in-text illustrations, one in black and white, and one in color.

About twelve years later, Laurencin re-purposed “*Rêverie de Marie*” as the cover of her autofictional memoir ***Le Carnet des nuits (The Night Journal)*** for both its 1942 and 1956 editions (bottom right), instead of producing a new image. And instead of inventing a title, she borrowed one from an early poem: “*Le Carnet des nuits*” is the title of a poem Laurencin first published in ***La Nouvelle Revue Française* No. 265 in October 1935** (upper right), an excerpt:

Sometimes – we look for travel.  
 One dreams of the Islands.  
 Without tiring –  
 You – you read the picture books of Kate Greenaway  
 In this large hidden room  
 With dark drapes.  
 At this concert – the One-legged woman danced  
 As if she were deaf  
 and no more than in the picture  
 Did her beautiful head move.



1.



2.



3.



4.

5.

Pellerin's **Images d'Epinal** (no. 1) were popular 19th century prints containing moralizing tales of good behavior, fables, and courtship rendered in brightly colored, comic strip narrative form. The phrase "image d'Epinal" came to mean a traditionalist or naïve depiction. The issue displayed here originally belonged to Laurencin and, as with the books of **Kate Greenaway** (no. 2), she would mine its clichéd fables and depictions of children and women. Laurencin's displayed illustration for **The Clever Princess or the Adventures of Finette** (1928) (no. 3) is the same image used for the painting on the right wall, **Two Women with a Dog in a Forest**, 1925-26; it is unclear which came first.



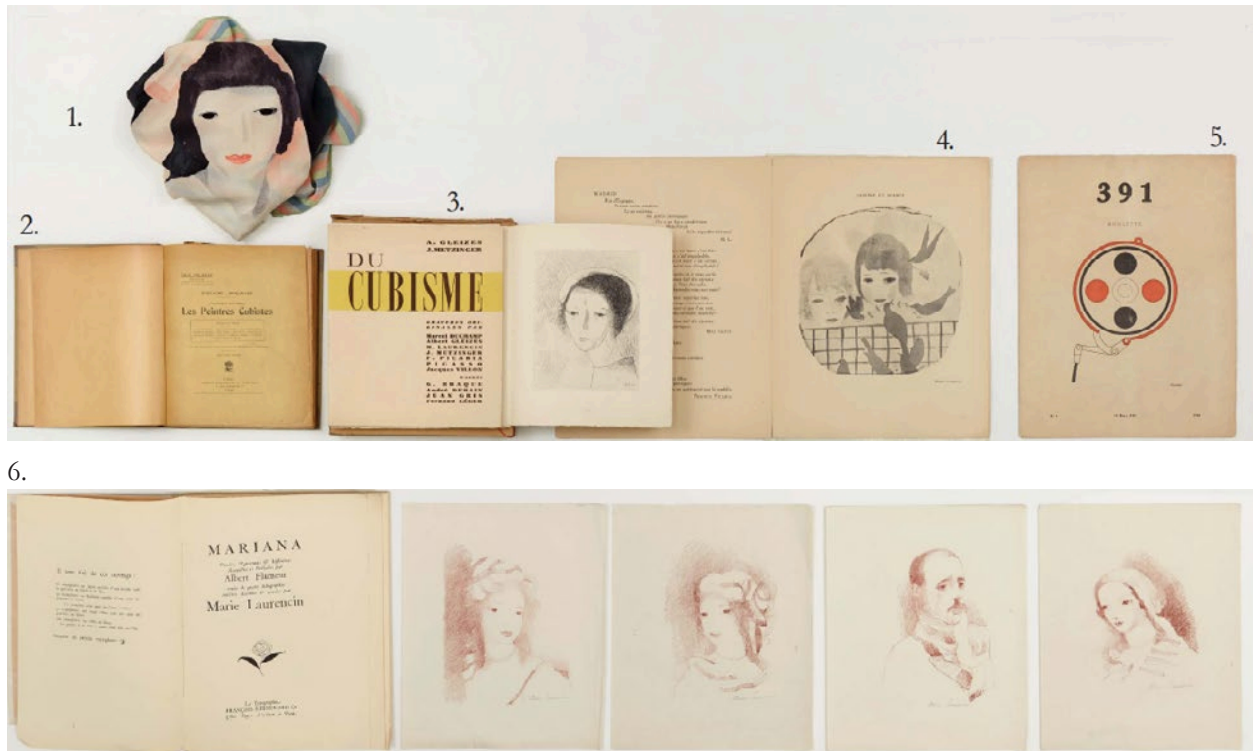
6.

Illustration from "The Clever Princess or the Adventures of Finette" (1928) and  
"Monsieur de Namur and Madame de Clèves" (1947)

**La Princesse de Clèves** (no. 6), is a 1947 edition of a famous French novel, first published in 1678 anonymously by Madame de La Fayette. Chronicling a virtuous married princess's love for the Duke of Nemours, the novel ends with the Princess' decision to reject the Duke after her husband dies out of a sense of duty and devote herself to life in a convent. In addition to illustrating popular texts such as *La Princesse de Clèves*, Laurencin also provided illustrations for Andre Gide's **La Tentative Amoureuse ou le Traité du vain désir** (*The Love Attempt or the Treaty on Futile Desire*) (1921) (no. 4) and the frontispiece portrait for Gide's novel, **The Poems of André Walter** (1922) (no. 5).



A selection of Laurencin's 69 etchings for Edith de Beaumont's 1950 translation of the lyric poems of Sappho, famous for their female homoerotic themes and emphasis on emotion, subjective experience and individual intimacy. As with all of her illustration work, Laurencin does not modify her style to suit her subject but propagates her identifiable graphic language of balletic girls wearing laurels, riding horses, and holding guitars among ancient verses.



A silk scarf reproducing a 1926 painting (**no. 1**) and a collaboration with Albert Flament on texts and illustrations for **Mariana (1932) (no. 6)** show the omnivorous range of circulation of Laurencin's jeune fille. Awkwardly included in the history of Cubism (**no. 2 and no. 3**), to which she never claimed allegiance, Laurencin was less well-known for her early collaboration with Francis Picabia on the first issues of **391 (no. 4 and no. 5)**, produced while both were living in Barcelona during World War I and for which she contributed poems and illustrations. Later, Picabia convinced Marius de Zayas to present a solo exhibition of Laurencin's works on paper in New York, her first exhibition in America, in 1917 at the Modern Gallery.