

# The Barnes Foundation Presents “Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris”

**First major US exhibition of French artist Marie Laurencin’s work in over 30 years**

**October 22, 2023–January 21, 2024**

**Press Preview: Tuesday, October 17, 9:30 am**

**Philadelphia, PA, July 11, 2023**—In fall 2023, the Barnes Foundation will present *Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris*, the first major US exhibition dedicated to French artist Marie Laurencin in over 30 years. Co-curated by Simonetta Fraquelli, consultant curator for the Barnes; and Cindy Kang, curator at the Barnes, this exhibition explores Laurencin’s career, from her self-portraits to her collaborative decorative projects; from her early cubist paintings to her signature works—feminine and discreetly queer—that defined 1920s Paris.

*Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris* is sponsored by Comcast NBCUniversal and Denise Littlefield Sobel. Additional support is provided by LAGOS. Funding for the exhibition comes from The Kaleta A. Doolin Foundation and Arthur M. Kaplan and R. Duane Perry. This exhibition is on view in the Roberts Gallery from October 22, 2023, through January 21, 2024.

Beginning in the early 20th century, French artist Marie Laurencin (1883–1956) created a unique pictorial world that placed women at the center of modern art. Working in Paris, in an environment dominated by male artists, Laurencin had a highly original painting style that defied categorization. She moved seamlessly between the male-dominated cubist avant-garde, lesbian literary and artistic circles, and the realms of fashion, ballet, and decorative arts.

Laurencin became a fixture of the contemporary art scene in prewar Paris and had a passionate and tumultuous relationship with the poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire. Pablo Picasso introduced them in 1907, and she immediately became part of the cubist inner circle. Their breakup in 1913, combined with the death of her mother, likely prompted a hasty marriage to the German baron and artist Otto von Wätjen in 1914. The couple fled to Spain during World War I and circulated among other self-exiled artists, including Francis Picabia. In 1921, the couple divorced and Laurencin returned definitively to Paris, having developed her signature style of diaphanous female figures in a blue-rose-gray palette.

Laurencin’s feminine yet sexually fluid aesthetic defined 1920s Paris. She was commissioned by Serge Diaghilev to design the ballet *Les Biches* and by society figures like Coco Chanel and Helena Rubinstein to paint their portraits. Laurencin’s romantic relationships with women, particularly with the married fashion designer Nicole Groult, inspired intimate paintings that visualized the modern Sapphism of contemporary lesbian writers like Natalie Clifford Barney. One of Laurencin’s final projects was to illustrate the *Poems of Sappho* in 1950.

“We are proud to present the first US exhibition in over three decades dedicated to Marie Laurencin’s work,” says Thom Collins, Neubauer Family Executive Director and President of the Barnes. “Shining new light on a remarkable artist deserving of a major reexamination, this exhibition is the Barnes’s fourth in an ongoing series exploring the achievements of significant but underrecognized women

working in the European modernist vanguard of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Suzanne Valadon, Marie Cuttoli, and Berthe Morisot.”

This exhibition holds a special significance at the Barnes; in 1923, Dr. Albert Barnes named Laurencin one of “the best French women painters” after having acquired several of her works, including *Still Life with Bowl and Fruit* (1907) on view in Room 10; *Woman with Muff* (1914) on view in Room 16; and *Head* (before 1921), on view in Room 11.

“Through this exhibition, we aim to reassess Marie Laurencin’s career, emphasizing the female relationships and networks—the Sapphic Paris—that Laurencin cultivated, which was just as significant to her assertion of modernity as her association with the male cubist avant-garde,” say co-curators Fraquelli and Kang. “We examine how Laurencin’s visualization of a ‘sapphic modernity’ subtly but radically challenges existing narratives of modern European art. Presenting new scholarship on her life and influence, this exhibition and catalogue tell Laurencin’s story through her art and bring new attention to her significant body of work.”

Featuring over 50 works by Laurencin from public and private collections around the world, *Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris* showcases paintings, works on paper, illustrated books, decorative objects, and ballet costumes, as well as works by Laurencin’s contemporaries and collaborators such as Max Ernst, André Mare, Jean Metzinger, and Francis Picabia. Arranged thematically and in roughly chronological order, the exhibition examines Laurencin’s interest in self-portraiture; her cubist milieu in prewar Paris; her difficult though productive period of exile in Spain; her designs for interiors and ballets; her fashionable portraits of women; and her inimitable vision of sapphic modernism.

Select exhibition highlights include:

- ***The Elegant Ball, Dance in the Country*** (*Le bal élégant, La danse à la campagne*) (1913), one of Laurencin’s major cubist pictures, exhibited at the 1913 Salon des Indépendants in Paris (Musée Marie Laurencin, Tokyo)
- ***The Woman-Horse*** (*La femme-cheval*) (1918), an enigmatic self-portrait of a woman painter in exile that shows Laurencin developing her signature style (Musée Marie Laurencin, Tokyo)
- ***Women with a Dove*** (*Femmes à la colombe*) (1919), an intimate double portrait of Laurencin and her lover Nicole Groult (Centre Pompidou, Paris)
- ***Women in the Forest*** (*Femmes dans la forêt*) (1920), which reinterprets 18th-century French pictures of romantic intrigue as a sapphic world devoid of men (private collection)
- ***Spanish Dancers*** (*Danseuses espagnoles*) (1920), one of Laurencin’s largest works that depicts her unique aesthetic world intertwining women and animals (Musée de l’Orangerie, Paris)
- ***Portrait of Miss Chanel*** (*Portrait de Mademoiselle Chanel*) (1923), a significant portrait of the famed fashion designer Coco Chanel when she was working with the Ballets Russes concurrently with Laurencin (Musée de l’Orangerie, Paris)

## RELATED PROGRAMMING

### Education Initiatives

#### **Online Class: Paris in the 1920s: Art, Design, Fashion, and Literature**

Instructor: Caterina Y. Pierre

Wednesdays, October 4–25, 2023; 6–8 pm ET

\$220; members \$198 (4 classes)

Learn about the artists, writers, and designers who helped define the modern era.

## **Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris (on-site)**

Instructor: Cindy Kang

Tuesdays, November 7–December 5, 2023; 1–3 pm ET

\$220; members \$198 (4 classes; no class November 21)

Dive deeper into our fall exhibition with Barnes curator Cindy Kang.

## **Online Class: Art and the First “Homosexuals”**

Instructor: Jonathan D. Katz

Wednesdays, November 8–December 6, 2023; 6–8 pm ET

\$220; members \$198 (4 classes; no class November 22)

This course surveys artistic representations of the emerging "homosexual" identity, from the early 1900s through the first decades of the 20th century.

## **ABOUT THE CURATORS**

**Simonetta Fraquelli**, an independent curator specializing in early 20th-century European art, is consultant curator for the Barnes Foundation. Fraquelli began her career at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, where she worked for over 20 years on a range of exhibitions. Since 2006, she has collaborated with several leading European and American museums. In 2017, she co-curated one of the largest exhibitions of Modigliani's work, *Modigliani* at Tate, London (with Nancy Ireson); at the Barnes, she co-curated *Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint* (2021) and *Modigliani Up Close* (2022). Fraquelli has published on many additional artists including Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, and Gino Severini. She holds advanced degrees from the Courtauld Institute, London.

**Cindy Kang** is curator at the Barnes Foundation. Her research and publications have focused on the relationship between painting and decorative arts in late 19th- and early 20th-century France. She curated *Marie Cuttoli: The Modern Thread from Miró to Man Ray* (2020) at the Barnes and served as managing curator for the Barnes presentations of *Berthe Morisot: Woman Impressionist* (2018–19) and *Renoir: Father and Son/Painting and Cinema* (2018). Kang commissioned the 2022 Barnes exhibition *Water, Wind, Breath: Southwest Native Art in Community* and co-led the institution's land acknowledgment process. She previously held curatorial and research positions at the Bard Graduate Center, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Frick Collection, and was a scholar-in-residence at the Getty Research Institute. She received her PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

## **CATALOGUE**

The 208-page illustrated exhibition catalogue *Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris* is published by the Barnes Foundation in association with Yale University Press. Edited by exhibition co-curators Simonetta Fraquelli and Cindy Kang, the book includes essays from the curators, Christine Poggi, Rachel Silveri, and Jelena Kristic, along with contributions from Oriane Poret and Corrinne Chong. The authors consider Laurencin's relationship to cubism; the pivotal period of her exile in Spain; the role of decorative projects in her career; her graphic work and illustrated books; and her interpretation of sapphic modernity. The exhibition and book illuminate how Laurencin's work subtly but radically challenges existing histories of modern European art.

## **EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION**

*Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris* is organized by the Barnes and curated by Simonetta Fraquelli, consultant curator, and Cindy Kang, curator at the Barnes.

## **SPONSORS**

*Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris* is sponsored by Comcast NBCUniversal and Denise Littlefield Sobel.

Additional support is provided by LAGOS.

Funding for the exhibition comes from The Kaleta A. Doolin Foundation Arthur M. Kaplan and R. Duane Perry.

Ongoing support for exhibitions comes from the Christine and Michael Angelakis Exhibition Fund, the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Exhibition Fund, the Lois and Julian Brodsky Exhibition Fund, the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the Christine and George Henisee Exhibition Fund, Aileen and Brian Roberts, and the Tom and Margaret Lehr Whitford Exhibition Fund.

The exhibition publication is made possible with generous support from the Lois and Julian Brodsky Publications Fund.

In addition, funding for all exhibitions comes from contributors to the Barnes Foundation Exhibition Fund.

### **ABOUT THE BARNES FOUNDATION**

The Barnes Foundation is a nonprofit cultural and educational institution that shares its unparalleled art collection with the public, organizes special exhibitions, and presents programming that fosters new ways of thinking about human creativity. The Barnes collection is displayed in ensembles that integrate art and objects from across cultures and time periods, overturning traditional hierarchies and revealing universal elements of human expression. Home to one of the world's finest collections of impressionist, post-impressionist, and modern paintings—including the largest groups of paintings by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Paul Cézanne in existence—the Barnes brings together renowned canvases by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, and Vincent van Gogh, alongside African, Asian, ancient, medieval, and Native American art as well as metalwork, furniture, and decorative art.

The Barnes Foundation was established by Dr. Albert C. Barnes in 1922 to “promote the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts and horticulture.” A visionary collector and pioneering educator, Dr. Barnes was also a fierce advocate for the civil rights of African Americans, women, and the economically marginalized. Committed to racial equality and social justice, he established a scholarship program to support young Black artists, writers, and musicians who wanted to further their education. Dr. Barnes was deeply interested in African American culture and became actively involved in the Harlem Renaissance, during which he collaborated with philosopher Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson, the scholar and activist, to promote awareness of the artistic value of African art.

Since moving to Philadelphia in 2012, the Barnes Foundation has expanded its commitment to diversity, inclusion, and social justice, teaching visual literacy in groundbreaking ways; investing in original scholarship relating to its collection; and enhancing accessibility throughout every facet of its programs.

The Barnes is situated in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape people. *Read our [Land Acknowledgment](#).*

Hours and ticket prices are listed on our [website](#).

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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<https://www.barnesfoundation.org/press/press-releases/the-barnes-foundation-presents-marie-laurencin-sapphic-paris>

# The Exhibition Making the Case for Art Without Men

Loved in her day, the French painter Marie Laurencin depicted a dreamy vision of a world of women. What does she have to say to audiences now?

**By Maggie Lange**

Oct. 25, 2023

“If you want what is commonly accepted as ‘a straight answer to a straight question,’ don’t go to Marie Laurencin to get it,” Dorothy Todd, the British magazine editor, wrote in 1928. If answers from Laurencin — one of the most notable female painters in interwar France — were anything like her work, of course they wouldn’t be straight, but coy, queer, covert and very pretty.

“Marie Laurencin: Sapphic Paris,” a new exhibition that puts all of the artist’s coded qualities on full display, opened this week at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

Born in 1883 in Paris, Laurencin became a central member of the artistic avant-garde, ruled by her friend Picasso, in early 1900s Paris. By the 1910s, she had broken free of the Cubist grip to create a distinctive, immediately recognizable aesthetic all her own, in macaron tints that collectors couldn’t get enough of. After her death, in 1956, her work fell into relative obscurity.

The Barnes show is the first major solo Laurencin exhibition in the United States in three decades, and the first exhibition of her work to highlight the obvious: Laurencin’s art is unavoidably queer, and noticeably lacking in men.

“Marie Laurencin is of the ‘lipstick lesbian’ variety: She constructs this very soft, feminine world that really spoke to viewers at the time,” said Libby Otto, an art history professor at the University at Buffalo. “And if you realize that, in her soft way, she’s constructing a world without men, of female harmony, there’s something pretty revolutionary in there as well.”



“Marie Laurencin,” a 1925 photograph by Man Ray. Man Ray 2015 Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP, Paris 2023; via RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

Jenni Sorkin, a professor of art history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, called Laurencin “a separatist,” describing the artist’s intentional and coded scenes. This show emphasizes Laurencin’s vision of a Sapphic world without men, which, Professor Sorkin noted, makes it the first of its kind in a major institution.

Of the dozens of faces featured in the Barnes exhibition, only two are male. One of her lovers, the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire, makes the cut, as does Laurencin’s longtime art dealer, Paul Rosenberg. Outside of portraiture (Laurencin reportedly charged more to paint both men and brunettes), male faces almost never appear in the hundreds of paintings that she created over the course of her 50-year career.

This is a central Laurencin paradox: She thrived in an art world that was almost entirely male by painting a world filled almost exclusively by women. When Laurencin pursued the French tradition of the 18th-century *fête galante* painting — pastoral scenes of courtship, flirtation and romantic intrigue epitomized by the work of Antoine Watteau — she excised all the men. There are animals and feminine mystique only, figures with her signature wide-set eyes with eerie hollow gazes, drenched in a creamy pastel palette.

“We’re always saying it’s diaphanous, because there’s a gauzy transparency to these paintings and everything is kind of floating,” said Cindy Kang, a curator at the Barnes. “This is an alternative world she draws you into that’s very dreamy.”

Simonetta Fraquelli, who curated the show with Dr. Kang, said that Laurencin wanted to create an alternative world for women. “But at the same time, she was very conscious of the male-dominated market,” she said. Laurencin made work that appealed to wealthy male buyers who might not interpret women embracing, kissing, and dancing as lesbian activities.

“She was adept at exploiting all the different constituents for her success,” Ms. Fraquelli added, invoking the “Barbie” movie, which similarly has no shame about either its sweet, girlie aesthetic or its profit-seeking ambitions.

“Perhaps we finally arrived at a moment that we can read Marie Laurencin in an interesting and robust way that we haven’t been able to in the past, due to her high femme style,” said Kenneth E. Silver, a professor of art history at New York University and the author of “Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925.”



“Portrait of Mademoiselle Chanel,” a 1923 oil on canvas by Laurencin. Fondation Foujita Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris 2023; Bridgeman Images

According to Dr. Kang, part of the reason Laurencin is once again enticing the wider art world is that “there is clearly more of an openness to taking that femininity seriously.”



“One issue that Laurencin did have with being taken seriously by, say, feminist art historians in the ’90s is that she was so feminine,” she said. “They just couldn’t get it.” After Laurencin’s death, her work fell into an especially peculiar trap: It was dismissed for its femininity and criticized for its supposed lack of feminist sensibility.

The intentional absence of men should speak volumes about her priorities, but Laurencin’s paintings aren’t shouters. Their figures whisper; they operate in secrets. “They’re very private works,” said Katy Hessel, an art historian and the author of “The Story of Art Without Men.” “Her figures share some intimacy. You’re actually looking at someone’s private world, someone’s interior world.”

“It feels like this incredible utopian world,” she said.

Professor Otto noted Laurencin’s ambition to find “a new visual language for feminine beauty that’s not the same as it was in the 19th century or with the Impressionists.” “She’s really striving to come up with a new aesthetic language to express female modernity and embrace the feminine from the inside,” the professor said.

Dr. Kang and other scholars argue that Laurencin’s Sapphic themes were ignored or overlooked for so long precisely because of their femininity. One scholar, Milo Wippermann, calls the neglect of Laurencin’s queerness a matter of “femme invisibility.”

“To see her from the queer feminine perspective, you see a type of queer feminine gender performance and you start to see what Laurencin was actually doing,” Dr. Kang said. A male collector like Albert C. Barnes, who created the Barnes Foundation in 1922 and acquired five of Laurencin’s works, “could think of her as easily feminine, but there’s a surrealist edge. And I think we’re now positioned to start to see that out, as opposed to ignoring it.”

Laurencin’s fantasy visions were not restrained to the canvas. She designed sets and costumes for theater and ballet; she illustrated books; she created decorative plates and wallpaper (Gertrude Stein bought several rolls).

And in each medium, Laurencin's weightless, floaty, femme aesthetic never wavers. Laurencin was so firm about her style that she declined to repaint a commissioned portrait of Coco Chanel, after Chanel complained it didn't look enough like her. But Laurencin had no interest in adhering to straightforward likenesses. She was interested only in creating an entirely new world.

***A correction was made on Oct. 26, 2023: An earlier version of this article described incorrectly the tradition of fête galante painting, typified by the work of Antoine Watteau. It was dominant in the 18th century, not the 16th.***

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section ST, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Art Without Men, Envisioned Over a Century Ago