Transgressing Time: Life and Death in the Portraiture of Paula Modersohn-Becker

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Transgressing Time: Life and Death in the Portraiture of Paula Modersohn-Becker

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For Marianne Ezekiel,

“Denn die freude die wir geben kehrt ins eigene herz zurück.”

When we make someone happy, the happiness returns to us.

*Ich liebe dich.*

I love you.
Come here, into the lamplight, I’m not afraid to look the dead in the face.

Rainer Maria Rilke, “Requiem for a Friend,” 1908
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Abstract

Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1876-1907, had a short, intense life – one in which death remained close by. This closeness is due to a high number of tragedies her family incurred, as well as her (correct) belief that she would die young. This apprehension for death, among other reasons that will be explored in this thesis, led her to be inspired by the Fayum mummy portraits, an ancient funerary art form dating back to 30-40 CE in the Greco-Roman period of Egyptian history.

Aside from the exhibition entitled *Paula Modersohn-Becker und die ägyptischen Mumienportraits* at the Museen Böttcherstraße there remains no scholarship directly comparing individual Fayum mummy portraits with works created by Modersohn-Becker. This gap in scholarship is significant for two primary reasons: firstly, because her encounter with the Fayum mummy portraits at the Louvre Museum pre-dates other European modernists’ engagement with African art, and secondly, that her engagement with these works illuminates discussions about the interplay of life and death in her oeuvre. This thesis outlines how this interplay is succeeded through self-re-imagination, visual symbolism of growth and regrowth, and portraits of her own child, Elsbeth. The culmination of these three elements demonstrates that themes surrounding the life cycle permeate her whole career, not only her maternal portraits. Moreover, this thesis will emphasize how Modersohn-Becker’s portraits transgress a linear timeline due to the insertion of ancient Fayum stylistic practices into her modernist works. Ultimately, this thesis offers an exploration of what drove Modersohn-Becker to be inspired by these ancient portraits, exactly how prominent they are in her own works, and how her compositions seemingly come alive with new meaning when the presence of life and death in her portraiture is considered.
Introduction

“When I took my eyes from these pictures and began looking at the people around me, I suddenly saw that human beings are more remarkable, much more striking and surprising than they have ever been painted.”
Paula Modersohn-Becker, February 15, 1903

Work for this thesis initially began in the summer of 2021 through a research grant funded by the Adrian Tinsley Program for Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship. The title of that project was “Primitivism and the Modern Woman in Transnational Modernist Painting c. 1900-1939.” This project offered a triplicate comparative analysis of artists who each engaged with the western ideology of primitivism from three different continents: Paula Modersohn-Becker, Lois Mailou-Jones, and Irma Stern. Incorporating both Critical Race Theory and Feminist Theory offered lenses through which to uncover the gender and racial implications for female primitivists as both the subject, and perpetrator, of primitivist ideology. Ultimately, this project argued that these women, while wrestling with primitivism, were capable of creating works that were both redemptive and discriminatory.

One of the most exciting parts of that project for me was learning about the relationship between Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Egyptian mummy portraits. Her works standing alone are beautiful and intriguing but learning about their connection to funerary artistic traditions dating back multiple millennia made her compositions all the more compelling. I remember the moment when I was truly struck by the similarities between her works and the Egyptian mummy portraits. Inspired by the work of the APPEAR Project at the J. Paul Getty Museum, I created a set of diagrams which visually compared her portraits to the Egyptian funerary portraits to ascertain how similar they were in relation to proportion and location of facial features. The
results were striking in similarities, and I had this blooming feeling inside me that a door had just opened up that I had never even expected to walk past. Wanting to share this discovery, I wrote to my mentor saying that I had “potentially very exciting progress.” Nine months later I feel confident in saying that that moment was not “potentially very exciting,” but in fact reshaped my undergraduate academic career and would guide my research for the next ten months.

Due to time constrictions, and a need to move on to other material to keep the project moving forward, I (temporarily) said goodbye to Modersohn-Becker and the Egyptian mummies, though a desire to know more about their elusive relationship always remained at the back of my mind. The work funded by the ATP grant focused on her maternal portraits as well as her engagement with Egyptian funerary portraits in order to ascertain how she developed a sense of the “Other” in her portraiture. When we think about maternal portraits in relation to funerary portraits, common themes emerge concerned with creating and sustaining life, when the life cycle begins and ends, and how the creation or end of life can be conveyed on the canvas. These ideas and questions laid the foundation for this thesis, which ultimately is concerned with how Modersohn-Becker’s works are capable of transgressing the boundaries of a linear progression of time. Thus, I have pursued this thesis that studies both the complex stylistic connections between Modersohn-Becker’s portraits and the Egyptian mummy portraits, and how these connections open up her new approaches to studying her career with focuses on time and the interconnectivity of life and death.

In many ways, these transgressions of a linear timeline are informed by her engagement with the Fayum mummy portraits. To better comprehend this engagement, I established five key questions to focus my research, and structure this final thesis. These questions include:

1. Who influenced Modersohn-Becker’s engagement with the Fayum portraits?
2. How are Modersohn-Becker’s' and the Fayum portraits *aesthetically* similar?

3. How are Modersohn-Becker’s' and the Fayum portraits *structurally* similar?

4. Why was Modersohn-Becker inspired by this ancient art form?

5. Why is the relationship between Modersohn-Becker’s' and Fayum mummy portraits significant to art history?

Chapter one of this thesis responds to the first question. Section 1.1 offers a biographical overview of her life; Section 1.2 argues that the trauma of grieving the deaths of a high number of close family members in her adolescence propelled her to paint one of her most famous works, *Self Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* (1906); Section 1.3 examines her time spent in the Worpswede artist colony of northern Germany, and how their ideologies shaped her interest in the life cycle; Section 1.4 responds to her maternal portraits, and asserts that her positioning as a step-mother and her relationship to her (step) daughter should be included in scholarship discussing Modersohn-Becker.

Chapter two of this thesis responds to the next four questions. Section 2.1 provides a historical introduction to the traditions of Egyptian funerary portraiture; Section 2.2 examines the aesthetic and structural similarities between Modersohn-Becker’s’ portraits and those of the ancient Egyptians; Section 2.3 offers an overview of the social and biographical factors which led her to be inspired by Egyptian funerary portraits; Section 2.4 argues why her engagement with these portraits is significant to art history.

Due to Modersohn-Becker’s’ works residing abroad in Bremen, Germany, high resolution digital images were studied to explore the brushwork and texture of each composition. I have tried to treat the artworks under consideration as tangible, material works and not just as digital images despite the limitations on seeing the original works firsthand. In light of being unable to
access these artworks in person, more emphasis was placed on secondary sources than perhaps
may otherwise have been needed. These secondary sources included articles, essays, and art
criticism. For primary sources, I utilized visual evidence (paintings and photographs) as well as
Modersohn-Becker’s own writing via letters and personal journals. When analyzing her own
writing, I offer criticism focusing on her language, a medium which I believe can be equally
revealing about the artist’s thoughts and intentions. A combination of both literary and visual
analysis in art historical scholarship enables us to not only study the final work, but to
understand the artist’s thoughts as they grappled with the process of creation.

This thesis certainly not have been possible without the support of those supporting me and
my research. Though not a cumulative list, those people include: my mentor, Dr. Jonathan
Shirland, whom I have had the honor to work with these last two years; my parents, who let me
turn the spare room into an office, and who supported these academic endeavors we never
anticipated; Benjamin, with whom I could ramble whenever I was really excited about an idea;
my grandmother, who has encouraged my pursuing a career in art history from day one, even if
she does not think modernist art is very interesting. My grandmother, to whom this whole thesis
is dedicated, also supported me by translating essays from the catalogue Paula Modersohn-
Becker Und Die Ägyptischen Mumienportraits: Eine Hommage Zum 100 Todestag Der
Künstlerin into English. This assistance was invaluable, as this catalogue is only available in
German and contains the essays and visual materials for the only exhibition that featured works
of Modersohn-Becker alongside Egyptian mummy portraits.

My grandmother’s ability to translate these essays is due to her upbringing in Berlin,
Germany. The majority of my father’s maternal relatives are dispersed throughout Germany,
primarily in the cities of Berlin and Bremen. This personal biographical connection is relevant to
this thesis because Modersohn-Becker spent significant portions of her life living in Bremen, or the nearby artist colony of Worpswede (please reference Appendix 1 for specific chronology). Though I have never lived in Germany, I visited numerous cities there, including Bremen, where I spent time staying with family members. This connection I have to Germany is largely why I feel so compelled to study the life and career of Modersohn-Becker. I am eager for when I return to Bremen and can see, in person, her compositions at the Museen Böttcherstraße.
Chapter 1. Paula Modersohn-Becker

1.1 Biographical Introduction

Paula Modersohn-Becker, full name Minna Hermine Paula Becker, was born on February 8, 1876, to her parents Mathilde and Carl Woldemar Becker. She grew up in Dresden, Germany, where she spent the first twelve years of her life before her family relocated to Bremen, Germany.¹ This move would set the precedent for frequent relocations throughout the rest of her life – both within Germany and across Europe. She often packed up her life to pursue arts training in London and Paris. There, she stayed with relatives or in small apartments, but was by no means a glamorous traveler. Her awareness of her peripatetic identity is registered by the fact that she would often sign her letters to her husband, Otto, “your little traveling wife.”

Her earliest formal art training occurred in London at a co-educational art school in 1892, and at the Drawing and Painting School of the Association of Women Artists in Berlin in 1896-98.² Though she lived for thirty-one years, her professional career lasted only one decade (1897-1907), instigated by her move to the Worpswede artists’ colony in northern Germany. In the following years, she met many of the most influential figures in her life in Worpswede, including Otto Modersohn (the man she would marry in 1901), Heinrich and Martha Vogeler, Fritz Mackensen, Clara Rilke Westhoff, and Rainer Maria Rilke. The influence of these figures on Modersohn-Becker’s life, decision-making, and artistic career will be explored throughout this thesis.

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² Ibid.
Her first public exhibition was in December of 1899 when she showed two paintings along with seven studies at the Kunsthalle Bremen. After receiving a terrible review in the local paper, she would not exhibit again for nearly seven years (November of 1906) in Worpswede. The positive reception she received in this latter exhibition is indicative both of her maturity as an artist, as well as art critics becoming more open to women contributing to Germany’s modern art scene. One year later, she exhibited one still life in Worpswede. Ultimately, though she completed more than 700 paintings in her ten-year working period, she would exhibit only six in her lifetime. She also sold only three works, all of which were to friends supporting her in times of financial distress.

Her most significant travels, in regard to this thesis, were her three trips to study art in Paris in 1900, 1903, and 1905. There she attended the Académie Colarossi, École de Beaux Arts, and the Académie Julian. Her attendance at these institutions demonstrates her commitment to formal art training in an era which left little room for women artists. Along with attending classes, she visited art museums such as the Louvre, Luxembourg Museum, Salon of the Société des Artistes Français, among others. Moreover, from June 11-14 of 1900 she was at the World Fair in Paris – an experience which undoubtedly shaped the course of her artistic career given that she had little exposure to international arts previously.

Given the arrival of the Fayum mummy portraits at the Louvre Museum as early as 1893 they would have been accessible to Modersohn-Becker on these trips. It is known that

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3 Radycki, Diane J. “Chronology.” In Paula Modersohn-Becker... 225-226.
4 Ibid.
5 Radycki, Diane J. Paula Modersohn-Becker... 35.
6 Ibid.
7 Radycki, Diane J. “Chronology.” In Paula Modersohn-Becker... 225-226.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Modersohn-Becker encountered these works in Paris, particularly in 1903, and Diane Radycki has illustrated how her encounters with Egyptian arts pre-dated other modernists’ initial engagement with Africa.\(^{11}\) Previously, scholars broadly accepted Maurice Vlaminck’s claim to the “discovery” of African art in 1906. Writing to her husband, Otto Modersohn, in February of 1903 she wrote, “Toward the end of my visit I saw some remarkably good copies of sketches by [Jean Auguste Dominique] Ingres and reproductions of wonderful ancient portraits whose color must have been applied in a remarkably flowing manner. A very charming picture of Cleopatra.”\(^{12}\) The reference to Ingres is interesting here given his prominence as an Orientalist and that he painted the ceiling design of the rooms at the Louvre containing the Egyptian collection. Her interest in color is not surprising given that early twentieth-century European art was especially preoccupied with color and its application – due to both Impressionism’s interplay of light and color and Expressionism’s vibrant colors and gestural brushstrokes. In a 1901 letter to her soon-to-be husband, Otto, she wrote, “but as for me, I love the depth of color as much as I do my own life. I need it for my life, just as much as I need air.”\(^{13}\) For her 31\(^{st}\) birthday (1907) Otto gifted her a book on Fayum mummy portraits, further highlighting her interest in this ancient art form.\(^{14}\)

As with many modernists, it is hard to confine Modersohn-Becker to one genre or movement, both due to the extensive variety of art she was exposed to in Paris, London, and in Worpswede and the rapid nature of artistic development observed in the late nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. But at the turn of the century Modersohn-Becker focused her paintings on

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\(^{11}\) Radycki, Diane J. *Paula Modersohn-Becker…* 69.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 248.
children and child nudes, primarily young girls as they represented an important cross-section of self-awareness, sexuality, and identity. A few years later she would start painting adult female nudes, a career move that would eventually lead to her painting the first nude female self-portrait in art history.

Radycki asserts that “her simplicity and economy of form easily secure Modersohn-Becker a place in art history between Post-Impressionism and Expressionism.” This idea of occupying a liminal space in art history is appropriate, for when speaking of the German modernist primitivists (European modernists who misappropriated African and Oceanic artifacts and artistic traditions), art historian Wilhelm Worringer referred to this making of art as a “pendulum” between looking to the future and back to the past. With this shift in mind, we can study her works from a gendered perspective simultaneously as the historical product of women penetrating the male-dominant art world, and as a pervasive questioning of women’s place in future western society. Moreover, we understand the complexities of Modersohn-Becker’s relationship to time: the simultaneous desire as a young artist to look back into the past while moving modernism forward.

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15 Radycki, Diane. “‘Pictures of Flesh’: Modersohn-Becker and the Nude.” Woman’s Art Journal, Fall, 30, No. 2 (2009), 5.
16 Ibid., 4.
1.2 Reimagining the Self

Throughout Modersohn-Becker’s life and artistic career, death remained nearby. While frequent visits by death was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century, given that the life expectancy of a German in 1875 was only thirty-eight, the presence of death in her life should not be overlooked due to its lasting impact on her artistic career.\(^\text{18}\) In 1879, when Modersohn-Becker was three years old, her cousin Emilie died. In 1881 her paternal grandfather, Paul Becker, died at age seventy-three; the following year her maternal grandfather, Ferdinand von Bültzingslöwen, died at age seventy-four. That same year, 1882, her brother Hans tragically died at only two years old. Four years later her eleven-year-old cousin, Cora Parizot, famously died by suffocation in a sandpit while playing with friends – Modersohn-Becker being one of them. Three years later her maternal uncle Günther von Bültzingslöwen died in 1889.\(^\text{19}\) By the age of thirteen, Modersohn-Becker had already witnessed the death of six close family members.

Moreover, it should not be discounted that her husband, Otto, was a widower when they wed in 1901. His previous wife, Helene Schröder, was not yet thirty-two years old when she died in 1900. She was survived by her young daughter, Elsbeth. In that sense, though marriage is often understood to be a celebratory rite of passage, often resulting in the creation of new life, the spectator of death remained nearby. Prior to marrying Otto but following Helene’s death (by one month), Modersohn-Becker contemplates her own life expectancy in her journal. In an entry dated July 26, 1900, she wrote:

> I know that I shall not live very long. But I wonder, is that sad? Is a celebration more beautiful because it lasts longer? And my life is a celebration, a short, intense celebration… I was thinking today about a picture of girls playing music under a cloud-covered sky, in gray and green tones, the girls white, gray, and muted red. A Reaper in a blue smock. He mows down all the little flowers in


\(^\text{19}\) Radycki, Diane J. “Chronology.” In Paula Modersohn-Becker... 225-226.
front of my door. I think that perhaps I, too, will not last much longer. I know now of two other pictures with Death in them; I wonder if perhaps I shall still get to paint them? 20

Modersohn-Becker’s apprehension for, or even anticipation of, death may be the reason she painted one of her most well-known works: Self Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day (1906). (Fig. 1) There is much great scholarly debate surrounding this portrait, in part due to its notoriety in art history as one of the first nude self-portraits painted by a woman (she created more nude self-portraits that same year). Though she as the subject is clearly pregnant in this piece, Modersohn-Becker would not actually become pregnant for another ten months in March 1907. The obvious question to ask is: why would she imaginatively impregnate herself through this painting?

Scholars often turn to maternal imagery, specifically the Madonna, to try and answer this question. In her 2012 article on maternal feminism, Pamela Turton-Turner briefly mentions the works of Modersohn-Becker and her contemporaries before exploring more deeply into Madonna imagery both in modern(ist) and historical contexts. While Modersohn-Becker never explicitly paints this subject, Turton-Turner illustrates an interesting duality found in modern depictions of the Madonna. This duality refers to a supposed innate animalistic desire in women coexisting with submission or innocence. 21 However, under the brush of a woman – Modersohn-Becker – the female body no longer needed to submit to these fantasies and projections of male heterosexual desire.

Rather, Modersohn-Becker’s painted body was a vehicle to explore the roughness of maternity and the ‘ugliness’ of the life cycle – subjects unexplored by men. Her own husband,
Otto, coyly remarked that she was attracted to “ugly” subjects. The word “ugly” here ultimately refers to women who are no longer virgins, for Modersohn-Becker’s maternal portraits stand in opposition to Classical Madonna (virgin mother) imagery. This ‘ugliness’ is why feminist scholars have been returning to Modersohn-Becker’s portraits of women and mothers again and again. Perhaps it is this ‘ugliness’ that makes her works so transcendent. By stripping away the superficiality of purity, we discover something much more meaningful.

Her interest in the maternal figure further diverges her works from Madonna imagery. Scholars have speculated that if Modersohn-Becker’s works can be largely accepted as a celebration of natural life, then perhaps that is why she famously painted Self Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day (1906) as pregnant, though she was not at the time pregnant herself. A witty, yet profound way to summarize this idea was coined by Anne Higonnet: her works are “pregnant with meaning.”

While this idea is strong and poetic, I offer that the reason behind this artistic choice comes down to two factors: the underlying feeling that she would die young and her belief in women needing children to be “real women.” In a passage taken from a letter dated February 8, 1906, Clara Rilke-Westhoff, a close friend of Modersohn-Becker, wrote:

Her only real desire is: not to be married. A child – she believes - is necessary for a woman to be a real woman. Almost like a theory, still she appears to have prospects for having a child, if she wants one. But these prospects can also change. And she has it all under control, so it seems.

From this we understand that Modersohn-Becker believed it imperative to bear a child before she died, which ultimately was just under two years after the composition of this letter. Additionally,

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23 Ibid., 19.
24 Quoted by Radycki, Diane J. Paula Modersohn-Becker... 134.
in the nineteenth and into the twentieth-centuries, it was uncommon for a woman to bear her first child after the age of thirty. Consequently, she likely felt the pressure of aging in addition to her personal beliefs surrounding motherhood.

Understanding both her belief in maternity’s infallible connection with womanhood, and her apprehension for death, perhaps then *Self Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* is an attempt to eternalize her body’s latent pregnant capacity. By depicting her body as pregnant, she could leave a mark on the world declaring herself a real woman by her standards without Otto ever having to impregnate her. In this sense, this self-portrait could have been the intended “prospects for having a child” which Rilke-Westhoff spoke of. Moreover, declaring her life a “short, intense celebration” is striking, prompting us to consider how pregnancy is viewed as a celebratory rite of passage in western cultures. As such, her pregnant self-portrait may also be viewed as an eternal celebration of her own life, declaring agency of her body and legacy as a woman.

Her obsession with youth and dying young is perpetuated by the Fayum mummy portraits. Alongside their startling likeness, the subjects of these Egyptian portraits are all quite youthful in appearance. It is unsurprising that Modersohn-Becker, a woman who believed she would die young and was fascinated by African art, created her self-portrait according to her aesthetic ideals of “prime” womanhood: youthful and pregnant. Youth as a subject matter is frequented throughout Modersohn-Becker’s career. She explores fantasy, growth, and play in

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26 Pregnancy and childbirth were periods of greater risk for women especially in nineteenth-century rural culture, with postpartum mortality rates being far higher than we would expect today. This looming risk is worth considering when we try and understand why Modersohn-Becker both believed she would die young, and was insistent on celebrating her young life.
these images, which ultimately invites the viewer to wonder how the innocence of a child may fare against the continual nature of time. These ideas will be explored further in section 1.4.

Her pregnant self-portrait, painted ten months before she became pregnant, implores us to question the role of time and self-imagining in Modersohn-Becker’s works. Through this piece, she broke the rules of conventional portraiture by painting her body not as it truly was, but rather as she imagined herself to be. She is painting her body in the liminal space between what is real and what she desires. I am not suggesting that this self-portrait should be read as a way to prophesize her later pregnancy, but it is worth exploring how this work, like so many of her others, exists outside the linear timeline of her life. Understanding and accepting that Modersohn-Becker’s works can move beyond a linear progression of time is imperative to the discovery of how life and death are consistently woven into her oeuvre.
1.3 Death, Decay, and Renewal

A re-imagining of the self is a recurring theme we find throughout her career. Perhaps in an unlikely way, we find a form of self-imagination right at the onset of her artistic career through tree imagery. In a journal entry from the late summer of 1897, she writes:

Worpswede, Worpswede, you are always in my thoughts. The atmosphere pervades me to my smallest fingertip. Your powerful big pines! I call them my men: broad, knotted and heavy and tall, yet inside them, fine, fibers and nerves. That’s how I imagine the ideal artist. And your birches: delicate, slender virgins who please the eye. With a languid, dreamy grace, as if life hadn’t unfurled for them yet. They are so ingratiating, one has to surrender oneself to them, one cannot resist. There are also some that are quite masculinely bold, with strong, straight trunks. They are my “modern women”.... And your willows, your old knotted trunks with silvery leaves. You rustle so mysteriously and tell of times long gone. You are my old men with silvery beards.27

This passage, though lengthy, is worth exploring to unpack the somewhat unusual nature by which she approached the natural world around her. The most obvious peculiarity is the direct gendering of different types of trees. Pine trees, according to Modersohn-Becker, are men: intimidating on the outside, but vulnerable within. She goes on to equate these conditions to the ideal artist – though it is unclear whether she intends this to mean that the ideal artist is a man, or if the ideal artist has a hardened exterior with a more emotional, soft interior.

Birches she declares as virgins whose lives “hadn’t unfurled for them yet.” It is impossible to read this phrasing without thinking about how abruptly short her own life was cut. Only ten years into her professional artistic career, and eighteen days into biological motherhood, had her life really “unfurled” before her? Her anticipation of dying young, as explored in Section 1.2, suggests that she knew her life’s narrative would remain incomplete – cut short before she could declare an ending on her own terms. This, among many other reasons,

27 Journal of Paula Becker [late summer 1897], in M-B/Fischer 1979, 102. Quoted by Radycki, Diane J. Paula Modersohn-Becker... 95.
is why investigating the role of time, both in her life and biography, is so fascinating and complex. Because her life never fully “unfurled” before her, it is up to art historians to piece together her legacy.

She goes on to declare that some birches are her “modern women.” Though, these modern women are the ones which are “masculinely bold, with strong, straight trunks.” This inversion of gender norms reflects Modersohn-Becker’s complex relationship with femininity, and how she approached modern womanhood. Progressives of this time period generated the term “New Woman,” which we understand as someone “who came of age between 1890 and 1920 and challenged gender norms and structures... while also denoting a distinctly modern appearance that contrasted with Victorian ideals.”

Modersohn-Becker qualifies as a New Woman due to her being a young adult at the onset of this period (she turned twenty-four in 1890), she challenged gender norms by her works rejecting the expectations of the male gaze, and she herself found marriage and sex to be unexciting.

Radycki asserts that this passage “reverberates with nineteenth-century symbolism,” and that it is “tempting to read [her] trees [painted in the years following this passage] as figures,” or as portraits. According to Radycki, this is due to the influence that Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) had on her career; an influence which reinforced in her the idea that brushwork is what makes a painting seemingly come alive, or vibrate. Moreover, the orientation of her canvases was often vertical – the orientation more common for portraits than traditional landscapes.

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28 Here, gender norms refer to a man-woman gender binary, as this was the widely accepted theory and presentation of gender in western visual arts and culture during the time frame this study is concerned with.
30 Radycki, Diane J. *Paula Modersohn-Becker*... 95-96.
31 Ibid., 95.
32 Ibid., 99.
submersion of portrait qualities into her landscape paintings contributes to the relevance of a
discussion of landscapes (trees) in a project concerned with portraiture.

Along with the influence of Cézanne, I assert that the work of Caspar David Friedrich
(1774-1840), specifically his 1822 *Solitary Tree (or Lone Tree)*, should be considered in
discussions of how to judge Modersohn-Becker’s trees as ‘true’ landscapes or portraits. *(Fig. 2)*
Friedrich, a German Romantic landscape painter, changed the function of the tree as part of a
composition in *Solitary Tree*. Traditionally, trees were used as a way to frame the border of a
canvas, a tradition which dates back to the Classical and Baroque eras.\(^3\) However, in *Solitary
Tree*, this tree has shifted from being an element of the landscape to the very subject of the
composition. Friedrich’s tree is mysterious and dangerous in its gnarled construction but is not
reminiscent of his compositions of similar elements (mountains, grasslands, water, etc.). Instead,
this tree (likely an allegory due to its shape mimicking the Crucifix) stands alone – just as
someone would stand alone for a portrait.

A similar distinction between being a landscape *element* and a compositional *subject* may
be found in Modersohn-Becker’s 1899 *Zweistämmige Birke vor Landschaft* (Birch Tree in a
Landscape). *(Fig. 3)* Here, the tree emerges from the sketch-like background in a golden light.
Though the tree splits in two directions, it does not symmetrically move across the canvas,
suggesting that it should not be viewed as a framing element. Even more significantly, this
distinction between an element and a subject is found in her 1901 *Birkenstämmle vor Landschaft*,
(Birch Trees in Front of a Landscape). *(Fig. 4)* Now even lacking leaves, the trunks and their
bark have become the focus of this piece. Also, the nomenclature change, from 1899 “in a

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\(^3\) Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "Caspar David Friedrich, *Solitary Tree (or Lone Tree)*," in Smarthistory, December 4, 2015, accessed February 9, 2022, [https://smarthistory.org/caspar-david-friedrich-solitary-tree-or-lone-tree/](https://smarthistory.org/caspar-david-friedrich-solitary-tree-or-lone-tree/).
landscape” to 1901 “in front of a landscape,” is significant. Considering that this latter work was painted after her first trip to Paris where she saw the works of Cézanne, among other French modernists, we can acknowledge this work as one done by a more matured, worldly Modersohn-Becker. She was an artist who now had the confidence to pull her trees out of the landscape, so to say, and place them in front.

Additionally, landscape as a genre was incredibly important to the Worpswede artists. For these artists, landscape was “a trope for human desires, for defining experiences of transcendence and change. In landscape the Worpswede artists were creating a credible unity, investing nature with beauty and harmony. They imagined the cycle of decay and renewal that challenges the finality of death.”

Radycki illustrates how this perspective – a Romantic imagining of the life cycle – combatted Europe’s shift towards Realism in the mid nineteenth-century. She goes on to say that despite Worpswede existing amidst Europe’s age of industrialization, the Worpswede artists “offered no shift in [artistic] perspective.” This lack of shift suggests artistic immobility, a resistance to moving forward. This resistance coincides with the Worpswede artists’ interest in primitivism, an artistic aesthetic in which Europeans viewed non-western cultures as coeval despite the progression of time.

When writing to Rainer Maria Rilke in 1901, Modersohn-Becker directly utilizes tree imagery in the written form to symbolize both his life and future growth:

*Berlin, February 16, 1901*

Dear Friend,

When I stood with the two of you [Rilke and Westhoff] in the room yesterday I was far, far away from you both. I was overtaken by a great sadness which was still with me today, dampening my high spirits. But during my nap it left me, and I began to feel that it was just a small sadness. Now it makes me happy that it has left and I’m

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34 Radycki, Diane J. *Paula Modersohn-Becker*... 99.
35 Ibid.
happy for myself and for life; and I wanted to tell you this and that I am happy for you, too, and reach out to you. Your little tree has shot up and has grown. And whoever sees it rejoices in it.

And so:

Here are greetings from one who sees it and is made happy.

This letter, laden with the complexities of remorse and joy, in an odd way reminds us of her mortality. She writes of feeling far away from those closest to her, as though her life was already slipping, as though the world were spinning too fast, and she could not keep up. Though Modersohn-Becker self-proclaims these emotions as fleeting and remedied by a nap, the ending of the letter suggests another narrative. As she writes of Rilke’s tree (his life) blooming, one wonders what was happening to her own? While such analysis can go no further than speculation, I argue that though she claims to rejoice in Rilke’s growth, the underlying message is that she feels lonely and mourns for the life she never had. The solemn tone in which she ends this letter suggests that she felt her own tree (her life) to not be growing. And, what happens when a plant stops growing? It dies.

While Radycki continues her analysis of Modersohn-Becker’s landscapes by focusing on her shifts in style and training as she moved from Worpswede to Paris (and back again), her poignant statement about the “the cycle of decay and renewal that challenges the finality of death” goes relatively unexplored. Whether or not her landscapes should qualify as portraits should not discount the reality that the collective interest of the Worpswede artists in death and life – via the decay and regrowth of the landscape around them – would permeate her artistic career until her death. Through this influence, and the on-going presence of death in her personal life, the life cycle became her most frequent subject. This notion allows us to study the

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37 Radycki, Diane J. Paula Modersohn-Becker... 99.
progressions of her artistic career as ultimately about life, death, and the spaces in between and beyond.
1.4 A Mother and Her Child

Throughout her career, Modersohn Becker painted “a total of twenty-three pictures of adult women with babies. But there are many more pictures where the pairings are nontraditional: old woman with baby and older child with baby.”38 Of these twenty-three images, nine of them feature women nursing babies, some of which are fully in the nude. Despite her being commonly referred to as a Mother and Child painter, Diane Radycki argues that it is hard to define Modersohn-Becker’s career by a subject matter which she only painted twenty-three times, compared to her overall collection that amounts to 700 painted works.39 Here, I am compelled to agree.40

Radycki also outlines that “none of the artist’s pictures of Mother and Child were painted before she was married in 1901; none were painted after she became pregnant in 1907.”41 Radycki does not extrapolate further on this statement, which is significant because between 1901-1907 Modersohn-Becker became a mother, specifically a step-mother. Though this subject matter (Mother and Child) did not emerge in her works until after she became a mother, we must remember that her interest in the life cycle (which includes both birth and maternity) did not begin in 1901. As discussed in Sections 1.1-1.4, Modersohn-Becker explored themes surrounding life and death through a variety of subject matter spanning her entire career. As such, we can utilize these Mother and Child portraits and her relationship with maternity as lenses through which to see the larger themes about life and death emerge so dominantly in her

38 Radycki, Diane J. *Paula Modersohn-Becker*... 124.
39 Ibid.
40 There is some irony to Radycki’s claim hereof not calling Modersohn-Becker a Mother and Child painter, given that the first photographic image of Modersohn-Becker in Radycki’s monograph, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: the First Modern Woman Artist*, is one of Paula with her newborn child, Mathilde. One wonders if this book were written about a male artist if the first photograph would show him with his child, as well.
41 Radycki, Diane J. *Paula Modersohn-Becker*... 124.
career. Reshaping how we understand her engagement with maternal themes allows us to study her career without the categorical limits of being called a Mother and Child painter.

On May 25, 1901, Paula Becker married Otto Modersohn. Following their eight-month engagement, she was now Paula Modersohn-Becker. She was also now a step-mother to a young girl, born 1898, named Elsbeth Modersohn from Otto’s first marriage to Helene Schröder. In other words, Modersohn-Becker became both a wife and mother to a toddler, a child who had already physically and emotionally bonded to another woman (Helene) for two years, in a period of less than eight months. This leap forward in time moves Modersohn-Becker’s life outside linear progression. In other words, she ‘skipped’ over three chapters of life which most women who have children experience: pregnancy, labor, and life post-partum. Again, we must consider how her becoming a step-mother to Elsbeth ultimately transgressed socially normative steps to becoming a mother, and how this transgression altered not only the relationship she had to her husband and (step) daughter, but to her views on femininity and motherhood.

Within the first two years of being married, she painted Elsbeth at least 10 times; far more often than Otto painted his daughter, indicating that Elsbeth and Modersohn-Becker shared a special closeness. Additionally, between 1903-1907, there are documented letters that Modersohn-Becker sent to Elsbeth, with numerous other references to the child in letters written between 1901-1902. It is likely that there are no letters written to Elsbeth before 1903 (nor after Modersohn-Becker’s death in 1907) because Elsbeth would not yet have been old enough to read. Her warm, maternal language in these letters, such as referring to herself as “Mother”

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42 She experiences these stages later in 1907 with the birth of her daughter Mathilde.
43 She also posed Elsbeth for various other portraits, though in the titles of such works the child is not named. Example: *Girl in a Red Dress* (1907)
rather than “step-mother,” disproves any speculation that she was not devoted to the young girl or interested in fulfilling the role of “Mother.” These letters may be found in Appendix 2.

What is curious, though, is that scholars concerned with Modersohn-Becker’s depictions of motherhood most often do not include in their discussions these letters which so clearly indicate maternal affection, nor her painted depictions of Elsbeth. Rather, scholars concerned with ‘figuring out’ who Modersohn-Becker was as a mother, or how she viewed motherhood, typically look to how she painted other mothers. It is possible that the tragedy of Modersohn-Becker being alive with her biological daughter, Mathilde, for only eighteen days before Modersohn-Becker’s sudden death overshadows the memory of who she was as a mother six years prior with Elsbeth. Or perhaps the estrangement between herself and her husband throughout part of her Mother and Child era makes it easy to forget that they were raising a child together. While these two reasons are possible, I argue that step-motherhood, even in the painted form, makes scholars uncomfortable. While scholars, such as Anne Higonnet and Pamela Turton-Turner, have differentiated images of the Madonna (virgin mother) from the modern mother – between the pure and “ugly” subjects, to assume Otto’s crude language – the step-mother does not easily fit in this binary.44

Ultimately, the purpose of this thesis is not to make a case for why Modersohn-Becker’s positioning as a step-mother is largely overlooked by contemporary, albeit feminist, scholars (though this would make for a fascinating future project). Instead, we must use the available scholarly material as a foundation to launch from and consider how this six-year period of 1901-

44 Further reading:
1907 and her portraits of Elsbeth Modersohn complicated her relationship with time. With close analysis, these works illuminate how playful Modersohn-Becker was with representing the age and maturity of Elsbeth. These subversive representations of age are valuable contributions to any scholarship concerned with Modersohn-Becker’s maternal works, as well as studies, such as this, concerned with her painted manifestations of time.
1.4A Elsbeth Modersohn

In anticipation of both her marriage and commencement of motherhood, Modersohn-Becker wrote to Otto about her intentions to build a home (and a life) together, and also to paint Elsbeth:

*Berlin, Eisenacher Strasse 61, February 12, 1901*

> To Otto Modersohn

> … I can't stop thinking that by this summer we'll belong to each other completely. I shall be your loving wife… And today I've been making notes on the way a house should probably be when we have build one in 10 years. I always like doing things like that, and you must, too. So many nice thoughts occur to one while doing something like that. And if one doesn't, by the time when is ready to build, one has forgotten all one's ideas. And I've been thinking about a portrait of Elsbeth with her golden curls and have been planning how the three of us will flop into some great lonely haystack and haying season, and how will play like big children. Oh, I keep imagining all these beautiful things to do. Do you, too?...

> Your Paula

The language of this letter recalls the ideas surrounding self-imagination, as explored in Section 1.2. She clearly is invested in imagining how her life will look in the future and urges Otto to do the same. Part of this imagining includes discussions of her role as a mother; she expresses longing for the three of them (herself, Otto, and Elsbeth) to play together like children, and she desires to paint Elsbeth. This letter dates seven months following the journal entry in which she directly stated: “I know that I shall not live very long.” The contrast between fantasizing about her life ten years in the future and anticipating death underscores her complex relationship with the progression of time. Perhaps, then, her domestic fantasies about the future helped her cope with her underlying apprehension of dying young. Alternatively, imagining herself playing various domestic roles (wife, mother) would have served as a more socially

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46 Ibid., 195.
normative façade she could express to other people, like her husband, while apprehending death internally.

In the early years following her marriage, Modersohn-Becker painted her step-daughter, Elsbeth, numerous times. These portraits include Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet (1901), Elsbeth in the Garden with Glass Ball (1901), Elsbeth with Blue Ribbons in Hair (1901), Das Kind (Elsbeth) (1901-1902), Five Children on a Slope, Elsbeth on the Right (1902), Elsbeth with Hens under an Apple Tree (1902), Elsbeth in the Brunjes Garden (1902), Head of a Little Girl (Elsbeth) (1902), Elsbeth with Goats (1902) and Elsbeth on a Chair (1902).

One of the earliest completed works she painted of Elsbeth is Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet (1901). (Fig. 5) The young girl is depicted by her side profile, with hair drawn back into a braid, and she holds a small daisy in her right hand. The disproportional smallness of the daisy compared to the size of Elsbeth’s hand contributes to her body’s monumentality. In other words, Modersohn-Becker chose to pull Elsbeth so far forward in the canvas that she nearly fills the whole composition just from her shoulders upwards. The close proximity that the viewer has to Elsbeth in this piece illuminates a somewhat discomforting peculiarity: her skin is clearly three different tones. Her face is pale and pearly, with suggestions of a golden light source to the left of the composition; her neck is so tanned it appears yellow; her right hand lacks any warm tones, but rather is eerily painted with reds, blues, and deep purples.

What is most unusual about this portrait is how old Elsbeth looks. In 1901 Elsbeth turned three years old – still very much so a young child. The girl in the portrait seems to be on the brink of adolescence: there are shadows under her eyes, her lips are bright red (perhaps makeup), and her bone structure lacks the soft roundness of childhood. She is also wearing a pearl necklet wrapped around her head, like a tiara. While it is possible that Elsbeth was merely playing a
childhood game of dress-up, her access to pearls, or any sort of fine jewelry, would have been a rarity in rural Germany.

Moreover, the symbolism of pearls is worth exploring to try to understand why Modersohn-Becker decided to adorn Elsbeth with such a fine piece of jewelry. Dating back to the Renaissance and Baroque periods in western art, but emerging in ancient Greek mythology, pearls have been regarded as symbols of perfection due to their spherical shape and iridescent surface. They are also associated with birth and rebirth, due to both their place as metaphors for Christ in the womb and the literal act of emerging (birthing) from the shell of a mollusk. Though subtle, we may understand the inclusion of the pearl necklet to be about the creation of life.

This idea is supported by Modersohn-Becker’s own circumstance in 1901; she had started a new chapter of her life by marrying Otto and was now partially responsible for the life of another human – Elsbeth. It is possible, then, that the dramatic aging of Elsbeth in this portrait is actually Modersohn-Becker implanting her own image unto this young girl. If we can accept the prevalence of self-imagination in Modersohn-Becker’s portraiture, then we can read this portrait of Elsbeth holding a daisy actually as a portrait of Modersohn-Becker holding a young life between her hands. Daisies are traditionally symbols of childhood innocence and joy, and this image of a child holding a daisy is one which Modersohn-Becker returns to numerous times. Suddenly a mother to another woman’s child, the fragility and significance of her responsibility may be laid out on the canvas by Elsbeth gripping that daisy.

48 Ibid.
The dramatic aging of Elsbeth in *Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet* is juxtaposed dramatically with *Elsbeth in the Garden with Glass Ball* (1901). (Fig. 6) Here, the child is painted wearing a white gown and large bonnet, clothing far more conventional for a toddler, or even an infant. Her round, plump face is more accurate depiction of a child this young. Compositionally, Elsbeth does not dominate the canvas as much as in *Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet*, but rather shares the space with the large glass ball to the left of her. The largess of this glass orb informs the viewer of the child’s small stature. Additionally, this glass orb acts as a mirror reflecting the scenery behind Modersohn-Becker (the painter). In this reflection there appears a house with golden light shining through the windows, indicating warmth and welcoming. It is unusual that this domestic setting, set far in the background, appears equally detailed to Elsbeth’s face. This lack of detailing is a radical departure from the clarity of *Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet*. One wonders if this departure was merely a stylistic exploration on account of the artist or is rather indicative of some emotional distance between the painter (the mother) and the subject (the child).

The surface of this painting is rough and uneven, due to her use of tempera paint. Tempera is a type of paint created when pigments are mixed with water-soluble binding agents, such as animal glue. The use of tempera results in the tacky, elevated surface we observe in *Elsbeth in the Garden with Glass Ball*. Paints such as tempera are incredibly long-lasting due to their composition including binding agents; the paint both seals to itself and seals to the canvas. Modersohn-Becker’s choice to work with tempera is significant since this material was also used in the creation of the Fayum mummy portraits – works she was exposed to in Paris in 1900, the year before she created this work. In these Egyptian mummy portraits, tempera along with encaustic (pigments mixed with beeswax) paints were used to ensure that the portraits would
withstand the test of time. In other words, just as the image within the portrait immortalized the deceased, the materials used to construct these portraits worked to immortalize the portrait itself. This emphasis on withstanding time is reinforced by these mummy portraits being a part of ancient funerary traditions and mumification practices, which are rooted in the art of preservation.

Modersohn-Becker’s thick, gestural paint application, and presentation of Elsbeth (stance and posture) in *Elsbeth in the Garden with Glass Ball* is similar to *Five Children on a Slope, Elsbeth on the Right* (1902). (Fig. 9) The similarities in surface texture are due to Modersohn-Becker revisiting tempera in this composition, as with the 1901 work. In this later piece, Elsbeth is again depicted in a long, flowing dress and a cap on her head (either a bonnet or sun hat). Her brushwork is gestural in both paintings, particularly in *Five Children on a Slope*, and it positions Modersohn-Becker’s style right on the edge of Expressionism. The facial features in both *Elsbeth in the Garden with Glass Ball* and *Five Children on a Slope* are blurred, indicating their presence without painting them in full detail.

*Elsbeth with Blue Ribbons in Hair* (1901) and *Das Kind (Elsbeth)* (1901-1902) present Elsbeth with traditional conventions of youth, such as in *Garden with Glass Ball* and *Five Children*. (Fig. 7 and 8) In both works, Elsbeth wears a puffy dress with blues sleeves, and her hair is adorned with blue ribbons. Compared to the first portrait examined, *Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet*, the blue ribbons are more conducive to her young age and the limited availability of luxury (pearls) in rural Germany. Though in *Elsbeth with Blue Ribbons in Hair* she has a thick, cloth headband wrapped around her head, this could have been easily made by a family member and should not be regarded as a symbol of maturity such as the peal necklet. Her apparel in both these works, as with her facial structure, is overall more appropriate to someone of such a young
age. However, From *Elsbeth with Blue Ribbons in Hair* to *Das Kind (Elsbeth)*, Modersohn-Becker has slightly elongated Elsbeth’s face, indicating aging.

*Elsbeth with Hens under an Apple Tree* (1902) follows bodily conventions of both *Five Children on a Slope* and *Elsbeth in the Garden with Glass Ball*. (Fig. 10) The child is painted as short and stout with the softness of youth. Again, her face remains somewhat ambiguous, with only suggestions of both eyes and mouth. Moreover, Elsbeth does not physically dominate this composition. Rather, a great tree emerges behind her, abundant with apples in blooming shades of green and orange. Elsbeth is flanked by hens on either side, an element which appears again in *Elsbeth in the Brunjes Garden* (1902). (Fig. 11) Though it is possible that the hens are merely a part of the rural landscape, their symbolic significance of fertility and nurturing implores us to question if they really are just a coincidental element.

*Elsbeth in the Brunjes Garden* shares many similarities with the first portrait of Elsbeth (*Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet* [1901]): she is painted outside, viewed by her side profile, hair pulled back from her face, and her head is adorned with heavy jewelry. The jewelry contrasts with her bare feet, reminding the viewer that she is just a small child. However, compared to the steadfast expression found in *Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet*, the young girl in *Brunjes Garden* seems both hopeful and curious. Her slightly open mouth and flushed cheeks are reminiscent of a child’s curiosity looking at the natural world around them. Moreover, in *Brunjes Garden*, the viewer can track her gaze down to the blue flowers, whereas in *Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet* she is looking beyond the composition. The most significant flower is not the one she is looking down upon, but rather the one which reaches up behind her. Compositionally, this flower suits the piece because it has grown as tall as Elsbeth, and its coloring reflects the rosiness of her cheeks and lips. It is odd, though, that Modersohn-Becker positioned Elsbeth next to this flower, called
Foxglove, because they are highly poisonous. Though beautiful, they can bring death. From this we understand a potential significance of this portrait may go far beyond the garden; rather, it can become an image of young life standing next to sudden death.

Foxglove garners its name because the clusters of blossoms resemble gloves, and primarily grew in areas that were thought to be inhabited by fairies; thus, they are also commonly known as Fairy Gloves, Fairy Caps, Fairy Bells, Fairy Fingers, Witches’ Fingers, and Fairy Thimbles, among others. “Another name, ‘Dead Man’s Bells’ serves to warn of the plant’s poisonous disposition.”49 Some legends told that fairies would hide themselves in the bell-shaped blossoms, others thought that a swaying foxglove was bowing down to passing fairies.50 There are endless variants of these legends depending on the region one studies, which is quite expansive since the plant is native to Europe, northern Africa, and central Asia.51 Regardless of region, we may recognize this flower as a visual representation of childhood fantasy and imagination. This relationship to fairies and childhood folklore is likely why Modersohn-Becker included this plant so dominantly in this portrait. Having spent most of her life in rural Germany, and as someone with a very powerful imagination, she likely had knowledge of the folklore around Foxglove (among other plants) and wanted to share that with her daughter, Elsbeth.

*Head of A Little Girl (Elsbeth)* (1902) revisits the soft, round facial structure observed in some of the 1901 works, but with more clarity. *(Fig. 12)* Modersohn-Becker uses tempera again, here, evident by the piece’s waxy overall appearance, and the uneven surface texture. Moreover, Modersohn-Becker has etched out thin contour lines from the painting’s surface. These etchings

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50 Ibid.
emphasize the uneven surface texture and give the overall composition a granulated appearance. This grainy look is comparable to portraits painted on slabs of wood, which was one of the primary elements used in the construction of the Fayum mummy portraits (along with linen, plaster, and cartonnage). Modersohn-Becker, as with all the Worpswede artists, was interested in emulating natural textures on the canvas’s surface, both due to this artist colony’s interest in German Romanticism and a personal desire to convey humanity through imperfect surfaces.

The final two portraits to consider are *Elsbeth with Goats* (1902) and *Elsbeth on a Chair* (1902). (Fig. 13 and 14) In both compositions, Elsbeth is depicted in a white dress with ribbons in her hair. The style of dress is comparable to both *Elsbeth with Blue Ribbons in Hair* (1901) and *Das Kind (Elsbeth)* (1901-1902). However, *Elsbeth on a Chair* is arguably a more mature composition - her figure is larger on the canvas and Modersohn-Becker has moved Elsbeth inside for the first time. This shift in setting may be understood as a shift from the freedoms of childhood play in exterior settings, to the more domestic pressures of interior settings. Additionally, in this interior setting, Elsbeth is wearing slippers on her feet. Whereas earlier, such as in *Elsbeth in the Brunjes Garden*, bare feet symbolized her youth and juxtaposed the elaborate jewelry she wore, the implantation of shoes on her feet both ages the child and restricts her from the world of imagination and dress-up.

Just as in *Elsbeth in the Brunjes Garden* (1902), Elsbeth is positioned next to a large plant – a mushroom – in *Elsbeth with Goats* (1902). Where the foxglove in the former work represents both the innocence of life (due to the connection to childhood fantasy) but also death, we may also understand the mushroom to stand in as a symbol of both growth and toxicity due to their poisonous nature. The repetition of painting the young child next to these complex representations of life suggest that Modersohn-Becker saw a correlation between fragility of her
young daughter and the fragility of life itself. Recalling that death was an ever-present force in the painter’s life, these symbols (Foxglove and the mushroom) which deposit themselves somewhere between security and danger are illuminated as intentional rather than random, and vital to the composition rather than elemental.

The portraits Modersohn-Becker paints of her (step) daughter Elsbeth following her marriage to Otto embody her complex relationship with time and aging. Her rejection of a linear timeline may be found by her painting Elsbeth older than she really was in earlier portraits, and borderline infantile in later works. This misrepresentation of the child’s age is further evidence of Modersohn-Becker’s interest in an artistic exploration of life and death. This exploration of life and death was completed by implanting symbols of rebirth, fertility, danger, and play, among others, into these portraits. The addition of new, young life through mothering Elsbeth offered Modersohn-Becker an opposition to the presence of death she experienced in her own life – the death of family members, an interest in funerary arts, and an apprehension for her own death which she expressed in the written form (as well as, I argue, her pregnant self-portrait in 1906). Moreover, by painting portraits of Elsbeth in various styles of dress, sometimes even luxurious, Modersohn-Becker could explore a set of imaginative roles that transgressed their class positioning.
1.5 Chapter Illustrations

**Fig. 1** Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*, 1906, tempera on cardboard, 101.6 x 70.1 cm. Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstrasse/Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany.

**Fig. 2** Caspar David Friedrich, *Solitary Tree (Lone Tree)*, 1822, Oil on canvas, 71 x 55 cm. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
Left, Fig. 3 Paula Modersohn-Becker, Zweistämmige Birke vor Landschaft (Birch Tree in a Landscape), 1899, Oil on cardboard, 55.4 x 42.1 cm. Busch-Reisinger Museum, Cambridge, MA, USA.

Right, Fig. 4 Paula Modersohn-Becker, Birkenstämmen vor Landschaft (Birch Trees in Front of a Landscape), 1901, Oil on cardboard, 73.6 x 46.2 cm. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark.

Fig. 5 Paula Modersohn-Becker, Elsbeth mit Perlenkette (Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet), 1901, Oil on canvas, paper, and cardboard.
Above Left, Fig. 6 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Elsbeth in the Garden With Glass Ball*, 1901, Tempera, 35.5 x 35.5 cm.

Above Right, Fig. 7 Paula Modersohn Becker, *Elsbeth with Blue Ribbons in Hair*, 1901, Oil on canvas, paper and cardboard, 49 x 39 cm.

Below Left, Fig. 8 Paula Modersohn Becker, *The Child (Elsbeth)*, 1901-02, Oil on paper, 49 x 47.5 cm.

Below Right, Fig. 9 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Fünf Kinder an einem Hang, rechts Elsbeth (Five Children on a Slope, Elsbeth on the Right)*, 1902, Tempera on Cardboard, 48.5 x 69 cm.
Above left, Fig. 10 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Elsbeth with Hens under an Apple Tree*, 1902, Oil on board, 48.9 x 38.1 cm.

Above right, Fig. 11 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Elsbeth in the Brunjes Garden*, 1902, Oil on canvas, paper, and cardboard, 71 x 89 cm.

Below left, Fig. 12 Paula Modersohn Becker, *Head of a Little Girl (Elsbeth)*, 1902, Tempera, 31.5 x 27 cm.

Below right, Fig. 13 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Elsbeth with Goats*, 1902, Oil on canvas, paper, and cardboard, 55 x 40 cm.
Fig. 14 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Elsbeth on a Chair*, 1902, Oil on canvas, paper, and cardboard, 18.5 x 27 cm.
Chapter 2. Egyptian Funerary Portraits

2.1 Historical Introduction

The Fayum mummy portraits (also called funerary portraits, or panel paintings) as an artistic practice began around 30-40 CE in the Greco-Roman period (332 BCE - 642 CE) of Egyptian history. The primary function of these portraits is rooted in the multi-millennia Egyptian mummification tradition. Rather than uproot this tradition entirely, funerary portraits were added to the pre-existing mummification process and laid atop the mummified body, covering the face. Caroline Cartwright, the Senior Wood Anatomist at the British Museum, writes that “the mummy portrait was secured in linen wrappings or in a cartonnage (layers of linen mixed with plaster) and placed over the face of the underlying mummy.”

In other words, the portrait was added atop the mummified body, masking the face. This symbolic convergence of old and new practices embodies the Greco-Romano era of Egyptian history.

This period is characterized by significant economic and social changes, such as the Roman occupation of Egypt in 31 CE and new trade routes emerging in the Mediterranean. Yet, some historic practices such as mummification persisted. This collision between ancient traditions in Egypt and European social and artistic practices contributes to why this period is so fascinating to scholars, and why, as will be explored in Section 2.3, Modersohn-Becker was drawn to these portraits. Though fascinating, this cultural collision due to Roman occupation of Egypt makes these difficult to study, for lingering questions about exactly who was creating these works and where the materials were sourced often remain ambiguous or unanswered.

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altogether. This promises great further scholarly exploration into these portraits in the decades to come.

The primary mediums used to create these funerary portraits were “encaustic [pigment mixed with beeswax] and tempera [pigment mixed with water-soluble binding agents] on wood panels, tempera paintings on linen, and painted masks and coffins of plaster and cartonnage.”

Egyptian artisans were familiar with working with linen due to the multi-millennia mummification tradition. Similarly, they excelled at working with wood. Dr. Amy Calvert writes that “Egyptian artists also used a variety of woods in their work, including the native acacia, tamarisk, and sycamore fig as well as fir, cedar, and other conifers imported from Syria. [Egyptian] artisans excelled at puzzling together small, irregular pieces of wood and pegged them into place to create statuary, coffins, boxes, and furniture.”

After sampling 180 portraits from a variety of international institutions, the most common types of wood found in mummy portraits and other Egyptian panel paintings include: Lime (Linden), Oak, Cedar of Lebanon, Fir, Yew, Sycomore Fig (not to be confused with Sycamore), Sidr, and Tamarisk. The first five wood types in this list are not native to Egypt but are European in origin. In fact, Caroline Cartwright found that non-native wood was used in 79.4% of the portraits and panel paintings in this sample. Of this 79.4%, Lime (Linden) was the most frequently used wood. This is due to two primary reasons. First, Lime (Linden) wood has a remarkably even grain, which contributes to consistent paint application and an even

57 Ibid., 17.
weathering over time. 58 Secondly, carpenters could easily cut thin panels and slightly curve the wood to fit snugly over the deceased’s face. 59 We may understand the use of European wood in the majority of Egyptian funerary portraits and panel paintings to be further evidence of the syncretism between these two cultures.

However, it is important to note that it is currently unclear the “factors determining individual wood choices” for portraits or panel paintings.” 60 This is due to a variety of reasons, such as: different artistic schools having stylistic preferences, economics (certain woods being more expensive than others due to supply availability), or even preferences of the family commissioning the portrait or panel painting. Additionally, “it is possible that some portraits were intended to be displayed in houses before being used for burial. If that is true, not all portraits needed to be on thin lime wood panels.” 61 The relative ambiguity of why unique wood selections were made again holds promise for future discoveries.

The relative rarity of these portraits, lack of serious scholarship until the 1997 exhibit *Ancient Faces: Mummy portraits from Roman Egypt* at the British Museum, and unanswered questions regarding their construction has led to erroneous nomenclature and categorizations surrounding these works. Scholars continue to judge Egypt as a pillar of western (European) visual arts culture, for Egyptian artistic and architectural elements can be seen in the Grecian and Roman empires. 62 The western claim over Egypt is also accredited to Egypt’s fall to Rome under Emperor Augustus at the Battle of Actium (31 CE), or later with Napoleon’s “Egypt

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60 Cartwright, Caroline R. “Understanding Wood Choices…” 23.
Campaign” of 1798-1801.63 This logic assumes that Egyptian art would not exist in greatness without European presence. Brian Curran rightly contradicts this:

As it stands today, the idealized and somewhat "revivalist" art of Late Dynastic [404-343 BCE] and Greco-Roman Egypt [332 BCE - 642 CE] is not favored by Egyptologists, who are attracted to the "great" periods of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, when Egyptian power and independence were at their peak. But these later productions were indeed characteristic of Egyptian art as the Greeks and Romans understood it, and it is only natural these more contemporary (and undoubtedly more immediately accessible) objects appealed to their tastes and interests.64

Approximately 100 years after the Battle of Actium, Roman Emperor Hadrian (76-138 CE) worked to reignite Rome’s interest in Egypt. His success “stimulated a second century Egyptomania that was as remarkable as was that of the nineteenth-century.”65 We understand the term ‘Egyptomania’ to mean “a fascination for Egypt…an adaptation of its aesthetics, shapes, themes and symbols by another period, originating in Roman Antiquity.”66 This Egyptomania persisted throughout the remaining three centuries of the Roman Empire.

However, after Rome’s fall in 476 CE, the architectural features, motifs, and painting styles which had been brought over from Egypt were no longer associated with their original roots.67 Rather, they were regarded as European art practices. In other words, Europe absorbed these artistic styles and techniques and claimed them as their own. It is partly for this reason that the presence of Fayum portraiture in the works of Modersohn-Becker has largely been understudied.

Egypt is also often lumped into the study of eastern cultures, referring to Egyptian art as a type of Orientalist art. This view largely stems from the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, for suddenly the eyes of the world were looking upon this cultural crossroad.68 However, it is most accurate to categorize Egyptian art as African, both in terms of geographic correctness and the stylistic exchanges we observe throughout the continent. Among the most compelling examples of this exchange were in the kingdoms of Nubia (contemporary northern Sudan and southern Egypt), which at times adhered to similar artistic practices as the Egyptians, though exchange slowed during the Nile’s arid periods as travel was more difficult.69

While contemporary scholarship works to decolonize the lens through which research is conducted, we must not neglect the presence of colonizers. The reality is that both empires were entangled with the other, trade routes being a prominent contributor to this cultural exchange. Thus, Europe’s presence in Egypt should not be overlooked, for its effects are seen in Egypt’s visual culture. The mummy portraits exemplify these effects.70 While construction of the faces followed an Egyptian measuring system, they abide by Grecian beauty standards, though “the clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry worn by the individuals represented in the panel portraits display fashions that were prevalent in the whole Roman Empire.”71 Caroline Cartwright notes that “the women, particularly, are shown with hairstyles, clothes and jewelry reflecting Roman and Greek fashions typical of the time. [And,] many of the people shown in the mummy

70 “ANCIENT FACES: MUMMY PORTRAITS FROM ROMAN EGYPT.” metmuseum.org.
portraits have been painted in a similar way to those seen on wall-paintings in Italy, for example in Pompeii.”\(^\text{72}\)

 Europeans were not yet aware of the existence of these portraits until the mid-seventeenth-century following Pietro della Valle’s (1586-1652) published account of his “travels to Persia and India by way of Egypt.”\(^\text{73}\) Not unlike other artifacts deemed “primitive”, these portraits were initially regarded as “curiosities.” It was not until the nineteenth-century when European interest in this art form sustained the desire to import these works.\(^\text{74}\) Just as in the second century of the Roman Empire, this is again due to Egyptomania. In this century, however, Egyptomania can be broken down into four primary categories: pseudo-commercialism, Egyptian aesthetics in furniture and architecture, Egyptian aesthetics in fine arts, and didactic Egyptomania, or the emergence of Egyptians collections in western museums.\(^\text{75}\) This thesis is primary concerned with the third category of Egyptomania: Egyptian aesthetics in European fine arts.

 Key collectors of Egyptian artifacts in the nineteenth-century include figures such as Henry Salt, Theodor Graf, and Robert Hay.\(^\text{76}\) Judith Barr writes that “in 1887 the discovery of hundreds of mummy portraits, which [Theodor] Graf then exported en masse and promptly exhibited in major cities across Europe and America, ignited both artistic imaginations and art historic fervor.”\(^\text{77}\) Another key figure responsible for the importation of Egyptian funerary portraits and panel paintings is William Flinders Petrie. Petrie led an excavation in Hawara.

\(^{72}\) Cartwright, Caroline. “Depicting the Dead: Ancient Egyptian Mummy Portraits - British Museum Blog.”
\(^{73}\) “ANCIENT FACES: MUMMY PORTRAITS FROM ROMAN EGYPT.” metmuseum.org.
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
\(^{77}\) Ibid.
Egypt in 1888, and later exhibited his teams’ findings at the Egyptian Hall at Piccadilly in London.\footnote{Barr, Judith. “From all Sides…” 111.}

Just as identifying the stylistic origins of these works can be challenging, tracing the provenance of Egyptian panel paintings is difficult, in part due to their rarity. Barr writes:

The relative rarity of ancient panel paintings has [meant] that post-acquisition, many portraits have been on near-constant display, precluding any comprehensive documentation of marks, stickers, stamps, or labels on their reverse. To date, these markings, often themselves of unknown provenance, are seldom referenced in museum publications or catalogs.”\footnote{Ibid., 114.}

Additionally, Barr argues that “tracing [the provenance of] a mummy portrait requires a consideration of how it \textit{may have been} described, not only how it would be labeled today.”\footnote{Ibid., 115.} In other words, proper analysis of these works and an understanding of their provenance requires scholars to consider three time periods: when they were created (30-40 – 642 CE), when they were excavated/imported to Europe (seventeenth – nineteenth-centuries), and how they are understood in the contemporary era.

Understanding that the Fayum portraits symbolized a westernized Egyptian culture, they were readily imported for they reflected aesthetics that were not entirely uncommon to the European eye. This study is only occupied with the French importation of such portraits, for these were the ones Modersohn-Becker would have seen at the Louvre Museum. These particular portraits were primarily excavated from Thebes (approximately 800 kilometers south of the Mediterranean Sea), and the Fayum region (100 kilometers southwest of Cairo). These portraits were acquired by the Louvre in the 1820s and the 1890s respectively.\footnote{Louvre site des collections. Accessed June 17, 2021. https://collections.louvre.fr/en/recherche?q=portrait%2Bde%2Bmomie.} Modersohn-
Becker only mentioned the Fayum portraits in her notes, perhaps because those were the only ones she saw, or perhaps she did not know they came from different archaeological sites.
2.2 Modersohn-Becker and Egyptian Mummy Portraits

2.2A Comparative Diagrams

Aside from the exhibition entitled *Paula Modersohn-Becker und die ägyptischen Mumienportraits* (October 13, 2007 – February 24, 2008) at the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in Bremen, Germany (a subset of the Museen Böttcherstraße), there remains no scholarship closely comparing individual Fayum mummy portraits with works created by Modersohn-Becker. This gap in scholarship is significant because it neglects how truly striking the similarities are between the portraiture of Modersohn-Becker and the Egyptian mummy portraits. These similarities matter not just to scholarship concerned with Modersohn-Becker’s artistry, but to art history as a whole because her engagement with Egyptian art pre-dates other modernist’s interest in (and misappropriation of) African art. While other nineteenth century artists did engage with Egyptian art, as a part of the cultural trend of Egyptomania, their engagements correspond more with tropes surrounding Orientalism rather than Modernist Primitivism. This precedent of Modersohn-Becker engaging with African art, originally noted by Diane Radycki, deconstructs the previously belief that Maurice Vlaminck *discovered* African art in 1906.\(^82\) A detailed investigation of the similarities between Modersohn-Becker’s portraiture and those of the Egyptian mummies builds upon the assertion made by Radycki about Modersohn-Becker’s precedent, and provides evidence of how she was able to directly infuse her modernist works with elements from ancient funerary arts.

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\(^82\) The word “discovered” here is ironic because African art existed for multiple millennia before Europeans first encountered it.
What is interesting about Radycki’s argument that Modersohn-Becker was the first modern artist to engage with African art is that Radycki does not find this engagement particularly well accomplished. Rather, she writes:

The artistic paths Modersohn Becker and Picasso explored took the two of them from Cezanne, through Degas, back to the Louvre’s famous collection of Egyptian art, especially its funerary portraits from Faiyum. They badly took (or stole) cues from ancient art. Her Self Portrait with Camellia Branch finds its gesture of a hand clasping a symbol of life to her breast in Lady Touy, an Egyptian sculpture that the artist had sketched in 1900. His [Picasso’s] Boy Holding a Blue Vase and her Self Portrait Holding a Lemon share the gesture of cupping hands holding up a round object, and the characteristic turn of the head and the skewed eyes of Faiyum portraits. All three paintings use the narrow, vertical format of Roman Egyptian mummy masks.\(^83\) (Fig. 15 & 16)

Initially, this criticism is alarming, especially coming from Radycki who is one of the foremost scholars on Modersohn-Becker. However, what this criticism ultimately reflects is the story that has been accepted by scholars for decades: that while Modersohn-Becker was fascinated with Antiquity, this fascination led to only superficial similarities between her portraits and the Egyptian funerary portraits. Dismissing these similarities as superficial, or “badly” done, neglects how formative these ancient works were in her artistic decisions following her exposure to them in 1903.

Inspired by the ongoing work of the APPEAR Project of the J. Paul Getty Museum’s Department of Antiquities Conservation, and the aforementioned exhibition Paula Modersohn-Becker und die ägyptischen Mumienportraits, I created diagrams which illustrate striking similarities between Modersohn-Becker’s portraiture and that of the Egyptian mummy portraits. These diagrams I created were directly inspired by diagrams from a 2020 essay in the APPEAR Project catalogue called “A Study of the Relative Locations of Facial Features within Mummy

\(^{83}\) Radycki, Diane J. Paula Modersohn-Becker... 145.
Portraits.” The findings of this essay are important because they outline consistent stylistic and proportional similarities among the mummy portraits.

For example, the APPEAR Project researchers found that “overwhelmingly, in mummy portraits, eyebrows, eyes, lower lips, and chins are consistently positioned higher up on the face than expected when compared with data on images of real faces.” Moreover, they discovered that the bodily position among the portraits is consistent; the head and shoulders are angled at different degrees but in the same direction. Similarly, they found that the head in the portrait is most often angled downward (to the left or right) by ~15 degrees. This downward shift is due to the neck of the deceased resting on a head rest to support the weight of the skull during the mummification process. This head rest tilts the head downward slightly (~15 degrees), which skews how the viewer’s eye perceives the location of the facial features. This altered perception of facial features is why the mummy portraits are painted with the facial features higher up on the face when compared to images of real faces.

The diagrams I have created offer visual evidence of the similarities between Modersohn-Becker’s portraits and those of the Egyptian mummy portraits. Based on the work of the APPEAR project researchers we know that the proportions and location of facial features and bodily positioning were not done by chance. Rather, consistencies among the portraits indicate that these were intentional artistic decisions determined partly by the physical mechanics involved in the mummification process. Comparing Modersohn-Becker’s work to these mummy portraits through visual diagrams allows us to see that the similarities between the two works exemplify her ability to fuse ancient artistic traditions into her own portraiture.

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84 Thistlewood, Jevon, et. al. “A Study of the Relative Locations of Facial Features within Mummy Portraits.”
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
Looking first at **Fig. 17**, on the left is a female mummy (c. 150) which arrived at the Louvre Museum in 1893; on the right is Modersohn-Becker’s *Self Portrait with Hat and Veil* (1906-07). To create this diagram, I digitally placed two portraits aside one another, enlarged the image to focus on the heads and shoulders, and added horizontal lines to map out the faces.\(^{88}\) By adding traversing horizontal lines to this diagram we see that the location of the lower chin, crest of chin, upper lip, nostrils, nose bridge, eyelid, brow bone, forehead, and hairline are in line with one another. We also observe similarities in the shape of facial features and structure. Note the cocked brows, almond shaped eyes, softly rounded chins, and pouting mouths. Moreover, Modersohn-Becker’s self-portrait occupies a similar stance that can be observed in mummy portraiture; though both the head and shoulders are angled away, they are not equiangular.

Looking now at **Fig. 18**, the same similarities emerge as the previous diagram, indicating a pattern rather than a coincidence. In this diagram, the left is a female mummy portrait (c. 180-211), and the right is Modersohn-Becker’s *Self Portrait with Camelia Branch* (1907).\(^{89}\) The facial features share locational similarities as indicated by the horizontal lines connecting the two images. Moreover, the proportions of facial features are similar; overly large, almond-shaped eyes, gentle brow arches, long nose bridges, and slender mouths. The shape of the face is also similar in both works. Resembling an inverted tear-drop, the face is broader towards the top and much narrower towards the chin. This facial shape differs from those of the previous diagram, **Fig. 17**, where the shapes were ovular with a consistent width from top to bottom. Modersohn-Becker’s self-portrait occupies a similar stance that can be observed in mummy portraiture; though both the head and shoulders are angled away, they are not equiangular.

\(^{88}\) This process was inspired by the aforementioned APPEAR Project comparative diagrams.

Becker’s adoption of different facial shapes, along with abnormal facial feature proportions, further demonstrates her engagement with Egyptian funerary portraits.⁹⁰

It is worth briefly discussing anthropometry, or the idea (as of the early twentieth-century) that racial difference can be assessed by studying the measurements of the body.⁹¹ Existing concurrently (though not as prevalent as it was deemed a pseudoscience by the 1870s) was the study of phrenology, the belief that one’s mental character could be judged by measuring the shape of the head.⁹² While it is unclear if Modersohn-Becker knew of these ideas specifically, she may have been exposed to similar ones while taking art classes. Modersohn-Becker’s adoption of Fayum facial features and proportions into her own portraiture suggests her understanding that not only were foreign art forms different in their construction, but their human subjects had physical differences, too.⁹³ Anthropometry in particular would have struck the modern primitivists, like Modersohn-Becker, who leaned into the development of an identifiable “other.”

With these ideas in mind, it is also important to acknowledge that all three diagrams are self-portraits. Examining a photographic portrait of herself next to her painted self-portraits allows us to ascertain if she viewed her facial features to be mutable, which in turn may explain why she implanted the Egyptian mummy portrait stylistic qualities and facial proportions into her own portraits. **Fig. 20** is a photograph of Modersohn-Becker. In this photograph we meet Modersohn-Becker as she was: a young, fair woman with soft facial structure and strikingly large eyes. She is poised in front of a leafy background, though the location is ambiguous. In

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⁹⁰ **Fig. 19** offers an additional example of a comparative diagram between a portrait done by Modersohn-Becker and an Egyptian funerary portrait.

⁹¹ Anthropometry has other contemporary uses, such as human identification or studying bodily composition.


⁹³ The idea of separate races based on skin color of geography has been refuted by anthropologists, scientists, and other academics.
one of her most prominent self-portraits, *Self-Portrait with Camelia Branch* (1907) from Fig. 16, the viewer sees the same large, almond eyes, thin eyebrows, and bulbous nose. Her thin photographed lips have been enlarged on the canvas, and her skin tone darkened, with deep shadows under her eyes. She applied paint in uneven strokes, which appear as rough striations. The resulting texture is as though her image is laid atop coarse stone.

The drastic changes in skin tone are something we also observed in the portraits of Elsbeth from Section 1.4A. Similarly, the shifts in the representations of Elsbeth’s age (discussed in Section 1.4A) suggest that Modersohn-Becker viewed portraiture, not only self-portraiture, to be dependent on the painter’s artistic vision rather than realistic reflections of the person’s “true” image. While there is clear likeness of the subject being the same person in her portraits, Modersohn-Becker demonstrates an ability and a willingness to modify her own appearance, suggesting to us that she viewed her appearance to be mutable. Evidence of her altering her own facial features, as well as those of other subjects she paints, helps to explain why her image appears different in painted versus photographic representations of Modersohn-Becker. Moreover, understanding that she viewed facial physiognomy to be mutable supports the argument that her portraits, namely self-portraits, reflect the artistic qualities of the Egyptian mummy portraits.

2.2B Paint Application and Texture

Paint application, medium, and technique is another avenue through which to compare the portraiture of Paula Modersohn-Becker to the Egyptian mummy portraits. The primary painting mediums for the Egyptian mummy portraits were encaustic or tempera. When using encaustic, the Egyptians would heat a metal spatula and drip the waxy-paint material onto the canvas. In
the modern era, encaustic was mixed with turpentine oil so that it could be used at room
temperature and packaged into tubes for wider distribution.\textsuperscript{94} Not as much information is known
about the ancient application technique of tempera.\textsuperscript{95} However, it is favored by some artists for
two primary reasons. First, when the tempera has a high oil content, the drying time is slow
(allowing for modifications) without leaving a film on the surface. Secondly, it is an easily
moldable material (with a brush, spatula, or fingers) which allows for the painter to achieve a
textured surface or to add in thin texture lines while the paint is drying.

\textbf{Fig. 12}, \textit{Head of a Little Girl (Elsbeth),} 1902, exemplifies Modersohn-Becker utilizing the
waxy texture of the tempera paint to implement thin-line etchings in the painted surface. These
fine etchings contour the face, hair, and clothing of the subject, as well as express the labor and
processes it took to create this composition by showing individual brush, or spatula, markings.
Her use of tempera in an era where oil was the dominant painting medium indicates her interest
in implementing ancient Egyptian artistic practices into her modernist works.

The heavily textured surface of her portraits also reflects the graininess of Egyptian funerary
portraits which emerges in those works due to being painted on wooden slabs. To reiterate from
Section 2.1, funerary portraits and Egyptian panel paintings were most commonly painted on
Lime (Linden), Oak, Cedar of Lebanon, Fir, Yew, Sycomore Fig, Sidr, and Tamarisk.
Moreover, non-native wood was used in over 75\% of these works.\textsuperscript{96} Although these woods were
selected due to their smooth surfaces and malleability, overtime the texture and grain of the
wooden slab would emerge forth more dominantly as the paint lost its opacity due to natural

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{94}] Stamm, Rainer, Paula Modersohn-Becker, and Angelica Hoffmeister-zur Nedden. “Kroß, Kraus, Knusperig:
Enkaustik, Tempera Und Die Maltechnik Ägyptischer Mumienportraits Im Werk Von Paula Modersohn Becker.”
Essay. In Paula Modersohn-Becker Und Die Ägyptischen Mumienportraits: Eine Hommage Zum 100. Todestag Der
\item[\textsuperscript{95}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{96}] Cartwright, Caroline R. “Understanding Wood Choices…” 17.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
degeneration. In much of Modersohn-Becker’s portraiture and self-portraiture, we observe rough surface texture due to the medium and instruments used (ex. tempera and metal spatula), and her multidirectional brushstrokes. (Ex. Fig. 15 and Fig. 17) In none of her portraits can we observe an even complexion throughout the composition, indicating her intentions to represent skin as coarse.

2.2C Accessories and Adornments

Along with the similarities in facial structure, shape, proportion, paint application, and bodily positioning as I have outlined above, we must also consider the decorative elements which contribute to the compelling aesthetic similarities found when comparing the works of Modersohn-Becker to Egyptian funerary portraits. These decorative elements include jewelry and hair accessories, such as wreaths or veils.

Section 2.1 introduced the idea that the Egyptian portraits reflect the Greek and Roman fashions (including jewelry) of the time. This reflection is most prominent in portraits of women and is a compelling example of the cultural fusion that occurred during Rome’s occupation of Egypt. Consistently in Egyptian mummy portraits, women are depicted wearing elaborate jewelry. This includes gold or pearl earrings, and large, often numerous necklaces made from gold, pearl, gems, or stone. Examples of this type of jewelry may be found in the aforementioned diagrams (Fig. 17-18). Archaeological investigations into the use of elaborate jewelry in funerary arts suggest that jewelry was utilized as a status symbol, especially when

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97 Cartwright, Caroline. “Depicting the Dead: Ancient Egyptian Mummy Portraits - British Museum Blog.”
precious metals or gemstones were used. There has not yet been a study that proves (or disproves) whether the jewelry in the funerary portraits was in fact owned by the deceased’s family. It is most likely that the inclusion of such elaborate jewelry was a way to help prepare the soul of the deceased for death, for the ancient Egyptians believed that such provisions preserved the deceased’s social status and way of life, even in the afterlife.

While jewelry in the early twentieth-century was transitioning to the art nouveau style, Modersohn-Becker maintained her preference for more traditional pieces with large stones. This contrasts with the art nouveau style of jewelry popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, which is characterized by soft lines, curved shapes, and pastel colors. Her favorite materials in jewelry were amber and stone, and the pieces she wore were large and heavy. Amber, in particular, is closely associated with Modersohn-Becker as it appears as a necklace in multiple of her portraits (ex. *Self-Portrait Nude with Amber Necklace* [1906] and *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* [1906]). Her fixation on this amber necklace is interesting for amber is a fossilized tree resin known for its preservative properties. In a literal sense, it embalms whatever is trapped inside, similar to the Egyptian mummies she was so fond of. This illustrates yet another way in which Modersohn-Becker’s fixation on life and death permeated her everyday existence and appearance.

The secondary decorative element that appears in both Modersohn-Becker’s and the Egyptian mummy portraits are hair accessories, specifically wreaths. Wreaths worn on the head may be understood as a symbol for life and death due to their circular shape, and the endless winding of the greenery and flowers, implying cyclical movement.

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99 Stamm, Rainer, et. al “Schmuckstücke: Die Wertschätzung Der Accessoires.”
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
commonly wore these wreaths to weddings, celebrations, or gatherings honoring the deceased. The most common types of greenery used in their composition were ivy, olive, and palm branches. When honoring the dead, however, evergreen twigs would be added, for evergreen is a symbol of the everlasting soul. For celebratory gatherings, wreaths were intertwined with violets, mint, myrrh, lilies, or roses.

Wreaths, and other similar hair accessories, are prevalent in much of Modersohn-Becker’s portraiture. Early examples of circular hair accessories include Elsbeth in *Elsbeth in the Brunjes Garden* (1902) wearing a wreath of woven greenery atop her head. Similarly, *Girl with Yellow Wreath and Daisy* (1901) features a young girl wearing a floral wreath. *Elsbeth with Pearl Necklet* (1901) features a circular hair piece made of pearls, and in *Elsbeth with Blue Ribbons in Hair* (1901) the child has a cloth headband wrapped around her head. Because these portraits were made before Modersohn-Becker encountered the Egyptian mummy portraits in 1903, I am not suggesting that they were directly inspired by ancient inspiration. However, I am suggesting that these early examples are evident of her interest in traditional women’s hair accessories even before she encountered the Egyptian predecessors in 1903. Moreover, I assert that these ancient accessories are another reason why she was so drawn to the Fayum images at the Louvre, seeing echoes of her own emerging practice in them.

A later example of her use of wreaths in portraits includes *Self-Portrait with Red Floral Wreath and Necklace* (1906/1907). The work closely resembles the portrait qualities that have been discussed in relation to the Egyptian funerary portraits. The enlarged eyes, thin brows, long nose bridge, slender mouth, elaborate necklace, downward tilt of the chin, and

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102 Stamm, Rainer, et. al “Schmuckstücke: Die Wertschätzung Der Accessoires.”
103 Ibid.
104 There are no easily distinguishable flowers in this wreath, so it is challenging to decipher any further symbolic significance.
shoulders tilted away from the painter are all congruent with stylistic components found in the Egyptian works. The slightly asymmetrical eyes are also striking, for this is a quality we can also observe in the Egyptian mummy portraits, albeit in a more subtle way. Some viewers and critics find her asymmetrical eyes to be quite somber-looking, likely due to the heavy eyelids that are incorporated in much of her self-portraiture. However, the lack of other compositional elements or body posture suggesting somberness indicates that we may interpret her heavy eyes as being contemplative, or curious about the world around her.

Moreover, *Self-Portrait with Red Floral Wreath and Necklace* features Modersohn-Becker adorned with a red floral wreath (roses?) atop her head. Finally, she created this work using tempera, which, along with encaustic, was the most common medium used in Egyptian funerary portraits. A floral wreath and heavy jewelry appear again that same year in *Seated Girl Nude with Flower Vases* (1906/1907), though the layout of this composition is so different from the other portraits in this thesis that it is challenging to make a compelling comparison. *(Fig. 22)* That being said, it is worth noting to show that jewelry and floral wreaths were prominent in her later portraiture.¹⁰⁵

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¹⁰⁵ It is worth also noting that in *Seated Girl Nude with Flower Vases* (1906/1907) we find Foxglove framing the girl’s image on both sides of the composition. Recalling that Foxglove symbolizes the interplay of childhood fantasy and danger, it is significant that Modersohn-Becker again utilizes this symbol in a portrait of a child.
2.3 Influences and Inspiration

Following an investigation of how Modersohn-Becker’s portraits are both aesthetically and structurally similar to the Egyptian mummy portraits, we must now consider what factors that prompted her to be inspired by this ancient art form. Considering the impact of the people she socialized with, the culture surrounding European Egyptomania, and the Egyptian art she had access to while studying in Paris allows us to ascertain how strong of a pull she felt towards Egyptian art.

Arguably the two groups of people who had the most influence on her artistic decisions were (1) members of the Worpswede artist’s colony and (2) people whom she met in Paris, or whose art she saw in Parisian museums. These “Worpsweders” included: Otto Modersohn, Rainer Maria Rilke, Clara Rilke Westhoff, Fritz Mackensen, Heinrich Vogeler, and Martha Vogeler. Of those she met in Paris, she corresponded with figures such as Emil Hansen Nolde, Clara Rilke Westhoff, Henri Rousseau, and Bernard Hoetger. Moreover, scholars, such as Diane Radycki, have outlined that many of her greatest Parisian influences were artists whose work she saw, but never met. These figures include Rembrandt, François-Auguste-René Rodin, Paul Gauguin (particularly the collection held by Gustave Fayet), Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, and Pablo Picasso.

The Worpswede colony, founded in 1884, embodied the back-to-nature movement that emerged in the nineteenth-century in opposition of the mass urbanization of Europe and the increasingly influential bourgeois culture. Some Modernists of this era developed a sort of “bourgeois phobia,” which was a reaction to the bourgeoisie (and the middle class) creating a
strong sense of “otherness” out of the lower class and rural communities.\textsuperscript{106} In response this divisive social culture, German modernists (namely the Expressionists) created art that “imagined folk simplicity of spirit and unity with nature [and] expressed a longing on their part to escape the complication of urban industrialized middle-class life.”\textsuperscript{107} This desire to escape mass industrialization prompted the rise of bohemia and a belief that returning “back to nature” was the way to uncover one’s “‘correct’ sense of self” and create art that reflected true human experiences.\textsuperscript{108}

Heavily influenced by both Modernist Primitivism and German Romanticism, the “Worpsweder’s” desire to return “back to nature” prompted their interest in the cyclical nature of life and death, as explored in Section 1.3.\textsuperscript{109} Moreover, we must not forget that though these artists were living in rural conditions in the colony, many of them, like Modersohn-Becker, had very comfortable class positionings. This transient ability to flit between social classes ultimately came down to their desire to live in certain – rural, peasant, folk – aesthetic conditions. These conditions were viewed to be more natural, a term we now understand to be laden with primitivist influence. This desire for a more natural life coincided with a fascination with the past, for the natural past stands in opposition of modernity. While the fulfilment of aesthetic roles may be called quite performative, that should not overshadow the influence that these aesthetic conditions had on both the artists living in them and the art that emerged from it. Modersohn-Becker’s fascination with aesthetics and aesthetic roles will be returned to in Section 2.4.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 209.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 208.
\textsuperscript{109} We understand “modernist primitivism” to be a European aesthetic movement rooted in fascination with cultures and arts deemed primitive, primarily those of African or Oceanic origin, which resulted from a need to justify colonial exploration and conquering in non-western regions.
Apart from her husband, Otto, the most influential “Worpsweder” in Modersohn-Becker’s artistic career was Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet whom she met in 1900, and who would later marry her closest friend, sculptor Clara Westhoff, in 1901. Both in Worpswede and Paris, Modersohn-Becker and Rilke socialized frequently and wrote letters to each other often. One of Rilke’s most successful literary accomplishments was the *Duineser Elegie* (the *Duino Elegies*), a collection of ten elegies that he began to write in 1912 following his 1911 trip to Egypt. This collection of poems is mainly set in the Egyptian underworld, and explores themes of suffering, mortality, and the transition of life to death. The *Duino Elegies* are evidence that Rilke, a man who held great influence in Modersohn-Becker’s life, was similarly interested in Egyptian culture and ideas surrounding life after death.

Though the *Duino Elegies* were written after Modersohn-Becker’s death, her companions expressed interest in Egypt during her life, as well. In fact, Clara Rilke Westhoff travelled to Egypt in the beginning of 1907, which was eleven months before Modersohn-Becker died. While abroad, Rilke wrote to his wife urging her to take notes of what she sees at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.\(^\text{110}\) He expressed interest in aesthetics, and aesthetic roles, in these letters, as well. On January 20, 1907, he wrote that “we create images out of ourselves, we make use of every opportunity to become creators of worlds…”\(^\text{111}\) It is unclear why Modersohn-Becker did not accompany Rilke Westhoff on this trip to Egypt. One wonders if she had gone on this trip, which lasted until mid-March of 1907, if she would have gotten pregnant with Mathilde (March 1907) and died (November 1907) that same year of complications from childbirth.

Modersohn-Becker’s trip to Paris in the spring of 1903 marks a significant turning point

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\(^{111}\) Ibid., 74-75.
in her developing interest in antiquity. It is during this trip that she began sketching replicas of ancient Egyptian sculptures, and in her letters she beings writing about feeling inspired by ancient cultures. (See Fig. 23-24) Writing to her husband, Otto, on March 9, 1903, she said:

This time it seems to me as if the Louvre has grown even larger. The world of ancient art has opened up completely to me for the first time, a world that seemed so cold to me, perhaps because of all those false imitations and the worshiping and the way people always carried on about it. It's becoming clearer and clearer to me that antiquity and the sense of the classic have a powerful closeness to nature. This proximity to nature, and the one who preaches is getting closer and closer to it, that is Rodin.  

This “powerful closeness to nature” would have particularly resonated with an artist like Modersohn-Becker who spent the majority of her life living in rural Germany. Moreover, this relationship between a closeness to nature and antiquity (the past) echoes the ideology of the back-to-nature movements she was familiar with.

Along with the people with whom Modersohn-Becker interacted, to understand the factors influencing her career we must now consider the Egyptomania that saturated European culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. One avenue through which she was exposed to Egyptomania was by the increasing popularity of Egyptian collections emerging at art museums and in private collections. Judith Barr writes that “Egyptian funerary portraits and shrouds began gaining a greater prominence within European private collections only in the early nineteenth-century.” Over time, the Berlin Museum, Louvre, British Museum, and the Egypt Museum in Turin emerged as the most important collectors of Egyptian art and artifacts in the western hemisphere.  

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113 Barr, Judith. “From all Sides…” 111.
114 Bishop, Paul. “‘An Solchen Dingen Hab Ich Schauen Gelernt’”…66.
Along with the growing collections of Egyptian artifacts circulating through Europe, Egyptomania was most prominent in the social culture surrounding world fairs and ethnographic showcases of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. These fairs and showcases displayed not only art and artifacts from non-western regions, but animals, plants, and indigenous peoples, as well. Raymond Corbey writes:

The Paris World Fair of 1878 was the first one in which many people from non-Western cultures were exhibited, in specially constructed pavilions and "native villages" (village indigène). The display of 400 natives from the French colonies Indochina, Senegal, and Tahiti met with huge success, as did the exhibits of indigenous peoples from Java, Samoa, Dahomey, Egypt, and North America itself at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.115

These “native villages” of the late nineteenth century transitioned to a style of display, known as panoramas, in the 1900s. Panoramas were “a particularly intriguing fantasy produced at the 1900 Paris Exposition… the illusion of travel to distant places. A technological miracle, the "distant Visions" or "Visions Lointaines" provided the spectator with simulated world tours.”116 For example, “on the Trocadero [in Paris] in 1900 one could walk through the Pavillons des colonies françaises: Martinique, Tunisia, Senegal, Dahomey, the Ivory Coast, and so on.”117 These panoramas overwhelmed the visitors’ senses and appealed to the European’s desire to experience the exotic, if only from the comfort and familiarity of the streets of Paris. Benedict Burton writes:

Panoramas made some pretense at being educational, but unlike the dioramas in the exhibit halls of the main fair, they tended toward the sensational, the mythological and the fantastic. In a sense they were caricatures of the serious exhibits. They exploited the sensational as though it were an educational or scientific display.118

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117 Ibid., 233.
This sensationalized, pseudo-scientific style of display ultimately hindered the viewer’s understanding of the non-western world by providing them with a very skewed, exploitive interpretation of it. Moreover, panoramas worked to condense the near-infinite number of non-western cultures into a singular category of “other.” This distinction between the west and the “other” ultimately led to false representations of the world outside Europe and increased the interest of middle and upper-class Europeans in the idea of the “exotic.”

To formulate a complete picture of the lasting impression that this trip to Paris had on Modersohn-Becker’s career, we must also consider the physical conditions of the Louvre Museum while she was visiting it. What was on display for her to see? How were these artifacts being displayed? To answer these questions, we can look to the history of the development of the Musée Charles X (Department of Egyptian Antiquities) at the Louvre. The Musée Charles X was inaugurated by King Charles X (hence the name) on the fifteenth of December of 1827 under the director and famed Egyptologist, after his deciphering of the Rosetta Stone, Jean-François Champollion. Originally, the novel Department of Egyptian Antiquities occupied nine rooms on the first floor of the Sully Wing, but it has expanded to cover two floors. The original architects assigned to this project were Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, who had both already been working on the Louvre for over two decades.119 The architectural and design plan was as follows:

[Percier and Fontaine] linked the nine rooms together harmoniously with high openings suggesting triumphal arches, stucco imitating pink and white marble, and gilding to highlight the architectural details…The ceiling decorations were done by the greatest painters of the period, such as Antoine-Jean Gros, Horace Vernet and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. The overall theme was antiquity, but the individual scenes ranged in inspiration from Egypt, Greece and Rome to medieval and Renaissance artifacts.120

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120 Ibid.
The ceiling was adorned with immense painted works such as Abel de Pujol’s *Egypt Saved by Joseph* (1826), or the *The Apotheosis of Homer* by Jean-Paul Balze and Raymond-Joseph-Antoine Balze (1855).\[121\]

These immense works, which rely on allegory and storytelling, would have captured Modersohn-Becker’s active imagination. Her comment about the Louvre “grow[ing] even larger” and “open[ing] up completely to [her] for the first time” suggests that not only was her world view expanding as she was spending more time away from home and in urban areas (Paris), but her sense of self, and her sense of mortality, was changing.\[122\] By engaging with Antiquity through the study of ancient art she was confronting the past in more tangible ways than she ever could before. With this perspective, we can acknowledge that her time in Paris in 1903 was a critical turning point in her development as an artist interested in depicting life and death through portraiture. In other words, after she saw painted depictions of death – through Egyptian funerary portraits and panel paintings – she began to conceptualize and recreate her version of life after death with more conviction and a more serious artistic drive. This opening up of her world through this introduction to Antiquity embedded her portraiture with a new vitality and distinguishes her works from those of her contemporaries.

\[121\] This work replaced Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ 1827 *The Apotheosis of Homer*.

2.4 Transgressing Time

Scholars who have written about Modersohn-Becker’s maternal portraits offer compelling perspectives on Modersohn-Becker’s interest in the life cycle. It is well understood how compositions featuring the Mother and Child subject are about creating and sustaining life. Scholars like Anne Higonnet, Diane Radycki, and Stewart Buettner have all opened doors for gender theory approaches to Modersohn Becker’s engagement with this subject. Ultimately, though, conversations about the life cycle in Modersohn-Becker’s oeuvre most often start and end with her maternal portraits painted between 1901-1907. While these conversations are substantial to what we now know about Modersohn-Becker, who for many decades was known only for her letters and journals, this limiting approach to her career leaves three significant gaps: first, the portraits she painted of her daughter, Elsbeth; second, that themes surrounding the life cycle are prevalent in more genres of her career than just maternal portraits; third, to truly understand the prevalence of the life cycle in her oeuvre is to reject a linear progression of time, and to accept that Modersohn-Becker was capable of transgressing such linear boundaries through her paintings.

This first gap was addressed in the first chapter of this thesis in Sections 1.4 and 1.4A. In those sections, I discussed that there is a plethora of portraits of her daughter, Elsbeth, that have been consistently lacking in the scholarly conversations about Modersohn-Becker’s’ maternal portraits. In addition to trying to bridge this gap, I demonstrated through visual analysis how life and death are joined together in these compositions through symbolic projections of death.

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123 Further reading:
Higonnet, Anne. “Making Babies, Painting Bodies…”
positioned next to a young child. Moreover, I discussed the radical changes in how Modersohn-Becker conveys Elsbeth’s age, despite these portraits being painted within a few years of one another. This disregard for more naturalistic aging provides evidence of Modersohn-Becker’s ability to think about growth beyond linear limits. In other words, by painting Elsbeth both far older and far younger than she was at the time the compositions were created, we understand that for Modersohn-Becker both facial features and self-image could be mutable.

The second gap, that themes surrounding the life cycle are prevalent in more genres of her career than just maternal portraits, may be addressed when we consider the influence of Worpswede in conjunction with ancient Egyptian funerary arts she encountered in Paris. Section 1.3 discussed how her time in Worpswede helped to lay the foundation for her critical thinking about life and death. Section 2.2 discussed how she utilized this foundation to study Egyptian mummy portraits and implement these artistic practices into her portraits through proportional similarities, bodily positioning, decorative elements, medium, and surface texture. Critical thinking about life and death (growth and decay) in conjunction with an interest in ancient funerary traditions helps us to understand her art to be imaginative projections about the future and the afterlife.

Themes surrounding the life cycle permeating more than her just maternal portraits is supported by the biographical evidence of her attire and gifts exchanged on her wedding day. When Modersohn-Becker married Otto Modersohn in 1901 she gifted Otto a “forever wreath” entwined with yellow flowers. She also wore a wreath to the ceremony, though this one had myrrh woven into it. While historically myrrh has been utilized as an offering at celebrations – for example, Christians believe that a king brought myrrh to the birth of Jesus Christ – it is most

124 Stamm, Rainer, et. al “Schmuckstücke: Die Wertschätzung Der Accessoires.”
often symbolically connected to death, mourning, and burials. This connection accounts for why myrrh is present in funerary traditions across various cultures. It is odd, then, that Modersohn-Becker wore a symbol of death and mourning on the day of her wedding. We know that she was excitedly awaiting her wedding day by the letters she wrote (refer to Section 1.4A), so it does not seem wholly fair to speculate that she was mourning the “death” of her freedom and individuality. Perhaps then we may recognize the presence of myrrh at her wedding to be another way that she is acknowledging the interconnectedness of life and death. Just as the wreath represents the continuity of the life cycle by its circular, woven composition, the inclusion of myrrh at her wedding connects this celebration of life and new beginning with a closeness to death.

This idea of interconnectivity is critical to addressing the third gap, that to truly understand the prevalence of the life cycle in her compositions is to reject a linear progression of time, and to accept that Modersohn-Becker was capable of transgressing such linear boundaries through her paintings. Among the most prominent examples of this transgression is in Fig. 1, her Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day (1906). In this composition, per Section 1.2, I argue that she broke the rules of conventional portraiture by painting her body not as it truly was, but rather as she imagined herself to be, for she was not really pregnant at the time it was painted. This direct example of self-reimagining is particularly compelling when we know that she believed she would die young – a belief that was tragically fulfilled when she died eighteen days postpartum. Self-reimagining offered Modersohn-Becker a way to record her story on the canvas as she wanted to tell it. In other words, she could eternalize her own image as pregnant, without needing her physical body to be pregnant. Her self-reimagining disrupts how western
scholarship typically approaches the life cycle, and instead forces us to address that her body on
the canvas can exist beyond traditional progressions of time.

Self-reimagination is also present in her *Self-Portrait with Red Floral Wreath and
Necklace* (1906-07), which I believe makes one of the most compelling comparisons of a self-
portrait to Egyptian funerary portraiture. (Fig. 21) As mentioned in Section 2.2C, Modersohn-
Becker was interested in hair wreaths and traditional styles of jewelry that could similarly be
found in Egyptian funerary portraits. In this work specifically she is wearing an amber necklace,
an element we also observe in her *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*. Amber is a fossilized
resin that entraps and preserves whatever is inside (small insects or animals, plant material, etc.).
In that sense, we can interpret it as a material used to immortalize substances against the
progression of time. Wearing a preservative substance around her neck is evocative of her
interest in “living on” after death. Alternatively, we may interpret it as a way for her to reconcile
with and prepare for her own death. Ideas of preservation and preparation for death were likely
influenced by her engagement with Egyptian funerary arts.

The large, crooked eyes are the most startling element of this composition, for they invite
the viewer to get lost in them. Contrasting the vacant blue background, the viewer feels even
more drawn in to them. Their crooked, unbalanced nature reminds us of Modersohn-Becker’s
willingness to distort her own image in her self-portraits. It is also significant that she appears
unclothed in this work, though it is not classified among her nudes. Seemingly adorned only by
the necklace and floral wreath, her body below her neck is shockingly flat and lacking
dimension. Diverging dramatically from some of her other nude self-portraits that celebrate
female curvature, this composition stands apart from that group due to the lack of any defined
forms below her neck. This lack of bodily definition reinforces the viewer’s attention on her jewelry, wreath, and eyes.

Just as with the amber necklace, a symbolic convergence of life and death appears in Fig. 22, *Seated Nude Girl with Flower Vases* (1906-07), created in the same timeframe as *Self-Portrait with Red Floral Wreath and Necklace*. These two works being painted at the same time is significant as they contain similar compositional elements, despite their subject matters being different. In both this portrait and the aforementioned self-portrait, the figures are adorned with heavy jewelry, floral wreaths, and are unclothed. Nudity is particularly important in the *Seated Nude Girl with Flower Vases* for this subject is a child. Though it is challenging to accurately estimate her age due to her rigid figure and impassive face, her lack of breasts suggests that she is pre-pubescent.

Just as in an earlier portrait of her daughter, Elsbeth, we find foxglove emerging prominently in the background of this composition in shades of pink and indigo. This complex flower, with significance as both a medicinal remedy and an element in children’s folklore, reminds the viewer, albeit subtly, of the presence of death due to foxglove’s poisonous nature. The viewer may also sense danger in the discomforting imagery of the solitary black flower the subject holds in her right hand. Unmatching the other floral arrangements, it is unsettling that the young child holds something both dark and mysterious. *Seated Nude Girl with Flower Vases* in coincidence with *Portrait with Red Floral Wreath and Necklace* provide further evidence of Modersohn-Becker’s ability to transgress time in her portraits and explore the interconnectivity of life and death.
To conclude, building upon the foundation laid by other scholars, this thesis offers an expanded approach to how we may consider the presence of the life cycle in Modersohn-Becker’s portraiture. Throughout the two chapters of this thesis, I utilized visual analysis, primary written evidence, and secondary sources to compile an argument of how her fascination with time led to her ability to paint transgressive renditions of life and death on her canvases. Acknowledging the interconnectivity of life and death in both her real life and in her compositions helps us to understand how these painted works are capable of moving beyond linear conventions of time. Through reimagining the self and other subjects, juxtaposing representations of life with symbols of death, as well as embedding her self-portraits with ancient stylistic practices, the transgressions of time in Modersohn-Becker’s compositions are illuminated.

Future research into the career of Paula Modersohn-Becker must commit itself to expanding our understanding of the life cycle in western epistemology. She productively complicates our understandings of the interconnectivity of life and death, offering an expanded perspective on the role of time to current and future scholars. When the transgressions of time in Modersohn-Becker’s compositions are illuminated, we find numerous doors of inquiry waiting to be opened as to both how and why these transgressions were accomplished. Specifically, future investigations into this topic should consider the mathematical measurements and proportions of her compositions, something I was unable to accomplish due to my inability to access these works in person. Studying the dimensions and proportions of her compositions may allow future researchers to ascertain if the heads in her portraits occupy the same 15-degree downward tilt as in Egyptian funerary portraiture. While the visual diagrams I created offer compelling
suggestions of proportional similarities, this analytic approach could make the argument more persuasive.
2.5 Chapter Illustrations

Above left, Fig. 15 Paula Modersohn Becker, *Self-Portrait with Camelia Branch*, 1907, Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 61.5 cm. Located at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany.

Above right, Fig. 16 *Lady Touy, Head of the Harem of Min at Thebes*, Egyptian New Kingdom, end of the 18th dynasty. Wood, height c. 33 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris, France.
Fig. 17 Diagram Left: *Female Mummy Portrait*, Roman Period, c. 150, Encaustic painting on basswood, 19 x 36 cm. Located at Louvre Museum, Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities; arrived 1893. Right: Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self Portrait with Hat and Veil*, 1906-07, Oil on canvas, 89.6 x 79.8 cm. Located at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in The Hague.

Fig. 18 Diagram Left: *Female Mummy Portrait of a Woman with Jewelry*, Roman Period, c. 180-211. Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1918, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Right: Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Camelia Branch*, 1907, Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 61.5 cm.
Above left, Fig. 19 Diagram, Left: Partial Reconstruction of a Female Mummy Portrait, Roman Period, c. 175-225, Tempera with gold leaf gilding on linden wood, 37 x 6 x 0.3 cm. Located at Louvre Museum, Paris, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities; arrived 1893; excavated in the Fayoum Region, date unknown. Right: Paula Modersohn Becker, Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace, 1905, oil on canvas, 34.5 x 27.3 cm. Located in the collection of Paula Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung.

Above right, Fig. 20 Portrait photograph of Paula Modersohn-Becker. Date unknown.

Above left, Fig. 21 Paula Modersohn-Becker, Self-Portrait with Red Floral Wreath and Necklace, 1906-07, Oil tempera on canvas, 50.4 x 45.2 cm. Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover, Rut-und Klaus-Bahlsen-Stiftung © Landesmuseum Hannover.

Above right, Fig. 22 Paula Modersohn-Becker, Seated Nude Girl with Flower Vases, 1906-07, Oil on canvas, 89 x 109 cm. Located at the Von der Heydt Museum in Wuppertal, Germany.
Above, Fig. 23 Paula Modersohn-Becker, Tracing, 1903-05. According to Löwenwächter from the Serapium in Memphis, 30th Dynasty, Louvre.

Below, Fig. 24 Paula Modersohn-Becker, Tracing, 1903-05. Sacrificial bearer.
Appendices

Appendix 1. Biographical Timeline

1876 Born Minna Hermine Paula Becker on February 8, 1876

1888 Becker family moves to Bremen, Germany, from Dresden

1892 Lives in England with relatives from April – December; attends co-educational art school in London

1893-95 Attends Teacher Training Seminary in Bremen

1896-97 Attends Drawing and Painting School of the Association of Women Artists in Berlin

1897 Moves to Worpswede art colony in northern Germany; meets Otto Modersohn; professional career as an artist begins

1897-98 Returns to Drawing and Painting School of the Association of Women Artists in Berlin

1898 Return to Worpswede; meets Clara Westhoff and Fritz Mackensen

1899 Shows nine compositions in three-person exhibition at the Bremen Kunsthalle

1900 January – June: Attends Academie Colarossi, attends Ecole de Beaux-Arts, attends the Salon of the Societe des Artistes Francais and the Exposition Universelle, meets Emil Hansen (Nolde), attends World Fair in June, returns to Bremen in mid-June; July: Return to Worpswede; September: Meets Rainer Maria Rilke in Worpswede, engagement to Otto

1901 January – March: Attends cooking school in Berlin; April: Rilke and Westhoff marry; May: Modersohn and Becker marry; November: Father, Carl Woldemar Becker, dies

1902 Estrangement from Rilkes

1903 Return to Paris; sketching Egyptian funerary portraits at the Louvre Museum; reunite with Rilkes

1905 Spring: Return to Paris; attends Academie Julian, sees Rembrandt etchings in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Otto joins her in Paris, with her sister and the Vogelers; Fall: increased interest in Gauguin and Van Gogh

1906 March – October: Attends Ecole des Beaux-Arts, sees the Salon de Independants, meets Henri Rousseau; June: Otto arrives unannounced in Paris; July: Rilke leaves Paris, they never meet again; September: Reconciles with Otto; November: Exhibits four paintings in Worpswede, positive review by Gustav Pauli in local paper
1907 **March**: Pregnant, returns to Worpswede with Otto; **July**: Summer holiday with the Hoetgers; **November**: Gives birth at home to daughter Mathilde (Tillie) on November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, dies 18 days later on November twentieth.
Appendix 2. Timeline of European Egyptomania and the Importation of Egyptian Mummy Portraits

332 BCE Beginning of Greco-Roman Period in Egypt

31 BCE Egypt falls to Roman rule under Emperor Augustus at the Battle of Actium

30-40 CE Mummy portraits emerge as an artistic practice in Egypt

117-138 CE Roman Emperor Hadrian ignites Egyptomania in Roman Empire

642 CE End of Greco-Roman Period in Egypt

1615 Pietro della Valle acquires two mummy portraits in Saqqara, outside Cairo

1798-1801 Napoleon Bonaparte’s “Egypt Campaign” stimulates Egyptomania

1799 Discovery of Rosetta Stone by Pierre François Xavier Bouchard; Europeans become interested in Egyptian hieroglyphics

Early 1800s Minimal interest shown by European buyers in mummy portraits

1822 Rosetta Stone deciphered by Jean-François Champollion

1827 Egyptian Department opens at the Louvre Museum in Paris

1820s Louvre Museum begins collecting mummy portraits from Thebes

1840s Fictional books about Egypt begin circulating through European markets

1865 Carl Richard Lepsius becomes Keeper of Egyptian Collection in the Berlin Museum; one of the “Fathers of Egyptology”

1869 Suez Canal opens between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea

1876 Volkerschaus, ethnographic showcases, display Nubians and Egyptians in Germany, France, and England

1878 World Fair in Paris; indigenous peoples from Egypt on display for French consumption

1880 Egyptology becomes a department at many European universities; large quantities of textiles are excavated at cemeteries in Panopolis (Akhmim), Antinoë (Sheikh Ibada), and of the Fayum region

1880s Fictional books about Egyptian life increase in popularity in Europe
1887 Theodor Graf emerges as primary buyer and collector of mummy portraits

1888-1889 Roman era cemetery is uncovered in Hawara, Egypt, by W. M. Flinders Petrie

1890s Louvre Museum begins collecting mummy portraits from the Fayum region

1900 World Fair in Paris; Albert Gayet displays textiles excavated from Egypt (Antinoë); emphasis on Panoramas as a style of display
Appendix 3. Letters to Elsbeth Modersohn

Cologne, February 10, 1903

My dear little Elsbeth,

Now Mother is sitting in the train! And has a dreadfully long trip until this evening, when you will be going to your little white bed. Then Mother will be in the great city of Paris. And just imagine, one no longer says meine lüttje Deern [German – my little girl] there, but one says ma petite fille [French – my little girl]. That does sound funny, doesn’t it? Has your old cough finally flown out the window again? I give you a sweet kiss and also one for dear Father [Otto], who must surely be back with you by now…

Paris, February 13, 1903

My dear little Elsbeth,

These five kittens are supposed to say good morning to you next Sunday and tell you that your mother is thinking about her little girl very much in this big city of Paris. There is a big garden here where many hundreds of children are playing with their balls and dolls. You would also have a lovely time playing here, but it is loveliest of all to do it in W[orpswede]. I kiss you. Your mother.

Paris, February 22, 1903

My little Bettine,

Today is Father's birthday, because it's also Sunday many, many bells are ringing here in Paris, for there are many, many churches here. When all the big and little bells ring together it sounds simply beautiful. Here in Paris are a vast number of white horses, you know, like the ones Mother is always painting. I always look at them good and hard… Yesterday evening I saw a bicyclist who had tide a red torch to his bicycle, and I thought, when it is summer again you will also be able to ride along with your Lantern and sing as you go. I kiss you devotedly. Your letter was so lovely. I thank you many times for it. Your dear Mother.

Paris, February 27, 1903

My dear little Elsbeth,

Today I have seen some wonderful animals again. There were birds which were very pink, and just imagine, they are as tall as Father and completely pink. In their legs are as long as Father's walking stick and their necks are as long as your little

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125 Modersohn-Becker, Paula. *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Letters and Journals*… 290. This letter does not have a complete translation.
rake. There were five of them and they were all eating together out of one dish and not even fighting. Are you still taking lovely walks with your dear grandmother? It's probably lovely...A lovely kiss: X, and one for your Father and Grandmother from your

Dear Mother¹² eight

Paris, March 14, 1903

My dear little Snow White,

When Mother comes home again she will be able to tell you a whole heap of things. Just imagine, I was on a steamship, just like the ones you have seen on the Weser in Bremen. we passed under five bridges. And each time we came to 1, the steamer made a very loud “Toot.” it was lovely. And then I saw a donkey today. He stood before a wagon and looked at me and said, “Hee-Haw.” and then I looked at him. But I didn't say anything to him. And then all the trees here are getting their dear little green leaves. And the birds are singing. are they doing that where you are comma two question mark you must show me everything when I am back period a lovely kiss from your Mother.

XXXXXXXXX¹² nine

Paris, March ?, 1905

My little Elsbeth, there are so many people walking in the streets here and so many horses and so many velocipedes, you couldn't possibly go out alone; Mother would have to look out for you. The little birds here in the city sing so beautifully and many people throw bread out for them and feed them. That looks so pretty. A kiss from your Mother.¹³ zero

Paris, 49, boulevard Montparnasse, February 27, 1907

My dear little Elsbeth,

I have waited so long before thanking you for the lovely pictures you sent me for my birthday. They made me so very happy. I have already pinned the one of the windmill on the wall. And whenever I happen to glance at it, I think of you. And now it won't be very much longer before we're all together again and celebrating Easter in Worpswede… grandmother wrote me that you were first in your class. Are you still? That would be very fine. We have to learn when we are small, so that we will know things when we are grown up. Right now I am painting a little Italian girl. Her name is Dolores Cataldi. Isn’t that a splendid name?

Now farewell, my dear Child. Say hello to Grandmother for me and to Uncle Kurt and Uncle Henry.

The repeated “X”s indicates kisses.
¹³ one Modersohn-Becker, Paula. Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Letters and Journals…313.
I send you a big kiss.

Your Mother\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{131} Modersohn-Becker, Paula. \textit{Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Letters and Journals}...417.
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Journal of Paula Becker [late summer 1897], in M-B/Fischer 1979, 102


