Review: Jacoba van Heemskerck: Truly Modern


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The Dutch expressionist, Jacoba van Heemskerck, is not a familiar name among American artists. She is better known in Germany and the Netherlands, where her work exists in museum collections. This English-language catalog for an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Netherlands, which houses the largest collection of her work — paintings, works on paper, mosaics, and stained-glass windows — sets out to remedy this omission. Little appears to have been published on this artist. There are a few monographs in German or Dutch and scant solo exhibitions of her work, more of which have been included in group shows such as the expansive La beauté exacte: de Van Gogh à Mondrian: art, Pays-Bas, XXe siècle at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris.

Jacoba van Heemskerck: Truly Modern couples the artist’s biography with her work. Born in The Hague in 1876, she began painting lessons with her father, a naval officer and seascape painter. In her early years, van Heemskerck worked in the circles of emerging modern artists, briefly training in Eugène Carrière’s Paris studio and exhibiting in the Salon des Indépendants with Mondrian and other Dutch artists. The catalog offers her paintings rendered in Cubism or Luminism, a Dutch style of Pointillism. Her best-known work, Two Trees (1910), demonstrates this style and her attachment to color play. Abandoning these styles, she began to favor color relationships and found Expressionism to her liking. Like many artists of this moment, she embraced theosophy and anthroposophy, the latter an active form of spiritualism engaged with
nature. Van Heemskerck spent a year of training and correspondence with Mondrian as their work influenced one another, yet ultimately diverged. Van Heemskerck remained drawn to spiritualism, depicting forms that varied between organic fluidity and geometry, or a blend of both. Her painting series of pyramidal sails standing tall like altarpieces — *White Sailing Ships on a Lake* (1915) — remains the most successful and resolved of these works. However, van Heemskerck found her longest devotion to, and affiliation with, *Der Sturm* and its founder Herwarth Walden. The catalog provides images of her lithographs and woodcuts appearing on the journal’s covers and pages from 1914-1923. By the early 1920s, she had turned to stained glass and began to create captivating designs such as the windows of the Marinekazerne Amsterdam. Had van Heemskerck not died in 1923 at the age of 47, it seems likely she would have contributed much more in this area of decorative design.

Having brought to our attention the work of this relatively neglected artist, it is regrettable the catalog lacks an index, an omission that makes searching for subjects of discussion difficult. However, the publication does provide a chronology and the first English translation of Willem Zeylmans van Emmichoven’s 1917 essay on the artist’s work.

Recommended for all art libraries.