

# Portrait of Young Genius

The Mind and Art of Marie Bashkirtseff

**Joel L. Schiff**

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# Preface

Joel L. Schiff's biographical study – *Portrait of Young Genius, The Mind and Art of Marie Bashkirtseff* – examines the various strands of this complex individual's life providing excellent insight into presenting Bashkirtseff both as a figure trying to find her own identity while functioning in a social environment that was quite demanding and complicated. This book admirably succeeds in demonstrating where Bashkirtseff came from, the pressures exerted on her by her family, her nascent feminist interests, combined with her insatiable desire to succeed at what was eventually her calling – as a visual artist with prodigious talent that placed her within the ranks of genius, one of the key hallmarks that other artists and critics looked for in an artist.

Each section of the book examines moments in Bashkirtseff's life either in the Ukraine, or in any number of urban cities from Paris to Vienna and Nice where Bashkirtseff was often dragged by her family, eventually focusing on the ways in which Bashkirtseff displayed her genius as a painter at the Académie Julian in Paris or on her own under the stimulus of Jules Bastien-Lepage and his brother, the architect Émile Bastien-Lepage. The sections of this book coalesce to provide a haunting picture of a young girl maturing while under the pressures of a family that did not understand her and trying to function creatively while under a death sentence from tuberculosis. Drawing on a wide range of sources Schiff effectively reconstructs Marie Bashkirtseff's life providing clues from her Journal that shed light on the varied examples of her career as a painter. And with the excellent reproduction of works in the latter section of the book a reader has a solid opportunity to see a broad range of her work under good conditions.

Since her death Marie Bashkirtseff's reputation, knowledge about her career, and creative work has continually grown. Her Journal is often required reading for anyone trying to understand

the position of a woman in the visual arts in the nineteenth century. More than this, her tragic demise, at age twenty-five, made her a martyr. Her love for Bastien-Lepage, who also died of stomach cancer, at a young age, presented these individuals as star-crossed lovers whose lives belie the fact that their creative works were significant. This book will go far in helping readers understand what both were trying to accomplish often with little time to do this and at considerable cost and personal anguish. It is a gem-like publication.

Gabriel P. Weisberg, Professor of Art History, University of Minnesota, Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres (France)

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# Introduction

*To die! My God, to die! To die without leaving anything behind me? To die like a dog, like hundreds of thousands of women whose names are barely engraved upon their tombs?<sup>21</sup>*

A fortune teller once told Maria Bashkirtseff that her son would be ordinary but her daughter, Marie, would be a star. And indeed Marie's life did become that of a dazzling light shooting across the firmament of human existence. Her Journal of more than a century ago, translated into multiple languages and still read today, reveals a woman who was vain, egotistical, melodramatic, envious, and jealous. But she was also an intellectual, a feminist, and at times she thought herself a genius.

Marie began her Journal in January 1873 when she was fourteen years of age. Her *raison d'être* for writing it, captured in the excerpt below, written some years after she started the Journal, was that she should be remembered as someone who lived fervently and passionately:

*What good is lying or striking poses? Clearly, I want to remain on this earth by whatever means. If I do not die young, I hope to remain as a great artist, but if I die young, I want my journal to be published. It can't fail to be interesting. Does my anticipation of being published, the idea that someone will read me, spoil – destroy – the only merit of such a book? Certainly not. First of all, I wrote for a very long time without thinking of being read. And then, it is just because I hope to be read that I*

*am absolutely sincere. If this book is not the exact, absolute, strict truth, it has no reason for being.*

Six months after penning this testament, Marie died of tuberculosis. She was twenty-five.

In the words of translator Mathilde Blind, Marie's Journal depicts 'the drama of a woman's soul ... [of] a girl with the ambition of a Caesar.' Four-time Prime Minister of Britain, William Gladstone, called the Journal 'A book without parallel.' Who but Marie could write the following with such poignancy age seventeen?

*To think only that we live but once, and that this life is so short! When I think of this my senses forsake me and my mind becomes a prey to despair! We live but once! And I am losing this precious life, hidden in obscurity, seeing no one. We live but once! And my life is being ruined. We live but once! And I am made to waste my time miserably. And the days are passing, passing, never to return, and carrying a part of my life with them, as they pass.*

*We live but once! Must this life, already so short, be still further shortened, ruined, stolen – yes stolen – by miserable circumstances?<sup>2</sup>*

Yet in her short, fevered life, this young woman of noble birth with the golden-red hair<sup>3</sup> and gray eyes set out on her own initiative to learn English, German, Italian, Latin, and Greek, music and drawing. After an illness damaged her voice, putting paid to a hoped-for singing career, she enrolled at the *Académie Julian* in Paris, studying under some of the greats of the French Academy and winning distinction for her work as a painter of French *réalisme*.



**Fig. 1.1** Marie Bashkirtseff, *Walery*, Paris, 1875. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nice.

Given Marie's fertile, questioning mind, it is only natural that she became incensed by the injustices accorded her sex. She wrote incisive pieces for the French feminist monthly *La Citoyenne* and corresponded with the eminent writer Guy de Maupassant. Her journals were an inspiration for those of Katherine Mansfield, Anaïs

Nin, the suffragette Kate Parry Frye, and Mary MacLane, among others.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to understand this most exceptionally complex individual, a biographical section is featured, followed by selected excerpts from her Journal, each juxtaposed with one of her fine paintings. Thus, it is hoped that some of the incandescence that was the life of Marie Bashkirtseff will continue to burn to this day.

*At this moment Mlle. Bashkirtseff appeared. I saw her but once. I saw her only for an hour. I shall never forget her. Twenty-three years old, but she appeared much younger. Rather short, but with a perfect figure; an oval face exquisitely modeled, golden hair, dark eyes kindling with intelligence – eyes consumed by the desire to see and to know everything – a firm mouth, tender and thoughtful; nostrils quivering like those of a wild horse of the Ukraine.*

*At the first glance Mlle. Bashkirtseff gave me the rare impression of being possessed of strength in gentleness, dignity in grace. Everything in this adorable young girl betrayed a superior mind. Beneath her womanly charms, she had a truly masculine will of iron, and one was reminded of the gift of Ulysses to the young Achilles – a sword hidden within the garments of a woman ...*  
*Mary J. Serrano, 1891*

## Endnotes

- 1 All quotes are taken with permission from *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, translated by Katherine Kernberger, Fonthill Press, 2012, unless otherwise stipulated.
- 2 From: *Marie Bashkirtseff – The Journal of a Young Artist*, translated by Mary J. Serrano, Cassell & Co., New York, 1889.
- 3 Fellow student Breakell p.112, comments that Marie’s hair was ‘almost flaxen ... despite the ‘red gold’ of Miss Blind’s version of the Diary.’ The ‘red gold’ hair reference is found in Mathilde Blind’s Introduction to *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, Cassell & Co., 1890, p.vii.
- 4 Having read Marie’s Journal, Anaïs Nin was quoted as saying: ‘I understand her (Bashkirtseff) so well I wonder if I am like her.’ The *Story of Mary MacLane* (1902) was enormously successful in America and in its first month sold 100,000 copies.

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*As it is, Marie Bashkirtseff, fighting against environment, fighting against disease, fighting against fate, has sent from her passionately throbbing girl's heart a cry that will re-echo through the ages – the cry of spirit struggling to cast off the bonds of matter; the cry of Genius proclaiming, in its bonds, its right to stand among the gods.*

... *Mary J. Serrano 1891*



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