

Misia Sert

Paris Art Studies - Misia, Queen of Paris (Misia Godebska 1872-1950)

1872 – Born in St Petresburg daughter of the fashionable Polish sculptor Cyprien Godebski and Sophie Servais, daughter of the celebrated Belgian cellist Adrien-François Servais. Her mother dies at childbirth leaving two more orphans Misia's brothers, Franz and Ernest. Misia will be brought up by her maternal grandmother in Hal near Brussels in a highly musical family one of whose close friends is Franz Liszt. Her father remarries Matylda Rosen-Natanson and settles in Paris.

1874 – Birth of Misia's half brother Cyprien (Cipa) to whom she will remain close all her life. The Godebskis buy a country house, La Grangette, in Valvins near Fontainebleau. Misia will later be educated at the convent of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart (current Rodin museum) which she will absolutely loath. It's there, however, that she will be given her first piano lessons by the composer Gabriel Fauré.

1889 – Creation of the artistic and literary review, La Revue Blanche, by the brothers Alexandre, Thadée and Alfred Natanson.

1892 – Misia's first public concert at the Théâtre d'Application in Paris remarked in the Revue Blanche.

1893 – Misia marries in Ixelles, Brussels her cousin by alliance Thadée Natanson (1868-1951) lawyer, businessman and journalist of Jewish-Polish origins. The couple settles in rue Florentin in Paris where Misia will hold her first "salon". Her guests are the collaborators of the Revue Blanche: Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, Félix Valotton, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Romain Coolus, Octave Mirbeau, Tristan Bernard, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel…

1894 – She appears on an advertising poster for the review designed by Bonnard. Natanson names the art critic and anarchist Félix Fénéon as editor of the review. Misia hears for the first time Debussy's opera Péléas and Melisande in a private recital by the composer. She accompanies the avant garde theater troupe of the director Lugné-Poe to Norway where she meets the playwright Henrik Ibsen.

1895 – Appears as fashionable ice skater on a Revue Blanche poster by Toulouse-Lautrec.

1897– Thadée and Misia abandon La Grangette which is too small for their numerous summer guests for a bigger house, Le Relais, at Villeneuve-sur-Yonne. The couple visits Venice, which is to become Misia’s favorite city outside of Paris.

1898 – Death of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, end of an era. Misia invites all the poet’s friends to Villeneuve after the funeral. La Revue Blanche publishes Valotton’s woodcut series “Intimités”.

1899 – Birth of Cipa’s daughter Marie-Anne (Mimi) who will become Misia’s favorite niece.

1900 – Misia meets Alfred Edwards, immensely wealthy businessman and newspaper publisher. He proposes to her husband Thadée who is nearly bankrupt to run Hungarian mines he’s invested in. He assiduously courts Misia.

1902 – Premiere in Paris of Debussy’s Péleas et Melisande.

1903 – Revue Blanche closes. Misia and Thadée separate against a background of increasing financial difficulties.

1904 – Misia and Thadée divorce.

1905 – Marriage of Misia and Alfred Edwards. They move to a sumptuous apartment on rue de Rivoli. Edwards builds a yacht in honor of his wife christened Aimée (after her initials: M,E) on which she will invite artists and friends for luxurious river cruises.

1906 – Edwards begins love affair with the actress Geneviève Lantelme. He writes a play, “Par ricochet” based on his experience of separating Misia from her former husband Thadée.

1907 – Misia separates from Edwards. Vacations in Normandy close to Vuillard, Tristan Bernard and the actor Lucien Guitry. Travels in Italy in the company of playwright Romain Coolus.

1908 – The artist Jean-Louis Forain introduces Misia to the Catalan painter José Maria Sert who sweeps her off her feet into a passionate love affair. Premiere in Paris of Mussorgsky’s opera Boris Godunov produced by Serge Diaghilev. Misia is mesmerized by the production. She is introduced to Diaghilev by Sert, they talk through the night and meet again for lunch the next day. She will become his closest friend and patron in Paris.

1909 – Misia divorces Edwards, he will pay her a generous monthly pension. Death of her father Cyprien Godebski. First Ballets

Russes season at the Théâtre du Châtelet.

1910 – Edwards marries

Genevieve Lantelme. Misia introduces the fledging writer and poet Jean Cocteau to Diaghilev. She leaves rue de Rivoli and moves to an old apartment on the quai Voltaire for which Bonnard paints four wall panels.

1911 – Lantelme drowns

mysteriously during a cruise on the Aimée. First London season for the Ballets Russes financed by Lady Rippon.

1912 – Scandal at

the Théâtre du Châtelet of Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of the Faun inspired by the Mallarmé poem and choreographed and danced by Nijinsky.

1913 – First ballet with

modern costumes, Jeux. Scandal of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring at the theater des Champs Elysées choreographed by Nijinsky. Serts spend summer with Diaghilev in Venice. Break up of Nijinsky and Diaghilev after his marriage to Hungarian dancer in Argentina. Diaghilev promotes new dancer Leonid Massine.

1914 – Death of Alfred

Edwards of pneumonia. The composer Eric Satie dedicates Trois morceaux en forme d'une poire to Misia. Thadée Natanson marries Reine Vaur. After the outbreak of war Misia with Cocteau organize ambulance convoys to the front.

1916 – Misia travels in

Italy and Spain. She moves to the hotel Meurice.

1917 – Scandal of opening

of Parade at the Théâtre du Châtelet, first "Cubist" ballet with sets and costumes by Picasso, script by Jean Cocteau and music by Eric Satie. Misia meets the modiste Gabrielle Chanel at the home of the actress Cécile Sorel. Chanel will become her closest woman friend in the post war period. She introduces Chanel to Paris artistic circles. Misia sells quai Voltaire apartment and travels with Sert and the ballets russes in Spain.

1918 – Death of Debussy,

Misia sees him on his death bed. Assists with Sert at marriage of Picasso and the ballerina Olga Khokhlova in Orthodox Russian church in Paris.

1919 – Death in a car

accident of Arthur Capel, Chanel's lover and protector.

1920 – Misia's niece

Marie-Anne Godebska works as a model for Chanel. Marriage of Misia and Sert in St Roch in Paris, honeymoon in Venice

in the company of Chanel. Misia introduces Chanel to Diaghilev. She will finance the new production of the Rite of Spring in the new choreography by Massinè.

1924 – First season in Monte Carlo of the ballet russes, creation of Les biches, music by Poulenc, choreography by Bronislava Nijinska with sets and costumes by Marie Laurencin and dedicated to Misia. Misia visits New York for the opening of a Sert exhibition at the Wildenstein gallery.

1925 – Sert meets the Russian sculptress Roussy Mdivani who becomes his mistress. She moves in with the Serts at the hotel Meurice. Misia discovers the affair during a summer holiday in Biarritz, Roussy attempts suicide and then leaves for New York.

1926 – Misia and Sert are in New York.

1927 – Misia, Sert and Roussy are back together and travel to Italy. Misia leaves for New York to help Bolette Natanson daughter of Alexander, brother of their former husband Thadée to set up a decorating firm. She makes glass trees out of crystal and crystal rock. Divorces Sert who moves into the Lutétia hotel with Roussy.

1928 – Misia moves to sumptuous ground floor apartment on rue de Constantine (esplanade des Invalides) where she will live until 1946. It is decorated with mother of pearl furniture, silver lamé curtains, Chinese porcelain, a vitrine of her hand painted fans and paintings by Toulouse-Lautrec, Vuillard, Bonnard and Renoir. Sert asks for a religious annulment of his marriage. Civil marriage with Roussy. Misia stays with Chanel and her lover the duke of Westminster in England before leaving for cruise with Sert and Roussy in Greece and Turkey.

1929 – Misia is in New York in the company of an aspiring Russian fashion designer, Fira Benenson. She is introduced to jazz and New York night life. In August rushes to Venice to see Diaghilev who is dying. She will organize and partially finance his funeral and burial on the island of San Michele.

1930 – Religious marriage of Sert and Roussy at Spanish church in Paris. Misia accompanies Chanel to Hollywood where she has a contract to design the clothes for 4 Sam Goldwyn films.

1933 – Misia gives a public concert at the Continental hotel in Paris. Plays 8 Francis Poulenc songs dedicated to famous Poles, one of which is dedicated her and another to her niece Mimi.

1937 – Death of Misia's half-brother Cipa. Sert sides with Franco's side in Spanish civil war. Shows "Martyrs of the Motherland" at Vatican pavilion (which officiously represents Franco's Spain) in 1937 Paris World's Fair.

1938 – Death of Roussy at 32 suffering from tuberculosis and morphine addiction. Misia looks after her in her final days. After Roussy's death Sert resumes a liaison with Misia though they keep separate apartments. Misia has serious problems with her eyes, she becomes closer to her niece Mimi.

1939 – Misia writes a text for the catalog of a Diaghilev exhibition at the Musée des arts décoratifs. After the outbreak of war Sert is named Franco's ambassador to Vatican and collaborates with Germans after occupation of Paris. Misia visits him every day in his rue de Rivoli apartment and helps him with his correspondence.

1940 – Premiere of Cocteau's celebrated play Les Monstres sacrés, inspired by the triangular relationship of Sert, Misia and Roussy.

1944 – Sert has an affair with Ursula van Stöhrer, the German ambassador's wife.

1945 – Death of Sert from hepatitis. Misia inherits his apartment on rue de Rivoli with all its contents. Her niece, Mimi, now divorced moves in with her along with Sert's former secretary the journalist Boulos (Pierre Ristelhueber) who supplies Misia with morphine. She begins seeing Chanel after having distanced herself from her during the war years. Loses an eye after a haemorrhage, recovers in Swiss clinic but has a heart attack on her return to Paris.

1946 – Writing of Chanel's memoirs in collaboration with Paul Morand. The chapter dedicated to Misia is particularly cruel.

1947 – Last trip to Venice, she is photographed by Horst.

1949 – Death of her niece Mimi in a car accident. Misia is arrested for using drugs, spends 24 hours in prison.

1950 – Death of Misia in her apartment on rue de Rivoli. Chanel does her mortuary toilette. A religious ceremony is held in the Polish church in Paris. She is buried in the cemetery of Samoreau near Valvins next to her niece Mimi.