

PORTRAIT OF A LIFE



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Melanie Klein and the Artists

Roger Amos



PHOENIX
PUBLISHING HOUSE
firing the mind

First published in 2019 by
Phoenix Publishing House Ltd
62 Bucknell Road
Bicester
Oxfordshire OX26 2DS

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-912691-41-8

Edited, designed, and produced by Communication Crafts, East Grinstead

Printed in the United Kingdom



www.firingthemind.com

*For Anne and our children
Howard, Rachel, and Josephine*

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PREFACE

This exploration of the portraits of Melanie Klein stemmed from a chance observation: the Melanie Klein Trust is in possession of a brief, silent cine film showing Melanie Klein walking in her sunlit garden at Clifton Hill with a man who, at the time, was unidentified. It was my wife who realised that this man was, in fact, the sculptor Oscar Nemon, identified from a photograph in Phyllis Grosskurth's biography of Klein. Why was Oscar Nemon in conversation with Melanie Klein in her garden in 1939? What did the artist and the psychoanalyst make of each other? Why did Klein "loathe" the sculpture he created of her, and why did she ultimately destroy it? In the process of trying to find answers to these questions, I came across many other artists, both painters and photographers, who had created portraits of Klein throughout her long life. Although Melanie Klein was famously reticent about her personal life, guarded in conversation and in her writing and destroying many documents and virtually all the letters she received, there is a wealth of images of her, which, individually and collectively, provide an insight into her life, adding colour and nuance to the sparse literary narrative. These images also provide an opportunity to observe the

convergence of often very different lives: how the portrait—the fruit of the brief creative collaboration between artist and psychoanalyst—is influenced by their life experiences, both shared and disparate. Melanie Klein struggled with the process of portraiture and was clearly ambivalent about the exposure this inevitably entailed, destroying two of the works of art created of her: a bust by Oscar Nemon and a painting by William Coldstream. Destroying a work of art is a powerful statement, which inevitably leads to a further question. Why were some of these creative collaborations successful and others not, or, to frame the question slightly differently, what was it the artists saw in Klein that she sometimes found so intolerable? For those who are unfamiliar with her, I hope this book will shine a sympathetic light on Melanie Klein's life and provide at least some answers to the many questions raised.

I have drawn on multiple sources during the research for this book, but I would first like to acknowledge my debt to Phyllis Grosskurth, whose biography of Klein, *Melanie Klein: Her World and Her Work* (1985), stands alone in the field. It is a pioneering examination of the Klein archives, a work of great scholarship and full of a surprising wealth of human detail, much of it provided by friends, colleagues, and relations who knew Klein personally and all of whom Phyllis Grosskurth was able to interview or communicate with directly. This is an invaluable source of information from those who bore witness to Klein's life, who knew her, who worked with her, and who in many cases loved her.

The Melanie Klein Trust has been consistently and enthusiastically helpful since the outset of this venture, and I am most grateful to the Trust for its unwavering encouragement and financial support. In particular, Dr John Steiner, a prominent contemporary Kleinian, has been generous and most stimulating in discussion, and many other psychoanalysts have also given freely of their time and thoughts, which have invariably been relevant, sometimes provocative, and always helpful. I would particularly wish to acknowledge in this regard my wife, Anne Amos, together with Jane Milton, Phil Crockett, and Helen Taylor-Robinson.

I would also like to extend special thanks to Melanie Klein's granddaughters, Diana Brimblecombe and Hazel Bentall, who were

unfailingly kind and gracious and provided valuable insight into some of the images.

Sometimes the artist, particularly the photographer, is lost sight of in these encounters, but portraiture is a joint creative collaboration, and an understanding of the artist, his or her life and preoccupations, can only but illuminate our appreciation of the sitter. In this regard, I am particularly indebted to Lady Aurelia Young for her biography *Finding Nemon* (Young & Hale, 2018), about her father Oscar Nemon, and for generously providing much background information and many illustrations about her father's work and his relationship with Melanie Klein. I am also indebted to Bruce Laughton for his biography, *William Coldstream* (2004), and to Teresa Topolski, the daughter of Feliks Topolski, for information she provided about her father's drawings of Melanie Klein. I would also like to acknowledge the help and encouragement given by Philip Stokes, Christopher Glass, and Pierre Dupont.

It is a special pleasure to acknowledge the scholarship of Professor Janet Sayers, who has explored the relationship between William Coldstream, Adrian Stokes, and Melanie Klein with great insight and thoroughness, and I am indebted to her for an introduction to this world where art criticism and psychoanalysis meet.

Finally, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the staff at the National Library of Scotland, who were helpful and efficient come what may and sourced without fuss many obscure references. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Luke Perry and Anna Irwin-Childs at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, who kindly provided the images of Oscar Nemon's low-relief sculptures of Melanie Klein.

It goes without saying that the opinions expressed are my own, unless acknowledged otherwise, and any errors or omissions are entirely mine.