

A New Language Before Silence

How to create a new language? How to endure criticism? Drawing on lessons from three Norwegian painters — Ragnhild Kaarbø, Charlotte Wankel, and Ragnhild Keyser — this presentation explores questions about living truthfully and remaining faithful to oneself. Between the two World Wars, these artists traveled to Paris in the 1920s, where they studied and developed a distinctive visual language. They became Norway's first Cubists. Through their unique style and way of life, the three women challenged not only prevailing artistic norms, but also gender conventions and societal expectations. They thrived in the vibrant and creative atmosphere of a global metropolis during an energetic era, before darkness descended over Europe with the outbreak of World War II. Eventually, they themselves were subjected to authoritarian criticism, and two of them abandoned Cubist painting as a direct consequence. Later, they were forgotten and undervalued. Through photographs, diaries, and letters, I recount the story of my great-aunt Ragnhild Kaarbø and her two friends, Wankel and Keyser. I focus on what they risked and what they lost — what they sacrificed by remaining true to themselves, but also what they gained. Underpinning this presentation is Aleida Assman's theory of passive cultural memory — and how activating such memory can challenge the established canon.

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