



Rene Steinke

Holy Skirts
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What initially attracted you to Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven as the subject for *Holy Skirts*?

Her boldness coupled with her fierce femininity — as manifested in her eccentric apparel — was especially intriguing. Early on, even before I was deep into the research, I had the sense that her "self-apparel" held meaning for her and others beyond a merely outrageous female appearance. George Biddle's description especially resonated, so I chose it as an epigraph.

Women are often defined by the way they appear to others. I wanted to explore how the Baroness took that process and turned it around, incorporated it into her art and life.

What were some of the challenges you faced in writing a fictional re-imagining of a figure drawn from real life?

First, there was the problem of research. At the time, there was no biography of the Baroness (though an excellent one was published while I was working on the book — *Baroness Elsa*, by Irene Gammel). I was working with original sources for the most part, letters, drafts of poems, the Baroness's aborted autobiography, and then scraps of things people had said about the Baroness, which turned up in various biographies and books about the period. The material was quite scattered, and many of the accounts sounded like gossip or legend. It annoyed me that the Baroness was sometimes dismissed as "crazy" or treated as just another colorful character wandering the streets of Greenwich Village. I wanted to get beyond the stereotypical, somewhat condescending thumbnail sketches of her.

When I was writing the book, it was a challenge to make both the Baroness and her story come alive, given the tasks of presenting both a historical period and what's known about her life. I never set out to write a biography — I wanted to imagine her story in particular incidents and situations, to explore her inner life, and shape it into a satisfying fictional form. In order to do that, I had to give myself permission to invent. That's what fiction writers do, of course, but somehow, because I wanted to be true to the central facts of the Baroness's life, I had to constantly remind myself that I was writing fiction. I had to come to terms with the fact that *Holy Skirts* would represent my vision of the Baroness, and I felt very protective of her legacy. But I also knew that my telling of her story would be different from those of others who had studied the Baroness. Once I got to that point, the Baroness became a stronger presence in the writing, almost as if she were speaking to me, and I often felt as if I was conducting a séance.

What do you think explains Elsa's attraction to men who could not satisfy her?

Elsa's expectations for her romantic relationships were in some ways along the lines of what women expect now — I don't think the men she fell in love with could accommodate both her ambitions and her passions. But I don't think she necessarily chose unwisely, for the most part. I think she chose in the best way she could, given her time and circumstances. But she was unwilling to compromise, and that kept her from sustaining a long-term love. This is one of the saddest things about her life, I think, that her longings only made her lonely in the end.

Can you think of any contemporary artists who carry on the legacy of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven?

She was certainly a uniquely gifted person, whose art was very much shaped by the time in which she lived. But occasionally, I see work that reminds me of the Baroness — in rock music, P.J. Harvey's and Courtney Love's distinctly female and erotic rants; in visual art, Vanessa Beecroft's nude stagings and Cindy Sherman's self-costuming; in poetry, the language poetry movement, which disrupts syntax and plays with form the way the Baroness did.

Can you elaborate on the significance of the book's title?

Holy Skirts is the title of one of my favorite poems by the Baroness.

It was also fitting because the themes of fashion and femininity are so important to the Baroness's story. As for the "holy" part, the Baroness was not religious in any traditional way, but she also wasn't an easy atheist — God often shows up in her writing. In her discussions of art and sex, she suggests a kind of sanctity to these things.