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**Lovis Corinth**  
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## At home with Lovis Corinth

The artist's daughter, now eighty-seven, reminisces about being painted by her father and life in Weimar Berlin

**Jason Edward Kaufman**

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Lovis Corinth (1858-1925), the turn-of-the-century German painter and printmaker, once renowned in Europe, is now too little known outside his native country. The St Louis Art Museum and the Nationalgalerie in Berlin have organised a comprehensive Corinth show. Already seen in Munich's Haus der Kunst, in Berlin and in St Louis, the exhibition opens at the Tate Gallery in London on 2 February (until 4 May). The Tate held the last major Corinth show in London in 1959. It is a monumental show, with some 300 works in oil, watercolour, pencil and etching—still only a fraction of his enormous oeuvre.

The exhibition and the excellent catalogue edited by Peter-Klaus Schuster (Prestel) will certainly focus attention on a man whose posthumous reputation has suffered undeserved neglect. That is the keen hope of the artist's eighty-seven-year-old daughter Wilhelmine, who, seventy-one years after the painter's death and half a century after emigrating to New York, is able to recall

many details of her childhood. The Art Newspaper took advantage of this opportunity to revisit the past by asking her about life in Berlin with Lovis Corinth.

It has been many years since you last saw your father. Do you have a clear recollection of him?

Wilhelmine Corinth: I was just sixteen when he died. I was very busy with my own little life, school and everything. But I absolutely remember him through all these years. Most of all I remember when he painted me. He painted me very very often, and also did watercolours, drawings and graphic work. You can find me everywhere, really.

What was his voice like? How did he speak?

He was from East Prussia where they have a Low German unintelligible to people who are not from there. But he did not speak that way. As a child, his father sent him to Königsberg, the biggest city in East Prussia, where he learned Latin and Greek, and mathematics which he never liked. So as a child he already learned to speak the proper German, and then later on spent student years in Munich, Antwerp and Paris. So he hardly ever spoke in his native tongue. He had a quiet voice and always asked for things with a very fine feeling. When he wanted to paint me, he never ordered me to sit still, though it's not easy to sit still for hours. I was used to it from when I was a tiny little child; I thought everyone did it. He always asked, "Would you like to sit a little bit like this? I paint very fast," he always said. And he did. "Just hold your arm like you are right now."

What was the atmosphere like in the studio? Were there props, like the skeleton that appears in so many of his works?

Yes, that was always there, so in school when we learned about how the body was built, I was never afraid. And then he had the armour that appears in many paintings. Sometimes it was set up. And he had the skull of a ram on the wall. And there were his own paintings, the ones he had not sold yet.

Did he collect works by other artists?

He had only two or three in his bedroom by young artists he thought had a future. He bought them from them. Otherwise there were no other artists. He had his own paintings hanging.

How did he spend his days? Did he have a routine?

He worked all day. I went to school in the morning and I remember that every morning a barber came to the house to shave him. Everything was so much more primitive in those times. We did not have running water or a shower—just a pitcher with water and a basin. We had one bathroom with a bathtub, and once a week we took a bath. We had lots of servants and my father had a cleaning person up in the studio, and someone who for a while took care of his materials, like cleaning the brushes and palettes. In later years Corinth allowed himself the luxury of taking new brushes for every new painting, so there were mountains of used palettes on his table in the studio, all dried out colours. It was a very much desired gift, for a young artist to have a palette with which he had worked.

Did you dine together?

We did not have breakfast together, but we were always together for the two main meals: the midday meal—in Germany that is the main meal—and also the evening meal, a very light meal. He didn't talk really. And even to make him eat was difficult. Very often he hardly touched anything. In his later years he was certainly different than in his early years, when he was a very handsome man. He was always in his thoughts. There was not much about his work during the meals. That was discussed more in the studio.

Did your parents often entertain?

We did not have visitors in a daily way, but we had big parties where the children were not allowed to be present, so we only looked through the doors. I don't know who came to the parties, but gallery people I'm sure. It was very elegant—gold brocaded wallpaper in the two living rooms, and the paintings in their gold frames—it was just beautiful. And rugs, naturally Oriental. And the furniture also was very elegant.

Did they often go out on the town?

No. Mother was so much younger and she had friends and she went out with them. Also, she had close friendships with actors and actresses and went with them to the theatre. But no, he did not want to go out. He wanted to go to bed early to be up in the morning. And he was always in his thoughts. He did not talk much. We were like three generations because my mother was almost twenty-five years younger than he was. This is also the reason that I'm still around.

What was your mother Charlotte's involvement with his work?

As she wrote in her memoirs, he very often called her over when he was working on something because he trusted completely her judgment and feeling, and she understood him as nobody else did. She knew his inner motives—why he was painting this or that judgment. And she left him alone when she felt he wanted to be alone.

And long after he died she made the catalogue raisonné.

It was an enormous work. She had always been the only one who really knew every single work by him. Almost every week I get photos sent by people who want me to say that it is a Corinth. Mostly it is clear to me that it is not, but I always say that I will not give an opinion. I only say if I have seen this painting in the studio or otherwise know something about it. Then I am always asked, To whom shall I go—who is the one who can really say if it is a Corinth or not? But there is unfortunately nobody. She was the only one. There are some very knowledgeable art experts, but really, to say yes or no, that was only my mother. That is why her catalogue is very important. A new edition came out five years ago [revised by Béatrice Hernad] and I was very much involved in that. I accepted as new additions only those works for which I still had some papers by my mother verifying that they are by Corinth. I cannot take this great responsibility. My mother also had two wonderful books published: *My life with Lovis Corinth*, and just, *Lovis Corinth*. I should see that they are printed again.

Did your father visit museums?

That was the reason he went to Amsterdam on his last trip when he caught pneumonia and died—because he wanted to see works by Rembrandt, his “great dark star in the darkness”, as he said.

Did you travel with him at all?

Only when we went to Bavaria. We had also the house on the Walchensee in the mountains in Bavaria. It was an absolutely beautiful spot. I went there last year for the first time in fifty years when this wonderful exhibition was in Munich. There was always a couple at the house to take care of it and look after the animals, a little horse, a goat, then two cats. Also we brought a cook, very often. My mother had built this house, and she saw to it that one room was called the studio, but he never worked inside, he was always outside painting the Walchensee landscapes. But he had his work materials inside. It was quite an undertaking to bring these still-wet paintings back to Berlin. They had special boxes that would hold the canvasses separately.

Was Corinth an Impressionist or an Expressionist?

That is the thing that makes it so difficult for America. They like to have everybody neatly in a box as an Impressionist, Expressionist, Cubist—whatever they call it. None of that applied for Corinth. He painted so much in his own style that he does not fit in any of these groups. That makes it difficult for the Americans to comprehend. Now, the more they see his works, the more they understand. But early on that was a hindrance. In the beginning he was an Impressionist, but not quite. Then later he said, “I have discovered the highest aim in art is to try to paint unrealistically”, which he did, but you still know what it was he painted. In the portraits he always wanted to paint the inner person, not just the likeness—the soul, as you say, of the person—which is why they are often so moving.

Was he very religious? Did he go to church?

No, he never went to church. But religion and church are two different things. I would not say he was not religious because he did not go to church. Luther said, if you want to pray, go to your little room. At Easter time he was especially taken by Christ’s death and suffering. One of his last self-portraits is as the Man of Sorrows. It was confirmed in 1925, the year of Corinth’s death. [There is a flower piece titled “The Confirmation”.] It took place at a special church in Berlin, and to my surprise Corinth came also and took communion. Later on he said that was the first time in his life that he did that.

You say he was introspective, always in his thoughts. Was he melancholy most of the time?

He was. I think all people living up in the north, where it’s dark and cold, are more heavy and sad in their thoughts and feelings than somebody who lives in Italy or the South. He said himself in his autobiography, “There was not one day I did not think of taking my own life ... The difference is that I did not do it”. He buried himself in work—over a thousand paintings and two catalogues for his graphics alone. (For the watercolours, unfortunately, there does not exist a catalogue. I wish somebody would try to do that). So he was always working from morning to evening. He came down for main meal at midday, then afterwards smoked a cigar and rested, then went up again to the studio and was there until evening.

Was your father very much involved in politics?

He must have been, because in his memoirs he was much saddened by the outcome of World War I, that Germany had not only lost but that there was the revolution and the whole new life

that came after that.

Your father was a nationalist. He spoke of World War I as a “Holy War” for Germany. But like Nolde, who joined the Nazi party, his work was later rejected. Do you think your father would have joined the Party?

I don't think so because it would have gone against his feeling for freedom. He had a very strong feeling as an artist. Even with the Kaiser in the beginning, and with the Berlin Secession—that was all before my time—he revolved against the Kaiser who also said one had to paint this or that way, and certainly Corinth did not go along with it.

Did he have racist sentiments?

He certainly wasn't a racist. Before Hitler it was not something that came up in Germany. There might have been artists in the Berlin Secession who were Jewish. Racism came only later with Hitler.

What was it like spending the war years in Hamburg?

The Germans called his work “entartete Kunst”, degenerate art, and they confiscated many of his most wonderful works from the museums and sent them to Switzerland. In Switzerland they knew about Corinth, and the Nazis themselves knew but they got the money. Some paintings were given back after the war, but that doesn't concern me. That our paintings came over here safely was due to my mother and brother. There was a big exhibition in Zurich of all of our family's paintings, watercolours, graphic works, drawings, and when this exhibition closed, my brother who lived in America already, and had nothing to do with the Nazis—he was a young engineer who studied here at Columbia University—he had the wonderful foresight to send them all here to America. I came here in 1947, because I had had enough of the misery in Germany.

At one time you owned a great number of your father's works. How did this come about?

My mother divided the art between herself, my brother and me. The portraits of me were mine, and portraits of my brother were his, and other paintings were dispensed to make it even. My mother died in 1967 and we then sold some. My brother died in 1988 and I inherited his works. I sold to museums and private collectors. There's not much left now. And I have three children and grandchildren for whom I want to leave something. So I don't have much that I can sell any

more, and I don't need to, thank God. This is all thanks to my father and I am very well aware of that. So I try as much as I still can to do things to further knowledge about him.

Are you involved in any projects at the moment?

Now I am the only one with the name Corinth, and the name will be gone with me because my brother didn't have children. There remain a lot of families in East Prussia and elsewhere in Germany with the name Corinth, but they have nothing to do with my father. He told us several times that his family was all dead—killed themselves or alcohol. They were not civilised city people. It was a different life there—so much the stranger that this genius came out of that atmosphere. But the little house where he was born in Tapiau [now Gvardeisk, Russian Federation], not far from Königsberg, is still standing. There is a plaque in Russian that says Lovis Corinth lived here. There are four or five families living in it now, and the main problem, if the house should be made an art centre or something like this, would be to find a place for these families. The desire is to raise money and get a group of people together in Germany to work on keeping the house standing.

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