

BEYOND THE SEA

Rita de Acosta: Portrait of an Icon

Throughout the first three decades of the 20th century, Rita de Acosta embodied an ideal of elegance, sophistication, and extravagance. From New York City to Paris, her charm inspired the greatest painters and photographers of the time. In 1954, the great Cecil Beaton was still moved when remembering this “woman of unusual intensity” who had achieved the feat of “making oneself a work of art.”

By Jérôme Kagan / August 28, 2023



Rita de Acosta, 1905. © Edward Steichen

Rita de Acosta y Hernandez de Alba was a unique character, even when she was a teenager. Her father, Ricardo de Acosta, was a Cuban exile whose father had made a fortune from his Dolores coffee plantation, which was beautifully landscaped with flowers and tropical fruit trees at La Jagua near Matanzas in Cuba. In 1870, he married 17-year-old Micaela Hernandez de Alba y Sanchez, who was born in Spain, and was a pious Catholic pew owner at St. Patrick's Cathedral. However, Mr. and Mrs. de Acosta lived on 47th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, in the ultra-chic Diamond District. This enormous material wealth formed the backdrop to Rita's childhood as the oldest of eight children born between 1871 and 1892. Each one of the siblings married into high society, but almost every union ended in failure.

The moment that William Earl Dodge Stokes laid eyes on Rita de Acosta, "a decided brunette of great beauty," according to a description in a column titled The Social World published by The New York Times in 1894, the year they met, he pursued her hopelessly before declaring his undying love. Rita was 19 and had just entered polite society, and he was 42. She was slim, sophisticated, and a sensitive dreamer.

Meanwhile, Stokes was a mustachioed giant with a dark stare and a clenched jaw. Mrs. Ricardo de Acosta was adamant: This was not the man for her daughter! He was Protestant, too old, and "way too



rich!“ But her oldest daughter was stubborn, and she was wed to William – who had suddenly converted to Catholicism – at St. Patrick’s Cathedral on January 3, 1895.

Descending from a line of merchants, Stokes inherited his first million from his late father James Boulter Stokes. He immediately invested in plots of land across Manhattan, and began building. Within ten years he had gone from being quite well-off to being a multimillionaire. Rita’s lifestyle was turned upside down. She had expensive outfits sent from Paris, shopped in the finest stores in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island and purchased English thoroughbred horses as if she was collecting buttons – much to the dismay of her husband.

The day Rita discovered that he had been unable to control his temper and physical cruelty, she filed for a divorce. In May 1900, she was freed from her marriage, was granted custody of their son, William Jr., who was awarded a princely allowance of 12,000 dollars per year (424,000 dollars today). What was a girl to do? Perhaps go back to dreaming...

Cupid’s Second Arrow

Rita had been so affected by the failure of her first marriage that it came as quite a surprise when she announced her upcoming wedding with Philip Mesier Lydig in

1902. Her new husband was tall, sported a mustache, and was eight years Rita's senior. The resemblance to Stokes made this new partnership look like a pitiful rerun. However, morally speaking, Lydig could not have been more different from his ill-natured predecessor. Born into an old New York family, Lydig was a cosmopolitan gentleman of exquisite manners, whose delicate tastes had been encouraged by sizeable wealth. Two hours after they had tied the knot, the couple set off for Paris, where Rita felt quite at home. Since 1895, she had ordered all her outfits from Callot Soeurs, including a scandalous black evening gown that revealed her entire back. It was unthinkable for her to buy shoes anywhere other than Place Vendome, one of the most chic shopping areas in Paris. Having made more than 150 purchases over 15 years, Rita contributed substantially to the success of Pierre Yantorny, the "most expensive shoemaker in the world."





Rita de Acosta, 1917. © Adolf de Meyer/Alamy Stock Photo



Giovanni Boldini, *Portrait of Rita de Acosta Lydig*, 1911.

However, the French capital offered many other advantages to art lovers such as the Lydigs. What's more, the simplicity and sophistication with which Rita conducted herself soon won over the biggest names of the day. Sarah Bernhardt, Edgar Degas, and Auguste Rodin were all friends. As for the painters, Giovanni Boldini was particularly fascinated, and completed a total of 14 portraits.

In the wake of contemporary progress, photographers also adopted Rita as a subject. Adolf de Meyer, Edward Steichen, and Gertrude Kasebier were all determined to capture the young woman's alabaster complexion, her triumphantly turned-up nose, her thin, pursed lips, and her ebony hair. Yet poor health forced Rita to step back from her busy social life. By the age of 40, she may even have wanted to pursue a new, more spiritual existence, one free from Philip and his reproaches about her lavish spending. In 1919, the smart-set was resigned upon receiving news of the couple's divorce, decided on grounds of incompatibility.

Third Time's the Charm?

Shaken by her divorces and physically weakened after falling off a horse in 1919, Rita sought comfort in religion. And there was no one better to guide her than Reverend Percy Stickney Grant, modernist leader in the Episcopal Church, with whom she slowly fell in love. In August 1921, the newspapers announced their marriage. However, Bishop William T. Manning, the head of the Episcopal Church, refused to authorize the



marriage, demanding Grant choose between his duties and his feelings for a divorcee. To Rita's chagrin, her beau called off their wedding. From that moment onwards, she descended into a compulsive shopping spree to the point of losing all control. Eventually, Rita decided to start saving money. Upon closer observation of her spending habits, it came to light that she purchased around 1,000 dollars of flowers every month (almost 17,000 dollars today). It was said that she declared: "I can go without food [...] but I will not be without my white flowers."

Rita de Acosta's final scandal broke in 1927 when she declared bankruptcy. Holed up at the Gotham Hotel on Fifth Avenue at Fifty-Fifth Street, her final years weren't happy ones. During an operation to address a spinal problem, an electrical short circuit left her with serious burns on her back. Having subsequently become addicted to morphine, Rita continued to act as though her life was nothing but grace and fulfillment, but deep down she was in constant pain. Just before she died, she asked her sister to cool her with a fan. In a final burst of elegance, she opened her eyes to utter her final, worried words: "Is it a Spanish fan?"



BY JÉRÔME KAGAN

After his literary studies, Jérôme Kagan turned to journalism. His passion for artistic avant-garde movements in the interwar period led him to publish a book on the Roaring Twenties in 2019, and a biography of U.S. publisher Condé Nast in 2022. He currently lives and works in Paris, and continues to cultivate an interest in the eccentric and beautiful creatures of the last century.