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# ROSE O'NEILL



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## SUFFRAGIST AND JOYFUL NON-CONFORMIST

*“She must be taught, as a young girl, not that she is a woman who can do what men allow her to do, but that she is a producer. She is to think about her vocation when she is young just as the man does now. Then when the time comes for choice, she is to emancipate herself from all traditions. She is to eliminate from her mind all thoughts of shocking anybody or anything.”* —Rose O’Neill.<sup>1</sup>

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**I**N 1915, THOMAS Edgelow, a reporter from the *New York Press*, visited Rose O’Neill and her sister Callista in their Greenwich Village apartments in Washington Square. There, Rose introduced Edgelow to what she described as “polymuriel” clothing: dresses that were loose and flowing, and could be worn on all occasions (Fig. 1). She told him, “it is quite time that some decisive stroke was struck for freedom of women, not only as regards the suffrage question, and of course, I am very keen on that, but on other matters. The first step is to free women from the yoke of modern fashions and modern dress. How can they hope to compete with men when they are boxed up tight in the

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Rose O’Neill. Doris Fleischman, “Woman’s the Virtues, Man’s the Stupidity, Is the Division the Gentle Inventor of the Kewpies Makes; *New York Tribune*, 14 April 1915, p. 5.



FIG. 1: Callista models a "polymuriel" outfit. Circa 1918. *Courtesy of the Rose O'Neill Foundation.*

clothes that are worn today?"<sup>2</sup> O'Neill also announced, "I refuse to have a box or cage my body."<sup>3</sup>

While we might see this as an illustrator's eccentric foray into fashion, the polymuriel design tells us a great deal about Rose and her desire to "free women" in all sorts of ways. The refusal to be boxed in, to allow anyone or anything to "cage" her, were defining principles in both her life and work. The editor of her published autobiography, Miriam Formanek-Brunell, notes that Rose's drawings often incorporate visual markers of liberation: a repetition of "soaring wings" and even her signature, whose "extending trails . . . defy standard conventions of linearity."<sup>4</sup> In short, O'Neill was a woman who refused to be contained. The desire to move beyond limits undergirded her writing too. In a letter to Witter Bynner dated July 4, 1918, she elaborates on the experience of upending gender binaries in the writing process and product: "There is an uncanny refreshment in playing with two

identities. It stretches out other pairs of undivined wings. I think I told you I did it once, achieving the greatest release in pretending a man was writing my words. The words took on an alien energy."<sup>5</sup> Here too, wings suggest a desire for artistic freedom, imaginative expression, and creativity that is forged in a refusal to be contained.

As her own reflections suggest, Rose O'Neill was an artist who refused easy categorization: she was a doll maker, but also the best-known female illustrator of her time, a painter, a sculptor, a cartoonist, a poet, an ad creator, and a novelist. Yet as Edgelow's 1915 *New York Press* interview suggests, it was not only her artwork—in range and style—that was boundary breaking; it was also her commitment to a life lived on her own terms. Feminist scholarship in the 1980s offered a fresh approach to Rose O'Neill, one that forged past the commercial success of the Kewpies and into the broader range of her production. Formanek-Brunell articulates one of the paradoxes in understanding

Rose. She points out that while later historiographic work places her under the label "non-conformist," that Rose changes the very category of what it meant to refuse predictability. While male artists who are "non-conformists" are often depicted as "antisocial . . . pessimistic, and despairing," Rose refused to conform yet remained not only "social" but even "ebullient" in her embrace of life.<sup>6</sup> She merged experimentation, resilience, and a fullness and joy in living.

Even so, her well-known Kewpies prodded some early Rose admirers to confine her strictly to the category of the domestic. This is somewhat understandable; Kewpies made their 1909 public debut in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and thus first appeared in a magazine for women reading about domestic spaces. While viewers of Kewpies have often assumed them to be little girls, they were in fact first identified by Rose as elves, and then referred to as little boys.

Over time, Kewpies show gender

2 Interview with Thomas Edgelow. "Rose O'Neill in Campaign to Introduce Her Novel Art-Garb." *New York Press*, 25 April 1915.

3 Ibid.

4 Formanek-Brunell, Miriam. Introduction. *The Story of Rose O'Neill: An Autobiography*. By Rose O'Neill. Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997, p. 8.

5 Armitage, Shelley. *Kewpies and Beyond: The World of Rose O'Neill*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, p. 36.

6 Formanek-Brunell, p. 7-8.



FIG. 2: Rose and Callista preparing to march for Suffrage circa 1915–1917. Courtesy of the Rose O'Neill Foundation.



FIG. 3: Rose O'Neill, *Suffrage Sacrifice Week*, c. 1915–1917. Courtesy of the Rose O'Neill Foundation.

variety and androgyny, but Rose first imagined a small army of kind elfin children, gendered male, who would help women in the home. Later they made appearances, sometimes in modified forms, on Suffrage posters demanding that mothers also had the right to vote. Kewpies were not mischievous, but helpful beings who were concerned

for the labor and lot of women, inside and outside the home.

Rose's own awareness of the public and private divide as a social construction likely formed early. Her father, William Patrick O'Neill took on a portion of the caretaking of Rose and her siblings at home while her mother

worked as a teacher. He also enthusiastically introduced them to the arts and humanities. Some researchers have described Rose's father as a figure who was himself located in the domestic, regularly playing with and educating the children. Others focus on his absence during his traveling book sales work, and point to Rose's

mother as having been the one to keep the family financially afloat. All of these are true: the father was not a stable source of financial support, was at home often when the children were young, and was then frequently absent when the children were older. Rose's mother, Alice Aseneth Cecelia Smith, who Rose and her siblings called Meemie, was all things: she both brought in the family's only steady income and was a stable force at home, especially during the father's itinerant absences.

In this sense, Meemie was also a boundary breaker. This was sometimes literal: when she and the children were once trapped inside their home on the prairie in Nebraska after a blizzard, Meemie broke through a window and then used an ax to chop through the heavily packed snow, creating a trail by which the children could also escape.<sup>7</sup> Similar tales of Meemie saving the children from rising waters and tornados pepper Rose's recollections. Her parents' shared

unconventionality undoubtedly shaped Rose. Reflecting on her time in the Ozarks in her autobiography, she writes that her father said of her possible suitors, while "there are admirable youths among them," it was "needless to say, *my* daughters" were to "have their careers."<sup>8</sup>

Rose struck out on her own career path at the age of eighteen, when she left the family's Nebraska home to begin work as an illustrator in New York City. Famously, the O'Neill's sold their family cow to pay for her trip. As a young woman alone in the city, she was accompanied by the Sisters of St. Regis when she began pitching her illustrations in visits to publishers. Hired as the staff artist at *Puck*, she became the only woman at the journal, a journal with a largely all-male readership and run by an all-male board. Furthermore, *Puck* was a publisher of political satire, a genre that had long been seen as the domain of male authorship. And yet Rose thrived: between 1897 and 1905 she pub-

lished over five hundred cartoons and illustrations in *Puck*.<sup>9</sup>

She and Callista eventually took up two floors of a Washington Square apartment building in Greenwich Village. There they hosted salons that drew in creatives from across the arts and humanities, and they became active in the Suffrage movement. In her autobiography, she writes, "Callista and I were keen about the fight for woman suffrage and I walked in some parades, wore a placard, and made drawings for the cause."<sup>10</sup> (Figs. 2 & 3). She also made two speeches. She cleverly leveraged her talent and budding fame in the name of suffrage: one poster depicted an enthusiastic Kewpie announcing, "President Wilson supports women's vote and so do I." In another, a Kewpie-like baby told passersby, "I'm a girl baby and I'm going to be taxed without representation." Such work demonstrates Rose's ability to merge feminism, humor, and creativity in the name of advocacy.

7 Armitage, p. 20.

8 O'Neill, Rose. *The Story of Rose O'Neill: An Autobiography*. Edited by Miriam Formanek-Brunell. University of Missouri Press, 1997, p. 67.

9 Armitage, pp. 74, 76.

10 O'Neill, Rose, p. 121.