



## Holy Skirts

By René Steinke  
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### Introduction

In 1917 no one had ever seen a woman like the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. She stalked Greenwich Village streets wearing a bustle with a flashing taillight and a brassiere made from tomato cans; declaimed her poems to sailors in beer halls; and modeled in the nude for artists like Man Ray, setting the city ablaze with her antics. At the center of the Dadaist circle, the Baroness -- poet and artist, proto-punk rocker, sexual libertine, fashion avatar, and troublemaker -- transformed herself into a living, breathing work of art.

*Holy Skirts* is a vivid imagining of the Baroness's story. Beginning with her burlesque performances in Berlin's Wintergarten cabaret, the adventures continue across Europe, through turbulent marriages and love affairs, until Elsa finally lands in New York City. Befriending Marcel Duchamp and other Greenwich Village artists and writers, she defines herself as a poet, even as she breaks the bonds of female

propriety.

### Questions for Discussion

1. To what extent are her mother's untimely death and her unhappy relationship with her father responsible for the unusual trajectory of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's life?
2. Why does Elsa make up elaborate stories about her upbringing and experiences, and what do these stories reveal about her vision for herself?
3. How would you describe Elsa's feelings about her sexuality and its various forms of expression?
4. "Later in her life, Elsa would become fond of saying that each of her three husbands stole something from her." To what extent is this remark true in the context of Elsa's marriages to August, Franz, and Josef?
5. How do Elsa's various roles as model, muse, and sex object impact her creative development as an artist?
6. How would you characterize Elsa's more flamboyant gestures -- as evidence of a truly "modern" woman, as indications of a provocative artist out to shock her audience, or as something altogether different?
7. When Elsa says to Sara, "I don't know how to pull life and art apart," what does she mean, and how is this condition borne out in *Holy Skirts*?
8. How do Elsa's literary triumphs (and failures) at *LETTERS* and *The Little Review* enable her to become a minor celebrity in her Greenwich Village community?
9. What do the film Elsa and Marcel Duchamp make together and her destruction of his work-in-progress, *Glass*, suggest about the nature of their friendship?
10. What aspects of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's life as depicted in *Holy Skirts* did you find most noteworthy? Why?

### About the Author

René Steinke is the author of *The Fires*. She is the editor-in-chief of *The Literary Review* and teaches creative writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She lives in Brooklyn.