

# LILI ELBE

b. December 28, 1882

d. September 13, 1931

## TRANSGENDER PIONEER AND PAINTER

**Lili Elbe was a renowned Danish painter who underwent one of the first gender-reassignment surgeries.**

*“... The one hundred percent male and the one hundred percent female are theoretical.”*

Lili Illse Elvenes, best known as Lili Elbe, was a transgender woman who received one of the first gender reassignment surgeries. Born in Denmark as Einar Magnus Andreas Wegener, Elbe worked as a successful artist before legally changing her name and living as a woman.

When Elbe was young, she studied painting at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, where she met a lesbian named Gerda Gottlieb. The two married in 1904, when Gottlieb was 18 and Elbe (still Wegener) was 22. The couple spent years traveling

through Europe. Elbe was known for her landscape paintings; Gottlieb illustrated books and fashion magazines. They eventually settled in Paris, where Elbe began living openly as a woman and became a muse for Gottlieb.

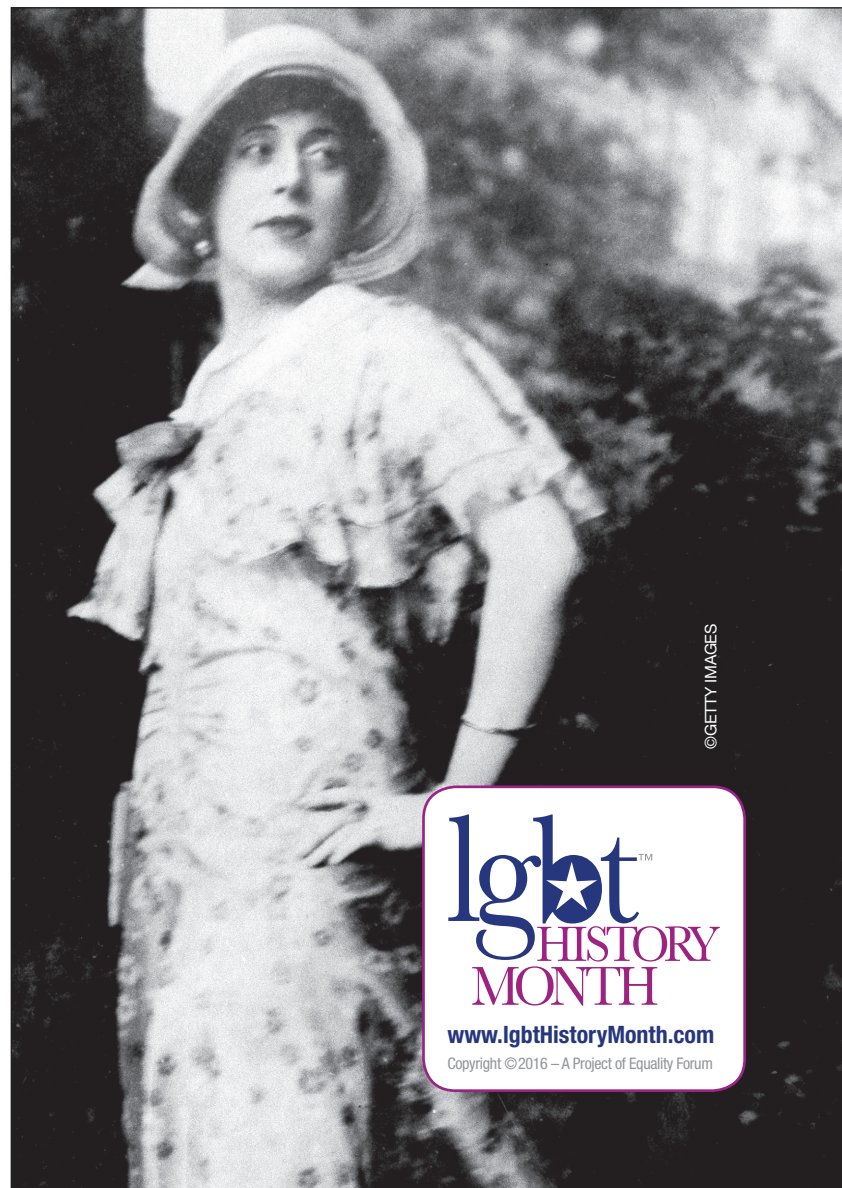
While in Paris, the couple was embraced by avant-garde social circles; the two women became the talk of the town. It shocked and fascinated the public when they found out that Elbe was a biological man. Newspaper articles were written about them all over Europe.

In 1930 Elbe relocated to Germany, where she had her first surgery to transition into a woman. The process was still experimental, but she had a series of operations under the supervision of the famous sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. After transitioning, Elbe legally changed her name, and the Danish court invalidated the couple's marriage. Elbe also left the art world. In an essay, she explained the transgender experience:

“Our assumption as a society is that ... people come in two types, male nature and female nature. This has no scientific basis ... I try to move from the language of the two sexes are similar or different to language that means we are all different.”

Elbe and Gottlieb eventually parted, and Elbe began a relationship with French art dealer Claude Lejeune. In 1931 in hopes of one day bearing children, she had her final operation—the most experimental one yet—to implant a uterus and construct a vagina. There were severe complications, and Elbe died a few months shy of her 49th birthday.

The award-winning movie “The Danish Girl” provides a fictionalized account of Elbe's life, based on an international best seller that has been translated into dozens of languages. The LGBT film festival MIX Copenhagen pays tribute to the transgender pioneer by presenting awards called the Lilies.



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