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Chloé Thomas

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Chloé Thomas
Doctorante, Université Paris 3
ATER, Université Paris 8

Francis Rose is a rose is a rose: Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round* and its illustrators

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Bio

Chloé Thomas has been a doctoral student at Université Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle since September 2012. She is writing her thesis on Gertrude Stein under the supervision of Prof. Christine Savinel.

Abstract

The relationship of Gertrude Stein to painters has been the object of numerous critical and scholarly studies. It is however a lesser-known fact that Stein also collaborated with artists, and in particular with Sir Francis Rose, to illustrate her books for children. Stein had been a fervent supporter of Rose, a British painter, since the early 1930s. Rose never achieved the fame that she thought he deserved, and he remains known today mostly for his illustration work for Stein.

Stein's first attempt at writing for children, *The World is Round* (1938), was commissioned by the American publisher William Scott. Scott refused the drawings by Francis Rose that Stein submitted to him, and had Clement Hurd illustrate the book instead; yet Stein was successful in having Rose's drawings printed in the British edition of *The World is Round*. Clement Hurd later became a famous illustrator of children's books (notably thanks to the successful *The Runaway Bunny*), and his pictures for Stein's work do correspond to the demands of children's literature. Francis Rose's drawings, on the contrary, are much closer to the uncanny atmosphere emanating from the text.

The connections of Gertrude Stein with the world of painters and artists are well known and widely documented. The American modernist writer is most famously remembered for her long and tumultuous friendship with Pablo Picasso, her early and staunch

support of Matisse, Cézanne or Juan Gris, and her many acquisitions. Her autobiographies, in particular the successful *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), are full of anecdotes about the Montparnasse luminaries who came to her dinner parties and provided new material for her outstanding art collection, which testifies of the major part she played as a patron of the avant-garde. The recent Stein show at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2011-2012 (then exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), displayed paintings that were once owned by Gertrude Stein and family members (in particular her brother and sister-in-law Michael and Sarah Stein, and her brother Leo Stein with whom she shared an apartment in the rue de Fleurus at the beginning of her Paris life), among which a number of artworks that are now recognized as being among the greatest masterpieces of the twentieth century.

In 1931, Gertrude Stein became acquainted, through Jean Cocteau and Christian Bérard, with a young British aristocrat, Sir Francis Rose. Stein was then 57; she had seen Picasso rise to fame and was confident in her prescient taste. She was also about to experience success as a writer for the first time with the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Rose, on the other hand, was 22 and still looking for recognition as a painter. Stein became his champion, and set herself to the task of making him the new Picasso. Through her connections with art galleries in France and in the United States, she had him exhibited, and she commissioned works from him in order to support him. To Stein, Rose embodied a new phase in European art, and was meant to continue the revolution started by Matisse and continued by Picasso. In a preface to an exhibition catalogue which she wrote in 1939, entitled “Introduction to Francis Rose”, she stated:

I believe that Francis Rose is the most important painter among the young painters painting today. Every country has its turn. In the nineteenth century it was French painters who created painting, in the beginning of the twentieth century it was Spanish painters who created painting and now towards the middle of the

twentieth century it is an Englishman who is creating the important painting of his time.

Francis Rose is a painter who is recreating life in colors, in many colors. English people have always loved colors, and at last in Francis Rose they have a painter who makes the colors English people love by painting. It is the first time it has happened and it is very important, his compositions live in colors, his drawing lives in colors, and it is all completely alive. (Stein, 'Introduction to Francis Rose')

After the French (Cézanne, Matisse) and the Spaniards (Picasso, Juan Gris), comes Francis Rose: other texts by Stein, notes for catalogues, letters, and autobiographical writings, confirm her unflinching faith in Rose's genius. In an unpublished piece on "English paintings in Paris" written in 1939, Stein went a step farther in her construction of Rose as a revolutionary and passionate painter, a "natural and violent thing", just like the thunderstorm during which he was allegedly born (the sentence on Rose was crossed-out in the typescript):

It is a long time now that Spanish painting has been on top, and then well ~~then Francis Rose was born in Surrey just before noon in the middle of a thunder storm.~~ That is the way English painting came to Paris. English painting came to Paris and it came as a natural and violent thing. (Stein, 'English Paintings in Paris')

Yet outside of Stein's world and works, Rose is virtually unheard of. No book was published to compile his works, nor did a solo exhibition ever take place after his death. Rose is in fact regarded by many critics as Stein's late mistake, and dismissed as such. He did enter her life at a time when she enjoyed most the company of well-bred, flattering young men; and he was indeed a flatterer, always desperate for money, and who expected of Stein to support him both artistically and financially. Stein did not fail him in either respect, always with the hope of seeing his breakthrough as a painter. As part of her support policy, and perhaps to make up for his failure to be recognized as a painter, she turned him into an illustrator for a number of her later works¹.

¹ Francis Rose had previously illustrated an edition of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1931). He illustrated a few more books in the 1940s, and in 1954, the *Cook Book* of Stein's partner Alice B. Toklas.

Stein had already experimented artistic collaborations with some of her painter friends, most notably for an edition of *As a Wife Has a Cow a Love Story*, illustrated by Juan Gris and published by the art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, as part of a series of books by avant-garde poets illustrated by avant-garde painters (Hubert and Hubert). Gris's cubistic lithographs truly work not so much as illustrations but as part of an iconotext mixing Stein's narrative and a celebration of the author and patron. Stein's collaboration with Rose, however, occurred in a different editorial context and aimed at a more straightforward rendering of her narrative. Both Stein and Rose seem to have rejoiced over this collaboration; but it remained first and foremost a means to help Rose make some money and establish himself later as a true painter. His drawings for Stein, however, did not gain much praise, or indeed interest, from publishers nor from critics. Beyond their intrinsic quality though, they constitute an interesting scholarly material in that they document what each of them expected from the collaborative process. The subtle interplay of identification that takes place between writer and painter and between painter and character does highlight the complex status of the illustrator, and brings new light to the only too rarely studied writings for children by Gertrude Stein.

1. Francis Rose and Gertrude Stein: late collaboration

Francis Rose, born in Hertfordshire in 1909, moved to France in 1929 where he studied with Francis Picabia, another of Stein's protégés, and worked as a set painter for the Ballets Russes. Stein became a benevolent, motherly figure to the insecure young man. Rose dedicated his memoir, *Saying Life*, to her, and wrote most thankfully of his patron: "As a person she took the place of my mother, and as an unwavering supporter of my painting I think that she was the only person who ever really understood my own revolution" (Rose,

Saying Life 182). The letters of Rose to Stein, kept as part of the Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas archive at the Beinecke Library at Yale, confirm a general feeling on Rose's part of being misunderstood and the common desire of both artist and champion to treat this seemingly hopeless state of facts as a sign of genius:

It is true when you say my work is never that of the mode. I seem to have the same poor luck and [illegible word] that Cezanne had to support from his contemporary. Today that I lead the soberest of lives infact [sic] almost that of a priest. Outside of my work really very little gives me pleasure. I am very tired of life and I cannot support gaiety. [...] I don't know if you understand me. I must be very dull. (Rose Letter to Gertrude Stein, 1936)

Comparing himself with Cézanne, Rose was posing as a misunderstood genius, redeemed only by the superior vision of Gertrude Stein. In general, Rose's letters, written in a very hesitant, almost childish, handwriting, and marred with spelling and grammar mistakes, alternate between self-deprecation and narcissistic affirmation, and often revolve around his money needs. The letters also reveal Rose's intense desire to see the completion of Stein's plans regarding their collaboration, which was thwarted by the hesitation of publishers. This project finally came into being in the 1940s.

In the late 1930s, Stein started to explore the genre of children's literature. She wrote three books which she regarded as being for children: *The World is Round*, *Gertrude Stein's First Reader and Three Plays* and *To Do: a Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*. The last of these she planned to have illustrated by her friend Raoul Dufy; however, this project never came to completion, and *To Do* was published only posthumously in 1957, at first without any illustrations (a subsequent edition provided an artistic rendering by Giselle Potter). Her first two children's books, however, were illustrated by Rose, at least in some editions. The *First Reader* is a series of "lessons" seemingly parodying textbooks (Watson); the *Three plays* added to the book are short scenes that were designed to be acted by children. *The*

World is Round, a short narrative, resonates more deeply with the rest of Stein's body of works, and its editorial history makes it particularly interesting to study in relation to the question of illustration. The text has been, in general, ignored by Stein scholars, perhaps because it only takes up a number of patterns that the author explored elsewhere with more consistency.

2. *The World is Round* and Stein's interpretation of children's literature

The World is Round, Stein's first attempt at writing children's books, was almost finished when Stein received a commission from an American publisher, William R. Scott, who had just founded his own publishing house and had been asking well-known authors to try their hands at children's literature; Steinbeck and Hemingway turned him down but Stein submitted the manuscript she had been working on (T. Hurd). Scott was happy with the book, and printed it in 1939 (Stein and Hurd), without raising questions about the generic classification of the text as children's literature.

The World is Round is a story about a nine-year-old girl, whose name happens to be Rose. This had been a favorite name of Stein's since at least 1913 and the first occurrence in her work of what was to become her signature line, "Rose is a rose is a rose". The heroine of the *World is Round*, then, was certainly not named after Francis Rose; it is, however, more likely that Rose was chosen to illustrate it precisely because Stein liked how his name resonated with the book. The story does abide by the expectations associated with children's books at the time: it starts with "once upon a time", implies talking animals, and contains a number of versified lines and word plays that sound like nursery rhymes. However, the tale is also full of hardly-veiled eroticism; it is a narrative of Rose's coming of age and discovery of

her body. Rose, consistently associated with the letter “o” and its female shape – “all of a sudden Rose knew that in Rose there was an o and an o is round, oh dear not a sound” (Stein, *Writings 1932-1946* 564) – becomes acquainted with her cousin Willie and his “I”s. In the last paragraph, the cousins appear not to be cousins and can get married, which is very “exciting”: “Willie and Rose turned out not to be cousins, just how nobody knows, and so they married [...] and sometimes singing made [...] Willie get more and more excited” (Stein, *Writings 1932-1946* 574). In the meantime, a lion replaces the wolf of fairy tales as the uncanny representation of sexuality.

Of course, these patterns do not make Stein’s text unsuitable for children: they are rather most classical motives in traditional fairy tales. The apparent sweetness of the text was enough, in any case, to convince William Scott, the intended publisher and commissioner of the book, that the story of Rose and Willie was worth printing as part of a children’s books collection. However, when Stein demanded that the book be published with drawings by Francis Rose, Scott refused on the ground that Rose’s art did not meet the specifications of publications for youth, and imposed instead a young American artist, Clement Hurd, who was later to become famous for his work on the best-selling *Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown. Hurd’s illustrations for *The World is Round* are, indeed, “round”, soft, in light colors (pink and blue). He privileged the representation of animals, making them look friendly and benevolent (*fig. 1*). To help advertise the book, Hurd even derived from the cover illustration a pattern for rugs and wallpapers meant to be sold as secondary products.



Figure 1: *The World is Round*, p.3, illustrated by Clement Hurd.

Hurd's rendering of the text remains subtle and intelligent, never ignoring the darker aspects of the narrative nor glossing over them. Some illustrations are actually quite dark (for instance the forest at night, in chapter 20), or even vaguely and symbolically sexual (the lighthouse in chapter 33, with light flashing at Rose, towards the end of the text and her reunion with Willie (fig. 2).



Figure 2: *The World is Round*, p.27, illustrated by Clement Hurd.

But Hurd obviously understood what was expected of him and designed a book that left room for the uncanny without being too openly aggressive. Stein was able to discuss the project with Hurd and both seem to have been happy with the book. Hurd wrote in May 1939:

I feel the responsibility profoundly of doing illustrations that will be worthy of your book. I do feel that an illustrator can only outdo himself when he really feels the challenge of a wonderful story. I hope I have carried out your suggestions about Rose. If only we could have had consultations at each step of the work I would be content. I have tried to subject the visual Rose to the charming characterization of the written one. So often the illustrations limit the imagination of the reader.

Hoping that my pictures will please you. It really means a great deal to me. (C. Hurd)

The explicit purpose stated in this letter that the illustrations should not “limit the imagination of the reader” also contains the implicit one of letting the crudest elements of the narrative as ambiguous as they are in the text, so that, as with fairy tales, the reader may unconsciously make sense of them. As for the “charming characterization” of the little girl, a polite comment on Stein’s work, it comes as somewhat surprising to anyone acquainted with the text and its very reluctance to actually characterize; but it is precisely a feature that Hurd had to bypass in order to provide an attractive enough rendering of Stein’s highly mysterious and resistant narrative.

Although the American edition of the book was somewhat successful, however, Stein did not want to give up on the idea of having her story published with Rose’s interpretation of it. She succeeded in securing a contract for him with the publisher B.T. Batsford for the

British edition of *The World is Round*, which appeared a few months after the American edition, in 1939 (Stein and Rose). Rose's work is quite different from Hurd's. The drawings are ink on paper, without colors (with the exception of the cover illustration and the frontispiece), and are neither as round nor as sweet as Hurd's. Yet Rose's letters to Stein regarding the negotiations they were conducting with British publishers bring evidence that Rose was not only willing to obey the specifications of illustrating for a young audience, but was actually Stein's greatest champion in asserting that the text was indeed meant for children, which Batsford seemed to doubt. Rose wrote from London, in 1939:

Now about the World is Round (from me and Cecil [Beaton²]) Batsford not sympathetic [sic]. The fellow you mentioned is sarcastic. Says book "no good for children under 40". The IDIOT won't believe me but it is a masterpiece for CHILDREN. Any ways talks of waiting. Does not think illustrations will help etc. Cecil and I talked a long time and decided I should tell you this. I think (or we both think) it is best for you to forget that publisher [...]. (Rose Letter to Gertrude Stein, 1939)

There was actually no need to go and look for another publisher, and Rose was soon allowed to display what he had in mind for this "masterpiece for children". He had little time, however, to do the illustrations, which contributes to explain their sketchy aspect and the reputation of poor quality attached to them. Batsford wrote to Stein in June 1939:

Francis [Rose] is in England and has been in several times to work out the detail of the illustrations for "The World is Round". I think we shall be able to make an extremely pretty book of it, and the fact that he is willing to do the drawings within two or three weeks will make it possible for us to get it out in September, which, failing crises, is a very advantageous time for an autumn book. (Gallup 338)

The lack of time did not mar Rose's enthusiasm, and he even developed broader ambitions for *The World is Round* and the extent of his collaboration with Stein. While he was still hoping he would get a contract for the American edition of the book, Rose wrote to Stein about his ideas for the drawings: "I will think it is a scenerio [sic] for a film. [...] You must

² Cecil Beaton, the British photographer, was a friend of Stein's and Rose's.

do a film with my sets” (Rose Letter to Gertrude Stein, 1938(?)). The idea of film sets (which might have been suggested by Cecil Beaton, who was becoming a major set designer) did not come to life, but Rose seems to have retained the desire to render some sort of motion in his illustrations, with series of drawings framing a text and showing the same character in evolving positions (*fig. 3*).

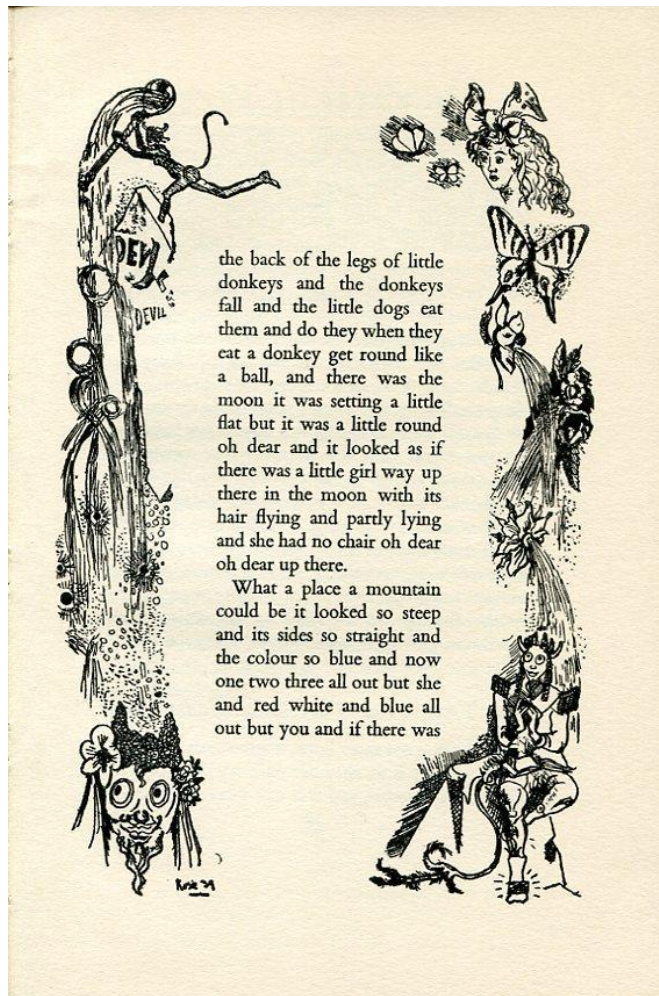


Figure 3: *The World is Round*, illustrated by Francis Rose, p.47.

The result is playful and amusing. Most animal characters are depicted in a very anthropomorphic fashion, much more than in Hurd’s version, which makes the lion look

more explicitly like a sexual predator, especially when he is associated with the devil (fig. 4).

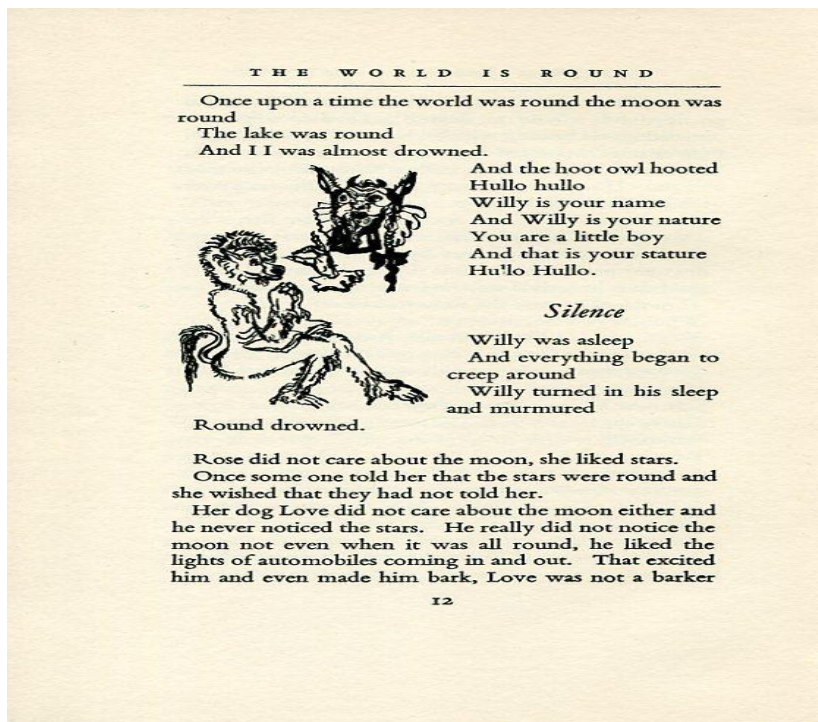


Figure 4: *The World is Round*, p. 12, illustrated by Francis Rose.

The latter apparently made much impression on Rose, who turned the devil into an obsessive image, both a farcical element and a threatening one. In general, Rose's interpretation of Stein's text verges sometimes on the bucolic, sometimes on the gothic and the uncanny, all of which looks rather Victorian, calling to mind the styles of such authors as John Leech or George Cruikshank (although they are no engravings) and their themes (the grotesque and satire). Stein's construction of Rose as revolutionary sounds all the more surprising when confronted with these particular drawings: they are indeed more reminiscent of the work of 19th-century illustrators of children's books, such as John Tenniel and Edward Lear, than of the avant-garde of the 1920s, of which Rose was supposed to be the continuation. Stein's appreciation of Rose's modernity has to be analyzed in the light of his other works, which are more strikingly original than these drawings and even verge on the psychedelic, as his

Hommage à Gertrude which he gave to Alice Toklas, Stein's life-long partner, after the death of his champion. But Rose's drawings may also be thought of as a parodic version of the Victorian illustrations they are reminiscent of; in that respect, they may be understood as partaking of a broader modernist tradition of subversion and parody. An anecdote recalled by Beaton sheds light on both Rose's and Stein's relationship to tradition:

Gertrude is still convinced that Francis Rose is today's greatest English painter, and it is high praise when she says: "He paints in the great English tradition." I recoiled when she produced his latest offering - a large Le Nainesque peasant. "This is a study of violence - that's why people hate it so. Of course the English critics turn away in dread, but a goof picture should take as much courage on the part of the spectator to appreciate it as on the part of the painter to paint it. (Beaton 29)

In 1945 Rose had exhibited paintings in tribute to the 17th century French painters Le Nain brothers, and his work had met with general hostility. Stein's insistence on Rose's belonging to a "great English tradition" should not be read as his continuing Le Nain's (or other painters') work, but rather as his taking up the ironical and provocative wit to be found in the English letters and cartoons from the 18th century onwards.

In that light, the apparent lack of originality of Rose's drawings for *The World is Round* may be seen as a subversion of Victorian prudishness, by exposing what fairy tales—and Hurd—keep dormant. Of course, that very prudishness is itself a 20th century cliché about the Victorian age, while the works of 19th century illustrators were themselves subversive; Rose's take may however be seen in relationship to that 20th century cliché rather than to the reality of Victorian art. In Hurd's work, there is a deliberate attempt at expunging some of the darkest elements of the story. Francis Rose's rendition of the little girl as pubescent, of the lion as manly and threatening, his insistence on the devil, are probably closer to Stein's text and to her understanding of children's literature. In fact, the narrative is no fairy tale in that its underlying patterns are hardly veiled and remain too obvious. Hurd's

illustrations can be regarded as an attempt at obscuring the obvious, while Rose's obey Stein's stance more faithfully.

There have been very few scholarly studies of *The World is Round* in general and of the drawings in particular; the most thorough one, an article by Barbara Will, who works notably on Stein's war works, compares Rose's illustrations to those of Hieronymous Bosch, and sees them as full of "uncanny and perverse imagery" (Will 349). Will opposes Hurd's "encompassing and pastoral vision" to Rose's attempt at "captur[ing] the erotic and nihilistic dimensions of *The World is Round*" (Will 349). This opposition seems legitimate, but it is somewhat problematic in that it stems directly from Will's reading of Stein's children's books as war works. To Will, Stein's books for children and her war narratives represent two versions of a similar anxiety, which Rose's illustrations render better than Hurd's. Although Stein did write war books (*Paris France*, 1939; *Wars I Have Seen*, 1945; and *Mrs. Reynolds*, written in 1940-1943 and published posthumously in 1952) at the same time as she was trying her hand at children's literature, *The World is Round* was written as early as 1938, before the outbreak of the war. *The World is Round* actually resonates more accurately with another work of the same period, *Ida* (1941), a novel destined for adults and of which *The World is Round* looks like an abridged or simplified rewriting. The themes in both works are very similar: identity and duality, narration and circularity, names and what they represent. Stein had been exploring these themes in all her vast body of works, and they come back in these later texts with a sense of urgency rather than resolution. *The World is Round*, just like *Ida*, could well be an instance of what Edward Said, building on Theodor Adorno, called the "late style" of ageing authors (Said); and in that respect, Rose's drawings, in their very darkness (no matter how playful the motives themselves can be) echo the unredeemed anxiety pounding behind Stein's words.

3. Francis Rose, by any other name

Stein's choice of Rose as her new Picasso, then, makes perfect sense in the light of Stein's return to her leitmotifs in *The World is Round*. The name Rose, which she uses in the book, was a favorite of Stein's and she placed it at the core of her consistent questioning of what names say. In *The World is Round*, she expands on the Shakespearian lines "What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.86), only to insist that the character Rose would not, indeed, smell as sweet if her name were any different. Would Stein have developed a late craze for Francis Rose had he been called otherwise? This is dubious, and the painter himself quite consciously plays on the pervading homonymy in his drawings. The only page-wide illustration in *The World is Round* is a portrait of the heroine, looking somewhat more mature than the 9-year-old girl it is supposed to represent (*fig. 5*). On the bottom left, the author has added his signature and the date, as he did with most drawings in the book. Yet it cannot be ignored that "Rose" is also the name of the character which is drawn. The identification of the illustrator with the illustrated subject is thus made clear. The illustrations become projections of Francis's own fears and fantasies, which are mediated through the little girl's coming of age and discovering of sexuality.



Figure 5: The World is Round, p. 4, illustrated by Francis Rose

Francis Rose never came to be recognized as the outstanding artist Stein thought he was, and he is remembered today mostly for these illustrations, which were supposed to be the springboard for another career rather than an achievement in themselves. But Stein, no matter how disappointed she must have been when faced with her protégé's lack of success,

probably consoled herself with the idea that his genius was there, in his very name, and just did not show to other people. To her, it was obvious: Francis Rose is a rose is a rose.

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