

Lili Elbe, A Tribute  
by [David Ebershoff](#)

Trinity Cemetery  
Dresden, Germany  
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Identity — Who am I? Who do I want to be? Who do I want others to see? Who among us hasn't struggled to answer those questions? Who hasn't questioned the reflection in the mirror? Many of our self-doubts and fears are really about identity. If you know yourself, you will conquer them and you'll be that much closer to being free. Almost a century ago a Danish woman — although she insisted on calling herself a girl — looked in the mirror and in an oil portrait by her wife and inside herself. She said, There, her, that beautiful woman with the big dark eyes and the mouth like an upside down valentine — she is me. Lili — I am she.

It was a radical statement of self-acceptance and self-expression. It would reverberate into the future in ways Lili Elbe could never know and touch the lives of people she would never meet. When she came to Dresden, seeking help from the doctors and nurses at the women's clinic, her mind was preoccupied with the past and the future. She was saying goodbye to a past that she believed no longer belonged to her. She was looking into a future she could not fully anticipate. One thing she did know — a false life is no life at all. She believed this city understood her, and accepted her, as she understood, and accepted, herself. The Elbe river — just over there through those trees — on its banks, watching its gentle but relentless flow, Lili saw a reflection of herself, moving steadily, incessantly, irreversibly forward.

The story of Lili Elbe is a story of identity. It's the story of a transgender pioneer. But it's also a story of art, of creating, of imagining what will be. The artist sees that which does not yet exist. He or she imagines a future others cannot perceive. The artist interprets reality, making it even more vivid and lasting. Lili interpreted the world, and herself, through art. Curiously Lili insisted she was not an artist despite the successful career she had as a painter when she lived as Einar Wegener. She said art and painting belonged to Einar. But here I disagree. She was an artist—her

greatest creation was herself. She imagined a future life and she came to Dresden to complete a self-portrait she began with Gerda in Copenhagen.

We're here today to remember that life, and to mark it with this beautiful headstone. We're here today to thank Beatrice Teichmann and the Trinity Cemetery and the city of Dresden for looking after Lili and serving as her guardian. We're here today to thank Gail Mutrux, who showed almost as much tenacity and self-belief as Lili in making the beautiful film about her. We're here today to thank Focus Features and Universal Studios for donating this monument. But mostly we're here today to thank Lili Elbe for the example she set through the life she led. She is an inspiration and a hero to many, including me. She has shown us that in truth there is peace.