

Sabine Wieber, *Jugendstil Women and the Making of Modern Design*, Bloomsbury (London, 2022), 227 pages incl. 14 plates and 55 ills; ISBN 9781350088528, £85.

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This is not a book specifically focused on architecture; that would be difficult, considering that it is a study of the contribution of women to Munich Jugendstil in a time (1895-1914) when the architectural profession in Germany was largely closed to women. But the book does in part engage with the relationship between architecture and women's design practice, patronage and taste-making. Revealing the diverse and active ways that women operated within Munich's wider Jugendstil networks, Sabine Wieber carefully elucidates the significant role they played in the production, dissemination, reception and consumption of what she calls 'Germany's first truly modern design language'.

Wieber is a thoughtful authority on the relationship between gender politics and material culture. Her research starts from the assumption that although women rarely feature in even the most revisionist accounts of Munich Jugendstil, their absence is the fault of art historiography, rather than a reflection of their importance at the time. Through meticulous sifting of archives and primary sources, she pieces together five case studies that demonstrate how women functioned at the heart of Jugendstil as 'maker', 'activist', 'student', 'patron' and 'reformer'. Recognised in their day as integral players, the memory of their contributions has been eroded by the 'heroic' values that shaped the later critical reception of modern German design

culture and relegated progressive women designers to the realm of the 'domestic', 'derivative' and 'decorative'.

The case studies she presents are fascinating. Chapter One opens with Max Littmann's Schauspielhaus (1900-1) with its Jugendstil interior by Richard Riemerschmid. Littmann and Riemerschmid are well-known, but Margarethe von Brauchitsch, who designed and made the extraordinary stage curtain with its abstracted cascade of petals embroidered in metallic thread, is not, despite the fact that she was a founding member of the United Workshops for Art in Handicraft, ran her own large and successful commercial embroidery studio, and also produced furniture and wallpaper designs, stained glass, ironwork and ceramics. Unlike more famous male contemporaries, such as Hermann Obrist, von Brauchitsch both designed *and* executed her eloquent Jugendstil embroideries.

Probably the most remarkable example of how progressive independent women used innovative architecture to articulate their modern identities is the Photo-Studio Elvira (1898), one of Germany's most recognised Jugendstil buildings. Commissioned as a home and workplace by the 'visionary feminists' Anita Augspurg, Germany's first qualified female lawyer, and Sophia Goudstikker, a professional photographer, the aggressive sensory engagement of its decoration shocked contemporaries (August Endell's fantastical façade so enraged the Nazis that it was removed in 1937). Shifting the focus from Endell as autonomous creator, Wieber demonstrates how Augspurg and Goudstikker deliberately conflated modernist aesthetics and progressive politics in the design of the studio to materialise the fabric of their private and professional worlds on their own terms and in their own style.

Women who would end up at both ends of the political spectrum were also at the heart of fertile exchanges with leading designers from across Europe. Elsa

Bruckmann, for example, the wealthy salonnière and later Hitler supporter, commissioned Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald to design the furniture and décor for the dining room in a flat on Nymphenburg Strasse where she held soirées that helped seed Jugendstil ideas. Although Munich's Jugendstil women moved in the same circles, they did not constitute an organised group and, Wieber argues, should not be approached as a 'separate sphere' for addition or reinsertion into canonical accounts of the movement. Instead, Wieber advocates approaches more responsive to the conditions of women's practice. Noting, for example, that it has taken design historians 'a long time to overcome disciplinary habits of prioritizing aesthetics over materiality', she looks to the 'so-called material turn' in art history, which better embraces the processes of creating and making Jugendstil objects. The famous 'Whiplash' embroidery of Obrist and Berthe Ruchet (1896) is thus valued as much for its material realisation as for the intellectual conceptualisation of its design.

The book contextualises the case studies of individual women by addressing the wider socio-political landscape that conditioned their activities in a gendered way. A century before Linda Nochlin, the German socialist politician August Bebel famously observed that 'The argument that women did not produce geniuses is neither sound nor supportable. Geniuses do not fall out of the sky, they must be given the opportunity to form and develop'. A whole chapter, therefore, is dedicated to discussion of the educational and professional opportunities for women opened up by Munich's innovative Debschitz School. Founded in 1901 by Olbrich and Wilhelm von Debschitz, the school pushed back against the deeply gendered issue of dilettantism by providing a professional training for women barred from state institutions. With its focus on 'kinaesthetic learning' and 'haptic experience', the school pioneered the *Vorkurs* (preliminary course) that would later become such a

famous feature of the Bauhaus. From a gender viewpoint, it was arguably more progressive than the latter: women were in charge of departments that included metalwork, ceramics and photography, while ‘every single surviving photo of the Debschitz School’s workshops [including the life drawing studio] features spaces that were populated by women students’.

The book makes clear that women’s experiences as protagonists of Munich Jugendstil were grounded in the movement’s efforts to break down academic hierarchies between the fine and applied arts. While, on the one hand, this gave a greater focus to so-called ‘women’s arts’ like embroidery, on the other it also meant that talented women artists were frequently asked to ‘materialize their male counterparts’ creative outputs’. Nowhere were such gender debates materialised more literally than in dress reform, addressed in the final chapter. Here Wieber highlights the interesting relationship with architecture that emerged in discourses around *Künstlerkleid* (artistic dress). The new emphasis on physical mobility and the healthy (uncorseted) female body, and the belief that a dress’s function should dictate not just its aesthetic but also its cut, responded to Sullivan’s maxim ‘form follows function’. On a different level, *Künstlerkleid*’s performative role in the aesthetically unified Jugendstil interior was articulated in architectural terms by figures like Hermann Bahr and Henry van de Velde, the latter arguing that ‘Jugendstil designers should employ the same tectonic principles as architects when designing garments’.

Wieber’s study is a refreshing scholarly offering that takes its strength from the author’s ability to combine new source material with a recognition of the (un)conscious gender biases of traditional design history. By exploring alternative modes of thinking about female artistic agency in an environment circumscribed by

gender, she opens up a welcome new critical space for consideration of women's lived experience in the Jugendstil artworld of Wilhelmine Germany.

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