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Christa Spreizer
CUNY Queens College, christine.spreizer@qc.cuny.edu

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Abstract

Review of Megan Brandow-Faller. *The Female Secession: Art and the Decorative at the Viennese Women's Academy*. Penn State UP, 2020. 304 pp.

Keywords

Vienna, modernism, Secession, arts and crafts, feminism, women's academy, women artists

Megan Brandow-Faller. *The Female Secession: Art and the Decorative at the Viennese Women's Academy*. Penn State UP, 2020. 304 pp.

The rediscovery of women's contributions to European cultural and artistic traditions continues apace in Megan Brandow-Faller's illuminating study *The Female Secession: Art and the Decorative at the Viennese Women's Academy*. The author draws much needed attention to women artists associated with the Viennese Secession and their modernist experimentations in ceramics, toy design, textiles, interior decoration, and other interdisciplinary media usually relegated to the (pejorative) category of *Frauenkunst* 'female identified arts and crafts.' She does this by interweaving the little-known institutional histories of women's arts academies of Secessionist Vienna with analyses of their contributions to expressionist, cubist, and primitivist impulses of the period. Throughout, Brandow-Faller succeeds in presenting a competing vision of modernism that has unfortunately (like other women-centered initiatives of the early twentieth century) faded from memory after the rise of fascism, World War II, and the normalizing cultural tendencies of the postwar period. The book is a fascinating account of how the decorative arts and *Frauenkunst* in particular were variously studied, subverted, reformulated, and celebrated by innovative women artists as they explored the materiality of artistic enterprise and the pliability of Secessionist philosophies broadly defined.

As their male artist counterparts, the female secessionists criticized Viennese conservative cultural institutions and what was perceived as their outmoded ideas regarding philosophy and artistic style. Outworn art academy traditions were rejected and a new emotional and expressive style was valorized and celebrated across Europe as a young generation sought to capture a reality that did justice to the promises of a new era. Like Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Oskar Koskoschka, and others, the women artists contributed to the innovative impulses of the period by focusing on expressive vitality and spontaneity, the relevance of the primitive and the subjective in contemporary expression. Like their female counterparts in the Austrian and German women's movements, who used terms such as "spiritual motherhood" and identification with the maternal as leverage to push for women's greater influence in the public arena, female secessionists also sought to subvert and disarm the gender-oriented prejudices of their male colleagues, critics, and the viewing public by embracing and refiguring the cultural pliancy of female-identified art types of early twentieth-century Europe.

The book begins with analyses of the *Wiener Frauenakademie* 'Viennese Women's Academy' or WFA (1897-1939), the *Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs* 'Association of Austrian Women Artists' (founded in 1910), and its more radical off-shoot, the *Wiener Frauenkunst* 'Vienna Women's Art' or WFK (1926). Women's historical exclusion from the Viennese Academy of

Fine Arts until the interwar period, perceived outsider status, “naivete” of artistic expression, and cultural associations with hearth and home (i.e., child-rearing, home-making, and folk art) made them attractive candidates for the institutional innovations of the newly formed Viennese Women’s Academy. In chapters including “The Art of Unlearning at the Viennese Women’s Academy, 1897–1908,” Brandow-Faller traces the influence of faculty members with close affiliations to the Klimt group and the Vienna Secession, such as Adolf Böhm, Hans Tichy, and Otto Friedrich, who taught their female students the power and versatility of the applied arts and handcrafts. The innovative and multidisciplinary works of Maria Likarz-Strauss, Fanny Harlfinger-Zakucka, Hilde Jesser-Schmid, and others, influenced by *Wiener Werkstätte* ‘Vienna Workshop’ and Secessionist philosophies, were later showcased to great acclaim at exhibitions such as the special children’s art section of the 1908 *Kunstschau* ‘art show.’ The second half of the book chronicles students’ participation at the 1908 *Kunstschau* and also lesser-known yet substantive national and international mixed arts exhibitions of the interwar period, such as the 1920 *Kunstschau* and the *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne* ‘International Exposition of Modern and Decorative Arts’ (1925) in Paris. Here, the author revisits the outsider status and materiality of their earlier artistic enterprises, especially when focusing on the innovations of the more radical and short-lived WFK under the leadership of Harlfinger-Zakucka starting in 1926. Seemingly innocuous items such as toys, dolls, ceramics and textiles, and their evocation of a “domestic” primitivism, became sites of play, innovation, subversion, and renewal as these artists succeeded in challenging the subordinate position of *Frauenkunst*.

Like the Viennese Secession, the women’s arts movement was splintered by competing interests. The author concludes by chronicling how conservative and radical wings of the women’s arts movement jockeyed for position in the interwar period. Ultimately, the WFK was a short-lived enterprise and its challenges to a traditional *Frauenkunst* subordinate to (male-centered) notions of artistic genius and the visual arts came to be lost in the late interwar period and with a return to a more traditional femininity and domesticity in society and the academy. Yet throughout this beautifully illustrated and thoroughly researched work, Brandow-Faller succeeds admirably in resurrecting an important aspect of the Viennese Secession and the influential role of women’s academies and their graduates in this process. The author’s deft interweaving of female-oriented secessionist art forms and practices of the Austrian *Werkbund* ‘Association of Craftsmen’ and *Wiener Werkstätte* underscores the many intersecting and competing connections within European modernism still to be discovered and highlights the diversity and richness of women artists’ contributions. This interdisciplinary work is highly recommended for scholars interested in European modernism, the Viennese Secession, gender

studies, feminist art history, arts education, as well as twentieth-century material culture.

Christa Spreizer
Queens College/The City University of New York