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Exhibition Reviews

Essays

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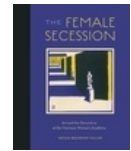
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Megan Brandow-Faller

The Female Secession: Art and the Decorative at the Viennese Women's Academy

University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2020.
304 pp.; 27 color ills.; 60 b/w ills. Cloth \$99.95
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In 1910, Vienna's recently founded Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs opened its inaugural exhibition, aptly titled *Die Kunst der Frau* (The art of women; November 5, 1910–January 8, 1911). Erica Tietze-Conrat (1883–1958), Austria's first woman with a PhD in art history, observed that this showcase of women's art across the ages failed to advance contemporary women's cause because it created a separate category of "feminine art" (*weibliche Kunst*) that was still measured against "masculine art" (*männliche Kunst*; "Die Kunst der Frau," *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* 46, no. 22, 1911: 146). To a certain extent, this conundrum lies at the heart of Megan Brandow-Faller's new book, *The Female Secession*, which critically examines the multilayered institutional history of women's art education and exhibition initiatives in early twentieth-century Vienna.

Brandow-Faller's publication comes on the heels of a series of high-profile exhibitions and critically acclaimed publications on the contributions of women artists to Viennese modernism between circa 1895 and 1938. (These include *City of Women* at the Belvedere Museum, Vienna, 2019; Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory* [Purdue University Press, 2012]; and Rebecca Houze, *Textiles, Fashion, and Design Reform in Austria-Hungary before the First World War* [Routledge, 2017].) Such work is indebted to Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber's seminal research, especially *Künstlerinnen in Österreich 1897–1938* [Picus, 1994].) Access to state education at the Academy of Fine Arts or the Applied Arts School was closed to women until 1920, and they were denied membership to Vienna's three big art exhibition societies, the Genossenschaft der bildenden Künstler Wiens (1861), the Secession (1897), and the Hagenbund (1899). And yet, central European women managed successful careers and created their own professional opportunities and networks that firmly anchored them in Vienna's cultural landscape. Their wide-ranging contributions to Viennese modernism must finally be acknowledged and historicized. Vienna's women artists and designers were influential and valued by their contemporaries. Like their male counterparts, they hailed from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and embraced divergent political positions, sexualities, and career strategies. Their effacement from institutionalized histories of modern art began with Adolf Hitler's Anschluss (annexation) of Austria in 1938 and after World War II, women artists—many of whom were Jewish—were not so much forgotten as deliberately erased from the modernist canon (see Johnson, *Memory Factory*, 1–18).

The Female Secession forms part of ongoing scholarly efforts that seek to intervene in the commercially valuable story of the cultural-historical period known as Vienna 1900, covering the final decades of the Habsburg Empire, which were kickstarted by Carl E. Schorske's foundational book *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (1979) and Kirk Varnedoe's compelling exhibition *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design* at the Museum of Modern Art (1986). Brandow-Faller offers an eloquently argued and expertly researched recalibration of firmly entrenched accounts of Viennese modernism from a candid perspective based on gender that expands the temporal parameters of Vienna 1900 to cover the 1920s. The term "female Secession" used in the book's title is intriguing and might suggest that the author adheres to a "separate spheres" model drawn from 1970s cultural feminism. But Brandow-Faller's methodology is nuanced, sophisticated, and rooted in meticulous historical research. She explains at the outset of her book that the expression "female Secession" was coined in 1927 by the Viennese art historian and critic Hans Ankewicz-Kleehoven (1883–1962), who commented on the progressive artistic trends in the recently founded collective of women artists called the Wiener Frauenkunst (2). Brandow-Faller adopts the term to signal how her subjects used craft-based media and the decorative arts as powerful (artistic) strategies within modernist discourse and practice.

The book evocatively "tells the story of how the female secessionists reclaimed and reinvented stereotypes surrounding women's art and the decorative" and in the process displaced "fixed oppositions between art and craft, between the decorative and the profound, and ultimately between what was assigned as masculine and feminine in art" (5). The nexus of craft, gender, and modernism thus lies at the heart of Brandow-Faller's project and recalls Martin J. Power's conception of style as a "means whereby social groups project their constructed identities and stake their claims in the world" ("Art and History," *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 3 [September 1995]: 382–87). Brandow-Faller does not shy away from using the term "craft" in place of "design," which has been more widely used by historians of Vienna 1900 to align themselves, and by extension their historical subjects, more closely with modern art and architecture.

It goes without saying that Vienna's women artists embraced competing aspirations and visions. Brandow-Faller teases apart some of the "generational struggles and diverging artistic philosophies on art, craft, and *Raumkunst* [that] drove apart the conservative and radical wings of the women's art movement in Austria" (5). Indeed, the author's shrewd uncovering of previously unmined archives and publications marks one of the book's considerable contributions to the field. *The Female Secession* tells the fascinating stories of women artists and designers who were active in Vienna 1900 through an institutional lens that starts with the *Kunstschule für Frauen und Mädchen*, founded by Adalbert Franz Seligmann in 1897 as a private teaching institution, and concludes with the radical women's art collective *Wiener Frauenkunst*, whose members disseminated Austrian Expressionism through craft (ceramics, glass, textiles, toys) rather than the painting more conventionally associated with art history's Expressionist "superstars," such as Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka.

Brandow-Faller methodically dismantles well-rehearsed modernist precepts like "function," "truth," and "rationalism" and posits a counterhistory that offers a more nuanced and complex picture of Viennese modernism's multipronged genealogy. Her book is divided into two roughly chronological sections. In part 1, Brandow-Faller presents the institutional parameters within which central European women could receive an art education. The *Wiener Frauenakademie* occupies center stage in this narrative. In part 2, she focuses on Vienna's female avant-garde during the interwar period to explain how their education informed their aesthetic vision and how a new generation of women artists started to push a more radical agenda in the 1920s. Each part features three substantial chapters that present new research to either shine fresh light on familiar events (e.g., the 1908 *Kunstschau*) and/or bring fascinating new discoveries to the reader's attention (e.g., the Adolf Böhm school). Two overarching themes bind the book: Brandow-Faller's interest in members of the female Secession's ongoing engagement with early twentieth-century "primitivism" and her protagonists' strategic adaptation of historically gendered discourses on ornament and handicraft.

In fact, the 1908 *Kunstschau* exhibition in Vienna brought child art to the attention of international audiences and critics—but the point that just over one-third of the exhibitors were women regularly escapes our attention. Brandow-Faller convincingly argues that female Secessionists reclaimed the creative potential of child art, toys, and folk culture in an effort to create a viable modernist language that negated prevalent dismissals of the decorative as modernism's "other." It is important to note here that primitivist art (meaning, untutored and thus "authentic") has a distinct and longstanding history in the multiethnic Habsburg Empire. And yet, the female Secessionists' rigorous critical engagement with child art, for example, has been virtually written out of mainstream histories of the 1908 exhibition, which repeatedly focus on Kokoschka's artistic debut. Vienna's most radical "decorative women," on the other hand, were "variously condemned to the margins of Central European modernism and collapsed with tropes of feminine fashionability" (159). In chapter 6, Brandow-Faller asserts that this avant-garde strategy anticipated second-wave feminist art, which strikes this reviewer as a slightly tenuous claim in an otherwise robustly argued and researched chapter.

The Female Secession is a beautifully designed book that features sumptuous color illustrations in addition to a large number of black-and-white photographs. For some, this might simply represent the book's high production value. But Brandow-Faller's commitment to giving her historical actors a visual presence is integral to her project of reinstating women modernists who were actively removed from art historical accounts of Vienna 1900. But this represents a potentially fraught enterprise. How can historians legitimately speak of a female Secession without falling into the dangerous trap of creating a separatist category for women artists and designers? Brandow-Faller sidesteps this minefield by using the evocative analytical concept of "separate but equal" (73). This enables her to show that the women artists and designers at the center of her study were deeply integral to the city's cultural fabric and recognized as modernists. They had public profiles and were valued by contemporary critics as well as fellow designers, painters, and sculptors. Their critical and commercial success imbued these female Secessionists with agency that ranged from living financially independent lives to inspiring the next generation of modern designers, painters, and sculptors.

Brandow-Faller uses gender as a powerful critical tool to interrogate the complex cultural-political dynamics of Vienna 1900. But her book does not simply restore women makers and craft practices to a modernist canon. Instead, she deploys her critical analysis based on immaculate research to reframe the critical parameters of Viennese modernism in the first place. *The Female Secession* offers a valuable recalibration of Vienna 1900 that should be of great interest to scholars in the field and design historians more generally, as well as to gender historians and anyone troubled by the persistent (scholarly) elisions of historical women. There is very little to fault in Brandow-Faller's elegant and persuasive analysis, but one question remains unanswered—namely, how did Vienna's female Secessionists relate to and/or interact with possibly similar initiatives in other artistic centers across central Europe? Admittedly, this is a big ask and exceeds the aims of Brandow-Faller's study. But it is this reviewer's hope that *The Female Secession* opens up new interpretative possibilities that extend well beyond Vienna.

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