

Secklehner, Julia

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‘Feminine horror’ or ‘eminent Viennese specialty’? Vienna’s *Kunstgewerblerin* in Paris, 1925

Julia Secklehner (secklehner@phil.muni.cz)

Masaryk University, Brno

Abstract

This article focuses on the Austrian contribution to the 1925 *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris and the role of the modern woman designer (*Kunstgewerblerin*) in light of the exhibition’s focus on the modern female consumer. Tracing how women’s contributions were seen as significant only when emphasising the pavilions shortcomings in offering truly modern (meaning practical and functional) design solutions, the article draws on debates about gender and the purpose of modern design, about the luxurious nature of the decorative arts in Vienna, and about the contested figure of the *Kunstgewerblerin* as a profession and a type of modern femininity. It argues that the ‘female factor’ in Austria’s participation in Paris epitomised a moment when women’s contributions to interwar Austrian design were being renegotiated in relation to the social, cultural, and economic concerns after the First World War

Keywords

women designers; *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*; applied arts; Austrian design; modernism and gender; decorative arts

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'Feminine horror' or 'eminent Viennese specialty'?¹

Vienna's *Kunstgewerblerin* in Paris, 1925

Julia Secklehner

Introduction: a festival of consumption

After visiting the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* (hereafter the 'Paris exhibition'), the Austrian journalist Max Ermers described the Austrian pavilion as a 'pink craft object beneath the green leaves of the Cours de la Seine', which offers 'light joys and carefree existence' as if one 'stood in front of the boudoir of a seductive woman'.² The pavilion was a pink-hued, low building with horizontally striped reliefs with a terrace expanding the limited space within for a popular Viennese café overlooking the Seine. (**Figure 1**) It further included a bell tower, designed by Oskar Strnad, and a glass house by Peter Behrens, featuring an array of exotic plants and woven garden furniture. Outside, open passages propped by slim pillars connected the different tracts of the pavilion, with an inner patio featuring a ceramic sculpture by Dina Kuhn. Inside, the pavilion included a reception room, a large exhibition hall with ceiling-high vitrines on either side, the café leading on to the terrace on the Seine, several offices as well as six smaller exhibition spaces, dedicated to embroideries, fashion accessories and theatre costumes, glassware, stationary, metal sculpture, tapestries and wallpapers. With the chief architect being Josef Hoffmann, a professor at Vienna's Academy of Applied Arts and co-founder of the Wiener Werkstätte design company, the pavilion was strongly dominated by the two institutions and affiliated companies such as Lobmeyer glass, the luxury furniture company Ungethüm, the Wienerberg brick factory, and the paper manufacture Elbemühl. Overall, the Austrian participation encompassed approximately one hundred and fifty different exhibitors, split between the pavilion and showrooms at the Grand Palais and the galleries at the Esplanade des Invalides. Throughout, the pavilion interiors and exhibits emphasised luxury design aesthetics, closely reflecting the aims of the Paris exhibition at large: aside from avant-garde projects such as Le Corbusier's functionalist Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau and Konstantin Melnikov's geometrical Soviet pavilion, flamboyance dominated, effectively defining Art Deco as richly ornamented and decorative, exoticist and fashionable luxury style.³

1) Julius Klinger, 'Mäda', *Das Tribunal*, 12 May 1927, MAK, WW Archive, WWAN 85-1419-2. English translation in Anne-Katrin Rossberg, 'Introduction. Brought to Light: Art and Life of the Wiener Werkstätte Women', in Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Anne-Katrin Rossberg and Elisabeth Schmuttermeier, eds, *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2020, 13. Claire Patek, 'Modefeuilleton. Ilse Mor-Jacken', *Neue Freie Presse*, 6 January 1921, 9.

2) Max Ermers, 'Wo stehen wir nun wirklich? Gedanken über die österreichische Kunstgewerbeausstellung in Paris und die Zukunft unseres Kunsthandwerkes', *Der Tag*, 23 June 1925, 2.

3) Jared Goss, 'French Art Deco', *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/frdc/hd_frdc.htm



Figure 1: Bruno Reiffenstein, Photograph of a wing of the Austrian Pavilion at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris (1925).

Source: MAK Vienna.

French companies and organisations were the clear majority of the exhibitors overall. Making up two thirds of the exhibition, they set out, as Maurice Dufrené, head of the applied art workshops of the Galeries Lafayette, explained, to showcase the 'creative genius' of France.⁴ That this was inadvertently connected to commercial interests was highlighted by the participation of several Parisian luxury department stores, such as the Galeries Lafayette and Printemps, which had their own, sumptuously decorated pavilions. The Paris exhibition was, thus, a festival of consumption. As Irena Makaryk has argued, the fair transformed Paris 'into a twentieth-century city focused on publicité, fashion, shopping, and, especially, the female consumer'.⁵

Similar to the aims by Parisian companies to demonstrate their prowess in modern art and design for commercial consumption, the Austrian participation was intended to position the decorative arts as central factors in the country's economic recovery after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918.⁶ By extension, the Austrian participation in Paris took the

4) Jérémie Cerman, 'The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts of 1925', *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe* [online], <https://ehne.fr/en/node/12305>.

5) Irena Makaryk, *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018, 106.

6) Makaryk, *April in Paris*, 3 and 14; Alfred Grünberger in *L'Autriche à l'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes Paris 1925*, Vienna: Executive Commission for the Austrian Pavilion in Paris, 1925, 18.

shape of a 'mission of peace', which sought to re-establish connections between France and Austria, after they had stood on opposite sides during the First World War, through cultural and commercial channels.⁷ In the exhibition catalogue, the president of the Austrian commission, Franz Quidenus, emphasised: 'This exhibition is perhaps more important for Austria than for other countries. For us, the decorative and industrial arts are not a matter of taste or a hobbyist's passion; they are already a strong support for our economic existence and a hope for our future.'⁸

Yet, ironically, a considerable number of the designers involved in the Austrian pavilion were women designers working in the nexus of the Wiener Werkstätte and the Academy of Applied Arts, who were accused of representing precisely what Quidenus sought to refute. Positioned as 'dilettante daughters of senior civil servants wasting valuable material ... who regard craft as a way of making pocket change before walking down the aisle', as Adolf Loos proclaimed, the work of these artists was closely linked to contemporary debates about the nature of contemporary Austrian design.⁹ Ultimately, this plunged the Austrian pavilion in Paris into uneasy debates over the relation between commercial interests, luxury produce and functional and affordable design, against the background of Austria's economic recovery after the First World War.¹⁰ Indeed, the heavily gendered conflict embedded in the flamboyant style and commercial focus of the exhibits was representative of the Paris exhibition overall. In his 1925 article 'The Decorative Art of Today', Le Corbusier argued, for example, that the applied arts had become too decorative and commercial and consequently found greater 'appeal to women and the popular masses'.¹¹ At the same time, Ermers's review enthusiastically complimented the playfulness of the Austrian pavilion's exterior with allusions to a modern woman of luxury, emphasising precisely the 'femininity' of the design as its greatest strength. By extension, as Simon Dell has suggested, the displays established 'a particular set of relations between the consuming subject and the displayed objects, in which the objects were defined as "expressive" of the identity of the consumer'.¹² In other words, women's presence as designers and as consumers were tied closely to the displays. In the case of the Austrian pavilion this conflation took on particular significance in light of the shifting roles of women designers and their impact on the image of Vienna's applied arts industry at the time.

Taking these preliminary considerations into account, this essay takes the supposedly 'effeminised' nature of the Austrian pavilion in Paris as a point of departure to assess the position of the Viennese craftswoman, or *Kunstgewerblerin*, as a particular type of modern designer that rose to prominence in the 1920s. In line with Robert Rydell's understanding of fairs and exhibitions as a 'symbolic universe', it considers women's participation in the creation of the pavilion in a wider sense, including their realisation of work by

7) Max Ermers, 'Friedensmission der Kunst', *Der Tag*, 7 March 1925, 7.

8) Franz Quidenus, *L'Autriche*, 23.

9) Adolf Loos, 'Ich-der bessere Österreicher', in Adolf Opel, ed., *Kontroversen: Im Spiegel der Zeitgenossen*, Vienna: Prachner, 1985, 100.

10) Walter Iber, 'Post-war Economies (Austria-Hungary)', 1914-1918 [online], April 2020, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war_economies_austria-hungary.

11) Michele Greet, "'Exhilarating Exile": Four Latin American Women Exhibit in Paris', *Artelogie* 5, 2013, 1.

12) Simon Dell, 'The Consumer and the Making of the Exposition Internationale Des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, 1907-1925', *Journal of Design History* 12: 4, 1999, 311-325.

chief designers, as well as designs of their own.¹³ As Tracey Jean Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn have argued, 'women were, of course, part of the "imagined fair community", but they entered the stage differently and on terms that were often not of their own making'.¹⁴ This was also true for the women designers contributing to the Austrian pavilion. Drawing on debates about gender and the purpose of modern design, about the luxurious nature of the decorative arts in Vienna, and about the contested figure of the *Kunstgewerblerin* as a profession and a type of modern femininity, it argues that the 'female factor' in Austria's participation in Paris epitomised a moment when women's contributions to interwar Austrian design were being renegotiated in relation to the social, cultural and economic concerns after the First World War.¹⁵

In the shadow of Vienna 1900? The Wiener Werkstätte, continuity in Austrian design and a changing social landscape

Despite the designation 'Austrian pavilion', the Austrian contribution to the Paris exhibition was dominated by a handful of Viennese institutions and personalities, who not only sought to shape what Austrian design ought to look like in the future but had also shaped its past. In July 1924, Hoffmann published an article about preparations for the exhibition in *Neues Wiener Journal*, noting: 'Here [in Paris] it is, to my knowledge, the first time that a world exhibition excludes all historical styles and lets only modern production speak. [...] For the first time, too, shrunken little Austria will enter the international competition and compete with many larger states'.¹⁶ Hoffmann showed himself as optimistic that Austria was fit to participate, based on its 'leading position on the international market' since the turn of the twentieth century and because 'it was almost single-handedly Vienna that helped Austria to this leading position' in preceding decades.¹⁷

Hoffmann emphasised two specific institutions that shaped the pavilion and its content: the Wiener Werkstätte, founded by the architect in 1904 together with the industrialist Fritz Wärndorfer and the designer Koloman Moser, and the Academy of Applied Arts, where Hoffmann began to teach in 1899. Closely linked by figures such as Hoffmann and Moser, the two had played defining roles in the shaping of Viennese Secessionism around 1900 as

13) Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs. The Century-of-Progress Exhibitions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 2.

14) Tracey Jean Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn, 'World's Fairs in Feminist Historical Perspective', in Tracey Jean Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn, eds, *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World's Fairs*, Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012, 2.

15) Megan Brandow-Faller, *The Female Secession*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2020; Christoph Thun-Hohenstein et al, *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2020; Megan Brandow-Faller and Laura Morowitz, eds, *Erasures and Eradications in Modern Viennese Art, Architecture and Design*, New York: Routledge, 2022; Elana Shapira and Anne-Katrin Rossberg, eds, *Gestalterinnen: Frauen, Design und Gesellschaft im Wien der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023; Elana Shapira, ed., *Designing Transformation: Jews and Cultural Identity in Central European Modernism*, London: Bloomsbury, 2021; Elana Shapira ed., *Design Dialogue: Jews, Culture and Viennese Modernism*. Vienna: Böhlau, 2018; Allison J Clarke and Elana Shapira eds, *Émigré Cultures in Design and Architecture*, New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

16) Josef Hoffmann, 'Die kommende Weltausstellung in Paris', *Neues Wiener Journal*, 6 July 1924, 17.

17) Hoffmann, 'Die kommende Weltausstellung', 17.

an internationally successful style.¹⁸ Both institutions, too, played a considerable role in women's design education and professionalisation in the early twentieth century: the number of students at the Academy of Applied Arts increased significantly during the First World War and led to women's growing presence in commercial design, as well as in design education.¹⁹ The first female professor at the Academy of Applied Arts, the textile artist Rosalia Rothansl, had been appointed in 1920; in addition, between 1924 and 1925, Maria Likarz-Strauß led the fashion department of the Wiener Werkstätte.²⁰ Many of the female contributors to the 1925 pavilion exhibition were employed by Hoffmann, too. Indeed, his classes at the Academy were a central starting point for the professional careers of many women designers. Between 1915 and 1930, few other design schools counted more female students, and over a third of them initially began to work for the Wiener Werkstätte.²¹ To a certain extent, this dynamic must be read critically; for one, women were still primarily encouraged to focus on 'domestic' aspects of design, such as ceramics, soft furnishings, and interior decoration. Women's education at the Academy and their subsequent channelling into the Wiener Werkstätte can also be characterised as the serial production of designers who had precisely the kind of formal and stylistic training required to fulfil the needs of the company.²² Nonetheless, many of these women carved out successful careers, which often began at the Wiener Werkstätte and with Hoffmann's recommendations. While women's roles often remained in a realm of design that was designated 'feminine', therefore – textile design, ceramics, glass, fashion, interiors – they gained greater responsibility and a heightened visibility in public life. Indeed, the design historian Tomoko Kakuyama has suggested that the Wiener Werkstätte's 'uniqueness was not only the decorative nature of its designs, but also the success of its female members'.²³ As most of them were trained at the Academy, the positioning of the two as cultural institutions important to women entering creative professions went hand in hand.

In Paris, nine out of thirteen Wiener Werkstätte designers were women, in addition to several students or recent graduates from the Academy of Applied Arts. Part of the women designers' contributions to the pavilion was the execution of designs by their professors – replicating a familiar pattern of arts and crafts production, in which men designed and women executed.²⁴ In this regard alone, women's contributions were plenty. They included the painted vitrines by Christa Ehrlich, Camilla Birke and Hilde Polsterer in the large exhibition hall, or the 'Collections Room', which showcased objects by the Viennese Workshop and were the centrepiece of the pavilion; the religiously inspired 'Room of Silence', executed by students from the class of Anton Hanak such as Angela Stadtherr, one of the few women

18) Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, ed., *Josef Hoffmann, 1870-1956: Progress Through Beauty*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2021; Werner Schweiger, *Wiener Werkstätte: Design in Vienna, 1903-1932*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1990.

19) Brandow-Faller, *Female Secession*, 73–100 and 125–156.

20) Lara Steinhäuser, 'By women for women: on the role of female fashion artists at the Wiener Werkstätte', in *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, 116–139.

21) Elisabeth Kreuzhuber, 'Limited opportunity, seized with both hands: women artists of the Wiener Werkstätte at the School of Arts and Crafts', in *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, 24–33.

22) This criticism has been suggested, for example, by Kreuzhuber, 'Limited opportunity', 24–33.

23) Tomoko Kakuyama, 'Design and Gender during Wartime – the Vienna Workshops in World War I', *The Journal of the Asian Conference of Design History and Theory* 4, 2022, 42.

24) Anthea Callen, 'Sexual Division of Labor in the Arts and Crafts Movement', *Woman's Art Journal* 5:2, 1984-1985, 1-6.

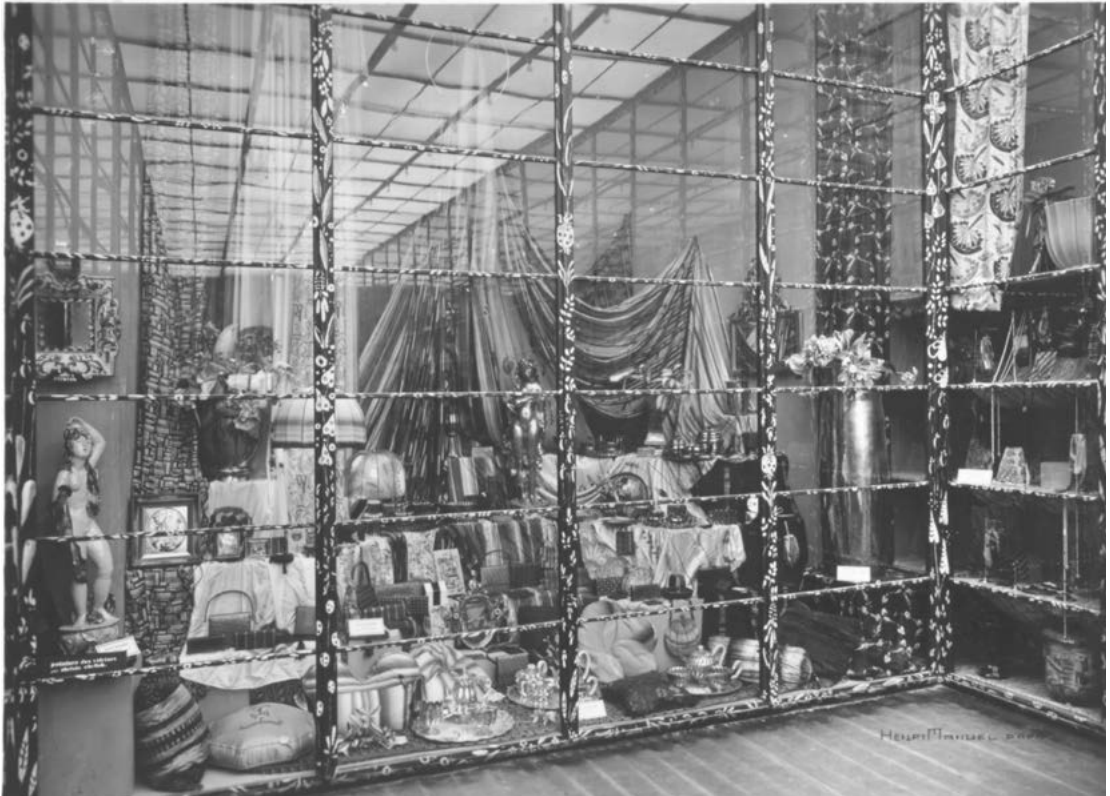


Figure 2: Henri Manuel, Photograph of a vitrine from the Wiener Werkstätte in the 'Langer Saal' at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris (1925).

Source: MAK Vienna.

specializing in metal sculpture, as well as Else Flesch and Marianne Wagner.²⁵ (Figures 2 and 3) Stadtherr's tin sculpture of a knight prominently featured in the section dedicated to the Academy of Applied Arts in the Grand Palais, which also showcased an architectural model by Polsterer alongside works by other students from Hoffmann's architecture class. In the exhibition halls of the Esplanade des Invalides, the majolica stove in the Gentleman's Room was designed by Hertha Bucher, a ceramicist who later specialized in façade work. The wall painting and intarsia work in the 'Resting Room of a Lady', first exhibited at the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry in 1923, was designed by Likarz-Strauß, and the large fresco of the tent-shaped ceiling in the tearoom was painted by Birke.²⁶

As these different interiors indicate, women's contributions to the pavilion went far beyond 'trinket design': they covered various media, including large-scale sculptures, such as Kuhn's *Female Nude* in the courtyard, Stadtherr's knight, and the metalwork in the room of silence, as well as extensive wall painting that featured as central elements in the pavilion's interior. Ceramics, a particular specialism of Viennese women designers such as

25) Max Eisler, 'Unser Handwerk in Paris', *Bau- und Werkkunst*, 1925, 305.

26) See Brandow-Faller, *Female Secession*, 137–151.



Figure 3: Bruno Reiffenstein, Photograph of the cult room by Anton Hanak's class at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris (1925).

Source: MAK Vienna.

Vally Wieselthier, Susi Singer, and Kuhn, ranged from expressionist designs for vases and sculptures of different sizes to large, tiled stoves. Hilda Jesser, meanwhile, built a room installation with paper designs, ostensibly designed for a *femme fantaisiste* ('fancy, artistic woman'), while embroideries by established artists and teachers such as Emmy Zweybrueck-Prohaska received praise in the French writer and art critic Marie Dormoy's discussion of Central European lace design exhibited in Paris.²⁷ Dormoy particularly emphasized the 'refined spirit of Vienna' in these works, referring to light humour and fantasy worlds as the defining elements of contemporary Austrian design. (Figure 4)

By and large, the contributions by women artists in Paris fulfilled an expectation of Austrian design that had already been established at earlier events, such as the Paris exhibition of 1900. At this point in time, women designers were predominantly represented as homemakers. Notions of 'feminine creativity', expressed through 'cosiness' (*Gemütlichkeit*), playfulness, rich colour and ornamentation, established Viennese middle-class women designers in the nexus of the Wiener Werkstätte as ideal figures to 'beautify' interiors.²⁸ Rebecca Houze has emphasised that this positioning maintained a 'strong ambivalence toward women, who, on the one hand, served as models of domestic artfulness yet, on the other, were incapable of true innovation, which must be accomplished by men.'²⁹ This interpretation remained central to discussions about women's designs in post-Habsburg Austria, too, and will be discussed later. Factually, however, the examples above of women's contributions to the 1925 pavilion underline the fact that their involvement had clearly extended beyond the realm of interior decoration and became more intrinsic to the design of the pavilion overall. Contributions by women designers to the Austrian pavilion were, thus, not marginal, nor did they exist in a separate sphere from the work of their male colleagues.

Women's contributions to the Austrian presentation were also recognised in the prizes awarded at the exhibition. A Grand Prix was given to Birke, while Likarz-Strauß and Polsterer received gold medals.³⁰ Silver and bronze medals went to the ceramicist Singer, who had her own pottery studio in rural Lower Austria and produced work for the Wiener Werkstätte, the ceramicist and textile artist Jesser, Leisching and Fanni Harlfinger – founder of the feminist art association *Wiener Frauenkunst* – as well as Mizi Otten-Friedmann, and the sisters Felice and Kitty Rix (Figure 5).³¹ Professionally, too, the participation in the exhibition reaped some benefits. For example, Polsterer, a recent graduate of the Academy, was hired on the spot by the Primavera design studio of the Printemps department store.³² She lived in Paris for the following decade as a tapestry

27) Marie Dormoy, *Exposition des arts décoratifs Paris 1925: Dentelles de l'Europe Centrale*, Paris: Editions Albert Levy, 1926, 2.

28) Rebecca Houze, 'From Wiener Kunst im Hause to the Wiener Werkstätte: Marketing Domesticity with Fashionable Interior Design', *Design Issues* 18:1, 2002, 3–23.

29) Houze, 'From Wiener Kunst im Hause to the Wiener Werkstätte', 5.

30) 'Österreich auf der Pariser Kunstgewerbeausstellung: Auszeichnung österreichischer Aussteller', *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 27 October 1925, 6.

31) Hans Ankwicz-Kleehoven, 'Österreich auf der Internationalen Kunstgewerbeausstellung Paris 1925, V. Die Interieurs an der Esplanade des Invalides', *Wiener Zeitung*, 12 September 1925, 7.

32) 'L'atelier Primavera des Grands magasins du Printemps à l'Exposition des arts décoratifs de 1925', *Vogue*, August 1925, 37; Jean-Paul Caracalla, *Le Roman du Printemps, histoire d'un grand magasin*, Paris: Denoël, 1989.



Figure 4: Bruno Reiffenstein, Photograph of embroidery from the class of Rosalia Rothansl at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris (1925).

Source: MAK Vienna.

designer, moved in the avant-garde circles around Tristan Tzara, and exhibited paintings in the *Salon des surindépendants*.³³

Seen in this light, the 1925 exhibition was also a springboard for the international careers of Viennese women designers. This might have been most evident in the case of Polsterer but it also held when it came to the careers of Likarz and Wieselthier, who, in subsequent years, began to work successfully in the Netherlands and the United States, respectively.³⁴ Viennese

33) 'Salons et exhibitionsitions', *Le Petit Parisien: journal quotidien du soir*, 21 November 1932, 8; Louis Lenon-Martin, 'Hilda Polsterer', *Paris-soir*, 21 May 1930, 4; Torrés Garcia, 'Un peintre viennois: Hilda Polsterer', *La Revue hebdomadaire: romans, histoire, voyages*, 9 January 1932, 242–244; Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski, 'Hilde Polsterer – Paris', *Estate of Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski*, Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, Vienna, ZPH 347, Box 3 Folder 1.

34) Megan Brandow-Faller, 'Feminine Vessels: The Ceramic Sculpture of Vally Wieselthier', *Woman's Art Journal* 35:2, 2014, 28.



Figure 5: Bruno Reiffenstein, Photograph of two enamel figures by Mizi Otten-Friedmann at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris (1925).

Source: MAK Vienna.

design in Paris was, thus, closely linked to the growing presence of women designers around the Academy of Applied Arts and the Wiener Werkstätte, imbued by the role of the *Kunstgewerblerin* as a particular social phenomenon of the time, intrinsically tied to fashion, the professionalisation of the woman designer and middle-class consumption.

Modern femininity and the *Kunstgewerblerin* as 'an eminent Viennese specialty'³⁵

At the time of the Paris exhibition, women's shifting roles were widely debated in Viennese society. In her essay collection *Gender and Culture*, first published in 1923, the Austrian feminist Rosa Mayreder noted, 'civilization [...] would seem to be in its origins a feminine achievement because women everywhere were the first farmers, potters, weavers, tentmakers, in

35) Patek, 'Modefeuilleton', 9.

short, the first technicians.'³⁶ Tracing gender inequality back to women's roles as caregivers, Mayreder argued that the further technology advanced, the more public responsibilities were taken on by men, leading to gendered divisions between men in the public and women in the private spheres. However, she no longer saw these developments viable in the early twentieth century: 'The types of female roles that were still considered ideal two generations ago are now completely out of date and cannot be maintained.'³⁷ At a time when Austria's social and political foundations had irrevocably changed with the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, feminists like Mayreder drew a link between the country's new political situation and steps towards women's emancipation in public life.³⁸ In the 1920s and 30s, the *Kunstgewerblerin* stood for a specific type of modern woman: a 'decidedly Viennese speciality', as the journalist Claire Patek described, whose designs mirrored her 'personality and individuality' as a professionally trained expert in different artistic media.³⁹

In relation to the Austrian pavilion in Paris this new kind of woman first became visible with the installation of the interiors and craft objects sent to Paris by train from Vienna in March 1925, accompanied by nine students from the Academy of Applied arts, who were responsible for the set-up. Alfred Roller, professor at the Academy, attested later on: 'The whole exhibition in Paris was completed and furnished by nine of our students; they completed the whole work by themselves, also the manual labour.'⁴⁰ Among them were three female students: the textile artist and designer Birke, the architect and ceramic artist Ehrlich, and Polsterer, primarily a painter and tapestry artist. Taking on the responsibility of furnishing the pavilion interiors 'with little more support than a scaffolding', the hands-on approach to exhibition design by Birke, Ehrlich and Polsterer was effectively promoted in the press. The illustrated weekly, *Wiener Bilder*, showed the three women dressed in workers' overalls next to the scaffolding, emphasizing that they not only created designs but also had the skills to execute them. **(Figure 6)**

With a focus on female makers (the male students remain invisible in the photographs), the changing role of women designers was thus intrinsic to the pavilion's presentation as a modern-day project. While *Wiener Bilder* offers little commentary on the image, the young women in overalls recall the Paris exhibition's framing as 'modern' and 'future-oriented' and can thus be read as an indication of the fact that the Austrian contribution was going with the times not only in terms of its aesthetics, but also in relation to the social changes of the post-war era. An important shift in this context was the professionalisation of women's craftwork. Across Europe, Grace Lees-Maffei has argued, 'the traditions of feminine accomplishments (textile and handicrafts) [...] eased the entry of women into art and design education generally, and [...] made interior decoration an often-recommended career for women.'⁴¹ Austria was no exception in this case.

36) Rosa Mayreder, 'Civilisation and Gender', in Pamela S. Saur, ed., *Gender and Culture*, Riverside, C.A.: Ariadne Press, 2009, 21.

37) Mayreder, 'Civilisation and Gender', 26.

38) Lynda J. King, 'The Woman Question and Politics in Austrian Interwar Literature', *German Studies Review* 6:1, 1983, 75-100.

39) Patek, 'Modefeuilleton', 9.


40) Alfred Roller, 'Der Streit an der Kunstgewerbeschule', *Neues Wiener Journal*, 12 November 1925, 5.

41) Grace Lees-Maffei, 'Introduction: Professionalization as a Focus in Interior Design History', *Journal of Design History* 21:1, 2008, 12.


Nummer 19. Wiener Bilder. Seite 3




Togal gegen Schmerzen
rheumatischer, gichtischer
und nervöser Art.
Besonders bewährt auch bei Kopfschmerzen — Fieberhaftig
im akuten Verlauf.




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Die internationale Ausstellung für dekorative Kunst in Paris: Generalansicht der gesamten Ausstellung. Wot. G. Zampus, Paris.



Ein städtischer Finanzminister: Mr. Winston Churchill verlässt nach seiner Budgetrede, in der er Steuererhöhungen und sonstige Gesetzentwürfe vorbrachte, das Parlament. Foto: Sport & General Press Agency, London.



Die internationale Ausstellung für dekorative Kunst in Paris: Wiener Kunstgewerbeschülerinnen — die Heilwinda Salcherer, Gertrud und Birke — bei der Arbeit für die Ausgestaltung des österreichischen Pavillons. Nach einer photographischen Aufnahme



Die internationale Ausstellung für dekorative Kunst in Paris: Präsident Doumergue eröffnet mit den Ministern und den Ausstellungsleitenden die Exposition. Wot. G. Zampus, Paris.

Figure 6: The International Exhibition for Decorative Arts in Paris: Students of the Vienna School of Applied Arts – Miss Polsterer, Ehrlich and Birke – at work decorating the Austrian pavilion (1925). Newspaper photograph, *Wiener Bilder*, 10 May 1925, 5.

Source: Austrian National Library, Vienna.

The professionalisation of women designers began in the late nineteenth century and, by the 1920s, distinctions between dilettantes, addressed in fashion and craft magazines, and trained designers were well-established in Austrian culture.⁴² Rothansl's advice columns on different crafting techniques for amateurs by an expert are one example of how this distinction was manifested publicly.⁴³ The shift in positioning women as professional designers is also visible in women's involvement in international exhibitions. The 1873 World's Fair in Vienna already included a pavilion of 'women's work'. Yet there was a significant difference between that and the 1925 exhibition. The earlier 'Pavilion of Women's Work' not only stood on its own as a separate category, it also sought to promote 'the work of the ideal bourgeois housewife'.⁴⁴ By contrast, in 1925 the work of women designers was an integral part of the Austrian pavilion and offered a display of skillfully crafted luxury design rather than examples of blissful domesticity, manufactured by designers who had trained at Austria's prestigious Academy of Applied Arts.

As the photograph in *Wiener Bilder* indicates, the meticulous work of painting all the vitrines, as well as the frescoes for the 'Gentleman's room' and the 'Resting Room of a Lady' in the Austrian pavilion, was completed by Birke, Ehrlich and Polsterer, all three of them fresh graduates from the Academy. Their sporting of worker's overalls made for a significant difference from the way their male peers dressed. In a photograph of Fellerer and Haerdtl, for example, the two architects are shown in the 'Garden room', casually sitting at a coffee table, posing for the camera in fashionable suits. In contrast to their leisurely self-presentation, the women position themselves as manual workers, suggesting that women designers did not simply draw fashionable craft objects, but took a hands-on approach to realising designs. Their public self-presentation thus suggests that they knew how to realise designs from start to finish. Birke, Ehrlich and Polsterer's portrait as designer-workers thereby adds an alternative narrative to that promoted by Hoffmann and his supporters such as Berta Zuckerkandl-Szeps in the presentation of the pavilion in the Austrian press, who read it as a continuity of the prowess of Viennese design around 1900. It is worth quoting at length Zuckerkandl-Szeps's summary of the pavilion and its role as a point of connection between the past and future of Austrian design, since it shows how supporters of Hoffmann viewed the architect as the most important representative of Austrian cultural identity in Paris:

That Austria is pioneering a new European art of living, that Austria was and is a spring of youth from which a European renaissance summons its strength; that the impoverished, wrecked, Austria led on a noose would be an artistic revelation at the international exhibition for decorative arts in Paris, as was already guaranteed by its success of yesterday, shows eternal strength. [...] The strength of a people, whose native culture roots in the joyful game of cheerful beauty, drums drumming and pipes piping, in a harmony of line and colour. The greatest gratitude, however, should go to Josef Hoffmann, who first and foremost led Austrian art to this success.⁴⁵

42) Rebecca Houze, 'At the Forefront of a Newly Emerging Profession? Ethnography, Education and the Exhibition of Women's Needlework in Austria-Hungary in the Late Nineteenth Century' *Journal of Design History* 21:1, 2008, 19–40.

43) Rosalia Rothansl, 'Häusliches Kunstgewerbe: Die Handarbeiten der Dame,' *Moderne Welt*, 4:9, 1923, 34.

44) Houze, 'At the Forefront', 25.

45) Berta Zuckerkandl-Szeps, 'Eröffnung des österreichischen Pavillons: In der dekorativen Pariser Ausstellung,' *Neues Wiener Journal*, 12 May 1925, 5.

By contrast, the photograph in *Wiener Bilder* literally puts a new kind of creator into the picture, who epitomised the figure of the female designer in Viennese public debates at the time: the *Kunstgewerblerin*.

To a certain extent, the *Kunstgewerblerin* fits the wider popular phenomenon of the 'New Woman', which was widely present in global interwar visual culture and has been described by Linda Nochlin as 'a heartfelt rejection of woman's traditional role as it was defined by every society in the world: rebellion against oppressive notions of the "womanly" understood to be a life devoted to subordinating one's own needs and desires to those of men, family, and children.'⁴⁶ Negative interpretations of this rejection of conventional lifestyles were widespread among established Viennese cultural figures and illustrate the resentments that the *Kunstgewerblerin* was exposed to in public culture. She was caricatured in popular illustrations, in advice columns, as well as in literary works, famously described in Joseph Roth's *The Emperor's Tomb*: '[A] craftswoman. Do you know what that is? She designs, or rather carves, in fact – crazy necklaces and rings, modern things you know, all corners, and clasps of fir. I believe she can also plait straw mats. The last time she was here she gave me a lecture, like a professor, about African art...'⁴⁷ As Roth's spiteful description makes evident, women's designs were set alongside prejudices against modernist art and its borrowings from non-European cultures, and conflated as an incomprehensible, primitivist body of work, created by the *Kunstgewerblerin* who personified not only a shift in applied arts production, but also a destabilisation of social and gender norms.

Most significantly, women designers became the target of the dismissive attitudes towards women entering the profession that were held by male architects and designers. Anne-Katrin Rossberg, curator of the *Women and the Wiener Werkstätte* exhibition at Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts (2021), has suggested that polemics against them were due to a sudden sense of competition that male designers experienced as women entering the workforce.⁴⁸ A common example of this polemic was conflation of the figure of the *Kunstgewerblerin* with the producer of unnecessary, frilly trinket designs. Haerdtl, for example, spoke of an 'unheard-of *Pupperlwirtschaft*' (bimbo economy) to describe the women employed at the Wiener Werkstätte, while the artist and print maker Julius Klinger renamed the design company the 'Viennese Broad's Decorative Art' in a personal attack on one of the company's main shareholders, Mäda Primavesi: 'Mäda! [...] one immediately thinks of something fractured, exaggerated, affected, frivolous, false, artificial and above all superfluous, in a nutshell: a product of the WW [Wiener Werkstätte]. Viennese Broad's Decorative Art – whom does that not fill with feminine horror!'⁴⁹

46) Linda Nochlin, 'Foreword: Representing the New Woman—Complexity and Contradiction', in Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco, eds, *The New Woman International – Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011, vii.

47) Joseph Roth, *The Emperor's Tomb*, trans. John Hoare, London: Granta, 1999, 97-98.

48) Völker in "'The women of the Wiener Werkstätte". Exhibition in Vienna. Review', *World Today News* [online], 19 September 2021, <https://www.world-today-news.com/the-women-of-the-wiener-werkstatte-exhibition-in-vienna-review-culture/>.

49) Rossberg, 'Introduction', 13.

Looking beyond such chauvinistic and downright misogynist attitudes, however, the *Kunstgewerblerin* was also defended as a viable profession for women in cultural and women's magazines. One aspect of this is women designers' own contributions to specialist publications. Megan Brandow-Faller, for example, has shown how, in her articles for *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, the ceramic artist and designer Wieselthier fashioned an image of herself that not only presented her as a professional but also played with the idea of the 'happy-go-lucky child-woman' as an emancipatory strategy.⁵⁰ Considering more popular news outlets where descriptions of women designers appeared, the profession emerges predominantly as an opportunity for women from the urban middle-class. For although the *Kunstgewerblerin* stereotype was closely tied to non-conforming femininity, she still largely belonged to moderate mainstream society and rarely represented more radical politically progressive artists and designers such as Friedl Dicker-Brandeis or Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. The typical woman designer was uninterested in politics, as Marianne Leisching said of her peers: 'The overthrow of 1918 affected them financially at most (but at the time they certainly earned very good money at the WW) [...]. Their views (to the extent that they had any) were conservative, monarchist, anti-revolutionary'.⁵¹ In light of this comment, it is apparent that becoming a *Kunstgewerblerin* was hardly a radical career choice in the 1920s. Rather, it had turned into a viable profession for middle class women, who had the necessary financial and social backing to receive the prerequisite training.⁵²

Taken at a wider angle and with the *Kunstgewerblerin's* position as a viable new profession in mind, public discussions suggest that the well-known comments by Loos and his allies represented only a fraction of her presence in public culture. Yet even these more informative and positive discussions cannot deflect from certain stereotypes that women designers were connected to – most of all, the idea that they wanted to produce fanciful decorative objects as an easy way to make money. An article published in the women's bi-weekly *Die Frau* in 1921, for example, aimed to clear up misconceptions by describing the *Kunstgewerblerin's* technical skills and material knowledge, as well as the personal dedication necessary, while warning of the financial risks of taking such a profession, for 'a domestic help is often better paid'.⁵³ Meanwhile, an advice column in the fashionable magazine *Moderne Welt* responded positively to a reader's query as to whether her daughter should become a designer, and described the profession as 'incomparably more promising' than an office job.⁵⁴ However, the column did not fail to mention that 'a sense of innovation and original work is a precondition for this indeed not very easy profession'.⁵⁵ Adding to these more direct descriptions, numerous advertisements for products of studios run by women designers, offering creative products from toy design to tailor-made fashion and soft furnishings, frequently featured in newspapers and magazines, and confirmed their visibility in Viennese interwar culture.⁵⁶

50) Brandow-Faller, 'Feminine Vessels', 28.

51) Leisching in Ann Kathrin Rossberg, 'The women artist's workshop', in *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, 149.

52) Elana Shapira, 'Professional Women in the Arts and Media in Vienna – Kulturschaffende Frauen in Wien', in *Gestalterinnen*, 9-28.

53) A. B., 'Von Geschmack und Mode. Die Kunstgewerblerin. Der richtige Weg', *Die Frau*, 3 December 1921, 2.

54) 'Bitte sagen Sie mir...', *Moderne Welt* 6:9, 1924, 42.

55) 'Bitte sagen Sie mir...', 42.

56) *Die Bühne* 8, 1925, 46.

The continued popularity of the profession also found emphasis in the film industry. Walter Reisch's romantic comedy *Episode* (1935) focused on the young designer Valerie, played by the popular actress Paula Wessely. Set in 1922, the film follows the ceramicist and student at the Academy of Applied Arts who struggles to make a living in the time of economic depression after the First World War. Merging fiction and reality, the film included several actual students of Strnad at the Academy of Applied Arts as silent extras (**Figure 7**).⁵⁷ Reisch and Wessely were nominated at the Venice Film Festival in 1935, and the film was the only one by a Jewish director admitted to German cinemas after 1933. In newspapers, film, and literature, therefore, the *Kunstgewerblerin* had a wide presence throughout the interwar period. She was intrinsically connected with the Academy of Applied Arts and the Wiener Werkstätte, and tied to a set of stereotypes that fluctuated between that of a 'confident, headstrong artist' and a 'material-wasting dilettante' with a consistent presence in relation to redefinitions of Viennese interwar design and its social and institutional contexts.⁵⁸ Placed in this wider context, the photograph in *Wiener Bilder* of Birke, Ehrlich and Polsterer as modern female designers emphasises the fact that the Paris exhibition not only showed new design, but also represented a new generation of women whose position was peculiar to its time.

A pillar of the national economy?

Given the positioning of the Austrian pavilion by government officials as a marker of the country's economic recovery, and the commercial outlook of the Paris exhibition overall, the role of the *Kunstgewerblerin* should also be considered in the light of economic concerns. Already in 1921, Patek emphasised that the professionalisation of women designers not only led to a playful and highly individual style in fashion and interiors, but also 'brought money to the country'.⁵⁹ In context, the term *Kunstgewerblerin* refers to the concept of an artistic profession that existed until the late 1930s, in which connotations of women's applied arts production became explicitly intertwined with national economic interests.⁶⁰ From the early 1920s onwards, Austrian arts and crafts quickly became the poster child for the new republic as a 'nation of culture', explained in the exhibition catalogue for Paris in 1925 by Federal Minister of Trade and Transport Hans Schürff, who talked of the Austrians' 'natural predisposition' towards the applied arts.⁶¹ In public debate, too, praise for the applied arts by journalists such as Zuckermandl and Jacqueline Bertillon testified to the important role of the decorative arts as luxury goods for international export.⁶² As early as 1922, Bertillon emphasised

57) Ingrid Wolf, 'Walter Reisch dreht seinen neuen Film Episode mit Paula Wessely', *Die Bühne* 397, 1935, 26–29.

58) Stephan Ehrenzweig, 'Gegenüber', *Moderne Welt* 8:17, 1926, 9; Loos, 'Ich – der bessere Österreicher', 100.

59) Patek, 'Modefeuilleton', 9.

60) Rossberg, 'Introduction', 13.

61) Schürff, *L'Autriche à l'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs*, 14. Herbert Hofreither, "'Kulturnation' Österreich: Anmerkungen zu Image, Identität, Sport, Film und Literatur', *Modern Austrian Literature* 32:4, 1999, 19–39. Marion Knapp, *Österreichische Kulturpolitik und das Bild der 'Kulturnation': Kontinuität und Diskontinuität in der Kulturpolitik des Bundes seit 1945*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2005.

62) Jacqueline Bertillon, 'Les industries de luxe à Vienne sont prospères mais ne travaillent pas pour les Viennois', *Le Jour*, 19 February 1922, 1. Berta Zuckermandl-Szeps, 'Eröffnung des österreichischen Pavillons. In der dekorativen Pariser Ausstellung', *Neues Wiener Journal*, 12 May 1925, 5.



Figure 7: Ingrid Wolf, 'Walter Reisch dreht seinen neuen Film Episode mit Paula Wessely', *Die Bühne* 397 (1935).

Source: Austrian National Library, Vienna.

that in Austria's precarious post-war economic situation, luxury arts and crafts flourished but barely had a market within Austria. Although the country's economy slowly recovered after the post-war hyperinflation with the help of League of Nations bonds and was largely stabilised with the introduction of a new currency, the Schilling, in December 1924, the middle and upper middle classes had suffered major income losses due to the rapid devaluation of money and reduced purchasing power.⁶³ Calls to the population to actively support the country's economic recovery were widespread at this time, not only in political pamphlets but also in fashion and society magazines directed at middle-class female readers.⁶⁴ The professionalisation of the *Kunstgewerblerin* in this light went hand in hand with a reinterpretation of women's contributions to the applied arts as part of economic resuscitation, supported through different strategies by middle-class women designers such as Rothansl.

Between 1923 and 1924 Rothansl regularly published articles in *Moderne Welt*. In one, titled 'Domestic Arts and Crafts. The Lady's Handicrafts' (**Figure 8**), Rothansl presented a range of techniques for textile work, including carpet weaving, embroidery and tapestry, intended to enable 'the lady with cultivated taste' to create her own designs.⁶⁵ Illustrated with photographs of Rothansl's own work and that of her student Jesser, a 1924 article on the creation and decoration of waistcoats, for example, not only provides instructions for sewing and gives advice on suitable haberdashery, but also recommends colour combinations and ways of arranging embroidery on the fabric.⁶⁶ Rothansl's contributions thus not only offered an introduction to the applied arts, including historical contextualisation, they also demonstrated the many steps that must be mastered by a craftswoman in the field of textile work, while positioning her and her student's work as a blueprint for domestic design.

With regard to the emphasis on the 'high moral value' of domestic arts and crafts, Rothansl's contributions at first glance reinforce a traditional image of women's handicrafts.⁶⁷ Yet unlike conventional women's or handicrafts magazines, *Moderne Welt* had a decidedly cosmopolitan orientation and, in addition to reports on the latest fashions from Paris, also included travelogues from all over the world, reports on the political and economic situation in Austria, as well as portraits of artists and literary texts. In this context, Rothansl's contributions can be interpreted as a popularisation strategy for Viennese design, which supported the high status of the applied arts in economically weakened post-war Austria.⁶⁸

Apart from encouraging handicrafts, the articles also addressed the reader as a consumer: advertisements printed below or next to the articles promote materials such as embroidery silk, while the fashion sections on the subsequent pages suggest how homemade items can be combined with the purchased items. Not least, with selected patterns from 'schools, studios, companies, independent artists', Rothansl's contributions offered not only versatile

63) Walter M. Iber, "'Rettungsschirm' für Österreich: Die Völkerbundanleihen', *Beiträge zur Rechtsgeschichte Österreichs*, 9:2, 2019, 388-391.

64) Hans Kerschbaum, 'Die Männer die Österreich sanieren', *Moderne Welt* 4:9, 1923, 1.

65) Rosalia Rothansl, 'Häusliches Kunstgewerbe. Die Handarbeiten der Dame', *Moderne Welt* 4:9, 1923, 34.

66) *Ibid.*, 32.

67) Rothansl, 'Häusliches Kunstgewerbe', 1923, 34.

68) Fiona Hackney, "'Use Your Hands for Happiness": Home Craft and Make-do-and-Mend in British Women's Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s', *Journal of Design History* 19:1, 2006, 23-38.

instructions, whereby patterns and stitched tracings could be ordered through the magazines, they also provided an overview of contemporary arts and crafts creation in Vienna in the 1920s. Many of the illustrations show works from Rothansl's own textile class, but patterns by independent artists are also presented including, for example, Hilde Weidner or Margarete Tiemann. Rothansl's contributions thus functioned as an advertising space for the Academy of Applied Arts and associated designers. Women were in the majority. With the growing presence of women designers in popular media, the contributions confirm the growing professionalisation and recognition of this profession. The fact that the works presented – such as tea cosies, cushion covers, netted doilies, wallets, and belts – were mainly of decorative value should not obscure the fact that arts and crafts had acquired a deeper ideological and economic significance in Vienna in the early 1920s. In the broader social and political context of the magazine, Rothansl's instructions can be read as part of an attempt to rehabilitate Austria's position as a 'nation of culture'. By extension, precisely this image was used to position Austria as an important supplier of applied arts for international markets at the Paris exhibition, exhibiting and promoting the same products that became synonymous with the *Kunstgewerblerin* in the early 1920s. In fact, even when Austria's political climate became more and more reactionary in the early 1930s and increasingly limited women's role in public life, the economic importance of women designers continued to be emphasised. The notion of 'feminine craft' had, thus, built a lasting legacy. In 1933, the conservative cultural magazine *Profil* published an article 'The *Kunstgewerblerin*' alongside a series of designs by Viennese Workshop artists Jesser and Likarz-Strauß, who had also exhibited in Paris in 1925. Stressing the role of the *Kunstgewerblerin* as a designer who must work in line with the requirements of industrial production, the article concludes: 'The importance of the *Kunstgewerblerin* in the national economy is evident. The responsibilities of women active in design and their part in the fruition and downfall of our economy is greater than ever before.'⁶⁹ Indeed, the fashion historian Jonathan Kaplan-Wajselbaum has emphasised that, from the mid-1920s until the Second World War, Vienna counted among the fashion capitals of Europe next to London, Paris and Berlin, owing to the successful establishment of department stores where fashionable items could be bought at affordable prices.⁷⁰ Given the international reach of the Paris exhibition and its overall commercial focus, the representation of women designers at the Austrian pavilion thus ought to be considered as an central aspect to establishing their cultural as well as their economic role in interwar Austria. Yet the particular modes of expression their work was identified with remained strongly contested.

69) H.A.V., 'Die Kunstgewerblerin', *Profil. Österreichische Monatsschrift für bildende Kunst* 4, 1933, 38.

70) Jonathan Kaplan-Wajselbaum, *Jews in Suits. Men's Dress in Vienna, 1890-1938*, London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

Modern design and the *Kunstgewerblerin* in Paris

Described as a 'Viennese woman with a thorough knowledge of contemporary Paris', an anonymous author in the (*Neuigkeits-*) *Welt Blatt* reported her horror upon visiting the Austrian pavilion in 1925.⁷¹ Pointing out the praise for the pavilion in the Austrian press, she writes about her disappointment upon visiting the 'unsightly' pavilion whose interiors were reminiscent of 'Christmas tree ornaments'.⁷² She also remarked upon the repeated exclamation 'pauvre Autriche!' among many visitors, unsure whether this pertained to the pavilion or to the 'petty state' that Austria had become after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918.⁷³ The connection pointed to the unfitting decadence of the pavilion as a form of national representation, drawing upon the fact that the country had been transformed into a small Alpine state in which the luxurious designs of Viennese institutions were an exception, rather than the rule.⁷⁴ This is not to say that the pavilion was generally badly received. As already noted, the French press by and large appreciated Viennese design, while the Frankfurt-based newspaper *Klimsch Anzeiger*, for example, in its review of the Paris exhibition, stressed that the Austrian pavilion was 'exceptionally noble' and 'exemplary and very dignified'.⁷⁵ Putting aside the fact that most pavilions received mixed reviews such as these, however, the decorative and luxurious character emphasised in relation to the Austrian pavilion, and the 'feminisation' of Viennese design this was associated with, merits some closer attention. With a focus on the applied arts specifically, a different matter was at stake beyond questions of national identity: namely, what modern design ought to look like and whether the kind of objects the women designers were identified with matched these ideas – or not.

Influential critics such as Ermers described the objects by women designers as 'an intoxicating cascade of fabrics and a remarkable richness of leather- and glassware, jewellery, lampshades, book bindings, miniature sculpture...'⁷⁶ His terminology recalls Klinger's description of the *Kunstgewerblerin*'s work as 'something fractured, exaggerated, [...] artificial and above all superfluous', produced by 'almost-artists of an individual kind for a cosmopolitan and moneyed stratum of society'.⁷⁷ In line with the dismissive attitudes towards craftswomen in a wider cultural field, Austrian critics blamed women's contributions for the failures of the pavilion to provide modern, practical solutions for Austrian design.

That the vitrines were not only richly decorated but also filled to the brim was a recurring point of criticism. Considering the set-up of the large exhibition hall, with its ornamented high vitrines, the overall impression was certainly overwhelming. Adding to this the rich colours, different materials and abundance of form of the exhibits, references to luxury consumption hardly come as a surprise. Of the large exhibition hall Ermers noted, 'here,

71) 'Pariser Eindrücke', (*Neuigkeits-*)*Welt Blatt*, 27 September 1925, 4.

72) 'Pariser Eindrücke', 4.

73) 'Pariser Eindrücke', 4.

74) Katherine Smits and Alix Jansen, 'Staging the Nation at Expos and World's Fairs', *National Identities* 14:2, 2012, 173-188.

75) 'Vermischtes', *Der deutsch-österreichische Photograph* 24, 1925, 10.

76) Ermers, 'Auf der Seine-Terrasse', 5.

77) Ermers, 'Auf der Seine-Terrasse', 5.

everyday objects are no longer produced with the seriousness, objectivity and solidity to offer potential for mass consumption, but as entertaining and alluring things to help one to overcome the monotonous life of someone not having to rely on employment.⁷⁸ What Patek celebrated as 'personality and individuality' in the design of the modern *Kunstgewerblerin* was, thus, positioned as a detrimental development in Austrian design production.

Looking more closely at some of the individual objects on display by women designers, such as the playful ceramic sculptures by Mizi Otten-Friedmann, glazed in different colours and richly ornamented, it is clear what Ermers and the anonymous visitor were criticising: the sculptures are decorative objects that are highly expressive in colour and form and have no practical function. (Figure 5) They served as miniature artworks that played with an overabundance of material, different shapes and patterns, forging a playful means of expression that clearly eschewed the 'objective', 'clean', and 'practical' nature praised in the work of Frank, Behrens, and Hoffmann at the same exhibition.⁷⁹ Similarly, the embroideries on display from Rothansl's class at the Academy present fantasy worlds in a variety of needlework techniques, which focused on formal exploration rather than serving a utilitarian purpose. Using the Austrian pavilion as a stage, Vienna's women designers clearly played on notions of the 'attractive', the 'frilly' and the 'playful', which could easily be used by those favouring a functionalist style to play out a gender bias that emphasised a separation of women's creative production from rational and functional modernity.⁸⁰ Instead of seeing craftsmanship, Ermers criticised the undue attention paid to aestheticized, decorative surfaces, describing them as the ideas of a 'femme fantaisiste', a fanciful woman with no sense of reality.⁸¹ Putting these flaws down to the new 'feminine character of Austrian design', he saw the spirit of the male design 'geniuses' of an older generation misinterpreted at the hands of their female students.⁸² The only remedy to this, in order to rejuvenate Austrian design, he found, was to shift towards a 'masculine, expert, serious [...] and well-constructed' mass industry, including the total reorganisation of the Academy of Applied Arts.⁸³

At this point, it is necessary to briefly contextualise Ermers' position. Between 1919 and 1923 this art historian and economist led the Housing Office for the municipality of Vienna ('Siedlungsamt der Stadt Wien'), where he was responsible for the planning of housing estates to counter the establishing of uncontrolled building in the city as a consequence of housing shortages after the First World War.⁸⁴ Additionally, he acted as one of the three deputy mayors of Vienna at this time, and regularly published articles on cultural questions, including reviews of the Paris exhibition in *Der Tag*, a left-leaning, liberal daily which held a critical

78) Ermers, 'Wo stehen wir nun wirklich?', 2.

79) Eisler, 'Unser Haus in Paris', *Neue Freie Presse*, 19 May 1925, 25.

80) Ankwicz-Kleehoven, 'Österreich auf der Internationalen Kunstgewerbeausstellung', 1.

81) Ermers, 'Wo stehen wir nun wirklich?', 2.

82) Ermers, 'Wo stehen wir nun wirklich?', 2.

83) Ermers, 'Wo stehen wir nun wirklich?', 2.

84) Klaus Novy and Günther Uhlig, *Die Wiener Siedlerbewegung 1918-1934*, Aachen: Klenkes, 1982; Inge Podbrecky, *Rotes Wien*, Vienna: Falter, 2003; Ulrike Zimmerl, *Wiener Siedlerbewegung und Siedlungswesen in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Vienna: Österreichischer Kunst- und Kulturverlag, 1998.

stance towards the Entente powers.⁸⁵ A similar scepticism towards Austrian dependence on international funds coloured Ermers's book of 1922, *Austria's Economic Decline and Rebirth. An Economic Program for Self-Salvation*, in which he argued that the country's economic recovery could only proceed through growing economic independence.⁸⁶ In other words, Ermers's political position and his understanding of modern design as functional industrial production suitable and affordable for a broad segment of the population, by and large stood in opposition to the luxury designs by middle-class women that the *Kunstgewerblerin* in Paris represented. From this point of view, Ermers's criticisms of the designs were, arguably, justified, notwithstanding their misogynistic motivations.

The gendered criticism of the pavilion, in this sense, can also be understood as an implicit critique of the middle class and its closed circuit of production, which stood in opposition to the goals of Red Vienna. It was the same group of Viennese cosmopolites who produced, promoted, and bought the luxury goods on display in Paris, forging a specific community that continued the design practices of Vienna 1900 in an updated form. In contrast to other women designers who supported Ermers's cause, such as the architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, who also worked on Vienna's housing projects, however, it can be argued that the *Kunstgewerblerin* designs had a fundamentally different purpose compared to Ermers's expectations of modern design. It was one that focused on women's creative emancipation. In 1928, three years after the Paris exposition, Illy Kjaer noted in her review of the exhibition *Contemporary Living* at the Museum for Art and Industry in Vienna, that the interiors exhibited reflected the maturing of 'an individual consciousness [...] in contemporary design, which does not unfold in a repetition of forms but, in searching the rhythm of its time, grapples to find its own expression'.⁸⁷ Kjaer, a painter and designer herself, as well as a regular contributor to feminist magazines, consequently argued that 'the applied arts offer women the cultural task of realising their own note, their own ways of life, and to carry their individual values of beauty into the widest everyday realities.'⁸⁸ The aestheticization of craft objects thus allowed women designers 'the possibility of meaningful artistic expression' beyond the easel.⁸⁹ For the Paris exhibition, as a showcase of luxury design for commercial purposes, this positioning corresponded closely with the main figure in mind for the exhibition overall: the modern, middle class woman consumer, who expressed her social and political emancipation with an emphasis on new fashions and interiors.

Conclusion

In line with the wider role of the *Kunstgewerblerin* as a contested figure in Austrian culture, women's contributions to the Paris exhibition were seen as significant only when emphasising the pavilions shortcomings in offering truly modern (meaning practical and functional)

85) Béla Rásky, 'Max Rezensiert Max. Über Max Ermers' Feuilleton zu Max Winters Die lebende Mumie. Ein Blick in das Jahr 2025 (1929)', *Kakanien revisited* [online], <http://www.kakanien-revisited.at/beitr/fallstudie/BRasky4.pdf/>.

86) Max Ermers, *Österreichs Wirtschaftsverfall und Wiedergeburt. Ein Wirtschaftsprogramm zur Selbstrettung*, Vienna: Renaissance, 1922.

87) Illy Kjaer, 'Die neuzeitliche Wohnung', *Die Österreicherin* 1:7, 1928, 4.

88) Kjaer, 'Die neuzeitliche Wohnung', 4.

89) Brandow-Faller, 'Feminine Vessels', 28.

design solutions. Beyond the gender bias such narratives emphasised, they also affected the presentation of a modern post-imperial Austrian identity. Rather than acknowledging the development that Viennese design had undergone with newly trained designers who emphasised an expressive and playful modernity, the attention paid to established figures such as Hoffmann instead accentuated a sense of reminiscence for the innovations of the fin-de-siècle. On the one hand, this presentation manifested a sense of Habsburg nostalgia, carried through Hoffmann, as well as journalists such as Ermers and Zuckerkandl-Szeps, who repeatedly emphasised the glory of the Secession years around 1900. On the other hand, the definition of Austrian design by a lingering presence of glories past negated women's contributions to the field. Rejecting a metropolitan, colourful and playful approach as Austria's new design identity, a confident representation of post-imperial identity would only return with the radicalisation of Austrian politics in the 1930s, delineated by Alpine-inspired designs.⁹⁰ In Paris in 1925 – a moment when women's contributions to Austrian design gained greater visibility – the gender bias attached to their designs rejected the mere possibility that this, too, could be what Austrian design represented.

Yet even though the criticism of these works as playful trinkets for luxury consumers was reasonable in light of the exclusive nature of the objects on display, they also missed the main purpose of the Paris exhibition. It was, after all, designed as a show of contemporary consumer culture, with the designers and consumers belonging predominantly to the middle class. Scholars such as Dell and Marta Leśniakowska agree that the particular position of the 1925 Paris exhibition in the history of large exhibitions was its focus on fashion and (female) consumers, embodied, not least, by the unmissable presence of luxury department stores.⁹¹ In this light, the designs on display were hardly a democratising venture but rather were a middle class one, which, recalling the marks of bourgeois distinction by sociologist Edmond Goblot, 'defined the "decorum" of a specific class'.⁹² In this sense, then, the contributions by Vienna's women designers might well have been frilly trinkets – yet these were ultimately in chime with the goals of the exhibition. More importantly still, it allowed them to develop their own design language and, as the journalist Else Hoffmann emphasised, to move to 'the top of this specific art movement' that reinserted Viennese design in a global market after 1918.⁹³

90) 'Alpenländische Moderne: Österreich auf der Weltausstellung Brüssel 1935,' in Ulrike Felber, Elke Krasny and Christian Rapp, eds, *Smart Exports: Österreich auf den Weltausstellungen 1851–2000*, Vienna: Christian Brandstätter, 2000, 118.

91) Dell, 'The Consumer', 323; Marta Leśniakowska, 'Czego nie widziano w Paryżu? Rok 1925 i 'łakome oko'', in Joanna Sosnowska, ed, *Wystawka paryska 1925. Materiały z sesji naukowej Instytutu Sztuki PAN Warszawa*, Warsaw: Polish Academy of Science, 2005, 75–89.

92) Edmond Goblot, *La Barrière et la niveau. Etude sociologique sur la bourgeoisie française moderne*, Paris: Felix Alcan, 1925, 32–33.

93) Else Hoffmann, 'Illy Kjäer', *Österreichische Kunst* 1, 1932, 31.

