

## Figuring out the Female Presence in the Arts

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### Abstract

In remembering educational reform, the inclusion of women in art schools, the unification of fine arts with applied arts, and the break with academic canons are essential. Consequently, also, the arts and aesthetics in their autonomies are necessary. This essay, however, intends to present a vital discussion for the universe of the arts—the conquest of the ideal of freedom and equality in search of greater female inclusion. Two aspects are essential in the search for this answer: understanding the transformations of modern times and the dimension of the freedoms achieved in the artistic scene. Many women have given us examples and paved the way by showcasing everything we can accomplish. However, this essay deals with the history of the role of women in the art scene of the early 20th century, meeting modern times, and the first significant manifestations for women's conquests—the representativeness of some women who stood out in the arts, crafts, weaving and fashion and became icons of these practices influencing new generations. Our focus, thus, is to show the interdependence between great women and great men in search of social justice for women, who have always been socially and professionally placed in the background. Among other things, this essay shows Bauhaus' precursor role in the inclusion of women and its influence on other art schools in Europe and the Americas, in the sense of creating legal mechanisms that would establish the same opportunities for men and women as an example for all segments of society.

## Modern Times and Professionalization

In principle, modern times in the artistic universe were essential due to the constant new forms that characterized their context, when ideologies almost always defined the contents of the arts in their purposes, bringing them closer to industry and the market, as well as the socio-political reality. Thinking about art, artists, their freedoms and equality is also to understand that in the last 100 years, new forms of art in their techniques have impacted cultural transformations for the following reasons: the rupture of values, the constant search for solutions to social problems, and changing habits and behaviors. These changes contributed to industrial and economic development with new specializations and a high demand for male and female professionals. In this sense, Bauhaus was a precursor. It was especially concerned about female professionalism.

Historically, this scenario of conquests indicates the preexisting female presence in the universe of the arts during the 18th century. However, their presence in art academies in their institutional forms was somewhat symbolic. There are no records of an intention to include women in art academies, nor of men's claims regarding the female presence. The document that records the founding of the Royal Academy in London, for example, is addressed to men with male pronouns everywhere. Still, in its content, the laws of the Royal Academy did not exclude women. So it was in other academies in Europe. This exclusion was certainly unnecessary, as in so many different circumstances that in the face of most men, it would not be necessary to exclude women from such institutions. Why would one think about eliminating them if they did not belong?

With modern times, the growth of the individual's autonomy in his or her political-social context encouraged the artistic vanguard. Thus, one must consider the support for female participation by many artists, writers, philosophers, and politicians—in short, men engaged in new times and socio-cultural transformations. In particular, this assistance aimed at modern times and a more just society, with attitudes that already outlined gender equality. It is here that I highlight the importance of the Bauhaus legacy in our current society for the freedoms under discussion, based on the article by Theresia Enzensberger, entitled *Die 'Bauhaus-Frauen' Weibliche Lehrlinge Erwünscht – Bloss nicht zu Viele!* (The 'Bauhaus Women' Desired Female Apprentices - Just Not Too Many) published by *Humboldt-Magazin* (2018).<sup>1</sup>

The author emphasizes the words of Walter Gropius, in Weimar, 1919, in relation to the objective of Bauhaus when founded: „*Als Lehrling aufgenommen wird jede unbescholtene Person ohne Rücksicht auf Alter und Geschlecht, deren Begabung und Vorbildung vom Meisterrat als ausreichend erachtet wird.*“ (Any person of

integrity can be accepted as an apprentice without the discrimination of age and sex, if his talent and previous education are considered sufficient by the masters council).<sup>2</sup> It was a transformation process that already had its signs; the Bauhaus accepted the admission of women. It must be considered that in Europe, Bauhaus was one of the few arts academies that accepted women. From this beginning and with the support of Gropius, the result was of great notability for the artists. The number of women enrolled exceeded that of men, and their interest continued to increase. Thus, the Bauhaus board, including Gropius himself, decided on a selection aimed at the most appropriate activities according to the skills of each of the new entrants, especially women who represented the majority. As such, weaving (Fig.1) stood out in its importance and domain of women, not men. Likewise, the Manifesto written by Walter Gropius, in Weimar, in April 1919, stands out, with the following excerpt translated by the author:

"Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all return to crafts, as there is no 'art by profession'! There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an elevation of the artisan. Divine grace, in rare moments of light that are beyond your will, unconsciously makes the art of your hand flourish; however, the basis of 'knowing how to do' is indispensable for every artist. That is where the primordial source of artistic creation is found."<sup>3</sup>

It is likely that with the Bauhaus lessons, any form of hierarchy would no longer be accepted by its members, both comparing each art and outlining differences between the artist and the craftsman to disqualify the latter's value. It is therefore understood that there is no point in claiming that women were selected for an "inferior" art. Such a distinction is not intended in the arts. It would be an involution. On the one hand, many women understood that there were no differences and developed their activities in the workshops positively and with great aptitude and talent—for example, Anni Albers and Gunta Stölzl in the textile area with weaving, and Anni Albers "combined the ancient craft of hand-weaving with the language of modern art."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there was nothing to prevent them from being in other areas if they identified themselves through their skills and talent. Presently, one of the main activists for the inclusion of women, Mrs. Manchel (Nelson Mandela's wife!), had the following message:

"in response to a question on how we can bring women's issues to the table: 'We shouldn't think of bringing women to the table -we should redesign the table because the former implies accepting the status quo. The table as it is will not serve the purpose of reimagining our societies. [...] I want you to re-imagine a society we are to build, because without the vision, then we cannot even re-design to build. I want each one of you... to re-imagine the society you want to leave as a legacy for your children and your children's children' (Manchel 2017)."<sup>5</sup>

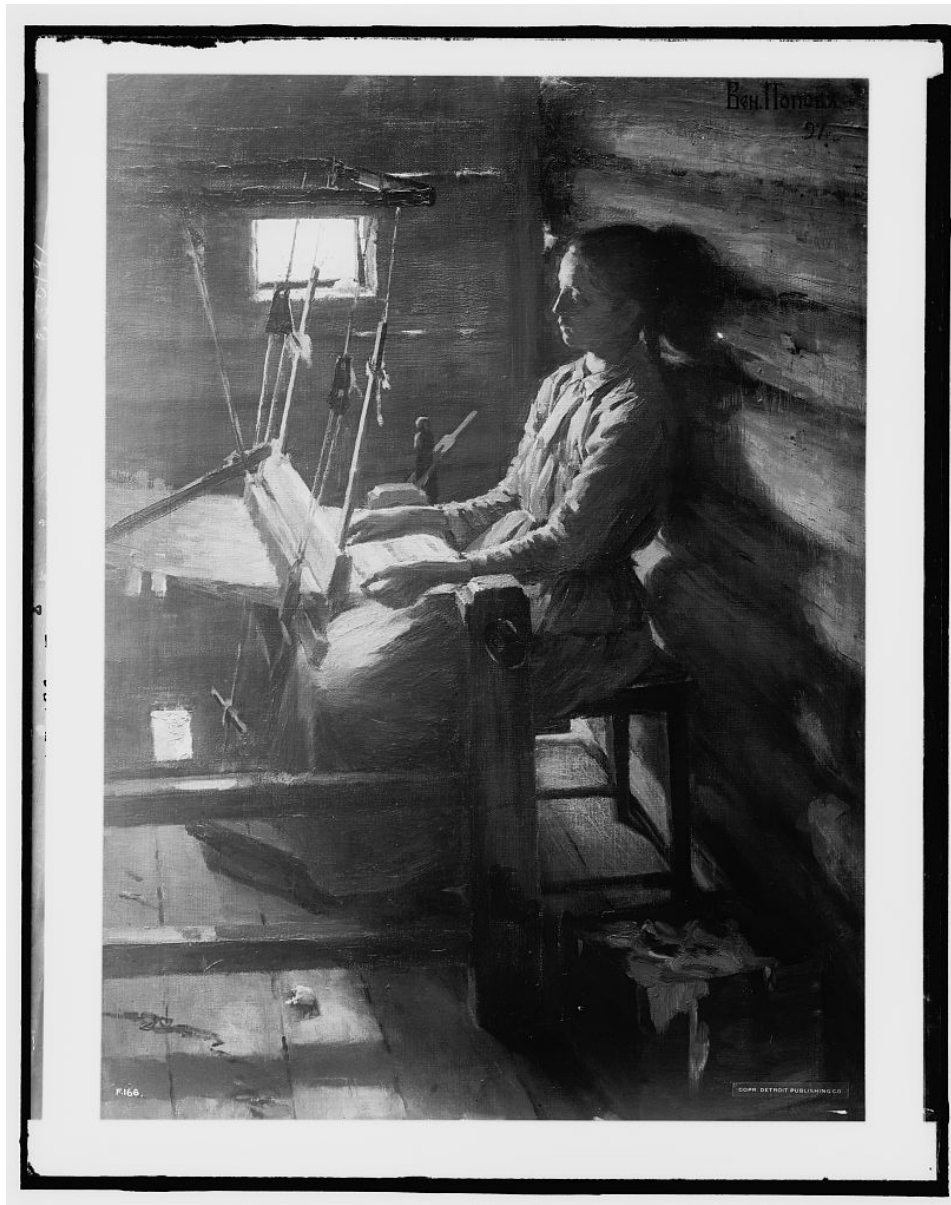


Figure 1: The Weaver. Photo: Detroit Publishing Co, 1900.  
Source: Library of Congress. Public Domain.

These women were determined and conquered their spaces. Anni, in 1933, went to North America and became a professor at Black Mountain College, North Carolina and her artworks became noticeable (Fig. 2). Gunta became a reference, mainly in the craft of master, even during the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany and, later, in Switzerland. Another highlight in this sense is the participation of Marianne Brandt in the metal workshop, where the presence of men prevailed. However, it is still necessary to consider that there are no records of any impediment to men in weaving if they were trained and interested in doing so. Weaving then developed, and art schools became interested in fashion as a discipline.

## Tradition, Market, Art and Fashion

From the ancient to the most recent civilizations, from brief notions to historical research, humanity has acquired an archive of references both in textile production and clothing concerning time and culture. However, addressing it throughout its existence involves the survey of a representative wearing apparel of each era. From Antiquity through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—in short, from the Modern period to the present day—clothing has developed and accompanied various ethnicities, civilizations, and cultures in their transformations. Due to its complexity, the proposed theme only addresses the importance of clothing in its transformation in the history of humanity, delimiting the meaning of fashion or the purpose of a history of fashion circumscribed to the modern world.

Fashion is a way of being or doing something to be adopted and valued by the majority in an ephemeral way. Fashion, therefore, is a phenomenon strictly related to appearances. In the arts, for example, at a specific moment, artists work with particular genre or style, addressing a subject in vogue and valued by the public or simply because it is done in such a way by imitating some celebrity or renowned artist. However, the factors that determine fashions are aesthetic when a new genre and its value are perceived in the arts. Because the great artists and creators are already at another stage, it is in this sense of imitation and exploration that fashions arise, in the arts or clothing, architecture, design, music, or other segments of cultural production, wishing to explore the genre that currently offers profitability and success. In principle, fashion concerns the applied arts, as the art of dressing assumes the aesthetic matter of everyday life.



Figure 2: Anni Albers, Tate Modern, London, 2019.  
Exhibition organised by Tate Modern and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.  
Photo by Steve Bowbrick.<sup>6</sup> Licensed under CC-BY-4.0.

However, items of clothing are conditioned to the models in vogue, always with individual adaptation possibilities, in which an aesthetic experience participates through the individual's subjective taste. It is in this sense that the aesthetic sense is involved actively in everyday life, then the arts. Both women's and men's clothing present through clothes an aesthetic configuration throughout the times of more magnificent, more colors, or more austere contexts, or still in almost all times with military or civilian uniforms, like the costumes of the Pontifical Swiss Guard designed by Michelangelo. The civilian uniforms of the First French Empire, some of which still prevail today, were designed by Jacques-Louis David. Furthermore, the aesthetics of many costumes can be loaded with symbolic meanings, such as the costumes of the Pharaohs with a crown that represented the dominion over Upper—white (*hedjet*)—and Lower—red (*deshret*)—Egypt.

Nowadays, we can use the example of the Pope's ten clothes and accessories, highlighting the ordinary costume, which is used in official ceremonies, political meetings, and other everyday activities. The robe used in this costume is white with 33 buttons that symbolize the age at which Jesus was crucified. For the fashion phenomenon in general, it must be considered beyond personal styles and tastes, which is the collective consensus. Exclusively to human's social and everyday life, fashion seeks novelty, change, and transforming behaviors, thus reflecting social, economic, and political attitudes toward contemporaneity. Fashion is a contemplation of the time when it is created, dressed, and used—a mirror image.

Modernity emerged at the end of the 19th century (Fig. 3). In the 20th century, the phenomenon of fashion was defined, outlining the history of fashion, due to its achievements focused on the West, changing tastes, ideas, expressions, and attitudes, which were reflected in art, the environment, decoration, objects, accessories, and clothing. Therefore, remembering the meaning of the work of female student artists at the Bauhaus art school is to accept the significant contribution of their skills to the development of the textile industry, the art of making clothing, and, above all, the relationship of a craft associated with the arts and culture, influencing social, economic and technological development. Clothing has been the primary historical reference, and contrary to the fashion phenomenon, it enables us to find through form the purposes of the human art of dress. Therefore, let us recall the image of the Upper Paleolithic human wearing animal skins—then, in antiquity, the clothing of the peoples of the Mediterranean, the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans—to see that the clothing of this time is more similar to that of the Modern Age. They wore tissues and not animal skins due to the temperate climate. They developed tissue culture techniques and tissue craft, producing linen, silk, wool, and cotton fabrics. They wrapped the tissues by draping them over the body with the help of ribbons or pins. They also produced shoes, hats, tunics, and pants. Thus, traditional clothing developed and became a reference for Western fashion, mainly due to the wide diffusion of Greco-Roman culture in the Enlightenment through paintings and sculptures discovered in the 18th century on archaeological expeditions. Clothing was the principal means for the fashion process, through which all the possibilities of changes and appearances could be manifested. It is, therefore, the mastery of this appearance

based on clothing and the socio-historical context of the conquest of human autonomy that modernity and fashion arise with the sense of the spirit of modern times. It should be noted, however, that the processes of project development, design, and configuration in the relationships between object-product, environment, and consumers are the principal means for technological innovation. And—not only in fashion but in all economic, social and industrial developments concerning science and technology—presenting an excellent exploratory discussion on the history of clothing, fashion and its social role is the well-known work of Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*.<sup>7</sup> Fashion is the history of modernity and the political, economic, and cultural issues in relation to the development of industry, the market, communication, and societies. The history of fashion has been considered by scholars, among which we highlight Lipovetsky, as having its beginning in modernity, the 14th century and consolidating itself from the 19th century, with the appearance of great tailors such as Charles Worth (1826-1895), Paul Poiret (1879-1944) and, the precursor among women (Fig. 4), Coco Chanel (1883-1971) (Schaffer and Saunders 2012)<sup>8</sup>. However, what matters here is the logic of technological innovation and creativity. It is what fashion represents socially—for example, through a new look, a new tissue or any other goods outside the production or recently launched, which represent the importance for the moment regarding trends by the appearances of the stylists' stars who they have provided some meanings regarding their creations prêt-à-porter (Jones 2011)<sup>9</sup>. Fashion is notorious, simple, and of great social significance. It determines the gap not only between the models and the design itself but also, and especially, the social class difference. The subtleties regarding styling, sketches, mood board (creation panel), and styling (fashion production) concerning current technology and colors adapting to trends and the concept of innovation and other elements involve the work of the fashion designer and include methodology in the collection projects. But it also consists of a power game that necessarily involves the differences in social classes.



Figure 3: Collection archive for Stange municipality.  
 The archive includes Normann Helger's collection.  
 Dating from 1880 to 1980, most items dating from 1900 to 1960. Source:  
 Digital Museum. Public Domain





Figure 4: Coco Chanel. Photo by Justine Picardie. Licensed under CC-BY-SA-4.0

## Last Observations

Undoubtedly, innovative results in the art world and the participation of female artists, architects, and designers are due to the freedoms and equality experienced during the existence of the Bauhaus and throughout the 20th century. Despite this rich history of female artists, new achievements are still desired for gender equality in our society. Old concepts and prejudices no longer have a place in our time. Although there is still a cultural stratification across different perspectives, there is also a strong democratic ideal and freedom to break with the elitist or conservative imperatives that encourage inequality and discrimination. In short, many of these value judgments must be reviewed, and the context and culture must always be considered when reflecting on the importance of the Bauhaus legacy. Recently, the historian and curator Arne Winkelmann, in an interview for *Humboldt-Magazin*<sup>10</sup>, reported the importance of Bauhaus for the formation and freedoms conquered in the Universities, affirming: "I cannot imagine another school as revolutionary as Bauhaus." This statement makes it clear that today, in addition to supporting the inclusion of women and their participation in decision-making positions and notoriety in the artistic universe, the visual arts encompass both the fine arts and new formats. This scenario is largely due to the Bauhaus.

It can be seen that, before, the decorative and applied arts were inferior arts before the fine arts. Currently, new disciplines such as design have acquired essential meaning for the development of a globalized society. Well, if the Bauhaus in its heyday was one of the few exceptions for accepting women working on its premises, I must note that this fact is exceptional. In the arts or any other profession, there is no more room for segregationism. Regardless of whether the State itself has created legal mechanisms for equating and valuing women's work, society has incorporated the need to do justice to women's work. As such, the woman and her work substantially changed the traditional social framework of other times, gaining space to do justice to her work, whether in art or any other activity. And, in time, gender equality is something consolidated. I do not doubt that this will happen, as we are in new times, and the world is always changing. Imagine and choose the future.

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## Notes:

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1. Theresia Enzensberger, "Die 'Bauhaus-Frauen' Weibliche Lehrlinge erwünscht – bloss nicht zu viele!" Humboldt-Magazin, 2018.  
<https://www.goethe.de/ins/br/de/kul/fok/bau/21385384.html>
  2. Enzensberger, "Die 'Bauhaus-Frauen', 2018.
  3. "Architekten, Bildhauer, Maler, wir alle müssen zum Handwerk zurück! Denn es gibt keine 'Kunst von Beruf.' Es gibt keinen Wesensunterschied zwischen dem Künstler und dem Handwerker. Der Künstler ist eine Steigerung des Handwerkers. Gnade des Himmels läßt in seltenen Lichtmomenten, die jenseits seines Wollens stehen, unbewußt Kunst aus dem Werk seiner Hand erblühen, die Grundlage des Werkmäßigen aber ist unerläßlich für jeden Künstler. Dort ist der Urquell des schöpferischen Gestaltens." In: Walter Gropius, "Das Bauhaus-Manifest von 1919." Humboldt-Magazin, 2018.  
<https://www.goethe.de/ins/br/de/kul/fok/bau/21394277.html>
  4. Cf. "A long overdue recognition of Anni Albers's pivotal contribution to modern art and design, this is the first major exhibition of her work in the UK."  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/anni-albers>
  5. Cf. Women Advancing Africa. Driving Social and Economic Transformation, 2017, p. 22.  
<https://gracamacheltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Women-Advancing-Africa-Report.pdf>
  6. Cf. Photos by Bowbrik licensed under CC By 4.0  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bowbrick/31551256937/in/photostream/>
  7. Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Empire de l'éphémère : la mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1987)
  8. Jane Schaffer and Sue Saunders, *Fashion Design Course: Accessories*. (New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc, 2012).
  9. Sue Jenkyn Jones, *Fashion design* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011). "She is Course Director for MA Digital Fashion at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts. She has worked as the owner and designer of a successful womenswear brand sold in major stores worldwide, and has also taught and inspired numerous gifted students who now work in the fashion industry, many of whom have become household names." <https://www.amazon.de/Fashion-Design-Portfolio-Laurence-King/dp/1856696197>
  10. Romy König, "Bauhaus gehört verstanden – und nicht unkritisch bejubelt." Interview with Arne Winkelmann. (Humboldt-Magazin, 2018).  
<https://www.goethe.de/ins/br/de/kul/fok/bau/21343958.html?forceDesktop=1>