

H-Net Reviews

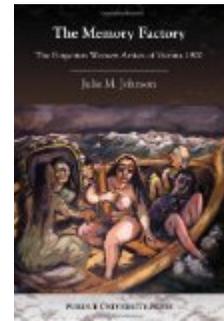
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julie M. Johnson. *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artists of Vienna 1900*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2012. 368 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55753-613-6.

Reviewed by Megan Brandow-Faller (City University of New York (Kingsborough))

Published on HABSBERG (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan



Frauenkunst and Its Discontents: Women Artists in the Circles of the Vienna Secession

In 1916, when surmising the perils of separate women's art institutions, an anonymous reviewer for one of Austria's leading feminist periodicals quipped that "the best success that one might wish of them [separate women's art exhibitions] is that they might no longer be necessary."^[1] Julie Johnson's important and meticulously researched study of women artists in Viennese modernism lends support to the idea that corrective exhibitions, institutions, and monographs serve to ghettoize women artists from the art historical canon.^[1] *The Memory Factory* flies in the face of feminist art historical inquiries stressing women's difference and embeddedness within separate institutions to argue that "women artists were not part of a separate sphere, but integrated into the art exhibitionary complex of Vienna" (pp. 4-5). Drawing case studies from five highly successful women painters and sculptors closely connected to the Vienna Secession (Tina Blau, Elena Luksch-Makowsky, Broncia Koller, Helene Funke, and Teresa Feodorowna Ries), Johnson refutes the historiographical tendency to lump women artists into an aesthetic "room of their own," seeking explanations for women artists' canonical exclusion in "a new center ... whose themes have not always fit into the dominant narrative structures of art history" (p. 111). Such an approach, Johnson maintains, is not useful, for the art historical "mothers" that she spotlights were leading practitioners of the dominant strategies of modernism. Indeed, painters like Funke and Koller often transmitted French postimpressionistic influences ahead of their male colleagues, in a more purely autonomous manner than Gustav Klimt and other al-

legorical painters, while exemplifying the Vienna modernists' interest in psychological interiority and nascent abstraction in the decorative. Johnson considers these artists' erasure from the art historical record highly jarring given that their life and work embodied textbook examples of misunderstood modernist forerunners: i.e., stylistic innovation, run-ins with conservative authorities, as well as acclaim abroad in advance of recognition at home (for instance, the "skying" of Tina Blau's masterful *Spring in the Prater* at the Austrian Artists' Guild in 1882). Similarly, Johnson shows how artistic personalities like flamboyant Russian sculptor Teresa Ries created more than one *succès de scandale*, for instance the well-known anecdote of how her delightfully provocative life-size marble sculpture of a witch sharpening her toenails before the Sabbath attracted comment from conservative emperor Franz Joseph. Today, however, Ries's works remains buried in the basement of the Vienna City Museum Depot: a poignant comment on the necessity of active scholarly intervention to combat the invisibility of women artists' works. Johnson rightly argues that Jewish women (including Ries) were strongly represented in Viennese women's art institutions and this book serves to remind the reader that fin-de-siècle Vienna is not a safe historical landscape divorced from the exigencies of two world wars and the *Anschluss*. On the contrary, as the author's final chapter on the post-1938 erasure of these artists' lives and legacies, Vienna 1900 is much more caught up in the "unfinished business" of the Holocaust than scholars have previously assumed.

Historiographically and theoretically, the *Memory Factory* is ambitious and complex, as evident in the book's richly documented endnotes. The author draws more from the arsenal of memory and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* studies than traditional feminist art historical inquiry. In so doing, Johnson privileges not only formal visual analysis, which indeed she does masterfully (on a par with the sort of analysis pioneered by Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, and Norma Broude in studying nineteenth-century French painting), but she also offers contextualized readings of non-visual sources such as feuilletons, artist biographies, and humorous texts.

Making women artists visible in the post-Schorske dialogue on Viennese modernism, a body of literature which has, according to the author, "inadvertently reinforced the silencing of women's pasts" or promoted false notions that women could not exhibit publicly whatsoever, represents an important corrective, if only the tip of the historiographical iceberg (p. 3). Carl Schorske's classic *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* attributed an efflorescence of modern art, culture, and literature to the disillusioned sons of liberalism who found meaning in an aesthetic *Gefühlkultur*.^[2] For Schorske and his followers, the heroic trio of Klimt-Schiele-Kokoschka exemplified a generational struggle that exploded in Klimt's famous "walk out" from the conservative Austrian Artists Guild to found the Vienna Secession (1897): an artists' union dedicated to the philosophy of *Ver Sacrum*, the idea of art as a sacred spring to rejuvenate modern life. Building on the pioneering studies of Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber, Johnson's book is among the first English-language works on women artists in the circles of the Vienna Secession.^[3]

Yet Johnson casts her net more broadly than merely speaking to scholars interested in Vienna. The author rethinks the idea that women artists were not active participants in shaping international Modernism as defined by Clement Greenberg: the famous genealogy of an increasingly abstract and autonomous art beginning with Édouard Manet (one of the first painters to privilege the painted surface of the canvas over naturalistic illusion) progressing through the postimpressionists, down to Jackson Pollock and the heroes of abstract impressionism. To begin with, as Johnson duly notes, Greenberg's Franco-centric definition of Modernism does not fit the Central European (particularly Viennese) context, which tended to retain narrative elements and the decorative: a form of "nascent abstraction [which] came to be seen as the opposite of Modernism" precisely because of its frilly feminine connotations (p. 11). Here,

Viennese architect and cultural critic Adolf Loos's famous dictum that "Wherever I abuse the everyday-use-object by ornamenting it, I shorten its *life span*.... Only the whim and ambition of women can be responsible for the murder of such material" comes to mind.^[4] Johnson's point is not only that Viennese modernism differed from the cookie-cutter variety, but that imposing Franco-centric definitions of Modernism on Vienna likewise marginalizes women's participation in a distinct brand of modernism, never as autonomous or self-critical of its medium as Greenberg would have liked. In this regard, Johnson provides rich case studies of international Modernism's cross-fertilization with the "homegrown" Viennese variety. For example, the still-life represented a particular forte for expressionist painter Helene Funke, paralleling the Fauves' and Cubists' enthusiasm for this genre, whereas it tended to be neglected by other Austro-German expressionists. Broncia Koller's work, moreover, shows the local penchant for combining figuralism with stylized surface decoration, mediated through references to Fauvism and postimpressionism.

A broader critique in Johnson's work is how the seemingly straightforward story of modern art presented in the "white cube" space of museums has only served to reify both the "band of brothers" modernist myth and its omission of women. As Johnson correctly insists, "[t]oo often, the work is expected to rise to the surface on its own, but curators (and art dealers) who serve as the gatekeepers of art museums and gallery spaces have rarely acknowledged that the space itself can enhance or alter the work of art itself" (p. 13). In a scathing yet justified critique of an interview with curator Kirk Varnadoe, in which issues of quality and stylistic innovation were insinuated, Johnson pointed the finger at MoMA's complete exclusion of women artists in its 1986 rendition of the "Vienna 1900" show. Sadly, suggesting that the "necessary evil" of corrective studies is still imperative, far too little has changed since 1986, as I argued in reviewing the Neue Galerie's 2011 "Vienna 1900: Style and Identity" show. Clearly, the issue is not quality but, as Johnson accurately surmises, a lack of active scholarly and institutional intervention in preserving the memory of women artists, an issue only compounded by the destruction of works and sources during the world wars.

Structurally, the book is divided into three parts. The first five chapters spotlight successful women artists, highlighting their public exhibitionary records and history of their posthumous erasure from the limelight, which Johnson frames in terms of their exclusion from paternalistic mythologies of father-son plots. The shorter

second section (chapters 5 and 6) offers a brief look at women's art institutions, focusing on the critical reception of Association of Austrian Women Artist's 1910 "Art of the Woman," a landmark historical retrospective of women artists' works which dwarfed Nochlin and Ann Sutherland-Harris's more famous 1977 retrospective. Finally, the last chapter, "1900-1938: Erasure," takes strides to retrieve Vienna 1900 from a historiographical no-man's-land distant from the mid-century cataclysms, to trace the stories of women artists in exile and under National Socialist persecution. Chapters 1, 4, and 6, previously published in article form, will be familiar to readers already acquainted with Johnson's work, as is the influence of her work on humor. Yet these chapters have been significantly modified and read seamlessly within the context of the book. It should be emphasized, however, that the de facto inclusion of women artists that the author stresses was entirely informal. Officially women remained barred from membership in the male artists' leagues and lacked rights to sit on jury or hanging commissions; were disadvantaged in being able to compete for scholarships and state prizes (due to the timing of separate women's exhibitions); and fought a long and bitter battle to gain admission to the Academy of Fine Arts (1920/21). The major exception, as Johnson rightly highlights, was the Klimt Group's progressive attitudes towards including the art of women—and even children (for example, Franz Cizek's influential *Jugendkursen* at the School of Applied Arts)—in its exhibitions.

Johnson hits her stride in the formal visual analysis in chapter 1 ("Writing, Erasing, Silencing: Tina Blau and the (Woman) Artist's Biography"), chapter 3 ("Broncia Koller and Interiority in Public Art Exhibitions"), and chapter 5 ("Teresa Ries in the Memory Factory"), which rank as the book's strongest. Johnson uses the example of Austrian impressionist Tina Blau (1845-1916), well known in German-language publications and exhibitions yet unfamiliar to English-language audiences, to lay the foundations of her argument that the Vienna Secession's construction of identity was self-serving and paternalistic. Blau possessed all the qualities one might hope for in a modernist forebear: the stylistic innovation found in her brushwork capturing the transitory qualities of light and color; her confrontations with conservative authorities; and her early success abroad. Blau's most famous canvas, *Spring at the Prater*, now hanging prominently at the Austrian Gallery Belvedere, proves her point well. Almost rejected and then skyed at the 1882 Künstlerhaus exhibition for its daring impressionism and profusion of light, only the comments of the French minister of fine arts salvaged

the picture from oblivion, to be eventually purchased for the imperial collections. Overall, Johnson makes a convincing case that Blau was selectively excluded from the Viennese modernist ancestor cult because male Secessionists could not swallow the idea of an "Old Mistress" as their artistic foremother, writing that "the Secessionists ... never figured themselves as wrestling with or being heirs to mothers" (p. 29). Worse, Blau has often been mistakenly characterized as the student, rather than colleague, of Emil Jakob Schindler, the landscape painter with whom she shared studio space at the Prater. The fact that Blau was doubly Other in fin-de-siècle Vienna, that is, as Woman and Jew, further problematized matters, particularly after the Austrian institutions, including the Women's Academy that she co-founded, were co-opted by National Socialists. Johnson argues that during her own lifetime, as a successful public artist fetching high prices, Blau consciously avoided connecting her work to negative stereotypes (copying, impressionability, fashionability) surrounding the feminine in art.

Johnson's further chapters masterfully compare the output of once-prominent women artists to the works of their male colleagues, likewise showing (as in the case of Blau) that women artists often served as stylistic transmitters, disseminating the latest developments in French postimpressionism among the Viennese modernists. The chapters on Broncia Koller and expressionist Helene Funke make excellent cases in point, although a paucity of surviving biographical sources on Funke makes her portrayal slightly less meaty than the others. Johnson's chapter on Koller, a Jewish painter siding with the progressive Klimt Group after it seceded from the Vienna Secession in 1905 and who was inaccurately memorialized as a "painting housewife" due to her interest in interiority and active role as patron, demonstrates the author's analysis at its most original. In a manner reminiscent of feminist interpretations of nineteenth-century French impressionism, in which feminist art historians traced stylistic points of similarity and departure among male and female artists, Johnson ingeniously traces Koller's influence on younger artists, including Egon Schiele and Erwin Lang. For instance, while Schiele's *Portrait of the Painter Hans Massmann* (1909) has typically been read as nodding to Klimt's *Portrait of Fritza Riedler* (1908), Johnson's side-by-side comparison posits a close connection to Koller's *My Mother* (1907), unveiled at the 1908 Kunstschau exhibition, in its staging and stylized background. Similar arguments are made regarding Koller's role in transmitting Van Gogh-esque influences to a younger generation of modernists.

Ironically, Koller's work was more "Modern" (according to Greenberg's definition of painting as a self-critical autonomous medium) than that of her male colleagues. Yet, unlike traditional feminist inquiry (for instance Linda Nochlin's famous re-reading of images of leisure and work through the authorship of Morisot's brush), Johnson stresses that "finding a new aesthetic or center is hardly necessary" for Koller because her work reflected themes of psychological interiority, long acknowledged by the Schorske school as an important leitmotif of Viennese modernism (p. 112). Nonetheless, it is unclear which definition of modernism/Modernism Johnson ultimately privileges here—the more homegrown Viennese variety or the international variant. Ultimately, Johnson uses the example of Koller to show how women artists were integrated into mainstream male institutions, their works influencing and influenced by their male colleagues; and, moreover, in Koller's case, serving as an organizational mediator after the postwar fissure of the Viennese institutional landscape. Likewise playing a leading role in Viennese *Raumkunst* (spatial or installation art) was applied artist and sculptor Elena Luksch-Makowsky, a frequent exhibitor at the Vienna Secession and fellow participant in the 1908 Kunstschau.

In the second section (chapter 6, "Women as Public Artists in the Institutional Landscape," and chapter 7, "The Ephemeral Museum of Women Artists") Johnson unfortunately closes and opens the book on separate women's art institutions all too quickly. She limits her discussion of Austrian women's artist leagues to the prewar period, focusing largely on feuilletonistic reactions to the Association's landmark 1910 "Art of the Woman" show, implying that the leagues ran out of creative gas after World War I. However, it was only in the interwar period that Austria's women's art movement reached its institutional zenith, propelled by the institutional parity achieved by Vienna's Frauenakademie in 1919 and the founding of a "female Secession," which mirrored earlier disagreements about the value of the applied and fine arts (for example, the role of *Raumkunst*, or installation art, which had provoked a rift between the Klimt Group and rump-Secession at the end of its "heroic" period). Moreover, while Johnson cleverly compares the Association's "Art of the Woman" exhibition to Nochlin and Sutherland Harris's better-known 1977 retrospective, the author's dismissal of the possibility of a feminine aesthetic obscures further parallels between the early twentieth-century Austrian and 1970s American feminist movements in the arts. Applied artist and designer Fanny Harlfinger-Zakucka provocatively raised

the notion of a separate feminine aesthetic in founding the Wiener Frauenkunst in 1926, a radical offshoot from the Association particularly emphasizing women's connection to the decorative, applied arts, and the importance of *Raumkunst*, boldly declaring that "we are of the opinion that works made by women's hands bear the stamp of their female origins in and of themselves."⁵ While it is clear that the "Art of the Woman" garnered misogynistic critical reactions which associated women's art with copying, superficiality, and mere ornamentation, what was ingenious about interwar Austria's female Secession's reaction to such criticism was the way in which it reclaimed the discursive territory surrounding *Frauenkunst* and women's connection to the decorative—and hurled such stereotypes back in the face of their critics in a series of provocative public exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s focused around *Raumkunst*. Moreover, given that the lady curators of the 1910 "Art of the Woman" show were notably silent on the subject of female subjectivity, it is somewhat unclear how Johnson concludes that "the women did not want to create a separatist manifesto or credo" (p. 298). Overall, perhaps it would have been useful to position the chapters on women's art institutions at the beginning of the work, for if women artists were as fully integrated into mainstream artistic life as Johnson's case studies would have us believe, then this begs the question of why separate institutions were even necessary. Was the Ministry of Education's support of such leagues a red herring, that is, a measure ultimately designed to cloister women at separate institutions, or did it fully support gender mainstreaming? Why, if the misogynist criticism engendered by "Art of the Woman" was as vehement as Johnson demonstrates, does the author seem to imply that women's collectives were less dynamic than the artistic boys' clubs that excluded them? Clearly, while Johnson is correct in countering false notions that women artists lacked the opportunity to exhibit their works publicly altogether, it is also true that women artists could not become regular members (with voting and jury rights) of the "Big Three" exhibition leagues until after World War II. Thus, underlining the importance of creative partnerships to Viennese modernism, most women who exhibited at the Secession could only do so, to use Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber's phrase, under a sort of "male protectionism" (through a connection to male relatives who were members). While cleverly borrowing Kutman Atalug's theories on identity and race, Johnson maintains that sociocultural constructions of gender can indeed be described as a jacket, manufactured by others, which one wears or not; some Austrian women artists

put on this jacket more often than Johnson is comfortable admitting. Even “Old Mistress” Tina Blau was not immune to perceptions that her paintings of the Prater reflected a certain female subjectivity (at least as her colleague Richard Kauffungen at the Women’s Academy interpreted them).

Such issues raised by *The Memory Factory* will surely stimulate lively scholarly dialogues. It is to be hoped that further studies like this will highlight women’s contributions to the field of early-twentieth-century applied arts, as well as the educational backdrop underlying these developments. Johnson is dead-on when she calls the separation of the decorative from the abstract one of Modernism’s “biggest blind spots,” an observation equally relevant to female handicraft tradition reclaimed by feminist activists (both in interwar Vienna and the better-known American feminist art movement of the 1970s). Here, given stereotypes of female “craftiness” and domesticity Viennese critics viewed women as particularly “at home” in the applied arts. Indeed, during the interwar years, the sort of inventive, avant-garde *Kunstgewerbeweiber* satirized in Joseph Roth’s *Emperor’s Tomb* achieved a certain expressivity in the context of functional objects, undermining the notion that “to be ‘high’ and ‘fine’ both women and art should be beautiful, but not useful or functional” (as Patricia Mainardi argued in the context of American quilts).[7]

All in all, *The Memory Factory* constitutes a tremendous breakthrough on women artists in Vienna 1900, rethinking many of the dominant paradigms of feminist inquiry and reframing the early twentieth century as “hardly a monolithic culture of repression” (p. 14). It is as rich in documentation as it is in theory and secondary literature, and raises many new questions not only relevant to studies of Viennese modernism, but scholars interested in women art’s institutions more broadly.

Notes

[1]. Throughout the review “Modernism” refers to the version of international Modernism as defined by Clement Greenberg, stressing the increasingly autonomous (i.e., abstract) nature of modern painting, whereas “modernism” refers to the Viennese home-grown variant of these debates.

[2]. “VII. Ausstellung der Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs,” *Der Bund* 12, no. 2 (February 1917): 14.

[3]. Since the publication of Schorske’s compelling essays, scholars have revised and expanded aspects of the his “failure of liberalism” paradigm, pointing to Schorske’s neglect of imperial patronage, the particularly Jewish character of Viennese modernism, and women’s contributions as artists and muses. See James Shedel, *Art and Society: The New Art Movement in Vienna 1897-1914* (Palo Alto: Society for the Promotion of Science, 1981); Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Emil Brix and Lisa Fischer, *Die Frauen der Wiener Moderne* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1997).

[4]. The author of numerous book chapters and articles on women artists, Plakolm-Forsthuber is best known for *Künstlerinnen in Österreich, 1897-1938* (Vienna: Picus, 1994).

[5]. Adolf Loos, “Ornament und Erziehung,” in *Trotzdem: Gesammelte Schriften* (Vienna: Prachner, 1997), 177.

[6]. Preface to the catalogue of the Verband bildender Künstlerinnen und Kunsthandwerkerinnen exhibit, *Wiener Frauenkunst, in Wie Sieht die Frau? May 17-June 29 1930* (Wien: Jahoda & Siegel), 7.

[7]. Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” *Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 344.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Megan Brandow-Faller. Review of Johnson, Julie M., *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artists of Vienna 1900*. HABSBUrg, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36900>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.