

# Design and Gender during Wartime – the Vienna Workshops in World War I

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## Abstract

Focusing on the women designers of the Vienna Workshops (1903-1932) during World War I, this study aims to examine the issue of design and gender. From the early period of the Vienna Workshops women designers participated in its activities. The percentage of female members increased during World War I. The expansion of women's employment due to the shortage of adult males in the workforce was a social phenomenon of the time. Among various occupations, the Workshops was an elite workplace with many graduates of the Imperial Royal School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna. Female members produced mainly fashion products during wartime. The fact that those products became the mainstay of the company reflects not only gender factors, but also the material conditions and patriotic climate of the time. Compared to metals, the shortages of fabrics were not so acute. Further, the Workshops was a driving force behind the move to break away from the influence of Parisian fashion. The reputation of its shows in Germany and neutral countries was praised in domestic media.

The progress of women designers in the Vienna Workshops was influenced not only by traditionally formed gender perspectives, but also by the social conditions of the period. In addition, as in the case of the Workshops, the substantial commercial success of women strengthened their status as designers.

**Keywords:** women designers; gender; the Vienna Workshops; World War I

## 1. Introduction

In this study, the relationship between women and design during World War I will be discussed. The main research object is the Vienna Workshops (Wiener Werkstätte, 1903-1932) in Vienna. Since the latter half of the 2010s, the study of the history of design in the German-speaking areas has become increasingly focused on discussing gender issues. Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding, the Bauhaus (1919-1933) has been internationally examining its philosophy and activities from new angles, and several studies which focus on its female members have been published (1). On the other hand, in Vienna, following *Stadt der Frauen* [City of Women] (2019) (2), which revealed the individual and organizational activities of Viennese women painters and sculptors in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the exhibition *Die Frauen der Wiener Werkstätte* [Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte] (2021) (3) was the first to focus on women designers of the Vienna Workshops.

The Vienna Workshops (hereafter WW) was a Viennese luxury arts and crafts company and a leader of Austrian modern design. Compared to other European design organizations and companies of the same period, the WW's uniqueness was not only the decorative nature of its designs, but also the success of its female members. When the Bauhaus started admitting any

person, regardless of age or sex, in the permissive post-war climate of Weimar, many women were already working as professional designers in Vienna, mainly in the fields of textiles, fashion or other small products.

Although a systematic analysis is difficult, more than 180 women worked for the WW throughout its existence (4). In particular, women made up the majority of the members in the department called 'The Artists' Workshop', where, in 1920, 19 of the 23 artists were women (5). Their products were introduced throughout the country and abroad, even in Japan, where the Japanese craft magazine *Tēkoku Kōgei* [Imperial Craft] published a special issue on Austrian arts and crafts in 1928, on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the company. Approximately 20% of the works presented in this issue were those of the WW's leading women designers, such as Mathilde Flögl (1893-1958), Maria Likarz (1893-1971) and Vally Wieselthier (1895-1945) (6). However, in Vienna in the 1920s, their designs were often associated with femininity and criticized by modernists. As for later studies of design history, the women of the WW have been the subject of far less research than its leading male members.

Focusing on the historical background of World War I, this study will examine the background of the increase in the WW's production in the fashion field, in which female members were involved, and will shed new light on issues of design and gender. Firstly, it clarifies the distinctiveness of the working environment of the women in the WW. It then examines the factors that led to the increased production of fashion products from two perspectives: the materials used and the patriotic climate of wartime. In conclusion, it will be pointed out that not only the traditional perception of gender, but also the social conditions of the time influenced the output by women designers.

## 2. Acceptance of Women by the Vienna Secession Artists

Women already participated in the art movement in Vienna around 1900, including craft areas. Compared to painting, sculpture and architecture, arts and crafts had traditionally been more accessible to women. The need for a national vocational school for women had also been recognized in Vienna since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a response to the demand for women in the art industry, and to the growing number of middle-class women without income. Rudolf von Eitelberger, the first director of the Imperial Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry in Vienna (est. 1864), was an honorary member of the Vienna Association for the Support and Promotion of Women in Need [Wiener Frauen-Erwerb-Verein] (est. 1866), of which his wife Jeanette was the president (7). Eitelberger's position was probably related to the fact that the associated Imperial Royal School of Arts and Crafts (est. 1867) accepted female students and opened the path for the training of female craftworkers.

The members of the Vienna Secession (est. 1897) had a relatively open attitude towards women at that time. Although the regular and foreign members were exclusively male, women artists such as sculptor Teresa F. Ries (1874-1956) were invited to the Secession's exhibitions. At the comprehensive art exhibition *Kunstschau* in 1908, organized under the leadership of the painter Gustav Klimt, who was the first head of the Secession, about one third of the exhibitors were women (8). The admission of women to the above-mentioned Imperial Royal School of Arts and Crafts was suspended in 1886, but was renewed in 1900 under its director Felician von Myrbach, who was a member of the Vienna Secession (9). Myrbach invited fellow secessionists Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser and Alfred Roller as professors, and implemented a pioneering applied arts education that emphasized individual creativity. They included female students in this new applied arts educational programme.

Founded in 1903 by Hoffmann and Moser, the WW included women artists during its early period. Therese Trethan (1879-1957) is the only female member who appeared in the WW's 1905

work programme as a painter. She was a student of Moser at the School of Arts and Crafts and had already started working with Jutta Sika (1877-1964) and other students from 1901, forming the Viennese Art in the Home [Wiener Kunst im Hause]. At the WW, Trethan painted small boxes and toys designed by Hoffmann and Moser (10). A number of female members also illustrated the successful series of postcards produced in the graphic department from 1907. In particular, Mela Koeler (1885-1960) and Maria Likarz created numerous fashion illustrations for women and children around 1910.

### 3. Privileged Position of the Vienna Workshops' Women Designers

The number of women artists in the WW increased during World War I. The female members were primarily represented in the textile department (ca. 1910), the fashion department (1911) and the Artists' Workshop (1916). The social advancement of women during the war was a phenomenon that occurred in many countries.

Immediately after the outbreak of war, public relief institutions and private charitable organizations were established in Vienna for women who had lost their family's breadwinner: the Official War Welfare Office of the Ministry of the Interior, the War Ministry, and the Austrian Red Cross; the Committee of Welfare for the Employment of Women and Girls of Vienna (who have become unemployed as a result of the war); the Central Welfare Office for Soldiers and their Families, and the Office for Women's Relief Action in the War, based in Vienna City Hall (11). Nevertheless, because these charitable organizations did not have sufficient capacity, many women were compelled to find employment and work themselves.

Conventionally, workplaces for women had been daily necessities factories, textile factories, restaurants and inns. After the outbreak of the war, a number of women found nursing positions in field hospitals or worked sewing military and medical uniforms, occupations which were close to their conventional spheres. Eventually, due to the shortage of male workers, women began to be employed in the munitions industry as well as in communications and transportation bureaus, and in medical institutions. Although female civil servants were already present before the war, more and more women began to appear in public places as tram conductors, mail carriers, traffic controllers or police officers (12) (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Female tram conductor in Vienna, 1915  
(*Das interessante Blatt*, July 8, 1915, 12.)

Some postcard series at the time depict these women in a healthy, beautiful and idealized way, encouraging their dedication to society (13). In reality, however, there were problems such as the wage gap between men and women, labour that was physically demanding for women, long

working hours and insufficient nutrition due to their weak position in the family. Local newspapers reported on machinery accidents at factories and suicides of women induced by these hardships (14).

In contrast, the WW was a very privileged workplace for its female members. Although we cannot confirm the actual status of the seamstresses and craftworkers who executed their designs, at least in the early days of the company, Hoffmann and Moser, who sympathized with John Ruskin and William Morris, respected their workers and provided a clean and safe working environment (15). In 1916, Hoffmann opened the Artists' Workshop. There, designers had unlimited access to materials and equipment, and the freedom to experiment with their creative ideas. As previously noted, female members were dominant in the Artists' Workshop. Important members Dina Kuhn (1891-1963), Felice Rix (1893-1967) and Vally Wieselthier were hired in 1917 and worked in this department. In addition, most of the members graduated from the Imperial and Royal School of Arts and Crafts. The WW was therefore an elite workplace where people with specialized education in applied arts were active.

#### 4. Increase of Fashion Products

During the war, the WW's main products were fabrics, blouses, dresses, hats, corsages and other fashion products. Along with Dagobert Peche and Eduard J. Wimmer-Wisgrill, who led the Artists' Workshops and the fashion department, they were created by its female members. Observing their sketches, and the portfolios published by the WW, namely *Mode Wien 1914/15* [Fashion Vienna 1914/15] (1914/15) and *Das Leben einer Dame* [The Life of a Lady] (1916), the fabrics were brightly coloured, and the designs were elegant, with ribbons and frills. In addition to the fact that these were traditional areas of women's production activity, there were two possible factors that may have contributed to the mainstreaming of fashion products during this period.

The first is the actual supply situation during wartime. Among various donations of materials made in the country, donations of metals were carried out on a large scale. Under the slogan 'I gave gold for iron', gold wedding rings were exchanged for iron rings, and other precious metals were also donated (16). In contrast to now valuable metal, cloth shortages were initially relatively less pronounced. The human resources available for production work were also more advantageous in field of fashion, for seamstresses were mostly women.

The Workshop's textiles, clothing and accessories were sold at shops both at home and abroad, including the Marienbad and Zurich branches that opened in 1917, and at fashion exhibitions in Germany and in neutral countries. Their colourful and elegant designs were known as the 'Vienna Workshops style'. However, as well as the work environment, the company's ability to continue producing such luxurious products was also unusual at the time. There must have been some governmental support for the business, likewise in the foundation of the Zurich branch by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (17). The fashion shows in Berlin in 1915 were also subsidized by the government (18).

As the war dragged on, daily commodities became scarce. At the end of the war, there was also a shortage of cloth. When paper-derived fabrics appeared as a substitute for cloth, they were initially used by medical personnel for hospital sheets and patient clothing. Gradually, these paper fabrics were introduced to the public. In 1918, the magazine *Wiener Mode* [Vienna Fashion] published an article on sewing paper dresses (19). In comparison, the WW seems to have rarely made paper dresses. Current research could identify only a few stage costume that was partially made from paper fabrics. An article in the *Neues Wiener Journal* of December 20<sup>th</sup> 1917 describes the costume as follows:

The Vienna Workshops, always active as a pioneer of novelties, has also undertaken this bold

experiment, and even if more of a capricious playfulness than a truly epochal affair is executed here, such experiments are nevertheless worthy of attention. In particular, the way in which the problem was approached is interesting. (...) The use of these papers does not actually mean a considerable reduction in the cost of the toilette, because the dresses are made entirely of silk, as usual, and only the outermost layer consists of artist's paper. Such a "paper dress" is not available for less than seven hundred to eight hundred crowns, and it is more the fulfilment of a capricious artist's whim to spend such sums on something not very durable. (20)

Thus, the paper dresses were hardly made for reasons of economic shortages in the WW. It was pointed out, in another newspaper article, that even the paper dresses were, in fact, not particularly cheap:

Although I believe I know that there are still enough fabrics and cloth in Austria, though unfortunately not in the right hands, the main hope for us at present is to produce paper clothing as quickly as possible; paper linen is already being produced, as are paper fabrics, and an exhibition will soon be held to show these fabrics to the general public. Of course, these paper garments will not be too cheap, but they will at least help get us over the worst! (21)

The source of the WW's material has not yet been investigated. Therefore, it is unclear as to whether they acquired the fabric 'unfairly'. In any case, it can be said that only a few companies at the time were able to continue making elegant fashion products under the pressure of shortages.

## 5. Fashion and Patriotism

Patriotism is another factor which contributed to the increase in fashion production by the WW. The development of Viennese fashion was linked to nationalist opposition to the traditional fashion centre, Paris – now the capital of Austria's enemy, France. After the outbreak of the war, German or Viennese elements in fashion became more important. In *Deutsche Frauen- und Mode Zeitung* [German Women- and Fashion Paper] no. 26, 1914, which was also published in Vienna, a writer stated that German women needed German fashion. The magazine would strive to Germanize the fashion trends, previously dictated by Paris, as well as to eliminate foreign words as a 'good German publication' (22). In *Wiener Mode* no. 3, 1914, the article titled 'Simple Viennese dress applying Austrian and Hungarian uniform motifs' also encouraged patriotic fashions. It featured folk costumes, patterns from Austria's ally Turkey, and dresses based on Austro-Hungarian military uniforms (23).

By that time, the WW was already one of the leading companies in Vienna, and its designers were expected to be at the forefront of the 'forget Paris' movement. Critic Bertha Zuckerkandl noted in her newspaper article 'Get out of Paris' on August 18<sup>th</sup> 1914 that the WW had been refining the Viennese clothing style (24). German art historian Gustav Pazaurek described the expectations for the WW as follows:

The ladies' dress and the ladies' hat, on the other hand, which up to now have been based almost exclusively on the Parisian fashion, will certainly not have an easy time at first for fully replacing the undeniable French grace, which is an inheritance of a centuries-old courtly tradition. The otherwise certainly rightly appreciated emphasis on purpose, together with hygienic appendages have already caused hopeful undertakings, aimed at the German 'reform dress', 'artist's dress' or 'self-dress', to fade away. But the allied Austria, especially those circles focusing on the 'Vienna Workshops', are probably the best to be called upon to lend us that touch of amiable arbitrariness, coquettish grace, and artistic whimsy, which our ladies

rightly do not want to and cannot do without. (25)

The trend for 1917 was a revival of the Empire style, with skirts no longer so full, and shorter than before (Fig. 2). An illustration from a newspaper article in 1918, which referred to WW's fashion, shows a slightly lower waist, but the natural silhouette and shorter length of skirts remained the same (Fig. 3). The delicate, loose lines evoked the elegance of the imperial capital, while at the same time reflecting people's desire for peace (26).



Figure 2: Illustration for a newspaper article 'Models of the WW'  
(*Fremdenblatt*, July 1, 1917, 13.)



Figure 3: Illustration for a newspaper article 'Individual Dress'  
(*Neues Wiener Journal*, June 23, 1918, 11.)

A newspaper article from September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1918, the last period of the war, reported that the WW's fashion exhibition in Berlin had been a great success, attracting as many as 1,000 business people and buyers from Germany and neutral countries. 'These costumes are excellent in their distinctive cut, distinguished simplicity and grace', and one critic 'especially appreciates the charming detail work, such as embroidery and trimming or the airy blouses as evidence of the finest fashion art' (27). The displayed costumes presumably contained delicate, playful and luxury elements, which were known as the Workshop's signature style, even if the materials were more modest than in ordinary times. Finally, the article points out the practical meaning of their success:

We have every reason to be proud of our Vienna Workshops, which is also performing pioneering and cultural work in its own way. In conclusion, these successes are also to be warmly welcomed from an economic point of view, since every increase in the export rate contributes to the improvement of our value. (28)

It is obvious that the WW's fashion exhibitions in Germany, and neutral cities such as Bern, Zurich and Stockholm, served as propaganda activities during the war, promoting Austrian cultural goods. Moreover, the exhibitions must have been economically important to secure profits for the company, and, in a broader sense, to strengthen the national economy.

## 6. Conclusion

The increase in the number of women in the WW was in line with the social phenomenon of the time. However, the women designers of the WW can be considered as an overwhelmingly elite group among the increased number of those female professionals, in the sense of their professional education and working environment. The fact that the fashion products they produced, including fashion portfolios and accessories, became the mainstay of the company reflects not only gender factors. Firstly, as a practical matter, it was far easier to purchase fabrics than metals, and it was easier to secure the personnel to execute the designs (seamstresses). Secondly, in relation to the patriotic climate of the time, vitalization of fashion was a way to compete with the Parisian styles and to demonstrate the cultural superiority of one's own country.

In conclusion, the progress of women designers in the WW was influenced not only by traditionally formed gender perspectives, but also by the social conditions of the period. In addition, the actual contribution to the company's business may have strengthened their status as designers.

Finally, one cannot simply compare women designers of the WW with those of the Bauhaus, because of differences in generation, historical backgrounds and the nature of the institutions (i.e. company vs school). Compared to the Bauhaus, however, the leading WW women during wartime were not students but hired designers, and under the artistic director Hoffmann, who respected individual inspiration, they seem to have been freer and more independent in their creative endeavours. Further investigation into women's roles and specific contributions in the two main design institutions of the German-speaking area promises greater importance for future exploration of the themes of gender and design.

## Notes

1. Recent Publications include: Ursula Muscheler, ed., *Mutter, Muse und Frau Bauhaus: die Frauen um Walter Gropius* (Berlin: Berenberg, 2018); Elisabeth Otto, ed., *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2019); Elisabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler, eds., *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective* (London: Herbert Press, 2019); Patrick Rössler, *Bauhausmädls: A Tribute to Pioneering Women Artists* (Köln: Taschen Verlag, 2019); Kai Uwe Schierz et al., eds., 4 "Bauhausmädels": *Gertrud Arndt, Marianne Brandt, Margarete Heymann, Margaretha Reichardt* (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2019).
2. Stella Rollig and Sabine Fellner, eds., *City of Women: Female Artists in Vienna 1900-1938* (Munich: Prestel, 2019).

3. Christoph Thun-Hohenstein et al. eds., *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2020).
4. Thun-Hohenstein, *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, 13.
5. Werner J. Schweiger, *Wiener Werkstätte. Kunst und Kunsthandwerk 1903-1932* (Augsburg: Bechtermünz, 1995), 98.
6. *Tēkoku Kōgei* [Imperial Craft] 2, no. 8 (1928).
7. Elisabeth Kreuzberger, “Kleine Chance, optimal genutzt: Künstlerinnen der Wiener Werkstätte an der Kunstgewerbeschule,” in Thun-Hohenstein, 24.
8. Sabine Fellner, “City of Women – Women of the City,” in Rollig and Fellner, 26.
9. Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber, “Education, Associations, and Networks,” in Rollig and Fellner, 52.
10. Thun-Hohenstein, *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, 15.
11. Klaralinda Ma-Kicher, “Die Frauen, die Krieg und die Stadt,” in *Im Epizentrum des Zusammenbruchs: Wien im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Alfred Pfofer and Andreas Weigl (Wien: Metroverlag, 2003), 73-74.
12. Ma-Kicher, “Die Frauen, die Krieg und die Stadt,” 75.
13. See illustrations of the postcards in Ma-Kicher, “Die Frauen, die Krieg und die Stadt,” 78-79.
14. Ma-Kicher, “Die Frauen, die Krieg und die Stadt,” 76-81.
15. Josef August Lux, “Wiener Werkstätte,” *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, no. 15 (1904): 1-14.
16. Tristan Loidl, *Andenken aus Eiserner Zeit: Patriotische Abzeichen der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie von 1914 bis 1918* (Wien: Verlag Militaria, 2004), 234, 244-245. However, the WW did not completely stop producing metal products, as it advertised for metal workers in newspapers in 1916 (*Arbeiter Zeitung*, August 22, 1916, 8; August 23, 1916, 8.). In addition, in newspapers from August 1918, almost at the end of the war, they placed advertisement seeking to purchase old and broken gold products (*(Neugkeits) Welt Blatt*, July 28, 1918, 10; *Neue Freie Presse*, August 4, 1918, 40.). It seems apparent that they intended to continue gold crafts production.
17. A letter from the Vienna Workshops to Eduard Leisching, March 16, 1918. (Collection of the Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna. MAK Archiv, AZ. 1918-254.)
18. Angela Völker, “Fashion, Textiles, and Wallpaper,” in *Wiener Werkstätte 1903-1932: The Luxury of Beauty*, ed. Christian Witt-Dörring and Janis Staggs (Munich/London/New York: Prestel, 2017), 284.
19. Susanne Breuss, “Alltagsdinge im Zeichen des Krieges: Neun Fundstücke aus der Frauen- und

Familienzeitschrift »Wiener Mode,« in Pfoser and Weigl, 533.

20. Unknown author, “Bühnenkleider aus Papier,” *Neues Wiener Journal*, December 20, 1917, 4.
21. Unknown author, “Die neue Kleiderversorgung,” *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 4, 1917, 4.
22. Unknown author, “Krieg und Mode,” *Deutsche Frauen- und Modezeitung*, no. 26 (1914): 11.
23. Breuss, “Alltagsdinge im Zeichen des Krieges,” 533.
24. Berta Zuckerkandl, “Los von Paris,” *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 18, 1914, 1.
25. Gustav E. Pazaurek, *Der Deutsche Krieg*, no. 4, *Patriotismus, Kunst und Kunsthandwerk*, ed. Ernst Jäckh (1914): 30.
26. Völker, “Fashion, Textiles, and Wallpaper,” 286.
27. Unknown author, “Wiener Herbstmode,” *Der Montag*, September 2, 1918, 4.
28. “Wiener Herbstmode,” 4.

## Author Biography

### Tomoko Kakuyama

Tomoko Kakuyama received Ph.D. from Saitama University, Japan. After teaching at Nanzan University as an Assistant Professor, she became an Associate Professor at Kanagawa University. She specializes in the design history of Central Europe, mainly of Austria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her latest publications include *Wīn Kōbō: Teito no Burando Tanjō ni miru Ōsutoria Dezain Undōshi* [Vienna Workshops: The Birth of a Brand and the Beginnings of Modern Design in Austria] (Tokyo: Sairyū sha, 2021). Her recent papers include “‘Wīn Kinetishizumu’, Senkanki Ōsutoria no Zenei” [Avant-garde of the ‘Vienna Kineticism’ in the Interwar Austria] (*The Journal of the Design History Workshop Japan*, no. 16 (2018)).

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