

RADICAL!
WOMEN*ARTISTS AND MODERNISM 1910–1950

Lower Belvedere
18 June to 12 October 2025



Claude Cahun, *I Am in Training Don't Kiss Me*, 1927 (2024)
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Radical! launches a lively dialogue between over sixty women*artists from more than twenty countries, with paintings presented alongside textile designs, sculptures alongside prints, drawings alongside photographs and films. Regardless of their background or aesthetic idiom, all these artists are united by their search for new forms of expression and representation and by their determination to shift artistic and social boundaries.

General Director Stella Rollig: *With Radical! we are giving women and gender-diverse artists their rightful place in the Modernist canon, drawing attention to their systematic marginalization, and reevaluating art historical narratives. The project challenges the notion of a linear sequence of avant-gardes and extricates the presented women*artists from the traditional art historical classifications that have contributed to them being forgotten and omitted from museum collections.*

Instead of perpetuating stylistic pigeonholes, the exhibition foregrounds the individuality of each artist's work, thereby acknowledging the true artistic spectrum that ranges from abstract to figurative, from critical to activist. What makes these approaches radical is not just the way in which they question social and artistic conventions, but mainly the tenacity with which the women*artists—often in the face of resistance—went their own way and accepted the inherent risk in doing so. Many of their subjects are just as relevant today as they were a century ago.

Curator Stephanie Auer: *The exhibition brings together women*artists who led self-determined lives—which was unusual for the time—and who held their own in a patriarchal world order. Their works are acts of emancipation, testaments to the changes in traditional gender roles. These women*artists championed the right to bodily autonomy, rendered visible social injustices, and protested anti-Semitism and racism. In abstraction they found an aesthetic idiom in which the artist's background or gender is immaterial.*

Women*artists of Classical Modernism are—with few exceptions—still considered marginal phenomena whose works are always assessed in comparison with those of their male contemporaries. *Radical!* presents the pioneering creative output of women*artists in the early twentieth century and follows six decades of feminist curatorial practice. This new perspective lets us see beyond the Eurocentric view of Modernism.

Radical! features works by Zubeida Agha, Gertrud Arndt, Benedetta, Romaine Brooks, Claude Cahun, Elizabeth Catlett, Sonia Delaunay, Inji Efflatoun, Alexandra Exter, Leonor Fini, Jacoba van Heemskerck van Beest, Hannah Höch, Erika Giovanna Klien, Katarzyna Kobro, Käthe Kollwitz, Lotte Laserstein, Tamara de Lempicka, Alice Lex-Nerlinger, Jeanne Mammen, Marlow Moss, Alice Neel, Anton Prinner, Gazbia Sirry, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Charley Toorop, Madiha Umar, Fahrelnissa Zeid, and many more.

The exhibition *Radical! Women*Artists and Modernism 1910–1950* is a joint project with Museum Arnhem and the Saarlandmuseum – Moderne Galerie, Saarbrücken.

*In this exhibition "women*artists" is used as an inclusive term that encompasses a range of gender identities.*

EXHIBITION TEXTS

The first half of the twentieth century saw huge upheavals in politics, technology, and society. With new forms of expression and stylistic approaches, the progressive art of the age, known as Modernism, challenged conventional ways of seeing. Classic art history tends to portray this era as a linear sequence of disparate artistic movements. Barely any lines of this narrative are given to works by women, queer people, and people of color. Which names come to mind when you think of Modernism? The exhibition *Radical!* is an invitation to think differently about Modernism—to see it as polyphonic, international, and contradictory. It launches a lively dialogue between works by over sixty women*artists from more than twenty countries, presenting paintings alongside textile designs, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, and films. Regardless of their background or stylistic classification, all these artists were united by their search for new visual languages with which to capture the modern world. What makes these approaches radical is not just the way in which they question social and artistic conventions, but mainly the tenacity with which the artists—often in the face of resistance—went their own way. Many of their subjects are just as relevant today as they were a century ago.

BROADENING PERSPECTIVES

The show *Radical!* focuses on women*artists active in the period from 1910 to 1950 and includes both established and less well-known names. Emancipation, protest, and abstraction are the three perspectives from which this exhibition approaches a wealth of works. Questioning gender roles, calling attention to social injustices, and transcending traditional forms of representation: The women*artists of Modernism not only reflected on but actively drove contemporary developments in these areas. Grouped according to these themes, this first room is conceived as an encounter between examples of various artistic approaches. The sheer diversity of styles and subjects testifies to the broad spectrum and the simultaneity of aesthetic idioms and individual approaches in Modernism.

NEW REALITIES. NEW IDENTITIES.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the achievements of feminist movements in their struggle for gender equality made a growing number of new and more autonomous lifestyles possible for women. Numerous women*artists expressed these changing identities in their works: By breaking with stereotypes, they deconstructed seemingly "natural" gender roles. Strong, self-determined depictions of and by queer people not only challenge strict binary "female" or "male" categories but also open our eyes to unique and unconventional ways of living.

MODELS OF EMANCIPATION

For a long time, women were denied access to life drawing classes, an essential component of any academic art education. For women, working with nude models was deemed a taboo for "moral" reasons. Only as emancipation progressed did the female nude develop into a central motif of self-reflection, telling of a newly won autonomy. Women*artists transformed the traditionally dependent relationship between male painter and female model into a more equal creative process. By doing so, they broke with centuries-old portrait conventions by depicting the female body as neither eroticized nor objectified. Instead, they aimed their gaze at the realities of women's lives, producing images of the body that defy traditional standards of beauty or show traces of aging.

ART AS A FORM OF PROTEST

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by political extremes and multiple crises. Women*artists reflected current events not just as meticulous chroniclers but as vocal critics of social injustices. In their works they addressed subjects such as poverty and mass unemployment, rising fascism and growing anti-Semitism, as well as the horrors of war. They directed their gaze at colonial and racist oppression and fought for women's right to bodily autonomy. Despite their individuality, common to all these artistic approaches is a clear understanding of art's social relevance and potential. While the choice of a figurative aesthetic idiom and the print medium facilitated the works' legibility and distribution, it has also led to them receiving less recognition in the history of Modernism.

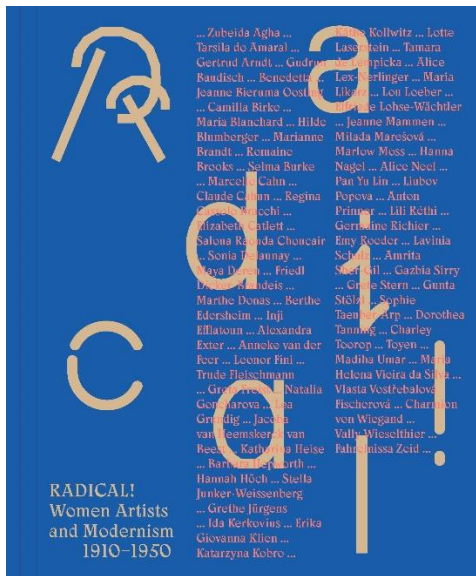
EXPERIMENT ABSTRACTION

The profound social, technological, and political upheavals in the first half of the twentieth century changed not just women* artists' self-image but also their view of people and their surroundings. The abstract aesthetic idiom offered a visual analogy with which to represent the dynamism and complexity of the modern world. Bold experiments with color and form, alternative spatial concepts, and multiple perspectives thus came to replace classic pictorial narratives. Turning to abstraction opened up brand new opportunities for women*artists. After all, by transcending cultural and national boundaries, abstract compositions are universally accessible and **simultaneously and provide** fewer clues as to the background, religion, or gender of their creators.

ART INTO LIFE!

Women*artists transferred the abstract aesthetic idiom to fabrics, clothing, carpets, and other practical objects in an act of utter equality. By doing so, they brought the latest artistic trends and the avant-garde visual language into people's everyday lives. At the same time, they tore down the traditional boundaries between the fine arts—painting, drawing, sculpture—and applied art, which had long been deemed inferior. Especially in the 1910s and 1920s, institutions like the Wiener Werkstätte in Vienna or the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau gave women the opportunity to receive a creative education—and to earn money with the skills they acquired. Despite their intrinsically innovative character, the works of female textile artists and designers were long considered mere craftwork.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE



Radical! Women*Artists and Modernism 1910-1950

Editors: Stella Rollig, Stephanie Auer, Andrea Jahn, Kathrin Elvers-Svamberk, Saskia Bak, Evelien Scheltinga

Authors: Stephanie Auer, Kathrin Elvers-Svamberk, Monica Juneja, Meike Lander, Katarina Lozo, Marsha Meskimmon, Evelien Scheltinga, Mirjam Westen

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GENERAL INFORMATION

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Art Mediation	T + 43 1 795 57-134 M public@belvedere.at
Media Contact	Media Belvedere, Prinz-Eugen-Straße 27, 1030 Wien T +43 1 795 57-177 M presse@belvedere.at

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