

# KUNSTMUSEUM THUN

## CABINET EXHIBITION

### SOPHIE TAEUBER TEXTILE REFORMER 17.8.–1.12.24

## ENGLISH

Sophie Taeuber (1889–1943) was a craftswoman, teacher, dancer, artist, author of a publication on textile design, architect and editor of an art magazine. The interdisciplinary body of work of this pioneer of abstract art has attracted international attention over the last twenty years.

This cabinet exhibition showcases Sophie Taeuber's early textile work, which originated in the embroidery and lace industry in Eastern Switzerland. The show provides insights into her childhood in Trogen, her training as a textile designer at the newly founded Stauffacher-Schule (Stauffacher School) and the Zeichnungsschule für Industrie und Gewerbe (School of Drawing for Industry and Trade) in St. Gallen, her studies at German reform schools, the Lehr- und Versuch-Ateliers für angewandte und freie Kunst (Teaching and Experimental Studios for Applied and Fine Arts) in Munich, and the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) in Hamburg, as well as her career as a teacher of design and embroidery in the decorative arts department of the Gewerbeschule Zürich (Zurich Trade School).

The materials available on her years of training show that Sophie Taeuber already took a modern approach even before her avant-garde inventions. The Zeichnungsschule für Industrie und Gewerbe in St. Gallen published stylised snowberries by its student in the journal *Textile Kunst und Industrie* (Textil art and industry) in 1909. The impulse for the design seems to have come from Otto Werder, who attempted at the end of the nineteenth century to introduce the Art Nouveau style to St. Gallen's textile industry. A few years later, Sophie Taeuber was doing colourful wool embroidery in the rustic folk style, usually on natural grey

linen. These pieces with their standardised, flatly rendered flowers anticipate the radical vertical-horizontal surface compositions she would create from 1915 onwards.

This exhibition focuses on newly discovered designs for the cottage industry in bobbin lace in the Bernese Oberland. The Arts and Crafts Reform around 1900 responded to rampant historicism and industrialization by calling for a return to hand craftsmanship. It was in this context that the bobbin lace technique was rediscovered. In 1915, Sophie Taeuber supported the charitable project *Klöppelindustrie* (bobbin lace industry), initiated by Alice Frey-Amsler (later her fellow teacher at the Gewerbeschule Zürich) to provide a better income for women in the Lauterbrunnen Valley by reviving the local lace-making tradition. Three floral bobbin lace patterns by Sophie Taeuber have survived. Two of the patterns were adapted to different circular and oval shapes. With her symmetrical model of a flower in cross-section, the artist drew on a type that can be found in the historical pattern collections of the Gewerbeschule Zürich but made the flower more geometrical. None of the many other flower motifs from Lauterbrunnen achieves this level of precision. Only a single drawing exists of the most modern of the three patterns, which shows orthogonally abstracted bell-flowers as motif.

Another image on view shows a design for a blanket that Sophie Taeuber submitted to the "Competition for a new type of white embroidery" organised by the Designers' Association of St. Gallen in 1921. Not only the original design drawing can be seen but also a sample of its embroidered execution as a photo in the *Mitteilungen aus Stickerei und*

*Kunst-Gewerbe* (News from embroidery and the art trade) published by the St. Gallen Designers' Association. The cabinet show puts this competition entry in context by illustrating the artist's previous avant-garde design processes.


In 1915, Sophie Taeuber translated the orthogonal structure of textiles into radical vertical-horizontal surface compositions for the first time. In the important book *Art since 1900*, Hal Foster illustrated a vertical-horizontal watercolour by the artist from 1917 as the earliest abstract geometric work. The Kunstgewerbereform (Arts and Crafts Reform) demanded faithfulness to materials, leading textile artists to adopt abstract forms more consistently than painting in the 1910s.

In parallel with this radically geometric concept, Sophie Taeuber created a typology of the world, a vocabulary of abstract figures she used to create modular designs. She arranged the figures not only in grids but also in rows, as illustrated by an embroidery design on graph paper whose motif is related to the competition entry. A flat composition is created here using figures, with each element incorporated in such a way that it touches the edges or other elements.

These figurative methods were inspired by historical textiles Sophie Taeuber was able to view at the St. Gallen Industrie- und Gewerbemuseum (Museum of Industry and Trade), which during her student days had acquired the important collection of Leopold Iklé. She found there models for the concept of depicting figures in square fields or lined up in a row. The show thus demonstrates that the reform movement and the avant-garde were more closely related than previously thought.

The catalogue *Sophie Taeuber. Textilreformerin*, designed by Hubertus Design, is being published in German by Scheidegger & Spiess (ISBN 978-3-03942-232-6).

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