

# THE DIVERSE BEAUTY OF MATHILDENHÖHE: AN INSIGHT INTO AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY AND CURATORIAL STUDIES

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## ABSTRACT

*This article aims to look at the World Heritage Site from the perspective of curatorial studies and aesthetic philosophy. The Darmstadt Artists' Colony made an enormous contribution to art and formed a bridge between the British Arts & Crafts movement and the German Association of Craftsmen, which eventually led to the Bauhaus movement. The last Grand Duke of Hesse and the Rhine was not only a patron who founded this Artists' Colony, but also a prominent curator together with the Austrian architect and one of the founders of the Vienna Secession, Joseph Maria Olbrich. Together they combined economic development with artistic innovation. The establishment of the Darmstadt Artists' Colony was a sensation in the art world. It marked the beginning of the 20th century, turning everyday life into an aesthetic experience.*

## KEYWORDS

*Heritage, Material culture, Curatorial studies, Aesthetic philosophy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The first time you visit the highest elevation above the city of Darmstadt in Hesse, it's like a portal to an unknown world where streamlined shapes and floral patterns merge. Even if you don't know the history of this place, you can feel the atmosphere of aesthetic freedom and inspiration. Mathildenhöhe is truly a breathtaking sight. The history of this place amazes with the scope of imagination and courage of young artists, who left a testimony of early modern architecture, urban planning and landscape design.

In the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century – beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century Darmstadt became a center of the arts. The Artists' Colony brought together leading artists and craftsmen as a means of improving German public taste and endowing the contemporary applied and decorative arts with a sense of German identity. This conjunction of national identity, design reform, and economic success was in tune with contemporary progressive design thinking. [5] One of the major centers of Jugendstil (in German 'Youth Style') movement in 1901 was Darmstadt Artists' Colony. Influenced by Japanese culture and existentialism philosophy, it was a German equivalent of art nouveau.

Three key ideas of Jugendstil movement:

- 1) Sharing the core values of Art Nouveau, Jugendstil artists used floral elements and organic shapes, later on as the style evolved artists shifted to more abstract and geometric forms.

- 2) Jugendstil artists wanted to bring art and design to a wide audience by setting up workshops throughout Germany and making it more accessible.
- 3) With the development of the Gesamtkunstwerk, a creative concept of combining art, the followers of Art Nouveau took its core idea of synthesizing all the arts to create a work of art that is perfect in its unity. The Gesamtkunstwerk is based on the category of the sublime, which is an important part of the ideology of the New Age and still remains an important concept in the history and theory of art. [10]

Jugendstil flourished briefly from 1894 to 1904 in Darmstadt, Dresden, and Vienna, its main centers, with provocative exhibitions and influential schools. Reflecting the "modern" spirit of their times, Jugendstil artists sought to create a new art free from the "vulgarity" of Naturalism and the eclecticism of historical rejuvenation, the two most popular trends of the time. Though the Jugendstil was short-lived, partly as a result of its popularization and distortion by mass consumption, the break with tradition and the artistic impulse it represented have had an important influence on modern art in our century. [11]

## **2. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE BIRTH OF BAUHAUS**

“Our Athens will be there – or nowhere”. In 1900 Hermann Bahr believed his expectation of Darmstadt could be summed up in those words. In the dedication to his book “Bildung” to the Grand Duke of Hesse and the Rhine, Bahr preceded this emotive statement in reference to the Darmstadt Mathildenhöhe project with the following sentences: “It is your resolution that there shall be achieved in Hesse what can only be dreamed about or wished for elsewhere: in Hesse Art shall no longer be a superficial decoration and mere trumpery of man, but the inner core of his existence. Our hopes need wander afar no more: there – or nowhere...”. [4]

The last Grand Duke of Hesse and of the Rhine was not only a patron who founded this Artists' Colony, but also, like the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, established a completely interdisciplinary form of curating together with Joseph Maria Olbrich (the architect, designer, and graphic artist). They brought together emerging artists to create unexpected productions. The Grand Duke himself selected a group of young artists between the ages of 20 and 31. He was impressed by the radical new Arts and Crafts aesthetic that he encountered in Great Britain. So, he decided to present paintings, sculptures and applied arts products side by side. Some of the invited artists had actually moved from one artistic field to another, such as Peter Behrens. He came to Darmstadt as a painter and designer and left as an architect. He even built his own house in Mathildenhöhe, designing all the decorative elements in just two years without any formal training. This is just one example of how influential this place was at the beginning of the XX century.

For many centuries, this area was used as a vineyard due to its favorable location. In 1800, Ludwig's younger brother, Prince Christian, turned it into a public park. And in 1833, he gave it as a wedding present to the hereditary Grand Duke Louis III and his wife Mathilde, after whom the park was named. In 1892, Ernest Louis succeeded his father Louise IV as Grand Duke. During his lifetime, he was a patron of the arts and an artist himself. Joseph Maria Olbrich was chosen by Duke Ernest Louis to design an Artists' Colony after the success of the Secession exhibition hall in 1897. [2] That's how it started. There were 23 artists lived and worked there. The first 7 artists were invited, among them: architects Joseph Maria Olbrich and Peter Behrens, a sculptor Rudolf Bosselt, painters Hans Christiansen and Paul Bürck, a sculptor Ludwig Habich, a designer Patriz Huber. The Grand Duke wanted the Hesse region to flourish and prosper. Some of these men were already established; others were still young and unknown. Olbrich, then aged 32, and destined to work in Darmstadt until his death in 1908 had worked under Otto Wagner in Vienna; Behrens, who was 30, had been part of the Munich Secession. They were devotees of the

idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk – the unity of art and life, artist and craftsman, and house and interior. [1]

They were the “keepers” who built magnificent villas in various styles, decorated them, and arranged the interiors for the future open salons (a kind of “cabinet of curiosities” or, in German, *Kunstkammer* and *Wunderkammer*). Indeed, Olbricht was an expert on visual culture and taste. Alexander Koch, the owner of one of the many influential German periodicals, the magazine “*Innendekoration*”, also contributed greatly to the development and promotion of the Artists' Colony.

Were artists who lived and worked at Mathildenhöhe imitating something “old” or creating new forms of expression? The secret of this place lies in the freedom of expression, an expression inspired by the poetic beauty of ruins, existential philosophy and nature. They treated their views as if they were pieces of action. It was a kind of “playground” for them. During the 19th century, Nietzsche's philosophy had a great intellectual influence on art. For example, the round main entrance door of the *Großes Glöckerthaus*, designed by Joseph Maria Olbricht in 1901 for the furniture manufacturer Julius Heinrich Glöckert, is a symbolic representation of the cycle of existence that Buddhists believe in. [3] Buddhists believe that one can only be liberated from this cycle of rebirth when one achieves enlightenment. It seems to me that some of the artists have indeed found two points of connection between silence and expression. They have revealed the plastic possibilities of art, vast expanses of creative space that reach far and beyond human possibilities to connect with a deeper, more spiritual existence. Instead of seeing two separate things, they saw connections and possibilities. The same idea followed Joseph Beuys in his many artworks, exploring the artistic “in-between” space and intuitive channels of communication.

The need for familiar beauty and constant search inspired them to prepare exhibitions in 1901, 1904, 1908 and 1914. As the Polish philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz once wrote:

“One of the motives of the creators and one of the reasons for the satisfaction of recipients is the similarity of a novel, landscape or a portrait to the real world, the ability to recognize familiar things and matters in them and tell yourself: these are my places, familiar places, my youth, this is my story.” [9]

In such way, during the 1908 exhibition, Olbricht designed the Wedding Tower to tell the personal story of the marriage of Duke Ludwig von Essen and his second wife Eleonore. The tower is an exceptional testimony of modernism and expressionism. The unusual top of the tower resembles both a palm and a crown, which is why it's also called the “Five-Finger Tower” or “The City Crown”. Most of the buildings are a fusion of different styles, such as the Ernst Ludwig House, and their interiors could be experienced as complete aesthetic works of art.

But what is aesthetic? A well-established standard conception in analytic aesthetics proposes the following two claims as axiomatic:

- 1) Aesthetic experience must be grounded in first-hand perception;
- 2) Aesthetic experience must be characterized by pleasure. [7]

In Germany the notion of aesthetic as an experience was coined in the mid eighteenth century by the Wolffian philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, in order to posit a “science of sensible cognition”, as a subordinate complement to logic, the science of the higher faculty of reason. Since for Baumgarten poetry is experienced as sensibility, the science of aesthetics comprehends the production and judgment of representations, and thus absorbs into its purview the faculties of imagination and taste. In Germany the term caught on rapidly. In Britain the word did not achieve

a comparable triumph until the end of the nineteenth century; however, the discourse we now call aesthetics knew a rich development in eighteenth century Britain and with the Wolffian tradition in Germany formed the two wings of Enlightenment thought on sensibility and taste which Kant, in the “Critique of Judgment”, judged unphilosophical and sought to resolve. [6]

Friedrich Schiller, for instance, defined beauty as “freedom in appearance”. Schiller's goal was to show how the concept of beauty could be used as a tool to bridge the gap between morality and aesthetics in Kantian philosophy. Schiller admired the revolutionary ideas of freedom and equality. Everything that is characteristic of the Artists' Colony.

The aesthetic experience lies in recognizing exactly what it is that makes it look beautiful through ordinary sense perception. For example, it might be something that evokes memories and you feel the presence of the artist. It gives a new dimension that floats above necessity. As Friedrich Schiller asserts in his series of letters “On the Aesthetic Education of Man”:

“Art must abandon actuality and soar with becoming boldness above necessity; for Art is a daughter of Freedom, and must receive her commission from the needs of spirits, not from the exigency of matter”. [8]

The Artists' Colony balanced this notion of freedom and necessity. They were given only one condition, so they also produced designs for manufacturing companies. Grand Duke combined business savvy with artistic innovation. Later, the artists moved from lavish design to the more modest development of homes for the middle class. Unfortunately, luxury mansions were very expensive to maintain. Thus, began the birth of the Bauhaus, which continues to inspire contemporary design and visual communication.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The Artists' Colony in Darmstadt approached Schiller's concept of absolute freedom, practical education, and openness in the aesthetic state, and profoundly shaped contemporary architecture and art in general. The Bauhaus school itself lasted only 14 years, but its impact on design is timeless. From modern architecture to graphic design, the broad influence of the Bauhaus movement has a rich history. To this day, Bauhaus continues to influence art and design through its functional design and aesthetic pleasure. It revolutionized the way people experience everyday life through the objects they use.

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