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Press pack
1st April 2019

AT THE MODERN ART DINING TABLE Ceramics of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933)

Musée Ariana, from 12th April to 8th September 2019

Press visits on request

Exhibition preview: Thursday 11 April at 7pm

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Swiss Museum for Ceramics and Glass
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Ville de Genève
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AT THE MODERN ART DINING TABLE
Ceramics of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933)
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CONTENTS

Context	p. 3
Introduction	p. 3
Ceramics in the spirit of the times	p. 3
Technology benefiting abstraction	p. 4
Success and decline	p. 4
Events	p. 5
Practical information	p. 6

À LA TABLE DE L'ART MODERNE
Céramiques de la République de Weimar
(1919-1933)
Musée Ariana, du 12 avril au 8 septembre 2019

CONTEXT

From 12th April to 8th September, the Musée Ariana is addressing an aspect of the history of German ceramics still not well-known in the French-speaking world. Presenting ceramics from a private collection, found mainly in flea markets in the Geneva region, this exhibition shows pieces from the 1920s and 1930s, very much a golden age of creativity in Germany.

INTRODUCTION

The joint centenaries of the founding of the Weimar Republic and the opening of the Bauhaus School (in 1919) provide the Musée Ariana with an opportunity to address an aspect of the history of German ceramics still not well-known in the French-speaking world. Yet the subject did arouse considerable interest in the mid-1980s, when the German art historian and collector, Tilmann Buddensieg (1928-2013), presented to the public his own collection of 1920s and 1930s ceramics. Exhibitions in Milan¹, London, Berlin², New York and Toronto followed, but it was not until the 2000s that people began to rediscover this particular type of ware³. Formerly curiosities found at flea markets, these ceramics have since entered the collections of numerous museums and been elevated to the status of collectible antiques.

CERAMICS IN THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

Between 1919 and 1933, Germany was under a republican regime for the first time in its history. The world was then experiencing a period of exceptional artistic ferment, led by the avant-gardes. These years coincided with the rise of modern art and abstraction, ranging from Russian Suprematism and Constructivism to the *De Stijl* movement in the Netherlands and the Bauhaus school. This art school, founded in Weimar by Walter Gropius (1883-1969), acquired an international reputation, notably for advocating the synthesis of art, crafts and industry. Its influence on contemporary German society permeated all the way through to ceramic production. Across the country, manufacturers adopted a new aesthetic, catapulting industrially-designed objects into the very heart of the most modest of homes.

The ceramics revival in Germany during the inter-war years was owing to its creamware industry (*Steingut*). Long-regarded as a cheap substitute for porcelain, this technique appealed to all levels of consumers in a context undermined by material difficulties. Its popularity derived from its own particular qualities, adapted to the times. Less expensive, thanks to its lower firing temperatures, offering the possibility of fixing a vast range of colours, creamware would become the ideal medium for a new indispensable tool - the air gun, or airbrush. Porcelain, firmly set in an ancient tradition, was thus ousted by mass produced, state-of-the-art ware.

¹ Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea (1984).

² Bröhan Museum.

³ Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe (2006); Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (2010).

TECHNOLOGY BENEFITING ABSTRACTION

The airbrush was invented in the late 19th century. Historians have attributed its origins to several people, including the ceramist Laura Anne Fry (1857-1943), who designed a mouth-held atomizer around 1883-1884, and the inventor Charles L. Burdick, who patented atomizing airbrushes in 1892-1893. At the turn of the century, this technique began to be employed in German porcelain factories, soon being coupled with the use of stencils (this combination made it possible to repeat patterns in series that would have been expensive to paint by hand). In the 1910s, the practice gradually came into more general use throughout the country, among both creamware and stoneware manufacturers. Yet the decoration remained figurative and highly traditional: still lifes, depictions of animals, landscapes, etc. It was not until the years 1925-1928 that the early hesitant geometric designs began to turn into true avant-garde abstract motifs. Inspired by the world of contemporary painting, they evoke the style of works by Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935), Paul Klee (1879-1940), etc. Airbrushed designs (*Spritzdekor*) then enjoyed a golden age, largely supplanting decoration applied with a brush or sponge.

At the same time, manufacturers were also taking a fresh look at the traditional volumes of domestic tableware, offering their customers items with more complex lines. Truly modern objects with daring shapes were thus added to their repertoire of innovative decorative designs.

SUCCESS AND DECLINE

In the late 1920s, the airbrush decorating technique was acclaimed and popularised by the press. The craze for geometric patterns resulted in them appearing on ceramics, fabrics, metal, glass and paper alike. Towards 1930, around 60 manufacturers in Germany were producing ceramics decorated by airbrush, including the groups Carstens and Villeroy & Boch, as well as the firms Theodor Paetsch, Grünstadt, Annaburg, Lehmann & Sohn and Max Roesler. In the space of ten years, the competition generated thousands of different combinations of shapes and colours. The democratisation of chocolate, for example, led to the creation of a vast array of hot chocolate pots (*Kakaokannen / Schokoladekannen*). In his sales catalogue of 1930, Christian Carstens (in Gräfenroda) alone offered 16 distinct forms of chocolate pots - all equally adaptable for coffee - available in a range of sizes (0.75 l. / 1 l. / 1.25 l. / and 1.5 l.) and with no less than 71 decorative variations⁴!

In 1933, the coming to power of the National Socialist German Workers' Party and the advent of the Third Reich marked a historic turning point, not only politically but also artistically. The aim of the Reich Chamber of Culture (*Reichskulturkammer*), established that same year, was to control the art world and impose its official taste on it, known as "heroic art". Not corresponding to this ideal, modern art was declared "degenerate". In the same year, the Bauhaus School was, moreover, permanently closed by the authorities.

In the field of ceramics, the originality of forms was gradually toned down. Decorative patterns that drew on geometric abstraction nevertheless continued, only experiencing a decline in terms of their mass production. Other designs - floral motifs or monochrome pieces - were developed at the same time, officially considered more "mainstream". A hybrid variation, a compromise that combined stylised flowers and geometric patterns, also emerged. Paradoxically, on the eve of the Second World War, several ceramic firms continued to offer busts of Adolf Hitler for sale alongside avant-garde inspired tableware! After the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art), organised in Munich in 1937 by the Nazi regime to condemn modern art, the rupture became more pronounced, leading to the decline of airbrush decoration. In 1940, however, the firm of Julius Paul & Sohn still retained some abstract geometric patterns among its collection of 1500 stencils⁵.

The war years finally brought production of these wares to an end. It was only in the 1950s that a genuine resurgence of the airbrush technique in the German ceramic industry became apparent, accompanied by new decorative designs.

⁴ Beate Spiegel, *Bizarre Muster auf Alltagsgeschirr*, p. 12.

⁵ Joanna Flawia Figiel, *Revolution der Muster*, p. 18.

E V E N T S

GUIDED TOURS

On Sundays 14 April and 1st September at 3pm with the collector, Nathalie Mouriquand; Sunday 16 June at 11am

GUIDED TOURS ON REQUEST

In French only

Payment and prior booking required.

VISITOR SERVICES

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PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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ADMISSION FEE

Free admission

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