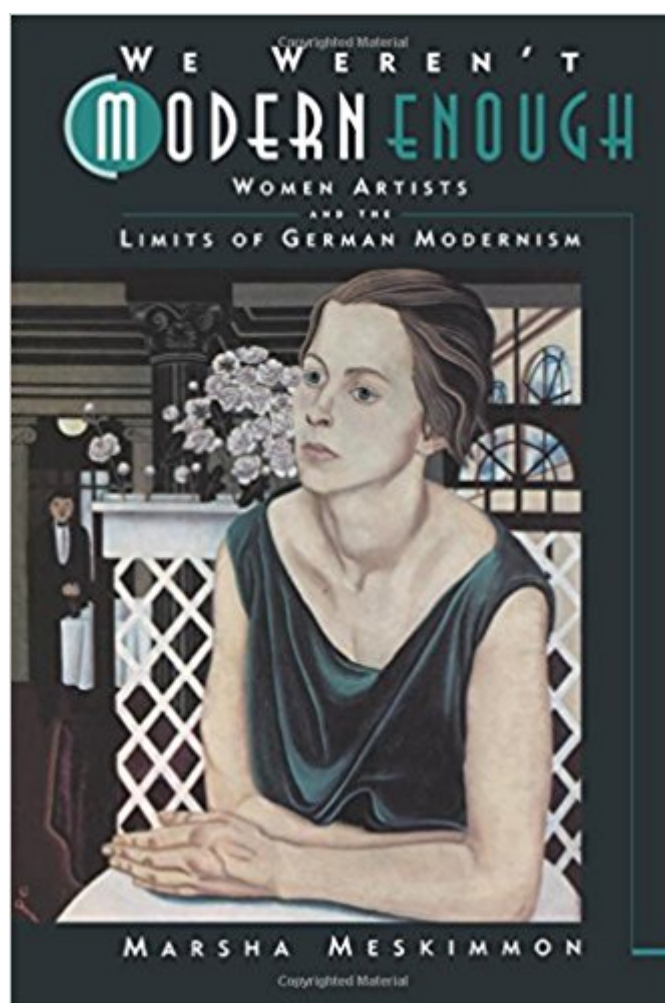


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We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists And The Limits Of German Modernism (Weimar And Now: German Cultural Criticism, No. 25)



Synopsis

Marsha Meskimmon furnishes a fresh perspective on the art of women in the Weimar Republic and in the process reclaims the lost history of a number of artists who have not received adequate attention; not only because they were women but also because they continued to align themselves with the modes of realistic representation the Expressionists regarded as reactionary. Reconsidering the traditional definitions of German modernism and its central issues of race politics, eugenics, and the city, Meskimmon explores the structures that marginalized the work of little known artists such as Lotte Laserstein, Jeanne Mammen, Gerta Overbeck and Grete Jurgens. She shows how these women's personal and professional experiences in the 1920s and 1930s relate to the visual imagery produced at that time. She also examines representations of different female roles; prostitute, mother, housewife, the "New Woman" and "garçonnette"; that attracted the attention of these artists. Situating her exploration on a strong theoretical base, she ranges deftly over mass visual culture; from film to poster art and advertising; to create a vivid portrait of women living and creating in Weimar Germany.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This is an important book [and] has wide-ranging implications for any historian concerned with the balance of change and continuity and with the role and interpretation of Classical antiquity in art, in Renaissance studies and beyond."--*The Art Book*

Marsha Meskimmon is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Art and Design at Loughborough University. Her books include *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (1996).

The years between the two World Wars in Germany were marked by a degree of turmoil in the nation's politics, economics and culture that was unprecedented at the time and remains unmatched to this day in the rest of Western European and American history. Unlike the 1960s, when social movements took place against a background of affluence, the rampant inflation and unemployment of the Weimar Republic meant there was no security whatsoever to counterbalance the tremendous changes penetrating to every corner of society. Everything which had once been fixed and solid became fluid and insubstantial; in Marx's words, "All that is solid melts into air". Gender roles in particular, which until that time had been enshrined as a kind of divine division of labour, were transformed from institutions into issues. Language lagged behind the pace of change: thus, that new breed of woman who cut her hair, played sport, took a job and followed fashion was simply called "die neue Frau". Similarly, the name *garçonne* was borrowed from French to describe the androgynous young city-dweller who made no secret of her bi- or homosexuality. The *garçonne* and the "neue Frau", while not strictly new in the sense of never having existed before, did attain a new level of visibility in public life and the mass media in the 1920s and 1930s. More often than not, they existed in combination with, rather than opposition to, traditional roles such as the mother, the Hausfrau and the prostitute. In Marsha Meskimmon's book *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and The Limits of German Modernism*, she explores the ways in which women perpetuated, refigured and fought against roles both old and new. Women artists occupied a unique position in the Weimar era. The nature of their work - painting or drawing in a studio, not employed as a sales assistant in a shop or a labourer in a factory - placed them at the borders between public and private, bourgeois and proletarian. While this ambiguity gave them more freedom to occupy numerous identities (wife, artist, mother) simultaneously, it also made their status more tenuous. Those married to male artists were sometimes able to negotiate an egalitarian partnership, but more often than not wives were overshadowed by their husbands and, in the case of Marta Hegemann and Anton Räderscheidt, sometimes even abandoned by them. As many of the women artists Meskimmon discusses were politically active - they were generally committed Socialists or Communists - their work featured realistic scenes of unemployment lines and hungry children gazing into gleaming shop windows, as well as satirical family portraits which mocked the

bourgeois ideal of domesticity. Realism was not considered avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s, however, and their work was classified as "women's art": hence painter Gerta Overbeck's lament that lends the book its title, "We weren't modern enough". During their lifetimes, many women artists supported themselves by drawing illustrations for children's books (this at least seemed "natural"). After their deaths, their work remained in the hands of their families or a handful of private collectors, mostly in Germany. With the exception of Käthe Kollwitz, who is not profiled in this book, most women artists of the era never found commercial success, and their names are forgotten today: Grethe Järgens, Jeanne Mammon, Lou Albert-Lasard, Lotte Laserstein. By documenting this part of history generally omitted in favour of folklore about the Weimar Republic's leading male figures, Meskimmon contributes a great deal to our understanding of the period as well as women's ongoing struggle for equality and recognition. However, it is unfortunate that her book takes such a fascinating subject and renders it stiff and awkward in academic jargon. All too often, Meskimmon uses words such as "alterity", "polyvocality", and "located subject", when a less scholarly turn of phrase would convey the same idea in a more immediate way. In her attempt to resurrect the histories of artists who were written out of the canon because they were women, Meskimmon's gender-studies idiom runs the risk of condemning them to yet another special-interest ghetto. Nevertheless, by detailing the many identities which women chose and rejected in the Weimar era, Meskimmon reveals these artists as women who made their lives on their own terms.

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