

Performing Modernism: A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest, Alexandra Chiriac, De Gruyter, 2022, 232 pp., 69 b&w and 23 col. illus., paper, £36.50, 9783110765588, eBook, free, 9783110765687

Alexandra Chiriac's book, *Performing Modernism: A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest*, offers a wealth of insights into the emergence and evolution of Romanian modernism through the contribution and role of Jewish artists and theatre designers. The book is seen as a welcome addition to the scholarship on Romania's interwar avant-garde, as highlighted in Irina Livezeanu's preface, but also makes a valuable contribution towards a more all-encompassing understanding of modernism and avant-garde. Through Chiriac's focus on less well-known figures and also, and perhaps more importantly, her emphasis on design and performance we are offered a different story.

The book's introduction tackles issues around the subject of Romanian and Jewish avant-garde. Chiriac notes that she has purposely avoided the category of 'Romanian avant-garde' to steer away from canonical understandings of the avant-garde. Instead, through her focus on the fluctuating and contested notion of 'Jewish' identity the reader can follow the trajectories of several Jewish designers. These examples include Andrei Vespremie and Max Herman Maxy, both based in Bucharest, whose work defies categorisation 'be it national, disciplinary, or otherwise' (p.19). The use of an altered lens has allowed a detailed inspection of different types of cultural production, specifically in the fields of design and performance, further disrupting the more traditional understandings of avant-garde artistic practices. This shift in focus is one of the book's strengths and makes a welcome

contribution to the scholarship that acknowledges the fluid boundaries of modernism rather than approaching it through strategies of exclusion.

The first section of the book looks in detail at the history of the Academy of Decorative Arts in Bucharest. It constitutes three chapters investigating the Academy's beginnings, its links with design institutions in Germany, its workshops, and its commercial section. The opening chapter introduces the reader to the contributions of Vespremie and Maxy in the establishment and continuation of the Academy. A highlight of this chapter is the emphasis that Chiriac places on being open to your research and allowing it to follow directions other than those originally set out with. The first chapter, therefore, gives the reader a more accurate genealogy of the Academy, which up until now has frequently been labelled as 'an outpost of the Bauhaus in Bucharest' (p.29). Indeed, the influence of the Schule Reimann on Vespremie, for instance, cannot be understated in the curation of both curriculum and objects that were produced at the Academy.

The second chapter provides an in-depth examination of the trademark pieces produced by the Academy. This chapter gathers its strength from approaching the Academy's output as it appeared visually in cultural publications, rather than the better-known archival material such as the heavily curated contents of the M.H. Maxy archive. Through these visual reproductions, Chiriac invites the reader to get up close to individual objects produced in metalwork, bookbinding, graphic arts, and textiles workshops. This close reading of visual material should not be underestimated as a method, as it has helped the author to prove that objects previously attributed to Maxy belong to Vespremie. In choosing this approach, Chiriac hopes that 'the objects themselves can act as a tool against historical erasure and

make manifest the legacy of the Academy and the contribution of its creator, Andrei Vespremie' (p.55). The reader is invited to follow the narrative through a large collection of black and white and colour images, which makes for a nice change from the limited set of greyscale images that seem to accompany most monographs on design.

Historical erasure also informs the books' third chapter. Here the reader is introduced to the important commercial section of the Academy, as run by Mela Brun-Maxy, a representative for the British furniture manufacturer Maple & Co. in Romania. Brun-Maxy became highly skilled in curating total environments that displayed Academy furniture and objects in the context of the home. Building on the work of Penny Sparke (2008)¹ and Tag Gronberg (2003)², Chiriac shows how the work and practice of Mela Maxy has been subsumed by her husband's practice. Within the narrative of the heroic male genius, M.H. Maxy's work was seen as more intellectual as opposed to the untrained lady decorators who were deemed to operate more intuitively. Although the field of research on female interior designers has gathered pace there is still much work to be done on understanding the importance of networks and patronage. The modern interior often played a key role in bringing people together and we are offered a tantalising glimpse into the performative aspects of the gatherings hosted by Brun-Maxy, both at home and in the Academy's exhibition spaces. Mela Maxy's work as the manager and financial backer behind the commercial endeavours of the Academy offers an intriguing case study for further research on patronage and the continuation of bringing unknown women to the fore.

¹ Penny Sparke, *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

² Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity. Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester; New York: Manchester university Press, 2003).

The second section of the book focusses on several collaborations within Yiddish theatre, with particular focus on the Vilna Troupe. The reader is eased into this second half by way of an intermission in which Chiriack cleverly knits together the two parts of the book; the first being the design of the interior and the Academy of Decorative Arts and the second with its focus on theatre and stage design. This interdisciplinary approach is fascinating as it highlights the many connections between interior design and theatre design which the author demonstrates through M.H. Maxy's designs, for example *The Sentimental Mannequin* (1926). For this play Maxy designed the stage as a shop window, showing his awareness of shop windows as an advertising medium. He conceived it as a perfect product placement tool for the academy, blurring art and life, and once again showing the influence of the Schule Reimann. Through the interweaving of research on modern design and theatricality this final section of the book has highlighted the driving role of commercial display in artistic innovations, both on and off stage, making visible the untapped potential offered by narratives that usually fall outside modernism understood only through its avant garde protagonists.

As the result of extensive primary source research and translation, this work offers a valuable Open Access resource for anybody interested in the Jewish contribution to avant-garde movements in Europe and the United States.

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