

Julia C. Reuckl

Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna

Between dilettantism and independent art – The situation of women at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts exemplified by the case of Adele von Stark

When the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts – the “Wiener Kunstgewerbeschule” – was founded in 1867 it was one of the first public institutions for higher education also accessible for women. As a whole a notable success, a closer examination shows the ambiguity and problematic aspects of these events.

For its founding father, philologist and art historian Rudolf von Eitelberger, the main purpose of the school was the improvement of the international competitiveness of Austria in the art-industrial sector. He was trying to encourage a corporate cultural identity to unify Austria and the crown lands in a time dominated by an instable political climate and strong nationalist movements. Industrial mass production has led to a decline of the traditional crafts. An organized artistic and technical education and the general formation of taste would guarantee the innovation of Austrian art industry.¹

The School of Arts and Crafts was directly linked to the Museum of Art and Industry which officially opened in 1864. The school consisted of four departments, the special classes or “Fachschulen” for architecture, sculpture and figurative and ornamental drawing and painting. Students without any appropriate pre-education had to attend a one-year preparation course.

The admission of female students to the new school can be considered as an important progress. The school's statutes however were formulated in a gender-free manner without explicitly mentioning women at all.²

¹ R. Eitelberger von Edelberg, *Österreichische Kunst-Institute und kunstgewerbliche Zeitfragen*, Braumüller, Vienna 1879, p. 118–131. *Gesammelte Kunsthistorische Schriften*, 2; G. Fliedl, O. Oberhuber, *Kunst und Lehre am Beginn der Moderne. Die Wiener Kunstgewerbeschule 1867–1918*, Residenz Verlag, Salzburg 1986, p. 58–66.

² The structure and statutes of the newly established school were also published in contemporary newspapers and therefore accessible for a wider audience – see for example “Wiener Zeitung”, no. 230, September 27th 1867, Vienna, p. 1–2.

Until the opening of the Kunstgewerbeschule the only opportunity for a woman to receive an artistic education was the attendance of a private art school. By this time, female artistic production usually wasn't acknowledged as independent art but always postmarked and subsumed as “dilettantism”.³

The reasons for toleration and advancement of an artistic education of women in the field of arts and crafts in the 1860s are therefore rather economically motivated. When Eitelberger encouraged the admission of female students to the Kunstgewerbeschule he didn't think of promoting women's artistic intentions as equal to men's. All he did was recognizing the idle potential of talent and cheap workforce for art industry and therefore he recommended their use and exploitation. It wasn't his intention to educate and cultivate female artists with own creative ambitions. This becomes obvious when he suggests the formation and employment of artistically skilled women in the fields of ornamental and flower painting, embroidery or weaving – in summary all kinds of artworks connoted with traditional idea of dilettantism.⁴

However, Eitelberger definitely did realize and analyse the problems concerning suitable educational options for girls and women much earlier than his contemporaries. Through graduation at the Kunstgewerbeschule women received a pro-

³ A. Loos, *Die Frau und das Haus*, “Neue Freie Presse”, Nr. 12284, November 3rd 1898, Vienna, p. 5; G. Fliedl, O. Oberhuber, op. cit., p. 105–106; E. Michitsch, *Frauen – Kunst – Kunsthandwerk. Künstlerinnen der Wiener Werkstätte*, unpublished thesis, University of Vienna, Vienna 1993, p. 20–26; for a detailed focus on history and function of female dilettantism see S. Plakolm-Försthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich, 1897–1938. Malerei, Plastik, Architektur*, Picus Verlag, Wien 1994, p. 23–38.

For the general situation and practice of artistic education for women in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century see B. Doser, *Das Frauenkunststudium in Österreich*, unpublished thesis, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck 1988.

⁴ R. Eitelberger von Edelberg, *Österreichische Kunst-Institute...*, p. 164; S. Plakolm-Försthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich...*, p. 39–42.

fessional education and therefore were given the chance to gain economic and personal independence, even if this might have caused rejection or disapproval in some social circles. Most of the female students had a bourgeois background and up until the late 19th century it was often considered to be shameful for (upper-) middle class families if their daughters worked for their living.⁵

In the first year seven female students were registered (from 50 altogether), in 1869/1870 there were 20 women among 120 students.⁶ They enrolled in the preparation course and the class for ornamental painting but were successfully kept clear of the higher arts classes like figurative painting or sculpture. The official explanation for the exclusion of women from these courses was the following: since a sound knowledge about the human body which would necessarily include a life drawing course couldn't be attended by female students on grounds of decency, they are naturally not well enough prepared for a higher arts education.⁷ When in 1872 a group of female students asked for the constitution of a special class just for women, their request was rejected immediately.⁸

Under the directorship of Josef von Storck in the 1880s further restrictions were imposed. Since the perpetuation of the admission of female students to the Kunstgewerbeschule was confronted with the accusation of encouragement of dilettantism, the registration for women was extremely hindered and they were advised to go to private institutions which by this time already existed to a sufficient extent. Exceptions should only be made for very talented and pre-skilled applicants.⁹

It should last until 1899 that women were granted free access to the school. When the school's directorship was

assigned to Felician von Myrbach in 1899, things changed drastically. Myrbach enforced a fundamental reform of the curriculum. He was the first who reasonably acknowledged the autonomy and originality of female artists and artisans. Myrbach also put into effect some essential personnel changes including the nomination of female teachers.¹⁰ His liberal way of thinking might have been related to his close contacts to the English arts and crafts scene where the presence of female artisans was common practice much earlier.

A personality who directly benefitted from Myrbach's radical innovations was Adele von Stark, who turns out to be one of the most important female protagonists at the Wiener Kunstgewerbeschule during the first two decades of the 20th century.

Born in the Bohemian town of Teplitz/Teplice in 1859 as the daughter of a higher state official Adele von Stark moved to Vienna at a time not yet determined.¹¹ Before she was accepted at the preparation class of the Wiener Kunstgewerbeschule in 1878, she attended a private drawing school for girls and women. After her year of preparation she was trained at the school's class for drawing and painting and the ceramics workshop. In 1887 she also frequented the workshop for ceramic decoration and enamelling. Her leading teacher was Professor Hans Macht, a traditionalist mostly relying on the old-fashioned teaching method of copying. Until 1890 she remained a student at the Kunstgewerbeschule. When Felician von Myrbach was appointed professor in 1897, she returned to the school and attended his classes for painting and illustrations for a year. This personal experience with Adele von Stark must have created the basis that facilitated her later career.

In the years between her recordings at the Kunstgewerbeschule – from 1890 to 1897 and from 1898 to her appointment in 1903 – Stark was working as an autonomous artist and artisan producing enamel works and creating miniature painting.¹² Besides she was giving private lessons in drawing and painting. She also went for various study trips to Germany

⁵ E. Michitsch, op. cit., p. 84–85; R. Berger, *Malerinnen auf dem Weg ins 20. Jahrhundert. Kunstgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte*, DuMont, Köln 1982, p. 192, 210.

⁶ G. Fliedl, O. Oberhuber, op. cit., p. 104–105; S. Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich...*, p. 42.

⁷ R. von Eitelberger, *Zur Regelung des Kunstunterrichts für das weibliche Geschlecht*, "Mitteilungen des k.k. Österreichischen Museums für Kunst und Industrie, Monatsschrift für Kunst und Gewerbe" 1872, 7/78, p. 60–62, esp. p. 62; G. Fliedl, O. Oberhuber, op. cit., p. 108; S. Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich...*, p. 42–43.

⁸ B. Doser, op. cit., p. 121; E. Michitsch, F op. cit., p. 56; S. Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich...*, p. 42–43.

⁹ G. Fliedl, O. Oberhuber, op. cit., p. 108–109; S. Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich...*, p. 43–44. Amongst others, it must have been primarily Armand Freiherr von Dumreicher, ministerial official at the Ministry of Education who opted heavily for the elimination of female students: A. von Dumreicher, *Vertrauliche Denkschrift über die Lage am k.k. österr. Museum für Kunst und Industrie*, Reichenberg 1885, p. 15–16.

¹⁰ G. Koller, *Die Kunstgewerbeschule des k.k. österreichischen Museums für Kunst und Industrie Wien 1899–1905*, unpublished thesis, University of Vienna, Vienna 1983, p. 10–29; B. Doser, op. cit., p. 157; S. Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich...*, p. 44.

¹¹ For a short biography of Adele von Stark see: S. Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Adele von Stark*, [in:] *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950*, 13/59, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna 2007, p. 105–106.

¹² Archive of the University of Applied Arts Vienna, personnel file Adele von Stark (hereinafter: AVA, Adele von Stark), reference number 3133/5345.

and Scandinavia and visited the cities of London, Paris, Geneva and Venice.

In 1903 Director Myrbach restructured the class of ceramics and enamels: the workshop's name was changed from "Special atelier for ceramic decoration and enamel painting" to "Special atelier for enamel works", Hans Macht was forced to retire and Adele von Stark became the workshop's technical teacher.¹³

Also in the case of Stark's promotion the problem of ambiguity becomes apparent. On the one hand, there's the extraordinary fact of a woman being given the opportunity not only to study and practice but also to teach within the sector of arts and crafts. On the other hand, we cannot skip the fact that the privilege of teaching was restricted to the executing part, excluding the creative process of designing which was still monopolized in the hands of men.

In 1908 Adele von Stark's temporary status was changed to a permanent one and in 1918 she was even nominated as a professor. She continued teaching until her death in 1923.¹⁴ Stark seems to have been a very engaged and full-hearted teacher as can be assumed from the recordings in the annual records of the Kunstgewerbeschule. She organized field trips for her students to various institutions in Vienna and its surroundings and also held lectures about the art of enamelling.¹⁵

In 1908 Stark managed to ensure that only students at an advanced stage of their artistic formation were admitted to her workshop. They mainly derived from the painting classes of Koloman Moser and Felician von Myrbach or from Josef Hoffmann's class for architecture. The designs created there were executed in the workshop. The "School of Adele von Stark" successfully presented enamel objects at diverse exhibitions in Vienna and abroad, for example at the 1914 Werkbund exhibition in Köln. Among her students were renowned artists like Maria Likarz, Rudolf Kalvach, Leopoldine König or Franz von Zülow.¹⁶

Stark's professional ambitions and her desire for teaching must have started much earlier than 1903. This cannot only be deduced from her private teaching activities following her formation at the Kunstgewerbeschule but also from an official

request to the governmental department in 1896 to found her own drawing school for women. The request was turned down but at the same time aroused a debate about the inadequate artistic educational opportunities for women.¹⁷

Adele von Stark's significance for the female emancipation movement within the Viennese artisan landscape actually exceeded her capacities in the sector of art training. It can be considered as her personal merit that the art of enamelling regained remarkable importance as an artistic technique. She was able to unite traditional techniques with modern motives and was also very curious on experimenting with new combinations of materials. The driving force behind these developments was once more Felician von Myrbach who heavily criticized the backwardness of enamel works created under Stark's predecessor Hans Macht and who enhanced Stark's creativity.¹⁸

The enormous stylistic development within Stark's career becomes obvious by comparing earlier and later works: during her time as a student of Hans Macht in the 1880s her work was already of high technical quality but very traditional in matters of style. Both form and decoration of the lidded vase in fig. 1 are inspired by oriental wares of the 17th century.¹⁹

After the turn of the century the drastic change of style becomes apparent. The copper-gilt framework of the small jewellery box in fig. 2 is filled with five enamel panels carried out in the technique of cloisonné enamelling. The cream white background is structured by white straps and black squares. As a technique's characteristic each of the enamel segments is enclosed by tiny metal ribs which have been brazed to the metal ground.

The wooden sewing box in fig. 3 was designed and executed by Stark around 1910. The lid of the hexagonal casket is adorned with translucent enamel, consisting of a greyish-lilac foundation with a spidernetlike décor overlaid by irregular pink spots and transparent glass stones in box mounts. On each of the three large sides two square pieces of translucent enamel are placed. On one of the lid's corners a rose quartz is applied to open the casket.

¹³ G. Koller, op. cit., p. 18; V. Vogelsberger, *Emailkunst aus Wien 1900–1989*, Edition Tusch, Wien 1990, p. 8–10.

¹⁴ AVA, Adele von Stark.

¹⁵ AVA, K.k. Kunstgewerbeschule des k.k. Österreichischen Museums für Kunst und Industrie, Bericht über das Schuljahr 1913/1914, p. 12; 1917/1918, p. 14–15.

¹⁶ V. Vogelsberger, op. cit., p. 9–12.

¹⁷ S. Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Adele von Stark...*, p. 105.

¹⁸ V. Vogelsberger, op. cit., p. 7–12; Stark's capacities are also outlined by contemporary art critics: A. S. Levetus, *Modern Decorative Art in Austria*, [in:] *The Art Revival in Austria*, ed. by Ch. Holme, Offices of The Studio, London–Paris–New York 1906, p. D X.

¹⁹ For an overview of the history of enameling from its beginnings up to the 20th century see for example F. Falk, *Email. Schmuck und Gerät in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Galerie am Graben, Vienna 1980.



Fig. 1. Adele von Stark, vase, ca. 1886, painter's enamel on copper, 10 × 9.5 cm, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art, Vienna, Austria; photo: © MAK / Tamara Pichler

Stark's works demonstrate a great wealth of motives. Apart from her use of abstract forms she also shows obvious enthusiasm for figurative decoration inspired by nature. The lid of the copper box in fig. 4 is decorated with two enamelled fire salamanders on a greyish foundation, circulating around a perforated, square opening. The design impresses with its naturalism and the brilliance of its colours. Tiny balls of copper are attached to the box's corners, concealing with subtlety the opening mechanism.

Since she was a highly talented female artist it's not surprising that Adele von Stark was closely linked to the Wiener

Werkstätte. Certainly as a result of her technical skills she was involved in the execution of Gustav Klimt's famous mosaic frieze for the dining room of the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, designed by Josef Hoffmann. Together with her former student Leopoldine König, Stark created the enamelled parts in the years of 1910 and 1911.²⁰

The case of Adele von Stark is a paradigmatic example for the situation of women within the Vienna School of Arts

²⁰ A. Weidinger, "Das Haus Stoclet ist wirklich sehr schön", [in:] *Gustav Klimt*, ed. by A. Weidinger, Prestel, München–Berlin–London–New York 2007, p. 118–137, cat. No. 192.



Fig. 2. Adele von Stark, jewellery box, ca. 1910, copper-gilt framework with enamel panels, 7 × 8 × 8 cm, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art, Vienna, Austria; photo: © MAK / Katrin Wißkirchen



Fig. 4. Adele von Stark, box, ca. 1911, copper and enamel, 8.5 × 11.5 × 11.5 cm, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art, Vienna, Austria; photo: © MAK / Katrin Wißkirchen



Fig. 3. Adele von Stark, sewing box, ca. 1910, wood with enamel panels, glass stones, rose quartz, 17.4 × 15 × 9.7 cm, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art, Vienna, Austria; photo: © MAK / Katrin Wißkirchen

and Crafts during the last decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The progressive spirit of the 1860s and 1870s which allowed free admission of women to the school rapidly transformed into the opposite by the time their ambitions became too serious and their claims too demanding. It should take until the turn of the century before women's ef-

forts and contribution to the school's activities were accepted and even welcomed.

Considering the topic of women artistically active on a professional level, two central problems become obvious. The first point is the demand for employment or even self-employment to gain personal and financial independence which is often condemned or at least criticized. The second point, which seems to be yet more difficult to overcome, is the female artists' desire for acceptance of their performances. Always confronted with the accusation of dilettantism it turns out to be almost impossible to be respected as an independent artist by male colleagues or by society in general.

Adele von Stark is certainly an enlightening example for an independent and successful businesswoman and artist in times when this was a difficult journey. Even if we don't have knowledge about her personal nature it can be assumed that she must have been very focused on her aims not to get off the track. We might also deduce this from the fact that throughout her life she remained unmarried and childless. Together with her distinctive artistic talent she managed to become a respected or at least accepted member within a male dominated world. The best evidence for her skills both in the sectors of arts and pedagogics are her numerous successful and renowned students.