

BUILDING A NEW BAUHAUS BODY*

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Introduction

All political acts ultimately affect our personal life. The political act of "creating" a type of new human being traces this political proposition to our roots. Accepted and understood canons of the German Wilhelmian era were completely torn apart by the devastation of World War I and by the unfathomable horror of World War II.

This paper explores one such canon, a canon of the human body developed by Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943), a "Master" at the Bauhaus from 1921 to 1929. Oskar Schlemmer's canon was a drawn and printed form that seemingly represented a new type of man: a "Bauhaus Body." This paper suggests that Schlemmer's new body type, which created a canon of human proportion, has surprising historical roots that bring the theoretical premise of the notions of type and canon into question. Oskar Schlemmer's canon of human proportion was formalized for his course titled *Der Mensch*, which he began to teach at the Dessau Bauhaus in 1928. In spirit it coincides with the Bauhaus's search for ideal types in form, this one being a 25-year old bald male body that he titled *Vordruck* or Form. Schlemmer did not use his students or anyone else from the Bauhaus, or any of other the already established Canons of human proportion to create his Bauhaus Canon. Rather, I discovered, he used the image of a late 19th century figure of a woman titled *Tafel 1* as the model for his *Vordruck. Tafel 1* was drawn and published by a young German doctor, Adalbert Goeringer (1860-1893) who was fascinated by the Golden Section and intent on publicizing his invention, the Golden Circle.¹ The Golden Circle was an instrument used for finding and drawing golden sections.

Schlemmer's *Vordruck*

During study of Schlemmer's *Vordruck*, I found three images that seemed to belong together. Much like a triptych, each was connected to the other through a shared series of marks. I surmise that from these three drawings came Schlemmer's *Vordruck. Tafel 1* is one of the three images. The other two are sketches taken from *Tafel 1*. Each of these two sketches became a moment in the transformation of female to male. In one, Schlemmer traced over Goeringer's drawing, transforming the woman into a seemingly sexless sketch of a body moving in place. This drawing abstracted what he called "a few important points" into major and minor landmarks that is shared by

the next sketch: a standing figure of a 25-year old male. This then became the *Vordruck*. Along the way, a "female" body position is also transformed from one having a graceful, tentative, subtle closed and uncomfortable openness into a "male" body position — one that is a straight-backed upright and erect. The *Vordruck* was then used by Schlemmer himself who made it into various costumes and skeletons, anatomical systems and animals even after he left the Bauhaus.

The *Vordruck* plays upon the subject of "ideal" German human form and proportions. What constitutes a "human being" became a basic component in Schlemmer's course on the human being as well as his designs. Schlemmer's course was a mixture of many of these earlier thinkers. For example, he drew from Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), a Prussian zoologist whose significant work in Cytology, and whose Naturphilosophie supplanted mysticism/religion as the salvation of humankind.² He also read Karl Gustav Carus (1789-1869), a professor of comparative anatomy and obstetrics/gynecology. Carus had developed theories of the unconscious and the soul within the context of phrenology and physiognomy; there were others.³ The subject wasn't too unusual for the time. What was unusual was that it was being taught as a required course to a variety of students at the Bauhaus. The focus on ideal types has particular importance and poignancy given the National Socialist Ideology that gave rise to the Second World War and the Holocaust.⁴

There are a number of questions that are opened by the realization that the *Vordruck* may have come from a female figure. Perhaps Schlemmer played a quiet and secret joke by using a 19th-century woman, her stance and her proportions to generate a man. The joke was played on all his students, his colleagues, everyone who glances at Schlemmer's images of the Bauhaus Man, as well as himself. Who is actually behind this image? Was the image male, female or neither? Perhaps Schlemmer's use of the figure was a act of expediency, something that was close at hand, something that he knew and had know about since his student days in Stuttgart. Or was his use of the female figure a philosophical statement on the purity of the golden section and the origin of the ideal within a universal rule shared by all people. Whatever the reasons, if there were reasons, Schlemmer's creation of the *Vordruck* was a play on the very dangerous subject of the ideal, the type, and canon.

What was the German type? How could it be established? Did it have a unique nature that was associated with fixed, static, unchanging character that the notion of Canon is associated with? This sort of canon may have been what Muthesius was searching for: simple forms that have been reduced, clarified, and abstracted as types.⁵ It was this search that celebrated a cerebral detachment that “promoted a logic, or universal characteristic ...,” a “drive toward systematization” and a search for the “prototype below the manifold of appearances” that Muthesius desired, Van de Velde questioned and Schlemmer unintentionally disrupted.⁶ Schlemmer’s invisible act might be a personal act to disrupt the establishment of Canons, the creation of types. While Schlemmer’s Bauhaus Canon seems fixed and unchanging and appears to be a reduction into the simplest, clearest form possible, it is also a very clear statement that at the root of his Canon a certain woman lies within the man. The Canon is neither “fixed” sex nor a clear gender. It slides between man and woman, an androgynous figure that is simultaneously both. On the surface it abandons its original female sex for male yet, I propose, it is both. Not a *masculine* Vitruvian Man, like Leonardo’s or Cesariano’s, nor the *feminine* Vitruvian Man of Francisco de Giorgio’s. Perhaps, uncertain about to which camp it belongs, it becomes a “paper doll” that constantly changes its identity, to become this androgynous inhabitant in Schlemmer’s new architecture of the Bauhaus.⁷

NOTES

* The following is an expanded abstract of a paper titled “An Absent Woman of the Bauhaus Canon of Proportion: Oskar Schlemmer’s *Vordruck*.” The complete paper from which the abstract was taken is published in *Intersight I*, The Journal of the School of Architecture and Planning, State University of

New York at Buffalo, (1997), pp. 49-55.

- ¹ Adalbert Goeringer published her image as the first *Tafel* (table or plate) in a short booklet that he wrote on the golden section and his invention, the Golden Circle: *Der goldene Schnitt (göttliche Proportion) und seine Beziehung zum menschlichen Körper und anderen Dingen mit zugrundlegung des Goldenen Zirkels* second edition 1911 (The first edition was published the year of Goeringer’s death in 1893.)
- ² Haeckel developed the theory of Anthropogeny which he believed proved universal application and fundamental importance of biogenetic law which could be used to explain all racial development.
- ³ *Psyche and Symbolik der menschlichen Gestalt*, Ricarda Huch, *Vom Wesen des Menschen, Natur und Geist*; Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Ludwig Klages, *Mensch und Erde*; Maximilian Perty *Die mystischen Erscheinungen der menschlichen Natur*; Schlemmer’s notes cover everything from cellular development, the skeleton, joints, inner organs, the upright posture, chemistry, glands, etc.
- ⁴ Edith Wyschogrod *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger and Man-Made Mass Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) explores the logic of the phenomena of man-made mass death as an outgrowth of contemporary thought and practice that can be traced to these times.
- ⁵ Type or Typus was associated with classifying a building by its use and as the “uniformity that underlies a corpus of works” .Stanford Anderson “Deutscher Werkbund - the 1914 debate: Hermann Muthesius versus Henry Van de Velde,” in *Companion to Contemporary Architectural Thought* ed. Ben Farmer and Hentie Louw. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 464.
- ⁶ Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 131.
- ⁷ It was used as a kind of paper doll by Schlemmer himself who made it into various costumes and skeletons, anatomical systems and animals even after he left the Bauhaus.