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Taeuber-Arp, Sophie, *Plans profilés en courbes*, 1935, Öl auf Leinwand, 55,5 x 46 cm (Objektmass), Kunst Museum Winterthur. Beim Stadthaus, 933, seit 1961

Documentation level



Name

Taeuber-Arp, Sophie

Other version/s of name

Taeuber, Sophie Henriette Gertrud
Taeuber-Arp, Sophie Henriette Gertrud

Dates of birth and death

* 19.1.1889 Davos, † 13.1.1943 Zürich

Municipality of origin (CH)

Gais (AR)

Nationality

CH, D, F

Brief biography

Malerin, Plastikerin, Textilgestalterin und Lehrerin an der Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich. Schweizer Pionierin der konstruktiven und abstrakten Kunst. Verheiratet mit Jean Arp

Fields of activity

Marionetten, Malerei, Plastik, Zeichnung, Grafik, Textilkunst, Innenausstattung

Lexicon article

Sophie Taeuber is born in Davos, the fifth child of Carl Emil Taeuber of West Prussia and Sophie Krüsi of Heiden. Her father, until 1887 a pharmacist in Davos, dies of pulmonary disease in 1891. Three years later his widow takes the children with her to Trogen in her native Canton Appenzell, where from 1900 she runs the boarding house that she has had built after her own plans. Sophie Taeuber grows up in an

emancipated and culturally open-minded milieu. Artistically gifted and at home with textile design, she enrolls in the Stauffacher-Schule, a new private school of drawing and design in St. Gallen, in 1904. From 1907 to 1910 she is a guest student at the School of Technical Draftsmanship, also in St. Gallen, which following her mother's death in 1908 becomes her permanent residence. In 1911 she moves to Munich and there attends the highly regarded Lehr- und Versuchsstätte Wilhelm von Debschitz. After a period as a student of the Hamburg School of Arts and Crafts from the summer of 1912 to the autumn of 1913, she returns to the Lehr- und Versuchsstätte in Munich and graduates in 1914. Taeuber settles in Zurich and lives from the craft commissions she receives. In November 1915 she meets [Jean Arp](#) and through him is admitted to avant-garde literary and artistic circles. From 1916 to 1920 she is an active participant in the Zurich Dada scene, including as a talented dancer (a pupil of the Laban School of Dance). From 1916 to 1929 she teaches textile design at Zurich School of Arts and Crafts, where her lessons set new standards. She joins the Schweizerischer Werkbund in 1915 and will remain a member until 1932. In 1918 she stages a successful production of the puppet show *König Hirsch* (The Stag King) and takes part in the *Schweizerische Werkbundaussstellung* in Zurich. The following year she falls sick with pneumonia and spends several weeks convalescing in Arosa. In 1922 Taeuber marries Jean Arp, with whom she will work and travel extensively right up to 1942. In 1925 she is both juror and exhibiting artist in the Swiss section of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Arts Industriels* in Paris. In 1926 she moves to Strasbourg with Arp and his family to enable them to take French citizenship. While there, she becomes friends with the architects Paul Horn and his brother André. They have already completed two successful modernization projects, and in 1926 commission Taeuber to convert the Palais Kleber into a modern entertainment center (with bar, movie theater, dance hall, tearoom, billiard parlor, and restaurant) to be called Aubette ([Plan Aubette No 127](#), 1928). Taeuber and Arp enlist the architect Theo van Doesburg to assist them with this ambitious undertaking. In 1929 Taeuber designs and furnishes the house that she and Arp will move into in Clamart-Meudon near Paris. She gives up her teaching position and home in Zurich to live permanently in Clamart, where she will remain until 1940. There she concentrates on her art, interior design contracts, and work on numerous exhibitions and publications, while staying in close touch with the Paris art scene. She is a member of the artist group Abstraction-Création in Paris from 1931 to 1934 and joins the Swiss artist group Allianz in 1937. That same year she becomes a co-founder and editor of the journal *Plastique/Plastic*, Paris/New York (five issues of which will be published before it is discontinued in 1939). In 1940, shortly before the occupation of Paris, she and Arp flee to

Nérac and from there to Veyrier. They also contemplate emigrating to the USA together with other “degenerate artists.” After a sojourn in Grasse in 1941–1942, Taeuber escapes to Zurich in late 1942 and there applies for an extension of her Swiss residence permit. In 1943, aged fifty-four, Sophie Taeuber-Arp dies of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning caused by the incorrect operation of a stove at the home of [Binia](#) and [Max Bill](#).

The training that Taeuber receives in Munich and Hamburg is wide-ranging and both practical and artistic in thrust. She has a broad knowledge of modern art, and has immersed herself in the study of both ancient and non-European cultures and in the depth psychology of C.G. Jung. This background in philosophy and cultural history will be a constant wellspring of inspiration for her work. In her early years in Zurich, she works on both textile design (weaving and embroidery commissions) and on free designs of her own making. The weaving technique itself leads her to create geometrically composed, rhythmic arrangements of shapes, often in different shades of red and blue, combined with black (*Vertikal-horizontale Komposition*, 1916). Horizontal-vertical designs alternate with others that emphasize the diagonals, some with curved lines. Parallel to this, she creates compositions with graphically stylized motifs (pennants, eyes, masks, boats, figurines) inscribed like ornaments into colored shapes (*Abstraktes Motiv: Masken*, 1917). Taeuber’s independently developed, Constructivist visual language fascinates and inspires Arp. They begin collaborating closely between 1917 and 1919, producing festive duo collages redolent of East Asian mandalas as well as African-inspired, two-part duo sculptures made of wood. In 1918 Taeuber creates a stage set and marionettes for the puppet show *König Hirsch* (The Stag King). Her use of the expressive content of three-dimensional forms (spheres, cones, cylinders) to characterize the various roles leads to a completely novel interpretation of the work.

This is the context in which, in 1918, she creates her Dada heads: parodic portrait heads made of old hat stands or wood that she herself has turned and painted (*Tête dada. Portrait de Jean Arp*, 1918). Around 1920 her visual language changes as the rhythmic rows of colored shapes (*Rhythmes libres*, 1919, gouache) give way to undulating checkerboard structures composed of rectangles and rhombuses (*Taches quadrangulaires en couleurs*, gouache). Taeuber’s trips to Italy in 1921 and 1925 open up still more themes: architecture (*Sienne*, 1921) and the figure (*Eléments de tension en composition verticale-horizontale*, 1923), which will form the basis of the interior design projects undertaken in Strasbourg between 1926 and 1928. Taeuber, who has hitherto worked only in gouache and small formats (with the exception of her large *Triptych*, 1918, oil and gold mounted on cardboard, Kunsthau Zurich), finds herself once again faced with the task of modeling space. Taeuber, Arp, and van Doesburg’s remodeling of the Aubette in Strasbourg produces an exemplary total work of art. Taeuber alone designs the Salon de thé, the Aubette Bar, and the floor tiles in the corridor, and almost certainly collaborates with Arp on the Foyer Bar and the glass painting in the stairwell, all of which bear her distinctively Constructivist imprint; she is also responsible for the general remodeling. To this day, the Aubette (which opened in 1928 and was largely destroyed in 1938) is considered a pioneering and unparalleled modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The lessons learned from the experience

inform Taeuber’s design of her own home in Clamart-Meudon, which she and Arp move into in 1929.

Being relieved of her teaching duties and living in a new place close to Paris’s artist circles have an inspiring effect on her; the years 1930 to 1939 see the production of a number of major works including paintings, reliefs, gouaches, drawings, and prints. Taeuber develops various overlapping and cross-referential themes; her work unfolds on several levels at once and oscillates between a Constructivist and biomorphic idiom. Her most important lines of inquiry concern the expressive content of forms (circle, rectangle, triangle) and the question of balance (*Statische Kompositionen*, *Dynamische Kompositionen*). Clear constellations of similarly sized, but irregularly arranged colored circles (*Cercles mouvementés*, 1934, Kunstmuseum Basel) alternate with circle-rectangle combinations. In the *Espaces multiples* series, circle, rectangle, triangle, rod, and cross combine to form dynamic ponderations that are further enhanced by the contrasting colors used (*Six espaces avec croix*, 1932, Fondazione Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach, Locarno). 1936–1938 Taeuber takes up the relief, which she develops out of her static compositions. Circular, semicircular, and rectangular shapes are arranged asymmetrically and at varying depths on a rectangular ground that is painted either black or white and often has shapes cut out of it at irregular intervals along the edge (*Relief rectangulaire, cercles découpés, rondelles sur tiges*, 1936, Kunst Museum Winterthur. Beim Stadthaus). Around 1938 Taeuber produces circular reliefs whose organically curved subsections in white or in color (*Coquilles et fleurs*, 1938, Gottfried Keller-Stiftung, Bern) follow the same biomorphic formulation as that of her works on paper of the same period. Constant changes of abode during the war years 1940–1943 result in the production of works on paper to the exclusion of all other media; painting materials are in short supply. Hundreds of drawings show her varying the theme of the line between organic and Constructivist order and dissolution. This *Mélange de dessin libre et de construction* reads like a symbol of the old order unraveling on account of the war.

Sophie Taeuber developed a unique way of translating the social utopia of modernism and the essential union of the fine and the applied arts into works of her own: She was at once painter, sculptor, textile designer, interior designer, teacher, dancer, print-maker, and editor. Yet it was precisely because of this cross-disciplinary approach—and the role of artist’s wife thrust upon her by circumstances—that recognition of her work was so long in coming. Taeuber, whose modesty was legendary, was overshadowed by her husband Jean Arp her whole life long. Her personal achievements were acknowledged only from a historical distance. In today’s Switzerland she is regarded as a pioneer of Constructivist and abstract art and is credited with having broken new ground in textile design and interiors. Her skills as artist and designer were coupled with an undogmatic curiosity and love of experimentation, expressed as much in her many different fields of work as in her practice of alternating between a Constructivist and organic mode of expression. The quintessence of her entire œuvre is her visual language with its unique blend of the rational and the poetic. What interested Taeuber were the form and expressive content of geometric and organic figures, the communicative potency of color, rules and deviations from rules, and questions of balance and imbalance.

Institutional collections (selection): Aargauer Kunsthaus Aarau; Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum; Kunstmuseum Bern; Clamart, Fondation Arp; Locarno, Fondazione Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach; Paris, Musée nationale d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou; Remagen-Rolandswerth, Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e. V.; Remagen, Arp Museum Rolandseck; Kunstmuseum Solothurn; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen; Strasbourg, Musée d'Art Moderne; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Kunsthaus Zurich; Zurich, Museum für Gestaltung.

Elisabeth Grossmann, 1998, updated 2014
Translation: Bronwen Saunders

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Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4023423&lng=en>

Last modification

27.11.2020

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