

“The Form of Plants Is Crystalline”

Notes on the Plant Cult of the 1920s

“Green Modernism,” the concept of the modernity of plants, gained currency in the 1920s in artists’ studios as well as in feuilletons, magazines, books, and the illustrated press. Art historians, writers, and natural philosophers rediscovered a parallel world of plant life, which was full of mystery to humans. At the turn of the century, Ernst Haeckel, Martin Gerlach,¹ and Karl Blossfeldt had referred specifically to the ornamental value of plants, elevating nature to the status of “artist”² in their watercolors, drawings, and photographs. However, by the mid-1920s, a broad audience was discovering plants as foreign, idiosyncratic things—decisively due to the illustrated press, the mass medium of the era. In 1925–26, art dealer Karl Nierendorf encountered photographs by Karl Blossfeldt, professor of “plant modeling” and plant studies in Berlin, most likely within the context of a group exhibition at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst (United State Schools for Fine and Applied Art) in Berlin. He subsequently exhibited them in April 1926 at his gallery on Lützowstrasse in Berlin, along with sculptures from Africa and Southeast Asia, lithographs by the graphic artist Richard Janthur, and living cacti. This show marked the beginning of the triumphant success of Blossfeldt’s cool, precise, yet stylized photographs of plants.

Green Architecture



Karl Blossfeldt, *Salvia officinalis*, Sage, 15 × Enlarged, 1915/1920

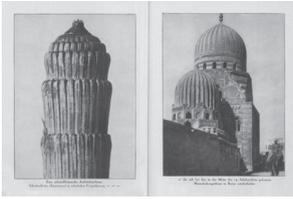


Exhibition view Galerie Nierendorf (*Exoten, Kakteen und Janthur*, with photographs by Karl Blossfeldt), Berlin, 1925/26

Karl Blossfeldt’s photographs were in tune with the times: his analytic gaze, his practice of isolating plants from their natural habitat in the clinical atmosphere of the studio, his focus on their ornamental form, and the abstraction of their natural colors in the gray tones of the photographs’ silver grain made the sections of plants selected by Blossfeldt appear as though frozen into metallic objects of the modern world. Unable to escape the images’ appeal, art critic Georg Poensgen commented drily, “All of this is no more than a concession to the current taste of intellectuals. However, it is done in such a pretty and appealing way that you can only take pleasure in them.”³

Even before a selection of Blossfeldt’s photographs was published for the first time, in the 1928 book *Urformen der Kunst* (later published in English as *Art Forms in Nature*), edited by Nierendorf, the illustrated mass media of the era had spread a new way of looking at plants: in newspapers, magazines, and feuilletons. Writer Karl Otten, for example, enthused about Blossfeldt’s photographs in his article “Das Genie der Pflanze” (The genius of plants) for the journal *Das illustrierte Blatt*.⁴ Art historian Robert Breuer presented Blossfeldt’s plant photographs under the heading “Grüne Architektur” (Green architecture) in *Uhu*, the illustrated monthly magazine published by Ullstein-Verlag in a print run of about two hundred thousand copies.⁵ “Blossfeldt’s name became known almost overnight—you might say that he became famous,” is how Otten summarized the astonishing success and spread of the new plant aesthetics in February 1929. Otten continued: “These are the buds, tips, sprouts, tendrils, and all

the other parts that exist in the thousands of variations of plant life. This is what our professor began to observe one day, the first inhabitants of our planet, looking at them more carefully and enlarging them so that he could see them better. Finally, he began photographing them, simply putting them on a plate and capturing them on paper. But then came his ingenious trick, a stroke of inspiration! He enlarged the picture to inconceivable dimensions.”⁶



Robert Breuer, “Grüne Architektur,” with photographs by Karl Blossfeldt, in *Uhu* 9, 1926

Blossfeldt was not the only one who looked at plants in this way, nor was he the first to discover the technoid aesthetics and functions of plants. The German-Austrian botanist and natural philosopher Raoul H. Francé had already published a book in 1919 called *Die technischen Leistungen der Pflanze* (The technical capacities of plants), with an entire chapter dedicated to the “Engineering tasks of plants.” With Annie Harrar, his assistant and later wife, whose photographs he had published under the pseudonym Dr. A. Friedrich, Francé illustrated his arguments by juxtaposing photographs of plants with technical equipment from the Deutsches Museum in Munich and architectural forms.

More than six years before pairing Blossfeldt’s photographs with architectural views,⁷ Francé and Harrar had made visible the analogies between *Kieselalgenarchitektur* (diatomic architecture) and Gothic flying buttresses or modern weight-bearing structures. However, the stiffness of some of Harrar’s plant photographs, which often resembled forensic photography, meant they lacked the suggestive power of the stylized and wholly aesthetic visual language of Blossfeldt’s work.

Only when the intellectual preparatory work of natural philosophers and natural scientists, such as Ernst Haeckel, Raoul Francé, and Jagadish Chandra Bose, encountered the cool aesthetics of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) in the 1920s did “Green Modernism” develop as a “new view of plants” that was diametrically opposed to the cozy “flower cult” at the turn of the century.

Cactus Windows



Cactus window in Rosa Schapire’s home 1922. Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Oldenburg, Nachlass Gerhard Wietek

In 1897, Alfred Lichtwark, director of the Kunsthalle in Hamburg and doyen of the German art education movement, imagined that the future of the “flower cult” would be much cozier. While predicting that “the next generation will force architects to build wide windows,” he anticipated that the flower boxes of the future would be filled with a “multitude of flower bulbs, violets, primroses, and auriculas.”⁸

Instead, cactus windows, which utilize the space enclosed by an interior and an exterior casement window for growing small collections of cacti, became all the rage in the 1920s. They were adopted by the art historian and collector Rosa Schapire in Hamburg, the photographer Aenne Biermann in Gera, Bernhard Hoetger in Worpswede, and Walter Gropius for his Master’s House at the Bauhaus in Dessau, to name a few. By the end of the 1920s, cacti, spurge, and rubber trees had replaced the potted flowers that had been so popular at the turn of the century. Exotic thorny plants and *Crassulaceae* became the trappings of modern interiors, taking an almost stereotypical place as props in the still lifes of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and becoming popular subjects of avant-garde photography. While Blossfeldt had focused on buds, flowers, and vines in his search for



Walter Müller-Wulckow,
Cactus window in Bernhard
Hoetger's home, Worpswede, 1929.
Landesmuseum für Kunst
und Kulturgeschichte Oldenburg



A greenhouse of the cacti dealer
Haage, Erfurt, 1933



Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Flowering
Cactus* (*Cactaceae Echinocactus
capricornis minor*), early 1920s.
Museum Ludwig, Cologne,
ML/Dep. 7576

useful forms for teaching ornamentation in applied arts education, the popularity of cacti, euphorbias, agaves, and tolerant rubber trees linked a longing for the exotic with the aesthetics of modernism, which favored a lack of ornamentation and flowers.

The World of Plants

This euphoria for cacti was accompanied by a conspicuous amount of literature, which was increasingly illustrated with photographs, including cactus guides and picture books. The *Monatshefte für Kakteenkunde* (Monthly journal of cactus studies), which had been published by the German Cactus Society since 1891, enjoyed a growing readership in the 1920s, and at the Palais Rosenhöhe in Darmstadt, the writer and philosopher Ernst Fuhrmann began exploring the life forms of plants with support from the former Grand Duke of Hesse and by Rhine, Ernst Ludwig. After founding the Auriga-Verlag publishing house in 1923, Fuhrmann began producing a biology series in 1924, with individual volumes devoted to agaves and spiny plants. His photographer, Albert Renger-Patzsch, was encouraged to focus on the wide-ranging forms of succulents, which he mainly photographed in the botanical gardens in Darmstadt and Dresden and later at the nursery of Friedrich Adolph Haage Jr. in Erfurt. Even before Renger-Patzsch became the harbinger of Neue Sachlichkeit photography, he had already published photographs of plants and dedicated several of his first essays to the photography of plants, blossoms, and cacti.⁹ In one of these essays, he reflected on the new interest in exotic plants:

Following the war, after being practically hermetically sealed off from the outside, Germany has passionately turned to caring for foreign flowers. Today, it is rare to enter an apartment that does not feature a few of the spiny creatures from the cactus family. . . . It has always been especially attractive to photograph these plants. The cactus and its related family have such a richness in the forms of their bodies and spines—this is what the leaves of this species are called, which for biological reasons have relinquished the function of assimilation to the succulents' chlorophyll-containing plant bodies—in a way that is so clearly perceptible and can be found in few other plant species. The bodies form spheres, cylinders, prisms, crystalline forms—practically geometric sculptures—but with the fine distinction of growing organically.¹⁰

Renger-Patzsch's cactus photographs reflect the allure of the organic geometry of exotic plants, which import a cosmopolitan spirit and modernity into contemporary homes. His photographs of cacti and agaves were published within a very short period of time in numerous journals for professional and amateur photographers as well as in illustrated magazines and art journals, such as *Der Querschnitt*, the journal of the German Werkbund *Die Form*, the *Hamburger Illustrierte*, *Das Kunstblatt*, and *Schünemanns Monatshefte*.¹¹ Bauhaus professor László Moholy-Nagy included two of Renger-Patzsch's cactus photographs in his groundbreaking book *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (Painting, photography, film), published in 1925, with which he marked the birth of the New Vision, and in 1928 they were part of Renger-Patzsch's own photo book *Die Welt ist schön* (The world is

beautiful). In his foreword to the book, Carl Georg Heise, art historian and director of St. Anne's Museum in Lübeck, commented on the visual power of these photographs: "Like zigzagged lightning, the *Euphorbia grandicornis* cuts through the dark surface of the images. . . . That is the ultimate: the plant is interpreted in terms of its typical features and then, without exerting even the smallest amount of force on its natural appearance, it is evaluated in terms of its enthralling linear ornamentation."¹²

Cactus photographs established an aesthetic commitment to modernism in the photography of Neue Sachlichkeit. They are found in the work of Aenne Biermann, Florence Henri, Fred Koch, Fritz Kühn, Aenne Mosbacher, Paul Wolff, and many others. German botanist Curt Backeberg's illustrated expedition report *Kakteenjagd: Zwischen Texas und Patagonien* (Hunting for cacti: Between Texas and Patagonia), another collaboration with the Haage nursery in Erfurt, was published in 1930. It included photographs by Backeberg and the Czech botanist and "cactus hunter" Alberto Vojtěch Frič, with a cover designed by the photographer and graphic designer Errell (i.e. Richard Levy).¹³

When Fuhrmann published his biology series, which was initially issued without illustrations, he predicted that "every real reader" of his books would also require good "photographic images of plants."¹⁴ To this end, he founded the photo book series *Die Welt der Pflanze* (The world of plants) that same year, publishing between 1924 and 1931 volumes on orchids, crassulaceae, cacti, and euphorbias that included photographs from his publishing house. Fuhrmann commented on the necessity of this series: "Photography was used relatively late for representing plants, after it had been considered self-evident for decades to reproduce colorful paintings with photography." He continued, "It is without doubt scent and color that represent the pleasant things about a plant; however, the characteristic, interesting, and biologically important aspect is the structure, and in photography this is separated from color and scent just as much as the formal beauty, allowing the viewer to concentrate on the essence of the plant."¹⁵



Aenne Biermann, *Cactus*, c. 1929. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, FH 08022



Curt Backeberg, *Kakteenjagd. Zwischen Texas und Patagonien*, Berlin: Brehm, 1930

“Vegetal Crystals, Living Architecture”

In addition to photography, the cactus became the emblem of cool modernism in Neue Sachlichkeit painting. There are very few still lifes by Magic Realist artists—from Alexander Kanoldt, Georg Scholz, Georg Schrimpf, Walter Schulz-Matan, and Eberhard Viegner to Franz Lenk, Anton Räderscheidt, and Rudolf Wacker—that do not include an exotic plant. The cactus was perfectly suited to Neue Sachlichkeit's search for a "new, mysterious sobriety" and its striving for a "cutting performance" and a "clipped, nearly austere rigor of visual structure," as historian Franz Roh defined the characteristics of Post-Expressionism.¹⁶

With the feistiness and still aggressivity of its spines, the cactus embodies domesticated wildness. Due to their ready availability through successful breeding methods and a blossoming trade, the cactus formed a piece of cosmopolitan exoticism in the home studio.

Critic Adolf Wortmann had already rhapsodized about the plant in 1925:

Are cacti . . . not vegetal crystals, living architecture? Sphere and cylinder, scale and



Anton Räderscheidt, *Cactus Still Life*, 1925. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, ML 76/2377

number? . . . Is our newly awakened enamoredness of abstract geometrical plants not comparable with our efforts to design spaces from the archetypes of limitedness, the sphere and the cube? We are tired of this rambling and capriciousness. We want laws. Because the point of being human is the drive to design, the drive for a cosmos whose symbol is the crystal. The form of plants is crystalline.¹⁷

In the late 1920s, art critic Walter Riezler summed up the peculiar rapture of his era: It probably has its own particular reasons, and it is not only a superficial “fashion” that cacti, of all things, are treasured and cared for more than any other plant today: it is their “atonal” growth, their ungraspable form, that is near and dear to us. They make us see nature in a new way, in a way that is different from earlier eras—but it is more lively in us than ever.¹⁸

After 1933, the cacti motif gradually disappeared from still life painting and contemporary photography. The Neo-Biedermeier style, which dominated the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellungen (Great German Art Exhibitions) held from 1937 to 1944, seamlessly incorporated still lifes of flowers. Photographer Paul Wolff predicted the end of an era: “Neue Sachlichkeit, the concept of the era that seemed to give us photographers a new age of photography, is no more.”¹⁹ Along with Neue Sachlichkeit, cacti also disappeared from the visual worlds of the 1930s. “Green Modernism” remained a symptom of the interwar period.

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- 1 See *Formenwelt aus dem Naturreiche: Photographische Naturaufnahmen von Martin Gerlach* (Vienna and Leipzig: Verlag von Gerlach & Wiedling, undated [1902–04]).
 - 2 See Ernst Haeckel, *Die Natur als Künstlerin, nebst: Dr. W. Breitenbach, Formenschatz der Schöpfung* (Berlin: Vita, 1913). The print run of the volume totaled forty-five thousand copies by 1929.
 - 3 Georg Poensgen, “Berliner Kunstausstellungen,” *Der Kunstwart: Rundschau über alle Gebiete des Schönen, Monatshefte für Kunst, Literatur und Leben* 39, no. 2 (1926): 131–32.
 - 4 Karl Otten, “Das Genie der Pflanze,” *Das illustrierte Blatt: Die Junge Zeitschrift für Haus und Familie, behagliche Freude, für Freizeit, Jugend und unterhaltsames Wissen* 14, no. 22 (1926): 478–79.
 - 5 Robert Breuer, “Grüne Architektur,” in: *Uhu* 9 (1926): 36–37.
 - 6 Karl Otten, “Die Pflanze baut,” *Schünemanns Monatshefte* 2 (February 1929): 178.
 - 7 See Robert Breuer, “Grüne Architektur,” *Uhu: Das neue Monats-Magazin* 2, no. 9 (June 1926): 28–38; Werner Lindner, *Bauten der Technik: Ihre Form und Wirkung* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1927), ills. 384–89.
 - 8 Alfred Lichtwark, *Blumenkultus: Wilde Blumen* (1897), quoted in Lichtwark, *Eine Auswahl seiner Schriften* 2, ed. Wolf Mannhardt (Berlin: Cassirer, 1917), 88–89.
 - 9 See Albert Renger-Patzsch, “Pflanzenaufnahmen,” *Deutscher Camera-Almanach* 14 (1923): 49–53; “Photographieren von Blüten,” *Deutscher Camera-Almanach* 15 (1924): 104–12; and “Kakteen-Aufnahmen,” *Photographie für Alle* 6 (1926): 83–86.
 - 10 Renger-Patzsch, “Kakteen-Aufnahmen,” 84.
 - 11 See the overview “Pflanzenphotographien von Albert Renger-Patzsch in Veröffentlichungen bis zu seinem Tod im Jahre 1966,” in Rainer Stamm, *Die Welt der Pflanze: Photographien von Albert Renger-Patzsch und aus dem Auriga-Verlag* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1998), 133–36.
 - 12 Carl Georg Heise, “Einleitung,” in Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist schön: Einhundert photographische Aufnahmen* (Munich: Kurt Wolff, 1928), 8.
 - 13 See Thomas Wiegand, “Fauna und Flora im Fotobuch: Der Brehm Verlag, Berlin,” in *Autopsie: Deutschsprachige Fotobücher 1918 bis 1945*, vol. 1, ed. Manfred Heiting and Roland Jaeger (Göttingen: Steidl, 2012), 350–51.
 - 14 From the Auriga-Verlag advertisement in Ernst Fuhrmann, *Agave* (Darmstadt: Auriga, 1924), after p. 134.
 - 15 Ernst Fuhrmann, in Walther Haage, *Die Welt der Pflanze, Band III: Kakteen* (Friedrichslegen/Lahn: Folkwang-Auriga, 1930), unpaginated.
 - 16 Franz Roh, “Nachexpressionistische Kunst: Ein Vorwort,” in *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, exh. cat., Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf (Berlin, 1927), unpaginated.

- 17 Adolf Wortmann quoted in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, cited after *Das Kunstblatt* 9, no. 1 (1925): 30.
- 18 Walter Riezler, "Das Kunstgewerbe heute und morgen," *Die Form: Zeitschrift für gestaltende Arbeit* 5, no. 10 (May 15, 1930): 254–55.
- 19 Paul Wolff, "Neue Sachlichkeit und Materialstudium," *Gebrauchsfotografie* 42, no. 4 (April 1935): 72.