

“Frauen in der Geschichte der Gartenkultur”

A Portrait of an Interdisciplinary Network

Roswitha Kirsch-Stracke

(translation by Miriam Knödler)

Since 1999 about 50 female and some male specialists from both field practice and research gather annually to uncover the achievements of women in horticulture. Interdisciplinary interactions, especially between the 'green' design professions of landscape and environmental planning as well as between aesthetics and cultural studies, are practised and enhanced; further experts from literature and history, architecture, sociology, pedagogy, biology, horticulture, agriculture and forestry also affiliate with the network. This portrait gives insight into the network's vivid and versatile structure.

Dating back to the late 1990s, the network “Frauen in der Geschichte der Gartenkultur” [Women in the history of horticulture] emanated from a study group with the same name founded by Dr. Gerlinde Volland, art historian at the University of Bielefeld, Roswitha Kirsch-Stracke and Petra Widmer, both research assistants at the former Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Development at the University of Hannover. Within the last 18 years, the network grew into an informally associated, open circle of about 360 persons, mainly from the German-speaking regions of Europe, but also from other countries like Japan or the United States. In lectures, reports and during field trips knowledge on female personalities is shared and introduced, their horticultural works are explained, and garden topics are discussed from a gender-specific perspective.

Since 2003 the study group arranges an annual symposium on the third weekend of September, which constitutes the network's central forum. The conference is tailored by (oral) presentations on an annual subject. For example, last year's symposium at Schloss Dennenlohe dealt with the subject of “Margravines and Countesses in Franconia – Strong Women Create” whereas in 2016, within a meeting in Zürich, shown in the picture below, “Female Experts and their Contributions to a High-quality Design of Public Open Spaces” were discussed.

Most symposium presentations hitherto have dealt with individual biographies. Examples of women who have been illustrated so far are elector Sophie von Hannover (1630–1714), reformers of agriculture, artists like Hanna Höch (1889–1978), authoresses of various genres, gardeners like iris breeder Helen Gräfin Zeppelin from Sulzburg, researchers in the field of horticulture like Martha Künzel in terms of her biodynamic plant breeding experiments at the concentration camp of Dachau, as well as numerous architects, and landscape and garden designers.

Biographies concentrating on (married) couples, highlight the individual's performances within joint works and broach the issue of differing approaches to design etc. Thus, inter alia, it became possible to contrast the famous actor Hermann (1785–1871) with the covert protagonist Lucie von Pückler-Muskau (1776–1854), who has played a key role in the layout and administration of the parks in Bad Muskau and Branitz (Roscher, 2009).



■ A group picture from the network's symposium “Female Experts and their Contributions to a High-quality Design of Public Open Spaces”, in Zürich, 2016. (Network “Frauen in der Geschichte der Gartenkultur”, September 2016)

Group related analyses have for example, focused on the princesses and their gardens in the margraviate Ansbach, delved into oriental gardens as they were mirrored by women's travelogues, shed light on female Jewish garden architects in the first half of the 19th century in Austria, and pinpointed pioneers in organic farming, silviculture and nature conservation. Talks given on current affairs discussed women's involvement in cities' communities' and international gardens and have shown how female experts have gained influence in open spaces' administration.

Other topics have included stereotypes and emancipation in garden architecture, early schools of horticulture for women, women's traces in ancient cultivated landscapes, the employment of women in public garden and cemetery boards as well as new job profiles and qualifications in the green sector being of interest for today's women within horticulture.

Organizers and speakers in the network strongly emphasize the assumption, or claim, that women do play a role in horticulture and also try to prove and source it as accurately as possible. Thereby, rather deviant forms of (historical) female commitment require experimental investigations and new trans- and interdisciplinary strategies. As a result questions regarding methodology are regularly discussed during the network's meetings.

Many contributions can be read in the network's own conference proceedings, which are published in print, in professional journals such as *Die Gartenkunst*, *Stadt und Grün* and *Zoll+*, or as short versions online (see www.gartenlinksammlung.de/netzwerk_frauen.htm).

Women in the history of horticulture – are there so many? Today this question, often posed and addressed to the network's organizers about 15 years ago, is not asked any longer. Still there are many women to be discovered and made visible, many aspects still hidden, yet to be disclosed. This motivates numerous future symposia and well reflects the statement the philosophers Edith Stein and Socrates are accredited with: “The more you know, the more you realize how little you know.”

Reference

Roscher, Astrid (2009). Lucie von Pückler-Muskau – heimliche Hauptakteurin im Schatten des grünen Fürsten? *Die Gartenkunst*. Vol. 21/Nr. 2, pp. 187–198.

Dr. Roswitha Kirsch-Stracke, Lecturer, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Sciences, Institute of Environmental Planning
kirsch@umwelt.uni-hannover.de

Miriam Knödler, Student of Horticulture, Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Dresden, Faculty of Agriculture/Environment/Chemistry
miriamKnuedler@gmx.net