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Karl Blossfeldt – work in progress

A project of Die Photographische Sammlung/  
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### Introduction

The name Karl Blossfeldt has a veritable signal effect today, instantly associated with powerful black-and-white photographs of finely rendered plant forms. Volumes have been written about the artist and the innumerable exhibitions paying tribute to his work enjoy a timeless topicality. No book on the history of photography, on the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement, and hardly any with a focus on "nature and art" fails to mention the achievements of the artist who taught from 1898 to 1930 at the institutional predecessors of Universität der Künste Berlin. The Internet is equally attentive. Reliable information about Blossfeldt's work is found on the website of the Karl Blossfeldt Archive curated by Ann and Jürgen Wilde. Visitors there, for example, can even leaf through virtual copies of the two books published during Karl Blossfeldt's lifetime, *Urformen der Kunst* [Art Forms in nature] and *Wundergarten der Natur* [Art Forms in nature].<sup>1</sup>

### Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932), teacher and avantgarde artist

Karl Blossfeldt is primarily known for his striking photographic studies of plants, all made by the same virtually unvarying method highlighting the form and material structure of plant specimens against a neutral background. In the enlarged black-and-white images of Blossfeldt's scientific photographs, specimens that measure just a few centimeters or millimeters across cease to be unassuming details of nature; they are revealed as veritable marvels of aesthetic construction – images which, in series, invite the observer to compare the different figures in a captivating visual scan. Detailed, accurate reproduction of the subjects combines with fine graphic tonality to create fascinating images. Two factors contribute significantly to the quality of rendition: firstly the fact that Blossfeldt's original gelatin silver prints were made from large glass negative plates, so the difference in size between a one-to-one reproduction and an enlargement is not dramatic; secondly, because Blossfeldt evidently had a great deal of experience of developing work and the use of optics, chemicals and papers. From the literature, we know that Blossfeldt was a self-taught photographer with simple equipment.<sup>2</sup>

Today, Blossfeldt's photographs are treasured museum pieces, originals of world art – especially the straight photography of the 1920s. The reason Blossfeldt originally made them, however, was more practical and prosaic: they were intended as reference aids for students in his "Modeling from Plants" class<sup>3</sup>. The photographic enlargements were supposed to introduce future sculptors, craftspeople and draftspeople to a grammar of plant forms that Blossfeldt saw as a kind of basic pattern for every art and architectural form handed down since Antiquity. The earliest actual record showing that Blossfeldt intended to use the fruits of his long association with photography for teaching purposes was a letter written in 1906. However, Blossfeldt had found the technical medium useful even during his days as a student and as a participant in a project run by Moritz Meurer in Rome; he saw it as a didactically and artistically effective method of presenting and preserving the image of a stage of plant life.<sup>4</sup> It thus furnished a good basis for the lengthier processes of sketching or sculpting by students.

The main distinguishing feature of the photographic method was that it permitted the enlargement of images for observation. However, as Blossfeldt's mentor Moritz Meurer mentioned in 1895<sup>5</sup>, photography still played a minor role among the numerous techniques used in the study of plants. Nevertheless, as Blossfeldt astutely recognized, it was a logical innovation for his profession – one which simultaneously built on techniques that harnessed light to project – or used drafting instruments to enlarge – botanical forms for better visualization and clearer typological profiling. What is more, although other tools were more important, microphotography came into early use<sup>6</sup>. Since Meurer explicitly identifies a number of professional methods for preserving sensitive botanical material – e.g. drying and pressing, immersion in alcohol, treatment with various chemicals, the use of galvanoplastic

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rajka Knipper and Tanja Löhr-Michels: Karl Blossfeldt Bibliography, Cologne, 2009, at [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rajka Knipper: „Die Sammlung Karl Blossfeldt in der Universität der Künste Berlin – Lehrmittel für den kunstgewerblichen Unterricht“, Cologne, 2009, at [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Claudia Schubert: „Karl Blossfeldt – Student Days and Teaching Career. Sources and Documents from the Berlin University of the Arts Archive“, Cologne, 2009, p. ..., at [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*,

<sup>5</sup> Moritz Meurer: *Pflanzenformen. Vorbildliche Beispiele zur Einführung in das ornamentale Studium der Pflanze*, Dresden: Verlag von Gerhard Kühtmann, 1895, S. 53–56.

<sup>6</sup> Vgl. Rajka Knipper, in: [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info).

coatings, embedding in wax and plaster or metal casting – it is safe to assume that the young modeller Blossfeldt knew about all these techniques and also used a number of them<sup>7</sup>. Adopting the views of Moritz Meurer, he was later to underline – just as his teacher before him – the need for hothouses as an important tool for preserving plant material for educational purposes.

While Moritz Meurer had criticized the growing use of pointless, inappropriate and hackneyed elements of decoration and design and striven to enhance the study of nature by reforming art teaching, Blossfeldt supported the same visionary idea and made it a principle of his work as a teacher for 30 years. He, too, saw teaching as a major platform for deepening knowledge of historical art and architectural forms inspired by nature. However, in focusing on and systematically harnessing the possibilities of photography, he adopted a new, more sophisticated and wholly individual method.

Thanks in particular to the gallerist Karl Nierendorf, who exhibited Blossfeldt's work in 1926 and prompted the publication of *Urformen der Kunst* two years later, Blossfeldt's photography attracted the attention of the avantgarde. In 1932, Blossfeldt's second book was published under the title *Wundergarten der Natur*. Since then, although with a significant caesura during the Second World War and the post-war era up to the 1960s, his fame has spread in an unstoppable tide through the art world and beyond.

In the 1970s, in particular, gallerists and collectors Ann and Jürgen Wilde, who acquired the major part of Blossfeldt's photographic estate, as well as the curator Klaus Honnef significantly helped position Blossfeldt's work in the spotlight of the new debate about art and photography. The idea was not just to get the artist acknowledged as an important historical figure in the context of his contemporaries but also to win recognition for his role as an inspiration for contemporary artists, a pioneer of methodological precepts that were reflected in the concept-oriented, documentary art emerging at the time and thus established an important line of tradition that extends through to the present day. Major events included the Blossfeldt exhibition at the Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn in 1976 and the inclusion of his works in the 1977 documenta art show at Kassel.

## Cooperation with Berlin University of the Arts

In 1999, Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, found a major cooperation partner in Berlin University of the Arts, known at that time as Hochschule der Künste Berlin. Together, the two institutions set themselves the goal of documenting and digitizing the Karl Blossfeldt collection in the Berlin university's possession and making it available for research and exhibition purposes. Within the framework of that cooperation and with advice from conservators and restorers, parts of the collection of photographs have been professionally mounted in passepartouts, properly boxed and inventorized in precise detail at Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur on the basis of scientific criteria<sup>8</sup>. The documents preserved in the university archive have also been inspected and digitized, making it possible to compile content-based selections in chronological order. This casts light, in particular, on Karl Blossfeldt's time as a student and teacher at the *Unterrichtsanstalt des königlichen Kunstgewerbe-Museums* (Institute of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum) and the *Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst* (United State Schools for Fine and Applied Arts) in Berlin. On a more general level, however, it also enables conclusions to be drawn about the conditions that prevailed in art and craft education from the turn of the 20th century to the 1930s<sup>9</sup>.

While the comprehensive inventorization of the Berlin Blossfeldt collection was largely concluded in 2008, cooperation between the two institutions and research on Blossfeldt's oeuvre will hopefully continue. Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur retains 70 original prints on permanent loan, with a revolving exchange option for the coming years. For the interested public, this means that works by Karl Blossfeldt will stay on view at the Cologne institution's premises and Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur will remain a key contact for exhibition and publication

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Catalogue raisonné of the Karl Blossfeldt collection at Universität der Künste Berlin, Cologne, 2009, at [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. catalogue raisonné of the Karl Blossfeldt collection at Universität der Künste Berlin as well as Rajka Knipper, at [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Claudia Schubert, at [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info).

activities. The Cologne institution has the possibility of presenting Blossfeldt photographs directly alongside original, methodologically related works by August Sander and Bernd and Hilla Becher, which form part of the core collection of Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur. This is an exciting option in the eyes of anyone interested in art and photography. Also available at the Cologne location are impressive works on the broad subject of botany by other photographers, such as Lawrence Beck, Natascha Borowsky, Paul Dobe, August Kotsch, Simone Nieweg and Albert Renger-Patzsch as well as photographs from the Folkwang Auriga publishing house.

## Exhibition activities 1999 – 2008

Since shortly before the present cooperation began, the Berlin Blossfeldt collection – astonishingly ignored by the art world throughout the post-war years and not put on public display until 1984, when part of it was exhibited at the Taube Gallery in Berlin – has been a focus of many exhibitions and publications. In 1999, a representative selection of photographs from it was featured in a touring exhibition organized by the Academy of the Arts in Berlin. Showcased at the Academy's own premises, the Fotomuseum Winterthur and the Kunsthalle Krems, it was accompanied by a book entitled *Karl Blossfeldt. Licht an der Grenze des Sichtbaren* [Light at the Borders of the Visible]. The Academy also staged a symposium to mark the occasion of the exhibition. It was documented in 2001 in the book *Konstruktionen von Natur. Von Blossfeldt zur Virtualität* [Designs by Nature. From Blossfeldt to Virtuality], which, as well as containing a collection of very interesting articles, has the special distinction of including a number of previously unpublished autographs.

Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur itself has also staged a number of exhibitions featuring Karl Blossfeldt photographs from its cooperation partner's collection, including a show entitled *Karl Blossfeldt and Natascha Borowsky* at the Cologne institution's premises in 2001. Blossfeldt's photographs have also been juxtaposed with work by other artists in many group exhibitions, for example in special shows at the Art Cologne fair in 2003 and 2007 and in *Landschaft und Naturstudien, Photographien von August Sander, Karl Blossfeldt und Albert Renger-Patzsch* in 2004 at the Galerie d'Art Contemporain, Am Tunnel & Espace Edward Steichen, Banque et Caisse d'Épargne de l'État de Luxembourg.

From March to June 2009, Karl Blossfeldt's photographs figured prominently in an exhibition at Die Photographischen Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur. Entitled *Plant Studies by Karl Blossfeldt and Related Works*, it was put together on the basis of the Berlin collection and traced a long arc from the 19th century to the present day.

Alongside original photographs by Karl Blossfeldt as well as herbaria, sculptures and documents in display cabinets, the show presented a number of examples of the graphic work of his mentor Moritz Meurer. Also on show were plates by Ernst Haeckel which inspired Blossfeldt as well as contemporary or earlier works on botanical subjects, including works by Anna Atkins, Adolphe Braun, Martin Gerlach, Charles Jones, August Kotsch and August Sander as well as from the Folkwang-Auriga publishing house and Wilhelm Weimar. The movements of the post-war years were represented by photographs by Dr. Herbert Franke, Ruth Hallensleben and Peter Keetman. With the work of Herman de Vries and Helmut Schweizer from the 1970s and 1990s, sequences were added which modify and revive the elementary, classificatory treatment of nature as a source of knowledge and the notion of the herbarium. Where the presentation extends beyond the medium of photography, the sculptural aspect was again underlined in the bronzes and terracotta works of Leiko Ikemura from the 1990s and the sculptures of Gerhard Winker. In the work of Lawrence Beck, Natascha Borowsky, Claudia Fährenkemper and Simone Nieweg, photographs from the 1990s through to today attested to a modern form of analytical art that is closely related to Blossfeldt's work. In these cases, the artistic challenge lies less in creative treatment of the material than in sensitive perception of the subject. Using different tools, they focus on individual shapes and their significance in their associative and separative context.

Last but not least, this exhibition centred on the work of Karl Blossfeldt prompted the publication of an edition of art prints agreed between Universität der Künste Berlin and Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur and produced by LUP AG Lithographie & Print Produktionen, Cologne.

## The Karl Blossfeldt collection of the Berlin University of the Arts Archive on the Internet – a catalogue raisonné

A complete overview of the historical substance of the Berlin collection is now – as of March 2009 – available on the Internet. This is the largest body of Blossfeldt's work to be published in full in a single medium. Posted on the website are 631 original photographs, 39 herbaria and 57 works of sculpture, also known as Meurer bronzes because of the context of their genesis (plus three fragments). An extensive selection of documentary material on Karl Blossfeldt from the university archive is made available for the first time and explanatory texts are presented on the material published, which is now accessible in full in a database. As a special attraction for Blossfeldt researchers, each photograph is not only presented with references to primary and secondary literature and, via the catalogues, to exhibitions featuring Blossfeldt's work but also to the Blossfeldt negatives and transparencies at the Deutsche Fotothek in Dresden and the Karl Blossfeldt Archive/Ann and Jürgen Wilde. The idea is – in the hope that further relevant original material will be published from other collections – to create a basis for a growing body of integrative Blossfeldt research at international level. The Internet was chosen as the medium for this because of the scope it offers for easy long-term incorporation of new findings and insights. *Karl Blossfeldt – work in progress* is a forum maintained by Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur in consultation with the Berlin University of the Arts Archive. Suggestions, comments and publication requests are welcomed and should be addressed to [photographie@sk-kultur.de](mailto:photographie@sk-kultur.de).

## Thanks

On behalf of Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, I should emphatically like to thank Berlin University of the Arts for the successful implementation of the collaborative venture, the support for the ensuing project and the very good and reliable cooperation that has marked its realization. In this spirit, I should specifically like to thank former President Professor Lothar Romain, who died in 2005, former Chancellor Jürgen Schleicher as well as present President Professor Martin Rennert and present Chancellor Wolfgang Abramowski. In particular, we are deeply grateful to Dr. Dietmar Schenk, head of the university archive, who has supported the work on the Berlin Karl Blossfeldt collection since 1999, who – like his ever-friendly supporting colleagues Karen Krukowski and Antje Kalcher – has listened carefully to our questions, who has generously shared his expertise with us at all times and who has supported the realization of this Internet platform in every way. In the knowledge that Dr. Schenk shares our gratitude, I should also like to say a very big thank you – on both his and our behalf – to the many colleagues and friends who have been involved. The fact that the Berlin Blossfeldt collection is now curatorially and scientifically secured and the present Internet platform has been established is due to their committed and tireless efforts. The content of the online publication was largely developed with meticulous care and admirable perseverance by my colleagues Rajka Knipper and Claudia Schubert at Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur. A basis for their work was furnished in turn, however, by crucial preparatory and flanking research – performed, for example, by the former director of Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Dr. Susanne Lange, and by my temporary colleagues Dr. Susanne Braun and Angela Schiffhauer, who explored the subject thoroughly and produced successful and important research results. We are delighted that Nancy Tanneberger – art historian and former student assistant at the university archive and now a researcher at the German Bundestag – has agreed to her essay „Von Waldenburg nach Rom. Der Maler und Kunstschulreformer Moritz Meurer (1839–1916)“<sup>10</sup> being published among the collection of essays on Karl Blossfeldt's work on the Photographische Sammlung website. Her remarkable essay not only presents the latest research findings on the work of Blossfeldt's teachers but also –

since Meurer's reforms were closely connected with an institutional predecessor of the university, *the Unterrichtsanstalt des Königlichen Kunstgewerbemuseums* – spotlights the history of the Berlin University of the Arts.

Thanks are also due to others in the Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur team – starting with our former librarian Martina Schulz and her successor Tanja Löhr-Michels, for their ever-persevering, at times arduous literature research and all the legwork associated with it. Ralf Baader and his successor Enrik Hüpeden deserve thanks for their sensitive work with the Blossfeldt originals, which they professionally mounted in passepartouts and boxed for conservation. A tribute also needs to be paid for the very valuable organizational and administrative support provided by my colleagues Patricia Edgar and Uschi Hollington, and especially to the staff of our parent organization SK Stiftung Kultur, among them executive director Professor Hans-Georg Bögner, Tanja Brunner, head of communications and marketing, and Dr. Ralf Convents, who is responsible for press and public relations.

My gratitude also goes out to the freelancers and independent agents who have been involved in this venture. Katrin Hüpeden performed the restoration work needed to secure the material and offered her expertise in frequent and always helpful inputs. Susanne Fern made professional quality reproductions of the relevant Blossfeldt originals and photographs of herbaria and sculptures, Lothar Kornblum photographed many of the original books, Claudia Stein rendered a particularly valuable service in scanning the pictorial material for Internet publication. Frank Dömer, contributing a great deal of expertise at the very start of the cooperation between Berlin and Cologne, professionally developed and repeatedly upgraded the database structure utilized internally for the Karl Blossfeldt collection. Sabine Lenthe of TRANSCRIPT, Büro für Umschreibarbeiten, Bremen, transcribed the often barely legible documents. We thank Dr. Karl-Heinz Linne von Berg, botanist at the University of Cologne, for identifying and verifying the botanical names of the subjects of Blossfeldt's photographs – a task that was particularly complicated by the fact that the plants presented were not to scale, had in some cases been trimmed by Blossfeldt and were not represented in their natural colour. This called for years of perseverance and professional skill. Daniela Kumor, Cologne, deserves thanks for her ever sensitive and meticulous editing.

Axel Ernst and Ulrike Korek of Korek Ernst GmbH, Hamburg, and Nils Henner Frasch worked with very generous commitment to provide fast and efficient programming for the complex task of ensuring that the fruits of the cooperation between Berlin University of the Arts and Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, are accessible online for a wide audience.

Finally, a special word of thanks is due to Dr. Jens Bove and his predecessor Wolfgang Hesse, who allowed us to access the collections of the Deutsche Fotothek, Dresden, and especially to Ann und Jürgen Wilde, who provided considerable support for the cooperation relating to Blossfeldt's work by checking the originals in the Berlin collection against negatives and transparencies in the Karl Blossfeldt Archive which they curate. Their pictorial material was scanned by Heinrich Miess and kindly made available for our database. Ann and Jürgen Wilde as well as the Deutsche Fotothek have permitted the partial amalgamation of the historical Blossfeldt collections in a single publication, which is a sensationally important step for research on the complete oeuvre of this major artist and photographer.

For the sake of Karl Blossfeldt, Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur and Berlin University of the Arts would be delighted to maintain the present joint exchange with all the parties concerned.

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Cover: Karl Blossfeldt: *Fern*. Young rolled-up leaves, n.d., property of the Berlin University of the Arts

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Rudloff: „Von Waldenburg nach Rom. Der Maler und Kunstschulreformer Moritz Meurer (1839-1916)“, in: *Zwischen Residenz und Töpferscheibe, 750 Jahre Waldenburg*, publ. Stadt Waldenburg, Meerane: Schwarz Druck, Werbung und Verlag GmbH, 2004, pp. 117-129. Cf. same essay Nancy Rudloff, now Tanneberger, *ibid.* at [www.blossfeldt.info](http://www.blossfeldt.info)