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## From Waldenburg to Rome

The painter and art school reformer  
Moritz Meurer (1839–1916)

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*Nature and Art, they go their separate ways, it seems; yet all at once they find each other.  
Even I no longer am a foe to either; both equally attract me nowadays.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Natur und Kunst*, 1800, translated by David Luke.

### Introduction

At its autumn auction in November 2001, the Berlin Villa Grisebach became the first auction house to offer vintage prints of Karl Blossfeldt's plant photographs.<sup>1</sup> That auction was an unprecedented success: the photograph of *Cotula turbinata* (funnel weed) fetched DM 112,000, the highest price ever bid for a single photograph at a German photo auction.

Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932), Moritz Meurer's best-known student, won a place in the history of German photography as one of the leading exponents of *Neue Sachlichkeit* [New Objectivity]. The aesthetic allure of his photographs derives from the photographic technique used to make them: Blossfeldt photographed plants and plant details at up to 40x magnification, creating images of flowers, buds, leaves and stems that present new perspectives to the observer. As Walter Benjamin wrote in 1928: "Whether we accelerate a plant's growth with a time-lapse camera or present its form for viewing at 40x magnification – the result in both cases is a geyser of new imagery gushing forth at points of existence where we least expected it."<sup>2</sup>



Karl Blossfeldt:  
*Impatiens glandulifera*,  
Himalayan balsam, Karl Blossfeldt collection of the  
Berlin University of the Arts,  
fonds 320, Blossfeldt photographs

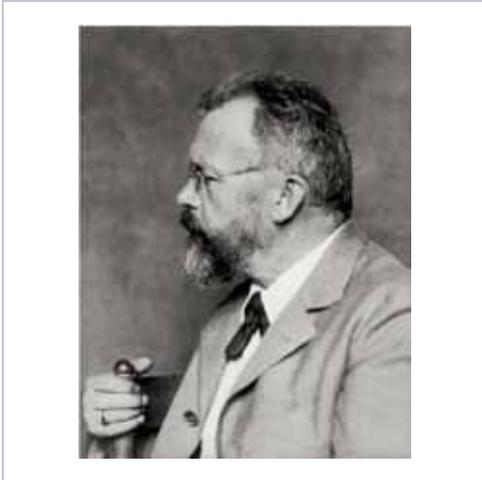
Karl Blossfeldt's plant photographs aroused a great deal of interest worldwide during the course of the 20th century. The work of his mentor Moritz Meurer, on the other hand, which was a source of both guidance and inspiration for Blossfeldt and pursued the same goal, sank almost into oblivion. Even today, Moritz Meurer's work and influence remain underappreciated.

Born in Waldenburg, Saxony, Moritz Meurer lived and taught for many years as a decorative painter in Berlin before becoming a protagonist of an arts and crafts reform movement calling for a whole new approach to the study of nature in the applied arts. Meurer broadcast his reformist ideas from Italy, which he made his home in 1884. No friend of what he saw as the overly schematic and theoretical curricula in place at the time, Meurer believed in "learning from nature itself" – using nature's beauty, diversity and underlying laws to teach and inspire arts and crafts school students.

<sup>1</sup> A *vintage print* is the first print that the photographer makes immediately after developing a negative.

<sup>2</sup> *Walter Benjamin*: „Neues von Blumen“, in *Literarische Welt*, 25 November 1928.

Meurer developed a new teaching method for this purpose and created suitable teaching materials. From 1892 onwards, he was assisted by the art caster and modeller Karl Blossfeldt, whom Meurer engaged to make botanical models and photographs – mostly enlargements – of botanical forms. In 1899, Blossfeldt became a lecturer at the Institute of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum in Berlin and ran courses based on Meurer's by then established teaching method.



Portrait photograph of Moritz Meurer, around 1900, Ann and Jürgen Wilde Archive

The remarkable story of the interest aroused by Blossfeldt's photographs began in 1926, when they were discovered, exhibited, published and reproduced as works of art. In the course of time, however, their original educational purpose was forgotten. So, too, was the fact that Karl Blossfeldt's artistic development had been crucially shaped by Moritz Meurer.

But the art world is not alone in overlooking Moritz Meurer. His home town, Waldenburg, also appears to have forgotten him. That is certainly the impression gained by anyone who calls at Kirchplatz 236, the house where he was born. The building is in a lamentable state. The only sign of its history is a plaque affixed to the facade in 1939 at the instigation of the Berlin Academy of Arts. It reads: "This is the house where the painter and art writer Moritz Meurer was born on 9 April 1839."

Yet Waldenburg has custody of a special treasure: Meurer's artistic and archival estate, comprising around 600 drawings, 800 photographs, 70 work portfolios and a number of oil paintings. Realized in Rome, where the artist lived from 1884 onwards, the works include botanical drawings, landscapes, interior colour scheme studies and portraits of Italian subjects. Their diversity attests to the broad span of Meurer's artistic work. Also of major importance is Meurer's extensive collection of photographs of ancient and Renaissance buildings, many of which no longer exist.

The works bequeathed to the Waldenburg Local History Museum were painstakingly restored and inventorized in the mid-1990s. So nothing would stand in the way of a project to research Moritz Meurer's varied oeuvre today.

## Meurer's family background

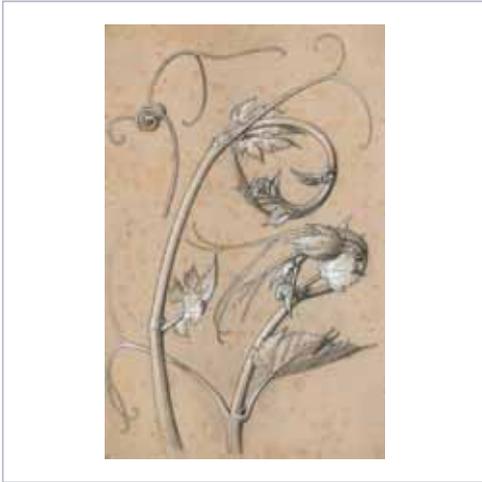
Gottlob Moritz Meurer was born in Waldenburg, Saxony, on 9 April 1839, the fourth child of archdeacon Moritz Meurer (1806–1877) and his wife Friederike Charlotte Meurer, née Petzold (1808–1848).<sup>3</sup>

Meurer's mother died in 1848 when he was just nine years old. His father, after studying theology in Leipzig, received his first appointment as deacon in Waldenburg before being assigned his own parish in the nearby village of Callenberg in 1841.

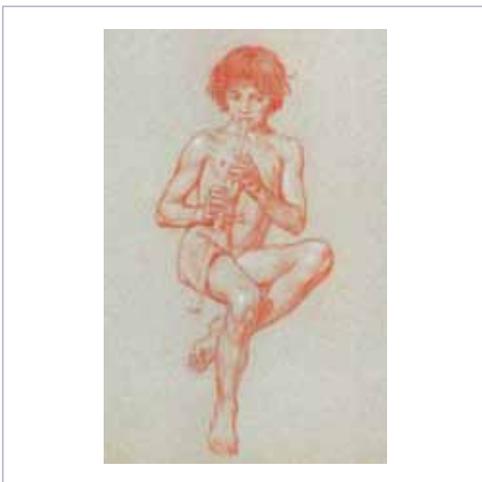
<sup>3</sup> In the old church, an archdeacon was the senior assistant and representative of a bishop. Later, the term was used to denote a clergyman with an administrative responsibility over part of a diocese (archdeaconry). Kirchensprengels, des Archidiakonats.

A committed advocate of Neo-Lutheranism, Meurer senior became known for his writings on the history of the Reformation and on ecclesiastical art.

During the years 1855 to 1859, he was also personally involved in the planning and design of his parish church, the new Saint Catherine's Church in Callenberg. He insisted that there should be "a clearly discernible correlation between church and church services and that the individual parts of the church building should be designed for specific ecclesiastical acts". The resulting church is a prime example of a return to liturgy-based spatial planning. The building and its interior fittings are designed to suit the sequence of liturgical acts. The font, for example, is situated in the original lobby.<sup>4</sup> In placing it here, Meurer marked a turning-point in the history of Lutheran church architecture in Saxony; he also aroused his son Moritz's interest in church painting and ornamentation.



Moritz Meurer: Book study, stipules and tendrils, pencil drawing, Waldenburg Museum



Moritz Meurer: Boy playing flute, red chalk drawing, Waldenburg Museum

For the young Moritz Meurer – and all of his five siblings – the parental home offered abundant scope for education.<sup>5</sup> Primary schooling was provided by the father himself; after that, Moritz junior attended the humanist grammar school in Zwickau, which Luther himself had cited in his *Colloquia Mensalia* as one of the five finest schools in Saxony. Because Moritz's father was a great admirer of the artist Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872), he encouraged and supported his artistically gifted son in his desire to study painting in Dresden under Schnorr.

<sup>4</sup> The lobby today is situated in the south aisle of the church.

<sup>5</sup> Meurer's siblings merit study in their own right. The best known is Siegfried Meurer (1840–1926), who teamed up with his brother Coelestin (1844–1916) to establish Meurer Prometheus, a noted Dresden gas stove and cooker company which still trades today under the name Ascobloc.

## Art studies and early commissions

In September 1856, Moritz Meurer became a freshman at the Royal Academy of Visual Arts in Dresden. There, he worked in the history painting studio of Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld and also studied under Ludwig Richter (1803–1884), who ran the landscape painting studio. In Richter, Moritz Meurer met an artist with a singular approach to religion and a profound love of nature. During the summer months, Ludwig Richter regularly took his students on long walks through the countryside around Dresden; the landscape studies that were generated by those excursions aroused Meurer's interest in nature, especially in the world of plants.

In November 1858, Meurer joined the advanced class at the Academy. Two years later, he left Dresden to complete his studies at the Academy of Arts in Munich.

The earliest fruits of Meurer's art studies can still be seen in the church at Callenberg. As well as the medallions for the sides of the apse painting *Christ as Redeemer of the World* by Carl Gottlieb Peschel (1798–1879), for which he created the originals, Meurer also composed the *Sacrifice of Isaac* mural for the north side wall of the chancel in 1860. Executed as a fresco, the image is based on a picture in the *Bilderbibel* [Bible in Pictures] published by his teacher Schnorr von Carolsfeld showing the scene in which the angel of God stops Abraham from sacrificing his son and reveals a ram for him to sacrifice instead. The *Bilderbibel*, a major work of German book illustration with 240 woodcuts of Biblical scenes, was published in 1860 and enjoyed widespread renown. Meurer's representation, like the original by his teacher, is replete with drama and action.



Moritz Meurer: *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, around 1860, fresco on the north side wall of the chancel of Saint Catherine's Church in Callenberg/Saxony (Photo Nancy Tanneberger)

In 1867, on completion of his art studies in Dresden and Munich, Meurer moved to Berlin, where he received numerous commissions for public and private buildings. For example, he realized figural and ornamental paintings for the Prussian Labour and Culture Ministry, the Moabit Criminal Court, the Lichterfelde Cadet School, the administrative headquarters of the Berlin-Hamburg Railway Company and the villa of a banking magnate called Liebermann in Tiergartenstrasse. The frequency and prestige of these commissions show that Meurer's artistic skills were highly regarded in Berlin. At the same time, it is clear that Meurer was increasingly turning away from free painting during this period and focusing on decorative artwork instead. Sadly, all of the decorative painting done by Meurer in Berlin was destroyed in the Second World War.

In 1872, Meurer embarked on his first study trip to Italy. Thanks to the stories told by his uncle, Heinrich Eduard Schmieder, who was the first embassy preacher for the Protestant community in Rome, he had been familiar with the country since childhood. Meurer's travels took him to places that had inspired many artists before him. In Ferrara, Venice, Rome, Capri, Naples, Palermo, Perugia, Florence and Siena, he captured the beauty of Italian landscapes and art treasures in numerous drawings, watercolours and oils.



Moritz Meurer: Young woman, red chalk drawing,  
Waldenburg Museum

In Rome and Tuscany, he also made copies of Renaissance wall decorations. Captivated by the country, Meurer must have felt even during that first visit a budding desire to settle in Italy. Many of the works he produced on the trip still exist - all dated and preserved at the Waldenburg Museum, complete with notes identifying the locations.

### Teaching years at the Institute of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum in Berlin

In 1869, as well as working as a decorator, Meurer became a temporary lecturer at the Institute of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum in Berlin – a position that was made permanent in 1871.

The Institute had been founded in 1867 as the educational arm of the German Crafts Museum in Berlin. This was in the wake of the European Arts and Crafts movement – a movement fuelled from 1851 by regular world exhibitions and an awareness that contemporary artist-craftsmen – partly because of the transition from single to mass production – were no longer able to match the standards achieved by craftsmen in earlier times. Reform efforts, initially emanating from England, led to the establishment of arts and crafts museums all over Europe tasked with the aesthetic education of craft workers and designers. This is how the Berliner Arts and Crafts Museum, its teaching institute and its library came to be forged as an educational entity. Its mission, as formulated in the 1867 Festschrift of the German Arts and Crafts Museum in Berlin, was to "make the tools of both art and science accessible to craftsmen".

Moritz Meurer was aware of the importance of an art and craft education when he accepted a permanent teaching post in 1871. From the outset, the Institute was also open to female students – a novelty in art education in those days – so Meurer taught not only ornamental and figural drawing but also commercial drawing for women.

Like most of the arts and crafts school lecturers – who included the architect Martin Gropius (1824–1880) – Meurer had no special teaching qualifications. He created his own teaching materials and designed his own courses. As part of this groundwork, he took students on trips to Italy, which were described in the Institute's annual report:

"Rare and very effective educational stimulus was provided by the study trips to Italy (July 1875 – February 1876 and May 1877 – January 1878). Financed by the Royal Government, they were undertaken by Institute lecturer Mr. Moritz Meurer and a group of students for the purposes of securing examples of decorative painting from the heyday of the Renaissance."<sup>6</sup>

In 1878, Meurer published his first major sourcebook: *Italienische Flachornamente aus der Zeit der Renaissance. Intarsien, Flachreliefs, eingelegte Marmorarbeiten etc. zum Gebrauch für Architekten und Handwerker als Vorlagen für Kunstgewerbliche und Zeichenschulen* [Italian Renaissance flat ornamentation. Intarsias, low reliefs, marble inlay work, etc. for architects and artisans for use as models in arts and crafts workshops and art schools].

<sup>6</sup> Generalverwaltung der Königlichen Museen. Kunstgewerbe-Museum (ed.): *Jahresberichte der Unterrichtsanstalt*, Berlin, 1986, p. 10

In the 1878/1879 academic year, Meurer took charge of a decorative painting workshop. In 1881, he saw the opening of the new Arts and Crafts Museum building. Designed in Italian Renaissance style by the celebrated architects Martin Gropius and Heino Schmieden, it featured interiors developed by Meurer and the painter and teacher Ernst Johannes Schaller (1841–1887):

"The two main high-ceilinged halls on the transverse axis of the upper storey – the one on the east side containing the majolica collection, the one on the west the precious metal collection – are distinguished by special artistic appointments. The ceilings of these halls are fashioned as domical vaults, finely segmented, adorned with figural low reliefs [...] and cleverly, appropriately and effectively appointed with decorative paintings: the majolica room by Meurer, the precious metal room by Schaller"<sup>7</sup>

As part of the programme of events marking the opening of the museum – the present-day Martin Gropius Building – Moritz Meurer was awarded a professorship. In 1883, at the age of 44, he left the Institute to fulfil a long-held dream: to live and work in Italy. As we will see, however, his efforts even there continued to focus on the German arts and crafts scene.



„... that youngsters look at nature and think about what they see.“

### Meurer's ideas for improving the content of courses at arts and crafts schools

"We head for the famous studio street, Via Margutta at the foot of Mt. Pincio, where Professor. Meurer now lives in the same building complex that accommodates the International Artists Union, and enter the outer courtyard where a gushing spring produces a fountain of clear water in the midst of a group of ancient stone figures. After climbing a few stairs, we find ourselves in the comfortable home that the professor shares with his siblings. The apartment alone is a sight worth seeing, its walls adorned with rare items brought by Professor Meurer from Tunis and Algiers and by his brother Coelestin from India. These rooms are a delightful place to spend time. On Wednesday evenings, friends call round for a glass of wine, among them many famous figures – artists such as Tuiallon, Vogel, etc., archaeologists and writers. One would be hard pressed to find a more stimulating salon in Rome."<sup>8</sup>

As this vivid description shows, Meurer had no trouble getting established in Italy. He was an active member of the Deutscher Künstlerverein – the German Artists Union – in Rome, of which he was appointed president in 1893, and also became a member of the German Archaeological Institute in Rome as well as the art academies of Venice, Bologna and Urbino.

From 1885 onwards, Moritz Meurer stood at the head of an arts and crafts reform movement calling for the introduction of scientific nature study courses at all German art schools. His support for this reform, he said, stemmed from the fact that he had "far more time in Rome to think about general art issues". What is more, Meurer shared Goethe's view that Italy was the only place where art and nature assumed a truly great variety of forms. In 1888, in a letter to the then director of the Berlin Institute, Ernst Ewald (1836–1904), he wrote:

"I would love to spend just one day with you exploring the area around Rome so that you might understand how much more can be gained from studying the local plant life. It is no coincidence that this was where the great observer Goethe hit on his early ideas of studying plants and their metamorphosis – ideas which he developed to intellectual maturity later when „forced to return from Italy and its diversity of forms to the shapeless world of Germany".<sup>9</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Das „Kunstgewerbe-Museum in Berlin“, in: *Centralblatt der Bauverwaltung*, December 1882.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Zacher: „Deutsche Ateliers in Rom. Zwanglose Interviews“, in: *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 19 March 1896.

<sup>9</sup> Berlin University of the Arts Archive (UdK Archive, fonds 7). All other quotations from Meurer's correspondence that are not assigned a footnote also come from this source.

From Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) – who was not only a poet but also a scientist who conducted studies in the fields of biology, geology, mineralogy and botany – Moritz Meurer also adopted the principle of looking at nature in a certain way. What fascinated Goethe – who wrote his essay on the Metamorphosis of Plants in 1790 – was "not making new discoveries" but "seeing that which is discovered in my own way". In the same sense, Meurer set out to use the beauty, the diversity and the underlying laws of nature to teach and inspire arts and crafts students.



Moritz Meurer (ed.): *Acer platanoides*, Norway maple, shoot, photograph of plaster model, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the Arts Archive, fonds 301, decorative art model collection

His student Karl Blossfeldt later came to hold the same views, a fact evidenced in the foreword of his book *Wundergarten der Natur* (Magic Garden of Nature). "A plant", Blossfeldt wrote, "builds on the basis of the same laws that need to be observed by every architect. [...] It shapes and fashions by logic and viability and uses elemental forces to achieve maximum artistic form."

The contemporary context for Meurer's endeavours is formed by the fact that, despite the establishment of educational institutes and museums, German arts and crafts had still not made any significant progress. One major reason for this resided in art and craft education itself: the design of a craftwork is normally based not on the imagination of the student but, as Meurer complained, on the imitation of earlier art and craft products that are considered exemplary. Students were supposed to learn from Ancient, Gothic or Renaissance designs and develop a formal idiom that they could apply to their work later with variations.

Meurer realized and argued that there needed to be more to modern art and craft design than just copying the work of earlier times. In summer 1888 he wrote:

"I believe it is only a matter of time before courses in forms from nature are introduced at all arts and crafts schools. [...] There is no future in mere 'stable feeding' with museum fodder; food from nature also has a rightful place. It is a mystery to me that at a time when studying and learning from nature is everything, when it is central even to philosophy, the arts and crafts scene believes that the road to understanding passes it by. The movement will gather pace, I have no doubts about that."<sup>10</sup>

As this letter shows, Meurer gave thought to the new *Naturphilosophie* of his time. The zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), one of the foremost representatives of the movement, had published his book on *General Morphology* in 1866 and published *Kunstformen der Natur* [Art Forms of Nature] in 1899. In this pictorial atlas of coloured plates presenting images of unknown flora and fauna captured with the help of a microscope, Haeckel showed the aesthetic beauty of the forms produced by nature and equated them with art.

In 1889, Meurer published his programmatic paper *Das Studium der Naturformen an kunstgewerblichen Schulen. Vorschläge zur Einführung eines vergleichenden Unterrichts* [The study of natural forms at arts and crafts schools. Proposals for the introduction of comparative teaching], in which he set out his criticisms of art and craft education and described what he saw as the way forward.

<sup>10</sup> UdK Archive, Berlin, fonds 7.

The "return to the source of nature", Meurer said, was a "rejuvenating bath" for any "art movement ossifying in stylistic tradition". He challenged arts and crafts school teachers to act: "We need to make sure that youngsters look at nature and think about what they see, delve lovingly into its myriad, even microscopically small forms and learn to recognize its laws and beauty. [...] We need to [...] inject more life and significance into arts and crafts courses by gearing methods from the outset more to a joint educational quest and comparative study of art and natural forms."<sup>11</sup>



Moritz Meurer (ed.): *Salvia glutinosa*, sticky sage, stem with inflorescence bud, photograph of plaster relief, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the Arts Archive, fonds 301, decorative art model collection

Meurer worked hard to get his ideas to a wider audience. He published essays in various German newspapers and periodicals, wrote to the principals of arts and crafts schools and went on lecture tours.

Meurer was not alone in holding the views he did. The architect and art theorist Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), who had played a major role in the establishment of Europe's first museum of decorative arts and design in 1852 – the South Kensington Museum in London – had been on record since the middle of the century insisting that the study of nature was vital for an arts and crafts education.

In 1856, the London-born architect and design theorist Owen Jones (1809–1874) published his design sourcebook *Grammar of Ornament*, a book still widely known and available for sale with a collection of stylized ornaments from all epochs and cultural contexts. In this work, Jones similarly emphasized nature's importance as a teacher. Like Meurer later, he believed that most ornament in past art periods was "based on the observation of principles revealed in nature by the definition of form".

Meurer's ideas struck a chord. Around 1890, the study of nature was broadly seen as key to the development of a new style in the decorative arts. Moritz Meurer was credited as both theorist and practitioner with having established the study of nature as a new teaching method at arts and crafts schools.

## Studying natural forms in Rome

But Meurer's reformist ideas found recognition in more than just arts and crafts circles; they also impressed the Prussian government, which saw their application as a chance to raise the standard of arts and crafts output. The world exhibitions had shown that craft and industrial products from Germany could not compete in the international market, so developing the decorative arts was a matter of major economic importance.

<sup>11</sup> „Ausstellung im Kunstgewerbemuseum“, in: *Dresdner Anzeiger*, 6 December 1890.

In March 1890, the Prussian House of Representatives debated Meurer's proposal to make the study of nature a school subject and voted to support it. So as of 1890, Meurer had access to substantial state funding to help him produce teaching materials for the new subject in Rome.

The aim was to make "nature's teachers" available to students at any time "either in their original form or as cast replicas or images".

From that time onwards, Meurer devoted himself to examining Italian plant life "with the magnifying glass of the botanist and the eye of the artist" to establish its usefulness for decorative arts courses. He was assisted in this by scholarship-holders from the Berlin Arts and Crafts Museum Institute, whose ranks were joined in 1892 by the qualified art caster and modeller Karl Blossfeldt. Blossfeldt was given responsibility in Rome for making plaster and bronze models of plants. A letter dating from 1892 shows how much Moritz Meurer valued Blossfeldt's work:

"In Blossfeldt, I am pleased to have found a modeller who really engages with my ideas in an intelligent way. There is no doubt in my mind that the assignments I entrust to him will produce very useful and valuable teaching materials. We are now working on the first shoots, which, thanks to the use of specially designed magnifying glasses, are yielding the most interesting forms."<sup>12</sup>



Moritz Meurer (ed.): Acanthus, bear's breeches, front, side and rear view of leaves, photographs, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the Arts Archive, fonds 301, decorative art model collection

Meurer created a small garden for the required plant material in the courtyard of his house. He also received assistance from the embassy gardener, who provided plants from the botanical gardens. Meurer and his scholarship-holders made numerous excursions into the Italian countryside, even travelling to Greece and North Africa in search of exemplary plant specimens.

Plants were selected for the teaching material collection on the basis of a number of typical forms. What Meurer regarded as typical were plant species that were used as models by creators of art and architectural forms in the past, especially in Antiquity and the Gothic period, e.g. acanthus leaves for Corinthian capitals.

The plant material obtained was dried and pressed; in addition, the scholarship-holders made drawings and models of the plants in plaster of Paris and bronze.<sup>13</sup> Some of the very sensitive dried plants were mounted on card and placed in small glass cases. To keep unprocessed plants and their forms in a natural state for as long as possible, Meurer used a variety of preservation techniques, e.g. dipping in molten paraffin. More delicate parts of plants, such as flowers, were placed in denatured alcohol, which made for stiffer, more durable forms. Meurer also ran experiments casting plants in metal.

<sup>12</sup> UdK Archive, Berlin, fonds 7.

<sup>13</sup> The items of this collection that still exist are preserved in the archive of the University of the Arts in Berlin, the successor institution of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum Institute. They consist of herbarium cases made by Karl Blossfeldt, small sculptures of plants and plant details (the so-called Meurer bronzes) and plates of plant images.

The aforementioned *Frankfurter Zeitung* article from 1896 contains an enlightening description of the work that went on in Meurer's studio:

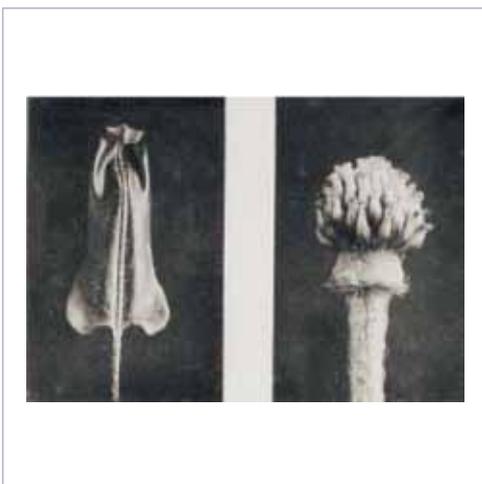
"The Prussian government has been backing Meurer's programme for five years now. During that time, scholarship-holders have been coming to his school to translate his ideas into models and teaching materials, which are then put on display in the Arts and Crafts Museum. We discover how they are produced on a tour of the main studio, which is situated in another part of the building. There, we find sculptors Blossfeldt and Heitsch hard at work with a number of Italian assistants.

The tables are covered with fresh and prepared parts of plants that serve as models. Often just mechanically enlarged and fashioned in clay, they look for all the world like art works. The most astonishing sight for me was a nettle cast in bronze, which struck me as having all the artistry of the most classical stylized ornament; acanthus leaves in bronze were similarly striking. A visit to this studio instantly reveals its potential for enriching the decorative arts. [...] The Royal Porcelain Manufactory in Berlin has already started making items shaped by Meurer's ideas."

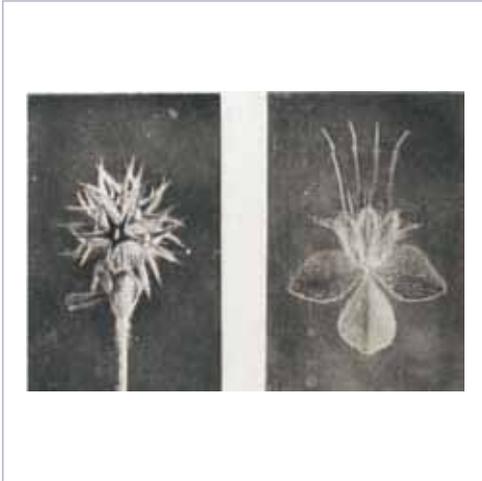
As well as making botanical models, Karl Blossfeldt was assigned by Meurer to photograph plants and plant details for his teaching materials collection. Meurer saw photography as a useful tool for representing the diversity and structure of forms in nature and showing the laws by which they are governed.



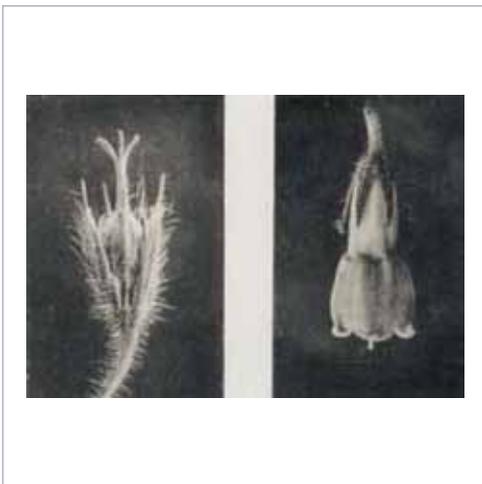
Moritz Meurer (ed.): *Varia*, various flowers, photographs, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the Arts Archive, fonds 301, decorative art model collection



Moritz Meurer (ed.): *Varia*, various flowers, photographs, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the Arts Archive, fonds 301, decorative art model collection



Moritz Meurer (ed.): *Varia*, various flowers,  
photographs, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the  
Arts Archive, fonds 301, decorative art model collection



Moritz Meurer (ed.): *Varia*, various flowers,  
photographs, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the  
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Enlarging the images to 3–15 times life size allowed them to be viewed in more detail: "The enlargements sometimes reveal a wealth of natural forms that escape the casual observer because of their diminutive size." Meurer and Blossfeldt used a microscope to create the magnified images: "We have obtained some nice results recently with microscopic photographs and will continue to use this technique", Meurer wrote in 1892.

### Establishing the new teaching method

The first fruits of the nature studies conducted in Italy took the form of plates of botanical drawings and water-colours, which were used in the plant drawing course piloted at the Berlin Arts and Crafts Museum Institute in 1891 under Meurer's supervision. So although Meurer continued to live in Rome, he made regular trips back to Berlin to teach.

Meurer's teaching method, which Karl Blossfeldt also used later, can be defined as follows on the basis of his theoretical writings. First, students learned to represent the appearance of the natural image, starting with individual, simple parts. Then they drew the plants from various perspectives to capture the characteristics of the relevant forms. In a third step, they moved to drawing from memory, which Meurer regarded as a key stage in the process. Drawing classes were flanked by lectures on morphology. The idea of this stage-by-stage instruction was to teach students that every natural form has a reason. Sharing Goethe's view that adaptation to habitat is a creative act, Meurer taught his students to apply the laws "that underlie the design elements and exterior forms of a plant" to their designs.

In 1892, plant-drawing classes were an established feature of the syllabus and popular with students. Three years later, Meurer published a major sourcebook entitled *Pflanzenformen. Vorbildliche Beispiele zur Einführung in das ornamentale Studium der Pflanze*. [Plant forms. Exemplary images for an introduction to the study of plants for design]. In 1899, he then published *Meurer's Pflanzenbilder. Ornamentale verwertbare Naturstudien für Architekten, Kunsthandwerker, Musterzeichner pp.* [Meurer's plant images. Nature studies for ornamental use for architects, designers, pattern-makers and others] containing over 100 plates of not only drawings and images of plaster and bronze models but also numerous collotype photographs by Blossfeldt.

Because the photographs were considered just illustrations and not works of art in their own right, however, Blossfeldt's name did not appear on the plates.

In 1899, Meurer established another subject at the Institute in Berlin. On his recommendation, Karl Blossfeldt was appointed as a lecturer in modelling from living plants. For his classes, Blossfeldt used the materials that had proven useful in Rome: plaster and bronze models of plants, herbarium cases and innumerable botanical photographs, always made by the same method throughout his 32 year teaching career. Blossfeldt's camera was just a tool to highlight and reproduce plant details. Realizing that it would take more than just the right teaching materials to reform the obsolete teaching methods still in use, Meurer started in 1896 to train a new generation of nature study teachers. Peter Behrens (1868–1940), director of the Düsseldorf Institute of Decorative Arts from 1903, also sent his teachers to Meurer in Rome. The courses were paid for by the Prussian Ministry of Commerce, which also made Meurer's teaching materials accessible to a wider audience.

Because of their systematic nature, Meurer's materials and sourcebooks were considered particularly recommendable and were made available to arts and crafts schools free of charge.

The successes that Meurer achieved earned him a reputation as a reformer and art educationist. He received invitations from many institutions to give lectures and report on the results of his studies. In 1899, he was commended by contemporary art historian Cornelius Gurlitt in his book *Die deutsche Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts, Ihre Ziele und Thaten* [German Art of the 19th Century. Its Aims and Activities]. Meurer, Gurlitt wrote, "is the first person to attempt a radical reform of decorative art by painstakingly scrutinizing the structure of plants."<sup>14</sup>

In 1903, Meurer's works were presented at the arts and crafts exhibition in Leipzig, which focused exclusively on the „decorative use of plants“. The very title of the exhibition shows that Meurer's theories had significantly impacted on the development of arts and crafts. Even so, the turn of the century did not bring an abrupt and total turnaround in decorative art education. For a number of years, the historical idiom of form still continued to be taught alongside the study of natural forms.

Meurer's didactic approach of using the diversity of nature as a source of inspiration for a new style in the decorative arts dovetailed with the call for a return to nature voiced by representatives of various reform movements around 1900 known collectively today as the life reform movement. In art, that call led to Jugendstil, which tore down the boundaries between the visual and decorative arts.

## Change of style in arts and crafts

1909 saw the publication of Meurer's last and most comprehensive textbook, *Vergleichende Formenlehre des Ornamentes und der Pflanze. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Entwicklungsgeschichte der architektonischen Kunstformen* [Comparative morphology of ornament and plants. With special attention to the evolution of architectural art forms]. To mark the occasion, the Fine Art Academy in Berlin staged an exhibition presenting Meurer's plant representations on 250 large panels. At the opening ceremony, the Academy's president Anton von Werner (1843–1915) gave a speech on Moritz Meurer's life and work.

That event can be seen as both the culmination and the end of Meurer's career. The turn of the century had produced a movement in the arts and crafts scene in Germany that was heading in a very different direction from the one propagated by Meurer.

<sup>14</sup> Cornelius Gurlitt: Die deutsche Kunst des 19. Jahrhundert. Ihre Ziele und Thaten, Berlin, 1899, pp. 658–659.



Moritz Meurer (ed.): *Eryngium campestre*, field eryngo, back of leaf, photograph, collotype, 1899, Berlin University of the Arts Archive, fonds 301, decorative art model collection

In 1907, the Deutscher Werkbund was founded. The age of "form without ornament" arrived. In 1910, Moritz Meurer's project in Rome – and cooperation with the Arts and Crafts Museum Institute in Berlin – officially ended. A letter written by the Institute's new director, Bruno Paul (1874–1968), in 1912 signalled the new zeitgeist: "We regard this almost scientific methodology, developed in the closing decade of the last century, as wholly outdated. [...] The technique would be admirably suitable for a botanical institute."<sup>15</sup>

Meurer received numerous accolades for his work, including the Silver Medal of the Munich Arts and Crafts Exhibition, the Prix d'Honneur of the 1896 Berlin Craft Exhibition and the Royal Prussian Order of the Crown, 3rd Class.

Meurer lived in Rome with his Italian wife Giselda Mona Meurer (1872–1942) until 1914. After the outbreak of the First World War, the couple moved to Dresden, the city where Meurer had spent his student days. This is where he died, on 3 November 1916 at the age of 75. According to his wishes, his mortal remains were buried in a Protestant cemetery in Rome.

In 1939, 100 years after Meurer's birth, exhibitions of his artistic estate were staged at the Graphisches Kabinett in Leipzig and the Academy of Arts in Dresden. On the initiative of the Berlin Academy of Arts, the date was marked – as mentioned above – by affixing a commemorative plaque to the house where Meurer was born, the then parsonage of St. Bartholomew's Church in Waldenburg.<sup>16</sup>

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Cover image: Moritz Meurer: Book study, stipules and tendrils, pencil drawing, Waldenburg Museum

<sup>15</sup> UdK Archive, Berlin, fonds 7.

<sup>16</sup> This essay was first published in *Zwischen Residenz und Töpferscheibe. 750 Jahre Waldenburg*, Ed. Stadt Waldenburg, 2004