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## Ladies First! Women artists in and from Styria 1850 to 1950

**Neue Galerie Graz, Joanneumsviertel, 8010 Graz**

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Curated by Gudrun Danzer and Günther Holler-Schuster

Information: +43-316/8017-9100, [www.neuegaleriegraz.at](http://www.neuegaleriegraz.at)

The exhibition *Ladies First!* is the first time that the Neue Galerie Graz has taken a closer look exclusively at the art production of women in Styria. At the heart of the show lie the works and life-stories of some 60 well-known – and a few lesser-known – women artists from the period 1850 to 1950. It was the generation of those born around 1850 for whom it was even conceivable that they could make a living from their own artistic activities. For the generation of female artists to follow, the emancipatory tendencies were already discernible, to the point that post-1950, conditions for women artists had been fundamentally transformed. With this overall assessment, the exhibition sets out to provide a first-ever survey of the creative work of Styrian women artists and to invite all those interested to engage further with this subject.

### Turning the spotlight on feminine art

'Why have there been no significant female artists?' the American art historian Linda Nochlin asked provocatively in 1971, thereby revealing the social discrimination that women faced in the art system. Hers was one of the first flames to light a feminist academic discipline in art, which to this day examines the part played by women in producing art. For Graz, Austria's second largest city, and for Styria, there has been no historical survey to date of the female artists from the region. Here, too, women's creative output has been to a large extent been suppressed, forgotten, marginalised. And that, even though female students were admitted to the so-called Provincial Drawing Academy in Graz from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and although the local art society, the Association of Styrian Artists founded in 1899, soon accepted women as members and gave them opportunities to exhibit. The exhibition's aim is to counteract this great squeezing out of women and to rectify the region's recording of art history. In this large-scale survey, the work and biographies of around 60 women artists are shifted to centre stage and thus returned to our collective memory.

### **100 years of art by women in and from Styria**

The period chosen for consideration is from the mid-19th to mid-20th century. It was the generation of those born around 1850 for whom it was even conceivable that they could make a living from their own artistic activities. For those born after 1880, the emancipatory process already came into effect, which, at the beginning and up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, increasingly brought public recognition to women active in artistic careers. In the period following 1950, conditions for women who wished to be artists had transformed fundamentally. In terms of regions, today's Štajerska, formerly Lower Styria, was also included in 'Styria' for the period prior to 1918 as belonging to the same cultural space. Over and above those women artists directly active in the region, the selection includes those born here, whose careers then developed elsewhere. These include one of the most exciting discoveries of the project: Marianne Stokes, née Preindlsberger, who achieved renown in England following the Pre-Raphaelites. Her works are represented there in major museums – in Austria she has fallen into complete oblivion.

### **Preferred range of motifs and controversial themes**

In essence, this tour through 100 years of art by women is chronological in structure. The selection of works is based on thematic criteria in order to illustrate interests in terms of contents and preferred broad areas in terms of motifs. It can be shown, in fact, that many of the women artists initially chose themes that were traditionally designated feminine: flowers, still life, gardens, the domestic sphere with the women living in it, portraits, sometimes self-portraits, female nudes as well as – often intimate – landscapes. The effort and struggles involved in being able to work as a woman artist at all did not permit the treatment of controversial themes and illustration of social discrimination in this early phase. Only from a certain point on, when female artistic activity was to some extent accepted – in Austria that was from 1918 on with the establishment of the First Republic and implementation of voting rights for all – did women artists sporadically take up such themes. In Styria it was the Expressionist Alwine Hotter who led the way here. Later on, Ida Maly, who was to fall victim so tragically to the National Socialists' euthanasia programme, engaged with contents of this kind, for example. In terms of form, the women artists developed their work predominately on the basis of what they had learning in their training and within the prevailing style of the period – as their male counterparts did, too. Thus, Marie Egner, probably the most eminent artist in the exhibition, is one of the key female representatives of Austrian Atmospheric Impressionism.

### **Social-historical background**

From a social history perspective, the women artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century mostly came from aristocratic or upper middle-class families – in Styria, too. Some of them were from military families, and often their close relatives or parents were active as artists, too. Women from poor circumstances who achieved an artistic career represent the exception for the period under consideration here. It is also striking that many of the female artists remained unmarried, or if they married, had no children – meaning they had to make a choice between career and family.

The exhibition cannot lay claim to completeness – neither in the positions shown nor in the research of the works and life-stories. With this overall show, it aims to offer a first overview of the work of women artists from Styria and to invite interested members of the public, and those doing research, to engage further with this.

A 200-page catalogue in English and German is published in conjunction with the exhibition, edited by Gudrun Danzer with the biographies of artists as well as contributions from the editor, Sabine Fellner and Karin Scaria-Braunstein.