

BOOK REVIEW

Nell Walden, Der Sturm, and The Collaborative Cultures of Modern Art

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Although her name might not immediately ring a bell, artist and art collector Nell Walden (born Nelly Roslund) can be considered a key figure in the German Expressionist movement and most notably in and around *Der Sturm*. Together with Herwarth Walden – whom she married in 1912 – she played a crucial role in building an international reputation for *Der Sturm*. Still, she was repeatedly pushed to the margins of traditional art history, which has resulted in the fact that most of us have no actual recollection of her today. The unfair fate that befell her was shared by many other female artists of the historical avant-gardes of the first half of the 20th century. It is only recently that artists such as Hannah Höch, Emmy Hennings, and Claude Cahun were taken seriously as professional artists and consequently were accepted as pioneers. Before this crucial change of perception, these and many other artists were at best seen as talented amateurs or sexually available muses to their male avant-garde colleagues. They were driven to the periphery of their respective movements, silenced, and eventually forgotten.

Associate Professor in Art history at Stockholm University Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe is the very first to expose but also to denounce the problematic reception of Nell Walden through art history. She points out that Nell Walden was largely overshadowed by the achievements of male genius Herwarth Walden, who founded *Der Sturm* in 1910. Indeed, Nell Walden called him a “forerunner and pioneer of the new art”¹ while others, for example the Expressionist poet August Stramm went even further and considered him as the true personification of *Der Sturm* (“*Der Sturm* is

Herwarth Walden").² However, heroizing Herwarth Walden highly contributed to the undervaluation of his partner's visionary role as an art collector, artist, manager, and (later) archivist of the Der Sturm. Surviving promotional pictures of the Walden couple – surrounded by an impressive art collection – demonstrate that Nell Walden played at least an equally important role. Moreover, often-overlooked source material of this kind exposes the many cracks in the existing Sturm historiographies: an undervaluation of aspects as collaboration and supportive labour as well as a neglect of the effective practice of self-presentation (and hence self-promotion) through photographs. Practices in which Nell Walden certainly had excelled.

Skrubbe's feminist reading finally re-positions, or rather re-centers Nell Walden as one of the driving forces behind Der Sturm. She presents to the reader an exhaustive study of the life and work of Nell Walden that is in line with ongoing feminist practices of denouncing the silence around many female pioneers of the historical avant-gardes. In this field of research, it is agreed upon today that rewriting these pioneers back into art history by means of biographies and historical revisions simply does not suffice. As such, a growing attention for features as the tactile and the collective emerged and new research interests were introduced: the gendered and embodied experience of women artists, the kinesthetic empathy of avant-garde audiences, and a broadened perception of the notion of the artistic medium (see for example Nell Andrew's concept of 'medium fluidity').³ Skrubbe shares this perspective in constructing a new narrative in which process, movement, and collaboration are situated on the same par with traditional art history's preference for text and static image.

More specifically, Skrubbe's book contributes to these respective fields in two significant ways. First, the publication succeeds in countering the existing Sturm

publications in which Nell Walden was only briefly mentioned or bluntly forgotten. The reader is informed of Nell Walden's position as an artist, mediator, collector, and archivist by means of largely unnoticed source materials such as staged photographs, her unique art collection and her own artistic oeuvre. In analyzing Nell Walden's artworks, Skrubbe states that her art is "historically significant for reasons to which stylistic value judgements do not apply."⁴ Again, she aims for a broader understanding of the limited ways in which Nell Walden's art was valued and perceived over time. Unravelling the fact that the artist had also logistically and financially supported her entourage, the book raises additional questions about the ways this might or might not have influenced the contemporary reception of her as an artist.

However, Skrubbe does not only consider Nell Walden's artistic oeuvre, but also does she revalue her organizational, supportive and social skills within *Der Sturm*. By bringing back these often-underrated management skills to our attention, she demonstrates that *Der Sturm* indeed was never driven by a single male genius, but that it instead benefitted from a large collective network in which many different roles were simultaneously being performed.

Second, Skrubbe meticulously illuminates the different ways in which Nell Walden had presented herself within *Der Sturm*. Innovative here is the fact that the author does not exclusively rely on traditional, verbal, written and visual source materials, but that she also considers spaces and objects as potentially embodying and communicating social gestures and meaning. Guided by Ervin Goffman's concept of liminality, Skrubbe situates Nell Walden's practice of self-presentation balancing between the public and the domestic space. The smoothness with which Nell Walden moved between these spheres, testifies of her talent for integrating art into everyday life. Even more, the strategy of making the private 'Walden collection' public by means

of pictures but also by literally opening the doors for interested spectators ultimately brought *Der Sturm* a step closer to its canonization. It is almost as if Nell Walden approached the domestic space as an extension of herself as an artist, an art collector, and a visionary spokeswoman.

Even more than the promotional pictures of Herwarth and Nell Walden in their home, the glamorous portraits of her – taken by befriended women photographers in the late 1920s and early 1930s – offered a metaphorical space in which Nell Walden could freely explore reigning social codes and stereotypes (e.g. the *Kindfrau*, the New Woman, etc.) while constructing an artistic identity of her own choice. Exactly by acknowledging the different ways in which Nell Walden had engaged with concepts as self-presentation and agency can we finally accept her as a key figure – and not just a supporting actor – within *Der Sturm*. In this way, Skrubbe successfully gives Nell Walden a stage in which she can finally “speak back to canonical art history.”⁵

Highly relevant to the field, this book considers *Der Sturm* as a series of encounters and collaborations rather than as a logical succession of relevant dates and artworks. Refuting the rigid and chronological structure of traditional art history itself, Skrubbe has tried “to read *Der Sturm* *through* Nell Walden while at the same time reading her endeavors *within and beyond* *Der Sturm*.”⁶ This patchwork perspective brings back to our attention that *Der Sturm* was by no means centered around the male authorship of Herwarth Walden, but that Nell Walden had operated as a key figure too. Moreover, Skrubbe’s book – innovative both in content as well as in methodology – illuminates the inspiring ways in which Nell Walden had succeeded in claiming agency and control over her multifaceted role as a representative of *Der Sturm*.

Although the book ends rather abruptly, it leaves us with a radical new perception of *Der Sturm* that *does* value Nell Walden's many realizations. It is an absolute must-read for everyone professionally active in the field or wanting to learn more on *Der Sturm* and the indispensable role that Nell Walden has played in it.

¹ Andreas Schlothauer, "Nell Walden – the first collector of non-European art in Germany?", *Kunst&Kontext* 1, 2014, p. 50.

² Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, *Nell Walden, Der Sturm, and the collaborative cultures of modern art*, New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 3.

³ In *Moving Modernism* (2020) Nell Andrew argues that the problematic reception of some art forms and media (in this case dance) was caused mainly by a narrow interpretation of what we traditionally consider to be the "medium": a material substance. As an alternative, Andrew aims for a broader interpretation which takes into consideration also the modes and gestures that are not confined to the material itself. She revisits abstraction from within "the light of choreographic performance" in the work of avant-garde artists Loïe Fuller, Valentine de Saint-Point, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Akarova. See: Nell Andrew, *Moving Modernism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁴ Skrubbe, 2022, p. 85.

⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.