

Please cite the Published Version

Stephens, Michelle (2015) Book review: Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design. *Textile*, 13 (3). pp. 318-319. ISSN 1475-9756

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2015.1102503>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Accepted Version

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Book review: Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design

Michelle Stephens

In *Bauhaus Weaving Theory*, T'ai Smith's curated account functions not only as a history of the weaving workshop but also as a subtly different examination of the Bauhaus through the lens of creative practice. It also provides a gap in literature, as it is the first scholarly analysis of the theoretical writing by the women weavers of the Bauhaus.

T'ai Smith details how the Bauhaus group of weavers, including Anni Albers, Gunta Stözi, and Otti Berger, challenged assumptions about the feminine nature of their craft. As the weavers began to write about their medium in order to define their practice, they took on the language of another discipline. First, they harnessed the terminology of painting's form and color theories, "those elements would later become part of their textiles' functional life" (39). After painting came architecture and photography, as the weavers resisted modernist thinking about distinct media.

It also discusses the conundrum the weavers faced as they harnessed the new language of functionalism. As their objects evolved from well-framed arts and crafts into adaptable, unframed things that spread across the surfaces of floors and walls or furniture, they had to generate essays to define their practice and its parameters. Analytical texts about tapestries and functional textiles reveal the vital role of these women in debates about medium in the twentieth century.

A recurrent theme is that the Bauhaus weavers argued that although a woven fabric is "an aesthetic whole: a composition of form, color, and substance into a unity, its applications are manifestations so diverse that woven pieces can only be explored through experimentation" (66). The Bauhaus, with its history of attention to craft in the workshops, was initially based on the idea that contact with the material was integral to artistic and technological developments (Fiedler & Feierabend 2013). What emerges is a conception of medium as a space for active learning.

Smith illustrates specific parallels between Otti Berger's essays and Moholy-Nagy's pedagogy in relation to the sense of touch. It evokes the question: is tactility the most important factor in cloth's experience? Debates continue into the reciprocity between optical and tactile elements within woven objects and as they function within space. Smith shows how there is a clear opposition between two sensory modes only to show how they are interdependent aspects of perception.

The Bauhaus weaving workshop itself is redefined in *Bauhaus Weaving Theory* as central to theoretical inquiry at the school. Critical questions arise of how specific value and authorship are readily established in the art world, with the limits of modernism. T'ai Smith also challenges broadly the belief that the crafts are physical and technical but never intellectual arts. Moreover, weaving is not just a set of processes; it is also, as Smith has indicated, "a certain mediation of the semi autonomous zones of form and history" (172). In this compelling account, weaving's practical and theoretical concerns are negotiated discursively.

Nevertheless, this book gives an excellent account of the history of the Bauhaus weavers, their development through the movement of functionalism, issues surrounding tactility, media, and individual progressions in practice. This text provides the resources for any contemporary weaver, textile artist, or enthusiast interested in the history of the discipline within the Bauhaus school, specific influences, and it will be key reference material for future generations.

Reference

Fiedler, J. and P. Feierabend, eds. 2013. Bauhaus. Germany: H.F. Ullmann Publishing.