

FERDINAND NIGG (1865-1949)

Origins

Ferdinand Nigg was born on the 27th November 1865 in Vaduz in the principality of Liechtenstein, where he also spent his childhood. He was the second youngest of five children. His father died at an early age.

Nigg the graphic artist

Ferdinand Nigg was educated in Zurich, Munich and Augsburg. In 1898, he moved to Berlin, where he worked as a designer and graphic artist, gaining recognition for his posters, advertising leaflets, covers, bookplates, publisher's marks and textile and art glazing designs. These were initially produced in the *Jugendstil* style and were reproduced in the most renowned arts and crafts periodicals of the time.

The first constructive ornamentation appeared as early as 1902. From 1907 onwards his approach to book design and, in general, to applied graphics and textile design, in the sense of a new constructiveness, also became the central idea of the "Deutscher Werkbund". This was then continued, intellectually, in 1919 by the "Bauhaus" movement. Ferdinand Nigg elevated cross stitch to a respected art form.

It is not surprising that the precursors of the "Deutscher Werkbund" movement such as, for example, the architect and designer, Hermann Muthesius, were sitting up and taking notice of the young graphic artist as early as 1903 and cultivating working relationships with him.

Ferdinand Nigg's participation in the first "Werkbund" exhibition in Cologne in 1914, where he exhibited textiles for interior decoration, can be considered to mark the conclusion of this. He had devoted himself to this area and its reform a long time before this while still in Magdeburg. A few of his embroidered chair covers and wall-panel friezes have survived, but unfortunately hardly any of his woven articles.

Teaching in Magdeburg

On the strength of his influence as a graphic artist and textile designer, Nigg was recruited to teach at the Magdeburg Kunstgewerbeschule [School of Applied Arts and Crafts] in 1903. The principal of the school at the time was Emil Thormählen. The school's progressive instruction in art and design attracted attention, was considered exemplary and was commented on animatedly in authoritative professional journals. Nigg took part in numerous exhibitions, showing, on the one hand, tapestries and, on the other hand, works from his vocational classes, including exhibitions at the Gewerbemuseum (Museum of Trade) in Basel in 1905, the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in Dresden in 1906 and at the Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts) in Berlin in 1907.

In 1907, Ferdinand Nigg was appointed professor. He continued to teach vocational classes in textiles and graphic art.

Period of working in Magdeburg

Nigg worked freely with materials, ornamentation and book design and was therefore able to take the first steps towards abstraction at an early stage. As a result, he advanced to working with painting techniques which were unusual at that time (for example, paste paintings, gouache painting techniques and other series of abstractions using pencil and crayon).

Teaching in Cologne

The school programme which had been tried and tested in Magdeburg, and which was compared at the time with the “Vienna workshops”, was also to be used in Cologne. In 1910, Emil Thormählen moved to the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts and Crafts) in Cologne, with Ferdinand Nigg following him two years later. From 1912 until 1931 he taught the same vocational classes as he had in Magdeburg, with the addition of one subject in Cologne, namely a vocational class for paraments, i.e. ecclesiastical textiles. Ferdinand Nigg was the first person to teach this subject in Germany. However, what is more important is that he introduced the most up-to-date artistic forms of expression into this field, thus reviving the art of paraments.

Paraments

Nigg’s professional colleagues at the Kölner Werkschulen (Cologne Crafts Schools)

During the nineteen-twenties Nigg’s colleagues at the Kölner Werkschulen (Cologne Crafts Schools) (formerly the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Arts and Crafts)) included the designer and architect, Richard Riemerschmid, the then principal of the school, the designer and church painter, Jan Thorn Prikker, and one of Germany’s most prominent church architects, Dominikus Böhm, who was the head of art of the “Institut für religiöse Kunst” (“Institute of Religious Art”), through which the commissions for the Kölner Werkschulen were channelled.

Nigg’s class

Nigg’s class created paraments for Cologne’s most important churches, not least of all for the new churches constructed by Dominikus Böhm. In addition to textiles for ecclesiastical use, the class created other items including choir carpets, in cross stitch, which were large enough to cover an area of more than 80m². One example of this was the carpet made jointly by teacher Ferdinand Nigg and his master pupil, Ada Boese, in 1926 for the church of St. Pantaleon.

Nigg the painter

By this time Nigg had stopped accepting public commissions. His applied graphic art and design had long since made way for his creativeness as an artist. His painting was characterised by an extremely personal form of expressionism which can perhaps be best compared with the spiritual attitude of Ernst Barlach.

Tapestries

Nigg’s tapestries, which were mainly embroidered using cross stitch, are treasures of composition, suffused with light. He embroidered everything himself.

Religious subjects

He had first focussed his attention on religious subjects in Cologne, devoting himself to these almost exclusively from the nineteen-twenties onwards. He created his most personal artistic

The twilight of Nigg's life

work away from prying eyes. Neither his pupils nor his professional colleagues nor those around him in Liechtenstein, to which he returned following his retirement in 1931, could have had any idea that his works of art were of such high value. From then on he lived a very secluded life, devoting himself to his art. Ferdinand Nigg died in Vaduz, on the 10th May 1949, at the age of 84.

In 1950, Canon Anton Frommelt, the first Nigg biographer wrote: "The peculiar fact that the artist only rarely allowed anyone to see his work now makes Nigg's work seem like a 'precious find', stumbled on by accident."

There was an overwhelming abundance of important art in the twentieth century, particularly at the beginning of the century and, as a result, there was a great deal to digest. Between radical changes in style, following his own artistic inclinations also represented a challenge for Ferdinand Nigg. His development extended from early naturalistic drawings from the close of the nineteenth century to the "*Jugendstil*" style to a two-dimensional geometrisation of forms and a brightening of colours to a detached constructiveness which is linked with the painter's expressiveness. Linocut had a really significant position in both his early and his late works and this is true not only of his fabric printing, but also of the pictures he created.

With a few exceptions, Ferdinand Nigg employed mixing techniques for his paintings: watercolours and gouache appear together with charcoal, graphite or India ink. He was a master at weighing up the forms of expression that existed at the time, both in art and the applied arts and crafts. The fact that, as a painter, he should also become interested in textiles should be regarded as a phenomenon of the time and was not at all unusual.

His tapestries embody the intensification and spiritualisation of his artistic knowledge and abilities. Like his painting, they undoubtedly extend beyond the applied arts.

Nigg used the small units of cross stitch to move into the free space of composition. He often took his design right up to the boundary of where it faded out, so that it may be presumed that the artist was capable, in the light of his inner vision, of portraying the diaphanous.

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