



The Great Polymath: Sophie Taeuber-Arp

Description



Swiss designer and artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp was one of the most significant and influential voices of the early 20th century, with a multidisciplinary practice that spanned embroidery, beadwork, textiles, painting, sculpture, furniture design and more. She successfully blurred the boundaries between fine art and design, bringing the same inventive, playful and instantly eye-catching brand of abstraction to everything she produced, observing, “The desire to enrich and beautify things cannot be interpreted materialistically, that is, in the sense of increasing their value as possessions; rather, it stems from the instinct for perfection and the creative act.”

Born in Switzerland as Sophie Taeuber in 1889, Taeuber-Arp trained at Debschitz School in Munich, before returning to Switzerland to pursue a career in textiles. While attending Rudolf von Laban’s experimental dance school in Zurich, Taeuber met her future husband, the Alsatian artist Hans (Jean) Arp. The pair often collaborated on works of art; they would become one of the most fruitful and prolific power couples of the early modernist era. Both became key players in the development of the early Dada movement in Zurich. Taeuber-Arp was one of only a few women associated with Dada, and her makeshift performance art, costumes, stage sets and sculptures embraced the Dada spirit of the absurd, nonsensical and child-like.



From 1916 to 1929, Taeuber-Arp taught textiles at Zurichâs School for Applied Arts, specialising in textile design. Throughout this time, she worked tirelessly as a designer, creating vast reams of textiles, embroidery and theatre costumes. Her bold and playful patterns featured striking geometric patterns and vibrant colours, echoing the rising abstraction of the European avant-garde. The starting point for much of this early design work was through colourful drawing on paper, which became a springboard for so many of her creative endeavours. Having trained in textiles, Taeuber-Arp based these drawings on the gridded structure of fabric construction, with vertical-horizontal compositions, modular constructions, and interlocking geometric shapes. Taeuber-Arp experimented freely within these rigid confines, toying with an endlessly recyclable variation of repeat patterns, tactile textures, and harmonious colours.



During the 1930s, she began working on what she called *multispace compositions*, in which a white or black background featured playful arrangements of lines, circles, crosses and squares, ordered to suggest dynamic patterns of movement. She compared these designs to the then popular game of boules, likening her motifs to the game's gentle rolling motion, and brought these ideas out into a range of disciplines.

As her career progressed, Taeuber-Arp increased the scope of her practice, expanding into interior design, jewellery, stained-glass illustration, painting, fashion, sculpture, architecture, costume and fabric design. She rejected the notion that applied and fine arts should be separate, or that craft was of less intellectual value than art, arguing in true Bauhaus style that art should be a part of everyday life, something we can share, enjoy, use, and live with. Taeuber-Arp particularly brought this ethos into her work with architecture and interiors throughout the 1930s, collaborating with her husband Arp and the Dutch architect Theo van Doesburg to reimagine a wing of the Aubette building in Strasbourg. For this collaborative venture Taeuber-Arp took charge of the Five o'Clock Tea Room, the Aubette Bar, and the Foyer Bar, producing visionary environments awash with her signature brand of vibrant pattern, shape and colour.



Uniting all Taeuber-Arp's divergent ideas was a desire to be true to her own inner spirit, in order to find the most individual and authentic means of self-expression, in whichever medium she chose. She wrote, "Only when we go into ourselves and attempt to be entirely true to ourselves will we succeed in making things of value, living things, and in this way help to develop a new style that is fitting for us."

CATEGORY

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