Document of German Art: the First Exhibition of the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony

On May 15, 1901 at 11 a.m. on the Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt, A Document of German Art, the first exhibition of the Artists’ Colony opened with a pathos-laden theatrical performance entitled The Sign, consisting of majestic music, symbolist prose, solemn costumes, and choreographed rhythmical movements (Ill. 1). This avant-garde play was staged by Peter Behrens and consisted of music by the composer and conductor Willem de Haan and words written by the author and critic Georg Fuchs. As a reflection of the ambitious goals of the exhibition - to infuse all aspects of everyday life with aesthetic quality - the opening celebration featured an enunciator revealing a crystal to Ernst Ludwig, the Grand Duke of Hessen. The crystal, a symbol of “new times”, was then carried into the main building of the Mathildenhöhe, the Ernst Ludwig House. This wide two-story building, today home of the Artists’ Colony Museum, features a slanted roof and a bold juxtaposition of a highly ornamented omega portal with a surprisingly modernistic white exterior (Ill. 2). Here, the first seven artists of the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony worked, from 1901 on, side by side in open studios, painting, sculpting, and designing furniture, silverware, jewellery, posters, menus, glassware, ceramics, and other applied arts products. All these works were then on display during the exhibition of 1901 in eight newly constructed and fully furnished houses grouped around the Ernst Ludwig House, among them the Deiters House (Ill. 3), named after the business manager of the colony Wilhelm Deiters. Even though the collective of artists who worked in Darmstadt were named the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony.
Colony (in German: Künstlerkolonie Darmstadt), they had little in common with earlier famous artists' groups such as the Barbizon school. The members of the Darmstadt Artists' Colony were not artists that banded together of their own free will, but were rather summoned to the Mathildenhöhe, beginning in 1898 and up to 1914, by Ernst Ludwig. Next to the Austrian architect Joseph Maria Olbrich, who was in charge of the first exhibition, the founding members included Peter Behrens, Rudolf Bosselt, Paul Bürck, Hans Christianesen, Ludwig Habich, and Patriz Huber. The Grand Duke handpicked this group of young artists, between 20 and 31 years of age, to further the progressive Arts and Crafts movement he witnessed first-hand in Great Britain and Germany. Ernst Ludwig was the son of Princess Alice of the United Kingdom and grandson of Queen Victoria. His reign of the Grand Duchy Hessen began in 1892 when he was only 23 years old. Closely linked to the British Monarchy, he frequently travelled to England and thus came into contact with contemporary British artists. Impressed by the radical new Arts and Crafts aesthetic, in 1897, Ernst Ludwig commissioned interior designs for two rooms in his Neues Palais (New Palace) in Darmstadt, which was later destroyed in World War II. The Reception Room in the palace was redesigned by Hugh Baillie Scott and executed by Charles Ashbee's Guild and School of Handicraft in London. The second commission, the furnishing of the palace's Breakfast Room, was also designed by Baillie Scott, but manufactured by the Darmstadt furniture company of Julius Glückert, an important German manufacturer of the time.
Ill. 3
Deiters House, view from the East,
Architect: Joseph Maria Olbrich, 1900/1901,
Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt
Photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt / Norbert Latocha, 2013
These two rooms, and individual pieces from them, were prominently featured in the German journal *Innendekoration* (Interior Decoration), one of the many influential periodicals belonging to the publishing house of Alexander Koch based in Darmstadt. Koch was the other mastermind of the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony, perhaps as important as the Grand Duke, as the publisher had great interest in promoting the decorative arts, the focus of his publications. A famous poster by Rudolf Witzel from 1898 advertising Alexander Koch’s journal *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (German Art and Decoration) was one of the very few German posters to be included in the prolific, subscription based periodical of exceptional posters entitled *Maîtres de l’Affiche* in Paris. Under the patronage of the Grand Duke, also in the year 1898, the exhibition *Erste Darmstädter Kunst- und Kunstgewerbe-Ausstellung* (First Darmstadt Exhibition of Fine Art and Decorative Art) took place in Darmstadt presenting paintings, sculptures and applied arts products, side by side. Alexander Koch was in charge of the Decorative Arts section and presented complete furnished rooms as part of the exhibition. Due to the success of this undertaking, in which some later members of the Artists’ Colony were presented, e.g. Hans Christiansen, the idea materialized to bring contemporary artists to Darmstadt to produce designs for the many manufacturing companies located in and around the city. Furthermore, with large-scale exhibitions, the artists were meant to boost the overall standing of Darmstadt, then the capital of the Grand Duchy Hessen. Directly influenced by Koch, and because Hessen did not have an abundance of natural resources, Ernst Ludwig followed through in this plan and thereby combined his passion for art with economic stimulus to achieve prosperity for the region: The artists of the colony were given artistic freedom under the only condition that
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they produce designs for manufacturing firms. Thus, the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony provided the grounds for artistic experimentation and simultaneously boosted the production of applied arts in Hessen. A postcard from the first exhibition on the Mathildenhöhe in 1901 (Ill. 4) - depicting the exhibition fence designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich - embodies this twofold character of the Artists' Colony. On the one hand, the fence represented progressive architecture, and, on the other hand, it displayed its economic role: the individual poster stands of the fence were rented by companies and manufacturers to advertise their products. In the first exhibition of 1901, approximately 200 businesses displayed works designed or selected by members of the Artists' Colony. Almost half of the companies were based in Darmstadt, among them the Hofmöbelfabrik Julius Glückert that produced many furniture designs by Olbrich and Patriz Huber. In the centre of the houses designed by Olbrich and built at the foot of the Ernst Ludwig House for several members of the Artists’ Colony, Julius Glückert owned a large villa functioning as a company show room, today known as the

Ill. 5 Large Glückert House, view from the West, Architect: Joseph Maria Olbrich, 1900/1901, Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt Photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt / Norbert Latocha, 2013
Large Glückert House (Ill. 5+6). He also purchased the adjacent Small Glückert House as his private residence, a house originally conceived for the sculptor Rudolf Bosselt. In the first exhibition, the only building not designed by Olbrich was the Behrens House (ill. 7). Peter Behrens came to Darmstadt as a painter and designer, and left the city as an architect. On the Mathildenhöhe, without any formal training as an architect whatsoever, he insisted on building his own house, the very first building he ever constructed. Moreover, he designed all elements included herein, from a light filled dining room dominated by white and grey colours (Ill. 8) to a dark and moody music room with geometric ornaments extending from the floor to the ceiling to the inlay work of a grand piano. Strongly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, Behrens succeeded in creating atmospheric rooms that could be experienced as aesthetic total artworks. His artistic success and experience in Darmstadt formed the foundation for his later work for the German company AEG - giving birth to our understanding of corporate design and his teaching of such exceptional talents as Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Adolf Meyer, and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, later known as Le Corbusier. It is quite remarkable that Behrens designed his house in Darmstadt, including the interior, and had everything built, manufactured, and completed in the span of two years. This achievement of Behrens and the other six members of the 1901 Darmstadt Artists’ Colony underlines the intention of the Grand Duke to energetically combine business development with artistic innovation. Nearly all works of art in the 1901 exhibition could be purchased and, to facilitate this, the entrance gate featured a foreign exchange office for the many international visitors. Even though some of the applied arts products were successfully mass-produced and sold, such as specific jewellery designs by Patriz Huber, the
first exhibition ended with a financial deficit. However, in marketing terms, the exhibition succeeded in establishing Darmstadt as a German centre for the arts and modern design. National and international magazines devoted extensive articles to the exhibition.

The Grand Duke realized that the abundance of temporary as well as permanent buildings constructed for the exhibition, as well as the daily musical concerts in the Plane Tree Grove and plays in the temporary theatre building, were all too costly. Coinciding with the emergence of the German Werkbund in 1907, of which Behrens, Olbrich and Jakob Julius Schar vogel belonged to the founding members, the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony shifted away from elaborate villa designs to a more sober development of housing for the middle class. This culminated in designs by Olbrich for the Opel Worker’s House in 1908 and by Albin Müller for a group of rental apartment buildings in 1914. This artistic and conceptual development bestowed the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony with a significant place in art history, bridging the gap between the British Arts and Crafts movement and the German Werkbund leading up to the Bauhaus.

Ill. 8
Peter Behrens,
Armchair
(for the dining room
of the Behrens House),
1901,
white painted poplar,
red leather upholstery,
Institut Mathildenhöhe,
Darmstadt Municipal
Art Collection,
Inv. no. 43/2 KH
Photo:
Bildarchiv
Foto Marburg /
Institut Mathildenhöhe
Darmstadt /
Gregor Schuster,
2013