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The German Painter behind the American Lens: Gabriele Münter as Photographer

Female artist Gabriele Münter (1877–1962) is recognized primarily for her innumerable contributions to twentieth-century German Expressionist painting and drawing. During her remarkably lengthy and prolific career, Münter co-founded *Der Blaue Reiter* (the Blue Rider), arguably one of the most famous and important art groups in twentieth-century Europe.¹

From an early age, Münter demonstrated inherent proficiency for the visual arts, a highly controversial skill for a female in Europe at the time. According to Imperial German social strictures, the historic gender equilibrium could only be preserved as long as men defended the country and women maintained the sanctity of the home. Nineteenth-century artistic tradition venerated academically-trained men as the primary creative agents responsible for popularizing “true” artwork. It was falsely presumed that an artistic woman was the “born dilettante,” meaning her creativity merely imitated a man’s originality.² Social norms dictated that women could only pursue art as a casual hobby to mitigate aimlessness and boredom. A woman who pursued a professional career in the visual arts via formal, didactic instruction obliterated the comforting notion that females served as the reassuring guarantors of conventional domestic stability. In her later life, Münter recounted confronting these restrictive attitudes as she matriculated into Munich’s exclusive artistic communities.

German painters refused to believe that a woman could have real talent, and I was even denied access, as a student, to the Munich academy. In those days, women could study art, in Munich, only privately or in the studios of the *Künstlerinnenverein*, the association of professional women artists.³

Though she circumvented normative gender expectations, a substantial portion of Münter's oeuvre explores the iconography of traditional female identity, particularly within domestic settings. Convenient accessibility to interior women's spaces of the home augmented Münter's ability to replicate these intimate scenes in a variety of media. Münter began this thematic exploration of domestic life in the photographs of her American relatives during her two-year sojourn to the United States (1898–1900).

It is critical to note that photography necessitated the reassessment of artistic agency by permitting amateurs exclusive access into art circles previously occupied by the creative elite. The conflation of these two distinct groups affirmed the camera's unique versatility. In their most simplistic form, photographs functioned as superficial mementos of daily life. Antithetically, photography offered both artists and amateurs an avant-garde method of emotive self-expression. Without extensive formal academic training or external influence, Münter took a series of photographs that documented the domestic lifestyles, behaviors, and attire of women in rural, turn-of-the-century America. The unique, pictorial compositions of many of these photographs prefigure several subsequent paintings executed from the early 1900s onward. Comparisons of both media suggest unequivocally that Münter's early artistic exploration and photographic experimentation catalyzed the rapid development of her professional career as one of Germany's most tenacious and prolific female artists.

Gabriele Münter's familial history in the United States began with her father. According to Münter's recollections, her father, Carl Münter, came to the United States in 1847 to avoid persecution and arrest in Germany.

He must have been a very fiery and idealistic young man, an enthusiastic believer in the liberal ideas of 1848. Shortly before the March Revolution of that year, he got into trouble for his political ideas and activities and, to avoid the scandal of his arrest and imprisonment, was packed off to America by my grandfather.⁴

At first, Carl Münter operated a general store, but he later obtained a degree in dentistry from the Dental College in Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1852, Münter married a widow, Mary Lucinde Richardson, in Quincy, Illinois. When she passed away unexpectedly only a few years later, Münter returned to Germany to visit friends and family. Increasingly eager to restore his dental practice in the United States, he returned to Tennessee, where he met his second wife, and Gabriele's mother, Wilhelmine Scheuber. Scheuber and her family had immigrated to the United States in 1845.⁵ After their marriage in 1858, Carl Münter and his new bride settled in Tennessee, intending to

remain in the country to be close to her relatives. However, the couple found their allegiance to the United States under scrutiny as tensions between the Northern and Southern states multiplied. Unwilling to subject their family to the growing hostility, the Münters returned to Germany as the American Civil War roared to life. The pair settled in Berlin, where Carl Münter re-established his dental practice.⁶

Between the years of 1865 and 1877, the couple had four children: August in 1865, Carl Theodor in 1866, and Emmy in 1869. Shortly after Gabriele's birth in 1877, the family relocated to Herford, Germany, and subsequently moved twice more. In 1884, when Gabriele was seven years of age, the family settled in Koblenz.

The Münter family, informed by American cultural principles, deliberately ignored the expectations that young women should pursue a domestic lifestyle. While gender norms in the United States still prohibited women from attaining certain freedoms, the American model remained far less restrictive than the German one. The Münter family referred to the American example to establish a framework for raising their daughters. Though men dominated European artistic communities, and women were not authorized to study in most traditional academic institutions, the family believed that formal artistic instruction would give Gabriele Münter a sense of confidence and purpose. Münter's family recognized her creative potential, and thus disregarded the prescriptive constraints imposed on women by patriarchal institutions and earnestly supported their daughter's burgeoning ambition to pursue art in an academic setting. Though most major German art academies remained closed to women until after the First World War, Münter sought private instruction from professors affiliated with these creative institutions.

Reinhold Heller, author of *Gabriele Münter: The Years of Expressionism*, outlines Münter's unusual, but advantageous artistic development inherently influenced by her family's American connections.

What distinguished the Münter home from others, if anything, was its close ties to the United States: Münter's parents had lived and married there, close relatives—continued to live there and American words, sayings, songs, and objects were sprinkled among the German ones in the home. Also attributable to the American influence was a lack of rigidity and a greater sense of freedom than was common in the German middle class.⁷

This consistent exposure to American culture during Münter's upbringing in Germany became an indisputably crucial element in her artistic advancement. During her travels in the United States, she became bilingual

and developed a greater understanding for American women's culture in both rural and metropolitan areas.

Carl Münter's lucrative profession allowed Gabriele a distinct advantage in social and professional endeavors. Her father's upper middle-class title and substantial salary allowed the family to provide an elite education for their children. Even after Carl Münter's death in 1886, Wilhelmine arranged for her daughter to receive formal drawing lessons through her school in Koblenz. Here, at the Lyceum for Girls, Münter began drawing regularly in an academic environment.

In 1896, Münter took private art lessons from a member of a Herford art organization *Malkiste* (art box). The next year, she relocated to Düsseldorf, where she studied under portrait and genre painter Ernst Bosch (1834–1917). She also joined the "Women's Atelier" of the Düsseldorf Academy. However, Düsseldorf's repetitive curriculum failed to challenge Münter. When her mother fell fatally ill in 1898, Münter returned to Koblenz, truncating her studies in Düsseldorf. On November 15, 1898, Wilhelmine died.

After the death of both of her parents, 21-year-old Münter received a substantial inheritance that enabled her to visit her American relatives in the United States.⁸ She undertook the voyage with her sister, Emmy Münter. The two sailed from Rotterdam on the S.S. Statendam on September 29, 1898. Once they had arrived in New York (on October 9), they visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They also made their way to Niagara Falls and Buffalo, New York. Nearly two weeks later, the pair departed by train for St. Louis, Missouri. As they traveled westward, they visited their mother's sister who lived just outside of St. Louis.

Beyond the flourishing cultural centers of the east coast and the Mississippi, the Münter sisters encountered the vast, wild prairies of rural America. Some sparsely populated areas lacked proper railways and road systems, posing travel difficulties as the young women journeyed further into the American plains. During this stage of the sojourn, Gabriele and her sister became acquainted with family members in rural social circles.

While in Arkansas, the two sisters chose to visit a second aunt, Caroline Schreiber, in the town of Moorefield. While visiting Schreiber, Münter celebrated her twenty-second birthday and received a state-of-the-art Kodak Bull's Eye No. 2 camera. This camera became the most extraordinary instrument of Münter's earliest artistic ventures. From behind the lens, she experimented with composition, lighting, and line. By examining Münter's photographs from her two-year journey in the United States, it becomes apparent that she developed and matured her sharp sense for aesthetic principles by practicing photography.

Informed by her acute isolation and increasing autonomy as a woman, Münter focused her American artistic examinations on solitary, reticent female subjects, often portrayed in domestic settings. The most striking example of this motif is her photograph 'Alte Frau im Lehnstuhl' from 1900 (fig. 1). In this image, an elegantly dressed woman rests languidly in a chair, mostly concealed by a table and a cluster of bottles. The photograph appears to have been taken from a seated position by virtue of the low vantage point. The woman's face is illuminated by a ray of bright sunlight steaming through the window beside her, contrasting sharply with the darkened room around her and her inky high-necked dress. The photograph is black and white, which highlights the sharp contrast between the sunlight on the woman's fair skin, her darkly tinted attire and the shadowy background.

This composition bears an unequivocal resemblance to one of Münter's later and most recognizable paintings: *Meditation* from 1917. In this image, Münter orchestrates a scene in which the solitary woman's figure is largely concealed, this time by the edge of the canvas. Kaleidoscopic colors rhythmically punctuate the shadowy interior: violet tulips arranged in a vase, amber sunlight streaming softly through the window, a bronze lamp with a ruby red shade, and a small plate of ripe, crimson fruit. The woman, painted in neutral hues, is arranged on the bottom left of the canvas. She gazes dreamily into space, curling her fingers to rest gently below her bottom lip. In both the photograph and the painting, Münter incorporates an open window, further



Fig. 1. Gabriele Münter. *Alte Frau im Lehnstuhl*, St. Louis. 1900. Photograph. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

emphasizing the contrast between the external world and the isolation of the interior.⁹ Though the window in the photograph remains unseen, its presence accentuates the existence of a world beyond the confines of domesticity. In subsequent photographs and paintings, Münter refines this motif, known as *Fensterbilder* (window pictures), offering a glimpse through visible windows into the world beyond. The window acts as a conduit through which the viewer may observe an auxiliary scene.

The woman's placement in both images is of primary importance. It seems that Münter was interested in experimenting with imbalanced compositions, likely because of the impromptu, photographic quality they achieved.¹⁰ She combines color and contrast with the arrangement of her subjects to create an asymmetrical scene. This sort of irregular composition is unusual and infrequently seen in paintings or drawings.¹¹ However, this haphazard arrangement hints at Münter's affinity for photography and her ability to capture instantaneous moments, either on film or on canvas.

Münter continued this thematic investigation of isolated, domestic women in her American photography. 'Junge Frau, in einem Türrahmen sitzend' (fig. 2), 'Mrs. Allen in ihrem Wohnraum' (fig. 3), and 'Lesende Frau im Profil' (fig. 4) typify this motif. 'Junge Frau' (1899/1900) depicts a contemplative young woman reclining in a shadowy doorway, perhaps escaping the relentless heat in Marshall, Texas, where Münter took this photograph. The young woman, likely one of Münter's own cousins, turns her face toward the viewer, though she directs her gaze away from the lens.¹² This behavior begets a sensation of spontaneity. In the background, a towering tree is visible through the open doorway, obscured slightly by the luminous glow of the sun. This is one of Münter's earliest implementations of a true *Fensterbild*. It is highly plausible that Münter derived inspiration from this photograph when composing later paintings *The Future (Woman in Stockholm)* (1917) and *Breakfast with Birds* (1934), as both feature prominent *Fensterbilder*.

Similarly, 'Mrs. Allen in ihrem Wohnraum' (1899/1900) merges an interior portrait with a "window picture." Mrs. Allen, whose identity we know from the photograph's title, rests comfortably in a chair in her living room. Her body inhabits the center of the photograph and dominates the scene. An intense, clear light illuminates her pale face and gown, suggesting this portrait was taken in close proximity to an open window or doorway. The dark backdrop rudimentarily affixed to the ceiling hangs limply behind Mrs. Allen and contrasts with her sunlit frame. Behind her and to the left, two stately trees emerge into view through the second and visible open window. While Münter could have easily adjusted the viewpoint to eliminate the background, its inclusion contextualizes the woman's placement within her home



Fig. 2. Gabriele Münter. *Junge Frau, in einem Türrahmen sitzend, Marshall, Texas*. 1899/1900. Photograph. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

and once again reveals Münter's interest in merging ancillary scenes of life with primary subject matter.

The final vignette, 'Lesende Frau' (1899/1900), depicts a young woman absorbed in quiet meditative reading. Motionlessly positioned in profile, the young woman grasps a letter between her fingers. She gazes down to read its contents, barely inclining her head and chin. Once again, an unseen light source illuminates the subject's face and dress. However, the fabric backdrop remains in partial shadow and conceals the space behind the subject. By simplifying the background, Münter insulates the seated figure from her surroundings. Münter revisits this motif in an analogous composition entitled *In Gedanken* (1924). In this painted profile portrait, a pensive young woman gazes down in subdued reflection. Her face and neck inhabit the entirety of the canvas as if Münter has reduced the original, photographic composition to its most essential feature.



Fig. 3. Gabriele Münter. *Mrs. Allen in ihrem Wohnraum, Marshall, Texas*. 1899/1900. Photograph. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Later, more generic references to Münter's American connection may be found in her painting *Still Life, Red* from 1909, which features vibrant bowls of sumptuously ripe fruit, a vase of freshly-cut zinnia blooms, and an American flag draped across a red table. While Münter's contemporaries may not have recognized her American affiliations, it is a profound homage to her family and her own journey to the United States.

Within the still-life vocabulary, the American flag, likewise, would have stood out as incongruous in the German or French settings where Münter displayed her work. This note of incongruity, of being out of place, is removed only once one knows of Münter's personal links with the United States and recognizes the flag as a souvenir of her earlier lengthy trip there. Then the still life's disruptive juxtapositions become resolved in recognition of Münter's milieu, her interests and her past . . . To [Münter's contemporaries], the flag was



Fig. 4. Gabriele Münter. *Lesende Frau im Profil, Moorefield, Arkansas*. 1899/1900. Photograph. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

necessarily an odd intrusion, its presence inexplicable except perhaps as an exotic reference to the world of Teddy Roosevelt or of Karl May's popular adventure novels of Indian life, resonating with European conceptions of only a half-civilized America, and reasserting the "wildness" of Münter's Expressionist style.¹³

After Gabriele Münter returned to Germany, she reapplied herself to the pursuit of a formal artistic education. In 1902, she joined the avant-garde art academy known as the Phalanx School, co-founded by Wassily Kandinsky. Münter noted in her later recollections that Kandinsky, as her instructor, accused her of being "un-teachable," meaning that her instinct for art was so precise that he could only cultivate her innate talent, rather than teach her anything new.¹⁴ This remark contributed to the myth that Münter's art was "primitive," and originated from a naïve and minimal understanding of aesthetics. However, her artwork betrays this notion and instead testifies to Münter's creative ingenuity. The artist's journey to the United States unques-

tionably played a vital role in the development of this inherent skill. Because her years in the United States were largely devoid of art, Münter learned to create art without adhering to formal academic curricula.

In the transformation of Gabriele Münter from artistic dilettante to professional artist, the American experience was fundamental. . . . Drawing in an artistic void, without guidance or reinforcing models, Münter was forced to depend solely on her own artistic memory, her own previously taught and continuously developing skills, and her own judgment. The only means she could employ were the ones she herself supplied. Fostered by her isolation were unprecedented self-reliance and independence of spirit.¹⁵

During the subsequent decade, Gabriele Münter refined her artistry, preferring to render prosaic scenes of daily life on canvas, rather than capturing these domestic vignettes on film. By 1912, Münter's photography became a mode of passive documentation, rather than an outlet for creative impulses. As demonstrated previously, many of her mature paintings ostensibly refer to her earlier photographs, both in composition and subject matter.

It is not likely that Münter fully assimilated during her sojourn in the United States, as she visited the country with no intention of remaining there permanently. Her photographs reveal her exploration of American culture. Images show Gabriele and Emmy Münter hiking, smoking, conversing and eating at massive picnics with family and friends, trying their hands at farming, and enjoying amusement park rides. Because Münter was more frequently behind the camera, rather than in front of it, her images document what she found noteworthy, comical, or unusual. She occasionally gave her photographs English-language titles, including "Plantin' taters!" and "Jim Wade feeding the hogs," phrases that she likely learned from her American relatives.

The maturation of her personal autonomy while in the United States enabled Münter to establish herself as a prominent, vital member of the European artistic community. Though she never returned to the United States, Münter reestablished contact with her American cousins in the years immediately following the Second World War. Later, her work was exhibited at the Dalzell Hatfield Galleries in Los Angeles and the Leonhard Hutton Galleries in New York City. Her intrinsic comprehension of complex artistic principles developed during her sojourn in the United States, when Münter honed her proficiency into a deeply personal and enduring artistic style.

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Notes

¹ *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) challenged conventional, objective renderings of the external world, the Academic style that had remained largely unopposed for centuries prior to 1900. European “Academic art” had its roots in ancient classical sculpture and architecture and prioritized heroic or historical scenes. To contradict this timeworn aesthetic tradition, the *Blaue Reiter* emphasized nonrepresentational figures and preferred a lively, vibrant palette. The artists of the *Blaue Reiter* illustrated the perpetual tension between inner and outer worlds: the inner world of the human psyche and spirituality and the outer world of society and culture. Inspiration for this idea stemmed from the revolutionary scientific advancements postulated by Max Planck and Albert Einstein, which theorized the infinitely expanding, consistently dynamic universe.

² Twentieth-century art critic Karl Scheffler asserted, “Because true originality can only be found where inner necessity reigns. . . . Therefore, since woman cannot be original, she can only attach herself to men’s art. She is the imitatrix par excellence, the empathizer who sentimentalizes and disguises manly art forms.” Karl Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst* (Berlin, 1908). Quoted in Reinhold Heller, *Gabriele Münter: The Years of Expressionism 1903–1920* (New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 46.

³ Edouard Roditi, *Conversations with European Artists at Mid-Century* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, Publishers, 1990), 115–116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵ In her 1957 interview with Edouard Roditi, Gabriele Münter noted that the rest of Wilhelmine Scheuber’s family remained in the United States and became American citizens.

⁶ Carl Münter was known and regarded in Berlin as the “American Dentist”.

⁷ Heller, *Gabriele Münter*, 40.

⁸ Münter’s personal recollections provide us with the majority of the information regarding her travels and development as an artist. See Johannes Eichner, *Kandinsky und Gabriele Münter: von Ursprüngen Moderner Kunst* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1957).

⁹ Delia Gaze, ed., *Concise Dictionary of Women Artists* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 502.

¹⁰ Throughout Münter’s artistic career, she returned repeatedly to imbalanced, spontaneous compositions to mimic photography. *Still Life, Bedroom* (1909), *Kandinsky and Bossi at the Table* (1912), and *Return from Shopping (In the Streetcar)* (1908) are all excellent examples of this stylistic motif.

¹¹ Exceptions may be found in nineteenth-century French paintings, particularly in those works affiliated with the Parisian Impressionist movement.

¹² Such arrangement of gaze and posture recall *Portrait of Olga Hartmann* (1910) and *Portrait of a Young Woman (Young Polish Woman)* (1909).

¹³ Heller, *Gabriele Münter*, 106.

¹⁴ According to Münter’s later recollections, Kandinsky told her, “You are hopeless as a pupil. One cannot teach you anything. You can only do what you have inside you. You have everything instinctively . . . All I can do for you is to protect and cultivate your talent so that nothing false intervenes.” Quoted in Gaze, ed., *Concise Dictionary of Women Artists*, 500.

¹⁵ Heller, *Gabriele Münter*, 43.

