

## **The Scorpion Snuffbox - A Visual Journey into a Queer Novel**

Herstory of Our Queer Futures

The curated journey through the ideas of the novel *The Scorpion (Der Skorpion)*, published in the interwar period by German writer Anna Elisabet Weirauch (1887–1970), offers a subjective exploration, inspired in part by the technique of objective chance, into a "lesbian" universe of other times and places, expanded and updated on multiple planes with modern-day nuances. Objective chance is evoked by the surrealists of the '20s and the '30s as a creative technique based on the seemingly random encounter with an external cause whose emotional impact is so strong that it generates a burning passion. In this exhibit, the passion for *The Scorpion*, the first *bildungsroman* in the history of literature to follow the coming of age of a cisgender lesbian in 1920s Berlin, was cultivated by the friendship with lesbian activists Suzette Robichon and Traude Bührmann. Starting from this novel, which becomes a point of departure in formulating a broader perspective on the image of the lesbian, the research developed informally, dialogically, becoming an activist approach that navigates among absent or little-known narratives in our cultural space.

The writer Anna Elisabet Weirauch is born in Galați, where she spends the first years of her life. After losing her father, in 1891, she emigrates to Berlin. She lives in Germany for the rest of her life. After studying music and acting in high school, Weirauch begins her creative work as a member of the Max Reinhardt theater troupe in Berlin, where she plays various roles, including staging her own plays. Through theater, she discovers her passion for writing. In the mid-20s, the artist starts a lesbian family with Helena Geisenhainer, with whom she lives until death. The novel *The Scorpion (Der Skorpion)* was published in German in 3 volumes, in 1919, 1921 and 1931, and later republished in more editions. The narrative follows the coming of age of the main character, Mette, in relation to society, intimacy, female masculinity and lesbian identity.

The exhibit *The scorpion snuff box - a visual journey into a queer novel* revisits this history in a queer-surrealist dialogue with contemporary art that places the queer experience in a historical continuum. The documentary section includes fragments of history preserved in the collection of the lesbian archive Spinnboden in Berlin. These documents are an introduction into the lesbian universe of Weimar Germany, an era of liberalization that

transformed the city into a true queer capital, a period quickly cut by the rise of national-socialism and the start of the Second World War.

First recorded in 1866, the term 'lesbian' was not used in the interwar period, the current meanings being formulated by identity politics derived from the LGBT rights movement. While sexology in the first half of the past century uses the term "male homosexuality", literature written by women prefers the word "friends", in both Romanian and German. The notion of friendship, defined as "an affective and cooperative relationship between human beings that is characterized by sympathy, respect, mutual affinity", is the basis of any type of relationship on the spectrum of lesbianism. Our exhibit imagines lesbian culture from the perspective of friendship – a friendship that opposes heteronormative constructions of femininity, refusing to place women in a permanent competition for male attention. Solidarity, care, love, passion or sexual relations between "women" are understood as radical gestures that disrupt the patriarchal order.

The curatorial installation uses a political understanding of the term "lesbian", challenging both the hegemony of cisheteronormativity and the simplification of identities. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), theorist Sara Ahmed states that "identifying as a lesbian means moving towards women, which, given the system we live in, involves an active and perpetual distancing from men."<sup>1</sup> Through contemporary art, the anti-essentialist approach inspired by the novel introduces the visitor to a utopian space that gives voice to non-normative, lesbian, trans, nonbinary, feminine, feminist, queer subjectivities. The curatorial gesture of the symbolic exclusion of the "man" from the territory of the lesbian imagination is a refusal of the male gaze. Thus, the exhibit leaves room for subjectivities most often fetishized to assert their authenticity and their own aesthetics.

The selection of contemporary artwork intersects the themes of *The Scorpion* without illustrating or representing them, the relationship between the visual and the narrative being one of random complementarity. The novel's main themes, such as healing nature, same-sex attraction, the refusal to pathologize lesbian sexuality, female masculinity, childhood, the passion for literature written by women or the mysterious motif of the scorpion, have a visual counterpart in the exhibit.

*The Scorpion* Trilogy was published at the beginning of the past century, at a time of maximum effervescence of homoerotic culture, in the

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<sup>1</sup>In original: To identify as a lesbian is to turn towards women, which, given the system we live in, requires an active and perpetual turning away from men.

context of the liberalization of censorship, in an environment marked by the research and activism of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), founder of the Institute of Sexology (Institut für Sexualwissenschaft) in Berlin. As early as the end of the 19th century, people in Germany campaigned for the removal of paragraph 175, which criminalized homosexuality, from the German Criminal Code, in tandem with intensive research in the field of sexology. After the revolution of November 1918, although deeply affected by poverty, hunger, labor strikes and the trauma of war, interwar Berlin stood out with its unprecedented intellectual, artistic and social freedom. In 1914, Magnus Hirschfeld published his groundbreaking work, *The Homosexuality of Man and Woman* (*Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes*). Subsequently, a significant number of educational conferences, film screenings and other programs were organized within his institute. Thus, the hegemony of heteronormativity is occasionally disrupted by research such as that carried out by the Institute of Sexology in Berlin or, on a smaller scale, by artistic and literary creations such as the novel *The Scorpion* .

Although homosexual acts were illegal in the '20s and the number of arrests and acts of violence against erotic gestures considered immoral was very high, Berlin tolerated or even allowed a greater amount of "proto queer" culture than other places. Therefore, *The Scorpion* appeared in a city where lesbianism had begun to become somewhat visible. For example, the first lesbian magazine in the world, published in the German capital between 1924 and 1933 and entitled *Die Freundin – Das Ideale Freundschaftsblatt* (*The Girlfriend – The Ideal Diary of Friendship*) was distributed in one million copies. In this context, the novel was well received, enjoying a favorable reception in the press and a subsequent republication.

There are no known echoes of this in the Romanian press. However, love between women was not a completely foreign subject even in interwar Romania. Less scandalous than male homosexuality, lesboerotic literature written by women appears in the work of writers such as Hortensia Papadat Bengescu (*Ciclul Halippilor*) or Henriette Yvonne Stahl (*Între noapte și zi*). However, interwar literary narratives of love between women are notable for the absence of a happy ending. Could the literary ideal of the love story - "once upon a time... and they lived happily ever after" - be unimaginable for a lesbian family? A female character of the famous French writer Colette said, referring to Paris in the '30s: "Two women who decided to live together, alone, are never safe. Everything is allowed for them, except peace." (*Le pur et l'impure*, 1932).

The novel *The Scorpion* and the biography of writer Anna Elisabet Weirauch offer an example that, without denying the specific violence experienced by lesbians, leaves room for healing, for survival, for life. In the exhibit *The scorpion snuff box - a visual journey into a queer novel*, the lesbian is represented both in intimate instances about the body and sexuality, starting from pathologization towards liberation, healing, love, desire, revolt, anger, mourning, and in relation to specific current issues shared with other women's struggles against racism, antisemitism, or for legalizing of sex work. Friendship between women, whether it takes the form of intimate relationships or remains an affective alliance without sexual implications, is understood as an alliance, a "sisterhood", a solidarity that disrupts the proper functioning of the patriarchal order.

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