Jonathan Long

Blossfeldt, Karl (1865-1932)

Karl Blossfeldt was a sculptor and a teacher of plant modelling at the Unterrichtsanstalt des Königlichen Kunstgewerbemuseums (Institute of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum) in Berlin, where he worked from 1898 until 1930. His reputation as a photographer rests on two books: *Urformen der Kunst* (Art Forms in Nature, 1928) and *Wundergarten der Natur* (Magic Garden of Nature, 1932). Both consist of extreme close-ups of plants, and seek to identify in natural forms the blueprints of industrial design. The images are characterised by extraordinary detail, revealing to the eye the geometrical structures and formal complexities of common flora. Blossfeldt had been using photographs since the early 1900s as tools of instruction for his design students, but the resonance of his books goes beyond instrumental applied photography. His artistic lineage has been traced to Jugendstil, while his use of the plants’ Latin names and their serial presentation link his work to the tradition of the herbarium and to the scientific photography of the nineteenth century. Urformen der Kunst was enthusiastically received by critics – Walter Benjamin and Lászlo Moholy-Nagy among them –, and Blossfeldt’s work has also often been seen as part of the inter-war German Neues Sehen (New Vision) movement.

References

Blossfeldt, K. (2014) The Complete Published Work, ed. H. C. Adam, Cologne: Taschen.