

Prof. Dr. Bettina Gockel
University of Zurich

Short Vita:

Prof. Dr. Bettina Gockel holds the Chair for History of Fine Arts at the Institute of Art History at the University of Zurich. She has been a Fellow at the Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science in Berlin (Germany), and a Member at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (U.S.A.). Her research interests are the history of art and photography with a special focus on the history of perception, psychology, and the history of science.

Abstract:

**Persia: Places of Longing as Landscapes of the Soul.
Photography, the Literature and Poetry of Romanticism and Expressionism,
and the Travels of Swiss Photographer and Writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach**

The Swiss photographer and writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908-1942) travelled four times to Persia and more often through her writings and memories; she used her experiences in Persia like the ones of her other travels, as a universal resource for her writings and imaginations. All too often, Schwarzenbach's writings are understood as more or less direct biographical expressions. This approach overlooks the universal literary meaning of her work. It is true that it is not easy to differentiate between the author as a real person and the author as a literary persona, especially in the case of such a charismatic personality like Schwarzenbach. And it is no exaggeration to state that Schwarzenbach was already a legend during her lifetime. This historical fact, namely the legend-building by Schwarzenbach herself and by the persons and artistic circles that surrounded her, underlines all the more that one needs to be cautious when identifying biography and art.

This paper seeks to explain Schwarzenbach's life, travels, photographs and writings through her knowledge of and interest in literature and poetry of the Romantic and Expressionist Era. Moreover, her acquaintance with the avant-garde art and literature of her own time offer an important context in order to understand her work, not least how she invented Persia through her photographs and writings. The place of longing becomes a literary and visual figure in her writings and photographs, and thus the landscape transforms into a landscape of the soul. The healing of the soul was a central theme and metaphor as well as a reality in the avant-garde circles of Schwarzenbach's time. Her writings and pictures are not mirrors of her mind and soul, but attempts to find a literary and poetic language for a universal human, if not humanistic theme, specifically the attempt to connect the inner and the external experiences in order to find harmony. This grandiose post-romantic project was certainly informed by personal experiences, but, as Thomas Mann stated at some point, the personal was only fodder for the arts, neither more nor less.



“Persia. Annemarie, 1935“, In: Alexis Schwarzenbach, Auf der Schwellen des Fremden. Das Leben der Annemarie Schwarzenbach, Munich 2008, page 278.