

## Otti Berger: Vision and Material – A Legacy

By Dr. Sigalit Meidler-Waks, 29 May 2025

Otti Berger was one of the most significant textile artists of the 20th century. Her work at the Bauhaus and her later activities in her own studio were characterized by modernity, precision, and a spirit of experimentation. In a time when women were underrepresented in the art scene, she carved out her place with extraordinary talent and perseverance. As a central figure in Bauhaus weaving, she combined functionality with aesthetics and was seen as a pioneer of modern design.

Her career was abruptly ended by the rise of National Socialism, but her work lives on, in fabrics that not only shaped spaces but also changed mindsets. For a long time, the work of Otta Berger, a highly successful and innovative modern textile designer, was forgotten. Her work exemplifies the creative power of women in the modern world. Her courage, visionary power, and designs continue to inspire artists, designers, and historians to this day. Otta Berger was an artist who wove a vision with threads, and whose artistic voice deserves renewed recognition.

**Otti Berger** was born as Otilie Esther Berger on October 4, 1898, into a Jewish family in the village of Zmajevac, in the Baranya region, which was part of Austria-Hungary at the time and now belongs to the Republic of Croatia. Due to Zmajevac being referred to in some documents by its Hungarian name, Vörösmart, Berger is often referred to as a Hungarian artist.



Her parents were Lajos Berger (1860–1941) and Ida Krausz (1880–1944), who were merchants in Zmajevac. She had two siblings, half-brother Oskar (Oszkar, 1888–1944), from Lajos Berger's first marriage to Regina Bichler, who later continued the family business, and younger brother Otto (1900–1960), who worked as a fashion designer in a salon in Karlovy Vary and Prague.

**Fig. 1** Getty. (n.d.). Otta Berger, Textile Design. Getty, Public Domain. Accessed March 19, 2025, from <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/104FA5>

After attending the girls' high school in Vienna, Otta Berger studied at the Royal Academy of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb (now the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb) from 1922 to 1926. From 1927 to 1931, she studied at the Bauhaus Dessau. Jews played a significant role in the Bauhaus movement, both as students and teachers, as well as supporters and collectors. The Bauhaus, an art, design, and architecture school founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius in Weimar, attracted many Jewish artists, architects, and designers who were drawn to its avantgarde and interdisciplinary approach. Several prominent Jewish figures significantly shaped the Bauhaus. Among them were Marcel Breuer (1902–1981), a Hungarian architect and designer whose iconic furniture pieces include the Wassily Chair; László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), a painter, photographer, and Bauhaus teacher known for his experimental work with light and photography; Anni Albers (1899–1994), a textile artist and one of the most important representatives of textile art at the Bauhaus; and Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (1898–1944), a designer, architect, and art educator who later taught children in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

With the rise of the National Socialists in 1933, the Bauhaus was defamed as a source of "degenerate art" and closed. Many Jewish Bauhaus artists fled into exile, particularly to the United States, Palestine, or Great Britain. The so-called "White City" was established in Tel

Aviv, with a collection of over 4,000 Bauhaus-style buildings designed by Jewish architects who had studied at or were influenced by the Bauhaus. Thanks in part to Jewish architects and designers who kept alive its innovative approaches, the Bauhaus movement continues to have a significant influence on architecture, design, and art worldwide. The ideas of functional design, typography, and modern architecture, in particular, were further advanced by Jewish Bauhaus members and integrated into the post-war modern era.

Otti Berger initially attended the preliminary introduction course with László Moholy-Nagy, one of the most important representatives of Constructivism, and lectures by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. Moholy-Nagy had his students create tactile panels to train their sense of touch. Berger, who was nearly deaf after an illness, was visibly enthusiastic about this task, and Moholy-Nagy was equally impressed by her execution of a tactile panel, so much so that he published her design in his book "From Material to Architecture" (1929).



**Fig. 2** Group portrait of the weaving class of Webmeister Kurt Wanke at the Bauhaus Dessau. Front row, second from the right: Otti Berger. Anni Albers: *On Weaving*, Dover Publications, Mineola 1993, p. 78 / Bauhaus Archiv Berlin.

After the preliminary course, Berger entered the Bauhaus weaving workshop, a field that was often assigned to women at the time but was rethought by Berger with a revolutionary approach. Here, Berger developed a keen sense of materiality. Under the guidance of Gunta Stözl, she learned complex weaving techniques and developed her own methods that were unique in their clarity and functionality. She developed a deep understanding of material, structure, and visual language and bridged the gap between art and industry, craftsmanship and theory.



**Fig. 3** Otti Berger, Kinderzimmerteppich, 1929. Photo credit: Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz

After completing her training, Berger graduated in 1930 with a Bauhaus diploma. She then briefly took over the leadership of the weaving workshop herself. During this time, she experimented with various techniques and materials and also incorporated plastic into textiles, which she designed for mass production. This led to the creation of innovative material combinations that would later bring her great success in her own studio. In 1932, she patented her textile designs, which she called "Furniture Fabric Double Weaves," becoming the only Bauhaus textile designer who patented her designs after the school closed. She finally received the patent in 1934, after which she sold the rights to the Shriver Corporation.

The "Furniture Fabric Double Weaves" were made of artificial horsehair; other fabrics such as "Lame-Plume Fabric" or "Double Fabric for Furniture, Wall Covering, etc." were made of cellophane and other cellulose-based ribbon materials.

In 1932, she left the Bauhaus and opened her own business at Fasanenstrasse 13 in Berlin-Charlottenburg, which she called "Otti Berger Studio for Textiles" (Otti Berger atelier für textilien). There, she designed fabrics for interior decoration, fashion, and industrial use. Her style was characterized by geometric shapes, strong colors, and functional materials. As a textile designer, she collaborated with various international manufacturers. She was one of the most innovative and successful textile designers among the graduates of Bauhaus and created revolutionary light-reflecting and sound-absorbing fabrics. Her company enjoyed great commercial success and she was one of the first designers to use her own designer label. Her modern creations were featured in international magazines and exhibitions.

Name	Profession	Address	Status
Brosch, Fr. Benny	Kunstschülerin	Breslau 11	Volljude
Brosch, Erika	Schneid- graphikerin	Stalefeld Kaisertstr. 11	Volljude
Brosch, Frits	Architekt u. Künstler	Berlin 9 35 Siedlitzstr. 8	Volljude
Brosch, Julius	Schneid- graphiker	Breslau Koblenzstr. 17	Volljude
Bundorf, Frits	Kunstschüler	Hagen 1/Seestf.	Vierteiljude
Bundorf, Max	Architekt	Hamburg 27 Klara Str. 34	Halbjude
Bunzgen, William	Kunstschüler	Königsberg	Volljude
Benz, Wilhela	Bildhauer	Berlin	alt. Jude verheiratet
Berowits, Paul	Kunstschüler	Berlin 9 62	Volljude
Berowits, Samuel	Kunstschüler	Berlin 9 35	Volljude
Berg, Isidor	Kunstschüler	Königsberg S. 1.3	Volljude
Berger, Ottil	Malerin	Stn.-Charlottenburg Fasanenstr. 13	Volljude
Berges, Selig	Kunstschüler	Hamburg 26	Volljude
Bergmann, Anna	Malerin	Frankfurt/Main Neue Mainstr. 52	Volljude
Bergmann, Rudolf	Kunstschüler	Stuttgart	Volljude
Bergner, Peter	Inszenier- regisseur	Berlin 9 36 Ruhmerstr. 9	Halbjude
Berkits, Thea	Schneid- graphikerin	Berlin 9 19 Brennstr. 15	Volljude
Berling, Max	Architekt	Sobornthal/Weserm.	Halbjude
Berlowitz, Selma	Kunstschüler	Stn.-Hilberseim	Volljude
Bernau, Ernst	Schneid- graphiker	Stn.-Hilberseim Friedrichstr. 17	Vierteiljude
Bernheimer, Lilly	Schneid- graphikerin	Stuttgart Königsstr. 3	Volljude
Bernstein, Charlotte	Kopistin	Stn.-Hilberseim Grossdammallee 20 3	Volljude
Bernstein, Georg	Kunstschüler	Berlin 9 8	Volljude
Bernstein, Hans	Kunstschüler	Stn.-Hilberseim	Volljude
Bernstein, Siegfried	Architekt	Berlin 9 4 Kronenstr. 17	Volljude
Berthold, Franz	Malen u. Kupfer	Dresden-A. Königsstr. 3	Halbjude
Beth, Henriette	Malerin	Stn.-Charlottenburg Königsstr. 5	Volljude

After the National Socialists seized power, Berger was systematically excluded as a Jewish artist. In May 1936, the National Socialists withdrew her license as a “model artist” (Musterbilderin) as a foreigner and due to her Jewish origin and excluded her from the Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer).

The exclusion of Jews from the Reich Chamber of Culture was a central step in the National Socialist cultural policy of systematically excluding and ousting Jewish artists, writers, musicians, and other cultural workers from public life. It was founded in 1933 under the leadership of Joseph Goebbels and served to control and standardize cultural life in the Third Reich. Membership in the RKK was compulsory for anyone who wanted to work in cultural professions.

Fig. 4 List of Jews, Jewish “half-breeds” and those married to Jews excluded from the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste since 1933. 1936-1944. R 55/21305 vol. 6, subject file. Federal Archives, Berlin-Lichterfelde, p. 15.

The First Ordinance to the Reich Chamber of Culture Act of September 22, 1933, stipulated that only persons of “Aryan” descent or “equals” could be members of the chamber. This meant that Jews were effectively barred from any professional activity in the arts, music, literature, film, theater, and the press. By the time the Nuremberg Laws came into effect in 1935, this exclusion was complete.

The consequences were dramatic: numerous Jewish artists lost their livelihoods, were forced to emigrate, or faced repression and persecution, including Ottil Berger. She initially fled to England in 1937. There she had to gain a foothold in an already established market. Her innovative ideas clashed with traditional British working methods, which made it difficult to realize her artistic vision. Her efforts to find work ultimately proved unsuccessful.

She spoke little English and was isolated due to her hearing impairment. Disheartened, she wrote in 1938, "I can't get through to people, sitting alone and sad and discouraged day after day, evening after evening."<sup>1</sup> The linguistic and cultural differences not only hindered her professional integration but also led to a sense of uprooting and isolation.

Together with her long-time partner, the Bauhaus architect Ludwig Hilberseimer, she embarked on a final journey before he emigrated to the United States. Her exile in London remained a tragic interim stop in her short but artistically influential life.

Due to her mother's severe illness in 1938, she initially returned to Zmajevac and attempted to immigrate to the United States from there. Despite the efforts of her fiancé Ludwig Hilberseimer, as well as Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, she initially did not receive a visa for the United States. When she finally did receive a visa, it was too late; the outbreak of World War II prevented her emigration. In April 1944, she was deported to Auschwitz with her family and murdered there. After the war, Ludwig Hilberseimer bequeathed pattern books and fabrics of Ottil Berger, which had remained in London, to the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard and the Art Institute of Chicago to make them accessible to the public. In the postwar period, her work was largely forgotten. It was only in

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from <https://www.fembio.org/biographie.php/frau/biographie/otti-berger/> retrieved on 24.08.2025.

the last few decades that her work was rediscovered in the context of a renaissance of interest in the Bauhaus. Today, museums around the world showcase her fabrics, designs, and texts.



The temporary Bauhaus archive in Berlin presented the exhibition "Otti Berger: Fabrics for the Architecture of Modernism" in the spring of 2024, featuring an installation by Judith Raum on Berger's work. The English-language publication "Otti Berger: Weaving for Modernist Architecture" was released to accompany the exhibition.

Fig. 5 Stolperstein Otti Berger, Fasanenstrasse 13 Berlin-Charlottenburg

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**\*Additional sources in which Otilija Ester Berger is mentioned can be found in the artist registry here: [Persecuted Jewish Artists, Otilija Ester Berger].**