



Equisetum heimale (Winter Horsetail), a young shoot enlarged 25 times

Date

1929

Primary Maker

Karl Blossfeldt

Medium

Rotogravure

Description

Although his photographs imply a close study of botany, Karl Blossfeldt was trained as an artist. He apprenticed at an ironworks and sculpture foundry in 1881 before moving to Berlin to attend the Unterrichtsanstalt des Koniglichen Kunstgewerbemuseums (Institute of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum). Between 1890 and 1896, he studied in Rome under Moritz Meurer, a German decorative artist who specialized in ornament and, as a proponent of the Arts and Crafts movement, looked to natural forms—rather than man-made or industrial ones—for inspiration. While working for Meurer, Blossfeldt began creating and photographing plaster casts and bronze models of botanical specimens. When he took a position at his alma mater in Berlin in 1898, he created a photographic archive of plants and natural forms that he used in his teaching of industrial design. Originally a means to an end, his photographs of plant forms magnified up to thirty times their natural size were soon embraced by the artistic avant-garde as precursors of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement—which promoted a dissociated, documentary style—and, in the incongruity brought about by their extreme magnification and phallic structures, even of the Surrealist movement. Blossfeldt's

photographs were exhibited to the public for the first time in 1926 at the Galerie Nierendorf in Berlin and were disseminated in two books published during his lifetime, in 1928 and 1932. *Equisetum hiemale* (winter horsetail) is a nonflowering perennial native to damp woodlands and the edges of bodies of water in North America and Eurasia. Blossfeldt, inspired by medicinal plant guides and classification books of the Middle Ages and by specimen books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Carl Linnaeus's herbaria, typically photographed his subjects against a gray or white background. He collected specimens from the countryside rather than purchasing artificially cultivated plants, believing that "only simple forms are suited to being rendered sculpturally." (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017) Plate 1 from the 1929 (2nd) edition of "Urformen der Kunst" ("Art Forms in Nature").

Dimensions

Image: 10 5/16 × 5 15/16 in. (26.2 × 15.1 cm) Sheet: 12 1/4 × 9 11/16 in. (31.1 × 24.6 cm)