

The depiction of female skiers in the context of art and design

Since its inception, skiing as both a leisure activity and a competitive sport has been accompanied by effective advertising images devised by well-known artists. On the basis of selected visual media (magazines, posters, postcards and photographs), above all from Germany and the United States, this study examines how the (body) image of female skiers was portrayed in the first half of the twentieth century. Breaking new ground in art-historical research, it investigates whether painters created different images than photographers, and if so, why. The main focus is on the “Roaring Twenties”, since it was above all during this period that the “skirt-wearing woman with her body squeezed into a corset” was transformed into the “new woman” who could become a top-rate sportswoman and even a medal-winning athlete if her body was trained to perform at a high level. Although there is very little source material available on the birth and development of women’s skiing, there is evidence that in the period around 1900, female skiers were a controversial social phenomenon. In urban circles, skiing emerged as a fashionable pastime of high society, and this was reflected among other things in the print media; in the countryside, by contrast, skiing was condemned as a “deplorable custom of city folks” – at least with regard to the sporting activities of so-called “winter enthusiasts”, as historical records show. The image of a woman skiing was a popular motif in ambitious sports magazines such as “Sport im Bild”, as well as in lifestyle magazines of the 1920s and 30s, including “die neue linie” and “Vanity Fair”. The female skier not only adorned the covers of magazines; she also featured on postcards and posters. This study examines how the image of the female skier is staged in and by the media: what type of woman is depicted, and what physical ideals are communicated? It also raises the question as to what part art played in constructing and shaping the identity of women who were actively involved in the sport of skiing.

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