



Price, D. (2016). Beauty on display: Karol Schenker in New York. In M. Halwani (Ed.), *Mas-ter of beau-ty: Karl Schenk-er's gla-m-orous im-ages* Walther König.

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Beauty on Display

‘Karl’ Schenker in New York 1925–30

Dorothy Price

In a December 1925 issue of the journal *Der Photograph*, buried in the ‘Miscellaneous’ section, one could read that the famous Berlin studio of Karl Schenker was now in the possession of Mario von Bucovich.¹ The buyer, until this time a virtually unknown photographer and fellow émigré from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, took over in Berlin as rapidly as Schenker had left. According to fellow Berlin photographer, Heinz Hajek-Halke, a level of sensation hung over this sudden turn of events, as ‘Schenker disappeared to the USA like a thief in the night.’² However, reports from the auction where he sold his fine antique furniture (including a grand piano), suggest that the departure was less dramatic than Hajek-Halke remembered; it was more likely the unexpectedness of Schenker’s departure, at the height of a successful photographic career in Berlin that had taken him a good decade to establish, that was the cause of Hajek-Halke’s concerns.³ Nevertheless, one could also take the view that to be at the height of popular fashionable taste in Berlin in 1925 meant to embrace all things American. The longed-for period of economic stabilisation ushered into Germany by American loans and business reforms via the Dawes Plan after 1924 meant that cultural style and fashionable pursuits in Weimar Berlin were to be understood in terms of the widespread embrace of a new ‘Amerikanismus.’ Jazz, the Charleston, cinema, Fordism, mass media, consumer culture and fashion were just some of the hallmarks of an Americanised *zeitgeist* that dominated the mid years of the Weimar Republic. Perhaps for Schenker, always in pursuit of the ideal, a trip to America was the next logical step in the trajectory of a successful commercial career to date.

Whatever the circumstances that prompted his departure, for the next five years Schenker seems to have taken a temporary break from both photography and Berlin. Together with his second wife, nineteen year old Lilli, Karl Schenker set sail for New York from Cherbourg on 17 October 1925, just a few days prior to his thirty-ninth birthday.⁴ On arrival in the USA and

¹ Cited in Eckhardt Köhn, ‘Inszenierte Mannequins oder Puppen,’ in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28.8.2013, 4, 4.

² Letters from Heinz Hajek-Halke to Walter Boje from 2.1.1982 and 11.1.1982 (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg).

³ Cf. auction announcement in *Berliner Tageblatt*, 29.9.1925.

⁴ Passenger Lists of Vessels arriving in New York 1820–1897. Microfilm Roll: Roll 3745; Lines 12 and 13; Page Number 55. Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36, National Archives, Washington D.C.

full of hope that he could establish a second career as a painter, he changed his name from Karl to Karol and set about re-inventing himself, sidelining his former successes in fashion and portrait photography in order to promote his work as a portrait artist instead. The reasons for this re-emphasis remain unclear, but what we do know, with the benefit of hindsight, is that it was not an entirely successful shift of focus. On his return to Berlin in 1930 he downplayed his forays into the visual arts in favour of a new sharp-edged approach to the familiar and evidently more successful financial milieu of fashion photography, skills which he seemed to have privately honed whilst abroad.

Piecing together fragments of Schenker's career in New York from available records remains a challenge. He seems to have deftly avoided being captured by either the 1925 or the 1930 New York census, though we do have evidence of both his arrival and departure from the city through contemporary newspaper records, ship manifests and passenger lists.⁵ It is from these that we can ascertain that Lilli and their daughter Iola (born on 8 October 1926), remained in America after Schenker's return to Berlin (on board the 'North German Lloyd liner Berlin' on 13 November 1930).⁶

We can also presume that Schenker's previous success and reputation in Berlin enabled him to move swiftly into a similar social milieu in New York. His first residency at the desirably exclusive Waldorf Astoria provided a good base-camp.⁷ An association with some of the major theatrical starlets and fashionable women of the day emerges from a trawl through the press of the era, particularly from the records of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and *Vanity Fair*, as well as one or two other titles from the time. Yet what binds all of these sparse references together and remains a pivotal starting point for the beginnings of a reconstruction of Schenker's career in New York, is an extant exhibition guide that lists 28 'Paintings and Drawings by Karol [sic!] Schenker' on display at the Gainsborough Galleries, Central Park South, from 17 January to 9 February 1927.⁸

The catalogue is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, nothing of Schenker's former career as a famous Berlin photographer is mentioned although almost all of the works

⁵ Passenger Lists of Vessels arriving in New York 1820–1897. Microfilm Roll: Roll 3745; Lines 12 and 13; Page Number 55. Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36, National Archives, Washington D.C.; UK Outward Passenger Lists 1890–1960, Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and successors, Outward Passenger Lists BT27, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, England; 'American Artists Not Appreciated in the U.S.', says Bartlett in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13.11.1930, 19, 19, a notice concerning Schenker's departure from New York. Passenger Lists also tell us that Lilli and Iola didn't stay put in New York during Schenker's five year sojourn there, but made at least two return trips to Europe in 1926 and 1928 respectively. For further information, see The National Archives records, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, England.

⁶ As reported in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13.11.1930, 19, 19.

⁷ New York Passenger Lists 3.10.1925, roll 3745, numbers 7 and 8.

⁸ *The Gainsborough Galleries Announce an Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Karol Schenker* January 17th to February 9th 1927; copy held at the Frick Collection, New York.

included are drawn or painted portraits, with a slight predominance of female over male sitters. The sitters themselves include members of the minor aristocracy, playwrights, composers and performers such as Gerhard Hauptmann, Giacomo Puccini, Enrico Caruso, Leni Riefenstahl and Dorothy Knapp, the American ambassador first to Germany (1922–25) and then to Great Britain (1925–29), Alanson B. Houghton, and Schenker's own wife and daughter, amongst a number of others. What is also clear from the catalogue is that many of the paintings and drawings included in the show were by no means new commissions; the exhibition appeared to be a summation of his works in pencil, crayon, water colour and oil from his previous four years in both Berlin and New York. The catalogue itself only contains a list of titles of works numbered from 1 to 28 with no additional notes or illustrations. However, despite its brevity, it remains a vital clue as to when, where and how some of these artworks were previously commissioned and disseminated. This is all the more apparent when read in conjunction with variously placed articles on Schenker's artistic credentials that appeared in the American popular press either side of the exhibition's opening and closing, as well as previously circulated images in the German popular press during Schenker's time in Berlin.

A short article on 'Recent Work by a Viennese Artist' appeared on page 168 of *Vanity Fair* in November 1926, just two months prior to the exhibition opening at the Gainsborough Galleries.⁹ The article was illustrated by four female portraits focused on head and upper body; drawings by Schenker, two of which had previously illustrated Max Osborn's article on 'Karl Schenker, der Maler und Photograph' in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (1924) and one of which had graced the front cover of German fashion magazine *Die Dame* at the end of August 1923. ((Abb. 1)) In the pages of *Vanity Fair* the heads are re-presented under the guise of national 'types' – 'Spanish', 'German', 'Chinese' and 'French' – rather than as individual sitters, a point to which we shall return in a moment.

Sixth months earlier, in its May 1926 issue, *Vanity Fair* had also published a satirical photo-piece entitled 'Five Fair and Familiar Faces Among the Chronic First-Nighters' illustrated with Schenker's photographs of five of his hand-made wax mannequins, accompanied by fictitious names and brief snap-shots: ((Abb. 2))

'Miss Coralie Trance: This Park Avenue bird-brain is invited to all the premières because her being a mute makes her coming a real treat to actors and audience.

Mlle. Celeste Basquine: Little Basquine (*se dit* that she is the *chère amie* of former rival bootlegger) makes every first night because she gives such snappy suppers afterwards.

⁹ Author unknown, 'Recent Work by a Viennese Artist,' in *Vanity Fair*, November 1926, 168, 168.

Mrs. Hedwig Upsala: Though hers is the mind of a canary, this Great Neck matron owes her theatre invitations to the fact that she last coughed in 1913.

Miss Annabelle Blemish: On every free-list because she is so audibly crazy about everything from Ibsen to Florence Mills. She was wild over Duse and RinTinTin.

Lady Bellwether: Fair hostess of Turpitude Towers, Kent, she concludes this gallery made from wax by the hands of a very imaginative artist.

Note: The creator of the wax figures on this page is Karl Schenker, a noted Austrian artist, who has recently arrived in this country from Berlin. Mr Schenker, an expert draughtsman as well as an amateur photographer, achieved a notable reputation on the continent as the delineator of extremely graceful feminine types. In his spare moments Mr Schenker made these wax figures. They are life size.’¹⁰

The images supplied for this satirical introductory piece had previously been well circulated in Germany, initially in Franz Blei’s 1925 article ‘Zu Karl Schenkers Wachsfiguren’¹¹ published in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* and subsequently in Max Osborn’s ‘Mannequins oder Wachspuppen?’ in a 1925 issue of *Die Dame*.¹² One can only presume that this first American *Vanity Fair* presentation of Schenker as ‘a noted Austrian artist’ and ‘an expert draughtsman’ over and above his skills as a photographer was prompted by Schenker himself in his search for a new US market for his ‘graceful feminine types.’ The ‘Note’ both declares the range of his talents and simultaneously and deliberately promotes the shift in his focus from photography to the visual arts.

In the subsequent *Vanity Fair* feature of a few months later, it is only Schenker’s draughtsmanship that is demonstrated via the reproduced images of the four portrait studies of supposedly national ‘types.’ The accompanying article, like its May precursor, erroneously constructs Schenker as an artist of Austrian origin (rather than Rumanian). This is perhaps a common cipher for his origins in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, but by association it also aligns him with more aristocratic roots than the parvenu Berlin he had left behind. Indeed the November article makes much of Schenker as ‘a native of Vienna, which is of course reputed to be the international headquarters for feminine beauty.’ The home of Gustav Klimt, the Vienna Secession and the Wiener Werkstätte, Vienna’s reputation as a city of luxury, adornment and beauty remained unabated even after the decline of the Austro-Hungarian

¹⁰ Author unknown, ‘Five Fair and Familiar Faces Among the Chronic First-Nighters,’ in *Vanity Fair*, May 1926, 72, 72.

¹¹ Franz Blei, ‘Zu Karl Schenkers Wachsfiguren,’ in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (4/1926), 263–264.

¹² Max Osborn, ‘Mannequins oder Wachspuppen?’, in *Die Dame*, 23 (1925), 6–9 (translated and reproduced here pp. ##-##).

Empire and the death of its most celebrated portraitist in 1918. The majority of Klimt's portraits, like Schenker's, were of women. From studying both artists' work it is visually evident that Schenker was self-consciously trying to imitate aspects of Klimt's oeuvre; re-animating the nostalgia associated with the Viennese painter's glittering fin-de-siècle beauties in his own era of rationalised industry, cool sobriety and new objectivity. As Jane Kallir has observed, 'one is hard-pressed to discern the personalities of Klimt's women.'¹³ Indeed, Klimt's contemporary, the Viennese critic Bertha Zuckerkandl also noted, on the occasion of an exhibition opening in 1903, that Klimt had excised 'any individual characteristics, so that only the typical, a sublime extract of the female type is captured in pure style.'¹⁴

Vanity Fair notes that Schenker 'was at first a photographer, and a very distinguished one, but he soon allowed this art to become a mere hobby, and devoted all serious attention to portrait painting.' It then proceeds to assess Schenker's work in implicitly gendered and colonialist terms, commenting that: 'Some of his best canvases, notably that of Alanson B. Houghton, American Ambassador to the Court of St. James have been of men, but he has preferred to specialize in women. There is in his work a trace of the Oriental, a meticulous exactness and attention to detail which makes for great delicacy of line. Yet he has achieved a certain quality of almost regal haughtiness, which is not without attractiveness [...].'¹⁵

Each of the reproduced heads is accompanied by its own paratext, invented it would appear, for the exigencies of the article. Thus a head simply labelled *German* in this context, with the description 'one of Herr Schenker's characteristics clearly shown here, is an almost exaggerated simplicity of line and composition' is illustrated in other contexts as a portrait of Leni Riefenstahl (at this time known primarily as a dancer and emerging actress in the niche, but hugely popular genre of the 'Bergfilm').¹⁶ Similarly, the head labelled *French* that is said to have 'an appealing wistfulness [...] something very charming and distinctly classic' is elsewhere identified as Madame Delphine Ponteves and was previously given prime position on the front cover of *Die Dame* in August 1923.¹⁷ The *Chinese* head however, remains anonymous whatever the context in which one finds her referenced or reproduced, whether in Max Osborn's 1924 article, here in *Vanity Fair* or as labelled as a *Chinese Noblewoman* in the

¹³ Jane Kallir, 'Portraiture,' in Agnes Husslein-Arco, Jane Kallir and Alfred Weidinger, eds., *The Women of Klimt, Schiele and Kokoschka* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2015), pp.61-67, 61.

¹⁴ Bertha Zuckerkandl, 'Gustav Klimt. Zur Eröffnung seiner Ausstellung,' *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14.11.1903 (translated by Emily Braun) cited in Kallir, 'Portraiture,' footnote 1, 66.

¹⁵ Author unknown, 'Recent Work by a Viennese Artist,' 168.

¹⁶ See for example Max Osborn, 'Karl Schenker, der Maler und Photograph,' in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 11 (1924), 273, 273.

¹⁷ See Florence van Kirk, 'A New Kind of Portrait Art: The Paintings and Pastels of Karol Schenker,' in *The Mentor*, June 1927, 26– 28, 26 (reproduced here pp. ##–##, ##).

1927 Gainsborough Galleries exhibition guide. Yet it is this portrait that unconsciously seems to be the pivot around which the author of the feature hinges the main article, extrapolating generic remarks from a repressed colonial obsession with the so-called ‘exoticism’ of ‘the Orient’ as transposed onto the ideal of remote and therefore by default ‘exotic’ feminine beauty. As Uta Poiger has observed, commercial mass media strategies of consumer-oriented advertising in Germany, the USA and Japan during the 1920s relied on Orientalist tropes and racial stereotypes in order to sell their wares.¹⁸ However, what remains interesting here is that the Chinese portrait is the only one that remains de-eroticised. The European women, especially the ‘German’ (Riefenstahl) wear loose décolleté clothing, gaze blankly to one side or into the middle distance with vacant expressions and resolutely resist categorisation as modern ‘Neue Frauen,’ erring instead on the side of an oddly nostalgic evocation of the timeless beauties of a mythical bygone era. The Chinese woman sits frontally facing the viewer, her hands resting in her lap and her mandarin-collared blouse buttoned up high under her chin. Schenker gives her a stereotypically impenetrable gaze that meets the viewers’ head-on and relinquishes nothing.

Schenker’s typological approach to portraiture was in keeping with certain more conservative branches of realism during the 1920s and early 1930s.¹⁹ Whilst Verist portraits by artists like Dix, Grosz and Schlichter were infamous for their biting satirical approach to individual sitters ((Abb. 3)), commercially oriented artists like Schenker worked to smooth over any subjective interiority, in favour of the cool surface approach that maintained psychological distance between sitter and viewer. Schenker’s beauties were on display, but they weren’t to be interfered with. In Walter Benjamin’s terms, they were types in a symbolic phantasmagoria of global consumer desire, kept at a required distance in order to maintain the capitalist illusion of need.²⁰ Schenker’s pursuit of ideal and generic ‘types’ of beauty was not an isolated exception; such strategies dominated the visual layouts of fashion and lifestyle magazines across Germany and America as a way of encouraging the new market of female consumers to measure themselves against and as Lynne Frame and other scholars have

¹⁸ Uta Poiger, ‘Fantasies of Universality? Neue Frauen, Race and Nation in Weimar and Nazi Germany,’ in Alys Weinbaum et al., eds., *The Modern Girl around the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 317–344.

¹⁹ There was a precedent for Schenker’s typological approach to portraiture published in a book of photographs in 1925 to which Schenker also contributed. *Natur und Kultur: Das Weib* was a book containing 120 photographic nudes by a number of different photographers. Each nude was categorised according to national and regional types (e.g. Swedish, Norwegian, English, German, Japanese, Indian etc). Clearly this practice also informed Schenker’s presentation of his drawings for *Vanity Fair* a year later.

²⁰ For more on this point see Janet Ward, ‘The Display Window: Designs and Desires of Weimar Consumerism,’ in Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in Weimar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 191–233.

suggested, find themselves wanting.²¹ As still predominates in magazines aimed at women today, feature articles on concepts of feminine beauty were laid out adjacent to advertisements for the latest creams, elixirs, perfumes, beauty salons and make-up. As a one-time commercial fashion photographer whose work featured regularly in such magazines, Schenker's temporary re-direction from camera to pencil did not radically alter his underlying premise. The contexts for the production, dissemination and display of the works might have changed, but their overriding aesthetic concerns had not.

The November 1926 *Vanity Fair* article seems to have acted in part as a prospectus for Schenker's artwork in the USA, ending as it does with the comment that 'Schenker, who has been in this country for several months, plans to have a showing at the Reinhardt Galleries in New York in December.'²² It seems however that either the venue had to be changed or that *Vanity Fair* had made a mistake; there is no evidence (at least that I have found from contemporary reviews and newspaper searches), that Schenker ever had a show at the Reinhardt Galleries in December 1926. However, as already noted, he definitely *did* have a show at the Gainsborough Galleries between 17 January and 9 February 1927 in which some, although not all, of the work on display was a collation of existing drawings and paintings, already published in *Uhu*, *Die Dame*, *Vanity Fair* (and perhaps elsewhere as well), in the preceding four years. The exhibition also attracted a very brief mention in the *New York Times*: 'Of Karl Schenker's paintings and drawings at the Gainsborough Galleries, it is only necessary to say that they are extremely accomplished likenesses of the great, living and dead, and of their lesser known fellow-beings. Some of Mr Schenker's immortals are Enrico Caruso, Giacomo Puccini, Ambassador Alanson B. Houghton, Ignace Friedman, Gerhart Hauptmann and Miss Dorothy Knapp.'²³

It was the lure of celebrity embedded in his works that was key to Schenker's continued survival in the competitive public domain of New York's ever-changing cultural, artistic and social scene. In particular it was Schenker's more recent portrait of former beauty queen turned Broadway performer, Dorothy Knapp, which had most resonance with the New York *zeitgeist* (see p. ##). In June 1927 in glorious technicolour, Schenker's portrait of Knapp wearing a backless and strapless ruby-red dress with full skirt and tri-cornered hat, adorned

²¹ Lynne Frame, 'Gretchen, Girl or Garconne? Weimar Science and Popular Culture in Search of the Ideal New Woman,' in Katarina von Ankum, ed., *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 12–40. See also Dorothy Rowe, 'Representing herself: Lotte Laserstein between Subject and Object,' in Christiane Schönfeld et al., eds., *Practicing Modernity: Female Creativity in the Weimar Republic* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006), pp.12–40.

²² Author unknown, 'Recent Work by a Viennese Artist,' 168.

²³ Author unknown, 'Around the New York Galleries. Works by Several Artists, Including Merton, Clivette, Schenker, Boardman, Robinson, Lemordant, Pye, Czobel and Others,' in *The New York Times*, January 23, 1927.

the front cover of *Town and Country* magazine. In the same month, special interest journal *The Mentor* published a themed issue on the topic of artists and designers, featuring a three page spread on Schenker and also including a whole page devoted to a sepia reproduction of the Dorothy Knapp portrait under the title, *The Show Girl*. The author of the piece, Florence van Kirk, appears to have had a well established career as a New York theatre producer and agent. Her most famous client was Japanese opera star Tamaki Miura. Van Kirk managed Miura on Broadway ‘presenting her in her new theatrical venture at the Selwyn Theatre’ in a version of the opera *Namiko-San*, which opened on 6 June 1927 and ran for two weeks before touring.²⁴ The theatrical connections between van Kirk and Schenker via the Knapp portrait are worth noting. The scenery in front of which Knapp is posed is clearly a theatrical set design or stage curtain, alluding to Knapp’s profession as a member of Earl Carroll’s dance troupe, the *Vanities*. Whilst my research has not uncovered any specific examples of Schenker’s work in New York as a set designer, there is explicit reference to this aspect of his activities in van Kirk’s article. She comments that ‘portraits have absorbed most of Schenker’s time, but his range of gifts includes interior decorating, costume designing, and settings for theaters and screen plays.’²⁵ We also know that many of Schenker’s sitters were stage and screen stars – actresses, dancers, musicians, composers, film-writers and opera singers, amongst others and that Dorothy Knapp was not the only actress in New York to be painted by him.

In October 1930 the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that the actress ‘Pearl Osgood of “Flying High” has had her portrait painted by Karol Schenker. It is now in the lobby of the Apollo, prior to being exhibited in a leading art gallery.’²⁶ Unfortunately the press trail concerning this particular portrait has not yet yielded any further information. All we know is that the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*’s report of the painting’s commission and its public display in the Apollo foyer occurred only a month before Schenker’s return to Berlin in November 1930. Returning then to *The Mentor* article, ‘A New Kind of Portrait Art: The Paintings and Pastels of Karol Schenker’ is perhaps the fullest extant New York account of the relationship between Schenker and his sitters that research has uncovered to date. It is therefore worth considering in some detail, particularly in light of the somewhat different tenor of the previous articles from *Vanity Fair* discussed above. Whilst *Vanity Fair* presented Schenker’s images of women as remote and distant national ‘types’ of ‘feminine charm,’ Florence van Kirk is at pains to

²⁴ Author unknown, ‘Plans for Miura,’ in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 31.5.1927, 34, 34.

²⁵ van Kirk, ‘A New Kind of Portrait Art,’ 26.

²⁶ Author unknown, ‘Plays and Players. Odds and Ends,’ in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11.10.1930, 9, 9. Frustratingly there is no reproduction of this portrait included with its mention here, nor any trace that I have found subsequently of the painting’s whereabouts yet.

present both the artist and his sitters as individuals. She begins with a sketchy biographical outline of Schenker's origins in Vienna, Warsaw, Munich and Berlin and his former 'international fame as a camera artist' before going on to discuss his technique as a visual artist: 'he works rapidly, making a portrait in from one to five sittings. He uses all mediums, lead pencil, red pencil, sepia, crayon, water color and oil, in which his sculptor's technic [sic!] is strongly apparent in the light and shadow effects obtained. A master draftsman, he relies on line and the pure clarity of modelling obtained in this manner rather than with color filling, which accounts for the fresh and very marked character of his work.'²⁷ She goes on to mention possible art historical influences ranging from the Pre-Raphaelites to Hans Holbein, perhaps as a way of situating both Schenker's subject matter (feminine beauties) in relation to his style (an clear linearity). A consideration of the sitters follows, 'whether it be a snub-nosed babe, a débutante, or a man of affairs.' Van Kirk fleshes out the characters whom Schenker portrays by reverting to anecdotes (real or fictitious – we can never be sure), apparently gleaned directly from the artist: 'Schenker shatters the popular belief that Caruso²⁸ took extraordinary care of himself by declaring "he smoked the biggest and blackest of cigars during the entire sitting and puffed such clouds of smoke I could scarcely see to draw." Dr Hugo Eckener²⁹ was sitting to him and talking of his sensational flight across the Atlantic when a telephone call gave him news of the *Shenandoah* disaster. Eckener spent the rest of the sitting explaining in detail just how the accident must have happened.'

The rhetorical flourish of the article continues with an account of Schenker and Lilli's first meeting in which she was apparently 'terribly afraid of the handsome, serious artist,' but with whom she eventually fell in love and married, now the proud mother to their 'little American-born daughter Iola.' The article is also illustrated with four portrait studies of which three had previously been reproduced elsewhere, at least twice. Somewhat confusingly, a gracefully posed but I think erroneously labelled 'Frau S.' was reproduced as the lead image in Max Osborn's 1924 *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* article, having also appeared on the front cover of *Die Dame* a year earlier, in May 1923, and as the cover image of The Gainsborough Galleries 1927 exhibition catalogue of Schenker's paintings and drawings. However in *The Mentor* she is identified not as 'Frau S' but as a portrait of Duchess Maria Bariatinska ((Abb.

²⁷ Here and the following quotations: van Kirk, 'A New Kind of Portrait Art.'

²⁸ Enrico Caruso (1873–1921), Italian opera singer and subject of one of the portraits on display at the Gainsborough Galleries show in January 1927.

²⁹ Dr Hugo Eckener (1868–1954), German aeronautical engineer and airship commander of the first airship flight across the Atlantic in 1924. In 1929 Eckener was to command the Graf Zeppelin in its first round the world flight. The USS *Shenandoah* was one of the US navy's first rigid airship. It was torn apart by turbulence over Ohio in 1925 during a promotional flight.

4)), Madame Delphine Ponteves, reproduced in van Kirk's piece, had also appeared in *Vanity Fair* in November 1926 as a 'French' type of beauty, as well as on the August 1923 cover of *Die Dame*. However, as already indicated, it is the portrait of Dorothy Knapp as *The Show Girl* that is given a single page spread to itself and a caption that summarises the concerns of the article overall: 'A highly decorative portrait in oils exemplifying Schenker's gift for composition, flowing line and harmonious colour. With him composition comes first. The simplest sketch reveals the individuality of the subject. A master of several mediums – crayon, water colour, oil – he uses whichever one best expresses the character of his sitter.'³⁰ As the fullest account of Schenker's practices as a portrait painter than any of the previously cited articles produced in American magazines during Schenker's sojourn in the US that we know of so far, van Kirk attempts to delineate Schenker as a portraitist who moves beyond the surface of appearances to uncover the beauty beneath. However, given the focus of his main subject matter – renowned 'beauties' of their day, this seems a slightly tautological endeavour. Dorothy Knapp is a perfect case in point. A former beauty queen in a 'Miss America' pageant, she appeared in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1924 and 1925. She was then billed by theatrical producer and writer Earl Carroll as 'The Most Beautiful Girl in The World' and went to work for him as one of the models in his Broadway review show, *Vanities*. In 1926 it was reported in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* that she was 'making her farewell appearances as a model in the current edition of the "Vanities"' in order to 'begin preparations immediately for her entry into the legitimate drama' and for which Carroll had commissioned a new play.³¹ Knapp was a constant source of popular press gossip at the height of her fame from 1925 onwards, always referenced in terms of her beauty. Thus, in a press report of November 1927 entitled 'Fatal, Fatal Beauty' a hapless journalist investigates her claims that beauty 'isn't everything' so (conveniently) seeks her out in her dressing room back stage to ask 'if it were indeed true': 'Miss Knapp, who stars in the 'Vanities' current this week in Brooklyn should know about these things. She was the winner, a year or so ago, of a national beauty contest and among various groups of admirers has long been hailed as the most beautiful woman in the world. In the close proximity that a stage dressing room compels, she appeared all that and a little more. Large, alluring eyes glowed at your interviewer and she said: "The trouble is, once you have a reputation for that sort of thing, you've got to be just so all the time or people will begin to say you aren't so much after all. But the worst of it is most producers believe if you're beautiful you're also dumb and can't do anything. Most of them would rather have

³⁰ van Kirk, 'A New Kind of Portrait Art,' 27.

³¹ Author unknown, 'A Play for Dorothy Knapp,' in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 30.1.1926, 10, 10.

somebody not so beautiful. Don't you think so, Mr Weer?" Looking at such close range into the eyes of the gorgeous Miss Knapp, Mr Weer was helpless and unable to disagree with anything she said. But looking at her, he could not quite see how it could be true.³²

Given that the predominant press coverage of Dorothy Knapp during the mid to late 1920s was insistently and universally concerned with her beauty, even if just as a tag-line in passing references to her in more general reports about the theatre at large, it should come as no surprise that Schenker painted her and that this is one of the few large-scale portraits in oils by Schenker from this period of his career that we have a record of.³³

Despite Florence van Kirk's assertions to the contrary, Schenker's work did not possess the psychologically penetrating gaze of his artistic peers, especially the renowned German portraitists of the day such as Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and Christian Schad. Schenker's strengths and ambitions rested with the pursuit of what he regarded as ideal beauty – glossy, impenetrable gazes of objectified female types, carefully posed and serenely placed irrespective of what medium was deployed. Whether it was the camera, the wax model, the pencil or the brush, Schenker's primary goal was the pursuit of an elusive ideal of beauty; one that he sought, but ultimately failed to find as a painter in New York.

³² Author unknown, 'Fatal, Fatal Beauty,' in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 3.11.1927, 4, 4. Unfortunately for Dorothy Knapp, her attempts to shed her type-cast role as only a beauty, backfired when in 1929 she persuaded Earl Carroll to cast her in the leading role of his musical *Fioretta*. She may have been a beauty, but it transpired that she couldn't sing and even her beauty could not shield her from what was Broadway's most expensive flop to date. She was removed from the role and tried unsuccessfully to sue Mrs Frederic Courtland Penfield, the show's financial backer as well as her former lover Earl Carroll. She did however go on to have a moderately successful career in talking pictures. More of the dismissal and subsequent lawsuit can be found in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 20.4.1929, 12; 12.4.1930, 2 and 18.3.1932, 2.

³³ The portrait of Dorothy Knapp could very well have been a commission, (in the way that his subsequent portrait of Pearl Osgood was) although I have not yet found any evidence of this, either way.

The author would like to thank Marsha Morton, Miriam Halwani, Eckhard Köhn and Camilla Smith for their generosity and insights.