

DESSA, The Art of Remembrance: Alice Salomon By Adrienne Chambon

How does one share the joy of discovering a remarkable historical figure, Alice Salomon, who inspired so many others and yet who has been relegated to the past? How can one reactivate her many interests, activities and accomplishments, and to do so in a way that brings her to life and carries forward the questions she raised into the present? These are some of the objectives that Dessa, the creator of this work, committed herself to explore. The result is a wonderful book full of surprises and unique in its approach.

This book is the end-point of Dessa's detailed archival research and her deep immersion into the many facets of Alice Salomon's life. An early feminist in the German context, a pivotal figure in the International Women's League in the early 20th century, and a leader in the field of social work who established the first School of Social Work in Berlin.

"The Art of Remembrance" as the title of the book indicates, spells out the aims of this book as a project, neither a chronological account nor a visual hagiography. Dessa conveys a sense of Alice Salomon as a person, whose life and accomplishments can be revisited and reinterpreted. Given the complexity of Salomon, Dessa chose the *collage* as the main modality of presentation, complemented by paintings and text—methodologies that she used in previous projects. Through careful juxtapositions of images representing events affecting Salomon or that she herself had instigated in local, national and international contexts, along with images of significant people and meaningful objects, Dessa crafted assemblages that show Alice Salomon as a strong woman making decisions, intervening in favour of social justice, committed to influencing society and the nature of social relationships. Each collage reflects a different theme. Altogether, these compositions or *montage* stand as a collection of diverse framings of Salomon, i.e., as multiple refractions. A refracted life for a work of remembrance. This is an exciting work of transmission, which avoids a closed and finite story-line.

These collages are complemented by a series of portraits of Salomon, paintings and sculpture made by Dessa herself. Particularly moving is a set of four paintings which convey contrasting moods. They are based on an octet by Felix Mendelssohn mentioned in Alice Salomon's autobiography and provide us with possible glimpses into Salomon's states of mind. The choice of Mendelssohn is not fortuitous but rather an indication of the close relationship that Salomon nurtured with many artists of her time. The paintings address the reader through a different sense of pace. They offer a sense of flow and peace that contrasts with the collages.

The accompanying texts to the collages are brief. Their function is to name the themes and provide short introductions to the context of the images. The fine introduction to the book was written by Adriane Feustel, the former head of the Alice Salomon Archive. It was Adriane Feustel who established the Alice Salomon archive in Berlin and was its founding director. She introduced Dessa to the richness of this archive. In her own writings on Alice Salomon, Feustel emphasizes that along with the social focus of her activities, Salomon believed in the power of art to serve as a bridge linking social interventions to the broader philosophy or spirituality of living.

The book closes with an imagined encounter across time. Dessa stages a contemporary conversation between Alice Salomon and herself, which brings out further aspects of Salomon's sensibilities including the importance of friendships. Their exchange reveals a number of echoes between Salomon's life and that of the artist. This portion of the book taps into a new genre, a process of resonance between 'subject' and interpreter. It bridges past and present, and expands the work to further interpretations.

I was somewhat familiar with the life of Alice Salomon and the Alice Salomon's Archive as a social work educator, and thus the eagerness I had to read this book. I was delighted to discover new ways of considering Alice Salomon through Dessa's richly evocative and descriptive material, and beyond her to consider how to 'do' historical memory work.

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