

INTRODUCTION

Art always has its roots in a particular age, but art is more than just an echo and a reflection of an epoch—it has a prophetic energy that reaches far and deep into the future.¹

Vasily Kandinsky, *Essays on Art and Artists*

The broad scope of this exhibition allows the Viennese tradition of modern design to be seen in a larger context and with new associations. It bridges the period from neoclassicism to the age of the Wiener Werkstätte, and concentrates exclusively on objects made in silver and other metals. In these materials, the modern formal language is most clearly recognizable. The selection of objects does not purport to be a comprehensive overview of the stylistic variety seen in Viennese silver products during the period, but is instead a selective presentation of only those objects that can be regarded as forerunners of modern design. It does not take into account various countercurrents, such as historicism.

Over the course of six chapters, the exhibition invites the visitor to embark upon an associative journey, in both an aesthetic and an intellectual sense. The historical, art-historical, and literary texts of the catalogue authors are important contributions that illuminate the given topics from a range of different viewpoints.

Serving as both a turning and a jumping-off point is “Neoclassicism,” the various aspects of which are explored in the first chapter: “The Reception of Antiquity,” the “Formal Reduction” of shapes and ornamentation as a specifically Viennese play on the neoclassical canon, and “Geometry as Language of the Enlightenment.” In the second chapter, “From an Ideal of Simplicity to the Modern Commodity,” Viennese silver from the first half of the 19th century is compared with that of the early 20th century. In the third chapter, “Mobility as Maxim of Modern Society,” traveling household sets of the 19th century, with their functionally oriented shapes, are discussed as a source of the modern aesthetic. In addition, the streamlined designs of Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser are considered alongside various futuristic objects. The fourth chapter, “Style & Self-Expression,” describes how the close relationship between the artists of the Wiener Werkstätte and their clients served as the driving force behind the creation of a new style. In the fifth chapter, “Vienna’s Experiment with Modernity,” radical designs by Hoffmann and Moser from the early years of the Wiener Werkstätte are placed in close proximity to architectural models of the same era. The blurring of lines between design and art can be seen as a precursor of cubism and constructivism.

The years chosen for the title of this exhibition mark the beginning and endpoint of a social and cultural evolution. In 1780, following the death of Empress Maria Theresa, Queen of Hungary and Bohemia and Archduchess of Austria, and after fifteen years of

co-regency with her, Emperor Joseph II succeeded to the throne. He pushed through a course of reforms partly begun during the reign of his mother. During his own reign, the effects of the Enlightenment, which had begun to blossom elsewhere in Europe, also came to be felt in Austria, bringing Joseph II the reputation of an enlightened absolutist. The basis was laid for an intellectual and social revision of values, one that must be seen as a prerequisite for a subsequent shift in taste that was to last into our own age. *Sachlichkeit* and sparseness were raised up as virtues; the tomb of Joseph II plainly symbolizes this.

In 1918, with the end of the First World War, the Hapsburg monarchy fell apart, Austria shrank to a sixth of its former size, and the First Republic was instated. Vienna, which at its peak was a metropolis of two million people, remained the capital city; however, with the loss of the crown lands and Hungary, it not only lost the basis of its economic prosperity, but also, in many areas, its primacy as an innovative center for art and culture in the heart of Europe.

In the period from 1780 to 1918, Vienna’s population increased tenfold. As the capital and imperial residence of the Hapsburgs, the city had always attracted craftsmen and artists. With the Vienna Congress of 1814–15 and the city expansion in 1858 creating one of the largest building booms of the age, this attraction continued to grow. Increased emigration from all parts of the monarchy at the end of the 19th century resulted in a bubbling melting pot of many cultures—an ideal and fertile ground for new impulses.

The 1900 movement was a short but intense fireworks in all genres of art, and remains a high point of Austrian culture. Particularly in the realm of design, Viennese architects and artists of the day took innovative and influential steps toward 20th-century modernism. In so doing, they were continuing a development begun with the aforementioned shift in taste at the end of the 18th century, which reached its first climax in the spare, objective design of Viennese Biedermeier. By considering and drawing connections between work of the early 19th and 20th centuries, one sees the flaring brilliance of Viennese design at its height.

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¹ English translation Michael Huey.