

Mid-Century Modern

Visionary Furniture Design
from Vienna

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Caroline Wohlgemuth

Mid-Century Modern

Visionary Furniture Design from Vienna

Birkhäuser
Basel

For Leopold, Konrad, and Claire

This book is dedicated to all those exiled who could
not be written about here.

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Introduction

It was one of the world's most creative metropolises and the city of modern design: Vienna 1900. Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos, the trailblazers of *Viennese Modernism*, are still renowned all over the world. The world's first so-called designer chair, the No. 14 chair by *Gebrüder Thonet*, was created in Vienna as well, with over 80 million sold around the globe. Michael Thonet, the inventor of bentwood furniture, is regarded as a pioneer of industrial furniture production and modern furniture design. But scarcely anyone today knows Franz Singer, Ernst Schwadron, Bruno Pollak, Friedl Dicker, or Liane Zimmler—all furniture designers from 1920s and '30s Vienna. It was the age of Sigmund Freud, Stefan Zweig, Friedrich Torberg, Franz Werfel, and Joseph Roth, whose works were read all over the world; Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg made music history, and Max Reinhardt's theater productions were internationally acclaimed. The ideas of the thinkers of the *Vienna Circle* had a decisive influence on the philosophy of the twentieth century. Despite the catastrophic economic and political situation in Austria, the period between the two world wars saw a golden age in art and culture, in music and literature, and in the sciences and the humanities. In this time, Vienna again became an inspiring and visionary cultural metropolis—including in the areas of architecture and furniture design. In addition to Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos, the younger generation of architects, such as Oskar Strnad and Josef Frank, as well as their students—who for the first time also included women—were active as furniture designers. Instead of luxurious, stately villas or apartment buildings, simple residential structures were built and countless apartments renovated. Many architects, aside from their work on social housing projects, became active primarily as furniture designers and interior architects, which led to a flourishing in furniture design. Unlike in turn-of-the-century Vienna, these furniture designers were first and foremost concerned with creating high-quality, elegant, and affordable furniture and thus making the lives of the occupants better and more comfortable.

This new age demanded a new furniture design: with their colorful and lightweight furniture, these designers followed an unconventional, typically Viennese path. Particularly in political unstable times, they endeavored to create spaces and furnishings that helped people feel comfortable and find more peace, serenity, and happiness.

In Vienna, just as in other major European cities, the end of World War I saw the emergence of a completely new image of women: young, independent women, the first to be admitted to universities and academies, made a name for themselves as furniture designers. Austria's first female architects, such as Ella Briggs, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, and Liane Zimmler, realized their ideas and formal principles with well-conceived, multifunctional furniture and flexible furnishings, and in their work advocated tirelessly for equal rights for women in society.

The history of Viennese furniture design, however, is also the story of the flight, the emigration, and the exile of Austria's intellectual and creative elite. The majority of the modern, visionary female furniture designers in Vienna, as well as Austria's first female architecture students—like Lisl Scheu Close, Ella Briggs, Liane Zimble, Anna Szabo, and Dora Gad—came from Jewish families. Countless designers, architects, and artists suffered tragic fates during the Nazi regime and were deported and murdered, including the furniture designer, interior architect, and painter Friedl Dicker, who died at the age of forty-six at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Some were able to flee Vienna in time to escape from the Nazis and establish themselves in Sweden, Brazil, or the US, continuing their careers as designers or teaching at renowned universities. The Viennese architect and designer Ernst Lichtblau fled from Vienna to the US in 1939 and taught at the *Rhode Island School of Design*, influencing an entire generation of young designers there. The architect and furniture and fabric designer Josef Frank emigrated to Stockholm as early as the end of 1933 and beginning in 1942 taught at the famous *New School for Social Research* in New York. His exuberantly-hued and imaginative furniture and fabrics from Vienna became known all over the world in the 1930s. Walter Sobotka, another architect and furniture designer from Vienna, fled to New York in 1938 and worked as a designer for *Thonet Brothers New York*; in 1942, he began teaching interior architecture at the *Carnegie Institute of Technology* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Liane Zimble, as well, fled to the US in 1938 to escape the Nazis. Ella Briggs, Lisl Scheu Close, and Dora Gad left Vienna already in the mid-1930s and had astounding careers as architects and furniture designers in Great Britain, the US, and Palestine, respectively.

By 1938, Vienna had within only a few years lost its best and most creative minds—a fissure in time and an irretrievable loss that ripped through all the arts and sciences, and one that can still be felt today. In addition to all the human tragedies, 1938 spelled an abrupt end to the golden age of Viennese furniture design. As early as the mid-1930s, many architects and furniture designers had left the city in the face of the dire political situation in Germany and Austria and the increasingly unbearable antisemitism there, emigrating to America, Great Britain, or Palestine. After March 1938, it was no longer a matter of emigration but of flight and forced exile—for those affected, leaving the country was possible only under very difficult circumstances. With the banishment of countless intellectuals, scientists, artists, musicians, and their families, the city of Vienna lost its soul in 1938.

When one looks at the biographies of the furniture designers who were forced to flee from the Nazis, a wide variety of different fates and life stories becomes apparent. But what they all have in common is that they were uprooted and banished from Vienna, the city where they were born, or where they studied, spent many years, and gained their first professional experience. These are fates that left behind painful scars on the affected families that can still be felt today. Figures like Josef Frank, Ernst Schwadron, and Liane Zimble had close ties with friends and fellow émigrés from Vienna for their entire lives, and despite their success wrote in their memoirs of how deeply wounded and saddened they were about all that had transpired—but also about their constant homesickness for Vienna. The world-famous historian and art historian Ernst H. Gombrich said of his native Vienna: “Vienna is my native city, of course, and German my mother tongue. I feel very comfortable with both of them. But when I think for a moment, I would find it ludicrous to say that Vienna is my homeland. I scarcely know anyone there. Who would I call there? I still have maybe two or three acquaintances in Vienna, no more. So while I come from Vienna, it is no longer my home.”⁶¹

With very few exceptions, the exiled furniture designers, the survivors of the Shoah, did not return to Vienna after World War II. Virtually no effort was made by the City of Vienna to invite them back. There was an erroneous impression that these people were very well off in their exile. The returnees were not made to feel welcome in Austria, and Vienna did not attempt to bring the lost families back.

In their exile in Stockholm, London, New York, Los Angeles, or Buenos Aires, the furniture designers for the most part were able to draw on the ideas, experience, formal principles, and skills they had acquired in Vienna and thus build a new life. Through their tireless teaching activities at the world's top universities, they also trained the next generation in furniture design. Richard Neutra, Frederick Kiesler—the early emigrants—and Josef Frank were far ahead of their time. Their visionary furniture creations inspired star designers such as Charles and Ray Eames, Arne Jacobsen, and Gio Ponti. Josef Frank's unique furniture, fabrics, and lamps, Frederick Kiesler's *Multi-Use Chair*, Richard Neutra's *Boomerang Chair*, and Martin Eisler's *Reversible Chair* are today twentieth-century design icons and the quintessence of *Mid-Century Modern* furniture design.⁰² Originals from the 1940s to the 1960s have become coveted collector's items, fetching record prices at design auctions. A number of their creations have been continuously produced or reproduced by international design companies.

With their inexhaustible creativity, the furniture designers from Vienna continued working in exile, disseminating their ideas throughout the entire world.

⁰¹ <https://gombricharchive.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/showdoc73.pdf> (accessed Sept. 20, 2021).

⁰² This term was coined by the American journalist and author Cara Greenberg. She used it for the first time as the title of her book *Mid-Century Modern: Furniture of the 1950s*, and today it refers to modern furniture design from the 1930s to the 1960s.

“In every minute of our world, millions and billions of thoughts are thought. But all these millions and billions of thoughts expire and vanish in the space of this minute, and already the next one no longer knows anything about them. But among these millions and billions of fleeting, ephemeral, fruitless, and worthless thoughts, one is sometimes born in this time that is special; one that does not vanish but continues to resonate, stimulating and embracing and sweeping up other thoughts with it—an invention, a discovery, an insight; an active and fertile thought that changes our time, our world.

Such thoughts are immeasurable, rare; only few are thought in each decade. But upon them rests the change of our intellectual, our moral, our real world.”

—Stefan Zweig, *On Sigmund Freud*, on the occasion of Freud’s 80th birthday.⁰¹

⁰¹ Stefan Zweig, *Über Sigmund Freud. Porträt, Briefwechsel, Gedenkworte* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989).

A HISTORY of Viennese Furniture Design

from Its
Beginnings
to 1960

Furniture design—a look back: from draftsman to designer

a

FROM HANDICRAFT TO INDUSTRIALLY MANUFACTURED FURNITURE

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, which started in England near the end of the eighteenth century and thus earlier than in the other European countries, the history of furniture design begins as well. It runs parallel to developments in modern technology, in social and economic conditions, and in modern architecture. Furniture reflects the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age.⁰²

In Europe, France assumed a pioneering role in furniture design and production. Numerous workshops were founded in the seventeenth century under Louis XIV that specialized in the manufacture of furniture, tapestries, and fabric, and French furniture shaped popular taste in interior décor throughout the European continent until well into the eighteenth century. The larger workshops had their own design departments, while the furniture itself was manufactured in the traditional manner by cabinetmakers or other specialized craftsmen. Sample books were printed and often published in large numbers. This made it possible on the one hand to establish uniform production standards and increase productivity, and on the other to better sell the products. At the same time, these sample books served as advertising material—they were the first sales catalogs. Although the work was still done by hand, specialization, standardization, and division of labor implemented in the large workshops already helped achieve an enormous increase in productivity.⁰³

The invention of the steam engine by James Watts in 1765 heralded the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which radically changed the life of people in England at the end of the eighteenth century and in the rest of Europe in the nineteenth. The steam engine was used to produce energy, with iron and steel production as well as the machine industry gaining in importance as a consequence. The result was industrial mass production, a completely new transport system, and an explosion of the cities. The new means of transport and liberal trade agreements led to a flourishing of international commerce.⁰⁴

Conception and planning—design—was now separated from production, which replaced the expensive and time-consuming labor of a craftsman with cheap machine work. Automated looms and large woodworking operations brought about decisive changes in people's living and working conditions. The newly created working class who toiled in the factories, often women and children, labored under adverse conditions for low wages, resulting in bitter poverty and catastrophic living conditions.⁰⁵

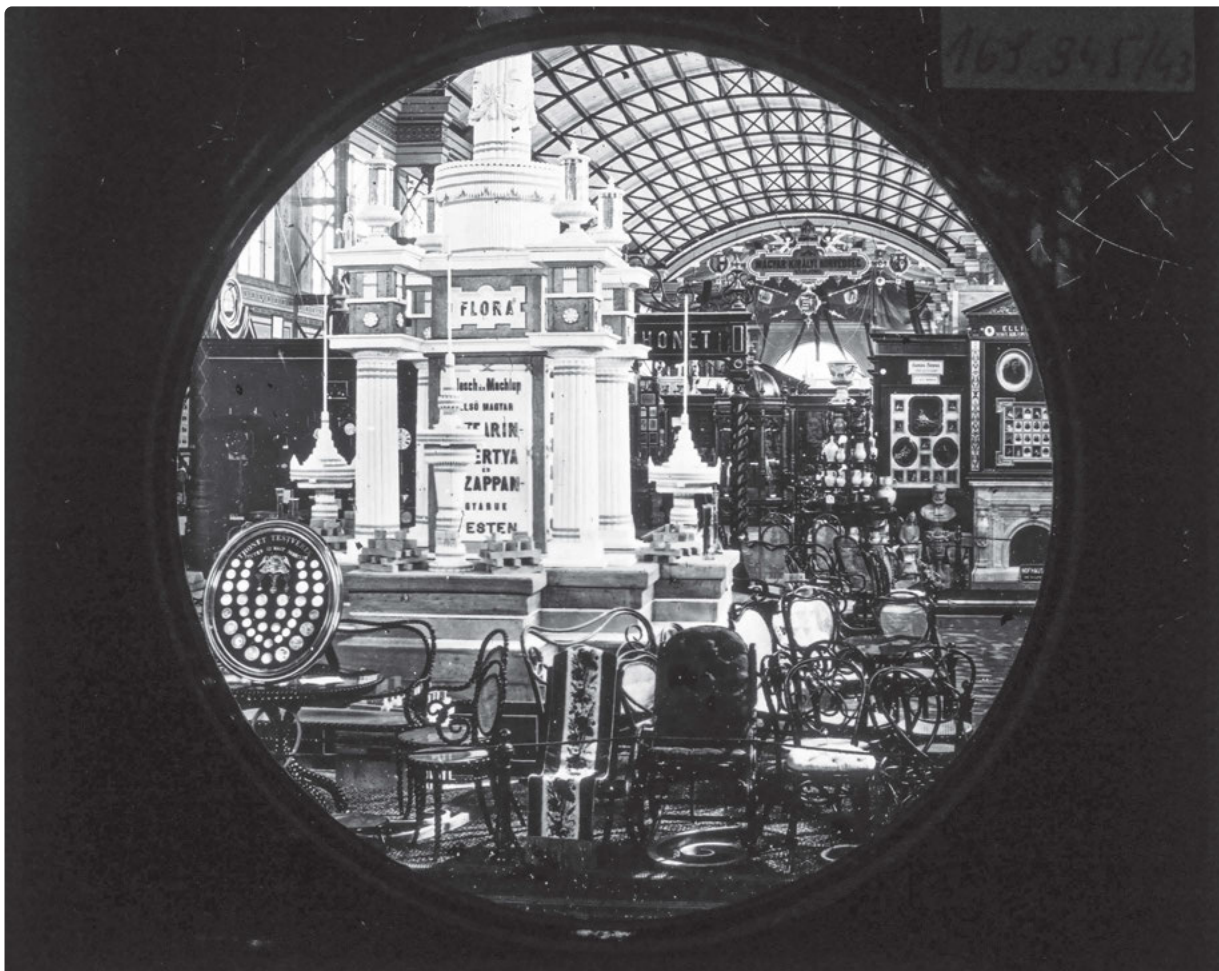
But demand for factory-produced goods rapidly increased. The factories turned out largely cheap, poor-quality furniture and domestic products for the mass market. While technical advances had resulted in new production methods and novel appliances and objects, the industrial sector placed no value on the form or aesthetics of the factory-made products, nor on their quality. Industry drew on past historical styles: in the industrial

⁰² Karl Mang, *Geschichte des modernen Möbels* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1978), 8.

⁰³ Thomas Hauße, *Geschichte des Designs* (Cologne: DuMont, 2014), 12, 21ff., 38.

⁰⁴ Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years: change and culture in the west, 1900–1914*, (London: Phoenix, 2009), 6ff.

⁰⁵ Charlotte Fiell and Peter Fiell, *Design of the 20th Century* (Cologne: Taschen, 1999), 6.



TOP □ 1873 International Exposition in Vienna: Thonet furniture: © Wien Museum/Wiener Photographen-Association

BOTTOM □ Sussex chair, wooden chair with freshwater-cane mesh seat; design: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ca. 1865; execution: Morris & Company, London, after 1865, © MAK

production of furniture, as well, Renaissance and Baroque elements were combined, and cheap, mass-produced furniture was decorated with Gothic Revival or Baroque Revival ornaments. The newly prosperous bourgeoisie loved a representative style; furniture and art objects were to demonstrate wealth and education. The apartments and houses of the upper middle class were typically cluttered, furnished with dark, heavy, and over-proportioned furniture in a jumble of styles. The economic success of these individuals was also to be reflected in the wealth of décor, embellishments, and ornamentation. It was the age of historicism, a style that was very popular in furniture design in Vienna as well.⁰⁶

Beginning with the Industrial Revolution in England, *design* was generally taken to mean *industrial design*, meaning product design.⁰⁷ The word had a different meaning in France: *design* is derived from *dessiner*, the French verb for “to draw,” or *dessin*, a drawing. The French term *dessinateur*, for a pattern draftsman, was also frequently used at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the textile industry in German-speaking countries. Thus, in Vienna, as well, the term *dessinateur* was widespread in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the context of fabric design. Not until the mid-twentieth century did the terms *design* and *designer* become common German usage.

b

THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON VIENNA

The second half of the nineteenth century in Europe was the era of great inventions, of new materials and technologies, and of international expositions.

The first international exposition, or world’s fair, was held in London in 1851 and was a venue for exhibiting, viewing, and comparing the cultures and industries of the world’s leading economic nations. The muddled hodgepodge of styles in the industrially manufactured products as well as their poor quality and deficient durability were roundly criticized from the very beginning of the London show. The fifth international exposition was held in Vienna in 1873. It is against this backdrop of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of mass production that the reform movements emerging in nineteenth-century Europe in art, design, and the arts and crafts are to be viewed.⁰⁸

London’s “Great Exhibition” of 1851 triggered vehement criticism in England and Europe. One of the fiercest critics of mass production was the British painter, architect, and poet William Morris, born in London in 1834. It was not only the aesthetic ills of historicism but also the social conditions that the newly created working class was living under that Morris condemned so vigorously. For him, the two were closely linked. The artist demanded sweeping reforms in the arts and crafts, a high level of quality for handcrafted products, and an equally high aesthetic standard. This made him one of the founding fathers of the *Arts and Crafts Movement* in England, a countermovement to industrial mass production with all its negative effects.⁰⁹

With its principles of a harkening back to craftsmanship and a rejection of historicism as well as a preference for simple, clear, and organic forms, this movement had a great influence on Jugendstil—the specific kind of *Art Nouveau* practiced in Germany and Austria—and particularly on the *Secession style* in Vienna. William Morris and his followers demanded the highest quality and aesthetic at affordable prices. *Morris & Company*, the firm he founded in 1861, designed textiles, wallpaper, and furniture that, while they

⁰⁶ Bernhard E. Bürdek, *Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis der Produktgestaltung* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005), 21; Hauffe (2014), 21ff., 34.

⁰⁷ Bürdek (2005), 13.

⁰⁸ Hauffe (2014), 28ff.

⁰⁹ Ibid., 44.



fulfilled these quality and aesthetic criteria, were not affordable for the general public, with the result that the works of the British artist and entrepreneur opposed his own ideals.¹⁰

The *Arts and Crafts Movement* marked the beginning of a development that in the subsequent decades was to have a decisive influence on the history of furniture design and architecture: designers, artists, and architects, but also craft enterprises and entrepreneurs joined forces to create communities in which they worked and studied together to find new solutions to the problems of mass production and industrialization and to put these ideas into practice.¹¹

The *Arts and Crafts Movement* served as an important impetus for the architects and furniture designers of *Viennese Modernism*, such as Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffmann. The furniture designers of the 1920s and '30s in Vienna, like Josef Frank and Oskar Strnad, were also significantly inspired by the *Arts and Crafts Movement* as well as by English interior design.¹²

LEFT □ Kennet cotton decorative fabric; design: William Morris; execution: Morris & Company, London, 1883, © MAK/Branislav Djordjevic

RIGHT □ Morris wingback chair, beech, woven cane, and brass, Model No. 6393; design and execution: Gebrüder Thonet, Vienna, ca. 1905, © MAK

¹⁰ Elizabeth Wilhide (ed.), *Design: The Whole Story* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 53.

¹¹ Hauffe (2014), 48.

¹² Marlene Ott-Wodni, *Josef Frank 1885–1967, Raumgestaltung und Möbeldesign* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2015), 36.

A new style of furniture became popular in nineteenth-century Austria and Germany: Biedermeier. This stylistic period, which extended from 1815 to 1848, had particular importance in Vienna: it coincided with the reign of the foreign minister and state chancellor Klemens Wenzel Lothar von Metternich, who played a leading role at the 1815 *Congress of Vienna*. He was a proponent of the monarchical principle and opposed all national and liberal movements in the Habsburg Empire in his time.

Biedermeier refers to the art and culture of the bourgeoisie that emerged at this time—in literature, music, and painting, but also in fashion, interior décor, and furniture design. The name is derived from an invented literary figure, the conventionally bourgeois village schoolteacher Gottlieb Biedermeier, the creation of the German writer Ludwig Eichrodt. This era was characterized by a retreat into the private sphere; as a reaction against the state control and strict censorship of the *Metternich police state*, bourgeois family life became increasingly important.¹³

These political and social circumstances left their mark on furniture design as well. The retreat of the middle class into their private homes had direct consequences for the furniture and home furnishings of the time, which were elegant and functional. The aesthetics of this furniture lay in the superb workmanship, the use of high-quality materials, and the organic forms. The center of the home was the living room, in which seating furniture was given a new, room-dividing function. New types of seating furniture were created for the various needs of the occupants and arranged in *seating groups*.¹⁴

The first Biedermeier furniture in Vienna was created according to English models and manufactured by hand by craftspeople or small workshops. Handicrafts were held in high regard in Austria and could look back on a long history. Industrialization and capabilities for mass-producing furniture were not yet widespread in the Habsburg Empire. Vienna did, however, have highly specialized furniture workshops, such as the *Danhauser* furniture company, which as early as 1808 employed over 130 highly trained cabinetmakers.¹⁵ With his company's products, the Viennese furniture-maker Joseph Ulrich Danhauser greatly influenced the new style of home furnishings in the Austrian capital. The *Viennese furniture* of the Biedermeier period, in the words of the Viennese art historian Max Eisler, "defined taste and formal style on the European continent."¹⁶

The furniture of the Biedermeier can be seen as a precursor to the modern furniture design of the twentieth century.¹⁷ The idea of a central living room and furniture that could be placed in it in a flexible manner was also taken up by the Viennese furniture designers of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Adolf Loos, Oskar Strnad, and Josef Frank.

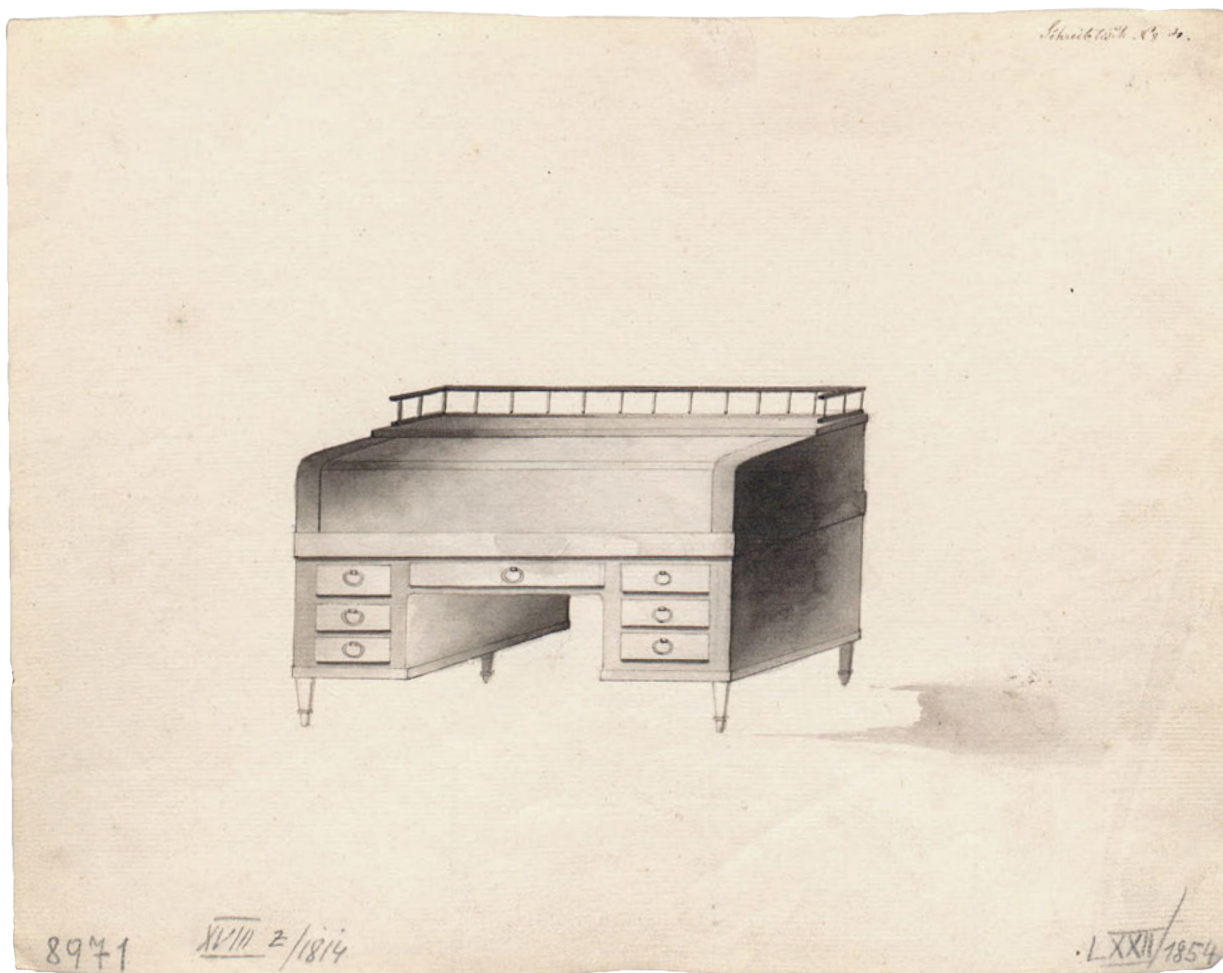
¹³ Felix Czeike, "Biedermeier," in *Historisches Lexikon Wien*, Vol. 1 (Vienna: Kremayr & Scheriau, 1992), 373f.

¹⁴ Ott-Wodni (2015), 47ff.

¹⁵ Mang (1978), 11.

¹⁶ Max Eisler: "Das Wiener Möbel gestern und heute," in Erich Boltens, *Wiener Möbel in Lichtbildern und maßgeblichen Rissen* (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1935), VI.

¹⁷ Mang (1978), 8.



ТОР □ Design for a desk
from the workshop of Joseph
Ulrich Danhauser, Vienna,
1814, © MAK

БОТТОМ □ Biedermeier chair;
design and execution: un-
known, Vienna, 1820 to 1825,
© MAK

Bentwood furniture: Gebrüder Thonet and Jacob & Josef Kohn

a

MICHAEL THONET — THE SUCCESS OF MODERN INDUSTRIAL DESIGN FOR FURNITURE

In the mid-nineteenth century, when furniture manufacturers were attempting to use modern carving and turning machines to imitate handcrafted and historic furniture forms, Michael Thonet developed his revolutionary *bentwood process*, a completely new production method that led to modern forms in the fabrication of wooden furniture. Through the use of steaming processes, the German master cabinetmaker from the Prussian town of Boppard am Rhein was able to bend solid beechwood into a curved shape. The wood was first treated in steam chambers at very high temperatures to make it pliable and then bent through the use of cast-iron clamps. The bent wood was subsequently dried in drying rooms, removed from the clamps, sanded, and its surface treated.¹⁸

Michael Thonet, a proponent of industrially made furniture and mass production, pursued the goal of manufacturing high-quality, elegant, and above all lightweight furniture in a cost-effective manner. In the process, he did not conceal the industrial production methods of his wooden furniture but instead made them a principle of his design. As early as 1830, Thonet conducted his first experiments in fabricating furniture from curved wood and continued to refine this process in the following years. However, he was not awarded a patent for his invention in Prussia.¹⁹

At an exhibition at the *Kunstverein Koblenz* in Prussia in 1841, these innovative bentwood chairs came to the attention of the Austrian state chancellor Metternich. At the invitation of Metternich, Michael Thonet traveled to Vienna to present this new furniture out of curved wood to the Austrian imperial court. Michael Thonet was granted the privilege of producing his new bentwood furniture in Austria and in spring 1842 moved to Vienna with his entire family. There, he met the French-British architect Peter Hubert Desvignes, with whom he was to execute large projects such as the renovation and furnishing of the Liechtenstein family's city palace in downtown Vienna. Thonet also furnished Vienna's Palais Schwarzenberg with his chairs of bent beechwood.²⁰

In 1849, at the age of fifty-three, Michael Thonet and his five sons opened their own factory for producing bentwood furniture, with its headquarters on Vienna's Gumpendorfer Straße. The family business soon received large contracts for furnishing coffeehouses, restaurants, hotels, and public buildings. The Thonets, who had perfected their wood-curving process in Vienna, were able to offer bentwood furniture from solid wood in outstanding quality and at an unrivaled price. Because other Viennese furniture manufacturers were also beginning to use the bentwood technique, the Thonets branded their furniture with a maker's mark in the form of a stamp.²¹

In 1851, Michael Thonet participated in the Great Exhibition in London, and the following year the family business opened its first shop in Vienna's city center. The company grew rapidly: by 1853 it had fifty-three employees and had acquired its first steam engine. Thonet turned the furniture

¹⁸ Mang (1978), 38.

¹⁹ Wilhide (2016), 42; Hauffe (2014), 36.

²⁰ Wolfgang Thillmann and Bernd Willscheid, *Möbeldesign. Roentgen, Thonet und die Moderne*, published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name (Berlin: Roentgen Museum Neuwied, 2011), 155.

²¹ Ibid., 19.

company over to his five sons—August, Josef, Jakob, Michael, and Franz—and the name was changed to *Gebrüder Thonet*. In 1856, they opened a furniture factory in Koryčany, in a wooded region of Moravia, now in the Czech Republic but at the time part of the Habsburg Empire. The design and final assembly continued to be done in Vienna. In this regard, Michael Thonet proved himself a visionary entrepreneur: he drew up the building plans along with his sons, oversaw the construction of his factories, and even developed the machines himself. In Moravia, where the factory was located, there was an abundance of cheap rural workers, as well as extensive stands of beech trees near the production facility. This variety of wood would be of decisive importance for the industrial production of *Thonet* furniture.²²

b WORLD FAMOUS: THONET'S NO. 14 CHAIR

The *Thonet* No. 14 chair, designed in 1859, became the “prototype for modern mass-produced furniture and the father of all designer chairs.”²³ The famous *Vienna Coffee House Chair* is considered one of the most successful industrial products of the twentieth century. Over eighty million were sold worldwide, and it was awarded a gold medal at the 1867 International Exposition in Paris.

The design was visionary in many regards: The No. 14 chair could be disassembled and packed flat, enabling it to be shipped all over the world at low rates. While early versions of the *Thonet* chairs were glued together, the No. 14 chair consisted of just six components that were held together by ten screws and two washers. Carefully disassembled, thirty-six chairs could fit into an innovative shipping box measuring one cubic meter, and at the destination, this thoroughly modern chair could be very easily reassembled. The chairs were completely lacking in ornamentation; they were lightweight, of outstanding quality, economical, and ideally suited for mass production and worldwide distribution.²⁴

The family business was innovative in the areas of sales and marketing as well: At this time, the Thonets were already publishing multi-language catalogs with each item of furniture individually numbered to facilitate orders. A worldwide network of sales offices was established in cities including Barcelona, Brussels, Chicago, and New York. *Thonet's* modern furniture received numerous prizes at competitions and exhibitions and was regarded as a textbook example of successful mass production.²⁵

With the No. 14 chair, the so-called *Wiener Geflecht*, or “Viennese mesh,” became known around the world as well. Woven cane has always been prized as an especially sturdy material. Woven-cane seating furniture had a centuries-old tradition, and particularly in England, cane was used quite frequently in furniture production. Michael Thonet was the first to make seats of woven cane or octagon mesh in mass-produced furniture. Today, the *Wiener Geflecht* is still used by numerous furniture producers in the design and manufacture of chairs, settees, and tables.

c JACOB & JOSEF KOHN—CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

Viennese furniture was produced in Austria not only by *Gebrüder Thonet* but also by the *Jacob & Josef Kohn* furniture company. The beginnings of this firm date back to 1850: that year, the businessman Jacob Kohn and his oldest son, Josef Schaje Kohn, founded a company in Moravia for the production and sale of building timber. The father and son soon opened three matchstick factories and became one of the largest wood businesses in the Habsburg Empire.

After the death of the company founder, Josef's sons Carl, Julius, and Felix joined the business. In November 1867, motivated by the economic success of *Gebrüder Thonet* in furniture production, the Kohns launched an

²² Mang (1978), 42.

²³ Hauffe (2014), 38.

²⁴ Mang (1978), 43.

²⁵ Thillmann and Willscheid (2011), 172ff.

RIGHT □ Chair No. 1 after the Schwarzenberg chair; design: Michael Thonet, Vienna, ca. 1850; execution: Gebrüder Thonet, Koryčany, ca. 1861, © MAK/Nathan Murrell



enterprise for the manufacture of bentwood furniture. A legal battle with *Gebrüder Thonet* began. Citing a lack of innovation, the authorities rescinded the Thonets' patent on the bending of wood for furniture, which the family had been granted in 1856.²⁶

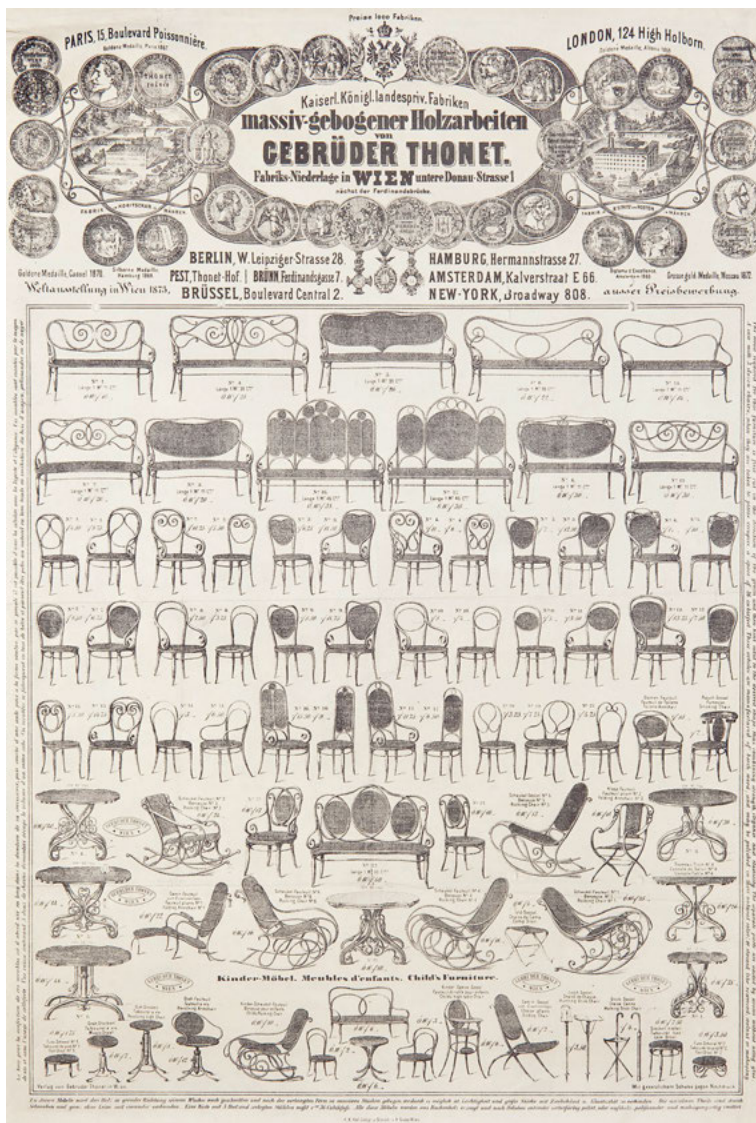
From this time on, *Jacob & Josef Kohn* were the fiercest competitors of *Gebrüder Thonet*: they henceforth concentrated on modern design, cost-effective production, and the worldwide sale of bentwood furniture. The business focused on expansion, establishing numerous production facilities, including in Cracow and Warsaw, and a worldwide network of sales locations. Furniture from *Jacob & Josef Kohn* could be purchased in Barcelona, Madrid, Berlin, Hamburg, Brussels, Kiev, London, Milan, Rome, Paris, and New York. In 1877, the successful family business from Moravia was named a purveyor to the Spanish court. That same year, *Jacob & Josef Kohn* opened a sales office in Vienna's city center, at 3 Burgring, with the company headquarters located nearby on Elisabethstraße.²⁷

After the death of Josef Kohn, his wife, Rosa Kohn, and his youngest son, Johann, entered the business, which was renamed *Aktiengesellschaft der Fabrik Wiener Möbel Jacob & Josef Kohn*. The furniture company with the ambitious motto "semper sursum"—ever onward—participated in many national and international exhibitions, including the world fairs in Vienna in 1873, in Barcelona in 1888, in Chicago in 1893, and in Paris in 1900.²⁸

²⁶ Stefan Üner, "Gebrüder Thonet," in *Wagner, Hoffmann, Loos und das Möbeldesign der Wiener Moderne*, ed. Eva B. Ottlinger (Vienna: Böhlau, 2018), 140.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 142.



LEFT □ Poster by Gebrüder Thonet, Austria, 1876, © MAK/ Katrin Wisskirchen

RIGHT □ Chair No. 14; design: Gebrüder Thonet, Vienna, 1859; execution: Gebrüder Thonet, Koryčany, ca. 1900, © MAK/ Georg Mayer

bottom □ Chair No. 14 disassembled; design: Gebrüder Thonet, Vienna, 1859; execution: Thonet-Mundus, after 1919, © MAK



a

VIENNESE MODERNISM— THE PHENOMENON OF THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

In the period around 1900, Vienna saw an extraordinary intellectual flowering not only in philosophy, painting, music, literature, architecture, and design, but in mathematics, economics, jurisprudence, medicine, and psychoanalysis as well. The city was also experiencing rapid population growth at this time: while some 1.7 million people lived in Vienna in 1900, by 1910 this number had exceeded 2 million. This was the capital of the Habsburg Monarchy, a large European empire with a population of over fifty million people whose countries extended far into the regions of eastern and southeastern Europe. Vienna was the center of power; of media, fashion, and culture; of good taste and design.

People from all provinces and crownlands streamed into the imperial capital in the second half of the nineteenth century, including many Jewish families. Through the constitutional laws passed on 21 December, 1867, regulating the basic rights of citizens, all individuals in this multi-national state, including Jews, were guaranteed equality before the law. The Jewish community in Vienna, which in the mid-nineteenth century had counted some 6,000 members, had grown to about 150,000 by 1900.²⁹ Vienna's liberal and intellectual upper class financed countless building projects in this period and played a crucial role in *Viennese Modernism* as patrons of the arts.³⁰

A characteristic feature of "Vienna 1900" was the interconnection between the arts—not only painting, sculpture, architecture, and arts and crafts, but also music, theater, literature, and philosophy. It was the Vienna of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, Gustav Mahler, Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, and Theodor Herzl. Many intellectuals and artists were drawn to Vienna, where great importance was placed on cultural achievements and intellectual brilliance.³¹ The amalgamation of different cultural influences had an enormous impact on the city, with this pluralism becoming its characteristic feature: Vienna was the city of cultural diversity and creative dialogue.³² This astounding intellectual and cultural wealth in Vienna 1900, the phenomenon of *Viennese Modernism*, would have been unimaginable without the liberal Viennese Jewish community of that time.³³ In *The World of Yesterday*, Stefan Zweig described this era in Vienna as "the age of reason," as a time of security and prosperity.³⁴

The flourishing imperial capital was nevertheless also characterized by a growing antisemitic sentiment, one that Vienna mayor Karl Lueger, among others, used deliberately as a political strategy. It was in this period, in 1896, that Theodor Herzl, a very popular journalist and editor of the *Neue Freie Presse*, published his book *The Jewish State*, thus establishing the idea of a political form of Zionism and of the founding of the State of Israel.

²⁹ <http://www.archiv-ikg-wien.at/archives/juedische-gemeinde-wien> (accessed July 16, 2021).

³⁰ Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Matthias Boeckl, and Christian Witt-Döring (eds.), *Wege der Moderne. Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos und die Folgen* (Vienna: Birkhäuser, 2015), 112.

³¹ Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, From Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012), 28.

³² Serge Lemoine and Marie-Amélie zu Salm-Salm, *Wien um 1900. Klimt | Kokoschka | Schiele | Moser* (Stuttgart: Belser, 2005), 40.

³³ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Jüdische Identität und jüdisches Schicksal. Eine Diskussionsbemerkung* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2011), 19ff.

³⁴ Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, trans. Benjamin W. Huebsch and Helmut Ripperger (London: Cassel and Company, 1943), 15.

The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the *fin de siècle*, took various forms in the different European countries: *Art Nouveau* in Belgium and France, named after the Paris gallery *Maison de l'Art Nouveau*; *Jugendstil* in Germany, after the art magazine *Die Jugend*, founded in Munich in 1896; *Modernisme* in Barcelona; *Stile Floreale* or *Stile Liberty* in Italy, after the London home furnishing store *Liberty and Co.*, or the *Secession Style* in Vienna—they were all part of an international movement that manifested itself in every area of art and design.³⁵

In Vienna, as in other European cities as well, a movement was emerging that rejected the conservative artistic establishments of the time.³⁶ On April 3, 1897, a group of painters, sculptors, and architects that included Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser, Joseph Maria Olbrich, and Josef Hoffmann founded the *Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs*, the *Vienna Secession*.³⁷ Its members stood in opposition to the conservative *Gesellschaft bildender Künstler Österreichs*, the traditional *Künstlerhaus*, and rejected the historicist style that was predominant in Vienna. The founding of the *Vienna Secession* marked the birth of *Viennese Modernism*. For the first time, Vienna assumed a pioneering role in architecture and made an important contribution to the emergence of a modern building style and modern furniture design that spread far beyond the Austrian borders.³⁸

In 1897/98, the exhibition building of the *Secession* was built to plans by Joseph Maria Olbrich. That same year, members of the *Secession* launched the art magazine *Ver Sacrum*, which served as a far-reaching mouthpiece for the modern ideas of the *Secessionists*. The *Vienna Secession* offered young artists the opportunity to present their works to the Viennese, with the goal of raising the local inhabitants' awareness of modern art. The group organized large-scale international exhibitions that showed works by artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Auguste Rodin for the first time in Vienna.³⁹ An exhibition in 1900 of works by the Scottish architect and furniture designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh made a great impression on Viennese architects and designers, particularly Josef Hoffmann.

Viennese *Art Nouveau*, or *Jugendstil*, could very soon be admired in many places: it adorned houses and public buildings, pictures, posters, books, and jewelry, as well as domestic objects in private households. Although there were many different trends in this regard, the artists had one thing in common: their rejection of historicism. They vehemently opposed ornate decoration, copies of historic styles, and inferior industrially produced goods. Very much following the model of the *Arts and Crafts Movement*, they sought new, simple, modern, and aesthetic forms. The artists frequently drew on forms from nature: organically curved lines, stylized plant forms, floral elements, and both symmetric and geometric shapes found their way into architecture, furniture-making, arts and crafts, and all areas of design. The representatives of *Jugendstil* responded to mass-produced goods and historicism by aiming to design every area of life, from buildings and pictures to furniture, wallpaper, fabric, and tableware. Buildings, their rooms, and all furniture and other objects contained therein were to form a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a complete work of art.⁴⁰

Vienna 1900 assumed for a time the role of the cultural capital of Europe: the most exciting composers, painters, architects, and designers of this era lived and worked in Vienna.⁴¹

RIGHT □ Poster for the XII Exhibition of the Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs at Vienna's Secession; design: Alfred Roller; execution: Albert Berger, both Vienna, 1901, © MAK

³⁵ Wilhide (2016), 92; Hauffe (2014), 48ff.

³⁶ Vienna's *Künstlerhaus* was built between 1865 and 1868 and henceforth served as an exhibition space for artists. It was originally operated by the *Genossenschaft der bildenden Künstler Wiens*, the professional association of painters, sculptors, and architects in Vienna, which later changed its name to *Gesellschaft bildender Künstler Österreichs*.

³⁷ Thun-Hohenstein, Boeckl, and Witt-Döring (2015), 102.

³⁸ Felix Czeike, "Secession," in *Historisches Lexikon Wien*, Vol. 5 (Vienna: Kremayr & Scheriau, 1997), 188.

³⁹ Lemoine and Salm-Salm (2005), 39.

⁴⁰ Hauffe (2014), 49.

⁴¹ Kandel (2012), 26; Blom (2009), 66.



b

ARCHITECTS AND ARTISTS AS FURNITURE DESIGNERS

Otto Wagner was one of the first architects in Vienna to occupy himself with the achievements of modern engineering and the use of new industrial manufacturing methods and materials. But the architect was interested not only in technical changes but also social ones.

In his early works, Otto Wagner was in large part a devotee of historicism. In 1894, at the age of fifty-three, he was named professor of architecture at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts (*Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien*) and that same year became Vienna's city planner. With his design and construction of Vienna's *Stadtbahn* rail system, he left an indelible mark on Vienna 1900. In his book *Moderne Architektur*, which was aimed at his students as well as the critics of his buildings, he demanded that the new age be given not imitations of historical styles but rather a new style, a "functional style."⁴² From 1899 to 1905, Wagner was a member of the *Vienna Secession*, whose exhibitions showed his designs for furniture and interior furnishings on several occasions. With the Post Office Savings Bank, built on Vienna's Georg-Koch-Platz between 1904 and 1912, Wagner created his most modern and important structure. It is considered a key work of European Modernism.

There was not yet a dedicated training program in Vienna for product or furniture design, which was still the domain of the architects. The academies for architecture in Vienna were simultaneously the educational institutions for aspiring furniture designers of the time, who were trained at the School of Arts and Crafts (*Kunstgewerbeschule*, today the University of Applied Arts Vienna), the Polytechnic Institute of Vienna (*Technische Hochschule*, the predecessor of the University of Technology), or at the Academy of Fine Arts. In the course of his nearly forty years of teaching, Carl König—architect, professor of architecture, dean and beginning with the 1901/02 academic year also the rector of the Polytechnic Institute—influenced an entire generation of architects and furniture designers. Many of his students, who included Oskar Strnad, Felix Augenfeld, Josef Frank, Frederick Kiesler, Richard Neutra, and Rudolph Michael Schindler, came from Jewish Viennese families, as did Carl König himself: he was Vienna's first and only Jewish professor of architecture.⁴³ Unlike Otto Wagner, who broke with historicism, Carl König was convinced that a thorough study of the past was the prerequisite for a new and modern kind of architecture. A number of people around Otto Wagner, who taught at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna until 1918, had antisemitic views,⁴⁴ and some of Wagner's students later became committed Nazis.⁴⁵

Josef Hoffmann, who studied and later worked with Wagner and admired him unconditionally, began teaching at the School of Arts and Crafts in 1898. He brought about a radical rethinking process in Vienna with regard to the design and production of everyday objects, furniture, interior furnishings, and architecture. Although Hoffmann viewed himself primarily as an architect, he was significantly more productive as a designer. As an alternative to the organic *Jugendstil* forms, he—whom the Viennese gave the nickname "Square Hoffmann"—developed a fondness for geometric forms and grid patterns as well as for the generous use of black and white.

⁴² Thun-Hohenstein, Boeckl, and Witt-Dörning (2015), 64.

⁴³ Ursula Prokop, "Josef Frank und der kleine Kreis um Oskar Strnad und Viktor Lurje," in *Josef Frank: Against Design*, eds. Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Hermann Czech, and Sebastian Hackenschmidt (Vienna: MAK, Birkhäuser, 2015), 48.

⁴⁴ Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Hermann Czech, and Sebastian Hackenschmidt (eds.), *Josef Frank: Against Design* (Vienna: MAK, Birkhäuser, 2015), 14.

⁴⁵ Prokop, in Thun-Hohenstein, Czech, and Hackenschmidt (2015), 48ff.

In the early twentieth century, exhibitions of Japanese art began being held all over Europe, including in Vienna, and Josef Hoffmann fell under the influence of traditional Japanese forms. From 1898 to 1936 he taught architecture at the School of Arts and Crafts as well as instructing his students in the areas of interior architecture and furniture design.

Another architect was very influential for the designers of the next generation: Oskar Strnad. He began teaching form theory classes at the School of Arts and Crafts in 1909 and as of 1914 taught architecture alongside Josef Hoffmann. There was a lively exchange of ideas among both the students and the professors of the architecture schools.⁴⁶ The students of König, Hoffmann, and Koloman Moser, who taught at the School of Arts and Crafts as well, but also those of Strnad devoted themselves intensively to questions of furnishings and the design of furniture. This period in Vienna was characterized by a spirit of new beginnings in the area of furniture design.⁴⁷

c

WIENER WERKSTÄTTE

In June 1903, Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser, and the Austrian industrialist Fritz Waerndorfer founded the *Wiener Werkstätte* (Vienna Workshops) as a production collective of fine artists with the objective of reforming the decorative arts in Austria. Their models were the British *Arts and Crafts Movement* and the ideas of the Scottish architect and furniture designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh. In the arts and crafts as well as in furniture design, a clear and geometric formal language developed that was characterized by right angles and stringent lines. The *Wiener Werkstätte* worked closely together with the *Secession* and the School of Arts and Crafts. The collective designed and produced furniture, books, posters, cards, lamps, fabric, jewelry, and paper goods in its own workshops in Vienna as well as in collaboration with other highly specialized companies, and marketed these goods internationally. In 1904, the enterprise opened its own cabinet-making workshop but produced only a small amount of the furniture; instead, renowned Viennese cabinetmakers and interior decorators such as *Portois & Fix*, *Anton Herrgesell*, *Friedrich Otto Schmidt*, and *Johann Nierdmoser* were contracted to produce the furniture, which was then exhibited and sold in the showrooms of the *Wiener Werkstätte*.⁴⁸

Although furniture and other craft objects from the *Wiener Werkstätte* were manufactured only in small numbers, they soon became well known internationally and were in great demand far beyond the boundaries of Vienna. The *Wiener Werkstätte* had its headquarters on Heumühlgasse in Vienna's Wieden and Neubau districts and opened sales offices on Kärntner Straße and Graben; these were followed by branch offices in Berlin, Zurich, and New York City.⁴⁹

The *Wiener Werkstätte* developed exclusive decorating concepts for interiors in which every detail was harmonized. The exquisite objects were produced by craftspeople in the *Wiener Werkstätte* studios, while external manufacturers were carefully vetted by the artists and designers before given a commission. Thus, glass was produced for the *Wiener Werkstätte* by the Viennese glassworks *J. & L. Lobmeyr*, porcelain by the manufacturer *Augarten*, and fabric by the *Backhausen* textile company. The successful positioning of the *Wiener Werkstätte* as a brand was at that time something completely new.⁵⁰

In 1916, Dagobert Peche, the highly imaginative artist and representative of the *Wiener Werkstätte*, established an artists' workshop, an open,

LEFT □ Design No. 4427 for a fabric pattern; design: Josef Hoffmann, Vienna 1902; execution: Johann Backhausen & Söhne, © Backhausen Archive

RIGHT □ Design No. 5041 for a rug; design: Josef Hoffmann, Vienna, 1904; execution: Johann Backhausen & Söhne, © Backhausen Archive

BOTTOM □ Design No. 7741 for a rug; design: Josef Hoffmann, Vienna, 1910; execution: Johann Backhausen & Söhne, © Backhausen Archive

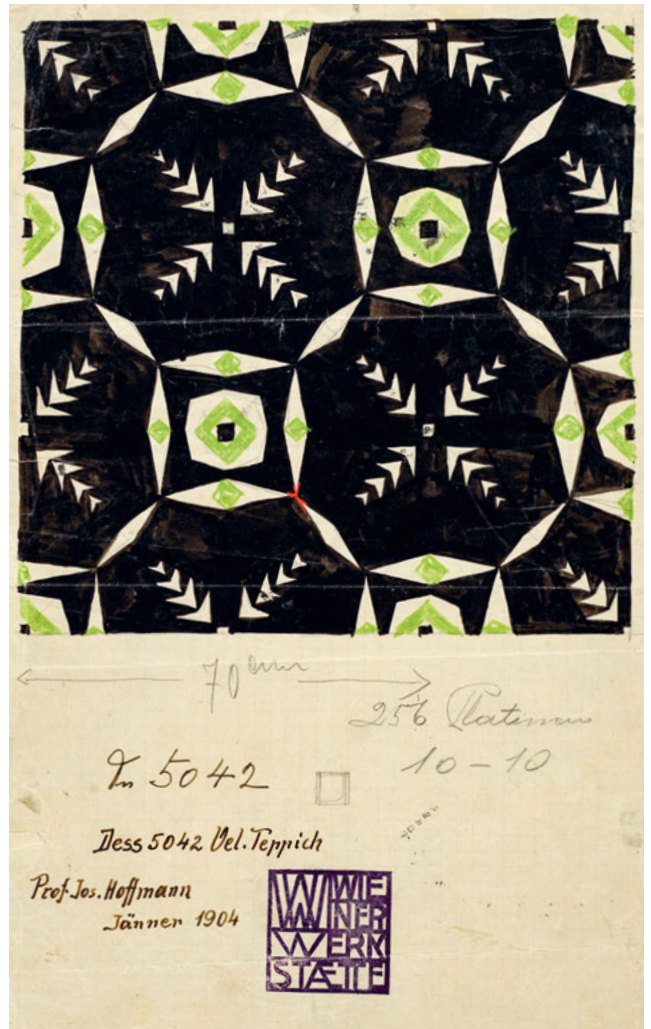
⁴⁶ Eva B. Ottlinger (ed.), *Wohnen zwischen den Kriegen. Wiener Möbel 1914–1941* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2009), 46.

⁴⁷ Eva B. Ottlinger (ed.), *Wagner, Hoffmann, Loos und das Möbeldesign der Wiener Moderne* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2018), 22ff.

⁴⁸ Ottlinger (2009), 47.

⁴⁹ Gabriele Fahr-Becker and Angelika Taschen, *Wiener Werkstätte, 1903–1932* (Cologne: Taschen, 2015), 12ff.

⁵⁰ Wilhide (2016), 102ff.



experimental art laboratory of the *Wiener Werkstätte* that during World War I was used primarily by women to develop their artistic potential. The focus was on the design of fabrics, wallpaper, and pillows as interior decoration elements, but also of jewelry, handbags, and decorative paper. The exuberant, wildly colorful fabric patterns and wallpaper designs of Felice Rix, Maria Likarz, and Mizi Friedmann anticipated the vibrant patterns of the 1950s and '60s. Compared with those of other countries, the fabric designs of the *Wiener Werkstätte* were extraordinary; numerous companies wanted to act as the company's agent and market the fabrics of the *Wiener Werkstätte* abroad.⁵¹

d

ANTAGONIST AND CRITIC OF JUGENDSTIL: ADOLF LOOS

He was the great antagonist and a vehement critic of the decorative Jugendstil and of the *Wiener Werkstätte*: Adolf Loos.

Born in Brno (now in the Czech Republic) in 1870 as the son of a stonemason, Adolf Loos studied building engineering in Dresden and then spent three years in the US, where he made ends meet by doing odd jobs, including working as a furniture draftsman and designer. He became acquainted with modern skyscraper architecture in New York and Chicago, where he visited the 1893 Columbian Exhibition.

In 1896, he settled in Vienna, where he worked as an interior architect and a critic at the *Neue Freie Presse* newspaper. At the beginning, he also published articles in *Ver Sacrum*, the art magazine of the *Vienna Secession*, but soon broke with the leading architects of the *Secession* at the time. He began his career as a consultant with the prestigious Viennese interior designer *Friedrich Otto Schmidt*, whose *Atelier für Zimmerdekoration* (Studio for Interior Decoration) was concerned primarily with copying antique furniture, but under the influence of Loos turned to modern interior design.⁵²

Interior design was the central element of the life of Adolf Loos. In Vienna, he designed private villas, apartment complexes, office buildings, shops, interior decor, and furniture. The business premises he designed for firms such as the exquisite men's clothier *Knize* on Vienna's Graben, the *Manz* bookshop on Kohlmarkt, the *Café Museum*, and the famous *American Bar*, stand as prototypes of modern interior architecture.⁵³

The year 1911 saw the erection of another manifest of *Viennese Modernism* in the very center of Vienna: Loos's residential and commercial *Goldman & Salatsch* building at 3 Michaelerplatz, right across from the Neo-Baroque wing of Hofburg Palace.⁵⁴ The finished building triggered a veritable scandal: The Viennese called the building with the unadorned façade "the house without eyebrows" and "a beast of a house." Even during construction, protests led to a building freeze ordered by the authorities. It is said that after the completion of the so-called Loos House, the elderly Emperor Franz Joseph never again used the palace's Michaelerplatz exit and even had the windows of the Hofburg facing the square nailed shut so he would not have to look at that "horrid" building.⁵⁵

As a critic of arts and crafts, Adolf Loos waged a public crusade against Josef Hoffmann and the *Wiener Werkstätte*. Loos did not see furniture and articles of everyday use as *objets d'art*—he made a clear distinction between utilitarian objects on the one hand and artworks and the works of architects on the other.⁵⁶ In his famous works *Ornament und Verbrechen* (Ornament and Crime) and *Wie man eine Wohnung einrichten soll* (How One Should Furnish an Apartment), Adolf Loos—following the ideas of Otto Wagner—bitterly opposed any form of decoration on buildings, utilitarian

⁵¹ Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Anne-Katrin Rossberg, and Elisabeth Schmuttermeyer (eds.), *Die Frauen der Wiener Werkstätte* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2020), 96ff.

⁵² Ottillinger (2018), 76ff.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Lemoine and Salm-Salm (2005), 38.

⁵⁵ Martina Pippal, *Kleine Kunstgeschichte Wiens* (Munich: Beck, 2000), 196ff.

⁵⁶ Thun-Hohenstein, Boeckl, and Witt-Dörning (2015), 162.