# ART FOR THE TIMES: Vienna in the 1890's

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*In 1891 Vienna hosted the first great exhibition of Oriental carpets. This year, the city is the site for the Fifth International Conference on Oriental Carpets. In this article, the author looks at the cultural and intellectual life of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its capital in the years around the turn of the century and demonstrates its profound influence on modern Western art and thought.*

The fifty years between 1860 and 1910 constituted a time of extraordinary richness and flux in the cultural life of the Western World. Just as the Industrial Revolution at the beginning of the 19th century had heralded the passing of an agrarian age that had endured for many centuries, so the artistic revolution which took place in England, France, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, of course, the United States in the second half of the century caused the overthrow of the Classical tradition enshrined in the Renaissance, and saw the beginnings of an eclectic modernism that is still with us.

The artistic revolution went in many guises and under many names—The Arts and Crafts Movement, *Art Nouveau*, The Aesthetic Movement, Impressionism, Symbolism, *Jugendstil, Historismus, Stile Liberty* and many others. It was a revolution which saw great changes in the values, both spiritual and material, which were placed on works of art. It was the period of the art school, the atelier and the museum, and also of a brilliant generation of art historians—Lessing, Bode, Kühnel, Riegl, Borenius, Wöfflin and Berenson to name but a few—whose work was to change forever the place of the artist in society.

The two symbolic centres of the revolution are Paris and Vienna. It is easy for us to see how extraordinarily rich and diverse Viennese cultural and philosophic life was in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was the capital of the vast Empire which traced its roots directly to the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne and which had been uninterruptedly ruled for some three centuries by one great dynastic family, the Habsburgs. It was the city outside whose walls the seemingly omnipotent armies of the Ottoman Turks had finally been halted and turned around; the names of Don John of Austria and the Battle of Lepanto remaining great landmarks in the story of modern Europe for every schoolboy historian.

This artistic upheaval was not confined to Vienna alone. Its influence was pervasive throughout the Empire. In Prague during the 1890's the Royal School of Art Craftsmanship was founded in imitation of the Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule, under the directorship of Professor Stribel. In Hungary, a new and fervent Maǵyar nationalism, combined with historic Byzantine and Ottoman influences, produced an interesting and eclectic blend of Eastern monumentality and *Art Nouveau* symbolism. The Hungarians lavished particular care on their pavilions in the many international exhibitions held throughout Europe and the United States during this period. Their pavilion at the Milan exhibition of 1905/6 was designed by Géza Maróthi in what can only be described as Maǵyar-Turko-Byzantine style, and contained carpets designed by the wife of the leading Hungarian *Jugendstil* designer Ede Thörökai Wigand as well as other examples designed by Aladar Kovosfoi-Kreisch and made by Leo Belmonte.

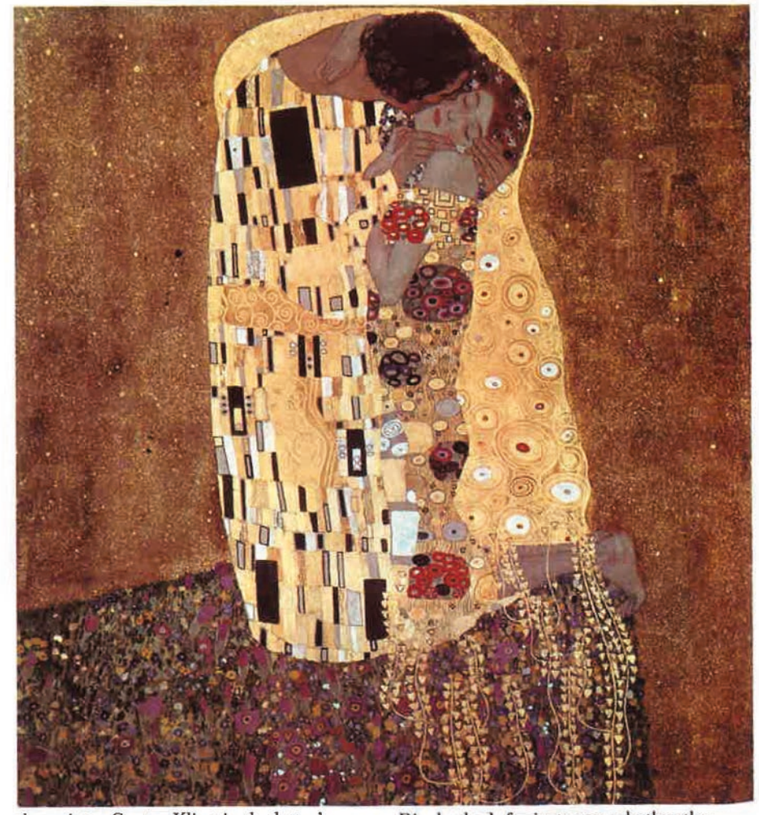
Kovosfoi-Kreisch, a close friend of Tolstoi, had founded the Gödöllo Atelier, a Hungarian handicraft studio based on the example of Morris & Co. in England and the various Russian workshops established at the turn of the century. Gödöllo was originally intended only for the production of tapestries and embroideries, but soon widened its scope to include other applied arts. Among their finest works was a suite of tapestries designed by Josef Rippl-Ronai for Count Tivadar Andrassy's commissioned dining room, which was displayed in the Hungarian pavilion at the Turin International Exhibition of 1911. Unfortunately the whole exhibition complex was devastated by fire, destroying a large proportion of the many exhibits. Of the tapestry suite only one piece, *Girl in a Red Dress*, survived. Rippl-Ronai, who had spent summers at Pont Aven with Gauguin and the other *cloisonniste* painters and who was perhaps the leading Hungarian proponent of the 'Whiplash' *Art Nouveau* style, is today best remembered for his association with the Zsolnay pottery at Pécs.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the wealth of brilliant talent which crystallised


**'Ver Sacrum' by Koloman Moser**
*XIIIth Secession Exhibition Poster, Vienna 1902. This poster recently made a world record price at auction.*
*Courtesy Christie's.*







**'The Kiss' by Gustav Klimt.**
*Painted in the same period as 'Danae' (1907-8), and like the latter one of Klimt's (1862-1918) most sensual and erotic visions or 'idea-paintings'. In 'Danae', the artist used a single rectangle as the phallic symbol of the unseen Zeus. Here they are used all over the man's robe in contrast to the vulvular-ovular symbolism of the woman's robe. The erotic 'Eastern' flavour is marked.*
*Österreichisches Museum, Vienna.*
*Courtesy The Bridgeman Art Library.*

in Austro-Hungary during this period is given if we briefly consider Trieste, then a small provincial backwater in a great empire. In the years around the turn of the century a visitor there might have encountered a young Viennese doctor, Sigmund Freud, pursuing his peculiar studies. Should he have wished for Italian lessons from an English speaking teacher, he might have found himself in the class at the Berlitz School of Languages taught by a young Irish expatriate, James Joyce, trying to earn enough money to support himself as a writer. Or he might have sat down in one of the many cafés in the University quarter next to a Bohemian called Rainer Maria Rilke, who was busy writing *Elegies*. He might have met a struggling Italian novelist by the name of Italo Svevo, whose finest novel, *Senilità*, is best known in English by the title given to it by his friend Joyce, *As Man Grows Older*. It is doubtful if the same could be said of Manchester, Dieppe or Milwaukee!

In Vienna itself movement followed movement in what now appears to be a frenzied rush of almost incredible creativity. In 1851 at the Great Exhibition in London, Prince Albert had embodied the European cultural establishment's view that the Renaissance best represented the age of expansion and commercial prosperity. By the 'Renaissance', of course, was meant primarily an art of somnolent Neo-classicism, which in Vienna is exemplified in the Ringstrasse, that huge circle of monumental buildings planned by the Emperor Franz Josef as a symbol of Imperial power and of the omnipotence of the established order over the stirring urban proletariat. It was the accepted primacy of this Neo-classical aesthetic which acted as the focal point for the revolutionary idealism of young Viennese artists and intellectuals in the latter part of the 19th century.

One of the most important thinkers in this group was the art historian Alois Riegl, born in 1858, the son of a minor official in an Austrian provincial town. He was appointed Keeper of Textiles at the Kunstgewerbe Museum in Vienna in 1886, and eleven years later as Professor of Art History at the University of Vienna where he was a colleague of Professor Franz Wickköff, himself a powerful ally of the painter Gustav Klimt in the latter's early battles with the cultural establishment over commissions for public buildings.

During his tenure as Keeper of Textiles, Riegl began work on one of the consuming problems which fascinated artists and art historians of the period; the relationship between Western Classical ornament and its Eastern counterpart, and as a corollary, the prime importance of abstract ornament itself in the history of universal aesthetics.

**A Cabinet by Kolomon Moser**
*Exhibited at the VIIIth Vienna Secession Exhibition in 1901. Manufactured by Portois & Fix, inlaid with metal, the fruitwood doors with teardrops of iridescent glass.*
*Courtesy Sotheby's.*

Riegl asked, for instance, whether the designs of Oriental carpets were indigenous to their place of manufacture, or were in fact a synthesis of the floral ornament of Byzantine and Islamic art. He concluded that the Islamic arabesque, for example, was little more than the ornamental *rinceau* of Classical art in Oriental guise.

Riegl proceeded, in a series of books, including *Altorientalische Teppiche* (1891) and *Stilfragen* (1893) to attack the 'Materialist' theory then in vogue, which claimed in essence that all decorative forms are the product either of the technique or the material, and should be separated from 'artistic creation', the product of an 'instinct for imitation'. Riegl wished to refute, or at least to minimise, the influence of such external factors.

In the process he advanced his theory of '*Kunstwollen*', literally 'the intention or purpose of art in every culture', a concept which it is a fair to say has seldom been properly understood. In essence the problem and the solution embodied in this word can be summed up thus: each work of art which does not conform to our preconceived Western artistic taste, as

nurtured by the prevailing Classical ideal, will have for us a disturbingly alien quality. To overcome this obstacle we need to suspend our aesthetic prejudices and try to decide the historical *raison d'être* of each antique work of art—that is to comprehend fully the historical circumstances in which that work of art developed—in the hope of discovering the true determining factors which made it exactly as we see it. If we do this, despite the difficulty, it will lose its strange inquietude, both in its entirety and in its component parts, and will acquire a necessary 'interior' which we had only previously been able to perceive in those objects which were the products of a familiar culture.

*Kunstwollen* in its essence can be taken as the aesthetic creed of the young generation of artists, architects and designers who created the uniquely Viennese version of *Jugendstil*. It expressed the view of Ranke, who proclaimed the 'equality of all eras in the eyes of God', and of the Vienna Secession itself, which was founded in 1897 by Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser and Josef Maria Olbrich with the motto *Der Zeit ihre Kunst—der Kunst ihre Freiheit* (Art for the Times—Art must be Free).

Hoffmann, Moser and Olbrich had all studied under Otto Wagner, the greatest late 19th century Viennese architect, who had, from 1894, been Professor of Architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1903 they founded their own production collective with the resounding title of the 'Wiener Werkstätte-Produktiv-Gemeinschaft von Kunsthandwerken in Wien'. At its height it employed 100 craftworkers and 37 mastercraftsmen, each of the latter being entitled to sign his own work.

The Wiener Werkstätte was unquestionably one of the greatest and most artistically creative of all the multi-purpose design ateliers that were among the most ubiquitous phenomena of the European Arts and Crafts and *Art Nouveau* movements. It far outweighed, in the brilliance and range of its work, the firm of Morris & Co or Ashbee's Guild of Handicrafts in England, with their somewhat impractical and sentimental mediaeval ethos, the later Deutscher Werkbund of Hellerau, near Dresden, or such 'folksy'

**'Female Figure' by Leopold Forstner**
*c. 1910, Mosaic in glass and ceramic. 76.3 × 16.5 cm (30" ×6½")*
*Forstner (1878—1936) was one of the earliest members of the Wiener Werkstätte. He is principally remembered as a mosaic artist and for the execution of Gustav Klimt's mosaic designs 'Expectation' and 'Fulfillment' in the Palais Stoclet in Brussels. He also produced mosaics of his own design for the Palais, of which this is a version made for himself. Note the blend of Hellenism and symbolism with the Byzantine inspired* matière.
*Courtesy Fischer Fine Art.*

examples as the Russian artistic communities of Abramtsevo, Trocadero and Talashkino, despite the latter having been the training centres of many of the artists and designers later to be associated both with Diaghilev's Russian Ballet and Constructivism.

The Wiener Werkstätte existed to create the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, in which everything from the exterior architecture to the light switches and the towel-racks made up a conscious stylistic whole. Unlike the Deutscher Werkbund or the Bauhaus itself the Werkstätte members had little interest in mass production or industry, although they made some concessions in this direction, most notably in their designs for ceramics, glass, cutlery and lighting manufacturers. They worked with the finest and most costly materials and only the very wealthy could afford to employ them. Despite the revolutionary quality of their work, one concept remained fixed—that art was elitist. They had no time for the somewhat contradictory socialist sentiments of William Morris in this context.

In the closing years of the 19th century Hoffmann, Olbrich and Adolf Loos, one of the important architects of the period who had studied Sullivan's work in Chicago at first hand and who became an early member of the Secession (in 1909 he sat for a portrait by the young Oskar Kokoschka) built a number of houses for a young generation of bankers and industrialists. The interior furnishings they used were a remarkable collaboration between all the available talents of the Secessionist Movement.

Hoffmann continued to execute similar commissions with the Werkstätte through the early years of this century, most notably between 1900 and 1915 at Hohe Warte, then a rich suburb of Vienna. He built four memorable houses there; the first in 1900 for Carl Möll, the second in 1901 for Hugo Henneberg, a printer and collector of Japanese art. This house contained furniture by Hoffmann and Charles Rennie Mackintosh as well as Klimt's famous portrait of Marie Henneberg. The third, built in 1909/10 was the Haus Ast, now the Saudi Arabian Embassy, but also famous as the home of Gustav and Alma Mahler, while the fourth was built between 1913 and 1915 for Otto Primavesi, a banker, who like Fritz Wärndorfer, the Werkstätte's first patron, spent all his money on Werkstätte projects.

The greatest commission of all, and the masterpiece of the *Art Nouveau/Jugendstil* Movement in Europe, was for the Palais Stoclet in Brussels. It was commissioned from the Werkstätte in 1904 by the young Belgian banker Adolphe Stoclet and completed between 1905 and 1911. It embodied the theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* carried through to its ultimate glory. Hoffmann himself was the architect, but the interior of the Palais Stoclet is a





**'Cafe Griensteidl, Vienna, 1890', by Rudolf Volkel**
***Museen der Stadt Wien, Courtesy The Bridgeman Art Library.***

kaleidoscope of the work of the greatest designers of the Werkstätte, working without constraints of time or cost. The centrepiece is the dining room with its great mosaic friezes 'Expectation' and 'Fulfillment', designed by Klimt and executed by Leopold Forstner in an extraordinary technique inspired by the Ravenna mosaics, incorporating gold, silver, semi-precious stones and enamels. The house is filled with the richest materials—marble, stained glass, precious metals and stones, ivory, coral and highly polished hardwoods. Apart from Hoffmann and Klimt, other designers who contributed to the Palais included Carl Otto Czeschka, the ceramicists Michael Powolny and Berthold Löffler, Kolomon Moser, who among other things designed the stained glass, (as he was to do for the second Wagner villa in 1913, working once again with Forstner who executed the mosaics on the exterior facade), the sculptors Richard Luksch and Franz Metzner and the Symbolist painter Ludwig Heinrich Jungnickel. Carpets and textiles were designed by Hoffmann and Moser.

It is impossible to mention all the great figures who made up the creative community in Vienna during this time. Writers included the dramatist Artur Schnitzler, whose plays capture the remarkable hothouse atmosphere of the *fin-de-siècle* capital, the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal and novelists Martin Buber and Robert Musil, the former also a rabbinical mystic. In Prague, of course, Rilke was working, as was a young man who began writing in 1898, Franz Kafka.

Mahler, Schoenberg and Berg provided the musical alternative to the Strausses and the millionaire Franz Lehar, whilst the scientific community included not only Vienna's most famous son, Sigmund Freud, and later his disciple Alfred Adler, but two subsequent Nobel laureates, Karl Landsteiner, discoverer of blood groups, and Julius von Wagner-Jauregg, as well as Eugen Steinach who initiated the study of hormones. Many of these men were Jews, and we should remember that Vienna was also home to Theodor Herzl, whose manifesto *The Jewish State*, published in 1896, marked the advent of Zionism. Yet, in one of history's great ironies, Vienna at this time also sheltered a young would-be art student, scarred by his experience of poverty and rejection. Adolf Hitler had little good to say of his life in Vienna, although the Ringstrasse, not surprisingly, impressed him greatly as a symbol of Imperial might.

**'Wildrosen' by Koloman Moser**
*c.1899, Bird and flower fabric design from the studios of the Wiener Werkstätte.*
*41 × 26 cm (16" × 10")*
*Courtesy Fischer Fine Art.*

That so much creativity was possible is due in large measure to some of the enlightened bureaucrats who encouraged Vienna's cultural diversity as something which could be held up with pride for the world to admire. Perhaps the possibilities this establishment support engendered are best summed up in the words used by Baron Wilhelm Ritter von Hartel, newly appointed as Minister of Culture, in a speech recorded in the *Protokol des Kunstrates* of February 16, 1899: 'Although every development is rooted in national soil, yet works of art speak a common language, and entering into noble competition, lead to mutual understanding and reciprocal interest'. □

*Bibliography see Appendix*