

# The New York Times

## Weekend Arts II

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**JASON FARAGO** | ART REVIEW



An installation view of objects and designs from the Wiener Werkstätte. Neue Galerie, New York

# In Debt to Inspired Design

A modern collective that was a commercial basket case.

BEFORE MODERN DESIGN was streamlined, it got intricate; before modern design was industrialized, it came from human hands.

In Vienna in the early 1900s, a last gasp of artisanal furniture and homewares emerged from a new kind of workshop, in which artists and craftsmen worked side by side. Elsewhere standardization swept through industry, and assembly lines alienated workers from the fruits of their labor. But these designers saw another path forward, one that made a virtue of objectivity, durability and craftsmanship. To be modern, for these designers, was to be on the shop floor.

“Wiener Werkstätte, 1903-1932: The Luxury of Beauty,” a handsome exhibition full of covetable objects at the Neue Galerie on Fifth Avenue, tells the story of Vienna’s most glamorous design firm, which was always better at fabricating teapots and printing textiles than at turning a profit.

The show packs the museum’s third floor galleries, which

have been hung with patterned curtains and other temporary wall treatments; pops up in the permanent galleries below; and spills right out onto 86th Street, where the front porch of the museum’s proud townhouse has been upholstered with a blue and white carpet reproducing the floor of Vienna’s Cabaret Fledermaus, one of the firm’s big early commissions. (The show has been organized by the Neue Galerie curators Christian Witt-Dörning and Janis Staggs, both of whom have presented earlier shows of decorative arts here.)

With more than 400 objects stuffed into four rooms, it can get overwhelming, and you’ll need diligence to appreciate the development of individual designers — notably Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser in the early days, and Dagobert Peche after World War I. For real insight, you’ll have to rely on the epic catalog, running to nearly 600 pages; the galleries are more like upscale total works of art, one part Wagner, one part Bendel’s.

The Wiener Werkstätte (or “Viennese Workshops”) was founded in 1903 by Moser, a painter; Hoffmann, an architect; and Fritz Waerndorfer, a textile magnate who provided the funding. They were sick to death of the Jugendstil (or Art Nouveau) decorative arts then in fashion in Central Europe, and convinced

that a new, collaborative model of production could best manufacture applied arts for a new century.

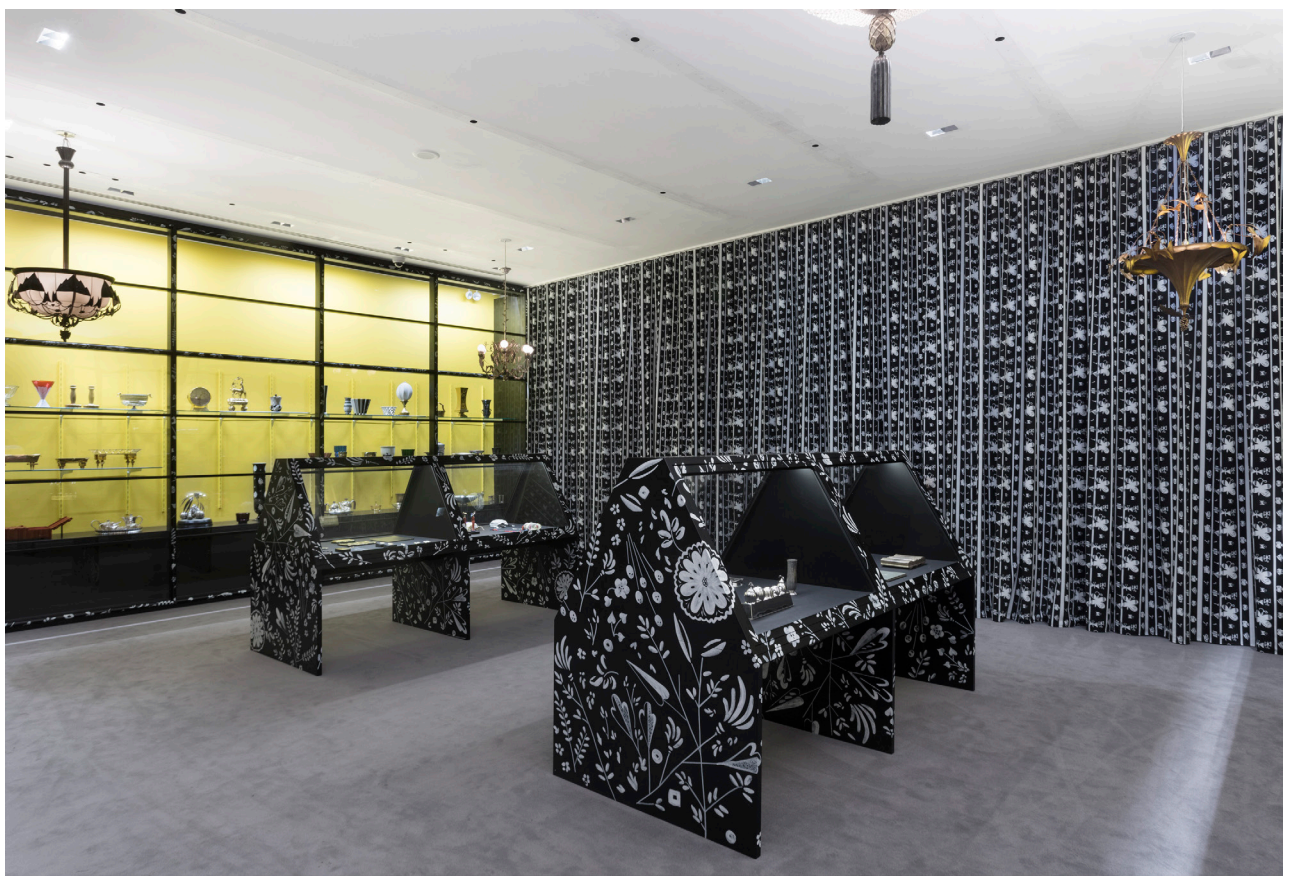
Like their fellow artists of the tradition-shattering Vienna Secession, Moser and Hoffmann drew on the example of England's Arts and Crafts movement, which had earlier aimed to dissolve distinctions between fine and applied arts, and to re-establish the nobility of manual labor that industrial capitalism was scrubbing away. Yet where Arts and Crafts objects looked backward to the English Middle Ages, the Wiener Werkstätte used handcraft to create thoroughly modern objects.

Moser liked to use checkerboard patterns in his designs; a sugar box here is covered with hundreds of little black and white squares, while a bread basket and cruet stand are both formed from silver panels punched with square voids. (Metal objects, from umbrella stands to napkin rings, constituted the plurality of the workshop's production.) Moser also designed the firm's logo, with its trademark interlocking W's, which appears here on wrapping paper, book bindings and other choice objects.

Hoffmann, too, liked right angles and rigid surfaces, though he could also embrace more swooping forms, as in a tea service made of silver and ebony from 1904 whose parabolic curves predate the space age by decades, or a 1910 silver centerpiece whose clover form recalls Islamic decorative arts. Both men also designed brooches, necklaces and belt buckles, out of silver and mother-of-pearl; leather purses and card cases; and solid, rectilinear furniture, made of oak and other pricey woods. A table of Hoffmann's design from 1904, and a set of library steps he made the next year, both incorporate heavy wood panels supported by cubic arrangements of bars, gussied up with mounts of silver or brass.

None of this came cheap. Vienna in the early 20th century was an imperial capital — Hoffmann moved there from what is now the Czech Republic — and home to a new haute bourgeoisie whose members, many of them Jewish, became enthusiastic clients. Still, the workshop's insistence on the best materials elevated expenses, as did the handsome salaries of the artisans, who stamped their monograms on their metalwork, fabric printing and book bindings. High production costs meant high retail prices, and that meant putting artistic ego to one side. Hoffmann's statement at the end of the Wiener Werkstätte's manifesto put it plainly: "We are not allowed to chase after daydreams. We have both feet firmly set on the ground, and we need commissions."

They got their biggest one in 1905,



An installation view of "Wiener Werkstätte, 1903-1932: The Luxury of Beauty," an exhibition full of covetable objects at the Neue Galerie. Below, a candy box in silver and coral by Dagobert Peche.



when the Belgian industrialist Adolphe Stoclet commissioned the workshop to design an entire house in Brussels, which necessitated the work of all the artisans and numerous freelancers, and mosaics for the dining room designed by one Gustav Klimt. The Palais Stoclet remains in the family and is not open to visitors, but a large model here, made by Hoffmann of linden and pear woods, gives a sense of the house's massive scale. The project went years over deadline, and the Wiener Werkstätte had agreed to do the job for a fixed price; the resulting costs nearly ruined them. For the rest of its days, the Wiener Werkstätte remained an economic basket case, unable to turn a profit even when it had more work than it could handle.

After World War I, and the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, Viennese society understandably took a less utopian view of housewares. The unity of art and design that Hoffmann and Moser advocated no longer seemed so imperative, and the

later days of the Wiener Werkstätte were dominated by Peche, whose ornamental gilded wood frames, feather-bedecked chandeliers and jewel boxes topped with preening stags made a mockery of earlier claims to objectivity and functionalism. (At the Neue Galerie, these later works are presented in a gallery amusingly decorated like a Wiener Werkstätte showroom. Its back wall is hung with a blue and white curtain reproducing an intricate design of Mathilde Flögl, one of several female designers who joined the workshop in the war years.) The Wiener Werkstätte, in its last days, even tried to set up a New York branch, though it closed in just a year.

I can't say I'm surprised that it didn't take here. The author Hermann Broch once called Vienna in the years around 1900 "a joyful apocalypse," in which an old order was crumbling and the one to come was not yet sure. In New York in the '20s, the hat racks and fruit bowls of a few Viennese designers would have been merely a style to choose from among others. Yet the debates around function and ornament that Hoffmann, Moser and the rest of the Wiener Werkstätte participated in were much more than aesthetic disputes. They were test cases for new ways of living, all the more seductive because they weren't fully realized.

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Wiener Werkstätte, 1903-1932:  
The Luxury of Beauty  
Through Jan. 29 at Neue Galerie  
1048 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan  
212-994-9493, [neuegalerie.org](http://neuegalerie.org).