**Hofmannsthal, Hugo von (Hugo Laurenz August Hofmann, Edler von Hofmannsthal) (1874, Vienna—1929, Rodaun)**

Hugo von Hofmannsthal was a leading Austrian writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His prolific works span a wide range of genres, from lyric poetry, verse drama, and narrative prose to dramatic tragedy, comedy, opera libretti, and essays. An early member of the Young Vienna literary circle and a precocious poet, Hofmannsthal was later known above all for his dramatic works and conservative, yet cosmopolitan views regarding Austrian culture, all of which converged in his co-founding of the Salzburg Festival.

**Timeline of Life**

**1874 1890-1891 1892-1894 1894-1895 1899 1906**

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born in Vienna Affiliation with Young Studies law in Voluntary military Doctorate in Break with

Vienna begins; meets Vienna service Romance Stefan

Stefan George philology George

**1906 1914-1915 1920 1929**

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Begins collaboration Serves as reserve officer First Salzburg Death following

with Richard Strauss and in war ministry during Festival son’s suicide

World War I

**Timeline of Key Works Published during Lifetime**

**1890-1899 1891 1892 1893 1895 1897-98 1899**

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Intensive poetry- *Gestern* *Der Tod des*  *Der Tor und* *Das Märchen Das kleine Welttheater Reitergeschichte*

writing phase*Tizian*  *der Tod* *der 672. Nacht* *oder Die Glücklichen*

**1902 1904 1909 1911 1912 1916-17 1919**

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*Ein Brief* *Elektra Elektra Der Rosenkavalier Ariadne auf Naxos*  Series of political *Die Frau ohne*

(drama) (opera) (opera) *Josephslegende* essays *Schatten* (opera)

*Jedermann*

*Über die Pantomime*

**1921 1922 1923 1925 1927**

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*Der Schwierige Das Salzburger Der Unbestechliche Der Turm* (first version) *Das Schrifttum als geistiger*

*große Welttheater Der Rosenkavalier* (film) *Raum der Nation*

**1928**

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*Die Ägyptische Helena*

Born into an ennobled, well-situated Viennese banking family, Hofmannsthal was a *Wunderkind*, successfully publishing his first poem as a 16-year-old in 1890 under the pseudonym *Loris Melikow*. He immediately became a core member of Young Vienna, and his poetry found a wide readership. Throughout his law studies at the University of Vienna from 1892 to 1894 and a year of voluntary military service (1894-95), he never ceased writing. In 1899 Hofmannsthal completed a doctorate in Romance philology in Vienna and worked toward his *Habilitation*, but eventually discarded his academic career aspirations in favour of writing. In 1901 he married Gertrud Schlesinger, with whom he had three children, and moved to Rodaun, then a suburb of Vienna, where he lived until his death.

Hofmannsthal quickly became a writer of European acclaim. With Goethe as his German role model, the young poet’s work demonstrated a formal virtuosity that belied his age. Often treating the grand themes of life and art, his poetry and early verse dramas were also informed by French symbolism. The resulting poems display a lush aestheticism and Viennese melancholy typical of the *fin-de-siècle*. His first verse dramas were equally eagerly received and two of these, *Der Tod des Tizian* (*The Death of Titian*,1892) and *Der Tor und der Tod* (*Death and the Fool*, 1893)—together with a reworking of Euripides’ drama *Alkestis* (1894)—thematise a Dionysian concept of death (cf. Nietzsche). Though Hofmannsthal is not known primarily as a prose fiction writer, his experiences and travels flowed into such important early prose works as ‘Das Märchen der 672. Nacht’ (‘The Tale of Night Six Hundred and Seventy-Two’, 1895) and ‘Reitergeschichte’ (‘A Tale of the Cavalry’, 1899). The former centres on a wealthy merchant’s son and his four servants. The young man is set on, yet incapable of self-discovery and dies a seemingly senseless death that mirrors his search in vain for a meaningful existence. Hofmannsthal’s contact with Stefan George from 1891 was pivotal. George was an early supporter, publishing the young poet in *Blätter für die Kunst*, but the relationship between the two frayed and ultimately ended in 1906.

Hofmannsthal’s ‘Ein Brief’ (‘A Letter’, 1902) marks an important turning point in his work and is a key text of modernism. Framed historically, the fictional letter from Philipp Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon is commonly read as a reflection of a crisis of language(*Sprachkrise*). By the turn of the century, Hofmannsthal’s interests had begun to shift away from aestheticism’s insistence on literary language for its own sake. After 1900 Hofmannsthal published little poetry and turned his attention to the stage, where he felt more able to explore the links between literature and life. His search for timeless themes and forms had led him to ancient Greek drama as early as the mid-1890s, but later intensified and resulted in treatments of the Electra and Oedipus myths in the first decade of the twentieth century. Around the same time, Hofmannsthal had begun exploring the comedic form, and two of his later dramatic works, the Viennese social comedies *Der Schwierige* (*The Difficult Man*, 1921) and *Der Unbestechliche* (1923) stand out. *The Difficult Man*, like ‘A Letter’, addresses the theme of language’s inability to convey the emotional truth of individual experience, but it does so through the indecisive protagonist, Hans Karl, and his position in contemporary Austrian society. *Der Turm* (*The Tower*, 1925/27), a political drama, was perhaps Hofmannsthal’s most fully realised masterwork of the 1920s. Based on Caldéron’s 17th-century *Life is a Dream*, Hofmannsthal’s tragedy is the culmination of years-long reflections on the human spirit, violence, and political legitimacy. Here again the author looks to the eternal relevance of tragic themes that are able to bridge past and present.

Following the break with George, two lifelong collaborations became decisive: with the composer Richard Strauss and the director Max Reinhardt. In 1900, Hofmannsthal unsuccessfully pitched a ballet concept to Strauss. But after Strauss saw a performance of *Electra*, he proposed the idea of an operatic version of the drama in 1906, and it subsequently premiered in 1909. A fruitful, though not entirely frictionless, musical-literary partnership began. With Strauss, Hofmannsthal was able to develop a new conception of musical theatre, in which the libretto was an autonomous literary text. Their collaboration resulted in five further operas, most notably *Der Rosenkavalier* (*The Cavalier of the Rose*, 1911), which was later filmed by Robert Wiene in 1925.

Hofmannsthal’s essayistic work is also significant. Important early essays include ‘Der Dichter und diese Zeit’ (‘The Poet and Our Time’, 1906), which addresses the societal role of writers, and ‘Über die Pantomime’ (‘On the Pantomime’, 1911), which treats gesture, dance, and pantomime, but his most fruitful essayistic period began with the outbreak of World War I. Though he served as a reserve officer and in the war ministry for a just year, Hofmannsthal was hopeful the war would lead to the renewal and revitalization of imperial order. His wartime political essays and culturally conservative post-war essays demonstrate a commitment to a broader pan-European culture, while exploring Austria’s culture heritage and political position. The most important of these are ‘Österreich im Spiegel seiner Dichtung’ (‘Austria in the Mirror of Its Literature’, 1916), ‘Blick auf den geistigen Zustand Europas’ (‘View of the Spiritual Condition of Europe’, 1921), and ‘Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation’ (‘The Written Word as the Spiritual Space of the Nation’, 1927), in which he pronounced the goal of a ‘conservative revolution’. These essays emphasise an idealised conception of political accord and spiritual solidarity through the unifying power of language, literature, and intellectual tradition. Hofmannsthal’s work as an anthologist and editor fits into this picture as well. Underlying all these efforts is a conception of the writer as an influential public figure, a standard-bearer for both cultural and political issues.

The ideas of conservative revolution and cultural reconstruction were embodied in the Salzburg Festival, which Hofmannsthal founded with Strauss and Reinhardt in 1920. The festival served to symbolically redefine the post-war Austrian national mythology, first through the eternal themes of ancient Greek drama, and later through the formal conventions of Catholicism. Key here are medieval religious mystery playssuch as *Jedermann* (*Everyman*, 1911; performed annually since 1920 at the festival, with the exception of the war years) and the revival of Baroque theatre forms like the morality play *Das Salzburger große Welttheater* (*The Great Salzburg Theatre of the World*,1922).

Hofmannsthal was also a prodigious letter-writer, and his correspondence includes published volumes with Strauss, George, Arthur Schnitzler, Harry Graf Kessler, and Rainer Maria Rilke. Hofmannsthal died in 1929 of a stroke, just days after his son Franz’s suicide. Although his only novel *Andreas* (*Andreas, or The United*, 1932) remained unfinished, his dramas and operas are still regularly included in theatre repertoires throughout the world.

**Key Works**

*Gestern* (1891, *Yesterday*)

*Der Tod des Tizian* (1892, *The Death of Titian*)

*Der Tor und der Tod* (1893, *Death and the Fool*)

‘Das Märchen der 672. Nacht’ (1895, ‘The Tale of Night Six Hundred and Seventy-Two’)

*Das kleine Welttheater oder Die Glücklichen* (1897, *The Little Theatre of the World*)

‘Reitergeschichte’ (1899, ‘The Tale of the Cavalry’)

‘Ein Brief’ (1902, ‘A Letter’ [also known as the ‘Chandos Letter’])

*Elektra* (1904, drama; 1909, opera, *Electra*)

*Der Rosenkavalier* (1911, *The Cavalier of the Rose*)

*Jedermann* (1911, *Everyman*)

*Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912)

*Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919, *The Woman without a Shadow*)

*Der Schwierige* (1921, *The Difficult Man*,)

*Das Salzburger große Welttheater* (1922, *The Great Salzburg Theatre of the World*)

*Der Unbestechliche* (1923, *The Incorruptible*)

*Der Turm* (1925/1927, *The Tower*)

‘Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation’ (1927, ‘The Written Word as the Spiritual Space of the Nation’)

*Die Ägyptische Helena* (1928, *Helen in Egypt*)

***References and further reading***

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Weinzierl, Ulrich (2005) *Hofmannsthal: Skizzen zu seinem Bild*, Vienna: Zsolnay.