**Hoffmann, Josef Franz Maria (1870-1956)**

Michael Johnson, Northumbria University



Josef Hoffmann

<http://www.mak.at/jart/prj3/mak/images/img-db/1350932577814.jpg>

Josef Hoffmannwas an Austrian architect and designer who was instrumental in formulating the aesthetics and theory of modernist design. Among the most progressive architects in turn-of-the-century Austria, he was a founder of the Vienna Secession and the Wiene Werkstätte. His early work was aligned with Jugendstil, the German and Austrian manifestation of Art Nouveau, but graduated towards an abstract, geometric simplicity that anticipated 20th-century modernism. Committed to the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), Hoffmann applied his talents to architecture, interior design, furniture and metalwork. His greatest achievement is the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, a true *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which all elements are synthesised into symphonic unity.

Born in Pirnitz, Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic), Hoffmann studied at the Higher State Crafts School in Brno and at Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts. He worked in the office of proto-modernist architect Otto Wagner, where he met future collaborator Joseph Maria Olbrich. He won the Prix de Rome in 1895, which gave him the opportunity to study classical architecture, and Mycenaean influences proliferated in his early work. Hoffmann was among the group of artists, architects and designers who seceded from the Association of Austrian Artists in 1897, objecting to what they saw as the inherent conservatism of established academies.

In the same year, Hoffmann and Olbrich founded the Vienna Secession, along with artist Gustav Klimt and designer Koloman Moser. He provided graphic designs for the group’s journal, *Ver Sacrum* (Sacred Spring), and designed installation spaces for Secession exhibitions. The most notable of these was an exhibition named after the group’s journal, in which a predominance of vertical lines unified the architecture, interiors and furniture. Committed to the Wagnerian concept of the Gesantkunstwerk, Hoffmann’s buildings were designed as all-encompassing artworks in which interior and exterior were linked by a singular expressivity, together with integrated paintings, sculpture and furniture. Implicit in the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* were the union of art and craft and the abolition of the academic hierarchy that separated them.

Hoffmann was a professor at the Viennese School of Applied Arts (1899-1941), where his students included Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele and, most notably, Le Corbusier, who later became a leading exponent of modernist architecture. Hoffmann’s work was illustrated in major periodicals of the day. Extensive reviews were published in the German-language periodical, *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, while an illustrated article by Fernand Khnopff in British arts journal *The Studio* (1901) brought him to the attention of the English-speaking world.

Hoffmann designed rooms for Vienna’s School of Applied Arts and the Secession at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900; these established his reputation internationally. Further commissions included four houses intended as part of an artists’ colony on the Hohe Warte, a hill on the outskirts of Vienna (1900-2). These were half-timbered properties, recalling the vernacular language of the British Arts and Crafts Movement. An abstract sensibility was apparent in the house he designed for Moser (1901-03), where sinuous curves were formalised into geometric forms within details such as doors and windows. He designed an exhibition pavilion for the 1909 Kunstchau (Art Show) in Vienna, which displayed a modernistic classicism. The severe façade was modulated by alcoves housing stylised classical figures, surmounted by the curving forms of an ogee roof.

Hoffmann championed the work of Scottish architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh - who received little recognition in his own country - and encouraged Mackintosh to participate in the eighth Secession exhibition. Enraptured by Mackintosh’s designs, Hoffmann began to infuse his own work with a comparable sense of quadratic geometricism from c.1900. Indeed, the interplay of squares was so prominent in his work that it earned him the epithet ‘Quadratl Hoffmann’ (Little Square Hoffmann). A prime example is the Kubus Armchair (1910), which multiplies the form of the basic cube to create a powerful geometric design. Hoffmann’s ideas on design were outlined in his essay ‘Simple Furniture’ (1901), in which he argued that furniture should respect the integrity of materials and emphasise function, principles which anticipated the key tenets of modernist design. Similarly, his metalwork evolved from curvilinear Jugendstil-inspired pieces to utilitarian products evoking mechanical forms. Hoffmann’s affinity for squares gave rise to a form of metalwork called Gitterwerk, which comprised objects executed in sheet metal and perforated with tiny squares.



Kubus Armchair (1910)

<http://www.icondesignstore.com/media/catalog/product/cache/1/thumbnail/600x600/9df78eab33525d08d6e5fb8d27136e95/h/o/hoffmann_kubus_chair_front.jpg>



Gitterwerk basket (1905)

<http://41.media.tumblr.com/467261deee967bbadc0d824c868f0e5d/tumblr_mopnagUykm1rpgpe2o1_r1_1280.jpg>

Some artists left the Vienna Secession due to internal disagreements. In 1903 Hoffmann and Moser founded the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshop), with financial support from the textile industrialist Fritz Wärndorfer. This group was inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, particularly Charles Ashbee’s Guild of Handicraft, with its ideal of collaboration between artists and craftsmen. Like the Arts and Crafts movement before it, the Werkstätte was heavily dependent on private patronage and its members were ambivalent in their attitude to mass production. Although they recognised the potential of machine-made goods, their work depended upon high quality materials and craft skills and ultimately failed to embrace modern means of production.

The Wiener Werkstätte’s first important commission was for a sanatorium at Purkersdorf (1904-6). Hoffmann designed every detail of the building, down to the furniture and appliances. The walls were thin stone veneers, the edges ornamented with mouldings emphasising their planarity. Externally, the use of unadorned surfaces anticipated the severe modernist architecture of Le Corbusier and others. Internally, the building’s spatial organisation, decorative finishes and furniture reiterate quadratic forms. Hoffmann’s metamorphic Sitzmaschine Chair (machine for sitting) was designed for the sanatorium (1904).



Purkersdorf Sanatorium (1904-6)

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bb/Sanatoriumpurkersdorf1-2.JPG>



Sitzmachine Chair (1904)

<http://www.design-museum.de/fileadmin/_processed_/csm_Nr670Sitzmaschine_Hoffmann_01_d425e936fd.jpg>

The pinnacle of Hoffmann’s artistic achievement is the Palais Stoclet in Brussels (1905-11). The banker and railway financier Adolphe Stoclet, one of the Werkstätte’s major patrons, commissioned Hoffmann to design a private mansion for his own occupation. The result was a suburban palace of the arts that embodied the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, replete with a dining room frieze by Klimt and copper statues by Franz Metzner on the stepped tower. With its ascending configuration of angular planes and use of lustrous materials, the building anticipated the Art Deco style of the 1920s and 30s.



Palais Stochlet in Brussels, Belgium (1905-11)

<http://photos.explorewonders.com/original/e2/34/8e/148-stoclet-palace-34-1407588012.jpg>



Palais Stochlet, dining room (1905-11)

<http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/758784/22863750/1370617418960/Josef_Hoffmann_design_dining-room_Palais-Stoclet_-Brussels.jpg?token=jEURghMapugqBvJU4tP%2BbKjYH%2BI%3D>

Hoffmann accepted commissions to design interiors for domestic and commercial spaces. Most notably, the Cabaret Fledermaus in Vienna (1907) fulfilled his ideal of unity between architecture and interior elements, embracing contributions from members of the Wiener Werkstätte. Hoffmann co-founded the Deutscher Werkbund in 1907 and the Österreichischer Werkbund in 1912. He continued to produce designs for the Wiener Werkstätte until 1931, but his reputation was tarnished during a brief period designing buildings for the Nazi administration. He died in 1956.

**List of works**

Design for Hohe Warte artists’ colony, 1900-11

Double house for Koloman Moser and Carl Moll

Sanatorium, Purkersdorf, 1904-6

Purkersdorf Armchair, 1904

Sitzmaschine Armchair, 1904

Kunstschau Armchair, 1905

House for Richard Beer-Hofmann, Vienna, 1905–06

Palais Stoclet, Brussels, Belgium, 1905–11

Palais Stoclet Armchair, c.1905-11

Interior design of Cabaret Fledermaus, Vienna, 1907

Fledermaus Chair, 1907

Siebenkugelstuhl Chair, 1908

Armloffel Chair, 1908

Ast Residence, Vienna, 1909-11

Kubus Armchair, 1910

Club Armchair, 1910

Haus Koller Chair, 1911

Skywa-Primavesi residence, Vienna, 1913–15

Country house for Otto Primavesi, Kouty nad Desnou (Winkelsdorf), Moravia, 1913–14

House for Sigmund Berl, Bruntal, Moravia, 1919-24

Villa for Fritz Grohmann, Vrbno pod Pradedem, Moravia, 1920-21

Klosehof housing complex, 1923–25

Villa Knips, Vienna, made for Sonja Knips, 1924-25

Four houses for the Viennese Werkbund’s settlement, 1930-32

Austrian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1934

**References and further reading**

Sarnitz, A. (2007) *Josef Hoffmann. In the Realm of Beauty*. Cologne: Taschen.

Fahr-Becker, G. (2008) *Wiener Werkstätte: 1903-1932*. Cologne: Taschen.

#### **Kallir, J. (**1986**)***Viennese Design and the Wiener Werkstatte*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.

Sekler, E. (1982) *Josef Hoffmann. Das Architektonische Werk; Monographie und Werkverzeichnis*. Salzburg: Residenz.