ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Viennese Style —And Function

Kolo Moser's study for a stained-glass window for the Steinhof church

Some of the most interesting architecture is the most ambiguous; the transitional period from about 1890 to World War I, never quite free of 19th-century tradition while straining spectacularly after a new, 20th-centry vision, is full of genius and contradiction.

That remarkable quarter of a century accommodated everything from the suavely sinuous Art Nouveau to the spectral solemnities of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the passionate renunciations of the past by Adolf Loos. It is a time when art and morality form a strange alliance. One by one, we are picking up these overlapping movements that came so rapidly on each other's heels and reexamining them in terms of the struggle between esthetic roots and radical theory. Today we find these real and false starts as fresh and challenging as they seemed in their own time and just as rewarding as the full-scale modernist revolution that they fostered.

The peculiar duality of this period is strikingly illustrated by an ambitious and extensive exhibition that opens on Tuesday at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 E. 91 St., through Feb. 4) called "Vienna Moderne; 1898-1918," and subtitled "An Early Encounter Between Taste and Utility." The show's guest director is Jan Ernst Adlmann, who has spent 15 years exploring the Austrian phase of the early modern movement.

The encounter that he describes created a paradoxical kind of design torn between the wish and the commitment to simplify radically and the irrepressible urge to decorate. The Viennese managed to have it both ways. For two vital decades, they were the force behind an evolving style that was consciously "functional" in its programs, materials and forms, at the same time that it was embellished by an elegantly restrained ornament that stressed an intrinsic, rather than applied, character.

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This style was largely the work of the Wiener Werkstätte, the Vienna Workshops established by the architect Josef Hoffmann and others in 1903, following the lead of the Vienna Secession, the group that broke away from the academic mainstream in 1897 under Gustav Klimt and Otto Wagner. The avowed purpose was to elevate the arts of design to the level of the fine arts; the ultimate objective was a "totally designed" environment.

However, this was not a movement that preached popularism or espoused mass production or a machine esthetic; it was a limited, hand-craft production for an elite clientele. Its high point was reached in the coordinated details of Hoffmann's Palais Stoclet in Brussels of 1904-11, one of the most

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elegantly opulent houses of the century. Only Adolf Loos attempted to break completely with the taste and standards of the past, in his famous coupling of ornament with crime, a position that seems ironic now seen against the rich materials of some of his designs. (A Loos table in the exhibition is embellished with onyx and has brass-tipped feet that seem to be walking off in all directions.)

The pioneering Werkstätte style followed the ornamental orgies of Art Nouveau and preceeded the strict asceticism of the Bauhaus. It drew on an intense admiration for the English Arts and Crafts movement and an absolute crush on Mackintosh and the Glasgow School, in the years just before and after the turn of the century, tempered by the Austrian traditions of Biedemeier and the Baroque. The product of these influences, fired in the crucible of moralist-esthetic theory, laid much of the groundwork for the later Dutch and German design, as well as for the "modernist" esthetic.

For those two important decades after 1900, the Viennese artists, architects and artisans produced beautiful ambiguities. The metalwork, ceramics, glass, furnishings and fabrics on display at the Cooper-Hewitt are a marvelously mixed lot. The objects made of rectilinear metal grillwork, called *gitterwerk*, or screenwork, are crisply abstract. Some furniture, such as a series of Hoffmann chairs done just after 1900, is almost primitively conceived and clumsily made. Other objects, like Kolo Moser's superb amber-studded silver vase of 1905 and the glass and ceramics done under his tutelage, or Hoffmann's later, magnificent silver fruit bowl of 1918 owned by the Cooper-Hewitt, are frankly lush in their senuous shapes and surfaces. From the merely curious to the seductively beautiful, there is not an uninteresting piece or a design cliché in the place.

In its second decade, the Werkstätte's restrained functionalism softened, its production dominated by Dagobert Peche's more conventionally ornamental but extremely handsome designs that foreshadowed the Art Moderne of the 1920's. But its most influential work, according to Mr. Adlmann, was characterized by "great reticence, precious materials and severe geometric ornament, or its absence all together." Vienna Moderne' s "brief, brilliant" 20 years, he tells us, was " one of the earliest skirmishes in the important modern design confrontation between the camps of Style and Functionalism."

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The Cooper-Hewitt show is steeped in style. Revolution, with hindsight, becomes nostalgia. Just as the Mackintosh rooms installed in London's Victoria and Albert Museum a few years ago seemed redolent with "the scent of heliotrope," these furnishings and objects evoked Vienna's creative, worldly and very fashionable pre-World War I avant-garde atmosphere. In the confrontation between Style and Functionalism, Style has clearly won; Style always does.

Once again, the Cooper—Hewitt's landmark Carnegie mansion interiors have proved to be an asset; the material gains great evocative immediacy from the domestic scale of the house and the sympathetic installation by Dorothy Globus and Robin Parkinson.

The exhibition, which contains important loans from public and private collections here and abroad, was organized by the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery of the University of Houston and will travel to Houston; Portland, Oregon; and Chicago after New York. The catalogue by Mr. Adlmann is a fine introduction to one of the less familiar and more fascinating aspects of early modernism. ■