

Pure aesthetics and
the concept of the
„Gesamtkunstwerk“:
The design of the
„Wiener Werkstätte“
in its historic context

Introduction

Imagine you enter a house designed by Josef Hoffmann, one of the founders of the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ at the beginning of the 20th century. The architectural style appears to be much lighter and often more playful than the historic representative architecture favoured by the rulers of the Austrian Kaiserreich during the 19th century. Every piece of furniture seems to have its own place. The whole interior is handcrafted by members of the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ and most of the time exclusive materials are being used. The furniture and the building work together as a unity in style. The same principle is also valid for the clothes, dishes, glasses, etc. that fill the cupboards and drawers as well as for lamps, curtains and carpets inside the building. Just at the right spot one could find a Youth Style painting by Gustav Klimt or Koloman Moser.

In their attempt to create a ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ the members of the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ imposed certain rules on the people who lived in the houses which they designed for them. It was for example strictly forbidden to disturb this symphony of art, craft and arcitecture by moving any piece of furniture or wearing unsuitable clothes.



Josef Hoffmann: Haus Beer-Hoffmann / Wien (1905)



I

The idea of the ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ was first formulated by Richard Wagner in 1849. In his essay ‚Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft‘ he comes to the conclusion that the artwork of the future can only blossom if theater, dance and music work hand in hand with architecture, painting and sculpture. He tried to use this principle in his operas.

His idea started to be relevant for the first time during a period of uncertainty. Industrialization, the Period of the Enlightenment and several wars had changed the face of Europe completely. A new middleclass had started to exist, mass-production became a massive threat to traditional handicraft, kingdoms had collapsed and were replaced by republics, the church and other traditional rulers of Europe gradually lost power while the population of Europe exploded...

Towards the end of the 19th century this development had almost reached its peak. The people of that time lived in the firm conviction that an era had come to an end (Fin de Siècle).

As art always reflects on its time it is not astonishing that first the ‚Arts and Craft Movement‘ in England (1870-1920), then the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ in Austria (1903-1932) and after the First World War ‚De Stijl‘ in Holland (1917-1931) and ‚Bauhaus‘ in Germany (1919-1933) reacted on these developements with their own interpretations of Wagners ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ in order to overcome old traditional art forms and to find their own design of a new society.

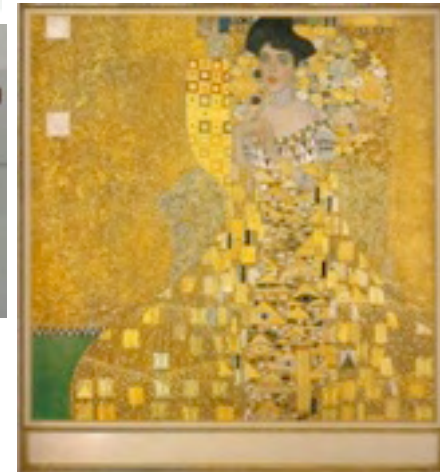
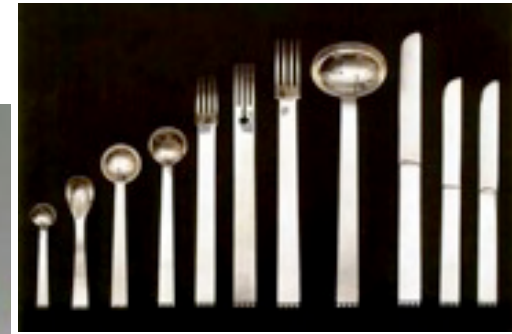
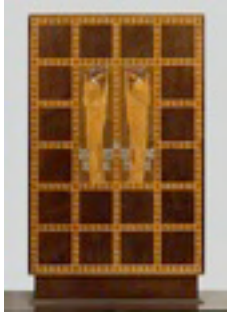
II

Influenced by Richard Wagner and the British 'Arts and Crafts Movement' the 'Wiener Werkstätte' tried to establish an alternative to the dominant 'Historicism', to the 'Neo-Renaissance' and the 'Neo-Baroque' architecture of the Ringstraße in Vienna, to the traditional art that represented the power of the old Austrian Empire.



Military Parade in the Ringstraße / Vienna (13.10.1913)

The 'Wiener Werkstätte' made no difference between 'high' and 'low' art. In their eyes every article of daily use could be art. In an attempt to protect traditional handicraft from mass-production they designed handcrafted everyday objects and gave them the aura of art. Their effort to save traditional handicraft in a time of soulless mass-production while opposing old overcome art forms was both conservative and progressive at the same time. Their customers did not only purchase a beautiful everyday object. It was even more important to acquire the individual aura of purity that the object carried in itself. When the 'Wiener Werkstätte' started to design architecture in relation to their handicrafts combined with paintings by artists of the 'Wiener Secession' their work became a concept that led to an idea of a new society based on pure aesthetics. If one tries to grasp the atmosphere and the spirit of the years before the First World War and if one looks at the prevailing representative art of that time this seems to be a quite liberating thought.



However at a certain point it can also be interpreted as an escape into the famous ‚Ivory Tower‘ that had almost no connection to the real world and its problems, designed for an elite group of people that formed a closed community within the society.

And there is another puzzling fact: Where is space for freedom if one is not allowed to move any piece of furniture? At the one hand the customers of the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ accquired a piece of Individualism by purchasing a true handcrafted design object but on the other hand within all these rules and regulations Individualism was condemned to drown very soon. For centuries the people of Europe were controlled by monarchs. Self-determination effectively did never exist. Why did the designers of the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ replace old rules by another system of rules? Did the people of the beginning 20th century stick to an unconscious need to be led? The ‚Viennese Gesamtkunstwerk‘ was indeed an alternative to old historic art forms. But at the same time it finally established a dictatorship of aesthetics

that turned the single human being into a puzzle piece within a closed framework of style.

III

The First World War changed Europe one more time. Germany and Austria lost their monarchies and became republics. During the ‚Golden Twenties‘ a new feeling of freedom and liberty could be felt while old conservative parts of the society struggled to survive. It is also quite significant for that time that Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis gained more and more acceptance as well as Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity.

After the war especially the German ‚Bauhaus‘ became famous for developing a new model of an alternative society within a framework of all the different forms of art, craft and architecture. It was clearly influenced by the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ although their approach appeared to be less restrictive and broader than theirs.

Teaching became an important part of their definition of the ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ and their design was less based on the individual artistic expression but more on functionality in order to satisfy the needs of a democratic society. At the same time in Holland ‚De Stijl‘ developed similar ideas for a new design.



Rietveld Chair / Gerrit Rietveld (1918)
Freischwinger / Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1927)

The ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ still existed after the war but due to the inflation it had to deal with major financial problems. Furthermore Individualism is always opposing everything that limits freedom. Did the new spirit of Individualism that started to prosper for the first time during the ‚Golden Twenties‘ make the position of the ‚Viennese Gesamtkunstwerk‘ even more unstable? One can only guess.

All these attempts of creating a ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ came to a sudden end with the big Economic Crisis after 1929. But did the story of the ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ really end then? The spirit of the ‚Golden Twenties‘ was suddenly broken and the people in Germany and Austria started to remember how easy it could be to allow themselves to be led by a strong man. The big crisis cleared the way for the dictatorship of National Sozialism and Adolf Hitler. Sometimes literature refers to Hitlers ‚Great German Empire‘ as an attempt of constructing the ‚Ultimate Gesamtkunstwerk‘. It is kind of funny that Hitler rooted his ‚Blut und Boden‘ ideology in an idea

formulated by the very same man that formulated the idea of the ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘: Richard Wagner was of the opinion that it was necessary to create great common myths which would have the power to unite all the different classes of modern society within one great national identity.

IV

The two World Wars left a deep scar in the psyche of the European people. After the war it was completely unthinkable that a European country would return to a feudal system. The time of kings and dictators was over! As a direct consequence of the Second World War the ‚Iron Curtain‘ divided Europe and the whole world for almost half a century in two opposing parts. While Communism ruled the eastern half of the world the western half developed a society based on Democracy and Capitalism.

Especially in the western society Individualism started to prosper again. Together with the feudal system also the old traditional art had died. After the war the only design a new generation of designers could tie up to was the design of the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘, of ‚De Stijl‘ and of the ‚Bauhaus‘. The whole architecture and the design of the 20th century is based on their achievements.

But in a more or less individualistic society there was no space for the old concept of the ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘. Even worse: nowadays the mere thought of a ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ as it had started to exist in Vienna with all its rules and regulations appears to be quite scary. After the experience of the Second World War we are scared of the tendency towards dictatorship that lies within the very idea of the ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘.

Instead designers as well as artists (i.e. Joseph Beuys with his ‚Soziale Plastik‘) tried to develop more flexible answers to the question of how art and design could help to form a better society.

V

Now at the beginning of the 21st century the world is growing increasingly together. The ‚Iron Curtain‘ does not exist anymore and we finally have a European Union. Life is faster, more effective, more productive. In a time of globalization it often seems that the individual loses importance again. It is hard to keep an overview of all the different aspects of our quickly changing global society and its often contradicting interests and inner conflicts. It is hard to understand the real reasons behind modern wars, behind terrorism and the poverty of the Third World. It is also hard to guess which design and which art might be really relevant for our time.

If one has a closer look at the galleries in big European cities like Berlin or Vienna one can see that the design of the ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘, of ‚De Stijl‘ and of the ‚Bauhaus‘ is still modern and popular. ‚Timeless‘ might be the right definition.

For example at the beginning of October 2009 ‚WOKA Lamps‘ in Vienna took part in the ‚Vienna Design Week‘ with original ‚Wiener Werkstätte‘ lamps and authorised handcrafted remakes. All these products are very exclusive and expensive (of course, they are still handcrafted). And they share an undeniable beauty of modern simplicity and purity.



Handarbeit von WOKA LAMPS VIENNA



Starting with William Morris, later Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Hoffmann, the Wiener Werkstätte and later the Bauhaus, the idea was vital to fight the destructive results of industrializing the handwork in the 19th century.

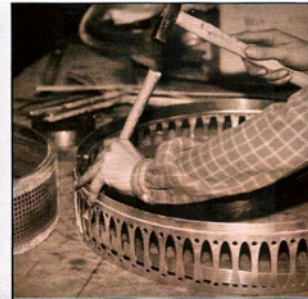
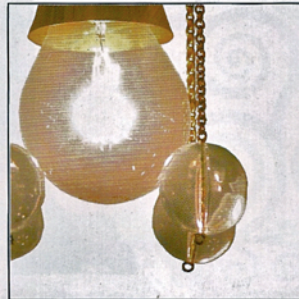
To put an antithesis on mass-production and to keep a standard of highest quality in design and execution it was necessary to save ancient techniques of handcrafts.

At WOKA LAMPS VIENNA the concept of high-end workshops is active up to date.

Our principle: building exclusive fixtures of superb material with artistic handwork.

Important Viennese and international Artists have delivered timeless designs in matchless elegance. These modern classic items are carefully manufactured custom made at WOKA.

Material is solid brass, partly casted, varnished or nickel-plated. Other surfaces are possible. Handblown opaline-glass or hand-cut crystal-glass. Silk shades. We also do custom designs!



But do pure aesthetics alone make the world a better place? Doesn't our time demand more than just aesthetics and exclusiveness? At the beginning of modern design when the 'Wiener Werkstätte' started to define their idea of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' this utopia was needed for developing a new design. Nowadays their concept is indeed not relevant anymore. Nowadays new concepts are needed! Design just for the sake of beauty and exclusiveness seems to be a one-way street that again leads towards the famous 'Ivory Tower'. It does not deal with the problems of our time.

Sources:

- Internet (see embedded links)
- Interview with Wolfgang Karolinsky / WOKA Lamps Vienna
- Der Preis der Schönheit / 100 Jahre Wiener Werkstätte (MAK / Hantje Cantz)
- Wiener Werkstätte (Gabriele Fahr-Becker / Taschen)
- Viennese Design and the Wiener Werkstätte (Jane Kallir)