

Vienna: Applied Arts in a Kaffeehaus Culture

A century after the Wiener Werkstätte, the applied arts are flourishing, mixing tradition and innovation.

STORY BY
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Seidl photo © MAK / Georg Mayer.



Opposite:
Ina Seidl
Wien, 2000, porcelain,
ribbon, largest handle
2 x 1¾ x ½ in.

Above:
Klaus Fritsch
for **Lobmeyr**
Whiskey decanter
and glass.



Right:
Daniel Kroh with
Walking-Chair
Design Studio
Hard Working
Furniture, work-
men's overalls,
27½ x 31½ x 15¾ in.

A recent exhibition of Ina Seidl's jewelry in Vienna at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (Museum of Applied Arts), known by its German acronym, MAK, included the pendant *Wien* (Vienna), a group of porcelain hearts assembled from assorted coffee cup handles suspended from a red string, as homage to her hometown and its Kaffeehaus culture.

It was that Viennese coffeehouse tradition that inspired Lothar Trierenberg to open Das Möbel (the piece of furniture), combining a café with a furniture showroom to create what he calls "Vienna's best-known public living room," where visitors experience furniture made by Austrian designers. At Das Möbel you can use chairs by the woodworking team Katja and Werner Nussbaumer, who combine the beloved bent-plywood seats of old Viennese trams with a contemporary steel frame, merging nostalgic and sustainable elements; or try one of the solid-looking benches by Dieter Gorjanz, a carpenter who works with freshly cut oak that continues to move and shift long after each piece is built. "Austria

has advanced to be a major player in the international design scene," Trierenberg says. "We are excited to be part of this and hope to broaden this trend in Austria and in Europe."

Across town, Karl Emilio Pircher and Fidel Peugeot have combined their skills to form the Walking-Chair Design Studio. In this street-level office/workshop, which functions as a showroom and retail outlet and incorporates the small Walking-Chair Gallery, the two have worked together for 10 years designing typography, interiors, exhibitions and a furniture series created from industrial Styrofoam packaging material sprayed with a polymer coating traditionally used in construction. Pircher, who studied at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, views design as a tool enabling creativity. "We come from the applied arts, and our approach is hands-on. We freely move back and forth between one-of-a-kind and industrial production methods, establishing a dialogue between the handmade and industry." Experimentation, cooperation with other designers and sustainability

are key when creating a collection like Hard Working Furniture, a group of chairs and sofas made in conjunction with the Berlin fashion designer Daniel Kroh, who recycles workmen's overalls to make multi-colored covers for the upholstered pieces.

Pircher points to the importance of Departure—a program initiated by the city in 2003 to provide small and emerging creative businesses with grants and access to knowledge—in helping to establish Vienna as a destination for creative talent. The city was one of the first in Europe to offer a substantial support program for creative industries after recognizing the applied arts and design scene as a valuable and expandable asset, given Vienna's tradition of handmade products such as furniture, glass and textiles fabricated in small workshops.

One of these businesses is Lobmeyr, renowned for producing and selling hand-blown glass of the highest quality since 1823. From its prime retail location in the Kärntnergasse, just a few steps from St. Stephen's Cathedral, Lobmeyr continues to work with designers like the American ▶



Left:
Andrea Auer
The White Tube,
electric wire.

Below:
Barbara Bloom
Installation of
Kaffeehaus chairs
at MAK.

“We come from the applied arts, and our approach is hands-on. We freely move back and forth between one-of-a-kind pieces and industrial production methods, establishing a dialogue between the handmade and industry.” —Karl Emilio Pircher



Ted Muehling to create glassware; it is an oft-cited example of the successful marriage of traditional craft skills and techniques with fresh ideas.

But this is not the first time that young designers with new concepts and traditional craft workshops have collaborated to create designs recognized well beyond Austria. The Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshops), founded in 1903 by Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser as a production community of visual artists, also relied on the high level of traditional craft skills available here. With a commitment to applied arts modeled after the British Arts and Crafts movement and a desire to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) by designing products and objects of high quality for all aspects of daily life, the Wiener Werkstätte succeeded in influencing modern design well beyond its liquidation in 1932.

The exhibition displays at MAK, which holds the Wiener Werkstätte archives, underwent a major redesign in the mid-90s. Barbara Bloom, a sculptor, created a display for the traditional Viennese chair, the iconic laminated bentwood examples designed by Thonet, by placing the coffeehouse chairs behind a milky glass screen and lighting them from behind. Their graphic silhouettes illustrate the designs as if they were featured in a furniture catalog: simple forms, easily identified, with mass appeal for the turn-of-the-20th-century consumer.

Nostalgia for tradition is given a contemporary twist in Hinterland, a shop opened by Gudrun Wallenböck, an architect, and Dörte Kaufman, an art historian, which carries contemporary handmade clothing, most notably Wallenböck’s Walking Skirts, incorporating photographs of the Austrian countryside, including mountains, wooden farmhouses, cows and edelweiss. These motifs are printed on a reversible double-apron design offering a new use for the apron, an important component of the dirndl—a traditional Austrian dress with a tight bodice and full skirt still commonly worn by many women across the country regardless of their social standing.

And at the Klaus Engelhorn Collection, the artist Robert Stadler offers an updated interpretation of another traditional object, the sofa, with Pools & Pouf! This

free-form collection of flowing, Dalí-esque shapes, which are covered with a gray grid of Chesterfield-style leather upholstery, reflects upon the persistence and mutability of traditional forms.

Another play on tradition is Petra Zimmermann’s reinvention of baroque elements by casting pieces of costume jewelry in resin. Motivated by “my curiosity to peek inside the treasure chest, I am careful to investigate the traditional role of glamour in order to expand the definition of jewelry,” Zimmerman says. Through appropriation and reinterpretation, she removes the found pieces from their original context without rendering their original decorative language moot.

Zimmerman’s jewelry is showcased at Galerie V&V among experimental work by a variety of young Austrian and international jewelry and textile designers. Owner Veronika Schwarzingner’s discoveries include Agnes Czifra’s one-of-a-kind textiles made from recycled ribbons, Katja Korsawe’s jewelry from rubber bands and cut-up pantyhose, balloon rings by Dimitar Belchev, and Sonja Bischur’s knitted neckpieces that function as both fashion accessory and jewelry.

“Vienna used to be a gray city, and one could sense its proximity to the eastern part of a still-divided Europe,” says Ursi Fürtler, a textile artist exhibiting hand-printed scarves at Galerie V&V. But the mood has changed over the last 30 years, she points out. “It is a vibrant city now and its inhabitants are hopeful and energized.”

“An alternative cultural scene in the late ’70s and early ’80s has influenced the face of the city and contributed to its current vitality,” adds Martina Zwölfer, a ceramist well-known for her tall slip-cast Three-Ribbon vases, who just opened a showroom with Bernadette Hahnenkamp in Vienna’s eighth district.

Andrea Auer, another jewelry designer, who works with plastic-coated electric wire and clear foil to create modern interpretations of the classic pearl-drop earring and linked chains, praises Vienna as a metropolis with international flair but a manageable, human scale. “I love living here,” Auer says. “I value the quality of life. The market is close by, and the next café is just around the corner.”+

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Above:
Petra Zimmermann
Bracelet, 2010, vintage bag, polymethylmethacrylate, gold leaf, blackened silver.

Right:
Gudrun Wallenböck and **Dörte Kaufman**’s shop, Hinterland, is known for Wallenböck’s Walking Skirts—aprons that incorporate photographs of the Austrian countryside.

Bottom:
Robert Stadler
Pools & Pouf! couch, 2004, upholstered leather, PVC, plywood, 8 x 3 1/2 x 3 ft.



Auer photo Beranek / Bloom photo © Gerald Zugman / MAK.

Pools & Pouf! photo © Patrick Gries, Paris.