

The Vienna Secession

The Vienna Secession, also known as *the Union of Austrian Artists*, was founded on 3 April 1897 by artist Gustave Klimt, designer Koloman Moser, architects Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Maria Olbrich and others. The architect Otto Wagner joined the group shortly after it was founded. The goals stated at the founding included establishing contact and an exchange of ideas with artists outside Austria, disputing artistic nationalism, renewing the decorative arts; creating a "total art", that unified painting, architecture, and the decorative arts; and, in particular, opposing the domination of the official Vienna Academy of the Arts, the Vienna *Künstlerhaus*, and official art salons, with its traditional orientation toward Historicism.

At the beginning, the Secession had fifty members, and Gustave Klimt was its first elected president. Its goal was proclaimed by Wagner's student, Olbrich: "To each epoch its own art, and to each art its freedom."



The Secession Building, designed by **Joseph Maria Olbrich** (1867-1908) and completed in 1898, was built as a venue for expositions of the group and financed by Karl Wittgenstein the father of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The domed gallery building, with a sculptural frieze over the entrance, in the centre of Vienna, became the symbol of the movement. It was the first dedicated gallery of contemporary art in the city. This helped make the French Impressionists and others familiar to the Viennese public. It was badly damaged by bombing during the war, set on fire by the retreating German army and looted. It was restored to its original state in the 1970s, and the Beethoven frieze reinstalled.

The motto of the Secessionist movement is written above the entrance of the pavilion: "To every age its art, to every art its freedom". Below this is a sculpture of three gorgons with snakes in their hair. Representing painting, sculpture and architecture.

Gustave Klimt (1862-1918) designed the poster for the first Secessionist exhibition in 1898; depicting Theseus slaying the minotaur, and presenting Athena as a liberator of the arts, conquering the ultra conservative old guard,



Ver Sacrum (*Sacred Spring*), the official magazine, of the Secession, was published from 1898 to 1903. It featured drawings and works of graphic art in the highly stylised and influential Secessionist style along with literary contributions from distinguished writers from across Europe.

Alfred Roller (1864-1936), graphic designer, set designer and painter, designed the cover of the first issue in 1898, and in 1902 the poster for the 14th Secession exhibition.

The 14th Secession exhibition in 1902, designed by Joseph Hoffmann and dedicated to Ludwig van Beethoven, was especially famous. A sculpture of Beethoven by **Max Klinger** (1857-1920) stood at the centre, with Klimt's Beethoven frieze mounted around it. The Klimt frieze has been restored and can be seen in the gallery today.



Klinger is best known today for his many prints, particularly a series entitled *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove* and his monumental sculptural installation in homage to Beethoven at the Vienna Secession in 1902.

Klimt's primary subject was the female body, and many of his works are marked by a frank eroticism. As well as his figurative works, which include allegories and portraits, he painted landscapes. He showed a prodigious talent from his boyhood, and early in his artistic career he was a successful painter of architectural decorations in a conventional manner. As he began to develop a more personal style, his work was the subject of controversy that culminated when the paintings he completed around 1900 for the ceiling of the Great Hall of the University of Vienna were criticized as pornographic.

Klimt's portraits are a total break from the "traditional" form of portrayals of the moneyed, bourgeois class. They emphasise flatness, repetition and overall patterned design; and introduce other materials, such as the gold background.

Emilie Flöge (1874–1952) was an Austrian fashion designer and business woman, and a member of the Viennese bohemian and *Fin de siècle* circles. An elder sister, Helene, was married to Klimt's brother who died in the year following their marriage. Emilie was Klimt's lifelong partner and the subject of a number of paintings; although they had a close relationship, it is not known if she numbered among his numerous mistresses.

In this 1902 **Portrait of Emilie Flöge** he elongates the form so that her head appears to be pushing out of the top of the painting, and her feet are resting almost on the bottom edge. Her figure is offset in the narrow format so that she appears to be about to move out of the left side of the picture. The most striking element is the rich patterning of the dress incorporating gold leaf, and which appears flat with no attempt to express real folds and wrapping around the figure. The hair style forming a black half moon, inspired by Velasquez's infanta features in many of his portraits.



Klimt made over a hundred preparatory drawings for the **Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I** (1907), commissioned by her husband.

it is composed of oil paint and silver and gold leaf on canvas. The portrait shows Adele Bloch-Bauer sitting on a golden throne or chair, in front of a golden starry background. Around her neck is the same jewelled choker Klimt included in the *Judith* painting. She wears a tight golden dress in a triangular shape, made up of rectilinear forms which merges with the background so much so that it has been said that "one comes across the model almost by accident, so enveloped is she in the thick geometric scheme".

For critic Frank Whitford the effect of the gold background is to "remove Adele Bloch-Bauer from the earthly plane, transform the flesh and blood into an apparition from a dream of sensuality and self-indulgence"; he considers the work to look more like a religious icon than a secular portrait; while for others, the gold gives the effect that Adele appears "melancholy and vulnerable, unapproachably aloof and yet rapt".

Art historian Elana Shapira describe how the background and gown contain symbols suggestive of erotica, including triangles, eggs, shapes of eyes and almonds. Also present are decorative motifs on the theme of the letters A and B, the sitter's initials. Whitford identifies influences of the art of the Byzantine, Egypt, Mycenae and Greece, describing that "the gold is like that in Byzantine mosaics; the eyes on the dress are Egyptian, the repeated coils and whorls Mycenaean, while other decorative devices, based on the initial letters of the sitter's name, are vaguely Greek".



When his brother, Ernst, died in December 1892, Gustav was made Helene Flöge's guardian. At that time Emilie was eighteen years old and Gustav became a frequent guest at the home of her parents, spending the summers with the Flöge family at Lake Attersee. Over the years he made many paintings in the area, usually in a square format. He worked constantly and regarded his landscapes as a 'holiday' from his more important figure paintings.

Tranquil Pond or **A Morning by the Pond** (1899) with its soft, gossamer transitions takes an unusual high viewpoint, perhaps inspired by Monet's Water-lilly paintings. The surface of the pond is modulated by short brushstrokes which evoke the colouration of the ripples with blue, pink and violet tones placed next to each other. The overall effect is of restrained, earthy colours, in contrast to his later landscapes.

The reflections of the sky and trees become the main subject. The reflection, with its gently rippling surface, is altogether brighter in treatment than the fragment of landscape behind the dark wall of trees on the opposite bank, lit by the first rays of sun. There is scarcely a glimpse of sky beyond the distant, violet

mountains, increasing the sense of contemplative intensity. The cropped representation implies a fragment of the eternal natural processes lying beyond the picture frame, and “in nature's lofty tranquility and solemnity....a foreboding of a greater, uncontrollable power.” Austrian writer Hermann Broch (*Hugo von Hofmannsthal and his Time*) says “Deep in the subconscious of all art, of all great art, lies the longing to once again become a myth, to once again depict the totality of the universe.”

Beechgrove I (1902) presents another overall design. There is little sense of distance in the traditional sense of aerial perspective, that is greying and bluing, and fading of the forms with indistinct edges, towards the background. The painting is very flat and made from a mosaic of similar sized marks (in the manner of Seurat) distance being suggested by the diminution of size and the recession of the ground. The colour is heightened and none naturalistic.



The subject is devoid of any literary references, or incident. It is nothing but a view of similar trees in a wood. And to anyone else would seem to offer little interest as a subject for a painting, a possible influence from van Gogh.



In 1899, Olbrich left Vienna to join the Darmstadt Artists' Colony. In 1900, he obtained Hessian citizenship and did not work in Austria again. Olbrich built the Grand Duke's house, the exhibition hall and the tallest structure of the colony, the Wedding tower; in addition to designing furniture for the various buildings.



Armchair



Exhibition building

Wedding tower in Darmstadt Artists' Colony (1908)

Ernst Ludwig House (1900)
now hosting the Darmstadt Colony Museum



Cabinet of maple, fruitwood, ebony and brass (c. 1900)

The Darmstadt Artists' Colony was founded in 1899 by Ernest Ludwig, Grand Duke of Hess. His motto was: "*Mein Hessenland blühe und in ihm die Kunst*" ("My Hessian land shall flourish and in itself the art"), and he expected the combination of art and trade to provide economic impulses for his land. The artists' goal was to be the development of modern and forward-looking forms of construction and living. To this end, Ernst Ludwig brought together several artists of the Art Nouveau in Darmstadt: Peter Behrens, Paul Bürck, Hans Christiansen and Joseph Maria Olbrich, among others.

In 1903, Hoffmann and Moser founded the Wiener Werkstätte as a fine-arts society with the goal of reforming the applied arts (arts and crafts). In 1907 they became founding members of Deutscher Werkbund.

In 1897 **Josef Hoffmann** (1870-1956) joined Otto Wagner's architectural firm and the Viennese Secession. At this time he wrote his first manifesto for the Secession, calling for buildings which were stripped of useless ornament. "It is not a matter of overlaying a framework with ridiculous ornament in moulded cement, made industrially, nor imposing as a model Swiss architecture or houses with gables. It is a matter of creating a harmonious ensemble, of great simplicity, adapted to the individual... and which presents natural colours and a form made by the hand of an artist..." In his writing, Hoffmann did not entirely reject historicism; he praised the model of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, and urged artists to renew local forms and traditions. He wrote that the basic elements of the new style were authenticity in the use of materials, unity of decor, and the choice of a style adapted to the site.



Hoffmann Cabinet for photographs (c.1902)



Hoffmann and Moser Armchair of wood and cane (1903)



Hoffmann Sitzmaschine (Sitting Machine), adjustable armchair: beech, plywood, wood and brass



Hoffmann Designs for the Wiener Werkstätte (1904-08)

An important division soon emerged inside the Secession between those who wished to give precedence to the painters and the traditional fine arts, and others, including Klimt, Hoffmann, Wagner, Moser and others who favoured equal treatment for the decorative arts. This dispute came to a head in 1905 when a prominent painter in the group, Carl Moll, proposed that the Secession purchase the Gallery Miethke, as an outlet for its work. This was supported by Klimt, Wagner, Hoffmann, Moser, and others. The issue was put to a vote by the members, and Klimt and his supporters lost by a single vote. On June 14, 1905, Klimt, Hoffmann, Moser and a group of other artists resigned from the Secession.



Hoffmann Purkersdorf Sanatorium (1904-05)



In 1905–1911 Hoffmann built the **Stoclet Palace** in Brussels for the financier Adolphe Stoclet. It is a departure from Art Nouveau and announced the coming of modernist architecture. In 2009 it was designated as a World Heritage Site.



Photograph of the dining room with furniture by Hoffmann and ceramic frieze by Klimt



Tower



Windows

Considered Hoffman's masterpiece, the residence is one of the 20th century's most refined and luxurious private houses. The sumptuous dining and music rooms exemplified the theatrical spaces of the *Gesamtkunswerk* ("total work of art"), celebrating sight, sound, and taste in a symphony of sensual harmonies that paralleled the operas of Richard Wagner, from whom the concept originated. In his designs for the Stoclet Palace, Hoffmann was particularly attuned to fashion and to the Viennese identity of the new style of interior, even designing a dress for Madame Stoclet so that she would not clash with her living room decor as she had while wearing a French Paul Poiret gown.



Klimt *The Embrace*, detail from the *Tree of Life* frieze.

The starkness of the exterior is softened by artistic windows, which break through the line of the eaves, the rooftop conservatory, and bronze sculptures of four nude males by Franz Metzner, which are mounted on the tower that rises above the stairwell. Regimented upright balustrades line the balconies, touched with Art Nouveau ornamentation.

The Stoclet Palace was the first residential project for the *Wiener Werkstätte*. Hoffman and his colleagues designed every aspect of the mansion, down to the door handles and light fittings. The interior is as spartan as the exterior, with upright geometric furniture and minimal clutter. This was an avant-garde, modernist, approach, presenting a 'reformed interior' where function dictated form.

Following 1900 Art Nouveau decoration became purer and the lines were more stylized. The curving lines and forms evolved into polygons and then into cubes and other geometric forms. These geometric forms were used with particular effect in the architecture and furniture of Olbrich, Wagner, Moser and Hoffmann., as in the Palais Stoclet.

The most prominent architect of the Vienna Secession, as it became known, was **Otto Wagner** (1841-1914), following his students Hoffmann and Olbrich into the *Union of Austrian Artists*.

He began to develop his own philosophy of architecture, based the need for buildings to be, above all, functional. He continued to develop this idea throughout his career. In 1896, in his book *Modern Architecture*, he wrote, "only that which is practical can be beautiful". Also: "Art and artists have the duty and obligation to represent their period. The application here and there of all the previous styles, as we have seen in the last few decades, cannot be the future of architecture...The realism of our time must be present in every newborn work of art."



The first **Villa Wagner** is a country house with neo-classical elements inspired by Palladio which he built for himself on the edge of the Vienna woods in 1886. He called it his "Italian Dream", and was surrounded by a park carefully designed to complement the architecture. The principal facade had a double stairway ascending to a portico with a colonnade, which was the entrance to the grand salon. The porch was decorated curving wrought iron, statuary, and a coffered ceiling. At either end of the main villa were pergolas with open colonnades. On either side of the main stairway to the entrance he placed plaques in Latin concisely stating his philosophy On one

side, "Without art and love, there is no life"; and on the other, "Necessity is the sole mistress of art."

In April 1894, Wagner was named artistic counsellor for the new *Stadtbahn* and was given responsibility for the design of the bridges, viaducts, and stations, including the elevators, signs, lighting, and decoration. Wagner hired seventy artists and designers for his transit stations, including two young designers who later became very prominent in the birth of modern architecture, Joseph Maria Olbrich and Josef Hoffmann.

The government committee in charge of the project specified that the buildings should be covered in white plaster, for uniformity, and that the style should be Renaissance, also for uniformity. Working within these requirements, Wagner designed stations and other structures which combined utility, simplicity and elegance. The most notable station he designed was **Karlsplatz station** (1894-99) now an exhibition hall of the Vienna museum. . It had two separate pavilions for the two directions, and was constructed with a metal frame, and covered on the exterior with marble plaques and plaster plaques in the interior. The exterior was covered with designs in a sunflower pattern, which continue



on the semi-circular facade. The carefully designed gilded decoration gives the building a remarkable combination of functionality and elegance.



At the eastern end of the Hietzing station platforms, the track is straddled by the **Hofpavillon**, intended as a private entrance to the *Stadtbahn* for the use of the Emperor Franz Joseph, although it was only used by him on two occasions. The pavilion was given a distinctive exterior and an Art nouveau interior for its intended use. The pavilion is no longer connected to the station platforms, but is open to visitors as one of the sites of the Vienna Museum.

The **Kirch am Steinhof**, or church of Saint Leopold, of the Steinhof Psychiatric hospital (1904–07) is a unique and finely-crafted example of Secession religious architecture, with a traditional domed exterior but sleek, modern gold and white interior lit by abundance of modern stained glass, designed by Kolomon Moser. The great majority of smaller details are the work of Otto Wagner himself.



The main feature of the church is a dome, and the facade was covered with marble plaques two centimetres thick, fixed with copper-headed bolts. The same white and gold design was maintained in the interior. The ceiling was also white, divided into sections by gilded lines. The altar, the central point, was covered with a lace-like gilded cupola, matching the dome overhead. The floor was made of white and black tiles, and sloped slightly, so those in the church had better view of the altar. It was one of the first and most celebrated examples of modern church architecture.



Wagner incorporated numerous features specifically related to its function within an asylum: e.g. there are very few sharp edges, and most corners are rounded; almost no crosses are visible; the priest's area is potentially entirely separate from the patients'; access to the pulpit is only from the vestry; emergency exits are built into the side walls in case a patient needed to be speedily removed; continuously flowing water replaced holy water stoups at the entrance; there were separate entrances for male and female patients, since gender segregation was mandatory in mental institutions at the time; confessionals were more open than is customary. There were toilet facilities easily accessible within the church in case of patient need. Originally the pews were of different

widths to accommodate different categories of patient: calm / restless / disturbed (the latter needing more space). The floor is raked as in a theatre though not as steeply, standing at the back the view to the altar is thus less obstructed.

The Linke Wienzelle Buildings are three apartment buildings in Vienna, constructed in 1898–99. The most famous of these is the *Majolica House*. Its facade is entirely covered with majolica, or glazed earthenware tiles in the colourful floral designs which characterized the early Vienna Secession. The Art Nouveau floral design of its facade was made by his student Alois Ludwig.



The other building is known as *House with medallions* because of its decor of gilded stucco medallions by Koloman Moser. The roof, visible from far away, features several sculpted heads, called *The Criers*, or *The Crying Women* by **Othmar Schimkowitz** (1864-1947). He provided sculpture for two other Vienna Secession landmarks by Wagner, including the Angels on the roof of the Kirche am Steinhof church, and sculpture for the Austrian Postal Savings Bank. The sculptures and other ornament were removed when the style was out of fashion, but have more recently been restored. He also made the *Gorgon* reliefs on the Secession building.

Wagner had his own town apartment in a third building, at 3 Köstlergasse. It featured decoration based on Japanese floral prints, and furniture of his own design, but its most famous feature was the bathroom. A marble plaque on the wall supported the shower head, the sink was of marble on nickel legs, and the bathtub was of glass, mounted in a nickel frame. Wagner had the bathroom displayed at the 1900 Paris Universal Exposition.



Stairway of the Majolica-Haus (1898)



Cabinet for the offices of the Die Zeit newspaper (1902)



Armchair (1898–99)



Armchair of beechwood, aluminium, and canes (1905-06)



Portable table for Wagner's villa (1904)

In 1894 Wagner became Professor of Architecture at the Academy of Fine Vienna, and increasingly expressed the necessity of leaving behind historical forms and romanticism and developing Architectural Realism, where the form was determined by the function of the building. His style incorporated the use of new materials and new forms to reflect the fact that society itself was changing. In his textbook, he stated that "new human tasks and views called for a change or reconstitution of existing forms".

A student of Wagner's, Rudolph Schindler, said "Modern Architecture began with Mackintosh in Scotland, Otto Wagner in Vienna, and Louis Sullivan in Chicago."

His later works, 1906 until his death in 1918, had geometric forms and minimal ornament, clearly expressing their function. They are considered predecessors to modern architecture.

Koloman Moser (1868–1918) was the most prolific designer of graphics and posters, and exerted considerable influence on twentieth-century graphic art. He was one of the foremost artists of the Vienna Secession movement, making illustrations and covers for the magazine of the movement, *Ver Sacrum*, and a co-founder of Wiener Werkstätte, whose studios and artisans produced a number of aesthetically and functionally designed household goods, including glassware, flatware, silverware, rugs and textiles.

Moser designed a wide array of art works, including books and graphic works from postage stamps to magazine vignettes; fashion; stained glass windows, porcelains and ceramics, blown glass, tableware, silver, jewellery, and furniture.

Moser's designs in architecture, furniture, jewellery, graphics, and tapestries helped characterise the work of this era. He drew upon the clean lines and repetitive motifs of classical Greek and Roman art and architecture in reaction to the Baroque decadence of his turn-of-the-century Viennese surroundings. In 1901/1902, he published a portfolio titled *Die Quelle* ("The Source") of elegant graphic designs for such things as tapestries, fabrics, and wallpaper.

In 1904, he created the Apse mosaic and glass windows for the Kirche am Steinhof in Vienna, and designed the decoration of the *Medallion House* of the Linke Wienzeile Buildings.



Landscape in Semmering (c.1907)



Angel, drawing for stained glass window, Kirche am Steinhof (1905)



Bookcase



Textile design (1899)



Design for anniversary stamp, with Emperor Franz Joseph (1908)



Frommes Kalender (1899)



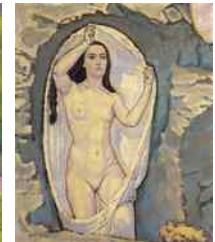
Armchair, "The Rich Catch of Fish" (1900)



Set design for "Das Phantom" (1913)



Garden in Spring (1911)



Venus in the Grotto (c.1914)

In art history **secession** refers to an historic break between a group of avant-garde artists and conservative European standard-bearers of academic and official art in the late 19th and early 20th century. The term was inspired by the history of political secession and dissolution of the city states of Central Europe. The name was first suggested by Georg Hirth (1841–1916) the editor and publisher of the influential German art magazine *Jugend* (Youth), which lent its name to the *Jugendstil* (Young Style). His choice of the word, Secession, emphasized the tumultuous rejection of the legacy of conventional art while it was being reimaged.

By convention, the term is usually restricted to one of several secessions — mainly in Germany, but also in Austria and France — coinciding with the end of the Technological Revolution, World War I and early Weimar Germany.

Of the various secessions, the Vienna Secession (1897) remains the most influential. It was inspired by the Munich Secession of 1892, and the nearly contemporaneous Berlin Secession of 1898, all of which begot the term *Sezessionstil*, or "Secession style" and continued to influence modern design throughout the course of the twentieth century.

Other secessionists



Max Kurzweil *Woman in a Yellow Dress* (1907)



Alfred Roller Poster for the 14th Secession Exhibition (1902)



100 Euro commemorative Secession coin (2004)



Ernst Stöhr *Vampire* (1899)



Franz Matsch *Ankeruhr clock* (1911-14)



Johann Loetz *Witwe Vase* (1900)

The designer Peter Behrens became a member of the Secession in 1938.

Under the regime of the Nazi Party the Secession building was destroyed as a symbol of degenerate art, but was faithfully reconstructed following World War II.

Following the split in 1905 the Secession group continued to function, and continues today, operating from its headquarters in the Secession Building. In its current form, the Secession exhibition gallery is independently led and managed by artists, holding regular exhibitions.

In 1945, following the War, Hoffmann rejoined the Vienna Secession. He was elected President of the Secession from 1948 to 1950.

The 100 euro Secession commemorative coin was minted in November 2004, with an image of the building on the obverse side. The reverse depicts a detail from the *Beethoven Frieze*, which is housed in the building.