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# Introduction: Beyond the Coffeehouse. Vienna as a Cultural Center between the World Wars

*Deborah Holmes and Lisa Silverman*

## Urban Myths

ANYONE WHO WALKS ALONG Vienna's Ringstrasse today cannot help but admire the grandiose architecture of the neo-Gothic Rathaus, the neo-classical Parliament, and the neo-Renaissance Opera House and immediately understand the city's reputation as a locus of former imperial glory. However, both the historicist buildings of the Ringstrasse and the memories of the empire that they were built to evoke belie another aspect of the city's history better represented by the four hundred equally imposing yet less centrally located blocks of council housing — the Wiener Gemeindebauten — found in districts beyond the Ring. The Karl-Marx-Hof and similar residential projects initiated by the city's Social Democrat administration during the years 1919–34 aimed to provide new, comprehensive living environments for the city's working class. Today they continue to stand as reminders of the fact that, during the years between the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Hitler's *Anschluss*, Vienna was the site of lasting cultural changes in areas such as housing, education, and the arts — all designed to rethink, reshape, and revitalize the urban population and to create a city offering the promise of a better life for as many of its inhabitants as possible.

Yet many of those who concern themselves with Vienna continue to overlook these and other changes during the interwar period. Our view of the city is colored by a barrage of clichés that often conceal its complex history as an urban center: its legendary charm and *Gemütlichkeit*, the coffeehouses and cakes, the notorious *Schmäh* (ironic wit) and *Schlamperei* (laissez-faire) of its population, not to mention their fascination with the aesthetics of death (as in the Viennese phrase “a schene Leich,” an attractive corpse). Alongside and not entirely unrelated to these popular city myths, another influential mythology has grown up among cultural historians of the Ringstrasse period and Vienna's glamorous fin de siècle. This is almost invariably presented as a golden age of cosmopolitanism, when subcultures be-

came mainstream and the effects of Viennese innovations reverberated around the world. Most often evoked by the names and achievements of a series of great men (Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, Gustav Klimt, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler), this view of Vienna is not only an idealized version of the fin de siècle itself but has become so overdetermined that it is fixed in our imaginations as the example par excellence of modern cultural intersections in Austria's capital, eclipsing all others.<sup>1</sup>

As a testament to the enduring, widespread appeal of this image of the city, the architectural historian Peter Hall opened his seminal 1998 study of the world's most noteworthy urban buildings with a quotation from Stefan Zweig's nostalgic reflection on the Vienna of his fin-de-siècle childhood:

The old palaces of the court and the nobility spoke history in stone. Here Beethoven had played at the Lichnowskys', at the Estherhazys' Haydn had been a guest, there in the old University Haydn's *Creation* had resounded for the first time, the Hofburg had seen generations of emperors, and Schönbrunn had seen Napoleon. In the *Stefansdom* the united lords of Christianity had knelt in prayers of thanksgiving for the salvation of Europe from the Turks; countless great lights of science had been within the walls of the University. In the midst of all this, the new architecture reared itself proudly and grandly with glittering avenues and sparkling shops.<sup>2</sup>

Notably both Zweig and Hall chose to stress the role of tradition in the impression given by fin-de-siècle Vienna, which is made to epitomize the way in which a city's past can feed into its innovative present. More notable still, Hall insisted that Zweig's *Die Welt von Gestern* (The World of Yesterday, 1943), written in exile in Brazil, is the most moving and perceptive description of a "golden urban age" that resulted when the city's population allowed the participation of Jews in its modern cultural achievements: "For the Viennese golden age in its ultimate florescence was peculiarly a creation of that Jewish society: a society of outsiders who, for all too brief a time, had become insiders."<sup>3</sup> That a contemporary history of world architecture opens with a reference to Jewish creativity in fin-de-siècle Vienna points to the unique resonance of this city myth. Its power is such that it either precludes interest in later, seemingly less glorious and more problematic periods or else they are somehow subsumed into the fin-de-siècle myth, according to which, from the 1880s right up to the *Anschluss* in 1938, Vienna is portrayed as a hotbed of avant-garde culture where everybody mixed regardless of background, resulting in the creation of world-class music, art, science, and literature. How else could Ronald Lauder — creator of the prestigious Neue Galerie Museum in New York City and the purchaser of Klimt's portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer for a record sum of \$135 million in 2006 on its behalf<sup>4</sup> — describe Vienna as a "fabulous place" before the Nazis came to power and ruined everything?<sup>5</sup>

In many respects it is no surprise that research on the fin de siècle tends to eclipse the interwar period. Vienna between the wars has been an unpopular object of study for the same reasons that fin-de-siècle Vienna is popular: the fin de siècle, transfigured by nostalgia, represents Austria's swan song under the monarchy, a prosperous, seemingly peaceful age characterized by a globally acclaimed boom in the arts, a time of cultural success and productivity.<sup>6</sup> During the First Republic, by contrast, Vienna was rocked by financial crises; unemployment doubled between 1929 and 1933, and the suicide rate increased.<sup>7</sup> Modernism became more and more problematic both politically and otherwise, and antisemitism took on a new and more threatening dynamic. The city maintained its picturesque exterior in many respects, but it was no longer possible to overlook the hardship and enmities beneath the surface. Nevertheless, interwar Vienna occupied such an unforgettable place in the memories of those who lived there that author and eyewitness Gregor von Rezzori (1914–98) questioned whether anyone who had not experienced it would be able to fathom its unique and contradictory tensions:

Wer nicht gelebt hat im damaligen Paradoxon des Neben-, Mit- und Ineinanders von tiefer Skepsis und irrationalster Verheißung, von schwärzestem Pessimismus und stürmischem Willen zur Welterneuerung, konservativstem Schönheitssinn und brutalem Ikonoklasmus, von Eleganz und Verlotterung, unbefangenster Luxus und demütig hingennommener Armut — wer nicht die Spannung dieser Widersprüche in sein Innenleben eingeatmet hat, der sollte imstande sein, es nachzuempfinden?<sup>8</sup>

[Anyone who has not lived through the paradoxes of that time, the coexistence, interaction and merging of deep skepticism and the most irrational hopes for the future, of the blackest pessimism and passionate commitment to world renewal, of the most conservative aesthetics and brutal iconoclasm, of elegance and impoverishment, of ostentatious luxury and humbly accepted destitution — how can anyone who has not absorbed the tension of these contradictions in their innermost being understand what they were like?]

For von Rezzori, who lived in Vienna from 1927 to 1938, understanding the city's cultural climate requires sensitivity not only toward the violent social and political events of that time and place but also with respect to its peculiar and pervasive intellectual and aesthetic atmosphere.

It is undeniable that in the volatile years from 1918 to 1938 issues such as politics and labor often overshadowed the concerns of art, literature, and culture that had occupied such a dominant position in the period immediately preceding the First World War. However, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the ensuing turmoil in no way resulted in an abandonment of art and culture, as has sometimes been assumed. Rather, it

led to new forms of expression and reflection in literature, theater, music, dance, scholarship, and many other areas. In other words, much that was culturally significant occurred in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s. A closer examination of the city at this time presents us with a unique combination of persisting urban and artistic myths alongside intense social change. Post-1918 Vienna may not have been able to compete with its own Habsburg past either strategically or in terms of social glamour, but it nevertheless remained a major — if ultimately doomed — center of cultural innovation.

The perception of these years in Vienna's history has been dogged by another recurring Viennese stereotype, namely, that the city never changes — or at least is peculiarly resistant to modernization. In *Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit*, for example, Hermann Broch portrayed Vienna as inherently moribund, incapable of facing the challenges of a new century. He made a very unfavorable comparison between the British Empire under Queen Victoria and Emperor Franz Josef's Austria:

Doch während England kraft seiner politisch-ökonomisch und kulturellen Resistenzkraft die viktorianische Tradition weiter aufrecht hielt und offenbar imstande ist, sie evolutionistisch in die neue Zeit überzuführen, fehlte in Österreich und besonders in Wien eine solche Resistenz: die Abschiedsstimmung, von der die Habsburgermonarchie seit Dezennien umfungen war, hatte sie den Tod vergessen lassen, und all die Menetekel, mit denen der Geist des 20. Jahrhunderts sich angekündigt hatte, waren unbeachtet geblieben; nirgendwo war man nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg dem Neuen weniger gewachsen als in Wien.<sup>9</sup>

[But whereas England, thanks to the political, economic, and cultural powers of resistance it had built up, was able to maintain the Victorian tradition and is now obviously capable of carrying it forward into a new period/era and evolving it further, this strength was lacking in Austria and particularly in Vienna. The valedictory mood that had enveloped the Habsburg monarchy for decades made it oblivious to death, and to all the writing on the wall that had proclaimed the spirit of the twentieth century; following the First World War there was nowhere less prepared for the new than Vienna.]

Broch's insistence on Vienna's inflexibility led him to reject as inherently "un-Viennese" the signs of artistic and cultural innovation that already were undeniably present in the city, such as the modernist buildings of Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos: "In einer schier mystischen Weise war diese Stadt [. . .] nicht mehr erneuerbar; was in ihr an Neuem errichtet wurde, gehörte nicht mehr zu ihr" (The way in which the city resisted renewal was positively mystical; anything new that was erected didn't belong there anymore).<sup>10</sup> Broch's presentation of the city was, of course, tailored to his idiosyncratic analysis of Hofmannsthal and pessimistic view of the culture that had failed to protect him and his contemporaries from National Socialism. However,

an unwillingness to look for or even recognize cultural modernity in Vienna between the wars still persists up to the present day. This is particularly striking when, as is so often the case, Vienna is compared to Berlin, German-speaking culture's other major capital. Vienna, so the stereotype goes, is content to "be," to maintain and strengthen its traditional characteristics, whereas dynamic Berlin is in a constant state of "becoming."<sup>11</sup>

In order to prove itself worthy of study, then, interwar Vienna not only has to face down the notion that anything of cultural significance occurred in the years preceding the First World War, but also that during the interwar years everything of cultural significance happened in Berlin. According to historian Marcus Gräser, the contrast of "old" and "new" became an indispensable mechanism in debating urban identity from the mid nineteenth century onward, soon followed by comparisons between individual cities along the same axis of past versus present. He presents these comparisons as a constitutive element of modern urban discourse.<sup>12</sup> There can be no doubt, however, that their polarizing nature has cemented the stereotype of Vienna as a backwater, overshadowed after the catastrophe of the First World War by culturally innovative Berlin. There are, of course, many factors that seem to substantiate this view. Berlin in the 1920s was experiencing its heyday, with global cultural implications — as had Vienna twenty years earlier — and there was a huge creative exodus from the Austrian to the German capital.<sup>13</sup> Vienna was reeling from the collapse of the monarchy, which marked the end of centuries of continuous court tradition. The loss of many Habsburg crown lands — Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Galicia, the Bukovina and so on — cut the city off from the creative and economic potential of its historical hinterland. Conversely, out of the ashes of imperial Vienna the Social Democratic "Red Vienna" rose with amazing speed and efficiency from 1919 onward — a city of modern welfare and administrative reform, new housing projects, and exemplary sports, library, and adult education services.<sup>14</sup> While it is true that in some respects Berlin did overshadow the Austrian capital, the fact that seminal periodicals such as Karl Kraus's satirical periodical *Die Fackel* were published in Vienna between 1899 and 1936 proves that it continued to influence cultural life beyond the borders of the new Austrian republic. Kraus's cultural critique and his lecture circuit remained centered on Vienna, although they both increasingly encompassed Berlin, Prague, and other European cities.<sup>15</sup>

The major exhibition *Modernism, 1914–1939* held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London during the summer of 2006 contained additional proofs of Vienna's contribution to the European modernist movement as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Photographs of the Geroge-Washington-Hof and the Karl-Marx-Hof — with their communal laundry facilities, crèches, and kindergartens — demonstrated the positive achievements of Red Vienna, a model that was copied by local authorities all over Europe. From Austrians already working abroad there was Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's famous "Frankfurter Küche"

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