

# JOSEF HOFFMANN AND THE ARCHITECTURAL CLOCK

by Carles Vallhonrat

(From the catalog)

“The architect and designer Josef Hoffmann, who was a staunch admirer of William Morris in his youth, told me that he read Morris’s writings on the social question with interest, but that he and his companions regarded such problems as ‘for the politicians to solve,’ not the concern of artists.” This note by the cultural historian Carl Schorske, although difficult to place within the tumultuous years that underscored Hoffmann’s lifetime, may help one to understand the more subtle facets of his artistic personality.

Because of his position as a child of the Viennese secession, and because of his accomplishments as one of the founders of the Wiener Werkstätte, Hoffmann was seen, by those active in architecture and the arts from the 1950s through the early 1970s, as a stylist indispensable to the understanding of the panorama of architecture and decorative arts before World War I, though seldom beyond. The explosive force of the work and theories of those conventionally called pioneers of the modern movement seemed eventually to eclipse everything else. That Hoffmann had been active almost to the end of his life came as a surprise to many when he died, as far removed from the turn of the century as 1956.

It was only in the mid-'70s that architects prior to the moderns and the machine age were studied anew. Wagner, Hoffmann, Olbrich, Asplund, Mackintosh, and Eliel Saarinen, among others, were reconsidered as representing the broken line in the descending lineage of the architecture of humanism. They seemed to be the generation between the past and the future. Hoffmann’s work embodies a stunning picture of that predicament.

Within his life’s work, there is an enactment of that condition, spanning his years as a *moderne* of the art nouveau modality at the turn of the century to the modern functionalist architect of the thirties and on to the end of his career. But it is in the period that starts with his work for the Fourteenth Secession exhibition, dedicated to Beethoven, and that runs parallel to his work with the Wiener Werkstätte, that one finds the exuberant virtuosity that seems to forewarn and expose the exploratory vein so characteristic of the architects and artists of this century.

That insatiable urge for experimentation was in the air not only in Vienna but elsewhere in Europe, and it produced a burst of artistic ideas and works that came to represent a new conception of the world. Hoffmann, who beyond the notorious ideology of the Secession had extended himself with the founding of the Werkstätte, found his brilliant sensuality more than his dialectical instincts to be his natural avenue of realization. It proved to be the constant with which he maneuvered over the years, within his different artistic periods, through the separable compositional modalities that covered most of the searches for legitimate style that tormented many of his contemporaries. These modalities ran from the stripped neoclassical—the last “allowable” stage of the use of the classical vocabulary—to the most carefree incursions into the many worlds of the abstract. Hoffmann did not take explicit positions within those feverish motions; they are assumed by his more ideologically eloquent contemporaries. His founding of the Werkstätte, with the painter Koloman Moser, among others, in retrospect seems a most civil and well-mannered accomplishment. The work that the Werkstätte allowed him to do appears in his hands to be an intimate revolution in the private corners of the art. Because of the reliance on

crafts and the emphasis on the design of useful objects and appurtenances of interior spaces, his work has suffered from being seen as a representation of nearly disappearing techniques and as an example of the less than indispensable decorative arts. But Hoffmann's creativity was unstoppable, and he had the skill to unify the physical character and nature of all the things we live with within our architectural spaces by making them appear concordant and comforting to the touch. Perhaps because of his inherent restlessness and his fascination for the way things are put together (his youthful enthusiasm for Morris and the British Arts and Crafts movement attests to that), he abandoned his early allegiance to the vogue of art nouveau and took on the newly accepted compositional modes stemming from three concepts that were then growing in acceptance: 1) Usefulness is good and function can be used as a source of inventiveness; 2) Scale doesn't have to depend upon stylistic elements of the past to be attained; 3) Abstraction is a legitimate source and a possible guarantee of new form.

The avenues that abstraction was opening up, and that would be at the core of so much of the art of this century, had (and still have) two provenances that are in both their etymology and epistemology. *To abstract* is a verb; it means to reduce something real to its skeletal characteristics. In painting, we credit that beginning to Cézanne. The French artist and theorist Ozenfant put it best when he suggested, in his book *Foundations of Modern Art*, that "at some point," Cézanne chose "to put appearance aside." (Cézanne was trying to reveal deeper truths, the very substance of things). Abstraction is also the word for a new world; almost a new materiality, composed of the elements of the modern world of physics and the way physics tells us what reality is now—atoms, mathematical notions, quarks, and forces we cannot see—thereby challenging the very concept of what we perceive and how we perceive it. We hold to mathematical elements mostly in geometrical form so that we can see them without the help of microscopes or other devices and use them as we would a new material.

This overlap and confusion of the two meanings fired art and theory all the years of Hoffmann's life. They still do today. The abstraction of the mathematical world, with a new conception of infinite space without beginning or end, pierced the old understanding of material things, leaving us without two previously fundamental architectural notions that until then seemed inseparable: first, gravity, indispensable to the way we build; second, scale as the giver of a sense of dimension, or the relationship between our size as people and the size of a space or an object. There were other ingredients in the newly brewing conceptual structure of art. One close contemporary of Hoffmann's was Adolf Loos, a man more adept than Hoffmann at using the force of a well-constructed theoretical manifesto to promote the goals of his art. Loos, in 1908, challenged the notion of ornament in his much read and quoted "Ornament and Crime." His narrative is forceful, and although it barely elaborates on the notion of ornament as the act of putting things together and to a use, it has the fire of moralistic implications. The theme catches on vehemently and everywhere.

The negation of ornament for Loos and for many of his followers, is fundamentally about the predicament of social relevance; it is also a question of style. Only incidentally does it seem to be an issue of relationship between the functional intent and the artistic intent or poetic vision. There is an overwhelming thrust toward the establishment of a new rationality—the nearly unarguable argument of the removal of the superfluous and the defense of simplicity. That is at the root of the hostility with which the most dogmatic of the moderns who were to follow looked at the outburst of creativity of the architects of the decorative arts and that exuberant period prior to World War I. In the later work of Josef Hoffmann, we find the appearance of the frugalities that came with the commissions available to architects after the war and the establishment of housing as a staple for architectural practitioners. Examples of that are Klose-Hof and Winarsky Hof, 1924–25; the Siedlung in Luxemburgstrasse, 1931–32; and the Werkbundsiedlung, 1930–32 (and it continues in his work as late as the apartment building at Heiligenstadterstrasse 129 in Vienna, finished in 1953). It can be argued that Hoffmann's work of that period does not distinguish itself from the efforts of some of his contemporaries, such as Karl Ehn, Peter Behrens, or Bruno Taut; nonetheless, it is remarkable in its faithful persistence to working within that sense of scale and

proportional systems that keeps him connected to the generation nursed in the traditions of the architecture of humanism.

With unrestrained agility; Hoffmann displayed an extraordinary gift for that sense of scale and proportional systems, starting with the Purkersdorf Sanatorium, in 1903 (or earlier, even in the 1902 Fourteenth Secession exhibition), and very aptly in the Ast villas: the first, in Vienna, in 1910; the other, much later, at Auen, in 1923. These two villas bracket perhaps Hoffmann's best years.

Threaded through his work is the outpouring of designs for all the appurtenances of the interior spaces, including the most minute objects and details. There, perhaps, one sees the most distinctive traits of Hoffmann's artistic character. In his making of objects, one follows that incessant creative pursuit that has him exploring the possibilities of all materials and experimenting with the most diverse elements of form, from the archetypal to the abstract, from a teapot to geometrical matrices. He uses them all, almost as a collage, as if it were only the textural properties of elements that compelled him to experiment and design. Furniture, lights, fabrics, silver, wallpaper, all seem at times not merely to wrap around the architecture but to define it. In that sense: it is revealing to see that his drawings nearly always appear to be made for all things to be built—as if they were necessary and an impatient requirement just waiting for the craft of making to take over. One should not be surprised at his constant use of graph paper and, often, a heavy line. This is just a step, the first in the sequence of the operations of the trades at which he was a master.

The fecundity, and inventiveness of Josef Hoffmann is apparent, even as one may be overwhelmed by the enormous quantity of drawings that have come down to us; and, happily, reside in many archives in Vienna today. Abundance is in so much of his work—an abundance of devices to enhance the sensuous character of each element and each surface that he makes. When one adds dots, nails, and buttons in whatever patterns to a wall, one enhances its texture, its readability, its overall scale, so that no square inch of its surface will fade away or stop playing a part in the definition of that space. It is the same with floors or ceilings, stripes, hatchings, tile works, even elements such as edges, joints, moldings, and hardware:; Everything is heightened—not only to activate our ability to read space, to see it, but to position these elements with the sort of precision that comes more from the textural and material play than from the exactitude of the cuts or sharpness of its joinery. Anyone who has seen the main hall of Palladio's villa at Malcontenta marvels at the presence of the walls and the fact that the spatial configuration seems to envelop one more tightly than in any other room where one has ever been. That every square inch is covered with Zelotti's paintings, with allegorical scenes and make-believe architecture, gives extraordinary fixity to the characteristics of the space. Hoffmann's work has that quality, and it is the sensitivity and the capacity to produce and make it work that has made Hoffmann an indispensable figure in that generation between the past and the future—a generation that so beautifully extended the art of architecture and the design of objects. It is said that Le Corbusier, regarded by many (mistakenly, I believe) as one of the most dogmatic architects and theorists of this century, went, when he was very young, to visit Josef Hoffmann at his office, in Vienna. Hoffmann represented the previous generation, particularly to those who espoused the canonical doctrine of the moderns as a moralistic stance. Le Corbusier, a man known for easily inflamed intolerance of the carefree insiders of his art, maintained for the rest of his life a warm affection for the older practitioner, whom he always called my master (*mon maître*).

