BEGINNINGS AND THE SECESSION

In 1897 a group of young artists gathered in the salon of Berta Zuckerkandl, a noted journalist and socialite, dismayed with the conservative state of contemporary Viennese art. Later known as the Secession, this group of progressive thinkers included Gustav Klimt, Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser, Wilhelm List, and Joseph Maria Olbrich. Banded together under the motto "to every age its art, to art its freedom," the Secessionists explored new formal and stylistic modes, encouraged the unification of fine arts and applied (decorative) arts, and brought the work of international avant-garde artists to exhibitions in Vienna.

The tenets of the Secession were fundamental to Hoffmann and Moser when, in collaboration with the industrialist art collector Fritz Waerndorfer, they established the Wiener Werkstätte in 1903. Extending Secessionist ideology into the realms of design, the Wiener Werkstätte championed the *gesamstkunstwerk* (total work of art), in which each element of a space was considered part of a holistic scheme. The Wiener Werkstätte also drew on principles from international Arts and Crafts movements and operated under the belief that reviving artisan production and integrating intentional design into daily life could address broader impulses for reform and modernity within Viennese society.

THE KÜNSTLER-WERKSTÄTTE AND WORLD WAR I

At the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts), Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser taught many women who later became a crucial part of the Wiener Werkstätte. Though women were not admitted to fine arts academies until the 1920s, at the Kunstgewerbeschule they could train in applied (decorative) arts, which were considered acceptable for women due to the perceived adjacency of these fields to domestic pursuits.

For some graduates, their first opportunities for paid artistic work were through the Künstler-Werkstätte (Artists' Workshops), an experimental studio that was founded at the Wiener Werkstätte in 1916. The Künstler-Werkstätte became a vital professional pipeline for women artists while also bringing an influx of workers to the Wiener Werkstätte to contend with labor shortages from World War I (1914–18).

The Künstler-Werkstätte allowed artists to experiment freely with material and form, developing original and expressive objects that went beyond simple adornment and surface treatments. As the artist Vally Wieselthier explained in her memoirs, "We had a huge studio, each of us got a key, and we had all the workshops imaginable at our disposal. We also had the best-trained foremen and workers, and all the time and materials we desired. We simply did as we pleased, and whenever the Wiener Werkstätte sold one of our products, the lucky winner always threw a big party."

At the end of World War I, Vienna emerged into a new sociopolitical and economic reality with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Wiener Werkstätte's program had to adapt. The plausibility of realizing a *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) had largely fallen away. Thus it was through individual, stand-alone works, which could still be integrated into their owner's daily life, that the Wiener Werkstätte continued the project of aestheticizing and modernizing society.

A NEW WOMAN FOR A NEW ERA

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Viennese women occupied a paradoxical position in society. While their city was a hub for avant-garde art and design, its corresponding cultural reforms still frequently excluded women. World War I was a catalyst for numerous societal changes that were pivotal to redefining women's roles, opportunities, and public perception. Most notably, Viennese women achieved the right to vote in 1918 with the fall of Austria-Hungary and the establishment of the Austrian First Republic.

Within women's movements of the period, economic independence and education were central concerns, particularly for middle-class women who sought a profession that required specialized training, including as an artist or teacher. In the context of such reforms, a "new woman" emerged—uninhibited, confident, and economically autonomous. Popular culture from the period caricatured this new woman as a fashionably dressed, short-haired decorative artist who scandalously smoked cigarettes. This, in turn, gave rise to unease (by some) about women's independence and competition in the arts. Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte mined such trivializing stereotypes of the naïve and childish female craftsperson to create a powerful vision of an emancipated woman through designs that were embraced by equally reform-minded clients.

The presence of women at the Wiener Werkstätte was impossible to ignore; not only did women constitute a prominent segment of the Wiener Werkstätte's workforce, but they were also a source of virtuosic experimentation and artistry. Their work was displayed to great acclaim throughout Vienna and across the world at international exhibitions and lauded in the press, including by prestigious voices such as the journalist and salon hostess Berta Zuckerkandl.

VALLY WIESELTHIER

Vally Wieselthier joined the Wiener Werkstätte in 1917 and was among its leading artists, gaining international notoriety for her work with clay. She was resolute in her aspiration to pursue an art career, and her father, facilitating Wieselthier's ambitions and defying conventions, never forced her to marry.

Wieselthier was educated at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) and from 1922 to 1927 had an independent ceramics workshop, a business she later sold to the Wiener Werkstätte to become its ceramics department head. The originality, beauty, and humor seen in Wieselthier's ceramics translated to other mediums she pursued in her time at the Wiener Werkstätte, designing everything from glass vessels and children's toys to advertising posters, textiles, and fashion accessories.

Wieselthier was one of the few Wiener Werkstätte artists who found success abroad. When her works were featured in a major ceramics exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1928, Wieselthier came to New York and established a veritable career in the United States: She was a key member of the modernist design association Contempora with Paul Poiret and others, designed department store window displays, molded and painted relief murals, and sculpted ceramics at increasingly ambitious scales.

PATRONAGE AND PROMOTION

Jewish women played a vital role in the success of the Wiener Werkstätte as clients and cultural intermediaries who promoted and amplified its vision. Notable patrons included the salon hostess Adele Bloch-Bauer, journalist Berta Zuckerkandl, artist Broncia Koller-Pinell, arts patron and gallerist Friederike Maria Beer, and women's rights advocate Magda Mautner von Markhof. These customers commissioned Wiener Werkstätte furniture and interiors, wore its fashions and jewelry, and used its objects in their day-to-day lives, embodying the spirit of the *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art).

The relationship between the Wiener Werkstätte and its patrons was a symbiotic one. Fritz Waerndorfer, a cofounder and financial backer of the collective, along with his wife Lili, was intimately and deeply connected to upper-middle-class Jewish circles and thus a key pipeline for the Wiener Werkstätte to reach its clientele. With the financial support and social visibility of Vienna's notable intelligentsia, the enterprise received cultural legitimization and prestige that galvanized its avant-garde sensibilities and contributed to its global renown.
In turn, Wiener Werkstätte designs became essential tools for its supporters to construct and project an image of modernity, styling themselves as progressive, respectable patrons of the arts.

FELICE RIX

Over the many years that Felice Rix (later Rix-Ueno) worked for the Wiener Werkstätte, she produced hundreds of designs, including more than one hundred for fabric alone. Her first efforts for the Wiener Werkstätte adorned the surfaces of patriotic glassware designed by Josef Hoffmann, but she soon took on greater responsibilities, designing toys, tableware, window displays, fashion accessories, posters, wallpaper, pillows, and textiles. Rix's uniquely abstract idiom imparts whimsy through designs replete with expressive motifs and emotive colorways.

While working at the Wiener Werkstätte, Rix met Isaburo Ueno, a Japanese architect working in Hoffmann's studio whom she married in 1925. Though relocating to Japan that same year had a stylistic impact on her output, Japanese artistic practices had long influenced Rix's aesthetic impulses. She continued to produce designs for the Wiener Werkstätte from afar until 1930.

Flouting convention was a family affair among Rix and her three younger sisters, who pursued artistic careers as well. The second Rix daughter, Edith, studied a variety of subjects before becoming a photographer; the third daughter, Gertrude Ilse, was a master seamstress and milliner. Rix's youngest sister, Kitty, also worked for the Wiener Werkstätte, primarily in the ceramics department, producing playful works that frequently incorporated animal and human figures.

FASHIONABILITY AND REFORM

The Wiener Werkstätte's textile department was established in 1910 and its fashion department a year later, thanks to the Jewish artist Marianne Zels, who had the dressmaking certification required to register the business. Wiener Werkstätte fabrics were produced prolifically—by some estimates more than five hundred new patterns were designed and released between 1910 and 1917 alone. Notably, the fashion department provided a unique opportunity for women to design for women. Financial records suggest that, at times, this branch of the Wiener Werkstätte single-handedly kept the entire enterprise afloat.

Women's dress was then, as now, understood in its capacity to be a revolutionary statement. A novel silhouette for garments that gained popularity in this period, aptly called "reform dress," did away with tight-laced corsets that emphasized the waist. Instead, garments were loose and flowing, allowing for freer movement by not constricting the body. In this way, reform dress became an unabashed declaration of modern values, while a fabric's opulent colors and patterns expressed individuality.

Wiener Werkstätte artists and clients alike were aligned with progressive reform and burgeoning feminist ideals. The Wiener Werkstätte's fashions were worn by its artists and employees, but could also be found throughout Vienna's high society. Its glamorous clientele included Friederike Maria Beer, a socialite who styled herself as a "walking advertisement for the Wiener Werkstätte."

BEYOND VIENNA

While the Wiener Werkstätte found local success, its renown and influence reached far beyond Vienna through exhibitions and the establishment of international shops. Throughout its existence, the business attempted to gain a stronger foothold abroad by opening branches in locations such as Berlin, Karlsbad, Marienbad, Zurich, and even New York. The Jewish architect Joseph Urban, who had immigrated to the United States from Vienna in 1911, supported creating a New York outpost to provide a publicity and sales outlet for audiences in America. The store opened in autumn 1922 and sold Wiener Werkstätte products as well as works by the Viennese artists Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele.

The Wiener Werkstätte participated regularly in trade exhibitions around Europe, perhaps the most prominent of which was the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris. Josef Hoffmann designed Austria's national pavilion, which he filled with hundreds of Wiener Werkstätte products, including textiles, glassware, ceramics, and other items by Lotte Calm, Mizi Friedmann, Felice Rix, and Vally Wieselthier, among others. Several women won awards, including Rix, who received a bronze medal.

Despite critical and popular success in Vienna and internationally, the Wiener Werkstätte's finances suffered. The 1929 Stock Market Crash and ensuing economic fallout resulted in yet another tumultuous landscape for its production and patrons. After nearly thirty years of operation, the Wiener Werkstätte closed in 1932. Its legacy nonetheless lives on in spaces where artistic experimentation, handcrafted methods of production, and a belief in the transformative powers of art and design are still valued.