

# “YOUTH STYLE”

## *Austrian and German Posters from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*

### Galerie St. Etienne

True collecting is a creative act. It requires an ongoing personal engagement with the visual environment that is comparable to artistic practice. Driven by boundless passion, collectors pursue a lifelong cycle of looking and learning. Looking inspires the collector to learn and then, with a better-informed eye, to look again and see anew. The process is both more dynamic and more enjoyable than just buying what everyone else is buying.

Merrill C. Berman was at one time a relatively conventional buyer of “name-brand” art. By the early 1970s, he had amassed a significant collection of Post-Impressionist, Abstract Expressionist and Photo-Realist paintings. Decimated by the bear market of 1973-74, however, he was forced to sell this collection and regroup. “My financial low point came just as Art Nouveau and Art Deco posters and objects were being rediscovered,” he recalled. Great material was plentiful and relatively inexpensive. Endowed with an innate feeling for graphic design, which he’d honed in boyhood by collecting political ephemera and studying printing, Berman dove in.

One thing led to another: Art Nouveau and Art Deco to the Vienna Secession, to Bauhaus and Dada, to the Russian avant-garde. Traveling around Europe and developing his eye along with a network of dealer contacts, Berman realized that, “I could surround a whole area and dominate the field of twentieth-century graphic design and related material.” It helped that he had little competition. A curator at the Museum of Modern Art advised him not to bother with Russian political posters. Communism was a huge taboo, both in the West and, after the fall of the Soviet Union, also in Russia. In the early ’90s, Constructivist and Socialist Realist works flowed westward, propelled by Russia’s need for hard currency. Berman, a self-described “contrarian,” was one of the few to appreciate the brilliance of this material. “I kept moving forward aggressively,” he says, “collecting posters, ephemera and other artworks” He expanded into photography, architecture and book design. “I needed the stages of design, from the original maquettes leading up to the final printed product...I had no prejudices against any kind of material. Nothing was insignificant. Few museums had the all-encompassing approach that I did.”

Berman was a pioneer in challenging the accepted canon of modern art history, but today the Museum

of Modern Art has come around. Adopting a new, interdisciplinary approach that integrates photography, graphic design, book design and architecture with painting and sculpture, MoMA recently acquired 324 avant-garde masterworks from Berman’s collection. “The new generation of curators isn’t like those from the ’70s,” Berman observes. “They like...all disciplines of collecting. Today’s art people all want context. They adore the political stuff.” MoMA will feature selections from the Berman acquisition in its exhibition *Engineer, Agitator, Constructor*, from May 10 through September 12.

“Youth Style” could be described as a prequel to *Engineer, Agitator, Constructor*. The MoMA exhibition focuses on revolutionary art between the two world wars, whereas “Youth Style” highlights antecedents dating from roughly 1895 to 1918. Just as Berman’s collection of Russian photomontage and constructivist material was facilitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, his holdings of early twentieth-century Austrian and German posters were bolstered by a more recent political development: the belated restitution of Nazi-looted art. In 2008, Vienna’s Albertina Museum returned 3,600 posters to the heirs of Julius Paul, an Austrian collector who died shortly before the 1938 *Anschluss*. It is not clear whether the collection, which was inherited by Paul’s nephew, Gaston Belf, was subject to a forced sale or simply stolen after Belf fled Austria in 1939. Berman was among those given first crack at the restituted works, which included countless rarities, all preserved in pristine condition by the Albertina. Complementing German and Vienna Secessionist material purchased earlier, the Paul acquisitions give Berman’s collection of fin-de-siècle Austrian and German posters unparalleled scope and richness.

“Youth style,” or *Jugendstil*, takes its name from the Munich periodical *Jugend* (established in 1896), whose influence extended throughout Germany and Austria. *Jugendstil* is sometimes described as the Germanic version of Art Nouveau. This is not entirely accurate, although there are superficial similarities. Both movements favored the use of applied ornament—botanical and relatively curvilinear in France, more abstract and geometric in Germany and Austria. Art Nouveau and *Jugendstil* were both multidisciplinary phenomena, manifesting themselves across a range of mediums that

included furniture, glassware, ceramics, metalwork, graphic design, architecture and the fine arts. This totalizing embrace of the visual environment was an outgrowth of industrialization, which provided new means to manufacture and more widely distribute all manner of goods. Where Art Nouveau and *Jugendstil* parted ways was in precisely how adherents responded to these sweeping changes. *Jugendstil* had an ideological component not seen elsewhere.

Though often associated with France, Art Nouveau actually originated in England, the first country to confront the aesthetic implications of industrialization. Machine production had severed the unity of art and craft that obtained when maker and designer were one and the same. At London's "Great Exhibition" of 1851, it became evident that industrial products were a mess—ugly and stylistically incoherent. William Morris, a leader of the British Arts & Crafts movement, concluded that machines were incapable of producing high-quality goods, and instead proposed a return to medieval workshop practices. The British government, on the other hand, decided to address the problem through education. The South Kensington Museum (today the Victoria and Albert), which opened in 1852, aimed to elevate the tastes of both the public and manufacturers by exhibiting exemplary objects from all over the world. The ancillary School of Design (today the Royal College of Art) taught artists to design for industry. Similar museums and schools soon sprouted all over Austria and Germany.

Spurred by competitive gatherings like the "Great Exhibition," the foregoing educational initiatives served nationalistic agendas. Nowhere was this more evident than in Germany, an aggregation of once autonomous principalities unified only in 1871. Beyond a desire for international economic hegemony, the German government needed a distinctive and distinctly German style to forge a cohesive national identity. Designers raided the past in search of German prototypes that could be adapted for contemporary use. Austria—which had been united under Hapsburg rule for over 600 years but was starting to experience the ethnic tensions that would eventually sunder its vast empire—likewise deployed historical styles to project an aura of power.

The stranglehold of historicism accounts for the exceptional fervor with which progressive Austrian and German artists embraced *Jugendstil* at the turn of the twentieth century. They believed it was ridiculous to foist bygone styles on a society that was modernizing at breakneck speed. "To the age its art, to art its freedom," was the motto of the Vienna Secession, founded in 1897. The Secession's journal, *Ver Sacrum* (Sacred Spring), presented itself as a source of cultural renewal. A youthful imperative to wipe out the older generation's

stultifying culture resonated not only in the name of the magazine *Jugend*, but also in Gustav Klimt's poster for the first Secession exhibition: an allegorical attack on bourgeois philistinism.

Unlike in France, there were no domestic avant-garde movements in Austria and Germany prior to the emergence of *Jugendstil*. And whereas the French avant-gardes largely eschewed Art Nouveau, many German and Austrian artists embraced the applied arts. "We recognize no difference between high art and low art," the Vienna Secessionists declared. "All art is good." The German magazine *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (German Art and Decoration, established in 1897) advocated a "complete integration of all artists, architects, sculptors, painters and craftsmen. They all belong intimately together in the same place, each thinking individually yet working together hand-in-hand for a larger whole." The goal was to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a coordinated aesthetic environment; the "total work of art." Such unity of conception might be expressed in exhibition installations, book design or in buildings that melded architecture with art, furnishings and interior decoration.

Many *Jugendstil* artists were polymaths, accomplished in several disciplines. "Either one is an artist, and then one must be able to do everything, or one is merely a technician who has mastered a particular craft," declared Josef Maria Olbrich, who designed the Vienna Secession building before being called, in 1899, to work on the artists' colony at Mathildenhöhe, near Darmstadt. Peter Behrens, who joined Olbrich at Mathildenhöhe, was adept at architecture, typography and graphic design. Others who switched effortlessly from architectural design to the graphic arts included Lucian Bernhard, Ludwig Hohlwein, Bruno Paul and Josef Urban. Heinrich Lefler (Urban's brother-in-law) and Alfred Roller, both of whom had trained as painters, went on to design stage sets. German and Austrian artists adapted the British workshop model to suit their ends, linking designers with artisans via collectives such as Munich's Vereinigten Werkstätten für Kunst im Handwerk (United Workshops for Art in Craft, established in 1898), the Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst (Dresden Workshops for Arts & Crafts, established in 1898), the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshop, established in 1903) and the Deutscher Werkbund (German Association of Craftsmen, a broader umbrella organization established in 1907). The various Austrian and German applied arts schools also helped launch the *Jugendstil* movement. Behrens, Adolf Michael Boehm, Bertold Löffler, Paul and Roller taught at such schools. Ferdinand Andri, Hans Rudi Erdt, Georg Erler, Klimt and Olbrich were among those who studied there.

Despite its stated goal of reforming the manufacture of utilitarian objects, *Jugendstil* focused extensively on

two-dimensional design. At the applied arts schools, students learned to create patterns that could be reproduced, more or less indiscriminately, on products like glassware, ceramics, textiles and wallpaper. *Musterbücher* (pattern books) provided exemplary prototypes. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* concept encouraged book designers to develop unified page layouts, coordinating illustrations and decorative borders with inventive typography. This emphasis on *Flächenkunst* (surface art) reached its apogee in the *Jugendstil* poster. Hans Sachs, a Berlin collector who was the driving force behind the Verein der Plakatfreunde (Association of Friends of the Poster, established in 1905) and the journal *Das Plakat* (The Poster, established in 1910), put forth the belief that, "Cultural and art historians of the later centuries... will draw no less on... the printed matter of the twentieth century than on great works of painting and sculpture."

The poster revolution was made possible by advances in lithographic printing technology. Lithography had been invented by a German, Alois Senefelder, in the 1790s, and although chromolithography was first patented in France, Germany remained a leader in the manufacture of presses, paper and inks. By the early twentieth century, the advent of metal printing plates and the development of mechanized rotary presses was facilitating the production of big, inexpensive color images on an unprecedented scale. But because lithography was incompatible with the letterpress process used to reproduce blocks of text, books and periodicals were still printed largely in black and white. Complex multicolored images, which had to be printed separately, were confined to things like magazine covers, "tipped-in" plates and above all, single-sheet posters. Posters, owing to their unique command of color, became the first vehicles for modern, mass-market advertising.

Fin-de-siècle posters were very much artifacts of the urban environment. They needed to be placed where lots of people could see them, and they had to stand out amidst the visual cacophony of city life. Strong colors and graphic, arresting imagery characterized the most successful designs. The influence of Japanese woodblock prints, introduced to Paris in the 1850s and '60s, had by the 1890s become ubiquitous throughout Europe. *Jugendstil* poster designers emulated the Japanese printmakers' asymmetrical compositions, their use of flat, solid blocks of color and their balancing of negative and positive shapes, separated by expressive lines. Text and image were treated as parts of a cohesive visual whole.

The *Jugendstil* poster is principally associated with three cities: Munich, Vienna and Berlin. Munich was the movement's birthplace, and the style here, at least initially, had the closest kinship to French Art Nouveau. However, the magazines *Jugend* and *Simplicissimus* (established in 1896) pushed the graphic arts in a less

decorative, more figural direction. Artists such as Bruno Paul and Thomas Theodor Heine not only produced illustrations for these periodicals, but designed posters for events and exhibitions. While *Jugend* was relatively lighthearted, *Simplicissimus* specialized in satirizing society and the government: an aggressive stance epitomized by Heine's emblematic bulldog poster. Heine's caricatures so offended the authorities that in 1898 he had to serve six months in prison. Fearing a similar fate, Paul published some of his *Simplicissimus* illustrations under a pseudonym. In 1901, eleven young actors formed a cabaret troupe, the Elf Scharfrichter (the Eleven Executioners), to protest such censorship. Would-be "executioners" of the bourgeois status quo, the group called itself a private club so as not to be shut down. "Invited guests" were alerted to performances through posters by Heine, Paul and others.

The Vereinigten Werkstätten für Kunst im Handwerk and the Deutscher Werkbund originated in Munich, but the city's extreme conservatism prevented *Jugendstil* from flourishing there. The Vereinigten Werkstätten and the Werkbund soon established significant footholds elsewhere in Germany. Artists once based in Munich gradually dispersed. Paul, a cofounder of both associations, became director of the Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum's school in 1907. Ludwig Hohlwein, who had trained as an architect in Munich, moved to Berlin in 1911 and thereafter specialized in poster design. Hohlwein's posters, nonetheless, retained a lyrical quality more characteristic of Munich than Berlin.

Austrian *Jugendstil* is often referred to as *Secessionstil*, and the style was, indeed, closely connected to the Vienna Secession and more broadly, to other avant-garde artists' associations such as the Hagenbund (established in 1899), Wiener Kunst im Hause (Vienna Art in the Home, active between 1900 and 1904) and the Wiener Werkstätte. Poster printers cultivated close relationships with these groups. Christoph Reisser, for example, was the "house printer" for the Hagenbund, while Brüder Rosenbaum worked with the Wiener Werkstätte. The master lithographer Albert Berger put his considerable talents at the disposal of the Secession and later collaborated with the Expressionists Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele. For the most part, Austrian exhibition posters were not commissioned by commercial entities, and the designers thus had a good deal of creative latitude. *Secessionstil* posters were conceived as *Gesamtkunstwerke*, with positive and negative shapes so closely integrated that at times they can scarcely be disentangled. Some of these posters are virtually illegible.

Therein lay the principal problem of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a failing grasped early on by the Austrian architect Adolf Loos. An excess of form undermines function. As Loos's sidekick, the writer Karl Kraus, put

it, some contemporary designers seemed unable to distinguish between an urn and a chamber pot. Moreover, art does not serve the same purpose as utilitarian design. Art, Loos averred, should shake viewers out of their complacency, while utilitarian objects should promote comfort.

Germans began noticing similar problems. Critics complained about “artist’s furniture,” designed by people who had no idea how a chair or cabinet is constructed. Then there was the pesky question of affordability. The crafts ethos intrinsic to the workshop model meant that products were often priced beyond the means of ordinary consumers. The Wiener Werkstätte’s extravagant architectural projects routinely ran way over budget. The Mathildenhöhe artists’ colony depended on the largesse of Ernst Ludwig, the Grand Duke of Hesse.

Whereas Munich and Vienna were not heavily industrialized, Berlin was on a different developmental trajectory. Between 1870 and 1910, the population of the inner city tripled. The metal, chemical and electrical industries, in particular, flourished, and Berlin became Germany’s first modern metropolis. Novelty and stylishness were necessary to compete in this rapidly changing commercial environment. Marketing campaigns endeavored to replicate, through branding, the direct personal bond that formerly had existed between customer and purveyor. Starting in 1907, Peter Behrens developed one of the first comprehensive corporate identity schemes—comprising everything from factory architecture and worker housing to product design, advertisements, logos and trademarks—for AEG, the Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (General Electricity Company). The *Gesamtkunstwerk* was tweaked to serve commerce.

Because there were few advertising agencies in Germany before the 1920s, promotional efforts were usually orchestrated by printers such as the Berlin lithographers Hollerbaum & Schmidt. For a small additional fee, this firm would advise clients on all aspects of marketing and coordinate the design of logos, packaging, advertisements, stationery and the like. Under the leadership of its artistic director, Lucian Bernhard, Hollerbaum & Schmidt specialized in the *Sachplakat* (object poster): a graphic image of a product juxtaposed with its brand name. A number of the leading Hollerbaum & Schmidt artists had studied

in Munich (Bernhard, Edmund Edel, Hans Rudi Erdt) or Vienna (Julius Klinger). Their move to Berlin was prompted not just by the city’s greater economic opportunities, but by *Jugendstil*’s failure to adapt to the realities of modern commerce. Unlike *Secessionstil* posters, the *Sachplakat* was a model of clarity and legibility. Echoing the thoughts of his compatriot, Adolf Loos, Klinger believed that the function of commercial art—to convey a message—is fundamentally different from that of fine art. This does not mean, though, that commercial art is devoid of aesthetic merit or that the poster’s value as a cultural artifact is any less than that of a painting or sculpture.

Hereafter, the fine and the applied arts largely went their separate ways. Still, the lessons of the *Jugendstil* period were not lost on the younger Expressionist generation. The Blauer Reiter group in Munich, the Brücke artists in Dresden and Berlin, Kokoschka and Schiele in Vienna—all internalized, in different ways, the earlier movement’s use of bold form, bright color and expressive line. After World War I, workshop and Werkbund ideals reemerged at the Bauhaus, which wisely focused on designing functional objects that could readily be manufactured by industry. The ideological upheavals of the twentieth century further broadened the rift between applied and fine art. After World War II, content became anathema to “serious” painting and sculpture. The primacy of abstraction and “art for art’s sake” was reinforced by the postwar art world’s disdain for popular taste and its professed (though often hypocritical) aversion to commercial considerations. Only recently has this high/low divide been eroded by a more full-throated embrace of capitalism and the all-encompassing influence of popular culture. As a result, it is finally possible to see fin-de-siècle Austrian and German posters in their proper historical context.

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