JOSEF HOFFMANN



JOSEF HOFFMANN

FALLING FOR BEAUTY



Ex-libris for Mäda and Otto Primavesi, woodcut, 1923–1924. Reprint by Eric Neunteufel in 2000, Austrian National Library, E-15946.

Between 1923 and 1925, Josef Hoffmann sketched variations of an ex-libris for Mäda and Otto Primavesi – patrons of the arts & crafts, and from 1915 to 1925 the owners and managers of the Wiener Werkstätte (after their separation, in which the WW played no small part, Mäda ran the company alone until its bankruptcy less than a year later) – that show the couple's names framing a house on fire. The burning house in question is or, better, was the Primavesi country house, built and furnished in 1913–1914 on a slope in the High Ash Mountains in the Czech Republic, after a folk-inspired Gesamtkunstwerk design by Hoffmann himself. Apart from the thatched roof and stone foundations, the huge house was made entirely of wood – a fact that didn't help in 1922, when a short circuit caused the house to burn down completely. Far from the quick ballpoint initials to mark a book as 'yours', ex-libris are carefully decorated and designed signatures, meant to be pasted on to a book's first page. Hoffmann didn't just aestheticize the tragedy (to tragicomic effect) but downscaled it to a miniature emblem. He was, above all, a master of disproportion. Did he really expect the Primavesis to recycle their 'ex-country house' as 'ex-libris' in every bibliophile edition they opened? All we know is that, apart from a woodcut of which no historical print exists, the ex-libris with the burning house remained a sketch. [Josef Hoffmann's ex-libris were studied at length in the article 'Der Künstler und seine Mäzene' (The Artist and his Patrons') by Alexandra Smetana and Claudia Karolyi, published in BIBLOS – Beiträge zu Buch, Bibliothek und Schrift (49, 2, 353–380) in 2000.]

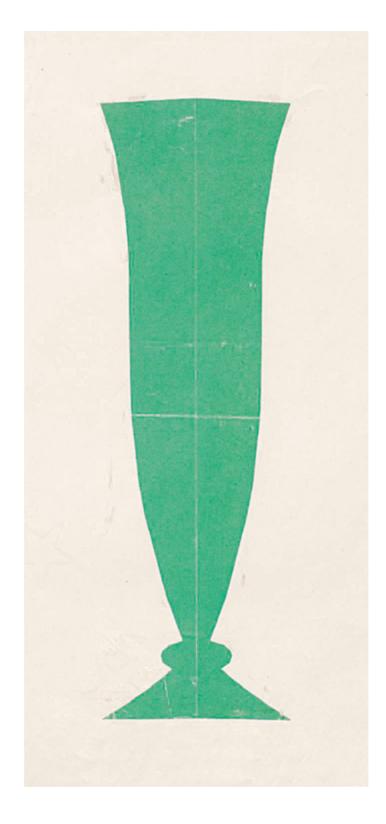


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Parisian 'classical' architect Charles Girault completed the triumphal arch at the beginning of Avenue de Tervueren to mark the 75th anniversary of Belgium. At the far end of this new boulevard, he also built the Congo Museum. These royal structures could hardly be described as modern, in contrast to an approximately contemporaneous building erected on that same Avenue de Tervueren between 1905 and 1911: a spacious house for the Stoclet-Stevens family, designed by Viennese architect Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956).

The 'Stoclet House', later known as the Palais Stoclet, will forever be remembered as an archetypal example of modernist beauty. A new economy of space and comfort made room for a different experience of luxury and art through simplicity and austerity in every respect – culminating in two 7-metre-long friezes by Gustav Klimt in the dining room. Hoffmann's design, for which he selected contemporary materials, colour schemes and geometry, is a harbinger of the 20th century. Again, art and history stand at the intersection of a new vision of humanity and the world.

Adolphe and Suzanne Stoclet-Stevens lived in Vienna in the early 20th century. It was the Vienna of Klimt, Loos, Freud, Wittgenstein, Webern, Schönberg,... and a host of new artists' societies that were then emerging. It is where the Stoclets, as young art lovers, met Josef Hoffmann. Like many after them, they were impressed by his ideas and designs. When they wanted to build for themselves, they resolutely chose him as their architect. Their return to Brussels was unexpected. The young Austrian architect and designer, himself a founder of the Wiener Secession and co-founder of the Wiener Werkstätte, completed his assignment in the Belgian capital. Thus, with his Palais Stoclet, Brussels acquired a world-class stately urban palace, located a stone's throw away from the Cinquantenaire Park. Its timeless beauty is unrivalled. Hoffmann designed everything, right down to the tiniest details: not only the building, but also the garden, the picture frames and plinths for the art collection, carpets, furniture, porcelain and cutlery... It is one of his most prestigious 'total' designs.

This iconic building, which is still owned by the Stoclet family and not open to the public, belongs to the early phase of Hoffmann's long artistic career; it is just one of his countless creations across multiple artistic disciplines. Hoffmann was possessed of prodigious talents and an insatiable urge to create beauty. He was an innovator yet conscious of tradition. The exhibition highlights the evolution of his ideals across six decades, including two world wars. Independent of the prevailing fashions, or the shifting ideologies and social conditions of his time, he remained true to individual and highly creative standards. After Henry van de Velde, who was the subject of an in-depth retrospective at the Art & History Museum in 2013-2014, and alongside Victor Horta and other Brussels contemporaries who are the focus of the ongoing Art Nouveau Year, we cannot ignore Josef Hoffmann.

Matthias Boeckl, Rainald Franz and Christian Witt-Dörring have conducted exhaustive research on Josef Hoffmann and unlocked, among other things, new material on the architect's attitude towards Nazism. Their research underpinned the 2022 exhibition at the Museum für angewandte Kunst (MAK) in Vienna, Josef Hoffmann. Fortschritt durch Schönheit / Progress through Beauty. We are grateful to them, as well as to MAK director Lilli Hollein, MAK vice-director Martina Kandeler-Fritsch and former MAK director Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, for their cooperation and permission to restage the exhibition concept. For the Cinquantenaire presentation, we enjoyed the exceptional support of several Austrian federal ministries and the Brussels-Capital Region, which was the catalyst for making Brussels the European capital of Art Nouveau. It has allowed us, for the first time in history, to mount a comprehensive exhibition in the city that underscores Josef Hoffmann's seminal importance to 20th-century European architecture and design.

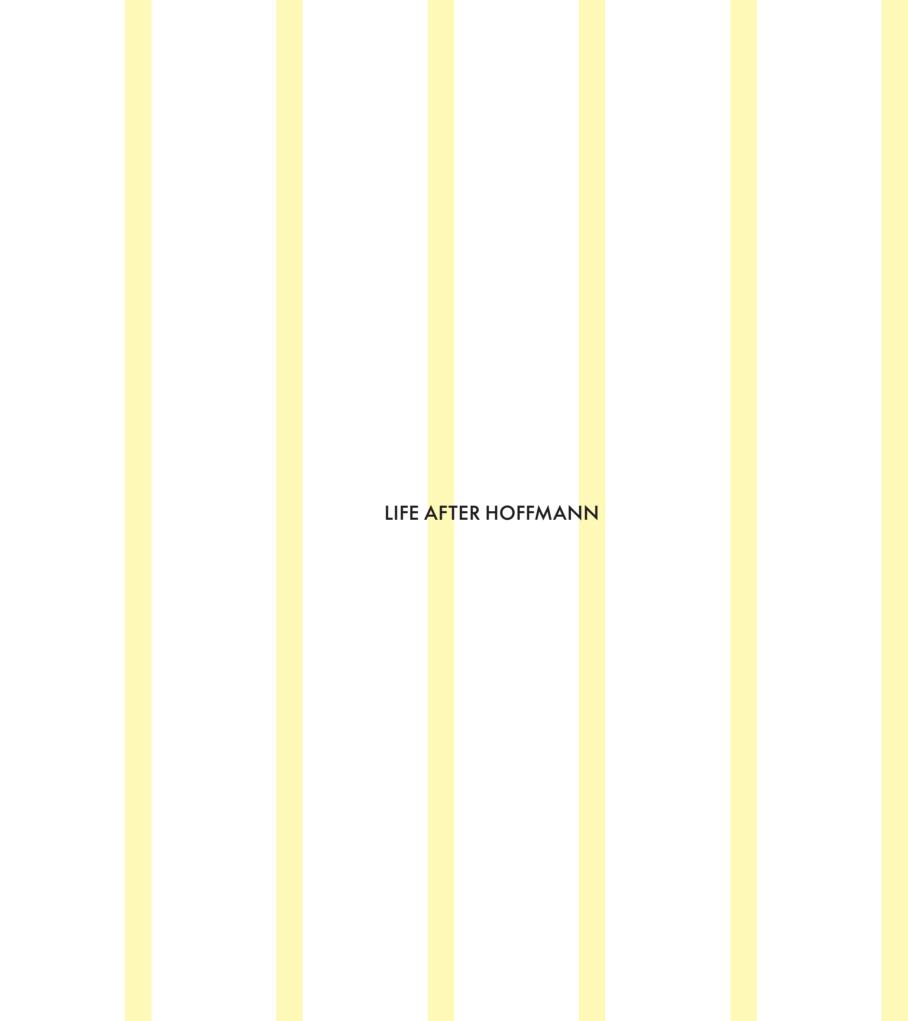
Adrián Prieto, doctor in architectural history, took on the role of artistic and scientific project leader of the Brussels exhibition and accompanying publication. Many people have contributed to its success, from the generous lenders to the museum personnel, the staff of Horizon 50-200, urban.brussels and visit.brussels, scenographer Kris Kimpe, lighting designer Chris Pype, project collaborator Nikolaas Verstraeten.

In particular, we would like to thank the Stoclet family, and especially Mrs Aude Stoclet and her son Laurent Flagey, who contributed to this publication and offer the reader an exceptional insight into the captivating childhood years they were privileged to experience in the Palais Stoclet. As heirs, they are still falling for Josef Hoffmann's beautiful legacy. As are we.

Bruno Verbergt Director General a.i. Royal Museums of Art and History

Paul Dujardin Commissioner General Art Nouveau Year







By CHRISTIAN WITT-DÖRRING

My life after Hoffmann began when I was 16 and my grandmother brought to my attention the exhibition Die Wiener Werkstätte. Modernes Kunsthandwerk von 1903-1932 at the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna. To her, the show stood for a world of bygone social norms and a host of attendant standards and requirements. For me, it became the initial inspiration for my later decision to study art history and specialise in the applied and decorative arts. To underscore the importance of this exhibition and for my broader edification, my grandmother took from the dining room her napkin ring, which she had acquired directly from the Wiener Werkstätte on the occasion of her marriage

in 1919. Although I had been exposed to it during three meals a day for many years, I had never consciously seen it until then. In my grandmother's hands and through her words, the napkin ring started to lead a life of its own, which until then I had not realised an object could even do. This awakened my interest and, in the days to follow, the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts welcomed me for the first time as a visitor.

It was also my introduction to Viennese decorative aesthetics from the first quarter of the twentieth century. My parents' generation – the children of the Wiener Werkstätte's original generation of clients – generally rejected this aesthetic. This change in

taste and values was reflected in the fact that, in the 1960s, silverware from the Wiener Werkstätte was priced and sold purely by weight. Design preferences at the time made it impossible to accept the artistic and technical quality of these pieces as a valid measure of their value. For example, in 1996, the children of Hermann (1878-1953) and Lydia (1879–1964) Wittgenstein decided to dispose of the Josef Hoffmann/Koloman Moser-designed furnishings of their parents' home, which had been executed by the Wiener Werkstätte at the time of their marriage in 1905. With this sale, the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts acquired much of its first furniture designed by Hoffmann.1 Together with silverware purchased at the same time from the Wittgensteins, these pieces constituted important examples of Hoffmann's early work in the exhibition I was encouraged to see.

Unconditioned by any previous knowledge, I experienced in that exhibition the creative fireworks of a constantly renewing, unknown, sensual world. For one press critic of the late 1960s, however, the question arose: "Isn't the quantity of the products here being confused with their quality?"2 Today, I can say that it was only time-worn prejudice against Josef Hoffmann as an architect, designer and co-founder of the Wiener Werkstätte that prevented the commentator from accepting what a multifaceted understanding of quality Hoffmann had to offer. That kind of perception, though, was also curtailed by the museum itself through its inclusion of the adjective 'modern' in the exhibition title as a defining characteristic of the objects on display. Was 'modern' meant to be understood in opposition to 'historical' - as had been the case at the turn of the twentieth century – or rather in the sense of international Modernism from the postwar period of the 1950s and 1960s? If one is to adequately pay homage to Hoffmann's genius and the creation of his Wiener Werkstätte,3 they must be praised for 30 years of individual artistic expression and continuous



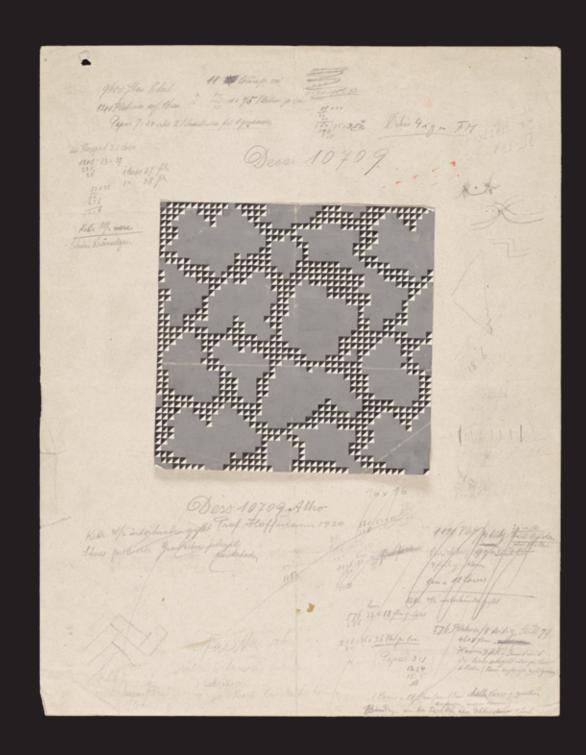
¹ As early as 1960, the museum acquired Hoffmann's own desk (1910) from his widow – its first piece of furniture designed by Hoffmann and manufactured in the WW.

² Die Presse, 27 May 1967.

³ Christian Witt-Dörring, Matthias Boeckl and Rainald Franz, Josef Hoffmann: Progress Through Beauty (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2021), 11–12.

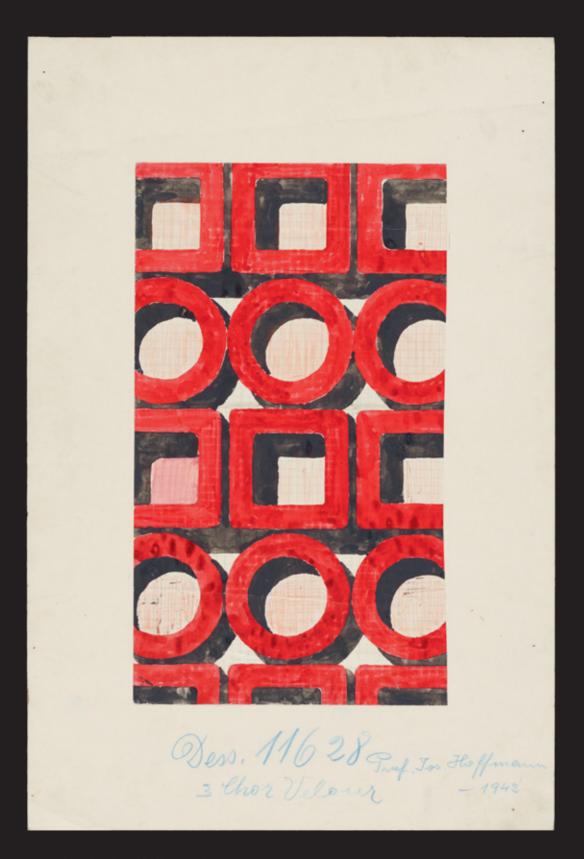


 $Gentleman's \ room, Dr.\ Hermann\ Wittgenstein's\ apartment, Salesianer gasse\ \textbf{7}, Vienna\ III, 1906, MAK$





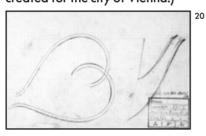


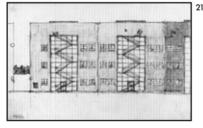


foreshadowing the avant-gardes (in so far as an avant-garde can be 'behind').



In an Austrian newspaper article from 1934 under the statement header 'Wir wollen das Kunsthandwerk befreien' (We want to liberate the Arts and Crafts), Hoffmann argues that "there are two ways of working: intuition, the imperatively innate talent for design, and the conscious academic effort based on brainpower."18 Hoffmann's siding with intuition was, so shows Sekler, thoroughly disciplined, and thus not to be confused with waiting around for inspiration to strike once more.¹⁹ Today, more than 5,000 of Hoffmann's drawings are preserved in the archives of the MAK and the University of Vienna. The graphic production is the clearest evidence of his ability to freestyle between a variety of formal experiences – from an ornamental detail to a high-finish design to complex social housing. (The issue of social housing was a constant in Hoffmann's later work, with numerous projects and buildings created for the city of Vienna.)





8 Josef Hoffmann, Der Wiener Tag, 27 December 1934, 2.
"Like many artists, [Hoffmann] knew that what mattered in designing was not to wait for a "creative moment", but to give imagination the opportunity to realize itself through a method, even a routine, of creative work. Hoffmann made this possible by an act of will that had become habit. It was guided by an unchanging sense of artistic direction [...]." Sekler, Josef Hoffmann. 220.

Even though this material is often presented (this is where conservation policy steps in) framed, hung as an artwork on the wall, the squared paper served as an instrument for Hoffmann, a way for his hand to immediately fix ideas and see possibilities. The drawings, often qualified as 'unique' for commercial purposes, do not conform to any kind of traditional technique of architectural representation. They appear childlike, even though they communicate all the information essential for its execution. They are, as Austrian architect Jan Tabor suggested in an article on Hoffmann's drawings: "objective record(s) of what does not yet exist".20 Hoffmann often explored alternatives and variations while drawing, creating ensembles based on formal fancies. On pencil sketches, he imagines and reimagines dimensions; on notes in the margin he points out alternative angles. A few drawings (actually collages) that Hoffmann made for the Viennese glass manufacturer Lobmeyr in the early 1920s show cut-out glass shapes, glued to a dark or neutral background. One shows a water carafe, open and wide; another a decanter with a cup-shaped stopper from the No. 238 'Patrician' set, one of the most renowned in the Lobmeyr production.





Both objects were initially envisioned with glass handles. To add handles – bearing in mind the volume and structural fragility of these two pieces of glassware – the first challenge would be to technically produce the glass. Even if such technology was available, the handle of the carafe would undoubtedly break as you held it in your hands. The weight and the volume just wouldn't allow this design to last at

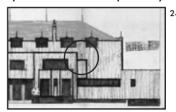
20 Jan Tabor, 'The Strange Objectivity of a Mythical Artist's Hand: Notes on Josef Hoffmann's Design Drawings', in Josef Hoffmann Designs (ed. Peter Noever) (Munich: Prestel, 1992), 284.

21 "You would surely despair if you could see how many solutions for the details he is working on that in our view are absolutely exquisite yet rejected by him again and again until I take the final one, about which he is still hesitating, from his hand. 'Fine then,' he says angrily, 'if you take the responsibility.'

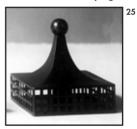
[...] Recently he changed all the details in the main entrance again because one detail in the upper windows that had to harmonize with the detail of the portal didn't work with some gutter or the like. And because the gutter had to be like thus and such for practical reasons, and the form of the window didn't suit the gutter, he changed all the details of the window and hence all the details of the portal again. I'm just using a

all. In both cases, the final product came without handles.

The high quality maintained by Hoffmann in his own studio, and in the Wiener Werkstätte, was largely the result of trial and error. The products that followed could hardly be called flawed, however. The ingenuity of Hoffmann's decisions was equally present in his buildings. In his sketches for the east and south garden-facing facades of the Palais Stoclet, dated 1 August 1906, a small rectangular space protrudes above the music room, from the exterior walls of the master bathroom and master bedroom. The most remarkable thing about this offspace is that it was partially built. 22



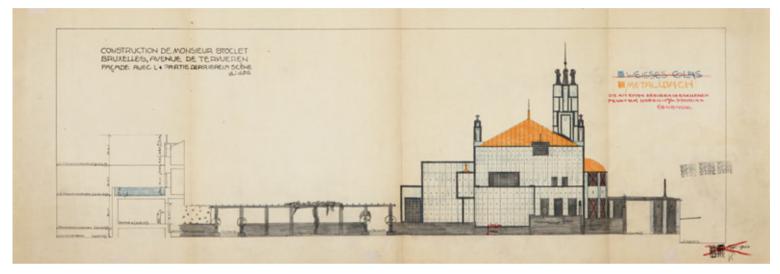
This rectangular space has no windows. The box is frivolously crowned with a copper cupola, similar in shape to smaller-scale objects from the same period, such as a metal paperweight designed by Hoffmann for the WW in 1905.

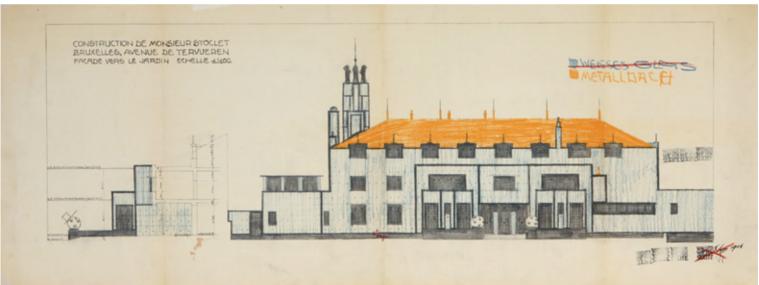


The plans allow us to identify this rectangle as the toilet, which was to be attached to the main bathroom. The Palais Stoclet is a remarkable dwelling, and we know that every single design decision, and every detail attached to the design, was carefully made. The floor of the breakfast room, for example, is covered in a black carpet on which hundreds of negative spots – white dots – already anticipate any (unlikely) breadcrumbs falling to the floor.

pedantic example, of course, but Hoffmann's unconditional insistence on the principle that the whole can only be solved fi all the details are solved makes him tower above all the architects of the (in my view many) centuries." From a letter by the Wiener Werkstätte's director, Fritz Waerndorfer, to Adolphe and Suzanne Stoclet, in which he, with the words of Christian Witt-Dörring, "had to justify again Hoffmann's time-consuming and self-critical design process". See Christian Witt-Dörring, 'Palais Stoclet', in Christian Witt-Dörring and Janis Staggs (eds.), Wiener Werkstätte: The Luxury of Beauty (Prestel: Munich, London, New York), 378–379.

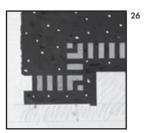
22 This anecdote was pointed out to me by Laurent Flagey during a visit to the Palais Stoclet.







A protruding restroom, ultimately reconsidered and removed, 1906–1907, private collection

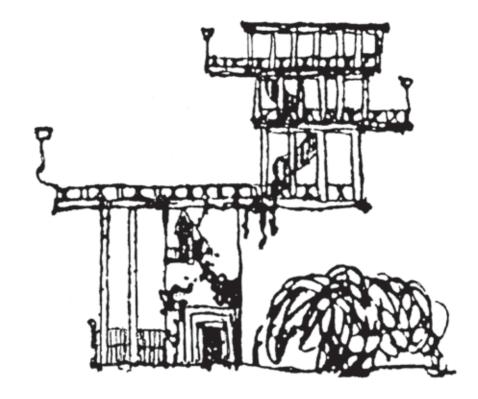


It is hard to believe the toilet was really intended to poke out of the exterior. Indeed, it could be understood as a modern attitude: prioritising the interior space over the composition of the exterior. Still, it seems implausible that Hoffmann and his builders couldn't come up with a better solution. Hoffmann realised his 'mistake' too late...



He must have reconsidered and corrected the clearly disrupted composition when the floating toilet cubicle was already basically there. What he ultimately did was to squeeze the toilet in between the big bathroom and the print room, reducing the latter's size considerably, giving one the feeling of being inside a cabinet.

Apart from the practical realities of building, a recurring interest in Hoffmann's practice is fantasy. In his seminal study, Sekler used the term 'fantasy' specifically in relation to three drawings, 23 dated prior to 1947, for semi-utopian garden pavilions or (as they are called in Austria) Salettls or Lusthaus. This small outdoor typology, developed extensively in court and aristocratic society from the eighteenth century onward, served the need for a more private ambience in the garden; having no other purpose than to please, it thereby gives ultimate expression to the Viennese gemütlichkeit (a word for comfort and cosiness as a state of mind). Since the start



of his career, Hoffmann returned repeatedly to these 'purposeless' constructions, not only in drawings but also as remarkable built examples – such as the garden pavilions for the Böhler House in Baden bei Wien (1910) and the Villa Primavesi in Vienna (1915).





Hans Hollein, the textbook figure of Austrian postmodernism, understood Hoffmann's early fascination with pavilions as part of "the (Austrian) dream of the south – the airy, open pavilion, bathed in sunlight". According to Hollein, Hoffmann intuitively "recognised the freedom of architectonic statement allowed by buildings of exhibition and art; he recognised that the pavilion is an architectonic archetype representing reduced structure, serving functions which belong more to the emotional sphere than to the rational. The playful, the enjoyable, the merry spirit of one's pleasurable presence – here it finds its built expression." 25

²⁴ Hans Hollein, 'Josef Hoffmann's Pavilion at the Biennale of Venice', in Josef Hoffmann The 50th Anniversary of the Austrian Pavilion Biennale of Venice (Biennale Di Venezia, 1984), 20.

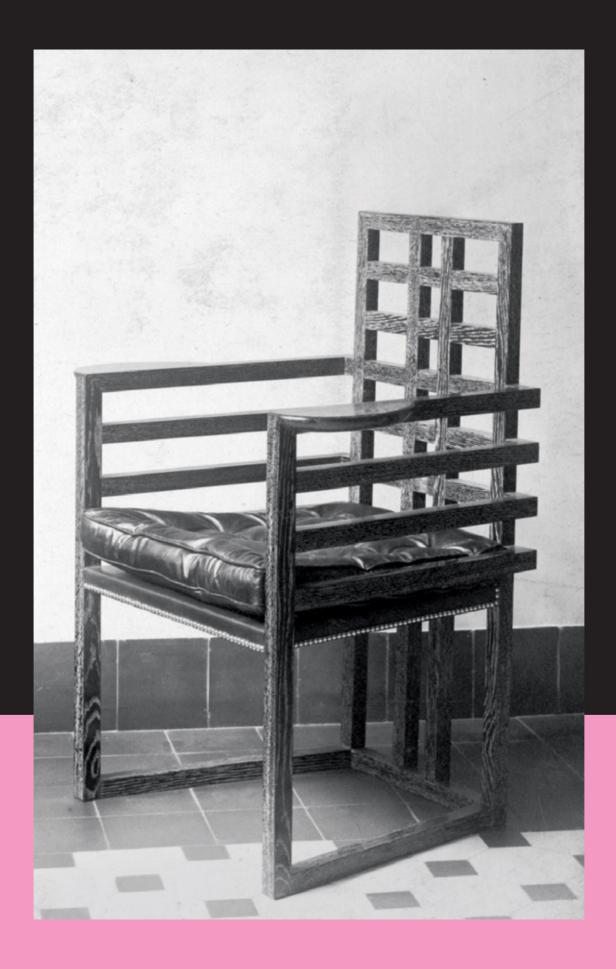
²⁵ Hollein, 'Josef Hoffmann's Pavilion', 20.

²³ Sekler, Josef Hoffmann, 445.

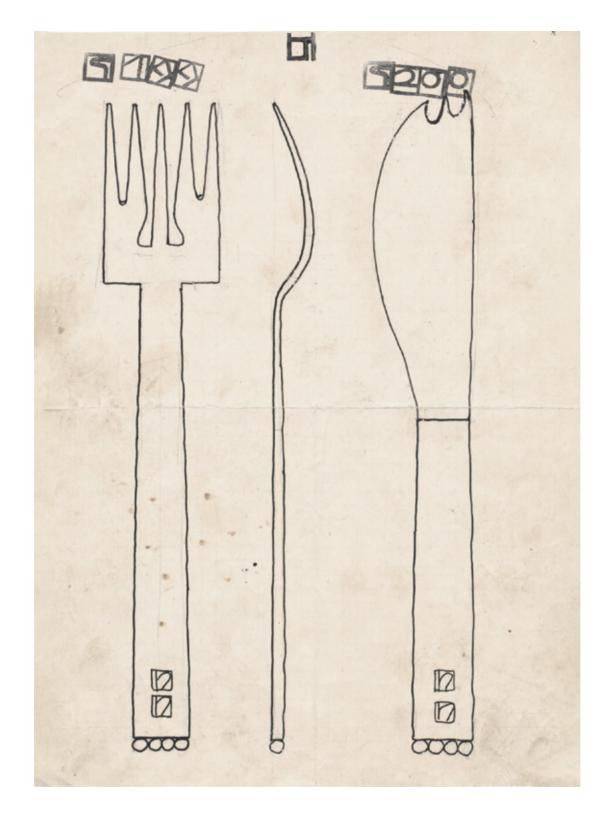
















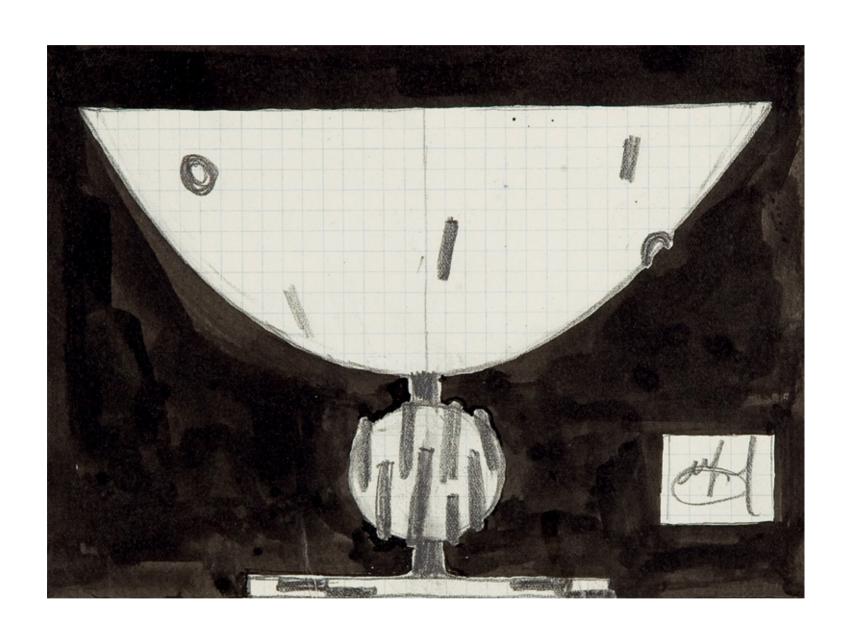


Entrance area and inner courtyard of the Austrian Pavilion at the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris, 1925, MAK



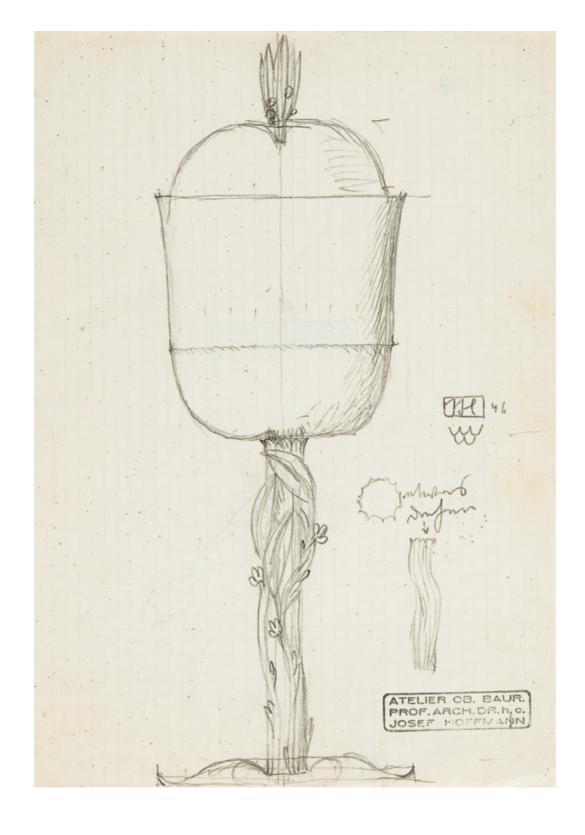










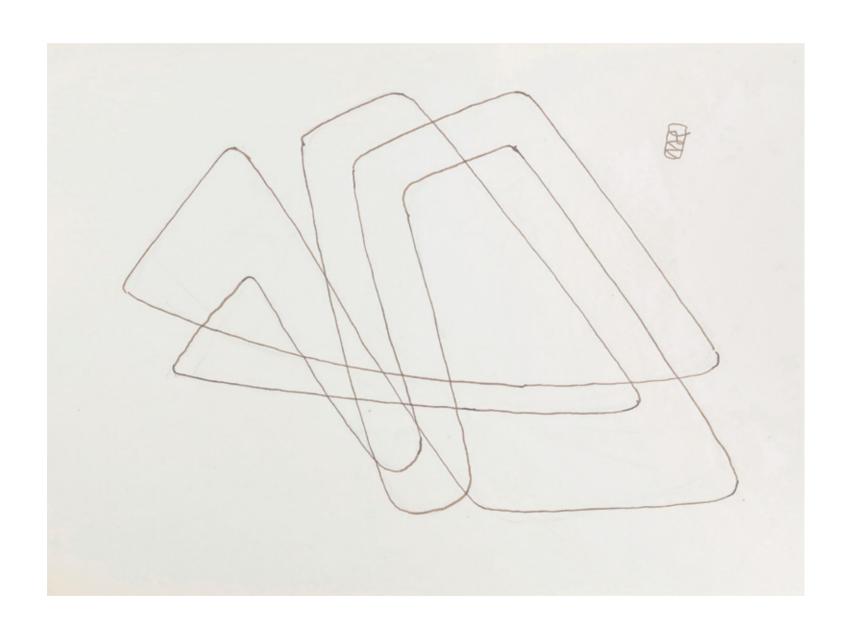














Trunk, painted by Franz von Zülow, 1947, Die schönen Künste, 1947 II, plate 118

COLOPHON

Essays

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Conversation

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Front cover

Cut-out of a small bowl, ca. 1928, glossy paper on paper, © MAK, KI 11971-19

Back cover

Glass window for a door in the vestibule of the Hochreith hunting lodge near Hohenberg, Lower Austria, designed for Karl Wittgenstein, 1906, © MAK, WWF 103-135-4