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A MONTHLY NEWS JOURNAL BY ARTSACRE - INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR CREATIVITY & CULTURAL VISION
NOVEMBER 2022 Issue XXXVI



Gustav Klimt, Portrait F. Fiedler

Vienna - City of Art and Culture

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With nine million residents, Austria is today one of the smaller countries in Central Europe. Its capital Vienna is home to 1.9 million people, about one fifth of the total population. Its impressive history as the residence of the powerful Habsburg dynasty made Vienna a cosmopolitan city. The city maintains this status thanks to its imposing architecture, which marks the city's core. It has earned its reputation as a city of art and culture from the long tradition of its theatres, opera, classical music, fine arts and its great art collections.



Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum and Maria Theresa Monument (Photo: Jorge Royan,)

The rise of the Habsburg rulers began with clever economic policies in the 13th century, and continued with successful imperial diplomacy and military successes until the beginning of the 20th century and the First World War, when the multi-ethnic state of Austria-Hungary dissolved as a European power and the end of the Habsburg monarchy was sealed. But Vienna retained a great heritage that it managed to preserve through wars and crises: Its magnificent centre, which includes great art museums, is now classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and attracts millions of



Vienna Albertina Museum, Entrance (Photo: Ph. Grieb)

visitors every year. Recently, I was able to visit four of these museums together with school friends.

The **Kunsthistorisches (Art History) Museum** on Maria-Theresien-Platz, dominated by the monument to Maria Theresa (regent from 1740-1780), together with the Naturhistorisches (Natural History) Museum, form one of the most spectacular ensembles of historicist Viennese architecture. In 1891 the emperor opened this palace of art, whose façades were designed with an elaborate programme of sculptures and reliefs. The staircase was decorated by painters such as Gustav Klimt and contemporaries. Their paintings refer to the departments that are presented there.

Visitors are received in a large rotund entrance hall and from there led up grandiose staircases to the collections, which open up on several floors to the left and right. We followed the chronological order of the art periods: Egyptian section, Greek and Roman antiquities, then the painting galleries divided by halls: Italian, Spanish and French painting, then Dutch, Flemish and German painting. The painting collections contain unique works by great old masters of the European art history, such as Raphael, Titian, Rubens, Dürer, Cranach, Breughel, Holbein or Rembrandt.

The **Albertina Museum** on Albertina Square, not far away, was the residence of Habsburg archdukes and

archduchesses for 100 years. Twenty precious furnished state rooms still demonstrate the lifestyle of the members of the Habsburg family. They are accessible and we visited them after our primary destination, the Batliner Collection, which is housed in the Albertina.

Herbert Batliner entrusted his collection of Classical Modernist paintings, one of the most important in Europe, to the Albertina in 2007. This stroke of luck for artists of Impressionism (including Monet, Signac), Vienna represents an important addition to the Habsburg heritage, which primarily comprises treasures of the Old Masters. The Batliner collection is focused on Post-Impressionism (Degas, Cezanne, Toulouse-Lautrec), German Expressionism with the artist groups "Die Brücke" and "Der blaue Reiter" as well as the Austrian Kokoschka, the Russian avant-garde (including Malevich) and Pablo Picasso.

Just a short distance outside the old town lies the **Belvedere Palace** (also known as the Upper Belvedere). Together with the spacious gardens and the Lower Belvedere, the entire ensemble, one of the most beautiful of the Baroque period, is also part of Vienna's UNESCO World Heritage. Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736) had it built in the 18th century between 1712 and 1723. He had made a reputation for himself as



Vienna, Leopold Museum, Art Nouveau in furniture design (Foto: Ph. Grieb)

a successful general and diplomat in the Habsburg monarchy and had acquired a considerable fortune.

In the upper Belvedere, Austrian art is exhibited in comparative positions to international artists of their time. Some of the most famous works by Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and other artists of Viennese Art Nouveau, the period around 1900, and Viennese Modernism are on permanent display here. French artists such as Monet, Renoir and van Gogh are also represented. The charming ambience of the palace in a large garden is a pleasant change from the busy city centre.

On the last day, we returned to Maria-Theresien-Platz and headed for the neighbouring new Museumsquartier to visit the **Leopold Museum** (Museumsplatz 1), which opened in 2001 and is one of the highlights of the new quarter. As a large white cuboid with a floor plan of 40 x 46 m and 24 m high, the museum dominates the southern part of the inner courtyard of the new area, surrounded by the historic stables that border the court. With more than 8,300 works, it houses one of the most important collections of Austrian art of the 2nd half of the 19th century and modernism. It was accumulated by the couple Rudolf and Elisabeth Leopold within half a century and includes extensive complexes of works by Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka and

artists of the 19th century. Large parts of this private collection were transferred to the Leopold Museum Foundation with the help of the Austrian state and the National Bank. Following a holistic concept of art, Rudolf Leopold also collected furniture and arts and crafts objects of the Art Nouveau period, documenting the influence of art on the design of handicraft products. The departure to a new modern era unfolded in many ways during this time: In furniture design, clothing, architecture, graphics, literature, theatre and more.

We concluded: Austria is fortunate to have generous sponsors helping the city and the republic to fill gaps left in museums after the end of sponsorship by the monarchy.

If this article has sparked your interest, internet-literate readers will find comprehensive public presentations of digital images from the collections of Vienna's museums online, with explanations in English:

- ❖ Kunsthistorisches Museum:
<https://www.khm.at/en/explore/digital-museum>
- ❖ Albertina Museum:
<https://sammlungenonline.albertina.at/>
- ❖ Belvedere Palace:
<https://www.belvedere.at/en/permanent-collection>
- ❖ Leopold Museum:
<https://www.leopoldmuseum.org/en>



Leopold Museum, Vienna