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Hannah E. Johnson

Illinois Wesleyan University, hjohnso1@iwu.edu

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"Stylists of the Beautiful Life": Secession Artists and Fashion in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

Abstract

Beginning in the 1870s, a far reaching call for reform spread across the Viennese middle class, infiltrating every field of interest from politics, to literature, eventually culminating in the 1890s in an extensive redefinition of the visual arts. From this nationwide sense of dissatisfaction toward the traditional flowed a new understanding of what was to be considered socially acceptable in the realm of art and architecture. This article attempts to not only identify the significant influence that revolutionary Viennese artists (including members of the Secession movement: Klimt, Hoffmann, and Moser, the *Wiener Werkstätte*, and architect Adolf Loos) had on early twentieth century fashion, but also to emphasize the distinction between mere clothing and the Viennese's apt manipulation of fashion as art.

Keywords

fashion, Vienna, Klimt, fin-de-siècle, Loos

Stylists of the Beautiful Life:¹ Secession Artists and Fashion in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

Beginning in the 1870s, a far reaching call for reform spread across the Viennese middle class, infiltrating every field of interest from politics to literature, eventually culminating in the 1890s in an extensive redefinition of the visual arts. From this nationwide sense of dissatisfaction toward the traditional flowed a new understanding of what was to be considered socially acceptable in the realm of art and architecture. No longer were the prized artists of the day to be confined by academic standards of technique and merit established by the *Akademie der bildenden Künste* (Academy of Fine Arts). A new found freedom, and propensity for experimentation, was to be the new norm; and the Vienna Secession was to be the guiding force.

The Secession, led in its early years by famed painter Gustav Klimt, was an organization of artists established in 1897 in response to the growing demand for a movement that would demonstrate a “break with the fathers,” would actively strive to “speak the truth about modern man,” and would produce art that could serve as an “asylum from the pressure of modern life.”² The group of nineteen artists broke away from the academy in order to hold their own art exhibitions under the motto “To the age its art, to art its freedom.” Though the aims of the Secession first manifested themselves most clearly in the paintings of the day, this attitude of modern rebellion in the name of truth could not effectively be contained in one medium. Apart from painting and sculpture, the worlds of music, architecture, furniture design, and fashion were all subject to the vast imagination of the greater Secession movement.

This period of reform was not unique to Vienna, but the way in which the attempts at reform were received by the public were particularly Viennese. The word “reform,” as first introduced, referred to a necessary shift in women’s clothing that would better suit the modern woman in her

¹ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 267.

² Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 214-215.

various roles inside, and outside, the home. The concept of reform fashion, officially accepted as an organized movement in 1902,³ initially targeted the construction of women's undergarments and was, more or less, launched in favor of practicality and function. This practical application of a new approach to clothing design included the direct health benefits that would result from the doing away of the s-curve corset fashionable at the time, and later expanded towards efforts to relieve women of the sheer amount of weight that the popular kind of dress necessitated.

In Vienna, however, health was only one component in the overall restructuring of women's fashion, and a minor one at that. As Rebecca Houze states in her article "Fashionable Reform Dress and the Invention of 'Style' in Fin-de-siècle Vienna," "it was not so much the healthiness of reform dress that the fashion world found attractive, as the new stylishness it offered."⁴ Well-dressed middle-class Viennese women were therefore not looking to the average feminist preaching the need for healthful, sensible clothing that would allow for more freedom of movement in daily activities.⁵ No; they were largely looking to artists of avant-garde sensibilities for fashionable inspirations as to how the new modern woman should dress. After all, the Secessionist artists who did temporarily deviate from their standard mediums in favor of brief experimentation with fashion design (i.e. Klimt, Josef Hoffmann,⁶ Koloman Moser⁷) did not design free-flowing clothing simply for recreational purposes. When Klimt and Moser began experimenting with dress design between 1904 and 1905, the primary purpose for the "artistic"

³ Rebecca Houze, "Fashionable Reform Dress and the Invention of 'Style' in Fin-de-siècle Vienna," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 5, issue 1 (2001): 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵ Mary L. Wagener, "Fashion and Feminism in *Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna," *Woman's Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (Autumn 1989-Winter 1990): 31.

⁶ A graduate of the *Akademie der bildenden Künste*, Hoffmann was one of the cofounders of the Secession movement, along with Klimt, Moser, and architect Joseph Olbrich. Hoffmann, an architect and furniture designer by trade, viewed reform fashion as a logical progression in the attempt to establish one all-encompassing art form.

⁷ Moser, one of the founders of the Secession, was an Austrian artist most noted for his graphic art. Moser also cofounded the *Wiener Werkstätte* in partnership with Hoffmann and art enthusiast Fritz Wärndorfer.

dresses that they created was to serve as “alternative evening wear” for special occasions or events.⁸ The unstructured gowns, still luxuriously adorned, were meant to be fashionable.

The gowns designed by Klimt, as well as his long time companion—fashion designer Emilie Flöge—shared similar styles that often featured “an empire-style or caftan-like bodice, draped from the shoulders and largely indifferent to the contours of the body.”⁹ The sleeves were generally voluminous from the shoulder, ending in a slightly tighter cuff at the wrist. The necklines were modest, allowing for appropriate coverage and comfort, as well as creating a visually attractive form. Klimt drew much of his inspiration for these designs from decorative elements present in Japanese and Chinese artistic tradition. Drawing particularly from the *Noh* costume,¹⁰ Klimt and Flöge attempted to design garments that would reflect the individuality of their wearers while simultaneously addressing the need for a reevaluation of acceptable fashions for the men and women of Vienna. The characteristic comfort and ease that were inherent within this new concept of dress were natural byproducts of the general aim of the Secession to introduce, through art, an openness and freedom into all aspects of life.

This attempt to construct a *gesamtkunstwerk* (a universal art) was even more a specific goal of the *Wiener Werkstätte* (Viennese Workshops for Arts and Crafts), established in 1903 by Secessionists Hoffman and Moser. The *Wiener Werkstätte* effectively served as the “commercial standard for the new art of Vienna,”¹¹ as it strove to create art that was accessible to the masses. By adding artistic detail to everyday decor, furniture, and clothing, the workshops contributed to the continued reformation of Viennese style. Overall artistic vision went beyond the standard

⁸ Houze, “Fashionable Reform Dress,” 38.

⁹ Kimberly Smith, “The Tactics of Fashion: Jewish Women in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna,” *Aurora: The Journal of the History of Art* 4 (2003): 141.

¹⁰ Wagener, “Fashion and Feminism,” 31. *Noh* is a form of traditional Japanese musical drama. The costumes are richly detailed and composed of the best quality materials. As is present in much of Klimt’s paintings, *Noh* costumes are swathed with symbolic motifs to further communicate thematic elements of the production.

¹¹ Houze, “From *Wiener Kunst im Hause* to the Wiener Werkstätte: Marketing Domesticity with Fashionable Interior Design,” *Design Issues* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 3.

canvas, to incorporate all facets of daily life including wall treatments, lighting fixtures, seating arrangements and the outfits purposed to be worn by the inhabitants of this new Vienna.

The fashion division of the *Wiener Werkstätte*, though opened later in 1911, provided the same general support for the fashion industry that the architecture and interior design divisions did before it. The notion of reform fashion had been discussed in Vienna before the turn of the century, but the publicized efforts of the *Wiener Werkstätte* helped popularize the movement. While Klimt borrowed elements from Eastern convention in his dress construction, the designers of the *Wiener Werkstätte* hearkened back to the style of the early Biedermeier period with their reintroduction of dresses that were composed of loose, lightly layered skirts and Empire waistlines.¹² These once recognizable stylistic components helped to make the eccentric reformed fashion approachable to the middle-class patrons. That said, the fashions produced by Secession artists and the *Wiener Werkstätte*, were slow to penetrate the mainstream.

Most women, despite minor grievances over the then standard beauty rituals, were hesitant to stand out from the corseted crowd. There were, however, select members of the bourgeoisie (often wealthy, progressively minded Jewish wives) who used their financial support of reform fashion as a means to demonstrate their artistic sophistication.¹³ Friedericke Maria Beer was an example one such woman. Painted by both Klimt and his protégé Egon Schiele, while boldly clothed in reform dress, Beer claimed that her entire wardrobe between the years 1913 and 1916 consisted of nothing other than *Wiener Werkstätte* originals.¹⁴ The workshops' efforts led the Viennese people to commit their time, their bodies, and their wallets to new found forms of expression across the artistic spectrum, certainly including the realm of fashion.

¹² Wagener, "Fashion and Feminism," 32.

¹³ Smith, "The Tactics of Fashion," 143.

¹⁴ Ibid., 142.

Architect Adolf Loos, though not a member of the Secession nor a supporter of the *Wiener Werkstätte*, similarly explored areas of art outside his own through his writings on his principles of architecture and fashion. Through his various writings on the subject of design, Loos worked to revitalize the mission to unite beauty and function, thus ensuring that function would finally dictate form. Loos was in favor of a transfiguration of men's and women's fashion that would include "introducing Western culture to Austria"¹⁵ as an example of how the definition of beauty is directly related to the ability of an object to fulfill its intended function. While Loos's approach to clothing, reflecting the same aesthetic he applied to architecture (i.e. emphasizing practical garments without unnecessary ornament, inspired by his affinity for the English style of dress), did not immediately appeal to the style-conscious Viennese, his judgments did at times run parallel with the ideological attitudes of the Secession and the *Wiener Werkstätte*.

All three parties believed women, as well as men, should be free from the unnatural hindrances that popular fashion mandated. However, unlike the Secession and the *Wiener Werkstätte*, Loos was not concerned with identifying a universal style that would define the modern age. Patrizia C. McBride writes in her article "'In Praise of the Present': Adolf Loos on Style and Fashion," that Loos believed contemporary style should be that which "cannot be identified as style."¹⁶ For Loos, to be dressed well was to be "dressed in such a manner as to attract as little attention to oneself as possible."¹⁷ In his 1898 article on the subject, "Ladies' Fashion," Loos purports that current fashion simply serves as a means to further sexualize woman's role in society. Rather than exerting the effort to satisfy some manufactured ideal, Loos

¹⁵ Patrizia C. McBride, "'In Praise of the Present': Adolf Loos on Style and Fashion," *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 4 (November 2004): 746.

¹⁶ McBride, "Adolf Loos on Style and Fashion," 751.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 756

“wishes for the advent of an era in which women will be allowed to be productive members of the public sphere and wear trousers.”¹⁸

Klimt, nor Hoffman, nor Moser, ever intended to dress their women in a pair of simple slacks. As before mentioned, fashion reform was occurring across Europe; however, Viennese designers and their patrons failed to embrace certain reform silhouettes that were endorsed by feminists elsewhere, namely the two-piece tailor-made English suit and knickers, due to their perceived lack of aesthetic appeal.¹⁹ Despite the elimination of the corset, the dresses produced by artists of the Secession, and later by the *Wiener Werkstätte*, were as mindful of the definition of “fashionable” as the works of the then universally recognized fashion designers. Though these unconventional garments at the time remained relegated to the periphery of style, the fashion division of the *Wiener Werkstätte* was, nevertheless, its most successful commercial venture.²⁰ As Carl E. Schorske writes in his assessment of turn of the century Viennese politics and culture, the Secession movement “manifested the confused quest for a new life-orientation in visual form.”²¹ Though the quest for fashion reform remained confused, even until the fashion division of the *Wiener Werkstätte* closed in 1932,²² Vienna’s revolutionary artists ultimately rescued fashion reform from the clutches of the purely health conscious. Due to the work of the Secession and the *Wiener Werkstätte*, reform *fashion* became worthy of its title.

¹⁸ Ibid., 760.

¹⁹ Wagener, “Fashion and Feminism,” 32.

²⁰ Houze, “Fashionable Reform Dress,” 51.

²¹ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 209.

²² Houze, “Fashionable Reform Dress,” 51.

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