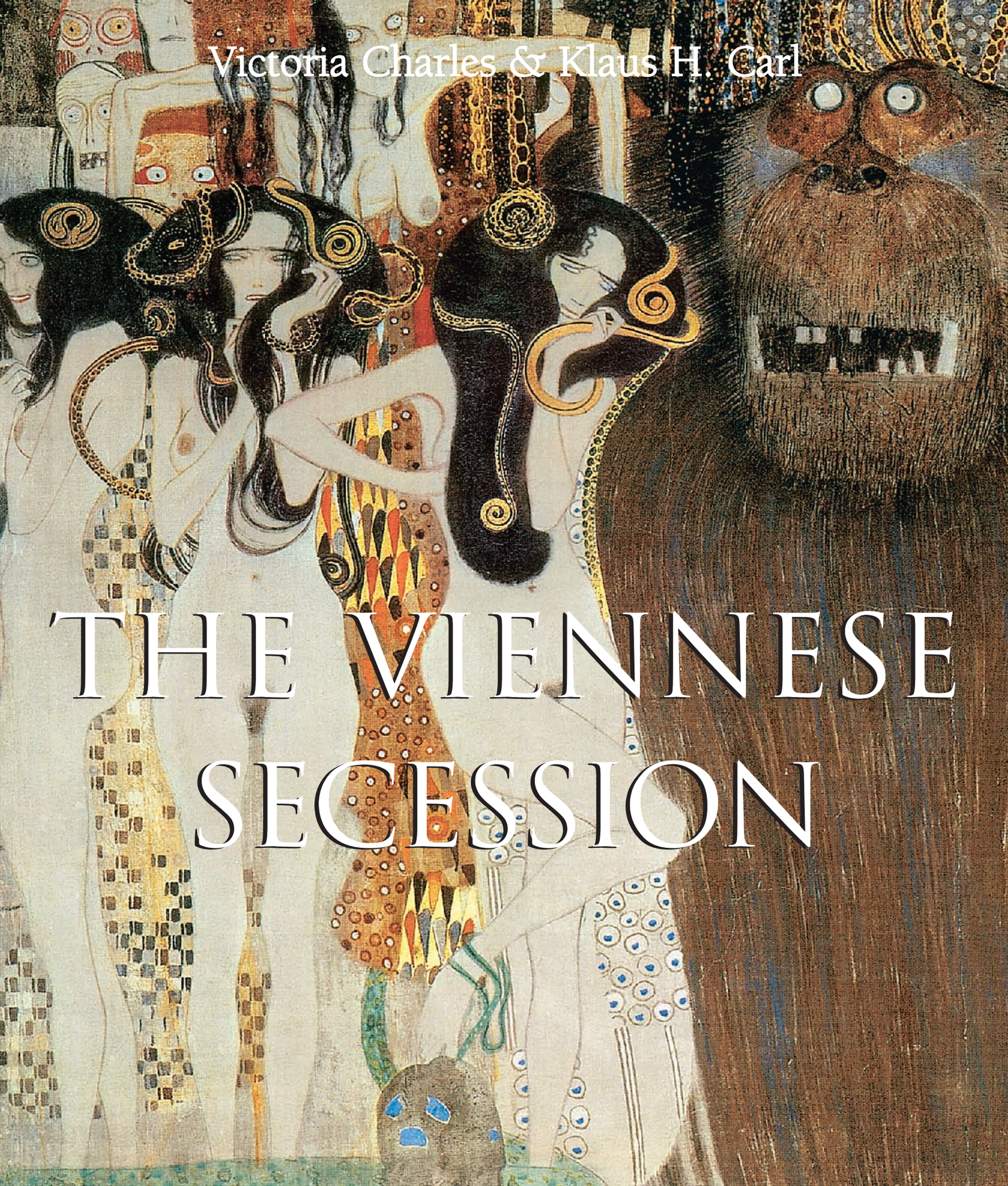

Victoria Charles & Klaus H. Carl

THE VIENNESE SECESSION

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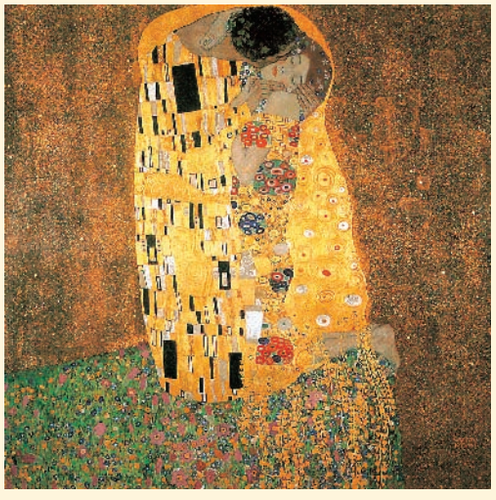

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PREFACE

To write a text on the Viennese Secession – an art movement that, despite its short creative period of barely ten years, had an enormous impact in the development of modern art – without consulting the contemporary witnesses of that period would be a futile venture. For this reason, this book will feature the writing of two contemporaries of the Secession artists, both believable and competent columnists whose testimonies are as relevant today as they were in the early 20th century. Excerpts from their commentaries have been carefully translated from the variety of German that was used before the Second Orthographical Conference in 1902. The two experts in question are Hermann Bahr and Ludwig Hevesi.

The Austrian Hermann Bahr, born 1863 in Linz, was a poet, outstanding essayist, influential art critic, and expert of contemporary literary movements from naturalism to expressionism, as well as one of the most important comedy authors of his time. Furthermore, he was a spokesman for *Jung-Wien* (Young Vienna), a group of writers and literary critics, who called themselves "Viennese coffeehouse writers" and used *Die Zeit*, a weekly literary magazine owned and published by Hermann Bahr between 1894 and 1904, as a mouthpiece for their ideas. He lived for over twenty years in Berlin, where he mainly worked with theatre manager, director, and actor Max Reinhardt (1873-1943). After two decades in Berlin, he left Germany for Austria to work in Salzburg and Vienna. In 1922, he returned to Germany to settle down in Munich, where he died twelve years later. Beyond his collection of critical essays and his activities as playwright of comedies, he also composed several works of prose and drama. To list every of Bahr's accomplishments would go far beyond the scope of this preface.

Ludwig Hevesi (1842-1910), born under the name Ludwig Hirsch in the Austro-Hungarian town of Heves, was a journalist and writer. He began his professional career in a Hungarian daily newspaper when he was 24-years-old and was shortly after promoted to report for the arts and culture section of the Viennese *Fremdenblatt*. During the reign of Franz Joseph I (1830-1916), ruler of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hevesi worked especially for the Secession as columnist and art critic. He once wrote:

> [...] "Indeed, there is no guidebook to the Secession." That was my response when a young art enthusiast, confronted with the first success of the new movement, asked me whether there was a book that he could consult to better understand the uncomfortable paradigmatic shift that he was faced with. If someone would put this question forward today, I would recommend the following book [...].

The Viennese Secession was not a singular event that came from nowhere. The movement had precursors and, naturally, also successors, and soon other, younger artists from other associations started rebelling against the rigid predominance of the established and generally rather conservative artists, who confronted all these new ideas for the training and education of artists with an uncompromisingly defensive attitude. Having no chance to exhibit their works together with already recognised artists – their work didn't usually clear the stage of pre-selection that was supervised by a jury which was evidently composed of these very artists – thus deprived them often of the opportunity to find buyers for their work.

In order to generate a holistic depiction of the Viennese Secession, a brief overview of the most important precursors of the movement is necessary.

Charles Robert Ashbee,
Chimneypiece, executed by Arthur Cameron for the Magpie and Stump (Pub), 37 Cheyne Walk, London, 1893.
Plain, repoussé and enamelled copper tiles, 215 x 201.5 cm.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Ditha Moser,
Folding calendar, 1907.
Donation from Oswald Oberhuber, Collection and Archive, Universität für angewandte Kunst, Vienna.


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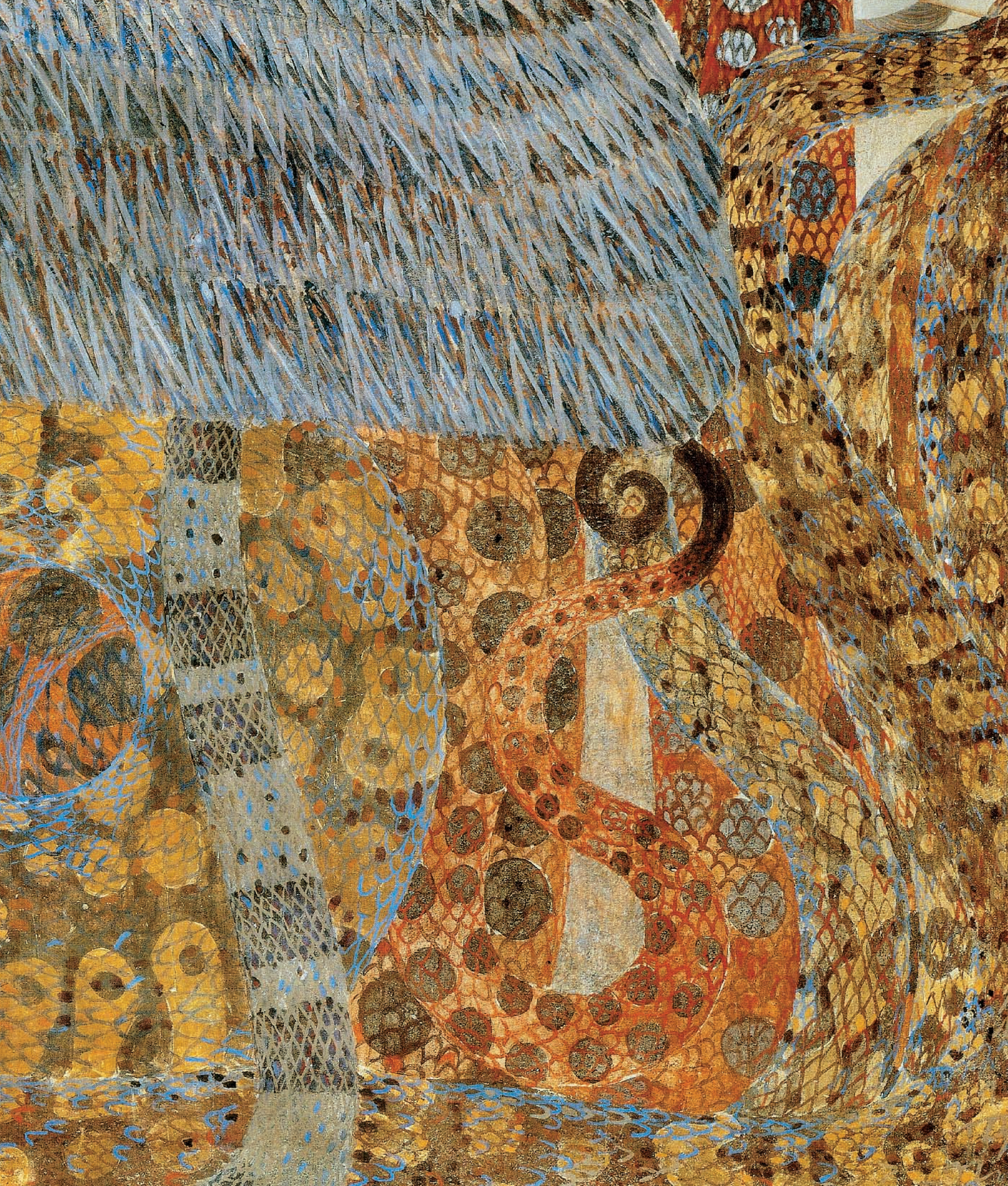

VIENNA IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Even though the Viennese upper class were passionately fond of dances, the opera, theatre, and music, they remained extremely conservative. Strict Catholicism accompanied by rigid social morals made them seem, at least in appearance, unmoving and close-lipped. While the rest of society was only too happy to embrace all sorts of pleasures then deemed sensual, for example the waltz, the so-called "good" society rejected any topic that was unaesthetic, erotic or even mildly sexual. Thus different standards were applied to different strata of society, which is telling about the dominant concept of morality in Vienna in particular, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in general, at the end of the 19th century.

In these decades, Vienna was a city at the zenith of its power and influence. Kaiser Franz Joseph I was the monarch of an empire of over fifty million people, encompassing several dozen constituent kingdoms and duchies from Bohemia to Serbia. However, at the end of World War I, at the beginning of 1918, the empire only had several months of existence left. With Kaiser Karl's failed attempt to conserve the empire in the form of a federal state, Austria suddenly became a small nation of seven million inhabitants, of which three million lived in and around Vienna. Barely twenty years later, Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) would annex the Republic, thus sealing its fate in the tumultuous years to follow.

However, the decline of Austria had begun long before the events of 1918 or 1934. A succession of military defeats were already a clear warning sign that the prolonged existence of the empire was not guaranteed. Furthermore, the rising impoverishment of thousands of Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, Jews, Romanians, and Romani led many to leave the poorest parts of the empire to look for work in the capital. However, their lot did not improve as the city could not provide enough work and accommodation, which led them to live in worse conditions than before. These social problems were ignored by the rich and influential citizens of Vienna who decided to blind and distract themselves with a true flurry of pleasure-filled activities instead.

These developments also influenced the decorative arts, which witnessed a lot of change and upheaval between the decline of the influential French style and the World Fair in Paris in 1889, which was held in honour of the hundredth birthday of the French Revolution. There was no simple and fluid transition from one style to another. Between the rise of new ideas and artistic techniques, older styles were consistently resurrected. Even as late as 1900, artistic influences popularised during the time of the European Restoration, or French art during the reign of Napoleon III (1808-1873), could still be seen in the exhibits of the World Fair. However, the imitation of these styles was not consistent enough for a coherent movement to form, mainly because there were many artists who wanted to distinguish themselves from their predecessors by expressing their own decorative ideals.

Despite their novelty, these new movements were not isolated from the influences of their predecessors. They were characterised by weariness from seeing the old forms and patterns repeated over and over again, from having to face the infinite imitation of furniture from the time of the French kings that all answered to the name of "Louis", beginning with Louis XIII (1601-1643), followed by Louis XIV (1643-1715) to Louis XVI (1754-1793). They also were

Gustav Klimt,
Gnawing Sorrow (detail from second panel of *The Beethoven Frieze*), 1902.
Casein on plaster, height: 220 cm.
Secession, Vienna.

Émile Gallé,
Orchid Vase.
Glass with inserted ornaments and relief. Private collection.

Louis Comfort Tiffany,
Fluted Flower-Form Vase,
between 1900 and 1905.
Lead glass.

characterised by a general dismissal of the common shapes and pattern of the Gothic style and the Renaissance. In essence, this new movement stood for the acceptance of a new art that was grounded in the modern age and not dependant on previous influences for credibility.

Before 1789, the year that marked the end of the *Ancien Régime*, different styles usually developed with dependence on the monarchs; this new century wanted its own style. The desire for freedom from art and fashion dictated by rulers and sovereigns was not only perceivable in France but also beyond its borders. Many countries in Europe witnessed the slow awakening of proud nationalism that was rooted in the wish for literature and art that could be called their own. In short, this desire created an emergence of new understanding and appreciation of art that was not a servile copy of past glory and even less an imitation of foreign influences. In addition, contrary to previous decades, the need for applied art skyrocketed, mainly because this branch of art had nearly died out in the 19th century. In the past, everything was richly decorated: from home décor and dresses to weapons and simple household objects. Every object possessed its own ornaments and its own beauty and elegance. The 19th century, on the other hand, essentially looked for functionality rather than elegance. Beauty, elegance and ornaments became superfluous. This century, which began with a totalitarian inde\ifference towards decorative beauty and elegance and ended so sadly in the drutal disregardof international human rights, was characterised by a paralysis of taste and aesthetics.

The return of the exiled concept of aesthetics was also at the heart of the Art Nouveau movement and its Austro-German manifestation, the *Jugendstil*. In France, people began to feel the absurdity of the situation and started to demand creativity, innovation and authenticity from cabinetmakers, decorators, stucco specialists, and even architects. This gave rise to a form of applied art that directly catered to the need of a new generation.

The World Fair of 1889

The multiple artistic trends that would lay the foundation for a new holistic style of art should manifest themselves on the Paris World Fair of 1889 first. The English exhibitors showcased their very own taste in furniture. The American silversmiths Graham and Augustus Tiffany decorated the products of their workshops with fascinating new ornaments while Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) showed the products of his revolutionary technique for the creation of stained glass.

An elite group of French artists exhibited individual pieces that also marked a progress in the spreading of the popularity of applied art in France. Émile Gallé (1846-1904) put furniture and coloured vases of his own design on display while Clément Massier (1845-1917), Albert Dammouse (1848-1926), and Auguste Delaherche (1857-1940) could convince the visitors of the world fair with mottled earthenware in hitherto rarely used brilliant colours and daring shapes. Henri Vever (1875-1932), The House of Boucheron, and Lucien Falize (1839-1897) presented intricately designed jewellery and silverware. The new trend towards elegant and capillary-thin ornaments was technically advanced to such a high degree that Falize even presented commonplace silverware with complex herbal designs.

The new ideas that were presented at the World Fair soon blossomed: everyone pushed towards a revolution in art. They sought liberation from the ideals and prejudice of the

Henri Vever,
Vase with Crickets.
Bronze and enamelled silver.
Exhibited in the Salon of the National Society of Fine Arts in 1904 in Paris.
Robert Zehil collection.

Edward Burne-Jones and **Kate Faulkner** (design) and **John Broadwood** (production),
Grand piano, 1883.
Oak, stained and decorated with gold and silver-gilt gesso,
266 x 140.5 x 45.7 cm.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

William Morris, *Tapestry*.