



2016

IL CAPITALE CULTURALE

Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage

JOURNAL OF THE SECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism
University of Macerata

Il Capitale culturale

Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage

Vol. 14, 2016

ISSN 2039-2362 (online)

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Registrazione al Roc n. 735551 del 14/12/2010

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a cura di Silvia Cecchini e Patrizia Dragoni

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The exhibition for sale. The Austrian Museum for Art and Industry between nationalistic exploitation and self-perception as an educational institution during the Austrofascist era

Maria-Luise Feher*

Abstract

The presented case study offers an outline of Vienna's museum of applied arts' history during the transitional phase from Austria's First Republic to the authoritarian regimes of Austrofascism. It covers if and to which degree external factors like political ideologies were influencing the institution's exhibition policies. Especially under the intense scrutiny of the ruling regime any proactive undertaking on the part of any museum's director holds special importance. Even more so as in this case Richard Ernst, the acting director, held this post from 1932 to 1950, thereby allowing the assessment of his policies throughout several changes of government. The study suggests that the modernisation of the exhibition space that took place under his leadership is connected to an overall repositioning as a scientific

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institution in opposition (or at least complementation) to the museum's previous function as a promotional platform for Austrian businesses at home and abroad.

Il caso di studio presenta uno spaccato della storia del Museo di Storia delle Arti Applicate di Vienna durante la transizione dall'Austria della Prima Repubblica all'affermazione del regime autoritario dell'Austrofascismo. Intende dimostrare se e in quale misura fattori esterni come le ideologie abbiano influenzato le politiche espositive dell'istituzione. Specialmente sotto l'intenso controllo del regime ogni attività proattiva dei direttori museali assume particolare importanza, come si evince dal caso di Richard Ernst, direttore in carica dal 1932 al 1950, che permette di effettuare una valutazione delle scelte da lui effettuate nel corso di dei diversi cambi di governo. Lo studio dimostra che la modernizzazione dello spazio espositivo, che ebbe luogo sotto la sua direzione, è connessa a una risistemazione globale del museo come istituzione scientifica, in opposizione (o almeno come completamento) alla precedente funzione intesa come strumento di promozione per le imprese austriache in patria e all'estero.

Between 1918 and 1938 the Austrian museum landscape was mainly characterized by the consequences of the harsh economic situation caused by the country's defeat and the great territorial losses during World War I. Within four years the formerly multi-ethnic state had shrunken to today's size and had undergone the transformation from a monarchic governance to a democratic republic. Those radical political changes resulted in social uncertainty and a collectively low self-esteem as a nation¹. These circumstances as well as the lacking financial resources led to an overall decrease in exhibitions – especially those dedicated to “mere art”. Simultaneously formerly independent artist groups and associations grew dependent on governmental subsidies which eventually guaranteed political influence on their artistic programme².

The Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie (Austrian Museum for Art and Industry, henceforth Austrian Museum)³ acted as an agent for Austrian artists working in field of the applied arts while at the same time maintaining a gatekeeper function in terms of providing a platform for selected artist groups. It held a special place in the Austrian museum sector and was always in the front row when it came to represent the nation. It was founded in 1863 with an explicitly educational purpose based on the model of the London South

¹ Shortly after the End of World War I many politicians as well as large parts of the population expressed doubts about the survivability of the diminished state. See Posch 1992, p. 144.

² Mayer 1994, p. 294.

³ The museum was initially established as *K. k. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie* (Imperial-Royal Museum for Art and Industry) and merely lost the prefix meaning Imperial-Royal after the rise of the First Republic. Since 1938 the museum was renamed two more times. Today it is called *MAK – Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst / Gegenwartskunst* (MAK – Austrian Museum for Applied Arts / Contemporary Art). It is worth noting though that from the very beginning the museum was colloquially simply called *Österreichisches Museum* (Austrian Museum). This was not only a mere abbreviation of the cumbersome official name – it also suggests the museum's function as an institution representative for the state and its people.

Kensington Museum. After a disastrous performance at the earliest world's fairs, the intention was to create an educational institution for craftsmen as well for the public⁴. For that reason it was not only one of the first public museums to be established in Austria, it was the only one subordinated to the *Bundesministerium für Handel und Verkehr* (Ministry of Trade and Transport) instead of the *Unterrichtsministerium* (Ministry of Education).

However, a closer look at the inter-war period reveals an involuntary disassociation from the founding ideas followed by a set of counter-actions, crucial to the museum's development towards becoming a modern gallery. As a result an overview of the entirety of the museum's exhibition activities indicates that from 1918 to 1932 the relation between didactic display and sales-oriented arts and crafts fairs shifted in favour of the latter⁵. The overall financial pressure had become so intense, that institutions as well as individuals were called upon to contribute to the nation's economic recovery. For the Austrian museums this meant that every exposition had to serve a "practical" purpose such as vending Austrian goods, advertising Austrian resources or selling the Austrian life style, art and landscape to foreign tourists⁶. In fact, the occupation with art for nothing but art's sake was nearly considered obscene – given the circumstances⁷.

However for the Austrian Museum even more significant than the shift to an authoritarian regime was the change of museum directors. In 1932 Richard Ernst took over from August Schestag after *de facto* leading the museum as vice director single-handedly due to Schestag's poor health. He remained in office until post-war times. This time span already suggests that he was neither outspoken supporter nor active opponent of any of the regimes he worked under⁸. Instead he was mainly interested in the wellbeing of "his" museum and he knew how to appeal to the political leaders by addressing the reigning ideologies by means of the museum's exhibitions. He thereby managed to fulfil the required adjustment with as few changes as possible. Although the politically implied adaptations in the museum's programme were minor and executed hesitantly, he could not ignore the authoritarian regime's conditions entirely⁹. For instance,

⁴ For that purpose the museum was paired with a School of Arts and Crafts similar to the Londoner's example. The public was meant to be educated in "good taste" by means of the exhibitions and regular lectures.

⁵ Feher 2012, p. 130 and ff.

⁶ Rigele 1994.

⁷ In 1936 Anselm Weißenhofer pointed out for example that the *Künstlerhaus'* 75th anniversary exhibition despite being dignified, was serious with taking into account the circumstances of the time: «würdig, wenn auch den Zeitumständen entsprechend ernst» (dignified albeit austere – according to the circumstances). See Weißenhofer 1936, p. 463.

⁸ Ernst first entered the museum in 1911 which means that he outlived four changes of government as a museum employee: from the Habsburg Monarchy (until 1918) to the First Republic (1918-1933), the Austrofascism (1933-1938), the National Socialist Regime (1938-1945) until his retirement during the Second Republic in the year 1950.

⁹ His support for progressive artist groups early in his career suggests that Richard Ernst was never wholeheartedly a follower of the Austrofascist movement. An example would be his commitment to

he had to give up his support for the *Österreichische Werkbund* (Austrian Association of Craftsmen) which promoted a modernist design. From 1934 on the Austrian Museum rather featured exhibitions of the *Neuer Österreichischer Werkbund* (New Austrian Association of Craftsmen) which advertised a “richer” more ornamented and supposedly “Austrian” style¹⁰. This becomes especially apparent in the presentation of the two opposing exhibitions “*Der gute billige Gegenstand*” (“The Good and Affordable Object”)¹¹ and “*Das befreite Handwerk*” (“The Liberated Craft”)¹² in 1931/32 and 1934/35. Apart from that the Austrofascist influence became palpable mainly in prestigious exhibitions that were conducted abroad.

1. *Departure into the Past*

In 1934 the Christmas-Exhibition “*Das befreite Handwerk*” marks an attempt to tread new paths, or to be more precise, follow the old ways anew. This presentation was staged under the banner of the Austrofascist idea of a renaissance of tradition. The exhibition’s organizers attempted said political shift to manifest in the establishment of a new style in arts and craft. At the same time this exhibition was the first appearance of the *Neuer Österreichischer Werkbund* after its separation from the *Österreichischer Werkbund*.

The exhibition’s explicit goal was to achieve nothing less than the reinvention of an “Austrian Style”, characterized by heavy ornamentation and playful design. The guiding principle to present richer and artistically “more substantial” work was already formulated in the tender¹³. Behind this notion stood the political intent to create a means of identification for the public. At the same time the more elaborate production process should warrant a better employment for the decorative crafts and other sectors of the applied arts. Therefore the unadorned style of the New Objectivity that had been prevalent up until that point was defamed as an alien experiment in style¹⁴. In this context Oswald Haerdtl¹⁵ reminisced about the idea of Old Vienna which owed its worldwide fame in all

the *Wiener Frauenkunst-Verband* (Vienna Women’s-Art Union) or the *Österreichischer Werkbund*. See Vienna, Museum für Angewandte Kunst-Archiv (henceforth MAK), 305-1931.

¹⁰ In 1933/34 a disagreement about questions of style, policy conflicts, personal discrepancies and financial difficulties led to the separation of a group of members of the *Österreichische Werkbund* who subsequently founded the *Neuer Österreichischer Werkbund* under the leadership of Clemens Holzmeister, Peter Behrens and Josef Hoffmann.

¹¹ *Österreichischer Werkbund 1932*; Posch 2012.

¹² Hertl 1934.

¹³ This intention was expressed in the invitation letter to the organising committee for the exhibition on 4 October 1934. MAK, 8-1934.

¹⁴ Hertl 1934, p. 6.

¹⁵ Oswald Haerdtl was the chairman of the trade’s section of the federation of cooperatives.

matters of art to broadly applied artistic capabilities and masterful techniques¹⁶. Consistently this seemingly newly regained appreciation for craftwork was perfectly compatible with the Austrofascist ideologies propagated by the new regime. Those being a glorification of the pre-war Habsburg era, expressed by a preference for historic art styles like the Baroque, an emphasis on Catholicism as well as a nationalism that honed in on Austria's rural landscape and cultural achievements. With this in mind the exhibition was propagated as a patriotic event¹⁷. The intent was further visualised with the poster that showed a series of medieval to modern guild signs, thus alluding to the Austrofascist concept of a corporate statism. Furthermore, the imperative of a heavier employment of the ornament followed seamlessly the state policy to impress upon the world the image of Austria as a nation that carries on in its baroque heritage. In the catalogue, mention of a bleakness in style that would not be compatible with the bright baroque temperament of the Viennese refers to this exact notion¹⁸. Despite these suggestions the exhibition showed – of course – no literal neo-baroque echo. But the exhibits were characterised by their richness in materials and the intricacy displayed in the surfaces. The furniture was refined with elaborate marquetry; even the walls were covered in heavily patterned wallpapers or paintings (figg. 1 and 2). This image of a traditional Austria that would not break with its past but rather invoke the splendour of the Habsburg era, was not only advertised with the local population but also abroad. The iconography of the Federal State of Austria as the (only) legitimate successor of the Imperial-Royal Habsburg Monarchy by ways of cultural continuity soon became the preferred means of representation.

This strategy becomes especially apparent when looking at the exhibition “Austria in London”, held in April 1934 at Dorland Hall. It was an impressive fair to present Austrian arts and crafts on several floors and stands to show how art production had to serve first and foremost economical and political needs. On the part of the museum plans to organise this expo had already existed since 1929 – therefore the opening shortly after the civil-war-like February Uprising was purely coincidental. But the extensive presentation of Austria's artistic and cultural heritage was immediately exploited for propaganda purposes: a successful presentation should serve to dispel any doubts as to the stability of the “Federal State”¹⁹. In the show, which was declared as trade fair, Austria

¹⁶ Hertl 1934, p. 7.

¹⁷ Heintl 1934.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 16.

¹⁹ The Austrian emissary in London, Georg Albert von und zu Franckenstein, mentioned in his report to the Ministry for Trade and Transport a conversation he had with the parliamentary private secretary Sir John Simons. Both had come to the conclusion that the exhibition had contributed a lot to remediate the negative impressions caused by the February Uprising. See MAK, 625/UZ 683-1934.

presented itself mainly as folksy and pristine natural landscape on the one hand and “Baroque Nation” on the other.

Thus a whole segment of the exhibition was reserved for baroque art. Furthermore a significant part of the ground level was reformed into the imitation of a – ostensibly – “typical” shopping street of Old Vienna. A wallpaper had been applied between the booths displaying a fictitious city view consisting of a capriccio of the most prominent architectural sights. Apart from St. Stephen’s Cathedral among those were the most recognisable baroque buildings such as St. Charles Church with its monumental double columns (fig. 3), the Dominican Church or the Holy Trinity Column on the *Graben*. This pre-Republican picture was only complemented by the addition of Ferdinand Bloch Bauer’s *biedermeier*-classicistic china collection. True to its Austrofascist values a considerable part of the exhibition on the second floor was dedicated to the display of ecclesiastical items such as crucifixes and monstrances. But also on the upper floors that were less dedicated to creating an ambience in favour of presenting goods and trading opportunities, the official Austria was barely presented more modern. The visitor’s circuit finally culminated in a “typical Viennese café”. The case study of “Austria in London” hence corroborating Georg Rigele’s observation that Austrofascist self-portrayal centred around traditional-rustic design as well as untouched natural landscapes on the one hand and urban baroque to *biedermeier* cultural values as counter balance on the other hand. Everything aimed at an impression of homeliness, serenity and joy of life in union with art and culture – values that are still predominately present in Austrian tourism advertisements. Just recently the Austrian National Tourist Office covered some subway trains in Beijing in photographic reproductions of idyllic meadows on Austrian mountainsides and picturesque village roads. Not only reminds the strategy of the historic concept of the London exhibition, but also the visual results ended up being somewhat similar²⁰ (fig. 4).

Although the Austrian Museum was the event’s organiser the exhibition was less in support of the arts and crafts producers than it can be considered an endeavour in the service of the whole of Austria. In this point of view the art objects were merely the means to create a desirable image and to create the necessary pretext to present the state as a welcoming vacation spot. That way the tourism industry stood to gain a maximum return for the minimal effort of a single stall at the fair selling tickets for boat trips to Austria, whereas the rest of the exhibitors suffered considerable expenses in the (futile) hopes of opening up a new market in England.

All in all Austria’s external representation in the period between 1933/34 and 1937 coincided entirely with the internally communicated ideals of the Federal State: the emphasis on classical culture and rural idyll always simultaneously

²⁰ Ehrling 2016.

aiming at tourism advertisement²¹. The tourism sector held special importance since Austria's industry had practically collapsed and there was no purchasing power left with its citizens. The investment into the creation of a desirable travel destination therefore was considered a highly patriotic effort. Even the unveiling of important engineering accomplishments like the Grossglockner High Alpine Road, central element at the World's Fairs in Brussels (1935) and Paris (1937), had to submit to this goal²². The main attraction were the serenely beautiful vistas throughout the mountain scenery provided by the road as opposed to a show of force and superiority as demonstrated by other authoritarian state powers of that time. Obvious examples for those very contrary power tactics would be the famous German and Soviet pavilions at the World's Fair in Paris that were supposed to impart technical as well as overall superiority.

2. *Ideology and Style*

In what way the Austrofascist regime's ideology changed the Austrian Museum's exhibition policy becomes abundantly clear in a direct comparison of the christmas-exhibition of 1934 "Das Befreite Handwerk" with the exhibition "Der gute billige Gegenstand". The longing for a picturesque idyll, coupled with the plea for more decoration as formulated in the year 1934 stood not only in stark contrast to the preachings of one of the most important and outspoken representatives of the Austrian Modern, Adolf Loos. It also marked a disassociation from the previously propagated course as expressed in "Der gute billige Gegenstand" in 1931/32. The exhibition was officially undertaken by the Austrian Association of Craftsmen²³ but it was primarily initiated by the museum's then vice director, Richard Ernst. This comparison shows the extent of the museum's exploitation on behalf of political interests culminating in the sudden change of policy concerning the museum's support of a preferred style. Considering the institution's explicit function as an educational agent for "good taste" this was a significant shift. The Austrian Museum's endorsement of a distinct group of artists entailed more than mere commendation – it also meant access to a broad national and international platform as well as financial backing (the museum routinely bought select pieces from the trade fairs held within its walls).

²¹ Rigele 1994, p. 254.

²² Mitterecker 2012.

²³ In the secession dispute between the Österreichischer Werkbund and the *Neuer Österreichischer Werkbund* the Austrian Museum sided with the latter and ceased being a member of the Österreichischer Werkbund in December 1933. MAK, 884-1933.

Under the leadership of Josef Frank the exhibition “Der gute billige Gegenstand” had displayed exactly the opposite ideal as “Das befreite Handwerk”. In particular the simple quality design of industrial products was to receive its curtain call (fig. 5). The then promoted tendency to simplicity was not only justified with the obvious necessity to economise – it was also seen as an expression of mental liberation by overcoming the ornamental jumble²⁴. The industrial furniture as advertised in 1931 thus constitutes the opposite of the opulently ornamented crafts work of 1934.

For “Der gute billige Gegenstand” the chosen strategy of presentation was the principle of immediate comparison of quality and feigned quality²⁵. For this method the organisers did not stop short of presenting German products as positive examples and lining them up with inferior Austrian manufactures. That decision was no small feat since it was considered an unpatriotic act. Any foreign commodities were seen as nothing but economic competition despite the Austrian Museum’s founding idea to provide access to the latest achievements of successful neighbouring states in order to improve the local performance on the market. After all in the atmosphere that had arisen with the financial crisis after World War I it was not desired to promote foreign work even further by displaying it. Documents verify that this kind of critique was anticipated²⁶. For the organisers to choose this method of presentation regardless, proves the high importance they put on conveying their message by means of persuasion – especially since it was Richard Ernst himself who had initiated the subject of the exhibition²⁷.

Naturally when it came to contemporary crafts exhibitions the economic and didactic demands – inherent to the Austrian Museum’s special function as the representative of a whole industry – had never been entirely detached from each other. However a fundamental difference in the approaches of the exhibitions of 1931 and 1934 is detectable: whilst “Der gute billige Gegenstand” worked with the premise of rational arguments and direct comparison, “Das befreite Handwerk” clearly operated on emotion. In the case of the latter there were no line ups at all – probably to avoid any potential loss of face for Austria. The presentation and the accompanying texts concentrated entirely on the supposed effect of imparting a sense of identity through a recourse to manually elaborate designs. Other creations (and creators) that were not in accordance with this position suddenly found themselves without the support of the museum’s

²⁴ Posch 2012, p. 26.

²⁵ From a report to the Ministry of Trade and Transport on past and future exhibitions. MAK, 181/UZ 603-1931.

²⁶ Letter from Richard Ernst to the Ministry of Trade and Transport from 28 April 1931. MAK, 305/UZ 354-1931.

²⁷ This was extraordinary at that point in time since usually proposals for potential exhibitions came from external organisations (Arts and Crafts Associations) which then were coordinated with the Ministry of Trade and Transport to be executed at the Austrian Museum.

platform. At the same time the message of “Das befreite Handwerk” went so far as to claim that the simplicity in design as practiced in the previous years had been responsible for the systematic exclusion of many craftsmen from the work process²⁸. The new approach of 1934 means nothing less than a complete shift from the focus on the consumer to the focus on the producer. For the public nevertheless this resulted in a message that it was downright patriotic duty to buy heavily decorated objects. It seems obvious that “Das befreite Handwerk” was positioned as antithesis to Adolf Loos’ modernist essay *Ornament and Crime*²⁹ while at the same time trying to create the image of a distinct “Austrian” style by evoking an allegedly genuine Austrian taste.

But the exhibition from 1934 was in its proportions a singular effort. Also the “dictate of the style” in no way met with the needs and financial capabilities of the customers. For those reasons there was no noticeable impact on the contemporary artistic language. In the following years the prevalent style was to stay modest and unpretentious. The ornament was reduced even further and disappeared not only from three dimensional contours but from surface textures as well. This evolution culminated in the modern design of the 1940s that held no room for patterned fabrics or lavish inlays³⁰.

Despite its missing effect on consumer behaviour, “Das befreite Handwerk” clearly exemplifies one fact: while the plain design vocabulary presented in 1931/32 was at least in part simply a result of economic necessities, the exhibition from 1934 sent out a distinctly optimistic signal. The reminiscence on the supposedly carefree era of the turn of the century held the message of improving times: with the new government led by the *Vaterländische Front* (Fatherland Front) the return of an intact world was to be expected.

3. *From promotion to education*

Apart from the propagandistic exhibitions that were in great parts economically motivated the Austrian Museum tried to fulfil a more or less self imposed task of educating the public. However since end of World War I the director’s control over the exhibition programme had severely diminished. The above discussed exhibitions demonstrate that a shift in political ideologies obviously was one of the reasons for this development. But first and foremost this situation was due to the deep economic crisis of those decades. This generated a pressure to allow the museum to be exploited in favour of the “common good” – namely to facilitate as many trade fairs and other economically beneficial

²⁸ Hertl 1934, p. 6.

²⁹ Loos 2010 [1908].

³⁰ For more information on the applied arts in Austria in the 1930s see Franz 2012.

endeavours as possible. On the other hand painful budget cuts almost led to the museum's complete incapacitation up to the point where the Austrian Museum had practically no leeway left. In 1932 the museum had to accept cuts to less than a third of the previous year's budget. And within merely 12 years the institution had arrived at less than a tenth of the budget it had received in the early years of the First Republic³¹.

It is therefore not surprising that in the late 1920s to early 1930s an unpleasant development reached its peak. It had become customary that external stake holders proposed ideas for exhibitions to be held at the Austrian Museum. Those were to be forwarded to the Ministry of Trade and Transport and, if approved, almost always accepted on behalf of the museum. Resulting in a great number of presentations took place that ultimately stood in no direct relation to the museum's purpose. A few remaining exhibitions of art groups had to compete with presentations like the "Verkehrsschutzausstellung" (Traffic Safety Exhibition) in 1926, a trade fair for shoes in 1931 or a sports exhibition in 1932³². Richard Ernst's assumption of office marks a change in this development. Even though the conditions made it hard to decline any propositions from solvent entities – under his direction the number of alien presentations declined noticeable.

Under these circumstances it seems even more impressive that during Ernst's leadership a huge effort was made to surpass the daily business and initiate a complete reorganisation of the house's collection. Not to mention the considerable amount of resources poured into the project by purchasing new showcases and renovating all of the galleries. It was one of his first projects immediately begun after his official appointment to the position of director in 1932. Its realisation was going to occupy Ernst until his retirement in 1950. The underlying intention was to implement a didactical concept that would meet better with the needs of interested lay people. Finally, the project accomplished to get rid of the old encyclopaedic system based on the scientific methodology of the 19th century. After all, this principle had addressed mainly scholars and historians who wanted to study the evolution within a style and period in detail. But that led inevitably to cluttered displays (fig. 6).

First results of the modernisation were presented as early as 1932 with the reopening of the antiques department of the ceramics collection. The most important changes were a significant reduction of the mass of objects, the elimination of replicas, the renunciation of a strict separation by materials and a more attractive presentation that operated with lighting- and mirror effects³³. Unfortunately no photographs of the 1930s' permanent presentation have

³¹ Breakdown of the annual budgets from 1912/13 to 1937. MAK, 345-1938.

³² For a complete list see the addendum in Feher 2012, p. 131 and ff.

³³ At least some of the showcases were equipped with mirror bottoms as to enable the under- or backsides of potteries.

survived. However, a picture from 1949 might serve as an example for the modern setup depicting the glass and china collection (fig. 7). It seems likely that this early post-war display would have been similar to the one developed only a few years earlier. Fortunately, there is a series of documents preserved in the museum's archive describing the presentation and its underlying intentions in detail³⁴. The concept was based on a showcase display within an unostentatious architectural environment. The objects were grouped by historic style which was indicated in the respective sections with a colour-coded background. Apart from the architecture's decorative restraint the most obvious change to the previous concept was the substantially more rigorous selection of items by concentrating on originals as opposed to the then common practice of exhibiting style-copies. In general the presentation concentrated on fewer objects that served as exemplary models for each historic style.

In that same context a parallel exhibition of modern ceramics by Robert Obsieger³⁵ was opened in a room in close proximity. The confrontation between historic and contemporary works was thought to be especially appealing and educational for the public. Another didactic innovation within the contemporary exhibition was the presentation of the production process reaching from the first sketches to the finished product³⁶. The same concept was later applied at the next phase of the reorganisation: with the glass and ceramics collection spanning the time frame from the Middle Ages to the Congress of Vienna. There it were, for example, pieces from the well established company *Lobmayr* that were set in relation to historic exhibits³⁷.

The major differences to the former display become apparent in historic photos showing the collection from around 1916 (fig. 8): besides drastically reducing the quantity of objects in the 1930s' and 1940s' exhibitions, no attempt was made to decorate the space with pieces of art as demonstrated in the older picture. In the earlier display, some of the objects – e.g. tapestries, stained glass or mirrors – were applied mainly to embellish the walls. This decorative concept, typical for museum displays of the turn of the century, had been implemented even more intensely in the halls of the older main building designed in the neo-renaissance style in 1871: where the objects had been placed in patterns in order to adorn the architecture. Except for those garnishing items, the collection was strictly sorted by the object's production materials – according to the common display practice.

³⁴ As a response to a critical review of the newly opened presentation in the magazine *Weltkunst* Richard Ernst wrote several explanatory letters to the responsible editor and demanded a printed rectification. See MAK, 148-1934; for the original critique see Poglayen-Neuwall 1933.

³⁵ Robert Obsieger was professor at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of arts and crafts), attached to the Austrian Museum.

³⁶ *Das Österreichische Museum wird modernisiert* 1932.

³⁷ Wagner 1991.

Ernst Garger, a custodian at the Austrian Museum, had argued in 1936 against that outdated manner of display. In doing so, his statements mirror the museological background of the 1930s' reorganization of the collection's presentation. According to him a modern exhibition should follow strictly scientific reasoning. The architecture's body should be as imperceptible as possible so that nothing would disturb the viewer's concentration on the works of art. He strongly opposed the contemporary demand for a cathedral-like ambience in museums. According to him the attempt to create "noble" surroundings did not only lack authenticity, but also pushed the museum towards being an entertainment facility³⁸. Lastly he pledged for a presentation that would combine not only objects of different materials but also of different genres³⁹.

With the new display by abandoning the strict separation by materials and even artistic genre up to a certain point a kind of neutral "period room" originated. This refers to a display that would, at its final stage, exhibit all types of visual arts in the same space, however⁴⁰, not any longer by way of a historic living room imitation (a "theme room") – as it had been commonplace in historic museums in the 19th century – but in a sober and objective manner with modern showcases. This meant for the museum that it became possible to show the essential phenomena that constitute the stylistic vocabulary of a specific period in time. To capture and imitate a historical "mood" by compiling different objects, however, was determinately avoided⁴¹. The debate over the configuration of displays for lay people versus displays for scholars was experienced as a battle between pleasure and study. The calling for the enjoyment of art that surfaced in this debate was answered by Ernst Garger with a third option: «studieren um zu genießen» (study to enjoy)⁴². He felt as if the non-scholarly audience was being underestimated and opted to put some responsibility on them. He required a certain intellectual effort from the visitors while the museum's objective was to provide an appropriate framework and the logical organisation of the display⁴³.

Ultimately all the attempts to prepare exhibitions to be better suited for an unschooled audience (in terms of art history) took into account the teachings of Hans Tietze. He had demanded the vivification of art history as early as 1925 in his critique of the Viennese museums. Furthermore he declared that the mere cataloguing of forms and the attribution of hands were outdated⁴⁴.

³⁸ Garger 1936, p. 815 and ff.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 813.

⁴⁰ Specific plans for a Renaissance room (which ultimately were never realised) were drafted by Richard Ernst to the point where he bought a set of furniture worth a quarter of a million Reichsmark in 1942. MAK, 158-1942.

⁴¹ Garger 1936, p. 815.

⁴² Ivi, p. 811.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Tietze 2007 (1925), p. 184 and f.

The newly reduced permanent exhibition of the Austrian Museum was in accordance with Tietze's demand for the renunciation of the presentation of mere gradual differences between major and minor masters in favour of an intrinsic distinction. Even the juxtaposition of historic and contemporary art as executed in the new display can be interpreted as a reaction to his conviction that living art holds the key to appreciating dead art⁴⁵.

In any case the fact remains that it took for Richard Ernst to assume the directorship to begin with the remodelling of the permanent exhibition – after the debate over Tietze's positions had been going on for almost a decade already. Interestingly a whole series of reorganisations in this spirit followed on a national and international level shortly after the Austrian Museum. This does not determine that the Austrian Museum specifically has triggered this development. But at least amongst the ranks of the most well-known museums of cultural history there are no earlier models to be found. To mention just a few examples for later reorganisations: the *Bayerisches Nationalmuseum* (Bavarian National Museum), the *Schweizer Landesmuseum* (Swiss National Museum) (fig. 8), the *Haus der Rheinischen Heimat* (House of Rhenish Homeland), the *Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte Dortmund* (Museum of Art and Cultural History Dortmund), the *Deutsches Museum* (German Museum) in Berlin (fig. 9) or the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg all began their modernisation later. Another noteworthy example is the Museo Civico di Bolzano (Town Museum of Bolzano). Like with the Austrian Museum its modernisation was begun in 1933 – right after the appointment of the new director Wart Arslan. He cooperated closely with the Italian fascist leadership and there is strong evidence that the reduction and selection of items on display in Bolzano went along with ideological pressure from the political officials⁴⁶. The Bolzano-reorganisation was mostly finished in 1937 and its aesthetic result was guided by similar intentions⁴⁷. Even in Vienna the reorganisation of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* (Museum of Fine Arts) was begun as late as 1935⁴⁸. Especially in the local context the Austrian Museum forced the remaining institutions to reconsider their traditional structures and to take a position in the debate on fundamental museum principles.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 179.

⁴⁶ For further reading see Museumsverein Bozen 2007, pp. 124 ff; Angelini 2015.

⁴⁷ In 1934 director Arslan stated in his activity report: «Esposizione di poche cose essenziali, con opportuni intervalli, in modo da consentirne il riposo dell'occhio del visitatore, e al tempo stesso da legarne il più possibile l'attenzione.» [Exhibition of few important pieces in proper spacing so that the viewer's eye can rest and his full attention can be ensured.] Quoted in Museumsverein Bozen 2007, p. 138.

⁴⁸ Starting with the Austrian Museum, all of those collections were gradually cleared and their presentations altered, thus, implementing the principles of modern museum display – a process that eventually would lead to today's White Cube. For the Bavarian Museum see Fuchs 1935, p. 4; for the Swiss National Museum see Neugass 1935, p. 2, (fig. p. 1); for the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna see Poglayen-Neuwall 1935, p. 1; for the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* see Stafski 1938, p. 1 and f.

In combination with the obvious decline of inappropriate exhibitions proposed by external interest groups the reorganisation of the collections signifies more than just a superficial make over. The institution's role had shifted since the founding of the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry and had practically ceased its function of an educational body (for customers and producers alike) in favour of providing a platform for patriotic purposes. Against this backdrop of an ever increasing appropriation by different stake holders in order to facilitate business promotion the undergone revisions can be construed as a means to reposition the institution in the realm of education and science and to take a place amongst the Viennese art museums on equal footing.

4. *Art, Politics and Trade*

Taking into account the extent of the radicalism of the Federal State of Austria's authoritarian regime it is only natural to assume excessive political influence on the Austrian Museum in favour of nationalistic ideals – especially since the museum had always served as a state's representative. It is therefore not surprising that some manifestations of political propaganda can be detected in the exhibition policy of the years following the assumption of power by the *Vaterländische Front* (Fatherland Front). Elements like an emphasis on Catholicism, a glorification of the pre-war era as well as the Habsburg monarchy were obvious parts of the earlier discussed special exhibitions. However the years 1933/34 mark no extreme turning point for the Austrian Museum in this regard, mainly because the general ideology of the regime broadly overlapped with the museum's founding purpose. The Austrofascist emphasis on (stylistic) traditions, the idealisation of craftsmanship, the promotion of Austrian manufactures and valuing ecclesiastical craftwork met incidentally with the Austrian Museum's already existing programme.

Whereas the omnipresent struggle for survival in the harsh economic circumstances was much more significant for the museum's strategies. The same goes for the personal influence of the director Richard Ernst. The modernisation measures that took place under his management were an expression of a commitment to education. They were part of a strategy to reposition the Austrian Museum as a scientific institution instead of a sales platform. Ernst's modern collection display – developed as a counteraction to the stagnancy over the previous two decades – proved so successful that it was quickly imitated by others. Even though not all the houses adopted the system with the same underlying idea of scientific order – many of the new curators considered it especially necessary to create that certain “enjoyment of art”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Posch 1992, p. 149 and f.

– the success proves that the 1930s' approach, as pioneered by the Austrian Museum, corresponded well with the prevalent zeitgeist.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. Cabinet, displayed in the exhibition “Das befreite Handwerk”, artist unknown, 1934/35 (MAK-Bildarchiv)



Fig. 2. Exhibition “Das befreite Handwerk”, 1934/35 (MAK-Bildarchiv)



Fig. 3. Exhibition “Austria in London”, wallpaper design by Max Frey and Fritz Zülow, Dorland Hall 1934 (MAK-Bildarchiv)



Fig. 5. Chair, displayed in the exhibition “Der gute billige Gegenstand”, artist unknown, 1931/32



Fig. 4. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie, before 1871 (MAK-Bildarchiv)



Fig. 6. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie, before 1871 (MAK-Bildarchiv)



Fig. 7. Glass and china collection, Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie, 1949 (MAK-Bildarchiv)



Fig. 8. Glass collection, Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie, 1916 (MAK-Bildarchiv)



Fig. 9. Gothic hall, Schweizer Landesmuseum, Zürich, 1935



Fig. 10. Deutsches Museum, Berlin, 1937

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