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The Wiener Werkstätte and Its Critics: Ornament and Design in Habsburg Vienna

This dissertation explores the critical discourse surrounding the Wiener Werkstätte in the years from its founding until the end of the First World War. It is not a stylistic analysis or a survey of the group, but instead will recover the rich debates over concepts of ornament and decoration, in which the objects of the Wiener Werkstätte figure as pretexts to discussing larger issues within Viennese society. In this way, the everyday (yet expensive and elite) items of the Wiener Werkstätte became potent expressions of cultural aspirations and identity.

For contemporary critics searching for definitions of art and identity, the ethnic mix making up the Habsburg Empire was the source of either Austria's strength or her weakness. Writers on Viennese design used these categories of East and West in fluid ways to construct competing conceptions Austrian identity, embracing either the polyglot nature of the Empire or rejecting the provinces in favor of Anglo-American modernity. Yet, the stylistic plurality of the Wiener Werkstätte resists easy categorization. Its early designs were noted for their reductive geometry, while later designs incorporated elements of folk art, the Viennese Baroque, and were unabashedly decorative. My study investigates how the Wiener Werkstätte reconciled these multifaceted artistic positions in its designs, and how these solutions in the decorative arts, which were widely covered and discussed in the press, contributed to defining the larger questions of what it meant to be both Austrian and modern in the late Habsburg era.