KLIMT AND THE RINGSTRASSE
A SHOWCASE OF GRANDEUR

Lower Belvedere
3 July to 11 October 2015

Gustav Klimt
Music (study), 1895
Oil on canvas
37 x 44.5 cm
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The development of Vienna’s Ringstraße, which took more than half a century, is considered a tour de force of urban planning. In the wake of the booming Gründerzeit years of the nineteenth century, a multitude of palaces and magnificent public buildings were erected along the world’s most beautiful boulevard. 150 years ago, on 1 May 1865, Emperor Francis Joseph officially inaugurated the Ringstraße. On the occasion of its anniversary, the Belvedere dedicates the exhibition Klimt and the Ringstraße, which runs from 3 July to 11 October 2015, to the charismatic Ringstraße painters, who had a great impact on their time. The show spans from the oeuvre of Hans Makart, nicknamed the ‘Prince of Painters’, to the triumph of a young group of artists gathering around Gustav Klimt, the so-called ‘Künstler-Compagnie’. The show is intended to convey the splendid lifestyle of the Ringstraße era. In addition to a number of sensual and narrative masterpieces, the exhibition also includes little-known works by the young Klimt.

Vienna’s Ringstraße as one of the city’s most influential and outstanding architectural ensembles forms an essential part of the historic centre of Vienna, now a World Cultural Heritage site. In the late nineteenth century, the boulevard lent expression to Vienna’s claim to being the sole hub of the Danube Monarchy and simultaneously identified the latter as one of the great political powers on the European continent. Building activities started in the 1860s and were only about to be completed when World War I broke out in 1914. With the Ringstraße, Vienna also presented itself as a new and dynamic centre of business and commerce.

‘Vienna’s Ringstraße is still synonymous with the splendour of the Gründerzeit, the nineteenth century’s belief in progress, and the city’s claim to being the capital of a great European power. The Ringstraße had thus become an indicator of social repute and a manifestation of the monarchy’s ambitions towards modernisation. Modelled on the urban renewal of Paris under Prefect Georges-Eugène Haussmann, a new and representative centre was developed that was intended to exhibit both Vienna’s economic capacities and its artistic and cultural potential,’ Agnes Husslein-Arco, Director of the Belvedere, points out.

A mirror of the monarchy’s efforts towards modernisation, the Ringstraße also marks the architectural transition from a medieval town of patricians to a modern industrial metropolis. ‘The architecture of the bourgeois palaces of the Ringstraße and their splendid interiors attest to the rising self-esteem and economic power of the upper classes. This is also illustrated by the bourgeoisie’s involvement in such projects as the Musikverein and the Künstlerhaus or the monuments paying tribute to members of the cultural community,’ exhibition curator Alfred Weidinger explains.

‘With the buildings accommodating the Natural History and Art History Museums, the imperial dynasty nevertheless also sought to demonstrate its cultural leadership. This went hand in hand
with a systematisation of the imperial collections, which documented a revised attitude towards and a new scientific understanding of the arts. The former treasuries and chambers of curiosities increasingly became collections ordered systematically according to scientific principles. In this respect, the collections of the bourgeoisie can also be interpreted as an emancipation from the universal collections towards which the imperial family aspired,” co-curator Alexander Klee adds.

This dual function of culture – a symbol of political authority in the case of the imperial court and a sign of economic power in case of the upper classes – is reflected by the Ringstraße’s architecture. Accordingly, the interiors of the respective buildings may be understood as expressions of different cultural self-concepts. The exhibition Klimt and the Ringstraße sheds light on the art of the Ringstraße period, its collectors, and their collections. Whereas the individual aspects of painting, sculpture, and architecture have previously mostly been examined within isolated scientific studies, the show at the Lower Belvedere seeks to re-establish the connection between the Ringstraße and its collectors and patrons. Images of interiors of public buildings and private residences enable us to compare divergent artistic positions and trace stylistic differences and continuities. The show presents examples of the history painting practiced by Carl Rahl and his school, works by the colour magician Hans Makart, and the early output of Gustav Klimt, then a young painter on the rise. The latter’s works represent the climax and conclusion of the Ringstraße period’s painting.

Today, the term ‘Ringstraße period’ evokes the ideal image of a glorified past. With its exhibition held on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Ringstraße’s opening, the Belvedere attempts to expose the artistic transformation that took place during the boulevard’s development over a period of fifty years. This period of a rapid industrial growth that affected all spheres of life – be it economics, politics, society, or the arts – was eventually marked by constant change, discrepancy, and continuity. The exhibition will comprise painted decoration for the Burgtheater and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, designs for the magnificent rooms of the Epstein Palace, Makart’s paintings for the study of Nikolaus Dumba, parts of the decoration for Dumba’s music room by Gustav Klimt and the Künstler-Compagnie, as well as furniture formerly owned by Makart. Moreover, the show will present objects once in the possession of such patrons as Friedrich von Leitenberger and Nikolaus Dumba and treasures from the collections of the Bloch-Bauer family and will provide a nuanced and multifaceted perspective of an epoch whose means of industrial production and reproduction surpassed the possibilities of manual production by far and which went in search of a new canon of artistic values.
Hans Makart

Although Neoclassicism, with its cool language of form, had interrupted the tradition of the Baroque towards the late eighteenth century, Emperor Francis Joseph preferred such artists as Carl von Hasenauer, Hans Canon, and Hans Makart. Called from Munich to Vienna by the emperor in 1869 as a history painter, Makart developed a highly idiosyncratic style, which for the following generation of artists served as the epitome of a historicising and decorative aestheticism that should actually be abandoned. With his Baroque vocabulary, powerful colours, and erotic motifs, Makart became the ‘Prince of Painters’ of Historicism. He planned complete interiors, and with his designs influenced not only domestic culture, but also theatre, art, and fashion. Having one’s portrait painted by him was a social must, while a visit to his myth-entwined studio amounted to an exotic experience: the exuberant interior decoration consisting of oriental rugs, antiques, wall hangings, arrangements of flowers and grasses, velvet curtains, and animal furs became a prototype. Interiors were modelled after his opulent studio, and collars and hats were made on the basis of his sketches. On 24 July 1879 he organised a festive procession on the occasion of the silver wedding anniversary of the imperial couple Francis Joseph and Elizabeth, with hundreds of costumes designed by him. The procession simultaneously proved a triumph of the bourgeoisie and an opportunity of its self-impressive festivities of Historicism. With the artist’s premature death – aged forty-four, he succumbed to the sequelae of syphilis – an epoch had come to an end.

Klimt and the ‘Künstler-Compagnie’

Together with Franz Matsch, their fellow student at the School of Arts and Crafts, the young Gustav Klimt and his brother Ernst teamed up in the so-called ‘Künstler-Compagnie’ or ‘Company of Artists’. This marked the beginning of an unparalleled career for the three artists, who congenially understood how to appeal to the taste of the late nineteenth century and meet the needs of a fastidious audience. While the Ringstraße palaces were under construction, the three artists were entrusted with the decoration of public buildings and private residences. As their works were highly imaginative and completed rapidly, they received commissions from the Vienna-based architects Fellner & Helmer, who were in charge of the painted decoration of theatres and Historicist buildings throughout the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and on the Balkan peninsula. Initially still influenced by Hans Makart’s Neo-Baroque style, Matsch and the Klimt brothers gradually began developing into a different direction. In 1885 the trio still executed designs by others, including sketches left behind by Hans Makart for the Hermesvilla. But in the villa’s ceiling decoration and the Burgtheater paintings, Makart’s style already retreated into the background. The ‘Künstler-Compagnie’ now rather harked back to international Salon painting, especially to Lawrence Alma-Tadema and the English Pre-Raphaelites. Makart’s illusionistic treatment of space and depth was replaced by more two-dimensional compositions, and his dynamism was reduced and gave way to a formally more austere painting style exhibiting naturalistic traits. The painting cycle for the
Kunsthistorisches Museum became another huge success for the ‘Künstler-Compagnie’, entailing a great deal of public prestige and the artists’ admission to the Künstlerhaus, a cooperative of artists. Two years later followed the important commission for the decoration of the assembly hall of the University of Vienna, from which sprang the famous Faculty Paintings.

Thanks to the masterfully accomplished decorations of the staircases of the Burgtheater and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the three artists finally established themselves as ‘painters of the Ringstraße’. When Ernst Klimt died in 1892, their collaboration of many years ended.

The Epstein Palace

In the late eighteenth century, the Epstein family, coming from Prague, soon enjoyed a high reputation and accumulated great wealth thanks to the booming textile industry. The family’s presence at the monarchy’s most important trading place and financial centre resulted in the expansion of their business to wholesaling and banking. Having a bank of their own turned out to be helpful in handling financial transactions related to their commercial activities. After the sale of their factories the Epsteins were to concentrate exclusively on the banking business. Shifting their economic interests from Prague to Vienna, Leopold Epstein largely moved the family’s residence and the seat of his company to Vienna. One of the richest bankers in Vienna, he was appointed director of the National Bank before he died after a cerebral stroke in 1864. After his death, his son Gustav came into the possession of a fortune of about ten million florins, which today would amount to almost 100 million euros. He sold his father’s company and in 1864 founded the private Epstein Bank in Vienna. Over the fight for hegemony in Germany, a war against Prussia broke out in 1866. The state needed money urgently, and the loyal and patriotic Gustav Epstein was the first private citizen to provide the emperor with substantial funds for this war. The Battle of Königgrätz put an end to the dreams of a unified Germany under Habsburg rule. Bismarck’s policy demanded that Austria be excluded from the German Confederation, and Berlin increasingly evolved into a political centre of Europe. In 1866, Emperor Francis Joseph awarded Epstein the Order of the Iron Crown of the third class in order to thank him for his generous donations, thus elevating him to knighthood.

The Epstein Palace, built between 1868 and 1871, was completed at the acme of the so-called ‘Gründerzeit’. It is the last Ringstraßer palace that has largely survived unchanged. Gustav Epstein had found his two favourite architects in Theophil Hansen, an established architect of the Ringstraßer period, and Otto Wagner, whom he entrusted with the supervision of the construction works. The Epstein Palace was the most important joint project of these two great architects, who belonged to different generations, but were connected by the bond of friendship. Theophil Hansen personified the architecture of Historicism that is so characteristic of the Ringstraßer style. With his architectural masterpiece, the Vienna Parliament, he probably left behind the most significant document of Historicist architecture of the Ringstraßer era. Otto Wagner, who also built the Epstein family’s summer residence in Baden near Vienna, subsequently overcame Historicism and made a name for himself through
such exemplary buildings as the Postal Savings Bank in Vienna. However, he was considered a pioneering architect mainly because of his theoretical writings and his teaching activities as a professor at the 'Academy of Modern Architecture', where he trained numerous important students.

The ground floor of the Epstein Palace accommodated the family's bank and its offices. In a small room near the entrance that could be accessed without being seen, a bank clerk discreetly distributed money amounting to about 800,000 euros yearly as an emergency relief to those in need. The sumptuous bel étage, with a magnificent staircase of its own, served as the Epstein family's residence. One of Vienna's most expensive and sophisticated rental suites was located on the second floor, accessible via a separate impressive staircase, together with further elegant apartments. The rented lodgings on the third floor were more inexpensive. And like all of the residential buildings of the Ringstraße, the attic floor housed small rooms for servants. The owner chose the most costly and state-of-the-art technological equipment, such as an elaborate heating and ventilation system and a refined security system that was probably unique at the time. Steel panels mounted beneath the windows could be wound up in the evening in order to ward off intruders trying to enter from the street. In 1871, during the final construction phase, the ailing Gustav Epstein, aged forty-three, put his managers in charge of the bank business and resigned in order to devote himself entirely to his artistic interests, the decoration of his palace, and his rapidly rising collection of old Dutch masters. In the Historicism wall and ceiling paintings in his study he had himself depicted as a friend of the Muses and not as a businessman. As the most important room and at the same time the social centre of the bel étage, it was based on plans by the architect Theophil Hansen and the history painter Carl Rahl that had originally been conceived for a ballroom for Grand Duke Nikolaus Friedrich Peter of Oldenburg and which the latter was unable to realise for financial reasons. Gustav Epstein encouraged the architect to revisit the old plans and adapt them for his palace on a smaller scale. This also illustrates the shift of financial power from the aristocracy to wealthy bourgeois families.

The painted stucco ceiling imitates marble and is interspersed with gilded ornament. Theophil Hansen and Carl Rahl were to transform the room into a 'temple of genuine conviviality' and combine a sense of art with the pleasures of life. The exhibition Klimt and the Ringstraße presents the cartoons by Eduard Bitterlich executed true to detail after Carl Rahl's small sketches. In line with the well-organised system of Rahl's painting school, work was divided up, so that the paintings were finally executed by the Oldenburg-born Christian Griepenkerl. The latter taught at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts between 1874 and 1910, heading a special course for history painting from 1877 onwards. He was the favourite teacher of an entire generation of Austrian painters. His most famous student was Egon Schiele, but the relationship between the young artist and the conservative history painter was marked by great tension.

The stock market crash in 1873 deprived the Epsteins of large portions of their fortune. The collapse of the bank could only be averted at great efforts, and the palace was kept in the family with the aid of mortgages until Gustav's seventeen-year-old son Friedrich died of a serious illness in 1877. Following the loss of their fortune and a further event of death, the family eventually moved to Budapest.
The building became home to numerous owners and was used for a number of different purposes. An analysis of all the facets associated with the palace over the years also illustrates the political, economic, and social dimensions of Vienna’s history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Private Patrons**

Glimpses into the interiors of the Ringstraße buildings and the surrounding parks reveal that the palaces and monuments built for their prominent initiators were designed by the most renowned artists of the time. The exhibition Klimt and the Ringstraße addresses the dynamic transition in the self-portrayals of members of the bourgeoisie on the one hand and of the court on the other. By featuring Nicolaus Dumba, Friedrich Leitenberger, and Anton Oelzelt, the show introduces three important bourgeois patrons who accomplished a great deal for Vienna, but who are hardly known to the general public today. They not only compiled their own collections and commissioned numerous works of art, but also attached great importance to philanthropic activities.

**Nicolaus Dumba – Philanthropist, Patron, and Cultural Policy-Maker**

The exceptional personality of Nicolaus Dumba, whose comprehensive achievements contribute to Vienna’s fame as a cultural capital to this very day, perfectly exemplifies bourgeois involvement at the time of the Ringstraße’s construction. Coming from an Aromanian family originally native to what is today Northern Greece, his father, Sterio Dumba, had already accumulated a substantial fortune as a merchant in Vienna. His sons Nicolaus and Michael knew how to add to the family’s wealth. Besides his roles as a successful exporter of cotton yarn and politician, Nicolaus Dumba had a great passion for music and art.

Dumba actively took part in the development of contemporary art. Succeeding Rudolf Arthaber as president of the ‘Österreichischer Kunstverein’ in Vienna in 1857, he proved so successful that he was appointed honorary member of the organisation in 1862. In 1864 he joined the ‘Genossenschaft bildender Künstler Wiens’, championing its causes. He contributed considerably to the compilation of the First International Art Exhibition in Vienna in 1882. Dumba supported the Museum of Arts and Crafts, functioning on its board of trustees in 1864 and again in 1868, and was a contributing member of the School of Arts and Crafts, which was established shortly afterwards. A delegate to the Imperial Council, Dumba repeatedly spoke up for education and culture in budget negotiations and was thus also an important ally of the Museum of Art and Industry (today’s MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/ Contemporary Art). Dumba’s term as chairman of the ‘Wiener Männergesang-Verein’ from 1865 to 1872 coincided with the choir’s heyday. Out of gratitude for Dumba’s great commitment, Johann Strauß dedicated the waltz Neu-Wien (opus 342) to him. Holding on to its tradition of a ‘Dumba mass’, the ‘Wiener Männergesang-Verein’ still commemorates its generous patron, who was
Dumba supported both Johann Strauss and Richard Wagner; the latter rehearsed Tristan and Isolde in Dumba’s house in Tattendorf in 1861. As chairman (1865–1872) and vice-president (until 1876) of the ‘Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde’, Dumba played an important role in raising the funds for the building of the Musikverein, built by the architect Theophil Hansen, for which he and his family donated substantial amounts of money. Dumba was also among the donors making possible the building of the Künstlerhaus in 1865, for which he raised the same sum as members of the high aristocracy.

One of the most ambitious Ringstraße projects from a civic perspective was the planning of the Parliament by the architect Theophil Hansen. In 1871, Nicolaus Dumba was appointed a member of the committee responsible of its construction, not only because of his abilities, but also because of his function as a deputy of the Imperial Council. In 1870, Dumba had been elected into the State Council of Lower Austria, and because of his knowledge and commitment was delegated as a deputy to the National Assembly of the Imperial Council – an office he held until 1885, when Emperor Francis Joseph appointed him a lifelong member of the House of Lords. Heinrich von Ferstel also turned to Nicolaus Dumba when he was in need of funds for the interior decoration of the University, asking him for backing in the National Assembly. Dumba funded one of the stained glass windows for Votivkirche, which was also built by Ferstel. During the planning phase of the Vienna Town Hall, the architect Friedrich von Schmidt sought the advice of his close friend Dumba. After Schmidt’s death, Dumba was one of the driving forces behind the erection of a memorial for the architect, which today is installed on Friedrich-Schmidt-Platz. Dumba was even consulted for the compilation of a department of musical instruments during the preparations of the 1873 World’s Fair. He donated his extensive collection of Schubert autographs, which due to its scope figures in the Memory of the World Register, to the City of Vienna. Nicolaus Dumba promoted such artists as Rudolf von Alt, with whom he travelled to Venice, or Hans Makart, whom he provided with the financial means for a study trip to the same destination.

The room decorated by Makart in Dumba’s palace on the Ringstraße (No. 4 Parkring) became legendary and was considered one of the most outstanding artistic achievements of the period. In commissioning Makart, Dumba promoted a young artist, and his attitude was such that he continued to favour contemporary art also in subsequent years. This is attested to by commissions with which he entrusted two rising stars: Gustav Klimt decorated Dumba’s music room, while Franz Matsch was in charge of the decoration of his dining room. Artists were highly welcome in Dumba’s hospitable and art-minded home, including the composer Johannes Brahms, who was a frequent visitor. Besides, Dumba, a clever economist, restructured many associations and institutions financially. Thanks to his connections, the ‘Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde’ received a bargain loan from the ‘Erste Österreichische Sparkasse’ for building the Musikverein in 1868. Dumba in turn came to the bank’s rescue with his private capital when it was in financial distress after the stock market crash and in 1880 was appointed its senior curator as a sign of gratitude for his engagement. In this latter function he made most generous concessions to the ‘Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde’ when it came to the settlement of their debt on mortgage. At the request of Crown Prince Rudolf, who was a friend of his, and – after the latter’s death – of the emperor himself, he also saw to the
funding of the edition of the so-called ‘Kronprinzenwerk’ [The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Word and Picture]. He was also elected into the Delegation, the highest political assembly of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, several times, and as one of fourteen members representing the two halves of the Empire repeatedly negotiated in the Quota Deputation, which settled the dual monarchy’s revenue equalisation. In the process, he even managed to gain the recognition of the Hungarian representative. Due to his engagement and his popularity he was appointed honorary member of the League against Antisemitism in 1893. After his sudden death on 23 March 1900, extensive obituaries appeared in the daily papers, tracing in detail the stations and events of his final days and his life’s work as if he had been a prince. Given Nikolaus Dumba’s merits in advancing Vienna’s cultural life, Friedrich von Amerling’s characterisation of his persona as ‘Austrian Apollo seems no exaggeration.

Friedrich Franz Josef Freiherr von Leitenberger – The Cosmopolitan Upper Classes

Friedrich Franz Josef Freiherr von Leitenberger was able to look back on a long genealogy of ancestors who had been successful textile manufacturers in Bohemia. His unusual zeal, his talents, and the confidence his father placed in him led to his being prematurely declared mature at the age of twenty in 1858, when his father put the direction of the factory in the son’s hands. Leitenberger expanded the works, consistently invested in new technology and printing techniques, and familiarised himself with the production of pigments. This contributed to his products being showcased at the World’s Fair held in Vienna in 1873 because of their brilliant colours, technical perfection, and attractive patterns. Leitenberger’s company was the largest cotton printing plant in continental Europe at the time. In order to enforce the industry’s economic interests, he founded the Association of Cotton Industries in 1891 together with his friend, the economic historian Hermann Hallwich. In 1892, the two of them also played an important role in the foundation of the Central Society of Austrian Industrials. When the Society firmly established itself as an institution with permanent headquarters in 1896, Leitenberger became its first president, an office he held until his death. Moreover, he promoted the foundation of an export academy, the precursor of today’s Vienna University of Economics and Business, which was inaugurated on 1 October 1898.

Leitenberger also recognised political engagement as a possibility to implement liberalist interests, which led to his candidature for political mandates and finally to his delegation as a deputy to the State and Imperial Councils. In 1869 he was knighted for his accomplishments, and in 1873 was elevated to the rank of ‘Freiherr’ or ‘baron’ for his achievements in the context of the 1873 World’s Fair. The Panic of 1873 caused the confidence in economic liberalism to dwindle; the laws of the market and free trade were no longer considered trustworthy, and demands were made to introduce such new regulations as protective tariffs for the domestic markets. Circles of the population affected by the crisis economically sympathised with mass movements of which they felt that they represented their cause. In 1891, Leitenberger responded to the Antisemitism that went hand in hand with the denunciation of liberalism by founding and financially backing the League against Antisemitism. Among its co-founders were, among others, Count Rudolf Hoyos, Baron Arthur Gundacker von Suttner and Bertha von Suttner, Johann Strauß, and Peter Rosegger. One of
the organisation’s correspondents was Theodor Herzl in Paris, with whom Leitenberger entered into a brisk exchange of ideas in 1893 as to the League’s goals and further course of action and the possibilities of accompanying journalistic coverage.

However, Leitenberger’s commitment was not limited to economic and political matters, but also extended to the sphere of culture. In 1875 he joined forces with Nicolaus Dumba, Heinrich Drasche, Franz Liebig, and Alexander Schöller as donors of the Austrian Trade Museum, which had emerged from the Committee for the Orient and East Asia. In 1887, Leitenberger and Dumba officiated on the board of trustees of this newly founded museum. In 1871, Leitenberger purchased a piece of real estate at what is today No. 16 Parkring, where he had a palace built that befitted his rank. The building his company had owned on Franz-Josefs-Kai since 1864 was considered inadequate for such an important industrial tycoon. The salon at the Leitenberger Palace on Parkring became a social meeting point frequented by Anton von Schmerling, Prince Auersperg, Baron Chlumecky, Minister Hasner, and many members of the Burgtheater’s ensemble, such as Adolf von Sonnenthal. Even Crown Prince Rudolf was among Leitenberger’s guests. Leitenberger also opened his palace for an extraordinary session of the League against Antisemitism. Moreover, he acted as a patron, funding the journey of Viktor Tilgner to Italy in 1874 with the company of Hans Makart and that of Emil Jakob Schindler to Dalmatia in 1873. Upon Schindler’s return, he bought five landscapes the artist had painted on the Isle of Lacroma (today’s Lokrum). Leitenberger was involved in the establishment of a number of civic cultural institutions, such as the ‘Genossenschaft der bildenden Künstler Wiens’, and was a founding member of the Vienna ‘Musikverein’. He initiated the erection of memorials, including the one for Mayor Liebenberg on Mölkerbastei, and submitted his own proposal for the layout of the square around the Town Hall, having commissioned Tilgner and Robert Raschka with the preparation of a model at his expense.

In addition to the pictures by Schindler mentioned above, Leitenberger also acquired several important works by Hans Makart for his art collection, reserving a separate room for them at his palace. Among these works were a painting of the dying Cleopatra exhibiting the idealised features of Burgtheater diva Charlotte Wolter, a smaller version of the same subject likewise depicting Wolter, and the portrait of a Japanese woman. He also owned paintings by his Czech compatriot Gabriel von Max from Prague, such as Saint Julia on the Cross and Light, and the work Italian Woman by Eugene de Blaas, all of which were installed in the rooms of his palace on Parkring.

By the time Friedrich Leitenberger died of a gastrointestinal disease in 1899, he had turned the Cosmanos textile factory into a company of European significance. In spite of the harsh competition in the textile industry and all the economic and political perils of the twentieth century, his textile plant in Josefštěl persisted for another century and was only closed down on 31 August 1999. The Leitenberger Palace on Parkring was converted into a hotel. During reconstruction, parts of the bel étage, with its elaborate wall and ceiling decorations, and the inner courtyard, featuring canopied passageways, were restored.
Anton Oelzelt - Building Magnate and Art Collector

In Vienna the name of Oelzelt now seems to be merely known from the small street off Heumarkt. Only architectural historians may be familiar with the fact that behind it is a millionaire, prominent art collector, and important patron of the Ringstraβe. Anton Oelzelt was born into humble surroundings. Working his way up from bricklayer and master builder in Hrototwitz (Hrotovice) and Znaim (Znojmo) in Moravia to town master mason in Vienna, he was eventually appointed court master mason in 1850. Oelzelt took advantage of the economically favourable situation for major building projects, such as on Heumarkt in Vienna. There is not only a street named after him, but also one dedicated to his father-in-law, Josef Lager, the owner of large brickworks. Oelzelt, when purchasing the Heumarkt plot of land, succeeded in outvailing his competitor, Alois Miesbach, through a more attractive offer. This was the first time the rivalry between the brickmaker Miesbach and his nephew and successor, Heinrich Drasche Ritter von Wartinberg, on the one hand and Josef Lager and Anton Oelzelt on the other made itself felt. Oelzelt realised projects not only on Heumarkt, but also near Schottentor.

The conspicuous structures built by him on the Ringstraβe remained a dominant sight for a considerable period of time, and people commonly referred to ‘Oelzelt’s houses’ as prominent landmarks in Vienna’s cityscape. Oelzelt’s buildings, such as those at Nos. 7–15 Opernring, lasting shaped the appearance of the Ringstraβe. In 1858, the Vienna Building Society sent Oelzelt to Paris with regard to the future development of the Ringstraβe, and he also was a member of the commission assessing the plans submitted in architectural competitions. In 1867, Oelzelt was knighted for his merits, receiving the nobiliary name ‘Newin’ (meaning ‘New Vienna’), which clearly alluded to his important role in the Ringstraβe’s planning. The speed at which his building projects advanced was surprising even for today’s standards. Although Oelzelt made use of such new technology as concrete mixers for his buildings near Schottentor, the working conditions must have been quite bad: repeated accidents were caused by dropping bricks, landslides, and settlements. A particularly unfortunate incident occurred in 1872 during the construction of Oelzelt’s house at No. 3 Schottenring, in which one worker was killed and six others were injured. As a consequence, Oelzelt became a target of criticism and satire during the months that followed. In order to ensure that construction work progressed rapidly, a smooth supply of materials and especially bricks was indispensable. Anton Oelzelt purchased additional brickyards and had new kilns installed, so that he was finally able to compete with Heinrich Drasche, Alois Miesbach’s successor, and his brick empire. The lawsuit he filed together with the General Austrian Building Society against the monopoly Drasche held on the modern Hoffmann kiln in 1872 was decided in his favour that same year. Oelzelt thus arrived at the climax of his economic power and was now in control of all the processes involved in a building project, from the purchase of property and the procurement of the necessary construction material to the completion of the building as such.

Yet Oelzelt built not only residential buildings, but also took on such tasks as repair works in the studio of Hans Makart in 1870. This early contact to Makart may have been led up to...
Makart’s painting the ceiling decoration in Oelzelt’s suite at No. 10 Schottengasse. Oelzelt had thus been one of the first collectors (if not actually the first) to commission Makart with a room decoration. Makart completed two large ceilings for him: the one in the drawing room was divided into four parts depicting personifications of the times of the day, while the dining room was adorned with the Four Continents integrated into a panelled ceiling. Oetzelt hired one of his friends, the architect Franz Fröhlich, for designing and furnishing the interior. In the meantime, Makart had been engaged by Nicolaus Dumba to decorate his palace. Oelzelt’s cultural interest is documented by his membership in the ‘Alterthums-Verein zu Wien’ (Vienna Antiquity Club), which he founded in 1854 together with August Artaria, Rudolf von Arthaber, Carl Blaas, Anton Dominik von Fernkorn, Prince Klemens Wenzel von Metternich, Eduard and Moritz Todesco, and Count Edmund Zichy. He was also listed as a member of the ‘Albrecht-Dürer-Verein’, and, from 1861 onwards, of the ‘Genossenschaft der bildenden Künstler Wiens’, with which the former had merged.

In 1868, Oelzelt purchased Josef Danhauser’s paintings Soup for the Poor and Rich Man from the Arthaber Collection at auction. Emmerich Ranzoni considers these two works the foundation on which Oelzelt based his future acquisitions, which continuously increased in number. Subsequently Oelzelt bought paintings from the collections of Friedrich Jakob Gsell, Peter Kotzian, Pietro di Galvagni, and Count Franz Anton Kolowrat-Liebsteinsky, to name just the most prominent ones. If Oelzelt had initially concentrated on Viennese artist, his collection eventually became increasingly international, comprising works by Oswald and Andreas Achenbach, Heinrich Bürkel, Alexandre Calame, Eugène Isabey, Carl Friedrich Lessing (whose famous Fire at the Abbey he had acquired in a round-about way), August Wilhelm Leu, Karl Markó, and Johann Matejko, as well as more recent ones, such as those by Robert Russ, plus an entire group of works by Constant Troyon and paintings by Benjamin Vautiers and Charles Verlat (the list is incomplete and only mentions a selection of names appearing in his auction catalogue). One of Oelzelt’s most important acquisitions was Franz von Defregger’s work The Last Reserves, which he purchased from the publisher Eduard Hölzel, ceding to him the reproduction rights for this popular painting. Although a large part of the works owned by Oelzelt were sold at auction in 1878, three years after his death, Oelzelt’s son Anton, acting on behalf of his late father, donated six masterpieces from the collection to the imperial picture gallery before the sale: Joseph von Führich’s Jacob Encountering Rachel with Her Father’s Herds, Josef Danhauser’s Rich Man and Soup for the Poor, Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller’s Christmas Morning, Friedrich Gauermann’s At the Blacksmith’s Shop, and Franz von Defregger’s Last Reserves. In 1879, the Academy of Fine Arts also received one of the paintings as a gift, namely Friedrich Gauermann’s Sheep in a Mountain Landscape. Later on, the Belvedere acquired Makart’s ceiling decoration for Oelzelt’s dining room at No. 10 Schottengasse and Waldmüller’s Still Life of Fruit and Flowers with a Silver Goblet, which had also been owned by Oelzelt, for its collection.

Like so many protagonists of the building boom, Oelzelt, who died of stomach cancer at the age of fifty-nine, passed away relatively young. From the numerous obituaries it becomes evident that Anton Oelzelt’s career – he had started out as a bricklayer’s apprentice and through his diligence and self-teaching had ended up as a millionaire – had been legendary
even during his lifetime, and that he was considered a moral example. Franz Fröhlich designed a tomb for Oelzelt and his family at Mauer, which was built in 1876 and dissolved in 2007. Since then the name of Oelzelt has only survived for an old park and a street in Mauer.

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LIST OF ARTISTS

Klimt and the Ringstrasse
A Showcase of Grandeur

John Quincy Adams
Joseph Matthäus Aigner
Friedrich von Amerling
Heinrich von Angeli
Johannes Benk
Julius Victor Berger
Josef Beye,
Eduard Bitterlich
Eugen von Blaas
Karl von Blaas
Hans Canon
Carl Cauer
August Eisenmenger
Christian Griepenkerl
Theophil Hansen
Josef Heu
Ernst Klimt
Gustav Klimt
Johannes Benk
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Collections of Bloch-Bauer-Pick & Karl Mayer:

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Robert Raschka
Alois Hans Schramm
Stefan Schwartz
GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition Title
Klimt and the Ringstrasse
A Showcase of Grandeur

Exhibition Duration
3 July to 11 October 2015

Venue
Lower Belvedere

Exhibits
237

Curators
Alfred Weidinger, Alexander Klee

Curator Assistant
Markus Fellinger

Catalogue
Klimt and the Ringstraße
Editors: Agnes Husslein-Arco, Alexander Klee
Belvedere, 304 pages, 23 x 28.5 cm, hardcover
German/ English edition
ISBN: 978-3-902805-74-4, 39 €

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Opening Hours
Daily 10 am to 6 pm, Wednesday 10 am to 9 pm

Regular Tickets
€ 11 (Lower Belvedere)

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