

# Reviews in History

Published on: *Reviews in History* (<https://reviews.history.ac.uk>)

---

## Textiles, Fashion and Design Reform in Austria-Hungary Before the First World War

**Review Number:** 1802  
**Publish Date:** Thursday, 23 July, 2015  
**Author:** Rebecca Houze  
**ISBN:** 9781409436683  
**Date of Publication:** 2015  
**Price:** £85.00  
**Pages:** 454pp.  
**Publisher:** Ashgate  
**Publisher URL:** <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409436683>  
**Place of Publication:** Farnham  
**Reviewer:** Shona Kallestrup

In this inspiring new study, Rebecca Houze builds on her series of excellent articles, in *Journal of Design History*, *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, *Centropa* and elsewhere, which deal with Austrian and Hungarian applied arts at the turn of the century. Vienna 1900 is a well-ploughed field in terms of art and architectural history and cultural studies; the achievement of this book is to provide a fascinating new approach to the area through the vehicles of textiles, fashion and dress reform. In bringing to the fore a wealth of new material (in both senses of the word), Houze provokes a welcome reconsideration of how we understand the complex cultural tapestry of Vienna, and to a lesser extent Budapest, in the last decades of the Empire.

Houze writes from the premise that the language of clothing underpinned turn-of-the-century Austro-Hungarian debates about the reform of architecture and the applied arts. Probably the best-known example of this is the comment by the 'father' of modern architecture, Otto Wagner, that the flamboyant historicist buildings of Vienna's Ringstrasse looked as if they were dressed up for *Fasching* (carnival). In his 1896 book *Modern Architecture*, Wagner famously stated that the retrograde eclecticism of the Ringstrasse was as out of place in the modern age as a contemporary man dressed in Louis XV clothing waiting for a train. Houze takes this further, arguing that the symbolism of dress pervaded not just architectural discussions of the time, but also a wide range of different practices, as both linguistic metaphor and concrete presence. She sets out to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of textiles, embroidery and fashion, revealing, for example, how a concern with preserving and promoting handcrafts underpinned efforts to meet the challenges of industrialisation and the modern age, as well as the intractable problems of controlling the Empire's myriad of national minorities. In so doing, she draws attention to this little-studied field's key

importance to any understanding of Austro-Hungarian visual culture. Although under-represented in terms of scholarly attention, it is a huge area for research and the topics she chooses to examine are, by her own admission, rather disparate. They range from the textile collections of the new museums of applied art to the fashion designs of Emilie Flöge, partner of Gustav Klimt; from Adolf Loos' penchant for elegant men's tailoring to the elaborate costumes of imperial jubilee parades; from Secession painting and interior design to new ideas about health, the female form and the rejection of the corset.

As the connecting thread between these, Houze turns to Semper's theory of cladding, his *Bekleidungsprinzip*. While scholars like Harry Francis Mallgrave and Ákos Moravánsky have demonstrated the theory's significance for modern architecture, Houze argues that its relevance also resonated in the realms of art history, museology, exhibition practice and modern art and design (p. 2). She claims that the link with clothing was omnipresent: 'From the influence of Gottfried Semper's *Bekleidungsprinzip* in the 1860s, to the extraordinary effort to seize control of women's textile arts in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by the Austrian and Hungarian schools and museums, to Adolf Loos' problematic reading of fashion and disguise at the fin-de-siècle, clothing motivated programs of change' (p. 291). The link could be both concrete and symbolic. For example, she argues that the problems with Austrian imperial identity, evident in the lack of a distinctive Viennese form of folk costume when all other regions of the Empire defined themselves through traditional dress, was reflected metaphorically in the opposing expressions of 'dress' and 'undress' in the work of modern artists, architects and writers. Likewise, she draws a parallel between the central Secession themes of metamorphosis and renewal and the transformative nature of fashion. While some of these speculative comparisons perhaps beg more concrete justification, they are certainly thought provoking, especially the discussion of how the particular Viennese ambivalence towards ornament (as reflected in the differing perspectives of Riegl, Loos and the Vienna Secession for instance) impacted on the development of modern architecture and design.

A key aim of the book is to reassert the role of women, not as the objectified femme fatale, Freudian sexual enigma or multi-layered allegory of the modern condition so beloved by scholarship on Klimt, but as a constant and undervalued presence in the applied arts of weaving, textiles, embroidery and fashion. As well as the preservers of craft memory and skill in an industrial age, these women were also significant generators of new creativity: one of the great achievements of Houze's study is to draw attention to the wealth of women practitioners in Vienna and to argue that embedded awareness of the so-called 'female' realms of embroidery, lace, textiles, fashion and dressing underpinned the 'male' innovations of modern art in the work of the Secession, Wiener Werkstätte and even Schiele and Kokoschka. This is further enriched by examination of a revelatory raft of active and independent women: not just artists and teachers, but writers, thinkers, journalists, magazine editors and agitators for female emancipation. Houze highlights, for example, the need for an in-depth study of the generation of women designers born in the 1870s and trained at the Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule whose work is often obscured behind their better-known male teachers like Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser (including Gisela Falke von Lilienstein, Marietta Peyfuss, Jutta Sika, Therese Trethan and Else Unger who, together with five male colleagues, founded Wiener Kunst im Hause in 1901).

Houze, quite rightly, seeks to map the origins of Vienna's turn-of-the-century culture of dress in earlier 19th-century theories and institutions. The book is thus divided into two parts. The first provides a detailed overview of the 19th-century historical and theoretical context. Chapter one lays the theoretical groundwork with a discussion of Semper's principle of dress. It stresses the central importance of textiles for Semper who, in his monumental and unfinished *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts* (1860-3), viewed the carpet as the predecessor of the masonry wall and argued for ancient decorated textile structures as the models for later architecture. It is above all his 'idea of

clothing as a mediating force with symbolic and transformative properties' (p. 37) that Houze harnesses to her argument that dress culture provided a deep-seated dynamic for change in turn-of-the-century Vienna.

Chapter two offers an enlightening discussion of the importance of textiles, particularly embroidery, in the collections and programmes of the new Museums and Schools of Applied Art in Vienna and Budapest. Inspired by the success of London's South Kensington Museum in raising the standard of British applied arts, both museums were founded as teaching collections to drive decorative art reform. In addition, the Budapest Iparművészeti Múzeum had a strong national agenda to promote Hungarian cultural identity in the wake of the 1867 Compromise. This achieved spectacular architectural realisation in Ödön Lechner's 1896 museum building, clad in ceramic tiles whose decorative patterns evoked the embroidered motifs of felt shepherds' cloaks from the Hungarian Great Plain. These museums, and their associated applied arts schools formed the nexus of a state network of technical and craft schools (*Fachschulen*) that extended across the Empire and provided a dynamic mechanism of exchange between centre and periphery. While Houze does not discuss the outlying *Fachschulen* in any detail, in chapter three she does focus on efforts to reform needlework in the wake of the 1873 Wiener Weltausstellung, whose exhibits had highlighted the unfavourable contrast between Austrian dilettante needlework and the brilliantly rich folk art of other regions of the Empire. Theoretical context is provided by analysis of Alois Riegl's discussion of folk art - divided between *Hausfleiss* (authentic folk art made for peasants' own use) and *Hausindustrie* (folk art produced for export) - within his broader theories regarding the evolution of decorative motifs.

As Houze points out in chapter four, however, Riegl resisted acknowledging the importance of folk art in forming notions of national identity, whose growing tensions were straining the seams of the ethnically patchwork Empire by the end of the century. Here Houze offers a fascinating, but tantalisingly brief, account of various national exhibitions in the 1890s, from the Exhibition of Home Industries and Agriculture in Lemberg (L'viv) in 1894 to Hungary's millennial festivities in 1896. Much more attention is devoted to imperialistic, Vienna-centred studies and exhibitions of folk art. Nevertheless, for readers interested in the view from the periphery to the centre, these last two chapters contain the largest amount of material related to developments outwith Vienna and Budapest.

Having recognised in part one the importance of folk art from across the Empire in driving design reform, it is somewhat frustrating that part two discusses its impact on modern art almost only in terms of developments in Vienna. These three chapters, while fascinating, are much narrower in focus. Their role seems to be to interrogate and enrich well-known narratives about Viennese modern developments by approaching them from the viewpoint of dress and textiles. Chapter five, for instance, draws links between embroidery and the much-discussed climate of anxiety at the turn of the century. Metaphors abound: tangled threads of nervous anxiety are found woven into the fragile structures of women's lace and stitched into the latent energy of the whiplash 'seams' of Hoffmann's interior decoration. While I found many of these parallels enlightening (in particular the revelation that the curvilinear, abstract wall decoration of Hoffmann's Kunstgewerbeschule room at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle was not stencilled, but appliqué decoration of brown felt), other claims were less convincing. I struggled to find anything new in the discussion of Klimt's *Philosophy, Medicine or Pallas Athene*; the description of *Medicine's* tangled mass of humanity, caught in a 'decorative thread-like substance that emanates from Hygieia' (p. 153) seemed to over-strain the metaphor a little. Nonetheless, Houze uses Klimt as a valid starting point for discussion of Vienna's deep fascination with the condition of femininity; importantly, she balances the male-driven, biologically based gender studies and Freudian investigations of female sexuality so prevalent at the time, with the female viewpoint of thinkers associated with the Vienna women's movement like Marie Lang, Auguste Fickert or Rosa Mayreder. It is refreshing to learn that women

did have a counter-voice: while male critics like Loos and Michael Haberlandt perceived an erotic aspect to embroidered ornament, Emilie Bach and others advocated it as a therapeutic activity to calm nerves. And while much male intellectual energy was put into creating sexual and racial stereotypes of the female (or Jew) as irrational, immoral, or 'diseased', women commentators had a much more common-sense approach. Natalie Bruck-Auffenberg advised melancholy housewives to 'take a walk, ride a bicycle or sit down at a sewing machine' (p. 159).

The final two chapters of the book focus more specifically on dress and fashion. Chapter six looks in some detail at the absorbing debates surrounding reform dress in Vienna. It discusses efforts to eliminate the corset and the resulting studies of changes to female body shape. It considers the relationship between health and fashion, explored in the new vogue for alternative lifestyles and the growing popularity of practices like nudism, open-air bathing, bicycle-riding and new forms of dance (although surely Loïe Fuller's innovative, swirling silk phantasmagorias didn't so much 'unveil' the body as dematerialise it? (p. 205). This feeds into a thoughtful account of the relationship between dress and Secession Style or *Jugendstil*: the flowing lines of reform dresses allowed woman to become a canvas for decorative motifs, harmonising with the lines of interior decoration and furniture. Woman was reduced to decorative art object, an indivisible part of the Secession Style *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In both this chapter and the next, Houze attempts to link fashion to key painterly developments. She discusses the 'invented garments' in Klimt's portraits of women, claiming influence not only from the Wiener Werkstätte and the fanciful artistic dresses Klimt produced with Emilie Flöge, but also (and more tenuously) from the 'peasant embroideries that had been the subject of research for many years at the Austrian and Hungarian museums' (p. 219). She reads the shift to Expressionism in the work of Egon Schiele and particularly Oskar Kokoschka in terms of the mask and the decorated surface, drawing on Loos' interpretation of the violent and disturbing turn to the inner psyche as 'an invigorating masculine antidote to the deceptive feminine surface decoration of [...] Klimt's golden portraits' (p. 270).

Also central to this discussion is Houze's consideration of the elaborate costumes of Vienna's imperial parades and vibrant carnival traditions. Imperial celebration had, for centuries, served as a powerful visual mechanism for demonstrating the unity of the Empire, illusory, as this might have been. Costume functioned as 'a visual map of the diverse geographical territory' (p. 249). It was collected, studied and exhibited, for example in Jacob von Falke's great *Costüm-Ausstellung* at the Austrian Applied Arts Museum in 1891. Seen from the centre, this was a rather paternalistic enterprise, reinforcing the colonial relationship between Vienna and the regions. But it also had international ramifications: lacking an overseas empire, Austria promoted her own ethnic riches, seen as superior in quality to the crafts produced in more industrialised imperial nations like Britain. Houze also discusses the legacy of Hans Makart's elaborate historicist parade costumes, and their connection to the Viennese love of costumed parties and annual celebration of carnival. Here she consults an impressive range of sources, from the Jugendstil-inspired butterfly Fasching costumes illustrated in the fashion magazine *Wiener Mode*, to Loos' theories of the 'mask', to satirical expressions of *Gschnas* (the irreverent element of carnival, embraced in the costumed parties of the Künstlerhaus).

In sum, this book offers a rich new approach to the area and constitutes a very impressive piece of academic scholarship. Based on Houze's doctoral thesis (evident, at times, in the density of the writing), it draws on a wonderfully wide-ranging selection of primary sources, as well as intelligent awareness of secondary writing in many different fields. Its bibliography alone is a valuable resource for anyone researching or teaching the area. Like most ground-breaking publications, it has a few minor difficulties: there is some discontinuity between sections, while a lack of cross-referencing between mentions of the same exhibition, festival or publication leaves the reader grateful for the

detailed index as a means of linking information together. It makes no concession to the non-German reader, assuming linguistic competency in the translation of book and article titles, as well as the laboriously long names of exhibitions and museums.

For this reviewer, the biggest problem with this book is the claim in its publicity blurb that it 'considers the entirety of Austria-Hungary'. It doesn't, a fact acknowledged by Houze herself in her introduction. This is very much a Viennese study, informed primarily by German-language sources and, as such, offers the viewpoint of the centre towards the periphery. Hungary, while the focus of some excellent discussion, is the secondary partner and, particularly in part two, suffers from a lack of attention to the same range of writings as Vienna. Of course, one is sympathetic to the huge language difficulties faced by any non-speaker of Hungarian (or Czech, Polish, Slovenian or Serbo-Croatian for that matter), but I do feel that the title of the book is somewhat misleading in this respect.

As mentioned in Houze's introductory literature review, the last two decades have seen admirable efforts to readdress the Vienna-centred nature of scholarship on the Empire and make known the parallel (and far from derivative) modern developments elsewhere. With this in mind, the overwhelming focus on Vienna in part two sits rather uncomfortably with the emphasis on folk arts from across the Habsburg lands in part one. Even here, other nationalities, with the exception of the Hungarians, are considered largely as they relate to the imperial centre. So the rich display of Romanian folk costumes at the 1873 Wiener Weltausstellung is seen as 'a strange and picturesque ancient culture' representing 'the Habsburg possession of these distant primitive domains' (p. 61). In fact the portrait busts at the centre of fig 2.10 appear to be not those of the Emperor Franz Joseph and Empress Elisabeth, but of Prince Carol and Princess Elisabeth of Romania, suggesting that this is, in fact, a photograph of the proud little Romanian section, allowed to exhibit independently from the Ottoman Empire for the first time since its recent unification and importation of a German prince. Far from being viewed as 'strange' and 'primitive', this was one of the young country's first attempts to assert itself on the European stage.

What I'm saying here is that this valuable study begs future research from the viewpoint of the periphery to the centre. It would be exciting to apply a similar methodology to the politically nuanced relationship between textiles and art in Prague, for example, or to the influence of folk textiles on the visual creations of artists like Stanisław Wyspiański, Kazimierz Sichulski or Olena Kulchytska. Surely as important as Hoffmann's interiors at the Paris 1900 Exposition Universelle, in terms of the transference of textile patterns and techniques to interior design, would be Modest Sosenko's Huzul-inspired murals for the Mikola Lysenko Higher Institute of Music in Lemberg, Dušan Jurkovič's mountain retreats in Moravia, or even the design of the Polish art society Sztuka's 1908 Exhibition in Vienna? In the wealth of primary sources she uncovers for Vienna, Houze indicates both the potential and vast scope of such an undertaking. One can only hope that her impressive study will now encourage others to begin the task.

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1802/>

**Links:**

[1]  
<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/reviewed-item/textiles-fashion-and-design-reform-in-austria-hungary-before-the-first-world-war/>