

The New York Times

## Crisp, Clean and Modern, Before Its Time

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ems and meditations on daily life to *Fliegende Blätter*, a weekly magazine in Munich. By the 1890s the name, its spelling slightly altered, began to be applied dismissively to the art, design and mind-set of Austria, Germany and Denmark between Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 and the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848.

Setting aside a few signal achievements (Schubert's music, for example), Biedermeier often seemed to represent an embarrassing interlude between Neo-Classicism and Romanticism, and a prelude to the claustrophobic fussiness of the Victorian Age. Imagine having our own product-saturated era named retroactively for the Family Guy.

But that was then. Toward the beginning of the 20th century the leaders of the Vienna Secession and Wiener Werkstätte embraced Biedermeier as a precedent for their unornamented designs. Over the years interest and respect mounted, but the rehabilitation did not gain serious force until the 1970s.

The Milwaukee show is in many ways the culmination of this process. It has been organized by Laurie Winters, curator of earlier European art at the Milwaukee museum; Klaus Albrecht Schröder, director of the Albertina in Vienna; and Hans Ottomeyer, director of the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. It will travel to these institutions as well as to the Louvre.

With more than a little revisionism, this show trims Biedermeier of most of its tea-cozy comfiness and sets it free, like a butterfly from a chrysalis. The exhibition is a pleasure to look at because Biedermeier emphasized the pleasure of sight itself, whether in meticulous landscapes or pieces of furniture whose structures are instantly comprehended.

Limiting Biedermeier to a style and seeing it primarily as a progressive one, the Milwaukee show defines Biedermeier's glory years as 1815 to 1835. It also examines its roots in late-18th-century Neo-Classicism, especially the Danish version. Included is an example of the influential curve-legged Greek Revival klismos chair designed by the Copenhagen cabinetmaker Nicolai Abraham Abildgaard in the early 1790s. And

*"Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity" is at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 North Art Museum Drive, Milwaukee, (414) 224-3220, through Jan. 1.*



Didier Aaron & Cie.

A Viennese writing cabinet from around 1810, in "Biedermeier."

the exhibition performs the dubious favor of dispelling Biedermeier's reputation as bourgeois (and therefore cheaply made) by clarifying that it was first adopted by royals and aristocrats — for their private quarters, if not their public rooms. Many of them had cut their teeth on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's exaltation of simplicity.

The exhibition confirms Biedermeier's status as a harbinger of many things modern: not only Wiener Werkstätte but Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Bauhaus and post-World War II modern design. Closer to home you can see glimpses of both the playful self-consciousness of Ettore Sottsass and the unwavering right angles of Donald Judd's furniture. Even Martha Stewart is not entirely ruled out.

Biedermeier introduced widespread advances to the logistics of daily life. It signaled the invention not only of simplicity but also the arrival, to some degree, of domesticity

as we know it and, in the process, of modern design and modern living. The wohnzimmer, or living room, as opposed to the traditional formal salon, is a Biedermeier innovation. And the clean, graceful shapes of Biedermeier furniture were aided by improvements in the techniques for wood veneer and bent wood. This show includes one of the first bent-wood chairs devised by Michael Thonet.

With several walls covered in eye-popping Biedermeier wallpaper, the show begins by illustrating how the style stripped Neo-Classicism of ornament, with before and after comparisons of rotund writing cabinets, floor clocks and sofas. Before is dark mahogany with carved and gilded ornaments; after is plain blond ash accented with crisp lines of inlaid ebony. The inlay on the writing cabinet wryly emphasizes its egglike form; topped by three stepped drawers, the cabinet reads as a large, lidded jar. After a cluster of Viennese silver

### ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images from *"Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity"* at the Milwaukee Art Museum:

[nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)

from before 1810 acknowledges further Neo-Classical influence, the show ranges through several countries. In the second gallery there is a face-off between Viennese and Berlin Biedermeier conducted most strikingly with two groups of chairs. Both adopted the telltale curved legs, but when it came to the backs, the Viennese favored keyhole shapes that suggested tightly corseted female torsos; the Prussians stuck with the stricter, sharper perpendicular elements of the klismos variety.

Either way, Biedermeier took furniture down to its three-dimensional skeleton and rebuilt it into what often amounts to an early form of abstract sculpture. This is perhaps most aggressively clear in the style's buoyant, almost boisterous settees and daybeds. Sometimes these works sit on bases whose curving forms suggest decorative details writ large and rendered functional.

A cartoonish energy can result, as with a boxy settee covered entirely in white fabric scattered with small red flowers and seemingly perched on a languid double scroll of shiny wood. It brings to mind the broad face and cat's-eye glasses of Roz in the movie *"Monsters, Inc."*, a character whose considerable bulk also seems to never quite touch the ground. In two other settees the rounded elements forming the legs, bases and arms are so distinct that they appear to be temporarily stacked in place, not attached.

Biedermeier feels especially contemporary because of its refusal to settle for recycling historical styles, a principle that was often lost in the deluge of revivals that prevailed, starting with Gothic, after the 1840s. In this regard a certain linguistic logic is worth noting. The main consonants of Biedermeier — b, d, m — are among the sounds that the mouth makes most easily, as millions of infants prove every day. (Mommy, Daddy and so on.) These sounds are comforting and familiar, but they also are the building blocks of speech, communication, thought and thus civilization. In retrospect, few words could have been better suited for the style whose invention of simplicity and domesticity laid the groundwork for so much that we embrace as modern.



Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity

Austrian coffee bowls at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

## Crisp, Clean And Modern, Before Its Time

MILWAUKEE — Biedermeier, like indigo, is one of those sparkling, poetic words that roll off the tongue. BEE-der-my-er. It's bell-like and Germanic, and it almost rhymes internally. It connotes a combination of savory lightness, insouciant precision and bourgeois propriety. But is it a style or an era? A compliment or a condescension?

These questions are mulled in glorious diversity and extensive detail in "Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity" at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Billed as the first major Biedermeier exhibition in North

America, it comes down on the style and compliment sides while ranging through 360 pieces of early-19th-century art and design, mostly from Germany, Austria and Denmark.

Included are the radiant, snapshotlike landscapes of the Danish painter Christen Kobke; the swank, curved-legged chairs and tables of Josef Ulrich Danhauser, the Viennese designer who opened that city's first fancy home-furnishings store; the strikingly ornament-free coffeepots, pitchers and candelabra of Viennese silversmiths like Franz Köll and Stephan Mayerhofer Sr.; and expanses of buzzy, eye-candy wallpaper from Vienna, Bohemia and Germany (including one large swatch from the house where the Brothers Grimm grew up).

These creations share several expansive galleries with much else: sculpture, textiles, clothes, jewelry, china, botanical studies, design drawings, watercolors of interiors, glassware, spittoons, writing cabinets, scientific instruments, settees and, most of all, more paintings, tables and chairs. The effect is almost overwhelmingly rich, yet the presentation seems to pass in a flash of clarity and rigor: a parade of crisp edges, clear shapes, clean surfaces and bold, delectable colors.

These last are credited to the color theories of Goethe, who believed in the beneficial effects of certain hues and recommended green and gray walls as the best to live with. He is represented here by an octagonal tabletop that doubles as a color chart illustrating his ideas and also suggests a collaboration among Brice Marden, Josef Albers and Ellsworth Kelly. Also displayed are parts of Goethe's collection of French and German wallpaper and textile samples. The Biedermeier love of color is expressed here in doses large and small, from a chartreuse silk daybed to a series of brilliantly monochromatic Viennese coffee bowls, trimmed in gold.

Biedermeier is a made-up name. It was invented in the 1840s, with satirical intent and a different spelling, for Gottlieb Biedermaier, a complacent, entirely fictional petit bourgeois who supposedly contributed naïve po-

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