

Birth of the Modern

INTENDED AS INTERIOR DESIGN FOR THE "COMMON MAN," SO-CALLED BIEDERMEIER STYLE TURNED OUT TO BE UNCOMMONLY PRESCIENT. BY SHEILA GIBSON STOODLEY



From top: Suite of four Biedermeier side chairs attributed to Josef Danhauser, solid maple with mahogany inlays, Vienna, circa 1830, 35 x 20 x 20 inches; a three-drawer Biedermeier commode, Carpathian walnut.

BIEDERMEIER FURNITURE didn't have a name when it was new, and didn't receive one until decades after it ran its course. "Biedermeier" comes from the moniker of a fictional village-dweller who starred in satirical German-language poems of the 1850s.

His surname translates to "common man" or "everyman," and the term didn't stick to the early 19th-century European furniture until the 1890s. But unlike other aesthetic movements that win their names in hindsight, Biedermeier's original meaning does not capture the qualities that we treasure in Biedermeier furniture now—its clean, sleek modernism, achieved centuries before modernism arrived on the scene. "A lot of the forms, when you look at them, they look 20th-century," says Adam Brown,

principal of Iliad, a Manhattan gallery that specializes in Biedermeier. "It's in keeping with the modernist aesthetic that's all the rage right now." He points to a circa-1825 pearwood veneer Biedermeier pedestal table, dubbed a "trumpet" table for the shape of its base and its single central support. "It could easily be mistaken for 20th-century design," Brown says, noting that the trumpet table inspired Eero Saarinen to create the tulip table in 1957.

On the other hand, New York dealer Karl Kemp points out that the clean simplicity of Biedermeier was an inheritance from ancient Greek and Roman furniture. In the book he co-authored, *The World of Biedermeier* (Thames & Hudson, 2001), Kemp observes that "Biedermeier was the paring down of the complex aesthetics of Classicism to essential moods, which resulted in designs that are extremely refreshing, relevant, and timeless." Michael Flick of Bonnin Ashley Antiques



in Miami points to another 21st-century advantage of Biedermeier. "It also lends a warmth. If you go to a contemporary environment and see antique Biedermeier pieces, they work, but they have warm, beautiful woods," he says. Referring to the use of French polish, a labor-intensive period finishing process that enhances the appeal of Biedermeier, he says, "It's so different than anything used today. It does not obscure the beautiful grain, which was what [Biedermeier] was about—the celebration of beautiful grains."

Peter Janowski, owner of Biedermeier-Vienna, a gallery with locations in Chicago and Vienna, Austria, identifies three aspects that make Biedermeier what it is: "Design, the beauty of the veneer, and its functionality." Design shines through in the proto-modernist nature of Iliad's trumpet table. Beautiful veneers might be the most visually alluring detail of Biedermeier; while its practitioners were not the first to decorate with wood, the advent of mechanical and steam-driven saws in the 1820s let cabinetmakers cut thin slices from woods that were too difficult to cut veneers from by

hand. "The way Biedermeier uses veneers is unique," says Tanya Paul, Curator of European Art at the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) in Wisconsin, which has a strong Biedermeier collection. "You don't see anything like it before that point."

The Biedermeier style's reliance on wood grain to shoulder most or all of the decorative work reaches its zenith with table tops. Janowski has a walnut center table, dating to 1820–25, with a stunning top. It is a fine example of bookmatching, a woodworking technique in which pieces of veneer mirror each other like the pages of an open book. "It shows how sensitive people were to the beauty [of the wood], and they knew how to use it," he says, going on to explain how the otherwise unadorned tabletop approaches modernism—its grain has "almost abstract forms, something that people can put their eyes on and look for shapes."

From top: Biedermeier sofa attributed to Josef Danhauser, walnut veneer, Vienna, circa 1825, 36.6 x 74.8 x 19.6 inches; Biedermeier trumpet style table, tilt-top pedestal table in pear veneer with mahogany inlays, Austria, circa 1825, 31 x 43.25 x 43.25 inches.

