



THE INVENTION OF SIMPLICITY

BIEDERMEIER

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For Immediate Release

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM TO PRESENT

BIEDERMEIER: THE INVENTION OF SIMPLICITY

FURNITURE, DECORATIVE OBJECTS, PAINTINGS, WORKS ON PAPER

SEPTEMBER 16, 2006 THROUGH JANUARY 1, 2007

Many Works on View in U.S. for the First Time

Milwaukee, WI, June 2006 – The first major exhibition in North America of furniture, decorative objects and fine art from the Biedermeier period (1815 - 1830) will be presented by the Milwaukee Art Museum from September 16, 2006 through January 1, 2007. *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity* will survey more than 400 works including painting, works on paper, furniture, silver, porcelain, glass, textiles, metalwork, wallpaper, jewelry and fashion. By examining the rich cultural heritage of the Biedermeier period in Germany, Austria and Northern Europe, the exhibition will show how elements of simplicity, natural beauty, and clarity of form predominated and gave shape to a new aesthetic vision that anticipated Modernism. Many of the works will be on view in the U.S. for the first time. The exhibition will travel to the Albertina in Vienna, the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, and the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity is organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum in collaboration with the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin and the Albertina in Vienna. It is curated by Laurie Winters, Curator of Earlier European Art at the Milwaukee Art Museum; Klaus Albrecht Schröder, Director of the Albertina in Vienna; and Hans Ottomeyer, Director of the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, in

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collaboration with a team of international scholars. A 400-page catalogue with approximately 400 full-color images and four essays by leading experts in the field will accompany the exhibition.

Lenders to the exhibition include: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago; The Cleveland Museum of Art; Milwaukee Art Museum; the Albertina, Vienna; Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin; Museum of Decorative Art, Prague; Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague; The Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Copenhagen, and many other museums as well as private collections in Paris, Vienna, Munich, Chicago and New York.

The Beginning of Biedermeier

The term "Biedermeier" is often assumed to be the surname of a cabinetmaker of the period, but is actually an imaginary character -- a pseudonym that played on the German adjective "bieder," meaning plain and unpretentious, and "Meier," a common German surname. Weiland Gottlieb Biedermaier was the name of a fictitious character who was portrayed in a Munich satirical weekly newspaper in the mid-1840s. His daily "common man" activities and naïve poems were showcased for the entertainment of bourgeois readers. Ironically, what began as an intellectual critique of the typical German citizen--who cared more about creature comforts than political activism -- turned into new model for living. The furniture, decorative arts, ceramics, glass and paintings of the period reflected the taste of the newly emerging bourgeoisie. Emphasizing less extravagant means, a new standard of beauty was created through proportion, simplicity, utility and elegance. The gilding and frills of the 18th century were stripped away to emphasize the natural beauty of materials and classical shapes. In the last decade of the 19th century, Biedermeier became the term used to describe the artistic and cultural period preceding the revolutions of 1848.

U.S. Exhibition Venue

The Milwaukee Art Museum will be the only U.S. venue for *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*. Reflecting the heritage of the population the Midwest, the

Museum is well known for its strong collection of 19th century German and Austrian painting and, recently, a growing collection of work from the Biedermeier period. More than 4.7 million people in Wisconsin and Illinois are of German or Austrian descent. German is still spoken in many households and a thriving constellation of artistic, social and political clubs keep a number of European traditions alive.

"The Biedermeier period is long overdue for study and we hope that the exhibition will attract considerable international attention," said Laurie Winters. "While it is often difficult to organize exhibitions that include fragile decorative arts, we were fortunate that every lender we approached recognized the significance of the exhibition and was willing to lend. We are able to include every piece of furniture and the decorative arts that we wanted for the exhibition and some of the most important examples of Biedermeier painting. The exhibition represents the very best of the Biedermeier period."

"This important exhibition brings new light to a period of great innovation that influenced the way people lived in their homes," said David Gordon, CEO and Director, Milwaukee Art Museum. "The Milwaukee Art Museum is delighted to originate this first exhibition on Biedermeier ever held in the United States with our distinguished partners from Vienna and Berlin. The exhibition and catalogue will be singular and stunningly beautiful."

Exhibition Background

Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity will for the first time elucidate the historical and intellectual movements of the period in the catalogue essays which will discuss the aesthetic conception of basic forms, the beauty of surfaces, new theories of perception, theories of the simplicity of the Viennese aestheticians, the circles of the academies of the fine arts, and the training of craftsmen at the "drawings schools" as early forms of design teaching. The essays will offer a clear definition of the aesthetic principles that inform the Biedermeier style around 1820.

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Intentionally excluded from the exhibition are the many revivalist subcategories of historical Biedermeier – Ornamental Antique, Empire style, Neo-Gothic, Neo-Renaissance and Neo-Baroque – that have a historical outlook. Rather, the focus is on the Biedermeier style as an innovative aesthetic in its own right, with a new cohesive, pure and unpretentiousness of form that foreshadows modern design. As Laurie Winters writes in the catalogue essay, Biedermeier “is interpreted not as a lowly product of bourgeois taste, but rather as a highly cultivated and refined quest for simplicity and purity that has its roots in the late 18th century. The provenances for many of the works clearly indicate that the patrons were members of the courts or the aristocracy.”

Furniture

More than 100 important pieces of furniture can be seen in *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity* and many have startling affinities with designs of today. An extraordinary selection of cabinets, tables and seating furniture demonstrate the period’s love of grained veneer surfaces, which often determined the shape, size and contour of the piece. A major tall case clock from Germany, ca. 1820, now in the collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum, is one major highlight of the exhibition. The clock, which has been reproduced in numerous publications on the Biedermeier period, is extremely modern in its use of contrasting light poplar burr veneer and black ebonized pear wood.

Two Vienna writing cabinets from ca. 1810 exemplify the new spectrum of options available at the time. Both are luxury pieces covered with precious wood veneers. The writing cabinet from the collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum, in dark mahogany, relies on the traditional sculptural décor of the lingering style of the French Empire. The other cabinet, from a private collection in Paris, made primarily of light ash, draws its elegant simple style from the natural persuasive power of the wood grain and the contrasting black bands that emphasize its geometric shape.

It can be said that Biedermeier was the era of the chair and some stunning examples will be on view: An armless mahogany Viennese chair with pyramid mahogany veneer, 1815-20, from a private New York collection, offers an oval back and bright red

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upholstered seat that is simple, yet extremely elegant. A pair of walnut veneer armchairs from Austria, ca. 1830, from the collection of Christopher Forbes of New York, demonstrates a sculptural approach to furniture with highly modern curves and contours. The single pedestal support anticipates the 20th century designs of Eero Saarinen.

A settee from Vienna, ca. 1815, from the Milwaukee Art Museum collection, offers one of the best examples of Biedermeier furniture in the U.S. with beautifully shaped mahogany veneer and gilding. The original drawing for the settee was located by the Museum, so it has been reupholstered as the designer, Josef Ulrich Danhauser, originally intended in white French silk with green gimping and fringe. This settee is early in date with its lingering motifs of the Empire style and offers a striking comparison to the more simplified and geometric forms that occur only five to ten years later.

The most important and influential of the Biedermeier manufacturers was Danhauser'sche Mobelfabrik (Danhauser Furniture Factory) in Vienna, founded by Josef Ulrich Danhauser in 1804 and continued by his son Josef Franz (1805-1845). The factory produced everything from complete suites of furniture to home furnishings that included glass, upholstery and wall coverings. Danhauser also published illustrated pattern books and blueprints of designs that other joiners could copy, thereby spreading the new style throughout the German-speaking world. A maple tea table, ca. 1825, with maple veneer on beech and softwood and mahogany inlays provides a stunning example of the designs, which would pare forms to their essentials, merging the useful with the beautiful.

Decorative Art

Decorative art flourished during the Biedermeier period. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the German poet, novelist, playwright and philosopher, was influential in developing color theory during this time. Many works from the Goethe house in Weimar, Germany, will be on view for the first time in the U.S. including his collections of wallpaper and textile designs. Goethe felt that green and gray were the most healthful colors, contributing to one's physical and mental well-being. Interior designers of the time incorporated his well-known theoretical studies into their work.

Many objects, especially porcelain, were made for use by royal families: A simple white porcelain service with a gold band was the favored dinner service of the Emperor Franz Joseph. A shockingly vivid green porcelain writing set was also once owned by the Austrian royal family. A beautiful porcelain platter depicting an enormous spray of hydrangea, the so-called *Snowball Flowers Platter*, 1803-04, was made for the King of Prussia, Frederick Wilhem.

Exceptional silver objects will be on view from the Asenbaum Collection, the largest known private collection of Austrian silver. A pair of candlesticks from Vienna, ca. 1771-1845, and a teapot from Vienna, ca. 1765-70, with an unusual fruitwood handle are restrained in their use of decoration and thus offer a uniquely modern simplicity. These works anticipate the abreaction and geometry of the Wiener Werkstätte, nearly a century later.

Painting and Works on Paper

Nearly 100 paintings and drawings in *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity* will offer a serious examination of the period's fine art. Biedermeier painting, which is not well known in the U.S., followed in the wake of the intellectual movement, German Romanticism. German writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Gottfried von Herder extolled Jean-Jacques Rousseau's cult of nature. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's philosophy ("Nature is visible Spirit; Spirit is invisible Nature") profoundly influenced landscape painters such as Casper David Friedrich and Carl Gustav Carus, who in painting nature, felt they were painting the manifestations of God. One of the highlights of the exhibition, Carus's *Swiss Landscape*, ca. 1822, echoes Friedrich's Romantic vision of an untamed nature. Nature and the attention to detail learned during the Romantic period were to become seminal sources of influence for Biedermeier artists.

Matthäus Loder, who was born in Vienna in 1781, became a court painter to Archduke Johann in 1816. He documented the life of the archduke and accompanied him on his

Copenhagen, and Munich doubled in size during this period, and new neoclassically designed apartment buildings sprang up to accommodate expanding populations. Houses were furnished with pairs of windows, creating brightly lit interiors that often looked onto busy streets or well-kept gardens. This concept of the interior is clearly represented in Georg Friedrich Kersting's small, private, almost intimate pictures that include portraits of his friends or family. Kersting relied on the concept of the "window picture" that had become popular in German Romantic painting and had been used by his Dresden colleague and friend Caspar David Friedrich. For Friedrich, the window functioned as a highly charged symbol conveying a sense of yearning for nature and the external world. His pictures posit an uneasy juxtaposition between internal and external. For Kersting, the open window reinforced the primacy and comfort of the interior world and the identification of the sitters with their surroundings.

Jewelry and Fashion

Much of the jewelry of the time was made from cast iron. During the Napoleonic Wars, women were encouraged to donate their jewelry to the war effort. Often they were given replacement jewelry made from iron, which came to reflect their patriotism and support for the war. The trend caught on and survived. Since the dominant fashion color was white, the jewelry would have been quite dramatic. Fashions were girlish and playful and became substantially more feminine, and by the end of the era much more erotic.

Exhibition Schedule

Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity will travel from Milwaukee to the Albertina in Vienna from February 1, 2007 to May 13, 2007, and to the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin from June 8, 2007 to September 2, 2007. A final smaller exhibition will be held at the Musée du Louvre in Paris, from October 15, 2007 to January 15, 2008.

Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity was made possible by The Argosy Foundation, Sotheby's, and others.