



# THE LURE OF BIEDERMEIER

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER DOW

THE SENSUAL, SERPENTINE, curving lines and silky, high gloss finish of Biedermeier furniture from Eastern Europe are enjoying a revival in this country at present. The style dates from the "high" era of Viennese interior decoration from 1815 to 1835 and continues on to 1848, when the Industrial Revolution swept away handcraftsmanship in favor of factory produced furniture. The term Biedermeier does not derive from a cabinetmaker's name, and was actually not in use in the early 19th century. The word became a literary pejorative in the Austro-Hungarian Empire around the 1850s, associated with a fictitious cartoon character who satirized the comfortable, stolid complacency of the newly-emerging middle-class.

ABOVE RIGHT: A three-drawer, bow fronted commode in burled ash with ebonized details, is flanked by two unusual side chairs in ash veneer. Above is a Romantic Period oil painting by French artist Hubert Robert, titled *Capriccio*, dated 1755. On either side, two etchings washed with watercolor, circa 1800, by Uggeri.





This nouveau riche constituency found a place in society following the demise of Napoleon and the successful rise of economic stability throughout Europe under its new leader Prince Metternich. Scholars in the 1890s, looking back nostalgically to an earlier era of aesthetic simplicity—at a time of high Victorian decoration—first coined the phrase Biedermeier to describe the furniture style, and it has remained in the lexicon ever since.

ABOVE: The Denenberg Fine Arts Gallery with translucent glass windows and limestone paved floor provides a perfect setting for Iliad Antik Biedermeier antiques and museum quality art. In the foreground, a pair of Biedermeier bergeres with a circular side table in between. A pair of Biedermeier faux semanieres flank a composition of two side chairs and a bow-fronted commode. The circular dining table in the center is complemented by four striped upholstered dining chairs.



**T**oday antique dealers and collectors consider Biedermeier furniture the first early interpretation of a modern, functional aesthetic, and this may be a reason for its increasing popularity in the 21st century. Biedermeier furniture resides comfortably in any room along side more modern furnishings and artworks. Primarily of fruitwoods, with rich, elaborately patterned wood grain veneers polished to a lustrous sheen, the furniture is frequently decorated with wood inlay or black-painted "ebonized" detailing. Andrea Zemel and Adam Brown, partners in Iliad Antik, first opened a gallery in New York devoted to Biedermeier furniture in the 1990s. Attracted to this style, they sought out pieces in various Eastern European countries, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and

established an atelier in Prague for restoring them to an authentic perfection. As a result of their East Coast success, Los Angeles beckoned, and they were introduced through a family friend to Stuart and Beverly Denenberg, owners of Denenberg Fine Arts. The Denenbergs have been collectors and private dealers in fine art for several decades, and two years ago decided to move their gallery from San Francisco to Southern California. Meeting Brown and Zemel turned out to be a proverbial match made in heaven for them. "We were complementary to each other," says Stuart Denenberg. "We had a space in the raw, and they were looking for a showroom in L.A."



UPPER LEFT: Andrea Zemel and Adam Brown, founders of Iliad Antik, who have rediscovered the Biedermeier style. Petite recamiere sofa in mahogany veneer with giltwood details combines a restrained form, presaging Art Nouveau, with a rich patina, rubbed to a high sheen through hours of



hand polishing. The lyre supported sewing table and the corner vitrine are expressions of finest Viennese cabinetry. Grouping of a Biedermeier petite secretaire of walnut with ebonized decoration and gilded columns, a scallop-backed side chair, pedestal cabinet, elaborate gilded mirror and clock of the Viennese period. Photo by Robert Levin. ABOVE: Circular dining table and four

accompanying dining chairs describe the intimate scale of 19th century Viennese interior decoration. The sculpture in the background from the Denenberg collection of museum quality pieces is by Spanish artist Domínguez y Viente, 1905, and depicts Hermes with lighting bolts, actually electric lights, a relatively new phenomenon in the early 20th century.



## DESIGN

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The "space in the raw" the Denenbergs purchased was a landmark building designed in the 1960s by noted architect Michael Morrison at 417 N. San Vicente Boulevard. A protege of Lloyd Wright, Morrison, who is now in his 80s, used the two story space as an ad hoc antiques emporium and design studio. In 2001 he was ready to sell.

The San Francisco couple, attracted to the unique trapezoidal building, with ample square footage, views and light, bought the property and set about a renovation that would allow them living and working space. "We live our work," said Beverly Denenberg, "there is no separation between who we are and what we do."

The entire ground floor, newly paved with 24-inch limestone squares, is one large gallery space furnished with fine examples of Iliad Antik Biedermeier furniture, complemented by a display of pieces from the Denenberg collection of museum quality paintings, sculpture and decorative objects from the 16th through to the mid-20th century. The arrangement has a seamless quality, rather like a beautifully furnished drawing room, and indeed the Denenbergs use it as an entertaining space when they invite guests for the evening. "We have some champagne here before going upstairs for dinner." While the second floor contains the Denenbergs private quarters, and also a guest room for Brown and Zemel when they visit every six weeks or so from New York, the library upstairs is also open to clients. Here, a judicious integration of Biedermeier furniture with modern pieces, such as a Ligne Roset dining table surrounded by Mateo Grassi leather chairs, demonstrate how antiques circa two hundred years old can merge into a pleasing composition of contrasting periods.

The early 19th century was a time of both opulence and restraint, elegance and simplicity, a contradiction of ideals defined by a desire for political correctness in a strong economy. (continued on page 84)

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Despite its association with middle-class modesty, Biedermeier furniture is characterized by a high level of craftsmanship. It required many expensive, labor-intensive processes in its making, and as many as 150 hours to apply the hand-rubbed shellac polish that creates its unmistakable, special sheen. The Iliad Antik atelier in Prague is staffed with craftsmen who have inherited the mastery of this polishing technique, and know exactly how to restore Biedermeier antiques to their impeccable, original glory. In assessing the best examples of the style, Brown recommends: "Look for clarity of form, choice of wood and well executed veneer." Walnut is often the favored wood. Its rich warm patina and lyrical patterning capture the essence of the Romantic period of Beethoven and Brahms and the magic of Old Vienna. The furniture ranges in price from \$7000 for a side chair, to \$29,000 for a tilt top pedestal table. Iliad Antik craftsmen can also make custom orders to accommodate requirements that were not familiar in domestic settings in 19th century Vienna. For example, an over-size, extendable dining table, a king size bed, or scone wall lights. "The atelier uses traditional methods of book-matched veneering, hand polishing and 23 karat water gilding," said Zemel.

Just like Odysseus, the heroic character of Ancient Greek mythology in Homer's "The Iliad," the tale of the Trojan War, and his post-war wanderings in "The Odyssey," Adam Brown searches for the holy grail of his desire in unexpected places, small apartments as well as grandiose castles, where it has been hidden away during decades of Post World War II separation from the West. Fortunately, he and his partner continue to find a treasure trove that delights designers and collectors, and enriches 21st century living in America. ☉