

# Austrian Neoclassicism

Between classical excess and contemporary simplicity lies the unique transitional style of Viennese Biedermeier.

By Deborah Prosser

Between 1815 and 1848, Vienna, Austria, was a cosmopolitan metropolis recovering from the deprivations of decades of war. With the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, which effected the political realignment of Europe after Napoleon's defeat, Vienna became a political and cultural center in the new world order. The city also experienced sweeping social changes wrought by industrialization, a rising middle class and the increasing privatization of domestic and family life. Culturally, the powerful combination of an increasingly wealthy bourgeoisie and an expanding population of skilled and inventive craftsmen gave rise to a unique period in furniture design now known as the Biedermeier era.

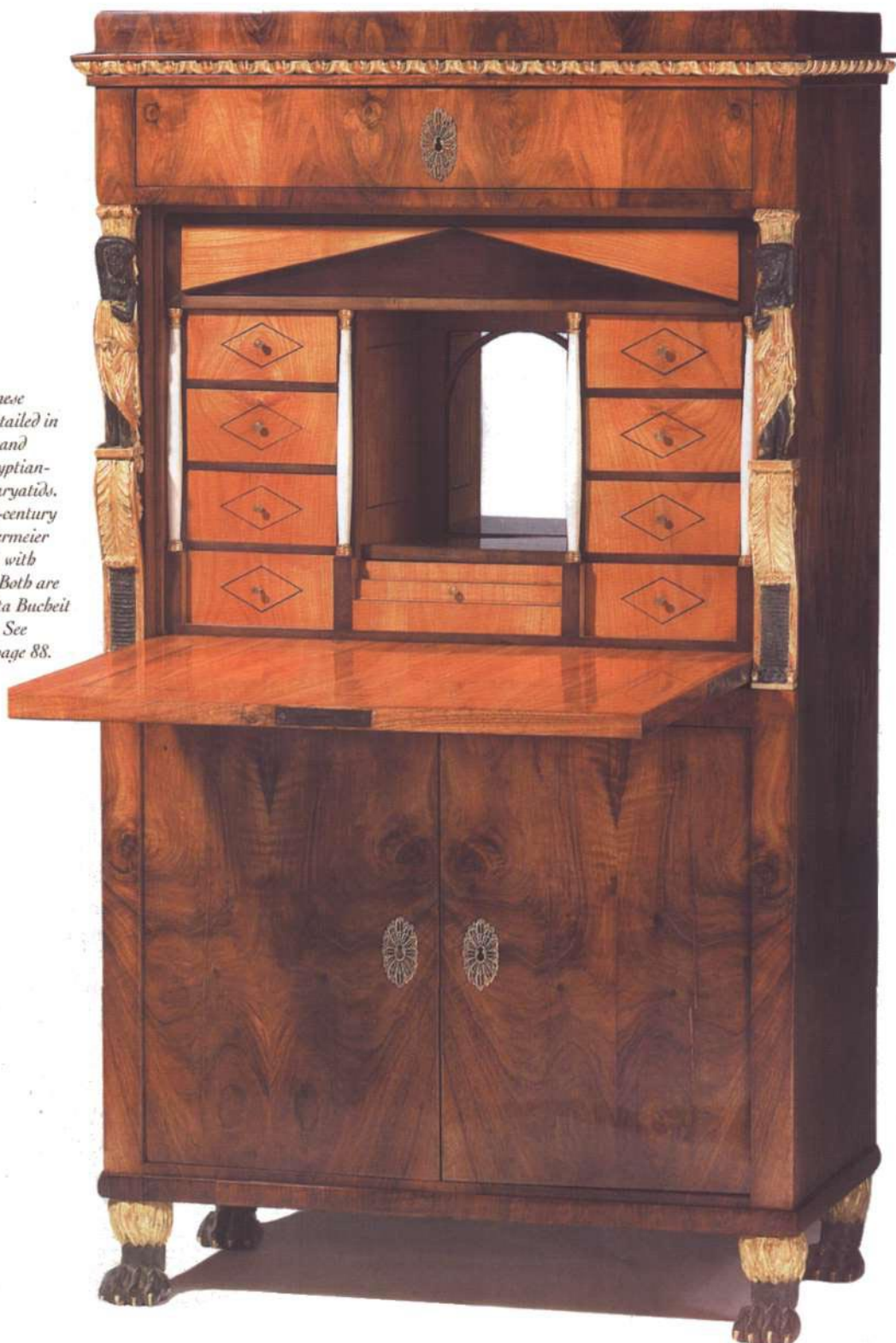
While many often misinterpret "Biedermeier" as the name of a specific cabinetmaker, the term actually refers

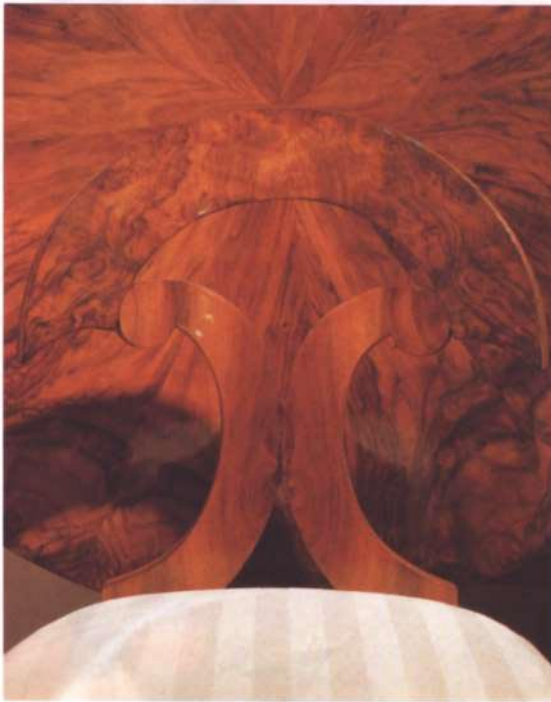


to a style that existed in Vienna in its purest form between 1815 and 1830. Prolific Biedermeier craftsmen celebrated the startling beauty of native German hardwoods, offered a unique interpretation of Neoclassical antecedents and supplied a growing middle- and upper-class market with distinctive pieces now sought after by contemporary collectors for their timeless elegance and singular beauty.

Scholars typically date the Biedermeier era from 1815, the year of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, to 1848, the beginning of populist revolutions throughout Europe. While decorative styles rarely conform to rigid political demarcations, Germany's politics and post-war economy during the Vormärz era (pre-March 1848 revolutions) shaped the design and production of household furnishings. The Congress of Vienna established Klemens von Metternich, Austria's minister of foreign affairs, as a leading statesman. Fearing the tyranny of Napoleon and the perceived horrors of the French Revolution, Metternich under Austrian Emperor Franz I inaugurated 30 years of intense political oppression and censorship throughout Germany's 38 principalities. German citizens, restricted in their public lives, turned inward

*An 1815 Viennese  
secrétaire is detailed in  
walnut veneer and  
flanked by Egyptian-  
inspired gilt caryatids.  
An early 19th-century  
Viennese Biedermeier  
chair (facing) with  
poplar veneer. Both are  
featured at Rita Bucheit  
Ltd., Chicago. See  
Resources on page 88.*





and focused their attention on their domestic environments.

The oppressive political climate fostered a popular culture centered on the physical and psychological comforts of home. Prevalent romantic beliefs asserted that a well-run household produced a positive moral effect on its inhabitants, further bolstering the domestic ideal. Biedermeier is the physical expression of a middle- and upper-class mindset that, in a desire for something new, rejected Empire furnishings for their associations with Napoleon and sought comfortable but luxurious domestic surroundings as a refuge from constant war. It was not a style espoused solely by the nobility and copied by the masses. Rather, members of the middle class also acted as arbiters of taste as they defined their new existence with delicate porcelain, intricate glassware and elegant furniture. Hakan Groth, Biedermeier historian and partner in London's Rupert Cavendish Antiques gallery, characterizes Biedermeier furniture as "essentially Empire ... shorn of its ormolu mounts, excessive gilding and aggressive self-importance." One may further view it as Neoclassicism on a domestic scale, and, in Vienna, Biedermeier furnishings adorned both the homes of the bourgeoisie and the private spaces of the Viennese imperial family.

The term "Biedermeier" was not in use in the early 19th century. The label began as a pejorative concocted in the 1850s by German intellectuals who viewed the Vormärz as an era of stolid complacency. In 1853, a doctor, Adolph Kussmaul, and a district judge, Ludwig Eichrodt, began writing satirical verses under the pseudonym, Gottlieb Biedermaier. "Gottlieb" means God-loving and "Maier" is one of the most common German surnames. Their poetry satirized upright citizens leading simple, unquestioning lives. Decades later, the early 19th century came to be known nostalgically as the era of the Biedermann—the simple bourgeoisie. Scholars first applied the term "Biedermeier" in the 1890s to the

artists and craftsmen of the period.

Biedermeier was a pan-European movement with many regional variations throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire and beyond. The exchange of immigrant cabinetmakers, pattern books and pieces of furniture between nations ensured a wellspring of new ideas that inspired Biedermeier craftsmen whose work in turn set standards for others. Vienna, rivaled only by Paris as a cultural center, was the most influential city for the production of Biedermeier furniture. The year-long Congress in 1814–15 stimulated production of decorative furnishings for nobles who wished to impress visiting dignitaries. Austrian Emperor Franz I also supported artisans by founding a polytechnic school and attendant public study collection for training craftsmen. In 1825, the city of nearly 300,000 residents supported more than 950

*FACING: Six c. 1825 German Biedermeier chairs (above), from Iliad Antik, mingle with a c. 1820 Austrian dining table and a pair of c. 1815 cabinets, from Karl Kemp & Associates Ltd. Antiques. A c. 1850 Austrian tilt-top pedestal table (below, left) is the backdrop for a scythe-shaped chair of the same origin. A c. 1810 Viennese Empire mahogany center table (below, right) complements a c. 1820 Russian Biedermeier vitrine, made of Karelian birch wood.*

*This c. 1825 Viennese globe-shaped sewing table (below, left), at Ritter-Antik Inc., is attributed to Carl Schmidt. Its interior (below) boasts nine secret compartments inlaid with ivory and ebony.*



*Gilt Corinthian columns accent this petite c. 1820 Viennese club secrétaire (right), veneered with book-matched walnut. The c. 1815 Austrian side chair has an ebonized pearwood veneer with maple inlays (at Iliad Antik).*

*Vienna's Danbauer Factory designed sofas with curved bases, such as this Biedermeier loop-based sofa (below) by Josef Danbauer, with the ebonized pearwood veneer commonly used by Viennese craftsmen (at Ritter-Antik Inc.).*



cabinetmakers, and royal decree mandated that master craftsmen had to pass an examination at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. The competitive market and high training standards meant the Viennese produced the most original and inventive interpretations of the Biedermeier style.

The hallmarks of Viennese Biedermeier furniture are graceful, serpentine curves, flat expanses of wood predominating over inlay, carving or gilding, and balanced proportions employing creative combinations of geometric shapes. Biedermeier artisans were indebted to the prevailing Regency, Directoire and Empire styles, but they employed Neoclassical formulas and motifs in ways done nowhere else. Lyre secrétaires, where the popular Neoclassical shape is not merely applied but rather subsumes the piece, and loop-based sofas appearing to have been made out of ribbons of wood are Viennese specialties and prime examples of their incomparable skill.

Some design decisions were economic. The importation of exotic woods and elaborate French ormolu mounts was difficult in the post-war economy. Viennese artisans turned



such deprivations into advantages. They employed ebonizing techniques with great skill, developed new formulas for composition ornaments and exploited the figures and shapes inherent in native fruitwoods. There is astonishing variety within the Viennese oeuvre, which ranges from elegant, uncomplicated designs to fanciful, elaborate creations. Beyond Josef Danhauser, who ran the largest factory and whose surviving drawings supply contemporary scholars with much of their knowledge of Biedermeier, few Viennese cabinetmakers are known, and only a small number of pieces were signed. Their body of work, however, stands on its own as an influential contribution to a distinctive era in furniture design.

Biedermeier furniture first enjoyed a positive reappraisal when early 20th-century modernists appreciated its balanced proportions, clean lines and flat, unbroken surfaces as an alternative to Victorian excess. Artists of the Jugendstil, the Wiener Werkstätte and the Bauhaus found inspiration in the simplicity and functionality of many Biedermeier forms, and the style gained status as a crucial influence on modern design. Some pieces appear to have been reduced to the simple essentials of basic functionality and beautiful wood. These qualities lend the style what gallery owner and author Karl Kemp has termed its "timeless modernity."

Scholars and dealers of Biedermeier furniture universally agree that collectors seek out pieces because they blend well with other furnishings. The simple, uncomplicated nature of many Biedermeier designs means they fit well in either period or modern interiors. They also concur that the most elaborate presentation pieces, globe tables and lyre secrétaires are the rarest available and the most desirable and expensive. While a Biedermeier side chair might sell for \$2,000, and a writing desk or table for \$20,000, a museum-quality lyre secrétaire or globe table will exceed \$100,000 on the market. Armchairs also are scarce and expensive because fewer were made in comparison to sofas during the period. Collectors value

*When open, this early 19th-century Viennese Biedermeier occasional table reveals an interior scene done in pen; at Rita Bucheit Ltd. Inlaid with burlled birch veneer, the table is equipped with secret compartments accessible through latches disguised in the oval table top, which is decorated with an inlaid figural scene.*





*A tour de force of woodworking, a c. 1850 Austrian pedestal table attributed to Josef Danbauer is between a pair of c. 1850 Austrian Biedermeier side chairs (left), with walnut veneer and ebonized details (at Iliad Antik).*

*French Napoleonic eagles decorate this c. 1835 Biedermeier sofa (below) from Napoleon Bonaparte's family. Veneered with walnut on pine, the sofa is attributed to Mainz, Germany's Wilhelm Kimbel (at Ritter-Antik Inc.).*



Viennese Biedermeier above that from other regions for its inventiveness and masterful workmanship, but pieces made in Vienna also are the rarest.

The market for Viennese Biedermeier furniture has grown steadily since the 1970s. The number of collectors desiring top-quality pieces is increasing, as is the amount of scholarly literature on the period. As Heinrich Leichter, president and founder of Ritter-Antik Inc. in New York City, asserts, many people simply fall in love with Biedermeier—with the period itself rather than specific furniture forms. Most devotees also favor pieces made between 1815 and 1830, before other historical revivals and machine production became influential. Beyond design and style, the woods, particularly the highly figured veneers, universally draw collectors to Biedermeier. Adam Brown of Iliad Antik in New York City reminds contemporary customers of the natural history inherent in Biedermeier pieces. The exquisite walnut and cherry veneers employed so deftly by Viennese craftsmen came from old growth Black Forest trees that no longer exist. The decorative arts of the past invite interest in the present not only for their beauty, but also because they are tangible links to distant people and events. Viennese Biedermeier possesses a unique beauty and rich history that contemporary collectors find difficult to ignore. □

#### For more information:

- **Capra Capra Antiques**, 319 Abercorn St., Savannah, GA 31401. (912) 256-9004.
- **Iliad Antik**, 237 E. 58th St., New York, NY 10022. (212) 935-4382.
- **Karl Kemp & Assoc. Ltd. Antiques**, 34 E. 10th St., New York, NY 10003. (212) 254-1877.
- **Ritter-Antik Inc.**, 35 E. 10th St., New York, NY 10003. (212) 673-2213.
- **Rupert Cavendish Antiques**, 610 King's Rd., London, England SW6. 011 44 207 731 7041.
- **Rita Bucheit Ltd.**, 449 N. Wells St. Chicago, IL 60610. (312) 527-4080.



*An early 19th-century Viennese lyre-shaped fall-front secretaire, at Ritter-Antik Inc., with mabogany on oak veneer. Its simple, geometric design, devoid of ornate decoration, is characteristic of the Biedermeier style.*