

Fellows



Heather Hess

Fulbright/IFK_Junior Fellow

Duration of fellowship

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Heather Hess

PROJECT TITLE

The Wiener Werkstätte and Its Critics

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In fin-de-siècle Vienna, where identity was fluid, multilayered, and hotly debated, the elite objects created by the Wiener Werkstätte came to be instantly recognizable as specifically Viennese and, moreover, models of good taste. Like the Vienna Secession, which the artists of the Wiener Werkstätte were closely allied, they did not operate on the cultural margins, but enjoyed a central position in Viennese social life, even gaining official and imperial support. New designs of the Wiener Werkstätte were hotly debated in the press, discussed in the feuilletons of widely-circulated newspapers as well as in limited, lavishly printed art-periodicals. For contemporaries, then, every object of the Wiener Werkstätte could be mobilized to support competing ideas of appropriateness and modernity. This project explores how the Wiener Werkstätte was received and promoted in the press, and its role in fixing ideas of modernity in Austria. Instead of focusing on connoisseurship or formal readings of the group's productions – as most studies of the Wiener Werkstätte so far have done – Heather Hess will consider the group in relation to wider debates on ornament, decoration, and taste. Thus, this project contributes to refining these definitions and understanding how contemporaries viewed these terms. She will also consider how the critics subjectively portrayed the works of the Wiener Werkstätte – too often, in the reviews, the written word does not accurately reflect the visual evidence (a problem which is especially glaring in unillustrated newspaper coverage). What do these (mis-)representations in the press mean?

The Wiener Werkstätte's most ardent foe is also one of the period's most famous figures: the architect and critic Adolf Loos. Loos' very personal polemics against the Wiener Werkstätte and Josef Hoffmann will be set against the voices of critics who are today less studied (especially in English-speaking scholarship), but who in their own time played leading roles in shaping the artistic discourse. As scholars have only recently begun to stress, ornament was not exclusively crime, and the writings of Ludwig Hevesi, Berta Zuckerkandl, Joseph August Lux, among others, will recover the full richness of these debates.

CV

M.A., Studied Art History at Rutgers University and at the University of Hamburg