

Art & Design

Reviews

“Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity”

★★★★★

Biedermeier style finds a comfy home at MAM.
By **Ruth Lopez**

A few years ago, the Milwaukee Art Museum wisely decided to add another dimension to its very strong collection of German paintings by acquiring a few pieces of Biedermeier furniture. In the process, curator Laurie Winters realized that there had never been a major Biedermeier exhibition in the United States. Which is how MAM's extraordinary “Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity”—an exhibition of more than 400 works of decorative arts, furnishings and paintings from 1815 to 1830—came to be. The show was assembled with the cooperation of the Albertina in Vienna and the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, and both museums will host the show next year before it travels to the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

The Biedermeier style emerged in Germany after Napoleon's fall in 1815. After the upheaval of war, people wanted to nest, and they wanted furnishings that were radically different from the grand Empire style. While we may associate Biedermeier with Germany, its style had a broader reach. After the war, Vienna, Berlin and Copenhagen emerged as strong cultural centers with art academies that attracted craftsmen and artists from all over Europe. The ideas of Biedermeier (a derogatory word, in short, inspired by the name of a fictional “everyman” more interested in his interior life than political issues) traveled around the region.

Even design junkies who think they know Biedermeier will find this show a revelation because it's about more than just elegantly simple blond-wood furniture; it's about the aesthetic ideas that promoted a way of living.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's color theories also had an impact on interior design—for instance, it was common to find green walls since the color was believed to be calming. Included here are charts and fabric samples assembled by Goethe that illustrate his (now debunked) theories.

The exhibit begins with a series of watercolor studies of interiors, giving viewers a sense of the original environment for these now desirable

pieces of furniture. While the furniture became more simple, with less inlay or ornamentation—in fact, it was all about the finish—the walls seemed to get more intense with color and pattern. For the installation, two 1827 wood-block prints were reproduced and the ever clever museum merchandising apparatus has made the rolls available for purchase in the gift shop.

Near the entrance is the first piece MAM acquired—a Viennese writing cabinet, one of the most important pieces in a home. It's considered—with its clawed feet and gilding—a transition piece because it hasn't let go of decoration. Nearby is another writing cabinet (pictured) that is full-tilt Biedermeier—the surface is everything. We fantasized on the way home of an office where all cubicles had been replaced by writing cabinets with ripply maple veneer. And we also thought about, of all seemingly unlikely things, “The Bean.” The most fascinating painting here was by Johann Erman Humel, a professor of optics who created a technical

masterpiece of the day (1831)—a giant basin, made out of one piece of granite and polished to such a high shine that people walking by in the Berlin park where it was erected (and still stands) could see their reflection. (Silver, by the by, was the metal of choice as the tableware in this

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exhibition makes plain.) Perhaps Anish Kapoor studied the basin or the painting before he created *Cloud Gate*. Or perhaps, as we can learn from the Silk Road exhibit here, this is just another beautiful example of how ideas travel and evolve—in this case more than 150 years later.

“Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity” is on display through January 1, 2007.

Vienna, writing cabinet, c. 1810.

