Review

Vienna 1913: Josef Hoffmann's Gallia Apartment

An Exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, April - June 1984

Obviously, this exhibition had a didactic purpose: to justify the Gallia collection, and to establish its content in terms of its patrons, the cultural life of Vienna, and the history of that utopian wonder drug called Design.

The catalogue does this better than the exhibition itself. Catalogues last longer than exhibitions, and remain as documents, so from that point of view that is fortuitous. But for a gallery-goer, or one who wished to directly experience size, colour, visual texture and detail, to perhaps even (illegally) touch one of these objects, this exhibition was very hard work indeed.

Why was this display so hard to grip? Partly it had to do with the kind of objects being shown. There seemed to be three separate groups:

- a loose range of remnants of a bourgeois household

- a set of photographs of an apartment, containing objects not unlike those displayed in the gallery (but many others as well)

- a set of sparse, elegant and slightly mannered perspectives by the star Designer himself.

The difficulty of reconstructing these materials into 'Josef Hoffmann's Gallia Apartment', as the catalogue has it, was compounded by the strong suggestions made by the framed notices lining the waiting room, that indeed there was an apartment waiting behind the blue haze. And in fact, enough of the physical structure of the apartment was presented to suggest that maybe there was. The smoking room and the boudoir were there but were surrounded by free, modernist space, which cast a very surreal aspect over the objects
and images being shown. Perhaps this was only a problem for those trained to be precise about spatial matters, like architects and their ilk, but I suspect that many others who visited this exhibition sensed that they were surrounded by the symbols of a dream spread out for analysis, rather than the bliss or nightmare that produced them.

However, once I realized that there was no apartment (or dream), and that part of the game was to reconstruct the rooms using the material in the show as a starting point, some interesting and timely questions appeared to haunt the scattered objets d'art.

In this review I'll concern myself with three of these perennial design problems: the designer's vision and its realisation, the role of the patron, and Style and Reality.

The designer's vision and its realisation

This is suggested by the relationship of the photographs to Hoffmann's drawings. Why is the impression given by them so different? The photographs show dowdy rooms filled with horrible stuffed furniture. The drawings show pretty pieces floating in a fairyland of fine patterns and articulated surfaces. Three years separate the photos and the drawings. They are also separated, I suspect, by the kind of frisson between client and designer that was lampooned by Adolf Loos in his Story of a Poor Rich Man. Compare the soft diagonal grid of the wallpaper in Hoffmann's drawings of the Smoking Room, and the loud floral pattern in the photos of the realised room. The question is - which is the real room, Hoffmann's vision, or the room that materialised. And with which do we identify the furniture in our imaginative reconstruction?

The Role of the Patron

The separate nature of the two sets of images (drawings and photographs) is reinforced in the catalogue where the individual entries on Hoffmann and the Gallias say very little on their interaction.
Compare the Gallia furniture to Hoffmann's earlier work of the 1900s, so influenced by Mackintosh (and often done with Kolo Moser - arguably the best stylist amongst the Viennese designers). Hoffmann's earlier work is challenging, elegant and sometimes humorous; his Gallia designs are none of these. The fluting which runs as a leit-motif through the apartment walls and furniture is symptomatic of this commission. A subtle decorative touch to classical columns and pilasters has been transformed into machined, absolute and pathological repetition, foreshadowing the kind of stodgy classicism that decorated the Third Reich. What morbid irony!

Did the Gallias subvert Hoffmann's mania for total aesthetic control, or did they not demand enough of him? Hoffmann seems to have been a designer wholly immersed in fashion, with neither vision nor analysis to guide him. For such a designer, the strength of the results depends critically on the part that the patron or client plays. This is generally an area in some need of scholarly research and an exhibition like this one points to its importance in understanding the production of style. I can't help thinking that the loud paper in the smoking room was the Gallias' message to Hoffmann that, after all, this was their apartment, and not his.

Style and Reality

Of course, some of the objects in this exhibition were stunning, and worth seeing in any context. The uranium glass (cat. 64) (what a timely object that is!); the pair of silver vases (cat. 39), the egg (cat. 28); all the carpet designs, and in particular those for the boudoir (cat. 85); and the swatchbook of silks (cat. 72).

The patterns of these silks illuminate another of the essays written by Loos, the famous Ornament and Crime. In this diatribe Loos equated the tattoo with barbarity and degeneracy; that is, if done by a contemporary European. He must have had in mind patterns like those in that swatchbook (catalogue, p.49) and also the notebook cover (cat. 74). Hoffmann's treatment of line as a sequence of dots, or points, is also reminiscent of the tattooist's technique. The essay by Loos argues for an acceptance of ornament where appropriate, that is, where it allows the craftsman some experience of control and expression, but not where this ornament is
directed 'from above' by the designer, or patron, and particularly not where it extends a worker's slavery by adding to his working hours. Loos thus placed ornament in a context of production, and also of human aspiration. His essay is still readable and relevant today. By contrast, the work programme of the Wiener Werkstatte (catalogue, p. 48) is embarrassingly short of an understanding of Ruskin and Morris, and as history has revealed, oblivious of the lives of the general public. This obsession for total and detailed control over someone else took two decades to shift from the world of design to the world at large.

The catalogue quotes J. E. Adlmann's dualistic analysis of Hoffmann's style, based on Nietzsche's concept of an 'eternal struggle between the rational (reductive, controlled) and irrational (expansive, vivacious) impulses' (p. 58). This simplistic and unreal categorisation, reminiscent of Wofflein's linear/painterly method of coping with style, only manages to class Hoffmann as a human being striving for certainty in a milieu of doubt and relativity. Hoffmann's response to this uncertainty was design, design, design right down to the last piece of silver. Now, we can see how double-edged this was; in the one stroke, oblivious to the toils of most people, and prophetic of their immediate future.

Reviewed by Alex Selenitsch