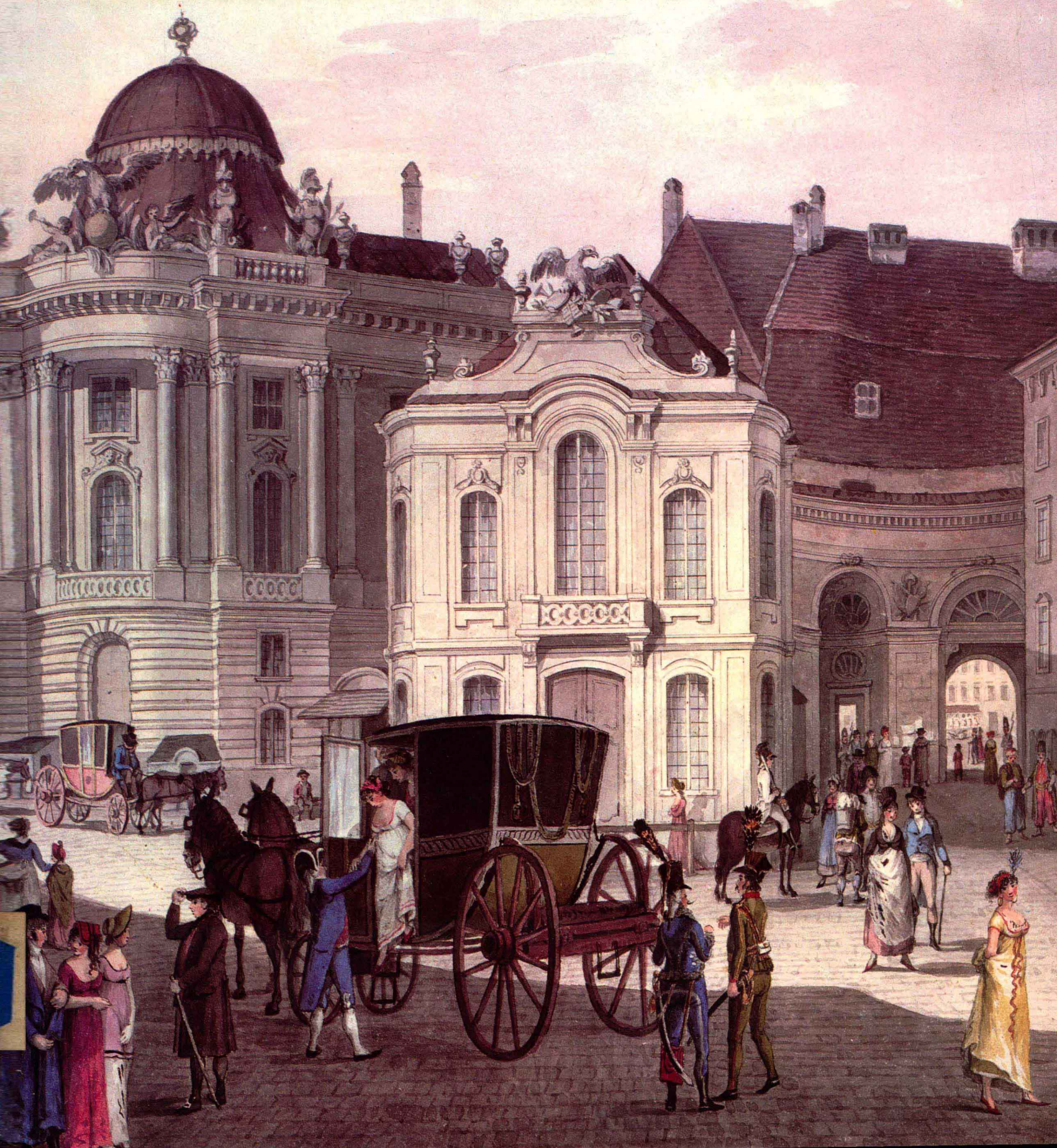


VIENNESE WATERCOLORS *of the Nineteenth Century*

W A L T E R K O S C H A T Z K Y



Walter Koschatzky

VIENNESE WATERCOLORS of the Nineteenth Century

Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York

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Jakob Alt. *The Artist with his Son Rudolf and a Companion.*
Looking Toward the Dachstein Mountains. c. 1825. Lithograph.
Graphische Sammlung Albertina (Ö.K. XIX, Vol. II, fol. 33).



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INTRODUCTION

The art of watercolor painting reached a very special peak in nineteenth-century Vienna, the capital of the Austrian Empire and residence of its Hapsburg emperors. Painting in watercolors did not begin in that century, of course, nor was Vienna where it originated. On the contrary, dissolving pigments in water, the most obvious method of creating colored pictures, was the very earliest method of painting used.¹

When paper came into widespread use in Europe in the fourteenth century, revolutionizing the possibilities of both drawing and painting, a whole new world opened up for watercolor painting in particular—with enormous implications. All mediums (pencil, pen, and brush) now found new ways of creating, on paper, linear or two-dimensional figures for the purpose of making an artistic statement, and those new ways gave rise to fresh objectives.

By the end of the medieval period two very different techniques of watercolor painting had emerged. One technique used dense, opaque paint to model highlights and depths and to produce an effect of solidity and corporeality. The other used relaxed, transparent brushstrokes; and the areas of color were pale enough to allow the paint underneath—and even the paper itself—to show through, which tended to produce floating, delicately luminous effects.²

The difference is fundamental. In the former, opaque technique (known in England as *body color*) a painting is always built up layer by layer, beginning with the darkest color and lightening progressively. The final “highlights” are achieved with applications of an opaque white pigment called Chinese white. This is why body color is said to be painted from dark to light and how, as its name suggests, it is able to produce a vividly three-dimensional, almost palpable image. In the other technique, termed transparent watercolor, the lightest tone available to the artist is the white of the paper he leaves unpainted. He starts with the palest shades, the thinness of the watercolor medium allowing him to lay down transparent areas of color one on top of another with a wet brush. This process, sometimes known as “glazing,” has the effect of modifying the colors that show through the various layers (yellow seen through blue, for instance, looks green). The dark-

er sections are painted next, and finally a few powerful blacks are laid on to provide the deep shadows. In other words, the watercolorist works from light to dark, exploiting the transparency of his well watered-down pigments. It is this transparent technique alone that is properly termed “watercolor painting.”

Transparent watercolor produces an entirely different effect from opaque body color, despite the fact that both use exactly the same ingredients: pigment, water, and a bonding agent (usually gum arabic). The difference lies solely in the density of the wash. Pure watercolor is capable of conveying more than a subject; it can convey atmosphere, intangible vibrations, and a kind of reality that transcends the physical realm. This is because of the ways in which the light that the white ground reflects shines through the transparent layers of paint to produce the sort of glowing, extraordinarily delicate nuances of color that the glazing process makes possible.

The scientific term for this modification of superimposed colors is additive mixing. Straightforward mixing in water is incapable of producing such tints; that method (subtractive color-mixing) invariably has the effect of “killing” colors by giving them a duller, grayer look. So it can safely be said that the big problem in body-color painting is how to achieve brightness: that technique does not permit glazing, and the mixed colors it employs tend to become murky and to lose their luminosity.

Artists attempted, particularly in the eighteenth century, to overcome this difficulty by adding a little Chinese white to all their body colors, which lightened them. Works painted in such “pastel tones” possess a character all their own. The opaque manner of watercolor painting with Chinese white added came to be known generally as *gouache* (or, even more recently, poster paints) and completely dominated the Rococo period. In fact, the subsequent history of watercolor painting is the story of a gradual emancipation from gouache and the emergence of a lighter, freer type of work using transparent paints. This development culminated in a number of truly brilliant high points of pure watercolor painting in the first half of the nineteenth century, after which the two techniques (opaque

and transparent) were used in conjunction before eventually almost dying out toward the end of the century.

For the artists, there was more involved, of course, than technique alone. The choice of a particular medium is never accidental, nor will it be governed by, say, an advance in terms of materials, although obviously the latter—special brushes, for example, or paints, or suitable paper—must be to hand. The crucial factor is the artist's desire, an aspiration. This "artistic aspiration," which is certainly not explicable in terms of any rational act of volition, means that the originality of the paintings of a given period is one of the clearest expressions of the place that period occupies in the history of the human psyche.³ That in turn is a product of everything the artist, his patrons, and ultimately all the members of a particular generation are for and against in their lifetime. It is in this sense that we speak of the "vital consciousness" of an age.

Artistic aspiration is defined in three stages: firstly by a given set of circumstances, secondly by the altering and overcoming of those circumstances, and thirdly by the goal achieved (the "vital consciousness" mentioned above) as a contribution toward a new and better view of the world and its problems.

Underlying all this is the fundamental problem of the ambivalence of the human situation: man is both determined—that is to say, bounded by time and place—and free, in other words, capable of acting creatively, with discernment, and in an organized manner. In fact, of course, man is obliged to act thus, since in the very exercise of his freedom of choice he is conforming to a law imposed upon him. In his novel *Kindred by Choice*, Goethe has Charlotte say, "As life draws us along we believe that we are acting on our own initiative, choosing what we do and how we take our pleasure; but, of course, if we look more closely, it is simply the intentions and inclinations of the age that we are compelled to coexecute."⁴

Properly speaking then, the questions that will concern me here are these: what "intentions of the age" did this great flowering of watercolor art in nineteenth-century Vienna reflect; what were the conditions that led up to this high point; what course did this blossoming of watercolor painting take, and who were the artists who used their freedom to attain such heights?

Some things that artists do call for great intellectual effort and a slow process of maturing. Certain works of art need to be constantly altered and improved before they achieve their final form. Buildings, sculptures in marble or bronze, large-scale murals, mosaics, and paintings on panel are all examples of this. But the rule does not apply to drawings, and it certainly does not apply to watercolor paintings.

The watercolorist's spontaneous manner of working directly on paper, using the simplest of means (its very simplicity makes watercolor one of the most demanding of artistic activities), is uniquely capable of capturing his thoughts and feelings as an artist—that is to say, as the person who, more than any other in his day, has a

special capacity for apprehending the present and anticipating the future. The artist, in other words, has the ability to "discover" reality and to bring his spontaneously encoded version of the truth to the attention of his fellow men—always supposing that they are equipped with the requisite powers of perception.

At which point I must state quite categorically that anyone contemplating such pictures in the belief that art is some kind of entertainment, a diverting embellishment of everyday life, is very wide of the mark. Art never was and never should be any such thing. The function of pictorial art has always been to reveal, convey, and propagate a deeper understanding of a particular worldview or conception of life.

Such spontaneous pictorial records, directly mirroring artists' conceptions of an age, are of truly inestimable value. I am reminded of the passage in Hegel's *Aesthetics* in which he speaks of "the miracle... of the whole mind passing directly into the skill of the hand."⁵ It follows that nothing whatever—no document, no historical or sociological interpretation, no list of dates and events—can say the things about an age (its worldview, and the joys, fears, and hopes that informed it) that these works are capable of conveying, small and sketchily executed though they often are. It is this quality that can elevate a simple watercolor sketch to the status of a key witness to its time—invaluable and unforgettable. Nor is that all: the depth and eloquence of the emotion that engendered the watercolor may make such a painting extremely important artistically—not so much in terms of any striking artistic skill or effect but, because, being filled with a certain tension in its internal structure, it is able to put that emotion across.

All of this I believe to be particularly true as regards the nineteenth century—a fascinating period in which ends and beginnings, legacy and renewal, expectation and disappointment are as inextricably bound up with one another as are the problems of conservation and change, adaptation and resistance. Today, perhaps more urgently than ever before, we are in a position to examine what all this means to us: progress, for example, which much of the nineteenth century idealized; the rise of the technological sciences; the whole relationship between reason and nature; and finally the conflicting demands of industrialization and Humanism.

The history of the Austrian Empire may well have reached something of an apogee during this period—in terms of its geographical hegemony, its internal organization, the power it wielded at the heart of Europe (where it acted as both bridge and bulwark simultaneously⁶), and the almost unprecedented cultural aura of which it formed the nucleus—a fact that is only now beginning to be understood fully and appreciated.

At this period in history Vienna, the "Imperial Capital and Residence," was indeed one of the brightest jewels in the world's cultural crown. However, the city did not achieve that status overnight, and together we must go back a little in time to discover how it came to do so.

	Francis Joseph I	Ferdinand I	Francis I (II)	Leo-pold	Joseph II	Maria Theresa
1740						J. M. Schmuzer 1733-1811
						V. Janscha 1743-1818
						L. Janscha 1749-1812
						C. Schütz 1745-1800
						J. Ziegler 1749-1802
						F. H. Fuger 1751-1818
						M. v. Molitor 1759-1812
						F. Runk 1764-1834
						J. A. Koch 1768-1839
						C. P. Schalhas 1767-1797
						J. Gauermann 1773-1843
						B. Wigand 1770-1846
1780						J. Knapp 1778-1833
						C. Russ 1779-1843
						J. Kniep 1779-1809
						J. Mössmer 1780-1845
1790						J. Alt 1789-1872
						J. Rebell 1787-1828
						J. N. Hoechle 1790-1835
						M. Loder 1791-1828
1792						J. A. Heinrich 1794-1822
						J. N. Passini 1798-1874
						J. Kuwasseg 1799-1859
						J. Danhauser 1805-1845
						J. E. Teltscher 1801-1837
						F. Gauermann 1807-1862
						F. Loos 1797-1890
						P. Fendi 1796-1842
						E. Gurk 1801-1841
						L. Russ 1809-1864
						A. W. Rieder 1796-1880
						J. Höger 1801-1877
						F. G. Waldmüller 1793-1865
						J. Kriehuber 1800-1876
						A. Schindler 1805-1861
						R. Theer 1808-1863
						M. Krafft 1812-1885
						L. Fischer 1813-1872
						J. F. Trembl 1816-1852
						E. Stöckler 1819-1893
						F. Alt 1821-1914
						A. Schön 1826-1897
						J. Selleny 1824-1875
						C. Schindler 1821-1842
						A. von Bensa 1820-1902
						C. Goebel 1824-1899
						A. v. Pettenkofen 1822-1889
1835						L. Passini 1832-1903
						S. L'Allemand 1840-1910
						E. J. Schindler 1842-1892
						A. Romako 1832-1889
						A. Greil 1841-1902
1848						E. Charlemont 1848-1906
						R. Raschka b. 1847
1916						



Jean-Etienne Liotard. *Archduchess Marie Christine Painting with Watercolors*. 1762. Crayon and red chalk. On loan from the Gottfried Keller Foundation; Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève, Geneva (1947–38).

I THE REFORMS OF MARIA THERESA AND HER SON JOSEPH II

MARIA THERESA LAYS THE FOUNDATIONS

Maria Theresa, born in 1717 as the eldest daughter of Emperor Charles VI, inherited her father's crown when he died unexpectedly in October, 1740, at the age of only fifty-five. (Her succession had been provided for by the so-called Pragmatic Sanction.) It became apparent immediately that a radical reorganization of the Austrian Empire was urgently necessary—and also that the young empress was a woman of outstanding gifts. She had a lucid understanding of governmental structures and of the demands of a new era, and she was inspired by an unshakable vision of a powerful, well-ordered multinational empire. All this was coupled with a rare ability to make vigorous, often quite intuitively motivated decisions. There was an irrational element in her makeup, the kind of “lucky streak” that successful leaders ought always to possess.

Maria Theresa's real greatness, however, lay in her maternal, humane, almost familiar attitude to the peoples of her realm; it formed the basis on which she arrived at her political decisions. At the same time she owed much of her success to her knack of placing the most outstanding advisers (Bartenstein, Haugwitz, Liechtenstein, Kaunitz) in the right job at the right time—and to her ability to listen closely to what those advisers said.

The so-called Theresian Reforms (which began in 1746) set out to make fundamental changes in all areas of the administration and political leadership of the monarchy, and the empress had to challenge powerful interests to push them through. In this she received crucial support from the loyal nobility, from a civil service that could be relied on implicitly to do its job, and from an officer corps that selflessly represented its empress and Austria in every garrison throughout the empire. Together these provided the requisite solid foundation for developments, the true importance of which would be inadequately conveyed by reeling off a list of individual measures affecting the administration, fiscal law, the army, or by mentioning, say, the centralization of power and the abolition of serfdom.

What really mattered was something quite different, something that lay behind the facts: an idea—or rather

an ideal—of human dignity, tolerance, and humanity. That was what fostered Maria Theresa's Austria. That was what informed its sustaining attitude toward life and the world, an attitude characterized for generations to come by prudence, understanding, and consideration for others—though also (there is no ignoring the fact) by a certain fatalism.

Part of the outlook that that ideal molded for at least two centuries (I personally believe its effects are still visible today) was a powerful commitment to an active, critical concern with culture. There was in Austria an awareness, at least, of the meaning and value of the arts and a feeling for the kind of education required to foster them. Maria Theresa herself was a trained opera singer and had worked as such before and even after her marriage. She, and perhaps to an even greater extent her children (all accomplished musicians), furnished the perfect model for those characteristically Viennese pursuits of domestic music-making and enthusiastic attendance at the opera.

The political significance of the Theresian Reforms for Austria and for what proved to be a sound and smoothly functioning heart of central Europe over two centuries need not concern us here.¹ On the other hand the cultural awareness of the period and its effect on the development of the arts must constitute my starting point.

Maria Theresa, though persuaded of the almost providential nature of her task, was not in the least given to any kind of strutting Baroque self-glorification. On the contrary, she repeatedly displayed very human and often quite self-critical traits. She wondered, for example, whether her decisions and reforms would adequately provide for a better future for her empire and would effectively benefit mankind, or whether the ill-tempered impatience of her son and heir Joseph would place all her achievements in jeopardy. Disappointment and resignation were very much the empress's lot in later years, for many of her fears regarding Joseph II proved eminently justified.

When plans were put forward in Vienna for founding an Academy to embrace all branches of the arts and sciences, it was suggested that the celebrated German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81) should be

asked to head it. Lessing himself was very ready to give up his “ghastly circumstances” in Wolfenbüttel in the duchy of Brunswick,² and the fact that his wife Eva König owned a silk mill in Vienna constituted a further reason for moving to the city. In the spring of 1775 Lessing even had talks with the relevant authorities in Vienna. These came to nothing, although, as he wrote to his brother Karl, he had been given “the very finest of receptions everywhere.”³ Indeed, Lessing’s arrival in Vienna was reported in all the city’s newspapers, and when his tragedy *Emilia Galotti* was performed in his honor, the audience accorded him repeated ovations. The authorities, however, decided against the project: the founding of an Academy of Sciences, they felt, should be “deferred until better days.”⁴ (In fact it had to wait for another seventy years.)

Lessing was eventually received by Empress Maria Theresa—and she sent him on his way with a rather remarkable observation: “I believe I take his meaning,” the empress said. “I am aware that good taste is not making any great headway. I just wish he would tell me whose fault that is. I have done all that lay within my wit and power to do. But I often think to myself: I am a mere woman, and there is not a great deal a woman can accomplish in such matters.”⁵ On that score she was undoubtedly mistaken. Maria Theresa was living proof of what a woman could accomplish in such matters, for she ushered in a new era of incomparable splendor. In addition to all her political, legal, financial, and humanitarian reforms she laid the groundwork for a flowering of the arts that was soon to give Austria a leading role on the international cultural stage.

In his *Oxford History of Music* Sir William Henry Hadow, whose view is certainly not clouded by local prejudice, makes this very clear. “If I had to cite the three greatest artistic periods in the history of the world,” he writes, “I should name Periclean Athens in first place, Elizabethan England in second place, and in third place, without a doubt, Vienna in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth.”⁶ For a whole host of reasons that conviction has never been brought to the attention of—and is certainly not shared by—the world at large.

Firstly there was the political position that Austria occupied among the European powers in the nineteenth century. With nationalism rampant in every country in Europe, objective judgments were scarcely possible. Moreover, Austria also faced enemies within: many nationalist forces were at work within this multinational empire; repeatedly defeated in war, Austria was eventually scorned, derided from within its own ranks. Then there was the country’s collapse into economic insignificance, which was aggravated by the total superiority of the victorious Allied powers after the First World War. Reduced to the status of an impoverished minor power, Austria temporarily lost all sense of identity and feeling of self-assurance.

This situation scarcely warranted a separate cultural self-awareness, let alone one with any claim to inter-

national attention. The conspicuous Austrian fatalism—as embodied in the old plague song, “*Ach du lieber Augustin*,” with its chorus of “Dear old Augustine, it’s all over for you”—turned into pessimism and the kind of destructive self-criticism of Austrian abilities and achievements exemplified by Karl Kraus’s mammoth Expressionist drama, *The Last Days of Mankind*.

Real and imagined inferiorities eventually led Austrians to admire all things foreign, which opened the door to every kind of outside influence. The resultant lack of an independent identity reduced Austria’s chances of recognition even further. Finally, the poverty of the interwar and postwar years meant only limited and not particularly attractive opportunities for Austrian authors to publish. With international interest already at a low ebb, Austrian artistic achievements proceeded to fall into total oblivion, locked in a downward spiral of diminishing interest and lack of demand.

Today, I am glad to say, the situation has changed radically in many respects. Austria’s artistic self-confidence has soared to fresh heights; there has been a huge increase in international interest, and the number of Austrian publications as well as their quality has substantially increased. One thinks of the field of contemporary literature, of recent international successes scored by Austrian artists, of exhibitions that have traveled all over the world, and of the greatly enhanced reputations now enjoyed by Austrian painters such as Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, and by turn-of-the-century art. Developments in the musical world come to mind too—the Vienna State Opera, the Vienna Philharmonic, the Salzburg Festival—as well as the successes of certain Austrian books, including a number of monographs about artists, which have had a perceptible influence on the art market.

Nevertheless, it took the academic world decades to outgrow a tendency to look down its nose at the nineteenth century. For a long time Vienna’s art historians showed a marked disinclination to accept Austrian artists of the period as valid research subjects. That, too, has changed as a result of the pioneering work of such modern scholars as Bruno Grimschitz, Heinrich Schwarz, and Fritz Novotny. Yet even now the reputation of watercolor painting in Austria—and particularly in Vienna—is very much less glorious than it ought to be. The time has come to set the record straight.

FRENCH INFLUENCES

In Austria and throughout Europe, the eighteenth century was clearly dominated by the example of France, which governed people’s way of life, their manners, and their language, as well as key areas in the arts. How far that dominance was more than merely alleged need not concern us here. What is certain is that the French constantly laid claim to a position of artistic superiority, and the upper classes of Austrian society were prepared to concede that claim.