

Press release

Exhibition

**October 18, 2007 -
January 14, 2008**

Musée du Louvre, Sully Wing,
1st floor, Salle de la Chapelle



Chair, c. 1825, walnut and pear veneer over beech and softwoods, contemporary yellow upholstery, Vienna (Austria), Musée du Louvre © Musée du Louvre / Lois Lammerhuber

**Biedermeier
From Craftsmanship to Design
Vienna and Prague, 1815–1830**

Through its involvement in the exhibition project *Biedermeier, The Invention of Simplicity*, originally conceived at the Milwaukee Art Museum and later embraced by the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Albertina in Vienna, the Louvre has taken an unexpected path, highlighting the emergence during the first third of the 19th century in Central Europe of a radical style, both sober and imaginative.

The Parisian phase of this touring exhibition, including about one hundred works from American and European collections, focuses in particular on interior decoration, furniture and objects created in Vienna and Prague.

An invitation to a journey through political, social and cultural history, the Biedermeier style perfectly embodies the values of a new art of living between 1815 and 1848. The term “Biedermeier” was derived from the name of a fictional character introduced to readers of a Munich satirical weekly in the 1840s. This everyman, Weiland Gottlieb Biedermaier (the original spelling) by name, was the embodiment of the model citizen, leading an uneventful and comfortable existence, more concerned with his family and his own naïve attempts at poetry than politics. A nostalgic take on this way of life prevalent in Central Europe in the 19th century, Biedermeier came to describe a style that was cozy and stolid.

The aim of this exhibition is to underscore the singularity of this movement as a harbinger of many aspects of modern aesthetics, including the age of industrial design. The objects presented include furniture, silver, crystal and porcelain pieces, wallpapers and textile samples, together with depictions of interiors, botanical studies and a few paintings. The presentation of these furnishings and objects invites the visitor to consider them under a new light, as original creations notable for their shapes, surfaces and dimensions.

Exhibition curator: Marc Bascou, chief curator, Department of Decorative Arts, Musée du Louvre, assisted by Béatrice Coullaré.

Exhibition catalogue: *Biedermeier*, produced in partnership with the Milwaukee Art Museum, the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Albertina in Vienna. Co-published by Musée du Louvre Éditions, Officina Libraria and Éditions Nicolas Chaudun, 240 p., €35. This publication was made possible thanks to the generous support of Arjowiggins.

This exhibition is organized in partnership with the Milwaukee Art Museum, the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Albertina in Vienna.

Visitor information

Exhibition open daily **except Tuesdays** from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and until 10 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays.

Place: Sully Wing, 1st floor, Salle de la Chapelle

Access to the exhibition is included in the purchase of an admission to the museum's permanent collections:

€9; €6 after 6 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays; free admission for all visitors the first Sunday of each month, and for youths under 26 after 6 p.m. on Fridays; free admission at all times for youths under 18, the unemployed, and holders of the “Louvre Jeunes”, “Louvre Professionnels”, “Louvre Enseignants”, “Louvre Etudiants Partenaires” or “Amis du Louvre” cards.

Further information

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Political and social environment

The Biedermeier era corresponds to the reign of Metternich, the iron-fisted chancellor of the Austrian empire, a period of peace following the Napoleonic wars, extending from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the revolutions of 1848. Dominated by a conservative spirit, this was an age less swayed by grandeur and heroism than by a desire for tranquility and stability. The considerable repression of civil liberties led people to withdraw into their familial and private lives.

Inseparable from these values of inward focus, quiet prosperity and domestic utility, Biedermeier may be considered as the artistic expression of the political and social order of that time. Contrasting with the opulent splendor of the French Empire style, Biedermeier embraced simplicity as a political, even moral, attitude.

In opposition to a widely received notion, the Biedermeier style did not initially reflect petty bourgeois ideals. At the outset, Biedermeier was favored above all by Emperor Franz Joseph I and the imperial family, by the ruling German families and the high aristocracy. Its influence later extended throughout Northern Germany, Scandinavia and Italy. However, it was not until the 1830s that it began to filter down to the middle class, to such an extent that it became its very embodiment.

Closely linked to historical and intellectual movements at the turn of the 19th century, Biedermeier's aesthetic foundations then came to convey a new way of life: the development of private residences, the emergence of domestic life as we know it today arose in this specific context. For example, the *wohnzimmer* or living room, as opposed to the traditional formal salon, is a Biedermeier innovation, as is the permanent quest for utility and comfort in the design of objects and furniture.

Biedermeier furniture

Until 1830 therefore, Biedermeier furniture was firmly entrenched in neoclassicism. Drawing upon this European tradition, the Biedermeier style was to develop its own completely innovative aesthetics, simultaneously sober and full of fantasy, stripping neoclassicism of all ornament thereby introducing entirely new creations.

The pragmatic approach of Biedermeier craftsmen abandoned the models imposed by Parisian decorators and instead sought inspiration in the English Sheraton and Regency styles.

The emphasis is on the structure of the furniture consisting of robust geometric forms, softened by buoyant curves. Mahogany began to be replaced by walnut, ash and fruit woods. The smooth surfaces highlighted the grain of the wood, discretely complemented by turnery or inlay elements.

The watercolors of interiors shown in the exhibition allow the visitor to appreciate the fundamental role of color: the upholstery of the chairs complements the wallpapers and curtains maintaining a single harmony of bright, solid colors, simply decorated with a trim or offering a dense network of subtle patterns in a single dominant scheme.

From craftsmanship to design

Due to the simplicity of forms and the abandonment of decoration, sometimes carried to the extreme of highly stylized, geometrically rigorous shapes, Biedermeier furniture and table objects appear today as prototypes for modern designs intended to be produced in an industrial manner.

However, in 1830, the industrial revolution had as yet had little impact on Central Europe. The main improvements in machinery originating in England, for example, were only slowly being introduced within the Central European workshops, which continued to rely on individual craftsmanship and where the entirety of Biedermeier's most characteristic pieces were produced.

The charm of these creations is therefore in large part the result of this duality: these objects, whose simplicity and sobriety easily call to mind industrial manufacturing processes, are in fact original creations, in which the craftsman's expertise is plainly evident.

In the Auditorium du Louvre:

- Friday, October 26, 2007 at 12:30 p.m., **Conference: Biedermeier and Modernity**, presented by Marc Bascou, exhibition curator, and Laurie Stein, art historian, Northfield, MN (USA).

- Saturday, October 20, **Symposium, 10 a.m.–6 p.m.: “Exhibiting Design: Object, Site and Environment”**.

- From October to December, at 12:30 p.m. and 8 p.m., **Concert series featuring works by Schubert**, with Dietrich Henschel, Julian Rachlin, Gleb Ivanov and others.