

ICONIC AUBÖCK A Workshop Shapes Austria's Concept of Design

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MAK – Press and PR
presse@MAK.at

Press Release
Vienna, 14.5.2024

Press Conference
Tuesday, 14.5.2024, 10 am
Please register at presse@MAK.at

The iconic, handmade design classics of the Carl Auböck workshop have influenced Austrian design for four generations. The MAK is devoting a comprehensive works exhibition to this legendary manufactory—that to this day operates in the Bernardgasse of Vienna's 7th District—exploring the materiality of Auböck's hugely diverse creations in brass, wood, horn, leather, and natural fibers. The roughly 400 exhibits in *ICONIC AUBÖCK: A Workshop Shapes Austria's Concept of Design*—including numerous unique items and prototypes—provide insight into the workshop's characteristic designs, that were often ahead of their time and attained worldwide recognition.

The MAK exhibition focuses on the workshop's stylistically formative interwar and postwar years and on the experimental 1980s. It presents objects of everyday use that transform home interiors into testing grounds for beautiful objects and witty artistic statements from the Carl Auböck workshop's rich repertoire—to include corkscrews, chess sets, and clocks. These remarkable designs—from paperweights to tree tables and lampstands—are mostly the work of Carl Auböck II (1900–1957) who—inspired by the Bauhaus, where he studied from 1919—amalgamated local and international styles.

His mentor at the Bauhaus was painter and art theoretician Johannes Itten (1888–1967). A revealing study completed in Itten's 1919 class provides early evidence of Auböck's preoccupation with the form-giving qualities of line and movement. His unique design language is manifested in candlesticks, bookends, shoehorns, vases, bowls, baskets, and ashtrays—as well as in his *Napoleon* of 1952/53, a graceful, abstract creation also presented in the exhibition as a hand-formed wax model.

Carl Auböck II also included the concept of the *objet trouvé* in his avantgarde repertoire. Using minimalistic, abstract, organic, and technoid combinations of materials, shapes, and surfaces, he succeeded in creating a distinctive sculptural language in miniature.

The MAK approaches Auböck's works from an unusual perspective—that of Surrealism. Strategies derived from this artistic and literary movement, with its neoteric vision of reality, are to be seen in the startling motifs and subjects of many of his sculptures and everyday objects. Carl Auböck II's challenge to traditional notions of form and function was fundamentally Surrealist—at a time in Vienna when Surrealism and the ideas of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) were comingling.

Auböck's artistic approach also interested Walter Gropius (1883–1969, head of the Bauhaus from 1919 to 1928). In the USA—where after his emigration he lived from the late 1930s onwards—Gropius had a set of unusual Auböck paperweights arranged on his writing desk: the hand (1947), the foot (1947), the egg (1947)—a homage to Constantin Brâncuși's (1876–1957) sculptural object *The Beginning of the World*—and a stone encased in leather (1950).

These at first sight irreconcilable combinations, abstract compositions, and visual jokes often hide—in a tongue-in-cheek way—their real purpose from both observer and user. Carl Auböck II's Surrealist style is to be found not only in objects of everyday use. He also explored carnal and fetishist themes, working with sculptural and symbolic forms, with materials of differing haptic qualities, and with natural substances.

In her collage-like text *Lampen am Stiel* [Lamps on a Cane] from 2005, writer Elfriede Jelinek analyses Auböck's designs as living language: "The irregular bulges of the bamboo cane's growth sections and the annual rings of Carl Auböck's famous tree segment tables are, after all, units of measurement, but not ones that we must—or indeed could—use ourselves. They measure only themselves, their own growth." The exhibition includes a selection of exceptional standing and table lamps from the 1950s.

The MAK also presents for the first time works by sculptor and textile artist Mara Uckunowa (1895–1987), who met Carl Auböck II at the Bauhaus in Weimar and later married him. The exhibition includes a selection of her abstract fabric designs from the 1940s with remarkable textures and colors, as well as a fabric covering for a newspaper and magazine rack by Carl Auböck II from the 1950s. Uckunowa's artistic development was shaped by Johannes Itten, Georg Muche (1895–1987), and Josef Albers (1888–1976).

Mara Uckunowa-Auböck's and Carl Auböck's son, architect and designer Carl Auböck III (1924–1993), progressed to producing small series of works. Inspired by his studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and by industrial design, through international cooperations he achieved worldwide fame for the Auböck workshop. Finally, Carl Auböck IV (* 1954) created



designs for Hermès and Tiffany products that are also included in this MAK exhibition.

Carl Auböck II's life must also be seen in the context of contemporary Austrian history. In 1933 he became a member of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) while it was still banned in Austria—then a regular party member after Germany annexed Austria in 1938. He was treasurer of the Vienna Arts and Crafts Association and—as labels on individual objects testify—his works were exhibited by the Werkbund. In 1943, together with Josef Hoffmann, J. & L. Lobmeyr, Karl Hagenauer, and others, the Carl Auböck Arts and Crafts Metal Workshop participated in the exhibition *Deutsche Werkkunst* [German Craftsmanship] in the State Arts and Crafts Museum in Vienna—as the MAK was called after the 1938 annexation of Austria.

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The fourth generation of Auböcks still produce immaculately handcrafted objects in the firm's workshop in Vienna's 7th District. The objects are much prized by collectors worldwide and may be found in international museums, including New York's Museum of Modern Art and London's Victoria & Albert Museum. Carl Auböck III's estate has been incorporated into the Architekturzentrum Wien's (AzW) collection.

The exhibition is accompanied by the publication *ICONIC AUBÖCK: A Workshop Shapes Austria's Concept of Design*, edited by Lilli Hollein and Bärbel Vischer, with contributions by Kimberly Bradley, Lilli Hollein, Nina Schedlmayer, and Bärbel Vischer. German/English, ca. 200 pages with numerous color illustrations. MAK, Vienna/Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel 2024. Available at the MAK Design Shop and online at [MAKdesignshop.at](https://makdesignshop.at) for € 39.

Press photos are available for download at [MAK.at/en/press](https://mak.at/en/press)



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Opening

Tuesday, 14.5.2024, 7 pm

Free admission to the exhibition opening

Exhibition Venue

Central Room MAK Design Lab

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

Exhibition Dates

15.5.2024–6.1.2025

Opening Hours

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

Curator

Bärbel Vischer, Curator, MAK Contemporary Art Collection

Accompanying Program

Details at MAK.at

MAK Admission

€ 16.50/15.50*; reduced € 13.50/12.50*; every Tuesday 6–9 pm:
admission € 8/7.50*

Free admission for kids and teens under 19

* Ticket price online

MAK Press and PR

Judith Anna Schwarz-Jungmann (Head)

T +43 1 71136-213, judith.schwarz-jungmann@MAK.at

Sandra Hell-Ghignone

T +43 1 71136-212, sandra.hell-ghignone@MAK.at

Ulrike Sedlmayr

T +43 1 71136-210, ulrike.sedlmayr@MAK.at

