

HYPE AND HIGH CULTURE **75 Years of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen)** **in Posters**

A cooperation between the MAK, the Vienna Festival |
Freie Republik Wien, and the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus

1

MAK – Press and PR

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Press Release

Vienna, 15.4.2026

Opening

Tuesday, 21.4.2026, 7 pm

Free admission to the exhibition opening

For 75 years, the themes of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) have been part and parcel of the city's cultural life. To mark this anniversary, the MAK is showing some 80 iconic campaigns from the collection of the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus in the exhibition *HYPE AND HIGH CULTURE. 75 Years of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) in Posters*. Held in the MAK Poster Forum, the selection from over 1,000 Festival posters not only documents the visual evolution of one of Europe's most important cultural festivals; it also sketches a psychologically revealing portrait of the city of Vienna, from the cultural upheavals of the post-war period to the radical contemporary designs under the artistic direction of Milo Rau.

In close cooperation with the Vienna Festival | Freie Republik Wien and the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, the MAK exhibition sheds light on the festival's eventful history, whilst also bridging the gap to current endeavors to push boundaries in art.

A chronicle of distinctive annual subjects (1951–2026) is juxtaposed with a thematic journey. This focuses on areas such as theater, music, exhibitions, venues (Arena), and public debates. As part of the exhibition, the entire collection of the Vienna Festival Archive is also being made available digitally for the first time ever. Since the Vienna Festival's founding in 1951, its posters have represented far more than mere advertising media; first and foremost, they represent a prism on the socio-political climate of the post-war years. The visual language of that time reinforced the drive to reinvent occupied Vienna as a cultural metropolis.

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The first theme, created by the renowned poster artist Victor Theodor Slama, seemed surprisingly conservative even by the standards of the time: a Baroque putto set against the city skyline was intended to symbolize trust and continuity in the wake of the ideological turmoil of the Nazi era. Visual communication was rethought following the horrors of the Second World War and the Nazi dictatorship, with Baroque or Biedermeier styles often drawn upon. The putto, a symbol of the “old, glorious Vienna” and *joie de vivre*, was meant to restore the city’s reputation as a world-class cultural metropolis.

Over decades, the works of distinguished and decorated graphic artists such as Walter Hofmann, Hans Fabigan, Hermann Kosel, Otto Liewehr, Georg Schmid, and Josef Seger left their mark on the cityscape. It was Liewehr, too, who developed the striking red-white-red “Festwochen W” in 1954, a signet that has lasted more than seven decades as a visual peg, an identifying marker as firm as an anchor. To mark the exhibition, the sketch for this will be on show to the public for the first time. The poster of this era was an instrument of aesthetic instruction and many times the recipient of awards due to the city initiative to judge posters. The latter was intended to enhance the artistic element in public space.

As a result, these posters subtly reflect the *zeitgeist*. Wedged between the postwar feeling of blissful release and the young Second Republic, later moving up to the scandal-enmired campaigns of recent times, these images set off memories of Vienna in the minds of its inhabitants: thoughts of unforgotten theater controversies, heated debates—and above all, experiences of great art. Controversial events within the urban social context such as the occupation by squatters of the Arena in 1976 echo, as do enduring moments such as Falco’s concert opening the Festival in 1985.

The paradigm shift: The poster as provocation

For nearly a quarter of a century, the Demner, Merlicek & Bergmann agency shaped the Festival’s image. The decisive break with the purely decorative tradition came with the turn of the millennium. Under the artistic direction of Luc Bondy, the agency radically changed its tone in 2001. Not only did the program on stage set out to provoke, but the campaign leading up to it as well. Under the slogan *From 11 May to 18 June, things will get serious*, original quotes from angry letters to the editor—such as “an insult to a nation of culture!” or “tasteless plebs!”—spearheaded the campaign.

This strategy of appropriating criticism transformed the billboard into a space of public discourse. The festival poster had now definitively broken away from its role as a mere medium of information and turned into an integral part of the artistic program.

The Mozart Year of 2006 remains iconic, as the festival countered the cult of genius with a touch of irony: posters featuring the heads of Mozart and Freud demonstratively rolling their eyes became iconic motifs in the history of Viennese design.



The Free Republic: The poster as political protagonist

In recent years, particularly under the artistic direction of Milo Rau, political tension has reached a new intensity. The proclamation of the “Freie Republik Wien” (Free Republic of Vienna) brings with it its own symbolic order, with the poster serving as a declaration of war. The events of 2025 demonstrate the enduring relevance of such visual statements: Posters by the Studio Sirene design collective (photographer: Anna Breit) depicting gay couples or pregnant women were torn down, defaced, or burned at Schwarzenbergplatz. The resulting “Vigil of Love” organized by the festival management proved once again that the medium of the poster still contains within it the power to resituate debates from the arts pages directly on to the streets.

HYPE AND HIGH CULTURE opens the series of many exciting cultural events as part of the 2026 Vienna Festival. This year, too, the Festival under the artistic direction of Milo Rau explores the boundaries between art and activism.

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Edited by the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus and the Vienna Festival
75th Vienna Festival

The booklet is available at the MAK and the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus.

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

A joint project of the Vienna Festival | Freie Republik Wien and the MAK

**FREIE
REPUBLIK
WIENER
FEST
WOCHEN**

In cooperation with the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus



Opening

Tuesday, 21.4.2026, 7 pm

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Exhibition Venue

MAK Poster Forum

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

Exhibition Dates

22.4.–20.9.2026

Opening Hours

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

Guest Curators

Franz Gangelmayer, Manuela Leutgeb, Wienbibliothek

MAK Curator

Peter Klingner, Deputy Head, MAK Library and Works on Paper Collection

Publication

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Supporting Program

available at MAK.at

MAK Admission

€ 19/18*; reduced € 15.50/14.50*

every Tuesday 6–9 pm: Admission € 9.50/8.50*

Admission free for children and teens under 19

* online ticket price

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