

## VALLY WIESELTHIER Ceramic Sculptor

1

MAK – Press and PR

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### Press Release

Vienna, 27.4.2026

### Press Conference

Monday, 27.4.2026, 4 pm

“Tell these people who I am!”—surely nothing captures the high artistic aspirations of the famous designer Vally Wieselthier (1895–1945) as concisely as her own words. Radically expressive, confident, and far ahead of her time, she broke the mold of functional pottery. She considered herself a sculptor and created masonry heaters, fountains, wall friezes, as well as impressive sculptures, but she was also a successful textile artist and graphic designer. With its first comprehensive retrospective on the artist entitled *VALLY WIESELTHIER: Ceramic Sculptor*, the MAK is turning the spotlight on her career in Europe and the United States and demonstrating her lasting and ongoing impact on Austrian ceramic art on the basis of 160 select objects. The exhibition was inspired by the partial bequest of her estate by her family in the US.

Wieselthier was a student of Josef Hoffmann and Michael Powolny at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts and is regarded as the most prominent representative of Wiener Werkstätte ceramics, which were defined entirely by women artists. From 1927 she ran the production site at the cooperative and developed a new form of ceramic sculpture of hitherto unknown expressivity.

The exhibition presents significant, in some cases never exhibited objects from European collections and from Wieselthier’s estate in the USA. With the Wiener Werkstätte Archive the MAK already had unique sources and objects related to her life and work but they have now been substantially enriched thanks to the donation of her entire estate on paper. This has made it possible to retrace Wieselthier’s artistic development in Europe and her previously almost unknown career in the USA.

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The subtitle *Ceramic Sculptor* points to a key aspect of her creative output: drawings, illustrations, and designs played just as important a part as ceramic. This was particularly evident during her time at the Wiener Werkstätte, but also in her early illustrations for the portfolios *Mode Wien 1914/5* [Viennese Fashion 1914/5] and *Das Leben einer Dame* [The Life of a Lady]. From this starting point, the exhibition shows Wieselthier's exceptional artistic development, career, and biography in thematic sections.

Wieselthier's various gifts and great determination were evident even in childhood. Born in Vienna in 1895, she won numerous competitions in swimming, high diving, tennis, and skiing. At the same time, she was interested in fashion and enjoyed drawing elegantly dressed ladies. In 1914 she secretly took the entrance examination for the School of Arts and Crafts, today's University of Applied Arts Vienna, where she studied under Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann, Michael Powolny, and the textile artist Rosalia Rothansl. In 1917 Hoffmann recruited his student for the Wiener Werkstätte (WW), where she was free to experiment with all manner of materials in the Artists' Workshop. Wieselthier later remembered her early years at the WW as the happiest of her life.

Founded by Hoffmann, Moser, and the entrepreneur Fritz Waerndorfer in 1903, the Wiener Werkstätte created high-quality everyday objects and interior decorations in line with the Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art. At the WW Wieselthier designed not only ceramics but also glass decor, fabric patterns, embroidery, jewelry, and silver objects, as well as posters and advertisements. She helped decorate the salesrooms, creating fantastical wall paintings.

One of the outstanding pieces in the MAK exhibition is the ceramic figure *Flora* that she created at the WW in 1928—a kneeling woman whose body is covered in orange-colored flowers and wild blue shading. A key work of expressive ceramics, it embodies the new model of femininity in the interwar period: self-assured, independent, and self-determined. At the same time, *Flora* is an example of how the artist repeatedly depicted herself in her figures.

Wieselthier was exceptionally good at self-promotion. She established contact with producers, published articles in the magazine *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, and was awarded commissions for architectural sculptures in Vienna. At the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925, Wieselthier found an ideal stage in the Austrian pavilion, which had been designed by Hoffmann, and received international attention for the first time. For the *International Exhibition of Ceramic Art* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1928, she traveled to New York and ultimately decided to stay there.

One of Wieselthier's first commissions came from the architect Ely Jacques Kahn; he asked her to decorate the doors of an elevator in a high-rise in Manhattan. The motifs are reminiscent of her fabric patterns for the Wiener Werkstätte, whereas the geometric structure reflects American Art Deco—a



perfect symbiosis in metal of her old and new design vocabulary. In 1931 she returned to Vienna for a couple of months and was given a celebrity welcome. She received commissions from Lobmeyr and the Augarten Porcelain Manufactory, which the press took as a sign that her hometown was proud of the internationally successful artist.

In the USA Wieselthier worked not only as a ceramicist but also as a fashion designer, illustrator, and window dresser. And she was repeatedly offered teaching jobs. There was a scandal at Louisiana State University in 1938: She was dismissed—allegedly because she wore short trousers and had taken her dog into the cafeteria, but actually because of her unconventional teaching style. This is probably what prompted her telegram to President Roosevelt: “Tell these people who I am!”

3

An obituary in the *New York Times* after her death on 1 September 1945 declared that Vally Wieselthier was “internationally known as a leader of the modern school of ceramic art.” In Vienna this recognition has only been accorded her in recent years: In 2011 the artist Iris Andraschek installed a memorial on the ground in front of the former entrance to the Wiener Werkstätte on Neustiftgasse entitled *Tell these people who I am*—etched into the asphalt as a plea that she not be forgotten. In 2021 a small park not far away was named after Wieselthier and offers children from the elementary school opposite the opportunity to explore Wieselthier’s fantastical approach and aesthetics.

As part of the exhibition, the symposium *Dance—Art—Design* will take place in the MAK Lecture Hall on 17 and 18 September 2026.

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



**Press Conference**

Monday, 27.4.2026, 4 pm

**Opening**

Tuesday, 28.4.2026, 7 pm

Free admission to the opening of the exhibition

**Exhibition Venue**

Central Room MAK Design Lab  
MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

4

**Exhibition Dates**

29.4.2026–10.1.2027

**Opening Hours**

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

**Curators**

Rainald Franz, Curator, MAK Glass and Ceramics Collection  
Anne-Katrin Rossberg, Curator, MAK Metal Collection and  
Wiener Werkstätte Archive

**Exhibition Design**

Claudia Cavallar

**Supporting Program**

Available at [MAK.at/en](https://www.mak.at/en)

**MAK Admission**

€ 19/18\*; reduced € 15.50/14.50\*; every Tuesday 6–9 pm:  
admission € 9.50/8.50\*

Free admission for children and teens under 19

\* Online ticket price

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