

On-grid (an elegant clarion call)

by Kathryn Allan

Tray, c. 1905 (V&A) Hoffmann, Josef (designer) Wiener Werkstätte (maker)
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O138595/tray-hoffmann-josef/>

What is it?

The object is a shallow, rectilinear tray. It is made of iron, which has been pierced with square perforations and painted white. It is 36.5cm in length, 27.5cm in width, and has a diameter of 1.5cm. The object was made circa 1905 in the Wiener Werkstätte (the Vienna Workshop). It is geometric in design, its gridwork – or *gitterwerk* – giving the object its pattern and texture. It is both structure and decoration, form and function at once. And, with its forensically considered detail – the width of the tray's handles equal to the height of its rim and set in from its corners the same distance, for example – a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in miniature.

One of the prime objectives of the WW [Wiener Werkstätte] was to impart a satisfactorily artistic and functional shape to objects in everyday use, and its designers therefore took an interest in tableware in all its different forms. (Schweiger, 1990, p.56)

The tray is everyday tableware, designed to bring art to the dining experience; a practical object serving up modernity.

The table at which one sits down to eat offers an opportunity among many in everyday life to bring into play a feeling for art. This is something important enough not merely to be left to the parlourmaid or butler. (*Hobe Warte* magazine, cited in Schweiger, 1990, p.60)

Its audience? The Werkstätte's customers 'were artists, members of the upper middle class, Jewish high finance and big industry' (Sarnitz, 2016, p.43).

Who designed it?

The tray was designed by Vienna Secession founding member Josef Hoffmann – an Art

Nouveau architect and designer known, due to his love of geometry, as ‘Quadratl Hoffmann’ (‘Square Hoffmann’). It is characteristic of Square Hoffmann’s purity in design and demonstrates his reach for ‘new surface constellations’ (Longhauser, Sekler and Völker, 1991, p.15). The tray and its friends – latticework place settings, electroplated silver and glass baskets, pierced and embossed silver vases, electroplated nickel silver cruets – announce themselves with the same austerity, typical of Vienna’s ‘grid’. Tableware for his Palais Stoclet, perhaps? As Escritt tells us, ‘In Vienna and Glasgow stylization became increasingly angular and ornament appeared to be in retreat.’ (ibid, p.133) Although designed by Hoffmann, the tray was made by a craftsman of the Wiener Werkstätte, the workshop’s artistic output being ‘of a very high quality’ (ibid, p.351)

What does it look like?

Whilst devoid of obvious iconography – graph paper awaiting equation? – it is, I think, an elegant clarion call of the period. It declares, in all its stark beauty – its blanched, severe clarity –

I’m new, I’m of now.

Note to Sol LeWitt (or Agnes Martin or the Mackintoshes,¹ depending on who’s coming to tea, who’s coming to feel art): Just don’t spill anything – it’ll fall straight through the holes.²

¹ One wonders if the conversation, over the gitterwerk constellations, would turn to ‘who first used the square’. (Longhauser, Sekler and Völker, p.13)

² Hoffmann’s latticework vases, baskets, teacups etc. have (or had) glass liners. His tray, however, appears not to have or have had such a liner. See, for example, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O88389/basket-hoffmann-josef/> and <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O381343/vase-josef-hoffmann/>.

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Wiener Werkstätte

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