



Fig. 1 JH, Austrian pavilion, Rome 1911 (contemporary photograph)  
Private archive

Valerio Terraroli

## Josef Hoffmann and His Reception in Italy

Clarity, geometric simplicity, sobriety, elegance, sophistication, extravagance, and balance: it is with these terms that the Italian critics describe Josef Hoffmann's style at the turn of the 20th century. A style so characteristic and innovative that—in contrast to the developments in Italy—it moves from a radically Secessionist interpretation of modernism, metamorphoses, and from the 1910s is courageously enriched with Classicist elements, then—primarily in the inter-war period—integrates quotations from art history, and hence becomes a benchmark for Italian architects and designers in the 1920s and 1930s. Hoffmann's relationship with Italian culture is one of give and take that begins during his training and intensifies from the 1910s when Hoffmann increasingly turns to the "Italian model." Remembering his travels through Italy in 1895/96, the Viennese architect writes:

"From the first I [...] was overcome by the onrush of impressions [...]. Nevertheless, as the school of Otto Wagner intended to keep us from falling sacrifice to the blind style copyism [...] [p]erhaps my appreciation of the simple yet peculiar Italian building style most prevalent in the country, which was an antithesis to the great, official architecture, came of its own accord. In any case, it had far more to impart for our endeavours to give shape to purpose and material."<sup>1</sup>

In 1911 Hoffmann reestablishes contact with Italy when he designs the Austrian pavilion at the *International Fine Arts Exhibition* in Rome; in 1933 a solo show is organized at the Milan Triennial, and the following year he constructs the Austrian pavilion for the Venice Biennale. Nevertheless, just like the novel ideas proposed by the Vienna Secession, the innovations in his architectural and decorative art vocabulary have no immediate influence on the Italian architects, artists, and designers of the early 20th century, who only investigate the Hoffmann model in the late 1910s and 1920s. At this time Hoffmann and the Vienna Secession finally become the main source of inspiration for Italian Art Deco and early, nascent modernism, and even go on to have an impact on the clear and elegant Rationalism of the likes of Carlo Scarpa.<sup>2</sup> Despite Art Nouveau being at the peak of its expansion at the time of the *First International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art* in Turin in 1902, Josef

Hoffmann's style has still had no considerable or at least no explicit or discernible influence on Italy. However, a certain interest in Hoffmann and the Viennese tradition can be identified in the newspaper articles published that year, in which astute and informed intellectuals discuss modernism and the merits of the new style. Vittorio Pica, for example, writes:

"The new Austrian interior decoration, above all for schools, newspaper editorial offices, and art exhibitions, brings to light such a sophisticated gracefulness and ingenious elegance that the eye of the art aficionado is instantly captivated. All those who had not been following the regular exhibitions of the Vienna Secession since 1897, were astonished and delighted by the exquisite and playful novelty of the overall decoration of the rooms in the Austrian fine arts section at the Paris World's Fair of 1900 [...]. The ensemble truly did have a rare charm with its expert interplay of green and gold with white and black, with its subtle emphasis of every arabesque and every stylized figural or tree motif on the monochrome walls. Josef Hoffmann's absence from the exhibition in Turin is thus deeply regrettable, since none other than he conceived, designed, and had executed these gorgeous rooms; he is undisputedly the most sagacious, most rational, and most original master of interior decoration [...]. He would have given the Italian public the opportunity to appreciate his value to one of the most interesting and characteristic aspects of Austria's current renaissance in the decorative arts; he would have made them understand that those same snapped off lines and those same mascarons with long hanging ribbons, with exaggerated dimensions [...] that seem quite tiresome on the exteriors of buildings, can in fact, when tastefully and discerningly arranged inside a room, appear eminently graceful."<sup>3</sup>

These observations are evidently the result of an intimate familiarity with Austrian innovations and the leading role of Viennese architects. One of the most vociferous advocates of Italy adopting the modernist style, Enrico Thovez publishes a long article in the magazine *L'Arte decorativa moderna* entitled "L'Arte decorativa austriaca" in 1903. Referring to the World's Fair in Paris in 1900, he declares: "With regard to design, novelty, skill, harmony of forms, and exquisitely elegant taste, the rooms furnished by Austria were superior to those of all other nations,"<sup>4</sup> and continues:



Fig. 2 Giovanni Greppi, house at Via Statuto 12, Milan, 1919  
Private archive



Fig. 3 Giovanni Greppi, Irpinia (Avellino) pavilion, Milan, Fiera Campionaria, 1928  
Private archive

"The editions of the magazine *Der Architekt*, as well as the volumes published under the title *Aus der Wagnerschule*, have made us aware of names and works, above all those of Joseph Maria Olbrich and Josef Hoffmann.<sup>5</sup> [...] The Austrian furniture shown in our pictures, correspond to the commercial model commonplace in Viennese homes. In contrast to the furniture designed by Olbrich, Hoffmann, Bauer, and other Secessionists, it is not the product of any particular innovation. It is simply English furniture, but developed, made robust and more practical [...]. Incidentally, its success at the exhibition in Turin in 1902 is the best proof that even the general public has acquired a taste for it."<sup>6</sup>

This confirms that the Italians are aware that Hoffmann has created a coherent architectural/decorative syntax and show their immediate interest, yet his impact on Italian art occurs only later, even if within the diverse panorama of Art Nouveau a fondness for abstract geometric forms can already be discerned among some Italian artists, predominantly among those artists who were raised as citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and were shaped by Viennese culture: Pietro Marussig, Ugo Zovetti, Adolfo Levier, Carlo Crampa, Vittore Zanetti Zilla, Alfeo Argentieri, and Luigi Bonazza. However, their abstract geometricity often and readily yields to floral shapes, naturalistic ornaments, or eclectic/Classicist quotations. Yet no homogeneous modern style ever emerges in Italy; instead, modernism is interpreted individually, with each artisan, artist, and architect's approach being conditioned by their own strengths and regional traditions. In a nutshell, a very eclectic interpretation of modernism as opposed to the rigor of the Secession. Nevertheless, there are some modernist markers: For example, the influence of Hoffmann can be identified in the furnishing of the music room commissioned by the famous Milanese gallerist Alberto Grubicy for his daughter (and which survived unchanged until 1922, the year the gallerist died). In 1907/08 Grubicy commissioned Gaetano Previati to produce a cycle of six paintings devoted to music for the villa on Via Carlo Ravizza in Milan; the villa no longer stands, but a photo from 1908 shows a room with contemporary furnishings that are unequivocally influenced by the Secession. The wooden wainscoting that frames Previati's paintings and divide the room, as well as the panels that separate the room proper from

>  
Fig. 4 Music room in Alberto Grubicy's house on Via Ravizza in Milan, 1908  
Alberto Previati's estate



the piano room, the parallelepiped furniture with rectangular recessed fittings, the deep, quadrilateral chairs, the drop-leaf table likewise influenced by the ornamental motif of the square (five white, quadrilateral intarsias on ebony wood): all this points to Hoffmann and Vienna, despite the fact that the furniture was most likely produced in Milan, by the company Quarti or Ceruti.<sup>7</sup>

Only at the Venice Biennale in 1910, when the famous solo show of 22 paintings by Gustav Klimt was held in the Austrian room of the central pavilion designed by the Austrian architect Eduard Josef Wimmer-Wisgrill, did the Italians fall in love with the Vienna Secession once and for all, specifically with the paintings and interior design, as the works by Galileo Chini and Vittorio Zecchin prove. Klimt can build on his success in Italy at the 1911 *International Fine Arts Exhibition* to commemorate the half centenary of the Kingdom of Italy, while Josef Hoffmann designs the now demolished Austrian pavilion in Vigna Cartoni, which hosted another solo show with twelve Klimt paintings. The building, U-shaped around a courtyard, incorporates classical forms in a sophisticated and simplified way: These can be seen in the high base, in the monumental windows with geometric jambs, in the plain, fluted pilasters of the cloister, as well as in the interior, which is conceived as a sacral, white, open space suffused with natural light whose only decoration consists in the rhythmic repetition of the straight line, the rhombus, the acute angle. All these elements are part of the Art Deco stylistic vocabulary and are used unambiguously in 1920s Milan in the projects of Giovanni Muzio, Gio Ponti,

Emilio Lancia, Tomaso Buzzi, and Giovanni Greppi. The rectangular splayed window reveals on the ground floor, the strict geometricity of the apertures, the T-shaped section of the main entrance, and not least the sharply triangular bay window of the building constructed by Greppi at Via Statuto 12 in Milan in 1919, all reveal allusions to Hoffmann's oeuvre. These elements are taken up again by Greppi in 1928 in the Irpinia (Avellino) pavilion at the *Fiera Campionaria di Milano* [Milan Trade Fair], though this time accompanied by classical allusions like Tuscan columns, spheres, and cornucopian vessels. What is impressive about Milanese Art Deco is its intelligent fusion of Hoffmann's square and linear forms with sophisticated historical allusions, from Mannerism to Neoclassicism. As, for example, in the so-called "Ca' Brütta" by Giovanni Muzio (1919–23), in the house on Via Randaccio built by Gio Ponti (1924–26), in Palazzo Borletti on Via San Vittore, which was similarly designed by Ponti but in 1928, and the headquarters of the Banca Popolare di Milano, which was constructed by Giovanni Greppi (1928–30) and in which Neoclassical elements coalesce with vast columns of cipollino marble furnished with architraves, familiar from the Looshaus in Vienna, which was built by Adolf Loos between 1909 and 1911.

Once a version of modernism finally emerges in Italy that rejects all Naturalist, Historicist, and Eclecticist compromises, Hoffmann is credited as its role model. The main points of reference are Stoclet House and his creations for the Wiener Werkstätte, in which he incorporates Baroque and Rococo



Fig. 5 Amedeo Bocchi, conference room, headquarters of the savings bank in Parma, 1917

Private archive

elements in his repertoire, though not without first simplifying and flattening their lines, such as in the Austrian pavilion for Paris in 1925: "It is an architecture of furniture that is inspired by Baroque forms; extraordinary architecture, the fruit of sophisticated taste and therefore interesting as an elegant game."<sup>8</sup>

Roberto Papini provides a striking definition that gives an indication of how the ideas of Hoffmann and the Wiener Werkstätte were perceived in Italy:

"Austria has been the avant-garde for three decades [...] the Austrian artists work metal and jewels, wood and glass, wire and ceramic with exceptional skill; one indulges their every caprice because it is always contained within the limits of a strict, if not obvious logic. The rooms created by Hoffmann, Strnad, and Gorge in the Austrian section constitute a fascinating compromise between whimsy and equilibrium. Woe betide anyone who dares imitate the Austrian architects and decorators without possessing their expert taste: the result would be ungainly and grotesque."<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Papini emphasizes Hoffmann's genius in the decorative arts:

"This style is shaped by few artists and almost exclusively by architects, with Josef Hoffmann at the forefront [...]. Clarity and geometric simplicity of forms indisputably dominate Austrian production; maximum frugality with adornments is accompanied by the simplification of form. Even if neither gold nor silver, the materials are precious thanks to the way they are worked: the obvious hammering, the care and expertise with which reliefs,

repoussage, rough and smooth surfaces, perfect contours, harmonious curves are created. Artisans who are such masters of their tools, such experts in every technique, are guided by a natural sense of elegance and sophistication. Certain things might go against our Italian taste, which is hostile to excesses even of sophistication; yet [among the Austrians' products] there is nothing vulgar or careless, nothing that does not comply with general contemporary taste."<sup>10</sup>

In *Le arti d'oggi. Architettura e arti decorative in Europa*, a comprehensive overview of Italian and international Art Deco published in Milan in 1930, Papini frequently cites Hoffmann. In the richly illustrated section, he compares him with Ponti and Lancia, attempting to prove that Italian architecture and decorative arts—despite their individuality—have reached the same level as their Austrian exemplars. Papini concludes his visionary and dreamlike account, which precedes the illustrated section and is dedicated to life in Universa—a metropolis that arose from the ruins of war—with praise for the "new classicism" in contrast to modernism: "The young people of Universa are not ashamed to admit that they live in an archaic age. It is an age in which people are starting over. [...] Founding a new classicism, means returning to order, measure, form, style."<sup>11</sup> These are the watchwords of Italian Art Deco, whose protagonists were Muzio, Greppi, Ponti, Buzzi, Lancia, Portaluppi, Andloviz, Zecchin, Martinuzzi, Chini, the early Scarpa and whose absolute lodestar in the field of both architecture and the decorative arts was Josef Hoffmann, the embodiment of the Secession. ■



Fig. 6 Piero Portaluppi, interior view of the Fagianaia Reale, 1928–30 Monza Park, Golf Club headquarters

Milan, Piero Portaluppi Foundation

1 Hoffmann, Josef, *Selbstbiographie/Autobiography*, edited by Peter Noever and Marek Pokorný, Ostfildern, 2009, 90. Trans. Bernd Magar and Andrew Oakland.

2 Franz, Rainald, "'La viennese evidente.' Immagini da un'architettura mitteleuropea: Hoffmann e Vienna nell'opera di Scarpa." in: Tegethoff, Wolf/Zanchettin, Vitale (eds.), *Carlo Scarpa. Struttura e forme*, Venice 2007 (Studi su Carlo Scarpa 6).

3 Pica, Vittorio, *L'Arte Decorativa all'Esposizione di Torino del 1902*, edited by Istituto Italiano d'arti grafiche, Bergamo 1903, 159–160.

4 Thovez, Enrico, "L'Arte decorativa austriaca," in: *L'Arte decorativa moderna* (II) 5 1903, 129.

5 *Ibid.*, 136.

6 *Ibid.*, 139.

7 The photo of the music room at the Grubicy villa dates from 1908 (Eredi Alberto Previati archive). See Staudacher, Elisabetta, "Le suggestioni di Previati per il salone musicale di casa Grubicy," in: Vorrasi, Chiara (ed.), *Tra simbolismo e futurismo. Gaetano Previati*, exh. cat. Castello Estense, Ferrara 2020, 69. My thanks to Dr. E. Staudacher and Dr. M. Vinardi for procuring this photo for me.

8 Papini, Roberto, *Le arti d'oggi. Architettura e arti decorative in Europa*, Milan/Rome 1930, ill. XLIII. Works by Hoffmann can also be seen in the following photographs: architecture and furniture: XXXVII–XL (together with the graphic arts pavilion by Ponti and Lancia at the exhibition in Milan in 1927), XLII, XLIV, XLVI (Paris 1925), LXXXIV (together with Muzio's Villa Minetti), XCVII (with the

vestibule from the Domus Nova series for the La Rinascente department store designed by Ponti and Lancia in 1927), CXIII–CXIV, CXXIII (interiors), CXXXV (collector's cabinet, together with a desk by Buzzi), CLV (table, together with a table by Buzzi), CLXIX–CLXX (interiors); metalwork: CLXXX–CLXXXII (lamps by the Wiener Werkstätte), CXCI–CXCL, CXCIV–CXCVII (coffee and tea sets and cups by the Wiener Werkstätte), CXCIX–CC (vases by the Wiener Werkstätte).

9 Papini, Roberto, "Le arti a Parigi nel 1925. II: gli interni e i loro mobili," in: *Architettura e arti decorative* (V) 1925, 357, 360.

10 Papini, Roberto, "Le arti a Parigi nel 1925. III: I metalli," in: *ibid.* (VI) 1926, 22, 24.

11 Papini 1930 (see note 8), 22.