

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Art and ideas are hard to escape in Vienna, with statuary gracing the rooftops and music behind almost every door. “The very streets of Vienna are paved with culture, the other cities with asphalt,” wrote social critic Karl Kraus. Even down to the public conveniences.

First flush

Toilets have long been a measure of civilisation. The earliest in the royal palace at Knossos on Crete date back to 1500 BC. Under the Romans, with their aqueducts and gravity-fed water systems, there was an explosion in toilet technology and Vindobona (as Vienna was known then) would have been well-plumbed. Thereafter toilets disappear, and by the Middle Ages the Viennese were emptying their waste directly into the street. It was normal European practice and disease was rife. Something needed doing, and in the mid-eighteenth century, central Vienna received Europe’s first modern sewer system.

Toilet technology

Vienna owes its public conveniences to one man, Wilhelm Beetz, a court official and the son of a dairyman. In 1880 he offered the city a 25-year contract for public conveniences based on those installed in Berlin. The plan was accepted and by 1910, there were seventy-three facilities across the city.

A number are still in use and come in one of two forms. One is an octagonal pavilion made from prefabricated iron panels inside which is concealed a gentlemen’s urinal. The urinal itself is not porcelain but metal, and is coated

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in special oil containing disinfectant. No water is used, meaning the facility never freezes, and odours are kept to a minimum. Beetz patented this so-called *Ölurinoir* in 1883, and received numerous well-deserved honours as a result. A fine example from 1903 can be seen on Puchsbaumplatz in Favoriten.

The second form is more elaborate. A roofed rectangular pavilion set on a stone base includes a separate entrance for each sex. Inside there are four cubicles on each side, as well as a heated attendant’s office, and the usual urinal for men. A recently restored example stands alongside the MAK on Parkring, replete with a decorative coloured glass border beneath its roofline.

Novel conveniences

Beetz reserved something special for the public conveniences on the Graben. Here,

STONES OF VIENNA

Vienna has been a forerunner in defining what makes a city civilised. The local sewer system dates from the 18th century

Vienna at Your Convenience: A History of Public Toilets



Jugendstil lanterns identify underground public conveniences on the Graben Photo: D. Smith

out of discretion, he placed the facility underground, advertising its presence by a pair of Jugendstil lanterns, which doubled as ventilation chimneys. Unveiled in 1905, it boasts oak doors and brass washstands but despite such luxury it was always free to use. The ladies’ side once contained an aquarium as proof of the purity of the water, and over the inevitable waterless urinal in the men’s area there hangs a copy of Beetz’s patent.

Novelty is still a feature of toilets in Vienna. In the Opernpassage is the Opera Toilet, where for a small fee the visitor can attend to nature’s call to the sound of the Blue Danube Waltz. The Toilet of Modern Art in the Kunst Haus, is decorated with Friedensreich Hundertwasser’s trademark crazed tiles and bold colours. And don’t forget the futuristic conveniences designed by architect Manfred Wolff-Plotegg for the Café Korb, the doors identified none too cryptically with sans-serif punctuation marks designating the desired user.

Lavatorial linguistics

The Viennese penchant for absorbing French words is longstanding. The early Habsburgs strove to maintain their Spanish court manners and to avoid the rationalist influence of France, but from the time of Empress Maria Theresia the influence of Paris grew. The language spoken at court was Schönbrunner Deutsch, an elegant, nasal upper class speech sprinkled with French expressions. Even today the pavement is referred to as the *Trottoir*, a coat closet is a *Garderobe*, a milky coffee is a *Mélange* – and of course a gentlemen’s urinal is a *Pissoir!* ♦

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