

THE ANCIENT MONUMENTS SOCIETY
VISIT TO VIENNA—18 to 25 SEPTEMBER 1980

By Jeremy Lowe

Vienna is an evocative as well as an enchanting sight from the north-west—the compact fortress city at the edge of Western Europe, launching forth from the slopes of the Wienerwald onto the trans-Danubian plain, its heart barely restrained by the great river. Susan Gold had planned just this view as the culmination of the first morning of our study tour, intending to stop our coach at the point above Grinzing from which Jan Sobiewski directed his Catholic armies to raise the Turkish siege of 1683. As it happened we saw the city only in broad brushed outline, submerged as it was in a thick autumnal haze. Later in the week we saw the prospect in full detail from the Steinhof, but on that first day the sweeping panorama was enough. It gave visual form to the historical sketch which had already been provided for us in Susan's excellent notes and to which we had just been introduced in our first morning's walks. By lunchtime the shape of the city was already becoming clear in our minds.

Forty-two of us had been found comfortable rooms in two nearby hotels in the Fleischmarkt—close to St. Stephan's Cathedral and to the pedestrianised city centre. The themes of our tour were to be the golden age of Austrian Imperial Baroque, and the maturing of Art Nouveau and the Vienna Secession. But it was the heart of the city itself which was the focus of all our visits. We soon began to find our way round its closely built up streets and few broad open spaces, finding that the friendliness we encountered made our visit both more than a study and more than a holiday.

Our first day was typical of the week. The morning was spent with Dr. Sylvia Montenari of the City Architects Department, who showed us some characteristic vignettes of the old town, the Heiligenkreuzhof of medieval origin with its 1662 chapel of St. Bernard, houses with fragments of late medieval fresco on their outside walls, courtyards with arcades and ironwork of all periods from Baroque to Art Nouveau. Then we visited some of the most recent conservation work outside the circuit of the old walls, typical stuccoed facades with charming, unsophisticated, ornaments. Our bus continued past the famous Karl Marx Hof of the inter-war period, through the pretty suburban village of Grinzing, famous for its vineyards and taverns, to the viewpoint above the whole city. After a brief stop there we crossed the wooded ridge and drove down to lunch and a visit to the vast monastery of Klosterneuberg. Here we were taken round by the custodian, Dr. Röhrig, being given a special showing of the monastery's greatest treasure, the gilt enamel altarpiece of the late 12th century by Master Nicholas of Verdun. In the church,

Dr. Donald Wright of our party, by special arrangement, played the remarkable organ for us while we admired Steindel's splendid choir stalls (c.1720). The organ was built in 1634 and last modified in 1750; as Dr. Wright remarked, it is an instrument that Bach himself would have found familiar. On then to the Residenz, an Austrian Escorial begun by the monastery in 1730 for the Emperor Charles VI to the design of Donato Felice d'Allio and stopped less than half finished when the Emperor died ten years later. Now it contains, besides a sumptuous Imperial suite of late Baroque rooms, a rich museum and art gallery.

Our varied pattern of visits was continued through the next five days. With Dr. Lehne of the Federal Historic Buildings Office we visited the old Judenplatz area, where houses of the 15th and 16th centuries are awaiting their expert investigation



Tuchlauben 19, late Mediaeval or Renaissance frescoes.

and treatment. We were shown a frescoed room of the period which had recently been discovered in No. 19 Tuchlauben, the house of the merchant Möndschein. Our guide for Schönbrunn was Dr. Monika Knofler and for the Opera House, Dr. Waska. With Dr. Neuwirth a group of us saw the laboratories and workshops of the Bundesdenkmalamt (State Conservation Bureau), where objects from the great Baroque monasteries of Melk and Kremsmünster were being treated side-by-side with painted panels by Klimt and the Secessionists. And all the while, between these organised visits, we quartered the city on foot, by tram and metro to find the major Baroque and Art Nouveau buildings.

It was easy to appreciate the outsides of the Baroque town

palaces and later city buildings, but their interiors were more difficult to see. At Schönbrunn the main state rooms were filled with an exhibition celebrating the Empress Maria Theresia; although excellently presented this did obscure the qualities of the lavish Rococo decor. Fortunately the enchanting ground floor rooms of tropical fantasy in the frescoes by Bergl could still be enjoyed. At the Upper Belvedere our visit was unexpectedly curtailed by a TV filming session in the grounds (in itself a surrealistic event of dancers repeatedly brought to life and then stilled again while some hitch was attended to). We were just able to scamper round the picture galleries and make acquaintance with the marvellous Klimts, but there was hardly any time for Hildebrandt's building, while of the Lower Belvedere, now housing the Baroque Museum, it was remarked that 'Vanbrugh did it better'. Nonetheless we were not left without interior splendours. On our last day Susan Gold had arranged a lunch for us in the Auersperg Palace of 1706-21, with an attractive Grecian room of the 1790s. Another great success was our visit to the Grand Hall of the National Library, an interior on a truly Roman scale begun in 1723 by the elder Fischer von Erlach but not finished till 1769. We spent a few minutes in the celebrated Post Office Savings Bank, 1904-6 by Otto Wagner, where all the furnishings and the aluminium fittings of the banking hall still survive, but mostly we took away an impression of facades—stucco decorated, often difficult to appreciate in narrow streets, sometimes handled with skill and verve. Thus we admired both the Altes Rathaus, 1699 by Fischer von Erlach, with its ingeniously set back entrance bays, and Wagner's Art Nouveau masterpieces on the Linke Wienzeile, the Majolica Haus and No. 38 next door, with their colourful faience facades, mysterious skyline sculptures by Schimkowitz, and leaf-entwined balconies.

Of course we saw many churches and monastic buildings. In the city, we liked the Peterskirche, 1702 by G. Montani, and the fine Italianate Jesuit church by A. Pozzo of 1703, and we puzzled over the extended composition of Fischer von Erlach's famous Karlskirche (1716-37) whose twin Trajanic columns and vast oval dome rise at one side of the Karlsplatz. Wholly different was the Votive Church, a fine Gothic Revival design in the French Court style, (with horrible glass), designed by Ferstel in 1855. Perhaps the greatest surprise of the whole visit to most of us was the Church on the Steinhof by Otto Wagner (1904-7), which is secluded within the grounds of the city mental hospital. The interior has been fully restored to its original purity of pale grey marble, soft white composition panels, and gold everywhere. The gilded copper baldacchino, Schimkowitz's altar reliefs, Geyling's mosaics, and Moser's delicate stained glass make up a breathtaking combination.



The west front of the church of St. Leopold on the Steinhof, designed by Otto Wagner, 1904-7.



Stained glass window by Schimkowitz in the church of St. Leopold on the Steinhof, Vienna.

Towards the end of the week we made a coach trip up the Danube valley. This began with Hildebrandt's buildings at Göttweig, built like Monte Cassino on an isolated spur, more as a palace than a place of contemplation. We were more deeply impressed by the superb joinery of the Imperial "hunting" rooms and by their delicate colouration, than by the grandiose Apotheosis of the Emperor, Charles VI again, which swept over the ceiling of the court stair. From Göttweig on to Dürnstein, beautifully situated low down by the Danube, below its mediaeval castle where Richard Coeur-de-Lion was incarcerated. The little walled town merges into the 18th century monastery. Finally, as was only proper, came Melk, fortified on its rock above the Danube. We were not altogether happy about the recent treatment of the exterior of the church—coarsely repainted in ochre and white—but the interiors were fully up to our expectations. The monastic buildings are vast, cool and grey, with just some excitement of decoration in the principal rooms. The church is the true climax, majestic and spacious, resplendent in soft red and pink, orange and gold. Its strong main elements are set off by a delicate counterpoint of detail, while the newly cleaned chancel and Beduzzi's superb high altar of 1727-32 are ablaze with gold.

We came home feeling thoroughly content. Our visit had not been all in earnest. There had been time for social occasions, visits to the Opera, to a reception at the British Embassy, and an evening at a 'Heuriger' in the village of Heiligenstadt. We had even managed some individual excursions, in my own case to the almost Asiatic suburbs east of the Danube, where in the late 19th century immigrant workers flooded in to jobs in the big engineering workshops. Mrs. Gold's preparation of the week and her organisation of all our outings were quite faultless. Our guides had been learned and patient. We are all very grateful to her and to them for such a successful introduction to the delights of the Imperial City of Austria.