

Vienna. My History

The permanent exhibition of the Wien Museum

Exhibition location	Wien Museum, Karlsplatz 8, 1040 Wien
Exhibition duration	permanent
Opening	Dezember 6, 2023. press conference 10 am
Opening hours	Tuesday to Friday, 9 am–6 pm, Saturday and Sunday, 10 am–6 pm
Press photos	www.wienmuseum.at/press_and_research

With its unrivalled collection of exceptional works of art and other historical and contemporary exhibits, Wien Museum's main location on Karlsplatz offers important insights into the history of Vienna. Built in the 1950s according to a design by Oswald Haerdtl, the city museum opened in 1959. 2020 to 2023 the building was renovated and expanded according to the design of architects Ferdinand Certov, Klaudia Ruck and Roland Winkler and reopened on December 6, 2023 by Mayor Michael Ludwig and City Councillor for Culture Veronica Kaup-Hasler with a new permanent exhibition.

The new permanent exhibition Vienna. My History takes visitors on a journey through the centuries. Over 1,700 objects, from prehistoric to contemporary times, await across three levels and 35,000 square feet. The exhibition focuses on people and their lives, shaped by politics and religion, social structures, and the environment around them. Topics such as work, housing, traffic, immigration, and ecology shape everyday life, both then and now.

The history of Vienna unfolds in a chronological way that winds around the museum's great hall. There, visitors encounter iconic objects, such as the 18ft-model of St. Stephen's Cathedral or Poldi, the enormous Prater whale floating in midair.

Interactive formats and tactile objects appeal to various senses, while more than 100 media stations and a digital guide provide additional layers of information. Programs for all ages are offered with a special focus on inclusion and accessibility. They can also be booked for groups..

Admission	Free
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Chapter texts

The Natural Environment and Early Settlements

Where can one make a good life? Where can one find the right natural conditions? These were the pertinent questions around 8000 years ago, when people first moved to present-day Vienna.

From the Stone Age onward, several societies settled in this part of the world. From archaeological finds, we know something about how these earlier peoples lived. We also know that they chose this area deliberately. The hilly landscape, the Danube River, and the creeks of the Vienna Woods offered plentiful natural resources. The objects that archeologists have found also reveal evidence of trade: the exchange of goods and technologies across a wide region.

The relationship between people and their environment changed when the Romans arrived. They built the area's first towns and began to shape the landscape to fit their needs. After the Romans left, other societies lived in the area. The Roman buildings fell into disuse.

Coming and Going Vindobona

What happens when a territory is taken over by new rulers? How does the change affect how people live? The Boii – the Celtic group inhabiting this area – faced these questions when the Romans arrived to turn Vindobona into a military fortress on the border of their empire.

The Romans were not strangers to the Boii: the two societies had been trading partners for several years. Soldiers and civilians from all over the Roman Empire moved to Vindobona; as the cultures mixed, many languages were heard on the streets – not just Latin.

Vindobona quickly grew into an urban center featuring a large fortress and impressive buildings. The local population benefited from the soldiers' presence. We know from extant sources that some locals became Roman citizens by enlisting in the military or marrying. But the sources do not tell us if others resisted the new rulers.

Urban Freedoms? Middle Ages and Renaissance

How was life lived in a dense urban space? Rich and poor might have dwelt near each other, but their living situations were very different. Statuses and rights were defined by the group to which people belonged: burghers and their families, nobles, clergy, members of the university, or people in the Jewish community. Parishes, guilds, brotherhoods, and other organizations also defined a person's place in society.

Medieval Vienna's city walls both offered protection to the population and signaled power and prestige. The city's fortunes relied heavily on its relationship with the current ruler, who could grant a wide range of rights and privileges – including, most importantly, Vienna's city charter in 1221.

Vienna remained closely connected to its surrounding countryside. Suburbs, vineyards, and meadows supplied city dwellers with food and other resources. People trading goods along the Danube River and on roads that had existed since Roman times brought the city wealth.

A Question of Power Imperial Residence and Fortification

Who calls the shots? In Vienna, city representatives had to negotiate power with the Habsburgs. After the city became the Habsburgs' permanent residence, the ruling family wielded its power with even greater force. Struggles for power also involved religion. When Martin Luther's ideas reached Vienna, Protestantism gained many supporters and the demand for reform put great pressure on the Catholic Church. But the Habsburgs remained Catholic. Together with the Church, they began a long campaign against the Protestants.

Another conflict arose outside Vienna. In Hungary, which had been recently added to Habsburg territory, the Ottoman Empire emerged as a chief rival. After Vienna had become a site in the ensuing military conflict, massive fortifications were erected with the help of the local population and of builders from Italy and Germany to defend the city. These bastions were constructed with help from the local population. They would dominate views of Vienna for many years.

History at Work The Second Ottoman Siege

An Ottoman army laid siege to Vienna in the summer of 1683. After two months, the siege ended with the city's liberation. Numerous monuments recall the event. Images and stories about it circulate widely, often advancing specific political ends.

The Wien Museum has played a central role in the transmission of a particular narrative: in the museum's exhibitions, the focus has been on heroic leaders and military feats. Additionally, the museum has prominently displayed the so-called Turkish loot, a collection of Ottoman weapons ostensibly seized as spoils following Vienna's liberation.

This room serves as a historical laboratory. After all, researching the past is a never-ending process: objects must be probed again and again, and exhibits revised based on the resulting insights. Were the supposed spoils really connected to the siege? And what happened beyond the battlefield?

How Much Order Do We Need? The Baroque and Enlightenment

What's more important: freedom or regulation? The tension between these two concepts shaped Vienna's development in the 18th century. The Enlightenment called old rules

into question and brought religious freedom as well as an end to torture and capital punishment. The era stood for a new sense of what it means to be human. Period portraits reveal previously unimaginable possibilities for individual development.

At the same time, the Enlightenment brought more controls and constraints. Compulsory schooling was introduced, as education was important if people were to be useful to the state. New welfare institutions were created for the sick, the elderly, and the disabled to provide both better care for and more control over these populations.

The 18th century also saw tremendous growth in Vienna. Densely inhabited areas developed just outside the inner-city fortifications. Vienna was on its way to becoming one of Europe's largest cities.

Under the Surface Repression and Revolution

After decades of war throughout Europe, a period of stability began in 1815. But at what price? Repression, surveillance, and censorship silenced the liberal and democratic ideas that had developed in the decades since the French Revolution. Vienna's middle classes retreated into the privacy of their homes, and a particular culture and lifestyle emerged as a result: the Biedermeier. Its artists depicted everyday life, but not its harsh realities.

What can Biedermeier images tell us about Vienna? What do the images hide? The first half of the 19th century was an era of rapid technological change, but industrialization is missing from the idealized images of Biedermeier life. Also concealed are the deep social and political tensions that simmered below the surface until ultimately boiling over during the revolution of 1848.

Boom Time The Ringstrasse Era

Faster, bigger, showier: the so-called Ringstrasse Era, named for Vienna's newly created grand boulevard, was a time of wealth and opportunity. Industrialists and bankers, many of whom built mansions along the boulevard, emerged as a new elite during this heyday of unregulated markets.

Like other rapidly growing European capitals, Vienna attracted hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Their hopes for better lives were mostly disappointed. Working conditions in Vienna's factories were miserable; housing in the city's tenements was abysmal.

What happens when boom turns to bust? The 1873 stock market crash shattered expectations of endless financial growth. In 1881, the devastating fire at the Ringtheater exposed the risk of reckless development. Soon people in the impoverished lower-middle and exploited working classes started to protest their situations..

Beauty on the Edge of the Abyss **Fin-de-siècle Vienna**

At the turn of the 20th century, Vienna was a global center for modern culture. The city's artists, musicians, writers, and philosophers revolutionized the way people saw the world.

To this day, the era's achievements shape both Vienna's view of itself and visitors' expectations of the city. This vibrant cultural life was enjoyed by only an elite. The pleasures its members savored were set against a backdrop of nearly unimaginable poverty and misery: Vienna's masses lived in squalor.

The city tried to raise the standard of living with new infrastructure projects, but these only underscored the social inequities. Before long, people started to protest. Members of the working classes demanded their rights. Women marched for education, self-determination, and the right to vote. Soon, World War I began and changed everything..

Utopia and Everyday Life **Red Vienna**

How do you improve the lives of an entire population? For decades, Social Democrats envisioned a more just society, and they developed plans to support that vision. After World War I, Social Democrats were voted into power and began to enact their policies. They started an enormous reform project widely known as "Red Vienna." It encompassed all aspects of urban life.

Red Vienna made a lasting mark on the city, particularly with its ambitious building projects: public housing developments, schools, kindergartens, and swimming pools. At the same time, Red Vienna promoted innovations in architecture, design, music, theater, film, and science.

Red Vienna ended abruptly: it was terminated by a fascist regime originating in Austria's Christian Social Party. The legacy of Red Vienna is still debated today.

Laboratory of Cruelty **National Socialism in Vienna**

Austria became part of the German Reich in an event known as the "Anschluss." It was accompanied by widespread violence. Even the new rulers, the National Socialists – Nazis for short – were surprised by the extent to which Vienna's population persecuted and robbed Jews. Nazis developed new bureaucratic systems for the 'orderly' confiscation of Jewish property, transforming Vienna into a laboratory of cruelty.

Nazis tried to create a 'racially' homogenous society. Nazi followers were encouraged to feel superior and were given opportunities to benefit from the new regime. Those who did not belong to the so-called Aryan race, who opposed Nazis on political grounds, or who were otherwise considered 'problematic' were persecuted with utmost brutality.

There were specific sites of Nazi terror and abuse throughout Vienna, including the infamous Gestapo headquarters in the Hotel Metropole, several outposts of the Mauthausen concentration camp, and many factories utilizing forced labor.

Between Worlds From Postwar Rebuilding to the Fall of the Iron Curtain

With the horrors of war at an end, how did Vienna reclaim itself? Who was in charge? In 1945, and for many years thereafter, the city was old in both demographics and infrastructure. It was also an in-between city situated along the Iron Curtain that separated east and west, unsure if its future lay in renewal or stasis.

Yet much of what makes Vienna so livable today – the Danube Island, a flood dam and vast recreational area; the city subway; and carefully restored, iconic old neighborhoods – has origins in this postwar period. During this time, Vienna also reconnected with the world, drawing immigrants, international organizations, and tourists.

Vienna's approach to modernization proved moderate and halting; generally, the city did not favor radical change. But Vienna produced innovations nonetheless. For the first time, the municipality granted residents a say in city planning, thereby also meeting civic activists' demands for greater voter participation..

A Growing City Histories of the Present

How has Vienna changed over the last few decades? What is it like to live here now? This section explores how residents have experienced Vienna's many transformations. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Vienna's population has grown. The wars in the Balkans; Austria joining the European Union (EU); the EU's expansion into Eastern Europe; and the refugee crises in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine – these have all made Vienna even more international and diverse.

Today, Vienna is widely considered an affordable city that provides a high quality of life. Nevertheless, global neoliberalism has deeply affected Vienna's economy and its residents' work life: rents are rising; employment is more precarious; and the income gap is widening. Global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change pose additional challenges for urban planners and residents alike.