

Friedrich Adler (1878–1942)



What remains of Friedrich Adler's artwork has been collected and restored by Ernst Schäll in cooperation with the Adler family. As a result of Schäll's efforts Adler's art has gradually found its way back to the realm of historical research being conducted on *Art Nouveau*. In 1994, Schäll's remarkable undertaking even culminated in exhibitions of Adler's paintings in different German cities, among them Laupheim. Thanks to the tombstones commissioned by Carl Laemmle for his family and the Jewish cemetery memorial designed by Adler, Laupheim's citizenry has long been surrounded by his artistic achievements, just without conscious awareness of it. In addition to these works Adler drafted a new home for his family which was built in 1905. His parents' house, built by his father in 1876, counts as another memento of Adler and was later converted into a café and pastry shop in 1989.

After attending the *Kunstgewerbeschule* in Munich for four years, Friedrich Adler studied at the Atelier for Teaching and Experimenting in Applied and Free Art in Munich, where he also worked as a lecturer from 1903 to 1907 before accepting a position at the School of Applied Arts in Hamburg. From 1910 to 1913 while still working in Hamburg, he taught master classes at the *Gewerbemuseum* in Nuremberg. During World War I, he served as a deputy officer and subsequently received several medals for his service. After the war, Adler re-

turned to the *Kunstgewerbeschule* in Hamburg. In 1927, he was appointed to the rank of professor and continued to teach until 1933.

Adler's first defining artistic environment was Munich's Jugendstil, which combined two different ideas: nature as the original form and the return to the abstract line. Especially significant for Adler's first works was the artistic circle led by Hermann Obrist, an important representative of this art movement originating in Munich. Adler was influenced by the forms of nature and focused on general construction principles rather than on superficial visual appearances. Examples of these construction principles were joints, gear wheels, rib structures and forms of tension and compression. Unfortunately, Adler's theoretical position on Jugendstil, which definitely influenced his teaching, was never recorded in detail.

In the 19th century criticism grew of products being manufactured by machines, owing to, among other points, the perceived disconnect with the spirit of stylistic patterns of past epochs. This led to the birth of the Arts and Crafts movement in the second half of the 19th century, which influenced decorative arts and is considered to be the precursor for Jugendstil. This English countermovement incorporated the technical developments of the time and yet created a counterbalance to soulless mechanization with its orientation towards prac-

ticality and utility. Jugendstil later added new aspiration to this artistic volition: the connection of the arts to each other and the desire to unify art and life. The art magazine *Jugend* (Youth) gave the art movement its German name, whereas the French equivalent *l'Art Nouveau* better emphasizes the movement's aspects of novelty and modernity.

In retrospect, it becomes clear that the repertoire of forms of *Art Nouveau*, which later developed into *Art Déco*, is defined by surprisingly divergent influences, which nevertheless form a unified whole. The first influence, which emerged at the end of the 19th century, is Symbolism. This movement replaces profanity with the unknown and unusual, an aesthetic position, which also incorporates the myth of femininity and eroticism. This aspect can clearly be observed in Adler's statuette *Inspiration*. Japanese color woodcuts with their dynamic lines and penetrations in a weightless space which describe the floating world (*Ukiyo-e*), were another source of inspiration for Adler, as was the application of organic forms of nature.

Adler experimented with different techniques over the years. He created wonderful batik prints, though his attempt to develop a machine for printing batik was less successful. He was also in demand as a furniture and interior designer. After 1933, Adler worked under a pseudonym and presumably designed a series with 30

items made from thermosetting plastic for Bebrit, a former German brand for household supplies. These objects are considered antithetical to his early works in Munich and as such illustrate the wide range of his creativity.

At the turn of the century, international exhibitions played a central role in the field of applied arts. Adler's participation in three of them (Turin in 1902, Nuremberg in 1906 and Cologne in 1914) was crucial to his career. The exhibition in Cologne, which included a synagogue design by Adler, was the biggest art exhibition in Germany at the time and helped him gain substantial recognition. Today, the museum in Laupheim exhibits a significant collection of Adler's work. His most impressive design shown at the museum is his replica of a synagogue window, depicting the twelve tribes of Israel. When compared to the original version from 1914, which can be found in Tel Aviv, Adler's design shows serrated and clearly delineated singular shapes in black outline which point to a close connection to Expressionism. Adler was also well-known for the objects he created for Jewish rituals. Thanks to the preservation of usable molds by the Wiedemann Company located in Regensburg, a number of exemplary pieces survived. In addition, a Jewish collector had sent some of Adler's works to Chicago, where they can now be seen at the Spertus Museum.

As a reaction to Jewish citizens being excluded from all aspects of cultural life in 1933, Adler took part in the founding of the *Jüdischer Kulturbund* in Hamburg. He was in amicable contact with Paul Henle, a painter and sculptor, who was able to emigrate in 1939. Adler did not consider himself to be in danger, although he did support his children's plans to emigrate. Walter Gropius, who knew Adler through the *Deutscher Werkbund*, urged him to move to the United States with him. Zionist artist Hermann Struck wanted him to leave Germany for Palestine as early as 1933, but Adler returned to Germany after a stay in Cyprus in 1936, probably due to private reasons. Back in Hamburg, Adler did not own an atelier anymore and had to move into increasingly smaller apartments, which limited his ability to work. Despite continuing efforts, by the Steiner family in New York, to help him emigrate and after an unsuccessful attempt to get a visa for the United States, Adler was deported from a compulsory housing facility to a concentration camp in 1942. Due to his age, Friedrich Adler was most likely executed upon arrival in Auschwitz on July 11, 1942. His son Paul Wilhelm was deported to Theresienstadt in 1943, and then to Auschwitz, where he died in 1944. Although the Third Reich ended Friedrich Adler's life in 1942 and severely impacted the survival of his work, his legacy is once again flourishing.

*Translated from the German by Mariana Castelli Rosa,
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