

ATELIERS OF EUROPE



ATELIERS OF EUROPE  
AN ATLAS OF DECORATIVE ARTS WORKSHOPS

John Whelan & Oskar Proctor

PRESTEL  
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## FOREWORD

Stephen Alesch

Bear with me if you can through this brief simplification of modern history. There are always exceptions, technical details and millions of stories. This is one of them, and it is written mostly from intuition, instinct, memories and imagination. I have not had enough time to interview everyone who has existed (or exists), or all of the experts everywhere, in order to generate a careful report. So instead, I conjured this from my Western gut.

The year 1849 – somewhere in Western Europe. The work is difficult, hours are long. The pay is ... how can you say? Far from making you rich. That's about as unlikely as panning for gold in California and discovering a flashy swirl of the magic flakes the first week after arriving. The only gold here is in the gold-leaf gilding on a large, carefully carved cabinet. 'Someone had to find that gold,' you might be thinking as you carefully brush it into the recess of a well-executed moulding, 'and quickly became rich selling it!' You might one day decide not to go back to that stool in that old room surrounded by dozens of specialized handmade tools, samples, templates and rigs designed by a thousand or more years of trial and error. Not to mention all of the materials that have been used. You could leave to find more of that same magical gold and all that it entails – the same gold that was sitting in front of you all along. Hopefully someone would fill your seat soon after you left and continue the work.

Sometimes, though, the seat would remain empty. What does that mean? Where did people go? What did they do? Well, in the last 200 years most simply headed west in search of fame and fortune, leaving their stations behind. We might conclude that, since we know the world is round, they would eventually return from the east. A wonderfully convenient loop. They would head out towards the setting sun and return home with the rising sun so long as they never stopped, ideally returning with bags of gold and a bright smile, bringing new lessons from the West and new old ones from the East. Riding the wonderful simple circular loop around our great mud-ball called Earth.

We could probably count on one hand the people who never stopped travelling west in the last 200 years and returned home

## RETURNING

over the Pacific, across Asia and back to where they worked, to where they were from. Most travelled as far as their dreams, money, feet, train, ship or horse would take them. To the 'edge'. Perhaps they moved again, maybe diagonally north or south, but in these last two centuries, mostly in the westerly direction. We know what they were looking for. Most, if not all had the same instinct: change, success, adventure, freedom, not being told what to do and how to do it. Maybe the magical New Age and the end of suffering? Utopia? These exciting things have always been represented by the West. The wild and rich western world, the untouched virgin frontier, undiscovered riches and freedom from oppression. We named it the Occident, the direction towards the setting sun, with its beautiful, captivating and hypnotizing golden glow luring us with its promise of glory, glamour and sweet sunsets overlooking the sea (preferably with a cocktail).

Technically this wondrous world can start anywhere, just as long as it is to the west of where you are and comes with enough distance to be able to forget where you are from, what you did and who you were, and, ideally, has a sea or edge of some kind to look over. This captivating frontier edge has steadily moved from the Atlantic coast of Europe to the American east, even to the Mississippi River for a time, and then on to California and eventually, mysterious Hawaii and Tahiti, far away on the mighty Pacific. All of these places in these last couple of centuries have held the honour of being our Shangri-La. Eventually, it appears, we ran into a dead end. Manifest destiny fulfilled. Somewhere out in that abyss, our wild day ends and our new day begins. The West dies and the East begins again, where we imagine the world ends.

It is fascinating to see this change after thousands of years of focus on the East. In our modern age, every person collects a bit of the dust of wanderlust, and when it weighs just a bit more than their boots, they get up and roll away west, likely never to return. The skills of workmanship left with these labourers and the master's supervision stayed behind. Those who departed worked hard, and their skills evolved. Studying the designs of these various far western edges shows that for the most part traditional skills dried up, then slowly begin to deviate and deteriorate into a primitive,

distilled and abstract version of the classical arts – like watercolours on a sheet of paper, the pigment diluting and fading as it spreads out. Frontier versions of classical forms develop. Simplified forms, then new forms never seen before appear; twisted, creative, different – but less refined and less correct, or ‘by the book’. Alas, the book was lost or thrown away. No supervision, just super vision. Strange proportions, distillation and abstraction become the norm. ‘Quick’ becomes an important attribute. A splash of paint or some spontaneous move is employed to attract waning attention. The bold, quick gesture of the slash is born. Cutting-edge work.

So be it: this is our world, this is how things evolve. Good and Bad mixed together into a high-voltage pop. Spreading out, deforming and distorting at the outer edge, further and further from the centre. If you reflect on it, all of this nihilist thinking follows a belief that the world is fundamentally flat. Calling and perceiving anything as an ‘edge’, as in our north, east, south, west edges, or an ‘end’, when we read or talk about things at our north, east, south, west end, proves it.

Well, we can always *return*. We can return by walking to the ‘end’ or ‘edge’, and then continue and return to where we are from. We can also simply turn back and go back the way we came. We can come around one way or another and return to these places. We can return to where human beings do things carefully and slowly. We can stand in them, we can look at them, we can study them, we can carefully photograph them. If we are in the proper position, we can still commission them to produce something. Maybe we can sit on a stool and work there, but most likely not – all this wandering and deviation from the classical arts, along with a couple of generations of power tools, has reduced our hand-eye coordination and dexterity to a low that has not been seen since 6000 BC.

There is a small chance that you do have the skills or are open to learning them. For that, we are blessed. I estimate there are quite a few of us where the hand and eye are still sharp and keen and know the difference between an awkward line and a beautiful one. There are not as many as there were, but much more now than, say, 50 years ago when the world crescendoed in its freefall, far-out *flat*



*earth* burnout stretching to imaginary faraway western edges. We knocked ourselves out, so to speak. Well, I believe the instinct has been triggered to come back. To *return*. To come around, to come to and regain consciousness. Too much tripping out, man.

In the modern world there have not been significant or well-known migrations from the West to the East, but the interest in the East captivated our civilization for thousands of years. The East was the source of teachings, arts, crafts, traditions, science and religion. The easterly direction is technically called the Orient. This word has become something that immediately conjures up anything from Japan or China, but that is a simplification. Orient means in the direction of the rising sun, and that has always held great importance to us. The Orient has a very different meaning for us than the Occident. The Orient is reliability, the return of the sun, awakening. It is the source and the spirit of all creation. It is creativity. It is our first god. It is being here. It is family and work and tradition. It is the absolute opposite of the West, with its dreams of leaving things behind and its end-of-the-day, end of things ... *departure*. It was not a premeditated decision for me to move in the opposite direction. It was instinctive and still is. It is a return to my home; it is a return to my Orient. To my family. To reliability. To be trusted just as we trust in the rising sun.

All of this is imaginary, of course. But imagination is what propels us to do things, and it is how we came to be before we understood cosmology. It is the simplistic driving force behind our actions and thoughts – the sun rising and setting – hypnotizing us into staying or going, focusing on the immediate or searching for the unknown. It is fortuitous that the world is round and there is no end. We do not have to leave, and if we do, we can simply *return*. God bless those who never left, and, if they did, returned and carefully work in these ateliers on beautiful things in peace and quiet. May our children and our children's children continue their great legacy. God bless the rising sun.

## INTRODUCTION

John Whelan

From 2017 until 2019, my young company The Guild of Saint Luke had the honour of working on some of France's most-loved culinary and cultural institutions. During a frenzied period of activity, we went about restoring and redesigning a number of historic brasseries in Paris and Alsace. At the time, facsimile versions in London and New York were ahead of the originals in terms of food quality and interior design. Savvy Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs had pinched the formula and improved upon it, while *les patrons français* rested on their laurels, attempting to lure coachloads of tourists with group offers and laminated loyalty cards. A frank conversation with my client resulted in an approach that we hoped would restore his originals to their former glory and recover the crown of authenticity in the process. Rather than modernize, we would vigorously row in the other direction. We chose to move backwards in order to move forwards. However, in order to fully embrace the intricacies of the historic interiors that had been entrusted to us, we had to find companies who could still work *à l'ancienne*. This is how I came to discover the atelier.

As an autodidact in the fields of design and architecture, my knowledge of companies capable of restoring 19th-century plaster mouldings or creating a new zinc *comptoir* was limited, to say the least. However, through a substantial amount of Googling and asking around, a network of businesses began to reveal itself – a world familiar to initiates but not to outsiders. I could sense that being contacted out of the blue by an Englishman working on French brasseries was baffling, even entertaining, to the proprietors. I was nevertheless warmly received and frequently invited to visit ateliers, an opportunity I always seized. During this two-year period, I must have gone to more ateliers than brasseries, ranging from the rugged (metalworking) to the refined (stained glass). What struck me was how accidentally beautiful these spaces were. In some cases, the companies were older than the brasseries themselves, boasting premises that were almost as grand. Nearly every atelier I visited had exceptional natural light but, most importantly, there was an authenticity to the spaces that appeared to be the result of prioritizing function over style. Viewed through a

‘WHENEVER THE BEAUTIFUL LOSES ITS MELANCHOLY, IT DEGENERATES INTO PRETTINESS.’

contemporary lens, it is hard not to see this as stylish, particularly when we are now used to seeing unpretentious workwear garments being hailed as high fashion.

This reading, however, risks trivializing the true value of these places. In reality, their atmosphere is far more potent and poignant than their unstudied 'cool'. With the lights off, the air hangs heavy with dust particles that are caught suspended in shafts of light. There are layers and layers of scratches and scores on walls and workbenches that read like unearthed palimpsests, suggesting a divine mystery without ever revealing it. The deep patina on every surface creates a distinctly melancholic mood, the passage of time leaving its mournfully beautiful souvenir. Exquisitely rendered works – often in a state of half-finish – catch the eye against a backdrop of toil and tarnish. Over lunch (when the French artisans were enjoying a *steak frites* somewhere), I would occasionally peel off from my host or guide and stand within these empty spaces, much as I tend to do whenever I see a church with an open door. The experience was moving and, dare I say, quasi-religious (I have always understood the grace of God better through His architects than His scribes). It is for this reason that I was compelled to write *Ateliers of Europe*. I do not profess any academic authority on the history of ateliers or their undoubted significance in the creation of modern Europe. I simply wanted to share these sublime, solitary moments, standing in these noble places of work with the feeling that time had stopped, if only for an instant. I would also like to celebrate the individual artisans, the custodians of ancestral techniques who continue to prop up the design industry. While they might not be visible in this book's photographs, their presence is felt, past and present.

Some of you might be wondering why I have insisted on using the French word 'atelier' when 'workshop' would suffice. I assure you that the reason has little to do with my experiences of working in France and more to do with how the word has come to be suggestive of the artisanal in the English language. For example, an enterprising pork-pie chef in East London might open an 'atelier' rather than a 'shop' on Columbia Road, keen as he is to differentiate himself and his pies from small-town supermarket alternatives. It

might be considered pretentious to use the word 'atelier' in the culinary world, but in the realm of the decorative arts, it makes a bit more sense. The word 'workshop' is of course accurate, which is why we have kept it in the book's subtitle. We have simply used 'atelier' in the title to emphasize the beauty, heritage and character of the companies featured herein. What I hope to express is that 'the atelier' is in itself a genre, being 'a workshop of the decorative arts' – and perhaps, after taking in photographs of many such places in one sitting, the reader will come to identify the similarities that unite them. If the book is successful in this regard, then the use of the term 'atelier' will not be an affectation.

We have also chosen to describe the book as an atlas, given that we make extensive usage of maps for navigation and group the ateliers by country. Aside from the practical benefits to the browser, one reason for this is to highlight the aesthetic similarities that can be detected in each country. A French atelier feels noticeably French, whereas an English one seems very different. For instance, it is no accident that the only overtly contemporary space featured (1882 Ltd) is to be found in England, a country that is decidedly less conservative than its Continental counterparts when it comes to new ideas in manufacture.

There has been little concerted effort to represent the countries equally, as we have chosen instead to do justice to the decorative arts by covering as many crafts as possible, selecting the most beautiful atelier in each category. Perhaps unsurprisingly, France and Italy provided the most examples – this being an accurate reflection of how they as nations (and cultures) treasure their artistic traditions and their artisans. Every nation probably deserves its own thorough survey. Out of the 28 ateliers featured in this book, there are 22 different crafts or materials being worked, from *chinoiserie* lacquer to handmade porcelain and limewash paint. We have managed to comprehensively represent the decorative arts – a full orchestra, if you will, that when playing together would create the symphony known to us designers as 'a project'.

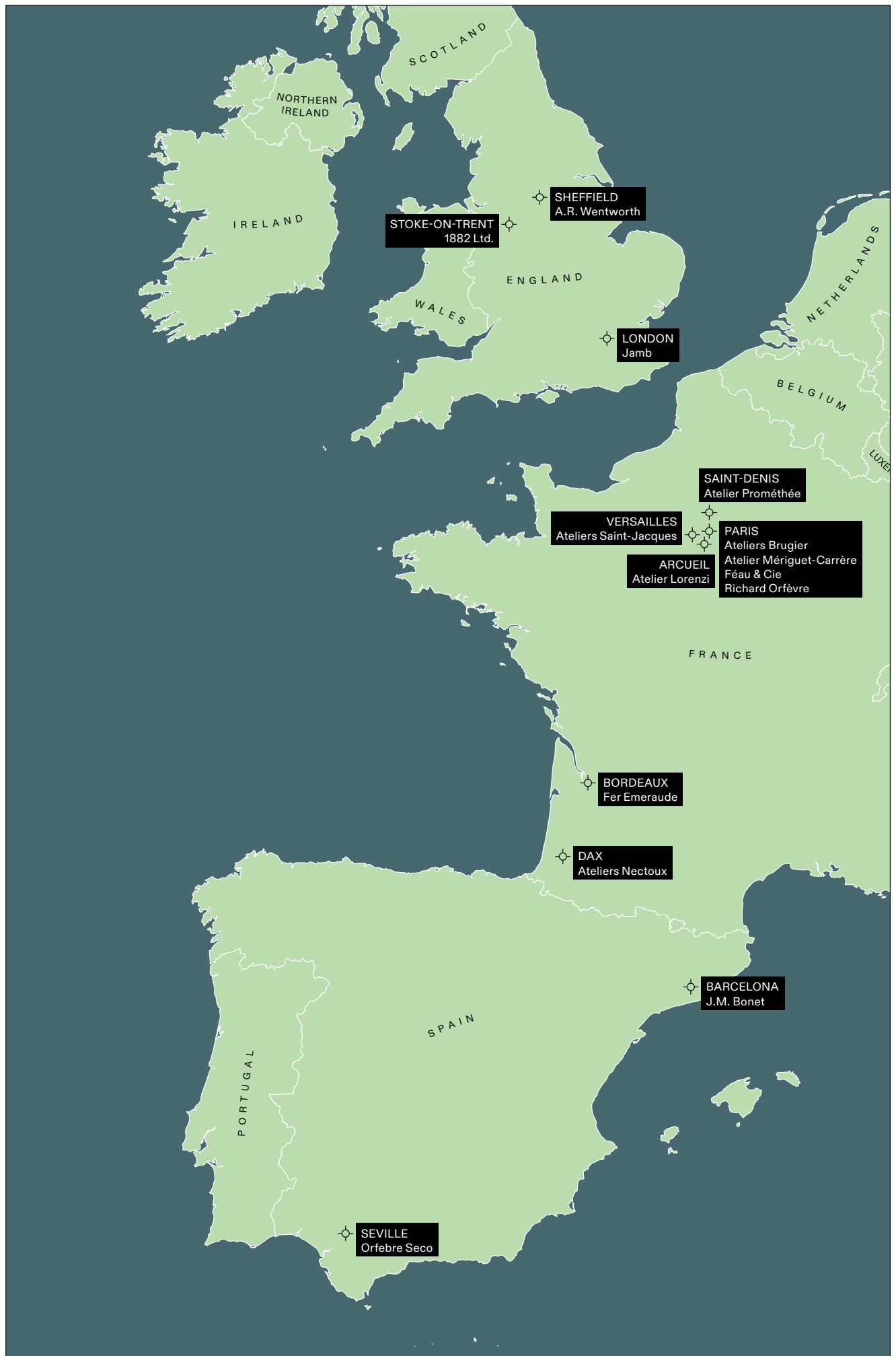
When we approached the ateliers at the beginning of *this* project, we were fortunate in triggering a snowball effect. A couple that I had worked with before agreed to be featured, which then

led to many others consenting. In the end, we were spared the blushes of a refusal, and as in my experience working on brasseries, we were warmly received by the proprietors and directors. The book is predominantly written from first-hand experience of talking to these individuals and hearing about their ancestors (if it was a family business) or the specificities of their creative process. I have attempted to give an overview of each atelier with sufficient detail to satisfy amateurs of the decorative arts without mystifying the debutante. Again, much of the description is subjective rather than objective, which will no doubt please some and displease others.

With regard to the photography that makes up this book, Oskar Proctor and I had clear objectives from the outset. Having collaborated a number of times prior to this undertaking, we both sing from the hymn sheet of 'natural light only', and again it is solely 1882 Ltd where we chose to break this golden rule, the cold cathode lights of their atelier being integral to their aesthetic. Oskar shot the spaces as we found them, with zero setup or artifice. We felt this to be the best way to honour the artisans of the past and present; we had no wish to interfere, merely to document for posterity.

If I have any hopes for this book, they are to give the uninitiated reader a comprehensive introduction to the European atelier and to feel what I felt when I stood inside them for the very first time. For those in the industry, many of the names featured will be well known, but others won't, and it will therefore be a pleasure to surprise my colleagues and peers with some lesser-known gems. And if it's not too self-indulgent, I would like this book to help stimulate debate around the role of the decorative arts atelier as we advance deeper into the 21st century. Some of the companies featured are wildly successful financially, catering to the world's high-net-worth elite. Others are not in such a fortunate position and face challenges from technological innovation and, more prosaically, dwindling interest in their craft. What will happen to the latter in the future is anyone's guess. One thing is certain, though: this book (and its author) stands in solidarity with them, believing that tradition, *savoir faire* and the handmade are not just luxuries, but essential to the ennobling and betterment of society.

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# MAP



J. & L. Lobmeyr.....  
WOKA.....

..... Vienna  
..... Vienna

# Austria



..... glass  
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18  
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16-33

J. & L. LOBMEYR  
(glass)

## A ramshackle courtyard of 18th-century buildings on Vienna's Salesianergasse is home to the atelier and archives of the city's most revered maker of chandeliers and glassware, J. & L. Lobmeyr.

A young Josef Lobmeyr founded the business in 1823, achieving overnight success selling wares in the Biedermeier style. He soon moved to larger premises on Kaerntner Strasse, whose exquisite facade still fronts the company's showroom today. At this upmarket address, Lobmeyr widened his selection of offerings to include candelabras and crystal light fixtures for candles, which by 1835 had become a firm favourite of the Imperial and Habsburg courts. Almost two centuries and over 5,000 designs later, cousins Leonid, Andreas and Johannes Rath continue the family tradition of fine

glassmaking into a sixth generation.

The two principal activities of the atelier are assembling chandeliers and decorating glass. The former sees the creation of a brass structure, followed by electrification and then the addition of beads and pendants. The latter treats glass as a stone to be cut, similar to the ornamental rock-crystal works of the 16th and 17th centuries. A stone or copper wheel is used to shape and engrave the glass into precious objects that are then hung in their multitude for chandelier designs. These processes have changed very little over the years. 'Not for nostalgic reasons,' Leonid is keen to add, citing an example of when he attempted to introduce a new cutting machine to create the decorative scores on their celebrated bar range by architect Adolf Loos. 'The experiment was a failure and the glasses felt lifeless,' he says, prompting the artisans to resume hand-scoring, creating the naturally elegant weave for which they are known. This emphasis on how their creations feel as well as look is an indication of how Leonid and his cousins have come to discern quality in a piece of glassware.

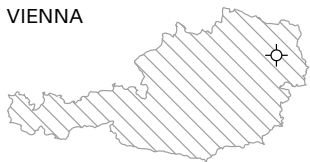
One ancestor in particular, the enterprising Ludwig Lobmeyr, did much to establish the company ethos. In 1856, he designed a set of glasses made from fine muslin crystal that were so pure and simple that they were considered avant-garde. When architect and designer Josef Hoffmann

reinterpreted these designs for the company in the 1920s, the template for the modern wine glass was born. Ludwig's free thinking was also on display when he partnered with Thomas Edison in 1881 to harness his revolutionary invention, the electric lightbulb. Together, they created the first electric chandelier, with notable designs for Vienna's Hotel Sacher and the Imperial Palace.

However, every generation of the family has contributed to the canon of Lobmeyr designs. None is more notable than Hans Harald Rath, who, after seeing pictures of distant galaxies shown by Wallace K. Harrison, the architect of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, designed the company's best-selling chandelier. Legend has it that he communicated his 1966 Metropolitan starburst design by sending Harrison a potato with toothpicks sticking out of it. Indeed, the celebrated design dealer Murray Moss once told the company that he was able not only to recognize a Lobmeyr piece, but to identify the generation of the family that created it.

From these quaint-looking headquarters in the heart of Vienna, Lobmeyr make, restore and archive a remarkable back catalogue of chandelier and glassware designs. They liken their decision to create as much as possible by hand to choosing to play an analogue instrument over a synthesizer. 'Authentic shapes are born of our hands, whereas digital ones in many cases only refer to them,' Leonid says, philosophically. Lobmeyr believe in the healing quality of the handmade in our increasingly complex, over-industrialized world. Kindred spirit and occasional Lobmeyr designer Ilse Crawford once said, 'The more virtual our lives become, the more we crave the physical.' As long as this remains the case, Lobmeyr will be supplying the world with fine decorative lighting and glassware for generations to come.

VIENNA







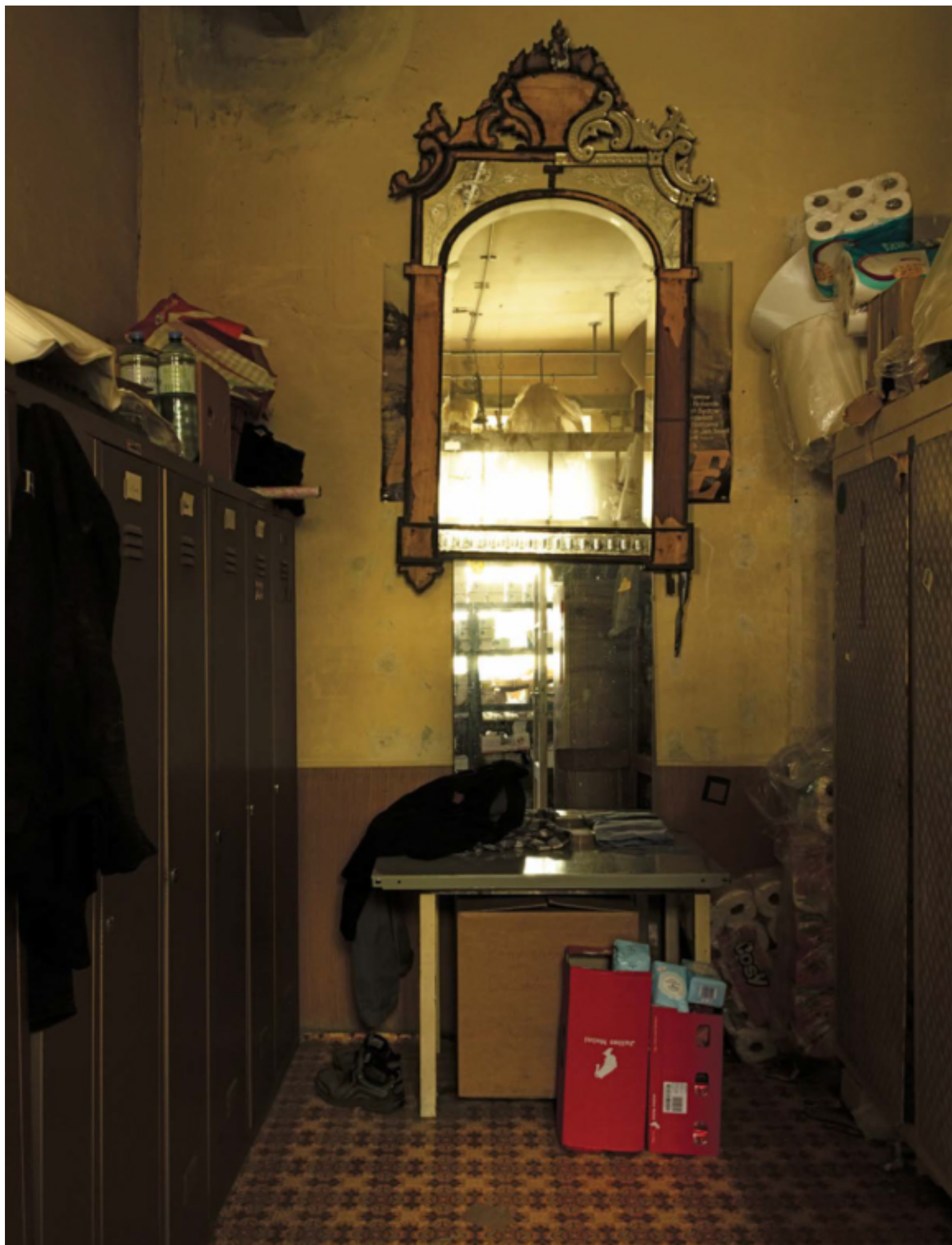
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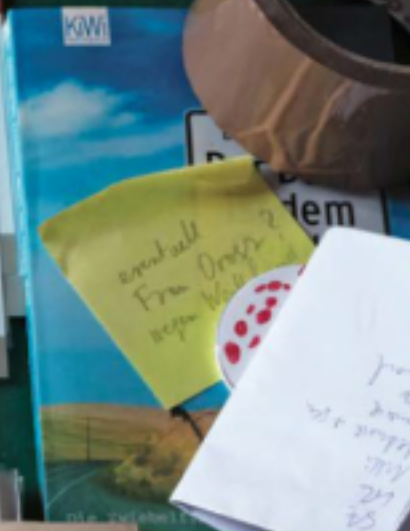




- ↑ The brass structure of a Lobmeyr chandelier being assembled.
- ← The initials of Josef and Ludwig Lobmeyr and the date '1866' engraved into blue glass.

J. & L. LOBMEYR  
(glass)





- 8. Juli 1958

Datum *1. August 1958* Nr. *5023/6*

Masse *112 x 85 mm* Bezeichnung

Gewicht

			46,00	
			15,00	
			9,00	
			114,00	
			11,60	
			15,00	
			17,00	
			16,00	
			3,00	
			3,60	
			1,50	
			6,00	
			20,00	
			69,00	
			39,60	
			1,50	
			0,-	
			480,-	
			1.250,00	1.250,00
Kosten?	6 Messingfüße	8,-	49,00	19,00
	6 Messingbüchsen	3,-	20,00	2,00
	6 an Ledergestell	1,-	12,-	12,-
<u>1957</u>	<u>Wiederaufbau</u>		1.820,-	1.820,-
	6 Tafel 2011/55 an Glas		25,00	36,-
	6 Tafel 2013/2005 an Glas		57,00	15,-
	6 Tafel 194		28,-	11,-
	Montage		3.230,-	3.230,-
<u>1958</u>	<u>7.170 - 2.4/2.121</u>			

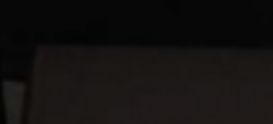
J. & L. LOBMEYR  
(glass)



The archives in the attic, managed by Peter Rath.









↑ Lobmeyr's best-selling Metropolitan chandelier being stored under a protective dust sheet.

J. & L. LOBMEYR  
(glass)

WOKA  
(lighting)

Early 20th-century Viennese design, known commonly as the Vienna Secession or the Wiener Werkstätte, had a profound effect on the course of the decorative arts. It was in many ways a precursor to Bauhaus modernism, where the ornamentation of the past was stripped away and replaced by stark geometric lines.

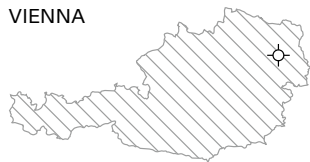
Unlike the Bauhaus, however, the Viennese designers were loath to abandon their beloved noble materials and insisted on the highest possible standards of manufacture. It may be for this reason that the output of the Werkstätte continues to fascinate – it was a unique period in design history when radical innovations in style were not met with the cost implications of mass production.

Yet for many years, the simple, shimmering designs by the likes of Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser and Adolf Loos were not available for purchase, having fallen out of production when the Werkstätte ground to a halt for financial reasons. In the 1970s, Wolfgang Karolinsky, a passionate archivist of the period, took it upon himself to remedy the situation when he bought a large collection of lamps at auction, many

in need of restoration. By engaging artisans capable of working in the manner of the early 20th-century masters, Karolinsky began to manufacture as well as restore. WOKA was born when he acquired the final pieces of the puzzle: the copyright to the designs, together with the original tools that were used to produce them.

Today, the company's 'Werkstatt', or atelier, is located in the western Viennese suburb of Ottakring, and contains many of these tools, from pressing tools to casting moulds and torsion meters. Here, technical drawings by the original Viennese designers are casually hung up with clips or scattered on workbenches. A team of international craftsmen set about remaking them, using the exact same techniques. This small, niche workforce contains a number of big personalities. One Japanese artisan honed his metalworking skills when making samurai swords back in his home country, and in his spare time creates large sculptures and lectures on sacred geometry.

VIENNA



# WOKA