

Between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the revolutions of 1848, there was a period of relative stability and peace in Central and Northern Europe. The art associated with this period, and the culture that gave rise to it, have come to be known by the name “Biedermeier.” Although much has been written in the last quarter-century on the subject, the Biedermeier style and era have eluded clear definition. In contrast to the neoclassical period that preceded it and Romanticism that to some extent overlapped with it, the term “Biedermeier” evolved without any strict logic: Biedermeier has variously been identified as a branch of Romanticism, as a late manifestation of Romanticism, as a completely independent, self-contained period distinct from Romanticism, and as a prelude to mid-century realism. Dates for the Biedermeier period are similarly problematic. Some art historians end the period in 1835 with the death of Austrian Emperor Franz I, others with the outbreak of revolution in 1848. However, characteristics typical of the period appear well before 1815 and as late as the 1860s.

Biedermeier art is problematic not only because of the stylistic lines of demarcation, but because the period is so closely associated with the political landscape of the “restoration” following the Napoleonic Wars. Exhibitions and publications in the twentieth century, with two important exceptions, have interpreted the works within the framework of the period’s emerging bourgeoisie, leading to grossly exaggerated interpretations of Biedermeier as a middle-class art made quickly, cheaply, and with middle-class interests in mind. New understanding has shown it to be a misconception to believe that the new middle class was the only patron of this art and that the spare, simple designs were a reflection of bourgeois modesty in taste and exhausted postwar economies. The classification of artists and objects has been equally fluid: the Dresden painter Georg Friedrich Kersting has just as often been identified as a principal exponent of the Biedermeier style as of German Romanticism.

Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity addresses these issues through the unconventional perspective of the aesthetics. Biedermeier is here identified as a term for an artistic era characterized by an emphasis on functionality and natural beauty. The style is marked by a considered balance of opposites in the ideal of nature and the simplicity of design. In its pure form, Biedermeier is characterized by an overall abstraction and geometry, brilliant color, and a lack of superficial ornamentation. Intentionally excluded from the exhibition are the many revivalist and historical forms of design and style that developed parallel to Biedermeier, as well as formal blends that were backward-looking, such as the ornamental antique, the Empire style, a literature-based Romanticism, neo-Gothic, neo-Renaissance, and neo-Baroque styles.¹

The over 400 works seen here encompass all branches of the decorative arts as well as paintings and drawings. They have been carefully selected for their shared