

Susanne Kelley
University of California, Los Angeles
skelley@ucla.edu

Wien bleibt Wien: Choosing Memory, Constructing Identity

The marketing tool with which contemporary Vienna is attracting tourists is the past. Vienna's charm depends on the experience of being reverted to an imperial time of demonstrated majestic pomp and power. Tourist sites advertise the city as an imperial capital with a historical cultural sophistication. My paper begins with the analysis of two historical and cultural icons that remain at the center of Vienna's identity – the Schönbrunn castle and Gustav Klimt. While the former is perhaps the most popular tourist destination in Vienna, the latter is the city's main marketing poster child, as we find his work represented on a multitude of displays including souvenirs available to tourists.

Why does Vienna, whose identity obviously still feeds off its imperial past, market itself with a figure, who participated in a movement – modernism – that conducted a deliberate turn away from the traditional? Perhaps because contemporary Vienna can relate to the fin-de-siècle artists, whose challenge it was to negotiate their ambitions of being modern with their continued affection towards the antiquated traditions of the Austrian monarchy.

I argue that the literature, art, and culture of the fin-de-siècle represent a “site of memory” (Pierre Nora) to contemporary Vienna that allows an acceptable nostalgia about a problematic imperial past by filtering it through a second cultural highpoint – the modernism around 1900. This detour in Vienna's cultural memory is not as politically controversial as directly advertising the height of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's power. In the second part of the paper, I demonstrate how this process functions in a literary example – the work of Peter Altenberg.

Peter Altenberg is a writer who belongs to the modernist circle “Jung Wiener.” His work most directly reflects the modernist mentality that strives to combine the challenge of expressing modern modes of existence with a deep bond to Vienna's literary, cultural, and political past. Altenberg's impressionistic writing style certainly accomplishes the former and makes him an important contributor to Viennese modernism, but in his texts, he manages to hold on to that which he considers typical and traditional Viennese mentalities and existences. He describes Vienna as he sees it, which is not a capital of a decadent empire spiraling towards its dissolution, but a space filled with a proud Viennese population leading the traditional culturally rich lifestyle associated with Vienna's imperial history. Altenberg's attraction to the reader of the 21st century is an insight into two Viennas – a capital of modern artistic innovation around 1900, and a city devoted to its extensive monarchical history.

This paper finally explores two sites of memory – one actual, one chosen, which make up the cultural image and identity of contemporary Vienna. A visitor strolling through Vienna then is confronted with these two sites of memory – the architectural reality of the city's imperial past and the chosen proclamation of the city's artistic proliferation at the last turn of the century, both of which work through each other to construct Vienna's identity as a space where at least the glorious parts of its history are harvested, but not openly problematized. The message this image conveys remains the same: “Wien bleibt Wien!”