



SHELF LIFE

The main showroom-cum-archive at 23 Bernardgasse. The top shelves hold historic pieces from the workshop, while wares for sale are displayed below with artful haphazardness, from car-hood ornaments to toast racks.

Finer Things

Over generations, the Auböck family has built a veritable temple to craftsmanship in Vienna, animated by the belief that everyday items can be elevated to the level of art.

BY SARAH MEDFORD
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INVENTING USEFUL objects was a Monday-to-Friday job for my father," says Carl Auböck IV, 64, of his upbringing within a family of celebrated Austrian designers. "It made for a special childhood." A fourth-generation metal craftsman and a practicing architect, Auböck was raised in the embrace of the *Werkstätte* Carl Auböck, producer of household gadgets and tools—door handles, wine pourers, toast racks—that, over almost a century, have become sought-after collectibles around the world. He now heads the Vienna-based business, as his father, grandfather and great-grandfather did before him. ("My father always said we lack fantasy, and this is why we always name our sons Carl," says Auböck, whose son, Carl V, is 30.)

Objects from the *Werkstätte* Carl Auböck may not be fantastical in the Klimtian sense, but they're some of the most engaging and socially intimate designs the last century produced. Emblems of evolving manners and customs, they're a reminder that our hands once performed more complex tasks than thumbing the surface of a tiny glass screen: cracking walnuts, for instance, stacking homemade pretzels onto a metal pike or arranging dried grasses in a vase. "Flowers were expensive," Auböck explains as he points to an ingenious vessel on the open shelves of the workshop (*werkstätte*) when I visited this past fall. "That's also why we made so many bud vases."

A youthful man with a hooded brow and a penchant for Levi's and Oshkosh barn jackets, Auböck dwarfs the glittering army of objects before him. There are about 4,500 designs in the company inventory archived here, in a three-story gray building on Bernardgasse, a 10-minute drive from the Vienna State Opera house. The workshop

and archive occupy the ground floor; upstairs are offices and apartments for several family members, including Auböck's 67-year-old sister, Maria, a landscape architect. Carl and his wife, Wendy, a costume designer, live on the outskirts of the city in a house designed by his father, right down to the children's beds and the cutlery in the drawers.

"I don't remember how I was first introduced to Auböck's work, but it was many years ago, and I was immediately struck by the simplicity of the designs," says the London-based fashion designer Paul Smith, who often stocks new and vintage pieces in his shops around the world. "As someone who is used to designing clothes, [I find] the way the objects combine form and function is fantastic. There's an ergonomic aspect, which I love."

Not every item is so simple. When asked about a curious lidded vessel on the archive shelves that looks like a bedpan for a cat, Auböck replies, "It's an ash collector—we call it a silent waiter. Party guests would carry a tiny ashtray in one hand—you could hold your long-stemmed glass at the same time. A maid came around and emptied them at the end of the night." For every arcane object he describes—sugar-cube presenter, snail-shaped pipe holder, a basket resembling a carpet beater, for washing fruit—there are an equal number of familiar ones: corkscrews, coasters, bookends. One reason so many are still in circulation, Auböck believes, is that they were well-used and well-loved, as seen by their shiny edges and haze of barely perceptible surface scratches.

Vienna was a center of Europe's cosmopolitan carriage trade at the turn of the last century, and the 7th

district around Bernardgasse housed skilled craftsmen catering to a patrician circle. Auböck describes it as "a Jewish gentry, a group of people who knew about design and art—they were more or less industrialists," he says. This was the milieu of Adele Bloch-Bauer, of Klimt's famous golden portraits and the Ephrussi banking dynasty so memorably described by Edmund de Waal in *The Hare With Amber Eyes*.

At No. 23, the first Karl Auböck (1872–1925) ran a metal shop producing so-called academic bronzes, such as chandeliers for the State Opera house and the eagle atop the obelisks in front of the Schönbrunn Palace. But it was the eldest of his three children, Carl II (1900–1957), who set the company's future course. An exceptional draftsman as a boy, he attended the newly opened Bauhaus on scholarship from 1919 to 1921. There he met his future wife, Mara, an artist who had crossed paths with a young Josef Albers in Munich and followed him to the Weimar campus, according to family lore. "That romance was maybe something but maybe not," says Auböck, who has seen a few letters between Mara and Josef. "But in any case, she then met my grandfather."

Following their marriage in 1923, the couple settled down in the 7th to a life of "splendid isolation," according to Auböck. "My grandfather was painting, my grandmother was weaving and designing fashion," he continues. "They had their garden, their workshop, a small nice flat in this building. And they were always working on products."

Challenged by a shortage of raw materials after World War I, Carl II began making small household

objects that were useful but also witty, with soft, organic curves—qualities that have distinguished the brand ever since. Not quite luxury objects when they were produced, the wares were cast in multiples at factories outside the city limits and finished by hand on Bernardgasse. Some were given embellishments of wood, glass, leather, rattan, horn or simple twine. Auböck is quick to distinguish between his family's oeuvre and that of the Wiener Werkstätte, the Vienna-based art and craft collective led by Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser and Dagobert Peche, whose rarefied, one-of-a-kind treasures were meant primarily as indulgences to be admired. Aspiring to that movement's ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, wasn't for the Auböcks; instead they responded to the emerging modernist codes of the Bauhaus. "They were more for production for the people," Auböck explains. "The Nazis said my family were Bolshevik. Of course, they were to the left. They were thinking of the user and a better future."

The Auböcks struggled to stay afloat during the war years, and production slowed to a standstill. In time, thanks in large part to the market-savvy Auböck women, an international sales network was built, one that continues to grow. The playful pieces Carl II designed from the 1920s into the mid-1950s remain the most coveted by collectors today—asymmetrical ashtrays, for instance, or bottle stoppers in the shape of a hand, as if waving for help. In contrast, the contributions of Carl III (1924–1993), a trained architect and industrial designer, are distinguished by their geometric purity. Carl IV's work recaptures some of his grandfather's ingenuity (a letter opener

with a swooping handle that doubles as a card clip). And Carl V is just getting started. From his desk in the architecture studio, where he and his father design local housing and small institutional buildings, he announces that he's just designed his first official Auböck piece: a chandelier for his sister's bakery.

Roughly 450 items, or about 10 percent of the archive, are kept in continuous production today. They tend to be utilitarian objects like hooks and knobs or small gifts—bookmarks and paperweights—that look enticing alongside shearing sandals and organic body oils in concept stores, such as The Apartment by The Line in New York and Los Angeles. Auböck designs a new piece when the right offer comes along (the Philip Johnson Glass House recently commissioned a pair of Johnson-style spectacles in patinated or polished brass for its gift shop), and occasionally he partners with a designer he admires to fabricate a work they've conceived, as with Formafantasma and Michael Anastassiades. The process can take up to two years.

Through such meticulous oversight, Auböck has built the family brand into a kind of cult collectible. He rattles off the names of fans around the world: Brad Pitt, Susan Sarandon, Diane von Furstenberg—and Paul Smith, of course. "I made these cuff links for Paul," Auböck says, reaching for what looks like a Halloween gag—two googly eyeballs, albeit beautiful ones. "Antelope," he clarifies. A commission? "No, I just made them. I was in his shop, and I thought it was so boring. So I made something new." (He hasn't yet gotten around to sending them.)

For many years, collecting Auböck was a shot in

the dark. The only way to identify the pieces was through rare vintage books and collectors' magazines, and most dealers who sold them didn't bother. One who kept stacks of such periodicals was New Yorker Patrick Parrish, who has traded in these pieces since the early 2000s. He estimates that prices then were roughly a quarter of what they are today—from about \$500 for a small bowl to \$14,000 for a tripod table in wood and brass, one of the few furniture pieces the company made.

In 2015, Parrish mounted an all-Auböck booth at the Design Miami/Basel fair in Switzerland and sold to a who's who of art-world heavyweights. "Everyone from Blum & Poe to directors at Gagosian—they all bought pieces," he recalls. Six years earlier, the dealer had gotten a similar response at Manhattan's Modernism fair. "Roberta Smith from the *New York Times* came into my booth and said, 'Who is this person and how have I never heard of him?'" Parrish says with a smile. "It's still a little under the radar, but going up, up up."

The evolution of Auböck from a niche, made-in-Austria curiosity to a covetable global collectible might never have happened if it weren't for Clemens Kois, a Salzburg-born photographer now based in New York. Kois stumbled on a horn coaster set 22 years ago at a Vienna flea market and bought it, flipping the switch on an obsession that now numbers over 1,000 pieces. In 2012, aided by Auböck and Parrish, he came out with a collectors' guide titled *Carl Auböck: The Workshop*. A second volume is due next spring. The book fueled interest and turned up a raft of new material; even today, Parrish observes,

he still encounters pieces he's never seen before. "There's no shortage," he insists.

This is partially true, according to Auböck (Parrish calls him "Number Four"). Early designs from the 1920s and '30s were made in editions of a dozen or two and are rare today, while some from the 1970s exist in the low hundreds. Records are scant, and the pieces weren't numbered, let alone consistently stamped, which has opened the door to counterfeiting. And yet the allure of buying Auböck continues to lie in its variety as well as its relative affordability. You could forage for a lifetime without exhausting the possibilities.

Nina Hertig of London's Sigmar gallery has helped clients build a focus on the company's vintage raffia pieces, or glass, or boxes and bowls. In the process, she's refined her own view of the work. "I think all of these objects are, without a doubt, an excuse for sculpture," she says. "And the function is kind of laid upon that."

Back in the ground-floor workshop, Auböck explains the process of metal patination as a worker files the edges off another pair of the spectacles created for the Philip Johnson commission. "I love to spend time here," he says. "Because it's breathing some kind of spiritualism. They had it," he says of his relatives. "And I think that maybe I can transmit the spiritualism with the pieces to the people who want to own it too."

Even with skilled employees and a solid client base, Auböck still feels the need to be in the workshop every day, hand-finishing pieces himself. "It's an easy job," he says. "You just have to develop an eye." ●



FAMILY MATTERS
From left: Carl Auböck IV stands outside the main entrance to the workshop where the business has been based since 1912; ashtrays in brass and patinated brass, designed by Carl Auböck II in 1953.



HEAVY METAL
Above: An assortment of polishing tools. Opposite, from left: Small brass items in the workshop, including a sculpture of Carl Auböck III by his father; three patinated-brass vases.

"THE WAY THE OBJECTS COMBINE FORM AND FUNCTION IS FANTASTIC."

—PAUL SMITH

