

PAIR OF SECESSIONIST ARMCHAIRS JOSEPH MARIA OLBRICH FRIEDRICH OTTO SCHMIDT 1898

pair of secessionist armchairs, Joseph Maria Olbrich (design), Friedrich Otto Schmidt (execution), 1898

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The two armchairs were created in 1898 based on designs by Joseph Maria Olbrich for the second exhibition of the Vienna Secession, which was officially opened on November 12 in the newly constructed Secession building at Friedrichstraße 12, 1010 Vienna. This presentation is considered the most significant in the early history of the Secession, as it was the first to take place in the specially constructed building and showcased the new exhibition venue to its full effect. The chairs were displayed in the “Arts and Crafts Room” - a space in which the association's new aesthetic program, the removal of boundaries between art and applied design, was expressed in a harmonious unity of form, material, and idea. The strict lines, geometric clarity, and focus on basic tectonic forms are closely related to other seating furniture that Olbrich created for this exhibition, especially those in the “vestibule” and the “main exhibition hall.” While Josef Hoffmann designed the famous “Ver Sacrum” room and chose a much more restrained design language there (chairs with lower backrests), these armchairs bear Olbrich's unmistakable signature.

The pieces were most likely produced by the Vienna workshop “Friedrich Otto Schmidt.” Founded in Vienna in 1859, the company developed from a wallpaper business into a leading studio for interior design and maintained close ties to artists and architects of the Vienna Modernism movement. Under Max Hermann Schmidt, the company collaborated with Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffmann, and the Vienna Secession, among others, took on major commissions for exhibitions, and had a decisive influence on modern interior design. The catalogue's expression of gratitude to Schmidt “for the decorative furnishings of our house and our exhibition” supports the assumption that the chairs originated from his workshop.

For the new upholstery, the fabric “Abimelech” by Koloman Moser for Backhausen & Söhne was chosen – a design from 1899 that had already been used for curtains and a sofa at the 1900 Paris World's Fair. “Abimelech” means “father of the king” or “my father is king” and lends the chairs a symbolic depth: the high backrests create a throne-like presence, while the name refers to dignity, authority, and sovereign calm. The combination of form, material, and name blends craftsmanship, artistic vision, and symbolic meaning into a unity that lends the furniture not only elegance but also an almost mythical aura. At the same time, the choice of fabric illustrates the close cooperation within the Secession and builds an aesthetic bridge between Olbrich's design and Moser's visionary textile design.

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