

*Flirting with Culture*

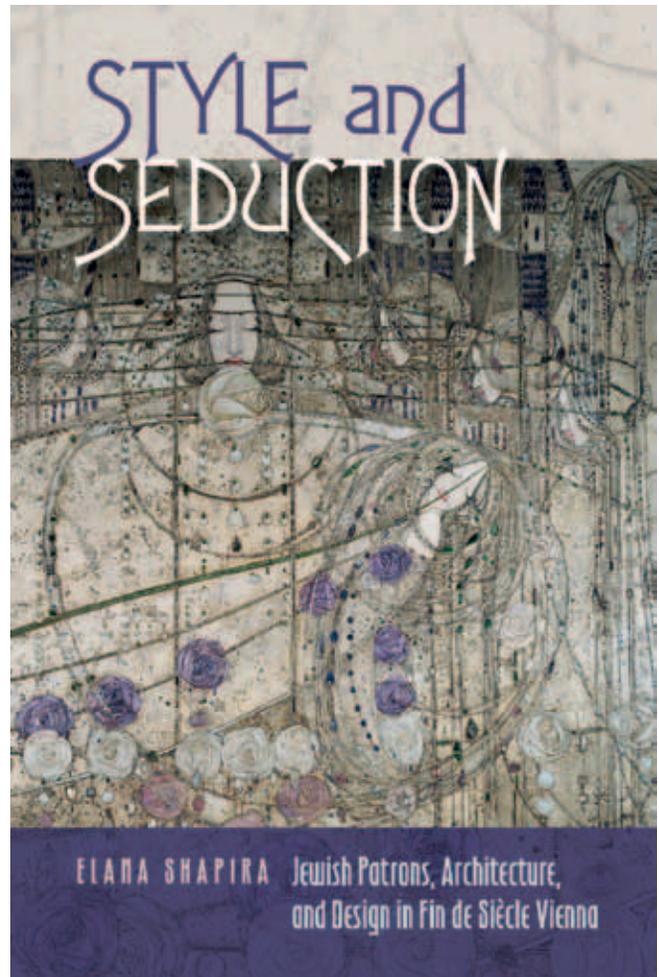
Elana Shapira, *Style and Seduction: Jewish Patrons, Architecture, and Design in Fin de Siècle Vienna* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016), xv + 314 pp., 30 black-and-white and color illustrations. ISBN 9781611689204 (hardcover)

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Stefan Zweig's *World of Yesterday*, written from exile in 1937, recalls the years before the Great War as a "world of security," where Vienna was a cosmopolitan city alive with ubiquitous eroticism, intellectual splendor, and, above all, a unique love for the arts. "Only with respect to the arts," he writes, "did everyone in Vienna feel the same entitlement, for love of art, in Vienna, was considered a common obligation." Art transcended origins and class; art replaced the privilege of birth. No wonder, then, Zweig continues, that the real lovers of the arts, the real audience, came from the Viennese Jewish bourgeoisie, for here was a social group fluid and unburdened by traditional values, whose members could become, everywhere, "the patrons and champions of all new things."

In many ways, Elana Shapira's impressive book *Style and Seduction* reflects Zweig's firsthand observations, adding color and nuance to a by now well-trodden field of Jewish patronage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is also a timely book whose publication coincides with the 150th anniversary of the Vienna Ringstraße Boulevard and the resurgent interest in, as it were, Ringstraße studies, inspired by both scholarly and popular inclinations. Only a year ago, a veritable flurry of exhibits celebrated the history of the "Ring" in various museums in Vienna, including the Jewish Museum, which featured *The Vienna Ringstraße: A Jewish Boulevard*, anticipating some of the material and observations Shapira has developed on her own.

But *Style and Seduction* is not only about the Jewish presence on the Ringstraße. It is a book about Jewish art lovers and the way they helped shape Vienna's cultural



scene from the 1860s to the years just prior to World War I. Shapira's organizing principle is a chronology of dominant stylistic periods. The story she tells unfolds logically from "The Historicists," a chapter that focuses mainly on the

Jewish predilection for neo-Renaissance palaces on the Ringstraße, to “The Secessionists,” where she untangles the Jewish ties to Joseph Maria Olbrich’s Secession House and its founding movement, to “The Modernists,” which establishes Jewish affinities to and vital support of the pioneering design movement of the Wiener Werkstätte, finally arriving at “The Avant-Gardists,” a chapter centered around Adolf Loos’s architectural agenda as a subtle strategy for the “modernization,” or rather de-Judaization, of Vienna’s Jews.

What sustains this impressive historical arc is Shapira’s quest for a “new semantics” of modern Viennese architecture and design – a semantics that makes it possible “to treat Jewish identification within Viennese modernism as a question of Jews actively fashioning a new language to convey their aims of emancipation as well as claims of cultural authority” (p. 2). The culture that shaped modernist Vienna, she argues, was one of collaboration, of creative relationships between Jewish clients and patrons and their (gentile) architects, that involved acts of self-fashioning which would not only open new possibilities of “Jewishness,” but would also give birth to a “new aesthetic” defining the urban landscape of fin-de-siècle Vienna. For Jewish patrons and clients, Shapira intends to show, style became a matter of “exposure and concealment in representing the Jewish self,” a subtle interplay of acculturation and self-identification manifested in iconographic detail and allusion. In contrast to gentile patrons, she argues, Jewish patrons in Vienna “preferred to serve [as] a template for a collective group,” expressing their interests and agendas in “direct relationship to their Jewish identification” (p. 13).

This, no doubt, is a very bold claim deliberately aimed at scholars who, like the Vienna-born art historian Ernst Gombrich, refrained from acknowledging such Jewish identification and such stark distinctions between gentile and Jewish sensibilities. In his well-known lecture at the Austrian Cultural Institute in London in 1996, which set the stage for Shapira’s musings, Gombrich insisted that, “One does not do a favour to the wealthy lovers of art, who happened to be Jewish, by calling them ‘Jewish patrons of art.’” It is, perhaps, telling that to most Jewish contemporaries of the period she chronicles, the Jewish

agendas of the wealthy lovers of art remained all but invisible. To Viennese Jews (and other Jews as well), assimilation and acculturation – to return once more to Zweig – represented a “deep inner need,” an existential “desire for home, tranquility, rest, security, and unstrangeness,” which seems to have been reflected in their identification with style rather than Jewishness. Indeed, it was the very self-fashioning of an aesthetic aristocracy that, according to Zweig, expressed a “secret longing to dissolve, through flight into the spiritual, one’s mere Jewishness into the universally human.” But this longing, as Shapira illustrates, was not as universal as it claimed to be; it was accompanied, rather, by a simultaneous reclamation of residual Jewishness, which, as Steven Aschheim once put it, “assimilation in the last analysis could neither repress nor dissolve.”

The sources and residue of Jewish self-fashioning among the most acculturated Jews, those who truly “made it” in a city that was as cosmopolitan as it was haunted by bigotry and anti-Semitism, constitute the core of Shapira’s historical imagination. Here, her work meets with that of earlier historians of the Viennese Jewish experience who have wrestled with similar questions, such as Steven Beller, Carl Schorske, Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, George Berkeley, Robert Wistrich, and William McCagg, to name but a few (and quite a few more who are oddly absent from Shapira’s book). Her work also reflects certain parallels with that of historians of German Jewry, for example, George Mosse, Michael Meyer or, more recently, Jonathan Hess, who have pointed out the confrontational nature of the so-called German-Jewish “symbiosis.” However, Shapira’s study, which might have relied on such works for some foundational insight, tends to depart from these earlier historians by offering a long view of Jewish identification, which, she insists, was not sharpened by anti-Semitism and the failure of liberal politics, nor merely a response to crisis, but present “because it had always been there” (p. 19).

Rather than reacting to the times, Shapira argues, Jewish patrons, from the very beginning of their patronage, remained conscious of their “otherness,” embracing styles that would “confirm their uniqueness within Viennese society” (p. 19). At the same time, however, she contends that “Jewish patronage was constructed as an existential

strategy in defense against antisemitism and was necessary to secure social position and claim cultural authority” (p. 233), making us wonder whether the modern need for Jewish identification can truly be removed from the context of crisis and whether Shapira’s departure from earlier historians is as radical as imagined.

But no book has to be radical. Sometimes a book can delve into the realm of the familiar, intuitive, and unsurprising to unearth genuinely new material. And sometimes two or more contrary positions can be equally true, as is often the case in the history of ambivalent identities, including modern Jewish identity. Shapira carefully approaches this identity as one of doing rather than being: “the issue is not assimilation or nonassimilation, but the attitude of self-fashioning” (p. 27). In the figure of the dandy she finds the archetype of Viennese Jewish self-fashioning, a “contagion of style and seduction,” in the words of Rhonda Garelick, which allowed “the Jewish man,” as Shapira writes, “to redeem the negative associations the broader culture imposed on the Jew and become an arbiter of taste” (p. 8). The replacement of stereotypes by seduction is the prime function of dandyism, which advances in Shapira’s work to a methodical all-in-one concept, like Benjamin’s flâneur or Arendt’s pariah. The dandy’s actions are called flirtation. Borrowing from the currently obligatory Georg Simmel, Shapira conceives of flirtation as a social game whose eroticism lies in creative license and simultaneous withdrawal, a being “half turned away,” preserving and perhaps constituting otherness and difference. According to Shapira, Viennese Jews flirted with Viennese culture, rather than fully embracing it (or, for that matter, being fully embraced by it). Armed with these attractive concepts, Shapira achieves what past historians of the modern Jewish experience have already articulated in much less colorful terms, such as co-constitution, positioning and performance, or cultural transfer.

And there is a lot indeed her book *does* achieve. Working from a truly astounding range of primary and archival sources, she brings to life the protagonists of her story with intimacy and richness of detail. Rarely has the active role of Jewish patronage been explored in such depth. We encounter the Jewish residents of the

Ringstraße, the Todescos, the Epsteins, the Ephrussi (the last the subject of Edmund de Waal’s acclaimed *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which deserved a footnote in the book), who, despite their outward identification with classical and Renaissance ornament, introduced Jewish codes in their interiors and, at times, façades. We meet Ludwig Hevesi and Karl Wittgenstein as characters to whom their Judaism mattered far more than they admitted even to themselves. A tour through Friedrich Victor Spitzer’s music room reveals a “private theatrical orchestration to display his cultural difference” (p. 107), whereas the music room of the industrialist Fritz Waerndorfer exhibits a peculiar affinity to the number seven. Richard Beer-Hofmann’s villa begins, after closer inspection, to look like a synagogue that represents “his and his guest’s Jerusalem in the Diaspora” (p. 160), and the avant-garde Goldman & Salatsch House, designed by Adolf Loos for the fashion merchant Leopold Goldman, allows for a “new performance of Jewish identification through conscious flirtatious acts between a performer (such as a tailor or guest of honor) and a client (or other guests and friends)” (p. 168).

What makes Shapira’s book compelling and important as a contribution to an otherwise amply explored field is the meticulousness of her accounts, the veritable wealth of background material, her excellent research, and her ability to trace and untangle complicated networks that encompass Jews and gentiles alike. She treats Viennese culture and society as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art integrating the visual, the literary, the worlds of music and theater, the press, and the ever-intriguing thicket of personal encounter. Everything is connected, everything is pregnant with meaning, everything points to enduring Jewish sensibilities, be they nostalgic, ironic, or subversive. To be sure, at times the need for meaning can elude historical clarity, and more than once Shapira’s book toys with the seduction of speculation. We come to wonder whether Richard Beer-Hoffmann really had the Temple of Solomon in mind for his villa, whether Fanny Figdor was really named after Fanny Arnstein, or whether the secessionists’ fascination with gold really had anything to do with the parable of the golden rings by a certain “Gottlieb” Ephraim Lessing. Perhaps.

At times, we are also overwhelmed by the author's tendency toward repetition and rote-reading, as it were, the joyful restating of an observation over and over again (such as the mildly obvious orientalist themes of the Secession House) and the stubborn reintroduction of her argument on any possible occasion. All too often she dispenses her conceptual twin panacea of dandyism and flirtatiousness (such as Adolf Loos visualizing "flirtatious dramas in his architecture" or Joseph Maria Olbrich's design for Spitzer's music room as consciously engendering

"the seduction of flirtation encouraged by the gaze" of his "dandy" patron). There is only so much flirtation a dandy can do, even in Vienna, and the reader cannot but notice a gradual impoverishment of Shapira's once enticing *cri de guerre* as the book progresses. But these forgivable idiosyncrasies will not diminish the real achievements and enduring significance of Shapira's study. Nor do they detract from the genuinely interesting story she has chosen to tell. Indeed, despite its occasional slippages in style, her book remains a most seductive read.