Art for All. The Colour Woodcut in Vienna around 1900

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Using blocks of wood for creating printed illustrations was quickly adopted in the West for illustrating early books and a wide range of short publications, single-page prints and broadsides. But by the middle of the 18th century the use of woodcuts had already begun to be replaced by more precise processes such as engraving and etching. It then began a slow slide to relative oblivion, only to be rediscovered as an artistic medium in the early 20th century, with Vienna serving as the nexus for a revival that was to last just a decade. This is the focus of the Art for All. The Colour Woodcut in Vienna around 1900 exhibition, running until October 3, 2016 at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt.

The setting for this revival is the Vienna Secession, formed in 1897 by painters, sculptors and architects who had resigned from the Association of Austrian Artists, as a protest against its emphasis on conservatism and the creation of work based on historical styles and subject matter. A reflection of that restlessness was the social reformist movement Kunst für Alle (Art for All), which encouraged lively discussion about authenticity and originality, as well as the democratization of art via the production of affordable artwork. Factor in the growing awareness of the color woodblock ukiyo-e prints of Japan, which had earlier seduced such artists as Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, and the result is an environment in which the creation of color woodcut prints enjoyed a brief golden age between 1900 and 1910 in Vienna.

The show includes 240 works by more than 40 artists and goes beyond woodcut printing to related techniques such as linocut, block printing and stencil spraying, which makes it the first exhibition of its kind to do so. Dr. Tobias G. Natter, the curator of the exhibition and an expert on Viennese art around 1900, states that “The rediscovery of the woodcut and associated techniques was an experiment with far-reaching effects during Modernism, not least for successive generations of artists. What is so fascinating about the color woodcut in Vienna is the stylistic and thematic variety as well as the mood of change, which can still be sensed today.” There’s no doubt that the freshness of the work is still striking, one hundred years later, with some of the pieces clearly anticipating directions that would soon be explored in everything from abstraction to Expressionism.

You can decide for yourself by checking out some examples from the show below. Highly recommended is what the organizers call an online Digitorial, which successfully places images from the show within a framework of contemporary social and creative conditions in Vienna. More information is available on the Schirn Kunsthalle site. To accompany the show TASCHEN has published a lavish exhibition catalog, claiming that “Through figure studies, landscapes, patterns, and typographical treasures, the featured works are accompanied by detailed captions, as well as essays exploring their aesthetic and ideological implications, and biographies for the more than 40 artists.”

Upper image credit: Franz Zöllner, From the Sorcerer’s Garden, 1998, Papercut print, hand-coloured, stuck to board, 18,5 x 32,4 cm, Vienna Albertina, Inv. DG 1892/41 © Albertina, Vienna