

K's VienNature Culturegram

Vienna in gold – A Jane's walk

Posted on May 15, 2018May 16, 2018 by karinsvad

Who's Jane?

I've been asked this. So here is a bit of background on the *Jane's Walk Vienna 2018* (<https://janeswalk.at/janes-walk-vienna-2018/>) festival. These walks are named for **Jane Jacobs** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Jacobs), who was an American-Canadian journalist, writer, and activist who had great influence on American urban studies, sociology, and how people thought about urban development in the 1950s and 60s. Without her activism, there would be no Washington Square Park (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington_Square_Park) in New York today — she fought against plans to demolish it for a highway, something that had already destroyed and torn apart other neighborhoods in New York. Jacobs famously wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Death_and_Life_of_Great_American_Cities) (1961) in which she introduced concepts such as “eyes on the street” and social capital. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital)

The golden city

The walk I joined on 5 May 2018 was led by the very knowledgeable and enthusiastic Tom Koch (<http://www.tomkoch.net/news>). It was one of several volunteer-led thematic walks on offer during the festival weekend and featured the elegant gold-plated shop signs that complement the gilded statues and ornamental rooftops (think of the iconic Secession (<https://www.secession.at/programm/tik/>)) that abound in Vienna.



Our guide for the walk, Tom Koch

Tom is a communications expert with a special interest in lettering and signs, and he knows a lot about shop sign history in Vienna. He took us on a whirlwind three-hour thematic tour through parts of the eighth, sixth, and fourth districts. (After the official end of the walk some hardy participants walked on to the first to see some more signs, but sadly I was not able to join them due to another engagement.)

*The Jane's walk volunteer with his
branded bag*

Shiny and prestigious – shop portals around

1900

Most of the **hand-painted gold-lettered signs** that Tom showed us were quite historic. Such signs were all the rage around 1900 and established Vienna's reputation as the center of the art of sign painting. Surprisingly many that were created between 1890 and 1920 have survived to this day, but not all of the golden signs you see nowadays are old. Many newer ones are imitations printed on foil and, unlike their original hand-painted ancestors, won't last for decades. Unfortunately it would not be affordable today to produce signs the way they once were.

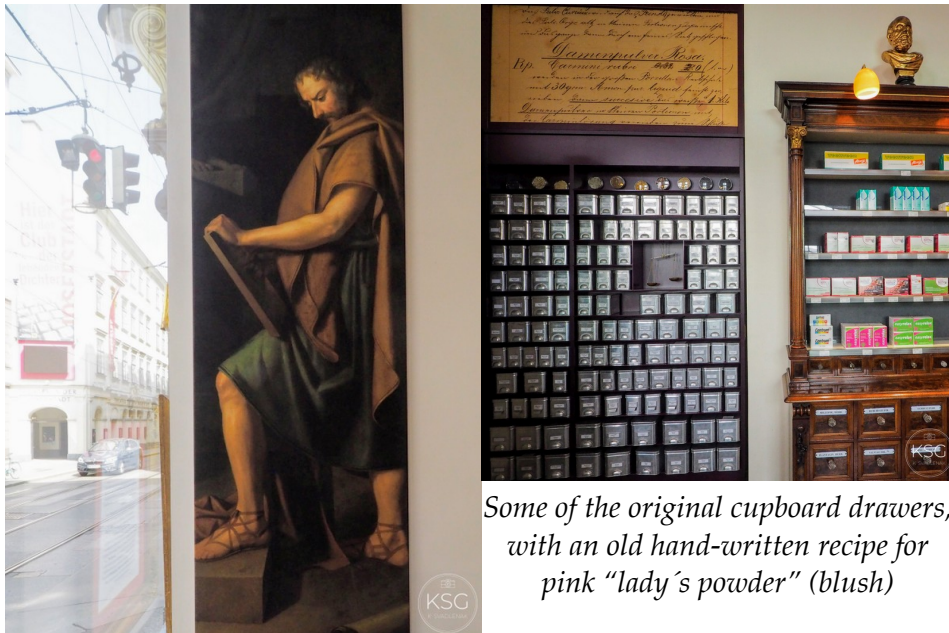


Carl Zapletal (1876-1941) was the first Austrian photographer to take photos from airplanes in 1912. In 1931 he received a prize for his work as sports and industry photographer. The sign above the door still bears witness to his former studio here.

One of the oldest pharmacies, originally founded in 1782 and now operating at its 1911 location, is the old **Löwenapotheke** (<http://www.alte-loewen-apotheke.at/Geschichte.aspx>) (Lion's pharmacy) in the eighth district. Apart from beautiful golden letters, it also has a replica of a **gas light** that was installed in 1816 – the first of its kind in Vienna – and of four **facade panels** painted by the famous Austrian painter **Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller** (<https://digital.belvedere.at/highlights/248977/ferdinand-georg-waldmuller/objects>), whose works are now found in museums.



The Löwen Apotheke has been operating at this location since 1911. It has been beautifully restored, both outside and inside.



Replica of one of the panels painted by F. Waldmüller

Another highlight was a visit to a really old-fashioned hair salon on Piaristengasse – one feels back in the 1950s in there. The cheerful hairdresser offers perms and other services in a quaint setting with private booths for customers who value their privacy. Astonishingly, apart from the portal, there is also an original cupboard designed by **Alfred Loos** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Loos).

Some of the original cupboard drawers, with an old hand-written recipe for pink "lady's powder" (blush)



The hair salon at Piaristengasse 2 was founded in 1912! Its friendly owner offers old-fashioned personal service.



The friendly hairdresser even volunteered to pose for my photo.



A display in the shop window advertises perms and more.



Original cupboard designed by Alfred Loos. Loos designed quite a few shop interiors. He rejected the ornamental style that was popular in his day in favour of more utilitarian, straight-lined style.

On the way we passed the **Alte Bäckerei** (<https://www.facebook.com/Alte-B%C3%A4ckerei-104387062992194/>) (old bakery), which still has some gorgeous original hand-lettered signs, though some of them have been replaced with imitations. None of the advertised goodies are likely to be available there now – these days it houses a bar – oh well.



The bar in Alte Bäckerei



This must have been quite a successful bakery once, if they could offer specialty products in gold lettering.

Tom then took us to see the facade of the old **Stelzhamer** (actually Stelzhammer) piano manufacture in the sixth district. When the sign was made, the sign painter made a spelling mistake and left out the second m – and thus it remained. The Stelzhammer family (https://www.musiklexikon.ac.at/ml/musik_S/Stelzhammer_familie.xml) had originally come to Vienna from Upper Austria, where Valentin Stelzhammer was registered as an independent piano maker in 1852. In 1948 the Austrian film "Der Engel mit der Posaune" (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Engel_mit_der_Posaune)" was made using this building as location. Have a look at the angel figurine above the doorframe!



It is likely that this sign has been unchanged since 1900. Rudolf Stelzhamer was born in 1864, and his shop in Barnabitenngasse is documented from 1900-1938.



Interior tiles and sculpture in the courtyard of the Stelzhamer building

The gold-painted sign inside the passage to the former piano factory at the Stelzhamer building

Some other shops we passed on the way:



The old Herzmansky building still bears the sign.



The tailor shop Netousek was founded in 1935. The old wooden portal was restored and adapted in 2012.

The portal next to Netousek's shop states that the building dates to 1895.



The Café Sperl also still has original side panels in black and gold. The other often used colour on these signs is burgundy red.

The eye had something to look at

Sign painting was a real art back then – it is also an almost lost art nowadays. As a special treat, we were accompanied by Josef Samuel of the Samuel Sign Painter shop, the last of four generations of sign painters in this family. Around 1900 there were 300 sign painters working in Vienna – according to Mr. Samuel he is the last one.



Samuel's Schildermalerei now functions as a museum

For me the real highlight was the visit to his former workshop (now a museum), where Mr. Samuel explained the tricks of his trade, showed us different qualities of gold leaf, demonstrated how he ground colour powders by hand and mixed them into long-lasting paints. Painters learned how to make their own colours, got special art lessons, and had to know about the chemical properties of the paints.



Some of Mr. Samuel's publications showing his work – and spots on the floor bear witness to the activities that once took place here.



Some of the things that were needed to make and mix your own colours

We learned that the colours used to contain lead, which made them very durable and UV resistant. Signs used to last 40-50 years before, Mr. Samuel says, but nowadays lead is banned, and the new industrially produced paints are not as durable. "Back then the eye had something to look at," he added wistfully, looking at some of the old hand-painted signs in his museum. "Now everything is so plain and simple."



*Letter exhibits at the
Schildermalereimuseum*



*Some of the older shop signs produced
by the Samuel family*

By the way, in 2017 there was a whole **Sign Week** (<http://www.signweek.com/>), “a week to celebrate Vienna’s heritage of shop signs and urban typography”, which unfortunately I missed. The aim of the Sign Week was to sharpen the eye for the beauty of manual typeface design and for the aesthetics of Viennese shop signs to ensure their conservation. Luckily, one of the exhibitions created for that week, **135 Years of Sign Painting Samuel**, (<http://www.signweek.com/ausstellungen/135-jahre-schildermalerei-samuel>) at the above-mentioned **Schildermalermuseum** is still on view (prior appointment necessary). The **Schildermalermuseum** (<https://betterletters.co/viennas-incredible-schildermalermuseum/>) is quite near Naschmarkt and makes for a fascinating glimpse into a now lost trade.



Mr. Samuel posed for me at the end of the tour with his most important tool (but I forgot what it's called). “Back then we still learned a lot of trade skills – now to produce signs you just learn to press buttons,” he says.

Tom Koch has also explored another fascinating aspect of old signs, or rather their remains: **ghostletters** (<http://www.ghostlettersvienna.com/>). These are the left-over pale marks of signs taken off or faded long ago that you can still see above some shop portals and on walls. In fact, Tom has written and illustrated an entire book on the subject (info below).

This walk opened up a completely new view on old signs for me. Thank you, volunteer team of Jane's Walk Vienna, Tom Koch and Josef Samuel for this very interesting insight into a lost craft.

Further reading

- Tom Koch's book project *[Ghostletters Vienna](https://shop.falter.at/ghostletters-vienna-17.html)* (<https://shop.falter.at/ghostletters-vienna-17.html>)
- *[Better Letters](https://betterletters.co/)* (<https://betterletters.co/>) – an interesting blog on lettering and signs, which I found when researching background information for this post
- **Schildermuseum** – call Mr. Samuel at 0664 936 79 43 to visit

Jane's Walks are volunteer-led walks that focus on exploring neighborhoods and conversation while walking. The walks can deal with a particular district or with a special theme. Every year, Jane's Walk takes place on the first weekend of May in memory of urban activist and thinker Jane Jacobs. Since 2014 Jane's Walk is also in Vienna. The next festival weekend will take place on 3-5 May 2019 – but walks are available all year round!

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One thought on “Vienna in gold – A Jane's walk”

1. *Luis* says: [May 16, 2018 at 8:39 am](#)

Thank you Karin for this excellent introduction to this subject which was unknown to me

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