

# Teaching Austria

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### Teaching "The Culture of Vienna" as an Enrichment Course

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In 2004 I had the opportunity to propose and teach a one-credit-hour elective course. I decided to teach "The Culture of Vienna" and emphasize the city, although of course I did at times refer to the culture of Austria as a whole. I would like to share a few ideas about designing such a course, some of which could also be adapted for a non-credit adult course, a preparatory course prior to a group trip to Vienna, or a regular three-hour college course. This class was taught at a small university with no German major, so materials were in English translation. The subject is interdisciplinary, of course, so possibilities abound for developing the course in numerous directions, involving colleagues in other disciplines, and encouraging students to choose their own research topics. I offer my ideas as possible starting points.

Due to the shortness of the course, which met once a week for an hour and a quarter, a packet of materials and modest student research for reports took the place of a textbook. (See in the Appendix to this discussion the class schedule, a bibliography, and a one-page handout, "The Culture of Vienna: Common Images"). The images -- stereotypes and commonplaces -- are A Tourist Destination, History Lives on, Vienna: A City of Art and Pleasure, *Fin de Siècle* Decadence, and *Schein und Sein* (Appearance and Reality). Also mentioned is the much-debated issue of the independence of Austrian literature from Germany's, and one definition of its particular qualities is given.

In designing such an enrichment course, many scholars of Austrian culture might well cringe at the obvious temptation such a project presents to share with students Vienna's most commercialized and superficial tourist attractions, stereotypes, travel films, and souvenirs. However, it is a sad fact that many Americans know little or nothing about Vienna and Austria, and it is not a joke that some fairly well-educated people do mix up Austria and Australia, so indulging in some academic tourism may well play an educational role as well as provide entertainment and excite interest in more serious study abroad, or at least in travel. Vienna *is* the city represented by *Sachertorte* (which we did sample) and Sissi films, concert ticket sellers dressed as Mozart, performing Lippizaner horses that seem to be constantly touring the United States, and umbrellas and shower curtains decorated with images of Gustav Klimt's painting "The Kiss." The movies "The Sound of Music" and "The Third Man" do have relevance. An instructor's sharing of some tourist material, as well as personal experiences and memorabilia, is legitimate as *part* of a cultural course. One good disclaimer is informing your students that some Austrian intellectuals refer disparagingly to such tourist culture as the "Hawaianization" of Austria.

Balancing superficial and commercial material with more serious academic content is one challenge; another is the task of planning an interdisciplinary course: addressing the various relevant disciplines of art, architecture, music, drama, literature, history, and perhaps also psychology (Sigmund Freud) or philosophy (Ludwig Wittgenstein). Viennese dialect is another potential area of interest for German-speaking students. Time limits dictate an overall general and introductory approach, with the background and interests of both instructor and students determining which fields can be addressed in somewhat more depth. In my class, literature, history, and music majors shared insights in their own special areas. Colleagues, too, are often glad to help with interdisciplinary courses: a colleague in music helped with musical selections and a dance professor shared a video on the Viennese waltz and would no doubt have given lessons if time and space had permitted. I confess that I did not present a PowerPoint on art but relied instead on sharing

art books in class. They were heavy to carry, but I was surprised to learn that our relatively small library had an impressive selection of art books representing Kokoschka, Klimt, Schiele, and Hundertwasser.

One key point of contact between scholarship and tourism involves history. Tourism is enhanced by the legend of the Turkish invasions bringing coffee and inspiring the famous coffeehouses of Vienna, the obelisk in the Kärntner Strasse shopping district offering thanks in Latin to God for the end of the medieval plague, and bakery windows displaying cake replicas of the Imperial crown, one of many lingering traces of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire. More seriously, the omnipresent sense of history in the city reflects a legacy of ancient events, wars, and rulers, along with the sobering and disturbing realities of both National Socialist rule and American and British bombing of Vienna's landmark buildings in World War II. During the post-war era, Austria has hosted numerous international summits and meetings and to some extent symbolized transcending the Cold War and divisions between Eastern and Western Europe. On the negative side, much publicity surrounded Austrian eruptions of Neo-Nazi sentiment surrounding the elections of Kurt Waldheim and Josef Haider. The concise and lively book, *Vienna, the Past in the Present* by Inge Lehne and Lonnie Johnson, offers a useful history of Vienna from the Roman Empire through its admittance to the European Union in 1995. It also incorporates considerable information on cultural and artistic developments through the years.

The artistic achievements of Vienna and the city's traditions of celebration and enjoyment are abundant, if not overwhelming. One unifying theme in this area is the sometimes startling co-existence of traditional and experimental or avant-garde art. Vienna's musical legacy not only offers an amazing range of popular and classical traditions, but the rather extreme poles of traditional waltzes, operas, and marches on the one hand and the atonal/twelve-tone music of Schönberg, Berg, and Weber on the other. I have a postcard of Viennese attractions that features images, of about the same size (equal time!), of the amusing but bizarre Hundertwasser House and the ancient focal point, St. Stephen's Cathedral, with its overwhelming historical, national, and religious significance. Hundertwasser's peculiar architectural theories and buildings contrast with the Cathedral and the Ringstrasse's mixture of traditional styles.

Another useful theme is *Schein und Sein*, appearance or illusion and reality, exploring the notion that the glittering surface of Viennese culture, with its atmosphere of theater and festival, covers some ugly realities. This image of Vienna can neatly encompass the Nazi era, native son Sigmund Freud's theories of dream and the subconscious, or anti-Austrian Austrian texts such

as passages in *The Woodcutters* or any number of other texts by Thomas Bernhard. Notions of melancholy and decadence, associated with the turn of the twentieth century, similarly add a negative side to the artistic beauties for which the city is known. For students who are new to the study of Viennese culture, however, it is best to emphasize its extraordinary artistic achievements and attractions more than any such negative portrayal. Students should not gain the impression that Vienna is “worse” than other world metropolises or that the course is anti-Vienna or anti-Austria.

It so happened that I was teaching “The Culture of Vienna” in 2004 when Elfriede Jelinek was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. To mark this event, I came into my class that week and read “the example of paula” aloud to my students. The story’s blunt staccato style, as in repeating phrases such as “housewife or salesclerk? salesclerk or housewife?,” was well-suited for reading aloud. In this story Jelinek uses dreary, robotic repetition to capture the monotony and hopelessness of male and female village dwellers who conform to prescribed roles and live unhappily with no sense of opportunity for their futures. Young people grow up and move mechanistically into repetitive jobs; they become accustomed not only to predictable lives and dull routines, but also to alcoholism and harsh, abusive parents and husbands. I could tell by their bleak expressions that the students were affected by the story. When I finished reading, they stared at me silently for a moment. Then one student said, “It sounds just like C----, Texas.” This story certainly provided a corrective to the escapism of Vienna’s dazzling tourist culture.

Few people can be expert in history and all the arts covered in an interdisciplinary course like this; I found that just giving a good introduction to so many subjects was a challenge, but a rewarding one. The experience gave me a chance to fill in some gaps in my own knowledge, step back and view Vienna and Austria from a new perspective, and gain a deeper appreciation of a culture I love through sharing it with others in a new way.

## Works Cited

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## APPENDIX 1: The Culture of Vienna: Common Images

### ***A Tourist Destination***

Vienna, Salzburg, and quaint Alpine villages  
Lippizaner horses, Wiener Schnitzel, Mozart ball candies, Klimt coffee cups  
“The Sound of Music”  
“The Hawaiianization” of Vienna/Austria (vulgar Commercialization)

### ***History Lives on***

The Habsburg Myth (a lost golden age of multi-ethnic harmony and security)  
The *Anschluss*: Annexation by the Third Reich 1938-1945  
Nazi Austria and/or “The First Victim of Nazi Aggression”  
liberation in 1945 by the Red Army, (in power till 1955)  
Austria between East & West  
Turkish Invasions (17<sup>th</sup> century): coffee left behind  
Remnants of the Plague, the Middle Ages, the ancient Roman settlement  
The Medieval/Baroque/Catholic heritage

### ***A City of Art and Pleasure***

Bohemian artists in coffeehouses  
The Hotel Sacher: the Sacher torte, whipped cream, *la chambre séparée*  
Theater, music, opera, balls, festivals, art, architecture  
The co-existence of traditional and avant-garde artistic styles

### ***Fin de Siècle (1900) Decadence (Downfall, Decay, Maladjustment, Excess)***

A melancholy mood of downfall, loss of the (Habsburg) Austro-Hungarian Empire  
Literature of Decadence: Joseph Roth *Radetzky March* (The downfall of a noble family parallels the fall of the Empire; the main character a decadent “grandson” lacks his grandfather’s “vitality,” faces an identity crisis, dies without heirs)  
Fragmentation, falling apart (*Lord Chandos’ Letter*) Altenberg’s impressionism

### ***Schein und Sein (Appearance and Reality)***

Ambivalence, self-hatred, masks and play-acting, escapism, “Underground Austria.” Freud’s subconscious, nest-befowlers (Anti-Austrian Austrian writers: Gerhard Roth, Thomas Bernhard)

### ***Austrian Literature: Unique, Independent (from Germany)***

Definitions frequently mention “continuing indebtedness to the Baroque tradition, conservative and anti-realistic nature, musicality, melancholy mood, emphasis on language and theater as central themes, passive characters, lack of action, resignation, fascination with decay and death.” (Gerald A. Fetz, “The Works of Thomas Bernhard: Austrian Literature?” *Modern Austrian Literature* 17.3/4 [1984]: 174)

## **APPENDIX 2: “The Culture of Vienna:” Class Schedule and Grading**

### **Meeting 1: Introduction to Course; Tourism**

Instructor shares souvenirs. Viewing of tourist video, “Austria: Vienna Salzburg.”

Discussion of video, Austrian tourism, stereotypes, and the “Hawainization” of Viennese culture.

Students receive packet of materials: Handout: “The Culture of Vienna: Common Images,” “Roots of Ambivalence” (Hofmann:1 -50); “The Ringstrasse,” (Schorske: 24-62).

Students draw report topics: one composer or artist and one short story from collections (Decker or Neuwirth).

### **Meeting 2: History**

Lecture on the history of Vienna, based on Lehne & Johnson, *Vienna: The Past in the Present*.

### **Meeting 3: Cityscape and Architecture**

Discussion of introduction, history, and handouts.

### **Meeting 4-5: The Myths of the Fin-de-Siècle**

Lecture on turn of the century culture and stereotypes.

Discussion, including contrasts with the turn of the twenty-first century.

### **Meeting 6-7: Art**

Students report on artists Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and Hundertwasser, view art books.

### **Meeting 8-9: Music and Dance**

Instructor plays tape of selections of Austrian music: Mozart, Strauss, Berg, Schönberg, Video on the Viennese the waltz.

Student reports on composers.

### **Meetings 10-11: Vienna: Surface and Depths**

Lecture and discussion based on “Schein und Sein” (appearance and reality), “Underground Austria” (Saur), and handout, “Roots of Ambivalence” (Hofmann).

### **Meeting 12:**

Instructor reads Elfriede Jelinek’s story, “the example of paula.” Discussion.

### **Meeting 13-14:**

Students present reports on selected short stories or turn in written papers and summarize them.

### **Meeting 15:**

Open-book final essay exam.

### **Grades:**

Report on artist or composer	25%
Report or paper on short story	25%
Open-book test	30%
Attendance and participation	20%