



CHAPTER 28

German Greek Revival, Biedermeier

1815–1848

Early-19th-century architecture in Germany and Austria continues the Neoclassical development first in the Greek Revival style, which is followed by a more eclectic approach that encompasses the Italian Renaissance, Byzantine, Early Christian, and Romanesque. The term *Biedermeier* applies mainly to middle-class interiors and furniture in Austria and Germany during the period of 1815 to 1848. This style, an adaptation of French Empire, replaces formality and majesty with comfort and function.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL

The German states, including Austria and Prussia, wage war against France for nearly 18 years before defeating Napoleon in 1813. In 1814, the Congress of Vienna convenes to decide the fate of Napoleon's empire. To help alleviate Germany's social, po-

The term Biedermeier, first used in 1853, was given to a political caricature appearing in the "Fleigende Blätter" who typified a well-to-do middle-class man without culture. Biedermeier furniture, marked by its commonplace forms, is a potpourri of early nineteenth-century classicism—Sheraton, Regency, Directoire, and especially French Empire—with certain traits of its own.

—Louise Ade Boger, *Furniture Past and Present*, 1966

litical, and economic problems, the Congress establishes the German Confederation to replace the Germanic remnants of the Holy Roman Empire and Napoleon's Confederation of the Rhine. The German Confederation unites 39 German states and Prussia under Austrian rule. Each state retains its independence and government.

As Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Clemens von Metternich of Austria strives to preserve the alliance by suppressing liberalism and nationalism. He institutes strong censorship and authoritarian rule, maintained by surveillance and repression. At the same time, he brings about economic recovery, which sustains his political stranglehold. Eventually, the growth of the middle class and the prosperity brought by the Industrial Revolution bring change in the form of revolutions beginning in 1848.

With political activism prohibited, people turn inward, focusing on their homes and families. They pursue tranquil, informal lifestyles in which visiting and entertaining friends are commonplace activities. Family members engage in hobbies and pastimes, such as reading, needlework, letter writing, or making scrapbooks. Practicality and coziness are more important than display and opulence are.

The period is a golden age for music and literature. Opera houses and music halls are filled to capacity. Those who can afford it own a clavichord and/or other type of musical instrument. Germans also highly esteem literature, owning numerous books and/or



▲ 28-5. Later Interpretation: Living room; published in *The Room Beautiful*, 1916. Biedermeier interpretation.

- **Window Treatments.** Window treatments vary from simple white muslin swags with fringe to multiple swags in brightly colored fabrics trimmed with braid, fringe, and tassels. Floor-length curtains and glass curtains may hang beneath the swags.
- **Ceilings.** Ceilings are usually plain gray or white. Some have painted decorations, wallpaper borders, plasterwork, or plaster rosettes (Fig. 28-3).
- **Textiles.** Local textiles dominate Biedermeier furnishings because imported ones are too expensive. Common upholstery textiles include horsehair, needlework, velvet, printed cotton, linen, or wool. Only the nobility can afford silk. Abstract patterns in strong colors are favored.
- **Lighting.** Most rooms have good natural lighting from large windows. Artificial lighting comes from ceiling fixtures (Fig. 28-10), such as lanterns or small chandeliers, sconces, and candlesticks. A few people can afford oil lamps.
- **Later Interpretations.** The simple, sparsely furnished Biedermeier interior appeals to designers of the late 19th and 20th centuries (Fig. 28-5). Later designers who adapt the basic forms of Biedermeier include Josef Hoffman, Peter Behrens, and Elsie de Wolfe.

FURNISHINGS AND DECORATIVE ARTS

Like the interiors, Biedermeier furniture is human scaled, comfortable, functional, and simple in design. Like architecture, it is composed of geometric solids, and may display classical attributes or copy or adapt antique prototypes. French Empire, English Regency, Sheraton, Louis XVI, and Rococo influence designers. Although designs are volumetric, furniture maintains a planar and frontal appearance, an angular silhouette with sharp corners and smooth surfaces. It is light in scale and often multipurpose to suit small spaces. Mostly made by artisans, it reflects a high degree of craftsmanship and concern for the material. Consequently, large areas of veneer emphasize the grain of the wood on most furniture.

Early examples (1815–1830) are rectangular in form with minimal decoration. Beauty and interest lie in the grain of the wood and the geometric or curvilinear composition. Classical restraint defines the image. Later furniture (1830–1848) moves away from classical restraint to greater exaggeration with more ornament, curves, and bulges. Innovation and fashion replace function and simplicity as industrialization takes hold. Unlike French Empire, there is little gilding, few bronze mounts, and no feeling of pompousness or majesty.

Public and Private Buildings

- **Materials.** Cabinetmakers use local woods, predominately light-colored fruitwoods, maple, birch, ash, or cherry (Fig. 28-6, 28-9, 28-10). Imported or exotic woods are too expensive for most people. Some pieces have inlay; marquetry; porcelain or glass plaques; or painted, stenciled, or transfer-printed decorations. In-

DESIGN SPOTLIGHT

Furniture: This side chair typifies the simplicity and elegance of Biedermeier furniture, with minimal decoration and classical restraint. The curved open back is inspired by French Empire and English Regency examples. Front legs are straight and tapered, while the rear legs are delicate sabers. Beauty and interest lie in the grain of the wood and the curvilinear composition. Fruitwood and mahogany are the most used woods. The seat is upholstered in a fashionable textile composed of plain stripes alternating with Greek key motifs.



▲ 28-6. Side chair in fruitwood, c. early 19th century; Germany.