

Cast Iron from Central Europe: 1800-1850
May 25 through August 7, 1994

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The first exhibition in the United States to explore the largely forgotten art of Central European cast iron opens at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts on May 25 and continues through August 7, 1994. It highlights two hundred and thirty decorative cast-iron objects borrowed from important museums and private collections in Europe and the United States. Featured will be a surprising array of articles for the home, including candlesticks, clocks, desk accessories, furniture, incense burners, and sewing implements; and more personal items, like perfume bottle holders, combs, fans, buttons, and jewelry.

Monumental works in cast iron, such as bridges and buildings, are considered to be the engineering and architectural marvels of the early industrial age. Overshadowed by these achievements and long neglected by scholars and art historians, however, are the exquisite ornamental objects that comprise this exhibition.

Central Europe -- which today includes much of Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary -- was the center of this decorative cast-iron industry in the first half of the nineteenth century. The region was rich in coal and iron needed by the foundries, which had adopted English advances in the casting process. The Prussian and Austrian governments supported the foundries as a means of stimulating their countries' economies. The serial method of casting iron produced quantities of reasonably-priced, high-quality goods that greatly appealed to the growing middle class in the Biedermeier Age.

The understated black patina and formal simplicity of cast-iron objects reflected the taste of the era. By decorating rooms at the New Palace in Potsdam with cast iron, King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia (1770-1840; r. 1797-1840) helped make cast iron a fashionable material. When Berlin's preeminent architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841) produced designs to be cast in iron, the quality

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of cast-iron objects was elevated to the highest level. Schinkel's work is included in the exhibition, along with work by other significant artists of the period.

Patriotism played an important role in the development of the Prussian cast-iron industry. Much of the early cast-iron jewelry, for example, resulted from Prussian resistance efforts during the Napoleonic wars. Women were urged to donate their gold jewelry to help finance the military and in exchange received cast-iron pieces inscribed "I gave gold for iron."

Examples from all the major iron foundries active in Central Europe, including the three Prussian Royal Ironworks, are represented in the exhibition. Several *New Year's Plaques* issued by the ironworks at the end of each year to commemorate their achievements will be on view. Of the more than ninety pieces from MAK - Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, one of the most exceptional is a delicate folding fan of steel filigree threaded with silk ribbon. Among the items from the Technical Museum in Vienna is a rare casting tree which reveals the process used to make earrings, brooches, and other work requiring consummate delicacy. On display will be over eighty selections from the Birmingham Museum of Art's cast-iron collection, one of the largest and finest holdings in the world. The exhibition is augmented by a working model of a blast furnace to demonstrate the casting of iron, paintings and engravings of the iron foundries, and nineteenth-century portraits of fashionable women wearing cast-iron jewelry.

Organized by The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts and MAK - Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, "Cast Iron from Central Europe: 1800-1850" has been curated by Dr. Elisabeth Schmuttermeier, Curator of Metalwork and the Wiener Werkstätte Archive at MAK - Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, and by Derek Ostergard, Dean, The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts. Funding has been generously provided by the Austrian Cultural Institute, New York.

A fully-illustrated exhibition catalogue, published by The Bard Graduate Center and edited by Derek Ostergard, will examine the extraordinary achievements of the cast-iron industry and the complex cultural, technological, and political relationships between Central Europe, Prussia, and England at the birth of the Industrial Age. Among the

contributors are Kenneth Barkin, Professor, Department of History, University of California, Riverside; Helmut Borsch-Supan, Curator, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin; Leon Botstein, President, Bard College; and Elisabeth Schmuttermeier.

Included in the range of education programs based on the exhibition will be a full-day symposium on Thursday, May 26, and a four-session continuing education course on base metals. Details will be announced.

"Cast Iron from Central Europe: 1800-1850" is part of an on-going series of exhibitions hosted by The Bard Graduate Center which highlights the decorative arts of the first half of the nineteenth century, an era often neglected by museums and publications. The series began with "Along the Royal Road: Berlin and Potsdam in KPM Porcelain and Painting, 1815-1848," organized in conjunction with Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin, which opened The Center's Gallery in October 1993. This was followed by two exhibitions from the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris: "Form, Function, and Beauty: Early Nineteenth-Century French Watercolors of Domestic Objects" and "The Borders of Eclecticism: French Wallpapers, 1789-1830" in March 1994.

The Gallery at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, located at 18 West 86th Street in Manhattan, is open Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, 11:00AM-5:00PM; Thursday, 11:00AM-8:30PM; closed Monday. Admission is \$2.00 for adults, \$1.00 for seniors; children under 12 are admitted at no charge.

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