

Photo Hervé Lewandowski tous droits réservés

Editor's Foreword : Letters from an Unknown Woman

Elisabeth Hervé

« To own an object created by this great woman architect does not mean to own some kind of material good, it means to take sides with beauty, with functionality, with quality. It is a present one can make to oneself by resolving an enigma that words are unable to formulate, since it is altogether essence and quiescence. It is a treasure. »

Lisa Fisher, art historian, in *Anna Lülja Praun architect, a pioneer at the heart of Viennese modern tradition (1906-2004)*, Marc-Antoine Patissier (under the direction of), Paris, 2016.

The works of Anna Lülja Praun have long been to us like the letters from an unknown woman, whose secret was a mystery to us. Soon enough, we came to realize that this woman had nothing in common with Zweig's heroin. She was neither an obdurate victim nor a crazy woman willing to die for a man who ignored her; on the contrary, she was the embodiment of will power, fighting spirit and tenacity. Her secret - it took us time to understand that - was that she probably had no secret. She was handing us a mirror, like she would have of a mask, and those who managed to obtain some confidences from her were barely a handful.

Now that she is up there at the modern architects' firmament, the very last star of a century she has lived through and through, she is for us forever unreachable.

We are left with her furniture, her lamps, her houses, all of which speak in her name, and those letters she sends us, each time a chair, a lamp or a table appear by the effect of Providence, are certainly the only ones we can interrogate without the risk of being rude or indiscreet. We're not taking here about tiling tables, flying chairs or an arabeque lamp - what is at stake, through the keen observation of each of her pieces of furniture, is the revelation of what this woman wants to tell us, she who devoted her life to those objects, until her very last breath.

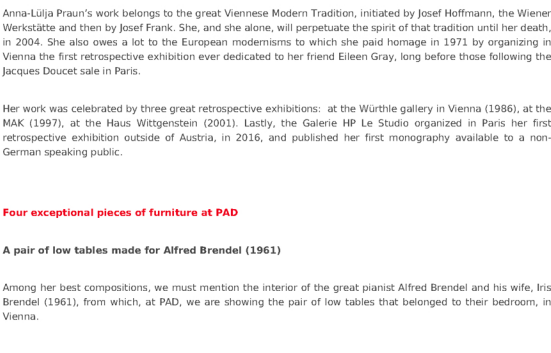
Anna Lülja Praun, architect (1906-2004)

Marc-Antoine Patissier

A pioneer of the Austrian Modern Movement, Anna-Lülja Praun was born in 1906 in Saint Petersburg (Russia). After studying architecture in Graz (Austria), she travels to Bulgaria, Switzerland and Paris, where she gets a glimpse of the work of Eileen Gray, who will have a strong influence on her work, from the 60's until her last days.

From 1930 onwards, she works in Graz with the architect Herbert Eichhozer, then in Vienna in the studio of Clemens Holzmeister, with whom she designs the Parliament of Ankara (Turkey) and the ancient Festspielhaus of Salzburg (Austria). In 1947, she is commissioned to restore the Belvedere Palace in Vienna.

She establishes her own studio in 1952.



Copyright Jaeger Robert/AFP, Wien 2001

In 1953, she is hired as the art director of Haus & Garten, which she leaves in 1959, to devote herself exclusively to the commissions of the Austrian cultural elite : houses and some furniture for maestro Herbert von Karajan, for pianist Alfred Brendel (1961), for composer György Ligeti (1980-1987) and also several houses, apartments and boats for Wolfgang Denzel between 1965 and 1980. In 1984, she designs and produces the entire furniture for Franz Sailer's apartment and for his galleries in Vienna and Salzburg. Her last piece of furniture was designed and manufactured in 2001 for a Swiss collector.

The pieces of furniture specifically designed for each one of these projects were all produced in close collaboration with the finest master cabinetmakers. They are of a great elegance, perfectly functional and their quality is exceptional due to much for their materials as for their manufacturing. These various pieces of furniture were not produced in series, therefore they are very rare today.

Anna-Lülja Praun's work belongs to the great Viennese Modern Tradition, initiated by Josef Hoffmann, the Wiener Werkstätte and then by Josef Frank. She, and she alone, will perpetuate the spirit of that tradition until her death, in 2004. She also owes a lot to the European modernisms to which she paid homage in 1971 by organizing in Vienna the first retrospective exhibition ever dedicated to her friend Eileen Gray, long before those following the Jacques Doucet sale in Paris.

Her work was celebrated by three great retrospective exhibitions: at the Würthle gallery in Vienna (1986), at the MAK (1997), at the Haus Wirtgenstein (2001). Lastly, the Galerie HP Le Studio organized in Paris her first retrospective exhibition outside of Austria, in 2016, and published her first monography available to a non-German speaking public.

Four exceptional pieces of furniture at PAD

A pair of low tables made for Alfred Brendel (1961)

Among her best compositions, we must mention the interior of the great pianist Alfred Brendel and his wife, Iris Brendel (1961), from which, at PAD, we are showing the pair of low tables that belonged to their bedroom, in Vienna.



Photo Hervé Lewandowski tous droits réservés

Since the creation of Herbert von Karajan's sofa in 1959, since she finally started working for herself, the method and personal style of A.-L. Praun have become established, and those tables from the early 60's are as accomplished as the furniture she created for the Sailer's twenty years later, and as the one she realized for composer György Ligeti's study, in the 80's.

At PAD, we show three more outstanding pieces that will confirm our point:

A red lacquer bench, from the Sailer commission (1984)

In 1984, Anna designed an extraordinary red bench for the rug gallery of Ingrid and Franz Sailer in Salzburg. She had four units made (one has not been recovered yet, the other three were purchased by us). Was it a tribute to Josef Hoffmann and the sign of the influence of Eileen Gray ? Certainly. But more evidently, a firmness in the lines and a formal perfection that demonstrate a total mastery of her art, the result of decades of assimilating the very best of the modern tradition.

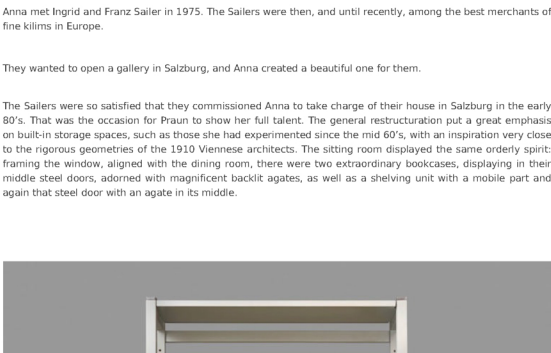


Photo Hervé Lewandowski tous droits réservés

This bench was made according to the same principles as the one used for the patterns and reserves of the rugs that were on the walls and on the floor. A pencil line structure, very light, but strong and flexible in its geometry, a removable upholstery made of natural suede, invisible from a distance. The red structure stands out like an arabesque on a background. The design clearly results from the geometry and the chromatic sequences of the rugs. Lastly, the bench stands on nickel plated brass feet that makes the whole even lighter.

A single shelving unit, with a mobile lower part, and a door adorned with an agate, coming from the Sailer commission (1984)

Anna met Ingrid and Franz Sailer in 1975. The Sailer's were then, and until recently, among the best merchants of fine kilims in Europe.

They wanted to open a gallery in Salzburg, and Anna created a beautiful one for them.

The Sailer's were so satisfied that they commissioned Anna to take charge of their house in Salzburg in the early 80's. That was the occasion for Praun to show her full talent. The general reconstruction put a great emphasis on built-in storage spaces, such as, and she had experimented since the mid 60's, with a footrest very close to the rigorous geometries of the 1910 Viennese architects. The sitting room displayed the same orderly spirit: framing the window, aligned with the dining room, there were two extraordinary bookcases, displaying in their middle steel doors, adorned with magnificent backlit agates, as well as a shelving unit with a mobile part and that steel door with an agate in its middle.

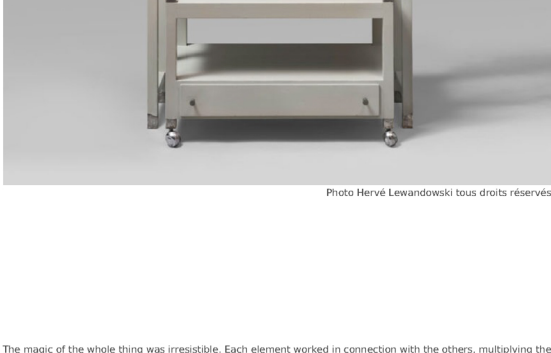


Photo Hervé Lewandowski tous droits réservés

The magic of the whole thing was irresistible. Each element worked in connection with the others, multiplying the poetic strength of the installation, with no heaviness whatsoever. One could recognize all the components of Praun's taste, especially her taste for rare stones, which she used here because of their expressive power and their capacity to create a very special lighting effect.

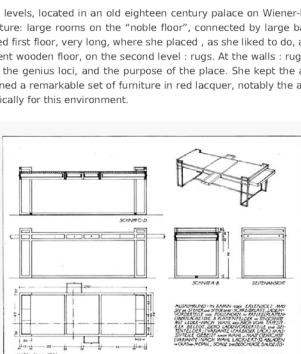
A red lacquer double desk with black leather, only variant (1988) of the Sailer commission (1984)

In 1983, The Sailer's opened a new gallery in Vienna, at number 7 Dorotheergasse, in the antique dealers district, very close to the Opera. This was again a success, but the new gallery they opened in Salzburg in 1984 was an even bigger one.



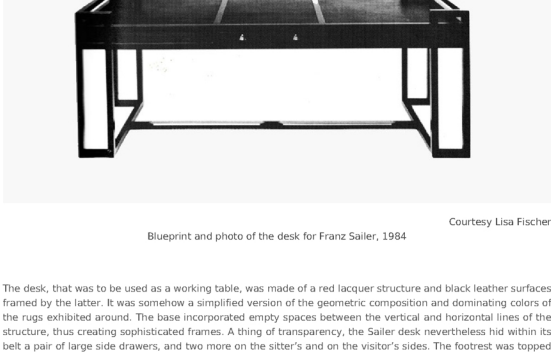
Photo Hervé Lewandowski tous droits réservés

That huge space on two levels, located in an old eighteen century palace on Wiener-Philharmoniker-Gasse, had its own original architecture: large rooms on the "noble floor", connected by large baroque wooden doors with their mouldings, a vaulted first floor, very long, where she placed, as she liked to do, a conspicuous, magnificent staircase. Over the ancient wooden floor, on the second level : rugs. At the walls : rugs. Following her principles, Praun took into account the genius loci, and the purpose of the place. She kept the ancient elements, made of natural wood, and designed a remarkable set of furniture in red lacquer, notably the aforementioned bench, and a desk, conceived specifically for this environment.



Blueprint and photo of the desk for Franz Sailer, 1984

The desk, that was to be used as a working table, was made of a red lacquer structure and black leather surfaces framed by the latter. It was somehow a simplified version of the geometric composition and dominating colors of the rugs exhibited around. The base incorporated empty spaces between the vertical and horizontal lines of the rugs displayed around. A thing of transparency, the Sailer desk nevertheless hid within its belt a pair of large side drawers, and two more on the siller's and on the visitor's sides. The footrest was topped with a protective double nickel plated fitting, quite the same material used for the drawer handles. Lastly, the leg frame came out above the table top at each corner to keep the files from falling. Beside the desk, Praun placed the only type of floor lamp she ever conceived for a domestic use, which she had designed in 1974.



Courtesy Lisa Fischer

The piece we are showing at PAD is a two user variation, and much larger than the 1984 desk. This variation was designed and manufactured in 1988 and remains up to this day the only one in black leather and red lacquer that is certified as having been manufactured.

The freedom Praun enjoyed through the Sailer commissions allowed her to thoroughly explore her ideas, to give the best of herself and to create the work of art she knew she could achieve in those conditions. The Sailer's left Austria in the mid 90's and took most of their treasures with them. Until her death, Anna, who had come to be called "Luwi" by them, enjoyed close, almost family relationships with the Sailer's.

During the 90's, Luwi kept working with the same mindset on small jewel-like pieces of furniture, but in 2000, she was 94 by then, a businessman from Zurich, and a client of the Sailer's, managed to convince her to accept two more commissions: a piece of furniture for a TV set, to be placed in a bedroom, and a large cabinet for an entrance hall. The latter, delivered in 2001, was her last piece. Klaus and Sylvia Mutschler were her last clients.

A woman architect in post-imperial Austria : a point of view

Marc-Antoine Patissier

In 1986, when the Pompidou Centre inaugurated the exhibition about the birth of modern Vienna, masterly curated by Jean Clair, no one knew that somewhere in Europe the tradition originating from the Secession and the Viennese modernism was still alive and well. No one.

No one, except a few scholars, collectors, artists or musicians, from Austria or Germany for the most part, but who had known Anna Lülja Praun for at least three decades and knew that - while progressing throughout the century - she had managed - against all odds, to keep alive that invaluable tradition, in particular against the International Style, that was being imposed with more or less success in all Western Europe, that was getting more and more americanized, from 1945 until the late 50's.

All went on as if the Austrian elite, whether artistic, intellectual, or from the business world - and in the first place Herbert von Karajan (as early as 1959), Alfred Brendel, György Ligeti, the businessman Wolfgang Denzel or gallerists Franz and Ingrid Sailer (in the early 80's), to name the most famous ones - had recognized in her the quintessence of the Viennese modernity.

Aware or not aware of the decisive role Praun was playing in the reconstruction or reinvention of a modern cultural Austrian identity, we now can see that these people were, as much as her, its main promoters.

How come is it then possible that it was not until 1997 that the MAK set up a little exhibition around her; and not until 2008 that an Austrian academic wrote a Master's thesis about her? How come was it not before that same year that two Parisian gallerists, namely we, discovered - while browsing the alleys of the Vienna Dorotheum - a small lacquer table the perfection of which was so admirable and the creator of which to them so totally unknown : "Anna Lülja Praun", mentioned the catalogue, "very important" added, with a mischievous smile, a well-known Viennese merchant. He did not bid on the table. "Too soon, too rare rare", he said to me. We needed nothing more to take up the challenge. Eight years later, Anna Lülja Praun had finally her first exhibition outside of Austria.

The first explanation that comes to our mind is that this lack of celebrity was due to the antifeminism endemic to the Viennese society from the mid 1880's all the way to the 1960's.

Its violence reached new heights by the turn of the century. Zweig's "neurotic" heroines, Freud's "analysed", Weininger's sexist frenzy, everything up to Klimt's Salome or Judith contributed to making the Viennese woman a perverse, weak or evil creature, a morally prostitute or a decadent aristocrat. To complete that picture, here goes Karl Kraus :

"The personality of a woman is inconsistency enabled by inconsistency." Karl Kraus, "Morals and Criminality" in "Sayings and Contradictions", Vienna, 1909.

However, it would be wrong to believe that the amount of hatred of women of some Otto Weininger or some Karl Kraus at the time of the Young Vienna, that the ordinary antifeminism and the contempt for - or, at best, the indifference to - women architects until recent days, are enough to explain why Anna Lülja Praun is still, for many people, an unknown woman.

The extreme rarity of her works on the market, the mystery and secret that surrounded her, the jealous passion and intimate attachment of her clients to her work, her late recognition, even in Austria, the inexistence of any publication about her other than in German, as well as of any catalogue raisonné, have long kept the amateurs and collectors in the complete ignorance of what must be called a prodigy : the incarnation of cosmopolitanism (which, either you like it or not, has been part of Austria's DNA for ages), the longest-living ambassador of Viennese modern tradition in the last third of 20th century, the only woman architect in her generation who was not obliged to seek a career abroad nor to die under nazi terror: Anna Lülja Praun is a miracle.

PAD
PARIS
ART+DESIGN

HP LE STUDIO
1, rue Allent
75007 Paris
FRANCE

+33 (0)1 40 20 00 56
hplestudio@orange.fr

Elisabeth Hervé
+33 (0)6 09 80 43 40

Marc-Antoine Patissier
+33 (0)6 03 12 55 60

Du mardi au samedi de 11h30 à 18h30



HP le Studio



Marc-Antoine Patissier

