

OPPOSITIONS BOOKS

Introduction by Aldo Rossi  
Translation by Jane O. Newman  
and John H. Smith

Adolf Loos

# Spoken into the Void

*Collected Essays 1897-1900*

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## Men's Fashion

Neue Freie Presse, May 22, 1898

To be well dressed—who does not want to be well dressed? Our century has done away with dress code regulations.<sup>1</sup> Everyone now enjoys the right to dress as he pleases, even like the king if he wants. The level of a nation's culture can be measured by how many of its citizens take advantage of this newly acquired freedom. In England and America, everyone does so; in the Balkan states, only the upper ten thousand. And in Austria? I do not care to hazard an answer to this question.

An American philosopher says somewhere, "A young man is rich if he has a good head on his shoulders and a good suit in the closet." That is sound philosophy. It demonstrates an understanding of people. What good are brains if they do not express themselves in good clothes? For both the English and the Americans demand of an individual that he be well dressed.

But the Germans do them one better. They also want to be *beautifully* dressed. When the English wear wide pants, the Germans point out to them immediately (I don't know whether this is thanks to old Vischer<sup>2</sup> or to the golden section) that these are unaesthetic and that only narrow pants may be considered to have any claim to *beauty*. They bluster, they grumble, and they curse, but nevertheless they have their trousers widened from year to year. They complain that fashion is just a tyrant. So it is; but what then? Has a reassessment of values been undertaken? The English once again are wearing a narrow cut of trousers, and now exactly the same arguments are being used to prove the *beauty* of wide pants. Let this be a lesson!

But the English mock the Germans' craving for beauty. The Medici Venus, the Pantheon, a picture by Botticelli, a song by Burns—of course, these are beautiful! But pants? Or whether a jacket has three or four buttons? Or whether the waistcoat is cut low or high? I don't know, but it makes me uneasy, it frightens me when I hear discussions about the beauty of such things. I get quite nervous when, gloating over another's deficiency, someone asks me in reference to a piece of clothing, "Is that supposed to be beautiful?"

Germans from the best society side with the English. They are satisfied if they are dressed *well*. They abjure claims to *beauty*. The great poet, the great painter, the great architect dress like the English. The would-be poet, the would-be master painter, the budding architect, on the other hand, make temples of their bodies in which beauty in the form of velvet collars, aesthetic trouser fabric, and Secessionist neckties is to be worshiped.

But what does it mean to be dressed well? It means to be dressed correctly.

To be dressed correctly! I feel as if I have revealed in these words the secret that has surrounded the fashion of our clothes up until now. We have tried to get at fashion with words like "beautiful," "stylish," "elegant," "smart," and "strong." But this is not the point. Rather, it is a question of being dressed *in such a way that one stands out the least*. A red dress coat stands out in a ballroom. It follows that a red dress coat is unmodern in the ballroom. A top hat stands out at the ice-skating rink. Consequently it is unmodern to wear a top hat while on the ice. In good society, to be conspicuous is bad manners.

However, this axiom is not equally practicable in every situation. A certain coat might go unnoticed in Hyde Park, but would be highly conspicuous in Peking, Zanzibar, or Vienna on the Stephansplatz. The coat is simply European. It is im-

*5 Showroom of the Goldman & Salatsch menswear store, the Graben, Vienna. Interior by Adolf Loos, 1898. From Das Interieur: Wiener Monatshefte für Angewandte Kunst II, Vienna, 1901.*

\*I have already made several of these ideas public in my lectures in the master tailor course at the Museum of Technological Trades.

TAILORS AND OUTFITTERS  
**GOLDMAN & SALATSCH**

K. U. K. HOF-  
 LIEFERANTEN  
 K. BAYER. HOF-  
 LIEFERANTEN






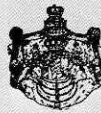
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 Herrn Erzherzog Josef  
 etc. etc.

WIEN, I. GRABEN 20.

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possible to demand that the man at the height of fashion and culture dress in Peking like the Chinese, in Zanzibar like the East Africans, and on the Stephansplatz like the Viennese! The axiom must therefore be narrowed. In order to be dressed correctly, one must not stand out at *the center of culture*.\*

At the moment, the center of Western culture is London. Of course, it might certainly happen that during his wanderings the stroller would come upon surroundings with which he contrasted sharply. He would then have to change his coat as he passed from one street to another. This would not do. We may now formulate our precept in its most complete form. It goes like this: an article of clothing is modern when the wearer stands out as little as possible at the center of culture, on a specific occasion, *in the best society*. This is a very English axiom to which every fashionable intellectual would probably agree. But it meets with hearty opposition among the middle- and lower-class Germans. No nation has as many dandies as the German. A dandy is a man whose clothing serves only to distinguish him from his environment. Now ethics, now hygiene, now even aesthetics is adduced to attempt to explain the conduct of this kind of buffoon. There is a bond that links them all together; it runs from Master Diefenbach<sup>3</sup> to Professor Jäger<sup>4</sup> through the "modern" would-be poet down to the Viennese landlord's son. But in spite of this they do not seem to get along. No dandy will admit to being one. One dandy mocks the other; under the pretext of attempting to exterminate the whole race of dandies, he continues to commit the sins of the breed. The modern dandy, or the dandy in general, is only one species of a far-reaching family.

The Germans suspect this dandy of setting the trend in the affairs of men's fashion. But this is flattering the poor creature far more than he deserves. We have already seen that it cannot even be said of the dandy that he dresses in a modern way. That would be of no use to him. For the dandy always wears only that which *the society around him* considers modern.

Yes, but is this not the same as being dressed in a modern way? By no means. This is why the dandies in every city look different. That which in city A creates quite a stir has already lost its excitement in city B. The darling of fashion in Berlin runs the risk of being scoffed at in Vienna. But well-heeled circles will always give priority to those shifts in fashion of which the middle classes take the least notice. No longer protected by dress regulations, they do not like being imitated by someone on the very next day. And so it is necessary to begin casting about for a substitute immediately. But only the most discreet means will be used in this eternal pursuit of materials and styles. The new cut will be kept for years like an open secret of the great tailors, only to be let out in the end by some fashion magazine. Then it still takes a few years until everyone, down to the very last man in the country, knows about it. And this is where the dandies have their day; they take over the whole affair. But the original cut has now changed quite a bit in the course of its long travels; it has adapted to specific geographical situations.

You can count on the fingers of one hand the great tailors worldwide who are in the position to dress one according to the most elegant principles. In fact, there are some metropolises in the old world which are unable to point to a single firm of this kind. There wasn't even one in Berlin until a Viennese master, E. Ebenstein, established a branch there. Before that the Berlin court was forced to have a good part of its wardrobe made at Poole's in London. But we possess a large selection of this small group of firms here in Vienna. We owe this happy circumstance to the fact that our nobility has a standing invitation to the drawing

6 Goldman & Salatsch advertisement  
for men's overcoats. From *Das  
Andere, Ein Blatt zur Einfuehrung  
Abendlaendischer Kultur in  
Oesterreich, founded and written  
by Adolf Loos, no. 2, Vienna,  
1903.*

7 Goldman & Salatsch advertisement  
for naval uniforms. From *Das  
Andere, no. 1, 1903.*

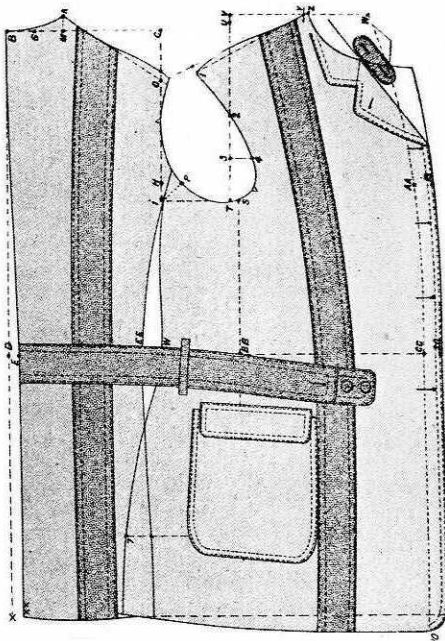


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8 Cartoon by Theodore Thomas Heine  
contrasting German and English  
fashions. Caption for the image at  
left: "Herr and Frau Schmidt look  
like this when they travel to London";  
for the image at right: "And like this  
when they return after a week there  
as Mr. and Mrs. Smith." From  
*Simplicissimus: Illustrierte  
Wochenschrift, Munich, 1902.*

room of the Queen; they have had many of their things made in England and have thus transplanted that elegant tone in clothing back to Vienna. It was in this way that the Viennese tailors attained their enviable position. One could probably say that on the Continent the top ten thousand best-dressed men are in Vienna, for even the lesser tailors are raised to a higher level by these great firms.

The great firms, as well as their closest imitators and competitors, all have one feature in common: they fear the public eye. Wherever possible, they limit themselves to a small circle of customers. Of course, they are not as exclusive as some of the houses in London, where admittance is conditional upon a personal recommendation by the Prince of Wales. But all public ostentation is anathema. It was the difficult task of the directors of the exhibition to induce some of the best Viennese houses to display their products. And it is clear that they slipped out of this noose quite cleverly. They exhibited only those objects which precluded imitation. Ebenstein was the most clever. He exhibited a tuxedo (incorrectly identified here in Vienna as a smoking jacket) designed for the tropics (!), a hunting vest, a Prussian commander's military uniform for ladies, and a coaching coat with engraved mother-of-pearl buttons, each of which was a masterpiece in itself. A. Keller displayed, in addition to his other excellent uniforms, a dress coat with the obligatory gray trousers; one could journey to England quite comfortably in this outfit. The Norfolk jacket also seemed to be well made. Uzel & Son showed the specialty of their workshop: uniforms for court and state occasions. They really must be quite fine; otherwise the firm could not have maintained its leading position in this line of business for such a long time. Franz Bubacek displayed hunting clothes for the kaiser. The cut of the Norfolk jacket is fashionable and correct. Herr Bubacek is making quite a show of courage by displaying it; he is not afraid of imitators. You can say the same of Goldman & Salatsch; they were there with their specialty, uniforms for the naval squadrons.



9 Tailor's pattern for a Norfolk jacket. From J. P. Thornton, *The Sectional System of Gentlemen's Garment Cutting, Comprising Coats, Vests, Breeches, and Trousers*, London, 1887.

But this is the end of my unqualified praise. The collective exhibit of the Union of Viennese Clothing Makers does not warrant it. Industries that cater to the general public must often look the other way, since the customer, by insisting on the fulfillment of his own desires, is frequently responsible for many a tasteless product. But here is precisely where the craftsmen could have shown that they were above their clientele; they could have taken up the banner against the large firms and then would have been left to do as they liked. But most have let this opportunity slip. They already reveal their ignorance in the choice of material. They make overcoats out of covercoat material and vice versa. They make lounge suits out of Norfolk material, frock coats out of smooth cloth.

They hardly do better with the cut of the clothes. Very few start out from the standpoint of working in an elegant style; most of them turn to the dandies for their inspiration. Of course, that kind of person can afford to indulge in double-breasted waistcoats and checked suits with velvet collars! One firm went so far as to produce a jacket with blue velvet cuffs! Well, if *that* isn't modern . . .

But I will mention here a few who have managed to keep their distance from this witches' sabbath. Anton Adam does good work, but cuts his waistcoats a little too low. Alexander Deutsch showed a nice winter overcoat, Joseph Hummel a nice ulster; P. Kroupa ruins his otherwise correct frock coat with braided trimming. There is one other firm that exhibited its products openly at the show which I would like to have mentioned. But when I attempted to open up a pleat on a Norfolk jacket that was ostensibly there to afford additional freedom of movement for the arm, I was unable to do so. It was counterfeit.

Who does not know of Potemkin's villages, the ones that Catherine's cunning favorite built in the Ukraine?<sup>1</sup> They were villages of canvas and pasteboard, villages intended to transform a visual desert into a flowering landscape for the eyes of Her Imperial Majesty. But was it a whole city which that cunning minister was supposed to have produced?

Surely such things are only possible in Russia!

But the Potemkin city of which I wish to speak here is none other than our dear Vienna herself. It is a hard accusation; it will also be hard for me to succeed in proving it. For to do so I need listeners with a very fine sense of justice, such listeners, unfortunately, as are scarcely to be found in our city nowadays.

Anyone who tries to pass himself off as something better than he is is a swindler; he deserves to be held in general contempt, even if no one has been harmed by him. But if someone attempts to achieve this effect with false jewels and other imitations? There are countries where such a man would suffer the same fate. But in Vienna we have not yet come so far. There is only a small circle of people who would feel that in such a case an immoral act has occurred, that they have been swindled. But today it is not only by means of the fake watch chain, not only by the furnishings of one's residence (which consist of outright imitations), but also by one's residence itself, the building in which one lives, that everyone wants to make himself out to be something more than he is.

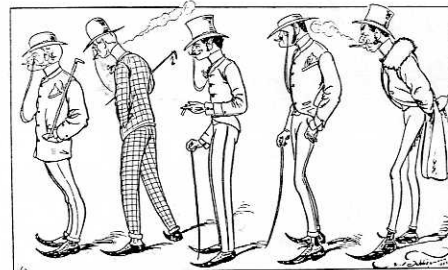
Whenever I stroll along the Ring, it always seems to me as if a modern Potemkin had wanted to carry out his orders here, as if he had wanted to persuade somebody that in coming to Vienna he had been transported into a city of nothing but aristocrats.

Whatever the Italy of the Renaissance produced in the way of lordly palaces was plundered in order to conjure up as if by magic a new Vienna for Her Majesty the Mob. A new Vienna where only those people lived who could afford to occupy an entire palace from socle to cornice line. On the ground floor were the stables; on the low-ceilinged, intermediate mezzanine level were the servants; on the first of the upper stories, with its rich and elaborate architecture, were the banquet and ceremonial rooms; above them were the residential and sleeping quarters. The Viennese landlord very much enjoyed owning such a palace; the tenant also enjoyed living in one. The simple man, who had rented only one room and a w.c. on the uppermost floor, was overcome with a blissful feeling of feudal splendor and lordly grandeur whenever he looked at the building he lived in from the outside. Does the owner of an imitation diamond not gaze fondly at the glittering glass? Oh, the tale of the deceiver deceived!

It will be objected that I impute false intentions to the Viennese. It is the architects who are at fault; the architects should not have built this way. I must defend the architects. For every city gets the architects it deserves. Supply and demand regulate architectural form. He whose work most accords with the wishes of the populace will have the most to build. And the most capable architect may depart from this life without ever having received a commission. The others, however, create schools of followers. Then one builds in a certain way because he has become accustomed to it. And he must build this way. The building speculator would most dearly like to have his facades entirely plastered from top to bottom. It costs the least. And at the same time, he would be acting in the truest, most correct, and most artistic way. But people would not want to

## Potemkin City

Ver Sacrum, July 1898



79 Caricature from Figaro: Wiener Luft, depicting "the passing afternoon parade on the Kärntnerring." 1883.

move into the building. And so, in the interest of rentability, the landlord is forced to nail on a particular kind of facade, and only this kind.

Yes, literally nail on! For these Renaissance and Baroque palaces are not actually made out of the material of which they seem. Some pretend that they are made of stone, like the Roman and Tuscan palaces; others of stucco, like the buildings of the Viennese Baroque. But they are neither. Their ornamental details, their corbels, festoons, cartouches, and denticulation, are nailed-on poured cement. Of course, this technique too, which comes into use for the first time in this century, is perfectly legitimate. But it does not do to use it with forms whose origin is intimately bound up with a specific material simply because no technical difficulties stand in the way. It would have been the artist's task to find a new formal language for new materials. Everything else is imitation.

But this was not even a matter of concern to the Viennese of the last architectural epoch. He was delighted, in fact, to be able to imitate with such lowly materials the more expensive material that served as the model. Like the authentic parvenu that he was, he believed that the others would not notice the deception. That is what the parvenu always thinks. At first he is sure that the false shirt dickeys, the false fur collars, all of the imitation objects with which he surrounds himself fulfill their roles perfectly. It is only those who stand above him, those who have already surmounted the parvenu stage and are among the initiated, who smile at his futile exertions. And in time the parvenu's eyes too open up. First he recognizes one inauthenticity among his friends, then another, in things he had earlier thought were authentic. Then, resigned, he gives them up for himself as well.

*80 View of the north side of the Kärtnerring, Vienna, as it appeared in 1873. Wood engraving by F. W. Bader, after a drawing by L. E. Petrovits.*

*81 View of the south side of the Kärtnerring, Vienna, as it appeared in 1873. Wood engraving by F. W. Bader, after a drawing by L. E. Petrovits.*

Poverty is no disgrace. Not everyone can come into the world the lord of a feudal estate. But to pretend to one's fellow men that one has such an estate is ridiculous and immoral. After all, should we be ashamed to live in a rental apartment in a building with many others who are our social equals? Should we be ashamed of the fact that there are materials that are too expensive for us to build with? Should we be ashamed to be nineteenth-century men and not men who want to live in a building whose architectural style belongs to an earlier age? If we ceased to be ashamed, you would see how quickly we would acquire an architecture suited to our own times. This is what we have anyway, you will object. But I mean an architectural style that we will be able to pass on to posterity in good conscience, an architectural style that even in the distant future will be pointed to with pride. But we have not yet found this architectural style in our century in Vienna.

Whether one tries to create out of canvas, pasteboard, and paint the wood huts where happy peasants dwell, or to erect out of brick and poured cement would-be stone palaces where feudal lords seem to reside, it is the same in principle. Potemkin's spirit has hovered over Viennese architecture in this century.





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