

Perspective Sue Course

Amanda Dunsmore Curator, International Decorative Arts & Antiquities



Sue Course is the grand-daughter of Melanie and Jakob Langer, whose Viennese apartment, designed by Adolf Loos, forms a remarkable complement to the Gallery's Gallia apartment, designed by Josef Hoffmann. Loos and Hoffmann were archrivals, diametrically opposed to each other's design philosophies, and their apartments illustrate two radically different paths towards modernism in early twentieth-century Vienna.

Amanda Dunsmore talked to Sue Course about her family's fascinating background and how the contents of her family's apartment came to be in Australia and at the NGV.

Can you tell me a little bit about Melanie and Jakob and their backgrounds?

Jakob Langer was born in Austria, in the small town of Prerau north of Vienna. He went on to study law, eventually becoming the director of one of Vienna's major banks, the VerkehrsBank, situated on the Ringstrasse opposite the Opera House. Melanie was born in Germany, but when she was a child the family moved to Budapest where her father, Wilhelm Gallia, became the first director of Budapest's Gas Light Company. Melanie was extremely artistic, a talented musician and learned to speak six languages, including French, English and Italian.

Jakob and Melanie married in Hungary in December 1902 but then soon moved to Vienna. Their first child Liesl was born in 1904 and a year later Peter, my father, was born. Melanie and Jakob were secular Jews. They never converted to Catholicism, like the Gallias and many other middle-class Jews trying to assimilate, and on the whole religion didn't seem to have played a big part in their lives.

Melanie's father was the brother of Moriz Gallia, who, together with his wife Hermine, commissioned Josef Hoffmann to design their apartment. When Melanie Gallia married Jakob Langer, the two families became linked although one side of the family decided to patronise Josef Hoffmann and the other side Adolf Loos, a very clear distinction in terms of these two architects' interior design aesthetics. Nevertheless, we know that Melanie and Jakob also bought objects from the Wiener Werkstätte, despite their preference for Loos' interior design approach.

How did they come to commission Adolf Loos to design their apartment?

The apartment was commissioned in 1903, less than a year after Melanie and Jakob were married. Like many young, middle-class Jewish couples, Melanie and Jakob followed the fashion of engaging a leading architect to design rooms in their apartment. In 1901 Jakob's brother, Leopold, also director of a Viennese bank, commissioned Loos to design his apartment. Then Jakob and Melanie commissioned Loos to design their apartment in 1903. Leopold's apartment is the Langer apartment that is usually reproduced in books on Loos' interiors. Unfortunately, there are no photographs of Melanie and Jakob's apartment but we know that the two were very similar in style.

Can you describe the apartment further?

The apartment was on the top floor of an apartment building designed by Otto Wagner in 1884 at 1, Lobkowitzplatz in the heart of old Vienna. Being on the top floor it had lovely views to the Vienna woods. According to Liesl the apartment had beautiful big rooms and the building had a marble staircase up to the top floor, as well as a lift. My grandfather and Loos became good friends and Loos used to visit the apartment often, sometimes bringing prospective clients with him so they could see his work, as the apartment was so central.



My grandparents lived in the apartment all their married lives. At one point Loos designed a third bedroom for my father, the green bedroom.

How did the contents of the apartment come to be in Australia?

After my father married he moved, but Liesl continued to live in the apartment with a maid; and then later after she married Erich Mueller. Jakob died in July 1932 and Melanie in January 1937, leaving all their furniture to Liesl, including my father's bed, which was always a bone of contention between them.

Following the *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass) attacks on Jews in November 1938 Liesl and Erich decided to leave Vienna. We don't know a great deal about how they got out but we know that they fled with only one suitcase between them and that the parlour maid was left to pack up the contents of the apartment and arrange for its shipment to Australia. As far as we know, everything did arrive in one large crate, but we're not sure how much was brought and what Liesl

Melanie and Jakob Langer
Photo courtesy of Sue Course

and Erich decided to leave behind. They were extremely fortunate that the crate did arrive, as it was not uncommon for the Nazis to sabotage the belongings of those trying to flee. They certainly didn't bring the large dining room table but much of the furniture from the living room and dining room came, including the wooden wall panelling which was integral to the design of the sideboard and the long-case clock, and much of their bedroom furniture also came. They also brought a number of commercially manufactured chairs, which Loos was a great advocate of, from the living and dining rooms. Loos regarded mid eighteenth-century English Chippendale chairs as some of the most comfortable chairs he'd ever sat in, and in that sense Loos was keen to include them in the designs for his clients' apartments. In his eyes, they represented successful design, regardless of their date and style.

So how did your grandparent's furniture finally end up in the NGV Collection?

Liesl and Erich settled in Melbourne when they arrived and lived with the furniture all their lives. My parents also came to Australia and my father, who was not able to practise law, became a cellist with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, having inherited Melanie's talent for music. I can remember visiting my aunt many times while growing up and seeing the furniture covered with all the paraphernalia of everyday life. It was just part of our lives; Liesl's son Alfred Mueller inherited most of the furniture. Over the years the mahogany wall panelling which did not fit into the Melbourne house had been made into various storage cupboards, tacked together by a handyman, while other bits were left lying about. In the early 1900s the NGV came to hear about my family and the apartment and over the next few years much of the furniture was acquired by the NGV, through myself and my cousin. It was a difficult decision to part with it but it was made easier by the opportunity to donate the works on behalf of my grandchildren, in that sense carrying on the family legacy.

The contents of the Langer and Gallia apartments, both now part of the NGV Collection, tell a fascinating story of patronage, while illustrating the complex development of modernism in Vienna during the early twentieth century. Both apartments feature in the NGV's current exhibition *Vienna: Art & Design*.

**MELBOURNE WINTER
MASTERPIECES 2011
Vienna: Art & Design**

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David Beaumont

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Melbourne Port 107x107cm oil on linen

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