

CARL AUBÖCK

THE WORKSHOP



CLEMENS KOIS

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Carl Auböck: The Workshop

Edited by Clemens Kois & Brian Janusiak

Narrative texts by Carl Auböck IV

With contributions from Sophia Lambrakis, Patrick Parrish, and Michael Boyd

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Introduction

Four generations of the Auböck family have spent over a century dreaming, toiling, inventing, and creating to give us designs that embody the spirit of timeless beauty, wonder, and ingenuity. They have invited us to witness the profound marriage of form and function in objects meant to adorn and improve the modern home and workplace – pieces that whisper their purpose, while proclaiming their quality and uniqueness.

While the Carl Auböck Archive in Vienna has catalogued and attributed more than 4,500 objects to Werkstätte Carl Auböck, we have chosen to showcase a collection of pieces in this book that highlight the broad spectrum of designs, details, materials, and functions associated with this long line of artists and craftsmen.

Each object by Werkstätte Carl Auböck, whether documented here, or not, and regardless of the series, is characterized by its unique ability to not only stand out, but also to stand alone, like a sculpture. Yet, unlike works of art, the pieces are dynamic in that they reflect a living synthesis with the people who use them. To say that they were ever merely part of an aesthetic backdrop purely for the purpose of indicating a certain lifestyle would be missing the point entirely. Instead, Auböck objects eloquently communicate with the beholder as well as the user in the context of a “modern living” culture as part of a multidimensional domestic landscape. To reflect this vital symbiosis, we have divided our book into chapters that represent the realms in which Auböck objects – at least the ones depicted here – interact most frequently: HOMESCAPES, DESKSCAPES, and TABLESCAPES.

Clemens Kois
New York, 05.23.2012



History and Significance of the Werkstätte Carl Auböck

The feverish creativity, the whimsy, and the wonder all began in 1912, when the bronzesmith Karl Heinrich Auböck founded his workshop at Bernardgasse 23, in Vienna's 7th district, where craftsmen in white coat smocks still tinker today. Under the guidance of Karl Heinrich Auböck, the workshop set about producing bronze animal statues and figurines as part of the "Vienna Bronzes" movement popular at the time. But it was not until his son Carl Auböck II, born in 1900, joined the workshop in 1919 that extraordinary things began to happen.

In that year, while attending a drawing class at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, the younger Carl (now with a "C") made the acquaintance of Swiss painter Johannes Itten (1888-1967). Itten was appointed by Walter Gropius to teach at the Bauhaus in Weimar not long after, and 16 of Itten's Viennese students, among them Carl Auböck, followed him there.

Backed by both Gropius and Lyonel Feininger, Carl II started studying at the Bauhaus in the winter of 1919. He attended the renowned Introductory Course given by Itten and worked in the metal workshop of Naum Slutzky (1894-1965). After leaving the Bauhaus in 1921, he eventually started working full-time at his father's Werkstätte by 1923. In addition to handling the orders placed by their American clientele, the younger Auböck began developing a series of intriguing new pieces whose designs were far more modern, more independent than the Art Deco styles being produced at the workshop thus far.

That very year, Carl II married Mara Utschkunova, a sculptor and, later, textile artist who he had met in Weimar. In 1924, their only son, Carl III, was born.

The elder Auböck, Karl Heinrich, passed away in 1925. Subsequently, work began on an ever-growing number of exciting new products under the masterful eye of his son. Venturing beyond bronze animal statues, Carl II introduced abstracted, functional art objects to the workshop's palette – lustrous curios that included corkscrews, paperweights, bottle stoppers, and, thanks to his penchant for coffee and cigarettes, lots of ashtrays. The new material of choice at

the workshop became brass, which Carl II, together with his workshop, adeptly polished and patinated, breathing life and soul into each piece that left his hands. Many of those playfully exquisite designs went on to become American best sellers.

Carl Auböck II's unmistakable and often amusing designs, which artfully bestowed new functions upon familiar forms, and his uncompromising craftsmanship, ingenuity, and novel use of found objects – or "objét trouvés" – to create larger, characteristic works like the much-celebrated Tree Table, undoubtedly left their mark on the Austrian, if not international, landscape of art and design. It's no wonder his works can be found in nearly every major art museum's design collection around the world.

Carl II's son, Carl III, proved to be a worthy heir to the family legacy. During his post graduate studies at MIT in 1951, the young architect and designer made the acquaintance of Charles Eames, Benjamin Thompson, and George Nelson and reconnected with his father's old Bauhaus acquaintances, Walter Gropius and Herbert Bayer. Back in Vienna, he worked together with his father in the years that followed, moving the style of the workshop more toward industrial design. As a designer, he was commissioned by industry to develop a series of innovative products like ski bindings, optical devices, and the Neuzeughammer flatware pattern #2060 for which he won numerous prestigious design awards, like the Compasso d'Oro at the Triennale di Milano, and a great following among his contemporaries.

The relationship between the two Carls was devoted, inspirational, brotherly, and very spirited. Each used that chemistry back in the workshop to create objects for the home – from floor lamps and coat racks to shoe horns and table bells – that were nothing short of sensational in form and material handcrafting.

After Carl Auböck II passed away in 1957, Carl III began running the workshop together with his wife Justine. A visionary who loved to travel, he worked to successfully expand Auböck design on an international scale, gaining

notable commercial clients like Tiffany & Co. and Saks Fifth Avenue in New York, the Ginza Shiseido Boutique in Tokyo, Harrods of London, and Paris's Christofle. As a believer that good design could heal the world, Carl III continued to develop his own collections through the 1980s.

Carl Auböck III headed Werkstätte Carl Auböck until his death in 1993. The reigns were then passed to Justine Auböck (1926-2004), followed by her children, Maria Auböck, a talented landscape architect and teacher, and Carl Auböck IV, architect and, like all preceding Carls, designer. The two siblings, who are still at the helm today, helped successfully stage a comprehensive Carl Auböck solo exhibition at the Wien Museum in 1997 and oversaw the publication of two books about the workshop's historical product catalogues as part of the Carl Auböck Archive.

The old Viennese townhouse/workshop, which witnessed the birth of the iconic hand-shaped bottle opener, among countless deviceful ideas, still operates today, producing collections and collection pieces on a flexible and ever-changing basis in the heart of the so-called "brilliantengrund" (or "diamond grounds") district due to the many chandelier manufactories in the area. As limited editions were never what the Auböcks were going for, international clients and collectors can still purchase "classic" Werkstätte Carl Auböck designs at any given time. New works are continuously being developed there as well, with particular attention still being paid to Old World craftsmanship, enduring quality, and timeless, good design.



1950s Workshop with Carl Auböck II hard at work

TB Thomas Brandstaetter is a Vienna based artist and writer. He studied philosophy and literature in Vienna and Madrid. As a journalist he mostly writes about design and architecture for a variety of international publications.

CA Carl Auböck IV is an architect and the current head of the Werkstätte Carl Auböck.

TB Mr. Auböck, you hail from a line of designers and craftsmen who left a lasting impression on the design world. That being said, when did the signature style of your workshop and brand, Werkstätte Carl Auböck, develop?

CA In the very beginning, our company manufactured traditional bronzes that captured the spirit typical of 19th-century Vienna. The first Carl Auböck, born Karl Heinrich Auböck, produced formal Vienna Bronzes of all sizes with naturalistic animal motifs. The golden eagles atop the two obelisks flanking the entrance to Schönbrunn Palace are attributed to him. Only much later though, starting in the late 1920s when an increasing number of designs by my grandfather, Carl Auböck II, began being produced, did something of a characteristic, signature style begin to emerge.

Beyond that, what distinguished Auböck objects was also the significant quality and complexity of the products created at the Werkstätte from that point on. Whereas the processing of a single material like brass, for example, was more or less easy, the mastery of material combinations like brass with horn, cane, or leather in one object was considerably more difficult and what set our workshop and our brand apart. One trade secret that made the rounds at the Werkstätte was, if you employ a number of materials and combine them with special, key details, imitation by competitors will be rendered virtually impossible.

How did your workshop make the transition from classic Vienna Bronzes to the innovative, yet functional designs now associated with Carl Auböck?

Following World War I, most of what we produced was merely decorative to help our employees and the family make ends meet. Only slowly did we accumulate enough resources to buy the materials necessary to create the very first pieces based on our own designs. One example of these early signature objects was a pair of Carl Auböck bookends. Shaped like animals and hand-sketched in our working and ordering catalogues by my grandfather, Carl Auböck II, the illustrations reflect the influence of the Johannes Itten drawing class he had taken, where they practiced symmetrical drawing with both hands. Grandfather was ambidextrous by nature and, therefore, had a very keen sense of spatial understanding and imagination. He created many of his designs during meetings with clients, sometimes sipping Turkish coffee and all the while smoking.

A mix of relaxed small talk and the targeted exchange of technical know-how was customary at the workshop. The tasks at the Werkstätte were clearly defined and structured according to each individual's talents and specialization. Workers were assigned jobs based on their skills, and their contribution determined their rank. "Busch," for instance, was perfect at making tree tables, and "Schabel" worked best with "Novak" on the delicate hinges of cigarette boxes. It was like an all-star band – together they strove for quality and, individually, each one possessed this spirit of achieving the highest standard in his own work. The hierarchy was constantly shifting and everybody had the chance to expand on his own realm of expertise. But they were constantly being put to the test in terms of quality.

Our father, Carl Auböck III, had the unique opportunity to learn about materials and their processing from this collective of interesting characters from very early on, as did I later on, in the early 1960s.

How would you describe your father, Carl Auböck III, and your grandfather, Carl Auböck II?

Our grandfather, CA II, was a multitalented artist who from early on worked in painting and sculpture – practices that inevitably influenced his ideas and inventions regarding object design for the modern home. He was an excellent metalworker, who would link together the most diverse materials and processing

techniques for the sake of their unique appearance. He was an innovator rooted in the workshop.

His son and our father, CA III, was a true modernist, an architect and a girdler by trade. He was a tenured professor of Metal Product Design, Master Class, at the University of Applied Arts Vienna (1977-1993). Through his teaching, his work for the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and his presidency of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID), he was able to establish relationships with architects and industrial designers from around the world back in the 1950s, when the term "design" still hadn't become a prerequisite in Austria. He was also one of the first young Austrian architectural and industrial designers to go on a "design" fact-finding mission to Japan.

CA III was passionate about his work, but he was also a man of the public, undertaking many travels throughout the years. I was lucky enough to accompany him on some of these trips later on, getting to meet the likes of Buckminster Fuller, Herbert Bayer, George Nelson, Victor Papanek, Massimo Vignelli, Marco Zanuso, Alessandro Mendini, and Malcolm McLaren with the Sex Pistols, among many others.

How do the designs of your father differ from those of your grandfather?

Due to his education and his work, our father, CA III, was more focused on industrial design, that is, on the industrial production of larger series. Technical innovations were his priority for such assignments as the Reichert microscope, the Olympia typewriter, the Elna sewing machine, the design for the first ski boot heel binding for Tyrolia, or the Ostovics Culinar collection.

You see, until today, the workshop had very few mechanized, or even automatized, tools at its disposal and never used industrialized machines such as die-cutters, presses, or folding machines. Everything until now has been made by hand and must, therefore, be designed accordingly beforehand. Neither the old workshop, nor the materials used were suitable for larger editions. After all, bronze and brass casting are [hand] crafts. As such, my father ended up creating designs that were much more reduced than my grandfather's, and worked with many materials that were suitable for larger, serial productions. The importance of these series such as the one in nickel-plated cast iron, for example, are only partly recognized by the broader circle of collectors, but their time will come.

Common to both men was certainly their powerful use of form and proportion. This probably runs in the family – I see it when I look at my sister's and my son's work – and is perhaps the outcome of our upbringing, where "die gute form" or "good design" was part of our education and our life ethic.

How would you describe the relationship between the two men?

Word has it that they were like partners, like good friends or brothers. Grandfather was the social and affable type, a man of subtle humor, English suits, and American shoes. He led a life of refined understatement and material nonchalance. His son, our father, was an only child, very cared for by his parents, and attuned to the canon of genuine quality and the spiritual background of all forms in nature and of man-made

artifacts from very early on. Nevertheless, as a kid, he was allowed to roll his wind-up cars over the shoes of guests like Adolf Loos and Elias Canetti at the famous "Café Museum."

What was the driving force behind the work of these two designers?

I would say the search for an object's underlying purpose was clearly important to both of them. Most of their designs, for example, were created for the living and dining rooms, for the stage of hospitality, so to speak. Household culture, shifting lifestyles, and gift-giving were an essential part of their vision. People gave each other vases, salt shakers, and other table objects as hostess gifts or favors. All these objects could be held in one's hand and handed to someone. They served a table culture and lifestyle that was communicative. One can discuss these objects time and time again. They have a history, an aura, a purpose, an idea. They are conversation pieces.

Did workshop employees have any influence on the design and creation of these pieces?

The ideas behind many of the pieces were created in the course of everyday life by the family itself. Other ideas came either from the buyers or those placing the orders. The designs, techniques, and choice of materials, on the other hand, have always been the exclusive responsibility of the Auböcks. After all, that is what lends the pieces their recognizable and unmistakable essence. For a new design to even become possible, though, solutions are sought together with the employees. They often know how the material is to be mastered, especially when it shows reluctance to the form. To that extent, the workshop community of employees with their vast knowledge and experience absolutely had an influence on the decision making.

Is there one specific design piece that contributed to making the Werkstätte Carl Auböck famous?

There was always this ambition in the family to create something new and beautiful out of nothing, out of some material that was seemingly substandard. The term "objét trouvé" doesn't quite cover it; however, it is the same process of stripping an object of its original destiny and giving it an entirely new purpose. The trunk utilized for the famous Tree Table, for instance, was originally wood waste intended for heating and taken from a turner's yard. Another example, the "Simperl," was first a straw basket originally used for allowing dough to rest before making bread. Both objects were given new feet in exactly the right proportions and were assigned a new function. These were undoubtedly some of the first ready-mades in the design world. What's more, each and every table is unique.

Were there any changes once the company transferred from CA II to CA III?

Back in my grandfather's day, there were 8–10 people working at the Werkstätte. During that time, my father and grandfather worked together intensely for 18 years, swapping ideas as they went along. Some great designs originated from that time period, like the "Vice-Versa" lamp and the flatware pattern #2060 for the Neuzeughammer factory for which my father received national and international awards. Before even going





Auböck IV Object Narrative

Plate No. 003

Magnifier No. 5071 & No. 5205

1958, 1959

“At the time these pieces were created, a large part of the Auböck clientele was made up of architects and building engineers. The tools they used in their professions inspired designs that would serve as motifs for promotional gifts and would later be adopted into the collection. Here, for instance, we have an abstracted, hexagonal nut embedded with a reading glass.”



Plate No. 004

Paperweight No. 4223

1947







Plate No. 022 Paperweights No. 4273.1 & No. 5599 1947



Plate No. 023 Paperweights No. 5599 & No. 4867 1947



Auböck IV Object Narrative

Plate No. 024 Paperweight No. 4626

1957

"The design of a watch without a dial is considered by the Auböck family to be CA II's last. Originally measuring 85 mm in height, the object was meant to be used as a paperweight. This particular watch, which was developed by CA III, is much larger and heavier. Watch-shaped key chains inspired by this piece were developed by Justine Auböck, the wife of CA III, in the early 2000s."



Plate No. 026

Magnifier No. 4796

1954



Plate No. 027

Magnifier No. 5223

1959



Plate No. 040b Table Clock No. 5112H (Detail) 1962



Plate No. 040c Table Clock No. 5112H (Detail) 1962



Plate No. 040d Table Clock No. 5112 (Detail) 1962



Plate No. 040e Table Clock No. 5112 (Detail) 1962



Auböck IV Object Narrative

Plate No. 041 Table Clock No. 5052 1962

“While working for the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) in the 1960s, CA III had the chance to meet and befriend designers such as George Nelson, whose iconic, modernist work – and, most notably, his wall and desk clocks – Auböck admired. The cylindrical and bauble shaped table clocks, which came outfitted in different colors of leather or even horn, pay homage to those momentous encounters. The clock faces were made from cast iron and plated with polished nickel.”



TABLESCAPES

Whether for a banquet of twenty or a party of one, a dining area serves as the stage of hospitality and the table, its focal point. Utensils, cutting boards, carafes, and even salt and pepper shakers are small props that indicate the occasion being celebrated and bring with them a sense of festivity and home.

Table and kitchenware by Carl Auböck, with their superior craftsmanship and their sculptural designs, have the unique ability to make the simplest dinner feel like a special occasion. As cooking and eating are rituals that should appeal to all the senses, the look and feel of smooth wooden fruit and nut bowls, horn salad utensils, and polished brass nutcrackers with leather covered grips enrich the wining and dining experience on any night of the week. What's more, nifty designs like a key-shaped corkscrew or a penguin bottle opener are excellent fodder for conversation around the dinner table as each Auböck piece seems to tell its own story.

Besides creating pieces that were purely designed, devised, and manufactured by Werkstätte Carl Auböck, the workshop also collaborated with other renowned companies like Neuzeughammer-Ambosswerk to create modernist, stainless steel flatware and bar tools embellished with materials such as wood, cane, horn, and leather.



Auböck IV Object Narrative

Plate No. 108

Table No. 4204

1948

“It was pure happenstance that led to the idea of creating side tables from objets trouvés. One day, CA II was picking up goods from the turnery using a pushcart. There, in the courtyard, he noticed a big pile of tree fragments and stumps, some of them of impressive size. CA II had always had an eye for things that most others would consider useless or worthless. So, he asked the owner if he could have some of the logs. The owner, who merely used the wood for heating and had plenty of it to spare, had no problem parting with a few pieces.

CA II took his find to the workshop and the tree table was created. Early pieces featured legs made of varnished iron pipes; later, when the economy began to boom, he exchanged them for brass ones.”

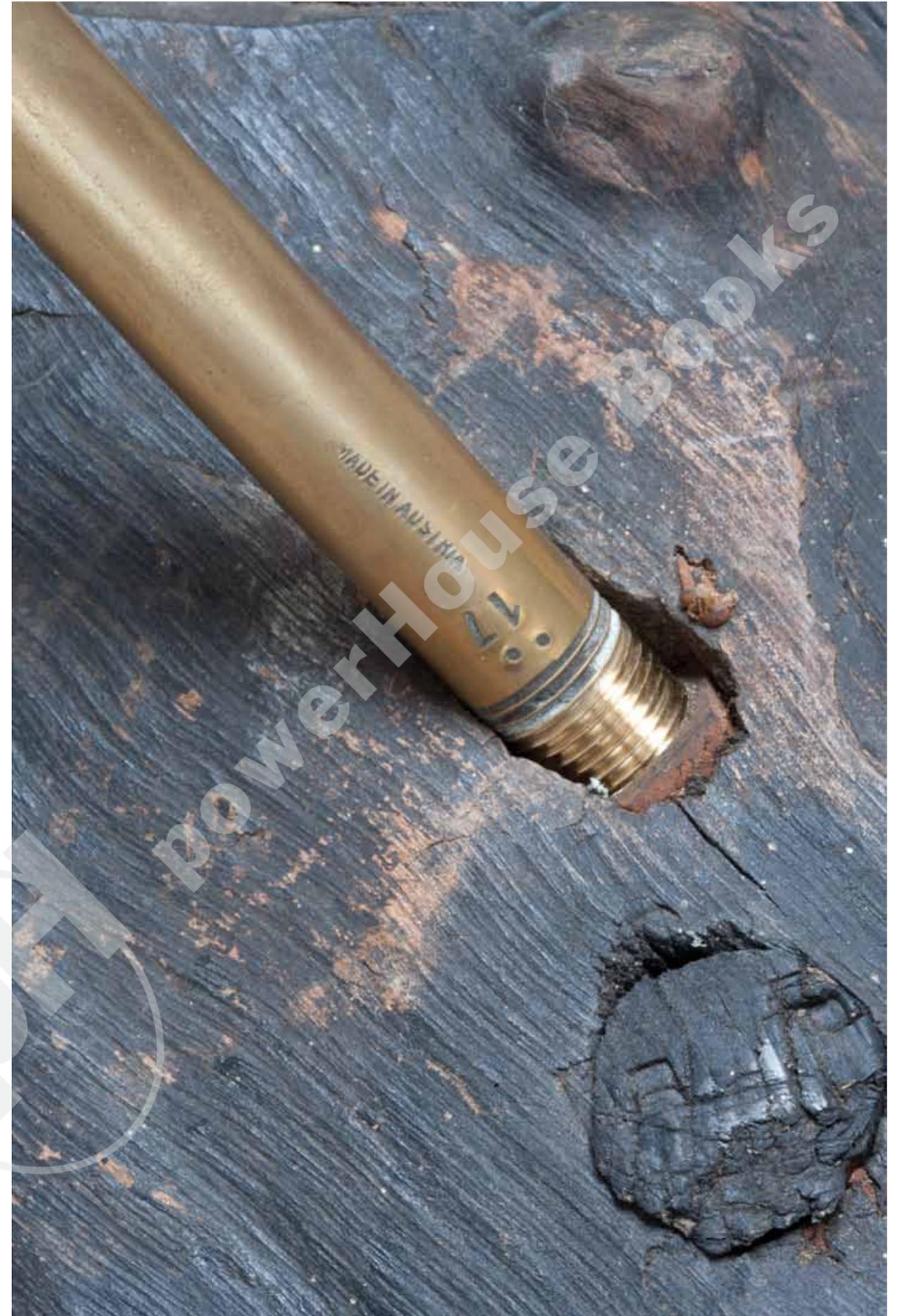


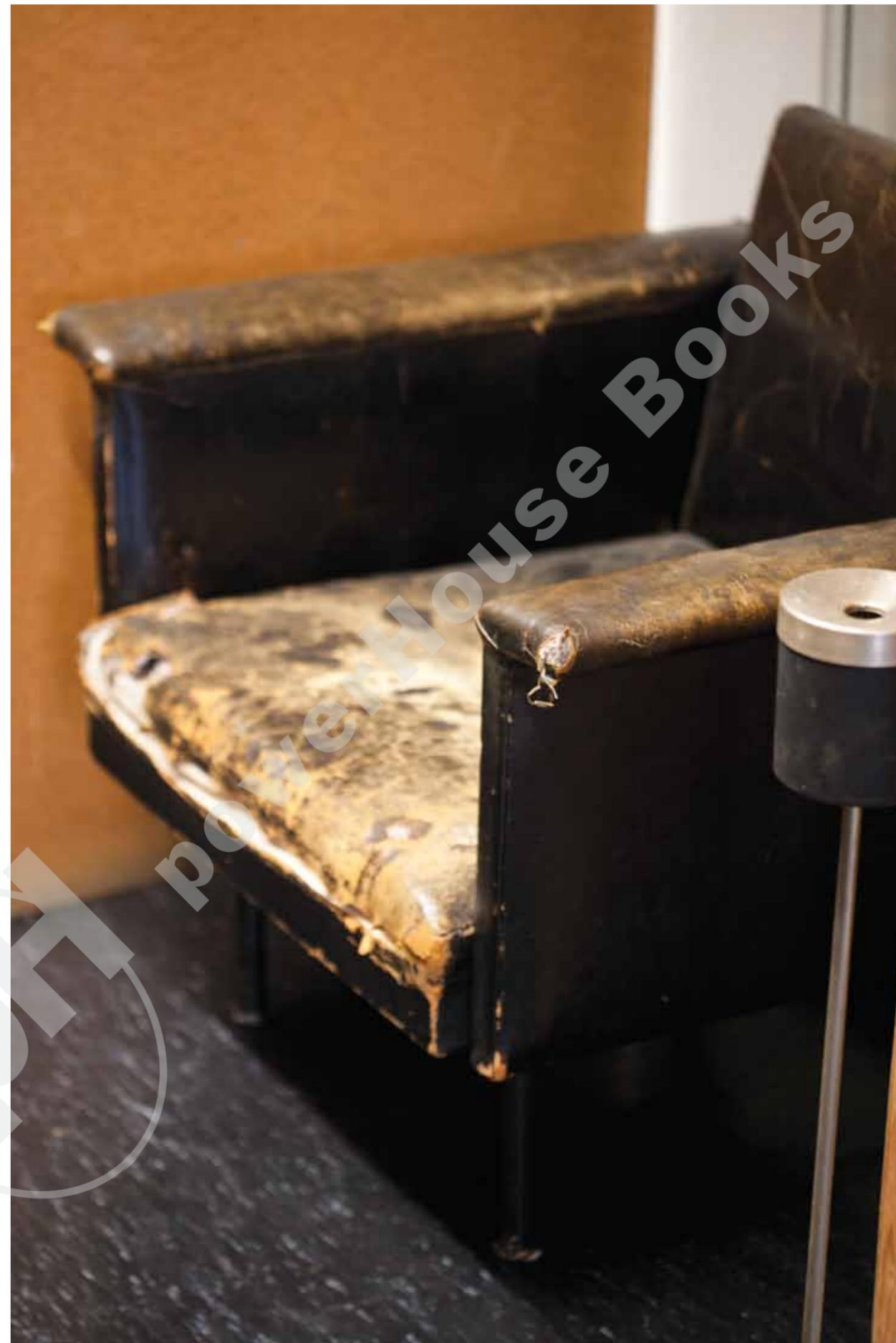
Plate No. 108b

Table No. 4204 (Detail)

1948

149





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