

I want to tell you a story about a poor little rich man. He had money and possessions, a faithful wife who kissed his business cares from his brow, and a brood of children that any of his workers might envy. His friends loved him because whatever he touched prospered. But today things are quite, quite different. It happened like this.

One day this man said to himself, "You have money and possessions, a faithful wife and children that any of your workers might envy. But are you happy? Look, there are men who lack all these things for which you are envied. But their cares are charmed away by a great sorceress—Art. And what does Art mean to you? You know nothing more than her name. Any swell can present his visiting card at your home, and your servant flings open the doors. But you have not yet received Art into your home. I am sure that she will not come of her own accord. But I will seek her out. She shall enter my home like a queen and live with me."

He was an energetic man; whatever he seized upon was carried out with vigor. People were accustomed to that from him because of the way he ran his business. And so on the very same day he went to a famous architect and said, "Bring Art to me, bring Art into my home. Cost is no object."

The architect did not wait for him to say it twice. He went into the rich man's home, threw out all his furniture, called in an army of parquet-floor layers, espalier specialists, lacquerers, masons, painters, carpenters, plumbers, potters, carpet layers, artists, and sculptors, and presto, quicker than you could blink an eye, Art was captured, boxed in, and taken into good custody within the four walls of the rich man's home.

The rich man was overjoyed. Overjoyed, he walked through his new rooms. Wherever he cast his glance was Art, Art in each and every thing. He grasped Art when he took hold of a door handle; he sat on Art when he settled into an armchair; he buried his head in Art when, tired, he lay it down on a pillow; he sank his feet into Art when he trod on the carpet. He reveled in Art with an enormous fervor. After his plate was artistically decorated, he cut into his *boeuf à l'oignon* with twice as much vigor.

He was praised, he was envied. The art journals extolled him as one of the leading patrons of the arts; his rooms were reproduced as models, commented upon, and explained.

And they deserved it, too. Each room formed a symphony of colors, complete in itself. Walls, wall coverings, furniture, and materials were made to harmonize in the most artful ways. Each household item had its own specific place and was integrated with the others in the most wonderful combinations.

The architect had forgotten nothing, absolutely nothing. Cigar ashtrays, cutlery, light switches—everything, everything was made by him. But these were no ordinary architect's arts; no, the individuality of the owner was expressed in every ornament, every form, every nail. (It was a psychological piece of work whose difficulty will be evident to anybody.)

Yet the architect modestly disclaimed all honors. "No," he said, "these rooms are not mine at all. Over there in the corner is a statue by Charpentier. And just as I would take it amiss if anyone tried to pass off a room as his own design if he as much as used one of my door latches, I cannot now make so bold for myself and

## The Poor Little Rich Man

Neues Wiener Tagblatt,  
April 26, 1900

Adolf Loos,  
Spoken Into the  
Void  
(MIT Press,  
1982)

... designed and executed by Josef Hoffmann  
for a Secession exhibition study.  
From *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk*,  
no. 2, 1899.

claim that these rooms are my spiritual property." It was spoken nobly and logically. Upon hearing these words, many a carpenter who had furnished one of his rooms with a tapestry by Walter Crane but had intended to take credit for its furniture anyway since he had designed and executed it was shamed to the very depths of his black soul.

Let us return after this digression to our rich man. I have already said how happy he was. From this point on he devoted a large portion of his time to the study of his home. For it had to be learned; this he soon realized. There was a great deal to take note of. Each furnishing had a definite place. The architect had meant well by him. He had thought of everything. Even for the smallest little box there was a specially prepared place.

The home was comfortable, but it taxed the owner's brain. Therefore the architect supervised the inhabitants in the first weeks so that no mistake might creep in. The rich man gave his best efforts. But it happened that he would lay a book down and, deep in thought, push it into a compartment made for newspapers. Or that he would flick the ashes of his cigar into the indentation in the table intended to hold the candlesticks. Once someone had picked up an object in his hand, there was no end to the guessing and searching for its correct place, and several times the architect had to unroll his working drawings in order to rediscover the place for a matchbox.

Where applied art celebrated such triumphs, applied music could not be permitted to lag behind. This idea very much preoccupied the rich man. He submitted a petition to the streetcar company in which he sought to have the nonsensical ringing replaced with the bell motif from *Parsifal*. However, he found the company uncooperative. They were clearly not receptive enough to modern ideas there. Instead he was permitted, at his own expense, to have the street in front of his house repaved so that every vehicle was forced to roll by in the rhythm of the *Radetzky March*.<sup>1</sup> The electric chimes in his rooms also acquired Beethoven and Wagner motifs, and all the celebrated art critics were full of praise for the man who had opened up a new field with his "art in the utilitarian object."

One can imagine that all of these improvements made the man still happier.

However, it must not be kept a secret that he preferred to be home as little as possible. After all, one also wants to take a rest now and then from so much art. Or could you live in a picture gallery? Or sit through *Tristan and Isolde* for months on end? Well then! Who would blame him for gathering new strength in a cafe, in a restaurant, or among friends and acquaintances? He had thought things would be different. But art requires sacrifice. Yet he had already sacrificed so much. His eyes became moist. He thought of many old things which he had loved and which he sometimes missed. The big easy chair! His father always used to take his afternoon nap on it. The old clock! And the pictures! But: Art requires it! One must only keep from weakening!

Once it happened that he celebrated his birthday. His wife and children had lavished gifts upon him. The things pleased him exceedingly and were a source of true joy to him. The architect arrived soon thereafter to look after the correctness of things and to make decisions on difficult matters. He entered the room. The master of the house greeted him happily, for he had many things on his mind. But the architect did not notice the other's pleasure. He had discovered something quite different, and he turned pale. "What kind of slippers are you



wearing?" he blurted out with effort.

The master of the house looked at his embroidered shoes. But he breathed a sigh of relief. This time he felt totally innocent. For the shoes had been made to the architect's original design. So he answered with a superior air. "But Herr Architect! Have you already forgotten? You yourself designed the shoes!"

"Of course," thundered the architect, "but for the bedroom. Here they disrupt the whole mood with their two impossible spots of color. Don't you see that?"

The master of the house did see it. He quickly pulled off the shoes and was pleased to death that the architect did not find his socks impossible too. They went into the bedroom, where the rich man was again permitted to put on his shoes.

"Yesterday," he began here irresolutely, "I celebrated my birthday. My family literally showered me with gifts. I have called you, my dear architect, so that you can give us some advice as to how we can best display these things."

The architect's face grew noticeably longer. Then he exploded, "How do you come to allow yourself to be given gifts! Did I not design *everything* for you? Did I not consider *everything*? You don't need anything more. You are complete!"

"But," the master of the house permitted himself to respond, "I am allowed to buy something for myself, after all!"

"No, you are *not* allowed! Never ever! That's all I need! Things that have not been designed by me? Didn't I go far enough by permitting you the Charpentier? The statue that robs me of total glory for my work! No, you must buy nothing else!"

"But what if my grandchild gives me something he has made at kindergarten?"

"Then you must not accept it!"

The master of the house was crushed. But he did not yet give up. An idea, yes, an idea!

"And what if I wanted to buy myself a painting at the Secession?" he asked triumphantly.

"Then just try to hang it somewhere. Don't you see that there is room for nothing more? Don't you see that for every picture that I have hung for you here I have also designed a frame on the partition or the wall? You can't even *move* a picture. Just try to find a place for a new picture!"

Then a transformation took place in the rich man. The happy man suddenly felt deeply, deeply unhappy. He imagined his future life. No one was allowed to give him pleasure. He would have to pass by the shops of the city impervious to all desires. Nothing more would be made for him. None of his dear ones was permitted to give him a picture. For him there were to be no more painters, no more artists, no more craftsmen. He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. *He is complete!*

36 Letztlich 1927  
a Secession exhibition study.

