

"I have the tendency to offer people dry bread, and that's not enough. Not at the first encounter, in any case."

(Jürgen Rajh)

So much for the introduction to a text that aims to put the special, even unique nature of Jürgen Rajh's ceramic stoves into words. A text about a product whose main characteristics are restraint and modesty.

In short, a paradox situation into which I have got myself, having recently expounded the merits of Jürgen Rajh's stoves to a common friend. My description, in which I tried to lend expression to my fascination with these heating objects, had evidently left a lasting impression and now presents me with the problem of trying to recall what exactly it was that I had actually said. What is it, then, about these wood-burning stoves that they hold such a fascination for me, that fill me with a sense of curiosity whenever I get to see pictures of Jürgen's latest project? The fact is, there are probably a number of reasons, some of which I may not even be consciously aware of. Which brings us to the first issue: Many of the stoves have a kind of restrained presence that lets them blend into the room, so that on entering one does not immediately perceive them as a distinct object, as a defining element of the room's character. One does not so much see them as "feel" them, even when they are not in use. And it is precisely this special quality that may make them initially appear as "too little", as "dry bread" but proves, on closer acquaintance, a refreshing departure from the all-too-common over-designed monoliths that can dominate an entire room, subordinating everything else within their range of influence. Impressing with their opulence at first, these latter stoves will soon lose their appeal but are, alas, permanent fixtures within the otherwise intimate confines of the living room.

A wood-burning stove is like a life partner, a cohabitant whose positive character traits become increasingly apparent as time goes on. Rarely will a trendy designer piece pass the test of time, enduring the changes in contemporary taste and continuing to enhance its owners' sense of wellbeing as time goes on. Although I do not know his exact secret, Jürgen Rajh, it seems to me, designs his stoves with a careful consideration of and respect for the existing architectural surroundings, taking great care to minimise his creations' impact on the room's feel and structure. This approach seemed to me reminiscent of the Bauhaus movement's form-follows-function paradigm, especially as the sober designs appear to have certain similarities with the latter's formal vocabulary. Asked whether I should (and, indeed, could) use this analogy in my text, Jürgen declined, stating that it was not justified today to base one's right to exist as an artist on an adherence to the Bauhaus style and that current thinking had to go far beyond Bauhaus philosophy. I do feel justified in observing, though, that the character of Jürgen's stoves, which he himself often refers to as "heating boxes" in conversation, arise mainly from their aesthetic and functional qualities. If I had to summarise the feel of these objects in a single word, I guess "transparency" would fit.

In some cases the room's shape and layout calls for the creation of a focal point; a core around which the room's fabric – like the lattice of a crystal – can take shape. In particular I am thinking here of the stove decorated by painter Oswald Tschirtner – one of the key proponents of the Gugging House of Artists

near Vienna – that adorns Jürgen’s workshop. Within the context of this neutral room with almost no discerning character of its own, this stove is a powerful statement with an almost sacral character. In keeping with his philosophy, Jürgen has opted for a simple cylindrical polygon design in this collaborative work, which shows Tschirtner’s well-known walking figures to their best advantage and minimises the stove’s visual interference with the artist’s work. Customers can by now choose from a wide range of designs and most will be faced with the question, how much wood-burning heater do I get for my money? All too many people – both retailers and end users – succumb to the desire for an eye-catching visual design. This tendency to define the product’s value according to its aesthetic impact is deceptive and gratifies mainly the owner’s desire to highlight its monetary value.

Especially in our western cultural sphere “dry bread” is associated not only with “bread and water” but carries the connotation of a reflection on the essential, on the bare necessities. One does not have to be an ascetic to understand and appreciate this quality. Even if the minimalism of Jürgen Rajh’s “heating boxes” may puzzle at first sight, it is worth taking a second, closer look at these unique objects and spending some time becoming acquainted with them.

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