

Art, Music and History, The View From Above: Vienna at a Glance

By [Prof. Sam Ben-Meir](#)

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Featured image: Closeup of the Cabin of the Wiener Riesenrad in Vienna (Source: [askideas.com](#))

*VIENNA, Austria – Among Vienna’s many landmarks, few are as unmistakable and beloved as its Riesenrad, the giant Ferris wheel that stands in the Prater amusement park, only a few miles from the city center. At its apex of two hundred and twelve feet, visitors are granted a unique vantage on an extraordinary city. This location provides the setting for the pivotal scene in *The Third Man* (1949), when Harry Lime (played by Orson Welles), a post-war profiteer in bombed-out Vienna, rationalizes his selling of watered-down penicillin to desperate civilians. For Lime, a bird’s-eye view means acquiring a standpoint beyond ordinary moral conventions, unhampered by notions of good and evil, right and wrong – it means reducing individual persons to anonymous, undifferentiated black dots.*

In different contexts, a bird’s-eye view can have various meanings, and in many ways this is the focal point of “Wien von oben: Die Stadt auf einen Blick” (Bird’s-Eye Vienna: The City at a Glance) an exhibit currently on display at the Wien Museum, Vienna, Austria. The exhibition includes several artifacts that represent as cold and amoral a view of the city as the one Lime cultivates. “Zone map of Vienna” (1943) enabled the British Royal Air Force to prepare for aerial bombardment during World War II. In it, the city center and densely populated areas are clearly indicated, as well as strategic infrastructure: railway stations, port facilities, as well as gas and electrical works.



Source: [Wien Museum](#)

When we consider how these aerial renderings of the city become reliable instruments of

warfare, what they leave out is at least as important as what they include. The first, and most obvious thing to be excluded is the sensuous, lived reality of the city – the city not as an aggregate of people and places existing *partes extra partes*: the city itself as a living thing.

It is the sensual element, the color, light, and human perspective that is indispensable to both Austrian landscape painting, and the genre of Viennese *vedutas*, which became extremely popular in the first half of the nineteenth century. In Jakob Alt's "View of Vienna from the Viennese Woods" (c. 1830), we see from the neighboring hills a city completely at home in its environs: the urban center is part of a landscape that is connected to the wider natural world. As the composer Robert Schumann observed in 1838:

"The Danube, the spire of St. Stephen's, and the chain of the Alps in the distance: these are an epitome of Vienna."

There is a fantasy involved in the view from above – the temptation is to think that we can possess the thing whole; that we can grasp an object in its totality. In fact, the farther above we go the more we tend to lose the world, to flatten it out, to erase its distinctions, its plurality, its qualitative differentiation. Perhaps this exhibit's reply to Lime comes in the form of an oil painting from 1931. Oskar Kokoschka portrays Vienna as seen from Schloss Wilhelminenberg, a children's orphanage on the outskirts of the city. Kokoschka's interest here is not so much a view of the city and its topography, but rather the socialist vision of childcare, which the artist depicts with a joyful scene of children at play.



The west front of Schloss Wilhelminenberg (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

With a panorama of Vienna from the early-1960s, we move from the sensuous to the super-sensuous and semi-religious. Anton Lehmden's mixed media canvas features a dove taking flight over the city, a symbol of peace and harmony, while the city nestles cozily in its hilly setting. The Viennese School of Fantastic Realism, of which Lehmden was a co-founder, was certainly influenced by Surrealism and its openness to literary, symbolic, and psychological content in painting. No less important, however, were the Old Masters (especially the early Italian and Northern Renaissance painters such as Bosch, Breughel and Grunewald) and the attention to realistic detail that their work inspired.

The show is a forceful reminder that the “view from above” is a curious and complex thing – historically a privileged point of view, but a vantage that has the potential to be liberating. As critical cartographers have long recognized, maps are creative – in a sense they make geography, by recording and constituting space. They have not only descriptive, but also prescriptive and performative qualities as well. As the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have emphasized: maps are open, productive, naturally creating or destroying rather than reinforcing, “detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification.”

It is in this light that we should consider the show’s inclusion of “counter-maps,” their use in contemporary activism, as well as their intention “to alter social behavior through the inscription of alternative information.” Counter-mapping, which includes collaboratively, produced local mapping, attempts to map “against dominant structures of power” – and is increasingly used in participatory planning and development projects. City maps can indeed become acts of protest, “instruments of emancipation,” as well as modes of resistance and critique. For example, “Urban Commons Vienna” (2012) indicates the locations of urban common goods available to all – including where fruit can be harvested, and at which offices and stores, workshops and goods are free (KostNixLaden).

When Crown Prince Rudolf (1858-1889) said that Vienna was “blessed by God,” he was, in no small part, referring to its being situated in the midst of the Vienna Woods. It has been observed that Vienna owes much to the Romans: they chose for their city of Vindobona a fertile valley on the banks of the Danube surrounded by tranquil wooded heights. In the final analysis, the exhibition at the Wien Museum is a gift to those who adore Vienna, a city which has long been the object of rhapsodic utterances, such as this one from 1548:

“He who has not seen Vienna has wasted his whole life.”

Sam Ben-Meir, PhD is an adjunct professor at Mercy College. His current research focuses on environmental ethics and animal studies. sam@alonben-meir.com Web: www.alonben-meir.com

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