

# HOUSE & GARDEN

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# BIEDERMEIER KEEPSAKES

*Rediscovering  
the painted and gilded  
glassware that  
toasted  
sentimental virtues  
and historic events in  
Middle Europe*

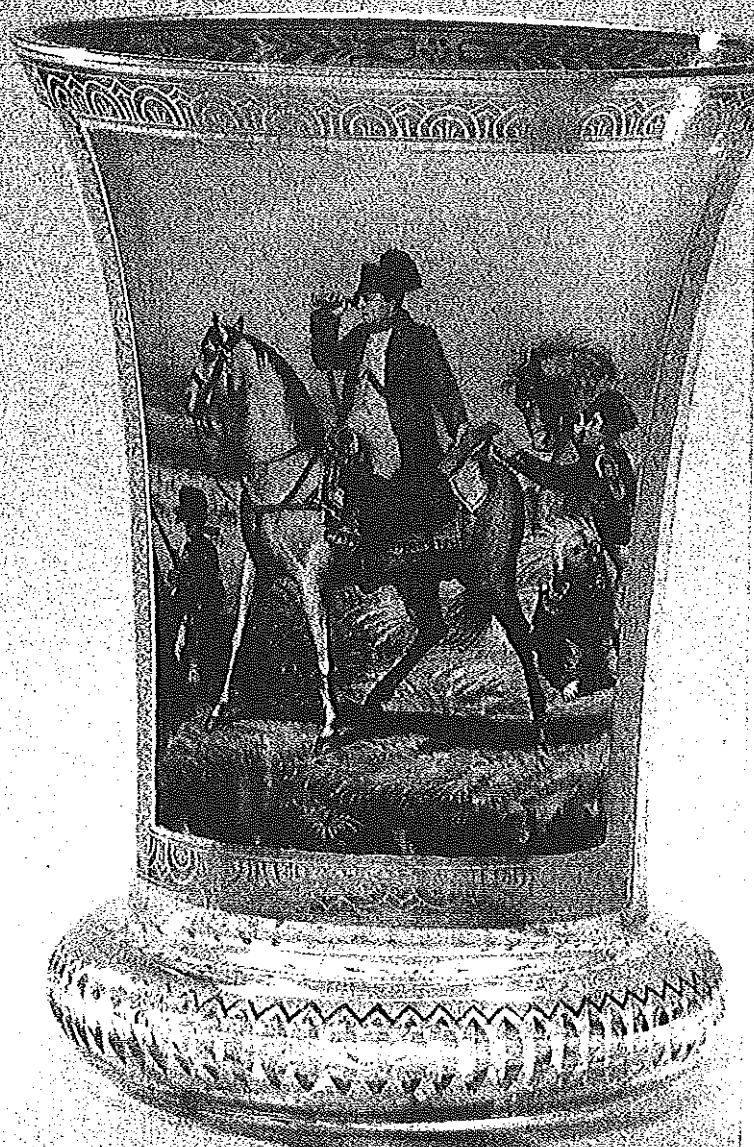
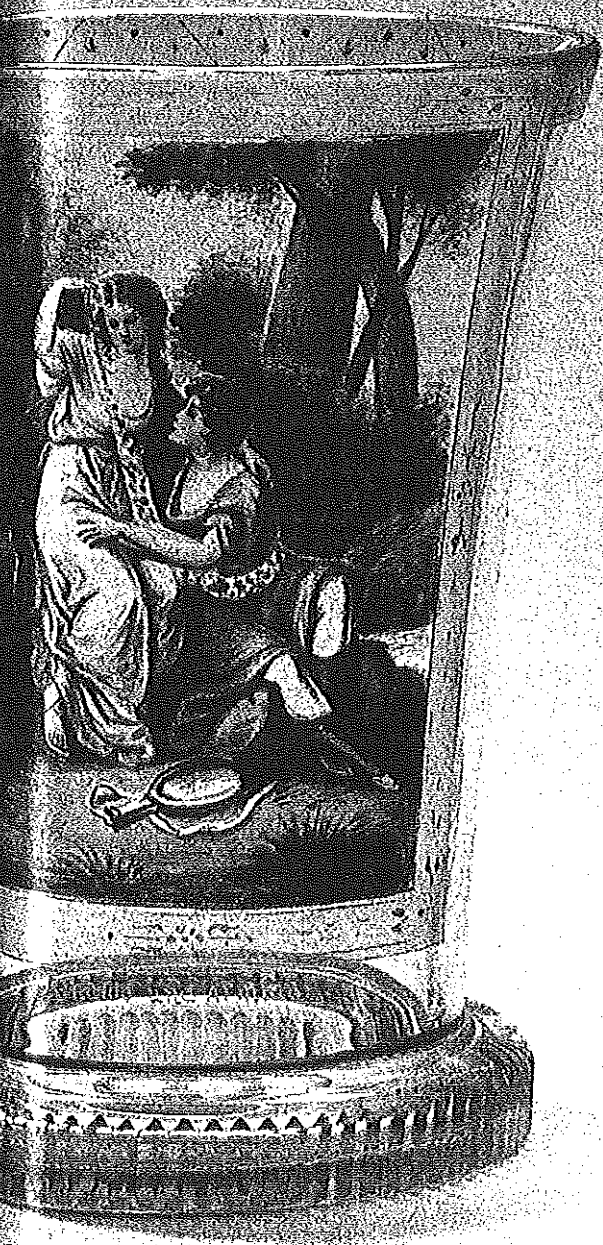
BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY MARK DARLEY

**T**he Napoleonic wars wreaked havoc on daily life in nineteenth-century Europe. Once there was peace, the newly prosperous middle classes of Germany and Austria sought the reassurance of family life as a refuge from an unpredictable world. It's a sentiment we can well understand today.

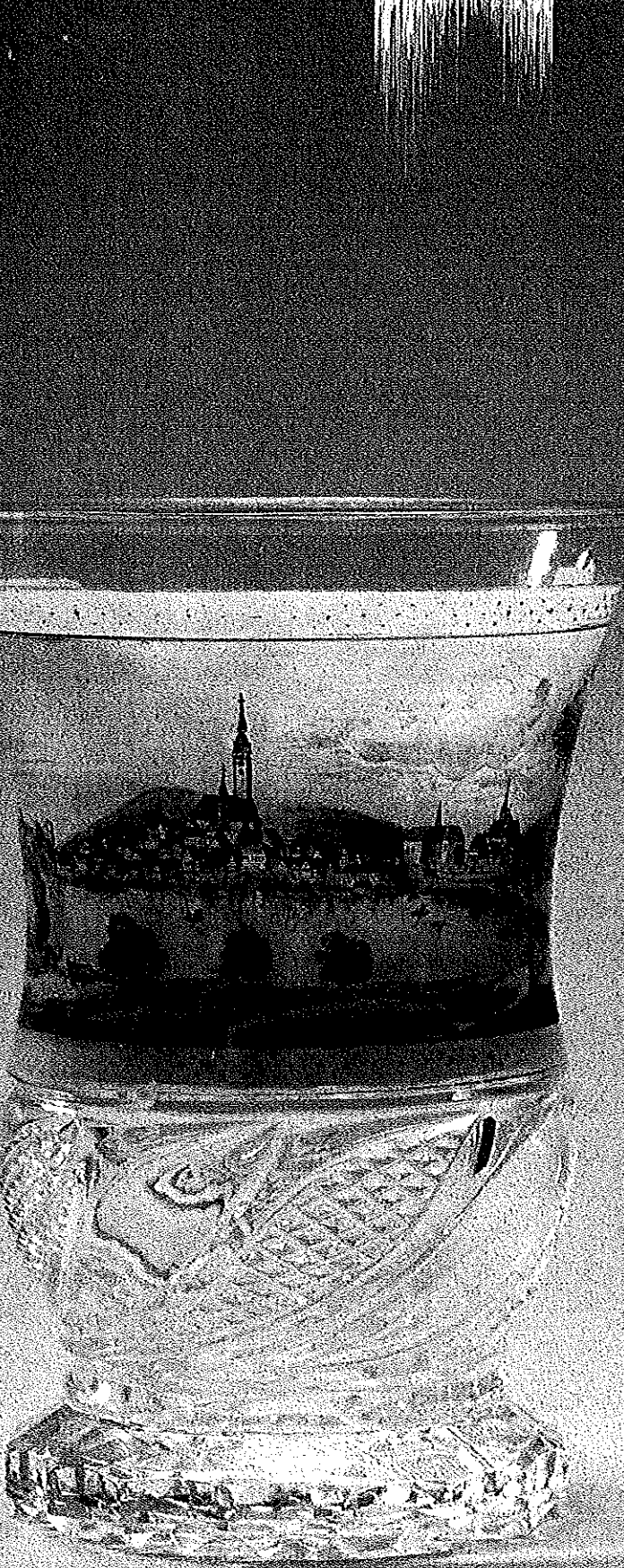
The decorative objects of the Biedermeier era celebrated to the utmost the pleasures of family life. If the furniture of the period is notable for its Classical line and lack of ornament, the glassware announced the bravura of commemorative occasions. Produced largely as keepsakes to celebrate wedding anniversaries and birthdays, it was elaborate in design and exquisite in execution and it introduced to the medium an unprecedented intensity of color. Like most precious objects, it is now so rare, especially in the United States, that only one or two dealers have anything to show, and its appearance in collections and publications is an event of note.

Scarce as Biedermeier glass now is, it was produced in profusion in Austria at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Glassmaking at the time was a major industry that employed about 40,000 people. There were 66 glass factories in the kingdom of Bohemia putting out 11 million florins' worth of glassware a year. About half of it was exported. So not only was the glass widely used

Bohemian beakers, *opposite*, depicting Rinaldo and Armida, at left, and Napoleon at Wagram, right. *Above*: Bohemian lidded goblet, c. 1850. All courtesy Wiener Glassalon, E. Skalitzki.







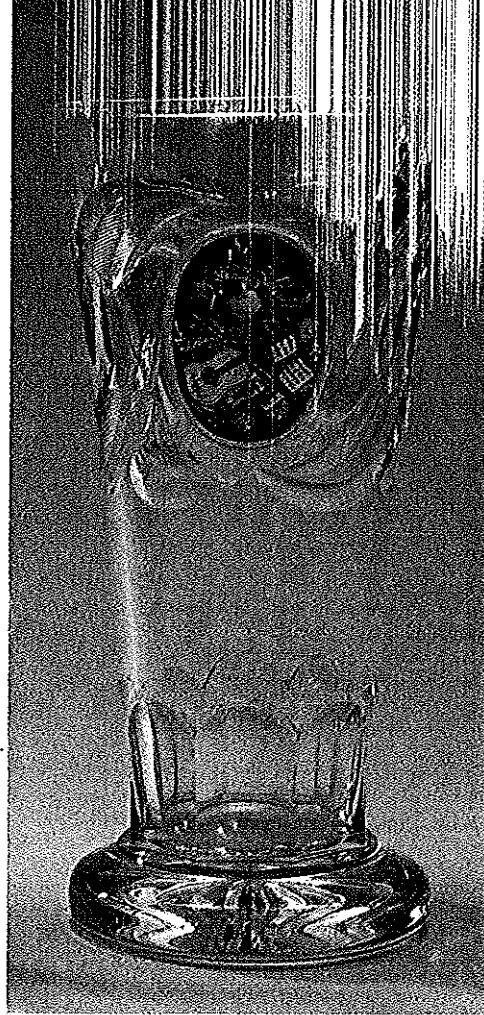
within Bohemia itself, but it also enhanced the prestige of the kingdom abroad.

In the peaceful and conservative years following Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna, the middle classes enjoyed a lifestyle of congeniality and plenitude. A profusion of objects were meant to elevate domestic comfort and well-being. There were gemütlich musical evenings and splendid meals in carefully appointed, well-proportioned living rooms.

We see it all when we enter the world of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. The year is 1835. "There they all sat, on heavy, high-backed chairs, consuming good heavy food from good heavy silver plate, drinking full-bodied wines and expressing their views freely on all subjects. . . . And now came, in two great cut-glass dishes, the 'Pletten-pudding.' It was made of layers of macaroons, raspberries, lady-fingers, and custard. At the same time, at the other end of the table, appeared the blazing plum-pudding which was the children's favorite sweet." Thomas Buddenbrook fetches two

bottles of dessert wine from the "second cellar to the right. . . . And the little dessert-glasses were filled with sweet, golden-yellow malmsey." A guest proposes a toast. "Come, my honest friends, let us honour ourselves by drinking a glass of this excellent liquor to the health of our host and hostess in their beautiful new home. Come, then—to the health of the Buddenbrook family, present and absent! May they live long and prosper!"

The glassware that held those raspberries and macaroons and golden malmsey (the sweetest Madeira) was in all likelihood Biedermeier. It went with the new affluence of families like the Buddenbrooks, and it gave their home its essential aura of luxury. The idea behind Biedermeier was to disguise and embellish to the utmost. As foods were diced and mixed and blanketed with sauces, so glassware was cut and shaved, engraved and painted. Working primarily with the various forms of vessels—drinking glasses and goblets, beakers, tankards, vases, bottles,



The town of Neuhaus on an ornate beaker from Bohemia, *opposite*, at left. Viennese *Ranftbecher*, right, made by glass master Anton Kothgasser in 1820, is painted in transparent colors, etched in silver-gilt, and inscribed "Be gay and be cheerful for all your living days." *Above*: A c.-1870 glass, a late survivor of the Biedermeier form, depicts flowers and musical instruments.

and jars—skilled craftsmen set about to achieve unabashed splendor. Particularly in the centers of the Steinschönau and Haida, they mastered the cutting, engraving, and finishing of glass in a way that surpassed all that had been done in the medium to date. When the goal was a crystal effect, the goblets glittered like diamonds. When a portrait profile was in order, the subject's face and even his skin tone were captured in the wall of a beaker with rare verisimilitude. The men etched in profile look more than amply fed, their ruffled shirts and velvet collars in perfect order. When a house is shown, it is a large and stately place surrounded by tidy orchards and a good iron fence.

The idea was material abundance. Here was glassware for people happy to own objects, eager to eschew the elemental in preference for the cultivated. It wasn't simplicity or purity or naturalism that they wanted, but the best that the latest technology and artistic training could offer. They liked glass cut into a thousand facets, suffused with

rich color, or enameled and gilded—or perhaps augmented in all those ways. In his glassworks in southern Bohemia, Count Longueval of Buquoy developed radiant black Hyalith glass, and Friedrich Egermann (1777–1864) developed jewellike Lithyalin glass in his workshop near Haida. In Vienna, Gottlob Samuel Mohn (1789–1825) mastered the use of translucent enamel hues pioneered by his father. He painted beakers, rather simple in form, with elaborate scenes of Moorish interiors, the triumphal arches etched in silver and gold. He put intricate cityscapes and genre scenes on drinking glasses only a few inches high. On some he inscribed the notes of the latest lieder, the words added in flawless script. Here were the means by which exotic lands and perfect spring gardens could be brought into the ordinary home at any time of year. Bringing the outdoors inside in a form that can never wilt or wither lent not only opulence but also a sense of simple virtue.

With these everyday (*Text continued on page 164*)

## BIEDERMEIER KEEPSAKES

(Continued from page 123) objects courtly living became the prerogative of ordinary people. You might not own a large jeweled necklace, but you could drink from a beaker the base of which felt like one. In several shops in Vienna, Anton Kothgasser (1769–1851), who was a painter for the Vienna Porcelain Factory, sold beakers with golden rims and beaded bases cut and colored for maximum richness of effect. One Kothgasser *Ranftbecher* (a beaker with intricate borders which has an elaborate cogwheel base) is decorated with a hive and a swarm of bees. Each yellow-and-black bee is individually painted in bright enamel. The

hive is done in vivid detail. Angus Wilkie, a New York antiques dealer who has written a forthcoming book on Biedermeier, sees that swarm as a fitting allegory of "honest Biedermeier citizens busily working." The bees' diligence pertains both to the men who made the money that paid for the objects and to the tireless artisans who created the precious glass.

Kothgasser's work knew no limits. On the sides of his beakers were landscapes, city views, ornate interiors, and portraits set in frames within frames and an elaborate sea of decoration. He could show goldfish and exotic birds, floral wreaths and lush bouquets. He

rendered ancient myths so that no detail was lacking and illustrated the architectural monuments of Vienna, Innsbruck, and Karlsbad in exacting detail. His especially fancy beakers were gilded not just outside but also within.

Whatever the emotional complexities of Mann's characters, their well-cushioned existence has its charm. There is a cheer to those crystal bowls, an optimism in the ruby reds and golden yellows of the painted beakers. To drink from gold may smart of the establishment, but after trying it just once, it is as hard to resist as the Buddenbrooks' pudding. □