TWO DISPLAY CABINETS CARL WITZMANN P. DONATH WIEN UM 1907

Two display cabinets with mother-of-pearl and ivory inlays, design by Carl Witzmann, execution by P. Donath, Wien, ca. 1907, Macassar ebony, mother-of-pearl, ivory, marble

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The architect and designer Carl Witzmann began his career with a cabinetmaking apprenticeship before studying from 1900 to 1904 at the Vienna School of Applied Arts in the architecture class of Josef Hoffmann, to whom he remained closely connected throughout his life.

Witzmann’s practice extended far beyond architecture to encompass complete interior designs, including furniture, textiles, lighting, and decorative objects. He created designs for the Wiener Werkstätte as well as for renowned firms such as Thonet, Backhausen, and Lobmeyr, demonstrating a refined understanding of materials and craftsmanship.

A pivotal moment in his career came in 1908, when, as the winner of a dedicated competition, he was entrusted with the overall design of the Kaiser-Jubiläums-Möbel-Ausstellung in Vienna. His comprehensive installation was awarded a prize and widely acclaimed for ist coherence and innovation. Among the works conceived for this exhibition were the present display cabinets, outstanding examples of his refined decorative vocabulary.

Executed in Macassar ebony, with solid wood and veneered construction in an elegant bombé form, the cabinets are richly adorned with intricate mother-of-pearl and ivory inlays. Marble elements, finely worked brass details, and the original bevelled glass panels and shelves further enhance their luxurious character. The gently curved, semicircular line lends the pieces a sense of fluidity and sophistication, while the highly polished precious wood surfaces underscore Witzmann’s sensitivity to material and finish.

The significance of these works is further underscored by their contemporary reception: the influential critic Berta Zuckerkandl discussed the exhibition in detail in Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration (1908), where the display cabinets with mother-of-pearl inlay were illustrated multiple times. She particularly emphasized Witzmann’s innovative approach and his predilection for refined, polished surfaces and curved, semicircular lines situating his designs at the forefront of modern decorative arts in Vienna at the time.

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