

# The Highest Art

The Kitzbühel Museum pays tribute to the ski paintings of Austrian artist and architect Alfons Walde. **BY EVERETT POTTER**



Above: Alfons Walde (1891–1958) is best known for his modernist paintings of Tyrolean winter landscapes and ski scenes. Right: *Zwei Skifahrerinnen* (loosely translated as “Two Ski Bunnies”) depicts two stylish women skiers pausing to admire the scenery—and to be admired themselves—on the Kitzbühel slopes in 1914.

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**T**he Austrian ski town of Kitzbühel may be best known in skiing circles for challenges like the men’s World Cup downhill on the Hahnenkamm, one of the most dramatic courses in the sport. But those two minutes aside, it also happens to be one of the most charming and stately ski villages in the world, a Tyrolean set piece with impeccably preserved stone townhouses, hidden squares, and traditional restaurants with sidewalk cafés. There’s a Euro-youth culture that parties hard at legendary bars like the Londoner, but the town is

also a haven for silver-haired second homeowners from places like Munich, who motor down the narrow streets in Bentley convertibles.

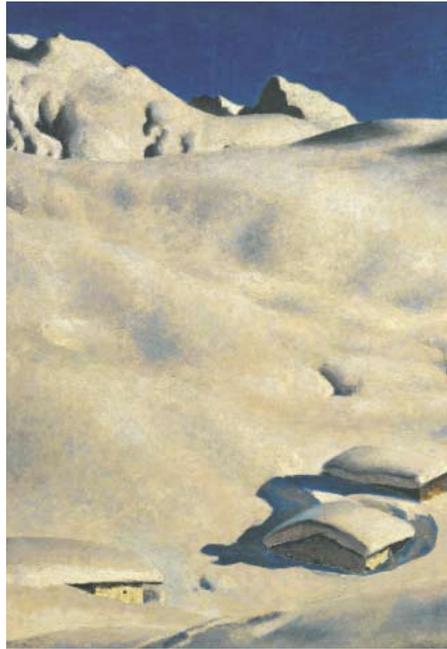
The centuries-old history of the town is best seen at the Kitzbühel Museum, which is located in an old granary and the medieval tower of the city’s fortifications. Behind its thick stone walls, this smartly assembled museum offers carefully and artfully selected exhibits, sound and film installations, giving a fine overview of the city. It starts with Bronze Age mining in 1000 B.C. (Kitzbühel’s fortunes rested on silver mining) and proceeds to the modern age

of tourism and winter sports with Kitzbühel’s legendary team of skiing champions, led in the mid-1950s by the late Toni Sailer. Sailer’s skis are on display, as are ski posters, vintage sleds and toboggans. If that were all that this fine little museum held, it would be well worth visiting.

But the real treasures lie in the art galleries, which have a permanent exhibit—closer to a shrine, actually—of the paintings of Alfons Walde. Born in Kitzbühel in 1891, Walde was trained as an artist and architect. He designed the iconic Kitzbühel logo and also its first tram. But it is as a painter that



*Aufstieg* (“Ascent”), painted in 1927, depicts skiers pausing in the winter sunlight as they skin up a hill.



*Almen in Schnee* (“Mountain Pastures in Snow”), painted in 1926, features a skilled depiction of the subtle colors of snow.

Walde made his greatest contribution to the sport of skiing. The Austrians consider Walde the first modernist ski painter, an artist who approached traditional subject matter with the perspective of the early 20th century avant-garde.

As a schoolboy, Walde started painting in watercolor and tempera, and was sent to study architecture at the Technische Hochschule in Vienna from 1910 to 1914. But he also continued to paint, and there was no more important time to learn the skills of an artist than in Vienna just before World War I. This was the Vienna of the Secession, a group of painters who broke away from the established art scene of the time and struck out with provocative works that shook the establishment. The Secession remains a landmark in modern art and the youthful Walde found himself thrown into the artistic circles of the city, meeting such legendary artists as Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, and Ferdinand Hodler, who would become pillars of 20th century painting in Europe.

Walde’s first exhibition was in Innsbruck, and in 1913, he showed four of his Tyrolean farm pictures at the prestigious Vienna Secession exhibition. When the war broke out,

he served as a Tyrolean Kaiserchutze (rifleman) in the high mountains. Post war, he returned to Kitzbühel. He began to paint again in earnest, producing drawings and pastels, and again contributed paintings to the Secession and the Vienna Künstlerhaus during the 1920s. In 1924 he received the first and second prize at the competition “Winterbilder” (winter pictures) and took part at the Biennale Romana in Rome in 1925. His work was even shown in the United States, at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh in 1928.

Scholars peg the mid-1920s as the time when Walde finally found his own distinct style. It was his vision of the Tyrolean mountain landscape, especially the winter landscape, that became paramount in his work. He developed a sensitivity for depicting the local mountain people, and the figures who populate his paintings are true Tyrolean types, many of them his neighbors, friends and mistresses. He had found his subject matter and he stayed with it for the rest of his artistic life.

Walde painted the mountain huts, the peasant faces, and the landscapes that his competitors also sought to

depict. But where he deviated from them was in his all-embracing attraction to the new sport of skiing.

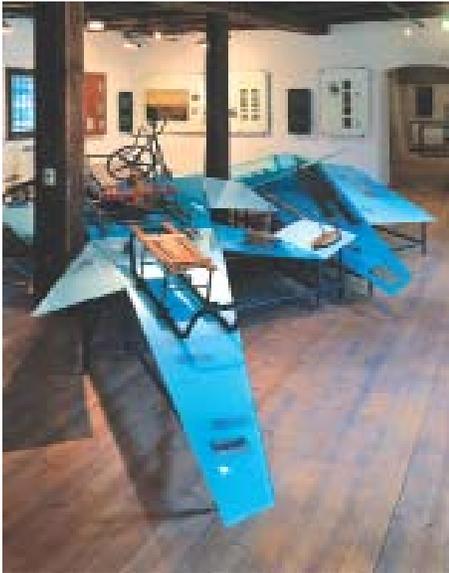
He painted skiers in motion, skiers at rest, and skiers flying off a high jump. The thrice-married Walde was also a dedicated ladies’ man, and his penchant for painting nudes led him to even paint nude frauleins on the snow, wearing nothing but boots and skis. He not only loved this new sport, he attacked it with uncommon vigor.

*Aufstieg* (“Ascent”), painted in 1927, shows Walde at the top of his game (see painting at left). Not only are the postures of the skiers pausing as they skin up a hill perfectly observed, but there is—in the darkened faces and the sky—a real sense of winter light, especially the intense Alpine sunlight. Walde was not a great painter of faces, but he was able to disguise that fact in the subjects that he chose and the perspective he used to paint them. It would also be difficult to find anyone who could capture snow so perfectly, in all its many moods. As for the subjects, if you’ve seen any of the mountain movies made by Leni Riefenstahl (think of *Der Weisse Rausch*), you instantly recognize the skiers by their postures, wardrobes and landscape.

*Übungshang* (“Practice Slope”) of 1925 playfully depicts the chaos of a beginners’ slope, from arms and legs akimbo to multiple tracks in the snow (see the cover of this issue of *Skiing Heritage*). It’s funny, and accurate. But what’s especially wonderful about this painting is that it depicts an activity that is far from heroic. It’s a scene that a hundred lesser painters would pass by. But Walde’s eye and brush capture a moment that is not only rooted in the sport, but says more than a hundred photographs could say about skiing.

*Zwei Skifahrerinnen* (“Two Ski Bunnies,” in a colloquial translation) from 1914 is one of his most Expressionistic style paintings, an early work painted during the height of the Expressionist movement in Austria and Germany (see page 15). It shows two female skiers pausing on the slopes, to preen and be admired, while checking out the scenery.

COURTESY OF KITZBÜHEL MUSEUM



COURTESY OF KITZBÜHEL MUSEUM



The Kitzbühel Museum has a permanent exhibit of Walde paintings (upper right), as well as ski posters, vintage sleds and toboggans (above), and the skis of Kitzbühel native and Winter Olympics alpine champion Toni Sailer. The museum is housed within the thick stone walls of the city's medieval fortifications (right).

COURTESY OF KITZBÜHEL MUSEUM



## DETAILS

### Kitzbühel Museum

Hinterstadt 32  
Kitzbühel, Austria  
Phone: +43 5356 67274  
E-Mail: [info@museum-kitzbuehel.at](mailto:info@museum-kitzbuehel.at)  
Website: <http://www.museum-kitzbuehel.at>

Hours:  
Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The paperback book *Alfons Walde: 1891–1958* by Gert Ammann, Wido Sieberer and Günther Moschig (Tyrolia, 2001) is written in German but contains many high quality, full-color images of Walde paintings; it is available on Amazon.com for approximately \$80.

With their stylish outfits, it suggests the swank place that Kitzbühel was fast becoming. These women are clearly from a different world than the peasants on skis around them.

*Almen in Schnee* ("Mountain Pastures in Snow") from 1926 depicts soft folds of snow in an alpine valley, a view familiar to skiers all over Europe (see page 16). What makes this a standout is Walde's subtle and intelligent depiction of snow, with the colors barely perceived. It's as if the sun is shining and the light is shifting. It's highly observant and a remarkably skilled work.

Walde began to design posters and other projects in the mid 1920s, coming up with the iconic "chamois on a mountain top" logo for Kitzbühel that remains the ski town's emblem to this day. In 1927, he turned his architectural talents toward the ski hill, designing the first tram to run up the Hahnenkamm

in 1927. He later designed and built a modernist house for himself high up on the ski mountain, which remains in his family's hands today.

Walde's architectural work was much lauded, and together with architect Rudolf Stolz, he received first prize for the design of the train station in Innsbruck in 1928. But during the late 1930s, war was on the horizon again. The Gestapo came to his house in 1938 and eventually imprisoned him for two months. After the war, in 1946, Walde created the design for the mountain station hotel at the Hahnenkamm. Only in 1956 was Walde given the title of "professor," an official recognition of his achievement. But his last years were marked by illness and he died in 1958 in Kitzbühel.

Today, Alfons Walde's paintings are in great demand, depicting an idyllic pre-war world that is long gone. The Walde collection at the Kitzbühel Museum is, in fact, privately owned but on extended loan.

When Walde paintings do come up for auction, prices tend to be high indeed. A painting entitled *Tauernhof*, depicting a high mountain house in winter, went for € 330,000 (\$414,832) when it was auctioned in Vienna in 2007.

When you visit the Kitzbühel Museum, strolling through the small, darkened galleries with Walde's perfectly lit paintings is like being transported back to the 1920s. It's a time when the Alps were rustic and undeveloped, and when everyone appeared healthy, youthful, and in love with the sport of skiing. ❄️