

# Friedensreich Hundertwasser

**CHARLOTTE GRAY**

Everything about Austrian artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser was like this photograph: eye-catching. He loved to play with expectations. Heir to the great Viennese painters Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, he shocked the staid arts establishment there in the 1950s by combining their sinuous forms with Crayola colours. Then he moved on to architecture, insisting that “the straight line is godless.” Once you have seen a Hundertwasser building, such as the Hundertwasser House or the thermal power plant in Vienna, you will never forget it. Undulating floors (“an uneven floor is a melody to the feet”), trees growing out of windows, rippling walls of coloured tiles, grass-covered roofs—the designs are mischievous and disorienting.

Born Friedrich Stowasser into an impoverished Viennese family, he was raised by his Jewish mother. His father, a civil servant, died when Friedrich was an infant. The Second World War was brutal for Friedrich’s mother’s family, who were all deported and murdered by the Nazis. But he and his mother survived because she enrolled her young son in the Hitler Youth. He spent three months at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts in 1948, but institutional education didn’t suit him. For the rest of his life he challenged convention and rejected the reigning aesthetic of modernism. He also changed his name to Friedensreich (“peaceful realm” in German) Hundertwasser (*hundert*, German for “hundred,” replaced the Czech syllable *sto*, which means the same thing). He frequently added Regenstag (rainy day) because, he said, he felt happy when raindrops gave colours an extra sparkle.

There was a lot of self-promotion—speeches given in the nude, tirades about the modern world. He threw himself into designing flags, postage stamps, posters, coins, woodcuts, tapestries, car plates, national logos, T-shirts, and a public toilet. He became, in the words of one art critic, “remorselessly popular.” We have one of his floridly coloured posters, depicting a curiously biomorphic cityscape, in our Ottawa house, bought by my husband when he was a student in Paris. But there was a serious message behind the mischief—a warning that twentieth-century advances were potentially dehumanizing. Hundertwasser’s polemics and his unruly artistic vision were driven by concern that relations among man, nature, and architecture were being corrupted. In 1959, as a visiting lecturer in Hamburg, he denounced the aridity of modern architecture and the tyranny of symmetry (he wore different-coloured socks on this occasion). In the two most famous speeches that he delivered naked, in 1967 and 1968, he condemned the straight lines, horizontals, and verticals imposed on humans by professional architects. He took particular aim at his fellow countryman Adolf Loos and declared that the Austrian architect’s severe modernism, without structural ornamentation, was responsible for human misery. Hundertwasser called straight lines “the devil’s tools” and “the rotten foundation of our doomed civilization.”

New Zealand was Hundertwasser’s Promised Land because its people accorded reverence to the

natural world. Wherever he was, his watch was set to New Zealand time. His body was buried on his farm there after his death at sea in 2000 on the luxury liner *RMS Queen Elizabeth II*.

“Visual pollution is more poisonous than any other pollution because it kills the soul,” he raged. Art critics never found a label or niche for such a maverick. Will his reputation last? Probably not. In his own lifetime, he was too, too much—too busy showing off, getting up people’s noses, battering his fists against the establishment. Although he became a hero of the 1960s counterculture and the 1970s environmental movement, who today recalls his flamboyant gesture of planting one hundred trees in Washington in 1980? Critics throw around words such as *braggadocio* and *conceit*. They point out that underneath the scattered windows, sinuous strips of colour, and mosaics of broken glass, the structure of Vienna’s Hundertwasser House is a conventional engineering grid.

And yet . . . there is a childish exuberance to his designs that lift the heart. Hundertwasser’s buildings (only a handful exist) are, like him, outrageous and provocative. Did I enjoy the Kunst Haus Wien—a Hundertwasser-designed art museum in Vienna where there is a fountain made of smashed pottery and where I kept tripping up on the rippling floors? Yes. Did I love this photograph I saw there, of the Great Man enjoying a jungle bath? Absolutely.



