Helena Rubinstein.
Pioneer of Beauty

Helena Rubinstein (1870–1965) is the pioneer of female entrepreneurship. At the age of sixteen she turned her back on the confining, middle-class conditions of her Orthodox Jewish family, heading first to Vienna, then to Australia. Without any help she founded a worldwide empire there, paving the way for many other, likewise predominantly Jewish businesswomen and businessmen in the new field of cosmetics. Her company soon included 100 branches in 14 countries with around 30,000 employees; she also became an important patron of the arts and sciences along the way.

Krakow—Vienna—Melbourne—London—Paris—New York—Tel Aviv are the essential stations of her life. The exhibition traces Rubinstein’s path as a migrant who conquered continents and broke conventions, and places her commitment to the self-determination of women in the spotlight. A focus on Vienna shows how skillfully she used her artistic network and business savvy on site. The fact that she succeeded more or less by herself seems to have almost amazed her when she looked back upon her life.

Cosmetics pioneer

Passion, toughness, tenacity, bearing responsibility, leading, commanding, coupled with an “innate,” extraordinary taste and an exceptional talent for capturing the spirit of the times—these are the essential traits that made Helena Rubinstein into the first self-made woman in history.

At a time when beauty care was not even a topic and make-up was regarded as defamatory and frowned upon, she prevailed with her idea that every woman could discover her individual beauty and should make the best out of it. Rubinstein was inspired by, indeed literally obsessed with the notion that women would gain self-confidence as a result. This was a disposition that appertained to her like few of her female contemporaries. She also
asserted herself, nearly by the way, in the (business) world still dominated by men and created a completely innovative market that sustainably established itself internationally and still exists today. “Beauty is your special field, your actual home, Helena. A field that is still fallow. Learn to build it.” A maxim that she repeatedly said to herself. Headstrong and unconventional, she crafted her own image. She spent a fortune on artworks, buildings and their furnishings. For the architecture and design of her beauty salons, her institutes, as well as her houses and apartments, she employed the most interesting and innovative architects of her era. Urban modernity was Helena Rubinstein’s principle, coupled with an excessive penchant for opulence. She also did groundbreaking work in the design, packaging and advertisement of her beauty products. From the very beginning of her activity, she recognized the importance of this métier and also hired the most interesting creative heads here.

**Waterproof mascara made in Vienna**
The expansion of Helena Rubinstein’s beauty salons also did not stop in Vienna. She founded a salon at Kohlmarkt 8 in 1932. Just a few years after the opening, Vienna already played an important role in Rubinstein’s enterprise: The race for the development of waterproof mascara that did not run in the rain or heat was won, first unnoticed, by the Viennese native Helene Winterstein-Kambersky. Confined to a wheelchair after suffering from lead poisoning, the singer patented the waterproof mascara, which she developed in many attempts, in 1935. Under the provision that she could market the formula herself with her own firm “La Bella Nussy,” she sold the license to Rubinstein. Waterproof mascara was introduced in a media-effective manner as a global novelty at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York with a water ballet. Back then, mascara was applied from aluminum tubes using paper sticks. Under the name *Mascara-Matic*, Rubinstein brought the mascara in a small tube with a brush, which is common up to today, onto the market in 1958.

In 1939, one year after the so-called “Anschluss,” the Rubinstein salon in Vienna was closed. Helena Rubinstein also experienced anti-Semitism in the USA, among other occasions, when she wanted to rent an apartment in New York. They refused to rent it to her because she was Jewish. But they messed with the wrong woman. Helena Rubinstein subsequently bought the whole building on Park Avenue. In cities that tended to be regarded as WASP strongholds she ceded the terrain to her long-time competitor Elizabeth Arden. Up to today, the rivalry between the two cosmetic giants has served as material for literature, as well as the motif for musicals and plays.
“Quality is nice, but quantity makes a show.”

After the Nazis seized power, Helena Rubinstein managed to bring nearly her entire family to the USA. However, one of her sisters, Regina Kolin, and her husband were killed in Auschwitz. Further strokes of fate were inevitable: the divorce of her beloved first husband Edward Titus, the death of her second husband, the considerably younger Georgian prince Archil Gourielli-Tchkonia, and shortly thereafter the death of her son Horace Titus in a car accident. The indefatigable beauty tycoon drew strength and incentive again and again from her work.

Trips to Australia, Japan, Hong Kong and Israel, where she planned a factory, roused her out of her sorrow. At this time, the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art of the Tel Aviv Museum, which she endowed and donated several works from her collection to, was opened. Moreover, she bequeathed her collection of historic miniature rooms with approx. 20,000 pieces of furniture and figurines in historic costumes to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

With all the glamour and megalomania, the “Jewish Queen Victoria,” as Rubinstein was called by the New York Post columnist Leonard Lyons, remained in part the little girl from Kazimierz: with an unashamed Slavic accent, a language mix spattered with Yiddish, German and Polish, and the legendary brown paper bags in which she took hardboiled eggs, chicken legs, Krakowska sausage and the correspondingly greasy dollar notes for the taxi to her office—and scolded all of the employees there who did not shut off the light when they left a room.

On April 1, 1965, Helena Rubinstein died at the age of 94. She was buried in her favorite Yves St. Laurent dress. Her wish to be laid in the grave with her most valuable, multi-rowed strings of black pearls was not fulfilled. In the end, Rubinstein always unflinchingly went her own way, which also meant that she fulfilled all of her dreams under her own steam, with self-earned money and according to her own, immodest predilections. She said it herself: "Quality is nice, but quantity makes a show."

**Helena Rubinstein. Pioneer of Beauty** can be seen from October 18, 2017 to May 6, 2018 at the Museum Judenplatz (Jewish Museum Vienna), a Wien Holding museum. Appearing along with the exhibition, which was curated by Iris Meder, coordinated by Danielle Spera and Werner Hanak-Lettner, and designed by Judith Eiblmayr, is a German-English catalog costing €29.95. Published by Amalthea Signum Verlag, it features numerous illustrations. The Museum Judenplatz, Judenplatz 8, 1010 Vienna, is open Sunday to Thursday from 10
a.m. to 6 p.m. and Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (wintertime), respectively 5 p.m. (summertime). The Jewish Museum Vienna, Dorotheergasse 11, 1010 Vienna, is open Sunday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Further information can be found at www.jmw.at or info@jmw.at.

Queries
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Photos and press material on current exhibitions can be found on the Jewish Museum Vienna homepage under www.jmw.at/de/presse

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