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| Klimt, Gustav (1862 – 1918) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| Gustav Klimt had an indelible influence on the artistic and cultural innovations that occurred in Vienna at the turn of the century. He was a founding member and public figurehead for the city’s Secession, an organization responsible for exhibitions that introduced the public to the latest developments in European modern art. His associations with leading members of the city’s cultural and intellectual elite, and his collaborations with leading artists, architects, and designers resulted in many important artworks.  In 1876, at age fourteen, Klimt enrolled at the recently founded Kunstgewerbeschule (Imperial and Royal School of Applied Arts and Crafts), where he spent seven years. Klimt soon established his reputation for large paintings in public buildings as part of the redevelopment of the Ringstrasse: a series on the history of theatre for the new Burgtheater (Imperial Court Theatre), 1886-88, was followed by murals in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Art Museum), 1891, featuring female personifications of the arts of ancient cultures, showing Klimt’s growing interest in women as a primary subject in his work. Klimt received the Emperor’s prize for his realist painting *Auditorium Theatre* (1888), which includes more than one hundred portraits of leading Viennese citizens making up the theatre’s audience. |
| Overview  Gustav Klimt had an indelible influence on the artistic and cultural innovations that occurred in Vienna at the turn of the century. He was a founding member and public figurehead for the city’s Secession, an organization responsible for exhibitions that introduced the public to the latest developments in European modern art. His associations with leading members of the city’s cultural and intellectual elite, and his collaborations with leading artists, architects, and designers resulted in many important artworks. Early Work In 1876, at age fourteen, Klimt enrolled at the recently founded Kunstgewerbeschule (Imperial and Royal School of Applied Arts and Crafts), where he spent seven years. Klimt soon established his reputation for large paintings in public buildings as part of the redevelopment of the Ringstrasse: a series on the history of theatre for the new Burgtheater (Imperial Court Theatre), 1886-88, was followed by murals in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Art Museum), 1891, featuring female personifications of the arts of ancient cultures, showing Klimt’s growing interest in women as a primary subject in his work. Klimt received the Emperor’s prize for his realist painting *Auditorium Theatre* (1888), which includes more than one hundred portraits of leading Viennese citizens making up the theatre’s audience.  The painting *Schubert at the Piano* (1898-99) shows Klimt’s use of the soft palette and expressive brushwork associated with Impressionism to evoke the domestic calm of the composer’s early-19th Century Biedermeier era, a time similar to the artist’s in that music played a vital and important role in both. The symbolic work was praised as being uniquely Viennese in its time.  File: KlimtSchubertAtThePiano.jpg  Figure 1. *Schubert at the Piano*  Source: <http://uploads7.wikiart.org/images/gustav-klimt/schubert-at-the-piano-ii.jpg> The Vienna Secession In 1897, Klimt and twenty of Vienna’s leading artists and architects formed the Vienna Secession to pursue a progressive, pan-European program of exhibitions. Klimt’s poster for the first exhibition in 1898 features Theseus slaying the Minotaur, with Athena, goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, and the arts, providing watchful supervision. The imagery has been interpreted as the youthful Secession organization ending the hegemony of traditional institutional policies.  Athena appears resolutely modern in *Pallas Athena* (1898) where she introduces the embodiment of ‘the naked truth’, the subject of the subsequent painting *Nuda Veritas* (1899). The woman’s abundant naturalistic red hair is an incendiary sign for the prevailing hypocrisy of artistic conventions.  File: KlimtPallasAthena.jpg  Figure 2. *Pallas Athena*  Source: <http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/philolog/klimt-pa.jpg> University Faculty Murals In 1896, Klimt began a commission for three paintings to adorn the Great Hall of the University of Vienna. For seven years, these images were at the center of heated debates among the university’s faculty, local journalists, artists, and intellectuals, regarding artistic freedom. The theme was to be the triumph of light and reason over darkness and ignorance, a metaphor for the university’s purpose. Instead of a scene of Enlightenment rationality, *Philosophy* (1900) shows the perpetual instability and chaotic nature of human existence and the mural was immediately criticized for its apparent lack of aesthetic beauty and narrative clarity.  File: KlimtPhilosophy.jpg  Figure . *Philosophy*  Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Philosophy-final-state-1907.jpg>  The realistically observed, rather than idealized figures, populating *Medicine*, completed in 1901, also circumvented expectations. Hygeia, the ancient personification for medicine’s benefits, appears in the foreground removed from the writhing mass of humanity she is powerless to aid. The biological and physical imperatives of mankind and the uncompromising presence of mortality, rather than any sense of divine creation, are represented with the pregnant female at top right and the nearby figure of death.  *Jurisprudence*, exhibited in 1903, reflects the toll that the preceding controversy had taken on the artist. The embodiments of truth, law, and justice appear as remote constructs at the top as the Furies unleash punishment and retribution on a frail old man, signifying the irrationality that governs human behaviour.  The *Beethoven Frieze* was made for the Vienna Secession’s 14th exhibition in honour of the composer in 1902. In it, the golden knight responds to humanity’s pleas to deliver them beyond life’s diversionary temptations, depicted in the middle wall, to realize genuine fulfilment, seen in the figures within golden waves flanked by choral singers, inspired by the last movement of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. Here, unity and happiness for mankind is to be found through creative expression, with the triumphant power of art a stark contrast to the powerlessness of individuals in the Faculty murals. Portraits of Society Women and Landscape Paintings In the highly stratified society of Vienna, many of the wealthiest Jewish individuals, lacking political equality, exercised their influence through artistic and cultural patronage. Many acquired Klimt’s work as an indication of their social prominence and liberal beliefs. Their portraits highlight the diversity of sources that Klimt freely incorporated into the decorative motifs that give each figure their alluring individuality, from Byzantine, Egyptian, Baroque, and Japanese elements, alongside his contemporaries’ geometric Jugendstil, in portraits of Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein (1905), Fritza Riedler (1906), Adele Bloch-Bauer (1907), and Friederike Maria Beer (1916)  File: KlimtAdeleBloch-Bauer.jpg  Figure . Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer  Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav\_Klimt#/media/File:Gustav\_Klimt\_046.jpg>  One of the most enigmatic relationships chronicled in paintings is between Klimt and the fashion designer Emilie Flöge, a woman of unusual independence for the time. The pair knew each other for twenty-seven years and though they never married, they were extremely close, as seen in *The Kiss* (1907-08) thought to depict the artist with Emilie.  The numerous landscape paintings done while spending summers with Emilie and her family at the lakes surrounding Vienna were readily acquired by patrons for their idyllic tranquillity. The kaleidoscopic colors, expressive line, and inviting brushwork show Klimt’s ongoing interest in Post-Impressionism. Late Work The final period of Klimt’s life shows his continuing interest in archetypal subjects – life and death, punctuated by love, desire, and birth, in works including *The Virgin* (1913) and *The Bride*, unfinished in 1918. The linear, architectural construction and the rich colors of these works show the influence of Klimt’s young protégé Egon Schiele, who along with Oskar Kokoscha, were introduced to the Viennese public through Klimt’s commitment to their work. Legacy Though Klimt is well known for his ‘golden’ decorative style, his work is complex and multi-layered in meaning and appearance. He was a skilled and versatile draftsman whose evocative sketches show the direct inspiration he found in women. His paintings present timely reinterpretations of Classical or archetypal subjects merged with the formal and spatial abstractions and decorative patterning that characterizes turn of the century imagery. Klimt’s work is as unique as his position for he bridges academic realism and narrative subjects dominant in much of the 19th century with the preference for abstraction that defined the beginning of the 20th century. His influence continues to be felt among contemporary artists for his commitment to truth and individuality, while the legacy of his work remains closely related to issues of restitution resulting from the events of the Second World War. Timeline 1862 Gustav Klimt is born on the outskirts of Vienna, July 14, 1862.  1876 accepted at the Kunstgewerbeschule School of Applied Arts, Vienna, founded in 1867  1878-79 founds Künstler-Compagnie with fellow artists Franz Matsch and brother Ernst to receive commissions for large-scale paintings in public buildings  1888 Künstler-Compagnie receives Golden Order of Merit for the Burgtheater paintings  1891 Klimt’s brother Ernst marries Helene Flöge; Klimt paints the first portrait of seventeen year old Emilie Flöge  Klimt joins the Künstlerhausgenossenschaft (Vienna Artist’s Association), an organization from which he will resign in 1897 to found the Secession  1897 Klimt is instrumental in founding the Vienna Secession; serves as its first president  Spends first of many summers with the Flöge family; begins painting landscapes  1898 first and second Secession exhibitions  1900 *Philosophy* is exhibited at the Seventh Secession exhibition  1901 *Medicine* is exhibited at the Tenth Secession exhibition  1902 *The Beethoven Frieze* is exhibited at the Fourteenth Secession  1903 Secession members Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser found the Wiener Werkstätte  *Medicine* is exhibited in a Secession exhibition devoted to Klimt, featuring over 80 works  Klimt visits Ravenna, Italy; the mosaics in the Church of San Vitale have a great influence on his forthcoming portrait work  1904 Klimt agrees to produce a marble frieze for the Wiener Werkstätte’s  gesamtkunstwerk commission - the Palais Stoclet, Brussels, not completed until 1911  1908 Klimt and his closest associates form the Kunstchau (Art Show), ending their contributions to the Secession with this alternate exhibition society  1910s Klimt’s work is widely exhibited throughout Europe  1918 Klimt suffers a stroke in January; dies from complications in February |
| Further reading:  (Schorske)  (Vergo)  (Smith)  (Zweig)  (Weidinger)  (Strobl)  (Nebehay)  (Koja)  (Klimt, Bailey and Collins)  (Natter and Grunenberg)  (Price)  (Natter and Frodl)  (The Naked Truth: Klimt) |