

## Gustav Klimt - Pioneer of Art Nouveau in Vienna

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Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) is not only the most prominent representative of Viennese Art Nouveau, today he is considered the most famous Austrian painter ever. His work "The Kiss" is an icon of this art period around 1900 and has made the Belvedere Palace, where it is exhibited along with other paintings by Klimt, a pilgrimage site for international admirers of this art movement.

Gustav Klimt was born on July 14, 1862, as the second of seven children to gold engraver Ernst Klimt (sen. 1834-1892) in Baumgarten near Vienna (now part of Vienna), and grew up in precarious circumstances. His extraordinary talent for drawing was noticed quite early. A scholarship enabled him to study at the Vienna School of Applied Arts run by the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry from 1876. His brother Ernst Klimt (jr. 1864-1892) followed him one year later to this school.

In 1881 the two brothers, together with their school friend Franz Matsch (1861-1942), founded a studio community called the "Künstler-Compagnie". In the following years, the Compagnie designed, among other works, curtains and ceiling paintings for several theatres in the

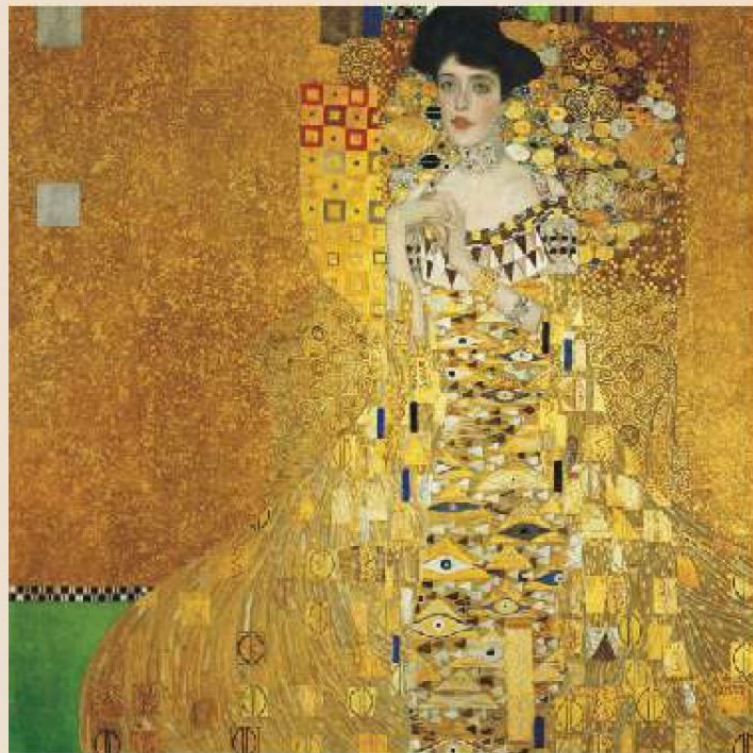
Habsburg countries. In 1885 the trio worked on the first project for the imperial court, creating the ceiling paintings in the Hermes Villa in Vienna, at that time a country palace outside Vienna, which Emperor Franz Joseph I presented to his Empress Elisabeth. From 1886 to 1888 the Compagnie painted the ceiling frescoes in the two magnificent staircases of the new Burgtheater, which impressed Emperor Franz Joseph I so much that he awarded the three members of the Compagnie the Golden Cross of Merit.

In 1890/1891 the trio took on, among other tasks, the spandrel and inter columniate paintings in the lavish staircase of the Art History Museum in Vienna, after Hans Makart, was unable to complete this

project due to his early death. At that time, the commissioning parties had difficulty finding artists who could carry out projects of this size at all. The young Compagnie proved its professional capabilities here.

In December of 1892, Gustav Klimt's brother Ernst died unexpectedly. Gustav took care of his brother's widow and his young daughter. He also completed his unfinished paintings. The Compagnie broke up. In 1894 Gustav Klimt, still together with Franz Matsch, accepted a commission for ceiling paintings in the newly built university, which, however, took several years from the first drawings to realization.

During this period, a number of artists broke away from the Künstlerhaus association (Society of Austrian Artists) with Klimt playing a major role, because they rejected the conservatism and traditional historicism that prevailed in the Künstlerhaus. The renegades founded the Vienna Secession, following the example of the Munich Secession, and elected Gustav Klimt as its first president. Vienna was a center of fin-de-siecle culture during this period. Here the currents of European cultures and civilization converged. Klimt was



*Gustav\_Klimt - Adele Bloch-Bauer (1907)*



*Gustav Klimt Burgtheater Vienna (1886)*

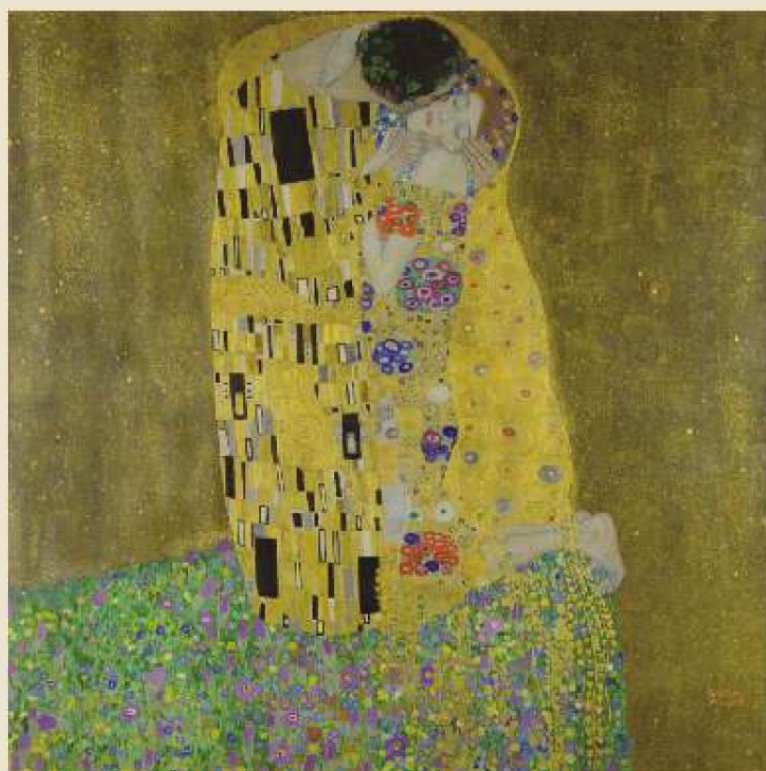
not only open to the new spirit that was breezing through Europe, he also had the confidence, skills, and creativity to quickly absorb and implement the new ideas.

The changing conceptions of art inevitably led to the collisions and turbulence surrounding the commission of the so-called faculty paintings, pending since 1894, four paintings for the Grand Ceremonial Hall of the

University of Vienna. They were to represent in allegorical manner the four classical faculties of a European university: Klimt was to take on this task for philosophy, medicine and jurisprudence, Matsch for theology. There was massive public criticism on Klimt's paintings, especially on the part of the university, while Matsch's work was accepted. Klimt seemed to provoke the conflict with his new symbolist painting, with which

he drastically departed from the traditional historicism and style of Matsch. The media controversies circled around the position of university science in society, state support for art, and its influence on artistic freedom. Finally, Klimt bought back the paintings, for which he had already received advance payments from the state, with the help of private patrons. They became private property.

From then on, he no longer accepted public commissions and turned increasingly to portrait and landscape painting. In addition, he designed clothing and jewellery. In his understanding, art should permeate everyday life and crafts. After this reorientation, he created the works for which he has become famous worldwide today. They are primarily the portraits of women, which he staged with magnificent robes and liked to frame with gold leaf and fanciful decorations. As the son of a gold engraver, he was familiar with precious materials and the aesthetics of jewellery designers. He incorporated ornamentation from



*Gustav Klimt - The Kiss (1907-08)*

ancient Egyptian art into his paintings, borrowed from Byzantine icons and mosaics, and allowed the texture of his surfaces to glitter with the colors of jewels and precious materials. One example is the portrait Adele Bloch-Bauer (1907), surely one of Klimt's and Austrian Art Nouveau's most important works. During these years (1907-1908) he also created his painting "The Kiss" mentioned earlier.

From 1900, Klimt spent most of his summer weeks at Lake Attersee, often accompanied by his long-time companion Emilie Flöge. Many of his landscape paintings were created there. In Vienna, he worked from 1911 in the Hietzing district at Feldmühlgasse 11 in a modest building, today known as the Klimt Villa. His former studio has been reconstructed there.

On February 6, 1918 Gustav Klimt died much too early after a stroke and subsequent pneumonia and was buried at the Hietzing cemetery. Vienna's art museums own still significant parts of Klimt's oeuvre, uphold his heritage and proudly present it to their visitors.



*Gustav\_Klimt Castle Kammer Attersee (1908-1909)*

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