

Gustav Klimt – Artist

No area of human life is so insignificant or trivial that it cannot offer scope for artistic endeavour ... the humblest thing, executed to perfection, serves to increase the beauty of this earth, and progress in culture can be grounded only in the ever more progressive permeation of the whole of life with artistic purpose¹.

Gustav Klimt, in his address at the opening of the exhibition held in honour of the Emperor Franz Josef's diamond jubilee in 1908.

EARLY LIFE

Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) was one of seven children, the son of a goldsmith and engraver. At the age of fourteen Klimt entered the Kunstgewerbeschule (the School of Applied Arts), where he studied decorative and applied arts. His younger brother Ernst also attended the school and they both later moved into a studio with fellow student Franz Matsch. The prolific building work in Vienna guaranteed them a plentiful supply of decorative arts work and the three completed several commissions for ceiling paintings and decorative panels, including the decoration of the staircase in the new Art History Museum and the new Burgtheater. Their work received acclaim: Klimt was awarded a Golden Order of Merit from Emperor Franz Josef for his contribution to art, and an Imperial Award for one of his paintings.

Klimt's brother Ernst died suddenly in 1892, in the same year as his father. For the remainder of his life, Klimt supported both his father's and brother's families, living in an apartment with his mother and two of his sisters.

SCANDAL

As Klimt's art developed, he began to move away from academism (highly realistic art based on imitations of classical forms) to explore his own style. The final public commission that Klimt and Matsch were to undertake together – canvases for different faculties of the Vienna University, to be installed on the ceiling of the auditorium – was to end in scandal. The theme of the murals was to be the triumph of light over darkness. Klimt was to paint *Philosophy*, *Medicine* and *Jurisprudence* and Matsch was to paint the central panel and *Theology*. Klimt's new artistic direction led to disagreements between himself and Matsch until, eventually, they could no longer work together. The murals remained incomplete for many years. When the paintings *Philosophy* (1900), *Medicine* (1901), and *Jurisprudence* (1903) were finally unveiled, each, in turn, caused public outcry. Klimt's paintings did not depict noble figures enlightened by science and learning. Instead, very mortal figures were shown unclothed and exposed in all their human frailty. *Medicine* depicted figures entwined with disease and death, twisted in agony and ecstasy, powerless in the face of destiny. *Philosophy* reflected existential angst – mankind dwarfed in the presence of the infinite. *Jurisprudence* showed figures at the mercy of a greater force, naked and insecure.



Madame d'Ors Gustav Klimt 1915. Gelatin silver photograph. © IMAGNO/Austrian Archives

Members of the university, the clergy and art critics were united in their condemnation of the works. They claimed Klimt's forms were ambiguous and his symbols undecipherable. The clergy was offended at the nudity, academics were upset by the images that confronted taboos and questioned traditionally held values: darkness triumphed over light, the best science of mankind was unable to cure disease and sexuality was overtly displayed. Debate about the works even reached parliament. Klimt, finally fed up with the public controversy, withdrew from the commission and repaid the amount paid to him. He never again pursued another public commission and chose instead to work for private patrons and organisations that supported his artistic vision. He completed two other murals: the Beethoven frieze for the Secession Exhibition, and the Stoclet frieze, a mosaic for the dining room of the Palais Stoclet – a building designed by Hoffmann for Belgian industrialist Adolphe Stoclet.

DID YOU KNOW?

When removalists from the Department of Education came to claim Klimt's University paintings *Philosophy*, *Medicine* and *Jurisprudence*, Klimt met them armed with a shotgun and refused to surrender his work. The paintings were bought by private collectors and later destroyed in a fire. Only photographs remain. Matsch's *Theology* hangs, restored, in the Theology Department of Vienna University.

LATER WORK

Klimt's style evolved over time, with various influences evident in his artwork. Portraits such as that of Adele Bloch Bauer, executed in his so-called 'golden phase', showed the influence of the Byzantine art that Klimt had seen on his trips to Ravenna in Italy. The folding screens of Japan also inspired Klimt's use of rich gold to embellish the surfaces of his painting, and Japanese art inspired his design and composition. Later, the rich gold ornamentation was replaced by bright colour. Female faces, eyes closed in reverie, would be shrouded in dense and busy pattern that would often merge with the ornamented background, such that only faces were visible. Klimt almost exclusively painted women. Through the use of symbolism, his paintings explored the dualities of the creative and destructive forces – birth, growth, death, decay and all of the states in between.

Klimt's later work showed the influence of his protégé, expressionist Egon Schiele, whose paintings and drawings expressed an inner angst. Klimt died after suffering a stroke during the flu epidemic of 1918, which killed millions in Europe. He left a huge body of work, including around four thousand drawings, which captured sensitive, sensuous and often erotic images of women, as well as many beautiful paintings, portraits and landscapes.

His paintings never fully left the realm of the realistic, but in their lavish use of pattern and ornamentation, they formed a bridge to Abstraction.

SOCIETY PORTRAITS

Gustav Klimt produced many portraits of Vienna's wealthy society women, who queued to be immortalised by his hand. He would only paint those he thought stylish or interesting and his paintings sometimes took a number of years to complete. Sitting for Klimt involved a degree of social peril for the sitters. Klimt was renowned for his numerous liaisons with his models and occasionally also his clients. Klimt worked from photographs as well as preliminary sketches to capture a likeness of the sitter. He had a ready collection of props and clothes in his studio with which he would dress his subjects to best highlight aspects of their appearance or character. While the portraits he produced in his early career were more realistic in style, his later portraits surrounded the subject with rich pattern and colour, such that only the head and hands were discernable, the body almost vanishing into the elaborate ornament of the clothing and background.

Fritza Riedler was the wife of Aloys Riedler, a practising engineer and well-known professor of engineering at the Berlin Technical College. Fritza Riedler often spent time in Vienna and the couple later retired there.

Klimt's portrait of Riedler was executed on a nearly square canvas. The triangular form of the ruffled dress with head at the apex gives the figure a monumentality, which is emphasised by the solid, flat blocks of colour in the background. Riedler's bearing is upright and her gaze direct, her hands, upturned and open, suggest vulnerability. Elaborate ornament in the chair and the arc behind her head contrasts with the expanse of vibrant burnt orange and gold, reflecting the influence on Klimt of Byzantine art. This image has also been compared to Diego Velázquez' portrait of *The Infanta Maria Teresa* 1652, with which Klimt would have been familiar. The shape of the patterned arc behind Fritza Riedler is similar in shape and position to that used by Velázquez.

Hermine Gallia (1870 – 1936) was the wife of Moriz Gallia. Her husband, who was twelve years her senior and also her uncle, managed the Viennese branch of Carl Auer von Welsbach's² light bulb factory³. Moriz was an entrepreneur and, with his wife, a keen supporter of the arts. Klimt's portrait of Hermine, completed in 1904, eventually hung in the salon of the Gallia's Josef Hoffmann- designed apartment, next to a portrait of her husband, painted by artist Ferdinand Andri.



Above: **Gustav KLIMT** Austria 1862–1918 *Fritza Riedler* 1906. Oil on canvas, 152.0 x 134.0 cm. Belvedere, Vienna



Left: **Diego Rodriguez de Silva y VELÁZQUEZ** Spanish 1599–1660 *Infanta Margarita Teresa in a pink dress* 1653–54. Oil on canvas, 127.0 x 98.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Gift, 1653



Hermine Gallia stands with her hands clasped in front of her body, which is swathed in the cascading frills and ruffles of her white gown. The tilt of her head and the sideways pull of her skirts give movement to the otherwise subdued composition, in which the figure advances gently from the muted background.

Gustav KLIMT Austria 1862–1918 *Portrait of Hermine Gallia* 1904. Oil on canvas, 170.5 x 96.5 cm. The National Gallery, London. Bought, 1976

EMILIE FLÖGE

Emilie Flöge was Klimt's close companion throughout his life, and it was Emilie that he called for before his death following a stroke in 1918. Emilie's sister Helene married Klimt's brother Ernst. Gustav Klimt became guardian of their daughter after Ernst's death. Klimt and Flöge were frequent artistic collaborators. He would design clothes for her fashion house, the Sisters Flöge, and she, in turn, was said to have worked on his designs for the Stoclet frieze. Flöge employed Hoffmann and Moser to design her fashion salon, including furniture and fabrics from the Wiener Werkstätte. Klimt frequently photographed Flöge in Wiener Werkstätte jewellery and Reform dress (see *What was the Reform Movement?*) and Klimt painted a number of portraits of her throughout their acquaintance.

Klimt also wore Reform style clothing, both for painting and relaxing, though he wore more conventional attire for public occasions. Klimt's garment designs, like his paintings, utilised luxurious textiles, decorative motifs and ornament. His designs for clothing were a political as well as an artistic statement, against a rigid and conservative Viennese society. Flöge's fashion house sold Reform clothing for women that embodied a modern and sophisticated Viennese style. Elegant, free flowing, bohemian, they reflected the desire to return to a more 'natural' state. Flöge was frequently photographed modelling her garments in natural settings, such as in a park or by Lake Attersee, where Klimt regularly joined her family on holiday. Flöge and her sisters also made regular trips to London and Paris to purchase fashionable stock for their Salon.



In this portrait, painted in 1902, Emilie Flöge confronts the viewer with her gaze, which is at once self assured and enigmatic. She is wrapped in a sleeve of shimmering pattern that streams upward to her face and then outwards in a fan behind her head. Flöge's expression and confident pose, with hand on hip, anchor the image to the world of reality, while the flat, earthy colours and contrasting patterns approach abstraction and hint at the unseen energies of the universe.

Gustav KLIMT Austria 1862–1918
Emilie Flöge 1902. Oil on canvas,
178.0 x 80.0 cm. Wien Museum,
Vienna.

What was the Reform Movement?

The Reform Movement was an international movement in fashion where women sought to free themselves from the physical and social constrictions imposed by tight corsets and restrictive fashions. Reform garments were part of a wider movement re-examining the role of women in society. They were loose and free-flowing with fewer restraints on the body than previous fashions.

The role of women in society was changing. Women were achieving increased access to the workplace and gaining greater legal rights. Fear of this emerging force led to portrayals in art and literature of 'the femme fatale' (the fatal woman), who used her new power not to nurture and nourish but to endanger and entrap man.

In *Ladies' Fashion*⁴, architect Adolph Loos commented on the changing role of women as reflected in the clothing worn by those who adopted the fashionable activity of cycling:

Only in the last fifty years have women acquired the right to develop themselves physically ... the concession will be made to the twentieth-century female bicyclist to wear pants and clothing that leave her feet free. And with this, the first step is taken toward the social sanctioning of women's work.



Gustav Klimt and Emilie Flöge boating on Lake Attersee. Both are wearing the loose garments of the Reform movement.

Gustav Klimt and Emilie Flöge in a boat on the Attersee c. 1905. Gelatin silver photograph, 11.4 x 8.2 cm. Wien Museum, Vienna. Gift of an anonymous donor, 1975

DID YOU KNOW?

Women did not gain the right to vote in Austria until 1918. New Zealand was the first country to allow women the right to vote in federal elections in 1893. Australian women gained the right to vote in 1902 (although some states had allowed it before this time).

→ ANALYSE

A SA VCD

Formal

Klimt combines the realistic and the abstract and contrasts form with flatness.

*Describe Klimt's use of **elements and principles** in his painting of Emilie Flöge.*

*How does Klimt create **balance and unity** in his compositions?*

*How does he ensure that the character of the sitter is still a **focus** in his portraits in spite of the elaborate ornamentation?*

*What **styles or influences** are evident in Klimt's work?*

*Look closely at the painting. What **techniques** do you think the artist has used?*

Look at how Klimt has placed Flöge in relation to the size and shape of the canvas. What is the effect of this placement?

Personal

*What is revealed of **Emilie Flöge's character** in Klimt's painting?*

What might the painting reveal about Klimt?

*What **personal associations** do you make with the painting?*

Cultural

What can we learn about **Klimt's time** (ie Vienna at the turn of the century), when we look at this painting?

What clues can we get about **fashion at the time** and the **attitudes to women in Viennese society**?

How does this art work fit within the **timeline of art history**?

How does it relate to work that went before it?

What **influences** can be seen in the work?

How does it influence the work that comes after – both that of Klimt himself and other artists?

Contemporary

How do **contemporary audiences** view this work and Klimt's work in general?

What do **contemporary commentators** say about this work?

Is this work still relevant in our time?

→ COMPARE

Find an example of a portrait painting by a contemporary artist. The Archibald Prize for portraiture website is an excellent starting point: <http://thearchibaldprize.com.au/>

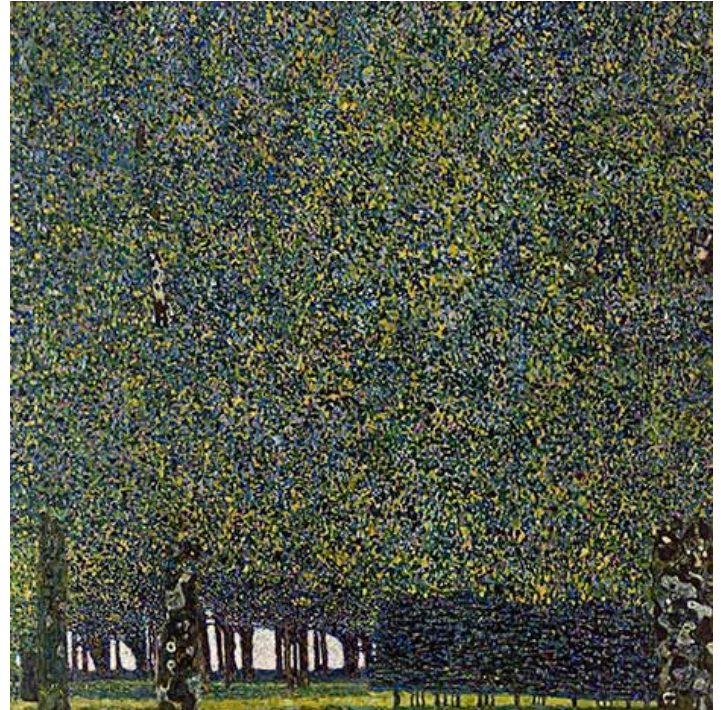
Compare the **techniques** used by Klimt with those of your chosen artist.

How does each artist use the **art elements and principles**?

How does each artist emphasise **the character of the sitter**?

What is revealed of each artist's **personal style** and interests?

How is the influence of the **artist's society or culture** evident in the work?



Gustav KLIMT Austria-Hungary 1862–1918
The park 1909. Oil on canvas, 110.4 x 110.4 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gertrud A. Mellon Fund, 1957

KLIMT'S LANDSCAPES

While Klimt painted some landscapes in the 1880s, it wasn't until the late 1890s, when he was in his thirties, that landscape became a consistent part of his repertoire. Unlike his portraits, which sometimes took years to complete, Klimt undertook his landscapes en plein air – outside – without preliminary drawings. These paintings were completed in the studio. Klimt produced many paintings during his summer stays at Lake Attersee, using a simple viewfinder to select compositions. Like the Impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840–1926), Klimt would sometimes sit painting in his boat on the water. As in his portraits, the realistic elements in the landscape became part of the decorative motifs. In *Italian Garden Landscape* 1913, the flowers form a vibrating carpet that leads the eye from one corner of the square canvas to the other. While there is no human presence the landscape vibrates with life.

In *Forest of Firs*, 1901 the lines of the trunks form abstract, vertical elements and the warm, dark tones create a subdued mood. The forest is peaceful, mysterious. Dark knots peppering the trunks lend a sense of buzzing energy to the gloom, while small glimpses of blue sky above the treetops hint at the wider world beyond.

→ ANALYSE

A SA VCD

Formal

What is the effect of Klimt's use of a **square format** rather than a more common rectangular one?

Where does Klimt place the **horizon line** in his paintings? What is the result of this placement?

What is the **focus** in each of the artworks? What role is played by **colour** in each of the compositions above?

How has Klimt created a sense of **movement and balance** in each artwork?

Klimt's landscapes have been described as 'a complete symbiosis between the observation of reality and a decorative construction'.⁵ Discuss how this applies to the images above.

Cultural

What **painting style** is evident in these artworks?

What do the paintings tell us about the Austrian landscape?

Do they tell us anything about Austrian culture?

Personal

What was **Klimt's connection** to the places represented in his paintings?

What aspects of the landscape does he capture?

What **associations** do the paintings hold for you?

Contemporary

What relevance do Klimt's landscapes have to a **contemporary audience**? Do we view them differently from how they would have been seen at the time they were painted?



Gustav KLIMT Austria
1862–1918 *Italian
garden landscape* 1913.
Oil on canvas, 110.0 x
110.0 cm. Kunsthaus
Zug. Stiftung Sammlung
Kamm

→ COMPARE

A SA

The landscape is often used by artists to **symbolise a mood or convey a message**. Find an example of a contemporary landscape painting that might do this. (eg Peter Booth's *Winter* 1993)

Describe the mood created by the artist. What **techniques** has the artist used to create this mood?

What **messages** does the painting convey?

Compare the contemporary painting to Gustav Klimt's *Forest of Firs I*, 1901. How might the artist's **personal ideas and experiences** be evident in each painting?

Some contemporary artists use images of the landscape to comment on society and the environment. (eg. In her series *groundspeed* (2001) and *one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape* (2003), contemporary Australian photographer Rosemary Laing draws our attention to our relationship to the land.) Find an example of a contemporary landscape that might also make a **social comment**.

In what ways does the contemporary portrayal of the environment differ to Klimt's?

What comments might the artist be making about the environment?

What were Klimt's aims in representing the landscape?

What can we learn about the environment presented by each artist from their portrayal?

How does the medium used contribute to the **emphasis** of each artist?



Gustav KLIMT Austria
1862–1918 *Forest
of Firs* / 1901. Oil on
canvas, 90.5 x 90.0 cm.
Kunsthau Zug. Stiftung
Sammlung Kamm

NOTES

¹ Gilles Néret, *Klimt*, Taschen, 2005, p.59

² Carl Auer von Welsbach (1858 - 1929) was an Austrian scientist and inventor who applied his many discoveries to commercially successful applications. Discovering that a metal filament light bulb was more efficient than the carbon filament light bulb in common use, he established a factory for production of the *Auer-Osilight* and introduced it commercially in 1902.

³ Tobias G Natter and Gerbert Frodl (eds.), *Klimt's Women*, Belvedere Gallery Vienna, Yale University Press, 200

⁴ Adolf Loos, 'Ladies' Fashion', in *Spoken Into the Void -- Collected Essays by Adolf Loos, 1897–1900*, Jane O. Newman & John H. Smith translators, MIT Press, 1982.

⁵ Rapetti, Rodolpe. *Symbolism*, Flammarion, Paris, 2005, p. 196.