

GUSTAV KLIMT & THE VIENNESE SECESSION

“Common to all the people of this age is the fact that more is weighing on them than they can bear; no one is equal to his or her burden. Never before has life been so heavy for people; just to exist, they muster an effort that goes beyond their strength.”

—Hermann Bahr, Austrian writer and critic, 1900

Gustav Klimt was a successful artist from a young age, winning awards from the emperor for his work. In the 1890s, however, Klimt shifted his focus, realizing that traditional styles of art, represented by historicist and academic paintings, were becoming stale. He challenged himself to pursue the wider ideals of modernism. In 1897 Klimt became one of the founding members of the Viennese Secession, a movement of some of the most progressive artists of the time. The group was called “Secession” because it split off from the older and larger Austrian Artists’ Union. Its aims in the 1890s were to “shake Vienna out of its sleep.” They created a true cultural exchange by partnering with artists abroad to assist in their mission to promote modernism in the imperial city. Members of the Secessionist movement saw the French sculptor Auguste Rodin as one of the most provocative and progressive artists of his generation.

The world surrounding Rodin and Klimt at the turn of the century was in constant flux as a result of industrialization and the rise of the modern city. Klimt experienced early success in his career, receiving commissions in the 1880s to create decorative murals for the magnificent new public buildings being constructed in Vienna.



Stephansplatz in Vienna, 1900. © Alamy

RODIN & VIENNA

“Your artistic achievement will prove to be an asset not only to your own country; it will enrich the whole of Europe. In America, too, it will meet with a keen response, that wonderful land with all its riches, which is so open to every artistic development that bears within itself a truly new beginning.”

—Auguste Rodin at the fourteenth Secessionist exhibition, 1902

Rodin was an important figure to the Viennese Secessionists due to his break with academic tradition and his key role in the modernist agenda. In 1897 the Austrian critic Ludwig Hevesi described Rodin’s work as “the violent art of the Parisian Michelangelo.” Rodin became a corresponding member of the Secessionists from their first exhibition in 1898 and exhibited a varying number of his sculptures alongside their artworks between 1898 and 1903. In 1901 he showed the largest group of his works in Vienna, nearly all plasters of his most famous works. These included *The Burghers of Calais*, *The Age of Bronze*, and *Eve*. The following year, Rodin briefly traveled through Vienna, both to observe the modern architecture of the city and to visit the Secessionist exhibition displayed in their pavilion.

Symbolism was one of the roots of modernism and represented the affinities between Rodin and the Secessionists. This movement began in literature but was soon defined by visual artists who believed that their works should reflect interior emotions and ideas subjectively rather than represent the world naturalistically and objectively. Klimt’s increasing shift toward Symbolism would prove a catalyst in his endeavor to move beyond historicism.

KLIMT & THE BEETHOVEN EXHIBITION OF 1902

“Never have such orgies of nakedness been celebrated in a Viennese exhibition.”

—Unidentified commentator, published in Vienna on April 14, 1902

The 1902 exhibition of the Viennese Secessionists—their most ambitious presentation—was dedicated to the great German composer Ludwig van Beethoven. The Secessionist installation embraced an interplay of sculpture, painting, decorative art, and music in a single installation to create what is known in German as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total work of art synthesizing many forms. Twenty-one artists participated. For the exhibition, Klimt created a huge frieze stretching more than 112 feet across three interior walls of the Secession building, where it remains today. Painted as a response to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, it expresses the ideals, in the words of the 1902 exhibition catalogue, of “Humanity’s desire for Happiness” and the “Hope for Salvation,” concluding with a theme on the famous “Ode to Joy” chorale. The symphony was performed during the run of the exhibition by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Gustav Mahler. Klimt’s *Beethoven Frieze* attracted lively criticism, both complimentary and adversarial.

Exhibitions by the Viennese Secession were presented in a specially designed “temple to art” that was inaugurated in 1898. This building, designed by architect Joseph Maria Olbrich, was composed of white cubic forms with flat walls, stylized ornament, and a gilded dome made of openwork laurel leaves. It was the centerpiece of an ultramodern style that came to be identified with the Viennese Secession, and with the city itself, in the early 1900s.



Joseph Maria Olbrich, the Viennese Secession exhibiting pavilion, ca. 1900. Imagno / Austrian Archives

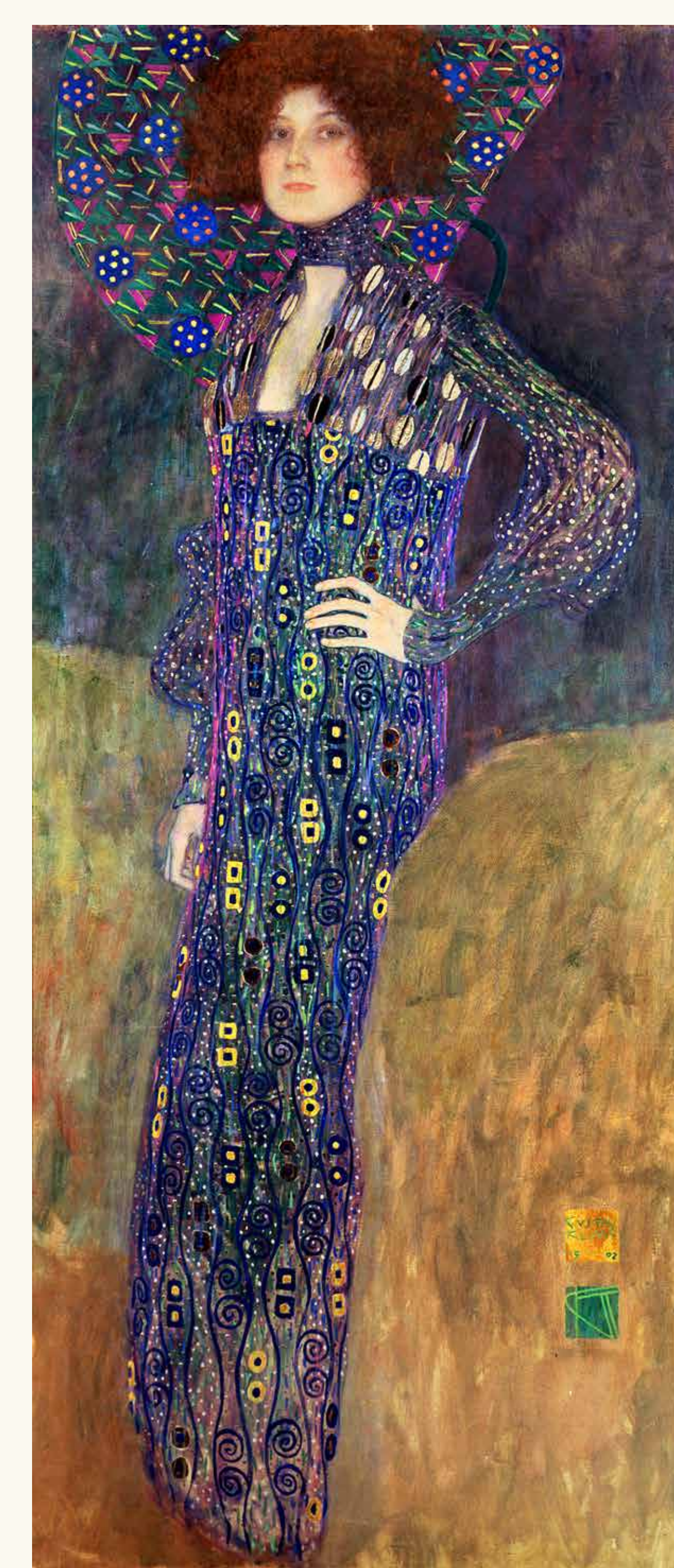
PORTRAITS & ALLEGORIES: THE WORLD IN HUMAN FORM

“[Klimt’s subjects] rise above the merely quotidian . . . like princesses or figures of the Madonna . . . with a beauty no longer susceptible to the depredations of life.”

—Joseph August Lux, press commentator, 1908

Klimt is best known for his portraits of women. From his groundbreaking depiction of Sonja Knips in 1898 (gallery 8) to paintings left unfinished upon his death, his pictures of women, many of which were made as commissions, were intended to impress. He often revealed in his subjects a certain remoteness yet also a sensuality. He combined many such likenesses with his signature dense patterning, as seen in the background of the unfinished portrait of Ria Munk (1917) and in the dress of Johanna Staude (1917). In this way, parallels can be drawn between Klimt’s portraits and his allegorical depictions of women, such as *The Virgin* (1913, gallery 10), with its all-over ornamentation. In contrast to his portraits, Klimt’s allegorical depictions of women covered the entirety of the female experience—birth, youth, sensuality, and decay.

Klimt’s sitters were wealthy, and the prices for his works were some of the highest of the time, even by international standards. The women pictured in Klimt’s portraits, however, lived in a society where men held control. Women were not allowed to vote, and in many cases their educational opportunities were limited.



Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Emilie Flöge*, 1902/1903, with later alterations. Oil on canvas, 71 1/4 x 33 1/8 in. (181 x 84 cm). Wien Museum, Vienna, 45677. Wien Museum Karlsplatz, Vienna / Bridgeman Images

KLIMT'S LANDSCAPES

"[I looked] with my 'viewfinder,' that is, a hole cut in a cardboard lid, for motifs of the landscapes I want to paint, and found a great deal, or—depending on how you see it—nothing."

—Gustav Klimt, 1902

Klimt started painting landscapes later in his career, around 1900. He worked slowly, producing only two landscapes a year in addition to his one annual society portrait, on average. Yet at his death landscapes represented one-fifth of his output. Unlike his larger figurative compositions, which drew divergent criticism, these landscapes were generally well received at the Secessionist exhibitions and were a good source of income. They followed a similar format, nearly all being square, and offered atmospheric views characterized by repeated patterning similar to works of French Impressionism and Pointillism. These distinctive features and their lack of depth—as seen on view here in *On the Attersee* (1900), and *Pine Forest* (1901)—led one critic to apply the term “painted mosaic.” Klimt painted many of these landscapes in the summer months in the mountainous region by Lake Atter (the Attersee), near Salzburg.

Klimt's annual alpine retreat provided the artist with respite from the pressures of his demanding portrait commissions. He generally spent a few weeks of the summer painting, reading, swimming, and hiking. These periods were not times of solitude, however, as he traveled with his brother's family, for whom Klimt assumed financial responsibility after his brother's death in 1892.



Gustav Klimt and Emilie Flöge in a rowing boat on Lake Atter, Austria, 1910. Gelatin silver print. Wien Museum, Vienna. Imagno / Wien Museum, Vienna

DRAWINGS & EROTICISM

“The drawings establish [Klimt’s] most incontestable claim to the title of mastership; their suppleness quivering with feeling is unparalleled in the whole of art today.”

—Hans Tietze, critic and scholar, 1918

Drawing was an essential part of artistic practice for Rodin and Klimt. Over the course of his career, Rodin generated a staggering number of drawings—ten thousand sketches are in existence today. His craft as a draftsman developed significantly over his lifetime, and his later work is, in its economy, widely acknowledged as an important precursor to modernism. In these drawings Rodin reduced his graphic tools to mere line and color washes, which he used to capture his increasing interest in movement. He once said, “It is very simple. My drawings are the key to my work.” Unlike Rodin, who wrote and commented openly on his work, Klimt rarely addressed his creative process. His drawings, therefore, provide an invaluable opportunity to see how he developed his ideas. Klimt drew on a daily basis, and critics universally celebrated his drawings, with one declaring, “Klimt is the supreme draftsman.”

The catalogue of drawings produced by each artist reveals a shared interest in erotic themes and poses. Within Klimt’s work, these drawings include scenes of heterosexual coupling, lesbian love, and female self-pleasure. When displayed during the artist’s lifetime, these renderings were critiqued as pornographic. However, for Klimt, Eros represented the core of humanist themes that he explored in his art, including birth, love, and death.



Gustav Klimt, *Seated Woman with Legs Spread*, 1904. Pencil on Japanese paper, 13 3/4 x 21 5/8 in. (25 x 55 cm). Leopold Museum, Vienna, 1322. © Leopold Museum, Vienna