

GRADUATE RESEARCH PAPER

Painting

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FROM ORNAMENT TO ESSENCE - REPRESENTED

BY GUSTAV KLIMT AND EGON SCHIELE

by

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The Vienna Jugendstil (1897) was born because of a demand for a new kind of art. Throughout the centuries, there had always been a style, and then suddenly there was not. Because this void had to be filled, a new style was deliberately created without recourse to eclecticism or historicism. This style was designated to be "a style of youth,"¹ and was called the Vienna Jugendstil, Art Nouveau or the Vienna Secession.

Robert Schmutzler, the historian of Art Nouveau, believes that it became an ornamental style, a style of decoration. This style attempted to restrict itself to two dimensions and to put an end to the age of geometrical perspectives.²

At the close of the 19th century the literary and artistic climate of sophistication was in a state of world weariness and fashionable despair. This was known as the "Fin de Siècle."

Artists, writers and thinkers in late nineteenth century Europe distrusted the growing materialism of their age and in turn they were motivated to search for truths that were of personal and universal significance. Artists like Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele embarked on personal journeys and strove to depict an art that would give body and form to emotions and dreams. They tried to clothe ideas into forms that would be open to the senses, or they withdrew into elaborate or exotic environments.

Originally a literary movement, Symbolism was born out of this inward search as writers and artists portrayed the longings and nightmares which epitomized the preoccupations of the fin de siècle--

death and frustration, union and conflict of the sexes, cruel or superfluous beauty, the fatal woman, the siren and the sphinx.³

The fin-de-siècle was not just a school of writers or painters--it was a mood or a temperament which in the arts of the last years of the nineteenth century embraced the Aesthetic movement as well as Decadent and Symbolist art. It was less a movement than an atmosphere.

In the Vienna Secession, the work reveals a return to the French concern with the picture surface. An antithesis was established in Vienna between elaborate color and material, and forceful parallel composition.

Gustav Klimt was the major, most celebrated and most sought after painter of the Vienna Secession. Klimt preserved his inclinations toward rich decoration. Through his work, the graphic artist can be distinguished from the painter of highly decorated, gold encrusted pictures. His father was a goldsmith and he came to know the Byzantine Ravenna,⁴ which in part may account for his love of rich materials and the mosaic format which are often incorporated into the surface of the paintings.

Klimt's works were usually square and his compositions consisted of squares. Due to his pointillism and the use of tempa and dry color on a dry ground, they were often mosaic-like in character.

Klimt committed himself to monumentally scaled painting and to the painting of society. His work was free from an over decorative, over theatrical quality. "He is Viennese through and through, not merely by birth but above all in his painting," stated the third issue of Ver Sacrum, which was concerned exclusively with Klimt.⁵ Klimt's use of ornamental decoration was added for deliberate effect. He was able to

convey his artistic desires in color and content through his masterly and extraordinary draughtsmanship and he was motivated by decorative and colorful subjects.

Klimt's main interest in all his paintings was the female figure. The male body hardly interested him and very few male figures appear in his work. He painted a series of women that evolved towards a very Viennese heavy-heartedness with oriental elements in the surroundings. Klimt painted women with rings under their eyes, quivering nostrils and sensual little mouths, and he remained faithful to depicting them this way.⁶ Oftentimes his female figures are given a full frontal stance which suggests drama and gives the outlines of these female figures an untouchable, menacing force. In a sense, the rule of woman over man is proposed, which is one of the great fin de siècle themes. A new type of matriarchy is established from the visual depiction of Klimt's women.⁷ So, in a sense he paints women to possess power, fear and control, and at the same time they are delicate, jewel-like and sensual. This is the mystery he discloses through his perception.

A new beauty presented itself in the Jugendstil. Each new style proposes an original type of beauty that evolves less from fashion than from the secret passions and aspirations of a generation. Klimt reveals a new kind of beauty through Judith, his Viennese "Mona Lisa" painting. She is pictured against a gilded Byzantine background. This painting is an example of Klimt's usage of rich decoration, and it is one illustration of the way he places a woman in the background and in a sense, he protects her, with lavish decoration.

Oftentimes Klimt's rendering of the figure is incorporated into an ornamented and undulating environment. An example of this is Water

Serpents (Fig. 1). This painting illustrates his usage of gilded gold in a mosaic type format.



Fig. 1. Gustav Klimt, Water Serpents, 1904-1907.
(Osterreichische Galerie, Vienna)

In addition to Klimt's figurative work, he also studied the landscape. The landscapes read with a given density--a density of color, form, and pattern. The Sunflower (Fig. 2) is a dramatic weighting of volume and emphasizes two-dimensional ornament versus three dimensional subject matter. A mesmerizing quality of Klimt's landscape densities is the rhythmic grouping of elemental verticals and horizontals. The Sunflower (Fig. 2) illustrates this in a very direct and formal way as

the flower singularity and majestically protrudes up the center of the canvas.

In The Pear Tree (Fig. 3), elemental verticals are also stressed by the rhythmic interplay of the tree trunks. The byzantine crowdedness and mosaic-like filling of the surface again distinguishes Klimt's landscapes and enhances their glimmering jewel-like intensity.

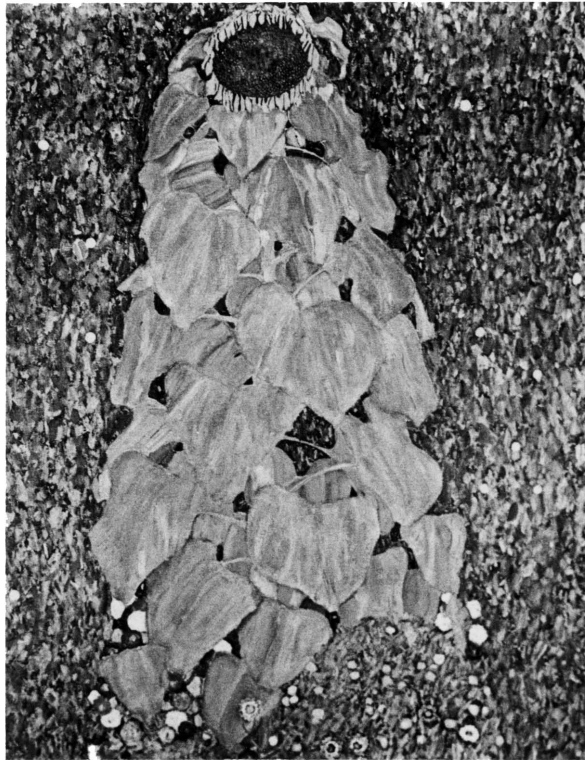


Fig. 3. Gustav Klimt, The Sunflower, 1906-1907.
(Private Collection.)

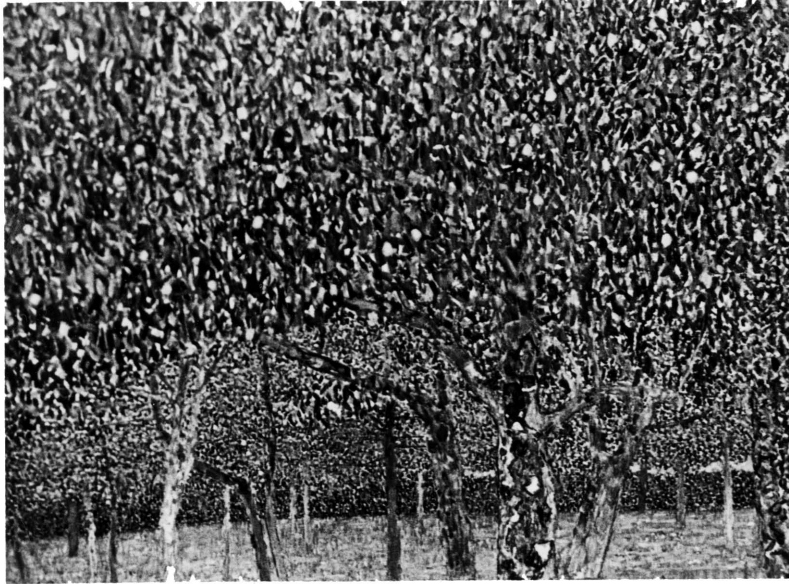


Fig. 4. Gustav Klimt, The Pear Tree, 1903.
(Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard,
University)

For Klimt, the plentitude of nature offered a cyclic variety of stimuli and sensations.⁸ Klimt collected, stored and displayed in a multi-faceted way a precious hoard of sense impressions. His impenetrable landscape facades sifted and solidified the phenomenon of fertility. In his figure and his landscape paintings, Klimt seized upon the biological principle in nature. He studied environments, as he had his portraits, with overlapping symbols of fertility and growth.

Perhaps Klimt could be considered the father image for Egon Schiele. The influence of Klimt upon Schiele's subject matter and style is confined to the Academy years, but the spiritual relationship of Klimt to Schiele emerged thematically.⁹ Schiele was born in 1890, and like Klimt, he belonged to the decade of the great and beautiful facade. The year 1900 introduced a decade that was restless rather than nostalgic, a

decade in which an entire culture's attention shifted from the facade to the psyche.

Through his art of portraiture, Schiele comprehensively studied the elusive element that accurately mirrored the collective cultural quest of his time--the inner self. I have singularly selected his portraits to contrast with Klimt's figurative and landscape paintings because like Klimt's landscapes and figurative works, Schiele's portraits are undulating, painterly, modeled, and distorted in form to a degree. Different from Klimt, Schiele empties his space of small exterior excess forms, and contains the activity and movement within designated space. An example of this is Portrait of Gerti Schiele (Fig. 4). Schiele's assimilation of Klimt's portrait style is evident through his use of ornament. Despite the intrusion of Klimtian devices, this painting with its angular contour, and the isolation of the figure, has an elemental starkness.

Both Schiele and Klimt approached Expressionism through an intensified application of the Jugendstil decorative silhouette, and Schiele approximates Klimt's turn-of-the-century style in his series of portraits. Their interpretations of the Jugendstil are much different in that Klimt employed decorative patterns in his work, he used bright colors, made use of intricate colliding background, and more often than not, he made more use of the sides of his paintings. Schiele used muted color and secluded it in selected areas. He tore through the facade and used the middle of his working surface freely; and his figures in a sense were placed in a visual void. Most distinct in contrast to Klimt, was Schiele's attempt to reach the psyche.



Fig. 4. Egon Schiele, Portrait of Gerti Schiele, 1909.
(Collection Viktor Fogarassy, Graz.)

Schiele's Portrait of Herbert Rainer (Fig. 5) shows his usage of the middle of the canvas. In this painting, he makes a universal statement about the universal themes of loneliness and vulnerability. No distinctive characteristics are exhibited by this child; he is an object surrounded by a void.¹⁰



Fig. 5. Egon Schiele, Portrait of Herbert Rainer, 1910.
(Osterreichische Galerie, Vienna)

In Schiele's preparatory sketch for the Portrait of the Painter Karl Zakovsek (Fig. 6), he illustrates his candid, intimate and very personal search for eloquent form. Emphasized in this study are an emaciated face and bony hands. It is the quality of line that suggests a diagonal counter movement.¹¹ He aims at the gut level in this study; the warped image, elongated fingers and face projects a disturbing, uncomfortable kind of reaction.

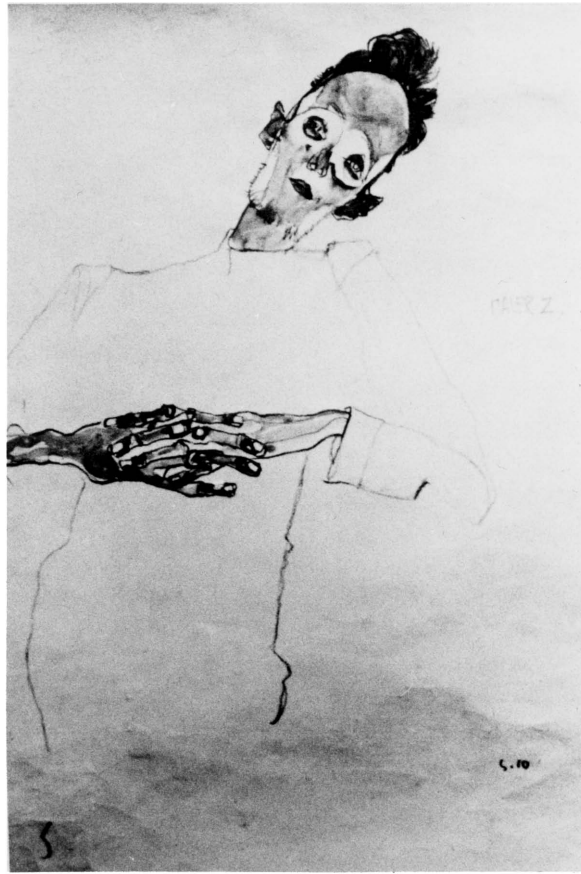


Fig. 6. Egon Schiele, Study for the Portrait of Karl Zakovsek, 1910. (Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna.)

From presenting photographs of a few selected works by Klimt and Schiele, I have indicated through description, things in their work that I respect. I have been influenced by Klimt's juxtapositions of surfaces, the ornamentality, the richness of his surfaces and the very personal depiction of his subject matter.

Schiele's awesome presentation of form integrated in vacant space has significantly influenced me for placements of amplified forms in my paintings. Both artists seem to animate the nature that they represent

in their work, and the adoption of color for the unification and integration of their work adds the element that seems to solidify their compositions.

But more importantly it is the spirit of their work that has affected me; their search for essence and reality. The Jugendstil period represents a search that I believe in. They used their visionary means to probe the inner man. In so doing this, they moved from ornament to essence.

FOOTNOTES

¹Robert Waissenberger, Vienna Secession, New York: Rizzoli, 1977, p. 1.

²Ibid., p. 1.

³John Milner, Symbolists and Decadence, Great Britain: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1971, p. 1.

⁴Ibid., p. 146.

⁵Waissenberger, Vienna Secession, 1977, p. 74.

⁶Philippe Julian, Dreamers of Decadence, New York, Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1969, p. 158.

⁷Werner Hofmann, Gustav Klimt, New York: Graphic Society, Connecticut, 1974, p. 25.

⁸Alessandra Comini, Gustav Klimt, New York: George Braziller, 1975, p. 27.

⁹Alessandra Comini, Egon Schiele's Portraits, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1974, p. 23.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 117.

¹¹Ibid., p. 43.

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