

secession

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THE BEETHOVEN FRIEZE BY GUSTAV KLIMT AND THE VIENNA SECESSION

“But this is where we draw the line and a burning fury grips anyone who still possesses a scrap of decency. What can one say about this painted pornography? [...] These paintings might prove quite serviceable for some subterranean cavern where heathen orgies are held, but not for exhibition rooms into which the artists have the gall to invite respectable women and young girls.”

S. G., April 22 1902, quoted in: Hermann Bahr, *Gegen Klimt*, 1903, p. 70

“Gustav Klimt has created a delightful frieze painting in the left hand aisle that reveals so much of his own bold and masterful artistic personality that one would fain call this painting his masterpiece.”

Ludwig Hevesi, *Acht Jahre Secession*, 1906, p. 392/393

These diametrically opposed comments both refer to Gustav Klimt's Beethoven Frieze which was presented to an astonished public as part of the Vienna Secession's Beethoven Exhibition in April 1902. Both quotes – just two examples from a barrage of printed reviews – clearly represent the dichotomy of positive and negative reactions to Klimt's art. The tone of these statements also reveals that the debate on Gustav Klimt, both as an individual and as an artist, had entered into a very emotional phase. The fate of this now world-famous artist was intimately connected with that of the Vienna Secession. The building of this association was an arena in which the battle for the acceptance of Klimt's art and that of his contemporaries was fought; at the same time, it presented itself as a temple, in which the uninitiated could gain access to the highest revelations.

This Janus-like ambiguity was nowhere more apparent than in the Beethoven Exhibition, which formed a decisive turning point in the early history of the Secession. The Beethoven Frieze itself would have been unthinkable without the background of this group project in which the artistic ideals of the new association were realized in a most consequent way. Participation in this ambitious project was of decisive importance to Klimt's artistic development.

The Beethoven Exhibition – Concept and Cult Object

In the summer of 1901 (according to Ernst Stöhr in his introduction to the catalogue of the Beethoven Exhibition), the Association arrived at the decision to mount a “different type of event” that would deviate from their usual exhibition practice. Although the Secession artists had already created exemplary installations that had ensured the best possible presentation of their own works and those of their foreign colleagues, this time they intended to go even further: “The longing for a major task gave rise to the idea of realizing in our own building what the spirit of the present withheld from the

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creative energies of artists: the comprehensive decoration of a whole interior.” The Secession artists wanted to find an ideal way of presenting their version of modern monumental art and, at the same time, put special emphasis on the work process itself – they wanted to “learn” together. Similar attempts all over Europe were united by one aspiration despite their diverging circumstances and origins: the desire to reinstate a harmonious co-existence between architecture, painting, and sculpture that seemed lost forever. Long-forgotten techniques and ancient styles were studied: epochs were idealized in which the unity of art, religion, and society still seemed unbroken. For this reason, the catalogue stated that the Secession members had oriented themselves towards “temple art” as the “most sublime and best that human beings had ever been able to produce”. What, however, would temple art have been without a dominating cult object?

Here, an ideal opportunity seemed to present itself to the Secession artists: the Beethoven figure of their venerated colleague Max Klinger from Leipzig was nearing completion and was being eagerly awaited by the art world. “The hope that the earnest and magnificent deference that Klinger dedicates to the greatness of Beethoven in his monument could be afforded dignified surroundings was enough to elicit enthusiasm and untiring dedication to the task, despite of the consciousness that this would only last a few days” – as Ernst Stöhr put it in the catalogue.

During an intimate preliminary celebration, to which Klinger had of course been invited (and which greatly moved him), the exhibition was opened to the strains of a small wind ensemble. Gustav Mahler conducted his own arrangement of a theme from the closing chorus of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. This poetic beginning of the Beethoven Exhibition was followed with avid interest by the public. The Beethoven Exhibition became one of the Secession’s greatest successes: almost 60,000 visitors were counted in the course of nearly three months. The numerous local and international reviews centered their attention on Gustav Klimt’s Beethoven Frieze and the Beethoven figure by Max Klinger that had inspired the whole exhibition program.

The main idea of this monumental polychrome sculpture goes back to one of the central themes of 19th century art: namely, the artist as the savior and liberator of mankind. Ludwig van Beethoven was often seen as being the archetype of a struggling artistic genius that suffers for the benefit of mankind; veneration for the artist had virtually assumed the character of a cult by the turn of the century. Klinger’s sculptural gesamtkunstwerk and contemporary reactions to its sensational presentation in the Secession must be seen in this light. In the half naked figure of the composer, who leans forward with clenched fists, a concentrated facial expression and eyes that gaze into the distance, critics saw a new and idealized type of human being. The “spiritual heroism” was much admired and people were fired by the hope for a new and better era. The figure, which is enthroned above the clouds and is accompanied by an eagle crouching at its feet, gives the impression of being a combination of both Jupiter and the Messiah, but with the facial features of Beethoven. In this work Klinger symbolized his ideal of a harmonious synthesis between classical and Christian traditions.

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Realization

Not only was the Beethoven Exhibition as a whole conceived to reflect these ideas, the wide variety of materials and colors employed in the figure of Beethoven itself (marble, bronze and semi-precious stones) were chosen with this in mind. It prompted the group of twenty-one artists to experiment with a motley variety of unusual materials and techniques in unorthodox combinations. Their guidelines included the “self-evident duty to use only real materials and so to avoid an illusion and deception” (catalogue of the XIV. exhibition). The catalogue speaks of the “limitations posed by the means available” almost with pride. The interior architecture was designed by Josef Hoffmann, the artistic head of the entire project. The solemn exhibition space of the Secession, displaying a sacral character by its division into a main room and two aisles, was structured by rectangular plaster elements, with alternating rough and smooth surfaces. The symbolic function of these rooms was apparent from their decorative design. The bright main hall, in which Klinger’s “Beethoven” was enthroned, served as an apotheosis of artistic genius. Beethoven gazed towards Alfred Böhm’s painting The Coming of Day on the entrance wall while Night Falls by Alfred Roller covered the rear wall. The side rooms, which showed a more subdued lighting, were concerned with the ideas of suffering and redemption, struggle and conquest: here the paintings were characterized by drama and narrative verve, and revealed strong horizontal movement. If one followed the route prescribed by the catalogue, one entered the left hand aisle first and was immediately confronted by Klimt’s Beethoven Frieze; at the same time one was already able to see the Beethoven figure from a distance through a wide aperture in the wall.

After meeting divine genius in the middle room, the visitor crossed to the right hand aisle to the exit, passing the frieze decorations of Male Courage and Valor by Ferdinand Andri and Joy, Thou Gleaming Spark Divine by Josef Maria Auchentaller.

Thematically the frieze-like paintings of the two aisles were accompanied by square decorative panels that were created by a number of different artists and placed at regular intervals along the lower parts of the walls. In spite of the wide diversity of materials and artistic techniques employed, the principle of a unified overall impression was upheld. All decorations were complemented by reliefs of stylized monograms that could be deciphered with the aid of the catalogue. This small square booklet (which itself was an important part of the gesamtkunstwerk of the exhibition) contained original woodcuts by many artists, which represented a novelty in the Secession. Alfred Roller’s exhibition poster displays the rhythmically repeated motive from his wall decoration Night Falls: a stylized, ornamental figure of the stooping angel with a disk in its hands and surrounded by stars.

The Beethoven Exhibition lasted only a few months, but the experience it afforded was to be of lasting value to those who participated. Seen from a historical point of view, the Beethoven Exhibition laid at the vanguard of a range of exciting developments, on which it probably had a catalyzing effect. The period following 1902 was marked by an increasing estrangement between “naturalists” and the “stylists”; finally the latter (who were represented by the Klimt Group) left the Secession in 1905. The Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshop) was founded one year after the Beethoven Exhibition so that aesthetic integration of all artistic disciplines could be continued on a professional basis. Major joint projects such as the “Steinhof Church” and the “Stoclet Palace” followed the principle of artistic co-

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operation that was attempted for the first time in the Beethoven Exhibition. What was irrevocable was the idealism that had sustained this unique project.

The Beethoven Frieze as “Decorative Principle”

From a strategic point of view, the left aisle assumed great importance, because it was from here that the visitor caught a first glimpse of the “holy of holies”, i.e. Klinger’s figure of Beethoven. In spite of their avowal of the principles of democracy and co-operation, the forty-year-old Klimt was entrusted with the role of figurehead for the exhibition. He was offered three walls in the left hand aisle, while two different artists had to make do with one longitudinal wall each in the opposite aisle. Klimt displayed great sensitivity in the way he exploited new techniques and in his treatment of problems concerning the content. The terse catalogue text underlines the fact that the frieze was intended to have a largely ornamental character that would be subservient to the architecture: “Decorative principle: Respect for the spatial disposition. Ornamented plaster panels.” Evidently, this supremacy of architecture encouraged Klimt to search for new stylistic solutions. His figures, which are presented either frontally or in profile, are grouped rhythmically and their postures and movements are subordinated to a strict system of verticals and horizontals. Their contours, which are largely drawn with the aid of a brush (but also charcoal, graphite or pastel crayons), are of particular significance; the light gray of the plaster areas serves as a basic tone for the gently painted skin areas. In the other parts the coloristic intensity of the casein paint contrasted effectively with the gold and the gleaming, reflecting or shimmering appliqué materials. The demonstrative avowal of the Secession members to employ “simple” materials in new and creative ways inspired Klimt to some highly innovative solutions: the Beethoven Frieze features carpet nails, curtain rings, fragments of mirrors, mother-of-pearl buttons and costume jewelry made of colored paste. At the same time, the brilliant, shimmering appearance of the frieze – particularly that of the central section – is reminiscent of the “heathen” predilection for colored materials in Klinger’s Beethoven sculpture.

The Picture’s Artistic Program and Symbolism

Klimt is just as self-assured in the way his themes reflect the programmatic guidelines. The catalogue merely states that the “frieze-like painting” was spread across three walls and consisted of a coherent narrative. It follows this statement with a short explanation of the individual parts of the program. Thus, on the left wall the long chain of floating genies, symbols of the “yearning for happiness”, introduces the viewer into the narrative. Up to the first third of the last wall these genies form a common element connecting single scenes. Along the first wall the “knight in shining armor”, who is being petitioned by “suffering humanity”, and driven by “compassion and ambition”, is taking on the fight for happiness. The “hostile powers” darken the narrow wall and blacken out the “yearning for happiness” for the moment. This is where “Typhoeus” (the monstrous ape with the oversized wings and snake-like body) holds sway, together with the “three Gorgons, sickness, madness, death, voluptuousness, wantonness, debauchery and gnawing grief”. The figures of “yearning”, however, are stronger and fly past them. The third wall, which opened up below the frieze to reveal the cult figure, is dedicated to the arts. Here, the yearning for happiness finds “appeasement in poetry”. The figures of “yearning”

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seem to run into an invisible wall and partly raise their hands in defense above the figure playing on the cithara. The following empty expanse seems to be a – probably thematically induced – caesura between the two last scenes. Here the arts, symbolized by female figures being carried upwards by golden waves, lead us into “an ideal world, the only place where we can find pure joy, pure happiness, pure love. The chorus of angels in paradise. This kiss to the whole world”. The last sentences – a quotation from the final chorus of the Ninth Symphony based on Schiller’s Ode to Joy – contain the key to the allegorical content of the entire frieze. The “Ninth” was fervently admired around 1900: the utopian ideas that were projected onto Beethoven at the time were largely drawn from contemporary speculations about this particular work. The genius cult that came to surround the figure of the composer had been greatly influenced by Richard Wagner. His ideas on the antithesis between suffering humanity and the struggling artist could easily have influenced Klimt: beyond that, the description of the scenes of the Beethoven Frieze offered by the catalogue show marked parallels to Wagner’s programmatic interpretation of the Ninth Symphony (which was destined for a lay public and published in 1846). Klimt, at any rate, would have found it easy to identify with the theme of the lonely, struggling and misunderstood artist. The attacks on his art – particularly the monumental pictures of Philosophy and Medicine which were created for the great hall of the university and shown in the Secession in 1900 and 1901 – had reached their height about the time when the first plans for the Beethoven Exhibition were being developed. The Hostile Powers grimaced menacingly from the middle section of the frieze at the visitor the moment he entered the room. This section (which was admired by Ludwig Hevesi for its bewitching beauty) challenged public and press alike – as the quotations mentioned earlier illustrate. In their mythological role of warding off evil spirits, the provocative depiction of the Three Gorgons is reminiscent of the three Gorgon heads situated above the entrance on the exterior of the building, just under the famous motto “To the Age its Art, to Art its Freedom”.

Klimt and International Art

In compliance with the exhibition program, Klimt intensively studied examples of “temple art” from the past as well as works by contemporary artists. Klimt combined a wide spectrum of influences in a sovereign and imaginative way, ranging from Egyptian, Greek, Japanese, Byzantine and mediaeval art to that of contemporaries like Beardsley or Munch. But it was above all the works of his colleagues from abroad who had just been enthusiastically received as “monumental artists” in the Secession itself that influenced him most. The “modern Gothic” of the Belgian sculptor George Minne inspired the kneeling, gaunt and angular figures of Suffering Humanity and Gnawing Grief (which, according to anecdote, is a veiled reference to the artist’s own fear of syphilis); particularly this emaciated, cowering figure anticipates the expressionism of Schiele and Kokoschka.

The combination of brightness and the elegantly elongated lines that delineate the figures along the longitudinal walls, together with the embracing couple in their golden bell, recall the Scottish Mackintosh Group.

The work of the Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler played an important role in heightening the monumentality and heroism of the human figure as well as the rhythmical repetition of motifs in the Choir of Angels in Paradise. The work of the Dutch-Japanese symbolist Jan Toorop, whose influence

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on Klimt reaches its peak in the Beethoven Frieze, was undoubtedly of significance for the flat and ornamental character of this group. Apart from being the immediate inspiration for some of the motifs, Toorop's example also encouraged the Viennese artist to experiment with his angular and slender female figures with their characteristically parallel and linear strands of hair (as in Yearning for Happiness and The Arts, etc.). Klimt's development of Toorop's programmatic use of line to evoke different moods is highly individualistic. The figures in the Beethoven Frieze are characterized by differing stages of linear stylization, that correspond to their roles in the narrative program or their degrees of reality. The most marked contrast within this frame of reference is between the flowing lines of the immaterial ideal figures representing Yearning and the realistic body contours of the muscular male figure of the loving couple. Even in the preliminary studies in black crayon, the contours of individual figures reflect their significance: delicate and flowing in the case of the floating figures, brittle and ascetic in the case of the kneeling naked man, sensually curved in the model for the Gorgons. The outlines of Gnawing Grief emphasize the gauntness and angularity of the figure, those of Poetry reveal archaic severity, while the muscular man expresses sexual vitality. All of these studies display a tense contrast between tectonic severity and highly sensitive linearity.

Expression and Ornamentation

The correlation between the concept and decoration is apparent both on a large and small scale in the Beethoven Frieze. Thus, the longitudinal walls feature brightness, openness and harmonious line and color combinations; good and positive aspects dominate in these parts of the allegory. The darker middle section, however, whose density is contrasted with the light silhouettes of bodies and ornaments is a catchment area for every conceivable form of vice and iniquity. The garish eroticism of the Gorgons with the striking bodily contours, strands of hair, and angular, clashing movements are clearly set off against the idealism of the harmoniously flowing figures representing Yearning and The Arts. Nowadays the middle section has lost its shocking effect, but nevertheless the extravagant splendor of the "evil" has lost none of its power to fascinate: even in the Middle Ages the image of hell spurred the imagination of artists and writers more than that of heaven (it is well known that Klimt was an avid reader of Dante). Seen from an allegorical point of view, the modern and timeless inferno of the Beethoven Frieze condemns material and sensual delights. At the same time, however, the wall of the Hostile Powers pays homage to the aesthetics of female body. Even the figure of Debauchery whose enormous curves mingle with those of Wantonness and Voluptuousness reveals its own poetry of line together with the elegant and sinuous curves of golden liana.

The dominant use of gold and ornament is of great importance in the Beethoven Frieze, whereby the borders between the figures and the ornament are kept flowing. Mirroring the exhibition architecture itself, a geometrical element is also apparent alongside curving Art Nouveau lines and floral motifs; many examples of spiral patterns can be found. Klimt's decorative imagination culminates in the Hostile Powers, beginning with the omnipresent snake and wings to the innumerable patterns and jewelry adorning the female figures. Debauchery is not only the most richly ornamented figure, she also displays the strongest coloring: her azure dress is the coloristic highlight of the middle wall.

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Epilogue

Three important innovations can be observed in the Beethoven Frieze by Gustav Klimt: the two-dimensional depiction and the monumental isolation of the human figure, the expressive use of line and the dominating role of ornament. Klimt's participation in the "Beethoven experiment" marks the beginning of his famous "golden period". Today, the monumental allegory, which was made accessible to the public again at the place of its genesis in 1986, is seen as one of the key works in the artist's development.

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