

KLIMT



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# KLIMT

THE BIGGER PICTURE

**PRESTEL**

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# Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, a spirit of cultural renewal affecting every domain of life took hold of Vienna, turning the Austro-Hungarian Empire's capital into one of the prime hotbeds of a new style of art whose main objective was to create a living environment that met the needs and aspirations of "modern man".

Paradoxically, this extraordinary blossoming occurred at the same time as a crucial event in European political history of the second half of the nineteenth century: the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire during the reign of Franz Joseph, who had assumed the throne in 1848 after the abdication of his uncle Ferdinand I. In 1859, following the war for Italy waged against the empire by an alliance of France and the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Habsburgs lost Lombardy and Tuscany, along with Parma and Modena. In 1866, defeat at the Battle of Königgrätz ended the Austro-Prussian War, and the empire was forced to cede Venice and the rest of Venetia to the young Kingdom of Italy. Finally, France's defeat by Prussia in 1871 marked the beginning of German unification and the supremacy of Berlin in the German-speaking countries.

The misfortune did not spare the imperial family. On 19 June 1867, Franz Joseph's younger brother, who had been crowned Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico in 1864, was shot by republicans. In 1889, Crown Prince Rudolf committed suicide at the age of thirty at his hunting lodge in Mayerling after killing his mistress, Marie Vetsera. On 10 September 1898, Empress Elisabeth, of fragile mental health and exhausted by her dietary regimens and the never-ending travels that she undertook in a quest to remedy her depression, was killed in Geneva by an Italian anarchist. Finally, on 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the emperor's nephew and heir to the throne, was also assassinated, in Sarajevo, along with his wife. This tragic event led Austria-Hungary to declare war on the kingdom of Serbia; as is

**Portrait of Gustav Klimt,**  
c. 1905, photograph (detail)

well known, the conflict was not contained to the Balkans, but led to the formation of alliances and ultimately to the First World War.

Despite all the blows struck against his empire, Franz Joseph managed to encourage the fulfilment of his capital's economic, artistic and cultural potential. Inspired by the urbanism of Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the official opening of the Ringstrasse, on 1 May 1865, was the first bold move in this campaign. Opulent residential buildings, tree-lined sidewalks, promenades for pedestrians and riders, new public buildings along the route of the old city walls: all of these created a convivial location prized by the upper bourgeoisie. Around the time of the Ring's development, Gustav Klimt quickly found himself involved in the creation of the very finest architectural decoration as part of the urbanization project, particularly because his studies had prepared him well to take on a project of this kind.

Born in 1862 in Baumgarten, a village in the suburbs of Vienna, Gustav Klimt was the second son in a family of four girls and three boys. His father was a chiseller and engraver who worked with precious metals; his son Georg (1867–1931) followed in his footsteps. Gustav enrolled in the School of Arts and Crafts (now the University of Applied Arts). The school was founded in 1868 and relocated in 1877 to the Stubenring, near the Museum of Art and Industry (now the Museum of Applied Arts). The museum, which was modelled after the South Kensington Museum (now Victoria and Albert Museum) in London, was founded in 1864. The School of Arts and Crafts consisted of four departments: architecture, sculpture, figurative painting and decorative painting, each including appropriate draughtsmanship training. In accordance with the vision of the school's director, Rudolf Eitelberger, the institution aimed to break down barriers between the “major” and “minor” arts, that is, between the fine and decorative arts. This institution is where Gustav – and his younger brother Ernst (1864–1892), who matriculated one year later – received sound training in decorative painting, which would quickly earn them renown once they completed their studies.

In 1883, the brothers opened a collective studio that they called the Künstler-Compagnie, or Artists Company, in the sixth district of Vienna with classmate Franz Matsch (1861–1942). The same year, they received a major commission to decorate the ceilings and curtain of the theatre in Reichenberg (now Liberec, Czech Republic) that had been built by two Viennese architects, Ferdinand Fellner (1847–1916) and Hermann Helmer (1849–1919). The following year, in 1884, the trio was once again hired by the Fellner-Helmer agency, which was constructing a theatre in Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia). The collaboration of the two teams continued in 1885 and 1886 with the theatre in Karlsbad (now Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic), with the Künstler-Compagnie once again responsible for the ceilings and stage curtain.

This was followed by the first major Viennese commission: on 20 October 1886, the imperial council of architecture hired the Klimt brothers and Franz Matsch to paint the ceilings of the two grand staircases in the new Burgtheater, built on the Ring by the architect Karl von Hasenauer (1833–1894) according to plans developed in collaboration with Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), one of the pre-eminent



German architectural theoreticians of the time. In *The World of Yesterday: Memoirs of a European*, published in German in 1942 and in English in 1943, Stefan Zweig, recalling the city where he grew up, stressed the Burgtheater's crucial role in Viennese culture: "The first glance of the average Viennese into his morning paper was not at the events in parliament, or world affairs, but at the repertoire of the theatre, which assumed so important a role in public life as hardly was possible in any other city. For the Imperial theatre, the Burgtheater, was for the Viennese and for the Austrian more than a stage upon which actors enacted parts; it was the microcosm that mirrored the macrocosm, the brightly coloured reflection in which the city saw itself".

The Historical Museum of the City of Vienna also asked the Künstler-Compagnie to immortalize the interior spaces of the old Burgtheater, built on the Michaelerplatz in the eighteenth century and partially renovated in the mid-nineteenth century, before the building's demolition. Some years later, in 1890, the gouache that Gustav Klimt painted for this commission won him the Emperor's Prize, in the amount of four hundred gold ducats. Two years previously, Franz Joseph had awarded him the Gold Cross for Artistic Merit for his work decorating the new Burgtheater. Considering that Hasenauer, an architect whom the emperor regarded very highly, had called on the talent of the three young men in 1884 to decorate the Hermesvilla, built for Empress Elisabeth on a former hunting ground east of Vienna, Gustav Klimt was clearly poised to establish himself as a major figure in Viennese architectural decoration. The ensuing decade would confirm his status.

In 1890, the Künstler-Compagnie was commissioned to work on one of the largest construction projects on the Ringstrasse, which had broken ground twenty years before: the celebrated Kunsthistorisches Museum, or Museum of Art History. As at the Burgtheater, Klimt was charged with decorating the ceiling of a grand staircase. He created eight spandrels and five intercolumnar pictures there. The building was inaugurated on 17 October 1891.

Following the death of Ernst Klimt from pericarditis, the Künstler-Compagnie was dissolved the following year. This did not keep Gustav Klimt and Matsch from pursuing a career in officialdom, however. In 1894, the board of the University of Vienna entrusted them with decorating the Great Hall of a new building, designed by Heinrich von Ferstel (1828–1883). Klimt's task was to paint the allegories of *Philosophy*, *Medicine* and *Jurisprudence*, as well as the ten spandrel panels on the theme of these allegories. Matsch was assigned the allegories of *Theology* and the *Victory of Light over Darkness*.

Success was not in the cards this time. Klimt opted to distance himself from the flamboyant, theatrical spirit of the Ringstrasse, manifested by the illusionist allegories of Hans Makart (1840–1884). Although his respect for allegory remained undiminished, he nevertheless departed from traditional iconography, which he judged insufficient for visualizing subjects relating to the human condition – precisely the subjects of the university's commission. The project ended in disaster. A first scandal erupted in March 1900 with the presentation of *Philosophy*. Eighty-seven professors