

secession

Vereinigung bildender KünstlerInnen Wiener Secession
Friedrichstraße 12, A-1010 Wien
T. +43-1-587 53 07, F. +43-1-587 53 07-34
office@secession.at, www.secession.at

BEETHOVENFRIES

Gustav Klimt created the Beethoven Frieze for the IX. exhibition of the “Association of Visual Artists—Vienna Secession,” which took place from April 15 to June 27, 1902. The exhibition architecture, designed by Josef Hoffmann, gave prominent form to the secessionist idea of the total artwork or *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Conceived as a homage to Ludwig van Beethoven, works by twenty-one Secession members related spatially and thematically to Max Klinger’s recently completed statue of the composer.

Klimt’s monumental fresco was located in the left aisle of the main hall, the first space entered by visitors to the exhibition. Today, the frieze is perceived as an autonomous work of art and is widely considered to be among the chef d’oeuvres of Viennese Art Nouveau (Jugendstil).

The frieze takes its theme from Richard Wagner’s interpretation of Beethoven’s IX. Symphony and depicts humankind’s search for happiness. To symbolize this yearning, Klimt chose “floating genii” who lead us into the story, recurring several times in the frieze as a horizontal chain of figures. On the left-hand wall, this horizontal band is only interrupted by one group of figures: a naked woman standing and a naked couple kneeling – symbols of suffering humanity – beg the Knight in Shining Armor for help. The “well-armed strongman” sets off in search of happiness on humanity’s behalf, inwardly spurred on by the two allegorical female figures behind him: Ambition and Compassion.

In the scene on the narrow wall, humanity must face the dangers and temptations of the “Hostile Forces”. The giant Typhoeus, a hybrid monster with shaggy fur, blue wings, and a snake-like body, extends across almost the entire wall, fixing the viewer with mother-of-pearl eyes. To his left stand his daughters, the three Gorgons, and above them, mask-like female heads stare out of the picture, allegorical representations of Sickness, Madness, and Death. The women to the monster’s right symbolize Lasciviousness, Wantonness and Intemperance, the latter identifiable by her large belly. Slightly further to the right cowers the emaciated female figure of “gnawing grief.” At top right of the narrow wall, we see the head of a floating genie. In Klimt’s narrative, this stands for humankind’s wishes and desires overcoming the “Hostile Forces.”

On the right-hand wall, humanity’s yearning for happiness finds fulfillment in poetry, portrayed as a female figure with a lyre. This is followed by an empty section under which, in the original exhibition layout, an opening gave a view of Klinger’s Beethoven sculpture. With this visual inclusion of the Beethoven icon, Klimt prepared for the frieze’s dramatic climax: in the final scene, female figures symbolizing the arts lead the way into the ideal realm of art. Klimt’s apotheosis of art consists of a kissing couple in front of the “Choir of Angels,” referring directly to Beethoven: the final chorus of Beethoven’s Ninth, based on Friedrich von Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*, contains the words “This kiss to the whole world.”

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The cycle was originally intended to be purely decorative and was to be removed after the exhibition. The frieze was purchased by collector Carl Reininghaus, who arranged for the artwork and its supporting structure of reeds and laths to be cut into eight sections and taken from the wall following the Klimt Retrospective (18th Secession exhibition, 1903). In 1915, it was acquired by the Jewish industrialist August Lederer. In 1938, the family Lederer was expropriated by the Nazis; the frieze remained in Austria. It was lawfully purchased by the Austrian state in 1972 and restored over a ten-year period by the Federal Office of Monuments.

In 1986, the fresco was installed in a specially designed room at the Secession and made permanently accessible to the public as a permanent loan from the Belvedere Gallery.

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Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.