

secession

Vereinigung bildender KünstlerInnen Wiener Secession
Friedrichstraße 12, A-1010 Wien
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SECESSION

The Vienna Secession is an exhibition space that occupies a unique position in the history of modern art, combining a contemporary, forward-looking program with a building whose architecture is an icon of the spirit of adventure around 1900. This architecture has aged well and as a result, its functionality and aesthetic elegance continue to offer excellent conditions for today's artistic and exhibition practice. The Secession is designed to be used in many different ways, a challenge taken up by artists who engage with both the inside and the outside of the building, producing an ongoing series of specially developed artistic ideas and concepts. Artists have often engaged with both the façade and the dome composed of 3000 gold-plated iron laurel leaves. The magnificent Hauptraum (main gallery) with its glass roof, one of the very first "white cubes," is particularly well suited for interventions on account of its flexibility. With the Grafisches Kabinett (print room) on the upper floor and the three-room gallery in the basement, this ensures a wide range of options for exhibitions.

In keeping with the motto that adorns its facade—"For every time, its art. For art, its freedom."—the Secession hosts an international program that explores current forms of artistic expression in solo and themed exhibitions. It is a sounding board for the aesthetic and critical discourses on art, culture, and society that define our era, and for the political significance accruing to them. The Secession is an important forum for young experimental art, but its concept also includes prominent, already established positions. Texts, catalogs, symposia, and lectures supplement, document, and communicate the exhibition projects.

Today, the "Association of Visual Artists Vienna Secession" is the world's oldest independent exhibition space dedicated explicitly to contemporary art. The yearly program of ten to fifteen shows is put together by the members of the Association's executive committee on a democratic basis according to purely artistic criteria. Funding comes in equal parts from public subsidies, private partners, and operating revenues.

The Secession was founded in 1897 by a group of artists led by Gustav Klimt who had split with the conservative Künstlerhaus. Klimt became the first president of the Association, whose founding members included painters Kolo Moser and Carl Moll, and architects Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Maria Olbrich. Olbrich designed the gallery in 1898, a built manifesto for the ideas of the new Association of Visual Artists that had committed itself to the Modernism of the moment. An important role was also played in the secessionist movement by the gallery's art magazine *Ver Sacrum* (Sacred Spring), whose programmatic title adorns the facade in gold letters to this day. Conceived as an "art temple" of early Modernism, the Secession is a key work of Viennese art nouveau, or "Jugendstil."

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On its foundation, the Secession caused a stir with its exhibition designs that focused attention on the space and crossed boundaries of artistic discipline, synthesizing architecture, painting, sculpture, graphic art, and interior design. One of the most famous exhibitions was a major group show dedicated to Ludwig van Beethoven that took place in 1902, for which Klimt created his Beethoven Frieze. Measuring over 34 meters in length, this mural takes its theme from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and its eroticism and graphic depictions inspired admiration as well as drawing intense criticism. The Beethoven Frieze was originally installed in the left-hand aisle of the Secession's main gallery, the Hauptraum, and was taken down in 1903. In 1973 it was purchased by the Austrian state and in 1986 it returned to the Secession, where it hangs in a specially designed room in the building's basement level.

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THE ASSOCIATION OF VISUAL ARTISTS VIENNA SECESSION

The Association of Visual Artists Vienna Secession was founded in 1897 by a group of artists led by Gustav Klimt who had split with the conservative Künstlerhaus. Klimt became the first president of the Association, whose founding members included painters Kolo Moser and Carl Moll, and architects Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Maria Olbrich. Olbrich designed the exhibition venue in 1898, a built manifesto for the ideas of the new Association of Visual Artists that had committed itself to the Modernism of the moment. The art magazine *Ver Sacrum* (Sacred Spring), whose programmatic title adorns the façade in gold letters to this day also played an important role in the secessionist movement.

The erection of its own exhibition building was one of the guiding principles of the "Association of Visual Artists Vienna Secession" that was discussed in the foundation meeting. The Secession members commissioned the above mentioned hardly 30-year-old architect Joseph Maria Olbrich, who was at the time a member of Otto Wagner's atelier, to design the building, which was to become a key work of Viennese Art Nouveau. A site along the Ringstrasse was originally chosen, but Olbrich's designs met with violent reaction on the part of the Municipal Council. It was only after the site was transferred to a plot on Friedrichstrasse that the Municipal Council granted permission for "the erection of a provisional exhibition pavilion for the period of the next ten years" (minutes of the meeting of the Municipal Council of 17 November, 1897).

The necessary financial resources for construction were partly supplied by patrons, especially the industrial magnate Karl Wittgenstein, and partly from the proceeds of the first exhibition in the k.k.Gartenbaugesellschaft (Royal and Imperial Gardening Society). The Municipality of Vienna allocated the site along the Wienzeile. Joseph Maria Olbrich designed the building over the course of ten months, continually modifying his designs to correspond to new requirements, while reviewing and refining them at the same time. The cornerstone was laid on 28 April 1898 within the framework of a small celebration. Only six months later, on 29 October 1898, the construction was complete.

The Vienna Secession was adapted and renovated several times in the course of its hundred year history. The entrance hall was already being altered in 1901. In 1908, part of the ornamentation and the slogan "Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit" ("For every time its art. For art its Freedom") were removed. The building was damaged by bombs during World War II and set on fire by the retreating German army.

During the reconstruction in 1963 the original décor was renewed and a second floor inserted in the entrance hall. Adolf Krischanitz was responsible for the most recent renovation in 1984/85.

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Alongside the restitution of the central entrance hall and main exhibitions spaces to their original proportions, the ancillary rooms for exhibition organisation and administration were reorganised and developed further.

The Secession building, which is now recognised as one of the high points of any visit to Vienna, was heaped with derision at the turn of the century. The building was described as Opinions "Temple for Bullfrogs", "A Temple of the Anarchic Art Movement", a "mausoleum", a "Pharaoh's Tomb", "The Grave of the Mahdi" and a "crematorium", the dome was known as "a head of cabbage", the whole building dismissed as a "a bastard between temple and warehouse" and "a cross between a greenhouse and a blast furnace".

Gustav Klimt and the Beethoven Frieze

On its foundation, the Secession caused a stir with its exhibition designs that focused attention on the space and crossed boundaries of artistic discipline, synthesizing architecture, painting, sculpture, graphic art, and interior design. One of the most famous exhibitions was a major group show that took place in 1902 (15 April to 27 June, 1902), for which Klimt created his Beethoven Frieze. This exhibition, conceived as an homage to the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, most sublimely embodied the secessionist idea of the "Gesamtkunstwerk".

A total of 21 artists collaborated on the exhibition under the direction of Josef Hoffmann. The exhibition centered around Max Klinger's Beethoven statue placed in the main hall. In addition to Klimt's Beethoven Frieze, wall paintings and decorations by Alfred Roller, Adolf Böhm, Ferdinand Andri and numerous other artists were presented. The declared aim of the exhibition was to reunite the separate arts - architecture, painting, sculpture and music - under a common theme: the "work of art" was to emerge from the interplay of the design of the rooms, the wall paintings and sculpture.

Klimt's monumental wall cycle was located in the left-hand aisle, which visitors to the exhibition entered first. An opening in the wall offered a view of Max Klinger's Beethoven statue, indicating the interplay of architecture, painting (Klimt's Beethoven Frieze) and sculpture (Klinger's Beethoven) as soon as the visitor entered.

The XIVth exhibition drew nearly 60,000 visitors, thus becoming one of the Secession's greatest public successes. It also proved fundamentally important to Klimt's further development, as well as that of numerous other participating artists: the ideal of the interplay and aesthetic integration of all artistic disciplines and the collaboration tested in the Beethoven exhibition was successfully continued by the Wiener Werkstätte, among others.

Today the Beethoven Frieze is considered one of Klimt's key works and one of the high points of Viennese Art Nouveau.

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While many artist colleagues hailed Klimt's Beethoven Frieze with enthusiastic praise, the general public and the contemporary press frequently reacted to the presentation of the frieze with indignation or even outrage. Klimt's work, which enjoys such widespread popularity today, was regarded by many of his contemporaries as incomprehensible, scandalous and "obscene".

In the case of the Beethoven Frieze, it was primarily the front wall with the "Hostile Forces" that elicited outrage: the depictions of Sickness, Madness, Death and the angular expressive figure of Gnawing Grief were decried as "images of madness and fixed ideas", "pathological scenes" and "shameless caricatures of the noble human figure", the lewd eroticism of the Gorgons and the depictions of Lasciviousness and Wantonness was denounced by many as "painted pornography".

The Beethoven Frieze was originally intended as an ephemeral work of art and, like the other decorative paintings, it was to be removed after the close of the exhibition. It was only owing to fortunate circumstances, that the frieze was not destroyed as planned: the Secession was to present the following year a major Klimt retrospective (XVIIIth exhibition, 1903), and it was decided to leave the work of art in place.

In 1903 the arts patron and collector Carl Reinighaus purchased the frieze, which was cut into seven pieces to be removed from the wall and was stored for twelve years in a furniture depot in Vienna, until Reinighaus sold the frieze again in 1915 to the industrialist August Lederer. Lederer was one of Klimt's most important supporters and owner of what was probably the most extensive and important collection of Klimt pictures in private hands at that time.

In 1938 the Lederer family, like so many other families of Jewish origin, was dispossessed. The Beethoven Frieze was thus placed in "state custody" and was only officially returned to the ownership of the family heir Erich Lederer, who had meanwhile settled in Geneva, after the end of World War II.

In 1972 the Beethoven Frieze was purchased by the Republic of Austria and restored over the course of ten years under the direction of Manfred Koller from the Federal Office of Monuments Vienna. Finally, in the course of the general renovation of the Secession in 1985, a room was created in the basement for the Beethoven Frieze. The dimensions of this room exactly correspond to the climatized space required for the frieze for reasons of conservation, and here the frieze can be shown separately from ongoing exhibitions. Since 1986 the wall cycle has again been made permanently accessible to the public at the Secession as a loan from the Austrian Gallery Belvedere.

Today

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One of the basic objectives of the Association is the presentation of current developments in Austrian and international art, as well as to cultivate an openness for experimentation. In keeping with the motto that adorns its facade—“For every time its art. For art its freedom.”—the Secession hosts an international program that explores current forms of artistic expression in solo and themed exhibitions. It is a sounding board for the aesthetic and critical discourses on art, culture, and society that define our era, and for the political significance accruing to them. The Secession is an important forum for young experimental art, but its concept also includes prominent, already established positions. Texts, catalogs, symposia, and lectures supplement, document, and communicate the exhibition projects.

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THE KEY TO VIENNESE MODERNISM

No Viennese building formulated the dawn of Modernism in such a youthfully radical manner or preserved it with such freshness as the white, gold-crowned “temple of art” of the Vienna Secession. An image of the future incorporating a new view of the past, which at the end of the 19th) century was in danger of being bogged down in the decorative detritus of a society obsessed with representation, education and culture which was falling apart at the seams.

If we understand a *key building* to mean an edifice which takes all the cultural and societal, economic and technological components, the inherited artistic traditions and forward-looking aesthetic tendencies of an age and unites all these elements at the highest level, then the House of the Vienna Secession is such a secular “key building,” encompassing all the approaches to art and architecture of the dawning era of Viennese Modernism around 1900. And we can safely hazard a look round at the sometimes overwhelmingly grand buildings of this decade, none of them has the same radiant power as this small exhibition building within sight of the Karlskirche, on the edge of a major space at the heart of the city for which the Viennese (even if it’s perhaps only in their minds) have still not found a form.

And what about Otto Wagner, you may ask? But Wagner’s “modern” buildings came into being at the end of an architect’s life that happened to coincide with the dawning of a new generation. They are signs of the times of a different kind, on a different scale and with a different significance.

In revolutionary circles Joseph Maria Olbrich was seen as the embodiment of the youthful genius, eclipsing all around. At the age of thirty his artistic imagination was at its zenith, embedded in an environment bubbling with creativity and in association with the most progressive forces in society. So he had the ideal “thermal conditions” for a soaring flight to unprecedented artistic heights. At the same time he was still under the wing of a master who was accorded a veneration bordering on the religious, and, what is more, he was intoxicated by the Wagnerian myth of progress and the Nietzschean self-understanding of art.

But the Secession occupies an absolutely unique position in yet another respect: the exhibition house is probably the best-analysed building in Vienna. During the course of the last general renovation Otto Kapfinger produced an accompanying work of research that not only provides a detailed history of the Secession’s planning and construction and its contemporary reception, but also describes the eventful chronology of permanent modifications, culminating in the partial destruction of the building in the Second World War and the later attempts at rebuilding and renovation.

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The last general renovation (by Adolf Krischanitz) – which, incidentally, was also completed in the midst of a “revolutionary mood” which swept through Viennese architecture in the nineteen-eighties – was a model exercise in “critical preservation,” an exemplary engagement with a hermetic but equally maltreated, one might even say fragmented, structure from the era of Viennese Modernism. So the building not only represents a singular “statement” but an ongoing discourse, a fascinating history of construction and critical reception that spans a whole century and still remains a challenge for contemporary architectural research in Vienna. The Secession reconciles a Viennese paradox, being a sign of its times and a timeless architectural monument in one.

Friedrich Achleitner

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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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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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