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The Golden Period of Gustav Klimt: The Analysis of *The Kiss* and *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*

Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) can be called one of the most prominent Austrian symbolist artists, whose method was unprecedented for his time. Klimt represented Vienna Secession movement but was also heavily affected by the Japanese school of art. His legacy includes numerous portraits, sketches, murals, landscapes, allegories, and other works. The major subject uniting them is the eroticism of the female body, represented in eclectic and fantastic style (Kim 29). Despite the fact that many of the artist's works were accused of pornography and provoked heated debate and criticism, he still managed to reach the peak of success during the "Golden Phase". The paper at hand will provide a brief overview of this period and attempt to analyze the two most outstanding works: *The Kiss* and *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*.

"Golden Phase": Period Overview

The "Golden Phase", which covered 11 years (1899-1910), was primarily characterized by the application of gold leaf alongside with oil. It is commonly believed that the artist's passion for gold derives from observing the work of his father, who was a gold-engraver. Klimt attempted to use gold even before the celebrated period: Golden leaf was applied in *Pallas Athene* (1898) and in *Judith I* (1901). However, *The Kiss* and *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* - the most famous and demonstrative works of the "Golden Phase" – were painted much later,

in 1907-1908 (Brooks 50). By this time, the artist had already elaborated the technique to perfection.

Klimt frequently visited Venice and Ravenna and was greatly inspired by mosaics and Byzantine imagery, which he later adopted while creating his masterpieces. Furthermore, he was commissioned, among other eminent painters, to decorate Palais Stoclet, which belonged to a wealthy Belgian industrialist, Adolphe Stoclet. This mansion is one of the most luxurious buildings of the Art Nouveau age. Klimt's best pieces of ornament, *Fulfillment* and *Expectation*, were painted there (Kotsimbos 858). The artist himself considered them the ultimate stage of supremacy in decorative painting

Despite the Klimt's preference for seclusion and avoidance of the public, he never rejected the society of women, which resulted in the creation of five unique portraits (1907-1909), intricately uniting his love of female beauty and costumes (Kim 30). All women in the paintings are wrapped in fur. Although an attentive viewer can easily discern repetitive motifs in Klimt's works, it is much more challenging to make inferences about his general vision and message. Klimt himself never gave any comments on the issue, which means that we are left to judge the period by the works attributed to it rather than the artist's perception.

The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I

Klimt created two portraits of Adele Bloch-Bauer (1881-1925), who was the wife of a Viennese banker. *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (also nicknamed *The Woman in Gold*) was painted in 1907 and is believed by many critics to be the best masterpiece of the artist. The painting is now exhibited in the Neue Galerie in New York City (Russell 1). Although it is debatable whether the portrait is the finest of Klimt's works, it is unquestionably the one, which took most of his time, preparation,

and effort. The work began in 1903; the first sketches were ready by 1904 and were purchased by Bloch-Bauers (who commissioned the artist to paint the portrait). The portrait was completed only in 1907 since it required a lot of preliminary steps.

Although it was not particularly big in size (140 by 140 cm), the elaborateness of the technique is impressive (oil paint was combined with gold and silver leaf; some bas-relief elements were made using gesso and a mixture of binder and chalk) (Russell 2). The combination of materials was unprecedented for the time.

The central part of the painting is occupied by the sitter on the golden throne, whose power and wealth are emphasized by the gold jewelry she is wearing (the same that Klimt painted in *Judith*). Excessive use of gold adds superiority to the image. However, despite the fact that the woman is clearly detached from the earthly plane, there is no arrogance in her face and posture (Russell 2). On the contrary, everything in her sensual manner, melancholic eyes, and fragile, slender hands proves that she is gentle and vulnerable. The evident paradox of the portrait consists in the chiaroscuro created by the artist between the oil and the golden elements: The character of the sitter is revealed through her garments while unadorned parts of the body look the least expressive. Moreover, the effect of mutilation is created due to the contrast between the unearthliness of the decoration and naturalism of the face. The head seems to be disjoined from the body, which makes the woman even more aloof (Spretnak 63). Klimt intentionally omitted redundant elements, including peculiarities of the appearance (leaving only the hands and face), in order to shift the focus of the viewer's attention to the ornament, which is the major conveyor of the message (Brooks 51). There we can find numerous allusions to the motifs used in Egypt, Mycenae, Greece, and Byzantine. They include almond shapes, decorative A letters, eggs, and triangles.

In the portrait, Klimt evidently wanted to step away from materialism to a pure form, yet without falling into extremes – the woman is tangible, her strikingly natural features do not allow abstractions. *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* is the iconic work not only of the “Golden Phase” but of Klimt’s entire heritage (Russell 5). It is frequently compared with Mona Lisa in its splendor and impact.

The Kiss

Another masterpiece, *The Kiss*, was created between 1907 and 1908. The painting is presently stored in the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere museum in the Belvedere palace, Vienna, and enjoys the same popularity as *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* (Spretnak 65). The work on the painting began when the gilded style and celebration of sexual love already totally dominated Klimt’s artistic space (Kim 71). The technique used by the artist is the same as in the previous work (composition of oil paint and gold leaf); yet, its size is considerably larger (180 by 180 cm).

The painting depicts a man clasping a woman in his arms. The couple in gorgeous garments, engulfed in an immense space of gold, is so closely knit that the woman seems to be totally absorbed by the man’s figure. The picture has a slightly tragic touch: The entwined bodies shown against the sky are balancing on the edge of a meadow of flowers. Thus, the viewer is apprehensive that the lovers are about to fall into the abyss. The figures create a dichotomic unity being contrasted in their clothes, shapes, and manner (rectangular, rigid forms, standing for masculinity, are juxtaposed to oval and fluid ones, symbolizing femininity). The man is dressed in a robe with black and white ornament arranged chaotically on gold leaf. His head is crowned with a vine halo, which suggests the unity with nature and divine powers. On the contrary, the woman’s body and face are painted with the use of ovals and

curvy lines. Her tight-fitting dress has a flower pattern on it (allegorically connecting her with the man and his crown of vine); flowers are interlaced in a necklace under her chin and decorate her hair, highlighting delicate features of the face. Unlike the man, who is powerful, persistent, and sharp, she is mild, sensitive, and tender. The paradox is that, despite her fragility, it is actually the woman who prevents them both from falling into the unknown.

Same as in *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, the decorative patterns used in the decoration of the garment are quite typical of the Art Nouveau movement. However, there is also an influence of the Japanese art revealed in the simplified composition, which violated European canons in depicting the position of the man's head (too closely to the top edge of the painting). The golden shroud, surrounding the couple, is much more expressive and striking than representational forms (Kim 68). Furthermore, three-dimensionality is in an obvious conflict with two-dimensionality of the shimmering, flat background. There are numerous interpretations of the picture. Many critics believe that it unites mythological and religious features (Globig 34). Yet, despite religious allusions in the painting, it is still commonly believed to celebrate an earthly unity, sexuality, and sensual pleasures.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Gustav Klimt conventionally belongs to the Vienna Secession Movement, it is rather difficult to classify his legacy as it bears the influence of many schools, epochs, and styles. In the works attributed to the "Golden Phase", he attempted to step away from realism, yet without going into pure abstraction. His paintings unite the fantastic with the natural and reveal the full potential and expressive power of ornament.

Works Cited

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Appendix 1

The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer



Appendix 2

The Kiss

