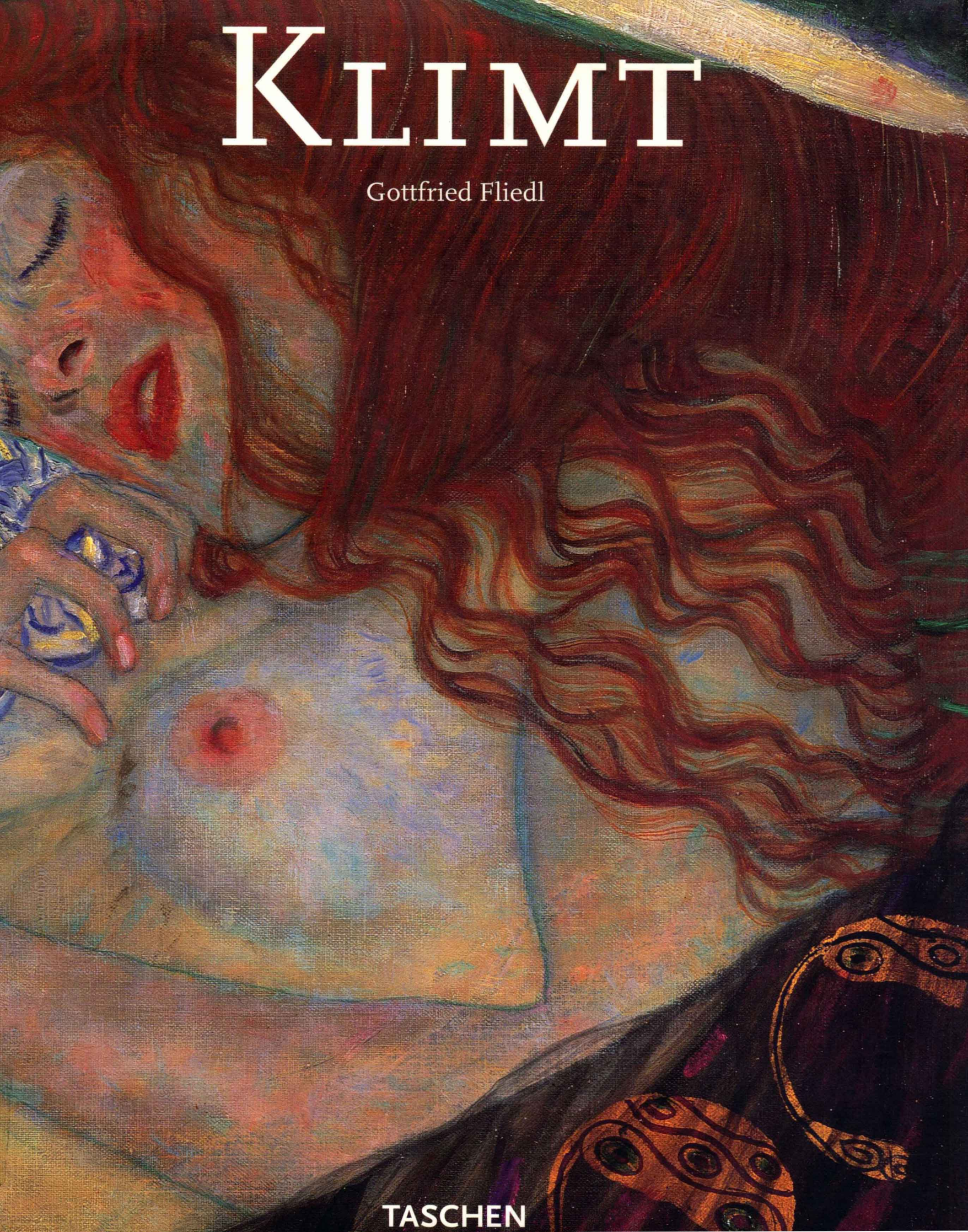


# KLIMT

Gottfried Fliedl



TASCHEN



Gottfried Fliedl

# GUSTAV KLIMT

1862 – 1918

The World in Female Form

**TASCHEN**

KÖLN LISBOA LONDON NEW YORK PARIS TOKYO

ILLUSTRATION PAGE 2:

*Lady with Hat and Feather Boa*, 1909

Dame mit Hut und Federboa

Oil on canvas, 69 x 55 cm

Österreichische Galerie, Vienna

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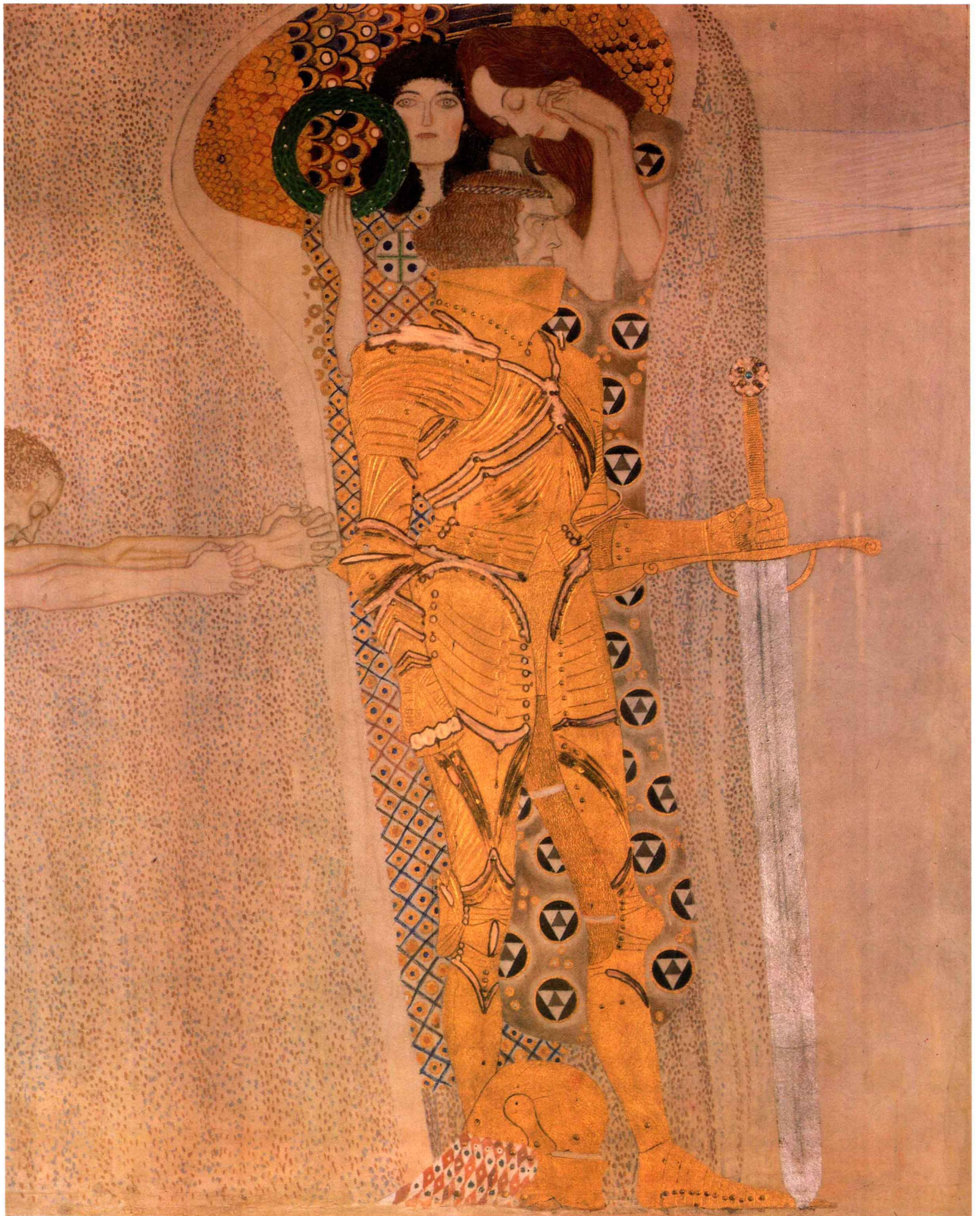
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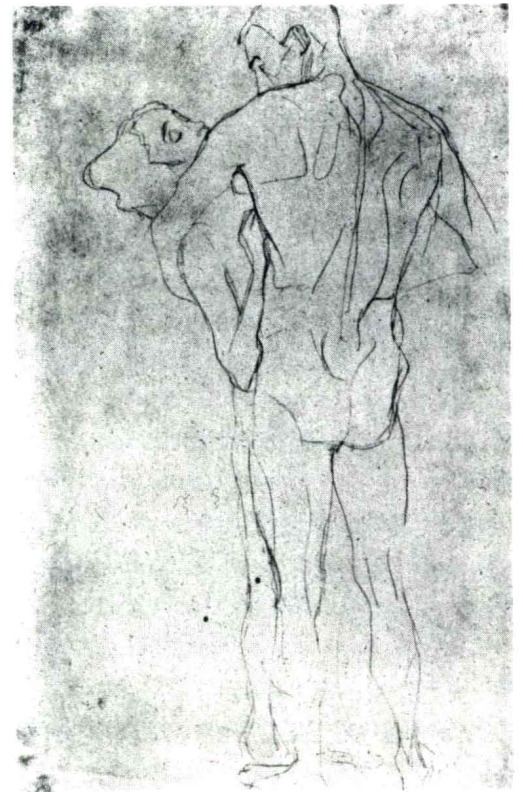
# Introduction – Klimt's Popularity

Summer 1977. A rail journey from Athens to Vienna. With all the usual delays, it will take the train about forty hours to reach Vienna. I am sharing a compartment with a young Japanese lecturer at some art college, who is travelling to the same place. He is one of those typical Far Eastern travellers who perfectly fits the standard cliché. He is going to do Europe in six days, with ten hours for Vienna – after an uninterrupted rail journey of two days and one night. He only has two aims in Vienna: to see Otto Wagner's architecture and – Gustav Klimt's paintings.

Klimt's worldwide popularity could be illustrated with many similar episodes. It can be seen in the undivided appreciation of a very broad international public as well as those with an academic interest in art and social history. It is likely that no other Modernist artist has ever enjoyed such broad and lasting popularity. (For the time being, we shall refrain from giving a precise definition of the term 'Modernism' and how far it can be applied to Klimt's work).

Many of his works have been shown so frequently in the mass media that not even Dalí, Beuys, Picasso or Warhol – to name but a few – can compete with Klimt for media coverage. None of these artists is currently being used so many thousands of times as an advertising vehicle or an object of advertising. The never-ending fascination of Klimt's art can be seen in the innumerable uses to which his works are put. In Austria, in particular, they can be found in the most unexpected contexts. If you wish, you can have your bathroom decorated with Klimt tiles, or you can adorn your sitting-room with some hand-made Klimt embroidery, which is of course also available as a ready-made *petit point* picture. Klimt's major works can easily be taken home in the form of posters, stained glass or postcards. Art Nouveau's discovery of the female body and nudity as an advertising medium can still be felt today. The eroticism and preciousness of Klimt's work is an inexhaustible source for advertisers.

Austria's most widely read tabloid paper, for example, has used Klimt's art to advertise for a series on Austrian love life. For the New Year concert of the Vienna Philharmonic, which is always televised worldwide, Klimt's painting *The Kiss* (p. 117) was re-enacted as a 'live painting'. A popular publishing house may want to use Klimt's art to enhance the visual appeal of its latest book. And posters of his paintings even serve to advertise the financial reliability of a bank. Again and again, motifs from Klimt's works are used. His art, which has been



*Naked Lovers, Standing*, around 1908  
Pencil, 55 x 35 cm  
Historical Museum, Vienna

*The Beethoven Frieze* (detail), 1902  
Der Beethoven-Fries  
Casein paint on plaster, 220 cm high  
Austrian Gallery, Vienna



duplicated and modified many times by the mass media, has been well able to cross social barriers. Paintings like *The Kiss* can be found as elegant decorations in typical middle-class sitting-rooms and also in the form of cheap posters in students' bedsitters.

The Austrian Ministry of Education has always taken a great interest in Klimt's oeuvre as well. The purchase of his *Beethoven Frieze* (pp. 104f.) by the state and the long and costly restoration of the painting by the *Bundesdenkmalamt* – the Federal Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments – clearly show that Klimt is officially recognized as a great Austrian artist. Austria's former chancellor Bruno Kreisky specifically urged the restoration and public presentation of this mural, which had originally been created for the Viennese Secession. Using his personal influence in speeches and essays, he emphasized that the frieze was the work of an artist who had hardly been recognized at all at the time and who was finally being honoured as a genius.

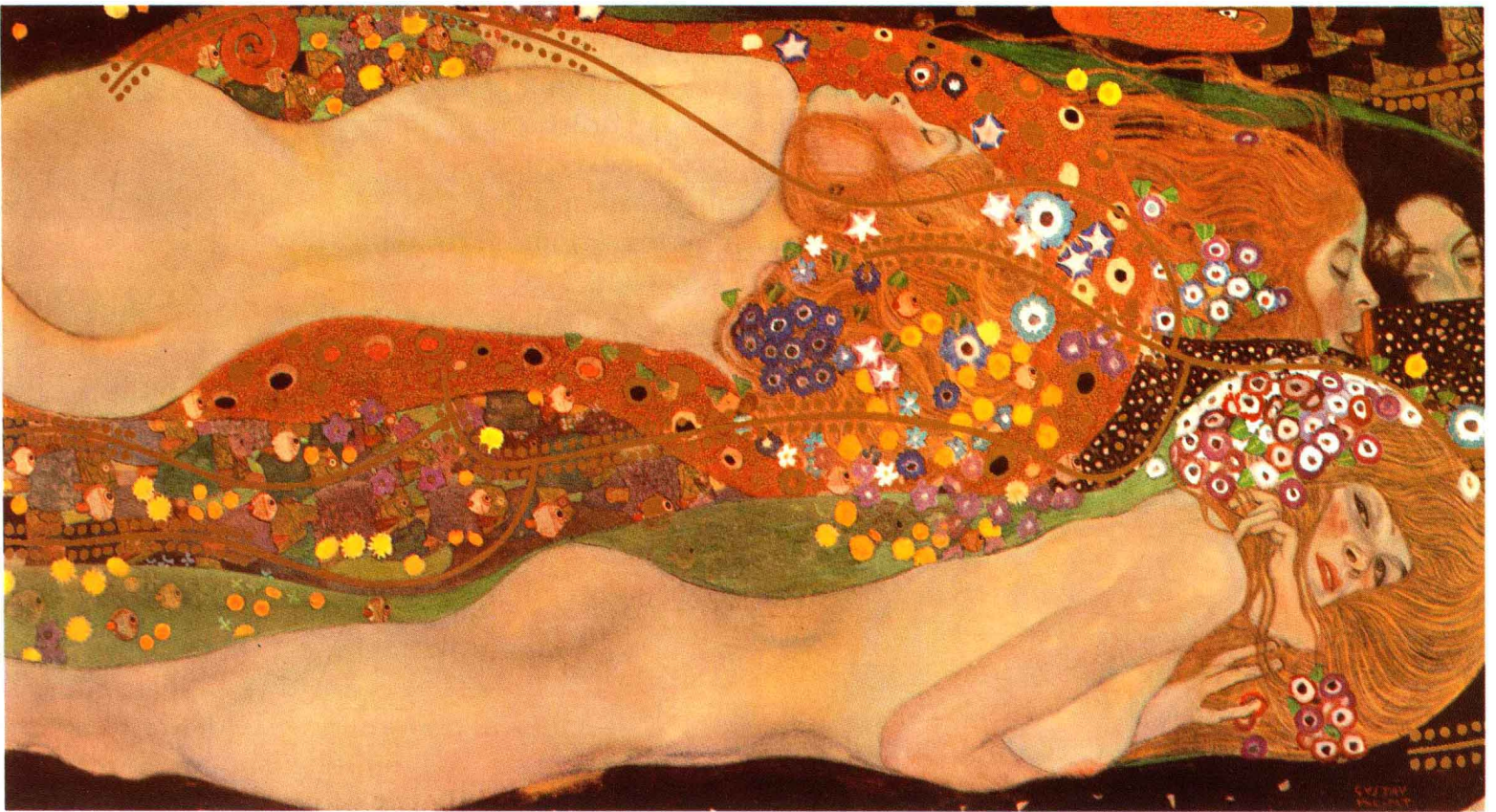
While it was being restored, the frieze was also copied to scale, for the purpose of various exhibitions. This procedure meant that the original became a self-contained monument. Initially it had only served as part of a larger exhibition that was planned as a work of art in itself. After the Secession exhibition it would simply have been discarded, so it was produced very cheaply. Since then, however, it has become a lasting artistic monument and has returned to its original place, the Secession building. However, it is no longer in the main hall, which is still used for special exhibitions of the Secession, but has been given a separate room in the basement.

All this evidence of Klimt's popularity makes it seem doubtful whether he should really be counted among the ranks of the great Modernists whom he probably surpasses as far as the omnipresence of his paintings goes. Names like Duchamp, Malevich, Mondrian and Magritte stand for epoch-making changes and exemplary developments in Modernist art. It is difficult to say if the same is true for Klimt and whether his art, too, contains new, pioneering artistic options with new, critical insights into reality.

When Hans Hollein staged his spectacular exhibition *Dream and Reality* (Vienna 1986), Klimt's main works provided some of its focal points and *The Kiss* was almost displayed like an object of worship. However, in the context of this tense contrast of *Dream* and *Reality*, nobody would have wanted to see Klimt's art as part of *Reality*. Although he witnessed the disastrous breakdown of an empire and the end-of-the-world experiment of an entire culture, his work is far more the ecstatic reflection of fin-de-siècle society than a critical, clear-sighted discussion of social reality at the time of the disintegrating Habsburg monarchy. Even during his lifetime he was simply regarded as *decadent* – a typical representative of the decay and decline that prevailed at the turn of the century. With the renewed interest in the culture of the declining Habsburg monarchy, this assessment of Klimt has disappeared almost altogether.

However, when we enquire into Klimt's position as an artist, we should add a further question: does Klimt fit into 20th-century art





*Water Serpents II*, 1904-1907  
 Wasserschlangen II  
 Oil on canvas, 80 x 145 cm  
 Private collection, Vienna

history at all? There can be no doubt that most of his important works were painted in this century. But his training, the beginning of his career and thus the crucial factors that influenced his later development as an artist reach far back into the 19th century – the heyday of bourgeois liberalism in the 1870s and 1880s. Moreover, considering that his art claimed to go against historicism and the tide of rapid industrialization, does it not somehow hark back to a cultural period that disappeared altogether with the decline of the Habsburg monarchy?

Art historians, of course, see Klimt mainly as a member and sponsor of the Secession, which rebelled against antiquated ideas in the world of art and decisively influenced the breakthrough of Modernism in Vienna. He is seen as a painter and graphic artist who opened up new artistic possibilities and who identified – both politically and as a painter – with the young, rebellious generation of artists. This is sometimes reflected in an almost propaganda-like quality of his works, e.g. his Secession exhibition poster. All this, together with his occasional practical involvement as the head, organizer and - albeit rather taciturn – spokesman of the group, makes him one of the pioneers of Modernism.

Klimt has even been called an avant-garde artist. If we define the avant-garde as artistic, social and at the same time political rebellion, then at first sight it does indeed seem to apply to an artist like Klimt. In a major article, the American cultural historian Carl Schorske has interpreted Klimt's life and work as a protest, a revolt against his father's generation and their art. Schorske sees the accompanying



conflicts as a 'crisis of the liberal ego', a personality crisis which left deep traces in Klimt's work. However, we will see that the alliance of Secessionist artists and state politics – which only lasted a few years anyway – was politically conservative, mixed with a mood of artistic change, so that it cannot be viewed as progressive in character except in a very limited sense. It was part of the paradoxical situation in Vienna at the time that the state was convinced that art as a medium was still unadulterated by all political antagonisms. However, this soon turned out to be a mistake. The Austrian minister of education, in particular, was convinced that art could express the concept of the state – its unity and that of the nations – in an unbroken form, irrespective of all social and ethnic crises. Many artists did indeed identify with patriotic cultural and artistic endeavours and allowed themselves and even their future ambitions to become subservient to this concept of the state and, occasionally, also to the monarchy.

Apparently, then, there was considerable antagonism between commitment to aesthetic rebellion and a truce with the ruling culture, between *avant-gardists* and *décadence* artists, who had once been in disgrace and were now admired and widely sponsored. The former had found their organizational backing in the Secession and – later – in other associations. Such antagonism poses a number of questions which will be discussed in the following chapters. Questions about Klimt's fascination, popularity and topicality lead to these very artistic and cultural problems, which are expressed in his work. They have survived and are still regarded with keen interest.

Klimt's fame is still growing. Art historians have developed increasingly accurate research methods to analyse important aspects of his work, and reproduction techniques are becoming yet more perfect, thus enhancing the sensory fascination of his paintings. Large-scale exhibitions in Venice, Vienna, Paris and New York, devoted entirely to the history of art and culture under the Habsburg monarchy at the turn of the century, have kindled a renewed interest in Klimt's work. To a large extent, his popular appeal has always been due to the art market. In the same year that he died a large exhibition of Klimt's drawings was organized at Gustav Nebehay's gallery, and even today's great art dealers enthusiastically continue to display his work everywhere in the world.<sup>1</sup>

In 1908, with the *Kunstschau* exhibition, Klimt was at the height of his career. The exhibition, which contained several of Klimt's works as its highlights, was described as a "festive garment" for the artist. The magazine *Die Fackel*, where Karl Kraus had written a number of sneeringly caustic remarks about him, also contained an article by Otto Stoessel, in which he said, "Despite his brilliant gifts and his most exquisite hyper-refinement of expertise, Klimt fell victim to this dreadful state of affairs called 'taste', thus sharing the fate of everything that is relative and passes away with time."<sup>2</sup> Hardly ever has a critic been so wrong.

"I'm not very good at the spoken or the written word, particularly not if I'm supposed to say something about myself or my work. (...) If anyone wants to find out anything about me as an artist who is worth considering as a person, then he should have a good look at my paintings and try to find out from them who I am and what my intentions are." Gustav Klimt



# Klimt's Fame

In order to understand Klimt, we must bear in mind that he is still surrounded by a number of clichés which have tenaciously persisted in playing an important role and which started when he was still alive. One of them is that of the unappreciated, misunderstood – even persecuted – artist. “Gustav Klimt,” wrote the former director the Albertina Graphics Collection in Vienna, “used to meet with bitter rejection in his time. Given the historical and socio-historical situation, this was inevitable. It was a world in which all academic teachings of beauty were gradually losing their credibility and people were holding on, with all their strength, to things that were familiar. This world was bound to express its aggression with vehemence. After all, it felt that not only its aesthetics were being threatened.”<sup>3</sup> It remains to be seen how far the standard concept of an artist who was in opposition to his times actually fits Klimt. It certainly arose quite early, at the beginning of his career, when Klimt did indeed become a controversial topic in Vienna’s cultural circles. In 1903 a book called *Gegen Klimt* (‘Against Klimt’) was published by Hermann Bahr, a card-carrying member of the Secession who frequently wrote for the association. The book consisted entirely of polemical outbursts against the painter, whom he labelled an “outlaw”.

Bahr had already stylized Klimt as a persecuted artist as early as 1901. Klimt’s sketches of his so-called *Faculty Paintings* (pp. 76f.) for the University of Vienna had given rise to some controversy, which prompted Bahr to depict the artist as an unrecognized, misunderstood genius who had to face a hostile public and whose only obligation was to his own art. “There is a young artist who is becoming known rapidly, who is given the respect of other artists, of connoisseurs and of laymen and who gets clients ... someone who is very likely, as they say, to ‘make it’ quickly. He has the most marvellous future in front of him, in a few years’ time he will be a professor – and then he can probably settle down to a quiet life. But that does not appeal to him. He is dissatisfied. He feels he can do more. He feels that he has never really given himself and that he has only ever painted in a foreign language, as it were. He can’t bear it any more. Only now does he realize what it is that makes an artist – the power to show his own unique inner world, which has never existed before him, nor will ever exist after him. So this is what he wants to do. He wants to be unique. He goes through a tremendous crisis until he has eradicated everything alien, has acquired all his means of expression and has finally



*Nude Woman, Standing and Leaning on Her Elbows, from the Left*, around 1900  
Red chalk, 32 x 45 cm  
Historical Museum, Vienna

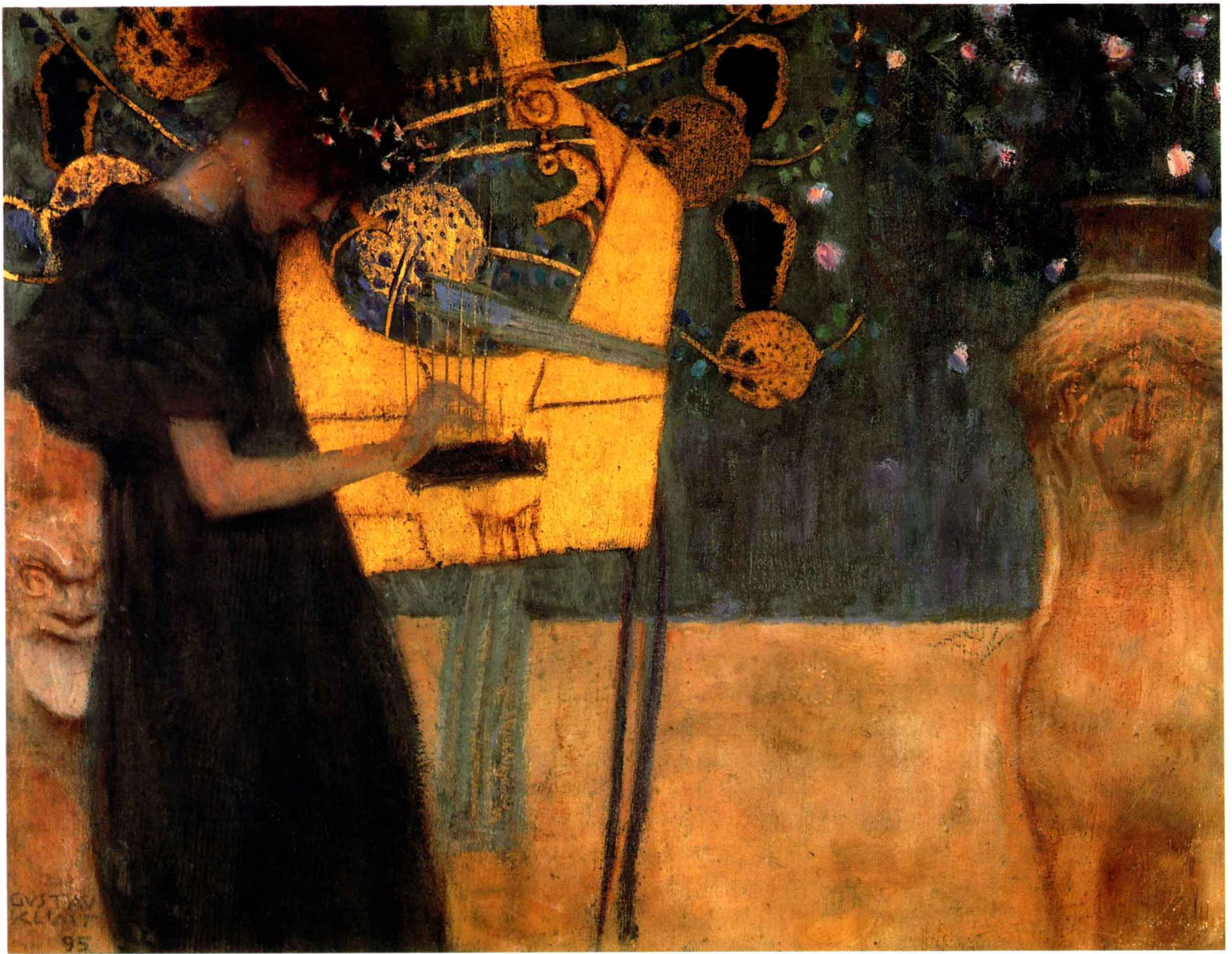
become his own artist . . . But suddenly something unexpected happens: not only is he misunderstood – no, ignorance runs out into the streets and rants and raves against him. People turn against him, using the crudest means of political agitation. He is personally denounced, suspected, slandered, and all the instincts of the common crowd are stirred up against him . . . ”<sup>4</sup>

Bahr’s speech was immediately printed and publicized in the form of a pamphlet. It cleverly promoted the idea of a lonely artist pitted against society, an autonomous, creative individual, not tied to traditions, independent of any influences, who necessarily has to face hostility because of his rebellious art, which is the very embodiment of progress. The idea of an artist who has to pay for his mission with social ostracism is a stereotype with which the 19th century, in particular, tried to determine the role of an artist in an ambiguous way. It is amazing that it should have survived so powerfully until the present day. Klimt was a prominent member of the Secession and, from time to time, its chairman. And although this artists’ association systematically rejected all traditional forms of art, it enjoyed the highest possible favour. A contemporary painting shows an audience of the Secession artists with Kaiser Franz Joseph I: Klimt is seen introducing the members of the artists’ association to the ruler, in particular the ancient Rudolf von Alt. The value of this picture is more than anecdotal, for it illustrates the political recognition of the Secession. Although some members of the Imperial family completely rejected it, this audience proved the national and political significance of the association, a status which it enjoyed for several years, mainly because of the patronage that was given to it by the minister of education, Hartel.

When the Habsburg monarchy had reached the height of its crisis and when social, national and economic problems seemed to have become intricately connected and therefore unsolvable, it was felt that art – and culture in general – was a force which could create harmony between all the disparate groups within society. The artists’ association was therefore given considerable support by the state. The picture of the audience may seem insignificant, but it is a pictorial document of this political hope as well as the attempt to combine political conservatism and aesthetic progress. This alliance was very much in agreement with the “mission” that the Secession had given itself: it was their aim to achieve both the aesthetic enhancement of life and the popularization of art.

As for Klimt himself, he certainly enjoyed public recognition both personally and as an artist. The failure of a large-scale project such as his *Allegories of Faculties* for the University of Vienna is insufficient to prove that he was an unrecognized, “sub-cultural” artist. This extremely prestigious commission did of course trigger off a quarrel that was preceded by many other arguments about large public buildings on Vienna’s Ringstrasse. Indeed, it finally resulted in the complete cessation of work for the Austrian state. However, after 1900, Klimt still had no difficulties in attracting the support of patrons, leading art critics and journalists. Access to the upper echelons of society was open to him ever since his brother had married Helene





*Music I*, 1895  
 Die Musik I  
 Oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm  
 Bavarian State Collection of Paintings,  
 Neue Pinakothek, Munich

Flöge, and, most importantly, Klimt continually received important commissions, so that he never had to suffer material hardship.

In 1900 Klimt was awarded a gold medal at the Paris World Fair, a year later the Bavarian State Collection of Paintings bought his painting *Music* (1895; p. 13), and in 1902 his first drawings were purchased by the celebrated Albertina Graphic Collection in Vienna. The 18th exhibition of the Secession (1903) was devoted entirely to Klimt, and in 1908 the Kunstschau exhibition celebrated his art by giving him an entire hall. In 1905, he was given the Villa Romana Award of the German Artists' Association. In 1906 he became honorary member of the Royal Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, and, shortly before his death, of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, although the latter never awarded him a professorship during his lifetime.

The real reason why Klimt was stylized as an unrecognized artist who did not receive fame until much later was, among other things, the continuing public apathy towards his most significant works and a lack of enthusiasm for showing them in museums. The proud rediscovery of the artist, which accompanied, for example, the restoration