



2

**Danae. 1907/08**

Oil on canvas, 77 x 83 cm,

Hans Dichand Collection, Vienna

# GUSTAV KLIMT AND THE ART OF EAST ASIA

BY JOHANNES WIENINGER

■ In 1913, the Japanese artist and journalist Kijiro Ohta visited Vienna with the objective of writing an article on Gustav

■ Klimt for the art journal *Bijutsu-shinpo* (“News from the Art World”). In its objectivity and detail, this report is something of a genre picture of the art scene in Vienna after 1900. Almost dispassionately, Ohta gives an account of his efforts to establish contact with Gustav Klimt. Procuring a letter of introduction with the greatest of difficulty, he follows up even the tiniest rumors, picking up rumors of indiscretion and offering in this manner overall an accurate picture of the “artist prince”.<sup>1</sup>

In the end, however, Ohta did succeed in making the arduous journey into the suburb, several kilometers to the west of Schönbrunn, where Klimt had maintained a studio since 1911. Ohta was sitting in the garden, when Klimt suddenly stormed past him and then, only recognizing him at second glance, remembered the announced visitor from faraway Japan and devoted a few minutes to the distant traveler. Klimt showed him several drawings and sketches as well as unfinished paintings displayed on easels, and then he finally broke the silence of their non-verbal communication with a single word: “Japon.”

This was exactly the word that the stranger was waiting for and that he could now take home with him as a sort of confirmation. But this verbal affirmation would not have been necessary. One glimpse of the studio would have sufficed: a display case with all sorts of little objects documented the interest in things foreign, and then there was the cabinet with kimonos and Chinese fabrics and robes. And above all, visible for every visitor – the great studio wall, with the image of the god Guandi (fig. 1) and his attendants (from China or Korea) in the middle, framed by *ukiyo-e*, Japanese woodcuts. All of this could pass for “Japanese”. People were not so meticulous at the time – what was most important was the fact that it was interesting and novel. It was not the content but the composition that mattered: all of these lines, colors

and surfaces contradicting the accustomed and studied rules, seemingly without space and hence also without time, this mix of art and ornament, the freedom and lightness with which an artist was able – and permitted! – to express himself.

Klimt’s work reflects the transition from the 19th to the 20th century; in fact, he himself was a driving force of this development in the Viennese scene. With the founding of the Vienna Secession in 1897, a group of innovative artists abandoned the traditions of Historicism and began to experiment with compositions, subjects, techniques, and colors. Not only did Klimt join this group of creative artists; he was, in fact, the outstanding personality among them.

The art scene in Vienna did not form part of the European avant-garde. For decades, the world had been looking to Paris and London, where traditional panel painting had long since been under-



1

**View of Gustav Klimt’s studio**

Vestibule of the studio in the Feldmühlgasse. Image of the god Guandi, surrounded by Japanese color wood



3 and 3a

Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), *Red and White Plum Blossoms*

A pair of two-section partition screens, paint and gold on paper, each 156 x 172,2 cm, Japan, Edo Period, beginning of the 18th century, MOA Museum of Art, Atami



going a renewal. The cultural climate in these two centers was by far more open than in other European capitals. Paris saw itself as the cultural capital. Artists flocked here in great numbers; many new ideas were pursued here, and Paris was also the departure point for many new ideas which spread into the rest of Europe. And one of the sources of these new ideas was Japanese art, which was welcomed and received with enthusiasm in Paris.

Western European countries established diplomatic and economic ties with East Asian countries well before Austria-Hungary. Furthermore, an aesthetic interest in the “new art” was aroused elsewhere earlier and, in the years around and shortly after 1870, had led to a so-called “exotic Japonisme”. The term “Japonisme” was coined around 1870 in Paris by Philippe Burty (1830-1890) and was used to refer to works which chiefly dealt with Japanese woodcut color prints (*ukiyo-e*). Just as everything from the Far East was termed “Indian” in the 17th century and “chinoiserie” in the 18th century, so in the 19th century, works from China and Korea were subsumed under the broad term “Japonisme” despite the fact that geographic knowledge had become more precise in the meantime.

By the time that Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858) produced his series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* just before his death, color woodcut

prints were also available for purchase in London and Paris. They were small, light, and easy to transport. With them, an entire culture could be placed in a portfolio and carried about. Katsushika Hokusai’s (1760–1849) little sketch books – from *Manga to One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji* – generally served the function of a vademecum. In the late 1870s, these printed pictures could be purchased in the first Orient shops, and there was surely not a single artist left who did not own something from East Asia.

A year after the founding of the Vienna Secession, the exhibition hall at the edge of the Karlsplatz was opened. And two years later, 1900, the never-to-be-repeated exhibition of Japanese art from the private collection of Adolf Fischer took place. Only a short time later, 1901, the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry (today’s MAK) mounted a monographic exhibit of the works of Katsushika Hokusai.

The great significance attributed to Far Eastern art as a prerequisite for an artist’s own creative work was evident in the Secession’s 16th exhibition in the year 1903, which bore the title *Development of Impressionism in Painting and Sculpture*. Jointly with the great Impressionists of France, woodcuts by Kiyonaga, Eishi, Toyokuni, Utamaro, Hokusai and Hiroshige were also shown here. But not only public collections and exhibitions showed Far

Eastern art; many private people began to collect orientalia as well, decorating their dwellings with the objects.

In the search for sources of inspiration, Far Eastern art lent itself readily. Japan was the last undiscovered culture, as the Viennese architect Adolph Loos remarked ironically.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when searching for “Japanese elements” in Gustav Klimt’s oeuvre, our sights must be set on works from two creative periods: on works from the so-called “Golden Phase” 1907/08 and the Stoclet Frieze, as well as on a succession of portraits after 1912.

#### ∴ DANAE

This subject from ancient mythology has a long tradition in the art history of Europe, which is why Klimt’s work is often, and probably justifiably, compared with the painting of the same name by the Venetian painter Titian (1485–1576). Upon regarding it more closely however, we can observe elements which are not explicable solely with reference to European painting history. The young lady is forced into a curious diagonal composition which is formed using bright and luminous surfaces – in particular, her thigh and the laburnum – as well as the dark, gold-adorned veil (fig. 2). The image is lacking spatial depth: the two-dimensional composition is defined by large and harmonious curvatures. The surfaces are placed next to each other – color placed next to color.

One does not need long to discover that these seemingly unusual compositions have an – indeed not coincidental – parallel to a work of Ogata Korins (1658–1716): the two-piece screen *Red and White Plum Blossom* by Ogata Korin (figs. 3 and 3a). Here the *Red Plum Blossom* is also divided by a large curved line running through the entire picture; creating a dark surface – the course of the river – and a bright, luminous one – the golden zone with the blossoming tree. Both Klimt’s *Danae* (77 x 83 cm) as well as Korin’s landscape (156 x 172,2 cm) are entered into more or less square formats, and if we transfer the division of the Japanese room screen onto Klimt’s picture, then we are able to see that the balance and tension of the two halves of the image, the relationship between empty space and painted area, resemble each other.

But there is also a great difference: Klimt mirrored Korin’s composition. He most probably knew that images were read from right to left in the Far East, but that the viewing habits in Europe would cause the eye to glide from left to right. In both pictures, the bright side is to be read first: Korin attracts our attention to the blossoms, Klimt to the laburnum.

#### ∴ ADELE BLOCH-BAUER I

At the same time, Gustav Klimt created one of his most noted portraits, the *Golden Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* (fig. 4).



4

Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I., 1907

Oil on canvas, 138 x 138 cm, Neue Galerie New York

Sitting elegantly in an armchair, Adele Bloch-Bauer’s sumptuous robes and her body are completely dissolved in ornament. She is enveloped in a veil, which falls in broad curves from her shoulders. But this is not all: it seems to melt harmoniously into the background, which frames and accentuates her face. The figure itself is displaced from the center, the veil only interrupts the golden void in the bottom part of the left half of the picture, emphasizing once again the asymmetric composition.

Gustav Klimt was obviously so fascinated by Korin’s pair of screens that he now followed up with the composition of its second piece, the *White Plum Blossoms* (fig. 3a). Again, one can imagine this square picture (138 x 138 cm), divided vertically in two, and perceive just how much Klimt modeled the composition on Korin’s.

One of the main characteristics of the so-called Rimpa school is the asymmetry in surprising two-dimensional composition. A balance between eccentricity and harmony resides in these usually large-scale works. There is no clash between the generous vacancy and implications of plenty; they fold into each other in curves and waves – can we not claim the same of the works of Gustav Klimt mentioned here?

Of course, we already find this principle in rudimentary form in Klimt’s *Portrait of Sonja Knips* from 1898 (fig. 2, page 28). This was the



5 and 5a

**A pair of screens**

Black-and-white book illustrations after an (unknown) original by Ogata Korin, from: Hoitsu Sakai and Ohashi Shintaro, *Korin Hyakuzu: 100 paintings by Korin*, 2 vol., Tokyo, 1895

very time in which he began to occupy himself with Japanese art, at first only in regards to motif, as we can also see in the bordure of the chalk drawing *Tragedy* from 1897. As early as 1891, the border of the portrait of the young Emilie Flöge, with cherry blossoms on a golden background, first shows Japanese motifs. If we review his portraits of seated ladies – all of them square or nearly square – we can witness a development in the direction of ornamentalization and flattening, from the portrait of Sonja Knips (1898) to the likeness of Marie Henneberg (1901/02), and the likeness of Fritza Riedler (1906) up to the portrait of Adele Bloch Bauer I.

Art history not infrequently refers to James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) as well as to other Western European artists as “models” for Klimt’s portrait painting. Such comments should not be neglected: to the contrary – they were among the first to set their sights on Japan. And it is also typical for the way Japonisme evolved in Europe. London and Paris were home to the vanguard as it were; German-speaking artists looked to the West – and discovered the East! The indirect approach led to a direct examination of the art of East Asia.

Gustav Klimt, who never visited Japan himself, had gained his knowledge on the one hand from the many collections around him, from exhibitions and also, of course, from secondary literature. Klimt himself reports that he would retire to the study of

“his Japanese books”. Which books specifically he owned is unfortunately unknown, since the library was dispersed, but one work can be cited that he was sure to have known well: *Korin ha gashu – Picture Collection of the Korin School* in five volumes, which also appeared in an English language edition.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, this five-volume publication belonged to those works of the day that offered the most detailed and delicate illustrations. Not only the quality of the colors, but the reproduction of gold and silver as well are extraordinary. In addition to the color woodcuts, this work offered the chance to become acquainted with and appreciate the colors and composition of the works of the Rimpa school. During these years, Japonisme reached its summit within Klimt’s oeuvre thanks to the possibility of studying directly Rimpa arts (figs. 5 and 5a) and, above all, through the works of Korin. The secondary Japonisme, which he got to know through the works of other artists, mutated by means of better sources to an independent decorative style.

These observations provide us with another opportunity to discuss Klimt’s “golden background”. To put it simply, the question is: Byzantium / Ravenna or Japan?

In Japanese interior design and decorative painting, the traditional use of gold reaches back into the 16th century. Particularly in screen painting, narrative subject matter is presented before a golden foil. Beginning in the 17th century however, the artists of the Rimpa school no longer used gold merely as a background, but also as a sort of counterbalance to the simplified depiction of landscapes. In the mosaic tradition of Byzantium/Ravenna, gold was used as a background, in front of which the figures were portrayed. In this respect, Klimt tends to be on the Japanese side, designing the golden surfaces as part of the composition and not just as a foil. Gustav Klimt visited Ravenna in 1905 and was thus able to study the mosaics directly. This was just before his “Golden Phase”, which is why it stands to reason that these personal art experiences are connected with the following period of work.

As previously discussed in relation to picture compositions, neither the one nor the other should be excluded here: the golden mosaics surely inspired Klimt to deal intensively with the complex of problems presented by “gold in the image”. And in the art of Rimpa, he must have found his ideal.

**STOCLET FRIEZE – 1908 TO 1911**

This mosaic frieze brings fine arts and applied arts together (see fig.6). The two long mosaic friezes adorn the dining room of the Palais Stoclet, mounted across from each other on the longitudinal walls – like a matching pair of multiple-part screens. Each side has more than six parts; the rhythmization shows, apart



6

**The Stoclet Frieze: Embrace (Fulfilment), 1909–11**

Mixed technique, 200 x 738 cm,

Palais Stoclet, Brussels

from all other technical arguments, a parallel to the screen painting system of East Asia.

Upon entering the dining room, the first thing one notices is the figures which correspond to each other and then, afterwards, the two rose bushes. The composition is very calm. A large tree in the center of the mosaic stretches its stylized boughs and branches over all parts of the images, its gold spirals spread across the walls, replacing the gold surfaces of the “golden epoch”. This tree only serves to unify two other, larger motifs: the people – the solitary girl and, opposite, the embracing couple – and the rose bushes. The mosaic friezes are decorative, they are calm, but they are not dull – the small number of motifs provide the composition with enough tension. The idea to interrupt a quiet composition with just a few motifs again shows parallels with Rimpa art. The representation of a continuous meadow serves as a foundation for the pictures: the bushes and trees stand rootless and as if upon flowing waves.

The dissolving of the bodies in surface ornament and their melding with each other gives us the opportunity to look back and compare the year 1902. The so-called “Beethoven Frieze” (plates 17, 17a and 18) was perhaps another conceptual formulation – public and not private, temporary, conceived as an ephemeral work for an exhibition and following a set subject matter. But, compared to the Stoclet Frieze, the execution of the “Japanese” elements is interesting. The Beethoven Frieze displays many ornamental references whose roots lie in the Far East. The often directly adopted samples were printed patterns and armorials or *katagamis*, Japanese coloring stencils, which had a strong influence on applied arts and decoration in Vienna around 1900. The driving forces were Koloman Moser and Josef Hoffmann, so that

Klimt had enough examples to make use of. Their use is, however, strictly motivistic.

In the *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* (fig. 4), *The Kiss* (fig. 5, page 16) and finally *The Embrace* in the Stoclet frieze (fig. 6), there is not only a rounding of individual motifs, but the Japanese origin of the patterns is only just discernible. Klimt’s interest in the conception in its entirety concerned him more than the detail, which would seemingly represent a departure, but was moreover an arrival at a much more profound accord.

**PORTRAITS – 1912 TO 1916**

A final group of portraits of women was produced in Klimt’s new studio in Hietzing, where, as described in the opening, he received his unexpected Japanese guest, Ohta, in 1913. The latter must have been well-informed concerning Klimt’s art and was duly expecting to see golden pictures, but he was, as he notes in his aforementioned essay, disappointed: “...I reported that he uses gold and silver only sparingly, and that he paints entirely differently from the way one would presume. ...”

It would seem that indeed a certain change of style did take place parallel to the relocation of his studio to Hietzing. Klimt painted more openly but, at the same time, a realism remained in his portraits; the ornamental fusions and layering, as for example in the Stoclet Frieze, gave way to a unified conception of figure and background, as if he wanted to interpret the subject matter additionally through the décor. And, to this end, Japan was evidently no longer sufficient. The décor tended toward the figural.

Until 1910, Klimt suffused his portraits with more dynamics by using a more or less pronounced lateral view – the subjects re-



7  
**Portrait of Eugenia (Mäda) Primavesi, 1914**  
 Oil on canvas, 140 x 84 cm,  
 Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota City

gard us slightly askew, slightly asymmetrically. In the portraits produced after 1912 however he maintains a frontal view. The subjects sit and stand looking straight ahead and frontally; one could almost describe the likenesses as rigid (figs. 7 and 8).

Diverse ornaments and color fields take the depth from every space. The figures stand without shadowing; their bodies, clad in the heavily geometric but softly falling waves of their robes, are highly ornamentalized. The soft curves of the garments define the body in contrast to the surfaces which are delimited by



8  
**Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer II, 1912**  
 Oil on canvas, 190 x 120 cm,  
 private collection

line and color. These are, on the one hand, floral in design and, on the other, one can distinguish apparently Chinese equestrian or theater scenes. Conjecture that Klimt was using variations of decorations from porcelain vases, can probably not be verified. However, we are reminded more of textiles and silk hangings, which were embroidered and painted, like the ones Klimt must have owned. Motifs from “dragon robes” can be discerned.

Is it only coincidence that Klimt combined his frontal portraits with Chinese décor? Probably not. Ancestral and sovereign por-



9  
**Portrait of the Qianlong Kaiser, attributed to Giuseppe Castiglioni, 1736**  
 Palace Museum, Beijing.

traits (fig. 9), but depictions of important deities as well – such as Klimt had in front of him at his studio in Hietzing daily – have a long tradition in East Asia and are always frontal, this being considered the ideal and truest form of portrayal for a person. Sumptuously ornamented robes and the wood carvings of the throne form an “ornamental plinth” in Chinese portrait painting similar to that aspired to by Klimt. This dense ornamentation spreads across the entire picture in Klimt’s works, to the point of “horror vacui” in the Beer-Monti likeness from 1916 (fig. 10).

Gustav Klimt was an avid reader and seeker. Fascinated by works of art history, he took over material and changed it to suit his purposes. He remained true to European traditions with regard to content; the subjects that he took up were familiar to Europeans. But as regards composition and design, he was open to new ideas and did not attempt to make a secret of his “love” for the Far East. In his oeuvre, we can trace a constant development from an



10  
**Portrait of Friederike Maria Beer-Monti, 1916**  
 Oil on canvas, 168 x 130 cm, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv

adoption of motifs, to independent variations with elements of style from the so-called Rimpa school, to a turning toward Chinese portrait art and the figural ornament as he had discovered it in Chinese textile art.

1 Kijiro Ohta and Gustav Klimt, *Zu Besuch bei Klimt in Wien. Das Atelier in Unter St. Veit in Wien* (Vienna: 2005)  
 2 Peter Pantzer and Johannes Wieninger (ed.), *Verborgene Impressionen. Hidden Impressions. Japonismus in Wien. Japonisme in Vienna. 1870–1930* (exhibit. cat. Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst: Vienna 1990)  
 3 Korinha Gashu, *Picture Collection of the Korin School*, 5 volumes, Tokyo, 1906–1909