

## Gold Standard

The watercolor studies resulting from Gustav Klimt's famed "Golden Period" are exquisite masterpieces in their own right.

In 2006, Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch Bauer*, from the famed "Golden Period" of his celebrated painting career, sold for \$135 million—at that time the highest price ever achieved for a work of art. Klimt is perhaps best known for his extensive use of gold as a primary medium in painting, most famously in *The Kiss*, one of the most lavish and persistent monuments to Art Nouveau.



Gustav Klimt (Austrian, 1862-1918)

Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

A lesser known, though no less important, aspect of his career is the fact that Klimt first established himself as a master watercolorist, in *Auditorium in the Old Burgtheater, Vienna*, an unusual commission that garnered the artist some of his earliest and most important critical recognition.

Watercolor was also the medium that would distinguish Klimt's later work as a master draftsman in the years after his death when critical attention shifted to the massive body of preliminary studies for his most famous works. Many of these sketches, though prepared and finished in watercolor, correspond in every detail and with mirror precision to the final oil and gold leaf paintings.

### Active Ornament

Klimt was born in 1862 in Baumgarten near Vienna, one of seven children and the son of a goldsmith and engraver. A leading Art Nouveau and Symbolist painter, he eventually founded the

Viennese Secession group, a movement away from the restrictive, bourgeois academic values in visual art. Klimt soon became famous for his highly decorative, mosaic-like compositions, in which sensual linear drawing collides on a flattened picture plane with kaleidoscopic patterns of symbol and color.

An erotic exuberance suffuses even the calmest of Klimt's landscapes. In the clothed society portraits of women, the livid energy of his ripe, vigorous nudes is transmuted into active ornament that rushes the foreground, surrounding its subjects in a *horror vacui* of detail and embellishment. This compulsion to fill every inch of negative space in the composition is perhaps the only similarity between the classically realist *Auditorium in the Old Burgtheater, Vienna*, and the highly innovative, fantastical depictions of Klimt's later work.

The theater painting reflects the conservative principles Klimt

1862

July 14, 1862	1876 – 1883	1883	1886	1890	1892	1894	1897
Gustav Klimt is born in Vienna	Studies with his brother Ernst at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts and Crafts) in Vienna	Forms the Artists' Company with his brother Ernst and the painter Franz Matsch	Accepts a solo commission from the Viennese government to depict the Old Burgtheater in watercolor	Awarded the Emperor's Prize from Franz Josef I of Austria for <i>Auditorium in the Old Burgtheater</i>	Klimt's brother Ernst and his father die	Awarded a major commission from the Ministry of Education for the University paintings <i>Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence</i>	A group of artists form the Vienna Secession. Klimt becomes their President.

first absorbed as a student at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts, where he studied from 1876 to 1883, alongside his brother Ernst Klimt. There, they trained in the dominant classical historical modes, and their subjects were frequently allegorical; Austria was depicted in harmonious scenes of wealth and grandeur consistent with the aristocratic values and triumphant worldview of 19th century Vienna.

The brothers eventually formed a small artists' company with the painter Franz Matsch (1861-1942), and the three completed numerous interior mural commissions for public buildings until Ernst's death in 1892.

### An Unusual Reversal

When Klimt accepted the solo commission for *Auditorium in the Old Burgtheater, Vienna*, in 1886, the municipal council contract stipulated that the painting must be a watercolor. In an unusual reversal, Klimt chose to portray the inner theater from the perspective of the stage, rendering the audience itself as subject.

While Klimt was certainly interested in the notion of spectator as spectacle, there's no doubt



**Mirror** Klimt's *The Embrace* (watercolor and pencil, 76 3/8 x 47 1/2") was a sketch for *Frieze for the Palais Stoclet*.

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1918

1898	1902	1904	1905	1908	1911	1912	February 6, 1918
First Secession Exhibition	Klimt's <i>Beethoven Frieze</i> , a visual interpretation of Beethoven's Ninth symphony, completed for the 14th Secession Exhibition	Awarded commission for the <i>Stoclet Frieze</i> to decorate the dining room of the Palais Stoclet	Leaves the Secession and forms the "Klimt Group"	Completes <i>The Kiss</i> , his most famous painting, and is awarded a gold medal for <i>The Three Ages</i> at the International Art Exhibition in Rome	Awarded first prize for the painting <i>Death and Life</i> at the International Art Exhibition in Rome	Becomes President of the Künstlerbund Artists' Union	Dies of a stroke in Vienna, at the age of 55



**Unusual Reversal** Klimt's *Auditorium in the Old Burgtheater, Vienna* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 0'0" x 0'0") garnered the artist early attention and stands as a testament to his remarkable skill as a watercolorist.

he was also taking advantage of an opportunity to court future patrons; he would depend until his death in 1918 upon the income from private commissions.

The hundreds of preparatory sketches for this piece confirm that Klimt portrayed many high-ranking officials and prominent society members. Individuals depicted had copies of the painting made for their homes, and it was perhaps this almost instant proliferation of reproductions, combined with the near photographic accuracy more commonly associated with oil paintings, that were responsible for lingering confusion over the original medium of *Auditorium*.

While the painting exists as the only watercolor in Klimt's body of finished work, the watercolor studies for many of his oils, and especially those from his "Golden Period," differ from the draftsmanship of most painters in that

they don't survive as mere shorthand for the finished pieces, but can be viewed as exquisite masterpieces in and of themselves.

In his design for the massive *Frieze for the Palais Stoclet*, for example, Klimt was so meticulous that even his first throw-away sketches on brown packing paper were detailed full-scale models for scenes in the frieze and incorporated all of the precious metals—gold paint, silver and bronze—of the final piece.

The watercolor study for the section of the frieze entitled *Fillment (The Embrace)* (on page 14), is an exact replica of the finished oil and gold leaf painting. That Klimt was able to achieve, in a watercolor or sketch, the full emotional force and aesthetic power of the final piece, confirms his genius not only as a draftsman, but as a consummate watercolor artist. □

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