

Google Arts & Culture

The Life and Art of Gustav Klimt



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The Virgin, Gustav Klimt, 1913/1913, National Gallery Prague

How to Make the Most of This Lesson

This lesson serves as a **roadmap** for your journey through a rich and exciting collection of online content made available by **Google Arts & Culture's partners**. You will explore photographs, slideshows, paintings, and more. The images in this lesson are just a sample of what's available to you via the **Google Arts & Culture** website.

You can complete this lesson independently or with fellow students, a teacher, or another adult. The text is accessible to a wide range of ages, but some content may be more appropriate for older teens due to mature subject matter.

Your journey in this lesson will take you through three major topics:

Chapter 1: Klimt's Early Life and Career

Chapter 2: The Secession

Chapter 3: An Up-Close Look at Iconic Klimt Paintings

You'll see some helpful signs along the way:



Estimated time for completing the chapter



Audio recording or video



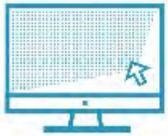
Link to more online content



Learning activity

Tools for Learning

Below are tools for learning that you may need for Digital Discovery lessons:



A device that connects to the Internet (a computer or tablet)



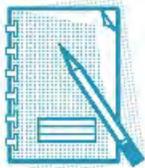
A tool for writing your responses and big ideas (pen, pencil, computer, etc.)



Art supplies (markers, crayons, paint)



Scissors



A notebook



Scrap paper

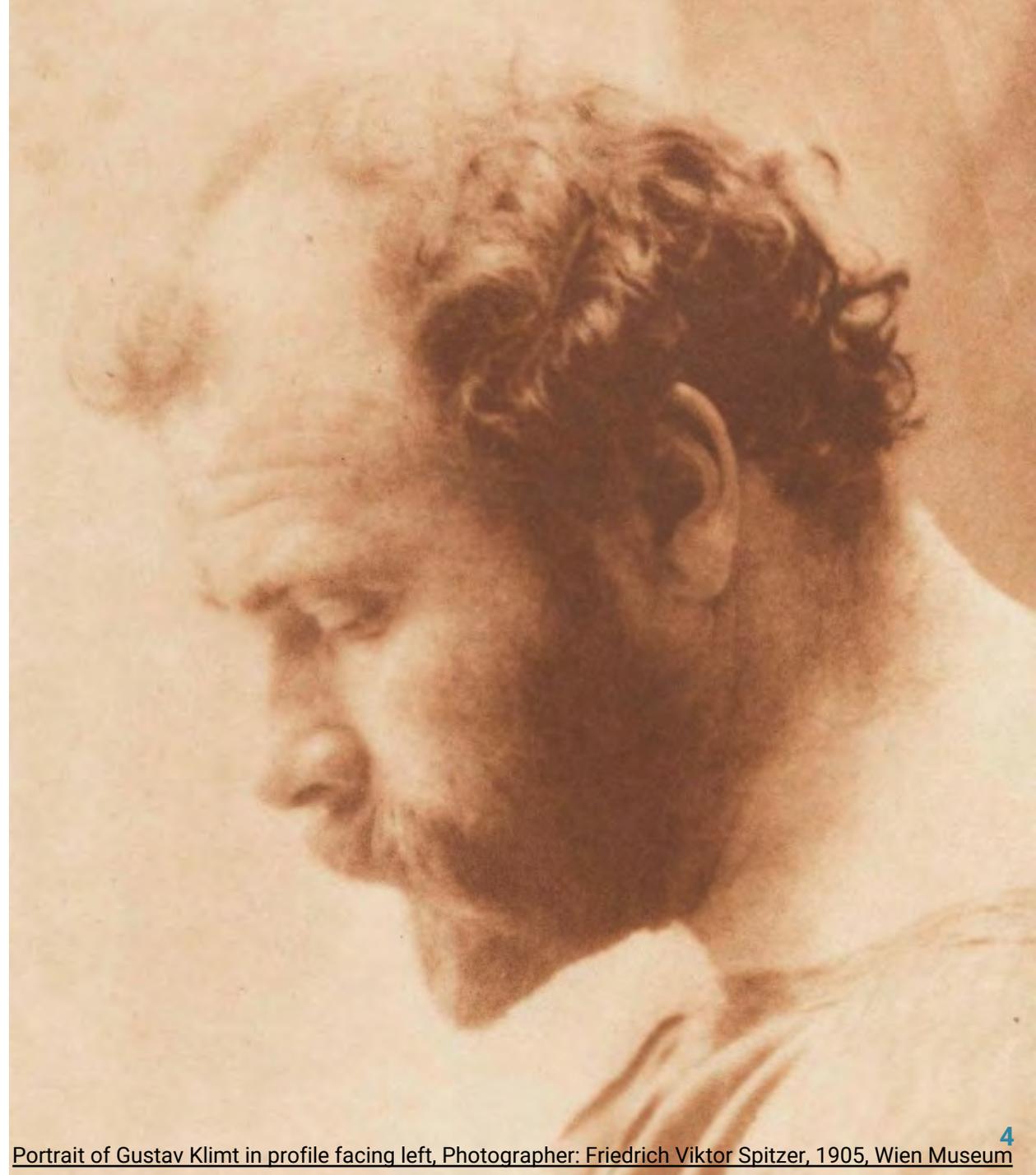
Explore! Google Arts & Culture pictures are **big**. If you want to explore a picture in greater detail, click on the magnifying glass symbol and zoom in with the zoom slider. By dragging the white box around, you can see even **tiny** details.

Welcome to The Life and Art of Gustav Klimt

The life of Austrian artist Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) reflects the contrasts into which Klimt was born. The city of Vienna in the mid to late 1800s was characterized by both bitter poverty and overflowing wealth. Klimt's life was also characterized by contradictions. He rose from humble beginnings to become the most famous of Austrian painters, mixing with the wealthy in Austrian society. Yet he often shied away from this life and never really left his origins behind. He began as a traditionalist but ultimately forged new trails in art. He had a lifelong partner but also many lovers. In this lesson, you'll learn about Klimt's life and art and then choose two Klimt works to contrast.

What will you do?

1. Learn about the life of one of the world's most famous painters.
2. Examine some of Klimt's work up close.
3. Understand the themes behind Klimt's work.



Portrait of Gustav Klimt in profile facing left, Photographer: Friedrich Viktor Spitzer, 1905, Wien Museum

What's in this lesson?

1. Learn about Klimt's early life and career and how he got his start in painting.
2. See what inspired Klimt in his work.
3. Understand why Klimt was often considered controversial.

By participating in this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Describe Klimt's early work.
2. Identify when Klimt moved away from tradition in his career.
3. Understand the themes that motivated Klimt and how he expressed them.

Vocabulary

commission, classical, idealized, reformist, modern art, secede, monumental, gold leaf, photo-realistic,
femme fatale, frieze

Need help with some of these terms? See the glossary at the end of this lesson.



Portrait of Gustav Klimt in profile, standing facing right, in a pale suit, a straw hat in his hand, Unknown photographer, c. 1890, Wien Museum

Klimt's Early Life and Career



What is this chapter about?
The early years of Klimt's career



How long with this chapter take?
1 hour

Chapter 1: Warming Up

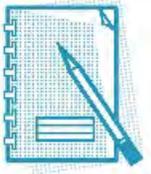
Before you explore, answer the questions below in your notebook.

Consider

1. What is the definition of the word *tradition*? Should traditions always be followed?

Discover

2. How did Klimt's early work reflect traditional painting styles?



Humble Beginnings

Gustav Klimt was born into a middle-class family in the suburbs of Vienna, Austria, in 1862. He was the second oldest of seven children. His father was a self-employed gold engraver. As a child, Klimt attended public elementary and secondary school. Though they had limited means, Klimt's parents sent Gustav and two of his brothers to the prestigious College of Applied Arts. Gustav and brother Ernst were painters and excelled at the school, paving the way for two additional years on state scholarships.



Wien 14., Linzerstraße 247: Birthplace of Gustav Klimt, Photographer: Moritz Nähr, around 1900, Austrian National Library



See a photo of Gustav Klimt as a young man [here](#).

Meet Gustav Klimt the artist in this quick [video introduction](#).

Painting in the Traditional Style

While in school, Gustav and Ernst formed the Künstler-Compagnie (Artists' Company) with another student, Franz Matsch, in 1879. The group's professors taught them the art of painting, including decorative painting. Vienna had many new public buildings for which the professors had been **commissioned** to create decorative works.

The new company specialized in creating paintings for walls and ceilings. The students' professors were responsible for some of the company's first assignments. The young artists painted ceilings in a new theater in Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia), as well as ceilings and curtains in theaters in Karlsbad, Bohemia (now Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic), and Reichenberg (now Liberec, Czech Republic). At the time, these cities were part of Austria-Hungary, which dissolved in 1918.



Read about the curtain design shown here in [this story](#).

View one of the company's early ceiling paintings [here](#).

Learn more about Klimt's early career in [this story](#).



Design for a Curtain of the Municipal Theater Karlsbad, Gustav Klimt, 1884/1885, Belvedere



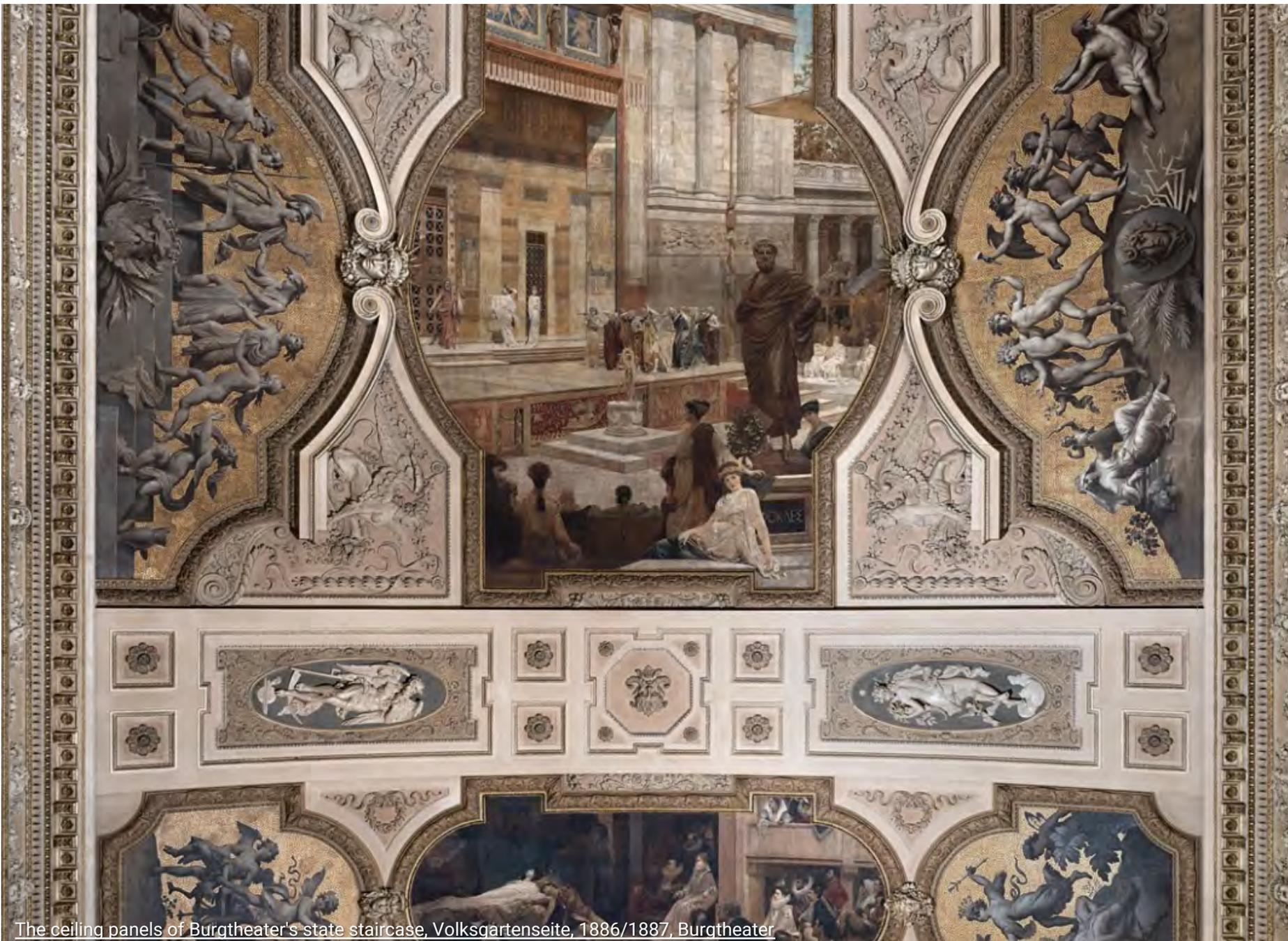
Fable, Gustav Klimt, 1883, Wien Museum

During this period, Gustav was still painting in the traditional, **classical** style popular at the time. This style is characterized by **idealized** figures and subject matter often related to ancient Greece and Rome. Portraits and landscapes were common.

An example of this style is this painting, 'Fable,' which Klimt created in 1883. The painting was part of a published series of works by multiple artists. Closely examining this painting shows Klimt's incredible attention to detail in the painting's characters.



View other early works by Klimt [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).



In 1886–1887, the three artists of the company created the ceiling paintings flanking the two main staircases of the new imperial Hofburgtheater.

The work brought them great fame and was a turning point in their careers. During this period Gustav also became well known for his portraits.



This is a detail of the ceiling paintings. To see them in their entirety, click [here](#).

Learn more about the ceiling of the Burgtheater [here](#).

The ceiling panels of Burgtheater's state staircase, Volksgartenseite, 1886/1887, Burgtheater

Emilie Flöge

In October 1891, Ernst Klimt married Helene Flöge. Through this union, Gustav met Helene's sister, Emilie. The two formed a lifelong relationship. Emilie and her sisters owned a well-known fashion salon. Her ideas about fashion were considered **reformist**. She rejected the wearing of a corset, an uncomfortable body-shaping garment that women had worn since as early as the 1500s.



Learn more about Emilie Flöge in [this story](#).



Emilie Flöge in a Reform Dress, Photographer: Dora Kallmus, 1909, Austrian National Library

The Death of Ernst Klimt

Though Emilie Flöge and Gustav Klimt never married, the two were like family. Klimt traveled every summer with Emilie's family, and she attended all official functions with him. Gustav was dedicated to Emilie, but he also had numerous relationships with his models. Some of these relationships resulted in children. Flöge and Klimt never had children of their own.

In the summer of 1892, Gustav's father died of a stroke. Then, in October, Ernst Klimt died suddenly of a heart attack. He left behind his wife and a young daughter, for whom Gustav assumed responsibility.

During the following year, Klimt fell into a creative crisis. Matsch moved out of the studio, and Klimt remained in the studio, alone. In 1894 Klimt moved into a simple apartment with his mother and unmarried sisters, where he lived until his death.



Read more about the life of Gustav Klimt in [this story](#).

Check out [this story](#) to find out more about Klimt's life from 1862 to 1892.



Emilie Flöge, Gustav Klimt and Eleonore Zimpel in Litzlberg at the Attersee, 1905, Belvedere

Chapter 1: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the questions below.



You read about the fact that the Artists' Company received commissions for paintings to decorate important public buildings.

- Why do you think these paintings followed traditional painting styles?
- Why might it be important to authority figures that public works follow a certain expected style?

Chapter 2:

The Secession



What is this chapter about?
How Klimt became a
"modern" artist



How long will this chapter take?
1 hour



Beethoven Frieze: "The Sufferings of Weak Humanity" and "The Well-Armed Strongman" (Panel 3, left side wall), Gustav Klimt, 1901, Secession

Chapter 2: Warming Up

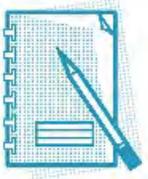
Before you explore, answer the questions in your notebook.

Consider

1. Why might following traditional artistic styles be considered limiting by some artists?

Discover

2. What is **modern art**? If you are unfamiliar with the term, look it up in the glossary and note its characteristics.



Klimt Moves Away from Tradition

During the late 1800s, some artists around Europe began rejecting the traditional, classical styles of painting. They were tired of following the rigid “academic” rules of art that they’d been taught in art school. Many began to “**secede**” from their traditional artist associations. Klimt himself was a member of the Association of Austrian Artists, the most important art society of Vienna. He and other younger members of the society began demanding changes to the rules of the society, to allow artists greater flexibility in their work. When these changes were rejected, Klimt and other members formed the Vienna Secession, in 1897. Klimt became the group’s president. The Secession artists moved toward a highly decorative, less academic style.



14th exhibition at the Vienna Secession 14. Ausstellung der Wiener Secession, Photographer: Moritz Nähr, 1902, Austrian National Library

This photo shows Klimt and other members of the Secession. Klimt is seated in the chair at left.



Learn more about Klimt’s life and career between 1894 and 1905 [here](#).



*"To every age its art. To every
art its freedom."*

—art critic Ludwig Hevesi

Pallas Athene, Gustav Klimt, 1898, Wien Museum

The Secession caused quite a stir with its first exhibition, in the spring of 1898. Klimt in particular was criticized by authorities for the nudity in his drawing on the exhibition poster. The exhibition was a great success, however. A second exhibition was held that fall in the Secession's new exhibition hall. Klimt exhibited this work, called 'Pallas Athene,' as a symbol of the fight for artistic freedom. It, too, was heavily criticized by some reviewers. Klimt began using a likeness of the image as a symbol of the Secession.



Read more about
the Secession in
[this story](#).

Klimt and the Vienna Secession

Klimt used the Secession exhibitions to showcase his new works. Many were landscapes, like 'On Lake Attersee,' and paintings of women. Others were larger, more **monumental** works. Klimt's work generated a lot of commentary from the public and from art critics alike. Some works were said to be obscene.



See how Klimt's portraits of women evolved [here](#).

Click [here](#) to see 'On Lake Attersee' in the Leopold Museum.

See more of Lake Attersee [here](#).



On Lake Attersee, Gustav Klimt, 1900, Leopold Museum



Adele Bloch-Bauer I, Gustav Klimt, 1903/1907, Neue Galerie New York

This portrait, 'Adele Bloch-Bauer I,' shows ways in which Klimt's style changed during the early 1900s. During what is called his Golden Phase (1901–1909), he relied heavily on the use of **gold leaf** in many of his paintings. Though the face of Bloch-Bauer is almost **photo-realistic**, the rest of the portrait shows the highly ornamented and decorative elements for which Klimt became well-known.



Learn more about this painting [here](#).

Read more about Klimt's Golden Phase and why and how he created these works in [this story](#).

The Faculty Paintings

One of the most controversial sets of works of the late 1800s was the Faculty Paintings. These paintings were commissioned in 1894 by the University of Vienna for the university's festive hall. They were each to represent a particular subject area—philosophy, medicine, jurisprudence (shown here), and religion. A fifth painting would be the centerpiece. Franz Matsch would paint the centerpiece and 'Religion,' while Klimt took the other three.

Klimt's interpretations were filled with nude figures of all kinds—young, elderly, and pregnant included. They were meant to symbolically represent different stages or elements of life.

The paintings were unveiled at different times. First was 'Philosophy,' which enraged philosophy professors, who believed it mocked the subject matter. A year later, local politicians declared the 'Medicine' painting a danger to public morality. Ultimately, the University of Vienna refused to accept the paintings. Klimt sold them and paid back the fee he'd received.



Read more about the Faculty Paintings [here](#).





Klimt x Lab, 'Jurisprudence'

Sadly, the Faculty Paintings were among several Klimt works that were lost or destroyed during World War II, after they were stolen from their owners by German officers. Today, all that remains of them are black-and-white photos.

However, cutting-edge technology has enabled researchers to re-create these paintings as they might have looked. Look at this version of 'Jurisprudence'!



Find out more about this groundbreaking work [here](#).



Learn about the mystery of the lost works [here](#).

Final Years

Though some found the Faculty Paintings and other works unacceptable, Klimt had many supporters and successes. He painted some of his most famous works during the 1900s. In 1911, he won first prize at the International Art Exhibition in Rome.

In 1918, Klimt suffered a stroke. He died of pneumonia in the hospital less than a month later. He was buried three days later at the Hietzinger cemetery.



Gustav Klimt standing in his garden in front of his studio, Photographer: Moritz Nähr, 1911, Austrian National Library



Read about Klimt's later years [here](#).

Chapter 2: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the questions below.



You looked up the definition of *modern art*.

- Does Klimt's work reflect the definition you found?
- If so, in what ways? Explain your answer.



Sunflower, Gustav Klimt, 1907/1908, Belvedere

Chapter 3:

An Up-Close Look at Iconic Klimt Paintings



What is this chapter about?

Some defining characteristics of Klimt's works



How long will this chapter take?

1 hour

Chapter 3: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions in your notebook.

Consider

1. Why might an artist frequently reflect on certain topics or themes in their work?

Discover

2. Based on what you've read about Klimt thus far, what do you think his common themes might have been?



'Judith'

This painting is one from Klimt's Golden Phase. Klimt created it in 1901. Judith is a biblical heroine who beheaded Assyrian general Holofernes to save her Jewish people from downfall. This detail of the painting shows Judith with a seductive look. The artist paints her face realistically, while much of the rest of the painting is the highly ornamental shapes and gold leaf for which he became famous during this time.

An interesting feature that the detail here doesn't show is the head of Holofernes, which Judith is holding on her left side. The painting combines the sensuality of Judith with the gruesome reality of the story to great effect. This painting reflects two of Klimt's common themes—**femme fatale** and threat to life.



To see the full length of this painting, click [here](#).

To read more about the symbolism in this painting and see more that reflect these themes, go to [this story](#).

Click [here](#) to see 'Judith' in the Belvedere.

To read more about 'Judith,' go to [this story](#).



Judith, Gustav Klimt, 1901, Belvedere

The Beethoven Frieze

The Beethoven **Frieze** also reflects the theme threat to life. On the left side of this image are three Gorgons. These are creatures from Greek mythology who have snakes for hair and turn anyone who looks at them to stone. The monster in the middle is Typhoeus, another deadly character from Greek mythology.



Read about and view the details of the Beethoven Frieze [here](#).

Learn more about the Beethoven Frieze in [this story](#).



The Beethoven Frieze, Gustav Klimt, 1901, Secession



'The Kiss'

This painting, created in 1908–1909, is perhaps Klimt's best known today. It is also from the Golden Phase, as you can see from the materials used to create the lovers' robes, the background, and the vines draped across the woman's ankles.

Love was another common theme of Klimt's work. It is unknown if this painting was representative of Klimt's own relationships or just a general symbol of the love between two people.



Read more about 'The Kiss' in [this story](#).

Learn about Klimt's use of love and the cycle of life as themes [here](#).

Zoom in on this painting to see the fine details [here](#).

Hear actress Joey King talk about 'The Kiss' in [this video](#).

Click [here](#) to see 'The Kiss' in the Belvedere.

'Goldfish'

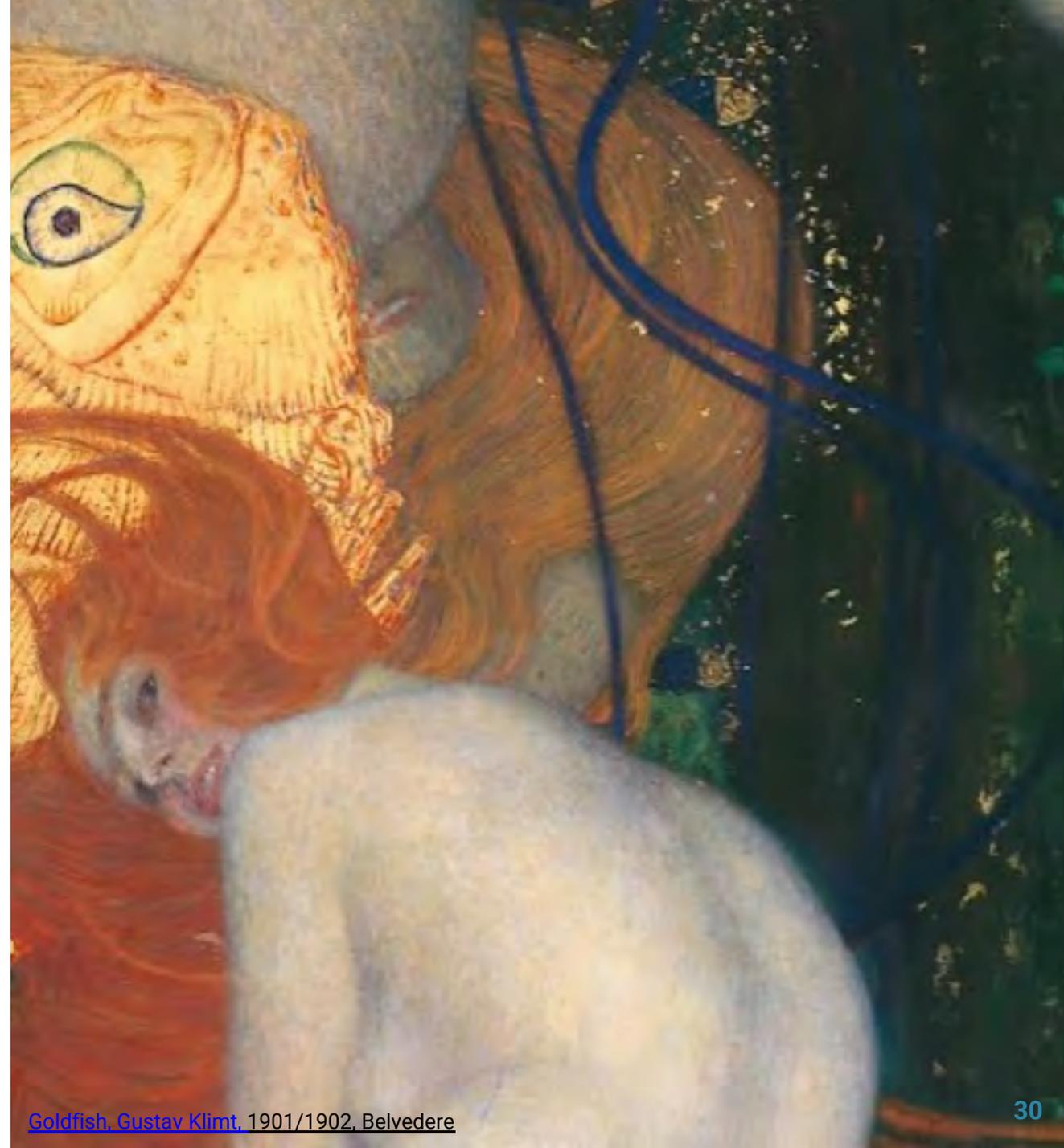
Two additional themes of Klimt's work are fantasy and literary symbols. In several of his paintings, he adopts a fairy-tale, fantastical setting with water-dwelling, female beings. Klimt described them as "mermaids" and "water serpents."

Klimt spent a great deal of time sketching studies of nude female figures for these paintings before actually beginning a painting. In 'Goldfish,' the giant shimmering fish is swimming up to the woman, whose hair is flowing gracefully in the water.



Read more about Klimt's works of fantasy and literary symbolism [here](#).

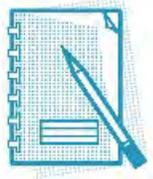
See an example of one of Klimt's sketchbooks in [this story](#).



[Goldfish, Gustav Klimt, 1901/1902, Belvedere](#)

Chapter 3: Wrapping Up

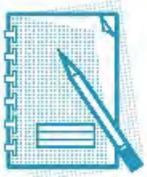
Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



You learned about some common themes in Klimt's work. Which painting that you've seen best reflects the theme it represents? Explain your answer.

Digital Learning in Action

So, what did you learn? Read the questions and complete the learning activities below to extend your learning based on what you just experienced.



Reflect Answer these questions:

- You learned how Klimt's work changed over time. Why do you think Klimt broke away from tradition to create a new style of art? In what ways can tradition be limiting?
- What were some common elements of Klimt's work, regardless of which period he was painting in?



Summarize: Write a one-paragraph summary of what you learned about Klimt's life and work. If needed, revisit the stories linked on slides 13, 17, and 23 for a refresher.



Create: Choose two works by Klimt that you saw in this lesson or in its story links. One work should be from Klimt's early career. The other should be from the Secession or later. Create a T-chart in which you contrast the two pieces of art. Your chart should include the following: materials used, subject matter, notes about style, and dates and titles of the pieces. If possible, include a copy of the work as the header for each column. Write a summary statement for your chart that describes why you chose the pieces you did and what you admire or dislike about them.

Would you like to find out more about Gustav Klimt? [This](#) is a good starting point.

Glossary

- **classical:** relating to a form considered of first significance in earlier times, particularly ancient Greece and Rome
- **commission:** a formal request to produce a work of art for payment
- **femme fatale:** a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or deadly situations
- **frieze:** a richly ornamented band on a building wall
- **gold leaf:** a paper-thin sheet of gold
- **idealized:** having a perfect and less-than-realistic form
- **modern art:** artistic trends developed after industrialization that used nontraditional subject matter, materials, color, and techniques
- **monumental:** distinguished and of lasting significance
- **photo-realistic:** realism in painting characterized by extreme attention to detail
- **reformist:** changed in order to improve a condition
- **secede:** to officially withdraw from an organization