THE PAINTINGS OF GUSTAV KLIMT
DEATH AND THE MAIDEN AND THE ARTIST AS SON-LOVER

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My topic in this article is Klimt's main subject, his paintings of women: the devouring-seductive women, the goddesses figures, the symbiotic uroboric aspect of the woman-mother-great goddess, the meaning of the art nouveau style as a feminine power, and the meaning of the death figure in his paintings. I will also relate to the narcissistic expression of feminine beauty and its adoration, to the devouring power of the woman, joining Eros and Tanatos, and to the artist as son-lover.

According to Neumann, artists express the *zeitgeist*. Neumann (1959, p. 5) claims that the great individual, the artist, expresses the transpersonal values of his/her culture, but also provides the missing contents that collective consciousness requires for its completion. Klimt's work will be approached here in this spirit, as an expression of the *zeitgeist*.

The *zeit* in this case is the early twentieth century, when artists discover the primary, physical, and archetypal sources of primitive art (mainly African art) and the primeval sources of the soul, of the unconscious discovered by Freud. The primary unconscious source of the culture and the soul is the realm of the Great Mother. Freud exposes the hypocrisy and the sexual repression of the Victorian era, stressing the sexuality that for him represents everything. He writes *Three Essays on Sexuality* and speaks of Eros and Tanatos. This time marks the onset of a reversal in the status of women, who are granted greater freedom and also begin to be dreaded, echoing ancestral fears so horridly manifest in medieval witch hunts. The description of the woman in art becomes central. The woman appears in the works of Aubrey

Beardsley, Edvard Munch, and Egon Schille mostly as *femme fatale*—strong, tempting, and destructive. This is the time of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, which recounts the tale of Salome falling in love with John the Baptist and ordering his beheading that was to become a Richard Strauss opera, and of Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1906), which combines misogyny with dread of feminine power.

Art in the early twentieth century does express the *zeitgeist* and contends with the newly formulated Great Mother archetype. It is at this time that Nietzsche announces the death of God, and yearnings for the divine devolve on to the Eros, the goddess-Great Mother and the woman-anima.

Artists are fascinated by the woman-mother and seek—for themselves and for the coming generations—symbolic-creative ways of expressing this archetype, of being enriched by it, and of coping with the threat of being devoured by it. In his writings about the Great Mother and the development of the feminine, Neumann contributes to this process the dimension of conscious observation. He thereby helps to raise awareness of the importance of matriarchal consciousness and its integration. Neumann explored the Great Mother motif in the work of Henry Moore. I will relate to Gustav Klimt, who preceded Neumann.

Gustav Klimt

I encountered Klimt through my daughter, who fell in love with the posters of his beautiful paintings representing paradisiacal, flowing, golden adolescent femininity. So I bought her a big album of his paintings and only then did I discover his complexity, the other side, the shadow of this hypnotic beauty, the death-Tanatos looming at the opposite, complementary pole of the female Eros that holds the painter captive.

Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) lived in Vienna and was a contemporary of Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, and Sigmund Freud. He painted in the art nouveau style. This style is, on the one hand, fascinated by the feminine, as evident in the curved flowing lines striving to create structures of primary

unity and, on the other, frequently includes a *femme fatale* figure. The classic *femme fatale*, dominating and destroying the captive-adoring male, appears in the contemporary literature in, among others, Rider Haggard, *She* (1886); Stefan Zweig, *Amok* (1922) and Heinrich Mann, *Der Blaue Engel* (1930), which would become a classic film in the genre.

The woman is the leit-motif of Klimt's work and is always at the centre of the picture. As the pillar of the world, she stands tall, distant, inaccessible, as if refusing to give herself, impervious, never smiling, at times appearing as a contemptuous onlooker. At the same time, she is sensual, sexual, naked or half-naked (Klimt would paint women naked and then cover them partly or fully), priestess, siren, temptress, mysterious, sorceress—the less accessible, the more alluring [pictures 1, 2]. The canvases are usually vertical and elongated, giving her a heightened, supremely spiritual quality, resembling the paintings of El Greco, whose extremely elongated figures seem ethereal. The woman's head is at the top part of the canvas, her eyes looking down, half-closed, on her head often a round adornment resembling a halo, giving her the ideal revered quality of an icon—supreme, elevated, archetypal. The spectator's gaze moves upward, as if adoring her. She has a strong power over the artist, who looks at her with loving passion until he can no longer paint anything but their recurrent encounter. Because she is inaccessible, he paints her again and again.

Circles are indeed a recurring motif in the ornamentation of Klimt's paintings. Moreover, the woman appears often within a closed cyclical frame in a solitary self-embrace, or with other women, or with women and children [pictures 3, 4, 5]. All these are a distinctively cyclical-uroboric description of self-contained, pre-conscious femininity, prior to the male's entry into her world (Neumann, 1972, p. 42). She who does not give herself is the virginal (like the virgin goddesses Athena, Hestia, Artemis, and Mary) self-contained woman, whose world is full without need for a male. Or the many women in the drawings lying naked, the spectator's and the painter's gaze focused on the woman's exposed sexual organ as if it were the source of the world, and

the locked gate at which the man repeatedly knocks. In many drawings the women are masturbating—satisfying themselves, self-contained. He draws groups of women together, sometimes as lesbians, flowing in water or held together in the cohesiveness of a united, paradisiacal, female world. This is the self-conserving stage to which Neumann (1994, pp. 10-12) refers.

A comparison with Vermeer, who also painted only women, is interesting in this context. They also express a self-contained wholeness. They are also at the centre of the picture, radiating idealization, and larger than life by virtue of Vermeer's adoring gaze. Vermeer's women, however, are bereft of sexuality and Eros. The gaze of the spectator-painter does not touch them, and that is perhaps the reason they are not threatening. The same is true of Renoir, who also painted women almost exclusively. His women are sensual, beautiful, soft, and alluring. Neither in Vermeer nor in Renoir's women, however, do we find the demonic-dangerous *femme fatale* motif.

Klimt's painting 'Tree of Life' expresses the wholeness of paradise, with its arabesque branches engulfing all the surrounding images. The big uroboric whole he longs for is expressed in his paintings through the unity of figure and background; just as the individual is not yet entirely separate from the motherly unconscious, so is the figure not entirely separate from the background. The ornamental motif of the woman's clothes is also the motif of the background. The flowers of the dress print are also the flowers around her. The wholeness-unity of the world is also well described in Klimt's many landscape paintings. The distinction between the figure (of the tree or the house) and the background is also blurred in these paintings, which have a uniform recurrent rhythm of plants and flowers, like the cyclical rhythm of life, potentially eternal.

The ongoing movement toward eternity is also the movement of the arabesque models in Klimt's paintings. This is the pantheistic-cosmic unity at once mystical and uroboric he creates in his paintings, when the movement of the art nouveau lines—curved, arabesque, and spiral—joins everything to everything and creates the world as a womb of flowing meshed loops.

Neumann (1959, p. 44) points out in this context that the role of great art is always to express the unitary reality underlying the split world. Since the western individual is at risk of losing touch with nature and the matriarchy, the artist offers as compensation a unitary reality, perhaps reflecting the influences of a romanticism nostalgically striving to renew a lost past of wholeness.

The woman is a captive of herself, in the bosom of water, or of the man embracing her when she is contained by him [picture 6]. Klimt's virginal, closed-eyed woman lacks consciousness and individuality. She still exists as an archetype. In many works he paints goddesses, mythological figures, or natural powers such as nymphs, gorgons, Athena, Judith [picture 7], Salome, music, tragedy, or ideas—'naked truth,' law, medicine, envy—as women. Or she is a mother and child, or a pregnant woman—representing fertility and motherhood, or a *femme fatale*. In all these paintings his woman is goddess, Great Mother, and anima. Although many of the paintings are portraits of high-society women, they too become the essence of the archetypal woman.

As a Great Mother, she is the goddess of unconscious instinctual nature and of the cosmos. As such, she is the goddess of nature and the flowers. In some paintings, nature is within the woman and around her (the vegetation is the woman's dress print and the surrounding nature). The many flowers in his paintings are a feminine symbol as well as a symbol of the feminine self.

In some of the paintings, women flow together in water, and the woman merges with the water as if remaining in a pre-natal, foetal state, the primary nature of unconscious existence and also of feminine feeling, while the spiral arabesque lines of the drawing appear as sea waves. The lines in the drawing of the woman have not yet separated from the lines of the waves and the seaweed, from archetypal sea existence (particularly in paintings of water serpents). As a Great Mother, she is the goddess of the animals. In one of Klimt's early paintings, 'The Fable,' the tame animals lie at the woman's feet.

The Beauty

The woman's power is in her sexuality but also in her great beauty. Beauty is the essence of Klimt's painting. Art itself is beauty. Klimt belonged to an artistic movement known as Secession, founded in 1897, which strived to make the entire human environment a place of beauty. Those who hoped art would heal humanity's afflictions viewed Klimt as the messiah of this new movement, taking a step toward redemption by placing a decorative awning over harsh reality and returning everything to universal harmony.

Beauty, art, and the woman are for Klimt one and the same. The curved lines of the feminine essence are the curved lines of art nouveau. (Klimt characterizes feminine figures by curved ornamentations and masculine figures by square ones). Klimt had a utopian vision of redeeming humanity solely through the special power of art and love, hinting at nineteenth-century European romantic trends of seeking redemption through the artist by creating contact with nature, the divine, the woman, and the hidden.

The woman's beauty expands not only through the power of colour and a manifold palette but mainly through the gold that Klimt uses so profusely. The alchemical gold that symbolizes the aim of the soul's quest (the 'self': the core of the divine soul) he engages in his service as ornamental baroque gold, which endows the woman/great goddess with a super-human, royal, divine, adored, greater than life quality. But I hold that, unlike alchemical gold, this gold is only decorative and external. It is a superficial, false gold. The gold of Midas. A gold that embalms the woman. A honeyed gold that entraps her. Klimt's beauty, his ornamentalism, and his paradisiacal existence could be viewed as a superficial disregard of earthly suffering. The foetal uroboric existence of closed-eyed women or women in water is a paradise of sleeping beauty, where no one has yet eaten from the tree of knowledge that awakens consciousness of evil and death. Egon Schille, a contemporary of Klimt who was highly influenced by him, expresses the inevitable shadow of the beauty emphasized by Klimt—ugliness and perversion, sickness and suffering. In the

social and cultural context, Schille's paintings could be viewed as a trend compensating for Klimt's exaggerated beauty.

Beauty is also the woman's narcissistic quality. The many eyes that appear as a recurring decorative element in Klimt's paintings and in art nouveau in general (as well as Egyptian or Mycenaean eyes) are as the eyes of the peacock, which also tends to symbolize narcissistic beauty. The woman is concerned with her beauty and with the man adoring her. The loving-hypnotized gaze of the painter, who experiences her beauty as an object of archetypal projection, is not personal. Her narcissistic beauty is the beauty of one who has no concern for the other, and the beautiful woman is thus inaccessible. She is as Lilith—devours the energy of the man. And she is as Narcissus—whoever loves him may lose his own self and become only an 'Echo' of the admired figure.

The Son-Lover and Death

As the goddess of animals, the Great Mother is also the goddess ruling the snakes. In many of Klimt's paintings, snakes are the woman's companions. These are the hair serpents of the women in the water, the hair serpents of the menacing gorgons he paints, and other serpents that, in some paintings, are held by the women or weave around in arabesque lines. For instance, at the forefront of 'Medicine' is a woman wearing a red dress of serpent-like lines, with a snake curling down her hands [picture 8]. Klimt's phallic snake is still—in Neumann's terminology—the fertilizing phallus (Neumann, 1989, p. 48) in the service of the Great Mother, uroborus-like, resembling the matriarchy's closed world. This is the earth snake, the snake of the Great Mother, the snake of unconscious energies not yet serving Aesculapius (the god of medicine) and Hermes-Mercury (who enables transformation within the soul) in order to develop consciousness. Neumann (1994, p. 197) claims that Mercury's snake must redeem itself from the powers of the earth but here, the snake is still the masculinity that serves the Great Mother and has yet to separate from her. It symbolizes the psychological situation of the

origin of consciousness, which is essentially masculine and as yet undeveloped, ruled by the unconscious existence of the Great Mother. At this stage, it symbolizes the psychological situation of the son-lover; the lover of the Great Mother who serves her, whose role is to fertilize her, and who is threatened by her because he is weak. In the animal world, the drone's only role is to fertilize the queen bee. The female of the praying mantis beheads the mail after fertilization (Marcus, 1996).

When looking at Klimt's 'Danae,' who is fertilized by Zeus' golden rain, we note the foetal circle she herself forms, entirely self-absorbed. Zeus is not in the picture, and she appears not to need him but only his semen of gold. Klimt himself, as the son-lover of the Great Mother is as the servant of the woman-mother he paints, as if fertilizing her with his golden paintings. In myths, the Great Mother uses the son-lover for her own needs and kills-castrates him when he wishes to separate from her. The great power of the motherly unconscious threatens the still amorphous masculine consciousness born from her. The power of the Great Mother endangers this young male consciousness.

Not surprisingly, then, we will soon find this threat in Klimt's pictures when the emphasized Eros invites the opposite pole—death. At times, in the blatant seductive sexuality; at times, in the threatening face of the woman—like those of the gorgons, or of Athena (in the picture, Athena holds in her hands a phallic rod, and on her chest is the horrid head of the gorgon), or of the pregnant woman in the 'Beethoven Frieze.' The death motif appears explicitly in this painting in the shape of the three gorgons identified with sickness, madness, and death. In 'Jurisprudence,' we also see three women (each within a closed circle of her own) and at the centre an aging man trapped between them within a menacing uroboric snake. Hostile forces appear in the shape of a monstrous monkey in the 'Beethoven Frieze,' and in the skulls and the darkness surrounding the pregnant woman in 'Hope' [picture 9]; in the black bird in 'Tree of Life'; in the skeleton that appears in several paintings, next to or within a complex of other figures; in the figures

of old men and women seemingly approaching death in other paintings, such as 'Death and Life' [picture 10], which he painted in 1911. The castrating woman is especially evident in two paintings of Judith and Salome, depicting Judith who seduced Holophernes and cut off his head, and Salome demanding the head of John the Baptist. The painting depicts a threatening figure, the fingers of her hand as a bird of prey. In both these paintings, she is sexual, seductive, has a cruel expression, at her feet the head of the beheaded man, all emphasized by the use of black.

In the 'Beethoven Frieze,' the man and the woman embrace within what appears to be a temple full of women. The man and the woman's feet are tied together with strings, as if her hair had curled around him. Curved lines mark their shared symbiotic bosom or, perhaps more precisely, the danger to the man imprisoned by the woman. Gilles Neret (1993, p. 42-43) writes about the 'Beethoven Frieze' that the rare appearances of the man in Klimt's paintings are meant to extol the woman's power. Despite Klimt's declaration that this is a hymn to femininity and that the man will be redeemed through the woman and through love, Neret claims that the man is actually endangered through his total embrace with the woman to whom he is subservient: 'It is the return of the hero to his mother's womb, the end of his journey to a womb he should never have left, the last embrace, signifying also a return to the source, to the cosmos in which woman is the true conqueror.' The embrace with the man in this and other pictures is not a *conjunctio*, when the feminine and the masculine reunite in a balanced wholeness. Instead, the man controls the woman—he embraces her and she is contained within him or draws him to herself. Man as such is not a subject in Klimt's paintings. He appears in relation to the woman and is either surrounded (controlled?) by women, or embraces-kisses the woman. This is a primary symbiosis-fusion—the man and woman are not engaged in a dialogue with one another but in a preconscious tie.

Klimt's use of gold and the quasi-mosaic quality of the paintings were influenced by his visit to Ravenna, where he saw the mosaics of Theodora,

empress of Byzantium. Sixth-century Theodora and her consort Justinian are presented in Ravenna as the earthly representatives of the cosmic hierarchy of figures from the Bible and the New Testament (Kenaan-Kedar, 1998, p. 127). She is lavishly dressed and wears sumptuous jewellery, in her hand is Jesus' cup of resurrection and above her head is a halo. Theodora is presented in the mosaic as a person endowed with royal and spiritual force. The historical account, however, is different. She is described as a whore, the daughter of a whore, a temptress and inciter, wise and hungry for power and control. Klimt's figures draw inspiration not only from the technique of the Ravenna mosaic but mainly from Theodora's duplicity—the sensual, sexual, seductive, and destructive element, and the adored royal element.

His painting of the woman is his idolatry, a cultic act in which both are victims of the power of archetypes. Klimt, as the son-lover of the Great Mother, is the lover of the woman and the servant of Eros. It therefore seems that he cannot but paint her because of her hypnotic power. Consciousness of the woman's lethal power, of the death and the maiden archetype, is imperative if the son-lover is to struggle against it. Klimt's painting, where he can shape the woman at will, is a struggle against her power. Thereby, as it were, he kills her and recreates her: he embalms her in gold, closes-chokes her throat in the splint of a royal piece of jewellery. Her arms in bracelets-handcuffs, he imprisons her in a golden cage, entangles her in the trap of ornaments and snake-like lines—which he now controls—mainly when he turns her into an object and an adornment, part of an ornamental wallpaper or of the flowery surrounding nature. The rhythmic-obsessive repetition of the decorative motifs is a ritual compulsion of the goddess' adoration, but also of his rule over her and of the neutralization of her power. She is as a wondrous butterfly, which he fastens to the canvas with the pin of the brush. She will only be his from now on, but embalmed. In curbing her, he has also curbed his own instinctual powers.

When Klimt paints the gorgons whose gaze turns all who look at them into stone, and the Lilith-like threatening women with the snake-like hair, he

is as Perseus, neutralizing their destructive power through their reflection in the mirror of the painting. Art becomes a mirror, and also a shelter, when it enables a symbolic-sublimating elaboration of the threatening archetypal force. His brush stroke is a sword and a shield.

The Artist as Son-Lover

Neumann (1990, p. 214) relates to the closeness of artists, all artists, to the archetype of the Great Mother and to their own feminine side. This closeness enables them to be nurtured by the Great Mother, by the great primary unconscious, and create. But this closeness is also a threat, and the more the artist is drawn in enslaved admiration into the unconscious, the greater the peril. The work itself, then, protects artists from this threat because it creates the 'third,' a bridging symbolic element symbolized by Hermes, the envoy between heaven and earth. Art mediates between the artist's consciousness and the great unconscious.

This proximity is what characterizes the artist, every artist, as the son-lover of the unconscious layer of the soul. The characterization of the artist as son-lover is most prominent regarding artists whose work is mostly or largely devoted to the woman-mother, and particularly regarding a man who lives as a son-lover in his relationship with the real mother and woman. This is true for Klimt, for Henry Moore, and for others.

The artist as son-lover serves the Great Mother (who symbolizes the unconscious) not only to fertilize her but to be fertilized by her. The implication is not that every artist necessarily has a weak ego, since we are speaking about the unique structure of the artist's soul, in which the uroboric incest is an imperative. The imperative is to stand at the edge of the unknown and pay attention.

Neumann (1990, pp. 214-215) claims that primary relationships leading to an emphasized mother archetype do not result, for artists, in the disorders usually affecting others. In fact, in the creative person this emphasis almost invariably leads to a significant strengthening of the ego's development. This

strengthening, together with the mother's activation of the unconscious, intensifies the tension that engenders creativity.

Neumann, as noted, states that the role of every artist is to describe the unitary reality underlying the split world. The unitary-pantheistic-mythical reality that Klimt describes in his many landscapes is also a facet of the paradisiacal world, of the individual's soul *participation mystique* in the world. As such, it is also an aspect of the attraction that the realm of the Great Mother holds for the artist. A realm of nature without human beings is equally attractive, and can endanger the ego striving for fusion and self-loss. Klimt's attempt to cope with the danger of the Great Mother as son-lover can therefore assume two forms—the adoration of the woman and the adoration of nature. Yet, he only shows awareness of the risk in his paintings of the woman and not in his nature paintings. Possibly, then, rather than being a new matriarchal trap, unitary nature was for him an escape from it since it is not controlled by the female figure that dominates his images.

The Anima

The woman in Klimt's paintings is not only the Great Mother threatening the son-lover, but also the anima. Does he endow her with the qualities of the feminine self? It is said that Flaubert said, 'Madame Bovary is me.' Did Klimt try to link up with his feminine essence in this way? Was he looking for the anima? (In some photographs, Klimt appears wearing a long robe, that is, women's clothing, not only in the privacy of his home but also in the street and among friends wearing suits and ties). The focus of his longings is as the core of the spiral that he, as it were, recurrently tries to decipher and fails. This is the anima, ultimately unattainable. Like the anima, this is a passive female figure, closed-eyed, sleepy, seductive, unconscious and, alternatively, a dangerous Lilith. This is the sexual seductive element in his soul, which he projects unto the woman and that threatens him through its archetypal force. The female figures, then, appear to embody for him the temptation of creative sexual power, of unconscious depths, but not the feeling that is a basic

component of the anima. As noted, the women are beautiful and distant-cool, egocentric-narcissistic, devoid of the emotional range of human life. Indeed, when he paints the woman all golden, he is as Midas who, by turning all he touched into gold turned also his daughter, symbolizing the anima, into golden metal incapable of human contact.

Klimt, then, is imprisoned in the woman's circle. He recurrently circles and besieges her walls, as if yearning to enter the uroboric circle of the woman-mother, perhaps Great Mother, perhaps anima, self-enclosed and leaving no room for the man. He is enslaved by her power, which hypnotizes him, but he cannot penetrate beyond the walls of the inaccessible archetypal essence. He is at the edge of the circle, at the edge between hunter and prey, between the yearning and the threat of devouring or being devoured.

The Art of the Period and the Threatening Aspect of the Feminine

Surrealists who were influenced by Freud and painted the contents of the unconscious painted also sexual contents, mainly the woman. From a masculine, Christian, patriarchal perspective, the woman is the one who represents and is responsible for sexuality. She is the sexual, tempting, and threatening creature. We find in Picasso, Dali, and Giacometti the motif of the castrating, consuming woman, the *vagina dentata*. The link between death and eroticism was widespread in surrealism. Another feature of surrealism was its pantheistic tendency to force the limits of reality, break through the borders between the living and the inanimate, as in the dream, and merge with it, a fusion bordering on the loss of self and a threat of its annihilation. The fear, the hostility, and the struggle to avoid being devoured—both by the woman and by the Great Mother who symbolizes the great unconscious—is expressed in surrealist art through the woman's negative pole and the violence against her.

Art had so far dealt with the actual revealed reality enabling some anchor from the abysses of the soul. The thrust of surrealistic art toward the unconscious is indeed enriching and seductive, but also threatening. The

unconscious, which opened up to surrealism's deliberate attempt to give a voice to its fertilizing chaos, also threatened to devour it, and note that the unconscious itself is symbolized by the Great Mother and the feminine.

The destructive, devouring, lethal facet of the woman emerges at this time in history because the sexual and social power of the woman, which attained social legitimacy, encountered a patriarchal world of men—and most artists then were men—that was not yet ready to accept the feminine element in their soul and denied it, repressed it, and condemned it. The men sharing the patriarchal culture and collective consciousness of the period had no access to options for transforming the mother archetype, for making the transition from the archetypal to the personal, or for encountering the feminine in enriching equality . The power of the Great Mother archetype and of the anima that was amorphously hidden in the soul and had been denied, gathered destructive power when it suddenly burst out as a devouring snake.

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