

# **ESSAY # 1**

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**Art History and Theories**  
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**Essay #2**

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doctor's certificate attached)**

**Lecturer: Dr Rosemary Brooks**

**Tutor: Dr Bridget Jolly**

**Tuesday 2pm**

**Student: Nina Gregurev**

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Discuss the expressionism of  
Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele  
In the context of the  
Secession Ethos

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With regard to this topic I have chosen to explore Gustav Klimt's Pallas Athene with its symbolic value and Egon Schiele's polemical discursive The Birth of Genius in order to discover what may be intrinsic to both.

The art of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, I believe, makes for a cathartic dualism within the context of the Secession Ethos of Viennese art. It brings to mind such humanising mythology as, for example, the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. *Gilgamesh* is essentially the story of natural man seen in the figure of Enkidu, giving way to the needs of and being incorporated by cultural man seen in the figure of Gilgamesh, his friend and double.

Both Klimt by his literary Symbolic application of Greek myth (cultural man) and Schiele by his expressionistic, inner, autobiographical art (natural man) (Gustav was Egon's father figure) make for an effectual artistic symbiosis within the Viennese Secession which sought to change the face of modern Viennese art.

Viennese Secession or Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs was formed in 1897. Nineteen artists, including Gustav Klimt (first President of the Secession), Joseph Hoffman, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Kolo Moser and Carl Moll, rejected the conservative attitude toward the arts of the Künstlerhaus, favouring a more modern experimental approach<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the Secession was to elevate public interest in Viennese art and bring international art of repute to exhibit in Vienna.<sup>2</sup>

While I believe that both Schiele and Klimt succeed in attaining the aims of the Secession, their art, though sometimes overlapping, remains two distinct styles. Klimt

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<sup>1</sup> Prossinger, C. 2000, "*Secession*" – "*Vienna*" in (Ed.) Jane Turner, *The Grove's Dictionary of Art, From Expressionism to Post Modernism, Styles and Movements in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Art*, pp 347,348

<sup>2</sup> Knafo, D. 1993, *Egon Schiele, A Self in Creation – A Psychoanalytic Study of the Artist's Self Portraits*.p 58

is at the Apollonian decorative end and Schiele on the Dionysian abstract end of the continuum. At this point my opinion concurs with Clement Greenberg who says of the two poles

The critic doubting whether abstract art can ever transcend decoration is on ground as unsure as Sir Joshua Reynolds was when he rejected the likelihood of the pure landscapes ever occasioning works as noble as those of Raphael.<sup>3</sup>

I surmise that perhaps the duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian poles named such by Nietzsche as stated in Lisa Florman's essay<sup>4</sup> is required to remain a duality and not a solidarity since they feed off one another by nature. Perhaps it is the flux between the two that sparks the dynamism of the creative imagination.

*Pallas Athene* (1898) by Gustav Klimt

Until the discovery in 1885 that "archaic period sculpture had originally been painted"<sup>5</sup> it was thought that classical Greek sculpture had always been unadorned by paint and as such contained "A noble simplicity and quiet grandeur".<sup>6</sup> Florman states:

For Winckelmann, Greek art was the antithesis of Baroque exuberance and of what he perceived as the decadent hedonism of the Rococo. To the extent that color and ornament were associated with sensualism, they were decried

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<sup>3</sup> Greenberg, C. 1961, "*Abstract, Representational, and so forth*", in (Ed.) Chipp, Herschel B. *Theories of Modern Art*, p 579

<sup>4</sup> Florman, L. 1990, "Gustav Klimt and the Precedent of Ancient Greece" p 310. [Electronic, 14 pages]

<sup>5</sup> Florman, L. 1990, Op. Cit. P 2/14

<sup>6</sup> Florman, L. 1990, Op. Cit. P 2/14 quoting Winckelmann

by academics well into the nineteenth century as reducing the moral value of the work of art. To paint a statue or to adorn it (as Kundmann had) with gold, risked introducing an irrational element that was decidedly unclassical.<sup>7</sup>

The polemical work of Gottfried Semper was borrowed from when Klimt, used in his painting the *Pallas Athene*, the palette indicated by Semper for the Parthenon. The *Pallas Athene* has a

Predominantly green background with subtle tints of purple, patches of red that make up in intensity what they lack in surface area, and above all, gold.<sup>8</sup>

As Florman suggests, the origin of the color gold is found in archaic vases.<sup>9</sup>

I concur with Florman further as she continues by observing that

The scaly, (gold), aegis with its hideous gorgoneion is made even more monstrous in Klimt's painting through visual associations. In the background behind Athena is a depiction of Herakles' fight against Triton. ... The image of the struggling hero was almost certainly intended as an allusion to the Vienna Secession's own fight for freedom ... In fact, sensual irrationality pervades the *Pallas Athene*. Not only is it evident in the application of gold, it is explicitly personified in the small naked figure of Nike, here less an emblem of military victory than of sexual liberation. Even Athena the goddess of wisdom is presented in a similar light. The bright red coloring of her lips, hair and peplos create an aggressively unclassical tone ... The cumulative effect of these associations is to destroy completely the notion of classical order and harmony, the world of "sweetness and light" in Matthew Arnold's saccharine phrasing ... By placing Athena, the consummate classical goddess, against a specifically archaic background, Klimt effectively undermines the authority of the entire classical tradition.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Florman, L. 1990, Op. Cit. p 2/14

<sup>8</sup> Florman, L. 1990, Op. Cit. p 3/14

<sup>9</sup> Florman, L. 1990, Op. Cit. p 8/14

<sup>10</sup> Florman, L. 1990, Op. Cit. p 3/14

Thus Klimt sustains the Secession Ethos. "To each age its art, to art its

freedom”,<sup>11</sup> words which were composed by the art critic Ludwig Hevesi, who supported the Secession through his writing.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore in light of the above, I refute Knafo who says

The figures of Klimt’s portraits were made to inhabit an unrealistic albeit beautiful world where design superseded meaning.<sup>13</sup>

I believe that though his ‘design’ can conceal conscious restorative meaning, it does not supersede it as it merely becomes subliminal. Klimt’s stylistic response to the art of the past as well as his radical treatment of a classical subject makes a statement akin to and in line with the individuation process in art, in individuals and in human society, and is expressive of the Secession Ethos to break with tradition. For example, the painting’s association with Greek polytheism – the link between Athena being Zeus’ daughter born without the aid of a mother – is effectively the application of ancient male myth in a modern way. In the painting, Athena the female god affects a traditional masculine pose barring the way, though sexualised by the gold paint as mentioned by Florman above, she remains a-sexual – a dangerous enigma: gaining her favour

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<sup>11</sup> Prossinger, C. 2000, Op. Cit. p 348

<sup>12</sup> Prossinger, L. 2000, Op. Cit. p 348

<sup>13</sup> Knafo, D. 1993. OpCit. Pp 24, 25

depends on her whim, one feels. The painting is hypnotic and I think it contains a kind of female Druidic presence. One perceives layers beneath layers of meaning including the ambivalence between her armour and body beneath it. The painting cannot help but draw an apprehensive response from the viewer. We cannot tell if we are safe or not under the gaze of this male fantasy – the favourite of her father, Zeus.

This painting is perhaps atypical of Klimt through its sheer force of presence. His art has typically been devalued by critics and other artists due to his overt use of surface decoration which has been equated with “lesser” and “female” applied arts and I argue that this anomaly is unnecessary if one takes into account the symbolic intrinsic value of his subject. How one expresses such a subject is as irrelevant as two different styles of hand writing expressing the same message. It is a matter of taste which one prefers, and taste can change. Klimt’s technique remains, in my view, more symbolist than expressionist. Yet his treatment of his subject effects a break from the past. In literature there is only one great story – with many variations on its theme – so also in art: the story of the human condition.

*The Birth of Genius* by Egon Schiele

Just as Klimt’s version of Pallas Athene sprang from the head of Zeus  
Without intermediacy of a mother, so too does Schiele attempt to exult his



personal disavowal of his mother and professes that he lives because of his father as expressed and deduced in his *The Birth of Genius* and subsequent writings.

Sherwin Simmons mentions that Schiele denied “feminised ties”<sup>14</sup> in his paintings – in other words he wanted to avoid surface decoration that would associate him with the decorative arts which were gendered feminine and inferior. Thus he gives no credit to this mother whom he felt was unnurturing to him. (Schiele’s mother looks to be not emotionally present in a portrait done by the artist of her. See Appendix) Simmons says

In a letter written to his mother two years after the *The Birth of Genius*, he, Schiele, made an extraordinary claim that says much about his understanding of the artist’s imagination and psychological state. “This is the great separation”, he told her, “Without doubt I will be the greatest, the most beautiful, the most valuable, the purest and the most precious fruit – through my independent will all beautiful and noble results are united in me – this also, no doubt, because of the man. [The man he speaks of is his father.] I will be the fruit which after its decay will still leave behind eternal life: therefore how great must be your joy – to have borne me?”<sup>15</sup>

Simmons goes on to say

This imagined separation involved much more than personal psychological history. It was in effect one of expressionism’s myths of origin, a fantasy about the relative values of fine and applied art, about paintings’ eternal life as opposed to textiles’ decay. Through such myths, male expressionist artists

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<sup>14</sup> Simmons, S. 2001, “Ornament, Gender and Interiority in Viennese Expressionism.” *MODERNISM/modernity*, Vol.8, No.2, p 271

<sup>15</sup> Simmons, S. 2001. Op. Cit. p 271, quoting Schiele.

struggled to separate themselves from the growing presence of women in the Viennese art world as well as in the discourse about ornament and fashion that accompanied women's expanding roles in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

Despite his bouts of apparent misogyny, Schiele's art is thoroughly expressionistic and decidedly breaks with tradition paving the way for further such psychoanalytic art.

Knafo says of Schiele

Through his confessional self-portraits, Schiele laid his life out on the canvas and embarked on an analysis of his personality as deep and ruthless as Freud's analysis of himself.<sup>17</sup>

*The Birth of Genius* depicts a child being born wide-eyed and screaming with a semblance to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. The mother appears lifeless. Technical application of paint gives rise to the appearance of blood and sinews beneath the skin – typifying his work of this time. The child expresses his terror and fury at a world that lacks the nurture he needs. What we know of Schiele is that his father, who had become mentally ill from syphilis when he died, is the parent he felt most bonded to. From his father's death on, Schiele began a process of self re-creation, the summation of which cultivated such paintings as *The Birth of Genius*. It is interesting that later the theme of the family (his own, that is, where he is a parent) led to a painting by the same name which depicts an altogether less anxious attitude – his internal needs being met in the objects of mother and child and self. The painting, *The Family*, acts as a

<sup>16</sup> Simmons, S. 2001, Op. Cit. p 271

<sup>17</sup> Knafo, D. 1993. Op.Cit. p 27

resolution to the process of individuation of which *The Birth of Genius* was the beginning – a beginning which negated the mother in principle, archetype and person.

Both Klimt and Schiele have stylistically broken with classical tradition and express the freedom of art as I have shown above. Klimt, though evidently more ‘symbolist’ than ‘expressionist’ in the subject of *Pallas Athene*, nonetheless illustrates the power of myth in token of personal reality compared to Schiele’s actual personal expressionistic, autobiographical and psychoanalytic reality – the subject of which is himself. Between the two, Schiele’s work draws one into his personal psychological and even physical space quite intrusively making the viewer partake of his vital pain, while Klimt’s art with its shiny smooth veneer acts on the viewer differently – more subliminally, less consciously. Admittedly Klimt’s art can validly be felt as somewhat shallow, as it appears to express the chaff and not the wheat due to its decorative nature, which like clothing worn by a woman can cover over the depth and meaning of the subject beneath while employing a facade, yet the woman – the subject – still exists!

In conclusion where Klimt’s *Pallas Athene* plays symbolical hide-and-seek such as in dream psychology, Schiele’s art has exposed the secret outright as in conscious waking life.

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