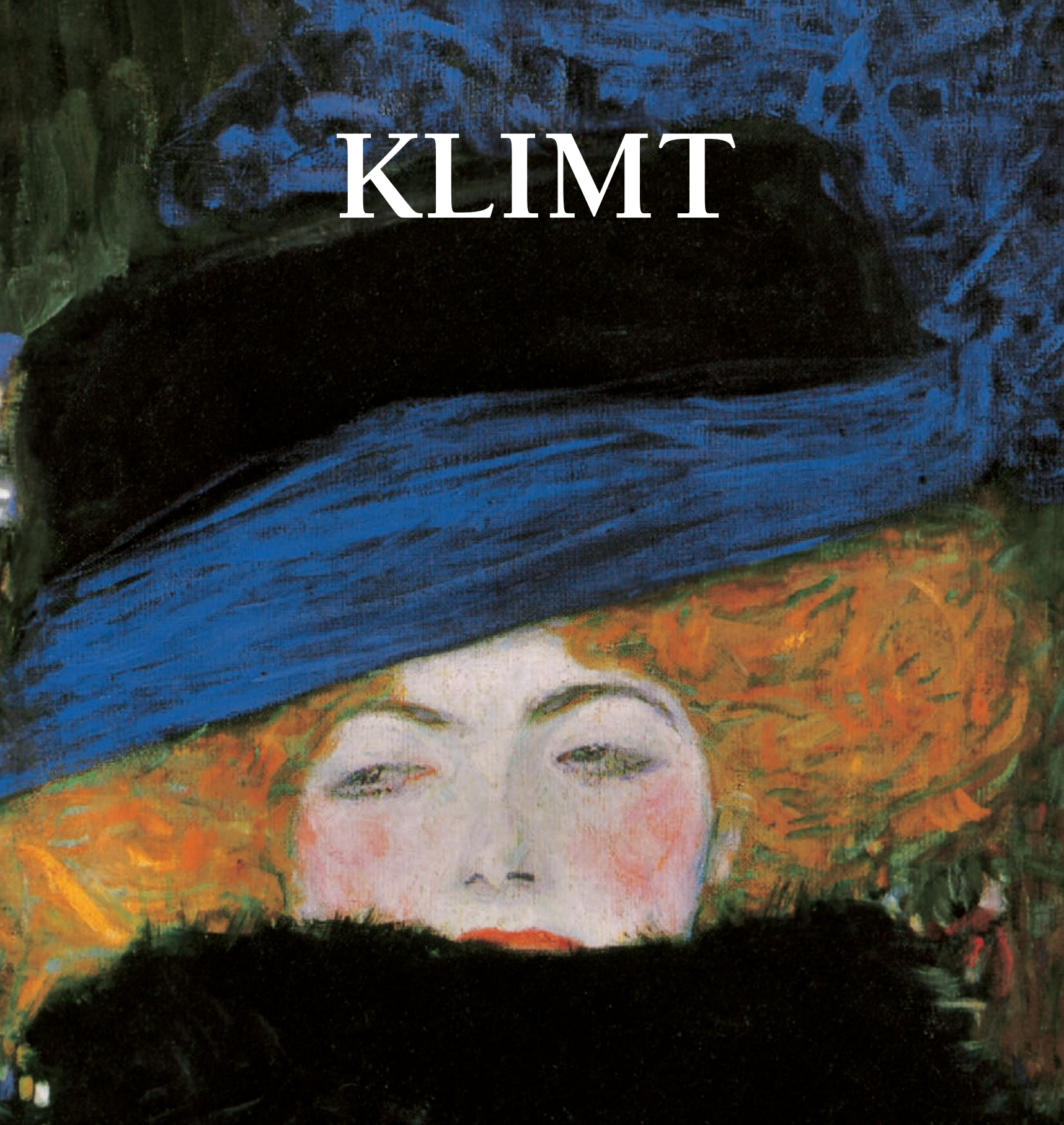


# KLIMT





Text: Patrick Bade

Layout: Baseline Co. Ltd.  
127-129A Nguyen Hue  
Fiditourist Building, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
District 1, Ho Chi Minh City,  
Vietnam.

© Sirrocco, London, UK (English version)  
© Confidential Concepts, worldwide, USA

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced or adapted without the permission of the copyright holder, throughout the world. Unless otherwise specified, copyright on the works reproduced lies with the respective photographers. Despite intensive research, it has not always been possible to establish copyright ownership. Where this is the case, we would appreciate notification.

ISBN: 978-1-78042-445-3



# Gustav Klimt



‘I am not interested in myself as a subject for painting, but in others, particularly women...’

Beautiful, sensuous and above all erotic, Gustav Klimt's paintings speak of a world of opulence and leisure, which seems aeons away from the harsh, post-modern environment we live in now. The subjects he treats - allegories, portraits, landscapes and erotic figures - contain virtually no reference to external events, but strive rather to create a world where beauty, above everything else, is dominant.

His use of colour and pattern, profoundly influenced by the art of Japan, ancient Egypt, and Byzantine Ravenna, the flat, two-dimensional perspective of his paintings, and the frequently stylized quality of his images form an oeuvre imbued with a profound sensuality and one where the figure of woman, above all, reigns supreme.

### Beginnings

Klimt's very first works brought him success at an unusually early age. He came from a poor family where his father, a goldsmith and engraver, could scarcely maintain his wife and family of seven children.

Gustav, born in 1862, obtained a state grant to study at the Kunstgewerbeschule (the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts) at the age of 14. His talents as a draughtsman and painter were quickly noticed, and in 1879 he formed the Künstlercompagnie (Artists' Company) with his brother Ernst and another student, Franz Matsch.

The latter part of the nineteenth century was a period of great architectural activity in Vienna. In 1857, the Emperor Franz Joseph had ordered the destruction of the fortifications that had surrounded the medieval city centre.

The Ringstrasse was the result, a budding new district with magnificent buildings and beautiful parks, all paid for by public expenses.

Therefore, the young Klimt and his partners had ample opportunities to show their talents and they received early commissions to contribute to the decorations for the pageant organized to celebrate the silver wedding of the Emperor Franz Joseph and the Empress Elisabeth.

1. *Fable*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 85 x 117 cm. Vienna, Wien Museum.

In the following year, they were commissioned to produce a ceiling painting for the Thermal Baths in Carlsbad. Other public commissions soon followed.

When one examines these early works, such as *Fable* (p. 4), *The Idyll* (p. 7), or indeed one of Klimt's earliest drawings, *Male Nude* (p. 8), it is clear that he is a painter of great skill and promise, but remains entirely within the accepted contemporary norms in his depiction of academic and allegorical subjects.

The women in *Fable* and *Idyll* are plump, adroitly draped in plain textiles, their hair smoothly pulled back behind the neck.

Neither would look out of place in the eighteenth or even seventeenth century. Their sensuality is matronly, motherly, their nudity decorous rather than exciting.

In the past, pubic hair had - if this part of the body was revealed at all - traditionally been glossed over into a smooth and unsuggestive 'v' reminiscent of modern-day children's dolls.

Many early medieval or Renaissance paintings which had shown even the suggestion of male or female genitalia had suffered the absurd addition of a floating fig leaf painted in by later, more prudish, souls.

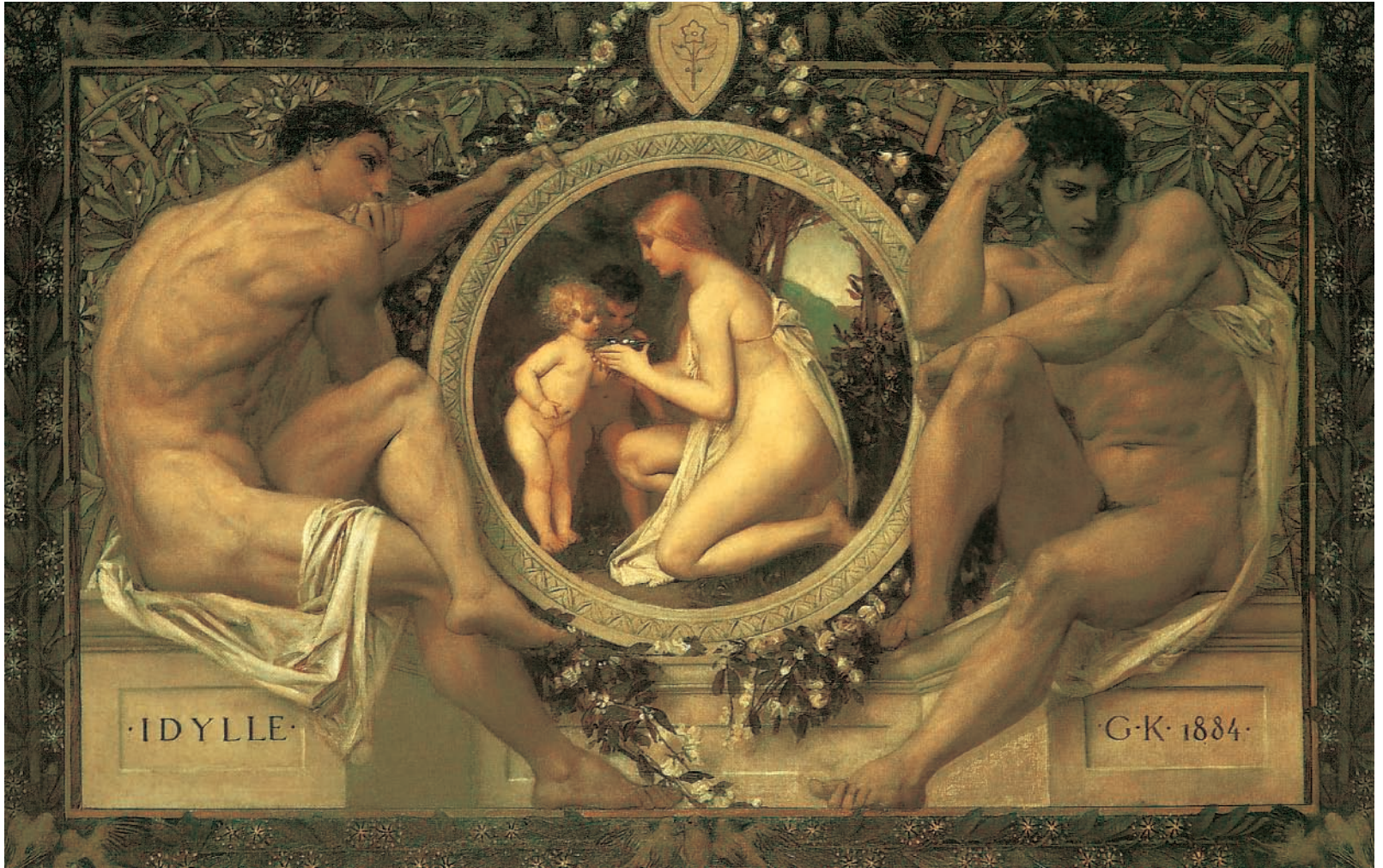
But even as early as 1896, Klimt had begun to be more explicit in the way he chose to depict the human figure.

There is, for example, an interesting difference between the final drawing for *Sculpture* and the painting itself. In the drawing we already see the trademark loose, wild, dark hair and the faintest traces of pubic hair.

The woman gazes directly at the viewer, standing as if caught naked in her bedroom doorway, summoning the viewer to caress her.

The painting, by contrast, has reverted to a more traditional style: gone the frontal stance, back the classical sculptural pose. Up goes the hair and the pubic hair disappears.

2. *The Idyll*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 50 x 74 cm. Vienna, Wien Museum.





3. *Male Nude Walking, Facing Right*, 1877-1879. Pencil drawing, 43 x 24 cm. Location unknown.

4. *Allegory of "Sculpture"*, 1889. Pencil and watercolour with golden highlights, 44 x 30 cm. Vienna, Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst.

### Secession

These early commissions established Klimt as a successful and prominent artist. Following the death of his father and brother Ernst in 1892, there seems to have been a distinct cooling-off in the working relationship between Klimt and Matsch as Klimt began to explore more adventurous waters.

In 1894, Matsch moved out of their communal studio, and in 1897 Klimt, together with his closest friends, resigned from the Künstlerhausgenossenschaft (the Co-operative Society of Austrian Artists) to form a new movement known as the Secession, of which he was immediately elected president.

The Secession was a great success, holding both a first and a second exhibition in 1898. The movement made enough money to commission their very own building, designed for them by the architect Joseph Maria Olbrich.

Above the entrance was their motto: 'To each age its art, to art its freedom'. The Secession not only came to represent the best of Austrian art, but was able to bring to Vienna French Impressionist and Belgian Naturalist works, which had never before been seen by the Austrian public.

Klimt was undoubtedly the central figure in this young and dynamic movement, but his success as a modern artist went hand in hand with the loss of his status as an acceptable establishment painter.

As he moved away from his traditional beginnings, he soon found himself at the centre of a series of scandals, which were to change his entire career.

### Scandal

In 1894, Klimt and Matsch had received a commission to produce a series of paintings for the University of Vienna. The subjects Klimt was assigned were Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence.

The nature of the commission can be easily imagined: The university would be expecting a series of dignified, formal paintings in classical style depicting the wisdom of philosophers, the healing virtues of medicine, and doubtless a statuesque blindfolded female figure holding a pair of scales and representing justice.



