

Gustave Klimt

BEETHOVEN FRIEZE

“Truth is like fire; to tell the truth means to glow and burn.”



The goals of the Secession were to provide exhibitions for unconventional young artists, to bring the works of the best foreign artists to Vienna, and to publish its own magazine to showcase the work of members. The group declared no manifesto and did not set out to encourage any particular style—Naturalists, Realists and Symbolists all coexisted. The government supported their efforts and gave them a lease on public land to erect an exhibition hall.

The theme of the fourteenth Secession exhibition was devoted to **Ludwig van Beethoven**. The aim was the “apotheosis of an artistic genius” who would “deliver tortured mankind from Agony and decadence.” A polychrome sculpture of the composer by **Max Klinger** (1857–1920) formed the centre piece of the main exhibition space.

Based on the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk (the Total Work of Art) — which the composer Richard Wagner had already attempted to realize in his operas—painting, sculpture, and architecture should work together to create a new kind of temple art, according to Klinger.

The “work of art” was to emerge from the interplay of the design of the rooms and the wall paintings and sculptures.



The Beethoven Frieze Programme

Gustav Klimt provided the most significant contribution to the exhibition with a wall frieze that was over 112 feet long and extended over three walls of a side hall of the Secession. The frieze depicts a monumental allegory and is considered to be one of Klimt's key works.

The frieze programme follows a description of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which the composer Richard Wagner had published in 1846. In addition, the frieze almost literally illustrates the words of Friedrich Schiller, which Beethoven himself set to music in the final chorus of the symphony.

Josef Hoffmann was responsible for the overall design of the exhibition. In reference to Christian sacral architecture he created a three nave space with apses with “a feeling of a temple for one who has become God.” In the left-hand space Klimt placed his “allegory of the salvation of mankind through the arts” in which Egon Schiele said the “entire Klimt religion” was expressed.



Left wall: "the yearning for happiness; the sufferings of weak mankind; their petition to the well-armed strong one, to take up the struggle for happiness, impelled by motives of compassion and ambition."

The frieze begins on the first longitudinal wall showing female figures gliding along horizontally, which is referred to in the Beethoven exhibition catalogue as "*Die Sehnsucht nach dem Glück*" (The Longing for Happiness)

The outstretched arms of the female figures float as if in water along the top edge of the frieze, while the areas below remain completely empty.



The first group of figures that the floating figures meet are an upright nude woman and a similarly nude kneeling couple. They symbolize "*Die Leiden der schwachen Menschheit*" (The Suffering of Weak Man-kind).

The "Suffering of Weak Mankind" group turns pleadingly towards a knight, the "*Wohlgerüsteten Star-ken*" (Knight in Shining Armour), who stands before them. He is shown wearing medieval armour and carrying a mighty sword. Symbolising "well armed Strength" the knight—identified with the artist—rides forth, out of compassion for weak mankind, to do battle with the depravity of the world and the power of blind instincts.



Behind the golden knight appear two allegorical female characters, "*Ehrgeiz*" (Ambition)" and "*Mitleid*" (Compassion). They are meant to act as "inner driving forces" to motivate the knight to "take up the struggle for happiness" in the name of humanity.

The knight's challenging gaze focuses on the subsequent scene, which stretches across the entire end wall where the "hostile forces" are gathered. He has to resist the giant Typhoeus and the three Gorgons.



Middle wall: the hostile forces; *"Typhoeus the giant, against whom even gods fought in vain; his daughters, the three Gorgons, who symbolise lust and lechery, intemperance and gnawing care. The longings and wishes of mankind fly over their heads."*

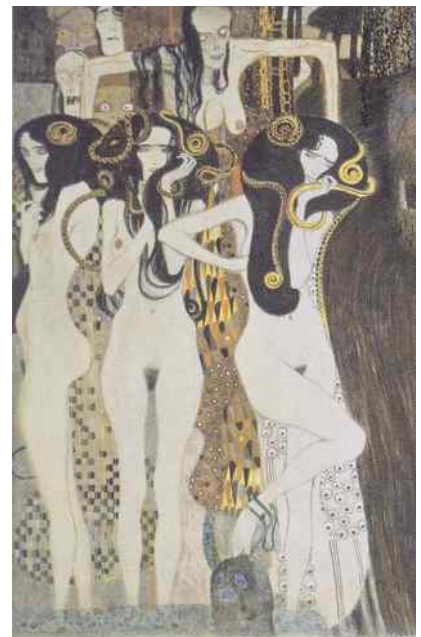


In the centre of the group lurks "the giant Typhoeus," a huge monkey-like monster, which according to mythology is the offspring of the earth goddess, Gaia, and the god of the underworld, Tartaros. To his left are "his daughters, the three Gorgons: sickness, insanity, and death."

Klimt's contemporaries were particularly worked up about the three Gorgons, with their total nudity and lasciviousness and vehemently protested against them.

Above the Gorgons, the skeletal female figure of death lurks dramatically with outstretched arms.

"... never has lust been more infamous, madness more appalling, innocence more touching, and sorrow more heartbreaking in its portrayal." (Austrian art historian, Hermann Ubell)



On his right side, Typhoeus's other daughters appear: "lust, unchastity and intemperance."

In addition to her bodily abundance, "Intemperance" displays a wealth of sculptural decoration, including glass stones, which were applied directly to the wall.

"... the representation of 'Unchastity' on the end wall of the hall is among the utmost obscene art that has ever been created. These are the Klimt-like paths that should lead us to Beethoven!" (Robert Hirschfeld, music teacher and critic in *Against Klimt*, Vienna, 1903)

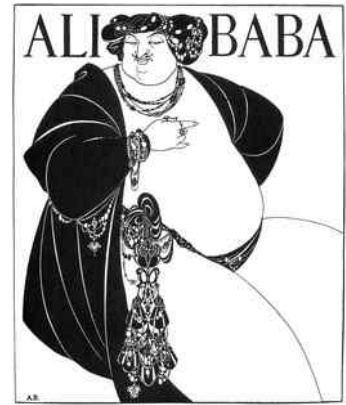




In addition to her bodily abundance, "Intemperance" displays a wealth of sculptural decoration, including glass stones, which were applied directly to the wall.

The figure of intemperance is reminiscent of **Aubrey Beardsley's *Ali Baba***.

Beardsley's illustrations were well known and admired by Klimt and the artists of the Secession.

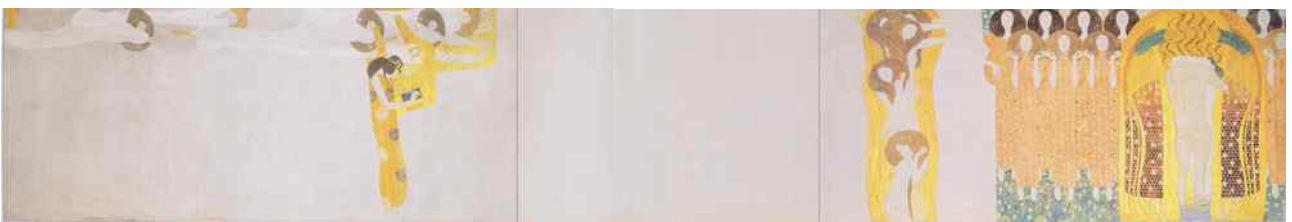


Away from the crowded figures, in front of the ugly snake body, and the mighty wings of the monster, cringes the "*Nagender Kummer*" (Gnawing Grief), a skeletal female figure whose expressiveness is particularly striking. Draped in her black hair she appears to be clutching her bony right leg to her chest.

The figures of the genii emerge from the top right corner and continue along the right wall, as if serenely floating,



On the right side the open wall permitted a view of Klinger's Beethoven monument. The allegory reaches its climax in a final symphonic idea "The Ode to Joy."



Right wall: "the yearning for happiness is assuaged in poetry. The arts lead us to the ideal realm in which we all can find pure joy, pure happiness, pure love. Choir of angels from Paradise. "Joy, lovely spark of heaven's fire, this embrace for all the world."

The "*Sehnsüchte und Wünsche der Menschheit*" (Longings and Desires of Mankind) return on the connecting longitudinal wall as a horizontal floating procession and move on until they are stopped by the lonely figure of "Poetry."





Here "the longing for happiness finds its satisfaction in poetry." Klimt presents the figure of Poetry in a manner inspired by ancient examples. Klimt also draws on the repertoires of ancient, Egyptian, and archaic cultures in many other of the frieze's motifs.

The catalogue of the exhibition proclaims that the arts lead mankind "over into the ideal realm, where we find only pure happiness, pure joy and pure love."

A vertical group of crouching women, called "*Die Künste*" (The Arts), reach from floor to ceiling like a living pillar, leading to the "*Chor der Paradiesesengel*" (Choir of Angels from Paradise)



The Choir of Angels from Paradise essentially corresponds to Beethoven's closing chorus of Schiller's "*Ode an die Freude*" (Ode to Joy). With raised hands and closed eyes, the floating female figures sing the song of joy.

His pictorial representation of the "kiss to all the world" manifests itself in the form of an embracing naked couple, which also signals the climax and finale of the frieze.

Klimt's symbolic union corresponds to Schiller's verse "*Joy, thy purest spark divine. This kiss to all the world!*" as set to music by Beethoven in the fourth movement of the Ninth Symphony.

Thus, the frieze expounds psychological human yearning, ultimately satisfied through individual and communal searching and the beauty of the arts coupled with love and companionship.



The Artistic Significance of the *Beethoven Frieze*

The significance of Klimt's artistic work in the *Beethoven Frieze* cannot be overstated. Linearity as an autonomous design element reaches its high point in Klimt's creation.

Klimt was also the first to use abstract, decorative elements derived from strict, geometric forms in the *Beethoven Frieze*,

Finally, his application of the colour gold and his use of real gold leaf in the *Beethoven Frieze* reached an unprecedented standard that the artist's subsequent works would then follow. The *Beethoven Frieze* marks the beginning of Klimt's Golden Period.



The Fate of the *Beethoven Frieze*

The fact that the *Beethoven Frieze* was not demolished after the end of the exhibition—as the other artists' murals were—is due to the commitment of Klimt's patron, Carl Reininghaus, who acquired the frieze after the end of the exhibition and laboriously removed it from the wall.

In 1913, the frieze was acquired by the Lederer family, which at that time owned the largest collection of paintings by Klimt. The frieze was sold by the family to the Republic of Austria in 1973. After years of restoration, the frieze was finally placed in the basement of the Vienna Secession.

Commemoration



The Secession movement was selected as the theme for an Austrian commemorative coin: the 100 euro Secession commemorative coin minted on 10 November 2004.

On the obverse side there is a view of the Secession exhibition hall in Vienna. The reverse side features a small portion of the *Beethoven Frieze*. The extract from the painting features three figures: a knight in armour representing *Armed Strength*, one woman in the background symbolizing *Ambition* and holding up a wreath of victory, and a second woman representing *Sympathy* with lowered head and clasped hands.

On the obverse side of the Austrian € 0,50 or 50 euro-cent coin, the Vienna Secession Building figures within a circle, symbolising the birth of the movement and a new age in the country.

Web sites:

The *Beethoven Frieze*:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/beethoven-frieze/agJyCiwKNleUlw>

Vienna Secession exhibitions:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/hwWx1ilaFkocLA>