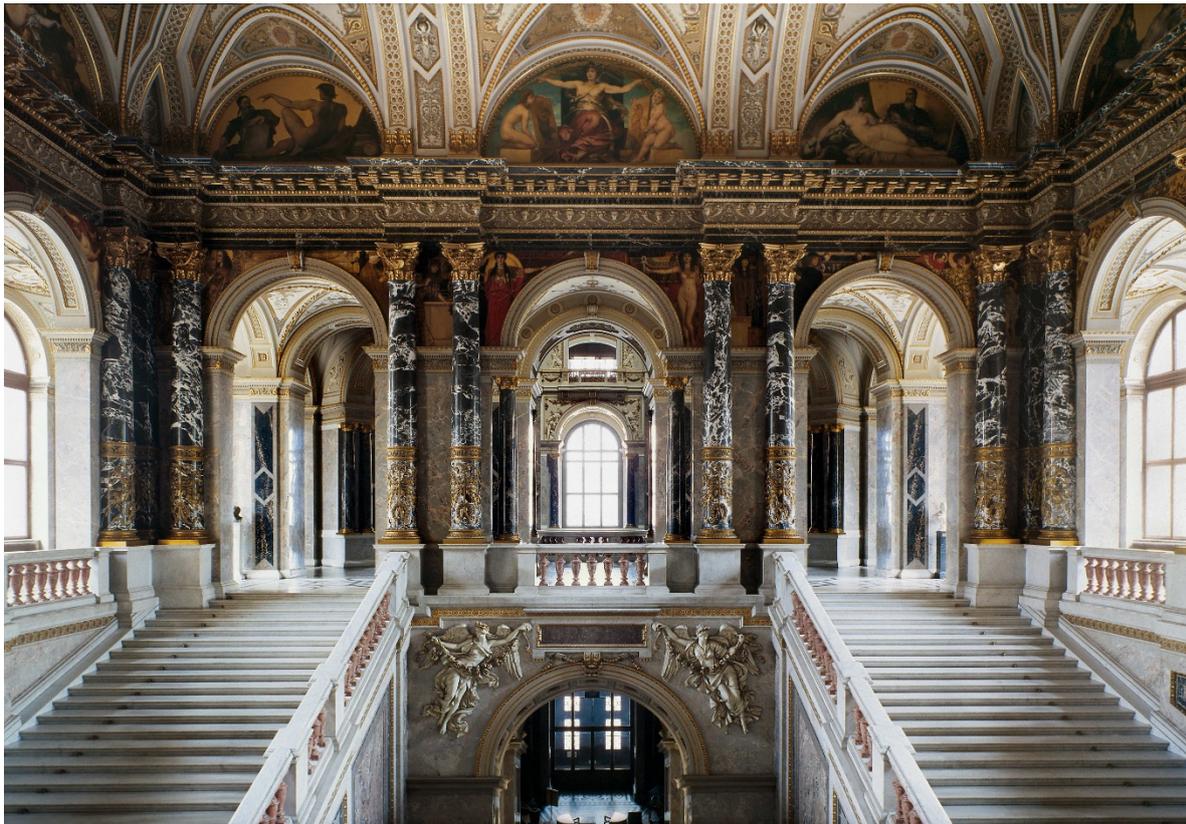

KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

**GUSTAV KLIMT'S PAINTINGS IN THE SPANDRELS AND THE SPACES
BETWEEN THE COLUMNS IN THE MAIN STAIRCASE OF
THE KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM**



KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN



Early Italian Painting

Spandrels and spaces between the columns on the far right.

Signed “G.K.” between the columns, 1890/91

© KHM-Museumsverband

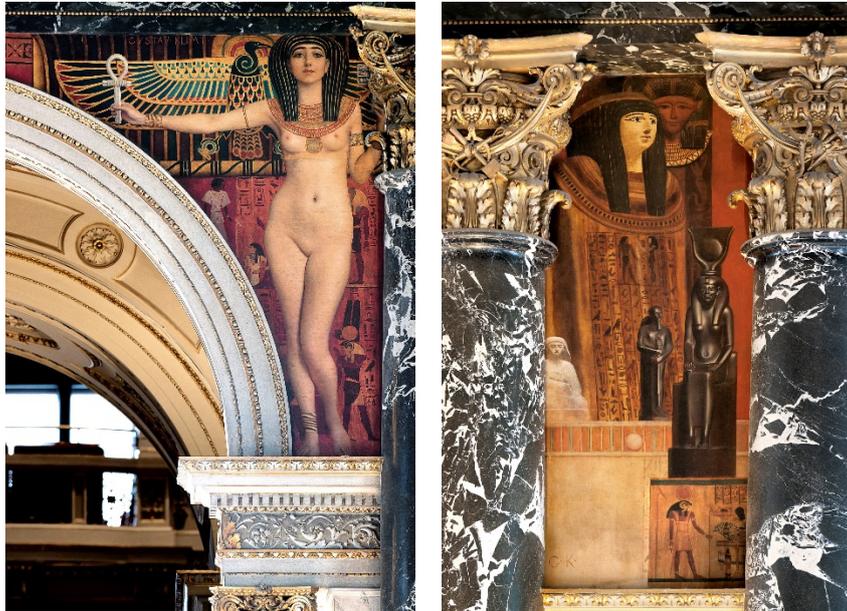
THE NORTH WALL

“Early Italian Painting” comprises Trecento and early Quattrocento art (ie, from the 14th and early 15th century); the leading centres were Florence and other Tuscan cities such as Pisa and Siena that brought forth artists like Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi, Ghiberti and Donatello, to name but a few. Florence was also celebrated as the home of early Humanists and of Italy’s most revered poet: Dante Alighieri, author of the Divine Comedy, the first work written not in Latin but in old Florentine dialect/Italian. In the spandrels a male and a female figure face one another, their curved bodies elegantly following the arch of the arcade. They document Klimt’s unrivalled skill that allows his painted figures to dominate threedimensional architecture.

Clasping a book, the young man dressed in the dark robes fashionable in 15th century Florence turns to his female counterpart. Her right hand is raised in a gesture designed to attract or entice him, and her dress of flaming gold brocade featuring ornaments inspired by Quattrocento designs glows with bright promise. Literature and art are joined as a bronze bust of Dante hovers above a winged putto with a halo clasping a shield in the space between the columns. A frieze of garlands and

KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

angel heads in the style of Lucca della Robbia accompanies the figures in the spandrels.



Ancient Egypt I and II

Left spandrel and space on the right between the two columns in the central axis. Signed “G.K.” between the columns on the left, 1890/91

© KHM-Museumsverband

The life in this world in but the preparation for our life after death. Few civilizations reflect this idea as forcefully as that of ancient Egypt. The funerary cult in all its many permutations dominated the lives of the ancient Egyptians and their art. In ancient Egypt the “anch” – the sign of life - was not only a character and a hieroglyph but also a cult-object and an amulet. The female figure clasping the “anch” in her right hand faces us in pure, bright, frontal nudity, she is the one who brings forth life. But between the columns lurks Death: a somber still-life, rich in content, featuring ancient Egyptian artefacts informed by excavated examples and contemporary research. Pictorial images such as the vulture of the goddess Nechbet in the concave moulding in the background are derived from the large atlas of ancient Egyptian art and civilisation published by Émile Prisse d’Avennes in Paris in 1877 and available at the time in libraries in Vienna.

The cleverly arranged still-life of ancient Egyptian funerary artefacts is dominated by a large polychrome wooden sarcophagus that is informed by another contemporary

KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

publication: the first catalogue of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (formerly the Musée de Boulaq) published by the eminent Egyptologist, Auguste Mariette, in 1872 in Cairo and featuring forty plates. In his important essay on *Gustav Klimt und die ägyptische Kunst* (Gustav Klimt and Ancient Egyptian Art), Ernst Czerny decoded the fascinating details of Klimt's pictorial language; the conflation of their place of origin (the location where they were discovered), time and function creates a geographic-chronological order of ancient Egyptian artistic production.



Ancient Greece I and II

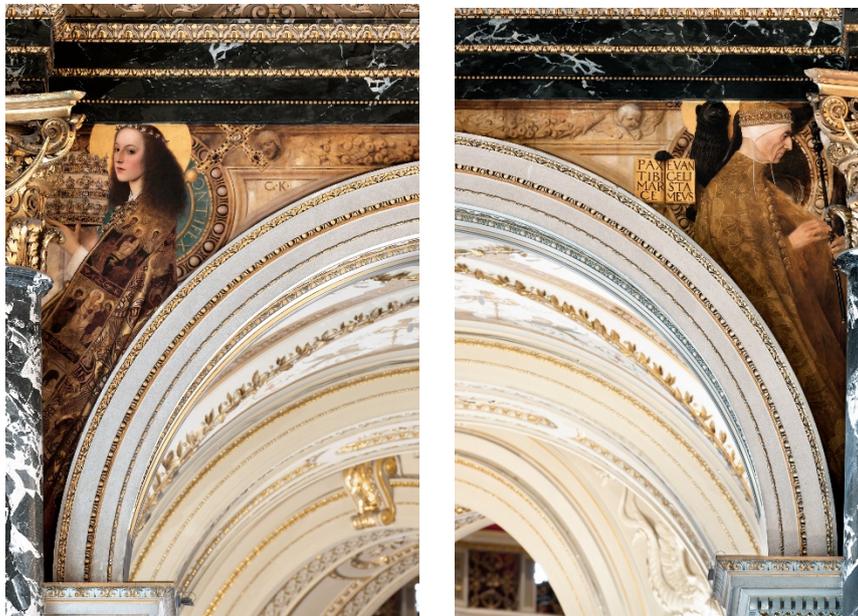
Left space between the columns and left spandrel in the central axis, signed “G.K.” between the columns; signed “GUSTAV KLIMT” in the top right-hand corner of the spandrel 1890/91
© KHM-Museumsverband

Again, a female figure forms the focal point of the composition. Athena, the mature goddess, fully aware of her beauty and her wisdom, her strategic skills and her bravery, is facing the viewer in this spandrel. Here, Klimt conflates two seminal large-scale sculptures by the celebrated ancient Greek sculptor, Phidias, both of which have only come down to us in marble copies: Athena Promachos and Athena Parthenos. Until his death, Klimt would repeatedly return to this conflated image.

The female figure depicted in the space between the columns is the deity's fascinating counterpart: a haetera, long known as the

KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

“girl from Tanagra”, is bending forward, her head turned slightly to the side, to face the viewer with a quizzical yet inviting gaze. We now know that Klimt did not copy artefacts from the rich holdings of the imperial collection for the decorative objects in the background. Instead he used as his model an Athenian black-figure vase featuring a depiction of Hades now in the Vatican Museum; and the small bronze depicting “Venus Loosening her Sandal” on the marble wall was discovered at Herculaneum. It is now in the National Museum in Naples. In the 19th century, hundreds of plaster casts of this figure – some with bronze patina – were sold.



The Roman and Venetian Quattrocento

Space between the columns and right spandrel on the far left; both signed „G.K.“ in the upper right hand corner; 1890/91
© KHM-Museumsverband

From the Middle Ages onwards “Ecclesia”, the Church, was generally depicted as a haloed female figure in a long cloak; her attributes are bowl, goblet, cross and cross-standard. Klimt’s Ecclesia is female, young and completely covered but for the chaste purity of her face and her slender hands. Richly embroidered with scenes from the life of Christ, her cope envelops her completely without even a hint of the contours of her body. Klimt implies movement by showing her leaning against the arch of the arcade rising behind her, and by drawing her cope like a curtain behind the column into the space between it and the next column to offer us a glimpse of Antonio Federighi’s aspersionum

KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

in the cathedral in Siena in the background. Church equals faith, power, wealth and patronage, especially in Rome, the seat of the papal court. Ecclesia's symbols and attributes are the pope's three-tiered tiara and the pontifical cross. One of the most beautiful mediaeval crosses to have come down to us is the reliquary cross of Emperor Henry II, one of the three extant artefacts in the treasury of the cathedral of Basle. Studded with jewels and cameos, it dates from the early 11th century. Hidden from public view between 1529 and 1827, it caused a sensation when the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin acquired it from an art dealer in 1836. Venice, or the Veneto, was long Rome's artistic counterpart further north. The Doge was the venerable Serenissima's highest representative. In analogy to the papal tiara, his insignia was the doge's cap. His pose and dress are informed by Giovanni Bellini's celebrated portrait of Doge Leonardo Lauredan (c. 1501; today in the National Gallery London).

KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

THE WEST WALL



The Cinquecento and Quattrocento in Florence

Space between the columns and spandrel on the far left of the west wall (facing the inner courtyard), all three paintings signed "G.K.", 1890/91

© KHM-Museumsverband

In the 15th and 16th century Florence was the epicentre of Early and High Renaissance art. The names of such celebrated sculptors and architects as Brunelleschi and Donatello or Leonardo da Vinci immediately come to mind. In the spandrels Klimt paraphrases Michelangelo's David and Botticelli's Venus as protagonists of Florentine art. The continuous background and bead moulding allow Klimt to anchor both depictions in the same pictorial space in which man and woman, even if not actually facing each other, are confronted.

Clearly outlined, David is a strong, self-assured and determined young man; in his left hand he clasps the bloody sword with which he has just beheaded Goliath. The scene literally reaches into the space between the columns on the left where we see the severed head of David's slain opponent dangling in his outstretched right hand. Looking at it as a separate painting, Goliath's severed head held up by its hair has turned into a bust. The translation of the Latin inscription that begins on the base and continues in the spandrel reads: "Whom God wants to destroy, he first blinds".