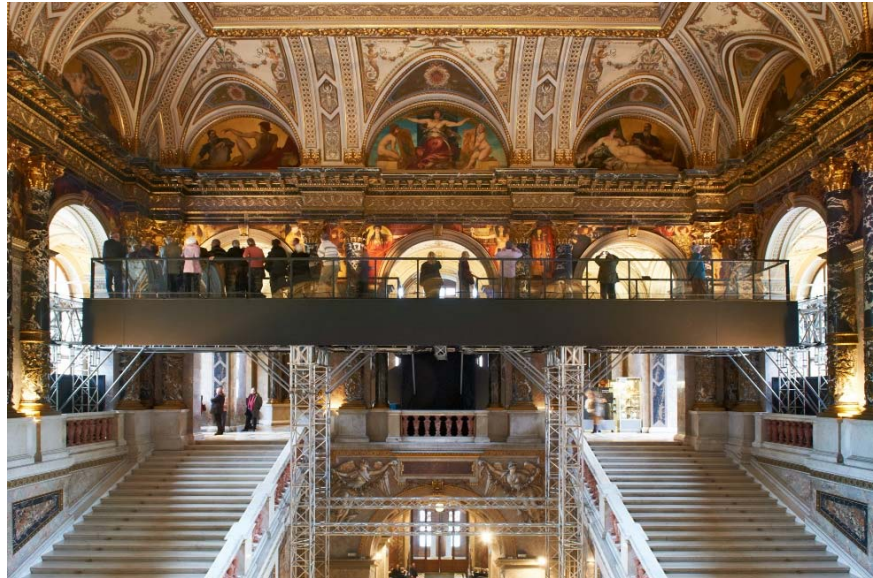

KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN



**FEBRUARY 13 -
SEPTEMBER 2, 2018**

STAIRWAY TO KLIMT

EYE TO EYE WITH GUSTAV KLIMT

To commemorate the centenary of the death of Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), visitors to the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna are invited to enjoy a close-up view of some of the master's unique early works installed above the columns and arcades of the Main Staircase. As we did in 2012, we have again built a bridge spanning the Main Staircase almost 12 metres above the ground so that this important cycle can be viewed in situ.

In 1890/91, twenty-eight-year-old Gustav Klimt was commissioned to produce wall paintings to decorate the areas between the arcades and the double-columns on the north wall of the large Main Staircase. The committee in charge of building and decorating the new home of the imperial art collections awarded the contract for the forty-part cycle to decorate all four walls to the Künstler-Compagnie (Artists' Company), which comprised Gustav Klimt, his younger brother Ernst and their friend Franz Matsch. The cycle depicts the history of art from Ancient Egypt until the nineteenth century.

Personifications – male and/or female – symbolize different artistic styles, epochs, regions and centres. Each figure's pose, attire and props reflect style, production and handling of the depicted period. Gustav Klimt was responsible for a total of thirteen paintings. He executed these oil on canvas paintings in the Künstler-Compagnie's studio, and in 1891, six months before

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the museum was opened to the public, they were glued to the wall. This magnificent cycle is in excellent condition and has never been restored.

The paintings in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna are precious examples of Gustav Klimt's early work, and they differ greatly from the paintings executed by his brother Ernst and Franz Matsch and their historicising style. Gustav's at times stark symbolic realism and the types of models he selected were precursors of the Wiener Moderne.

BACKGROUND

In 1859 Emperor Franz Joseph decreed the razing of the mediaeval city walls that still surrounded Vienna's Inner City. The imperial museums of, respectively, fine art and natural history were erected between 1871 and 1891 as part of the subsequent development of the Ringstrasse, the city's grand boulevard.

Gottfried Semper's and Carl von Hasenauer's monumental neo-Renaissance museum buildings feature splendid interiors – these mega-projects next to the Hofburg functioned as an expression of the Habsburgs' power and magnificence. The architects decided on a four-wing palace-like complex surmounted by a central cupola. The facades have corner and median risalits. A wide, magnificent staircase connects the Entrance Hall with the Cupola Hall and the galleries on the First Floor. Much attention was lavished on the architectural and painterly décor of the Main Staircase.

As the leading painter of the time, Hans Makart was commissioned in 1881 to decorate the entire monumental Main Staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna. This comprised the central ceiling painting, twelve semi-circular lunettes above the cornice, and paintings to fill the spaces beneath the cornice between the double-columns and in the pendentives (the three-cornered wall spaces between the arcades and the cornice). When Makart died in 1884 he had only completed the portraits of great master painters for the twelve lunettes. The committee then decided to award the contract for the ceiling painting to Hans Canon, but he too died soon afterwards. Canon had recently finished the ceiling painting for the staircase of the Natural History Museum (The Cycle of Life).

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THE KÜNSTLER- COMPAGNIE

Franz Matsch and the brothers Gustav and Ernst Klimt

Up stepped the Künstler-Compagnie, founded in 1883 by three artists – Franz Matsch and the brothers Gustav and Ernst Klimt – who shared a studio and collaborated on large decorative projects (all three had studied at the School of Applied Arts). In 1885 the Künstler-Compagnie produced paintings for the Hermes Villa, and in 1886 for the staircase of the Burgtheater. Following Canon's death in 1885, they were initially asked to execute both the ceiling painting and the paintings for the pendentives and between the columns. However, the commission for the prestigious ceiling painting eventually went to Mihály Munkácsy, a Hungarian society painter based in Paris, who produced a depiction of the apotheosis of the Italian Renaissance. In 1890, the Künstler-Compagnie accepted the somewhat less-prestigious commission for the paintings in the pendentives and between the columns. The pictures were to be completed in only five months, which proved to be unrealistic. The canvases were only installed in April 1891, i.e. only six months before the museum was opened to the public on October 17, 1891.

CONCEPT AND PROGRAMME

The art-historian and curator Albert Ilg devised the concept for the forty-part cycle. We do not know how the members of the Künstler-Compagnie decided to divide and allocate the commission; eventually Franz Matsch took charge of the south wall, Gustav Klimt the north wall, and Ernst Klimt the east wall. Each of them then also decorated one axis on the west wall. As these wall spaces do not allow for much compositional freedom and innovation, Ilg decided on female and male personifications whose attire, pose and selected props were to represent the different stylistic epochs, region and centres.

Gustav Klimt produced a total of thirteen paintings in this cycle, and they depict the following:

The paintings above the left arcade on the north wall depict the "Roman and Venetian Quattrocento" (i.e. the fifteenth century). The female personification of Ecclesia adorned with the papal tiara represents Rome, while the Doge (seen in profile) and the lion of St Marc stand for Venice. The figures are not facing each other, presumably a reference to the rivalry that existed between these two artistic centres.

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The paintings above the central arcade (including the spaces between the columns framing it) represent, on the left, “Ancient Greece”, and, on the right, “Ancient Egypt I and II”. Interestingly, Klimt decided to depict both Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and the art of war, and the nude figure clutching the ancient Egyptian sign of life, the “ankh”, facing us. The space on the left is given over to a haetera, long known as the “girl from Tanagra”; her face with its quizzical-inviting expression is shown in three-quarter-profile. On the right objects connected with the ancient Egyptian cult of the dead forge a bridge between life and death.

The depictions above the right arcade on the north wall symbolize “Early Italian Painting”. Here, a young man reading a book and a female Christian saint engage in a silent dialogue. Between the columns on her right we can make out the outlines of a bust of Dante Aligheri, and below it a small angel clutching a shield. Gustav Klimt’s paintings above the left arcade on the west wall depict the “Florentine Cinquecento and Quattrocento”, i.e. art in Florence in the fifteenth and the sixteenth century. Here Klimt made a pragmatic decision and depicted David clutching the head of Goliath to represent sixteenth-century art, and Venus, inspired by Sandro Botticelli and attended by a Cupid, fifteenth-century art in Florence.

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PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

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The Klimt bridge

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The Main Staircase

© KHM-Museumsverband



Gustav Klimt

Early Italian Painting

Painting in the pendentive on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

© KHM-Museumsverband



Gustav Klimt

Early Italian Painting

Painting in the pendentive on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

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Gustav Klimt

Ancient Greece II (Pallas Athena)

Painting in the pendentive on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

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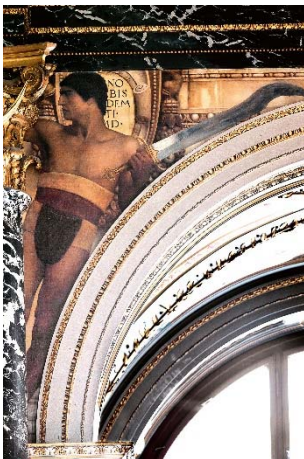
Gustav Klimt

Ancient Greece I

Painting between the columns on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

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Gustav Klimt

The Florentine Cinquecento (David)

Painting in the pendentive on the west wall of the Main Staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

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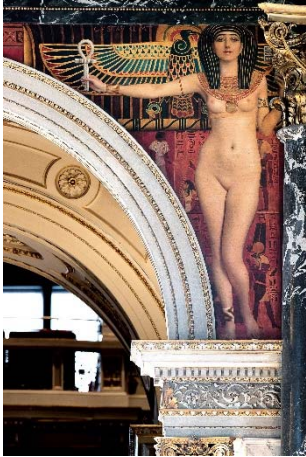
Gustav Klimt

The Florentine Quattrocento (Venus)

Painting in the pendentive on the west wall of the Main Staircase of the
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

© KHM-Museumsverband



Gustav Klimt

Ancient Egypt I

Painting in the pendentive on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

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Gustav Klimt

Ancient Egypt II

Painting between the columns on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the
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1890/91

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Gustav Klimt

The Roman and Venetian Quattrocento (Doge/Venice)

Painting in the pendentive on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

© KHM-Museumsverband



Gustav Klimt

The Roman and Venetian Quattrocento (Ecclesia/Rome)

Painting in the pendentive on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

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Gustav Klimt

The Florentine Quattrocento (Dante)

Painting between the columns on the north wall of the Main Staircase of the
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

1890/91

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VIDEOS

For videos about our exhibitions and series of talks as well as other lectures and interviews please go to the YouTube channel of the Kunsthistorisches Museum
www.youtube.com/user/KHMWien.

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OPENING HOURS AND ENTRANCE FEES

Tuesdays – Sundays, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Thursdays until 9 p.m.

June, July and August open daily!

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Children under 19	free
Group ticket (p.p.)	€ 11

Guided Tour	€ 3
Audioguide	€ 5

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