Art nouveau — A Viennese Gesamtkunstwerk

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_Blossoming colours, golden ornaments, structuralist style, and sensual representation—this year marks the 150th anniversary of the artist Gustav Klimt. This is the time to indulge in this art nouveau style, and the place to enjoy his oeuvre is Vienna: Klimt’s native Vienna is celebrating the distinguished painter with the Klimt Year 2012 jubilee._

Luscious flowers merging into elegant female figures and organic ornaments crafted into luxurious jewellery epitomise art nouveau (Jugendstil in German and Modern in Russian) at the end of the 18th century, fin de siècle. Its style, which has a variety of names, constitutes a global movement, and its spirit is as colourful as its style. Its oeuvres still dazzle the global art scene with record-breaking prices, and even centuries after its peak period, its style is still copied in interior design and jewellery.

The art nouveau concept combines the arts into a form of “syn-arts”, truly in the spirit of breaking and merging boundaries—merging arts and crafts from high culture to the everyday, combining the sensual and the crafted, connecting the organic earthiness to the artistically elevated, and striving for the creation and the realisation of the synaesthetic Gesamtkunstwerk.

Gustav Klimt spent most of his life in Vienna, and a trip to Vienna offers a synaesthetic experience: the city not only celebrates the extraordinary, but also appreciates the art of the ordinary—with architecture and artworks to enjoy, and cuisine in which to indulge.

There are several museums now offering special exhibitions, notably the Belvedere and the Albertina, as well as the Leopold Museum in the avant-garde MuseumsQuartier—explore the quarter’s designer shops for unique souvenirs.

Moreover, one can trace Klimt’s influential artwork in the numerous cityscapes and in a variety of monuments, notably in the Viennese Secession art house—the ideal starting point for a Klimt journey. The golden-green Secession art house still hosts the Beethoven Frieze [Beethovenfries]—a wall painting that is part of the “Close-up” exhibition. During the
former Austro-Hungarian era, the name “Secession” served as a synonym for “art nouveau”, and its motto is still engraved above the entrance: “To every age its art. To art its freedom.” [Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit.]

Within walking distance to the Secession, the Albertina impresses with its astonishing architecture and permanent collections. The special Albertina exhibition “The Drawings” frames the Klimt with an exploration of his artistic methodology and mediums. Klimt created fascinating effects with various means, and the exhibition features drawings created with pencil, chalk, or coloured pencils, and painted with feathers, watercolours, or gold paint.

The Leopold Museum offers the most avant-garde and audience-oriented perspective display, and sets out to understand the painter, as well as the human being, in its exhibition “Klimt: Up Close and Personal”. Paintings, including the vital Death and Life, drawings and correspondences explore both the artistic and artist’s life in an innovative setting, offering novel and holistic perspectives. The Leopold Museum illuminates Klimt’s artistry with his own reflections on his working methods. Vivid photographic images of his typical artistic attire and the reconstruction of his studio support the museum’s theme impetus of “up close and personal”— whilst avoiding myths and clichés.

The museum offers a vintage-communication experience to the visitor: from the museum’s own post office, one can send reproduced postcards to loved ones at home— Klimt himself was an avid letter writer.

Gustav Klimt’s artistry was avant-garde for his time and his most famous oeuvre, The Kiss, advanced as an epitome of the fin de siècle ambiance and emerged as one of the art nouveau icons. In the image, gold is not only employed as a mere luxury material; the usage of the material reflects the aura of human emotion. Klimt’s famous canvas is part of the Upper Belvedere, and the Belvedere gardens offer an ideal setting for wandering around.

If you would like a holistic perspective on art nouveau for your personal library, the recently published Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) by Norbert Wolf (2011) is a true Gesamtkunstwerk. The book is gold framed in a larger-than-life format, and even its font is adapted to the art nouveau style. The author offers a multi-perspective and global view on the art movement. From everyday objects to haute couture and high culture, the book offers a holistic insight into the global movement and places a special focus on Gustav Klimt and Viennese architecture from its opulent beginnings to contemporary designs.

Figure 3: The Upper Belvedere, Vienna.
Figure 4: The aura of Klimt’s The Kiss (Der Kuss, 1908) at the Belvedere.
Figure 5: A collection of Klimt books.