



## KLIMT, FROM PAINTING TO FASHION

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**Abstract:** Fashion has been a subject for most fields of art, starting from visual arts to cinema and literature. The metamorphoses of fashion, an art in itself, are under the sign of history that marked the social during the evolution of humanity. The present paper makes a reference to the links between fashion and Klimt's work. Klimt proved to be a visionary by means of his visual, unique and unmistakable signature concerning the way he treated the clothed woman. As he worshipped the female body, he portrayed it, reflecting the fashion style of an era that was meant to be renewed. His work, strongly influenced by feminine values, became conspicuous as a manifesto against the rigidity of the Viennese society in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The modernity of Klimt's vision generated the metamorphosis of the woman model, from the corseted woman until that time, and not only in terms of fashion, to the freed woman, using the metaphorical instruments of his art. The artist's complex creativity helps us find him in four different situations, all in close connection with fashion art: the painter Klimt, who portrays woman who shows herself by showing her garment; the fashion designer Klimt who suggests outfits for his collaborator, Emilie Flöge, remoulding the dress as a clothing item; the fashion photographer from the photographs of Emilie Flöge wearing his creations; and, indirectly, by his paintings from the cycle Women, which had a powerful impact on contemporary fashion. Such a complex, visionary creator, whose painting and fashion interfere, is worth mentioning for his contribution to the fashion art avatars.

**Key words:** Golden Phase, The Kiss, Emilie Flöge, Adele Bloch-Bauer, Schwestern Flöge

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In social history, as well as in art history, the human body was established as a provocative space to explore, a material for various kinds of cultural interventions. In art history, the manner of artistic representation of the body related to everyday life, the body becoming an experimental space, especially in fine arts. When clothed, the human body gets multiple artistic and communicative valences, the garment itself becoming an art object that artistically shapes the body, giving it the attribute of an appearance generating performance. By giving the body a certain image, the garment itself can generate aesthetic satisfaction, in an obvious visual statement. The clothing habits of an era can outline "the characteristics of morals and of dominant sensitivity" [1], the fashion history thus becoming "a way of penetrating the heart of social history" [2]. Since "each form of art has its own power according to its specific means" [3], in the same way the garment becomes a force of expression through the agreement between form and materiality, emphasized when they are in the same matrix with the pictorial art. Like any other form of art, fashion art "is an attempt towards uniqueness, it becomes known as a whole, as an absolute and, at the same time, it belongs to a system of complex relationships... it is matter and spirit, form and content" [4].

### 2. KLIMT IN THE ARTISTIC CONTEXT OF THE ERA

In this context of form and content, Klimt, a Symbolist painter, an outstanding member of the Viennese secessionist movement, exploited in his canvases not only the female body but also femininity in its entire splendour. Women portraits, which reconstructed the rise of Viennese bourgeoisie at the border of the 19th and 20th centuries, represented the core of Klimt's canvases.

Faithful to the representation of this bourgeoisie, through its female exhibits, Klimt discovered his original creative energy, unique and unmistakable when exploring and depicting the female body, more or less clothed, full of sensual symbols.

“Under the influence of sinuous and sensual contours typical to Art Nouveau artists such as Munch, Klimt also creates dense images of symbolic meanings that are directly inspired from the imaginative and have little contact with the real world”. [5] A primary topic in Klimt’s works, the woman protagonist appears at her superlative beauty. The women depicted by him are charming by their bodies that are more or less emphasized by garment. He was the painter who probably endowed the woman at the beginning of the 20th century, whether fatal or mythical, with the most beautiful expression.

### 2.1 Fashion design, a source of artistic expression

In the history of painting as a major art, the garment of the person portrayed has often been a form of expression and artistic message, a tool to communicate the meaning of the visual work of art. As for Klimt, we identify an emphasized communion between the female body and the garment that accentuates her sensuality up to her eroticism. The effects are sumptuous, sensual, and slightly abstract. Fashion becomes the source theme for many of Klimt’s works. We find in his works a semantic communion between the two languages – fashion and painting – between which there is a trans-coding operation, a structural dialogue in which the energy of decorativism and chromatics become fundamental elements of their aesthetics.

Klimt’s interest in women’s fashion, expressive in his paintings, seems to be due to his relationship with Emilie Flöge, an Austrian fashion designer and businesswoman, the life companion of the painter.

### 2.2 Clothing representations in Klimt’s paintings

Exploring the feminine corporeality, Klimt associates it to his concern for fashion, in a way that makes him unique by his most representative works. Familiar with the latest fashion in haute-couture due to his collaboration with Emily Flöge’s salon, Klimt accentuates the hairstyles, make-up and accessories. He transforms the woman, makes her less dangerous by alleviating her fatalism through attitude and clothing subtlety.

A representative painting in terms of the suggestive value of clothing is *The Portrait of Gertrude Loew*, exhibited in 1903. The gentle, almost ethereal garment worn by the daughter of a Viennese intellectual, a friend of Klimt, suggests the youth virginity of the depicted person, a delicate texture for the body that hides a chaste soul. The painting belongs to Klimt Foundation today.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, La Belle Epoque flourished in Europe, a period in which fashion, targeting women’s emancipation, represented something else than what Klimt was painting. Klimt’s dresses were unlike anything else, they were a disavowal of his contemporary fashion and, at the same time, a search of the primary dress. [6] The dresses worn by his women had an oriental allure by their chromatic and decorative register, most of them being image-dresses for the woman portrayed.

Like other great painters, Klimt knew several distinct periods in his work, the most appreciated being the “Golden phase”. It is during this creative period that he began to give lustre to his works full of sensuality, with gold leaves used in religious art to symbolize divinity, Klimt, in turn, deifying the woman.



Fig. 1: Danae, 1907

Source:

<http://www.klimt.com/>

Danae, mythical symbol of divine love, appears in Klimt’s painting wrapped in a purple, sumptuous veil denoting imperial descent. The translucence of the veil that only symbolically covers the body emphasizes the fragility of the female body.

The decorative register of the veil texture reveals the painter’s interest in the design of the textile surface.

The most representative works for Klimt’s Golden phase period are *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* and *The Kiss*. The commissioner of the first painting was Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, Adele’s husband, a Viennese salon lady. The ornamental complexity of the painting is typical for the

Austrian Jugendstil. The woman's attitude, the body suggested in an emphasized decorative of the dress that overlaps the decorative of the seat and of the painting frame, the geometric elements of dress, all remind us of elements of Egyptian art. In this painting one can find a depth of the decorative motifs and of the garment chromatics focused on repetition, alternation, symmetry, conjugation and overlapping. This creates a garment in a complex compositional form in which it harmonizes with the woman's body. The binomial woman-garment is in a metaphorical, synchronic relationship. The woman is glorified by juxtaposition, the quasi fusion between decor-garment/ decor-background. Her clothing is here a glorification of woman, with the typical sumptuousness of the Byzantine garments richness, outlined by the use of gold and silver leaves in the work composition.



Fig.2: Portrait of Adele Bloch Bauer I, 1907  
Source:  
<http://www.klimt.com/>



Fig. 3: The Kiss, 1907  
Source:  
<http://www.klimt.com/>

*The Kiss* is an allegorical representation of the couple caught in a tender hug. The man's garment, juxtaposed against the background, surrounds the bodies of the couple in love, becoming itself a symbol of love. The garments, meticulously painted, are distinguished by various and complex composed decorative elements, by chromatic contrasts representative for Klimt's work. Their brightness is given by the gold leaf used by the artist, especially during the Golden phase period.

Both garments of the couple are distinguished by a composition of linear decorative structures typical to Art Nouveau combined with organic elements that refer to the Arts and Crafts Movement. There is an ornamental dialogue between the two lovers' garments. The man wears a garment with black and white rectangular motifs randomly placed on gold leaf decorated with spirals, while the woman wears a tight-fitted dress, which follows the contour of her body, decorated with floral motifs on round or oval background elements, all on a background of parallel wavy lines.

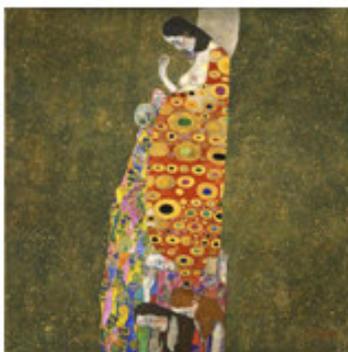


Fig. 4: The Hope II, 1907



Fig. 5: Portrait of Emilie Flöge, 1902



Fig. 6: The dancer -postum portrait of Ria Munk, 1912

Source: <http://www.klimt.com/>

The late nineteenth century witnesses an artists' trend towards the non-western element in fashion, towards exotic and oriental, towards primitivism, as an escape from the rapid changes of the complexity of urban fashion. "One of the clearest examples of such primitivism of the Artistic Dress is the work of Gustav Klimt. Like many artists of the period Klimt revealed his interest in non-western styles in his personal collection, which included a caftan from North Africa. The basic line of many garments Klimt designed echo those of the North African garments." [7] The Artistic Dress proposed by Klimt, stood out of the ordinary, seemed out of place in the Viennese society, and so Emilie's appearance in a dress created by Klimt in 1908 was interpreted at the Kunstschau art exhibition opening. [8]

The feminine outfits in Klimt's works from the cycle *Women* are interpreted by some critics as an anti-fashion manifestation, and, in terms of the Artistic Dress, it has a very limited clientele. The fashion coordinates to which the artist relates to are full of meanings. As for Klimt, fashion was the theme source for his painting and vice versa. The decorative register of his fabrics has a special place in his works. The rich chromatic contrast of the garments, the geometry sweetened with organic elements, the emphasized, luxuriant decorativeness, a reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics or oriental textiles, all are put in the service of woman as the centre of his representations. The gold of the Byzantine style completed by the magnificent scenery makes the human figure become insignificant. The woman shows her attire and herself, and it is the woman's attitude, always placed centrally, that is of highest interest.

Similar to other genres of paintings, I can say that in the painting of Klimt, "from a morphological point of view, the dressing signs are articulated by juxtaposing or overlapping some elements, by the association of colours and lines, by adding decorative elements in a three-dimensional concert"[9].



Wedding dress in which, unlike the other creations signed by Klimt, the geometrical motifs are missing.

Fig. 7: Portrait of Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein, 1905

Source: <http://www.klimt.com/en/gallery/>



A dress from the late period of Klimt's creation, with Chinese decorative motifs, which, by means of drapery, give another clothing line than in previous creations

Fig. 8: Portrait of Elisabeth Baroness Bachofen-Echt, 1914

Source: <http://www.klimt.com/en/gallery/>

### 2.3 Klimt's relation with fashion design

Too little is known in the artistic milieus about how involved Klimt was in the real world of fashion. The close relationship he had with Emilie Flöge, who owned the Viennese fashion house "Schwestern Flöge", most likely caused his interest in this field. Klimt himself drew outfits as well as jewellery and textiles for Emilie's fashion house. [10]



Fig. 9: Emilie Flöge and Gustav Klimt, 1905 [11]



Fig. 10: Portrait of Emilie Flöge [12]



Fig. 11:  
Emilie Flöge with Klimt creations  
Source: <http://www.klimt.com/>



Fig. 12:

„At the beginning of the twentieth century it was non unusual for visual artists also to design clothes. In 1906, for exemple, Gustav Klimt photographed his close friend Emilie Flöge, the fashion designer, modelling ten dresses that he had created.”[13] The dresses designed by Klimt and created in the salon owned by Emilie, are dresses that lack girdle, they fall freely from the shoulder line, with wide sleeves, a cut that makes the wearer comfortable. The design of the dresses suggested by Klimt attracted Paul Poiret's attention, the creator who freed the woman's body after centuries of corseting.

“Poiret meanwhile has made his own radical experiments in the aesthetic of women's fashions. When he saw the Klimt room at the World Exposition in Rome he sensed a remarkable harmony between Parisian and Viennese design.”[14]

### 3. KLIMT, A LANDMARK IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION

There are a few contemporary designers who have been influenced in their creations by Klimt's artistic proposals. Dior's spring collection 2008 introduced opulent outfits in vibrant magenta, red and yellow, with geometric motifs that seem to be made by the artist's brush itself. Aquilano Rimoldi, presented a spring collection in 2011 in which he took over the decorative elements of *The Kiss* and *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*. The rectangular geometric patterns in the portrait of the same Adele and the work *The Tree of Life* inspired the collection with the title *Resort 2013* signed by Sarah Burton for Alexander Mc Queen. And the examples can continue because even now what Klimt proposed more than a century ago in the field of textile design proves to be modern and abreast with the time.



Fig. 13: Dior, 2008

<http://www.style.com/slideshows/fashion-shows/spring-2008-couture/christian-dior/collection/37>



Fig. 14: Rimoldi, 2011

<http://www.dulciedulcie.com/2013/10/art-as-fashion-lwren-scott-aquilano.html>



Fig. 15: Sarah Burton, 2013

<http://www.chaos-mag.com/alexander-mcqueen-resort-2013-stuns/>

### 4. CONCLUSIONS

During the time he created, Klimt explored new possibilities of rendering the female body. Using colour, which gave him the possibility to move colours and decorative elements, Klimt brought the clothed woman in the spotlight of his works. The fashion language outperforms body language and sometimes completes it. (like in *The Kiss* and *The Three Ages of Woman*). The richly decorated garment, geometric and / or organic, in vivid, energetic colours, accentuates the woman's sensuality, his works being today guiding marks for textile design meant for fashion.

On the other hand, the clothes proposed by Klimt, worn by Emilie, are adapted to the time when the feminist movement began; as the woman wanted to be socially liberated, Klimt frees her from the body corseting. And by the preserved images with Emilie wearing his creations, Klimt can be considered a forerunner of fashion photography.

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