

Klimt's Last Studio

By Duncan J. D. Smith

Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* is the world's most famous painted embrace. Its presence in Vienna has long attracted visitors, where the familiar image has found its way onto everything from cufflinks to dog jackets. But what of the studios where the enigmatic artist conjured up such trail-blazing imagery? Until recently all were considered lost.

Decorative painter

Klimt was born in 1862, one of seven children to a Bohemian goldsmith. The family's modest home at Linzer Strasse 247, however, has long since given way to modern buildings. After attending Vienna's Universität für angewandte Kunst Klimt commenced work as a decorative painter. Commissions included the Hermes Villa for the imperial household, as well as the newly-built Burgtheater and Kunsthistorisches Museum, all in the emperor's beloved Historicist style.

But Historicism was backwards-looking, and Vienna felt staid when compared with Paris, where Impressionism was causing a sensation. In response Klimt co-founded the Wiener Secession, which quickly established a fully-fledged Viennese take on Art Nouveau. Historicism would no longer hold Vienna back in the arts.

Lost studios

When the Secession fell apart in 1905 Klimt continued alone to develop further the idiosyncratic styles for which he is known. How far he had already come can be gauged by the furore caused when he unveiled a series of ceiling murals commissioned by the University of Vienna. Branded pornographic by academics Klimt returned his fee and removed



the pictures. He vowed never to work for the state again.

By this time Klimt was working in his second studio at Josefstädter Strasse 21, where he painted *The Kiss*. He had moved there in 1892 after vacating his first

studio at Sandwirtgasse 8, in which he had been ensconced since 1883. Neither is extant today although both carry commemorative plaques, as does the house at Westbahnstrasse 36, where Klimt lived with his mother and sisters.

Garden house

In 1912 Klimt moved studio once again, this time to a single-story garden house on Feldmühlgasse in Unter St. Veit. The property was owned by a furniture manufacturer, Joseph Herrmann, whose daughter married the painter Felix Albrecht Harta. Through this artistic connection it was rented to Klimt, and it was there in February 1918 that he succumbed to a fatal stroke. He had been working simultaneously on two works, *The Bride* and *Lady with Fan*.

Klimt's friend Egon Schiele pleaded for the studio to be left untouched in tribute to the artist – but it wasn't to be. Within months Schiele, too, was dead. Whilst the contents of the studio fell into private hands, the building itself was assumed lost after the Herrmanns erected a villa on the site in 1923. It was therefore a complete surprise when plans unearthed in 1998 revealed the exciting reality that the walls of the old studio had actually been incorporated into the new building.

Orchard with Roses

Both villa and studio have subsequently been renovated and turned over to the Comenius Institute, for use as a museum and cultural centre. Contemporary photographs and eyewitness accounts have helped with the work. Schiele, for example, described the reception room with its collection of East Asian art, and Carl Moll alluded to the room where Klimt's models – “several were at his beck and call” – undressed.

Klimt himself had the studio's north-facing picture window installed as well as the semi-wild cottage garden, filled with shrub roses and fruit trees. He captured something of it in his *Orchard with Roses* (1912). Although long lost it is hoped one day that the garden will be re-planted. One can imagine Klimt in his trademark indigo-blue kimono nodding his head in approval.

The Klimt Villa at Feldmühlgasse 11, 1130 Vienna is open Feb-mid July and mid Aug-Oct, Thursday to Saturday 10am-6pm

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