

Lifeworks

Symbol and surface

This year's summer blockbuster offering from the National Gallery of Canada is *Gustav Klimt: Modernism in the Making*. Organized exclusively by the gallery, the show is the first comprehensive North American retrospective of the work of the Austrian artist who lived from 1862 to 1918 and was the most renowned member of the fin-de-siècle Art Nouveau movement known as the Viennese Secession. The exhibition of 36 paintings and 90 drawings reunites some of the artist's best-known works, including the National Gallery's own *Hope I* (1903) and its golden successor *Hope II* (1907–08), with many lesser-known ones, such as a set of landscapes Klimt executed during summer holidays on Lake Attersee and a selection of remarkably graphic erotic drawings.

Klimt's most familiar paintings combine naturalistic depictions of beautiful, mostly naked women with ornately patterned and shimmering gold spaces. His highly decorative, aesthetically appealing work is frequently reproduced on posters, placemats, coffee mugs, greeting cards and other ephemera.

This summer in Ottawa, the alluring red-haired woman Klimt portrays in *Hope I* levels her frank gaze from the



Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Eugena Primavesi*, 1913–1914. Oil on canvas, 140 cm × 85 cm.

Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota City, Japan

sides of city buses and appears in fully naked, pregnant splendour in newspaper and magazine advertisements. Evidently (and pardoning the pun), the hope would be that *Hope I* will entice visitors out of the sun and into the gallery. This reviewer had the additional hope that the show would provide some deeper insights into Klimt's art.

Despite the advertising frenzy surrounding the show, *Gustav Klimt: Modernism in the Making* is a serious attempt at a scholarly assessment of the importance of the artist's work. More than three years in the making, the exhibition is an ambitious undertaking for the National Gallery that, in the end, is not entirely successful. Although it affirms Klimt's extraordinary abilities, it isn't entirely convincing in its presentation of the motives and meaning in his work.

Indisputably, the artist's hand dazzles. Klimt revels in his exploration of the possibilities of paint. His earlier paintings are rendered with the smooth, glass-like surfaces characteristic of Academic painting; later ones are textured with loose, Impressionist

brushwork. The landscapes are uniquely executed in the more controlled Pointillist style of the French painter Seurat. Drawings such as *Embracing Couple* (1901–02) are further evidence of his outstanding draughtsmanship. Klimt's ability to render three-dimensional forms with an economy of line recalls the work of Ingres, who was celebrated for his drawing ability in early 19th-century France. Clearly, Klimt's innate talent and his training at the Kunstgewerbeschule (the school of applied arts in Vienna) between 1876 and 1883 provided him with the means to produce work of outstanding quality and earned him many commissions and patrons.

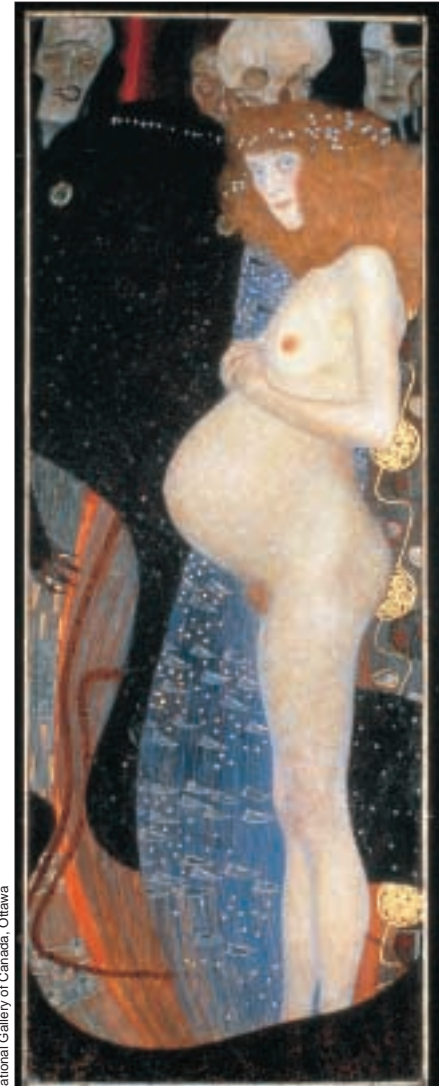
Although Klimt's technical virtuosity is undeniable, it is difficult to come to terms with the depth of meaning in his art. Heavily influenced by late 19th-century Symbolism, Klimt makes allegorical content an integral component of his work. In *Hope I*, "Death" and three grotesque heads represent the ugliness in the world, while "Hope" and "Beauty" are found only within the pregnant woman. In keeping with the artist's intentions, the paintings must be interpreted with a consideration of

their symbolic meaning. However, the highly decorative nature of the work itself constantly undermines the impact of its deeper meaning. Even contemporary critics remarked on "the conflict between Klimt's luxuriant manner — with its emphasis on surface and sheen — and the intended profundity of his allegories."¹ This conflict continues to be debated and is by no means resolved in the current exhibition.

Another barrier to understanding Klimt's work is the decision by the show's organizers to present the works with minimal contextual information. The impetus for this comes from Klimt's own statement, reproduced at the entrance to the show, that "whoever wants to know something about me as an artist — and that is the only thing that matters — must look attentively at my paintings and try to glean from them who I am and what I want."

Unfortunately, restricting the scope of the exhibition to information that is present in the work itself leads to little understanding of how Klimt's art relates to that of his peers, especially those involved with the Viennese Secession, and how it was perceived by his audiences. For example, even though the show alludes to controversies regarding the public acceptance of Klimt's work (such as those associated with the exhibition of *Hope I*), it doesn't provide enough background information to convey a clear sense of the controversy. In the same vein, it is hard to grasp the extent to which Klimt's work was considered controversial, given that most of the paintings included in the exhibition, such as *Portrait of Eugenia Primavesi* (1913–1914), were in fact commissioned by an enthusiastic and wealthy circle of Klimt supporters. In the end, the failure to deal with the questions surrounding the contradictions between surface and depth in Klimt's work and those regarding its public reception results in a somewhat unsatisfying experience for the gallery visitor.

Ironically, the greatest controversies have surrounded the show itself — those generated by questions of possible Nazi connections with some of the works, and by a long, bitter strike by



Gustav Klimt, *Hope I*, 1903. Oil on canvas, 189.2 cm × 67 cm.



Gustav Klimt, *Embracing couple*, 1901–1902. Study for the *Beethoven Frieze*, Fourteenth Secession, 1902. Black crayon, 45.0 cm × 30.8 cm.

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

the same gallery workers who had planned and assembled the show. Now that these issues have been resolved, the biggest controversy at this point is not at all about the art of Gustav Klimt, but about the final number of visitors to the exhibition and the impact the negative publicity has had on the National Gallery's desire for another successful summer blockbuster.

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Reference

1. Braun E. "Klimtomania/Klimtophobia." In: Bailey C, editor. *Gustav Klimt: modernism in the making*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada; 2001.