

THE SHAPE OF A WOMAN

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the birth of artist *Gustav Klimt*, Taschen celebrates the luxury and life of the Art Nouveau prince of decadence with its up-coming book "*Gustav Klimt: The Complete Paintings*."

by Sarah Hassan

It has been quite the celebratory year for Gustav Klimt. With 2012 marking the 150th anniversary of the legendary artist's birth, museums and galleries such as the Albertina, the Kunsthistorisches, the Leopold, and the Wien in Vienna, the Neue Galerie in New York and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, are paying homage with exhibitions on several aspects of Klimt's incredible body of work. The Getty explores the volume of drawings and sketches the artist executed in preparation for his major paintings; the Neue Galerie showcases the artist's rare and intimate letters with his closest companions; and in Vienna highlighting treasures from paintings to photographs to assorted ephemera.

Klimt, a symbolist painter born in 1862 in the Austrian empire, was one of the most important artists of the Vienna Secession movement and paved the way for the Modernist era. As one of seven children, Klimt came from artistic beginnings; his brother, Ernst Klimt, was also a painter, and their father, Ernst the Elder, was a gold engraver who married an aspiring musical performer. Gustav went on to study at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts where he mainly trained as an academic and architectural painter, greatly influenced by the work of Hans Makart, adopting a conservative tone for his own pieces. His early years saw Klimt as a muralist, working with his brother and their friend, Franz Matsch, all commissioned to paint the interiors and ceilings of large public buildings in and around Vienna. Today, the city lives on as a vital and exuberant stamp of Klimt's evolved style thanks to these early assignments.

SHOCK & AWE

In 1897, Klimt became one of the founding members of the Vienna Secession and its publication, "*Ver Sacrum*," staying with the group until 1908. The goals of the Secession were to highlight the work of radical young artists and bring the best foreign artists to Vienna, pursuits which were carried out with the support of the government and bearing no manifesto. A champion for the inventiveness of others, Klimt went on to shock and awe the world with his own work, beginning with three paintings commissioned for the University of Vienna, "*Philosophy*," "*Medicine*" and "*Jurisprudence*"—eventually destroyed by retreating SS forces—which treated traditional allegory in frankly sexual terms causing the artist to be accused of pornography. Undeterred and largely inspired by the female form, Klimt went on to produce some of his most iconic work, such as the luxurious and ambitious "*Beethoven Frieze*," on permanent display in Vienna's Secession Building, "*The Kiss*"—which is one of the most recognizable images in the history of art—and "*Portrait of Adele Bloch Bauer*" (purchased for a record \$135 million by Ronald Lauder for his Neue Galerie) both executed during his hugely beloved "golden phase," which saw the artist working with gold leaf on canvas. Klimt became known for his lush palate and viscerally intoxicating portrayals of women: swimming, resting, embracing and modeling nude—or clothed in upper class finery, and decorative motifs which took inspiration from the ancient world, eastern elements, and the new aesthetic of Art Nouveau.

NYMPS, MUSES, SHE-DEMONS & SEA SERPENTS

The world of Klimt, with sprawling, curlicued trees, fanciful galaxies, and overgrown gardens, is indeed a woman's world—nymphs, she-demons, pregnant women, aging crones, sea serpents, heiresses, daughters, seductresses and muses all make up the dreamy cast of characters. Women come in all shapes on the canvas: full thighs highlighted in blues; ripe bellies outlined in crimson; sagging breasts unable to feed; and trails of long hair like splashes of ink in water. Sometimes dark, or ablaze with a sunset palate, the frank sexuality Klimt explored in his work inspired the artists who came after him, such as Egon Schiele, and continues to demand veneration from the world of scholarship to high fashion.

THE PRINCE OF DECADENCE

It is no surprise, then, that *Taschen*, the German book publisher known for its wide variety of titles covering architecture, fashion, fine art, sexuality, travel and design, are releasing a monograph devoted exclusively to Klimt's paintings: "*Gustav Klimt: The Complete Paintings*."

In October, the \$200 edition will be available, promising an unsurpassed look at the "prince of decadence" and his complete catalog of work, including all his known letter correspondences. The book's editor and author, Tobias G. Natter, has been the director of the *Leopold Museum* since October of 2011 and is an internationally recognized authority on Viennese art at the turn of the century. This provenance is tempting enough for any lover of the artist's work, as Klimt has no shortage of fans and foes in the amphitheater of art history. As Natter promises to explore the "for or against Klimt?" dichotomy with this monograph, readers can rest assured, as they can with most of the books Taschen publishes, that there will be plenty to ogle over, as Klimt's work has always managed to successfully speak for itself.

No doubt this monograph will delight, however; every edition has always proven better than the last. Coming out hot on the heels of certain closing exhibitions, one can predict that this book will satisfy some of Klimt's followers and fans desire for 2012 to reign as his year-long birthday party. If there is indeed a heaven, one can imagine that it is awash with gold and inhabited by languid, long-haired beauties singing of Vienna's number one son, attempting to match the other-worldly women Klimt so successfully gave the earth as its own.

Sarah Hassan is a New York City-based writer, editor and cultural critic. She wrote about the life and scandals of *Colette* for *TREATS!* issue 3, and regularly contributes to *Artwrit* and *The Herald*. She is also an accomplished dancer and performer, and serves on the guest faculty at Sarah Lawrence College.