Golden Halo: Gustav Klimt's *The Three Ages of Life* as Modern Madonna

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When one reviews the art historical canon referencing Gustav Klimt, the results are the same: Klimt was a very sexual man who painted very sexual women. Contemporary critics look at the culture of Vienna at the time, the artist's personal affairs, his sumptuous use of gold, and brazen poses and exposure of his models to justify the notion that Klimt's work was exclusively prurient[1]. However, this method of analysis does not account for the many influences on Klimt's style or the positive weight of his personal relationships. Klimt was not just a painter of female sexuality, but a devotee of women whose appreciation for the female form was akin to divine adoration. Indeed, elements of many of his works evoke respect for the female much like images of the Christian Madonna. This respect is perhaps a reflection of the art-

ist's 1903 trip to Ravenna and subsequent exposure to the mosaics there, and/or a mirror of the artist's loving personal relationships—as Klimt did not simply use women for personal pleasure and exploitation. Through biography, visual analysis, and iconography, I propose that Klimt's 1905 work, *The Three Ages of Life* (fig. 1) is a concrete example of the artist's positive relationship with the female. To support this claim, I will suggest The Three Ages of Life as a modern Madonna and Child, illustrating that Gustav Klimt's work was not exclusively prurient, nor even a straightforward representation of the cycle of life through the figure of an anonymous woman.

Klimt was born in 1862 in Baumgarten, a Viennese suburb, the son of an engraver with modest means.[2] He lived the rest of his life in Vienna, moving to the city with his family, where he remained with his mother and unmarried sisters even after his father's death in 1892.[3] During Klimt's lifetime, Vienna was steeped in "the parallelism between taboo and licentiousness, by which a woman is either put on a pedestal or unabashedly exploited depending on her social standing," which "managed to do nothing less than ruin Vienna around 1900…corrupted it and paved way for both the zealots and the advocates of a unified moral standard to run riot with full abandon."[4] These stigmas are necessary to note in order to establish that the artist produced his work within a culture which contained a deep-seeded prejudice against women. His depictions of the female form, then, whether intended to be over-sexualized displays or not, would likely have been taken by his

contemporary critics as such.

This point is clearly illustrated through the writings of Karl Kraus, editor of the Viennese journal *Frackel* (Torch) which "[lit] the way to the world of good taste' for the bourgeoisies" at the turn of the century.[5] Of Klimt's work, he writes: "Whether she is called Hygieia or Judith, Madame X or Madame Y, all his figures have the pallor of the professionally misunderstood woman, and Mr. Klimt has given them the unmistakable dark rings, or shall we say Schottenringe [an anti-Semitic reference to a woman's dark eyes and coloring] under their eyes."[6] Although the Jewish bourgeoisie of Vienna were vastly influential and resounding patrons of the arts, their visual representation was still marred by the inversely related rise of Austrian nationalism and pan-European anti-Semitism at this time.[7]

The depiction of Jewish women was particularly clouded by negative associations. At the time, the use of a Jewish model tapped into the prejudiced over-sexualizing of Jewish women—a phenomena which traces back to the Medieval fear of Jewish women seducing men away from Christianity—of which Gustav Klimt seems to have been aware; he seems to have capitalized on it for his more licentious works (i.e. *Judith I* of 1901 and *Judith II (Salome)* of 1909).[8] In contrast, the young mother figure in *The Three Ages of Life* is easily identifiable with fin-de-siècle Vienna's rising sense of Austrian nationalism. Her ethnicity indicates that Klimt knew the cultural stigmas associated with the coloring of his models,

and therefore, chose a fair-haired woman to illustrate the maternal love seen in *The Three Ages of Life* following in the tradition of a Christian Virgin and Child.

In 1903, Klimt visited Ravenna and Venice twice, viewing the art and studying Byzantine mosaic techniques "in-depth and in person."[9] It was these visits which influenced the start of Klimt's "golden period" and inspired his intense ornamentation of the female form.[10] This "golden period" is the period within Klimt's works (beginning directly after his 1903 trip to Ravenna) in which the artist used gold leaf and various metallic paints as primary construction tools.[11] It also is marked by a sense of *horror vacui*: typically, Klimt's "golden" works are made up of intense ornamentation offsetting gently treated human figures to create drama and lusciousness within the work.[12] The artist formulated this style in concert with the Byzantine works he saw abroad, including the colors, themes, and construction of mosaics, especially those of Ravenna, and particularly those found in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo (fig. 2, 3).

The visual similarities between Klimt's *The Three Ages of Life* and the mosaics of Ravenna begin with the color palette. The gold used for the background in the mosaics is featured in the bubble-like patterning which fills the oblong brown space in Klimt's painting and adorns the mother-figure's hair. This same gold is present as highlights in the metallic bronze panels which make up the majority of the background of *The Three Ages of Life*. It is mixed with white dots and pale patches, creating an almost

marbled effect. This effect connects the painting to *Mosaic of procession of Virgins Saint Justina, Felicita, Perpetua, Vincenza carrying crown symbol of martyr in Saint Apollinare Nuovo* (fig. 2), as the white dots appear like the plaster peaking through tessere. The effect is exceptionally important as it links Klimt's entire golden period to his 1903 visit to Ravenna, and can be easily cited in *The Three Ages of Life.* [13]

However, the most interesting palette similarity is the specific use of blue (the symbolic color of the Virgin Mary) in both Klimt's piece and the mosaics of Ravenna. *Mosaic of procession of Virgins Saint Justina, Felicita, Perpetua, Vincenza carrying crown symbol of martyr in Saint Apollinare Nuovo* (fig. 2) leads the visitor's eye to the nave, where another mosaic—*Virgin and Child Enthroned With Four Angels* (fig. 3)—sits. In this mosaic, the Virgin Mary "is seated on a jeweled throne…[dressed] simply in a purple tunic with gold clavi and a purple *maphorion* or overmantel, part of which forms her headdress. She sits on a red cushion with gold stars and holds her right hand up in a gesture of blessing."[14] Only here is the color blue utilized: in the jewels which adorn Mary's throne, as a slight outline of her face, the angels' halos, and highlights of the angels' robes. We can make the case that Klimt uses blue in the same way as the mosaics of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, where the color blue is used sparingly and in its traditional role to highlight the Virgin Mary and her retinue. Klimt harkens to this tendency by using a limited amount of blue in *The Three Ages of Life*, keeping it contained within small circles placed around the mother and child. The blue

acts in both cases to offset the figures of mother and child from the surrounding figures. This separation gives the mother and child a visual sense of otherworldliness, removing them from the realm of humanity and hinting at divinity.

Klimt also uses patterns like those seen in the mosaic (fig. 2 and 3). Scholars have yet to examine the connection, but this tendency is perhaps best illustrated through the "eye" pattern: a thin circle of color with a dot in the middle. This "eye" or bull's-eye pattern makes up the dresses of many of the processing virgins. Here, it appears as red and green alternating rows of "eyes" broken up by a beadlike string of brown and white, offset by golden fabric in the women's dresses. In Klimt's painting, this pattern appears as yellow and orange circles with light and dark red dots at their centers. Moreover, Klimt also reflects the golden stars of the Virgin's cushion in the eye patterning of the old crone's background (fig.1 and 3).

Another key visual point yet to be analyzed by scholars, is the floral pattern which adorns the Virgin Mary's throne in *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels* (fig. 3). On either side of the seated Virgin, there are stylized flowers made of a blue jewel center with white jewel petals and a dark outline. This same pattern of flower is seen in Klimt's work adorning the hair of the mother figure (fig. 1). For the figure of the Virgin, the jeweled flowers pull the viewer's eye upwards to center on her face and the Christ Child. These flowers in Klimt's work have the same effect.

Fig. 2 *Mosaic of procession of Virgins Saint Justina, Felicita, Perpetua, Vincenza carrying crown symbol of martyr in Saint Apollinare Nuovo*, 6th century AD, Ravenna.
Photo Credit : Alfredo Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY

Fig. 3 *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*. Mosaic. Bzyantine, 6th CE.
Photo Credit : Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY
S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy.

Fig. 1 Klimt, Gustav (1862-1918). *The Three Ages of Life*. 1905. Oil on canvas, 171 x 171 cm. Inv. 951
Photo Credit : Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali/ Art Resource, NY.
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy.

The white petals contrast with the mother figure's red hair and draw the viewer's eye up to her face and her connection with the child. This visual draw puts an emphasis on the physicality and humanity of the two figures, keeping in line with the Christian tradition of Virgin and child.

This point forces consideration of Klimt's use of flowers within *The Three Ages of Life*. The white flowers which draw the viewer's eye also create a round pile—like a crown or halo—resting on the hair of the mother figure (fig. 1). This detail harkens to the halo of the Virgin Mary (fig. 3). The artist suggests divinity, then, in the painting though relation to the mosaic.

These visual similarities suggest strongly that Klimt used the mosaics of Ravenna as a grounding point for the construction of *The Three Ages of Life*. The general palette the artist employed, the specific use of color within the painting, and the placement and type of patterning, especially flowers, all indicate Byzantine influences, specifically from Ravenna: this, in turn, grounds the work within the Christian religious tradition.

Do the apparent Byzantine influences in this piece indicate an iconographic corollary, which extends to the divine adoration of the female and the role of motherhood? The visual connection creates a foundation for further analysis, giving the viewer a solid direction to follow when searching for iconographical information. Early Byzantine art is derived "from [Constantinian] imperial court art," rendered Christian, and identifiable by "the richness of light, color, and texture that produces emotional intensity."[15] Art of this period is also heavy with a "revived classicism," a "love of intricate pattern," and the highlighting of "texture and radiance," which is especially apparent in the later Ravenna mosaics that Klimt visited in 1903.[16] At the time of Ravenna's construction, the "great Christian churches [brought] together all types of expression—biblical, idyllic, and symbolic—into compositions of great unity and beauty, which have now become recognizable and unmistakable as Christian art," but which grew out of the pagan Roman court tradition.[17] It is this mixture of classical and Christian iconography which *The Three Ages of Life* references, and the identification of the Virgin on which Klimt appears to have capitalized in his own work.

Upon seeing *The Three Ages of Life*, the viewer's eye is first drawn to the figures of the mother and child. The image of a young woman holding a young child close to her naturally associates to iconographical representations of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. The particular pose in Klimt's work is a variation of the style of an *Elousa* or Virgin of Tenderness—a depiction of the Virgin and Child "in which the child's face is pressed affectionately on the mother's."[18] Although in this work the cheeks of the two are not actually touching, Klimt makes a clear allusion to the tradition by placing the face of the child in close proximity to the mother's and illustrating their faces with peaceful, tender expressions.

Interestingly, the center background panels which separate the mother and child from the crone figure also create two different planes within the work. This separation results in a mixed perspective in which the crone seems to be above and in front of the mother and child because of the aligning of her hair with the young woman's shoulder, while also occupying the space behind. There is a similar effect within many Byzantine works, mainly the use of "reversed perspective in the table, thrones, and footstools presenting a foreshortened view which comes from the other world in the picture, not from the spectator's human standpoint."[19] Such perspective gives Klimt's work an air of other-worldliness. It removes the figures from the realm of humanity and elevates them into another dimension—making the mother and child more than a simple daily life scene.

However, there is disunion with traditional representations of the Virgin and Child. Here, Klimt has shown a mother figure unclothed—not a generally accepted state for representing the Virgin. However, the figure's genitals and second breast are covered by the flowing blue cloth and the child—leaving just one breast exposed. This exposure may simply be a continuation of the theme of "signal at the breast" in which the nursing Christ child calls attention to the breast of the Virgin Mary to highlight his humanity.[20] These images of the Virgin and Christ child specifically focus the viewer's attention on the breast of the mother not to arouse a sexual response, but to remind the viewer that Christ, too, was human and relied on food to sustain his human condition.[21]

Another discordance is the sexualizing of the mother figure—especially in relation to the crone juxtaposed in the background. One could argue that the exposure of the young mother's breast, her total nudity, and the sense of voyeurism associated with her closed eyes refute the claim that this is a modern Madonna and Child—even one in the tradition of "signal at the breast." However, the image does not create a sexual connection between the viewer and the subject. Instead "the intimacy between the Virgin and Child…effects a like intimacy between these figures and the spectator," encouraging a sense of maternal memory, comfort, and peace within the viewer.[22] In this way, the exposed breast of the mother actually heightens the spiritual quality of the work, and serves to remove it further from the realm of the sexual.

Nevertheless, the lack of clothing on the mother figure creates a distinct disconnect between Klimt's work and the traditional representation of the Virgin Mary. However, Klimt was not the only artist of the time to show a Madonna in this way. Edvard Munch's earlier *Madonna* created a similar depiction of the Virgin between 1894 and 1895, showing a dark-haired woman with hands behind her back, completely exposing both breasts to the viewer, visibly nude to the waist with suggestion of complete nudity. This brazen exposure of both breasts combined with the figure's arched back create a noticeably sexual representation—making Klimt's single exposed breast modest in comparison, and together, deconstructing traditional images of the Virgin Mother.

Klimt's choice to depict the mother here with red hair connects her with the visual tradition of Mary Magdalene more closely than that of the Virgin Mary. The Magdalene is generally shown as a red-haired, young, attractive female, often with limited clothing or simply covered by her hair. Red in the earlier context connotes the Magdalene's licentious, sexual youth. It is not out of the question that Klimt's mother figure (or even the crone) could be the artist's nod to the visual trope of Mary Magdalene. Nevertheless, the presence of the child and the obvious display of maternal love still suggest that the figures represent the Virgin and Child. The potential reference, then, to Magdalene becomes a cultural statement; referencing the prejudiced Viennese view of women as either idealized creatures put on a pedestal (the Virgin Mary) or unashamedly exploited sexual beings (Mary Magdalene).[23] By combining the two, Klimt has shown a distinctly modern view of the female as both sexual and sacred.

If this is the case, the presence of the crone figure comes sharply into focus. If we see the red-headed mother as a hybrid figure mixing the visual canon of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, then the crone (visibly aging, hiding her face in shame) takes on the role of an antitype—Eve. The crone is placed on a forward plane, coming before the image of mother and child and creating a stark visual contrast: her age against the youth of the mother, her sagging breasts and stomach a reminder of the wear of childbirth on a female body, her dark brown skin with purple veins opposing the milky white of the younger woman. Her presence, forward placement, and contrast of age all suggest that Klimt has used the crone not merely to indicate an aged woman in the final stage, but to create an Eve—the antitype of Mary. In "Mary Magdalene the messenger of life and joy, as sustained by their opposite pole, the messenger of death: the image of Eve, who [has]… been made the original source of sin and death."[24] Like Eve, the crone comes before the mother figure; she hides her face in shame like Eve at the fall, but only together do they make up the complete image. For this reason, Klimt constructs the two in separate spaces but places them both at the center of the image—making it necessary to take them both in together and understand them in juxtaposition with one another.

This brings us to the overall construction of the work. *The Three Ages of Life* is broken up into thirds. A dark brown patch intersecting the top and traveling almost completely across the image turns the background into the structure of a cross when the mother and child figure combine with the crone (fig. 1). While this is not an overt statement of crucifixion, it lurks in the background of the image, alluding to the necessary death of the child and the Catholic belief in Eve's guilt in this matter. The crucifixion would not exist without the original sin caused by Eve, and the background cross within Klimt's image would not be complete without the crone/Eve figure. Therefore, visual association between the presence of the crone and the death of the child supports the figure as a representation of Eve and humanity's fall from grace.

A modernist interpretation of the work might further suggest that Klimt sees woman as martyr, or sacrifice, to gender-specific burdens.

The visual similarities and iconographical content of the work suggest strongly that *The Three Ages of Life* is at least linked to the Christian tradition of depicting the Virgin and Christ child, specifically through Byzantine mosaics. Nevertheless, the viewer is still left with the issue of the artist's intent when he completed the work. Did Gustav Klimt consciously construct these allusions to Eve, the Virgin Mary, and Child? While contextualizing the painting within the culture of early twentieth century Vienna gives the viewer a deeper understanding of the way the work would have been received, looking at the artist's personal relationships allows insight into the motivation behind the work's creation.

Many critics focus on the number of affairs Klimt had to perpetuate the idea that the artist merely used women for personal pleasure and gain. However, the few letters between Klimt and Marie Zimmerman (the mother of two of his children and lover from around 1900 until Klimt's death) shows Klimt as tender and communicative.[25] He supported her financially throughout his life while she moved, following the relocation of his studio, to be closer to him while she raised their living son.[26] The letters show the two used pet-names and intimately discussed Klimt's problems, work, and their children—displaying concretely Klimt's aptitude for deep affection and commitment to a single woman.[27] This aptitude for

affection and his willingness to support Zimmerman throughout his life creates a different image of Klimt than that usually portrayed by critics. Here, he is a caring father and devoted lover. One can infer that if the artist had such an emotional connection with Zimmerman and his son (born August 1899), he would have been quite familiar with maternal love and the inherent connection between a mother and child when working on *The Three Ages of Life.*[28]

It is apparent *The Three Ages of Life*, while nominally concerned with the female life cycle, goes beyond this to display maternal affection and relates directly to the Christian tradition of the Virgin and Child. We can be sure of this not only because of Klimt's own experience with maternal love, but also the painting's strong visual connection with the mosaics of Ravenna, iconographical relation to the Virgin, and the cultural context of Vienna at the time of its production. In doing so, Klimt challenges the cultural division between mother and lover—producing a work which shows respect for the female in all ways, and identifies with her plight. This duality negates the critical tendency to see Klimt's work as exclusively prurient, reveals the artist's aptitude for female identification and respect, and begins to construct an image of the Madonna for the modern age.

ENDNOTES

1 Mary Kenon Breazeale, "The Female Nude in Public Art: Constructing Women's Sexual Identity in the Visual Arts," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9, no.1 (1986), 62.

2 Christian Michael Nebehay and Gustav Klimt, *Gustav Klimt: From Drawing to Painting* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 23.

3 Ibid., 24.

4 Christian Brandstatter, *Vienna 1900 Art, Life, and Culture* (New York: Vendome, 2006), 29.

5 Branseatter, *Vienna 1900 Art, Life, and Culture*, 23.

6 Ibid., 29.

7 Nicholas Parsons, *Vienna, a Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 220.

8 Mitchell, *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, 296-299.

9 Eva Stefano, *Gustav Klimt: Art Nouveau Visionary*, trans. Stephen Jackson (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2008), 88.

10 Neue Gallery Website, *Gustav Klimt*, http://www.neuegalerie.org/collection/artist-profiles/gustav-klimt.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Neue Gallery Website, *Gustav Klimt*, http://www.neuegalerie.org/collection/artist-profiles/gustav-klimt.

14 Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 159.

15 Ibid., 53.

16 Ibid., 53.

17 Ibid., 54.

18 Albert C Moore, *Iconography of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 252.

19 Moore, *Iconography of Religion*, 256.

20 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 131.

21 Ibid., 132.

22 Ibid., 131.

23 Brandstatter, *Vienna 1900 Art, Life, and Culture,* 29.

24 Ingrid Maisch, *Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman through the Centuries* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 35-36.

25 Nebehay, *Gustav Klimt: From Drawing to Painting*, 264.

26 Ibid., 264.

27 Ibid., 265-270.

28 Ibid., 256.