

LILY BROOKS

Visualizing the Modern Woman:

Klimt's *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* and

Picasso's *Gertrude Stein*

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The *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907) (fig 1.) by Gustav Klimt and the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* (1906) (fig. 2) by Pablo Picasso revolutionized female portraiture at the dawn of the 20th century. The tantalizing gold leaf ornamentation, strategic inclusion of erotic symbols, and agitated demeanor of the Bloch-Bauer contrasts sharply with the strikingly simple Stein portrait, with its monochromatic palette, androgyny, and disengaged subject. The departure from verisimilitude allowed Klimt and Picasso to freely portray their own artistic aims and interests. In the process they created two of the most important images, signaling a new phenomenon of the modern woman. The roots of each artist's vision of the modern woman can be found in Klimt's appreciation of Freud and Picasso's primitive constructs. The central question to be asked here is whether these two women had any control over the manner of their own representation, or was it attributable purely to the artists to determine their models of modernity? Through an investigation of the contrasting structure of sexuality and femininity in these two portraits, it becomes clear that the women did play an important role in the formulation of their own identities and did help to initiate new visualizations of the modern woman.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Europe was a fertile breeding ground for social and cultural transformations that fostered the birth of modernity. Paris had already become a city that embodied modernization; through the progressive nature of philosophy, literature, and art the openness of sexual commentary was not only part of its cultural identity, but also its artistic identity. In contrast, Vienna was still moving towards this modernized scheme. Marked by political integration produced by forward thinking and a crisis of personal expression, the city and its people were in a state of renewal. The rapid immigration rates in Vienna, however, allowed for the development of original minds that permeated the fields of science, art, and culture, and openly rejected conservative preservation of tradition. This withdrawal from social consensus was viewed by the avant-garde as a marker of modernity.

Klimt emerged in Vienna during a period that scholar Eric Kandel identifies as one of a widespread feeling of psychological isolation among the Jewish female population.¹ Before the turn of the century, Jewish women experienced intense marginalization because

of gender biases and therefore were unable to attain sufficient jobs. Due to these obstacles, Jewish women such as Adele Bloch-Bauer became more active in politics and charitable organizations in order to prove their societal influence.² Furthermore, at the turn of the century the *haute bourgeois* social class in Vienna forcefully controlled the majority of the art community. They contributed to the establishment of Secessions, which had become prevalent in Vienna due to artists' desire for exhibition societies that challenged the canon of tradition. The Secession in Vienna brought a positive light to the international image of the city, ultimately attracting new crafts and industrialization, which in turn led to strong economic growth. It was solely because of the Secession and the support of Jewish women that Austria finally established a systematic art world that was completely managed and financed by the state.³ Therefore at the beginning of the century, Klimt was focused on publicly-commissioned works, such as the murals *Medicine* (1901) (fig 3) and *Philosophy* (1901) (fig. 4) for the University of Vienna, but he was aggressively marginalized by artistic conservatives for the intense use of eroticism and nudity.⁴ The criticism of Klimt mirrored the anxiety and confusion in Vienna. Furthermore, the societal arrangement led to a division in personality initiated by a fear of open sexuality that had been instilled in individuals in the nineteenth century.

These complexities of Viennese individuals became the focus of Dr. Sigmund Freud, whose publication *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 introduced psychoanalysis. Freud defined the subjective mindset, an idea that heavily influenced Klimt and helped to shift his work. Beginning around 1902, Klimt's work had a more conscious reflection of the field of psychoanalysis, just as he began to interact with several elite Jewish women who were dominating patrons in the art community and also commonly attributed to the *femme fatale* prototype as referenced by scholar Martha Kingsbury.⁵ The *femme fatale* is described as a sensual and alluring woman who becomes gradually more dangerous due to the submissive restrictions of dominant culture.

The recognized artistic representation of this type of woman was almost always full frontal with a taut and elevated expression of the head. The eyelids are lowered as if to project a feeling of power and control over not just the viewer but also their male counterparts. The

expression of female eroticism had triumphed over the masculine eroticism, as posited by Kingsbury. Various artists experimented in this artistic subject, but the most notable were Klimt and Edvard Munch, who referenced mythic or religious models when completing their works. Munch's *Madonna* (1893-1894) (fig. 5) and Klimt's *Judith* (1901)(fig. 6) intensify the expression of the femme fatale due to the configuration of erect postures accompanied by a sexualized passion. However, Klimt took the components of the *femme fatale* and reinforced them in order to become the psychological portraitist of the Viennese female.

Similarly Picasso experienced a new direction in his work after 1902, but with an emphasis on primitive forms rather than strictly psychoanalysis. Through the recognition of ancestral and primal values, Primitivism became a celebrated characteristic of modernity. The phenomenon of primitivism first originated in the nineteenth century as a strong fascination of ancestral and primal art in Africa, Asia, and Pre-Columbian America.⁶ The Western interest in these works further distanced artists from establishment values, harkening back to the beginning of figural representation by drawing on ancient and classical models of Venus and Athena and, more importantly, non-Western sculpture that abstracted natural form for expressive effect. By 1907, Picasso would usher in the revolutionary style of Cubism. Before arriving at the complex spatial structures of Cubism, however, for several years Picasso was exploring simplifications of form and composition as seen in *Gertrude Stein*. Picasso was absorbed by the female figure, but usually preferred nude poses or genre scenes rather than portrait formats. He depicted women as raw, primitive sexual beings, but Gertrude Stein allowed him to experiment with a new form, a woman who gave Picasso profound exposure to a truthful embodiment of a modern female.

Klimt and Picasso were not the only artists to seek new the female prototypes; Cezanne and Matisse, among many others, experimented as well. However, the interaction with Bloch-Bauer and Stein in particular led Klimt and Picasso to initiate a radically new representation of women as a reflection of the current culture. Thus, while the evolution of these two artists seems to confirm the standard view of them having total command over the manner of presentation and the artistic process, the depictions of these two women in their portraits were embodiments of a visualized expression of a new

paradigm in femininity. But the question remains, was this paradigm completely an extraction from the artist's perspective rooted in primitive or psychoanalytic origins, or can it be determined that the women themselves contributed something to this new representation?

Adele Bloch-Bauer, an Austrian Jew, and Gertrude Stein, an American Jew, were two women who exemplified stylized modern culture (fig. 1 and 2). Both voluntarily abandoned the practice of the Jewish religion as apart of their independence from familial and social expectations. Bloch-Bauer, who in many ways defined herself through art patronage, was a childless woman who did not fit into the respectable conventions of society. Similarly, Gertrude Stein, a writer who recontextualized the English language, focused on establishing herself as a pioneer in literature. Both women emphasized sexuality in their lives and in their respective portraits, though those forms of sexuality were quite different from one another. The two women were grounded in cities that exposed them to modernist theory and in turn these environments contributed to their realizations of a new, modern femininity.

As Catherine Stimpson argues, the dynamic between the female mind and body was conflicted and therefore crafted a strong feeling of anxiety.⁷ A woman's mind was becoming progressive, while sexual behaviors remained restrained. The privileged upbringing of these two women greatly assisted them in promoting women's issues in their cities. Stein posited that education would allow women to evolve their lives and to become released from their class bias, stating, "women [without education] were over-sexed [and] economic dependents."⁸ From an upper-middle-class family originally from Pennsylvania, Gertrude had money but not a great deal of it; however she did receive an impressive education in America by following her brother to Harvard and Johns Hopkins. Bloch-Bauer was also rooted in financial privilege, but was denied a traditional education, since Viennese women were not expected to take opportunities for professional or intellectual advancement. Despite this lack of higher education, she did promote social reforms and women's suffrage. The two women recognized the marginalization of women in the early twentieth century, and each participated in movements aimed at empowering women amidst different social stratifications.

The wealth of these women enabled them to collect art, and through collecting they were able to define

themselves personally and to express their social views. Gertrude stood for everything that was not completely accepted in the Western world: a lesbian, a female, a writer, and a financially independent woman, which contrasted with Adele who confirmed society standards by marrying a wealthy industrial Ferdinand Bloch. The Bloch-Bauer collection became highly celebrated in Vienna. Ferdinand revered Asian art and porcelain in particular, but the collection was also balanced with traditional old master paintings. While Adele had a similar interest as her husband, she had formed a significant understanding and appreciation for modern painters. Having been denied an education, Adele found alternative outlets for learning, which involved a close association with artists and intellectuals. The Bloch-Bauers created one of the most impressive collections in Vienna and therefore became significant patrons for several artists.

Klimt had begun as an allegorical painter, but became focused on depicting the personality of his female portrait sitters. No detailed information confirms how Bloch-Bauer and Klimt met, but they did move in same intellectual and artistic social circles.⁹ The Bloch-Bauers quickly became important supporters of Klimt; they were the only patrons to have two commissioned portraits from him.¹⁰ Adele took to Klimt more than any other artist due to his charismatic personality and his progressive ideology of the freedom of art. While the ambiguity of their relationship as suggested by Anne-Marie O'Connor leads to a question of a possible affair, however there is still no definitive evidence to support this claim.

After traveling briefly in 1903, Gertrude and her brother Leo decided to settle in Paris at the Rue de Fleurus, which would soon become a highly-established salon for modernist artists like Picasso. The open and inviting atmosphere of Paris not only allowed Gertrude to express her sexuality, but also to break from the previous dependency on her brother. The time abroad gave Stein the opportunity to form two distinct groups of friends: artists and intellectuals. On Saturday evenings there were regular visitors such as the Matisse or Cézannes. Alice B. Toklas, the life partner of Gertrude, observed in her autobiography that Stein would sit in her oversized chair with her feet tucked underneath the seat, which gave an impression of a static and monumental position. The description by Toklas directly parallels the stature that Stein takes for the painting; therefore it furthers the realistic character of the portrait in more

than just a predetermined stance but rather a common disposition that accurately portrays the influence of both Stein's physical position and actively eludes to a static illustration of an icon. The relationship between Picasso and the Steins began through her brother Leo's strong interest in a small piece by the artist, *Young Girl with a Basket of Flowers* (1905) (fig. 7). Interestingly, Gertrude was not fond of this piece, but due to the persistence of her brother they purchased it and it joined the extensive collection of Renaissance art, Cézannes, and Matisse. Toklas noticed that there was an immediate connection between Gertrude and Picasso, not sexual but rather conversational, which in turn was springboard for the portrait. Lubar suggested that Picasso asked to paint Gertrude for the sake of pleasing his patron, her brother.¹¹ This assertion seems to illustrate that Picasso was a young and ambitious artist who wanted recognition. Rubin credits Picasso's attraction to Stein because like her, he was also a foreigner. Rubin furthers the relationship by stating both were dedicated self-psychologists searching for the primitive nature of individuality. Stein was creating a self-image through her writings, which struck up dialogue among her circle of companions.

Having examined how these two women were independent, educated, and prominent patrons who defied the social expectations of their backgrounds, we can return to the two portraits and see what roles they played in the women's identities. While it is often suggested that these two portraits exemplify the progress of the modern woman in the first decade of the twentieth century, it should be borne in mind that the modern female identity is achieved in contrasting ways through each portrait. Bloch-Bauer is frequently defined as a woman who was suffocated by the underpinnings of modern society due to the preconceptions brought on by the anxious nature of Viennese society. Adele, however, radicalized the imposed fear of female sexuality by distinguishing herself as an elite member of society who represented the empowerment of the woman through the artistic community. The empowering stance of Bloch-Bauer reflects the representation of a *femme fatale*, however she is not seen as threatening, but rather as a testament to the anxious nature of Viennese society. In comparison, Stein poses with a similar stature of monumentality, which imposes a feeling of permanence within the

portrait. Stein's sexuality however does not serve as a reflection of suppressed eroticism, but as an image of erotic progression for the twentieth century. The position of each woman is seated as to show a period of thought or recollection. The mundane color palette and primitive figural structure call to mind the assimilated mold Stein had created for herself in Parisian society. The cascade of geometric shapes in the Klimt portrait, however, reveals a cryptic manifestation. The spangled gold and jeweled colors and the indistinguishability of the background call to mind Byzantine mosaics and shrines that Klimt had visited in Ravenna in 1902, sending the viewer into a rhapsody of erotic fantasies that are belied by the anxious pose that cannot escape conversation.¹² This depiction accurately represents the mature style of Klimt where he was bolder and more ornate in his representation. She, unlike Stein, is engaged with the viewer, showing displacement and centrally exposes the suffocated female identity crisis, which again reaffirms that this was the pinnacle of Klimt's psychological female depictions. In comparison, the portrait of Stein portrayed the formidable androgynous ego of the sitter. Unlike Klimt, Picasso completed his portrait through more than eighty sittings. As scholar Lucy Belloli and others have gathered, Picasso and Stein were both artists in their own right—Picasso in painting and Stein in linguistics, which in turn added a passion for an accurate execution in the portrait.¹³ The manifestation of androgyny and the disengagement of the subject that are so striking in the painting may be said to be largely indebted to the force of Stein's personal character and lifestyle, which was already publicly understood.

The formulation of the facial features in both portraits plays a critical role in terms of the individual artist and furthermore the women themselves. Bloch-Bauer allowed Klimt to activate the stylistic balance between naturalism and ornament, not only through her own status in Viennese society, but also through her marginalized Jewish female identity. The incorporation of the excessive gold detail and geometric ornamentation around the face combined with the inclusion of almond-shaped eyes provides a spotlight to the anxious yet sensual expression of the sitter. Stein gave Picasso the opportunity to experiment with the form of a prominent woman who was already established in her being. Where the personality of Bloch-Bauer continuously aided Klimt, the overt personality of Stein provided a challenge to

Picasso. The frequent reliance on preliminary drawings by Picasso was prevalent in the portrait of Stein. Several alterations, in the head particularly, gave Picasso an outlet of frustration on deciding the accurate angle of representation. The effacement of the head in 1904 according to scholar Robert Lubar, is a sign of neutralizing the existing models of gender and sexuality.¹⁴ Furthermore, as suggested by scholar Neil Schmitz, the disengaged gaze of Stein, is a definitive statement of her identity. By withdrawing from the viewer, Stein was able to separate herself from the being a traditional portrait.

When viewed frontally the almond-shaped eye slits are typically representative of sensuality as seen in the Bloch-Bauer, but here they reflect the influence of the African and Oceanic masks, which Picasso had examined in 1904 (fig. 8). It has been speculated that the face of Stein was a mirror-image of the *Death Mask of Fontdevila* which Picasso completed around the same time as the portrait. The mask-like and monumental character of Stein transforms into a species of androgyny, as suggested by biographer John Richardson, a "hommese."¹⁵ By balancing that stylistic choice with the modern subject of Bloch-Bauer, Klimt formed an original portrait of the Viennese female psyche. The sense of passion seen through the direct engagement of Bloch-Bauer allows the viewer to see a *femme fatale* who is caged by social conventions.¹⁶ Stein is seen less as a female heroine but rather as an androgynous materialization of femininity. The primitive and stylized nature of the respective portraits pays homage to Bloch-Bauer and Stein as modernistic reconstructions of femininity.

The ornamentation of the *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* and abstraction of the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* initiate a visual trend that is purely attributable to the women and conclusively represents a new visualization of female culture. Bloch-Bauer is viewed as a tightly woven individual who embodies the restrictive cultural underpinnings imposed on women. Similarly, Stein is a pictorial formulation of sexual acceptance of female Parisian society. The two women shift into positions of icons, through not only the decisions of the artists, but also through the identified markers of each woman. The anxious yet sexualized nature of Bloch-Bauer inspired Klimt to balance his enriched 'golden style' with Freudian context as a way of demonstrating the social and personal circumstances which affected Adele. In comparison, Stein's homosexual and foreign character

offered an opportunity for Picasso to expand his primitive knowledge and share a relationship with another artist. The critical contributions given by each woman enabled these artists to complete two visual initiatives that exemplify modern female identity.

Endnotes

1. This isolation began with the response to an unaccepting culture of sexuality and gender, therefore women in particular were seen as sexual beings not allowed to be exposed. Artists took this suppression as a new modern inspiration. Alison Rose, "Jewish Women," in *Fin de Siècle Vienna* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008): 5.
2. The proliferation of organizations became paramount for Jewish women because they provided them with an opportunity to counter the dominant patriarchy that was rampant during the nineteenth century. Jewish men, especially rabbis, idolized past Jewish women and idealized present Jewish women, as if to say that they did not contribute to the Zionist movement.
3. Tobias G. Natter, "Gustav Klimt--painter between the times," in *Gustav Klimt*. (Yale University Press, 2001): 9-13, 14-15.
4. Klimt frequently used non-Western prototypes including his illustration of Venus in order to portray a blatantly sexualized female. Susanne Kelly, "Perceptions Of Jewish Female Bodies Through Gustav Klimt And Peter Altenberg," in *Imaginations Journal* 3.1 (2012): 109-122.
5. Martha Kingsbury, "The Femme Fatale and Her Sisters," in Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds. *Women as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970* (New York: Newsweek, 1972): 183-205.
6. African and Oceanic art including tribal masks, sculpture and printmaking were of great interest to twentieth century painters due to the sense of simplification and reduction.
7. Catharine Stimpson, "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein," in *Critical Inquirey* 3.3 (1977), 490, described the dynamic between women's minds and bodies at the turn of the century in Paris and how Gertrude Stein fit in that formulation.
8. Ibid.
9. Klimt was a relatively known artist but the center of art patronage was the haute bourgeoisie where he knew the most money was. Frank Whitford explores this concept in *Artists in Context: Gustav Klimt*, (London: Trafalgar Square: 1993).
10. Klimt was infamously known to have affairs with his models even during his life-long partnership with Emilie Flöge. Women were a major part of the artist's personal and professional life. Ibid.
11. Robert Lubar, "Unmasking Pablo's Gertrude: Queer Desire and Subject of Portraiture," in *Art Bulletin* 79 (1997): 57-84.
12. Anne-Marie O'Connor, "Dengerate Women" in *The lady in gold: The Extraordinary Tale of Gustav Klimt's Masterpeice, Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*. (New York: Random House), 42.
13. Lucy Belloli, *The Evolution of Picasso's Portrait of Gertrude Stein*.
14. The traditional representations of woman became a fear of Picasso, a reason why he turned to the primitive. The mask-like presentation of Stein resembles a form of symbolic castration and abandonment of recognized social processes.
15. Stein represents androgynous representation of the self-fertilizing goddesses and deities. John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso* (Random House: 1991).
16. The Jewish woman became a common illustration for turn of the century artists because they were products of a marginal tradition, who ultimately turned to the arts in order to focus on a productive outlet. Susanne Kelley, "Perceptions Of Jewish Female Bodies Through Gustav Klimt and Peter Altenberg," in *Imaginations Journal* 3.1 (2012): 109-122.



Figure 1: Klimt, Gustav, Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I, 1907, o/c, 138 × 138cm.



Figure 2: Picasso, Pablo, Portrait of Gertrude Stein, 1905, o/c, 100 × 81.3 cm.



Figure 4: Klimt, Gustav, Philosophy, 1901, o/c, 430 × 300cm.



Figure 5: Munch, Edvard, Madonna, 1894, o/c, 90 × 68 cm.



Figure 3: Klimt, Gustav, Medicine, 1901, o/c, 430 × 300cm.

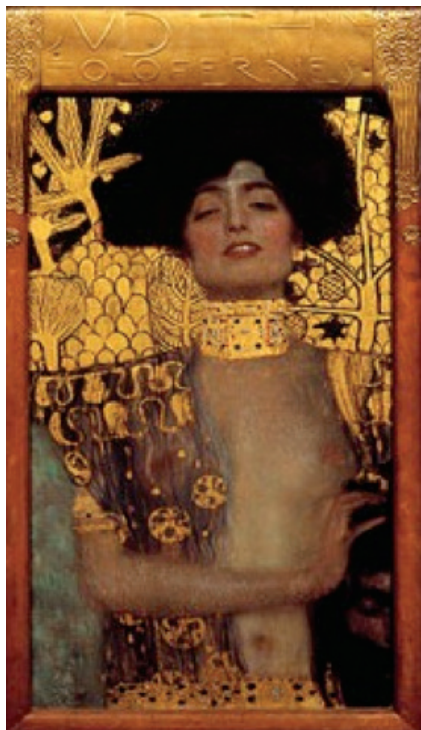


Figure 6: Klimt, Gustav, Judith and the Head of Holofernes, 1901, o/c, 84 cm × 42 cm.

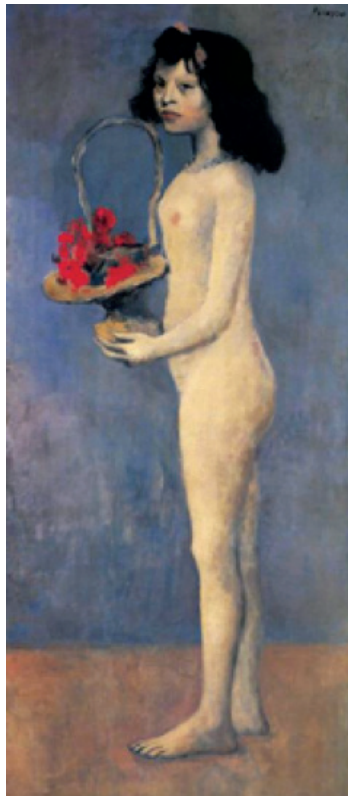


Figure 7: Picasso, Pablo, Young Naked Girl with Flower Basket, 1905, o/c, 155 × 66cm.



Figure 8: Head of a Man, Iberian, Cerro de los Santos, Spain, 5th-3rd century B.C.