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“There’s a Chinese vase standing in the bookcase”

East Asian elements in the late work of Gustav Klimt

In 1913 the Japanese artist and journalist Kijiro Ohta (1883–1951) visited Vienna with the aim of writing an article on Gustav Klimt for the art magazine *Bijutsushinpo* (*News from the World of Art*). He managed to get a recommendation only with the greatest difficulty but in the end succeeded in surmounting the arduous journey to the suburb of Hietzing, several kilometres further west of Schönbrunn, where Klimt had had his studio since 1911. Ohta arrived at last, but had to wait a short eternity until Klimt appeared. The latter showed several drawings and sketches, unfinished pictures were on the easel – finally, he relieved the non-verbal communication with a single word: “Japan”.<sup>1</sup> This was the very word the Japanese journalist had been waiting for and could now take home with him like an endorsement. A Japanese “trail” runs through Klimt’s complete works, whether early examples from his Secession period, with motifs echoing this influence, or his graphic works for *Ver Sacrum* at a time furthermore when direct knowledge of Japanese art are verifiable, or his works in the so-called “golden period”, which ended<sup>2</sup> around 1911 in the *Stocletfries*.<sup>3</sup> A year later, 1912, he changed his studio’s location to Unter-St.-Veit in a small, tucked-away garden house. One of the rooms deserves special mention because of its furnishings, the so-called “Vorraum” – vestibule. This was the setting chosen for the black-stained furniture suite designed by Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956), transferred from the studio on Josefstädter Strasse, also the “ukiyo-e wall” trenchantly described by Egon Schiele (1890–1918): “Japanese woodcuts were hung choc-à-bloc all round, and two large-scale Chinese pictures.”<sup>4</sup> Only the two large, dark-blue pictures have survived until today, whereas the Japanese woodcuts have not (see p. 63). They must evidently have been easier to sell because of their small format, or used elsewhere as wall decoration. It was possible to orientate the work of reconstructing Klimt’s studio on the photos taken by Moritz Nähr (1859–1945) in 1918 and also on similar prints with comparable pictorial compositions from the ukiyo-e collection of the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna. Therefore this vestibule wall with its pictures once more conveys the impression it made on visitors of that time – and which confronted Klimt himself, day in and day out. The room is on the dark side – an impression reinforced by the black furniture – therefore this gaily colourful picture wall

with its small-scale adornments acts as an eye-catcher, a positive invitation for people to linger and look. And it tempts the question whether and how Gustav Klimt was influenced by these pictures in his late work, which was produced here. He had indeed admitted his affinity to Japan to the Japanese artist Ohta. But how is this detectable in his work? A very important theme from around 1911/12 onwards was the portrait of a lady motif in all kinds of variations, with two picture types perceptibly dominant: the full-length portrait, and the half-length figure concentrating on face and hands. The most famous half-length portrait *Woman in Black Feather Hat* was exhibited in Venice as early as 1910. Thoughtfully, resting her head on her hand, the unknown woman's glance gazes past the observer – most of Gustav Klimt's half-figure portraits have no name. The oppressive black of the hat accentuates the melancholy keynote of the picture. The figure herself is seated as though forced into a corner, restricted by the compositional confines of the picture format. Hand and face are executed in detail, the outlines acting as vehicles of expression. In contrast, the other colour areas and dabs of paint are applied with spacious brushstrokes. Like this picture, the concentration on face and hands can be seen as well in the portrait *Lady in a Fur Collar*, painted six years later; here the position of the hand is described in the literature as “strangely distorted”.<sup>5</sup> Taking into account all the options and freedoms in the European portrait, we must also point to the half-length portraits in Japanese art. Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) not only produced official portraits of “beautiful women”, but also cast new light on life behind the scenes of the pleasure quarters. Portraits of famous women with children, at their toilette, eating, reading or simply waiting and relaxing presented an inside view of the private life of prominent ladies. They are pictures full of atmosphere, very relaxed and peaceful, the clear delineation of hands and face unruffled by the smoother patterns of the casual underwear and *yukata*. What appears in Klimt's portrayal to be “distorted” can be interpreted in Japanese colour block prints as a specific expression of elegance. The array of full-length portraits must be seen in succession to the *Stoclet Frieze*, in which the body dissolves into an ornamental choreography.<sup>6</sup> The viewer is confronted by strictly frontal portraits, whose bodies – amorphous configurations with solemn faces – are more plinth than body part. Two-dimensional, shadowless, the figures seem to hover, narrow strips of ground offer no foothold for the subjects – these strips, too, are tilted against the plane. The picture background is always used as two-dimensional projection surface, decorative and stagey. In pictorial composition

and concept of “the figure in the space”, Gustav Klimt is coming close in these portraits of ladies to the principles of the Japanese colour woodblock prints, which take the full-length portrait of a lady as one of their main themes. The portrayal of the personality concentrates on face and hands, the body dissolves in a vaguely defined mass of ornament. From the second quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, the “bijin” (“Beauty”) is no longer portrayed in isolation, but in front of scenery. Colour prints from this epoch were the very pictures to adorn Gustav Klimt’s wall. Another aspect of the Japanese colour woodblock print must be mentioned here, namely its clarity of colouration, also detectable in Gustav Klimt’s late work and pre-eminently in the portraits. The refulgent colours of the nineteenth-century Japanese woodcut inspired many artists to use brighter, unmixed painting material. We are familiar with this from art history: starting with French Impressionism and the Fauves, continuing through German Expressionism and on to the work of Paul Klee (1879–1940) and others.<sup>7</sup> Of course, Gustav Klimt knew the works and tendencies of his fellow painters, and it fits well into the overall picture of the history of European art to view his pictures and the Viennese post-Secession within this larger context. Klimt was utterly capable of deciphering the sources of his era and apply them to his own work. A further aspect of the portraits is interesting here, namely the Chinese background of the pictures. The Japanese influence can be traced in the overall composition, but since 1912 the background painting shows Klimt favouring motifs from Chinese painting. This is particularly striking in the background of the painting *Portrait of Friederike Maria Beer* of 1916 (see p. 12). Almost a secondary subject, the teeming, gaily coloured figures cavort around behind the portrayed lady. Riders and rank and file armed with lances suggest a warlike theme. The literature repeatedly states “after a Chinese vase”, also the word “Korean” can be found. The source of this reference is a zestful description of the “Portrait of Miss Beer” by the Viennese art historian Max Eisler in his Klimt monograph of 1920: “She wears a blue-and-white, silk dress adorned with an undulating pattern, a fashion fabric of the Wiener Werkstätte; it suits her, but needs to be gathered at her feet; this is done in the twinkling of an eye. The fur jacket doesn’t fit the occasion; but it has a broad-patterned lining with a distinctive purple accent; so it’s turned inside out. There’s a Chinese vase standing in the bookcase, illustrated with a torrent of fighting, stocky figures, green, yellow and purple – the fitting background. Thus everything works together in no time at all.”<sup>8</sup> Although this vase doesn’t exist any more, the description enables us to specify what

kind of vase it must have been. Eisler very precisely describes a Chinese vase from the Imperial Manufactory in Jingdezehn, painted (“illustrated”) in the pre-1700 period in the style of the *famille verte*, with scenes from Chinese history or based on illustrations for novels.<sup>9</sup> But it wouldn’t have been Klimt if he hadn’t made a small modification: the bearded figure at the right is wearing make-up, familiar from male protagonists (“jing”) in the Peking Opera. Hence Klimt combined a portrait of an actor with a painted face with the portrait of a seventeenth-century prince. It might appear strange today that Klimt combined sources from the Japanese colour woodblock print with small-scale figural motifs from Chinese porcelain painting, but these were the very areas of East Asian culture that were typical of collecting activities at that time. The Asia Collection of today’s MAK, then Museum of Art and Industry, still reflects this “collectors’ scene” of the Viennese haute bourgeoisie, which was also closely connected to the “art scene”. Up until around 1920 there were three focuses of collecting: Japanese colour woodblock prints, Chinese porcelain, and ornaments in the form of Japanese dyer’s stencils and textiles from Japan and China.<sup>10</sup> And these three aspects of East Asian art ostensible in exhibitions, collections, first publications and the art-dealing scene are the very aspects to turn up again in Gustav Klimt’s works. His small collection – united and immediately accessible in the studio vestibule – to a great extent adorned the apartments and homes of his clientèle, as is documented on historical photographs. A larger collection of this type was compiled for instance by Professor Emil Zuckermandl (1849–1910); but he was never able to implement his plan of setting up an Asia Museum near the Purkersdorf Sanatorium, which was built by his brother Viktor (1851–1927). Part of the collection was auctioned off in June 1916.<sup>11</sup> The lost portrait of Viktor’s wife Paula Zuckermandl (d. 1927) was painted in 1912, thus when Klimt had first moved into the studio in Unter-St.-Veit; it is the prelude to the “series” of full-length portraits of ladies of the Viennese upper class, which preoccupied Klimt until his death. Klimt’s tendency to ornamentalise the body is already perceptible. But the background is a Chinese ornament, forming a foil like wallpaper. It is a repeat cloud ornament, related to the ruyi motif, a propitious sign. The way Klimt uses it can also be seen in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Chinese enamel works: as background pattern for landscapes or for immortals travelling in flight. Remarkably, the illustration to catalogue number 230 in the auction catalogue of 1916 shows this kind of very rare enamel bowl from the Zuckermandl collection. Klimt seems to have been extremely partial to this type of

dynamic background. There is hardly a picture in which he did not draw from the rich treasury of forms of Japan and China – in his late work particularly China. Hence he was able to express the status and personality of his “clients” far better than if he had merely depicted their bodies as recognisably and anatomically correct. The way he integrated the things surrounding his subjects into his pictures was almost symbolic. Fashion and art – these were the major interests of the Viennese families in whose circles the artist personalities engendered by the Secession moved. So Klimt also portrayed their cultural and prestigious ambitions. He chose the East Asian motifs and pictures not only out of an isolated whim: he was indeed part of this society, which he so aptly characterised in its ambience. The acutely aware Max Eisler was one of the first to point out this intricate relationship with the Viennese cultural élite: “The persona of our master thus grows into its greater contexts. His art was neither personally isolated nor unmodern; on the contrary, it is a bridge of historic necessity and significance.”<sup>12</sup>

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1 | See Kijiro Ohta’s description on pp. 15–18.

2 | Gustav Klimt: *Stocletfries*, 1909–1911, Palais Stoclet, Brussels [ND 1967: 153; W 2007: 192; N 2012: -].

3 | Johannes Wieninger: *Japon – Zum Japonismus bei Gustav Klimt*, in: Beate Murr: *Gustav Klimt – Erwartung und Erfüllung: Entwürfe zum Mosaikfries im Palais Stoclet*, ex. cat., Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, 21. 03.–15. 07. 2012, pp. 97–119.

4 | Verena Traeger: *Gustav Klimts ethnographische Sammlung*, in: *Belvedere. Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst. Sonderband Gustav Klimt*, Vienna 2007, p. 124.

5 | Alfred Weidinger (ed.): *Gustav Klimt*, Munich 2007, cat. no. 229.

6 | Johannes Wieninger: *Japon – Zum Japonismus bei Gustav Klimt*, in: Beate Murr: *Gustav Klimt – Erwartung und Erfüllung: Entwürfe zum Mosaikfries im Palais Stoclet*, Ausst.-Kat., Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, 21. 03.–15. 07. 2012, pp. 97–119.

7 | Siegfried Wichmann: *Weltkulturen und moderne Kunst: Die Begegnung der europäischen Kunst und Musik im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert mit Asien, Afrika, Ozeanien, Afro- und Indo-Amerika*, ex. cat., Haus der Kunst, Munich, 16. 07.–30. 09. 1972; Ministère de la Culture et de la communication, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux (ed.): *Le Japonisme*, ex. cat., Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, 17. 05.–15. 08. 1988; Musée national d’art

occidental, Tokyo, 23. 09.–11. 12. 1988; Zentrum Paul Klee, Museum of East Asian Art (ed.): *Vom Japonismus zu Zen. Paul Klee und der Ferne Osten*, ex. cat., Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 19. 01.–12. 05. 2013; Museum of East Asian Art, Cologne, 18. 10. 2014–01. 02. 2015.

8 | Max Eisler: *Gustav Klimt*, Vienna 1920, p. 46.

9 | For lack of the original, please note a plate of the same epoch and stylistic orientation from: Christie's Interiors, Sale 2667, lot 210, Rockefeller Plaza, New York 08./09. 01. 2013. Thanks to Christie's Vienna.

10 | Johannes Wieninger: "Japan in Wien" – *Japanische Kunst in Wiener Sammlungen und Ausstellungen um 1900*, in: Peter Pantzer, Johannes Wieninger: *Verborgene Impressionen. Japonismus in Wien, 1870–1930*, ex. cat., Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, 04. 04.–04. 06. 1990, pp. 37–42; Johannes Wieninger: *Zur Geschichte der Ostasiensammlung des Österreichischen Museums für angewandte Kunst, 1918–1939*, in: *Minikomi – Informationen des akademischen Arbeitskreises Japan*, no. 4, 1997, pp. 14–18.

11 | *Nachlass Hofrat Professor Emil Zuckerkaudl*, auction catalogue, Dorotheum, Vienna 1916.

12 | Max Eisler: *Gustav Klimt*, Vienna 1920, p. 2.