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ABSTRACT

A Partner in Their Suffering: Gustav Klimt's Empowered Figure in *Hope II*

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Although much of Gustav Klimt's work is well recognized, his painting *Hope II* (1907-1908) has received little attention in academic studies. Rejected by his peers on its initial exhibition, this work was found offensive by even his staunchest supporters. Second wave feminists have also been critical of his painting, finding in it an objectification of women. This is likely due in part to the central subject of the piece involving pregnancy. Klimt was unafraid to paint images that shocked and diverged from traditional aesthetic styles. During a time of rapid social change and development of the feminist movement, Klimt offered fin-de-siècle Vienna an image that invited conversations about female sexuality, identity, and fertility. This paper constitutes a rereading of Klimt as empathetic to the female experience by way of a close analysis of *Hope II*. The artist's closeness to many women indicates his awareness of their plight. His portrayal of fertility in this painting offered a new perspective of womanhood in art with a depiction of woman as autonomous and empowered. Criticism from second-wave feminists often follows Klimt's work. However, his continued representation of the female body should be read as a glorification of the body rather than objectification of it.

Keywords: Gustav Klimt, Pregnancy, Feminism, Female Bodies, Vienna, Modern Art

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The heartbreak of a miscarriage or any hardship in pregnancy can be traumatic, disturbing, and painfully private. The topic of pregnancy has often been taboo throughout western history, which has cornered many women with difficult encounters in pregnancy into emotional secrecy, and made them almost silent in society as well as in art and literature. Despite the frequency of pregnancy throughout human existence, few artists from before the postmodern era (with the exception of those depicting the Virgin Mary) have made it the subject of their work. Austrian modernist painter Gustav Klimt is one exception. His painting, *Hope II* (1907-1908) (Fig. 1), was a peculiar image for its time, and presents symbols and stylistic elements demonstrative of difficult themes including miscarriage, death, and hardship in pregnancy. These elements give a unique voice to women that was seldom offered in fin-de-siècle Vienna's visual culture. Many scholars find fault with Klimt's representation of women because they believe his work exploits the female nude for male gain. I, however, believe Klimt's work is worthy of a rereading. His portrayal of the female body affords women autonomy rather than its objectification as he uses this to show a sense of individuality. This is seen more vividly in *Hope II* than the rest of Klimt's work because he shows female fertility and the private experiences that accompany it, displaying the power women have in their innate ability to perpetuate the human race. Elements of the painting indicate that the main figure has life experiences that are not only powerful and beautiful, but also tragic and fraught with loss, thus making her an individual and not an object.

One could dispute Klimt's ability to accurately and adequately access the unique experience of female fertility on the grounds of the artist being a man. I would counter that argument with the fact that Klimt suffered the loss of a child himself. Moreover, as an artist he was able to put himself into the position of the suffering maternal figure as he painted her. On his

discourses addressing artistic creation, Friedrich Nietzsche said, "For the creator himself to be the child new-born he must also be willing to be the mother and endure the mother's pain. Truly, I have gone my way through a hundred souls and through a hundred cradles and birth-pangs. I have taken many departures, I know the heartbreaking last hours."[1] Not only did Klimt know the reality of the trauma alluded to in *Hope II*, but as a creator, he was required to feel those same emotions through the perspective of the woman he brought to life. Certainly this is problematic in that the labor of creating an image does not equate the labor of child birth, but the act of creation is not one without heartbreak either by means of critique or toil.

An in-depth reading of the careful composition Klimt configured in *Hope II* gives the viewer this insight. Repetitious circles – common shapes he repeatedly used in conjunction with his female figures – are representative of the cyclical nature of life.[2] Blocks of bright red, green, and yellow-gold are certainly the most eye-catching and lay flat against the main figure and form a kind of shield for her body, nearly obscuring the figures at the bottom of the image. Green, the color frequently used to indicate new life or fertility,[3] is the foundational color of the canvas. This is overlaid with hints or specks of gold, a color that is a symbol of hope and divinity, and reinforces the title of the piece. The gold is also seen throughout the woman's robes and enshrouds her with vibrancy. The powerful shade of red demands attention from the viewer's eye and represents emotions of great intensity – passion, love, seduction, and even anger and danger.

While the vibrant colors and captivating mosaic-like patterns are a large component of the image, easily overlooked details reveal an unusual somber tone of the painting. As the

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[1] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Adrian Del Caro, and Robert B. Pippin, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125.

[2] Alessandra Comini, *Gustav Klimt*. G. Braziller (New York, NY, 2001), 17.

[3] Because the color green is so closely associated with nature, life, and spring, it is also assimilated to represent human life and fertility.

coloring and grandeur of the image evokes more positive, or rather, lively emotions, the figures themselves provide an opposing reaction. The three women at the foot of the maternal figure repeat her posture with their faces turned downward. Their soft skin-tones are placid and calm. All eyes and mouths are closed indicating a moment of stillness, meditation, or prayer. The figures are occupied and seemingly unaware of a world beyond their pictorial plane.

At first glance the maternal figure herself may even be viewed as lifeless were it not for her right hand that is in the process of being raised or lowered. Life is also evidenced in the body of the woman. Waning energy and spirit is demonstrated in her gaunt, skeletal, and nearly colorless face, but her robust body shows signs of liveliness, health, and well-being. It should be noted that the woman's ashen face is in contrast to her well-nourished body. Already it introduces the interplay between mother and child, and life and death – a theme I will demonstrate held great fascination for Klimt. The woman's body produces and protects her unborn child, but in so doing sacrifices her own body (and life). The simultaneity of life and death which pregnancy alludes to is powerful, and by representing it as such the viewer must consider the severity of such an experience and what that means for the woman who is to become mother. Those familiar with Klimt's work can see that *Hope II* has slight differences from many of his other paintings. Typically the nude female figures he painted were overtly naked and forced the viewer to confront their nakedness. Sometimes they were even contorted, uncomfortable, and ostensibly ugly, as exemplified by his painting *Danae* (1907) (Fig. 2). However, in *Hope II* it is the woman's pregnancy that is the most striking part of the painting, not her partial nudity.

By looking at Klimt's personal history with women the viewer can begin to understand how his relationships with women in his real life was just as complex and untraditional. Klimt's

reputation for having multiple relationships with female models was and is publically known. It is believed he fathered fourteen illegitimate children with various women, but he never made any permanent ties to them and instead chose to live with his mother and sister throughout his life. His most well-known relationship was his friendship with Emilie Flöge, with whom he stayed close to throughout his life.[4] His fixation on the female form in his artwork seems to reflect his fascination with women, his relationships with them and their position in society. I believe these numerous familial, friendly, sexual, and romantic relationships with women allowed Klimt unique insight to the life of a woman in Vienna during his lifetime. Having fathered fourteen children Klimt was no stranger to pregnancy and birth. His relationships with the mothers of his children was nontraditional so it is easy to understand why he would portray such a subject in a nontraditional way. By so doing, Klimt enables an exploration of the facets of womanhood outside of sexual objectification. *Hope II* sets itself apart from the work produced in Vienna during the early 1900s as well as Klimt's other paintings of women because it addresses an aspect of a life that is uniquely female – pregnancy.

Klimt's contemporaries deemed the depiction of pregnancy as inappropriate because *Hope II* was rejected upon exhibition on the grounds of its subject matter.[5] However, I maintain it is imbued with meaning, which is far more personal than many of Klimt's other pieces. But just like the subject of pregnancy throughout history, Klimt's *Hope II* has been largely untreated due to its variation from the rest of the artist's *oeuvre*. Art historians have spent most of their efforts attempting to understand his traditional style and many have even characterized his style as diminishing women. For example, Lisa Fischer unapologetically identifies Klimt as a chauvinist who preyed on young women of the lower class to fulfill his sexual desires and serve

[4] Comini, 17.
[5] Ronald Lauder, *Gustav Klimt* (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2007), 95.

as his nude models. She rejects Klimt as a social modernist on the grounds that he did little to alleviate the bondage women were in during his lifetime.[6] Susanna Partsch reads various nude portraits by Klimt as devoid of any humanity, and merely means of achieving male objectives.[7]I believe little has been said about *Hope II* because it introduces fertility as another facet of the female body – a topic with which most Klimt scholars seem to be uninterested. Thus *Hope II* has been surrounded historically and symbolically in silence. Even in its time, not much attention was paid to this piece. However, too much fame or analysis would have perhaps robbed the painting of its intimate quality, an attribute which I contend lends itself to greater meaning. In fact, after *Hope II* was briefly on exhibition, Klimt preserved it from the critical public eye by keeping it in his studio – a place where guests were seldom invited.[8]

It may be fair for scholars to argue that some of Klimt's work was objectifying, but I do not believe *Hope II* should be identified as such. Klimt was not afraid to diverge from tradition, even if that meant choosing subjects that were different from his typical *oeuvre*. In fact, he valued nonconformity so much that he lead a completely new movement of art during his time. Klimt and his contemporaries, including Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffman, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Max Kurzweil, and Wilhelm Bernatzik, all seceded from the Vienna Künstlerhaus (Art Academy), challenging the rigidity of the institution that limited their creative strengths. They sought an opportunity to create art that was more theoretical than historical. Their response to this was to start a movement of their own – the Vienna Secession Movement.[9] As a founding member and inaugural president of this art collective, Klimt consistently sought out opportunities

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[6] Gustav Klimt, Tobias G. Natter, and Gerbert Frodl, *Klimt's Women* (Cologne: DuMont, 2000), 33-34.
[7] Susanna Partsch, *Gustav Klimt* (New York: Prestel, Münich, 1994), 35.
[8] Lauder, 95.
[9] Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna, 1898-1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and Their Contemporaries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 38-39.

to create art that shocked and opposed academic artistic traditions.[10] He did this primarily by including nude women in a majority of his paintings and abandoning rules of naturalism, which created flat images that looked distorted and unusual. This approach to his aesthetic reinforced his mission to look beyond the representational and create figures that were almost other-worldly.

Apart from his efforts to contest the academic standard of art we can even see glimpses of his personal life imbued in the messages of his art. For instance, the subtle melancholy detected in the details of *Hope II* certainly falls in line with Klimt's tendency to include life and death motifs in his work, but could also likely reflect a loss Klimt himself faced in the middle of his career. His bohemian lifestyle left him with many attachments to both women and illegitimate children. Unfortunately in 1903 one of his sons, Otto Zimmerman, died shortly after birth. Otto's mother, Maria (Mizzi) Zimmerman, was likely the model for this and many of his other paintings,[11] which gives further evidence that *Hope II* was a personal response to that experience. Little is recorded about Mizzi's life and grief after the death of her son, but a portion of her sorrow is recorded with Klimt's in *Hope II.* Notable symbols and components included in the painting point to this suffering. The skull peaking out from behind the swollen belly of the mother is a ubiquitous and clear symbol of death. This element was not added until a few years after its first exhibition,[12] and there is little evidence as to why Klimt made the change after it was originally completed. Even so, it can be surmised that Klimt was visually introducing the threat of death to mother and child posed by pregnancy and childbirth, and it remains a

[10] Anne Higonnet, "Making Babies, Painting Bodies: Women, Art, and Paula Modersohn-Becker's Productivity." *Women's Art Journal* 30:2 (Fall – Winter 2009): 15-21.
[11] Partsch, 60.
[12] Lauder, 266.

significant element when interpreting the image. Some read it as an ancestral presence, an ominous prophetic message that death is imminent, or even a remembrance of a failed pregnancy of the past. The skull functions iconographically as a *memento mori*, or reminder of mortality. A tradition frequently seen in western art, this component is regularly seen in the *vanitas* images.[13] It is clear Klimt would choose such a symbol given his inclination to recontextualize allegorical figures and tropes. Paradoxically, death can be a looming subject that is associated with the emergence of new life. No matter Klimt's original intention to add the skull, it is an emblem of loss. Moreover, its presence is unsettling in conjunction with a maternal subject matter that is generally linked to feelings of hopefulness and joy, but the inclusion of the skull provides a platform for invoking the suffering that all too often accompanies pregnancy.

Beyond his personal history, *Hope II* accumulates more meaning as we understand it within the greater context of his entire career. After leaving the Vienna Secession in 1905, Klimt was showing in fewer exhibitions, and as a result sold fewer paintings – ultimately finding the public's interest in his work in a decline.[14] His departure from the group was prompted by a consensus of its members for a more commercial focus.[15] He was not moved from his artistic convictions, however, and he continued to create paintings that followed his objectives of avant-garde work that challenged rigid traditions of the past. Aesthetically, his work evolved after taking a trip to Ravenna in 1903.[16] His gold leafing and mosaic-like patterning are reminiscent of the Byzantine style he discovered there, but I maintain this also had an effect on his representations of women, *Hope II* in particular. The maternal figure in this painting is presented

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[13] *Vanitas* images generally connote a warning against vain pursuits in mortality. Reminding the viewer of the fragility of life, perhaps guiding them to a more moral life.
[14] Partsch, 50.
[15] Victoria Charles, and Klaus H. Carl, *The Viennese Secession* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2011), 110.
[16] Comini, 27.

with the same adoration as a saintly figure on the walls of Byzantine cathedrals. A resemblance is seen in the mosaic in the southern portal narthex of Hagia Sophia titled *Virgin Mary Amid Emperors Justinian and Constantine* (990 AD) (Fig. 3). In this image, the most venerated mother of western culture sits above the viewer and even the supporting royal figures. Her presence is as demanding as the maternal figure in *Hope II*, and the simple composition clearly indicates the importance of the Virgin Mary. Her full drapery and interaction with the supporting figures are echoed in *Hope II*. Just as the emperors bow to the Virgin Mary, the three females at the bottom of Klimt's *Hope II* also turn their faces downward in respect of the maternal figure in the center. This fosters a sense of respect for the maternal figure. Rather than being an object she is elevated to a person owed admiration. This kind of respect is what identifies Klimt as a supporter of the feminist movement. As stated in the Declaration of the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City in 1975, " the human body, whether that of women or men, is inviolable and respect for it is a fundamental element of human dignity and freedom."[17]

Klimt defied tradition further as he included another element in the painting that gave the maternal figure symbolic divinity. Just behind her a flesh-colored mass sweeps up from her shoulders to the top edge of the canvas. The color and shape look rather insignificant and banal, but they cut through the textured backdrop and solicit notice: it is a profile of her wings. They are not fashioned out of feathers or even something resembling a celestial matter, but match the hue and vibrancy of her skin, and so are seemingly constructed of flesh. While this figure oscillates between life and death, she also becomes a conduit between heaven and earth. She is a tangible angel. As her body is dangerously close to passing over to death and heaven, she also ushers her new child from a spiritual sphere to a physical one.

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[17] Lynn P. Freedom and Stephen L. Isaacs, 1993, "Human Rights and Reproductive Choice," *Studies in Family Planning* (24): 18-30.

Having established that Klimt's representation of this woman is not literal and instead is conceptual, the wings can be seen as a symbol of her nature.[18] It is likely Klimt did not intend for her to be seen as religious messenger, but instead likens the role of a mother to something holy and divine. So then, the wings on the maternal figure are indicative of her character and nature and not her sole identity. By painting a mortal mother with angel wings she is thereby associated with other angels in Christian theology, like Gabriel who told the Virgin Mary of her divine mission as the mother of the Christ child. The mother in *Hope II* is a divine vessel and a physical pathway between heaven and earth, life and death.

Symbols in *Hope II*

These physical emblems all point to the greater meaning that Klimt hoped to convey in his work. Just as Byzantine artists disassociated themselves from literal representation in favor of more 'holy' allegorical images, Klimt too sought to imbue a more theoretical meaning into his work other than the literal. His love of symbols and allegory also reinforced the themes and ideas that were fascinating to him. Often times his artwork included allegorical figures of his own design or from mythology, but typically they were used in new settings and perhaps outside of their original narrative altogether. One of the clearest examples of this is the Beethoven Frieze (Fig. 4) he designed in 1902 for the Vienna Secession building. The entire three-panel series is made up of multiple allegorical figures which show the ultimate victory mankind has over evils and opposition such as sickness, madness, and of course, death – all themes which were hardly discussed by any of the traditional artists of the time. Opening up these topics was important to

[18] In the early stages of Christianity, Saint John Chrysostom canonized just what the wings of an angel represent, writing: "They manifest a nature's sublimity. That is why Gabriel is represented with wings. Not that angels have wings, but that you may know that they leave the heights and the most elevated dwelling to approach human nature. Accordingly, the wings attributed to these powers have no other meaning than to indicate the sublimity of their nature." Saint John Chrysostom and Delio Vania, *The Ethiopian Review of the Pseudocrisostomic Homeland of Ficu Exarata and its Eastern Tréfonds* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), 34.

Klimt as his fresco stood as an ensign for the Vienna Secession made permanent on the walls of their headquarters. The panels follow a narrative which was conceptualized by Klimt, but each of the figures represents an attribute or value rather than specific characters. Most notable are the figures in the center panel one of which includes Klimt's first depiction of pregnancy. Here the figure is the embodiment of lasciviousness, wantonness, and intemperance.[19] This is reinforced by the way she stands and turns away from the viewer. Her posture and dangling arms suggest apathy toward any of her surroundings. Furthermore, her presence is looming even against the large monstrous figure she flanks. There is a great sense of discomfort that she exudes making her something of an inconvenience to the narrative being told.

This piece also illustrates the foundational philosophies that are represented in Klimt's work throughout his career. He as well as his contemporaries in the Vienna Secession believed that art should be an immersive experience. Viewers were to walk into the space and be presented with awesome sights and sounds. Beethoven's ninth symphony played in the room as the viewers looked up to the large fresco panels high on the walls and a large statue of Beethoven stood unavoidable in the center of the room. The Vienna Secession's beliefs were that not only should all the arts work together, but also that they should consume the viewer physically, emotionally, and mentally. Klimt's participation in such a movement paves the way to read many of his works in a philosophical vein. Understanding how he hoped to captivate the viewer through multiple artistic media extends an invitation for the beholder to see each image in a more conceptual way – looking beyond the literal and mimetic. Klimt likely wanted his viewers to consider not only *who* but also *what* each figure represents, the environment of the piece and how that changes the viewer's experience, and finally, the effect it has on the viewer's mind,

[19] Partsch, 30.

body, and emotions. He and other Vienna Secessionists hoped to revolutionize the way art was comprehended in Vienna at the turn of the century, and *Hope II* does in fact provoke more from the viewer than passive comprehension of the scene.

As mentioned above, one of the deeper meanings Klimt strive to convey in his immersive works was the common subject of life and death. These subjects were fairly consistent throughout his career. During the artist's lifetime, Austrian compatriot Sigmund Freud developed his philosophies on sexuality, death, and the subconscious theories that many scholars see evidence of in Klimt's artwork. Although Klimt lived during the time of Freud, scholars such as Alessandra Comini believe that Klimt likely never read any of Freud's theories. That does not mean he was unfamiliar with them, however. It is quite reasonable to assume Klimt's involvement in many intellectual and social gatherings made him familiar with the new ideas Freud published.[20] Some of the radical theories Freud offered alluded to a subconscious drive toward death called the *death instinct* (Thanatos), which was naturally subdued by the *life instinct* (Eros). These impulses are what Freud believed motivated people to often act in self-destructive behavior, and also to prioritize pleasure and gratification.[21] These themes dealing with the cyclical nature of life and death are seen in many other of Klimt's paintings as he likely grappled with the conflicting drives he personally saw in the human experience. The maternal figure in *Hope II* is an appropriate choice to discuss these ideas because she embodies both the drive toward life and death. This subject, in fact, was optimum for Klimt for several reasons: it represented life, death, and the female body in a shocking way and then warpped it all in a cloak of decorative modeling. Almost seamlessly, he produces an intersection of his aesthetic style, social objectives, and striking allegorical themes.

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[20] Comini, 17.

[21] Michael Jacobs, *Sigmund Freud*, 2nd ed. (SAGE Publications, London; Thousand Oaks, Calif, 2003), 45.

Despite his masterful skill of creating natural looking anatomy, Klimt often created scenes that were "otherworldly," just as his Byzantine progenitors did. Even though he did do work in portraiture upon commission, many of the images he painted of his own accord were allegorical. This surely is the case with *Hope II*, as the figures are not literal depictions of persons, but instead figures of meaning. In other words, the figures are an embodiment of a general virtue or characteristic and not a depiction of a specific person. Comini stated it thus: "The incorporation into Klimt's allegories and landscapes of a meaning-saturated environment paralleled the development of the charged façade in Klimt's portraiture."[22] By creating this setting, his figures were not isolated into a specific narrative, but could be adapted to numerous scenarios.

This is an important component to *Hope II,* as Klimt attempted to generate conversations of female identity, sexuality, and especially the complexities of pregnancy. The opportunity granted here is in the universality of the subject. Pregnancy, and in some cases the loss that accompanies it, has permeated, and will continue to permeate, history. It is a part of the human experience that will not change, no matter the culture or generation in which it is examined. Here the anonymous woman occupying the center of the canvas represents an identity which is unique yet malleable to any prospective viewer. As an allegorical figure, the woman is not tied to a specific time or place, and instead transcends those dimensions, allowing the conversation about pregnancy and womanhood to be opened up to anyone. Women who have ever found themselves to be in similar situations as the maternal figure in *Hope II* – dealing with pregnancy and loss – can easily foster connection with the woman who represents such profound emotional depth in

[22] Comini, 18.

any time or circumstance. The barrier of specific narrative is gone and the viewer can then more easily enter the scene and even place herself in the place of the maternal figure.

While the details in the image provide captivating value, the main figure herself dominates the canvas. Her presence is unavoidable and confronts the viewer unapologetically making her readily available to the viewer. This is offset by the position she assumes. She looms largely over the scene, but turns perpendicularly to the viewer, almost concealing her identity. In this way she becomes a type, or a symbol for any woman who has experienced pregnancy rather than a specific person. By averting her eyes, she does not return the gaze of the viewer, but she does return the sentiments attached to such an experience of pregnancy. In this sense she again exists as a sacrifice – giving her own identity in exchange for the viewer to relate and put themselves in her place.

Of course, Klimt's rendering of pregnancy did not begin with this image, and is in fact previously seen in his painting *Hope I* (Fig. 5), which he produced in 1903. This iteration of pregnancy follows a more shocking method in which the female figure is completely naked and has very little emotion. Here Klimt presents a woman who is identified only by her life-giving ability. It is not until he paints *Hope II* that his maternal figure gains a more dynamic identity.

The use of the female nude has always been problematic in art history whether the female figure was pregnant or not. Many are quick to identify the female nude as objectifying and thereby in favor of censorship and covering the female body. Further consideration of this reveals the double standard of this belief, however. By maintaining that the body should always be concealed it is implied that the body is something of which to be ashamed. Accepting the nude body glorifies and honors the human form. This does not mean the female nude has never

been manipulated for the sake of voyeurism, but it does mean it is possible to show the female nude in a way that is mindful of the rights of women.

Michelle Vangen addresses the ways in which even pregnancy – a decidedly female function – was exploited for the objectives of men. She writes: "In their hands the trope of mother became a political tool used to address many of the social issues that dominated the Weimar years."[23] At this time women were increasingly occupying positions outside the home, they were taking newly developed contraceptives (which decreased birthrates), and seeking a voice in the public square. All of this brought national apprehension, so motherhood became a point of political concern. The shifting of roles women traditionally held meant changes that most political systems were frightened of and for which they were unprepared.[24] Klimt, however, addresses this issue in a way that gives the female figure her voice in *Hope II*. Her encounter with death and the personal cost of her own well-being makes her self-sacrificing and autonomous. Revealing such an experience makes it impossible to see her as inhuman, or objectified.

As these changes began to be manifested in Viennese culture, the General Austrian Women's Association (GAWA) was formed. Leading this movement were the voices of powerful feminists – Rosa Mayreder, Irma Troll-Borostyáni, and Grete Meisel-Hess. Each of these women wrote countless responses to the circulating theories of misogynists, but unfortunately were only given a fraction of the attention they deserved from society in fin-de-siècle Vienna. These feminist voices called for greater change in society, and saw it as their womanly duty to bring salvation to Vienna. The GAWA lobbied for free and unrestricted

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[23] Michelle Vangen, "Left and Right: Politics and Images of Motherhood in Weimar Germany," *Women's Art Journal* 30:2 (Fall – Winter 2009): 25-30.
[24] Agatha Schwartz, "Austrian Fin-De-Siècle Gender Heteroglossia: The Dialogism of Misogyny, Feminism, and Viriphobia," *German Studies Review,* Vol. 28 (2005): 355.

divorce, abolition of prostitution, and equal opportunities for female education. They did regard a woman's pursuit of motherhood and marriage as noble but ultimately wanted two things: women to be more represented in the public sphere, and women to be gatekeepers of their own sexuality. They felt that society could be cleansed only if more women were heard – by participating more in public spaces while also maintaining their uniqueness as women.[25] As they strove for these utopian ideals they brought about social change for women that was unprecedented.[26] This was likely why so many women were attracted to Klimt and included in his close circle of friends – Klimt shared many of their a revolutionary sensibilities. As stated previously, Klimt regularly challenged tradition and authority. It is likely the progressive opinions of feminist women was of interest to him. Klimt himself has said, "Whoever wants to know something about me – as an artist which alone is significant – they should look attentively at my pictures and there seek to recognize what I am and what I want."[27] Given that most of his work included the female figure, it can be understood that the consideration of women was important to him. Additionally, the modern way he portrayed them indicates his interest in their efforts towards progressivism and social justice.

Female artists also joined in these conversations by presenting new female perspectives of expressionism, fashion, literature, and so on. Emilie Flöge was one of the most recognized designers of the time and made great strides for the women at the turn-of-the century in Vienna. Most often recognized for her association with Klimt, Flöge and her sisters opened a dress-making firm offering a radical new style to upper-class women of loose fitting clothing that was organic in shape and decorative in style. This radical style, as seen in a photograph of Klimt and

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[25] Schwartz, 348.

[26] Harriet Anderson, *Utopian Feminism: Women's Movements in Fin-de-siècle Vienna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 97.

[27] Christian M. Nebehy, *Gustav Klimt: Dokumentation* (Wien: Nebehay, 1969), 40.

Flöge (Fig. 6), was known for its draping shape that did not cling to the shape of the body. The flowing nature of this outfit and others like it seemed to represent a liberation for women's bodies both figuratively and literally. The Flöge sisters' shop continued to offer traditional designs, but greatly affected the fashion trends of the early 1900s. This change in fashion was due in part to an ongoing conversation in Viennese society calling for more practical, unrestrictive clothing for women. Many laboring women needed clothing that accommodated their factory jobs, and progressive feminists, such as Helen Roberts, saw the current use of the corset as a symbol of the subordination of women.[28] This was just one example of the way women were seeking liberation in society. Klimt's closeness to Flöge certainly made him aware of this ongoing feminist conversation in Vienna at the time. As the debate on a woman's appearance and dress waged, Klimt was able to stay apprised of the ongoing discussion of women's dress standards and expectations. He sided with the feminists not only in his own personal dress, which mirrored Flöge's designs, but also in the draping clothing in which he often chose to paint his female figures. For example, the clothing that covers the main figure in *Hope II* is loose and unrestricting. She is allowed movement and thereby autonomy. Through Flöge, Klimt had the opportunity to participate in Vienna's feminist movement by way of his art and influence in society.

As the leading voices of feminism, Mayreder, Troll-Borostáni, and Meisel-Hess urged women to rethink their position in society. They identified the changes that women were making in Vienna and saw the positive effects made possible by such action. Agatha Schwartz identified their position as such: "Women abandoned the role of 'bearers of meaning' for that of 'makers of

[28] Mary L. Wagener, "Fashion and Feminism in "Fin de Siècle" Vienna," *Woman's Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (1989): 29-33.

meaning,' and thereby became 'threatening to the disciplinary culture'."[29] Klimt buttressed their efforts with his autonomous female figure in *Hope II*. Instead of giving her meaning of his own design he allows her to generate meaning on her own by representing her personal experience with pregnancy.

Hope II is an endorsement of the gathering and unification of women whose plight was to revolutionize societal sexism and revitalize gendered expectations. With this painting, Klimt opened up a discussion for the role of women in society in fin-de-siècle Vienna in a unique way. The gathering of the three women at the base of the maternal figure displays a camaraderie shared specifically among women. Certainly Klimt did not belong in such a community because he was a man, however, I believe his depiction of female friendship and closeness displays a kind of respect or reverence he had for them. Another clear example of his view of the female plight from Klimt's *oeuvre* is *Three Ages of Women* (1905) (Fig. 7). While an in-depth look at this painting is not the purpose of this paper, it does touch on the community women share in motherhood. Again this is seen in his *The Virgin* (1913) (Fig. 8). Here the women are not only all depicted together, they are also gathered tightly and joined together. Their bodies seem to all connect in some way making them a sorority instead of a group of individuals. Furthermore, the composition he creates with their bodies and their distorted positions voids them sexual objectification. I would argue that Klimt's portrayal of women in such a manner shows their humanness and makes it harder for them to be objectified.

Klimt's departure from objectifying conventions of fin-de-siècle Vienna can be seen most profoundly in *Hope II.* By comparing it to the companion and preceding work, *Hope I*, it can been seen how Klimt first works with the subject of pregnancy and then distinctly develops it in

[29] Schwartz, 348.

a more progressive way with *Hope II*. Like *Hope II*, the maternal figure in *Hope I* is also accompanied by symbols of death. Three ominous figures represent life's eventual progression toward death by showing youth, maturity, and lifelessness. Their varying ages, the skull, and the robes they wear all indicate that they are symbolic vestiges of the life cycle.[30] The woman at the center then becomes the means by which life continues. As Anne Higonnet argues, this specifically represents the renewal of *male* life and identifies the maternal figure as an object by which man can exist.[31] However, the features of the figures in the back are so obscure that they could easily be identified as male or female, or gender neutral at the very least. This preliminarily identifies the maternal figure as an exceptional participant in life – one who perpetuates all human life.

A few remaining components of the images constitute a dissimilar feeling between *Hope I* and *Hope II*. The background of *Hope I* is full of dark tones of black and blue which neighbor the woman's pale skin and create a relatively cold environment. This is offset by her vivid red hair, which pulls immediate attention to her apathetic face and pubic area. Her shameless nudity and profile position make her pregnancy remarkably evident. She looks at the viewer directly, but her expression is uninviting. The only tenderness she exudes is the placement of her hands at the top of her belly, but it is private tenderness reserved for the connection she has with her unborn child. It is as if she is displaying her possessiveness over her baby. There is a subtle but noteworthy band of black which covers her feet. Certainly this stripe of paint is not made out of modesty, but puts a clear physical separation between the viewer and the woman – dividing them into two different spaces. This calls to remembrance Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-1863) (Fig. 9), which decades earlier became the subject of ridicule due in part to the

[30] Partsch, 65.
[31] Higonnet, 17.

confronting glance of the central female nude. Undoubtedly, Klimt was looking to other avant-garde artists like Manet who also sought to create a sensation. *Hope I* conjures the same discomfort as *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* when the viewer is forced to visually converse with the naked woman before them and realize his or her voyeurism.

Art historian Susanna Partsch claims Klimt utilizes a traditional objectifying style in *Hope I*, "The subject for Klimt is his personal experience with pregnancy and death. But in the present context the painting is also evidence of Klimt's image of woman…degraded to the status of an object."[32] If this interpretation is valid, objectifying the central figure makes her devoid of emotional meaning and is less available to those trying to identify or connect with the image emotionally. However, she notes that this subject is a personal one for Klimt and born out of an experience that was likely full with emotion. It is more likely this painting reflects his contemplation on intersection of life and death and woman's important role in such an experience. *Hope II* expands this even further as Klimt shows a more developed maternal figure who is portrayed with dignity and who is clothed, even if only partially. Partsch also briefly comments on *Hope II*, noting that the geometric clothing which veils her body removes the objectifying focus from the image.[33] This figure is inaccessible to voyeurism and instead stands as an emblem of maternity, further removing her from an objectifying stare. Not only does the draping garment provide the figure with more individuality, it also constructs an environment that is more intimate and private. The scene becomes reverent as the garment shrouds the mother and makes her sacred instead of a spectacle. Her breasts may be exposed, but this signifies the postpartum functions of her body, namely breast feeding, and identifies a feature of her maternal qualities. Showing her breasts does not sexualize her body, but identifies her body as incredible

[32] Partsch, 65.
[33] Ibid, 70.

and valued. Ultimately, her posture and clothing give her human qualities that make her relatable. All of these features are lacking in *Hope I*.

Depictions of women in art and the perception of women in Viennese fin-de-siècle society were quite polarized and depicted either the *femme fragile* or the *femme fatale*. Misogynists, who were unfortunately also tastemakers of the time, put women in two categories both of which defined them by their sexuality: sexually frigid/innocent or sexually deviant. Agatha Schwartz contributes greatly to the study of gender issues in this culture and identifies Otto Weininger and Paul Julius Möbius as the men who construct such dominating and restrictive positions. Schwartz observes, "the equation of 'woman' with mere sexuality and reproductive functions results in the centuries-old binary opposition of the mother and the prostitute."[34] This limited identification of women is not only set at two extremes, but empties the female sex of any sense of autonomy or personal identity. Unfortunately, this way of thinking dominated Vienna in the early 1900s. Weininger and Möbius' writings were published at much higher rates than that of their feminist counterparts.[35] Most often Möbius relied on phony science to justify his claims as is exemplified in his book *Schwachsinn des Weibes* where he states, "Nature wants motherly love and faithfulness from and educator of her children….That's why woman is childish, jovial, patient, and simple-spirited."[36] Stating that women are "simple-spirited" and "childish" for the purposes of motherhood both identifies them as only useful as mothers and clearly degrades their character, thus devoicing them of a greater identity.

Notwithstanding these social conditions, a third category of female sexuality is brought to light when considering some of Klimt's allegorical female figures: feminine fertility. Dietrun

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[34] Schwartz, 352.
[35] Ibid, 353.
[36] Paul J. Möbius, *Ueber den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* (Halle a. d. S.: Marhold, 1904), 26.

Otten examines this category as such arguing, "Klimt takes in this respect a special position, in that he did not share the general misogynistic view of woman, rather he placed her in a position of power surrounded by secrecy and wonder, on which depended the continuance of life in eternity."[37] This is done in *Hope II* by elevating the maternal figure to a position of veneration. As mentioned earlier, the association with the Byzantine style places the female figure in a situation parallel to royal or sacred persons. Just as Otten pointed out, these women in Klimt's paintings are lauded for their ability to propel mankind into eternity through fertility and are therefore respected for that position.

As progressive as this viewpoint was for its time, however, it still limits womanhood to the confines of sexual definition. Sara Ayres identifies this in her survey of Klimt's works and their environments, "Such formulations, while seductive, do rehearse stereotypes which define women by their physical ability to bear children and make them the rather passive recipients of bestowed significance and limited influence."[38] I believe that *Hope II* deviates from this tendency by giving the woman an experience of some sort. The viewer is left not knowing what exactly that experience is, but the juxtaposition of the pregnant female with the skull indicates that she experienced, or is yet to experience, something harrowing. She does not broadcast this, but allows viewers to understand this experience if they too are willing to share their own experience as well.

Upon reading Möbius' misogynistic claims, Rosa Mayreder responded by saying: "He conceives of woman as a mere elemental creature, and sees her only in the perspective of her maternal calling. But it is impossible in any highly developed state of society to regard man and

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[37] Dietrun Otten, "Die Klimt-Gruppe", in *Klimt und die Kunstschau 1908*, ed. by Husslein-Aeco and Weidinger, 171.

[38] Sara Ayres, *Contexts of Display for the Late Work of Gustav Klimt: 1908-1930* (London: University of London, 2011), 87.

woman as mere elemental beings unless we also regard all civilization as futile or as a process of degeneration."[39] This statement identifies how feminine fertility is degrading unless it is accompanied by a greater understanding of female worth. By making the maternal figure in *Hope II* capable of having emotions and living through harrowing experiences Klimt provides her with an identity beyond being a mother.

Pregnancy in the Arts and Society

Upon reception of the first painting, *Hope I*, many critics voiced their conservative concerns about the image. Astonishingly it was not the issue of nudity or sensuality that was contested but the subject of pregnancy and parturition (the act of giving birth) that provoked so many poor reviews. Critics maintained that such functions of life were to remain a private matter.[40] There is little wonder as to why images of pregnancy like *Hope I* and *II* were so ill received. "In the typography of bodies, pregnancy is traditionally concealed and confined to the private sphere and yet constantly subject to public scrutiny. While pregnancy seems to belong naturally to the intimate relations of private personhood, it is always publically mediated and subject to intense regulation,"[41] remarked Rosemary Betterton in her study of maternal bodies in contemporary art. Betterton identifies the paradox of pregnancy in society in that it is seen as profoundly private, yet relegated publically. It is a universal occurrence of human life, yet it is hardly spoken of. And while it is a personal experience, the community decides how and when it is seen in society.

Even up until the mid twentieth-century women were often expected to be discreet about their pregnancies and were commonly excused quietly from their occupations when they began

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[39] Rosa Mayreder, *Survey of the Woman Problem: From the German of Rosa Mayreder* (S.l.: Forgotten Books, 2015), 23.
[40] Lauder, 50.
[41] Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts* (Manchester: University Press, 2014), 28.

to show signs of being pregnant – relegated to the domestic domain. Unfortunately, decisions like these were and have been repeatedly made by persons who are not the mother nor child. This is something seen today in the way pregnant women often have their bellies touched by strangers. Certainly that would not happen to a woman who was not pregnant. And yet there is this tension between what is public and what is private. Betterton quotes Iris Marion Young, a feminist scholar of social injustice who describes her experience of being pregnant, again highlighting the paradoxical demands of pregnancy. Young says: "The belly is other, since I did not expect it there, but since I feel the touch upon it, it is me."[42] She talks of the way her pregnant belly touches the tops of her thighs when she sits down. It is an unfamiliar experience. She knows that it is her body touching her body, yet it is the "other" (expressed by Martin Heidegger) – apart from her and at the same time a part of her. She feels herself being touched, and also can separately feel herself touching. She is the "(M)other."[43]

This brings to light the question of whether or not a man can depict pregnancy and do it justice while also doing so respectfully. I would argue Klimt does achieve a respectful rendering of pregnancy in *Hope II*. He is participating in this discussion of a female experience as a male voice and from a male perspective, and certainly does not have the same authority as a female artist, but his representation of pregnancy in this image should be considered a marked departure from some of his more ostensibly objectifying images of women. Furthermore, it shifts away from the usual male visual economy. This subject likely held little interest for the male viewer, although there were may have been some who romanticized maternity for their own ends.

Klimt was not the only one to abandon this convention, and was accompanied by several female artists who found great interest in maternal and pregnant figures. One of the most notable

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[42] Betterton, 37.
[43] Ibid, 37.

female artists of this time was Paula Modersohn-Becker. As she explored her interest in painting she most often found herself painting the female nude. Her most famous painting was *Self-Portrait at Age 30* (1906) (Fig. 10) where she herself is the nude figure depicted. An inscription at the bottom of the canvas reads, "I painted this at age 30, on my sixth wedding day, P.B." Her signature, P.B., excludes her married name pointing to her need for an identity outside her marriage to her husband. The most interesting element in this self-portrait is that she is depicted pregnant. She was not pregnant at the time, which begs the question of why she would make this choice. Higonnet commented that while she pursued a career in art, she likely also wanted to be a mother.[44] It may also be concluded that this is a display of her being an agent of her own free-will, and that motherhood for her is a choice. Still there is room for the argument that she could have also been commenting on the expectation of women at that time to have children. Nonetheless, she asserts her authority as a woman and as an artist in creating a conversation about female identity, sexuality, and fertility.

Klimt became an important part of this ongoing battle for feminists as he painted *Hope II*. Of course he does not have the same perspective or authority that Modersohn-Becker had because he was a man. He did, however, have influence and was able to lend his voice to the cause when so many other women were given no heed. *Hope II* celebrates womanhood by highlighting certain feminine relationships. The emphasis rests on the connection of mother to child, and female supports at the feet of the maternal figure. Certainly, this scene could have been manipulated for a misogynistic agenda, but with this subject Klimt created an opportunity for his audience, male or female, to see female sexuality and pregnancy in a more liberating way.

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[44] Higonnet, 16.

All viewers were invited to converse with the image in a way that identified the central figure as an individual instead of just a body.

He reproductive functions of a woman's body are reverenced and even celebrated in *Hope II.* This was in contrast o the customs of the early 1900s when a woman was expected to quarantine herself in her home when she became pregnant. The idea of being ostracized from the public eye for pregnancy is absurd by today's standards, but it was just another way misogynists dictated the way pregnancy was dealt with. In the case of *Hope II*, however, the private nature of the scene and the silence with which it was received adds to its meaning. The critique of *Hope I* may have lead Klimt to paint his second scene, *Hope II*, in a slightly more dignified way, but while the variation between *Hope I* and *Hope II* is subtle, the effect is important. The clothed mother becomes a figure with which to interact and relate. The individuality in *Hope II* allows the viewer to look at the woman and connect with her. The emotional distance is lessened and the viewer is then allowed to say "I understand" in a unique and specific way. In comparison to *Hope I*, the warmth of the colors in *Hope II* suddenly feels less out of place. This range of colors produces an atmosphere of comfort and security – a place where it is safe to converse about the heartbreak associated with the underlying theme of death and suffering. The opportunity for empathy or connection with the subject is lost in *Hope I* as maternal figure confronts the viewer straight on. The interactions between the painting and viewer is a confrontation rather than a connection.

Empathetic Resource

Hope II was on display only once and soon after taken to Klimt's studio where it would remain before being sold to a private collector, Eugenia Primavesi. Thereafter it was sold

between other various private collectors until the 1970s,[45] and made a symbol of the privacy owed to pregnancy. Thus the subject matter remained a discreet one on the canvas as it had in real societal life. While this concealment may have halted any inkling of progress seen by the modern maternal woman hoping to call greater attention to pregnancy in general, it places the scene in a private space that lends itself to more personal conversation on the treatment of pregnancy instead of public scrutiny. Because this image conveys a heavier subject matter, in this case, the concealment may have been ideal. While feminists were seeking to become the gatekeepers of their own sexuality and fertility the private environment *Hope II* was kept in allowed for viewers to consider these topics without the authoritative voices of misogynists leading the discussion.

As *Hope II* addresses such topics, it would have been important for the viewer to employ his or her emotional faculties while looking at this image. Today art historians often remain tethered to strictly formalistic readings of artwork, but in this case it is imperative to consider what artistic theories *Hope II* was born into. Klimt would have certainly contemplated empathy theory – a concept developed in Vienna at the turn-of-the-century by Theodor Lipps[46] – as he painted his maternal figure and her supportive figures. In a sense, Klimt offers himself as a support to them as they seek to find a voice in the public square. Robert Katz, a contemporary psychologist, explains what it means generally to offer this support by providing an example from the Old Testament:

> A Jewish legend explains the way in which God came to comprehend the people. He made Himself like them. The Hebrew root *shavah* means to make equal or make identical with. The term is applied to God's activity of going into exile with Israel. He becomes a partner in their suffering. The dramatic account of God's

[45] "Gustav Klimt. Hope, II. 1907-08 | MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art. December 1, 2017. https:www.moma.org/collection/works/79792.

[46] Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 69.

> empathy for man was very likely as an admonition to mortals to sharpen their own sensitivities by imagining themselves to be in the position of others.[47]

Klimt's personal history with the loss of Otto was not an experience that could have been accessed by everyone, but *Hope II* created a conduit for those who at least had similar experiences to commiserate with him and vice versa.

As the viewers of that time looked at the maternal figure, they could start to identify with certain aspects of the image that bring to mind experiences they may have had. For example, they might have seen the obvious pregnant belly of the mother and remember when they too were carrying a baby. They might have seen the skull and be reminded of a miscarriage they recently experienced. Or they might have seen the women in the foreground clinging to the dress of the mother and recall a time they comforted a sister after the loss of an infant. These memories might have been painful to recall, but by making that connection the viewer had the opportunity to understand the painting in a personal way. And in turn, the viewer could then feel understood him/herself. He or she might have recognized that someone else (whether it is the painter or even an imagined figure in the painting) could identify with feelings and circumstances that they too had undergone. This was likely a measure of what Klimt was hoping to accomplish with this image.

The presence of the three woman at the feet of the mother provides a secondary tier of empathy exercised in *Hope II* and mirror the same empathy that Lipps and others advocated in the early 1900s. The women gather at the feet of the mother holding on to her with their eyes closed. They bow their heads as if in prayer to commune with her in what can be concluded is mourning or suffering. They become a visual representation of Katz's poignant phrase, "partner

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[47] Robert L. Katz, *Empathy, its Nature and Uses* (Free Press of Glencoe: New York, 1963), 17-18.

in their suffering." Thus the three women are a support to the maternal figure, just as the painting itself became a support to the viewer.

Klimt made the interaction between painting and viewer readily available in the way he balanced the compositional elements on his canvas. The profile of the maternal figure conceals part of her face making her less recognizable but also more accessible. She is not someone to simply be identified, but someone that can be identified with – a symbol of womanhood and/or maternity rather than a specific woman. Additionally, by only having a portion of her face and body exposed, an invitation is extended to the viewer to enter into the scene privately.

Without the advocacy of Klimt the feminist movement in fin-de-siècle Vienna would still have moved forward. Women would have still found victories in their search for recognition, and conversations about female sexuality and fertility would have continued to be opened. Furthermore, the taboo subject of pregnancy would have found greater discussion. However, *Hope II* allowed for Klimt's contemporary viewers to feel they had an advocate in their ongoing fight for gender equality. Indeed, Klimt seems an unlikely source for this advocacy, but his close association with women and passion for depicting them in his paintings suggests his sincere interest in their plight. His encounter with the sorrow of infant mortality without question impacted his life and career, and likely made him think about life and death a little differently. His use of conceptual ideas and figurative iconography created a woman who embodies not only personal experience, but also stood for something greater.

Figures

Figure 1 – Gustav Klimt, *Hope II*, 1907-1908, MOMA, Oil, Gold, and Platinum on Canvas

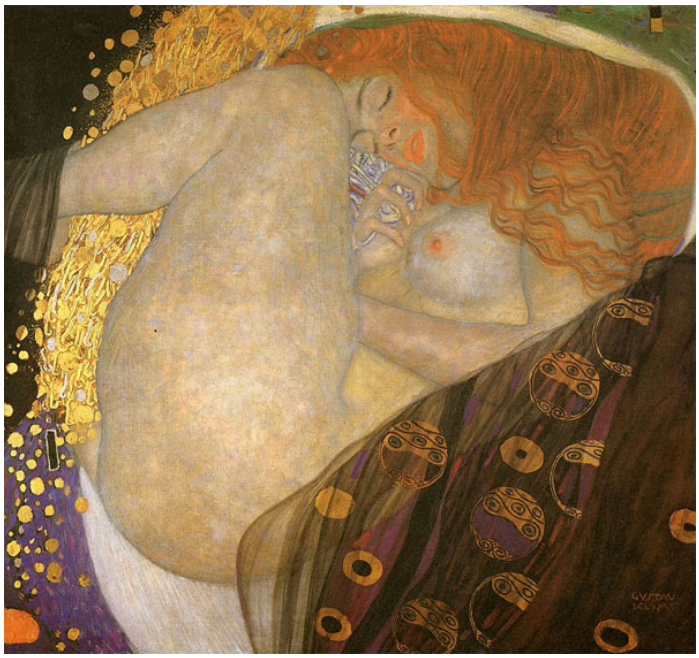

Figure 2 – Gustav Klimt, *Danae*, 1907, Galerie Wurthle, Oil on Canvas

Figure 3 – *Virgin Mary Amid Emperors Justinian and Constantine*, 990, Hagia Sophia, Mosaic

Figure 4 – Gustav Klimt, Beethoven Frieze (Center Panel), 1902, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Gold, Graphite, and Casein Paint

Figure 5 – Gustav Klimt, *Hope I*, 1903, National Gallery of Canada, Oil on Canvas

Figure 6 – Hans Böhler, Gustav Klimt and Emilie Flöge, 1910, Photograph

Figure 7 – Gustav Klimt, *Three Ages of Woman*, 1905, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Oil on Canvas

Figure 8 – Gustav Klimt, *The Virgin*, 1913, Národni Galerie, Oil on Canvas

Figure 9 – Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1862-1863, Musée d'Orsay, Oil on Canvas

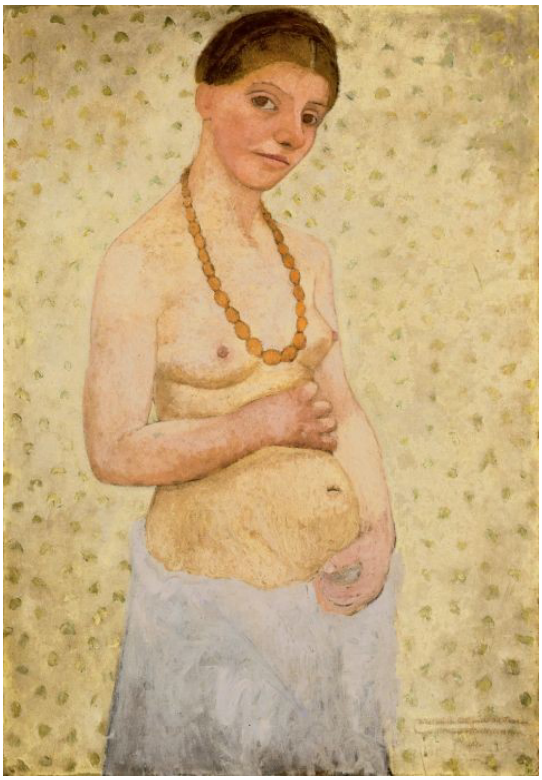

Figure 10 – Paula Modersohn-Becker, Self-Portrait at age 30, 1906, Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Tempera on Canvas

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