

Klimt's Last Studio

13th District (Hietzing)

When visiting the art galleries of Vienna, or many of the city's gift shops for that matter, the name of artist Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) will be encountered again and again. Son of an immigrant gold engraver from Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), Klimt began his career in the 1880s, along with his brother Ernst, by decorating the grand buildings springing up along the Ringstrasse (notably the ceilings of the **Burgtheater's** side pavilions and the stairwell spandrels of the **Kunsthistorisches Museum**).

In 1897, however, having withdrawn from public life following the death of both Ernst and his father, he re-orientated himself artistically by co-founding the Association of Austrian Fine Arts - Secession. This was a progressive movement of like-minded artists and architects who believed fervently that the backwards-looking Historicist tradition, typified by the overblown buildings of the Ringstrasse, was holding Vienna back in the arts. This was especially apparent when compared with Paris where Impressionism and Symbolism were causing a sensation. Within a few short years the Secession had created the fully-fledged Viennese version of European Art Nouveau, known as Jugendstil, in which art and architecture, aesthetics and function, were fused seamlessly together.

In 1903 a group related to the Secession, but devoted to applied arts such as fabrics and wallpapers, was founded. Called the Wiener Werkstätte, this increasingly commercial organisation created a rift in the overall membership of the group leading to the eventual break up of the Secession. Klimt meanwhile had left the group in 1905 to develop further his increasingly idiosyncratic style of painting, financed by his wealthy patrons.

A measure of how far the artist had moved on from his early works can be gauged by the uproar caused when his three murals for the strait-laced New University on the Ringstrasse were unveiled - Klimt returned his fee and removed them! Viewed in retrospect Klimt's incredible originality and versatility is all too obvious - his glittering golden period culminating in *The Kiss*, the sumptuous portraits of society women, the impressionist landscapes of **Lakes Attersee** and **Garda**, and his later works influenced by Japanese art and the bold primary colours of the artist Matisse.

It was during this latter phase, whilst working simultaneously on two works *The Bride and Lady with Fan* in his studio in Hietzing, that Klimt suffered a fatal stroke as he prepared for his daily walk. He died of pneumonia shortly after on February 6th 1918 aged just 56. He was buried in the little cemetery at **Hietzing** (Hietzinger Friedhof) close to his fellow Secessionists Otto Wagner and Koloman Moser who died the same year, as well as Jean-Baptiste Cléry, the last servant of Louis XVI who had married 'Empress' Maria Theresa's daughter, Marie Antoinette.



It has long been known that Klimt's birthplace at **Linzer Strasse 247** was demolished in 1966 and that his earlier studios at **Sandwirtgasse 8** (1883-92) and **Josefstädter Strasse 21** (1892-1912) were also no longer standing. Likewise it was thought that his last studio, in **Hietzing**, had been obliterated in 1923 by the construction of a neo-Baroque villa on the same site (photo).

However, as a result of a local citizen's initiative in 1998, the original plans for Klimt's last studio were re-discovered revealing the exciting fact that its walls still existed, encased within the fabric of the later villa. As a result the modest studio where Klimt worked from 1912 onwards has undergone modest restoration by the Gustav Klimt Memorial Society and can again be experienced by his many admirers. With its whitewashed walls and black-painted window frames it once stood in the midst of a large garden full of vividly flowering vegetation, tended by Klimt himself and thought to be depicted in his painting Orchard with Roses (1912). It is to be hoped that in time the flower garden and orchard familiar to Klimt will blossom once again.

(Note: Klimt's paintings and drawings can be seen in the **Upper Belvedere Palace** (including The Kiss), the **Leopold Museum** in the **MuseumsQuartier**, **Vienna's Historical Museum** and the **Secession** building in **Karlsplatz**, the Graphic Arts collection of the **Albertina** and **Hietzing's** district museum.)

Text & photographs © Duncan J D Smith 2004 from the forthcoming book Only in Vienna - A Guide to the Hidden Corners, Little-Known Places and Unusual Objects of the City on the Danube

13th District (Hietzing), Feldmühlgasse, take U-4 to Unter St. Veit
Open Sat, Sun & holidays mid-May to Sept 3pm-6pm

(note: the ownership of the Klimt Villa is currently under discussion and may affect future opening times)