

Klimt's Last Studio

By Duncan J. D. Smith

Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* is the world's most famous painted embrace. Its presence in Vienna has long attracted visitors, where the familiar image has found its way onto everything from cufflinks to dog jackets. But what of the studios where the enigmatic artist conjured up such trail-blazing imagery? Until recently all were considered lost.

Decorative Painter

Klimt was born in Vienna in 1862, one of seven children to a Bohemian goldsmith. The family's modest home at Linzer Strasse 247 (14th District), however, has long since given way to modern buildings. After



attending Vienna's University of Applied Arts (Universität für angewandte Kunst) Klimt commenced work as a decorative painter. Commissions

included the Hermes Villa for the imperial household, as well as the newly-built Burgtheater and Kunsthistorisches Museum, all in the emperor's beloved Historicist style.

But Historicism was backwards-looking, and

Vienna felt staid when compared with Paris, where Impressionism was causing a sensation. In response Klimt co-founded the Wiener Secession, which quickly established a fully-fledged Viennese take on Art Nouveau. Historicism would no longer hold Vienna back in the arts.

Lost Studios

When the Secession fell apart in 1905 Klimt continued alone to develop further the varied and idiosyncratic styles for which he is known today. How far he had already come can be gauged by the furore caused when he unveiled a series of ceiling murals commissioned by the University of Vienna. With the works branded pornographic by academics, Klimt returned his fee and removed the pictures. He vowed never to work for

the state again. By this time Klimt was working in his second studio at Josefstädter Strasse 21 (8th District), where he painted *The Kiss*. He had moved there in 1892 after vacating his first studio at Sandwirtgasse 8 (6th District), in which he had been ensconced since 1883. Neither is extant today although both carry commemorative plaques, as does a house at Westbahnstrasse 36 (7th District), where Klimt lived at the time with his mother and sisters. The studio on Josefstädterstrasse by the way is the one seen in photos of Klimt in a garden clutching a cat.

Garden House

In 1912 Klimt moved studio once again, this time to a single-story garden house on Feldmühlgasse in the Viennese suburb of Unter St. Veit (13th District). The property was owned by a furniture manufacturer, Joseph Herrmann, whose daughter married the painter Felix Albrecht Harta. Through this artistic connection the property was rented to Klimt, and it was there in February 1918 that he succumbed to a fatal stroke. He had been working simultaneously on two works, *The Bride* and *Lady with Fan*.

Klimt's friend Egon Schiele pleaded for the studio to be left untouched in tribute to the artist but it wasn't to be and within months Schiele, too,



was dead. The contents of Klimt's studio passed quickly into private hands and the studio itself was assumed lost after the Herrmanns erected a villa on the site in 1923. It therefore came as a complete surprise when in 1998 forgotten plans of the

villa emerged revealing the fact that the studio had not been demolished but instead incorporated into the new building.

Orchard with Roses

Both villa and studio have subsequently been renovated and turned over to the Comenius Institute for use as a museum and cultural centre. Contemporary photographs and eyewitness accounts have helped with the work. Schiele, for example, described the reception room with its collection of East Asian art, and Carl Moll alluded to the room where Klimt's models – "several were at his beck and call" – undressed. A

Japanese visitor, the artist Kijiro Ohta, who visited Klimt in 1913, wrote a revealing account of his meeting Klimt, who appeared wearing no underwear!

Klimt had the studio's north-facing picture window installed, which can still be seen today, and planted the semi-wild cottage garden filled with shrub roses and fruit trees. He captured something of it in his *Orchard with Roses* (1912) (see above). Although long lost, it is hoped that before long the garden will be reborn too. One can just imagine Klimt in his trademark indigo-blue kimono nodding his head in approval.