

AMBIGUITY IN  
GUSTAV KLIMT:  
AN EXAMINATION  
OF THE FEMALE  
SUBJECT IN  
KLIMT'S **SONJA**  
**KNIPS, DANAË**  
**& JUDITH I**



Breaking away from traditional artistic practices, the Viennese Secession was a pivotal movement that gave way to art modes such as Symbolism and Art Nouveau in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As one of the leaders of the Secession, Gustav Klimt was recognized for his ornamental style and highly erotic representations of women. In fact, Klimt has often been dubbed “a painter of women” due to the predominance of female subjects in his paintings and drawings. Upon close examination of Klimt’s most famous paintings such as *Sonja Knips*, *Danaë*, and *Judith I*, many scholars have raised the following question: Do Klimt’s works degrade or empower women?

In answer to this question, academics such as Frank Whitford and Lisa Fischer have argued that Klimt primarily degrades women in his pieces by representing them as sexual objects. In his book *Klimt*, Whitford identifies the female subjects in the artist’s works – particularly in his drawings – as “anonymous and largely passive” and as existing “only to whet the appetite of the male spectator who is not only a potential lover but also a voyeur.”<sup>1</sup> Lisa Fischer supports this idea in her article, “Gender Asymmetries in Viennese Modernism,” by asserting that Klimt sought only to “master woman by reducing her to a symbol” in his paintings and drawings.<sup>2</sup> Her article concludes:

*[Klimt] is thus an integral component of the system of those fin de siècle artist heroes who did not wish to solve social, political or personal conflicts in the real world, but who instead stylized themselves as gods and fled the real world by creating art worlds... In [the laboratory of modernism], Klimt became what he was: smug and narcissistic as a person, thoroughly conventional as a painter in his interpretation of the female.*<sup>3</sup>

Both scholars link Klimt’s demeaning attitude towards the female form to the predominant misogynistic views of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Vienna.

On the other side of the spectrum, scholars such as Regine Schmidt and Jill Scott have gone so far as to identify Klimt as a contributor to the feminist movement that was gaining momentum at the turn of the century. In her essay “Of Sweet Young Things and Femmes Fatales,” Regine Schmidt argues:

*By rendering visible the various manifestations of “woman” it was these three – Schnitzler, Klimt and to some extent Dörmann – who came tantalizingly close to defining the “modern woman” as independent and in control of her own eroticism. The women’s movement*



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*was to lead girls and women through the revolution of their daily lives, but it was artists, especially Gustav Klimt, who led "sweet young things" and "femmes fatales" alike towards the "path to freedom" by recognizing the power of eroticism and lifting its taboo.<sup>4</sup>*

By describing Klimt as a leader of women towards the "path to freedom," Schmidt's assertion contributes greatly to the idea that the artist supported the empowerment of women during his time.

Scott's article "Public Debates and Private Jokes in Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*: Effeminate Aestheticism, Virile Masculinity, or Both?" also highlights the importance of female sexuality in Klimt's works by claiming: "Klimt portrays female sexuality as powerful and legitimate, and Klimt's women gain a subject position through their desire, exemplified in their penetrating gaze."<sup>5</sup> These arguments greatly contrast those of Whitford and Fischer, offering individuals a different perspective from which to view Klimt's pieces.

While all art work, including Klimt's, may be interpreted in a myriad of different ways, I argue that to strictly identify Klimt as either a liberator of women or a sexist symbolist would be to engage in binary thinking, and thus constrict one's perception of the artist into a very narrow field of vision. Thus, in response to the aforementioned question, "Do Klimt's works degrade or empower women?", I argue that Klimt's paintings do both – and much more, for that matter. However, I would like to suggest that Klimt's deliberately ambiguous style allows for *at least* these two fundamental interpretations: 1) That his paintings represent a celebration of growing female empowerment; and 2) That his works are an expression of the male anxiety surrounding newly empowered women at the turn of the century. In this article, I will show that through his representations of bourgeois women, as in *Sonja Knips*; seductive nudes, as in *Danaë*; and *femmes fatales*, as in *Judith I*, Klimt gives his viewers the opportunity to do double-readings of his paintings in a way that celebrates the very ambiguity of artistic creation and reception.

### *Portrait of a Bourgeois Woman: Sonja Knips*

In the late 1890s, Klimt's ambivalent style of painting was made particularly clear when he began painting portraits of bourgeois women.

Although subtle in his portrayal of female sexuality, Klimt nonetheless offers his viewers the possibility of reading his portraits as both empowering and demeaning representations of women. *Sonja Knips* (1898) (Fig. 1), the first female portrait he ever painted, depicts a noblewoman at the edge of her chair in a bourgeois garden-like setting.<sup>6</sup> Her body's



position and the tight grasp of her left hand on the arm of her chair gives the viewer the sensation that she is about to stand up and do something. In his essay "Gustav Klimt – Painter between the Times," Gerbert Frodl supports this idea by suggesting that Sonja's "immobility still seems to be anticipatory, as if the quietness in the studio were only temporary." In this way, Klimt may be suggesting that Sonja has the power to "leave" the painting if she so desires, thereby giving her authoritative agency as the subject in the painting. On the other hand, by painting her as immobilized in that particular position, Klimt may also be suggesting that he, a man, has authoritative power over *her*, and that she is in fact powerless in the current situation. This, of course, is only one example of how Klimt's equivocal style allows the viewer to read his paintings in multiple ways, leaving much to the viewer's imagination.

Moreover, Klimt's ambiguity is embedded in the most haunting aspect of the painting: the subject's facial expression. Sonja's penetrating gaze, reserved air and rigid posture may remind the viewer of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1865) – a self-possessed woman unavailable for the taking. There is, however, a key difference between Klimt's *Sonja Knips* and Manet's *Olympia*. While *Olympia*'s viewers are excluded from her visual space, Sonja's viewers are free to enter hers if they so choose. Viewers may interpret Sonja's portrait in such a way by observing the air of indifference the lady gives off through her open body position and reserved stare. Rather than push the viewer away with a deathly stare like *Olympia*'s, Sonja demonstrates a certain amount of vulnerability, as though she is at the mercy of the viewer's gaze.

Another key difference is the position of both of the women's left hands: *Olympia* uses hers to rigidly cover her genitals, while Sonja grips the arm of her chair. While both hand positions may suggest that the women have ownership over their sexualities, *Olympia*'s is more forceful and direct, giving the viewer a sense that she has control over her body. In contrast, Sonja's grip appears to be more temporary, and may again be related to the idea that she is about to stand up at any moment. This comparison shows that although *Sonja Knips* may be read as a painting that empowers the female subject, the work may also be read as condescending in nature.

In his essay, Frodl asserts: "Klimt's large female portraits are contradictory in themselves and in complete accordance with his art's two-sidedness."<sup>8</sup> Frodl goes on to claim that a "dualism between reality and identity" can be found in many of Klimt's works. This duality is clearly present in Klimt's *Sonja Knips*: the reality of the subject's position in society as a female is juxtaposed with the uncertain identity of the *real* Sonja Knips.



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Moreover, *Sonja Knips* exemplifies the ambiguous nature of Klimt's style as a whole, as it teeters between an empowering representation of a bourgeois woman, and a demeaning snapshot of a woman trapped in her subordinate position in society. Tobias G. Natter supports this idea in his essay, "Portrait of Sonja Knips": "[...] Sonja Knips seems to personify the essence of bourgeois order and, at the same time, to be harassed by constraints and subliminal eroticism."<sup>9</sup> As a result, the viewer is confronted with a double-reading of the portrait – one that at once recognizes Sonja to be the sole possessor of her identity as well as subject to the male-dominated society she inhabits.

### *The Seductive Nude: Danaë*

Klimt's *Danaë* (1907) (Fig. 2) also offers the viewer the possibility of constructing a double reading of the female subject as both in possession of her sexuality and a victim of 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal norms. In this painting, Klimt depicts female sexual pleasure through the image of a foreshortened female nude in the fetal position. According to traditional Greek myth, Danaë was locked in a bronze tower by her father, King Acrisius of Argos, in his efforts to circumvent an oracle foretelling his death by his daughter's future son.<sup>10</sup> However, Zeus, who greatly admired the girl for her charms, transformed himself into a golden rain shower in order to impregnate Danaë as she slept.<sup>11</sup> In his painting, Klimt captures the moment when young Danaë is being penetrated by Zeus' rain shower.

In this painting, Klimt uses content and perspective in a way that allows for a double reading of the painting: as both a celebration of female sexuality and a voyeuristic depiction of female pleasure. In his "The Eternal Feminine," Whitford identifies the figure of *Danaë* as "passive" in her experience of sexual intercourse.<sup>12</sup> However, I argue that asserting this is to disregard an important detail in the painting: the woman's clawed right hand. By portraying Danaë's fingertips as digging into her right breast, Klimt suggests that she is participating in the sexual experience depicted in the painting. This rigid motion is not the least "passive" in nature, as it denotes not only a reaction, but also a kind of affirmation to what is taking place in the scene – whether conscious or unconscious. Moreover, Danaë's parted lips and relaxed facial expression also convey an affirmative reaction to Zeus' penetration. Furthermore, Danaë's rippled hair falling over her left shoulder gives the viewer the sense that a kind of orgasmic vibration is taking over the young woman's body, again suggesting that she is receptive to the sexual pleasure she is experiencing. Interestingly, Danaë's facial expression



and overall experience of pleasure may be compared to Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*. In fact, Danaë and Theresa experience pleasure from the same source: the divine. However, given Danaë's nude body and position, Klimt's painting is more directly associated to sexual pleasure, whereas Bernini's Theresa is reacting to her affinity with the Catholic God. By representing Danaë as actively engaging in a sexual experience, Klimt is perhaps attempting to raise her status from a submissive woman to a woman in full possession of her sexuality and eroticism.

Nevertheless, Klimt's intent remains ambivalent. Despite Danaë's receptivity, the viewer cannot help but experience the same feeling of "voyeurism" that he or she might feel while looking at the female subject in Degas' *The Tub*. In both works, the artists' use of perspective specifically enhances the feeling of voyeurism. Moreover, Klimt's use of allegory and mythical subjects alone reveals the equivocal nature of his works. Klimt used allegory and myth for a number of his paintings, including *Pallas Athena*, *Leda*, *Judith I*, and *Judith II*. Through the use of Greek myth in Danaë, Klimt, in a way, legitimizes his use of erotic portrayal by giving his female subject an identity associated to a specific narrative, rather than representing sensual pleasure for the sake of doing so. Whitford suggests that Klimt often uses classical allusion as a "respectable disguise" for the "fulfillment of a common male voyeuristic fantasy," as in *Water Serpents* (1904–07), in which two half-naked women sensually embrace one another.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, Klimt may be using the myth of Danaë to legitimize his portrayal of a woman experiencing sexual pleasure for male-viewing purposes. On the other hand, Klimt's use of recognizable female figures may also point to his desire to give legitimate identity to his subjects and highlight the importance of female sexuality through archetypal female figures. In this light, Klimt's *Danaë* may be read in two very different ways: as a legitimization of female sexuality or as a depiction of a woman as a sexual object. This ambiguity is also apparent in Klimt's *Judith I*, in which the Biblical figure of Judith is portrayed as a *femme fatale*.

#### *The Femme Fatale: Judith I*

In his painting *Judith I* (1901) (Fig. 3), Klimt depicts the character of Judith from the Old Testament, who piously saved her people from the Babylonian general Holofernes by bewitching him with her intellect and beauty.<sup>14</sup> This story, however, is not the one depicted in the painting. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Judith's story was reinterpreted: instead, Judith became the *femme fatale* who maliciously had sexual intercourse with Holofernes before decapitating him.<sup>15</sup> Klimt's representation of Judith is, like *Sonja*



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*Knips* and *Danaë*, ambiguous in nature. Eight years later, Klimt produced a second Judith, *Judith II* (1909), which many people have mistakenly referred to as Salome – another archetypal *femme fatale*. However, Schmidt argues: “Klimt’s *femme fatale* is not nearly so dangerous [as Salome]; rather, she is a modern woman, independent and ‘in control of her own eroticism.’”<sup>16</sup> In this way, Schmidt offers a first reading of *Judith I*: a liberated woman in possession of her sexuality.

Depicted with her lips parted and eyes half-closed, Judith’s facial expression may be interpreted as one of rapture, once again reminiscent of Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. Judith’s eroticism is also highlighted by her partially nude body, reminiscent of the effect Klimt’s nudes, such as *Danaë*, can have on the viewer. Just as *Danaë* may be construed as a portrayal of self-possessed female eroticism, *Judith I* may also be interpreted in a very similar way. Her intense experience of pleasure is depicted in much the same way Danaë’s is: as a feeling that has overtaken her entire body. The viewer may also detect the same engagement in the experience of sexual pleasure in *Judith I* as she or he can identify in *Danaë*. Rather than deny her experience, Judith embraces it and revels in the pleasure of it by allowing her face to express her erotic experience.

In contrast to *Danaë*, however, Klimt treats Judith’s eroticism as directly associated to the act of murder, perhaps suggesting that sexual gratification can be achieved through violence. In Alessandra Comini’s book *Gustav Klimt*, the author points to Klimt’s ability to accentuate the theme of decapitation by emphasizing Judith’s neck collar through ornament and décor.<sup>17</sup> This, along with the omnipresent head of Holofernes held in Judith’s hands, may create a sense of fear within the viewer, who may once again come to question Klimt’s intentions. Whitford suggests that in Klimt’s work “contemporary women are represented as witches, gorgons, and sphinxes in order to embody Klimt’s fears and desires.”<sup>18</sup> Whitford explains that in this way, Klimt “paradoxically [dresses his female figures] in theatrical costume in order that their true nature may be revealed.”<sup>19</sup> However, Judith’s “true nature,” like the true natures of *Sonja Knips* and *Danaë*, is equivocal. Whether she represents a self-possessed modern woman or simply a sexual object, Klimt gives the viewer the liberty to create his or her own interpretation.

### Conclusion

By primarily representing women in his works of art, Klimt neither enforces nor discourages the view of the independent, self-possessed modern woman. Rather, the artist allows for a double reading of his



works as representations of both the liberated woman and the submissive female trapped in a male-dominated society. Interestingly, Whitford asserts: "Klimt's ambivalent view of woman as idol on the one hand and as deadly predator on the other was widespread."<sup>20</sup> He explains that, due to the rise of the feminist movement at the turn of the century, "many men felt that their sexual identity was threatened by women's unprecedented demands for political and social emancipation."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it was perhaps a result of the social and political climate in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Vienna that Klimt chose to represent his female subjects in this contradictory way. However, regardless of his motivations, Klimt's work is significant for the fact that he calls attention to the ambiguity inherently present in works of art. Rather than project a specific message that is blatantly clear to all viewers, Klimt works with allegory, ornament, and the female subject to create art that may be read by the viewer in many ways. In conclusion, whether his true intent was to free women through his art or keep them within the bounds of Victorian society, one thing is clear: Klimt's equivocal style allows for multiple readings of his works – readings that ultimately reach far beyond notions of female liberation and containment.





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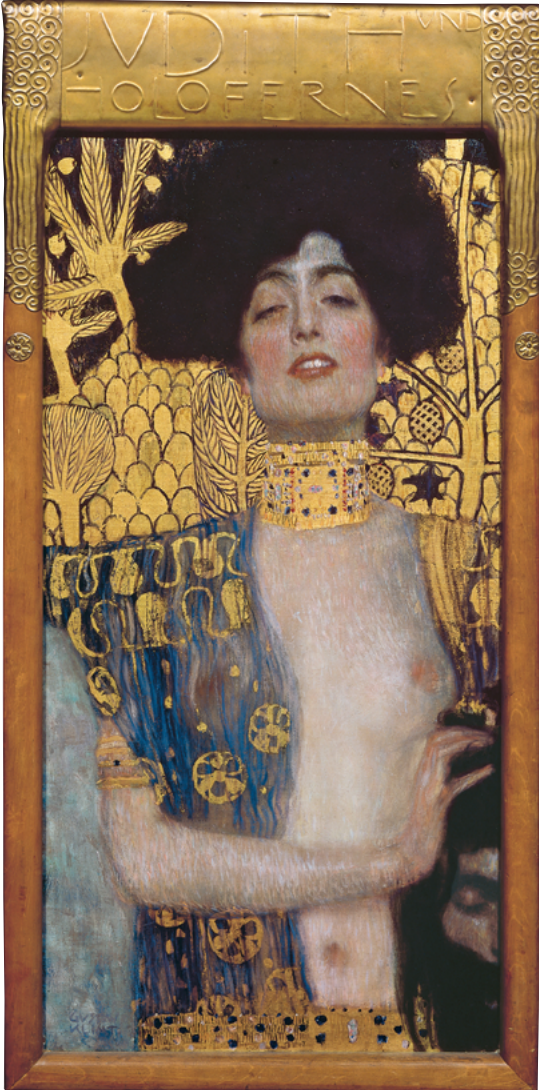
2



<sup>1</sup> Gustav Klimt  
*Sonja Knips*, 1897/1898  
Oil on canvas  
145 x 146 cm  
© Belvedere, Vienna

<sup>2</sup> Gustav Klimt,  
*Danae*, 1907/1908  
Oil on Canvas  
77 x 83 cm

<sup>3</sup> Gustav Klimt  
*Judith*, 1901  
Oil on canvas  
84 x 42 cm  
© Belvedere, Vienna



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Frank Whitford, "The Eternal Feminine," in *Klimt*. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1990), 162.
- <sup>2</sup> Lisa Fischer, "Gender Asymmetries in Viennese Modernism," in *Klimt's Women*, ed. Tobias G. Natter and Gerbert Frodl. (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 37.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Regine Schmidt, "Of Sweet Young Things and Femmes Fatales. Gustav Klimt and Women around 1900. A Path to Freedom," in *Klimt's Women*, ed. Tobias G. Natter and Gerbert Frodl. (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 31.
- <sup>5</sup> Jill Scott, "Public Debates and Private Jokes in Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*: Effeminate Aestheticism, Virile Masculinity, or Both?" in *Gender and Modernity in Central Europe: The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Its Legacy*, ed. Agatha Schwartz. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 33.
- <sup>6</sup> Gerbert Frodl, "Gustav Klimt- Painter between the Times," in *Klimt's Women*, ed. Tobias G. Natter and Gerbert Frodl. (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 12.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>9</sup> Tobias G. Natter, "Portrait of Sonja Knips," in *Klimt's Women*, ed. Tobias G. Natter and Gerbert Frodl. (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 84.
- <sup>10</sup> Pamela Gossin, "All Dançæ to the Stars': Nineteenth-Century Representations of Women in the Cosmos," *Victorian Studies* 40.1 (Autumn 1996): 67.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 68.
- <sup>12</sup> Whitford, "The Eternal Feminine," 162.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 163.
- <sup>14</sup> Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, "Judith," in *Klimt's Women*, ed. Tobias G. Natter and Gerbert Frodl. (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 220.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Scott, "Public Debates and Private Jokes in Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*," 33.
- <sup>17</sup> Alessandra Comini, *Gustav Klimt* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1975), 22.
- <sup>18</sup> Whitford, "The Eternal Feminine," 169.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.



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