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In Gustav Klimt's masterwork, the figure of Death gazes toward a vibrant patterning of figure and color which symbolizes, perhaps, not only life but resurrection.

The Grim Reaper

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Although inspired by his mother's death, Gustav Klimt's painting *Death and Life* is as much about life as death. The allegorical work depicts the Grim Reaper holding a club instead of the usual scythe or hourglass. His dark robes are covered with crosses symbolic of the Church, cemeteries, and death. He gazes across the canvas toward a vibrant patterning of figure and color which symbolizes, perhaps, not only life but resurrection. At least three generations, from infant to grandmother, are depicted with their limbs intertwining and overlapping. It may be possible for death to take individuals from life, but life as a whole will escape and continue to survive.

The motif of the dance of death coming to everyone, wealthy or poor, derives from a medieval print tradition.¹ Most of the figures have their eyes closed, perhaps in a dream state. This may be an influence of the writings of the artist's friend, Sigmund Freud. Klimt described this painting, which won first prize in the 1911 International Art Exhibition in Rome, as his most important figurative work.²

For some reason, Klimt reworked *Death and Life* in 1915 by changing the gold background to grey and adding ornaments and patterning to the figures of death and life.³ Perhaps he wanted to create a more somber overall tone and to increase the contrast between the figures.

Gustav Klimt was born the second of seven children in a poor family in Baumgarten, a suburb of Vienna. He showed significant artistic talent in school and a relative convinced his mother to let him, at the age of fourteen, take an examination that secured a place for him at the exclusive School of the Arts and Crafts in Vienna. He studied there for seven years along with his brother Ernst. His style at that time was hyper realistic.

In 1892, Klimt received a government commission from the Ministry of Culture and Education to decorate the Great Hall of the University on the subject of the theological virtues. He painted allegories for Philosophy, Jurisprudence, and Medicine, but these nude females were considered scandalous and he was incriminated for "pornography" and "excessive perversion." Private commissions during this time allowed him more artistic freedom. He became somewhat of a rebel by joining the Association of Austrian Visual Artists (better known as the Vienna Secession) which

provided young artists with regular opportunities to exhibit their work, brought the best foreign artists to Vienna, and published its own magazine, *Ver Sacrum*. The Vienna Secession played a foundational role in the development of Modernism by establishing a countercurrent against the official academic school and bourgeois conservatism of the time.⁴

Klimt was the dominant force in the art world from about 1900 until his death in 1918. He remained in Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which rivaled Paris and London as a cultural center with such luminaries as Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schönberg, and Stefan Zweig. Klimt lost interest in his first style, the Golden Style, with the beginning of Expressionism. It became necessary to have more varied and strong colors to allow the paintings to depict emotion. His influences were Edvard Munch, Pierre Bonnard, and Henri Matisse; on his travels to Paris he discovered the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and the Fauvists.

Klimt suffered a stroke while getting dressed on the morning of January 11, 1918. It paralyzed the right side of his body so that he could no longer paint. This had been one of his fears throughout his life. Less than a month later he died in the pneumonia epidemic in Vienna. The State provided a grave and an elaborate ceremony which was attended by national representatives. Obituaries credited him with not only reviving Viennese painting but also putting it on an international stage.

NOTES

1 Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, "Klimt's Death and Life," *Smarthistory* at *smarthistory.khanacademy.org/klimt-death-and-life.html* (accessed June 13, 2013).

2 "Gustav Klimt, *Death and Life*," Leopold Museum, *www.leopoldmuseum.org/en/leopoldcollection/masterpieces/41* (accessed June 13, 2013).

3 Julian Damy, "Gustav Klimt: His Life and Work," *iklimt.com* (accessed June 13, 2013).

4 "Gustav Klimt, *Death and Life*," The Leopold Museum.



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