

*Gustav*

**KLIMT**



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# His Life

“I am not interested in myself as a subject for painting, but in others, particularly women...”

Beautiful, sensuous and above all erotic, Gustav Klimt's paintings speak of a world of opulence and leisure, which seems eons away from the harsh, post-modern environment we live in now. The subjects he treats – allegories, portraits, landscapes and erotic figures – contain virtually no reference to external events, but strive rather to create a world where beauty, above everything else, is dominant.

His use of colour and pattern, profoundly influenced by the art of Japan, ancient Egypt, and Byzantine Ravenna, the flat, two-dimensional perspective of his paintings, and the frequently stylized quality of his images form an œuvre imbued with a profound sensuality and one where the figure of woman, above all, reigns supreme.

## Beginnings

Klimt's very first works brought him success at an unusually early age. He came from a poor family where his father, a goldsmith and engraver, could scarcely support his wife and family of seven children. Gustav, born in 1862, obtained a state grant to study at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (the Vienna School of Art) at the age of 14. His talents as a draughtsman and painter were quickly noticed, and in 1879 he formed the *Künstlerkompagnie* (Artists' Company) with his brother Ernst and another student, Franz Matsch.

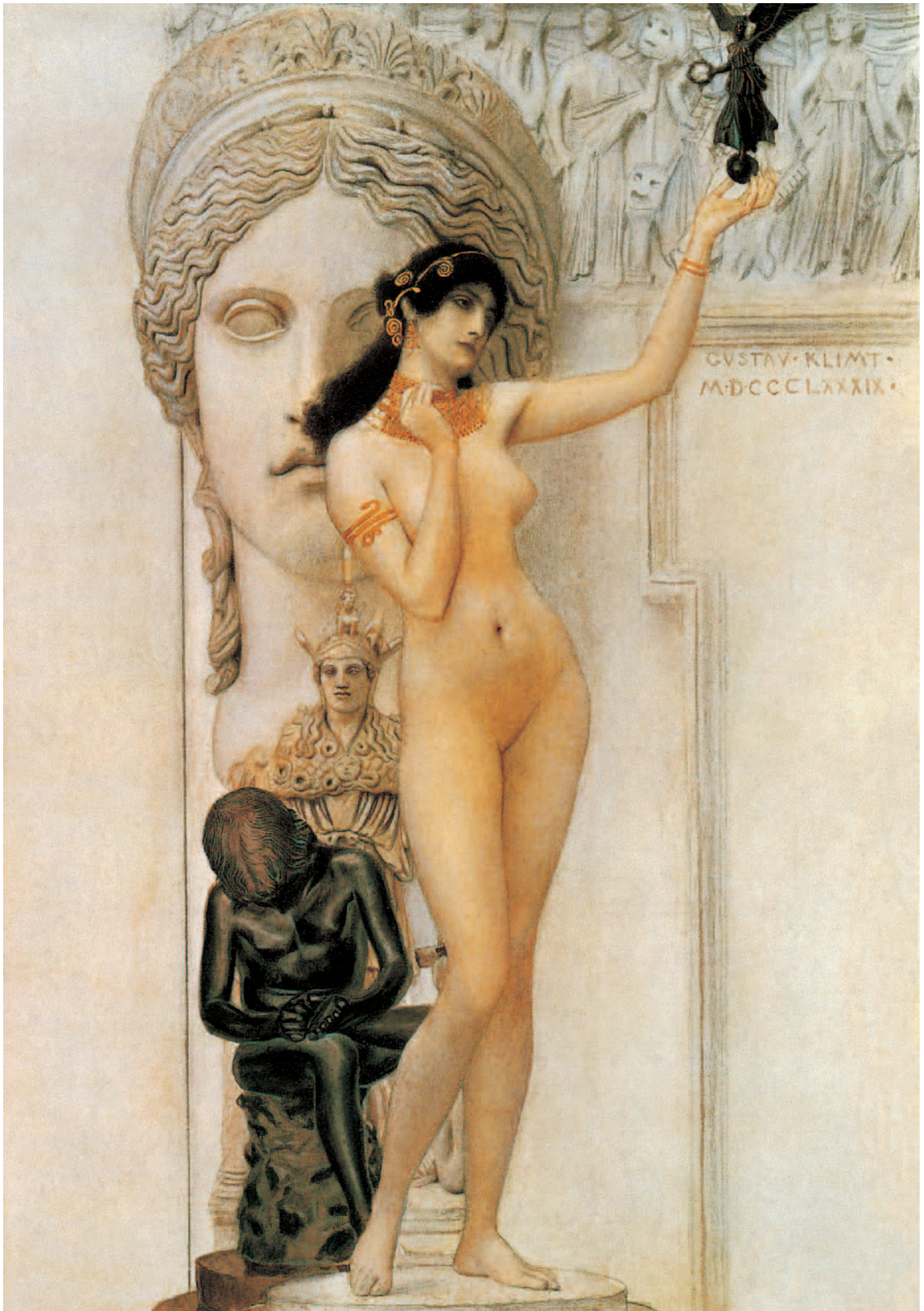
The latter part of the nineteenth century was a period of great architectural activity in Vienna. In 1857, the Emperor Franz Joseph had ordered the destruction of the fortifications that had surrounded the medieval city centre. The Ringstrasse was the result, a budding new district with magnificent buildings and beautiful parks, all paid for by public expenses. This meant therefore, that the young Klimt and his partners had ample opportunities to show their talents and they received early commissions to contribute to the decorations for the pageant organized to celebrate the silver wedding of the Emperor Franz Joseph and the Empress Elisabeth. In the following year, they were commissioned to produce a ceiling painting for the Thermal Baths in Carlsbad. Other public commissions soon followed.

When one examines his early works, such as *Fable* (p.55), *Idyll* (p.57), or indeed one of Klimt's earliest drawings, *Male Nude Walking Facing Right* (p.4), it is clear that he is a painter of great skill and promise, but remains entirely within the accepted contemporary norms in his depiction of academic and allegorical subjects. The women depicted in *Fable* and *Idyll* are plump, adroitly draped in plain clothing, their hair smoothly pulled back behind the neck. Neither would look out of place in the eighteenth or even seventeenth century. Their sensuality is matronly, motherly, their nudity decorous rather than exciting.

In the past, pubic hair had – if this part of the body was revealed at all – traditionally been glossed over into a smooth and non-threatening 'v' reminiscent of modern-day children's dolls. Many early medieval or Renaissance paintings which had shown even the suggestion of male or female genitalia had suffered the absurd addition of a floating fig leaf painted in by later, more prudish, types. But even as early as 1896, Klimt had begun to be more explicit in the way he chose to depict the human figure.

1. *Male Nude Walking Facing Right*,  
1877-79  
pencil, 43 x 24 cm.







2. *Allegory of "Sculpture"*, 1889.  
pencil and watercolour,  
44 x 30 cm,  
Historisches Museum, Vienna.

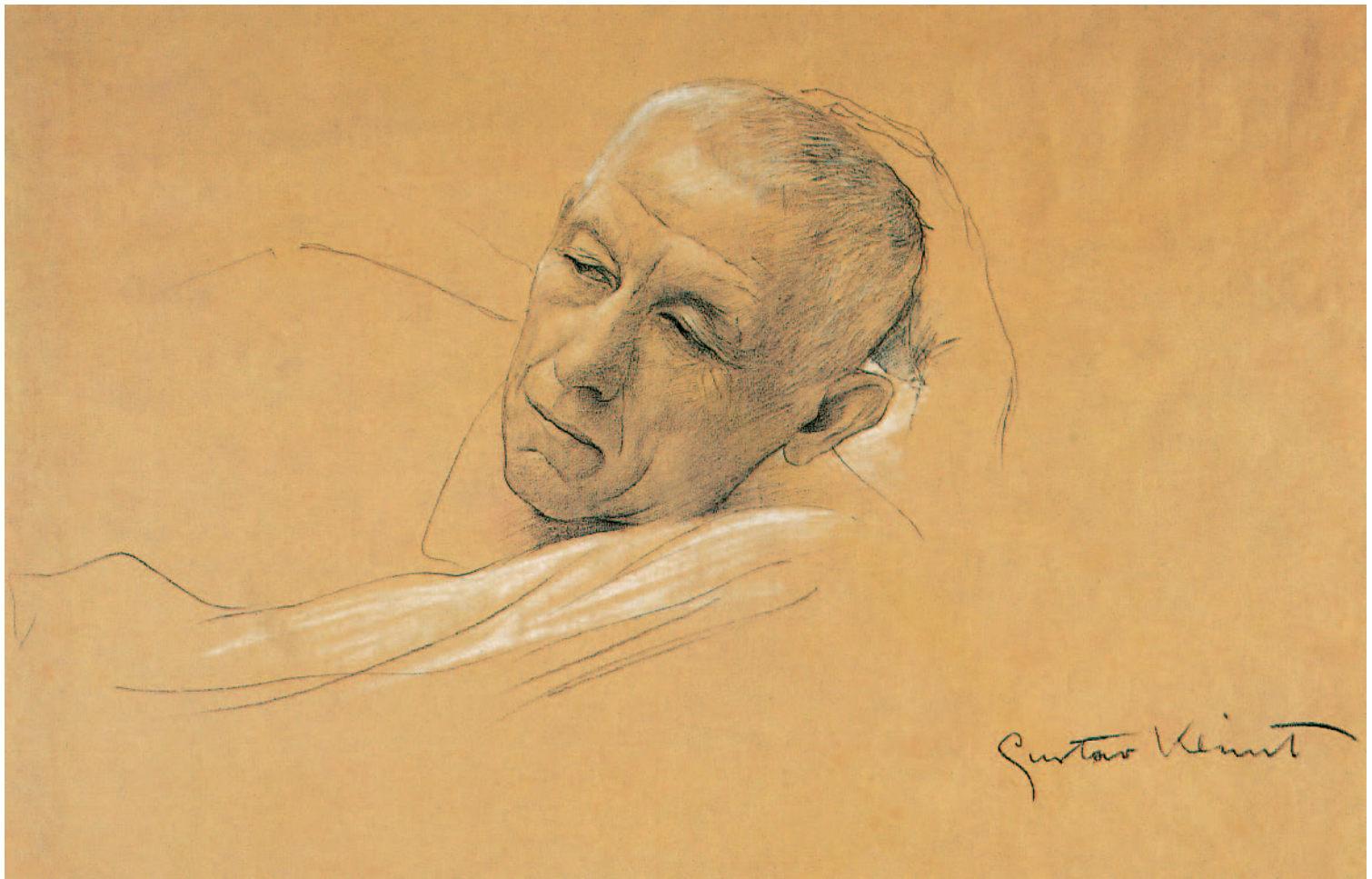
3. *Fairy Tale*, 1884  
black pencil, ink and lavish,  
63.9 x 34.3 cm,  
Historisches Museum, Vienna.





4. *The Death of Juliet*, 1886  
black pencil with white  
highlights, 27.6 x 42.4 cm,  
Graphische Sammlung  
Albertina, Vienna.





5. *Man's Head Lying Down*, (Painting  
from the ceiling of The Imperial  
Venetian Theatre), 1886-1888  
black chalk, white highlights,  
28 x 43 cm,  
Graphische Sammlung  
Albertina, Vienna.

There is, for example, an interesting difference between the final drawing for *Sculpture* and the painting itself. In the drawing we already see the trademark loose, wild, dark hair and the faintest traces of pubic hair. The woman gazes directly at the viewer, standing as if caught naked in her bedroom doorway, summoning the viewer to caress her. The painting, by contrast, has reverted to a more traditional style: gone is the frontal stance, with the reappearance of the classical sculptural pose. Up goes the hair and the pubic hair disappears.

## Secession

These early commissions established Klimt as a successful and prominent artist. Following the death of his father and brother Ernst in 1892, there seems to have been a distinct cooling-off in the working relationship between Klimt and Matsch as Klimt began to explore more adventurous subjects.

In 1894, Matsch moved out of their shared studio, and in 1897 Klimt, together with his closest friends, resigned from the *Künstlerhausgenossenschaft* (the Co-operative Society of Austrian Artists) to form a new movement known as the Secession, of which he was immediately elected president.

The Secession was a great success, holding both a first and a second exhibition in 1898. The movement made enough money to commission their very own building, designed for them by the architect Joseph Maria Olbrich. Above the entrance was their motto: "To each age its art, to art its freedom". The Secession not only came to represent the best of Austrian art, but was also successful in the bringing together of Viennese-French Impressionist and Belgian Naturalist works, which had never before been seen by the Austrian public.

Klimt was undoubtedly the central figure in this young and dynamic movement, but his success as a modern artist went hand in hand with the loss of his status as an accepted and established painter.

As he moved away from his traditional beginnings, he soon found himself at the centre of a series of scandals, which were to change his entire career.

## Scandal

In 1894, Klimt and Matsch had received a commission to produce a series of paintings for the University of Vienna. The subjects Klimt was assigned were Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence. The nature of the commission can easily be imagined: the university would be expecting a series of dignified, formal paintings in classical style depicting the wisdom of philosophers, the healing virtues of medicine, and doubtless a statuesque blindfolded female figure holding a pair of scales and representing justice.

What they got, several years and much hard work later, caused such a scandal that Klimt eventually repaid the advances he had received and took the paintings back.

Despite the fact that on its first showing in Paris at the World Fair in 1900 *Philosophy* won him the gold medal, the Viennese were not of the same opinion as the French as to the painting's merits.

6. *Portrait of a Woman*, c. 1894  
oil on wood, 39 x 23 cm,  
Kunsthistorisches Museum,  
Vienna.









7. *After the Rain*, 1899  
oil on canvas, 80 x 40 cm,  
Österreichische Galerie, Vienna.

8. *Water Sprites (Silver Fishes)*, 1899  
oil on canvas, 82 x 52 cm,  
Kunstsammlung Bank Austria  
AG, Vienna.









9. *Music*, 1901  
lithography.





The first appearance of the unfinished *Medicine* in the following year caused even greater controversy. It is difficult to fathom precisely what Klimt meant to say about medicine in this painting.

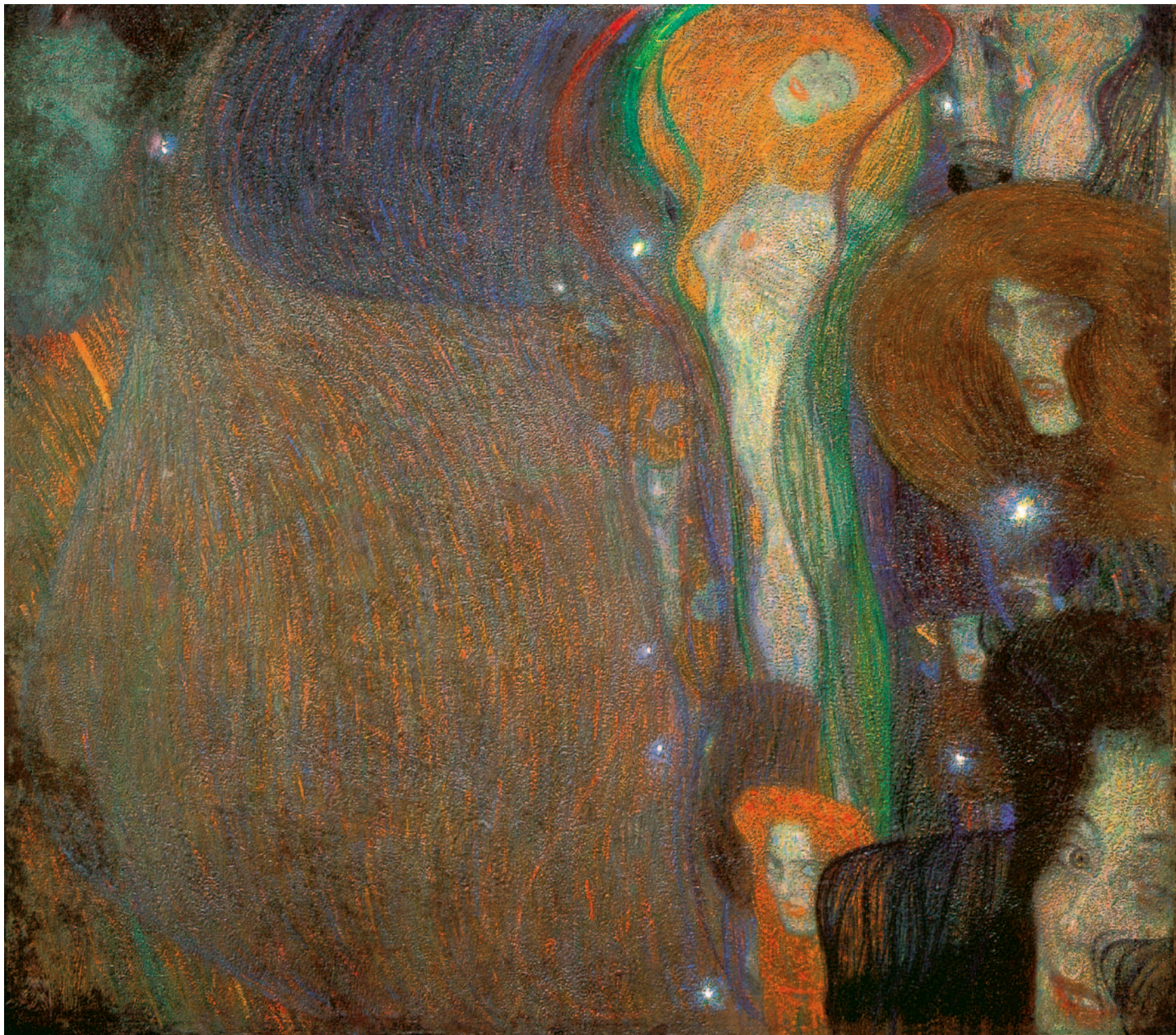
The vision is chaotic, almost hellish. Its skulls, wrinkled elderly figures and mass of human bodies speak of human suffering, not of its cure. The viewer's eyes are drawn inevitably to the two striking female figures at the bottom and top left of the painting. Clearly the figure at the bottom represents *Medicine* itself as the traditional symbol of the serpent suggests, but rather this art nouveau woman, adorned in gold, looks more like a priestess likely to sacrifice a sick person than to heal them. The naked woman at the top of the picture is remarkable for the dynamic abandonment of her pose. Our eyes are inevitably drawn to the woman's groin as she flings out her arms in a parody of crucifixion.

The sketch for the figure shows very clearly how bold and excellent a craftsman Klimt was: the heavy line and subtle shading lead our eyes firmly to the woman's pubic hair. Interestingly though, in the sketch the woman looks as if she may have posed lying down or leaning against something, whereas in the painting she is standing precariously unsupported, as if about to fall.

10. *Two Girls with Oleander*, 1890  
oil on canvas, 55 x 128.5 cm,  
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford  
(Connecticut).

Both these and the other female figures around them represent a complete departure from the rotund, comfortable women of the traditional nineteenth-century academic style. Klimt's women are long-haired, slender, lithe, and possess a sexual awareness that is both alluring and almost threatening in its directness.





11. *Will-o'-the-Wisp*, 1903  
oil on canvas, 52 x 60 cm,  
private collection.