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ART REVIEW

'Klimt vs. Klimt: The Man of Contradictions' Review: Exploring an Art-Nouveau Master Online

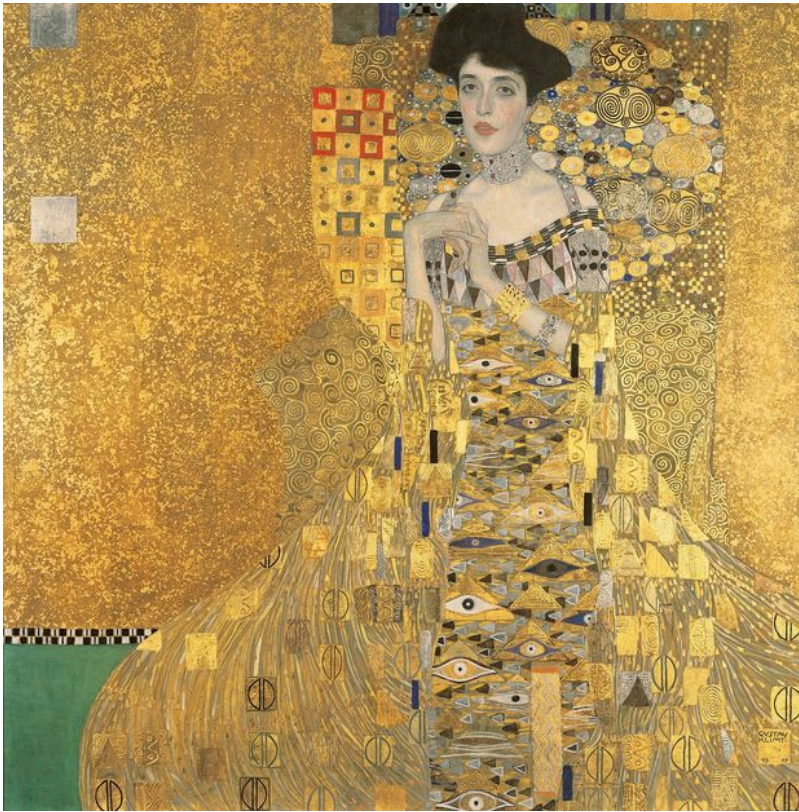
Google Arts & Culture's recently launched online hub offers a look at the Austrian artist that would be impossible in a traditional museum setting.

By Jane Kallir

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The digitization of the art world is in full swing, given a hefty push by the Covid-19 pandemic. Arts professionals accustomed to dealing with traditional mediums, such as painting, struggle to make their material intelligible to digital natives. While digital content should ideally serve as a teaching tool that leads viewers back to the original artwork, the two modes of communication are not always compatible. The dazzle of the newer media can overwhelm the smaller, quieter art of earlier times, as is the case with the two immersive Van Gogh experiences now on view in New York. Such presentations function as autonomous entertainments, effectively superseding their sources.

Google Arts & Culture recently launched an online hub, "[Klimt vs. Klimt: The Man of Contradictions](#)," devoted to the Austrian Art-Nouveau master Gustav Klimt (1862-1918). It is chock-a-block with features that will be familiar to anyone who spent time in lockdown browsing art-related websites: videos, of course; digital slide shows with seductive zoom features; a virtual Klimt exhibition that could never be duplicated in real life, both because of the cost and because some of the paintings no longer exist. As one would expect from Google, the Klimt site is technologically impressive and easy to navigate. High-resolution images were solicited from the world's foremost Klimt collections, including those at the Belvedere, Albertina, Leopold Museum and Wien Museum in Vienna and the Neue Galerie in New York. The project was overseen by Franz Smola, curator of 19th- and 20th-century art at the Belvedere. The stories that accompany the artworks were for the most part scripted by the Belvedere, or by the institution responsible for the visuals.



Gustav Klimt, 'Adele Bloch Bauer I' (1903)

PHOTO: NEUE GALERIE

At first glance, the title “Klimt vs. Klimt” appears misleading, suggesting an internal psychological conflict that, so far as we know, was not characteristic of the artist. But the clickbait-y premise successfully encourages those familiar only with Klimt’s most famous canvas, “The Kiss” (1907-08), to set aside their preconceptions. The subtitle, “Man of Contradictions,” hits closer to the mark. The viewer is guided through a series of dichotomies—feminism/misogyny, tradition/modernity, poverty/affluence, glitter/doom—that have long preoccupied serious Klimt scholars. Those who want to dive deeper may choose from pictorial essays on the artist’s best- and least-known works, his drawings, his use of materials and color, his female “muses,” his relationships with other artists, his early work as a muralist, the Vienna Secession, his cats . . . on and on, seemingly ad infinitum.

According to Google Arts & Culture’s press release, the site comprises “120+ curated online exhibits” and over 700 visual “assets.” There are far more images, of far better quality, than could ever be accommodated in a printed book. Purists will certainly quibble over the occasional factual errors, the sensationalism and the translation glitches in some of the accompanying stories. (For example, Klimt’s paintings were never “banned” as pornographic, and he was not, in his early years, an “interior decorator” but rather a highly acclaimed muralist.) Nonetheless, the texts are more than adequate. While it is to

be hoped that “Klimt vs. Klimt” will inspire viewers to visit the featured museum collections in person, the Google Arts & Culture hub provides a meaningful substitute for those who cannot do so.



‘Faculty Paintings’ exhibited at the Austrian National Library in 1928

PHOTO: GOOGLE ARTS & CULTURE

There is, however, one major problem with “Klimt vs. Klimt”: its treatment of the artist’s lost “Faculty Paintings” (usually referred to in English as the “University Paintings”). These three monumental canvases, originally commissioned for the University of Vienna and depicting the faculties of “Philosophy,” “Medicine” and “Jurisprudence,” belonged to the Jewish collectors August and Serena Lederer. The paintings’ destruction during World War II resulted from the persecution of the Lederers and the looting of their extensive collection by the Nazis. Glossing over this part of the story, the background text provided by the Austrian National Library mentions in passing that Serena Lederer was “expropriated” by the National Socialists, while stressing that the Klimts were sent to the remote Schloss Immendorf to protect them from Allied bombing. In the closing days of the war, retreating German troops sabotaged the castle, immolating the “Faculty Paintings” along with a number of other Klimts owned by the Lederer family. We know the “Faculty Paintings” only from black-and-white reproductions and a single color reproduction, depicting a detail from “Medicine.”

Google Arts & Culture’s attempt to colorize the “Faculty Paintings” using machine learning is both the most sensational and the most ill-conceived feature of “Klimt vs. Klimt.” To start off, Mr. Smola scoured contemporary accounts for descriptions of the paintings’ colors, and then attempted to find those colors in extant Klimt works. But the

matches were at best educated guesses, and there were just 80 pertinent paintings to choose from. Google Arts & Culture's AI team tells us that "an algorithm needs 5,000 images to learn one object." So the team melded Mr. Smola's color hypotheses with an algorithm comprising input from one million real objects, and another based on the roughly nine million artworks in Google Arts & Culture's database. The result is a trio of lurid color mashups completely lacking in the nuanced tonal transitions that are the hallmark of Klimt's style. It's a fancy parlor trick that, at best, tells us little about Klimt and, at worst, misrepresents his achievement.

If "Klimt vs. Klimt," on the whole, demonstrates the ability of digital technology to make art accessible on a heretofore unimaginable scale, the colorization project illustrates the danger of allowing AI to write art history.

—*Ms. Kallir, president of the Kallir Research Institute in New York, co-curated the 2015 exhibition "The Women of Klimt, Schiele and Kokoschka" for the Belvedere museum in Vienna.*

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