

Strand 2. Art Nouveau and Politics in the Dawn of Globalisation

Japanese Aesthetics and Gustav Klimt: In Pursuit of a New Voice

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Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century, Japonisme—an artistic *lingua franca*—became one of the most organic, overarching components of Gustav Klimt's new art. This paper draws parallels between Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Sonja Knips* and Itō Jakuchū's print *Golden Pheasant and Bamboo in Snow*. The discovery of an unexpectedly close dialogue between Klimt and Jakuchū and the striking similarity of the formal language of the two works supports the paper's thesis that Itō Jakuchū's print is the primary source of influence behind the conception and execution of the portrait and, by extension, that Klimt's engagement with Japanese stimuli is one of the main engines behind his creative pursuit, starting at the end of the 1890s. This discovery challenges preconceived notions and existing concepts and illustrates the impossibility of understanding Klimt's heritage comprehensively and adequately without examining the role of Japonisme in it.

Keywords: Gustav Klimt, Japonisme, Itō Jakuchū, the Vienna Secession, ukiyo-e prints.

In the wake of the World Fair of 1873 in Vienna, a strong wave of Japonisme permanently reshaped the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. According to Hermann Bahr, the Viennese encountered the presence of “Japonisme in all the arts,” which were “impossible to understand without bearing in mind the influence of Japanese art.”¹ Japonisme indeed became a *Zeitgeist* in *fin de siècle* Vienna and, in the visual arts, Gustav Klimt was its main advocate.

In 1897, a group of young Austrian artists, inspired by the French Impressionists, divorced themselves from the old bulwark of the *Künstlerhaus Wien* and established the Vienna Secession. Gustav Klimt was one of the main protagonists of this movement and accordingly became the first President of the group. Tellingly, in the same year, the artist started to work on one of his most significant paintings, *Portrait of Sonja Knips* (1898; Fig. 1), which inaugurates not only Klimt’s total conversion to Japonisme but also marks some prominent stylistic changes. Klimt highly valued the portrait and used every opportunity to exhibit it at home and abroad. Thus, after its presentation in Vienna at the emblematic II Secession exhibition in 1898,² the painting frequently was shown abroad. In 1899, eager to demonstrate his experimentation with Japanese art, Klimt exhibited *Portrait of Sonja Knips* in London, and in 1900 at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, etc.³ However, critics at home and abroad failed to recognize his witty and ingenious experimentations with Japanese aesthetics. Nevertheless, scholars hailed this portrait as a milestone in Klimt’s *oeuvre* from the outset. Despite the fact, that *Portrait of Sonja Knips* has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, scholars began to associate it with Japonisme only very re-

¹ Quoted in Klaus BERGER, *Japonisme in Western Painting, from Whistler to Matisse* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 345.

This paper is a part of a future monograph on Japonisme in Klimt’s art. Due to space constraints, the analyses of the literature, Klimt’s early engagement with Japanese stimuli as well as some analyses of *Portrait of Sonja Knips* have been shortened or omitted.

² The exhibition was held in the newly opened “residence” of the Secession—a graceful building with a golden dome-like semi-sphere at the top, designed by architect Joseph Maria Olbrich, as a symbol of new art.

³ Elizabeth Clegg emphasizes that the “participation in an especially ambitious international exhibition in Paris” was a step of special significance for Klimt and it is emblematic that he chose *Portrait of Sonja Knips* to represent his art before the international audience for the first time. Elizabeth CLEGG, “Austrian Art’ on the Move,” in Tobias G. Natter and Christoph Grunenberg, eds., *Gustav Klimt: Painting, Design and Modern Life*, London, Tate Publishing, 2008, p. 53.

cently. Von Miller⁴ and Bisanz-Prakken⁵ were also among the first to consider the Japanese influences on the portrait. Later, Johannes Wieninger⁶ as well as Jane Rogoyska and Patrick Bade,⁷ also firmly steer the analysis of the portrait toward the Far East. Although by now the presence of Japanese influences on Klimt's *oeuvre*—including *Portrait of Sonja Knips*—has become an unchallenged precept, little has been done to explain why, when, and how Klimt developed his deep interest in Japanese art or identify sources of inspiration for particular works of art. In this regard, Klaus Berger's evaluation made in the early 1980s is still germane: "in general terms, the extensive literature on his [Klimt's] work sometimes acknowledges the existence of a Far Eastern 'stimulus,' but this has yet to be traced in detail."⁸ This study strives not only to fill the gap but also to illustrate the impossibility of understanding the roots of, and reasons for, some seminal stylistic changes that occurred at the end of the 1890s without considering the role of Japanese stimuli in such changes. The paper argues that the primary source of inspiration during conception and execution of the portrait was Itō Jakuchū's print *Golden Pheasant and Bamboo in Snow* (1771; Fig. 2). Prior to this study, no one had pointed out any parallels between the two works.

Stefan Zweig in *The World of Yesterday*—his autobiography, which serves as a “biography” of the epoch—characterizes the old Austro-Hungarian Empire as “a State without ambitions, which hoped to preserve itself unharmed in the European domain solely by opposing all radical changes.”⁹ Echoing Zweig, Hermann Bahr eloquently voices a concern of many Viennese intellectuals: “Nothing happens here, absolutely nothing... The future is blooming all around us;

⁴ Manu von MILLER, “Embracing Modernism. Gustav Klimt and Sonia Knips,” in Renée Price, ed., *Gustav Klimt: The Ronald S. Lauder and Serge Sabarsky Collections*, New York, Neue Galerie, Prestel, 2007, p. 197.

⁵ Marian BISANZ-PRAKKEN, *Gustav Klimt: The Magic of Line*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012, p. 132.

⁶ Johannes WIENINGER, “Gustav Klimt and the Art of East Asia,” in Jane Kallir and Alfred Weidinger, eds., *Gustav Klimt in Search of the “Total Artwork,”* Munchen, Prestel, 2009, pp. 53-4.

⁷ Jane ROGOYSKA and Patrick BADE, *Gustav Klimt*, New York, Parkstone Press International, 2011, p. 91.

⁸ K. BERGER, *Japonisme...*, pp. 297-8.

⁹ Stefan ZWEIG, *The World of Yesterday*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1964, p. 33.



but we are still rooted in the past.”¹⁰ However, at the beginning of the 1870s, amid the heavy clouds of agony and despair, one unexpected and uncontrollable force was on its way to the banks of the Danube—the arrival of the Japanese delegation for the World Fair of 1873.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the Japanese viewed their participation in the *Weltausstellung* in Vienna as a unique opportunity to demonstrate Japan’s potential. Accordingly, the Meiji government dedicated its best resources and enormous efforts to the preparations for this event. Doshin Sato points out that the Japanese hired Gottfried Wagener, a German intellectual and scientist, to select the most important and powerful items¹¹ for the Exhibition and “Wagener’s plan to take advantage of Japonisme and the interest in the exotic hit the bull’s-eye.” Therefore, the enormous success of the Japanese exhibition in Vienna was “the result of studying the Westerner’s eye and interest ahead of time and making thorough preparations to meet Western taste.”¹² In consequence, some two hundred Japanese products received numerous awards and prizes, including five prizes-of-honor, while the Americans, by comparison, left Vienna with only two.¹³ Tayfun Belgin emphasizes that, after the *Weltausstellung*, “a market for Japanese products quickly arose in Austria: Japan was the word on everyone’s lips.”¹⁴ Peter Pantzer states that “in its broadest sense Japonisme was encountered in almost every living room.” Furthermore, the scholar underscores that “out of this emerged, in its own radical and independent potency, the art of the Viennese Secession, or of a Gustav Klimt, and went on to attain an overriding significance;

¹⁰ Quoted in Peter VERGO, *Art in Vienna, 1898-1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and Their Contemporaries*, London, Phaidon, 1993, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ Peter PANTZER, “Japonisme in Austria or: Art Knows no Boundaries,” in Peter Pantzer and Johannes Wieninger, eds, *Verborgene Impressionen. Japonismus in Wien 1870–1930*, Wien, Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, 1990, p. 25.

¹² Doshin SATO, *Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State: The Politics of Beauty*, trans. by Hiroshi Nara, Los Angeles, The Getty Research Institute, 2011, pp. 109-111.

¹³ P. PANTZER, “Japonisme...., p. 26.

¹⁴ Tayfun BELGIN, “Viennese Japonisme: From the Figured-Perspective to the Ornamental-Extensive Style” in Gregory Irvine, ed. *Japonisme and the Rise of the Modern Art Movement: The Arts of the Meiji Period: The Khalili Collection*, New York, Thames & Hudson, 2013, p. 91.



all this came from the same soil and humus, the intensive cultivation of the fashion for things Japanese.”¹⁵

It is “through these world exhibitions,” as Sato underscores, “the rage for Japanese art—Japonisme—would explode and sweep the West. The Vienna International Exhibition was held just when enthusiasm was rising (rapidly).”¹⁶ Shortly after the *Weltausstellung*, Hans Makart, the most celebrated Viennese artist of his time, echoing the Impressionists, inaugurated the advent of Japonisme into the Austrian visual arts with his *Die Japanerin* (1875): a half-naked beauty, dressed in a kimono and Japanese pins in her hair. The Viennese, following the artists and art connoisseurs in Paris and London, became keen collectors of Japanese prints. However, entering the full-blown race for Japanese artifacts a few decades later, the Viennese undertook this pursuit with unmatched enthusiasm. As a result, at the beginning of the twentieth century Vienna had one of the largest collections of *ukiyo-e* in the world outside of Japan. Following the *Weltausstellung*, the *Österreichisches Museum für Künste und Industrie* began collecting Japanese art and in 1897 exhibited twenty-seven *ukiyo-e* prints to the public.¹⁷ In other words, *fin de siècle* Vienna was incurably “infected” with Japonisme and Klimt could not have avoided its overwhelming avalanche-like impact.

It is well known that Gustav Klimt had a large collection of Chinese and Japanese art. In the winter of 1918, shortly after Klimt’s death, the young Viennese artist Egon Schiele wrote a letter-article, “Klimt’s Generosity of Spirit Was Genuine,” in which he describes in detail the master’s dwelling and collection: “...the sitting room, [was] furnished with a square table in the middle and a large number of Japanese prints covering the walls...and from there into another room whose wall was entirely covered by a huge wardrobe, which held his marvelous collection of Chinese and Japanese robes.”¹⁸ Schiele’s comment indicates that Klimt’s interest in collecting

¹⁵ P. PANTZER, “Japonisme...,” pp. 23-24.

¹⁶ D. SATO, *Modern Japanese...*, p. 111. Regarding the immense effect of the World Fair of 1873 on the Danube capital, see *Experiment Metropole 1873: Wien und die Weltausstellung*, Wien, Wien Museum, 2014.

¹⁷ K. BERGER, *Japonisme...*, p. 246.

¹⁸ Quoted in Serge SABARSKY, *Gustav Klimt: Drawings*, London, G. Fraser, 1983, p. 15.

was very serious and his Japanese paraphernalia was extensive. Unfortunately, after Klimt's death, his collection was not preserved intact. Verena Traeger, who is researching the content and fate of Klimt's collection, points out that Emilie Flöge, the artist's life-long friend, kept a large portion of Klimt's collection in her apartment in Vienna, which "was gutted by fire in the last days of the war in 1945" and, as she underscores, "the precise losses... can no longer be determined today."¹⁹ Thus, tracing the influence of Japanese art on Klimt's *oeuvre* is a very difficult endeavor since his collection was neither recorded nor preserved. Moreover, Klimt left behind no written letters or other documentation about his art or collection. Consequently, scholars face great uncertainty concerning Klimt's heritage. It is difficult and perhaps even impossible to find answers to many questions, especially regarding the artist's collection, which vanished in the calamities of World War II. Such ambiguities are to a high degree responsible for the scarcity of research on Japonisme in Klimt's art. This situation leaves scholars with only two choices: first, keep the status quo and treat the presence of Japonisme in Klimt's art as unimportant and accidental features; or, follow Klimt's advice and scrutinize his art for possible sources of influence. Here, we may refer to a very short letter—the only letter in which Klimt discusses his art—that states: "Whoever wants to know something about me—as an artist, the only notable thing—ought to look carefully at my pictures and try to see in them what I am and what I want to do."²⁰

Klimt was notoriously inquisitive and receptive regarding the diverse formal experimentation that captured the European visual landscape in the second part of the nineteenth century, particularly the integration of various elements of Japonisme by Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Undoubtedly, this inquisitiveness stimulated his own exploration of Japanese aesthetics. Johannes Wieninger points out that Klimt's first engagement with Japanese art occurred in the early 1890s, pointing out that the border of the first *Portrait of Emilie Flöge* "with cherry blossoms on a golden background, first shows Japanese motifs." However, Klimt's interest in Japanese art was dramatically expedited after two tragic personal events, which occurred in 1892

¹⁹ Verena TRAEGER, "Klimt as a Collector," in Tobias G. Natter, Franz Smola and Peter Weinhäupl, eds., *Klimt: Up Close and Personal: Paintings, Letters, Insights*, Wien, Brandstätter, 2012, pp. 108-125.

²⁰ Quoted in Frank WHITFORD, *Klimt*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 18.

and precipitated a profound change in his art. That year, within several months Klimt had lost the two most important people in his life, his father and younger brother Ernst. Arguably, the loss of his brother was the most significant for Gustav, since they were extremely close. They studied and worked together and shared many professional plans and dreams. Recall that, at the end of the 1880s, Gustav and Ernst Klimt and their mutual friend Franz Matsch organized the *Künstlercompagnie* (the Company of Artists) which, as Frank Whitford emphasizes, at the time of Ernst's death was "enjoying the height of its success" and "had gained a reputation, extraordinary for such young painters, for work of high quality carried out at speed and always to the full satisfaction of the client."²¹ Scholars have noted that Klimt "experienced a creative crisis" during the long period of recuperation after 1892, was unable to finish any serious project, and produced only a very limited number of works.²² The unexpected and uninvited "freedom" turned into a long and exhausting period of anxiety as well as hard intellectual self-examination. Klimt had to sort out numerous existential questions during that grim period and the agonizing search for answers inevitably penetrated his art. The poetic idealism of his early works was transformed into the mysterious presence of an Unknown, as a *memento mori*, an allusion to his personal tragedies. Klimt's art became increasingly introverted, deeply intellectual, engaging more with the fundamental philosophical issues of life and death (*Hope I* (1903), *Hope II* (1908), *The Three Ages of Woman* (1905)), the role of talent in a world populated by dark and brutal "hostile forces" (*The Beethoven Frieze*, (1902)), the essence of love (*The Kiss* (1908)), the endless struggles of humanity with injustice, death, and other calamities (the three University Paintings (late 1890s and early 1900s)), etc. In this light, it is not surprising that, as Peter Gorsen observes, "if the early Secessionists elevated the spirit of life to the only 'holy' principle, Klimt instead wanted to see art take into consideration the dissonant entanglement of life and death."²³

²¹ Ibid., p. 45.

²² Ibid., p. 46.

²³ Peter GORSEN, "Jugendstil and Symbolism" in Christian Brandstätter, ed., *Vienna 1900 and the Heroes of Modernism*, New York, Thames and Hudson, 2005, p. 41.



This highly dialectic approach to his artistic mission resulted in an intense pursuit of a new path in art. Out of that despair issued forth Klimt's unshakable desire to change his art and, by extension, the Viennese visual landscape. Klimt's attitude toward his mission as an artist became highly self-critical and self-conscious. During that time, Japanese art became one means by which he began to work himself out of this impasse. Tellingly, around that time Klimt started to wear "an indigo-blue gown resembling a kimono," as was noticed and described by his Japanese visitor, painter Kijiro Ohta.²⁴ This subtle and innocuous step, which some may regard as merely whimsical, was not accidental. The kimono-inspired gown that Klimt now wore was not only a chief item of his wardrobe, it was a well thought-out statement, a conscious metaphor indicating that Japonisme had become one of the main forces behind his new art. By the end of the 1890s, Klimt knew a great deal about Japanese art and his artistic compass was firmly set towards the Far East. For Klimt, Japonisme became the main antithesis to academism and he enthusiastically delved more deeply into it. In this respect, Klimt's *Portrait of Sonja Knips* is of special significance for at least two reasons. First, it signals Klimt's total conversion to Japonisme. Second, it sheds light on the prominent stylistic change in his art that occurred in the late 1890s. As it was mentioned above, it appears that working on this portrait Klimt was greatly inspired by Itō Jakuchū's print *Golden Pheasant and Bamboo in Snow*.

Itō Jakuchū (1716-1800) left behind an incredibly diverse and rich heritage, consisting of numerous paintings, prints, sculptures, decorated dolls, etc., despite having been preoccupied with the family's wholesale grocery business in his native Kyoto for half of his life, until age forty. In the history of Japanese art, Jakuchū belongs to a group of artists identified as eccentrics. As Christine Guth emphasizes, "reclusiveness, deeply felt religious convictions, and an uncanny ability to imbue even the most mundane subjects with a mysterious, supernatural quality all contributed to the popular image of Jakuchū as an artist outside the norm."²⁵ In the second half of the

²⁴ Kijiro OHTA and Gustav KLIMT, *Zu Besuch bei Klimt in Wien. Das Atelier in Unter-St. Veit in Wien*, Freistadt, Plöchl Druck-GmbH, 2005, p. 109.

²⁵ Christine GUTH, *Art of Edo Japan: The Artist and the City 1615-1868*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 82.



eighteenth century, the center of artistic activities shifted from Kyoto to the new capital Edo (modern Tokyo), where local artists started to introduce colors to woodblock printing. Famously, Suzuki Harunobu created a picture calendar in 1765, utilizing full-color printing for the first time. In 1771, only six years after the Edo artists started to use colors in print production, Jakuchū created a series of six bird-and-flower (*kachō-zu*) color prints. One of them was *Golden Pheasant and Bamboo in Snow*.

Itō Jakuchū was extremely popular in both Japan and the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Edward Dillon, in his book *The Art of Japan*—one of the earliest western investigations of Japanese art, published in 1906 and 1909—writes: “Jakuchū is a name that has recently come to the front both in the West and in Japan. There is a Jakuchū cult that threatens to rival that of Kōrin and of Hokusai. The temple of Shōkoku-ji at Kyoto, where thirty of his most brilliant *kakemono* are preserved, is the Mecca of his devotees.” Here, Dillon is talking about the famous set of thirty hanging scrolls—*Colorful Realm of Living Beings*. The author acknowledges that *Colorful Realm* scrolls were acquired by the Imperial Household in 1889. He also notes that the Japanese started to reproduce Jakuchū’s art enthusiastically.²⁶ One of the best examples of such efforts, the tapestry replicas of *Colorful Realm* were exhibited at the Worlds Fair in St. Louis in 1904. Dillon underscores that Kyoto’s art from the second part of the eighteenth century, to which Jakuchū belongs, is “one that is the best represented in our European collections.”²⁷ In 1897, as Money Hickman and Yasuhiro Satō emphasize, the Japanese turned to Jakuchū’s prints and made numerous facsimile of them, responding to the strong interest in Jakuchū’s art in Japan and the West.²⁸ It should be emphasized that among Jakuchū’s prints, which are not very numerous, *Golden Pheasant and Bamboo in Snow* is one of the most expressive and refined. Therefore, it is unsurprising that this print quickly found its way into Western collections and later became a part of major art museums such as the British Museum, Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, Met-

²⁶ Edward DILLON, *The Art of Japan*, London, Methuen, 1909, p. 85.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁸ Money L. HICKMAN and Yasuhiro SATŌ, *The Paintings of Jakuchū*, New York, Asia Society Galleries, 1989, p. 153.



ropolitan Museum of Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (the museum possesses three of them), etc.

By the end of the 1890s, Klimt was well aware that Japanese aesthetics preoccupied the creations of many of his contemporaries. Intrigued and fascinated by such developments, he was probably looking for lesser-known Japanese prints for his own experimentations. It is possible that Klimt might have seen or even acquired Jakuchū's print from famous collector Adolf Fischer, who in 1909 founded the Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne. In 1897, Fischer published a book *Bilder aus Japan* on Japan and its culture, based upon his extensive travels. Traege points out that Fischer "was an acting student of the Vienna court actor Josef Lewinsky," whose portrait Klimt painted in 1895.²⁹ It is evident that Klimt developed very good relationship with Fischer during these years, which resulted in the VI Secession Exhibition in 1900, completely devoted to Japanese art from Fischer's collection. Moreover, Fischer again traveled to Japan in 1897 including Kyoto where, as mentioned earlier, Jakuchū's prints became widely available.³⁰

Klimt may well have encountered Jakuchū's print *Golden Pheasant and Bamboo in Snow* during the preparatory stage of work on the portrait. According to von Miller, "there are eighteen preparatory drawings for *Portrait of Sonja Knips*, in which he [Klimt] rendered the various studies of sitting and moving in both vertical and horizontal formats before ultimately deciding on the square."³¹ Analysis of the study-drawings for the portrait reveals Klimt's dissatisfaction with the traditional approach to representation in Western portraiture and highlights his intensive search for new techniques that move well beyond the mere recording of likenesses. Among these studies, the drawing from the Albertina Museum in Vienna, *Woman Sitting in an Armchair* (Fig. 3)—is of special significance, for two reasons. Firstly, it seems to be the last preparatory drawing for the portrait, since it presents Sonja sitting in a three-quarter view, which is very different from the rest of the drawings, but almost identical to the model's pose in the portrait. Secondly, this draw-

²⁹ V. TRAEGER, "Klimt...., p. 119.

³⁰ It seems that Fischer was familiar with Jakuchū's art and in 1902 he acquired one of his *kakemonos* for his own collection.

³¹ M. von MILLER, "Embracing Modernism..., p. 200.



ing exhibits striking parallels to Jakuchū's print. Compositinally, all three works—the Albertina drawing, the portrait, and the print—are built upon the same geometric formula, based on the intersection of two main diagonals and a horizontally oriented asymmetrical composition. Comparing the Albertina drawing and the portrait with the print, it appears that Klimt virtually mirrors Jakuchū's compositional framework. Initially, as is evident in the drawing, Klimt's geometry was even more congruent with Jakuchū's. In the portrait, however, he slightly readjusts the angle of the main crisscrossing diagonals. It is also interesting that, in the drawing, the sitter is placed in a rectangular format, virtually identical to the horizontal *ōban* of Jakuchū's print. *Ōban* was the prevailing size of rectangular Japanese prints and, consequently, many of Klimt's contemporaries, influenced by ukiyo-e prints, generously utilized a rectangular format in their works. Given this, it is unsurprising that Klimt avoids the rectangular format for the portrait, perhaps as an over-exploited element of Japonisme. Accordingly, he adjusts the geometry of the portrait to the square format. Ultimately, in this way Klimt incorporates into the portrait slight deviations from the drawing and, ergo, from the print. Conceivably, it was dictated by a desire to conceal his source of influence. This development made a significant and lasting influence, because after *Portrait of Sonja Knips*, Klimt frequently creates his increasingly asymmetrical compositions within the precise symmetry of a square.

As a rule, Klimt's drawings share one common characteristic—the fluidity and confidence of a line. However, the Albertina drawing generates a very different impression. There is a certain tension within it, stemming from an evident visually intense search and simultaneous desire to conceal and reveal something. Further examination uncovers more intriguing and rewarding insights. Firstly, we encounter in the drawing the unusual character of the representation of the fingers of Sonja's left hand, which are depicted unambiguously as bird's claws. Interestingly, this compelling detail is utilized in both the drawing and the portrait. However, there are two more witty and ingenious hints at Jakuchū's golden pheasant within the drawing, which are absent in the portrait and have gone unnoticed by scholars. One of them is a little bird, nestled in Sonja's right hand. Another is an outline of a bird's head, delineated by the edge of the chair and a fold of the model's dress, with a pronounced eye and a beak. These playful appearances of two

birds in the drawing might reveal Klimt's initial desire to incorporate a bird alongside Sonja and serves as a direct reference to Jakuchū's subject. In the portrait, however, the artist revised his plan again, perhaps because it was too obvious an indication of the source. Instead, Klimt decided to pursue a different path by creating a riddle via visual metamorphosis, which unfolds in the portrait.

In *Portrait of Sonja Knips* one of the most notable characteristics of Klimt's subject is its complicated body language. Carefully choreographing the model's movements, Klimt depicts Sonja, perching at the edge of a chair and leaning slightly forward, which reveals her desire to escape or 'fly away' like a bird. The fingers of Sonja's left hand, clawing at the chair, betray not only Klimt's intentional allusion to metamorphosis but also her inner tension. It is noteworthy that, unlike many of his contemporaries, Klimt avoids the popular custom of depicting models wearing kimonos, and clothes Sonja conventionally in European attire. However, having been inspired by Jakuchū's subject, Klimt plumes his model as a mysterious woman-bird.³² Sonja's dress—one of the most mesmerizing forms in the portrait—brings new characteristics to the subject while simultaneously providing another allusion to Jakuchū's bird. Klimt's preoccupation with the rendering of the gown is apparent. He depicts each stroke with such painstaking scrupulousness that—using the expression employed by Yukio Lippit to describe Jakuchū's manner of

³² The golden pheasant, a widespread subject in Chinese and Japanese art, also became popular in the West. Thus, in *La Japon Artistique* (nos. 15) published a reproduction of a print of an unknown artist depicting a golden pheasant, accompanied by a brief note which states that it "represents the golden pheasant, which is no longer unknown to the Europeans." See *Artistic Japan*, nos. 15, New York, 1888, p. 192. This laconic comment indicates that at the end of the nineteenth century Western artists and art connoisseurs possessed a fair amount of knowledge about Far Eastern art and its symbolism. Europeans indeed have known about the golden pheasant since Marco Polo's return from China. See Patricia Bjaaland WELCH, *Chinese Art: a Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*, Tokyo, Tuttle Publishing, 2008, p. 80. Focusing on the contemplative image of a noble bird, Jakuchū skillfully introduces additional characteristics by adding the bamboo (a symbol of strength and endurance). "Confucians likened bamboo's ability to bend without breaking to being a desirable virtue in a gentleman." Ibid., p. 20. Jakuchū elevates its symbolic meaning further by depicting bamboo covered with snow—in Japan this implies "that men of exalted character rise above the vices of the age in which they exist." See Alexander F. OTTO and Theodore S. HOLBROOK, *Mythological Japan: or, The Symbolisms of Mythology in Relation to Japanese Art*, Philadelphia, 1902, p. 32.



painting—"the brushwork-generated logic"³³ suggests it is not fabric but feathers. The evenly distributed and closely placed iridescent, shimmering, long strokes are indeed reminiscent of the trepidation of the feathers of a real bird. The protruding ruching of the wing-like fluffy shoulders and the high collar of Sonja's gown serve both decorative and allusive purposes and remind one of a bird. Thus, Sonia's pose, feathered dress, claw-like hand, even her head and piercing acute glance, are visual references to Jakuchū's bird.

Scrupulously modeling Sonja's dress in a way that strongly suggests a feathered wrapping, Klimt orchestrates a series of parallel short and long brush strokes, which he transforms into highly rhythmic independent forms, as a reverberation of the measured rhythm in the rendering of the bright feathers of Jakuchū's bird. Such highly rhythmical distribution of the decorative patterns stretches far beyond the frame of Sonja's portrait and resonates in many of Klimt's subsequent works (*Portrait of Fritza Riedler* (1906), *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907), series of landscapes, etc.).

Captured by the brilliance of Jakuchū's colors, Klimt's color palette is also dominated by intricate combinations of pink and white, accompanied by red accents and a wintery-cold green almost identical to the color of the bamboo in Jakuchū's print. All of this is enveloped by a brownish-black background. The depiction of the "detached" lilies behind Sonja is another detail influenced by the print. Like Jakuchū, Klimt introduces greenery, in a mirroring fashion, in the upper right corner behind the sitter. However, he replaces the bamboo with its Western counterpart, the lily. The presence of the lilies serves diverse purposes. On the one hand, the cluster of flowers is utilized as a decorative canopy that symbolically separates the beauty and brightness of the sitter and serves as an antithesis to the overwhelming darkness. On the other hand, both Jakuchū's bamboo and Klimt's lilies bring additional layers of symbolism to their subjects. Weidinger points out that Klimt often "depicted the metaphorical connection between flowers and women which, particularly in literature, was a subject popular at that time" and "symbolize

³³ Yukio LIPPIT, et al., *Colorful Realm: Japanese Bird-and-flower Paintings by Itō Jakuchū*, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 2012, p. 25.



the character of the sitter and, thereby, can be understood as a veiled comment by the artist.”³⁴ Klimt combines the white lily—an ultimate symbol of purity and innocence—with red—a symbol of love, and suffering.

Among the numerous parallels between the portrait and the print, the presence of the pronounced darkness in *Portrait of Sonja Knips* is one of the most notable and striking aspects of Jakuchū’s influence upon Klimt. As a devoted Zen Buddhist, Jakuchū always imbues his visual messages with deep symbolism. Undoubtedly, Klimt recognized that the intensity of Jakuchū’s charcoal-black background provides not only an extraordinary contrast to the bright coloration of the bird but also gives philosophical, eternal dimensions to the print. Jakuchū’s background resonated with Klimt and reverberated with the existential questions that deeply gripped him following his fateful losses in 1892. For this reason, it is not surprising that he closely follows Jakuchū and assigns almost half of the pictorial space of the portrait to flat darkness. Like Jakuchū, he also builds the composition upon the juxtaposition of the lyrical image of Sonja with the alarming background. In this manner, Klimt—a spirited adherent of Symbolism—sets a theatrical stage and skillfully inserts his model into the duality of an artist-created world. He deliberately emphasizes the drama by accentuating the sharp contrast between the two picture planes—Sonja’s world and the Unknown. These two realms stand as a reflection of Freudian theories—one as exposed, vulnerable consciousness, the other as murky sub-conscious, inaccessible, mysterious, and therefore sinister. Ultimately, a few lost white lilies reaching into the picture from the top left balance the composition and metaphorically promise a sign of salvation. The power of suggestion intrinsic to Japanese aesthetics became an organic part of Klimt’s art.

Thus, discovery of the striking morphological and conceptual similarities between Klimt’s *Portrait of Sonja Knips* and the enigmatic Japanese source underscores that Jakuchū’s print *Golden Pheasant and Bamboo in Snow* appears likely to have been a primary source of influence behind the conception and execution of the portrait. Jakuchū’s art, based on more tradi-

³⁴ Alfred WEIDINGER, “Symbolism in Landscape Paintings” in Alfred Weidinger, ed., *Gustav Klimt*, Munich, New York, Prestel, 2007, pp. 177-78.

tional Japanese aesthetics, spoke to Klimt on a deeper level. As such, the portrait provides a unique—and probably exceptional—example of Klimt’s very close artistic dialogue with a single Japanese source.

Furthermore, it is evident that *Portrait of Sonja Knips* plays watershed role in Klimt’s *oeuvre* and inaugurates some key and far-reaching stylistic changes. Some of these innovations have been noted by previous scholars. For instance, Wieninger writes that if we review Klimt’s “portraits of seated ladies—all of them square or nearly square—we can witness a development in the direction of ornamentalization and flattening, from the portrait of Sonja Knips.”³⁵ Nevertheless, the range of innovations incorporated into the portrait is even wider. Starting with Knips’ portrait, the artist deliberately moves away from the traditional representation of the background and, instead of placing his Viennese *Frauen* within interiors or landscapes, Klimt inserts his models in meticulously crafted flat abstractions (*The Three Ages of Woman* (1905), *Portrait of Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein* (1905), etc.). Undoubtedly, the surprising viability of the flat dark background reflects both artistic and personal dimensions for Klimt. Therefore, it is not surprising that Klimt elevates the background to a different formal and philosophical level and that it became the common denominator of many of his subsequent paintings. Starting with *Portrait of Sonja Knips* Klimt invented a new stage for his formal experimentations—a model’s dress. Since a dress by itself is a tool of adornment, it naturally turns into a kind of circumscribed stage and *ergo* effectively presents Klimt’s formal experimentations. Pluming Sonja as a mysterious woman-bird, Klimt introduces the idea of metamorphosis, which also repeatedly reemerges in many of his later paintings.

The unexpectedly bold synergy of traditional and “foreign” elements in *Portrait of Sonja Knips* is the most appropriate allegory for Klimt’s new art, wherein concern with the model’s likeness was replaced by self-expression and artistic freedom, and in this quest, Japonisme served as the most suitable vehicle. Depicting the white lilies amidst overwhelming darkness, Klimt also announces the coming of a new age and with it a new art, thereby fully implementing the slogan

³⁵ J. WIENINGER, “Gustav Klimt...,” p. 54.



of the Vienna Secession, "*Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit*," which the group adopted in 1897. From the end of the 1890s onward, Japonisme—a turn of the century artistic *lingua franca*—deeply scored Klimt's visual memory and consciousness and became one of the most organic, overarching components of his new art.



Curriculum Vitae

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Svitlana Shiells, a former professor of art history, has taught at various universities in Ukraine, America, and Austria. The focus of her research is Japonisme in Eastern and Central European modern art. She has developed many new courses, including a course on Japonisme at GMU, VA. Dr. Shiells has widely presented her research at numerous conferences, lectures, and seminars, for instance, at Harvard University (a seminar on Japonisme), Tokyo University of the Arts, College Art Association, the Library of Congress, conferences in Budapest (2017), London (2017), and various universities, art museums and galleries. Recently, Svitlana Shiells became an independent scholar and is working on a monograph on Japonisme in Gustav Klimt's oeuvre.