1900a

Sigmund Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams*: in Vienna, the rise of the expressive art of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, and Oskar Kokoschka coincides with the emergence of psychoanalysis.

Sigmund Freud declares in the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "If I cannot move the higher powers, I will stir up hell." With this passage, taken from *The Aeneid*, the Viennese founder of psychoanalysis "intended to picture the efforts of the repressed instinctual impulses." And right here, we might think, lies the connection between this intrepid explorer of the unconscious and such brazen innovators in Viennese art as Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), Egon Schiele (1890–1918), and Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980). For they too seemed to stir up hell, in the early years of the century, through a liberatory expression of repressed instincts and unconscious desires.

These artists did stir up hell, but it was no simple liberation. Unfettered expression is rare in art, let alone in psychoanalysis, and Freud would not have supported it in any case: a conservative collector of ancient, Egyptian, and Asian artifacts, he was wary of modernist artists. The connection between these four Viennese contemporaries is better drawn through the notion of the "dream-work" developed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. According to this epochal study, a dream is a "rebus," a broken narrative-in-images, a secret wish struggling to be expressed and an internal censor struggling to suppress it. Such a conflict is often suggested in the most provocative paintings by Klimt, Schiele, and Kokoschka, which are frequently portraits: a struggle between expression and repression in sitter and painter alike. Perhaps more than any other modernist style, this art places the viewer in the position of psychoanalytic interpreter.

Oedipal revolt

Although Paris is more celebrated as a capital of modernist art, Vienna witnessed several events that are paradigmatic of turn-of-the-century avant-gardes. First was the very act of "secession" —the withdrawal from the Academy of Fine Arts in 1897 of a group of nineteen artists (including Klimt) and architects (including Joseph Maria Olbrich [1867–1908] and Josef Hoffmann [1870–1956]) into an order of its own, replete in this case with its own building **[1]**. In opposition to the old academic guard, the Secession advocated the new and the youthful in the very names of the international style that it adopted, which was called *art nouveau* in French and *Jugendstil* in German (literally, "youth style"). Also typical of avant-gardes was that this advocacy provoked great scandal. First, in 1901, the University of Vienna rejected a grim painting on the subject of philosophy that it had commissioned from Klimt, who responded with a second painting on the subject of medicine that was even more outrageous. Then, in 1908, the School of Arts and Crafts expelled Kokoschka after a performance of his lurid drama of passion and violence, *Murderer, the Hope of Woman*—the first banishment in his long, nomadic life. And finally, in 1912, the authorities charged Schiele with kidnapping and corrupting a minor, jailed him for twenty-four days, and burned many of his sexually explicit drawings.

1 • Joseph Maria Olbrich, *House of the Vienna Secession*, 1898
A view of the main entrance

These controversies were not staged for bourgeois titillation; they pointed to genuine rifts between private reality and public morality in Vienna at the time. For the new art emerged as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was collapsing; it was symptomatic, the historian Carl E. Schorske has suggested, of "the crisis of the liberal ego" in the old order. Here lies a further connection with Freud: more than a liberation of the self, this art attests to a conflict within the individual subject regarding its threatened authorities, the academy and the state—in Freudian terms the superego that

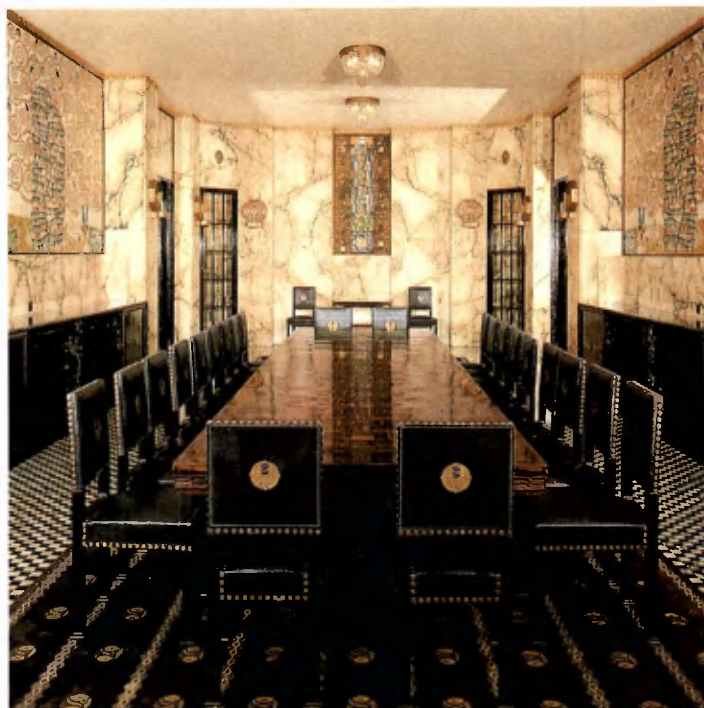
surveys us all—"a crisis of culture characterized by an ambiguous combination of collective oedipal revolt and narcissistic search for a new self" (Schorske).

This crisis was hardly punctual or uniform. Differences existed not only between the Secession and the Academy but also between the Expressionist aesthetic of young painters such as Schiele and Kokoschka and the Art Nouveau ethos of Secession artists such as Klimt, who advocated a "total work of the arts." (This *Gesamtkunstwerk* was exemplified by the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, designed by Hoffmann in 1905–11 with arboreal mosaic murals created by Klimt **[2]**). The Secession was divided internally as well. In its craft studios (or *Werkstätte*), it promoted the decorative ▲ arts, which other modernist styles often suppressed ("the decorative" became a term of anxious embarrassment for many proponents of abstract art); for example, Klimt used such archaic media as tempera and gold-leaf as well as mosaic. On the other hand, in its expressive use of line and color, the Secession also encouraged modernist experiments in abstract form. In this way, it was caught up in contradiction: in style between figuration and abstraction; in mood between fin-de-siècle malaise and early-twentieth-century *joie de vivre*. And this conflict tended to be evoked in the edgy, almost neurasthenic line that Klimt passed on to Schiele and Kokoschka.

In these tensions with the Art Nouveau style of the Secession, the great German critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) later glimpsed a basic contradiction between the individual basis of crafted art and the collective basis of industrial production:

> *The transfiguration of the lone soul was [the] apparent aim [of Art Nouveau]. Individualism was its theory. With [the Belgian designer Henry] van de Velde, there appeared the house as expression of the personality. Ornament was to such a house what the signature is to a painting. The real significance of Art Nouveau was not expressed in this ideology. It represented the last attempt at a sortie on the part of Art imprisoned by technical advance within her ivory tower. It mobilized all the reserve forces of interiority. They found their expression in the mediumistic language of line, in the flower as symbol of the naked, vegetable Nature that confronted the technologically armed environment.*

If Art Nouveau represented a last sortie on the part of Art, the Secession signaled its full embrace of the Ivory Tower, as exemplified by its white building, replete with floral facade ornament and grill dome, intended by its designer Olbrich as "a temple of art which would offer the art-lover a quiet, elegant place of refuge." Thus, even as the Secession broke with the Academy, it did so only to retreat to a more pristine space of aesthetic autonomy. And yet, in a further contradiction, the Secession took this autonomy to be expressive of the spirit of its time, as announced by the motto inscribed beneath the dome: "TO EACH AGE ITS ART, TO ART ITS FREEDOM." Here is, as art historians in Vienna might have said at the time, the very "artistic will" (or *Kunstwollen*) of this new movement.



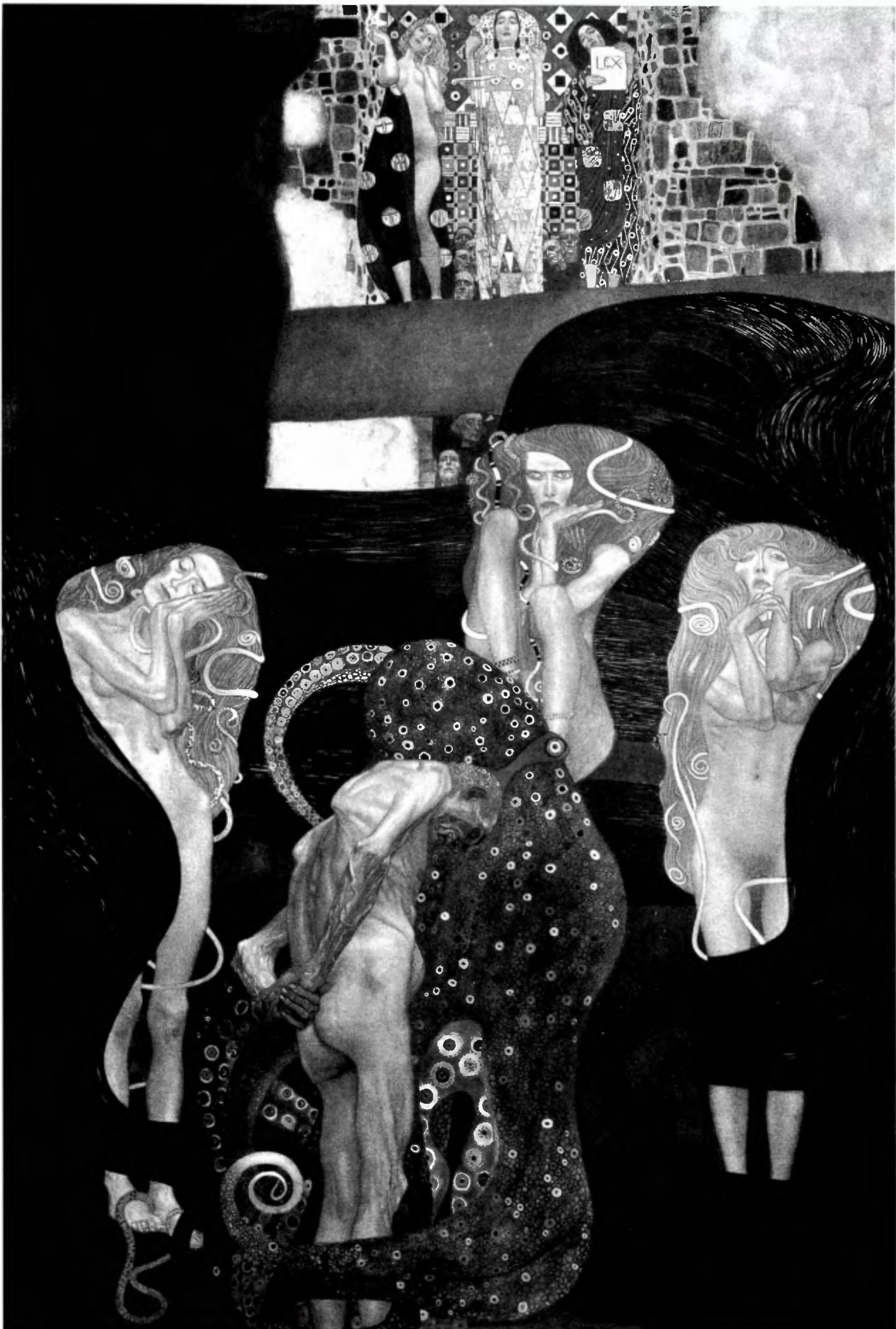
2 • Josef Hoffmann, Palais Stoclet, Brussels, 1905–11
Dining room murals by Gustav Klimt, furniture by Josef Hoffmann

Defiance tinctured by impotence

The first president of the Vienna Secession was Gustav Klimt, whose career passed from the historical culture of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, through the antitraditional revolt of the avant-garde at the turn of the century, to an ornamental portraiture of Viennese high society after this modernist revolt appeared, to him at least, to be routed. His father, an engraver, had sent him to the School of Arts and Crafts, from which he emerged as an architectural decorator in 1883, just as the monumental buildings of the central Ringstrasse of remodeled Vienna came to completion. His early works included allegorical paintings for two new Ringstrasse buildings—a painting of dramatic figures (including Hamlet) for the ceiling of the City Theater (1886–8) and a painting of cultural representatives (including Athena) for the lobby of the Museum of Art History (1891). In 1894, on the basis of these successes, the new University of Vienna commissioned him to produce three ceiling paintings—representing Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence, respectively—on the Enlightenment theme of the "Triumph of Light over Darkness." Klimt worked intermittently on the project for the next ten years, exhibiting the first painting, *Philosophy*, in 1900. By this time, however, he was caught up in the Secession, and the finished painting was hardly what the University had in mind. Rather than a pantheon of philosophers, Klimt presented an anguished passage of commingled bodies through an amorphous space overseen by an obscure sphinx in the center and a luminous head (which evoked Medusa more than Athena) at the bottom. In this world, Darkness seemed to triumph over Light.

If Klimt questioned rationalist philosophy in this commission for the University, he mocked therapeutic medicine in the next,

▲ 1910



3 • Gustav Klimt, *Jurisprudence*, 1903–7
Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown (destroyed 1945)

unveiled in 1901. Here Medicine is represented as yet another hell, with even more bodies, some slung in sensuous slumber, others massed with cadavers and skeletons—a grotesque phantasmagoria of "the unity of life and death, the interpenetration of instinctual vitality and personal dissolution" (Schorske). An even stronger slap in the face of the University, the painting was again rejected and Klimt rebuked. His rejoinder was to rework the final representation of Jurisprudence **[3]** into one last hell of criminal punishment, with three large, intense furies around an emaciated man, all naked in a dark space below, and three small, impassive graces gowned in a hieratic space above. These allegorical figures of Truth, Justice, and Law hardly assist the male victim, who, surrounded by octopus tentacles, is at the mercy of the three furies of punishment (one sleeps obliviously, one stares vengefully, one winks as if on the take). Here punishment appears psychologized as castration: the man is gaunt, his head bowed, his penis near the maw of the octopus. In a sense, it is this constricted man whom Schiele and Kokoschka will attempt to liberate, though in their art too he will remain broken. "His very defiance was tinctured by the spirit of impotence," Schorske writes of Klimt. This is true of Schiele and Kokoschka as well.

These failed commissions signaled a general crisis in public art at this time: clearly, public taste and advanced painting had parted company. For the most part, Klimt then withdrew from the avant-garde in order to paint realistic portraits of stylish socialites, ornamental people set against ornamental backgrounds. His withdrawal left it to Schiele and Kokoschka to probe "repressed instinctual impulses," and they did so in the guise of often anguished figures stripped of historical reference and social context. (To look at his figures, Schiele once remarked, is "to look inside.") Skeptical of the decorative refinements of Art Nouveau, both Schiele and Kokoschka turned to Postimpressionist and Symbolist painters for expressive precedents. (As in other capitals, retrospective exhibitions of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin were influential, as were Secession shows of the Norwegian Edvard Munch [1863–1944] and the Swiss Ferdinand Hodler [1853–1918].)

Symptomatic portraiture

Having grown up in a bourgeois family of railway officials, Egon Schiele met Klimt in 1907 and soon adapted the sinuous, sensuous line of his mentor into his own angular, anxious mode of drawing; in the ten years before his death (Schiele died in the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918) he produced some three hundred paintings and three thousand works on paper. In bloody reds and earthy browns, pale yellows and bleak blacks, Schiele attempted to paint pathos directly in melancholic landscapes with blighted trees, as well as desperate pictures of aggrieved mothers and children. More notorious are his drawings of adolescent girls, often sexually exposed, and his self-portraits, sometimes in similarly explicit positions. If Klimt and Kokoschka explored the reciprocal relation between sadistic and masochistic drives, so Schiele probed another Freudian pair of perverse pleasures—voyeurism and exhibitionism. Often he stares so intently—into the mirror, at us—that the difference between his gaze and ours threatens to dissolve, and he seems to become his only viewer, the solitary voyeur of his own display. But for the most part, Schiele does not seem defiantly proud of his self-image so much as pathetically exposed by its damage.

Consider his *Nude Self-Portrait in Gray with Open Mouth* **[4]**. The figure recalls the emaciated victim of *Jurisprudence* turned round and made younger. He has broken free; yet free, he is broken: his arms are no longer bound—they are amputated. Less an angel in flight, he is a scarecrow pinioned and cut at the knees. His slight asymmetry skews other oppositions as well: although male, his penis is retracted, and his torso is more feminine than not. With rings around his eyes, his face resembles a death-mask, and his open mouth could be interpreted equally as a vital scream or as a deathly gaping. This self-portrait seems to capture the moment when vitality and mortality meet in neurotic morbidity.

This transformation of the figure is the primary legacy of Viennese art at this time. It might seem conservative in relation to other

4 • Egon Schiele, *Nude Self-Portrait in Gray with Open Mouth*, 1910
Gouache and black crayon on paper, 44.8 × 31.5 (17⅝ × 12⅜)

▲ 1903, 1906

modernist art, but it provoked the Nazis to condemn it as "degen-▲erate" thirty years later. Well past its service as classical ideal (the academic nude) and a social type (the proper portrait), the figure here becomes a cipher of psychosexual disturbance. Without direct influence from Freud, these artists developed a sort of symptomatic portraiture that extended van Gogh's expressive renderings of people, a portraiture that evokes less the desires of the artist than the repressions of the sitter—indirectly, through tics and tensions of the body. Here, what the attenuated, often emaciated line is in Klimt and Schiele, the agitated, often scratched line is in Kokoschka: a sign of a tortuous surfacing of subjective conflict.

Also influenced by Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka developed this symptomatic portraiture further than Schiele, and he probed its disruptive dimension further too—to the point where he was forced to leave Vienna altogether. During his troubles, Kokoschka was supported by the modernist architect and critic Adolf Loos (1870–1933), already notorious for his austere designs and fierce polemics, and the 1909 Kokoschka portrait of this great purist could be said to capture their "partnership of opposites" **[5]**. Similar to the Schiele self-portrait in stylistic respects (down to the ringed eyes), the painting evokes a subjectivity that is nonetheless quite different. The clothed Loos gazes inward: he is composed, but one senses he is under great pressure. Indeed, rather than *ex*pressed, or pressed outward, his being seems *com*pressed, or pressed inward. Self-possessed in both senses of the term, he reins in his energies with an intensity that seems to deform his wrung hands.

A year before the portrait was painted, Loos had published his diatribe against the Art Nouveau of the Secession; titled • "Ornament and Crime" (1908), it might as well have read "Ornament *is* Crime." Loos deemed ornament not only erotic in origin ■ but excremental as well, and though he excused such amorality in children and "savages," "the man of our day who, in response to an inner urge, smears the walls with erotic symbols is a criminal or a degenerate." Not coincidentally, in this land given the excremental nickname "Kakania" by the novelist Robert Musil, Freud published his first paper on "character and anal eroticism" in 1908 as well. Yet, whereas Freud wanted merely to *understand* the civilized purposes of this repression of anal-erotic drives, Loos wanted to *enforce* them: "A country's culture can be assessed by the extent to which its lavatory walls are smeared," he wrote. "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects." Loos was not sympathetic to psychoanalysis; his friend and compatriot the critic Karl Kraus (1874–1936) once called it "the disease of which it thinks it is the cure." But like Freud, Loos did imagine the anal as a messy zone of indistinctness, and this is why he implied that the applied arts of the Secession and the violent outbursts of Expressionism were excremental. Against such confusion, Loos and Kraus demanded a self-critical practice in which each art, language, and discipline would be made ever more distinct, proper, and pure. We do well to remember that Vienna was the home not only of such disruptive painters as

5 • Oskar Kokoschka, *Portrait of the Architect Adolf Loos*, 1909
Oil on canvas, 73.7 × 92.7 (29 × 36½)

Klimt, Schiele, and Kokoschka, but also of such disciplinary voices as Loos in architecture, Kraus in journalism, Arnold Schoenberg ▲ (1874–1951) in music, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in philosophy (who once wrote that "all philosophy is the critique of language"). Already at the beginning of the century, then, we find in Vienna an opposition fundamental to much modernism that followed: an opposition between expressive freedoms and rigorous constraints. HF

FURTHER READING

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▲ 1937a • 1962b ■ 1903, 1922 ▲ 1958