Gustav Klimt’s Athena
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Abstract

Women are the predominate subject of Gustav Klimt’s oeuvre, from his beautiful portraits of women patrons and acquaintances, to his murals for the Old Burgtheater, University, and Kunsthistorisches Museum. One woman who appears multiple times in Klimt’s work is the goddess Athena. Athena is the goddess of wisdom, military victory, reason, intelligent activity, and arts and literature. With these attributes in mind we begin to take a closer look at the works of art that Klimt included Athena in, in the context that the figures are placed in, and for what purpose they were made. Did Klimt portray Athena in a certain way to highlight one of her attributes? Why was Athena a recurring figure for Klimt? I will focus mainly on three of Gustav Klimt’s works that include Athena and look at the different ways he portrayed the goddess in each piece, including: the mural on the wall of the Kunsthistorisches museum in Vienna, the poster for the first Secession Exhibition, and his painting titled Pallas Athena. While there are a few other representations of Athena by Klimt, I will focus on these three, which are the most prominent and well known. I will also look at other representations of Athena found throughout the city of Vienna. In particular I will consider the fountain in front of the Parliament building, the mosaic at the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, and the owls, a symbol of Athena, on the Secession building, to gain further insight into the importance of the goddess within the city of Vienna.

Discussion

Why Athena?

Gustav Klimt has always been one of my favorite artists, so when I took the art history seminar course on Vienna in 1900, I knew that my research would include Klimt. Within the first few weeks of the course I noticed that professor Houze had shown two different images of works by Klimt that featured the goddess Athena. I quickly became curious if he had portrayed her more than the two times that I had seen in class. After some research I found that he actually portrayed her six different times throughout his career and I knew that I wanted to continue my research to figure out why he portrayed her six different times throughout his career. After some research I found that he was so interested in the goddess to put her in his artworks that quickly became curious if he had portrayed her more than the two times that I had seen in class. While we may never know the exact reason why Gustav Klimt decided to portray Athena multiple times throughout his career, it can be considered to be for the fact of Athena being the patron goddess of the arts and wisdom. With Klimt including Athena on the poster for the first Secession Exhibition, it created the idea that she would be the symbol to represent the Secessionists, and it was only further emphasized when the owls, symbol of Athena, were added on to the design of the Secession building. Whether for the fact that Athena is this great goddess, or because Klimt clearly liked to paint women, she was an important figure considering Klimt rendered her six times throughout his lifetime that we know of. But not just Klimt; many other artists portrayed Athena, and she is seen multiple times throughout the city of Vienna where Klimt lived. Being that this is the conclusion of my research, there are still other questions that emerged and remained unanswered. What other aspects in Klimt’s oeuvre did he take from classical antiquity, not only in his renditions of Athena, but also in the other paintings and drawings he completed within his life? What does the symbol of Athena mean to the rest of Vienna? Gustav Klimt continues to be an inspiration, but leaves so many unanswered questions.

Purpose

Poster for 1st Secession Exhibition (1898)
Kunsthistorisches Museum

The paintings were designed to fill the main stairway’s spandrels and intercompartments with figures and ornamental motifs borrowed from each of the major historical periods represented in the museum’s collection. The space provided for forty-two separate paintings, of which Klimt did eleven, including both of the images of Greek antiquity. He painted Athena to represent the Hellenic culture’s art, but posed her as a young Vienna lady who is wended, stylized, and idealized as a figure of a young woman that is aimed towards the future by holding the winged Nike with her spear as a symbol of victory.

Method

I used the art historical method of visual analysis and comparison because it is the most logical method to use when analyzing multiple artworks from the same artist that feature the same subject matter.

Conclusion

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References