
Who is that woman? Adele Bloch-Bauer

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Her name is Adele. She is the woman in Gustav Klimt's most famous – and most reproduced painting: “Adele Bloch-Bauer I” and the world's second most expensive painting, sold in 2006 for an estimated 135 million USD. She is also the only woman Gustav Klimt painted more than once.

“Adele Bloch-Bauer” an oil, silver and gold leaf on canvas measures an awe-inspiring 138 cm by 138 cm. Completed in 1907, it took Klimt a reported three years to finish the portrait, which was commissioned by Adele's Austrian sugar-magnate husband, Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer.

On first inspection, the portrait, with its vast expanse of delicate gold filigree that surrounds an ethereal face looks like just that: a commissioned portrait that flatters the upper-class wife of a mighty Viennese business tycoon. It is only by watching quietly that one is drawn into the unspoken narrative of the work. A whispered story of a special bond between artist and model, which it has been rumoured, linked them beyond a platonic friendship for years.

Surrounded by a daring sea of gold, Adele appears fragile, and Klimt paints her with gentle intimate nuance. Her hair is delicately heaped, lids droop heavily across large almond eyes, plump lips parted slightly and flushed cheeks spread a warm glow across her face. Her elegantly tapered hands are folded loosely to hide a deformed finger. Adele gazes adoringly at the viewer, as she must have all those years ago at the artist that was painting her. Looking at Adele I and comparing it to that other famous Klimt work – “Judith I” – widely regarded as his most erotic painting, it is glaringly clear why it is believed that Adele inspired “Judith I” and why rumours of an affair persist.

Some say that “to understand an artist is to understand his work”. Gustav Klimt is known as an avid admirer of women



who never marries and is often called “Painter of Women”. As so many notorious womanizers, Klimt spends his life – and his work – paying homage to women. And yet, surrounded by an ever-changing posy of beautiful and often naked young models, Klimt paints only one woman (apart from his muse Emilie Floge) twice: Adele Bloch-Bauer. A portrait that takes him almost three years to complete and of which he makes more studies than of any other painting throughout his entire career. Who is this Adele Bloch-Bauer that exerts such lasting influence over the notorious Casanova?

Adele Bloch-Bauer was born in 1881, the youngest daughter of a large, wealthy Jewish banking family. A highly-strung and outspoken young woman, Adele, who is denied access to university by sheer fact of her gender, enters into an arranged marriage with business tycoon Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer at the tender age of eighteen to escape her parent's household.

Adele was typical of the upper-class Viennese women of her generation: women who demanded and acquired rights previously denied to them in social, economic and po-

litical spheres. Denied access to university, she studies German, French and English classical literature at home. As part of the avant-garde intellectuals of Vienna of that time, Bloch-Bauer is often described as a “proud, arrogant and outspoken woman...a modern woman living in a world of yesterday”. To those around her, she gives the impression of a refined mix of romantic personae: sick and fragile on the one hand, a self-conscious and proud salon lady on the other. Maria Altmann, Bloch-Bauer's niece and heir remembers her as “Suffering, suffering, always with headache, smoking like a chimney, terribly, delicately dark.... Süffisant, arrogant... Always in search of intellectual stimulation.”

Whether or not they had an affair remains a mystery. What is clear is that Adele adored the artist and his work. Over the course of her life, she collects five of his works. His paintings adorned the walls of her chambers and his photo stood prominently on her bedside table. In 1925 and aged 43, Adele Bloch-Bauer dies suddenly of meningitis in Vienna. It is rumoured she confessed her relationship with Klimt only to her physician and personal maid.
