

Klinger's *Christ on Olympus*: The Confrontation between Christianity and Paganism

Elizabeth Tumasonis

Volume 20, numéro 1-2, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072761ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072761ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Tumasonis, E. (1993). Klinger's *Christ on Olympus*: The Confrontation between Christianity and Paganism. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 20(1-2), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072761ar>

Résumé de l'article

Entre 1890 et 1897, l'artiste allemand Max Klinger peignait *le Christ sur le mont Olympe*, son oeuvre la plus considérable et la plus ambitieuse. Elle représentait le Christ et les quatre vertus cardinales apparaissant devant Zeus et les dieux olympiens. La critique récente autant que la critique de l'époque ont interprété l'oeuvre de diverses façons et au moins un critique du temps l'avait vu comme la célébration du triomphe de la Chrétienté sur le paganisme, mais une relecture du contexte suggère autre chose. Une longue lignée d'écrivains allemands, comprenant Goethe, Schiller, Heine et plus particulièrement Nietzsche, ont vu le Christianisme comme une religion "mortifère" qui avait détruit la sensualité naturelle et l'amour de la vie, caractéristiques des Anciens. Comme de nombreux intellectuels de l'époque, Klinger admirait Nietzsche. Un examen approfondi du tableau et des oeuvres qui s'y rattachent laisse croire que Klinger voyait son tableau comme une allégorie nietzschéenne, rejetant la culpabilité chrétienne liée au corps et affirmant de nouveau la sensualité physique. Les oeuvres de Klinger reflètent cette idée d'une association entre l'antiquité classique et la liberté sexuelle, idée largement partagée par de nombreux artistes symbolistes allemands à la fin du siècle. À travers ce thème, ces artistes désiraient se libérer des conventions morales et esthétiques de leur temps.

Klinger's *Christ on Olympus*: The Confrontation between Christianity and Paganism*

ELIZABETH TUMASONIS, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

Résumé

Entre 1890 et 1897, l'artiste allemand Max Klinger peignait le *Christ sur le mont Olympe*, son oeuvre la plus considérable et la plus ambitieuse. Elle représentait le Christ et les quatre vertus cardinales apparaissant devant Zeus et les dieux olympiens. La critique récente autant que la critique de l'époque ont interprété l'oeuvre de diverses façons et au moins un critique du temps l'avait vu comme la célébration du triomphe de la Chrétienté sur le paganisme, mais une relecture du contexte suggère autre chose. Une longue lignée d'écrivains allemands, comprenant Goethe, Schiller, Heine et plus particulièrement Nietzsche, ont vu le Christianisme comme une religion "mortifère" qui avait détruit la sensualité naturelle et l'amour de la vie,

caractéristiques des Anciens. Comme de nombreux intellectuels de l'époque, Klinger admirait Nietzsche. Un examen approfondi du tableau et des oeuvres qui s'y rattachent laisse croire que Klinger voyait son tableau comme une allégorie nietzschéenne, rejetant la culpabilité chrétienne liée au corps et affirmant de nouveau la sensualité physique. Les oeuvres de Klinger reflètent cette idée d'une association entre l'antiquité classique et la liberté sexuelle, idée largement partagée par de nombreux artistes symbolistes allemands à la fin du siècle. A travers ce thème, ces artistes désiraient se libérer des conventions morales et esthétiques de leur temps.

The German artist Max Klinger (1857-1920) was widely celebrated in the 1890s for his versatility as a painter, sculptor, and printmaker. After the turn of the century, his work fell into neglect and his reputation into obscurity. Only in the last twenty-five years or so has there been a revival of interest in Klinger with a series of exhibitions and publications dedicated to him, mostly in Europe.¹ English-speaking art historians have generally concerned themselves with his graphic works, paying less attention to his paintings.² Kirk T. Varnedoe and Elizabeth Streicher opined that his "body of prints . . . has proved to be of more enduring import and appeal [than his paintings]. . . . These images seem not only original, but uncannily modern. By contrast, Klinger's giant allegorical paintings. . . now evoke a more distant, historical interest. . . ."³ Yet the paintings occupied a very important place in the artist's *oeuvre*; perhaps they are not as appealing to modern taste as Klinger's etchings, but they can hardly be overlooked.

During the years between 1890 and 1897, Klinger created a huge, complex picture (500 x 900 cm.), bringing together painting and sculpture in a single work that was clearly intended as his masterpiece (Fig. 1). This work, *Christ on Olympus* (*Christus im Olympe*), depicts a group of figures in a highly realistic style, obviously painted in the studio from posed models with painstaking attention to detail. They fit awkwardly into the idealized Arcadian landscape around them. Yet, despite its dry academic manner, the picture is of considerable interest because of its unconventional subject. I propose that the work reflects Klinger's engagement with the philosophy of Nietzsche, an interest which he shared with many other artists, writers, and thinkers of his day. Nietzsche exerted an enormous

influence upon the intellectual *milieu* of Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. An examination of Klinger's painting and other related works by the same artist and by his contemporaries shows us that one of the reasons that Nietzsche's ideas were so popular and influential was their emphasis on the importance of sensuality. In the 1890s, his writings were widely understood as a call for erotic freedom. Although Nietzsche himself might perhaps have been surprised at such an interpretation of his work, it was taken up by many who felt constrained during an era of sexual repression. As I hope to demonstrate through iconographical analysis, Klinger intended to create an allegory of Nietzschean thought, as he interpreted it, in *Christ on Olympus*.

The artist structured this immense work as a triptych with a predella, in the tradition of the medieval altarpiece. It was mounted in an ornate frame carved with palm trees and flanked with marble statues. Through this combination of painting and sculpture on an architectural scale, Klinger hoped to realize the German concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁴ He had previously explored this concept in his considerably smaller *Judgement of Paris* (320 x 720 cm.). This was enclosed in a frame decorated with painted plaster reliefs while in *Christ on Olympus* Klinger placed the picture and its carved frame on a marble base, to which he attached over-lifesize figures. The *Judgement of Paris* was thus a somewhat less elaborate prototype for the total work of art the artist aimed to achieve in *Christ on Olympus*. In his book *Malerei und Zeichnung*, Klinger deplored the lack of monumental art in Germany in the nineteenth century and called for a collaboration between painting and sculpture. "Such total works," he wrote, "incorporating all of the visual arts, correspond to that which Wagner sought and attained

Figure 1. Max Klinger, *Christ on Olympus*, mixed media on panel, 500 x 900 cm., 1890-97. Leipzig, Museum der bildende Künste. Severely damaged in World War II; no longer exists in this format. From F.H. Meissner, *Max Klinger. Radierungen, Zeichnungen, Bilder, und Skulpturen* (Munich, 1914), pl. 30. Reproduced with permission of the Museum der bildende Künste, Leipzig.



in his musical dramas.”⁵ In *Christ on Olympus*, his most ambitious painting, Klinger aspired to this Wagnerian ideal. Unfortunately, the picture was damaged in World War II and no longer exists in the format illustrated here. Seldom exhibited, its remains are preserved at the Museum der bildende Künste in Leipzig, on permanent loan from the Neue Galerie des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Vienna.⁶

Klinger’s painting is Wagnerian not only in its attempt to bring together several different art forms but also in its theme. The artist chose as his subject the *Götterdämmerung*, or twilight of the gods. Unlike Wagner, however, he chose to represent this motif in terms of classical rather than Nordic mythology. The central panel of the work depicts Mount Olympus, invaded by Christ and four figures carrying a cross. Stern and determined, Christ stands before the throne of Zeus the Thunderer, who is shown as aged and bemused, with little thunder left in him. He seems to recognize defeat as he realizes that his day is done. We can see a cold, gray fog rising in the background. It drifts into the landscape from the left, the direction from which Christ has entered, and is about to blot out the classical temple on the hillside behind Zeus. The fog is a visual metaphor underscoring Klinger’s theme: the picture represents that moment when the age of paganism has come to an end and the Christian era has begun.

The subject of the twilight of the Olympian gods was new to painting but had been a recurrent theme in literature since the eighteenth century. In 1788-89 Friedrich Schiller expressed his regret for the loss of the classical past in his poem *Die Götter Griechenlands*. He depicted an idyllic vision of a lost world in which even the stones and trees were inhabited by deities, an Arcadia alive with gods and goddesses who brought warmth and beauty to the ancient world. Schiller imagined antiquity as a time when human beings lived without self-reproach, in harmony with nature and with the gods:

Not to that culture gay,
Stern self-denial, or sharp penance wan!
Well might the heart be happy in that day —
For Gods, the Happy Ones, were kin to Man!
The Beautiful alone were Holy there!⁷

To the poet this beautiful and joyful world was no more; the Greek gods had vanished from the earth. He maintained that the rich panoply of paganism was a victim of monotheistic Christianity:

Cold, from the North, has gone
Over the Flowers the Blast that kill’d their May;
And, to enrich the worship of the ONE,
A Universe of Gods must pass away!⁸

Goethe shared Schiller's vision of antiquity. In a poem of 1797, *Die Braut von Korinth*, he described a passionate affair between two lovers of ancient times, a man from Athens and a young woman from the city of the title. When the man first sees the maiden he makes love to her, invoking the gods as the advocates of sensual delight. He says:

And you, child, bring Cupid on to me!
You are pale with fear,
Dear girl, come and here
Let us see how joyful gods can be.⁹

But she comes from a family of Christians and has been dedicated to a life of celibacy by her mother. The affair ends tragically when the mother discovers the young lovers:

Soon the old gods' motley swarm was driven
From the quiet house by such disdain.
Worshipped is One God, Unseen in Heaven,
And a Saviour crucified in pain.
Sacrifice is here,
Not of lamb or steer,
But of untold human woe and bane.¹⁰

In this ballad, Goethe portrayed Greek paganism as a religion of happy sensuality, in contrast to the stern demands of Christian asceticism, which he saw as a denial of life. He believed that the Greek religion affirmed life rather than denied it and that the gods of the Greeks placed no inhuman demands upon their followers. He commented darkly:

Wrath no god forbears
When a mother swears
That she'll keep from love a daughter's hand.¹¹

In the nineteenth century, the theme of the confrontation between Christianity and classical paganism became widespread. Many of the English Romantic poets expressed nostalgia for the beauties of paganism. In the famous sonnet of 1807 that begins "The world is too much with us. . .," Wordsworth lamented the loss of the classical past:

. . . Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.¹²

Not everyone shared this Romantic yearning for the past. Many of the Victorian writers expressed prim disapproval of the ancient Greeks. When in 1844 Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton translated Schiller's *Die Götter Griechenlands* into English, Elizabeth Barrett (later, Elizabeth Barrett

Browning) was moved to write a poem in answer to Schiller. In *The Dead Pan*, she described at length the death of each of the Olympian gods; these events she equated with the crucifixion of Christ and the beginning of the Christian era. With Victorian piety, she saw the demise of the gods as heralding the end of an age of darkness and superstition and she refused to mourn for classical antiquity. She adjured the gods to

Get to dust, as common mortals,
By a common doom and track!
Let no Schiller from the portals
Of that Hades call you back,
Or instruct us to weep all
At your antique funeral.¹³

Barrett called for poetry based upon Christian rather than classical subjects. Her sentiments were shared by the English poet Charles Kent, who made a bulky, if little known, contribution to the theme with his 139-page poem, *Aletheia: Or the Doom of Mythology*, published in 1850. Kent conjured up the figures of classical myth one by one, in pages of interminable poesy. Finally Aletheia appears to announce that Christ is risen and Pan is dead, the gods are overthrown, and that truth and love and the Christian God have banished the "pagan devils."¹⁴

In German literature, however, the outlook of Goethe and Schiller was kept alive throughout the nineteenth century. In 1853, the German-Jewish writer Heinrich Heine published an essay, *Götter im Exil*, celebrating the gaiety of Greek paganism which was, he thought, destroyed by the mean-spirited iconoclasm of early Christianity. He suggested that "The real question was whether the dismal, meagre, over-spiritual ascetic Judaism of the Nazarene, or Hellenic joyousness, love of beauty, and fresh pleasure in life should rule the world?"¹⁵ This idea achieved its ultimate expression in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, who in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), contrasted the Greek affirmation of life, despite its terrors, to death-obsessed Christianity. He characterized Christianity as a refuge for the cowardly and Judeo-Christian morality as an invention of the weak and timid, those too fearful to live life to the fullest. In *Ecce Homo*, written in 1888, Nietzsche maintained that the Christian concept of God

was invented as the counter-concept to life — everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, all deadly hostility to life. . . bound together in one horrible unit. The concept. . . "beyond" [was] invented in order to depreciate the only world that exists — in order to leave no goal, no significance, no task to our earthly reality. . .

The concept "immortal soul" [was] invented to despise the body. . . . The concept "sin" was invented in order to mislead our instincts.¹⁶

In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche postulated his famous polarity between Apollo and Dionysus, the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian." But in his later writings he seemed to lose interest in Apollo as he became more and more preoccupied with Dionysus. Nietzsche described the Greek god of wine as one who affirms this body, this life, and this world, gladly embracing all things, even the fearful void that, Nietzsche believed, lay at the core of reality:

This is the very essence of Dionysus. . . . He finds reasons for *being himself* the everlasting Yea to all things, "the tremendous and unlimited saying of Yea and Amen" "Into every abyss do I bear the benediction of my Yea to life." . . . *This again is the very essence of Dionysus.*¹⁷

Making explicit the polarity he saw between Christ and Dionysus, which replaced the earlier polarity between Apollo and Dionysus in his world view, Nietzsche concluded one of the sections of *Ecce Homo* with the query, "Have you understood me? Dionysus versus Christ. . . ." ¹⁸

Nietzsche's writings exerted a widespread effect around the turn of the century on a whole generation of artists, writers, and poets called the *Lebensbejaher* (the affirmers of life), or the Vitalists. Among those poets considered representative of Vitalism were Richard Dehmel, Otto Erich Hartleben, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Detlev von Liliencron, and Rainer Maria Rilke.¹⁹ Many of them drew images from Nietzsche, as in these lines from a poem by Hartleben, published in the periodical *Pan* in 1895:

. . . I am Dionysus
I am of all life the richest friend,
See my naked body browned
By the gladdest rays of Helios.²⁰

Klinger was among those intellectuals greatly influenced by Nietzsche. In 1905, he listed his heroes in his diary, mentioning Beethoven, Wagner, Brahms, the painter Arnold Böcklin, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.²¹ In his art, Klinger paid tribute to many of these "princes," as he called them. He portrayed Nietzsche in 1902 in a bronze bust based upon a death mask that deeply moved him; it showed, he said, a "face of such boundless, inexpressible mental anguish."²² He was inspired by it to repeat his portrait bust of the philosopher in at least four versions between 1902 and 1904 (Fig. 4), sometimes working in bronze and sometimes in marble.²³

Klinger made a detailed study of Nietzsche's writings, especially *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in the early 1890s when

he was at work on *Christ on Olympus*.²⁴ When the picture was first exhibited in 1897, it attracted a great deal of comment.²⁵ Most of the writing about it consisted of effusive description, along with the kind of inflated panegyric that often passed for art criticism at that time. One of the few contemporary attempts to analyze the meaning of the work systematically appeared as a monograph by Paul Schumann, published in 1899. Schumann painstakingly identified each of the figures in the painting, which he construed as a celebration of the victory of Christ over the "frivolous thoughtlessness" of the Olympian gods.²⁶ Such an interpretation is a triumph of nineteenth-century piety but bears little relationship to Klinger's picture or to the long German intellectual tradition from which it sprang. Schumann must have been trying to protect Klinger, whom he greatly admired, from the harsh vituperation the artist had already experienced when exposing his paintings to the views of rigidly conventional Wilhelmine society (see note 4). Surely Klinger, who considered Nietzsche a "prince," intended the painting to suggest the tragic loss of pagan sensuality with the arrival of Christianity and its morality of asceticism.

That Klinger intended *Christ on Olympus* as an allegorical representation of Nietzsche's ideas (or at least of the way that he interpreted those ideas) becomes apparent through a detailed examination of his figures. On the predella, there appears a tangled group of nudes identified by Schumann as Titans. In classical mythology, these giants had once ruled the world but were overthrown and imprisoned by the Olympian gods. In Nietzsche's version of mythology, the Titans represented the forces of the irrational, the terrible meaningless conflict that he, like Schopenhauer (who was also admired by Klinger), saw as the true reality underlying appearances. This sense of the tragic and the terrible at the core of existence was, according to Nietzsche, revealed to the Greeks through the Dionysian rites, when they threw off the mantle of reason and sought the riotous and even violent ecstasy afforded by wine. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche wrote,

The effects wrought by the Dionysian also seemed "titanic" and "barbaric" to the Apollonian [sic] Greek; while at the same time he could not conceal from himself that he, too, was inwardly related to these overthrown Titans and heroes. Indeed, he had to recognize more than this: despite all its beauty and moderation his entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, revealed to him by the Dionysian.²⁷

The philosopher believed that Greek tragic drama grew out of the Dionysian rites. Through it, he thought, the Greeks harnessed their emotions, their suffering, conflict,

and despair, to create something powerful and positive. They looked into the void but did not renounce it; rather, they seized and embraced it. Like Goethe and Schiller, Nietzsche believed that the ancients had been a people of joyous sensuality but this joy, he thought, was hard-won, gained only through victory over the Titans, representing their own potential for despair. Nietzsche portrayed the Greeks as celebrating life on the edge of the abyss. He contrasted the Greek attitude towards suffering to that of the Christians. The Christians, in his view, made a virtue of suffering and denied all bodily pleasures, looking for their rewards in the next world rather than in this. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he wrote that Christianity

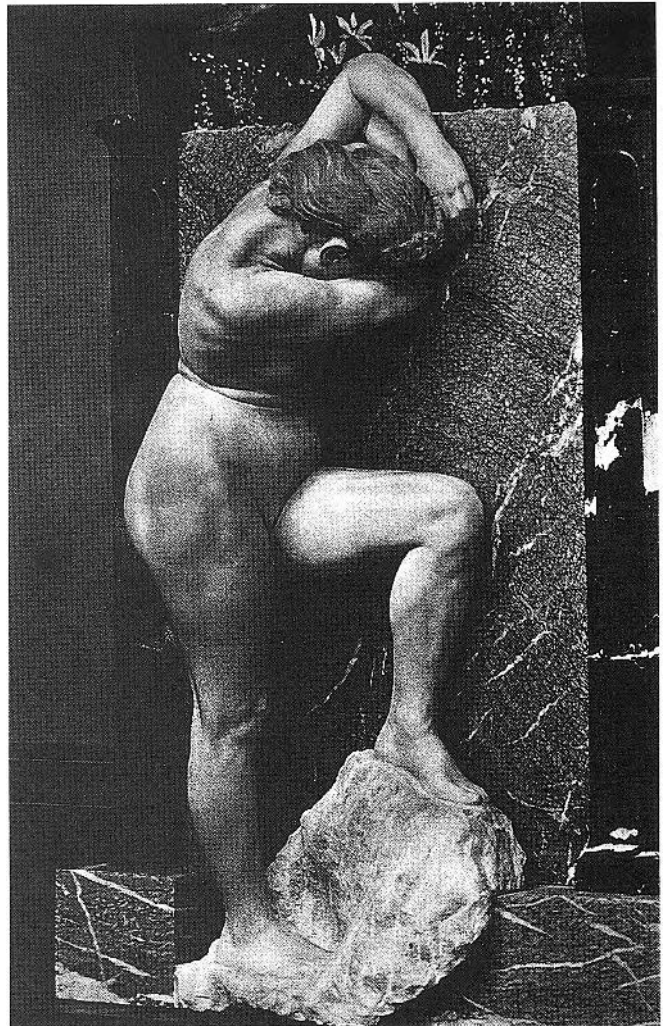
as the religion for sufferers [takes] the part of these upon principle; [it is] always in favour of those who suffer from life as from a disease, and . . . would fain treat every other experience of life as false and impossible.²⁸

In *Christ on Olympus*, Klinger drew upon Nietzsche's image of the Titans as the foundation upon which Greek culture rested. By placing the Titans on the predella below the depiction of Mount Olympus, he suggested, like Nietzsche, that the entire existence of the Greeks "rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge." These Titans are battering away at the foundations of the throne of Zeus, indicating that with the beginning of the Christian era the forces of unreason and despair will once again soon be on the loose.

On either side of the predella, the artist placed a carved marble figure. The one on the left buries her head in her arms in an attitude of sorrow (Fig. 2), while the one on the right looks upward towards the events above her with an expression of interest or anticipation. Schumann named these figures "Regret" and "Hope," saying that they represent grief over the death of paganism and the simultaneous yearning after Christianity.²⁹ But one might also say that these two figures represent two different attitudes towards suffering and thus towards life. The one on the left, the side of the picture associated with the entry of Christ, seems to have abandoned herself to her pain, whereas the figure on the right, associated with Zeus and the gods, might well be seen as a symbolic representation of the attempt to overcome suffering through a Nietzschean act of will.

A similar theme is carried out in the central panel of the painting, in the background on the right side, where a group of nymphs or bacchantes are dancing in a ring beneath the trees. They seem to be an embodiment of joy itself, suggesting a celebration of life and a sense of oneness with nature. In the panel on the left are a pair of similar figures, youthful and healthy; instead of dancing with joy,

Figure 2. Klinger, *Christ on Olympus*, detail.



however, they flee with expressions of dismay. They are driven away by a group of wizened old men with drawn, emaciated faces, apparently crawling up out of the earth. One of them raises his arms in a gesture of rage or supplication. They seem to represent the forces of asceticism, the professional sufferers whose time has finally come. Their coming heralds the beginning of an era of discord.

These events are occasioned by the arrival of Christ in the sacred precinct of the pagan gods, depicted on the central panel (Fig. 3). Christ, haggard and with a pallor suggesting anemia, enters in the company of four female figures who may represent the four traditional cardinal virtues, Temperance, Prudence, Fortitude, and Justice.³⁰ The gods react to the unexpected appearance of the newcomers in various ways. Some seem completely unaware of the events underway, like Pan in the background, who is about to pounce on a voluptuous nymph. Others, like little Ganymede on the knees of Zeus, seem bewildered, not

Figure 3. Klinger, *Christ on Olympus*, detail.

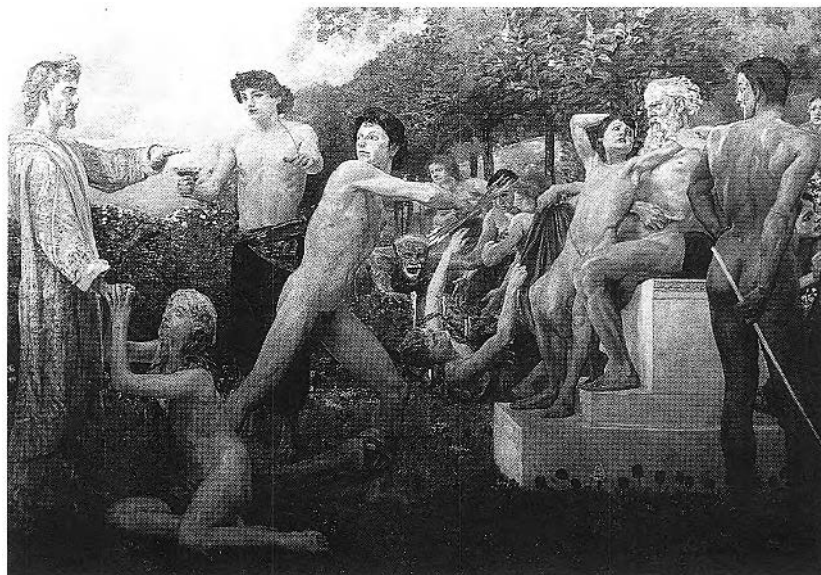
understanding that they are witnesses to their own downfall. Some stare in unabashed curiosity, like the three female nudes on the left, representing the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite.³¹ In the right foreground, a muscular figure seen from the back represents Hermes, who also looks on with amazement. Behind the throne of Zeus, Artemis, recognizing the implications of Christ's arrival, faints dead away while her brother Apollo holds her swaying form to prevent her from falling. In the panel on the right, Ares, god of war, draws his sword in alarm while below Persephone gazes balefully at the new arrivals. In her lap she cradles her consort Hades, who sleeps on oblivious to what is happening. In the middle of the central panel, Christ is greeted by Dionysus, Nietzsche's Yea-sayer, who offers Christ a cup of wine, the drink of Bacchic ecstasy.

Wine was of course the instrument of the Dionysian rites. Nietzsche saw these rites as an attempt on the part of the Greeks to look through the veil of ordinary appearances that human beings call reality. Through wine, he thought, the Greeks fearlessly beheld the true reality underlying appearances and gazed into the yawning void. Wine enabled them to understand and accept reality, to merge with nature and to become one with the universe. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche evoked

the rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence. . . . [A] chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality. . . . In this sense, the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet; both have once looked truly into the essence of things.³²

In Klinger's picture, Christ, with Temperance standing behind him, spurns Nietzsche's drink of rapture and of truth. His eyes are fixed on Zeus. Without looking to the side, he waves away the proffered cup and with it the wisdom it represents.

Among all the Olympian pantheon depicted by Klinger, the figures who react most strongly to the arrival of Christ are the two immediately before him. Psyche, symbol of the soul, is the only one who seems to be glad to see the newcomer. She falls adoringly on her knees before him, suggesting that the appeal of the new religion is to the spirit. Psyche's consort, Eros, representing the body, recoils violently in fear and horror. His reaction is more extreme than that of any of the other figures, perhaps to indicate Klinger's



view that it was Eros who suffered the most under Christianity. As we have seen, there was a long tradition in German thought that looked upon Christian asceticism as the antithesis and enemy of erotic love.

Klinger had previously dealt with the subject of Eros and Psyche in a series of forty-six etchings executed in 1880,³³ illustrating the famous story recounted by Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*.³⁴ The artist depicted the reconciliation of the lovers after their long separation in his etching *Cupid Finding Psyche* (Opus V, No. 41 in the series), in which the pair embrace in an Arcadian landscape (Fig. 5). Eros (or Cupid) then returns to Olympus, where he pleads his love for Psyche with Zeus (or Jupiter). Jupiter commands that Psyche be brought before him, where she is given a cup of nectar to drink, and Jupiter says to her, "Drink, Psyche, and become an immortal. . . . Cupid will now never fly away from your arms, but *must remain your lawful husband forever*."³⁵ Klinger represented this scene in his etching, *Psyche's Reception in Olympus* (Opus V, No. 43), in which Mercury ushers shy Psyche before Jupiter's throne and Ganymede offers her the beaker of immortality (Fig. 6). The composition of this etching is similar to that of *Christ on Olympus* and could well have been the source of the artist's idea for the later painting. The final sheet of Klinger's series was entitled *The Birth of Joy* (Opus V, No. 46), and represented the result of the marriage of Eros and Psyche.³⁶ We see Jupiter receiving the new-born infant in his arms (Fig. 7).

In *Christ on Olympus*, Christ is portrayed as an interloper intruding into the marriage of Eros and Psyche, which had given birth to joy in the earlier series of etchings. Klinger thus suggested in his painting that the happy union of soul and body characterizing life in ancient times was destroyed

Figure 4. Klinger, *Portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche*, marble, 1903. Weimar, Nationale Forschungs- und Gedenkstätten der klassischen deutschen Literatur. From Max Schmid, *Max Klinger* (Bielefeld and Leipzig, 1926), fig. 139. Reproduced with permission of the Nationale Forschungs- und Gedenkstätten der klassischen deutschen Literatur, Weimar.

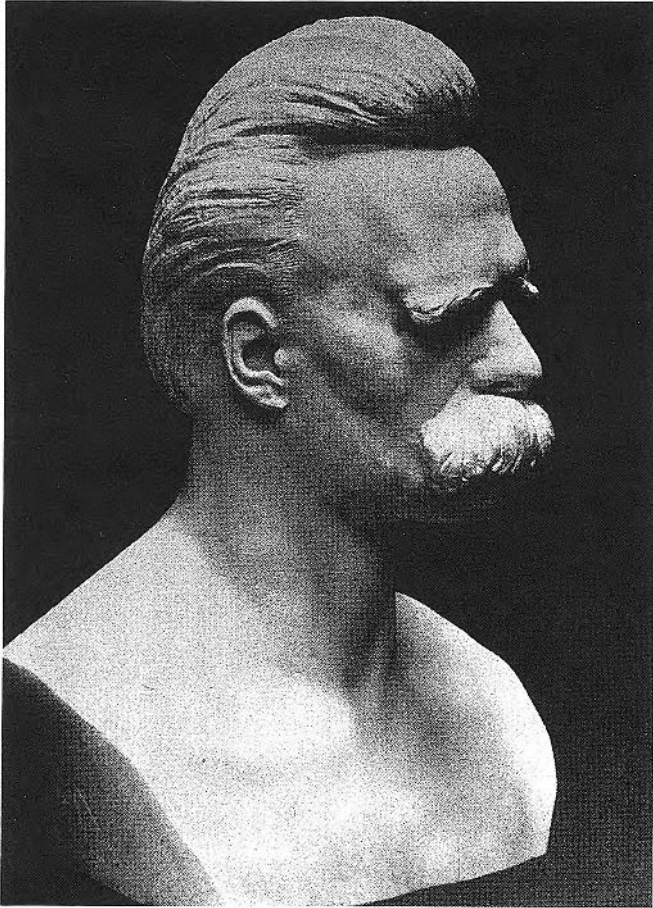
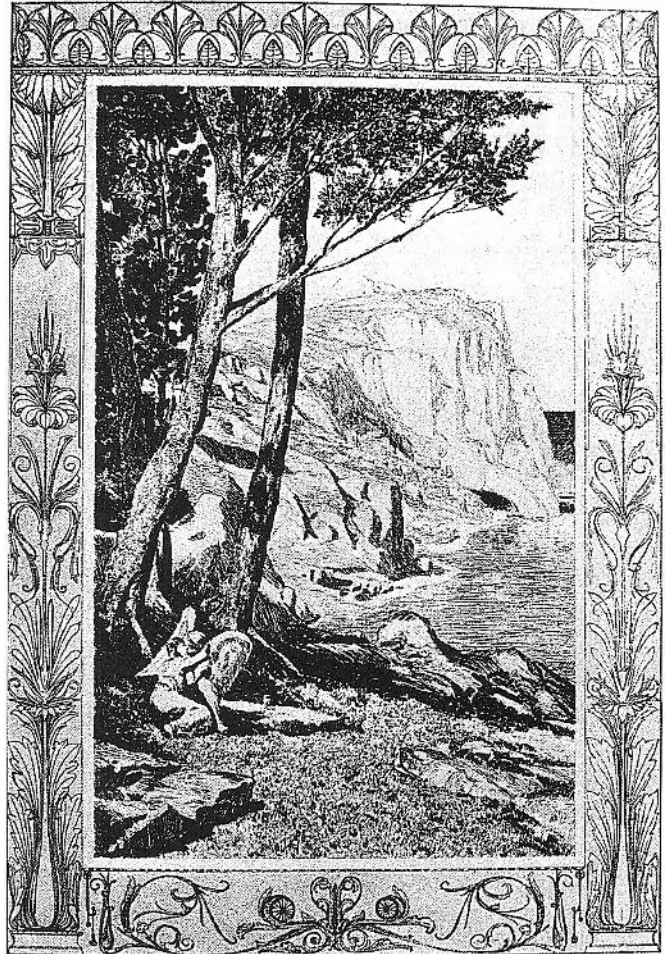


Figure 5. Klinger, *Cupid Finding Psyche*, etching, from the series *Cupid and Psyche* (Opus V, No. 41), 1880. From H.W. Singer, *Max Klingers Radierungen, Stiche, und Steindrucke: Wissenschaftliche Verzeichnis* (Berlin, 1909), 104.



by Christianity and that joy, the result of this union, had vanished from the world in the Christian era. When we examine the painting in the context of Klinger's earlier work, we can see that its meaning is very different from the interpretation put forward by Schumann.

Another interpretation of the painting was offered by Richard Dehmel, who has been called "the most prolific representative" of Vitalism in the years between 1890 and 1910.³⁷ In 1893, Dehmel published a poem, *Jesus and Psyche*, subtitled *Fantasy at Klinger's*.³⁸ In this work, Dehmel described a visit to Klinger's studio where he saw *Christ on Olympus*, then still unfinished, and fell into a reverie before it. The poet imagined that Christ accepts the cup of wine that is offered to him by his "Brother Bacchus." He drinks from it and then he sets it to the lips of the weeping Psyche and commands her to drink, saying, "This is my blood." Psyche drinks. Speaking for his imaginary Christ, Dehmel wrote,

But I draw my Psyche to me,
And wrap my kingly mantle around her,
And I speak: Weep not, my darling, come!

So I climb with her to the throne of Zeus
And I lay aside my crown of thorns:
Today Jesus celebrates his wedding feast!³⁹

Dehmel's Jesus orders all the assembled gods to dance and to rejoice and to celebrate his marriage to Psyche, "for the Bridegroom is here!" The poet thus suggested that, despite his admiration for Nietzsche, he was unwilling to abandon the Christian religion altogether; he hoped to find in Klinger's painting evidence of a new synthesis of Christianity and paganism by proposing a marriage between Jesus and Psyche. But when Klinger's picture was completed four years after the poem was published, the painter implied that he did not agree with Dehmel's interpretation. He portrayed Jesus rejecting the wine of Dionysus and Psyche shackled to her husband with a linen band, made very obvious by virtue of its bright blue colour. Thus Klinger pointed up the dilemma: how can Jesus marry Psyche when she is eternally married to Eros? He indicated that the bond linking the body to the soul cannot be broken, although it can certainly be damaged,

Figure 6. Klinger, *Psyche's Reception in Olympus*, etching, from the series *Cupid and Psyche* (Opus V, No. 43), 1880. From Singer, *Max Klingers Radierungen*, 106.

as is demonstrated by the violently differing reactions of the two figures to Christ's arrival.

When *Christ on Olympus* was first painted, a wide range of interpretations of the work was put forward, as we have seen, showing that its meaning was by no means obvious to contemporary viewers. It has retained its ambiguity and a similar diversity of interpretation has been proposed in recent years by Klinger scholars. However, none of the modern studies has taken into account Klinger's enthusiasm for the philosophy of Nietzsche nor made any attempt to fit the work into the intellectual context of *fin de siècle* Vitalism.⁴⁰ I submit that the painting should be seen as a call for a new sense of physical freedom and a rejection of nineteenth-century prudery. In it Christ and the four Virtues are shown modestly robed in severe, concealing garments and in strong contrast to the easy, unshamed nudity of the pagan gods. Klinger often depicted nudes in his work. He believed that the great art of the past was based upon an appreciation of the beauty of the human body. "If we want . . . a healthy sensibility for art," he wrote, "we must have a sensibility healthy enough not only to bear nakedness but to see it and to learn to value it."⁴¹ He frequently inveighed against the puritanism of the public, which was unable to appreciate the beauty of the human body.

The nudity of the gods and goddesses in the painting suggests the sensuality which many, from Goethe to Nietzsche, had seen as the fortunate lot of the ancient Greeks. In 1901, Klinger wrote in a letter:

Sensuality is a foundation for all artistic being. It brings us to a new creation, physical just as well as spiritual, through the experience of the enticements of nature. Here in Germany, for the past hundred years, we have been feeling the curse of the spiritual, so-called moral, overgrowth, and we have been harvesting [its fruits] here in a form so tangible that one would rather exercise oneself in . . . barren imitations rather than going back to the living kernel to find oneself anew. . . Nature tells us, you should enjoy what is necessary; we must say, you should reproduce what you have enjoyed. I remember a remark that [the versatile artist Karl] Stauffer-Bern made to me. He saw a print that I had just made, in which I drew a female form in the hard, unpleasant style I was using at that time. And then he pointed to the fold of an elbow and said, "But Klinger, doesn't it ever occur to you, that one can kiss a thing like that?"⁴²



Klinger went on in the same letter to say that he found most of the art of the past century barren and joyless; among the few artists he admired was the painter Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), whose work, he said, showed real sensuality. Klinger included Böcklin in his list of heroes along with Nietzsche and in 1887 he paid tribute to the older artist when he dedicated to him a cycle of etchings, *A Love* (Opus X).

Klinger not only admired Böcklin, but was very much influenced by him and frequently borrowed subjects and motifs from his work. Like Böcklin, Klinger depicted the minor deities of classical antiquity, the nymphs and the satyrs, the fauns and the centaurs, with which the Greeks had peopled their world. These creatures, to Böcklin as to Klinger, were personifications of nature and represented the simple pleasure which, both artists believed, the ancients had enjoyed in their unity with nature. This idea is exemplified in the circle of joyously dancing bacchantes portrayed by Klinger in *Christ on Olympus*, a motif derived from Böcklin's many depictions of ring-dancing nymphs. This theme was first seen in Böcklin's work in an illustration to Schiller's poem *Die Götter Griechenlands*, commissioned in 1859 by the Cotta Press for a Jubilee Edition of Schiller's poetry.⁴³

Many other borrowings from Böcklin may be seen in Klinger's representations of minor classical deities. Around 1895, he painted two mythological creatures of the sea, embracing passionately on the shore (Fig. 8); this work has been inaccurately given the title *Sirens*.⁴⁴ The theme is related to Böcklin's *Triton and Nereid*, of 1873-74 (Fig. 9), which is also a representation of two classical sea-beings who loiter aimlessly on a surf-scoured rock. Böcklin's work clearly has erotic implications, but they are much less overt than the candid sexuality found in Klinger's. Although he spoke out against prudery all his days,⁴⁵ Böcklin seems to have been unable to break free of his Pietistic upbringing and he hesitated to paint figures that were completely nude or openly erotic. Even in a work like *Triton and Nereid*, he

Figure 7. Klinger, *The Birth of Joy*, etching, from the series *Cupid and Psyche* (Opus V, No. 46), 1880. From Singer, *Max Klinger's Radierungen*, 109.



could not quite overcome his aversion to the depiction of total nudity. The nereid is posed provocatively on the rock but she is nevertheless veiled with a strategically placed strand of hair. The male Triton avoids her, turning a cold shoulder to her as he blows on his horn of shell, while, she, neglected, coyly strokes a suggestive sea-serpent. There is, in contrast, nothing coy about Klinger's rendition of the theme in *Sirens*. Like Böcklin, he chose to paint mythological sea-creatures, yet unlike the older artist he did not hesitate to explore the erotic implications of the theme. His figures do not turn away from each other, but come together in a passionate embrace, washed by the waves, in an image that pre-dated the famous beach scene in the film *From Here to Eternity* by more than half a century. How shocking this picture must have seemed in the 1890s!

One could apply to Klinger's mythological lovers Nietzsche's characterization of the satyr as "One who proclaims wisdom from the very heart of nature, a symbol of the sexual omnipotence of nature which the Greeks used to contemplate with reverent wonder."⁴⁶ During the nineteenth century, this sort of thing was more likely to be contemplated with pious outrage than with reverent wonder. In a comparison of Böcklin and Klinger, we find that Böcklin was still very much of that century. Even though he was admired by Klinger for his sensuality, in his work

he seems to have been inhibited by the proscriptions of his times. Böcklin skirted the nakedly erotic. Klinger, however, sought a new era in which the repressions of the old century might be cast off.

Klinger's search for sexual liberation reflects the social and economic conditions of his times. In Germany, as elsewhere in Europe, the century was characterized by the rise of the bourgeoisie, especially after Bismarck's victory over the French in 1871 and the subsequent unification of the German states. During the *Gründerzeit*, the time of the founding of the Wilhelmine Empire, the country developed from a backward agrarian society to a modern efficient industrial state in less than thirty years. This was a period of economic turbulence and rapid social change. The accelerated development of industry was accompanied by the mushroom-like growth of a large new middle class, which asserted its new-found social and economic respectability by imposing a rigid moral code upon German society. By the 1890s, many German intellectuals like Klinger began to rebel against the stifling restrictions of bourgeois morality and found in Nietzsche's writings affirmation of their struggle for erotic freedom and personal liberation.

As part of this struggle, Klinger produced many works on erotic themes. He is perhaps best-known today for his series of etchings, *A Glove* (Opus VI; published 1880), a memorable study of sexual fetishism. *A Glove* is set in the modern era, with the characters dressed in the contemporary costume of the period, complete with bustles and bowties; this seems somehow to our eyes to add to the disturbing and indeed claustrophobic atmosphere of the series. In those of Klinger's works in which the figures are clothed in modern dress, sexuality seems perverse, fraught with strange obsessions, haunted by guilt, and often ending in violent death. In his series of etchings, *Dramas* (Opus IX) of 1883, Klinger included one plate, "*In flagranti*," depicting an illicit meeting between a woman and her lover which has been tragically interrupted when the lover is shot by the woman's husband. Klinger showed the body of the unfortunate man stretched out on the moonlit terrace of a fashionable villa; the woman cowers as her husband leans out the window, rifle in hand (Fig. 10). In another series, *A Love* (Opus X) of 1887, Klinger traced the stages of a love affair between an upper middle-class woman and a top-hatted gentleman she meets while out riding in her carriage in the park. The lovers enjoy passion and happiness in each other's arms (one of the plates is entitled *Happiness*) but the woman eventually becomes pregnant. In the plate titled *Shame*, Klinger shows her wandering through the city streets, haunted by an imaginary figure casting no shadow and embodying her sense of disgrace. She feels herself the

Figure 8. Klinger, *Sirens*, oil on canvas, 100 x 185 cm., 1895. Villa Romana, Florence. From Meissner, *Max Klinger*, pl. 35. Reproduced by permission from the Soprintendenza per i Beni artistici e storici di Firenze.

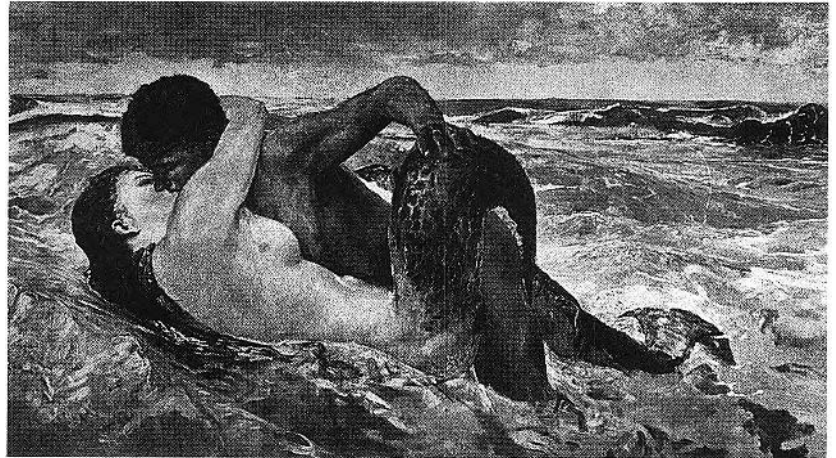
centre of all eyes; matrons in flowered bonnets stare at her and whisper behind their gloved hands. In the final plate of the series, the affair comes to a tragic end when the woman dies in childbirth.

In sharp contrast to his representations of the tortured course of love in contemporary nineteenth-century Europe are Klinger's depictions of erotic encounters between the figures of classical mythology. In the painting *Sirens*, his fish-tailed creatures embrace freely, unencumbered by shame or fear. How different they are from the tormented lovers in *Dramas* or *A Love!* These works show that Klinger believed that in classical antiquity human beings (symbolized by these mythic creatures) had celebrated life without guilt and with a sexual openness that no longer existed in the modern age.

This idea became widespread around the turn of the century and may be discerned in the works of many German-speaking artists; a couple of examples will suffice to demonstrate the prevalence of this concept of the classical past. In Munich, Franz von Stuck executed dozens of paintings depicting satyrs, nymphs, centaurs, tritons and other mythological hybrids, all dancing, frolicking, fighting, and making love with unselfconscious abandon.⁴⁷ Many of his works have obvious erotic implications. In his *Faun and Nixie* of 1902, he depicted a fish-tailed sea-nymph and a goat-legged faun cavorting in the waves, in what is clearly the first stage of a merry miscegenation (Fig. 11). Although not as intensely erotic as Klinger's *Sirens*, Stuck's picture is related to it as well as to Böcklin's *Triton and Nereid* of thirty years before.

In Vienna, similar themes were explored by Gustav Klimt. In his picture *Moving Water* (1898), he painted a group of nixies or nereids floating in the waves. Alessandra Comini tells us that "*Moving Water* took its cue from the sea-nymph frolics of Böcklin and Max Klinger, and its watery surround was to provide the symbol-polluted environment for two later versions of companionably close 'swimming' females entitled *Water Serpents*."⁴⁸ *Water Serpents* (c. 1904-07) is more decorative and stylized than Klimt's earlier version of the theme but it is even more explicitly erotic (Fig. 12). The two fish-tailed female figures embrace each other closely in their watery bed. One buries her face against the breast of the other, whose eyes are closed in ecstasy. In an article in *The Art Bulletin*, Lisa Florman demonstrated that Klimt drew the subject for this work from classical mythology and that he was influenced by his own particular interpretation of the writings of Nietzsche.⁴⁹

Stuck and Klimt are only a few examples of the many



German-speaking artists around the turn of the century who depicted erotic themes in terms of classical mythology. These artists clearly conceived of the classical past as a kind of ultimate male fantasy, an imaginary utopia of erotic freedom. Unlike Klinger, neither Stuck nor Klimt was given to painting elaborate allegories.⁵⁰ Klimt's work, for example, is less obviously literary than Klinger's and was thus more appealing to modern taste, although the same could hardly be said of Stuck. But an examination of Klinger's giant painting *Christ on Olympus* tells us a great deal about the ideas afoot around the turn of the century. I believe that Klinger intended the work as an elaborate Nietzschean allegory. However, Klinger's intentions are not in themselves important; what is important is how his contemporaries read and reinterpreted his work. Critics like Schumann misread Klinger's message but it was understood clearly by Stuck and Klimt and many other artists and poets of the period. In *Christ on Olympus*, Klinger suggested that he believed that the classical past had been a time, not just of erotic freedom but a time when life was celebrated with a joyous sensuality, a sensuality destroyed by the prohibitions of Christianity. This belief was rooted in a long tradition in German intellectual history which gained new currency with the Vitalists of the 1890s. Like other intellectuals of his generation who were influenced by Nietzsche and interpreted Nietzsche's writings to suit their own purposes, Klinger called for an overthrow of Christian asceticism and nineteenth-century constraint and demanded a new affirmation of the body. The cry for liberation from the moral as well as the aesthetic conventions of the period was of course at the very heart of modernism. Klinger's painting is, therefore, despite its old-fashioned academic style, to be seen as one of the gateposts of the modern era.

* My thanks to Kathlyn and Robie Liscomb for their comments and criticisms.

Figure 9. Arnold Böcklin, *Triton and Nereid*, mixed media on canvas, 105.3 x 194 cm., 1873-74. Schackgalerie, Munich. Reproduced by permission of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich.

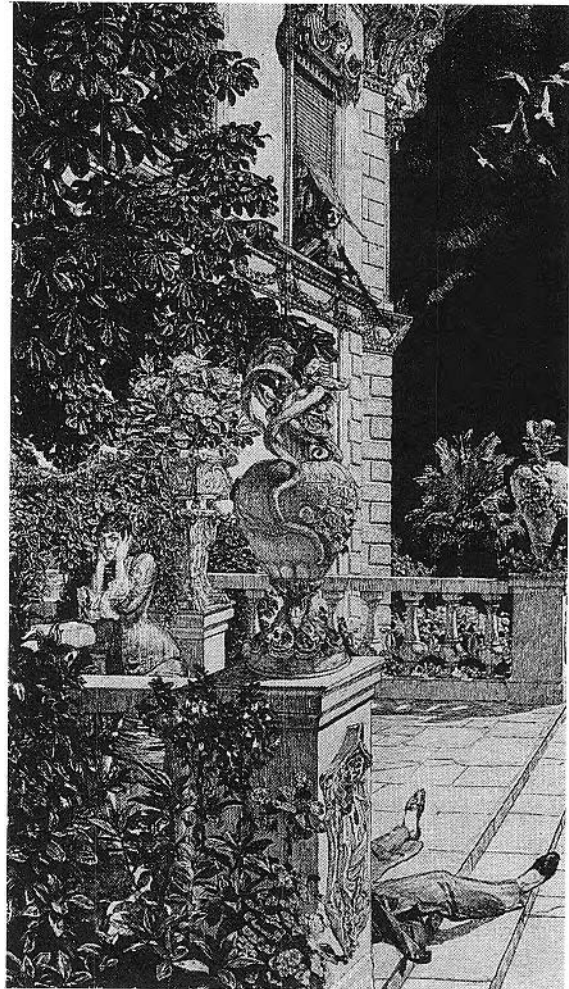


- 1 Since 1970, there have been several important exhibitions of Klinger's work in Europe. The first, breaking ground for a revival of interest in the artist, was: *Max Klinger 1857-1920: Ausstellung zum 50. Todestag des Künstlers*, exhibition catalogue, Leipzig, Museum der bildende Künste (Leipzig, 1970). It contains an enormous bibliography very useful to Klinger scholars. Other, more recent, exhibition catalogues include: *Max Klinger 1857-1920, Beeldhouwwerken, Schilderijen, Tekeningen, Grafiek*, exh. cat., Rotterdam, Museum Boymans - van Beuningen (Rotterdam, 1978). *Max Klinger 1857-1920, Malerei - Graphik - Plastik*, exh. cat., Künstlerhaus Wien (Vienna, 1982). *Max Klinger: Wege zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, exh. cat., Hildesheim, Roemer-und-Pelizaeus Museum (Mainz am Rhein, 1984). *Max Klinger: 1857-1920*, exh. cat., Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut (Frankfurt am Main, 1992). Other important contributions to the literature include: Alexander Dücker, *Max Klinger* (West Berlin, 1976). Gerhard Winkler, *Max Klinger* (Leipzig, 1984). Martin Michalski, *Max Klinger: Künstlerische Entwicklung und Wandel weltanschaulicher Gehalte in den Jahren 1878-1919* (Augsburg, 1986).
- 2 See *Max Klinger: A Glove and Other Images of Reverie and Apprehension*, exh. cat. with essay by Jan van Adlmann, Wichita Art Museum (Wichita, 1971). This exhibition was limited to Klinger's graphic work. Since that time a great deal of the scholarship on Klinger has dealt with his prints. For example, J. Kirk T. Varnedoe and Elizabeth Streicher have also concentrated on the artist's career as a printmaker in *Graphic Works of Max Klinger* (New York, 1977).
- 3 Varnedoe and Streicher, *Graphic Works*, 13-14.
- 4 Klinger intended *Christ on Olympus* as the companion piece to two earlier works on the theme of Christ, both completed in 1890: *Crucifixion* (Museum der bildende Künste, Leipzig) and *Pietà* (formerly in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, lost during World War II). The artist intended these three paintings to be exhibited together in a single room as a total art environment incorporating painting, sculpture, and architecture in a unified whole; unfortunately, the exhibition he envisioned never took place. Klinger called this kind of installation *Raumkunst* (or "art of space"). The two earlier works in this trilogy were more conventional in subject matter than *Christ on Olympus* but not necessarily more conventional in handling. In the *Crucifixion*, Klinger originally depicted the figure of Christ on the cross as naked, rather than with the usual loincloth. The painting caused a scandal when it was exhibited in 1893. The police threatened to close the exhibition and Klinger was forced to paint over Christ's genitals what he wrathfully called a "repulsive rag." See Hans Wolfgang Singer, ed., *Briefe von Max Klingers aus den Jahren 1874 bis 1919* (Leipzig, 1924), 180. Klinger's realistic depiction of Christ with genitals uncovered caused him to be attacked as "an enemy of the state, *lèse-majesté*, and even Jew." See Winkler, *Max Klinger*, 274. This episode confirmed the artist in his opposition to the narrow-minded prudery of contemporary Wilhelmine society. The overpainting he so despised was removed when the work was restored in 1970. See *Max Klinger: 1857-1920*, (Frankfurt, 1992), 342.
- 5 Max Klinger, *Malerei und Zeichnung*, 2nd edn (Leipzig, 1895), 21.
- 6 The predella, side panels, and sculptural framework of the painting were badly damaged while it was in storage during the war. In recent years, the central panel was exhibited in 1978 at the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam, in 1981-82 at the Künstlerhaus Wien, and in 1992 at the Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main.
- 7 Friedrich Schiller, *Poems of Schiller*, trans. Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (Leipzig, 1844), 205-09. The original text: *Finstre Ernst und trauriges Entsagen / War aus eurem heitern Dienst verbannt, / Glücklich sollten alle Herzen schlagen, / Denn auch war der glückliche verwandt. / Damals war nichts heilig als das Schöne. . .* is from Friedrich Schiller, *Die Götter Griechenlands*, in *Gedichte, Erzählungen: Schillers Werke*, III (Frankfurt, 1966), 83-86.
- 8 Schiller, *Poems*, 205-09. Original text: *Alle jene Blüten sind gefallen / Von des Nordes schauerliches Wehn, / Einen zu bereichern unter allen / Musste diese Götterwelt vergehn.* from Schiller, *Werke*, III, 84-86.
- 9 J. W. von Goethe, *The Bride of Corinth*, in *Poems*, dual language edn, trans. E.H. Zeydel (Chapel Hill, 1957), 62-63. Original text: *Und du bringst den Amor, liebes Kind! / Bist vor Schrecken blass! / Liebe, komm und lass, / Lass uns sehn, wie froh die Götter sind.*
- 10 Goethe, *Poems*, 62-63. Original text: *Und der alten Götten bunt Gewimmel / Hat sogleich das stille Haus geleert. / Unsichtbar wird Einer nur im Himmel,*

*Und ein Heiland wird am Kreuz verehrt;
Opfer fallen hier,
Weder Lamm noch Stier,
Aber Menschenopfer unerhört.*

- 11 Goethe, *Poems*, 62-63. Original text:
*Doch kein Gott erhört,
Wenn die Mutter schwört,
Zu versagen ihrer Tochter Hand.*
- 12 William Wordsworth, *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, I, ed. Nowell Charles Smith (London, 1908), 445.
- 13 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "The Dead Pan," *The Complete Works*, (New York, 1900), III, 156.
- 14 Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), 272.
- 15 Heinrich Heine, *Gods in Exile*, in *The Sword and the Flame: Selections from Heine's Prose*, trans. Charles Godfrey Leland (New York and London, 1960), 547.
- 16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, trans. Clifton B. Fadiman, et al., (New York, 1927), 932.
- 17 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 902.
- 18 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 933.
- 19 For a study of Vitalism and the influence of Nietzsche on German literature before World War I, see Gunter Martens, *Vitalismus und Expressionismus: Ein Beitrag zur Genese und Deutung expressionistischer Stilstrukturen und Motive* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, and Mainz, 1971). For the classic study of *Lebensbejahung* in German poetry of the 1890s, see Elisabeth Darge, *Lebensbejahung in der deutschen Dichtung um 1900* (Breslau, 1934). For a more recent study of the influence of Nietzschean thought on German society in general, see Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994).
- 20 Otto Erich Hartleben, in *Pan*, I, 1895, 143, trans. by author. Original text:
*Ich bin Dionysos,
bin alles Lebens reichster Freund,
vom frohsten Strahl des Helios
sieh meinen nackten Leib gebräunt.*
- 21 Max Klinger, *Gedanken und Bilder aus der Werkstatt des werdenden Meisters*, ed. Dr. H. Heyne (Leipzig, 1925), 75.
- 22 *Max Klinger* (Leipzig, 1970), 58-59.
- 23 For a study of several of Klinger's variations on his portrait of Nietzsche, see Klaus Gallwitz, ". . . die wahrste Ausgeburt der Gegenwart" in *Max Klinger: 1857-1920* (Frankfurt, 1992), 65-71.
- 24 Michalski, *Max Klinger*, 19.
- 25 The extensive contemporary literature on the painting includes: H. Sellnik, *Kling, Klang, Klung! Betrachtungen über das Klingersche Bild "Christus im Olymp"* (Leipzig, 1897). C. Gattermann, *Der Olympier Kritik des Klingerschen Bildes Christus im Olymp* (Leipzig, 1897). Hohne, *Zu Klingers Christus im Olymp* (Gütersloh, 1900). Paul Kuhn, *Christus im Olymp*, published by Paul Kuhn (no place, no date).

Figure 10. Klinger, *In Flagranti*, etching, 41.9 x 25 cm., from the series *Dramas* (Opus IX, No. 1), 1883. From Singer, *Max Klingers Radierungen*, 147.



- 26 Paul Schumann, *Max Klinger: Christus im Olymp* (Dresden, 1899), 6.
- 27 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, ed and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1967), 46.
- 28 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, trans. Helen Zimmern, et al. (New York, 1927), 448.
- 29 Schumann, *Max Klinger*, 4.
- 30 Schumann identified these figures as the cardinal virtues and then proceeded to name them Humility, Justice, Piety, and Truth (not the usual four cardinal virtues in the Christian tradition). Schumann, *Max Klinger*, 5.
- 31 The goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite were previously depicted together by Klinger as a trio of temptresses in his earlier work, the *Judgement of Paris* of 1885-87 (Neue Galerie des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien, Vienna). A few years later, the artist turned to a depiction of Aphrodite, on her own without her two rivals, as a representative of paganism in polar opposition to Christianity in his sculptural *Monument to Beethoven* (1885-1902) Upon its completion this work was exhibited in the Vienna Secession and today is in the collection of the Museum der bildende

Figure 11. Franz von Stuck, *Faun and Nixie*, oil on panel, 81 x 71.5 cm., 1902. Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Reproduced by permission from the Bildarchiv preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.



Künste, Leipzig. Klinger decorated the back of Beethoven's bronze throne with a relief depicting the nude figure of Aphrodite on one side and a figure of John the Baptist on the other. The saint points at the goddess accusingly; the crucifixion of Christ may be discerned in the background. In an essay on the Beethoven monument, Georg Bussmann wrote that this relief conveyed Klinger's sense of the opposition between the "asceticism and denial of life (*Lebensverzicht*)" of Christianity, on the one hand, and the "sensuality, lived to fullest (*ausgelebter Sinnlichkeit*)" of antiquity, on the other; Bussmann however associated this theme, for no clearly stated reason, with the artist's interest in Schopenhauer rather than Nietzsche. See Georg Bussmann, "Der Kunst ihrer Zeit: Max Klingers 'Beethoven' in der 14. Ausstellung der Wiener Sezession," in *Max Klinger: 1857-1920*, (Frankfurt, 1992), 38-50. There are several works of art by Klinger, including sculpture and prints, in which he alluded to the dichotomy he saw between Christianity and paganism, but nowhere is the subject handled as thoroughly and explicitly as in *Christ on Olympus*. It is outside the scope of this paper to deal with all manifestations of the theme in Klinger's work.

- 32 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 59-60.
- 33 Klinger's cycle of etchings on the subject of *Eros and Psyche* (Opus V) was published in its entirety by H.W. Singer, *Max Klingers Radierungen, Stiche, und Steindrucke: Wissenschaftliche Verzeichnis* (Berlin, 1909).
- 34 For a modern translation of the Latin story, see Robert Graves, *The Transformations of Lucius, Otherwise Known as the Golden Ass* (New York, 1951).
- 35 Graves, *The Transformations of Lucius*, 142. Emphasis the author's.

36 Apuleius wrote, "*Sic rite Psyche convenit in manum Cupidinis, et nascitur illis maturo partu filia, quam Voluptatem nominamus.*" "*Voluptatem*" has been variously translated into English. Graves renders it as "Pleasure;" Lindsay, as "Joy." (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Jack Lindsay (Bloomington, Indiana, 1962), 142.) Klinger used the German word "*Freude*" (Joy) to signify the daughter of Eros and Psyche.

37 Martens, *Vitalismus und Expressionismus*, 102.

38 Richard Dehmel's poem, "*Jesus und Psyche: Fantasie bei Klinger*," was first published in his volume of poetry, *Aber die Liebe* (Munich, 1893). It was re-published in Richard Dehmel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin, 1907), II, 23-30.

39 Dehmel, *Gesammelte Werke*, II, 28, trans. by author. Original text:

*Ich aber ziehe meine Psyche an mich
und schlage meinen Königsmantel um sie
und spreche: weine nicht, mein Liebling, komm!
So steig' ich mit ihr auf den Sitz des Zeus
und lege meine Dornenkrone ab:
heut [sic] feiert Jesus seine Hochzeitsnacht!*

40 Recent interpretations of *Christ on Olympus* vary widely but few of the modern Klinger scholars have attempted to put the work in the intellectual context of the artist's own time. In a study published in 1984, Gerhard Winkler based his interpretation on Schumann's 1899 monograph. He described the painting as a depiction of the triumph of a new ethical order over classical decadence. Winkler interprets Klinger's picture as a representation of the moral decay of the ancient world. He rather priggishly describes Klinger's Zeus as a pederast, his Bacchus as drunken, and his Amor as debauched. Like Dehmel, Winkler believes that the picture suggests an alliance of Psyche and Christ as a symbol of the beginning of a new, more ethical era in human history. He recognizes, however, that Dehmel's proposed marriage between Christ and Psyche is impossible, as "she is to remain indissolubly bound to the god of love, which Klinger makes clear with a blue band." Winkler thinks that the picture was Klinger's way of demanding a new synthesis of two different ways of seeing the world. He tells us that "according to Klinger's ideas, the contest of powers comes to an end with the reconciliation of opposites. . . . The selfless love of Psyche and the spiritual purity of Christ arrive at a new kind of alliance, which prevails over the separation of soul and body growing out of the Christian way of thinking but which, at the same time, subjects the world view of the ancients to a new ethos, rejecting the licentious way of life of Bacchus and Amor" (Winkler, *Max Klinger*, 278). Winkler offers no evidence for his interpretation, nor does he quote from Klinger's writings to support his claim that he is expressing the artist's own ideas. His interpretation of the painting seems to be based entirely upon a description of it and does not take into account Klinger's stated admiration of Nietzsche or the widespread cult of Nietzsche in the 1890s.

Other recent interpreters of Klinger's painting include Alexander Dücker, who, in 1976, explained it rather bizarrely as manifesto of sexual sado-masochism. Dücker suggests that the picture

Figure 12. Gustav Klimt, *Water Serpents*, mixed media on parchment, 50 x 20 cm., c. 1904-07. Österreichische Galerie, Vienna. Reproduced by permission of the Österreichische Galerie.



has two meanings, an “official” one, intended for the middle-class public, who would be offended at any attack on their religion, and a private one. The official subject in Dückers’s view, is a variation on the traditional theme of the harrowing of Hell; the just-crucified Christ descends into the “shadow-realm” to save unconverted sinners. But, Dückers points out, this traditional Christian theme has little to do with the artist’s private intentions. He writes “[Klinger’s] other work is sufficient indication that the Christian teachings were for him no longer the object of belief. When Klinger placed in opposition the Olympian gods and that ascetic Christ, understood as the personifi-

cation of the denial of the will to life, then, with a certain inevitability, commenced a clash between the official claim and the actual representation. The idea of asceticism came into conflict with the demands of the *fin de siècle* for erotic freedom, for which antiquity was directly the model” (Dücker, *Max Klinger*, 114). Dücker’s interpretation is diametrically opposed to Winkler’s. He appears at first to be on the right track in his understanding of the picture as a call for erotic freedom, but the only evidence he offers for his interpretation is Dehmel’s poem. He reads the poem, with its description of a marriage between Jesus and Psyche, not as a symbol of a new synthesis of Christianity and paganism but, oddly, as a deliberately blasphemous piece of erotic literature. Dücker applies this kind of thinking to Klinger’s painting as well. He sees Psyche, kneeling submissively before her stern lord, as a kind of masochistic victim. Dücker maintains that Klinger depicted her as “the humiliated victim of man’s lust who is desirable just because of her suffering, in the sense of the Marquis de Sade” (Dücker, 117). Dücker therefore holds that the private agenda of Klinger’s painting is not merely a demand for sexual liberation, but a confession of Klinger’s own sado-masochistic tastes. The only evidence that he supplies is the example of two earlier works by the artist, a drawing and an etching, which Dücker claims are sadistic in theme; the first depicts Amor driving a group of young women with a whip and the second shows him shooting them with his arrows of passion. These two images seem rather slim proof on which to base an interpretation of Klinger’s allegorical painting, much less an analysis of his entire psychosexual orientation. They could just as well be seen as a comment on the nature of love as a driving force that cannot be denied. The painting certainly bears upon Klinger’s attitudes towards eroticism, but it seems far-fetched to see it as confession of a taste for sadistic sex. Like Winkler, Dücker has made little attempt to fit the picture into the intellectual context of the period when it was painted.

A recent study emphasizing the importance of Vitalism for Klinger is that of Martin Michalski, who recognizes Nietzsche’s role in forming Klinger’s view of the world but does not discuss *Christ on Olympus* in the context of the artist’s philosophy. For a discussion of the influence of Nietzsche on Klinger, see Michalski, *Max Klinger*, 19-24.

In a brief recent study, Friedrich Gross interprets Klinger’s painting in Marxist terms. Gross sees Klinger’s Greek gods as signs of nineteenth-century bourgeois decadence and Christ as the embodiment of the “rugged individual” who arrives to usher in a new proletarian Utopia. Because Klinger lived in Leipzig, much of the writing on him and his work in recent decades has been by East German art historians. In the old East Germany, Klinger was frequently portrayed as an artist of the political left, on no very good grounds other than the need to justify the study of his work by an appeal to the party line. It is interesting to see this idea of Klinger still put forward as late as 1992. See Friedrich Gross, “Vom Alltagsgetriebe fern: Der grosse Einzelne in Klingers ‘Kreuzigung Christi’ und ‘Christus im Olymp’” in *Max Klinger: 1857-1920* (Frankfurt, 1992), 72-83.

- 41 Klinger, *Malerei und Zeichnung*, 57-59.
- 42 Hans Wolfgang Singer, ed., *Briefe von Max Klinger aus den Jahren 1874 bis 1919* (Leipzig, 1924), 145-46.
- 43 Rolf Andree, *Arnold Böcklin: Die Gemälde*, catalogue raisonné (Basel and Munich, 1977), 246.
- 44 The title is a misnomer because, in classical mythology, the Sirens were half bird, not half fish. The theme of embracing mythological lovers, in harmony with the natural environment around them, recurred regularly in Klinger's work and may be seen in his etching on the subject of the embrace of Cupid and Psyche (Fig. 5).
- 45 For example, in 1866 Böcklin spoke to his student Schick about "the concepts of morality of our times, how people see in a naked figure only the nakedness and not the beauty." Rudolf Schick, *Tagebuch-Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1866-1868-1869 über Arnold Böcklin* (Berlin, 1901), 80.
- 46 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 61.
- 47 All of Stuck's paintings have been illustrated in Heinrich Voss, *Franz von Stuck, 1863-1928: Werkkatalog der Gemälde* (Munich, 1973).
- 48 Alessandra Comini, *Gustav Klimt* (London, 1975), 21.
- 49 Florman recognizes the origin of these embracing fish-tailed creatures in classical mythology, pointing out that the stylized plants meandering across Klimt's composition are grapevines: "The motif is both rather simple and common — it appears on any number of Attic amphorae, usually accompanying the image of Dionysus." Florman ties Klimt's treatment of classical mythological figures to his interest in Nietzschean themes, particularly that of the Dionysian, but she does not link these themes to the work of Klinger, or to the widespread preoccupation with Nietzsche around the turn of the century, or to a call for a new erotic freedom. Florman does not notice the sultry eroticism of this work, although it seems blinkered to ignore the sexual impact of Klimt's languid lesbians. See Lisa Florman, "Gustav Klimt and the Precedent of Ancient Greece," *The Art Bulletin* LXXII, 2 (June 1990), 310-26.
- 50 It was precisely because of Klinger's taste for elaborate allegories that Robert Goldwater dismissed him as a mere *Gedankenmaler* rather than a true exponent of the Symbolist movement; his work is "all too tangible and literary," wrote Goldwater, "more puzzle than mystery." See Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism* (New York, 1979), 34-36. Goldwater's attitude towards Klinger was typical of those modernists who rejected Klinger without trying to understand how his work reflected the intellectual ambiance of the *fin-de-siècle* period in Germany.