



The mysterious oil painting that Dutch art collector Alexander Wetzel bought at an online auction for €150, and which he is now convinced is by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt

OF
TRUTH

AND
BEAUTY

Emilie Flöge was a feminist, a fashion designer and, in 19th-century Vienna, a woman ahead of her time. She was also the lover and muse of the artist Gustav Klimt. But could a scruffy picture picked up online for €150 really be a long-lost portrait of her? Alix Kirsta investigates



Portrait of Emilie Flöge (1902) by Klimt

There is nothing unusually striking about the painting. It is clearly old, shows signs of wear and tear and looks unfinished. Nor is the woman's face out of the ordinary; she isn't a great beauty. However, there was something about it that stopped Alexander Wetzel in his tracks, late one night in July 2016.

The 41-year-old businessman and art lover, who lives in The Hague, was browsing a Dutch online auction of artworks when the phone rang. His mother Valentina was on the line from America and sounded excited. Like her son, she collects affordable art and antiques, and had also seen the portrait. As Wetzel recalls, 'She told me to look at it carefully and take it very seriously.'

Information about the work was scarce. The painting, oil on wood, measures 9 x 7in. The seller owned an antique shop in Amsterdam, and described it as an 'art nouveau portrait of a woman from Germany or Austria, year 1920'. Both sitter and artist were unknown, and there was no record of previous ownership.

When Wetzel asked his mother whether to buy it, she responded instantly. 'She has extensive art knowledge, especially of art nouveau, as well as fashion design of that period. Without hesitation, she told me to buy it.' Valentina Wetzel was sure she recognised the woman in the portrait as the pioneering Viennese fashion designer Emilie Flöge, a member of the Wiener Werkstätte, the architectural and design branch of the Vienna Secession founded by Gustav Klimt and his circle in the late 1890s.

Wetzel bid €150 for the portrait and two unrelated smaller works, and once he got it home, spent hours poring over the fine detail, the antique dealer's advice echoing in his ears: 'It is worth doing research into the painting.' Although the picture was dirty and discoloured, with surface cracks and fragments of missing paint, he saw similarities to the brushwork and palette of late-19th and early-20th-century Austrian painters. Then he spotted the date of the work. 'When I examined the numbers under a strong magnifying glass, I saw the seller had wrongly quoted 1920. It is 1910. The '1' is painted with a slight upper curve in the gothic German style often adopted by Secessionist painters.'

The more research he did, the more it dawned on him that his mother could be right about the sitter. But if Valentina Wetzel had correctly identified Emilie Flöge, then who was the artist? Could this perhaps be not only an unknown portrait of Flöge but also a long-lost work by the most important man in her life, Gustav Klimt?

Klimt enthusiasts, familiar mainly with the artist's ornamental symbolism, might dismiss this as wishful thinking. As will some art critics. The painting appears too naturalistic, the palette too muted to be by the same hand that created lush, gold-embellished works such as *The Kiss*, *Judith I* and the *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* - today known worldwide as *The Woman in Gold*. Could Klimt, a renowned sensualist and womaniser, whose erotic depictions of women as goddesses or naked temptresses scandalised fin-de-siècle Vienna, paint such an ordinary portrait?

In fact, that is exactly what Klimt did at times. Only a handful of art experts are aware of the artist's less ornamental early work or the naturalistic style he adopted in the last decade of his life. A little-known 1893 portrait of 19-year-old Emilie Flöge resembles Wetzel's painting stylistically. The handling of the foliage, her costume and the perfunctory representation of her hands aren't dissimilar. The best known of Klimt's three portraits of Emilie dates from 1902, and it is telling that she and her family reportedly so disliked its showy glamour that they allowed Klimt to sell it to a museum.



Wetzel's attempt to solve the mystery of his portrait rests on whether or not he can eventually obtain a definitive appraisal from a recognised Klimt expert. If the work was declared genuine, it would set the art world buzzing. Market prices for Klimt remain stratospheric. Since 2006, when Ronald Lauder paid £73 million for the iconic golden portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, Klimt sales continue to break records. A relatively unknown flower scene fetched £48 million at Sotheby's in 2017. In 2016, Oprah Winfrey sold Klimt's second (less ornamental) portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer for an estimated £119 million to an unnamed Chinese collector, making a 71 per cent profit - Winfrey had bought the work in 2006 for £70 million.

Emilie Flöge was always an enigma among art scholars. While Klimt's last words were 'send for Emilie' and there is evidence that the embracing couple in his mas-

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terpiece *The Kiss* represent him and his lover, the exact nature of their 27-year relationship remains a mystery. This is partly because his image as a serial seducer, unable to commit to any woman, is so much at odds with his closeness to Flöge, whose achievements and role in his life have been largely forgotten since her death in 1952.

The two met around 1891, when she was 17, and one of her sisters, Helene, married Klimt's brother Ernst, also a painter. When Ernst died 15 months later, leaving his widow with a newborn daughter, Klimt was made the infant's legal guardian. From then, he and the Flöges became extremely close, and Klimt, 12 years older than Emilie, was a regular visitor to the family home. He gave Emilie drawing lessons; they socialised and took French

lessons together. Klimt was already a successful if controversial artist who had turned his back on traditional styles of painting, pursuing modernist techniques and co-founding the radical Vienna Secession. Flöge was expected to become financially independent - and, as a graduate of the School of Arts and Crafts, was a trained seamstress and a gifted artist. By her 20s she had become a rarity of her time: an emancipated, successful businesswoman. The couple moved among Vienna's high society, radical artists and intellectuals, attracting gossip, followed by the press. An enthusiastic motorist, Flöge was often seen about town in her yellow open-top sports car. Klimt was one of the first people to have a telephone installed - which he detested - and to own a motor boat.

In 1904, when Flöge opened a couture salon, *Schwester Flöge* (Sisters Flöge), in Vienna with her two sisters, their closeness to Klimt guaranteed them an elite clientele even before the doors opened. At the height of their success, they employed more than 80 people.

Flöge's designs represented a dramatic challenge to convention, and some clothes were designed by Klimt, a keen lover of fashion. Reflecting the burgeoning 'Reform Movement', dedicated to liberal social values, the gowns were a hit with early feminists, working women demanding unrestricted freedom of movement and lifestyles. Flöge's kaftan-style dresses hung loose and unbelted, accentuating physical movement. Black and white geometric patterns, stripes, squares and triangles added to the impression of movement. Photos of Klimt, alone or with Flöge, wearing full-length blue 'working' smocks provided further publicity for her designs. Today they remain strikingly modern: recently Valentino created a Flöge-inspired line for his autumn/winter 2016 collection.

Scores of pictures of Flöge and Klimt reveal glimpses of their relationship. These were taken during the long summer holidays they spent with her family at their retreat on Attersee (Lake Atter). Here, unlike in Vienna where Klimt lived with his mother, he and Flöge

lived as a couple. He holidayed there from 1898 almost until his death in 1918, bringing canvas, easel and paints, and working on commissions, sometimes with Flöge's help, in-between long hikes, boating excursions and visits to neighbours and relatives.

In the 1980s, bundles of Klimt's correspondence were discovered - about 600 cards, letters, telegrams and other papers, which Flöge had kept neatly tied with blue ribbon all her life - shedding new light on his need to share his life with her. Klimt wrote to her up to eight times a day while abroad, and even wrote to her when both were in Vienna. Although many cards contain mundane information about the weather, his health, meals he ate, his surroundings and the people he met, he often says he misses her, and there are flashes of tenderness. From Toledo, he writes: 'I thought of you most intensely.' On one card, dated 1897, he drew a heart and sent her 'a long kiss', and for her 22nd birthday he copied a dozen lines of 18th-century romantic poetry and drew a winged heart pierced with a sword.

Biographer Wolfgang Fischer claims this proves his dependence on Flöge. 'He had a possessive fixation on Emilie. There was no other man in her life, yet he was incapable of taking a decision and making her his fiancée, wife or official mistress.' Certainly, they shared a deep love, whether platonic or sexual is unknown - though his diagnosis of syphilis could be highly relevant. 'For 20 years,' Fischer says, 'Emilie was Klimt's wife, the person to whom he related most closely. He could not live without communicating with her.'

When he died, Klimt left half his estate to Flöge, the rest to his family. Although he acknowledged four illegitimate children, 14 paternity claims were made. For a year Flöge kept a key to Klimt's studio, where she allegedly retrieved basketfuls of her correspondence to him and burnt it. Her 'Klimt room', containing his gifts and belongings, including his easel, smocks, hundreds of drawings and mementos, was badly damaged when a fire destroyed her Vienna flat in 1945. Flöge kept what was salvaged until her death, aged 77, on 26 May 1952.

In his search for information about Flöge, Wetzel has trawled archives and information about her estate, but has found no mention of any missing portrait. He believes the work he now owns may have been removed by firemen, builders or police from the debris of her flat and dumped outside, before being picked up and sold for a few shillings by some poverty-stricken passer-by.

But what makes him so sure the portrait is of Flöge - let alone the work of Klimt? Last year Wetzel submitted the work for analysis at the scientific laboratory at G Matthäus Museum of Art and Science in Milan (used by Italian police to uncover fake art and stolen antiques), and the reports seem encouraging. Analysis of the painting's age, condition and composition dates the work to the early 20th century; while chemical analysis shows only pigments available at that time. Spectroscopic scans and fluorescent X-rays of the deepest brushwork reveal the artist made changes to the final image of the woman's neck, lips and eyes. Importantly, there was no evidence of cleaning, restoration or added paintwork within the past century. What most excited Wetzel is that the lab found what appear to be numbers and letters buried within the painting. They have advised Wetzel to have these analysed by professional experts on artistic style and handwriting.

This has prompted him to carry out further detec-



tive work, after learning how to alter the colour and contrast filters on his computer once the image of the painting was uploaded. 'As I put on the blue filter, I suddenly saw the numbers 1874 on her cheek - the year of Emilie's birth. I played about more, and the letters G, then AV materialised along her bottom lip. Elsewhere is an S and O, which may stand for Oleander, the villa where they stayed, and Schloss Kammer [the village in which it's located]. It was a eureka moment. Tiny, invisible details you wouldn't see normally,' he says excitedly.

Wetzel thinks these letters were a secret code between the couple, in what was intended to be a private portrait. Most recently, he believes he has discovered Klimt's gothic-style signature in the lower left-hand corner, deep within the paint - also invisible to the naked eye. 'If you examine Klimt's signatures, you find he combined Secession design with medieval gothic German lettering,' he explains. Confusingly, this makes both his monogram and signature appear like a logo or trademark, easy to miss among a thicket of brushstrokes. 'Scholars have recently found that in 1905 Klimt developed an oval signature: first name above last. This was found on some paintings and on letters and entrance cards to museums and shows - and that one is on this portrait.'

Although Wetzel has already emailed photos of the portrait to two art experts who dismissed it as 'unlikely to be by Klimt', another expert, based in Texas, has no doubt about the identity of the woman. When Wetzel sent forensic artist Lois Gibson his portrait and a photo of Flöge, she spent three weeks analysing the two images. The results were uncanny. 'One process involves placing a series of transparencies of the photo on top of the portrait. The facial anatomy in the portrait is so nearly exact I was able to lay the photo on top and the two lined up identically. The only difference was in head position,' says Gibson. Then she used her knowledge of dentistry and maxillofacial structure to compare the facial anatomy of the two women. The entire bony structure and the soft tissue, millimetre by millimetre, proved a match. 'There is a slight difference in the lower lip, because the artist attempted to give it more volume, but basically the mouth is the same shape. It is definitely Emilie Flöge.'

Wetzel needs no convincing. But he knows there is a long way to go - and the final verdict of the art world, notoriously hard to convince, still remains to be seen. ●

