

March 19, 2010

Sex, Scandal, Klimt and the Arts & Crafts Movement:

Christoph Buechel's Element 6 Exhibition and the Beethoven Frieze

By C.J. Hurley

When the Vienna Secession was formed in 1897 with Gustav Klimt at its head, their intentions were, following the precedent set by the Arts & Crafts movement, to initiate reform by unifying the fine and the decorative arts, to bring purer form to the design of buildings, furniture, glass and metalwork through the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk [the total work of art], and ultimately bring about the redemption of humanity through art. A tall order by any standard, and, by its very premise, it is an idea infused with moral implications, spiritual concerns, and an overarching concern to improve humankind. Therefore, the recent exhibition at the original Secession building and spearheaded by Swiss artist, Christoph Buechel, of Klimt's Beethoven Frieze alongside an installation of a real sex club, called Element 6, leaves one to ponder the correlation between the installation and the frieze, and whether Klimt would approve.

The exhibition, which acts as an active sex club after museum hours, requires visitors wishing to see the "Beethoven Frieze" to walk through the sex club environs which were transported there from another part of town. Buechel has curiously refused to comment on his exhibition, leaving others to speak for him. According to Secession spokeswoman Urte Schmitt-Ulms, Buechel hoped to spark a reaction reminiscent of the explosive scandal Klimt caused when his "Beethoven Frieze" was first exhibited in 1902. And Element 6 adds that Buechel "aims to give as many people as possible the opportunity to overcome their inhibitions" by exploring the sexual possibilities evoked by the installation. The club goes on to say, "In the framework of this exhibition at the Secession, each individual can test for himself or herself whether this opens up new dimensions for his or her own sexuality."

Buechel's desire for an exhibition that inspires people to evaluate their sexuality and offer vistas to openly explore, experiment, and overcome repressive inhibitions is admirable in a world that continually "sells sex" while simultaneously demonizing it as something bad, dirty, and perverted. I have a long history of pursuing sex and gender issues in my own art and can relate to Buechel's desire to provide an avenue for exploring the topic of sexuality. "Hurley's [paintings] are scathing yet funny glimpses into the kinky, sinister side of human nature..." [Triad Style August 18, 1993. "The artist's statement argues that Hurley means to provoke discussion of gender issues and mythological archetypes...It is an ambitious and technically exacting body of work, and it's the star of the show." [November 10 1997, the Nashville Scene]. From personal experience I can sympathize with Buechel, but I think he's missed the mark by trying to cause scandal, especially in the name of Klimt.

Besides the fact that I don't think Klimt was trying to create scandal, I think you don't have to seek out Klimt's frieze in order to stir it. Shock value can be incited anywhere. Unfortunately, I think that Buechel's desire to help people explore their sexuality is questionable in light of his desire to cause scandal. Scandal immediately implies impropriety of some sort, and is anathema

to any desire to help people better their sexuality. Also, the exhibition is too Vienna specific with its attachment to Klimt's frieze; without the frieze, there is no relationship to the scandal it is trying to emulate, therefore, it would fall flat in another venue in another city. Sadly, it appears that Buechel's true intention was to place himself on the map of the international art scene by using the popularity of Gustav Klimt to fuel his controversy, which unfortunately worked out brilliantly for him. Countless press releases and articles have gone out on this exhibition [I'm guilty of adding another], and as yet, I haven't read anything about whether the intention of his exhibition has aided anyone in working through their sexual inhibitions. And speaking of intentions, what about Klimt's intentions for his art?

[I thought the essay could end here minus the last sentence. Something from the concluding paragraph could be added to better conclude the piece.]

[Following below, however, is more information about how Klimt's work is generally misinterpreted, and Arts & crafts enthusiasts may find it useful to have this kind of understanding regarding Klimt.]

Confusion over the correlation of Klimt's frieze to the Element 6 sex club installation heightens with the fact that Klimt's artwork is rarely understood and is repeatedly taken out of its context as *gesamtkunstwerk*. *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s unification of the fine and applied arts was intended to create an inseparable unity of the arts with life, in short this meant "life as art" and "art as life.". As recently as the 1990's when I was at university, Klimt's work was taught in what can at best be described as bleary terms; I heard things like, "Is this painting, or is it merely decorative garbage?" It is dangerous to take Klimt's work out of its context as part of a greater scheme.

Klimt did not paint the Beethoven Frieze as an independent work of art to be regarded in itself; it was part of a *gesamtkunstwerk* for the Vienna Secession's XIVth exhibition dedicated to Ludwig van Beethoven. The exhibition catalog described the purpose of the exhibit: "First of all, there must be a unity of space, and this space must be enriched by paintings and sculpture which conform and contribute to the overall idea. The parts must be strictly subordinated to the whole. Logic enforces subordination to the character of the room and sustains the central idea." [Susanna Partsch, *Klimt: His Life and Work* (Barnes & Noble, Inc., by arrangement with I.P. International Publishing, 1999) p. 142]. The romantic themes of Beethoven's music, especially his 9th symphony based on Friedrich Schiller's poem *Ode to Joy*, formed the core of the exhibition. Many artists contributed artworks and sublimated their imagery to fit both the Beethoven theme, and the architectural scheme of the exhibition, designed by Josef Hoffmann. Klimt's frieze was no different, not only did it conform in scale to the proportions dictated by the space allotted by Hoffmann, but it told, in tandem with the paintings and sculptures of other contributing artists, an allegorical tale based on the lines of *Ode to Joy*.

From the standpoint of *gesamtkunstwerk*, Buechel's installation of a sex club has no context to the Beethoven Frieze or Klimt's intentions for it. The only connection Buechel has suggested is the controversy caused by Klimt's frieze. It is my understanding that Max Klinger's sculpture of Beethoven caused more of an outrage than Klimt's frieze ever did. Klinger's nude depiction of the composer, who held a god-like status, didn't fit with Viennese society's image of their cult hero; they were offended. Neither Klinger's nor Klimt's aim was controversy; they were

celebrating their hero, Beethoven. I think Klimt was aiming to express the plight of humanity through an allegorical depiction of ideas embedded in the chorus of 9th Symphony's Ode to Joy, the quest for god, the "yearning for happiness", the overcoming of despair caused by "illness, madness and death". It seems grossly unfair for Buechel to use a great artist like Klimt, as a vehicle to promote himself and his controversy. Klimt created the Beethoven frieze as a temporary piece of art for a one time exhibition. Had it been dismantled and not survived like so much of the rest of the installation, then Buechel would have been left to his own devices for getting his message regarding human sexuality out to the world.

Above the entrance to the Vienna Secession's exhibition rooms is inscribed: "Der Zeit ihre Kunst, Der Kunst ihre Freiheit", to every age its art, to art its freedom. Words of wisdom that still apply today. All artists are all charged with the responsibility of finding their own voices through which to express their artistic concerns. Art history is filled with chapters of revolutionary artists who worked to reform and improve society, Klimt and others involved in the international Arts & Crafts movement were some of the most enduring. Christoph Buechel's purpose is noble, it's just too bad he strayed onto the path of controversy for controversy's sake and rode Gustav Klimt's coattails to do it. Regretfully, I don't think anyone will find that by visiting his exhibition they will better overcome their socially imposed sexual inhibitions. Scandal stole his thunder.