Also in 2018, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Royal Academy of Art in London opened surveys exploring the creative influences of Klimt and his young mentee Egon Schiele through the medium of drawing.

In a series of talks in Boston in conjunction with the exhibition, Professor Judith Bookbinder spoke about the aesthetic differences of Klimt, Schiele, and Schiele’s contemporary Oskar Kokoschka. Bookbinder extrapolated on the legacy of their stylistic innovation and conceptual investigations on European modernism, particularly in the work of such artists as Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and Karl Zerbe.

Professor Claude Cernuschi also discussed Klimt’s career as he graduated from the historicist style toward the decorative aesthetic of Art Nouveau and developed a controversial reputation in the prejudicial political climate of fin-de-siècle Vienna. “The distinction between applied art and fine art is remarkably blurred in his mind,” Cernuschi commented on Klimt’s familial background of goldsmiths and gold engravers, and Klimt’s articulate use of gold leaf. “At every point, Klimt is going to push the envelope, not only collapsing flatness and three-dimensionality, fine art and applied art, but severity and gravity...with this blatant emphasis on sexuality.”

Paris’ Atelier des Lumières opened its exhibition space in 2019 with an immersive digital display of paintings by Klimt and his milieu.
Gustav Klimt (Austrian, 1862-1918)

Ria Munk I, 1912
Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:103.6

Gustav Klimt was one of the most significant artists of fin-de-siècle (end of the century) Europe. As a founder of the Vienna Secession movement in 1897, he led a period of stylistic transformation in Austria, renouncing the dominant confines of Viennese academic historicism for the lush and esoteric visual splendor of Symbolism and decorative Art Nouveau. Prominent public commissions defined the innovative and audacious painter’s early career, after which he transitioned into portraiture. Women were a central focus throughout, frequently depicted through sensual and symbolic imagery, sinuous lines, and ornate patterning.

In the paired down Ria Munk I, Klimt memorializes Maria Munk, who committed suicide at the age of twenty-four on December 28, 1911 after a broken engagement. Klimt worked on three renditions of a portrait, commissioned by the Munk family, leaving the third—a full length vision in his ornate decorative style—unfinished at his own death. In this intimate initial view, Ria appears in a flower-laden death bed. Klimt focuses on her delicate pale features and the whisps of hair around her face, retaining a touch of realism. Rather than a haunting psychological portrait of death, the likeness radiates a somber peace and soulful grace, as if young Ria is merely sleeping.

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