

Discovery

Markus Fellingner  

THE *PORTRAIT OF MARIE KERNER VON MARILAUN AS A BRIDE:* A REDISCOVERED EARLY WORK BY GUSTAV KLIMT

ABSTRACT

This article describes the discovery of a previously unknown early work by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt. Another discovery made this attribution possible: that of unpublished letters written by Klimt to the leading Austrian botanist Anton Kerner von Marilaun, who commissioned the painting. As Klimt's painted oeuvre of around 250 works is relatively small, finding a completely unknown and previously undocumented painting is an extremely rare occurrence. Thanks to these letters and to further identified sources, the genesis of the painting—a portrait of Kerner's wife Marie as a bride—is excellently documented. We also gain a more precise impression of Klimt's working method during this phase of his career. The article begins by describing the circumstances that led to the discovery of the painting. First, a content analysis contextualizes the most important information from these letters, relating this commission to well-known examples of Klimt's early work. The client and the subject of the portrait are also introduced in more detail. By addressing contradictory information found in various sources regarding the subject's identity and the dating of the work, the article goes on to offer further details about the painting's creation. A concluding stylistic analysis positions the painting in the wider context of the artist's existing early oeuvre.

KEYWORDS

Klimt Gustav; Belvedere; Vienna; Secession Vienna; Portrait; Kerner Anton; Kerner Marie; Early Work; Vienna 1900; 20th Century; Painting; Wedding Portrait; Vienna University Archive

In early 2017 in the Vienna University Archive, the discovery of five letters by Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), previously unpublished and completely new to researchers, provided the first indication of a hitherto unknown early work by the artist.¹ Through an analysis of the rediscovered letters, the below sets out the research that led to the identification of the work. My investigation of the letters reconstructed the period in which the painting was made as well as Klimt's personal and professional relationships with the family of the client. In addition to this, a concluding stylistic analysis makes it possible to position the portrait among the artist's existing early work. In this way, the case described here is an exemplary illustration of how meticulous archival research can lead to the integration of a previously unknown work into the oeuvre of a leading artist of the modern era.

The letters are dated between November 25, 1891 and January 16, 1892 and come from the estate of Anton Kerner von Marilaun (1831–1898), Professor of Botany at the University of Vienna and the Director of the Botanical Garden.² In the first letter (Fig. 1), Klimt confirms to the professor his acceptance of the commission to paint his wife, a

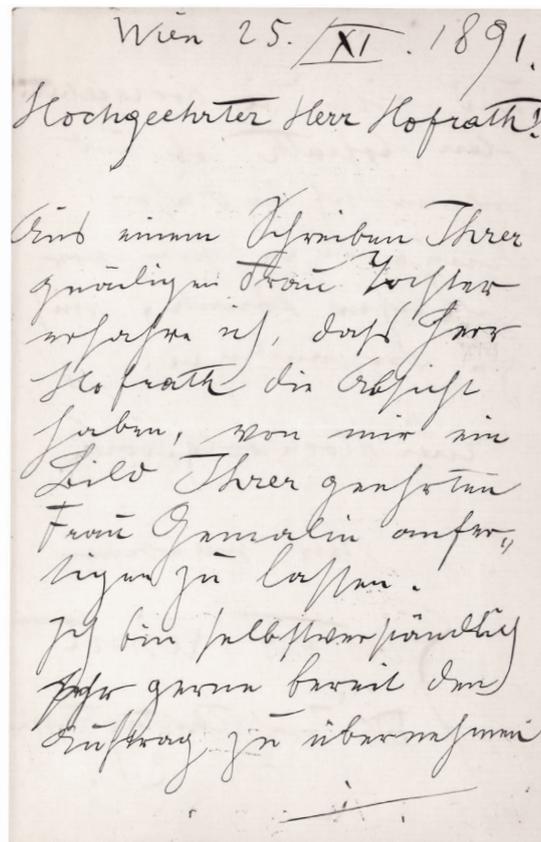


Fig. 1: Letter from Gustav Klimt to Anton Kerner von Marilaun, November 25, 1891, in Vienna University Archive, sign. 151.277 (Photo: Vienna University Archive).

commission that had been conveyed to the artist by Kerner's daughter. In the second letter dated December 23, 1891, around one month after the first, Klimt reports that the work is provisionally finished and asks the professor to view it. The next two letters are dated December 24, 1891, just one day later. In the third letter, Klimt regretfully reports that he is only able to carry out the changes to the painting Kerner requested to a very limited extent. He asks that the painting should not be collected until after 5 p.m. in order to allow more time for it to be wrapped. In the subsequent letter written on the same day, Gustav Klimt describes the changes that he has made in more detail: "I was unable to make more progress with the painting today, I made the coloring of the face rather more vibrant, but I could only add very little paint to the dress because, as I said, it is not yet dry enough." The artist ends by requesting that the picture should be returned to his atelier in the following days so that he can retrospectively carry out the other desired changes. In this letter, Klimt also names his fee as 200 Gulden. The final letter is dated January 16, 1892. Klimt confirms the receipt of a further 50 Gulden that Kerner has sent to him for the later, unplanned work of making the alterations. This means that the then 29-year-old Klimt earned a total of 250 Gulden.³ In this final letter, Gustav Klimt announces that he will varnish the painting in the near future, "given that, in their current condition, most of the colors, namely those in flesh tones, are already suffering a considerable degree of sinkage."⁴

The dates on the letters suggest that the portrait was commissioned as a Christmas gift for Kerner's wife Marie and that it was produced in just a few weeks. However, the letters hardly offer any clues about the creation of the painting: Neither the technique nor the dimensions are mentioned. We only learn that the painting is a portrait of Kerner's wife, that she wore a dress, and that the client had already provided a frame.

Previous research into Gustav Klimt had not identified any female portrait from the period around 1891/1892 that could be associated with this commission. The only painting that came into possible consideration was the portrait of an unknown woman in the Wien Museum [Vienna City Museum] (Fig. 2), described in earlier catalogues raisonnés as dating from around 1894.⁵ Following the death of the leading Viennese art collector August Heymann (1857–1937), this work was transferred from his collection to the Wien Museum under the title *Portrait of Frau Heymann*. But this attribution has never been confirmed. The only other known portraits of women painted by Klimt during this period were his *Portrait of Mathilde Trau* (1893, private collection) and *Portrait of a Lady* (around 1893/1894, private collection). However, the identity of the subjects of both of these works is certain.⁶ Following the rediscovery of the artist's letters, as the extensive body of literature on the life and work of Anton Kerner contains neither a mention of Klimt's portrait nor an image of Kerner's wife, the identity of the painting remained a puzzle.

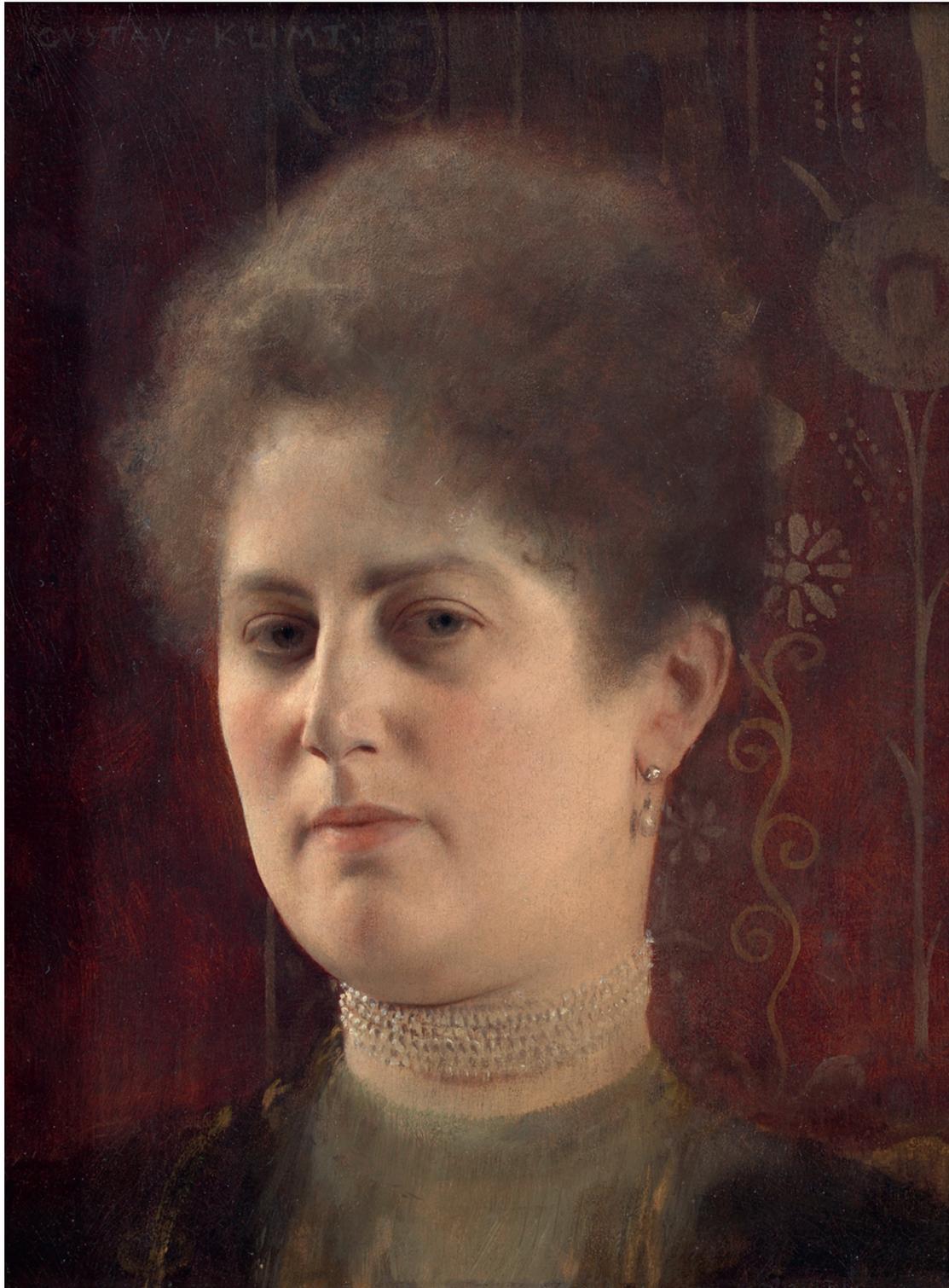


Fig. 2: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of a Lady (Frau Heymann?)*, around 1894, oil on cardboard, 30 x 23 cm. Wien Museum, inv. no. 61061 (Photo: CC BY 4.0, Birgit and Peter Kainz, Wien Museum).

The Portrait of Marie Kerner von Marilaun as a Bride

In his day, Anton Kerner was a highly respected personality (Fig. 3).⁷ He was born in Mautern, Lower Austria, on November 12, 1831. After studying medicine, he increasingly dedicated himself to botany, and in 1855, he became a teacher at an *Oberrealschule* [technical high school] in Buda, Hungary, where he would receive his first professorship at the Polytechnic University three years later. This was followed in 1860 by his appointment to the Chair of Botany at the University of Innsbruck. It was here that he met his later wife, Marie, whom he married on May 1, 1862. Four years his junior, Marie Kerner was born on May 21, 1835, the daughter of the District Governor of Vorarlberg, Johann Nepomuk Ebner (who became Ritter von Rofenstein in 1839). Her first husband, Karl Maria Leonhard Graf von Wolkenstein (1831–1859), had died soon after their wedding.⁸

Kerner's *Das Pflanzenleben der Donauländer* (translated into English as *The Background of Plant Ecology*), appeared in 1863, a year after his wedding. This book became the standard work on the flora of Austria-Hungary and established Kerner's position as the leading botanist of the Danube Monarchy.⁹ His scientific reputation was made particularly apparent by the admiration for his work expressed by Charles Darwin (1809–1882), one of the most influential natural scientists of the age. Kerner's estate contains four letters from Darwin written between 1869 and 1876,¹⁰ and Darwin even wrote the foreword to Kerner's book *Flowers*



Fig. 3: Studio Fritz Bopp (Innsbruck), Anton Kerner von Marilaun, ca. 1870–1875, photograph. Private collection (Photo: author).

and Their Unbidden Guests.¹¹ Alongside Kerner's scientific renown, he and his wife were also at the heart of Innsbruck's cultural life.¹² Their visitors included the Austrian writers Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872) and Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868) and the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882).¹³ In 1877, Kerner was ennobled and awarded the title of Ritter von Marilaun, followed a year later by his appointment to the University of Vienna, where he prepared his two-volume major work, the richly illustrated reference book, *The Natural History of Plants* (1887–1891).¹⁴ He remained a professor of the University of Vienna and Director of the city's Botanical Garden and Botanical Museum until his death on June 21, 1898.

The portrait—an oil painting on canvas of 68.8 by 54.5 centimeters—was finally tracked down in September 2017, following the tracing of Anton Kerner's descendants (Fig. 4). It was painted as an oval image on a rectangular canvas due to the form of the original frame that is still in place today. The work was brought to Kerner's property in Trins in Gschnitztal, Tyrol, either during his lifetime or by his descendants, remaining there for five generations in the ownership of the family. According to current information, it was never exhibited or reproduced, but was first put on public display during the reconfiguration of the permanent collection in the Upper Belvedere in spring 2018 (Fig. 5). The painting was finally sold at the Im Kinsky auction house in April 2024.¹⁵



Fig. 4: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Marie Kerner von Marilaun as a Bride*, 1891–1892, oil on canvas, 68.8 × 54.5 cm. Private collection (Photo: Belvedere, Vienna).



Fig. 5: First presentation of the *Portrait of Marie Kerner von Marilaun as a Bride* in the permanent collection of the Belvedere, March 2018 (Photo: author).

A single additional reference to the painting prior to the discovery of the letters in Kerner's estate comes from a published speech delivered by the Danish biologist and geneticist Diter von Wettstein (1929–2017), great-grandson of Anton Kerner. During an award ceremony in 2010, von Wettstein declared that: "My grandmother Adele, daughter of Kerner, studied painting with Gustav Klimt a now famous and a popular painter who also painted her as a bride before they had moved to Prague. This painting now hangs in our house in Trins (Austria)."¹⁶

This incorrect identification of the figure in Klimt's portrait as Adele von Wettstein, née Kerner, the only daughter of Anton and Marie Kerner, is probably due to the age of the subject. When Klimt painted the portrait, Marie Kerner von Marilaun was 56, yet she is portrayed as a young woman in a wedding dress. Adele Kerner married on May 1, 1889, approximately two and a half years before Klimt painted her mother's portrait. This explains why Diter von Wettstein came to the obvious conclusion that the painting was a wedding picture of his grandmother Adele von Wettstein. However, the real identity of the subject can be confirmed with the help of an inscription on the back of the frame. Although written by Adele von Wettstein herself, the inaccuracies it contains leads to the suspicion that it was only added towards the end of her life: "This picture depicts my mother as a bride and was commissioned by my father to mark my parents' silver wedding. He commissioned it from Gustav Klimt, who was then a pupil of Laufberger and gave painting lessons to my brother Fritz and myself. The portrait was produced on the basis of a miniature that had been painted at the time of the wedding in 1862. This means that the silver wedding was celebrated in 1887. Adele Wettstein-Westersheim née Kerner v. Marilaun."

The dates of the letters received from Gustav Klimt enable us to rectify the information regarding the silver wedding anniversary. Given that Ferdinand Laufberger (1829–1881), Professor of Life Drawing and Painting at the School of Arts and Crafts of the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry (Kunstgewerbeschule des k. k. Österreichischen Museums für Kunst und Industrie), died in 1881—eleven years before the first letter to Klimt—it is also necessary to correct the statement that Klimt was studying as Laufberger's pupil at the time. Klimt was indeed a pupil of Laufberger from 1878, but he completed his studies in 1883 under Laufberger's successor, Julius Victor Berger (1850–1902). The statement that Klimt gave Adele and her brother Fritz painting lessons is, however, remarkable. This would make the two children Klimt's first identified pupils. During the years in which Klimt was studying under Laufberger, Adele was approximately 15 to 18; her brother Fritz was three years younger.

A source of further information about the portrait of Marie Kerner is the unpublished chronicle by Gustav Klimt's younger brother Georg (1867–1931), now in the

possession of the Klimt Foundation.¹⁷ In this manuscript, Georg includes the Kerner family in the social circle within which Gustav moved, also mentioning the tuition that Gustav Klimt gave Adele. Regarding the portrait's commission, he reports that Klimt painted the lady of the house as a bride. In order to do this, he only had a faded daguerreotype at his disposal, together with her husband's remark that his wife at the time of her wedding loosely resembled his daughter at the time of the commission. This explains why Klimt may not have achieved an accurate likeness, and yet his client was still delighted with the picture. Georg approximately dated the events as taking place in 1883/1884.

The now faded daguerreotype mentioned by Georg Klimt has been preserved (Fig. 6). However, it appears to have been less useful as a model for the painting than the "miniature" mentioned in Adele von Wettstein's inscription on the back of the frame. Both works also remained in the possession of Kerner's descendants (Fig. 7). The "miniature" is actually a hand-colored photograph of Marie Kerner in her wedding dress that nonetheless differs from Klimt's portrait in a number of ways, including the



Fig. 6: Anonymous, *Portrait of Marie Kerner von Marilaun*, ca. 1855–1860, daguerreotype. Private collection (Photo: author).



Fig. 7: Unknown artist, *Portrait of Marie Kerner von Marilaun as a Bride*, 1862, photograph, watercolor. Private collection (Photo: author).

The Portrait of Marie Kerner von Marilaun as a Bride

details of the dress and the bridal wreath. Given its strong similarity with the portrait, a further photograph from the time of the wedding could also have been used by Gustav Klimt as a model (Fig. 8).

The use of photographic models is not unusual for Klimt's early work and has been verified for a number of his paintings.¹⁸ The memoirs of his sister Hermine (1870–1936) tell us that, as a student, Klimt supplemented the meagre family income by earning small amounts painting portraits based on photographs.¹⁹ *Portrait of a Lady with a Lilac Scarf* (Fig. 9), bequeathed to the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum [Art History Museum] in Vienna several years ago, has an oval form that provides an interesting parallel with the portrait of Marie Kerner. The lady's clothing seems extremely outdated for the years around 1895, when the portrait is assumed—on the basis of stylistic analysis—to have been painted, leading to the suspicion that an older miniature was used as a model.²⁰

In stylistic terms, the portrait of Marie Kerner is closest to Klimt's paintings on the staircase wall of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, and, in particular, his figures



Fig. 8: Unknown photographer, *Portrait of Marie Kerner von Marilaun*, 1861, photograph. Private collection (Photo: author).



Fig. 9: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of a Lady with a Lilac Scarf*, ca. 1895, oil on canvas, 67 × 41 × 2 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Picture Gallery, inv. no. 9907 (Photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

Ancient Greece (Fig. 10) and *Ancient Egypt*. Despite the photographic models, the wedding picture seems strongly stylized and the composition is clear and structured. As a half-length portrait, the depiction of the bride is strictly symmetrical and has a frontality that is only gently countered by the slight leftward rotation of the upper body. The center of the work is occupied by the decorative element of the round brooch, while the figure of the bride is ornamentally framed above and below by the white flowers and green leaves of her bridal wreath and bouquet. Her powerful, plaited hair has a similar function. Klimt reduces his natural subject to a simple yet striking form that creates an iconic impression. In this sense, this early work by Klimt already exhibits the core principles that led to the later female portraits of the artist's Golden Period (1901–1909).



Fig. 10: Gustav Klimt, *Ancient Greece*, 1891, oil on canvas, 230 × 230 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, inv. no. AU C (Photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

NOTES

- 1 Vienna University Archive, autograph collection, sign. AT-UAW/151.277; for more on the letters, see Thomas Maisel, “Briefe im Universitätsarchiv führen zu Klimt-Gemälde,” *Uni:view*, March 1, 2018, <https://medienportal.univie.ac.at/uniview/wissenschaft-gesellschaft/detailansicht/artikel/briefe-im-universitaetsarchiv-fuehren-zu-klimt-gemaelde/>. The letters have since been published with transcriptions in the Gustav Klimt Database: <https://gkdb.link/5676-2755>, <https://gkdb.link/8132-3711>, <https://gkdb.link/4691-7576>, <https://gkdb.link/4457-8264>, <https://gkdb.link/4727-5219>.
- 2 Vienna University Archive, sign. AT-UAW/131.33.
- 3 According to the historical currency calculator of the Austrian National Bank, this amount corresponds to around 4,385 Euros in 2024: <https://finanzbildung.oenb.at/docroot/waehrungsrechner/#/>.
- 4 “da in dem jetzigen Zustand die meisten Farben, namentlich in den Fleischtönen, sehr eingeschlagen sind.” Vienna University Archive (see note 1). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations by Rupert Hebblethwaite.
- 5 Johannes Dobai, “Oeuvrekatalog der Gemälde,” in Fritz Novotny and Johannes Dobai, *Gustav Klimt* (Salzburg: Welz, 1967), cat. no. 65; Alfred Weidinger, Michaela Seiser, and Eva Winkler, “Werkverzeichnis der Gemälde,” in *Gustav Klimt*, ed. Alfred Weidinger (Munich: Prestel, 2007), cat. no. 90; Tobias G. Natter, *Gustav Klimt: Sämtliche Gemälde* (Cologne: Taschen 2012), cat. no. 87.
- 6 Natter 2012, cat. nos. 74 and 79 (see note 5).
- 7 For more on Anton Kerner as an individual see, among others, Maria Petz-Grabenbauer and Michael Kiehn, eds., *Anton Kerner von Marilaun (1831–1898)* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2004); Ernst Moritz Kronfeld, *Anton Kerner von Marilaun: Leben und Arbeit eines deutschen Naturforschers* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1908); and *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950* (ÖBL), vol. 3 (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1965), 302–304.
- 8 *Gothaisches genealogisches Taschenbuch der gräflichen Häuser*, vol. 47 (Gotha: Justus Perthes, 1874), 972.
- 9 Anton Kerner, *Das Pflanzenleben der Donauländer* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1863). Translated into English as: *The Background of Plant Ecology* (Ames, IA: Iowa State College Press, 1951).
- 10 Vienna University Archive, autograph collection, sign. AT-UAW/151.273.
- 11 Anton Kerner von Marilaun, *Flowers and Their Unbidden Guests* (London: C. K. Paul & Co, 1878). Translated from the German: *Die Schutzmittel der Blüten gegen unberufene Gäste* (Vienna: Zoologisch-Botanische Gesellschaft, 1876).
- 12 Kronfeld 1908, 55 (see note 7).
- 13 Petz-Grabenbauer and Kiehn 2004, 12–13 (see note 7).
- 14 Anton Kerner von Marilaun, *The Natural History of Plants: Their Forms, Growth, Reproduction, and Distribution*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Blackie & Son Limited, 1894). Translated from the German: *Pflanzenleben*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1887–1891).
- 15 *The Gustav Klimt Sale*, auct. cat, Im Kinsky, Vienna 2024, lot 13.
- 16 Diter H. von Wettstein, “My Life as Written for Graduate Students,” 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170424150438/http://vlpbp.org/Itaawardvonwettsteinceremonyditterspeech102510a.html>.

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17 Georg Klimt, “Das Leben des Gustav Klimt und seiner Familie” (handwritten manuscript, Klimt Foundation, inv. no. S16, 78–79). Many thanks to Sandra Tretter and Peter Weinhäupl for the information.

18 See, for example, Agnes Husslein-Arco and Alexander Klee, eds., *Klimt und die Ringstraße*, exh. cat., Belvedere, Vienna, March 27–July 12, 2015 (Vienna: Belvedere, 2015), 252.

19 Hermine Klimt, “Aufzeichnungen über Gustav Klimt,” quoted in Christian M. Nebehay, *Gustav Klimt: Dokumentation* (Vienna: Galerie Nebehay, 1969), 60.

20 Guido Messling, ed., *Auf Goldkurs: Gustav Klimt, Dame mit lila Schal, Ansichtssache 9* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2014).

Markus Fellingner studied art history at the University of Vienna. Since 2016, he has been a curator at the Belvedere, where he has curated numerous exhibitions with a focus on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists and artistic themes. In 2019, he curated the exhibition *Gustav Klimt: Vienna and Japan 1900* in Tokyo and Toyota, and, in 2022–2023, the show *Klimt: Inspired by Van Gogh, Rodin, Matisse* in Amsterdam and at the Belvedere. He is currently compiling the catalogue raisonné of Tina Blau's paintings together with Claus Jesina.

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