

**By fire and without sword:**

malice and misapprehension concerning the interpretation of Gustav Klimt's *Judith und Holofernes*.

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1. Gustav Klimt, *Judith und Holofernes (Judith I)* 1901, 84 x 42 cm, oil, Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere in Vienna.

Judith is the main character of the story with the same name, part of the Old Testament. She is an Israelite widow, who saves her people out of the clutches of the hostile Assyrians by seducing the commander-in-chief, Holofernes. When he loses his head, Judith cuts it off with his own sword. Images of her in painting do not seem to appear before the Middle Ages.

Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) painted Judith twice, i.e. in 1901 and again in 1909. The first picture of the two will be discussed in this article. It has a worked frame of brass inscribed with '*Judith und Holofernes*'(fig.1)<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, since 1901 the painting has also been known as *Salome*. Besides the inscription on the frame, there is another subtle detail in this painting, showing Klimt's deliberate choice for the figure of Judith: the Assyrian inspired motifs. In the background he puts cone shaped mountains and trees derived from Assyrian relief's such as were found on the palace walls of Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.)(fig.2). This reference, however, seems to have gone unnoticed by his contemporaries. According to Alessandra Comini, Klimt added these motifs: "Uit vrees dat de ondubbelzinnige identificatie 'Judith en Holofernes' die op de lijst stond gescheiden zou worden van de inhoud, schilderde Klimt met een archeologische sluwheid [...] een specifieke verwijzing naar een bijbelse plaats op het schilderij zelf"<sup>2</sup>. Having seen Klimt's wall paintings in the stairwell of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Werner Hofmann also emphasizes the accuracy with which Klimt gives his images more power: "Diese Arbeiten beweisen archäologischen Fleiss, kostümkundliche Akrabie und illusionistische Detailfreude im Dienste eines vornehmen Geschmacks"<sup>3</sup>.



2. Palace relief of Sennacherib, 705-681 B.C., Nineveh.

A proposal for a change of the title into *Salome* appeared for the first time in 1901, the year in which the painting in question was finished. In the periodical *Die Kunst für Alle* one can read about this painting in an article unaccompanied by a reproduction of it: "Seinen reichen dekorativen Geschmack [...] zeigt Klimt noch in [...] einer "Judith", die eigentlich besser in "Salome" umgetauft würde"<sup>4</sup>. In 1905 the *Zweite Deutsche Künstlerbundausstellung* organized in Berlin, exhibited this painting under the title *Salome* (nr.103)<sup>5</sup>. Again in *Die Kunst für Alle* a full-color reproduction without the frame appeared in 1912, once more entitled *Salome*. In the accompanying article, however, the painting is referred to as *Judith*.<sup>6</sup> Comini does cite the title *Salome*, but doesn't refer to *Judith* in her article *Titles can be troublesome; misinterpretations in male art criticism*.<sup>7</sup> Now representations of *Judith und Holofernes* without a frame came into circulation, thus increasing the confusion regarding the title. In the same year, for example, a book about the Salome motif by Hugo Daffner appeared.<sup>8</sup> In his synopsis the '*Salome*' of Gustav Klimt also occurs for the sake of completeness. Daffner probably only knew the picture without the frame. Nevertheless, the author gets the impression that the figure is an older, stable, sensual woman, perhaps with the features of Judith: "Bei ihm ist Salome nicht mehr die fantasieverdorbene Jungfrau [Oscar] Wildes, bei ihm ist sie eher die Frau *entre deux ages*. [...] Kein Zufall, das eine Zwillingsschwester diesen [sic] Salome Judit [sic] getauft ist."

The statement of H. Trog in *Die Bildenden Künste* shows the ambivalence still keeps art critics puzzled, eighteen years after date: "Salome [oder Judith], der erstere Titel jedenfalls der zutreffendere". More recently in literature, both titles still appear, apart from each other or together,

in the latter case with one of them between brackets. Already during his life the rectification had been proposed, but whether or not Klimt agreed with it is unknown. He obviously wasn't anxious about the interpretation of his paintings and he even praised the countries in which his pictures were regarded "lediglich als Bilder".<sup>9</sup> His work was supposed to speak for itself.

As the alternative title *Salome* suggests, the theme of Judith as a *femme fatale* is closely related to the equally Biblical Salome. On King Herodes' birthday, his daughter performs such an impressive dance that she merits a reward: the head of John the Baptist, which is presented to her on a silver dish. The motif of the two narrations shows an important similarity: a woman gets the hewn-off head of a man. Yet there are some essential differences, which caused Salome to develop into a far more popular theme, especially in the fin-de-siècle period. The exotic dance of Salome brought her audience into raptures, and is an excellent motive for painters to depict a lustful, fatal woman for their public. She was an object which could be viewed from all different angles and in all sorts of seductive postures. Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) also created a good precedent with his numerous Salome depictions. Besides, the image of Salome is more feminine than the tougher, more masculine Judith; Salome didn't plan ahead to rob John the Baptist of his life and therefore his masculinity in advance. She was persuaded to the decapitation by her mother Herodias. What's more, the deed was performed by an executioner, therefore she could accept the head with immaculate hands. Judith wielded the sword herself; an active role which is more directly threatening to the male sex.

Comini is the first to work out the ambiguity concerning the contents of the painting.<sup>10</sup> She approaches the problem from the feminist theory, especially in her article *Titles can be troublesome: Misinterpretations in Male Art Criticism*, in which she suggests that Klimt was cleverer than his contemporaries. In the article she doesn't even mention the Assyrian motifs, probably aiming to emphasize the female image. According to Comini, male art critics considered Klimt's figure of Judith too voluptuous, and therefore suggested to rename the work *Salome*. Klimt was thought to have a better understanding of the Biblical story than his male art critics, because to him Judith was the ultimate embodiment of "de persoonlijke slachteres der wellust - de adembenemdste vertegenwoordigster van Eros".<sup>11</sup> [the personal butcher of lust – the breathtaking representative of Eros]

According to Comini, the misapprehension concerning the interpretation of this painting in the first place arose, because the non-erotic tradition of the Judith motif in art: "As earlier depictions had always shown, Judith never actually enjoyed her dreadful, God-given task of saving the Israelites by decapitating Holofernes".<sup>12</sup> Beside the tradition of Judith as the embodiment of chastity and humility, Caravaggio (1571-1610) and company, however, introduced the dramatic and erotic aspect of these stories. Artists like Christoforo Allori (around 1620) painted themselves in the role of Holofernes, and their mistresses as Judith. The painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652) produced five monumental pictures with the theme 'Judith and Holofernes'. In these works the physical power is shown, necessary to sever a head from a person's body. According to most artcritics, Gentileschi, who had been raped, coped with this impressive occurrence through these paintings. As subjects for her paintings she chose heroines again and again, Judith among them. Moreover, from the early sixteenth century a picture of an unknown master has survived, in which Judith is depicted with a cupid, which is also a link with the erotic. Studying the images of Judith, it becomes clear that Comini's statement is unfounded. In the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna there is even a very seductive *Judith*, a copy after Jan Liss dating from around 1625 (fig.3).<sup>13</sup> She looks at the viewer over her left shoulder; a posture which perhaps served as an inspiration for the woman who is placed in the foreground of Klimt's painting *Goldfische* (1901-02).



3. Copy after Jean Liss, *Judith mit dem haupt des Holofernes* about 1625, 126 x 102 cm, oil, Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

3.a Gustav Klimt, *Goldfische*, 1901/1902, oil on canvas, 181 x 67 cm. collection Kunstmuseum Solothurn

Though Salome was preferred as the personification of the femme fatale, Klimt, however, chose to depict Judith. He portrayed her in the most representative posture of the fatal woman: frontal with the head thrown into the neck. The question is whether Klimt's Judith is shown with far too passionate features: isn't she represented too fiery to be a chaste heroine? Beside the posture and the radiation which give rise to this query, the 'corpus delicti' is missing i.e., the sword.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the attention is concentrated on Klimt's portrait of Judith as an object of lust, an image corroborated into a deadly passion by Comini: "What made the frankly-expressed orgasm of Klimt's female so shocking was the hideous circumstances under which it was achieved - at the mortal expense of her partner".<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in 1901 this aspect was mentioned in the literature as the reason for the proposal of the 'more fitting' title *Salome*: "Für die prachtvolle biblische Gestalt der Töterin des Holofernes is dies [sic] Gesicht zu lüstern und zu pervers. Es liegt eine Erschlaffung darauf, die nicht von der That [sic] kommt, sondern vom Genuss".<sup>16</sup> Comini also assumes that this tendentious interpretation has to do with the too lustfull features of this Judith: "Decapitation of the male by the female meant only one thing to the Symbolist generation - the lurking, lusting presence of a Salome". and "...male critics jumped to the right conclusion - sex - while insisting on the wrong title - Salome...".<sup>17</sup> According to Comini, Klimt had replaced the frustrated lust of Holofernes by the erotic radiation of a modern femme fatale. Thus he used the contents of the Biblical story to convey a personal representation of the femme fatale: "She was Lust's personal executioner - and thus, for Klimt, the far more spellbinding representative of Eros".<sup>18</sup> However, Comini overlooks the fact that other Judith figures are produced in this period, which, like the *Judith* of Klimt, display fatal features. There is no disagreement about these titles: in 1885 Benjamin Constant, for example, also painted *Judith* (fig.4). The Orientalist painting shows a triumphant fatal woman with a bare upper body. Behind her back, she is holding the big, deadly weapon. This example proofs the aspect of perversity isn't sufficient to explain the ambivalence. In my opinion it makes more sense to compare the fin-de-siècle iconography of the Judith and Salome figures.

The stocktaking of the paintings with the theme 'Judith', respectively 'Salome' from the period 1880-

1920 (the period in which most representative pictures were made) shows there are six paintings about Judith, as opposed to forty-two Salome figures. In the iconography, the Salome's show more variation in both attributes and posture, in accordance with the Biblical story. The emblem most used is the plate on which often lies the chopped-off head of John, sometimes pierced with a sword. There are only two reproductions of Salome figures (from Romani and Stevens) that are carrying the sword themselves: in both cases it lies passively in her lap. In these pictures John's head is not depicted.<sup>19</sup> The Judiths, however, are provided with a sword; the presence of Holofernes is obviously not necessary in fin-de-siècle pictures. Remarkably there are only two Judith figures depicted without a sword, both creations of Gustav Klimt. With this motif, the artist is deviating from the tradition. The argument that Judith can be seen as a *femme fatale* by depicting her without a sword is now placed in a different light. This fundamental idea is, in my opinion, the principal cause for the improvement of the title by art critics: Klimt was the only one who created Judith figures without a sword. They merely carry the head of their victim as a sign of recognition, while five Salome's are also depicted with only the head of John the Baptist as an 'attribute'. Because Judith by the lack of her emblem couldn't be recognized anymore, and because of her depiction as a lustful woman, the impression arose that Klimt didn't portray Judith, but Salome. First and foremost one saw a woman, full of fire and without a sword.

#### Sources and credits

1. **Comini**, Alessandra , *Gustav Klimt*, translated in Dutch by Gerrit **Komrij**, Amsterdam 1975. The original appeared as *Gustav Klimt* New York, 1975, p.13; Comini points out that this frame is made by the goldsmith Georg Klimt, brother of Gustav.
2. **Comini**, op.cit.1, p. 24.
3. **Hofmann**, Werner, *Gustav Klimt und die Wiener Jahrhundertwende*. Salzburg 1970, p. 17.
4. **Ostini**, Fritz von , 'Die internationale Kunstausstellung im Glaspalast zu München' in: *Die Kunst für Alle* 16 1901, p. 542. **Comini**, op.cit.4, p. 54; refers uncorrectly to page 540.
5. **Novotny**, Fritz en Johannes **Dobai**, *Gustav Klimt*. Salzburg 1967, p. 320.
6. **Haberfeld**, Hugo , 'Gustav Klimt' in: *Die Kunst für Alle* 27 1912, p. 176, reproduction unpagged, opposite p. 173; **Comini**, Alessandra , 'Titles can be troublesome: misinterpretations in male art criticism.' in *Art Criticism* vol.I 1979, p. 54; names the title 'Salome', but doesn't mention the title 'Judith' used in this article.
7. **Comini**, Ibid.
8. **Daffner**, Hugo , *Salome: Ihre Gestalt in Geschichte und Kunst* München 1912. Probably, the 'Zwillingschwester' refers to the painting of Judith from 1909.
9. **Novotny** & **Dobay**, op.cit.5, p. 320.
10. **Comini**, op.cit.1; **Comini** op.cit.6
11. **Comini**, op.cit.1, p. 24.
12. **Comini**, op.cit.6, p. 51.
13. This painting wasn't exhibited before 1923, but according to professor Schulz of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, it is possible that Klimt had seen it. Originally, this 'Judith' belonged to the holdings of the imperial Salzburgermuseum of emperor Franz Jozef. In 1895-97 it was donated to the Vienese collection at the opening of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Probably Klimt knew the painting: he could have seen it after working on the stairwell of this Museum.
14. **Fliedl**, Gottfried , *Gustav Klimt 1862-1918: de wereld in de gedaante van een vrouw* translated by Temilo van **Zantwijk**, Hedel 1989. Original appeared as *Gustav Klimt* Genève 1989.
15. **Comini**, op.cit.6, p. 52.
16. **Ostini** von, op.cit.4, p. 542.
17. **Comini**, op.cit.6, p. 51.
18. **Comini**, Ibid, p. 52.
19. Perhaps these two Salome-figures are inspired by the *Salome* painted by Henri Regnault in 1870.

#### Illustrations

1. Gustav Klimt, *Judith und Holofernes (Judith I)* 1901, 84 x 42 cm, oil, Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere in Vienna.
2. Palace relief of Sennacherib, 705-681 B.C., Nineveh.

3. Copy after Jean Liss, *Judith mit dem haupt des Holofernes* about 1625, 126 x 102 cm, oil, Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

4. Benjamin Constant, *Judith* 1885. Reproduced in: Bram Dijkstra *Idols of perversity*, Oxford, 1986, p.377, fig. XI,15.