

IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ▪ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



IMAGINATIONS

JOURNAL OF CROSS_CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.csj.ualberta.ca>

"Perceptions of Jewish Female Bodies through Gustav Klimt and Peter Altenberg"

Susanne Kelley
May 21, 2012

To Cite this Article:

Kelley, Susanne. "Perceptions of Jewish Female Bodies through Gustav Klimt and Peter Altenberg" *Imaginations* 3:1 (2011): Web (date accessed) 109-122. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.stealimage.3-1.10

To Link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.stealimage.3-1.10>



The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a **Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives 3.0** license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions.

PERCEPTIONS OF JEWISH FEMALE BODIES THROUGH GUSTAV KLIMT AND PETER ALTENBERG

SUSANNE KELLEY, KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Gustav Klimt and Peter Altenberg are two figures within Viennese fin-de-siècle cultural production whose art may reveal a perception of local Jewish culture through their different foci on the non-European female body image. Both men have moments in their career, when their attention turns to non-European cultures, through which they inadvertently represent and interpret their own. A selection of these two artists' most well-known works demonstrate two frameworks in which Viennese Jewishness can be read through an alignment of the female body with Asian and African cultures.

Résumé

Gustav Klimt et Peter Altenberg sont deux personnalités viennoises de la culture fin-de-siècle dont l'art peut offrir des indices quant à la perception de la culture juive à travers leur représentation du corps de la femme non-européenne. Tous deux ont réussi involontairement à représenter et à interpréter leur propre culture en se concentrant sur des cultures non-européennes à certains moments de leur carrière. Cette sélection des plus célèbres œuvres de ces deux artistes fournit deux modèles d'interprétation de la judéité viennoise à travers la représentation de corps de femmes asiatiques et africaines.

The Viennese *fin de siècle* is famous for a psychological focus on the self. Scientists and psychologists began to offer new theories of human behavior and perceptions (Sigmund Freud, Otto Weininger, Otto Mach); literature and art examined the self in its local environment (Arthur Schnitzler, Peter Altenberg, Hermann Bahr) and strove for new modes of expressing the complexities of a modern society (Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arnold Schoenberg, the Secessionist movement). Inspiration for nontraditional perception, communication and presentation of the modern individual and societal reality came as much from within (i.e. life in Vienna and its history and tradition) as from the outside. In 2010, the exhibit *Wilde Welten: Aneignung des Fremden in der Moderne* at Berlin's Georg-Kolbe-Museum connected the artistic break and, to some extent, cultural break with tradition in European Modernism to the widespread fascination with the image of the "foreign," "exotic," or even "wild" around 1900 (Wanken 7; Berger 85). Overtly, the representation of non-European cultures ranged from the scientific and ethnographic to the pseudo-scientific and commercial spectacle. While products constructed for popular consumption, including the commercial realm, tended to thrive on stereotypical images when displaying the other (Dreesbach; Wolter), in many artistic and literary works, we find interpretative representations, which reveal an artist's reading of European home culture.

In this essay, I turn to the perception of the female Jewish body at the Viennese *fin-de-siècle* and examine two artists' expression of the familiar by masking it with the foreign. Scholarship of the body as representation of culture has accompanied the move in literary, culture, and Jewish studies, from focusing on "culture as text" to "culture as performance" (Hödl 83). At least until the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Jewish identity and culture tended to be represented in isolation from non-Jewish culture and often in association with physical weakness. Even in the twentieth century, Jewish contributions to European culture were mostly identified as occurring through non-physical professions and talents, or in short, through text and book. Literary or cultural scholarship has only been giving attention to

the Jewish body for a limited number of years. Of those works, the majority focused on the male Jewish body, until feminist scholarship drew attention to the female Jewish body¹.

In his book *Muscular Judaism*, Todd Presner identifies the decades around the *fin-de-siècle* as the moment when a Jewish self-transformation takes place from a people "who had for centuries been considered weak, powerless, physically unfit, cowardly, and even degenerate [...] into a muscular, modern people, able to found a nation-state based on and inspired by the European model" (217). Since Nordau's term "the muscle Jew,"² which is central to Presner's book as well as to the discourse on Zionism, primarily refers to the male body, the female Jewish body is due its own consideration. In this essay, I turn to the aesthetic attention the female Jewish body received in the works of two Viennese Modernists. I concentrate on the depiction (and its lacking) of the Jewish female body by the non-Jewish Gustav Klimt and the assimilated Jew Peter Altenberg. My interpretation of both artists' work suggests that female Jewishness was transformed through elements of non-European imagery, in order to create an effective representation. Underlying this observation is the fact that the female Jewish body has no one specific location where her Jewishness can be identified. Because only the male Jewish body distinguishes itself as Jewish through circumcision, according to Sander Gilman, "the male Jew" was marked as "the exemplary Jew." Gilman writes: "The centrality of the act of circumcision in defining what a Jew is made the very term 'Jew' in the nineteenth century come to mean the male Jew" (*Freud, Race, and Gender* 49). Both Klimt and Altenberg created or described female bodies whose look was distinct from traditional appearances in Viennese society by drawing attention to foreign elements/cultures/races that have been pseudo-scientifically and stereotypically associated with Jewishness in popular culture around 1900.

Alison Rose observes about the *fin-de-siècle* that "The Jewish woman was an attractive figure on the Viennese stage despite anti-Semitism. Whether she functioned as a victim or as a villain, she almost invariably appeared exotic, alluring, and beautiful [...] The attraction of the

‘otherness’ of the forbidden Jewish woman undoubtedly contributed to her popularity on the stage” (Rose 213). As I intend to show, Rose’s characterization of the Jewish woman in Viennese theater can extend to other modes of cultural production where similar perspectives were prevalent. Furthermore, Klaus Hödl’s argument that the presentation and interpretation of Viennese Jewish history must shift its focus from “the existence of two distinct, Jewish and non-Jewish, social entities ” to “mutual exchange of Jews and non-Jews ” (Hödl 7), points out cultural production as a whole to be a particularly vibrant area of Jewish and non-Jewish exchange, and thereby, supports the intersection of the fine arts, literature, and theater. Different modes of cultural expression, therefore, may reveal overlapping perceptions.

Klimt and Altenberg, for example, share an affinity with women and have become known for their effort to interpret them in their life’s work. Strikingly, both men have moments in their career, when they turn to non-European cultures, which inadvertently represent and interpret their own. A selection of these two artists’ most well-known works demonstrate two frameworks in which Jewishness can be read through their alignment of the female body with Asian and African cultures. Gustav Klimt’s implements an aesthetic differentiation of the Jewish Viennese female body, which primarily aligns itself with cultural expression of Middle-Eastern and Asian cultures. Although Jewish presence in Vienna is not actually mentioned in Peter Altenberg’s *Ashantee*, his literary description of the Ashanti village on display in the Vienna Zoological Garden mirrors the status of the Jew in his world. Both Klimt’s aesthetic and Altenberg’s physical description of bodies different from the mainstream culture offer us examples of the perception of the Jew as a non-European race and culture, rooted in nineteenth-century European racial science.

Gustav Klimt was known for his large Jewish clientele throughout his career, which also made him subject to anti-Semitic jabs by contemporary critics including Karl Kraus (Brandstätter 29; Natter 69). Of course, the centrality of the Jewish body in Klimt’s portraits

was not an aesthetic one, but a financial one. After he withdrew himself from publicly commissioned work following the scandal of the university paintings³, he had to rely on his private patrons, many of whom belong to the Viennese Jewish upper-class. A result of Klimt’s close relationship with such families as the Bloch-Bauers, Lederers or Zuckerkandls is a number of Jewish family portraits which, by default, display the female Jewish body. “Indicative of Klimt’s reliance on these families are the myriad portraits he made of his patrons’ wives and daughters, with many of whom he forged strong alliances” (Lillie 56). Possibly because some of his Jewish patrons were also his strongest supporters, Klimt implemented a striking freedom in the portrayal of the families’ women. Many of these private portraits are marked by a transformation or even masking of the body with elements far outside of traditional nineteenth-century portraiture, resulting in an often ethnic interpretation of the female Jewish body. In particular, Klimt used Byzantine, Egyptian, Japanese, and Chinese thematic and stylistic elements. He tended to combine Byzantine mosaics with Egyptian, and Japanese ornaments, while employing the Chinese elements by themselves. Given Klimt’s many non-Jewish clients, one might argue that his oriental focus was likely not the Jewishness of his female subjects, but the creative expression of femininity. The commonality of elements between some of the Jewish family portraits with his mythical works, however, allows an identification of some common elements and themes among Jewish female bodies crafted by Klimt.

The works of Klimt and Altenberg also happen to mirror a trend among Viennese *fin-de-siècle* artists which Alison Rose identifies as non-Jewish artists depicting Jewish figures much more frequently than assimilated Jewish artists did (185). In contrast to Klimt stands Peter Altenberg, who included a very limited number of Jewish figures in his literary works. By itself, this observation is unremarkable, if it were not for the importance he placed on social class, which (in his vignettes about female characters and their lives) reflects national background. The lack of explicit Jewish presence in Altenberg’s literary texts, thus, contrasts his

otherwise demonstrated interest in people of different races, cultures, and nationalities. Whereas Klimt renders the female bodies Jewish through the aesthetic story he provokes in them and the, at times, stereotypically orientalized but also empowering stylization, Altenberg inevitably expresses the status of the Jew in Viennese society by engaging in racial discourse, albeit with an attempt at demonstrative innocence.

Gustav Klimt was a master at original interpretations of femininity. He regularly engulfed woman in artistic, exotic worlds and garments, often in direct relation to Asian art and culture. The present analysis concentrates on the first portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer that was privately commissioned by her husband Ferdinand and completed in 1907, along with the two Judith paintings (1901 and 1909) which have been speculated to portray Adele Bloch-Bauer as well (Kallir 42). *Judith I* and *II* mark the beginning and end of Klimt's famous golden period, whereas *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* represents one of the paintings at its pinnacle. *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, of course, gained worldwide fame and skyrocketed in value due to the 2006 restitution case in which Austria returned it, alongside four other Klimt-paintings, to Bloch-Bauer's niece and remaining heir (Lillie 55). Here, I discuss *Adele Bloch-Blauer I* as one of the most well-known examples of the portraits Klimt painted of bourgeois female Jews between 1900 and 1918⁴ and *Judith I* and *II* as examples of Klimt's more controversial mythical work.

In his portraits, Klimt created an individual world for each of the women, a "dream world" as critics described his various spaces (Bailey 51). Paintings from the "golden period," portray either no movement, or movement that seems to be frozen in place, as in *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, where the opulence of the precious gold lends the portrait a metallic and lifeless atmosphere (Natter, "Gustav Klimt: Female Portraits" 116). In many of Klimt's portraits, he outlines gestures by shaping the garment, not the body, as is certainly the case in *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*. Rather than loosely hanging down her body like the reform fashion Klimt liked to wear himself (Eder 53; Houze 40), this dress seems to hold up Bloch-

Bauer and thereby has the appearance and function not unlike a piece of furniture.

In many of his portraits, especially during the golden period, Klimt presents a displaced world, in which every element, including the woman "trapped" in its center, is a carefully crafted work of art (Kallir 32). Klimt's contemporary Hermann Bahr said: "This mutability of appearances in which none of the creatures is empowered in itself, but can be imposed on any one of the others, troubles him. He paints a woman as though she were a jewel. She merely glitters, but the ring on her hand seems to breathe, and her hat has more life in it than she herself. Her mouth is like a blossom, but one does not imagine it can talk—yet her dress seems to whisper" (qtd. in Schmidt 30). This artist's increased freedom in the representation of femininity, however, comes at a price. Along with the body, her personality and eventually even her identity disappear. The symbolic elimination of Bloch Bauer peaked in the erasure of her identity during the Third Reich, when the painting was exhibited as "portrait of a lady against gold background" (Lillie 80) and became known only as "lady in gold" (Natter, "Princess without a History?" 72-73). In *fin-de-siècle* scholarship, too, though, Adele's along with many other painted wealthy Jewish women's identities proved of little interest until the 2001 exhibit *Klimt and his Women* at the *Österreichische Galerie Belvedere*. Since said exhibit, scholarly interest in Klimt's Jewish patrons has increased drastically (Strauss; Lillie).

In portraits, Klimt was at his best when he removed the bourgeois women from the comforts of their domesticity and displaced them into unfamiliar and fantastic spaces, with *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* as one of the highpoints. When ignoring the subject's Jewish identity, one could simply argue that he enabled an escape through art by replacing her body shape and physical expression with foreign, but also estranging elements. When considering Bloch-Bauer's Jewish identity, one must question whether her stylization serves as an enhancement, a stereotyping or detraction from the Jewishness. For sure, the metallic disembodied woman Klimt portrays becomes a type of untouchable other, not unlike the Jewish characters we

find on Vienna's stages to refer back to Rose's quote. Further quoting Rose: "The conflation of the image of the Jew and the woman and the sexualized image of the Jew possibly found their most fertile soil in *fin de siècle* Vienna" (221).

In contrast stand two well-known portraits Klimt painted of non-Jewish women. The portraits of *Sonja Knips* (1898) and *Emilie Flöge* (1902) predate Klimt's golden period, but feature a toned-down version of many of the characteristics that make out his later portraits. *Sonja Knips* is the first portrait in a series of privately commissioned portraits painted for and of the modern Viennese bourgeoisie (Kallir 12). The square dimensions and the departure from the realist depiction determine the beginning of Klimt's art nouveau style (Kallir 12, Natter 84). The heaviness of the dress also previews Klimt's later tendencies to put emphasis on his subject's garment and not her face, as is epiphomized in *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*. The head dress and dress comprised of ornament in *Emilie Flöge* likewise anticipate the style of the golden period when garments were almost entirely constructed of ornament (Kallir 20). Yet, the images of these two non-Jewish women lack the references to the non-European which we find in the Judith and Adele Bloch-Bauer paintings. The contrast of the desexualized, albeit ornamental, European looking Emilie Flöge and the oriental, sexual *Judith I*—painted only one year apart—is an example of two drastically different interpretations of the female subject. *Sonja Knips* set the stage for the style of his later portraits, including *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*. "This was not the erotics of the typical fin-de-siècle *femme fatale*, but rather of a physically potent woman with great sensuous presence, as well as the freshness of youth [...]" (von Miller 197). This same interpretation could apply to *Emilie Flöge*, a painting likewise contrasting the ornamental heaviness of *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* and the fatal eroticism of *Judith I* and *II*. In *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, Klimt replaces the delicate flowers implemented in *Sonja Knips* and *Emilie Flöge* with overpowering oriental symbols, giving this particular Jewish subject a more artificial, performative aura than the women in the earlier portraits.

Klimt's *Judith* paintings offer the staged sexuality *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* is missing. In this case, however, Klimt's interpretation of Judith follows the tradition of the character of the nineteenth century, but it turned out that the audience added its own twist by conflating Judith with Salome. The Judith of the Old Testament is a faithful widow who tries to prevent Holofernes from destroying her besieged town. She gains his trust and ultimately decapitates him in his sleep. Because she acted in faith, the murder is interpreted as a saintly action. Unlike the original story which painted Judith as a chaste heroess, the Judith since the second half of the 19th century has become the quintessential *femme fatale*, conneing sex with murder (Hammer-Tugendhat; Kultermann). Starting with a play by Friedrich Hebbel in 1840, cultural productions begin to present Judith as a sexual being, which also becomes the point at which a convergence of the figures Judith and Salome takes place in art and literature (Sine). Salome, from the New Testament, is famous for the dance in return to which she demands the head of John the Baptist. In Flaubert, "she twisted her waist, made her belly ripple like the swell of the sea, made her breasts quiver, while her expression remained fixed, and her feet never stood still. She danced like the princesses of India, like the Nubian women from the cataracts, like the Bacchantes of Libya" (qtd. in Kultermann 190). Like Judith, she did not acquire the image of the sexual revengess until the nineteenth century, but Salome's main characteristic also became an erotic orientalism.

Although Klimt named both of his paintings *Judith (I and II)*, and both paintings clarify that the severed head she holds is Holoferne's, critics persisted in changing the woman's identification from Judith to Salome. *Judith I* experienced the name-change from the beginning, but *Judith II* was not unofficially renamed until after Klimt's death (Kallir 42). This confusion of mythical figures represents a symptom of the newly found preference in art and literature for creating the deadly sexual woman. Because we do not see a weapon in the image, Judith's partly exposed body and posture exude a mixture of eroticism and power, but not militaristic strength. *Judith II* is the much more threatening figure

due to her posture, facial expression and the cramped positioning of her hands and fingers. The colorful robe has an organic quality that is in stark contrast to the artificial golden nature in *Judith I*. Here, the movement of the robe resembles that of a dancer, determining the alignment with Salome.

Klimt displays many of the elements of the biblical oriental story and inserts elements adopted from Egyptian, Japanese, and Chinese art, but gives his main subject what his contemporaries recognized as distinctly Jewish features. Commenting on *Judith I*, Felix Salten states, “One often encounters such slender, glittering Jewish women and longs to see these decorative, flirtatious and playful creatures suddenly hurled toward a horrid destiny, to detonate the explosive power that flashes in their eyes” (qtd. in Kallir 16). Jane Kalli summarizes: “Klimt’s artistic realization of the prevalent fantasy of sex with a dark and dangerous Jewess eloquently expressed the comingled strains of misogyny and anti-Semitism that characterized fin-de-siècle thought” (Kallir 16). So, in the *Judiths*, sexuality, Jewishness, and the Oriental merge to convey a powerful and dangerous woman, known for male fatality. She even represents a female contrast to Nordau’s “muscle Jew,” or the “new type of Jew who is corporeally strong and morally fit,” which themselves are the characteristics needed to realize the Zionist nation state and the “rebirth of the Jewish people” (Presner 1).

Peter Altenberg was one of Klimt’s fans who read his work through a romantic lens. Similar to his own intentions, Altenberg interprets Klimt’s artistic treatment of women as: [...] man hat sie erhöht zu ihren eigenen romantischen Gipfelpunkten! Man wird ihr gerecht, man verklärt sie, man macht sie sichtbarlich für die Skeptiker mit ihren trüben freudelosen Augen! Gustav Klimt, ein mysteriöses Gemisch von Ur-Bauernkraft und historischer Romantik, dir sei der Preis (Altenberg, *Bilderbögen des kleinen Lebens* 116).⁵ An artist’s role, then, is not only to display, but to offer an interpretation of the women he describes through paint or words. Although, at first glance, Altenberg is a master at tuning into the individual and revealing a moment in their lives

that encapsulates their entire being, in the end, he never just writes about one individual. Woman, in particular, is linked to myriad critiques Altenberg offers of bourgeois Viennese society (Schönberg 53). In *Ashantee*, he focuses on the Ashanti women contained and displayed in a prescribed space—similar to a performance in the theater—in the midst of bourgeois Viennese society.

In his *Ashantee*, we find an ostentatious “respect” for the Africans alongside passages that are in line with his contemporaries’ hierarchical classification of the races, Jews included. As Sander Gilman has discussed, in nineteenth century racial science, light-skinned Europeans were ranked above dark-skinned Europeans and black non-Europeans rank well below. The Jew ranked as black as the black African. “The Jews are black, according to nineteenth-century racial science, because they are not a pure race [...] But the blackness of the African, like the blackness of the Jew, was credited to the effect of certain diseases, [...] It is the change in the nature and color of the skin which marks the syphilitic; it is the color and quality of the skin which marks the Jew” (*The Jew’s Body* 99-100). Here, I read Altenberg’s portrayal of the Africans as a reflection of the Jewish presence in Viennese society. As Ian Foster points out, the presence of the Ashanti as the “symbolic absolute Other” in Vienna automatically placed them in the center of an ongoing “rhetoric of difference” which also included the casting of the Jewish population as outsider:

The significance of this rhetoric of difference—of belonging and not belonging—in a city where over half of the population had been born elsewhere and where virulent anti-Semitism was in the process of celebrating its political triumph is plain. Within a few weeks of arrival in Vienna, the Ashanti entered a highly differentiated language of racial/ethnic difference. (46)

Hence, Altenberg’s text fits into an expanded discourse that to a large degree revolves around the issue of Jewish inclusivity or exclusivity in Viennese society and culture.

In Altenberg's *Ashantee* of 1897, one of his most long-lived publications,⁶ the narrator (who Altenberg identifies as himself by naming him P.A. or Sir Peter) sketches out his encounters with a group of Ashanti from Ghana who resided the previous year in an ethnographic exhibit at Vienna's Zoological Garden. The text is dedicated to "meinen schwarzen Freundinnen, den unvergesslichen 'Paradieses-Menschen' gewidmet [Dedicated to my Black women friends, the unforgettable paradise people]" (trans. von Hammerstein). As the dedication reveals, the text primarily focuses on P.A.'s acquaintanceship with the Ashanti girls and women, although the tribal group also consisted of men and boys. Although researchers tend to disagree about the actual plot in the text (Wolter 144), the narrator's fascination and infatuation with three African women is clearly a major theme, if not the driving force of the "story."⁷ Contemporary Altenberg fans may wish to qualify *Ashantee* as a critical text in the postcolonial sense, but it is undeniable that the actual practice of human zoo displays is not the focus of Altenberg's criticism. Throughout, he juxtaposes critically-oriented sketches with moments of cultural and ethnic stereotyping (von Hammerstein 103), which results in an ambivalent perspective from which the assimilated Jew Altenberg presents not only the African other, but also provides a glimpse into his conflicted Jewish Viennese self.

Altenberg's readers are foremost drawn to his writing style and approach, both of which reflect the everyday present of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna through collections of short sketches. For over 100 years now, Peter Altenberg (born Richard Engländer) has been acknowledged in two ways: as a Viennese Modernist, whose Modernism hinges on his unique impressionistic writing, and as an eccentric Bohemian, who shines with moments of literary genius. Studies about him rarely discuss his works and his life or lifestyle separately, as both are equally unique and, more importantly, are easily linked. Except for analyses of *Ashantee*, Altenberg scholarship tends to be comprehensive, rather than focusing on a specific aspect of his work or a specific publication. Within these studies, topics that tend to receive attention are: Altenberg's eccentric lifestyle, Altenberg

as a literary impressionist, Altenberg's relationship to and representation of girls and women, Altenberg as a representative of Vienna's coffeehouse culture, and his struggle with his own physical and mental health.⁸ The subject matter of *Ashantee* automatically distinguishes the text from the rest of Altenberg's oeuvre and scholars tend to discuss it in the postcolonial framework (Wolter; von Hammerstein; Kopp; Schwarz). Hence, *Ashantee* is likely the most politically loaded of Altenberg's publications, even if its author did not intend it to be. While the author or narrator claims a unique and un-Viennese sensitivity to non-European cultural traditions, the actual language of *Ashantee* often suggests otherwise. The text's messages are, therefore, of mixed nature.

Altenberg begins *Ashantee* with an edited excerpted passage from *Meyer's Encyclopedia* about the Ashanti's homeland which provides mostly geographical and historical information.⁹ Information about the Ashanti people and culture is limited to the following sentences:

Die Aschanti sind echte, kraushaarige Neger, welche das Odschi sprechen; sie sind namentlich im Teppichweben und in Goldarbeiten sehr geschickt. Es herrscht Vielweiberei. Die Religion ist Fetischismus. Die mysteriöse Aufgabe der Priester besteht hauptsächlich darin, die bösen Genien durch geheimnisvolle Ceremonien und hysterische Tänze zu beschwichtigen. (1)¹⁰

According to Foster, Altenberg purposefully manipulates the encyclopedia article by evoking the most penetrative clichés about African peoples as a critique of the text and the attitudes it represents (48-50). Foster argues that Altenberg means to undermine stereotypes and generalizations by drawing attention to the Ashanti "as people, as individuals first and foremost" (51). Some passages of the text surely achieve just that, while others put into questions the author's noble intention. *Ashantee's* reader not only learns very limited information about the daily life and living culture of this African people, (s)he also does not learn much about the individual women at the center of the text. While Altenberg appears to criticize the focus on the Africans'

skin color in some moments (see “Der Hofmeister”), in others, he joins his fellow Viennese in the same skin—and body—focused gaze he just criticized. Even though the narrator displays racial tolerance by forming relationships with the Ashanti, his descriptions always include a note of the blackness of the African body.

He mixes his generalizations of the Ashanti (as the “black people”) with his ever-present infatuation with the young women. Here too, the body plays a role, as Altenberg succumbs to the inclination to point out the women’s breasts and describes which part of the body is bare and which is covered by clothing. In 2008, Sander Gilman argued that the stress on the women’s blackness changes the underlying motivation of the author. “Als Altenberg seinen Text verfasste, war im europäischen Bewusstsein die Vorstellung von schwarzer Sexualität als pathologisch bereits fest verankert” (“Schwarze Sexualität” 166).¹¹ The perception that skin color determines a different type of sexuality mirrors the perception of the Jewish woman on the stage or in a Klimt painting where she possesses a particularly powerful sexuality compared to her non-Jewish viewers. Werner Michael Schwarz observes that the media of the time promoted the sexual image of Ashanti and Jews alike: Die sexuelle Promiskuität, die man nicht nur in diesen Medien den ‘Aschanti’ unterstellte, wurde auf Juden und Tschechen projiziert und daraus eine Bedrohung der ‘deutschen Rasse’ konstruiert’ (Schwarz “Postliberales Spektakel’ 133).¹²

Altenberg, though, at the same time feeds and undermines the stereotypes of the black “visitors” in Vienna’s midst. On the one hand, his portrayal of the Ashanti reflects the general perception of non-white races, Jews included, by the surrounding media and popular culture. On the other hand, he provides passages which argue directly against the one-sided perception of the outsiders. I argue, therefore, that Altenberg’s text not only contains certain descriptive attitudes towards the black bodies which mirror the Viennese perception of the Jewish bodies among them, but his inconsistency reveals a personal identity conflict he may feel as an assimilated Jew who strives to be

part of Vienna’s mainstream culture, while living out the lifestyle of a bohemian.

In the book’s first sketch, Altenberg introduces the theme of the self and the other. He depicts a tutor who chastises his student for suggesting a cultural difference between the Ashanti and the Viennese: “Mache nur nicht gleich solche Abgründe zwischen Uns und Ihnen. Für Die, für Die. Was bedeutet es?! Glaubst du, weil das dumme Volk sich über sie stellt, sie behandelt wie exotische Thiere?! Warum?! Weil ihre Epidermis dunkle Pigment-Zellen enthält?! Diese Mädchen sind jedenfalls sanft und gut” (9).¹³ In the same sketch, however, the narrator undermines this standpoint of ostentatious respect when he describes one of the women he will later befriend: “Tioko im Garten, bebt, legt den dünnen heliotropfarbigen Kattun über ihre wunderbaren hellbraunen Brüste, welche sonst in Freiheit und in Schönheit lebten, wie Gott sie geschaffen, dem edlen Männer-Auge ein Bild der Weltvollkommenheiten gebend, ein Ideal an Kraft und Blüte” (12).¹⁴ Although the Viennese male visitor A.P. later uncovers the zoo’s outrageous rule that the tribe’s people were not allowed to wear Vienna-fall-weather appropriate clothing, as it would be pretentious and spoil the locals’ viewing experience, he also takes pleasure in the display, as he frequently mentions the bare upper female bodies for their beauty and their naturalness. David Kim judges the latter as “a fantastic idealization of the Other whereby anything African is celebrated as originally whole and naturally beautiful” (7). Sander Gilman goes so far as to argue that underlying Altenberg’s text is solely sexual fantasy: “Dieser starke Subtext vermittelt des Autors Assoziationen zwischen seinem ‘Sehen’ des Schwarzen und seinem Fantasieren über dessen Genitalien. Die Entschlüsselung dieser verborgenen Codes legt die Funktion des Schwarzen innerhalb der Fanatsiewelt von Peter Altenberg und von Wien im Fin de Siècle offen” (164).¹⁵ So, Altenberg’s text oscillates between cultural or at least humanistic sensitivity, or the immodest goggling of a self-declared romantic, and possibly raw sexual fantasy towards a non-European other. His portrayal of the African people is always lined with infatuation and the scenes he offers paint an image of a

naturally mild humanity, not of dangerous activism or sexuality like Klimt's Judith. Barbara Schönberg argues about Altenberg's oeuvre that "Whenever it is a matter of Altenberg's perception of the social injustices inherent in his world, he consistently expresses through the vehicle of 'Woman' the most severe indictments against his bourgeois society. Correspondingly, the females in Altenberg's work most often suffer and bear the brunt of social inequality and injustice" (56). While certainly not the objective of the text, *Ashantee* may serve as the one literary work in which Altenberg indirectly offers his commentary on racial differences in Viennese society, such as the Jewish presence in Austrian culture.

In an 1897 newspaper piece, Altenberg considers his experiences with the Ashanti and concludes that romanticism is the core of the experience.

Ein solches Medikament für die überladenen, überfütterten und dennoch schlecht genährten Seelen war der Verkehr mit diesen noblen würdevollen Lüge-losen schwarzen Menschen. Man kann es sagen, niemals störten sie unsere romantische Phantasie, welche sie zu 'Paradies-Menschen' umdichtete, niemals enttäuschten sie dieselbe. Und wunderbar war es zu sehen, wie 'weiße Menschen' in diesem Umgange poetisch, liebevoll und ein wenig schwärmerisch wurden, bei welchen bisher im Drang des Tages diese zarteren Blüten nicht trieben. ("Abschied der Aschanti" 111-112)¹⁶

Altenberg's perceptions of the Ashanti are clearly lined with infatuation, but they are also extremely egocentric. Ignoring the political reflections an exhibit such as this one may have offered of the Vienna of his time, Altenberg instead devotes himself to an interpretation of the Ashanti's presence as a timeless phenomenon that is disconnected from all political reality. I argue that the text as a whole suggests a different intention from Altenberg, who means to use some of his juxtapositions between Viennese and Ashanti to expose emotional deficiencies in traditional Western definitions of culture. Moreover, similarly to the *Ashanti* text itself, this commentary stays true to the focus on racial differences marked by skin color. The black Ashanti serve the white

Europeans by not forcing them to be confronted with any meaningful and enlightening knowledge or realizations about either culture. This devotion to stereotypes and preconceptions, and the resistance to perspectives that may undermine them, again reflects the political and cultural attitude towards Jewish culture at the *fin-de-siècle*.

In the end, Altenberg's infatuation with the Ashanti females and their bodies is less about them and more about the narrator's (and the author's) self-stylization, including an underlying conflicted identity. Katharina von Hammerstein concludes: "Literature of the turn-of-the-century Vienna served as a space that allowed for wishes, anxieties, and myths about the Self and Other to be represented and, at times, questioned" (103). Altenberg's piece, along with its contradictions, joins a larger public discourse about cultural legitimacy in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. At the same time, *Ashantee* is the one literary text in which Altenberg may have masked a confliction about his own identity as an assimilated Jew in Vienna, which we otherwise only find in his personal correspondence (see letter quoted by Gilman, *The Jew's Body* 201). Simultaneously, and in contrast, by choosing to align the Jewish bodies with non-European culture in the three paintings I discussed, Klimt also removed the subject matter from his own biography and engaged in a purely creative exercise. Yet, the result is a further conflicted aesthetic representation of female Jewishness.

Although this essay does not settle on one interpretation of the image and role of the female Jewish body in Viennese modernist art and literature, it suggests that the representation and non-representation, the embodiment and disembodiment/masking of female Jewishness express a struggle with the complexities of society, identity, and intercultural contact. As the quote below from Hermann Bahr, the descriptor and critic central to Viennese Modernism, reflects, the presence of the Jew in Vienna around 1900 is part and partial to the definition of its culture and mentality:

The real Jew has no power in the city of Vienna. Unfortunately. It could use some of his diligence,

his industriousness, his earnestness. But the city has always defended itself against him. It doesn't want the competence, greatness, and strength of Jewry. But the Jew who doesn't want to be one, who betrays his race by leaving it, the one who plays something he is not, he is Vienna's kin. The artificiality of these fugitive beings who, emptied of all past, crave to cloak themselves in any present and any future, who are no more than shells of men ready to spout off something different every day, who are capable of being nothing but appearing anything—these have always allured the Viennese. (Bahr qtd. in Spector 621)

With respect to the cultural production during Bahr's time, the question of Jewish influence to the movement remains central in the scholarship on Viennese Modernism. Gustav Klimt and Peter Altenberg are two figures within that production whose art may reveal a perception of local Jewish culture through their different foci on the non-European female body image. Neither Klimt nor Altenberg deliberately set out to define the Jewish woman, but, taking the contemporary perceptions on race into account, the works of both inevitably complemented each other in offering insight into the image of female Jewishness in the Vienna of their time.

Notes

1. Early works include Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* (1991) and Susannah Heschel's *On Being a Jewish Feminist* (1983) for example.

2. Specifically, Nordau spoke about "Muskeljudentum" in 1903 before and in reference to a group of gymnasts belonging to a Jewish gymnastics society in Berlin (Stanislawski 92).

3. After the public scandal around three paintings, Klimt was commissioned in 1894 to paint for the new university in Vienna, the artist vowed to step away from publicly commissioned work. The scandal involved a vehement protest against the artist's unconventional depiction of the subjects *Philosophy*, *Medicine*

and *Jurisprudence*. Eventually, Klimt forfeited the commission for the paintings and returned all advances. In 1905, the authorities returned the paintings to him. In 1945, all three paintings were destroyed in a fire.

4. Refer to the catalog for the exhibit *Klimt and his Women* held at the *Österreichische Galerie Belvedere* from September 20 to January 7, 2001.

5. Author's Translation: "You elevate them so they reach their own romantic peaks! You do her justice, you glorify her, you make her visible to the sceptics with their hazy joyless eyes! Gustav Klimt, a mysterious mixture of primordial natural power and historical romanticism, you deserve the prize! "

6. The first edition of the text was published in 1897 by Samuel Fischer and counted 33 sketches. In 1904, Altenberg extended *Ashantee* by five sketches and included it in the fourth edition of *Wie ich es sehe*, published by Fischer in 1904.

7. Altenberg does not write stories in the traditional sense. Instead, each of his books is a collection of sketches expressing an observation he makes of himself or the world around him. Altenberg himself calls them "extracts of life" (*Was der Tag mir zuträgt* 6).

8. See: Barker, Andrew. *Telegrams from the Soul*. (1996); Kosler, Christian. *Peter Altenberg: Leben und Werk in Texten und Bildern*. (1981); Köwer, Irene. *Peter Altenberg als Autor der literarischen Kleinform*. (1987); Schaefer, Camillo. *Peter Altenberg oder Die Geburt der modernen Seele*. (1992); Simpson, Josephine M. N. *Peter Altenberg: a Neglected Writer of the Viennese Jahrhundertwende*. (1987). Von Wysocki, Gisela. *Peter Altenberg: Bilder und Geschichten des befreiten Lebens*. (1979); Welling, Peter. *Zwischen Kulturkritik und Melancholie Peter Altenberg und die Wiener Jahrhundertwende*. (1999); Zeisl Schoenber, Barbara. *The Art of Peter Altenberg: Bedside Chronicles of a Dying World*. (1984).

9. See Ian Foster for a comparison of original Meyer's encyclopedia and excerpted sentences used by Altenberg (Foster 47-48).

10. "The Ashantee are full-blooded, authentic, curly-haired Negroes who speak Odschi; they are especially skillful in weaving rugs and making gold jewelry. They practice polygyny. Their religious practice consists of fetishism. The priests' mystical duties lie mainly in appeasing evil spirits through obscure ceremonies and hysterical dances." (Trans. von Hammerstein)

11. Author's Translation: "When Altenberg composed his text, the image of black sexuality as pathological was already deeply anchored into European consciousness" ("Schwarze Sexualität" 166).

12. Author's Translation: "The sexual promiscuity of which not only these media accused the Ashanti, was projected onto Jews and Czechs and presented as a threat to the 'German race.'"

13. "Don't place such an abyss between us and them. To them, to them. What does that mean? Do you think that way because there are stupid people who act as if they are superior to them, and treat them like exotic animals? Why?! Because their epidermis consists of dark pigmentation?! These young girls, at any rate, are gentle and good." (Trans. von Hammerstein 32).

14. "Tioko was shivering in the garden. She wrapped her thin, heliotrope-colored cotton shawl over her wonderful light brown breasts, which otherwise existed in freedom and beauty, as God had created them, offering the noble male gaze an image of earthly perfection, an ideal of strength and flowering." (Trans. von Hammerstein 34).

15. Author's Translation: "This strong subtext communicates the author's association of his 'seeing' the black person and his fantasy about his genitals" ("Schwarze Sexualität" 164).

16. Author's Translation: "The association with these noble dignified lie-less black people was such medicine for the overburdened, oversaturated and still poorly nourished souls. One can say, that they never disturbed or disappointed our romantic imagination which transformed them into 'paradise-people.' And it was wonderful to see how 'white people' became poetic,

loving and a little infatuated in their association, even those for whom the delicate flowers had not bloomed until now in the pressure of the everyday" ("Abschied der Aschanti" 111-112).

Works Cited

Altenberg, Peter. "Abschied der Aschanti." *Ashantee: Afrika und Wien um 1900*. Ed. Kristin Kopp and Werner Michael Schwarz. Vienna: Löcker, 2008. 111-113. Print.

---, "Ashantee." 1897. *Ashantee: Afrika und Wien um 1900*. Ed. Kristin Kopp and Werner Michael Schwarz. Vienna: Löcker, 2008. 11-86. Print.

---, *Ashantee*. Trans. Katharina von Hammerstein. Riverside: Ariadne P, 2007. Print.

---, *Bilderbögen des kleinen Lebens*. 3rd ed. Berlin: Reiss, 1909. Print.

---, *Was der Tag mir zuträgt*. 3rd Rev. ed. Berlin: Fischer, 1906. Print.

Bailey, Colin B., Ed. *Gustav Klimt: Modernism in the Making*. New York: Abrams, 2001. Print.

Berger, Ursel. "Fremde im Atelier." *Wilde Welten: Aneignung des Fremden in der Moderne*. Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 2010. 83-96. Print.

Brandstätter, Christian, Ed. *Vienna 1900: Art, Life, Culture*. New York: The Vendome P, 2005. Print.

Dreesbach, Anne. *Gezähmte Wilde: Die Zurschaustellung 'exotischer' Menschen in Deutschland 1870-1940*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2005. Print.

Eder, Franz. "Gustav Klimt and Photography." *Klimt's*

- Women*. Ed. Natter, Tobias and Gerbert Frodl. Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2000: 50-56. Print.
- Fischer, Lisa. "Gender Asymmetries in Viennese Modernism." *Klimt's Women*. Ed. Natter, Tobias and Gerbert Frodl. Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2000: 32-37. Print.
- Foster, Ian. "Altenberg's African Spectacle: *Ashantee* in Context." *Theatre and Performance in Austria: From Mozart to Jelinek*. Ed. Ritchie Robertson and Edward Timms. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1993: 39-60. Print. Austrian Studies IV. Print.
- Gillerman, Sharon. "More than Skin Deep: Histories of the Modern Jewish Body." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. 95.3 (Summer 2005): 470-478. Print.
- Gillman, Abigail. *Viennese Jewish Modernism: Freud, Hofmannsthal, Beer-Hofmann, and Schnitzler*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2009. Print.
- Gilman, Sander. *Freud, Race, and Gender*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. Print.
- , *The Jew's Body*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- , "Schwarze Sexualität und modernes Bewusstsein in Peter Altenbergs *Ashantee*." Ed. Kristin Kopp and Werner Michael Schwarz. *Ashantee: Afrika und Wien um 1900*. Vienna: Löcker, 2008. 163-173. Print.
- Grabovszki, Ernst and James Hardin. *Literature in Vienna at the Turn of the Centuries: Continuities and Discontinuities around 1900 and 2000*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003. Print.
- Hammer-Tugendthat. "Judith." *Klimt's Women*. Ed. Natter, Tobias, and Gerbert Frodl. Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2000. 220-225. Print.
- Hödl, Klaus. "From Acculturation to Interaction: A New Perspective on the History of the Jews in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*. 25.2 (2007): 82-103. Print.
- Houze, Rebecca. "Fashionable Reform Dress and the Invention of 'Style' in Fin-de-siècle Vienna." *Fashion Theory*. 5.1 (2001): 29-56. Print.
- Kallir, Jane. *Gustav Klimt: 25 Masterworks*. New York: Abrams, 1995. Print.
- Kim, David D. "The Task of the Loving Translator: Translation, Völkerschauen, and Colonial Ambivalence in Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee* (1897)." *Transit* 2.1 (2006): 1-21. Print.
- Klimt, Gustav. *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*. 1907. Oil and gold on canvas. Neue Galerie New York, New York.
- , *Judith I*. 1901. Oil on canvas. Österreichische Galerie, Vienna.
- , *Judith II*. 1909. Oil on canvas. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Venice
- Kopp, Kristin and Werner Michael Schwarz Ed. *Ashantee: Afrika und Wien um 1900*. Vienna: Löcker, 2008. Print.
- Kultermann, Udo. "The 'Dance of the Seven Veils.' Salome and Erotic Culture around 1900." *Artibus et Historiae*, 27.53 (2006): 187-215. Print.
- Lillie, Sophie. "The Golden Age of Klimt. The Artist's Great Patrons: Lederer, Zuckerkandl, and Bloch-Bauer." *Gustav Klimt: The Ronald S. Lauder and Serge Sabarsky Collections*. New York: Prestel, 2007: 54-89. Print.
- Natter, Tobias and Gerbert Frodl, ed. *Klimt's Women*. Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2000. Print.
- Natter, Tobias. "Princess without a History? Gustav Klimt and 'The Community of All who Create and All who Enjoy.'" *Klimt's Women*. Ed. Tobias Natter

- and Gerbert Frodl. Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2000. 57-74. Print.
- , "Gustav Klimt: Female Portraits." *Klimt's Women*. Ed. Tobias Natter and Gerbert Frodl. Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2000. 76-147. Print.
- Nebehay, Christian. *Gustav Klimt. Dokumentation*. Vienna: Nebehay, 1969. Print.
- Presner, Todd. *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish body and the politics of regeneration*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Rose, Alison. *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2008. Print.
- Schmidt, Regine. "Of Sweet Young Things and Femmes Fatales: Gustav Klimt and Women around 1900. A Path to Freedom." *Klimt's Women*. Ed. Tobias Natter and Gerbert Frodl. Vienna: Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2000: 25-31. Print.
- Schönberg, Barbara. "'Woman-Defender' and 'Woman-Offender,' Peter Altenberg and Otto Weininger: Two Literary Stances vis-à-vis Bourgeois Culture in the Viennese 'Belle Époque.'" *Modern Austrian Literature*. 20.2 (1987): 51-69. Print.
- Schwarz, Werner Michael. *Anthropologische Spektakel: Zur Schaustellung 'exotischer' Menschen, Wien 1870-1910*. Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2001. Print.
- , "'Postliberales' Spektakel und Leidenschaft im Konjunktiv." *Peter Altenberg. Ashantee: Afrika und Wien um 1900*. Ed. Kristin Kopp and Werner Michael Schwarz. Vienna: Erhard Löcker, 2008: 115-140. Print.
- Scott, Marilyn. "A Zoo Story: Peter Altenberg's Ashantee (1897)." *Modern Austrian Literature* 30.2 (1997): 48-64. Print.
- Simpson, Josephine M.N. *Peter Altenberg: Bilder und Geschichten des befreiten Lebens*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1987. Print.
- Sine, Nadine. "Cases of Mistaken Identity: Salome and Judith at the Turn of the Century." *German Studies Review*. 11.1 (1988): 9-29. Print.
- Spector, Scott. "Modernism without Jews: A Counter-Historical Argument." *Modernism/modernity* 13.4 (2006): 615-633. Print.
- Stanislawski, Michael. *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001. Print.
- Strauss, Monica. "Klimt's Last Retrospective." *Forward.com*, Nov. 7, 2007. Web. Mar 25, 2011.
- Von Hammerstein, Katharina. "'Black is Beautiful,' Viennese Style: Peter Altenberg's Ashantee (1897)." *Peter Altenberg. Ashantee*. Trans. Katharina von Hammerstein. Riverside: Ariadne P, 2007: 101-113. Print.
- Von Miller, Manu. "Embracing Modernism: Gustav Klimt and Sonja Knips." *Gustav Klimt: The Ronald S. Lauder and Serge Sabarsky Collections*. New York: Prestel, 2007: 189-211. Print.
- Wanken, Christiane. "Einleitung." *Wilde Welten: Aneignung des Fremden in der Moderne*. Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 2010: 5-24. Print.
- Wolter, Stefanie. *Die Vermarktung des Fremden: Exotismus und die Anfänge des Massenkonsums*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2005. Print.

Bio

Susanne Kelley is Assistant Professor of German at Kennesaw State University. She holds a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles. She has published on the role of Vienna 1900 in contemporary Vienna's self-marketing strategies as well as on the travel motif in post-Wende German literature. Her current research focus is modernism and Viennese culture, fin-de-siècle and the visual arts, tourism and travel literature, and orientalism in literature and visual arts.

Bio

Susanne Kelley est maître de conférences en allemand à L'université Kennesaw State. Elle est titulaire d'un doctorat de l'Université de Californie Los Angeles. Ses publications se concentrent sur le rôle du Vienne des années 1900 dans les stratégies contemporaines d'autopromotion, ainsi que sur le thème du voyage dans la littérature allemande d'après la Réunification. Actuellement elle mène des recherches sur le modernisme dans la culture viennoise, les arts visuels de la fin de siècle, la littérature de tourisme et de voyage, ainsi que l'orientalisme dans la littérature et dans les arts visuels.