

Gallery texts Golden Boy Gustav Klimt

Inhoud

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Golden Boy Gustav Klimt. Inspired by Van Gogh, Rodin, Matisse...

Many people know Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) only from his painting *The Kiss* or another of his 'gold' works. But who was this Austrian artist and what else did he create?

In his paintings and drawings, Klimt explored the great themes of life. He combined subjects such as love, death, suffering and the quest for happiness with a swirling, decorative style.

Klimt initially painted murals in the traditional, academic manner in which he had trained. But he gradually set off down a new path. He was a founding member in 1897 of the Secession. This pioneering artists' association brought a large amount of international modern art to Vienna for its exhibitions. So even though Klimt did not travel much, he was still able to see a lot of the Western European art of his time.

His introduction to the work of Auguste Rodin, Vincent van Gogh and others led to portraits of powerful women, symbolic scenes and atmospheric landscapes. Our exhibition shows Klimt in the company of the artists whose work he admired. Inspired by them, he made drawings and paintings in a style entirely of his own, which still speak to our imagination today.



Gustav Klimt (1862-1918)
Josef Pembaur, 1890

Klimt was commissioned to paint this eloquent portrait of Josef Pembaur by the popular pianist's fan club. The artist himself admired the musician too. The portrait was based on a photograph and was painted in a very realistic and refined manner in keeping with the academic standard. Klimt added a lyre in the background as a reference to

Pembaaur's musical profession. He painted yet more classical motifs in the frame.



Lourens Alma Tadema (1836-1912)
Unconscious Rivals, 1893

The Dutch artist Sir Lawrence (originally Lourens) Alma Tadema was an international star at the time. Klimt knew his work well, from exhibitions in Vienna and through reproductions. His watercolour of a Roman women's bath recalls the idealized classical world that Alma Tadema evoked. Note the similarities between the women's poses and the classical setting with marble and antique sculpture.

Classical beginnings

Klimt's early work shows a taste for classical antiquity - the era of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. His paintings are full of idealized nudes, sculptures and architectural elements such as columns and friezes. All painted with an exceptionally refined technique.

Klimt received his traditional academic training at the School of Arts and Crafts. He followed in the footsteps of Austria's 'prince of painters' Hans Makart. When the latter died in 1884, Klimt, his brother Ernst and another painter-friend took over some of his unfinished commissions. Murals for the interior of Vienna's Burgtheater (1886-1888) and Kunsthistorisches Museum (1890-1891) made Klimt the city's leading history painter. He was particularly inspired by Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema's classicist scenes and by the art of antiquity.



Gustav Klimt

Study for The Altar of Dionysus, 1886

Followers of the Greek god Dionysus rest after their frenzied worship. Klimt chose this subject from classical antiquity for one of his ceiling paintings in the Burgtheater. Alma Tadema's compositions with characters in classical poses clearly served as examples.



Gustav Klimt

Hermine Gallia, 1903-1904

James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

Harmony in White and Blue, c. 1872-1874

(c. 1910 restored by an unknown hand)

Klimt painted numerous life-size portraits of women in their interiors. The models in these works often merge with their backgrounds. In this portrait of the collector Hermine Gallia, the translucent white dress forms a decorative shell. Only her face and hands are depicted realistically - something Klimt would continue to do until his final portraits. This painting is clearly related to James McNeill Whistler's atmospheric 'ladies in white', with its chequered pattern in the dress and background.

Mood and emotion

The unexpected deaths of his brother Ernst and his father in 1892 plunged Klimt into a deep crisis. In the years that followed, he increasingly distanced himself from the traditional rules of academic painting. He pursued greater

inspiration in his work by creating a dreamy atmosphere with subtle shades of colour.

We can only guess at the underlying meaning of some of his paintings. Klimt's examples included the enigmatic portraits produced by Fernand Khnopff. The high-profile Impressionist exhibition held at the Secession in 1903 also influenced him. Klimt's painting technique at the time has an Impressionist feel, but his brushstrokes are more rhythmic and less loosely applied.



Gustav Klimt
Emilie Flöge, 1902 (with reworking until 1908)

This portrait of Emilie Flöge was viewed at the time as a symbol of 'the charm of an entire city, in the shape of a woman who gleams like a jewel'. Flöge was close to Klimt. She was the sister of Helene, who was married to the artist's brother Ernst. Flöge was a successful fashion designer. Her dresses can be seen in many of the portraits Klimt painted of her and other women. The striking 'reform dress' (corset-less) shown here might have been one of them.



Gustav Klimt
Water Serpents II, 1904, reworked 1906-1907

Jan Toorop (1858-1928)
The Three Brides, 1892-1893

Klimt creates a universe here in which nude underwater creatures float around sensually. Attempts to interpret the

work have been made ever since it was painted. 'We are gently rocked back and forth between reality, dream and ornament', one critic wrote. Klimt was inspired by the undulating lines of Jan Toorop, as can be seen in his influential work *The Three Brides*. The 'serpents' are surrounded by veils of water plants, decorated with gold. Klimt also painted a sparkling pattern of fish, stars and circles.

Symbolism beneath the surface

The soft forms of Klimt's inspired 'atmospheric art' (*Stimmungskunst*) gradually gave way to sharper, swirling lines. It is a shift that began with his 'Beethoven Frieze' (1901-1902), in which influences from foreign art can be detected. From now on, a painting was primarily a decorative object for him, which had to fit into an interior. Klimt used a large amount of gold leaf in these works. His 'Gold Period' lasted until 1907.

There is a world of symbolism, however, beneath the decorative surface of his paintings. Klimt created dream realms populated by fantasy figures. These characters symbolize abstract ideas. Their frequently contorted poses represent powerful emotions and desires. Klimt's themes are often universally recognizable. They express struggle, temptation, love. And since he offered little explanation of what his paintings mean, all are free to interpret them as they wish.



Auguste Rodin (1840-1917)
Danaid (large model), 1889

This mythological figure, one of the Danaids, throws herself to the ground in despair at her punishment by the gods. The curve of her back and buttocks is echoed in several works by Klimt, among them *Water Serpents II*. Klimt felt a strong affinity with the sculptor Auguste Rodin, whom he met in Vienna in 1902. Both were concerned in their work with emotions, the stages of life and the shapes of women's bodies.



Gustav Klimt
Various Faces (Lady in an Armchair, 1897-1898)

Klimt produced a number of portraits in the late 1890s, in which he experimented with blurred backgrounds and a fairly monotone colour palette, consisting chiefly of red, grey and black. This painting is the most intriguing of them, thanks to its dreamy atmosphere. The French artist Edmond Aman-Jean painted a similarly atmospheric portrait of a woman lost in thought (alongside).



Gustav Klimt
Lady en face, c. 1898

This face emerges from the dark background like a mask. Klimt's painting style, diffuse and with subtle shades of colour, evokes an unreal atmosphere. He was inspired to paint this work by the dreamy heads of the artist Fernand Khnopff. Like the latter's mysterious female faces, the young woman's gaze here seems to contain a hidden world.



Gustav Klimt
Girl in the Foliage, c. 1898

This small portrait is one of Klimt's most Impressionist paintings. It shows a young woman in a white blouse against a background of foliage, loosely painted with broad brushstrokes. Her face is rendered in pastel shades of yellow, red and blue that make her skin appear almost

translucent. In the years that followed, Klimt perfected this technique of superimposing touches of colour to achieve his desired skin tone.

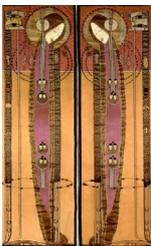


Gustav Klimt
Schubert at the Piano (study), 1896

Music played an important part in Klimt's work. He created this design to place above a door in his patron Nikolaus Dumba's music room. In it we see the Viennese composer Franz Schubert. The candlelight and the red glow on the faces heighten the warm atmosphere. The brushwork and subtle rendering of the light recall the work of the French Impressionists.

Gustav Klimt
Poster for the 1st exhibition of the Wiener Secession (censored version), 1898

The blank space in this poster symbolizes the fact that Klimt's artistic future had yet to be written. He created it for the opening of the first Secession exhibition in 1898. The combat between the Greek hero Theseus and the Minotaur represents the Secession's battle against the established order. A conflict that was confirmed when the poster was promptly censored: Klimt was obliged to add a tree trunk to cover Theseus' genitals.



Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh (1864-1933)
Embroidered Panels, c. 1902-1904

The British artist Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh used ribbons, glass beads, gold-painted buttons and other materials to create these delicate panels. Klimt knew the artist and her work well. She might have inspired him to

incorporate buttons and semi-precious stones in his Beethoven Frieze. The stylized, elongated female bodies and decorative ornaments can also be seen in that work.



Gustav Klimt
Study for *Lasciviousness* in the Beethoven Frieze, 1901

‘Lasciviousness’ is one of the temptations in the Beethoven Frieze (on the wall above). It is embodied by a woman with luxuriant hair and a provocative expression. Her wavy locks consist of parallel lines and recall the drawings of Jan Toorop. The press already described Klimt’s style as ‘Tooropian’ during his lifetime.

The Beethoven Frieze

Klimt created a monumental frieze, a reproduction of which is shown here, for an exhibition devoted to the composer and cult figure Ludwig van Beethoven in 1902. The painting was combined with a sculpture of Beethoven by Max Klinger and fitted seamlessly into the modern architecture of the Secession building. This made it a true *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total interplay of different art forms.

The frieze is an interpretation of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and deals with humanity’s search for happiness. The story ends with ‘a kiss for all the world’, as sung in the final chorus of Beethoven’s symphony.

Klimt made numerous studies for the figures in the frieze, in which the influence can be seen of artists like Jan Toorop and Auguste Rodin.

Left wall:

The women at the top symbolize the longing for happiness, while the three nudes stand for humanity’s suffering. Humankind calls on the knight to battle for happiness. The women behind him represent Compassion and Ambition – qualities that motivate the knight in his combat.

Middle wall:

The hostile powers: in the middle the invincible giant Typhoeus. To his left, his daughters the three Gorgons, Sickness, Madness and Death. The women on the right symbolize Lust, Lasciviousness and Intemperance, the latter identified by her large belly. The small figure at the bottom right is Unrelenting Worry.

Right wall:

At the top fly the desires and wishes of humanity. The longing for happiness is fulfilled in poetry, the standing figure with lyre. The 'pillar' of women a little further along represents the arts, which guide us to the ideal realm in which we can all find pure joy, happiness and love. The choir of angels from Paradise sings 'Joy, bright spark of divinity, this kiss is for all the world.'



Auguste Rodin (1840-1917)

Nude seen from the back, legs open, n.d.

Rodin, like Klimt, made lots of sketches of nude women. The Frenchman worked quickly and mostly restricted himself to the outlines of the figures. Klimt also concentrated on the contours, but Rodin's lines are freer: correct proportions were less important to him. This must have struck Klimt at an exhibition of Rodin's drawings in Vienna in 1908. His own drawings subsequently became looser and the lines freer.



Gustav Klimt

Seated woman with covered face, study for *The Bride*, c. 1917

This intimate image of a woman is one of Klimt's many erotic drawings. He broke taboos by unashamedly

depicting pubic hair or masturbation. This reflected shifting views on sexuality at the time, but also drew fierce criticism. The jury is still out today: was Klimt a free thinker or a voyeur?



Gustav Klimt
Standing lovers, study for *Fulfilment* in the Stoclet Frieze, 1907-1908

Embracing couples are a recurring subject in Klimt's work. The most famous example is his painting *The Kiss*. A similarly entwined couple also occupies a prominent place in the Beethoven Frieze and in the mosaic he designed for Villa Stoclet in Brussels. This drawing is a study for the latter work. Klimt used a few lines to convey the man's volume. The woman's cramped pose suggests a love that is intense yet also stifling.



Gustav Klimt
Male nude seen from the back and below, study for the Faculty Painting *Philosophy*, 1897-1898

Besides being a painter, Klimt was a versatile draughtsman. He mostly drew female nudes, but he also made drawings of nude men. The latter are often viewed from the back. Klimt concentrated in this case on the complex interplay of muscles. This is also powerfully depicted in the lovers in the frieze. We find similarly muscular backs in the work of Rodin and the German artist Sascha Schneider.



George Minne
The Kneeling Youth, 1898-1901

This sculpture is part of George Minne's *Fountain with Kneeling Youths*. The complete group shows five introspective boys kneeling around the edge of a fountain. It was an enormous success at the Secession exhibition in 1900. This fragile figure expresses solitude and yearning. Klimt used the same angular pose in his Beethoven Frieze, where the kneeling man and woman together personify suffering humanity.



Gustav Klimt
Will-o'-the-Wisp, 1903

A Will-o'-the-Wisp is a bluish, moving light that appears above marshes. Hence the fluorescent colours of this painting. The phrase also denotes an elusive person. These women with their writhing bodies seem as though they could fly away at any moment. Klimt never explained why he painted them or what they symbolize.



Gustav Klimt
Judith, 1901

Judith, a figure from the Old Testament, lays her hand on the severed head of Holofernes, the enemy general she has

seduced and killed to protect her people. Sensual and strong women were a popular subject at the time. Klimt's most important example in this respect was the famous painting *The Sin* by the German Symbolist Franz von Stuck (**alongside**). *Judith* was the first canvas in which Klimt used gold leaf. He also designed the gilt frame.



Gustav Klimt

Life is a Struggle (The Golden Knight), 1903

Like his counterpart in the Beethoven Frieze, this Golden Knight battles against the hostile forces that confront human beings in life. Some interpret him as the embodiment of the artist himself. Klimt struggled against the negative criticism that his work received. The only opponent we see here, though, is the serpent, a biblical symbol of evil, who enters the picture on the left.

Criticism

Nowadays, Klimt's work seems modern and distinctive. To many of his contemporaries, though, his art was highly unusual. He received his fiercest criticism for three ceiling paintings he made for the University of Vienna.

Klimt personified the respective faculties as nude, hovering figures of all ages, which was unconventional to say the least. The work was greeted with widespread incomprehension. Klimt decided not to accept any further public commissions. He concentrated in future on landscapes and portraits.

Staircase

'Klimt vocabulary'

Klimt's paintings are packed with decorative forms. He filled his backgrounds with them, but the clothes worn by his models often consist largely of these ornaments too. The designer-artist Bas van Beek has taken these decorations from Klimt's paintings and used them to make a visual language, the 'Klimt vocabulary'. We invite everyone to create new patterns with them. Find a shape and stick the sticker on the staircase wall.

Ground floor



Gustav Klimt

Avenue to Schloss Kammer, 1912

Klimt was impressed by the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. He saw them at the Impressionist exhibition in Vienna in 1903, which included *The Pink Orchard*. More of Van Gogh's work later featured at the progressive Galerie Miethke and in the *Internationale Kunstschau* exhibition. The thickly applied paint, blue outlines and gnarled branches of the trees in Klimt's *Avenue to Schloss Kammer* might have come straight from a Van Gogh painting.

Stylized landscapes

Klimt's landscapes have a character entirely of their own. There are no people in them and the forms have been stripped down to a highly decorative whole. It was only in 1898 that Klimt began to create landscapes. But from that time on, he painted them in the Austrian lakes area, where he stayed almost every summer with his friend Emilie Flöge and her family. Klimt executed almost all of his landscapes on square canvases. He used a card with a square hole to

choose a piece of nature that offered an attractive composition of colours and planes.

The influence of Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh and Théo Van Rysselberghe can be detected in the landscapes that Klimt painted from 1903. He had seen their work at influential exhibitions. In response, the colour contrasts in his own landscapes became stronger and the lines more stylized.



Fernand Khnopff
Still water, 1894

This tranquil pond symbolizes the unfathomable human psyche. Khnopff painted the water as if it were a mirror: it reflects the trees and sky, making it impossible to see the bottom. A similarly mysterious atmosphere is found in Klimt's waterscapes. He painted *A Morning by the Pond* (alongside) a year after seeing Khnopff's work. The latter was also reproduced in *Ver Sacrum*, the Secession's magazine.



Gustav Klimt
Lakeshore with Birches, 1901

Klimt painted this lakeside view during one of his holidays with the Flöge family. The foreground contains pretty flowers and slender birch trunks, brushed in the loose manner of the Impressionists. The fact that the sky is not visible lends the landscape a mysterious, somewhat dark atmosphere. A similar effect is also found in Khnopff's work.



Théo Van Rysselberghe
Pointe Saint-Pierre in Saint-Tropez, 1896

The Belgian Théo Van Rysselberghe was the most influential Pointillist in Vienna. Painters using this technique placed individual dots of pure colour alongside one another, which the viewer's brain then 'blends' into the intended tone. Klimt painted with coloured dots too, but did so far less rigidly than Van Rysselberghe or Georges Seurat.



Gustav Klimt
Italian Garden Landscape, 1913

Klimt adored flower gardens. He painted this luxuriant example during a tour of Italy. The canvas is a colourful patchwork, in which the artist reveals an eye like Van Gogh's (alongside) for the colourful splendour of nature. Both artists created a vibrant painting of a garden in full bloom.



Edvard Munch (1863-1944)
Summer Night on the Beach, 1902-1903

Norwegian artist Edvard Munch was already known in Klimt's time for powerful paintings filled with expanses of colour and flowing outlines. The reflection of the moon on the water has been reduced here to an abstract form. Klimt had plenty of opportunities to see the painting. It was purchased in 1904 by a collector whose home he visited. It later came into the possession of Alma Mahler, the composer's widow, who had once been in love with Klimt.

Colourful ode to women

Klimt did not make his first and only visit to Paris until 1909. While there, he saw the latest art of the day. Klimt was inspired by the way the French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and others depicted elegant Parisian women. They used graceful lines and large expanses of colour. This heightened the flatness of the image. Some of Klimt's female portraits display a similar combination of decorative style and flat surfaces. They have an almost graphic look, as if printed.

At the end of his career, Klimt produced a number of impressive compositions showing contemporary, confident women. The paintings are large, powerful and expressive. Decorative patterns fill the background. Klimt opted for even more pronounced colours than before. This betrays the influence of Van Gogh and of Fauvists like Henri Matisse, who were known for their use of bright, clashing colours.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901)
Poster for the journal *La revue blanche*, 1895

Toulouse-Lautrec created this poster for a modern art magazine in Paris. The fashionable and dynamic appearance of the young woman lent itself perfectly to this purpose. Dressed in extravagant clothes with fur and feathers, she seems to flit past us. Klimt might have known the work from the widely distributed book *Les maîtres de l'affiche* (Masters of the Poster) or from a Lautrec exhibition at Galerie Miethke in 1909.



Gustav Klimt
Friends I (The Sisters), 1907

These Viennese women dressed in winter clothes are depicted without any spatial perspective. Geometric patterns and large expanses of black dominate, giving the impression almost of a print. Together with the fashionable atmosphere of the painting, this technique reflects the influence of Toulouse-Lautrec's popular poster art.



Édouard Manet (1832-1883)
Study for Bar at the Folies Bergère, 1881

In 1909, Klimt sent a postcard from Paris to his friend Emilie Flöge: 'Visited a private gallery with Tschudi yesterday - Cézanne - Manet - very nice!' Klimt rarely expressed admiration for the work of international artists. This study by Manet for a larger painting (The Courtauld Gallery, London) was shown in Vienna several times. Manet played with the reflection in the mirror and the position of the barmaid. The snapshot character of the scene made it thoroughly contemporary.



Gustav Klimt
Johanna Staude, 1917-1918

Johanna Staude was a modern woman. This is clear from Klimt's portrait, which shows her with a fashionably short haircut and a blouse made of fabric from the *Wiener Werkstätte* (Viennese workshops, where artists and designers produced decorative art). The frontal composition and expressive colour contrasts recall Matisse's *Girl with Green Eyes*. There is a powerful interplay in that painting too between the model and the colourful motifs in the background.



Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890)
The Zouave, 1888

Van Gogh chose his colours according to the person he was painting. For this 'Zouave' - a French infantryman serving in North Africa - he opted for 'a coarse combination of disparate tones'. Van Gogh's intense colour contrasts and powerful contour lines had a liberating effect on many later artists. We find them in Klimt's late portraits too.



Gustav Klimt
Ria Munk on her Deathbed, 1912

Ria Munk took her own life at the age of 24 when her fiancé broke off their engagement. Her parents gave Klimt the difficult commission of painting this deathbed portrait. He

surrounded the deceased young woman with stylized flowers and contrasting expanses of colour. Klimt left a second, life-size portrait of her unfinished: 'The Munk portrait is becoming a sore spot - I just can't do it!'



Gustav Klimt
Adele Bloch-Bauer II, 1912

In 1909, Klimt organized the *Internationale Kunstschau* exhibition. Art by Matisse and other Fauvists was shown there for the first time. Their influence prompted Klimt to opt for a palette of very bright colours. This is the first portrait in which he adopted the Fauvists' bold style, with vivid hues and a background with flat expanses. Klimt had already painted a portrait of Bloch-Bauer a few years earlier, immortalizing her as the 'lady in gold'.



Gustav Klimt
The Bride, (unfinished), 1917-1918

The significance of this bride in the midst of a group of entwined figures is not clear. Nor do we know which is 'the bride' herself: the woman in blue, or her semi-nude companion on the right? The work is unfinished, large sections are unpainted, enabling us to see how Klimt built up his compositions. *The Bride* was on the easel in Klimt's studio when the artist died in 1918 aged just 55. We can only guess at the direction his work might have taken after this.



Gustav Klimt (1862-1918)
Eugenia Primavesi, 1913

Eugenia Primavesi was a patron of the arts. She bought several paintings by Klimt. The artist was also a welcome guest at the costume balls she held at her country house. Klimt's friend Josef Hoffmann designed an interior there with elegant floral patterns. The profusion of flowers and the intense colours in this portrait will undoubtedly have been to her taste. The coarse painting style, leaving part of the canvas visible, makes the execution of the work very modern.

Bas van Beek inspired by...

Just as Gustav Klimt was inspired by various artists, the decorative elements in Klimt's art are an inspiration to the Dutch designer-artist Bas van Beek (1974). The motifs of Klimt's contemporaries at the Wiener Werkstätte (Viennese decorative art workshops) also have a strong appeal for Van Beek. He places these Viennese patterns in a contemporary context by digitally redesigning them and using them for wallpaper or upholstery fabric.

Van Beek often takes product designs from the past in order to redesign and reproduce them. He aims to question the way we look at art, particularly the distinction we commonly make between 'original' and 'reproduction'. Is that difference still relevant?

What immediately stands out in this room is the gold, three-dimensional wall, which echoes the exuberant style of Klimt's 'Gold Period'. Especially for this exhibition, Van Beek has also come up with a 'Klimt vocabulary' – a visual language based on the decorations in the Austrian artist's paintings. We invite our visitors to use them to compose new patterns on the staircase walls.

Marina by Dagobert Peche

Klimt's portrait of Friederike Maria Beer (1916) shows her wearing a dress in the Wiener Werkstätte's Marina fabric, the name of which refers to the waves on the sea. The pattern and the Asian motifs in the background make this portrait the most exuberant that Klimt painted. Van Beek created a digital reproduction of the Marina pattern and used it to upholster this sofa.

The original portrait of Beer is now in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Mizne-Blumental Collection.

Mauerblümchen (Wallflower) by Josef Hoffmann

This wallpaper is based on the Wiener Werkstätte design *Mauerblümchen* (Wallflower) by Josef Hoffmann. Together with Klimt, this architect-designer was one of the founders of the Vienna Secession. Hoffmann's design was used at the Primavesi family's country house in Winkelsdorf, Czechia. The pattern was applied not only as wallpaper but also for the ceiling lamp and clothing (see photograph).

Klimt's portrait of Eugenia Primavesi is one of the last works in this exhibition.

Blätter (Leaves) by Martha Alber

The fabric of the blouse that Johanna Staude wore in Klimt's portrait of her was designed by Martha Alber, an artist at the Wiener Werkstätte. The motif consists of a sequence of leaves, hence the name *Blätter* for this design.

The original painting can be seen in the previous room.

Gustav Klimt, Frank Lloyd Wright, Verner Panton et al.

This gold-tiled wall alludes to Klimt's Beethoven Frieze, and more specifically to the architecture with which it forms a unity. Van Beek took particular inspiration, however, from the textile blocks of the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and the vacuum-formed tiles of the designer Verner Panton. Both of these drew in turn on designs from the past, including the coffered dome of the Pantheon in Rome. In this way, Van Beek highlights the historical and ongoing interaction between artists and designers.