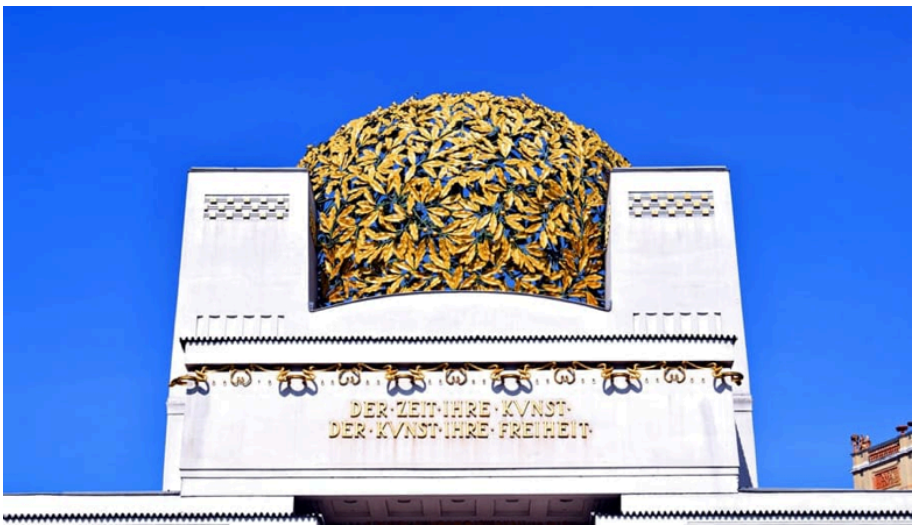
1. The Golden Rebel: A New Art for Vienna



In 1897, a group of young Austrian artists decided that the established art institutions were too conservative. They wanted to create something entirely new. Among them was Gustav Klimt, who became one of the most celebrated figures of the movement. Their motto was: *To every age its art, to art its freedom.* Their new headquarters, the Secession building in Vienna, was crowned with a spectacular golden dome made of intertwined laurel leaves. Inside, artists experimented with painting, architecture and decorative arts, often combining geometric patterns with natural forms.

Klimt came from a family of gold engravers: his father was a goldsmith, and the young Gustav grew up surrounded by the techniques of working with precious metals. Later, he transformed this childhood experience into an unmistakable artistic language.

His famous painting The Kiss (1907–1908) seems almost to be made of gold leaf. Two lovers embrace, wrapped in an extraordinary cloak of geometric patterns and shimmering decorations. The figures appear to float between reality and fantasy, as if they belonged to a world outside time.



But there is another fascinating connection: Klimt's fascination with gold was also inspired by his travels to Italy. During visits to Ravenna, he admired the magnificent Byzantine mosaics of San Vitale and Sant'Apollinare Nuovo. Their golden backgrounds, which seem to capture and reflect light, made a deep impression on him.

But perhaps the most charming part of this story is a postcard Klimt sent from Ravenna in December 1903. He complained about the miserable weather and the poor condition of his hotel, where rain even leaked through the ceiling! Yet, despite these inconveniences, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of the mosaics, describing them as being of “incredible splendour”.

It is tempting to imagine him standing inside the Basilica of San Vitale, looking up at the golden mosaics of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora, and suddenly recognising a new artistic possibility: what if a modern painting could shine like an ancient mosaic? When he returned to Vienna, this experience became one of the inspirations for his celebrated Golden Period.

Austria – Vienna Secession, founded in 1897.