
MAX KLINGER'S
RED-HEADED MODEL
A DOSSIER

Fall 2020

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KLINGER, Max
1857 - 1920
German School

SEATED YOUTH, circa 1883/85
(*Sitzender Jüngling*)

Oil on carton

24 3/8" x 32" (63 x 81 cm)

Monogrammed in red oil at lower left: *MK*



fig. 1

In 1883, during an almost three year stay in Paris, Max Klinger (1857-1920), began work on *The Judgment of Paris* (*Urteil des Paris*), 1885/87, a project that, thematically at least, had been inspired by his earlier print portfolio, *Cupid and Psyche* (*Amor und Psyche*), 1880. *The Judgment of Paris* engrossed Klinger for four years; from 1883 through 1885, he produced several studies in preparation for the final work: a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which the painted canvas and the wood carved frame, with plaster figures, are unified in service to the narrative. (fig. 1) The work depicts the main players responsible for ushering in the Trojan War: the god Hermes (Mercury), Paris, the goddesses Hera (Juno), Athena (Minerva), and Aphrodite (Venus), who are in the process of disrobing so that Paris may judge their beauty most effectively, and Eros (Cupid). The figures are surrounded by a kind of watchful chorus, from the bust of the woman at far left, which is very reminiscent of the sculpture included in the vestibule at the Villa Albers (Berlin)

(fig. 2), where Klinger had also received a commission in 1883, to the serpentine Medusa at the far right, to the frieze of faces at the bottom of the frame, who are, from left to right, a satyr, the goddess Eris (Discordia), and a giant.



fig. 2

In *Malerei und Zeichnung* (1891), Klinger defined his early paintings, like *The Judgment of Paris* as *Raummalerei*, works which create an environment of three-dimensional space through the use of multimedia decorative elements; in English, this is known as SPATIAL ART. The hybridity of naturalism and symbolism in the work shocked viewers in 1887, when it was first exhibited at Berlin's *Königliche Akademie der Künste*, by upending their expectations for a straightforward depiction of the oft-depicted narrative and setting them off balance. Klinger achieved this by, on the one hand, placing his figures in a traditionally academic, neo-classical landscape; the sense of depth and space in the middle-ground and back-ground is similar to that in Claude Lorrain's interpretation of *The Judgment of Paris*, circa 1645/46, and this depth and space are created through the use of atmospheric and linear perspective. (fig. 3) However, on the other hand, Klinger's figures are lacking their iconographical attributes which would help the viewer to identify them as mythological gods and goddesses; divorced from these familiar and expected identifiers, the bodies of these figures lose their ideal nude status and are now just shockingly naked. For 19th century viewers, this shock was heightened by the brightly colored cloth Paris

holds in his lap, placed there, presumably, to hide the physical manifestation of his pleasure at seeing the naked bodies of the women on display before him.

The present work, a study for *The Judgment of Paris*, was likely executed between 1883/85. (fig. 4) This date can be established for these reasons. First, stylistically, works from this period of Klinger's career incorporated carefully deliberate modeling and transparent glazes. In the present work and other figure studies from this period, including *Study for the Central Figure of "The Blue Hour"* (1888), luminous shades of pink, blue, and yellow lend an underlying glow to the sumptuous flesh of the sitters. (fig. 5) By 1900, Klinger had absorbed some of the tenants of Impressionism; his brushwork became much looser and the articulation of skin tone is much denser, taking on an almost pasty appearance. Secondly, the position of the red-haired youth in this study is similar to that of the Paris figure in a rough sketch of the overall composition from 1883. (fig. 6)



fig. 3

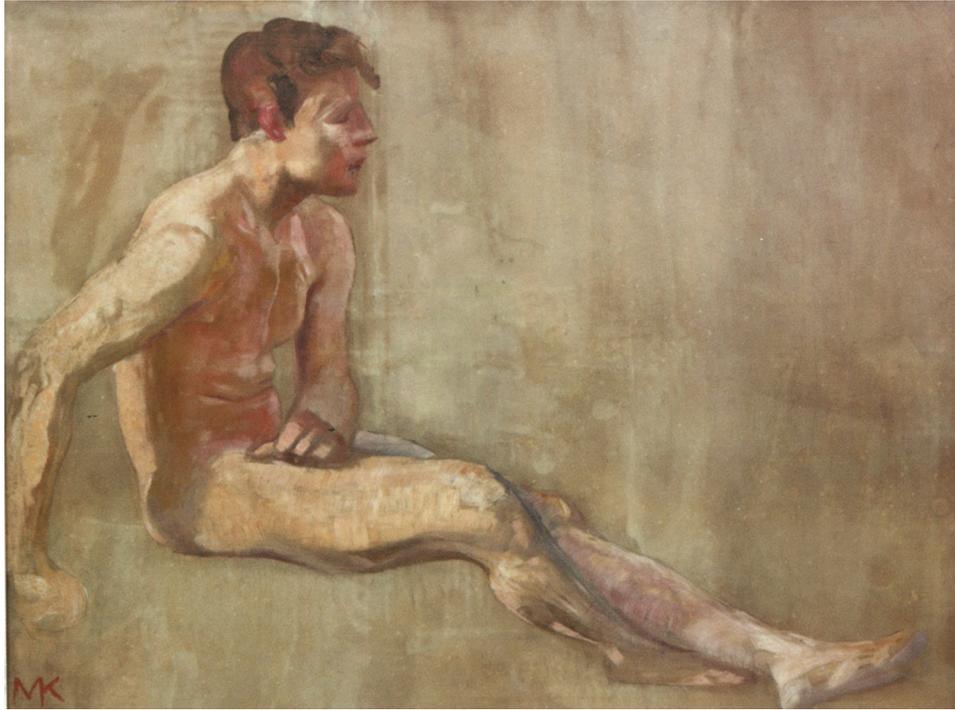


fig. 4



fig. 5



fig. 6

While in the finished work, Paris's body is tense and upright, the Paris in these earlier studies is more relaxed. His right arm is placed in a position of support; he leans upon it, rather than using it to grip the side of his stool as in the finished painting. And, his posture with outstretched legs and concave torso suggest a spirit that is less bothered. Finally, both historical and visual evidence point to the fact that this model was most probably Parisian and that this study would have been executed during Klinger's time there. In fact, the majority of Klinger's work on *The Judgment of Paris* was done while he was in Paris from July 1883 to December 1886. At least two other Parisian models were included in the work, the female model who was chosen to represent Aphrodite (Venus) and the dark-haired male model who was eventually selected to be Paris; this latter model appears in a number of studies dated to the time Klinger was in Paris. (fig. 7) Both this dark-haired model and the red-headed model in the present study, were also featured in Klinger's 1889/1910 print series, *On Death (Vom Tode)*, a project which was

begun while the artist was in Paris and released in two parts over a period of twenty years. Both models can be seen together in *Philosopher* from *On Death, Part 2*, in which the standing red-haired model reaches out to a reflection of himself while standing over the larger body of the dark-haired model in repose. (fig. 8)



fig. 7



fig. 8

It is unclear when or why Max Klinger ultimately decided to cast the dark-haired model as Paris and the red-haired model as Hermes (Mercury) in *The Judgment of Paris*. It is tempting, though, to contemplate a psychologically based explanation. Perhaps Klinger, also a red-head, as seen in a self-portrait (fig. 9), felt a kind of kinship with the character of Hermes (Mercury), and so he selected his model doppelgänger for this role. While it is the Trojan mortal Paris, who actively judges the Greek goddess beauty contest and grants the final prize to Aphrodite (Venus), on the condition that he will receive in return, Helen, the wife of the Greek king Menelaus, it is Hermes (Mercury) who, like a visual artist, orchestrates the whole event behind the scenes. Described as witty and wily, the god Hermes (Mercury) is a messenger, communicator, and trickster, not unlike the symbolist Klinger himself.



fig. 9



fig. 10



fig. 11

In *The Judgment of Paris*, Hermes (Mercury) is the guide, responsible for coaxing the action of the myth along from the beginning, when he gets the ball (or golden apple) rolling by informing Paris of his responsibility of awarding this apple “to the fairest” of the three goddesses before him, to the deciding moment when he instructs the goddesses to remove their clothing for Paris’s benefit. Perhaps, though, Klinger’s choice of the red-haired model to stand in as Hermes (Mercury) was purely for aesthetic reasons; maybe the model’s physique was best suited for his position within the composition, in which he stands, in contrapposto pose, with his back facing the viewer. Although this positioning seems a purposeful way of pointing out the “shocking” nakedness of the figures (Hermes (Mercury)) is shown without his usual winged sandals and hat), this pose also directly refers back to the similar one of Athena (Minerva) in Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving of *The Judgment of Paris* (after Raphael, circa 1510/20), a work that Klinger likely knew. (fig. 10)

Interestingly, Max Klinger’s red-headed muse appears also appears in later works. In the aforementioned *Vom Tode* print, which was part of the second release of impressions in 1910, Klinger seems to have aged both models slightly; certainly, not by almost 30 years, as he first met both models in the early ‘80s, but with the creative license of an artist that would have enabled him to adjust earlier studies so that his models became less youthful and more mature as the subject required them to be. The red-head also appears in a, now destroyed, painting, another mythological scene, from 1909: *Homer Singing to the Greek People* (*Homer singt dem Griechenvolke*). (fig. 11) He is the second seated figure on the left and his pose is nearly identical to that in the *Seated Youth* study. Repeated use of models and their poses, through time and across the media of painting, prints, and sculptures, was a common choice for Klinger during his approximately 40-year career. It would be of interest to learn more about these models.

Stephanie Hackett

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