



**THE VIRGIN (2015)**  
Models: Neera Nath, Sabina Singh, Nadine Kreisberger, Shreya Singh, Simar Motwani, Naina de Bols-Juzan, Bianca Peralta.

"Klimt addresses the different stages of female sexual awareness, inspired partly by Freud's findings on the subject. The figures cocoon together to form a cloud in a decorative floral theme."

# FRAMED

After a tribute to Raja Ravi Varma, **Rohit Chawla**, one of the country's most prominent photographers, moves on to the vivid imagery of Gustav Klimt. In an exclusive interview with *Vogue*, Chawla shares his thoughts and images. By RIA DUBASH





**THE KISS (1907)**

Models: Ayesha Thapar and Anoop Magu.

"I find this to be one of Klimt's tamer pieces—it's more about love than eroticism. It doesn't have the overt sexuality prevalent in his other paintings and seems to embody his belief in the transforming quality of love and art. Some believe that this painting represents the love between Klimt and his mistress, Emilie Floge."

**A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST**  
Chawla pays photographic tribute to his artistic heroes.



**e**very photographer has a distinct style; how would you define yours?

I have always been drawn to graphic minimalism and the inter-play between form and

space. My upcoming exhibition in April, 'Out of Fashion', reflects this style in abundance. Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles Correa and Richard Avedon have shaped my visual sensibility.

**Art seems to feed your imagination. Your previous photo tribute to Raja Ravi Varma seems to have ignited a drive to reinterpret yet another legendary artist, Gustav Klimt.**

Absolutely. Great art, a distinct and

original aesthetic, and great visions are hallmarks that guide me in my creative endeavours. After all, a truly great artist survives the vicissitudes of time and taste. In the end, history is the final judge of his or her longevity.

**What led you to exhibit a photographic tribute to Klimt?**

One chilly spring day in New York, I made my first foray up the steps of Neue Galerie, seduced by its prized inhabitant, 'Adele Bloch Bauer', a 135-million-dollar painting that made Gustav Klimt the 20th century's most expensive artist. I saw the swirls of gold, glinting squares and rectangles proliferating in kaleidoscopic permutations, dizzy circles and drunken spirals, the visual equivalent of opposing harmonies. I followed Klimt's work back to his hometown, Vi-

enna, and I became hooked on his Byzantine luxuriance of form, the vivid juxtaposition of colours derived from the Austrian Rococo. Klimt's portraits in particular, with their abundant sensuality, underlying eroticism and decorative tracery created in me a yearning to re-live his vision.

**How did you reconstruct Klimt's eclecticism?**

How does one create geometry and perspectives that cannot normally be seen through the camera's viewfinder? In this journey of swapping easel for pixels, I found a worthy partner in master craftsman Manoranjan Mukherjee, who created the iconic backgrounds. In reconstructing Klimt, there was equal pleasure in accuracy and form. Klimt can never be considered an artist of mere dazzle >



**MEDICINE (1900-1907)**

Model: Tejuswani Chaudhary.

This was interpreted as Klimt's salutation to the achievements of the medical world. It was inspired by his interest in symbolism. The nude figure behind represents death, disease and pain.

SALONI PURI/TROHIT CHAWLA



**THE PORTRAIT OF FRITZA RIEDLER (1906)**

Model: Smriti Bhatia. "This painting marked the start of Klimt's golden period. The strong graphic quality instantly drew me to it. The eye of Horus is present in the painting, symbolising the presence of Egyptian royalty. The striking window-like motif behind Fritza's head is influenced by Spanish Baroque painters."



**THE EMBRACE (1905)**

Model: Saloni Puri. "This painting was part of the Stoclet Frieze (1905-1911) series on expectation, tree of life and fulfillment. This is how Klimt understood the cycle of life. The female body is covered in a floral dress with circles, which is symbolic of Klimt's women."



"In reconstructing Klimt, there was equal pleasure in accuracy and form. Klimt can never be considered an artist of mere dazzle or surface beauty"

or surface beauty. 'The Sequel' is my humble photographic tribute to an opulent artist of desire.

**What's your opinion on the artist's muse?**

It's a much-abused word. A muse is someone with an understated, natural style, in whose eyes the photographer finds a sense of narrative and intrigue, one with whom the artist can create magic. There's purity in the word. My wife Saloni has been a constant muse in my life. In true Hitchcock style, she makes fleeting appearances in my exhibitions.

**For 'The Sequel', you have photographed prominent women, including Chitrangada Singh and Ayesha Thapar. How did you choose these women?**

For the portraits there was a loose resemblance, but more importantly [I chose] those who I felt could in some sinuous way lose themselves in Klimt's enchanting vision and become the artist's living self-portraits in the process. Photography in this case was a bit like mummification, and it was brave of them to agree to do it.

**What was the greatest challenge in trying to exact Klimt's work?**

The challenge was multi-fold—from recreating the Byzantine luxuriance of form to re-enacting the abundant sensuality and underlying eroticism of Klimt's portraits, there is no doubt this exercise involved both head and heart.

**Which one of Klimt's works is your personal favourite?**

Chitrangada in the *Adele Bloch Bauer* portrait is my favourite. I love it for its languid and delicately sinuous form. ■

**PORTRAIT OF ADELE BLOCH BAUER (1907)**

Model: Chitrangada Singh.

Known as the Austrian *Mona Lisa*, this is one of Klimt's most celebrated paintings. I like the delicate interplay between flowing lines and angular geometric forms that create a dream-like sensuality."

