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## JONATHAN JONES ON ART BLOG



# Tammam Azzam's Kiss: an unromantic commentary on the Syrian conflict

The artist has used Klimt's idealistic vision of love to highlight the pain and suffering in his country



A kiss for the whole world ... Tammam Azzam's version of the Klimt masterpiece. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

Love is the drug for the best and most effective political art. The powerful and hilarious Berlin Wall graffiti picture that showed a fraternal kiss between Communist leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker became a world-famous work of dissenting art. Banksy emulated its cheek in his mural Kissing Coppers. Now the Syrian artist Tammam Azzam has enlisted one of the greatest kisses in art to protest against his country's suffering in a war watched passively by the outside world.

Azzam has Photoshopped Gustav Klimt's painting The Kiss against a war-ravaged (and ancient-looking) Syrian building. The image has gone viral, being rapidly shared around the world. And no wonder: it is an extremely eloquent picture. Klimt's painting looks like a projection in a pacifist *son et lumiere* – in inventing this apparent piece of public art, Azzam imagines a country where peaceful gatherings are still possible.

The painting whose golden ghost he has made to materialise on a ruinous facade is a passionate plea for universal love.

Klimt's Kiss is the painting that launched a million Athena posters. Many people think of this work, painted in Vienna in 1907-8, as a soppy, romantic image. It is that, but it is profoundly and idealistically so. Klimt visualises an ecstatic union of two people in an image of universal sister- and brotherhood. The Kiss takes its text from a line in the moving choral performance of Schiller's Ode to Joy in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: "This kiss is for the whole world!"

In the ethereal white, black and gold Beethoven Frieze that he created for the Vienna Secession building in 1902, Klimt set out to illustrate the movements, moods and meaning of Beethoven's Ninth. A section of this dreamlike frieze depicts the "kiss for the whole world". Five years later, when he painted his erotic vision of embracing lovers The Kiss, Klimt gave the same idea of global, unlimited human love a more perfect and gloriously simple image.

Taking that passionate image and putting it on a wall in Syria, Azzam invokes one of the most universal works of art to try and touch international hearts that are OK with ignoring his country's pain. *Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!*

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