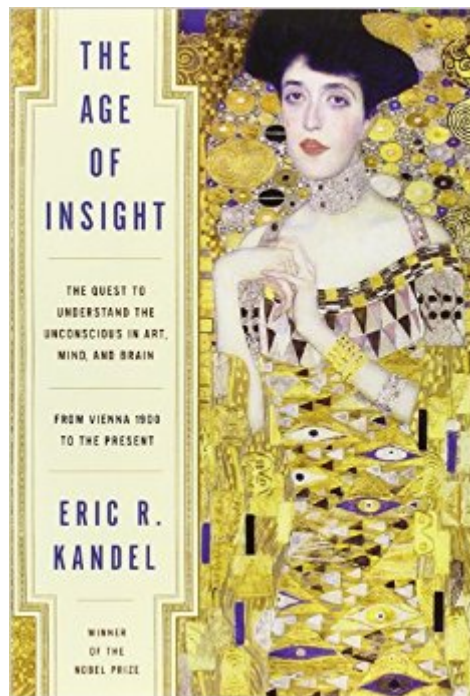


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# The Age Of Insight: The Quest To Understand The Unconscious In Art, Mind, And Brain, From Vienna 1900 To The Present



## Synopsis

A brilliant book by Nobel Prize winner Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight* takes us to Vienna 1900, where leaders in science, medicine, and art began a revolution that changed forever how we think about the human mind—our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions—and how mind and brain relate to art. At the turn of the century, Vienna was the cultural capital of Europe. Artists and scientists met in glittering salons, where they freely exchanged ideas that led to revolutionary breakthroughs in psychology, brain science, literature, and art. Kandel takes us into the world of Vienna to trace, in rich and rewarding detail, the ideas and advances made then, and their enduring influence today. The Vienna School of Medicine led the way with its realization that truth lies hidden beneath the surface. That principle infused Viennese culture and strongly influenced the other pioneers of Vienna 1900. Sigmund Freud shocked the world with his insights into how our everyday unconscious aggressive and erotic desires are repressed and disguised in symbols, dreams, and behavior. Arthur Schnitzler revealed women's unconscious sexuality in his novels through his innovative use of the interior monologue. Gustav Klimt, Oscar Kokoschka, and Egon Schiele created startlingly evocative and honest portraits that expressed unconscious lust, desire, anxiety, and the fear of death. Kandel tells the story of how these pioneers—Freud, Schnitzler, Klimt, Kokoschka, and Schiele—inspired by the Vienna School of Medicine, in turn influenced the founders of the Vienna School of Art History to ask pivotal questions such as What does the viewer bring to a work of art? How does the beholder respond to it? These questions prompted new and ongoing discoveries in psychology and brain biology, leading to revelations about how we see and perceive, how we think and feel, and how we respond to and create works of art. Kandel, one of the leading scientific thinkers of our time, places these five innovators in the context of today's cutting-edge science and gives us a new understanding of the modernist art of Klimt, Kokoschka, and Schiele, as well as the school of thought of Freud and Schnitzler. Reinvigorating the intellectual enquiry that began in Vienna 1900, *The Age of Insight* is a wonderfully written, superbly researched, and beautifully illustrated book that also provides a foundation for future work in neuroscience and the humanities. It is an extraordinary book from an international leader in neuroscience and intellectual history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a splendid book both on the workings of the brain and how it can be exemplified in the art of Vienna 1900. This was after all the place and time that led to modernity making Vienna one of the pre-eminent capitals of the world. One is swept up in the feeling of being privy to the birth of the new understanding in medicine and art as it took place in Vienna 1900 in its most intense unfolding and this description is extended to later work, predominantly at US universities, often by people who derived from the Viennese school of thinking through emigration. The work follows the tradition of the bridge-builders between the seemingly opposed subjects bringing new insights from brain-science in understanding art. It shows, in academic detail, the brain as a network that finds pleasure in the acquisition of knowledge in either field. It is rather comprehensive and learned at that. The book is cerebral but very readable; in fact I read it in a Marathon session in preparing for a trip to New York to the Golden Aedeus, this Mona Lisa of the Fin de Siècle. You don't need the trip though; there are wonderful reproductions in the book of interesting work to be analyzed. You need also not read all the academic detail, there is much to enjoy by taking glimpses or by looking at shorter summaries and graphs. In the first part we learn, in an especially engrossing section, about the general atmosphere in Vienna during its golden time, its coffee-house and theater culture, its literary, musical and salon life but another forward force was the influence of Europe's premier Medical School of the time in Vienna that established such routines as stethoscope or auscultation.

\*\*\*\*\*"In conversation with Paul Holdengräber, Eric Kandel will discuss the book already praised by Oliver Sacks as 'a tour-de-force that sets the stage for a twenty-first century understanding of the human mind' in all its richness and diversity." "My relation with the Viennese milieu started with my father telling me about the dream city, the reincarnation of late antiquity Alexandria, where I was born after WWII. He took his postgraduate studies in Vienna University before it was annexed by

Hitler. Sam, my younger brother was fascinated with Klimt, few of his frescos still hanging on my house walls. But I was a fan of Mozart and Freud, and later I encountered the magical worlds of Dr. Kandell; thanks to the intellectual tours of Charlie Rose. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Vienna, the pride of the Austro-Hungarian Empire - was considered the cultural capital of Europe, by my dad and many, with its unique atmosphere and sophisticated charm. Vienna embraced a versatile mix of musicians, scientists and artists, who met in cafes and spent the evenings in sparkling salons, or gathering of people under the roof of an inspiring host, held to amuse one another and enjoy fine taste and broaden their knowledge through conversation. They used liberal discussions, of novel ideas that may have led to inventive conclusions, with influential results in psychology, brain science, and innovation of literature, and art. Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, among many others began exploring a charming new territory: the then mystical unconscious.

"But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light." -- Ephesians 5:13 (NKJV) The Age of Insight is a hard book to categorize. Professor Kandel's stated purpose is to demonstrate how a knowledgeable scientist can write clearly about science so that the interconnections between art and science can be exposed to those who know only about the art. As such, this book is more about informing those interested in the humanities than those whose interest is in science. As a necessary part of his method, there's a circumscription around a narrow set of artists and literary figures rather than an attempt to make a universal statement. To have attempted otherwise would have made a hefty book into a multi-volume tome that few would read. As someone who reads a lot of art history, history of science, and current research on mental processes, I was impressed by the conception of the book and how deftly it was carried out in ways that deepened my appreciation for subjects I have long been familiar with. I was grateful for these new perspectives. I found the book to be enjoyable for the most part. If I got to a part that was too elementary for what I wanted to absorb, I just skipped quickly through until I got to weightier material. I didn't have to do that very often. This book would be a wonderful gift to a budding artist or writer . . . or to an art historian in training. I'm sure that many wonderful shows could be mounted that would take advantage of the information here in ways that would delight museum and gallery goers. Although the book will seem flawed to some, I think it succeeds in its purpose of proposing a new way to write about art and science.

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