

**EGON
SCHIELE**

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Egon Schiele

22 February – 18 June 2017

To set the tone for the upcoming commemorative year of 2018, the Albertina is mounting a comprehensive exhibition of artworks by Egon Schiele that positions his radical oeuvre within an epoch characterised by a schism between the modernist and the traditional. 160 of Schiele's most magnificent gouaches and drawings will introduce viewers to an artistic oeuvre that highlights human beings' existential loneliness as its great theme while drastically opposing the values of fin de siècle society.

While Schiele is typically viewed as part of Vienna's turn-of-the-century artistic and intellectual elite, among personalities ranging from Mahler to Schnitzler, from Freud to Kraus, and from Altenberg to Hofmannsthal, this exhibition at the Albertina is conceived according to a different principle: large photographs hanging in the air pit the artist's works against the reality of his environment, as a visible demonstration of just how out of sync the two were. The real backdrop represented by these photos makes clear the acute discrepancy between Schiele's output and the society amidst which he lived.

The Great Draughtsman

Alongside being one of turn-of-the-century Vienna's two key figures along with Klimt, Egon Schiele was not only a co-originator and grand master of expressionism, but furthermore—and above all—the 20th century's greatest draughtsmen. Following his studies at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts, where he adhered to that institution's rigid stylistic standards, the young artist first turned to the Art Nouveau style. It was in Klimt that he found his role model. But unlike Klimt, whose drawings served as ideas, cartoons, or sketches for paintings, Egon Schiele soon came to regard his own works on paper as artworks in their own right. By 1910, the barely 20-year-old Schiele had already created an entirely unmistakable style that he could truly call his own—above all in his drawings.

In these, as well as in watercolours and gouaches, the artist broke new ground: it was with assured, strong strokes that he would sketch out his subject, which was usually the human body. Unerring contours lend his depictions their unique character, while simultaneous defamiliarisation is achieved via daring perspectives, exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, and his subjects' general fragmentation. Schiele's so precisely calculated drawings also show how he trod new ground in terms of iconography and colouration. It is therefore with good reason that the artist's drawn works are viewed as being at least equal in status to his paintings—and Schiele the draughtsman was, in fact, far superior to Schiele the painter. As a draughtsman, he went on to become a great role model for many artists of our own times.

Iconoclasm as a Matter of Principle

Egon Schiele's depictions of emaciated bodies manifest an aesthetic of the ugly that was as radical then as it is now. It contrasts diametrically with the ideal of beauty propagated by the Secessionist circle of Gustav Klimt. The young Schiele actually eliminates the contradiction between the beautiful and the ugly, the normal and the pathological. His protagonists stand

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symbolically for human beings' alienation from society and from religion. They embody an allegory of the modern individual's homelessness—in which the renouncement of false shame is transformed from a broken taboo into an aesthetic principle.

Schiele as an Ethicist and Moralist

In order to find a new approach to decoding Schiele's often so riddle-like and allegorical oeuvre, the Albertina's exhibition sheds light on the artist's diverse sources of inspiration. And for the first time, a group of pictures that has thus far not been iconographically decoded is being paid close attention: the so-called *Allegorical Works*. New research has found that, in these pictures, Schiele was addressing Francis of Assisi's ideal of poverty and the *Spiritual Franciscans* (or *Fratricelli*) of the 13th century. The adherents of this movement were expected to commit themselves to pastoral care and a life of poverty.

Between 1912 and 1918, Egon Schiele created a series of works showing men in humble clothing and bearing pathetic titles such as *Redemption*, *Devotion*, and *The Truth Unveiled*. In borrowing motivic and thematic material from Francis of Assisi's ideal of poverty, the young artist once again set himself apart from the materialism upheld by the Viennese fin de siècle elite associated with Gustav Klimt and the Wiener Werkstätte. Such artworks by Schiele cannot, however, be viewed as a representation of the artist's personal state. They much rather speak to lofty moral aspirations: Schiele proves to be not only a creative mind possessed of the greatest freedom and aesthetic autonomy, but also a champion of ethical integrity and passionate spirituality.

It is likewise in the context of his high moral ideals that one can view his well-known V-gesture, the earliest example of which is seen in his *Self-Portrait with Peacock Waistcoat*. This hand gesture is a quotation from the famous Byzantine mosaic of Christ Pantocrator in Istanbul's Chora Church. Not only in this gesture, but also in the halo sanctifying his head, Egon Schiele performatively stages himself as a chosen one of high rank. His chaotic hair and aloof gaze downward towards the viewer give the impression of a self-confident genius who brings salvation upon the earth as both a creator and a ruler: a worldly Christ as sustainer of the world, an artist as creator and messiah. It is thus that Schiele reinterprets and expressionistically translates a significant aspect of Byzantine iconography into a contemporary gesture.

A Vast Survey

Despite his short life (1890–1918) and an artistic career that barely exceeded ten years, Egon Schiele left behind an astoundingly vast oeuvre. Not counting his sketchbooks, he created over 330 paintings and over 2,500 drawings. The Albertina is home to a large number of works from every creative phase of this short-lived genius.

These holdings, which provide the conceptual starting point and core of this exhibition, are complemented by various important loan works from Austrian and foreign collections and museums. The present exhibition thus presents a unique perspective on Egon Schiele's artistic development, which his untimely death at just 28 years of age was to so abruptly terminate.

Wall texts

Egon Schiele

Egon Schiele was born in Tulln, Lower Austria, on June 12, 1890, to the town's stationmaster Adolf Schiele (1850–1904) and Maria Schiele, née Soukop (1862–1935). He grew up with his sisters Melanie (1886–1974) and Gertrude («Gerti», 1894–1981). While still a child, he began to draw.

He attended one year of secondary school in Krems before he changed to Klosterneuburg. Doing poorly at school, he had to repeat a grade. On December 31, 1904, his gravely ill father died in Klosterneuburg, to where the family had moved. Schiele would suffer from his father's loss throughout his life, honoring his memory in the allegorical double self-portrait *The Hermits*.

Schiele's well-off uncle Leopold Czihaczek (1842–1929) became his guardian. Thanks to his mother, yet against his guardian's will, Schiele applied to Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts, which accepted him as its youngest student. During his years in Christian Griepenkerl's (1839–1916) master class, Schiele got to know Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) in 1907 and moved into his first own studio. In 1908, he presented his work in a public exhibition in Klosterneuburg Monastery for the first time, where he attracted the attention of Heinrich Benesch, who would become an important collector and his companion.

The Beginnings

In October 1906, at the age of sixteen, Egon Schiele was admitted to the master class of the history painter Christian Griepenkerl at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts. In three years of study, Schiele mastered a number of techniques thanks to his natural talent for sketching and to the fact that most of the teachings focused on drawing.

After just a few years, Schiele was producing works in a wide variety of styles that speak to his interest in naturalism, symbolism, late Impressionism and, from very early on, the Viennese Jugendstil. Gustav Klimt became his primary point of reference.

Particularly Schiele's prodigious mastery of the flat style typical of the Wiener Werkstätte and the Secession reveal how the young artist quickly threw off his professor's academic conventions. Soft undulating lines envelop his figures harmoniously, and his preference for the decorative ornamental line manifested itself in both his nudes and his portraits and full-length figures.

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Self-Discovery

Schiele's works were presented in the International Art Exhibition in Vienna in 1909. The artist came in touch with Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956) and the Wiener Werkstätte. Together with several colleagues, Schiele founded the “Neukunstgruppe” in protest against the conservative approach prevailing at the Academy of Fine Arts and left his class in July 1909. In December, the group showed its works in Vienna for the first time. Schiele got to know the art writer Arthur Roessler (1877–1955) and the important collector Carl Reininghaus.

In late 1909, early 1910, Schiele worked side by side with Max Oppenheimer (1885–1954), left Art Nouveau behind, discovered his own style, and began to write poetry. In 1910, he painted portraits and worked on cards for the Wiener Werkstätte and designs for the Palais Stoclet in Brussels. He showed his work at the International Hunting Exhibition in Vienna.

The expressive, wildly colored pictures created as independent works on paper in 1910 already secured his place in art history.

The Presence of the Absent

Schiele's figures, including his self-portraits, move in a space devoid of objects or coordinates. They are drawn without the objects whose existence is only suggested by the position of a hand or the posture of the body. The missing objects are virtually present in his subjects' body language and gestures, which lends the compositions a strangely unreal atmosphere. In *Seated Nude Girl*, Schiele chose not to depict the seat on which the figure presumably rests; however, the girl's obvious sitting position evokes, like an echo, the chair that remains unseen.

Egon Schiele and Children

In May 1910, Schiele, together with his student friend Anton Peschka (1885–1940) and the mime artist Erwin Osen (1891–1970), visited Český Krumlov, where the unequal trio intended to found a colony for artists. Before taking leave, Schiele started to dedicate himself to a series of drawings of ragged working-class children and erotic nudes of young girls. The main group of these works was created in Český Krumlov and at the end of the summer of 1911 in Vienna, after Schiele's return from Bohemia.

These drawings are masterpieces of the art of characterization and convincingly convey a complete naturalness. The sharp, rough drawing style eloquently captures the children's tattered garments, calloused hands, and frail bodies.

Whereas Schiele depicted boys without any attempt at eroticization, he did sexualize his female nudes: the representation of the female body is always erotic and seems to establish a rapport with the observer, as if a secret pact had been struck between the young seductress and the seduced spectator. In these nudes, everything is arranged to achieve the effect that its contemplation was intended to trigger. Defiantly breaking the taboos of the day, these works show the repressed sexuality of children in an openly aggressive manner.

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Turbulent Years

Schiele's first major solo exhibition was presented in Vienna in 1911. The artist met Walburga "Wally" Neuzil (1894–1917), who remained his favorite model and partner until his marriage to Edith Harms in 1915.

In May 1911, he and Wally moved to Český Krumlov, where the romantic old town became a permanent subject of his art. Yet the couple was already driven out of Český Krumlov because of their free way of living in early August. Schiele took residence in Neulengbach in August 1911, and Wally frequently came to visit. The natural surroundings he loved so much and the proximity to Vienna clearly contributed to the beginning of a productive creative phase. In 1912, Schiele showed his work in Budapest, Munich, Dresden, and in the Museum Folkwang in Hagen and participated in an exhibition of the Vienna Hagenbund, where he attracted the attention of the art collector Franz Hauer.

Three works by him were included in the legendary Sonderbund Exhibition in Cologne. In November 1912, he moved into his studio in Hietzing, which he would keep throughout his life. On Gustav Klimt's recommendation, Schiele was introduced to the industrialist and art-collecting Lederer family. The artist's financial situation improved.

Self-view

Taking himself as a motif and adopting the guise of different characters, Egon Schiele set out to explore uncharted territory. His understanding of the changes taking place in turn-of-the-century society led him to devise self-renderings that operate as symbols of psychosocial conflicts. His different self-representations and dramatizations are not the product of the artist's introspection; rather, they are the theatrical consequence of his realization that, in the modern era, coherent inner life has ceased to exist. Human beings have become alienated from themselves, from religion, and from their social and natural environment: they have come unstuck, lost their bearings.

Schiele's V-gesture

While the work of Egon Schiele as a whole is already marked by a certain emblematic nature, it is particularly the gestures of the human figures he depicted that have attracted the attention of the viewers from the very beginning. It was especially a constantly recurring enigmatic hand-sign – primarily but not exclusively in his self-portraits – which was subject of preoccupation. Referred to here is that gesture in which the hand is stretched out flat with all fingers except the thumb aligned, while between the index and middle finger a wedge-shaped gap is spread open. Because of the resulting form, which is reminiscent of the letter V, this sign has been named the V-gesture.

But what exactly does the peculiar, constantly reoccurring gesture mean? The answer was to be found in a consideration of historical works of art. It is no coincidence that the first piece of evidence led directly to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, where Schiele was trained. An illustrated book on the Byzantine Chora Church in Constantinople (Istanbul), published in 1908 and still extant in the academy's library, includes a reproduction of a large Pantocrator mosaic, which the author praises as "the best what the Kariye Djami can exhibit in mosaics."

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That the extremely unusual, symbolic hand gesture of this image of Christ with his index and middle fingers spread to form a V must certainly have drawn Schiele's attention and served as a source of inspiration is evidenced by several of his self-portraits. Schiele sees himself as a savior, his art as a moral-ethical presupposition.

In Prison

In April 1912, Schiele's artistic career was suddenly interrupted. His habit of using the children of local lower-middle-class families, with their rigid moral conventions, as models was viewed with the same suspicion in Neulengbach as it had been earlier in Český Krumlov. When Schiele and Wally Neuzil agreed to take Tatjana von Mossig, a 13-year-old runaway, to Vienna to live with her grandmother as the girl wished, her father, a retired naval officer, filed a police report accusing the artist of kidnapping and child abuse.

On April 13, 1912, Schiele was arrested in Neulengbach. The accusations were eventually shown to be unfounded; nevertheless, as some of the neighborhood children had seen nude sketches in Schiele's studio, the district court of St. Pölten sentenced him to three days in jail for "failing to keep erotic nudes in a sufficiently safe place." The authorities seized one hundred and twenty-five drawings that were deemed "immoral," one of which was burned in a symbolic act.

During the weeks he was jailed while awaiting trial, Schiele created a series of prison drawings that reflect his utter despondency and growing panic as he considered the frightening possibility of being sentenced to twenty years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

After his release, Schiele relocated to the studio of his friend Dom Osen in Vienna. That same summer of 1912, he traveled with Wally to Carinthia and Trieste, as well as to Lake Constance and Munich, where he discovered the work of German Expressionists.

At His Peak

Early in 1913, Schiele was admitted to the Association of Austrian Artists and participated in its exhibition in Budapest. He also presented a large number of works in prominent shows in Munich, Berlin, and Düsseldorf in that year. The International Black and White Exhibition and the 43rd Exhibition of the Secession in Vienna included works by the artist.

He travelled a lot: to Český Krumlov, Munich, and Villach, he painted *Stein an der Donau*, and, at Arthur Roessler's invitation, vacationed with Wally on Traunsee, and with his mother and sister Gerti in Carinthia.

In 1913, Schiele continued to dedicate himself to Francis of Assisi in expressive allegories on paper but also concerned himself with the Ancient World. His pictures of isolated bodies from 1913/14 show him at the peak of his mastery in expressive, timeless representations of man's existential solitude.

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Egon Schiele and Francis of Assisi

In 1911, Schiele began to plan a major Francis and Clara cycle, of which he realized three paintings before his arrest in April 1912: *Conversion*, *Caress*, and *Agony*. The strange pictures with their mysterious titles show, as the Viennese art historian Johann Thomas Ambrózy revealed, that Schiele was concerned with ethical contents, which he mostly explored by drawing on the example of Francis of Assisi (1181/82–1226). The artist regarded Francis in his voluntary poverty and all-encompassing love as an antagonist of the materialistically oriented power-wielding Church.

In 1913, Schiele continued to dedicate himself to Francis of Assisi in several works. These expressive sheets show scenes from the saint's biography and legends about his devoted companions. Schiele renders these figures wearing short habits in accordance with the traditional costume of the Spirituales, who, unlike the increasingly secularized faction of the Franciscan Order, the Relaxati or Conventuales, adhered to Francis's strict ideal of poverty.

Schiele unwaveringly stuck to his fascination with Francis of Assisi and his circle as a moral model throughout his life. Schiele shared many traits with Francis of Assisi, his secret role model: his almost religious love of nature, his love of freedom, his spontaneity, his contempt of money, and his kindness. "One of the few quintessentially genuine artists, Schiele was also one of the few good persons with a kind heart," wrote Albert Paris Gütersloh about him. The poet and essayist Johannes Käfer, an unbiased witness, who could not have heard about this approach to deciphering Schiele's allegorical work, credited the artist with "the sincerest kindness, Franciscan love of all creatures, and unaffected modesty" in 1946.

War Years

The Arnot Gallery in Vienna presented Schiele in a successful solo exhibition that opened on December 31, 1914. The Kunsthaus Zürich showed works by the artist in 2015.

Schiele was passed fit for service when mustered in May 2015. On June 17, he married Edith Harms in the Lutheran City Church of Vienna. The couple spent their short honeymoon in Prague, where Schiele had to report for duty. He was allowed to work in his studio in Hietzing on his days off. 1915 saw him focusing on large allegorical paintings and melancholy pictures of Český Krumlov again. He was invited to show his work in a group exhibition staged by the Berlin Secession in December.

In early May 1916, Schiele was posted to Mühlberg near Wieselburg in Lower Austria to work as a clerk in the prisoner-of-war camp for officers. The artist and the Russian prisoners talked about their shared longing for peace and a united Europe. He was allocated a studio in the camp, and his wife frequently visited him there. Yet, cut off from the Viennese art scene, his artistic production dwindled remarkably in these days.

Edith Harms, a Good Match

In early 1914, Schiele made the acquaintance of the sisters Edith (1893–1918) and Adele Harms (1890–1968), who lived across the street from Schiele's studio. Egon married Edith in 1915, shortly before he was drafted to serve in the war. Edith demanded that he sever all ties with Wally before their marriage, and he agreed to her terms.

Schiele painted and drew his father-in-law and both sisters. Edith frequently posed for him, and in the early days of their marriage she refused to let him use any other model. However, the situation changed in 1918 when Edith became pregnant, and Schiele produced countless sketches of other women who embodied his ideal of the slim-figured model. Schiele continued to turn out erotic drawings.

Edith's letters to the artist are written in an affectionate tone, but letters or postcards from Schiele to Edith are few and far between. The works in which Schiele depicted pairs of lovers with his and Edith's features speak volumes about the artist's emotional take on his own marriage.

Egon Schiele and Photography

In 1914, Schiele discovered the possibilities of art photography and, with the help of Anton Josef Trčka, began experimenting with photographic self-portraits.

Trčka's pictures of Schiele rank among the photographer's most famous works. The question of who is the true author—Schiele posing for Trčka or Trčka behind the camera—has no clear-cut answer. The close framing and the composition taking up the entire picture, with the figure grazing the edges, are essential factors in the photographs' esthetic effect. The context of the image, the orthogonal arrangement of the background, and the touch-ups are all genuine Trčka devices. However, Schiele's artistic contribution—the theatrical quality of his pose, the emphatic body language and facial expression—were just as important as the photographer's work in achieving the artistic result.

Given their peculiarity, these photographs can only be understood as the combined effort of two equals, as photographic portraits by Trčka and self-portraits by Schiele.

Český Krumlov, the Dead City

The small city of Český Krumlov (Krumau), now located in the Czech Republic, was the birthplace of Schiele's mother and played a singular role in the artist's life and work. Picturesquely situated within a meander of the Moldova River, Český Krumlov provided the artist with numerous fascinating motifs. In 1911, Schiele and his partner Wally decided to take residence in Český Krumlov. However, their plan was doomed to failure, and the couple were driven out of town after just three months. The townspeople probably disapproved of their "concubinage," and many were openly critical of the fact that children frequently visited the artist's studio. Schiele painted many small and large-format pictures that depicted Český Krumlov as a "dead city," a deserted relic of bygone days. *Old Houses in Český Krumlov* can be considered a masterpiece because of the way in which Schiele combines pure linear pencil sketching with the chromatic tones of putrefaction that permeate the houses—a contrast that generates spatial tension.

Late Success

The pinnacle of Egon Schiele's financial success came in March 1918 when his work was shown at the 49th Exhibition of the Vienna Secession. He designed the poster for the event, which constituted a manifesto of his relations with other artists; he was listed as one of the show's organizers; and he even developed its general concept. Although some sectors of Viennese society expressed serious reservations about certain aspects of the event, it was a great success and marked Egon Schiele's big breakthrough.

The opening drew a large crowd. The reviews document the atmosphere at the event: "Numerous works by the artist—whom we shall soon be calling the master—feature melancholy images of German cities from everywhere and nowhere, men of mortal sadness, exhausted women, and pensive children who never smile, their eyes fixed upon us in a strangely open stare. And we are confronted with images of vice, sin, and wickedness. While unfolding his atrocious and horrible fantasies, Schiele simultaneously dwells in the midst of the decorative and the ornamental surfaces of Jugendstil." (*Wiener Abendpost*, March 11, 1918)

Schiele's pictures were presented in the great main hall of the Secession. On the very first afternoon, he sold five paintings and numerous drawings. He was subsequently showered with portrait commissions, and the demand for his erotic nudes began to increase. We know that he had 177 sittings with various models in his last creative year alone.

Early Death

Schiele was finally transferred to Vienna in January 1917. He was allowed to live in Hietzing again and could pursue his work as an artist on a larger scale. Schiele and Albert Paris Gütersloh were commissioned to organize the "War Exhibition 1917" in Vienna's Prater. Schiele planned to found a "Kunsthalle" together with proponents from the fields of art, literature, and music, a venture aimed at supporting cultural reconstruction after the war. His work was shown in exhibitions in Vienna, Munich, Amsterdam, Stockholm, and Copenhagen in 1917.

After Gustav Klimt's unexpected death in February 1918, Egon Schiele came to be regarded as the legitimate heir of the Austrian avant-garde's grandmaster and the foremost authority of Vienna's art scene. Edith, Schiele's wife, six months pregnant, came down with Spanish influenza and died on October 28. Schiele made his last drawing of her on her very dying day before succumbing to the disease himself.

Aged twenty-eight, Schiele died in the early morning hours of October 31, 1918, the day the Austrian-Hungarian Empire was officially dissolved. According to his sister-in-law, his last words were, "The war is over—and I must go—."