

Egon Schiele

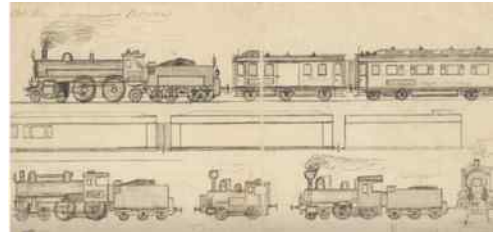
"I shall go so far that people will be seized with terror at the sight of each of my works of 'living' art"



Egon Schiele (1890 – 1918) was an Austrian Expressionist painter. A protege of Gustav Klimt, Schiele was a major figurative painter of the early 20th century. His work is noted for its intensity and its raw sexuality, and the many self-portraits he produced, including nude self-portraits. The twisted body shapes and the expressive line that characterize Schiele's paintings and drawings mark the artist as an early exponent of Expressionism.

Schiele was born in Tulln, Lower Austria, where his father, Adolf, was the station master. Egon's mother Marie, was born in Krumau.

As a child, Schiele was fascinated by trains, and would spend many hours drawing them, to the point where his father felt obliged to destroy his sketchbooks. He drew obsessively.



There is a story that his father gave him a sketchbook which was supposed to last him a month, and in one day he had filled it. To those around him, Schiele was regarded as a strange child. Shy and reserved, he did poorly at school except in athletics and drawing, and was usually in classes made up of younger pupils. It is suggested (on circumstantial evidence) that he also displayed incestuous tendencies towards his younger sister Gertrude (*Gerti*), and his father, well aware of Egon's behaviour, was once forced to break down the door of a locked room that Egon and Gerti were in to see what they were doing (only to discover that they were developing a film). It is certain that he and Gerti had a very close relationship united by their father's syphilitic tyranny, and that he made sexually explicit drawings of her, but there is no evidence that the relationship was physically sexual. When he was sixteen he took the twelve-year-old Gerti by train to Trieste without permission where they spent a night in a hotel room.

This photograph of 1906, already with an anguished look in his glance from a lowered head, shows him as a smartly dressed art student with an artist's pallet.



When Schiele was 14 years old, his father died from syphilis, and he became a ward of his maternal uncle, Leopold Czihakczek, also a railway official. Although distressed at his nephew's lack of interest in academia, he recognised Schiele's talent for drawing and unenthusiastically allowed him a tutor, and then attendance at the School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna, where Klimt had once studied, then in 1906 to the more traditional Academy in Vienna. His main teacher at the academy was a painter whose strict doctrine and ultra-conservative style frustrated and dissatisfied Schiele and his fellow students so much that he left three years later. His **Self-portrait** (1906) was drawn at about the age of sixteen.

In 1907 (age seventeen) Schiele sought out Gustav Klimt, who generously mentored younger artists. He brazenly asked if Klimt would exchange one of his drawings for one of his own, to which it is said Klimt replied "Only one? You are a much better draughtsman than I am." By then Klimt was a well established artist who could charge very high prices for his portraits.

Klimt took a particular interest in the young Schiele, buying his drawings, offering to exchange them for some of his own, arranging models for him and introducing him to potential patrons; and to the Wiener Werkstätte, the arts and crafts workshop connected with the Secession. Schiele's earliest works between 1907 and 1909 contain strong similarities with those of Klimt. In 1908 Klimt invited Schiele to exhibit some of his work at the Vienna *Kunstschau*, where he encountered the work of Edvard Munch, Jan Toorip and Vincent van Gogh, among others. That year he left the Academy and founded the "New Art Group" with other students dissatisfied by the ultra conservative stance of the teaching. His professor, Christian Griepenkerl, after overseeing some of his work, is said to have told him "Schiele, for God's sake, do not tell anyone that you were my student!".

Gustav Klimt in a Blue Painter's Smock (1913), with his mentor in dressed in his usual monk-like robe, shows Schiele's unhesitating complete mastery of line. The exaggerated, expressive hand gestures are typical of Schiele's portraits.



Art critic Martin Gayford wrote in *The Spectator*: “He [Schiele] found his distinctive style very early. His entire oeuvre is that of a young man; most of the work in the first of the two rooms of this densely packed little exhibition dates from 1910–11, when Schiele was just 20. That helps to explain some tendencies: a half-disgusted preoccupation with sexuality and a similarly queasy fascination with examining his naked self. The male figures mainly seem to have been modelled by the artist, though it is hard to be certain since the head is often not included.”



Anton Peschka was five years older than Schiele and was in the same class at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. They eventually became brothers-in-law when he married Schiele's sister, Gertrude, in 1914.

In the **Portrait of Anton Peschka** (1909) the hair, beard and moustache are painted in a deep black. Schiele uses mainly neutral shades of grey and beige in the rest of the painting, with a few small points of dark pink colour used in the fabric of the chair and in a pattern of foliage. This makes Peschka and his clothing stand out in a subtle contrast. Schiele also used red paint to highlight his subject's cheeks and the knuckles of his hands. The paint that Schiele used included a metallic finish that is used to add a silver and gold bronze sheen to the walls and the chair.

The flattened shape of the chair and the jacket, defined only by the outlines, the division of the background into a few rectangular shapes, the textile pattern which bears no relationship to the curvature of the

chair, and the relative realism of the portrait head surrounded by what is in essence pure abstract forms, shows the striking influence of Gustav Klimt.

Unlike Klimt, Schiele was not able to obtain commissions for portraits from wealthy patrons early in his career. All the early portraits are of friends or family. The **Portrait of Gerti Schiele** (1909) was done when his sister was about fifteen. It marks a distinct departure from the style of Klimt and the Secession. The drawing is angular, contained within a sharp-cornered silhouette. The decorative patterning is still there, but much reduced. Most markedly the thin, bony figure is set against a completely blank background, creating a startling effect of isolation. It is this isolation of the image, with its a sense of existential angst, which became the characteristic hallmark of his early portraits.



Arthur Roessler, was an editor, a writer, an art consultant, art historian and art critic. He was a leading talent-scout of his day.



In Schiele's **Portrait of Arthur Rössler** (1910) we see a handsome, distinguished man, well dressed and elegant, sitting in a curious pose with his hands across his body. Those hands are large, long, lean and artistic. Centrally positioned in the picture, they immediately claim the viewer's attention.

The thumbs are not displayed; It is said that Schiele considered thumbs to be stumpy and ugly, out of harmony with the rest of the hand. Our attention is then drawn to the uniformity of colour: dominating shades of brown. Even the skin and hair tones blend with the various browns of Roessler's smart suit. His head, in profile, gives an impression of fine intelligence behind the half-closed eyes and the composed expression. In contrast, the knobby, angular body does not express such composure, it looks alert, anxious and uncomfortable. The milky background of creamy-beige whirls directs attention onto the darker central figure; the resulting light/dark contrast almost creates a 3D effect.

“Schiele has seen and painted the gem cold eyes in human faces whose pallid sheen and sorrowful smiles resemble those of vampires starved of their grisly sustenance: faces that shimmer with the livid colours of putrefaction, and of death beneath the skin” Arthur Rössler

“I bring forth out of myself always more, always something further, an endless brighter shining, as far as love, which is everything, enriches me...I want to tear into myself so that I may create again a new thing which I, in spite of myself, have perceived. My existence, my decay, disposed to enduring values, must sooner or later bring my strength to other strongly or more strongly developed beings...I am so rich that I must give myself away.”

In Schiele's *Portrait of Max Oppenheimer* (1910) the figure is dramatised by the stance, the right arm flung out of the picture, the gesture of the left hand, characteristically making a v shape between the thumb and fingers, but especially by the sickly green pallor of the face. The distinguished coat and tie seems to emphasise by contrast the wild, feral, explosive gestures of the subject.



The painter and printmaker Max Oppenheimer (1885 -1954) was a child prodigy. From 1903 to 1906 he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts of Prague. He shared a studio in 1910 with Egon Schiele, along with whom and Oskar Kokoschka he was considered as being one of Austria's leading avant-garde artists.



His work was influenced by several different movements including expressionism, cubism and futurism. His work was included in two art exhibitions in 1908 and 1909 in Vienna co-organised by Gustave Klimt. He was known for his portraits of contemporary cultural figures such as Thomas Mann and Arnold Schoenberg.

Oppenheimer's, expressionistic *Bleeding* (1911) is reminiscent of Schiele in its pose but is more detailed in the representation of flesh and underlying bone and muscle. The placing of the figure within the white penumbra, with its suggestion of a halo, is a device which Schiele was also to exploit. We may ask who influenced who in creating these images of martyred mankind?

The nervous lines and disjointed colours of *Portrait of the publisher Eduard Kosmack* (1910) are typical of Schiele's works. The strong inner tension is underlined by the direct gaze beneath an extremely high forehead. his penetrating gaze and the irregular contour of the seated subject's body with its bony hands and the arms pressed close together with the hands, hanging between the legs. emphasize his withdrawn character.



Eduard Kosmack was the editor of two major magazines in Vienna, *Der Architect* and *Das Interior*, and a very influential figure in artistic circles at the time, also known as a noted hypnotist, which is reflected in this portrait – in his attitude, posture and intense gaze.

Finally, the withered sunflower next to him creates a strong symbolic impact, interrupting the strict symmetry of the portrait.

"I must live in my own excrement, breathe in my own poisonous sticky fumes. Yet I am a human being! I still am. Does no one think of that?"



In 1910, Schiele began to explore the human form and his style took a dramatic turn as he began to exhibit works with sexually and psychologically intense subject-matter. His *Self Portrait, Grimacing* (1910) exhibits Schiele's raw and radical new style.

The emaciated, tortured figure of the artist, bony and angular, bristles with an inner tension made visible by the agitated pencil line and painted white surrounding aura. Schiele stares wildly, his large, dark eyes glaring menacingly, his mouth open, and his shock of hair standing on end. Colour is limited to shades of brown, with only certain areas of the body (mouth, nipples, navel, and genitals) tinted red.

The background is plain, foregrounding his fully nude body. He stands facing the viewer with his left arm twisted behind his back and his right arm bent sharply at the elbow, in a pose suggestive of the crucified Christ. His dramatic use of line makes it look as if his skin was rubbed raw, exposing the muscle underneath.

That Schiele had a strong streak of narcissism in his personality is evident from his many self-portraits, albeit often depicting himself as a raw, flayed and misunderstood figure. In that he can be seen as a progenitor of late twentieth artists who use their own bodies as fields for the exploration of social and psychological concerns.

He was fascinated by photography and had himself photographed in dramatic, sometimes contorted poses, as in this photograph of 1914 by **Anton Josef Trčka** (1893 - 1940). The hand gestures are a prominent feature of these photos, which he would use in his paintings.



Once free of the constraints of the Academy's conventions, Schiele began to explore not only the human form, but also human sexuality. Schiele's work was already daring, but it went a bold step further with the inclusion of Klimt's decorative eroticism and with figurative distortions, that included elongations, deformities, and sexual openness, to a unique level of emotional and sexual honesty in place of conventional ideals of beauty.



In his early self-portraits and paintings of the figure there remains no trace of the sumptuous and shimmery gold inspired by Klimt, only a raw and tortured body that reveals its true self. In this **Self-portrait** Schiele is positing a body that is honest and authentic. Schiele expresses his intense, inner feeling to the world through art by portraying bodies with nothing to hide. Everything is on the surface, raw and emotional, in order to show the true face of the modern man.

The details of the face are portrayed in scratchy, angular lines, the hair like a tangle of barbed wire. The raw red of his shirt is the red of blood, as if oozing from a wound in his neck. The long, emaciated fingers make a V shape, which, it has been pointed out, is an echo of the female pudendum.

"Bodies have their own light which they consume to live: they burn, they are not lit from the outside."

The figure in **Self-portrait with Black Clay Pot (1911)** is angular and raw. He makes an almost abstract, geometrical shape of the head and upper body, which in this instance is clothed. It is pushed over awkwardly to the left half of the picture and appears crushed by the frame; and swallowed into the arrangement of rectangular shapes, of which it is merely a part.



"I do not deny that I have made drawings and watercolours of an erotic nature. But they are always works of art. Are there no artists who have done erotic pictures?"

In 1910, Schiele began experimenting with painting nudes and within a year a definitive style featuring emaciated, sickly-coloured figures, often with strong sexual overtones. Schiele also began painting and drawing children.



In **Reclining Nude (1910)** he pushes the figure to the top of the page, seeming to decapitate it by the angle of the corner of the page. The torso has no hint of its natural colour but is painted in lurid yellow and green, which initially gives the impression that she is wearing a body stocking, until we notice the details of nipples, navel and pubic hair. The colouring, the splayed legs, with purple stockings and the positioning on the page, irresistibly draw the viewers attention to the groin. This is no alluring Venus reclining on a bed for the delectation of the male gaze, such as Titian may have painted. The sickly colour, the sagging breasts, and the sense of a forced, open pose has more of an impression of a strange, insect-like specimen laid out on a slab for scientific examination.

In 1911 Schiele met the seventeen-year-old Wally Neuzil, who lived with him in Vienna and served as a model for some of his most striking paintings. Very little is known of her, except that she had possibly previously modelled for Gustav Klimt. Schiele and Wally wanted to escape what they perceived as the claustrophobic Viennese milieu, and went to the small town of Krumau in southern Bohemia, the birthplace of his mother. Despite Schiele's family connections in Krumau, he and his lover were driven out of the town by the residents, who strongly disapproved of their lifestyle, including his alleged employment of the town's teenage girls as models.

They moved to Neulengbach, 35 km west of Vienna, seeking inspirational surroundings and an inexpensive studio in which to work. His time there, to begin with at least, was relatively happy and productive. However he produced a number of dark, pessimistic works, such as *Dead Mother I*, *Prophet* or *Pregnant Woman and Death*.

Dead Mother I (1911) is the earliest in his series dealing with motherhood. The Dead Mother paintings continue a symbolist tradition linking motherhood and the fear of death. However, Schiele's treatment of the theme is despairing, and possibly highly coloured by his fraught relationship of with his own mother. Misogyny and a mother complex are equally expressed in it. As Eva di Stefano stated: "the earth-black colours of night dominate....The child, admittedly still alive but marked out by destiny, trapped in the lifeless mother, radiates starry brightness [and] by way of contrast [with], the mother's body looks like a transcendent globe."



This painting, alternatively titled *The Birth of Genius*, is one of the most expressive works of the then twenty-year-old artist. In 1911, Schiele wrote to Arthur Roessler, who was the first owner of the painting: "It only now occurred to me that *Dead Mother* is one of my best." Roessler received the painting as a gift from the artist and hung it in his study. Every part of the depiction exudes the tragedy inherent to the subject: the mother's features are haggard, her eyes broken and her head turned unnaturally to the side as she tenderly embraces her child. The language of colour speaks volumes. The mother's skin is rendered in cool and earthy colours – life is over, her body is a dead shell for the child that grew inside of her. The child seems hopelessly lost; even if it's orange and crimson-coloured skin signifies vitality and life, the mother's death will nevertheless seal its destiny, in addition to her own.



The Self-Seers (Death and Man) is one of three double self-portraits done in 1910 and 11 uniting Schiele's obsession with himself and his own psychological obsession with morbid themes.

In this sinister self-portrait, dealing with the duality of the human condition, he depicts himself with his Doppelgänger, his exact double. As if saying that death is our other selves which we carry with us, an integral part of the human psyche, this own features are clearly distinguishable in the figure of death, which like ectoplasm seems to exude from his human body. The colours are of mud, the facial expressions unsettling, fingers stretched wide, brushstrokes heavy. It is as if the fingers are those of a corpse scratching its way back from burial through damp soil. While his drawings at this time are light and colourful, his paintings are dark and distorted, as if growing from the rain soaked muddy soil.

The Doppelgänger was a popular motif in German Romantic literature, and also in the works of Shelley and Poe. It is useful to note that only ten years after this painting Sigmund Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he first proposed the theory that man possesses the death instinct, Thanatos, as well as Eros, the life instinct, and that these two, in parallel, dominate the unconscious mind.

The painting of ***Living room in Neulengbach*** (1911) is reminiscent of van Gogh's bedroom, in its layout and the picture on the wall. The floor is raised up to make a rectangle against which the rectangles of the furniture are arranged. However, Schiele's colours, by contrast, are dark and murky.



Schiele's studio became a gathering place for Neulengbach's delinquent children. Schiele's way of life aroused much animosity among the town's inhabitants, and in April 1912 he was arrested and jailed for (allegedly) seducing a young girl below the age of consent; and more than a hundred of his drawings were seized as considered pornographic.

"No erotic work of art is filthy if it is artistically significant; it is only turned into filth through the beholder if he is filthy."

Nude with Red Garters (1911) and ***Girl with Black Hair*** (1910) are typical of the many drawings and watercolours of young teenage girls found in his apartment at the time of his arrest and trial.



There are different accounts of the scandal but what appears most likely to have happened was that Egon and Wally were waiting on the station platform for the train to Vienna, when a child, Tatjana Georgette Anna von Mossig, (who was not one of the street children, but from a good family background) approached them and convinced them to take her to Vienna. On arrival Egon was taken into custody for her kidnap and rape. He was arrested for seducing a young girl of thirteen, below the fourteen-year-old [age of consent](#). This was patently a misunderstanding, at best, or fabrication at worst, as the girl had run away from home – the police had been alerted and already out searching for her.

When his studio was searched the drawings he had made in Vienna or Krumau were discovered in a drawer. The children he had invited into his studio were living on the street with no source of income, abandoned by society and possibly their parents. Posing for Schiele, clothed or naked, was for them a source of small amounts of money. The later drawings of the children of Neulengbach probably were not in the nude, but it seems that he had left one such (earlier) drawing on display. So, although the charge of seduction was dropped, he was found guilty of exhibiting erotic drawings in a place accessible to children and sentenced to three additional days in jail added to the twenty-one days he had already served. In court, the judge burned one of the offending drawings over a candle flame.

“To restrict the artist is a crime. It is to murder germinating life.”

In his first few days in prison he had no means of painting or writing. These were allowed him after three days. He started a prison diary: “At last! At last! At last! At last alleviation of pain! At last paper, pencils, brush, colours for drawing and writing. Excruciating were those wild, confused crude, those unchanging uniformed, monotonously grey, grey hours which I had to pass – robbed, naked, between cold bare walls – like an animal.”

This drawing of his prison cell shows the cramped and insanitary conditions in which he was held, behind a rough plank door and with a chamber pot in the corner.



The alienation of the modern artist is expressed in the twelve watercolours that he did in prison, depicting the difficulties and discomfort of being locked in a jail cell. They are all inscribed with aphoristic comments; such as “I feel purified rather than punished.”

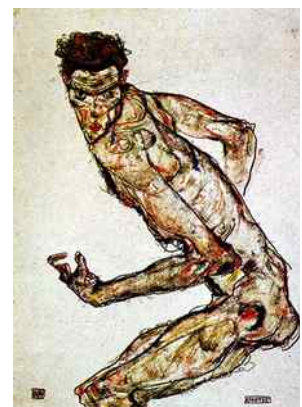
Apart from the view of his prison cell and others of its contents, they comprise a group of self-portraits in which he appears as the archetypal prisoner and victim, with cropped head, his gaunt face with its staring, suffering eyes staring out from amidst the coats and blankets in which he is protectively huddled.

The ***Self-portrait of Schiele in jail*** is inscribed: “For my art and for my loved ones I will gladly endure to the end!”

His diary was published posthumously by Arthur Rössler, and some doubt has been cast on its authenticity, as he may have embellished or even written it.

“Art cannot be modern, art is eternal.”

Self-portrait with his head down (1912) Shows him as a man much older than his twenty two years; it shows him bowed but unbeaten. Sometime later in 1913, he produced a powerful, nude self-portrait. Simply titled ***Fighter*** it is an image of continued defiance. The artist's body, with rippling muscles, is crouched like a beast at bay ready to spring at an attacker.





Egon Schiele's **Self-Portrait with Physalis** (1912) is one of his last artworks to be independent of the shame and humiliation brought about by the artist's wrongful arrest. The impact that his imprisonment had on his career lasted a lifetime.

"The various elements of the composition are arranged in a balanced web of reciprocal relationships: the raised and the lowered shoulder, the head turned to the side and the eyes looking in the other direction, the slender but incisive stems of the lantern fruit plant with the powerful red of the blossoms. Nothing is left to chance. Each and every line has its continual correspondence. The hair and body are deliberately cut off at the top and bottom, matching each other."

Portrait of Wally (1912) is most likely the best-known portrait of his partner Wally Neuzil, (1894 - 1917) painted as a counterpart to his **Self-Portrait with Physalis**. This harmoniously composed likeness shows Wally with her slightly-lowered head, auburn hair, and oversized, bright blue eyes looking directly at the viewer. Particularly impressive are Schiele's use of geometric shapes and the harmony of colours: orange and blue, white and black, red and green. The portrait exudes intimacy and tenderness, thus revealing the lovers' closeness.



Schiele's skill is in drawing. His women are all anxious lines, scratched out with an energy that suggests the artist's feelings towards his subject. As these pages from his sketchbooks show he drew rapidly and with great sensitivity for the forms of the body, expressing movement, direction and the softness of flesh, all in one sweeping line.

"I was in love with everything - I wanted to look with love at the angry people so that their eyes would be forced to respond; and I wanted to bring gifts to the envious and tell them that I am worthless"

Seated female nude with elbows propped (1914) is no softly lit daydream but a vigorous embrace of real flesh and bone. The model seems to be enduring the objectification imposed by the revealing set-up. Do the eye contact and chin rested on a hand suggest a challenge, or boredom? The teasing stockings and high heels, along with the open legs, are frank about their purpose. The knowingness in the way Schiele depicts the naked body, including his own, makes his supercharged eroticism all the more unsettling.

Of this and **Recumbent Nude** (1914), from the same model, Simon Wilson says: "These must rank amongst the most formally beautiful and most intensely and lyrically erotic of all his drawings of the single female nude."



He abandons the normal use of perspective, locating the figure in what would be a conventional viewpoint. Instead he constantly shifted his point of view, often pushing the figures out of the centre of the paper, and cutting them off at the edges, somewhat increasing the sense of anxiety; sometimes drawing them from a ladder which positioned him above the model, as in **Nude on her Stomach** (1917), where the luxuriant mass of red hair covers most of the upper body, while the stockings, masking off the lower legs, which are further cut off by the edge of the paper, shockingly concentrates the attention on the naked lower, rear of the torso.

The choice of viewpoint has implications, which in comparison with Klimt's nudes, reveals a quite different intent and approach: the attitudes and depictions of Klimt's young women suggest that they act as if alone and unobserved. They are relaxed, posing as if immersed in auto-erotic daydreams, "eloquent of desire."

As viewers we have entered a private area as voyeurs, secret, unseen onlookers, witness to events not intended for our eyes.

Schiele's work, by contrast gives the impression that the artist has arranged the poses with deliberation and subject to his way of seeing. His eye is not 'the ideal organ of desire,' (in the words of Peter Altenberg) as in Klimt, but the dispassionate observer of the poses which he has imposed on them; stripping bare the body in a radically new way, leaving it



exposed and defenceless – bodies, hardly ever relaxed but contorted, exhibited, offered up, put on show. Schiele examines his model as if it were a specimen laid down for examination with his optical scalpel on an operating table. With a clinical gaze he mercilessly dissects it with his pencil. Thus, as in **Recumbent Nude** (1914), in general his nudes do not seem intimate or absorbed in their own worlds, as they do in Klimt, but instead are isolated and tensed, but frequently looking straight at the artist, or us as the onlooker; this is in complete contrast to the Klimtian voyeuristic experience.



In defence of Schiele's nudes:

These are not the plump, soft and rounded nudes of Titian, reclining on a bed for the gratification of the male gaze; nor are they the (acceptable) smooth, airbrushed, china-doll fantasies of Alexandre Cabanel's *The Birth of Venus* (1863), or Bouguereaus's *The Wave* (1896); they are, instead, the factual, hard edged and flawed bodies of real girls and women – laid out as if on an operating table. Artists' models were often from poor backgrounds, regarded by middle class society as little better than prostitutes, and in order to make a little money were paid to pose in whatever positions the artists required them to adopt. Yes, he makes them sit or lie with legs apart, displaying their genitalia for his fascinated and forensic gaze, and the scratchy, lashing marks of his pencil; yes, they are erotic in the sense that they arouse thoughts of sexual desire, but more specifically in the sense of that word signifying eros: lust for life or life energy; yes, they are erotic in the sense of images of women displaying their bodies, and their sexual features, and who may sometimes be indicating readiness for sexual encounters, but they do not draw us, the viewer, into a dream of shared space and a tactile encounter; nor, on the other hand, do they put the viewer in the role of voyeur, peeping around the door in the hope of seeing what we should not see; they are, rather, representations of woman in her wholeness, as flesh, blood and bone, as fully human, in her miraculous existence and imperfect presence, and ultimately as a sexual being. In this Schiele's nudes are unprecedented in the history of art, and a unique contribution to the cultural life of twentieth century Europe. (RS)



Unlike the models posed as lofty goddesses and nymphs that dominate "the nude" in western art history, Schiele's women work a nervy, very human sensuality. It speaks to our time, as much as it did the sex-conscious intellectual circles of the artist's fin-de-siècle Vienna: **Blonde girl in green stockings** (1914)

In his forward to the publication of the *Prison Diary's* in 1922 Arthur Rossler wrote about the arrest and imprisonment of the artist as "the ill-intended blunder of overly enthusiastic moral busybodies and the pitiful martyrdom of an artist who was misunderstood in his lifetime."

"Schiele's female nudes...are unprecedented in great art in their degree of sexual completeness, and present us in a general way of a view of the human figure which is also new to art. Schiele's female nudes, however, are in no way the vehicle for the expression of metaphysical Angst, as are that whole group of his male nudes...they are pure projections of male sexual feeling, and in this respect too they are unprecedented in their range, freedom and intensity." (Simon Wilson)

In a review entitled *Can Genitals be Beautiful* of a Schiele exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1997 John Updike "concluded that Schiele's nudes were too gaunt to excite the male viewer sexually and hence could not be considered pornographic; genitals could be beautiful, or at least they could be displayed on the walls of the Modern...By contrast, [problematically] having safeguarded Schiele's work as none arousing, as art as opposed to pornography, he then proceeds to write in vivid detail about the artist's depictions of the female sex [as] 'the secret cave', the 'densely curly pudenda' the genitals 'lit as if from a fire

within'....Such 'peeps'...were the source of the exhibitions 'electricity'." (Gemma Blackshaw; from *Egon Schiele, The Radical Nude*) Which thoughts prompts the question: if it is acceptable as art to portray other features of the human body, such as a finger, a nose, a foot as beautiful (or as ugly, as the artist's fancy dictates) then why not the genitals? Is the feelings of repugnance, or fear, of those 'private' parts of the body, and distaste at their representation, merely a consequence of two thousand years of Christian teaching, or is there a deeper psychological reason?

"The beauty of form and colour which Schiele gave us did not exist before. His artistry of draughtsman was phenomenal. The assurance of his hand was almost infallible. When he drew he usually sat on a low stool, the drawing board and sheet on his knees, his right hand (with which he did the drawing) resting on the board. But I also saw him drawing differently, standing in front of the model, his right foot on a low stool.. Then he rested the board on his right knee and held it at the top with his left hand, and, his drawing hand unsupported, placed his pencil on the sheet and drew his lines from the shoulder, as it were. And everything was exactly right. If he happened to get something wrong, which was very rare, he threw the sheet away; he never used an eraser. Schiele only drew from nature. Most of his drawings were done in outline and only became more three-dimensional when they were coloured. The colouring was always done without the model, from memory." (Heinrich Benesch, friend and patron.)



The ***Self-Portrait Drawing a Nude Model Before a Mirror*** (1910) is unique in that it includes the artist in a nude study from life. It provides an insight into his working practice. Photographs of his studio show him in front of a large, free-standing mirror. This belonged to his mother and he is reported to have begged it from her and carried it around between his various studios.



Friendship (1913) is a particularly strong design. As in many of his depictions of two figures the interpretation is ambiguous as to whether it represents a male figure behind the female, or if it is two women lovers. Schiele broke new ground by depicting lesbian lovers in intimate situations.

Between 1913 and 1914 there was a transitional development in his drawing style, quite different from his earlier figure studies. In his pencil drawings, line (as distinct from shading or modelling) was his principal mode of expression: the outlines of the body being conveyed in continuous delicate lines. Conversely, as may be seen in ***Blonde Girl in Green Stockings*** (1914), his watercolours and gouaches contain heavier and more definite contours, sometimes reinforced by repeated pencil strokes were coupled with a greater interest in internal modelling of the figure, rendering details of muscle and flesh, achieved by carefully sculpted small, washes



and touches of colour. The contrast between these depictions of mature women with his earlier, rapid depictions of waifs and strays could hardly be greater. His attitude towards his models is also markedly different: there is an obvious lack of personal involvement or interest in them, other than as starting points for what are largely formal exercises in composition.

"At present, I am mainly observing the physical motion of mountains, water, trees and flowers. One is everywhere reminded of similar movements in the human body, of similar impulses of joy and suffering in plants."

His landscapes are a part of his oeuvre which often gets insufficient attention. Here also he was to break new ground in the representation of the world around him, and made highly personal and revolutionary paintings which stood conventional ideas of depicting landscape, and in particular the built environment, on its head. As a student he was capable of conventional, atmospheric portrayals, which gave way to the stylised renditions, influenced by his connection with the secession artists. However, in his mature landscapes, from 1910 on, he was beholden to no one.

He wrote: "In Vienna there are shadows. The city is black and everything is done by rote. I want to be alone. I want to go to the Bohemian Forest. May, June, July, August, September, October. I must see new things and investigate them. I want to taste dark water and see crackling trees and wild winds. I want to gaze with astonishment at mouldy garden fences, I want to experience them all, to hear young birch plantations and

trembling leaves, to see light and sun, enjoy wet, green-blue valleys in the evening, sense goldfish glinting, see white clouds building up in the sky, to speak to flowers. I want to look intently at grasses and pink people, old venerable churches, to know what little cathedrals say, to run without stopping along curving meadowy slopes across vast plains, kiss the earth and smell soft warm marshland flowers. And then I shall shape things so beautifully: fields of colour.”



In 1907, shortly before his seventeenth birthday, Schiele received a telegram saying that he was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, contrary to his, his teachers, and his family's expectations.

His sister, Gerti, still twelve years old, wanted to go with him and find a school in Vienna, but was refused. However, before it was time to leave the pair decided, without permission, to go on holiday. They went by train to Trieste and found a cheap hotel, where they signed in as brother and sister, and shared a room. The owner was not interested in their relationship as long as they could pay up front. They stayed for two weeks, walking around, viewing the harbour and boats, seeing the sights and observing other visitors. At night, while Gerti slept Egon made paintings, largely from memory and notes.

The positioning of the boats towards the edges of the picture in **View of Trieste Harbour** (1907), the emphasis on the flattening of shapes, and especially the treatment of the rippling reflections – water as a system of decorative, curling lines – are typically secessionist. It was at this time that Schiele probably became aware of Klimt and the advanced, symbolist techniques current in Vienna.

At the age of twenty he wrote: “I received the clearly remembered impressions of my childhood from flat countrysides with tree shaded spring-time roads and raging storms. In those days it seemed to me as though I already heard and smelled the miraculous flowers, the speechless gardens, the birds in whose shiny eyes I saw my rosy mirror image. Often when it was spring I dreamed of the universal music of life, then I rejoiced in the magnificent summer and laughed as during its splendour I painted for myself the white winter.”

In a letter to Franz Hauer, a collector, in 1913 he wrote giving a description of his vision of nature: “I also do studies, but find, and know, that copying from nature is meaningless to me, because I paint better picture from memory, as a vision of the landscape – now I mainly observe the physical movement of mountains, water, trees and flowers. Everywhere one is reminded of similar movements made by human bodies, similar stirrings of pleasure, pain in plants. Painting is not enough for me; I am aware that one can use colours to establish qualities. – When one sees a tree autumnal in summer, it is an intense experience that involves one's whole heart and being; and I should like to paint that melancholy.”

The painting **Sunflower II** (1909) depicts the tall delicate plant, rising like a slender spear out of its little bed of flowers, isolated and exposed, with a browning head and long, angular dying leaves recalling human gestures. It is an anthropomorphic image of fragility, longing and mortality. It is the mortified Saint Sebastian of the natural world.

The poet Georg Trakle, who shared Schiele's identification with the martyred saint came close to this apprehension of nature in his poem *The Sunflowers*:

“You golden sunflowers / Feelingly bowed to die, / You humble sisters / In such silence / Ends Helion's year / Of mountainous cool. And the kisses / Make pale his drunken brow / Amidst those Golden / Flowers of melancholy / The spirit is ruled / By silent darkness.”



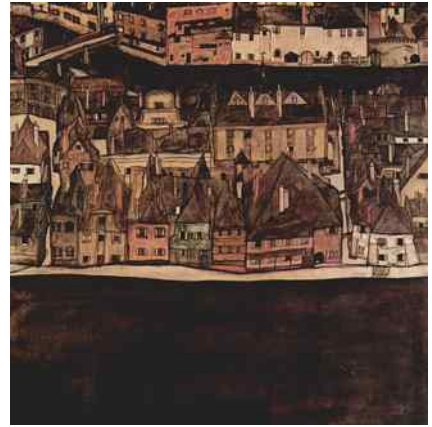
Dead City III (1911) is a small painting on wood (37.3 × 29.8 cm.). He made a number of variations of the motif, as seen from the castle hill. Krumau is the birthplace of Schiele's mother, to where he and Wally had withdrawn from Viennese city life. The picture shows a group of houses, enclosed on three sides by a deep blue ring symbolizing the Vltava river, so that the village seems isolated and as if floating in an indefinable, abstract space. The city becomes almost like a still life "emerging from the dark in a mysterious and visionary manner".

The buildings are out of scale, and painted as a network of flat shapes in dark browns and grimy whites. They seem as if clustered oppressively together on an isolated outcrop, lost and isolated in some none worldly space; the compacted group seems more a product of Schiele's inner state of mind than a detached compositional exercise derived from the real scene.

In *The Small Village: view of Krumau an der Moldau* (1912–13) the houses along the waterfront are lined up like railway carriages: a reflection of his lifelong interest in trains.

Painted from a high viewpoint across the Vltava river the interlocking houses and old walls of the little town create a frieze-like pattern of flattened rectangles and triangles. Any suggestions of perspective is severely repressed, and indications of spacial depth achieved through the stacking of the different layers. In the top left corner a diagonal line of a bridge dramatically links together the two, isolated clusters of houses. A few patches of drained colour relieve the over-all dense browns and greys.

Český Krumlov, one of the most beautiful Renaissance towns in Europe and an outstanding architectural jewel, was an inspiration to Schiele. The beauty and situation of the town in the middle of the Bohemian landscape have always attracted artists and writers. He and Wally first moved there in 1911.



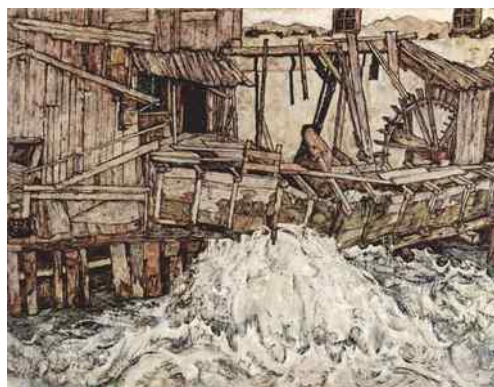
The view of *Stein an der Donau II* (1913), situated on the Danube, in its flatness and sense of distance, as if viewed through a telescope, and the bands of hillside fields cutting out any suggestion of sky, is reminiscent of Klimt's views of buildings across water at Attersee. However, in Schiele the mood is quite different: in place of a conceptual arrangement of a structured space and a pleasing harmony of greens and floral colours, we have a frieze of grimy brown and grey buildings, a tortuously aligned bank of grubby white cliffs topped by wedges of inaccessible fields. The towers of the churches seem to dominate and oppress the smaller dwellings in the front.

As in other landscapes the town is represented as a frieze of buildings, like carriages of a train; and, as in medieval paintings, with no regard to comparative scale. Instead, each building, as with the layered landscape behind is treated as a fragment in the overall design, contributing to the general appearance of flatness.

The Bridge (1914) presents a customary drab looking scene. The complicated web-like structure of the bridge and its somewhat flimsy looking supporting posts, takes up a little over a third of the left side of the picture. The perspective of the underframe and spidery looking framework above is in stark contrast with the flattened slabs of water and fields. There is no sign of human life; even the barge which drifts into view on the distant right, seems not to be piloted by mortal hands.

The contrast of busy, marginalised forms and large empty central space is a compositional device initiated by the Secessionists.

In 1914, Schiele had a studio in the Viennese suburb of Hietzing. Across the street he glimpsed Edith and Adèle Harms, daughters of a prosperous middle-class, Protestant locksmith family. In February 1915, Schiele wrote a note to Roessler stating: "I intend to get married, advantageously. Not to Wally." When he told Wally, she left him immediately and never saw him again. Despite some opposition from the Harms family, Schiele and Edith were married on 17 June 1915. The First World War had begun in July 1914.



The Old Mill (1916) was most likely painted during the time of Schiele's military conscription which took place four days after his marriage. Schiele produced several landscapes and cityscapes after becoming inspired during his wartime travels. These did not display any of the exaggerated contours, a trademark of his previous paintings.

It shows a remarkable skill in drawing: in representing the rotting and collapsing wooden mill, the underside with its supports and the white rush of water from the mill race.

In *House with Shingles* (1915) the squares and rectangles which made up the individual buildings and their details in earlier cityscapes combine into an image of a single house.

By studying the earlier drawings we can see how he changed the composition of this painting over time. Initially he wanted to include a river running directly across the bottom of the canvas, taking up a good quarter of the picture but eventually he left this out in order to allow him to add extra space in front of the house and include the patches of garden screened by a line of trees.



Schiele's watercolour *Four Trees*, painted in 1917, unusually expresses a sense of greater depth through contrasts in the lighting, drawing attention to the mountains and bright sun in the background. It is suggested that the trees on the edges of the painting, in contrast with the more central tree which has lost most of its leaves, are healthier in order to portray a belief from the artist that those who follow a more original and natural route in life, on the margins of society, would be happier and healthier than those whose lives are more conservative and bound by tradition and the norms of narrow morality. It is a more optimistic and cheerful image than most of his landscapes, and is one of his more popularly loved paintings.

When Schiele decided to marry Edith he treated Wally very badly. Perhaps somewhat innocently on his part: he had a strong narcissistic streak which possibly made it difficult for him to appreciate that what was in his interests, maybe wasn't in the interests of those around him. Wally's origins are somewhat obscure. She had moved around a lot, found work as an artist's model, which suggests that she came from a poor and unstable background, which may have made her more vulnerable to the advances of older men; although she definitely had a strong personality. She had lived with Schiele for four years; she was his model for many of his artworks; she had defended him against accusations of pornography and the protestations of narrow-minded citizens who hounded them out of Krumau, and stood by him during his period in prison. Perhaps also, coming from a middle class background himself, he snobbishly thought that she was not quite suitable as a marriage partner. Roessler recalled that Schiele asked Wally to meet him in their local bar. He silently handed her a letter in which he undertook "to spend several weeks every summer together." He seems to have thought that he could live in a *menage a trois*; Edith, although friendly with Wally, would never have agreed to such an arrangement. Wally walked out of the bar and out of his life; but not out of his creative imagination: he was subsequently to make a number of works in which she featured. Wally joined the Red Cross and later died of scarlet fever in Dalmatia in 1917, aged just twenty four.

Schiele, we know from photographs, was a natty dresser concerned with his appearance. Unlike his mentor Klimt he was no bohemian going around almost permanently in a painter's smock, or an old, paint stained suit.



In this double portrait, *Lovers, Self-Portrait with Wally* (1914-15), the couple are unusually fully clothed, which suggests that Schiele is recording or remembering an actual event, or moment in their lives. Is this a moment of tenderness? Or is Wally desperately clinging to her lover who is averting his gaze and trying to detach himself from her embrace?



Edith Schiele (1915) is a tender portrait of his wife. He did a number of portraits of her, making a feature of the sweeping lines and patterns of her dress. In this one, seated on the floor, she looks, a little demurely, up at the artist. Stylistically, his later portraits, especially those of Edith are more naturalistic, with fewer of the distortions of contour that his nude studies betrayed. In his later work the handling of the paint becomes denser, broader, richer and more complex, and with a concern for creating an overall unity of effect.

Three days after his wedding, Schiele was ordered to report for active service in the army where he was initially stationed in Prague. Edith came with him and stayed in a hotel in the city, while Egon lived in an exhibition hall with his fellow conscripts. They were allowed by Schiele's commanding officer to see each other occasionally.

The **Portrait of Frederike Beer** was commissioned in 1914 by the subject. Frederike Beer was an art lover and passionate devotee of the Wiener Werkstätte, who, she stated designed “every stitch of clothing I owned!” She had noticed Schiele at an exhibition, and intrigued by his appearance, approached him through a friend to paint her portrait. The result is the greatest of his female portraits and a spectacular, decorative pose. Swathed in an ankle length figure hugging Wiener Werkstätte dress she is “set like some great living jewel against a sumptuous monochrome gold ground. Beyond this its deeper power derives from the radical simplicity of the composition, from Schiele's use of his early device of floating the figure mysteriously in space, from the bold zig-zag pose that echoes the great Michelangelo *Pietà* in the Duomo, Florence and not least from the gaunt face, staring eyes and clutching, almost claw-like hands that belong more to Schiele than to the plump and placid Fräulein Beer.” (Simon Wilson)



Two Women (1915) has been interpreted as a lesbian situation, a theme which fascinated artists such as Klimt and Schiele; however, it may also be taken to represent Schiele's hope (or fantasy?) of living in a *ménage à trois* with Wally and Edith, going on holiday together. In this case the red haired nude woman is Wally with head flung back and the clothed woman, with a rather doll-like face represents Edith; the two entwined in what might be taken as a lovers' embrace. Out of deference for Edith's 'modesty' he changed her features when depicting her in the nude, or, as in this case, what might be interpreted in a compromising mode. Of course the pair would not have posed together, and it may have been drawn from two professional models, or possibly entirely an invention.

Edith was the model for most of his female figures after his marriage, but during the war (due to circumstance) many of his sitters for portraits were male. Since 1915, Schiele's female nudes became fuller in figure, but many were deliberately illustrated with a lifeless doll-like appearance.

The abandonment of Wally led him to paint **Death and the Maiden** (1915-16). The piece nods to Klimt's 'The Kiss', but the dramatic and tormented scene is in fact its antithesis. Wally's portrait is based on a previous painting, but Schiele's is a newly imagined image.

A couple are embracing on a bedsheet – or is it shroud? – in a wilderness of rocks and boulders. She is clothed in a brightly patterned short dress; her stockinged legs are unshod. She leans forward, desperately clutching the male figure, which, although has the face of her lover is transformed into a grey mask with black eyes and the haunted look of death. The voluminous arm of his dark robe (like a monk's habit) covers her extended arm in such a way that it 'reads' as a thin wishbone limb, grasping his back.



Schiele, like Klimt, loved women; however, his primary subject and greatest interest was himself. He was a narcissist and obsessed with his own visceral experience of life.

It has been suggested that the contrast between the figures represents the collision of pre and post WWI Vienna, with Wally's gayly coloured dress representing the frivolity of pre-war Vienna and the dull, monkish robe of Egon the aftermath, with Europe reduced to rubble. Schiele's genius is his ability to express ugly and personal emotion while reflecting on the universal suffering of war.

Around this time Schiele, now a married family man, began experimenting with the themes of motherhood and family, a traditional subject from German art.



The artist's relationship to his family was improving. He had always had a difficult relationship with his mother; she tended to complain about his failure to fulfil his filial obligations rather than support him in his artistic pursuits. From Schiele's point of view, his mother – for that matter, any mother – was little more than a useful expedient, a means to an end. It was the child who represented life and the creative spirit, as the artist confirmed in his 1911 painting *Dead Mother I or The Birth of Genius*.

His mother posed for the painting of *Mother with Two Children* (1915-17), while his infant nephew, the son of his sister Gerti and his best friend Anton Peschka, served as the model for both babies.

The children represent two antithetical and yet complementary responses to life: the one on the left

passive, asleep, sightless; the other active, awake, a "seer." The folksy, gaily colourful children's clothing contrasts with the deathly white face of the mother, who by comparison, looks pallid and exhausted, she survives only to nurture passively the life she has created. Nonetheless, the painting can hardly be considered a family portrait. Although Schiele's bearing was conditioned by his personal circumstances, his allegories were never explicitly auto-biographical.

A second version, *Mother with Two Children II* (1915), is more macabre, The face of the mother is ghastly grey, and the children almost floating, curiously detached. Set against a gold background it has the look of a grim, morbid icon.



His memory of his father, who had died aged fifty-four, when Schiele was fourteen, was different. He afterwards felt that he had had a special relationship with his father. In 1913 he wrote to his brother-in-law: "I don't know whether there is anyone else at all who remembers my noble father with such sadness. I don't know who is able to understand why I visit those places where my father used to be and where I can feel the pain... I believe in the immortality of all creatures ... why do I paint graves and many similar things? because this continues to live in me."



The Embrace (1917) is one of Schiele's more developed paintings of a nude couple. They are 'lost', enveloped in a white frothy sea of bedsheets. It may represent himself and his wife, Edith, although it is impossible to tell. Also, whether he worked from models or from a combination of memory, imagination and previous studies may not be known. According to Adèle, his sister in law, Edith *did* pose for him in the nude, even for some of his more explicit compositions showing female genitalia; however, out of consideration for her sensitive feelings, he usually changed the facial details in work that was intended for public exhibition. There are indications that before being publicly exhibited Schiele repainted the area between the woman's legs, 'drawing up' the sheet to cover her pubic area.

During the last phase of his life Schiele's handling of paint became denser, broader, richer and more complex. He is becoming more concerned with creating an overall unity of effect, and an increasing naturalism. There is less distortion of the contours and a lessening of overall tension. The *Portrait of Dr Hugo Koller* (1918) is among his last, great portraits, others include the *Portrait of Albert Paris von Gütersloh* (1918) a fellow painter, left unfinished at his death.

For his portrait of the industrialist and art lover Dr Koller he takes a high viewpoint, which in no way diminishes the sense of his presence and gravity. He is shown surrounded by books: on the shelf behind, on the floor alongside his chair and lined up in front. The suit he is wearing and the deep armchair he is seated in are painted in a rich deep vermillion. Which contrasts dramatically with the ochres and reds of the face and hands. The striking white patch of the book on his knee is picked up by his shirt cuffs and collar. Two overlapping circles structure the design: the major one



running from the hands around the arms and shoulders, the other looping around the legs. While being unobtrusive they hold together the design and impart a sense of theatricality which raises the portrait above that of a conventional representation.



His last painting, *The Family* (1918), depicts a more mature and settled view of the family life he hoped for. It shows a self-portrait of a naked man in front a naked woman (who may not have the face of Edith but has the red hair of Wally) who squats with an infant between her legs. Edith was expecting their first child at the time of painting, and at a later point Schiele overpainted a bouquet of flowers that had been placed between the woman's legs with a child wrapped a blanket, modelled by his nephew Toni.

The figures are arranged in a solid pyramidal composition, with the woman on the floor gazing into space to her left with her arms by her sides. She is resting between the legs of the man, who is slightly elevated on a bed or couch, calmly regarding the viewer, with his left arm bent over and resting on his left knee and his right hand across his heart raised to his left collar.

The addition of the child unifies the family group, of mother surrounded by father and son staring off into space with only Schiele confronting the viewer with a doleful smile. Mother and child create a coherent oval format with the squatting father-figure stacked behind, effectively framing the other two figures. The position of the child at the bottom of an inverted pyramid links the movement around the limbs, unifying the design.

There is little or no foreshortening; each figure having its own pictorial space. The father-figure, with its melancholic 'separateness,' is closer to the darkness behind, but is still essentially integrated in painterly and thematic terms with the other figures. It forms a final self-image of resignation but lacks the angst and agony of former years. Although having a high degree of completeness it was the last painting he was working on when he died, some parts of the painting appear unfinished, including the man's left hand.

Schiele's light duties in the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First World War allowed him to continue painting and exhibiting. This painting was exhibited at the 49th exhibition of the Vienna Secession in 1918, for which Schiele also designed the poster. The exhibition included 19 of his paintings and 24 drawings. Schiele was perhaps the leading painter in Vienna, following the death of Gustave Klimt in February 1918 from a stroke followed by pneumonia caused by the Spanish flu.

Before succumbing to influenza in 1918 at the age of twenty-eight, he created over three hundred oil paintings and several thousand works on paper. The human figure provided Schiele with his most potent subject matter for both paintings and drawings. The self-portraits of his large series of watercolours and paintings produced between 1910 and 1918 are searing, psychologically complex images.

In the autumn of 1918, the Spanish flu pandemic that claimed more than 20,000,000 lives in Europe reached Vienna. Edith, who was six months pregnant, succumbed to the disease on 28 October. Schiele died three days after his wife. He was 28 years old. During the three days between their deaths, Schiele drew a few sketches of Edith.



Further reading:

Egon Schiele: by Simon Wilson, Phaidon

Schiele, The Midnight soul of the Artist: by Reinhard Steiner, Midpoint Press

Egon Schiele; The Radical Nude: Ed., Peter Vergo, The Courtauld Gallery

The Pornographer of Vienna (Biography): by Lewis Crofts, Old Street Publishing