In Review: Egon Schiele at the Neue Galerie

by Michael Pepi
Egon Schiele’s brief but prolific life followed a modernist arc we know all too well. The precocious adolescent enrolls in an academy, only to revolt against its conservative traditions. After becoming a protégé to a contemporary master (Gustav Klimt), he soon forms a splinter group with like-minded cronies. Steadily shocking the establishment with a bohemian lifestyle and indecent pictures, he befriends an influential critic who connects him with prominent collectors. Rising out of a truly revolutionary milieu around Austria’s cultural capital, he was called to served in World War I, just as he began to show in earnest around Europe. He accepted an invitation to join the Vienna Secession (and organize its forty-ninth exhibition). Fitting with Schiele’s grandiose self-
image, this whirlwind of activity occurred in all of about ten years. Schiele was dead at age twenty-eight, succumbing in 1918 to the Spanish influenza that killed his second wife days before.

In “Egon Schiele: Portraits,” the curator Alessandra Comini focuses on portraiture—the artist’s preferred genre—to make the case for Schiele’s singular mark upon the development of Modernism in Europe. The exhibition features some of the foremost examples of Schiele’s inventive, formally daring, and often perverse (even by today’s standards) figures. The show is divided up by the source of his sitters. “Family and the Academy” reflects his troubled childhood and the stringent pedagogy at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste. Here we see Schiele’s early formal training (Schiele had been obsessed with drawing as a child) contrasted with a late portrait of his father-in-law Johann Harms, perhaps his most painterly work. Schiele depicted his young artistic circle with a verve and curiosity that set him apart. At the age of twenty, he portrayed three fellow artists in the Neukunstgruppe—the group that he and fellow students formed in protest of the academy—in three different works, one of which is *Portrait of the Painter Karl Zakovšek* (1910). In these works, Schiele fully developed his characteristic style. In *Portrait of the Painter Karl Zakovšek* (1910), we see an arresting psychological projection onto the distorted anatomy of the sitter. Zakovšek’s body, slouching with an elongated and asymmetrical shoulder, is suspended on a blank background, characteristic of Schiele’s distinctive style and a marked departure from his training.

![Portrait of the Painter Karl Zakovšek (1910)](image)

In his writing, Schiele refers to his work as an attempt to differentiate between the painter who merely “looks” and the one who truly “sees.” His “pathological” depictions were part of this conceit: to unravel the essence beneath the societal constructions that burdened his sitters. In the pre-war years, Schiele is completely unphased by propriety. Schiele’s overly erotic and fantastical
portrayals of lovers, numerous models (some purportedly minors), and himself were continued attempts to grasp the inner nature of his rotating set of subjects. In April of 1912, Schiele was arrested and briefly imprisoned on charges of immorality connected with his work with children. This marked a turning point in Schiele’s life that is trenchantly documented by a separate room in the exhibition containing several works completed in jail.

Though he often worked in isolation, Schiele’s success brought him into contact with rarefied elements of bourgeois society, specifically a commission to portray the children of the wealthy Lederer family. Comini includes several works from this commission, including two portraits of the fifteen-year-old Erich Lederer, where we begin to see Schiele apply what would become his signature style to an objectively rendered subject after its own likeness. Comini suggests that these are among the works from a period marking Schiele’s passage from an interest in the underlying cognitive or emotional essence of his sitters towards the sociological environs of his subjects, a change hastened further by the artist’s later encounters with war and marriage. Another work illustrating this transition is his large portrait of his second wife, Edith, where the emphasis lies not in an eroticized shimmer of a human form but in the colorful dress that covers an otherwise staid version of his young wife. *The Family* (1918), one of his last works, anticipates his unborn child and Edith together in a nude scene. The heavily worked background and foreground suggests a domestic scene, again less interested in the raw subject than their new environs. Edith died of influenza six months into the pregnancy.

As much as the work on display showcases Schiele’s radical vision, it risks isolating him from the related departures that defined the Viennese avant-garde. Schiele’s formal inventions did not appear out of nowhere. Such context is laid out in detail in the exhibition catalogue but perhaps overlooked in the galleries themselves. A trip downstairs to the Neue Galerie’s rotating permanent
collection, however, provides first-hand links to the visual language from which Schiele emerged. Namely we see the elongation of the human form already present in the fin-de-siècle work of George Minne, shown in *Kneeling Youth* (1898). The sketches of Gustav Klimt, the distortions of Oskar Kokoschka and Alfred Kubin: Schiele’s visual language and use of allegorical portraits were very much creatures of the art nouveau environment and avant-garde fashions of his day.

![Kneeling Youth](image)

Even museum exhibitions as tightly focused as “Egon Schiele: Portraits” can smuggle in a bold thesis. At the least, we’re provided a penetrating lens with which to see Schiele as he was received during his short yet forceful life. So what was Schiele’s special contribution to European Modernism? Portraiture was already showing signs of crumbling away from the genteel conditions of its patronage. And the second decade of the twentieth century was not short on bold formal experimentation. Perhaps the answer lies in a striking portrait of the painter Max Oppenheimer. Schiele isolates his subject in the empty field of vision, with economical yet nervous gestures, confining him to starkly cut positive space. Oppenheimer’s head and tortuous hands do the majority of the work to orient the wispy frame as it cascades down like some geological formation. It is without peer. The ground may have been well set for a precocious and anxious talent, though few could predict the ultimate manner in which Schiele employed his own uncompromising method with ambitious representations of his circle.
Egon Schiele: Portraits is on view at the Neue Galerie, New York, from October 9, 2014 through January 19, 2015.

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