Egon Schiele: A Spiritual Searcher amid Social Disintegration

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Of the two artists, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, many would think of Klimt’s work first, given his world-renowned reputation and such paintings as his iconic *The Kiss*. But Egon Schiele, who painted during the same period, deserves new and fresh attention as a painter of power and, in light of my particular interest, a searching spirituality. A happy accident of professional assignment from the period of 2006 to 2011 allowed me the opportunity to explore and enjoy the works of Schiele and particularly so in such museums as the Leopold and Upper Belvidere Museums, which have important collections of his work. I was taken by an unanticipated openness and a searching quality in his work, both of which suggested to me a spirituality that invited exploration. I was drawn back to see Schiele’s work again and again, and this essay is testimony to his power and importance as an artist.

Egon Schiele (1890-1918) lived and worked in Vienna and the surrounding area for the greater part of his short life. At the turn of the 19th/20th centuries, the city enjoyed a golden age. It was the capital and center of gravity of the soon to collapse Austro-Hungarian Empire, the great Habsburg empire of eleven nations and as many languages. But it was also home to the uncertainty, decadence, poverty, social dislocation, and political upheaval that preceded the first of the two world wars that so shaped the last century in Europe and continues to shape it now. It was a center of creativity for music, the arts, philosophy, medicine, and the sciences. There was also much contemporary activity among spiritualist groups and the work of Madame Blavatsky and the theosophical society, which Schiele was almost certainly exposed to.\(^1\)\(^2\) Many of those shaping this cultural melting pot, including Freud, Schoenberg, and Wittgenstein, signaled its immanent unraveling and decline, and none more sure-footedly than Schiele.
Egon Schiele was born in Tullin, a small town near Vienna and died tragically 28 years later of the 1918 epidemic of Spanish flu. His father was the town station master, whose early death from syphilis left an enduring mark. He was poor, experienced the appalling underbelly of the imperial city, and though non-conformist and difficult most of his life, enjoyed the esteem of key figures like Klimt. In his art, he saw things in a way that allowed space for the darkest aspects of life, and made room for the men and women of sorrows, and the “terrible guests of the night of the soul”.

**Schiele’s Work**

With regard to how he worked, one of those who witnessed it describes him in this fashion: “Schiele drew quickly, the pencil slid over the white surface of the paper as if guided by a spirit hand, as if it was effortless. He never rubbed anything out and if the model moved the new lines were added to the old ones with the same infallible assurance. He never added color to the drawings in front of the model, but always afterwards, from memory.” So, not surprisingly, he left an enormous body of work, especially considering that he died so young. His work draws deeply on his own visceral experience and is full of authentic emotion rendered visible with a sure touch. There was an autistic, narcissistic element to him and he was something of a poseur, almost Dali like.

Schiele was an exceptional artist, unequivocally expressionist and arguably surpassing his mentor Gustav Klimt. His work contrasted with that of Klimt whose work was characterized by good taste and offered an urbane and ennobling if somewhat decadent beauty. One need only think of the power and popularity of Klimt’s *The Kiss* to appreciate his satisfying artistic style. Schiele, however, had an “almost pious naiveté” accompanied by authentic searching and openness. He was full of raw emotion, reacting powerfully to “the beautiful illusion” of the 19th century. His palate was loneliness, desperation, sexuality, new life and death.

The work, *Self Portrait with Spread Fingers*, was one of his many naked or near-naked self-portraits. In this work we find an expressive eccentric gaze and pose. As in many of his other paintings the figure is surrounded by a white accenting aura. And in his work he explores powerful gestures and feelings.

**NOTES**


Many of the self-portraits are dark, some are world weary but others are more benign and less enigmatic. His work is imbued with a commitment to being true to whatever aspect of experience he chooses to examine. He has the capacity to create and sustain powerful moods. Sometimes, as we will see later, his search seems desperate and fearful.

With Schiele’s limbs and particularly hands, are always important. The striking gestural and “enigmatic mannerisms” were possibly borrowed from those of autistic children. Schiele’s capacity to illuminate spirituality through such bodily presentations can be seen most immediately in four canvasses selected from a dozen works from primarily the 1910/12 period. These have, arguably, a significant and sometimes idiosyncratic visionary and spiritual content. All of them are imbued with symbolism, deeply moving and difficult to fathom. There is something in them of a dream world and of a lost world that is being sought. And sometimes the search seems desperate and fearful. The four works are: Revelation (1911), The Poet (1911), The Hermits (1912), and Transfiguration (1915), that have reference to psychiatric patients he was allowed to see. They also possibly derive from theatrical, dance and mime performances that he saw and was influenced by. One might also suggest parallels between his work and that of Munch, Toulouse Lautrec and Lucien Freud.

In Schiele’s art, spirituality might be viewed as an unlikely subject for consideration. The erotic quality of his output is the dominant and most widely known theme in critiques of his work. It is a characteristic feature of many of


8. This can be seen in: Frank Hoifodt. Edvard Munch. (London. Tate Publishing. 2012).


Self Portrait with Spread Fingers, 1911. Pencil, gouache and white on paper, 52.5 x 83 cm. The Leopold Museum, Vienna. Inventory No: 1383. Reproduced with permission.
his drawings and paintings of women as well as in his more precocious narcissistic self-portraits. However, it is likely that the emerging neuroscience studies of the spiritual and related states will throw interesting light on this question.

His work can be roughly classified as follows: self-portraits, including erotic material; women, including erotic drawings, mothers, and couples; portraits, often but not exclusively commissioned; architecture and nature paintings; and paintings with a spiritual or visionary quality, some of which are traditionally “religious”.

We have already touched on the first of these, self-portraits, and will return to the second, women, in the discussion below. We will not discuss his portraits other than to note that the paintings, though interesting and unusual, say at least as much about Schiele as they do about the sitter. His architecture and nature paintings are highly individual and immediately recognizable. Some of the former derive from a period when, having witnessed great suffering, he felt he could no longer paint people. Paradoxically the architecture paintings from this time are often anthropomorphic and can be dark and menacing. But there are also uplifting examples and his nature paintings record some scenes of outstanding beauty, with a sense of peace and painterly harmony that, despite his turbulence, is characteristic of his work. Examples of these latter type of works include *Crescent of Houses, Island Town* (1915) and *Setting Sun with Four Trees* (1917).

**The paintings of women**

With regard to his paintings of women, the erotic drawings and paintings are easily accessible. Their composition records human experience in a way that is both fresh and authentic, rather than with a mood of pornographic titillation. Notwithstanding this, he was known in some circles as the pornographer of Vienna. This led finally to his imprisonment and the burning of certain of his works.

A defining discussion of this issue would require an extended study in its own right. However, it is helpful to note a subtle parallel to Schiele’s work which can be found in Ishiguro’s novel “An Artist of the Floating World”.

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13. See biographical material in note 1.

This occurs in an exchange between two painters, master and pupil. The context includes the tension among younger artists about the role of art in supporting institutions and the state.

This official role was being set against the artist’s capacity to capture the more ephemeral and luminous moments of truth and insight that are part of the “floating world” of parties and pleasure houses. The master says: “The best things . . . are put together at night and vanish in the morning . . . . The finest most fragile beauty an artist can hope to capture drifts within . . . [the] pleasure houses after dark”.

He continues: “I suspect the reason I couldn’t celebrate the floating world was that I couldn’t bring myself to believe in its worth. Young men are often guilt ridden about pleasure . . . . It’s hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its validity.”

Schiele’s work is unclouded by guilt and, obviously, has not been produced in the service of ideology or institution. It captures a delicate truth that can easily be lost. And he is quoted as feeling that “even an erotic work of art has a sacred quality”.

Notwithstanding this, other painting where women were treated did not elicit concern over the issues of the erotic or pornographic. One is of a mother and child and the other is of a couple. The purpose of presenting them here is to illustrate Shiele’s connectedness to appalling circumstances some mothers found themselves in, and his sensitivity to the human condition, as he witnessed it. He was not just obsessed with the erotic. He was equally obsessed with birth, new life, death and endings, with life as he saw it in his city. He was tuned into the immense suffering people encountered in ordinary lives. His depiction of mothers has little in common with the Madonna and Child theme but borrows heavily on his experience in seeing patients in the gynecological hospital and possibly post mortem. This accounts for some of his most distressing pictures of women and children. He was given access to these patients and hospital facilities by an obstetrician patron—an unlikely possibility today.

Blind Mother (1914) illustrates this well. The statuesque mother is posed, in front of a cot or a cradle, in an uncomfortable position, and nurses her two

infants. Her upper body is bent down to the right between her legs. The face, though determined, has blank, dead eyes; her pale skin stands out from the warm hues of the background. The composition is thought to draw on Rodin’s figure “Crouching Woman” (circa 1881) and was completed after several studies some of which still survive. It conveys the sense that the mother is very much on her own with these two children. Their hope for a future is dependent on her strength and we realize the limits of that future.

The mother/child theme was explored time and again by Schiele, and is at least as revealing as his other work. For example, in *Dead Mother I* (1910) the baby is enclosed in a uterine-like structure consisting of black shrouding and his mother’s arm and boney hand on one side and her hair on the other. The child has a good color and gleaming eyes. The mother’s face is corpse-like and appears to be marked with earth. Her mouth drops slightly, her eyes are lifeless and empty. Her fate is determined. The baby is trapped in a tight space, encircled by the inert. There is no visible escape. By contrast, *Young Mother* (1914) (also known as *Blind Mother II*) is a little more reassuring. Recording the vulnerable innocence of a young mother; it is finely depicted and is one of the few in this series with the expression of positive feelings. This hopeless and almost desperate feeling in some of the mother series is common, although some later more positive examples exist, such as *Mother with Children* (1917).


19. See web reference for all pictures in 3 above.
It is important to give due weight to this work and not to regard Schiele as one dimensionally a painter of erotic work. For him the body is a window into the soul; his paintings illustrate states of mind people lived through, that until then were scarcely acknowledged. Some say he “created the modern world by scandalizing it”.20

His later work includes couples and sometimes small families. We can note strength of feeling in *Death and the Maiden* (1915-16), which is at the Upper Belvidere Museum in Vienna.21 The feeling is too strong for words but conveyed with a precision that borders on the mathematical. Here he is dealing with endings. The composition may be related to the ending of his relationship with his mistress/muse, Wally Neuzil, prior to marrying his wife Edith Harms in June of 1915. However, it is open to deeper readings. The lovers, though huddled together against the difficulties surrounding them are turned away from each other. They have painfully come to realize their own limitations. They will not be protected from the disintegration they know is immanent. From their harrowing expressions we have a sense that they both know that they will not be able to comfort and/or save each other and are looking beyond the now and each-other; often the starting point of a personal spiritual journey. Several earlier studies for this work still exist. The mood created is also evident in other similarly themed paintings such as *The Lovers*.22

Theology usually overemphasizes the cognitive and Spirituality sometimes undervalues it. Today spirituality draws heavily on emotional responses and hence will find ample material to work with in Schiele, as is evident in the small selection of his works illustrated here. It has been said that “Working as he did between the psychotic and non-psychotic

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22. See web links in note 3
elements of his personality, Schiele is an appropriate artist for our time; . . . his feelings of disintegration and “dismemberment” are nourished by the creative, sane parts of his personality.”

**Spirituality and four representative paintings**

There are four visionary canvasses in which the connection with spirituality is more easily discerned. (It is more difficult to assess Schiele’s relatively few explicitly Christian religious paintings, including Crucifixion scenes, which I do not find convincing). These four works are selected from a dozen or so paintings from primarily the 1910/12 period. They have, arguably, a significant and sometimes idiosyncratic visionary and spiritual content. Regrettably, their content has not been sufficiently recognized and commented on in light of their spiritual aspects. All of them are imbued with symbolism, deeply moving and difficult to fathom. There is something in them of a dream world and of a lost one searching. Sometimes the search seems desperate and fearful; possibly well justified. They are *Revelation* (1911), *The Poet* (1911), *The Hermits* (1912) and *Transfiguration* (1915). The word *vulnerable* and the phrase *searching with hope* come to mind in considering them. Both conditions are consistent with his spiritual journey.

**Revelation (1911)**

This is a solemn, mysterious and somewhat severe painting with three figures. One, kneeling before an impressive figure in a large cloak, reminiscent of a liturgical cope, is obviously the
recipient of the “revelation”. An overseeing female figure is in the background; she is possibly softer and more empathetic but has a severe mouth. As with many of Schiele’s paintings the arms, legs and garments are strangely positioned and leave some confusion as to whom they belong. Schiele’s language, writing about this painting, is essentially secular and a little confused. But he does envisage something like the communication or transmission of the vision of the older man to the younger.25

The disposition of the figures suggests that the revelation is being conferred in, what might be taken in Christian terms, to be a quasi-liturgical and sacramental way. In consequence, the experience leaves the recipient irrevocably changed, again, a sacramental feature. In Schiele’s words the central figure is “giving out an hypnotic astral orange light into which a kneeling adolescent figure . . . .[is] sinking”. . . . It might be a poet, an artist, a scholar or a spiritualist.”26

The painting, is a beautiful work with a stained glass quality with a surprisingly pleasing ensemble of colors, all of which combine to convey a sense of the movement of the spirit.

**The Poet (1911)**

This small richly colored self-portrait, also known as *The Lyricist* draws on the tilted neck of Klimt’s *The Kiss*. The play of light on the work gives it an almost luminous quality, as though it were lit from within. The composition is full of powerful feeling. To quote Gaillemin: “Weighed down by the burden of revelation, the artist’s head bends and rests on his shoulder . . . . The body is listening to itself, hoping to be reunited with the world.”27 The hands at the

center are highly expressive; the upper-hand almost a self-embrace. Wistful warm eyes are partially closed, possibly for comfort. His expression is sympathetic and tired. The mood suggests withdrawal into repose following creativity or growth that deeply echoes spiritual processes.28

The Hermits (1912)

This very large canvas has two figures leaning to the left. They seem to glide, sway or, as the tilt and raised foot suggests, even dance in unison. Schiele is in front and the older man behind is Klimt. Both are enfolded in a long dark caftan suggesting a brotherhood. This was Klimt’s style of dress, and was also

27. See references in notes 18, 20, and 21.

adopted by Schiele. Both heads are surrounded by halo like rings of light, as are the bodies to a lesser extent. Klimt’s head is also crowned with red roses. They are, perhaps, like ripe autumn fruits, that has fallen to the ground and taken root. Some are beginning to flourish and project a triangular zone of support toward the inclined duo. Schiele’s white garland stays in place.29

The younger man in the front has his head inclined and his somewhat shifty eyes averted, possibly rebellious in a somewhat edgy glare. He looks alert, moody, pouty and petulant with uncertain averted eyes. The older man is behind, eyes now closed and blinded. Is he satisfied and withdrawn? Is he no longer capable of envisioning his own power? He seems to be leaning on the younger man, and is willing to be led by him. Is Schiele, though leading, furtive and incapable of squarely facing something important? Is it his muse? Or the establishment? Or the ultimate goal of his search: the truth, and the mysterious and mystical dimensions that inform it? The older man, satisfied or satiated, has possibly abandoned the search.

Strangely, for hermits, these are images of people with a lot of fear, frightened of the circumstances of their lives unsure if anybody or anything can be trusted. There seem to be marked by fear and in search of hope and reassurance.

Schiele painted this picture over a long period of time and never sold it. He adds something in his prose poetry, that becomes more obvious in the painting once he draws it to our attention. He wrote: “. . . the figures themselves represent the fragility of everything that has any importance, . . . these are the bodies of people who are . . . nothing but sensibility. The two figures must be seen as a cloud of dust on this earth, a cloud that wants to form but is destined to collapse powerless”.30 Gaillemin feels the canvas is a “complex symbol of Schiele’s relationship with Klimt . . . is a return to the romantic vision of the artist’s role as an intermediary with the absolute, a member of a brotherhood which can help humanity on its journey toward mystery.”31 Here there is much of the feeling of the lost one searching somewhat fearfully. This is also present in the next canvas.

29. See references in notes 21, 23, and 24.


Transfiguration (1915)

Again, this is a very large canvas with two robed ungainly figures. It is also known as Disappearance, Floating Away, Levitation and The Blind II. It may be taken as transfiguration in the traditional sense. But it may also be associated with other transformations such as death and dying, or even Schiele’s taking on the duties of husband and father, a radical break with his past. There is a gaucheness about the figures being drawn up from the partially withered meadow of this world into a state of graced validation. The lower figure is robed (another self-portrait) that is charged with feeling with its feet on the ground but about to leave its safety, tentative and apprehensive. Eyes wide open, interrogating the viewer: Is this ok? He is poised on the edge of commitment, not fully trusting but with hope. This state, seldom described, well reflects how we often stand in relation to God. The upper figure is suspended in mid-air experiencing similar emotions. This canvass provides endless material for reflection for those experiencing troubling and unexpected aspects of spiritual transformation. It expresses the dark night experiences.
Conclusions

Revelation, The Poet, The Hermits, Transfiguration, as well as other works repeatedly use Schiele’s own body, face and gestures to magnificent effect. He creates wonderful harmonies of color and sustains powerful impressions of various phases in the life of the lost one searching. They present emotions that, perhaps, are not the way we think we should feel. But in the face of the impenetrable, and desperate events, we sometimes find (possibly surprisingly) these feelings in our selves. In moments when grace favors us, these images help us recognize that our responses can include a furtive wariness as a partner to hope.

Some critics feel that Schiele didn’t have a formal well thought-out system behind these compositions, rather they had matured in an unconscious, possibly, semi-dreamlike state.\(^{32}\) Notwithstanding this, they are compelling and leave us in little doubt about his personal spiritual journey. The meanings of his work, however, needs to be “excavated”\(^ {33}\) for the worlds of religion and spirituality. An attempt to create and paraphrase, as I have done here, is not enough to do them justice. We need further work by conscientious critics with spiritual sensibility to uncover the inspiration and mystery of these exceptional paintings.

These paintings have an almost sacramental or liturgical quality. Abbot Hederman says: “When we accomplish liturgy we do not enter another world as a replica of this one. The transformation which occurs, the making present of the kingdom of God is not a make believe. . . . it takes place personally in the space inside each one of us.”\(^ {34}\) We become transformed. We become transfigured. There is something of this transformation and transfiguration in these paintings, but there is also a gaucheness and clumsiness partly arising from the figures’ unexpectedly being drawn into a state of almost playful, freedom and lightness. It is also possible that they benefit from Schiele’s lack of training in theological matters and can be seen as his attempt to articulate these profound matters for himself. In this his achievement and compelling use of color is unique and to date he has had no real successor.

Schiele’s own letters and prose poems, particularly around 1910 see him


\(^{33}\) See reference in note 1

\(^{34}\) Op Cit. P. 160
full of “fervent admiration of and adoration for [both] nature and life” and, yet, an “appalling fear” which proved to be well justified. He seemed to be “torn between an uncontrollable desire to merge into nature, and a fear of being swept away”. He was a young man, barely beyond adolescence when these works were completed. He wrote: “to dream forever, bursting with a superabundance of life – endlessly – with horrible pains inside the soul – blaze, burn. . . . Speak the language of the creator and give.” And further: “The greatest experience of feeling is religion and art. Nature is the goal – but that is where God is, and I feel him strongly, very strongly, more strongly yet.”35

Ultimately his work doesn’t try to deal with formal religion or theology. But his spirituality is sufficiently powerful and explicit so that we can see in it a rich, if tortured and dark, source with which we can engage. While, I think, this is palpably evident in the works described here, it is also discernible in many of his other work once one explores their meaning.

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35. See references in note 30.