

Egon Schiele

Expressive Sensuality

TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY VIENNA was a hotbed of contradictions. The proud capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire enchanted the world with the glamorous façade of a glittery metropolis while boasting a refined sense of modernity. Below this bejeweled and self-affirming exterior lay a city of rampant corruption, poverty, and social tension. Under these opposing strains the masterful artist Egon Schiele emerged. He created a unique vision of expressive sensuality, in which the human form was captured with a ferocity so intense that it bordered on the grotesque.

Born the son of a railroad official, Schiele (1890-1918) was reared in the confining reality that his destiny lay with the railway industry. However, his artistic inclinations appeared early and compelled him to pursue his talents to their fullest expression. His rare artistry surpassing his leanings toward locomotive engineering, he sought to fulfill his dream with formal academic training at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. Unfortunately, the artificial and restrictive methodology of this institution so stifled his individualism that he felt forced to abandon his studies.

His early works reflect the formal and restrained idiom with which he began; albeit skilled in execution, they lack the sophistication of his later efforts. He was greatly influenced by the Viennese master Gustav Klimt, and although his drawing style retains his own distinctive hand, it resonates with elements of Klimt's sinuous line and interpretation of form. Schiele's style underwent a radical transformation upon discovering Rodin's draw-

ings: he began sketching his models with a continuous line from the very inception of the meeting of crayon and paper, giving his work a nervous vitality. Watercolor served to complete his renderings and complement the lively energy of his line. Underlying the expressive forms that would dominate his landscape lay a melancholy emptiness reminiscent of Edvard Munch's. Schiele's solitary figures set against a bare landscape in various contorted poses force the viewer into a contemplative introspection and evoke a sense of abandonment. These darker psychological aspects that impart an expressive nature to his art are as integral to an understanding of it as the readily visible animated forms. For lack of funds, his sister Gertrude often served as his model. The painting *Kneeling Girl in Orange-Red Dress* (**Figure**) shows Gertrude in a contorted pose that further accentuates her frustrated visage. The jagged, painterly line outlining the figure matches this mood. The bright orange-red hues of the dress also echo the nervous energy of his subject and lends volume and weight to the attenuated, filamentous form. Onwards from 1910, he would often formally isolate his subject in even greater relief by inscribing a thick white gouache stroke in a halolike fashion. Beyond the artistic influences that inspired his work, Schiele was profoundly altered by the currents of sexuality and disease intimately intertwined within his familial circumstances.

Four of his siblings died before he was aware of their existence because his father transmitted syphilis to his wife and these progenies. His father's untreated syphilis led to a fully ripened insanity and an untimely

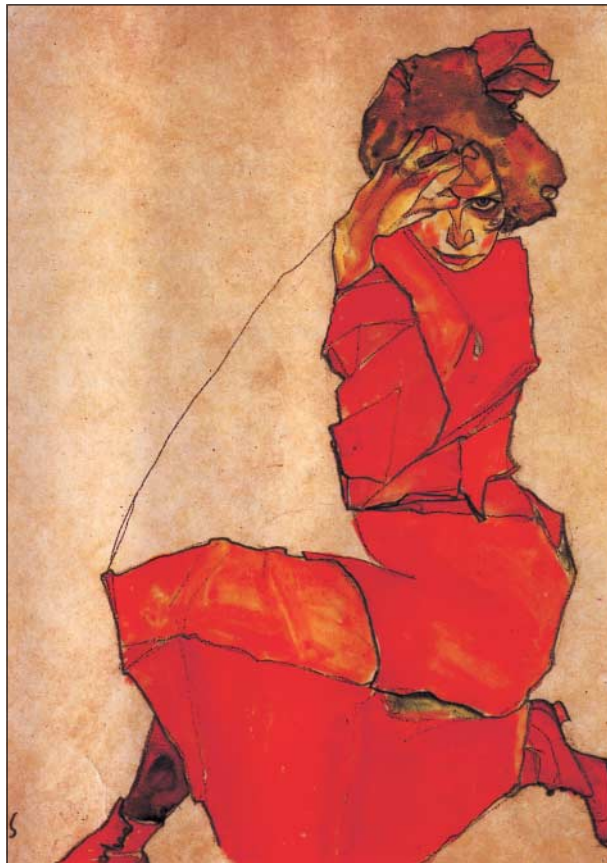
death. The youth who witnessed the fruits of his father's sexual misfortunes contemplated and explored the contrarian notions of sex and death in many artistic endeavors. Unlike the restrained and superficial sexuality that predominated the canvas of his contemporaries, Schiele constructed a bizarre erotic imagery from the disfigured and even grim faces and bodies that he was compelled to study. His choice of vibrant colors—blue, red, and green—enforce the expressionistic qualities of his art and accentuate the unnatural appearance of his subjects. Although Klimt served as a patron and a paternal figure, Schiele departed from his mentor in many fundamental ways. Klimt's reserved yet adorned figures have only the most superficial resemblances to Schiele's painted subjects. These tend to harbor a forlorn anxiety that make them unmistakably a product of Schiele's creation.

Schiele's obsession with an overt, raw sexuality distinguished him from his contemporaries as well as his predecessors. In his works Victorian subtlety is entirely abandoned for a new, honest, albeit at times uncomfortable sexual confrontation. Subjects are portrayed in various contortions that accentuate their sinuous figures, and are posed oftentimes with their genitalia unabashedly exposed. He would even frame truncated portions of the lower torso with the genitalia in full view. He painted women in extreme conditions, from the virginal child-woman at the cusp of discovering her own sexuality to the pregnant woman who had already found it. Beyond the graphic poses, sexuality was also expressed through the various trappings of clothing—garters, stockings, and other items that carded sexual overtones. Al-

though he celebrated sexuality in a perverse sense, he also struggled thematically with death and commingled the two concepts. His painting *Dead Mother* is the best example of this odd pairing of themes. The central figure of the infant is coddled womblike by an encircling swathe of black cloth and by the arms of its deceased mother. Schiele may leave some viewers dismayed by the choice and execution of his themes, but their visceral response is what makes his work so challenging, enduring, and distinct.

Although Schiele's beauty may be deemed ugly by some, the human form that is his central obsession carries with it a dignity and tragedy that render it beautiful in an unconventional manner. Unfortunately, his talent was ended early by death. He died at 28 years of age from the Spanish influenza.

Samuel M. Lam, MD
Lam Facial Plastics
1112 N Floyd Rd, Suite 9
Richardson, TX 75080
(e-mail: samlammd@yahoo.com)



Egon Schiele (1890-1918). *Kneeling Girl in Orange-Red Dress (Kniendes Mädchen im orangeroten Kleid)*, 1910. Gouache, watercolor, and black crayon on paper 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ in (44.6 × 31 cm). Leopold Museum, Vienna, Austria.