

Confiscated

Egon Schiele's *Self-Seer* 1910 was the first in a year-long series of three double self-portraits, and although missing for over seventy years remains much discussed by those interested in the work of the short-lived Austrian artist. For some, it signals an important moment in Schiele's relationship with his mentor, the symbolist artist Gustav Klimt (1862–1918). For others, the combination of eroticism and psychological symbolism is the most telling aspect of the work: Schiele's striking image suggests an extreme fascination with the self and perhaps anticipated ideas about narcissism and the 'divided self' in psychoanalytical theory.

Schiele's early career was defined by his relationship with Gustav Klimt, the most famous painter associated with the Austrian Secession movement. After two years of training in Vienna, in 1907 Schiele contacted Klimt, who proceeded to mentor the young artist. Klimt introduced his protégé to artists, patrons and curators in Vienna, and invited him to exhibit in the 1909 *Kunstschau*, the last major international exhibition in the city before the First World War. Schiele exhibited two portraits that, combining realism with areas of highly stylised geometric abstraction, showed Klimt's stylistic influence on the nineteen-year-old artist. Schiele remained indebted to Klimt throughout 1909 but rather than using symbolic figures as his patron did, he began to focus instead on self-portraits. In *Self-Portrait with Spread Fingers* 1909, for example, Schiele used Klimt's trademark gold and block colours alongside his face and hands, to focus attention on them. In this first self-portrait as a young adult he showed his face made-up with lipstick and rouge, suggesting a theatrical performance or gender ambivalence.

In early 1910, however, Schiele departed sharply from the decorative style of the Vienna Secession movement. Barely twenty, the young painter began to emphasise the grotesque in his self-portraits, showing his face distorted, his skin discoloured and his body brutally curtailed. Strange truncations hint at some form of censoring, prompted by shame or fear of self-revelation.

This was powerful imagery in early twentieth-century Vienna. Capital of the Hapsburg Empire, the city had both fabulous wealth and endemic licentiousness and disease. In 1904 art historian Julius Meier-Graefe compared the city to 'a lad who has grown too quickly, tremendously tall but shockingly thin, weak of bone and precociously diseased'. 'Abnormality' and 'greatness' were being linked in some circles, and Schiele's shocking self-portraits can be seen as relishing the theme of depravity, then linked to the idea of potential genius rather than to moral or physical weakness. Viewing human sexuality with a rare directness that, to some, bordered on the pathological, Schiele

Egon Schiele 1890–1918

Self-Seer 1910
Oil paint on canvas
80 x 79.9 cm

found himself in trouble with the authorities on a number of occasions for his sexually explicit drawings and paintings; his use of young girls, including his sister, as nude models broke taboos, and he was briefly imprisoned for displaying a drawing of a semi-naked girl in his studio.

The use of a second figure, looking over the shoulder of the first, was the striking feature of the double self-portraits painted in 1910–11. If the first was the artist, as seen in a mirror, then the second could be interpreted in narrative terms as a close friend or lover, in symbolic terms as a personification of death, or in psychological terms as some sort of ‘other’ or divided self. Art historian Alessandra Comini noted in 1975 that these works, whether begun as an exploration of auto-eroticism or death, became ‘in part a battle before the mirror, between the artist as creator of and vessel for his own image’. Similarly, Jane Kallir wrote in 1998:

The title Self-Seer ... could refer to the artist's visionary capabilities, or to his introspective stance ... In several pictures from the series [the second figure] assumes the guise of a muse or spectre manipulating the artist like a puppet from behind ... now the spectator is a friend, now a ... incubus ... then it reappears as death incarnate. The double self-portraits thus hold manifold symbolic possibilities, leading Schiele to confront not only the creative spirit, but also the spirit of his father, and ultimately the spirit of death, which only immortal art could vanquish.

In the first of the series, completed in December 1910, a strangely de-sexed and naked Schiele is shown kneeling and partly enveloped in a dark garment. Behind him, and seemingly mimicking the position of his left hand with its fingers rigidly splayed, is a youthful twin figure. In another work in the series, *The Prophet* 1911, the two figures, one nude and the other clothed in black and seemingly blind, stand next to each other. The final work of the group, *Self-Seer II (Death and the Man)* 1911, shows two almost skeletal figures, one white and ghostlike embracing from behind a man seemingly transfixed by intense emotion. As his writings reveal, Schiele had a strong sense of his creative powers, which he rejoiced in but which he also saw as inescapably linked with transience and disintegration (‘I am so rich that I must give myself away’, he wrote in 1911). The series was a unique attempt by an artist at the height of his powers to explore a new terrain, and as such the loss of *Self-Seer I* is particularly significant.

To try to find a buyer for *Self-Seer I*, Schiele used his network of supporters in Vienna. He had met the writer and collector Arthur Roessler in 1909, and when approached Roessler suggested physician Dr Oskar Reichel (later killed in the Holocaust) as a purchaser for *Self-Seer*. Reichel duly acquired the work and Schiele wrote to him in January 1911 to express his satisfaction with both the painting and its buyer:

Without meaning to flatter you, I know of no greater Viennese art connoisseur than you. Therefore I have chosen you to receive this picture from my newest series – in time, you will be completely won over by it, as soon as you begin not to look at it, but to look into it. This is the picture of which G[ustav] Klimt remarked that he was happy to see such faces. It is certainly the best thing that has been painted in Vienna lately.

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Schiele continued to promote *Self-Seer*. It was featured in Paris von Gütersloh's 1911 book *Egon Schiele: An Attempt at an Introduction*. In 1912 the artist convinced Reichel to allow the work to be transported to Munich and Cologne for display and possible sale. Willing to support the young artist, Reichel agreed, though the trip proved unsuccessful, and the painting was returned to him in January 1913.

Egon Schiele died in 1918, aged just twenty-eight, a victim of the Spanish flu epidemic that claimed more than twenty million lives across Europe. Nonetheless, his fame in Vienna continued to grow after his demise. In October 1928 the city's Neue Galerie and a local artists' association jointly staged an exhibition of over two hundred Schiele works. It is not known when the painting left Reichel's collection but the catalogue for this exhibition listed the 1910 *Self-Seer* as among four works lent from the collection of 'Fritz Grünbaum, Vienna'.

Fritz Grünbaum was born in the Czech city of Brno, where his father ran an art dealership. Moving to Vienna aged eighteen, Grünbaum embarked on a career as a cabaret artist in 1903. Returning from service in the First World War, Grünbaum found considerable success in both Austria and Germany. His travels between Vienna and Berlin allowed him to build up an art collection that by the late 1920s numbered some four hundred pieces, including no less than eighty works by Schiele. With the arrival of the National Socialist government in Germany in 1933, Grünbaum, like many cabaret artists, began to use his shows to voice his opposition to the regime. However, it very soon became clear that it was not safe for him to perform in Germany: in June 1934 the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* dedicated an article to Grünbaum as an enemy of the Reich.

Formalising their longstanding hatred of 'degenerate' art, seen as unhealthy and unpatriotic, the German authorities began a programme of confiscations to remove such works from the country's public museums and galleries in the summer of 1937. With their exploration of the creative aspects of degeneracy, works of Egon Schiele within Germany were soon the targets of such confiscations. In March 1938 Austria was annexed to the German Reich in an 'invasion' during which, allegedly, not a single shot was fired. Immediately, the new National Socialist authorities began the process of excluding Austria's Jewish community, and other opponents of their regime, from society. However, Schiele's works were viewed more with contempt than anger in Austria, and were not typically subject to confiscation campaigns or export embargos; and such was the prevalent hostility to modernism that those works that were seized from their owners for resale struggled to find new buyers. During the rapid Nazification of Austrian society, some important collectors were able to flee abroad with their artworks (the Nazis' campaign against 'degenerate' art ironically contributed at least this much to artists such as Schiele becoming better known in America and other Allied countries). But other collectors were not so lucky.

Attempting to flee to Czechoslovakia by train, Fritz Grünbaum and his wife Lily were arrested and returned to Vienna. Grünbaum was deported to the Dachau concentration

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camp in May 1938, while in Vienna Lily was left to ‘authorise’ the governmental confiscation of the couple’s property (his power of attorney, signed in Dachau, gave her authority to do so and she would have had little choice). Although much publicity surrounded the notorious 1937 exhibition *Degenerate Art* and Nazi destruction of ‘degenerate’ art, the process of confiscation was orderly and considered. Vienna’s Jewish collections contained thousands of highly valuable works, not to mention many ‘Nazi-approved’ pieces, and the authorities undertook a process of formal assessment, requiring Jewish owners to complete asset registrations detailing their works. Approved pieces were handed to Nazi officials or taken for the planned ‘Führer Museum’ in Linz, Hitler’s hometown. The rest, including many ‘degenerate’ works, were sold with the cooperation of dealers and auction houses in the city. Grünbaum’s collection was almost certainly seized for sale rather than destroyed. A property assessment for Lily Grünbaum dated 20 July 1938 provides the last record of *Self-Seer*; later documents refer to the collection, but only in general terms. Following the confiscation of her apartment in October 1938 Lily Grünbaum was registered at four different addresses between 1938 and 1942. She was finally arrested on 5 October 1942 and deported to the Maly Trostinc extermination camp near Minsk, where she was murdered on 9 October. Her husband had already died. After a two-year period in the Buchenwald camp Grünbaum had been returned to Dachau in late 1940. Failing in his attempt to commit suicide on New Year’s Eve 1940, the sixty-year-old Grünbaum died of tuberculosis on 14 January 1941.

The story of what happened to Schiele’s *Self-Seer*, however, does not end there. After Lily Grünbaum’s deportation, her collection would have become the property of the German Reich. In theory, the collection should have been confiscated and sold off through a sub-section of the Gestapo responsible for selling off Jewish-owned luxury goods. But the Grünbaum collection does not figure in any of the related records. In 1956, however, around forty Schiele works from the Grünbaum collection appeared on the market via a dealership in Switzerland. According to the dealership’s owner, he had acquired the work from Mathilde Lukacs, sister of Lily Grünbaum, who survived the war in Belgium. The sale attracted buyers from across Europe and America, and included the 1911 oil *Dead City III*, which had appeared alongside *Self-Seer* in Lily Grünbaum’s July 1938 property assessment. Mathilde Lukacs died in 1979; it was never verified whether she had indeed passed the works to the Swiss gallery or whether she had the right to do so.

In 1998 forty-four governments agreed to the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi Confiscated Art. While encouraging research into potentially stolen works, the principles paved the way for international legal recognition of heirs’ rights to reclaim works lost by their ancestors. As a result of the sheer number of high value works it contained, and the uncertainty surrounding the 1956 Swiss sale, the Grünbaum collection has come to play a central role in determining the scope of these international laws. Can the sister-in-law of a collector be presumed to have had the right to sell that collector’s work? Should normal limitation periods apply? If a work is transported from German-occupied Austria, sold in Switzerland and currently held by

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a gallery in New York, which country's law applies? Many of these difficult questions remain to be resolved.

Egon Schiele is now among the world's most high-priced artists. *Self-Seer* was well known when it was lost and, though today remembered through a black and white photograph that does not do the work justice, it remains so today. Given the fate of those works that reappeared in Switzerland in 1956, it remains possible that *Self-Seer* still exists and may one day resurface.

Text—

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