

The Evolution of Expressionism  
In Turn-of-the-Century Vienna:  
Klimt and Schiele

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Until 1897, Classicism in Viennese high art had served as a mimetic construct of the elite society who were both art's staunchest supporters and the purveyors of moral and philosophical values that served as its staple of judgment. In the following years, from 1898 to 1918, were revolutions of both natures, political and philosophical. The artistic transformation from the Classicism of the Habsburg Monarchy to the expressionism of the Café "Nihilism" could be seen most obviously in two of Vienna's foremost artists of the time, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele. This paper seeks to compare and contrast the works of these two artists who seem to crystallize the moral, social, political, and artistic upheaval of early Twentieth Century Vienna.

It is fitting that Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele died six months from one another, both of the Spanish influenza, and both in 1918. It is important to note that even though stylistic variables call for their ultimate contrast, they loved and admired one another, and they both stood for the values that defined Secessionism. Their proximity in philosophy makes it all the more profound to discover their differences. In Klimt came classical objectivity housed in a contemporary conceptual framework. In Schiele came the shift to brutal subjectivity that pushed the limits of this framework. Even though, as will be discussed, the similarity of the subject matter seems to remain a constant, the execution becomes the variable upon which the change becomes dependent. The manner of execution of a similar subject matter also allows the change to become curiously

evolutionary whereas most artistic transformations attempt revolution in the absolute denial of previous stylistic traditions. The linearity of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele's actions becomes imperative to this discussion.

As if it were a Viennese bedtime story, the villainous empire of the Habsburg Monarchy held dominion over many of the dealings of Austria during its reign. Standards (both moral and otherwise) by which most cultural adaptations were judged were set quite high, perhaps to segregate the elite from the lower classes. Manifestations of these attitudes were not limited to science or politics. The art which was accepted as high art was being created by artists determined to associate their work with an elite sponsor. Academy professor Josef Trenkwald was quoted as saying that it was bad for a public to see work [of a non-classical nature] because the creators of such work had a "tendency to use 'unbeautiful' models who were 'without that transfiguring shimmer of poetry which inspired every picture of the antique and renaissance periods.'" (Shedel, p.5)

This Classicism, a pervasive element in the Rubenesque works of Makart (Fig. 1), was the standard that not only dictated the configuration of the accepted artwork, it shackled the philosophy that came to characterize the Secessionist viewpoint. A term which is continually used to describe the Classicist paradigm in Vienna is "aestheticism" (Schröder and Szeeman, p.24). The splendor which came from the objective beauty inherent in "aestheticism" seemed to exude a defensive, conservative air. The subject matter that canonized Viennese classical artwork usually

contained landscape or figurative elements which became delusionarily representative of the current social and political situation. From the position of this artwork, such as that by Makart, elements of life and politics were grand and romantic; not at all to what the lower classes responded. But the elite society would not ideologically support anything to the contrary. After all a contrary ideology or paradigm would not perpetuate the image of its superiority.

The ruling class of aestheticians were referred to as *Alten*, or "older." These conservative *Alten* held decision-making positions in most, if not all, avenues of administration. The *Alten*, as alleged leaders, were obviously not concerned with being influenced or led by the mandate of the masses. This is indicated by the length and strength of their administrative rule and the subject matter of the artwork. These factors distanced the art from the population it sought to represent.

As any presence of a ruler might imply, there must also be a ruled, and the outspoken called themselves the *Jungen*, or "young." The turn of the century brought the *Jungen* into new light. Johann Strauss performed the *Triumph of Oprezza*, Victor Adler's labor movement of social democracy was underway, Sigmund Freud pushed his Interpretation of Dreams to the surface in 1900, along with Sex and Character, by Otto Weininger. The *Alten* and *Jungen* conflict ultimately gave rise to the formation of the Secession, whose first president-elect was Gustav Klimt. If the *Alten's* views could be characterized as splendor-seeking, the

*Jungen*, who in the fine arts were recognized by the Secession, were truth seeking.

At first, the Secession's pervasive style came from Art Nouveau, which was considered in its early phases to be radically opposed to Classicism. The decoration and stylization of Art Nouveau was not compatible with the truth-seeking of the *Jungen*, whose works became more and more psychological. This artistic flowering coincided with the last years of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Frenzied writers penned it "a joyous apocalypse" (Hermann Broch as quoted in Schröder and Szeemann, p. 15) and a "trial run for the end of the world." (Karl Kraus as quoted in Schröder and Szeemann, p. 15)

With its detached romanticism and splendid elegance, the *Jungen* believed the art of the Classicists to be contemporarily irrelevant. The Secessionists thought that it could only be imitation designed for profitability. After all, "the meaning of art lay in its vitality as an expression of its own time" (Shedel, p. 22), and given the fall of the Monarchy and the subsequent institutional instability of the state of affairs, seemed to leave only one option for the thinkers and artists to rely on, introspection.

As the president of the Secession, Gustav Klimt was the figurehead whose work stood in clear opposition to the Classicists. Although his beginnings were traditional, his sensibilities pushed him forward into rebellion.

Klimt's choices rarely deviated from two facets of subject matter, figurative and landscape. This in itself is not

sufficient to indicate a movement away from Classicism, as they were popular subjects for centuries. The orientation and inclusion of darker elements characterize some of Klimt's more mature work; as seen in *The Three Ages of Man* of 1905. (fig. 2) Even though the temperament of the subjects would indicate a more truthful endeavor in the inclusion of decay, mortality, and the cycle of life, the manner of execution may call into question Klimt's true empathy with his subject matter. His work, stylistically, has been characterized as having a carpet-like effect of brush strokes. This is seemingly unimportant, but becomes very important when placed in a critical light. This "atomization" of his subject matter into discrete portions of light allows for a certain harmony through which a mood is communicated. Klimt's paintings are compositions in which "separate objects dissolve and become the bearers of evanescent tricks of light." (Schröder and Szeeman, p. 24) It seems as though the manner of execution belies the information presented by the subject matter. The subject matter seeks truth of contemporary relevance (i.e. despair and impending change), but the presentation of such revolves around a more conservative, classical notion of beauty (fig. 3).

Later spoken of as "divisionism," Klimt's style was criticized by Klaus Albrecht Schroder as an avoidance that is contrary to the conviction of the angst that the figurative involvement suggests. As critics have said, "techniques of this sort remain totally peripheral to the alienation process that is

going on in the real world" (Schröder and Szeeman p.24) and that this forced homogeneity masks the true heterogeneity of life.

Ultimately, Klimt's mystical, even symbolic figurative compositions (although immersed in decorative fields of pattern) and ominously arranged landscapes (fig. 4) contained avant-garde connotations that were breaking points for the Secessionists. However, the "sensations (caused by the harmonious joining of separate objects) progressively usurp the place of the subjective presence..." (Vergo, p.23) and this tends to deny the position of the artistic statement. This subjectivity, or the presence of the artist's emotion fused with the object, or subject matter, seems even to elude Klimt's erotic work.

This erotic work, mainly of women in suggestive or submissive poses (fig. 5) suggests ideas or morality that were taboo in the culture of the elite. Nevertheless, the execution of such drawings weakens the position the subject matter presents; the line work is faint and elegant and the poses are such that the women do not face the viewer, causing a voyeuristic effect. Klimt seems to use classical techniques of approach "to cushion the impact of what he was presenting" (Schröder and Szeeman, p. 25). They remained "remote flesh" (Schröder and Szeeman, p.25), dreamlike, unreal, distant. Klimt seemed incapable of combining his emotional, subjective presence with the objects he chose to render; that task faced the next generation of the Secessionists, and with them, Egon Schiele.

Egon Schiele was born in 1890 in Tulln, a small town on the Danube. His upbringing was a traditional one, occurring during

this conflict of states. His youth was punctuated with the death of his father and eldest sister. He was admitted to the Akademie für bildende Künste (Academy of Visual Arts, Vienna). The traditional, classical setting taught the bright young student much, but it was obvious that his sensibilities clashed with the beliefs of his professors. His involvement in the Academy ended with Professor Christian Griepenkerl declaring that the devil hath shat [Egon Schiele] into his classroom.

Up until 1907, Schiele's work consisted of classically arranged landscapes and traditional, art academy figurative works. Even early works showed a decidedly different sense of color and shape arrangement. When he was seventeen, he met Klimt, who further influenced his style into his early twenties.

Schiele's subject matter ranged from town to rural landscape, and from erotic to portrait-like figures. As he matured, his emotive presence began to reshape and redefine the subject matter that had for so long been the resting place of Classicism, for example, the *Portrait of Eduard Kosmak*, a commissioned piece (fig. 6). Portraiture had been addressed for years, but never alluding to the psychological state of its sitters. It has been likened to Munch's *Puberty*, although the impending change is not awareness of sexuality as much as being on the fringes of madness. This may be a projection of Schiele onto his sitter, hence the re-definition of the subject matter by coupling it with the angst of the painter. In concurrent work, figures sharpened and bent, the landscapes begrudgingly gave up their depth, and the young females were deprived of their

solitude. Schiele's graphic style allows for full absorption of the confrontational nature of his work. In contrast to Klimt, his "fleshy awareness" found in early drawings are considered by Werner Hofmann as evidence:

of the determination to break out of the gilded cage of ornamental euphemism into the wilderness of unchecked desires... to be aware of the flesh, instead of smoothing it out into ornament or mortifying it in a spirit of aestheticism (Schröder and Szeeman p.19) (fig. 7).

Among the artists who were aspiring Expressionists, Oskar Kokoschka had attempted a full break with Classicism and did so by uprooting all traditional ties, even so far as to disassociate himself from Gustav Klimt. The fascinating proximity of Egon Schiele to his classical beginnings makes one question outright rebellion when trying to introduce new ideas into a system. It seemed obvious that in Kokoschka's behavior he segregated himself from the system he sought to change, but because of his lack of direct participation, was much less prone to cause uproar. Schiele himself had "no unequivocal desire to break from a recent artistic past out of which he himself had sprung." (Shedel, p. 192) His work even bore comparisons with old master works, and "yet (in the manner of the presentation of) the content was entirely contemporary." (Shedel, p.11) Possibly one of the main ways a critic could acknowledge contemporary content was if it was housed in the vocabulary of tradition; a dialect well understood by the Cogniscenti of Vienna.

Schiele's departure from the Academy in 1909 allowed him to strike out on his own. In December of that year he showed at the

Pisko Gallery. The show consisted of mainly figurative works, models, and close associates. It was probably, initially to Schiele's horror, "cited as 'ugly' and 'morbid' with 'outrageous gesticulations and completely unnatural use of color'" (Shedel, p. 190). He was then on the path of the avant-garde.

The portraits Schiele produced in his early twenties had what Comini called the transformation of an object into a "subjective realism." In part, this presupposed the notion that an object perceived by a viewer was in turn defined by the viewer's perception. This would follow Rudolph Arnheim's definition of form, which includes the perception of the object in question. The definitions that Schiele brought to his sitters were sometimes quite revealing and upsetting. They, according to Schiele himself, pointed to what was to come, not maybe exactly what was seen. "How wonderful, everything is living dead," Schiele is to have said. Working within the dialect of Classicism, using its brush strokes, its mediums, its subject matter, Schiele sought to change the definition of what the artworld thought was beauty.

To the Alten, beauty was probably better characterized as splendor. More importantly it was used as a tool, maybe segregational, but probably delusionarily escapist. This is how they wanted to be seen. Schiele fought the Alten with knowledge that they knew, but could not bear to accept. The emergence of Schiele's subjective soothsayings allowed the Secessionists to access partial potential "truth." The "truth" that the Secessionists sought did a great deal to expose superfluous

splendor, a veil that clouded reality. Ugliness and morbidity to Schiele showed truth, which was beautiful (fig. 8).

The difference between Schiele and Klimt seems to be in degrees, not in contrast. As was said before, their aspirations were similar but the varying degrees mark honesty, not success. The approach, not medium or subject matter, but Schiele's execution delineated the outcome of an artwork fraught with subjectivity and "unchecked desires." These degrees and simple variables, or (one could say in a scientific context) mutations, are probes which feel out avenues of change. But in an evolutionary context, mutations always operate within the system. An evolutionary approach within its framework is the only way to change the system. The relationship between Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele is a good example of a paradigmatic change working within the system of a classical framework.

Had Gustav and Egon rejected all traditional upbringing, as did Kokoschka, they would then cease to operate in the dialect that was then understood by the people whose thoughts and values they sought to influence, expand, and change. It is very difficult to elicit response from someone who has no prior understanding or exposure upon which to base new information. Here arises the strange interplay of observation and theory. Thomas Kuhn, a scientific theorist, suggests that observation, or what is observed, is contingent upon one's prior theories or beliefs. Without prior context a viewer might disregard or even deny existence of a phenomenon. For example, someone observes an apple falling from a tree to the ground. One already knows the

theory or is familiar with the event. The observation is acknowledged. If one witnessed an apple falling up, one would have no prior context or theory in which to base new information. The unfamiliarity could then breed discomfort, forcing a defensive posture. In defense, one not only will deny relevance of the event, it could be denied as ever having happened. If radical, contemporary, relevant, new concepts are to be introduced, an evolutionary stance is needed to insure common ground, and to avoid alienation. Revolution, on the other hand, ensures conflict.

Klimt's early successes had given power to a movement which received interest and support from the liberal party. The liberal outlook theorized that the Habsburg Monarchies problems "could be solved through the establishment of personal and economic freedom within the framework of a parliamentary state" (Shedel, p. 21). To the liberals, the Secession stood for personal, subjective freedom that worked in the framework of the bourgeoisie dominated fine art, and embodied the new social and democratic movements. With this, "the Secession became the beneficiary of a process of social change over which it had no control" (Shedel, p. 21), or did it? Either way, Klimt and Schiele came to represent (as the most prominent and compelling figures of the Secession) the movement that revolved around personal freedom, i.e., subjectivity.

The educated masses were tired of the imperial house "set[ting] the tempo [for society] with the palace forming the center not only in a spatial sense, but also in a cultural sense

of the super-nationality of the monarchy" (Shedel, p. 50). The people were wary of the collectivising and subsequent subordination of themselves, and the self-aggrandizing splendor that attached itself to the imperial house via Classicism in conservatism. This conservatism could be, and probably was, construed as a preservational tool for the elite dominance. Schiele and Klimt, working evolutionarily, represented a faction of society astute enough to utilize Classical dialect, create elite-dominated fine art, and radical enough to angrily stomp splendid elitism with a "burning, total subjectivity" that marked "the cleanest break of all with the aestheticism of the past" (Schröder and Szeeman, p. 16) as in Schiele's *Dancer* of 1913. (fig. 9)

Whether or not the Secessionists were completely successful is impossible to gauge. What Klimt and Schiele, apart from their differences, accomplished was to ease the paradigm of an expressive, metaphorical reading of fine art into a classically dominated sphere of appreciation. This happened by way of evolution, which eased concepts that had never been seen before into the seemingly fixed paradigm of the elite. They said what had never been said, using the language understood by all. They brought the bitter that was truth to the sweet that was life, enlivening mortality . The success of Klimt and Schiele was not long-lived, even though expressionism carried on as the primary voice of artists in Vienna. The seeds had been sown.

On February 6, Gustav Klimt died of the Spanish influenza. After the greatest exhibition of Schiele's work which established

him as Vienna's heir to the Secessionist presidency, he died of the same disease on October 31, 1918, three days after his pregnant wife, Edith. Splendor alone could never tell the whole truth.



Figure 1. Hans Makart, *The Dream*, 1872, oil on canvas.



Figure 2. Gustav Klimt, *The Three Ages of Man*, 1905, oil on canvas.

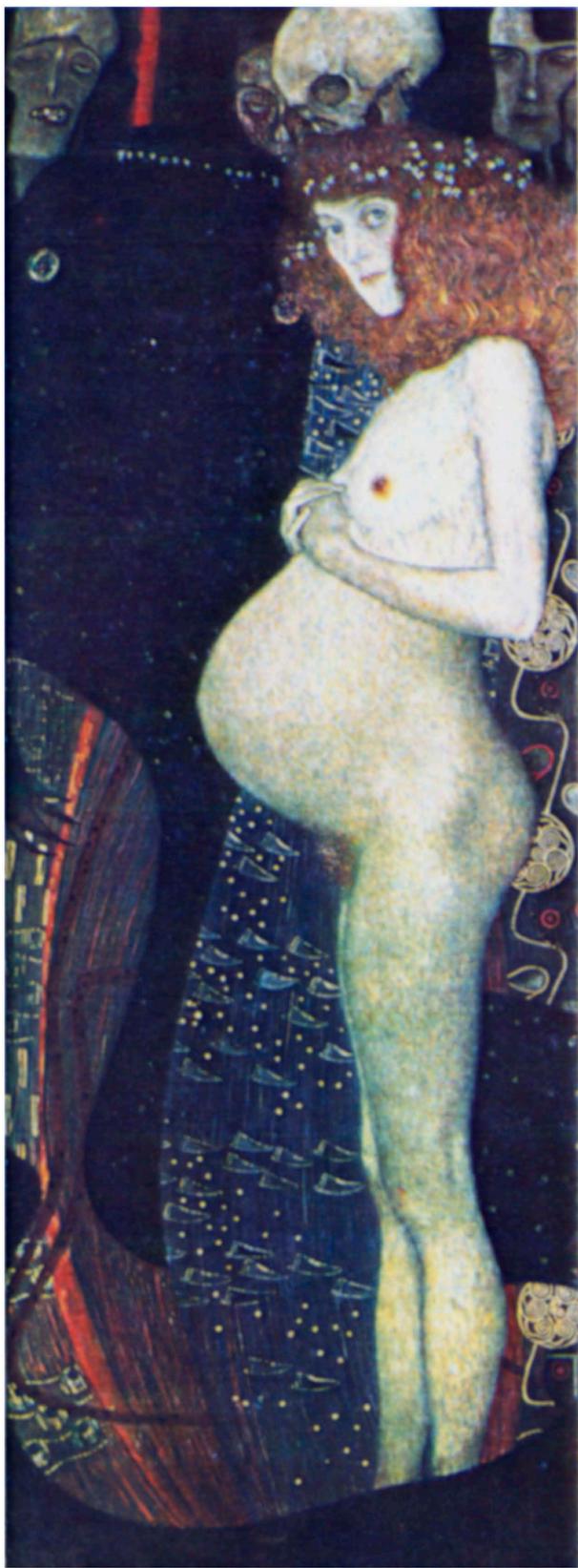


Figure 3. Gustav Klimt, *Hope I*, 1903 oil on canvas.



Figure 4. Gustav Klimt, *Gathering Storm*, 1903, oil on canvas.

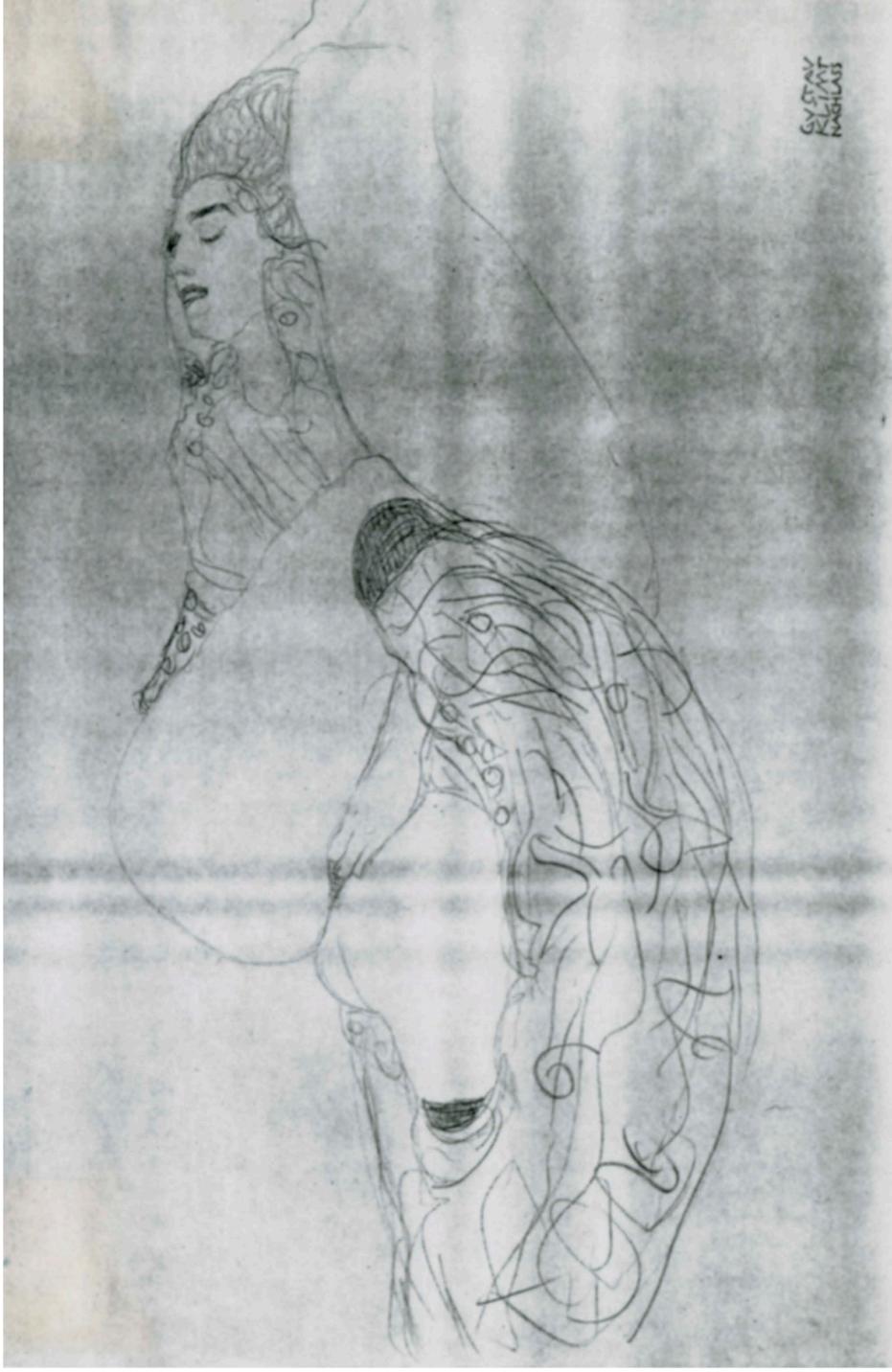


Figure 5. Gustav Klimt, *Reclining Semi Nude (Masturbating)*, 1912/13, oil on canvas.



Figure 6. Egon Schiele, *Portrait of Eduard Kosmak*, 1910, oil on canvas.



Figure 7. Egon Schiele, *Nude Self Portrait*, 1911, watercolor.



Figure 8. Egon Schiele, *Dead Mother*, 1910, oil on canvas.



Figure 9. Egon Schiele, *The Dancer*, 1913, oil on canvas.

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