THE SILVERMAN COLLECTION

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Preface by Richard Nagy Interview by Roger Bevan Essays by Robert Brown and Christian Witt-Dörring with Yves Macaux

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From our first meeting in New York it was clear; Benedict Silverman and I had a rapport. We preferred the same artists and we shared a lust for art and life in a remarkable meeting of minds. We were more in sync than we both knew at the time.

I met Benedict in 1991, at his then apartment on East 66th Street, the year most markets were stagnant if not contracting – stock, real estate and art, all were moribund – and just after he and his wife Jayne had bought the former William Randolph Hearst apartment on Riverside Drive. Benedict was negotiating for the air rights and selling art to fund the cash shortfall. A mutual friend introduced us to each other, hoping I would assist in the sale of a couple of Benedict's Egon Schiele watercolours. The first, a quirky and difficult subject of 1911, was sold promptly and very successfully – I think even to Benedict's surprise. A second followed, a 1917 watercolour of a reclining woman naked – barring her green slippers – with splayed legs. It was also placed with alacrity in a celebrated Hollywood collection. While both works were of high quality, I understood why Benedict could part with them. They were not the work of an artist that shouted: 'This is me – this is what I can do.' And I understood in the brief time we had spent together that Benedict wanted only art that had that special quality. Looking around the apartment on East 66th Street, it was evident that his extensive collection of French Art Nouveau and Wiener Werkstätte furniture had just that quality.

I was slightly disappointed the art was flowing in the wrong direction; as an art dealer I wanted to be selling to this man. I could feel that with him there was the potential to handle works of art for which I had the greatest appetite. In true Benedict style he assured me that in due course he would be back in the game with renewed gusto. It was a bit longer than he imagined at the time, but in the interim we had become friends.

It was some four or five years until we made our first purchase together: Otto Dix's *Venus mit Handschuhen (Venus with Gloves)*, a work of brilliance from 1932. A rather precious painting, of a young woman nude except for her long black opera gloves, it was conceived as a homage to Lucas Cranach's *Venus*, 1532, in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. The impact of this little painting is, in the first instance, a blow to the solar plexus, before it engages intellectually. It is not the easiest of subjects, but then Benedict embraced the louche and the outcasts from polite society, whom he felt in their brutal honesty had more impact than their more respectful contemporaries.

This small painting hung in the apartment in a wonderful juxtaposition with the Dix masterpiece already in the Silverman collection, *Selbstbildnis mit Modell (Self-Portrait with Model)*, 1923. In this near life-size double portrait, the artist depicts himself rigid in his formal self-consciousness, his model so comfortable in her nakedness that her innate sensuality is palpable. Ever the professional, Dix is trying with Herculean restraint, veins pulsing at the temple, to ignore the obvious erotic tension; while the model in control of the situation can afford her relaxed

demeanour. This painting, with its discomforting friction, is a master class in Neue Sachlichkeit.

The next work we went for was Max Beckmann's *Aperitif,* 1947. A slice of life, and a delicious denial of post-war austerity, the beautiful Quappi is in a sophisticated café/club drinking champagne with her cigar-smoking partner. We bid at auction against another friend and connoisseur – in ignorance at the time – who later had the audacity to say the price was crazy. Benedict had a stock response to such criticism: 'The point was to acquire the very best work available and to that end I certainly overpaid on occasion. But as any true collector of passion can testify, settling for second best is simply not a choice.' The irony of course is that the collector who buys with passion invariably benefits financially by dint of the quality he acquires. And as the cliché goes, the quality remains long after the price is forgotten. This under-bidder was someone with whom we were to lock horns with again over the years. Inevitably in a field as narrow as Austrian and German art from before the Second World War, one was going to rub up against the same players regularly. The most consistent of these competitors when it came to work by Schiele and Kubin was the late great Viennese connoisseur Rudolf Leopold. He was well matched with Benedict and both men caused anxiety in the other when they were interested in the same work. It is fair to say that mutually coveted works were won and lost by both. I think Benedict, in keeping with his nature, was happy with his triumphs and forgot about his losses.

Such was our understanding, through years of dining and travelling, that we could walk around a museum exhibition and test each other with the three pieces we would like to take home: invariably our choices were the same, time and time again. And so in 2002, I called Benedict from Switzerland to say I wanted to buy a George Grosz painting of exquisite rarity, a painting from 1918, and one of the very few Dada oil paintings left in private hands. The auction was a bric-a-brac affair, with the painting estimated at $35,000. With only two hours before the sale I telephoned Benedict and described the painting: a Cubo-Futurist work depicting the tightrope of life, a misstep from which could end in a desperate existence on the streets. I asked him to lend me up to $4 million dollars so that I could buy the work for stock. Without hesitation he barked, 'go for it.' I bought the painting, *Tempo der Strasse (The Tempo of the Street),* and given our synchronicity of taste, it was not surprising that when he saw it some months later he immediately exclaimed 'I'm buying it for the collection!'

The most significant purchase we made, as much in cost as in artistic importance, was the philosophically provocative *Die Tafelrunde (Around the Table)*, 1917–18, by Schiele. I showed a transparency of the work to Benedict on a Monday and by Friday he was on a plane from New York to Zurich. After seeing the painting in all its glory we repaired to a restaurant, where he baldly stated he had to have it, despite the lack of cash on hand. He worked out a plan, hocking his future earnings, and the painting has now become a star of the collection. I relate the story as an example of a true collector's response to a great work and as an example of this collector's decisiveness. Had he delayed, the opportunity would have been lost. The seller was a man who had previously said that this painting would be the last to leave his collection, but due to an onerous legal battle, and massive legal fees to be paid, the painting became available. Some months later the vendor won his case and hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

For Benedict the price was the last consideration when reviewing a work for his collection. It was first the blow to the guts, then the mental engagement. After that the question of price was one of affordability. Price was not irrelevant, but also not important. Benedict had no interest in art as investment; it was never a motivation. If the verdict was to go forward it was done swiftly and generously. That's not to say, of course, that if there was a dollar on the table he didn't want it on his side. But in all fairness he decided first if a work was of 'Silverman quality' and then how to make the purchase.

Over the years, as one would imagine, the collection that Benedict kindly referred to as 'our collection' was the object of an inundation of loan requests from major museums worldwide. The loan is always felt; a work on loan leaves a yawning gap on the wall. As reluctant as he was to see them leave, he inevitably acquiesced, as he truly wanted to share the pleasure and passion these works of art inspired.

This is the man who, with a glass of wine in hand, takes the time to contemplate his collection. He considers the creation of the works – who, where and when they were made and the circumstances – taking time to lose himself in the zeitgeist of central Europe during its greatest turmoil.

Benedict Silverman is a collector for whom I have the greatest respect and affection. A broad-minded individual, a connoisseur and a bon vivant, he is a man of sophistication despite a common touch, with whom it is always a pleasure to spend time. He is that rare bird unspoiled by possessions yet affected by the best of them.

Benedict has taken the decision to disperse his collection in the near future and let others enjoy what he has had for so long. The proceeds will go into a foundation to rescue children from illiteracy. He and his wife Jayne have sponsored The Literacy Trust and its Reading Rescue programme for twenty years, so it is fitting that this man's collection has become the means for many thousands of children to have their eyes and minds opened.

Benedict has moved on, but this book will stand as a record of the collection of one man's remarkable taste and honed eye.

Taken at the Flood:
A Portrait of Benedict Silverman

Interview by Roger Bevan, 21 June 2012

Benedict Silverman has come to London to approve the provisional display of a collection of pictures that he is loaning to Richard Nagy's new West End gallery for an autumn exhibition. When we meet at the gallery, the framed canvases and works on paper are stacked around the walls in an arrangement that is, for their owner, unfamiliar. Just a few weeks ago, they were hanging in the Riverside Drive apartment in New York where Mr Silverman has lived with his second wife Jayne Bentzen for the last fifteen years. But he is planning to sell the triplex that they built, with its particularly tall ceilings, for his collections of French Art Nouveau furniture and Tiffany glass and lamps. They are leaving Manhattan and will divide their time between the woods of Connecticut and the shores of Miami.

Now 83, Mr Silverman is simplifying his lifestyle, shedding his possessions, and his superb collection of Austrian and German art from before and after the First World War will, he knows, be leaving too. He paraphrases Wordsworth: 'The world was too much with me, getting and spending, I was laying waste to my powers.' He is narrowing his goals: fun (always) and health (still in good shape).

I ask him why he was attracted to this chapter of modern art history. 'I like paintings of torment,' he tells me, 'of tension, of the human experience.' He has never responded to pretty pictures and recalls an encounter with an auction house expert proclaiming the magnificence of a Claude Monet *Haystacks* composition. 'Why,' he retorts, 'would anyone want to own that picture. It doesn't do anything for me, it doesn't relate to the human condition, it has no meaning for me.'

I wonder whether there might have been a family ancestry connecting him with Berlin or Vienna. He doesn't think so but he is convinced that, in a former incarnation, he would have lived in Middle Europe rather than Paris or London.

What were his first acquisitions? 'Eric Estorick encouraged me to buy the collection of six Kubin drawings in 1972 and, at the same time, I acquired the Schiele *Street Urchin* (cat.8) and the Meidner with the two large figures in combat (cat.14).' He points across the room to one of the most violent pictures in the collection. 'The standing figure,' he explains, 'that's me. I have entered the real estate business. Buildings are collapsing all around me, there's turmoil in every deal. I am pushing down on my competition, I am trying to get ahead. I am in pain. I bought the picture with my first wife, Gerry Lou (who died in 1985), and she said, "You're right, Benedict, that is you."'

Other pictures in the collection convey a mood of violence, too. Why did they strike a chord with him? Was there an early trauma in his life? For some moments, Mr Silverman, usually one of the most alert conversationalists, is quiet. Evidently, he is troubled. At last, he speaks, but more distantly: 'I am sure that there was… I had a mother until I was six years old. She gave birth to my twin sisters but suffered from postpartum depression. She was institutionalized and she never came home. From the age of seven or eight, I was responsible for looking after my sisters. It was difficult for a young boy and it affected me permanently.' Clearly, an uncomfortable memory has been awoken and, after another pause, he adds, 'I can't talk about it anymore.'

Later, when the interview has ended and I am leaving, Richard supplies an intriguing addendum to the conversation: 'The urchin boy in Schiele's watercolour, that's Benedict, of course.'

Why, I ponder, is the Die Brücke school omitted from his collection? We might have expected to find pictures by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and his colleagues. 'That's easy,' Mr Silverman explains. 'I never found a picture from that period that was provocative enough. There were occasional exceptions. There was a Nolde watercolour which I attempted to buy, a man and a woman staring at each other with a lot of tension, but I was unsuccessful at the bidding.' Richard joins our conversation: 'It was not a conscious decision to not buy a Kirchner but there wasn't a Kirchner of sufficient quality to excite Benedict… of Silverman quality. The only picture which I can think of is the 1914 Potsdamer Platz street scene of prostitutes which came out of the Brücke Museum and was acquired by Ronald Lauder for $38 million. Had that picture appeared at an earlier time, I am sure that Benedict would have had a go.' The collector nods: 'Exactly that.'

Interestingly, Mr Silverman has brought his collection to Richard Nagy for exhibition and, when the time is right, for dispersal. How did he meet the dealer and why has he chosen this route? He explains: 'When I was buying the air rights to my apartment, and building the two additional floors, I needed to raise funds and decided to sell a couple of Egon Schiele watercolours. Richard was recommended to me as a dealer who could be trusted to handle this business and, in fact, he obtained higher prices than I had expected and we had agreed. From the start, it was clear to me that there was a synchronicity of tastes, Richard and I liked the same artists and the same works of art. Ever since I re-entered the art market in 1996, I have asked his advice on pictures and he has made proposals which would fit into my collection.' Evidently, it has been a successful two-way street and Richard has supplied Mr Silverman with most of the key works in the collection.

With just a trace of nostalgia, he adds: 'Richard shaped the collection and I have no doubt that he is the right man to handle its dispersal.'

Has he, I wonder, had any regrets? Later, he will speak of a portrait that Picasso painted of his dead friend, Carlos Casagemas – and which he knows that he should have bought when it came to auction – but his thoughts turn to his tastes and how, on occasions, they have been misunderstood. He indicates Otto Dix's *Selbstbildnis mit Modell (Self-Portrait with Model)*, 1923, which is leaning against a corner wall, briefly ostracized from the collection. The artist is fully clothed but the model is naked. It's a picture that has caused offence but, in his opinion, unfairly. 'I have always taken the position that the naked model holds the power, she's in total control and is completely relaxed in her nudity, while the artist is uptight, he's rigid – he's the one

with the issues, not the model. However, some people do not agree with this view.' Is this another composition in which Mr Silverman might have identified himself? The connection is understood but not voiced.

Mr Silverman, it strikes me, does not entertain regrets. He looks forwards rather than backwards. He has a new mantra, he says, and he quotes Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and a short speech by Brutus: 'There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.'

Fortune has come to Mr Silverman but his charitable work, rather than his business successes or his collection, is, he believes, his major accomplishment. 'For the last twenty years, my wife Jayne and I have supported Reading Rescue (a discipline developed by Dr. Nora Hoover), which trains teachers how to tutor a child who is at risk of not learning how to read. Now we have decided to sell the apartment and the collections and direct the proceeds into a family foundation that will sponsor

childhood education worldwide. The idea to form a foundation came from my wife Jayne and I realized that this was the correct thing to do.' He elucidates: 'I believe that if you educate people they have got a chance. If they cannot read, they have no chance.' Is he thinking of his own childhood, and how he took his chances?

By the same token, he despairs of the recent expansion of the art market and the droves of new collectors or investors who are reshaping its values. 'I hate it! I hate it!… the yachts, the airplanes, the art collection, it's a way of announcing: look at me, I am a rich and important man.'

He adopts a different creed. 'Benedict Silverman is an Old Testament guy: don't advertise your wealth and mind your own business. I prefer to hide my light under a bushel. I am not an extravagant man but a man who has always wanted to be surrounded by art.'

In a firestorm, or if he were to withdraw one work of art from his global dispersal, which would he keep? He doesn't hesitate. 'The Schiele watercolour of the woman with the homunculus. To me, it says everything about the artist. There is no picture of 1910 which says more. Most of the Schieles in the collection are autobiographical, and therefore very personal statements by the artist and without doubt among the artist's best works. They all say with a loud voice, "I am Egon Schiele, this is what I paint, this is who I am."'

Benedict Silverman knows who he is and what tide he is intending to take.

1

Zwerg mit Kerze / Dwarf with a Candle c.1902

Alfred Kubin

How did I come to create such things?… It was one and the same power that led me to dreams and silly pranks in childhood, later to sickness, and finally to art… Fantasy has put its hallmark on my existence, it is fantasy that makes me happy and makes me sad. I recognise it constantly inside and outside me. (Alfred Kubin)[1]

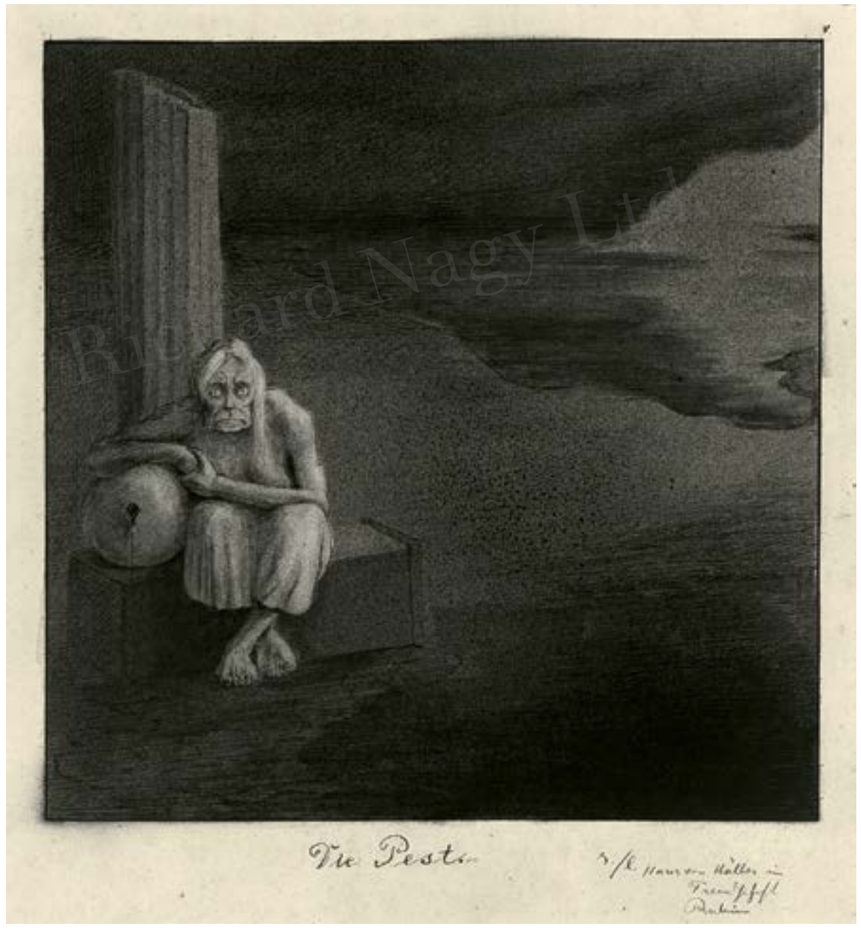
This strange creature creeping, through the darkness under an outsize bowler hat, is one that serves as a proxy self-portrait or fantasy alter ego for Kubin. Especially during this period, he was absorbed by the darkness of his own visions, fearfully attempting to shed light on them. The artist later referred to this figure, in a letter he wrote to the bookseller Reinhard Piper in 1917, as a shy, fantasy assistant able to venture into the dark recesses of his mind and illuminate fantastical visions of another reality. Enclosing a drawing of this same bewhiskered, bowler-hatted creature with a candle in a letter requesting some rare and hard-to-find books from Piper, Kubin wrote: 'I am sending you my dwarf: he is so small that he can fit into any publisher's cupboard and perhaps he will be able to find something for me.'[2]

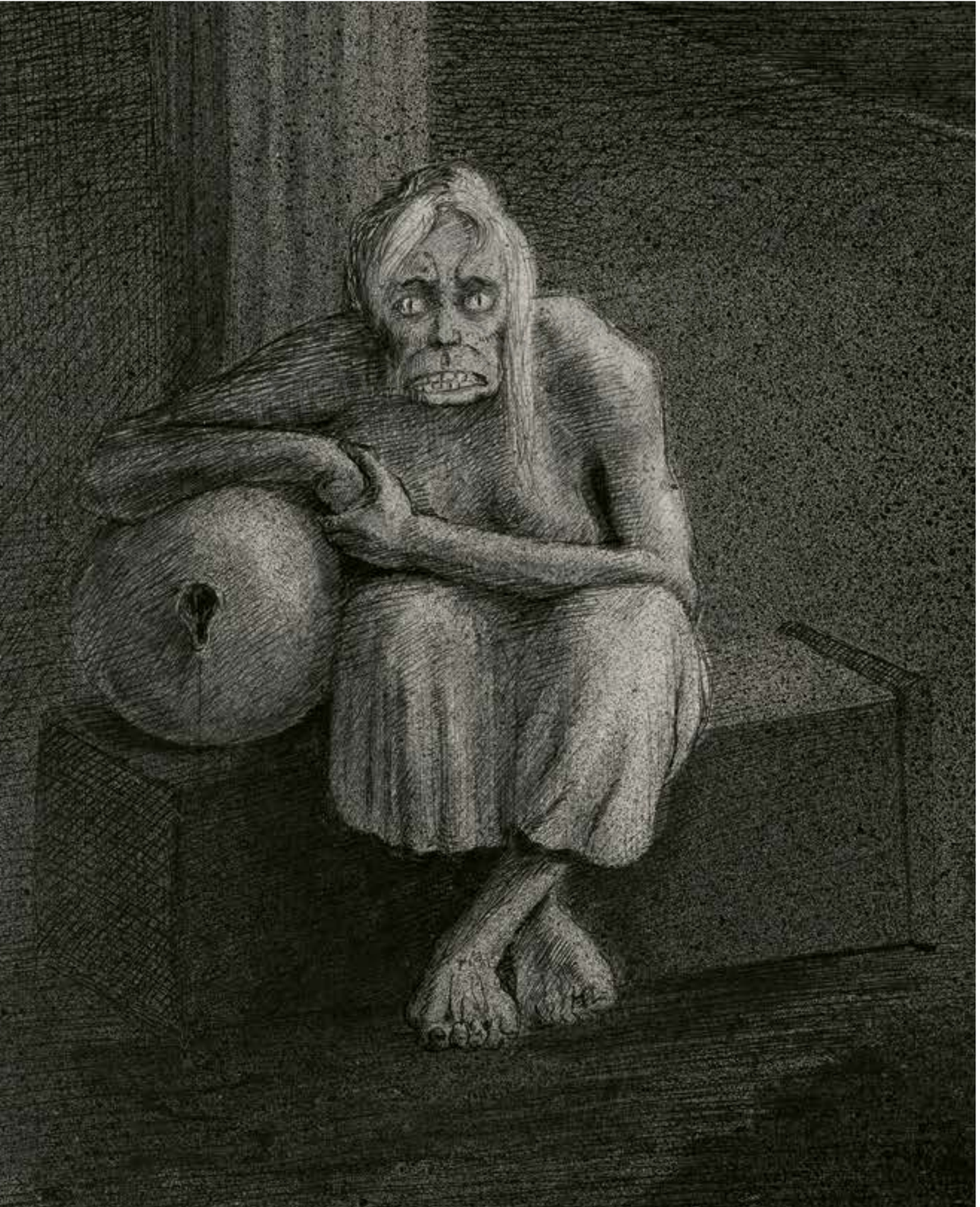
Reminiscent of a creature from Francisco de Goya's *Los Caprichos*, 1799, this 'dwarf' thus functioned for Kubin as a kind of whimsical pathfinder in the murky and troubled realm of his own unconscious. 'My conceptions,' Kubin once said of his creative practice, 'do not follow any aesthetic canon, nor are they caricatures; they escape all formulations, but I know that certain creative forces drive me irresistibly. I do not see the world "just like that", but in moments of strange half-wakefulness, I am astounded to behold its transmutations which are often almost imperceptible, so that in my first stage of awareness they are seldom clearly seen but must be groped for and gradually hunted out.'[3]

RB

1 Alfred Kubin, quoted in *Alfred Kubin: Visions from the Other Side*, exh. cat., Galerie St. Etienne, New York, 1985, unpaginated.
2 Alfred Kubin, letter to Reinhard Piper, 19 October 1917. See *Alfred Kubin / Reinhard Piper, Briefwechsel, 1907–1953*, Munich and Zurich, 2010, no.53, p.77.
3 Alfred Kubin, quoted in A. Horodisch, ed., *Alfred Kubin: Book Illustrator*, New York, 1950, p.15.

2
Die Pest / The Plague c.1902
Alfred Kubin





Ever since I began to think, I came to the bitter, inescapable conclusion that my life is always, at every conscious moment, an essentially painful one. Unpleasant events follow each other like the beads of a rosary changing from uneasiness to the discomfort of unfulfilled desires, to the most terrible bodily pain or desperation, with countless interim stages. Only the fear of the moment of death has kept me alive. (Alfred Kubin)[1]

The subject of *Die Pest* was a common theme in late nineteenth-century Symbolist painting and one that Kubin himself often depicted in a variety of ways. Expressive of both the fragility of mankind and of the awesome, unseen and elemental powers ranged against him, images of the plague proliferated in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century art to such an extent that they have often been interpreted as prophetic of the cataclysm of the Great War, and of the demise of an entire era that this conflict brought about.

For many fin-de-siècle artists, and later for 'apocalyptic' poets and painters such as Georg Heym, Alfred Mombert or Ludwig Meidner, the theme of the plague served a dual purpose. It allowed them to express a collective sense of the vulnerability and fear that, as artists and outsiders in society, they often deeply felt. At the same time, in the depiction of the universal destruction and complete annihilation of society, it was also a subject that allowed the artist's psyche to revel in the awesome power of this unknown terror and to enact revenge fantasies against such an uncaring world.

Kubin depicted the plague on numerous occasions. In one of the first of these works, *Die Epidemie (Epidemic)* of 1900–01, a giant skeletal figure is depicted pouring pestilence from a bag over a village. *Die Seuche (Pestilence)* of 1902, by contrast, depicts a desert panorama littered with corpses, while another *Die Pest (The Plague)* of 1904 shows a caped male figure rushing through a landscape accompanied by an ensuing plague of rats. In this version of *Die Pest,* which

was first illustrated in the magazine *Die Kunst für Alle* in January 1903, one year after Arnold Böcklin's famous 1898 oil painting of the same subject had appeared in this same periodical, Kubin represents the plague as a solitary figure in waiting. A spectre of death in the form of a snake-eyed old crone seated on a fallen ruin and in front of that perennial symbol of mortality, the broken column, Kubin's personification of plague is represented as the polar opposite to that popular nineteenth-century symbol of beauty, purity and creativity, known as 'The Source'. As a comparison with the most famous example of this genre, Jean-Auguste-Domenique Ingres' 1856 painting *The Source* reveals, Kubin has revelled in depicting the sombre opposite to this much-celebrated image of youth, health and beauty. Where the beautiful naked figure of Ingres' maiden stands pouring pure water from an amphora, Kubin's shadowy, crouching hag carries an empty, dried up vessel and is a personification of all that is decrepit and abhorrent.

Reminiscent of other shadowy figures of darkness and evil, Kubin's figure of *Die Pest* reveals the enduring fascination with the spectre of fear and death that had played on the artist's mind ever since his childhood.[2] 'There were all sorts of things that aroused my burning curiosity; for example, corpses,' Kubin recalled of his youth. 'The fisherman… quite often dragged decomposed bodies out of the lake, for there were many careless persons who drowned there. This was the origin of my admitted interest in grisly scenes.'[3]

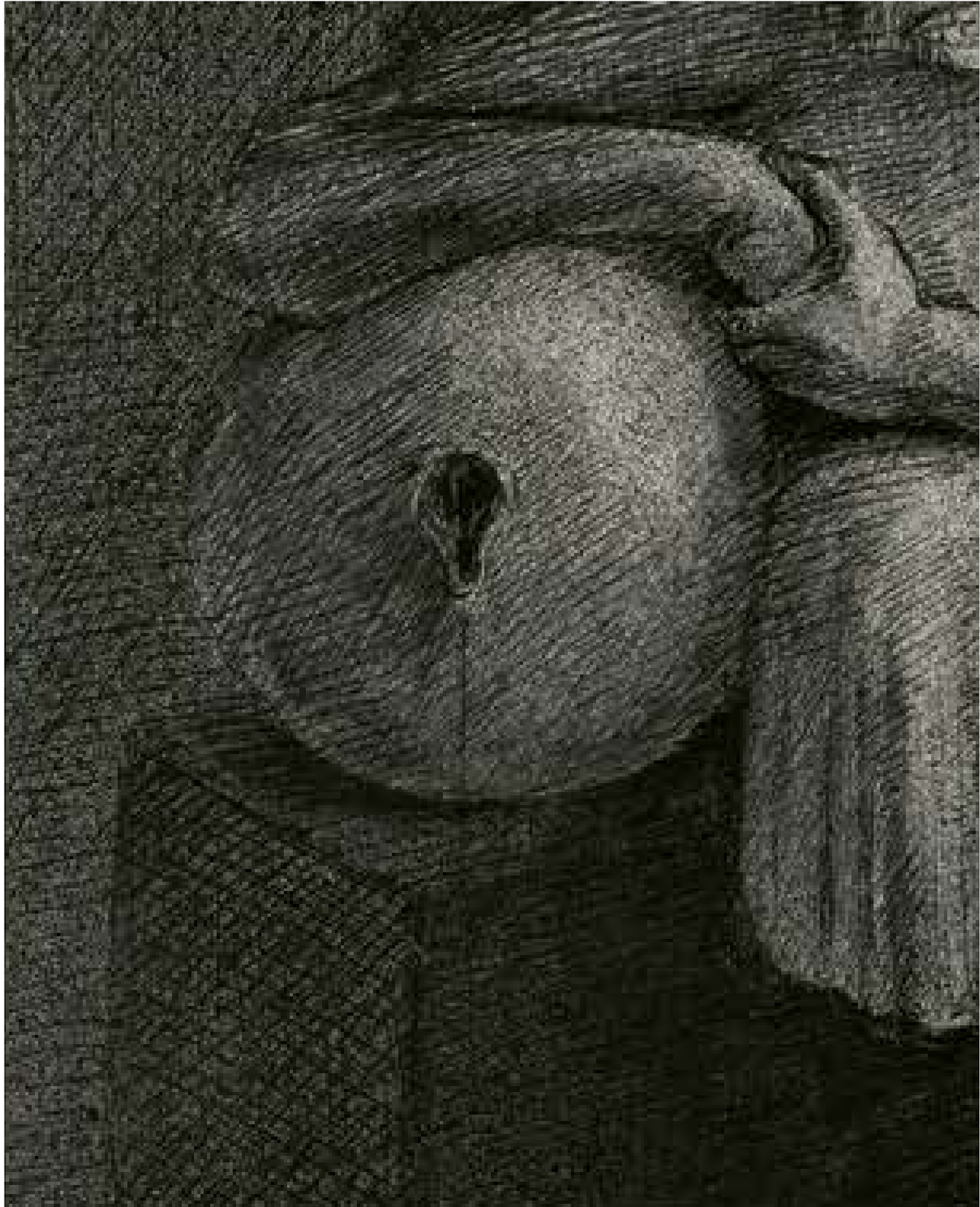
RB

Kubin, *Epidemic* 1900–01

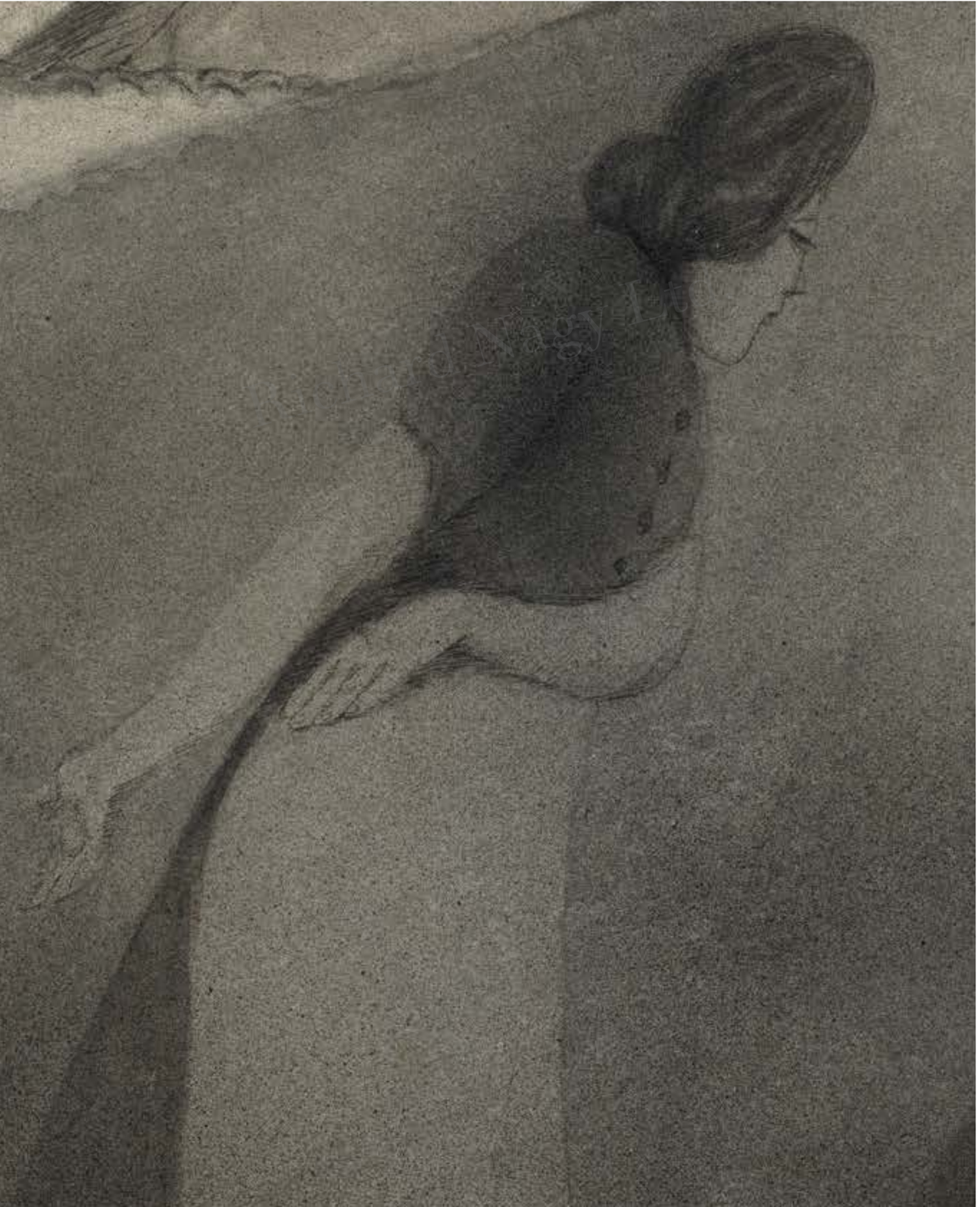
Kubin, *Pestilence* 1902

Kubin, *The Plague* 1904

1 Alfred Kubin, letter to his sister Maria, 20 February 1904, quoted in W. Schmied, *Alfred Kubin*, London, 1969, p.12.
2 See in particular with comparison to this work Theodore Kittlesen's 1896 drawing, *The Plague on the Steps*.
3 Alfred Kubin, quoted in K. A. Schroder, 'Alfred Kubin; or The Cruelty of Images', in A. Hoberg, ed., *Alfred Kubin Drawings 1897–1909*, exh. cat., Neue Galerie, New York, 2008, p.44.



3
Die Flucht / The Flight c.1904
Alfred Kubin



For all of us, whether we know it or not, conceal deep within us the legacy of a dreadful personal past. Former experiences – often going back to the period of fading childhood – are neither past nor dead; no, they give birth anew again and again, leave their mark again on our souls, and establish countless connections with the impressions of later experience. (Alfred Kubin)[1]

A particularly fine example of the screened spray technique that Kubin often applied to many of his early pen and ink drawings to create an eerie twilight atmosphere, *Die Flucht* is a simple, sinister and deeply evocative work articulating the archetypal childhood fear of separation from the mother.

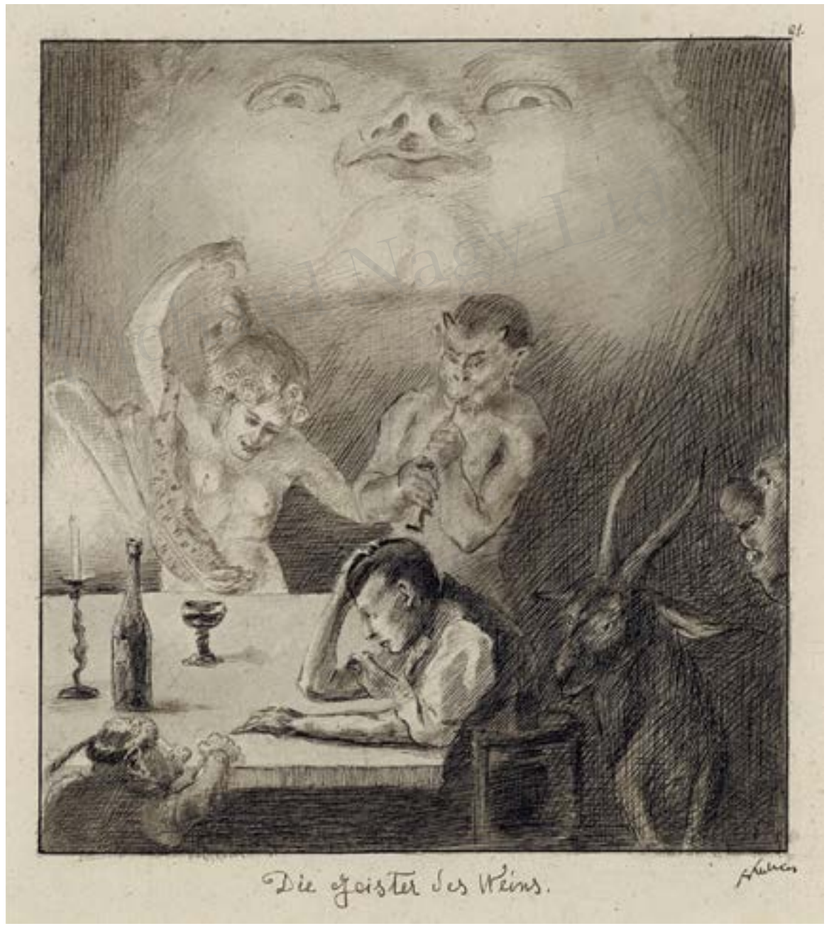
Depicting an infant being carried away by a dark, sinisterly smiling, ghost-faced male figure, this work is centred on the emotive image of a gently illuminated child reaching out for its mother, who appears either powerless or unwilling to help it. Sometimes entitled *Das geraubte Kind (The Stolen Child)*, the subject is that of a child being forcibly taken from its mother either by Death or by another sinister, unknown force personified by the dark figure on whose back it is travelling.[2] Unnatural themes and disturbing images of isolation proliferate in Kubin's work, but this theme of a child's separation from its mother is one that had particular resonance for the artist, being the central and defining theme of his own troubled childhood.

The eldest child of Friedrich and Johanna Kubin, Alfred Kubin was devoted to his mother and deeply resented the disruption to their life together when, after a prolonged absence, his strict and punitive father returned to the family. 'My mother and I had just settled ourselves comfortably in our new home when one fine day this, to me, unwelcome, character broke in upon us… and in my heart I felt only hate, hate, hate toward my father and all men,' Kubin recalled in his autobiography.[3] A few years later, when he was ten, the death of his mother from tuberculosis had a permanent traumatizing effect on Kubin and, along with his continuing fear and dislike of his father, became a primary cause of his neurotic adolescence, triggering the onset of the visions and nightmares from which his art originated. 'You want to take away my fear,' Kubin is known later to have remarked to a priest, 'but fear is actually my (artistic) capital.'[4]

R B

1 Alfred Kubin, 'Zur Eröffnung einer Kubin Austellung', quoted in Alfred Kubin, *Aus meiner Werkstatt* Munich, 1976, p.78.
2 This work bore the title *Das geraubte Kind (The Stolen Child)* when it was sold at Sotheby's London, 29 November 1972.
3 Alfred Kubin, *Autobiography*, trans. Denver Lindley, New York, 1968, p.iv.
4 Alfred Kubin, quoted in P. Werkner, *Austrian Expressionism: The Formative Years*, trans. N. T. Parsons, Palo Alto, 1993, p.215.

4
Die Geister des Weins / The Ghosts of Wine c.1904
Alfred Kubin



In the early years I was subjected to an obscure creative force that continually tormented me with its power, the pictures appeared before my 'inner consciousness' as in a kaleidoscope, altering themselves in a steady stream like the billowing sea … As I contemplated such waves of images I was, of course, in the grip of an alien power (a magic?) and I submitted myself as a human being with complete passivity to these minutes or hours (I never measured their duration), which were like a kind of drunken interlude. (Alfred Kubin)[1]

Taking the intoxicated mind as its theme, *Die Geister des Weins* is an important early work by Kubin, in which the artist gives powerful expression to the rich but tormenting nature of his unique and fascinating visions. Emulating Francisco de Goya's famous aquatint *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 1797–98, Kubin depicts himself slumped at a table in a state of drunken melancholy, surrounded by hallucinatory spectres that have evidently been brought on by the wine he has drunk. Comprising a goat, the god Pan, a dancing naked woman, an ugly fat man who might represent Silenus, and a pig-faced dwarf, they collectively illustrate not only the spirit of wine but also the kind of feverish visions that are well known to have haunted and tormented Kubin throughout his early career, and which – as he himself was only too aware – formed the wellspring from which his extraordinary art arose.

Until he found comparative happiness with his wife Hedwig, whom he married in March 1904, Kubin's troubled childhood and traumatic adolescence were characterized by profound misanthropy and fear. 'I create,' he once said of himself, 'not out of pleasure but in order to forget the entire loathing that I feel for myself and for the world.'[2] The extraordinary visions, nightmares and presentiments of doom that characterize the plethora of predominantly dark and subtly rendered drawings and watercolours that poured out of Kubin between 1899 and 1904 give powerful

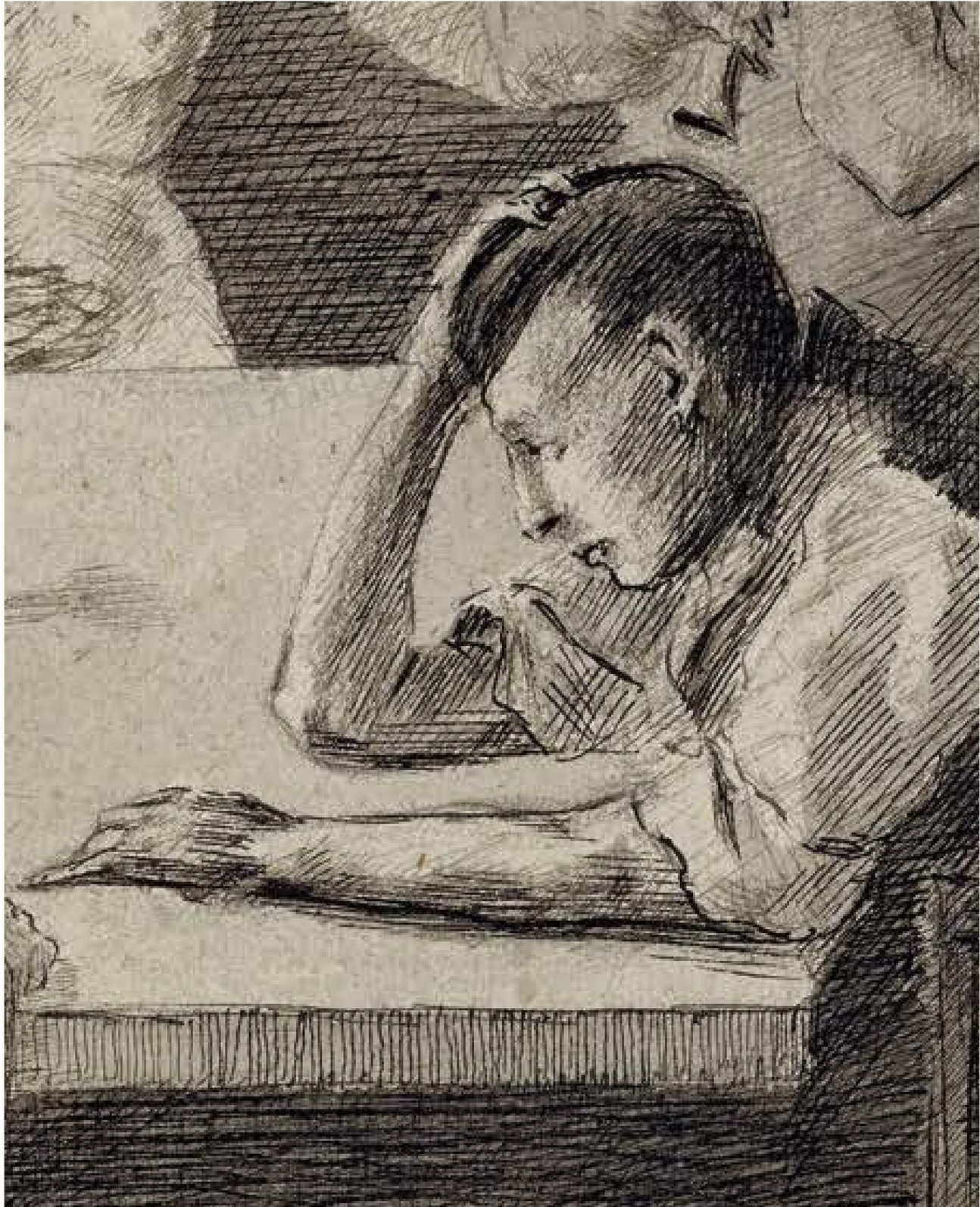
form to the horror and anxiety he experienced. Indeed, so much so that, like all great art, Kubin's work of these years speaks not just of his personal fears; it also provides a profound insight into the time in which it was made and, more specifically, into the dark recesses of the nineteenth-century mind. A pictorial equivalent of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic probing into the neuroses of the modern psyche, the monsters, demons and she-devils of Kubin's haunting, near delirious imagery speak unforgettably of a disturbing twilight world of the mind. As such they appear to catalogue the end of an era.

In artistic terms, Kubin's pictures express the end of the nineteenth-century Symbolist imagination. Kubin's art, as he readily admitted, followed a tradition that ran from Goya's *Los Caprichos*, 1799, to the work of Odilon Redon, Felicien Rops, Edvard Munch and James Ensor. Darker, more neurotic and disturbing in its visionary nature than that of such forebears, Kubin's uniquely melancholic and often terrifying imagery came to life through a revelatory encounter the artist had in Munich on seeing Max Klinger's dream-like cycle of engravings entitled *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhs (Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove)* of 1882. 'Here,' as Kubin famously recalled in his autobiography, 'a whole new art was thrown open to me, which offered free play for the imaginative expression of every conceivable world of feeling. Before putting the engravings away I swore that I would dedicate my life to the creation of similar works.'[3]

RB

Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* 1797–98

1 Alfred Kubin, quoted in P. Werkner, *Austrian Expressionism: The Formative Years*, trans. N. T. Parsons, Palo Alto, 1993, p.195.
2 Alfred Kubin, quoted in P. Werkner, ibid., p.215.
3 Alfred Kubin, *Autobiography*, trans. Denver Lindley, New York, 1968, p.xxii.



5
Die Sphinx / The Sphinx c.1905
Alfred Kubin

Above all, I now tried to think more normally about my past destiny, to accept as inevitable that catastrophe which still seemed so painful… Certainly, I was now no longer capable of such emotional flights… But my marriage had brought me so much new happiness that I soon recovered the incentive to work. I now produced a series of harmoniously executed drawings in delicately graduated tones. Whereas before I restricted myself to grey and closely related bluish, brownish, and greenish shades, now I started to include yellow, green, orange, various shades of red and so on in my range. (Alfred Kubin)[1]

As an ancient and mysterious creature epitomizing the femme fatale, the sphinx is a powerful mythological archetype that held particular appeal for many nineteenth-century Symbolist artists, Kubin among them. A frequent subject in the art of Felicien Rops, Fernand Khnopff and Franz von Stuck, for example, this legendary, man-devouring female – part-woman, part-lion – encapsulated much of the fascination and fear that men felt towards the image of an empowered female in the late nineteenth century.

In addition to this, Kubin had been mesmerized by both the idea and image of the hybrid, ever since a hallucinatory experience in a variety theatre following his encounter with the non-rational images of Klinger's print cycle *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhs (Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove)* of 1882. Between 1898 and 1904 Kubin's art abounds with visionary images of hybrid creatures and other mutations often disturbingly mixing the human and the animal.

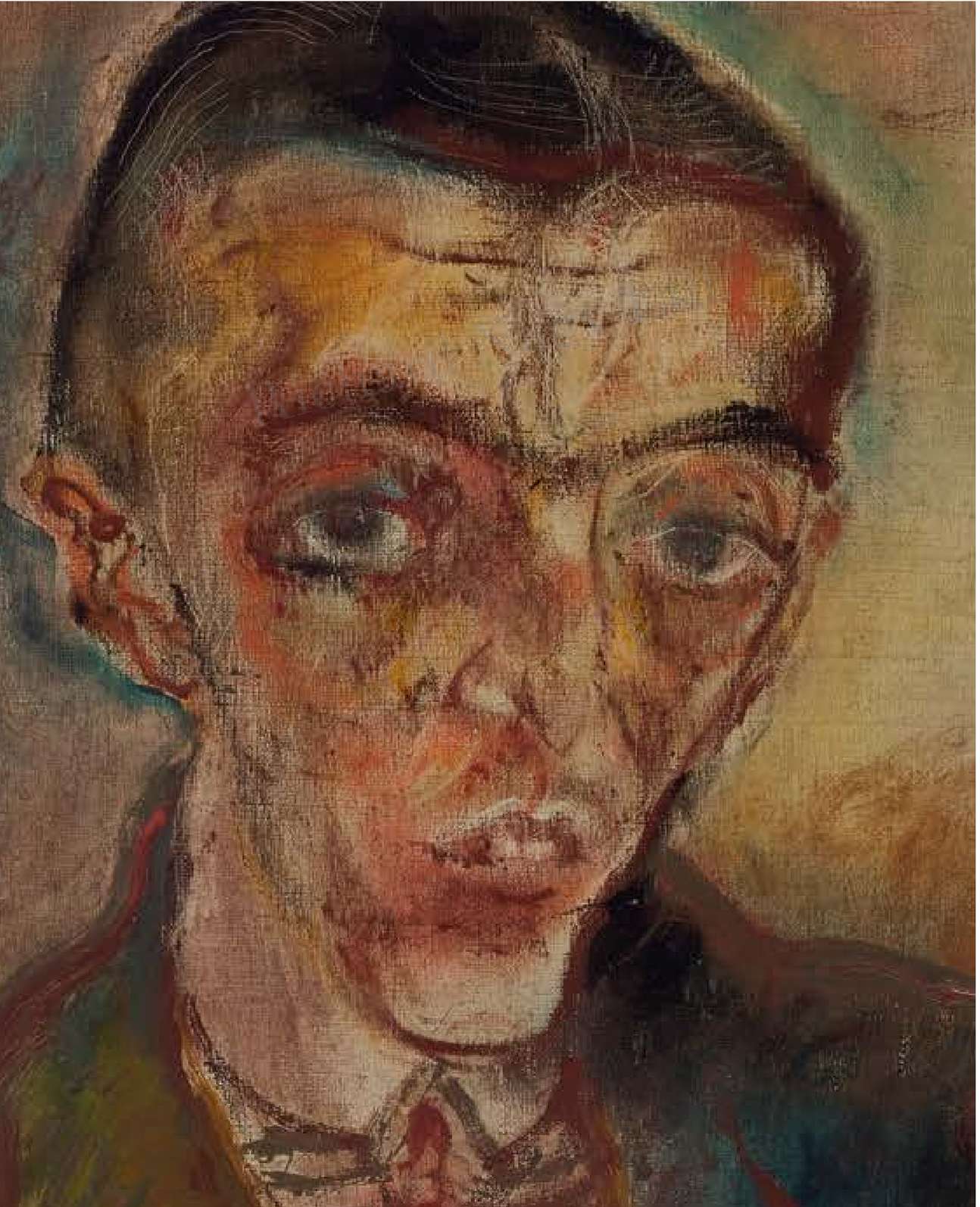
In particular, images of demonic women – so often a symbol of life and procreation – predominate in Kubin's work as sinister symbols of abomination and death. In a disturbing but for Kubin typical reversing of the norm, his work often directly equates the fertility and life-giving power of women with their opposites, destruction and death. This recalls the morbid views expressed in Otto Weininger's misogynistic book *Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character)* of 1903: 'All that is born of woman must die.' Weininger pointedly wrote: 'Reproduction, birth, and death are indissolubly linked.'[2] Pregnancy in particular is presented in Kubin's work as a horrific, almost anti-natural abomination. Deriving perhaps from his own traumatic personal experience when, as a boy aged eleven, he had been seduced and sexually abused by a pregnant relative, Kubin expressed a particular revulsion at the idea of bodily procreation.

A timelessly fascinating fusion of womanly beauty and intelligence with the physical prowess and power of the lion, the sphinx is an enduring icon that often appears in European fin-de-siècle art as a symbol of malevolent feminine power. But in this work – executed after Kubin's marriage to Hedwig Gründler in March 1904, when the darkness and severity of his earlier visions had to some extent mellowed and he began to use warmer and brighter colours in his work – Kubin presents a distinctly less threatening and more exotic image of the mythical creature than many of his Symbolist forebears. Shown reclining against a stage-set-like background and framed, rather domestically, by curtains, *Die Sphinx* seems more like a figure from a cabinet of curiosities on display in a circus side show than an image from a nightmare. Seemingly imprisoned within the trappings of power, with its Egyptian hair style, strange lace-frilled collar and heavy ermine cloak reminiscent of a lord's or cardinal's robes, Kubin's sphinx is an inscrutable, uneasy and pained-looking creature.

R B

1 Alfred Kubin, *Aus meinem Leben*, Munich, 1923, p.xxxiv.
2 Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, New York, 1906, p.150. Kubin is known to have once described Weininger as 'the greatest man of the century'.

6
Conte Verona / Count Verona 1910
Oskar Kokoschka



When I paint a portrait, I am not concerned with the externals of a person – the signs of his clerical or secular eminence, or his social origins… I (try) to intuit from the face, from its play of expressions, and from gestures, the truth about a particular person, and to recreate in my own pictorial language the distillation of a living being that would survive in memory… (Oskar Kokoschka)[1]

Among the most moving, incisive and disturbing of all twentieth-century portraits, Kokoschka's early paintings are powerful, psychologically probing works that seem to catalogue an entire culture in decline. Echoing in places the mystery and exaggerated drama of some of Vincent van Gogh's, and later Ludwig Meidner's, tormented self-portraits, these strange, haunting exposures of a fragile, visceral and ailing humanity – manifesting itself through an electrified painterly pattern of nerve-endings pulsating under the outer skin of surface appearance – are among the very first examples of a truly Expressionistic style of portraiture. They are eerie, disturbing and sometimes even prophetic paintings that appear to, and sometimes even do, depict the way Kokoschka's sitters were to look twenty years later or after a debilitating illness.[2]

Today, they are highly regarded for the ferocity of their vision, the amazing acuteness of their perception and their apparent ability to uncover a disturbing existential truth about the nature of modern man. But when they were first exhibited, these works gave such a shocking, unwelcome and disturbing insight into their time that they caused little but scandal, uproar and dissent.

Painted between January and February 1910, *Conte Verona* was first exhibited at Paul Cassirer's Gallery in Berlin in June of that year and later included in Kokoschka's Hagenbund exhibition in Vienna, where it was among several works viciously attacked by local critics as being 'depraved' and one of a series of 'massacres in paint', 'disgusting plague sores', or 'puddles of foul stink'. The painting is a portrait of a small and little-known Italian aristocrat, Count Verona, and belongs to a series of hauntingly memorable portrait paintings that Kokoschka made of tuberculosis patients staying in the Lungensanatorium Mont Blanc in Leysin near Lake Geneva, in the winter of 1909–10.

At the invitation of his good friend and tireless supporter, the architect Adolf Loos, Kokoschka had been invited to Leysin to accompany Loos' companion, the English dancer Bessie Bruce, during her stay and treatment for tuberculosis

at the sanatorium. 'I occupied my attic in the sanatorium at Leysin for quite a while,' Kokoschka wrote in his autobiography. 'It was a long, severe winter. Loos visited me from Vienna only rarely. Some of the patients sat for me, talked into it by Bessie Loos (sic). They were like shrivelled plants, for whom even the Alpine sunshine could not do much. They set little store by my painting: to them it was a minor distraction in a succession of identical days spent awaiting a cure – or the end.'[3] 'Yellowing portraits hung on the walls,' Kokoschka recalled, while the atmosphere was 'quiet, and sad'. Among this strange international gathering of sickly, but also sometimes hypochondriac, aristocrats who populated the *Magic Mountain*-like retreat at Leysin, was Count Verona – 'a small Italian', described by Kokoschka as having a 'caved-in face coming to a point at the chin' and being 'a passionate ice skater (who) often spat blood'.[4]

Along with the Duke de Montesquiou-Fezensac and his wife, and Bessie Bruce, whom Kokoschka also painted at this time, *Conte Verona* is one of the extraordinary series of near visionary portraits that Kokoschka made of patients at the sanatorium in which his subjects were rendered almost like spectres or shadowy human presences manifesting themselves in a strange, dim half-light. This is a quality particularly true of the portrait of the Count of Verona, where the yellowing light of the background appears to actually radiate through the figure in a way that seems to hint at a spectral form and, perhaps also, his apparent dwindling material presence on the Earth.

Exuding shades of Dostoyevsky's gothic graveyard tale *Bobok* and more notably perhaps Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* – a novel based on Mann's own experience of the sanatorium in Davos in 1912 and for which this painting could well serve as an illustration – *Conte Verona* is a powerful and moving portrayal of a clearly tubercular patient nobly clinging to his fading dignity. As in Kokoschka's most famous painting of this period, his portrait of Auguste Forel, the artist depicts his sitter like some visionary presence. Perhaps drawing on the example of a little-known nineteenth-century Viennese painter, Anton Romako, Kokoschka in both these portraits depicts the image of his sitters like a pictorial memory materializing itself amidst a near mystical haze.[5] Like the *Saint Veronica*, which he had painted in 1909, the extraordinary images of Count Verona and Auguste Forel seem to have magically imprinted themselves as if by some strange chemical process onto the flat, raw and empty surface of his canvas.

In *Conte Verona*, Kokoschka has heightened this sense of the image being a crystallized, memory-like vision by impregnating the mysterious, hazy and empty background to the figure with a sequence of vague stains, splodges and

Kokoschka, *The Duke de Montesquiou-Fezensac* 1910

Kokoschka, *Bessie Bruce* 1910

Kokoschka, *Auguste Forel* 1910

smears appended also with strange, indecipherable, cipher-like marks and signs, including, in one place, a symbolically appropriate image recalling a bloodstained hand-print. The tremulous features of the Count himself have been rendered through another extraordinary array of delicate smears, stains and scratches worked by both hand and all parts of the artist's brush. As Jens Friedrich recalled, watching Kokoschka paint around this time, the artist had a unique working practice using 'the palm of his left hand as a palette to mix colours' and painting often 'with the fingers of his right hand'. To produce a highlight he would often scratch 'the paint off with his little finger to reveal the white priming of the canvas', as he appears to have done here, perhaps with the hard end of his brush, to establish the thin strands of Count Verona's very carefully parted hair. Asked why he did not paint 'with brushes like other people', Kokoschka replied: 'Look, the path from the brain, down the arm, and then down a brush as well is much too long. If I could, I'd paint with my nose.'[6]

The combination of this direct, impulsive, highly intuitive and seemingly electrically charged way of painting with Kokoschka's famous and almost psychic ability to divine and render the key idiosyncratic features of his sitters led to a startlingly psychological style of portraiture – one that Adolf Loos, among others, asserted was the product of the artist's 'X-ray vision'. The mysterious ability of X-rays to expose a hitherto unseen aspect of reality or the hidden structure of a person or object was very much a part of the popular imagination at this time.[7] Kokoschka's seemingly similar ability to penetrate surface reality in his painting and reveal the 'inner' nature of his subjects was thought of by many, including the artist himself, as an essentially mystical talent. Unlike some critics, who referred disparagingly to his 'Koko-Rays', for Kokoschka his apparent 'second sight' was both inherited from his mother and derived from his own deliberately visionary approach to seeing.

'Consciousness,' Kokoschka wrote in the most important statement on his art of this time, 'is a sea ringed about with visions… Without intent I draw from the outside world the semblance of things, but in this way I myself become part of the world's imaginings. Thus in everything, imagination is simply that which is natural. It is nature, vision, life.'[8] With its warm yellowing candlelight glow and the ghostly apparition-like appearance of its sickly but conscientious sitter, *Conte Verona* is a haunting work that encapsulates Kokoschka's unique medium-like approach to painting and portraiture in a powerful and memorable way.

RB

1 Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life*, London, 1974, pp.33–35.
2 Kokoschka's *Portrait of Auguste Forel*, for example, famously showed the aging professor of zoology as if he had suffered a stroke, in exactly the place where he was indeed to be affected by a stroke not long after he sat for Kokoschka. This occurrence, along with other Kokoschka portraits that presented their sitters as they themselves were to admit they later looked, led to the legend of Kokoschka having a kind of 'second sight' or X-ray vision. Adolf Loos famously said of his portrait by Kokoschka that it was 'more like me than I am'.
3 Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life*, op. cit., p.51.
4 Oskar Kokoschka, ibid. and Frank Whitford, *Oskar Kokoschka: A Life*, London, 1986, p.54.
5 Kokoschka may have come to know Romako's work through one of his earliest and most important patrons, Oskar Reichel, who also owned the largest collection of Romako's work in Vienna.
6 Jens Friedrich, 'Ein Vagabundleben, Erinnerungen', quoted in *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits from Vienna and Berlin*, exh. cat. New York, 2002, p.91.
7 As Tobias G. Natter has pointed out, 'The X-ray and its various uses undermined some basic certainties about perception and physics, particularly with regard to the impenetrability of solids. The protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg (The Magic Mountain)*, Hans Castorp, falls in love with a Russian fellow patient of the sanatorium in Davos Switzerland that forms the setting of the novel. He succeeds in obtaining an X-ray image of this woman and gazes at it devoutly in his room. The portraits Kokoschka painted during his own stay in a sanatorium, at Leysin, appear like a visual equivalent of Mann's description of the morbid atmosphere at the Davos institution.' See Tobias G. Natter, 'Portraits of Characters, Not Portraits of Faces: An introduction to Kokoschka's Early Portraits', in *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits*, exh. cat., New York, 2002, p.93.
8 Oskar Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of Visions', 1912, quoted in *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits from Vienna and Berlin*, exh. cat., New York, 2002, p.236.

7
Ria Munk 1 1912
Gustav Klimt

At midday yesterday, at her apartment in Währing, Marie M., aged 24 daughter of the financier Alexander Munk, shot herself in the left side with a bullet from a 5mm caliber revolver. The emergency services were called, but the inspector could only confirm that the death had taken place. (Wiener Fremdenblatt, 29 December 1911)[1]

Ria Munk I is the first of what are now believed to be three posthumous portraits of Maria (known as 'Ria') Munk that Klimt painted between 1912 and 1918. It is a radiant and poignant deathbed portrait of an attractive young Viennese woman lying, like Shakespeare's Juliet or Ophelia, in peaceful but lifeless repose surrounded by flowers. Indeed, the painting draws a direct parallel between these tragic heroines and the twenty-four-year-old daughter of a rich Viennese industrialist, who, out of love, had shot herself through the heart in December 1911.

Painted in 1912, *Ria Munk I* is the finest of several deathbed portraits that Klimt made periodically throughout his career. These included an exquisite fictitious portrait of Shakespeare's Juliet in 1885, a now destroyed portrait of Emile Flöge's sister Pauline, and a moving depiction of Klimt's own infant son, Otto. The cult of the death mask and the more elaborate deathbed portrait was fairly common in fin-de-siècle Vienna. Reflecting the Viennese obsession with Eros and Thanatos, it was a fashion that also conveyed what Stefan Zweig described as the Viennese citizen's pervasive love of theatre and spectacle that extended even into death. 'In Vienna,' wrote Zweig in his fascinating memoirs of this period, 'even funerals found enthusiastic audiences and it was the ambition of every true Viennese to have a lovely corpse, with a majestic procession and many followers; even his death converted the genuine Viennese into a spectacle for others. In this receptivity for all that was colourful, festive and resounding, in this pleasure in the theatrical, whether it was on the stage or in reality, both as theatre and as a mirror of life, the whole city was at one.'[2]

Ria Munk I is, however, more than a simple deathbed portrait aimed at recording a likeness of the young woman's youthful features for posterity. Klimt is thought to have worked from photographs of Ria in his creation of this and his other pictures of her; but, like John Everett Millais in his Pre-Raphaelite portrait of Ophelia, Klimt has alluded to the romantic nature of the tragedy by setting Ria's features amidst a garland of flowers. Taking the square format that Klimt favoured for his landscapes, the artist has divided the canvas into three distinct areas: a foreground of roses, the reclining figure of Ria herself, and an upper strip of deep, resonant and radiant blue, often indicative in his art of death and the afterlife.[3] Using flowers to allude to both Ria's youth cut short and to the tragic, deeply romantic story of her death, this portrait presents a near-Symbolist vision of a real, contemporary tragedy.

Ria Munk was the daughter of the wealthy Viennese businessman, financier and entrepreneur Alexander Munk and his wife Aranka Pulitzer Munk. Daughter to Charlotte Pulitzer of the newspaper family, Aranka Munk was also the sister of Klimt's most important patron, Serena Lederer, who, together with her husband August, owned the largest collection of his work. As the most sought-after portrait painter in Vienna, Klimt had painted both Serena and her mother Charlotte. He had also painted the Munk family alongside Serena Lederer and the Pulitzers in their theatre box in his 1887–88 painting of the auditorium of the old Burgtheater. Klimt therefore may well have known Ria long before the circumstances of her suicide came to colour his portraits of her.

Following Ria's death, it was evidently the ambition of the Munk family for their daughter to take her place amongst the celebrated pantheon of society women painted by Klimt. It is not known if it was they, or perhaps Serena Lederer, who commissioned this first portrait of their daughter on her deathbed. In any event, the deathbed scene appears to have proved insufficient and perhaps too morbid a memorial for the family, as Klimt was subsequently asked to work on a second full-length standing portrait of Ria, painted as if from life. Klimt is known to have had difficulty with this second painting, remarking that he 'couldn't make it a likeness'. He is believed to have eventually altered the painting into its present, more erotic, bare-breasted form as *Die Tänzerin (The Dancer)* or *Ria Munk II* – probably a portrait of Johanna Jusl, a dancer with the Vienna Hofoper.[4] Later still, in 1917, Klimt began what is widely believed to be a third portrait of Ria entitled *Frauenbildnis (Portrait of a Woman)* or *Ria Munk III*, in which, according to leading Klimt scholar Dr. Marian Bisanz-Prakken, he articulated the entire story of her tragic love affair and suicide using symbols embedded in the elaborate decorative and floral background of the painting.[5] This picture, however, remained unfinished at the time of Klimt's own death in 1918.

At noon on 28 December 1911, Ria Munk had taken her own life by shooting herself through the heart after falling out with her lover, the writer Hans Heinz Ewers. The tragedy was recorded in the diary of the Viennese writer Arthur Schnitzler on New Year's Day 1912, but it caused little scandal. Like duelling, suicide was not an uncommon way out of an impasse in matters of love or honour in turn-of-the-century Vienna. The most celebrated example of this was in 1889, when the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Crown Prince Rudolf, along with his lover, Baroness Maria Vetsera, committed suicide together in the Imperial hunting lodge at Mayerling. There were many other prominent suicides among leading Viennese families during this period.[6]

Ria Munk had met Hans Heinz Ewers in April 1911; that summer, while visiting the isle of Brioni in Istria, they had become engaged. From the beginning the relationship between the two was an unequal one. Ria was a well-brought-up Jewish woman of twenty-four, while Ewers was a thirty-nine-year-old married man, well established as a writer and on the point of publishing what would prove to be his most popular and scandalous novel, *Alraune*. Ria dreamed of intellectual stimulation and of liberation from a repressive home life, while Ewers seems to have enjoyed the idea of life with Ria as an independent man of means. It seems that Ria's mother Aranka supported her daughter in this unconventional relationship, even promising Ewers a dowry, while her father, Alexander, did not approve of the liaison. Ria herself appears

Klimt, *The Dancer (Ria Munk II)* 1916

Klimt, *Portrait of a Woman (Ria Munk III)* 1917

to have seen in Ewers the prospect of an escape from a family life that she once described as 'deadly boring'. 'I have no desire to read at the moment,' she wrote wittily in 1910. 'I am so saturated with indolence and boredom, like a wet sponge that is no longer able to absorb any more water.'[7]

Constantly seeking intellectual challenges, Ria avidly attended university lectures, studying under Laurenz Müllner, a tutor of philosophy. It was Müllner's unexpected death in November 1911 that first plunged Ria into a psychological crisis, which overcame her completely in December when Ewers broke off their engagement. Although the precise reasons for the break are unknown, Ewers seems to have feared commitment and Ria seems to have killed herself because of a broken heart. Certainly Aranka Munk is known to have lamented after her daughter's suicide, 'My sacred and good child has died for her great love.'[8]

Aranka also showed some concern that Ria's suicide might become conflated in the public imagination with the salacious material in Ewers' recently published story *Alraune*. *Alraune* was a horror story, which, following the legend that the mandrake plant is born from the semen of hanged men, describes how a prostitute was artificially inseminated with the semen of an executed murderer by a wayward professor of genetics. The prostitute subsequently gives birth to an amoral daughter – the 'Alraune' of the title – who grows up to become a femme fatale. When she discovers her lineage Alraune exacts bitter revenge upon the professor. In her essay on Klimt's painting *Frauenbildnis (Ria Munk III)*, Bisanz-Prakken has argued how the shadow that Ewers and *Alraune* cast over Ria Munk's life and her very public death can be read in the symbolism of the flowers and other details of the elaborate backdrop that Klimt designed for this final painting of Ria.

With regard to Klimt's first painting, *Ria Munk I*, another fiction by Ewers – the play entitled *The Lady of Shalott*, which Ewers wrote soon after Klimt's death in 1919 and which he dedicated 'to the memory of M.M. (Maria Munk) and, in life, to A.D.G.' (Adele Guggenheim Lewisohn) – is of particular interest. This play, which throws into stark contrast the personae of a painter, an 'irresponsible poet' and a dead bride, includes a poignant scene conflating the three characters that recalls Klimt's first portrait of Ria, in which the painter draws a portrait of the dead bride while the poet is seen scattering roses over her dead body. A favourite of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, *The Lady of Shalott* was, like Ophelia, Juliet or Tosca, another famous tragic heroine. Like all these heroines and Ria Munk herself, she was ultimately most renowned for her beauty in death.

RB

Millais, *Ophelia* 1852

1 Extract from the Viennese daily newspaper *Wiener Fremdenblatt*.
2 Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, London, 1943, p.18.
3 See *Gustav Klimt, Modernism in the Making* exh. cat., Ottowa, 2001, p.127.
4 Gustav Klimt, postcard to Emilie Flöge, 1913, quoted in *Gustav Klimt, Modernism in the Making*, exh. cat., Ottowa, 2001, p.223.
5 See Marian Bisanz-Prakken, 'Ria Munk III von Gustav Klimt. Ein posthumes Bildnis neu betrachtet' in *Parnassus*, March, 2009, pp.54–59.
6 For example, John Collins has noted that 'of the seven siblings of Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, son of Klimt's patron Karl Wittgenstein, three were lost to suicide'. *Gustav Klimt, Modernism in the Making*, exh. cat., Ottowa, 2001, p.127. See also Arthur Schnitzler's novel, *Fräulein Else*, 1924.
7 Ria Munk, quoted in Sophie Lille, 'Das kurze Leben der Maria Munk. Ein Porträt der Moderne von Gustav Klimt wird restituiert', *Parnassus*, March, 2009, pp.60–62.
8 Aranka Munk, quoted in ibid., pp.60–62.

8
Stehender Knabe / Standing Boy 1910
Egon Schiele

I, Eternal Child, always watched the passage of the rutting people… I listened and watched and wanted to hear them, see into them, strongly and more strongly.
(Egon Schiele)[1]

This young ragamuffin, standing with his hands in his pockets and confronting the viewer with a direct and seemingly unselfconscious gaze, is one of the first of a series of portraits of street children that Schiele began to make in the spring and summer of 1910.

Over the next two years, up until the scandal in Neulengbach when Schiele was arrested and convicted on a charge of corrupting a minor and effectively compelled to stop using child models, the artist was persistently fascinated with drawing and painting working-class children. As his friend, patron and champion Arthur Roessler wrote in his biography of the artist, it was the unique insight these often dirty, malnourished and prematurely aged street children gave into the decaying underside of Austrian life that ultimately fascinated and intrigued Schiele. In the faces, bodies, clothes and attitudes of these 'urchins', Schiele discerned the perpetual and simultaneous processes of growth and decay, life and death, already at work amidst the newness, innocence and vitality of their youth and, in this strange mixture, also something perhaps of the unique autumnal atmosphere of decadence and decay in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. 'For months on end,' Roessler recalled, Schiele 'was fascinated by the havoc wrought by the sordid sufferings to which these – in themselves – innocent creatures are exposed. He wondered at the curious changes in the skin, with watery blood and polluted juices trickling sluggishly through its slack vessels; the light-shy green eyes behind the red inflamed lids, the scrofulous wrists and finger joints, the mucus dribbling mouths – and the souls inside these sordid vessels'.[2]

Little more than an adolescent himself, Schiele, at twenty years old, seems to have had an extremely close rapport with the children who modelled for him. Always a fierce observer of the inner nature and passions of man and their manifestation in the poise and posture of the body, Schiele's

portraits often seem to capture the outward physical expression of his subjects' inner psyche. This is an important aspect of his art that is perhaps nowhere better revealed than in his unique and often moving portraits of adolescents and children.

In particular, it was the raw openness of these children's natures and the unaffected and uninhibited way in which they moved and behaved that most fascinated Schiele; he captured the characteristic and often charming idiosyncrasies of these miniature adults' attitudes and behaviour by combining his sharp powers of observation with the unerring magic of his line.

To encourage and even prompt such unselfconscious behaviour in his young sitters, Schiele deliberately set up an extremely relaxed atmosphere in his studio, allowing the children to do more or less as they pleased, often – and later with disastrous consequences in Neulengbach – without the knowledge or approval of their absent parents. As his friend Paris von Gütersloh recalled of Schiele's studio at this time, the comparatively liberal and bohemian atmosphere was welcomed by the children: 'there were always two or three smaller or larger girls; girls from the neighbourhood, from the street, solicited in nearby Schönbrunn Park, some ugly, some attractive, some washed, but also some unwashed. They sat around doing nothing… Well, they slept, recovered from parental beatings, lolled about lazily (which they were not allowed to do at home), combed… their closely cropped or tangled hair, pulled their skirts up or down, tied or untied their shoelaces. And all this they did – if one can call that doing something – because they were left to themselves like animals in a comfortable cage, or so they perceived it…They feared nothing from the paper that lay next to Schiele on the sofa, and the young man was always playing with the pencil or the brush… Suddenly, although he didn't appear to have been paying attention at all, he would say very softly… "stop!" And now, as if under a spell of his magic, they froze as they were – lying, standing, kneeling, relaxing, tying or untying, pulling down or up, combing themselves or scratching themselves – as though they had been banished to timelessness or covered with lava, and then in a twinkling, brought back to life. That is the immortal moment in which the transitory is transformed into the eternity of art.'[3]

Stehender Knabe is almost certainly one of a series of portraits of young boys that Schiele made shortly after his arrival in Krumau (now Cesky Krumlov) in the summer of 1910. Schiele had retreated to this rural riverside town where his mother had been born in order to escape the dark and repressive urban atmosphere of Vienna. He did not seek out his mother's relatives however, but kept clear of any such

Schiele, *Young Boy* 1910

Schiele, *Young Boy* 1910

obligations by setting himself up in private accommodation through the help of a local schoolboy, who had evidently come to idolize the young artist.

Immediately after he set to work in Krumau, Schiele's style underwent a significant change; in a number of portraits of local children executed on brown wrapping paper, of which *Stehender Knabe* appears to be one, the artist began to work with a more muted, sombre and autumnal range of colours indicative of the atmosphere of melancholy and decay he associated with Krumau. This strangely self-assured and almost sensually precocious young boy, executed in a combination of charcoal and a black watercolour wash, is a powerful example of the new anti-classical naturalism and gritty realism that Schiele attempted to invest his work with at the time. Set deliberately off-centre as if to heighten the bleak emptiness of the brown paper page, the boy stands in a pose that has all the appearance of spontaneity and naturalness, but which was probably dictated by Schiele in order to assure these very qualities. This earthy young figure asserts himself as the absolute antithesis of the colourful beau monde of the Viennese salon and the sumptuous paeans to 'beauty' that Gustav Klimt portrayed in his society portraits. As Schiele himself observed of his work at this time, 'I went by way of Klimt till March. Today I believe, I am his very opposite.'[4]

RB

1 Egon Schiele, letter to Josef Czermak, 1910, quoted in R. Steiner, *Egon Schiele*, Cologne, 2004, p.30.
2 Arthur Roessler, 'Egon Schiele' *Bildende Kunst*, vol.1, no.3, 1911, p.114.
3 Paris von Gütersloh cited in *Gustav Klimt – Egon Schiele: Zum Gedächtnis ihres Todes vor 50 Jahren*, exh. cat., Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, 1968.
4 Egon Schiele, letter to Josef Czermak, 1910, quoted in R. Steiner, *Egon Schiele, The Midnight Soul of the Artist*, Cologne, 2004, p.30.

Schiele, *Young Boy* 1910

Schiele, *Three Young Boys* 1910

9
Frau mit Homunkulus / Woman with Homunculus 1910
Egon Schiele

My mother is a very strange woman. She doesn't understand me in the least and doesn't love me much either. If she had either love or understanding she would be prepared to make sacrifices. (Egon Schiele)[1]

Painted in the last months of 1910, this important and well-known image of a semi-nude young girl looking seductively over her shoulder at the viewer, while also turning away from a strange-looking, pleading and grasping creature, is a magical work that encapsulates in naked human form one of the key enduring themes of Schiele's art. Highly erotic and yet also slightly disturbing in the way in which the elegant and sensual forms of a young girl enjoying the first flush of sexual maturity are set directly against the darker, awkward and fumbling forms of a needy and even perhaps malformed infant, it is a fascinating exercise in contrasts. It is one that seems to literally embody much of the sinister and erotic atmosphere of fin-de-siècle Vienna, through its powerful articulation of life and the human body as a kind of battleground constantly being fought over by the elemental forces of Sex, Procreation and Death.

Schiele's feelings towards motherhood were extremely complex, and for him, sexual impulse and the creation of life was haunted by its ghostly corollary, death. Although he believed, much like his elder influences Gustav Klimt and Evard Munch, that sexuality was the primal force of all existence, he certainly felt that pleasure came with a sting. His father, having contracted syphilis, sired four siblings who did not survive their diseased inheritance, and finally succumbed to an insane death.

The artist's relationship with his parents was equally complex, informing who he was and explaining the nature of his art. While he seemed to dislike his mother, he certainly mourned his father: '… is there anyone else at all who remembers my noble father with such sadness…'[2]

Clearly no conventional portrait of a mother and child nor perhaps even an image of maternity, this 'Anti-Mother' has for many years born the inadequate title of *Mutter und Kind (Mother and Child)*. This is presumably because this work is one of an apparent group of three major paintings that Schiele made in the last months of 1910, each of which deals with a similar but contrasting aspect of the relationship between a woman and a child. Erotically charged, in its depiction of a highly seductive young girl apparently beset by the seemingly unwelcome and distinctly unerotic appendage of a burdensome child, this work is one that presents simultaneously both the causes and, in the form of its human progeny, the physical effects of the human sex drive. It is, in this respect – and in the fact that it is one of the first of Schiele's paintings to make full use of the transparent glue-like binding agent Syndetikon to invest his figures with a fuller, more plastic, animate and expressive sense of materiality and volume – much more than a mere watercolour sketch or simple figure study. It is a carefully considered, fully worked image intended to stand as a completed work in its own right. With its implied sense of metaphor, it remains a unique and intriguing painting that seems to operate halfway between a prolonged series of highly erotic portraits of young adolescent girls that Schiele repeatedly made between 1910 and 1911, and the long series of oil paintings invoking the timeless and also sometimes spiritual theme of the mother and child that he also began at this time.

The subject of the mother and child is one of the most common and persistent themes in all Schiele's work. Far from being conventional portraits of maternal love, however, these paintings more often than not depict a dynamic, existential and sometimes even spiritual struggle between what Schiele saw as the two diametrically opposed, rather than complimentary, protagonists.[3]

From the beginning, the mother and child theme was, for Schiele, an expression of the central aesthetic of his work – the simultaneously living/dying, growing/decaying nature of all existence. Reflective of a recent trend in much turn-of-the-century Symbolist art, where the traditional depiction of the mother as a fecund, caring and nurturing 'madonna' was often deliberately undermined or subverted, Schiele's

mothers were mostly weary, unwilling, weakened, debilitated, and even dead figures presented in direct opposition to their youthful, radiant, vivacious and demanding offspring.

Among the many works that may have inspired Schiele in this respect are Edvard Munch's troubling and sexualized *Madonna,* 1895–1902, with her sperm-like homunculus, Munch's *Dead Mother* of 1899 and Max Klinger's 1889 graphic treatment of the same subject. Giovanni Segantini's famous painting *The Wicked Mothers,* 1897 – acquired by the Viennese State in 1901 – and the bloody pieta that Oskar Kokoschka made for the 1909 poster of his play *Murderer, Hope of Women*, also provided scandalous examples of the mother and child theme being used as a symbol of the existential struggle between life and death. But the greatest influence on Schiele, as in most things at this early stage in his career, was Gustav Klimt, who also repeatedly used the theme of motherhood as an existential metaphor for the passage of human life in such paintings as his 1905 *Die drei Lebensalter (Three Ages of Woman)*. Indeed it was this composition, along with that of his 1910 painting *Die Familie (The Family)* that served directly as a stylistic source for a number of Schiele's subsequent pictures of mothers.

On a personal level too, Schiele's feelings towards motherhood were also rooted in this Symbolist notion that both the sexual impulse and the mystical creation of life were inexorably haunted by their ghostly double, Death. Schiele's early family history played a significant role in this respect, for his childhood was marred by a strong sense of the personal risk involved with the act of procreation, given his father's syphilis. As a consequence Schiele seems to have developed an almost pathological interest in the relationship between sex and death – one that clearly extended to the conditions of motherhood and infancy, both of which he seems to have regarded with a pervasive sense of morbidity. An aunt of his even remembered, for example, the morbid curiosity that Schiele showed at an early age when he eagerly sought out the dead child of a local shopkeeper in order to draw it lying in its bier.[4]

The inexorably intertwined relationship between the archetypal themes of sex and death (Eros and Thanatos) is clearly also invoked in the divided and contrasting relationship between the young woman and the child in *Frau mit Homunkulus*. Her flushed cheeks, coquettish backwards glance, vermillion breast, and the tilt of her hip drawing attention to the crux of the thighs, form a pictorial embodiment of erotic energy and sexual arousal – but, in stark distinction, the comparatively dull, neglected and somewhat unhealthy-looking newborn beside her seems to represent her opposite, embodying the waning and debilitating force of Thanatos. By depicting this being in

Munch, *Madonna* 1895–1902

Segantini, *The Wicked Mothers* (detail) 1897

Klimt *Three Ages of Woman* (cartoon) 1905

a pose that indicates its desire for succour, Schiele conveys the sense, common to many of his pictures of mothers and children, that its life and energy comes not only from the mother but at the expense of her own health; it is a debilitating drain on its mother rather than any kind of boon or comfort. Far from being a completion of woman, the child, for Schiele, is often presented as a rival to her. In this work, Schiele also represents this comparatively outsize creature as a kind of appendage or growth, an unwelcome physical burden whose crude, stumpy fingers seem to claw at the sinuous young body of the erotic, near-naked girl.

Such a symbolic contrast between the image of an adolescent woman in full sexual bloom and the ugly omnipresence of death all around her is part of a strong Germanic tradition that ranges from the sixteenth-century paintings of Lucas Cranach and Hans Baldung Grien all the way to Gustav Klimt's *Die Hoffnung (Hope),* 1903, and indeed Schiele's own *Schwangere Frau und Tod (Pregnant Woman and Death),* 1911.[5] In *Frau mit Homunkulus*, however, the conventional vanitas motif expressed in such 'Death and the Maiden' images has been supplanted by a seemingly morbid meditation on the relationship between sexuality and the responsibilities of nurturing that come with motherhood.

Schiele's main preoccupation with this notion of the conflict between eroticism and the maternal impulse may in fact derive from the period in the spring of 1910, when the artist became fascinated with drawing the pregnant patients and newly born babies he observed at the clinic of the gynaecologist, Dr. Erwin von Graeff. Schiele's predominant interest in these often highly detailed pencil and watercolour studies was in the distortions of the human form visible in the enlarged breasts and distended bellies of heavily pregnant women, and in the swollen heads and awkward, feeble limbs of the newborns. Schiele's biographer Arthur Roessler has claimed that he initiated the famous series of paintings of mothers that Schiele started to paint at this time by suggesting the subject to him near the end of 1910, after a period during which the artist had reportedly complained to him about the unsympathetic way his own mother was treating him.[6] Recommending that Schiele attempt to exorcize his distress by making a series of paintings on the theme of mothers and motherhood, Roessler even went so far as to suggest individual titles on a sentimental theme such as the 'blind mother', the 'unwed mother' and the 'step-mother'. The first painting that Schiele completed in response to Roessler's suggestions, however, was *Die tote Mutter (Dead Mother)*, 1910.[7]

Die tote Mutter was one of Schiele's first masterpieces. Executed in a highly thinned and near transparent oil, it derived its simple but emotive composition directly from Klimt's recent painting of motherhood, *Die Familie (The Family)*. But in contrast to Klimt's tender depiction of a mother with two children all cosily asleep together, Schiele's interest lay specifically with the stark division between the vitality of the baby and the apparently world-weary, grey, emaciated and lifeless form of its dead mother. Formally and thematically it was this aspect of *Die tote Mutter* that set an important precedent for the many paintings on the theme of motherhood that followed.

At the same time that Schiele produced this painting he also made at least two fully worked and clearly important gouache and Syndetikon paintings on a similar theme. This work, *Frau mit Homunkulus,* is one of them. The other, known now only in a black-and-white reproduction and generally referred to as *Mutter mit zwei Säuglingen (Mother with Two Suckling Infants)*, 1910, was lost during the Second World War. Both these paintings, executed using Syndetikon mixed into the paint to give it an enervated and expressive surface, are in very different ways pictures that appear to represent the complete opposite of Schiele's *Die tote Mutter*.

Like *Die tote Mutter, Mutter mit zwei Säuglingen* clearly also derives from Klimt's *Die Familie,* only here Klimt's harmonious family unit of a mother and two children has been deliberately fractured and split. While one child remains enclosed and nurtured at its mother's breast, the other infant, naked and isolated, lies alone, clawing in a void of darkness. Seemingly outcast and visibly separated from the mother's exposed and swollen nipple, the implication appears to be that this child is abandoned and might die while the other, red-faced and smiling at the viewer and enclosed in the warmth of its mother's embrace, will survive and thrive.

In fact, in what is perhaps a justification of its seemingly inappropriate title, *Frau mit Homunkulus* seems, in connection with *Die tote Mutter* and *Mutter mit zwei Säuglingen*, to complete a thematic trilogy defining different types of mothers. While *Die tote Mutter* depicts a prematurely aged and dead mother with a thriving child and *Mutter mit zwei Säuglingen* depicts a mother weighed down by the attention of two suckling infants, one thriving, one outcast and abandoned, *Frau mit Homunkulus* depicts the antithesis of these self-sacrificing women. Here, a coquettish young woman, full of sexual energy and independent erotic desire, seems to thrive at the expense of the unwanted or abandoned offspring – probably not her own. Indeed, these three works could be seen to fit the subjects Rudolph Leopold has said Schiele adopted in response to Roessler's suggestions, with the intention of completing a cycle.[8] The evident youth and lone sexuality of *Frau mit Homunkulus* could well, for example, represent 'Fräulein Mutter' (Unwed Mother)

and *Mutter mit zwei Säuglingen*, with its mother caring for one child but not the other, 'the Stepmother'. *Die tote Mutter*, as a 1911 version of the same composition reveals, was also a representation of 'the Birth of Genius'; genius that comes, as Schiele repeatedly reminded his own mother, at the expense of its mother's life.[9]

That Schiele intended *Frau mit Homunkulus* to be seen as some kind of allegorical painting on the theme of maternity rather than as a mere figure study is also indicated by the fact that it is likely the young woman in *Frau mit Homunkulus* did not give birth to the depicted 'child', as Schiele scholar Jane Kallir has suggested. The girl, with her slender figure, long dark hair and black stockings, resembles a favourite model of Schiele referred to as 'The Dark-Haired Girl', whom he drew and painted repeatedly throughout 1910 and 1911. Kallir has conjectured that this painting may in fact have had a closer and more personal meaning for the artist than its title suggests.

In May 1910, Schiele is known to have taken one of his lovers, evidently pregnant and known now by the initials 'L.A.', to Dr. Graeff's clinic, presumably for an abortion. Schiele, who, like his mentor Klimt, engaged in sexual relations with many of his models, may well at this time have found himself potentially the young father of an unborn and unwanted child. It is in this context that the strange dichotomy at the heart of *Frau mit Homunkulus* offers itself as a kind of pictorial allegory of what may have been Schiele's own personal feelings about parenthood.[10]

Ultimately this extraordinary gouache and Syndetikon painting of an 'Anti-Mother' remains an enduring and fascinating enigma. In part an exercise on the mother and child theme that would preoccupy Schiele for the rest of his life, and in part an erotic portrait of a young woman with whom he had an intimate relationship, the painting is also, and perhaps most of all, an allegory that reflects the often paradoxical nature of Schiele's own complex feelings towards sex, women and motherhood. These were feelings by no means unique to Schiele. Indeed, in Vienna, in 1912, Sigmund Freud discerned these feelings as both a psychological disorder and a cultural dichotomy to which he famously gave the name 'Madonna/Whore complex'.[11]

In this context it becomes clear that one of the most important features running through the heart of *Frau mit Homunkulus* is not just the sexual nature of the child-mother but also her extreme youth. As Freud and many other cultural observers were well aware, the idea of the unwed mother, like that of the sexually active or even seductive child, was one that struck at the heart of Viennese anxiety about sex and sexuality around the turn of the century. The cultural historian Sander L. Gilman has pointed out,

Schiele, *Dead Mother* 1910

Schiele, *Mother with Two Suckling Infants* 1910

Schiele, *Dark Haired Girl* 1911

for example, that although it was largely a popular figment of the male imagination in fin-de-siècle Vienna, the concept of the sexualized child and the child-mother, like the stereotype of the degenerate lower-class female, came to fuel what he describes as the 'sexual fantasies, or nightmares of an entire society'.[12]

The sexualized child repeatedly pervaded Schiele's work, most especially in his portraits of street children. It was also evidently a concept that troubled his imagination. 'Have adults forgotten,' Schiele famously wrote on this subject, 'how depraved, i.e. how sexually stimulated and excited, they themselves were as children? Have they forgotten how the terrible passion burned within them and tortured them when they were still children? I have never forgotten it, for I suffered from it dreadfully.'[13]

In *Frau mit Homunkulus*, the overt eroticism of a girl, in direct contrast to the ugliness and nurturing needs of an infant, seems to illustrate the 'neurotic' assumption common to those with a Madonna/Whore complex that sexuality and motherhood are mutually exclusive or opposites. The simple but paradoxical subject matter of this painting would clearly fit the category of 'Fräulein Mutter' that both Roessler and Leopold have suggested Schiele intended to paint at this time. In his later oil painting *Die junge Mutter (Young Mother)*, completed in 1915, the twisting pose of the naked young mother to some degree resembles the sinuous and distinctly more erotic pose of the even younger woman in *Frau mit Homunkulus*. In this far less troublingly erotic, subtler, but ultimately more muted painting, however, the implied rejection of the child or its demands is not at all clear.

In contrast to Schiele's more mature but seemingly watered-down version of the same theme, *Frau mit Homunkulus* is a work that encapsulates the Madonna/Whore duality that so distinguishes the fin-de-siècle Viennese idea of 'Woman' within one powerfully sensual yet troubling image. In this regard, it is this earlier work that ultimately stands as an important symbol of its time – a magical, seductive and erotic icon that embodies much of the paradoxical allure of Vienna at the beginning of the century.

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1 Arthur Roessler, *Erinnerungen an Egon Schiele*, Vienna, 1948, pp.62–63.
2 Ibid.
3 Schiele's very first treatment of the mother and child subject appears to date from 1908 in the form of a mystical-looking red-chalk work sometimes entitled *Madonna and Child*, which, perhaps based on an earlier 1903 self-portrait by Elena Luksch-Makovsky, depicts a mysterious, haloed mother proudly thrusting her illuminated Christ-like progeny into the face of the viewer. Schiele subsequently painted several other large oils on the theme of mothers and their children between 1910 and 1915, with his last work on the subject (other than his imaginary 1918 portrait of his own family-to-be) being his large melancholic portrait of a seemingly aged and dying mother with two young infants (now in the Österreichisches Museum Belvedere, Vienna), completed in 1917.
4 See Frank Whitford, *Egon Schiele*, London, 1981, p.33.
5 The skull appended to the mother-to-be's dress in Klimt's *Hope I* also resembles the way in which the infant's skull-like head seems strangely appended to the girls' body in *Mutter und Kind (Mother and Child)*. See also, in this respect, the suckling head of a baby in Giovanni Segantini's *The Wicked Mothers*, 1897.
6 See note 1.
7 According to Rudolf Leopold, this first painting *Die tote Mutter (Dead Mother)* was intended by Schiele in 1910–11 to be followed by *Birth of Genius*, *Fräulein Mutter* and *Stepmother* to form a series. The sequence of fully completed oil paintings that Schiele actually produced on the subject of motherhood, was *Dead Mother*, 1910, followed by *Birth of Genius*, *Madonna* and *Pregnant Woman and Death* all of 1911, *Mother and Child* of 1912 then *Holy Family*, 1913, *Blind Mother*, 1913, *Young Mother*, 1913, and *Mother with Two Children*, 1915–17.
8 See note 5.
9 *The Birth of Genius (Dead Mother II)*, 1911, (Kallir cat. raisonné no.195).
10 In the catalogue for the exhibition of Schiele's work at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in 1994, Kallir has even gone further than this, speculating that *Mutter und Kind* may actually depict Schiele's own offspring. 'Or was he,' she asks, 'attempting to come to terms with an abortion? For an artist who made a direct connection between creativity and birth, who believed that "Life means sowing seed", either situation would have had profound emotional ramifications.' See Jane Kallir, *Egon Schiele*, exh. cat., Washington D.C., 1994, p.58.
11 According to Freud, the Madonna/Whore complex was a psychological disorder in men who had usually been raised by a cold or distant mother, who in the hope of fulfilling their need for an intimacy unmet in childhood either seek out or project qualities of the mother onto their partner. Equating sex with sin, they can become impotent with their partners but able and desirous of sex with those they deem degenerate or sinful women. Although there is now no one universally used definition of the Madonna/Whore complex, discussions of it usually revolve around this dichotomy of how some men can view women as two distinct and separate personas – saint and sinner, mother and whore. The complex can also revolve around a distinction between sacred and profane love. See Sigmund Freud, *On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love II)*, first published in 1912.
12 Sander. L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology, Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, New York, 1985, p.58.
13 Frank Whitford, *Egon Schiele*, London, 1981, p.29.

10
Selbstportrait als heiliger Sebastian / Self-Portrait as Saint Sebastian 1914
Egon Schiele

I began to think deeply. I became aware of people with open souls and their saintly hearts, and I thought about liars and evil people. Thus I came to the conclusion that the pure, true human being must live eternally. (Egon Schiele)[1]

One of the most memorable images in Schiele's art, this extraordinarily dramatic, icon-like self-portrait is a work that marks the melodramatic peak of his tendency to depict himself as a holy man and as a lone and misunderstood outcast.

Adopting the role of a martyred saint, Schiele stands in a monk's habit pierced by two long arrows, his arms outstretched as if crucified against the empty page. Bent in a dramatic swooning gesture, his eyes closed in death or deep inner contemplation – with his fingers parted in that sacred and mysterious gesture of both division and unity common to many of his early self-portraits – he presents himself as a youthful and beatific martyr, an icon of the selfless and suffering creative being, victimized by others. In the role of Saint Sebastian, Schiele indeed presents himself as the artist-martyr – a lone figure content to endure the ultimate sacrifice for his calling.

In depicting a martyrdom, this drawing, executed in the latter part of 1914, marks the extraordinary culmination of Schiele's repeated allegorical portrayal of himself as a sacred figure and holy outcast.[2] Following his first self-depictions as a kind of mystic seer and prophet in 1910, Schiele had repeatedly drawn and painted himself as a monk or hermit, suffering many of the agonies and deprivations of the ascetic, then graduating to the figure of a cardinal in the contentious *Kardinal und Nonne* (*Cardinal and the Nun*) of 1912. Towards the end of 1913, in his largest and most ambitious painting to date, Schiele portrayed himself in a mysterious meeting with an aging saint. This now lost, life-size painting titled *Begegnung (Encounter)* was proudly entered, unfinished it seems, as Schiele's sole contribution to an important painting competition organized by Carl Reininghaus in 1914.[3]

Schiele's *Selbstportrait als heiliger Sebastian* was effectively his next major public self-statement to follow this work, as it was this drawing that served as the basis for the poster Schiele made to promote his next exhibition in Vienna, his second one-man show held at the Gallery Arnot in January 1915. In choosing to depict himself so dramatically as a wounded and even Christ-like martyr to advertise this exhibition, Schiele was in part following an avant-garde trend already set by fellow Viennese painters Oskar Kokoschka and Max Oppenheimer. In 1909, Kokoschka, as the city's most famous enfant terrible of its avant-garde, had his head shaved like a criminal in a symbolic act of reproach against the way he felt he was being treated by the Viennese establishment. In 1910, after abandoning the city for Berlin, he further iconized his status as an outcast by depicting himself again shaven-headed, bare-breasted and

pointing to a Christ-like wound in his chest for the exhibition poster for his first show at the Der Sturm Gallery. In 1911 Oppenheimer followed Kokoschka's lead, depicting himself naked and tearing at a similar bloody wound in the poster he made to promote his one-man show at the Moderne Galerie in Munich.

Ever since Paul Gauguin (as *The Yellow Christ*, 1889) and after him Edvard Munch had depicted themselves as the crucified victims of an uncaring multitude, the act of depicting oneself as a wounded and suffering martyr-to-the-cause was a clear statement of alliance with the predominantly Expressionist avant-garde. Some writers have even suggested that in adopting the role of a martyred saint, Schiele was intentionally exploiting the notoriety he had gained following his imprisonment in Neulengbach. But, while there is some similarity in style between Schiele's self-representation as Saint Sebastian and the pathetic blanket-covered victims he depicted himself as in his Neulengbach watercolours, this drawing, as Jane Kallir has pointed out, is not really about imprisonment nor is it merely a simple exercise in self-pity.[4]

Like his many other self-depictions in the guise of a monk or holy man, Schiele's *Selbstportrait als heiliger Sebastian* is more a pictorial assertion for the world to see that, as he had written on one of the watercolour self-portraits from Neulengbach prison, 'for my art and for my loved ones I will gladly endure till the end'. It was this same attitude of being prepared to take on all the sufferings of the world that Schiele reiterated to his sister Gerti in November 1914, around the time that he made this work, writing to her that the war had transformed their era into 'the most phenomenal age that the world has ever seen. We have grown accustomed to all sorts of deprivation. Hundreds of thousands of people perish miserably. Each one must suffer his fate, living or dying. We have become hard and fearless. What existed before 1914 belongs to another world – we will thus always look to the future, whoever is without hope already belongs to the dying – we must be ready to suffer all that life can bring'.[5]

Schiele's decision to depict himself as Saint Sebastian for the poster of his first war-time exhibition seems strongly to reflect these same ideals. Indeed, in the poster version of *Selbstportrait als heiliger Sebastian*, the storm of elongated arrows assailing the martyred Schiele visually echoes the figure of a soldier dying in a hail of bullets. Unlike other depictions of Saint Sebastian, Schiele does not show the martyr bound to a post but as a free-standing, almost willing victim, his arms outstretched in a gesture of openness and supplication that, no doubt intentionally, also echoes a crucifixion. Schiele, who had at this time been turned down for military service on the grounds of his frail health, but

Schiele, *The Hermits* 1912

Photograph of Schiele in front of his now lost painting *Encounter* 1914

Schiele, Arnot Gallery exhibition poster 1915

who knew a recall was increasingly likely, seems to be visually reiterating the sentiments he had expressed in his November 1914 letter to Gerti. Each person, be they a soldier, an artist or even, as in Gerti's case, a recent bride and mother-to-be, must willingly face and endure the sufferings of the age.[6]

Traditionally seen as a divine protector against the plague and often invoked by whole communities in times of great peril, the tragic figure of the martyred Saint Sebastian – a young man shot through with arrows – was, of course, a potent and appropriate icon of self-sacrifice to be invoked at a time when so many young men were themselves deemed to be laying down their lives for the good of all. Indeed, Schiele was not alone in adopting the story of Saint Sebastian as a fitting symbol of the times. At the same time that Schiele made this drawing, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska invoked the Saint Sebastian legend in a somewhat bitter drawing of a military firing squad, entitled *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* – where he too seems to have set himself in the role of the martyred saint.[7]

In Schiele's case, to jump into the role of a saint sacrificing himself for his fellow man, or metaphorically bearing the assault of the multitude, was only a step away from his prolonged series of self-portraits as a variety of mystics, ascetics and holy men. That it is one of these ascetic figures that Schiele again represents when he came to draw himself as Saint Sebastian is indicated not only by the monkish habit he wears but more particularly by his gesturing hands, with their fingers parted in the same indivisible duality of his prophets and self-seers, and by his conspicuously closed or hollowed-out eye sockets. This last feature, indicative of death, malnourishment and also of blindness, is a central theme in much of Schiele's imagery – blindness often seeming to stand in his work as a symbol for a kind of second sight, or inner vision and wisdom.

With a face that echoes the downcast and hollow-eyed face of the figure (supposedly Klimt) in *Die Eremiten (The Hermits)*, 1912, Schiele now seems to present a man who is oblivious to all the trials and torments of the physical world – a man lost in inner contemplation and concentrating solely on an inner spiritual mission or purpose. In this respect this image seems to anticipate Schiele's last two important self-incarnations as a dead or dying holy man in *Entschwebung (Levitation* or *Transfiguration)* and in his moving farewell to his girlfriend Wally, the morbidly entitled *Tod und Mädchen (Death and the Maiden)*, both painted in 1915.

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1 Egon Schiele, letter to Franz Hauer, 25 January 1914, reproduced in Christian M. Nebehay, ed., *Egon Schiele (1890–1918): Leben, Briefe, Gedichte*, Vienna, 1979, p.301, no.633.

2 Saint Sebastian did not actually die from the shooting, but was nursed back to health only to be later beaten to death for insulting the Roman emperor Diocletian. He is sometimes known as the saint who was martyred twice.

3 The painting, in its complete form, was to have been extended to the right of Schiele's figure with a horizontal sequence of figures, all of them blind.

4 Jane Kallir, *Egon Schiele*, exh. cat., Washington D.C., 1994, p.134.

5 Letter to his sister Gertrude, 23 November 1914, reproduced in Christian M. Nebehay, ed., *Egon Schiele (1890–1918): Leben, Briefe, Gedichte*, Vienna, 1979, p.314, no.714.

6 Schiele's *Self-Portrait as Saint Sebastian* is a typically extreme and melodramatic visualization of this principle. Schiele, feeling himself already a victim after his imprisonment in Neulengbach, here draws on his repeated practice of depicting artists as holy men and extends it into the role of a self-sacrificing Man of Sorrows willing to lead by example and even, perhaps, to take the suffering of others upon himself. 'The important personage and the great artist count less for me than the pure, exalted, noble human being (Christ),' Schiele had written, in a somewhat sanctimonious but revealing letter about the way he now felt, to Reininghaus in 1913. 'I came into this world through love; I live with love for every kind of fellow being, and I will depart with love. I know that it is only one in a thousand, who can see the world with love for people, animals, plants and things, that it is only one in a thousand that can really discern the great organism of all things, who sees the spiritual life of plants and the countenance of their living breath in their faces… I'm sure of this only because I am compelled to sacrifice myself and to lead a martyr-like existence. I will nevertheless remain true even if it means the passing by of the greatest of treasures: I hate this about businessmen: I am continually thrust among these liars!… I have experienced unspeakably bitter days and I have got to know all about people, the high and the low, their passions, their weaknesses and appetites, their ways of life, and all their brutal and noble actions…' (Egon Schiele, letter to Carl Reininghaus, 13 February 1913, Christian M. Nebehay, ed., *Egon Schiele (1890–1918): Leben, Briefe, Gedichte*, Vienna, 1979, no.456.) Schiele's own call-up would come in June 1915 at a time when he was eager to secure a post as an official war artist, writing to his brother-in-law Anton Peschka that he believed he could 'create the most important works about the war'. Egon Schiele, letter to Anton Peschka, 9 June 1915, Christian M. Nebehay, ed., ibid., no.794.

7 See Richard Cork, *A Bitter Truth, Avant-Garde Art and the Great War*, exh. cat., London, 1994, p.78.

11

Frau in Stiefeln / Woman in Boots 1918

Egon Schiele

(Schiele's) artistry as a draughtsman was phenomenal. The assurance of his hand was almost infallible. When he drew, he usually sat on a low stool, the drawing board and sheet on his knees, his right hand (with which he did the drawing) resting on the board. But I also saw him drawing differently, standing in front of the model, his right foot on a low stool. Then he rested the board on his right knee and held it at the top with his left hand, and his drawing hand unsupported, placed his pencil on the sheet and drew his lines from the shoulder, as it were. And everything was exactly right. If he happened to get something wrong, which was very rare, he threw the sheet away; he never used an eraser. Schiele only drew from nature. (Otto Benesch)[1]

With its fluid and unerring single-line depiction of a young female model, squatting with her skirt lifted and her legs wide apart, while staring directly out of the picture to provocatively engage with the viewer's own gaze, this drawing of 1918 is a work that fiercely, almost defiantly, asserts the raw sexual nature of its subject. It is one of a series of extraordinarily fluent and accomplished drawings executed in black conté crayon that Schiele made of young female models crouching, masturbating and lying in various states of undress and sexual arousal throughout the last year of his life. As Jane Kallir has pointed out with regards to this series of drawings, these highly sexualized works differ from Schiele's earlier, more nervous, energized and sexualized drawings of the human being by the more distanced and even voyeuristic approach that they take towards their subject.[2] In his earlier drawings and watercolours of 1910 and 1911, Schiele – then an adolescent wunderkind with a precocious gift for draughtsmanship – had engaged directly in an almost feverish and Expressionist manner with the sexual nature of his models, working as if he were an active participant in the scenes he depicted. Here, in these later, bolder, but ultimately calmer and more objective drawings made in late 1917 and 1918, the more mature, now married and professionally established Schiele adopted a more knowing and naturalistic approach to his models. It is an assured and more mature approach that can in some ways perhaps be

seen as also indicative of its time and of the pervasive 'return-to-order' that increasingly came to distinguish much of European avant-garde art in the wake of the First World War.

The increased prosperity and domesticity that marked Schiele's return to Vienna in 1918 and to life at home with his wife Edith, whom he had married in 1915, also provided the twenty-eight-year-old artist with a degree of both financial and emotional stability for the first time in his adult life. Alongside a growing reputation in the wake of Gustav Klimt's death in February 1918 as Vienna's leading artist, this new situation allowed Schiele to regularly employ a stream of professional models. In addition to his wife Edith and her sister Adele, who also often posed for him, Schiele's notebooks for the year 1918 record visits to his studio of 177 paid models. With the healthier physiques of these women also marking a distinct difference from the often vampiric pubescent waifs, prostitutes and street urchins who formerly were often depicted as strange and fragile vessels housing the ferocious primal energy of the human sex drive, Schiele's drawings of 1918 began to reflect his increasing interest in the depiction of women as complete, autonomous and independent beings.

Abandoning pencil in favour of the wider, smoother but more difficult to control – and impossible to correct – crayon and charcoal that he came to prefer during the last two years of his life, his late drawing style also became an extraordinarily eloquent expression of volume. As can be seen in this work, Schiele's complete command of the difficult medium of black crayon was exceptional. Here, in this drawing, he has evidently taken little time to swiftly render the complete image of the squatting woman with a fast-moving smooth line that magnificently conveys the space, volume and depth of the crouching figure and her raised skirt. Seemingly sculpting the white space of the paper with this stark black line, in this and other drawings like it from this period, Schiele manages to create a complete image of his subject no longer requiring or indeed allowing for the addition of colour. Often leaving his line broken in places so that the white empty space of the otherwise blank sheet becomes an integral part of the drawing itself, the stark line and blank paper together generate a drawing that is no longer a sketch or a partial approximation of its subject, but a powerfully complete picture in its own right.

Frau in Stiefeln is one of a series of several such drawings of crouching women that Schiele made in the latter part of 1917 and 1918, which appear to have provided a vocabulary of poses to be used in preparation for a major series of oil paintings that he intended to install as a frieze of works in a mausoleum, but which he was tragically never to complete.[3] In October 1918, Schiele, along with his wife Edith, who was six months pregnant, died in the Spanish influenza epidemic that swept across Europe, killing millions. The extensive sequence of oil paintings that Schiele had in mind were to form an allegorical cycle of works articulating his perennial themes of earthly existence, death and eternal life.

Schiele's last great oil painting, *Die Familie (The Family)* of 1918, depicting the artist himself, a crouching female and a child, is believed to be perhaps the only completed oil painting from this intended cycle. It is believed that a series of paintings of nudes were intended to form the outer chamber of this project, where they would be expressive of 'earthly existence'. In the context of *Die Familie* these paintings and other drawings like it from this period, it seems likely that *Frau in Stiefeln* is one of the drawings that Schiele made in 1918 as part of his preparation for his grandest and most ambitious cycle of paintings.[4]

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Schiele, *Girl with Raised Skirt* 1917

Schiele, *Seated Girl in Blue Chemise* 1917

Schiele, *Seated Nude with Green Boots* 1917

Schiele, *Seated Nude* 1918

1 Otto Benesch, *Mein Weg mit Egon Schiele,* New York, 1965, p.25.
2 *Egon Schiele*, exh., cat.,Washington D.C., 1994, p.167.
3 See Jane Kallir, *Egon Schiele Drawings and Watercolours*, London, 2003, pp.444–45.
4 See ibid., p.445. See also very similar drawing of probably the same model to this work: plate 222 in Rudolf Leopold, *Egon Schiele Paintings, Watercolours Drawings*, London, 1972, p.481.

12
Die Tafelrunde / Around the Table 1917–18
Egon Schiele

In Vienna I will have time to work every day, I'm thinking of making a large figure-painting with all my close acquaintances, life-size, sitting around a table. I have already been negotiating with a landlord in Vienna for a new studio-apartment with a garden at 13, Wattmanngasse, in Althietzing, which we could rent from May.
(Egon Shiele)[1]

One of Schiele's very last paintings, *Die Tafelrunde* is a historic and visionary work painted sometime towards the end of 1917 or in the first months of 1918, which attempts to fuse Schiele's allegorical sense of his sacred mission as an artist with what he hoped would be the new political realities of post-war Austria. In many respects a pictorial manifesto of an artistic brotherhood that was never to actually materialize, this painting, also sometimes entitled *Die Freunde (The Friends)* was, like *Selbstportrait als heiliger Sebastian (Self-Portrait as Saint Sebastian)*, 1914, a quasi-religious picture that also provided the source image for the poster advertising an important exhibition of Schiele's work. In this case it was the 49th Viennese Secession held in March 1918 at which Schiele, as the main exhibitor, was finally to make his name and be acclaimed as the leading avant-garde artist in Vienna.

Die Tafelrunde was first conceived by Schiele over a year earlier, in January 1917, in anticipation of the 'new start' he wanted to make on his return to Vienna where he was to be stationed, with light duties and in relative comfort, at the city's Military Supply Depot. Eagerly looking forward to a speedy end to the war – which would in fact drag on for another twenty months – and delighted to be reunited with his wife in the city he now called home, Schiele envisaged the beginning of a dramatic new era.

The new and spacious studio in Hietzing would provide, Schiele hoped, the opportunity for him to paint the large canvases he had often dreamed about. The initial concept of *Die Tafelrunde* seemed to be that it should serve as a kind of pictorial statement of the collective identity and intent shared between Schiele and his fellow artists, many of whom (Gustav Klimt, Paris von Gütersloh and Anton Faistauer, for example) were already living in this fashionable district of Vienna and with whom Schiele now sought to formalize a creative brotherhood.

The notion of an artists' collective would become increasingly prevalent in avant-garde circles towards the end of the war, as the Socialist ideal that had so suddenly transformed Russia spread swiftly across Europe and the forthcoming end of the war seemed, initially, to promise the onset of a new era of brotherhood for mankind. In cities such as Munich and Berlin, avant-garde artists became increasingly politicized and images of 'The New Man' and even a new Socialistic kind of Christian symbolism began to emerge in Expressionist art. In genteel but crusty old Vienna it was, surprisingly, the almost completely apolitical Schiele who, with perhaps purely personal aims, seems to have been among the first to think of taking part with his contemporaries in a collective or group enterprise, with the singular and strangely patriotic goal of 'saving' Austrian culture. Although Schiele cannot be thought in any way to have been a political artist, throughout the war he had been a contributor to Franz Pfemfert's Berlin-based periodical *Die Aktion*. This was an anti-war Expressionist periodical set up 'against the age', as Pfemfert declared, and more particularly against the war and the militaristic thinking that had brought it about. While the substance of what Schiele contributed to *Die Aktion*, portrait drawings and poems, was entirely apolitical, the wider concept of an Expressionist brotherhood of artists strongly fostered by this periodical cannot have been lost upon him.[2]

In early March 1917, not long before the Tsar's abdication in Russia, Schiele wrote to Anton Peschka about establishing a 'Kunsthalle' in Vienna. This was to be no formal 'association' *(Verein)*, he insisted, but purely a kind of 'spiritual gathering place to offer poets, painters, sculptors, architects and musicians, the opportunity to interact with a public that, like them, is prepared to battle the ever-advancing tides of cultural disintegration'. Recalling the appeal that he and its founders – Arnold Schönberg, Gustav Klimt, Joseph Hoffmann, Anton Hanak and Peter Altenberg – had recently sent out, Schiele related to Peschka their aims: 'Since the bloody horror of the war came crashing down on us, many have realized that art is something more than a matter of bourgeois luxury. We know that the coming era of political peace will bring with it the great confrontation between the materialistic tendencies of our civilization and those remnants of noble culture that the commercial age has left us… We stand at a turning point in history and recognizing the uniqueness of this moment, we consider it our human obligation to show that we were not idle when the time came to defend and save our most precious property, our cultural heritage, to reaffirm its spirit and make sacrifices for it.'[3]

By the summer of 1917 all Schiele's plans had, however, come to nothing. The shared concept of the Kunsthalle lay in ruins, the war dragged on and Schiele's persistent lack of finances meant that he was unable to procure the larger studio in Wattmanngasse. It was only towards the end of the year, with the forthcoming prospect of an important group exhibition at the 49th Secession, that these ideals seem to have been rekindled in Schiele's imagination. Initially Schiele had been ambivalent about the idea of exhibiting at the Secession, perhaps showing loyalty to his earlier mentor Klimt, who had suffered so much at its hands. But, when it was made clear to him that he was to be the leading light, in charge of the Secession's organization and to be given the large central room in which to display nearly fifty of his own works, Schiele became a keen advocate.

Seemingly recalling his earlier enthusiasm for the ill-fated Kunsthalle, Schiele sought to promote the idea of the Secession as the collective enterprise of a brotherhood of like-minded cultural figures (with himself at the helm). Employing his original idea of an image of both he and his artist friends seated around the table and sharing a common cultural purpose, Schiele translated a variant on the theme of *Die Tafelrunde* into a striking graphic image to be used for the Secession poster. In preparation for this poster, Schiele produced one small oil-and-gouache study on card and one gouache-and-ink study in addition to the final poster design.

The oil painting, *Die Tafelrunde*, which is a much larger, significantly different and ultimately more ambitious painting than these works, is one that, as well as inspiring this memorable and important poster, seems to relate ultimately to Schiele's continuing aim of creating a large, even perhaps life-size, allegorical painting of a Last Supper. Indeed, Schiele's ambition in this respect appears to have persisted even after his triumph at the Secession, for as his friend and patron Heinrich Benesch recalled, in July 1918, following the acclaim and important flood of sales that the Secession had prompted, Schiele had finally moved into the larger studio in the Wattmanngasse. And it was there that Benesch recalled Schiele immediately making the preparations for a vast Last Supper painting, witnessing the monumental new canvas the artist had already stretched and prepared for just this purpose.[4]

With its central subject of a meal being shared – rather than books being read, as in the Secession poster – and with the modest, smock-like clothes of the figures further emphasizing Schiele's common theme of depicting artists as ascetic holy men, *Die Tafelrunde* seems to equate the gathering of a group of artists with the sanctity and communion of the Last Supper. Indeed a sketch in Schiele's 1918 sketchbook even reveals the artist at one time conceived of a composition of figures kneeling, rather than sitting, around a table.

By no means clear in the poster and its sketchy designs, the figures that Schiele depicts in *Die Tafelrunde* are all specific and often recognisable portraits of his artist friends and associates. Schiele himself is seated at the head of the table facing the viewer, and the unmistakable features of Paris von Gütersloh are discernible as the man in the

Schiele, Secession 49 exhibition poster 1918

Schiele, *Study for Tafelrunde* c.1918

middle of the left-hand row of artists seated on his right. The first of these figures, sitting directly to Schiele's right, is the painter Georg Merkel, who confirmed this fact in a letter to Jane Kallir in 1964. Debate still rages over the identities of all the other 'friends' portrayed in the painting. Anton Faistauer and Felix Albrecht Harta are generally thought to make up two of the figures sitting to Schiele's left, with, perhaps, Alfred Kubin seated between them. Wolfgang Fischer also suggests that it is Georg Kars, Willi Novak and the great Viennese architect Otto Wagner who appear in the poster design.[5] It is usually assumed to be Gustav Klimt who is seated with his back to the viewer at the bottom of the painting directly opposite Schiele, but by the time Schiele created the Secession poster in March 1918, Klimt had died. Out of respect for the great Viennese artist, his chair was left conspicuously and poignantly empty in this later design. Schiele expert Alessandra Comini has even suggested that 'close study of the lithographic poster copies reveals… the scrawl of Klimt's distinctive signature faintly indicated on the right-hand page of the book in front of the empty chair'.[6]

In her catalogue raisonné of Schiele's works, Jane Kallir 'tentatively' proffers an alternate list of 'friends' around the table, suggesting that in addition to the known figures of Merkel, Schiele and von Gütersloh, the others are again Felix Albrecht Harta and Anton Faistauer with Kubin sitting between them and Klimt, in fact seated at the bottom left next to von Gütersloh.

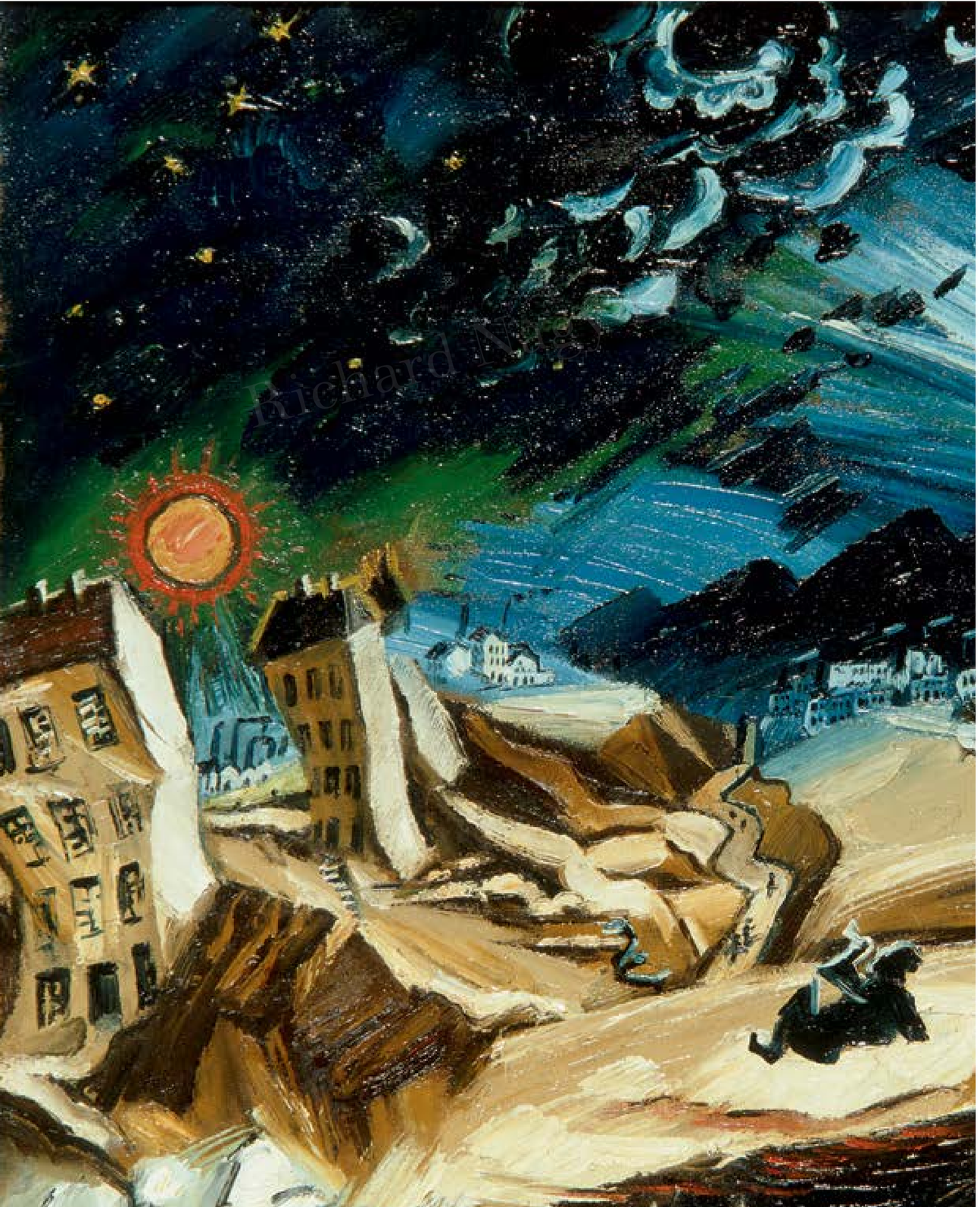
The precise identity of the figures in *Die Tafelrunde* will probably never be settled, but it is clear from the way that Schiele has laid out this scene, the monk-like appearance of the figures, and even the ancient and timeless form of the earthenware wine flasks formerly used in one of his designs for a picture of a deposition, that he wanted to draw a clear parallel between the gathering of his artist friends and the spiritual symbolism of the Last Supper.[7] From his portraits of mothers and children, hermits, seers and prophets, to such works on the theme of agony, conversion, resurrection and transfiguration, Schiele's earthly and distinctly secular paintings had often paralleled the subject matter and iconography of Christianity and their traditional representation in Western art. With its group of artist/monks and its deliberate invocation of a Last Supper theme, *Die Tafelrunde* is clearly a painting that belongs within this tradition in Schiele's work. Presenting an image of Schiele, hands raised in animated conversation or debate, busily engaged with and working amongst a communal brotherhood of artists, it is a picture that effectively presents the artist's vision of his future professional self – in much the same way that his other great self-portrait of 1918, *Die Familie (The Family)*, presented an imagined vision of his future domestic self as a father and husband. In both these paintings, in which Schiele's visions were tragically not to be, the twenty-eight-year-old artist displays a new-found optimism for the future and, for the first time, represents himself in a patriarchal role as both an adult and a leader. The youthful melancholy of the fatherless boy who had populated his paintings with religious allegory full of substitute father-figures and mystical alter-egos has here given way to a simpler, brighter and more optimistic vision, at precisely the time he felt he had reached maturity and become a man.

In the absence of the great life-size painting on the theme of the Last Supper that Schiele was perhaps still preparing at the time of his death in October 1918, *Die Tafelrunde* stands as not only the final work in Schiele's long sequence of religious allegories, but also as the pictorial manifesto for a new future that was regrettably never to be.

R B

1 Egon Schiele, letter to Anton Peschka, March 1917, Christian M. Nebehay, ed., *Egon Schiele (1890–1918): Leben, Briefe, Gedichte*, Vienna, 1979, no.1182, p.418.
2 For a detailed account of the increasing radicalization of the Expressionist avant-garde in Germany at this time, see Joan Weinstein's *The End of Expressionism*, Chicago, 1990.
3 See note 1.
4 Heinrich Benesch, *Mein Weg mit Egon Schiele*, New York, 1965, p.35.
5 Wolfgang Fischer, *Egon Schiele, Desire and Decay*, Cologne, 2004, p.42.
6 Alessandra Comini, *Egon Schiele's Portraits*, Berkeley, California, 1974, p.185.
7 Ibid., p.186.

13
Apokalyptische Landschaft / Apocalyptic Landscape 1913
Ludwig Meidner



It was a strange and doom-laden time, in those days the great universal storm was already baring its teeth and casting its glaring yellow shadow across my whimpering brush-hand… My brain bled dreadful visions. I could see nothing but a thousand skeletons jigging in a row. Many graves and buried cities writhed across the plains.
(Ludwig Meidner)[1]

Painted in 1913, this explosive landscape is one of the best-known of Meidner's famous series of Expressionist city-scenes, known as 'Apocalyptic Landscapes'. The most important and distinctive of all Meidner's works, these 'landscapes' were responsible for propelling the visionary nature of Meidner's Expressionism until his call-up into the German military in 1916. Begun in a manic rush of creativity in Berlin during the long hot summer of 1912 and appearing to grow ever more ominous and dark, these works encapsulate and define at least three of the great themes of Berlin Expressionism – the city, the cosmic night, and the notion of *Weltuntergang* (end of the world). Today, they are seen as eerily prophetic of the cataclysm of the Great War and are widely recognized as among the most powerful, representative and enduring images of the Expressionist era.

Meidner's 'Apocalyptic Landscapes' were painted in an impulsive, spontaneous and near-automatic manner that brought into life a series of both ecstatic and nightmarish visions of chaos and destruction, 'received' when Meidner was living alone in his crude attic studio in a suburb of Berlin. Psychological landscapes, these epic and often grandiose visions provide an insight into all the passions and fears of the age as they collided in the excited mind of their lonely, sensitive and spiritually torn creator. A painterly fusion of the influences of Vincent van Gogh, the exultant modernism of Robert Delaunay's Eiffel Towers and the cosmic imagery of Berlin's Expressionist poets, they are also among the first Expressionist paintings to depict the city and to engage with this generation's deeply ambiguous and highly problematic relationship with modernity and the realities of metropolitan life.

It 'was a summer unlike any other', Meidner later recalled of the 'angry vicious' months in 1912 out of which this powerful series of paintings were born. 'It was a strange and doom-laden time for me as none other ever was. I was very poor but not at all unhappy: I was charged with energy, full of mighty plans… Food was a minor matter, and I did not crave it, but sailcloth, bought cheap in the Wertheim department store, seemed the most valuable thing there was. I was in love with that canvas, which I stretched and grounded myself, and I went so far as to kiss it with trembling lips before painting those ominous landscapes.'[2] Feverish, half-starved, often drunk and reeling from the constant heat and the irritation of a skin disease, the impoverished twenty-eight-year old Meidner actively induced the delirious, visionary nature of these works, painting in a trance-like state throughout the night with his back turned to the open window and its view over the rooftops of the city. There, like an ecstatic and drunken van Gogh, attempting to commune with the cosmic mysteries of the heavens, he conjured up vision after vision of cities radiating with energy or doomed to destruction and breaking apart under the night sky.

'All summer I trembled before steaming canvases, which in every part, every tattered cloud and torrential stream foretold the misery of the world,' Meidner remembered. 'I broke countless tubes of indigo and ochre. A painful compulsion forced me to smash everything that was stable and upright, to spread ruins and rags and ashes over all my landscapes…

Mountains floated in the background like warning voices, the comet laughed hoarsely and airplanes sailed like dragon flies from hell in a yellow storm.'[5]

In each of these paintings Meidner presented the city – almost always an approximation of contemporary Berlin – as a battleground where a dynamic life and death struggle between immense external forces is taking place. In this way, like pictures of the storms he sometimes felt raging inside his own head, his cityscapes became a metaphor for the troubled and tormented minds of so many of his generation, trapped in an unforgiving and repressive world. This portrayal of the city as a modern landscape of looming catastrophe is rooted in the language and imagery of the Expressionist writers and poets that Meidner so admired and many of whom he knew.

'I, a torn ocean: I, always a storm: I, the mirror of the external, as wild and chaotic as the world,' wrote Meidner's friend, the poet Georg Heym.[4] It was primarily from Walt Whitman and Alfred Mombert, as much as it was from artists such as El Greco or van Gogh, that Meidner seems to have gained the idea of using both landscape and night sky as a metaphor for his own emotions. Indeed, in a prose-poem entitled 'Greetings from the Painter to the Poets', Meidner salutes these two great influences by describing them in ecstatic landscape terms, praising Whitman as the 'poet of the foaming urban seas' and lauding Mombert as a 'meteor over the mountains'.[5] In the same way that these poets often used the self as a measure and medium for the whole of creation, Meidner began to use their contemporary 'Heimat' – the city – as a painterly conceit through which to express the passion and anxieties of his own increasingly febrile mind.

Apokalyptische Landschaft was painted in 1913 shortly after the original explosion of Meidner's visions in the summer of 1912 had given way to the first of what became a series of mystical revelations. Transforming from an atheistic follower of Nietzsche and Baudelaire into a devout and fearful believer in the Jewish God of his childhood, Meidner began to think of himself increasingly as a lone prophet empowered with a terrifying divine insight. It was perhaps in accordance with this revelation that Meidner seems to have begun to recognize his own personal investment in the tempestuous nature of the scenes he depicted. Already somewhat biblical in their depictions of disruption and disaster, including desert scenes, earthquakes and great floods clearly foreign to Berlin, Meidner, as in this *Apokalyptische Landschaft*, also went so far as to include, almost humorously in this case, a portrait of himself as an apparent victim, caught up in and overwhelmed by the storm of his own visions.

Crossing the invisible borderline between the drama of Meidner's intense nocturnal self-portraits from this period and that of his visionary landscapes, *Apokalyptische*

Meidner, *Apocalyptic Landscape* 1913

Meidner, *The Burning City* 1913

Landschaft is a work that encapsulates within one image almost all the key elements of his art while embracing and even emphasizing the schizophrenic nature of his vision. Among the most prominent of its features common to other 'Apocalyptic' works are those of the foreground figure fleeing and the broken tree, which is clearly intended as a symbol – like the sickle moon that also often appears in Meidner's and other Expressionists' imagery, as a symbol of the forthcoming cosmic harvest – the apocalypse.[6] Indeed, this repeated use of the broken tree may even be a portent of greater disaster, if it is a pictorial reference to the destruction of the mystic world-tree of Norse and Saxon mythology, Yggdrasil. According to Nordic legend, this cosmic world tree, uniting heaven and earth, is the only living thing to survive an apocalypse and, in some cases, the only hope from which the human race might be reborn.[7] Yggdrasil's prominent destruction and limb-like fragmentation in this context, would suggest the utter hopelessness of mankind's future.

Meidner, however, seems to be the only person in the picture aware of any impending catastrophe, although the form of the shattered tree visually echoes the reclining pose of the other main human presence in this work, the shadowy black figure lying seemingly relaxed at its centre. It is likely that this dark reclining persona at the centre of the painting represents some kind of generic lone prophet of the wilderness, similar to those that appeared with great frequency in the works of Meidner's Die Pathetiker colleague, Jakob Steinhardt. In Steinhardt's work it was the emotional impact of such figures that was most important, and their identity, be they based on Job or Jeremiah, was deliberately left open.[8]

A clue to the pictorial purpose of such figures in Meidner's work may be found in another similar reclining figure in Meidner's 1915 painting *Begebenheit in der Vorstadt (Incident in the Suburbs)*, also in this collection. In this later painting there is once again a contrast established between a dark and seemingly peacefully reclining figure and the protagonist in the foreground shown leaving the scene. It is a contrast that seems to speak of two separate psychological responses to the approaching storm – two different 'states of mind': 'those who Stay' and 'those who Go', to paraphrase the title of a famous trilogy of paintings by the Italian Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni that caused quite a stir when it was shown in Berlin at the Der Sturm Gallery in the spring of 1912, where Meidner, along with most of the Berlin avant-garde, had seen it. While Meidner's 'Apocalyptic Landscapes' are fundamentally different in subject matter, many of them clearly share with this famous trilogy its novel attempt to convey pictorially some of the disjunctive emotional and psychological effects of modern urban life.

Meidner's foremost painting in this respect is his 1913 painting entitled *Ich und die Stadt (Me and the City)*, in which his own self-image and that of the city are seemingly merged and juxtaposed as equal counterparts. In this work Meidner's angular features tremble with the same intensity and neurotic energy as the crooked streets and slanted rooftops that seemingly radiate from his head in a manner highly reminiscent of Boccioni's *Simultaneous Vision* of 1912 – another important Futurist painting that he had seen at the Der Sturm Gallery the previous spring.

Painted around the same time, *Apokalyptische Landschaft* is an extended study in just such contrasts, juxtaposing an explosive Meidner with an equally eruptive landscape in what is essentially an even more ambitious version of the same subject, here extended to portray the entire cosmos in uproar. In this work the basic notion of an Apollonian city of man – symbol of civilization and of the temple of the mind – is threatened by and under attack from the chthonic Dionysian forces of chaos in the night sky – which Meidner knew prevailed in the poetry of his friend, Georg Heym. The notion of the sun being in conflict with the moon may be suggested by the dramatic counterbalancing of a red, sun-like orb with the white light behind the mountain, possibly suggesting that the red sun is being eclipsed by the moon – another familiar cosmic symbol of the apocalypse used by Meidner in at least two other 'Apocalyptic Landscapes' of this period. The red cosmic orb in this work could equally be a *Blutmond* (blood-moon) – another portent or agent of apocalypse common to the metaphorical imagery of Expressionist poets. It might even be the 'giant red fireball' that Alfred Mombert described in his 1906 *Mondaufgang (Moonrise)*, where, 'above a struggling barrier of black clouds' and bestowing an 'unknown feeling of God in our souls', it brought delusion and ultimately murder and chaos to the city below.[9]

Meidner, *Apocalyptic Landscape* 1916

Meidner's apocalyptic scenes cannot however be limited or restricted to any one linear narrative or symbolic interpretation. A strong and noticeable element of schism, contrast and counterbalance, of one element being immediately echoed or repeated by its opposite, is common in much of Meidner's work from this period and is especially pronounced in this composition.[10] Here, in addition to the manifest sense of rupture caused throughout the whole picture by the explosion behind the mountain, the sky appears to be both night and day at the same time. Violent and explosive in its nature, it seems to threaten the land, which is itself composed of the apparent opposites of city and desert, and lies like a prostrate and quivering body beneath its dark and infinite expanse. The red rays of the sun are also opposed by the cold white light of an explosion of a comet or meteor in the hills. The sharp, black-silhouetted diagonals of these mountains are mirrored on the other side of the painting by the angular and illuminated man-made forms of the tottering houses. The apparently stable and static reclining form of the black figure at the calm centre of the painting is also balanced, offset and opposed by the frantically fleeing individualized portrait of hysterical Meidner running out of the picture – a figure that simultaneously autographs this entire landscape as a portrait or dream-image of the inside of his mind.

A simultaneous portrait of both a world and a mind split into two, this painting is an extraordinarily intense vision of an entire cosmos feverishly oscillating between contrasting extremes and on the brink of collapse. Foremost among the wildly swinging emotions at the heart of this landscape is the key notion of Meidner's isolation and his attempt to flee, leaving a doomed civilization behind him. This theme of potential escape from a world apparently condemned to destruction is one that runs through many of Meidner's 'Apocalyptic Landscapes' and visions. There is a pervasive sense of the biblical, of the story of Lot and of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as of the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah – two prophets whose sayings Meidner is known to have copied out 'in his best handwriting' and pasted around his studio walls. This biblical tendency is one that grew in Meidner's work, becoming increasingly prevalent after the outbreak of war and reaching its culmination in his portraits of prophets and such 'Apocalyptic Landscapes' as *Der Jüngste Tag (The Last Day)* of 1916, as well as in the other great painting in this collection, *Begebenheit in der Vorstadt* of 1915.

RB

1 Ludwig Meidner, 'Denkwürdiger Sommer', 1964, cited in Carol S. Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, Los Angeles, 1989, p.64.
2 Ludwig Meidner cited in Thomas Grochowiak, *Ludwig Meidner*, Recklinghausen, 1966, p.29.
3 Ludwig Meidner, 'Vision of the Apocalyptic Summer', *Septemberschrei*, Berlin, 1920, p.8.
4 Georg Heym, diary entry, quoted in Frank Whitford, 'The Work of Ludwig Meidner', *Studio International* February, 1972, p.56.
5 Ludwig Meidner, 'From the Barracks in Kottbus', 1917, quoted in Thomas Grochowiak, op. cit., p.150.
6 See Frederick S. Levine, *The Apocalyptic Vision: the Art of Franz Marc as German Expressionism*, New York, 1979, pp.115–17.
7 According to the story of Ragnarok, the great apocalyptic battle that signifies the *Götterdämmerung* – the twilight of the Gods – Yggdrasil still stands after all the giants and gods have destroyed one another. Hiding in its branches are *Lif* (life) and *Lifthrasir* (desiring life), the man and the woman who become the primal parents of later generations of mankind. See Lorena Laura Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology*, Santa Barbara, 2004, p.206.
8 Only vaguely defined, almost as if it were a burnt hole in the central rock at the heart of the work, and not a man at all, this strange and ambiguous figure is by no means unique in such apocalyptic scenes. In an early 'Apocalyptic' drawing of 1912 where the path of a comet seems about to crash into a town, Meidner rendered a similarly relaxed reclining figure seemingly enjoying the ominous prospect of a town's destruction while the sun set behind it. Because of its almost complete blackness, the reclining figure in the painting has been compared to that of Lesser Ury's 1897 painting of one of Meidner's favourite biblical seers, the prophet Jeremiah, lying in shadow alone under the mystery of a starry night sky, but the parallel is otherwise tenuous. Another prominent and equally mysterious figure of Meidner's shown reclining in the midst of an apparently apocalyptic landscape is that in the Berlin Nationalgalerie's famous and equally enigmatic *Apocalyptic Landscape* of 1912. Here a naked figure, somewhat reminiscent of El Greco's Laocoon – another prophet doomed by the gods for his prophetic insight – lies sleeping beside a peaceful campfire complete with tents or teepees, while all around him is thrown into chaos. This figure has prompted even wider speculation as to his identity ranging from the notion that he is an exhausted refugee or a noble savage to, most bizarrely, a sex-changing transsexual (Donald Gordon, *Expressionism, Art and Idea*, New Haven, 1987, pp.40–41).
9 As in the work of many Expressionists of this period, particularly the poems of Georg Trakl and the paintings of Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele for example, the pairing of the colours red and white or sometimes red and black were often used as a form of simplistic colour symbolism signifying the counterbalancing forces of Eros and Thanatos that underpin all creation. See also Alfred Mombert's 'Mondaufgang', written in 1906 in *Alfred Mombert, Dichtungen, Gedichte – Werk*, vol.1, Munich, 1963, pp.48–49.
10 The idea of a ying and yang-like balance of opposite cosmic forces establishing some kind of balance in the heavens is an ancient Hermetic belief that reappeared with increasing prominence in the nineteenth century and informed the theories of Bachofen and Nietzsche as well as many of the more loosely thought-out ideologies and pseudo-sciences of the nineteenth century. This notion of a mystic, cosmological balance of opposites was indeed key to the cosmic aesthetic of Alfred Mombert. As Raymond Furness has pointed out, for Mombert, there were four great 'wounds' that bleed through creation: 'Sonne, Feuer, Weib und Meer', while much of his poetry attempts to 'express how the vital tension between complimentary opposites pulses through eternity and also through the eternal recurrence of all things'. See Raymond Furness, *Zarathustra's Children: A Study of a Lost Generation of German Writers*, Woodbridge, 2000, p.55.

14
Begebenheit in der Vorstadt / The Incident in the Suburbs 1915
Ludwig Meidner

Oh Berlin! You guillotine of all my hopes for joy. You hangman of all my delicacy, purity and virtue. Why was I trapped so long in your painful net? Later I'm going to live only in the country, close to the lonely and infinite openness of the plains. (Ludwig Meidner)[1]

In January 1915, after having lived in Dresden for much of the previous year in a shared studio with his close friend Ernst Wilhelm Lotz, Meidner returned to Berlin. Lotz, an Expressionist poet who had enthusiastically volunteered for the army in August 1914, was killed at the Front only a few weeks after his enlistment. Meidner, who both dreaded and opposed the war from its outset, was devastated by the loss of his friend and soon afterwards fled to Berlin, where he rented a run-down attic studio only a few streets away from his earlier garret room in Friedenau. This time Meidner based himself high up above the nearby suburb of Wilmersdorf, and it was there in the autumn of 1915, after months of crisis, that the religious themes and biblical imagery that had for a long time underpinned his visionary Expressionism, finally broke through to the surface of his art in a series of overtly religious works.

Long feared to have been lost or even destroyed, *Begebenheit in der Vorstadt* is one of the most important works from the brief period that Meidner spent in wartime Berlin before he too was drafted into the army in 1916. Reproduced here for the first time in colour, the painting depicts a moment of departure in the form of an apparent struggle between two central and contrasting figures on the outskirts of a city that, like so many of Meidner's 'Apocalyptic' towns, is seemingly under threat from an oncoming storm. A typically turbulent and disorienting composition dominated by a tempestuous sky full of ominous portents and jagged and electrifying blue and white light that shoots like lightning throughout the composition, the work is a combination of 'Apocalyptic Landscape' and the kind of sinuous figure compositions that Meidner was soon to adopt in his portraits of biblical prophets and sibyls.

While the mood of the painting is dominated by the dramatic, almost convulsive sky with its threatening white light, apocalyptic sickle moon and even the ominous presence of an observation balloon of the kind then in frequent use at the Front, the main subject of the work is the enigmatic Cain and Abel-like struggle taking place between two anonymous figures.[2] Both clad in black, like the fearful uniform citizens of Meidner's very last 'Apocalyptic Landscape', his ominous judgement day picture entitled *Der Jüngste Tag (The Last Day)* of 1916, one has fallen, seemingly pushed down to the ground by the other more dominant standing figure. Wide-eyed, the suppressed figure stares back towards the city seemingly reaching out for it, vainly clutching at the air. The other man, grim, determined and apparently focused on a distant horizon or goal, strides forcefully past him, marching away from the city as if out of the picture.

The dominant element in this scene of apparent flight and altercation in the face of an oncoming storm is the coexistence of two contrasting states of mind, here diametrically opposed and prominently rendered in the form of a physical struggle. Like the biblical story of Lot and his wife leaving the condemned city of Sodom, or the fratricide of Cain and Abel, or even Romulus and Remus, this painting also seems indicative of an eternal law of opposites and the inevitable clash between them.

Something of this is indicated in the way that these two figures compositionally form a unity at the centre of the canvas – as if they were one single, double-headed form facing in two opposite directions. Not unlike the intentional ambiguity established in Meidner's earlier portrait of Alfred Mombert, where the poet was shown simultaneously both seated and running away, the double figure in the present work also seems to deliberately assert an image not just of conflict, but of paradox and even self-contradiction.

Scenes depicting the fleeing from a landscape of catastrophe are, of course, fairly common in Meidner's art of this time, but this work appears to be the only one in his oeuvre in which the act of leaving is depicted not just as the main subject of the painting but also as a struggle and conflict between two men. In the same way that all of Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes are psychological landscapes or mental self-portraits that provide a revealing insight into the artist's turbulent and often feverish mental state in the years running up to the First World War, this painting too, with its imagery of panic, confusion, struggle and conflict, seems reflective of the changed atmosphere of 1915. Painted at a time of great uncertainty, transition, and tragedy for Meidner, this bold and assertive representation of two men clumsily struggling against one another while caught up and lost in one of the artist's apocalyptic scenes is highly evocative of Meidner's own tormented personal situation at this time.

Underlying the scene – as it did the entire landscape of Europe at this time – is the dark and all-pervasive presence of the war. Meidner, like so many of his colleagues who had resisted the initial 'hurrah enthusiasm' of August 1914, was now under permanent threat of a military call-up to a war that he didn't believe in. The war had also seeped into and poisoned every aspect of his generation's former lives, shattering their Expressionist dreams and murdering their hopes for a better world in the future. As a friend of Meidner's, the writer Wieland Herzfelde, noted of this period, there was a widespread feeling amongst the avant-garde that the repressive and authoritarian Imperial powers against which they had always instinctively rebelled, had now forced their international brotherhood of artists into a divisive war amongst themselves. This pervasive view that a young generation was now slaughtering each other solely for the maintenance and financial gain of the ruling powers was certainly key to the group of artists and writers that Meidner still regularly entertained in his studio on Wednesday evenings.[3] Indeed, it is just such a portrait of brother fighting brother that another young member of this group, Heinrich Maria Davringhausen, made in his large anti-war painting of 1916 entitled *Der Irre (The Madman)*, in which a young German and French soldier are depicted like two demented puppets locked in the embrace of a fight to the death.[4]

For Meidner at this time, it must have seemed, on a personal level at least, that his whole world was closing in on him. With 'brother turning against brother', as the prophet Isaiah had forewarned, he was condemned to watch his generation tearing itself apart.[5] His diary entry of 19 November 1915 records: 'What tormenting, tumultuous, exhausting months! I was examined for the army, fears before and after. There was anxiety, uncertainty about my work, no friends, no friendship, no love, excessive and almost irreligious frenzy, yearning, a burning desire for profound union with God. There was war nausea and unknown, menacing things made me shake, again and again a foreboding of death (especially just before falling asleep, hallucinations, quickly fading visions – but never a great and splendid ecstasy). Yesterday evening on the 18th November, or rather this morning around three o 'clock Ernst Wilhelm Lotz's spirit visited me. I had gotten his hat out. The rhythms of his poems went through my head. He came; I felt it very plainly.'[6]

While the city had always been a battleground in Meidner's paintings – a dangerous but dynamic and explosive place – its suburbs represented the spiritual desolation of an urban wasteland. In the vain attempts of the petty bourgeois to keep up appearances amidst the encroaching privations of wartime, the suburban landscape began to provoke in Meidner, as it did in his friend George Grosz, a profound feeling of nausea and revulsion. 'You suburbs on the Oder,' Meidner later wrote, recalling the outskirts of Breslau for example, 'how bold you are in your cheap whore's perfumes. The petit bourgeois stuff their bellies. Suspicious stomping reverberates in your nooks and crannies and the dogs mew excruciatingly and rend their fur.'[7]

It was also this desolation of the suburbs that Meidner called to mind as an image of the ravages of war while stationed as a prison guard during his service in the army in the winter of 1917. 'Deafening frost descends from the eastern sky… Icicle-night paralyses the suburbs. The cold flies from the moon, which smacks its teeth… In the suburbs the women weep. Curses rise up out of basement holes and rats' nests. The want of coal screams from the windows. Influenza nests in all the corners. The little ones whimper and their whooping-cough cries pierce the day. The baker has nothing in his shop. He buries his hands deep in his pockets and shivers and above him the day-owls cry "death, death" and the flags flap noiselessly in the north-east.'[8] The outskirts of the city and its suburbs were therefore an appropriate backdrop for a portrait of the desolate state of mankind in 1915, which, on both a personal and a more universal level, is ultimately what *Begebenheit in der Vorstadt* is. Aping the allegorical language of the Bible, the painting is a depiction of man at his most elemental and base, struggling with his brother man, both trapped in a hostile wilderness – a landscape of desolation and doom.

Meidner, *The Last Day* 1916

Meidner, *Portrait of Alfred Mombert* 1912

An apparent conflation of the biblical stories of Cain and Abel and Lot and his wife departing Sodom, this painting is an extension on the theme of fleeing away from the sins of the city and all the torments, attractions and trappings of the modern world it represents, which runs through much of Meidner's apocalyptic imagery from these years. In this sense this picture invokes not only Meidner's ambiguous personal feelings towards the city and all that it represents, but also something of the fundamental nature of the human condition – of two different basic human responses to catastrophe when reduced to the level of pure instinct and the struggle for survival. In this respect *Begebenheit in der Vorstadt* stands as a powerful metaphor for the divisive influence of war on what Meidner now knew to be his own tragically doomed generation.

RB

1 Ludwig Meidner, 'Aschaffenburg Journal', August-September 1918, cited in Victor H. Miesel, ed., *Voices of German Expressionism*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970, p.184.

2 In accordance with Meidner's fear of death-bearing comets and apocalyptic skies he seems to have held a disproportionate fear of all aircraft, particularly zeppelins and balloons that, before the war, he observed at Berlin's Tempelhof airfield. Also, in an article in *Art* magazine in which he interpreted several of Meidner's apocalyptic paintings as reworkings of famous biblical scenes, Gerd Presler interpreted this painting as a straightforward representation of Cain and Abel. See Gerd Presler, 'Ludwig Meidner', *Art*, September 1988 p.58.

3 'We would have been ashamed to judge people on the basis of their nationality (and) to consider them enemies,' Herzfelde recalled. 'The Russian Chagall, the Frenchman Apollinaire, they were close to us, they felt and searched and experimented as we did. The officers and the professors, even if they happened to speak German, what difference did they make to us? How could they expect enthusiasm or "sacrifice of blood and toil" from us? Some of our friends had already fallen… Franz Marc, the "Blue Knight", the young poets Georg Trakl and Alfred Lichtenstein, Weisgerber and Macke, the Munich painters, were buried somewhere and rotting and with them also the work they might have created. We too were threatened by the same – we didn't call it fate – we called it madness, crime and murder.' Wieland Herzfelde, 'The Curious Merchant from Holland', *Harpers Magazine*, no.187, 1943, pp.569–76.

4 Meidner's own 'Hymn of Brotherly Love' written in 1917 also takes this theme as a basis for a new Socialism that he, like many Expressionists, hoped would emerge after the war. See 'Hymne der Brüderliebe', from *Septemberschrei*, Berlin, 1920, reproduced (in English) in Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism, Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, Berkeley, 1993, pp.170–72.

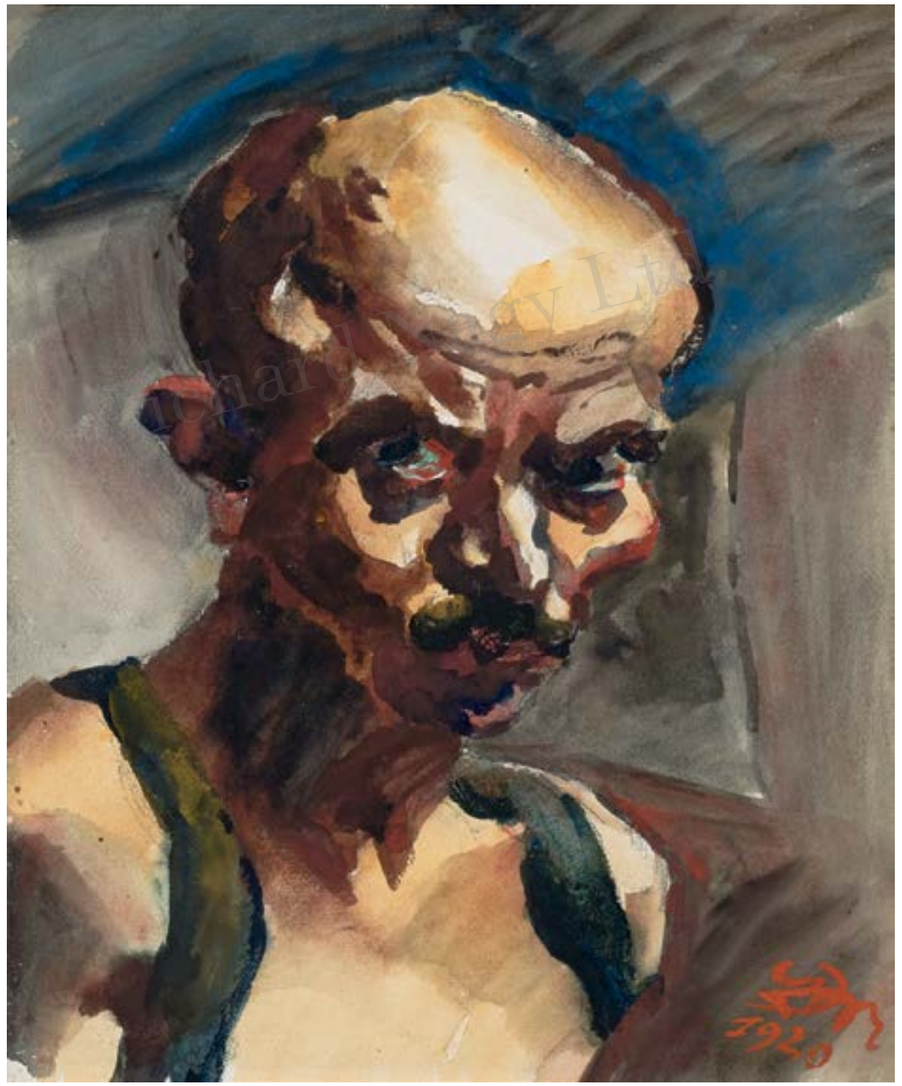
5 Isaiah 19:2.

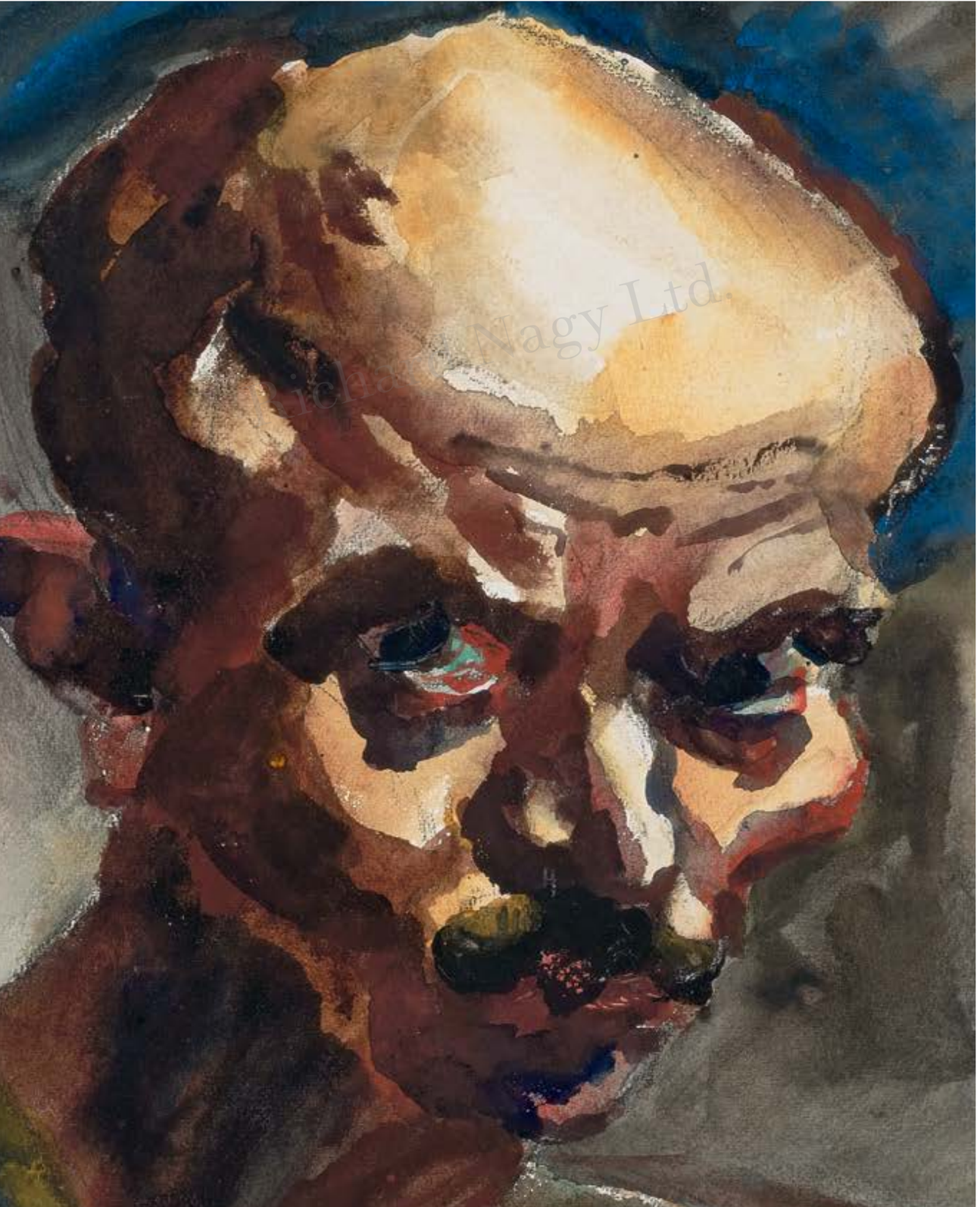
6 Ludwig Meidner, 'Journal 1915', reproduced in L. Kunz, ed., *Ludwig Meidner, Dichter, Maler und Cafés*, Zurich, 1973, p.41.

7 Ludwig Meidner, 'Hymne auf den hellen Tag' (Hymn to the light of Day), in *Im Nacken das Sternemeer* (The Sea of Stars at my Back), Leipzig, 1918, pp.55–58, trans. in *Ludwig and Else Meidner*, exh. cat., London, 2002, p.27.

8 Ludwig Meidner, 'Winter Anno 17', in *Im Nacken das Sternemeer* Leipizig, 1918, pp.49–50 trans. in *Ludwig and Else Meidner*, exh. cat., London, 2002, p.34.

15
Selbstbildnis / Self-Portrait 1920
Ludwig Meidner





I, Ludwig Meidner, battered lump of clay, ostracised, apocalyptic, my skull swept by the winter wind… My last picture is bleeding on the easel. It resembles open, festering wounds. One can still see how the damp paint shines lushly. Oh, and there is the field of work, bloody, covered in sweat, and the paint rags screech around and it reeks of turpentine and my palette lies long like an open belly, and my hands tremble when I look at it all. (Ludwig Meidner)[1]

'As inadequate and inaccurate as the stylistic term "Expressionism" often seems – on the one hand, in itself, it refers to nothing beyond what has been the essence of art for all periods, while on the other it is so narrow as to tell us nothing at all about artists like Marc, Lehmbruck, Kokoschka, Klee and is therefore useless as a general category for modernism. Nevertheless, among the notables of our day there is one who must be called an "Expressionist", if only for the sake of the phonetic vitality of the word: Ludwig Meidner. Everything he does is expression, eruption, explosion. This is the hottest crater of a volcanic epoch, spewing out the lava of its visions in unpredictable bursts and with irresistible power, in the relentless swell of inner fire. There is probably no other artist whose hand is directed as absolutely as Meidner's by the will to give tongue to his latest explosiveness, the vaulting of his spiritual urgings, his furious energies, to force, to hurl out his inmost being on canvas and paper.'[2]

These words, published in 1920, are among the first written on Meidner and remain perhaps the most apt and accurate description of the artist and the extraordinarily vital and expressive body of work that he produced in the years running up to the First World War. The paintings, drawings, prints, writings and prose-poems that Meidner made in a seemingly manic rush of creativity between 1912 and 1920 are among the most dynamic, insightful and representative works of Expressionism and the entire era it defined. But, as with all eruptions and explosions, no matter how powerful or spectacular, Meidner's extraordinary burst of creative energy and formal power was dramatically short-lived. 'Expressionism', like so much else in Germany in the wake of the Great War, had by this time entered into a state of crisis. Indeed, by 1923, when the then thirty-nine-year-old Meidner publicly renounced his earlier 'Expressionist' self in an autobiographical article, he too knew that his best work was already behind him.[3]

As it was for many of these artists, for Meidner, the violent and apparently visionary nature of his art was as much an outward expression of his own personal demons as an articulation of the wider fears and concerns of this tremorous and febrile age. Indeed, with hindsight, it can clearly be seen that the innate conflict and violence of his supposedly prophetic 'Apocalyptic' paintings describe as much the long and torturous journey of Meidner's soul as they do any foresight of the destruction and existential chaos wrought by the war. Meidner's landscapes of these years are very much portraits of what Eberhard Roters described, as the artist's own 'inner countenance', while at the same time his portraits and self-portraits are themselves painterly landscapes that powerfully convey the turbulent and animated nature of their sitters' inner conflict and deep existential unease.[4]

'It was a strange and doom-laden time,' Meidner recalled, 'in those days the great universal storm was already baring its teeth and casting its glaring yellow shadow across my whimpering brush-hand… My brain bled dreadful visions. I could see nothing but a thousand skeletons jigging in a row.

Many graves and buried cities writhed across the plains… I feared those visions, although the finished products gave me a strange, warm feeling of satisfaction, a slightly satanic joy.'[5] This strange mixture of fear and joy produced by these visions, and Meidner's ability to capture them, came about because somewhere inside of him, like many of his generation, he masochistically welcomed the notion of a cosmic or divine retribution against the sins of modern man. 'I cried out inwardly for the far-off rattle and the trumpet blasts of future catastrophes,' Meidner admitted. 'In my self-portraits was I not compelled to paint streams of blood and mangled wounds? Did I not crave the comet-tails and blazing volcanoes in every background?'[6]

Executed in Berlin in 1920, this watercolour is one of the last of Meidner's self-portraits to be painted in the bold and feverish style of his Expressionist period.

A nocturnal self-portrait presenting what Meidner once described as his 'Nachtgesicht' (nocturnal visage), it depicts the thirty-six-year-old artist standing semi-naked at his easel, his gaunt, tormented, malnourished features frozen in that near trance-like state of manic intensity that he perpetually brought to such painterly acts of introspection. Emerging from the dim half-light of his gloomy and impoverished studio room, with his bloodshot eyes wildly piercing the bald, moonlit dome of his forehead and the tight craggy features of his face set into deep shadow, this dark and brooding image lays bare the existential core of Meidner's art and the personal intensity of his dark and lonely night-time journeys of the soul.

Making use of what was for Meidner the relatively rare medium of watercolour and his prodigious gifts as a draughtsman, this self-portrait, with its Rembrandt-like use of dark muted brown colours, echoes the mood and style of many of the etched self-portraits that Meidner was making at this time, which are equally Rembrandtesque.

From the paintings of van Gogh and Munch onwards, portraiture, and the self-portrait in particular, was one of the key elements of Expressionist art, playing a crucial role in the movement's celebration of self and psyche. Meidner not only produced some of Expressionism's greatest portraits and self-portraits, he also painted and drew all those around him – the painters, poets, writers, editors, actors and play-wrights of the time – with such passion and devotion that his work has become an essential document of the Expressionist era. Indeed, as George Grosz remembered, it was not possible to pay a visit to Meidner's studio without him making a portrait of his guest, such was his passion and compulsion to get down onto paper the energy of those around him.

For Meidner, making a portrait was a mystical journey into the soul of his subject. 'The visage of man,' he wrote,

Meidner, *Me and the City* 1913

Meidner, *My Nocturnal Visage* 1913

'is a reflection of divine glory,' even though painting it was, 'more often… a feat of slaughter with bloody scraps of flesh'. Bring the 'forehead's frown, root of the nose and eyes close together,' Meidner demanded, as a means of gaining intensity, and then, 'like a burrowing animal, bore down into the inexplicable ground of the pupil and the whites of your sitter's eyes and do not let your pen rest until you have tied your sitter's soul to your own in a pathetic bond. Sink down into the intimacy, into the moist and fearful intimacy of a pair of lips. Observe the point or the scarred softness of the chin. The ornament of the ear should charm you again and again, as should the flaming hair around gaunt cheeks; the prickly bristles, the little hairs at the mouth should be a pleasant taste for your flitting pen.'[7]

Yet exceeding even this passion to establish a 'pathetic bond' with the inner beings of those around him was Meidner's compulsive need to venture, time and again, into the depths of self and gnaw at the bare bones of his own tormented soul. Of the many Expressionists – Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Beckmann, Oskar Kokoschka and Otto Dix among them – who frequently painted themselves, only Egon Schiele rivals Meidner in the obsessive nature of his need to check the path of his soul against the minute but ever-changing details of his outer countenance. But whereas Schiele's art can often seem mannered and even melodramatic in its persistent depiction of the artist as a beatific martyr to his cause, Meidner's anguish and suffering always comes across as compellingly real. Schiele's art, in this respect, is betrayed by its beauty and its creator's exquisite command of his media and devastating facility, whereas Meidner's is distinguished by the intensity of the artist's struggle.

'You out there who look into our rooms longingly, what do you know of the flagellation, the laboured breathing, the shivers of cold and the feverishness that accompany daily creative work! Oh, to dance on an icy mountain ridge in eternal solitude, to balance on a knife's sharp edge, so close to the stars, but always with an abyss of tears yawning on either side. I hear the strangled whimpering down below from the artists ne'er redeemed, always straining. I see my own body wallow in misery, but in the end my pining hand twitches for the paintbrush.'[8]

RB

Meidner, *Self-Portrait* 1935

1 Ludwig Meidner, *Im Nacken das Sternemeer*, Leipzig, 1918, pp.61–63.
2 Willi Wolfradt, *Ludwig Meidner, Das junge Deutschland*, Berlin, 1920, vol.3, no.1.
3 Ludwig Meidner, 'Eine autobiographische Plauderei', in *Junge Kunst*, Leipzig, 1923, vol.4, pp.8–12.
4 Eberhard Roters, 'The Painter's Nights', in Carol S. Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, Los Angeles, 1989, p.72.
5 Ludwig Meidner, 'Denkwürdiger Sommer', 1964, in ibid., p.64.
6 Ludwig Meidner, 'Vision of the Apocalyptic Summer', *Septemberschrei*, Berlin, 1920, p.8.
7 Ludwig Meidner, *Im Nacken das Sternemeer*, Leipzig, 1918, p.32–33.
8 Ludwig Meidner, *Im Nacken das Sternemeer*, Leipzig, 1918, pp.61–63.

16
Tempo der Strasse / The Tempo of the Street 1918
George Grosz

Art, in its production and direction, depends on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be one in which the thousand fold problems of the day are revealed in its consciousness, an art which allows itself to be noticeably shattered by last week's explosions, which is forever trying to collect itself after the shock of recent days. The best and most challenging artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the turbulent whirl of life, who, with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their time. (Dada Manifesto)[1]

Grosz painted *Tempo der Strasse* in the spring of 1918. A kaleidoscopic cross-section of Berlin rendered in a Cubo-Futurist style, it depicts the city night as a dark and frenzied psychological onslaught of exhilarating sights, sounds and sensations. The painting is one of a series of era-defining oil paintings of Berlin at night that Grosz made during the turbulent last years of the First World War when, in the wake of the Russian Revolution and with a debilitating stalemate at the Front, Germany was a land slowly sinking towards catastrophe. This extraordinarily perceptive and even prophetic series of paintings began with his work *Grossstadt (Metropolis)* in the last weeks of 1916, and concluded with Grosz's vast political portrait of revolutionary Berlin, *Deutschland, ein Wintermärchen (Germany, a Winter Fairytale)* completed during the November Revolution of 1918.

Painted between 3 April and 6 May 1918, *Tempo der Strasse* is one of at least three paintings, each depicting a different thematic aspect of the city life that Grosz made in conjunction with one another. In addition to *Tempo der Strasse*, the other two oils he made at this time were the large *Widmung an Oskar Panizza (Dedicated to Oskar Panizza)*, 1917, and the now lost painting *Im 28. Stock (On the 28th Floor)*, 1917–18. The subject of *Widmung an Oskar Panizza* is a parade of death painted in the manner of Brueghel and Bosch, and as Grosz declared at the time, as a 'protest against mankind gone mad'.[2] *Im 28. Stock* is a modernist portrait of bestial capitalists living a decadent 'high-life' in a vast mechanized city of skyscrapers. In contrast, *Tempo der Strasse* records the irrepressible pulse, dynamism and gritty excitement of the city streets. A colourful invocation of what Grosz at the time lauded as the 'emotion of big cities', *Tempo der Strasse* portrays the artist's own experience of the city streets as a simultaneous montage of signs, symbols and events. Here modern urban existence is defined as a precarious balancing act amidst widespread chaos and insanity and between the intoxicating pleasures and the perilous dangers of the city night. It is a persuasive vision of life as a 'dance on the edge of a volcano', here symbolized by the lone and central figure of an attractive female tightrope walker dancing her way on a high-wire across the vortex of this convoluted collage of metropolitan imagery, while the admiring profile of Grosz himself looks on.

Created towards the end of the First Word War at a time when Grosz, having been declared mentally unfit for military service, was bitterly using his work to remonstrate against the so-called sanity of a society that still believed in perpetuating the conflict, the prevailing mood of these city paintings is, as the poet Theodor Däubler was the first to point out, 'apocalyptic'.[3] Deriving in part perhaps from his friend Ludwig Meidner's own feverish premonitions of apocalyptic towns and landscapes, Grosz used a deconstructive Cubo-Futurism in these 1917 and 1918 oils to render a fragmentary sequence of visionary and prophetic portraits of war-time Berlin as a bubbling cauldron of mechanized greed, decadence, gaudy glamour and crime. Such a sense of mass hysteria is central to the seemingly endless flood of grotesque figures spewing forth along the city grid like sewage in *Widmung an Oskar Panizza*, for example. In contrast, *Im 28. Stock* depicts a more specific and isolated study of the corrosive power of modern capitalism to turn men into beasts through the depiction of an avaricious top-hatted 'white-slave trader' making money off the sale of naked female flesh to his lustful, dog-faced clientele.[4]

Tempo der Strasse, as its title suggests, is a work that attempts to give pictorial form to the dizzying pace and electrifying experience of the modern city. To convey what Grosz once described as the mad simultaneous 'opium-rush' of emotions – a convoluted mixture of excitement, fear, desire and danger – that he experienced pulsing through the streets of what was, at this time, both the fastest-growing

Grosz, *Metropolis* 1916

metropolis on earth and the chaotic vortex of a war-torn country teetering on the brink of collapse and revolution.[5] Adopting the cult of simultaneity then widespread in much Expressionist and Futurist poetry, for Grosz the 'tempo of the street' was a phenomenon that could only be expressed through the simultaneist device of the 'Querschnitt' (cross-section). In Grosz's hands, this was a pictorial technique that made use of Cubo-Futurist polarization to allow a myriad of events all to be viewed and perceived simultaneously as one multifaceted, if also fragmented, kaleidoscopic whole.

Cutting through the streets of the city to reveal both the interior and exterior view of things, fusing sign and imagery, people, machines and shadows, street-lights and stars in the night sky, and the blood red of a murder with the crimson glare of the brothel, Grosz's use of 'cross-section' was also a distinctly modernist attack on the apparent validity of a single, orthodox and coherent view of life. Highly cinematic in its effects, the multiple imagery and perpetually shifting scenes of Grosz's cross-sectional viewpoint brought the 'cut and paste' techniques of the film-editor to bear on painting and drawing in a way that anticipated such great later filmic depictions of the city as Walter Ruttman's 1927 *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* and Dziga Vertov's 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera*. Indeed, Grosz, a great devotee of the cinema, had recently learned some of the practical techniques of filmmaking through his collaboration with John Heartfield on a series of propaganda film projects for the Universum Film AG prior to making this picture. Together, these two artists would soon apply this same 'cut-and paste' cross-sectional view of the city to a pioneering series of photomontages critiquing the disorder of their time.[6] According to Harry Graf Kessler, for one of these film projects Grosz wanted 'to create a kind of graphic World-Chronicle (or monthly magazine) in film in which the public would see a hand actively caricaturing in a grotesque way all the current events of that month'.[7]

Grosz's chronicle-like 'Querschnitt' vision of the city – used to such effect in *Tempo der Strasse* – also gives a similarly 'deconstructive' view of the world. By presenting modern life as a frantic but also accidental or chance-driven assemblage of disparate though colliding parts, it serves a deliberately anti-classical and even anti-art purpose – one that both anticipates and reflects what was at this time his newly emerging stance as a Dadaist and founder member of Berlin's newly formed Club Dada.[8] Modern, even mechanical in its own nature, its cinematic and also simultaneous perspective ultimately provides an egalitarian means of representation that sets every element on the same plane. In this way it is a technique that not only flies in the face of all established style or conventional artistry, but also denies any notion of hierarchy or purposeful order. It is therefore a fitting and appropriate pictorial technique that attacks at the very foundations of tradition, classical order, reason and indeed any other supposedly fixed rule or standard of the kind to which, at this time, the oppressive Imperial regime in Germany was then desperately attempting to cling, in its vain attempts at providing a moral justification for continuing the war. 'In our struggle against the stupidity and arbitrary brutality of the present government, it no longer makes sense for a productive artist to work in old modes,' Grosz was later to write.[9] 'Film,' he declared, 'is the most modern pictorial medium that we have. It will produce the art of the future. If you really want to know what the world looks like, you go to a movie, not to an art exhibit.'[10]

In contrast to denying the all-too visible truth about the war and hanging on to outdated ideals of order, reason, nobility and sacrifice for the fatherland, Grosz's paintings from this period embrace the ugly but exhilarating essence of modernity itself and attempt to depict it as it is – as an awesome, unstoppable and constantly flowing mechanical tide pulsing through all the apparent chaos of the world. Like *Grossstadt* before it, *Tempo der Strasse* is a work that both invokes and exposes the great mechanical, transformative and even revolutionary power of modernity. The apocalyptic nature of this picture is indicated, as elsewhere in Grosz's work of this time, by the blood-red full moon hanging in the night sky in the top left of the painting, while the industrial and mechanical power of modern times is loudly emblazoned in several places across the canvas in the repeated signs and symbols of the many all-powerful, newly industrialized energy businesses. The logo of *AEG* – the *Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft* (General Electricity Company), the first company in Germany to employ a complete brand, logo, design and corporate identity created for it by the architect and designer Peter Behrens – here dominates the lower left of the painting. Above it the word *Kohlen* (Coal) appears with, at the top of the painting, the *Schlägel und Eisen* cross-hammers of a mining company. These are the most prominent signs clearly visible in the picture. Each represents the industrial and corporate might powering the hectic 'tempo' of the city night.[11]

In his paintings *Grossstadt*, *Die Abenteurer (The Adventurer)* and *Tempo der Strasse,* the prominent appearance of a Star-Spangled Banner asserts a powerful Americanizing presence at work within the heart of the modern metropolis. In *Tempo der Strasse*, a Stars and Stripes is shown directly alongside a noticeably smaller black, white and red flag of Imperial Germany, as if to symbolize this point. Similarly, Grosz's use of the word 'tempo' in the title of this picture invokes a sense of musicality and America's most important, infectious and all-pervasive cultural export

Grosz, *Dedicated to Oskar Panizza* 1917

at this time, ragtime music and jazz.[12] Jazz was for Grosz and his generation an entire cultural phenomenon symptomatic of the fast, syncopated tempo of the ever-increasing pace of modernity, the city and the extraordinary, exotic and mechanized rhythms of America. 'Scream into the world,' Grosz wrote while at work on *Tempo der Strasse*, describing his working practice and just the sort of fusion of music and mechanics that the picture appears to portray.[13]

By the time that Grosz was painting *Tempo der Strasse* in April 1918, America had also become Germany's enemy. For Grosz, however, America's entry into the war in April 1917 was an event that only served to reinforce his own emerging sense of purpose and identity as a committed opponent of his country's ruling powers and to further politicize his artistic aims of heralding their destruction. After his first discharge from the German military in May 1915, Georg Gross and his friend Helmut Herzfelde had defiantly Americanized their own names by officially changing them to John Heartfield and George Grosz in order to identify themselves not just as Anglicized outsiders from the Reich, but also with the kind of forward-thinking modernity that the idea and ideal of America represented.[14]

The invocation of America in so many of Grosz's drawings and paintings of this period is therefore in part an act of defiance. City paintings such as *Grossstadt, Die Abenteurer* and *Tempo der Strasse* that parade the Stars and Stripes are both a paean to and a critique of modernity. Depicting a kind of idealized vision of the gritty urban chaos of modernity that Grosz envisaged taking place in America, these paintings also answer this with a caustic representation of its underside, the manifest dystopia that Grosz was witnessing at first hand in all that was modern Berlin. It is a divided world that Grosz depicts and it is in the representation of this division that his paintings strike at the heart of the modern dilemma – at the simultaneous attraction and the alienation that the metropolis instils in its inhabitants.

It is precisely this notion of the Americanized modernism of the city and of metropolitan living as an increasingly difficult and dangerous balancing act that is invoked in *Tempo der Strasse* and indeed symbolized at its centre by the depiction of a tightrope walker dancing her way across a high-wire strung over the city streets. Because they too were societal outsiders, acrobats and circus performers were popular figures in much German Expressionist art from this period. The 'Seiltänzer' or tightrope walker was especially so, as this dangerous and graceful art seemed most of all to symbolize the precarious balancing act that is modern man's walk through life. It was just such a symbol of a tightrope walker that had been used by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Also sprach Zarathustra* to illustrate an existential parallel between the dangerous, daring and graceful art of the tightrope-walker and the path of man. 'We are all tightrope walkers,' Max Beckmann was also later to declare, 'With them it is the same as with artists, and so with all humanity. As the Chinese philosopher Lao-tse says, we have "the desire to achieve balance, and to *keep* it".'[15]

For Grosz too the 'Seiltänzer' was a favourite subject featuring in his drawings and watercolours ever since he had first witnessed 'The Greatest Show on Earth', the Barnum and Bailey circus, in the small town in Pomerania where he had grown up. In particular Grosz recalled a 'mysterious sweet charm emanating from the tight-corseted and voluptuous-hipped female performers. With the assistance of opera glasses one could admire fleshy glories that used otherwise to be most diligently concealed. Well-rounded thighs encased in silk tights played a prominent role in my imagination'.[16]

Between 1914 and 1915 Grosz made numerous sketches and drawings of acrobats and circus performers, especially female tightrope walkers such as the internationally renowned

Lina Pantzer, whom he presumably saw performing in Berlin at this time.[17] Indeed, in conjunction with his planned portfolio of scenes from the big city to be entitled *Grossstadt,* Grosz also aimed to publish a portfolio of drawings of acrobats. The painterly culmination of these acrobat drawings is his oil *Seiltänzerin (Tightrope Walker)*, 1918, a picture in which the voluptuous and tight-corseted female tightrope walker of his fantasies appears amidst the haze of the circus lights walking the wire while a lone admiring clown looks on. The simple juxtaposition of dominant female grace and foolish subordinate onlooker has close parallels with many of Grosz's images of Circe and other dominant femme fatales lording it over their male admirers, prompting them to suicide and murder. With its image of an erotic and seemingly topless female tightrope walker with top hat and parasol, juxtaposed alongside another erotic female torso clad only in stockings, a clown's face and Grosz's own profile, in *Tempo der Strasse* Grosz has set the *Seiltänzerin's* potent mix of eroticism and danger at the heart of this city scene.

Like Kirchner's depictions of gothic streetwalkers patrolling the city streets, this image of an erotic tightrope walker and clown embodies in figurative form the simultaneous allure and repulsion of city life that captivated so many young artists of this period, seemingly pulling them like moths ever closer towards a fatal flame. City life, Grosz asserts in *Tempo der Strasse*, is a tightrope walk over the abyss with death ever-present. And, as if to reiterate this, the stylish figure of Death in the form of a dandified top-hatted city-wanderer or 'flâneur', similar to that which can later be found in Grosz's painting dedicated to Edgar Allen Poe of November 1918, appears underneath Grosz's own profile, joyfully striding out into the chaos of the city night.

RB

1 Richard Huelsenbeck, 'Dadaistisches Manifest', read at the first 'Great Berlin Dada Soirée', April 1918, reproduced in *Dada Almanach,* Berlin, 1920, p.36.

2 'In 1917… I began to draw what moved me in little satirical drawings. Art for Art's sake seemed nonsense to me… I wanted to protest against this world of mutual destruction… everything in me was darkly protesting. I had seen heroism… but it appeared to me blind. I saw misery, want stupor, hunger, cowardice, ghastliness. Then I painted a big picture: in a sinister street at night a hellish procession of dehumanized figures rolls on, faces, representing Alcohol, Syphilis, Pestilence. One figure blows the trumpet, and one shouts "hurrah!" parrot fashion. Over this crowd rides Death on a black coffin – direct as a symbol, the boneman. The picture was related to my ancestors, the medieval masters, Bosch and Breughel. They too lived in the twilight of a new epoch and formed its expression… Against Mankind gone mad, I painted this protest.' George Grosz, 'Notes for Trial', 3 November 1930, quoted in Hans Hess, *George Grosz*, New Haven, 1985, p.80.

3 'Right now, George Grosz is the Futurist temperament of Berlin', Theodor Däubler, *Die Weissen Blätter* 3, 1916, p.167.

4 Note this interpretation and the watercolour precedent of *Im 28. Stock* (white-slave-trader, etc.).

5 This painting is entitled *Tempo der Strasse* in the artist's own hand in a handlist of works with prices sent by Grosz to his dealer Goltz in Munich in the George Grosz Archiv in Rome.

6 See with reference to these ideals Heartfield and Grosz's *Leben und Treiben in Universal-City 12 Uhr 5 mittags (Life and Bustle in the Universal City 12:05 Noon)* of 1920 – a cross-section montage that mixes lights and wheels and also the appropriately entitled photomontage *Dada-merika.* See also Hanne Bergius, *Dada Triumphs! Dada Berlin, 1917–1923 Artistry of Polarities,* Farmington Hills, MI, 2003, pp.183–87.

7 Harry Graf Kessler, 19 November 1917, quoted in Jeanpaul Goergen, ed., 'George Grosz: Die Filmhälfte der Kunst', *Kinemathek*, no.85, December 1994, p.47.

8 Dada was effectively launched in Berlin in April 1918 with the publication of the Dadaist Manifesto, a selection of which is quoted from at the beginning of this essay.

9 George Grosz foreword to *Der Spiesser Spiegel,* Dresden, 1925, quoted in U. M. Schneede, *George Grosz The Artist in his Society*, New York, 1985, p.114.

10 George Grosz, 'Ein neuer Naturalismus? Eine Rundfrage', *Das Kunstblatt,* vol.1, no.9, 1922, pp.382–83.

11 The logo for AEG also appears in Grosz's 1918 drawing *Grossstadtstrasse mit Kutsche* (Graphische Sammlung der Staaatsgalerie, Stuttgart).

12 Grosz recorded in his autobiography that 'it was at the Cinepalast on Nollendorfplatz, owned by an Italian-American group, that I watched my first ragtime singers and dancers shortly before the war'. George Grosz, *A Small Yes and A Big No,* trans. A. J. Pomerans, Huntingdon NY, 1955, p.181.

13 'Absolute affirmation!!!! Discipline! Increased elasticity!… Brutality! Clarity that hurts! There is enough music to go to sleep to! Therefore these American songs, like sharp, barbed hooks that hook themselves into the brain (one can speak of anti-art – please! I have never had intimate relations with 'fine art!). Oh, songs of the chainsaw or the riveting of constructions – kilometers of vastness sung through the telephone wires, exalted cranking of the motor on cement roads and floating black steamships – in your ranks painters – paint for all your worth – catch the frantic time before the Devil gets you! and before the rotation-machines sing you your funeral song – mind though: put a lot of black into your palette and many greys – the colour of your worldview only exists in 'Varieté' – yes, holy (my God! yes!) contemporaneity – a thousand throats scream the same street-song, cities are wrecked one after another – Jensen's 'Wheel' whizzes – hoho lottery, colourful circus arena, abnormalities of every calibre, in 3 years –! Hourly new worldviews, already thunder haunts the gaudy horizon – soon it will snow – Oh! our life's blissful April! (bad! bad! Lad! Boy! – yes! one day, only once will you put your hands into your suit jacket pocket – your bulging wallet is already stolen).' George Grosz Letter to Otto Schmalhausen 22 April 1918, H. Knust, *George Grosz, Briefe 1913–1959,* pp.60–62.

14 Grosz had for a long time been obsessed by all things American. In his youth he had copied an entire Leatherstocking tale by Fennimore Cooper out by hand. In Berlin he was often known to dress in American-style clothing and the decoration of his studio during this period ranged from a Wild West setting complete with a tepee in the middle and the walls decorated with self-penned photographs and drawings dedicated to him from famous Americans such as Thomas Edison, to a sleek Chicago-style boxing gym or modern American bureau and later an engineer's patent office.

15 Max Beckmann, 'Letters to a Woman Painter', 1948, quoted in B. Copeland Buenger, *Max Beckmann Self-Portrait in Words, Collected Writings and Statements 1903–1950,* Chicago, 1997, p.317. Beckmann depicted himself as a tightrope walker in several works, even making fun of the tragic role that each played in society in a little-known satirical text of 1927 entitled 'The Social Stance of the artist by the Black Tightrope Walker'.

16 George Grosz, *A Small Yes and A Big No,* trans. A. J. Pomerans, Huntingdon NY, 1955, p.16.

17 Other famous tightrope walkers of this period included 'Fräulein Alida', who in the Neustädter Sportplatz in König-Albert-Strasse in Dresden in the summer of 1909 was the main attraction of the Zirkus Max Schumann. There, watched by Kirchner, who later recommended the performance to Heckel, she performed a ballabile on a rope with the aid of a parasol.

17
Selbstbildnis mit Modell / Self-Portrait with Model 1923
Otto Dix

For me, the object is primary and determines the form. I have therefore always felt it vital to get as close as possible to the thing I see. The 'What' matters more to me than the 'How'. Indeed, the 'How' arises from the 'What'. The new element in painting, lies ultimately in the extension of the subject area, an enhancement of those forms of expression (that are) already present in essence in the Old Masters. (Otto Dix)[1]

From the very first, Dix's self-portraits played a central and determining role in his art. Pictorial manifestations of Dix's sense of artistic identity and of how he perceived his artistic role in the turbulent and fast-changing times in which he lived, his self-portraits are powerful statements of intent. Numbering around forty works, along with nearly eighty other works on paper executed in a variety of media, the self-portraits rank alongside those of Dürer, Rembrandt, Gauguin, van Gogh, Schiele, Picasso or Beckmann as among the finest and most important examples in the entire genre. Often taking the form of allegory and metaphor, Dix's many and varied self-images stand as key pictorial statements that both define and give a unique insight into his personal, philosophical and aesthetic outlook on the world.

Selbstbildnis mit Modell presents Dix smartly dressed and standing stiffly in a stern professional manner, isolated against a nondescript dark canvas or painted wall, juxtaposed to a buxom, sensual and blatantly nude model. It is the first major self-portrait that Dix made after moving to Düsseldorf from Dresden for commercial and career reasons in the autumn of 1922. Dix entered the Düsseldorf Academy as the master pupil of the Expressionist painter Heinrich Nauen, taking up this position primarily because it came with its own studio – a key consideration for Dix during this turbulent period of hyper-inflation and economic instability in Germany – and because academy life also allowed him continued free access to facilities such as the life-drawing classes and their models. Settled into his new studio, married to Martha, and having signed an exclusive contract with the dealer Karl Nierendorf, Dix, at thirty years old, had moved beyond the Dionysian passion of Expressionism and the bitter extremes of Dada and was now set on pursuing a career as the most committed 'realist' painter of the visible world around him.

It is this ambition that he addresses in *Selbstbildnis mit Modell*. Painted in 1923, in the midst of a widening and ongoing debate about a Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) or realism that would ultimately pitch the neo-classicism of Munich-based artists like Georg Schrimpf, Carlo Mense, Alexander Kanoldt and Heinrich Davringhausen against the seemingly socio-critical and deliberately anti-classical realism of the newly-dubbed 'Verist' painters – George Grosz, Otto Dix, Rudolf Schlichter and Georg Scholz – Dix's *Selbstbildnis mit Modell* is a work that functions as if it were the artist's own pictorial response to this question of a 'new naturalism' as it concentrates on the idea of the object or model as 'primary', through the surprising clarity and overt presentation of the naked model as the singular and sole subject of the artist. Recalling the composition and bleakness of Hans Baldung Grien's *Eva, die Schlange und der Tod (Eve, Death and the Serpent)*, c.1505–25, in some respects, this extraordinarily stark and even minimal work appears to present Dix's model as almost a kind of physical embodiment of naked truth. She is neither a classical nude nor the idealized figure of the nineteenth-century naturalist painters, but a precisely rendered and naked image of unadulterated reality – an image of life undiluted and as it comes. Youthful and attractive but neither beautiful nor ugly, Dix's model, a vivacious and undeniable element of life – the artist's subject – is the truth and the reality that Dix wishes as a painter to render, to represent and from which, this painting suggests, his art derives. She is a symbol or an icon of precisely the type of 'new naturalism' that Dix himself wished to pursue and to make the subject of his art. Indeed, standing facing the viewer and looking out of the picture with her hands on her head, this open, easy and seemingly unaffected pose even appears to derive from a significant earlier and distinctly 'naturalist' precedent: Max Klinger's painting *Campagna*. Klinger was an artist whose work was well-known to and much admired by Dix. His *Campagna* is a typical nineteenth-century image of 'natural' beauty in which an attractive nude girl was often shown standing alone in a landscape at the mouth of a stream – an idealized symbol of purity, nature and beauty. Also known under the title *Die Quelle (The Source)*, Klinger's painting is an allegorical picture that asserts the natural beauty of its subject as also the 'source' of the artist's inspiration.[2] Dix's adoption of this pose – also somewhat redolent of that of Goya's naked Maya – in *Selbstbildnis mit*

Modell, where his youthful, naked but distinctly un-idealized model also seems to represent the 'source' of his own art, appears to serve a similar purpose, representing the holistic natural source of Dix's painting.

It is, in this respect, a seemingly very different image of himself alone in his studio with a naked woman to his previous rendition of this subject in 1920 – his outrageously horrific and deliberately over-the-top Dadaist masterpiece *Selbstbildnis als Lustmörderer (Self-Portrait as a Sex-Murderer)*. But there are in fact important similarities between these two landmark works – similarities that epitomize the change in Dix from Dadaist 'Wild-man' to savage Realist. Dix's great and now lost self-portrait as a sex-murderer was his ultimate attempt to 'outdo' the Berlin Dadaists by rendering himself as a kind of über-Dadaist destroyer, a cosmic dancing Dionysian apotheosis of life's alpha and omega.[3] The scholar Rita E. Täuber has described this work as an incarnation of the artist as a demonic antihero caught in the spiral of creation and destruction.[4] Rendered in the pictorial language and cardboard cutout style of pulp fiction, Dix's self-portrait as a sex-murderer is once again rooted, however bizarrely, in the tradition of the artist's relationship with his model and muse.[5]

Selbstbildnis mit Modell operates in direct contrast to this earlier work: instead of depicting himself in the fury of the creative/destructive moment, Dix now represents himself as the consummate, disciplined and self-controlled artist professional. Maintaining his discipline, distance and focus in the presence of the sexual vitality and dynamic reality of life in front of him, he is frozen in a pose that effectively displays him internalizing this Dionysian energy in order to let it fuel his creative vision. Both an alternative and a response therefore to his earlier self-portrait as a sex-murderer, in which he represented himself as a crazed Dionysian outlaw beyond all control and as a demonic destroyer of all art, culture and beauty (seemingly embodied by 'Woman'), *Selbstbildnis mit Modell* presents its Apollonian opposite. As its title suggests, this painting depicts Dix as the fiercely objective, sober realist standing before his model, gazing fixedly beyond her, intent only, it seems, on his creative vision, while she, rendered in precise, clinical detail and flirtatiously engaging the viewer with her stare, serves as the artistic source of Dix's passionate quest.

In this work, like many of his earlier nudes, from the broken bodies of prostitutes and malnourished mothers to those of his sex-murder victims, the naked female form represents the nature and condition of both Dix's art and the world around him. Thrust into the foreground, naked and exposed, the model represents primarily the idea of truth-to-nature that was so important to Dix at this time,

Dix, *Self-Portrait as a Sex-Murderer* 1920

Dix, *The Dancer Anita Berber* 1925

Dix, *Self-Portrait with Easel* 1926

while he, standing beside her, fully clothed in a formal business-like manner, remains serious, concentrated and apparently sexually and emotionally unaffected by the proximity and vitality of her naked presence. Like a doctor beside his patient, Dix's stern, composed Apollonian figure announces the seriousness of his purpose. Offering a direct counterbalance to the Dionysian energy and sexual vitality of this naked girl, the formality and restraint of Dix's upright figure introduces a polarized dynamism into their encounter and a peculiarly charged atmosphere of stoicism, scientific precision and unimpassioned objectivity indicative of the cold, austere realism with which he renders his model. As Willi Wolfradt wrote in the very first text about this work published in 1924, Dix 'plants himself broadly in the painting before the stark naked model, with the cold expression of a vivisector, absolutely unwavering and objective. The situations as such are not what is amazing here, but rather the rattling spectre of an extremely high-tension realism (and one that never explodes into caricature), into the irony of which the artist incorporates himself without batting an eyelash'.[6]

Standing in such a way as to openly display the model's nakedness in blatant and full seductive sight of the viewer to whom she coquettishly looks out at, while Dix himself, stern-faced and smartly clad, gazes intently past her into the middle distance, the painting establishes a complex and intriguing game of looking between himself, his subject and the viewer. While the traditional Old Master-like theme of the artist and his model appears to be the focus of the picture, both figures are simultaneously displayed before the viewer and against the empty space of the painting in such a way as to seem separate and isolated, like scientific specimens that have been made available for our inspection.[7] Indeed, there is a new clarity and almost clinical sharpness in the painterly style of this work that is reminiscent of the dispassionate objectivity of modern technology. It is a quality that encapsulates precisely the cold and distanced 'sachlich' objective quality that Gustav Hartlaub was so famously to define two years later. Paul Westheim wrote of Dix's work of this time: 'When Dix paints people it is as if he were sending out arrest orders. If I may be allowed to use the terminology borrowed from the art of photography, his portraits are like enlargements or close-ups, which reveal almost everything. They have something of the brutality of the police 'Wanted' posters that announce information of vital public importance.'[8]

Significantly, Dix, at the time he painted this self-portrait, had just developed an interest in photography through his friendship with the photographer Hugo Erfurth, who he had first met in 1920. Erfurth, like August Sander, another contemporary photographer of this period with whom Dix became friends, pursued an especially cool and objective style of photography, situating his subjects, as in a police mug-shot, against a bleak empty background and depicting them often in close-up and isolated like a human specimen at the mercy of his all-seeing lens. This technique, which became a typical example of the new 'sachlich' approach of so much painting and photography in the 1920s, had an important influence on Dix, who clearly felt himself to some extent in competition with the camera, and, as perhaps can be seen for the first time in *Selbtsbildnis mit Modell*, introduced this essentially photographic method of posing into some of his most famous portraits, including those of *Anita Berber*, *Heinrich George* and *Sylvia von Harden*.[9]

Central to this shared approach of Erfurth's photography and Dix's portraiture, as well as to this painting's subject of 'artist and model', is the open display of a complex game of looking and seeing that makes us question what constitutes visual truth. Questions of photography versus painting, realism versus abstraction, naturalism versus classicism and the hand-crafted versus the machine-made lay at the heart of almost every debate about the direction and purpose of contemporary art in Germany throughout the mid-1920s.[10] In the same way that the Verists' use of the broken female body in their sex-murder pictures and depictions of prostitutes spoke of the dysfunctional and broken nature of the post-war world, the holistic and beautiful female nude, by contrast, often stood as a symbol of the classical tradition and beauty of the past. Dix's contemporary Georg Scholz, for example, made repeated use at this time of the female nude as a convenient symbol of traditional art and beauty prostituting itself to the evils of industrial capitalism. In a series of paintings and watercolours made around the time that Dix first met him in October 1922, Scholz depicted an iconic nude lying like the Venus of Urbino before the mechanized skyline of New York, operating industrial machinery and, in *Die Herren der Welt (The Rulers of the World)*, pictured as a photographer. In this last work, where she seemingly symbolizes the 'fallen' nature of modern art, Scholz's prostitute-like nude takes snap-shots of a beautiful pastoral landscape that lies on one side of the river, while the other is dominated by a factory clearly belonging to her businessmen associates. The implication is that the mechanical realism of photography is at odds with the classicism and pastoral beauty of the past. Dix in *Selbstbildnis mit Modell* seems to state the opposite. While formally invoking the composition and mood of an old master vanitas painting like Baldung Grien's *Eva, die Schlange und der Tod*, he paints a disturbingly precise and up-to-the-minute 'New Naturalist' or Neue Sachlichkeit self-portrait in the sharp, clear style of photography, thus proudly depicting

Dix, *The Nasturtium* 1930

himself as a modern realist, ready to work within established artistic tradition to challenge anything the camera can do.

Far from being what it at first might appear to be – a sparse, simplistic and objective self-portrait of the artist with an anonymous nude model – *Selbstbildnis mit Modell* is a work that invokes all of the central themes of Dix's art at this crucial point in his career. A deliberate and carefully thought-out programmatic statement declaring his intention of being a modern realist painter working within and continuing the traditions of the Old Masters, the painting borrows from both the techniques and styles of Baldung Grien and contemporary photography.[11] An invocation of the timeless, but also, in the avant-garde world of the 1920s, the seemingly outdated, theme of the artist with his 'model', the painting also explores the question of the nature and 'source' of artistic inspiration. It visually posits the idea of an art that is simultaneously rooted in the ideals of the past while also being reflective of the modern reality taking place before our eyes. In this bridging of past and present, it evokes the ever-present struggle between Eros and Thanatos that Dix believed lay at the source of his own creative powers and of his identity as an artist. An antithesis to his earlier self-portrait as sex-murdering Dadaist destroying art and beauty, this work, like many of his later 'studio' paintings, scientifically dissects the borderlines between beauty, ugliness, reality and illusion, nature, classicism and the role of art, all within the context of the painter's profession. A meditation and visualization of all these features in his work, it is ultimately the nature of art as the defining factor of Dix's own life that is the real subject of this deceptively simple and very powerful self-portrait.

RB

1 Otto Dix, 'The Object is Primary', *Berliner Nachtausgabe*, 1927, reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art In Theory 1900–1990,* London, 1997, p.390.

2 See Paul Kühn's book on *Max Klinger* published in Leipzig, 1907. *(Weiblicher Akt) Campagna* is illustrated on p.305. The painting is given the title *Die Quelle* or *La Source* in the 1932 edition of Meyers Blitz Lexicon in an illustration of nineteenth-century paintings under the collective title of *Die Schönheit*. The pose of the girl in *(Weiblicher Akt) Campagna* also appeared in a modified form in one of Klinger's best-known paintings, *Die blaue Stunde* of 1890. This pose is also reminiscent (in reclining form) of that of Goya's naked *Maya* – another famous old-master precedent that Dix directly parodied in a grotesque etching that he humorously dedicated to the great Spanish artist.

3 On this work see Olaf Peters, 'Painting a Medium of Cool Execution', in *Otto Dix,* exh. cat., New York, 2010. For a comparison between it and *Selbstbildnis mit Modell* see Rita E. Täuber, *Der hässliche Eros, Darstellungen zur Prostitution in der Malerei und Grafik 1855–1930,* Berlin, 1997, pp.132–33.

4 'Wie nah Zeugung und Zerstörung im Leben beienanderliegen und wie sehr sie sich gegenseitig für den Künstler, der nach Nietzsche immer vernichten muss, um schöpferish zu sein, bedingen, machte Dix im Selbstbildnis des *Lustmörders* deutlich'. Rita E. Täuber *Der hässliche Eros: Darstellungen zur Prostitution in der Malerei und Grafik 1855–1930*, Berlin, 1997, p.132.

5 It is seemingly Dix's muse-like doll – so central to his work of the period 1919 to 1920 – that the artist is perhaps murdering in this painting. See *City of Night*, op. cit., in note 3.

6 Willi Wolfradt, *Otto Dix*, Leipzig, 1924, p.6.

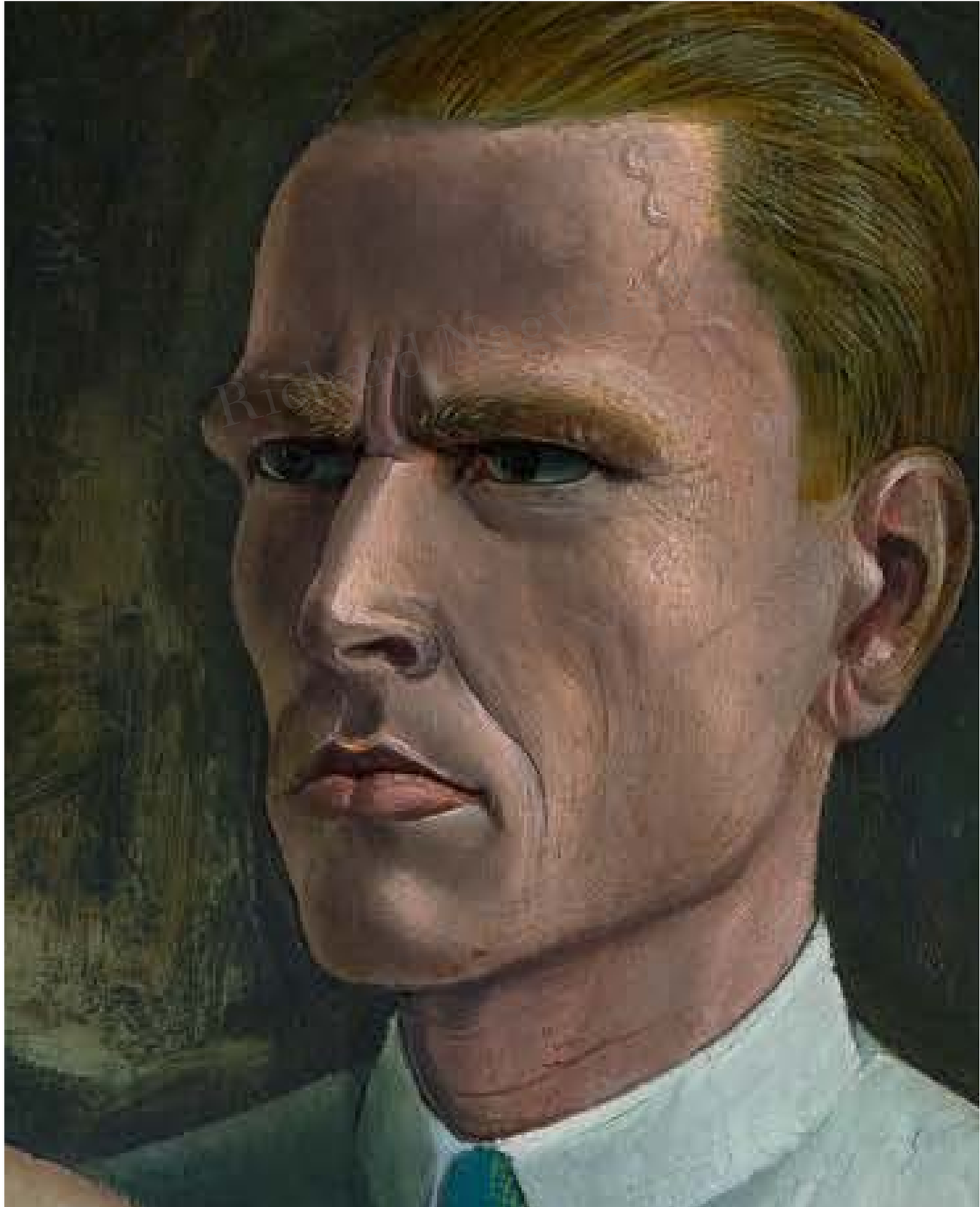
7 Dieter Schmidt contrasts the business-like austerity of this work with Lovis Corinth's self-portrait with a naked model (his wife) in the studio where he depicts himself drinking, relaxed and proudly grabbing his model's breast. See Dieter Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis*, Berlin, 1981, p.90.

8 Paul Westheim, *Das Kunstblatt*, 1926, p.145, quoted in Paloma Alarcó, 'Otto Dix: The Old Master of Modernism', *Otto Dix retrato de Hugo Erfurth,* exh. cat., Madrid, 2008, p.173.

9 See Andreas Strobl, 'Otto Dix and Hugo Erfurth, The Painter in the Age of Photography, in ibid. pp.175–84.

10 Franz Roh was perhaps the first to identify a sense of rivalry between painting and photography in current artistic trends in his famous book *Nachexpressionismus. Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei,* published in Leipzig in 1925.

11 Citing an unpublished thesis by Janina Nentwig, Olaf Peters has also suggested that the intention of this picture was programmatic, pointing out that its reception, after the trial for works such as *Girl in Mirror* and the confiscation of *Salon 11* was an important consideration for Dix. See O. Peters, *Otto Dix*, exh. cat., New York, 2010, p.201.



18
Venus mit Handschuhen / Venus with Gloves 1932
Otto Dix

I am not a gifted pupil of Rembrandt, but rather of Cranach, Dürer and Grünewald.
(Otto Dix)[1]

Venus mit Handschuhen is one of only two paintings by Dix to bear the title of 'Venus'. A small, gem-like painting made in a mixed oil technique on panel and in a style deliberately emulating that of the Old Masters, it is an intimate portrait, seemingly made for private contemplation. Although boldly signed and dated '1932 dix' in the top right-hand corner, it presents an image that seems to stand outside of time. It depicts an anonymous and disquietingly young female nude, dressed solely in evening gloves and illuminated against a dark background of drapery and fur. A Lolita figure, she flirtatiously engages the viewer with her eyes while unashamedly revealing her nakedness and erotic nature.

The only other work of Dix's to bear the title 'Venus' is a famous and now lost painting – the so-called *Venus des kapitalistischen Zeitalters (Venus of the Capitalist Age)* that the artist had painted at the height of the inflation period in Germany in 1923. This painting was given its provocative but not inaccurate title by Dix's dealer Karl Nierendorf, with the conscious aim of identifying both its imagery and the artist with the troubled and dramatic times in which it was made. *Venus des kapitalistischen Zeitalters* depicted in grotesque detail the dilapidated nude body of an aging prostitute. Standing naked, save for her stockings, shoes and a large floppy black hat, and set against a background décor that is as run-down as she is, this disturbing, mad-faced spectre of the age is, like so many of Dix's paintings, a contemporary updating on an Old Master precedent – in this case, the sixteenth-century Venuses of Lucas Cranach.

In the same way that Dix's *Lustmord (Sex-Murder)* of 1922 was an 'ugly realist' reworking of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, c.1510, or his *Kriegskrüppel (War Cripples)*, 1920, a sardonic and black-humoured contemporary take on Breugel's blind cripples, this 'Capitalist Age Venus' was Dix-the-Realist's painterly response to both Cranach's Venuses and, more particularly perhaps, to the joyous modernism of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's colourful reworking of the same subject: *Stehender Akt mit Hut (Standing Nude with Hat)* of 1910. Drawing on Cranach's famous small *Venus* of 1532

in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, Kirchner had translated the pose and gentle eroticism of Cranach's figure into a full-length studio portrait of his girlfriend Dodo standing naked, save for her shoes and a large black floppy hat of the type that other Cranach Venuses and Judiths wore.[2] Dix's *Venus des kapitalistischen Zeitalters* seems to update the apparent optimism of Kirchner's colourful, modernist 'gothic' take on the Cranach by offering a bitter, sardonic, but undeniably 'real' contemporary counterpart.

In *Venus mit Handschuhen* Dix returned to this same theme, and also to Cranach's Frankfurt *Venus*, to create a subtler but equally modern and ultimately, perhaps, even more troubling image of a contemporary goddess of love. *Venus mit Handschuhen* was painted when Dix was professor at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Dresden, a fertile period when he revisited many of the themes of his early 'Verist' work, reworking them in a series of highly ambitious and professionally-executed large-scale paintings: *Strassenkampf (Street Fight)* of 1927, *Grossstadt (Metropolis)* of 1927–28 and his great war triptych *Der Krieg (The War)* completed in 1932.

In these three masterworks Dix deliberately employed a more sumptuous and painterly style of realism. Sophisticated and craftsmanlike, it was a style more befitting of his new status as an 'academician'. Derived from the Old Masters, Dix's style of the late 1920s and early '30s abandoned the pronounced tendency towards caricature or exaggeration distinguishable in earlier 'Verist' pictures like *Venus des kapitalistischen Zeitalters*. In place of this deliberate elevation of the ugly, Dix now favoured an even more sober and precisely rendered approach that, while shying from nothing ugly or unpleasant to the eye, sought more to convey the unique presence and 'aura' of his subjects. His 'ideal', he said, was 'to paint like the masters of the Early Renaissance', in a way that demonstrated the essentially timeless and eternally recurrent nature of the contemporary events and scenes he was depicting.[3] It was a deliberate mixing of the old and the new. 'What was new thousands of years ago', he said, 'is old today but nevertheless new again. How should one distinguish where the old ends and the new begins?'[4]

Towards this end Dix did not just emulate the style of the Old Masters, bestowing the fascinating and gaudy 1920s world around him with the aged gothic dignity of Grünewald or Hans Baldung Grien; he also copied their techniques, painstakingly developing a unique and extremely laborious way of painting in a series of layered glazes. It is this technique that lends the surface of his works such a sophisticated lustre, luminescence and seemingly age-old depth. Always inventive and dramatic in the use of his signature, in the mid-1920s Dix also began to sign his pictures with signatures and monograms that formally imitated those of the first German

Cranach, *Venus* 1532

Dix, *Venus of the Capitalist Age* 1923

masters. In *Venus mit Handschuhen*, for example, Dix has signed the work with a monogram that overlays the letters 'd', 'i', and 'x' on top of one another, in a manner reminiscent of both Dürer and Cranach.[5]

Venus mit Handschuhen is in fact one of a series of overtly Old Master-type nudes that Dix began painting in 1930.[6] As preliminary sketches for this painting reveal, it was Dix's original intention to depict this youthful Lolita-like sitter, like so many of Cranach's Venuses, holding a transparent veil in front of her naked body. For Cranach, the transparent veil was a convenient pictorial motif that he used with the pretence of covering up his Venuses' nudity, while actually emphasizing their nakedness. Titillating and playful, Cranach's Venuses simultaneously hide and reveal their nakedness in a way that clearly echoes and points to the seductive power of art and to the fundamental artifice inherent within the art of painting.[7]

Dix too was not only aware of this practice in Cranach's work but had put it to use in several of his paintings of the mid-'20s. In *Selbstbildnis mit Muse (Self-Portrait with Muse)* of 1924 for example, he deliberately invoked the ambiguity between reality and 'realism' and between representation and artifice as symbolized by the veil, by showing himself in the very act of painting this see-through covering while it both hides and reveals the voluptuous body of his apparently living model. The multiple layers of realism and artifice left open in this picture were again explored in a more morbid manner in the painting *Stillleben im Atelier (Still Life in the Studio)* of the same year, where this time Dix depicted the same veil having been dropped by his living model onto the visibly dead or inanimate matter of a decaying mannequin beside her. The blue transparent veil makes a third appearance in 1926 in Dix's parody of the 'Three Graces', *Drei Weiber (Three Wenches)* where, in a revolting paraphrase of the pose of Cranach's Frankfurt Venus, a grotesquely emaciated blonde coquettishly holds the veil both aloft and around her malnourished and distended form.

In *Venus mit Handschuhen* Dix returned to the figure of Cranach's Venus, this time exploring the same game of concentrating on the extreme youth of his model and her knowing and self-assured nakedness. Rather than the veil, which Dix had originally thought of using, it is the long black evening gloves that here emphasize his Venus' nudity. These more fetishist items of clothing bestow the figure with an apparent sophistication that seems to belie her youth. Adding another layer to the strong and highly sensual play with textures that distinguishes this picture, these fashionable elbow-length gloves set this otherwise timeless scene firmly in the nocturnal demimonde of the 1930s. The gloves also open this portrait to a number of alternative interpretations;

Dix, *Three Wenches* 1926

Dix, *Metropolis* (right panel) 1928

chief among them the prospect that far from being a classical 'Venus', this Lolita-like modern-day goddess of love is more an adolescent prostitute, little older than a child, yet wise and experienced far beyond her years.

In this respect, some critics have seen *Venus mit Handschuhen* as a deliberate counterpart to the distinctly more wholesome portraits of nurturing mothers that Dix also painted at this time. But while the youthful eroticism and apparent venal sexuality of this girl does operate as a kind of pendant to these modern-day Madonnas, *Venus mit Handschuhen* also sits comfortably within the series of Old Master-type nudes that Dix had been producing since 1930, particularly such paintings as *Vanitas* and *Liegender Akt auf Fell (Nude Lying on Fur)*, both painted in 1932.

Like *Venus mit Handschuhen*, both of these paintings have clear Old Master precedents while also being demonstrably studio portraits. *Vanitas* is a simple realist reworking of Hans Baldung Grien's *Der Tod und das Mädchen (Death and the Maiden)*, 1517, while *Liegender Akt auf Fell* is a mocking paraphrase of Cranach's *Reclining Water Nymph*, 1515–20. Each is effectively an updated allegory that has been staged in Dix's studio. They are, like the more complex *Melancholia* of 1930, both demonstrably 'realist' portraits deriving directly from life that are also painterly constructions of deliberate artifice that have been set up like a stage-set in the artist's studio to 'play out' a specific and enduring theme. In its seamless unifying of contentious realist subject and timeless, allegorical theme, *Venus mit Handschuhen* can be seen to mark the culmination of this tendency in Dix's work.[8]

Venus mit Handschuhen is also the last in a long series of paintings – perhaps beginning with *Selbstbildnis mit Modell (Self-Portrait with Model)* in 1923 and *Selbstbildnis mit Muse* in 1924 – that use a studio portrait of the nude to explore a specific theme. In these earlier paintings Dix's subject had been the model as a living, breathing and tangible object of life and reality – the source of his art and inspiration and a pictorial metaphor for the nature and practice of painting (and realism) itself. The central theme of *Venus mit Handschuhen* is the element that was clearly also present in these earlier paintings but left deliberately understated – the artist's model as a figure of Eros. It is this theme, with a particular emphasis on the sensual and physical pleasures of love and sex as embodied by the female nude, that is the chief subject of this painting. Interestingly, Dix has here chosen not the buxom and heavy-hipped blonde that he himself preferred, but a frail, thin, and adolescent brunette more likely to have been painted by an artist like Egon Schiele.

Lying halfway between Schiele's autumn melancholy and Frank Wedekind's play *Frühlings Erwachen*, 1890–91 Dix's choice of model for his 1932 'Venus' is one that seems

Dix, *Vanitas* 1932

Dix, *Self-Portrait with Muse* 1924

to deliberately invoke a sense of the innocence of youth being corrupted by the irrepressible drive of Eros at the very onset of maturity. This is a theme conveyed in *Venus mit Handschuhen* not merely by the work's title, but more particularly by the extraordinary range of notably dark, contrasting, but highly sensual textures that Dix has used to compliment the pale luminescent skin of the girl and her fragile, underdeveloped form. From the elbow-length evening gloves and dark velvet drape set behind her to the sumptuous fur on which she is seated, or the delicate curls of her finely brushed hair or her smiling red lips, the painting visually plays with a wide range of textures that are all seemingly pleasant and inviting to the touch. Central to all of this visual play of sensuality however, and key to the meaning of the painting itself, is the pubic area or 'mound of Venus' with its rich and plentiful forest of pubic hair that the young girl proudly appears to be presenting to the viewer like a gift.

Infused by an atmosphere of both seduction and corruption redolent of nineteenth-century Symbolist paintings like Franz von Stuck's famous *Die Sünde (Sin)* of 1893, something sinister and venal seems also to lie within Dix's apparently objective portrait of this vampish young girl enjoying the first flush of youth. That great eternal and often cosmic symbol for Dix of the irrepressible force of Eros, the vulva – the ultimate reason, he had once written, that lay behind all the wars of mankind – is brought firmly down to earth in this small, intimate and seemingly personal Neue Sachlichkeit portrait. *Venus mit Handschuhen* is, in this respect, the complete opposite to the great celestial fertility goddesses that had peopled Dix's earlier Expressionist paintings of Eros such as *Mondweib (Moon Woman)* and *Schwangeres Weib (Pregnant Woman)*, both 1919. In direct contrast with these giant goddesses, the petite 'Venus' that Dix presents in *Venus mit Handschuhen* is a distinctly worldly creature, neither a symbol of fertility nor even really an image of health. Instead, like Cranach's Frankfurt Venus, she is an ambiguous figure infused with a strong sense of seduction and sin. In the same way that Dix's earlier Expressionist goddesses had symbolized the burgeoning hope of Revolution and a new dawn for mankind, this small, masterful but ultimately unnerving Venus, painted in Dresden in the last months before Hitler came to power, seems to embody Dix's anxiety about the future.

RB

1 Otto Dix quoted in Fritz Löffler, *Otto Dix, Life and Work*, New York, 1982, p.138.
2 Kirchner reportedly based his painting on the Cranach Venus of 1532 now in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt after seeing a reproduction of it in Otto Mueller's Berlin studio. See Donald Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968, p.70.
3 Dix's account to Hans Kinkel quoted in Diether Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis*, Berlin, 1981, p.252.
4 Otto Dix, 1927, quoted in ibid., p.206.
5 See Andreas Strobl, *Otto Dix Eine Malerkarriere der zwanziger Jahre*, Munich, 1995, pp.184–88.
6 Dix appears to have painted no nudes other than those included in his large allegorical and religious pictures for many years after 1932. *Venus mit Handschuhen* is listed in Fritz Löffler's catalogue raisonné as the last nude that Dix painted in 1932.
7 On this subject, see Elke Anna Werner, 'The Veil of Venus: A Metaphor of Seeing in Lucas Cranach the Elder', in *Cranach*, exh. cat., Frankfurt, 2007, pp.99–109.
8 Fritz Löffler lists *Venus mit Handschuhen* as the last nude of 1932 and, with the exception of such paintings as the large allegories of *Saint Anthony*, *Lot and his Daughters* or *The Triumph of Death* for example, Dix would not paint another studio nude until his 1944 *Selbstbildnis mit liegendem Akt (Self-Portrait with Recling Nude)*.

19
Studie für Malepartus / Study for Malepartus 1919
Max Beckmann

The orgiastic period which broke out in Germany simultaneously nothing more than feverish imitation … everywhere it was unmistakable that this over-excitation was (in fact) unbearable for the people, this being stretched daily on the rack of inflation and that the whole nation, tired of war, actually only longed for order, quiet, and a little security and bourgeois life. And secretly it hated the republic, not because it suppressed this wild freedom, but on the contrary, because it held the reins too loosely… Nothing ever embittered the German people so much – it is important to remember this – nothing made them so furious with hate and so ripe for Hitler as the inflation. For the war, murderous as it was, had yielded hours of jubilation, with ringing of bells and fanfares of victory. And being an incurably militaristic nation, Germany felt lifted in her pride by her temporary victories; while the inflation served only to make it feel soiled, cheated, and humiliated; a whole generation never forgave nor forgot the German Republic for those years and preferred to reinstate its butchers. (Stefan Zweig)[1]

Studie für Malepartus is a disturbing collective portrait of a world gone mad. Part of a spectacular series of searingly penetrative portraits of his homeland made by Beckmann in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, it is an extraordinarily powerful drawing providing a persuasive insight into the widespread trauma, decadence and desperation that engulfed Germany at this time and persisted throughout much of the 1920s.

Executed in a combination of black crayon and pencil, *Studie für Malepartus* is a forceful and expressive graphic work that served as a preparatory study for one of ten litographs comprising the 1919 portfolio entitled *Die Hölle (Hell)* that Beckmann produced after a revelatory visit to Berlin in March that same year. Outlining Beckmann's odyssey-like passage through all walks of Berlin life during this turbulent period of political violence and unrest, Beckmann's *Die Hölle* was an attempt, in the strong Germanic tradition of print cycles on the same subject, to provide an essentially objective portrayal of the then current state of mankind and the continuing presence of the war in people's lives.[2] Echoing, in many respects, George Grosz's fiercely critical portraits of Berlin as a 'riot of the insane', *Studie für Malepartus* portrays a contemporary night-club scene as a fast-tempo *Totentanz* or 'Dance of Death'.

Its title, 'Malepartus', derives not, in fact, from Berlin, like most of the works in the print cycle *Die Hölle*, but from the name of a popular nightclub in Frankfurt am Main – the city where Beckmann had gone to live after his discharge from the army in 1916. This nightclub was appropriately named 'Malepartus' – literally meaning 'bad seed' in Latin – after the name of the castle hide-out of legendary trickster figure, Reinecke Fuchs. Originating in a twelfth-century cycle of French allegorical stories known as the 'Roman de Renard', Fuchs was a mischievous fox whose story had perennially been told and retold in Germany in a variety of populist fables, most notably perhaps by Goethe in 1793. Applied to this 1919 drawing by Beckmann, the title of 'Malepartus' functions not merely as the description of a real nightclub of the time therefore, but also as an indication of the near clandestine and speak-easy nature that such establishments had become in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the First World War.[3]

Such was the orgiastic intensity and extent of the ferocious dance fever that engulfed Germany in the wake of the Great War that it had actually prompted the passing of a series of city ordinances aimed at curbing and regulating both the practice of dancing and the establishments where it took place. Dance – especially newer types such as ragtime, the tango, the foxtrot and the shimmy all coming out of the Americas and accompanied, in the main, by American jazz music – was widely looked upon by the German authorities as a reckless and even dangerous activity, inexorably linked to the rapidly increased promiscuity of the times and the epidemic levels of syphilis and other venereal diseases that had spread throughout the country since 1914.[4] In response, all over Berlin in 1919, thousands of street posters from the health ministry appeared depicting a Germanic maiden dancing a tango with a skeleton beside the admonishment, 'Berlin, halt ein! Besinne Dich. Dein Tänzer ist der Tod.' (Berlin Stop and Consider! Your Dance Partner is Death.') This caustic and memorable refrain of 'Berlin: Your Dance Partner is Death' was, of course, immediately taken up as a popular catchphrase and appeared in numerous topical sketches and humorous songs in the cabarets of the time. It was also a refrain that has since come

to be seen as prophetic of the whole precarious Weimar era and its eventual catastrophic slide into the darkness and oblivion of the Third Reich.[5]

Like several of the preliminary drawings for *Die Hölle*, *Studie für Malepartus* is a work that differs significantly from the final drawing, also entitled *Malepartus,* that served as the template for the final print of the same name in the *Hell* portfolio. Of particular interest in the context of the post-war dance fever is that, in the centre of *Studie für Malepartus*, Beckmann has also depicted a woman locked in a dancing embrace with a skeleton. Forming a fascinating and timely centrepoint around which the rest of the manic music and dance appears to spiral, this is a couple that Beckmann has ultimately removed from the final drawing and its resultant print. Beckmann may have thought twice about centring this work on the image of a girl dancing with death because it was too literal a translation of what must have been an over-familiar image at this time. Alternatively he may have changed these figures in the final version because this propagandistic image had, by the time of *Die Hölle*'s publication, suddenly ceased to have such topical relevance.

In a partial turnaround in Berlin in April 1919, the dance ordinance forbidding such dances was lifted. Seeing that their ban on dancing was having little or no effect, the Berlin city authorities instead pursued a new tactic in which a selected few of the largest dancehalls were suddenly allowed to re-open while elsewhere, ballroom dancing remained supposedly forbidden. The feverish post-war dance craze nevertheless continued unabated. After years of war and now during a desperate period of revolutionary turmoil and austerity, people urgently needed a release and a place to temporarily forget their troubles. The dancehalls, cabarets and bars of Berlin famously became the places within which this desperate need for jollity was played out. 'With shouts of rapture, people plunged in, letting go at any price,' some of the participants of the time later recalled. 'This crazy dance fever, with its recklessly exaggerated orgies of contorted limbs, became the rage everywhere.'[6] Ultimately, after the closure of defiant bars, mass arrests and inevitably costly and prolonged lawsuits, the authorities were obliged to back down and their entire civic enterprise against dancing was eventually abandoned. As a consequence of this failure, Berlin was to remain largely, and notoriously, without censorship throughout the 1920s.

Beckmann, for all his personal reservations about Berlin – he hated what he called its 'cold rudeness and snobbery' and described it as a 'corrupt and spiritless' place – did recognize that the city was the location where post-war chaos, hypocrisy, and misery were being acted out with the greatest intensity.[7] Berlin was for him the arena that best embodied the essence of modern man's tragic destiny, and it was primarily for this reason that after revisiting the city and witnessing the turbulent revolutionary events of March 1919 there, he centred his cycle of prints *Die Hölle* on the many different aspects of urban life and experience that he had witnessed in the city. As he had written shortly after the war, Beckmann saw it as the artist's moral duty to embrace the tragic nature of the age through a depiction of the city and the struggling lives of its citizens. 'The war has now dragged to a miserable end,' he wrote. 'But it hasn't changed my ideas about life in the least, it has only confirmed them. We are on our way to very difficult times. But right now perhaps, even more than before the War, I need to be with people. In the city. That is where we belong these days. We must be a part of all the misery that is coming. We must surrender our hearts and our nerves to the terrible cry of pain uttered by the poor, deluded people. Right now we have to get as close to the people as possible. It's the only course of action that might give some purpose to our superfluous and selfish existence – that we give people a picture of their fate. And we can do that only if we love humanity.'[8]

Beckmann's visit to Berlin in March 1919 coincided with the general strike and its subsequent violent put-down by thuggish, privately funded mercenaries, known as the 'Freikorps'. An important element running through Beckmann's depiction of these events in his *Die Hölle* portfolio was the artist's strong sense of empathy with, but personal detachment from, the trauma and unfolding tragedy of these events. An outsider visiting from Frankfurt, Beckmann was able to perceive the inexorable and fascinating decline of the age in a way few other artists of this period could. Able to grasp the way in which the devastation of the war had eaten into the entire fabric of daily life, Beckmann was also at pains to reveal in almost every one of the historic plates of *Die Hölle* how at the heart of all these seemingly momentous, tragic and dislocating events lay a universal, wounded and fragile humanity. As a result, the plates of *Die Hölle* dwell on wider themes than just the polarized politics of the time, but invoke poverty, hunger and the crippled state of the country *(Der Nachhauseweg (The Way Home), Die Strasse (The Street)* and *Der Hunger (Hunger))*, the pervasive violence, crime and brutality of the period *(Das Martyrium (Martyrdom)*, *Die Nacht (Night)* and *Die Letzten (The Last Ones))*, and the enduring persistence of Nationalism and war-mongering *(Das patriotische Lied (The Patriotic Song)* and *Die Ideologen (The Ideologists))*.

Beckmann, *Malepartus*, plate 8 from the portfolio (lithographs) *Hell* 1919

Set against this backdrop of violence and squalor, the mad orgy of dancing and lascivious coupling that Beckmann depicts in the drawings *Malepartus* and *Studie für Malepartus* completes this modern day tour through the various levels of 'Hell' that Beckmann had purportedly witnessed on his March 1919 visit to Berlin. With its glaring electric lights and feverishly concentrating jazz band seemingly shaking the composition off balance, there is – amidst the sea of wild flailing limbs, desperate gropings and passionate embraces of both *Malepartus* drawings – an enduring sense of each figure's loneliness and isolation. It is a sense, common to many of Beckmann's pictures, that despite the almost desperate camaraderie and communal activity of the densely packed composition, that each individual is somehow locked into the prison of their own body, their own being, unable to ever really connect with any other. Amidst the collective soup of frenzied revelry on display therefore, a profound sense of existential loneliness along with the manifest falsity of such a mad rush to enjoyment is made desperately clear.

As Stefan Zweig memorably recalled, it was in this immediate post-war period, at the very beginning of the new German Republic, that the seeds of its tragic destiny were first born. Beckmann's rendering of the manifest falsity and inner pain of this orgiastic dance mania in *Studie für Malepartus* is an important aspect of this drawing that, like the figure dancing with death at its centre, was ultimately to prove prophetic of the desperate and tragic fate towards which Germany blindly chose to dance in the 1920s. *Studie für Malepartus* captures and expresses an extraordinary, frantic, devil-may-care mood of indulgence that anticipates and portends the even greater excesses that Berlin was soon to witness, when the tottering German economy finally collapsed and the ensuing spiral of inflation further compounded the social and material destruction already wrought by the war.

RB

Weimar Health Ministry poster 1919

1 Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, New York, 1964, pp.313–15.

2 See in particular in this respect Albrecht Dürer's *Harrowing of Hell,* 1510, and Hans Holbein's 1538 woodcuts on the theme of *Der Totentanz (The Dance of Death).*

3 The theme of Reinecke Fuchs along with that of a 'Totentanz' or 'Dance of Death' taking place in *Studie für Malepartus* also reinforces the association of this print cycle with early Renaissance images of death, hell and the apocalypse.

4 Levels of venereal disease reached epidemic proportions in the immediate aftermath of the war. In Germany, despite being perhaps the most hygienically organized of the European nations in this respect, soldiers returning from the Front where many had contracted disease from the state-run brothels combined with the shortages, severe poverty and widespread wartime promiscuity amongst women, began to spread the disease rapidly. As Stefan Zweig recalled of levels of venereal disease prior to the war, 'It must not be forgotten that… sexual diseases were spread a hundred times more rapidly than they are today and that they were a hundred times more dangerous and horrible in effect, because medicine did not yet know how to approach them clinically… The statistics of those days show that in the army and the big cities at least one or two out of every ten young men had fallen victim to infection.' Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, New York, 1964, p.88. Estimates of infected people in the post-war period in Germany have been thought to have been as high as 60% of the population. See also Magnus Hirschfeld, *The Sexual History of the World War*, New York, 1941, pp.92–110.

5 The phrase 'Berlin, Dein Tänzer ist der Tod' appeared for example in a satirical song by Walt Mehring at this time. See Roland März, 'Metropolis-Berlin, Dein Tänzer ist der Tod' in *Der Potsdamer Platz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner und der Untergang Preussens,* exh. cat., Berlin, 2001, p.259.

6 Helmut Günther and Helmut Schäfer *Von Schamentanz zur Rumba*, Stuttgart, 1959, p.205.

7 Julius Meier-Graefe, 'Gesichter', 1919, Baron von Erffa and E. Göpel, ed., *Blick auf Beckmann*, Munich, 1962, p.53. See also Sarah O'Brien Twohig, 'Beckmann and the City', *Max Beckmann Retrospective*, exh. cat., St Louis, 1986, p.99.

8 Max Beckmann, 'Schöpferische Konfession', in Kasimir Edschmid, ed., *Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit,* Berlin, 1918, in Barbara Copeland Buenger, ed., *Max Beckmann Self-Portrait in Words*, Chicago, 1997, p.184.

20
Aperitif c.1947
Max Beckmann

My aim is always to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into painting – to make the invisible visible through reality. It may sound paradoxical, but it is, in fact reality which forms the mystery of our existence. (Max Beckmann)[1]

Beckmann saw and painted all of human life as what he once described as a *Welt-Theater (World-Theatre)*. For Beckmann, all of existence, indeed reality itself, was a façade – an intricate and fascinating mask that both reflected and disguised deeper existential truths.

Aperitif is a work that presents barroom life as an almost stage-like arena of human interaction. An intimate and personal work painted in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and at a time when Beckmann was on the point of beginning a new life, it is one that openly celebrates society's return to the pleasures and rituals of daily life after several long years of upheaval and war. A barroom scene, with film-noirish echoes of the glamour of 1920s nightlife, *Aperitif* is a work that is ultimately reflective of Beckmann's personal feelings and aspirations after having lived through a long period of isolation and exile in occupied Amsterdam.

Typically dark and compact, it depicts, in a seemingly intimate and knowing way, a distinctly elegant barroom and all of the rich pleasures to be had there: swift and attentive service, champagne and cigars, conversation and an elaborately dressed, pretty girl. Compressed with imagery and atmosphere, it is, for such a small picture, a surprisingly intense work, providing a window onto a world that must have seemed at turns both exotic and reassuring to Beckmann, as well as perhaps a little decadent after his many years of deprivation and austerity in Holland.

With its glamorous central figure of a woman (perhaps Beckmann's wife Mathilde, known as Quappi) wearing a large Western-style hat, *Aperitif* is infused not just with an aura of wealth and plenty, however, but also with that of America. Throughout the last days of the Second World War and until his eventual emigration to the 'New World' over two years later, Beckmann's thoughts and aspirations were almost permanently fixed on the dream of beginning a new life for himself in the United States. Beckmann had begun taking English lessons in preparation for an eventual move to America as early as July 1945, and with the help of friends like Stephan Lackner and art dealers such as Curt Valentin, several large, important and financially successful

exhibitions of his work had also been mounted in the U.S., in 1946, to prepare the way for him. On the strength of these successful sales of his work in America, in the spring of 1947 Beckmann and Quappi had, for the first time in over ten years, paid a visit to the French Riviera, staying in Nice and Monte Carlo before returning, via Paris, to Amsterdam. In August 1947 the couple then set sail for America, stopping first in New York before moving to St. Louis in September, where Beckmann was to replace Philip Guston as a professor at the Art School of Washington University there. *Aperitif* is an undated work from this period in Beckmann's life and it is not known whether it was painted shortly before or after Beckmann's arrival in the U.S.

With its elegant but also typical barroom scene, *Aperitif* could derive from any one of the smart bars and hotels that Beckmann had made a point of visiting in 1947. In his diary from this period Beckmann often noted down the bars and restaurants he had visited along with details of the meals and drinks he had consumed. Amongst many others, *Aperitif* could, in this respect therefore, depict a bar in Nice or the casino in Monte Carlo, La Coupole in Paris, the bar of the St. Regis in New York or even one in St. Louis. Alternatively, it could also depict the bar on the SS *Amsterdam*, the ship on which Beckmann and Quappi had sailed to New York in the company of such luminaries as Thomas Mann and the American actress Katharine Hepburn. It may also be, like many other works from this period, a wholly imagined scene or one of a fond memory of an earlier time gone by.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, among the first requests that Beckmann had made to Curt Valentin was for the dealer to send over some bottles of whisky and/or champagne. Enjoyment of the finer things in life was clearly as much at the forefront of Beckmann's mind at this time as America was. Throughout the war Beckmann had craved good food, drink and tobacco and in paintings such as *Austernesserinnen (The Oyster Eaters)* of 1943, *Artisten-Café (Artists' Café)* of 1944 or *Prunier* of 1944 for example, he had expressed such desires and relived earlier memories of the good times he had enjoyed before the war.[2] In 1947, after years of deprivation, Beckmann was, for the first time since the Occupation, legally and financially able to travel and, in his travels through France and later in the year to America, appears to have eagerly sought out the luxury of good food and drink at every opportunity. It is essentially this return to a higher and more elegant lifestyle that *Aperitif* celebrates.

In its composition, however, *Aperitif* is a work based loosely on a similarly structured but atmospherically very different barroom scene that Beckmann had made

Beckmann, *The Oyster Eaters* 1943

Beckmann, *Artists' Café* 1944

at the height of a period of austerity and shortages in Amsterdam in 1944, entitled *Bar Braun*. A similar format and composition to both *Austernesserinnen* and *Aperitif* and also depicting three people in a barroom, *Bar Braun* is a painting infused throughout with a sense of loneliness and isolation. Making use of a typically thin and elongated format in order to compress the figures together – a repeated motif in Beckmann's painting, particularly in his depictions of nightclubs and bars – *Bar Braun* shows Beckmann's wife Quappi and two male figures all in close proximity in a way that in fact emphasizes how each individual is seemingly stranded from the others and lost within the isolation of their own thoughts. The barroom too, unlike the elegant scene of *Aperitif*, is both gloomy and disturbingly bare – a bleak and melancholic interior landscape seemingly reflective of the exiled Beckmann's own often dark moods during his years living in exile and isolation in a foreign town.

While the apparent exoticism and dressy opulence of *Aperitif* stands in direct contrast to the evocative war-time *Bar Braun*, Beckmann has composed and rendered *Aperitif* in such a way, using strong contrasts of rich colour and numerous black shadows and other dark blocks of form, that it seems also to recall, in some ways, the more decadent mood of glamour and decay that distinguished the 1920s. Beckmann himself had earlier documented this period in pictures such as his *Tanz in Baden-Baden (The Dance in Baden-Baden)* of 1923 and his 1919 self-portrait with a champagne glass, where all the desperate intensity of 1920s life seemed to have been manically compressed, as in *Aperitif*, into the comparatively small picture planes Beckmann had provided. It is, in this respect, solely the flamboyant and more modern attire of the young woman of *Aperitif*, her American-looking hat and the 1940s styling of her hair, that clearly distinguishes this watercolour from these other earlier works. In most other ways, with its intently hurrying black-tied waiter, cigar-smoking old man and young coquettish woman, the equally crowded scene in *Aperitif* seems to mark an almost cyclical sense of return to a 1920s-style nightlife.

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1 Max Beckmann quoted in Peter Selz, *Max Beckmann*, New York, 1996, p.101.

2 Along with food and drink, Beckmann, during the most austere years of 1943 and 1944 in Amsterdam, also frequently painted barroom scenes and landscapes from the South of France where he and Quappi had regularly spent their summers.

Beckmann, *Prunier* 1944

Beckmann, *Bar Braun* 1944

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Idealistische Begegnung / The Idealistic Encounter 1928

Oskar Schlemmer

Richard Nagy Ltd.

What does the artist do? He makes the unclear appear clear, the unconscious conscious, the impossible possible: plucks the One out of the Chaos, simplicity out of multiplicity.
(Oskar Schlemmer)[1]

While most of the pioneering artists who taught at the Bauhaus championed geometric abstraction as the language best suited to expressing the vision of a future realm of absolute perfection, Schlemmer was unique among them in seeking through the image of man and the human form the ultimate measure of all things. Throughout his entire career, Schlemmer pursued a visionary art and a unique proto-classical ideal that championed a geometric crystallization of the human figure as the sole, irreducible and immutable truth in, what was for him, an otherwise mysterious, volatile and even chaotic universe.

In a lecture Schlemmer gave in Darmstadt in 1929, he proclaimed his ideal was to produce artistic creations 'born of the combination and the ideal balance of abstraction, proportion, and law on the one hand and nature, feeling and idea on the other'.[2] Painted in the spring of 1928 at the very height of Schlemmer's involvement with the Bauhaus, *Idealistische Begegnung* is a unique and in many ways atypical work within the artist's oeuvre that nonetheless completely encapsulates this ideal. An extraordinary refined, elegant but also dramatically sparse composition starkly contrasting the apparent emptiness of space with the human form, *Idealistische Begegnung* is, as its title perhaps also suggests, a powerful demonstration of the picture plane being used as an idealized field within which all sorts of polarities, including those outlined in his Darmstadt lecture, are almost magically reconciled.

Schlemmer early in his career had stated that his primary artistic aim was to depict 'the most romantic of ideas in the most prosaic of forms'. With its strong sense of personal interaction between two contrasting figures in space, *Idealistische Begegnung*'s subtle fusion of near-abstract and figurative form is almost Expressionist in the way in which it infuses the empty spaces and cool geometry of Schlemmer's idealized forms with an unusual but profound sense of psychology and emotion. A rare example in Schlemmer's oeuvre of overt drama and emotion, the painting is also one that conjures a deep sense of the innate mysticism that lay at the heart of the artist's aesthetic, and his existential vision of the human form as an immutable archetype capable of bridging the visible world of outward appearance and the hidden, inner, metaphysical realm of the spirit.

It was this capability of his idealized forms to articulate a dynamic and emotionally expressive language, to essentially function on twin levels of meaning, that clearly excited Schlemmer about this work. On its completion in April 1928 he noted with satisfaction in his diary that 'the new picture *Begegnung*, has ready appeal'. In contrast to the 'serene, perhaps too serene interiors' that he had repeatedly been making prior to this, Schlemmer found this work to be 'explosive' and 'eruptive' with 'mighty contrasts of types and chiaroscuro'. 'Perhaps,' he noted also, referring to his sense of himself as a personality forged from extremes, 'it does show something characteristic of me, peculiar to me:

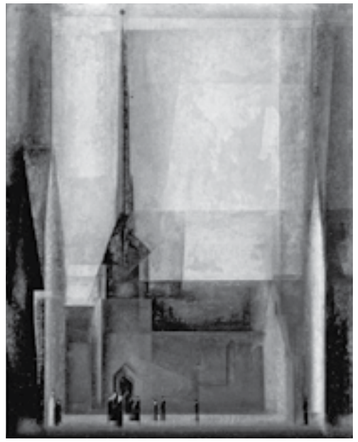
the tension, the emotional quality and the effect. And then a new element: the strong mass of white taking shape against a dark, imaginary space. I must figure this out and discover where the crucial elements lie.'[5]

Marking a new development in Schlemmer's work that the artist was not, in fact, later to pursue, *Idealistische Begegnung* was one of the first paintings Schlemmer had made after a comparatively long break from painting during the previous couple of years.[4] Between 1925 and early 1928 Schlemmer had concentrated almost entirely on work for the theatre, and on his extensive duties as the master in charge of the theatre department at the Bauhaus. *Idealistische Begegnung* is based on a drawing with the title *Ideelles Portrait (Imaginary Portrait)* made on 7 December 1927. It was only around this time, as Schlemmer had confided to his diary in February 1928, that 'ideas for pictures… (were)… finally flowing' again, 'even entering my dreams, so that pictures come to me between waking and sleeping'.[5] As a consequence, Schlemmer decided in early 1928 'to do full justice to only one pursuit at a time. Either painting or the theatre… (and had) now resolved not to lose the thread of painting… to consider all else secondary'.[6]

In his work for the theatre over the previous years, and in particular the production of his epic and always-evolving 'Triadic Ballet', Schlemmer had sought, through a combination of the strict constructivism of the sets and the physical restrictions on movement provided by his geometric costumes, always to control and contain the innate 'Dionysian' energy of the dance within a refined and restrained 'Apollonian' shell. In so doing, it was Schlemmer's aim to attain in the ballet as a whole an elemental sense of harmony and union through the aesthetic resolution of these two fundamentally opposing principles of life. 'The dance, which is Dionysian and wholly emotional in origin,' he had written of his aims with this project, 'becomes strict and Apollonian in its final form, a symbol of the balancing of opposites.'[7]

It is a similar elemental reconciling of opposites, a balancing of Dionysian energy, passion and force with cool, rational and objective Apollonian form that underpins the composition of *Idealistische Begegnung*, one of the first paintings that Schlemmer made after his decision to transfer his energies from the theatre back into painting. In both its form and its subject matter, *Idealistische Begegnung* conveys the same sense of a conjunction of opposites as that attempted in his 'Triadic Ballet', here, reinforced by the pictorial conceit of an idealized and distinctly mystic meeting. For not only does this painting represent a seemingly enchanted encounter between two contrasting figures – one male and vertical appearing like

Feininger, *Church of the Minorites II* 1926



Feininger, *Gelmeroda IX* 1926

an apparition above a female whose horizontal head gazes upwards in apparent wonder, but it also conjures a sense of existential mystery between these figures and the strange light and dark empty space surrounding them. Through the drama and simplicity of its elegant and refined graphic style, the painting articulates the existential nature of encounter that lies at the very heart of Schlemmer's work, the meeting between form and formlessness, between the immutable idea and reality of the human form and the vast, unknowable, infinity of empty space.

Schlemmer's experience of stage design, ballet and choreography had led him to the discovery that 'the human figure, plucked out of the mass and placed in the separate realm of the stage (or the empty plane of the picture) is surrounded by an aura of magic and thus becomes a space-bewitched being'.[8] His ultimate aim of depicting 'the most romantic of ideas in the most prosaic of forms' is combined with this discovery in *Idealistische Begegnung* into a pictorial attempt at imbuing an encounter between two otherwise ordinary figures in space with a powerful existential sense of mystery and magic. 'I hope to refine my expressive tools,' Schlemmer had declared as early as 1913, 'to the point where I can render some great spiritual conception,' stating that he believed that it could only be through a purely 'objective representation of nature' that an artist would be able to 'capture a more profound form of mysticism. The mysticism that is crucial to the painter's vision'.[9]

This pervasive mixture of objectivity and mysticism that subtly infuses much of Schlemmer's work is particularly enhanced in *Idealistische Begegnung* by the direct confrontation between sharp, clearly delineated form and the hazy diffusion of mysterious white light and rich dark brown that originate in the top right and left-hand corners of the picture respectively. Emphasizing the angular dynamism of the painting's composition, it is primarily this aspect of the work that bestows it with a sense of sacred lighting in a manner similar to that employed by Schlemmer's Bauhaus colleague Lyonel Feininger, whose crystallized images of Gothic cathedrals from this period often visually echo the refined mystical geometry of Schlemmer's own articulation of space and the human form. Displaying a kind of mystical classicism like that found in a painting such as *Barfüsserkirche II (Church of the Minorites II)* of 1926, *Idealistische Begegnung* is also a similarly holistic and harmonious compositional fugue of angular planar tectonics and subtle modulation of sublime light, colour and shade. It is, on one level, a painting with an apparent subject matter derived from the world of visual appearance. On the other, like Feininger's cathedral paintings, *Idealistische Begegnung* is clearly also an idealized vision, a complex semi-abstract fusion of disparate formal elements brilliantly resolved into a fascinating unity on the picture plane in such a way as to exude a strong, near-mystical aura that intimates at the idea of perfection.

It is also in this articulating of an aura, or another dimension lying hidden behind the supposedly clear objective world of visible reality, that Schlemmer can be seen to be as Karin von Maur, the leading contemporary scholar of the artist's work, has described him, 'the purest representative of Metaphysical Painting in Germany'.[10] Though 'stylized into concise silhouettes or conical or spherical configurations', she writes, Schlemmer's figures always 'retain their roots in natural, organic form, and never petrify into either lay-figures in the manner of Carra and de Chirico, or into mechanical men à la Léger or Baumeister…What (Schlemmer) as the only one of the Bauhaus artists attempted was a comprehensive synthesis… a path somewhere intermediate between the constructivism of De Stijl and the verism of Dix or Beckmann. Indeed, he was convinced that an artist in Germany, living in the geographical centre of a country in the heart of Europe, must always be aware of the necessity of contributing to a balance and synthesis of opposing forces and influences. Seen in this geopolitical light, Schlemmer's preference for intersecting axes and symmetries takes on deeper meaning… The standing pose comes to represent "steadfastness", the act of walking becomes a "passage" through space, in both a physical and existential sense. In this frame of reference everything suddenly takes on multiple meanings…'[11]

It is essentially this innate and existential 'balance and synthesis between opposing forces and influences' that is articulated in *Idealistische Begegnung* – a work that in this context can be seen to depict both a physical and a metaphysical vortex around which all these elements appear to be centred. It is no accident, for example, that, at the very heart of the picture, the focal point and compositional apex of the work is, appropriately for its theme, two hands clasping each other. Simplified forms conjoined into a union but also surrounded by a seemingly mystic void of white space, they, like everything else in the painting, are clearly divided into distinct areas of light and shadow. Here, as in the wider picture itself, one crystallized form encounters another. The solidity and precision of the visible world is contrasted directly with the vague immateriality of nothingness. Light is sharply divided from darkness, the visible matter of reality encounters but is segregated from the ethereal metaphysical space that appears to pour down like a sacred light from the top right-hand corner of the picture. In this way *Idealistische Begegnung* asserts itself as an existential encounter between elemental polarities as well as a potentially mystic or

romantic one between two humans. The sharp division of the composition into dualities and their resultant elegant and harmonious resolution into a united, almost cosmic seeming whole intimates, like so much of Schlemmer's work, at an ideal or state of perfection indicative of an underlying and ever-present ordering force at work within the world.

Idealistische Begegnung is a pictorial play, expressed primarily in terms of such dualities as light and darkness, male and female, form and formlessness, which appears to assert that, although all phenomena may appear chaotic and full of contradictions, in the realm of art at least, if not elsewhere in society, it is possible to synthesize all these opposites in a single, coherent and perfect form.[12] In this respect *Idealistische Begegnung* can be seen as a pictorial expression of the sentiments Schlemmer had recorded two years earlier on the subject of many of his contemporaries' fears about the encroaching threat of mechanization on art and life. 'Let's not complain about mechanization,' Schlemmer had advised, 'but be happy about precision! Artists are prepared to transform the darkness and danger of a mechanical age into the luminosity of an exact form of metaphysics. If the artists of today love machines and technology and organization, if they prefer the precise to the vague and the confused, then instinctive salvation from chaos and our anxiety for expression are the same as pouring new wine into old skins: formulating the impulses of the present and of today's man, giving them form, which will be unique and without precedent.'[13]

Although *Idealistische Begegnung* is Schlemmer's most visionary and dream-like picture it is also an elegant encapsulation of the artist's entire synthetic approach to painting. A work that seems to fuse the mysticism of Expressionist drama with the metaphysical dream-like realities of Surrealism, the painting also brings together and seemingly unites the realm of constructivist art with that of the 'New Objectivity', Abstraction with Realism. A yin and yang-like synthesis of form and space, *Idealistische Begegnung* is ultimately a unique work that functions like a pictorial manifesto of Schlemmer's entire visionary aesthetic ideal. It is a singular demonstration of the famous proclamation that Walter Gropius later made about Schlemmer's painting as a whole, that it 'vibrates with a new spatial energy' and, like 'a premonition', awakens the mind of the observer to the idea of a 'future holistic culture, a culture that will reunite all the arts'.[14]

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1 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, 10 April 1915, in Tut Schlemmer, ed., *The Diaries and Letters of Oskar Schlemmer*, Evanston, Illinois, 1972, p.23.
2 Oskar Schlemmer, catalogue for the exhibition 'Der schöne Mensch in der Neuen Kunst', Städtisches Ausstellungsgebäude, Darmstadt, 1929, p.54.
3 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, 4 February 1928, in Tut Schlemmer, ed., op. cit., p.232. In addition, Schlemmer saw his own personality as one of Apollonian and Dionysian contrasts.
4 Soon after completing *Idealistische Begegnung* Schlemmer received a commission to paint a large cycle of murals for the interior of the Folkwang Museum in Essen. This important commission completed in 1931 was to preoccupy the artist for much of the next three years. His work on these murals, along with the dramatically changing political climate in Germany between 1928 and 1931, ultimately led to Schlemmer's work developing in a different direction to that intimated by *Idealistische Begegnung*.
5 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, 4 February 1928, in Tut Schlemmer, ed., op. cit., p.224. In the light of the unique nature and near Surrealist, dream-like imagery of *Idealistische Begegnung* it seems highly possible that the inspiration for this painting may well also have come to Schlemmer in such a semi or subconscious manner.
6 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, 4 February 1928, in Tut Schlemmer, ed., op. cit., p.224.
7 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, September 1922, in Tut Schlemmer, ed., op. cit., p.128.
8 Oskar Schlemmer, 'Formale Elemente der Bühne', p.14. Manuscript of a lecture given on 4 March 1933, Oskar Schlemmer Archiv, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.
9 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, April 1915, in Tut Schlemmer, ed., *Briefe und Tagebücher*, Stuttgart, 1977, p.10.
10 Karin von Maur, 'Oskar Schlemmer and His Struggle to Achieve "Precision of the Idea"', *Oskar Schlemmer*, exh. cat, Madrid, 1996, pp.182–84.
11 Ibid.
12 Schlemmer saw the need for order and the mystical search for a harmonious reconciling of opposites as more than a mere aesthetic aim. Like many of the Bauhaus faculty it was an ambition that held important socio-political significance for him, one that grew ever more acute as the political situation in Germany became ever more polarized in the late 1920s and early '30s.
13 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, April 1926, p.87, quoted in Marga Paz, 'Oskar Schlemmer: Six Aspects of his Work', *Oskar Schlemmer*, exh. cat., Madrid, 1997, p.189.
14 Walter Gropius, 1961, quoted in *Oskar Schlemmer*, exh. cat., Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1986, p.119.

22

Drei am Geländer / Three by the Banister 1931

Oskar Schlemmer

My good pictures could be reduced to a few simple forms, to one good, full chord. One needs so little in the way of good composition to make a picture!… This must be the foundation of my further work. For it implies a return to integrating the abstract with elementary, simple pictorial forms: it banishes the naturalistic plague, which had begun to spread unchecked… (Oskar Schlemmer)[1]

'I must become simple again,' Schlemmer noted to himself in June 1931, after three years of work on the creation of an extensive and elaborate series of murals for the Folkwang Museum in Essen.[2] Believing that in these murals and other recent paintings he had succumbed to what he felt were more 'baroque' impulses in the suggestion of tension, movement and emotion, Schlemmer noted that he had 'abandoned simple pictorial elements in favour of natural elements (and) figural motifs, which were never natural enough to satisfy as such'.[3] Schlemmer intended in future, he declared, to constrain such Dionysian impulses within a more Apollonian field of order.

In the summer of 1931, Schlemmer acted on these intentions by embarking on a completely new series of deliberately more restrained and refined paintings that made use of what has become known as the *Geländermotiv* (banister motif). This was a series of painstakingly crafted paintings contrasting carefully orchestrated groups of figures against the fixed and angular geometry of stairways, balconies and banisters. Today they are recognized as marking the culmination of what Schlemmer called his 'grand figural style' and the establishment of his long-held ideal of a complete pictorial synthesis between figure and space.

Painted in Breslau in August 1931, *Drei am Geländer* is one of the very first of the *Geländermotiv* series made almost continuously between the summer of 1931 and September 1932. The series is distinguished by five major oil paintings, the best known of which is *Bauhaustreppe (Bauhaus Steps)* in the Museum of Modern Art in New York – the painting that Schlemmer himself considered to be the finest of all his pictorial creations.[4]

Drei am Geländer is one of two completed watercolour studies for the very first of these five oils, *Gruppe am Geländer (Group at the Banister)* of 1931, now in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf. It was with these two 1931 watercolours – *Drei am Geländer* and

the similar study of the same name now in the Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen – that Schlemmer first introduced the *Geländermotiv* as a way of breaking up the baroque sense of movement of his recent pictures. In these two watercolours, the railings, banisters and other architectural details all combine to constitute an almost Mondrian-esque backdrop of strong rectangular strips or blocks of colour that anchor the more fluid dynamics of his walking and climbing human figures. Painted on 27 August 1931, *Drei am Geländer* from the present collection is likely to be the earlier of these two watercolours because here these blocks are rendered more naturalistically as bleak building-like forms somewhat reminiscent of the austere architecture of the *pittura metafisica* and the new 'sachlich' (objective) approach it had engendered in Germany in the 1920s. In the oil version on this theme, *Gruppe am Geländer,* Schlemmer resorted to a completely abstract pattern more reminiscent of the presumably later and undated Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum watercolour.

Probably the very first completed work of the entire *Geländermotiv* series therefore, *Drei am Geländer* is a work that demonstrates Schlemmer's main intention in all these pictures of creating a single harmonious and holistic image in which the living, motional architecture of the human form becomes seamlessly integrated within the inert, static and geometric architecture of its surroundings. Like the abstracted backgrounds in most of these paintings, Schlemmer's figures are also idealizations. They follow in many respects the pattern he had defined as the *Rückenfigur (Rear-View Figure)* type in his Essen murals, which conveys what he described as a de-psychologized and essentially monumental approximation of the human form. Such figures, Schlemmer explained, are *Kunstwesen* (art-beings) rather than *Naturwesen* (natural beings), figure-based elements that ultimately stand as pictorial allegories or symbols of the human form.[5]

In *Drei am Geländer*, the curves of multiple corporeal forms and the cool rational grid-like background establish a formal dialogue that seems to speak of an idealized interaction between man and environment. In this way the painting's undeniably sophisticated pictorial harmony articulates the Romantic idealism and near-religious nature of Schlemmer's art, and his lifelong search to refine a unique pictorial synthesis in which all the seemingly disparate and varied phenomena that collectively make up the visible world become harmoniously integrated. This search was part of an essentially mystical belief in some kind of innate and universal order unifying all the apparent chaos of nature. It was a belief shared by many of the leading abstract artists of the period but one that remained comparatively

Schlemmer, *Bauhaus Steps* 1932

Schlemmer, *Group at the Banister* 1931

rare among those who, like Schlemmer, still adhered to figuration and a more classically derived belief in the ultimate immutability of the human form.

As the balance between order and chaos in the external world around him seemed to grow ever more delicate in the polarizing political climate in Germany in the late 1920s and early '30s, Schlemmer's art seemed to grow increasingly focused and concentrated. It was as if the pervasive need for order in his work grew ever more acute as the external threat of the world's descent into chaos gained ground. Schlemmer's adoption of the angular and restraining armatures of the *Geländermotiv* can be seen as a reflection of this tendency. As Karin von Maur has noted, there were probably psychological reasons behind Schlemmer's sudden attraction to staircase motifs after a period of 'baroque indulgence'. The scaffolding or banister motifs evidently provided 'support and stability in the face of what he felt to be irrational subconscious forces, a structure both literal and pictorial to channel those forces into rationality'.[6]

In addition, the *Geländermotiv* may also reflect a deeper and more widespread psychological need for stability and structure prevalent through all aspects of German life in the socio-political disintegration of the period. Hitler and the Nazis, for example, repeatedly manipulated and capitalized upon the latent desire for a return to order in their quest for power. In later years they even appropriated their own sterile form of neo-classicism to express the semblance of a 'New Order'.

Following the death of Schlemmer's great friend, mentor and confidant, Otto Meyer-Amden, in 1933 and the Nazi assumption of power, the artist was ultimately to suffer greatly under the new regime. After the Nazi closure of the Dessau Bauhaus in 1932 and subsequently the Breslau Academy where he worked, Schlemmer would spend much of the next ten years isolated from friends, family and colleagues, jobless and without an income. His art was effectively silenced. Suffering from an illness, in part brought on by these troubles, Schlemmer died in 1943. His close friend and companion Julius Bissier interpreted Schlemmer's 'tectonics and classicism' during this troubled last decade of his life as a kind of 'asylum for his sense of gloom about the world, an ultimate hopelessness and a voluntary escape into fictitious order'.[7] This notion of art as a precious and sacred refuge from the chaos of the world, where idealized forms and pure, open structures provide a welcome retreat into an ideal classical order, is central to the cool harmonies and elegant geometric structuring of *Drei am Geländer*.

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1 Oskar Schlemmer, diary entry, 22 June 1931, in Tut Schlemmer, ed., *The Diaries and Letters of Oskar Schlemmer*, Evanston, Illinois, 1972, p.280.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 The five oils comprise *Gruppe am Geländer* of 1931 in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf. An immaculate composition consisting of four figures, this painting was followed by an extremely similar but more complex seven-figure composition *Szene am Geländer* (Private Collection, Stuttgart), which projected a series of steps receding into perspective at the centre of what was in all other respects the same composition. These two paintings' subtle integration of figures shown simultaneously ascending and descending a grid-like and near-abstract lattice of stairs was subsequently developed in 1932 into the more open and explicit image of a staircase in *Treppenszene* of 1932 (Kunsthalle, Hamburg) and then culminated in Schlemmer's famous tribute on this same theme to the recently closed Bauhaus in the painting *Bauhaustreppe,* where figures were shown walking up and down the Walter Gropius-designed staircase of the Dessau Bauhaus. The final oil of the *Geländermotiv* series, *Geländerszene* (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart) is an ultimately less convincing fusion of the central figures of *Bauhaustreppe* with the more concentrated semi-abstract focus of the first two paintings in the series.
5 Oskar Schlemmer, 'Zu meinen Wandbildern für das Museum Folkwang in Essen', *Musuem der Gegenwart* 1/4, 1931, pp.147–53.
6 Karin von Maur, 'The Art of Oskar Schlemmer', in *Oskar Schlemmer*, exh.cat., Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1986, p.72.
7 Memorial Speech for Oskar Schlemmer held on 4 September 1948, quoted in Matthias Bärmann, ed., *Julius Bissier – Oskar Schlemmer, Briefwechsel,* St. Gallen, 1988, p.128.

23
Die verwunschenen Prinzessinnen / The Enchanted Princesses 1900
Koloman Moser

The boundless evil caused by shoddy mass-produced goods, and by uncritical imitation of earlier styles, is like a tidal wave sweeping across the world. We have been cut adrift from the culture of our forefathers and are cast hither and thither by a thousand desires and considerations. The machine has largely replaced the hand and the businessman has supplanted the craftsman. To attempt to stem this torrent would seem like madness. Yet for all that we have founded our workshop. Our aim is to create an island of tranquility in our own country, which, amid the joyful hum of arts and crafts, would be welcome to anyone who professes faith in Ruskin and Morris.[1]

Moser is renowned alongside Josef Hoffmann as one of the foremost designers in Vienna around 1900. A founding member of the Secession, he represents the ideal of a synthesis of the arts inspired by the English Arts and Crafts movement, which elevates the applied arts to the same creative level as the fine arts. Having studied painting at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, in the late 1890s he shifted his focus to designing textiles, glass and ceramic works. He exhibited his first executed designs for furniture at the 8th Secession Exhibition (November to December 1900), where, alongside the sideboard *Der reiche Fischzug (The Rich Trawl)* and a cigar cabinet, he also presented *Die verwunschenen Prinzessinnen*, the cabinet discussed here.

The art critic Ludwig Hevesi commented on 10 November 1900 on Moser's latest sphere of artistic activity: 'The most Moser-ish of all however is a corner cabinet called *The Enchanted Princesses*. We can in fact see three slender maidens inside it, with gold bands in their endless hair, spellbound in intarsia, not without some scattering of those silver discs and pearls of dew that so lovingly and discreetly contribute to Moser's work. Outside a fish monster serves as escutcheon and elongated, iris-coloured tears flow down the door wings.' This report might be mistaken for the description of a painting – Moser even gives the furniture a title, an approach that breaks new ground in Vienna. We appreciate this more when we realize that the Secession artists were strongly focused on individualistic artistic expression within the context of the unity of the arts. Consequently, from the point of view of a painter, it behoves an artist to provide a title casting light on his creative concept for a piece of furniture. Moser's furniture is not content to be part of a conventional, uniform interior design concept dictated by sets and ensembles. It stands out in its surrounding space like an individual, solely definable by its quite personal attributes, similar to a sculpture or painting. It no longer represents the so-called 'good taste' of the old aristocratic society, whose success depends on the fulfilment of a given standard and not on the fulfilment of personal needs. It has a voice and uses it. Whether someone wants to hear it or even finds it beautiful, is not the determining

criterion here. The decisive point is that Moser makes use of furniture to give personal feelings a public voice. In doing so he breaks a taboo against traditional social rules.

Neither does the cabinet correspond to the usual ideas of haute-bourgeois, not to mention aristocratic prestige. Moser gives the board – as primary constructional element of an item of furniture – aesthetic significance. He doesn't process it by giving it frame and filling, as accords with tradition. Nor are the individual surfaces defined and limited by mouldings as framing elements. The furniture is placed neither on a base nor crowned with a cornice. The smooth board remains the elemental medium of the craft of cabinet-making. We only have to look at the legs, attached as boards that continue the side walls and hence only appear at the cabinet front as thin posts; or, instead of a cornice or base, Moser has shallow-carved boards beginning and ending on the same level as the cabinet's front and side walls. For Moser, the painter, the board is a support for a painting and instead of a painting technique he uses wood marquetry in order to express his pictorial idea. This is manifest only when opening the cabinet, like a medieval retable. In the centre of the cabinet opening Moser places a small board with the frontal depiction of a princess. Indicating that the outer sides of the two doors are primarily pictorial substrates, he scatters raised and asymmetrically arranged tear-shaped glass droplets across the front.

Moser's cabinet model *Die verwunschenen Prinzessinnen* was conceived for the 8th Secession Exhibition as a three-legged corner cabinet and subsequently made in a four-leg version by the furnishing and interior decorating firm and furniture manufacturer Portois and Fix. Born of the conviction that artistic expression has the capacity to enhance the quality of people's everyday life, the question of whether it is a piece of furniture or a work of art is no longer relevant here. Both fuse with each other as a self-evident unity.

CW-D, YM

1 Koloman Moser and Josef Hoffman, 'The Work-Programme of the Wiener Werkstätte' a 1905 manifesto, as quoted in *Vienna Moderne, 1898–1918: An Early Encounter Between Taste and Utility*, Houston, Sarah Campbell Gallery, University of Texas, 1979, p.87.

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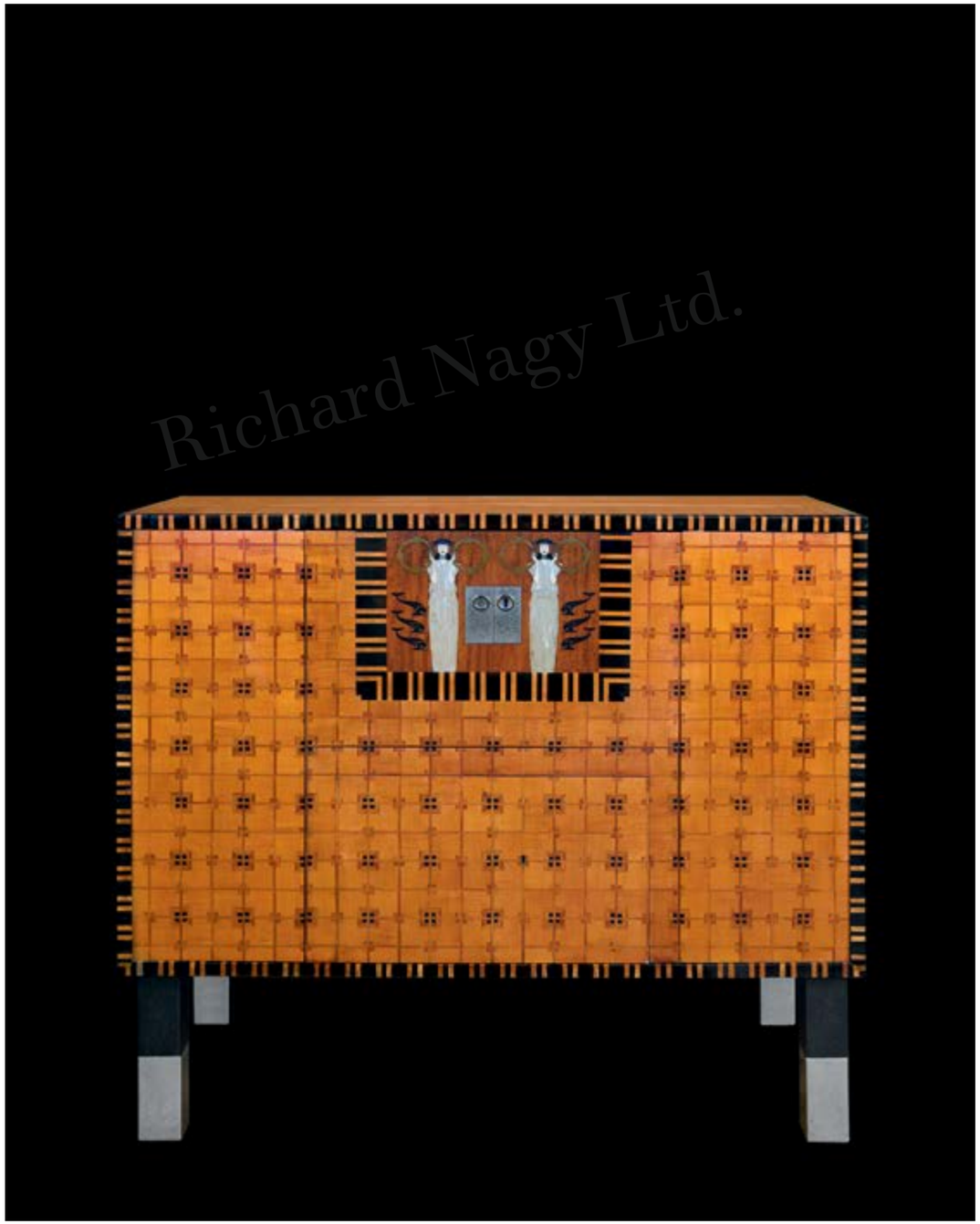
Péter Rostás, *Mágnások Lakberendezője. A Friedrich Otto Schmidt Lakberendezőház Története (1858–1918)*, Geopen, Budapest, 2010, p.162.

24
Sekretär / Secretaire 1902
Koloman Moser



The year 1902 brought the final breakthrough in Moser's artistic career with the fruition of a Viennese style that was independent, modern, and distinct to the bourgeoisie, the development of which had been the foremost aim of the Vienna Secession since its founding in 1897. The initial dependency on curvilinear Belgian and French Art Nouveau was discarded, and realization dawned that Austria's national roots were to be found in the Viennese Biedermeier style. For the young generation of artists, the formal expressions of Biedermeier realized the first style not derived from an aristocratic lifestyle but suited to the needs of the bourgeoisie. It expressed itself primarily in a reduced, functional and modest idiom. Moreover, in Biedermeier culture the world of forms and everyday life had been in harmony for the last time prior to 1900. This defined an ideal that – contrary to Historicism, which was nurtured by a world of historical forms – was an essential precondition for life in the modern world of the middle classes. Unlike France, which endeavoured in the latter part of the nineteenth-century to rediscover its roots in the age of Louis XIV, a geometric-abstract idiom dominated visual language in Vienna.

The writing cabinet presented here can be identified as one of two pieces of furniture designed by Moser in the Ver Sacrum room of the 17th Secession Exhibition. In his review of the exhibition on 2 April 1903, the art critic Ludwig Hevesi writes: 'In this room we see two remarkable, light cabinets by Moser, in the simplest cubic forms, but appetizing ("appetitlich") in material and foldable like Old Japan.' Conclusive proof that he was writing about this very piece is provided by the exhibition catalogue, which mentions a writing cabinet in the Ver Sacrum room. Since the exhibition had already opened on 26 March 1903, Moser must have completed the design for the elaborate execution by the end of 1902. Hevesi's description of the writing cabinet might be difficult to comprehend in terms of today. The attribute 'appetitlich' (appetizing) as an adjective for a piece of furniture is surprising, but understandable in the context of Hevesi's emphasis on the bright finishing. In contrast to the then current fashion in Historicism,which favoured sombre surroundings and shutting out daylight – thus keeping the public eye out of the private sphere of the home, the Secessionists propagated a bright atmosphere connecting the inside and the outside world. Light surfaces were felt to be hygienic and therefore appetizing, or pleasing. Hevesi's association of the piece with Japan does indeed refer to its function as a writing desk, only visible when unfolding horizontal and vertical elements, but may be extended to include the Japanese woodcuts and dyers' stencils that were such important sources of inspiration for Moser's planar art.

The writing cabinet betrays the painter, who doesn't think a priori in tectonic dimensions. For him, this cuboid-shaped carcass furniture is not constructed of bearing and loading

elements, but consists of individual planes that might be interpreted as support for images.

The front and side walls of the writing cabinet are covered with geometric marquetry and framed dark, awakening the impression that the piece is constructed of single planes. Moser consequently sets the legs directly onto the front and rear walls, without the intermediary element of a horizontal bearing element like an apron. This gives the effect of a retractable telescope, which keeps the cabinet in a visually precarious state. The same artistic approach defines Moser's design for the Klimt Collective in 1903 as part of the 18th Secession Exhibition. He frames the bright gallery walls with greyish-gold geometric ornamental bars, thus creating an effect of ephemerality in the material space. In contrast to the architect Josef Hoffmann, who employs framing elements in his furniture designs and interiors in order to define and generate space, Moser uses them to accentuate the individual planes.

Moser's writing cabinet is first and foremost an art object – its function is not immediately accessible. As in an item of Biedermeier furniture, where the veneer is applied to create the visual impression of a uniform and uninterrupted surface across horizontal and vertical structural elements, Moser subordinates the function to the retention of an intact surface decoration. The symmetrically arranged escutcheons hint at a sideways opening at centre front; whereas half of the top folds upwards, the two outside quarters of the front open to the left and right. Only after this is done can the actual desk board with the figural decoration on the front be dropped down. This decorative element harmonizing with the proportions of the front not only recalls the monumental locks on sixteenth-century Spanish vargeñuos, but is also similarly placed, namely in the top centre of the front. Conversant with the artistic and handcrafted achievements of earlier generations, Moser manages to reinterpret traditional contents and discover his own independent, modern idiom.

CW-D, YM

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Ludwig Hevesi, *Acht Jahre Secession*, Vienna 1906, 1906, p.431.
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25
Vitrine 1905
Carl Otto Czeschka

Alongside Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser, Czeschka is one of the most eminent associates of the Wiener Werkstätte. He studied painting from 1894 to 1899 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In the context of the Siebener Club (the Club of Seven) he came into contact with the later founding members of the Secession and committed himself to their ideology of the unity of the arts. It was chiefly Moser who kindled and subsequently fostered the young artist's enthusiasm for the Viennese flat style in the graphic arts and painting. Thus by 1900 he was already a member of the Vienna Secession and in 1902 appointed assistant teacher for drawing at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) of the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry. In 1904 he took over as head of the drawing and painting class until his departure for Hamburg in 1907, where he directed the specialist class for planar design and graphics and the artistic direction of the bookbinding workshop. It was Czeschka who recognized the young talent Oskar Kokoschka and enrolled him in his class, despite the resistance of his professorial colleagues.

The most important event for Czeschka's further artistic career was his entry into the Wiener Werkstätte towards the end of 1905. Here he developed his talents as a draughtsman and attained grandiose achievements in all fields of the applied arts, most notably in the planar style. He was capable, like no other, of breathing life through his ornamental inventions into the surface area at his disposal. He developed his own unique ornamental style that derives from the graphic approach and plays with the opposite polarities of naturalism and abstraction. His work for the Wiener Werkstätte includes designs for metal objects, jewellery, furniture, graphics, textiles, embroidery, wall decorations, glass windows and works in leather. Although only for a short period, it occurred in the most creatively ambitious years of the Wiener Werkstätte, which saw the realization of a number of projects based on the Gesamtkunstwerk, a synthesis of the arts. These included the interior design and furnishing of the Hochreith hunting lodge for Karl Wittgenstein, the home of Dr. Herrmann Wittgenstein, the interior design and furnishings of the

Cabaret Fledermaus, and the building and furnishing of the Palais Stoclet. Czeschka's name was associated with all these projects.

For Emperor Franz Josef's Golden Jubilee, the Klimt Group, which had opted out of the Secession in 1907, organized the 'Kunstschau' (June to November 1908) as a large-scale show of the artistic achievements attained since the founding of the Secession. In conjunction with Josef Hoffmann's temporary exhibition building, the exhibition aimed to embody a synthesis of the arts. Room 50 of the exhibition was the representative room of the Wiener Werkstätte. Czeschka's display cabinet, which the Wiener Werkstätte had worked on for two and a half years, was placed alone in its centre in a pre-eminent position. Its price, more than a Klimt portrait, was enormous – 25,000 kronen – the most expensive single object ever made by the Wiener Werkstätte. It was purchased by the Austrian industrial magnate Karl Wittgenstein (father of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein) for the salon of his palace in Vienna.

The display cabinet corpus is actually free-standing and fitted onto a base made of Makassar ebony, its ground plan formed of a rectangle with half-ovals set on the narrow sides, which flare out at the open ends. It is principally of hammered silver and bevelled and curved glass panes. Individual parts are decoratively accentuated with mother-of-pearl shells, semi-precious stones, enamel and ivory. The top is fashioned of onyx. Despite its elaborate surface decoration, the display cabinet corpus is clearly structured into single compartments by means of a decorative moulding with strong relief pattern, which adopts the shape of the bevelled glass panes. They are the two straight longitudinal sides of the cabinet into which the doors are set, as well as the two half-oval, flaring narrow sides, measuring three fifths of the corpus. The remaining top two fifths of the narrow sides are formed straight in continuation of the longitudinal sides. The resulting gradation of the narrow sides acts as a plinth on each for a caryatid, which together support the top. Their outline corresponds yet again to the larger dimension of the display cabinet's base. This gives the impression of a closed, oblong furniture corpus, but allows the transparent central showcase part to attain its full effect as an autonomous vertical element. The overall composition of the display cabinet is not unlike a lace curtain, dominated by the subtle interplay of opaque versus transparent surfaces. In principle, transparency is provided solely in the longitudinal central part of the display cabinet, and this is restricted yet again to only five onion-shaped openings placed one above the other. The remaining areas of the long rectangle and the curved glass panes of the side areas are covered in a fantastical, transparent network of leaves, grape-like fruits, and all sorts of fauna. The richly inventive vegetal network hides each of the five shelves inside the display cabinet so that the showpieces inside are framed as in a reliquary and appear to be in a state of flotation. Despite their solid execution, Czeschka manages to make the robes of the caryatids seem crocheted. He accomplishes this by filling in the intermediate spaces of the fabric pattern composed of shield-shaped leaves with blue enamel.

Czeschka's design created in 1905 for the display cabinet occurred in the early years of the Wiener Werkstätte, when objects of unique individuality could be realized in consummately crafted execution and uninhibited by any financial considerations. Their extremely luxurious products were therefore dependent on the small class of the haute bourgeoisie that was open to the new artistic ideas of Viennese Modernism. In these terms, Czeschka's display cabinet is an embodiment like hardly any other Wiener Werkstätte product of the creative enthusiasm of an extremely gifted young generation of artists, to whom the Wiener Werkstätte opened up the possibilities of living out their talents. Czeschka interprets the traditional theme of the 'display cabinet' anew and in the truest sense of the word makes a rare jewel out of it, one that was worthy of representing the Wiener Werkstätte for the Golden Jubilee of Emperor Franz Josef.

CW-D, YM

Design Carl Otto Czeschka, 1905
Execution Wiener Werkstätte (Model no.S1000), 1905–08
Silversmiths Adolf Erbrich and Josef Czech
Metalworkers Franz Guggenbichler and Josef Holi

M.A.K. Vienna Fotoarchiv WWF 94-80-4, WWF 94-81-1, WWF 94-82-1, WWF 94-83-1, WWF 103-172-1, WWF 105-268-1, WWF 115-49-7
Designs WWE 174-3, WWE 174-1, WWE 174-2

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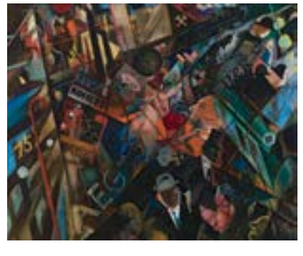

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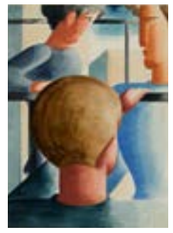

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