

ARTS

Poised between radicalism and revenue

Egon Schiele's portraits reveal an artist who combined painterly versatility with a canny business sense.

By Ariella Budick

The Neue Galerie exhibition of Egon Schiele's portraits casts an ennobling light on an artist I've long considered an overgrown adolescent. Beautifully curated by Alessandra Comini, the show traces his gift for line, cutting neatly through the cloud of theatrical angst he threw up around himself. In most Schiele shows, including the massive 2005 retrospective at, yes, the Neue Galerie, it's easy to be distracted by his messianic narcissism and Byronic affectations. That's partly his fault: he tirelessly propagated his own emaciated, erotically stunted and fecklessly provocative persona - then died at 28, before he could outgrow it.

Comini filters out the noise and focuses on his skill, which was tremendous, and his surprising versatility. Her Schiele isn't so much a hooligan with a paintbrush as a canny businessman. Just like his teacher Gustav Klimt, he adapted his technique to the vagaries of the market. When the currency he needed was the approval of his peers, he painted like a fearsome revolutionary. A 1910 portrait of his friend Max Oppenheimer is really the depiction of a long black coat that bunches at the back into a hump-like fold. Above this funereal garment hovers a disembodied face shadowed in bilious green; from the sleeves protrude a pair of lizardlike hands, pointing towards the ground. The strangeness is all.

But when he was working for pay, Schiele specialised in avant-garde lite. In a drawing of August Lederer, the wealthy industrialist and collector appears sombre and clear-eyed in a traditional three-quarter pose. Only around the shoulder does the line start quivering with that characteristic electric turbulence. A watercolour of



Awkward beauty: from left, 'Serena Lederer' (1917); 'Portrait of Dr Franz Martin Haberditzl' (1917); 'Erich Lederer in Overcoat' (1913)

Belvedere, Vienna; Private Collection



Lederer's son Erich brazenly flatters the decadent young Aubrey Beardsley fan. The man's pouty mouth blazes in a heart-shaped splash of crimson, his tousled black hair falls just so, his suit clings, and his eyelashes are long enough to wave in the breeze.

The artist's helpfulness apparently extended to Erich's social life; Schiele introduced him to a slew of studio models. The young master's mother was not pleased, but that didn't stop her from commissioning a portrait of her own. Schiele presents Serena Lederer with classical restraint, as an elegant lady with soft eyes and a firm jaw. Only when he gets to her outfit does he let go; there his line spins into maniacal tremors to render the torrid ruffles of her sleeves. Serena collected Klimt, and Schiele duly borrowed the master's decorative flourishes.

It took him some time to figure out the

right balance between his inclinations and his clients' desires. Early negotiations did not always conclude successfully. Oskar Reichel, a prominent doctor and collector of Kokoschka, offered him a commission in 1910, and then refused to pay. Perhaps he objected to the powdered white face that swoops up like a mask to meet the frizzy hairline, or to the lipsticked wound of his lips, or the claw-like hands, cut off at the fingertips. Schiele had asked 800 Kronen for the painting, but wound up selling it to another collector for 40.

Quick to grasp economic realities, Schiele also learnt to gratify his sitters, especially the beautiful wives of wealthy patrons. Frau Dr Horwitz, resplendent in her broad orange hat, looks sufficiently bohemian and fetchingly distended for the watercolour to retain a soupçon of radicalism, without sacrificing her lithe, aristocratic loveliness. Her fingers,

clasped in one of Schiele's characteristic benedictions, are elongated, but more in the mannerist style of Bronzino than the diseased fashion of Kokoschka.

Schiele buttered up men too. The study for a 1917 portrait of Dr Franz Martin Haberditzl, director of what would eventually become the Belvedere Museum in Vienna, exaggerates only his finest features: the high patrician cheekbones, the aquiline nose and alert,

A DIFFERENT VIEW . . .

Egon Schiele: The Radical Nude

'His raw, expressive nude portrayals of young girls, children and of himself just out of adolescence are today more not less disturbing than when he created them' Jackie Wullschlager reviews the Courtauld's Schiele exhibition, 'among London's best shows of 2014', in Saturday's FT Weekend



intelligent gaze. Schiele reserves the most expressive treatment for this powerful man's jacket, collar and waistcoat.

That exquisite draughtsmanship turns muddy in the oil version of the Haberditzl portrait, hanging nearby. The fine tracery of the face disappears into a pulpy mess of flesh. Only an ear survives intact. The suit, beautifully articulated in the drawing, devolves into a swamp of brown and beige. Seeing both together confirmed my sense of a vast gulf in quality between Schiele's works on paper and his canvases. Comini was wise to administer the oils sparingly.

The Neue Galerie also indulges in plenty of erotica, and I question its relevance to a portrait show. That section does, I suppose, contain pictures of people, but the women who strike all those stock poses are generic stand-ins, scaffolding for a profusion of genitals and naked limbs. See one orgasmic convulsion and you've seen 'em all. Some critics have read these pinched, contorted bodies as peepholes into the artist's troubled psyche. Actually Schiele churned out the stuff for a claue of specialised collectors. Klimt, too, had built up hoards of amatory women; it was from him that Schiele learnt the market value of masturbation.

A great wall of self-portraits stands opposite the dreary hardcore stuff, and looking at them I'm reminded of my vacillating relationship with Schiele's work. As a teenager I saw my own passionate uncertainties reflected in his shuddering lines, bony joints, jutting ribs and devilish eyes. His suffering was my suffering. Later I grew impatient with all that neurotic navel-gazing. The relentless preening and posing, the obsessive selfies, the hours evidently spent glued to a mirror - these habits seemed juvenile and narrow. The Neue Galerie show has brought me round again, which is the kind of persuasive feat that a good exhibition can pull off. Comini has helped me see beyond an unpleasant attitude to a young man's wild gift and all the awkward beauty it produced.

Until January 19, neuegalerie.org