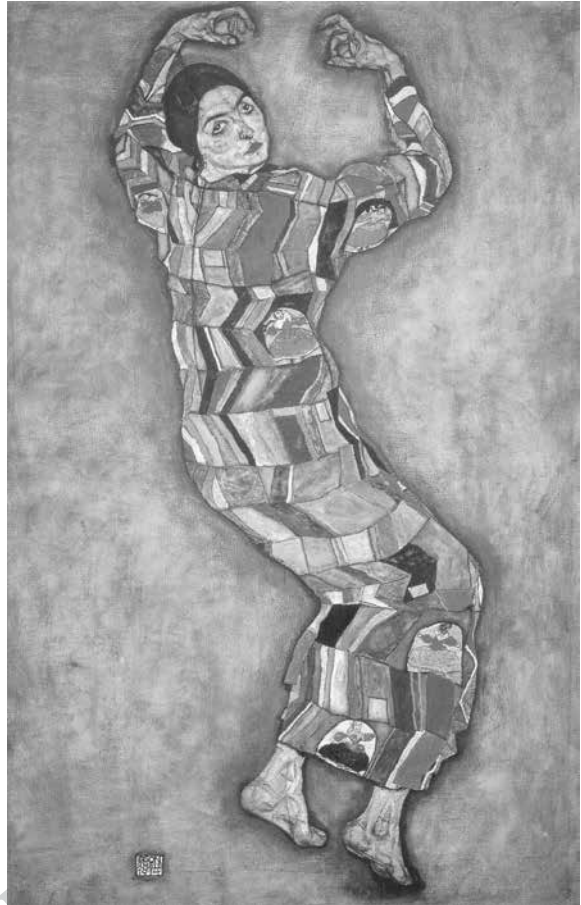




1



2



2

Fig. 1 Egon Schiele: *The Dancer*, signed and dated lower right, 1913, gouache, watercolor and pencil on paper, 48 x 32 cm, Rudolf Leopold, Vienna (KD1414).

Fig. 2 Egon Schiele: *Portrait of Friedericke Maria Beer*, signed and dated lower left, 1914, oil on canvas, 190 x 120.5 cm, private collection (KP276).

Fig. 3 Gustav Klimt: *Portrait of Friedericke Maria Beer*, 1916, oil on canvas, 168 x 130 cm, private collection.

# A comparison of the portraits of Friedericke Maria Beer painted by Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt\*

## Differentiating between scenography and grammar in painting

Schiele's oeuvre is often linked to that of Klimt. In fact, there are people who think of Schiele as a disciple of Klimt. This paper will show that this idea is a misconception. Klimt's influence on Schiele's art was circumstantial. In fact, it might be the case that Klimt's most fundamental contribution to Schiele's art was quite early, when he encouraged him to develop his own artistic inclinations and capacities. Even though it is true that Schiele's oeuvre before 1910 shares some of the characteristics of the Secessionist movement, once Schiele began to develop his own artistic language, he moved very far from the fine arts practiced by his contemporaries.

The Vienna of those days was characterized by many fractures. One of them had to do with art and placed Klimt and Schiele on different shores. There were two clear stands. On the one hand, that of the Secessionists, intimately related to Hermann Bahr's ideas. On the other hand, one could find the critical modernists, who were enlightened by the artistic languages they had developed<sup>1</sup>. Characters such as Adolf Loos or Karl Kraus reacted with their "critical modernism" towards the excess of rhetoric of the Viennese liberal culture and this involved the art of the facade of the baroque Secessionists. Painters as Klimt, despite how criticized he was by the academia, were too close to the "feuilletonists", while the artistic practice of Schiele (or Richard Gerstl) resembles some of the features of the rigorous work of the critical modernists<sup>2</sup>.

Let us take the case of Kraus in order to understand the divergence. It is no coincidence that Kraus named his magazine *Die Fackel*. It is a sign of the profound character of his criticism. One had to attack the core of the program of the ones on the other side. Just like Loos, the author of *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* made clear that it was necessary to move away from the whereabouts of those who were interested in finding (or even inventing) a truly Austrian art. There is a distinction that Kraus drew that can illustrate the gulf between the two parts. He contrasted those who differentiated between an urinal and an urn and those who used both objects indistinctly. He believed that Loos and him belonged to the first group, while the Secessionists were in the other boat. And with the Secessionists went their supporter par excellence, Bahr<sup>3</sup>.

In general, it could be said that Vienna was reluctant to any kind of change, even to those more superficial. The negative reaction of the Viennese society to Klimt's university paintings is well known. In order to safeguard his pride, Klimt had to purchase his own paintings with the money he had previously got for them. It was his way to accept that his consecrated buyers were not ready for his art. This is how Klimt, who had been blamed for selling his soul to good taste<sup>4</sup>, was attacked for exactly the opposite by the reactionaries, and even by those not so reactionary, like, for instance, Kraus.

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Due to a last-minute hindrance of the lecturer, this speech was not held at the symposium, but is published here.

\* This paper is a revision of the contents of the chapter "El caso Friedericke Maria Beer", in Carla Carmona, *En la cuerda floja de lo eterno. Sobre la gramática alucinada de Egon Schiele* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2013), 91-101.

- 1 Allan Janik was the first one to use the term "critical modernism". It refers to those who confronted modernity (particularly its limits) with a ferocious criticism immanent to their work (whether it was literary, philosophical, pictorial, architectonic or musical). For instance, they struggled against the narcissist, theatrical, solipsist and sentimental atmosphere (that 'Romanticism of the nerves') surrounding the cultural and artistic spheres of the fin-de-siècle Vienna (think of the buildings in the 'Ringstrasse' or the writings of aesthetes such as Herman Bahr), cf. "Vienna 1900 Revisited: Paradigms and Problems" in Steven Beller, ed., *Rethinking Vienna 1900* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 27-56.
- 2 Alessandra Comini noticed this difference, although she did not know the term, cf. *Egon Schiele* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 8-9 and *Egon Schiele's Portraits* (California: University of California Press, 1974), 1-7.
- 3 Looking closely into the moral character of Bahr can shed light upon the fundamental nature of the divergence. There is an anecdote that defines in a wonderful way how Bahr was perceived by somebody of the moral type of Kraus. It is said that Bahr wanted to travel to Russia but he did not have enough money for it. So he decided to write a chronicle of his journey to Russia before actually going for the trip. In this way, he would pay all the expenses of the journey with the fees he would get for his article, cf. Herman Bahr, *Contra Klimt*, Editorial de Arte y Ciencia, Fundación Juan March, Madrid, 2006, p. V. On the contrary, critical modernists lived their lives and developed their artistic practices the >

talk of tensions in Klimt's canvas, despite the introduction of such a variety of elements. The composition is very flat; figure and background are hardly distinguishable as a result of the characteristics of the dress. On the contrary, Schiele was able to confer to this bourgeois girl the muscular tension of his acrobats: on the one hand, to her feet, hands and face, and on the other, to her structural dress of paradigmatic volumes. Thanks to this and to the austere treatment of the background, there is no continuity between figure and background.

Nevertheless, the figure in Schiele's canvas responds to its surroundings, to the void. But which figure? There is no continuum within the figure itself. It could be understood as a puzzle of dissimilar pieces that generates everything that exists (in the composition). It is that randomly composed puzzle that confers meaning to the composition. That is how Schiele's hallucinated grammar faces our anthropocentrism and probably also that of Schiele himself. The human character of the figure is almost non-existent. It is more similar to a landscape: half nature, half artifice. The geometrical forms of the dress are transformed into chimneys, little flowers, naked trees and an endless numbers of windows. All of them are paint. All of them are a construction. It is only possible to talk of lines and pigments.

Schiele has been almost unanimously criticized for this painting. For instance, although Alessandra Comini observed the similarity between this canvas and the series of self-portraits of 1910 (Fig. 8), she affirmed that Schiele did not use in the right way those resources because he did not build any relationship between the apparent tranquility of the figure and the violence of the pose. Comini had an explanation for it. She held the view that the young Schiele must have felt insecure before a liberal woman of a higher class and could not paint freely<sup>11</sup>. Take another example. Nebehay, having this painting in mind, stated that Schiele painted men better than women<sup>12</sup>. But the truth is that Schiele made beautiful portraits of women, like the one he made of his wife in 1915, where Edith Schiele is presented as a rose in all its splendor (Fig. 9). The portrait of his wife speaks for itself. I hope to have shown how rich Schiele's portrait of Miss Beer is in grammatical terms.

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11 *Egon Schiele's Portraits* (California: University of California Press, 1974), 127-132.

12 *Egon Schiele. Sketchbooks* (Londres: Thames & Hudson, 1994), 148.