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Egon Schiele: The Radical Nude

Barnaby Wright, Peter Vergo, Gemma Blackshaw

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Rising to prominence in Vienna alongside Gustav Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka in the turbulent years around the First World War, Egon Schiele (1890-1918) is one of the most important artists of the early 20th century and a central figure of Austrian Expressionism. He produced some of the most radical depictions of the human figure created in modern times – so radical that in 1912 Schiele was imprisoned for two months for exhibiting his 'offensive' nudes. At the trial the judge is alleged to have burned some of the artist's drawings in open court with a candle flame.

Accompanying the first ever museum show in this country devoted entirely to the artist, this publication will explore in detail one of Schiele's most vital and original subjects – his extraordinary drawings and watercolors of male and female nudes. It will bring together an outstanding group of the artist's works to chart his groundbreaking approach during his short but urgent career. Schiele's technical virtuosity, highly original vision and unflinching depictions of the naked figure distinguish these works as being among his most significant contributions to the development of modern art. This sharply focused catalogue will be provide an opportunity to examine more than thirty of these radical works, assembled from international public and private collections for the exhibition.

Schiele arrived in Vienna in 1906, aged just fifteen, to train as an artist. He quickly proved his precocious talent and the following year sought out Klimt, who mentored Schiele and helped establish his reputation. Nothing he produced during these first few years in Vienna prepares us for the extraordinary breakthrough Schiele made in 1910 when he began to draw the figure in an entirely new way and the subject of the nude took on an increasingly important role. Highly gestural and expressive, his nudes from this year are manipulated to perform a psychologically charged body language that soon became a hallmark of his art. This catalogue will begin with a rich selection of nudes from this seminal year including a number of Schiele's powerful naked self-portraits. The main section will explore his provocative nudes of the following few years when he pushed artistic convention to offer a more direct expression of human experience, bound up with themes of self-expression, procreation, sexuality and eroticism. Many of these works affronted contemporary standards of morality and were considered pornographic.

The last part of the book will look at works from the final productive years of Schiele's short life before his untimely death in 1918 from Spanish influenza, aged just 28. His later nudes suggest a more classical solidity and sometimes lyricism, whilst retaining their unflinching rawness as naked bodies. Throughout the book will be a number of major self-portraits, demonstrating how Schiele's approach was linked to his sense of self and his ongoing examination of his physical and psychological make-up. An important aspect of all these works is Schiele's unique draftsmanship and the authors will investigate the development of his technique and approach to the medium that he made so distinctively his own, as well as his wide-ranging influence on the course of modern art that still resonates today.

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