

ART APPRECIATION GROUP – February - Report by Tony Seward

At our February meeting we began a two-part look at 'Vienna 1900', focusing on the painters Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) and Egon Schiele (1890-1918). In the dying days of the Austro-Hungarian empire the city was a cultural powerhouse, leading developments in medicine, science, art and music. At the same time it manifested intractable social and political problems and, amongst the intelligentsia at least, a sense of crisis and existential angst, fertile ground for the new practice of psychoanalysis pioneered by Sigmund Freud.

Klimt was a classically trained artist who responded to this febrile atmosphere by introducing a new realism to the portrayal of the human body, which shocked the staid burghers of the Viennese establishment. Influenced partly by French Symbolism, he then proceeded to distort the figures in major works like the Beethoven frieze in order to convey philosophical ideas and to explore the human psyche. These were increasingly overlaid with a rich decorative surface, notable, after his visit to the Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna, for its lavish use of gold leaf, most apparent in his best-known work, 'The Kiss'. Although popular as a romantic icon, its meaning is hard to decipher: the woman appears to be submitting passively to the man's embrace, with no reciprocity between the two. It is suggested that the strange shape of the composition is phallic, but who knows?



The Kiss, 1907-8 (Belvedere Gallery, Vienna)

The second film of the afternoon explored Klimt's wider significance as leader of the Vienna Secession, a movement which culminated in a series of immensely influential exhibitions to which international artists and architects – including Charles Rennie Mackintosh – contributed. Its most prominent memorial is the 1898 Secession building in Vienna. The film also explored the reasons why Klimt's work escaped the destruction suffered by that of his contemporaries, who were condemned as 'degenerate' by the Nazis.



Joseph Maria Olbrich, Secession Building, Vienna, 1898

One of these was Egon Schiele, a disciple of Klimt's who took his master's realist depiction of the human body to new extremes. Like many artists of the time, he was strongly influenced by the sparseness and economy of line in Japanese prints. Particularly in his many self-portraits, he appeared to be testing the human frame to its limits, stretching and distorting the body and ruthlessly exploring inner anguish through facial expression. While Klimt is something of a blind alley in the history of art, Schiele's influence is everywhere, and exhibitions of his work still pack a raw power undiminished by the years.



Self-portrait with arms thrust backwards, 1915 (EWK, Bern, Switzerland)

In March we will look at the last in the trinity of leading Viennese artists of the period, Oskar Kokoschka, leading on to consideration of German Expressionism.