

Sydni Zastre
 HIST301
 Dr. Kenneth Mouré
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‘The Erotic Work of Art is Also Sacred’:¹
 Sex, Fear, and Fascination in the Art of Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

Sex was everywhere in Vienna at the fin-de-siècle. This period (here defined as 1890-1918) was one of rapid social change and tension, especially about the roles of the sexes and their relation to one another; it was also characterised by a ‘belief on the part of the literate and voluble bourgeoisie that the end of the century would bring with it decay, decline and ultimate disaster.’² This confusion and agitation coalesced into an obsession, both latent and blatant, with sex. It obsessed such thinkers as Richard Krafft-Ebing, later to be dubbed the first sexologist; Sigmund Freud, whose *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* appeared in 1905 and are still hotly debated today; and Otto Weininger, whose 1903 dissertation *Sex and Character* – and suicide in the same year – sent shockwaves through Viennese society. Although outwardly the city retained the prudish morality of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, calling for the rigid separation of the sexes and the confinement of sexual matters to the marital bedroom, Stefan Zweig recalls wryly in his memoirs of the time that ‘While in its incessant fear and prudishness [society] was constantly tracking down the indecent in all forms of life, literature, art, and dress, in order to avoid every possible incitement, it was actually forced to think constantly of the indecent.’³ In art, sex was inescapable. ‘Even respected academic art could contain barely disguised erotic undertones;’ and those artists working outside the academy – such as the Vienna Secession, founded in 1897 by Gustav Klimt and his colleagues, and their heirs, the Expressionists – made no effort to confine

¹ Egon Schiele to Leopold Czihaczek, September 1, 1911, in *Egon Schiele, 1890-1918: Leben, Briefe, Gedichte*, ed. Christian M. Nebehay (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1977), 182.

² Shearer West, *Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1993), 1.

³ Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (New York: The Viking Press, 1943), 73-74.

eroticism to undertones in their work.⁴ The art critic Julius Meier-Graefe said of art in Austria around 1900: ‘Women influenced all this art, good and bad alike...In Austria...the worship of women is an integral part of the national culture;’ and indeed, representations of women produced in fin-de-siècle Vienna formed the locus of this swirling storm of both fascination with and anxiety about sex.⁵ The paintings and drawings of women by perhaps the most notable artists of the Secession and the Expressionist movements respectively, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, vividly express these fascinations and fears.

‘It is impossible to imagine Klimt without women,’ wrote the journalist and art critic Franz Servaes in 1912, and his words still ring true today.⁶ Women were central to Klimt’s personal life: he lived with his mother and two of his sisters, and although he never married, Klimt maintained a deep and lifelong bond with his sister-in-law Emilie Flöge, the subject of several portraits; it was for her that Klimt called while on his deathbed.⁷ He was also rumoured to regularly sleep with his models, those from the lower classes as well as from Vienna’s upper crust – and certainly the fourteen paternity suits filed after his death would suggest these rumours held some truth.⁸ It is hardly surprising, then, that Klimt’s oeuvre is saturated with depictions of women, whether posed formally and demurely as in his early portraits;⁹ or cheekily, such as in 1902’s *Goldfish*;¹⁰ or in the midst of sexual rapture, such as in 1907’s *Danaë*.¹¹ In the latter two paintings, the women are nude, and Klimt’s fluid lines and vivid colours create a lush and thrilling atmosphere. Neither

⁴ West, 90.

⁵ Alfred Werner, “Two Austrian Expressionists,” *The Kenyon Review* 26, no. 4 (1964), 605.

⁶ Agnes Husselin-Arco and Alfred Weidinger, ed., trans. Jane Michael, *Gustav Klimt: Life and Work* (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2014), 58.

⁷ Husselin-Arco and Weidinger, 112.

⁸ Robert Weldon Whalen, *Sacred Spring: God and the Birth of Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 208.

⁹ See for example his portraits of Sonja Knips and Serena Lederer (both 1899).

¹⁰ See Fig. 1.

¹¹ See Fig. 2.

woman is ashamed of her nakedness. Klimt was fond of mythological subjects, of whom Danaë is one: she is depicted at the moment that Zeus, in the form of a shower of gold, impregnates her with the hero Perseus. She curls around the shining torrent, thighs drawn up, breasts bared, and eyes closed, in a solipsistic attitude aptly described by art historian and curator Werner Hoffmann as ‘open self-surrender.’¹² Meanwhile the more active central figure of *Goldfish*, a mermaid-like woman depicted underwater, bares her abundant backside to the viewer with a roguish smile. (The painting was completed in the wake of scandal and originally entitled *To my critics*.)¹³ Both paintings revel in the beauty of their subjects, loudly proclaiming and celebrating their femininity: long hair flows, full lips curl, pale flesh glows. But even in these works, Klimt does not reach the full extent of his ‘boundless worship of sensuality.’¹⁴ It is in his erotic drawings that Klimt’s fascination with and celebration of women takes on an even more unrestrained form. In the words of art historian Gottfried Friedl, “‘Womanhood,’ for Klimt, consisted in an unlimited capacity for erotic and sexual enjoyment – no more. Although he had elevated sexuality to the level of art in a way nobody had ever attempted before,’ in his drawings ‘he also tried to reduce the female to this element.’¹⁵ Far from the stiffly posed portraits where clothing often seems to swallow its wearer,¹⁶ Klimt drew women naked, posing freely and languidly, frequently indulging in sex acts, whether alone or with female partners.¹⁷ Klimt savours their nudity and pleasure with a voyeuristic thrill, delighting in their sexuality just as much as the women seem to, themselves. In an era where sex, masturbation, and homoerotic desire were not openly discussed, much less depicted outside of

¹² Werner Hoffmann, trans. Inge Goodwin, *Gustav Klimt* (Salzburg: Verlag Galerie Welz, 1971), 17.

¹³ Bernd Apke, “A Farewell to Allegory” in Max Hollein and Tobias G. Natter, eds., trans. Elizabeth Clegg, *The Naked Truth: Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka and Other Scandals* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2005), 110.

¹⁴ Tobias G. Natter, “On the Limits of the Exhibitable: The Naked Body and Public Space in Viennese Art around 1900” in Hollein and Natter, 35.

¹⁵ Gottfried Friedl, *Gustav Klimt 1862-1918: The World in Female Form* (Cologne: Taschen, 2006), 191.

¹⁶ See for example the portraits of Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein (1905), Fritza Riedler (1906), and even Baroness Elisabeth Bachofen-Echt (1916).

¹⁷ See for example Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6.

pornography, Klimt's representations of women pleasuring themselves or each other – or even just sleeping, sitting, or reclining – in a languid, dreamlike state provided a utopic alternative to the stifling morality of Vienna at the fin-de-siècle. These artworks 'form that world which womanhood represented for [Klimt] – an erotic world that was not impeded by forbidden pleasures or perversions.'¹⁸

Klimt did not only celebrate women, however: he also feared them. This fear (described by his contemporary, the art historian Hans Tietze, as 'erotic neurasthenia')¹⁹ is evident throughout his oeuvre, from the drawing *Fish Blood* (1898) to the two *Watersnakes* paintings (1904 and 1907) to the final panel of 1902's *Beethoven Frieze*, known as *This Kiss to the Whole World*.²⁰ In each of these works, women's hair is a prominent feature – one which Patrick Bade calls 'the ultimate weapon of seduction. At a time when respectable women kept their hair up and under careful control in public situations, the sight of such free-flowing hair held connotations of the loss of inhibitions and unbridled sexuality.'²¹ In *Fish Blood* and *Watersnakes I and II*, where 'Klimt's women are at home in a liquefied world, where the male would quickly drown...their strongly corded hair [is] in threatening contrast to the softness of the flesh and the sensitivity of the hands.'²² The women (or perhaps they are sirens?) bask naked and shameless, sending daring, haughty looks to the (presumably male) viewer; they display themselves without offering. Men may look, but not touch, and the winding coils of their hair send a warning of what may befall them if they do. Even paintings with more obviously human subjects bear this threat. *This Kiss to the Whole World* is the final panel in the allegorical journey of a knight through all the sufferings of humankind; he has

¹⁸ Fliedl, 192.

¹⁹ Nicolas Powell, *The Sacred Spring: The Arts in Vienna 1898-1918* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), 132.

²⁰ See Figs. 7, 8, 9, 10.

²¹ Patrick Bade, *Gustav Klimt* (New York: Parkstone International, 2011), 104. [Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost](#) (416895).

²² Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 224.

finally found fulfilment in art, represented by an intimate embrace with a woman. Her face is not visible – the knight’s back is to the viewer and her head is buried in his shoulder – but, tellingly, cords of her long hair wrap tightly around her and her lover’s ankles, binding them together. There is a sinister element present even in this moment of joyful consummation. Klimt’s preoccupation with long, flowing, mobile hair, which sometimes has a mind of its own, is indicative of his fearful awareness (whether latent or realised) of women’s potential to allure, entice, and ultimately entrap men. Entrapment, however, is not all he fears. Klimt’s iconic depiction of Adele Bloch-Bauer as the Biblical heroine Judith in *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*²³ – one of a series of luxurious, gold-drenched portraits of the Jewish socialite, who may have been his lover – expresses a deep sexual anxiety about ‘castration, in its traditional inverted disguise as decapitation.’²⁴ In the view of art historian Susanna Partsch, ‘Klimt was fascinated by [Adele Bloch-Bauer], and at the same time feared her. From Klimt’s point of view, she wants to cut off his head, the very head she then caresses.’²⁵ Fliedl further explores this fear, connecting it directly to Judith’s sensual nature (expressed undeniably by her half-bared breasts, half-lidded eyes, full, parted lips, and head tipped back as if in pleasure):

Rather than showing her as an active heroine killing a man who has been overcome by his erotic impulses, she herself is overwhelmed by erotic feelings, and this makes her appear dangerously unpredictable...Mysterious powers seem to lurk in this alluring woman, violent energies that might not be quenched once those feelings catch fire...²⁶

Analysis of his paintings and drawings proves that fascination with female sexuality was inextricably entwined with fear for Klimt, and indeed for Viennese society at the fin-de-siècle. Female sexuality and pleasure were daunting mysteries – but where society preferred to react by

²³ See Fig. 11.

²⁴ Schorske, 224.

²⁵ Susanna Partsch, trans. Michael Robinson, *Gustav Klimt: Painter of Women* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2006), 81.

²⁶ Fliedl, 140.

denying their existence and significance or else confining them to the shameful worlds of sex work and pornography, Klimt celebrated women *because of* their sensual natures and capacity for pleasure. However, even he was unable to fully free himself from the fin-de-siècle's intense sexual anxiety. His protégé Egon Schiele, working in the same 'atmosphere of compulsion and obsession,' would encounter many of the same conflicts – although with decidedly different results.²⁷

Nearly thirty years younger than Klimt – although destined to die just months after him, both in the influenza epidemic of 1918 – Egon Schiele first met the older artist in 1907, while still a student at the Akademie der bildenden Künste, and was heavily influenced by his work. In a 1911 letter to his uncle Leopold Czihaczek, Schiele professed 'a craving to experience everything,' and this wish seems to have been fulfilled through his art.²⁸ His oeuvre is hugely varied in scope, particularly considering the extreme brevity of Schiele's life and career: he died at twenty-eight, having begun his formal training only twelve years prior. But although his subjects were as diverse as dying provincial towns (among them his hometown of Tulln an der Donau), his bourgeois male patrons, wounded soldiers, the children of the slums, and, overwhelmingly, himself, 'the central importance of [the female nude] in [Schiele's] work is matched by its analogous position in that of Klimt.'²⁹ Alfred Werner recounts that 'When Egon Schiele begged [Klimt] for one of his drawings in exchange for several of his own, Klimt, twenty-eight years his senior, protested: "Why would you want one? You already draw better than I."'³⁰ Certainly the erotic drawings of Egon

²⁷ Patrick Werkner, "The Child-Woman and Hysteria: Images of the Female Body in the Art of Schiele, in Viennese Modernism, and Today," in Patrick Werkner, ed., *Egon Schiele: Art, Sexuality, and Viennese Modernism* (Palo Alto: The Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1994), 61.

²⁸ Schiele to Czihaczek in Nebelhay, 182.

²⁹ Werkner, ed., 59.

³⁰ Werner, 604.

Schiele were ravenously (if covertly) collected in their own time, and are still admired today.³¹ Like Klimt's, Schiele's drawings express and revel in a liberated female sexuality; like Klimt, he frequently took as his subject women engaging in sexual acts, whether alone or with partners, both female and male. (His real-life relationships with women were much more clear-cut than Klimt's, however; for years his lover and favourite model was Valerie 'Wally' Neuzil, the vivacious, red-haired, working-class subject of many of his most recognisable works³² – although in 1915 he rather abruptly broke off their affair in order to make a more strategic marriage to the gentle-featured bourgeoisie Edith Harms, the subject, alongside Schiele himself, of many of his later, more tender portraits.)³³ But despite their mutual proclivity for drawing the female nude, Schiele's approach differs from Klimt's. The model in a Schiele drawing, unlike one of Klimt's, does not seem to exist passively in a sumptuous dreamland, but rather in a very real world of her own creation, in which she 'speaks not only for herself, but for her social class, her societal role, her character, her femininity, and the subtle ways in which she is able to use it.'³⁴ There is a confidence in Schiele's line and an easiness in his models' bearing that lends a charming playfulness to drawings such as 1914's *Reclining Nude with Left Leg Raised*³⁵ and or the *Kneeling Seminude* of three years later.³⁶ The reclining nude shows a woman sprawled comfortably, stretching her leg high to reveal her genitalia (although less, it seems, in a sexual way than simply to test her flexibility). 1917's kneeling woman is nude down to her waist, lending credence to Werner's assertion that 'For [Schiele]...a woman's body was the universe, and her exposed torso the focus

³¹ Frank Whitford, *Egon Schiele* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 119.

³² See for example *Portrait of Wally Neuzil* (1912), *Wally* (1912), *Wally in Red Blouse Lying on Her Back* (1913).

³³ See for example *Edith Harms* (1915), *Edith Harms Adjusting Her Stocking* (1916), *Embrace* (1915).

³⁴ Manfred Wagner, "Egon Schiele as Representative of an Alternative Aestheticism" in Werkner, ed., 83.

³⁵ See Fig. 12.

³⁶ See Fig. 13.

of all passions.’³⁷ She intently examines her left breast, her face set in deep concentration: she seems completely unaware that she is being observed. *This* is the defining feature of Schiele’s erotic drawings: he was certainly a voyeur, but he achieved the feat of drawing his models as though he weren’t one – as though they were only ‘in the private presence of a man who is deeply interested in [them], not as a poesie, but as a woman.’³⁸ By allowing women to let their guard down completely and capturing them in their most intimate, relaxed, and exposed states, Schiele plumbed the depths of his fascination with and reverence for the female body, in the process thoroughly subverting the suffocating morals of his time.

However, Schiele’s fascination with the body was matched by his revulsion towards it. His gaze, voyeuristic as it may have been, did not romanticise its objects; rather, it saw them all too clearly, in their ugliness, messiness, pain, despair, and mortal fragility: ‘He knew that the urge to look is interconnected with the mechanisms of disgust and allure. The body contains the power of sex and death within itself.’³⁹ Schiele’s entire oeuvre shows itself vastly more concerned with truth than with beauty. Unlike Klimt’s, ‘his nudes are not the result of a constrained sexuality trying to free itself through fantasies of superiority or romantic escapism. They are intensely real’ – so much so as to often be disturbing to the viewer.⁴⁰ Many of his paintings and drawings, especially portraits of himself and others, with their distorted limbs, tortured grimaces, and skin blotched with vivid and unhealthy colours, are nearly impossible to speak of as *beautiful*; but they do carry the weight of a deeper psychological truth.⁴¹ His *Standing Nude Girl* of 1910 is uncomfortably thin, her ribs and hipbones jutting out from beneath grey-hued skin: judging by Schiele’s frequent

³⁷ Werner, 612.

³⁸ Elsen in Werkner, 16.

³⁹ Esther Selsdon and Jeannette Zwingerberger, *Egon Schiele* (New York: Parkstone Press, 2011), 7.

⁴⁰ Werkner, 73.

⁴¹ See for example the 1910 self-portraits *Grimacing*; *Nude*; *With Arm Twisted Above Head*; and *With Hand to Cheek*.

use of poor children as models, this malnourished state may not have been an artist's exaggeration.⁴² The very fact of her nudity, combined with the ambiguity of her age – her face is childish, but her breasts are developing and she sports dark pubic hair – raises further uncomfortable questions for the viewer; we feel we have intruded obscenely on something not meant to be seen. His *Seated Young Girl* of the same year is even more unsettling; she is posed nude and coquettishly, one hand touching her reddened lips, but her arms and fingers are almost skeletal, and her skin too is of an unhealthy brown-grey hue.⁴³ She glances at the viewer with a smirk made unnerving by the dramatic rimming of her eyes in red, suggesting illness or bleeding. To modern eyes, she looks like nothing so much as a zombie – someone, or something, undead. Schiele's acute awareness of the nearness of death to life, and the intimate relation of sex to death, can be read in his depictions of women, rendered 'simultaneously sexually attractive and repulsive.'⁴⁴ These artworks express the morbid, anxious obsession with sex that plagued Vienna at the fin-de-siècle – an inescapable paradox summed up bluntly by Schiele himself: 'I believe that man must suffer from sexual torture as long as he is capable of sexual feelings.'⁴⁵

It is perhaps fitting that Gustav Klimt died just eight months before the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Egon Schiele on the very day of its dissolution. Their work typified and encapsulated the spirit and sensibility of fin-de-siècle Vienna, even if, as was often the case, by contradicting it, exposing its unseemly underbelly, bringing to light all that which it refused to discuss or admit. 'To every age its art. To every art its freedom,' proclaimed the motto of the Vienna Secession; and indeed, the art of Klimt and Schiele – especially their depictions of women – possessed and expressed a new sexual freedom, while never managing to throw off the shackles

⁴² See Fig. 14.

⁴³ See Fig. 15.

⁴⁴ Bade, 50.

⁴⁵ Whitford, 119.

of anxiety and mortality that dogged the fin-de-siècle. As a distressed visitor leaving a Klimt-Schiele exhibition in New York in the 1960s commented, ‘There is something wrong with this world – these men know.’⁴⁶ That knowledge translated itself into beautiful, sensual, unsettling, and ultimately timeless works of art, which still fascinate and disturb today.

⁴⁶ Werner, 616.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Gustav Klimt, Goldfish (1902)



Figure 2. Klimt, Danaë (1906-1907).



Figure 3. Klimt, *Girlfriends* (1913).



Figure 4. Klimt, *Reclining Female Seminude* (1912-1913).



Figure 6. Klimt, *Reclining Woman* (1914).



Figure 5. Klimt, *Seated Woman with Open Legs* (1916/17).



Figure 7. Klimt, *Fish Blood* (1898).

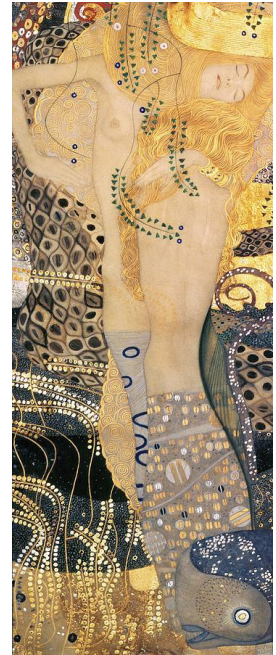


Figure 8. Klimt, *Watersnakes I* (1904).



Figure 9. Klimt, *Watersnakes II* (1904).

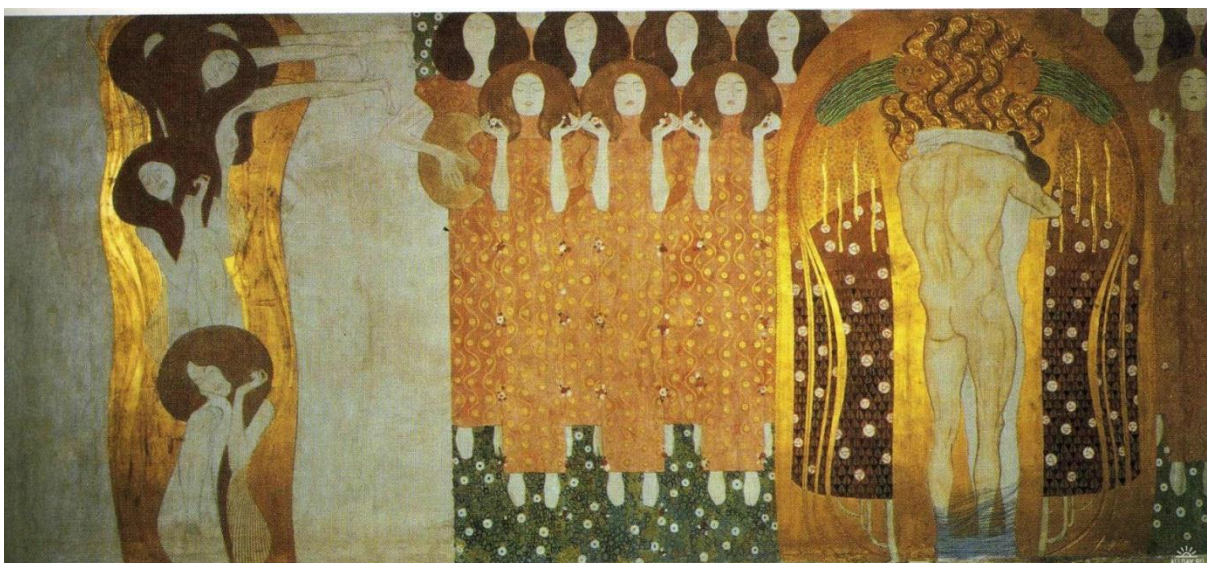


Figure 10. Klimt, *This Kiss to the Whole World* (detail of *Beethoven Frieze*) (1902).



Figure 11. Klimt, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (1901).

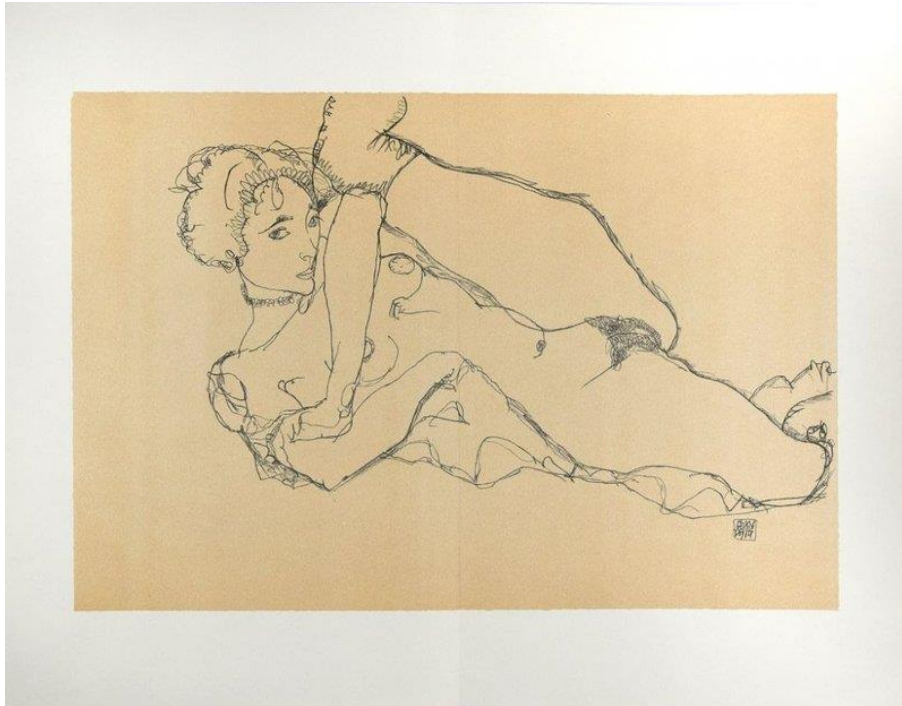


Figure 12. Egon Schiele, Reclining Nude with Left Leg Raised (1914).



Figure 13. Schiele, Kneeling Seminude (1917).

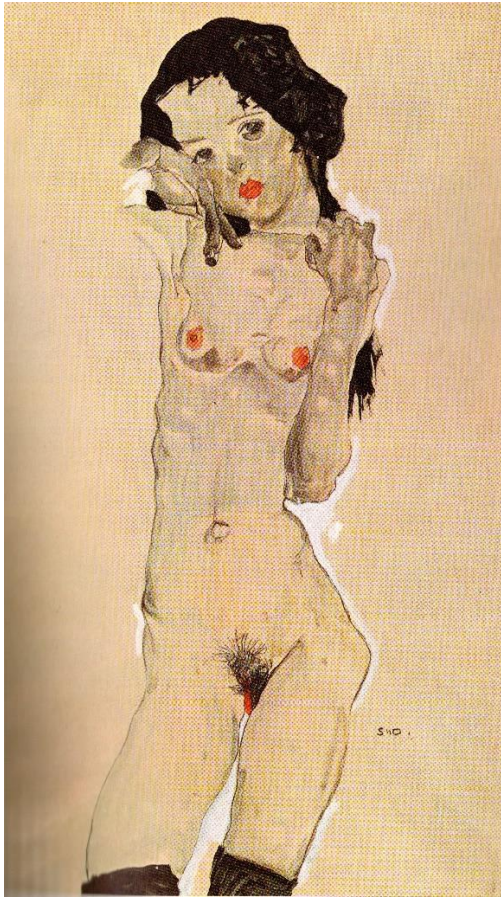


Figure 14. Schiele, *Standing Nude Girl* (1910).

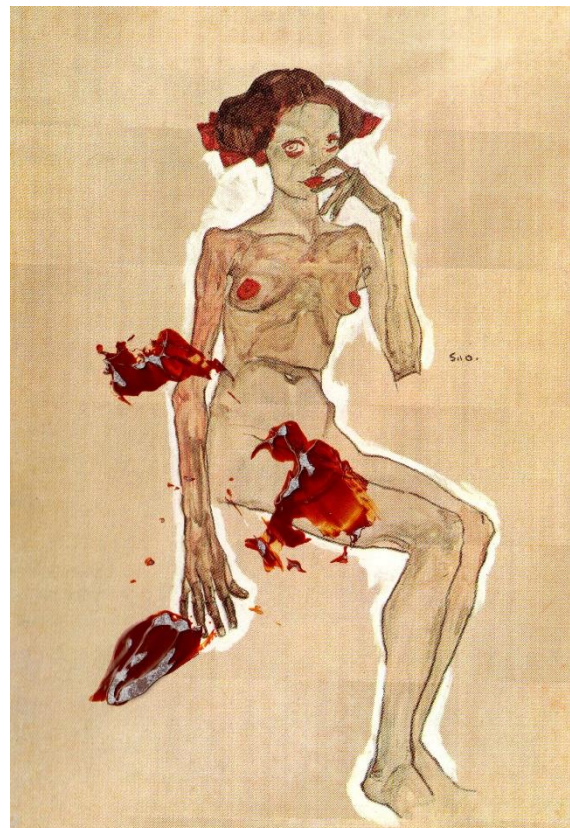


Figure 15. Schiele, *Seated Nude Girl* (1910).