

*The Devil is Loose Here:
Egon Schiele Meets 1960s America*

Rachel Berry

Davidson College

Mint Museum of Art

18th Annual Collegiate Art History Symposium

March 30, 2008

When I first began researching Egon Schiele, I noticed that he became extremely popular in the United States beginning in the 1960s but had been virtually ignored prior to that time. I asked myself why this Austrian Expressionist from the turn of the twentieth century became so popular in American culture around 1960. Some Schiele scholars such as Renee Price claim that Schiele's art transcends time and place. If this is the case, the popularity of the artist should be constant. But clearly it hasn't been. I wondered why.

My exploration of Schiele's popularity in the United States beginning in the 1960s and his lack of popularity prior to that time led me to the theoretical approaches of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. Writing primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, historian and philosopher Michel Foucault promoted the notion that history is always written from the point of view of the present. He suggests that historians are influenced by the concerns of their own societies, thus they are preoccupied with topics of contemporary interest and project these fixations onto history. Roland Barthes, literary critic and contemporary of Foucault, promotes a similar notion in his essay, "The Death of the Author." Barthes writes that the author is an antiquated Western construct that is no longer relevant in contemporary society. He would further argue that one's understanding of a work is not fixed but changes in light of the cultural context of the one who is examining it. Where, then, does our understanding of a work come from? According to Barthes, meaning is determined by what he calls the *scriptor*, in art history, Barthes's scriptor becomes the viewer. Barthes claims the viewer or scriptor determines her own meaning in the work of art, and this meaning is shaped by that viewer's personal experiences as well as her cultural climate. In short, these two theorists give primary

importance to the context in which a work is received rather than that in which it was produced. Although it has been said that the art historian can determine what a work means by understanding the artist's personality and the culture that produced the work, in this presentation I will argue that he cannot. It is my contention that the meaning of a work of art evolves historically as viewers continually re-interpret it in light of the cultural influences of their day, a conclusion which helps us understand why Schiele's art resonated particularly well with 1960s American viewers.

If my thesis is correct, an examination of the cultural events of the 1960s should reveal parallels with Schiele's works. In fact, that is precisely what we find. One parallel that the scriptors of 1960s America saw between their cultural climate and Schiele's art was an overt emphasis on sexuality. Beginning in the 1950s, the traditionally conservative sexual attitude in the United States was beginning to change. In 1948 and 1958, Indiana university zoologist Alfred Kinsey released *Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, respectively. These reports, known popularly as the Kinsey Reports, compiled detailed information on the sexual habits of American adults as revealed in interviews. The Kinsey Reports spurred discussion about human sexuality in the general population and at first drew much criticism for their alleged immorality. In retrospect, however, the Kinsey Reports can be seen as a precursor to the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s, which was a time of greater sexual permissivity not only among individuals but also in popular culture. Music of the late 1950s and 1960s included lyrics about sex, and performers such as Elvis Presley and Bo Diddley danced in previously unheard of sexually suggestive manners. In 1968, the

Motion Picture Association of America instituted ratings for movies. Prior to this action, all films were required to conform to what would now be considered a PG rating.

Americans' increased interest in sexuality is witnessed in the increase in R-rated films and decrease in PG films created. The changing cultural attitude towards sex extended even into the realm of politics. In Washington, President Lyndon B. Johnson created the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1967. In a report released during the Nixon administration, the Commission called for a repeal of all laws prohibiting the showing and selling of pornography. Although Nixon disapproved, this motion was seen as part of the effort to make sex a normal part of everyday (adult) life.

As issues of human sexuality were coming to the forefront of American popular culture, an interest in the erotic quality of Schiele's work was growing. The effort to exhibit Schiele's erotic works was timid at first, as American audiences were slowly warming to the idea of eroticism in public art museums. Thomas Messer, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, wrote in the catalogue to the 1960 exhibition *Egon Schiele: 1890-1918* that he avoided subjects that Boston audiences might not accept in order to avoid criticism that would hurt the reception of Schiele's oeuvre as a whole. This work, *Reclining Woman with Green Stockings* of 1917, appeared in the Boston exhibition. In 2005 Messer, remembering the exhibition, commented that a small selection of Schiele's erotically themed works was ill received by "Boston's proverbially prudish public." The exhibition seems to have remained within the bounds of taste for *New York Times* art critic Stuart Preston, who noted Schiele's "sensuousness" and

"occasional perversity" while giving the exhibition a positive review overall. As the 1960s progressed, exhibition reviews included more and more references to Schiele's eroticism. In a 1961 review of a show at the Galerie St. Etienne in New York, art critic John Simon wrote of Schiele's "brooding, almost animalistic, sexuality" in certain works and an "imperial serenity" in others. The works mentioned in conjunction with these descriptions were *Woman With Blond Hair* (1912) and *Seated Woman, the Artist's Wife* (1917). For Simon, several of the works exhibited combined these two qualities of sexuality and serenity, as in *Standing Female Nude* (1912) and *Reclining Nude with Black Stockings* (1911). Despite the latter's unhindered depiction of female genitalia, Simon also noted that Schiele's popularity was growing in the United States—deservedly, in his opinion.

A second parallel that 1960s American scriptors saw between their own culture and the work of Schiele was a volatile socio-political situation leading to violence, societal alienation, and angst. The malaise of 1960s America stemmed from what they saw as a repressive morality and political climate. Responses were often violent. The decade saw the assassinations of three major national leaders: John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. During the Civil Rights Movement, of which King was an important player, numerous riots occurred in cities across the United States in response to centuries of racial inequality and prejudice, the worst of which took the form of beatings, rapes, and lynchings. A 1967 race riot in Detroit left forty dead and more than a thousand wounded. Violent images from the Civil Rights struggle as well as the Vietnam War permeated the national news, broadcast daily onto televisions in American

homes. The already violent atmosphere was coupled with a spirit of uncertainty caused by the possibility of world destruction by nuclear warfare.

Exhibition reviews of Schiele's work in the 1960s reflect the sociopolitical issues of violence and destruction as primary concerns in the 1960s American conscious. Historian Frederic Morton, writing in 1979, recounted a colleague's description of Vienna as "African and hot-blooded, crazy with life.. .restless.. .passionate.. .the devil is loose here." Morton comically added that this description was not of 1970s rock band the Rolling Stones but of fin-de-siecle Vienna. In 1971, critic David L. Shirey wrote, "the Vienna of the turn of the century smelled of death", though he might just as easily have been describing police turning fire hoses on African-American protestors or American soldiers executing Vietnamese children, as in this 1970 Vietnam War protest poster. Shirey saw in Schiele an untamed ugliness of jagged line that mercilessly condemned the corrupt society in which he lived. A witness to the social activist mindset of the 1960s and 1970s, James Mellow noted that Expressionism was a movement that could not be evaluated along strictly formal lines but rather that one must give merit to the personal and sociopolitical climate of the work's production. Mellow claimed that prior to the 1960s the cultural climate in the United States was not prepared to understand the artist. It is easy to see how a 1960s gallery visitor could view a work such as Schiele's *Dead Girl* of 1911 and find it eerily similar to images of death in the media. In 1968 *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer claimed that the artist's works were the perfect manifestation of the "intense, exacerbated emotions" of "the end of an empire [and] the collapse of a decadent morality".

A third characteristic linking 1960s America to the art of Egon Schiele was the theme of rebelliousness. In 1960s America, young people in particular began to question the system, no longer accepting political and societal restrictions on behavior. This, in combination with an emerging sector of the media catering to youth, began to create a separate youth subculture. Beginning in the 1950s, a subset of youth known as the Beatniks rebelled from their parents' values, preferring not to have steady jobs or addresses. Many were involved in drugs and sexual experimentation, which later contributed to the Psychedelic Movement and the Sexual Revolution. Many of these youth considered themselves part of the counterculture movement, questioning societal norms. The assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 further turned many youth against what they felt like was a repressive system. The rebellious spirit spread to college campuses such as the University of California at Berkeley, where students held sit-ins and rallies to defend their freedom of speech, after having been prohibited from freely distributing pamphlets on various social topics. Due to the Vietnam War and the threat of the atomic bomb, students and other youth felt a strong desire to change the world around them. The spirit of angst and alienation led to a desire for rebellion—against their parents, against standards of morality, and against the political system.

As Schiele's works continued to be exhibited more frequently in the 1960s, discussion of his youthful rebelliousness was often connected with Freudian angst. 1960s scriptors used the Neulengbach affair, a trial in which Schiele was incarcerated for his erotic drawings, to illustrate Schiele's rebellion against the unjust moral standards of his society. The work on the screen is Schiele's 1911 work depicting his prison cell. In 1967 and 1968, Hilton

Kramer mentioned the Neulengbach affair in reviews of two Schiele exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum and the Galerie St. Etienne, both in New York City. Kramer saw Schiele as existing as part of an "extraordinary flowering of intellectual and artistic genius" that existed despite "a preposterous and provincial public morality." References to the strict public standards of propriety in fin-de-siecle Vienna and Schiele's violation of them reinforce Foucault's claim that in societies where erotic themes are repressed, any discussion of the subject appears as a deliberate rebellious act. Foucault also postulated the notion of a power that suppresses, which became popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Due to the popularity of the idea of repressive morality, the 1960s public clung to Schiele's incarceration as evidence of Schiele's deliberate rebellion, portraying the rebellion in a positive light. The 1960s scriptors were rewriting history influenced by their current concerns, one of the primary being the transgression of unjust moral standards.

The 1960s dialogue about sexuality and unjust moral standards is tied to the collective angst in American society, expressed in Freudian scholarship of the time. 1960s Freudian scholar Norman Brown explored many of the Viennese psychoanalyst's theories, among them the notion that negative influences in early childhood cause sexuality that is considered 'abnormal' or 'perverse.' Art historian Edward Lucie-Smith postulated that erotic art can be a form of exorcism, thus some 1960s scholars such as Alessandra Comini argued that Schiele's work was just that—the exorcism of negative childhood influences on his sexuality, as in this 1917 self-portrait, *Crouching Male Nude*. Schiele's biography certainly allows for this interpretation, as the young Schiele bore

witness to his father's mental and physical degeneration from syphilis, which he had contracted from a prostitute during his honeymoon. Comini wrote that Schiele's father's sexually-transmitted disease must have influenced his sexual themes, as if by treating erotic themes in his life and work Schiele could prevent the kind of mental and physical deterioration experienced by his father. Comini also noted the 'ravenous eyes' and 'searching countenance' of Schiele in his self-portraits, like these of 1910 and 1912. Some scholars saw these characteristics as evidence of Schiele's self-criticism of and self-discovery through erotic explorations on paper and canvas. 1960s historian Carl Schorske wrote in that his grasp of Freud, an important influence in his cultural atmosphere, was what allowed him to forge a connection with what he saw as the psychological nature of Schiele's work.

To be sure that these issues are unique to American viewers of the 1960s, it proves useful to study the period prior to the 1960s to determine what gallery goers and critics were saying about Schiele at that time. If my thesis is accurate, one would expect a lack of emphasis on eroticism, socio-political instability, and rebelliousness in the period prior to the 1960s that would lead American scriptors to ignore the work of Schiele. That is precisely what we find. Pre-1960s viewers saw no or few parallels between Schiele's work and their own society. They all but ignored the artist, despite attempts by European refugees such as Otto Kallir and Serge Sabarsky to introduce his work to American audiences. For Kallir, Schiele stood for the 'good Austria' that he wanted to preserve. His 1940 Schiele show did not prove to be a success, however, due to the tainted reputation of all Germanic cultures due to World War II. The *New York Herald Tribune* responded

unenthusiastically, stating that it was a difficult time to excite the public about a new artist, especially one that had not been a part of the art scene in Europe for over twenty years. In 1948 Kallir's Galerie St. Etienne tried again with an exhibition entitled *Egon Schiele's Paintings—Beal, Ships, Salemmes*, which focused on images of boats like this 1912 painting, *Trieste Fishing Boat*, rather than erotic works. Though in the 1960s Schiele's figural works on paper, many of which are nudes, garnered more attention and sold for higher prices than his paintings, the 1948 Galerie St. Etienne exhibition chose to focus primarily on the paintings. The work chosen to represent Schiele's oeuvre in a *New York Times* illustration was *Portrait of an Old Man* (1916), a work notably lacking in eroticism, violence, and rebelliousness. This work differs from the bulk of Schiele's oeuvre, as it is a painting of a clothed figure rather than a drawing of a nude. In addition, *New York Times* art critic Sam Hunter failed to mention eroticism in a review, even though he did discuss Schiele's nudes, saying that they "tend to become mechanical in their calligraphy with the littleness and intricacy of just good decoration." It was in the late 1950s and 1960s when the themes of eroticism, angst, violence, and rebellion combined to form the core of American popular culture that Schiele became fashionable for art critics and viewers.

Likewise, today's scriptors in post 1960s America no longer interpret Schiele in the same way as the 1960s scriptors. Cultural and political changes in recent decades have been accompanied by new scholarship, allowing for modifications and even reversals in interpretations of his works. Many contemporary Schiele scholars reject the theory of Schiele's works as introspective explorations into the artist's psyche, instead

favoring a reading of theatrical compositions that place the subject, often the artist himself, at the mercy of the viewer's gaze. This *Self-Portrait with Arm Twisted Above Head* of 1910 is an example of a work in which today's viewers interpret Schiele's composition as an affected pose. Contemporary American artist Mario Naves suggests that the appeal of Schiele to contemporary audiences is in this narcissistic theatricality that resonates with us because of our media's fascination with pop culture stars like Paris Hilton. This does not mean that contemporary museum goers have rejected all previous interpretations, only that we have modified them according to our own cultural climate. Certain aspects developed by earlier scriptors remain an integral part of scholarship, such as the importance of a disturbing brand of eroticism. History, then, is always written from the point of view of the present but inevitably influenced by the past.

The contemporary re-interpretation of works of art is not limited to artists such as Schiele. Applying my thesis to Allan Ramsay's coronation portrait of *Queen Charlotte*, circa 1762, we also find that the meaning of this work has been re-interpreted in light of cultural changes. Spectators have often commented on the German-born queen's unusual facial features, some even calling her ugly. A 1989 article in *The Charlotte Observer* reveals that many now believe the queen had African ancestry. Historian J. A. Rogers suggested this hypothesis in the 1930s, but for some reason it was ignored for a half a century. In articles published in the 1970s, writers mention the queen's full mouth and broad nose without describing these features African. But why, given that Rogers posited his theory in the 1930s? It is my contention that the culture was not ready for the new interpretation. Several contemporary historians, however, are re-writing Charlotte's

history in light of her African heritage. One historian states that no one is purely black or purely white, asking, "Why be ashamed of [Charlotte's] African features?" The notion of mixed ancestry resonates particularly well for us this year in light of the presidential race. Democratic candidate Barack Obama's mixed ancestry is often mentioned and cast as a positive attribute that potentially broadens his appeal. Perhaps our present-day concepts of race and ethnicity have allowed us as scriptors to re-interpret Ramsay's portrait of *Queen Charlotte*, emphasizing her African features rather than ignoring or denying them.