

Out of Hours Art

A RADICAL REIMAGINING

Egon Schiele: the Radical Nude

*The Courtauld Gallery, London,
23 October 2014–18 January 2015*

Only once before have the works of Egon Schiele (1890–1918) been exhibited in this country, and there are no major works of his in any UK collection: a blind spot exemplified in the 1960s by *The Burlington Magazine*, that mandarin among art historical publications, denouncing Schiele's work as the kind of thing you find daubed on the walls of public lavatories. It is true that some of the work in this show is 'pornographic', in that the depiction of sexual organs is explicit: Schiele was himself imprisoned for public immorality after children happened to see some of these works.

The show fills only two rooms. The first looks at 1910, the year Schiele found his own style — a sort of radical reimagining of the life class nude — while the second presents a chronological sequence, running from then until his death from Spanish flu in 1918. The earlier works have a true brilliance of line and the way in which the human body is depicted is unprecedented; the colouring suggests rotting or newly-slaughtered meat, and some brutal foreshortening can make the picture quite hard to read. There are two absolutely magnificent depictions of a mime artist called Erwin Osen, which should be enough to convert any sceptic to an appreciation of Schiele's work; given an

added piquancy by the fact that the two later fell out after Osen started passing off drawings of his own as being by Schiele, who was by then becoming something of a commercial success.

There is a clear stylistic break in about 1912–1913, when concentration on line appears to give way to a concentration on colour. I like the later works less: the purity of his line yields to a kind of fussiness, a quasi-realism that seems at times almost conventional, aggressive in its overt sexuality certainly, but also a bit 'prettier'. Overall this is a very rare opportunity to see some remarkable work, and the chance should not be missed.

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Egon Schiele (1890–1918). Erwin Dominik Osen, Nude with Crossed Arms, 1910 Black chalk, watercolour and gouache, 44.7 x 31.5 cm. The Leopold Museum, Vienna.



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