



**Egon Schiele's Work in Český Krumlov** *see article on page 10*

*Top left: Krumau Landscape 1916; top right: The Little City 1913; below: Krumau Crescent of Houses 1915*





## Egon Schiele, Český Krumlov and the Search for Belonging

Frances Blythe

The multi-faceted Austro-Hungarian empire, spanning the years 1867 to 1918, was a rich network of cultural and geographical sources and lineage. It was into this complex of nation states that the artist Egon Schiele was born on 12th June 1890 in Tulln, Austria. With Czech Catholic heritage on his mother's side, and German Protestant roots on his father's, Schiele's ancestry was a product of the multinational make-up of this vast empire. Schiele's mother, Marie Soukup, was born and raised in Český Krumlov (Krumau), a town in Bohemia close to the Czech/Austrian border. Her family had originally been peasants in this agricultural region and had later established themselves as independent farmers in Krumau. Schiele's father, Adolf Schiele, was born in Vienna, though he was officially a citizen of Prague. The Schiele family worked in the railway industry and belonged to the middle class echelons of Austro-Hungarian society.

Such cultural diversity in the ancestries of so-called Austrians was not unusual in this period. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and composer Gustav Mahler, both contemporaries of Schiele's and moving in the same artistic circles, were born in Moravia and Bohemia respectively before later moving to the capital Vienna, where they are now famed for their work there. In this article I hope to highlight the ramifications of this network of identities for Austrian cultural output in this era, and the way in which Schiele's artworks responded to the social upheaval and instability that led to the eventual dissolution of the empire in 1918. In her biography of the artist, Jane Kallir has noted that, though an inveterate traveller, Schiele's wanderings were confined almost entirely to the Austrian Empire, whose landscape he recorded with a bittersweet devotion that betrayed a lingering ambivalence. This dependence on the Austrian environment had a two-fold impact on him. On the one hand, it tended to throw him back on his own resources, reinforcing the personal character of his work. On the other, it ensured that whatever influences were manifested upon him were produced by stimuli specific to Austria.<sup>1</sup>

This dependence on the Austrian environment is crucial, for Schiele's landscapes exclusively portray the Empire's geography. Unlike his contemporary

Oskar Kokoschka, who depicted major European cities with a characteristically Expressionist brushstroke, Schiele never sought to look beyond the boundaries of the Austro-Hungarian realm, nor to frame its culturally prolific cities. Thus we might ask ourselves, what influence did the rural geographical terrain of Austria-Hungary exert upon the young artist and how did it uniquely shape his landscape painting?

Schiele's childhood and schooling were characterised by dislocation and upheaval. Upon completion of elementary school in Tulln in 1901, the Schiele family decided that Egon should be sent to a *Realgymnasium*, which would be in keeping with their middle-class ambitions for their son's career.<sup>2</sup> Schiele, however, had little interest in the rigorous academic training provided by such staid institutions. There was no *Realgymnasium* in Tulln, which resulted in the family sending Egon to school 50 miles away in Krems, where he boarded with a widow. In her biography of the artist Jane Kallir describes how at first the young Schiele was allowed to go home at weekends, then only once a month. Homesickness gnawed at him, and the childless widow was not particularly sympathetic. He developed a lifelong habit of taking long, solitary walks, and once, when his parents came to visit in Krems, they were surprised to find him missing. Upon his return, some two hours later, the boy explained: "When I wander off, I always pretend that I am going home".<sup>3</sup>

This perpetual longing for home stayed with Schiele into his teenage years and later into adulthood. Even his father Adolf expressed the desire to see his wife's birthplace, Krumau, and took the family there in the summer of 1904. This would be Egon's first trip to the picturesque medieval town on the River Vltava, and it inspired him greatly. Notably he returned to the town in 1911 with his partner, Wally Neuzil, to seek refuge from the critical atmosphere of the Academy in Vienna. Here, however, respite was short-lived: the artist was forced to leave the small town after villagers took offence at his painting of local young girls nude in his garden. Krumau resurfaces repeatedly in Schiele's landscapes, often from the same viewpoint on the castle hilltop above the river. Clearly, the town held a special place in

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<sup>1</sup> J. Kallir, *Egon Schiele: Life and Work*, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.

Schiele's heart, yet the artist would often depict it as diseased or dying. It was indeed in Krumau, on New Year's Eve of 1904 when Egon was just fourteen and a half years old, that Adolf Schiele would die whilst his son was outside drawing. Kallir has noted that on his later peregrinations, Schiele was constantly drawn to towns connected with his family history, including Trieste, where his parents had spent their honeymoon, and even to Neulengbach, where his aunt and uncle sometimes passed the summers.<sup>4</sup> Many art historians, Kallir included, have noted the impact of his father's career in the rail industry on Schiele's choice of subject matter: "The beneficiary (...) of a free rail pass until he reached adulthood, he developed the habit of jumping on trains just for the joy of it, riding them to the end of the line and then returning. Schiele thus fulfilled the destiny foreseen already as a child in Krems: he became a wanderer, perpetually in search of home".<sup>5</sup>

If Schiele's experience of his homeland was one of a series of journeys that left him unable to bury roots into the terrain, this instability and lack of belonging is legible in his artworks. In their examination of landscapes devoid of figures, Schiele's artworks question the place of the individual in this changing society and the role of culture as he traverses a physical and metaphorical wilderness. They bring together the mind, body and ground to map the demise of an era and an empire.

Austria-Hungary at this time was a cultural crucible whose artistic output was almost unparalleled in the world. In architecture, art, literature, medicine and science, Vienna was the centre of innovation and exchange of ideas. Yet in Schiele's landscapes we are offered little evidence of this creativity but rather a world on the brink of decay and collapse. From rural field compositions to urban towns, death ever lurks within the frame. Krumau, as it appears in Schiele's *oeuvre*, is persistently referred to as 'Dead City' (*Tote Stadt*). This perspective of death in a small town community presages the sense of impending doom upon the nation as a whole. In choosing a palette of nauseous greens and browns to depict Krumau's medieval streets and architecture, Schiele infects his canvases with a sickly glow, revealing the death of any kind of community in their barren, empty state.

Bohemia at this time was in the throes of nationalising developments. In her work, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands became Czech*, historian Nancy Wingfield interrogates the complicated, uneven transformation of the region between the years 1880 to 1948 from an entity

Egon  
Schiele,  
Self-portrait  
1910



consisting of 'multiple, layered identities - class, confessional, imperial, local and regional - into two overarching national identities, Czech and German'. As identities became increasingly divided, so the resulting exclusion and protests became increasingly violent in the region. Arguably Schiele and his partner Wally were the victims of this growing culture of exclusion when they felt obliged to leave Krumau in the summer of 1911. Though Krumau itself was a relatively peaceful, predominantly German-speaking town within the southern Bohemian territory (70% of its inhabitants spoke German according to a census in 1910), the political instabilities of the region were coming to the fore in this period and Schiele would almost certainly have been aware of the tensions surrounding issues of national identity, particularly concerning the use of language and bilingualism. The Badeni language reforms in 1897 had sought to enforce an artificial distinction between ethnic identity and language, in that they forced the local population to make a decision between their Czech and German identity. In reality, however, despite close monitoring on language frontiers, most Bohemians and Moravians continued to exist as they had done previously, sending their children to schools across these new linguistic borders in order that they might retain their bilingualism. Pieter M. Judson's work *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* explains the difficulties in assessing the extent

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. See also W. G. Fischer's biographic account of the artist's childhood in W. G. Fischer, *Egon Schiele: Desire and Decay* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1995), p. 7.

of bilingualism in this period - a culture of which Marie Soukup and her Austrian family were a part.

It is little wonder then that during this era in Europe Modernism as an artistic and literary movement sought to question traditional modes of identity and being. In Austria in particular the Modernist movement witnessed a crisis of identity and language.<sup>6</sup> From an interrogation of the psychology of the self in fictions by Arthur Schnitzler, Rainer Maria Rilke and Robert Musil to musings on interiority and isolation in the poetry of Else Lasker-Schüler and Georg Trakl, Austrian artists were attempting to define their sense of place in their fictions and the wider world, and this through a deficient language. What we see in Schiele's artworks therefore is an attempt to come to terms visually with this psychological and linguistic crisis.<sup>7</sup> However, these paintings are not just a reflection on the role of the individual within a community but of the community as a whole and its place in history. Schiele's landscapes appropriate the idea of inherently not belonging, and in so doing mirror the precariousness of the Austro-Hungarian empire on the verge of dissolution.

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<sup>6</sup> Vienna's *Sprachkrise* (language crisis) at the turn of the century represented the mutual experience of a loss of faith in the capacity of language to offer authentic communication. The up-and-coming author Hugo von Hofmannsthal was the first to significantly engage with the issue in his famous text *The Letter of Lord Chandos* (1902), while the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would later explore the limits of language in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (first published in 1921). For further information on the crisis of language see: K. A. Smith, *Art and the Crisis of Language in 'Work and the World'* in *Between Ruin and Renewal: Egon Schiele's Landscapes*, pp. 61-63; and Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Huter and Patrick Werkner have argued that Schiele's art favours the performative and gestural over verbal communication as a response to the insufficiency of language to express emotion: See P. Werkner, *Austrian Expressionism: The Formative Years*, trans. Nicholas T. Parsons (Palo Alto, California: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1993), pp. 227-235, and M. Huter, 'Body as Metaphor: Aspects of the Critique and Crisis of Language at the Turn of the Century with Reference to Egon Schiele' in P. Werkner, *Egon Schiele: Art, Sexuality, and Viennese Modernism* (Palo Alto, California: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1994), pp. 119-129.