London Landscape

Facing the modern and the medical

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A review of the exhibition 'Facing the Modern: The Portrait in Vienna 1900', which was at the National Gallery, 9 October 2013–12 January 2014

This was the UK's first major exhibition devoted to the portrait in Vienna at the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As the National Gallery website explains, 'Portraiture is closely identified with the distinctive flourishing of modern art in the Austrian capital during its famed fin-de-siècle: artists worked to the demands of patrons, and in Vienna modern artists were compelled to focus on the image of the individual.'

Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Arnold Schönberg and Oskar Kokoscka are among the most famous painters of the period, and of a specific style and interpretation of the period; of society, of groups, and of individuals. I was inspired while reflecting upon these by the many 'medical' matters touched upon.

One room is devoted to the portrait as a simultaneous declaration of love and commemoration of death. Death masks (the most famous exhibited are those of Mahler, Klimt, Schiele and Beethoven) were common at the time, and work on them had to be rapid before decomposition set-in and changed profiles. The most extreme was by Klimt, commissioned by the Gallia family (which was forced to escape from the Nazis some 20 years later) to portray a lady who had already died. He portrayed her as a dead person lying as in Pre-Raphaelite painting. The family refused such work and the famous Klimt was pushed to paint traces of living body in a post-mortem situation, with an unrealistic and pale atmosphere.

Beethoven died after a long illness and, because suspicious of being poisoned, he had stipulated in his will that an autopsy should be performed upon his death. Also, doctors investigated his ear canals, aware of his deafness.

Antoine von Amerling is painted on her deathbed, describing with extreme naturalism the gleam of the skin, the hint of a tear in the eye.

Psychological portrayal is a leitmotiv for these painters. In 1918 Schiele arrived to paint the final days of his wife in pregnancy; she died six days later

from 'Spanish flu', followed three days later by Schiele himself! He portrays young men, long, pale faces and thin, elongated fingers splayed against the hips. In this way, he is creating a general image of awkward adolescence, the sense of end of a period, and an illusion of freedom with the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with its Viennese society, artists and unique period of art.

In Schiele's works, the artist's body itself 'seems material to be manhandled. The exaggerated slightness of frames and the thrust of his truncated shoulder create a depleted yet dynamic body that was so centered to his portrait practice' says the exhibition's curator.

Georg Schonberg is portrayed by his father Arnold in the claustrophobic family apartment, and he glances anxiously away from his father.

Some portraits withdraw to a private sphere that consciously evokes another, that of mind. This period saw so many suicides in the society that many artists portrayed suicides a short time later: I was impressed by two young sisters depicted looking so well, yet both committed suicide one year later.

Oscar Kokoscka was criticized by the press for representing 'deranged visions from a sick childhood'. The figures appear as lost in their own thoughts: I was impressed by a family all sitting in the dining room, five persons, but everyone looking at themselves, their own toys, books, work. The same painter arrived to the extreme of psychologically portraying, when we see a man with an expression that the sector press described as 'a study of the expression of the Wandering Jew'. You must consider that Jews were a big and very active population at that time, before everything changed for the worse with the arrival of Hitler.

Last but not the least, Kokoscka depicted people in the sanatorium. Tuberculosis was rife at the time and a generation of people, including artists, died. He took time to study many patients, giving us a very unusual and interesting medical view; for the portrayed, this was a minor distraction from a succession of identical days spent awaiting a cure...or the end.

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