

Documentary

For whom the bell tolled

The 100th anniversary of the 1918 influenza pandemic is an occasion to pause and remember all those who died. The influenza pandemic caused an uncertain number of deaths, but estimates place it at about 50 million. At the time of the pandemic, most families had at least one member or knew someone who succumbed to the disease. My great-grandmother died of 1918 influenza, leaving behind seven children. The fear of another pandemic scarred the following generations. Among the victims of the 1918 influenza pandemic there were also some famous artists whose creative trajectory was suddenly stopped. On Nov 10, BBC2 broadcasted a documentary about one of the most provocative and controversial artists whose life was tragically cut short by the 1918 influenza pandemic, the Austrian painter Egon Schiele.

In *Egon Schiele: dangerous desires*, the painter's short life is described with attention to contextualising the artistic and social milieu in which Schiele emerged. His explicit paintings represented a major break in the conservative Viennese tradition of the early 20th century, and even today his famous nudes remain controversial, forcing viewers to become, as artist Jack Chapman says in the documentary, "voyeuristically connected to this person".

In the documentary, a panel of commentators, including several art historians, actress and model Lily Cole, and pop singer Iggy Pop, share their impressions on Schiele. With the help of actor Henry McGrath, who re-enacts on screen the tortured poses that Schiele created in his self-portraits, the influence of Schiele's work on the creation of the public image of pop icons, such as David Bowie and Iggy Pop himself, is brought to the surface.

As the 1918 influenza pandemic was responsible for the untimely death of the artist, another infectious disease—syphilis, this time affecting his father—scarred Schiele's childhood. In the early 20th century, syphilis was one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in Europe, and people with the disease were burdened with a social stigma due to the high incidence among sex workers. In the absence of an effective treatment (arsphenamine was only developed in 1908), the impact of syphilis on society was devastating. Adolf Schiele, the artist's father, contracted syphilis on his wedding night when, after being rejected from the marital bed by his wife, he had gone to a local brothel. The disease caused behavioural changes and, ultimately, insanity in Adolf, which affected the life of the whole family and prompted young Egon to seek refuge in painting. When Adolf died in 1905, Egon Schiele was only 14 years old.

Whether the origin of his father's disease was known to Schiele is not clear, but a fear-tinged fascination with sexuality and the body constitutes a central feature in the

artist's production. Schiele employed sex workers as models for his work, mainly for economic reasons. In Vienna, where, in the early 1900s, the age of consent was 14 years, many sex workers who posed for Schiele were younger than that, an element linked to the explicit nature of his paintings that challenges the morals of the viewer still today. In the documentary, however, Schiele's attitude towards women remains uncertain. Was he a feminist? Did he objectify his models? The same commentators cannot agree on the actual meaning of the centrality of the female body and the self-awareness of the models in Schiele's works.

What surely separated Schiele for his contemporary artists was his frank depiction of naked bodies. In a marked rupture from the boundaries of traditional figurative art and following the steps of another famous Austrian painter, Gustav Klimt (another victim of the 1918 influenza pandemic), Schiele portrayed naked bodies without any attempt to neutralise their sexuality. The absence of any beautification and the use of particularly tormented poses in his figures, including in his famous self-portraits, remain strikingly modern even today.

In the documentary, art historians suggest that Schiele's psychologically and erotically charged works met the favour of the Viennese public because they threaded the fine line between art and pornography, which was flourishing in Vienna at the time. Schiele was also a master in capitalising the scandal generated by his own licentious lifestyle. After he was put on trial and condemned to a short spell in prison for public indecency, when some of his nude paintings were found hanging in his studio where local children could come and go, he used that negative fame to expand his market, this time portraying more mature women. His marriage with Edith Harms did not quench Schiele's provocative nature, prompting him to use his reluctant wife as a model for new explicit paintings. Sadly, their life together did not last for very long, because they both died when the influenza pandemic reached Vienna in 1918. The 6-month pregnant Edith was the first to fall ill and die, followed 3 days later by the 28-year-old Schiele.

Reflecting on one of the most controversial figures of modern art, *Egon Schiele: dangerous desires* is an interesting exploration of the reasons why Schiele remains a divisive artist to this very day and how his legacy has affected following generations, even outside painting. His untimely death in the biggest modern pandemic leaves us with the question of what Schiele would have achieved if he had not been cut down in his 20s by 1918 influenza. A question important for all other victims of the pandemic.

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Published Online
November 19, 2018
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(18\)30723-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(18)30723-0)

Egon Schiele: dangerous desires
BBC2
Directed by Teresa Griffiths
Produced by Richard Bright
Nov 10, 2018