

Kindred Spirits: The Courage and Creativity of Egon Schiele and Fritz Grünbaum

by Jonathan Petropoulos

Claremont McKenna College

Viennese cabaret performer Fritz Grünbaum and Hollywood legends Fritz Lang, Josef von Sternberg, and Billy Wilder shared a common passion for rebel artist Egon Schiele. Before World War I, film director Fritz Lang was an exuberant young artist with painterly ambitions, and for his entire life, he credited Schiele as his greatest inspiration, and drew in the style of the artist. After Lang fled Nazi Germany in 1933, following Joseph Goebbels's famous offer to have him direct films for the Reich Propaganda Ministry, Lang's Schiele collection was lost. This was not an isolated case.



Fritz Grünbaum, circa 1927. Photo: © Theater Museum, Vienna.

Each of these Hollywood legends had roots in the decadent, cabaret-infused, operatic Vienna, and in their youth observed the finale of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Each was Austrian, Jewish, charismatic and influenced tens of millions. Yet, although audiences worldwide immediately recognize the names of Lang, von Sternberg and Wilder, Grünbaum's name is shrouded in mystery.

Mystery also permeates the life, work, and legacy of the legendary artist Egon Schiele. Schiele's artistic obsession with prostitutes, nudity, and exploring humanity's dark side pushed the envelope both artistically and legally in the fin de siècle Habsburg Empire. Schiele's phenomenal influence derives from his intense portrayal of dark eroticism. Among the first to explore the relationship between painting and photography, Schiele perched himself on a ladder to obtain new and compelling angles. Film noir's obsession with sex, glamor, and voyeurism, tinged by death, corruption, and decay, springs from Schiele's work.

Reflected in the vision of the great Viennese cinematic auteurs, Schiele's moods and characters emerge on the silver screen, securing his place as godfather of film noir.

No artist in this milieu was more transgressive, and few as talented. Schiele was inspired by his mentor and friend, Gustav Klimt, and tried to surpass him in terms of audacity and intensity. His aesthetic influenced musicians such as David Bowie and Sid Vicious. Contemporary mainstream museums and critics shunned Schiele with his dark influences. Over time, Schiele emerged as one of the twentieth-century's greats. Larger audiences flock to ever more influential exhibitions as museums compete fiercely for his works.



Fritz Grünbaum, circa 1930. Photo: © Theater Museum, Vienna.

Fritz Grünbaum's courage in mocking the Nazis is legendary. His cabaret performances in concentration camps, cracking jokes to raise the spirits of his fellow inmates in the face of almost certain death, have inspired generations of creators. Grünbaum was a major celebrity during his lifetime. His round face, spectacles and his habit of driving open-air automobiles surrounded by tall beautiful women were immortalized in both silent and talking pictures. Films such as *The Theft of the Mona Lisa* (1931) and theatrical works as *Dollarprinzessen* (*The Dollar Princesses*) introduced his comedic genius to international audiences. As the star of a popular radio show, Grünbaum perfected a form of comedy routine known as the Double Act (*Doppelconférence*) with Karl Farkas. This interplay between a very smart character and a very dumb character influenced American vaudeville acts such as Abbott & Costello.

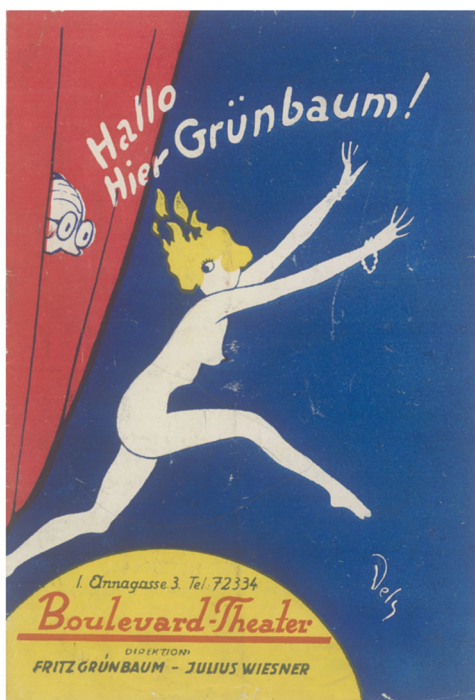


Left: Fritz Grünbaum. Photo: © Theater Museum, Vienna.



Right: "Vienna Laughs Again". Revue scene with Karl Farkas and Fritz Grünbaum, 1926. Photo: © Theater Museum, Vienna.

Grünbaum emerged to early fame as a cabaret star and would retain that role for the rest of his life. His career launched in Vienna's Cabaret Hell in 1907. Later in Berlin he made his mark in Rudolph Nelson's Chat Noir in Berlin. Upon returning to Vienna, he eventually called Cabaret Simpl his home, but played bigger venues, including the opulent imperial Burgtheater on the Ringstrasse. Grünbaum's role as a cabaret emcee was immortalized in Joel Grey's Tony and Oscar-winning role in Cabaret. In 2007, Ulrich Mühe played a fictionalized Grünbaum as a Jewish acting instructor pulled out of a concentration camp by Joseph Goebbels to coach a depressed Hitler in Dani Levy's controversial comedy My Führer.



Hello! Hier Grünbaum!, 1927. Boulevard Theatre, Vienna.
Photo: © Theater Museum, Vienna.

Grünbaum never hesitated to stand up to authority. Before World War I, when a Habsburg officer interrupted his cabaret act with anti-Semitic jeers, Grünbaum went into the audience and slapped him. In the ensuing duel, Grünbaum was injured. Grünbaum was fearless. He fought for Austria in World War I on the Italian front, serving as a platoon leader in the battle of Görz in 1916 where 50,000 Austrians perished defending a bridge. In August 1917, reassignment to a desk job saved his life. He grew more disillusioned and critical as the war progressed, penning subversive poems and pacifist songs.

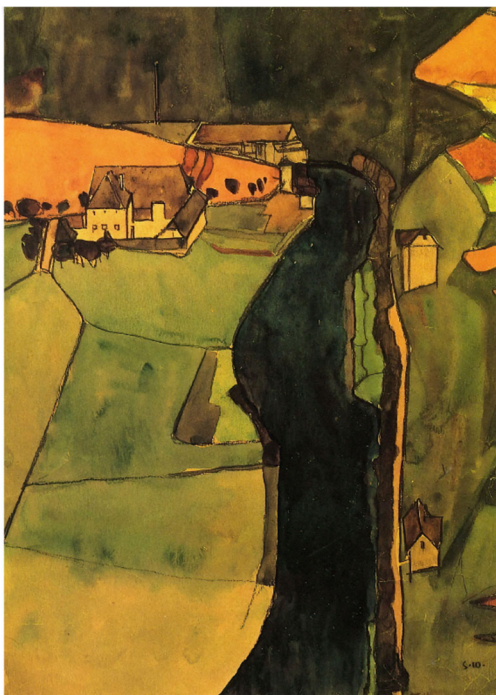
Grünbaum gave his last performance as a free man on the eve of Hitler's invasion of Austria in March 1938. He opened by looking through the curtains onto a darkened stage exclaiming, "I see nothing, absolutely nothing. I must have wandered into the National Socialist culture." The next day, the Austrian

government banned his performances. Upon Hitler's triumphant march into Vienna a few weeks later ("the Anschluss"), Grünbaum was hunted, imprisoned, and transported to the Dachau concentration camp as a cultural enemy of the Reich and a Jew.



Egon Schiele, *Die Selbstseher*, 1910. Present whereabouts unknown. Lost from the Grünbaum collection. Photo: Courtesy of the Kallir Research Institute, New York.

As early as 1925, Fritz Grünbaum emerged as one of the most important collectors of Schiele as memorialized in Vienna's *The Stage* magazine (*Die Bühne*). Thirteen years later, Grünbaum owned an astonishing eighty-one Schiele artworks. Grünbaum's Schiele collection ranged from the intensely erotic to haunted landscapes. Schiele's oil painting, the self-portrait *Die Selbstseher* (1910), which remains lost today, is considered a masterpiece of modernism. Schiele represents himself with two figures bathed in light, like the spotlight on a cabaret stage. *Die Selbstseher* is haunting and disturbing: only swirling, turbulent darkness surrounds the figures, with a giant, straining hand extending from the center.



Egon Schiele, *Stadt am blauen Fluss (Krumau)*, 1910. Sold pursuant to a restitution settlement agreement with the heirs of Fritz Grünbaum in 2014. Photo: Artefact / Alamy Stock Photo.

A Nazi inventory of his apartment, compiled while he was in the Dachau Concentration Camp in 1938, reveals that Grünbaum's Schiele collection included five major oils (*Tote Stadt III (Stadt am blauen Fluss III)*; *Schwarzes Mädchen*; *Boote, sich im Wasser spiegelnd*; *Landschaft mit Blauen und Häusern*; and *Die Selbstseher*) and seventy-six drawings and watercolors. Housed in a luxurious apartment, the collection as a whole numbered some 450 items, including works by Oskar Kokoschka, Max Liebermann, and Edgar Degas. Grünbaum took great care in acquiring artworks, studying catalogues and consulting with experts, including gallery owner Otto (Nirenstein) Kallir, a leading Schiele expert who, in 1930, compiled the first catalogue raisonné of Schiele's oil paintings. Kallir gave Grünbaum privileged access and a selection of the best works.

Fritz Grünbaum found a kindred spirit in Egon Schiele. Both were provincial strivers seeking to make an impact on the cultural scene of Vienna the

capital of the Habsburg Empire (Schiele in Tulln in Lower Austria and Grünbaum in Brunn in what is now the Czech Republic). Each pushed the limits of freedom of expression and spoke to universal truths. Austrians appreciate Grünbaum as a humanist philosopher, a model followed by comedians like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Mel Brooks, and Jerry Seinfeld. Schiele's subversive spirit speaks to the perennial rebel.

Schiele perished tragically in 1918 just as Fritz Grünbaum's career soared. Schiele obsessively pursued a singular artistic vision until his death at age 28 from the Spanish flu. His pregnant wife Edith died shortly after him. Death at his prime prevented Schiele from achieving the true fame and wealth that many modernist artists enjoyed after World War I. Schiele's early death curtailed his lifetime's artistic output. A Schiele coming to the art market is a special event.

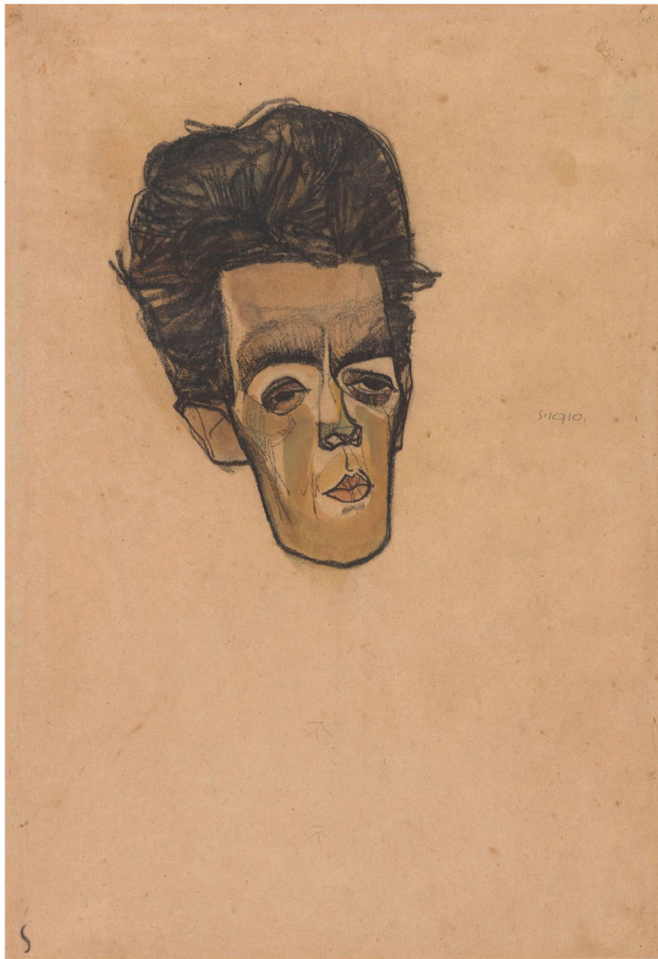
Prior to his death in October 1918, Egon Schiele was largely unknown outside Austria. Fritz Grünbaum, Fritz Lang, Josef von Sternberg, and Billy Wilder—Vienna's cultural elite—all helped discover Schiele by collecting his works and advancing his reputation in coffee houses, exhibitions and salons. These four collectors were Jewish, suffered Nazi threats and opposed authority. Many of Schiele's early collectors perished in the Holocaust.

Egon Schiele and Fritz Grünbaum are known to history for their tremendous, path-breaking talent and courage in the face of intimidation. This courage was formed in the rebellious ethos of Viennese culture in the fin de siècle period. Older contemporaries, like Sigmund Freud, had challenged the Austrian establishment and paid a price. Freud's professorship was long delayed over disapproval of psychoanalysis and his topography of the mind. Both Schiele and Grünbaum challenged the establishment. Courage and obstinance took their art and visions to a new level.

The apotheosis of Grünbaum's courage came staging plays in the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps. At first, the SS guards forbade performances. When the guards weren't looking inmates scrambled to form a stage by pushing tables together. Plays without subversive or anti-Nazi messages were later permitted. Grünbaum offered a spiritual resistance with double-entendre and subtle jokes to amuse his fellow-prisoners. Although the SS guards laughed, they rarely realized that Grünbaum mocked them. Grünbaum didn't always succeed in hiding barbs from his captors. When a guard refused him soap, Grünbaum quipped: "People who cannot afford soap shouldn't run such expensive concentration camps." For this remark, he was punished brutally.

Even as his health failed, Fritz Grünbaum continued to offer performances mocking the Nazis. By the end of 1940, he could barely stand, wracked by tuberculosis. But on New Year's Eve 1940, while confined to the Dachau infirmary, Grünbaum gave his last performance for fellow prisoners. He knew that most of his audience would not survive the camp, and that he faced a similar fate. According to the death certificate filled out by the Nazi authorities, Grünbaum died of a heart attack on 14 January 1941. His wife, Lilli Herzl Grünbaum, was deported to Minsk and killed at Maly Trostenets in October 1942. The documents on his wife's death are murkier since she was not registered in the mass shooting pits of the East.

Egon Schiele is now celebrated in Austria. His works draw tourists from around the world to the galleries of the Leopold Museum and the Belvedere (the Austrian National Gallery). Austria's embrace of the tortured artist may be heartfelt today, and reflects an appreciation for his nudes and dark vision. By contrast, in 1912, he was found guilty of exhibiting erotic pictures in a place accessible to youth and sentenced to twenty-four days imprisonment. The authorities seized many works from his studio on the grounds that they were pornographic. At trial, the judge burned one of the drawings over a candle flame. Schiele, like Grünbaum, offered a vision, a critique of the world, that challenged existing norms, and threatened authority. Both artists paid a price for that vision.



Egon Schiele, *Selbstbildnis*, 1910. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York (Fred Ebb bequest).

Is it any surprise that Fred Ebb, of legendary Kander & Ebb fame, had a 1910 Schiele self-portrait—once owned by Grünbaum—on the wall of his New York city apartment as he penned the lyrics to Broadway smash hit *Cabaret*? The emcee character, who navigates the world depicted by Schiele, narrates the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazis, captures both the courage and the tragedy represented in the life of Fritz Grünbaum.

Cabaret was written some twenty years before New York District Attorney Robert Morgenthau seized two works by Schiele in 1998 on loan to The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. One of them, *Tote Stadt III* (*Stadt am blauen Fluss III*), had belonged to Grünbaum. The Morgenthau seizure of *Tote Stadt III* (*Stadt am blauen Fluss III*) brought international attention to the fate of Grünbaum's magnificent art collection.

The historic occasion of Christie's auction of *Frau mit schwarzer Schürze* and *Frau, das Gesicht verbergend* from the Grünbaum collection provides another extraordinary opportunity to appreciate the life of Fritz Grünbaum, to reflect upon his tragically lost art collection, and to explore the seismic and magnetic influence of Egon Schiele.



Egon Schiele, *Tote Stadt III (Stadt am blauen Fluss III)*, 1911. Leopold Museum, Vienna. Photo: The Artchives / Alamy Stock Photo.

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