

Comparative Study

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Exploring the female figure:
fictitious grandiosity and sober pragmatism

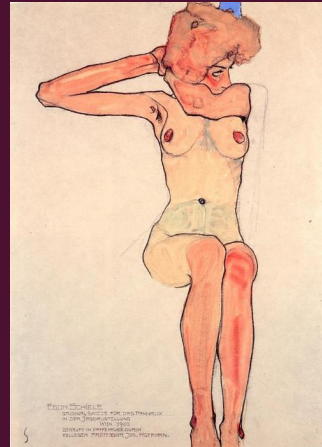
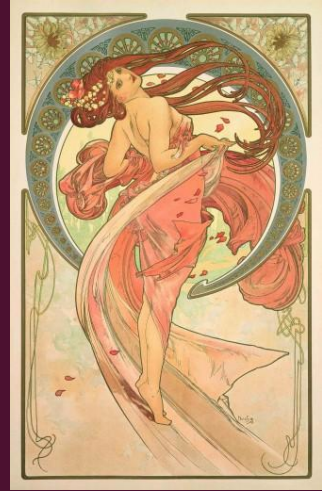
The following study analyses the representation, purpose, and significance of the following artworks:

Nu Assis (1910) and *Women Sitting with her Legs Drawn up* (1917) by Egon Schiele
And Dance (1898) by Alphonse Mucha

Introduction

For the purpose of this investigation I chose to analyse 'Sitting Woman with Legs Drawn Up' and 'Nu Assis' because of the informal yet invasive nature of Egon Schiele's depiction of the female form. These works feel intrusive and intimate and I chose them as they are uncompromising, captivating, and detailed. These works were considered inappropriate at the time of their creation but are now seen as revolutionary and hugely influential to the fine art at the time. As a contrast I chose to study the 'Dance', from the series 'The Arts' (1898) by Alphonse Mucha. It is a poster from color lithograph and depicts a healthy, beautiful girl with auburn hair swaying in the breeze, soft drapes of fabric encasing her. She seems to be sweeping the clouds; the idea of movement is very clear. I chose this work because of the focus on the single figure, the idealization of beauty and the portrayal of movement. The romanticized depiction of women is timeless.

By comparing Schiele and Mucha I'm able to scrutinize two artists from neighbouring countries at similar time periods, both affected by the First World War. Vast differences can be seen in their style although both artists often depicted women. Their works were received very differently, providing Mucha with unwanted fame, while Schiele was shunned and forced to be a nomad much of the time. Mucha was very interested in religion and purity, whereas Schiele became much more invested in the meaning of life explored through pleasure and pain, with particular emphasis on intimacy.



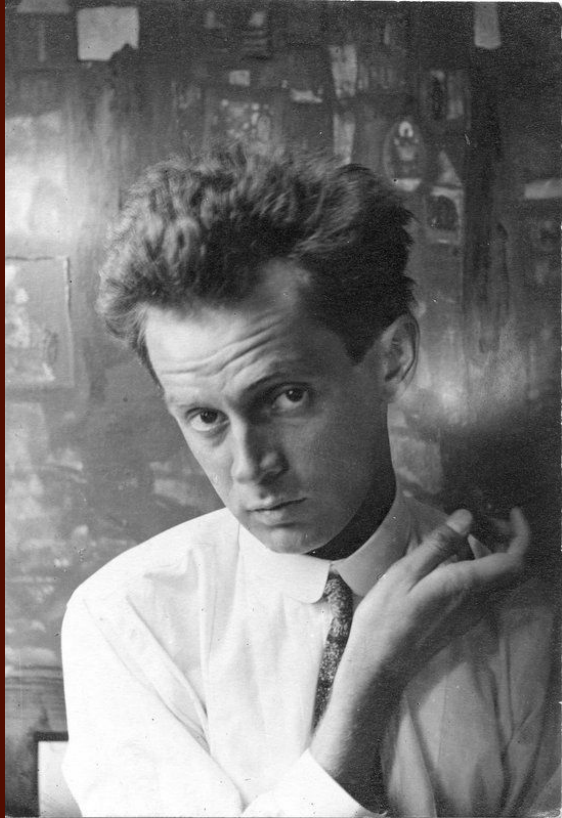
Alphonse Mucha - Historical Context

Mucha was born in Moravia (now a region of the Czech Republic), in 1860. He gained his fame while working in Paris. His career success began by chance when creating a print for probably the most famous actress in Paris, Sarah Bernhardt in 1895. He elevated posters to an art form and engaged the world with the 'Art Nouveau' movement. He created many works depicting beautiful women with their signature flowing hair and billowing fabric. These were used as posters, decor, and advertising for several brands. He became frustrated at gaining fame from his commercial work and believed that the purpose of art was simply to communicate a 'spiritual message'. He attempted to distance himself from the 'art nouveau' style for much of his life. Mucha was a strong Slavic nationalist, extremely religious, and donated many works to the city of Prague. He moved to the USA to earn money in order to support Czech nationalistic projects and on returning to Prague began 'The Slav Epic' (1911-1926), a lifelong project of darker pieces meant to inspire Slavic nationalism and represent the spiritual virtue of his country.

In the 1930's strong waves of nationalism rippled through Europe. In 1939 Mucha was among the first to be arrested in Prague by the marching German troops. He died later that year of pneumonia. The Art Nouveau style drifts in and out of fashion but influences many artists. The legacy left by Mucha is sure to continue inspiring artists into the future.



Egon Schiele - Historical Context

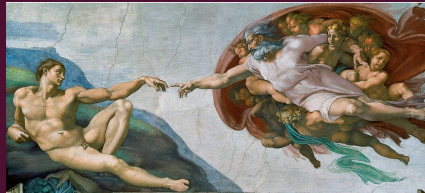


In 1890 in Tulln, Austria, Schiele was born. Coming from a humble setting, his father died when he was only 15. He studied at more than one academy but most notably the 'Akademie der Bildenden Kunst' in Vienna, 1906, being only 16 at the time. Adolf Hitler was rejected from this school a year later. Schiele was frustrated by the conservatism of the school and sought out Klimt, who took an immediate liking to Schiele and chose to mentor him. Though Schiele's work was influenced heavily by Klimt: his fixation with the female form, and depictions of intimacy, later in life he found his own more minimal, expressive style with less in common with the rich nature of Klimt's work. His expressionist style was very different to existing art of the era.

Themes of his works include sex and death. He mainly created portraits as this was commercially viable but he also did many self-portraits which was unusual at the time. Much of Schiele's work is erotic and pornographic, leading to legal troubles and controversy. In 1912 Schiele was arrested for vulgarity in his pieces. He was forced to move from town to town after being accused of trying to seduce young women, under the age of consent. When the First World War broke out Schiele was ordered to active service. Stationed in Prague, his artistic talents were recognized and he was treated well, never being put on the front line and even being allowed to continue painting while guarding Russian troops. Soon after, in 1918 he died from the outbreak of Spanish Influenza. Whilst his career was cut short his works continue to sell for huge prices.

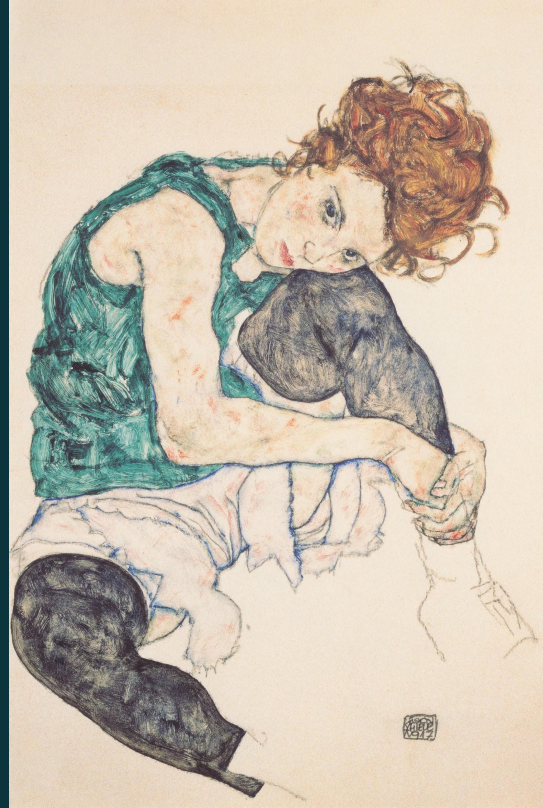
Analysis of *Dance* (1898)

- First Impression: The ephemeral moment captured has a distinct playfulness. The woman has a serene expression though her feet are pointed, hand tensed and body leaned back in what should be a strained posture.
- The style focuses on the beautiful, ideal women similar to the Pre-Raphaelites and has the same stylistic movement as high-renaissance paintings (similar to '*The Birth of Venus*' by Botticelli or '*The Creation of Adam*' by Michelangelo (below)). The fabric and hair seems to mimic the dramatic floating of these earlier religious works, unsurprising given Mucha's devout religious standing.
- The colors throughout the painting are soft, almost pastel, and peaceful, creating a sense of whimsy and comfort for the viewer. The woman is highlighted as she is all in red, warm tones whereas the background are greens and blues in a neutral tone. This also emphasizes the health and vigor of the woman.
- This is a lithograph poster originally printed on vellum and satin. These were expensive, rich materials. This makes sense given the commercial audience Mucha was appealing to at this time.
- This series was created at the height of Mucha's fame, but he had not yet reached the stage of frustration at the commercial world. There is still a naivety to the image as it is so idealized.



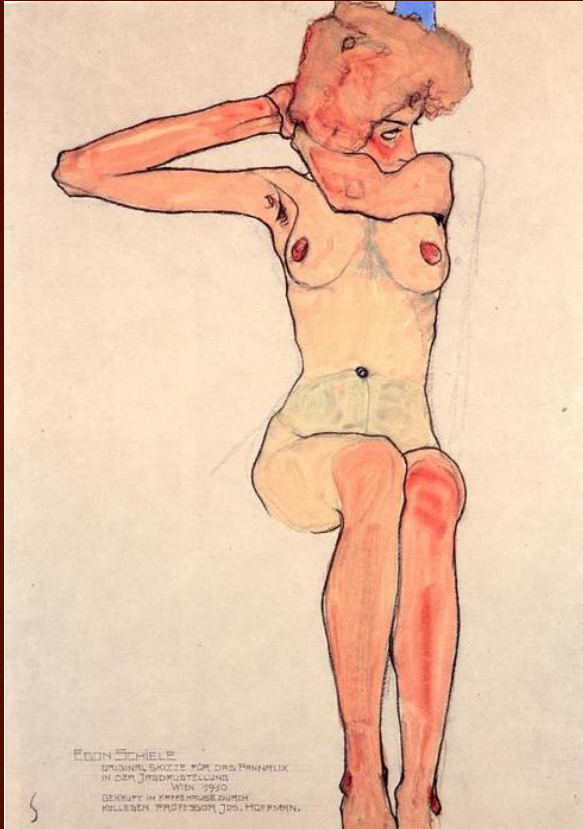
Analysis of *Sitting Woman with Legs Drawn Up* (1917)

- First impression: there is a certain serenity to the expression of the woman but the incomplete nature and the uneven and rough lines give a sense of uncertainty and mystery.
- The style is nearly as realistic in the anatomy as Mucha's pieces but comes off as much more honest and representative of the feelings of the time, as the first World War ended in 1918.
- The completely blank background adds to the unfinished feeling of the piece. The use of color is also minimal though bright and applied unevenly, this creates interest for the viewer.



- This piece is created from gouache, watercolor, and crayon on paper. This mix of media seems to be applied in an almost tumultuous way and gives the viewer insight into the emotional state of Schiele at this time.
- The cropping of the image or where it has been placed on the paper is interesting because it nearly falls out of frame near the feet and knees. Perhaps Schiele began this piece at the face and did not consider before sketching further. It also gives the piece an unorthodox feeling. The leg seems very close as it leaves the frame and pulls the viewer into the piece.
- The position of Schiele's wife, the woman being depicted, is curled up though not uncomfortably, as if she is relaxed and comfortable in this position.

Analysis of *Nu assis* (1910)



- First impression: This portrait is the most intimate, which is interesting considering the figure is looking away, as if to avoid making eye contact with the artist and viewer.
- The odd position of the model is very intriguing but reveals little. It is clear she is seated on some unknown object, adding further to the mysterious air of this piece. The figure seems delicate and shy almost but this is at a juxtaposition with the open pose. The dark outline around her body commands the attention of the viewer.
- The use of color is very minimal, the background is, yet again, left blank. This gives sole focus to the figure. The color red in this image is watered down and applied sparingly, so that this passionate and strong color has the opposite effect. It gives the figure a flushed look. Her torso remains less colored to pull focus to her long extremities. There are small traces of blue above the head, at the sternum, and around the stomach, creating more interest than in a monochrome piece.
- The image, similarly to the other Schiele piece, is cropped in an interesting manner, the head and feet leave the edge of the paper and the figure is placed nearly at a third of the paper's width. The effect of this is to elongate the figure and give a certain amount of intimacy to be so 'close' to the woman, as well as obeying the rule of thirds.

Schiele's Influential Style and His Legacy

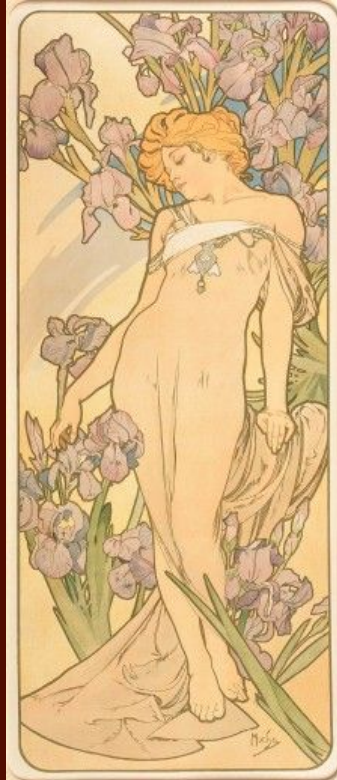
Though broadly classed under Expressionism along with Edvard Munch and Paul Klee of the same time period, Schiele's work remains hugely influential. Expressionism is very broad as a movement and loosely defined as 'the use of distortion and exaggeration for emotional effect'. Expressionism developed at the turn of the 20th century, from about 1905 to 1920. Schiele was a key artist in this movement, representing his subjects in a brutally honest way. Today his works are still being sold. He was a prolific artists creating many sketches and drawings on paper. His works are amongst the most expensive works on paper and are still exhibited in galleries and shows dedicated specifically to him and his style.

An interesting addition to Schiele's legacy is the popularity of the self-portrait. Though they had been done before, there had rarely been such quantity and in so intimate a manner. Great numbers of artists are inspired by Schiele in their personal depictions.



Mucha and Schiele - Depictions of Women

Alphonse Mucha's depiction of the ideal woman, though bountifully beautiful and delicate, does not do justice to the human body in all its imperfections nor does it reflect the mood of the time, full of tension and worry due to the impending war. This being said, as most of Mucha's famous Art-Nouveau work is centered around commercial-use and advertising it is ideal to have these romanticized women to appeal to the masses. Given their purpose, Mucha's women were portrayed perfectly.



Many of Egon Schiele's women are depicted in an erotic and in some ways perverse manner, presenting the body with callous honesty. Interestingly, in modern times, many of Schiele's works are considered feminist pieces with the sole focus being on the celebration of women's bodies, as they really are. It is hard to understand how controversial they were at the time of their creation.

Comparison - Composition, Color and Style



Surprisingly in Mucha's piece the focal point is the breast. The circle behind the figure is drawing the eye to the center. This is also the origin of the long sheaths of fabric and where the curls of the hair are pointing. The piece can be separated into three sections. The foreground is the figure, gown, and hair. The middle ground is the circular encasing object behind the figure, in the deeper green and blue shades. Finally, the background is the washed green colors in three sections. Patterns of threes are very pleasing to the human eye.



In contrast the focal point of this piece by Schiele is definitely his wife's face. There are lines created by the body which all intersect at her face, leading the eye there. There are three strong colors used in this painting: the red hair, the black tights and the green shirt. In the middle of these you find the face. It is a simple composition with no background. This is a part of Schiele's style and leaves the focus unobstructed on the character.

Comparison - Technique and Detail



Focusing on these two close ups demonstrates how Mucha and Schiele utilize and execute detail, as well as the effect they have on the entire piece. Mucha uses fine lines, carefully placed to create a very clean effect. The fabric is an example, the color variation is carefully placed. All the colors are from the same family and appear controlled and planned.

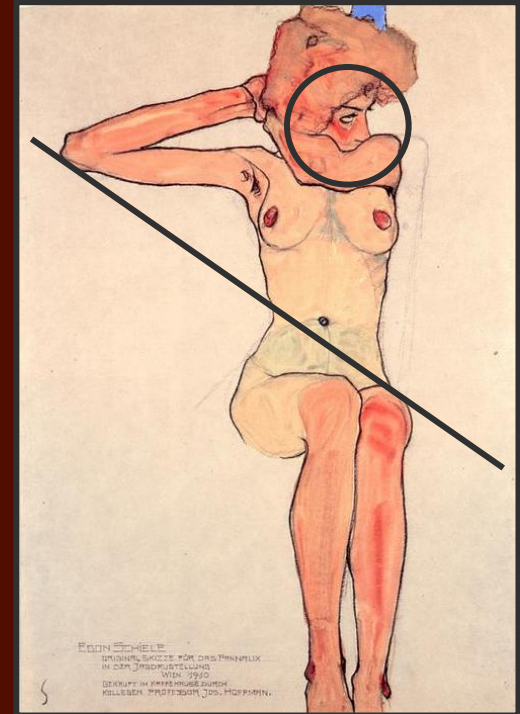
Schiele uses line weight as can be seen from the woman's arm, as well as color variation to create interest and focus, like just below the eye in the right image. Here he uses blue and red in the same region, adding interest to these areas. These techniques are much less careful and some chance is taken.

From the careful, immaculate style of Mucha to the rougher, gritty style of Schiele, they both employ reason and technique in the decisions they make to create different effects in their work.

Schiele is using the woman's position to pull the focus upwards towards features of the woman's face. That's where the detail is the greatest and the colors are quite strong. The diagonal line I have indicated is pulling the viewer's sight. Diagonals are very pleasing to the human eye. The strong red lines in the leg / knee point up towards the face.

The body is in a very open position, unafraid, whereas the face is hidden away behind the woman's arm. This position is unusual and adds a sense of mystery or a story to the piece.

Both artists use a soft color palette giving the figures in these pieces a warmth and perhaps vulnerability.



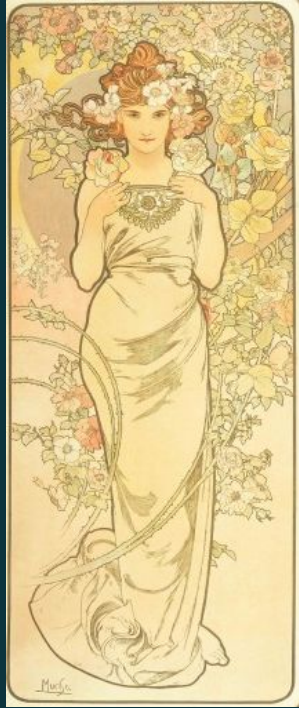
Conclusions



Alphonse Mucha and Egon Schiele are two artists that worked and were known at the same time, but in very different ways. Mucha appealed to the commercial market and presented women in his paintings as healthy, glowing and heavenly, whereas Schiele took a different approach. His women were unruly, unapologetic and unromanticized. These different representations, when compared, can be rather shocking. Even now nearly 100 years later we are not used to the human body being depicted as Schiele does. Mucha's idealism is seen everywhere today, in photos, movies, adverts, and social media. Mainstream media continues to produce images like Mucha's with an ideal body type exemplifying figures of perfect health. Schiele looks at people to pique interest and portrays a raw realism.

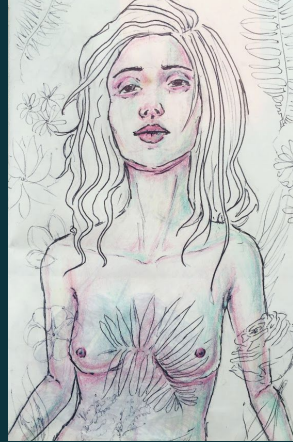
For contemporaneous European painters these two artists have very different styles. The Expressionist style, in which Schiele's work is categorized, claims to use distortion in the piece to create emotional effect, whereas Mucha's Art Nouveau aimed to escape reality and abandon the historical style seen widely in the 19th century.

Influence on My Artwork - Mucha's Idealism

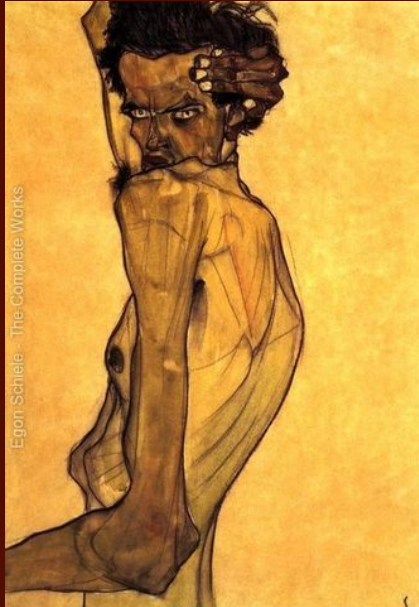


I've always been fascinated by the female form, and in the past tended to idealize it with thin waists and full hips and an almost banal flawlessness. Looking at Mucha's women you can fully appreciate the romanticized being. The way in which Mucha employed this style in commercial use is informative and seems relevant even today. The use of high quality print to create many copies interests me.

In much of my work the organic shapes, including long flowing hair and commonly beautiful figures are reminiscent of the Art Nouveau style. Analyzing Mucha's work is encouraging me to explore further the ornate nature and careful placement of color to create a calming and harmonious atmosphere. Mimicking the precision and care from Mucha's pieces would be very valuable and I hope to learn and explore this more in future.



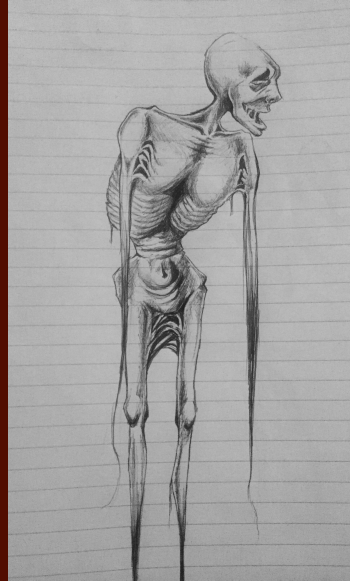
Influence on My Artwork - Schiele's Brutality



Egon Schiele - The Complete Works

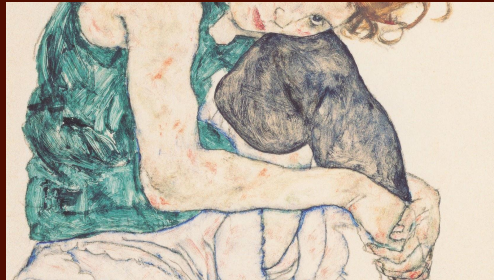
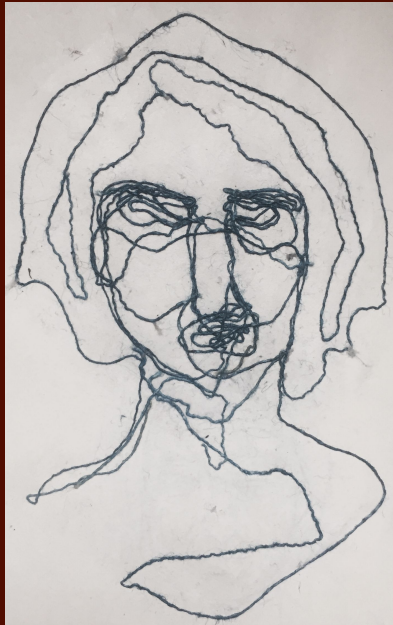
Egon Schiele's style is very attractive to me. The imperfect and brutal reality of the human figure is now much more fascinating to me than the romanticization. I began with attempting to idealize the female form and then began to distort figures to evoke emotions. For me there is still much to be learned about how perfection is perceived and can be depicted and also how I can use technique and detail to evoke emotion.

The exaggerated reality of the human form Schiele creates is something I will continue exploring. Until now I've mostly investigated emaciation. Analysing Schiele's work has motivated me to explore other forms of exaggeration as well as the representation of everyday women from observation.



Further Influences on My Artwork

Schiele's use of line including the consequence of the slightly jagged line as well as the unfinished line is something I am will look into further but have begun to explore with thread.



Mucha's Art Nouveau works' have encouraged me to examine the illustration of fabric and cloth and how it can be used to create setting, volume and movement in a composition.



In the future I will explore both of these contrasting styles in more detail. For me, Schiele has the more interesting figures and I am more naturally drawn to his work, but I do not want to underestimate the power of traditional beauty and pleasing the viewer. The ornate and cautious sense of Mucha's pieces could add to my own work. The technique of lithography, which is new to me, is appealing as I like the idea of creating many copies. I'm really excited about exploring these prospects in the coming months.

Evaluation - Exploring the Female Figure



Fictitious Grandiosity and Sober Pragmatism

For me this comparative study has been a very rewarding project that has already influenced my own work and my thinking. It has highlighted new techniques and media I wish to explore and I have ideas for different compositions and subjects to create.

It has also enabled me to explore a little the compromises practising artists may have to make. Mucha producing such commercial images while seeking to portray spiritual messages or Schiele being forced to relocate as people found his almost realistic portrayals of women as morally unacceptable.

In some ways this quick watercolor has enabled me to bring together the sparse compositions and sharp delineations of color from Schiele and the idealised portrayal of the female form from Mucha. Whereas in the collagraph print I have learned some of the exaggeration and emaciation of Schiele and have begun to explore the intricacy of Mucha, though not to the extent I would like. I still have a lot to learn from these two artists.

In conclusion, there is room for both fictitious grandiosity and sober pragmatism in both my own art and in the world of art.

