

Egon Schiele.

Red Chrysanthemum. 1910



One of the many pleasures of writing these articles for Flora is being able to focus on unexpected works by artists about whom we might have certain fixed ideas. *Red Chrysanthemum* by Egon Schiele was shown at the 2019 Royal Academy exhibition of drawings by Schiele and Gustav Klimt lent from the great collection at the Albertina Museum in Vienna. For visitors who thought they knew Schiele's work, *Red Chrysanthemum* was perhaps the most surprising piece in the show.

Egon Schiele was among the more controversial artists of the twentieth century and his work is highly recognisable. As a leading member of the movement known as Expressionism, Schiele's work emphasises emotion and subjective feeling. His life and career were very short. He was born in 1890 and died of Spanish 'flu in Vienna in 1918. He was precociously gifted as a child and when he was admitted to Viennese Academy of Fine Art at the age of sixteen, he was its youngest student. Schiele was a central figure in the artistic, intellectual, psychological and sexual maelstrom of early twentieth-century Vienna. He is best known for his arresting and

visceral portraits and especially his nudes. These drawings and paintings are graphic, raw and disturbing studies of the human figure presenting the body as contorted and distorted. They are open and explicit but thoroughly unerotic. Schiele's nudes show the body in its purest, physical, animal form: they use the human form to challenge, not to comfort.

It comes as a surprise then to discover that Schiele drew and painted flowers. But he was always drawn to nature, even as a child painting the flowers that grew wild by the side of the railway line (his father was a station master and the young Egon also spent hours painting trains). He never lost his love of flowers but generally his floral art has the same melancholy atmosphere as his portraits and nudes. He painted and drew sunflowers, foxgloves and there are some beautifully delicate studies of meadow flowers such as poppies and daisies. But these are mostly shown in a spindly, withered, shrivelling state emphasising the fragile, linear structure of the plant as his emaciated human figures highlight the basic frame of the body.

In 1910 Schiele went to live in his mother's home town of Krumau (now Cesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic) where he rented a small cottage with a country garden and many of his flower paintings date from this period. Perhaps the most striking and interesting are his two studies of chrysanthemums.

The *White Chrysanthemum*, like so many of Schiele's flowers, is fading, its petals dying and dropping; life is fading into death. *Red Chrysanthemum*, however, has a completely different feel to it. It is at its fullest bloom, rich and strong. Schiele captures the sense of a flower in the prime of life with broad, quick strokes of watercolour using a palette of reds from the lightest pink to the deepest burgundy with touches of blue to heighten the colour and draw the eye around the flower. The familiar round shape of the chrysanthemum with its great pom-pom of petals seems to leap off the paper. Like Schiele's other work it has a simple, direct structure, a sketch-like quality but in contrast to what we think of as a drawing by Schiele, *Red Chrysanthemum* shows us a side of Schiele's art that is often hidden. It draws us in, warms us, makes us smile and connects us with the beauty of nature.

What also strikes us about *Red Chrysanthemum* is its timeless quality. It feels as though it could have been painted yesterday as much as a century ago, in 1610 as easily as in 1910. Schiele believed firmly that art existed outside time, and flowers with their cycle of life, death and renewal attracted him for this very reason. *Red Chrysanthemum* is a painting for all time. "Art", Schiele wrote, "cannot be modern. It is primevally eternal".