Egon Schiele, a revolutionary painter and draftsman, developed a style of lurid portraiture which brazenly pushed the boundaries of the already forward sexuality of the turn-of-the-century Viennese culture. Although some of his contemporaries were painting with an equally provocative and sometimes dark style, Schiele’s work traveled more deeply into the human psyche, presenting his audience with challenging portraits of sexuality sometimes to a perverse and almost pornographic degree. Schiele’s style, which began with works seemingly indulgent to his libido, later developed into maturity with works that delved into the whole human personality, rather than just the often more primitive nature of sexuality.

The city that Egon Schiele dwelt in for most of his short life was Vienna, Austria. *Fin-de-siècle* Viennese culture was one of forward movement and revolution. Vienna tripled in population and was almost entirely remodeled as the second industrial revolutionary paved its way through Eastern Europe and beyond (Riedl, 25). It was in this time of renovation that drastic social reconstructions were also taking place. The innovative theories about sexual desire and the subconscious proposed by Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Sigmund Freud largely affected new ways in which society, especially that of the Viennese, were beginning to change. These rapid transformations in Viennese culture helped to develop conflicts of social awareness. Gerald N. Izenberg discusses these conflicts in regard to the external influences of Egon Schiele’s work:

Schiele’s explorations in portraiture were . . . refracted through a turn-of-the-century crisis in European masculine identity. The crisis was born of social and political developments that worked to undermine middle-class males’ sense of power and self-esteem, among them the woman’s movement and a new cultural awareness of the psychological power of mothers and of female sexuality. These factors were especially powerful in the
psychology of artists, who often felt both marginal and effeminate in a culture that valued the manly virtues of the warrior and the entrepreneur (Izenberg, 1). From the turmoil of the time Schiele’s work emerged confronting its audience with a somewhat dark response to the confusion of the era.

Although the portraiture that Schiele produced was largely shaped by the Viennese culture in which he lived and worked, it was also influenced by his friend and mentor Gustav Klimt. It was after one of their first meetings in 1909 at the Internationale Kunstschau exhibition (which Klimt himself directed), that the two artists developed a close rapport, each fascinated with the other’s work (Riedl, 353). In the beginning stages of this relationship, Egon Schiele began to create his style firmly in the spirit of the Secessionists. This group of artists, brought together mainly by Klimt, sought to work outside the bounds of traditional academic art creating their own Art Nouveau applied and decorative styles (Whitford, 21). Schiele’s 1909 piece *Woman With a Black Hat*, a portrait of his younger sister Gertrude Schiele, exemplifies the influence of Klimt and the secessionists on his early style. Frank Whitford writes:

*Woman with a Black hat*. . . employs the square format favoured by the Secessionists in general and presents us with a bold clearly defined shape set against a flat, light background. The figure is rigid, her gaze unblinking, her hands frozen in a contorted gesture. The circular motifs on Gerti’s dress are used in a manner reminiscent of Klimt, asserting the shape of the area to which they are applied and giving movement to the surface of the rigid figure (48-49).

Schiele soon began to expound on this style rapidly developing a more personal manner.

By 1910, only a year after the Internationale Kunstschau exhibition, Schiele began to produce more Expressionist works in which his emerging “aesthetic of ugliness” is clearly visible (Riedl, 353). Schiele painted an ongoing series of self-portraits in this period, most of which depict the artist through dark yet bold colors and harsh, exaggerated lines. In the self-portraits, Schiele is usually shown nude or semi-nude, emaciated, and with an overall grotesque appearance. Schiele worked most often in watercolor for these, abandoning his previous use of oil, although not permanently. The self-portraits reveal Schiele’s
growing fascination with his own libido and human sexuality in general becomes apparent. According to Simon Wilson:

These self-portraits are the most significant, original and compelling works of the first year or so of Schiele’s maturity: they form the core of his art in that period. . . . The self-portraits can broadly be divided into those expressive of metaphysical Angst and those expressive of sexual Angst. In both categories of course Schiele is also obsessively concerned with the self (21-22).

One of these self-portraits that clearly exhibits both the metaphysical and sexual angst described by Wilson is Schiele’s work from 1910, Self-Portrait, Nude Facing Front. In it, the artist’s figure is paradoxically both dissolved and given form through his painterly brush strokes. The paint itself becomes Schiele’s means for expression, the bruise-like colors characterizing the anguished feeling of the painting. Schiele faces the audience, his body and face contorted and distorted to unnatural proportions. He is a wasted mass of writhing muscle and loose skin. Every hair on his body stands on end, as if they were trying to free themselves from his form. His face is twisted into a look of revulsion. The artist has, through his painting, become the embodiment of his psychological angst.

Schiele did not paint himself only in such a grotesque manner. He also produced many portraits that featured nude women depicted in a similar style often bordering on the perverse. This period of Schiele’s work scandalized the public and resulted in charges of pornography and a brief imprisonment in the town of Neulengbach (Riedl, 353). This series of females differs in one way from his series of self portraits: where the self-portraits solely depict sexual and psychological angst, the series of nude women includes the element of the provocative. They are the projection of the male fantasy. The grotesque and exaggerated way in which they are handled merely seems to be Schiele’s own view of society and humanity as a whole and also possibly his preoccupation with death. Patrick Werkner notes the provocative nature of these portraits, “He often uses props to heighten the erotic effect of what he shows. Stockings and underclothes, shoes and ribbons, are sexual fetishes often emphasized through colour. A lifted skirt, a hand-gesture, a look from beneath lowered eyelids, shows Woman as seductress, as an enticing, animal creature” (Cited by Schröder and Szeemann, 38). Schiele demonstrates the seductive quality of the female
through deft lines and saturated colors. Although they are usu-
ally depicted in a sexually explicit and even perverse manner,
they are not pornographic because they were not created exclu-
sively to be sexually provocative.

As Schiele aged, his portraiture matured, and he moved
away from the overt sexuality of his earlier works. He began to
explore the nature of personality and the connections of his sub-
jects to their surroundings. He moved away from the expres-
sionist way in which he had earlier worked, settling on a calmer
style (Riedl, 354). Of this period Werkner comments:

From 1912 onwards, Schiele's drawings place increas
ing emphasis on concrete reality; in portrait drawings,
for example, there is a clearer concern with the external
physiognomy of the sitters. All in all, these changes
were the prelude to a line of development which led to
the considerably more realistic manner of Schiele's last
years (Cited by Schröder and Szeemann, 39).

This new manner is exemplified in one of Schiele's last and
unfinished works, The Family. In it a family is portrayed, with
the male figure being a self-portrait. Although Schiele maintains
his expressive painterly quality and rich colors, the mood has
softened. Though the figures are nude, there is nothing lewd or
even really sexual about them. They are positioned in a realistic
plane, as opposed to floating about the frame of the work.
Schiele does exaggerate and distort the figures a bit, but not in
a frightening manner as before. The Family is a poignant por-
trait of the life that Schiele was beginning to embrace and
shows his maturity.

As with many artists, Egon Schiele's work was characterized
by many transitions. Through the growth of his style he dis-
dayed the surprising and dark progressions of his own mind.
Though his portraiture was at times more provocative than
beautiful, Egon Schiele created a startling look into the psyche
of turn-of-the-century Viennese culture.
Self-Portrait

Self-Portrait, Nude, Facing Front 1910
The Portraiture of Egon Schiele

Nude Female

Two Women

The Family