

Viewpoint

Psyche and Provocation: Experiencing Works of Austrian Expressionism in the Belvedere Collection

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Abstract

This article argues that Austrian Expressionism provides a compelling case for studying art experience due to its emotional intensity and radical aesthetics. Drawing on works from the permanent exhibition of the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere (The Austrian Gallery) in Vienna, the article focuses on seven paintings displayed in the exhibition room entitled 'Psyche and Provocation'. Combining Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura' with Eric Kandel's insights from brain and cognitive sciences, the study explores how the experience of these artworks is shaped by their materiality, spatial context, and the viewer's potential psychological engagement. This analysis contributes to debates on authenticity, the role of museums, and the evolving nature of visitor experience in the post-digital age. Further, it highlights the continued relevance of Benjamin's aura concept while integrating contemporary cognitive perspectives on art perception.

Keywords: visitor experience, art museum, Austrian Expressionism, aura, post digital age

Introduction

This viewpoint examines the complex relationship between viewers and selected works of Austrian Expressionism in the exhibition room 'Psyche and Provocation' within the permanent exhibition *Picture This! The Belvedere Collection from Cranach to Lassnig* at the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere (The Austrian Gallery) in Vienna. We argue that Austrian Expressionism is particularly well-suited for studying art experience, as the artworks, known for their radical aesthetics and emotional intensity, encourage viewers to engage deeply with both internal and external realities, thus creating a bridge between personal and collective experience.

How do sensory perception and cognitive processes influence the experience of paintings and other cultural objects? This question has been of interest to art historians from the beginning of the discipline during the late nineteenth century and, due to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, there has been interest in psychological studies and collaboration with psychologists from the outset (e.g. Bushart 2007; Carbon 2024). Historically, Vienna has played an important role in these discussions, and some of the most cited contemporary models on aesthetic perception are associated with Vienna (e.g. Leder et al. 2004; Leder and Nadal 2014; Pelowski 2017). The Austrian-American neuroscientist and Nobel laureate Eric Kandel (2012; 2024) focuses specifically on the art of Vienna around 1900, the time period to which the works in the 'Psyche and Provocation' gallery belong. He shows universal, specialized mechanisms of our brain to construct the visual world, including paintings. At the same time, perception is shaped by our individual experiences, memories, and emotions. One of the great challenges of twenty first century neuroscience is to understand how these higher-order cognitive processes interact. According to Kandel artists themselves are aware of the significance of these unconscious processes—both their own and those of their viewers—and may deliberately engage with or challenge them in their work. Kandel has extensively explored the intersection of art and brain science, especially investigating the artistic movements of Viennese Modernism and emphasizing how artists like Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), Egon Schiele (1890-1918), and Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) delved into the human unconscious,

revealing emotional truths that could not be conveyed through traditional art forms. A central theme in Kandel's *The Age of Insight* (2012) is the connection between the artistic practices of the Vienna Secessionists and the early discoveries of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. In *Essays on Art and Science*, Kandel (2024) traces the roots of our understanding of art's psychological impact back to early twentieth century Vienna, where the art historian Alois Riegl and his students Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich developed the concept of the 'beholder's share' (first under the term 'beholder's involvement' by Riegl 1901/1985 and then coined as 'beholder's share' by Gombrich 1961, see Kandel 2024: 119-120). This notion emphasizes that an artwork is only fully realized through the viewer's perception and emotional response, forging a vital connection between art, psychology, and neuroscience. Kandel explores the brain's role as a 'creativity machine,' illustrating how it processes art by integrating sensory input with personal memories, emotions, and cognitive functions, presenting a compelling narrative about human perception and the transformative power of art.

The 'Psyche and Provocation' room serves as a central case study within the inter- and transdisciplinary research project 'Art Experience in the (Post-) Digital Age {original | digital | virtual}' (OrDiV) that aims to explore the dynamics of art engagement, particularly how individuals view, interact with, and respond to the seven selected paintings analysed in detail below (see: Brinkmann et al. 2026). The project also focuses on examining and differentiating the perceptual qualities of original artworks, their digital surrogates, as well as digital expansions into the virtual space (augmented and virtual reality). While the gaze of actual museum visitors engaging with the artworks is investigated and recorded with mobile eye trackers, their cognitive and emotional involvement is studied through qualitative interviews and an online survey. Referring to Walter Benjamin's concept of the aura (1936/2018), the project asks: are there differences between image media when it comes to art experience?¹ Four empirical studies compare the engagement with the same seven artworks from the 'Psyche and Provocation' room when presented in four different image media (original, digital, augmented, and virtual reality). While the results of these visitor studies will be presented in a different paper, the present text focuses on the theoretical aspects of the potential interactions between viewer and artwork, which fosters a dialogue starting with the act of looking at the images.

To explore these relationships, we will first examine the concept of art experience from two distinct perspectives: Kandel's exploration of art perception and Benjamin's concept of aura. These approaches are particularly fitting because they offer complementary insights into how viewers engage with art and they seem specifically fitting for Austrian Expressionism. These two perspectives thus provide different yet intersecting ways to understand how the seven artworks are potentially experienced in a museum setting. Second, we will demonstrate through an exhibition analysis why this particular museum space is especially well-suited for studying the experience of art.

Art Experience

In broad terms, the experience of visual art typically begins with looking at a work of art. It then develops through an inner dialogue in which visual input is continuously processed in relation to thoughts and evolving emotions—ranging from associations and aesthetic effects to interest, pleasure, or even rejection. This gaze relation is an important part of the theory proposed by Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936/2018). Benjamin emphasizes the aura as the uniqueness and authenticity of a work of art, claiming that the physical presence of an original has a special effect on the viewer that mechanical (mass) reproductions don't have.

Benjamin's notion of aura emphasizes an artwork's unique presence, connecting its creation to the present. However, reproduction technologies like photography or film diminish this aura, weakening its ability to engage the viewer in a reciprocal gaze (Benjamin 1991a: 646-647). For Benjamin, the original artwork is not passive but actively interacts with the viewer, a dynamic exchange most evident in direct encounters. Building on Riegl's broader theories about the history of vision (Levin 1988; Lang 2006: especially 136-178; Nanay 2016: 138), Benjamin (2018: 228) argues that human sensory perception and the medium through which it operates are shaped not only by natural factors but also by historical contexts (see

also: Nanay 2016: 138).² As Bence Nanay (2016) states, Riegl's influence is evident in these ideas, but it was Benjamin who most explicitly articulated and popularized this perspective on the historical conditioning of vision. Benjamin's main focus is on the evolution of art and perception during the transition from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. He argues that modernity is defined by a fundamental shift in the 'sensorium,' a concept that has become central to modernity theories, emphasizing that this transformation was driven by technological advancements (Benjamin 2018: 230; Nanay 2016).

For Kandel (2024: 119), the concept of the 'beholder's share' is 'the beginning of a scientific approach to portraiture and art'. He underlines that the individual contributions that are added to the canvas through the viewers' collaboration with the artist while beholding the painting through their 'perceptual and emotional involvement' (Kandel 2024: 120) are highly personal due to the top-down cognitive processing that includes the viewers' subjective experiences, expectations, but also learned associations (Kandel 2024: 122, 185). Kandel (2012: 324) argues that the brain responds to the visual and emotional power of works such as those of Austrian Expressionism by activating neural networks associated with empathy, identification, and emotional resonance. Further, he highlights that modern neuroscience has identified specific brain regions that become particularly active when perceiving faces, hands, and bodies (Kandel 2012: 322). He links the unique role of facial expressions, gestures, and bodily depictions in conveying emotions in art to these biological foundations of perception. Additionally, he proposes that the intensified emotional effect resulting from exaggerated facial features, hand movements, and body postures—seen in artistic styles such as Expressionism—may be rooted in these neurological mechanisms. In the case of Schiele and Kokoschka, whose works often deal with existential themes such as fear, death, and sexuality, it becomes clear that their art impresses not only through its aesthetic quality but also through the depth of its emotional impact (Kandel 2012: 324).

While both Benjamin and Kandel refer to the 'beholder's share' when they discuss the impact of visual art on the viewers, for Benjamin, the experience of aura that can occur during the engagement with an original artwork, emphasizing authenticity and human authorship, is one important aspect that not only enhances, but constitutes, art experience. Benjamin's rather vague concept has been interpreted in different ways. The philosopher Dieter Mersch (2002: 76, 89), for example, differentiates between the aura as aesthetic experience (effect) and visual information processing that can be described as sign or language. An auratic experience cannot be forced, it occurs spontaneously and centres on the experience of seeing itself rather than on the informational content of what is depicted. Thus, the aura is that unattainable 'more' through which original artworks possess their self-presence, they 'look back' (Mersch 2002: 94). While Benjamin strongly argues that it makes a difference if we behold a work of art as an original or as a mechanical and thus not human-made reproduction, Kandel leaves the topic of different media out.

Benjamin's interest in painting and art studies shows his intense involvement in the debate on aesthetics in modernism, which redefined the relationship between technology, art, and the human being after 1900. However, the technical innovations of the time which profoundly changed people's lives - such as the telephone, the automobile and film - also brought with them a reduction in holistic sensuality. The accelerated work process pushed back sensual space of experience in favour of a functioning human being. This shift changed not only self-perception but also the very nature of visuality, leading to what has been described as 'human-free art' (see: Gelhard 2014: 117).

Today, in the post-digital age, understood as a continuation of the digital era—omnipresent yet increasingly invisible (Cramer 2014)—this concept remains highly relevant, albeit in a slightly different form. It has already been extended to digital reproductions, replacing the previous focus on mechanical ones (e.g. Latour and Lowe 2010; Schweibenz 2018, Gaetani 2021; Han 2023). Today's digital reproductions of paintings are increasingly available online in high resolution and top quality, and it is even possible to simulate the surface texture, light reflections, and shadows from different perspectives in virtual space. Particularly with paintings such as the seven discussed here, an impasto brush stroke can be realistically reproduced. In this respect, today's reproductions are much closer to the original compared to Benjamin's time—at least on a visual level. According to Sarah Kenderdine and Andrew Yip (2019: 275),

Benjamin may not have pinpointed an irreversible loss of aura through reproduction but rather identified an ongoing crisis, triggered by technological change, in which the experience of aura is continuously questioned and reaffirmed, until museums redefine their role or until new media forms become fully integrated into the historical canon.

Within the OrDiV project, we propose that there may be a media-specific effect on top-down processing—particularly in terms of emotional impact and the ability to connect with the image in the sense of an auratic experience through an encounter. Beholding the original artworks in a physical museum space might further enhance a stronger introspective experience (see: Doering 1999) compared to a digital surrogate in the digital space. Austrian Expressionism serves as a fitting example for these assumptions, as it offers emotional intensity and a strong sensory experience, and the often-described immediate effect when encountering the works.

The seven paintings in the 'Psyche and Provocation' exhibition room, as human-made works of art and material testimonies of the turn of the century, are displayed against a warm terracotta coloured wall chosen by the curator, Franz Smola, reminiscent of light flesh and skin tones, highlighting the human aspects at the heart of these artworks (see Figure 1).³ At the same time, it subtly alludes to the artists' authorship and their personal engagement with the depicted subjects. A text panel is provided in this room in German and English explaining that the young, rebellious artists were interested 'in inner worlds, in subjective feeling and strong emotions' rather than outer appearances. Smola curated this room as part of the reinstallation of the permanent collection in 2019.⁴ He kindly allowed for a modification of the exhibition room in the context of the OrDiV project. This enabled us to display Helene Funke's (1869-1957) *Nude Looking in the Mirror* (1908/10) next to Schiele's *Embrace*, replacing the previous work *Der Rentmeister (The Rentmeister)* (1910) by Kokoschka. The exhibition analysis in the following section highlights associative connections between the works.



Figure 1: Exhibition room *Psyche and Provocation* with the two Gerstl paintings, Upper Belvedere Vienna, photo by Ellice Jachek / Belvedere, Vienna

The Structure of the Gaze: Artworks and Beholders

The title of the exhibition room, 'Psyche and Provocation', immediately evokes associations with Freud and psychoanalysis, as well as the interaction between art and psychology around 1900, even though this was not the primary intention of the curator.⁵ Due to the curatorial and architectural concept of the Upper Belvedere, the 'Psyche and Provocation' room is ideally visited after following a tour through the other exhibition spaces—including the Klimt room with its iconic *The Kiss* (1908/1909). This way the visual contrast between Klimt's art and the expressionists becomes evident. The visitors transitioning between these two art styles are immediately confronted with Richard Gerstl's (1883-1908) *Self-Portrait, Laughing* (1907/1908)⁶ when stepping into the room.⁷ In contrast to Schiele and Kokoschka, Gerstl dismissed Klimt's painting (Werkner 1986: 57) and was referred to as the 'Anti-Klimt' (Metzger 2019: 60). The self-portrait is particularly emphasized in the room through the wall design: a slightly darker-coloured circle creates a kind of spotlight on the artwork and is accompanied by an explanatory wall text stating that he passed away at just twenty-five, leaving behind approximately eighty works, which remained largely unknown to the public until many years later. Among them are several self-portraits, most of which feature a solemn expression. His works are characterized by a certain fragility and a subtle but profound examination of the human psyche. According to Patrick Werkner (1986: 60), the content and message of Gerstl's pictures are identical: '[t]he message is not, as it often is in Klimt's work – and in a different way in the work of Kokoschka and Schiele – on the level of what is depicted. Gerstl's painting [...] never becomes an allegory'.⁸ A tendency towards self-questioning and self-representation was a common trait shared by Gerstl and Schiele (Werkner 1986: 62). Gerstl, who was generally considered well-read, was also familiar with the writings of Freud, and was particularly interested in *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), which had been published in the year 1900 (Kallir 1974: 141; Werkner 1986: 51; Freud 1900).

The young Gerstl depicted in the painting *Self-Portrait, Laughing* appears to be looking directly at the viewer, with his right and left eyes seemingly opened to different degrees. Gerstl's mouth is wide open, revealing his teeth. This open laughter has been described in the literature both as cheerful and approachable (Haldemann 2019: 13) and, on the other hand, as an uncanny grimace (Werkner 1986: 64). In 1905, the much bigger painting *The Sisters Karoline and Pauline Fey* was created by Gerstl, which hangs left to the self-portrait.⁹ The work has the same potential as that of the laughing self-portrait to tip into the uncanny. It is rendered in a strangely colourless and sombre manner, entirely in contrasting light and dark colours, once again depicting highly expressive eyes with a direct gaze at the viewer. While the bodies are not clearly distinguishable from one another, rather merging, the different pairs of eyes with their intense gaze make it clear that these are two separate individuals, whose bodies completely disappear into the white fabrics. Notable is the thick black line at the bottom, which forcefully attempts to separate the figures from one another. The Fey sisters appear to float freely in front of a dark background without any discernible architecture, which is quite similar in the next portrait on the left, Schiele's *Eduard Kosmack* (1912).¹⁰ Researchers have frequently noted Schiele's tendency to detach his figures from any spatial or architectural setting, causing them to appear as if they are floating in isolation against an indeterminate background. It is widely agreed among scholars that this approach signifies the modern subject's sense of alienation, often interpreted as an allusion to a solipsistic, 'existential' emptiness (see: Cernuschi 2023). Like a hypnotist, the portrayed figure seems to want to draw us under his spell. His fixed gaze beneath a prominent brow meets us head-on. Schiele used the gaze of his figures to create a connection between the viewer and the subject. This direct address through the gaze intensifies the power of the portrayal. The phenomenon in which viewers of portraits often have the impression that the portrayed faces are returning their gaze is already well documented (e.g. Weigel 2013) and it applies to three of the seven paintings in the room that are portraits (see Figure 2). According to Kandel (2012: XV), portrait painting in Vienna in the early twentieth century is particularly suitable for scientific studies in terms of cognitive psychology: '[p]ortraits of the Viennese modernists, with their conscious and dramatic attempts to depict their subjects' inner feelings, represent an ideal example of how psychological biological insights can enrich our relationship to art.'

Kosmack's bony hands and arms are pressed tightly against his body, which we consider as emphasizing a reserved character. Only the sunflower to his right breaks the strict symmetry of the composition. Schiele's expressive style is already evident: gesture, posture, and facial expression have now become the key design elements of his portraits. The entire body serves as a medium for conveying human emotions.¹¹ Similar to the black brushstroke between the sisters Fey, a thick brushstroke is visible next to Kosmack on the canvas. Kosmack stands out against the bright background, with lighter colours around the head creating an aura-like effect. The spiritualistic concept of aura was highly fashionable at the time, captivating many artists (Rosenberg 2013). Notably, they were particularly interested in the aura of a person—typically considered invisible—and sought to make it visible in their paintings, as seen in Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907) or Wassily Kandinsky's *Lady in Moscow* (1912). Benjamin, however, transferred the term to the artwork itself.

After the three portraits with expressive gazes and prominent eyes, *Still Life with Mutton and Hyacinth* (1910) by Kokoschka can be found on the adjacent wall.¹² Here, too, there is an undefined dark background against which the eerie and sombre objects stand out, except for the bright white hyacinth on the right side of the painting. In contrast to the human eyes in the preceding works, this painting features various animals: most notably the dead ram, which gives the painting its title, with its lifeless, vacant stare, the small dot-like eye of the axolotl in the foreground, and the beady eye of the white mouse. Additionally, there is a turtle depicted, though its head is so shadowed that its eye is barely visible. This assemblage of animal gazes could reveal a connection to Freud, who in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) attributed elements of surprise and horror to creatures such as mice and lizards, particularly due to their sudden, rapid movements. Although *Totem and Taboo* was published three years after the creation of *Still Live with Mutton and Hyacinth*, a connection to Freud is supported by Kokoschka himself, who in his autobiography *My Life* (1974) explicitly drew a parallel between his own work and Freud's contributions. Kokoschka describes Expressionism as a response to Jugendstil or Art Nouveau, which aimed only to beautify the surface without addressing the inner life. He views Expressionism as a contemporary and counterpart to Freud's development of psychoanalysis, emphasizing that it was a cultural phenomenon of its time, rather than just an artistic trend (Kokoschka 1974: 66). By drawing a parallel between his own accomplishments and those of Freud, Kokoschka not only acknowledges the significance of the founder of psychoanalysis but also, perhaps even more so, seeks to elevate his own status. In doing so, he implies that the intellectual authority and insight into the complexities of the human mind, which are commonly attributed to Freudian theory, should likewise be recognized in his own artistic work (Cernuschi 1999: 351). In his autobiography, Kokoschka writes also about this painting, tells the backstory and refers several times to the eyes of the lamb. He was invited to eat an Easter lamb and was left alone with the dead animal in the kitchen, that 'even after being slaughtered, looked at me with such reproach in its eyes (... that) seemed to cloud over and become lifeless as I watched' (Kokoschka 1974: 45).

As with Kokoschka's painting, the next one does not depict human beings. Schiele's work *House Wall (Windows)* (1914) is on display left of the still life.¹³ The painted wall is interrupted by irregularly arranged windows, twelve whole and three partially visible. None of them resemble the other: partly open, partly closed, each window has a different colour. Windows are not just a pictorial motif, an accessory to the main subject, they can be seen as a metaphor with a long history in art. They primarily represent a boundary between an interior and an exterior, or are positioned between reality and illusion, or between the real and virtual worlds—an ambiguity that invites fundamental interpretations and meanings (e.g. Selbmann 2012). Further, windows are, as the popular doors, also a symbol in Freud's considerations (e.g. 1920). Thus, the windows in Schiele's painting could be understood as eyes, looking at the visitor (see also Szadai 2017: 17). This theme fits perfectly with the expressionist exploration of the inner life of the portrayed individuals and their outward appearance. Moreover, Benjamin (1991b: 486) himself engaged with the effect of depicted windows when reflecting on the architectural physiognomy of Paris as captured in Charles Meryon's (1821–1868) etching *Pont au Change* (1854). Benjamin notes that the narrow, towering houses with their dark, hollow windows appear to gaze back at the viewer. These window openings reminded him of the haunting eyes of impoverished children—figures crowded together in confined spaces,

mirroring the densely packed tenement buildings of that period.

The second painting of Schiele in this room is *The Embrace* (1917), featuring a man and a woman who are completely absorbed in one another.¹⁴ The crumpled fabric accentuates the intensity of this encounter. The embrace they engage in seems to us somehow desperate. In this painting, created during a personal crisis, Schiele's mood of downfall is reflected—also through the harsh contours and bold brushstrokes. Both figures look away from the viewer, which creates a voyeuristic atmosphere.

With the seventh and final painting in the exhibition room, the topic of nudity is taken up and another variation of the gaze is introduced: the reflection of the woman's gaze in the mirror in Funke's small painting *Nude Looking in the Mirror* (1908/10).¹⁵ This work stems from her time in Paris, so in the strict sense it cannot be counted as 'Austrian Expressionism'. Although German-born, Funke, while still living in Paris, joined the Austrian Association of Women Artists in 1910 and moved to Vienna in 1913, where she and Helene Taussig introduced the wild and colourful painting style of the Fauves to Austria (Bucher 2007: 47; Nowak-Thaller 2019: 134). That Funke, inspired by French artists such as Mary Cassatt, engaged with the dialectic of seeing and being seen has already been discussed in relation to other works of hers (Bucher 2007: 51-54; Storm 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no existing literature specifically addressing this painting, although it is reproduced in several books (e.g. Funke 2011: 153, Rollig and Fellner 2019: 168).

Funke succeeds in creating a space in which the viewer can identify with what is depicted, with colour dominating form in her works (Weigel 2018: 12). We see the woman from behind and through the mirror from the front while she is looking at herself with her right hand on her head in her black hair. She wears a big blue necklace that might be the same as the one in *Mädchen mit blauer Kette und Mandoline* (*Girl with blue necklace and mandolin*) (undated), a painting which also dates from her time in France, and a turquoise cloth lies loosely over the thigh of her crossed legs. The flowing line of the cloth is echoed not only in the legs but also in the round object, possibly a plate, on the console table that seems to be leaning against the wall. Besides this art object, another one can be seen in the mirror, probably a painting. The woman sits on a round blue pouf with red dots and fringes, which is depicted in another painting *Frauenakt/Kleiner Akt mit Polster* (1908-1910) showing a nude model holding the same jug that is depicted here - a visual reference can be made to Kokoschka's still life that also features a jug.¹⁶ The work can be seen as part of a series of naked women Funke painted in France. From the time in Paris (1906-1913), many non-dated artworks of female nudes have been preserved, some of them marked 'Paris'. Therefore, it is assumed that most of the female nudes were created during this period, especially since depicting male nudes was still taboo for female painters in Germany at that time (Nowak-Thaller 2007: 30). These were most likely created in her studio with the same objects and interior appearing in different works, thus, giving an insight into her working (and possibly living) environment.

Analysing the gaze structures in the museum display, including the seven artworks and the visitors, we can conclude that standing at the centre of the exhibition space, visitors find themselves being observed—Gerstl, Kosmack, and the two Fey sisters all direct their gaze toward the visitor. However, when turning away from Kosmack and looking in the opposite direction, the visitor's role shifts from being the observed to becoming a voyeur, witnessing intimate, private moments: on the left a nude woman gazes at herself in the mirror. Umberto Eco (1993: 35) describes the mirror as a prosthesis since visual stimuli can be perceived where our eyes do not reach. On the right side of the wall, a naked couple engages in lovemaking (Schiele's *Embrace*). Here, the act of looking is deliberately avoided: while the couple appears together, they remain emotionally distant, their eyes turned away from one another. Turning further clockwise to the next wall, visitors face the two paintings without human-beings, yet as described above, with works that include the eye motif (windows) and the eyes of dead or possibly scary animals. Art is not viewed according to strict subject-object relationships, but rather the art touches and disturbs viewers in the process of beholding. It is the 'other' that fascinates and forces us into a specific view, instead of the sovereignty of the gaze (Mersch 2002). In our opinion this arrangement of paintings creates a unique dialogue between the artworks and the viewers, visualizing emotional and psychological depths in different ways and making the connection between art, psyche, and perception palpable.

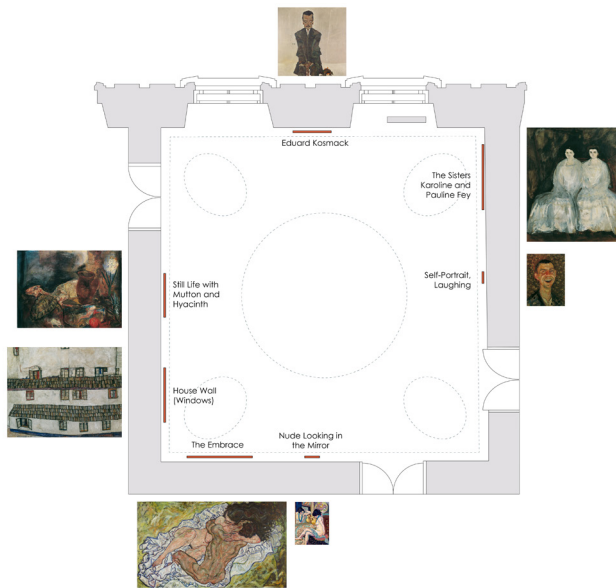


Figure 2: Exhibition room *Psyche and Provocation*, Upper Belvedere Vienna, graphic by Ellice Jachek / Belvedere, Vienna

Conclusion

Although Benjamin formulated his ideas nearly a century ago—and despite the fact that his concept of aura changed and evolved throughout his writings and still remains somewhat ambiguous—the impact of the digital revolution has far exceeded anything he could have anticipated. Much like the technological advancements of the twentieth century, digital innovations have led to profound social and cultural transformations, fundamentally reshaping both the production and perception of visual art. Consequently, the study of how digital media influence visitors and audiences has become an increasingly significant field of research and practice.

Within this framework, two key considerations arise regarding the analysis of the artworks and exhibition space of the 'Psyche and Provocation', both of which serve as guiding principles for the OrDiV project. First, the potential impact of the artworks within the exhibition room—while hopefully convincingly identified in our analysis—remains inherently hypothetical. Whether visitors experience this impact depends on various factors, including individual aspects such as personal interest in Austrian Expressionism and available time, as well as contextual elements like visitor density and the presence of guided groups in the exhibition space. Empirical studies will be the next step within the OrDiV project to assess these variables and their influence on the experience of the artworks. Second, the preceding analysis—particularly concerning the composition of the works and the relationships that emerge between them within the physical museum space—highlights the main differences in the digital realm. The Belvedere's online collection provides high-resolution digital reproductions of all seven paintings. However, as it is common in digital collections, these works appear in comparison with the originals as flattened, two-dimensional representations, stripping them of their materiality—an essential aspect of Expressionist art—along with the tactile quality and depth conveyed through the artists' brushstrokes. The transformation of analogue artefacts into digital formats has been a central topic in cultural heritage research, emphasizing that

digitized objects derive from pre-existing, non-digital originals, a distinction that fundamentally shapes their perception (e.g. Zuanni, 2021). Moreover, digital reproduction not only alters the artworks themselves but also affects their contextual presentation. In the online collection, the paintings are displayed against a neutral white background, devoid of the distinctive wall colour that characterizes the physical exhibition space. Further, they are presented as individual objects rather than as part of a curated ensemble. The spatial distribution on the different walls and the corresponding variations in viewing modes or 'viewing roles' that viewers potentially adopt (intuitively and likely unconsciously) that we have pointed out, are lost in the digital presentation, eliminating the relationships between the works that are central to the effect of the exhibition's design.

These are two crucial differences that will likely influence the art experience of the same artworks presented in different media. We are aware that there are many more differences that can be applied to any artwork and are not specific to our case study—for instance, variations in artwork size or the zoom function available online, which enables a level of visual proximity unattainable when viewing the original due to security restrictions.

Austrian Expressionism is characterized by its intense engagement with human expression and the inner world of emotions. This period saw a profound transformation in portraiture, with the gaze emerging as a central compositional and psychological element. But does this radical and provocative style of painting still resonate with contemporary audiences? Do today's museum visitors experience a sense of historical presence when encountering such an original work of art? And if they do, is this effect exclusive to the physical original, or can it also be elicited through digital mediation, such as an online collection? What happens when the exhibition space—including walls and wall colour—is recreated in a virtual reality (VR) environment?

At this intersection, Kandel's neuroaesthetic perspective offers a valuable complement to Benjamin's theory by demonstrating how the art of Vienna around 1900 reveals the deep connection between artistic creation and human cognition and emotion. The innovative aspect of Austrian Expressionist paintings may not be immediately evident to all viewers, as their historical significance often requires prior knowledge. However, the thematic concerns of these works—many of which can be effectively conveyed through digital reproductions—remain highly relevant today, offering personal points of connection for contemporary audiences. Moreover, the unsettling quality inherent in some of these paintings, along with their often dark and dramatic colour palettes, retains its psychological impact. This suggests that while materiality plays a crucial role in the perception of Austrian Expressionist works, certain affective and thematic dimensions persist across different modes of mediation. It remains highly questionable whether digital reproductions can elicit an auratic experience in the Benjaminian sense, or whether an auratic experience in the digital realm constitutes an entirely different phenomenon. Exploring these distinctions in the future is essential in understanding the evolving relationship between original artworks and their digital counterparts in the contemporary museum landscape.

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Notes

- 1 We are aware that there is no single, fixed definition of aura; the concept has undergone multiple reinterpretations within Benjamin's own work, which will not be revisited in detail here. The concept defies precise definition, allowing for an emphasis on various aspects of its inherently vague meanings (see e.g. Fürnkäs 2000).
- 2 In art historiography, the description of a history of seeing is closely linked to the development

- of technological advancements (see Rosenberg 2019).
- ³ Franz Smola, interview by authors, digital recording, 7 July 2024, Vienna.
- ⁴ The influence of this reinstallation of the permanent exhibition on museum visitors' viewing behaviour has been investigated by Reitstätter et al. 2020.
- ⁵ Smola, interview, 7 July 2024.
- ⁶ Richard Gerstl, *Self-portrait, laughing*, 1907/08, oil on canvas, 40 x 30.5 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, Inv. No. 4035 <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/objects/2829/selbstbildnis-lachend>.
- ⁷ The dating of this work is disputed: Klaus Albrecht Schröder (Schröder 1993: 166) had set the date at 1908 without giving reasons. Raymond Coffey, on the other hand, argues the painting dates from 1907, based on stylistic features and a statement by Alois Gerstl, the artist's brother, that 'the self-portrait as a nude' (painting dated 12 September 1908) was the last self-portrait by the artist. Franz Smola therefore suggests dating the painting 1907/1908.
- ⁸ Original citation in German translated by the authors to English: 'Die Aussage liegt nicht, wie so oft bei Klimt — und in anderer Weise auch bei Kokoschka und Schiele — auf einer Ebene des Dargestellten. Gerstl's Malerei [...] wird nie zur Allegorie' (Werkner 1986: 60).
- ⁹ Richard Gerstl, *The Sisters Karoline and Pauline Fey*, 1905, oil on canvas, 175 x 150 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, Inv. No. 4430 <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/objects/3224/die-schwester-karoline-und-pauline-fey?#>.
- ¹⁰ Egon Schiele, *Eduard Kosmack*, 1910, oil on canvas, 99.8 x 99.5 cm, Belvedere Vienna, Inv. No. 4702.
- ¹¹ See description in the Belvedere's online collection: <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/objects/3456/eduard-kosmack?#>.
- ¹² Oskar Kokoschka, *Still Life with Mutton and Hyacinth*, 1910, oil on canvas, 87 x 114 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, Inv. No. 2358 <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/objects/8158/stillleben-mit-hammel-und-hyazinthe?#>.
- ¹³ Egon Schiele, *House Wall (Windows)*, 1914, oil on canvas, 111 × 142 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, Inv. No. 4278 <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/objects/3072/hauswand-fenster?#>.
- ¹⁴ Egon Schiele, *The Embrace*, 1917, oil on canvas, 100 x 170 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, Inv. No. 4438 <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/objects/3232/die-umarmung?#>.
- ¹⁵ Helene Funke, *Nude Looking in the Mirror*, 1908/1910, oil on canvas, 46.5 x 38.5 cm, Belvedere, Vienna, Inv. No. 11709 <https://sammlung.belvedere.at/objects/83909/akt-in-den-spiegel-blickend?#>.
- ¹⁶ Helene Funke, *Frauenakt/Kleiner Akt mit Polster*, 1908-1910, oil on canvas, 45.4 x 37 cm, Niederösterreichisches Landesmuseum, St. Pölten. See: Funke 2011: 118.

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