

**Erwin Dominik Osen, *Self Portrait with Dog and Cat***  
Vienna 1891 – 1970 Dortmund

tempera on paper, *circa* 1936  
27 9/16 by 27 9/16 inches (70 by 70 cm)  
signed lower left: 'Erwin Dom Osen'

- provenance: Private collection, Austria, by 1948;  
sale Christie's, London, December 4, 1987, no. 578;  
sale Dorotheum, Salzburg, September 21, 2018, no. 2;  
Private collection, Austria
- exhibited: Akademie der Bildenden K nst, *Entwicklung de  sterreichischen Kunst von 1897 bis 1938*,  
Vienna, 1948, p. 16, nn.  
Galerie am Stadttor, *Erwin Dom Osen, A Vieneser Painter 1881-1970*, Schladming, 1988, pp. 18-19.
- note: One of the most extraordinary individuals to be part of and survive the Viennese avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century was Erwin Dominik Johann Osen. He was orphaned by a Japanese father and Austrian mother at an early age, but when six years old entered the ballet school of the Vienna Court Opera, where its director, the composer/conductor Gustav Mahler, recognized the child's exceptional gift for design and promoted his education. Osen first studied painting privately with Albert Roller in 1904 and then with Gustave Klimt in 1907. Following this, he enrolled at the Vienna Academy in the class of Christian Griepenkerl, where most significantly he met another young artist, Egon Schiele (1890-1918), with whom he became for a time best friends. Together they were in 1909 among the founders of the *Neukunstgruppe* (New Art Group), which opposed to the rigidity of the Academy's approach, sought, according to their manifesto, "the complete independence of the artist from tradition and the need for each artist to be himself." The group, despite the later addition of Arnold Schoenberg and Oscar Kokoschka, was short-lived, and after three exhibitions, gradually dissolved by 1912. It seems that also by 1909 Osen had become a student of the well-respected, if traditional, stage designer of the Hofoper, Anton Brioschi (1855-1920).
- In the first biography of Schiele written by his friend and supporter, Arthur Roessler (1877-1955), Osen, under the reversed version of his name "Neso," is characterized as "an adventurer," and described as "tall, slim, lean as an Arab, with the pale, beardless face of a 'fallen angel.' Dressed elegantly, he appeared always at ease and was bejeweled in a noticeable fashion, wearing exotic rings and a thick necklace about his neck."<sup>1</sup> Roessler goes on to write that this Osen "resembled a figure in a melodramatic film. He had a cinematic sense of drama and was a virtuoso mime, with the gift of improvisation, an easy sense of fantasy, and many invented narratives about his travels and experiences. He was in fact a consummate actor and liar."<sup>2</sup> Osen earned his living as a stage designer, mime artist, and singer. When Schiele met him, Osen was accompanied by his girlfriend Moa, "a slender dancer with a mask-like quiet." She too was quite distinctive with "a stiff, bone-white face covered by a bluish black parting of hair and the face of an Egyptian princess...and reminiscent of the Vahine of Tahiti."<sup>3</sup> This unusual couple, who fascinated Schiele, created an original cabaret act (fig. 1), employing bizarre and exaggerated suggestive gestures. Their theatricality found reflection in some of Schiele's studies of Osen, both naked and dressed, with "bony arms and hands, contorted in gestures of barely articulate emotion and a face frozen in expressions of rapture (figs. 2a-b )."<sup>4</sup> Osen, who also encouraged Schiele's interest in the French poet Rimbaud, accompanied him in the summer of 1910 to Krumau, a town in southern Bohemia

where Schiele's mother had been born, and it has been suggested that Osen's "theatrical gestures may well have influenced the expressive body language" of Schiele's nudes of that year.<sup>5</sup> Several of the studies he did of his friend are inscribed "MIME VAN OSEN" (figs. 3a-c) and another "SANGER VAN OSEN" (fig. 4). Schiele also used Moa as a model for several drawings in 1911 (figs. 5a-c). But most importantly both Osen and Schiele shared an interest in psychological expression, and it was Osen, who commissioned by a Dr. Kronfeld to make drawings of the mental patients at the Steinhof asylum for a lecture on pathological expression, may have made a lasting impression on Schiele.<sup>6</sup> Osen's own drawings of Moa, nudes, and the mental patients, as well as his townscapes, reveal his talent and closeness to Schiele at this time (figs. 6a-f).

In June 1912 after a brief imprisonment for "the dissemination of indecent drawings," Schiele found refuge in Osen's Vienna studio, but soon, according to Roessler's account, Schiele recognized Osen as "an imposter" who had falsified and signed works with Schiele's signature. And even worse, he stole Schiele's own drawings, his paints, brushes, and paper and sold them.<sup>7</sup> Wounded by such betrayal, Schiele ended their friendship, and the two artists went off in different directions. Schiele was to die tragically young in 1918, but his reputation has grown tremendously. Osen left Vienna in 1913. He went first to Munich where he worked in the design and costume section of the Kunstlertheatre. There he designed a striking poster for the *Mikado* (fig. 7). But by the next year, 1914, he was in Prague where for that city's New German Theater he received a commission to design the backdrops for one of the first performances of Wagner's *Parsifal* to be presented outside Bayreuth. These won him first prize in a German international competition of stage designs in Frankfurt. By 1915 he was in Berlin working with Max Reinhardt and subsequent travels took him to New York, Brazil, and even West Africa. In 1924 he returned to Berlin to work as a painter and film director. In 1934 Osen was back in Vienna and spent the war years in hiding. His painting continued into the 1950s in Vienna, where now calling himself Mime van Osen or Erwin Dom-Osen, and finally Dom O-Sen, to honor his Japanese ancestry, he gave out the most diverse information about his origin, and again traveled, visiting Zug, New York, and Paris. In about 1955 he first visited Dortmund, Germany where he married and settled in 1960. There he exhibited his works among which was a large painting *Martinwerk*, a depiction of a metal processing plant done for the major metallurgic company the Hoesch Group of Westfalenhütte (fig. 8).<sup>8</sup>

Few artists have undergone such a dramatic transformation as Osen, from wild bohemian youth to respectable establishment artist. His later work, often employing his favorite square format, included portraits (figs. 9a-c) such as that of 1953 devoted to the great star of the Vienna Opera, Luba Welitsch (fig. 9d), landscapes of his native Austria, often of the majestic mountains (figs. 10a-d), unusual aerial and atmospheric views, (figs. 11a-d), and a series of mystical themes (figs. 12a-d). The present *Self-Portrait* and a pendant of the same size of his wife, Eibylein – Iby Chong-Osen (fig. 13), both with their pet white Highland terrier are undated. But when what seems to have been this *Self-Portrait* was exhibited in 1948, it was dated as 1936, making the artist forty-five years of age. In this *Self-Portrait* to which he also adds a sleeping cat, Osen, showing himself a master of details, also pays homage to his Japanese origins by including a Japanese paper and bamboo lamp and a fantastic, large, decorative mask that echoes his own fixed stare. One wonders if his white visage is a remembrance of his days as a mime or is it rather a nod to the Kabuki tradition.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Egon Schiele Book*, ed. by Fritz Karpfen, "Memories of Egon Schiele by Arthur Roessler," Vienna, 1921, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> See Frank Whitford, *Egon Schiele*, London, 1981, p. 70; and Jane Kallir, *Egon Schiele: The Complete Works*, New York and London, 1990, pp. 415-16, nos. 596-602.

<sup>5</sup> See Jane Kallir, *Egon Schiele: Drawings and Watercolors*, New York, 2003, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Whitford, 1981, p. 72. See also the important article by Gemma Blackshaw, "The Pathological Body: Modernist Strategising in Egon Schiele's Self-Portraiture," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2007, pp. 393-395.

<sup>7</sup> Roessler, 1921, pp. 79-80. See also Nicolas Powell, *The Sacred Spring: The Arts in Vienna 1898-1918*, Greenwich, 1974, p. 150. According to the exhibition catalogue *Egon Schiele: The Radical Nude*, The Courtauld Gallery, London, 2014, p. 98, Roessler's unflattering account of the Osen-Schiele relationship, led Osen to conduct a successful lawsuit, so that a later edition of Roessler's text was withdrawn from sale.

<sup>8</sup> See Peter Koebeck, "Hoesch Museum Dortmund: Exponat des Monats September 2014," *Dortmund-Ost*, August 29, 2014.