

THE EXHIBITION AT THE SIGMUND FREUD MUSEUM

“Eros & Thanatos – Drives, Images, Interpretations”, presented by the Sigmund Freud Museum at Berggasse 19 in Freud’s former living quarters, shows an overview of artistic depictions of a number of thematic complexes that Freud incorporated into his theory of drives. Together with the Graphic Collection of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, whose director Monika Knofler has curated the exhibition with the aid of Jeanne Wolff-Bernstein as a scientific advisor, the Sigmund Freud Museum presents works from Dürer through Klimt (provided by the Graphic Collection and the LIECHTENSTEIN MUSEUM) illustrating five aspects of the Freudian drive scheme:

“Desire and Destruction” illuminates the interplay between the life and death drives in love. For Freud, destruction is also an inherent part of love – the human being unconsciously wants to destroy his or her lover by fully merging him or her into the self. Generally the life and death drives maintain a balance, the absence of which can lead to complete happiness or total destruction. Works by Bonaventura Genelli, Lucas van Leyden, Bartholomäus Spranger, Hendrick Goltzius, Marcantonio Raimondi and Andrea Mantegna visually depict this dynamic.

The room “Sexual Drives” shows how Freud’s contemporaries Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele laid bare the sensitive and often tormenting sexuality lying below the surface of Viennese society. Like Freud, Klimt and Schiele also arrived at the conclusion that sexuality often has its roots in childhood, and they depicted this in their work, alongside sexual seduction and the struggle that is often inherent in love. Freud himself never devoted his attention to the work of the two artists, but the thematic proximity of his work with that of these two contemporaries – hardly noticed at the time – becomes readily apparent in this room.

The theory of narcissism, which Freud formulated in 1914, is dealt with in the section “Self-Love”. The well-known parable of Narcissus, who drowned when he became infatuated with his own reflection in a pool of water, is represented in the depiction by Sebastian Mansfeld. Works by Albrecht Dürer and Johannes de Cordua complete the exploration of self-love and its pathological excesses.

Violence, War, and Self-Destruction

In Anna Freud’s former consulting room, the section of the exhibition dealing with violence and war is presented. The destructive drive, usually neutralized by Eros, can unfold its complete annihilating effect when this counterbalance is disturbed – as happens in war, whose terrors have been depicted by numerous artists. The selection shown here focuses on works by Luca Giordano and Jacques Callot as well as by Bartholomäus Spranger and Johan Moreelse. One of the works is attributed to Titian, while Bartolomeo Passerotti, Bonaventura Genelli and Cristofano Allori complete this thematic area. Francesco Cairo’s “Lucretia” depicts the Roman woman who, according to legend, felt that she had been dishonored by the rape perpetrated by Sextus Tarquinius and saw suicide as the only alternative. Cairo’s work is exemplary of the thematic complex “Self-Destruction”.

The link between the special exhibition and the permanent collection housed in Sigmund Freud’s workrooms is represented by the engravings presented in Freud’s waiting room of the Four Elements by Cristoforo Dall’acqua after Louis Boullogne, which now are to be seen in their original form. In his engravings, the French artists depicted visually the theory of the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles. Like Freud, the ancient Greek philosopher postulated that life is governed by two fundamental powers, love and strife. In hanging the depictions of the four elements in the waiting room, Freud was paying homage not only to the theories of Empedocles, but also to his own conception of drives.