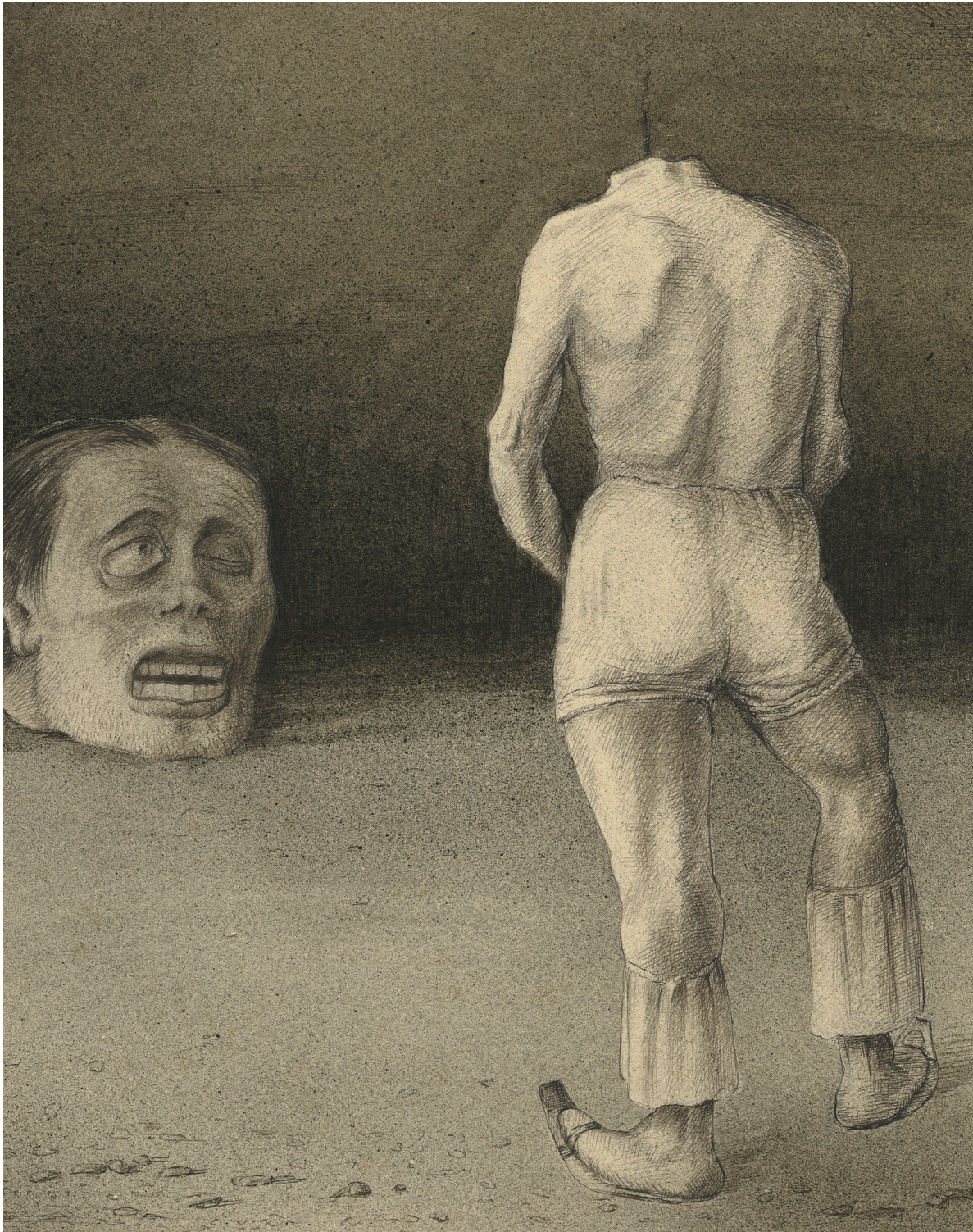


ALFRED KUBIN

THE AESTHETICS OF EVIL

14.8.2024 TO 12.1.2025

ALBERTINA modern



Exhibition Facts

Duration	14. August – 12. January 2025
Venue	ground floor ALBERTINA MODERN Karlsplatz 5, 1010 Wien
Curators	Elisabeth Dutz Laura Luzianovich (Assistant)
Works	100
Catalogue	Available for EUR 29,90 (German and English) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via https://shop.albertina.at/en
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1 1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0 info@albertina.at www.albertina.at
Opening Hours	ALBERTINA MODERN Karlsplatz 5, 1010 Wien Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
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ALFRED KUBIN

THE AESTHETICS OF EVIL

14 August 2024–9 February 2025

Prominent illustrator Alfred Kubin shows us the world in the clutches of evil. The ALBERTINA MODERN exhibition presents works from early in Kubin's career between 1899 and 1904, taken from the ALBERTINA'S comprehensive collection of around 1,800 drawings. His bleak world, where the evil, frightening and gruesome reign, is revealed in a selection of around 100 of these pieces.

Alfred Kubin (1877–1959), a loner and an individualist, created an œuvre that is characterised by intense spiritual agony. His images, often depicting oppressive fantasy worlds, reflect dark visions of the modern soul. Kubin drew fantastical beings, grotesque faces and ominous scenarios in which sexual anxieties, obsessions, anguish and the feeling of helplessness dominate. These themes expose the secret impulses and fears of the human psyche, which were examined by Sigmund Freud during his time.

Uncompromising openness and a move away from traditional iconography

The exhibition displays Kubin's uncompromising openness and his move away from traditional iconography, as well as the diversity of his artistic works. In his early pieces, Kubin captured the tension of the 20th century in a prophetic way: the dissolution of the individual in the crowd and the solitary individual who has retreated into themselves, who can't find their place in the modern world. He himself suffered from the advancing scientification, mechanisation and bureaucratisation and considered himself a person who belongs to the past.

His childhood was shaped by misfortune like the death of his mother, insurmountable fear of failure and depressive episodes, which eventually led to an unsuccessful attempt to take his own life – incidents that had a considerable impact on his images. His aesthetic is gloomy, oppressive, evil. It gives his images a quality that unsettles the observer and at the same time confronts them with their own humanity. Kubin felt overwhelmed by the burden of life and the inevitability of death – a fascination that is reflected in his intensive preoccupation with the end of life as a theme for his drawings.

Woman as a femme fatale, a seductress, a man-devouring demon and an ominous messenger of death is also a recurring theme. He was afraid of women, their sexuality, their bodies – the progressing emancipation made him anxious. Influenced heavily by Otto Weininger's book *Sex and Character*, Kubin shows his misogynistic attitude and panic about women.

His early work displays a wealth of fantastical and grotesque depictions of animals, metaphors for animal instincts and the brutality of people. These pieces, which align with his pessimistic picture of the world, reflect a sombre view of human existence.

Between autobiographical commentary and revolutionary diagnosis

Images of horror, demons and destruction didn't leave Kubin until his death in 1959. It is said that, at the end of his life, his priest said: "Without his fears, he would have been deprived of his existence." Kubin's art resides in the tension between autobiographical commentary and revolutionary diagnosis. It remains a notable testament to people's inner abysses and his fears, which are both personal and universal. His images reveal the torment he experienced and show a world in which people view themselves and their surroundings with horror and fascination.

Exhibition Texts

INTRODUCTION

This exhibition showcases Alfred Kubin's famous early work up to 1904, a selection from the ALBERTINA Museum's holdings of some 1,800 drawings by his hand. It is a dark world reigned by evil, in which frightening and terrifying forces prevail. In drawings of superior quality the artist confronts us with the horrors of his imagination, fed by his traumatic experiences as a child and adolescent.

Alfred Kubin was born in Litoměřice, Bohemia, on April 10, 1877. He grew up first in Salzburg and then in Zell am See. His mother's death weighed heavily on ten-year-old Alfred: she was the first person whom he witnessed dying. Many others were to follow. Corpses of drowned people haunted him not only in his nightmares. All this led to his permanent fascination with death and poisoned his relationship with women and sexuality. He was oppressed by his strict father; his stepmother, one of his mother's sisters, died after childbirth. The young boy remained deprived of affection: everyday life became his personal hell.

While apprenticed to a photographer, young Kubin was introduced to nightlife. He became interested in women and took to drinking excessively, with his physical and mental health deteriorating. Kubin suffered from depression and from terrifying attacks of anxiety. Not even twenty years old, he attempted suicide at his mother's grave. Art would eventually rescue him. Starting in 1898, Kubin discovered pen-and-ink drawing during his studies of fine art in Munich, arriving at his nightmarish, fantastic visual language: his early work was created, which was as grandiose as it was horrific. Around 1900 he had his first successes. In 1903 he became famous overnight when the *Weber Portfolio*, a collection of facsimile prints of his drawings, was published.

In those days he met Emma, his great love, who died unexpectedly after several months. Kubin found consolation helping him over his tragic loss in Hedwig Gründler, a wealthy widow, whom he married in 1904. The couple purchased Zwickledt Castle, Kubin's lifelong

residence and center of his brisk artistic activity. The relationship with his father improved considerably. Yet the latter's death triggered another creative crisis in Kubin, from which the artist escaped through the publication of his only book, the extremely successful fantastic novel *Die andere Seite [The Other Side]*.

Kubin was terrorized by fears throughout his life. He was afraid of poverty, illness, and death, albeit aware of the fact that fear was the chief driving force behind his work as an artist. He died in Zwickledt on August 20, 1959, at the age of eighty-two.

That Alfred Kubin's work is of unbroken relevance today is illustrated by many of his themes, all of which continue to be highly topical: warfare, captivity, torture, executioners, people displaced or persecuted, plague, and pandemic. He gets to the bottom of these visions in a breathtaking manner, which makes him one of the most outstanding draftsmen of the twentieth century.

CONDEMNED TO DEATH FROM BIRTH

Man's birth always also encompasses death—this thought is behind many of Kubin's drawings on subjects like pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. Due to his negative view of the world, informed by the reading of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, Kubin committed emaciated, skeleton-like female bodies to paper, thus illustrating the omnipresent dangers awaiting the newborn child. There is no hint at all of maternal affection and intimacy.

Women's inferiority propagated by society and her degradation as procreator continued to be the status quo around 1900. That the woman is consequently also responsible for man's death was postulated by the misogynistic Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger, who was not alone in his misapprehension. Kubin adopted this idea particularly impressively in his drawing *The Egg*, where an open grave lies waiting next to the pregnant woman, or also in *The Last Nurse*, who cradles a miniature grown-up man laid out in a coffin in her arms.

FEMME FATALE

Female sexuality and the relationship between man and woman play a major part in Alfred Kubin's oeuvre. The artist primarily presents the woman in her role of a seductress—naked, shameless, and possessive. On the one hand, the man is therefore the victim that succumbs to the woman's temptations, unable to defend himself. On the other hand, in some drawings he becomes a tamer or pimp keeping the other sex in check.

This prominent emphasis on the woman's sexuality and power was in line with the zeitgeist of the fin de siècle. Around 1900, male artists portrayed women as saint and femme fatale at the same time, as untouchable angel and bloodthirsty vamp. Both in the visual arts and in literature it becomes clear that the man must beware of the woman and her sexuality, of her imminent emancipation.

Whereas in some works the woman, about to be devoured by an ape or subdued by a tamer, plays a passive role, in most drawings she takes on the active part, hunting her male prey in the form of a spider, seducing men with her naked body, pronging a man's remnants. In Kubin's eye, woman's sexuality lurks everywhere for man. Even a crevice enclosing a rider becomes recognizable in its analogies to the female genital. Kubin found his models for such depictions in the work of artists of Symbolism like Félicien Rops (1833–1898), Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), and Franz von Stuck (1863–1928).

ALIENATION FROM NATURE AND ORIGIN

In the nineteenth century, progress going hand in hand with a profound transformation of society took hold as massively as never before in the history of humanity. Due to industrialization, people could no longer keep pace with an accelerating and changing world—a phenomenon that has troubled coming generations to this day. The result was a sense of alienation: of being separated from one's innermost feelings, unable to be in touch with oneself, of being ignored, a creature trampled upon. Human instincts, constituting the

primitive aspect of mankind, were no longer compatible with science and its insights. Human beings were left to their own devices, lonely souls in the currents of history. Kubin perceived the expansion of science, technology, and bureaucracy as a burden. He considered it necessary “to revisit the silent grounds of dreaming nature, the primordial mother of all of us.” In his drawings, he expresses a sense of forlornness and alienation not only through deserted scenery and lonesome human beings, but also through individual body parts severed from the human figure.

NIGHTMARES OF DARKNESS

Who does not know the nightmares preventing one from sleeping, causing palpitations, forcing one to toss and turn in bed or awake with a start, soaked in sweat? Kubin is a master of the dark side of sleep and the evil side of dreams. The artist was convinced that we dream not only in our sleep but also during the day, “yet daydream is mostly blinded by the glaring sharpness of reason.”

Nightmares mostly deal with plummeting to the ground, with being locked in, with persecution, betrayal, or hurt. Kubin’s drawings, frequently depicting gruesome scenes, illustrate these themes and even more: the female body, which is perceived as a threat, such fantastic and grotesque creatures as vampires, and, of course, death, which, for example, emerges from the waves of the sea in the form of a skull and causes a ship to capsize.

Dreams and nightmares are frequently impossible to grasp and forgotten soon after we wake up, or they almost fade completely when we try to remember them. Kubin emphasizes this world of shadows after waking up from a nightmare with the gloominess of his pen drawings or especially in his gouaches, in which bright forms like tentacles or glowing heads stand out against the dark.

BEASTS OF HORROR

“I definitely prefer the four-horned cow to the one having only two horns ...,” Kubin wrote in 1911. Reality and fantasy become one in the artist’s world of thoughts and symbols. He combines humans and animals to create horrible beasts, such as in *Serpent Incubus* and *Wrong Way*. The artist thus accentuates the animal side present in man. In his drawings he particularly revisits snake- and spiderlike creatures.

On the one hand, due to its phallic form, the serpent, a highly ambivalent symbol, is associated with masculine connotations; on the other hand, it is just as well linked with femininity due the role of a seductress assigned to it in the biblical Fall of Man. Moreover, as an animal that snaps and kills, it is associated with death and destruction, whereas it can equally stand for life, as it regularly discards and renews its skin. With Kubin one can be sure that the snake’s negative symbolism is emphasized, with its seductive, devouring, and monstrous qualities pushed to the fore.

The same holds true for the spider. In Kubin’s art, the animal, which is quite small in this part of the world, turns into a huge, predatory monster, which, however, can just as well become the quarry. In other drawings, it spins its web and devours its prey: humans instead of insects.

GROTESQUES AND MONSTROSITIES

Grotesque brings together gruesomeness and a comic element. It is such contradictions as these that make Kubin’s work so fascinating for us. Distorted and exaggerated proportions, weird creatures, and fantastic juxtapositions of figures lend his drawings an enigmatic character. His works thus often shift from humor to horror.

Kubin drew inspiration for his fantastic compositions from the work of the German painter and sculptor Max Klinger (1857–1920) and the British illustrator and graphic artist Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898). At the age of twenty, Kubin discovered the medium of pen drawing, which would become his preferred technique and accompany him throughout his life. Soon

after the turn of the century, Kubin's drawings were presented in exhibitions in Germany and Austria, such as with Paul Cassirer in Berlin, in a Phalanx exhibition in Munich, and at the Vienna Secession. Some of his pictorial inventions were also reproduced as prints, including the *Weber Portfolio*, which is also on view here.

LIFE – A TORTURE CHAMBER

“I don't create out of pleasure, but in order to forget all the disgust I feel toward myself and the whole world,” Kubin said in 1902. In his drawings, the artist confronts us with human abysses. Impaled, penetrated, bound, and hanged—Kubin presents to us the pain humans are capable of inflicting upon one another. His role model for the brutality and directness of the scenes of torture was the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), who has gone down in the annals of art history with his cycle of prints *The Disasters of War* (1810–13). Kubin followed the same route, but he did not show the cruelties committed by soldiers to make their victims suffer, but women and men in everyday life.

Further examples were Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525/30–1569) and Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450–1516), whose works Kubin was able to study in depth during his visit to Vienna in 1905. His drawing *Scenes in Hell* resorts to the crowded compositions by these two artists, reflecting their preference for grotesque and absurd depictions of hybrid creatures. Painful and cruel moments run through a multitude of Kubin's works. The artist thus certainly also attempted to come to terms with the torments he had experienced himself, such as the constraints imposed upon him by his despoti

DEATH AND DEVIL

Alfred Kubin had felt drawn to death since his childhood. Among other things, he was fascinated by corpses. His mother Johanna was the first person whose death young Kubin witnessed. He was thus forced to separate from the human being closest to him. Later, as an adolescent, he voluntarily frequented mortuaries and curiously observed how the fishermen in Zell am See, the small town where he grew up, recovered floaters from the lake on a regular basis. Once Kubin even said that his first love was a dead woman.

All these impressions and his suicide attempt at his mother's grave when he was not even twenty are reflected in his work. In Kubin's art, evil lurks everywhere, and death has many faces: it manifests itself as an angel, a ghostly apparition, devil, the Reaper, a henchman, Death's Bride, and numerous other figures. All of us will live to see their hour, go on their journey into the afterlife—and Kubin reminds us of this.

INESCAPABLE FATE

The facsimile prints shown here, based on original drawings by Alfred Kubin, derive from the so-called *Weber Portfolio*. It was named after its publisher, Hans von Weber (1872–1924), a German editor and art patron. He and Kubin had been friends since 1901. It is said that during his first visit to the artist's studio Weber bought as many as forty-eight drawings. The publication of the *Weber Portfolio* in 1903, consisting of facsimiles of fifteen drawings, greatly contributed to the artist's popularity.

A major part of the sheets deals with death and man's inescapable fate. A horrible skull emerges from the waves; a male figure holds on to the tail of a snake over an abyss; a huge skeleton sows the seeds of an epidemic across a village; the only things left of an emaciated horse are skin and bones; the hand on the clock of death moves forward relentlessly; overpowering fate herds together a crowd of people.

A motif Kubin frequently revisited over many years is war. One of the scenes shows a giant soldier about to trample an army with his hooped elephant's foot. This sheet was also part of

the *Weber Portfolio*, but in the exhibition is presented as an original drawing dating from 1918.

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Press images

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Alfred Kubin
The Large Head, 1899
Ink on paper
19 × 16 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
Plague, 1902
Ink on paper
25 × 33 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
Feast after the Slaughter, ca. 1900
Ink on paper
23 × 23 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
The Last Nurse, ca. 1900/01
Ink on paper
15 × 16 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Wien 2024



Alfred Kubin
The Prisoner, before 1900,
Ink on paper
13 × 27 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
The Oneberry, 1900
Ink on paper
8 × 20 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



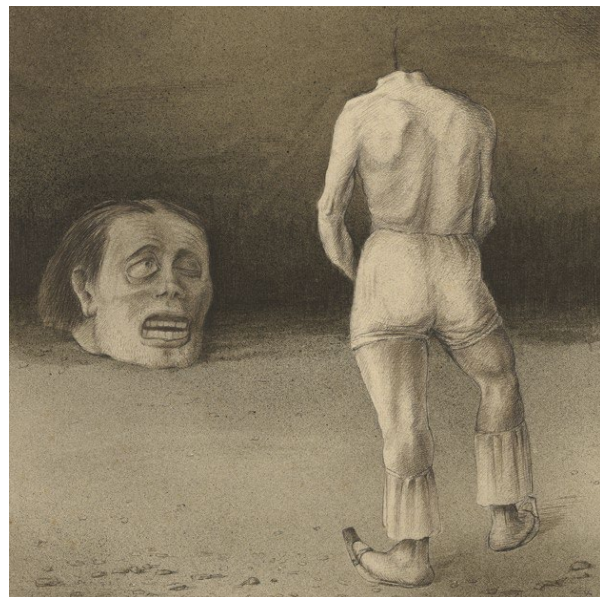
Alfred Kubin
Sadness, after 1900
Ink on paper
21 × 35 cm

The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



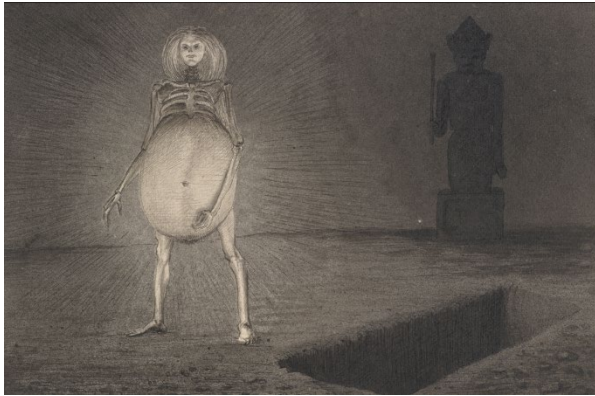
Alfred Kubin
The Spider, ca. 1901/02
Ink on paper
19 × 25 cm

The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
Self-Reflection, ca. 1901/02
Ink on paper
23 × 23 cm

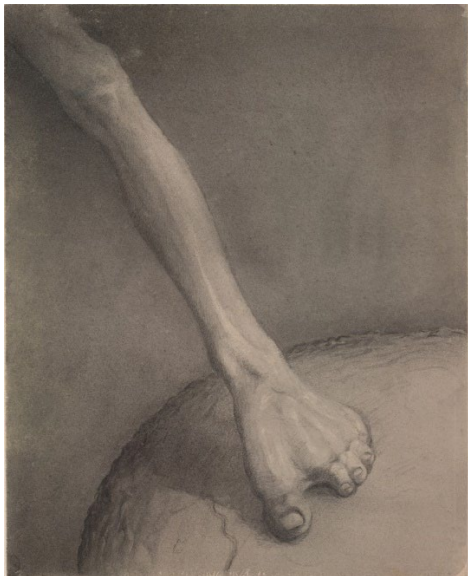
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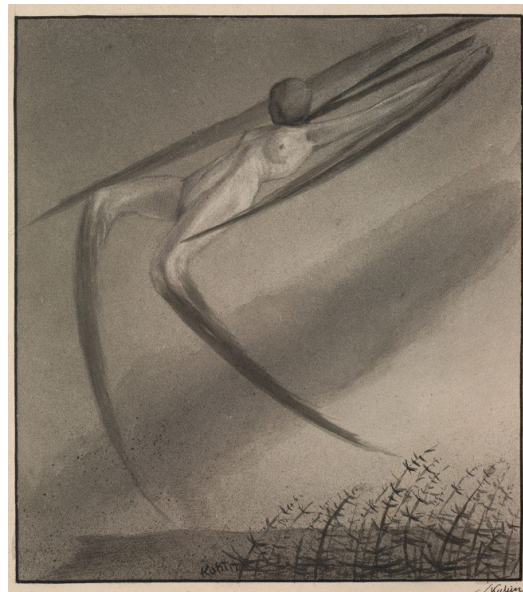
Alfred Kubin
The Egg, ca. 1901/02
Ink on paper
16 × 24 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
The Pursued Man, ca. 1902/03
Ink on paper
22 × 35 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
The Step, ca. 1902/03
Ink on paper
31 × 25 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
A Dream Visits Us Every Night, ca. 1902/03
Ink on paper
26 × 24 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
The Brood, 1903-06
Ink on paper
23 × 36 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard
Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
Drowning, 1903
Ink on paper
22 × 22 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard
Spangenberg, München / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Alfred Kubin
War, ca. 1918
Ink on paper
30 × 35 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Eberhard
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