



Oskar Kokoschka

Oskar Kokoschka was the third in the great trio of Viennese artists. This trio also included the great Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele. Kokoschka, however, is the one whose reputation is currently hardest to assess. He was born at Pochlarn on the Danube on March 1, 1886. His father was Czech and came from a well-known family of Prague goldsmiths. He was rather work-shy and Kokoschka later said of him, "From him I learned to endure poverty rather than work slavishly at distasteful work." His mother came from the mountain region of Styria in Austria and claimed to have second sight. Oskar was the second of their four sons and as a child, he moved with his family to Vienna.

As a boy, Kokoschka was not particularly attracted to art. He wanted to study chemistry, but was recommended for a scholarship at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts by a teacher who had been impressed by his drawings. He entered the School in 1905, the year in which he started to paint in oils. In 1907, he found work at the Wiener Werkstotte and soon began to expand his activities to literature. Asked to produce a children's book, he wrote his own text, *Die Traumenden Knaben* (The Dreaming Youths), which was not very appropriate for the young, but made a good basis for his distinctive illustrations. He also wrote two plays, *Sphinx und Strohamann* (The Sphinx and the Scarecrow) and *Murder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murderer, Hope of Women). These two plays are now considered to mark the beginnings of Expressionist theatre in Germany.

In 1908 Kokoschka's work was shown in the Kunstschau exhibition in Vienna, which featured the avant-garde group around Gustav Klimt. His contributions were a center of controversy because of their Expressionist violence. As a result, he was dismissed from the School

of Arts and Crafts. In 1909 his work was shown at the second Kunstschau and his two plays were performed in the little open-air theatre attached to the exhibition buildings. However, there was a tremendous scandal because of their violence and irrational structure. Thus, even the Werkstotte would no longer employ him. At one time he managed to keep alive by betting on his own capacity to drink visitors to Vienna under the table.

In 1910 Kokoschka's luck changed. He went to Berlin and was taken up by Herwarth Walden, the energetic owner-editor of *Der Sturm*. Walden commissioned him to do title page drawings for the magazine and used one for almost every issue. He was also given a contract by the powerful art dealer, Paul Cassirer. In 1911 he returned to Vienna and was appointed as assistant teacher at the very school that had dismissed him. He had a show at the Hagenbund in Vienna, which was attended by Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne. He exclaimed indignantly, "This fellow's bones ought to be broken in his body!" Most important of all, in 1911 he began a passionate affair with Alma Mahler, the widow of the great composer, who was considerably older than him. The year 1912 was even better. He was able to give up teaching and showed at the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne, which united the whole German-speaking avant-garde with the Blaue Reiter (informal association of expressionist artists) in Munich.

By 1913 his relationship with Alma Mahler started to show signs of tension. They traveled to Italy together and on one occasion visited the Naples aquarium. Kokoschka watched an insect sting and paralyze a fish before devouring it and immediately, he associated the scene with the woman by his side.

As time passed, Kokoschka was still looked upon as a controversial figure. When he began teaching art at a Viennese girls' school, whose headmistress was known for her progressive views, some of the parents objected so strongly that the Austrian government actually banned him from teaching. When war broke out, an impossible relationship and an impossible situation seemed to arise. Adolf Loos used his influence to have him appointed Lieutenant in an exclusive regiment of dragoons (mounted infantrymen) with a glamorous uniform. As soon as he was appointed, Loos had a postcard made of Kokoschka in his finery, which was sold in shops alongside those of leading actresses.

At the beginning of 1915 Kokoschka was seriously wounded. He was taken prisoner and suffered a head injury and a bayonet wound to the lung. He spent a period of recuperation in Vienna, but was then sent to the Isonzo Front, where his health soon broke down completely. He went to Stockholm to consult a brain specialist and then to Dresden to try and recover his health. His grief was as much mental as physical and was perhaps connected with his remaining feelings for Alma Mahler. To exorcise his obsession, he chose a life-sized doll, complete and life-like in all details, and treated it like a living companion. He went as far as escorting it to the opera.

After the end of the war, the political situation in Dresden was very unstable, just as it was everywhere else in Germany. Kokoschka formed part of a small, left-wing bohemian group. In the newly liberal climate of 1919, he was officially appointed Professor at the Dresden Academy and with this position came a beautiful house and studio.

Outside of Dresden, his reputation continued to rise. The composer Paul Hindemith set *Murderer, Hope of Women* to music and it received numerous performances. Among them was one at the Dresden State Opera. In 1922 Kokoschka was invited to exhibit at the Venice Biennale. His health had now improved and he was becoming restless. He resigned his post at the Dresden Academy in 1924 by simply giving a note to the porter and leaving the city before his intentions were discovered. A period of travel followed which was financed by the proceeds of his now lucrative Cassirer contract. Using Munich as his main base, he went all over Europe, North Africa, Egypt, Turkey and Palestine.

The year 1931 brought great success for him despite the darkening political horizon. He had a show at the Kunsthalle in Mannheim, which Cassirer's successors brought to the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris. It did well with the Parisian public. However, as triumph came, conflict came also. Kokoschka demanded more independence from his dealers. They, in turn, were anxious to establish his work as a staple commodity in the art market. Kokoschka broke with them and there was an acrimonious exchange of letters in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which was one of Germany's leading newspapers.

In 1932 Kokoschka once again showed at the Venice Biennale, but now his reception was stormy. Mussolini made it clear that he disliked Kokoschka's art, and the pro-Nazi press in Germany

seized the opportunity to attack him. By 1933 his finances were severely strained and he left Paris for the provinces. He went to Vienna to be with his mother. He felt ill at ease in a city ruled by the fascist administration of Chancellor Dollfuss, and after his mother's death, he went to Prague and took Czech citizenship. The Austrian government tried to lure him back by offering him the Directorship of the School of Arts and Crafts and in 1937, he was the subject of a major retrospective at the Oesterreiches Museum *fur Kunst und Industrie*. This perhaps meant less to him than the fact that his work was also on show that year in the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich. At the same time, more than four hundred of his works were removed from German museums.

The Munich Agreement Of 1938 indicated that Prague was no longer a safe refuge. In September Kokoschka left for England. This was the logical choice, but it was also the only place in Europe where his art was not very well known.

The Kokoschkas were desperately poor. In 1939 they moved to Polperro in Cornwall, where Oskar made watercolors of the local scenery and Olda Pavlovska, who would later become his wife, ran a pastry shop to help their finances. The next year, however, they returned to London, as Kokoschka was convinced that their neighbors were suspicious of them. London seemed to bore and depress him:

“What am I to do in this hole (their London flat)? I must invent new subjects for my paintings. I am quite starved for something to see. When the spring comes I feel how it stirs in me as in a migrant bird, and I become quite nervous: I must leave town and paint something real - a grasshopper or something. When I come back to town the landscapes turn into political pictures. My heart aches, but I cannot help it. I cannot just paint landscapes without taking any notice of what happens.”

His fortunes began to look up as soon as the war was over. In 1945 he received a symbolic tribute in war-battered Vienna, an exhibition shared with Klimt and Schiele which were both long dead. In 1947 there was a large Kokoschka retrospective at the Kunsthalle in Berne and in 1952, a room was devoted to his work at the 26th Venice Biennale.

Kokoschka had become a British citizen in 1947, but was not eager to remain in a country that he felt had slighted him. In 1953 he began to run his School of Seeing at the *Internationale*

Sommerakademie fur Bildende Kunst in Salzburg. Thus, he re-established his ties with the Austrian milieu in which he began his career and in the same year he settled permanently at Villeneuve on Lake Geneva. He became once again, an extremely celebrated artist, but he had drifted away from the post-war art world and though much respected, was a marginal figure when he died in Montreux, Switzerland on February 22, 1980.

Oskar Kokoschka was a great Austrian-born painter of expressionist portraits and landscapes who struggled through life trying to find acceptance of his new views of art. Expressionism, a movement in European paintings that put emphasize on subjective feelings and emotions, was greatly supported by him. Landmarks of this movement consisted of violent colors and exaggerated lines that helped contain intense emotional expression. Art and beauty was quickly beginning to change. The view of what was art and what was not was questioned intensely and as time passed by, these new art form began to be accepted. Many of Kokoschka's works were views of harbors, mountains, and cities. Examples include *Harbor of Marseilles* (1925, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri), *View of Cologne* (1956, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne), and *Tower Bridge* (1925-1926, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota). He tried to paint with great freedom and exuberance. Though he was best known as a painter, Kokoschka was also a writer. His literary works include poetry and plays not translated into English and a collection of short stories, *A Sea Ringed with Visions* (1956; translated 1962). His art, along with the help of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, helped to open people's eyes and revolutionize the art world.

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