



5-30-2014

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Recommended Citation

Muir, Elizabeth G. (2014) "Oscar Kokoschka's Black Portraits: Emotions and Personality in Paint," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol15/iss1/7>

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Abstract

The first oil paintings Oskar Kokoschka created after departing the Wiener Werkstätte in 1909 were his scandalizing black portraits, met with near universal hatred by the public, the critics, and the sitter of these portraits. This paper will explore the radical elements of these black portraits in Kokoschka's depiction of movement, his use of hands as signifiers, his method of painting, and his desire to depict the genuine character of his sitters.

Keywords

Oscar Kokoschka, Adolf Loos, black portraits, art history

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Elizabeth Muir

"We are all trapped in our own skins, clowns trying to shield ourselves from the absurdity of transience by imagining ourselves to be more or less worthy images of God."

—Oskar Kokoschka

Rebellion was characteristic of turn-of-the-century Vienna; shocking new ideas and approaches to creation marked art, music, biology, and psychology. Even during this age of defiance, Oskar Kokoschka was one of the most recalcitrant artists, and he utterly shocked critics with his paintings and sculptural busts. The Vienna press notoriously called Kokoschka the "super savage" of Vienna, and after seeing an exhibition of Kokoschka's paintings in 1911, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand reportedly stated "someone should break every bone in [Kokoschka's] body."¹ The first oil paintings Kokoschka created after departing the Wiener Werkstätte in 1909 were his scandalizing black portraits, met with near universal hatred by the public, the critics, and even the sitters of these portraits. This paper will explore the radical elements of these black portraits in Kokoschka's depiction of movement, his use of hands as signifiers, his method of painting, and his desire to depict the genuine character of his sitters.

Kokoschka was able to reveal the true personalities of his sitters almost solely due to his patron and friend, Adolf Loos. Loos was an architect who bought Kokoschka's work *The Warrior* in 1909. In this sculpture, he saw the vast artistic talent of Kokoschka. This bust is a self-portrait and it is violent in its portrayal of Kokoschka's skin, shown peeled back to reveal the turbulent nerves beneath. The expression on Kokoschka's face is one of pure suffering. Kokoschka realized how much the public hated *The Warrior*. Every day he would visit his bust in its gallery to remove the food wrappers mockingly stuffed in its open mouth.² Kokoschka declared, "Loos entered my life like a fairy king" and he whisked Kokoschka away from working for the Wiener Werkstätte, an institute known for creating aesthetically pleasing decorative arts.³ Loos indignantly believed Kokoschka making postcards and fans for the Wiener Werkstätte was like "using

1. Claude Cernuschi, *Re/Casting Kokoschka: Ethics and Aesthetics, Epistemology and Politics in Fin-de-siècle Vienna* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 201.

2. Cernuschi, *Re/Casting Kokoschka*, 26.

3. Ludwig Goldschider and Oskar Kokoschka, *Kokoschka with Fifty Colour Plates* (New York: Phaidon Publishers, 1963), 10.

a race horse as a farm horse.”⁴ Loos did everything in his power to further Kokoschka’s career. He not only persuaded many of his own clients to have their portraits painted by Kokoschka, but also promised to buy these paintings if Kokoschka’s clients hated their portraits and refused to pay for them.⁵ By all accounts, this was a common occurrence, and Kokoschka acknowledged his own surprise when a client liked their portrait. In his biography, Kokoschka mentioned he was genuinely astonished when Moritz Hirsch, the subject of the unbecoming portrait *Vater Hirsch* loved his portrait, and how Hirsch “hung it in his flat and even paid me for it.”⁶ Having Loos as a safeguard to buy his work meant Kokoschka had an extraordinary level of artistic freedom in these portraits. This allowed him to show his clients as he saw them, with no need to flatter vanity or ego.

In these portraits, Kokoschka showed his subjects in expressive movement, revealing their characters in motion. Looking at Kokoschka’s portrait *Peter Altenburg*, the subject’s hands are in mid-gesture, as if intensely absorbed in convincing the viewer of his side of an argument. Altenburg is depicted by Kokoschka glancing to the side with his large, sensitive eyes full of nervous energy. The viewer can see around the eyes of Altenburg how Kokoschka emphasized the wrinkles of his subject, highlighting the endless hours Altenburg devoted in cafes, and the short nights spent in hotels and brothels.⁷ Kokoschka conveyed movement in his rapid brushstrokes of black paint on Altenburg’s left hand, and in the hurried scraping of paint across the coat, making the arms appear in motion. Oddly enough, Kokoschka saw Altenburg’s character as that of a newborn seal pup with a “habitual expression of astonishment” and expressed this sense of character in the long whiskers, drooping eyelids, and balding head of Altenburg.⁸ This painting examines multiple facets of Altenburg’s personality in motion, showing his bohemianism, intelligence, and flaming temper all in the movement of his hands and body.

Kokoschka deftly captured movement in these portraits because of his unique artistic training. While studying at the School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna, Kokoschka became frustrated with drawing from motionless models in his life drawing course. He rebelled against painting people in the manner of still lifes,

4. Tobias G. Natter, *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits from Vienna and Berlin 1909-1914*, ed. Tobias G. Natter (Cologne: Dumont Buchverlag, 2002), 114.

5. Ume M. Schneede, “More Like One Than One Is: Modernist Portraits,” in Natter, *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits*, 14.

6. Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life*, trans. David Britt, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1974), 34.

7. James Guida, “A Flâneur for All Seasons,” *New Yorker* March 7, 2013, n.p.

8. Kokoschka, *My Life*, 41.

and thus used the limber children of acrobats as his own models.⁹ He then asked permission from his school to draw his models moving, allowing him to “sharpen his sense for the reality of appearance.”¹⁰ The way these black portraits were painted by Kokoschka shows this artistic training, because when Kokoschka painted his sitters, he permitted them to move around the room and go about their daily activities. This meant Kokoschka could view multiple sides of his subject’s characters. When his subject Egon Wellesz asked if he could change position while sitting for Kokoschka, Kokoschka responded with “do you think that I am such a bad painter that you have to sit still for me to be able to paint you?” and permitted Wellesz to move about as he pleased.¹¹ In the portrait Kokoschka painted of art historian husband and wife Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, they were permitted to walk about the room, answer mail, and converse with one another “as if they were alone” while having their double portrait painted, allowing a more natural side of their personality to show.¹² Hans is in side profile, but Erica sits stoically with her face forward. Neither Hans nor Erica acknowledges the other person’s presence in their facial expressions; both figures are introspectively thinking. However, their hands are in dialogue with one another. The viewer of *Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat* can imagine an intense intellectual debate happening between the two in the movements of the hands, and the “flow of (their) energies” is visible.¹³ In a sense, Kokoschka shows two sides to both sitters in this portrait. He shows Hans and Erica as their separate selves each absorbed in their own thoughts, but also as husband and wife together in the motions and debate of their hands.

Using hands as an expression of self is a reoccurring theme in Kokoschka’s black portraits. For instance, in his portrait *Lotte Franzos*, the subject’s face is thoughtful, yet her hands are anxious. The right hand is strained out with nervous scratched lines radiating out of the fingertips, and the left is tense and unnaturally bent. One reason for this nervous portrayal of the hands is attributable to Kokoschka falling in love with Franzos while painting her. Kokoschka believed that the feeling was mutual, and spoke of her “gentleness, lovingkindness (sic) and understanding” and stated “she choose (sic) me.”¹⁴ However, given Kokoschka’s obsessive past behavior with women, and his less than perfect

9. Goldschider and Kokoschka, *Kokoschka*, 10.

10. Hans Maria Winger, *Oskar Kokoschka: The Work of the Painter* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), 22.

11. Natter, *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits*, 150.

12. Ibid., 122.

13. Patrick Werkner, “Gestures in Oskar Kokoschka’s Early Portraits” in *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits*, 34.

14. Goldschider and Kokoschka, *Kokoschka*, 14.

record of honesty, it seems more likely that Kokoschka's infatuation with Franzos was entirely one-sided. The nervousness in Franzos's hands conveys how uncomfortable she was with sitting for Kokoschka, especially since she was recently married. In a letter to Franzos, Kokoschka acknowledged that she hated her portrait, but tried to explain it to her, writing that hands and movements were equally important in revealing character.¹⁵

Kokoschka deemed his portraits the "black portraits," because he believed these works "emphasized the soul's dirtiness," and he wanted to show the interior state of his sitter's minds.¹⁶ Kokoschka was always intent on using his paintbrush as a scalpel, and some critics compare him to Sigmund Freud because of their mutual wish to dig beneath the surface and reveal the hidden wishes and true personalities of their clients.¹⁷ Kokoschka wished to create paintings that would reveal the true character of his sitters in a glance. For example, in his autobiography, Kokoschka described the "complicated character" and emotional turmoil of his sitter in the portrait *Baron Viktor Von Dirsztay*.¹⁸ Kokoschka believed that Von Dirsztay felt disgust for his Hungarian family and their tasteless nouveau riche manners. Kokoschka believed this shame manifested itself in a skin disease "that even Freud could not heal him [of]," which caused Von Dirsztay to constantly itch his skin.¹⁹ Playing the role of an amateur psychoanalyst, Kokoschka believed Von Dirsztay suffered from grand, romantic fantasies (*Weltschmerz*) and saw his character as being similar to a melodramatic clown, trapped in his role.²⁰ In his portrait of Von Dirsztay, Kokoschka portrayed him as desperately trying to maintain the appearance of a grand and aristocratic figure through his florid, theatrical hand gestures. Kokoschka selected a color palette of dark blues, whites, and blacks in painting Von Dirsztay. The whiteness of the diseased skin of Von Dirsztay's hands and face looks like heavy stage make-up, and the flowing blue and grey backdrop of the painting contrasts against the pale skin and dark suit of the portrait. The pensive face of Von Dirsztay shows that

15. "Oskar Kokoschka to Lotte Franzos, Leysin, Sanatorium Montblanc, 28 of January 1910," in *Oskar Kokoschka Letters 1905-1976*, trans. Mary Whittall (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 18.

16. *Great Modern Masters: Kokoschka*, ed. Jose Maria Farena, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 8.

17. Itzak Goldberg, "Talking Hands" in *Klimt, Schiele Moser, Kokoschka: Vienna 1900*, ed. Marie-Amelie Zu Salm-Salm (Paris: Lund Humphries, 2005), 76.

18. Kokoschka, *My Life*, 46.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

much of the grand figure he cut was an act. Twenty-four years after the portrait was finished, Von Dirsztay committed suicide.²¹

In this instance and others, Kokoschka believed himself to be a clairvoyant artist. In many of his interviews and biographies, Kokoschka liked to emphasize how he could see into the souls of his sitters. One instance of this was in a portrait of a young, brilliant Dutchwoman that Kokoschka portrayed as covered in a veil-like layer of little spots. When questioned about these little spots Kokoschka “explained that those spots were there because the model.... had seemed so distant and absent-minded” while he was painting her. Later, the model was diagnosed by a doctor as “mentally deranged,” making Kokoschka appear all-seeing.²² However, Kokoschka made these statements after his black portraits were created, and it is therefore possible that he could have simply faked this foresight in order to enhance his claim of being able to display the inner soul in his works.

Clients of Kokoschka commented on his method of painting being akin to theatrical performance. The act of painting for Kokoschka involved the movement of his entire upper body, as he furiously applied, reworked, and scraped his canvas. He not only used a paintbrush to apply paint to his paintings, but also his fingers and nails. These marks are evident in the delicate scratches incised in the background of the portrait of Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, and in the visible thumbprints in many of his works, including the visible thumb smearing in his portrait *Herwarth Walden*. Erica Tietze-Conrat remembered Kokoschka painting with his canvas balanced on the legs, holding it steady with his left hand and painting with his right.²³ One sitter recalled asking Kokoschka why he painted with his fingers. Kokoschka responded with “the path from the brain down to the arm and through the brush is too long. If I could, I would paint with my nose.”²⁴ Kokoschka’s method of painting showed that he believed that an artist should be involved, body and soul, in creating a truthful image of the sitter’s personality.

Kokoschka’s objective in these black portraits was not to portray his sitters as they wished to be viewed, but as a representation of their characters, including the buried sides of their personalities. With penetrating accuracy, Kokoschka painted all of his portraits with the intent to delve beneath the surface of his sitter’s public façade, depicting their depression, intelligence, and unease. These portraits represent the revolutionary move in portraiture away from images of the public

21. Ibid., 47.

22. Natter, *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits*, 34.

23. Erica Tietze-Conrat “Ein Porträt und Nacher” in *Oskar Kokoschka: Early Portraits*, 122.

24. Goldberg, “Talking Hands,” 17.

self—glorified, but with none of the sitter’s actual personality—to creating works that stripped away the layers of class, status, and ego to show the naked truths of the soul and mind. Kokoschka captured the realities of his sitters’ personalities because of the financial security from his patron Adolf Loos, his skill at illustrating movement, his use of hands as an additional expression of his sitter’s mind, his method of studying his sitter’s personality, and his intense method of painting. Turn-of-the-century Vienna was an era of social upheaval, anxiety, and death; Kokoschka’s talents and techniques allowed him to beautifully capture these aspects of his surroundings in paint.