The Early Portraits of Oskar Kokoschka: A Narrative of Inner Life

Author: Rosa Berland
Published: September 2007

Abstract (E): It has long been granted that part of the aesthetic experience of art lies outside the conventional sphere of the maker—that is, a painting also involves the imaginative reconstruction by the viewer. To an extent, this can be designed and guided by a visual artist. If the artifact is merely discursive, it can be approached like logical sequences, "put" there for the viewer to discover analytically. This is particularly true of portraiture, which has served an important social function, whether official or sentimental. However, when a painting is less logical and codified, as is the case of early expressionism, something other than the iconography of rational systems of thought and forms from the natural world comes in. Focusing on capturing movement, psychological effect and transience, Oskar Kokoschka's portraits work within a theory of subjectivity that reveal the sitter's psychology and valorizes artistic imagination.

Abstract (F): C'est une idée très ancienne qu'une grande partie de l'expérience esthétique échappe au domaine du producteur et que, en d'autres termes, la lecture d'un tableau implique sa reconstruction imaginaire par le spectateur, même s'il est possible à l'artiste de modeler et de diriger cette expérience, du moins en partie. Si l'oeuvre est un artefact strictement discursif, elle peut prendre la forme de phrases logiques offertes à la lecture analytique du spectateur. Dans le cas des portraits, dont la fonction sociale (officielle ou sentimentale) est grande, les œuvres fonctionnent certainement de cette manière-là. Cependant, quand une œuvre est moins structurée logiquement et selon des codes partagés, comme il arrive dans les premières années de l'expressionisme, une lecture iconographique et rationnelle des formes et des idées n'est plus possible. Les portraits de Kokoscha, qui s'efforcent de capter des mouvements psychologiques instables et passagers, se placent à l'intérieur d'une tout autre approche, qui révèle la psychologie du modèle tout en mettant en valeur l'imagination artistique du spectateur.

Keywords: Portraiture, posture, psychograms, illusionism, "inner movement"

To cite this article:


Introduction

"The entire modern history of painting, with its efforts to detach itself from illusionism and to acquire its own
As Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hubert Damisch suggest, painting must be approached not simply as an image mirroring nature, but as a wider, active intellectual process. Damisch makes the claim that "painting not only shows, but thinks, through forms that might be designated as symbolic in Cassirer's sense." (Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 446). Oskar Kokoschka's early-twentieth-century expressionist portraits can be examined in the context of an understanding of painting as a complex expression of the artist's creative and subjective process, "thought" which is not necessarily rational or analytical, symbolized by graphic expressive form and mystical sfumato. By combining impressionist technique with distortion of color and form, Kokoschka's work reflects the philosophical view that art should capture neither the formal nor the purely abstract, but a sense of movement and emotion, rendered through creative intuition and expressive and atmospheric artistic technique.

Kokoschka emphasized expressive plurality of form, movement, and atmosphere in his writing, for instance when observing the way Titian's *Pieta* captured ontological experience with tricks of light and palette and form to create work of the purest expressive order: "The secret of this strange work cannot be grasped all at once. At first glance one sees no more than a religious subject dating from the period when the Pantocrator of Byzantine Christianity had given place to the suffering son of Man who sacrificed himself for the sins of man. ---The keynote is set by the motionless, limp figure of the Son of Man in the lap of the blue-clad Mother of God, placed centrally in the depths of a grotto. But what a blue it is! I had to look closely several times, because within that carefully calculated perspectival space I had the impression of a movement: the central group seemed to be retreating into the distance before my very eyes. The explanation must presumably lie in Titian's use of color." (*My Life*, 200) Kokoschka sees Titian using color to create an illusion of movement outwards from the (imaginary) depth of the canvas and supplementing perspective with color. The artist wrote of his lifelong search for revelatory clues for "depth" in art, and for insightful and meaningful painting, examining the use of formal qualities to create spiritual or emotive qualities, such as those often seen in expressionism, specifically the use of resonant color: "Is it then the extraordinary effect of the Madonna's blue robe? No, there is more to it than that. What is involved here is neither kineticism nor optical experiment, but a statement in visual terms, such as no theory can explain. The creation of a distinct picture plane in which to set apart the mother and her dead son is an expression of grief at the annihilation of the human spirit as it has been known since antiquity. To rationalist beholders this painting will hold no message or warning; for they live in a world whose reality consists exclusively of measurable, countable facts, which can be photographed or otherwise mechanically produced." (*My Life*, 200, my italics.) Although Kokoschka retreats from theorizing the effect he sees in Titian, it is precisely in what he rejects - an exclusively mechanical, empirical reality - that we can see where his real interests lie.

Kokoschka's early painting is characterized by the play of iconographic dissemblance, kinetic use of color, and abstracted backgrounds, all pointing to the centrality of emotion and set in a fleeting temporal space, often overcast with sfumato and nocturnal aura. In his paintings, the picture plane shifts, and like the process of dreaming, reflects displaced emotion and significance, represented in often in the face of the sitter, awash in the density of the aura or the scratched textural canvas. Out of an atmosphere of fog, the sitters emerge like figures from the cloud of the artist's
imagination. While Kokoschka's work can be measured by logical observations of the use of color, application of paint, and the general formlessness of the backgrounds, his work is in some ways indescribable. This difficulty arises because the primary subject of the paintings is something immeasurable and illogical: the painter's process of artistic vision and insight revealing the workings of his sitter's inner mind and state of being. Some of the portraits appear disjointed and unflattering, stark renderings of the subject's neuroses. His sitters often summarily rejected them, though some later recognized the truth of the depiction. This essay will further investigate Kokoschka's unique artistic process and the idea that a painting can make a statement in visual terms.

I. Detachment from Illusionism:

Born in Pöchlorn, Austria, in 1886, Kokoschka began his artistic career in fin de siècle Vienna with training at the Kunstgewerbeschule and commissions for the Wiener Werkstätte. Having already completed an illustrated book of expressionist poetry, Die Traumenden Knaben, in 1908 for the Wiener Werkstätte, Kokoschka began to paint expressionist portraits in 1909, stylistically and philosophically diverging from the codified standards of beauty of the Viennese Secession and Jugendstil. The artist was searching for what Merleau-Ponty, referring to Cézanne, has called depth; the meeting of technique, form, and the intangible on the picture plane, something beyond copying and reproducing, exceeding decoration and allegorical representation. For the most part, Kokoschka's portraits were of the Viennese intellectual elite, commissioned through introductions facilitated by the architect and theorist Adolf Loos. While these paintings began as courtly portraits, they also embodied conceptual experimental messages about emotion and "truth" but without the symbols of social status and history. Displacing historicism, Kokoschka's anti-naturalist imagery emphasized the sitter's psychological state of being, and, implicitly, the artist's own intuitive creative process. Characteristically, the portraits feature subjects with haunted countenances against indistinct dusk-like backgrounds. Kokoschka also exaggerated the physical features of his subjects in order to depict psychological affect, while at the same time omitting both contextual background and any scheme of metaphorical or analogical symbolism. The young artist clearly came to these techniques from a sense that artistic inspiration is somehow primordial and visionary: "The state of awareness of visions is not one in which we are either remembering or perceiving. It is rather a level of consciousness at which we experience visions within ourselves." (Kokoschka, On the Nature of Visions, 1912). Indeed, Kokoschka claimed that he had inherited the gift of second sight from his mother; his belief in this mystical ability was a primary source of inspiration. While the artist developed a compelling subjectivity linked to an investment in the cult of the artist as visionary, it can be said that the Viennese portraits were not discursive, in the sense that they did not address a codified, shared artistic sensibility, nor did they engage in the social or formal discourse of the traditional portrait. Rather, I argue that Kokoschka's paintings articulate a metaphysical way of portraying focusing on the artistic process itself. The purposefully atmospheric, vague backgrounds serve as metaphor for his mystic powers of revelation and imagination. In these paintings, the physical is engendered by the depiction of the psychological, the form crumbling away from the center into surrounding backgrounds and indistinct foregrounds. The discursive object-the portrait's nominal
subject is no longer the central essence of the painting. Instead, the subject becomes a reification of psychological truth. Kokoschka explains this process: “The effect is such that the visions seem actually to modify one’s consciousness, at least in respect of everything which their own form proposes as their pattern and significance. There is an outpouring of feeling into the image which becomes, as it were, the soul’s plastic embodiment.” (Kokoschka, On the Nature of Visions)

By the late 19th century, the experimentation of artists such as Edouard Manet, Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Edvard Munch among others had already changed the practice of portraiture through inventive conveyance of feeling and sentiment beyond formulaic analogy. Using unorthodox color and exaggerated line and form, these artists went beyond narrative representation and codes of allegory and status, all supplanted by subjective views. However, much like the landscape painting of Joseph Mallord William Turner and Claude Monet, Kokoschka’s particular innovations also embody the intangible, the hidden play of light, reflection and shadow in vapor like movement, transformed by Kokoschka through a psychological mirage of the sitter on the picture plane, dissolving and reemerging like a grotesque ghost exposed with bright paint, gestural brush strokes, and exposed canvas, techniques seen in early Fauvism and the work of van Gogh.

II. The Paintings: Beyond the Physical Figure

Kokoschka’s early paintings (between 1909 and 1911) include over fifty portraits. From the start of this highly prolific period the artist adhered less and less to plasticity, moving farther and farther from the style of the Secession and the formal parameters of portraiture. Despite Kokoschka’s own account of rejection and the poor reviews in the Viennese press, he was not entirely an outcast. When his work at the 1908 Kunstschau generated a popular scandal, the architect Adolf Loos introduced Kokoschka to intellectual leaders such as Karl Kraus and acted as a liaison for various portraiture commissions. Loos brought Kokoschka into the intellectual circle of the Café Central, where he met Peter Altenberg, Georg Krackl, Arnold Schoenberg, and others. One of Kokoschka’s first transitional works was the 1909 portrait of Ernst Reinhold (Trance Player; Musée d’Art Moderne, Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels). Reinhold, an actor, had played a lead in Kokoschka’s expressionist play Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen earlier the same year. This fragmentary portrait engages the viewer with Reinhold’s gaze, which provides a forceful psychic impression. Elsewhere in the portrait Kokoschka retreats from naturalistic representation, especially in the abstraction of the hands and a roughness in texture and ghostly lighting, emphasizing movement and brushstroke and calling attention to the process of painting and to the spectral quality of the sitter. Such subjectivity turns the viewer from the subject toward the artistic process itself, and to the artist’s vision. In the valorization of his subjective viewpoint, Kokoschka reconfigures the role of portraits: they become a locus for the mystic interpretation of the psychological state of sitters, and a site for artistic experimentation. Kokoschka achieves a plurality in his technique-disregard for naturalistic rendering, the use of movement, transience, distortion, abstracted backgrounds—that moves the portrait from a created illusion of reality toward abstraction. The abstracted atmospheric background in this painting, as in Kokoschka’s other portraits, functions as a visual
The real painter purposefully "upsets the givens," and Kokoschka does so by using many different dissonant techniques to create effect and depth. The artist uses movement and broad gestural strokes of strong color to render a portrait of lucidity and embodiment in the portrait of Adolf Loos, 1909 (Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin). This work is a regal portrait that achieves its power and presence by means of artisanal practice in place of indexical signs. Kokoschka orchestrates a sense of powerful movement with diagonal slashes of color in the background and foreground and in the cloth of Loos' suit. Loos, the embodiment of intellectual rigor, is at the center of a rich kineticism that is perceptually confusing. Is it the psychic power of an electrified Loos, or is it the effect of the tumultuous blue background that creates this intense sense of power and movement? Generally, despite this exercise in optical trickery and legerdemain, the painting is more formal than some of his later, more experimental works. Kokoschka's nod to symbolism is seen in the way in which Loos' authority is signified by his regally clasped hands at the center of the painting.

In 1908, Loos commissioned the portrait of the Viennese writer Peter Altenberg. In this work, Kokoschka has utilized the standard expressionist vocabulary of intense color and gestural, kinetic handling of paint, rendering a spiritual or psychological resonance, something intangible and quite apart from stylistic modes. Uninterested in formal techniques of realism, Kokoschka focuses on the painting's surface, his process readable in the brushstroke and pigment, thereby emphasizing the artist's role at the same time as creating the plastic effect of aggravated tension and movement. There is anxiety in Altenberg's face and his reddened hands and neck appear distressed, and all this is set against a confusingly abstract background, the force of the black halo and sfumato rendering the foreground and center uncertain. Kokoschka has added to the depressive tension by rough scraping of the textured canvas with spots of red pigment and dismal black and yellows. Kokoschka claimed, "When I paint a portrait, I am not concerned with the externals of a person - the signs of his clerical or secular eminence, or his social origins." (My Life, 33). Accordingly, this work expresses only Altenberg's emotional state-vague anxiety and social awkwardness-rendered in exaggerated shaky form and line, while Altenberg's intellectual or social status is simply not evident. In this portrait, Kokoschka liberates what is formless, the essence of experience, the emotional or psychological life. His philosophical outlook can be understood in view of Merleau-Ponty's description of this liberation: "The painter's vision is not a view upon the outside, a merely physical-optical relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible." (Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, 124). Kokoschka's reification of the intangible is also evident in the portrait Martha Hirsch, Dreaming Woman, 1909 (Neue Galerie, New York). Removed from the reassuring background of a parlor or other metaphorical setting, Kokoschka's portrait is clearly less a matter of the synthetic representation of the subject than a mimetic impression, almost phantasmagorical. The artist depicts Martha Hirsch against a floating resonant black aura, awash with nervous tension. She is dreaming, lost in thought, distracted and isolated by the black shadow. Kokoschka has scraped away at the surface, creating a surface of tension, and shifting perspective and
emphasis, encouraging the viewer to gaze upon Martha's face and back and forth confusingly to the aura and surface of the ghostly foreground and background. Adding to this sense of mysterious movement and sense of timelessness, Kokoschka does not give us any discursive clues about the identity of this anxious woman—what social class she belongs, her family, her social status, or any other elements of the ordinary visual language of analogy and metaphor. Instead, we are presented with a picture that is purely emotional impression, an expressiveness rendered by the artist's first impression of his subject. This perceptual confusion is best understood in the context of Kokoschka's own writing: "I depend very much on being able to capture a mental impression, the impression that remains behind when the image itself has passed. In a face I look for the flash of the eye, the tiny shift of expression, which betrays an inner movement" (My Life, 33). Here the artist intentionally creates shifting planes of focus, in order to encourage the view that his subjective depiction has its own importance specifically in his capturing of movement and transience and the intangible on the picture plane, rendered in an engagement of abstraction and presence and ghostly subjects conveyed with expressive abstracted brushstrokes. Kokoschka's technique is one of both jarring rigor and purposeful abstraction meant to reflect transcendent vision.

Another portrait that uses painterly technique to focus on the narrative of inner movement is the painting of Ludwig Ritter Van Janikowski (private collection, New York). Kokoschka claimed that his subject suffered from an incurable infliction the Viennese called the French Disease. "Loos wanted me to paint his portrait before the disease attacked his brain, which it was soon expected to do, and indeed not long afterwards he died" (My Life, 42). Painted in 1909 in the Steinhof mental hospital, Kokoschka's gestural application of paint and textural scratches create a sense of movement and emotional tension. These patterns are repeated in the background and the face, creating a sense that Kokoschka has captured a moment in time, a snapshot of his beleaguered sitter's life. However, unlike a photograph, the painting expresses something not seen in the plastic form and symbol, but in a mode of thought—purposely vague, awash with a sense of mental anguish and confusion, and loss. The dark sfumato background lends to the impression of the fleeting and immaterial. Kokoschka emphasized the importance of motion: "I try to keep my sitters moving and talking, to make them forget they are being painted. This has nothing to do with extracting intimate secrets or confessions but rather with establishing, in motion, an essential image of the kind that remains in memory or recurs in dreams. I could not do this if my sitter had to keep still, as he might for a photographer, or to hold a stiff pose." (My Life, 33) Here the impression of motion and transience is so comprehensive that the melancholic Van Janikowski resembles a specter emerging from a nocturnal fire, a figure from the artist's nightmare. Kokoschka described the search for a painterly way to depict the intangible, the spectral, and the spiritual realm: "For centuries, artists tried to find a solution to the problem of the gradual fading of the inner light; there were experiments, for example, with two-fold lighting, candle-flames and moonlight—as in different ways with Altdorfer and Caravaggio, or in El Greco's tinfoil-like color." (My Life, 210)

The use of two-fold nocturnal lighting can be seen in Kokoschka's painting of the Conte Verona who suffered from tuberculosis. Kokoschka's 1910 portrait departs from the other works by extending still further the marked exaggeration of features, set against a nocturnal vapor like atmosphere, a subversion of the illuminated vagaries of Monet and Turner. The Conte appears like a character in a dream or distorted figment of Kokoschka's mind, emerging on the canvas from an elemental, cloudy yellow space,
providing an aura for his nightmarish, exaggerated features. Kokoschka defies the usual rules of logic and clouds the viewer's perception with the impression of memory, dissolution, and sleeplessness. Though painted at the Leysin sanatorium, the portrait disregards the demands of naturalism and neither resembles the sitter nor establishes a hospital environment. Primarily it is the artist's impression or intuitive vision that is articulated, as well as the sorrow of the Count's life, his melancholy invalid's face rendered with broad energetic brushstrokes in a harsh palette. The Count's face struck Kokoschka as caving in; he explains how such intuitions are articulated: "What used to shock people in my portraits was that I tried to intuit from the face, from its play of expressions, and from gestures, the truth about a particular person, and to recreate in my own pictorial language the distillation of a living that would survive in my memory." (My Life, 33) This practice of distillation of truth (an entirely subjective truth) can also be seen in Kokoschka's 1911 portrait of the Baron Viktor von Dirtzay. (Sprengel Museum, Hanover). Though the artist was friendly with the Baron, even illustrating his books, he recognized his friend was complicated: "Even Freud, who he went to for years, could not heal him, because the cause of his illness was the contempt he felt for his family." (My Life, 46) In the Baron's portrait, Kokoschka uses a highly stylized technique of bands of white light and diagonal and vertical lines to illuminate and invigorate the picture plane. The contrast of the oceanic background with the graphic black lines and vibrant blues and whites create dissonance and contrast. The Baron's white hands look as if they belong to a corpse, yet they are illuminated like the hands of a saint in an El Greco painting, contributing to an eerie and ghostly iconic focus while contrasting with the opprobrium the portrait also emphasizes. Further, the geometry and high graphic quality belies the tragic sense of self-satisfaction on the Baron's face, and as a result the portrait seems almost contemptuous. Kokoschka explains, "It is not my trade to unmask society, but to seek in the portrait of an individual his inner life, that measure of all things" (My Life, 23). Tragically, the Baron died in a double suicide with his wife Klara in 1935.

III. Return to mysticism

The patronage of Adolf Loos allowed Kokoschka the opportunity to paint a considerable number of portraits of the elite, of renowned intellectuals. However, as the portraits show, Kokoschka was not interested in taking part in biographical fiction making for others, in his paintings modes of power and privilege were no longer part of the metaphorical language of portraiture. The status of the subjects seems almost incidental; they have become players in the drama of the artist's life and his vision. There is a total elimination of a story told in analogy and social piety, instead the sitter is framed by a constellation of radiating auras of malaise and anxiety. In some sense there is a disruption of historicism, beyond the poetic or political. Kokoschka's portraits convey the intangible emotional state of the sitter relying entirely on his own subjective observation of the sitter's psychic aura, made as if in a mystical trance and rendered in a style unconcerned with naturalism. Along with his colleagues and contemporaries (such as Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse and Vincent van Gogh), Kokoschka contributed to the perception of the art of painting as something subjective and psychologically expressive rather than primarily discursive and historical. However, Kokoschka did not only engage within a subversion of the social or formal discourse of the traditional
portrait. Rather, his paintings proposed a new way of portraying people. In fact, the object portrayed is no longer the subject or even the essence of the painting; rather it is the metaphysical transfiguration exposed by Kokoschka's "visionary" emphasis on pure intuition. Kokoschka's innovation, then, lies in the intentional representation of both his subjective view of his sitters, in the portrayal not of their rational and physical context but their subjective inner life, contrasted with atmospheric backgrounds symbolic of artistic process. With this innovative approach, he contributed to the development of the analysis of art beyond matters of form and discourse.

Kokoschka's philosophical understanding and investment in artistic intuition meant that his painting penetrated beyond daily appearances, delving under skin to reveal inner faces, as Adolf Loos once put it. It is said that the ability Kokoschka claimed, to see into the souls of those he painted, allowed him to expose anxiety, corruption, malaise, innocence, and even mental illness in his portraits, described as "psychograms." More importantly, Kokoschka articulated a singular dialogue that espoused his belief or philosophy that the truly inventive artist had the ability to see the inner life of his sitter. He painted what he "saw," but because of the nature of his vision he was not tethered to naturalism or plasticity. However, Kokoschka was not particularly interested in complete visual abstraction. Rather, he emphasized and relied on the creative power of the unconscious and the dream world, from which spiritual forms emerge, something stronger and more meaningful than what scientific realism, or photography, or pure abstraction might render. Kokoschka describes the spiritual voyage of artistic discovery: "I search, inquire and guess. And with what sudden eagerness must the lamp wick seek its nourishment, for the flame leaps before my eyes as the oil feeds it. It is my imagination, certainly, what I see there in the blaze." (Kokoschka, On the Nature of Visions)

Although Kokoschka's paintings are often characterized as powerful depictions of the emotional, specifically the exposing of the sitter's hidden inner life and emotional states, the discourse created by the artist's autobiographical writing as well as art historical criticism has also focused on the mystic powers of the artist himself and his discovery of emotion, and even quintessential expressionism. Certainly, a return to mysticism is key to development of expressionism, something subjectively imaginative rather than referentially discursive. Kokoschka's technique relied primarily on the exaggeration of corporeal elements juxtaposed by with immaterial psychic effect generated by a sense of movement through vagaries of light and shadow and sfumato. But through the process of a mystical mimesis, perhaps out of an imaginative stream of consciousness-described by the artist as clairvoyant and visionary-these portraits are not part of a collective artistic understanding or discourse. Rather, they are an archaeological remnant of Kokoschka's mind. As the artist wrote in his 1961 essay, I Paint Portraits Because I Can "We today have no social exemplar that could give the portrait in particular a sense and meaning over and above that of the physical figure." True inventiveness, it would seem, transcends the plastic and natural, the mechanics of form and symbol, and resides instead in the imagination and soul of the painter. Unfettered by repression, the painter has access to the world of the mind and inner life.
Rosa Berland is an Assistant Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Current research interests include early 20th century Europe, specifically the emergence of literary and visual expressionism and the development of Latin American modernism with a special focus on surrealism. Rosa_Berland@moma.org

Oskar Kokoschka, My Life, translated from the German by David Britt, New York, Macmillan, 1974, p. 37. A work of art made from paint applied to canvas, wood, paper, or another support (noun). Glossary. A representation of oneself made by oneself. Glossary. Who said what? Oskar Kokoschka said: ‘There is no such thing as a German, French, or Anglo-American Expressionism! There are only young people trying to find their bearings in the world.’

1. DID YOU KNOW? Kokoschka’s work spans multiple mediums including painting, printmaking, and playwriting. Through many Expressionist influences in Berlin, Kokoschka created early examples of Expressionist plays. Below is an example of one of his early plays, Murderer, Hope of Women. Related Links.