

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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## OSKAR KOKOSCHKA, FAMOUS EXPRESSIONIST PAINTER, SEEN IN RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION AT MUSEUM

The first major retrospective exhibition in New York of the well-known Austrian expressionist Oskar Kokoschka will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from July 20 to September 28. More than 50 paintings, an early sculpture and a selection of prints and book illustrations summarize the artist's career of 40 years. Loans from European and American museums include 5 major works from The Austrian State Picture Gallery never before exhibited in this country. Two recent canvases are to arrive from Switzerland in time for the New York opening. The exhibition was assembled for circulation by the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art and has been shown in 4 other American cities. It is to be installed in the first floor galleries by Margaret Miller of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Painting and Sculpture.

A personality of great and diverse talents, Kokoschka has fought throughout his stormy career as a pamphleteer, playwright and painter for the freedom of the artist and the integrity of the individual. The first of the "degenerate" artists in the Hitler sense of the word, he estimates that the Nazis destroyed perhaps one-third of his total work. The artist's portraits show us the personalities involved in the intellectual ferment of pre-World War I Vienna, as well as of the doomed pre-Hitler German generation. Magnificent views of some of the world's most fascinating places round out his particular vision.

Together with the French Georges Rouault and the German Max Beckmann, the Austrian Oskar Kokoschka forms the so-called "trinity" of contemporary expressionist painters. The use of distortion and elongation, the bold immediacy of colors, the overemphasized gesture and the newly revitalized symbolism are all characteristics of expressionist art and of Oskar Kokoschka's painting in particular.

The tempestuous story of Kokoschka's life is as fascinating as his work. He was born in 1886 at Pöchlarn, Austria. Though his family was often in material want, his father, a goldsmith, and his strongly intuitive mother early instilled into their three children a love of nature and an enthusiasm for philosophy, literature and music. Though

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Kokoschka was first interested in chemistry as a career, at the age of 18 he accepted a scholarship to the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts. In the Vienna of 1904 the revolt against 19th-century academic art was still a burning issue and was focused in a short-lived decorative style called Art Nouveau in France and Sezession in Austria. Kokoschka at first came under its influence, but at the Vienna Kunstschau in 1908 he exhibited a Self Portrait, a painted terracotta sculpture, that represented a complete break with this decorative movement. Only by comparing the sinuous, ingratiating quality of Art Nouveau\* with the expressionist violence of this head, can the shock to the official Viennese art world be estimated. An attending Austrian Archduke, Francis Ferdinand - later assassinated at Sarajevo - snorted, "This man's bones should be broken in his body!" The newspapers declared him a "public terror," a "degenerate artist" and a "puddle of foul stink." From these published attacks Adolf Hitler may have first formed his "Germanic" art theories. (In documents found after the war, Hitler had ordered Kokoschka shot without trial should he be found.)

In connection with the Kunstschau several evenings of entertainment were arranged at which two of his plays were performed. Written largely at rehearsals, the plays were strange and moody with occasional flashes of brilliance and highlighted the bigoted shallowness of bourgeois life. The audience, however, started riots in the theatre; the open-air performance was spoiled by a regiment of Moravian soldiers stationed nearby who interfered in alarm. Bloodshed was barely averted by the arrival of the police. These episodes cost Kokoschka his teaching post in the school, and only through his friends who helped to support him on portrait commissions, was he able to survive.

In spite of his condemnation in official circles, Kokoschka won tireless and ardent supporters among the younger and more progressive artists and writers in Vienna and Berlin, notably the pioneer modern architect, Adolf Loos, the art historian, Hans Tietze, and the Berlin editor and impresario, Herwarth Walden, all of whose portraits are included in the exhibition. Since Kokoschka was generally regarded as one of the founders of the expressionist drama, and continued to write for the theatre, poets and dramatists, such as Peter Altenberg, Ritter von Janikowsky and Walter Hasenclever were his most frequent portrait subjects.

\*An exhibition of Art Nouveau furniture and decorative arts from the Museum Collection is in a gallery adjoining the Kokoschka exhibition.

In the years before the first World War Kokoschka divided his time between Berlin and Vienna. A friend describes him at this period as a silent and serious young man who could, however, be intellectually voluble and charming but usually preferred to remain reserved. His favorite topics of conversation were not art subjects but rather the world production of coal and petroleum, the misery of people living in slums and the need for poor children to get to the country. His social consciousness was early aroused and is still a major interest. In Berlin Kokoschka was in close contact with the most progressive minds in Germany, both politically and artistically. He became an illustrator for periodicals such as Der Sturm. The paintings of this period, such as The Tempest of 1914 which emerged from a clash of temperaments between himself and a Viennese woman whom he loved, tell also of the impending world cataclysm.

Though a pacifist and determined not to kill the enemy, Kokoschka at the outbreak of war sold his great canvas, The Tempest, to buy a horse, joined a cavalry regiment and left for the Russian front. There he was soon ambushed, shot through the head and bayoneted through the lungs. Declared unfit for further duty he was sent to a Stockholm brain specialist who was unable to help him. Despairing, Kokoschka decided to commit suicide on the front; but through a mysterious friend he was saved, and instead he played a part in Dresden in some of the most dramatic phases of the German revolution.

The painter was ill and subject to frequent mental aberrations due to his wartime head injury. He provoked a sensation by ordering the making of a life-size doll, intended to serve him as companion and model.

Dresden proved a harmonious setting both for his painting and for the relaxing of his troubled mental state. He was made a professor at the Dresden Academy in 1919. With his position came a studio from which he painted the view of the Elbe Bridge, Dresden I, 1920, in which the bright, saturated colors give an indication of the painter's renewed confidence.

In 1924 he left Dresden, and during the following years he traveled through most of the countries of Europe and the Near East where he painted from rooftops and turret windows his ambitious and spectacular scenes of towns, usually signing them "O. K."

He returned to Vienna in 1931 to be with his sick mother, and he

remained there until 1934. Deeply affected by the Nazi persecutions in Germany and the firing on workers' homes in Vienna, he attempted to make of his painting political weapons to be used against the Dollfuss "dictatorship," against Nazism and finally against war itself. In 1934, having been named the most degenerate of degenerate artists, he was forced to flee from Vienna and settled in Prague. There he painted his famous portrait of Masaryk together with the 17th-century educator and humanist, Jan Amos Comenius. The pure artist was now thoroughly subordinated to the pamphleteer and propagandist.

Eight of Kokoschka's paintings were hung in the 1937 "Degenerate Art" exhibition in Munich. In 1938 he escaped to England. Here he painted the symbolic What We Are Fighting For, 1942-43. But in general he found it difficult to paint in London, a city fighting for its existence. Moreover, the fate of many of his works, then outlawed on the Continent, was in grave doubt. The Knize collection, for example, of which 6 paintings are included in this exhibition, was smuggled out of Austria in 1941. Rolled up in a suitcase, the canvases were taken to Switzerland where the Kunsthaus in Zurich restored them and kept them for the owners who finally retrieved them only last year.

Since the war, Kokoschka's old spirit has re-established itself in such works as the superb view of the Matterhorn, 1947, and the View of Florence, 1949. At 63, he is vigorous and active. He will come to this country from Europe to teach painting in the Berkshires this summer, and later he expects to travel in America.

A catalog of the exhibition has been prepared by James S. Plaut, Director of the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art. It contains 48 plates in photogravure and 8 plates in color, a letter from the artist and an analysis of the paintings in the exhibition. A paper-bound copy of this volume is available at the Museum of Modern Art for \$1.75.