Oskar Kokoschka: Expressionist, Migrant, European

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In June 1908, 22-year-old Oskar Kokoschka was introduced to the public at the *Internationale Kunstschau* in Vienna. A student at the Academy of Applied Arts, he exhibited the illustrated book *The Dreaming Youths,* commissioned by the Viennese Workshops a year earlier (Fig. 1). The book was not well received – as the *Wiener Zeitung* suggested, one 'could not see anything more ridiculous' at the exhibition. [1] It would take another year for Kokoschka to manifest his position as *enfant terrible* of pre-war Austrian art: at the *Kunstschau* in 1909, he presented *Murder, Hope of Women* (Fig. 2). An expressionist play based on the struggle for power between male and female archetypes (the conqueror and the femme fatale), the performance caused so much outrage that its creator only narrowly escaped arrest. For all the scandal it caused, the play traced a significant shift in the artistic trajectory of Vienna 1900: moving away from the flowery decadence of art nouveau towards raw expressionism, a new generation of artists challenged the ideals of their predecessors at the dawn of the Great War.
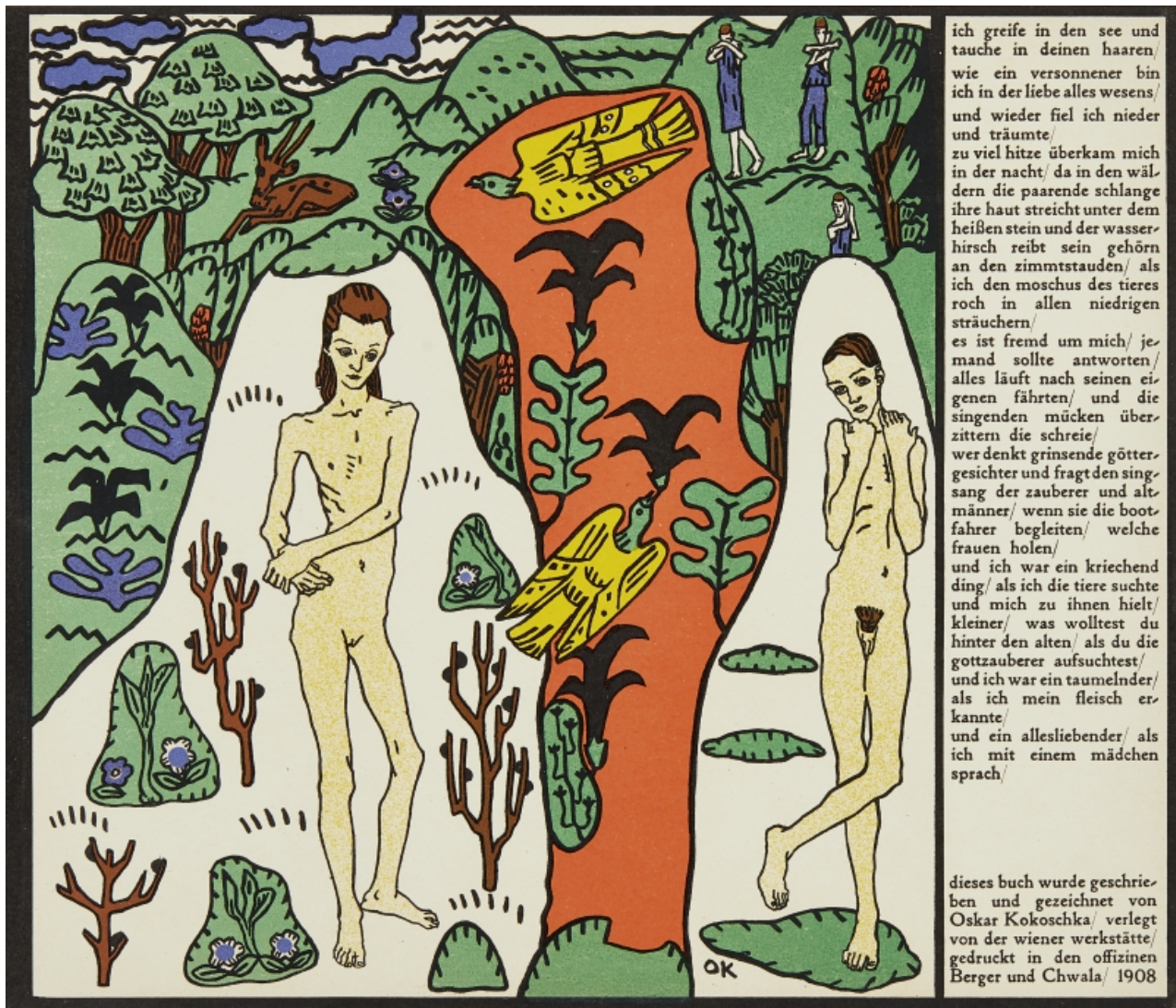
ich greife in den see und tauche in deinen haaren/ wie ein versonnener bin ich in der liebe alles wesens/ und wieder fiel ich nieder und träumte/ zu viel hitze überkam mich in der nacht/ da in den wäldern die paarende schlange ihre haut streicht unter dem heißen stein und der wasserhirsch reibt sein gehörn an den zimmtstauden/ als ich den moschus des tieres roch in allen niedrigen sträuchern/ es ist fremd um mich/ jemand sollte antworten/ alles läuft nach seinen eigenen fährten/ und die singenden mücken überzittern die schreie/ wer denkt grinsende göttergesichter und fragt den singsang der zauberer und altmänner/ wenn sie die bootfahrer begleiten/ welche frauen holen/ und ich war ein kriechend ding/ als ich die tiere suchte und mich zu ihnen hielt/ kleiner/ was wolltest du hinter den alten/ als du die gottzauberer aufsuchtest/ und ich war ein taumelnder/ als ich mein fleisch erkannte/ und ein allesliebender/ als ich mit einem mädchen sprach/

dieses buch wurde geschrieben und gezeichnet von Oskar Kokoschka/ verlegt von der wiener werkstätte/ gedruckt in den offizinen Berger und Chwala/ 1908

Fig. 1. Oskar Kokoschka: "The Girl Li and I", Page 8 from *The Dreaming Youths*, 1907/08, Leopold Museum, Vienna – photo: Leopold Museum, Vienna/Manfred Thumberger © Fondation Oskar Kokoschka/Bildrecht Vienna, 2019

This well-established narrative forms the entrance to the retrospective *Oskar Kokoschka: Expressionist, Migrant, European* at Vienna's Leopold Museum. Encompassing a wide selection of over 250 works, including Kokoschka's best-known paintings and drawings as well as some exceptional loans, such as a recently discovered mural for Alma Mahler, the exhibition aims to shift focus from the prodigal artist who never abandoned figurative painting to broader societal positions he adopted throughout his life.

Moving from Kokoschka's early years as the scandal-making young artist to his extensive work as 'soul slasher' ('Seelenaufschlitzer') portraitist, as his intense psychological portraits were called by Alfred Ehrenstein, the exhibition initially follows Kokoschka the young expressionist, reaching its first peak in the context of his intense relationship with Alma Mahler. After their separation, a heartbroken Kokoschka volunteered to fight in the Great War. Yet the trauma of war seems only secondary to that of separation, documented in disturbing plays and emotive double portraits, which unequivocally pair the notion of 'expressionism' with that of the tormented artist. Kokoschka's fixation on Mahler was only resolved in 1919, when the artist beheaded a

custom-made surrogate doll to find closure (Fig. 3).

In combination with the restrictive binary forms of *femme fatale/femme enfante* present throughout his work and his close relationship to figures like Adolf Loos, whose abuse of young girls has only recently come to light, Kokoschka's use of violence against the female body as an artistic trope is deeply troubling. Yet while the exhibition offers some brief commentary on the misogyny and troubled masculinity tied to the culture of Vienna 1900, Kokoschka's position as the male genius is perpetuated – particularly because the exhibition narrative privileges his voice and perspective above all.

Fig. 2. Oskar Kokoschka: Poster for his drama *Murder, Hope of Women* in the Internationale Kunstschau, 1909, Leopold Museum, Vienna – photo: Leopold Museum, Vienna/Manfred Thumberger © Fondation Oskar Kokoschka/Bildrecht Vienna, 2019

Fig. 3. Exhibition View: Oskar Kokoschka: Expressionist, Migrant, European 2019 – photo byLisa Rastl © Leopold Museum, Vienna

The convergence of personal and political ruptures in 1918/19 implies a break in Kokoschka's oeuvre, intensified by his move to Dresden in 1919, where he held a professorship at the Academy of Fine Arts until 1924. In relation to the 1920s and 30s, the exhibition focuses on Kokoschka's travels and his moves between Vienna, Dresden and Prague, where he relocated to after the collapse of the First Austrian Republic in 1934. Here, Kokoschka's 'migrant identity' is emphasised, which in many ways was characteristic for that of someone growing up in the late Habsburg Empire. Born in Pöchlarn (Lower Austria) to parents from Bohemia, Kokoschka first became a citizen of the First Austrian Republic after 1918, but, moving to Prague after the collapse of the Republic in 1934, he gained Czechoslovak citizenship the following year. With the National Socialist invasion looming over the Czech Lands after the Munich Agreement, he fled to Britain with his partner Olda Palkovská, becoming a British citizen in 1946. The couple moved to Switzerland in 1953 and Kokoschka re-adopted Austrian citizenship in 1975. Based on the many passports he held at different times therefore, Kokoschka could be claimed by several national histories of art at different stages of his career. The exhibition acknowledges this, however, neither positions itself within the discourse nor directly comments the issue. And Kokoschka himself? In an interview with the German tabloid *Bunte* in 1971, he responded to Austrian Chancellor Brno Kreisky's offer of citizenship with the words, 'What does a passport even mean? I have always and everywhere been Austrian!'[2]

While this statement, though perhaps nostalgic, would be an entry point into the artist's identity as 'migrant' and 'European', the topic here is largely treated on a surface level, relating to geographical and architectural landmarks. Overall, the artist's focus on allegory, (self-)portraits and the female figure seamlessly continues from his pre-war years, revealing only a formal shift: more cheerful with bright colours and rougher brushwork, Kokoschka's painting style seems to settle and to become much more coherent in the interwar years (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Oskar Kokoschka: *Dresden, Augustusbrücke with Figure*, 1923, Museum Folkwang, Essen – photo: Museum Folkwang, Essen/Artothek © Fondation Oskar Kokoschka/Bildrecht Vienna, 2019

Despite Kokoschka's extensive travels and moves, therefore, chances of a close engagement with how formal changes in his work might relate to his position as a migrant in the social and political hotbed of interwar Central Europe are missed.

In fact, Kokoschka had already begun to travel in the 1910s with a stint in Berlin, yet the exhibition particularly focuses on the topic of migration in relation to the rise of National Socialism, when Kokoschka was declared a 'degenerate artist' and included in the infamous 1937 exhibition in Munich. The same year, one of his paintings was slashed by a Nazi sympathiser, and the destroyed painting became the focus of a London exhibition of émigré art. Narrated by newspaper clippings and video footage of the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition, the presentation of the attack on Kokoschka's work is also supplemented by a letter in which the artist complains about the incident to the Austrian chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg (Fig. 5). That the Austro-fascist regime politicised Kokoschka in their own terms in the mid-1930s, showing him as the great 'Austrian artist' to spite the NS-regime, is, however, barely touched upon.

Instead, the focus of the exhibition shifts to Kokoschka's British exile as the point in time when his political engagement became the strongest. Safe from alien internment as a Czechoslovak citizen, Kokoschka produced aid posters and a series of allegorical paintings commenting on the flawed politics of the Allies in the lead up to and during the war. In comparison to the space devoted to the fin-de-siècle, however, little time is spent on these activities, seamlessly moving on to the late 1940s and 50s when Kokoschka was rehabilitated in Austria. No doubt, his anti-Fascist activities in exile helped to raise his profile in a country needing to redefine itself after National Socialism. Exemplified by the large *Prometheus Triptych,* commissioned by Count Antoine Sailern, and paintings for the Salzburg Festival, Kokoschka largely maintained his interwar painting style and motifs (Fig. 6). Given this strong sense of continuity, the final rooms in the exhibition resemble an epilogue, with the artist's success firmly anchored in his 'wild days' of a fin-de-siècle past.

Fig. 5. Oskar Kokoschka: *Self-Portrait of a 'Degenerate Artist',* 1937, National Galleries of Scotland, on loan from a private collection – photo: National Galleries of Scotland © Fondation Oskar Kokoschka/Bildrecht Vienna, 2019

Fig. 6. Oskar Kokoschka: *Prometheus Triptychon (Hades und Persephone, Apokalypse, Prometheus),* 1950, The Courtauld Gallery, London – photo: The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London © Fondation Oskar Kokoschka/Bildrecht Vienna, 2019

The phrases most frequently used to describe Kokoschka are 'champion of figurative art', 'enfant terrible', and, in relation to his growing political conscience in the interwar years, 'homo politicus'. Yet even though the exhibition promises a reassessment of these terms in relation to concepts echoing contemporary issues, 'migrant' and 'European', it does not go beyond loose associations and upholds most of the artist-myth surrounding Kokoschka in a classical narrative that seems to coincide with established historical narratives.

While the fin-de-siècle is presented as a golden age that brought to light Kokoschka's creativity (notwithstanding his problematic representation of women), the years between the two World Wars appear as a less successful, muddled period, defined by continuous change, which resembles narratives of an unstable interwar Austria. As the exhibition suggests, only by living through the Second World War in exile could Kokoschka manifest his position as 'Austrian artist' once and for all – much like analyses of Austrian identity suggest that, after the break-up of the Habsburg Empire, a sense of Austrian identity could only be regained after the Second World War. Despite promises to do things differently, Kokoschka in *Expressionist, Migrant, European* still appears as a barometer of canonical history, while his own position as *artiste celebre* is reaffirmed in this alignment with history at large.

Julia Secklehner

Oskar Kokoschka: Expressionist, Migrant, European (Leopold Museum, Vienna, 6th April to 8th July 2019)

[1] a.fr.,'Bildende Kunst', *Wiener Zeitung,* 9 June 1908.

[2] 'Was bedeuted schon ein Paß? Ich war doch immer und überall Österreicher!'. Kokoschka quoted in 'Oskar Kokoschka: Später Triumph in der Heimat', *Bunte,* no. 26, June 1971, pp. 16-17.