

Else Lasker-Schüler, “Oskar Kokoschka” (1913)

Abstract

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the establishment of a self-consciously “modernist” art. In May 1910, Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980), a young Viennese artist with *Jugendstil* roots, moved to Berlin, where he had mounted his first successful exhibition just a few months earlier. Berlin was a hotbed of artistic experimentation, and Kokoschka quickly joined the staff of the *Sturm*, a new and influential periodical that championed new directions in the visual arts. Traditionalism, however, still remained part of the “official” Berlin art culture. Nonetheless, the following critique of Kokoschka’s work, written by poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945), suggests that innovation and novelty were increasingly being recognized as markers of artistic achievement. Lasker-Schüler sees Kokoschka’s style as a departure from the equally innovative Viennese artist Gustav Klimt.

Source

We walk immediately through the large hall and into the small hall of drawings, a kennel of female bears, women’s bodies, dancing clumsily as though in an old Germanic ceremonial procession; mead is flowing under their fur skins. My companion flees back into the large hall; he is a Troubadour; the Duchess of Montesquieu-Rohan listens with more attention to his song than the lumbering bearess on tuberous soles. And this because Kokoschka’s princesses are hothouse wonders. One can count their carnivorous filaments. All of his breathing creations are blood-sucking vegetable essence; their shocking truth in similarity is veiled by an air of propriety. Why do I suddenly think of Klimt? He is a botanist, Kokoschka a planter. Where Klimt plucks the fruit, Kokoschka digs out the roots—where Klimt reveals the human being, a farm of creatures is generated out of Kokoschka’s colors. I shudder at the sight of the pointed fangs that have cracked, there in the bluish gums of an old man, but in the painting the laughing Italian tears greedily to catch and enjoy the fullness of resplendent life. Kokoschka like Klimt or Klimt like Kokoschka see and sow the animal in man and harvest it each according to their own colors. Tired of love, the lady allows her coaxing body to float back to earth from terrible dreams; she will always land softly on her rose-white claws. The skeleton of the man’s hand vis-à-vis the woman’s portrait is a timeless image on a sheet of paper, its powerful bloom is the Dalai Lama’s head. I also recognize the well-known Viennese architect, listening to his base, gorilla-like pupils and his mute, ape-like speed; a dance without music. My companion points with a Troubadour’s gesture to my blond Hamlet; in an ironic gladiatorial pose, Herwarth Walden struggles against the wanting, wicked spirit of the times. In all of Kokoschka’s paintings there is a ray of light. Out of the crepuscular color of the sky over Bethlehem, two hands, like Maria’s, hand down the child. Many clouds and suns and worlds approach, blue issues forth out of blue. The snow burns on its landscape of snow. It is venerable, like the history of a jubilee: Dürer, Grünewald.

Oskar Kokoschka’s painting is a young priest’s figure, his blue-filled eyes turned towards the heavens, hesitating and proud. He touches human beings like things and places them, compassionate tiny figures, on his hand smiling. I see him always as though through a magnifying glass; I believe he is a giant. Broad shoulders rest upon his slim trunk, his doubly curved forehead thinks also twice. A silent Hindu, chosen and sanctified—his tongue unyielding.

Source: Else Lasker-Schüler, “Oskar Kokoschka,” in *Gesichte. Essays und andere Geschichten*. Leipzig:

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