



Tower Bridge, London

Artist: Oskar Kokoschka, Austrian (1886-1980)

Date: 1925

Creation Place: Europe, Austria

Style: 20th Century

Accession Number: 61.36.5

EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism was a modernist movement, initially in poetry and painting, originating in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Its typical trait is to present the world from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas. Unlike Impressionism, its goals were not to reproduce the impression suggested by the surrounding world, but to strongly impose the artist's own sensibility to the world's representation. The search of harmony and forms is not as important as trying to achieve the highest expression intensity. These artists wanted to express meaning or emotional experience rather than physical reality. Expressionism is one of the main currents of art in the later 19th and the 20th centuries, and its qualities of highly subjective, personal, spontaneous self-expression are typical of a wide range of modern artists and art movements.



Self portrait done by Oskar Kokoschka

ARTIST

Oskar Kokoschka was born in Austria. He was the second of four sons, the family moved to Vienna when he was still very young, and as child he was not particularly attracted to art. However, he entered the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts on scholarship and soon began to expand his activities. He produced a children's book (*hardly suitable for children but but it got his illustrations noticed*), and he also wrote two plays. Because these were brutal, violent, and created a huge scandal, Oskar was dismissed from the school. His chief protector was the pioneer Modernist architect Adolf Loos who secured many portrait commissions for him. His early career was marked by portraits of Viennese celebrities, painted in a nervously animated style. In 1910 he went to Berlin to draw for magazines. In 1911, he returned to Vienna as assistant teacher at the very school that had dismissed him. Also in 1911 he began a passionate, often stormy affair with Alma Mahler. (you knew this was coming)

Now a brief **“you should know”** about Alma. She was a Viennese-born socialite well known in her youth for her beauty and vivacity. She became the wife, successively, of composer Gustav Mahler, architect Walter Gropius, and novelist Franz Werfel, as well as the consort of several other prominent men. (red flag) Our Oskar falls into this category. She was the composer of seventeen songs and an important feature of the artistic scene in Vienna and later in Los Angeles. (I bet)

Between 1912 and 1914 she had a tumultuous affair with Kokoschka, who created many works inspired by his relationship with her, including, perhaps most famously, his painting ***Bride of the Wind***. Oskar's consuming passion was transformed into subjugation and his jealousy into obsession. Kokoschka's mother rushed to her



Alma Mahler

son's assistance and wrote to Alma. "If you see Oskar again, I'll shoot you dead!" This famous painting testifies to that anguished time. When Alma became pregnant by him but had the baby aborted she caused him such a blow that he was never able to recover from it. He continued to love her his entire life.



Bride of the Wind

He joined the army after the break with Alma. Oskar was a dedicated soldier and rapidly advanced to the rank of officer. He was shot, left for dead, spent a period of time in convalescence in Vienna, and then requested to go back to the front. After his second tour of duty he suffered shell shock and was unfit for service. During this time he commissioned a life-sized doll in the likeness of Alma, his former lover. Here was his closest brush with insanity. In 1919, at a wild party, Oskar beheaded the doll, thus separating himself from the curse of his life, Alma.

After a period of recuperation in Dresden, Kokoschka traveled throughout Europe from 1923-34. In the numerous landscapes that resulted from this journey, he perfected the style that was to remain with him for the rest of his career. It was a rapid shorthand approach that combined the spontaneity of watercolor technique with the complex paint densities possible only in oil. His reputation in Germany grew. He was deemed a degenerate by the Nazis and fled to Prague. Following Hitler's invasion of Austria in 1938, and the uncertainty in Europe, Oskar emigrated to England with a young Czech law student whom he would marry in 1941. Her name was Olda Palkovska. His art was very little known in England and therefore a logical place to locate if you sought anonymity. However, it was also very challenging as they were poor and Oskar was bored and depressed with London. He was not eager to stay in a country he felt had slighted him. (I think this is a common complaint from artists)

In 1947 he traveled to the United States, and did lecture at MCAD several times. He has been an inspiration for many artists and is thought of as the inventor of expressionism. Eventually he settled in Switzerland where he lived the rest of his life. He died in 1980.

OUR PIECE

This is one of the finest examples of Kokoschka's ability to express an intellectual and emotional experience. Tower Bridge, London shows the reality behind the experience. He liked to paint from the highest points, thus achieving the greatest visual scope. This work shows his characteristic brush stroke, his extraverted approach and his great objectivity and color. Tower Bridge, London is an emotional experience for Kokoschka and he presents that passion and emotion to us in his unique expressionistic style.



Other landscapes done by Oskar Kokoschka

TOUR IDEAS

City Scapes
Expressionist Artists
Love and Scandal
Industrialization
Let's Go Europe
Color, Bridges, Water