

ALBERTINA

Oskar Kokoschka 11 April – 13 July 2008
Exile and New Home 1938–1980

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Exhibition Information

Name of the exhibition: Oskar Kokoschka. Exile and New Home, 1938–1980

Dates of the exhibition	11 April to 13 July 2008
Press conference	10 April 2008, 10 am
Opening	10 April 2008, 6:30 pm
Venue	ALBERTINA, Bastei Hall
Exhibits	167 works – 90 works from the Albertina's holdings 112 drawings, 44 paintings, 11 graphic prints
Catalogue	Oskar Kokoschka. Exil und neue Heimat 1934–1980 (Oskar Kokoschka, Exile and New Home 1938–1980) Edited by Antonia Hoerschelmann, with contributions by Gunhild Bauer, Katharina Erling, Antonia Hoerschelmann, Werner Hofmann, Edwin Lachnit, Artur Rosenbauer and Heinz Spielmann. In German, 328 pages, 320 illustrations., including 280 in colour. € 29.
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1, 1010 Vienna, Tel. +43(0)1 534 83-0 info@albertina.at, www.albertina.at
Opening hours	Daily 10 am – 6 pm., Wednesdays 10 am – 9 pm
Entrance fee	Regular € 9.50, concessionary € 8.00/7.00
Guided tours	Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays, 3:30 pm Duration: approx. 1 hour Tel. +43 (0)1 534 83-540, besucher@albertina.at
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OSKAR KOKOSCHKA

Exile and New Home, 1934–1980

There has long been a need for an exhibition of the late works of Oskar Kokoschka and a corresponding new positioning. The Albertina's show pays tribute to this important creative period, exhibiting 44 paintings and some 160 watercolours, drawings and graphic prints. More than half of the objects on view come from the holdings of the Albertina, whose collection of some 1200 of Kokoschka's works is one of the world's largest.

Self-assured and free from the influence of contemporary tendencies, the cosmopolitan Kokoschka finally developed his own totally unique style from the 1930s onward (in 1936 he was 50 years old). The way in which Kokoschka dealt with colours and subjects then became increasingly confident; his sophisticated colouring created the distinctive moods of his pictorial spaces. This was true no matter whether he was working with oils, watercolours or coloured pencils.

Whereas in his early creative years Kokoschka's works emanated from his own personal experiences, beginning with his exile in Prague in 1934 his orientation shifted more and more towards the outside world. The exhibition follows the unsettled life of the artist, which became a veritable odyssey through the war-torn Europe of the 20th century. In the years from 1933 to 1938, along with his "avant-garde," Dadaist and Expressionist colleagues, Kokoschka was branded a "degenerate" artist and various works of his were included in almost all of the "Schandausstellungen" (exhibitions intended to inspire disgust).

After his flight to England in 1938, Kokoschka produced a number of poignant paintings related to current war developments. As a painter, he responded with

bitter parables to the dreadful events of those years. At least from that time on, his political views became an integral part of his life and oeuvre, as a number of striking works bear witness (“The Frogs”, 1968).

Like portraits, Kokoschka’s cityscapes portray the different temperaments, atmospheres, world views and characters of Prague, London, Florence, Rome, Salzburg, Berlin and Fribourg. The paintings are accompanied by diary-like sketchbooks, which he always carried with him.

Figure groups and allegories, which express the bonds between characters joined by fate (“Cupid and Psyche“, 1950–1955), are another important subject. And, recalling his own stormy relationship with Alma Mahler, Kokoschka also cast a humorous look at himself as a “Rejected Lover” (1966).

Kokoschka confidently defines himself as an heir to a European heritage and in his paintings, drawings, graphic prints and portfolios, addresses topics from world literature (“Odyssey“, 1964–1966) and theatre (Raimund cycle, 1959/60). Music, which played a significant role in his life, is also transformed into shimmering filigrees of impastoed colour compositions (“Morning and Evening“, 1966–1976) or, as in the portrait drawings of Jenny Abel playing the violin (1973), seems to resonate in the picture.

The last pictures that Kokoschka painted in his 80s deal with questions about life and death. Examples are the paintings “Time, Gentlemen please” (1971/72) and “Ecce Homines” (1972). They constitute a moving finale for the creative work of this world-class Austrian artist.

A comprehensive catalogue has been prepared for the exhibition: “Oskar Kokoschka. Exil und neue Heimat 1934–1980” (Oskar Kokoschka, Exile and New Home 1938–1980), edited by Antonia Hoerschelmann, with contributions from Gunhild Bauer, Katharina Erling, Antonia Hoerschelmann, Werner Hofmann, Edwin Lachnit, Artur Rosenauer and Heinz Spielmann. In German, 328 pages, 320 illustrations, including 280 in colour. Bookstore edition available from Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2008. Exhibition catalogue: € 29.

Biography

OSKAR KOKOSCHKA

1886

March 1: born in Pöchlarn (Lower Austria) as the son of a Prague family of goldsmiths.

1905–1909

Arts and Crafts College Vienna. Influenced by Gustav Klimt's and Vincent van Gogh's works.

1910

Contacts with the artists of the New Secession in Berlin. Works for Herwarth Walden's magazine "Der Sturm." First journey to Switzerland.

1911–1914

Assistant at the Vienna Arts and Crafts College. Love relationship with Alma Mahler.

1914–1916

Voluntary military service in the cavalry. Returns to Vienna after having been seriously wounded.

1919–1924

Professor at the Dresden Academy of Arts.

1924–1931

Numerous travels to Switzerland and Italy, to France, Spain, the Netherlands, and England, as well as to Africa and the Near East.

1931

Returns to Vienna.

1934

Haunted by the civil war and the Austro-fascist dictatorship, Kokoschka emigrates to Prague. Meets Olda Palkovská, his future wife.

1935

Czechoslovakian citizenship.

1937

Slandered as a “degenerate artist” by the Nazis. 417 of his works in German museums are confiscated.

1938

Escapes the Nazi regime and goes into exile in London.

1947

UK citizenship.

1953

Moves to Villeneuve on Lake Geneva.

1953–1963

Runs School of Seeing at the Salzburg Summer Academy.

1974

Receives honorary citizenship of Austria.

1980

February 22: Kokoschka dies in Montreux.

Prague 1934–1938

Kokoschka's first stay in the city of Prague lasted longer than originally planned. From 1934 on, his ancestors' former domicile became the traveler's refuge, but also his center of rest and a second home after Vienna: the artist loved the open character of the city, which offered itself as the first destination for many German refugees.

From 1933 to 1938, Kokoschka was condemned as a "degenerate" artist in Germany. His works were removed from museums, his books confiscated. Already in 1935, President Masaryk himself helped the internationally renowned artist to be granted Czechoslovakian citizenship.

Kokoschka's political commitment increased, which gradually also began to manifest itself in his art. Yet, his work shows no break in the mid-thirties. During his four-year stay in Prague, he painted city sceneries and allegories – actually continuing the exploration of the subjects he had dedicated himself to during his years of traveling. His Prague group of works may be said to be characterized by the unusually large number of views of one and the same city, the agitated atmosphere of the sceneries depicted, and the unreal, solitary feeling of his allegories.

Right at the beginning of his stay in Prague, Kokoschka fell in love with the nineteen-year old law student Olda Palkovská. She became his friend, companion, and most important discussion partner. Oskar Kokoschka and Olda Palkovská got married in London in 1941. Olda would outlive her husband by 24 years. After Czechoslovakia had been surrendered to Germany in the Munich Agreement in 1938, Oskar Kokoschka and Olda escaped from the Nazis to England at the eleventh hour.

Exile in London 1938–1945

Olda Palkovská and Oskar Kokoschka escaped from the Nazis in the last plane leaving Prague. 1938 marked a completely new beginning for the artist who arrived in London almost without a penny. He believed that most of his work was lost on German territory. Kokoschka fell into a deep depression and creative crisis.

Only a longer stay in Polperro, a fishing village in the southwest of England, with Olda in 1939 put an end to this predicament. Kokoschka began to work with watercolors again for the first time since Dresden. The series of six painterly watercolors was executed independently in parallel to various pictures in oil. Kokoschka had never aimed at grasping a place's atmosphere of light in watercolors before. This approach paved the way for his colored pencil landscape drawings – a technique the artist discovered for himself in Scotland in the summer of 1941.

Colored pencils and sketchbooks were to accompany Kokoschka throughout his late oeuvre for more than thirty years until 1973. Perfecting his quick and rhythmic stroke in both drawing and painting, the artist achieved a virtuoso mastery of this technique, which requires utmost abstraction in matters of color. He emphasized the details important to him with strong colors. These sketches anticipate the quickly painted landscapes of the forties and fifties with their “numerous attack-like colored surprises” (Kokoschka).

The Political Artist

Though Kokoschka was certainly no apolitical man in his early years, he was primarily interested in his contemporaries' psychological problems as an artist. With the rise of National Socialism, the graphic artist's and the painter's attention increasingly focused on society and finally on European and world politics. Leaving Austro-fascist Vienna and going into exile in Prague in 1937, Kokoschka definitely turned into a "political" artist. Labeled a "degenerate artist" in Germany, he put the Czechoslovakian government to the test with his personally financed poster campaign "Help the Basque Children!": the poster was immediately forbidden by the authorities in Prague. Kokoschka maintained his political attitude throughout his years in exile; it was to become an integral part of his life and work until his ripe old age.

While in London, Kokoschka mainly criticized British appeasement politics with his satirical allegories. These paintings were shown in the Free German League of Culture's exhibitions presenting artists in exile. Kokoschka wrote articles, held stirring speeches, and gave radio interviews in which he attacked the Nazi dictatorship in Europe and vehemently advocated supporting young emigrants.

After World War II, Kokoschka financed another poster campaign, this time in the London Underground. In the 1950s, Kokoschka dedicated several of his graphic works to humanitarian purposes such as the Aid for Hungary initiative by the Association of Swiss Lithographers.

After the end of the war, Kokoschka supported the re-establishment of Austrian culture which he regarded as an essential foundation for a stable democracy and lasting peace. In 1945, he wrote: “A creative man has to find out what darkens the human mind in order to liberate it.”

Travels from England 1945–1953

After nine years of exile in England, the end of the war marked the beginning of another period of restless journeys for Kokoschka. As his Czechoslovakian passport posed a hindrance to his travelling ambitions in the Cold War, he became a British citizen in February 1947. London remained the couple's main place of residence until they moved to Switzerland in September 1953.

At the first major postwar retrospective in Basel in 1947 and further exhibitions, Kokoschka was enthusiastic to discover that many of his works had survived the war. He and the former coproprietor of the Cassirer Gallery in Berlin, Dr. Walter Feilchenfeldt, who had emigrated to Zurich, met each other again. Thanks to Walter Feilchenfeldt's recommendation, the important Swiss art sponsor Dr. Werner Reinhart asked Kokoschka to do a portrait of him. Between sessions, Kokoschka began to paint his first large-size landscape pictures after the war.

In conjunction with his exhibition at the Venice Biennial of 1948, Kokoschka did various views of Italian cities with their perennial monuments as symbols of self-assertion. He also made drawings of artworks, which, for him, revealed “the lasting result” of the history of man after the damages caused by the war: they provided him with particulars regarding “social change and man's unceasing political struggle for becoming human” (Kokoschka).

Kokoschka and Austria

Since his student days at the Academy, Kokoschka's relationship to Austria was strained. He deliberately chose the role of the outsider and "artiste maudit". Experiences like the dramatic separation from his mistress Alma Mahler, his serious injury in World War I, or the later disregard for his work and himself in the 1930s' corporative state confirmed Kokoschka's negative notion of Austria.

Despite some efforts by the City of Vienna in this regard, Kokoschka did not seriously consider to return to Vienna after World War II. Yet, he showed his commitment to the country in various essays on Austrian culture and by articulating didactic ideas concerning a reorientation of its education system.

After Kokoschka had been appointed Honorary Chair of the Secession, the artist's first monographic postwar exhibition in Austria was presented there.

The same year saw the ceremonial reopening of the Vienna State Opera. Kokoschka received the commission to design a tapestry for its Gobelin Hall. In the following year, he painted the rebuilt State Opera at the Ministry's request.

Salzburg and the “School of Seeing”

While Kokoschka had his reservations concerning the official Austria, his relationship with Salzburg remained largely unspoiled. The gallerist and art book publisher Friedrich Welz played a decisive part in this. It was also on his initiative, that Kokoschka painted the city in 1950.

The artist and his publisher planned to found a summer school, which, after numerous bureaucratic obstacles had been overcome, could actually be established as the Summer Academy of Fine Arts in 1953. Kokoschka's first seminar was held under the title “School of Seeing.” It was only in 1963 that the artist, because of his age, gave up his teaching activities in Salzburg.

“I train my students to open their own eyes. My students are required to paint acting people in motion: an experience that takes place either in a closed three-dimensional space or outdoors. What has to be learnt is turning one's entire attention to the actual incident and coordinating the inner tension with the practical mastery of the difficult technique of watercolor painting that cannot be corrected. Life is no “nature morte”, no matter how much the theoreticians of abstract art would like that” (Kokoschka on the approach of his “School of Seeing”).

Villeneuve, Switzerland 1953

In September 1953, Olda and Oskar Kokoschka moved to Villeneuve on the Swiss shore of Lake Geneva. They had a house with a studio built for them on a plot with a view of the lake in the neighborhood of Wilhelm Furtwängler, Charlie Chaplin, and many other celebrities. The couple did not travel less after having settled in Switzerland. Kokoschka appreciated the country spared by the war, in which his first and most important exhibitions after 1945 had been presented. Many of his works had been saved from the Nazis by being brought to Switzerland. The move to Villeneuve marked the beginning of the externally most peaceful phase of his life, which would last for 27 years.

He completed the monumental painting “Amor and Psyche” and began to work on the “Thermopylae Triptych,” a symbol of resisting, for the University of Hamburg. With his graphic works, such as those he did in support of the Aid for Hungary program after the bloodily crushed uprising in 1956, he continued to speak up for political freedom and humanitarian help.

During spring bloom of his garden in Villeneuve, Kokoschka avoided to travel. His flower watercolors capture the light shimmering through the leaves and blossoms: he aimed at capturing the immortal in transient forms.

Pictures of Cities 1953–1967

From Villeneuve, Kokoschka undertook extensive travels. Between 1953 and 1970, he did one or two portraits of cities a year, painting no city more often than London. In its vast sceneries of the late fifties and sixties, reality dissolves, the color becoming transparent. Kokoschka is not interested in topographical features but in the cities' dynamic and vitality, which manifest themselves in the continuous change and pulsating motion of their elements. He elevates the city to a living organism. Beneath a high horizon, the urban panorama is bent to an approximately elliptical form whose interior is frequently occupied by an expanse of water: a river bend, a harbor basin, a bay.

Based on two focal points, the composition reveals a much larger section of reality than the human eye's natural field of view or a central perspective construction. What could otherwise only be perceived in a juxtaposition of its singular elements is forced into one pictorial surface by his CinemaScope-like expansion. Driven by its inherent energies, the city seems to whirl around a stable core.

Kokoschka's late pictures of cities evince the artist's humanist attitude. He painted and drew a number of German cities, where a regained prosperity had begun to overgrow the scars left by the devastations of war. Only his picture of Berlin with its view of the eastern sector became a political demonstration against the suppression of freedom. The other cities present themselves as monuments of a self-assertion that have stood the test of time. Like the entire city, its individual buildings are depicted as volumes in lively motion, growing and soaring upward.

Theater and Literature: Myths of Mankind

Kokoschka had already proved himself as a dramaturge and director early on in his career, yet only of his own literary works. The first work by another author he interpreted was Mozart's "Magic Flute" for the Salzburg Festival after the war. In 1958, he began to dedicate himself to a cycle of plays by Raimund for the Vienna Burgtheater. Effortlessly moving across different times and places, Raimund's fantasy felt familiar to him. Executed with colored pencils, body colors, and watercolors and relying on stumping and white heightening, Kokoschka's theater drawings are characterized by a particular long-distance effect and an unusual brilliance.

From 1963 on, Kokoschka devoted himself to illustrating the foremost cycles of Greek, European, and Biblical myths during the winter months. He commenced with Shakespeare's "King Lear" in 1963 and began to work on his interpretation of the "Odyssey" in the year after. Kokoschka did not regard Ulysses as a hero but as a roguish vagabond recounting his restless life without remorse and embellishment. It was the perennial wanderer on his quest for truth he identified with. According to Kokoschka's conviction, nonrepresentational, abstract art was not suited for the humanist world-relatedness of artistic reflection.

Last Pictures 1970–1980

Even at the age of eighty-two, Kokoschka still took an interest in current political events: “The Frogs” criticized the European nations’ indifference toward the military dictatorship in Greece and the invasion of Soviet troops in Prague in 1968.

Music, which played an essential part in Kokoschka’s life, is transformed into pastose, delicately shimmering tones in “Morning and Evening.” In his late pictures, light finds expression as a dynamic emotional energy. Almost endowing things with a meaning, it bridges opposites and visualizes the moment of inner understanding. Both with “Morning and Evening” and with the series of portraits showing the famous violinist Jenny Abel, the eighty-five-year old artist responded to pictorial ideas of his early years and reinterpreted them.

From the sixties on, themes of youth and old age, love and fulfillment, death and transience finally pushed to the fore. The focus of Kokoschka’s last pictures is on inner experience. The iconography of his late years is determined by the sublimation of ultimate existential issues into the generally significant. What is striking is the artist’s readiness to face death, his situation, and truth. With an ironic smile, he titles his last self-portrait, in which death opens the door for him, “Time, Gentlemen please” – relating the closing-time call in English pubs to his premonition that he would soon have to leave the stage of life.

Press pictures

Caption for each picture: *Oskar Kokoschka, © Fondation Oskar Kokoschka/VBK, Vienna 2008*



1: *In the Garden*, 1934
Oil on canvas
Albertina, Vienna – On permanent loan from the Batliner Collection



2: *London, Tower Bridge II*, 1963
Oil on canvas
Marlborough International Fine Art



3: *Prague, Charles Bridge* 1934
Oil on canvas
Národní Galerie, Prague



4: *Self Portrait*, 1964
Watercolour
private collection



5: *Storm Tide in Hamburg*, 1962
Oil on canvas
Hamburger Kunsthalle / bpk
© Foto: Elke Walford



6: *Nymph*, 1936
Oil on canvas
National Gallery in Prague



7: *Help the Basque Children!*, 1937
Colour lithograph
Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague
© Photo: Ondrej Kocourek, Prague



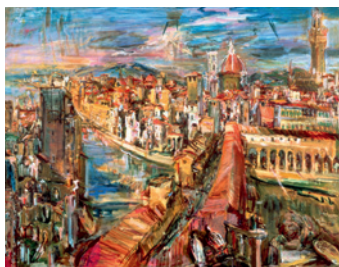
8: *The Red Egg*, 1940-1941
Oil on canvas
National Gallery in Prague



9: *Lobster on a Plate*, 1945
Coloured pencils
Wienerroither & Kohlbacher,
Vienna
© Photo: courtesy of Wienerroither
& Kohlbacher, Vienna



10: Pumpkin, 1945
Watercolour
Albertina



11: Florence: View from the
Mannelli Tower, 1948
Oil on canvas
Kunststiftung Merzbacher
(Merzbacher Collection)
© Photo: Kunststiftung Merzbacher



12: „Waking Slave” by
Michelangelo; Accademia, Florence,
1954
Sketchbook 31
Coloured pencils
Albertina



13: Time, Gentlemen please,
1970–1972
Oil on canvas
Tate, London



14: Ecce Homines, Cardboard for the
mosaic of the same name in the St
Nikolai Church in Hamburg, 1972
Tempera on cardboard
Private collection, Hamburg
© Photo: Ines Otschik, Museen der
Stadt Aschaffenburg (City Museums
Aschaffenburg)



15: Tiger, 1969
Watercolour
Albertina