



"Beyond Words: Author Portraits" Has Something to Say

The "Beyond Words: Author Portraits" traveling exhibit by the late Swedish artist and sculptor [Carl Köhler](#) is not housed in a trendy gallery or abandoned Wicker Park storefront. You'll find these paintings and collages of famous writers at the University of Chicago [Joseph Regenstein Library](#).

The exhibit feels at home here. While some of the nation's smartest students — maybe future Presidents or Nobel laureates — are quietly studying, some of literature's greatest men and women keep watch. At night, after the library has closed and these students have retreated to their apartments and dorms to continue their [rigorous education](#), do the paintings and drawings linger in their subconscious whispering their legacy "[Carpe Diem! Seize the day! Make your lives extraordinary](#)"? I wouldn't be surprised if they do.



Portrait of Marina Tsvetejva by Carl Köhler

Am I being cliché and saying that these portraits speak? Yep. There is some mysterious story behind every single one of these writers. Köhler was able to capture a sliver of that mystery in his work. [Brendan Behan](#), who balanced his time between jail, pubs and odd jobs, looks lost with one eye filled in and the other left blank. An oil painting of French playwright [Antonin Artaud](#) depicts a pained man with deep grooves in his hands and face; he suffered from neuralgia, depression and a laudanum addiction. And the drawing of Virginia [Woolf](#), who committed suicide, seems haunted.

Carl Köhler clearly chose to represent writers who had hard lives. The exhibit includes 27 oil and ink portraits, which include James Joyce, Guillaume Apollinaire, Samuel Beckett, Jean Cocteau, Günter Grass, Henry Miller, Franz Kafka and Joyce Carol Oates. As I moved through the portraits, where some of the authors look reflective, some confused, but none joyous, I felt I was being reminded over and over that just because someone is brilliant doesn't mean they have it together. "I hope that people, after visiting the exhibit ... see behind the author's faces and see the personalities. And hopefully they feel that these portraits are something new and unique," Henry, Köhler's son and the exhibit's curator said when [he spoke to the National Post earlier this year](#). Thanks to Köhler's depictions of these writers, I learned something new about each of them. But he also left a lot open for interpretation, both his own as the artist and my own as the audience.

Henry also said that Köhler had great reverence for these writers because they inspired his own writing, although he never published anything. Even though both Köhler and many of the writers he painted are no longer alive, their art is still here for us to dig into and take something away from. And everyone can probably take away something different. To me, the exhibit reinforced what I've been hearing since I studied writing in college; writing is hard, writing is lonely, and even though success is hard to come by, if it is something that you love, you will do it anyway. I'll never be as famous as the authors Köhler painted. But all that Carpe Diem stuff isn't about being famous anyway.

[Beyond Words: Author Portraits](#) will be open until December 11 at University of Chicago's Joseph Regenstein Library. Monday - Thursday 8:30 am - 6 pm, Friday 8:30 am - 5 pm, and Saturday 9 am - 1 pm.

Henry Köhler is the curator of the exhibit and would like to thank Barbara Wing and Maureen E. Mulvihill for making it possible.

By [Betsy Mikel](#) in [Arts & Events](#) on October 15, 2010 4:20 PM  0 Comments  1 Like 891 Views

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