

Literary Art in Brooklyn

Carl Köhler's author portraits in at the Central Library in Brooklyn, New York

Library goers in Brooklyn are in for something different: The Central Library at Grand Army Plaza greets them with some twenty author portraits done by Swedish artist Carl Köhler (1919-2006).

"It certainly doesn't happen every day that we show works like this coming from across the ocean and far away," says Barbara Wing, Manager of Exhibitions at the library. The portraits – depicting authors like Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and Gunnar Ekelöf among others – ended up in Brooklyn, thanks to Carl Köhler's son Henry Köhler, who is passionate about promoting his father's art. Though the name Carl Köhler means little to the general audience, it's a well known name among art connoisseurs. Born in Stockholm in 1919, Köhler studied at Konsthögskolan in Stockholm as well as at Academie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. He worked mainly with painting and collage, experimenting freely with different expressions, techniques and subjects which he found in the worlds of theatre, music, dance and literature. Using oil, acrylic, drawings and graphics, he worked in the modernist tradition. After a period of painting on canvas, he moved over to raw materials, such as plywood.

"Henry Köhler sent a proposal to the Brooklyn Library, and when I looked closer at his father's art, I saw just how strong it was," explains Wing. "It's very good and of course with the author portraits it's a perfect fit for a library."

Carl Köhler displayed his work throughout Sweden. He received several cultural and art scholarships during his life, the last of which was awarded from the Swedish Painters Society when he was 85.

"My father was very interested in literature," Henry Köhler writes. "Especially French literature and the French language. And there are many French author portraits in this exhibition."

Indeed, there are portraits of Guillaume Apollinaire, the famous surrealist poet, as well as Claude Simon, Nobel Laureate in Literature in 1985.

"Father had a strong sense for people's faces, characters, and bodies," Henry Köhler continues.

Apart from a few exhibitions as a student in Paris and one later on in Canada, Carl Köhler never exhibited outside Sweden during his lifetime. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was a family man who didn't while away at bars and pubs. Barbara Wing calls him a pure artist:

"It doesn't seem as though he did much to market himself. He seems to have lived and breathed art."

During his last years, Carl Köhler mentioned wanting to have an exhibition with author portraits. It didn't happen then. Instead it is happening now. Köhler didn't leave a will, but told his children (Henry and daughter Frida) to "take care of my art work," which is what they are now doing by making sure it is seen by a broader audience. There have been exhibitions in Stockholm at Strindbergsmuseet and Konserthuset, and they also have ambitions for more exhibitions in the future. As for the exhibition at the Brooklyn Central Library, Henry Köhler writes:

"My father would have been deeply moved and honored over this."

The exhibition opened on February 2 and runs through April 4. It will thereafter move to the Swedish Seamen's Church in New York City.

For more information:

www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org

www.swedishchurch.net



Gunnar Ekelöf as seen by Carl Köhler. [ENLARGE IMAGE](#)



Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, by Köhler.

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Barbara Wing, Manager of Exhibitions at Brooklyn Central Library, holds one of Carl Köhler's author portraits (this one is of Günther Grass) while putting up the art work.

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