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Köhler's Franz Kafka.

Artists are often thought of as strange and special lenses, and the works that they create allow us to glimpse the world as they see it. We can, when looking at their images, experience a new perspective on familiar subjects, places, or issues. We can be guests in their visions. Artists who develop a consistent, recognizable style are honing that lens, narrowing the focus, and making their visual story more linear.

The late Swedish artist [Carl Köhler](#)'s approach to portraiture was quite different. A literary enthusiast, Köhler painted a series of portraits of authors for which he became not the lens but the conduit. He did not interpret his subjects through his own stylistic filter, but instead allowed himself to become so fully immersed in the

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creative expression of the authors that each one dictated a distinct visual manifestation, a distinct stylistic approach. The result is a collection of portraits as varied and unique as the writers themselves. A collection of these works can now be seen in an appropriately literary setting at the University of Toronto's [Robarts Library](#) in the exhibition "[Beyond the Words: Author Portraits by Carl Köhler](#)."




Köhler's Gunnar Ekelöf, His Last Years.

The driving force behind the exhibition, which is making a stop in Toronto between showings in [Brooklyn](#), [Washington](#), and next, Vancouver, is the artist's son, Henry Köhler. After Carl's death in 2006, Henry began working to broaden the public's awareness of his father's works. We spoke with Henry Köhler about his goals in bringing this collection to North America. "I hope that my father's art gets truly recognized by the art world. I know that many artists feel that way; however, my feeling is that Carl, my father, had something unique."


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That uniqueness may be the artist's responsiveness—his willingness to listen deeply to the voices of his subjects. This allows the portraits to become a depiction of the relationship between a writer and their reader. It's as if the artist is visualizing the way that the words make them think and feel, and, therefore, what he sees behind the words.

This approach renders the aesthetic choices made in each work much more weighty. Every line thickness and every choice between translucent orange pastel or unforgiving wood cut has a conscious implication. It all means something, and it all seems right. Köhler 's [depiction of Michael Jackson](#) is a case in point. Haunting and fragile, this kind of disturbing portrait that doesn't rely on precision for its deadly accuracy is made possible by allowing the subject to guide the media and execution. It's clear that the artist connected with this author's subjects. According to his son: "I think my father did these portraits because he was so interested in the characters. My father was very literary himself; he wrote a lot."

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Köhler's Guillaume Apollinaire.

It's quite something to see an artist work so confidently and competently across a swath of styles. Like a comedian who is talented with uncanny imitations, Köhler steps into the shoes of an abstract expressionist in one work, and a cubist in another. Henry Köhler sees this flexibility as one of his father's greatest strengths. "My favourite element in my father's art is his different techniques. He uses so many various materials. I have seen my father's art from the time I was born, at home when I grew up, and when I moved to my first apartment I decorated all the walls with paintings, so they have been a big part of my life. I couldn't imagine

a life without them."

"Beyond the Words: Author Portraits by Henry Köhler" features James Joyce, Brendan Behan, Samuel Beckett, Jean Cocteau, Günter Grass, Henry Miller, Franz Kafka, Joyce Carol Oates, Virginia Woolf, and others, and can be seen in Toronto at Robarts Library until March 14.

By [Amanda Happé](#) in [Culture](#) on January 19, 2010 11:00 AM [0 Comments](#) [5 Likes](#)

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