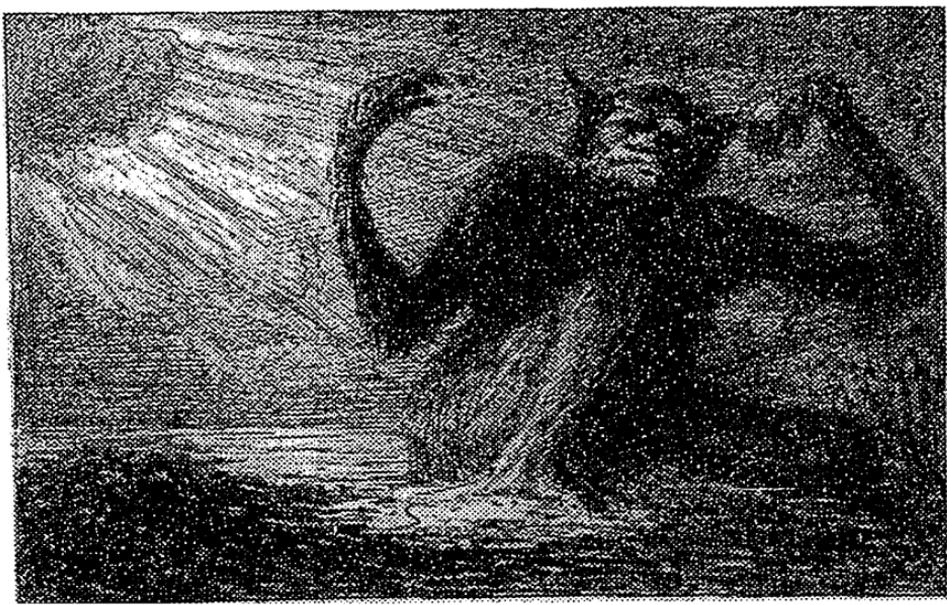


Art: Alfred Kubin Show A Lesson in Fantasy



"Der Affe," (The Ape), by Alfred Kubin, at the Galerie St. Etienne

By GRACE GLUECK

NOW that we're alive again to the virtues of Expressionism, the work of the Austrian artist Alfred Kubin (1877-1959) seems to take on new vitality. A fantasist of deep emotional power, and a draftsman of large talents, Kubin has never had a big press in this country, probably because he never made it as a painter. Yet for all its small scale, his graphic imagery — ranging from the haunting use of animals as "psychic" metaphors to jolly sketches of country life — takes as firm a grip on the mind as work in a "major" medium.

The current Kubin show of 52 drawings and watercolors at the Galerie St. Etienne, 24 West 57th Street (through May 7), with 21 loans from the Lenbachhaus, a public collection of his work in Munich, is termed by the gallery "the most comprehensive of its kind ever held in this country." Maybe, although the Serge Sabarsky Gallery had a pretty good one in the early 1970's. With a number of fairly slight entries, this exhibition doesn't seem to give the strongest account of Kubin, a very prolific artist who also had a highly successful career as a book illustrator (only touched on in this show). Yet until some museum takes enough interest to pry his work from the Austrian collections where much of it is held, we'll have to make do with Kubin shows that can be mustered by galleries. And this one has ample rewards.

Before Kubin reached 30, his life was a series of emotional disasters. One vivid, Bergmanesque image from the enlightening catalogue essay by Jane Kallir, a director of the gallery: as a boy Kubin saw his mother's death throes and then watched his father run weeping through the house with her emaciated body. Childhood beatings by his father, a suicide attempt at 19, a couple of nervous breakdowns, the death of his fiancée and later the death of his father — with whom he had been reconciled — were part of the bleak picture.

Yet Kubin, who'd been drawing from boyhood, managed somehow to transmute this dismal "material" into art — not without a struggle, to be sure. Thwarted in painterly aspirations by his failure to master color (catch that stopping an artist today!), he rendered his rich fantasy life in striking graphic imagery. Take, for example, "Fear" (1899), a remarkable small drawing in which a man hangs by his fingertips on the edge of an abyss, while a bloated corpse reaches up from below to grab his shackled legs. In early works such as this and "The Plague" (circa 1901), a sinister bearded figure, whose long cloak billows back as he rages through a landscape, Kubin was influenced by the German fantasist Max Klinger, as well as by Goya, Ensor, Munch and Redon. It's worth noting, too, that Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" was published in 1899, and Kubin had probably read it.

In 1908, he wrote a long, partly autobiographical "dream" novel, "The Other Side," which dealt with a Teutonic fantasy land based in Asia. Writing it apparently resolved much of Kubin's early emotional turmoil. His art became less fraught with the bizarre imagery that was very much in the macabre tradition of 19th-century German illustration and more concerned, as he later wrote, with "the universal." Still rich with poetic fantasy, it gradually took on a naturalistic, narrative quality, laced with earthy humor. He was very good, for example, at getting the smug shrewdness of a peasant grandmother's expression as she confronts the viewer close up, and his street scenes are rife with wonderfully Caligariesque detail, as in "Fleeing Burglar," of 1927, in which a nightcapped man gropes vainly out of a window after a thief who whizzes past.

Kubin had a brief flirt with the Blue Rider movement early in his career, but he was not an avant-gardist, and as modernism infiltrated German art, his work remained traditional and illustrative. Yet his work celebrates compellingly — particularly in the haunting early images — the deep vein of irrationality in art (and in us) that won't go away.

Also of interest this week:

Richard Bosman (Brooke Alexander, 20 West 57th Street): "The door of Henry's LUNCHROOM opened, and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.

"'What's yours?' George asked them.

"'I don't know,' one of the men said. 'What do you want to eat, Al?'

"'I don't know,' said Al. 'I don't know what I want to eat.'"

What brings to mind the opening lines of Hemingway's "The Killers" are Richard Bosman's crude canvases of gunmen, victims and cops. They may not be as classy, but they're every bit as terse and macho. In "Rubbed Out," for instance, a pair of trouser legs and shiny shoes loom beside the sprawled body of a hood; in each of four parts to a canvas titled "A Job to Do," a man bent on bad deeds shaves, puts on a shirt, knots his tie and dons a pair of sinister gray gloves. And in "Nightside," a detective's arm and hand (we can tell he's a dick by his trenchcoat and flashy wristwatch) pulls back a bedsheet from a female corpse.

Surfing in two years ago on New Wave painting, Mr. Bosman has specialized in disaster images, parodying the good, clean American fun of killer comics and gangster movies. He's skilled at "bad" painting, lavishing kitschy brushstrokes and lots of gore on his subjects, which in this show also include a car crash, a boat's overturning, a poker game, a poisoning and a hot pursuit. And the fans seem to love it: the show is virtually sold out. But the truth is that too much "bad" painting tends to drive out good, and this may be happening in Mr. Bosman's case. His work is much more interesting in the toned-down medium of prints, particularly the woodcut, a technique eminently suited to his crude, simple style. Too bad there are none in this show. (Through April 16.)

Werner Drewes (Associated American Artists, 663 Fifth Avenue at 53d Street): Here's a retrospective of more than 60 years of work in woodcuts by Werner Drewes, now 84, who came to the United States from Germany in the early 1930's after study at the Bauhaus with Klee and Kandinsky. (He's represented, incidentally, in "Prints From Blocks: Gauguin to Now," the big survey at the Museum of Modern Art.) Three of Mr. Drewes's earliest prints, done in 1919, have a lively Expressionist quality: two lyrical landscapes in which black predominates, and a soaring cathedral pillar. By the 1930's, in this country, the work had lightened up considerably, and he was concentrating on the geometric forms of New York City buildings (a 1930 effort, "Corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street," looks oddly like the Trump Tower going up today.)

In the mid-30's, he shifted surprisingly into abstraction (he helped found the American Abstract Artists group in 1937). Among the best of these pieces is "Red on Red" of 1935, which despite its name, is a black-and-white print of densely clustered Constructivist forms that pays some homage to Kandinsky. From then on, he pursued both abstract and figurative modes, although the later figurative work tends toward the cliché landscape. Color invaded his prints in the 1940's, and he produced some lovely color abstractions, but his work in black and white seems the strongest and best. In any event, he's still productively at it, with prints from this very year on view in the show. (Through April 2.)

Siah Armajani (Max Protetch, 37 West 57th Street): Siah Armajani's sculptural-architectural constructions have been getting around lately; a sampling of them is on view in "Directions 1983," the biennial show at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. And why not? The work is elegant and imaginative, and brings a new glow to that tarnished old catchword, "craftsmanship." In this show, he transforms mundane architectural elements into sculpture, creating two fanciful mantelpieces, an odd but majestic bookshelf, a garden gate, a door with a window in it and a tricky stained-glass "window within a window," the star of the exhibition.

Take a pulp-like bookshelf, obviously made for an alchemist or a Merlin. A small "V" sits on a larger inverted "V." Shelves line the sides of the structure, and a big step raises the user to the top "V," set at a majestic height, to read — or to proclaim — a large book. And that dazzling window! In structure, it's a curtain-wall factory window, with a smaller one set into it for ventilation. But the whole is made of blue and white leaded glass etched with an abstract design, which as light passes through it projects the design like a painting onto the wall behind it, creating a teasing visual ambiguity.

There's a mystical, earlier American kind of vision to this work that gives it great appeal. (Through April 2.)