

Obituary

Konrad Oberhuber (1935–2007)

ON 12TH SEPTEMBER 2007 Konrad Oberhuber died aged seventy-two after a long illness. He was one of the outstanding art historians of his time, and his eye and connoisseurship in the field of Renaissance and Baroque art were unrivalled. He was born on 31st March 1935 in Linz, Austria, into a family that adhered to the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophic thought and its Goethian and religious background remained essential for him throughout his life and were fundamental for his anthropological approach to art and artists. He studied art history with Karl Swoboda in Vienna and his formation was moulded by the famous Vienna school founded by Riegl, Wickhoff, Dvořák and Schlosser which insisted on a thorough training in all historical methodologies.

His extraordinary talent was already evident in his thesis on Bartholomeus Spranger in 1959 and he was subsequently sent to the Austrian historical institute in Rome. While it was compulsory to spend half of each day copying Baroque documents in the Doria Pamphilj archive, he dedicated all his free time to the study of late Raphael and his school. I met him at the Hertziana and, at a time

when Mannerism was fashionable, we confessed our common love of Raphael at first only secretly. Soon we became close friends.

My thesis was devoted to the architecture of Peruzzi and I subsequently worked on Raphael's architecture, but Konrad taught me how to look at paintings and drawings and encouraged me to study Peruzzi as a painter and figural draughtsman: we were both curious to understand the interrelation of figural and architectural inventions in such universal artists as Raphael and Peruzzi. In a short time a group of young scholars of various nationalities, all admirers of Raphael, assembled at the Hertziana. Oberhuber was one of the leading spirits and, thanks to his comprehensive vision of Raphael, he had understood how wrong it was to restrict the study of the artist to his undisputed autograph works because in his later years, when he produced his most exciting ideas, he left the execution mainly to his pupils. Oberhuber was asked to complete Fischel's corpus of Raphael's drawings and extended his interest to the master's entire *œuvre*. During his visits to the major collections of drawings, he discovered a great number of unknown drawings by Raphael and others wrongly attributed to him as well as those by many of his pupils and contemporaries which he generously left to other specialists to publish. Philip Pouncey, John Gere and other connoisseurs regularly came to the Hertziana to discuss new findings and hypotheses. One of Oberhuber's most spectacular discoveries was that of Raphael's original portrait of Julius II in the reserve

collection of the National Gallery in London, published in this Magazine, 113 (1971), pp.124–30.

Oberhuber was never the introverted, silent scholar of popular conception but exploded with enthusiasm on discovering something new and demonstrated his attributions by adopting the pose with his body in the way the artist might have done. For him art was the highest expression of the most privileged human beings which could only be understood by trying to identify as closely as possible with the artist. When lying on the beach, he tried to explain why an Italian moved in a different way to a northern European or an American, or why older people moved differently from young ones. If his attempt to classify anthropological behaviour according to chronological and geographical criteria and to see the evolution of art history according to the cyclical theories of Steiner did not convince everybody, his wide-ranging take on the world was always highly stimulating and opened doors to new methods and insights.

In 1961 Walter Koschatzky called him to the Albertina in Vienna where he had always hoped to work and where he systematically reviewed the attributions of hundreds of drawings of different periods and schools. There he married – not by chance – a modern dancer, Marianne Liebkecht, the granddaughter of Karl Liebkecht. In 1971 he was appointed to a post at the university in Vienna and started his career as a charismatic teacher.

As a student Oberhuber had spent a year in the United States. In 1971 he accepted an invitation to work as curator of drawings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and from 1975 he taught at Harvard University and was later appointed Professor of Fine Arts there. In 1983–84, on the occasion of the five-hundredth anniversary of Raphael's birth, he was invited to spend a year at the Hertziana; he brought with him a group of talented Raphael students, and scholars such as Sylvia Ferino, Marcia Faietti and Achim Gnann owe much to his teaching. America changed the direction of his interests: freed from the rigid limits of academe, he

increasingly found his friends among contemporary artists, as their many contributions to the Festschrift for his sixty-fifth birthday testify, and became the adviser to many great American collectors. In 1987 he succeeded Koschatzky as director of the Albertina, as Hofrat and honorary professor of Vienna University, reaching the climax of his career. He not only continued his former studies, but used his influence to discover and assist promising artists.

Over the years Oberhuber's range of scholarly study had widened to include Parmigianino, Giorgione, Titian and Veronese, the Italian engravers of the quattro- and cinquecento, Bruegel and even Poussin's early work, while he never abandoned his interest in Spranger and his contemporaries. Raphael remained, however, central to his thought, and the results of over two decades of intensive study flowed into the monograph published in 1982 and subsequently printed in many different editions and languages, still the most authoritative book on Raphael. The Raphael year in 1983 also provided him with the chance to divulge his unique knowledge in the catalogue of the drawings he published together with Eckhart Knab and Erwin Mitsch, and in a series of lectures and articles. Raphael meant much more to him than just a favourite artist: 'Raphael was not just a painter', he wrote. 'He himself was a representative of Christianity according to the highest ideals. He was the most profound embodiment and expression of the forces of religious reform in the Renaissance church. The church failed the tasks it had set itself then, but Raphael's impulse spread through the centuries and still has a long mission in the future'.¹

After his retirement from the Albertina in 2000 Oberhuber taught for two years in Japan and then transferred with his new family to California where he died, withdrawn from most of his former activities and friends.

CHRISTOPH LUITPOLD FROMMEL

¹ K. Oberhuber: *Raphael: The Paintings*, Milan 1999, p.229.