

Imaging the Inside: Edmond Xavier Kapp, Character Portraiture and Artistic Insight

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Since his death in 1978, Edmond X. Kapp's works have received next to no scholarly attention and are rarely exhibited.¹ Considering the quality of the works, as well as the numerous contemporary exhibitions, and reviews by writers as prominent as Virginia Woolf, it might be expected that his name would be familiar to scholars of art history, yet he occupies a precarious position in the margins.

Numerous factors might have contributed to Kapp's decline into relative obscurity including his multiple artistic identities as a creator of humorous caricatures, a portrait artist, an abstract painter and a poet, as well as his elitist publishing preferences, producing expensive, limited-edition books rather than publishing in the press. Attempting to pinpoint why Kapp has largely eluded art history is likely to be a nuanced and multifarious activity. With this in mind, this article will begin to address the question by approaching Kapp's oeuvre in two parts: an introduction to his professional practices and reception, followed by an analysis of how the artist negotiated the traditions of portraiture and caricature in order to discuss how this affected his contemporary and posthumous reception.

Kapp was born in Highbury, North London on 5 November, 1890, to a family of wine merchants of German-Jewish origins. At seventeen he won three scholarships to study modern languages in Paris, Berlin and Christ College, Cambridge, spending a year in each place. It was whilst studying at Christ College that Kapp began to draw and after graduating in 1913, he held a small exhibition of his work at Cambridge.

At this stage, Kapp's style was strongly influenced by Max Beerbohm, whom Kapp had met whilst he was a student. His early works bear a strong resemblance to the decadent aesthetic style of the *Yellow Book*, an artistic journal of the 1880s in which Beerbohm played a key role. Despite Beerbohm's professional support,² Kapp told Yvonne, his wife, at a low personal moment in 1926, that he felt Beerbohm had led him astray artistically (Yvonne Kapp 2003: 125).

¹ The author curated *Composing Characters: Edmond Xavier Kapp's Portraits of 20th-Century Composers*, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 29 June – 26 August 2012, the first exhibition of his work in ten years.

² Beerbohm provided an introduction to the catalogue for Kapp's exhibition at the Leicester Gallery, London in 1922.

With the onset of war in August, 1914, Kapp enlisted immediately as a subaltern with the 11th West Sussex Regiment. Whilst in the trenches, Kapp continued to draw character portraits to amuse fellow soldiers, and he also drew the devastation surrounding him.³ After the First World War, Kapp decided to study art. He applied to but was not accepted by either The Slade or the Vienna Academy of Arts. In 1922, after returning to England, Kapp married Yvonne Meyer. During the early years of their marriage, the couple travelled around Europe, moving from city to city, living a bohemian lifestyle.⁴ Kapp was eventually accepted as a pupil at the Lipinski School of Art in Rome in 1923.

Kapp maintained a reputation as a caricature artist, yet he rejected the traditional newspaper work of the caricaturist, as he wanted to choose his own subjects (Yvonne Kapp 2003: 82). Fortunately, after his second solo exhibition in 1922, he found a number of patrons who were willing to subsidise his lifestyle (Yvonne Kapp 2003: 82). He would also make money by increasing the output of his drawings of his most famous sitters, through either hand-copying his works, or by making a small number of prints to be sold individually or bound in expensive limited-edition collections.

Kapp's brief fame within the intellectual society of his day relied on social contacts and on the fame of his previous portrait sitters. His commercial successes also seem to be from the fruits of this networking. In this context, Kapp's work could be viewed as social documentary or as novelties rather than as fine art, which may go some way to explain why his works — collected by over twenty prominent institutions such as the National Portrait Gallery, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge — usually reside in storage.

³ Because of these war drawings, Kapp was made an official war artist during the Second World War, drawing scenes of the home front.

⁴ Yvonne Meyer was a journalist, photographer, translator and writer, best known for her biography of Eleanor Marx. In 2003 she wrote an autobiography, *Time Will Tell*, which contains some of the little biographical information available about Edmond Kapp.



Figure 1: GORDON SELFIRDGE, 1928

Kapp came to resent his success as a caricaturist, claiming that it had destroyed his integrity. He called his works ‘clever, good-taste trash’ and ‘stunt books of cheap drawings’ that ‘commanded false prices and a press reputation with its false values’ (Yvonne Kapp 2003: 125). He began to explore abstract painting but with little success. Subsequently he continued to produce character drawings to fund his lifestyle, but these works began to move away from *The Yellow Book* style he had inherited and began to assume the qualities of portraiture.

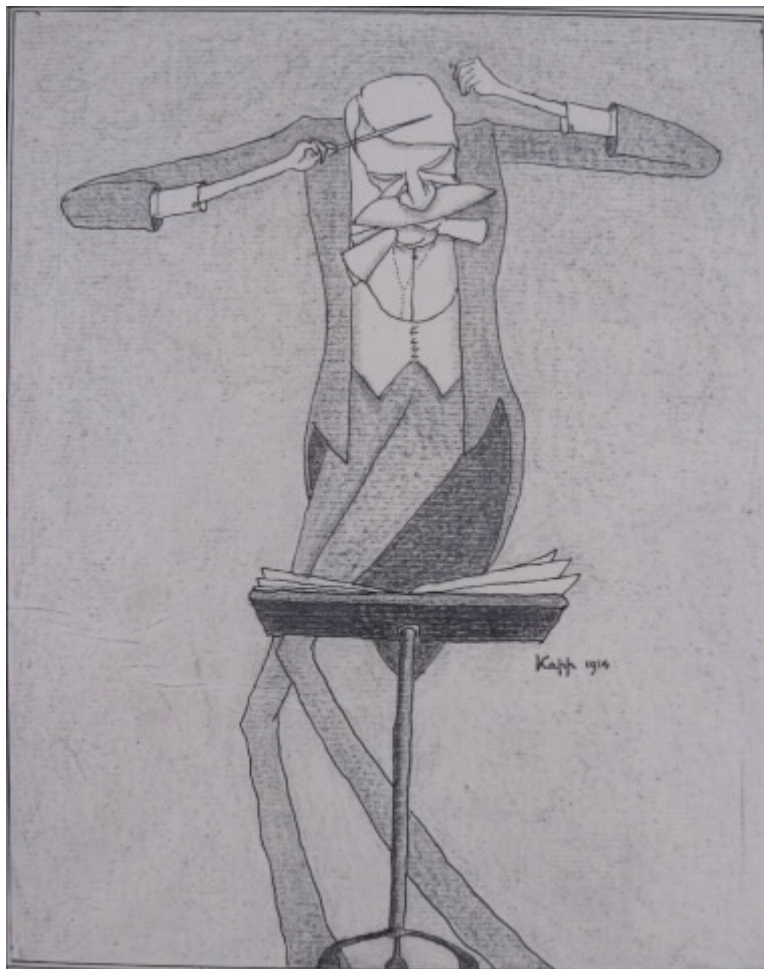


Figure 2: EDWARD ELGAR, 1914

Elements of Kapp's style, especially in earlier works, closely fit traditional descriptions of the genre of caricature — a comic portrait captured in just a few strokes — as laid out by Andre Félibien (Gombrich and Kris 1938: 320). The treatment of Gordon Selfridge (see Figure 1), for example, fits this description as, true to his profession, he is more suit than man.⁵ Works like these conform to a formula of simplification from primary sketch to final drawing that is associated with caricature. Kapp's portrait of Edward Elgar is one of his most traditional works in this sense, reducing earlier drawings to emblematic details such as Elgar's iconic moustache (see Figure 2). However, in a letter to Hamish Miles, then director of the Barber Institute, Kapp protested at being described as a caricaturist,⁶ quoting the definition from *The Universal Dictionary of the English Language*: a grotesque, laughable representation of a person in a drawing.

⁵ All images are courtesy of The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

⁶ In his correspondence with Miles, Kapp claimed that only one of the works in the Barber collection was a caricature, but did not say which.

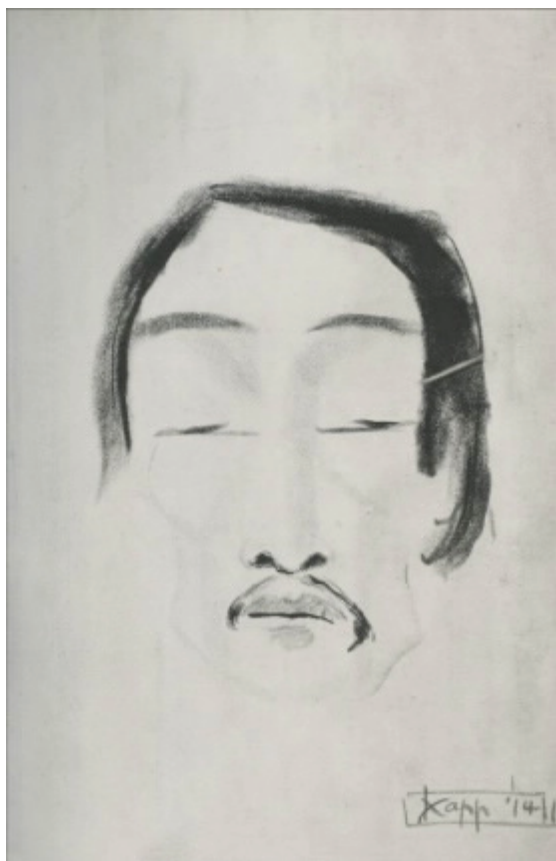


Figure 3: YONE NEGUCHI, 1914

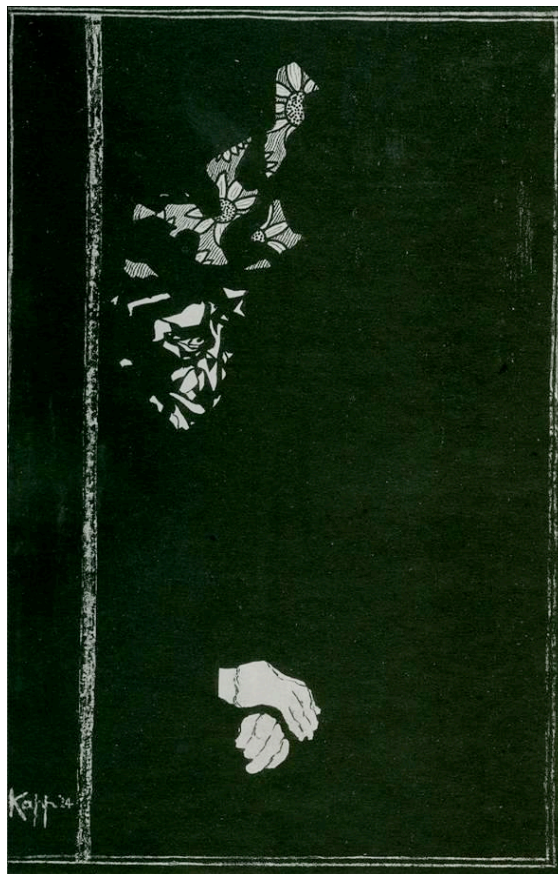


Figure 4: MRS. GRUNDY

Sir Claude Phillips of the *Daily Telegraph* claimed that Kapp's works showed 'a certain ruthlessness, yet without anything approaching spite or meanness' (Edmond Kapp 1919).⁷ Most definitions of caricature, such as the one Kapp cites, involve notions of satiric intention. This, I would suggest, is one of the main factors which differentiate Kapp's works and traditional caricature, as they do not generally seek to deflate their subject. Kapp claimed that all of his subjects sat for his drawings, and many, such as Pablo Casals, Noël Coward and Aldous Huxley, were friends or artists he admired, who sat for him a number of times. This would suggest that, where Kapp's portraits do use humour, it is likely that the sitter was complicit in the joke.

Portraiture has been compared to physiognomy in its attempt to reconcile outward appearances with the inner personality to create a visual expression of the individual (Sherry 1987: 6). The difference between this physiognomic element in portraiture and in caricature can be attributed to the latter's interest in wit and play through the treatment of physical detail. The self-consciously minimal style of the caricature characteristically positions the artist as a

⁷ Reproduced in Edmond Kapp: 1919 with no further referencing.

self-depreciative ironist, affording them a reputation for unpretentiousness (Sherry 1986–87: 6).

Although Kapp chose not to call his works ‘caricature’, it is nonetheless clear that he chose to adopt elements of the character-portrait format. He utilises formal attributes which are associated with quick, uncontrived execution and couples them with the content of traditional formal portraits or fancy portraits, which depict the subject amongst the equipment of their interests or work, serving to aggrandize them socially and intellectually. By combining these techniques with those of caricature as described by Sherry, Kapp's works give the impression of depicting a seemingly uncontrived likeness of the subject both visually and intellectually. This type of treatment goes beyond the minimalist irony and self-deprecation of the caricature artist, and has the effect of positioning Kapp as a complex individual with a nuanced understanding of personality.

Kapp’s contemporary reception is best characterised by J. B. Manson, the former director of the Tate Gallery, who described him in *The Times* as a ‘distillateur of the perfume of personality [...] he extracts the quintessential expressions of persons. His drawing is a concrete expression of the soul.’ (Kapp 1919). Virginia Woolf reviewed Kapp's first book, *Personalities*, in the essay ‘Pictures and Portraits’.⁸ Her review is as emphatic as Manson’s, exclaiming: ‘Oh to be silent! Oh to be a painter! Oh (in short) to be Mr. Kapp’ (Woolf in McNeillie 1986: 166). Manson claimed that Kapp had the ability to extract and express the mind and soul of his subject, while Woolf approves of his supposedly silent authorial voice. These reviews seemingly position Kapp’s role in his own work as neutral and silent — presenting him as a gifted communicator of reality, rather than an interpreter or creator of meaning.

The works in Kapp’s limited edition publication, *Personalities*, are bookended by the first figure in the collection, the Japanese poet Yone Neguchi, which Kapp has titled *The Seer of Visions*, and the final character, *Mrs. Grundy*, an allegorical figure representing self-censorship and external judgement (Harvey 2006: 134). Thus, the publication begins with a mystical figure with his eyes closed, captured in a light, diffused sketch which is contrasted by the final figure, the dark, ominous Mrs. Grundy (see Figures 3 and 4). Ben Harvey argues that the inclusion of Mrs Grundy brings up issues of censorship and editorial selection, ‘a figure Kapp must fight against, or ignore, as he goes about his business of poking fun at the great, the good and the powerful’ (Harvey 2006: 154), contrasting with the position of *The*

⁸ First published in *The Athenaeum*, 1919

Seer of Visions. In this context, this coupling is suggestive of a conflict between creative desire and the influence of censorship.

Kapp's oeuvre embodies an experimental search for an artistic voice that unified image and idea, be it the depiction of personality or of music — as his later abstract work, which emulates Kandinsky's synesthetic visualizations, would explore. The terms 'personalities' and 'reflections' which he chooses to adopt, give insight into how he perceived this element of his work. The former suggests that he intended his character portraits to be visualisations of personality while the latter suggests a dual meaning, of both a visual reflection of the sitter, and of the artist's own mental reflections on the sitter.



Figure 5: ALBERT EINSTEIN, 1923



Figure 6: RABINDRATH TRAGORE, 1921

Michele Hannoosh claims that caricature functions through a kind of psychological splitting, in which the work represents the self and the other simultaneously: the self and the ironic self — the subject and the artist. This suggests that caricature functions on a basic level by exploring and exploiting psychological concepts of the self in relations to the other (1993: 73). This element of psychological splitting, or *dédoublement*, raises questions much like those surrounding the concept of 'psychological portraiture', a term referenced by Hugh Gordon Porteus in his introduction to the catalogue of Kapp's 1961 Whitechapel retrospective. Commonly applied to the portraiture of artists like Vincent van Gogh, Oskar Kokoschka and even Rembrandt, the term describes a perceived psychological intensity in portraiture.

Interpretations of both caricature and 'psychological portraiture' tend to assume the possibility of visually depicting psychological reality — and both assume that the artist has the faculties to access the interior life of the subject and 'reflect' it through their own

subjective visual interpretation. Expressionist ‘psychological portraiture’ created a visual language of inner meaning using medium and compositional choices to create an effect of psychological insight — such as the capturing of movement, intense or muted colour, heavy or feather-light facture and, in some cases, through the use of pathological imagery.⁹

Within caricature, phrenology is a device often employed to express psychological character and Kapp’s drawings do adopt these methods of cranial exaggeration, seen in the inflated head of Sir Norman Angel or Einstein’s high brow (see Figure 5). Kapp’s treatment of his subjects also uses formal elements similar to those adopted in portraiture which is often described as psychological. His drawing of Rabindranath Tagore (see Figure 6), for example is an intimate, textured and detailed portrait using soft, diffused line, giving the impression of a deep, spiritual, man of the mind.

His drawing of Percy Wyndham Lewis, on the other hand, is created through the use of harsh lines and blocks of geometric shapes and texture, from which the fragmented figure of Lewis emerges, creating a strong visual impact which could be linked to the harsh angles and heavy printing of the Vorticist journal, *BLAST* (see Figure 7). On a more traditional level, Kapp makes reference to the achievements of his subjects through use of emblems such as those seen in the drawing of Richard Strauss (see Figure 8), in which he is surrounded by musical paraphernalia and depicts the sun rising over the mountains — referencing the second section of his tone poem, *Eine Alpensinfonie* (Nickerson and Wootton 2007: 226).

Kapp's character portraits were interpreted by contemporary critics as depictions of their subject's interior life (J. B. Manson in Kapp 1919). But contrary to this, I would argue that Kapp is predominantly concerned with their intellectual ability and professional successes, attempting to ascertain and depict the essence of genius.

⁹ The relationship between portraiture and psychology in the early twentieth-century is explored in more detail in Blackshaw and Topp 2009.



Figure 7: PERCY WINDHAM LEWIS, 1914



Figure 8: RICHARD STRAUSS, 1917

Despite his long career of drawing ‘personalities’ I am not aware that Kapp ever made a self-portrait. Within his oeuvre, the artist's own personality is seemingly muted, allowing him to inhabit his subjects, ‘reflecting’ their genius and reputation upon his own, through his ‘reflections’ on their personalities. Despite his own misgivings about caricature and his aspirations to create more traditional fine art, Kapp's career within character portraiture is a unique negotiation of the modernist rhetoric of the creative genius.

Kapp forged a career independently and refused to ally himself with any artistic group. Whether or not it was an ideological stance, this rhetoric of independence seems to be mirrored in his artistic reception throughout his life, as both a blessing and a curse. Yvonne Kapp claims in her autobiography, that both the Slade and the Vienna Academy of Arts refused to accept Kapp on the grounds that ‘if taught, he would lose such originality as he had and gain little by way of compensation’ (Yvonne Kapp 2003: 57). But it was this stylistic and ideological independence that afforded him prestigious commissions such as *The League of Personalities* while, most notably, Picasso offered to sit for Kapp (see Figure 9) and for no other artist, as he claimed that Kapp would not be ‘influenced’ by him (Whitechapel 1961: 5).

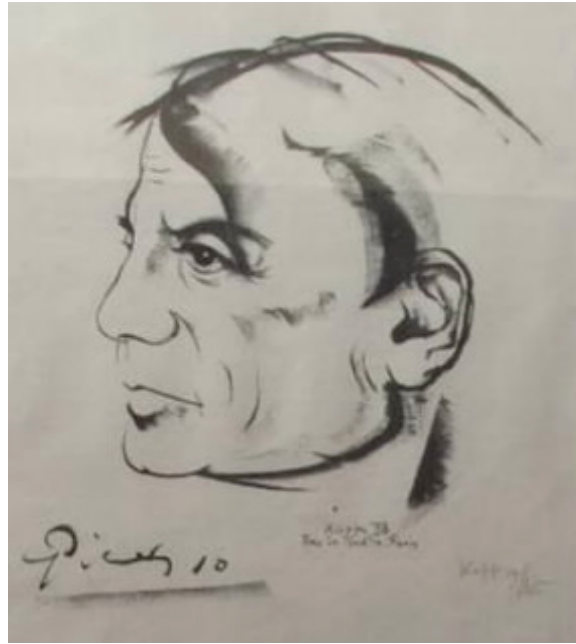


Figure 9: PABLO PICAASSO, 1938

Kapp's complex and often contradictory negotiation and definition of his practice afforded him a contemporary reception as an autonomous artistic talent with superior skills of analysis and expression, but it also compromised his position in art history, in part because of his habit of stylistic borrowing in order to suit his sitters and in part because he did not associate himself with a specific social or artistic zeitgeist. Defining Kapp's own style is difficult and locating his oeuvre within the narratives of twentieth-century art is equally complicated, which may have contributed to his limited posthumous reception. Kapp achieved his fame through drawing the famous, and in depicting 'genius' he engaged with the concept of genius but it seems that his harnessing of fame and genius was not enough to secure his own long-term reputation.

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