

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

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Abstract

Edmond Xavier Kapp's drawings depict some of the greatest figures of the twentieth century, from Winston Churchill to Percy Wyndham Lewis and Albert Einstein, yet his work is little known today. Kapp chose to call his drawings 'personalities' or 'reflections', rather than defining this element of his oeuvre in traditional terms of either portraiture or caricature. The article explores Kapp's complex negotiation of genre, how he defined his work with these parameters and how this would impact his contemporary and posthumous receptions.

Kapp's artistic independence, his refusal to associate himself with a single artistic group or movement, afforded him a reputation of autonomy, originality and ideological impartiality. Similarly, his stylistic diversity — his creating an aesthetic specific to each subject — was critically received in terms of 'psychological portraiture'; he was heralded as 'a distillateur of the perfume of personality'. The article explores character portraiture and psychological portraiture, discussing how both of these genres assume the possibility of a physical embodiment of personality, and how both facilitate the stereotype of the creative genius who possesses superior insight into the interior life of individuals.

Keywords: Caricature, portraiture, psychology, physiognomy, genius, reception history