BORN UNDER SATURN
The Character and Conduct of Artists
A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution

MARGOT AND RUDOLF WITTKOWER

Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION

CONNECTING the two grand-ducal residences of Florence, Palazzo Vecchio and Palazzo Pitti, is a long gallery that begins in the Uffizi and extends nearly a kilometer across the Arno and the busy quarter of the Oltrarno. Out of bounds to tourists and seldom visited by anyone, it contains the largest collection in the world, begun by Cardinal Leopoldo dei Medici in the seventeenth century and continued well into the twentieth, of artists’ self-portraits. From Andrea del Sarto and Vasari, through Rubens and Rembrandt, Van Dyck and Velázquez, David and Delacroix, to Maurice Denis, Balla, and Chagall, the painters stare out at us with proud, enigmatic gazes, sporting elaborate robes, gripping their brushes and palettes, toying with books and musical scores, sometimes even holding their own self-portraits. We walk this monumental artistic mile wondering what these men, and occasional women, were like. They seem to challenge us to gauge their personalities, or their personas, from their paintings. They prompt a question first asked by Philo Judaeus, a writer of the first century A.D.:

Unfailingly, works of art make known their creator, for who, as he looks at statues and pictures, does not immediately form an idea about the sculptor and the painter?

I take this quote from Margot and Rudolf Wittkower’s *Born Under Saturn*, first published in 1963 and here reissued, a book which brings the resources of modern scholarship to explore the relation of the artist’s character to the character of his art. Can we really judge the personality from the work? Where do our ideas of artistic character come from? Do we know enough about the development of art as a profession? What are the tools we need to study creativity in a historical context? The Wittkowers seek to put such questions in historical perspective as they
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discuss the lives and accomplishments of a host of European artists from the late Middle Ages to the dawn of the Romantic era. The picture that emerges from their pages is at once finely detailed and sweeping: we see the Renaissance artist separating himself from the medieval guild, striking out on his own, and suffering the uncertainties of a newly unmoored social status, which is the moment, the Wittkowers argue, that the notion of the melancholic and eccentric artist takes hold. It is followed, however, by a much longer period in which the artist emerges as an eminently respectable figure, of the sort epitomized by Sir Joshua Reynolds, with his huge income and confident standing in the upper ranks of society. Then, with the approach of Romanticism, an era ushered in by William Blake, the artist reappears once again as a rebel against convention, breaking the bounds of rationality.

Born Under Saturn is a book of vast range, acute intelligence, and fast narrative pace. It is not only a fascinating compilation of stories of artists' lives but a pioneering introduction to the concept of the artist and the way it has been modified by history. Furthermore, it sheds light on some of the major debates about method that affected the development of art history during the twentieth century. But to appreciate the full accomplishment of this book requires some more detailed knowledge of Margot and Rudolf Wittkower's own lives and labors.

Rudolf Wittkower (1901-1971) was one of the great lights of the generation of German Jewish art historians forced to emigrate by the Nazis. He found refuge from the Nazi regime first in London and later in New York, where he ended his career at Columbia University. Wittkower was best known for his studies of Renaissance architecture, writing with great and revolutionary insight on Alberti, Michelangelo, and Palladio, but he was also an authority on baroque sculpture and the foremost scholar on the work of Bernini. Educated in post-World-War-I Berlin and Munich, Wittkower wrote a thesis on the minor Veronese Renaissance painter Domenico Morone, and then, in 1923, moved to Rome to take up a position at the newly formed German research institute, the Bibliotheca Hertziana. There he assisted the director, Ernst Steinmann, with his research on Michelangelo, and began to investigate the undervalued fields of baroque architecture and sculpture. The seventeenth century had long been considered a degenerate period; scholarly literature on it was sparse. Wittkower and Heinrich Brauer's massive catalog of all the known drawings by Gianlorenzo Bernini, published by the Hertziana in 1931, formed the basis for the study of the major artist of the baroque for generations and is still an invaluable tool.

How unusual and innovative Wittkower's interests were emerges from the following story. Bernard Berenson, the great connoisseur of early Italian painting, came to Rome to visit Steinmann. He was introduced to Wittkower as one of Steinmann's young assistants, and asked to see his work. Wittkower offered photographs of the Bernini drawings. Berenson sat across the table reviewing the labels on the back, not even bothering to turn the photographs right side up. Finally he said, "When I look at these, I feel physically sick." Wittkower was furious. His own determination to try to find the value and the importance of what a student was doing was to make him a master teacher, shaper of two generations of British and American students.

Assistants at the Hertziana remained bachelors until they left the position, but on the last day of 1923 Wittkower broke with this tradition by marrying. He was then twenty-two and his bride barely a year younger; they had known each other since they were seventeen and sixteen. Margot Holtzmann (1902-1995) came from a well-to-do Jewish medical family in Berlin, but was determined to pursue a career in furniture making and design, unconventional for a woman, especially of her background. She had enrolled in the Tischlerei Fachschule in Berlin in 1919 and the Stadtische Kunstgewerbe und Handwerkschule in nearby Charlottenburg in 1920. Throughout the 1920s, she held various jobs as a garden designer and interior designer while raising her and Rudolf's child, Mario.

In 1933 the Wittkowers emigrated to England. Politically aware, they had the foresight to realize that Hitler's grip on power would not prove temporary. The next year Rudolf was lucky to find work in the great library of 120,000 books formed in Hamburg by Aby Warburg but relocated to London in 1934. Warburg, a scion of the great Hamburg banking family, died in 1929 but the Wittkowers had met him in 1927, a year after he had emerged from a mental clinic on the Lake of Constance, which he had entered for the treatment of the schizophrenia that had plagued him since 1918. They formed a bond with Warburg. He was, Rudolf Wittkower later maintained, the one real genius he had ever met, with interests that encompassed the whole world of visual culture, not just the great art of the Florentine
Renaissance, but also astrology, and popular items from advertisements to comic strips. He appreciated the loftiest flights of the Renaissance spirit but also saw the demonic undercurrent beneath.

Warburg, victim of schizophrenia, brought melancholy to the attention of early-twentieth-century scholarship, and gave the initial stimulus to the work that emerged decades later as *Born Under Saturn*. Indeed, melancholy is a key to the work of many early Warburgians. Melancholy for the Middle Ages was synonymous with *acedia*, gloomy sloth. But in the Renaissance the neo-Platonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino rediscovered a passage in Aristotle where the ancient author maintains that all men who achieve distinction in the arts and sciences are melancholic. He went on to conflate Aristotle’s creative melancholy with Plato’s divine mania, the source of artistic inspiration. Thus melancholy became the mark of the creative spirit. (Michelangelo, for example, called his own habitual gloom and self-imposed isolation *pazzia*, folly, but he really was referring to the divine mania of Plato.) Warburg’s followers, above all his great disciple Erwin Panofsky, continued to investigate the meanings of melancholy. It lies at the heart of Panofsky’s biography of Dürer. Scholars of Elizabethan literature were drawn to the subject as well. And if melancholy held a position of strange pride in the Renaissance sensibility, it also had a grim pertinence in the world of the twentieth century. Saturn, tutelary deity of melancholy, assumes a place of honor in the title and on the frontispiece of the Wittkowers’ book.

At first sight one expects *Born Under Saturn* to be a study in the psychology of the artist, but if anything the book is a historian’s revenge against psychology, or at least against the wave of psychologizing interpretations of the artist that began in the nineteenth century. Rumors of Freud had reached and intrigued Rudolf in his student days. At one point he kept pencil and pad by his bed to record his dreams, and he took an interest in lecturers coming to Berlin from Vienna to speak on topics such as Leonardo and psychoanalysis. As Margot was later to say, this was a time when a new interest dawned in the personality of the artist. But by 1963 the Wittkowers had come to believe that history was a good deal more revealing about art and artists than psychological speculations.

Their skepticism was aroused by a series of efforts to discover an anchorage in psychology, but outside of history, for the study of person-
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The realistic, joyful mood of the Renaissance, with its entirely worldly, earth-loving, pleasure-seeking, constructive, artistic nature, had, in comparison with the Gothic spirit, a more cyclothymic infusion.

However preposterous this may sound now, Kretschmer was very much in fashion in the 1930s. His theories were used by the rising historian of the Vienna School, Hans Sedlmayr, to interpret the unconventional designs of an artist dear to Rudolf Wittkower’s heart from his days in Rome, Francesco Borromini (1599-1667). Inferring an inner psychotic state from Borromini’s occasional irascibility and his tragic suicide, Sedlmayr analyzed his architecture in terms of what he called, using Kretschmer’s term, a schizothymic personality, discerning within the visible architecture abstract forms that he saw as deep structures of Borromini’s art.

To Wittkower these were so many pretentious clichés, of no help in illuminating the achievement of an architect of immense creativity. Constitutionally adverse to the imposition of authoritarian intellectual constructs on history, Wittkower took on Sedlmayr and the two engaged in a series of attacks and counterattacks in learned journals in 1931. The polemic tone of these was deepened by Wittkower’s awareness of Sedlmayr’s Nazi sympathies, but beyond that it was based on deeply contrasting views of what made for valid art history. The case of Borromini is illustrative of Rudolf and Margot Wittkower’s approach to the question of artistic personality. Borromini only occupies a few pages in *Born Under Saturn*, in the chapter on artists’ suicides, but three years later, in an address on the occasion of the tercentenary of the artist’s death in 1967 (drafted at first by Margot but then revised and delivered by Rudolf), Wittkower considered him anew. The address, published with the dramatic title “Personality and Destiny,” is a small masterpiece, and one of the most insightful studies of the personality of any baroque artist. The Wittkowers take us as far as one can go from the published sources; subsequent generations have descended into the archives to create whole new worlds out of what were short sections of the book.

The Wittkowers touch on questions of sexuality and homosexuality without prudery or circumlocution, but in this book of 1963 these issues do not tower the way they might today. The authors are content with recovering the tone of imperturbability that patrons of the Renaissance and baroque periods exercised when dealing with artists whose lives were freighted with erotic material. And though several women artists appear in its pages, the fundamental question posed by Linda Nochlin in 1971 as “Why have there been no great women artists?” does not arise. Still the Wittkowers assembled the framework necessary for an answer to that question: the importance of training in academies where women were excluded from drawing after the nude, and the conception of art as a career with its own patterns of training and patronage.

This may be the place to mention that throughout their many years of marriage the Wittkowers often worked together as a team. Another book appeared under their joint names in 1964, *The Divine Michelangelo*. *Born Under Saturn*, however, is more Margot’s book than Rudolf’s. The preliminary work and first draft were hers, she revealed to
an oral historian from the Getty Foundation in 1993, though she added that it would never have been a real book if Rudolf had not pulled it to pieces and put it back together again. Against his suggestion that she publish it under her own name, she countered that his was the recognized name and the book would fly higher if both appeared as authors. So it came out in 1963 as by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower. In this edition, in tribute to the main author, the order of the names has been reversed.

Born Under Saturn is a remarkable book, full of fascinating information presented with a judiciousness and intelligence that remains exemplary. It will interest the reader concerned not only with artists of the pre-modern world but with the historiography of art history as it evolved early in the last century. And last but not least, it is a tremendous pleasure to read.

—Joseph Connors

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COLLECTED ARTICLES OF RUDOLF WITTKOWER
EDITED BY MARGOT WITTKOWER


TRIBUTES, OBITUARIES, STUDIES


INTRODUCTION


OTHER BOOKS MENTIONED

