

# Agneta Pleijel

# Double Portrait

A novel about  
Agatha Christie and  
Oskar Kokoschka

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## FIRST SITTING

Sir Max and Lady Mallowan have discussed the matter of the portrait at their kitchen table in the apartment in Chelsea. To begin with, it didn't go down too well.

No, Max. I hate the idea.

You're going to be feted when you turn eighty whether you like it or not, Agatha. Let the portrait be a part of the celebrations.

I don't know anything about Kokoschka.

I've never seen his work.

By this stage the exhibition has been taken down, but Max assures her that Kokoschka is one of today's most significant painters, who has lived an exciting life. He has travelled a great deal. Emigrated to Prague to get away from Hitler. Lived in England as a refugee during the war. Might still be a British citizen.

But six long sessions, Max. What on earth will we talk about?

Ask him about Alma Mahler.

Gustav Mahler's wife? Why would I do that?

He was her lover. Allegedly.

Be serious for a change, Max!

But it's true. That's what Max has heard; it's part of cultural history. Agatha doesn't say anything. Max and Mathew are two very stubborn individuals; it's difficult to stand up to them. The decision is made. Yes, she will go along with it. But she is very cross, not least about her own acquiescence. Oh well, six sessions will pass. And she has every intention of keeping her mouth shut.

April gives way to May. Glorious weather. Mrs Kokoschka steps out of the cab; in one hand she is carrying the box containing paints, brushes and turpentine. It also contains cigarettes and a bottle of whisky. The canvas is clamped under her other arm. The driver turns his attention to her husband.

A London taxi is spacious, but it isn't easy to extract a stiff gentleman who refuses to let go of his folding easel, which is reminiscent of a spider and is hysterically tied up with yards of string. It takes time, but Olda is patient. She is used to this performance.

Sir Max opens the door. He consists of a rotund body in a brown tweed jacket and plus fours, and welcomes them effusively. He informs them that his wife is resting, but will be down shortly. He takes Olda by the arm and attempts to draw her inside.

She declines; unfortunately she has to go.

Olda strides away among the pedestrians in her pale spring coat. One might almost think that she'd found a babysitter for the next few hours, but she would never say that. Not to him. She's delighted to have the time to browse the bookshops. The leaves are beginning to come out; in a few days, London will be drenched in greenery. She catches sight of her reflection in a shop window and smiles.

The hallway is so cluttered that it's not easy to negotiate a path: countless umbrellas in different colours, at least as many walking sticks, toy animals and brightly coloured dolls – representations of Harlequin and Pulcinella – hanging from hooks on the walls. And behind a bulging curtain, an enormous collection of ladies' and gentlemen's outdoor clothing.

Sir Max is a professor of archaeology at the University of London. Kokoschka has read some of his articles; the subject has interested him ever since his youth in Vienna. However, he was unaware of Mallowan's connection to Agatha Christie; Olda had to enlighten him.

The library walls are covered in books and boring paintings, along with shelves displaying vessels and sculptures. Mallowan has worked on archaeological digs not only in Ur, the city where

our forefather Abraham is said to have first seen the light of day, but also in other places in Iraq and Syria, for example Nimrud, searching for the history of humanity.

This pot is from the Chaldees, remarkable, just look at it! Hard to date but definitely prehistoric, before the scriptures. Say five thousand years before our era. Time is irrelevant; people have always been the same, vain, mendacious, with an insatiable lust for power.

Mallowan is succinct, humorous, sarcastic.

He leads Kokoschka up a staircase to the room which is to be the artist's studio. Bookshelves, cupboards, a table and a window overlooking a back garden that is more like a park. The two men kneel down in order to free the easel's spider legs from the tangled string, then Kokoschka places his box on the table and takes out the whisky. Mallowan smiles and fetches two glasses.

They settle down and chat, as gentlemen of their generation like to do, about how they spent the war. Mallowan was an intelligence officer in Egypt, and was unable to get home to his wife for several years, which was challenging. When the war broke out Kokoschka arrived in England, fleeing from Czechoslovakia. They get along well. They smoke – Kokoschka has his cigarettes, Mallowan his pipe.

Agatha is not resting. She is searching through her wardrobe. She picks out a dress from India in a flowing pink fabric. According to Max, it makes her look like a *memsahib*. She tosses it aside impatiently. She contemplates herself in the mirror, her wrinkled cheeks, the liver spots, the increasing resemblance between her throat and that of a turkey. The idea of being painted is unappealing. She is fat. Very fat. It doesn't matter in everyday life, but she has always been uncomfortable with people looking at her – long before old age began the process of enlargement.

She has survived by keeping quiet and listening to others.

When she has finished a book, new plots immediately come crowding into her mind. She listens to voices, inside and outside. Things happen. Unfamiliar figures appear. A millionaire with influence in many countries. A hypochondriac actress with several lovers. A diplomat, a travelling salesman, a female medium, a pharmacist or a tramp who kills the owner of a chemist's shop.

Journalists constantly ask where she gets her ideas from.

From the Harrods storeroom, she replies tersely.

Are your characters modelled on real-life individuals?

Oh no. They demand to be written. Money and self-interest are often the triggers for murder. Inheritance and business. But also jealousy, the desire for revenge and injured vanity. She finds it difficult to kill off those with whom she has a certain empathy. A weakness. On the other hand, she has few illusions about her fellow man.

People and their actions, not least the sordid and the mean, appeal to her. You have to be careful with the settings. If you write about the Sphinx or the Orient Express, you have to get it absolutely right.

The reader is important.

She doesn't know who he or she is, but the process involves a kind of mutual co-operation. The reader expects a mystery. On that point she is honourable. And old-fashioned. All the clues are there, laid out in the text, but she has to lead the reader astray. He or she must be taken by surprise.

You fooled me again, Mrs Christie! Author and reader play cat and mouse with each other. The reader tries to see through the author, while it is her job to outwit him or her. For example, what did a witness really see? Early on in life she became aware of how blind people can be.

More often than not, the witness doesn't see reality, but rather his or her own perception of that reality. If Agatha has one talent, it is her ability to

lead the reader astray. To exploit what he or she hasn't noticed, even though it's right there in front of their nose. There is nothing more fascinating, in her opinion, than showing the reader how blind and unseeing human beings really are.

She tries on a green suit jacket. It makes her look like an overweight schoolmistress. She fires off a series of meaty curses aimed at her husband and grandson before putting on the pink Indian dress and heading for the studio. She tells herself that she will simply be a motif, rather like the Eiffel Tower or St Paul's Cathedral, and get the thing over and done with.

The room is thick with tobacco smoke. Kokoschka gets to his feet, bends over Mrs Christie's hand and kisses it. She finds this comical, but then he is from Eastern Europe. Mrs Christie is a big woman, he notes, and she appears to be swathed in something that looks like a pink tablecloth.

She lands in the armchair, letting out a puff of air.

Now be a good girl – it's not going to hurt. Max tenderly strokes her cheek, then leaves them alone. Kokoschka sits down in front of her at his easel. She takes in his scruffy appearance. They gaze at each other, and neither speaks for a while.

Mrs Christie, he begins politely.

Mr Kokoschka, she replies with a slight grimace.

I'm sure you don't believe that our meeting is pure chance, he says.

Of course it is. You got a commission and decided to fulfil it. I'm not very keen on the idea – you might as well know that from the start.

He stands up and moves the easel; he seems rather restless. Then he takes a folded striped apron

out of his box and ties it around his waist. It makes him look like a skinny cook. His face reminds her of an elderly native American Indian. Like someone in a story by Karl May. Winnetou, probably.

I think we often overestimate chance, he says. In fact everything is interdependent. It is connected to what has happened in the past, and it determines the future. Let us get to know each other a little better before we start work, Mrs Christie.

I thought all I had to do was sit still and keep quiet.

You can change position whenever you like. And I'm happy for you to talk.

About what, Mr Kokoschka?

Whatever comes into your mind.

Nothing comes into my mind. I don't like being painted. End of story. And I'm not much of a talker. But feel free to chat away if you like.

Kokoschka lights a cigarette. He offers her a glass of whisky. She shakes her head. She has never learned to drink whisky, although she has tried. Nor has she ever succeeded in learning to smoke.

Have you really tried?

I have. But you carry on drinking. And smoking. And talk as much as you want. I can never think of any topics of conversation.

Kokoschka bursts out laughing.

Let us talk about death, love, and art, he suggests. In no particular order.

Mrs Christie can't suppress a smile. My grandson Mathew tells me that you paint characters, which sounds dreadful. Unfortunately I've never seen any of your work.

Kokoschka digs around in his box and finds the childhood photograph that Fischer gave him, and holds it up to show her. She leans forward and frowns, then she shakes her head, looking less than pleased.

Yes, that's me. A very long time ago. Let's not talk about death.

Then we will move on to art, Mrs Christie. Who are you as an artist?

Mrs Christie sighs. I am deeply embarrassed, Mr Kokoschka, that my husband and grandson have persuaded us to do this. I am totally opposed to the idea. I write simple crime novels. My mother-in-law, my first mother-in-law, found it shameful. She thought I should be writing biographies of famous men instead, which would be more appropriate for a woman. Stuff and nonsense!

Who is an artist, Mrs Christie, if not you?

Kokoschka gazes at her from his chair, one leg crossed over the other.

An artist? That sounds rather important, Mrs Christie says. I assume that you are, Mr Kokoschka.

And Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. They are admirable, I've read their work. I've also seen some of Beckett's plays. Characters buried up to their neck in sand, commenting on nothingness. All very fine, very deep, and definitely not for me. I have done the only thing I can do – told stories about people.

Writing has enabled me to be left in peace.

Kokoschka notices her hands. The fingers of her right hand are drumming on the arm of her chair, rapidly and not entirely rhythmically. She seems unaware of it herself, but it reflects her irritation. The movement fascinates him.

Then let us take love, Mrs Christie. When did the girl in the photograph fall in love for the first time?

A hint of sorrow passes across Mrs Christie's face. The question is cheap, as if it came from an old man offering a little girl sweeties during a train journey. The kind of old man she was constantly being warned about. She shakes her head. Thinks for a moment, then makes her decision.

Mr Kokoschka. Tell me about Alma Mahler. I believe you knew her.

He is taken aback – by his own reaction too. Alma, that really was a long time ago. He looks down at Mrs Christie's feet, encased in sturdy shoes. Gets the idea that there is water pouring

over them. She is a water creature. The first impression always holds a truth within it. Mrs Christie's fingers continue to drum on the arm of the chair.

He puts the photograph back in the box.

There are no childhood photographs of Oskar as a boy. He was born in the small town of Pöchlarn, but the family soon moved to Vienna.

No photographs; you have to cross the sunlight forming a prism of colours in a gutter in the proletarian quarter of the city.

A ten-year-old on a wooden staircase in an area with no sanitation.

With pigs grunting around the houses and drinking water that has to be fetched from a pump. People throw their rubbish anywhere. He sees his mother Romana coming along with a heavy bucket of water. She reaches into the pocket of her skirt, hands him a piece of bread.

He munches away, his mind elsewhere. His scruffy father emerges from the house and sits down on the steps; the boy edges away. He catches sight of something astonishing.

A dead baby squirrel!

It is floating on top of a disintegrating newspaper in the ditch. A sodden little body, how did it die? Was it stung by an insect? Bitten by a rat? The green morning light in the water forms a

casket of beauty around the baby squirrel, which disappears along with all the other waste.

Disgusting, his father says. Everything ends in decay and dissolution.

This is his father Gustav, a man with a bitter tongue, broken before his time. He comes from a family of goldsmiths, known not only in Austria, but with branches in Paris and Madrid. Several relatives are very well off. Gustav didn't get much further than selling watches in the suburbs of Vienna, followed by a period in a subordinate role as a bookkeeper.

Then unemployment. He doesn't lack education, but spends most of his time sitting at home drinking, seeking support for his melancholy in books.

If it wasn't for Oskar's mother, there would be no food on the table. She is much younger and from humbler beginnings, and she runs around doing her job as a laundress as well as taking on extra work, making bread for the local bakeries and dealing in tobacco. He has two younger siblings. Their mother is inventive and hardworking. Her eyes sometimes flash with rage, but she is always there for him. Oskar adores his mother.

He can no longer stand his father's gloomy predictions, and he can't rescue the dead baby squirrel. He swings his bag of schoolbooks over his

shoulder and leaves. The wall of a building flares bright orange. He sees a carriage drawn by a blue horse with a green coachman and a girl in a pink dress in an avenue of lilac shadows. He isn't the brightest scholar, but he draws and paints.

On a whim he sends samples of his work to the Kunstgewerbschule. Not an academy, a school for artists. There are hundreds of applicants, but he gains a place. The news is followed by Gustav whining: You're going to be an artist? Jesus. You'll end up begging on the streets like me.

But Romana is as proud as punch. You are my son. You were chosen to be great. We are both full of spirit and fire.

It's true: they were both born beneath brightly burning flames.

Nothing can change his conviction that the world speaks to us through light and colours, and that our eyes were created to interpret them. This is very clear in a late photograph of him and two artist friends, Schiele and Oppenheimer.

The other two are in suits. Oskar is wearing tight white trousers and a boldly cropped dress shirt, his head shaven. His hands are in his pockets, his expression full of self-awareness.

His first exhibition. He paints the walls black so that visitors walk into a darkroom, and the paintings stand out to shocking effect.

They are regarded as formless. Incomprehensible.

Offensive and garish.

All this goes through Kokoschka's head as he gets to his feet and takes a few stumbling steps across the floor in front of Mrs Christie. The memories swirl unexpectedly around his mind. He is walking with his friend Loos in the whirling snow on Ringstrasse. Loos, the architect, much older, contacted Oskar after his first exhibition, which he thought was the work of a genius. In his opinion, Oskar represented the new Vienna, as opposed to the stagnation in art, literature and philosophy.

However, there was one weak spot in his youthful self-confidence: women.

Sexual urges and brothels. That was what was on offer. When his passionate love for a friend's sister ended with her breaking things off, he was hurled into an abyss of despair, melancholy and suicidal thoughts. By that stage he had begun to write, and his pieces for Vienna's cabaret scene became crazed and furious. About the fact that women had the upper hand. And men indulged them.

No grammar, an insane syntax. As in *Murderer, the Hope of Women*. The man kills the woman. Before she dies she plunges the knife into him and he gives up the ghost. The sexes are so far apart

that they can never reach each other. Everything has cracks. Every surface can shatter, every bond can be torn apart. Nothing is what it purports to be. The only thing worth holding onto is art.

He is unhappy, and Loos is a support.

But not only Loos; Karl Kraus also believes him to be a genius when it comes to painting. Kraus praises him in his magazine *Die Fackel*, which has its finger on the pulse of the time. Kraus has the sharpest pen in Vienna, and yanks down the pants of double moral standards, the double monarchy, and anti-Semitism.

Kokoschka sits back down at the easel, still with Loos's voice in his ears: Look around, Kokoschka. Vienna consists of shit. Statues of shit and busts like turds. Palaces that are piles of shit and opera houses made of crenellated shittiness.

All of this deserves to be destroyed. He remembers what Loos called meaningless décor: a crime. Pompous bragging – statues of Atlas with bulging muscles, goddesses with huge breasts, cherubs and bunches of grapes – surrounding the stinking guts.

Loos designed factories and houses with restrained austerity and a total lack of shittiness. He wasn't just a friend, he was more like a father.

They were in agreement about the ability of true art to tear down scenery and cut through falseness.

They both worshipped Gustav Mahler's music, which seized them in an iron grip. Trumpets, percussion, kettledrums, a thunderstorm of sound. Tempests and crescendos soaring to orgasm, then immediately turning to tenderness, a warmth and simplicity that brought tears to the eyes.

Kokoschka doesn't know how to tell the ironically severe Mrs Christie about Alma. He takes his charcoal pencil out of the box, weighs it in his hand but doesn't use it.

Alma Mahler, he says slowly, as if he is tasting the name. It's true, we had an affair for a few years.

Yes? Tell me more.

The simplest way to put it is to say that I was overwhelmed by a love that was too big for me. The only word for it is obsession.

They sit in silence for a little while.

Tell me more about obsession. It interests me, says Mrs Christie.

Kokoschka takes a slug from his whisky glass, then runs a hand through his wayward hair.

I must inform you, Mr Kokoschka, Mrs Christie adds, that I know nothing whatsoever about Alma Mahler. We don't need to discuss her. It was your idea that we should talk. I'm perfectly happy to sit here in silence with my own thoughts.

You think it was chance that brought us together, Kokoschka replies. I don't agree. Nor was it chance that made you ask me about Alma Mahler. I just wasn't ready.