

69: John Koch *Interlude* (1963)

Susan Dodge-Peters Daiss

Detail by detail, we are drawn into John Koch's painted world, lured into the carefully cultivated life of art and music that he and his wife, musician and teacher Dora Zaslavsky, led in New York City from the 1930s to 1970s. Their apartment on Central Park West, on the tenth floor of the El Dorado, served both as their home, their studios—they owned two adjoining apartments—and as the setting for legendary parties that brought together distinguished artists, musicians, critics, and patrons.¹ Like Rubens and Mozart, who through their art had access to the most powerful people of their time, the Kochs entered the New York City world of affluence and influence thanks to their individual artistic gifts.² At a time in the City's history when it was fast becoming the center of the international avant-garde, the Kochs were committed to the practice of art forms with the most historical of pedigrees—Dora, classical music; John, portraiture, still life, and interiors. Those who knew them speak of their shared dedication to their work and to each other, of lives dedicated to the mastery of their art that was both their identity and a means to another end: access to people and resources so they could fashion a way of life that was, itself, “a work of art.”³

Writing about Koch in *Esquire* in 1964—when he was at the height of his artistic powers and reputation—Dorothy Parker speaks of the “nostalgia” that his work evokes, “nostalgia for those rooms of lovely lights and lovelier shadows and the loveliest people....[I]t is the sort of nostalgia that is only a dreamy longing for some places where you never were.”⁴ Perhaps the one who most longed for the reality implied in these paintings was the artist himself. In the great tradition of the old masters who were his only teachers—the painter trained himself over four years of looking at and copying masterpieces in the Louvre—Koch paints with extraordinary verisimilitude that easily seduces his audience into believing that he has painted precisely what was before him. But as he readily admitted, “this is far indeed from the truth....I am intensely concerned with the believability of my painted world. Again and again I invent objects, people, and even places that do not exist.”⁵ Koch's painted world is an artful balancing act of realism and artifice, of ease and effort. His interiors are no more painted lies than stage sets for the theater. The models are actors, the objects are props, the room is the convincing backdrop where the drama unfolds.

The drama of *Interlude* is actually an entr'acte—a familiar subject in Koch's work—when artist and model are taking a break. Those familiar with his art would recognize several of the characters immediately: in the background, seated on a sofa, looking off to the viewer's right—the painting's “stage left”—is the artist himself. Drink in hand—a habitual gesture for many of the actors in Koch's paintings—he gazes intently at the canvas in process. In the middle-ground, dressed in a brilliant red robe, is Koch's wife, Dora Zaslavsky, another stock figure in Koch's work. The model in the foreground is Rosetta Howard, who appeared in at least two other Koch paintings: *Studio—End of Day* (1961) and *Two Artists and a Model* (1965).⁶ The essential action of *Interlude*—this scene—is Rosetta's reaching for a cup of tea, extended toward her by Dora, whose downcast eyes suggest deference to the model's nudity as well as thoughtful handling of the hot liquid. The model's beauty and the power of her presence—though seen only in her back—recalls a comment the artist once made: “I find the back of a human being as eloquent and expressive as a face.”⁷

Props, like figures, also recur in Koch's work, taking on a supporting role in his narratives. These objects—some associated with affluence, others with a workaday reality—are set amidst spacious surroundings, and eloquently tell the story of the Kochs' complex world. The Queen Anne chair on the left, which echoes in shape and tonalities the contour and colors of the model's back, is a familiar object in many of his paintings. The small serving table—here, with a teapot and martini



pitcher—makes multiple appearances, as do the easel, the yellow stool supporting the palette, the gooseneck lamp, the daybed, the tufted and fringed sofa, and the black-framed mirror. Mirror? What appears at first glance to be a bank of windows behind the artist—an architectural detail and not another prop—is revealed as a mirror when “real” elements in the room—a corner of the canvas in process and the repetition of the gooseneck lamp—are finally seen as reflections. Koch has played the well-known decorating trick, placing a mirror on a wall to enlarge the sense of a room. The effect here is not simply the expansion of interior space, though he does include the breadth of Central Park in the view to the east out the Kochs’ tenth-floor windows. The illusion is more complex: a technical *tour de force* making his viewers pay close attention to details and appreciate how initial appearances may be deceiving.

As was his usual practice, Koch made multiple sketches before painting *Interlude*, three of which are known, two now in the Gallery’s collection.⁸ The overall composition is already set in the three extant drawings. Koch appears to be adjusting the precise placement of the three overlapping figures in the room: will they be in the center of the canvas or off to one side? (He finally places Dora and Rosetta slightly to the left.) He plays with the placement of Rosetta’s right arm and her legs. (He finally positions the model’s legs in front of her—not off to the side—and places her right arm by her side, pressing her weight into her right palm on the very edge of the daybed.) He experiments with ideas for lighting and cropping, and sketches particular details—the back of the easel, the line of Rosetta’s right side—while trying out different positions for her hand. (He finally decides to angle Rosetta’s fingers to the right.)

Perhaps the most significant decision developed through these drawings is the physical distance portrayed between Dora’s and Rosetta’s two extended hands. Should the gesture of the extended cup of tea be consummated or not? Koch determined in the end to leave a critical gap between the two women’s hands. The dynamic gap that includes a white tea cup, an older woman’s white hand and forearm, and the opening hand of the young African American model is the most articulate and poignant moment in the entire painting. In this intimate world of the artist’s studio—ten stories above the streets of New York—two women are engaged in an historic reversal: a young black model is being served by an older white woman.

Interlude is signed and dated on the painting’s lower right: “Koch 1963.” Is it a coincidence that this was painted at the height of the Civil Rights movement? Koch had painted African Americans in his work earlier and would do so again, but never, before or after, with the implied narrative of the changes at work in contemporary American society. *Interlude* in many ways is a painting like all the others: a beautifully crafted insider’s glimpse into the Kochs’ enchanted, even rarified, world, complete with its familiar figures, objects, and setting—down to the often-repeated deception of the mirrored windows. But in this single gesture, first glimpsed perhaps in the course of a working day, Koch has captured a moment—an interlude—that takes on a level of contemporary meaning rarely, if ever, achieved elsewhere in his work.

(Facing page)
John Koch,
1909–1978
Interlude, 1963
Oil on canvas,
50 1/4 x 39 1/4 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas
H. Hawks, 65.12
Estate of John Koch, Courtesy
Kraushaar Galleries, New York



John Koch, 1909–1978
Study for “*Interlude*” (I), 1963
Graphite on paper, 14 x 11 in.
Gift of the artist, 65.63.1
Courtesy Kraushaar Galleries,
New York



John Koch, 1909–1978
Study for “*Interlude*” (II), ca. 1963
Graphite on paper, 14 x 11 in.
Gift of the artist, 65.63.2
Courtesy Kraushaar Galleries,
New York

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