

Professor Michael Podro

Art historian who was a leading figure in the field of aesthetics

Michael Podro was one of Britain's leading art theorists, a critic and philosopher who developed a highly independent position as a teacher and person of influence in the field of aesthetics at Essex University, where he helped build up the Department of Art History and Theory. With the unruly hair of a quintessential Professor (he was depicted in a 1985 painting by Ron Kitaj as "The Jewish Rider", appropriately hunched in a railway seat), he helped generations of students and fellow art historians to think widely and deeply about the subject of art, provoking them with frequently opaque, but often quixotically inspirational ideas about the practice of art.

Born in 1931, Podro was educated privately at Berkhamsted School in the outer suburbs of London, and, following national service in the RAF, read English at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he was much influenced by the ideas of F.R. Leavis and the traditional interest of the Cambridge English tripos in the history of ideas. Indeed, when he came to reflect on the nature of art history as it was to be taught at Essex, he continued to regard it as a version of literary criticism – "giving emphasis to the critical dialogue rather than the critical catalogue". Much to his disappointment, he only got a 2.2 in both parts of the tripos.

On graduating, he took himself off to the Slade to learn to draw, but after a year transferred to University College's philosophy department, inspired by his reading of Cassirer's *Platonic Renaissance* in England. Given his intellectual interests and the fact that he chose to write his dissertation on "Konrad Fiedler's Theory of the Visual Arts", he was inevitably drawn into the orbit of the Warburg Institute, where he had a slightly love-hate relationship with Ernst Gombrich, its Director, who, alongside Richard Wollheim, was the co-supervisor of his thesis (he wrote both their obituaries for the British Academy), but who never appointed him to the permanent staff of the Institute, which remained his spiritual home.

From 1961 to 1967, he was Head of the Department of Art History at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, where he was a friend of Frank Auerbach and other painters. Indeed, one of his great strengths as an intellectual was that he had an unusual understanding of the practice of art, particularly drawing, an affinity for artists as individuals with their own quirks of psychological motivation, and a genuine and deep engagement with the physical experience of works of art, continuing to believe in the relevance of practical criticism in front of the works themselves. Right at the end of his life, Podro was made an Honorary Doctor of the University of the Arts and he used the occasion to deliver an unexpected (and fortunately largely inaudible) diatribe against what he regarded as the bureaucratisation of the traditional London art schools.

After a brief period back at the Warburg Institute as a Lecturer, Podro moved to Essex University in 1969, appointed by Joseph Rykwert, who shared Podro's interests in the history of ideas, but with whom he rapidly fell out. It was said that the origins of the feud lay in the differences of their Polish ancestry. From this point onwards, Essex University became Podro's second home and he loved the long corridor on which the offices of the department lay, his weekly graduate seminar in which he was able to expound the relationship between art and ideas, and the first-year teaching on 18th-century art, which has long been a compulsory requirement for students at Essex. Most of all, he enjoyed the

evening train back to London during which (to the consternation of the other passengers) he and the other itinerant members of the department would hold an impromptu seminar about the latest exhibitions or some new art historical publication or the works of Hogarth. He was fully aware of how important this atmosphere of debate was to his teaching. As he wrote in his response to receiving an honorary degree from Essex: "We have not only argued about what we have written, about lectures that we have given, but we have argued over many bottles about how the subject should be taught."

During his time at Essex, he published the two books on which his art historical reputation rests. The first was *Manifold in Perception: theories of art from Kant to Hildenbrand*, published in the Oxford-Warburg series in 1972. It is a dense, thoughtful text on the key writers on the theory of art, all German, whom Podro had systematically analysed. The second book was *Critical Historians of Art*, published in 1982, which is slightly more discursive, but still demonstrates his deep commitment to philosophical exegesis. They established his reputation as one of the leading figures internationally in the history of aesthetics and led to regular invitations to lecture in the United States and to his appointment as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1992.

In 1987, Podro was appointed a trustee of the Victoria and Albert Museum and he played a key role during the extremely difficult period when Elizabeth Esteve-Coll as director fired the majority of its senior staff. Podro felt that the trustees had been inadequately informed as to what was to happen and were then assumed to be responsible for its consequences. It was a situation which he disliked and so devoted much energy, with characteristic probity, to trying to resolve.

As an art historian, Podro was unusual as an intellectual generalist at a time when the great majority of the profession were specialists, devoted to what he called "bit-by-bit empirical enquiries". At Essex, he was crucial in establishing an atmosphere of creative intellectual freedom amongst both staff and students. Besides his work, he had a wry, dispassionate and occasionally ironic view of the world, a detestation of the techniques of conservation which he believed had destroyed the surface of works of art at the National Gallery, and a great love for his wife, Charlotte, a paper conservator from Northumberland.

Michael Isaac Podro, art historian: born 13 March 1931; Head of the Department of Art History, Camberwell School of Art and Crafts 1961-67; Lecturer in the Philosophy of Art, Warburg Institute 1967-69; Reader, Department of Art History and Theory, Essex University 1969-73, Professor 1973-97 (Emeritus); Trustee, Victoria and Albert Museum 1987-96; FBA 1992; CBE 2001; married 1961 Charlotte Booth (two daughters); died London 28 March 2008.

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