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Haus unter I.

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Haus-Motiv I

ALFRED KUBIN

1877 Leitmeritz, Bohemia – Zwickledt, Upper Austria 1959

Haus Usher [The House of Usher]

Pen and black ink over traces of black chalk, on cadastral paper. Circa 1909. Bearing the artist's initials *AK* lower left in the image; signed in pencil *Kubin* lower right and titled *Haus Usher I* in the lower margin corners. On the verso with annotations in the lower margin. 314 x 259 mm

LITERATURE: Edgar Allan Poe, *Das schwatzende Herz und andere Novellen*, translated by Gisela Etzel. With 14 drawings by Alfred Kubin. Munich and Leipzig: Georg Müller 1909, S. 31 full-page illustration, 123 x 112 mm, (minimized in the printed edition) – We used the following edition: Edgar Allan Poe, *Erzählungen in zwei Bänden*, Vol. II–Mit den Zeichnungen von Alfred Kubin, VMA-Vertriebsgesellschaft, Wiesbaden o.J., Vol. II, ill. p. 101 – Alfred Marks, *Der Illustrator Alfred Kubin, Gesamtkatalog seiner Illustrationen und buch künstlerischen Arbeiten*, Munich 1977, p. 32, no. 70

Alfred Kubin's early drawings are known primarily for their strange, unfathomable subject matter. Not only do they represent terrifying images of tangible horrors but they also convey visions of the darkest forebodings and worst nightmares in pictorial form.

Kubin's almost obsessive preoccupation with macabre themes that handle death and dying, apparitions of demons and ghosts, hybrid creatures, deformed figures and scenes of gruesome acts of physical brutality, is in part explained by events in his early life. Misfortune dogged him and his youth was marked by personal strokes of fate such as the loss of his mother and the death of his first fiancée. In his emotional fragility he lacked the resources to cope with the complexity of his experiences and the psychological scars they left. Coupled with this, his subconscious teemed with a flood of strange imaginings to the extent that he feared losing control over his own actions and even his mind. A family friend, recognizing his strong artistic inclinations, encouraged him to enrol at the private art school of the painter Ludwig Schmidt-Reutte in 1898. A year later he entered the Munich Academy but almost immediately broke off formal training to continue his artistic education autodidactically. He was a frequent visitor to the graphic arts collection at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, where he was profoundly affected by his discovery of the drawings and prints of Max Klinger. He also encountered the work of Goya, Redon, Ensor and Rops. In their graphic works he recognized the same strange, spectral themes that had preoccupied him for so long in his subconscious and in the periods of spiritual intoxication that had visited him. He strove constantly to expand his own formal artistic methods as a way of processing and restraining the flood of apparitions that were released in his mind. These artists were his models and his study of their etching and aquatint techniques and use of black-and-white inspired him to develop his own distinctive pen, ink and wash style in his drawings.

In Munich, Kubin stood out artistically and thematically. Although solitude fostered the development of his fantasies he nevertheless sought the company and friendship of like-minded people. The year 1901 marked the beginning of a rapidly expanding exchange with fellow artists, patrons, gallerists and writers. At a studio gathering, he met the writer Max Dauthendey, who introduced him to literary and artistic circles. He soon enjoyed many stimulating friendships with writers and poets and through them became aware of the potential of book illustration. He began to

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travel extensively and his contacts soon extended far beyond Munich. In 1901 the gallerist Paul Cassirer offered him an exhibition at his gallery in Berlin. In 1903 he created his first cover illustration – for Thomas Mann’s novella *Tristan*.¹ On a trip to Vienna in 1905 he met with the writer Gustav Meyrink to discuss Meyrink’s novel-in-progress *Der Golem* and plan a series of illustrations for the book. Demand for his illustrative talents grew and in 1907, the Munich publisher Georg Müller commissioned him to create drawings for a German edition of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*.² The illustrations were made in pen and ink on white paper. Kubin was to employ the technique for his entire illustrative oeuvre.

That same year he again experienced a series of severe psychological crises. They were triggered by the illness of his second wife and the death of his father. In 1908, he suffered a psychological and artistic breakdown and for a time abandoned drawing. In his autobiography, he describes the circumstances that led up to the crisis and how he overcame it.³ He diverted, as it were, the flood of images present in his subconscious and which he sought to define in his drawings to literary form and in the space of three months completed *Die andere Seite*, his first and only novel. It was published by Georg Müller – then his most important contact and client – in 1909.⁴ With the completion of the manuscript, it was as if Kubin had purged his soul of his weird imaginings and his artistic crisis was overcome. He was able to illustrate his own story in the proven technique of pen and black ink. Since 1905, he had energetically pursued commissions for illustrations. One of these was a commission to illustrate a German translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart and Other Stories*. It was published by Müller in 1909 under the title *Das schwatzende Herz und andere Novellen* and was the first in a series of eight volumes of stories by Poe illustrated by Kubin. By 1920, when all eight volumes were published, Kubin had created over 100 drawings for some of Poe’s finest works.

The predominantly gruesome subject matter of Poe’s writings chimed with the illustrator’s own fantasies, so that Kubin’s interpretations of Poe’s stories can probably be seen as the most densely worked and compact illustrations of his early creative period and those that have the closest rapport with the writer, both artistically and thematically.

The present sheet depicts a view of *Haus Usher*, the ‘House of Usher’ that Poe describes in detail at the beginning of his eponymous tale, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The composition is closely contained within framing lines. It depicts the ancient, skull-like building and the dark pond in front of it within a barren landscape populated only by an approaching crow. Since Poe describes the house again and again in the story and makes it responsible for the ominous fate of its inhabitants, the Usher family, the present illustration is placed at the beginning of the narrative. Kubin invests into it all his skill as a draughtsman. He represents the decaying mansion as the actual protagonist of the text, while deliberately refraining from detailed depictions of the ghoulish happenings within it. At the end of the tale the entire house, its façade already deeply fissured, bursts apart as a result of the horrific events and falls into the dank pond below. The dark waters close over the rubble. Kubin marks this

¹ Annegret Hoberg, ‘Kubin und München 1898-1921’, in *Alfred Kubin 1877-1959*, exhib. cat., Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich 1990, repr. p. 51.

² Hoberg, ‘Biographie’, in op. cit., p. 19.

³ Ulrich Riemerschmidt (ed.), *Alfred Kubin, Aus meinem Leben*, Munich 1977, p. 40 ff.

⁴ Hoberg, op.cit., p. 55.

moment, which is described at the very end of the tale,⁵ with a closing drawing in pen and black ink, which he places under the last line of text [Fig.1].

The tightly contained, finely delineated penwork with its intricately interwoven web of lines and dense hatching strokes shows the stylistic influence of Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-85). Kubin was familiar with his works on paper. In correspondence dating from late 1909 or early 1910 with his friend Fritz von Hermanovsky Kubin discusses an impatiently awaited consignment of works by Bresdin which Hermanovsky is sending him on approval. The urgent tone of Kubin's enquiries as to when the promised sheets would finally arrive shows his conviction that Bresdin's black-and-white drawings will provide him with an important source of inspiration for his own illustrations.⁶ Many of Kubin's drawings for his 'fantastic' novel *Die andere Seite* mirror this influence.

The early illustrations Kubin executed at the dawn of the twentieth century marked the beginning of "an artistic oeuvre in which nightmares and visions of the afterlife, horror and death, the fantastic and the threatening were translated into graphic paraphrases. This beginning was to mark the entire oeuvre of the book illustrator Alfred Kubin."⁷



Fig.1: Closing drawing at: E.A. Poe, *The House of Usher*, in: E.A. Poe, *Das schwatzende Herz und andere Novellen*, Munich and Leipzig 1909, p. 54, 65 x 112 mm.
(Marks, p.33, ill. 71)

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, *Erzählungen in zwei Bänden mit den Zeichnungen von Alfred Kubin*, II, Wiesbaden, n.d., p. 121.

⁶ Annegret Hoberg, 'Kubin und München 1898-1921', in exhib. cat., *Alfred Kubin 1877-1959*, Munich 1990, p. 56.

⁷ Erwin Mitsch, *Variante und Wiederholung im Werk Alfred Kubins*, in exhib. cat., 1990, repr. p. 143.