

# A biographical note on Adrian Stokes

by Donald Meltzer<sup>1</sup>

On 15 December 1972, in a lovely Georgian terraced house in Church Row, the most beautiful street in Hampstead, the country playground of Eighteenth Century London, Adrian Stokes (1902–1972) died quietly and with great dignity, painting to the very last despite the impairment from brain metastases of a rectal carcinoma. His life was both a private and a public one of unflagging devotion to art and to psychoanalysis—and to building a bridge between the two that will stand for generations.

Mr. Stokes, as he came to be respectfully called by all his admirers save the few most intimate, was born in London and educated at Rugby and Magdalen College, Oxford. Handsome and sociable, a superb tennis player and gifted speaker, his life was equally divided between the scholarship of art history, painting, and participation in the worlds of art and psychoanalysis. He numbered many of the most distinguished figures of both worlds among his personal friends: Ezra Pound, Naum Gabo, D. H. Lawrence, Roger Money-Kyrle, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, and many, many others. He served the Tate Gallery for several years and saved the work of the Cornish primitive, Alfred Wallis, from destruction at the time of the artist's death in poverty and obscurity. He was among the first patients of Melanie Klein when she came to England, and this experience coloured his life and activities thereafter. In 1950, with the musician Robert Still, he founded the Imago Society of London.

However, painting and writing about art were his two main professional activities. He published twenty books and many papers in journals of art history and psychoanalysis. His paintings, mainly landscape early on, still life of bottles later, and nudes finally, are widely appreciated and hung in many collections. So much then for his status. To define his stature is less simple, for his thought was deep, his aesthetic intuition sure, and his mode of expression poetic, but not easy. His chief areas of study were the Russian ballet, art and architecture of the Italian trecento and quattrocento, painting of the impressionists, and culture of the Greeks.

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From this melange, with the aid of psychoanalytic theories, chiefly those of Melanie Klein regarding the child's preoccupation with the inside and outside of the mother's body, he fashioned an aesthetic theory. Although its evolution was slow and its eventual structure never expounded, it has been pulled together in Professor Richard Wollheim's edition of a collection, or rather selection of the works of Mr. Stokes, *The Image in Form* (1972).

It might be interesting to chronicle my personal experience from private conversations, dinner parties, visits to galleries with him, and the period during which he helped me to write the section that I contributed to *Painting and the Inner World* (1971). To Adrian Stokes emotion was the central phenomenon of mind, and art the central record of emotion in civilization. When he embraced psychoanalysis, and the developments of Melanie Klein's thinking, in particular, he did so because the theories seemed to him to throw an unparalleled light on the phenomenology of art as what Wittgenstein has called "a form of life." While he decried the psychoanalytical tradition initiated by Freud in papers such as "Leonardo", "Gradiva", and "Dostoyevsky", in which the personal aspect of the content of the work was placed above its formal structure in importance, he felt that the understanding of unconscious mental processes in general gave a new and richer meaning to the formal aspects of the creative effort. He thus was inclined to seek for the mysterious powers of art in its basic references to bodily experience and object relations, to visual configurations (*Colour and Form*), tactile sensations (*Smooth and Rough*), to the geography of life space (*Inside Out*), and to the haunting quality of repetition of patterns, the "incantatory" element, as he called it.

Adrian Stokes' approach to understanding this medley of configured phenomena held as its basic reference the body of the child and his unquenchable thirst for knowledge about his body, and that of the mother, who was both his "world" at the outset, and his template for the larger world later on. Like Melanie Klein's early emphasis on the role of the "epistemophylic instinct" in the development of the child's mind, Stokes always laid stress on the exploratory aspect of looking and listening, the way in which the eyes and ears have fingers to touch, a nose to smell, a tongue to taste the aspects of the world they encounter. Thus for him a painting was first of all a surface which the artist variously attacked and caressed, and which the viewer fairly crept about on with his eyes. He held that this exploration

followed two great modes of operation, that of breaking into (carving) and that of restoring (modelling), corresponding to the activities of the child in its relations to the mother, first aggressively entering her under the sway of its impulses in disregard of her welfare (paranoid-schizoid position) followed by attempts to repair the damage its unbridled needs had produced (depressive position). The constant operation and oscillation of these two processes was as necessary for the development of a work of art as it was for the evolution of mental structure in the child.

In consequence of this emphasis on the thirst for knowledge, art and science were absolutely fused in Adrian Stokes' view, and must be fused if creative work was to supplant mere skill. It seemed to him absolutely natural that Piero della Francesca should have been interested in mathematics, for Newton to be a theologian, and for Wittgenstein to be a musician. Nor did he ever doubt that in the most skilled hands, a cultured mind could make both a science and an art form of psychoanalysis. Had other interests not called him so urgently and other talents not so early found their means of expression, he would have made a splendid psychoanalyst. He was a splendid man.