

Andor Kraszna–Krausz Foundation

Foundation awards are made possible through the generosity of Andor Kraszna–Krausz, a man who foresaw the importance of the language of pictures long before the inception of the phrase ‘the medium is the message’. His imprint, Focal Press, still dominates the photographic press.

During KK’s life (as he was familiarly known) he published 1,200 books on the camera arts all over the world, marketing an astonishing 50 million books. His work was everything to him and it was to his work, and the pursuance of his vision, that he left his considerable fortune.

KK was born in Szombathely on 12 January 1904. His parents were Adolf Krausz and Iren Krausz (née Rosenberger). He added the unidentified ‘Kraszna’ to his name some time before 1925 to further a myth that his origins were in the Hungarian aristocracy, denying a Jewish heritage to which he never admitted. He attended the Szombathely Roman Catholic High School, graduating in 1922.

Little is known of his early years, except that he was a gifted amateur photographer at the age of 12. Then legend seems to intervene. One view has it that bowing to parental pressure, he went to read Law at Budapest University, and later liked to put about the rumour that his valet accompanied him.

We do know that he enrolled in the Department of Theatre Studies and Cinema Technology at the Technical Institute in Munich. Later he began writing letters on film as the Berlin correspondent for the avant garde journal *Close Up*: A magazine devoted to the art of films. This was published between 1927 and 1933 (Vols 1–10) and included amongst its collaborators Gertrude Stein, Sergey Eisenstein, Pudovkin, John Grierson and Paul Rotha.

In 1923 he moved to Munich University to pursue his interests at the school of photography and cinematography. In Munich he came into contact with the publisher Wilhelm Knapp, who had read his critical writing on film and who invited KK to edit the new magazine *Filmtechnik* in 1926. This became the leading moving picture trade paper and KK edited it until

1936.

Knapp was a pioneer in photographic world literature and gave the young KK a thorough grounding in the practical foundation of the craft he so admired. Knapp saw it as his mission to stimulate and inform the amateur photographer. It was in this between-the-wars climate of change and instability that KK developed his intuitions for what he called 'photoliterature' and how it would develop. His editorial style was liberal, disparaging big studio commercial productions, the dominance of the star system, and the exorbitant production costs of films. He preferred to argue for socially relevant, culturally significant film-making and applauded the contributions of technicians to the art of film-making. But apart from reviews of a few books which included photography, such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Malerei, Photographie, Film* [Painting, Photography, Film) of 1926, there is little evidence in these years of the passion for photography with which KK launched his second career in Britain.

Kraszna-Krausz came to England in 1937 and the following year founded Focal Press with its lower case 'f' (taken from the f/aperture symbol) as its colophon. The key to an almost immediate success was his creation of a style in publishing that placed a priority on clarity of explanation – not only in words, but in clear line illustrations that were easy to understand. His aim, and his outstanding achievement, was to make photography comprehensible to the masses at a time when the expert use of the still camera was still shrouded in technical mystery for the general public. One of the earliest books from the press, *The All-in-One Camera Book* by E Emanuel and W D Dash, taught the amateur the principles and practice of good photography; it sold over a million copies and went into 81 editions. This book also established the Focal Press style of simple, unambiguous text and illustration.

In the early 1940s KK began to publish large-format picture books on 19th century photography. These featured works by William Henry Fox Talbot, David Octavius Hill, Julia Margaret Cameron, Roger Fenton, Frank Sutcliffe and others, selected from the permanent collection of the Royal Photographic Society by Alex Strasser with commentaries by Kraszna-Krausz. Unusually for the time, these books reproduced original prints and

KK's accompanying essays described their relationship to the history of photography. The idealism that KK found in the Victorian photographers also informed his own commitment to providing access for every intelligent reader to modern technical work in film-making and photography at the highest level, clearly explained and concisely delivered.

KK was no ordinary, commercial publisher. His dedication to the audio-visual media meant that Focal Press published many serious, even erudite, works of importance to professional practitioners and image technology scientists. The innovative series Progress in Photography and the unique Focal Encyclopedia of Photography covered the field comprehensively, both in academic and practical terms. It is to pursue that vision that the Foundation's Awards and Grants are given.

Cinematography, television and other audio-visual media soon became equally dominant in the range of books that Focal Press brought to the market - handbooks for the professional film cameraman, technique books on everything from television news to sound recording, and classics such as Karel Reisz's Technique of Film Editing.

KK's editorial command was characterised by perfectionism as well as sound journalistic principles. Every fact had to be checked if a shred of doubt could be found. No sentence should be of convoluted structure or length. And the knowledge of the reader should never be taken for granted. Moreover he was a considerable stylist in a language that was not his native tongue.

In pursuit of excellence, he coaxed experts in the fields of photography, film and television who previously laid no claim to authorship to write for Focal Press. Through his guidance and confidence, many became highly respected writers on the audio-visual media. Focal Press was sold to Pitman in the 1960s, but KK continued to run the company until 1978.

KK was a man of many contradictions. Though always interested in making a profit, he upheld old-fashioned notions of performing a service to the public by producing works that might never recoup their capital outlay. Such generosity went hand in hand with a tight rein on overheads - a

quality that perhaps enabled him to create the reserves upon which the Foundation now draws. But for all his financial control, he indulged his own tastes as a bon viveur with an aristocratic flair appropriate to the reinvention of himself.

He was expansive in sharing his own expertise on photographic history and technique, while being reticent to the point of secrecy about his private life. He took Catholic Last Rites at his death, aged 85, in December 1989.

Six years before his death, he set up the Kraszna–Krausz Foundation and donated his valuable collection of books on photography and the audio-visual media to the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television in Bradford where there is now a reading room in his name. In recognition of this and his outstanding contributions to the media he was awarded the prestigious Kulturpreis by the Photographic Society of Germany in 1979 and received an honorary doctorate from Bradford University ten years later.

KK was a shy man who shunned publicity, which is why he is not as well known as his achievements deserve. Today's climate of publisher self-aggrandisement would have appalled him. Yet he had a notion of his own self-importance, and was an autocrat to his employees and even to his wife (who predeceased him). At the same time his very personal privacy betrays an ambivalent self-esteem. To quote his own words on accepting the Kulturpreis:

One's own past is a mere continuation and extension of the past of others. One is only a link in a chain, never a complete beginning nor – let us hope – the end of it all.

Certainly his link with the future is assured in the prizes and grants that the Kraszna–Krausz Foundation is able to award today.