

Modernism and the School of Arts and Crafts in Bratislava

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Iva Mojžišová was a major Slovak art historian who was based at the Slovak Academy of Science between 1963 and 1997. Her essay charts Bratislava's School of Arts and Crafts (ŠUR) from its establishment in the early 1930s until its politically-impelled closure at the end of that decade. Contextualised with references to the history of artistic education and to such contemporaneous, like-minded institutions as Bauhaus, the study shows how the School of Arts and Crafts emerged primarily in response to economic needs and yet soon became a centre for artistic innovation. Mojžišová discusses the important artists who worked there and the range of media that was taught and researched, including interior design, typography, and metalwork. She examines the school's concern to modernise Slovak culture, its belief in the equal status of fine and applied art, and its principles of functionality and respect for the materials used. This text first appeared in the edited collection Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia – 20. storočie (The History of Slovak Fine Art: 20th Century, ed. Zora Rusinová) in 2000.¹ (JO)

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Bratislava's School of Arts and Crafts (Škola umeleckých remiesel: ŠUR) is one of the most interesting chapters in the history of Slovakia's modern artistic culture. It constituted an exceptional act, one in which the vital impulses of domestic tradition fused with a firm determination to break free of cultural isolation and reach the same level as the international art of the time. In its activities it transcended the boundaries of an educational institution and stimulated a wave of modernising efforts in various spheres of artistic culture. It was known as Bratislava's Bauhaus, but in reality it was not, belonging as it did to different conditions and a different context.²

Genesis

In the summer of 1912, Josef Vydra, the future founder and director of the School of Arts and Crafts, attended the Fourth International Congress for Art Education, Drawing and Art Applied to Industries in Dresden. He had been invited there as the General Secretary of the newly-founded Slovak Union of Drawing Teachers (Slovanský zväz učiteľov kreslenia). The twenty-seven-year-old Vydra thus appeared on the international stage to discuss the modernisation of art pedagogy. He was one of the most energetic pioneers of new paths in art education in the Czech lands and, after the rise of the Czechoslovak Republic, in Slovakia as well.

But questions about the meaning and goals of artistic instruction had already been raised long beforehand. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, the famous Swiss proponent of the Enlightenment, considered an education in drawing as 'one of the universal human rights, and one that, throughout the centuries, has not been applied only because we have lacked the right method for it'.³ Pestalozzi could not have guessed that the search for such a method—one meant to lead to the free and natural development of the human personality—would continue for more than one hundred years. And when, in 1869 in Austria, and immediately afterwards in other European countries, the compulsory teaching of drawing was introduced into schools of general education, it came saddled with the same curse that would also long afflict academies of fine arts. Learning to draw meant copying: mechanically imitating old source materials and plaster models. Artists, from Charles Baudelaire and James Abbott Whistler to Paul Cézanne and Le Corbusier, described the academies as 'laughable', 'harmful' and 'dead'.⁴ These institutions might well have died out, had it not been for the initiative of a wholly different kind of art education. This initiative was borne from the worlds of work and technical progress.

The role of direct stimulus is customarily ascribed to the first world's fair, the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, which set directly before its spectators' eyes the astounding achievements of industrial civilisation, while at the same time presenting an alert about an unprecedented decline in taste. It revealed how factory products were imitating hand-produced, craft-based goods, mimicking their 'handmade' forms, techniques, and materials.

Pressing and casting were passed off as forging and beating, and gum, gutta-percha, and cast iron posed as stone, wood, and metal. The machine's capacity to produce quickly, at low cost, and in a large quantity ran counter to the 'morality' of the products. Their imitation luxury earned the designation 'cheap and nasty'.

The German architect Gottfried Semper, who was involved in preparing the London exhibition, saw a way towards rectification in the union of art with science and industry, while the English art historian and philosopher John Ruskin and the artist William Morris rather looked for a solution in the revival of craft and its fusion with art. Ruskin, Morris, and their followers in the Arts and Crafts movement, together with Semper, believed in art education. Museums and schools of arts and crafts thus began to be founded in Victorian England and, soon after, on the continent too.

The pioneers of these new ideas knew that it was necessary to begin 'with an original and precise design by the artist',⁵ and that 'drawing is only a means towards an end', this end being to 'support a workshop-based education'.⁶ It was not enough to draw the object: it was also necessary to make it. One step was now accomplished: craft workshops began to be established at these schools. But no didactic relationship arose between the design and the workshop production stages. A conflict emerged between anticipatory theory and intractable practice. Nobody knew how to teach design.

The trend towards reform saw a sharp upturn after 1900, particularly in Germany, which, in its attempt to 'refine its production' and carve out a space for itself on the international market, drew on the English experience. In the new type of arts and crafts schools, equipped with workshops led by prominent architects and designers—Peter Behrens in Dusseldorf, Henry van de Velde in Weimar, Hans Poelzig in Breslau (Wrocław), Herrmann Obrist and Wilhelm von Doebischitz in Munich—art sought out a place between craft, architecture, and engineering.⁷

These efforts culminated, after the First World War, in the German Bauhaus. Bauhaus's founder, architect Walter Gropius, together with its brain trust of pedagogues, also sought didactic approaches that would lead to a reconciliation between art and industrial society.⁸ From its fusion of spiritual and manual work, methods emerged at Bauhaus that enabled it to design and create prototypes of mass-producible objects, to develop a rationalised approach that did not also mean surrendering artistic intuition and invention. A way of teaching design was finally found. Bauhaus became the first avant-garde design school, and it opened the way for the teaching of perhaps the most defining artistic discipline of the twentieth century.

Alongside Bauhaus there were other arts and crafts schools of the workshop-based kind active in the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s: non-higher educational schools whose character was, to a greater or lesser degree, experimental. Among these there were the forgotten 'small Bauhauses': Sándor Bortnyik's school in Budapest, Władysław Strzemiński's in Koluszki and Vydra's School of Arts and Crafts in Bratislava. The Bratislava school, whose leader had the most pedagogical and organisational experience, was the most highly elaborated of these schools and the one that existed the longest. It can be considered a modern culmination of the reformist spirit of the period before and after 1900, and can be granted a legitimate, belated place within this European historical context.

The Story of the School of Arts and Crafts

The School of Arts and Crafts was long a 'schola non grata', as it did not fit the ideological requirements of the regimes that came after it, and this had bitter consequences. The works it produced gradually disappeared and its documents were lost; both were destroyed or scattered to unknown places. Galleries had no interest in them and did not collect them. Investigating the history of the School of Arts and Crafts and identifying the range of its artistic activities is therefore quite a challenging task.

The school's guidelines and structure derived from three main sources: the tradition of domestic 'handmade' production, bound to local raw materials; the legacy of the reforming arts and crafts schools; and awareness of avant-garde pedagogical concepts.⁹

Prior to the School of Arts and Crafts, the absence of an art academy was compensated for by the private schools of Gustáv Mallý in Bratislava (1911–1932), Károly Harnos in Komárno (1918–1927), and Eugen Krón in Košice (1921–1927), which provided the foundations of an education in drawing and painting. But there were other reasons for founding the school. First and foremost there were the concerns of small-scale Slovak trade and industry, which wanted to counter the competition from large Czech and foreign companies through the education of ‘taste and eye’, the cultivation of an awareness of everything ‘that the new era demands’.¹⁰ It was a question of creating ‘a school for trade and industry, one that would educate students in the understanding of contemporary needs, not in art’.¹¹ Only the name, School of Arts and Crafts, remained anachronistic, inadequately describing the institution’s aims and ambitions. Its original name was more appropriate: the Artistic School for Craft, Trade and Industry (Umelecká škola pre remeslá, obchod a priemysel). But choosing an old and, in Central Europe, well-established appellation was probably a strategic move in the face of conservative and unsympathetic forces.

The school thus arose not so much from artistic motivations as from economic ones.¹² Yet history shows that the thing that ultimately benefitted most from the school’s existence was precisely modern Slovak artistic culture.

At the outset, the School of Arts and Crafts set educating young people as its goal: whether educating those already possessing craft training to achieve greater perfection and creativity in artistic and technical terms, or, conversely, training talented youths from general educational schools who needed to develop their knowledge of crafts.

During a preliminary exploratory period between autumn 1928 and late spring 1931, the Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry established evening courses in drawing and advertising techniques, using a trio of teachers: Josef Vydra, Ludovít Fulla, and Gustáv Mallý. The School of Arts and Crafts emerged out of these courses in 1930, obtaining provisional spaces and workshops within the new, unfinished construction of the Apprentice Schools (Učňovské školy) (Fig. 16.1). The project gained further departments of drawing and other new teachers. It is shown, however, that several of these teachers ‘did not adopt the modern attitude towards production’, that there was still (in 1931) an insufficient number of the kind of workshops that would enable ‘the creation of a new type of school, so-called experimentation, work with materials and the exploration of various techniques’, and that a ‘paper-based’ education was continuing to dominate.¹³ One-off courses offered a degree of help, notably a series of lectures by László Moholy-Nagy.¹⁴



Fig. 16.1. The building of the Apprentice Schools and the School of Arts and Crafts, Bratislava (after 1930). Black-and-white photograph Orbis. Archive of the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava.

Josef Vydra, appointed the central director of the Apprentice Schools and the School of Arts and Crafts, decided to solve the situation in a radical manner, and removed those pedagogues who were at odds with the school's programme. Janko Alexy, Karel Štika, František Motoška, and Adolf Petříček all left. Remaining were the three graduates of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (UMPRUM)—Ludovít Fulla, František Malý, and Ferdinand Hrozinka—who were then joined by Mikuláš Galanda. During the first half of the school's existence an important role was played by Antonín Hořejš, musicologist, art historian, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and a man of many contacts and inexhaustible energy. Hořejš lectured on contemporary taste and was Vydra's right hand in terms of realising and maintaining the school's orientation.

Over the following years, from autumn 1931 to winter 1934–1935, the school belonged to the avant-garde and its representatives. The team expanded to include some remarkable personalities. Showing superb judgement, Vydra selected Zdeněk Rossmann, Jaromír Funke, and Júlia Horová, and later František Reichentál and František Tröster. The principles of Functionalist design firmly established themselves at the school. In place of the original and slightly nebulous concept of new taste in production, clear requirements arose: functionality, constructional and formal simplicity, intimate knowledge of the material, and standardisation and typification. These principles were mirrored in the school's structure. Consisting of eight departments, it was divided partly according to function and partly according to material. The departments of painting (led by Fulla), fashion and textiles (with Malý at the head), and ceramics (run by Horová) made up the field of housing culture, while Funke's photography department, Reichentál's interior design department, and Rossmann's department of typography and functional graphics fell within the realm of promotion and advertising. Hrozinka's woodwork department and Tröster's metalwork department collaborated with all the others. Also teaching in the workshops were the 'young masters', graduates of the school: Jozef Kinkor, Karol Rompf, and Viktor Blaschke.

There was close collaboration between the individual departments, one reason for which was that their work often intersected. This was not merely a matter of pedagogy, nor of an attempt to conduct an education based on the idea of the fundamental unity of all artistic work (the same idea that had guided Walter Gropius in founding the Bauhaus).¹⁵ The orientation towards teamwork, unity, and wholeness had gone from being a postulate of avant-garde movements to being a cultural and civilisational need, even an imperative of the times.

Even children's courses, originally focussed on drawing and painting, acquired a workshop character at this time, and extended into ceramics and weaving. As with the famous Viennese school of Franz Cizek (František Čížek), who was Vydra's model in this respect,¹⁶ children at the School of Arts and Crafts were not simply left to the freedom of a pure stream of creativity (as was initially promoted); they were given direction right from the start, taught about composition, and how to handle various technical procedures.¹⁷

The School's library subscribed to a wide range of foreign magazines, while its great hall displayed Jan Tschichold's collection of international avant-garde posters, exhibitions of Josef Sudka's photographs, Ladislav Sutnar's book covers and posters and Polish graphic art, and an international photographic salon.¹⁸ This early period constituted the school's happiest and most vital years.

The period from 1935 to 1937 can be described as a time of consolidation. The school lost Funke, who was replaced by František Kožehuba, and it gained Josef Vinecký, a former student of Henry Van de Velde in Weimar (who had led ceramics workshops at that city's arts and crafts school and later at the Breslau Academy), and Emanuel Margold, the Berlin architect and former member of the Darmstadt Artists' Colony. There was an increase in students from the Czech lands, Yugoslavia, and Poland. After trying for several years, Vydra succeeded in creating a film school, the first in Czechoslovakia, for which he ultimately managed to recruit the long-desired Karel Plicka.

The pedagogues put their teaching experiences to use beyond the school's walls. The photography curriculum that Funke had devised in 1933 was promptly implemented both in Bratislava and at the State Graphic School in Prague (Státní grafická škola v Praze).

Reichentál published a booklet, based on his teaching programme, called *The Arrangement of Shop Window Displays* (*Aranžování výkladních skříní*, 1937), and Rossmann produced the book *Lettering and Photography in Advertising* (*Písmo a fotografie v reklamě*, 1938).¹⁹ Circumstances were hardly conducive to the establishment of international contacts, but these developed in spite of things. René Chavance came over from Paris to give a lecture, Morton Shand visited from London, and Ernst Kállai, editor of the magazine *Bauhaus*, came from Berlin. The former director of Bauhaus, Hannes Meyer, stopped in Bratislava during a tour of Czechoslovakia, while Zdeněk Pešánek came to talk about light sculpture and Karel Teige about modern typography. In the school's great hall one could have seen exhibitions by Moholy-Nagy and the Paris group Les Artistes musicalistes. The 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, held in Paris, brought unexpected success and an affirmation of the correctness of Vydra's staff choices. Among those whose work received medals at the exposition were five of the school's professors (Fulla, Tröster, Rossmann, Galanda, and Horová). Beneath the Eiffel Tower two bold pavilions stood provocatively facing one another: one, made of light stone and featuring a Prussian eagle, represented Germany, while the other, made of multi-coloured marble and featuring a couple with legs astride, representing the 'new people' about to conquer the world, belonged to the Soviet Union. In the Spanish pavilion there hung photographs of dead children and destroyed cathedrals. And, lying serenely reflected upon the surface of the Seine, there was also Krejcar's Czechoslovak pavilion of glass and steel, a vision of the noble architecture of the future.

The school's final period, from winter 1938 to autumn 1939, was a time of threat and of struggle for survival. In January, Rossmann, with the help of the other professors, devised a new statute for the school, which proposed the introduction of entrance exams, along with, ultimately, a new preparatory course vaguely similar to Bauhaus's *Vorkurs*, which had been intended to serve the development of students' individuality and their ability to create original, non-imitative designs.²⁰ The aim was thus to instil the demand: 'No copying!' Whether these plans were actually implemented is not known. The daily teaching of window display arrangement, fashion and textiles unfolded satisfactorily, as did the film course. Despite an increasing interest from abroad, a feeling of disillusionment arose in Bratislava concerning the school's original ideals. Mikuláš Galanda died early in the summer of 1938. The school received instructions to equip itself with gas masks.²¹ In autumn 1938, in the context of Slovakia's newly-declared autonomy, the Czech professors were removed from their posts and put back 'at the disposal of the Prague government'.²² Vydra managed to push Fulla forward as his successor in the role of the school's director, and Fulla sought to retain continuity through an unsuccessful attempt to recruit Slovak graduates of Prague's Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design. He ultimately entrusted several classes to Ján Mudroch and engaged both Jozef Chovan and Rudolf Hornák. The Apprentice Schools were made independent of the School of Arts and Crafts and given a new director. Slovakia's diligent Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment established censorship boards and in April drew attention to impending celebrations to mark the fiftieth birthday of Adolf Hitler.²³ On 1 October 1939 the School of Arts and Crafts in Bratislava was abolished.

Modernisation and Modernity

In Rossmann's promotional poster for the 1929 exhibition *The Civilised Woman* (*Civilisovaná žena*), we see the back of a woman's head with a long plait and a hand holding some scissors, just about to ruthlessly snip the plait off (Fig. 16.2). This is a graphic, concise image of a radical step towards change. In Slovakia the struggle for the modernisation of lifestyles and the struggle for modernity in art were mutually interwoven. Connected to this was the desire to renounce the traditional hierarchisation of 'free' and 'applied' art.²⁴ This impulse had a differing intensity in different disciplines. At the School of Arts and Crafts it manifested itself more markedly than anywhere else.²⁵

Antonín Hořejš, in his lectures on contemporary taste, appealed to his students to understand their responsibility for the future and to find a practical route towards that future in the basic rules of functional work.²⁶ Malý and Horová, in pursuing that route, attained a unique



Fig. 16.2.
Zdeněk Rossmann,
Civilised Woman
(*Civilisovaná žena*,
1929). Poster,
91 x 60 cm.
Museum of
Decorative Arts,
Prague. © Pavel
Rossmann.

and wholly organic fusion of modern rationalism and the traditional approaches of folk material culture (functionality, simplicity, the 'truthfulness' of the material). Simple, functional, and sturdy ceramic bowls made of glazed and fired clay; simple and hygienic woven curtains, carpets and tablecloths; practical and light pieces of wooden and metal furniture: all these things, as designed and produced by the school's students, comprised examples of how to purify and improve a living space, of how to create 'order inside one's own home'.²⁷

When Vydra asserted that the School of Arts and Crafts had a closer and more active relation to production than Bauhaus did, he was not wholly correct.²⁸ Designers may have been ready for such engagement, but Slovak industry, unlike German industry, was not.²⁹

One fundamental postulate of Functionalism was respect for the material. The concern here was with the polarity between old, traditional, timeless substances like wood, ceramic clay, wool, and flax, and new ones like celluloid, plastics, and nickel silver. Moholy-Nagy, in the pictures he exhibited in Bratislava, used troilite and silberit. In Funke's approach to photography, as in New Objectivity photography in general, studies of different materials comprised a frequent part of the training and often became a theme of the photographs themselves. Horová found inspiration for

her teaching of modern ceramic art in the rich variety of different types of folk pottery. Malý, a 'textilist' by disposition but also a Surrealist painter, let his students freely improvise on a loom with different kinds of fibers: rough and smooth, dull and shiny, thin and thick. In this way students honed their feel for the handling of contrasting optical and haptic qualities, as learning and play merged together. Under the name of 'fun weaving' (*zábavné tkanie*) this method became one of the attractions of the children's courses.

New ways of handling metal, and the use of new metals, were features of Tröster's metalwork department. In his spatial lessons involving cords stretched over rigid frames, one may perceive affinities with the work of Russian sculptor Naum Gabo, who during the mid-1930s created the first construction consisting of curved planes fitted with plastic threads. In Tröster's teaching on space in the interior design department, as previously with Funke's approach, light was presented as a material: reflections, reflected light, and spotlighting were shown to increase plasticity, deepen space, and change proportions.

Teaching students to 'think in materials' received a new impetus when the School of Arts and Crafts adopted the method of 'mechanised drawing' from the Apprentice Schools. This was originally a passive teaching aid which, by means of stencils, templates, or grid-lined paper, served to compensate for insufficient preparation in drawing at primary school. At the School of Arts and Crafts, this technique was transformed into an active method for training students in the rules of composition, colour harmony, rhythm, and contrast. The use of various kinds of grids, stamps, rollers, and chemical etchings on paper, of relief-like layers of paint applied with spray guns, of enlargements with the aid of a pantograph or montage techniques using cut-out paper, print, photographs, textile pieces, sticks, glass, and sheet metal was all intended to deepen students' knowledge of the planar and spatial composition of forms and materials. Besides the models provided by František Čížek's Viennese school or Josef Albers's preparatory courses at the Dessau Bauhaus, this new direction was inspired by the personal presence of Moholy-Nagy in Bratislava.³⁰

It seems that at the School of Arts and Crafts the 'mechanical' method grew from being a teaching aid into a creative technique. It is probably at this time that Slovakia's first collages, montages, and assemblages were produced. But even these were not intended as self-sufficient artistic works. Instead they found a practical application in the design and, often, the realisation of objects.

Montage or photomontage techniques often appeared in the work of Rossmann and his students. Paper or textile-based collage had a purely artistic and non-associative role when taught on the children's courses. In 1930 Galanda gave a distinctive quality to his drawings by pasting pieces of coloured paper onto them. Finally, around the same time (above all in 1932), Fulla heightened his non-illusory handling of colour with the aid of his 'colour-fields' (*farboplochy*), whose painted form resembled stuck-on coloured paper. Frottage techniques, using textile materials or natural elements, were also incorporated, appearing in the teachings of Surrealist artist Malý.

The field of typography was both a direct expression of its era and also, perhaps, that era's most prominent and visible expressive medium. Galanda had recognised this trend relatively early, from his time in Prague and his experience with the magazine *DAV (CROWD)*. For a certain time (particularly in 1929) Fulla was much engaged by typography, and the medium's originally-practical nature acquired a deeper meaning for him. Alongside a Constructivist-style book cover and the first application of lower-case type in Slovakia for Ján Poničan's poetry collection *Demontáž* (1929), together with his designs for the magazines *Slovenská grafia (Slovak Graphic Art)* and *LUK (BOW)*, he produced non-functional typographical compositions and pictures, which we only know today, and partially at that, from reproductions. Fulla reached a place where no Slovak painter had ever previously set foot: abstraction.³¹ The picture *Rose and Hillside (Ruže a svah)*, later to be hidden by another image painted over it, was described by Fulla himself as abstract. And, likewise, his unpreserved kinetic folding book, which he characterised as a Suprematist or typographical poem or as an abstract film. He got to show this at the *Sub-Tatras Exhibition (Podtatranská výstava)* in Spišská Nová Ves (1929), but was not able, as he had planned, to make printed reproductions.³² Galanda would soon add to Fulla's efforts with several tentative experiments in non-objective



Fig. 16.3. Mikuláš Galanda and Ludovít Fulla in their studio on Trnavská Street in Bratislava (c. 1930). Black-and-white photograph. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

drawing. Fulla housed Galanda in his own studio, and it is thus under the same roof that the famous *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu* (*The Private Letters of Fulla and Galanda*) were born and the first Slovak attempts at abstraction created (Fig. 16.3).³³ These efforts represented the two principal forms of abstraction at that time: geometric-Constructivist in Fulla's case and organic in Galanda's.

The magazine *Slovenská grafia*, which was founded in 1929 and whose aim was to modernise the graphic arts and applied graphics, was the first periodical to offer information about current developments in various fields of modern artistic culture. Rossmann was the magazine's designer, following Fulla; the editor was Hořejš, who enjoyed the collaboration of Vydra, Malý, and Galanda. 1931 saw another magazine that would not have arisen without the staff of the School of Arts and Crafts: *Nová Bratislava* (*New Bratislava*). This was published by Hořejš, whose editorial duties were shared with Rossmann, the architect Bedrich Weinwurm, and the journalist and critic Daňo Okáli. Photographs were provided by Funke and members of the group Sociofoto. The treatment of photography as an optical reporting instrument, the consistent Functionalist-style layouts, and the socially-critical content of the texts comprised a pure manifestation of the anti-ornamentalist International Style modernism of the early 1930s.

When Rossmann came to the Bratislava school (after studying for a short time at Bauhaus), he already had graphic design experience from working on the famous magazines *Pásmo* (*The Zone*) and *Index* and on the international almanac *Fronta* (*Front*). He had had one of the highest reputations among the Brno avant-garde. The Functionalist concept of typographical design now acquired a new form within his work. Pictorial writing—the square or rectangle of photographic content—became the chief bearer of information. The desire for the suppression of subjectivity resulted in an ascetic style, but Rossmann's work retained its distinctive 'handwriting'. It would soon be claimed that his influence had spread to virtually every printing works.

Funke's arrival at the school came at a time when he had turned away from abstract compositions and photograms, the work that had made him a photographer of international stature, and returned to the object.³⁴ If Plicka, shortly beforehand, had created works of artistic photography out of documents of folklore, the several years Funke spent in Bratislava showed the local cultural community that modern photography was actually modern art, of equal value

to classical art forms. Paradoxically, this happened just at the moment when demands were being made for photography to become a form of utilitarian ‘service’, and thus more than pure art.³⁵ For Funke, however, these two roles were not antithetical. The photographs from his collection *New Architecture* (*Nová architektúra*) and his cycle *Bad Housing* (*Zlé bývanie*), which derived partly from his sojourn in Bratislava, and the new photography produced by his department at the School of Arts and Crafts, evidently impacted on the photographers of the local YMCA and of other amateur photo clubs, as well as on the Sociofoto group.³⁶

One area that always attracted the avant-garde’s interest was scenography, as a fusion of visual and dramatic expression and an opportunity for architectural or artistic experiment upon the live space of the stage. In 1930, under Fulla’s direction, three students of the school, including the future scenographer Martin Brezina, designed the sets for a production of Russian writer Alexei Tolstoy’s play *Factory of Youth* (*Fabrika molodosti*) at the Slovak National Theatre (Slovenské národné divadlo). Fulla found himself in a strange situation: the play’s director, Ján Borodáč, made no specific requirements of the artist. Fulla was thus free to design the stage as a colour-based composition in space, comprised of flat, planar fields and of ‘elementary forms distilled to their minimum features’.³⁷ His designs for Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and Aleksandr Afinogenov’s *Fear* (*Strach*) suggest theatricalised Constructivist pictures. Fulla’s remarkable experiments with anti-illusionist stage design prepared the ground for the innovative scenographic work of František Tröster, which arose from Tröster’s symbiotic ‘designer-director’ relationships with both Viktor Šulc in Bratislava and Jiří Frejka in Prague. His ‘dramatic projection planes’ and ‘adjustments of the angle of vision to the dramatic events’—whereby perspectives would be given from both above and below the action or a performer would be picked out with the aid of lighting and thrown shadow—introduced a new way of applying architectural principles to stage design (as especially in a production of Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Fidelio* at the Slovak National Theatre in 1936) and marked Tröster’s entry into the history of modern international scenography.³⁸

A new kind of architectural-cum-interior design work developed out of the installation of exhibitions. In Slovakia the pioneers in this regard were Fulla and Malý, but the rendering of exhibitions into ‘demonstration spaces’ (El Lissitzky’s term) was also practised by Rossmann and Tröster, becoming a lifelong interest for them.³⁹ In this field Rossmann represented the architect-as-Functionalist, objective and disciplined, focussed on the forceful visibility of the works exhibited (*Wooden Dwelling* (*Bývanie v dreve*), at Bratislava’s Danube Fair of 1932, and *Batá’s Monument* (*Batov pamätník*) in Zlín in 1936). Tröster, by contrast, embodied the architect-as-dramatist, setting objects in dynamic spaces fitted out with curved surfaces, glass, and corrugated paper (*Young Slovakia* (*Mladé Slovensko*), Prague, 1937).

Reichentál, leading the department for window display arrangement, straddled the boundary between the two conceptions above. His students’ end-of-year projects would themselves be displayed in the windows of the city’s shops. As Slovakia’s sole direct link with Russia’s post-revolutionary avant-garde, Reichentál based his work on the Constructivist principles of equilibrium, contrast, rhythm, and symmetry and its opposite.⁴⁰

In thinking about the School of Arts and Crafts at this remove in time, questions inevitably arise as to whether, and how, the school fulfilled the aims it had set itself. Did it raise domestic production to the level of modern industrial production? It attempted to do so and in part it succeeded. Did it introduce methods that impressed themselves on students with their novelty and modernity? Yes, certainly, at least to the extent that material and technical conditions allowed. Did it successfully train its artistic and creative youth for craft, trade, and industry? History has denied us the possibility of answering this question. The school’s lifespan was brief, and the war severed or obscured its connections to future developments. Tens of students had to leave because they were of Czech or Hungarian origins or for ‘racial’ reasons, and it has not been possible to trace their subsequent lives. We know only of those who became distinctive artistic personalities.⁴¹

The significance and the mission of art and applied art schools of this new type, the meaning of the education they provided, and above all their impact within society, are all attested by the means by which they were ended: force. Moscow’s Vkhutemas school was abolished

in 1930, the Breslau Academy of Arts and Crafts in 1932, both the Bauhaus (which had relocated to Berlin) and the Frankfurt School of Art were closed in 1933, and the Itten School in Berlin shut down in 1934. Even in Czechoslovakia, that last island of democracy amidst countries ruled by totalitarian power, the School of Arts and Crafts did not survive. There is much to indicate that its founder had intended to gradually turn it into a more extensive modern international learning place, and that it was on its way to becoming such. Vydra's plan was thus realistic: it did not fail. What failed was reality itself.

Translated by Jonathan Owen

- 1 Iva Mojžišová, 'ŠUR a moderna', in Zora Rusinová (ed.), *Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia – 20. storočie* (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2000), pp. 18–25.
- 2 Bauhaus was the charismatic school that arose from the merger of the School of Arts and Crafts and the Art Academy in Weimar. From 1925 onwards it was based in Dessau and then briefly in Berlin, before being liquidated by the Nazis in 1933. Its founder, Walter Gropius, selected teachers from among the leading contemporary artists: Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Vasilii Kandinsky, Lyonel Feiniger, Oskar Schlemmer, and László Moholy-Nagy. Bauhaus's greatest innovations included its preparatory course, which aimed at releasing creativity through the handling of materials and three-dimensional forms, its concurrent formal and workshop-based styles of education, and its equalisation of all the different art forms under the umbrella of architecture. Among the extensive literature on Bauhaus, see: H.M. Wingler, *Das Bauhaus* (Cologne: Gebr. Rasch & Co., Bramsche and Du Mont Schauberg, 1975); R.K. Wick, *Bauhaus-Pädagogik* (Cologne: DuMont, 1994).
- 3 Cited in Wolfgang Kemp, "...einen wahrhaft bildenden Zeichenunterricht überall einzuführen": *Zeichen und Zeichenunterricht der Laien 1500–1870, ein Handbuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1979), p. 154.
- 4 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Die Geschichte der Kunstakademien* (Munich: Mäander Verlag, 1986), pp. 231–233
- 5 Owen Jones, *The True and the False in the Decorative Arts* (London: Strangeways & Waldon, 1863), p. 33. Cited in Pevsner, *Die Geschichte der Kunstakademien*, p. 248.
- 6 Gottfried Semper, *Wissenschaft, Industrie und Kunst* (Mainz/Berlin: Florian Kupferberg Verlag, 1966), p. 67. First published: Braunschweig, 1852.
- 7 Hans M. Wingler, *Kunstschulreform 1900–1933* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1977).
- 8 Similar aims were adopted by Vkhutemas (Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie; the Higher Art and Technical Studios). Founded in Moscow in 1920, this school trained highly-qualified architects and experienced artists to serve the needs of industry. Just like Bauhaus, the school had preparatory courses and workshops, but there was a much higher number of students and a wider range of views among the teachers, who included Aleksandr Rodchenko, Liubov Popova, Aleksandr Vesnin, Aleksandra Ekster, and Nadezhda Udaltsova. In 1928 it was renamed Vkhutein, as it reoriented itself to predominantly scientific-technical training. See: Selim Khan-Magomedov, *VHUTEMAS: Moscou, 1920–1930* (Paris: Editions du Regard, 1990).
- 9 Peter Zaťko, *Domácka výroba najmä na Slovensku a na Podkarpatskej Rusi* (Bratislava: Hospodárske rozhľady, 1931); Thomas Strauss, 'Slovenský variant moderny', *Umění a řemesla* 3 (1978): pp. 10–19
- 10 From a speech by Jozef Orság, Land President of Slovakia, at the inaugural opening of the new building of the Apprentice Schools and the School of Arts and Crafts (26 October 1930). *Výročná zpráva Učňovských škôl a večernej školy umeleckých remesiel a reklamného umenia 1930–1931* (Bratislava: 1931), unpaginated.
- 11 *Zápis z II. schôdze kuratória ŠUR 25.9.1930*. Archive of the City of Bratislava (Archív mesta Bratislavy: AMB) (uncategorised).
- 12 Indeed, artists themselves had called for a school that would train 'master artists', 'draughtsmen and designers' for trade and industry. These figures would then be able to spread 'good taste' throughout Slovakia. See the letter from the Union of Slovak Artists (Spolek slovenských umelcov) to the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment (10 March 1928). AMB (uncategorised).
- 13 *Zápis z III. schôdze kuratória ŠUR 11.6.1931*. AMB (uncategorised).
- 14 Iva Mojžišová, 'Škola umeleckých remesiel a Bauhaus', *Ars*, 4 (1990): pp. 45–47.
- 15 Ladislav Foltyn, *Slovenská architektúra a česká avantgarda. 1918–1939* (Bratislava: Spolok architektov Slovenska, 1994). See, in particular, the chapter: 'Umenie a priemysel – Škola umeleckých remesiel (ŠUR)', pp. 89–92.
- 16 A closer contact between Vydra and Čížek is affirmed by Čížek's letters to Vydra from 1913 and 1914. See the papers of F.V. Mokry in the Literary Archive of the Memorial of National Literature (Pamätník národného písennictví), Prague.
- 17 The interest shown in children's artistic expression by the teachers at the School of Arts and Crafts is noted in: Rainer K. Wick, 'Prüfstand Bauhaus-Pädagogik. Die Kunstgewerbeschule in Bratislava', in Susanne Anna (ed.), *Das Bauhaus im Osten. Slowakische und Tschechische Avantgarde 1928–1939* (Ostfildern-Ruit: G. Hatje, 1997), p. 30.
- 18 Besides the annual showings of work by students at the School of Arts and Crafts, or at the school and the Apprentice Schools, the exhibitions presented in the school building were mainly borrowed from other institutions.
- 19 František Reichental, *Aranžování výkladních skříní* (Prague: Státní ústav pro učebné pomůcky škol průmyslových a odborných, 1937); Zdeněk Rossmann, *Písmo a fotografie v reklamě* (Olomouc: Index, 1938).
- 20 *Zápis z konferencie ŠUR 10.1.1938*. AMB (uncategorised).
- 21 *Korešpondenčný protokol ŠUR 16.7.1938*. AMB (uncategorised).
- 22 In December 1938, Hrozinka, Malý, Rossmann, Tröster, Vinecký, Vydra, and later Margold and Plicka, all had to return to the Czech lands.
- 23 *Korešpondenčný protokol ŠUR 15.4.1939*. AMB (uncategorised).
- 24 Slovakia too was influenced by those figures who, after the First World War, posed questions about the role of art in society and looked for ways of rationally organising things and relationships; their ideas mainly reached Slovakia via Prague or Brno. Initially those figures were mainly avant-gardists like the Russian Constructivists, the Dutch De Stijl artists, Le Corbusier, and the Bauhaus school. There were also those who were closer to practical, everyday life, like the members of the German Werkbund or the Union of Czech (later Czechoslovak) Work (Svaz českého/československého díla). In thought as well as in practice, they 'sociologised' art and broke down the boundaries between the spiritual and material spheres of life. The most important architects and artists, such as Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Vladimir Tatlin, El Lissitzky, and László Moholy-Nagy, undertook interior design work and created kitchen furniture, utensils, posters, and book layouts.
- 25 Fulla, Galanda, Malý, and Reichental were painters; Horová and Vinecký were sculptors; and Rossmann and Tröster were architects. These artists did not channel their energies in a single direction, but in several (they were the first to do so in such a consistent manner in Slovakia). They not only produced paintings, sculptures, or architectural structures, but also advertisements, typography, printed promotional materials, bowls, and home accessories. For more information on the painting and sculptural work of the artists mentioned, see: Ján Abelovský and Katarína Bajcurová, *Výtvarná moderna Slovenska: maliarstvo a sochárstvo 1890–1949* (Bratislava: Petr Popelka/Slovart, 1997).
- 26 Antonín Hořejš, *Súčasný vkus. Rukopis prednášok na ŠUR 1931–1934*. Private archive (uncategorised).

27 Le Corbusier, 'Die Innenaustattung unserer Häuser auf den Weissenhof', in Werner Graf, *Innenräume* (Stuttgart: F. Wedekind, 1928), p. 123. A floor plan is 'an organising plan for the life processes that take place in the dwelling', according to Bedrich Weinwurm. ('Wohin führt der neue Weg?', *Nová Bratislava* 1 (1931): p. 9.) That principle was supposed to be reflected in the materials and forms of the interior furnishings. The editors of the magazine *Stavba* (*Building*), led by Karel Teige, proclaimed the watchwords of maximum hygiene, exploitation of materials to their full capacity, low price, functionality, and lightness. ('Předpoklady a zásady vnitřního zařízení', *Stavba* 4 (1925–26): pp. 35–36. I thank Ing. Ladislav Foltyn for drawing my attention to this manifesto-like declaration.) In other words: cheapness and good quality. In Slovakia, however, there was ultimately a distance between words and deeds that was not easily overcome.

28 'Škola umeleckých remesiel v Bratislavě', *Výtvarná výchova* 13 (1935): p. 9.

29 Derava and Slovak Ceramics in Modra (Slovenská keramika v Modre) were two companies that retained an enduring interest in collaborating with the School of Arts and Crafts. The Tatra furniture company and the Sandrik firm were sporadically interested, and many other enterprises ordered posters, printed advertisements, etc.

30 According to Vydra, Moholy-Nagy had confessed that, as a 'fugitive' from the study of law, he had never really learned to draw, and this had led him to express his ideas artistically in a 'mechanical' fashion. Josef Vydra, 'Mechanisovaný a manufakturní kreslířský projev', *Výtvarná výchova* 13 (1935): p. 33.

31 'Fulla was the first and only one who dared go beyond the boundaries of the object', stated Matuščík for the first and only time. Radislav Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla* (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Slovenského fondu výtvarných umení, 1966), p. 39.

32 The way in which these works disappeared is symptomatic of the era. The artist destroyed them himself in order to avoid the grave charges of cosmopolitanism or Formalism that he might have faced from the two régimes that were to come.

33 In the context of Slovak modern art, *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu* played the role of a manifesto, even if in fact it was not one. Doubtless, however, nobody in Slovak culture had ever slapped their glove in the face of a narrow-minded public quite as boldly and as blatantly as Fulla and Galanda did here. Four issues of the 'letters' appeared between 1930 and 1932.

34 There is some valuable information about Funke's activity at the School of Arts and Crafts, taken from his hitherto unknown correspondence, in Antonín Dufek (ed.), *Jaromír Funke: Průkopník fotografické avantgardy (1896–1945)* (Brno: Moravská galerie, 1996), pp. 60–71.

35 Karel Teige, 'Úlohy moderní fotografie', in Josef Hofman and Antonín Hořejš (eds.), *Moderní tvorba užiteková* (Bratislava, 1931).

36 Funke took part in the *Exhibition of Social Photography* (*Výstava sociální fotografie*) in Prague and Brno in 1933.

37 Ludovít Fulla, *Okamihy a vyznania* (Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1983), p. 166.

38 Věra Ptáčková, 'Tröstrova scénická architektura v Praze a Bratislavě', in *Kontexty českého a slovenského umenia: Zborník referátov z konferencie* (Bratislava, 1988), p. 375.

39 Rossmann, as artistic deputy to the general commissioner, and Tröster, as the creator of an exposition on energetics and agriculture, played an important role in the resounding success of the Czechoslovak pavilion at Expo '58 in Brussels. Alena Adlerová, 'My v Bruselu 1958'. *Umění a řemesla* 4 (1987): pp. 37–42.

40 In 1920–1921, Reichentál studied at the radical Petrograd State Free Art Educational Studios (Petrogradskie GSKhUM), and not at the Imperial Academy of Arts, as is commonly stated. See the copy of the archival report from 1935. Archive of the Slovak National Gallery (uncategorised).

41 Alumni of the School of Arts and Crafts include ceramicists Dagmar Kubíková-Rosůlková and Zuzana Zemanová and photographers Tibor Honty, Miloš Dohnányi, Marie Rossmannová, and Irena Blühová. Others who attended the school include film directors Ján Kádar and Vladimír Bahna, cameraman Karol Krška, scenographers Martin Brezina and Ján Ladvenica, typographer Jozef Kinkor, and painters Ludovít Kudlák, Martin Tvrdon, Ladislav Guderna, Viliam Chmel, Ervin Semian, and Ludmila Cihánková.