

Cyprián Majerník:
From the
Grotesque to the
Tragic

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Zsófia Kiss-Szemán is a Slovak art historian who serves as curator at the City Gallery of Bratislava. Her essay offers a thorough introduction to Cyprián Majerník, a Slovak painter who established himself in Prague in the 1930s. Majerník's mature work was characterised by a sense of the grotesque, a fascination with the lives of circus and theatrical performers, and recurring scenes of mysterious riders, as well as the mounted figure of Don Quixote whom Majerník repeatedly painted in an act of disguised self-portraiture. Kiss-Szemán's analysis reveals that Majerník's innovation was less a matter of radical form than of new content and perspectives. Though essentially realistic and often strongly narrative-based, Majerník's pictures are distinctive for their grotesque irony and their testimonial power in expressing a despair that is both personally and politically inspired. This chapter, though drawing on the author's previous writings on Majerník, has been prepared especially for this volume.¹ (JO)

Cyprián Majerník: From the Grotesque to the Tragic

Cyprián Majerník was a singular figure in interwar Slovak painting, for he excelled not only as an artist but also as a person, being blessed with charisma, candour, and a deep love for other people. The strong impact of his art results from the remarkable unity of his artistic personality, from a personal integrity that somehow heightens the intense radiance of each work, and from the unequalled authenticity of his testimony as both artist and human being.

Studies and Early Work

Prior to establishing a unique, distinctive artistic viewpoint of his own, the painter Cyprián Majerník (born 1909 Veľké Kosťolany, died 1945 Prague) undertook foundational training at Gustáv Mally's private art school in Bratislava,² and then studied at the Academy of Fine Arts (Akademie výtvarných umění) in Prague.³ Majerník identified with the approach of the Czech artist Willi Nowak, with whom Majerník's friend Jakub Bauernfreund had begun studying in 1929; in later years many other important Slovak artists, possibly under Majerník's influence, would also study with Nowak.⁴ The young Majerník was especially taken with the sensuous painting of Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and André Derain (1880–1954), which was similar in style to the work of Professor Nowak and his students. The early works Majerník produced in 1930 to 1932, with their expressiveness and bold use of colour, come closest to this approach. From this period onwards, he retained the refined use of colour while concentrating more on the construction of his pictures through the use of stronger, more defined forms. Majerník's first preserved works (still lifes, landscapes, and nudes) date back to 1930. Like the other students at the academy, he acquired the rudiments of painting through the production of still lifes and nudes. The bittersweet context of this time of training was recounted by Endre Nemes in his memoirs.⁵ Majerník's still lifes (of flowers, fruit, and sometimes the two in combination) initially had a markedly-academic character, possessing as they did a concrete descriptiveness and a certain hardness (for example *Still Life (Zátišie)*, 1930), and yet, thanks in part to the use of techniques like watercolours and gouache, they matured into a more individual form of expression with its own distinct style, marked by the use of warm colours and a lively decorativeness (such as *Bouquet of Flowers (Kytica)*, 1930).⁶ *Still Life (Zátišie)*, 1931) can be considered the most accomplished of Majerník's still-life works, and the one with the strongest personal touch, already featuring several core characteristics of his art: the background space of the painting is depicted in a vague manner, ridding this work of any descriptive character and contributing not only to its expression of modernity but also to the concentrated manner of that expression; perspective shifts to the viewpoint of the painter from above, successfully ridding the work of any disruptive moments within the surface of the pictorial field; the soft, warm colour scheme seems to saturate the picture with emotion; and then there is the power Majerník discovered in the free-flowing arabesque, which organically forms and repeats the natural curves of the depicted objects.



Fig. 18.1. Cyprián Majerník, *Reading Woman (Čítajúca)*, 1933–1934. Oil on canvas, 62 x 81 cm. Bratislava City Gallery, Bratislava.

Majerník's early works derived in their essential features from his study of Matisse's work, while also distinctively combining various influences from Post-Impressionist painting (*Lying Nude / Bashful Woman (Ležiaci akt / Hanblivá, 1930)*). They have a decorative quality derived from Matisse, and yet they also emphasise narrativity, the presence of the 'painterly narrator'.⁷ One especially impressive work from his pre-Paris period, without the least tinge of the academic study, is his painting *Reading Woman (Čítajúca, 1930–1931)* (Fig. 18.1). This picture may show the unmistakable influence of Fauvist painting, but amidst the blurred and dream-like colours, we also see Majerník's own distinct addition in the way he gives a light veil to the image by means of warmer tones, thus softening the intensity of the original French Colourist style. Thanks to his audacious combination of perspectives—a gently inclined table with a still-life on a decorative pattern and the figure of a young woman presented virtually from below—the use of space tends towards two-dimensionality. The figure, like the space and the other objects, is depicted sketchily,

which gives the painting a sense of liveliness, suggesting the immediate, even intimate depiction of a woman caught in a private moment.

Like virtually every young artist at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, Majerník felt a strong desire to acquaint himself with Paris, its atmosphere and its art. He decided on studying in Paris and requested a study grant from the Academy of Fine Arts. The rector of the academy did award him a grant, though in the end he did not receive it. Majerník nonetheless travelled to Paris in December 1931 and in spite of great poverty he stayed until around May 1932.⁸ This was his only sojourn abroad for study, and it brought him valuable experiences and, literally, visible results. These were most clearly manifested in an individual approach to painting and the formation of his own style. Of course, he could not avoid being inspired by several world famous painters: besides getting to directly experience the work of Matisse and Derain, the work of Marc Chagall proved a great discovery, and Chagall's influence alternates with the impact of the two aforementioned painters (whose form-creating elements in particular shaped Majerník's painting). Chagall's work evidently made him realise the power of narrative and the effectiveness of storytelling, while reinforcing his interest in a modern and meaningful manner of narration. The work Majerník produced in Paris went through three fundamental changes: he developed a bravura control of paint colours, achieving a purer tone; he liberated forms and broke free of descriptiveness; and he began to work with the grotesque, which gave to his work a greater looseness and freedom. He discovered a city, and the lives of its people, to portray in his work, and this led him to transcend Slovak painting's clearly sanctified theme of country life. In this respect, Majerník's work proved truly exceptional in the context of Slovak art in the interwar years.

Several years after his Paris experiences Majerník produced the painting *Lovers on the Outskirts* (*Milenci na periférii*, 1935). Set in a destitute suburban apartment, the painting has a heightened and bizarre character situated between decorativeness and brutality. The extravagant, garish colours, recalling the atmosphere of travelling circuses at town fairs, and the figure of the room's inhabitant, a young and desirable prostitute at the peak of her profession on the city's outskirts, resound in relation to the scene's completed act of murder like a grotesque spasm. As Beáta Jablonská wrote:

It is clear at first sight that this picture deals with tragedy, one that has occurred in the cheap setting of a modest apartment. A naked woman with a slit throat, lying on a turned-down bed, and a (now) dressed man, washing his hands. Only the quantity of drops and stains of blood vulgarises, deliberately, the outwardly coolly serene atmosphere of the completed business. One can see from this picture that Majerník, when wandering around the Parisian boulevards in a hungry state, did not only encounter the work of favourite painters Henri Matisse and Marc Chagall, but also and most importantly the drawings of Jules Pascin (Julius Mordecai Pinkas), a painter of the urban underworld and of the rough life of nocturnal Paris.⁹

In that urban and metropolitan environment, Majerník sampled various different layers of reality, all of which probably seemed equally futile and empty to him. Majerník offered a direct reminiscence of Paris in another work, *Salut (Folies Bergères)* (*Kankán*, 1933). Standing on the edges of obscenity, this painting is a vulgar depiction of a cancan dancer that fully makes manifest the tragicomic nature of variety entertainment.¹⁰ The picture leads almost seamlessly into Majerník's subsequent exploration of the world of the circus, and thus provides a link between his formative experience in Paris and a significant theme of his mature painting.

The Visual Grotesque in Cyprián Majerník's Early Work

The character of interwar Slovak art is best grasped and defined through the opposing concepts of old and new, traditional and modern. The dilemma of choosing between them greatly marked the development of art in Slovakia. Artists' attitudes to these questions, which for the most part were not formulated theoretically but which were nonetheless latently or explicitly present in the work itself, are easily discernible. Naturally, the relationship to the traditional or the modern

was manifest at various levels. While one artist might adopt a stance of comprehensive revolt or rejection, another would concern himself only with specific artistic issues, or with a single element (for example relating to content, form, or the means of expression). In examining the art, artists, and individual works of this period, one finds that the most common characteristic was the congenial symbiosis of traditional subject and modern expression, with the traditional subject likely to consist of the tried-and-tested village or landscape scene with mountain themes, and the modern expression to consist of applying the formal innovations of international modern art. The art of Central Europe reached its peak in the 1930s: in the Slovak case in the work of Ľudovít Fulla and Mikuláš Galanda, but also in the early work of Cyprián Majerník. Traditional themes like village life, shepherds, work in the fields, or the Madonna gave way to works of artistic originality, which comprise more than simply the capturing of ordinary reality or soulless form. While in Fulla and Galanda's painting the emphasis shifted to the idea of the picture as a reality with a claim to its own authentic life, Majerník's work overcame former boundaries in a different sense. Though Majerník also organically integrated the new developments of international modernism into his own form-creating language, he did not abandon the emotional experience of the reality he depicted and remained concerned to capture that reality. To this end he chose the form of the grotesque. His early work retains an epic quality, though this is distinguished by a grotesque viewpoint on the events and characters depicted that is exceptional for Slovak art.

Two Madonnas (Dve madony, 1932) is one early work that typifies his grotesque, critical perspective in dealing with the issue of village religiosity, which here sits on the borderline between habit and hypocrisy on the one hand, and genuine beliefs and values on the other. Are pilgrimages and processions merely a common custom, a formality, a popular entertainment, an opportunity to escape from oppressive everyday life, or are they an authentically spiritual phenomenon? Majerník ingeniously blurred the boundaries in this painting, as everything fuses together within a multitude of lavish pure colours and barely-outlined forms of figures and objects. On the left side there is a religious icon of low artistic quality (a run-of-the-mill Madonna sculpture), on the right side there is the idol of art in an inferior incarnation and possibly in dubious services (a poor-quality reproduction of a Sistine Madonna on a drooping procession banner, in the hands of a drunk holding a demijohn). An ambiguity or double meaning, along with a related sense of irony related to this, arises from the number of Madonnas: are not two Madonnas too many? One real one would have sufficed.

The sense of the grotesque that Majerník discovered in life and in his own childhood memories was projected onto the canvas, and reworked into merry, even comic situations with caricatured protagonists. These paintings contained a sometimes lesser, sometimes greater tragicomic undertone, and in several cases they virtually resembled Renaissance grotesques or decorations with animal and plant motifs, but converted into a more modern artistic language.

One such comic painting, *Teliatko (The Calf, 1932)*, catches a single scene at a certain moment, and yet manages to recount an entire story about a young girl exasperated by a wayward calf that is clumsily trampling over a garden flower bed. From out of this charming, innocent little scene of situational humour, Majerník was able to create a Fauvist-style picture. In a picture like this the artist was already applying his clear sense for theatricality, which became, in different forms, an enduring element of his work: while in his earlier work this takes the form of folk entertainment, the circus, and other stagebound forms of life, at a certain point in his career the space beneath the broad sky opened up to become a theatre of real-life events.

Majerník was also known to depict the same kind of incidents and experiences in literary form. His first such attempts had arisen in 1928 to 1929, when as a student at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts he had published short stories with sharp punchlines and sarcastic mockery, stories involving situational reversals and humorous or satirical elements. Majerník managed to free himself from the purely pictorial character of his work while in Paris, finding there his own way towards reconciliation with the Slovak countryside. His stories had offered signs of the conviction and viewpoint that, in Majerník's painted work, helped him exceed and fully develop the expressive possibilities of painting.¹¹

The conception of the painting *Backyard – Abbatoir (Dvorček – zabíjačka*, originally just *Picture (Obraz)*, 1933 reveals a shift in expression when compared to *The Calf*. While critics tends to align these works together due to their subject matter, there are obvious differences in Majerník's approach to painting, consisting above all in a changed conception of space, which has now led almost to the point of negation. Only the most essential features remain: the artist has renounced decorative richness, something that survives only, in a *pars pro toto* manner, in a playfully-curved pig's tail. Arabesques alternate with large fields of colour, in this way strengthening the sharpness of the effect. The deliberate enlargement of individual parts, figures, and objects evokes laughter, but also defines the balance of power between the protagonists: for instance, a huge knife in the foreground attains the status of a key character attribute, while the cutting off of the male protagonist's head by the upper frame adds a sense of brutality to the picture.

Thematically related to these pictures are Majerník's paintings on the folkloric theme of the Morena (*Morena*, 1933). These paintings straddle the borders between a sense of mere justification on the basis of custom or tradition—possibly empty tradition—and a meaningful, deep, internal experience and feeling of life. They concern a sense of conflict between internal experience and common custom. A young girl with crooked lips looks just as unreal as the figure of the Morena itself. The raising up of the Morena (a straw doll representing the old Slavic goddess of winter and death, still a part of today's folklore) and her subsequent burning or drowning is a traditional ritual. For Majerník however the fundamental question is: who is the 'doll' here? Is it the girl who is in the hands of empty customs, or the Morena, the symbol of everything that is old and moribund, condemned to be sacrificed, to be 'thrown out'? The painter made this sense of the doll's powerlessness clearer and more obvious in the final version of this painting by depicting a Morena figure without hands. The ritual of ridding oneself of the accretions of the seasons of decay (autumn and winter), so as to create a space for the celebration of new life (spring) can be related to various layers and realms of life and can be interpreted in various ways. This can concern old hangovers from the world of art, but for Majerník it certainly also applies to outdated conceptions of the world. This tension between the living and the dying, the old and the new, is heightened in painterly terms through intensive, spontaneous, even in places somewhat violent brushstrokes and through rich shades of poisonous green and cold blue.

The contrast between a cool green and a warm brownish-terracotta colour provides the basis for the painting *Two Figures from an Album / Wedding (Dve postavy z albumu / Svadba*, 1933), which I consider one of Majerník's greatest pictures from this artistic period. He managed to import a range of different meanings into this picture, a highly cultivated work of the grotesque in which Majerník achieved a fully mature and distinctive style. Between the background and the figures—who look almost as though they are stuck onto a neutral background, outlined only by large fields of warm colours—there reigns a sense of discord. The fundamental erotic undertone and the sense of conflict between the depicted couple are blatant here. The tension is heightened particularly by the discordance between the two central figures: the bride in white sheer clothing that reveals her body and emphasises her female form, and the bridegroom in folk costume. This is a world on the borderline between two different strata of living culture. But which ones? Folk life and urban life? Or, in the latter case, is this merely folk life playing at being urban? Is the woman the bride of a wealthy farmer who has herself been brought up in an urban environment, or is this simply the mask of some spoiled clothes horse from the countryside? We might expect some clarification within the picture, but the unclear painted field only further obscures the picture's subject. The huge sense of strain in the picture is further enhanced by the glimmering white lace of the bridal clothes, which confer a sense of trembling excitement, and yet the woman also has a stone-like face, like that of a dummy, and stiffly poised hands. *Two Figures from an Album* appears like a memory, a photograph full of tension, excitement, possibly hope, and like a last spark of a dying world with its disruptive alien elements.

Other Majerník paintings with a rural, religious thematic can be interpreted in the same manner, for instance *Wedding Procession (Svadobný sprievod*, 1935), *Procession (Procesia*, 1934), *Yard (Dvor*, 1934–1935), pictures which show the double meaning or the emptiness of these same

customs. These paintings do not present disproportionate mockery, but rather the disproportionate experience of particular circumstances in a given environment. As a completely new and alien element in Slovak painting, Majerník's grotesque perspective was welcomed with enthusiasm by some, and condemned and criticised by others. According to Ján Abelovský and Katarína Bajcurová, 'the frequent use of absurd, grotesque contrasts between genre motifs and religious symbols not only functions as secular critique, a satire on the obscurantism and backwardness of the Slovak countryside. It means much more besides: to this young painter the spiritual essence of traditional Slovak life seems completely empty, lacking in any inner meaning'.¹² This young painter certainly did occupy various cultural, existential, as well as artistic crossroads, and this led to great changes in the course of his art.

Majerník's Surrealist Intermezzo

The year 1935 represents a milestone in Majerník's life and work, for this was the year when he moved from academically-conceived paintings with a hedonistic, sensually-refined use of colour and a lively, often comically-tinged epic character towards works that had a large degree of scepticism in their content and a spontaneous painterliness of expression. Majerník's first creative period came to a close with an exhibition at the Elán Hall, Prague, which met with an enthusiastic critical reception.¹³ Unfortunately, this significant event was joined by the first symptoms of an unforeseen illness, which compelled him to take an almost year-long rest from painting. A shift in the direction of his artistic aims gradually manifested itself too.

The gouache painting *Mladucha (Bride)*, 1936) is one of his last grotesque paintings. A bride, wearing a white dress that symbolises innocence and holding a wedding bouquet, gazes fixedly at a bull, whose own interest is focussed on something beyond the field of the picture. The sense of extreme antithesis, expressed in the positioning as well as in the use of colour, captures a life situation condensed into a single fateful moment. The grotesqueness of this 'wedding photograph' virtually cries and screams with hidden brutality. An ominous foreboding does not save this sad bride with her uneasy expression from a sense of uncertainty, evoked by the picture's unstable sense of space and the skewed wall in the background. Between the figures, and between the sketchily-outlined objects, dark shadows creep, and these add a harsh, cold spirit to the painting. With this picture Majerník indicated and clearly delimited the relatively narrow circle of themes that would accompany his work until the end of his life: violence and powerlessness, fate and death.

In 1936 he produced a group of pictures concerned with the theme of violence, which almost always appears with a sexual undertone. The paintings in question are *The Seduction (Zvádžanie)* and *The Embrace (Objatie)*, along with their variations and studies. *The Seduction*, with its epic quality, still links back to the preceding period in Majerník's work, but formally it points to his future attempt at a form of depiction stripped down to signs. We can see this particularly in the face of the nun, which in its rudimentary form brilliantly captures the expression of an offended woman with downcast eyes, defending herself against an unwanted advance. One cannot ignore a certain deliberate theatricality in the picture, as supported by the background with columns, the scene's positioning, as though on a podium, and the fact that Majerník's figures acquire, or rather retain, the appearance of dolls as much as real people. In this way the whole scene acquires a generalised character and gains a level of universal applicability. This well-known theme from Giovanni Boccaccio's stories, in which a nun is seduced by a monk, is developed into a picture that reveals an unflattering truth.

Closely connected to *The Seduction* is *The Embrace* (1936), which in both its subject and its composition follows the same pattern. The themes of lovers and violence had already engaged Majerník in his previous work, as clearly evidenced by the painting *Lovers on the Outskirts*. With *The Embrace*, it seems that Majerník took a concrete incident—a murder that he had probably read about in the news—and turned it into a picture with a symbolic meaning. The large, hairy hands of the attacker remain at the level of symbol, with the rest of the figure concealed behind a door, unnecessary to the articulation of the artist's ideas. In contrast to his previous depictions of interior space, Majerník here opens up, empties out, and neutralises the space, hereby strengthening



Fig. 18.2. Cyprián Majerník, *A White Horse* (*Biely kôň*, 1936). Tempera, card, 46.5 x 60 cm. Bratislava City Gallery, Bratislava.

the sense of generality. In a gouache study for this painting called *The Embrace (Fascism)* (*Objatie (Fašizmus)*, 1936), Majerník still adhered to cold green and blue colours, but in the painting itself he softened the dominant tone to an earthy, brownish colour with rough and ominous shadows. The woman here is dressed in white, just like the brides whom we saw with their bulls and bridegrooms, and is the victim of an act of violence. A monument rears up in the background, and while its significance is not totally clear, it could be seen as a dark premonition of the need for future monuments to new victims. This object, situated in this empty and deserted site, orients the painting in a Metaphysical direction.

For a scene like this, Majerník drew inspiration from the work of Giorgio de Chirico and the Czech Surrealists, though in this respect we must also not forget his Slovak friends and contemporaries Endre Nemes and Jakub Bauernfreund, who in 1936 together organised their first independent exhibition. This exhibition is considered the first Surrealist exhibition in Slovak art. Yet Majerník's rare sense of poetry is somewhat different: it is nourished by solitude, by feelings of loneliness and hopelessness; it is a melancholy poetic that gives these pictures an atmosphere of suspension between dream and reality.

The White Horse (*Biely kôň*, 1936), Majerník's most expressive and important picture from this period, depicts a landscape with a white horse beside some ancient ruins (Fig. 18.2). The sense of uncertainty is increased by the unclear aspects of perspective (the horse's legs are hidden behind the paving, or the ground, of the structure in ruins, while the structure's column apparently stands in the background) as well as by the disproportionality of the objects presented. A house vanishes into the distance and a barren branch gloomily sticks out from it. The horse has stopped, as if stunned, in its run across the open landscape, and its expression betrays surprise and fear. It looks out into the world of the viewer with a great distrust. The picture symbolises the psychic state of the artist in an important and life-changing situation. Its whole atmosphere suggests that this vision, full of mysteries and uncertainties, with tokens of the past and of an uncertain future, is a concentrated, symbolic expression of a free spirit under threat. The painting's symbolic nature was indisputable. Multiple interpreters of Majerník's work recognised its exceptional qualities and several connected it to the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Fascism. If we accept that the ancient

column symbolises old European culture and values, evidently then under threat, then such an interpretation makes sense. This Surrealist-symbolic intermezzo in Majerník's work, which brings him close to Metaphysical painting, belongs with the greatest individual artistic testimonies of loneliness, anxiety, and deep, inconsolable woe.

The year 1936 was marked by various experiments in which Majerník made use of his knowledge of Surrealist and Metaphysical painting. These experiments were accompanied by a plunge into the human psyche, into the subconscious, as Majerník used his paintings to try and reckon with his own fate. Loneliness and death became his main subjects, and he sought suitable pictorial methods with which to express them. He discovered the white horse as a means to express his feelings of sadness and emptiness; he chose Surrealistic methods of depiction and perception to capture the confusion and disintegration around him. The themes of innocence and violence run through all his painting career and this brief period is no exception.

Majerník's painting *Widow (Vdova)*, 1936) is, formally speaking, one of Majerník's experiments and it is one of his few pictures to be conceived as a monofigural, vertically-oriented composition. The expressive contrapposto of the female figure dynamises the picture's overall layout, in which individual objects are gathered together into a compact mass of forms. *Sť. Batholomew's Day (Bartolomejská noc)*, 1936), which refers to the eponymous French massacre that exposed the illusion of peace between the Catholics and the Huguenots in 1572, is a dynamic picture whose composition emphasises diagonals and presents complicated forms. The use of gouache, which Majerník had started using as an 'emergency' measure during his illness (it is more pliable than oil paint), enabled him to work more quickly. Yet Majerník made pencil studies for all his pictures, and these were more thoroughly realised than the paintings themselves, whose details were only cursorily outlined in gouache. Among all of Majerník's pictures, this one makes most expressive use of several typical aspects of Surrealist painting: the joining together of various contorted human body parts; their fusion into a tangle of almost unidentifiable forms; their deformation; the accentuation of eyes (in this case of one large eye on the forehead of a monstrous supine figure); spatial uncertainty; ominous shadows; and the human face presented as a mask. These human figures also suggest an image of a group of objects, and this, together with the painting's indeterminate interior and its melange of forms, helps evoke a feeling of chaos, confusion, disintegration, cruelty, and disgust.

The Circus and Theatre in Majerník's Work

In the mid-1930s, Majerník saw his existence as a path leading from nowhere to nowhere. His sense of hopelessly wandering through an unknown world with an unknown beginning, an unknown end, and unknown goals sealed his future path as a painter, which led through the tragicomedy of the circus and the theatre and towards a tragic end. The motif of alien, unidentifiable beings, resignedly wandering through an undefined environment, appears for the first time in the characters of his gouache picture *Two Riders (Dvaja jazdci)*, 1936). At first glance what strikes us here is the hardness and purity of expression. All expressive means are concentrated on those elements that bear meaning, that have testimonial value. Majerník has divested his work of all superfluous details, renounced all 'light relief' both at a formal level (for instance through decoration) and in terms of content (as through irony), and given full rein to his personal feelings, his unending sorrow. As Karel Šourek wrote:

This is the resignation of a man whose sole gift to all the world's unfortunates, seen parading in an unceasing procession of symbolic wanderers through his pictures of the last years, can be nothing more than compassion. Or even less than that, for this is no sentimental sympathy, but a rugged compassion that recognises no false consolations. He does not delude himself about these either. The idea of escape, which had originally coloured his experience of life with an intensive desire for some new, unknown departure point, has gradually turned to despair over an escape that is futile.¹⁴

The oblong format, across which the scenes of life stretch unceasingly, became an established feature of the artist's work. This picture depicts two unspecified characters on horseback,



Fig. 18.3. Cyprián Majerník, *Clown's Performance* (*Klaunovo vystúpenie*, c. 1936). Tempera on paper, 28 x 42 cm. Bratislava City Gallery, Bratislava.

and the raised front leg of one of the horses suggests that these are the trained movements of circus animals. The environment of the fairground is further signalled by the human figures' clown-like clothing. The strong, spotlight-style lighting completely divides the figures from the picture's dark background. These blindingly-illuminated figures pass before the black background, as harsh shadows fall menacingly onto the insipidly-coloured sawdust. But the sharp lighting allows for no illusion of fame or success within the spotlights, as Majerník uses it to shift the picture into the realm of Metaphysical painting, a genre in which he had already worked. The dark, plain background—making this a circus act without viewers—turns the act into something pointless and absurd. This is a tragicomic theatre with ominous implications that apply to all beings living on this earth, no matter whether the tops of their heads are rounded or cone-shaped. Majerník's sense of the dramatic is remarkable, as is the effectiveness with which he defined his creative path.

As noted, 1936 was marked by many changes and experiments in Majerník's work, as well as by successes and wide recognition. Majerník became a member of the Artistic Forum (*Umělecká beseda*), based in Prague, and a 'naturalised' element of that city's art scene.¹⁵ He underwent a kind of self-reinvention, artistically speaking, and grappled ever more intensively with the fate laid down for him by a disease—multiple sclerosis—from which he had no hope of recovery. In parallel with this he developed an ever-deeper sympathy for the miserable lot of many people prior to (and then during) the Second World War, and he included himself among the long ranks of the suffering. In his own fate he felt an identification with the masses of senselessly and brutally-condemned people, and his painting slowly developed into a loud and conspicuous *ars poetica*. He posed questions about where we come from and where we are headed, about the mysterious road of life and its dark secrets.

Majerník's interest in the world of the circus led him directly and seamlessly to the portrayal of town fairs and religious celebrations. Indeed, the only major shift that took place concerned the surrounding environment, which changed from a village setting to an urban, metropolitan one: in other words, to a sense of greater universality. Majerník's pictures were, from 1936, populated by clowns, circus performers, and acrobats, figures in whom the artist was able to perceive, and deeply identify with, an inner tragedy (Fig. 18.3). He was stimulated by their human dimension, their pain, and their unstable lives, in which they wore a mask of gaiety during the performance and a bitter smile in the everyday struggles outside the circus tent. An uncertain lot in life, the alternation of successes and necessary sacrifices, unceasing concerns about one's own survival,

creative struggle, and attractive demonstrations of one's talents: these realities accompany the lives of both artists and circus performers.

The subject of acrobats, clowns, fairs, and circuses has long been a familiar one in art (through *commedia dell'arte*, for instance). It was addressed in visual art by many important artists (such as Jean-Antoine Watteau), and in the nineteenth century it was used for its socially-critical dimension (as in Honoré Daumier's drawings and paintings). The spiritual affinity between the fine artist and the performing artist (an exponent of the 'lower arts') was also clearly articulated by Charles Baudelaire and in the paintings of Pablo Picasso. Picasso's art, especially the work of his Rose Period, inspired a wide range of twentieth-century artists in various media (including writers like Guillaume Apollinaire and Rainer Maria Rilke) to look backstage and seek out the hidden face of a life spent in the spotlights, where humanity is revealed in all its pain and suffering.

Majerník was definitely familiar with Picasso's work, but he was actually inspired to produce his own version of these themes by the work of František Tichý. While in Picasso's work the social subtext cannot be ignored, and while in Tichý's the sense of poetry is most evident, what stands out clearly in Majerník's paintings is their existential essence and metaphorical character.¹⁶

The painting *Three Riders (Traja jazdci, 1937)*, in which three fantastically-conceived heads, or masks, pass before a multi-coloured background, reveals a sense of artistic discipline and even a certain static quality—making this a benumbed image of a moment of fluid existence—that adds to the picture's effectiveness. Strange figures pass before our eyes, travelling from one unknown place to another. Crowds are slowly forming. The painting's mood is mysterious and poetic: virtually everything in it—the setting, the characters, the end and intention of their journey—remains a mystery. A great enigma on a road leading through a pinkish and pale-green world. The mysterious riders in the painting *Rose-Coloured Sand (Ružový piesok, 1938)* find themselves in an open but indeterminate space, and thus provide an obvious connection between Majerník's circus-themed paintings and these rider-fugitives. This painting's overall atmosphere connects it to the world of the circus. The melancholy, pinkish sand induces an imaginative mood and increases the picture's impact. It is not entirely clear whether these rider figures, with their mysterious, masked or featureless heads and their fantastical costumes, are such innocent beings: they seem to bring, or to embody, a sense of menace or threat.

Majerník regularly returned to the theme of circuses until the end of his life, sometimes in the form of sad and grief-stricken jesters and clowns with roughly daubed-on makeup (*Klaun (Clown), 1940*), and at other times in the form of clowns with stonelike faces, grimacing while performing (*The Musical Clown (Hudobný klaun), 1940*). Head portraits of clowns appeared only rarely in Majerník's work. Each of his clowns has individualised features, despite the homogenising mask of makeup, which has a symbolic value in signifying the equal sufferings and shared lot of these different figures. It is as though the endless sad faces, with their deformations (such as a bulbous clown's nose), have been plunged into a grey indeterminacy, with their specific features—and their individual torments—merging into one another.

Majerník's many works featuring circus performers and comedians were ultimately joined by images from the related world of theatre, scenes involving ballerinas, actors, and singers. Their images range from simple, figurative, and somewhat static depictions to livelier and busier group paintings. Majerník's techniques, which changed according to the thematic orientation of his work, help deepen the works' significance (*Blind Singers (Slepé speváčky), 1936*). While Majerník never imparted his own resemblance to his Pierrots or Harlequins, these paintings radiate a sense of empathy with the figures depicted. Their loneliness pierces through the laughter and the perceptive viewer may be able to see their invisible tears. Yet these figures do not bear individualised physiognomies, appearing rather as representatives of that extensive group of desolate, melancholy souls unable to escape the eternal tragedy of humanity's earthly lot.

Don Quixote: A Disguised (but Acknowledged) Self-Portrait

Rider, picador, nomad, circus performer, cavalier, Don Quixote, fugitive, pilgrim, soldier: there are many variants of the figure on horseback in Majerník's work, all on the eternal journey that leads

from nowhere to nowhere. The man on horseback is a man in search of truth and happiness: one who wanders the earth in a waking dream, hoping to find some meaning in life; who stubbornly continues to hunt down a trace of purpose or significance in the world; who devoutly pursues anything that gives off the least flash of the essence of existence; who is comforted by his ephemeral successes under the spotlight; who faces an uncertain end to his lifelong journey. Majerník's riders of life are seasoned, experienced, worldly-wise, unappeased, defeated, and resigned, and yet they are also dignified figures with noble, elevated souls.

The painter's personal feelings fused with the anxiety of his fellow wanderers, an anxiety that became ever more noticeable in the wider atmosphere of the late 1930s. Many artists fixed their attentions on the Spanish Civil War and considered it their duty to take a firm view on such events. Among Czech artists, the voices that resounded most frequently were those of warning, protest, and compassion.

Up to this point the motif of the horse or the bull had featured relatively frequently in Majerník's work, but only in relation to themes of death and violence. As he became absorbed by the events in Spain, he began to fuse these subjects with the image of the toreador, tackling the theme of the mortal battle between man and bull in an assured fashion. One of his first works to deal with bullfighting appeared in 1936, at the time of his Surrealist experiments: *Bullfight* (*Býčí zápas*, 1936). By fragmenting the individual parts of human and animal bodies, as well as of individual objects, Majerník enhanced this painting's dynamism, emphasised movement, and strengthened the feeling of chaos. This is an image governed by fear and uncertainty, pointless bloodletting and death. Majerník's later treatments of these bloody battles in the arena put greater stress on theatricality. Another of Majerník's Spanish-themed paintings is *The Equestrienne* (*Krasojazdkyňa*, 1940), which is distinguished from his other images of performers predominantly by its depiction of space. Majerník turned the already near-featureless space of the arena into a 'wild' outdoor space, depicting it in the sketchy manner familiar from his earlier works and reducing it virtually to pure horizon, to the simple division of land and sky. It is as though the equestrienne has left the arena to continue her wanderings across the stage of life. Another female figure embarks on a life of wandering in *The Spanish Bride* (*Španielska nevesta*, c. 1940), which was possibly inspired by a contemporary news report or photograph. Besides showing Majerník's continued interest in the lives and culture of the Spanish, this work also reveals much about the painter's methods and techniques. The figure herself nearly takes up the whole space of the picture. The green background symbolises hope, while the yellow that shines through it is the colour of sun and life: both colours give support to the main subject, emphasising the woman's face amidst the traditional black lace veils of the Spanish bride. The lacework has not been painted in detail: a tangle of loose, disorganised lines in the right place is sufficient. The painting's quick, sketch-like character ensures an impression of freshness, while Majerník gives most attention to the sad, submissive expression of this woman with sensuous lips and hopelessness in her deep-set eyes.

Among the various connections to the culture and reality of Spain in Majerník's work a tragic hero appears: the figure of Don Quixote (Fig. 18.4). Majerník discovered himself in the figure of this sorrowful knight, whom we can interpret as a self-portrait. Don Quixote, who longs to live in a now-vanished world, escapes into the world of fantasy, one in which his chivalry would be recognised, accepted, and understood. Majerník most certainly understood the spirit of Don Quixote. He was himself a tragic, yet strong, personality distinguished by a rare charisma.

Don Quixote has been a well-known character since his original appearance in Miguel de Cervantes's novel of 1605, and throughout the intervening centuries he has been a subject of interest not only to Spanish artists, writers, and philosophers, but also to many important representatives of European culture in general. During the Romantic period of the nineteenth century, the character experienced a great revival in visual art, when Gustave Doré and, later, the French illustrator Tony Johannot gave him a visual form that has remained well known and undergone little change to this day. But the most famous visual representation is probably by Daumier, who had a significant influence on virtually all depictions of Quixote by twentieth-century artists. There was a further revival of interest in the ingenious gentleman of La Mancha



Fig. 18.4. Cyprián Majerník, *Don Quixote* (*Don Quijote*, c. 1940). Pencil, paper, 28.5 x 20.8 cm. Bratislava City Gallery, Bratislava.

at the beginning of the twentieth century thanks to the Spanish philosopher and writer Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), who founded his theory of the renewal of society and humanity on the idealism of Don Quixote. Unamuno sought a way out of the socio-political and moral crisis of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Spain, though he ultimately aimed to regenerate Europe as a whole. He brought his ideas together in his major work *The Tragic Sense of Life* (*Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, 1912) and his ‘quixotism’ spread across Europe.

Don Quixote also enjoyed a renaissance in Czech art. The first Czech translation of the novel appeared in 1864 and immediately proved very popular. The book’s first edition already featured illustrations by such important Czech artists as Karel Purkyně and Quido Mánes. Cervantes’ hero was first depicted in a Czech painting by Eduard Svoboda, who initiated a long series of oil-painting representations of Quixote by such artists as Vlastimil Rada, František Kobliha, František Tichý, Karel Souček, Oto Guttfreund, and, of course, Majerník.¹⁷ In one of Majerník’s depictions, the artist’s own initials can even be seen on Quixote’s shield (*Don Quixote* (*Don Quijote*), 1940). The Slovak poet Laco Novomeský paid tribute to Majerník in his poem ‘Some Don Quixote by Cyprián Majerník’ (‘Ktorýsi Don Quijote Cypriána Majerníka’):

This painter saw that a rose is given to the world
by the burning flame that madmen mock,
the flame that also tortured him. But, the trickster, he hid his powerlessness,
and his sorrow at his powerlessness, behind Quixote.¹⁸



Fig. 18.5. Cyprián Majerník, *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza* (*Don Quijote a Sancho Panza*, c. 1940). Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 60.8 cm. Bratislava City Gallery, Bratislava.

There is a remarkable sense of shared feeling between Majerník and his 'sorrowful knight'. The variations he produced on the image of Don Quixote point to the painter's enduring interest in capturing this figure. From 1937 a whole series of Quixote pictures arose that use various techniques, while offering similar interpretations. In terms of the character's most basic attributes, Majerník eagerly took the lead from Cervantes' suggestive description: a tall, thin, impoverished, elderly man with the features of an ascetic idealist and an invariably-dignified expression and posture. Majerník presents a figure with a classic, elongated face and a frail physical frame, sitting atop an emaciated horse and situated against a neutral landscape with a low horizon, a setting that enables Quixote's stature to appear as towering as possible, thus underlining the character's monumentality. At one level, Majerník's repeated depiction of Quixote is his gesture of solidarity with the Spanish people, but it is also an expression of his desire to escape from everyday reality. In the majority of these pictures Don Quixote is depicted alone, the solitary knight with his lonely dignity, who stands out against an almost entirely blank pictorial space. The exception to this is the painting *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza* (*Don Quijote a Sancho Panza*, c. 1940), in which Don Quixote, as usual, stands tall over a low horizon, while Sancho slowly vanishes behind him like a shadow dissolving into earthly clay (Fig. 18.5). The knight pursues an immemorial path in the name of undying ideals and the fulfilment of real and imagined noble aims, a journey with a serious intention and a tragic(omic) end.

The crowning achievement of these Quixote paintings is *Don Quixote (Don Quijote, 1943)*. Majerník's colour scheme is brighter here, which clearly attests to the painting's emergence in parallel with his colour lithography. There is a dominant, yellowish tone that permeates the whole painting. The composition retains its balance through subtle shifts in the mass of trees comprising the picture's background, as Quixote's head reaches high above the scene. The sense of optimism and hope in the painting are undeniable. The casual and free-flowing paintwork creates an immediacy and freshness, while the even curling brushstrokes, in their intensity and movement, turn this image into an expression of tranquil joy. The painting is a celebration of the eternal strivings of its hero, Don Quixote of La Mancha, on his lifelong path, which ultimately leads, after a journey full of pain, ridicule and unceasing battle in the name of his ideals, to a gravestone inscribed with the legend: 'He had the luck ... / To live a madman, yet die wise'.¹⁹

Forced March: Majerník's Requiem

The final chapter of Majerník's life and work coincided with the intensification of the war, and specifically of its impact on the civilian population. At the same time, Majerník attained exceptional successes in his art: in 1940 he organised an exhibition at the Aleš Hall of the Artistic Forum, which was introduced by Jan Zrzavý. This second (and, in fact, final) exhibition during Majerník's lifetime presented works from 1936 to 1940, and it was not only a great success but also an immense stimulus for the artist himself. An unbelievably rich and fruitful creative period then began for Majerník, in which he developed various different painting techniques in parallel with each other, along with a wide range of subjects and themes. Majerník readily and fully devoted himself to painting as to the sole relevant means of self-expression.

In his paintings from the early 1940s he continued his themes of the circus and the theatre, but he took these to another level. The paintings no longer depicted a story or an event, a performance or attraction, but rather present the essence of an incident: the elements that are invisible, intangible, and yet crucial and defining. People sit in a theatre, passive participants in something; we are shown the audience watching, but the stage itself remains hidden. We can only guess or imagine what it is they are watching, yet it thereby becomes much more real in its essence than anything sensory impressions could capture. The stage is imaginary, the actors and the viewers throw menacing shadows, the viewers are unidentified and thus universal, and taking place on the actual stage (the stage of life) is the greatest tragedy in human history, one caused by human beings themselves: the Second World War. Majerník's paintings are populated by inert viewers with a passive demeanour, by observers and potential victims (as in *Lady with Theatre Glasses (Dáma s divadelným ďalekohľadom)*, 1941, and *Viewers / On the Balcony (Diváci / Na balkóne)*, 1943). Majerník gave his figures masks, to hide the fear in their faces (*Masks (Masky)*, 1943), yet he was unable or unwilling to conceal the fear in the eyes, and he also revealed signs of distress and horror in their very postures (*Masks (Masky)*, 1940). Circus performers in bizarre hoods, clowns with a rough layer of makeup on their faces, actors in costumes, people in masks: these are all variations on the theme of people who disguise themselves, transform themselves, pretend or hide behind a mask. These figures are mocking, combative, provocative, aggressive, and among them is one seemingly-uninvolved observer, standing to one side and looking at something else beyond the picture frame. On the boundaries of theatre and life, on the borders of spectacle and tragedy, along the edge between spotlight and darkness, invisible scenes play out. Even the actors themselves become observers who merely endure, who go through the motions and kill time, but their uncertain, forced smiles dissolve and disappear amid the glittering abundance of costumes (*Courtship (Pytačky)*, 1939). In his attitude to such phenomena, Majerník came close to that group of painters then active in Prague, who, during the war, found a metaphorical expression of their resistance to the alien civilisation of the occupiers in the themes of culture and cultural events. His closest and most important counterpart in Slovak painting was clearly Ján Želibský, who also turned to urban genre scenes featuring cafes, theatres, and concerts (compare, for instance, Želibský's *The Box Seat (Lóža)*, 1940). Both painters depict their scenes with a certain degree of reserve; we are shown averted figures shrouded in the darkness of uncertainty, watching an event in

which none of the characters depicted is actually participating. Through the absence of the scene's internal focal point, Majerník created a latent theatre of the tragic drama of life, taking place in the invisible background (*Café Society (Kaviarenská spoločnosť)*, 1941–1942).

Majerník visited Slovakia numerous times in the early 1940s, predominantly to see his parents in Veľké Kostoľany, though on several occasions he also went to Bratislava to meet with former classmates from the Academy of Fine Arts. Many commentators connect these visits to his native land with the emergence of a whole series of paintings presenting joyful, near-idyllic visions of the countryside. At this time, he painted several hitherto virtually-unseen landscape pictures and a couple of variations on the theme of the watering of livestock (*Summer (Leto)*, c. 1940, and *By the River (Pri rieke)*, 1942). The theme of maternal love, or familial happiness, began to appear in his paintings (for example *Motherhood (Materstvo)*, c. 1940), as did the subjects of everyday activities and the ordinary, quiet joy of life (*Water Carriers (Nosičky vody)*, c. 1940). Majerník found a suitable means of depicting these tranquil themes, using balanced compositions, gentle and regular crosshatching, and earthy colours with a subdued intensity. He avoided big contrasts in lighting or colour, and the figures are shown in full, engaged in gentle movement and with serene expressions on their faces. With regard to form, he tended to employ fields of colour laid horizontally above one another. With these various aspects of style he created an even rhythm and a harmony between the individual components. This short-lived idyllic quality in Majerník's work attests to a brief real-life reconciliation with his fate, with the prospect of the ultimate fusion of his being with nature. Soon, however, the world of anxiety, pain, suffering and sympathy would again dominate his work (as in *The Good Samaritan (Milosrdný samaritán)*, c. 1940), though in their deep sense of sorrow and their vigorous compassion these new works are at one with the principal tone of Majerník's art.

Majerník's path was gradually filled by a relentless stream of fugitives, outlaws, riders, abandoned people, vagrants, migrants, homeless people, patrols, lost beings, outcasts, people with knapsacks on their backs and their children in their arms, people journeying in wagons, by foot or in boats, people in refugee camps, and people who had been driven from their homes and found themselves in an uncertain space and an unending time. These perpetually-recurring elements in Majerník's paintings helped to establish a fundamental dimension of his work: its sense of the tragedy of humankind and of the emptiness and anxiety of a new global reality. Unceasingly assaulted by catastrophes that are both social and individual, the modern person is put at the mercy of unpredictable forces, which he or she is not able to confront. One person becomes a victim, another an aggressor. Both can unexpectedly exchange roles, and predator can become prey. Majerník was always fascinated by this phenomenon; from the beginning he was taken with the character and role of the circus animal-tamer, the relationship between man and horse, and the more universal, symbolic significance of that relationship. The man is smaller, weaker, more vulnerable than the horse, but because of his courage and knowledge he can control the horse at the circus (*The White Horse (Biely kôň)*, 1938, and *Circus Artists (Cirkusanti)*, 1937–1938).

Images of refugees and riders comprise a recurring theme and an emphatic refrain of Majerník's pictures of the 1940s. Crowds of people driven from their homes form an unceasing stream that resembles a bundle of dirty rags. They are forced to march off, with their knapsacks on their backs, into the unknown and the uncertain. These despairing groups, in their uniformity of distress, are engulfed by an endless woe (*Spanish Motif (Španielsky motív)*, c. 1937, and *Homeless People (Ludia bez domova)*, 1943). Majerník found his outlaws, his nameless heroes, for real in the inhuman drama of the war, and he shared imaginatively in the suffering and horror that paralysed those real people as they faced a premature oblivion. This very sense of authenticity gave Majerník the moral authorisation to present his indictments in the form of painterly testimony. It is clear that his contemporaries concurred with him in this, for he produced two series of works for the wider public, both on the theme of refugees, in the easily-reproducible and widely-accessible form of the lithograph (*Displaced People / Refugees I (Vystaňovalci / Utečenci I)*, 1944, and *Refugees / Refugees II (Utečenci/Utečenci II)*, 1944).²⁰

The image of the tragic march on foot alternated with the passage of riders through an arid and desolate landscape. The figure of the sorrowful knight, Don Quixote, was replaced ever more frequently by an unknown rider with mysterious intentions. The similarity between the two figures made for a smooth transition between two of Majerník's major themes, as the ingenious knight and his unrealisable ideals gave way to the rider and his reality. Riders on horseback traverse Majerník's expansive spaces with weapons in their hands (*Refugees (Utečenci)*, 1941, and *Partisan Patrol (Partizánska hliadka)*, 1943). Again, their mission and the aim and purpose of their journey remain undefined; the painting's 'narrative' is the event itself, the journey itself, as is customary throughout Majerník's work. This unbounded stage with its broad horizon became a limitless space for drama. The same motifs appear again and again, like the inevitable symptoms of an irrevocable illness. The painter's compulsion to throw himself repeatedly on variations of the same subject matter can be explained only by the bottomless sense of wrong and injustice that he felt (*Four Riders (Štyria jazdci)*, 1942). In this period Majerník heightened the already emphatic massiveness of the horizons in his paintings by adding further horizontal lines, which only increase the sense of distress, evoking the sheer distance travelled across these borderless spaces that extend beyond the pictureframe (*Mounted Patrol (Jazdná hliadka)*, 1943, and *Riders (Jazdci)*, 1942). This monothematic focus led Majerník towards a summative composition underlined by his sovereign mastery of the paintbrush.

1942 saw the appearance of *Unprecedented Encounter (Neslýchané stretnutie)*, 1942, awarded the State Prize for Art in 1947). It took Majerník long years of working on preparatory studies before he could undertake the final version in oils. A majestic and monumental picture emerged, adequate in its means of expression to the pathos of its subject and captivating in its grasp of the real and lifelike. A dense crowd of people, at the front of which is a mysterious rider of unidentified but important function and authority, advances past a rough, dark, coffin-shaped wall into an open and unknown space. The picture's foregrounding of horizontal lines and its exceptional narrow-rectangle format signal the historical persistence and universal applicability of the act of wandering, here undertaken by men, women, and children as they approach a group of figures with strange robes and concealed faces who await their arrival. The last of these figures, whose face is revealed as that of a skeleton, indicates the true direction of this journey into the unknown. In the words of Karel Šourek:

Majerník's whole world has now become a single senseless journey towards an unknown destination: we will always find an insurmountable obstacle somewhere in front of us—if, that is, we are able to get as far as this. And finally, as we reach the journey's equally senseless endpoint, the face of Death appears. This is the import of the artist's greatest and most emotionally powerful picture. A silent, stealthy and devious death, yet one that is no less horrifying in its absurd randomness, which in one stroke unifies all these performers of unknown roles into a procession of the condemned, encumbered by a crushing hopelessness as they creep towards that 'unprecedented', face-to-face encounter with death. These conceits drew on the insane realities of the war, which had allowed tens of thousands, indeed millions, of people to suddenly assume the role of that same senseless fate whose plaything Majerník perceived himself to be.²¹

The final chapter of the life and work of Cyprián Majerník coincides with the intensification of the war, and in particular with its increased impact on the civilian population. The image of the tragic march on foot alternates with the passage of riders through an arid and desolate landscape. Unceasingly assaulted by catastrophes that are both social and individual, the modern person is put at the mercy of unpredictable forces, which he or she is not able to confront. Majerník did not paint scenes of combat, dead bodies on the battlefield, or bloody events, and yet each of his pictures from this period has a subtext about the war; each work is set within a context of violence and powerlessness; each painting is sealed with tragedy and carries within itself the telling features of anxiety, the attempt to escape, and the irreversibility of fate.

- 1 See, for instance, the monograph Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, *Cyprián Majerník* (Bratislava: Bratislava City Gallery (GMB), 2009).
- 2 Majerník probably studied at Mally's art school from spring 1924 until spring 1926, when he was accepted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. In Bratislava, he became acquainted with Koloman Sokol and Ján Želibský, as well as with Jakub Bauernfreund, who was about five years older than Majerník. In Prague, he connected with other students from Slovakia, such as Endre Nemes and Ján Mudroch.
- 3 According to his student card, Cyprián Majerník was a student at Academy of Fine Arts from 11 October 1926 until the school year 1931–1932. His professors were Josef Loukota and Jakub Obrovský. He completed the winter semester (ending December 1931) there, but for the summer semester (the first half of 1932) he was already studying in Paris. He never formally graduated from his five years of study in Prague.
- 4 After his arrival in Prague, Bauernfreund stayed with Majerník in Letná. Willi Nowak's pupils include Endre Nemes, Bedřich Hoffstädter, Ján Mudroch, Ján Želibský, Peter Matejka, and Eugen Nevan.
- 5 Endre Nemes, *Pod príkrovom času* (Prague: Akropolis 2002), pp. 54–56. During his studies, Majerník fell seriously ill and he had to go out regularly to eat: 'We watched him daily from the windows of our studio, observing how he would enter the little pub opposite, and we said to ourselves: "There goes a painter who has lunch every day"'.
- 6 Karol Vaculík, *Cyprián Majerník* (Bratislava: Slovenské vydavateľstvo krásnej literatúry 1957), p. 8.
- 7 Karel Šourek, *Cyprián Majerník* (Prague: Výtvarný odbor Umělecké besedy, 1946). For a near-complete version of this text see: Karel Šourek, 'Cyprián Majerník', in *Výber z celoživotnej tvorby Cypriána Majerníka*, exhibition catalogue, Slovenské múzeum (Bratislava, 12 April–12 May 1946), unpaginated.
- 8 Ludmila Peterajová, *Cyprián Majerník* (Bratislava: Tatran, 1981), pp. 15–18. Majerník did not finally attain a study grant, and thus, at a time of economic crisis in Paris, he nearly starved. He apparently lost as much as 11 kilograms (according to archival documents at the Archív výtvarného umenia SNG, inv. č. zložky 8 A 10).
- 9 Beáta Jablonská, 'Cyprián Majerník: Milenci na periférii', in *Sme* (2 October 2008).
- 10 We know from Majerník's correspondence with Juraj J. Cincík that he also painted a nude that might seem 'a little indecent' to 'Slovak mothers'. The letter is quoted in Peterajová, *Cyprián Majerník*, p. 52.
- 11 Six stories by Majerník were published in *Ludová politika* between 1928 and 1929. They were reprinted in Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, *Cyprián Majerník. „okrievať v očistujúcom jeho žiarení“* (Bratislava: Galéria mesta Bratislavy, 2009), pp. 165–171.
- 12 Ján Abelovský and Katarína Bajcurová, *Výtvarná moderna Slovenska* (Bratislava: Peter Popelka / Slovart, 1997), pp. 467–469.
- 13 Located at the Mazáč bookshop on Spálená ulice in Prague. The exhibition took place between 6 March and 14 April 1935.
- 14 Šourek, *Cyprián Majerník*, unpaginated.
- 15 The positive reception of Majerník's art, particularly in the Prague context, was attested by an unceasing interest in his paintings, as evident in the many articles and reproductions of his work in the leading, opinion-forming cultural and artistic journals. See: Juraj Mojžiš, 'Neslýchané stretnutia Cypriána Majerníka', in *Neslýchané stretnutia Cypriána Majerníka a iné texty* (Bratislava: Fotofo, 2003), pp. 16–17.
- 16 Compare, for instance, Jan Marius Tomeš, *František Tichý. Malířské dílo*. (Prague: Odeon, 1976).
- 17 One critic with a long-term interest in depictions of Don Quixote in Czech art is Pavel Štěpánek. See: Pavel Štěpánek, *Don Quijote v českém umění*. (Kladno: Galerie výtvarného umění v Kladně, 1989). Other Czech artists who depicted Quixote include: Beneš Knüpfer, Karel Hýbl, Vratislav H. Brunner, Lubomír Boček, Petr Dillinger, Vladimír Modrý, František Ropek, Pavel Šimon, Karel Toman, Jiří Trnka, and Jaroslav Vodrážka.
- 18 *Ten maliar pobadal, že ružu svetu podá bláznami vysmievaný zápal horúci, ktorý ho mučil tiež. Lež figliar, za Quijota skryl svoju bezmocnosť i smútok z bezmoci.*
- Laco Novomeský, *Stamodial' a iné* (Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ 1964), pp. 64–66.
- 19 Miguel de Cervantes, *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. John Rutherford (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 981.
- 20 Majerník created a series of graphic prints at the request of the European Literary Club (ELK), as a member of its artistic department. In this way the ELK secured the advantageous purchase of a series of artworks.
- 21 Šourek, *Cyprián Majerník*, unpaginated.