

Palimpsest  
– A Possible  
Language for  
Interpreting  
Twentieth-Century  
Art History  
(As Illustrated by  
Košice Art of the  
1920s)

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### **Palimpsest – A Possible Language for Interpreting Twentieth-Century Art History (As Illustrated by Košice Art of the 1920s)**

Over the last decades, researchers' attention has gradually shifted from events in the traditional centres of art to issues relating to the art history of the periphery. A good example of this shift is the interest in Slovakia in the first half of the twentieth century, for instance the appropriation of works by artists speaking a language other than Slovak. Košice in the 1920s was characterised by multiculturalism, which was visible in the dynamics of artistic life. The development of art was also supported by the First Czechoslovak Republic's atmosphere of tolerant democracy. The town also offered refuge to many immigrants, and this essay focusses mainly on their contribution to the cultural environment of Košice.

In thinking about the languages of art, I have tried to find the keyword that would aptly characterise the reason behind art historians' current interest in previously-marginalised subjects, namely in the art of Eastern Slovakia in the interwar period. They focus mainly on so-called Košice modern art in the 1920s, the representatives of which belonged to different nationalities and creeds. I have been inspired by Dario Gamboni's introduction to a compilation of the conference papers from the 32<sup>nd</sup> International Congress in the History of Art organised in 2008 by the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA), where he referred to the reflections of André Corboz: 'Swiss architect André Corboz showed that the land is no given commodity; it results from various processes. It is not a piece of land but a collective relation depending on the experience between a topographic surface and the population settled in it. The land, just like the locality relevant to the artistic work, changes as the time passes, and at the same time it can move'.<sup>2</sup>

In his text, Corboz explained that in the light of the complexity and the integration of functions within the various national or regional communities, there is a need to understand how this physical and mental entity called the land was formed and what it consists of.<sup>3</sup> As for Košice, the importance of the town was considerably affected by the establishment of a new state, the Czechoslovak Republic. The routes of economic and cultural influences radically changed. The citizens found themselves in completely new legislative and administrative frameworks. Within their new citizenship, a new regional mentality shaped in relation to ethnic questions that eventually overlaid the original one.<sup>4</sup> The situation of that time in Slovakia raises many questions, mainly political ones, relating to a recurrent change in the paradigm for interpreting the art of individual historic periods including the twentieth century. These political questions emerged with the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, though they had already been relevant in the interpretation of fine art of the period 1900 to 1918. Every change in the country's political orientation found its reflection also in the form of artistic representation preferred by the state: in relation to this we should also mention the social and political functions of art. This essay applies the notion of palimpsest to the art to the art of Eastern Slovakia in the 1920s, namely to the work of Hungarian-speaking artists who, for a certain period of time, lived and worked in Košice.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to the traditional perspective, cultural management is here regarded as an equal partner in artistic life. As the specifics of architecture completely differ from those of painting, sculpture and graphic art, architecture is not included.

Our art historians—and by ‘our’ I mean both Slovak and Czech scholars—were looking for signs of an autochthonous modern art tradition in the 1920s, which they found in works by artists who declared their Slovak ethnicity even before the establishment of the republic. The main thing they considered important was the art’s ties to the Czech and the Moravian environment. At the beginning of the century, quite an important role was also played by the interest of Czech artists and art critics in their ‘exotic’ Eastern neighbours. As a result, attention was paid particularly to Slovak-speaking artists depicting the Slovak landscape and Slovak subjects.

As the towns were inhabited by people of different nationalities, it was impossible to use urban subjects as symbols for the affirmation national identity. Artists therefore assigned this role to the village and villagers, their folklore and customs. The interpretation of Slovak art in the first two decades of the twentieth century has been long dominated by an idyllic picture of life in the country, villagers working in the field or celebrating the feasts, surrounded by a picturesque mountainous landscape. And it was the mountainous landscape that was turned into a symbol of Slovakia by artists such as Martin Benka, Janko Alexy, Zoltán Palugyay, Miloš Alexander Bazovský, and their followers.

### **The Question of Language in Searching for an Image of Košice art**

Košice in the 1920s was a town whose cultural life was comparable to that of any other European city of a similar size. As a cultural centre of the eastern part of the new republic, Košice was a typical Central-European conglomerate of creeds and nationalities; yet, before 1918, almost no member of the intelligentsia declared Slovak nationality.<sup>6</sup> The situation changed only after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic and the arrival of officers sent from Prague to put the laws of the young state into practice.

The first attempt to integrate the nationally-diverse Košice circle into Slovak fine art was made by Josef Polák. In his 1925 study ‘Fine Art in Slovakia’ he dealt with the artists who were born in Slovakia and before 1918 lived and worked in Budapest.<sup>7</sup> In a footnote he also mentioned Hungarian-speaking artists who returned to and settled in Slovakia after 1918, such as Bertalan Pór and Eugen Krón. It should be mentioned that the first relevant essay on Slovak fine art in the newly-established Czechoslovak Republic, Štefan Krčméry’s article of 1924, did not include a single mention of the Košice circle.<sup>8</sup>

Polák’s study was rather an isolated effort. For instance, a collection of papers entitled *Slovak Literary and Artistic Presence (Slovenská prítomnosť literárna a umelecká, 1931)* only accepted Slovak-speaking artists declaring Slovak nationality.<sup>9</sup> The oeuvre of Hungarian-speaking artists of national minorities including the artists of the Košice circle was mentioned neither in Vladimír Wagner’s essay on painting nor in Jozef Cincík’s historical essay on sculpture, although his overview of nineteenth-century artists also included natives of Slovakia. In 1931, Kálmán Brogyányi published his book *Painting in Slovakia (Festművészet szlovenszón)*.<sup>10</sup> He accepted all significant Slovak artists, though he also stressed artists of national minorities. In a chapter about Košice he praised the activities of Josef Polák and drew attention to František Foltýn, Géza Schiller, Konštantín Bauer, Anton Jasusch, Elemír Halász-Hradil, Vojtech Erdélyi as well as lesser-known artists of the Prešov and Michalovce circles. He also dealt with the activities of various art associations, stating that Bratislava, Komárno, and Košice were the centres of artistic life after 1918.<sup>11</sup> For many years, Brogyányi’s considerably-different view of fine art in Slovakia remained unnoticed by Slovak art history. It was accepted neither by Wagner’s book *Profile of Slovak Fine Art (Profil slovenského výtvarného umenia)* nor by other publications.<sup>12</sup>

In his book *Slovak Fine Art 1918–1945 (Slovenské výtvarné umenie 1918–1945)*, published in 1960, Marian Váross, director of the Institute of Art History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, summarised the results of a collective research project by the institute.<sup>13</sup> When integrating the Košice circle into Slovak fine art, he stressed mainly the artists who had been born in today’s

Slovakia, and studied abroad or fought in the First World War, but then returned home after the end of the war. Despite marginalising, to some extent, the importance of artists declaring Hungarian nationality, such as Anton Jasusch, he incorporated their oeuvre into Slovak art. If, however, an artist with the same roots had stayed in Budapest after the end of the First World War and returned to Slovakia only after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, such as Eugen Krón, he was included in the final part of the book's 'Creative Profiles' section, entitled 'German and Hungarian visual artists living in Slovakia'.<sup>14</sup> Though the importance of the art school run by Eugen Krón at the East Slovak Museum (Východoslovenské múzeum) in Košice was noted at several points in the book, especially in connection with works by Koloman Sokol, Városov did not provide any specific information about the school itself. Gejza Schiller was included in the same passage as Krón, while František Foltýn was briefly mentioned in the part entitled 'Czech Visual Artists Living in Slovakia'.<sup>15</sup> The publication mentioned neither Alexander Bortnyik's stay in Košice between 1924 and 1925 nor the temporary stays of other leading representatives of the Hungarian left-wing avant-garde.<sup>16</sup>

The response to Városov's book came shortly afterwards. In 1962, Ladislav Saučín completed the manuscript of the book *Fine Art in Eastern Slovakia 1918–1938 (Výtvarné umenie na východnom Slovensku 1918–1938)*, which was published two years later.<sup>17</sup> His book featured artists living and working in Košice as well as those who found a temporary refuge in the town. Apart from his interpretation of works by individual artists (for instance, he was the first to point out the importance of Krón's posters), he also presented their biographies, not missing out any relevant detail. For instance, in the biography of Alexander Bortnyik he stated that Bortnyik lived in Košice between 1924 and 1925 as a Romanian national, while before he 'had been living in Vienna and Weimar, where he worked at the Bauhaus'.<sup>18</sup>

The publication *Anton Jasusch and the Birth of the East Slovak Avant-garde (Anton Jasusch a zrod východoslovenskej avantgardy)* by Tomáš Štrauss, which focussed on the artist's life and work and his importance for art in Košice, significantly contributed to the understanding of the uniqueness of Košice art.<sup>19</sup> Compared to Saučín, Štrauss paid closer attention to Polák's arrival in Košice and his activities, to the establishment of Krón's art school at the East Slovak Museum, to the school itself and to many artists who attended courses and displayed their works at the museum. The publication also provided a more detailed list of avant-garde artists who stayed in Košice and its environs for a short period of time, or who exhibited or gave lectures in Košice. It is important, however, that Štrauss pointed out the atmosphere of tolerance and respect for all nationalities living in Košice. As he put it: 'it is symptomatic that in terms of work of the leading artists of the so-called Košice circle, the question of national and cultural identity was irrelevant ... In the early 1920s, a few voices rose up in Slovak artistic circles to warn Polák against surrounding himself with foreign elements ... but these attempts did not have any impact on actual internationalist feeling'.<sup>20</sup>

It took another thirty years before Ján Abelovský and Katarína Bajcurová published their book *Modern Fine Art in Slovakia, Painting and Sculpture 1890–1949 (Výtvarná moderna Slovenska, maliarstvo a sochárstvo 1890–1949)*, which accepted Saučín's and Štrauss's interpretation of Košice modern art in the 1920s and integrated it into twentieth-century Slovak fine art.<sup>21</sup> The subchapter devoted to Košice modern art was supplemented with detailed comments and notes including artists' biographies as well as with a rich selection of images. Yet, the writers seem not to have conducted archival research; they just updated research findings available even before Városov's book had been published, by adding new information from Hungarian literature. Still, in terms of integrating artists of national minorities into Slovak fine art, the book can be considered an important milestone.

However, too much time had passed since Városov's book was published. As a result, despite unique pieces of information provided by Saučín and Štrauss, the Košice avant-garde was for many decades perceived as a tangential issue. Városov's restrictive view has been only slowly relativised by other writers; the list of examples would exceed the extent of the present study. While in recent years there has been increased scholarly attention to Košice modern art, in terms of art history, the issue has not as yet been sufficiently elaborated. For instance, public collections in Slovakia house a large number of prints and drawings by Eugen Krón, and yet no relevant publication on his body of work has so far appeared in Slovakia. Even more surprising is the case of Anna Lesznai, a native

of Nižný Hrušov, whose work is completely omitted from the history of Slovak fine art, although in the 1930s it was presented by Hungarian art critics in newspapers and magazines published in Slovakia.

### **The Historic Framework of Košice**

Before the First World War, Košice was an important cultural centre of the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was not situated on the periphery as it may seem today. This is not to say that the town occupied a central position in a political map of that time, however, and there were still many other similar towns in the south-east of Austria-Hungary, such as Oradea, Cluj, or Nagybánya (Baia Mare) in today's Romania, or more specifically in Transylvania. All of these towns, including Košice, adapted to the dynamics of modern times, which is clearly visible in the monuments of Art Nouveau architecture.

The Allied Supreme Council defined new borders in Central Europe on 12 June 1919. These were codified by the Treaty of Trianon (4 June 1920), which radically changed political conditions in the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. This period also saw the creation of several new states. The independence of the Czechoslovak Republic was declared on 28 October 1918.<sup>22</sup> The beginnings of the new Czechoslovak state were turbulent for that region whose art was clearly oriented towards Budapest. Most Košice inhabitants probably did not speak Slovak.<sup>23</sup> On 21 March 1919 the Hungarian Soviet Republic was proclaimed. The Communist leaders wanted to create a political system in the manner of Soviet Russia. The Hungarian Red Army occupied the larger part of southern and eastern Slovakia. In Košice, for instance, this was warmly welcomed, the entire city was decorated with Hungarian national flags'.<sup>24</sup> On 16 June 1919 the Slovak Soviet Republic was proclaimed in Prešov which, however, only existed for twenty days. The Hungarian Soviet Republic was finally defeated on 1 August 1919 and Košice was occupied by the army led by the French General Hennocque.

As a result of the establishment of the new state, the importance and nature of Košice changed. The town became an eastern metropolis of the young republic, though it was not then on the periphery, as it is today. Yet, Prague, the new capital, was far away, and therefore it was politically necessary, with all guns blazing, to promote Czechoslovak statehood in Košice. Being fully aware of this task, President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk visited Košice as early as 21 September 1920. But the region was highly volatile, about which the nationally-mixed population was kept informed by both Hungarian and Slovak newspapers.

### **Officers Sent from Prague**

Czechoslovak statehood was promoted by officers recommended by Prague. Among these officers was, for instance, Josef Polák, a young Doctor of Laws, who knew the region of Eastern Slovakia from personal experience: as a soldier in the First World War he had been dispatched to the Eastern Front. During his studies in Prague he also attended lectures on art history and started publishing articles and essays on cultural subjects. He first visited Košice early in 1919 and took an active interest in the local museum's collections. It did not take long before he was commissioned to take charge of the East Slovak Museum (9 March 1919), which originated in the remains of the former regional museum, whose collections had been taken, without permission, to Budapest during the war by the former museum director.<sup>25</sup>

Despite a difficult personal situation (which included ill health and a 'stormy' marriage), Josef Polák did a great job in managing the East Slovak Museum.<sup>26</sup> Archival materials relating to his activities in the 1920s show that for many years he worked officially only as a museum administrator; he had neither the authorisation to act as a director nor a director's salary. He built museum collections and struggled for survival. Subsidies for the museum were not commonplace. He had to ask for them again and again, following a complicated administrative procedure which reflected the fact that the museum was owned by the state and came under the Ministry of Education and National Edification in Prague, and yet was located in Slovakia, which had its own self-administration. Despite other duties, such as creating an inventory of moveable

monuments in Eastern Slovakia, Polák took an active interest in contemporary fine art; he mounted exhibitions, organised auctions, and even founded an art school at the museum.<sup>27</sup> He also enabled many immigrants—Budapest-based artists involved in the Hungarian Soviet Republic who had to leave Hungary to avoid political persecutions—to find a temporary home in Košice. Many internationally-recognised artists accepted his invitation to stay for a while in Košice. Some of them were repatriates, which means that they were born in the territory of today's Slovakia, for instance Eugen Krón who was commissioned by Polák to run the art school at the East Slovak Museum open to a broad public. His classes were attended by several young artists who later shaped Slovak interwar art. Moreover, Polák organised lectures and theatre performances that were covered by the press. The theatre presented the best works of contemporary Czech literature; in 1922, for instance, an open-air performance of Karel Čapek's play *The Robber* (*Loupežník*) and Bedřich Smetana's opera *Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*) were staged. Theatre performances aimed at promoting Czech and Slovak culture and increasing awareness of Czechoslovak statehood.<sup>28</sup> Polák was also instrumental in staging Čapek's play *R.U.R.* in Košice. He had the play translated into Hungarian and discussed the possibility of its staging at the National Theatre in Budapest. The poster for the opening-night performance in Košice was designed by Eugen Krón. Polák was an open-minded, creative, and cosmopolitan person, although today one can also hear critical voices with respect to his business activities relating to the sale of artworks.

Despite the aforementioned facts, publications informing about the activities of Josef Polák have been rather sporadic and the oeuvre of artists he supported was interpreted for more than fifty years as beyond the mainstream history of modern Slovak fine art. In the world of fine art, however, a logo-centric view does not play such an important role as in other areas of art and culture. Painting, sculpture, and graphic art (and architecture) have a language of their own that can be understood by those who can read it, irrespective of the language spoken by the artist: most Košice-based artists did not speak Slovak. Nevertheless, due to the tolerant polyglot Josef Polák and his diplomatic skills, Košice became their home.

### Modern Art in Košice

Modern art in Košice emerged early in the twentieth century due to artists who had studied in Budapest and Munich, visited Paris, and who during their short stays in artists' colonies in Nagybánya (today's Baia Mare, Romania) or Szolnok had become familiar with plein-air painting, which, however, cannot be clearly interpreted as a regional variant of Impressionism. Some artists preferred the reflection of Art Nouveau in symbolical and decorative compositions, while the works of others resonated with Post-Impressionism. Elemér Halász-Hradil, who had run a private art school for many years, moved from Art Nouveau to Post-Impressionism, and this tendency was also visible in the work of Konštantín Kővári-Kačmarik, a mentally-unstable genius whose work was long ignored. Josef Polák did his best to incorporate his work into the history of Slovak fine art through organising the artist's posthumous exhibitions.<sup>29</sup>

Anton Jasusch entered the art scene in Košice before the First World War and reached the pinnacle of his career in the 1920s (Fig. 4.1). His works resonated with current European trends. In his large-scale compositions one can find the reflection of Art Nouveau and Symbolism on the boundary between figurative and non-figurative art. Before the war he stayed in Munich, where he got familiar with works by artists from the Blaue Reiter, and met Vasilii Kandinsky and Aleksei Jawlensky.<sup>30</sup> Jasusch tried to cope with the cruelty of war that he experienced first-hand through Eastern philosophy. His exhibition of large-scale paintings in Košice created a strong controversy that culminated after a 1924 re-installation in Bratislava. The art critics referred to his works as non-Slovak: paradoxically, the artist found a defender in Jur Koza Matejov who argued that the artist's mother was Slovak. Today we could say that Jasusch's image of the world, marked by the horrors of the First World War and, in terms of style, by the European variant of Symbolism and Expressionism, significantly differed from the idyllic picture of Slovak landscape as depicted by Martin Benka, the most popular painter of the time, who was seeking a local intersection of Art Nouveau and Expressionism in his works.<sup>31</sup>

In May 1921 the East Slovak Museum mounted the exhibition of the *Tvrdošijní* (The Stubborn Ones) from Prague (Josef Čapek, Václav Špála, Jaroslav Král, Valentín Hrdlička, Josef Chochol, Zdeněk Rykr, Egon Adler, Emil Filla, Otto Guttfreund, Jan Zrzavý, Otakar Kremlička, Otakar Marvánek, Josef Šíma). Among the guests were Ludovít Kudlák, native of Slovakia, with his wife, Anna Kvas-Kishonti, Berlin-based artist Friedrich Feigl, and Budapest-based artist Béla Uitz. Kudlák and Uitz maintained close contacts with the representatives of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and cooperated with Lajos Kassák, living in emigration in Vienna at the time, in editing and publishing the *MA (Today)* magazine. In the manner of the Russian avant-garde, visual artists and art critics participated in the proletarian revolution with the ideas and works they published in *MA*. With respect to the politically-unstable situation in Košice, it is necessary to appreciate the courage of Josef Polák who displayed works by artists of all nationalities and political convictions. Apart from the aforementioned artists, among the guests were also Paul Klee (it was his first exhibition outside German-speaking countries) and several members of the Dresden Secession, such as Otto Dix, Eugen Hoffmann, Otto Lange, Constantin von Mitschke-Collande, and Lasar Segall.<sup>32</sup>

Polák's activities turned Košice into an artistic centre of European importance. Under his leadership the East Slovak Museum mounted over one hundred exhibitions in the 1920s. Apart from local traditions they also presented modern and avant-garde art by Slovak, Czech, and European artists, art groups, and art associations, including those artists who found their temporary home in Košice.

Among the artists who had been given a helping hand by Josef Polák was also Eugen Krón, a native of the village of Sobrance in Eastern Slovakia. Polák commissioned him to run classes at the East Slovak Museum, which have been referred to as 'Krón's graphic school' in academic literature.<sup>33</sup> 'Apart from lessons in drawing and graphic art, the students could also attend lessons in applied arts and evening nude figure classes'.<sup>34</sup> The school operated between 1921 and 1927 and shaped such distinctive talents as Július Jakoby and Koloman Sokol. In 1922 the students of Krón's art school displayed their works at the East Slovak Museum.<sup>35</sup>



Fig. 4.1. Anton Jasusch, *Death of the Planet (Free Composition III)* (*Zánik planéty (Voľná kompozícia III, Konec planéty)*, 1924). Oil on canvas, 266 x 268 cm. East Slovak Gallery, Košice.

Eugen Krón was trained in lithography. 'Between 1911 and 1912 he attended evening drawing classes at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, run by Prof. Zemplényi, and in the summer he visited the artists' colony in Nagybánya'.<sup>36</sup> Like most artists involved in revolutionary events in the Hungarian Soviet Republic, he had to leave Hungary to avoid persecution. In his case, however, one cannot speak about emigration, as he returned to his native land, which, in the meantime, became part of a different state. The years spent in Košice were, as the artist admitted in many interviews, the happiest and most fecund period of his life.

Most art historians dealing with Krón have put the emphasis on his pedagogical activities. However, he was an excellent graphic artist too. His figurative works focussing on groups of naked, mostly male bodies are characterised by clear composition, convincing drawing technique, and professionally-mastered graphic technologies. He was trying to express his prophetic message on the meaning of life, personal relations, revolution as the future of humankind. Krón's style can be connected with works by members of Osmá (The Eight), which he had seen before the First World War in Budapest. Kernstock's and Pór's nudes of young men in the landscape symbolised the hope for change, which Krón never gave up. In addition to non-commissioned works, represented by the series of lithographs *Eros*, *Man of the Sun* (*Muž slnka*) and *The Creative Spirit* (*Tvorivý duch*) (mid-1920s), Krón also designed posters, both theatrical and political, for instance the 1923 election poster for the Communist Party of Slovakia, a work that fully corresponded with his political convictions.<sup>37</sup> Krón fully integrated into the Czechoslovak environment, although until the end of his life he used Hungarian as a written language.<sup>38</sup>

In 1921 he applied for membership of the Union of Czechoslovak Visual Artists in Prague.<sup>39</sup> During his stay in Košice he displayed his works at the East Slovak Museum together with Benedikt Baja (1922). Though the art school run by Krón was closed towards the end of the 1920s due to a lack of funds, the artist himself received financial support of two thousand Czechoslovak crowns from the Ministry of Education and National Edification in Prague in 1928.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, losing the prospect of regular income and unable to keep up a decent standard of living, he decided to leave for Italy and stay with his brother in Milan.

Apart from numerous photographs, the image of Josef Polák has also been preserved in many portraits. The most important one can be said to be the painting by Alexander Bortnyik, a representative of the Budapest avant-garde, who stopped in Košice on his way from Weimar to Budapest (Fig. 4.2). Originally he planned to stay just a few days, but ultimately he spent five months in Košice. In his portrait he managed to capture the inner world of this intellectual and tireless organiser of cultural events. Looking at the picture, one can see a calm and moderately self-confident man who is able to arrange the chaos of life into meaningful relations. And on the contrary, due to Josef Polák one can perceive Alexander (Sándor) Bortnyik as part of the leftist Hungarian avant-garde circle, whose representatives found a temporary refuge in a liberal Czechoslovak Republic, namely in Košice.

In 1924 Polák mounted Bortnyik's solo exhibition at the East Slovak Museum and enabled the artist to design his own exhibition poster. Besides, as a Communist 'inclining towards engaged art and agitprop' Bortnyik was on friendly terms with local representatives of the Communist movement. Unfortunately, any attempts to reconstruct his activities in Košice have failed so far; it is a well-known fact, however, that he met his second wife there. The source materials relating to Bortnyik's stay in Košice give evidence of the liberal and tolerant atmosphere of this multinational town.<sup>41</sup>

Reconstructing the story of Gejza Schiller, an artist who stayed in Košice for a period of five years, seems to be even more difficult (Fig. 4.3). Schiller took an active part in Budapest artistic life: he displayed his works at Múcsarnok and met a circle of left-wing artists. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, like many of his colleagues, he found a refuge in a metropolis of Eastern Slovakia.<sup>42</sup> In Košice he created his most significant works, partly with reference to Pablo Picasso's Cubist period and partly oriented towards civilism. In his works he responded in a lyrical manner to both the urban way of life and the landscape in the vicinity of Košice. His closest friend and colleague, František Foltýn, lived in Košice in the first half of the 1920s before he left





Fig. 4.2. Sándor (Alexander) Bortnyik, *Portrait of Dr. J. Polák, Director of the East Slovak Museum in Košice* (*Podobizeň Dr. J. Poláka, riaditeľa Východoslovenského múzea v Košiciach*, 1924). Oil on canvas, 95 x 87 cm. East Slovak Gallery, Košice.

for Paris. Foltýn displayed his painterly talent in his paintings with social subjects characterised by shapes built up of colour surfaces. Schiller and Foltýn maintained close contacts with Josef Polák. In 1923 they held a joint exhibition at the East Slovak Museum. As for Schiller, he had displayed his works at the museum already in 1921, in a group exhibition together with Vilmos Perlrott-Csaba, Margit Gráber, Maria Galimberti, Karol (Károly) Quittner, Oskar Ember, and Árpád Balázs.<sup>43</sup>

Ivan Máca (János Mácza), a theatre theorist and aesthetician, was an associate of Lajos Kassák. His political and professional profile can be reconstructed based on his crucial contributions to *MA* magazine. Mácza arrived in Košice 'in 1920 based on a commission of the Hungarian Communist Party. Born in 1893 in Nižný Hrabovec, Slovakia, he quickly adapted to local conditions. After arrival in Košice he began working as a columnist with *Kassai Munkás* (*Kassa Worker*), a local Communist newspaper. He implemented his experimental projects in the area of theatre and mass culture within the local proletarian culture movement ... Mácza had to leave Košice after directing a mass performance as part of the May Day demonstration in 1922; he emigrated to Vienna and later to the Soviet Union'.<sup>44</sup> The performance took place 'with the assistance of a working-class cultural association ... Košice was the only European town where the innovative public performance (Vsevolod Meyerhold's *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (*Vzatie zimného dvortsa*)) took place'.<sup>45</sup> The circles of young leftists in Vienna and Košice kept in close touch. This is evidenced by the fact that Kassák organised two 'activist evenings' in Košice in 1922 in which he participated together with his wife, the actress Jolán Simon.<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 4.3. Gejza Schiller, *Town Scene (Mestský motiv)*, 1924). Oil on canvas, 94.5 x 109 cm. East Slovak Gallery, Košice.

Moreover, Mácza published Kassák's articles, with which he tried to introduce avant-garde ideas. While the audience in pre-war Budapest was shaped by the radical attitudes of young artists and art theorists yearning for social change, the audience in Košice preferred a more moderate form of modern art. In Moscow Mácza established himself as an influential Marxist aesthician. His decision to leave for the Soviet Union fully complied with his worldview. After all, Gyorgy Lukács, one of the most prominent representatives of Marxism in aesthetics and literary science, on whose works the Frankfurt School was based, also moved to Moscow and remained there until the end of the Second World War.<sup>47</sup>

In connection with the above theme of émigré artists and their time in Košice, we must also mention the life and work of Anna Lesznai. Born as Amália Moskovitz to the family of a doctor, she was brought up in a mansion in the village of Nižný Hrušov, near Košice. The family used to spend spring and summer in Nižný Hrušov and autumn and winter in Budapest. At the age of nineteen, as a divorced mother, she started attending drawing courses. Later she displayed textile designs, which she made in her manufactory, wrote poetry and children's fairytales, illustrated books and designed book covers. She moved in the avant-garde artistic and intellectual circles of Osmá. Her second husband was the sociologist Oskár Jászi, minister for national minorities in Károlyi's government at the time of the break-up of Austria-Hungary.<sup>48</sup>

During the existence of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Lesznai worked at the People's Commissariat for Education and prepared the curriculum of art education for primary and secondary schools. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic she escaped to Vienna together with her husband, but just one year later they got divorced. Her life partner became the graphic artist Tibor Gergely, with whom she fled Europe in 1939 and emigrated to the USA, where she lived and worked in New York until 1965.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Lesznai visited Nižný Hrušov on a regular basis, as her eldest son was staying there with his family. Her textile designs and illustrations drew inspiration from the

beauty of surrounding nature and local folk art. By inviting other artists to her family mansion she was building a social background for those who found a temporary home in Košice, or came to town to display their works or give lectures. Although most books dealing with this artist's life and work state that she emigrated from Hungary to Vienna, she also went on to emigrate, in her own fashion, to the territory of the liberal Czechoslovak Republic, namely Slovakia. Before she left for the US (1939), she visited her native village on a regular basis to see her son from a previous marriage, Károly Garay.<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion

My brief notes on the activities of artists, museologists, and art theorists in Košice, and the outline of their lives, activities, and works in the 1920s, are definitely not complete. The relevant literature on art in Eastern Slovakia in the 1920s includes the names of many other visual artists, such as János Kmetty, Róbert Berény, Károly Kernstok, Vilmos Perlrott Csaba, Béla Kontuly, Margit Gráber, Lajos Tihanyi, Károly Quitner, Otto Ember-Spitz, Benedek Baja, Géza Csorba, Károly Kotász, Dezső Orbán, Béla Uitz, and Sándor Ziffer, but does not differentiate between the artists who lived in Košice and those who only arrived in town to display their works or give lectures.<sup>50</sup> The archival research that would bring answers to this question still needs to be done. In any case, a respectable list of artists gives evidence of a lively cultural life in Košice.

In the 1920s Košice was part of Czechoslovakia. The liberal democracy provided a background for the acceptance of modern and avant-garde artists as well as for their art production, organisational, and exhibition activities. The cultural environment in Košice was shaped equally by local artists and intellectuals and by the artists who found there their temporary home. This fact underlines the importance of the tolerance that characterises Košice's *genius loci* in the 1920s, of tolerance as a formative element in the appropriation of current ideas and programmes into the social, cultural, and artistic life of the town.

It should be mentioned that during their stay in Košice all painters inclined towards a variant of neo-Classicism more or less modified by civilism. They took a similar step to avant-garde artists in the European artistic centres disillusioned with the art experiments of the early-twentieth century. In connection with the cataclysm of the First World War, a common phenomenon in Europe was the return to figuration, the search for harmony, and the approval of humanistic values of peace, love, family happiness. The artists who found political asylum in Košice did not prepare world revolution and their life was not endangered. They expressed themselves through a form of modern art that was moderate rather than avant-garde: even Alexander Bortnyik drew and painted well-balanced neo-Classical compositions. The only activities that defy the moderate orientation were the radical leftist activities of Ivan Máca (Mácza), which, from today's perspective, can be referred to as collective performances.

In the case of the present study, the rewriting of the history of visual art—palimpsest—takes place on a more or less whitewashed basis. Left-wing artists in Košice, speaking mostly Hungarian, German or Czech, have been long perceived by Slovak art history as foreigners and their works excluded from the interpretation of art history, despite the fact that many of them had been born in the territory of today's Slovakia, returned home after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, and significantly contributed to the character of local art. Yet, it took art history several decades to accept these artists; paradoxically, it focussed not on the artists themselves but on their followers. Exhibition curators pointed out their works only in order to emphasise the social orientation or revolutionary character of Slovak interwar art, but they integrated them into the whole of Slovak fine art only exceptionally.

Rewriting the history of fine art in the first half of the twentieth century required increased efforts by art historians of several generations, who had been long in the minority: the acceptance of a group of inhabitants speaking a language other than Slovak, whose ancestors had been living in the territory of today's Slovakia for many generations, is quite a new phenomenon. This situation can be illustrated by two publications on Slovak fine art in the period under focus, namely *Slovenské výtvarné umenie 1918–1945* (*Slovak Fine Art 1918–1945*) by Marian Városov, which dealt with

representatives of Košice modern art in a separate chapter on marginalised artists, and *Výtvarná moderna Slovenska (Slovak Modern Fine Art)* by Ján Abelovský and Katarína Bajcurová, which interpreted works by artists of national minorities as part of the overall view of Slovak visual art. Yet, there are many articles, essays, and academic studies challenging a logo-centric picture of Slovak fine art in the 1920s, advocated mainly by Marian Váross and art historians of the so-called Slovak state, written by Ladislav Saučín, Tomáš Štrauss, Eva Šefčáková, Silvia Ilečková, Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, Gábor Hushegyi, and other Slovak scholars. The contribution of Hungarian colleagues to the examination of the given subject is very important; it is comparable to the contribution of our Czech colleagues in the past.

The current interpretation of the specific territory's art history within the specified period of time was also supported by an overall change in the paradigm of the relation of society to minorities and their language, which has allowed art history to marginalise consideration of the language spoken by the specific artist during his or her stay in our territory. By integrating the work of artists' previously forgotten or schematically-interpreted creative efforts, one can get a more vivid picture of Slovakia's artistic past, enriched by a European dimension; the work of many artists living in Košice in the 1920s was internationally recognised even before their arrival in Košice (Alexander Bortnyik), while other artists became famous in Europe shortly after they left the town (František Foltyň).

Once again, the attention of scholars and the wider public has turned to cultural life in Košice and its modern art of the 1920s. Knowledge of the subject has been deepened by new research findings and a change in the perspective on individual artworks and the circumstances of their origin. In connection with the title of 'European capital of culture,' Košice institutions have contributed to revealing the town's unique artistic past. In this respect, the biggest effort has been made by the East Slovak Gallery (Východoslovenská galéria), which organised two symposiums (2010 and 2012) on Košice modern art and prepared a book and an exhibition. Apart from the Slovak art historians, their colleagues from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, Poland, and Ukraine took part.<sup>51</sup> The initiative can serve as a constructive example of cooperation beyond merely national and regional borders. It has also encouraged other research projects, as the present essay shows.

*Translated by Janka Jurečková*

1 Zuzana Bartošová, 'Palimpsest ako jeden z možných jazykov interpretácie dejín umenia 20. storočia (Na príklade umenia Košíc dvadsiatych rokov 20. storočia)', *World Literature Studies: časopis pre výskum svetovej literatúry* (special issue) 5/22 (2013): pp. 56–74.

2 Dario Gamboni, 'Repatriation/Introduction', in Jaynie Anderson (ed.), *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, 2009), p. 1072.

3 André Corboz, 'Le territoire comme palimpseste', *Diogenes* 121 (1983): pp. 14–35.

4 The importance of the 'horizon of reference' has also been pointed out by Corboz, 'Le territoire', p. 1.

5 'Palimpsest – a manuscript on which later writings have been superimposed on effaced earlier writing.' Mária Ivanová-Šalingová and Zuzana Maníková (eds), *Slovník cudzích slov* (Bratislava: Pedagogické nakladateľstvo, 1979), p. 645. The essay uses the term metaphorically to mean that after the establishment of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918) the Hungarian-speaking inhabitants of Košice, which was a significant Hungarian town during WWI, outnumbered the Slovak ones.

6 Ivan Halász, 'Slovenská národná politika a židovská komunita v období dualizmu', in Ivan Halász, *Uhorsko a podoba slovenskej identity v dlhom 19. storočí* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2011), pp. 101–102. The essay includes data processed on the basis of the survey conducted in 1910 (published in 1915): out of sixty lawyers and forty-one physicians, not a single one claimed to speak the Slovak language.

7 Josef Polák, 'Výtvarné umění na Slovensku', in *Slovenská čítanka* (Praha: Kabelík, 1925), p. 527. The study was brought to my attention by Ján Bakoš, 'Situácia dejepisu na Slovensku', *Analekta: Informačné a metodické materiály o výtvarnom umení* 7/1979 (1984): pp. 1–264.

8 Štefan Krémery, 'Počiatky slovenského výtvarného umenia', *Iskusstvo Slavjanj/Umenie Slovanov* 2 (1924): p. 31.

9 Ján Smrek (ed.), *Slovenská prítomnosť literárna a umelecká* (Prague: L. Mazáč, 1931).

10 Kálmán Brogyányi, *Festművészet szlovenszón* (Kassa: Kazinczy Könyvtár, 1931).

11 Brogyányi, *Festművészet szlovenszón*, p. 22. Slovak translation available in the library of the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava.

12 Vladimír Wagner, *Profil slovenského výtvarného umenia* (Turčiansky Sv. Martin: Matica slovenská, 1935).

13 Marian Váross, *Slovenské výtvarné umenie 1918–1945* (Bratislava: SVKL, 1960). The information can be verified based on various bibliographic data and excerpts on index cards, which can be found in the documentary department of the Institute of Art History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava.

14 Váross, *Slovenské výtvarné umenie*, pp. 282–284.

15 Váross, *Slovenské výtvarné umenie*, p. 281.

16 I have pointed out the hidden nationalism of the publication in my study 'Národná versus európska podoba výtvarného symbolizmu (s prihliadnutím na diela Martina Benku, Antona

- Jasuscha, Arpáda Murmanna, Jána Koniarka a ich interpretácie', in Eva Malití (ed.), *Symbolizmus v kontextoch a súvislostiach* (Bratislava: Ústav svetovej literatúry SAV, 1999), pp. 347–66.
- 17 Ladislav Saučín, *Výtvarné umenie na východnom Slovensku 1918–1938* (Košice: Východoslovenské vydavateľstvo, 1964).
- 18 Saučín, *Výtvarné umenie*, p. 42.
- 19 Tomáš Štrauss, *Anton Jasusch a zrod východoslovenskej avantgardy* (Bratislava: SFVU, 1966).
- 20 Štrauss, *Anton Jasusch*, p. 35. Štrauss cites *Slovenské pohľady* 38 (1922) here.
- 21 Ján Abelovský and Katarína Bajcurová, *Výtvarná moderna Slovenska, maliarstvo a sochárstvo 1890–1949* (Bratislava: Peter Popelka – Slovart, 1997), pp. 148–191.
- 22 Miroslav Buchwaldek et al. (eds.), *Československé dějiny v datech* (Praha: Svoboda, 1986), p. 387.
- 23 Halász, *Uhorsko a podoby slovenskej identity v dlhom 19. storočí*, pp. 101–102.
- 24 Karol Anton Medvecký, *Slovenský prevrat, Zv. 4* (Trnava: Spolok sv. Vojtecha, 1931), p. 300. According to: Dušan Kováč, 'Spoločensko-politická situácia', in Lena Lešková and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán (eds.), *Košická moderna / Košice Modernism. Umenie Košíc v dvadsiatych rokoch 20. storočia / Košice Art in the 1920s* (Košice: Východoslovenská galéria, 2010), p. 34.
- 25 Magda Veselská, *Muž, ktorý si nedal pokoj/Príbeh Josefa Poláka (1886–1945)* (Prague: Židovské muzeum, 2005), p. 17.
- 26 Veselská, *Muž, ktorý si nedal pokoj*, p. 31.
- 27 Josef Polák's hand-written notes, undated. Archive of the East Slovak Museum in Košice, fund Josef Polák, item 1921 (Rukopisné poznámky Josefa Poláka, nedatované. Archív Východoslovenského múzea v Košiciach, fond Josef Polák, zložka 1921).
- 28 Acquisitions logbook for collections 1920–1930, Historical Press section, East Slovak Museum in Košice (Prírastkový denník zbierok 1920–1930, časť Historické tlač, Východoslovenské múzeum v Košiciach).
- 29 Eugen Sabol (ed.), *Katalógy košických výstav do roku 1955. Bibliografický súpis* (Košice: Štátna vedecká knižnica, 1956), p. 9.
- 30 Tomáš Štrauss, 'Triumfujúci urbanizmus: Košice 2013, Európske (hlavné) mesto kultúry', in Štrauss, *O myslenie a nemyslenie* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2011), pp. 51–87.
- 31 Bartošová, 'Národná versus európska podoba', pp. 347–366.
- 32 Jaroslav Slavík, 'Pražská skupina Tvrdošíjn a Slovensko', in Ján Bakoš and Iva Mojžišová (eds.), *Kontexty českého a slovenského umenia* (Bratislava: Správa kultúrnych zariadení ministerstva kultúry a Kruh priateľov českej kultúry, 1988), pp. 302–24.
- 33 The school was established on 1 May 1921, and the first class took place on 3 May. Archív Východoslovenského múzea v Košiciach, fond Josef Polák, zložka 1921.
- 34 Magda Veselská, 'Dr. Josef Polák a jeho pôsobenie v Košiciach', in Lena Lešková and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán (eds.), *Košická moderna / Košice Modernism. Umenie Košíc v dvadsiatych rokoch 20. storočia / Košice Art in the 1920s*, p. 53.
- 35 Sabol, *Katalógy košických*, p. 9–10.
- 36 Abelovský and Bajcurová, *Výtvarná moderna*, p. 173.
- 37 Poster published in a catalogue to the exhibition 'Graphic Art in Košice'. Helena Němcová, *Grafika v Košiciach* (Košice: Východoslovenská galéria, 1990).
- 38 Tomáš Štrauss (who knew Eugen Krón in person), in conversation with the author.
- 39 The letter dated 15 September 1921, addressed to Eugen Krón, 'a graphic artist in Košice', shows that the artist was an 'active' member of the Syndicate of Czechoslovak Visual Artists in Prague. Archives of the Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, estate of Eugen Krón, inv. no. 22335/1985, document no. 10. (Archív Maďarskej národnej galérie, Budapešť, pozostalosť Eugena Króna, inv. č. 22335/1985, č. dokumentu 10).
- 40 Letter of the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment to Eugen Krón, Prague, 7 March 1928, reference no.: 8016/28-V. Issue: Eugen Kron, a graphic artist in Košice. Scholarship. We would like to inform Mr Eugen Kron, a graphic artist in Košice, Rákociho okr. 24, that based on his application of 15 January the Ministry provides him with financial support in a total amount of 2,000 Kč. Signed on behalf of the minister: Wirth.' Archive of the East Slovak Museum in Košice, Josef Polák fonds, item 1921 (misplaced correspondence of 1928) (List z Ministerstva školství a národní osvěty Eugenu Krónovi, Praha 7. březen 1928, č.j. 8016/28-V. 'Věc: Eugen Kron, grafik v Košicích. Studijní podpora. Panu Eugenu Krónovi, grafiku v Košicích, Rákociho okr. 24. se oznamuje, že na základě jeho žádosti z 15. ledna se mu uděluje podpora 2 000.- Kč, kterou poukazuje a žádá, aby do konce roku 1928 podal správu, jak povolenou podporu použil. Za ministra podepsán: Wirth.' Archív Východoslovenského múzea v Košiciach, fond Josef Polák, zložka 1921 (omylom založená korešpondencia z roku 1928)).
- 41 Katalin Bakos, 'Výstava Alexandra Bortnyika v Košiciach v roku 1924', in Kiss-Szemán, *Košická moderna*, p. 75–77.
- 42 Gyula Ernyey, 'Gejza Schiller (1895?–1928) – Vždy na ceste', in Lešková and Kiss-Szemán, *Košická moderna*, pp. 58–68.
- 43 Sabol, *Katalógy košických*, p. 9–10.
- 44 Károly Kókai, 'Maďarská avantgarda vo Viedni v rokoch 1920–1926 a košická moderna', in Lešková and Kiss-Szemán, *Košická moderna*, p. 21.
- 45 Štrauss, *O myslenie*, p. 58.
- 46 Kókai, 'Maďarská avantgarda', p. 21.
- 47 John Scott, 'Kulturální analýza v marxistickém humanismu', in Tim Edwards (ed.), *Kulturální teorie – klasické a současné přístupy* (Praha: Portál, 2010), p. 36.
- 48 Ignác Romsics, *Trianonská mierová zmluva* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2006), p. 84.
- 49 Petra Török, 'Nižnohrušovský Jardiň Paradise – hornozemská Arkádia Anny Lesznaiovej', in *Anna Lesznai*, exhibition catalogue, Slovenské národné múzeum – Múzeum kultúry Maďarov na Slovensku (Bratislava, 2008); Róbert Berény, 'Lesznai Anna', *Forum* 10 (1932): p. 262.
- 50 Lilla Szabó, 'Košická moderna a košická typografia medzi dvoma svetovými vojnami', in Lešková and Kiss-Szemán, *Košická moderna*, pp. 86–92.
- 51 The two symposia were collected as Lešková and Kiss-Szemán, *Košická moderna* (2010) and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán (ed.), *Košická moderna / Košice Modernism. Umenie Košíc v dvadsiatych rokoch 20. storočia / Košice Art in the 1920s. II. časť / Part II* (Košice: Východoslovenská galéria, 2012).

