

Zdeněk Rykr and the Chocolate Factory

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Vojtěch Lahoda was a prominent Czech art historian who served, between 2012 and 2017, as Director of the Institute of Art History at the Czech Academy of Sciences. This expansive study of the uncategorisable interwar Czech artist Zdeněk Rykr traces the dazzling variety of periods and styles that comprised Rykr's tragically shortened career, a career that incorporated painting experiments, design and advertising work, and even early forms of assemblage or installation. Lahoda explores the artist's connections with Cubism and Surrealism, the key inspirations provided by his travels, and his love of heraldry and symbols. Deserved attention is also given to Rykr's award-winning wrappers for the Orion chocolate company, with Lahoda forcefully revealing how such commercial assignments were far from simply a necessary evil for Rykr, but served his desire to raise the standards of public taste. This text is a condensed excerpt from Lahoda's monograph Zdeněk Rykr a továrna na čokoládu (Zdeněk Rykr and the Chocolate Factory) from 2016.¹ (JO)

Zdeněk Rykr and the Chocolate Factory

An Outsider at the Forefront

Today it is very well known, not least because of artists like the painter Zdeněk Rykr, that it is impossible to squeeze the history of modern art into a linear model. Yet many art historians concerned with modernism have been completely unable to imagine how an artist can work simultaneously with fundamentally opposed artistic codes, such as Cubism or naturalism, without preferring one over the other. As Jindřich Chaloupecký once wrote, 'the key for understanding Rykr's thinking and art was missing in this context'.²

That is why the ease with which Rykr could move from one type of artistic thinking to another was such a source of amazement. The majority of critics considered this a negative attribute, but Viktor Nikodem thought the opposite. For him, Rykr was:

the type of artist who is always discontented and always experimenting. In his tendency towards a certain sense of surprise, in the ease with which he seizes on new stimuli and which gives to his work a strongly improvisational quality, he possesses undoubtable talent, sharp perceptiveness and intelligence. This even manifests itself in the interesting introductions with which he accompanies his exhibition and in which he proves unusually capable of reflecting on artistic issues and on his own work.³

Places

Few artists are as closely bound up with topography and travelling as Zdeněk Rykr. His travels and sojourns in various corners of Europe, his attempts to extract from these experiences something for his own work, formed a set of interlocking relations and contexts that cannot always be mechanically decoded. Rykr was able to draw on some of the stimuli gained from his travels after the fact. He would come back to these stimuli, at times working with what was virtually a 'memory of a memory': an approach not so different from the strategy of the Artificialist painters, who conceived of the image as an indefinite reminiscence, something held up in opposition to the limiting and negative role of memory itself.

Several of the places and spaces important to Rykr's work can be characterised very generally (Spain, the Netherlands), while in other cases this is a matter of concrete localities (Kolín, Bechyně, Mallorca, Rhodes, Paris). In assigning importance to place, we are also giving importance to context. The emphasis on different places in this essay is interwoven with sections concerned with the development of relationships, artistic frameworks, and local contexts, and our degree of focus will vary in accordance with the specific theme.

The importance of places for Rykr is demonstrated in his article 'Paris – Berlin – Praha' from 1929. Here Rykr reflected on the names of these three cities, which symbolise cultural values in whose triangle several generations of Czechs have now lived: 'as on a chessboard with three pieces, each of these values combines in this way or that. At one moment Paris leads, at another

Berlin, and Prague is always trying to catch up'.⁴ Of course, the appeal Paris had for Rykr did not mean grafting a Czech plum onto a Gallic orange, and thus giving birth to 'Gallic Czechs'. In other words, this was not about aping another culture or any foolish idealism. Such a fixation on French culture led to the idealisation of Paris, as well as to an unjust view of Berlin and prejudice against Germans: according to this view Germans were obnoxious, Berlin was expensive, people didn't know how to dress or eat properly, there were no beautiful women there, and they were always playing at something, whether, during the time of the Fredericks, playing at being France with its court of Versailles, or, today, at being America with its skyscrapers. Though people did also travel to Berlin, they did so, apparently, in secrecy. 'To admit that you were in Berlin, this is an act of courage in Prague. To expound upon Paris, this just contributes to good moral'. Rykr concluded: 'I consider Berlin the freest city in the world, a city where everything is permitted. There one can proclaim oneself a monarchist or agitate as cheaply as possible, there one can produce kitsch or the wildest experiments...'. France lives, but Germany is alive. 'That is why each of you must choose as you consider best and move the three figures on your chessboard according to your need – that is, of course, if we do not have an urgent need for a fourth point on the chessboard, bearing a cube with the sign "Moscow". We probably will soon'.⁵

Jaromír Funke

Rykr helped overcome his feelings of isolation and exclusion not only through his passion for painting and drawing, but also through his correspondence with photographer Jaromír Funke, a former fellow pupil of the Kolín Gymnasium who was four years Rykr's senior. These erstwhile schoolmates' friendship was accompanied by the exchange of artistic works. In 1920 Rykr created several portraits of Funke, of which three variations have been preserved that use a Cubist, Expressionist, and monochrome style, with crude and rough-hewn forms that clearly indicate the impact of Bohumil Kubišta's work on Rykr. Rykr made a gift to Funke of several pictures and a range of drawings, especially those made in Chyš, and in return Funke photographed a great many of Rykr's works at the beginning of the 1920s. Basically any photograph of any of Rykr's drawings, paintings, or sculptures that were produced before 1924, and in some cases even afterwards, is the work of Funke. As regards Rykr there are of course four key photographs by Funke, in which Rykr's works—a Cubist bust, a plaster Cubist figure and some wrapping paper for Orion-Maršner—are framed within still-life images dominated by Cubist elements: the design of the paper, the sculptural figures, and the inclusion of Maurice Raynal's 1921 book *Picasso*. There was clearly some influence here from Rykr, who around this time, between 1921 and 1922, had begun an intensive exploration of Cubism, and who was well-informed about contemporary writing on modern art. In another of Funke's photographs, hitherto known only in the form of a negative, a Cubist bust of Rykr's appears along with a range of issues of the journal *Tribuna* (*Tribune*), which feature reproductions of Rykr's pictures on the cover.

At the Third Exhibition of The Stubborn Ones

And then all of a sudden, like a bolt from the blue, this mere apprentice seemingly got an offer—from whom, exactly? —to exhibit his work as a guest at the third exhibition of Tvrdošijní (The Stubborn Ones) in Prague! In 1921 this group represented the highest pinnacle of achievement in Czech modern art. It was nothing less than an artistic supergroup (comprising Josef Čapek, Vlastislav Hofman, Rudolf Kremlička, Otakar Marvánek, Václav Špála, and Jan Zrzavý), and from its first exhibition in 1918 it had achieved huge renown, something confirmed by the participation of a range of elite guests (Emil Filla, Otto Gutfreund, etc.), including guests from abroad (Otto Dix, Lasar Segall, Paul Klee).⁶ It is difficult to imagine a better opportunity for an up-and-coming artist to assert his talents within the institutional world of modern art.

The introduction to the exhibition catalogue was written by Václav Nebeský, who at this time was formulating his idea of 'diversified modernity' in regard to the Czech art of the 1920s; this was the idea that no specific stylistic formula was favoured over any other.⁷ For Nebeský, Rykr's work fitted very well into this concept that emphasised the pluralism of modernity and

a non-hierarchical approach to style. According to the catalogue Rykr exhibited two still lifes and a portrait of a woman (all paintings, most likely in oils) along with the terracotta sculpture *Head (Hlava)*.⁸

Nebeský considered Rykr's pursuit of 'various paths' in his work as absolutely legitimate, since this reflected the 'fragmentation and multiplicity of the times'. He concluded: 'Rykr is young and an autodidact. The range of experiments and explorations that he has undertaken is for him a better school than the most diligent attendance at the most enterprising Academy could ever possibly be'.⁹

One work from the third Tvrdošíjní exhibition was of key importance for our protagonist: a free copy after Poussin by Bohumil Kubišta. Kubišta's desire to find objective laws for painting led him as far as the abandonment of colour and the turn to monochrome expression, but it also led to a respect for several of the old masters. This was also mirrored in the young Rykr's work of this era, as was clearly perceived by Nebeský. A posthumous exhibition of Kubišta's work in 1918, organised by Jan Zrzavý, was nothing less than a revelation for Rykr.

According to Jaromír Pečírka, out of the eight separate exhibitions of Rykr's work between 1920 and 1941, the most important for Rykr himself was his participation in the Third Exhibition of The Stubborn Ones.

Cubism

Rykr's article 'On Today' first appeared in the company of an article by Karel Teige called 'Cubism, Orphism, Purism and Neo-Cubism in Paris Today', which posed the question whether Cubism was living or dead.¹⁰ While Teige believed that Cubism was actually dying, he was also convinced that all the new art that was now coming into being must first pass through the experience of Cubism. At the same time, he stressed the presence of Cubism in sculpture, in the work of artists like Alexander Archipenko, Jacques Lipschitz, and Henri Laurens, who were able, through the influence of Cubism, to give relatively small sculptures a monumental architectural force. If we recall Rykr's remarkable, unpreserved Cubist plaster sculptures of figures, sadly since destroyed, then we must recognise Rykr's immense sympathy for the opinions proclaimed by Teige, namely that Cubism is important for sculpture because of its emphasis on architectural and constructive qualities. At the same time these sculptural experiments reveal themselves as exceptional in the context of Czech art. Had they survived, it would be difficult to find any companions for them. Rykr thus entered the field of sculpture as something of an innocent, unmarked by others' influence, but he showed an immense gift for creating works that were supremely contemporary and individual.

The journey from the absolute to the concrete is a journey from the abstracted signs of reality to reality itself and its 'beating pulse'. This is why Rykr's Cubist paintings from 1922, of which practically nothing has been preserved (the entire extensive series is known only from black and white photographs), strove to combine the attempt to reduce reality to the plane of the painting, 'tying it down' and reconstituting it as blocks of colour, with lively brushwork and in many cases even a naturalistic presentation of the subject. Frequently the subject is rendered quite realistically, and is simply framed within a 'facet': a distant evocation of Cubism.

In these pictures Rykr expressed the vital force that is hidden in objects, in things, but which is also apparent in his figural variations of a girl, shown here and there with a guitar. The path of Cubism after the First World War was for Rykr a path from 'condensed forms', such as Cubism had already attained, towards reality. Rykr here considered Cubism as, on the one hand, a living style of the present, but on the other hand he indicated that its *a priori* artistic laws must return to reality (to life) and to its 'flow', something that probably cannot be captured with a single style. Rykr understood Cubism very broadly as a tendency marked by rules and laws, and at the same time as a tendency that enters into contact with reality. He grasped it simultaneously as the style that most adequately expressed the dynamic of a new way of life, which 'has no use for half-heartedness, no use for detours, but wants to go in a straight line, like an arrow'.

This postulate is most strongly felt in Rykr's 1921 article 'Archipenko's "Women"' from the weekly journal *Den (Day)*.¹¹ Rykr referred to several reproductions of the work of sculptor Alexander Archipenko in *Kunstblatt (Art Paper)*, which for Rykr were 'charming and attractive and at the same time have a crystalline cleanness of form'. His attempt to define the 'new style' is a little ponderous: this style is founded, according to Rykr, on the very general polarity of a synthesis of feeling and formal will: 'Archipenko achieves a synthesis of feeling and the formal will of the new style. This is not merely an exploration of architectural issues of space. This is also the successful embodiment of the refined experience of the modern human being. Archipenko's sculptures are in no way a Cubist-Expressionist compromise. They have passed through the forge of formal composition and decomposition, fanned with the air of content. They are not so far off that style that we call Classicism'.¹²

It is evident that Rykr sought in the new style not only a formal will but also content, story, the experience of life, a sense of vital energy. He compared here a woman's charm as depicted by the Impressionists, such as Renoir or Aristide Maillol, with Archipenko's work. In contrast to Renoir or Maillol's female figures, Archipenko's women are 'sharp like a knife and cold like ice'. He continued: 'and if I ask in what way they entice you towards them, you will reply that it is precisely through this mysterious and yet also natural magic of mechanised life that they speak to you, in the language of something that is not simply observed or held up to the senses for admiration. This is not the seductive, loving or childbearing woman. This is not really woman at all. This is a pleasantly created toy, evoking, through the elegance of its lines, an automobile from last season or the locomotive of an American express train'.¹³

We are certainly reminded here of the Devětsil anthology *Život (Life)*, in which Karel Teige presented the entire iconography of a new poetics, a poetics in which the machine, the ocean liner, and the automobile all had their place.

Josef Čapek, writing in 1924, considered Rykr's work close to Devětsil.¹⁴ Yet Rykr remained at odds with Teige in regard to the emotional experience evoked by the idea of woman. Hence the concept of 'charm' appeared in the text just cited, a fairly alien term to avant-gardist rhetoric. Modern technique, for Rykr, was something that is supposed to make manifest the dynamics of reality, but that should in no way exclude figurative and narrative schemes.

Rykr's attitude towards Cubism as the basis of the new style was quite evident throughout the eighth issue of the journal *Veraikon (Veil of Veronica)*, from 1922, whose pictorial component 'was for the most part prepared by "Devětsil"', as an editor's note has it.

Cubism's 'new pictoriality', the term that Josef Čapek applied to recent Czech Cubist paintings, stands in absolute opposition to the Cubo-Expressionism of Rykr's paintings from early 1920. He also of course attempted painting in the backlit style of analytical Cubism, as is shown by a still life from an earlier collection of Funke's.

The essential thing of course was that Rykr, between 1920 and 1922, saw Cubism as a very broad tendency, one that in its very breadth was capable of being the basis of the 'new style'. He was able to accommodate the melancholy conception of expressive Cubism, based on the example of Bohumil Kubišta, but only a little time later he could paint sensuously-liberated still lifes that fused Cubism with the lushness of Henri Matisse, paintings that also remarkably combined Cubist-style faceting and compositional methods with a vital Realism, even in certain places a naturalism, and with the decorative principle that he had adopted so well in designing wrappers for the company Orion Maršner.

Realisms

Jiří Urban divided the phases of Rykr's work from 1923 to 1928 as follows: the Realist and neo-Classical period (1921 to 1922), the period of planar stylisation (1922), the second Realist period (1923 to 1924), the imaginary Realism of the 'Spanish' period (1925 to 1926), the raw Realism of the 'Segonzacian' period, after the French painter Dunoyer de Segonzac (1927), and Purism (1928).¹⁵ These helpful 'pigeonholes' were later supplemented by Marcel Fišer, in the catalogue for a 2000 exhibition, with a period of 'robust figuration' in 1924 and with the 'high society'

Realism of 1927.¹⁶ Some pictures are naturalistic, others are neo-Classical, while elsewhere Rykr presented landscapes and figures as a kind of ephemeral and fragile matter, in a form of transcendental Realism (Fig. 5.1). The various forms of Realism with which Rykr experimented did not, for the most part, meet with understanding from critics. Jindřich Chalupický, in the catalogue for an exhibition in Liberec in 1965, did not include Rykr's Realist, post-Cubist paintings among the work from 1923 to 1927. Elsewhere he referred to these as 'futile realism'.¹⁷ In the catalogue itself he wrote with a certain scorn about 'descriptive realism'.¹⁸ Furthermore, in the introduction to a catalogue for an exhibition of Rykr's work at the Topič Salon in 1932, Chalupický wrote that this was only the second exhibition, the second year of Rykr's work 'that should be counted, as everything produced before this—his distinctive version of Cubism, his powerful Spanish motifs, his many newspaper illustrations, and all the rest—must be considered as preparation, as learning, as useful wanderings and mistakes'.¹⁹ In other words, all that is essential in Rykr's work only occurred, according to Chalupický, after 1930, while everything before this was training and preparation. In this way Chalupický set an unmistakeable emphasis on Rykr's avant-garde and experimental tendencies, which began to develop most markedly in the mid-1930s.



Fig. 5.1. Zdeněk Rykr, *River Bank (Landscape with Bridge) (Nábřeží (Krajina s mostem))*, 1928). Oil on canvas. Photograph: Zdeněk Matyáško. Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague. © 2018 Zdeněk Matyáško.

In reality, throughout the 1920s Rykr presented a whole range of approaches towards Realism. Rykr's branching into watercolour painting was facilitated by his experience of drawing illustrations for news reports, something he had been doing, de facto, since his student days in Kolín. He began to use watercolours professionally when he began working professionally on newspapers in 1924. For Rykr, drawing was something fundamental, the central point in the act of painting, an activity virtually akin to breathing; thus, a drawing for Rykr was not merely a preparatory study. On the contrary, it was the definitive record of a moment, something more essential than the worked-on and worked-over painted image. The misunderstanding of Rykr's paintings by a number of his critics, who attacked his pictures for being insufficiently developed as paintings and thus for being 'mere' drawings, was simply the result of this conception of drawing.

Purism

After the sudden surge of sensuality and vitalism there came—as was common with Rykr—a sharp reaction and the need for a sudden and radical change. Or, alternatively, in parallel with his works of vitalist Realism Rykr painted pictures that were the absolute opposite: cool, hygienically clean, simple, clear. What was said in Funke's family about Rykr was probably actually the case: he was supposedly always so discontented with his own perfection, his capacity to master a new artistic direction or a specific manner of painting, that he always—and probably with a certain fear and anxiety about getting stuck in such a state and the ensuing threat of perfectionism—quickly abandoned the artistic solution he had attained and aimed at a different one, founded on new obstacles. This is most probably why, in 1928 and particularly 1929, a 'hygienic' cleansing of his painting occurred. Rykr explained this situation in his article 'The Contemporary Situation of Painting', written for the journal *Přítomnost* (*The Present*) in 1929.²⁰

He states that through all of contemporary life there runs a fundamental orientation towards hygiene, towards a purification that it is possible to capture both verbally and pictorially. The painter himself welcomes this tendency; his only problem is that it has not yet manifested itself in painting. Rykr wrote this article in the same year he created a series of 'hygienic', puristic pictures, such as *Staircase* (*Schodiště*, 1928), or other pictures that we know today only from black and white photographs, like *Washbasin* (*Umyvadlo*) and *Small Table* (*Stolek*). The washbasin, suggestive in black and white reproduction, is even an instrument of the cleansing about which Rykr wrote.

According to Rykr, the first painter who had sought to achieve such 'hygiene' in painting was Cézanne, who 'pulled the picture apart and tried to find its modern mechanics'. 'Abstract invention' and 'veracious form', according to Rykr, here reached a point of equilibrium. In addition there was Rykr's own attempt, as a painter, to balance these elements. He saw the then-current state of visual art in terms of an opposition between a group of 'sealed off' artists, among whom he ranked the 'blind' followers of Picasso, and a group of 'Realists', with their 'imperial and biedermeieresque isms'. Rykr did not see too much hope in either one of these groups; rather he found it, again, in 'old father Cézanne'. This emphasis on Cézanne as a kind of forefather of modern art connects Rykr to Bohumil Kubišta and his own interest in Cézanne, which culminated in a text about the painter from 1910.

The Hygiene of Public Space

Rykr's singularity consists in the way he linked his efforts as an advertising artist and graphic designer to one of the most dynamically-developing firms in Czechoslovakia, the chocolate company Maršner-Orion. Rykr's collaboration with this firm, later just called Orion, can be grasped as a revision of the position of the modernist artist, who is now willing and even able to work for a capitalist enterprise and to deliberately accentuate the 'market' value of his artistic creations, which are placed in the service of consumerism. The motives here were not only financial, although we should not have any illusion that finances were of no consideration, but were also connected with taste. For Rykr it was a matter of the hygiene of public space. He understood the public environment as a space to which aesthetics and taste should be applied, and he responded with acute, almost physical pain to the assaults of kitsch and bad taste that he encountered at every step. His own engagement with advertising should be grasped as a response to the crisis of public taste, as an attempt to change this situation.

How did it happen that an expanding firm reached out, from among tens and maybe hundreds of possible choices, to a young, untrained and unknown artist? The only realised works that Rykr would have had to show for himself in 1921—the year when he signed his first known contract with Orion-Maršner—were his posters and advertisements for the Student Youth Club in Kolín, for S.A. Feldmann shoes, and for the Kolín oil refinery. Yet, when reading the Orion firm's history online, we learn that the director of the company had to persuade Rykr several times, and even 'recruited' him, to put it in football jargon. How is it possible that this important Czechoslovak firm could have pursued the unknown youth so insistently? Did Orion have a recommendation

from somebody? And so, a young artist of twenty-one years of age, untrained academically and then beginning his university studies in the history of art and archaeology in Prague, got an attractive offer to collaborate with an expanding chocolate factory. From this moment, that is from his first contract in 1921, he determined the visual aspect of the sweets, bonbons, and chocolate produced by Orion-Maršner, later Orion, for the next twenty years. This kind of 'life' contract between an artist and a commercial firm is something we only find rarely even at an international level. When the firm won awards, as it did at world exhibitions in Barcelona in 1929, Brussels in 1935, and Paris in 1937, these successes were connected above all with the name of Rykr.

In 1927 Rykr represented Czechoslovakia at an international exhibition of posters in Antwerp (running from 10 to 23 December), where, alongside the firms for which posters had been created, prominent artist-designers were also featured. Orion, with its bonbons and chocolate, thus found itself in the company of Ladislav Sutnar, Josef Čapek, Václav Špála, and Slavoboj Tusar.²¹

In 1935 and 1936 Rykr collaborated with the Baťa shoe company. In 1936 this company gave out three artistic awards: one hundred thousand koruna for visual art, twenty thousand koruna for a novel, and ten thousand koruna for poetry. 'The detailed undertaking of Baťa's decision, which in its amount exceeds all financial rewards previously given to the arts, was entrusted to the acad. painter Zdeněk Rykr, who is the artistic advisor for the Baťa plants'.²² R. Marek wrote that 'in 1935 the Baťa firm requested Rykr's services. In the course of his activity for this firm Rykr succeeded in getting the chief of one plant to found an art gallery in Zlín, to which end Baťa devoted a payment of 100, 000 koruna as a starting sum'.²³

Rykr felt that advertisements and applied art could become part of the world of art, and that they can even be a source and a stimulus for 'non-commercial' creation. Rykr's abstract works from 1933 and his assemblages make a lot more sense when seen in the light of his experience as a creator of advertisements.

Rykr's experience of creating advertisements and as editor of the advertising magazine *Typ* (*Type*), where he concerned himself with the theory of how to arrange shop window displays, led the painter to what we today call installation art. A number of his radical, Surrealism-tinged objects are unthinkable without his experience of interior decoration or even without his acquaintance with kitsch. The essential thing, of course, is that Rykr did not see his advertising activities as something secondary or incidental, but as part of his artistic 'work'. This was best expressed by Rykr's wife Milada Součková: 'why cannot a writer of excellent sermons be a priest, or a painter a designer of functional art!? But a secondary occupation during the day and "raving in bed" at night? One or the other, but both, we don't like the idea of artists doing this'.²⁴

Art on Chocolate Wrappers

Rykr's chocolate wrappers can be divided into a number of categories, which, surprisingly, correspond very closely to those of his independent work (Fig. 5.2). Alongside the fascination



Fig. 5.2. Zdeněk Rykr, series of five wrappers for Orion Chocolate (1928–1939). Print, paper. Photograph: Zdeněk Matyáško. Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague. © 2018 Zdeněk Matyáško.

with the Orient and with Orientalisms evident in his chocolate wrappers (such as the one for the Kofila bar), with their motifs of mosques and palm trees, and the Spanish aesthetic of sun and subtropical fruits seen in his Citron Chocolat design, a number of his wrappers fall within the decorative, ornate aesthetic of art deco through their use of wallpaper-like decorative and abstract patterns (the covers for the chocolate products EOS (1923), Oranta, ORMA, ORIMA (1927), and others). Besides these we can also observe a number of clean, Constructivist-style wrappers, corresponding to a Functionalist aesthetic of utility (Mentol Forte Orion). Neither did Rykr avoid billowing, organic abstraction, with his abstract paintings from 1933 finding their parallel in his wrapper for Narcis chocolate, or gestural abstraction, with which he experimented in both his independent work and his wrapper designs (the wrapper for Orion Bonbons). As in his paintings, Rykr used historical motifs like cartouches, emblems, and coats of arms in designs from the Museum of Decorative Arts. He drew on this weakness for heraldry in his chocolate wrappers too.

Rykr unquestionably shared in the Orion company's wider advertising strategy, whether this meant the architectural attraction promoting Orion at the world exhibition in Brussels in 1935, the arrangement of expositions for Orion at other exhibitions, or the design of several shop window displays (particularly on Prague's Národní třída).

By 1932 Rykr's uncommon attainments here were noted by Jindřich Chalupecký, who otherwise never engaged with the applied arts. He stated that Rykr's 'abstract style was changing, losing its simple and austere geometric quality and acquiring something organic'.²⁵ Chalupecký particularly valued the modern, contemporary quality of Rykr's approach and ornamental style. The very name of Chalupecký's article, 'Art on Chocolate Wrappers', shows that he saw Rykr's attainments as something more than industrial graphic work.

When Rykr was contacted by the editors of avant-garde journal *The Booster* in 1937, on the occasion of an exhibition with the French Salon des Surindépendants, it was most definitely he who facilitated the appearance of an advert for Orion in the journal's winter issue of 1937 to 1938 (December to January), which featured contributions from, among others, Henry Miller and William Saroyan, and was provocatively named 'Air-Conditioned Womb Number'.²⁶

The chocolate factory Orion became, for Rykr, not only a lasting source of his livelihood as a commercial designer of wrappers, but also the producer of a special substance, charged with an internal and powerfully sensuous significance. This was practically a fetishistic substance, one that contained within itself all the mystery of childhood.²⁷

The Czechoslovak Pavilion at the Paris World Exhibition of 1937

'Two posters, commissioned from Rykr by the Ministry of Trade, are hung up in all the train stations, in the hallways of the Metro underground system and on street corners, and they are very pleasing to look at'.²⁸ This account informs us that, at the time of the opening of Czechoslovakia's pavilion at the Paris World Exhibition of 1937, Rykr penetrated, by way of his posters, not only into the realm of the pavilion but also into the public space of Paris. The Czechoslovak pavilion for the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, held in Paris in 1937, was designed by Jaromír Krejcar, Zdeněk Kejř, Ladislav Sutnar, and Bohumil Soumar. The pavilion contrasted sharply with the stone pavilions of Germany and the Soviet Union on the opposite bank of the river. The four-floor framework of the main building, which had a square layout, was supported by four massive columns. There was a tower with an observation platform, which was accessible via a spiral staircase and protected by a metal canopy.

On 22 May 1937 an article appeared in the Prague journal *Telegraf* (*Telegraph*) reporting on Rykr's promotional decorations for the pavilion.²⁹ This is actually the only source that gives us any idea of what Rykr created for Paris. The article's subheading is very laudatory: 'The painter Rykr is completing an interesting display for the Paris exhibition. An original idea, which commands attention. Tasteful promotion deserves praise'. Besides pictures devoted to Czechoslovakia's spas, which measured 2.5 metres high and, together, eighteen metres wide, Rykr also worked on a project known as the 'Alphabet of Czechoslovakia' (*Abeceda československá*), a 'telegraphic description' of the state. 'On a concrete wall, five metres long and three metres high, will be placed painted

images of many of the charming corners of our land'. Rykr's work for the Czechoslovak pavilion in Paris was part of a large-scale campaign by the Ministry of Trade to promote Czechoslovakia. As part of this campaign, at the end of May 1937 the Ministry of Trade opened an information office to support the tourist industry in the premises of the former church of U Hybernů, opposite the Municipal House (Obecní dům). On the occasion of the opening of the office, some 'large colour photomontages' by Rykr were exhibited: 'these are 12 large and very colourful canvases of the [Czechoslovak] spas from the [Czechoslovak] pavilion in Paris, along with the Czechoslovak Alphabet, a symbolic expression of the unity of the Little Entente and two large canvases depicting the Tatras and the Krkonoše. Because of their unified and original conception and their technical means the paintings received considerable attention'.³⁰

The Exhibition at the Rubešova Gallery, 1933

Rykr aroused a wave of disapproval and mockery with his exhibition at the Rubeš Gallery in 1933, where he exhibited pictures tending towards abstraction (*Chestnuts (Kaštany)* and *February Sun Over a Small Town (Únorové slunce nad malým městem)*). In these paintings Rykr reached the borders of abstraction, simplified signs to the limits of legibility, and created pictures with maximally simplified organic and natural forms. In their commonly recurring forms, as well as in their titles, these pictures refer back to reality, albeit to a reality grasped in very broad terms: the reality of nature and the cosmos.

What particularly inflamed several reviewers were the small figures or sculptures made from paper, wood, and fired clay (as with *Poor Old Woman (Chudá babka)*). To these Rykr added seven painted terracotta relief works whose subjects were the settings of Mallorca and Bechyně. Of course, thanks to this very criticism we can get at least a broad idea of what these various experimental works, objects, and installations looked like. According to F.X. Harlas, Rykr presented 'oil paintings, gouaches, terracotta and sculptures made of paper, clay and wood'.³¹ The sculptures specifically are now known only from photographs; they were most likely destroyed and not preserved. The critics all concurred that the desire to *épater les bourgeois* had reached its peak in these works by Rykr. One review argued that the works presented here were nothing new, and that this had been seen before at the exhibition *Poesie 32*. Rykr's sculptures were described thus: 'two hanging pieces of paper, on one of which is sketched an Egyptian eye, with a bit of cellophane added—and this is a *Poor Old Woman*. Or, again, some painted Easter eggs and balls stuck to the leg of a commonplace wooden chair, and with a coquettishly wavy piece of wire, this becomes a *Girl in Summer Clothes (Wood)*. Wood is really what this is'. In summary, 'this is not experimenting, this is toy-making'.³² Another critic described the exhibition as 'a path down a blind alley'.³³

Away (Pryč, 1934)

Such was the name of Rykr's solo exhibition from 1934. For Jindřich Chaloupecký this was an important display of Surrealist art, even if Rykr himself was never an orthodox Surrealist and to a certain extent rejected the movement as mere 'literature'. At this exhibition he presented a number of works that to this day have few equivalents in Czech art: objects, assemblages, and installations.

Around 1933, Rykr created a series of spatial, relief, and planar object-assemblages. Only photographs have been preserved of these radical works, which were composed of ordinary objects and rubbish. As he put it himself, Rykr was interested in that point when 'wood stops being a stick and a broken sculpture stops being junk and when these things start to live their own strange life—one in the horror and pain of solitude, the other in the bizarreness and romance of the emotions'. Jindřich Chaloupecký later expressed his thoughts about these objects: 'in their time they were, I think, without equivalent...'.³⁴

When, in 1934, Rykr exhibited these radical assemblages and objects, he named the whole exhibition *Away*. This could not only mean going away from one place to another, something evoked by a picture of a train station waiting room with a view out onto the tracks (*Away (Pryč)*, 1934), but also moving 'away' from painting, from the traditional method of the painted image,

something demonstrated in the assemblage *Suitcase* (*Kufř*, 1934), which was ridiculed by critics at the time. It is as though the composition of the exhibition as a whole had some kind of message: Symbolist-Realist, but also imaginative, pictures like *Diabolo*, *The Big Park* (*Veliký park*) and *Away* were combined with Surrealist compositions (*In Brand New Houses* (*V docela nových domech*)) and with the objects and assemblages already mentioned.

But Rykr's 'away' has another level of meaning, indicated by Jindřich Chalupecký in the text of the exhibition's own catalogue. This exhibition aimed to move away from conventions, from the criteria of painting, from rules, from 'progressive, artistic and cultural ideals', from 'the foolish aspirations binding the days of our existence with the dream of success and security'.³⁵ The assemblage *Glory* (*Sláva*, 1934), which shows a bone on a string suspended from a piece of wood as though from a gallows, confirms Rykr's subversive ideal of 'glory'. The same applies to the picture *In Brand New Houses*, in which a cage with fighting cocks appears (a metaphor for the art world and its battles?) along with some childish graffiti on the side of a wall, which refers creativity back to its primary sources. The motif of the melancholy of childhood is also represented in the picture *The Big Park*, where a child chases a hoop in an artificial castle garden: a melancholic picture par excellence.

Did Rykr's *Away* exhibition mark a path away from an academic artistic education (which in the end the painter did not himself attain), away from the stereotyped conventions of representation, towards the roots of creativity, towards primary forces, which are formed in the world of childhood and are full of pure, primal ideas? Such a direction would have been supported by Rykr's attempts to approximate the 'artless' drawing style of children in his work from 1933 to 1936.

***Orient*, 1935**

In the mid-1930s, Rykr was working simultaneously in several different modes: one of these was organic and decorative abstraction, which in several cases comes close to the work of Joan Miró, and elsewhere to André Masson. Rykr himself saw his work as somewhere between Miró and Paul Klee; Josef Čapek added to these the name of Picasso.³⁶

At his exhibition at the Topič Salon at the turn of 1935 to 1936, the works exhibited were made of 'none other than rubbish, paper, string,

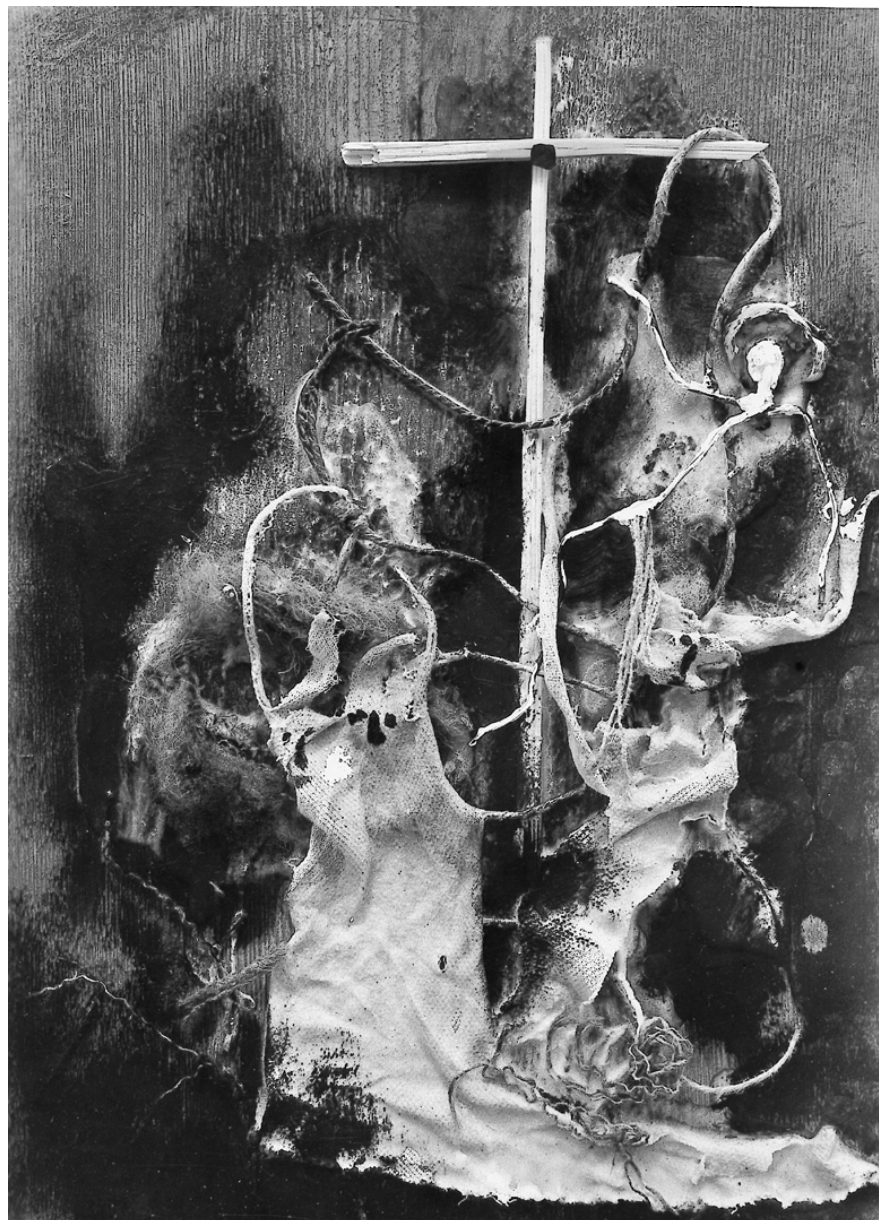


Fig. 5.3. Zdeněk Rykr, from the *Fourteen Stations* (*Čtrnáct zastavení*) cycle (1935). Mixed media. Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague.

sticks, rags, wire and pins', and were dubbed by critics as 'decorative puzzles'. Here he presented his cycles *Orient* and *From Greece* (*Z Řecká*), but also 'preliminary sketches for *The Way of the Cross* (*Křížová cesta*) and *Figures of Saints* (*Postavy svatých*)' (Fig. 5.3).

In the spring of 1935, Rykr and Milada Součková undertook a short—but, for Rykr's artistic development, highly significant—trip to the island of Rhodes. Both on the journey there and on the way back, the married couple spent time in Athens. This trip was the basis for the glass-box assemblages of the *Orient* cycle and the wood-mounted assemblages of *From Greece*.³⁷ The latter cycle has not been preserved, yet the more delicate glass boxes of the *Orient* assemblages have. These glass boxes were not too large in size, and into them Rykr inserted pieces of paper, wool, pebbles, and sticks, having already painted onto these objects. These assemblages comprised poetic spaces representing memories of Rykr's stay on Rhodes. This was a kind of emotional 'archaeology' of memory, expressed here through matter (though *things*, such as stone, wool, or string) and through gouache work. Rhodes is itself a place of 'memories of the past', crisscrossed by the most diverse currents, movements and cultures: Islam, Byzantium, Christianity. Rykr's assemblages are a poetically-expressed vision of the Orient and of Greece, and these poetic visions should be seen to have the same validity as the historicist memory.

The Way of the Cross

'Through the spectral quality of its colouring and its romantic tangle of suggested but not fully expressed forms, this *Way of the Cross* has a colourist quality and effect'.³⁸ *The Way of the Cross* was created out of laminated and dyed rags, sealing wax, gum arabic, metal strips, wires, mirrors, pins, and it was said to have suggested 'a vaguely folkish, baroque dressed wax sculpture'.³⁹ Critics saw these objects as 'Dada-style "jokesterish" conglutinations' and called them 'freakish toys'⁴⁰ or "'still lifes" made of rubbish'.⁴¹

The Countryside

In 1936 and 1937, Rykr created a series of drawings, paintings, assemblages, collages on glass, and paintings on glass that all shared the motif of a strangely and, in places, brutally stylised countryside. As is shown by a number of drawings at the National Gallery in Prague (Národní galerie v Praze), the inspiration for this was one of Rykr's summer stays in Bechyně, most likely in 1937. The question is whether Rykr stayed at this time in Bechyně itself, or on the farm that he drew several times, or in Koloděje nad Lužnicí, to which he also took drives with Milada Součková. Rykr moved from drawings of sweet-looking cows to a radical and cruel manner of expression, by means of which his countryside idyll is turned into a strange horror story, into mythic pagan ritual or a whirl of weird masks, as though presenting some rural carnival parade. Country scenes turn into a nightmare filled with monstrous, bestial animals and with agricultural tools that are brought to life and turn dangerous.

In his pictures of cities and villages the painter created a kind of living organism composed of things, objects, and figures, which are shown in a state of unceasing transformation, turning wild and dangerous, and which somehow seem to be permanently deformed from inside. These metamorphoses into new matter, while grotesque, are always portrayed in dark, brownish, olive-green, and earthy hues, or even, to use the name of an early picture painted in Chyš in 1920, in 'muddy' hues. The houses in these paintings seem to be alive, set in motion by an internal force, as with the houses of the fantastic city of Pearl in Alfred Kubín's novel *The Other Side* (*Die andere Seite*, 1909). They also resemble the houses designed by Hans Poelzig for Paul Wegener and Carl Boese's film *The Golem* (1920).

These pictures dominated Rykr's retrospective at the Arts Union (Krasoumná jednota) in 1937, his last solo exhibition during his lifetime. There he exhibited pictures from 1936 (*Cows* (*Krávy*), two pictures called *Countryside* (*Venkov*) and *Village* (*Vesnice*), and also *Village Square* (*Náves*), *Country Scene* (*Venkovská scéna*), *Forge* (*Kovárna*) and *Farmland* (*Oranice*)) and from 1937 (*Farm Tools* (*Polní nářadí*), *Lucie, Dog and Beggar* (*Pes a žebrák*), and *Countryside* (*Venkov*)). Again, this was a weird vision of the countryside: the cows in these pictures are deranged, insane-looking

monsters and the rural buildings resemble something between ruins and collapsing stage sets; bogeyman figures wander among these buildings together with animated fences, farming tools, logs, and apparitions from another world, while a coachman rides a bizarre waggon through a village, all leading us to wonder which of these beings is the most spectral and ghostly. The basic colour tone of these pictures is a gloomy brown ochre, with shades of mouldy green. These are not cosy villages, but rather the refuge of a bizarre 'sludge'. But within this very sludge, in the mud of one's native soil, in a world of pagan rituals and phantoms, there is a chance of safeguarding one's 'native language', as Milada Součková revealed in her 1937 poetry collection *Kalady or the Refuge of Speech* (*Kalady aneb útočiště řeči*).

Elegies and Knights

In Spain Rykr had evidently been impressed by the importance of the aristocratic tradition and the cult of chivalry, something that Cervantes had subjected to criticism through the sad figure of the knight Don Quixote. 'The Spaniard is still like the Knight who surveys the relics of his castle, the long lines of his ancestors...'.⁴² Rykr even wrote about the 'sacred conservatism' of these traditions, something that would have suited his orientation towards history at the end of the 1930s.

Looking at the pictures of Rykr's 1938–1939 *Elegies* (*Elegie*) cycle, we enter a world of emblematic images, of fictitious funeral portraits, a world of knights and veiled women, of Renaissance-era pyramidal tombs, weeping women, abandoned pillars, and female mourners with the head of a Roman genius.

The 'elegiac tradition' presents a standalone chapter in Rykr's work. I refer here to a key study of this motif, Erwin Panofsky's 'Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition'.⁴³ Rykr's weeping and melancholy women have clear resonances of the Imperial and neo-Classical tombs of the nineteenth century, which Rykr, as an historian of art, certainly knew well.

From 1937 onwards, the modernist, stylised figure of a knight appears ever more frequently in Rykr's paintings and drawings. His painting *The Knight, the Woman and Death* (*Rytíř, žena a smrt*, 1938) was a throwback to the neo-Baroque and an evocation of chivalric historicism.

In his elegy paintings Rykr demonstrated outstanding erudition with his historicist motifs of coats of arms, emblems, and signs, which were often derived from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. This knowledge had possibly been gained from observing the architecture of Prague and South Bohemia, especially Bechyně. Součková was also attracted to Czech Baroque, and later, in exile in the USA, would devote a whole book to it.

In a series of drawings produced after the Munich Agreement in 1938, Rykr seems to be appealing to Saint Václav, patron of the Czech nation. According to legend, the armed knights of 'Saint Václav's army' lie dormant in Blaník Mountain, awaiting the day when their help will be needed and Saint Václav will call them to battle.⁴⁴ Saint Václav himself appears in several of Rykr's drawings and compositions from 1938.

I have written elsewhere about the depressive character of Rykr's elegies and their melancholic relationship with modern (and avant-garde) art, tinged as this character is with a sense of sadness and possibly even hopelessness about solving the rebus of modern painting (connected with this is the question as to which medium is most suited to representing the modern world: hence Rykr's experiments with assemblages and three dimensional objects).⁴⁵

Tombstones

A series of Rykr's works featuring the motif of mourning women and stylised tombstones were inspired by the neo-Classical tombstone, which Rykr might well have seen in Prague, for instance at the Malá Strana cemetery, as well as at the Olšany cemeteries, which Milada Součková often mentioned in her prose writings. Several of these paintings were even imitations of the marble tombstone plaque and feature a picture of a mourning woman within the picture (*The Weeping Muse* (*Plačící múza*, 1939)). Another picture used rapid brush strokes to achieve the illusion of marble and recalls Rykr's abstract paintings from the early 1930s. Again this involves a picture within the picture, this time containing the image of a mourning woman with a veil floating over

a landscape, from which protrude a sawn tree stump, an ancient temple, and a grotto or something that suggests a pagan burial ground (*Elegy (Elegie, 1939)*).

The motif of pyramid-shaped headstones can be observed in several works of the *Elegies* cycle. These refer to a style of tombstone from the Renaissance, such as Bartholomeus Spranger featured in his painting *Allegory of the Triumph of Fidelity Over Fate (Allegory on the Fate of the Sculptor Hans Mont)* from 1607.

Rykr also included mourning women in his *Elegies* paintings. Sometimes the flying mourning women in these compositions also take the role of muses. These women are a free variation on the figure of the *pleureuse* or professional mourner, such a frequent presence at gravesides from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ The bizarre spaces featuring temples, ruined columns or walls with chequered flooring are most likely references to Masonic symbolisms, intended to evoke places of devotion and ritual. Of course, these are only suggestions of such 'secret' places and their unknown rituals. One suspects that Rykr had a deep knowledge of the symbolism of mourning and elegies, including the Masonic symbolism, given that he had studied the history of art and had opportunities to acquaint himself with many figurative antecedents in the iconography of melancholy. This highly informed painter was thus able to work, in a very free manner, with a whole range of complicated symbols, symbols that he of course put to his own uses and made his own, transforming them and giving them a contemporary relevance. Their original meaning (such as their Masonic significance) gives way to the symbolic depiction of the threat to art and the artist, to the idea of the sacred or secret place as a kind of temple for the veneration of the artist.



Fig. 5.4.
Zdeněk Rykr,
*The Speaking
Zone (Mluvící
pásmo, 1939)*.
Print, cardboard.
Photograph:
Zdeněk Matyáško.
Institute of Art
History, Czech
Academy of
Sciences / Museum
of Czech Literature,
Prague. © 2018
Zdeněk Matyáško.

The Speaking Zone

In 1939, Rykr and Součková published a new volume of Součková's poetry, *The Speaking Zone* (*Mluvící pásma*), in a large format this time and with graphic design work by Rykr, who again illustrated it with his colour lithographs (Fig. 5.4). This now-rare publication, printed in 100 numbered copies, is one of the most remarkable manifestations of typographical design in Czech art of the 1930s. Bound in a spiral ring binder cover, the volume is comparable to the journal *Telehor*, which František Kalivoda published in Brno in 1935. Contrary to the expressive and historicist signs that formed the basis of the illustrations for *Kalady*, the new volume incorporated very austere, minimalistic planar illustrations, featuring abstractly conceived signs and fields of colour. These illustrations stand in sharp contrast to Součková's verses, in which the theme of cosmic infinity and immensity is mixed with a consciousness of human mortality, emphasised with near-baroque pathos. The New York World's Fair of 1939 and the great technical and scientific successes that it presented were all seen by Součková as a propaganda trick, a screen or covering for a deceitful and dishonourable world.

Paris 1936–1938

In September 1936 Rykr participated in a vernissage for an exhibition with the Autumn Salon des Surindépendants. Součková, in a letter to Chalupecký, noted that the exhibition space, held in Paris's largest trade fair site at the Parc des expositions of the Porte de Versailles, was a huge exhibition palace, and virtually a *ratejna* (incommodious workers' living quarters), flooded with sand, and that the things exhibited were very avant-garde.⁴⁷ André Breton was said to have attended the exhibition.

At some point in the first half of 1937 Rykr arranged to participate in an exhibition at the Galerie L'Équipe, on Boulevard Montparnasse. This exhibition opened on 28 May 1937 and ran until 11 July 1938. Rykr exhibited here together with Maurice Estève, Fedor Loevenstein, Alfred Pellán, and Géza Szóbel. The catalogue featured a reproduction of *The Knight, the Woman and Death* (1938), one of his greatest works.

Estève was interested in Surrealism, in Giorgio di Chirico, but also in theatre and film. In 1937 he helped Robert and Sonia Delaunay with decorating the Pavilion of Aviation and Railways at the International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris. While Estève's work of the 1950s and that mentioned above is generally well-known, his work prior to 1937 is not, and yet it does not lag behind Rykr's work in its mutability. Likewise, in Estève's work we do not find one single dominant tendency: Purism is crossed with brutal deformations in a spirit of Art Brut. Alfred Pellán was one of the most important Quebec painters. In 1926 he went to study in Paris. Marked by its extravagant colours and forms, Pellán's work in some ways also recalled Art Brut. Fedor Loevenstein was of Czech-Jewish origins, born in Munich, and, just like Rykr and other painters at the L'Équipe, he painted simultaneously in figurative and abstract styles.⁴⁸ According to Součková he was Rykr's main point of contact.⁴⁹ Géza Szóbel was originally from Hungary, but spent more time in Paris than in Budapest.

In June 1937 Rykr was in Paris at the World Exhibition, involved both in the installation for Orion and the Czechoslovak pavilion's tourism section.

Involvement with the Surindépendants led Rykr to the magazine *The Booster*, which had been published since 1937 by the American Country Club of France, based in Paris. The editorship's address was 18 Villa Seurat, where Henry Miller was then living. The Christmas issue of *The Booster* from 1937 featured contributions by Gerald Durrell, Raymond Queneau, Alfred Perles, Patrick Evans, Anaïs Nin, Henry Miller, Oswald Blakeston, David Gascoyne, William Saroyan, and also Milada Součková, with the prose text 'La Fille de Mme Flechner'. An accompanying note describes this as a fragment 'from the great unpublished Czechoslovak novel *Amour et Psyché*, by Milada Součková. Translated from the Czechoslovak'. Most crucial though for us is the note at the end of the magazine concerning Milada Součková, which sets us on the path to discovering how Rykr got involved with the journal *Delta*, which was the continuation of *The Booster*. Apparently the editors met Součková at the Surindépendants exhibition. Clearly, then, the editors made

contact with Součková by means of Rykr, who was exhibiting at the Salon and who was himself invited, most likely under the influence of Součková, to collaborate on *Delta*, into which *The Booster* transformed in 1938. Rykr's vague connections with *The Booster* are suggested by such details as the advertisement for Orion that appeared in an issue of the journal (December 1937–January 1938), which could only have been arranged via Rykr as a long-term collaborator with the firm. In the spring of 1938, the Artists' Association of Prague (Sdružení výtvarníků v Praze) organised the exhibition *Paris 1938 (Paříž 1938)*, which bore the subtitle 'several members of the Salon of the "Surindépendants" and guests'. The Salon's members—André Beaudin, Benjamin Benno, Francisco Borés, Maurice Estève, Fedor Loevenstein, René Mendes-France, Alfred Pellán, and Suzanne Roger—sent their work from Paris. Rykr was presented alongside them in the catalogue as a member of the Salon, with three of his exhibited paintings featured (*Meeting (Potkání)*, *The Knight, the Woman and Death*, and *From Prague (Z Prahy)*).

The Bathroom

The final theme of Rykr's paintings is the motif of the bathroom. This is a place of hygiene, as Rykr had already noted in his 1922 study 'On the Situation of Modern Paintings', in which he wrote: 'if the Renaissance has the lion as its symbol, the Gothic the dragon, decadence the orchid, post-war Cubism the herring, then let us now have the bath as our emblem. It is almost comical how people do not want to step into this water. And artists least of all. Any eau de cologne, rubbed on 'just like that', is fine with them, as long as they can avoid taking a proper shower'.⁵⁰

We should of course rank this space with Chalupecký's fateful places. It is as such that the bathroom, and above all the bath, were perceived in the past: as places of purification, but also of death.⁵¹ Who knows whether Rykr himself did not reflect in the bathroom—this frequent site of voluntary departures from life—on ending his own earthly existence?

The apparently harmonious pictures that Rykr created in the several months before his voluntary death are in marked opposition to his psychological state at this time. It is as though, in spite of the dead-end reality surrounding him, Rykr stubbornly persisted in constructing the space of a new reality, a new universe. He continued to search for this space in Mallorca, in the motif of women playing with a ball or in drawings of fisherman. But his escape to Mallorca was too brief.

We can only guess how far an artist well-versed in the history of art, like Rykr, was aware of the deathly connotations of his ambivalently-toned cycle *Woman in a Bathroom (Žena v koupelně)* when seen in the context of artistic tradition. Jacques-Louis David's famous painting *The Death of Marat (La Mort de Marat/Marat assassiné, 1793)* is a monumental image of a murder in a bath presented virtually as a tomb sculpture.

The bathroom becomes a beautiful tomb, in which the memory of a woman's body (the female nude remains a symbol of beauty here) is mixed with nostalgia and the inability to truly capture this beauty. Rykr's pictures of bathrooms are a continuation of his elegiac allegories: they are elegies on the loss of beauty, on the fleeting aroma of the female body, on the transformation of the site of purification and freshness into a tomb, a potential place of death.

The Missing Person

There are various hypotheses about Rykr's suicide. Alongside his marital problems, the reason most often cited is the danger Rykr was in for his activities with the advertising company PIRAS. In January 1939 he was appointed to the company's governing board and in September he became the director, in an attempt to save a firm owned by Jewish investors through the transfer of its shares and functions to non-Jews.

The first anti-Jewish measures had been established by the second half of April 1939, during the time of Beran's government. On 20 March 1939 it was decreed that the authorities could install trustee administrators (*Treuhänder*) in enterprises as a matter of 'public interest'. The aim was to create lists of Jewish enterprises to be aryanised.⁵² By the end of September 1939, Jews living in Bohemia and Moravia had been banned from the sale of enterprises or real estate. A decree by the Chief of Civil Administration on 29 March 1939 banned Jews from transferring

property on the basis of sales contracts or other measures. In June 1939 the Reich Protector issued a decree about Jewish property in which, besides a ban on Jews disposing of their property, there appeared for the first time the racial criteria of the Nuremberg Laws and the definition of the terms 'Jew' and 'Jewish enterprise'.

On 4 July 1939, the government adopted a decree delimiting the range of activities that Jews could perform, issued on the urging of the Office of the Reich Protector. But the decree was not made public until nine months and three weeks later (on 24 April 1940). This was due to the fears of the Reich interior minister, who was afraid that the elimination of Jews from the Protectorate's economy could negatively influence economic development, and thus it was recommended to proceed by stages.

In January 1940, a 'trustee' (*Treuhand*) was appointed at PIRAS, who most likely looked into the personnel trick. Rykr might have feared, with justification, that his transparent attempt at protecting a Jewish firm had been discovered by the Gestapo.⁵³

Andrea Culková, maker of a documentary film about Rykr, considered the hypothesis that the cause of the painter's suicide could have been Jindřich Chalupecký. Součková apparently recalled how Chalupecký would come to visit them and how Rykr became his spiritual guru. 'The grounds on which Chalupecký built his theories were taken from Rykr'. Culková asserts. In 1939 Chalupecký had the printing plates ready for a monograph on Rykr. 'But because Rykr was very unpopular after the arrival of the occupiers, Chalupecký halted the publication. Milada Součková never forgave him for this, and claimed that this was one of the factors that compelled Rykr to end his life'.⁵⁴ Of course, inside a preserved mock-up of this Rykr monograph a letter was inserted from the publisher to Chalupecký, informing him that the book cannot be published for reasons of censorship.

Milada Součková, in a letter to Chalupecký from 1941, suggested that Rykr had been ill, and in a letter from 1969 she attested that in emigration she had come to the opinion that his illness had been spiritual. 'Rykr always said: you'll see, even when Chalupecký has a big beard he'll still be pushing a pram in front of him with an art-infant inside. Rykr always saw a situation clearly—if it had not been for his illness. Yet I only want to see him as the Rykr of his pictures and of Chalupecký's words'.⁵⁵ Several years later, Součková asserted of Rykr in another letter that: 'spiritually he was not completely healthy, today this is clear to me. All too clear. And he knew this, and I did not, at the time'.⁵⁶

Rykr's spiritual illness could also have been a response to the mosaic of reasons that led to his suicide under the wheels of a train travelling from Prague to Plzeň (not Prague to Paris, as was often claimed in the past, for such a death would have beautifully closed the mythic circle of connections between Rykr's life and work). Chalupecký even indirectly voiced the suspicion that this death, with its theatricality, had been staged by Rykr. He thus, in essence, linked Rykr's suicide to the idea of 'propaganda theatre', which is how the Marquis de Sade, in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, described the death by suicide of the revolutionary elites.⁵⁷ We learn from the documents of the Police Directorate that the suicide occurred on 15 January 1940 at 11:15am, by means of train no. 29, travelling from Smíchov station to Plzeň (it had left Prague at 11:11am). A none too clear picture of the end of Rykr's life is offered by another document from the Police Directorate: a missing-person report. This was submitted by Marie Součková, Milada Součková's mother, and Rykr's mother-in-law on the same day on which Rykr committed suicide. The report could have been submitted in the afternoon, or at noon, even possibly at the very time that the tragedy occurred in Smíchov, for it is recorded that Rykr was 'seen ... in his apartment by the notifier' at 8am and 'by his wife at 10am in the advertising office of Piras, where he is employed'. It is generally customary to search for missing persons only when they have really disappeared and have not been seen for a certain time, say one or two days, which evidently was not the case here, for Rykr had been seen at 10am the same morning. Moreover, in the same missing person report, the column headed 'Family history and last residence of the missing person, relation to the notifier' reads: 'Family data unknown. 40 years old. Son-in-law'. It is interesting that the request to find this missing person came not from his wife, but from his mother-in-law, who did not

even know his date of birth. Had she, or someone in her vicinity, guessed what Rykr wanted to do? Why announce a search for a person who had disappeared only a couple of hours before, and who presumably might be taking care of some assignment or other in the city, entirely possible for someone as busy and occupied with work as Rykr undoubtedly was? Or is it that the notifier had obtained some clue as to Rykr's plans, and hoped, by means of the search, to prevent the worst from happening?

Conclusion

It is clear today that Rykr was one of the most interesting and original Czech artists of the first half of the twentieth century. This does not mean that his work had no fluctuations in quality or that we must simply reverse the previous 'scores', changing what was formerly designated as a minus into a plus. Things are not so simple—every painting, every drawing, is different from one another—and yet we are attempting here to present the value of Rykr's work as a whole. As a value that strongly connects with his life and thought, a value oriented to the current issues of the modern world, and not in the sense of something fashionable but of something urgent and pressing. Rykr's work remains contemporary, but in several cases it is also markedly anachronistic. This, again, is the paradox of his work, a paradox nicely captured by Jiří Padrta: 'at the same time, for all its inconsistency and its lack of polish, or maybe precisely because of these things, there is something extremely serious and truthful in Rykr's work: the risk taken by a man who is always on a journey, who unceasingly looks for and grasps art as permanently changing cognition, as experience, the sparkle of ideas, play and adventure'.⁵⁸

The broad range of Rykr's creativity, which in his time was considered as something negative and even harmful to modern art, instead demonstrates the unbelievable creative energy of an artist who never became entrenched in what was 'certain', who never stopped investigating new areas and who always sought out new challenges and considerable artistic risks with a near-suicidal ethos. I consider the case of Rykr a practical contribution to the discussion of the significance of art and the avant-garde, a contribution to the reflection on the very conditions of the modern world. These conditions are submitted to analysis through the creative, artistic gesture, and not only in the sense of 'high' art. Rykr earned his living through the writing of articles and columns and the publishing of illustrations for them; he devoted himself with great commitment to modern advertising, in which field he constantly explored the possibilities of modern expression as applied to everyday consumption. Advertising became for him a kind of performative instrument for the raising of standards of taste in public spaces.

Rykr is a typical subject of his Central-European environment in his attempts to overcome the limits set by the 'domestic' avant-garde and the art world in general, and in the indisputable traits of mourning, lamentation, and melancholy that characterise his work as a whole.

Translated by Jonathan Owen

1 Vojtěch Lahoda, *Zdeněk Rykr a továrna na čokoládu* (Prague: Kant, 2016).

2 Jindřich Chalupický, 'Zapomenutý Rykr', *Výtvarná práce* 11/22–23 (1963): p. 10.

3 N. (Viktor Nikodem), 'Rykrův outsiderské hledání a nalézání', *Národní osvobození*, 1936? (the attached date, apparently 'květen [May] 1936', is badly printed), Oddělení Dokumentace (henceforth OD) ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV/2, no. 149. The cited contemporaneous articles without page numbers come from the convolutes processed by Dr. Otakar Rykr, deposited at the Regional Museum in Kolín (henceforth RMK) and at the Institute of Art History at the Czech Academy of Sciences (AVČR). Otakar, the father of Zdeněk, cut these articles out and stuck them onto A4 paper, so that in the vast majority of cases the page numbers have not been preserved.

4 Zdeněk Rykr, 'Paříž – Berlín – Praha', *ČZ. Kalendář* (1929): pp. 128–131. OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., II., no. 91.

5 Rykr, 'Paříž – Berlín – Praha', pp. 128–131.

6 Jaroslav Slavík, 'Skupina Tvrdošíjní a hosté', *Umění* 30 (1982): pp. 193–213; Karel Šrp, *Tvrdošíjní a hosté*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie hlavního města Prahy (Prague, 1987). Rykr also exhibited with Tvrdošíjní (The Stubborn Ones) in Košice.

7 Václav Nebeský, *Tvrdošíjní a hosté podnázev: Vystava III*, exhibition catalogue, Krasoumná jednota (Dům umělců Rudolfinum) (Prague: 1921).

8 According to the catalogue the prices (in Czech koruna) were as follows: '89. Still life (private property), 90. Portrait of a woman, 2500 koruna, 91. Still life, 1200 koruna, 92. Head (terra cotta), 1000 koruna...'. A review from the time (by E. Kleiner in *Národních listech* 6 December 1921) wrote of 'black and white paintings'. Most likely these were the still lifes reproduced in *Veraikon* in 1921 under the name *Still Life (Zátiší, oil, 1921)*, p. 89, and *Still Life with Books (Zátiší s knihami, oil, 1920)*, p. 91.

9 Václav Nebeský, *Tvrdošíjní a hosté podnázev*, unpaginated.

10 Karel Teige, 'Kubismus, orfismus, purismus a neokubismus v dnešní Paříži', *Veraikon* 7 (1922): pp. 98–112.

- 11 Zdeněk Rykr, 'Archipenkovy "Ženy"', *Den* 1/23, 20 December 1920: p. 12. For the same issue of *Den*, Rykr produced a cover illustration of Ludwig van Beethoven. *Den* was a journal for 'art, physical culture and society', and was published from 1 November 1920 to the beginning of 1921. The editor was, initially, J. Bor, and then, from no. 19 onwards, Zdeněk Kalista, while the last two issues were edited by Karel Teige. In no. 27 there is a short article by Jaroslav Janík, 'The Illustrations of Z. Rykr', which rates Rykr's illustrations for M. Mareš's book *Pricházím z periferie* highly.
- 12 Rykr, 'Archipenkovy "Ženy"', p. 12.
- 13 Rykr, 'Archipenkovy "Ženy"', p. 12.
- 14 Josef Čapek, 'Pražské výstavy', *Lidové noviny*, 13 February 1924 (review of Rykr's exhibition at the Fine Arts Association (Krasoumná jednota): 'He is a Doctor of Philosophy and has been painting for years, though without joining any artistic group, such as Devětsil or Nová skupina [the New Group], to the second of which he would organically belong both generationally and in his artistic tendencies'.
- 15 Jiří Urban, 'Osamělý běžec Zdeněk Rykr', *Umění* 28 (1980): pp. 56–73.
- 16 Marcel Fišer, in Vojtěch Lahoda, Petr Štembera, Marcel Fišer, Jindřich Chaloupecký, and Kristian Suda, *Zdeněk Rykr 1900–1940: Elegie avantgardy* (Prague: Prague City Gallery, 2000), p. 258.
- 17 Jindřich Chaloupecký, 'Souborná výstava Zdeňka Rykra', unpublished article from his estate, p. 1 of the manuscript (uncategorised).
- 18 Jindřich Chaloupecký, *Zdeněk Rykr. Přehled díla 1900–1940*, exhibition catalogue, Oblastní galerie v Liberci (Liberec, 1965), unpaginated.
- 19 Jindřich Chaloupecký, *Zdeněk Rykr. Obrazy 1931–1932*, exhibition catalogue, Topičův salon (Prague, 6–24 May 1932), unpaginated.
- 20 Zdeněk Rykr, 'Současná situace malby', *Přítomnost* 4/7, 21 February 1929: pp. 102–103.
- 21 *Internationale Plakkaat-Tentoonstelling*, exhibition catalogue, (Antwerp, 10–26 December 1927). OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV/2, no. 142.
- 22 Unknown author, 'Baťa vypsal umělecké ceny', *Polední list*, 14 January 1936, Chotěboř City Museum (Městské muzeum Chotěboř), III. 58.
- 23 Josef Richard Marek, 'Životní film malíře Zdeňka Rykra', *Věstník klubu československých turistů. Odbor Kolín – Vlastivědný sborník středního Polabí* 7/1–3 (1940): p. 2.
- 24 Milada Součková, *Hlava umělce. Studie k větší práci* (Prague: Pamir, 1946), p. 46.
- 25 Jindřich Chaloupecký, 'Umění na čokoládových obalech', *Typ* (1932): pp. 632–3.
- 26 Zuzana Malá, 'Milada Součková a časopis The Booster/Delta', *Česká literatura: časopis pro literární vědu*, 62/3 (2014): pp. 395–409.
- 27 Milada Součková, *Amor a Psyché* (Prague: ERM, 1995), p. 47.
- 28 Clipping with no headline or author, 'Malíř Zdeněk Rykr', *Polabská stráž*, 12 November 1937. OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., II/2, no. 202.
- 29 Unknown author, "Abeceda Československa" na světovou výstavu do Paříže', *Telegraf* (22 May 1937). Regional Museum in Kolín (Regionální museum Kolín), no. 10.
- 30 'ŠP' [sic], 'Nová státní kancelář pro podporu cizineckého a státního ruchu', *Národní osvobození* (1 June 1937). Regional Museum in Kolín (Regionální museum Kolín), no. 11, 190/b, 85.
- 31 F.X. Harlas and Z. Rykr, 'Umění', *Národní politika*, 17 October 1933. OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV., no. 276/164b.
- 32 Josef Richard Marek, 'Z. Rykr u Rubeše', *Národní listy*, September 1933. OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV., no. 275/164a.
- 33 Adolf Felix, 'Zdeněk Rykr', *Rozhledy po literatuře a umění*, 2/16–17 (1933): pp. 9–11. OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV., no. 282/164c.
- 34 Jindřich Chaloupecký, 'O Zdeňku Rykrovi', *Výtvarné umění* 14 (1964): p. 371.
- 35 Jindřich Chaloupecký, 'Pryč', exhibition catalogue, Palác Dunaj (Prague, 1934). Reprinted in Jindřich Chaloupecký, *Cestou necestou* (Jinočany: H & H, 1999): p. 13.
- 36 Josef Čapek, 'Z. Rykr v Topičově salonu', *Lidové noviny*, 4 January 1936. OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV/2, no. 178.
- 37 On the confusion between the *Orient* and *From Greece* cycles, see: Fišer, 'Malířské dílo na pozadí životních osudů autora – revize dosavadních poznatků na základě průzkumu písemných pramenů a kresebné pozůstalosti' (MA thesis, Ústav dějin umění FFUK Prague, 1997), pp. 29–30.
- 38 'Kr' [sic], 'Následovník Františka z Assisi', *Polední list* 2 (2 January 1936). OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV/2, no. 175.
- 39 N. (Viktor Nikodem), 'Rykrovo outsiderské hledání a nalézání', *Národní osvobození* (1936? The attached date, apparently 'květen [May] 1936', is badly printed). OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV/2, no. 149.
- 40 Pavel František Malý, 'Nezmoudření Z. Rykra', *Samostatnost* (January 1936). OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV., no. 278/180a.
- 41 J.R. Marek, 'Výstava Z. Rykra', *Národní listy* (14 January 1936). OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., IV., no. 279/180b.
- 42 Z. Rykr, 'Španělsku, Toulky světem', *Zabranění zájmy* 1/2 (May 1926): p. 59 OD ÚDU AVČR, v.v.i., II., 56.
- 43 Erwin Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia ego: Poussin a elegická tradice', in E. Panofsky, *Význam ve výtvarném umění* (Prague: Odeon, 1981), pp. 231–250.
- 44 The legend is mentioned in Milada Součková, *Kalady. Svědectví. Mluvící pásma. Dílo Milady Součkové, svazek III* (Prague: Prostor, 1998), p. 101.
- 45 Vojtěch Lahoda, in Lahoda et al., *Zdeněk Rykr 1900–1940: Elegie avantgardy*, pp. 164–181.
- 46 E. Panofsky, *Grabplastik* (Cologne: Verlag Du Mont Schauberg, 1964), p. 28.
- 47 Milada Součková, letter to Jindřich Chaloupecký (7 April 1964). Fond Jindřich Chaloupecký, LA PNP.
- 48 On Loewenstein, see: Anna Pravdová, *Zastihla je noc. Čeští výtvarní umělci ve Francii 1938–1945* (Prague: Opis – Kristina Médliková, 2009), p. 32.
- 49 Součková, letter to Chaloupecký (7 April 1964).
- 50 Z. Rykr, 'Současná situace malby', *Přítomnost* VI, 28 February 1929: p. 102. Rykr's friend Jaromír Krejcar was also concerned with the idea of the bathroom as a new hygienic environment: See 'Koupelna', *Pestrý týden* 2/1 (1927): p. 12; Jaromír Krejcar, 'Hygiena bytu', *Žijeme* 2 (1932–1933): pp. 132–134.
- 51 Heiko Herwald, 'Das Baddewannensyndrom oder der Tod in der Badewanne', *Kunst + Unterricht* 151 (August 1991): pp. 198–221.
- 52 Adéla Hoffmannová, 'Perzekuce židů v českých zemích a na Slovensku 1938–1945 a její mezinárodní aspekty' (BA thesis, FSS MU Brno, 2011), p. 10.
- 53 Petr Štembera, in Lahoda et al., *Zdeněk Rykr 1900–1940: Elegie avantgardy*, p. 339.
- 54 Marcel Kabát, 'Co zabilo umělce? Případ pro detektivy. Rozhovor s Andreou Culkovou', *Lidové noviny* (13 March 2014): p. 11.
- 55 Milada Součková, letter to Chaloupecký (7 July 1969). Fond Jindřich Chaloupecký, LA PNP.
- 56 Milada Součková, letter to Chaloupecký (12 October 1973). Fond Jindřich Chaloupecký, LA PNP.
- 57 Daniela Tinková, 'Dobrovolná smrt a elita Francouzské revoluce', *Český časopis historický* (95 January 1997): pp. 1–35.
- 58 Jiří Padrta, 'Stále neznámý Rykr', *Výtvarná práce* 13/15 (1965): pp. 7–8.

