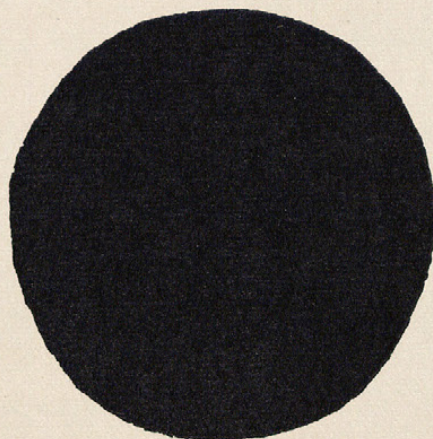


A READER IN  
EAST-CENTRAL  
-EUROPEAN  
MODERNISM  
1918–1956

Edited by:  
Beáta Hock Klara  
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Jonathan Owen









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With contributions by:

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Marie-Louise von  
**Motesiczky**  
Charitable Trust

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This Reader is dedicated to the memory  
of Iva Mojžišová (1939–2014)  
and Vojtěch Lahoda (1955–2019)

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# Introduction: Towards a Minor Modernism?

BEÁTA HOCK, KLARA KEMP-WELCH,  
AND JONATHAN OWEN



## **Towards a Minor Modernism?**

This Reader emerged out of a pedagogical experiment: a German-affiliated Hungarian-born scholar and a Polish-speaking English-born scholar designing an English-language MA course on Central-European art and culture for an international group of students.<sup>1</sup> As we considered how best to teach modernism from a Central-European perspective at the Courtauld, and discussed the methodological and narrative shifts our task would entail, we were inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's 1975 essay 'Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature'. The philosophers were interested in Franz Kafka's lived experience of multiple cultural identification, as a German-speaking Jew from Austro-Hungarian Prague, and defined the particularly Central-European features of his writing as having the hallmarks of 'a minor literature'. They argued that such literatures have a 'high coefficient of deterritorialisation', that 'everything in them is political' and 'takes on a collective value', ultimately proposing that minor modernisms embodied the 'revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature'.<sup>2</sup> We were also seeking to define how the modernisms of East-Central Europe were at the revolutionary heart of the modernist enterprise as a whole. If, for Kafka, it was the 'situation of the German language, in Czechoslovakia, as a fluid language intermixed with Czech and Yiddish' that produced the 'possibility of invention', then, for the artists that interested us, likewise, it was the fluid interpretation of the modernist idiom and its intermixing with local twists that gave rise to the particular power of their creativity.<sup>3</sup>

Our course required students to rethink European modernism as an interdependent whole, from the starting point that it could not be understood properly without an understanding of the art of East-Central Europe. From an East-Central-European perspective, it was clear that the German and the Russian art scenes were at least as relevant as the French 'art-historically acknowledged' centre in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Just as European cultural production has always been closely bound up with the history of shifting borders and patterns of migration, the interchangeability of majority and minority positions became central to our thinking. The cultural identities of key actors within the art scenes of Austria, Germany, Hungary, and the Czechoslovak and Polish Republics often remained plural despite the formation of individual nation states after the collapse of the multinational Austro-Hungarian and German empires.<sup>5</sup> Seeking to embrace the challenges of art historiography in a multi-ethnic region, we combined the study of major 'isms' of art such as Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism with research on local artists' particular aspirations. Our course explored the region's diversity of cultures to discover the critical debates in aesthetics and politics they occasioned, and how these relate to today's art-historical concerns. We were faced with a challenge: would we be able to populate our weekly reading lists with the requisite primary and secondary sources if we were limited, in the first instance, to texts available in English? We found that we were able to take advantage of a series of indispensable sources, but we also identified certain gaps.

While there was an excellent array of significant English-language scholarship on German and Soviet art (much of it produced by British and US-based art historians), generally speaking, there was less literature available in English on developments in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, or Romania. The Hungarian art historian Éva Forgács has proposed that East-European art has tended to fall 'between narratives':

The rediscovery and art historical restoration of the Soviet Russian avant-garde resulted in the creation and acknowledgment of a narrative parallel to that of Western modernism. Cubo-futurism, Rayonism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Proun, Productivism, and their prominent representatives arose as fully-fledged chapters and agents of the Russian avant-garde with their impact on their Western counterparts fully recognized. However, the East-European art of the same historic periods [was] only fragmentarily recovered. Art from the region had to fit either the Western or the Russian narrative. So Czech Cubism and Surrealism, Polish Constructivism

and the Expressionist and Constructivist tendencies in Hungarian art were soon discovered and integrated into what became “the avant-garde of the 1920s,” but the vanguard tendencies offer, in these countries, a particularly thin section of the entirety of their modernist art. A number of innovative, idiosyncratic, and important artists were active, who, for one reason or another, never joined movements, and therefore were not integrated into any of the master narratives of modernism.<sup>6</sup>

We noted that while émigré artists such as László Moholy-Nagy had been the focus of English-language exhibition catalogues and monographs, there was often a surprising international invisibility regarding other artists who had played definitive roles in their own national contexts.<sup>7</sup> Exhibition catalogues and specialist scholarly journals in the region had only recently, and far from consistently, begun to function bilingually and to include English-language translations and, historically, it had been more common to include English-language summaries in edited volumes and journals than full translations. While there is a fair amount of relevant literature in German and in French, this, too, often remains untranslated into English. Hungarian art historian Krisztina Passuth, for instance, first surveyed avant-garde artistic connections from Prague to Bucharest in her French-language monograph in 1987, and revisited the subject in a Hungarian-language book some ten years later, but while a German version of this latter work was published in 2003, it remained inaccessible in English until the publication of an excerpted chapter here.<sup>8</sup> We thus set out to fill at least some of the gaps by translating a collection of essays into English. We were aware that there was good material that ought to be translated and made more widely available to an international audience. But before introducing the rationale for our selection of texts for the Reader, and for their thematic presentation, we would like to offer a few methodological reflections on some of the key approaches taken by scholars of East Central European art whose work is available in English, weighing up their claims in relation to the key question posed by the Polish art historian Andrzej Turowski in his short, polemical book of 1986 (still only available in French): *Existe-t-il un art de l'Europe de l'est?*, or *Is there such a thing as East-European Art?*<sup>9</sup>

Steven Mansbach's major study *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) made the case that there was, and that the art of Eastern Europe deserved a survey of its own. Drawing on the network of Soros centres of art—established across the region in the 1990s—for support in carrying out his research, he set out to produce an ‘interpretative overview’ that reclaimed the ‘essential role played by eastern European artists in the genesis of the modern aesthetics with which we are familiar in the West’ to allow ‘for a fuller understanding of the history of modern culture’.<sup>10</sup> Mansbach noted that the work with which his book was concerned represented ‘an extraordinary medley of art styles, references and meanings’.<sup>11</sup> He asked how it was that the material in his book has remained a ‘terra incognita’ for so many in the West and why it was that ‘our present understanding of the modern movement in general’ had become ‘so much more partial that it was a half-century ago, when Western critics, historians, artists, and the educated public were relatively well informed about and indebted to the artistic developments from the Baltic to the Balkans?’<sup>12</sup> In examining what ‘happened to eclipse this formative modern art from the general cultural consciousness’ he pointed to a combination of factors, ranging from the resurgence of various forms of ‘cultural narrow-mindedness’ in the region in the 1930s, to the decline of the avant-garde in itself, as well as the suppression of national histories of modernism under Soviet rule, and the inaccessibility of archives until the 1990s. Above all, though, Mansbach argued that ‘the greatest limitation for a Western public’ was a ‘general ignorance of the historical, political, and social conditions to which the respective modern movements were a creative response’.<sup>13</sup> The structure of his book—with chapters devoted to: The Czech Lands; Poland and Lithuania; The Baltic States of Latvia and Estonia; The Southern Balkans of the Former Yugoslavia: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia; Romania; and Hungary—reflected his ambition to remedy this ignorance and to give readers insight into ‘the distinctive cultural and political histories to which modern art in each land was a highly original response’. His aim was to ‘avoid perpetuat[ing] the monolithic mindset that has so long obscured the singular achievements of the lands of eastern Europe’.<sup>14</sup>

Mansbach was at pains to work against the grain of the ‘cold-war tendency in the West to envisage the entire region monolithically, and the commensurate Soviet policy to denigrate strategic differences within the Eastern bloc’.<sup>15</sup> In particular, he sought to examine and foreground ‘the causal connection between national identity and the creative diversity within the modern movement’, linking modern art in the region to ‘various mid- and late-nineteenth-century movements of “national awakening”’, often laden with local ethnographic references.<sup>16</sup> He argued that ‘what progressive artists in the East borrowed from modernists in the West was not likely to be a defiant political posture but rather a repertoire of visual styles and formal solutions that might be adapted selectively to suit the prevailing conditions—aesthetic and social—in the varied cultural landscape on the eastern margins of a rapidly modernising Europe’.<sup>17</sup> Mansbach claimed that there was a ‘general absence of regular, meaningful, and mutually beneficial contact among the principal figures of the eastern European avant-gardes—relative to the rich interconnections prevailing to the west as well as those in the multinational Soviet Union to the east’, though he conceded that avant-garde magazines served as a forum for the transmission of information, and that Western galleries and artists’ studios were other transit-stations. To summarise, his emphasis was on creative diversity, hybridity, and the particular pathways and trajectories to modernism that developed in different countries in greater or lesser degrees of isolation. If Mansbach’s is an account of minor modernisms in the sense outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, it is a narrative of deterritorialisation and of the political, but if it is also to be understood as a narrative of collectivity, then it has to be of a collectivity thought of, above all, in relation to the construction of national identity.

In the same vein, Éva Forgács has argued that the idea of East-European art ‘did not—could not—originate from Eastern Europe’, claiming that artists ‘did not identify themselves as East European either during the interwar era or throughout the cold war period’.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, she noted, ‘if they related at all to being East European, it was with an aspiration to overcome this tag. They thought of themselves as Polish, or Czech, or Slovakian, or Hungarian, or Romanian, or Yugoslav ... and, ultimately, as *European* artists’.<sup>19</sup> Belonging to a generation of intellectuals with vivid memories of ‘four decades of isolation inside the Soviet bloc’, Forgács was keen to stress the ‘internationalism of the historical avant-garde’ and the sense of there having once been a ‘pan-European intellectual community’.<sup>20</sup> She noted that the catalogue of Kassák’s 1973 posthumous exhibition in Bochum included a text by the museum director Peter Spielmann, in which he observed that the 1920s avant-gardes ‘cooperated beyond national borders ... It is extremely important for us today to understand the trends of our own time through their activity, and, learning from them, to try to overcome our national isolations’.<sup>21</sup> In stressing the internationalism of the pre-Soviet period, however, there was also a danger of failing to take on board the internationalism of experimental art across post-war Eastern Europe, on the one hand, and, more widely, the global Socialist internationalism of the Cold War, on the other. While Forgács claimed that there was all but no ‘regional discourse’ in the post-war period, as artists (inheritors of the historical avant-garde tradition) turned for the most part to developments in the West as a point of reference, rather than entering into dialogue with artists in neighbouring countries, such a thesis of isolation has been challenged in recent years by a new generation of scholars, working with a different set of priorities. It transpires that despite the division of Europe at Yalta, both the Socialist cultural bureaucracies in different satellite countries and individual artists continued to value and to foster a wide range of official and unofficial regional and global exchanges in the period, whether before or after the respective ‘thaws’ that followed the death of Joseph Stalin, at different points, in different countries.

A watershed moment in overcoming some of the scholarly challenges outlined above came in 2002 with the publication of the primary source reader *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2002) in connection with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation*. Both exhibition and reader took a trans-cosmopolitan approach to the avant-garde art of the region, focussing on dialogues and exchanges among artistic circles in Belgrade, Berlin, Bucharest, Budapest, Kraków, Dessau, Ljubljana, Łódź, Poznań, Prague, Vienna,



Warsaw, Weimar, and Zagreb. The publications associated with the exhibition reflected the degree to which 'the avant-garde had become at once regionally diverse and irretrievably international' and foregrounded the 'ambition among the members of the avant-garde for universality in a world of nation-states'.<sup>22</sup> The curator Timothy O. Benson asked what it might mean to try to 'comprehend a world of locales without center or peripheries' in which artists sought to 'develop the grammar of a new mode of communication that would lead to a new collective consciousness'.<sup>23</sup> For the most part, he surmised, the Central European Avant-Gardes were 'neither nationalist, nor fully internationalist', just as Central-European identity itself could be said to be 'ambiguous, diffuse, fragmentary, contradictory'.<sup>24</sup>

The sourcebook *Between Worlds* noted that there had been increased interest in bringing the artistic avant-gardes of Central Europe back into focus since the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>25</sup> If 'the visual arts and art criticism of the Central-European avant-garde' had 'remained in relative obscurity for the English-speaking world', the editors noted, then 'in large part this was due to the inaccessibility of sources and lack of translations'.<sup>26</sup> The project of translating a vast selection of primary sources from all over the region and presenting the selected texts 'as an interrelated discourse'—structured thematically around shared areas of concern such as 'style as the crucible of past and future'; 'art and social change'; 'internationalism'; and 'the twilight of ideologies'—resulted in an extremely substantial publication, which proved in many respects exemplary of what Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski referred to as 'horizontal art history'.

Piotrowski insisted that 'while Western art history has a vertical and hierarchical form, the Eastern one, due to its plurality, take[s a] horizontal, non-hierarchical and polycentric form'.<sup>27</sup> Piotrowski therefore argued that a 'pluralistic, heterogeneous view' was more appropriate than the production of a 'single narrative of East Central European art'.<sup>28</sup> His focus, methodologically, was on difference, proposing post-war Eastern Europe as distinct from 'the West', in the first instance, and as composed of diverse local experiences, in the second. In a paper entitled 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', the late scholar argued that 'the stylistic narrative' characteristic of the Western art-historical paradigm was 'never simply reflected' in the Eastern and Central-European context, where 'modernism defined in terms of style has always been translated into heterogeneous mutations', such as 'Russian Cubo-Futurism, ... Hungarian Activism, Polish Formism, and Central European Surrealism except for the Czech variant'.<sup>29</sup> Piotrowski therefore concluded that it was more 'productive to stress the tensions between the local experience of art and the [Western] canon', arguing that 'attention should be concentrated on the deconstruction of the relationship between those two domains', emphasising the 'identity of place'.<sup>30</sup>

Arguably, a historical emphasis on national diversity has sometimes had the side-effect of further provincialising East Central European art. James Elkins, in his reader *Is Art History Global?*, used the argument that 'as a discipline and as a unit within universities, art history is very much a North American and Western European phenomenon', and that non-Western art-history textbooks 'tend to be deeply nationalistic in motivation': discrediting and even disavowing the existence of art historical research in other parts of the world, including in East-Central Europe.<sup>31</sup> Faced with this sort of historical amnesia, it has become all the more important to point not only to historical differences but also to historical connectivity: to do so in a 'pluralistic, heterogeneous' manner, as advocated by Piotrowski, is also the aim of our own edited volume. In addition to the English-language arguments and approaches articulated above, there have been a wide range of publications in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia during the past decades relating to artistic developments in the period 1918 to 1956. Our Reader combines a selection of translated extracts from these publications with new writing produced especially for this volume, emerging out of a series of research events and workshops held as part of our wider, five-year-long research and educational project funded by the Motesiczky Charitable Trust.

One possible pitfall inherent in setting the methodological focus on difference and insisting on national specificity is the reification of inherited narratives that rely on vague, ahistorical perceptions of fixed European borders, nations as enduring collectives, and the purity of national-cultural identities. Newly-emerging transnational and global approaches to history

writing question exactly this sort of (over)emphasis on the ‘national container’, in other words, the practice of explaining historical processes and social change solely from developments taking place within national boundaries. Without denying the relevance of nation states as settings that greatly determine the macrostructure of cultural life (and thus bring about a heterogeneous landscape in any region, including Eastern Europe), we wish to argue that the phenomenon of interculturality and the broad circulation of artistic paradigms or intellectual movements in the modern world also need to be given equal weight.<sup>32</sup> Counteracting the importance attributed to national or regional specificity or to the supposed incommensurability of, say, Eastern and Western Europe, global studies and transnational history offer a different approach. These fields of study seek to promote critical reflection on how the world works as an interlinked, interactive set of processes and relationships. With this insight, the ‘impurifying’ impact of cross-border flows and connections as well as of itinerant biographies is eagerly recognised as a constituent part of national cultural history.

Whereas the term ‘globalisation’ is most commonly used to describe the processes of increased trade and cultural exchange that have characterised the past three to five decades and led to an ever-tighter integration of countries across continents, scholars working in global history point out that globalisation has been taking place for hundreds of years. They identify the pre-modern phase of economic interdependence as ‘archaic globalisation’ and the period from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the First World War as the age of ‘first globalisation’. The circulation of information, money, people, and goods across national boundaries reached an increased level in this era; proportionately it was even higher than it is today.<sup>33</sup>

Considered through the lens of global integration, the decades between the two World Wars appear as a period of nationalisation and de-globalisation, and this holds true for the region of East-Central Europe as well. After the First World War, nation states such as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia were (re)established, and in this new political climate Wilsonian idealism, with its promotion of national self-determination, found fertile ground. The 1930s, plagued by the Great Depression, were especially dominated by autarchic economic policies and nationalist ideologies. However, when non-economic flows are also considered, this characterisation does not seem to be quite as adequate. Pierre-Yves Saunier has explored labour migration, the movement of refugees, but also the intense cross-fertilisation taking place in the realms of the natural sciences, social activism, as well as in the circles of (often *émigré* or exiled) intellectuals and artists. In these fields, connectivity and the circulation of individuals and conceptual models did not abruptly halt even in the 1930s, the ‘hardcore of deglobalisation’ as canonical chronology would have it.<sup>34</sup> While conservative and nationalist circles played a prominent role within the cultural scene in many societies of interwar Central Europe, the artistic vanguard represented a cosmopolitan orientation and had strong links to the inter- or supranational avant-garde. Earlier decades and centuries also witnessed intense cultural exchanges, but progressive artists of the 1920s placed a persistent and conscious stress on internationality, exactly *because* internationality as a desired predisposition was *not* self-evident. Turning away from patriotism and embracing cosmopolitanism clearly entailed a refusal of the nationalist stance that was seen by many as the root of the conflict that had led to the First World War.<sup>35</sup>

And yet, while standard European art histories point to the internationality of the avant-garde as an unmistakable fact, this same internationality is persistently underplayed in *how* the history of modernism is constructed and narrated. The history of avant-garde movements is very often written in national frameworks: individual tendencies or movements are attributed to particular countries or cities where they were allegedly rooted. A transnational approach is less invested in pinpointing the moment of birth of artistic movements than in observing how they circulate, it can help to retrieve a broader spectrum and a deeper dynamism of the cross-border and cross-cultural reach of these phenomena.

Art history has, historically, tended to be compartmentalised not only by national boundaries but by stylistic movements. Modern art movements, especially when presented in time diagrams, are often conceived of as stations in a linear development. Some of these charts—

such as Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s well-known catalogue cover for the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* or Tate Modern's 2006 timeline by Sara Fanelli—do more justice to the way these trends were entangled and interrelated. Nevertheless, these diagrams remain comparable to some other, more schematic charts: in some respects individual art movements are, for the most part, assigned particular geographical locations rather than individual artists' names. Thus, the various 'isms' of cosmopolitan modernism become effectively nationalised or anchored to single localities as is the case with, for instance, German Expressionism, Italian Futurism, Zürich (and Berlin) Dada, Russian Constructivism, and French Surrealism.<sup>36</sup>

It is no new observation that this sort of linear art history has been selective and partial, composed in the interests of a progressive, developmental model, a linear or 'vertical' line from movement to movement.<sup>37</sup> As such, it is also less able to account for developments emerging and running parallel with one another; indeed, it very much blurs the historical reality that the modern 'isms' were not necessarily distinguishable at the time of their emergence. By focussing on the most important centres and best-known artists, such timelines create and reify a universal canon of art history. This is highly exclusionary, especially if seen from locations that are peripheral to this master narrative, as East-Central Europe arguably is. A few examples may aptly illustrate how this universalist—but in fact selective and exclusionary—canon occludes degree of modernism's internationality. Internationality is the word most often used to characterise the outreach of modernist tendencies, but it would be more terminologically-precise to point to its *supra-* and *transnationality*. This terminology is employed to suggest that artistic practices were exchanged and shared between different cultural communities, and, if so, identical elements of style or aesthetics will be self-evident in a cross-section of these different communities.<sup>38</sup>

From this perspective, the usual appropriation of modernist movements by nations or localities might need to be critically rethought. When referring to German Expressionism, for example, should we not rather say that some of the early centres of Expressionism were in German cities? For, as Hubert van der Berg noted in dissecting this seemingly-straightforward trope, the 'German' in 'German Expressionism' did not necessarily designate nationality, as this was a time when the educational and exhibition institutions of the art sector in German cities attracted great numbers of foreign artists. They converged on Berlin (an otherwise unspectacular new capital city), which became the centre of the international progressive art world in the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> Galleries and publishers exhibited and printed artists and authors from all over Northern, Western, and East-Central Europe, but also Japan and America. Those arriving from the former Habsburg and Prussian territories spoke the language, so the fact of being German-speaking alone does not necessarily allow for identifying protagonists as German either. Likewise art-historical labelling was far from being complete at the time: the usage of terms was still inconsistent, so that practically any new trend emerging in any country could be called Expressionism (or Futurism, for that matter), and these yet-unfixed labels denoted a complex assortment of supranationally-emerging styles.<sup>40</sup>

As is well known, Dada was first based in Zürich, even if only by way of an accident of geography, and Romanian-born Tristan Tzara (originally Samuel Rosenstock) is counted as a major proponent of this (non-)movement. Research carried out in the past ten to fifteen years has revealed how not only the famed Tzara, but a handful of Romanians around the Cabaret Voltaire were the *drivers* of the Zürich movement.<sup>41</sup> In this case, a biography-based research methodology was able to remove the national veil and bring to the fore the multi-ethnic medley of a geographical location that was a safe haven for émigré intellectuals from all over the world. (Vladimir Lenin is said to have lodged in the same street as the Cabaret Voltaire.)

Similarly, the Tate timeline only lists Italian artists as the chief propagators of Futurism. A more nuanced art-historical account might also mention the Russian Futurists. Harsha Ram has, instead, framed these two versions of Futurism in a genuinely transnational manner. In his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, he asserted that, in the early-twentieth century, Paris was a *deterritorialised cosmopolitan core* (very much in the same way as Berlin was in the 1920s, drawing temporary inhabitants from Europe and beyond), and the aspiration of both Italian and Russian Futurists was *to re-territorialise* and appropriate or claim this core,



albeit through different strategies.<sup>42</sup> Italian artists set out to compete with Paris, the centre. In doing so, they continued to accept an art-historical paradigm that divided the map into centres and peripheries, and their aspiration was to assert their own leading position on the art-historical map. Rahm saw a clear indication of this in the fact that Marinetti's 'Futurist Manifesto' was very strategically first published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. The artists around Marinetti placed emphasis on their Italianness, but this 'patriotism' lacked pride in, or reverence for, national heritage. The Futurists wanted to obliterate the past, while, at the same time, they wished to place Italy on the global map of then-contemporary art. Except they did not say 'global', they said *mondial*.

Russian artists, however, set out to *undermine* the logic of the core's hegemony and to redefine the cosmopolitan tropes of modernity, claims Harsha Rahm.<sup>43</sup> Members of the Futurist circle themselves were newcomers to Russia's metropolitan centres from the provinces. They did not have the kind of cultural capital Marinetti possessed, who easily traversed European cities and cultures, but they had nonetheless experienced their own brand of Eurasian multiculturalism in their home regions. They shored up this heritage as a source of artistic innovation and as an equally cosmopolitan and culturally-mixed milieu, albeit with different 'ingredients' than that of Paris.

It is much less well known that there were a number of artists who declared themselves Futurists in Poland too, and grouped together under the name Formists (Formiści). They interpreted Futurism quite liberally: it appears that they embraced all manifestations of new art in one name, and 'Futurist' was often just a loose signifier for post-Symbolist literary innovation, a celebration of urban modernity, and an inclination towards public provocation.<sup>44</sup> They rejected the kind of poetic radicalism established by the international literary avant-garde: free-word poetry breaking with linear typography, conventional syntax, and logic. They even opposed Marinetti in certain regards and rejected the Italians' idealisation of modern technology and the machine. One could dismiss this Polish stance as a lingering aesthetic conservatism. Or, taking historical reality into account, one might argue that the Polish Futurists treated the machine differently because, in Poland at the time, 'the machine was an exotic [and] imported element', and as such did not exactly belong to the lived everyday experience of modernity.<sup>45</sup> Thus, taking a transnational approach reveals that Futurism, too, had a supranational presence in the 1910s and 1920s, and that different groups had different stakes in appropriating its basic ideas to their own needs and interests. An interdisciplinary angle will furthermore reveal that daring ideas did not travel in unhindered free space: the degree of industrial development and the (limited) availability of technology could enable or hinder their implementation.

The capacities of Polish industry at the time also put constraints on the ambitious designs of Polish Constructivists. In addition to the well-known Russian Constructivists, Constructivism also had its Polish, Hungarian, and Czech iterations. Members of the Polish groups Blok and especially Praesens designed furniture, individual apartments, and functional housing estates very much in the vein of the leading French architect Le Corbusier, even blocking out different designs for different social strata. But most of these could never be built or turned into prototypes for industrial production. Consequently, they entered the history of Polish avant-garde architecture as theoretical essays on artistic composition in three dimensions, based on a certain geometric abstraction.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, these artists critiqued the kind of architecture presented at the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts (Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes) in Paris in 1925. These pieces deployed elements of folk art and craftsmanship, which were felt by these avant-garde critics to be anachronisms, the historical residue of an earlier age, a 'parochial ghetto'.<sup>47</sup> Significantly, these structures mostly used wood, iron, and brick as building materials instead of the steel, glass, and reinforced concrete considered the materials of cutting-edge architecture at the time, not only for their aesthetics but also for their physical capacities. But, as David Crowley has rightly noted, if architects were not only keen on producing artistic manifestos but actually wanted to build, they were forced to arrive at (or settle for) construction materials they had available. That is to say, their choice of what to build with was not necessarily driven by enthusiastic support for a national cause.<sup>48</sup> Giving due consideration

to the material conditions that influenced the possibility to partake in the global flow of artistic trends and practices is an approach that was also advocated by editors of the volume *Circulations in the Global History of Art*.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, and as a gesture toward another anniversary besides 1989, we wish to point to the example of the one-hundred-year-old Bauhaus, a school that is generally considered a German institution and whose history has long been linked to only a handful of—mostly German—masters. In recent years, scholarly research has revealed that, by the end of the 1920s, over a quarter of Bauhaus students in each year were foreigners, typically coming from Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and the USA. Playing the ‘East-European card’ and including Eastern-European students and masters in Bauhaus history sharpens the picture of a ‘multicultural’ institution operating in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin,<sup>50</sup> on the one hand and, on the other, contributes to analytical efforts to transnationalise national (in this case, German) cultural histories. Tracing these protagonists’ post-Bauhaus mobility and the works they created during their voluntary or forced migration has the potential to further map the school’s outreach in time and space.<sup>51</sup>

The brief cases above exemplify some of the approaches we intended to convey during our pedagogical experiment at the Courtauld and the series of events (closed-door workshop, conference panel, public lecture) we organised during the years of collaboration.<sup>52</sup> Taking a broader regional look and reading developments within national borders together with events and tendencies in other geographical locations is also either an explicit practice or a methodological subtext in many of the readings selected for this anthology.

Four years on from delivering our course and tentatively identifying a range of English-language readings for our students, and now thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, we are ready to make our open-access online contribution to expanding the East-Central-European art-historical field in the English language. Our aim has been both to identify previously-untranslated but valuable secondary materials and to translate some of the most interesting recent scholarship in the field, and to make an expanded body of secondary literature available to international students, to complement the pioneering translations of primary materials that were undertaken as part of the LACMA-based collaboration. Our contributors examine the projects of modernism and modernity from a range of East-Central-European perspectives, crucially proposing to call into question European modernism’s usual framing as an interwar phenomenon by taking the period 1918 to 1956 as our timeframe. In so doing, we deliberately include periods of national autonomy, more radical and more conservative moments, democratic, and state Socialist periods. As Luiza Nader has pointed out, the logic of the twentieth-century art-historical periodisation operated according to a logic of exclusion, taking the question of the Holocaust and its representation off the table. Our own aim has been to seek to acknowledge the war and the Holocaust, which are erased by a traditional art-historical division of modernism into ‘interwar’ and ‘post-war’. Besides those post-war movements that emerged organically or outside the official cultural sphere, this collection extends to include Socialist Realism, the prescribed aesthetic doctrine of East-Central-European states from c. 1948 to 1956. Socialist Realism has been notably redefined by Boris Groys as representing not only the liquidation of modernism but also its continuation, perpetuating the ideals of ‘historical exclusiveness, internal purity and autonomy’.<sup>53</sup> More concretely, analysis of specific local incarnations of Socialist Realism reveal a negotiation between Realist and modernist formal practices, sometimes by erstwhile avant-gardists.

As co-editors, we have selected chapters from within our respective areas of linguistic and cultural competence, and thus our selections focus on Polish, Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak art. (Our third editor, Jonathan Owen, joined this project specifically to help develop the Reader, and his fluency in Czech and Slovak added to our existing linguistic competencies.) In selecting our chapters, we have sought a roughly equal balance of focus between these countries, an aim that we felt was especially important with regard to Slovak culture, which has typically been marginalised by—or elided with—Czech culture, despite the often distinct nature of Slovak artists’ inspirations and cultural-historical context. Of course, this aim is complicated by the difficulty at certain

points of assigning a single nationality to the works or movements discussed: for instance, should the film *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933)—an ethnographic work about rural Slovakia produced with the cooperation of the Slovak Cultural Association (Matica slovenská) but directed, edited, and scored by Czech artists—be considered primarily a Czech or a Slovak work?

In developing the Reader we initially developed a series of thematic headings under which to organise the various chapters. As the book's contents evolved, as chapters were replaced and new themes and ideas arose, this structure became less and less possible to sustain. Nonetheless, the important areas of concern indicated by these headings remain present: these include historiographies of readings of modernism (as in Marie Rakušanová's and Krisztina Passuth's texts, which showcase, respectively, encounters between Czech and international theories of Cubism, and affinities across the spectrum of the regional avant-gardes); discussions of abstraction and of various Realisms (as in the chapters on two Hungarian 'schools'—The European and the Roman School—which illustrate artistic pursuits in opposite directions: towards abstraction or towards Realism, while both remained within the modernist paradigm); analyses of gender representation or performance (as in Martina Pachmanová's study of the gendered nature of the campaign against ornamentalism in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s or in Júlia Cserba's presentation of the cross-dresser sculptor Anton/Anna Prinner); and consideration of the role of institutions, from museums and training schools to commercial producers, in fostering artistic experiments or sustaining national traditions (as in Kinga Bódi's close reading of the genesis of the plans for the national Pavilion at two different editions of the Venice Biennale). The chapters cover not only the traditional arts of painting and sculpture but also industrial design, film, photography, and typography, along with the intermedial forms produced under the impact of these modern technological media (Ágnes Kusler and Merse Pál Szegedi demonstrate, for instance, how social photography impacted on Gyula Derkovits's painting). Our hope is that this wide-ranging collection will help to further open up the field of Central-European art histories, stimulate further international dialogue and promote the teaching, at an international level, of a more nuanced and inclusive account of modernism.

1 The development and implementation of the course *A Minor Modernism? Central European Art and Culture 1918–1956* was generously supported by the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust, established with the legacy of the turn-of-the-century Viennese artist. Our sincere thanks to the M-L v M Charitable Trust, for their long-term commitment to that project and this follow-on publication.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polen (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 16–17. First edition: *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1975).

3 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 20.

4 Krisztina Passuth, 'Berlin – Mittelpunkt der Kunst Osteuropas', in Ingo F. Walther (ed.), *Paris, Berlin, 1900–1933. Übereinstimmungen und Gegensätze Frankreich-Deutschland. Kunst, Architektur, Graphik, Literatur, Industriedesign, Film, Theater, Musik* (Munich: Prestel, 1979), pp. 222–230.

5 See, for instance: Pieter M. Judson and Marsha L. Rozenblit (eds.), *Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005).

6 Éva Forgács, 'How the New Left Invented East-European Art', *Centropa* 3/2 (May 2003): pp. 102–3.

7 We found no English-language translation of Lajos Kassák's autobiography, for instance.

8 Krisztina Passuth, *Les Avant-Gardes de l'Europe centrale, 1907–1927* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987); *Avantgarde kapcsolatok Prágától Bukarestig, 1907–1930* (Budapest: Balassi, 1998); *Treffpunkte der Avantgarden Ostmitteleuropa 1907–1930*, trans. Anikó Harmath (Budapest and Dresden: Balassi and Verl. der Kunst, 2003).

9 Andrzej Turowski, *Existe-t-il un art de l'Europe de l'Est? Utopie et idéologie* (Paris: Editions de la Villette, 1986).

10 Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. xiii.

11 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, p. xiii.

12 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, p. 1.

13 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, p. 3.

14 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, p. xiii.

15 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, p. 3.

16 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, pp. 3, 4, 5.

17 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, p. 5.

18 Forgács, 'How the New Left Invented East-European Art', p. 93.

19 Forgács, 'How the New Left Invented East-European Art', p. 93.

20 Forgács, 'How the New Left Invented East-European Art', p. 93. See also: Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 2018); Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, *Art beyond Borders. Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)* (Budapest: Central-European University Press, 2016).

21 Peter Spielmann, 'Introduction', in *Lajos Kassák 1887–1967*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Bochum (Bochum, 1973), unpaginated. Cited in Forgács, 'How the New Left Invented East-European Art', p. 97.

- 22 Timothy O. Benson, 'Introduction', in Timothy O. Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation 1910–1930* (Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and MIT Press, 2002), p. 16.
- 23 Benson, 'Introduction', p. 19.
- 24 Benson, 'Introduction', p. 20.
- 25 Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, 'Introduction', in Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930* (Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and MIT Press, 2002), p. 17.
- 26 Benson and Forgács, 'Introduction', p. 17.
- 27 Piotr Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', *Third Text* 3/1 (January 2009): pp. 6–7.
- 28 Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', p. 8. He explained that a universal approach to the post-war art of the region was not possible because the art of the region developed in relation to the very different 'Ideological State Apparatuses' in place in different countries (p. 5).
- 29 Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', pp. 5–6.
- 30 Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', p. 5. One might also add here that such a perspective also has certain blind spots: in privileging the centrality of place to the question of identity formation, one occludes other central features of identity formation, not least ethnic and religious. What space, in such an account, might there be for the Jewish communities of Central Europe, for Roma artists, and for those displaced by war across the region?
- 31 James Elkins, 'Art History as a Global Discipline', in James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), p. 10.
- 32 Here, the use of the term 'circulation' is meant to signal the changing conceptualisation of intercultural encounter and exchange from 'influence' to 'circulations', also observing cases of cultural transfer, adaptation, and appropriation but also resistance and hybridisation, pointing toward transculturation.
- 33 Tony Makin, 'Globalisation: Context and Controversies', *Agenda: A Journal of Policy Analysis and Reform* 7/4 (2000): pp. 293–302.
- 34 Pierre-Yves Saunier, 'Globalization', in Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 458.
- 35 T.J. Demos, 'Circulations. In and Around Zürich Dada', *October* 105 (Summer 2003): p. 148. See also: Hubert F. van den Berg and Lidia Gluchowska, 'Introduction. The Inter-, Trans- and Postnationality of the Historical Avant-Garde', in Hubert F. van den Berg and Lidia Gluchowska (eds.), *Transnationality, Internationalism and Nationhood. European Avant-Garde in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Leuven, Paris, Walpole: Peters, 2013), pp. ix–xx.
- 36 On this, see also: Hubert F. van den Berg, 'Expressionism, Constructivism and the Transnationality of the Historical Avant-Garde', in van den Berg and Lidia Gluchowska (eds.), *Transnationality, Internationalism and Nationhood*, pp. 23–42.
- 37 Dawn Ades, 'Reviewing Art History', in Alan Leonard Rees and Frances Borzello (eds.), *The New Art History*. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1988), pp. 12–13.
- 38 Hubert F. van den Berg puts this theoretical proposition to practice in his essay referenced above: van den Berg, 'Expressionism', pp. 23–4.
- 39 On Berlin's particular magnetism, see: Éva Forgács, 'Romantic Peripheries: The Dynamics of Enlightenment and Romanticism in East-Central Europe', in Per Baeckström and Benedikt Hjartarson (eds.), *Decentering the Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), pp. 43–63.
- 40 van den Berg, 'Expressionism', p. 32.
- 41 See: Tom Sandquist, *Dada East. The Romanians of the Cabaret Voltaire* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2006).
- 42 Harsha Ram, 'Futurist Geographies: Uneven Modernities and the Struggle for Aesthetic Autonomy: Paris, Italy, Russia, 1909–1914', in Mark Wollaeger (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 313–340.
- 43 Ram, 'Futurist Geographies', pp. 321, 332.
- 44 Przemysław Strożek, "'Marinetti is foreign to us': Polish Responses to Italian Futurism, 1917–1923", in Günther Berghaus (ed.), *Futurism in Eastern and Central Europe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), p. 95. See also Strożek's contribution to this Reader.
- 45 Aleksander Wat, quoted in Strożek, 'Polish Responses to Italian Futurism', p. 106.
- 46 Monika Król, 'Collaboration and Compromise: Women Artists in Polish-German Avant-Garde Circles, 1919–1930', in Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-Gardes*, pp. 349–352.
- 47 David Crowley, *National Style and Nation-State: Design in Poland from the Vernacular to the International Style* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 80–89.
- 48 Crowley, *National Style and Nation-State*, pp. 94–95.
- 49 Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Introduction: Reintroducing Circulations: Historiography and the Project of Global Art History', in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (eds.), *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 1–2.
- 50 Over the years there have been a handful of research and curatorial enterprises laying the groundwork for such investigations: Susanne Anna (ed.), *Das Bauhaus im Osten. Slowakische und Tschechische Avantgarde 1928–1939* (Stuttgart: Ostfildern-Ruit Hatje, 1997); Dora Wiebenson (ed.), *Central-European Students at the Bauhaus*, special edition of *Centropa* 1 (2003); the exhibition *A művészettől az életig—magyarok a Bauhausban (From Art to Life—Hungarians at the Bauhaus)*, Janus Pannonius Museum (Pécs, Hungary, December 2010–February 2011); Jadranka Vinterhalter (ed.), *Bauhaus—Networking Ideas and Practice*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art (Zagreb, 2015).
- 51 Further enterprises pursuing similar goals include: Beáta Hock, 'Bauhaus—A Laboratory of Modernity and Springboard to the World', in Rafał Makala and Beate Störckuhl (eds.), *Nicht nur Bauhaus – Netzwerke der Moderne in Mitteleuropa* (Berlin and Boston, forthcoming); and the online research platform and travelling exhibition project *Bauhaus Imaginista* with autonomously-conceived iterations in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, and Berlin throughout 2018–2019. <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org>, accessed 30 October 2019.
- 52 'Continuities and Ruptures: Art in Pre and Post-War Central and Eastern Europe', workshop at The Courtauld Institute of Art, 12 June 2015; 'After the Great War / After the Cold War: Nations, identities and art histories in Central and Eastern Europe', panel at the 41<sup>st</sup> AAH annual conference, University of East Anglia, Norwich, 10 April 2015; 'Brno, city of the avant-garde?', public talk by Prof. Matthew Rampley at The Courtauld Institute of Art, 26 February 2016; 'Interdisciplinarity and Central-European Modernism 1918–1956', closed-door workshop at The Courtauld Institute of Art, 3 June 2016.
- 53 Boris Groys, 'A Style and a Half: Socialist Realism Between Modernism and Postmodernism', in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (eds.), *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 79.



# In the Currents of the International Avant-Garde Movements

KRISZTINA PASSUTH

*Krisztina Passuth (1937–) has been a key figure of Hungarian art history and a pioneer of comparative studies on the East-Central-European avant-garde. Her books and essays have investigated networks formed around art movements and art journals, and this work has greatly contributed towards the international contextualisation of the regional avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s. In the present volume we provide the English translation of an excerpted chapter of her 1998 Hungarian-language monograph *Avantgarde kapcsolatok Prágától Bukarestig* (itself a revisited version of *Les Avant-Gardes de l'Europe centrale*, published in 1987). (BH)*

## **In the Currents of the International Avant-Garde Movements**

If we examine the most important artistic schools and phenomena of Central and East-European countries not in terms of national specifics, but rather with the international avant-garde movements as our point of departure, then we find that the periods before and after the First World War are quite distinct. Before 1914, French Fauvism influenced the Hungarian Neos and Czech Eights, the earliest modern-inspired groups in both countries, as well as the later, more radical associations that emerged from them: the Czech Painters' Group and the Hungarian Nyolcak (The Eight).<sup>1</sup> In Prague, the leading role was taken by Cubism, which had originated in France but soon became autonomous, while the Hungarian Nyolcak style drew from Cézanne, Matisse, Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism alike. There was no independent Fauvist painting in either country, although a Czech Cubism did exist. At its inception, Czech Cubism was linked to its French counterpart, but never became part of it, instead developing independently. While Cubism enriched works by Hungarian painters and sculptors living temporarily or permanently in Paris, it did not come to play a decisive role in Hungarian art; no real contact existed between French Cubism and Hungarian movements.

Expressionism was part of most new, evolving stylistic schools before the First World War, albeit often more furtively, and not in pure form. This was most relevant for Romanian painting, even before the Dada era, and for Czech Cubo-Expressionism. In Slovene painting, Expressionism appeared later, between 1920 and 1930: its representatives Veno Pilon, Ivan Cargo, Tone and France Kralj, Luigi Spazzapan and others remained firmly within the confines of figurative depiction, and their works cannot be regarded strictly as avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Expressionism, mixed with Post-Impressionism or other schools, only appeared in certain characteristic marks, but did not exist as an autonomous movement.

### **Futurism in East-Central Europe**

The situation is entirely different with Futurism which, as an avant-garde movement *par excellence*, expanded from Italy into most European countries. This was the first avant-garde movement which wanted, indeed loudly demanded, the transformation of art in its entirety, as well as the whole traditional social structure, institutions, indeed even individual lifestyles and habits, in a word: everything, including music, writing, cuisine, and so on. Futurism wanted to accelerate the rhythm of existence, and even if it did not succeed in doing so, its dynamism and momentum nevertheless recruited followers in many places.

Futurism appeared as early as 1909, primarily in literary form, in numerous European cities. That same year, Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* was published in Romania, Poland, and Slovenia. Futurism's fine-art debut came somewhat later in January 1913, with exhibitions of Futurists, Cubists, and Expressionists in Budapest and Lvov, and a Futurist show in Prague around the same time (Fig. 1.1). The Budapest exhibition aroused great interest, eliciting both positive and negative reactions from writers and artists, with Béla Balázs, Róbert Berény, Károly Kernstok, and later Lajos Kassák publishing commentaries.<sup>3</sup> As a writer, Kassák was fascinated by the vision of Futurist image and Futurist spectacle; the impact of Carlo Carrà's painting *The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (*I funerali del anarchico Galli*, 1910–1911) would remain with him for years.



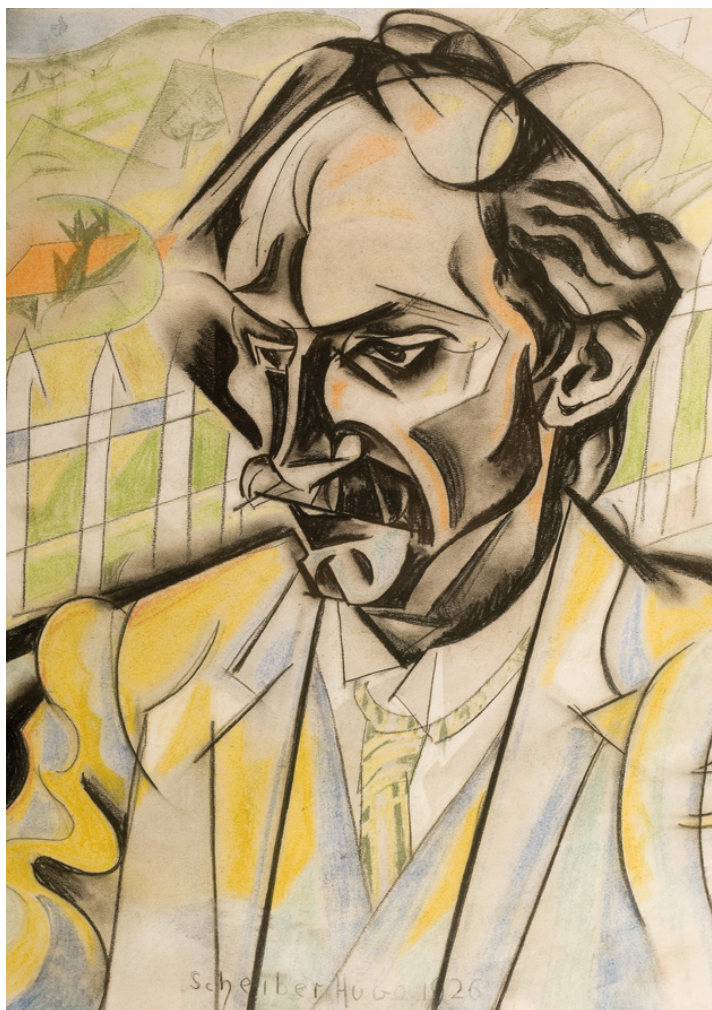


Fig. 1.1. Hugó Scheiber, *Portrait of Mihály Babits* (*Babits portréja*, 1926). Pastel on paper, 72 x 56 cm. Gallery Kieselbach, Budapest. © DACS 2019.

In his 1916 texts, Kassák reinterpreted the experience of Futurist painting in his own words, which pulsated with the force of fragmented words and sentences.<sup>4</sup>

Italian Futurism's direct wartime involvement proved unpopular everywhere. Nevertheless, the Hungarian painter most influenced by Futurism was also the farthest removed from its dynamism and aggression: Lajos Gulácsy.<sup>5</sup> Having lived in Italy for a time, it was the experience of



GULÁCSY LAJOS: Ceruzarajz

war together with the spectacle of Futurist painting that presumably caused an unexpected change in his perspective: fear and anguish in a style resembling Futurism, expressed in the restless movement of deformed figures dissolving into one another (Fig. 1.2). At around the same time, Béla Uitz, one of the painters associated with Kassák's journal *MA (Today)*, also engaged with the experience of war and Futurist pictures, conveying the drama of military conflict with an approach similar to that of Carrà.<sup>6</sup>

However, the notion of war held by Kassák and his circle was diametrically opposed to Marinetti's. From the outset, Kassák was bitterly and intractably opposed to war, articulating his anti-war stance through his writings and editorial activities. This is precisely why Kassák only turned his attention towards Futurism once the war was over. In 1921, he reproduced one of Marinetti's

Fig. 1.2. Pencil drawing by Lajos Gulácsy. Published in *MA (Today)* 3/ 8–9 (September 1918): unpaginated. Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, Budapest.

most original ‘tactilist’ manifestos in *MA*. However, relations between the two men could not be termed cordial or friendly; rather, this was an intellectual struggle between two rivals, two similarly-forceful personalities. On the occasion of the Futurist congress in Rome, Kassák published his view of Marinetti:

Without a doubt, F. T. Marinetti, *the Italian, the Futurist, the artist*, is one of the most characteristic personalities of our time ... That this movement was timely, or that it found its emphatic representative in Marinetti, is undeniable. But like every pioneer, Marinetti too had to fail in the struggle against the past. Because the path he has followed until now cannot remain the straight path leading to tomorrow...<sup>7</sup>

Marinetti and Kassák’s intellectual duel almost flared up into physical conflict when they met in person in Vienna in 1925. As Kassák later recalled:

The Marinetti-Kassák meeting quickly upended order in the classy hotel: we got embroiled in an enormous argument which almost ended up in fisticuffs, because I had already formed my categorical political and artistic-political standpoints, and could not in the least agree with Marinetti and the Futurists, whose work I otherwise acknowledged. Marinetti attacked the table so hard that the waiters came over to try and assuage the quarrel, but to no end. At the end of our meeting, Marinetti shook my hand for a long time and embraced me, saying that we need such artists who are determined to fight for their views.<sup>8</sup>

While Kassák was emphasising the differences between the Hungarian movement and Futurism, at the same time, in 1927, the Romanian journal *Integral: revistă de sinteză modernă* (*Integral: A Magazine of Modern Synthesis*) published a special issue (10/12) on Futurism.

The situation was completely different in Poland and Czechoslovakia, where an autonomous local variant of Futurism emerged. The first Futurist club was opened in Kraków in 1918 by the poet Bruno Jasiński, Stanisław Młodożeniec, and Tytus Czyżewski. Two years later in Warsaw, the Futurists published *Tak* and *Gga*, manifestos in the format of an almanac. Numerous smaller publications followed, including *Litmus Papers* (*Papierek lakmusowy*) and *Knife in the Stomach* (*Nuż v břuhu*). Unlike their Italian colleagues, the Polish Futurists declared themselves anti-nationalist and anti-patriotic, attacking Polish bourgeois nationalists and the church. Their literary works fused anarchist ideas with the Italian Futurists’ alogism. One of the most important Polish Futurists was Czyżewski, whose paintings used Formist modes of expression, while his poetry brought the phenomena of machines, dynamos, and magnetism to life. Futurist events were held in smaller Polish cities, but these were mostly fleeting in nature. Futurism left its most enduring mark on Polish literature. This characteristically Polish phenomenon was perhaps partly due to the popularity of the 1923 publication of texts by Italian Futurists Marinetti, Francesco Cangiullo, and others in the Kraków-based journal *Zwrotnica* (*Railway Switch*). Certain Polish Futurists, such as Jalu Kurek, maintained contact with Marinetti up until 1924.

In Bohemia, Futurism asserted itself in entirely different ways and forms. At the 1913 exhibition of Italian Futurists in Prague, it was not the paintings but rather the sculptures, such as Prampolini’s mobile statues, that captured the attention of modern Czech artists. Bohumil Kubišta was among the first to react to Futurism with his post-1913 Futurist-inspired paintings, but his early death put an end to any further development. Futurism left a more enduring mark in the oeuvre of the versatile Jiří Kroha. Kroha originally worked as an architect, but was equally assured in painting, sculpture, utopian design, and the performing arts. He was among the first to employ film projection in theatre, plays of light and dark, and lighting scenery: in other words, the basic concepts of Futurist theatre. As František Šmejkal has shown, Futurism played an important role in Kroha’s art, particularly his wall paintings for the Montmartre cabaret in Prague and his 1918–1919 drawings and watercolours. Šmejkal wrote:

The dynamism of modern life is expressed in the multiplication of contours. The figures decompose according to their axis of movement, with their most characteristic gestures recurring, and the organic integration of their shapes into their environment. The composition of energetic lines in dynamic diagonals, sharply contrasting colours, and mutually-penetrating geometric forms frequently gives the impression of rotational movement.<sup>9</sup>

Futurism in Czechoslovakia only truly asserted itself after 1920, primarily in journals such as *Disk*, *Pásmo* (*The Zone*), *Veraikon*, *Stavba* (*Construction*) and *RED*. In 1922, Josef Čapek designed the front cover for the Czech edition of Marinetti's *Words in Freedom*. Čapek's paintings suggest the Futurist vision and the threat posed by modern machinery.

From 1921 onwards, Futurism became increasingly important in Prague theatre. Italian Futurist theatre was embodied in the figure of Italian artist Enrico Prampolini.<sup>10</sup> Compared to the other Futurists (Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, or Carrà), Prampolini's paintings were not particularly significant, yet his versatility, organisational flair and energy guaranteed him a special place within the movement. From 1920 to 1922, he was a travelling diplomat for Italian Futurism, working to secure artistic diplomatic contacts and reinforce fraternal and professional ties in various countries, including Czechoslovakia and Russia. A lively circle of writers and painters formed around Prampolini in Prague, which included Rudolf Kremlička, Jan Zrzavý, Bedřich Feuerstein, Josef Šima, Adolf Hoffmeister, and Karel Teige, in other words, artists from both the Stubborn and Devětsil circles. (At the same time, most of these artists and writers were also in close contact with Roman Jakobson.)

Having introduced modern Italian art to an audience that included many Futurists, in Prague's House of Art (Dům Umělců) in October 1921, Prampolini turned his attention mainly towards the theatre. In November that year, he directed the *Futurist Syntheses* at the Švandovo Theatre. This was the first time Prague audiences had witnessed a rotating stage, as well as the geometric, simplified avant-garde costumes and sets originally created for performances by the Italian Synthetic Futurist Theatre (Teatro Sintetico Futurista). Prampolini's key principle was to make the simultaneity of events perceptible. His ideas found fertile ground in Prague, where Feuerstein and Jiří Frejka continued with even bolder experiments at the Liberated Theatre (Osvobozené Divadlo).<sup>11</sup>

In December 1921, the Švandovo Theatre organised a Futurist evening at which two leading personalities of the Italian and Czech movements met for the first time: Marinetti and Teige. The official encounter was followed by a friendly gathering at Teige's flat, where Marinetti read aloud from his own works. Personal contacts between the artists were facilitated by Růžena Zatková, a young Czech artist who had lived in Italy and had close connections to Marinetti's brother. As a result, it was Zatková who received Marinetti in Prague. Influenced by Boccioni, Zatková's works explored the impact of kinetic art, and she also painted and created assemblages, yet her role connecting others overshadowed her artistic significance.

Despite Zatková's involvement and the development of Italian-Czech personal contacts, the two movements swiftly and dramatically parted ways. Prampolini published his manifesto on absolute painting in the Czech journal *Veraikon* in 1922,<sup>12</sup> and publicised the activities of the Devětsil group two years later in his richly illustrated article on Czech art for a Rome-based journal, but this was where his role ended.<sup>13</sup>

Having participated in Marinetti's 1924 Futurist congress in Milan and his Fascist cultural activities, the Devětsil then broke with Marinetti's concepts and politics.<sup>14</sup> Since Teige and colleagues could not adopt Marinetti's views as their own, any genuine, straightforward cooperation became impossible. Nevertheless, a certain artistic affinity remained, mostly manifesting itself outside the theatre, in new typographic possibilities and the re-creation of typography for postcards in particular.<sup>15</sup> Despite Teige's reservations, *Pásmo* published a long article in its tenth issue of 1925 entitled 'Futurism and the Modern Italians', followed by a special issue on Futurism in February 1929. Yet by this time, both schools had abandoned their original aims, irrespective of politics, and could no longer be strictly regarded as avant-garde movements.

Considering these events, publications, and works scattered across space and time, it appears it was only in the early 1920s (and long after its first appearance in 1912 to 1913) that Futurism won any real impact and influence in East-Central Europe, precisely at the time that Marinetti was consciously seeking contacts with these countries.

### Dada in East-Central Europe

International Dada emerged during and largely in opposition to the First World War. During the war, although Dada remained largely out of reach for East-Central-European countries, certain Dada phenomena were present in Polish literature, mixed with Futurism.

In 1918 to 1919, when hostilities ceased in former war zones and the Zürich Dadaists left their temporary home, Dada burst onto the battlefield of European avant-garde art almost without introduction, attracting perhaps even more attention than Futurism had. From the 1920s onwards, the Cabaret Voltaire's uncompromising, internationalist actions to offend middle-class mores, its unlimited desire for freedom, and a distinctive Dada philosophy became important factors and drivers in the development of nascent East-Central-European avant-garde movements.

Yet it was not the Zürich Dadaists that visited Prague in 1920, but their Berlin followers Raoul Hausmann and Richard Huelsenbeck, who introduced their audience to the German Dada scene. The meeting was exceptionally successful, since a group of friends already existed around Artus Černík who were very responsive to Dada. Černík was one of the founders of the Devětsil movement, and would later edit the journal *Pásmo* based in Brno. It was probably due to him that the representatives of German Dada felt immediately at home in Prague. In September 1921, Hausmann returned to Prague with Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch to undertake a Dada lecture tour of Czechoslovakia. Schwitters continued his creative work in Prague, on occasion making his characteristic Merz collages by Prague lamplight. He regularly visited the city until the end of the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> Initially, Schwitters's Dada evenings were mostly attended by local Germans, but later also attracted Czech intellectuals who were relatively early to welcome the spirit of Dada. This enthusiasm culminated in *The Modern Art Bazaar* (*Bazar moderního umění*) exhibition of 1923.

Collages, photos, photomontages, and typographic compositions by the Devětsil artists were inspired by earlier international (and mostly German) Dada works, although this was mostly in terms of their general approach since no concrete borrowings can be observed. Interest in Dada art endured, with Teige publishing many texts on Dada, yet this interest was not exclusive, since Czech artists were equally occupied with Constructivism, L'Esprit Nouveau, and other schools.<sup>17</sup>

Czech Dada in Prague dominated theatre, specifically the Liberated Theatre from 1926 under its directors Jindřich Honzl and Jiří Frejka. This mobile theatre and its broad stylistic repertoire, including occasional cabaret, was the joint work of foreign authors (Marinetti, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Yvan Goll, Jean Cocteau and Alfred Jarry) working together with Czech writers (Vítězslav Nezval, Teige) and Czech directors, dancers, actors, and set designers (Antonín Heythum, Jindřich Štyrský, Ivan Mrkvicka, Zdenek Rossmann and others). Pantomime and dance played a particularly important role. In 1927, Jiří Frejka and a few other members left to establish a new theatre, the Dada, and performed works including Schwitters's *Shadow Game* (*Schattenspiel*) and Cocteau's *The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower* (*Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*). František Šmejkal wrote that, in 1927, 'the first piece by playwrighting and acting associates Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich was performed at the [Liberated Theatre]; it was full of poetist humour and puns in which some form of Dadaist absurdity lived on, and met with huge success from the audience'.<sup>18</sup>

Schwitters's presence and active participation in theatrical and artistic life indicated close contact between the Devětsil group and the Dada scene in Hannover, and his exhibition in Prague at the end of 1926 was one of the highpoints of this collaboration. Thereafter, Czech theatre, cabaret, and fine arts continued to absorb the spirit of Dada.

Two representatives of the Serbian avant-garde, Branko Poljanski and the young Dada writer Dragan Aleksić, discovered Prague together in 1920. One year later, they founded a Dada club in Prague to promote Zenitist concepts.<sup>19</sup> Aleksić organised Dada evenings for the same purpose in smaller Serbian towns, Osijek and Subotica.<sup>20</sup> Poljanski and Aleksić consciously developed connections with Tristan Tzara and Schwitters, and even sought contact with Kassák. Nonetheless, Ljubomir Micić, the founder of the journal *Zenit*, criticised Aleksić's Dada activities, either out of jealousy or antipathy towards Dada. In response, Aleksić established his own journals in 1922, first *Dada-Jazz* and then *Dada-Tank*. Their contents were bold and explicitly



anti-tradition, and the covers reflected the spirit of international Dada, yet neither existed for more than one issue.

Although most Romanian Dadaists were based in Switzerland, the movement's influence did reach Bucharest in the 1920s, primarily at the 1924 exhibitions organised by the journal *Contimporanul* (*Contemporary*).<sup>21</sup>

Polish Dada was practically indistinguishable from Polish literary Futurism or Formism (with which Futurism was partly interlinked). Polish Dada was characterised by playfulness, humour, and fluidity but could not be regarded as a distinct trend within Polish art.<sup>22</sup>

Dada played a decidedly larger role in Hungary, having been discovered as early as 1920 by young members of the *MA* group exiled in Vienna. After the long war years of isolation in Budapest, the world had opened for them in the Austrian capital, allowing them to encounter international Dadaists for the first time. The earlier political character of Zürich Dada, its opposition to war and nationalism, had lost its urgency, even though this had been perhaps most important for Kassák. Nevertheless, from 1921 onwards, major figures from Zürich and international Dada soon started appearing in *MA* with increasing frequency. Éva Forgács wrote:



Fig. 1.3. Lajos Kassák, cover of the Hungarian edition of Tristan Tzara's *The Gas Heart* (*Le Coeur à gaz / Gázszív*), (1922). Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, Budapest.

Kassák thus had to undergo an internal change and a change in approach before [MA] could publish its first issue in 1921, which was almost entirely a Dadaist publication ... He plugged [MA] into the current of the international avant-garde, in which both image and text were of equal significance.<sup>23</sup>

Kassák clearly took great pleasure in publishing artists who, like himself, used two languages of expression: verbal and visual art. They included Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Theo van Doesburg (under the name I. K. Bonset), and Raoul Hausmann. In place of Activist works, MA also featured Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck, George Grosz and others.<sup>24</sup> Even before publishing his own first concrete poems, Kassák included Sándor Barta's 'The Green-Headed Man' ('A zöldfejű ember'), a concrete poem in a perfectly Dada style, in the third issue of MA in 1921.

Dada also influenced Kassák as an artist. His earlier, small collages were as comparable to Kurt Schwitters's Merz prints as his *Numbered Verses* (*Számozott költemények*) were to Schwitters's poems, although neither work borrowed explicitly from Schwitters. Kassák published some of his numbered verses in the February 1921 issue of MA. As Pál Derék writes: 'with the help of reality fragments broken down into ever smaller units during the desemiotising process and through condensing them into 'bricks' (Kassák), a construction method could come about that allowed harmony to enter the work of art'.<sup>25</sup>

Kassák did not want to become a Dadaist and preserved his own integrity, yet he also played with the tools of Dada in his texts and pictures.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the entire linguistic construction and inner logic of his image architecture manifesto, and the repeating contradictions and self-contradictions all reflect the Dada editorial technique.<sup>27</sup> Kassák was particularly interested in Dada as an artistic tendency and method, and proposed an exchange of publications in a 1921 letter to Tzara. He offered MA in return for 391, and requested translations of Tzara and Picabia for publication.<sup>28</sup> Kassák designed the cover for Tzara's *The Gas Heart* (*Le Cœur à gaz / Gázszív*),<sup>29</sup> and would continue to count on Tzara's friendship for many years, as their correspondence attests (Fig. 1.3).<sup>30</sup>

At the same time that Kassák discovered international Dada, MA began publishing works by a new contributor: László Moholy-Nagy. In 1921, Moholy-Nagy's entire approach, his painting and drawing style comprised of mechanical elements, bore most resemblance to international Dada and Picabia's style in particular. The following year however, MA took a decisive turn towards Constructivism and the geometric abstract, and after 1925 further Dada phenomena appeared only in Budapest and mostly in literature and theatre.

This period after 1925 marked the second era of Dada. The new, revised approach emerged in Prague and Budapest theatre, with contemporary plays, pantomimes, dances, Dada sets and directorial style. In Budapest, the writer Ödön Palasovszky set up the Green Donkey Theatre (*Zöld Szamár Színház*), named after a painting by Sándor Bortnyik (who cannot be described as a Dadaist). Bortnyik had also returned to Hungary in the meantime. He designed the sets and wrote the *Green Donkey* (*Zöld szamár*) pantomime based on his experiences in Germany and at the Bauhaus: the play was published in the fourth (1925) issue of *Periszkóp* (*Periscope*), based in Arad, Transylvania. Nevertheless, the Green Donkey Theatre only represented Hungarian Dada for a short while, and in a somewhat isolated fashion. At around the same time, another (exclusively) literary centre came into being, the short-lived Budapest journal *IS* (*Also*), which published Dada and Surrealist writings by Árpád Mezei, Imre Pán, and György Gerő from 1924 to 1925. Thereafter, Dada was only present in Hungarian intellectual life blended together with other schools, into which it slowly dissolved.

### **The Influence of De Stijl: Vilmos Huszár**

The impact of De Stijl, its geometric, puritan art and meticulous theory, coincided with Dada's influence in East-Central Europe. The leading personality and theorist of De Stijl, Theo van Doesburg, was also active as a Dada poet under the pen name I. K. Bonset at the same time, thus paradoxically embodying the fusion of these two otherwise contradictory movements.

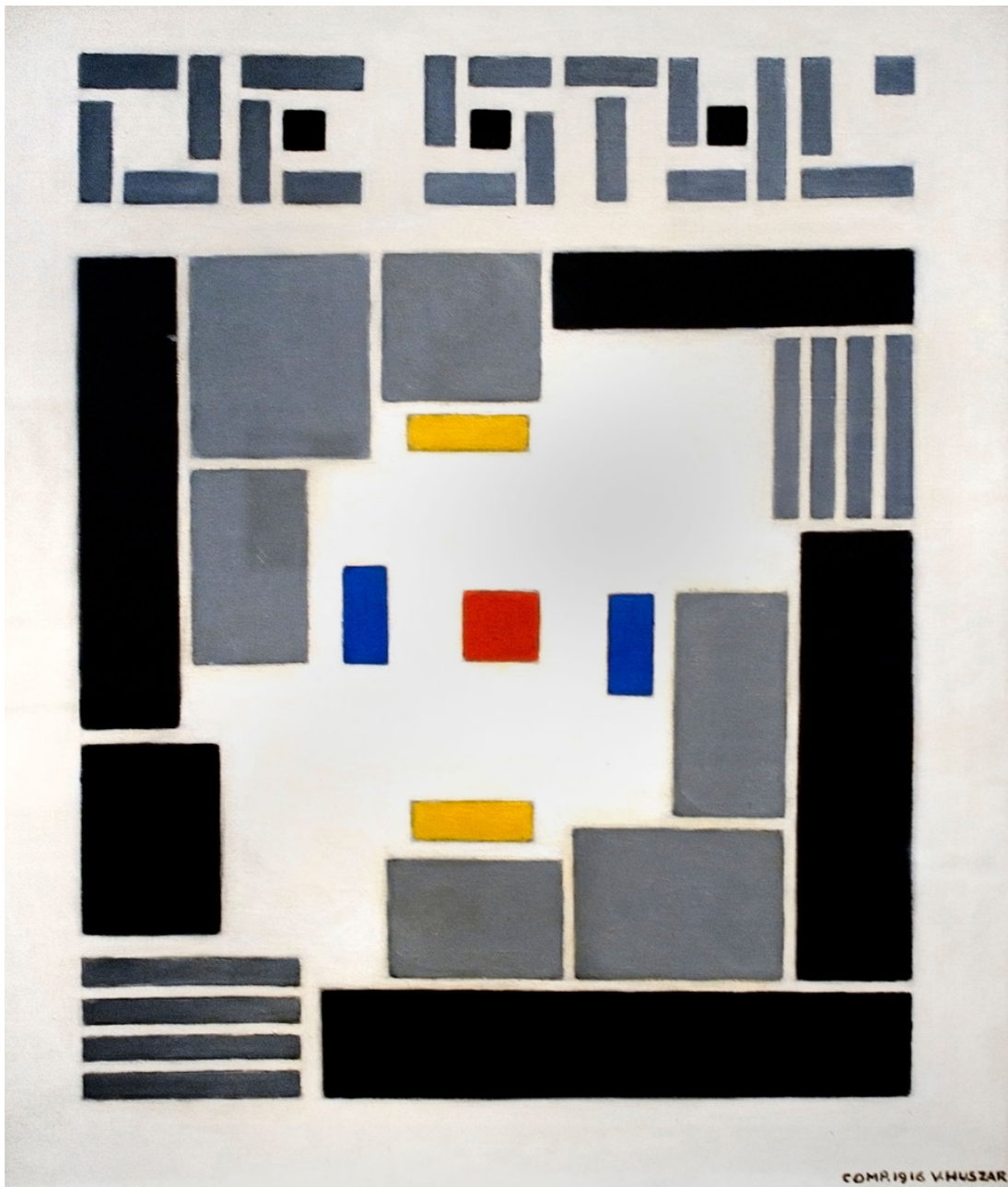


Fig. 1.4. Vilmos Huszár, *Abstract Composition* (draft for the journal cover of *De Stijl*, 1916). Oil on panel, 42.3 x 38.9 cm. Peter Horree / Alamy Stock Photo. © 2019 Erven Vilmos Huszár/ DACS.

De Stijl as a movement was inseparable from the journal of the same name. Its first issue was published in 1917 with a logo and inscription by the Hungarian artist Vilmos Huszár (Fig. 1.4).<sup>31</sup>

Huszár was still very young when he arrived in the Netherlands from Hungary, influenced by József Rippl-Rónai's decorative, colourful style and Béla Czóbel's paintings from his Fauve-inspired neo-Impressionist phase. Huszár's early pictures in the Neo style confirmed his confident sense of colour and compositional skills, although his painting style changed somewhat in later years once he had settled permanently in the Netherlands. From 1916, he developed towards pure abstraction, making his first stained glass windows. Representing a new genre within De Stijl, they featured a characteristic ensemble of traditional techniques, traditional or gothic window frames, and framed geometric abstract composition.

The conceptual background and art theory of the De Stijl movement was mainly based on Piet Mondrian's philosophy of art, the theory of neo-Plasticism, which also greatly influenced Huszár's theoretical writings and works. According to Mariann Gergely:

the three primary colours (red, yellow, blue) are used in place of the colours of nature; distinct colour plains appear instead of the illusion of spatial form; and straight vertical and horizontal lines represent the eternal latitudinal and longitudinal dimensions of existence.<sup>32</sup>



Huszár's initially-abstract De Stijl art loosened somewhat in his interior designs. They realised the same De Stijl principles as his pictures, but in three-dimensional space with colourful wall surfaces. His *Berlin Model* (*Berlin makett*), co-created with Gerrit Rietveld, won great success at the 1923 Great Berlin Art Exhibition [*sic*]. The same year, and following Van Doesburg's example, Huszár organised a Dada lecture tour with Van Doesburg and Schwitters, during which he presented his mechanically-movable dance figures. He would later design numerous functional, applied-art objects, just like the Bauhaus masters, before returning to painting.

The intellectual encounters and rivalries between *De Stijl* journal and *MA* lasted from 1921 to 1924. Kassák published a poem by I. K. Bonset (Van Doesburg) in April 1921, followed one year later by De Stijl works and an article by Van Doesburg with twelve illustrations in June 1922. In return, *De Stijl* published works and texts by Moholy-Nagy, László Péri and Kassák.<sup>33</sup> However, relations between the two movements collapsed in 1923. In 'Correction (for the attention of *De Stijl*)', published in the July 1923 issue of *MA*, art critic Ernő Kállai hit out at De Stijl, a school he considered exclusively Constructivist and, as such, out of touch with everyday life since 'it cannot bring together people into a society'. Cooperation between *De Stijl* and *MA* thus came to an end, the intellectual duel continuing not only within the printed press, but also at (and beyond) the Bauhaus, where Van Doesburg found equally little success. Although Van Doesburg wanted to further disseminate his concepts within the Bauhaus, the De Stijl course of his Weimar free school was not made part of the Bauhaus curriculum. Ultimately, it was László Moholy-Nagy, and not Van Doesburg, who was appointed as professor at the Bauhaus in the spring of 1923.<sup>34</sup>

Other East-Central-European artists who came into contact with De Stijl included the Czech Emil Filla, and members of the Polish BLOK and Praesens groups. A prominent figure in Czech Cubism, Filla left his homeland during the war and settled in the Netherlands, in part due to his friendship with Béla Czóbel who already lived there. Filla had encountered the De Stijl movement in 1917, as his correspondence with Van Doesburg and Paul Citroen attests.<sup>35</sup> However, his friendships with De Stijl members dwindled after he returned home in 1921.

The encounter between De Stijl and Polish representatives of Constructivism was substantially different, and less personal in nature.<sup>36</sup> Poland did not have a De Stijl movement, but rather a Polish De Stijl approach. The Poles had already clarified their own theoretical and practical concepts when they came into contact with De Stijl. Notwithstanding the many differences, the relevance of the encounter lay in the fact that the De Stijl's principles, organising structures, and thoughts on the functions of art were fairly analogous to those of their Polish counterparts. Polish and Dutch artists were well acquainted with each other's activities. When *BLOK* started publishing in 1924, Mieczysław Szczuka requested that Van Doesburg publicise the Polish avant-garde in his journal in return for *BLOK* advertising *De Stijl* in almost every issue. Both *BLOK* and *Praesens* reproduced illustrations and theoretical texts by Dutch artists. Among the Poles, it was primarily Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro who critically explored Van Doesburg's architectural concepts and counter-compositions. Nevertheless, they held Van Doesburg's art in exceptional regard, in particular because he focussed his attention towards space, rather than volume. Just like Van Doesburg, the Polish Constructivists regarded space as the key starting point for modern creative sculpture and architecture. They agreed that isolated surfaces, pure colours, and straight lines were crucial in architecture to foreground volume as much as possible. Their theories—Van Doesburg's Elementarism, Strzemiński's Unism, and Stażewski's Constructivism—had much in common.<sup>37</sup>

All differences aside, it was the Polish BLOK and Praesens groups whose activities most resembled the thinking, abstract geometric style, and later Functionalist works of De Stijl artists. This was a true intellectual meeting of minds whose influence would be felt for years to come.

*Translated by Gwen Jones*

- 1 Artists of the Hungarian Neo grouping typically studied in Paris; some were pupils of Matisse (e.g. Vilmos Perlrrott-Csaba, Géza Bornemissza) or had joint exhibitions with him (Béla Czöbel, Sándor Ziffer). Intensive colours in plain compositions, strong contours and simplified shapes characterise the 'Neo' style. The first Hungarian avant-garde group was formed, in 1909, out of chiefly Neo artists (they were later known also as 'Searchers'). Nyolcak (The Eight) was an avant-garde art movement of Hungarian painters active mostly in Budapest from 1909 to 1918. They were connected to Post-Impressionism and radical movements in literature and music as well, and led to the rise of modernism in art culture. The members of [Nyolcak] were: Róbert Berény, Dezső Czigány, Béla Czöbel, Károly Kernstok, Ödön Márffy, Dezső Orbán, Bertalan Pór and Lajos Tihanyi. They were primarily inspired by French painters and art movements, including Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Fauvism ... While [Nyolcak] as a group had only three exhibitions, their activity was of immense significance, as their influence went far beyond the visual arts. The exhibitions were accompanied by series of symposia, and by events featuring new Hungarian literature and contemporary music'. 'Wikiwand', accessed 30 October 2019, [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/The\\_Eight\\_\(painters\)](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/The_Eight_(painters)). (*The Editor*)
- 2 *Ekspressionizem in nova stvarnost na Slovenskem 1920–1930*, exhibition catalogue (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1986).
- 3 *Kortársak szemével. Írások a magyar művészetről 1896–1945* (Budapest: Corvina, 1967), pp. 127–32.
- 4 Lajos Kassák, 'Carlo D. Carrà *Anarchistatemetés* című képe alá', *A Tett* 11 (1916): pp. 174–76. For more on this subject, see: Julia Szabó, 'Some influences of Italian Futurism on Hungarian painters', *Acta Historiae Artium* 24/1–4 (1978): pp. 435–43.
- 5 The art of the virtually self-taught Lajos Gulácsy (1882–1932) is not associated with any particular school, although he is occasionally said to be a forerunner of Surrealism on account of the kind of dreamy lyricism lingering over his paintings. His works also evoke a medieval or Pre-Raphaelite sensibility and feature Rococo-style figures that live in Naconxypan, a fantasyland of his invention. Upon the outbreak of the First World War he suffered a nervous break-down and from that time on was repeatedly treated in psychiatric sanatoriums, and died as an inmate of a psychiatric institution. (*The Editor*)
- 6 See Béla Uitz, *Háború (Szuronybarc)* (1917) and *Háborús rajz*, both reproduced in Júlia Szabó, *A Magyar aktivizmus művészete 1915–1927* (Budapest: Corvina, 1981), pp. 56–57.
- 7 Lajos Kassák, 'F. T. Marinetti (a futuristák római kongresszusa alkalmából)', *Periszkop* 1 (1925), Arad. Reprinted in János Kovács (ed.), *Periszkop 1925–1926. Antológia* (Bucharest: Kriterion, 1980), p. 272.
- 8 Lajos Kassák, *Az izmusok története* (Budapest: Magvető, 1979), p. 275.
- 9 František Šmejkal, 'Futurismus a české umění', *Umění* 1 (1988): pp. 20–53.
- 10 *Enrico Prampolini*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Civica (Modena, 1978); Luigi Tallarico, *Verifica del futurismo* (Rome: Giovanni Volpe, 1970).
- 11 Plays directed by Prampolini in Prague include: p. Buzzi, *Parallelepiped* (Švandovo Theatre, 1921); Marinetti, *Il tamburo di fuoco* (National Theatre, 1922); *La Rinascita dello spirito*; E. Morselli, *Glauco* (National Theatre, 1923); William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (National Theatre, 1924); L. Folgore, *Quadrante d'amore* (National Theatre, 1924). See: Federico Brook and Vittorio Minardi (eds.) *E. Prampolini* (Rome: Istituto Italo-Latino Americano, 1974), unpaginated.
- 12 Enrico Prampolini, 'Tendenze della pittura italiana d'avanguardia e nuova pittura assoluta', *Veraikon* (April 1922): p. 44–48.
- 13 Enrico Prampolini, *Feuerstein, NOI 2* (1924): p. 46.
- 14 František Šmejkal, 'Le constructivisme tchèque', *Bulletin analytique des périodiques d'Europe et de l'Est* 29 (1983): pp. 38–40; Květoslav Chvatík and Zdeněk Pešat, *Poetismus* (Prague: Odeon, 1967), pp. 109–40.
- 15 Giovanni Lista, *L'Art postal futuriste* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1978), p. 38.
- 16 František Šmejkal, 'Schwitters und Prag', in Michael Erlhoff (ed.) *Kurt Schwitters Almanach* (Hannover: Postskriptum, 1983), pp. 109–40.
- 17 Karel Teige, 'O dadaistech', in *Tvorba 2* (1927): p. 168.
- 18 František Šmejkal, 'A 20-as évek cseh avantgardja', in *Devětsil*, exhibition catalogue (Budapest: Múcsarnok, 1989), unpaginated.
- 19 Zenitism was the specifically-Yugoslav avant-garde aesthetics born around the magazine *Zenit*, founded and edited by Ljubomir Micić. The magazine was published in Zagreb (February 1921–May 1923) and Belgrade (June 1923–December 1926). (*The Editor*)
- 20 Irina Subotić, *Likovni krog revije 'Zenit' (1921–1926)* (Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete, 1995), p. 7.
- 21 Ion Pop, 'Dada Rumänien', in Stephan Waetzoldt (ed.) *Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Neue Nationalgalerie and Akademie der Künste, 1977), 3/111–3/114.
- 22 Andrzej Turowski, 'Dada Polen', in Stephan Waetzoldt (ed.) *Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre*, 3/100–3/102; Andrzej Lam, *Polska awangarda poetycka. Programy lat 1917–1923. Antologia* (Kraków: WŁ, 1969).
- 23 Éva Forgács, 'Le a széplelkek macskazenéjével', in Forgács, *Az ellopott pillanat* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 1944), p. 140. See also: Imre Bori, *A secessziótól a dadáig* (Novi Sad: Fórum, 1969).
- 24 Activism, an avant-garde movement of progressive artists, philosophers, and writers, was launched by Lajos Kassák around 1915–1916. The Activists had radical views on society and arts without, however, a uniform programme, and took part in reforming the institution of art during the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. (*The Editor*)
- 25 Pál Deréky, *A magyar avantgárd irodalom (1915–1930) olvasókönyve* (Budapest: Argumentum, 1998), p. 28.
- 26 Teige nevertheless regarded Kassák's 1922 appearance as Dadaist. Teige, 'O dadaistech', p. 168.
- 27 Lajos Kassák, 'Képarchitektúra', *MA* (March 1922): unpaginated.
- 28 Lajos Kassák, letter to Tristan Tzara, 1922; Lajos Kassák, letter to Ödön Mihályi, 1921. Budapest, Kassák Museum. See also: Péter György and Gábor Pataki (eds.), *A Dada Magyarországon* (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, 1982).
- 29 Tzara, *Gáz-Szív* (Vienna: MA, 1922). Front cover by Lajos Kassák.
- 30 The correspondence is split between the Bibliothèque Littéraire Doucet (Paris) and the Kassák Museum (Budapest).
- 31 On Vilmos Huszár, see: Sjarel Ex and Els Hoek (eds.), *Vilmos Huszár* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1985); Éva Bajkay, 'A Hungarian Founder of the Dutch Constructivists', *Acta Historiae Artium* 30 (1984): pp. 311–26.
- 32 Marianna Gergely, *Huszár Vilmos (1884–1960) festő, tervező* (Budapest: Hungarian National Gallery, 1985), unpaginated.
- 33 László Moholy-Nagy, 'Produktion-Reproduktion', in *De Stijl* 6/7 (1922).
- 34 Krisztina Passuth, 'Théo van Doesburg et le mouvement d'avantgarde hongrois', in Serge Lemoine (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg, Peinture, Architecture, Théorie* (Paris: Philippe Sers, 1990).
- 35 Vojtech Lahoda, 'Emil Filla en Nederland', *Jong Holland* 9/3 (1993): pp. 45–7.
- 36 Andrzej Turowski, 'De Stijl i Polska Awangarda', in Paul Overy, *De Stijl* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1978), pp. 140–58.
- 37 A fundamentally-important text on this theme is Andrzej Turowski, 'L'avant-garde polonaise et Théo van Doesburg', in Lemoine (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg*, pp. 172–9.



Is the Cubism  
that is Czech Also  
Universal? Czech  
Art Theory (1921–  
1958) and Cubism  
as a Cultural  
and Transcultural  
Phenomenon

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### **Is the Cubism that is Czech Also Universal? Czech Art Theory (1921–1958) and Cubism as a Cultural and Transcultural Phenomenon**

The title of this study refers to Noam Chomsky's 1957 book *Syntactic Structures*. In this book Chomsky showed, among other things, that the attempt to express meaning through grammatical construction is fruitless. Grammatical form is arbitrary and always corresponds with meaning in an 'imperfect' and 'vague' manner.<sup>2</sup> The urgent need to ascertain whether the art to which we now give the name 'Cubism' is universal, even when it was created in the Czech lands, is projected into a breakneck syntactical form, one that makes no promise of solving a burning problem, but rather implies a series of questions of a different and more fundamental kind: is Cubism Czech? Is Cubism universal? Is Cubism a thing at all? The text that follows does not aim to answer the opening question, nor the half-questions that arise from it, in spite of the fact that it will repeatedly pose them. It will show that however we formulate the question regarding the 'internationalism' of Czech Cubism, this will always involve an instinctive and illogical grammatical operation, which will bypass the question's real significance.

There are several causes of this peculiarity, and of course not all of these can be grasped with a metaphor from the realm of revisionist linguistics. In what ways were the values of Cubism's 'Czechness' or 'internationalism' defined in Czech art theory, and how did these concepts influence the dialogue, or the absence of dialogue, between local art history and 'Western' art-historical discourse? It is necessary to look for a response in the early texts about Cubism. As this study will show, studies by important Czech personalities such as Vincenc Kramář, Václav Nebeský, Jan Mukařovský and others had great significance for the construction of Czech Cubism's image and for the choice of the instruments with which it was methodologically anchored. The period covered in this text is delimited by two books by Vincenc Kramář: *Cubism (Kubismus)*, which came out in 1921, and *Questions of Modern Art (Otázky moderního umění)*, published in 1958. But my study will also make selective reference to art-historical conceptions that were formulated later, for instance Miroslav Lamač's 'Cubo-Expressionism' (*kuboexpresionismus*). Attention will be devoted too to other methods of interpreting Cubism favoured by Czech art history, methods partly growing out of early Cubist theory, among which we find research into 'modern Realism', biographism, an idiosyncratic form of iconology enriched with suggestions of Gestalt theory, and the conception of Czech Cubism as pure 'Picassoism'. This essay will analyse to what extent these interpretive frameworks really captured the characteristic features of local pre-war modernism and how far they represented a tendency to mythologise local modern art and culture.

The question of the extent to which Czech Cubism can be considered a phenomenon of universal art history is connected with the symptomatic gulf between a dominant, semiotically-oriented 'Western' history of art and Czech art history. This ensues from the radically different evaluations of the phenomenon commonly known as Czech Cubism in the local and in the 'Western' context. My aim is not to negate the values and approaches of these two art-historical

discourses, nor to exalt the qualities of one methodological framework at the expense of the other. On the contrary, through the revision of the existing interpretations and approaches of Western and local art historians I will attempt to draw attention to their intersections of viewpoint, as a potential inspiration for a future reciprocal and transcultural dialogue. A number of these possible intersections are indicated in Czech contributions to early Cubist theory, and all the more precisely in some of their least-remembered aspects.

### **Is the Cubism that is Kahnweiler's also Kramář's?**

In 1938 the aesthetician Jan Mukařovský expounded a thesis about the Cubist picture which, in the context of structural-linguistic analyses of Cubism, in retrospect appears absolutely fundamental. That is, he observed in the Cubist 'object-sign' a synecdochic character. In his text 'Towards a Noetics and Poetics of Surrealism in Painting', he wrote: 'Cubism has now revealed the possibilities of the poetic trope known as synecdoche, which is defined as the representation of the whole by a part'.<sup>3</sup> This fact is interesting for the reason that, when Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois emphasised the metonymic, synecdochic feature of Cubism in their semiotic interpretations, they based their analysis on Roman Jakobson's texts 'What is Poetry?' (1933–1934) and, particularly, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances' (1956).<sup>4</sup> Yet the affinity between Mukařovský's views on Cubism and the theses of Russian Formalism, which thanks to Jakobson resounded in the Prague Linguistic Circle in the form of Viktor Shklovskii's theory about the creative method of the artwork 'defamiliarising' the work's referent, was not too widely acknowledged in Czech histories of art.<sup>5</sup> The result of this was that Mukařovský's significance for the 'New Art History' was long overlooked in the Czech lands. That Mukařovský's text 'Art as a Semiological Fact' was included by Norman Bryson in his anthology *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France* is a fact of which very few Czechs are aware.<sup>6</sup>

Vojtěch Lahoda, however, has expressed the interesting view that Mukařovský, during his reflections on the synecdochic nature of the Cubist sign in the 1930s, came back to the idea of Cubism as a lyricism of artistic elements, as it had been formulated in the 1921 book *Cubism* by Vincenc Kramář, a graduate of the Vienna School of Art History.<sup>7</sup> Karel Šrp has also acknowledged that Kramář's concept of Cubism is close to Structuralism in places. However, he saw an essential difference in the fact that for Jan Mukařovský the Cubist picture served above all as an example of things depicted as signs, while on the contrary Kramář always grasped it as a depiction of 'the thing in itself'. Mukařovský, in contrast to Kramář, was aware of the essential gap between empirical reality and its depiction.<sup>8</sup> Mukařovský's sign-based conception of Cubism was closer in this regard to another founding figure of Cubist theory, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler.

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, a dealer in pictures who before the First World War had helped Kramář create one of the first and most significant collections of Cubist art, drew attention to the sign-based character of Cubism in his studies of the 1940s, specifically the books *Juan Gris: His Life, Work and Writings* (*Juan Gris: sa vie, son œuvre, ses écrits*) and *Picasso's Sculptures* (*Les sculptures de Picasso*).<sup>9</sup> But already in his 1920 book *The Rise of Cubism* (*Der Weg zum Kubismus*) Kahnweiler evaluated Cubism as a new kind of language, founded on the conflictual relationship between the memory image in the mind of the spectator and the forms represented in the painting.<sup>10</sup> Kramář wrote his 1921 book *Cubism* in reaction to Kahnweiler's monograph. On a number of things he was in agreement with Kahnweiler. He emphasised the revolutionary nature of the formal methods of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque's Cubism, including the opening up of form and the breakdown of the object, the disruption of the perspectival construction of space and of natural light sources.<sup>11</sup> Kramář believed that, from out of the elements of the Cubist composition, an 'image of the object ... arises ... in the mind of the comprehending spectator',<sup>12</sup> and thus he confirmed Kahnweiler's conception of the Cubist picture as an analytical study of the object that is then composed anew in the mind of the spectator.<sup>13</sup> Kahnweiler supported this thesis with a quotation from Immanuel Kant about the fusion of multiple impressions into a single perception.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to Kahnweiler, Kramář, in his book *Cubism*, did not employ the metaphor of language in his analysis of Cubism, nor did he reflect on the nature of pictorial representation.<sup>15</sup>

Kramář considered Cubism a ‘lyricism of form’, and he described Picasso’s collages from his synthetic period as ‘the most perfect possible equivalent to the reality emerging from his soul’.<sup>16</sup> Václav Nebeský, in his 1921 review of Kramář’s publication, compared the two theorists’ concepts.<sup>17</sup> According to Kahnweiler, he wrote, ‘the spectator’s mind, following the hints and orienting guidelines of the Cubist construction’, conducts a ‘retroactive compositional operation’, which results in a ‘final vision’.<sup>18</sup> This vision ‘presents ... an image of that same reality that was subjected to artistic transfiguration’. By contrast, ‘for Kramář’, wrote Nebeský, ‘an impression arises in the spectator’s imagination of a reality of a quite different nature, an entirely spiritual and interior reality’. Nebeský concluded his account with the assertion that Kahnweiler’s interpretation is ‘more French’ and Kramář’s ‘more Slavic’.<sup>19</sup> In his 1923 study *Art After Impressionism (Umění po impresionismu)* Nebeský himself argued along the same lines as Kramář in speaking about a deep spirituality, ‘running into mysticism’, in regard to Picasso’s Cubism.<sup>20</sup> Nebeský’s assessment shows how contemporaneous views about Kahnweiler’s ‘linguistically’ based interpretation of Cubism prevented this aspect of Cubist theory from taking root in Czech art history. The paradox remains that Nebeský also attempted a very idiosyncratic structuralist investigation of Cubism himself, though of course without arousing any greater interest in this method within the dominant Czech discourse.

Indeed, Czech histories of art—as compared with the theories of Václav Nebeský and the aesthetics of Jan Mukařovský—retained a cautious distance from the structuralist interpretations of Cubism to which Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler was inclined and with which even Picasso himself identified in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup> During one of his conversations with Kramář at this time, Picasso sketched out a human head drawn partly in vague outline and partly in Cubist style, so as to express the arbitrariness of the artistic sign in relation to the referent. Kramář was decidedly unconvinced by Picasso’s argument and, in his 1958 book *Questions of Modern Art*, he stated that ‘according to Picasso’s latest opinion all these various methods of representing nature are merely signs with which we communicate, and we cannot declare any one of these more truthful than any other, ... of course, the Cubist Picasso did not judge things this way ... at that time, driven not by a programme but by an inner necessity, he pursued the form of expression that, in his judgement, best approximated things as they really are’.<sup>22</sup>

Writing of ‘semantic philosophy, or the theory of signs and symbols’, Czech art historian Jiří Padrta argued in 1964 that this philosophy’s influence was so acute throughout the 1930s that a number of that era’s intellectuals succumbed to it, including even Picasso, ‘who in one interview from that time speaks entirely in this philosophical vein’.<sup>23</sup> ‘In agreement with part of the specialist literature’ devoted to ‘the problem of language and written script’, Kahnweiler, according to Padrta, came to conclusions that strongly favoured the concept of the artwork as a ‘formative script’, which has an autonomous existence as given by the laws and rules of artistic creation, but which at the same time, ‘in the communicative sense’, ‘refers to the outside world’. For Kahnweiler Cubism was ‘a new kind of realism’, using unconventional methods of depiction. Kahnweiler rejected all abstract art as decorativism, a play of ‘hedonistic spirits’, while those Romanticisms that abandon the purely plastic aspect and draw assistance from literature and psychology were designated as an art that is ‘impure in method’. Padrta considers Kahnweiler’s conception too limited, incapable of appreciating that extensive field of artistic creation deriving from an inner model of the world.<sup>24</sup>

### **Is the History of Cubism that is Czech ‘Semiotic’?**

Jiří Padrta was one of the most significant Czech modern art historians of the second half of the twentieth century, and his critical assessments of Kahnweiler’s sign-based conception of Cubism show how Czech art history after the Second World War was unable, or unwilling, to connect back to the structuralist and semiotic experiments of interwar Czech art theory. In Mukařovský’s case the lack of appreciation was probably due to the fact that Mukařovský himself, adopting the Stalinist rhetoric of the early 1950s, repented for his interwar ideas, which were supposedly laden with bourgeois Formalism.<sup>25</sup> But, as was mentioned earlier, neither did Czech histories of modern art elaborate on the structuralist impulses in Václav Nebeský’s texts. Nebeský introduced his study *Art as a Manifestation of the Spirit (Umění jako projev ducha)*, written in the early 1940s,



with a short summary of contemporary issues within semantics and examined the difference between ‘meaning, the sign and the mark’ (*význam, znak* and *značka*).<sup>26</sup> Of course Nebeský’s work remained unconnected with structural-linguistic discourse; he attempted rather to formulate an independent aesthetic systematics, which finally resulted in his formulation of three basic categories: ‘physioplastics, psychoplastics and ideoplastics’ (*fyzioplastika, psychoplastika* and *ideoplastika*).<sup>27</sup>

The originality of Nebeský’s sign-based analyses was already anticipated by his reflections from the early 1920s on the Cubism of Bohumil Kubišta, in which he offered an interesting way of thinking through the representation of spatial depth in Kubišta’s pictures from 1912 to 1915.<sup>28</sup> According to Nebeský, in these pictures Kubišta employed planimetric and stereometric representations, with which he either emptied full volume or filled empty volume.<sup>29</sup> Planimetrics presents geometric figures as part of a two-dimensional surface, whether in the form of planar curves or closed shapes. In contrast, stereometrics is the form of geometry representing three-dimensional space, with objects taking the form of polyhedrons or round solids. Through the hypothesis he drew, Nebeský offered a particularly substantial explanation of Kubišta’s motivations for his deployment of these two types of geometric representation. According to him, Kubišta, as a ‘painter with the instincts of a sculptor’, originally conceived the pictorial ‘space purely as a stage for the malleable and expressive life of the object depicted: as empty volume seen from the inside’. Nebeský points out, however, that with the passage of time Kubišta became ever more interested in the ‘question of the equal empowerment of painterly elements’: in other words, ‘how to find the common denominator between actor and stage, how to formally unify the solid volume seen from outside with the empty volume seen from inside?’ (Fig. 2.1).<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 2.1. Bohumil Kubišta, *Painterly Still Life (Záviš malířské, 1913)*. Oil on canvas, 47 x 34.5 cm. Private collection.

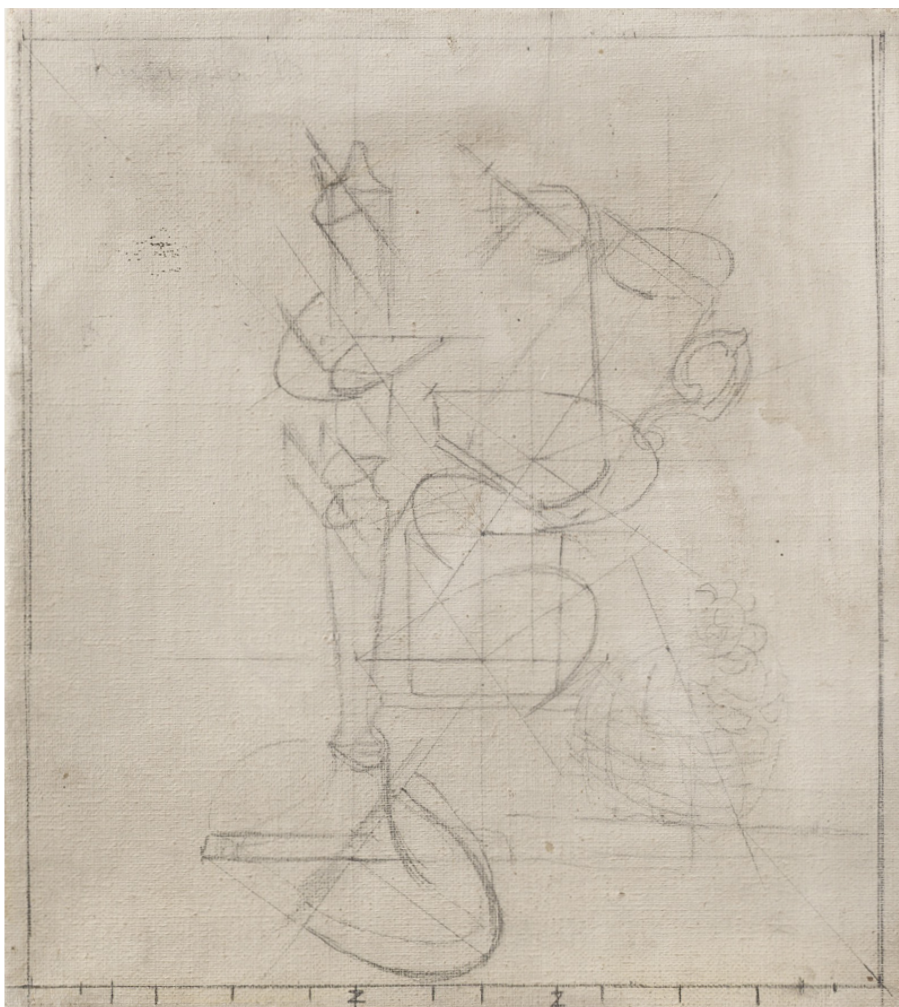


Fig. 2.2. Bohumil Kubišta, *Still Life (Zátiší)*, 1912). Pencil on canvas, 33.5 x 32 cm. National Gallery, Prague. © 2018 The National Gallery in Prague.

Nebeský's approach to Kubišta's handling of pictorial space is not dissimilar to the semiological-phenomenological exploration of Picasso's paintings in the texts of Leo Steinberg. In his article 'Picasso's Sleepwatchers', Steinberg engages in reflections on spatial abbreviations, slants and slopes, by means of which a picture makes present even that which should not be seen, namely the backs of the objects depicted.<sup>31</sup> A conception of space not as a visual continuum but as an interior modelled by contact and tension, as a web of chance palpations, reachings, graspings, and circlings, is what Steinberg discovered in Picasso's *The Young Ladies of Avignon (Les Demoiselles d'Avignon)*.<sup>32</sup> Nebeský defined the means by which Kubišta conceived pictorial space, identifying these with planimetric and stereometric representation. A few decades later Rosalind Krauss, in her study 'The Motivation of the Sign', applied structural-linguistic methods to Picasso's work from 1909 to 1912. Her conclusion was that Picasso began to use the semiotic repertoire of collage at that point when he realised that the signifying activity of proto-Cubism and analytical Cubism unavoidably fails to create the illusion of spatial depth. He thus began to thematise the absence of depth 'inscribed' on the 'collage surface'.<sup>33</sup> Nebeský's analysis of Kubišta's Cubist re-evaluation of pictorial representation shows that the signifying activity of Kubišta's greatest works does not thematise flatness, or the absence of depth, such as Krauss later found in Picasso's collages; rather, by applying a combination of different geometric models to pictorial signs, Kubišta's work disrupts depth in its hitherto familiar form (Fig. 2.2).<sup>34</sup>

### Is Cubism A Thing At All? The Structural Linguistic Response

Within the framework of 'Western' art-historical discourse, Rosalind Krauss, Leo Steinberg, and Yve-Alain Bois have, since the 1970s, been among the most influential interpreters of Cubism. At a time when Czech histories of art had succeeded in forgetting the structuralist legacy of Jan Mukařovský and Václav Nebeský, these 'Western' art historians were connecting with a strong

tradition of semiotic and formally-analytical interpretations of Cubist paintings. Yve-Alain Bois drew predominantly on Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's work in his texts, and chose among his secondary literature a study by Werner Spies.<sup>35</sup> Krauss's work in many ways developed out of the analyses of Clement Greenberg, the semiotics of C.S. Peirce, and the semiology of Roland Barthes.<sup>36</sup> Leo Steinberg, meanwhile, used concepts from Saussurean linguistics for his analysis of Picasso's Cubist works.<sup>37</sup>

Rosalind Krauss summarised the aims of a semiologically-oriented art history in her text 'The Motivation of the Sign'. Researchers who rely on concepts from structural linguistics are attempting, in her view, to capture something that we might call a general history and theory of representation. The semiological interpreter, according to Krauss, remains forever alert to the reality of the huge gulf that divides the signified (the conjoined twin of the signifier within the semiological structure of the sign) from the referent. The signified is a mental concept: the meaning. The referent is the (real) object. The system produces the sign as a component of a vast network of other signs, and the concept-meaning is a function of that same system; it is affected by it. Contrary to this is the status of the concept-meaning within an iconologically oriented art history, which looks for meaning—seen as similar to the positivist truths of the scientific disciplines—outside of this system.<sup>38</sup> Krauss, with the aid of structural linguistics, sets herself in sharp opposition to iconological histories of art.

Krauss focussed exclusively on Picasso, as did Yve-Alain Bois in his study 'The Semiology of Cubism' (published in the same collection). Bois openly admitted that he connects the epistemological turn in the history of representation solely with the creative achievements of Picasso and refused Braque any credit for the innovations that enabled Cubism's 'semiological epiphany'.<sup>39</sup> In addressing the question of the origin and the true character of authentic Cubism, both authors responded with a single name: Pablo Picasso. Though Krauss and Bois represent a revisionist art history, they proved unable in their reflections to rid themselves of the geographical limits of canonical Cubism. They remained fixed upon Paris as the ultimate modernist centre and on Picasso as the sole true Cubist, subverting established models of representation. Nebeský's semiotic account of Kubišta's treatment of spatial depth has shown us that the application of structural linguistic methods, even within the context of local manifestations of Cubism, can reveal independent subversive attempts at a new type of pictorial representation. Nebeský also proved that this type of art-historical work can easily do without the traditional models of thinking, which relentlessly demand a solution to the question of influence coming from the dominant centre. But this example failed to resonate more strongly in later, retrospective assessments of Cubism, whether in Czech or in foreign art-historical discourse.<sup>40</sup>

In 1971 Rosalind Krauss wrote a review of an exhibition staged by Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, which for the first time ever included Czech examples in an overview of Cubist art. Krauss's review did not speak favourably of Czech Cubism: '17 works by the Czech adepts, Filla, Kubista [*sic*], Procházka, Benes [*sic*], Gutfreund and Capek [*sic*] attest to the orgy of academicism that the new style unleashed on European art'.<sup>41</sup> It is not surprising that Czech experts on Cubism did not convey Krauss's opinion back to Czech readers. In my view, a text by Edward F. Fry from the book *Czech Cubism 1909–1925* (*Český kubismus 1909–1925*) can be read as one of the few direct references to Krauss' critique: 'those whose standards of Cubism are set by the works of Picasso and Braque and their peers should not too hastily dismiss the Prague school of Cubism's rise during the years before the World War One'.<sup>42</sup> It is very tempting to refuse to engage with Krauss's assessment, and to respond to it with the following simple condemnation: that this is an arrogant statement by a representative of cultural hegemony and a defender of the Western canon, who has not bothered to acquaint herself better with the phenomenon she criticises. But the whole matter is more complicated; it makes sense to analyse her critique, and to do so in a wider context. Several texts by Yve-Alain Bois make clearer the semioticians' motivation in criticising non-canonical Cubism, especially the Cubism from regions more geographically remote from Paris. In his 1997 article 'Cubistic, Cubic and Cubist', he wrote that the 'geometrizing style', which gripped the whole of Europe after 1910, cannot be termed 'Cubist', since it only comprises



some kind of 'cubistic' manifestation, which in contrast to the Cubism of Picasso and Braque made no attempt at a new and subversive analysis of the conditions of pictorial representation, instead merely applying fashionable forms to the same old subjects.<sup>43</sup> Bois makes generalisations and, in a single sweeping gesture, he uses the conveniently broad category of geometrising style to sum up all cubistic manifestations from outside the Parisian centre and the circle of 'private Cubists' Picasso and Braque.<sup>44</sup> But the argumentative arsenal he uses for his critique of these so-called 'geometrising' and 'cubistic' tendencies has its roots in Central-European art history.

### Does Cubo-Expressionism Exist?

In attempting to establish a distinct artistic identity for the region of Central Europe, within which the Czech lands are usually included,<sup>45</sup> local art history spent long decades developing the idea of a specific tendency in local modern art towards psychologism, irrationality, and spiritual-expressive manifestations.<sup>46</sup> In its theme and setting, such art supposedly takes place at the sublimated level of an affiliation with literature, where it tells stories about the fate of the individual. This well-worn stereotype derived in large part from the traditional art-historical polarity of north and south, of Nordic and Roman cultures, and relied on Heinrich Wölfflin's system of oppositions as well as on the early 'Expressionist' theory of Wilhelm Worringer.<sup>47</sup> In the Czech context it can also be connected to, among other things, the category of a specific, hybrid trend in modern art: Cubo-Expressionism.<sup>48</sup> This concept has a complicated genesis, which leads us again to Kramář, who in 1921 mentioned the possibility of a 'cross' (*křížení*) between Cubism as a pure 'formal and objectivist tendency' and a 'subjectivist Expressionism'.<sup>49</sup> In terms of gravity and significance for the development of art, Kramář of course privileged a pure and unadulterated Cubism. With this assertion he was evidently continuing an older polemic dating back to before the First World War, when he, together with Emil Filla and other members of the Group of Fine Artists (*Skupina výtvarných umělců*), stood against an opposing school of thought comprising the Čapek brothers and Stanislav Kostka Neumann. The latter camp, in debates about the character of modern art, emphasised the necessity of mixing and balancing the qualities of Cubism and Expressionism.<sup>50</sup>

More than 30 years later, in a quite different political and cultural context, the idea of a 'cross' between Cubism and Expressionism was resurrected by Miroslav Lamač. In 1957 and 1958 Lamač and Padrta succeeded, thanks to the political thaw, in initiating an exhibition of Czech modern art in Brno and Prague. In the text of the exhibition catalogue Lamač devoted considerable attention to the work of Bohumil Kubišta, Antonín Procházka, Emil Filla, and several former members of *Osma* (The Eight Group) from 1910 to 1912, work that, for him, is characterised by the attempt to 'use the techniques of Cubism to heighten the expressiveness of a definite subject, which often has a symbolic function'. In Kubišta's work in particular he finds not so much a pure Cubism as an expressive quality, a symbolic evocation of psychic events, spiritual forces and emotions.<sup>51</sup> These aspects of pre-First-World-War Czech modern art, which made for a specific local modification of Cubism, were covered extensively by Lamač in his major synthetic study *The Eight and the Group of Fine Artists (Osma a Skupina výtvarných umělců)* from 1988, although he had already defined this phenomenon with the concept of Cubo-Expressionism during the first half of the 1960s.<sup>52</sup> In his article 'Czech Avant-Garde Painting in International Contexts', Lamač had attempted to relate Czech modern art to the Western canon. If we consider his reflections of that time in their political-historical context, we could say that he was attempting, in a difficult era, to put the Czech lands back on the cultural map of Europe.<sup>53</sup> In terms of the viability and serviceability of the term Cubo-Expressionism his mission was successful, as the concept not only entered into Czech art-historical discourse, but was also adopted by Western art historians, such as Donald E. Gordon and Steven Mansbach. Mansbach even wrote about the 'uniquely creative forms of Cubo-Expressionism' in the Czech lands.<sup>54</sup> James Elkins of course caustically noted in a review of Mansbach's book that 'it seems apparent that an innovation (Cubo-Expressionism) which needs to be described in terms of two prior innovations (Cubism and Expressionism) may be hard to present as an avant-garde'.<sup>55</sup> Despite Elkins's doubts we can of course say that Lamač defined what were for many years the fundamental contours of art-historical thinking about

the early Czech avant-garde and its points of departure. At the same time, the concept of Cubo-Expressionism revealed the interpretative limits of the generalisations that unavoidably accompany the rise of broad art-historical narratives. This is clearly shown by Lamač's assessment of Kubišta's Cubo-Expressionism, about which he wrote:

If we accept French Cubism as the defining model, we would have to describe our painter's conception of Cubism as in many ways a misunderstanding of it ... From the beginning Kubišta's approach is much more rational. The inspirations he took from Cubism enabled the more consistent achievement of pictorial order, the freer construction of form, the attainment of more artful composition. However, these rational elements lead, as usual, to the strengthening of the irrational and even the outright imaginative and fantastic aspects of the painting.<sup>56</sup>

Even Lamač used the work of Picasso and Braque as his reference point, but from this comparison Kubišta's work emerges as proof of 'creative misunderstanding'. This concept has long been used in analyses of the relation between Czech modern art and the artistic centres, as in the case of the older generation of artists who formed the Mánes Association of Fine Artists (SVU Mánes).<sup>57</sup> Vincenc Kramář was already convinced that Kubišta was not a representative of the 'one true' Cubism à la Picasso, which makes Cubism 'the basis of a new realism', focussed on 'a poetic conception of things'. Kramář, like Lamač eight years later, considered 'Cubistic Expressionism' to be the result of Kubišta's deviation from real Cubism (Fig. 2.3).<sup>58</sup>

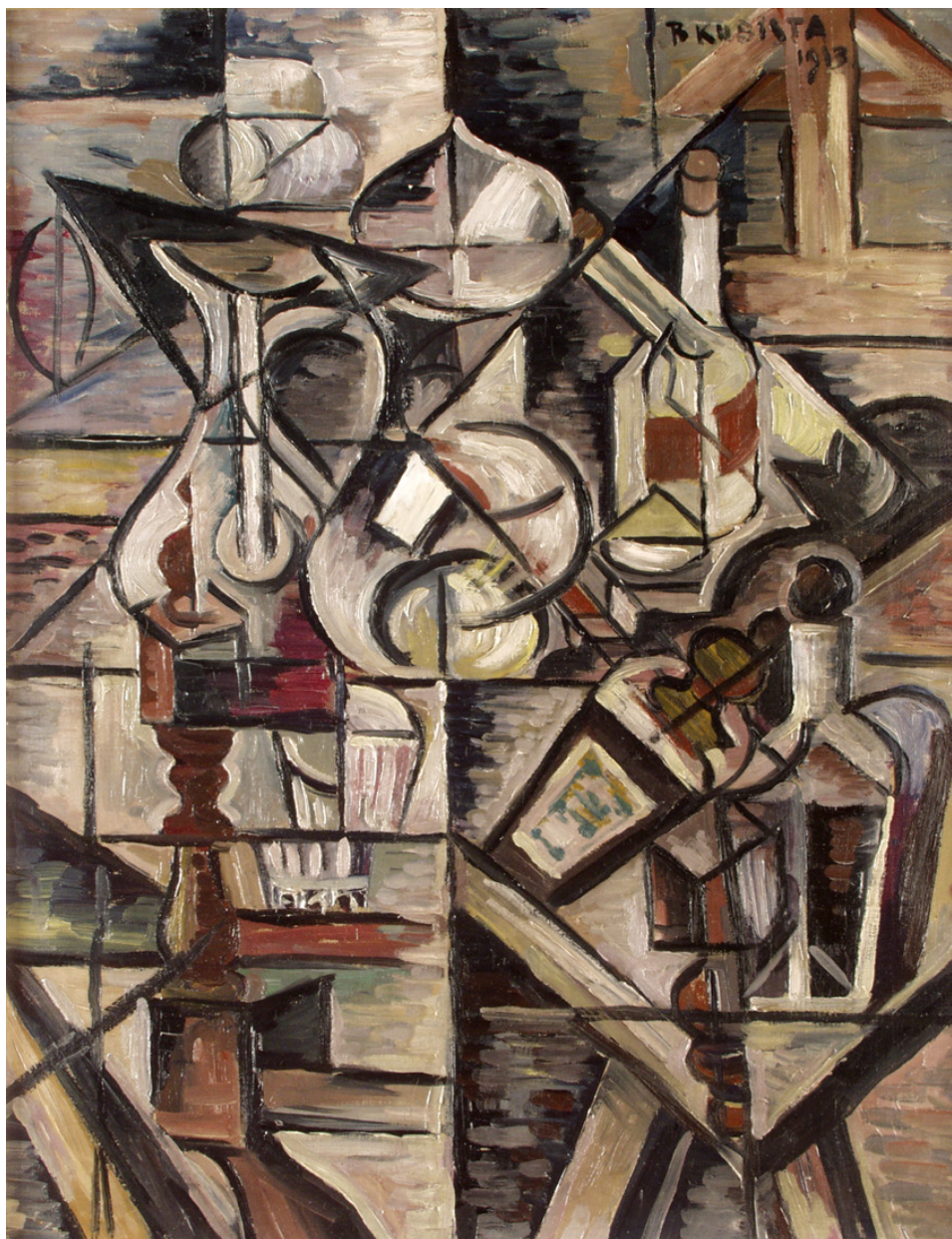


Fig. 2.3. Bohumil Kubišta, *Glass Still Life (Skleněné zátiží, 1913)*. Oil on canvas, 68 x 54 cm. Regional Gallery (Oblastní Galerie Vysočiny), Jihlava. © 2017 OGV in Jihlava.

Lamač's assumption was that Kubišta consciously put the distorted forms of early Cubism in the service of his paintings' expressive, fantastic, and imaginative themes. For him, in Kubišta's work there was no instinctive search for new forms of pictorial representation, a search canonical art history has ascribed to Picasso and Braque alone, and the revisionists Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss accepted this thesis without reservation. The stereotyped view of Picasso's Cubism as a purely intuitive creative achievement was not challenged until the 1980s, in the work of Patricia Leighton, a cultural history-oriented revisionist of Cubist history, who convincingly shows that the myth of the intuitiveness of Picasso's work was successfully created by Picasso himself. In this way he distinguished himself from, among others, the salon Cubists of the circle around Metzinger and Gleizes, who, in contrast, were charged from the very first discussions of Cubism with being academic and intellectually calculating.<sup>59</sup>

Lamač's emphasis on the expressive, imaginative, and fantastic qualities of Cubo-Expressionism confirmed foreign interpreters in their convictions about the symbolic, expressive, and thus content-based character of the Czech approach to Cubist representation. Edward F. Fry describes this specific Czech response to Cubism as 'imitative emulation', which attempts merely to 'reproduce the style and appearance of Cubist painting', to graft it onto 'an indigenous local tradition of styles and subjects'.<sup>60</sup> According to Fry this was 'a response typical of almost all Czech Cubists' during the years 1910 to 1912 to the stimulus of Parisian Cubism.<sup>61</sup> While Fry does not use the term Cubo-Expressionism, it is clear that his characterisation of the dominant features of early Czech Cubism is taken from the tradition formulated by Miroslav Lamač and other art historians, who from the 1950s onwards attempted to integrate Czech modernism into the Western narrative of art history while at the same time emphasising its uniqueness and specificity. In their attempt to assert the cultural identity of Central Europe by emphasising the emotionality and literariness of early Cubist works, Czech histories of art prevented these works from being considered as interesting experiments in pictorial representation. If Czech art historians did not look for such ambitions in the work of their artists, it is easy to see why foreign ones did not do so either.

### **Is the Interpretation of Cubism that is Biographical Global?**

The exhibition and book project *Czech Cubism 1909–1925 (Český kubismus 1909–1925)*, to which Fry contributed the essay cited above, was an important milestone in the presentation of the phenomenon of Czech Cubism abroad. This project arose in the 1990s, and for historians of Czech modern art this decade brought, among other things, the need to reckon with the Marxist-Leninist rhetoric of the past.<sup>62</sup> Pavla Pečinková, writing in 1993, even found in Lamač's interpretation of Czech Cubism (specifically of Kubišta's work) the residue of 'the socialist realist hegemony of the times', a restriction of 'observation' to the 'method of Kubišta's ordering of reality', and a defence of Cubism as 'modern realism'.<sup>63</sup> It is in these terms that she evaluated Lamač and Padrta's Kubišta exhibition project from 1960 to 1961. She acknowledged that Lamač, in his study 'Attempts at Synthesis in the Work of Bohumil Kubišta', was already, in 1962, examining the 'psychological depth and internal drama' in Kubišta's work, but, she wrote, 'he does not permit himself to acknowledge anything that would exceed the limits of atheism and sober rationality', and he thus remains concerned predominantly with 'Kubišta's artistic transposition of reality'. Lamač's emphasis on the psychological, imaginative layers of content and the dramatic narrativity of Czech Cubo-Expressionist works evidently does not suffice; what should also be revealed is the 'energetic character' and 'spiritual foundations' of Kubišta's paintings. According to Pečinková, Kubišta's work must then be understood today 'as an example of a specifically Central European spiritual interpretation of external formal impulses'.<sup>64</sup>

At a time when the interpretative framework of canonical Western Cubism is dominated by an approach that concentrates on uncovering the sign-based character of Cubist works and on tracing the indexical, rather than iconic, function of the structures and forms of a revolutionary style of pictorial representation, Czech art history, influenced by prevailing political and cultural paradigms, pushes into the background that part of Lamač's research into Cubism that examined





Fig. 2.4. Bohumil Kubišta, *Saint Sebastian* (*Svatý Šebestián*, 1912). Oil on canvas, 98 x 74.5 cm. National Gallery, Prague. © 2018 The National Gallery in Prague.

the method of the new painting style and its use for a 'new artistic transposition of reality'.<sup>65</sup> Pečinková's explicitly-formulated views resounded through the rest of Czech writing on Cubism, which focussed even more consistently on the content-related, spiritualised side of Czech and Central-European works.

This tendency seems a little ironic when we recall that, in 1909, Kubišta had himself revealed, with visionary foresight, the desire among Czech art historians and critics for the presence of content, when he discontentedly declared that 'almost nobody in this country sees anything in a picture besides its content and substance'.<sup>66</sup>

Czech art history's obsession with the subject matter of Cubist painting led, in the case of the assessment of Bohumil Kubišta, to favouring a small number of works, which became the ones most frequently reproduced, exhibited, and interpreted, even in the context of international presentations of Czech Cubism. The catalogue for the London exhibition *Cubist Art from Czechoslovakia* from 1967 placed a reproduction of Kubišta's *Saint Sebastian* (*Svatý Šebestián*) at the beginning, while, in contrast, his still lifes from 1912 to 1913, which cannot be 'read' for a clear symbolic message, remained of no interest to experts (Fig. 2.4).<sup>67</sup> The work that Lamač, in 1957, had designated a 'symbol of pain and suffering', Kubišta's *Saint Sebastian*, is later analysed



in detail in two sections of the expansive book *Czech Cubism 1909–1925* (*Český kubismus 1909–1925*) from 1991. Due to its German-language translation and subsequent English-language version, the book has become an important present-day source of information on Czech Cubism for foreign readers. Jiří Švestka wrote of this painting that it ‘is one of the central works of Czech Cubism ... Kubišta approached the subject of Saint Sebastian, soldier of Christ, as a (self-)portrait, in which the artist appears in the role of a martyr in the service of art’.<sup>68</sup> Karel Srp, in another part of the same book, asserted that *Saint Sebastian* is, ‘in terms of its content and formal aspects’, ‘probably the most important ... of Kubišta’s 1912 paintings ... It is regarded as a self-portrait, a symbol of the painter’s fate as he strives for a modern style confronted with public indifference’.<sup>69</sup> Srp then subjected the painting to a thorough formal and iconographic analysis. Both these art historians base their analysis on an interpretation of the painting by Jan Zrzavý. Two years after Kubišta’s premature death in 1920, Zrzavý described *Saint Sebastian* as ‘the picture where Kubišta’s soul, for perhaps the first and the last time in all his work, opens the calix of his personal pain and a bitter scent blooms in the pallid flower. This is a modern St. Sebastian—a symbol of Kubišta himself. This is the artist’s lament over the injustice of fate, over poverty, despair and the blows with which life beats him down—as well as a recognition of his holiness and of the nobility of this martyrdom’.<sup>70</sup> This emotive testimony by a contemporary of Kubišta, and moreover a close friend of his, obviously gave later interpreters a strong justification for their tendency to read the picture’s subject biographically. Of course, later interpretations of *Saint Sebastian* offer no critical reflection on the Zrzavý quote, disregarding the way it embodies the typical ‘salon rhetoric of that time’, or the emotional effusiveness characteristic of Zrzavý’s artistic self-stylisation.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, many art historians also favoured the biographical method as an approach to other works by Kubišta, even those which did not invite such readings neither through their theme nor the existence of contemporary testimonies. The principle of biographism formed the sole basis of an entire monograph, Luboš Hlaváček’s *The Real Life Drama of Bohumil Kubišta*, and even some very recent publications on Kubišta put their stress on the circumstances of Kubišta’s life.<sup>72</sup> Biographism, which became the principle instrument of Czech art history’s agenda, obviously opens up a range of possibilities for tracing the artist’s intentions within the conceptual scheme of the artwork. There is no doubt that those art history texts focussing particularly on Cubist painters’ philosophical, literary and art-historical preferences contributed a whole series of noteworthy findings and have helped us grasp the inner dynamic behind the emergence of several works of Czech Cubism.<sup>73</sup> But during the 1980s and 1990s the popularity of the biographical method distanced Czech art history ever more markedly from Western discourse. Rosalind Krauss, for instance, categorically rejected it in her writings on Cubism. She was convinced that the ‘heroic mission’ of semiotics consists in the way it protects art history from the ‘gossip’ of the biographical method.<sup>74</sup> Armed with their semiotic instruments, Krauss and other art historians wanted to reckon with William Rubin, John Golding, and other historians of Cubism from the older generation, whose writings had set great emphasis on the circumstances of Picasso’s life and had shared in the creation of his cult. This tradition was very strong. Its origins could be traced to Gertrude Stein and the reminiscences presented in her book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.<sup>75</sup> Through her adoration of Picasso’s genius and the heroic circumstances of his life, Stein could present herself as a visionary genius who had discovered the temperamental Spaniard’s talent before anyone else.<sup>76</sup>

### **Is the Interpretation of Cubism that is Marxist Czech?**

In the second part of her study ‘The Motivation of the Sign’, Rosalind Krauss engaged with the ways in which sociological theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin opposed the methods of Formalist linguists. Bakhtin agreed with the Formalists that meaning is constructed, not given in advance, but he disagreed with them about the medium in which a given construction takes place. According to the Formalists this medium was ‘language’, while for Bakhtin it was ‘discourse’.<sup>77</sup> Krauss then explored how Picasso constructed meaning in his collages, and situated these works within an intertextual space shared with Apollinaire and Mallarmé’s earlier discourses around the concept of the newspaper sign.<sup>78</sup> David Cottington pointed out Krauss’s erroneous interpretation of Bakhtin’s

key concept of *heteroglossia*, which he argues should not be identified with this kind of simplified intertextuality. Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* is structured through oppositions between the centripetal social and ideological forces that construct a unitary language, and the centrifugal forces that diversify discourse and divide it into the various languages and dialects of different social groups, professions, generations, and periods. Reflecting on the significance of Picasso's collages 'in the context of an individualised dialogue with Apollinaire or Mallarmé' cannot then, according to Cottington, be presented as an application of Bakhtin's complex model.<sup>79</sup> Krauss's use of Bakhtin's concept was described as ahistorical by the American art historian Patricia Leighton.<sup>80</sup> She herself appropriated the principle of *heteroglossia* for a methodological arsenal that she applied in her essential book *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism*.<sup>81</sup> Leighton's texts heralded a fundamental shift in the critical attitude of interpreters of Cubism, who begin to look at Cubist works in broader intellectual and social contexts. The author of the most interesting contributions to the historiography of Cubism is the British art historian Timothy James Clark, who applied the methods of the so-called 'new art history', which include the Foucauldian concept of discursive formations and the Marxist unmasking of hegemonic mechanisms.<sup>82</sup>

On this point too Anglo-American research on Cubism bypassed Czech art history, although there is obviously a more complicated background behind such an assertion. Karel Teige, in his study of Bohumil Kubišta, used the language of Marxist theory in defining the historical circumstances of the rise of modern art in Central Europe in terms of the locally-specific transformation of liberal capitalism into monopoly capitalism. According to Teige, the wider trend of a transition towards imperialism was modified by specific conditions in the individual countries. 'The growth of intellectual forces' occurs at 'a different pace' in those regions whose integration into capitalist development is later and more gradual; this applies then to a nation where the bourgeois system and all its attributes could only ripen after the breakup of a foreign monarchy and the establishment of an independent republic. 'Artistic developments, which in these conditions generally took their inspirations at second or third hand, suffered a retardation that was symptomatic for the whole Austrian cultural context: the line of evolution, with its numerous caesuras, here ran unevenly, sometimes rapidly but more often at a much slower tempo, through a peculiar alternation and reversion of "isms"'.<sup>83</sup> When Milena Bartlová contemplated the reasons why Teige's Marxist theory did not impact in a more fundamental way on Czech art historians, she argued that it remained, for them, too closely connected to an ephemeral area of artistic criticism.<sup>84</sup> Peter Zusi accurately wrote that '[Teige's] Marxism was too unorthodox to be countenanced in the period of 1948–1989, and too fervent to evoke sustained interest after 1989'.<sup>85</sup>

Czech art history's lack of interest in a purely Marxist interpretation of modern art and Cubism has more complex causes. As a whole, Czech art history has defined itself negatively against social histories of art. In the 1950s and 1960s the students of Max Dvořák, who had applied Dvořák's spiritual-expressive methods within a framework of Marxist and socially-oriented art history, met with loud criticism.<sup>86</sup> Frederick Antal's ideas were refused as vulgar sociology and Czech art history instead linked itself with Dvořák's dialectical approach, which was gradually enriched by an idiosyncratically conceived iconology.<sup>87</sup> For a number of Czech art historians in the second half of the twentieth century the iconological method offered a way out of the trap set by Socialist ideologues. Iconology, enriched by the tradition of gestalt psychology, of course proved to be a fruitful interpretive instrument in certain cases, as for instance with Bohumil Kubišta's specific form of Cubism.<sup>88</sup>

There was another reason why modern art could not become an object of investigation for the vulgar Marxist-Leninist approach, either during the Stalinist period or after (when it survived as a secondary stream alongside higher-quality art-historical discourse): during the 1950s and early 1960s modern art was socially taboo. From this point of view it seems paradoxical that in the 1990s Miroslav Lamač and Jiří Padrta were, as noted, criticised for analysing Bohumil Kubišta's work as a set of forms bound to external reality and for emphatically interpreting it as modern Realism, in accordance with Socialist-Realist doctrine.<sup>89</sup> Lamač and Padrta deserve great credit for making

Czech modern art visible during a difficult era that was still culturally and even politically repressive, and even if their transposition of canonical Western categories into the Czech artistic context seems debatable today, their project was in its time an act of personal and professional courage.

Despite emphasising the content-based aspect of Cubo-Expressionism and its role in the development of Czech modern art, Miroslav Lamač showed an enduring interest in the formal aspects of Cubist representations of reality, although on this issue he referred exclusively to the Anglo-American historiography of Cubism. For instance, in a theoretical text on Cubism from 1981 he acquainted Czech readers with the most significant elements of John Golding and Robert Rosenblum's Formalist interpretation of Cubism.<sup>90</sup>

### **Is the Cubism that is Czech Realist?**

As mentioned elsewhere, Vincenc Kramář defined Cubism from within a Marxist framework as a 'modern realism', poetically recreating sensory reality.<sup>91</sup> Kramář dissuaded Karel Teige from using the term Formalism in connection with Cubism, a term Kramář grasped reductively as 'play with forms'. In contrast to this, Cubism, for Kramář, contributed to 'the weaponry of political and social caricature': its character was 'socially revolutionary'.<sup>92</sup>

Kramář had expressed his reservations about Formalism in his 1921 book *Cubism*. 'Pure formalism, that is, playing about with forms', would lead, according to Kramář, to a 'quick decline'.<sup>93</sup> The critique of Formalism, as understood by Kramář, overlapped with his rejection of abstraction, on which he concurred with Kahnweiler. At the turn of 1930 to 1931 Kramář wrote the text 'The Abstractness and Factuality of Contemporary Art', in which the Formalism of abstract art (presented in a negative light) is contrasted with the positively-conceived factuality that he connected with, for instance, the highly valued Cubism of Emil Filla.<sup>94</sup> However, from the 1940s onward Kramář's views on Cubism were exposed to ever stronger external pressure. After being labelled as 'degenerate art' in the Protectorate-era Czech lands, it began to be attacked in Communist Czechoslovakia as bourgeois 'decadent formalism'. Kramář's outstanding collection of Cubist art, dominated by the proto-Cubist and analytical Cubist works of Pablo Picasso, was in the given period one of the few places where information about modern art was freely available.<sup>95</sup>

At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s the relationship between Realism and Formalism became an urgent issue for theorists like Kramář and Teige. As a 'realism that creates with a new poetic conception', Cubism, according to Kramář, stands on a different level from 'imitative realism'; it does not want 'to entertain, nor to lecture, nor to tell stories that will contribute to the raising of moral standards and the re-education of humanity, as socialism does, and this is why the communist comrades see it chiefly as formalism'. This is how Kramář explained the specific Realism of Cubism in a letter to Karel Teige from 13 September 1949, in which he reacted to Teige's study about Bohumil Kubišta.<sup>96</sup> Teige responded to Kramář's letter with a book that was only published posthumously in 1966, under the name *Developmental Transformations in Art* (*Vývojové proměny v umění*). In an attempt at terminological revision Teige opposed the discussion of Realism and Formalism as it had been moderated by the ideologues of Socialist Realism.<sup>97</sup> In regard to Cubism he considered not only its Realist but also its 'irrealist' aspects.

Kramář, in his 1958 book *Questions of Modern Art*, warned about the casual use of the terms 'Realist' and 'Formalist', 'patriotic' and 'cosmopolitan',<sup>98</sup> but in a text from 12 years earlier, *The Cultural Political Programme of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC) and Fine Art* (*Kulturně politický program KSC a výtvarné umění*) (1946), he had unambiguously condemned Formalism, calling it the 'fruit of the breakdown of the bourgeois class'.<sup>99</sup> In contrast he defended Cubism as an art that was at first sight incomprehensible, but in fact completely realistic. In the same text Kramář had also attempted to connect his interpretation of Cubism to contemporaneous discussions about folk art and its significance for the cultural emancipation of the proletariat. His long-upheld conception of Cubism as a poetic, lyrical recreation of reality was here supported by an emphasis on some of its affinities with folk and national-cultural values.<sup>100</sup> Of course Kramář, who had joined the Communist Party in 1945, also had to deal with the question of Czech modern art's relationship to 'East' and 'West' in this text. His response was again predominantly motivated

by his attempt to defend Czech Cubism, and its orientation towards Picasso, in the new political situation. He wrote that ‘in the west the representatives of the real culture go along with progress, have a positive attitude towards the Soviet Union, and look to the East just as we do. One example of this is the leading artist of the era, Pablo Picasso himself’.<sup>101</sup> Kramář had devoted his attention to the dialectic of the national and the international in his 1921 book *Cubism*.<sup>102</sup> He returned to this theme yet again in his text ‘Spain and Cubism’ from 1937, which is devoted to, among other things, the methodological issue of how the geographical migration of artistic forms interacts with national determinants.<sup>103</sup> A slightly paradoxical conclusion emerged from Kramář’s lifelong reflections on this theme: Czech Cubism’s local specificity consists in the singular way it elaborated on the initiatives of Picasso, particularly the factuality and poetic Realism of his Cubism.

Kramář’s thesis—that ‘Picasso and Braque’s work’ not only influenced Czech painting but ‘also very fruitfully inspired contemporary [Czech] architecture and sculpture’—was revived by the exhibition and publication projects of the 1990s, which attempted to establish ‘Czech Cubism’ as a label by, among other things, unambiguously connecting it with ‘real Cubism’.<sup>104</sup> This was something notably attempted by the aforementioned book *Czech Cubism 1909–1925*, which was first published on the occasion of an exhibition of Czech Cubism in Düsseldorf in 1991, and which saw a new edition in 2006. Writing later, from a distance of more than ten years, the main authors connected the original project with a sense of post-revolutionary enthusiasm, in which it ‘became possible for the first time to look without ideological barriers at the considerable contribution Czech fine artists had made to twentieth-century European culture’.<sup>105</sup> A similar ethos accompanied other important displays of Czech Cubism organised after 1989 in Europe and the United States.<sup>106</sup> In this way Cubism fulfilled an important historical role. The rhetoric accompanying its anticipated inauguration into the Western canon of art history corresponded with the rhetoric justifying Czech society’s return to ‘the West’.

However, at the turn of the millennium a new initiative emerged from Central Europe, one that sought to replace the vertical model of the traditional canon with the concept of horizontal art history, and with a new geography of modernism that took account of demythologised local specificities.<sup>107</sup> The ideas of Piotr Piotrowski resounded through Czech art criticism, particularly in the work of Vojtěch Lahoda.<sup>108</sup> Architectural historian Dalibor Veselý, long based in Britain, also stated, in a 2005 article, that as soon as we reduce ‘the horizon of reference’ to the narrow context of canonised Cubism, we lose much of Czech Cubism’s ‘cultural identity and specificity’.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has not answered the questions set out in the introduction; on the contrary, it has raised new ones. Is it beneficial to maintain the borders between art-historical discourses? Do we still believe that certain methods are inevitably predestined for the interpretation of certain specific works and should leave other works alone? Are structural linguistics, Marxist semiotics, and semiology really only suitable for interpreting the Cubism of Pablo Picasso, with its radical re-evaluation of the concept of pictorial representation? And are iconology, biographism, and gestalt psychology really the best means to grasp the essence of that expressive Cubism of Central-European provenance?

The hostile rejection or dismissive neglect of Czech Cubist production by semiotic art history provokes the momentary refusal of any attempt at reconciling these two discourses. It is worth recognising, however, that much of the work of American semiotic art history is based on Central-European intellectual sources, sources that Czech art historians either seldom recall or know nothing about. It is precisely the dominant Czech art-historical discourse that demands self-reflexive revision. Do the traditional methodological instruments of Czech art history still provide a workable analysis of the material that we generally know as Cubism? Or do they mythologise Czech and Central-European culture and the *genius loci*, at the cost of distorting the real character of local modern art?

There is a whole range of Czech Cubist works that have not found entry into the circumscribed framework of mythologised culture, works that were thrust into the background or

only rarely analysed. Czech and Central-European artists had their identities flattened out, as the conveniently broad category of Central-European artistic expressivity and psychologism obscured the subtler specificities of their creative individualities. The interpretations of the dominant Czech art-historical discourse made it harder for local artists to join that exclusive club of Cubist reformers of representation, whose members were cosseted by a semiotically-oriented Western art history.

The paradox of these art-historical mythologies—whether taking the form of Cubo-Expressionism or the myth of Prague's Cubists as the direct followers of Picasso—consists in the fact that they wanted to tell a story about something that was purely Czech, and yet could not do this without the aid of the Western canon and its terminology. At the heart of such discourse lies the frustration of an unrequited love for the West, which manifests itself in the universalist ambitions of local modern art history.

*Translated by Jonathan Owen*

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- Marie Rakušanová, 'Je kubismus, který je český, světový? : Případ Kubišta', *Umění* 65/5–6 (2017): pp. 474–500.
- 2 Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 101.
- 3 Jan Mukařovský, 'K noetice a poetice surrealismu' (1938), in Jan Mukařovský, *Studie z estetiky* (Prague: Odeon, 1966), p. 310.
- 4 Roman Jakobson, 'What is Poetry?' (1933–1934), in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), pp. 740–750; 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances' (1956), in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 239–259. See also: Rosalind Krauss, 'In the name of Picasso', *October* 16 (Spring 1981): pp. 5–22; Rosalind Krauss, 'The Motivation of the Sign', in William Rubin, Kirk Varnedoe, and Lynn Zelevansky (eds.), *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* (New York: Abrams, 1992), pp. 261–286; Yve-Alain Bois, 'Kahnweiler's Lesson', *Representations* 18 (Spring 1987): pp. 33–68; Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Semiology of Cubism', in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, pp. 169–208.
- 5 Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (trans.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 5–24.
- 6 Jan Mukařovský, 'Art as semiological fact', in Norman Bryson (ed.), *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1–7. Jan Mukařovský and Julia Kristeva were the only two non-French authors whom Bryson included in his anthology (alongside Foucault, Barthes, Louis Marin, Jean Baudrillard and others). On the Czech marginalisation of Mukařovský's significance for the 'New Art History', see: Marta Filipová, 'Vizuální studia v českém prostředí', in Marta Filipová and Matthew Rampley (eds.), *Možnosti vizuálních studií: Obrazy – texty – interpretace* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2007), pp. 215–216.
- 7 Vojtěch Lahoda, 'In the Mirror of Cubism', in Vincenc Kramář, *From Old Masters to Picasso*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery Prague (Prague, 2002), p. 27. See also: Lahoda, 'The Canon of Cubism and the Case of Vincenc Kramář. On the Place of Czech Cubism in the History of Modern Art', in H. Berg and L. Gluchowska (eds.), *Transnationality, Internationalism and Nationhood: European Avant-Garde in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), pp. 131–144.
- 8 Karel Srp, 'Art on a Different Basis', in Vincenc Kramář, *From Old Masters to Picasso*, p. 136.
- 9 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: sa vie, son œuvre, ses écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946) (English edition: Douglas Cooper (trans.), *Juan Gris: His Life and Work* (London: Lund Humphries, 1947)); Kahnweiler, *Les sculptures de Picasso. Photographs by Brassai* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1948) (English edition: *The Sculptures of Picasso* (London: Rodney Philips & Co., 1949)).
- 10 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, trans. Henry Aronson (New York: Wittenborn, 1949), pp. 11–12. First published: Kahnweiler, *Der Weg zum Kubismus* (Munich: Delphin Verlag, 1920).
- 11 Vincenc Kramář, 'Kubismus', in Josef Krása (ed.), *O obrazech a galeriích* (Prague: Odeon, 1983), p. 70. First published: Kramář, *Kubismus* (Brno: Moravsko-slezská revue, 1921). (French edition: Erika Abrams (trans.), *Le cubisme* (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2002)). See also: Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, pp. 10–11.
- 12 Kramář, 'Kubismus', p. 71, 73.
- 13 Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, p. 12.
- 14 Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, p. 12. 'In the words of Kant, put together the various conceptions and comprehend their variety in one perception'. In many respects Kahnweiler's and Kramář's theories arose from similar Central-European intellectual sources, including the work of Alois Riegl, Adolf Hildebrand, Wilhelm Worringer, and Wilhelm Wundt. See: Manfred Brunner, 'Daniel-Henry Kahnweilers "Weg zum Kubismus" als Quelle Kubistischer Werkabsicht', in *Kubismus. Künstler-Themen-Werke*, exhibition catalogue, Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle (Köln: 1982), pp. 131–145.
- 15 Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, p. 11. 'Picasso's new method made it possible to "represent" the form of objects and their position in space instead of attempting to imitate them through illusionistic means'.
- 16 Kramář, 'Kubismus', pp. 64, 84.
- 17 Kramář, 'Kubismus'; Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*.
- 18 V. N. [Václav Nebeský], 'Česká kniha o kubismu', *Volné směry* 21 (1921–22): pp. 294–296.
- 19 Nebeský, 'Česká kniha o kubismu', pp. 294–296.
- 20 Václav Nebeský, *Umění po impresionismu* (Prague: Aventinum, 1923). Cited in: Karel Srp (ed.), *Václav Nebeský. Smysl modernosti* (Prague: VŠUP, 2002), p. 43.
- 21 Ján Bakoš, 'Česko-slovenský štrukturalizmus a dejepis umenia. Pražský lingvistický krúžok a dejiny umenia', in Ján Bakoš *Štyri trasy metodológie dejín umenia* (Bratislava: Veda, 2000), pp. 161–220.
- 22 Vincenc Kramář, *Otázky moderního umění* (Prague: NČVU, 1958), p. 34.
- 23 Jiří Padrta, 'Doslov', in D. H. Kahnweiler (ed.) *Mé galerie a moji malíři* (Prague: SNKLU, 1964), pp. 170–171.
- 24 Padrta, 'Doslov', pp. 170–171. On Kahnweiler's negative relation to abstraction, see: F. Gabriel, 'Der Briefwechsel zwischen Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler und Hermann Rupp', *Berner Kunstmittellungen* 163 (January–February 1976): pp. 2–6.
- 25 Jan Mukařovský, 'Ke kritice strukturalismu v naší literární vědě', *Tvorba* 20/40 (1951): pp. 964–966. The publication of an anthology of Mukařovský's texts in 1966 (see note 3) again drew aestheticians' attention back to his ideas of the interwar period, but art historians (with some clear exceptions, such as Karel Srp) remained uninterested in his work. The semiotic model of art interpretation formulated by art historian and theologian Josef Zvěřina was an anomaly in Czech art history and produced no followers. Josef Zvěřina, *Výtvarné dílo jako znak* (Prague: Obelisk, 1971). See also: Bakoš, 'Česko-slovenský štrukturalizmus a dejepis umenia', pp. 161–220.
- 26 Václav Nebeský, 'Umění jako projev ducha', *Život* 18 (1942–44): pp. 44–45.

27 Nebeský, 'Umění jako projev ducha', pp.44–45.

28 The inventiveness of Nebeský's reflections on Cubism is also affirmed in his study of Picasso from the early 1920s, which even appeared in English translation in Marilyn McCully (ed.), *A Picasso Anthology: Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Václav Nebeský, 'Pablo Picasso', *Vělné směry* 21 (1921–22): pp. 108–124. See also: Nebeský, 'The Nature of Space in Picasso's Work', in McCully (ed.), *A Picasso Anthology*, pp. 148–150. This anthology also includes Kramář's catalogue introduction from 1922: Vincenc Kramář, 'Manes Gallery exhibition, Prague', pp. 151–153.

29 Václav Nebeský, 'Bohumil Kubišta', in František Čerovský (ed.), *Bohumil Kubišta ve vzpomínkách současníků* (Prague: Aventinum, 1949), p. 171. First published: *Musaion* 2 (1921): p. 17.

30 Nebeský, 'Bohumil Kubišta', p. 171.

31 Leo Steinberg, 'Picasso's Sleepwatchers', in Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 95.

32 Leo Steinberg, 'The Philosophical Brothel', *October* 44 (1988): p. 63.

33 Krauss, 'The Motivation of the Sign', p. 263.

34 Nebeský developed this idea further in a chapter devoted to Kubišta, which he included in his French-language publication on Czech modern art as a whole. Václav Nebeský, *L'Art moderne Tchécoslovaque* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1937), pp. 48–55.

35 Werner Spies, 'Vendre des tableaux: Donner à lire', in *Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: Marchand, éditeur, écrivain*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou (Paris, 1984), pp. 28–29.

36 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 70–83.

37 Steinberg pointed out the significance that the difference between the analogically based sign and the arbitrary (i.e. linguistic) sign had for Picasso's early Cubist work. He elaborated on these ideas in his lecture *The Intelligence of Picasso*, which he presented on several occasions, beginning in 1974, and which he published in 2007: Leo Steinberg, 'The Prague Self-Portrait and Picasso's Intelligence', in Anne Baldassari (ed.), *Cubist Picasso*, exhibition catalogue, Musée Picasso (Paris, 2007), p. 103–117.

38 Krauss, 'The Motivation of the Sign', p. 273.

39 Bois, 'The Semiology of Cubism', pp. 174–175.

40 This is in spite of the fact that several of Nebeský's texts were available in foreign languages, such as the above-cited *L'Art moderne Tchécoslovaque* and 'The Nature of Space in Picasso's Work'.

41 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Cubist Epoch', *Artforum* 9 (February 1971): pp. 32–38. See also: Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum – Metropolitan Museum of Art (Los Angeles – New York, 1971).

42 Edward F. Fry, 'Czech Cubism in the European Context', in J. Švestka and T. Vlček (eds.), *Czech Cubism 1909–1925: Art, Architecture, Design* (Prague: Modernista, 2006), p. 12. Czech and German editions published 1991.

43 Yve-Alain Bois, 'Cubistic, Cubic and Cubist', in Eve Blau and Nancy J. Troy (eds.), *Architecture and Cubism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 187–194.

44 Bois uses the term 'private Cubists' to describe Picasso and Braque. Douglas Cooper often designates them 'true Cubists', as well as 'instinctive Cubists'. For the work of Le Fauconnier, Metzinger and Gleizes, Bois chose the term 'public Cubism' and Cooper 'systematic Cubism' or 'epic Cubism' (see Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*), while Edward Fry uses 'sub-Cubism' or 'minor Cubism', thus following the terminology of Kahnweiler that Vincenc Kramář had also imported into the Czech lands. Edward F. Fry, *Cubism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966).

45 The concept of 'Central Europe' originally came into use in German-speaking territories during the second half of the nineteenth century, when it helped to serve the political, economic and cultural interests of imperial Germany and the Austrian side of Austro-Hungary (Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: Georg Reimer Verlag, 1915). See also: Jacques Droz, *L'Europe Centrale. Évolution historique de l'idée de 'Mitteleuropa'* (Paris: Payot, 1960)). Later the term would fall into disrepute as a result of the brutal impacts of World War II and it was only in the 1960s that the term was taken up by several intellectuals from non-German Central-European countries, who wished to show 'the West' the necessity of a more differentiated perception of the geopolitical, cultural, and psychological situation of the region

within the bipolarised world of the Cold War (Milan Kundera, 'Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe Centrale', *Le débat* 27 (November 1983): pp. 3–22). The use of the term 'Central European' in relation to the history of modern art in a given region remains insufficiently examined within Czech scholarship. If Czech historians situate Czech modernist art in the context of Central Europe, they generally seem to have in mind an area shared for thousands of years with Teutons, Magyars and other Slavs. If that is the case, then where are the borders between the 'centre' and the 'West', between 'centre' and 'East'? Or do they have in mind the historical lands of former Austro-Hungarian monarchy? There is not one approach to the concept that might ensure the construction of a true cultural and intellectual whole, something with which to establish meaningful dialogue with Western cultural hegemonies. It is symptomatic, for instance, that Austria, through the second half of the twentieth century, has pursued its cultural politics in relation to 'the West' and that these consisted in the attempt to persuade the West, firstly, that it has nothing in common historically or ideologically with Germany, and, secondly, that it is the sole successor country to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which stands for truly Western and modern artistic values. From the 1950s onwards, projects devoted to Viennese art nouveau have presented this movement to the Western public (generally encountering the concept of 'Central Europe' for the very first time on such occasions) as a manifestation of pure modernity and of a special *genius loci*, while the imperial dimension of Austrian modernism has of course been pushed into the background. See: Elizabeth Clegg, *Art, Design and Architecture in Central Europe, 1890–1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 1–2.

46 This was a stereotype, connected predominantly with the earlier avant-garde generation of The Eight Group (Osma) and The Group of Fine Artists (Skupina výtvarných umělců). Other stereotypical ideas, focussing more on 'Czechness' than on the 'Central Europeanness' of Czech culture, emphasised qualities like lyricism, sensuality, musicality, etc. See also: Milena Bartlová, *Naše, národní umění* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2009), pp. 21–28.

47 In the exhibition *Expressiv*, curated by the German art historian Dieter Ronte, the modernism of the former Austro-Hungarian territories was reduced to an art of 'spiritual-expressive penetration into our world,' 'the art of psychologisation and emotionalization' (Dieter Ronte, 'Mitteleuropa als Brückenkopf', in Thomas Strauss (ed.), *Westkunst-Ostkunst. Absonderung oder Integration? – Materialien zu einer neuen Standortbestimmung* (Munich: Scaneg Verlag, 1991), pp. 79–87). At this 1987 Vienna exhibition Ronte presented the work of contemporary artists from the former territories of the Danubian Monarchy, but he also offered a broad and generalising interpretation of the modern art of Central Europe, in which he automatically ruled out the existence of rationalist, Constructivist, or Formalist tendencies within the region. In retrospect this exhibition can be seen as a product of Austrian cultural politics, using a clearly legible concept to attract the attention of hegemonic Western culture (indeed the exhibition travelled to Washington), rather than attempting to establish a real discussion within the space shared with former territories of the Habsburg monarchy.

48 We also encounter this concept in German art, where it is specifically mentioned in connection with the work of post-war sculptors Herbert Garbe and Rudolf Belling. See Eberhard Roters (ed.), *Berlin 1910–1933* (Berlin:1983), p. 117; Stephanie Barron, 'Der Ruf nach einer neuen Gesellschaft', in *Expressionismus 1915–1925. Die zweite Generation*, exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, 1988), p. 37.

49 Kramář, 'Kubismus', pp. 100–101.

50 This opinion was expressed most explicitly by Stanislav Kostka Neumann in 'Kubism, čili aby bylo jasno', *Lidové noviny* (5 May 1914), reprinted in *Konfese a konfrontace*, vol. 2 (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1988), pp. 259–260. It is interesting that in the 1950s several of Neumann's arguments were taken up by Kramář, who prior to World War I had rejected them in disgust, in order to support his own assertion of Cubism's close relationship to objective reality and thus to Realism. See Kramář, *Otázky moderního umění*, p. 8.

51 Miroslav Lamač, *Zakladatelé moderního českého umění*, exhibition catalogue, Dům umění města Brna (Brno – Prague, 1957), pp. 25–26.

52 Miroslav Lamač, *Osma a Skupina výtvarných umělců* (Prague: Odeon, 1988), pp. 198–328.

53 Miroslav Lamač, 'Česká malířská avantgarda ve světových souvislostech', *Výtvarné umění* 14 (1964): pp. 267–283.

54 Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 2. The concept of Cubo-Expressionism found

its way into the pages of dictionaries of modern art. See: Ian Chilvers, *A Dictionary of 20th-Century Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 151.

55 James Elkins, 'S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)', *The Art Bulletin* 82 (2000): p. 783. This concept was also criticised by Elizabeth Clegg. See: Clegg, *Art, Design and Architecture in Central Europe*, p. 164. The term Cubo-Expressionism is of course generally not accepted by the younger generation of American researchers, who very rarely engage with it. See, for instance, Nicholas Sawicki, *Na cestě k modernosti. Umělecké sdružení Osma a jeho okruh v letech 1900–1910* (Prague: FF UK, 2014). See also: Nicholas Sawicki, 'Becoming Modern: The Prague Eight and Modern Art, 1900–1910' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2007).

56 Lamač, *Osma a Skupina výtvarných umělců*, p. 201.

57 Roman Prah, *Vlně směry. Časopis secese a moderny* (Prague: Torst, 1993), p. 64. German edition: Roman Prah, *Freie Richtungen: die Zeitschrift der Prager Secession und Moderne* (Prague: Torst, 1993).

58 Vincenc Kramář, letter to Karel Teige, 13 September 1949, in Vratislav Effenberger (ed.), *Karel Teige. Vývojové proměny umění 1900–1910* (Prague: NČVU, 1966), pp. 332–333. Lamač, *Zakladatelé moderního českého umění*, pp. 25–26.

59 Patricia Leighton, 'Revising Cubism', *Art Journal* (Winter 1988): pp. 269–276.

60 Fry, 'Czech Cubism', p. 12.

61 Fry, 'Czech Cubism', p. 12. Fry considers Emil Filla as having attained a higher and more penetrating level (intentional emulation), though of course not until his Dutch period during World War I. Something of an anomaly, then, is Fry's appreciation for Czech Cubist sculpture: in his view Gutfreund had achieved 'such a high conceptual level in his work that he was almost comparable to Picasso himself'.

62 Of course, at this particular point in time for the Czechs, that reckoning did not have the subtler character that might have allowed for some distinction between Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, and Neo-Stalinism.

63 Pavla Pečinková, 'Výstava Bohumila Kubišty', *Umění* 42/1 (1993): pp. 96–98.

64 Pečinková, 'Výstava Bohumila Kubišty', pp. 96–98.

65 Pečinková, 'Výstava Bohumila Kubišty', p. 97.

66 Bohumil Kubišta, 'Malby Mikuláše Alše v radnici', in František Kubišta and Karel Teige (eds.) *Bohumil Kubišta. Předpoklady slohu* (Prague: Girgal, 1947), pp. 18–19. First published 1909.

67 *Cubist art from Czechoslovakia*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery (London, 1967). The exhibition also travelled to some other European cities besides London. The curator's text of course took care to introduce the phenomenon of Cubo-Expressionism to an unacquainted public ('Cubo-Expressionism', p.6). But the choice of exhibited works did not really help to clarify the contours of Czech Cubism, for the exhibition included not only work by František Kupka and Jan Zrzavý, but also, for instance, Rudolf Kremlíčka, whose paintings were not even remotely related to Cubist aesthetics.

68 Jiří Švestka, 'Czech Cubism: The Dilemma of the Nascent Central-European Avant-garde', in Švestka and Vlček (eds.), *Czech Cubism 1909–1925*, p. 16.

69 Karel Srp, 'Bohumil Kubišta', in Švestka and Vlček (eds.), *Czech Cubism 1909–1925*, p. 122.

70 Jan Zrzavý, *Posmrtná výstava Bohumila Kubišty*, exhibition catalogue, Krasoumná jednota (Prague, 1920), pp. 3–5. Reprinted in Karel Srp (ed.), *Jan Zrzavý. O něm a s ním* (Prague: Academia, 2003), p. 77.

71 Pečinková, 'Výstava Bohumila Kubišty', p. 97.

72 Luboš Hlaváček, *Životní drama Bohumila Kubišty* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1968); Ivana Kyzourová, 'Hypnotizér nebo hypnotizovaný?', in Michaela Ottová and Aleš Mudra (eds.), *Arts vivendi. Profesoři Jaromír Homolka ad honorem* (Prague: Halama, 2006), pp. 373–399; Karel Srp, *Bohumil Kubišta. Zářivý krystal* (Řevnice and Ostrava: Arbor vitae, 2014).

73 We could mention here Petr Jindra's study, "'Vado ut a somno exsuscitem eum". Bohumila Kubišty Vzkříšení Lazara', in Petr Jindra (ed.), *Kubismus 1910–1925 ve sbírkách Západočeské galerie v Plzni*, exhibition catalogue, Západočeská galerie v Plzni (Plzeň, 2009), pp. 48–68.

74 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Semiology of Collage', 1981, lecture at Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, New Orleans. See also Rosalind Krauss, 'In the name of Picasso', *October* 16 (Spring 1981): pp. 5–22; Aruna D'Souza, 'Biography Becomes Form: William Rubin, Pablo Picasso, and the Subject of Art History', *Word and Image* 18/2 (2002): pp. 126–136.

75 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 64. First published 1935.

76 Stein completely marginalised Braque, who responded angrily in writing to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. See: Georges Braque, 'Testimony Against Gertrude Stein', in Marilyn McCully (ed.), *A Picasso Anthology: Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 64.

77 Krauss, 'The Motivation of the Sign', p. 274.

78 Krauss, 'The Motivation of the Sign', pp. 274–278.

79 David Cottington, *Cubism and its Histories* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 215.

80 Patricia Leighton, 'Cubist anachronisms: Ahistoricity, Cryptoformalism, and Business-As-Usual in New York', *Oxford Art Journal* 17/2 (1994): pp. 91–102.

81 Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

82 Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes From the History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 184.

83 Karel Teige, 'Bohumil Kubišta', *Kvart* 5–6 (1949): pp. 350–378, p. 356.

84 Milena Bartlová, 'Czech Art History and Marxism', in *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (2012), accessed September 2019: <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/bartlova.pdf>. Bartlová, 'Marxism in Czech Art History 1945–1970', *kunsttexte.de* 4, 2015, accessed September 2019: <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/8220/bartlova.pdf>.

85 Peter Zusi, 'The Minimum Dwelling by Karel Teige, Eric Dluhosch', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48/1 (Spring 2004): pp. 135–136.

86 Jaromír Neumann, 'Dílo Maxe Dvořáka a dnešek', *Umění* 9/6 (1961): pp. 525–572. In this text Neumann attacked the social art history of Dvořák's students while rehabilitating Dvořák himself.

87 Bartlová, 'Czech Art History and Marxism'. Jaromír Neumann, 'K Antalově knize a otázkám renesančního umění', in Frederick Antal, *Florentské malířství a jeho společenské pozadí. Městská republika než převzal moc Cosimo de' Medici – 14. století a počátek století 15* (Prague: SNKLHU, 1954), pp. 283–299; Rudolf Chadraha, 'Sociologie umění', in Sáva Šabouk (ed.), *Encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění* (Prague: Academia, 1975), pp. 474–476; Nicholas Sawicki, 'Modernist Paradigms After the War: The Case of Max Dvořák', in Vojtěch Lahoda (ed.), *Local Strategies, International Ambitions. Modern Art in Central Europe 1918–1968* (Prague: ÚDU ČAS, 2006), pp. 47–52.

88 Mahulena Nešlehová, 'K vrcholnému dílu Bohumila Kubišty', *Umění* 23 (1975): pp. 325–345.

89 Pečinková, 'Výstava Bohumila Kubišty', pp. 96–98.

90 Miroslav Lamač, 'Kubismus', *Výtvarná kultura* 5/4 (1981): pp. 15–22; John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907–1914* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958); Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Abrams, 1960).

91 Vincenc Kramář, 'O realismu a formalismu', *Výtvarné umění* 4 (1954): pp. 45–48.

92 Vincenc Kramář, letter to Karel Teige, 13 September 1949. See also: Vincenc Kramář, *Kulturně-politický program KSČ a výtvarné umění* (Prague: Svoboda, 1946); Karel Teige, 'Pokus o názvoslovnou a pojmoslovnou revisi', in Teige, *Vývojové proměny umění*, pp. 9–139.

93 Kramář, 'Kubismus', p. 101.

94 Vincenc Kramář, 'Abstraktnost a věčnost současného umění', *Vlně směry* 28 (1930–1931): pp. 206–215. See also: Kramář, 'Život a dílo Emila Filly' (1947), in *O obrazech a galeriích*, p. 133. Emil Filla was Kramář's favourite artist and his close friend. When Kramář was advising Carl Einstein in 1928 as to the choice of two Czech illustrations for the third edition of Einstein's book *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, he recommended Filla's work as his first choice. See Lada Hubatová-Vacková, 'Vincenc Kramář and Carl Einstein', in *Vincenc Kramář. From Old Masters to Picasso*, pp. 202–205.

95 Lahoda, 'In the Mirror of Cubism', p. 32. Up until his death Kramář made his professional collection available to the general public. In 1954 he donated a large part of his collection to the state and today these works are part of the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Prague National Gallery (Sbírký moderního a současného umění Národní Galerie v Praze).

96 Vincenc Kramář, letter to Karel Teige, 13 September 1949, p. 332.

97 Teige, *Vývojové proměny umění*, pp. 14–139, 153–321. There was also Marian Városov's book *Teória realizmu vo výtvarnom umení*, which contained an interesting examination of Realism and its relation to modern art from the viewpoints of anthropological aesthetics and Marxism (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Slovenskej akadémie vied, 1961). See especially 'Kubismus', pp. 88–90.

98 Kramář, *Otázky moderního umění*, p. 46.

99 Vincenc Kramář, *Kulturně politický program KSČ a výtvarné umění* (Prague: Svoboda, 1946), pp. 8, 22–23. This text was Kramář's response to Václav Kopecký's speech at the Eighth Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, 31 March 1946. See: Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945–1956* (Prague: Torst, 1998), pp. 156–157.

100 Kramář, *Kulturně politický program KSČ a výtvarné umění*, pp. 18–22.

101 Kramář, *Kulturně politický program KSČ a výtvarné umění*, p. 35. Tellingly, in this sentence he wrote the word 'west' with a lower-case first letter, and 'East' with a capital.

102 Kramář, 'Kubismus', p. 106.

103 Vincenc Kramář, 'Španělsko a kubismus', in *Španělsko*, Prague 1937. The collection was published by the Committee to Aid Democratic Spain. Besides Kramář's contribution there were also texts by the Čapek brothers, František Halas, Vítězslav Nezval, Ivan Olbracht and many others.

104 Kramář, 'Kubismus', p. 89.

105 'Foreword to the New Edition', in Švestka and Vlček (eds.), *Czech Cubism 1909–1925*, p. 9.

106 Miroslav Lamač (ed.), *Cubisme Tchèque*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou (Paris, 1992); Alexander von Vegesack (ed.), *Český kubismus: architektura a design 1910–1925* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 1991); Ágnes Husslein (ed.), *Tschechischer Kubismus 1912–1916*, exhibition catalogue, Rupertinum Museum für moderne Kunst (Salzburg, 2001).

107 Piotr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History', *Umění* 56 (2008): pp. 378–383. An interesting revisionist perspective on the theory and history of Polish Cubism was offered recently by Lidia Gluchowska in 'In the Shadow of the Official Discourse: Towards a Revision of the History and Theory of the Polish Idiom of Cubism', *Ars* 47/2 (2014): pp. 156–171. Piotrowski criticised those projects, such as the extensive 1994 exhibition *Europa, Europa*, that sought to map out the Central and Eastern-European avant-gardes, yet the noble intentions were realised, unavoidably given the period in which the exhibition was held, to the effect that the representatives of Western institutions hastily gathered up material from across the whole region. The resulting unified vision of Central-European art has become the target of Piotrowski's sharp criticism in the article 'Central Europe in the Face of Unification', *ArtMargins*, 29 January 2003, accessed September 2019: <https://artmargins.com/central-europe-in-the-face-of-unification/>. See also: Ryszard Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus (eds.), *Europa, Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, exhibition catalogue, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn, 1994). The exhibition *Europa, Europa*, by way of counter-example, helped give rise to the conception of the project *Central European Avant-gardes. Exchange and Transformation* (Timothy Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-gardes. Exchange and Transformation. 1910–1930*, exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum (Los Angeles, 2002).

108 Vojtěch Lahoda, 'Global Form and Local Spirit: Czech and Central European Modern Art', in Lahoda (ed.), *Local Strategies, International Ambitions. Modern Art in Central Europe 1918–1968* (Prague: ÚDU ČAS, 2006), pp. 9–20; Vojtěch Lahoda, 'Český kubismus a vertikální kánon dějin umění', in *Orbis artium. K jubileu Lubomíra Slavička* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2009), pp. 422–423.

109 Dalibor Veselý, 'Czech New Architecture and Cubism', *Umění* 53 (2005), p. 586.





3

# Parasitism

ANDRZEJ TUROWSKI

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## **Parasitism**

The question of the role of Cubism and Futurism in Polish art cannot be reduced to that of its relations with a radiating centre, whether Parisian or Italian. Cubist and Futurist discourses of the first decades of the twentieth century were entangled in modernist ideologies, which, in Polish art, oscillated between the universalism of linear, historiographical utopias and the particularism of agendas whose artistic solutions were determined by a concrete history. In this respect, like Expressionism and Dada, in accordance with the context, Cubism and Futurism were treated as the source of all modernity in Poland, initiating a new art in a nation that had become independent after the First World War. If the Constructivism of the 1920s sought to see its history in close relation to the 'international avant-garde' (as announced in the subtitle of the magazine *Blok*), then, in the eyes of its founders, Formism emerged on 'Polish soil', nourished by the Romantic-Expressionist tradition. This did not prevent 'universalist' Constructivism from treating the Formist experience of Cubism as the most significant experiment of early Polish modernism. Neither did it prevent Formism, in its search for a modernist identity, from negating 'German' Expressionism, to which it owed a great deal. Revolutionary Constructivism needed Cubism to paint a picture of formal progression, while Cubism provided Formism, in its search for 'lasting style', with an argument in favour of a new order, albeit one it could not connect with the emotional experience of history. Constructivism, victorious, saw Expressionism as less and less useful.

## **Cubo-Expressionism**

News in the press of French Cubism reached Poland without much delay, and a number of Polish artists may have seen Cubist paintings in Paris as early as the beginning of the 1910s.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, an understanding of Cubist concerns only really began to emerge as of the turn of

1912 to 1913, and still only within a limited circle of artists. The first to devote more attention to the new tendency was Adolf Basler, a critic living in Paris who served as an artistic correspondent for the Polish press. Basler delivered a lecture on Cubism for the students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków at the end of 1912, which he published shortly afterwards.<sup>2</sup> His articles stressed with enthusiasm the birth in France (Cubism) and in Germany (Expressionism) of a ‘universal European style’ in which the ‘mechanism of perspective, calculated simply as a naturalist illusion, has been surpassed by the rhythm of architectonic compositions’.<sup>3</sup> He went on to describe the Cubist achievements of Pablo Picasso in a somewhat Expressionist spirit:

He arrived at fantastic creations produced as fetishes by nations without history by way of Cézanne’s lessons in cuboid construction, seeking forms that were entirely liberated from natural proportions. Only [the following] could attract this unique representative of contemporary art: forms with grotesque deformations, of a pure expressive quality, enormous in their primal being, summarising the most primitive of metaphysics; fear of the powers of nature, worship of evil forces.<sup>4</sup>

Basler had not yet set up an opposition between Cubism and Expressionism, simply seeing these as two conventions in contemporary painting ‘elevating the work to abstraction’. He wrote:

In Cubism, as in Fauvism, expression is not in the least limited to the pathetic expression of a face or to a sudden movement. It lies in the layout of the picture: in the manner in which weighty figures are disposed, in leaving empty space around them, in the proportions, in short, in the composition, that is to say in the art of decoratively arranging various elements, which provides the painter with a means to express sensation.<sup>5</sup>

The first *Exhibition of Futurists, Cubists and Expressionists* in Poland, at the Industrial Museum (Muzeum Przemysłowe) in Lwów, organised by The Association of the Friends of Art (Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuki) in mid-1913, presented a similar point of view.<sup>6</sup> The exhibition had already been shown in many European cities and travelled to Lwów directly from Budapest. It was organised by Herwarth Walden’s Der Sturm gallery in Berlin.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition comprised the work of twelve artists—among them Aleksei Jawlensky, Vasilii Kandinsky, Egon Adler, Oskar Kokoschka, Bohumil Kubišta, Hans Richter, Lasar Segall, and Ludwig Meidner—who had relatively little to do with French Cubism or Italian Futurism at that time. No Futurist paintings came to Lwów from Budapest, and Cubism served to represent the general idea of modernity in Poland rather than a concrete artistic practice. The exhibition poster designed by Józef Wodyński, featuring Kubišta’s painting *Murder (Vražda, 1912)*, appears to convey the character of the exhibition well. The characteristic geometric forms of the Czech artist were rendered in an Expressionist style. The murder was that of art.

There is nothing paradoxical about the fact that the earliest traces of Cubist style, coloured by Expressionism and Primitivism, are to be found in the work of Polish and Jewish artists studying and living in various parts of the Russian Empire, rather than in France. The artistic experiments of Zygmunt Waliszewski serve as an example: he is known to have made drawings in the spirit of Cubism, Futurism, and neo-Primitivism, similar to the Russian versions of these tendencies, as early as 1915. Waliszewski encountered avant-garde art in Georgia (he lived in Tbilisi), where plentiful information about the work of the Russian and Ukrainian modernists interested in Cubism and Futurism arrived by way of Moscow and Petersburg as well as Kiev and Odessa (these included David and Vladimir Burliuk, Alexandra Exter, Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Ilya Zdanevich). In the war years of 1914 to 1917, while serving in the Russian army, Waliszewski went to Moscow several times, having been injured on the front. In his recollections about the artist, Józef Czapski wrote:

When the 21-year-old Zygmunt Waliszewski arrived in Kraków, he already had an extensive career as an artist behind him, from his first exhibition as a miracle child in 1908 in Tbilisi, to his later feverish work as a portraitist, illustrator and decorator. He already knew French painting from Manet to Picasso from Shchukin’s gallery in Moscow; in the Caucasus, he met artists of all tendencies who had travelled there from all over Russia, during the war and revolution.<sup>8</sup>

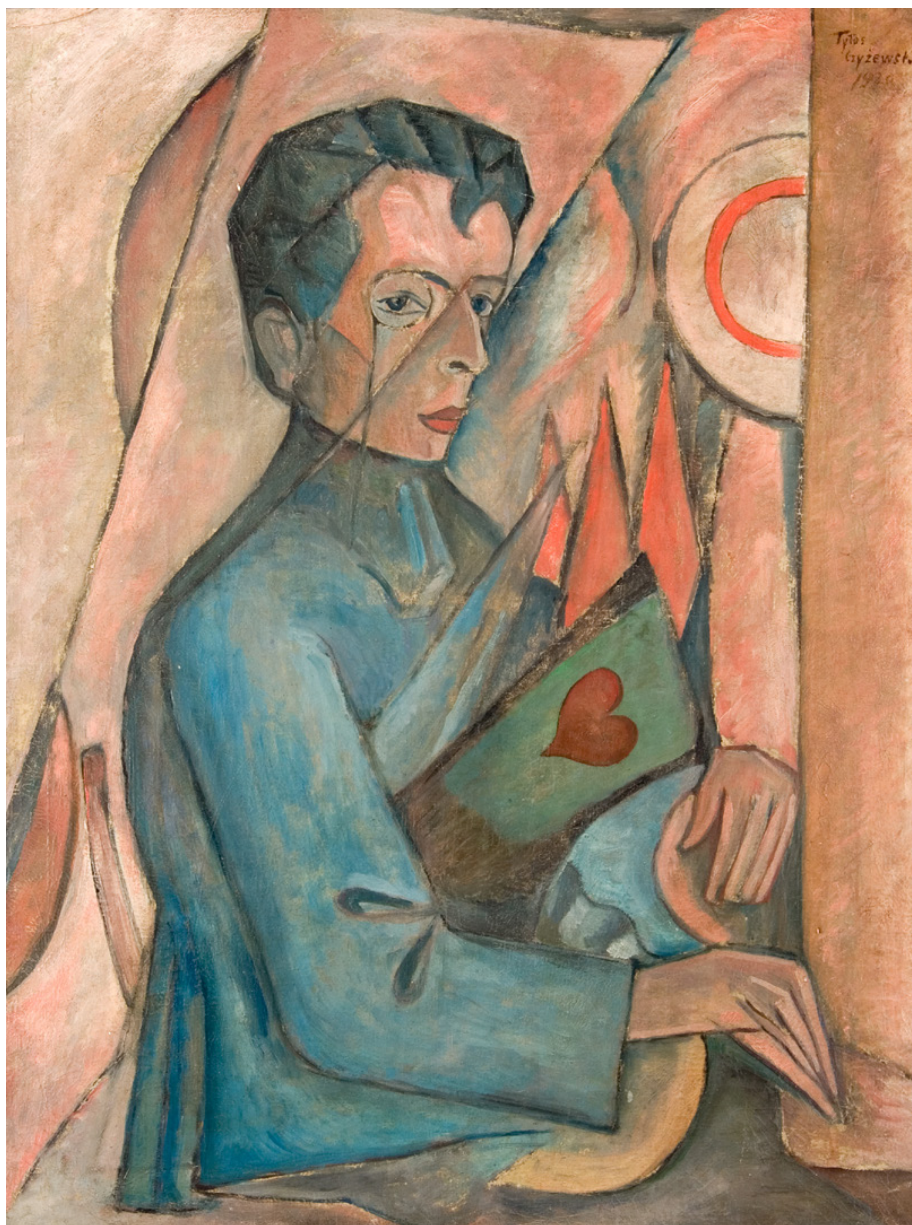


Fig. 3.1. Tytus Czyżewski, *Portrait of Bruno Jasiński* (*Portret Brunona Jasińskiego*, 1920). Oil on canvas, 78 x 60 cm Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

Before the war and the 1917 revolution, there was a large circle of Polish artists in Moscow and Petersburg, who could have encountered the pronouncements of the Russian Futurists and the avant-garde through Sergei Shchukin's collections of French art. Some of these returned to Poland between 1917 and 1922. Among them were Stanisław Noakowski, a graduate of Petersburg Academy, Władysław Strzemiński, who was studying military engineering, and Katarzyna Kobro, who was at the start of her artistic career. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) became acquainted with the art of the Russian Futurists during the war, though by this point he was already fairly well-versed in modern art in France. There were also many Jewish artists, who settled in Poland after the October Revolution, moving in avant-garde circles. Mojżesz Broderson was among them; he returned to Łódź from Russia in 1919, bringing with him information concerning new Russian and Jewish art in Russia. Marek Szwarc, co-founder of the group *Jung Idysz* with Broderson, studied in Paris in the years 1910 to 1914, moving in the circle of the Expressionists of the School of Paris, and travelled in Russia during the war, also bringing back news of the Russian avant-garde.

The first works in Poland to be deformed in a spirit close to Cubism were made in around 1915. They were all by Tytus Czyżewski, and the earliest of these, lost today, were an ink drawing entitled *Dance* (*Taniec*), two versions of *Madonna* (tempera and a drawing in ink) and the somewhat later portraits (1916–1917).<sup>9</sup> In all Czyżewski's compositions, the Cubist dispersion of form was accompanied by the decorative stylisation of the surface (or surfaces), based on asymmetric

composition, the regular ‘rhythmisation’ of individual parts of volumes, with the help of hatching, encompassing forms with curved lines. Similarly, in the *Multi-surface Compositions* (*Kompozycje wielopłaszczyznowe*), the most original works in Polish Cubism from the point of view of formal experimentation, created by Czyżewski alongside his other work right up to 1920, we see a similar tension between an attempt at the Cubist destruction of space, and a decorative, almost symbolic resolution of the picture plane (Fig. 3.1).<sup>10</sup> Zbigniew Pronaszko, who collaborated closely with Czyżewski, provided a theoretical ground for such a vision of Cubism in 1914. In an article entitled ‘Before the Great Tomorrow’, Pronaszko cited the words of Juliusz Słowacki—‘Everything is created by the Spirit and for the Spirit and nothing exists for a bodily purpose’—and demanded the search for a form that was ‘stronger, more defined, more decorative’.<sup>11</sup>

The strength of the Symbolist tradition, associated with entirely original, decorative, form, was particularly evident in the art of Bolesław Biegas.<sup>12</sup> Renowned French critics were interested in him, seeing in his sculpture and painting a rebirth of the Symbolist tradition; these critics included Guillaume Apollinaire, André Salmon, Louis Vauxcelles, Emile Verhaeren, and André Fontainas. Biegas’s work remained influenced by the decadent philosophy of Stanisław Przybyszewski and Expressionist painting, and was full of allegorical-symbolic references, often connected with ancient Slavonic ideas and myths. In his ‘spherical paintings’ (*obrazy sferyczne*), the human figure was part of a net of abstract, circular lines and intersecting surfaces. In certain works from 1918, the linear decorativeness of the composition and the flatly-applied colour dominated, creating arabesques of abstract form associated with magic and esoteric signs.

The idea of Cubism as a continuation of the Polish or European tradition of modern art, first Romantic-Symbolist then Romantic-Expressionist, remained fairly strongly implanted in Polish artistic thought until the end of the 1910s. It was in the context of this discourse that Expressionism (as a synonym of the modernity to which Cubism aspired), as opposed to Impressionism (and not Symbolism), began to play a greater role as of around 1917. It is also in this context that we can see the as-yet-amicable relations between Cubism and Expressionism of those times. The early histories of the Poznań group Bunt (Rebellion), of the artists of the Jewish movement Jung Idysz in Łódź, to whom I will return later, and of the Kraków group of Formists, who were officially called the Polish Expressionists in the years 1917 to 1919, are all characteristic in this regard. Nevertheless, as Zbigniew Pronaszko wrote in his programmatic article, published at the time of the opening of the first exhibition of the Kraków group: ‘It is not the name that matters here; it is as incidental as Futurism, Cubism, Orphism and so many others in the field of Expressionism’.<sup>13</sup> Besides Pronaszko’s article, the exhibition catalogue referred to texts by Adam Mickiewicz and extracts from Jean Metzinger’s deliberations on Cubism.

Zbigniew Pronaszko’s first Cubist works are from 1917: a series of nudes drawn in ink and painted, one of which was used on the cover of the catalogue of the first Formist exhibition (Fig. 3.2). It is crucial to stress the difference between the ever-more-clearly ‘Expressionistic’ Cubist works of Czyżewski (for example, the lithographic poster for the Kraków exhibition) and the ‘Cubistic’ (though decoratively over-stylised) works of Pronaszko, declaring himself an Expressionist. One could say that a particular Cubo-Expressionism defined the work of the Polish modernists in the short period between 1917 and 1920. This term would not just serve to encompass the work of Czyżewski and Zbigniew Pronaszko a similar set of concerns were to be found in certain compositions by Leon Chwistek, Gwidon Gwozdecki, Jerzy Hryńkowski, Tymon Niesiołowski, Andrzej Pronaszko, Kamil Witkowski, August Zamoyski and several others.

The group’s new name, Formists, was announced at the third exhibition of the Kraków Expressionists in 1919. ‘Today’, wrote Chwistek, ‘there is an opportunity to create’:

a new style, conceived of on the scale of the Gothic. This aim has united us for two years under the banner of Expressionism ... yet it transpired that in the public perception this name united us with German art, which remains in a constant state of experimentation, and does not shrink, in many cases, from unsavoury eccentricity. In these circumstances, it has become necessary to signal our distinct character by introducing a new name. This is how we came to call ourselves Formists...<sup>14</sup>





Fig. 3.2. Zbigniew Pronaszko, *Formist Nude (Akt formistyczny, 1917)*. Oil on canvas, 113 x 63 cm. Courtesy of the National Museum, Kraków.

Of course, in this instance, too, it was not so much a matter of the name, but of signalling a clear opposition between Expressionism from Germany and Formism as a Polish art, remaining in close relation to Italian Futurism and French Cubism.

As of the end of 1919 and the beginning of 1920 (though the first traces of this process were already evident in 1918), Cubism began to function in opposition to Expressionism in Polish art. Even though artistic theory and practice made ever less reference to it, it was associated with ideas of order, the desire to create a style, in a word, with a classicist order foreign to the 'eccentricities' and 'nihilism' of Expressionism (which some people felt to be closer to Dada). Ideologies of construction and organisation, particularly those conceived in stylistic-decorative terms, became increasingly popular in Poland (which had regained its independence as a result of the war), and especially when it was possible to unite them with the 'authenticity' of the folk primitive in art. This was also the developmental path followed by most Formists after 1920. Paradoxically, a Cubism that was opposed to Expressionism deprived the first 'Polish Cubists' of modernist legitimacy, a 'modernity' guaranteed by its association with the Polish artistic tradition, cited in a very free manner: Romantic, Symbolist, or outright Expressionist. The source of the opposition between Cubism and Expressionism, firmly rooted in both European Cubism and Expressionism, was a Nietzschean opposition of the arts common in modernist discourse.

As soon as the contemporary version of this opposition was absorbed by Polish artists, the moment the modernist movement became universal, these artists' declaration in favour of Cubism had the effect of cutting them off from the national tradition. In seeking to maintain tradition, if only in its folkloristic form, while also remaining modern (which is to say Cubist), the 'Polish Cubists' had to adopt the new name 'Formists', so as to distance themselves from the aforementioned opposition and to found, on new ground, a synthetic, 'rhythmic-primitive style' for Polish modernism (the 'Rytm' group).

At the beginning of the 1920s in Poland, we can no longer speak of Expressionism or Cubism as synonyms of modernity. The Cubist tradition that reigned universally in avant-garde circles situated Cubism as the only historical basis for the modernist development of art. The opposition between Cubism and Expressionism, to which the Cubo-Expressionist Formists referred, became the key category of avant-garde history. In 1924, the Cubists and Suprematists were named among those collaborating with [the magazine] *Blok*, while the Expressionists were passed over. The oppositional model of two tendencies in the development of modern art was already strongly rooted in the artistic consciousness, making for clear demarcations. Strzemiński saw the pathway emerging from Cubism as the only creative pathway for the development of art. 'Formal analysis', he wrote, 'leads to the conclusion that Cubism is an enrichment, [an] expansion of painterly form, while Expressionism [is] its demise, decay'.<sup>15</sup> From then on, the avant-garde created a narrative of its own progressive history with a clearly-defined beginning, in which there was a break with everything that was 'uncreative'. Avant-garde works also signalled the end of this history, and the beginning of a new process, purged of any ambivalence, whose ultimate aim was to be the aesthetic and social unity of art and life. It is clear then, that this unity had to be born of opposition. Cubo-Expressionism thus played an important role in the historiography of the avant-garde: it divided and united.

Along with the recognition of the 'purifying' role of Cubism in the process of avant-garde history, Constructivism brought about an appropriation of Cubo-Expressionist Formism and an inclusion of its 'Cubistic form', liberated of 'Expressionistic content', into avant-garde history. Initially criticised, then later forgotten, Formism was once more supposed to testify (by way of Cubism) to the modernity of Polish art and to its universal sources. 'Modern art in Poland began with Formism': this was how Strzemiński began his history of art in 1934. 'The main postulate of Formism', he went on, 'was pure form. This set Formism apart from other contemporary tendencies in art and facilitated its successors' relatively simple passage from object-based to abstract art'.<sup>16</sup> This all-too-evident mystification was needed by the Constructivists to justify their own 'logical' development. In reality, there were few shared features between Formism, in search of expression and style, and Constructivism, which needed Formism because of its pre-Cubist orientation. This notwithstanding, the avant-garde model of the dichotomous development of twentieth-century art was born on the eve of Cubo-Expressionist unity.

### **Futuro-Dada**

The history of Futuro-Dada discourse was rather different. As opposed to Zürich Dada, whose specificity was defined to a certain degree by an attempt to overcome the Expressionism of which it was born, Dada discourse in Poland operated in the sphere of Futurist terminology. If, seen from Zürich, Dada appeared homogeneous, from a Polish perspective it seemed to be an amalgamation of statements full of cracks, inconsistencies, and borrowings. Taking Dada as one of the variations of the avant-garde rebellion against culture, consequently saddled with ambiguity, its Polish Futurist version proved the most important element of Dada anti-art, undermining any stylistic or morphological unity, without ever being part of the Polish history of the movement.

This is why, in place of the uncertain history of Dada in Poland, it is important to see Polish Futurism as one of the clearest examples of the movement, in the bosom of which we can trace the specific shifts of emphasis caused by the Dada perspective. From this point of view it is not insignificant that the birth of Polish Futurism after 1918 took place in an atmosphere of sensation and scandal, an inseparable element of the first Dada manifestations of the circle of the



Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, among whose collaborators was the Futurist Filippo Marinetti. It is also relevant, as suggested above, that the Polish artists of the first avant-garde who came to the country from Russia between 1918 and 1922 brought with them the experience of the Futurist revolution. An announcement for the Warsaw poets' café Pod Pikadorem which opened almost immediately after the end of the war, appealed, in a pastiche of a revolutionary decree from Russia: 'Countrymen! Workers, soldiers, children, elderly people, women, intelligentsia and playwrights! Opening on Friday, 29 November, at 9pm: the first Warsaw poets' café POD PIKADOREM ... Long live the Executive Committee of the POETS' CAFÉ'.<sup>17</sup>

Information about Italian Futurism, full of 'dynamism, fury, faith, courage', had already reached Poland before the war.<sup>18</sup> Fragments of Marinetti's manifesto were published in 1909 in the Warsaw *Świat* (*The World*) with the recommendation that the 'credo of action as fast as an automobile, as buoyant and lofty as an airplane, is a much needed elixir for our literary association'.<sup>19</sup> In 1911, Cezary Jellenta greeted the birth of the Vitalist poetry of the Futurists, linking it to the Nietzschean critique of culture and civilisation.<sup>20</sup> A year later, in an analytical article devoted to Marinetti, he saw in Futurism new possibilities emerging from 'grasping certain properties of today's rhythm of life and metropolitan fever'.<sup>21</sup> The Kraków *Krytyka* (*Critique*) also included a wide-ranging essay on Futurism by Aleksander Kołtoński in 1914, stressing the particular weight of the phenomenon in contemporary culture.<sup>22</sup> Associating Futurism with the Romantic tradition, like Jellenta, Kołtoński added that there is

something in this art of Schopenhauer's "will", something of the Nietzschean "ubermensch", some of Weininger's misogyny, and a great, great deal of Bergsonism, an affinity to which Marinetti admits, after all, though with an emphasis worthy of a Futurist demanding for himself and for Dante and Edgar Allan Poe the first place in the final wavering of the all-powerful rule of ideas and according all rights to the intuitive creative imagination.<sup>23</sup>

The painting of the Futurists, referred to by Kołtoński as the art of 'states of the soul', devoid of the 'iconographic aspect of the picture', tended towards the 'synthesis of colours and shapes'. 'Every combination of lines, volumes and colours', wrote the critic, 'besides its absolute value, possesses the value of a plastic equivalent of a certain state of the soul, produced externally by a whole complex mechanism of forces, both known and unknown'.<sup>24</sup>

It is often noted that there was a link between the early phase of the reception of Futurism in Poland and the readership of Henri Bergson and Stanisław Brzozowski. Their attempts to transplant the energetic Futurist ideology onto Polish territory resulted in trivialising the Futurist apology for technology, which was alien to the economic realities of Poland. In practice, however, after 1918, and despite earlier expectations, Futurism did not become a philosophy of labour, but rather, in view of its scandalising slogans, took the form of an artistic fashion.<sup>25</sup>

It was certainly a matter of fashion. I am minded to believe that despite a degree of popularity in literature, Futurism did not define itself independently in the history of Polish art, and certainly not in visual art. As a specific Futuro-Dada, Futurism played a significant role in Polish artistic life, simply giving its name to a whole range of manifestations, which grew out of it. Futurism in Polish art could be termed a discourse, which dissipated into Dada. While Dada, a name that was used very reluctantly, could be referred to as having been a discursive parasite on the enigmatic body of Futurism.<sup>26</sup> Let us look at the birth and life of this phenomenon, paying attention to its chronology.

The founding of the 'Katarynka' club in Kraków in 1919 by the poets Bruno Jasiński and Stanisław Młodożeniec together with the painter Tytus Czyżewski would be among the earliest events in the circle of the Polish Futurist avant-garde, following on from the Warsaw poet's café 'Pod Pikadorem' and Anatol Stern and Aleksander Wat's first leaflet, *Yes (Tak)*. It was to be a place for avant-garde artists' meetings and performances, modelled on the Cabaret Voltaire. Subsequent poetic evenings, organised in Kraków in 1919, were interrupted by the police, and publications were confiscated. At the same time, in Warsaw, Stern and Wat organised the first 'sub-tropical evening organised by white negroes', and their phonetically-written manifesto *Gga*, published shortly afterwards, whose title was intended to resemble the honking of geese, was withdrawn

by the censors.<sup>27</sup> The (intentionally-misspelled) *A Nife in the Stomak* (*Nuż w bżuhu*), published in Kraków in 1921 proved to be a similar scandal. Futurist concerts attracted crowds in 1921. During Jasiński's evenings, the actor Helena Buczyńska demonstrated word-art, intended to be a 'synthesis of recital, music and dance'. At the Futurist ball entitled the 'The Smiling Steed' ('Uśmiechnięty rumak') in Kraków, the actors improvised a crowd of mannequins from a Czyżewski burlesque, wearing geometric cardboard costumes. If it is really true, Stern pushed the naked Wat about in a wheelbarrow along the streets of Warsaw, on a Sunday full of strolling bourgeois. In Kraków, in lieu of a concert, a piano was placed on a cart. The history of Polish Futurism, full of anecdotes, ended suddenly at the end of 1923 and the beginning of 1924, along with the emergence of calls for a new art, whose task was to be the organisation of society and, with it, of a new order. Provocation and destruction were to be replaced by construction.

'Cubism, Expressionism, Primitivism, Dadaism outdid all the "isms". The only tendency that has not yet been exploited in art is onanism', ran the manifesto 'Concerning Futurist Poetry'. 'Our art', it went on, 'is neither the reflection of the anatomy of the soul (psychology), nor an expression of our aspirations to the next world of God (religion), nor a discussion of eternal problems (philosophy) ... The work of art is an essence. Dissolved in yesterday's glass, it should colour it entirely with its own hue'.<sup>28</sup> The Polish Futurists, like the Dadaists in Zürich, rebelled against art in the name of life; seeing themselves as the prophets of a social revolution, they directed their critique against the myth of art. In the cultural field, social scandals were supposed to shatter the bourgeois world's conception of art as a sphere of 'lasting' values. They were to be directed against an aesthetic perception identified with the sublimated act of contemplation, against artistic institutions sacralising the artist and his products, against the idea of the artist devoting his life to an artistic mission. 'Art has to be surprising, all-penetrating and [should] knock one off one's feet', read Jasiński's manifesto 'To the Polish Nation, A Manifesto Concerning the Immediate Futurisation of Life'. And then:

Modern man has long ago lost the ability to be moved or expectant. Legal codes have once and for all normalised and classified all manner of the unexpected. Life, which differs from the modern machine in that it permits fairy-tale like surprises, is becoming less and less different from it ... All logical possibilities have been exhausted to the last. The moment of constant rumination until loss of consciousness [has arrived]. Life, in its logic, has become nightmarish and illogical.

We, the Futurists, wish to show you the gate that leads out of this ghetto of logic. Man has ceased to feel joy because he has ceased to have expectations. Only life conceived of as a [ballet] of possibilities and surprises can return this joy to him. In the [devilish] circle of things that are self-evident, we have understood that nothing is self-evident and that besides this logic, there exists a whole sea of illogicalities, of which each can create its own distinct logic, whereby  $A + B = F$  and  $2 \times 2 = 777$ .

A deluge of wonders and surprises. Nonsense dancing along on streets. Art – en masse.

Anyone can be an artist.

Theatres, circuses, street performances, all played by the public itself. We call on all poets, painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, and actors to take to the streets.

The stage is revolving.<sup>29</sup>

A section of the manifesto *Gga*, entitled 'Primitivists to the Nations of the World and to Poland', threw 'civilisation and culture, with their sickliness' on the rubbish-heap. It announced: 'We chose simplicity, vulgarity, merriness, health, triviality, laughter. We willingly renounce uprightness, seriousness, pietism'.<sup>30</sup> The manifesto continued:

We erase history and posterity, as well as Rome, Tolstoy, hats, India, Bavaria and Kraków. Poland should renounce tradition, the mummy of Prince Józef and theatre. We destroy the city. Every mechanism—aeroplanes, trams, inventions, telephone. Instead of these, primordial forms of communication. The apotheosis of the horse. Only assembled and mobile homes. Shouted and rhyming speech. We understand the social by way of the rule of idiots and capitalists. This is a foundation most fecund for laughter and revolution.<sup>31</sup>

The subsequent paragraphs of this so-called Futurist manifesto outlined an agenda of anti-art that was characteristic of Dada, at the basis of which there lay a principle of 'Primitivism' intended to replace 'degraded culture' with 'original' values. The new art, modelled on circus spectacle for the great masses, was to be characterised by triviality and laughter.

The manifesto of the Polish Futurists, published in 1920, was essentially a polemic with the Futurist agenda of Marinetti, though it adopted certain of his slogans. Based on the Dada conception of art as play, as seen from the point of view of the Primitivists, it represented a protest against urban civilisation, technology and logic. Closer to Francis Picabia's art than to Marcel Duchamp's, with all the distance characteristic of Dada attitudes, the Polish artists doubted the value of the 'machinic' agenda (as opposed to the Italian Futurists proclaiming the cult of the machine, which had been raised to the rank of the highest symbol of modernity). In Polish poetry, the iron stove and the engine, the coffee grinder and the telephone, the electric lantern, and even the gas lamp, were Futurist, rather than Dada machines. The poetic paintings of Tytus Czyżewski in the volumes *Green Eye. Electric Visions (Zielone oko. Elektryczne wizje)* and the somewhat later *The Snake, Orpheus and Eurydice (Wąż, Orfeusz i Eurydyka)* are reminiscent of the lyrical schemas of the machinic paintings of Picabia. 'Red light explodes', read Czyżewski's text, 'the phallus is transformed into a giant electric light bulb. Naked, blackened with coal, the god of the underworld Pluton cries: dynamo phallus; the red shining phallus remains—a bulb'.<sup>32</sup>

Forming an integral part of this 'drama', Czyżewski's drawings were defined by the author as 'dynamo-psycho studies of specific moments. Each of these pictures is my DYNAMOPSYCHO'.<sup>33</sup> In many of Czyżewski's poems, there is a Futuro-Dada symbiosis of the primitive and technology; a tendency to connect unconnected images, carried over into other, unexpected contexts; and a tendency to juxtapose religious and mythological symbolism (deprived of its original meaning) with a civilising and erotic symbolism. 'Man produced and unleashed the engine, which will at some point kill or surpass him', wrote Czyżewski. 'We will build machines, we will travel to the stars, to observe the sun. The sun will be surprised at where man acquires so much "knowledge". Man will build a mechanical sun. The old sun is an old, trusty machine. Let us love the sun and let us not talk about it behind its back. Mankind of the future is an electric machine—sentient, complicated, but stylistically simple'.<sup>34</sup>

Dada play with form and content was constantly present in Polish Futurism: mixing up types, upsetting morphological principles, using new artistic techniques, and, ultimately, negating meaning. Associated with this was contempt for aesthetic values and a conviction that anything can be material for the artwork and that meaning is born of chance. Nonsense, abstraction, and a lack of logic were the fuel and content of anti-art. In this sense, the first Polish mobiles, non-objective assemblages, the sculptures of Mieczysław Szczuka, constructed of pieces of metal, wire, glass, and wood, could all be considered to be 'Dadaistic'. The reviewers of Szczuka's exhibition, which opened in December 1921 in Warsaw, noted the 'elements of Tatlinism and Dadaism' in his work, interpreting the latter as 'neo-Naturalism'. In his 'Dadaistic works', Szczuka was supposed to be depriving real objects their 'logic, according to reality', in order to situate them in the world of the imagination'.<sup>35</sup>

The everyday language used by poets, the language of the press, telegraphic abbreviations, as well as individual words deprived of meaning amounted to a Dada search for triviality and chance. A *faits divers* news style was central to the structure of a great many of Bruno Jasiński's poems in his 1923 collection *A Shoe in the Buttonhole (But w butonierce)*. Popular artistic gimmicks of the Polish avant-garde included Czyżewski's unexpected choreography of graphic texts, the use of typographic signs in the visual organisation of poems or, vice-versa, the use of collages with words of sentences in painting. Czyżewski's poem 'The Mechanical Garden' ('Mechaniczny ogród') serves as an example. With a view to the slogan *parole in libertà*, it was a Futurist poem composed solely of nouns. From a Dada perspective, it is a static poem, familiar from the 1920 manifesto, where the spatial disposition of individual words has been rendered concrete by a graphic arrangement that imposes a visual 'unity of reading'. Bruno Jasiński's 'Manifesto Concerning Futurist Poetry' proclaimed: 'We break once and for all with all manner of description (painting), and, on the

other hand also with all manner of onomatopoeic means ... We rule out the sentence as an anti-poetic freak ... We rule out the book as a form of further delivering poetry to the receiver ... We break once and for all with the pathos of eternity in connection with art'.<sup>36</sup>

Concealed within Dada was the need to negate the Dada attitude and Dada art itself. We also see such experiments among Polish artists, the best example being, perhaps, the previously-cited sentence from the manifesto of the 'futurisation' of poetry. In his manifesto 'From the Machine to Animals' ('Od maszyny do zwierząt') Czyżewski prophesied the death of 'Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism and Dadaism'.<sup>37</sup> Stern wrote:

Had they asked me for a more personal opinion on the matter I would have found myself in real trouble. For my part, I stopped thinking of myself as a Futurist worthy of the name as soon as I noticed that people struck up a conversation with me too calmly, and did so without fear or disgust. Futurism died in me when it stopped being a puzzle, often terrifying me, myself. I remember the time with sorrow, despite the understanding that its end was inevitable.<sup>38</sup>

The issue of the end, of abandonment, of loss, and of the ironic distance towards one's own art that came with it, were undoubtedly a result of the 'programmatic' principles of the movement; they were written into its poetics of destroying order, infringing rules, breaking out of schemas. Stabilisation, freezing, and immobility were the enemies of Dada; it opposed these with change, with a categorical alteration of rules that verged on self-destruction. This was the agonism of Dada.

In light of the above remarks, Dada discourse in Poland harmonised with Dada in general, co-creating a common sphere of concerns. Scandalising history, the ideology of contestation, unconventional structure, and, lastly, agonism, were characteristics that were shared by the whole movement. Polish Dada discourse seems to be specifically situated by its symbiotic nature, its parasitic existence within Futurism, its traces within Expressionism. That is its role within Polish art history. Thus, besides the common field of Dada as a whole, there was also another side to the Dada problem, perhaps one that defines what was specific about the Polish avant-garde more precisely.

Let us stress, once more, that what seems to specifically locate the Polish Dada discourse is the symbiotic nature of its parasitical existence within Futurism. Let us try to unearth the consequences of this symbiosis, if only for the purposes of the reflections provided here. Let us look at Futurist Dada from the point of view of that which most upset the Eastern- and East-Central-European versions of Futurism and Dada around the world: the problem of the end of art. From such a perspective, we immediately notice that, in Poland, Dadaistic death did not just mean the death struggle of Dada in its own self-entanglement. Here, the Dada discourse (and in this it was certainly different from Italian Futurism) was born on the ruins of the world in the insanity of a repressive civilisation, in the dehumanisation of cultures, at the time of the death of art. The catastrophic vision appropriated from the Expressionists, which appeared in Poland along with the war, remained somewhat side-lined among Polish Expressionists by the battle being waged for the psychic rebirth of mankind. Not finding strong support in Expressionism, it gently undermined Futurist optimism, only to take root finally in Dada pessimism, bewitching artists with its nihilism. 'We are approaching the end with mathematical precision', wrote Jasiński in *The Legs of Izolda Morgan* (*Nogi Izoldy Morgan*) in 1923:

Soon, everything around us will be replaced by machines, we will move around amidst machines. We are making our every move dependent on the machine. We are laying down our weapons. We are giving ourselves over into the hands of an alien element, hostile to us. The girdle of iron nerves, which still supports our hegemony over ourselves, has to crack any moment now. Then there will remain war or madness. For the time being nobody can see [or] understand this. We are blinded by our power. There is no way out. We have hemmed ourselves in on all sides ourselves. And, after all, it is already inside us. You cannot live without the machine. Perhaps your forefathers still could. But you cannot. Defence is impossible. We have to wait. The poison is within us. We have poisoned ourselves by our own will. Syphilitic civilisation.<sup>39</sup>

The Futurist attitude to the machine, to technology, and, ultimately, to contemporary civilisation, was ambivalent: it oscillated between adoration and contempt, between elation and disappointment,



Fig. 3.3. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), *Composition (Visit to Raja) (Kompozycja (Wizyta u Radży)*, 1921). Oil on canvas, 77.5 x 90 cm. Muzeum Okręgowe, Toruń.

as in Czyżewski's poem: 'the wheels turn in the cities / black gold red / furious machines / delight thunder torment ... and then the hour struck on the white clock / and the propeller hummed / and I met four coffins on the way / and the tram ran over the dustbin man's cart'.<sup>40</sup>

The Dada view of contemporary civilisation, the world of mechanised people and humanised machines, did not share this ambivalence. The Moloch of the metropolis, the wild crowd, the mindlessness of machines, took on a singularly negative tone. No longer apologetical, the world produced within Dada discourse was one approaching catastrophe. Play was overwhelmed by the terrifying unknown. The Futurist utopia of the dynamic equality of forces and the infinite spiral of progress was reversed in the Dada looking-glass. Losing its balance, seduced by the 'mechanical instinct', beneath whose mark lurked the devil, it delighted in Apocalypse.

Dada discourse in Polish art was a systematic 'stepping outside of Futurism', a shifting of accents unsettling its unity. In his memoirs concerning Futurism, Wat rightly stressed that, in Poland, this movement had 'the least in common with classical Futurism'.<sup>41</sup> He confessed to Miłosz that

the name was as inappropriate as can be, though we did change it to neo-Futurists and so on, though in fact that was not really it. Undoubtedly the greatest influences were on the one hand Russian Futurism, so Mayakowski [*sic*], and especially Khlebnikov, and on the other from Dadaism. Our guiding line are some contacts or proximities, or propinquities of avant-garde-revolutionary literary tendencies with the political left ... And, at least in my case, for instance, it was not connected with the Russian revolution, but rather perhaps the influence of catastrophist literature, foreseeing catastrophe, the decadence of Europe, Spenglerism even before Spengler, moods which were, after all, so alive in the Europe of those years. Dadaism is that which might otherwise probably be called nihilism, the loss of faith in the possibility of a future European civilisation ... The fact of the founding of Poland was, for us, an incident of far less gravity than the general catastrophe of the era, the great unknown that lay before us, although, because we were young, impudent, it was extremely promising for us too.<sup>42</sup>

Like their nineteenth-century forebears, the Expressionists opposed a sense of the emptiness of the world with the riches of the soul, the complexity of experience, the suffering or the scream of the individual torn apart by dramas. The Dada reply to a vision of the world heading towards catastrophe was wild play, continual joking, constant concealment. The Expressionists saw possibility in art, the Dadaists threw art to be consumed by life, they lost the artist in the crowd of the street'. The Expressionists were effectively engaged in a systematic 'play for the psyche', while the Futurists, with Promethean pathos, gave art away to future centuries, while the Dadaists, with a clownish laugh, devoted art to the 'great unknown' of life.

### Pure-Hoaxing

It is worth recalling, here, a text by Witkacy. It is a most interesting parody, a pastiche of a Dada manifesto, written by an artist who did not want to be taken for a Dadaist. In 1921, Witkacy wrote a text entitled *Litmus Paper (Papierek lakmusowy)*, with the subtitle 'The latest artistic novelty Pure-Hoaxing'. There has been continuous controversy over Witkacy's Dada. Though the insistence on absolute creative freedom, the gesture of abandoning art and devoting one's life to going into business with a portraiture firm were not Dada, they have some experience of Dada discourse. Witkacy's publication *Litmus Paper*, signed with the pseudonym Marcei Duchąński-Blaga ('Marcei Duchąński-Hoax', created by Polonising the name of Marcel Duchamp), clearly pointed to Dada as a negative area of reference, in which the whole of contemporary creativity had to be considered. The parodic, and at the same time polemical, tone of this text, is not evidence of disregard for the phenomenon, though it was a warning against it. That which linked Witkacy to the Dadaists was a catastrophic vision of the world, a pessimistic diagnosis. It was the remedy that marked him apart. Witkacy the metaphysician, the rebel inheritor of turn-of-the-century art, the Polish Expressionist, the Formist refusing to submit to the agenda, became a defender of the art of 'lost causes' (Fig. 3.3).

The protest formulated by Witkacy was the result of the conviction that negating art (and also abandoning it) could only be carried out within the sphere of a 'play for art'.<sup>43</sup> Referring to the Futurist utopia, Witkacy wrote: 'Art will be finished, and the happy, mechanised people of the Future will no longer need her, in view of the extinguishing of metaphysical feelings that spring from a sense of the singularity of the personality. The point is not to hasten this process, but, as far as possible, to pull back from it. This is also the end towards which my own work tends'.<sup>44</sup>

Witkacy wrote that the Dadaists believed that there was no such thing as art, and, perusing their statements, he wrote: 'I don't know whether this has been written seriously or as "farce" and therein lies the whole horror of the thing. A time will come when it will not be known what is True and what is False, what is the result of artistic necessity, and what is purely mechanical chance, or, worse, conscious hoax. This is the terminal, inevitable fate of Art in the social development of mankind'.<sup>45</sup>

In *Litmus Paper*, he wrote that:

we need at last to tear away the mask that has stifled so many generations and condemned the most talented hoaxers to be pickled in their own juices. It must be said that this way of presenting the problem already contains the substance of a new agenda. Once again, we ask: how can one outstrip Futurism and Dadaism? BY PURE HOAXING. What freedom! What bliss! To be able at last to begin hoaxing blissfully and luxuriously. Hooray!! Our chests expand, our hair blows free, our eyes pop out of our heads. Pure hoaxing!! The first and last to do so, WE speak, shout and howl this magical word, which nobody else has had the courage to pronounce. Nobody is going to outstrip us.<sup>46</sup>

With Dada irony, Witkacy, 'Marcei Duchąński', distanced himself from Dada. The Dada Apocalypse lay between the Promethean utopia of the Constructivists and the anti-utopia of a standardised culture, a dramatic conflict of art and anti-art in Poland conceived of in light of the end of civilisation. This discourse was hard to identify in view of the mask it threw on, appearing unexpectedly where art questioned its identity in the face of annihilation.



It was within these, somewhat internal, boundaries, faced with a fascination and horror of defeat, that the Dada game was played out. The Dadaists were surrounded from without by enemies, without whom, nevertheless, they were unable to live.

### Dada-Constructivism

If, in Western Europe, the alliance between the Dadaists and the Constructivists was founded on both tendencies' evolving political context, then, likewise, the introduction of Futuro-Dada into the Constructivist orbit in Poland, should be read in relation to Polish artists' strategic subordination of their missing historical links to their own ends. Sketching out the progressive model of the development of the history of art, the Polish Constructivists, like art criticism of the time, stressed the opposition between Cubism and Expressionism (and the Futurism that was often identified with it), and underlined their rationalist-Formalist provenance, which they associated with Cubism. There was no room for Dada in such a model, and although its representatives were sometimes mentioned under other labels, the name Dada did not appear as a movement shaping contemporary art in survey texts published in Poland.<sup>47</sup> Understandably, given their agenda, neither the catastrophist nor the folkloristic tendencies of the Futuro-Dadaists appealed to the Polish Constructivists. Wishing to keep both Futurism and Dada in their own circle, the Constructivists had to break with the Polish version of Futuro-Dada discourse. Constructivism had need of Futurism and Dada in their international forms, initiated by George Grosz and John Heartfield's declaration at the Dada-Messe in Berlin in 1920—'Art is dead. Long live the new machine art of Tatlin'—whose community in Poland was best defined by Peiper's slogan 'city, mass, machine'.<sup>48</sup> No wonder, then, that the Polish Constructivists turned to the 'post-Dadaist' Kurt Schwitters, collaborating at that time with Theo van Doesburg and El Lissitzky, for an article on Dada.

Responding to the Constructivists' expectations, Schwitters wrote: 'Dadaism was born of a certain world view [that was] in no way Dadaist, but rather reform-minded'.<sup>49</sup> 'In 1924', he continued, in his article published in *Blok*:

when they begin to construct skyscrapers in Germany, when, with the help of radio it is possible to hear voices from across the continent, when art returns to normativity and life, while, on the contrary, it is precisely life that demands normative art, then the soul is a sickness, is psychosis. Ah! This is when things get bad! When Dada and the soul descend and the soul, the soul spoils its mortal enemy and wages war...<sup>50</sup>

In inviting Schwitters to write an article on Dada, the Constructivists wanted to stress the universal legitimacy of contemporary art and not the meaning of the artistic agenda hidden behind the word Dada. In appropriating Dada, they sought to forget it as soon as possible. 'Here in Germany', wrote Schwitters,

Dadaism is no longer as necessary as it was in 1918. Now artists of Promethean utopias are living and working, and so they have enabled the exceptionally-fruitful development of Constructivism. Dadaistic contestation, superimposing itself onto a catastrophic vision of the world, and other interpretations of technology and revolution, were written into the Constructivist genealogy, colouring the evolution of rational art with a particular irrationalism or alogia. I have in mind here phenomena such as Zenitism, Poetism and so on in the spirit of the times, in the spirit of 1924. Dada paved the way for them and supports them today. To name a few names, I am thinking of people like Lissitzky (Hannover, Ambri-Sotto), Burchartz (Bochum), Moholy, Gropius and Meyer (Weimar), Mies van der Rohe, Richter (Berlin), Schwitters (Hannover) and many others.<sup>51</sup>

Schwitters's opinion that Constructivism should take the place Dada, creating a new platform of understanding, responding to the new conditions of life, was essentially one that was shared by the Polish Constructivists. Ending his article, Schwitters wrote: 'I gave to Dadaism the journal *Merz*. *Merz* should serve Dada, abstraction, and construction. In recent times, however, the constructive formulation of life in Germany has been so interesting that we have permitted ourselves to publish the forthcoming issue 8/9 of *Merz*, entitled 'Nasci', without Dada'.<sup>52</sup>

In Poland, Futuro-Dada, which preferred to call itself Futurism, was bending under the weight of the Dada imagination. This did not last long. When they came on the scene, the Constructivists consigned Dada and Expressionism alike to oblivion. They had no trouble with Dada, as it had never taken firm root in Polish art. A mystified Cubism and a non-existent Futurism occupied a privileged place in the avant-garde history of Polish Constructivism, as forms of the tradition required by modernism. Expressionism was in no way useful, though many of the later constructors of the world specifically tended towards Expressionism in their student work, and its metaphysics provided a good account of the years of crisis.

### Expressionisms

What was this Expressionism, excluded by Constructivism from avant-garde art history? What were the Expressionisms (for perhaps we should speak of more than one) that were brought back to life in the post-war climate of 1917 to 1922 and condemned sometime later to oblivion?

Expressionism found its direct points of reference in spirituality, interpreted in various ways, as the 'Polish Expressionists', later known as Formists, admitted, as did the creators of the Poznań journal *Zdrój* (*Source*, 1917–1922), who, in 1918 came together in the Poznań group Bunt, and, finally, the Łódź Jung Idysz, founded in 1919, heading towards similar solutions, though travelling along a separate path. For all these artists, form operated in relation to a religious mysticism filled with heresy or folklorist faith, Romantic idealism, decorative Symbolism, neo-Romantic 'intensivism', as well as nascent modernist formalism.<sup>53</sup> Among the Poznań artists (as opposed to their colleagues from Kraków, who were searching for the spatial deformation of shapes), form was separated from the rational construction of the picture and took on intensified expression, finding its basis in the metaphysical, spiritual, and esoteric sources born of abstraction.<sup>54</sup> In the work of Jewish artists, form was rooted in the mystical tradition and in the folklore of the Hasidic imagination, whence they glided towards the spatial dimensions of non-objective worlds. One cannot really speak of a unified artistic agenda among these groupings. Attempts to form alliances did not lead to any wider cooperation between them, and there is evidence of fundamental differences among Expressionisms in Poland after 1917.

This particular crisis is evident in positivist political and philosophical matters, which was marked out at the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century, with the birth in Poland of a modernity that was decidedly more strongly-rooted in the irrational tradition than in the rational processes of modernisation. *Młoda Polska's* reaction against the positivist reduction of man to a soulless cog in the machine of nature was accompanied by the popularity of the Vitalist philosophies of, above all, Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, and, later, Henri Bergson, which chimed with the decadent moods of the era. It was no coincidence that it was this very problem, as I have already explained, that brought the Romantic problem of the 'soul' up to date at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.<sup>55</sup> The neo-Romantic irrationalism and idealism that appeared at that time did not have the force of the anti-positivistic breakthrough, which characterised the beginning of modernity elsewhere. In Poland, modernism, generally speaking, was strongly grounded in realism and naturalism. In other words, realism and naturalism, inseparable from the positivism of the domain of artistic experience, and filtered through the neo-Romantic breakthrough of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, became the components of the early modernist (*Młoda Polska*) aesthetic. Realism and naturalism defined the features of Polish Symbolism (neo-Realism) and early Expressionism, giving them an essentially conservative character.

Form took on a decorative meaning in turn-of-the-century art, and the slogan 'art for art's sake', though familiar from *Chimera*, did not find much favour in the aesthetics of *Młoda Polska*. Symbolism was more present. It was propagated by Miriam (Zenon Przesmycki), who tried to 'initiate the reader into the play of invisible elements', with decadent pathos.<sup>56</sup> In proposing 'to see the word as a picture and to reveal the secret of its origins', Stanisław Przybyszewski lent Symbolism and its form a depth of expressive experience.<sup>57</sup> 'For the Symbolist', he wrote,

thought is identical to existence. The essence, which only appears in the internal phenomena of

existence, is that which lives in the soul of man. The soul and the essence of the world are the same. Moreover, the Symbolist intuitively feels the connection of his soul with the soul of the whole of nature, and besides the accidental thing, sees some secret world, beyond the temporal, the limitless eternities out of which he himself was born.<sup>58</sup>

We are neither ‘Modernists’, nor ‘Symbolists’, wrote the Expressionists in their programmatic article opening the first issue of *Zdrój* at the end of 1917. In reality, they were even closer to the pan-psychism of the neo-Romanticists:

Art is for us that one, indivisible [thing], which binds us with an unbreakable knot to the invisible world, which is the link between the lower, empirical sphere, with the other-worldly sphere, a ‘phantom’ and ‘vision’ of every higher value in life, in which life at last begins to take on real meaning, and man, in the whole indivisible sphere in which he lives, appears to himself in all his dimensions.<sup>59</sup>

The term Expressionism only appeared on the pages of *Zdrój* in the fourth issue of the journal in 1917, in Jerzy Hulewicz’s article ‘On the Fullness of Life’.<sup>60</sup>

The path of all ambitious artists of the first decades of the twentieth century to the ‘world of pure values’ passed by way of spiritual expansion and the sifting through of the ‘modernity’ of emotional-expressive elements within Symbolism and the local tradition, so as to penetrate the depths of their own psyche, where they found ‘estranged images, distorted and deformed, fantastical and grotesque, and, ultimately, entirely abstracted’.<sup>61</sup> The journal *Zdrój*, from which the artists’ group Bunt emerged in 1918, was the first artistic milieu in Poland of a clearly-Expressionist bent, indicating a commonality of interests with the art of the Berlin groups associated with the journals *Die Aktion* and *Der Sturm*. Remaining strongly influenced by the art of *Młoda Polska*, the Kraków Cubo-Expressionism that initiated the history of Formism was only entangled in passing in the Expressionist problem that was in the process of emerging in the first decade of the twentieth century in Central Europe (Austria, Germany, and Bohemia).

Expressionist modernity incubated slowly in Kraków, in an atmosphere of uncertainty—what is it?—and almost immediately lost its Expressionist quality. Mieczysław Porębski stressed that soon after their first exhibition, the day-old Expressionists became Formists ‘in order to suddenly join pictorialism, respecting the painterly sphere of post-Impressionism (and post-Symbolism)’. Before Expressionism, the Kraków-based art historian continued,

the giants blocked the path to the new: on the one hand those who, under the leadership of Witkiewicz the Elder and Sygietyński first began to produce naturalistic (why not?) “art for art’s sake”, and on the other, those who, breaking out of these naturalist beginnings, began to search for models, not so much in Impressionism, as this appeared rather repetitively and episodically here, but in Post-Impressionism, by way of the particularly emotive dry divisionism of late Gieryski, the lessons of the Pont-Aven school transmitted by way of Ślewiński, contacts with the Nabis, and, in particular the proximity between Pankiewicz and Bonnard after 1908. Besides this, the particular, unique atmosphere of this art, in which it was not art itself that counted, nor the undoubtedly fruitful apprenticeship to others: Malczewski and Wyspiański, Mehoffer and the young Weiss, Boznańska and Wojtkiewicz. The atmosphere of Symbolism, interpreted in different ways, the direct encounter with what was unclear, insufficiently defined, ambivalent, somehow suspect, malformed. An atmosphere of heightened (though not, certainly not!, expressionist) expression, a Dionysian rather than Apollonian turn to the classical, a turning away from the corpses and spectres of the nation’s past, in the name, precisely, of a tomorrow arriving by some country road of other, budding with winter corn.<sup>62</sup>

But if there was so little Expressionism in Formism, then what was the unfinished Cubism that was part of the Cubo-Expressionist style? Perhaps the one to write best on Formist Cubism was the artist and theorist of Formism Zbigniew Pronaszko in his 1918 article, notably entitled ‘On Expressionism’. ‘Painting cannot be a “return to nature”’, he stressed, repeating Maurice Denis’ famous definition of Symbolism, viewed as an introduction to French Cubism; ‘painting must always be a return to the picture. [For] a picture is the deliberate, logical filling of a certain space with particular forms, constituting in this way a unified, unchanging organism’.<sup>63</sup>

‘While looking at or contemplating an object’, Pronaszko continued, by now in a Cubist spirit, ‘I do not only see it frontally, quite the contrary: a whole range of its aspects and views enter my consciousness and it is only after I have reassembled them that I come to receive its full expression, its essence’.<sup>64</sup> He concluded his deliberations: ‘The goal here is expression, which is revealed with the help of the sign, conventions, reacting to shapes, which come to us whilst we contemplate an object. For this expression the essential task of painting is to find form and it is this, which Expressionism strives for. Impressionism gave the optical impression of an object; Expressionism seeks to reveal its expression’.<sup>65</sup>

For the Poznań Expressionists, form was all but non-existent, and if it did exist then it did so somewhere in the depths of the soul. It is no surprise that the words of the Alsatian poet Ernst Stadler—an Expressionist poet writing in German but seeking connections with French culture, who had perished at the beginning of the Great War at Ypres in 1914—‘form is a bolt, that must shatter’ (*Der Aufbruch*, 1914), were close to their hearts.

A significant shift had taken place between ‘Bunt’ and Formism in the conceptualisation of the symbol, which produced one of the essential tensions of emergent modernity. If, in both cases, the source of expression was the neo-Romantic thought of *Młoda Polska*, with its idealism, irrationalism, subjectivism, spiritualism, and mysticism, then the point of reference was modern form, with its spiritual depth and rational clarity. Form, torn apart in the symbol, was associated with the metaphysics of the absolute in the Expressionist circle of *Zdrój*, while, among the Kraków Formists, the stylistic continuity of the symbol was associated with the absolute of form. The Poznań artists’ reconciliation with the ‘dark’ ideas of Przybyszewski and the Formists’ with the ‘decorative’ forms of Wyspiański make sense, when viewed from this perspective. The Expressionists saw in Przybyszewski’s texts the modernist passage of the soul (after the example of Kandinsky), liberating itself from Romantic form, but true to the idea of creative individuality; of the artist leading mankind to the heights of spirituality. This made it possible to treat Expressionism in broad association with the metaphysical tendencies of the modern era, and not just with the history of symbolism. Sensing that they were the inheritors of Wyspiański, on their route to ‘pure form’, the Formists had to ‘denude his thinking, with all its nationalist phantoms, of regressive baggage; ‘of those old Hussar’s helmets, lances, and wings’, as Karol Irzykowski wrote, ‘that came with the new wave of Romanticism [and] were assiduously fished out by the authors of irredentism’s idealism; denuded, in order to perceive in them the domination of modern form’.<sup>66</sup> In Stanisław Wyspiański’s *Liberation* (*Wyzwolenie*), in his dialogue with Maska, Konrad continued to call for the soul. ‘Do you have no soul?’, he asked, ‘Don’t you know what the soul is, the force that is what it wants to be and is not what it does not want to be; the soul, which is immortal and comes from God, and you say that you know it, for you destroy its godliness, halting its ambition, but you do not have It. You are not it. Because to have it and not to be it, is illogical’. The journal *Maski* (*Masks*), which favoured the Formists, selected as the epigraph for its first issue a fragment from *Liberation*, in which, avoiding the national problem and Polish spirituality, Konrad said the following to Maska concerning form: ‘It has to have an artistic form ... the inducible, artistic, form of inducible beauty, which nothing will be able to resist, which will smash like a hammer and before which all else will crumble’.<sup>67</sup> Not a word about the soul. In subsequent issues of the journal, the abstract floral motifs from Wyspiański’s decorative herbarium were published alongside the Cubist volumes of Pronaszko.

There was something more in the disagreements between these two groups, Józef Ratajczak recalls, something more important, for those advocates of internal narratives, the naturalists of the Soul, could not agree to a cult of pure form, or, in other words, to arriving at the depths of the human soul by way of external form, which, in their view, was just what the Formists proposed. Artur Maria Swinarski wrote that ‘the contemporary Formists from *Zdrój*, suddenly began to look upon Wronecki with suspicion, and to call him a Formist, which was the worst insult in those circles’.<sup>68</sup> And yet, as early as December 1919 and January 1920, there was a joint exhibition of the Formists and Bunt in Poznań. Along with ‘Umberto Boccioni’s Theatrical Synthesis’, the Formist dance performed by Rita Sachetto as part of the ‘Zdrój Evening’ organised on the occasion was a key attraction.

The Jewish artists of the Łódź Jung Idysz group did not maintain close contacts with the Kraków artists. Things were different with the artists of the Poznań Bunt. Although the planned joint exhibition never took place, individual artists from Jung Idysz and Bunt maintained personal relations. Their works could be seen together at group exhibitions: they met in Poznań (Marek Szwarc), in Łódź (Adam Bederski) and in Berlin (Jankiel Adler and Karol Kubicki). They exchanged information and opinions. They valued Expressionism's spirituality, seeing it as a value common to all mankind and a synonym of modernity. However, Jewish artists stressed the tradition of 'native' culture far more strongly, being the source of their universal identity, and associated Expressionism with Symbolism (Adler) as a characteristic of great art as a whole, and Futurism (Broderson) was the source of the contemporary revolution of the soul. 'Art', it was written in 1919 on the occasion of an exhibition of Jewish art in Białystok, 'achieves a higher degree of artistic beauty and truth only in national art, organically and indivisibly connected to all the deepest secrets of the national psyche, revealing themselves through the prism of the universal feelings of mankind and the aims of the artist'.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, though, the artists of the Jung Idysz group were averse to local reality, to the archaic forms of life of Jews in Poland, while also stressing, at the same time, their parallel fascination with metropolitan contemporaneity and new phenomena in art.

The Warsaw literary critic Jakub Appenzlak wrote in 1920 that 'the gales of the latest artistic transformations are blowing into "young Jewish art". Its foundations are shaking from the pulsations of the great cities and epochal events. The crumbs of Futurism and Expressionism are dropping onto young Jewish artists' desks and canvases; the echoes of social tremors and individual perplexities giving rise to new truths are reverberating in their ears'.<sup>70</sup> The most perceptive scholar of the art of this circle, Jerzy Malinowski, has stressed that 'young artists, with the agenda of Jewish renewal, sought to break with the past and to achieve the cultural level of other nations by way of an accelerated progress. In other words, they were all concerned with the question of how to rationalise tradition in such a way as to become a universal artist'.<sup>71</sup> The problem was far from simple, though key to modernism. For many Jewish artists, Marc Chagall served as an example of an artist freely using Jewish motifs in a syncretic and lyrical manner, as well as being an artist who was well integrated into European culture. The Chagallian renewal of language was not a rejection of the marginal qualities of Jewish culture. On the contrary, the artist aimed to include this somewhat strange atmosphere of provincial thought in the circuit of universal ideas. Of course, this entailed destruction and abandoning religious mysticism, which was difficult to assimilate, and replacing it with a metaphysics of abstraction (Henryk Berlewi) or with expressive stylistics, with the features of the irrational originality of an art expressing the 'truth of life' (Broderson).

A specific form of Futurism that rationalised tradition was the re-formulation by Jewish artists of their own Jewish past and a means to look into the future, having arrived at this vantage-point. Mojżesz Broderson defined the whole of modern art as a Futurism that included 'Expressionism and Cubism'. In a manifesto published in *Jung Idysz*, the new art represented by the group was to be a search for the 'essence in the pulsation of existence', truth and Realism in 'mystical faith'.<sup>72</sup> This mystical existentialism, allowing for the synthesis of spirituality and corporeality, led to the sensorial understanding of the secret of existence by way of art, music, and dance. The element of Dionysian joy lurking in Hasidic heresy was a means to experience infinity and godly unity. Expressionism 'does not see only external and accidental things in phenomena', wrote Jankiel Adler, but was conscious that 'everything is unity and eternity, and that above "everything" there rises the holy breath of Eternity'.<sup>73</sup> Behind the Expressionism of the artists of Jung Idysz there was the experience of the mysticism of Eastern-European Hasidism, abandoned, but never eliminated from the consciousness.<sup>74</sup> The emotional world of Hasidism exerted a great force of attraction on minds striving for the spiritual renewal of Judaism, and was enormously significant in artistic circles.

The Hasidic movement, with its clear national and folkloristic attitude, took advantage of sophisticated symbolism relating to the tradition of Jewish folklore, and traditional Hasidic art tended to intensify the expressive qualities of representations and to develop ornamental-figurative narrations, in which artists codified traditional motifs. The problem of the Jewish

avant-garde, which, in Poland, was born with the Jung Idysz group, was tearing oneself away from this conservative and marginal model in the name of the universal values of contemporary art, while at the same time continuing to identify with one's own culture. In this way, models of contemporary Expressionism with its irreligiosity and secular metaphysics, expressed in art by way of radical abstraction, came to be superimposed onto traditional Jewish motifs, often taken from the abstract ornamentation of synagogues and various biblical narratives or, occasionally, fairy tales.<sup>75</sup> These problems led the Łódź Expressionists to Constructivism, well known as a result of the many contacts that the Łódź artists made in both the East and the West of Europe, either by way of their studies, or because of their many journeys, or else by way of their international friendships and artistic connections. Berlewi wrote, in 1921: 'A new idea is ignited under the foundations of old forms; its relation to the old forms it is more revolutionary, it cannot fit within them. Then there is a battle between two opposites, and the form of the past must be surpassed. The new idea has to be given its appropriate shape. The problem is that in order to master form, one has to overcome the old and to create the new'.<sup>76</sup>

Translated by Klara Kemp-Welch

1 Tytus Czyżewski was in Paris in the years 1908 to 1909 and again in 1911 to 1912; Witkacy was there in 1908 and again in late spring in 1911; Jacek Mierzejewski in the summer of 1912; and in autumn 1912, Leon Chwistek (who stayed until 1914), Leon Dołżycki and Tymon Niesiołowski all went to Paris.

2 The lecture was entitled 'French Painting from Cézanne to the Cubists'. In the somewhat contentious comments on Basler's visit and lecture, we read that at the academy he talked 'about the Cubists in particular' and also 'waged a series of disagreements in cafés with painters, sculptors and critics, showed the catalogue, for which he had written the introduction, of an exhibition of the latest Modernists, such as Kokoschka, Kandinsky, and a group with a name rather like that of an inn: Der Blaue Reiter.... See: *Ryduwan (Chariot)* 11 (1912), p. 170. The following year, it was the turn of Adam Dobrodzicki to spoke about Cubism, having spent time in Paris in 1910, after studying at the Jagiellonian University and the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków.

3 Adolf Basler, 'Stare i nowe konwencje w malarstwie (od Cézanne'a do kubizmu)', *Krytyka* 38/4 (1913): pp. 210–220; and 38/5 (1913): pp. 260–271; Adolf Basler, 'Nowa sztuka', *Museion* 12 (1913). The editors of *Krytyka* added a note to the article to say that this was an informative text received from Paris. A discussion of Basler's Paris correspondence and that of other critics writing about Cubism can be found in Anna Wierzbicka's book, *We Francji i w Polsce 1900–1939. Sztuka jej historyczne uwarunkowania i odbiór w świetle krytyków polsko-francuskich* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 2009), pp. 115–128.

4 Basler, 'Stare i nowe konwencje', p. 264.

5 Basler, 'Stare i nowe konwencje', p. 263.

6 Władysław Witwicki (ed.), *Wystawa Futurystów, Kubistów, Ekspresjonistów*, exhibition catalogue (Lwów: TPSP 1913).

7 A detailed discussion of the exhibition can be found in Elizabeth Clegg, 'Futurists, Cubists and the Like': Early Modernism and Late Imperialism', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 56/2 (1993): pp. 249–277. Anna Wierzbicka discusses the exhibition in *We Francji i w Polsce*, pp. 129–136. Its wider context is interestingly explored in Przemysław Stróżek, *Marinetti i futurizm w Polsce 1909–1939. Obecność-konteksty-wydarzenia* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 2012), pp. 45–51.

8 Józef Czapski, *Patrząc* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1983), p. 66.

9 Also noteworthy is Zbigniew Pronaszko's altar in the Church of the Missionaries (Misjonarzy) in Kraków, dated 1911–1912 (known from reproductions in *Nowości ilustrowane* 48 (1917): p. 7, and sometimes treated as the first work of Polish Cubism) as well as the Cubist studies (1911–1914) of Tadeusz Matkowski, shown from 1911 onwards at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris. A discussion of Czyżewski's literary work in relation to his artistic work has been interestingly interpreted in a number of recently-published works: Beata Śniecikowska, *Słowo-obraz-dźwięk. Literatura i sztuki wizualne w koncepcjach polskiej awangardy 1918–1939* (Kraków: Universitas, 2005); Agata Soczyńska, *Tytus*

*Czyżewski, malarz-poeta* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2006); and Diana Wasilewska (ed.), *Między słowem a obrazem. Rzecz o Tytusie Czyżewskim* (Kraków: Universitas, 2017).

10 Czyżewski's 'multi-surface' paintings are known only from the reproductions included in Leon Chwistek's book *Tytus Czyżewski a kryzys formizmu* (Kraków: Gebethner i Wolff, 1922). The earliest of these is *Salome*, reproduced in *Wianki* 1 (1919) and dated 1915–1917 (the first, watercolour, version is from 1909 and is currently in the National Museum in Kraków), and the remainder are from 1916 to 1920. They have recently been discussed in Małgorzata Geron, 'Obrazy wielopłaszczyznowe Tytusa Czyżewskiego', *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Zabytkoznawstwo i Konserwatorstwo* 42 (2011): pp. 547–564.

11 Zbigniew Pronaszko, 'Przed wielkim jutrem', *Ryduwan* 1 (1914): p. 125.

12 Bolesław (Biegalski) Biegas (1877–1954), studied wood-carving in Warsaw in 1895 to 1896 and was then educated at the School of Fine Arts in Kraków as of 1896. As a result of conflict with his professors, he interrupted his studies and went to Paris in 1901. That same year he took part in the tenth Vienna Secession exhibition. He occasionally studied at the Paris École des Beaux-Arts, beginning his independent artistic activity. He remained in Paris, intermittently travelling to Poland, for the rest of his life. He mostly showed at the Salon des Indépendants, but also at the Salon National des Beaux-Arts and at the Salon d'Automne. He played an active part in Polish artistic life in Warsaw and Kraków. As of 1902, he showed his work within the circle of the Paris journal *La Plume*.

13 Zbigniew Pronaszko, 'O ekspresjonizmie', *Maski* 1 (1918): p. 15.

14 Leon Chwistek, 'Formiści. Wystawa III. Katalog' (1919). Reproduced in Leon Chwistek, *Wielość rzeczywistości w sztuce i inne szkice literackie*, (ed.) Karol Estreicher (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1960), p. 98.

15 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Michał Sobeski - Malarstwo doby ostatniej', *Zwrotnica* 8 (1926): p. 214.

16 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Sztuka nowoczesna w Polsce', in Jan Brzękowski, Leon Chwistek, Przeclaw Smolik, and Władysław Strzemiński, *O sztuce nowoczesnej* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Towarzystwa Bibliofilów, 1934), p. 59. For more on Formism, and a full bibliography, see: Małgorzata Geron, *Formiści. Twórczość i programy artystyczne* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2015).

17 *Wiadomościami Literackie* 51–52 (1926).

18 A thorough discussion and a full bibliography on the reception of Futurism in Poland is provided in Przemysław Stróżek, *Marinetti i futurizm w Polsce 1909–1939* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Sztuki PAN, 2012).

19 *Przegląd Wileński (The Wilno Review)* published the full text in 1913. Ignacy Grabowski, 'Najnowsze prądy w literaturze europejskiej – futuryzm', *Świat* 40–41 (1909).



- 20 Cezary Jellenta, 'Futuryzm', *Literatura i Sztuka* (supplement of *Dziennik Poznański*) 42 (1911), pp. 659–661; and 43 (1911), pp. 676–678.
- 21 Cezary Jellenta, 'Futuryści - dywizjoniści. Manifest malarski', *Rydwani* 5 (1912), pp. 179–183.
- 22 Aleksander Kołtoński, 'O futuryzmie jako zjawisku kulturalnym i artystycznym', *Krytyka* 7–8 (1914), p. 354.
- 23 Kołtoński, 'O futuryzmie' p. 354.
- 24 Kołtoński, 'O futuryzmie', p. 94.
- 25 Grzegorz Gazda, *Futuryzm w Polsce* (Wrocław, Warsaw, and Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1974), p. 63.
- 26 In contemporary usage in Poland, the word Dadaism has negative connotations and in popular usage it serves to describe something that is either serious or is outright harmful.
- 27 The poster announcing this 'sub-tropical evening' was the work of the Constructivist Henryk Berlewi. The exhibition space was hung with works by the Polish Formists: Berlewi, Kramsztyk, Witkowski, Żywnowski. The 'avant-garde stylistics', if any, were limited to somewhat geometrical, Expressionist deformation.
- 28 Bruno Jasiński (ed.), *Jednodniówka Futurystów. manifesty futurystów polskiego. wydanie nadzwyczajne na całą Zeczpospolitą Polską* (Kraków, 1921).
- 29 Bruno Jasiński, 'To the Polish Nation: A Manifesto concerning the Immediate Futurization of Life', trans. Klara Kemp-Welch, in Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930* (Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass.: LACMA and MIT Press, 2002), p. 189. Originally published as 'Do narodu Polskiego: Manifest w sprawie natychmiastowej futurystycznej życia' in Jasiński (ed.) *Jednodniówka Futurystów* (Kraków, 1921).
- 30 Anatol Stern and Aleksander Wat (eds.), *Gga, Pierwszy polski almanach futurystyczny* (Warsaw, 1920).
- 31 Stern and Wat (eds.), *Gga*.
- 32 Tytus Czyżewski, *Waż, Orfeusz i Eurydyka. Wizja antyczna* (Kraków, 1922).
- 33 Czyżewski, *Waż, Orfeusz i Eurydyka*.
- 34 'Tytus Czyżewski o „Zielonym oku” i o swoim malarstwie (autokrytyka - autoreklama)', in Jasiński (ed.) *Jednodniówka Futurystów*.
- 35 J. L. (Jan Nałęcz -Lipka), 'Warszawa. Wystawa Szczuki, Starzewskiego [!], Millera', *Lucyfer* 2–4 (March 1922): p. 34; Aleksander Wat, 'Trzy wystawy', *Nowa Sztuka* 2 (February 1922): p. 28. The introduction to the catalogue of Szczuka's previous exhibition had been written phonetically, in small letters, by Edmund Miller. Szczuka's works in the catalogue were not titled, only numbered.
- 36 Bruno Jasiński, 'Manifesto Concerning Futurist Poetry', trans. Klara Kemp-Welch, in Benson and Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds*, p. 192. Originally published as 'Manifest w sprawie poezji futurystycznej', in Jasiński (ed.) *Jednodniówka Futurystów*.
- 37 Tytus Czyżewski, 'Od maszyny do zwierząt. - Kto się gniewa na nas?', *Formiści* 4 (1921).
- 38 Anatol Stern, 'Zwierzęta w klatce. O polskim futuryzmie', *Kurier Polski* 19 (1923).
- 39 Bruno Jasiński, *Nogi Izoldy Morgan* (Lwów: Spółka Nakładowa "Odrodzenie", 1923).
- 40 Tytus Czyżewski, 'De profundis', in Tytus Czyżewski, *Noc – dzień. Mechaniczny instynkt elektryczny* (Kraków: Gebethner i Wolff, 1922).
- 41 Aleksander Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony. Rozmowy przeprowadził Cz. Miłosz*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1990), pp. 25–26. First published London: Polonia Book Fund Ltd., 1977.
- 42 Wat, *Mój wiek*. pp. 25–26.
- 43 See: Wojciech Sztaba, *Gra ze sztuka. O twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo literackie, 1982).
- 44 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 'O skutkach działalności naszych futurystów', in *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze*, pp. 221–231.
- 45 Witkiewicz, 'O skutkach', pp. 221–231.
- 46 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Manifest [Fest-Mani] Papierek lakmusowy* (Zakopane, 1921) / *Manifesto [Festo-Mani] Litmus Paper*, trans. Klara Kemp-Welch, in Benson and Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds*, p. 340.
- 47 Texts that were important for the development of Polish Modernism included: Stefania Zahorska, 'Kubizm i jego pochodne', *Południe* 1 (1924); Stefania Zahorska, 'Filozofia ekspresjonizmu (Uwagi na tle malarstwa)', *Przegląd Warszawski* 28 (1924); and Waclaw Husarski, 'Podstawowe zagadnienia malarstwa współczesnego', *Reflektor* 1 (1924). It is worth noting that, in referring to his 1918 Zürich exhibition *Great Exhibition of Abstract Painting* and the exhibitions of Paul Klee, Hans Arp, and Francis Picabia that were organised at the same time, Mieczysław Sterling did not mention Dada as a shared experimental platform for the cited artists. Sterling, 'Obrońca modernizmu w walce z modernizmem', *Sztuki Piękn*e 7 (1933): pp. 243–244. One of the few texts in which the word Dadaism appears is the review: Aleksander Wat, 'Wystawa Szczuki i innych', *Nowa Sztuka* 2 (1922).
- 48 Tadeusz Peiper was the first in Poland to publish Tristan Tzara's article 'Dada' (*Zwrotnica* 3 (1922)). It appeared in the same issue in which Strzemiński's notes on Constructivism in Russia were published.
- 49 Kurt Schwitters, 'Dadaizm', *Błok* 6/7 (1924).
- 50 Schwitters, 'Dadaizm'.
- 51 Schwitters, 'Dadaizm'.
- 52 Schwitters, 'Dadaizm'.
- 53 Wiesław Juszcak, *Malarstwo polskiego modernizmu* (Gdańsk: Wyd. Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2004), p. 19.
- 54 Lidia Głuchowska, 'Ezoteryka i polityka w grafice wczesnej polskiej awangardy Formistów, Buntu, Jung Idysz', in Barbara Chojnacka and Michał F. Woźniak (eds.), *Wielość w jedności. Litografia i techniki druku płaskiego w Polsce po 1900 roku (Materiały z sesji naukowej 22–23 października 2015 roku)*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Okręgowe im. Leona Wyczółkowskiego (Bydgoszcz, 2016), p. 59; Agnieszka Salomon-Radecka, 'Początki sztuki abstrakcyjnej w Polsce na przykładzie twórczości ekspresjonistów poznańskich związanych z czasopismem *Zdrój* (1917–1922)', *Dyskurs* 9 (2014), pp. 179–198; and Salomon-Radecka, 'Pionierzy abstrakcji', *Arteon* 6 (2017), pp. 27–29.
- 55 Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, 'Wzniosłość, Słowacki i młodopolski ekspresjonizm', *Teksty Drugie* 3 (1999), pp. 33–43.
- 56 Elżbieta Grabska, *Moderniści o sztuce* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), p. 284.
- 57 Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Z gleby kujawskiej (syn ziemi)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Warsaw: Księgarnia M. Borkowskiego, 1904), p. 15
- 58 Przybyszewski, *Z gleby kujawskiej*, p. 6.
- 59 Editorial, *Zdrój* 1 (October–December 1917), p. 3.
- 60 Józef Ratajczak, *Zgasty "brzask epoki". Szkice z dziejów czasopisma „Zdrój” 1917–1922* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1980), p. 316.
- 61 Tomasz Gryglewicz, 'Malarstwo środkowoeuropejskie około 1910 roku', in Teresa Hrankowska (ed.), *Przed wielkim jutrem. Sztuka 1905–1918. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki. Warszawa, październik 1990* (Warsaw: PWN, 1993), pp. 221–223.
- 62 Mieczysław Porębski, 'Ubi leones', in Hrankowska (ed.), *Przed wielkim jutrem*, pp. 11, 18.
- 63 Zbigniew Pronaszko, 'On Expressionism' (First published as 'O ekspresjonizmie', *Maski* 1/1 (January 1918), pp. 15–16), trans. Klara Kemp-Welch, in Benson and Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds*, p. 179.
- 64 Pronaszko, 'On Expressionism', p. 180.
- 65 Pronaszko, 'On Expressionism', pp. 179–181.
- 66 Karol Irzykowski, 'Czyn i słowo oraz Fryderyk Hebel jako poeta konieczności. Lemiesz i szpada przed sądem publicznym. Prolegomena do charakterologii' (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980), p. 249. Cited in Teresa Walas, 'Wyspiański jako problem polskiego modernizmu', *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2008), pp. 15–16.
- 67 Konrad: '...Wait, wait, wait. — It has to have artistic form... ha... yes...yes... — form [that is] irrevocable, artistic, form of irrevocable beauty, which nothing can withstand, which will strike like a hammer and before which everything will bow-down'. ('Poczekaj, poczekaj, poczekaj. — To musi mieć formę artystyczną... ha... tak... tak... — formę nieodwołalną, artystyczną, formę nieodwołalną piękną, przed którym nie ostoi

się nic, która jak młot walić będzie i przed którym wszystko polęże'). Stanisław Wyspiański, *Wyzwolenie. Dramat w trzech aktach...* (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1903), conversation with Mask 18, verse 1829.

68 Artur Maria Swinarski, cited in Józef Ratajczak, *Zgasy „brzask epoki”. Szkice z dziejów czasopisma „Zdrój” 1917–1922* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1980), pp. 54–55.

69 Jerzy Malinowski, *Malarstwo i rzeźba Żydów Polskich w XIX i XX wieku* (Warsaw: PWN, 2000), p. 167.

70 Jakub Appenzlak, 'Przegląd literacki', *Nasz Kurier* 76 (17 May 1920), p. 3. Cited in Malinowski, *Malarstwo i rzeźba Żydów Polskich*, p. 169.

71 Malinowski, *Malarstwo i rzeźba Żydów Polskich*, p. 169.

72 Mojżesz Broderson, 'Manifest', *Jung Idysz* 2–3 (1919), p. 2. Reprinted, trans. Zbigniew Targielski, in Jerzy Malinowski, *Grupa „Jung Idysz” i żydowskie środowisko „Nowej Sztuki” w Polsce 1918–1923* (Warsaw: Polska Akademia Nauk / Instytut Sztuki, 1987), p. 176.

73 Jankiel Adler, 'Ekspresjonizm (fragmenty z prelekcji)', *Nasz Kurier* 292 (1920), p. 4. Reprinted, trans. Saul Wegman, in Malinowski, *Grupa „Jung Idysz” i żydowskie środowisko „Nowej Sztuki”*, p. 180.

74 Hasidism is a mystical sect of Judaism, focussed around Tzaddiks. As distinct from the 'learnedness' of Rabbis, the Tzaddiks are ascribed para-rational values, and the place of theoretical debates in contacts between people replaced by Hasidic storytelling. The great Tzaddiks were not always the proponents of a new doctrine, but they had something mysterious and charismatic about them, which gave their life the expression of excellence, and also meant that the relationship with them had an irrational character. The lives of the Tzaddiks were surrounded by an aura of legend. Triviality and depth, original and borrowed thoughts were intertwined in a single whole in the vast mass of anecdotes and stories serving an important role in the social life of the Hasidic Jews, all but becoming a new religious value, or at least a religious ritual.

75 See also: Kazimierz Piotrowski, 'Irreligia Buntu. Geneza i morfologia poznańskiej apostazji', in Grażyna Hałasa and Agnieszka Salamon (eds.), *Bunt. Ekspresjonizm poznański 1917–1925*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu (Poznań, 2003), pp. 119–139.

76 Henryk Berlewi, 'W walce o nową formę'. Reprinted in Karolina Szymaniak (ed.), *Warszawska awangarda jidysz* (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2005), pp. 125–126. This is a corrected version of a translation by Zbigniew Targielski, published in Malinowski, *Grupa „Jung Idysz” i żydowskie środowisko „Nowej Sztuki”*, p. 211.



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 (Festoművészet 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 Gutfreund, 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, Koniec 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 Osma (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 dvorčsa*)) 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 motív, 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, pozostalost' 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 Eugenovi Krónovi, Praha 7. březen 1928, č.j. 8016/28-V. 'Věc: Eugen Kron, grafik v Košicích. Studijní podpora. Panu Eugenu Kronovi, 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 symposiums 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).



# Zdeněk Rykr and the Chocolate Factory

VOJTĚCH LAHODA



*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.<sup>1</sup> (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'.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

### **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'.<sup>4</sup> 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'.<sup>5</sup>

### 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 Tvrdošíjní (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).<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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)*.<sup>8</sup>

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'.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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)*.<sup>11</sup> 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'.<sup>12</sup>

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'.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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'.<sup>17</sup> In the catalogue itself he wrote with a certain scorn about 'descriptive realism'.<sup>18</sup> 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'.<sup>19</sup> 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 unmistakable 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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'.<sup>22</sup> 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'.<sup>23</sup>

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'.<sup>24</sup>

### 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'.<sup>25</sup> 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'.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

### **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'.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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'.<sup>30</sup>

### **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'.<sup>31</sup> 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'.<sup>32</sup> Another critic described the exhibition as 'a path down a blind alley'.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Away (Pryč, 1934)***

Such was the name of Rykr's solo exhibition from 1934. For Jindřich Chalupecký 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 Chalupecký later expressed his thoughts about these objects: 'in their time they were, I think, without equivalent...'.<sup>34</sup>

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'.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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,

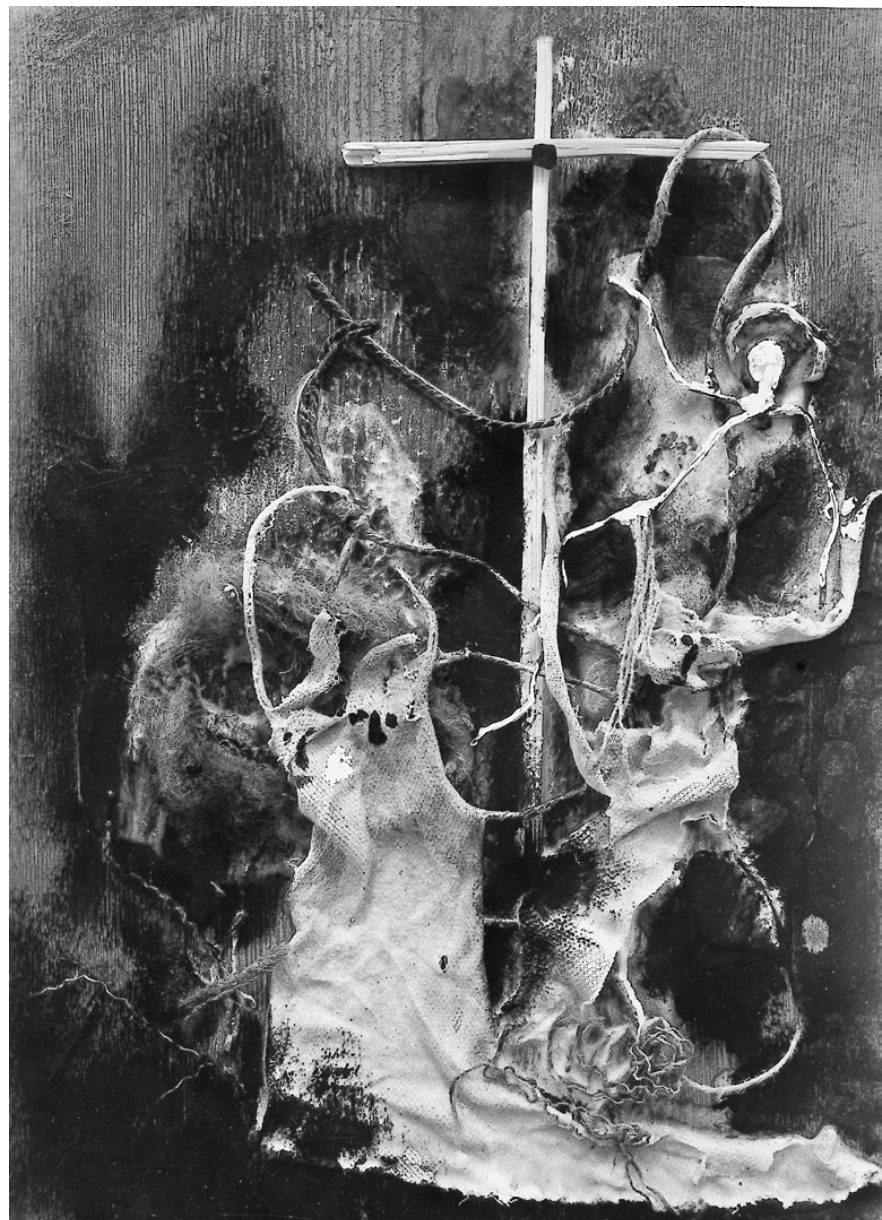


Fig. 5.3. Zdeněk Rykr, from the *Fourteen Stations* (*Čtrnáct zastavení*) cycle (1935). Mixed media. Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague.

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*.<sup>37</sup> 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'.<sup>38</sup> *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'.<sup>39</sup> Critics saw these objects as 'Dada-style "jokesterish" conglutinations' and called them 'freakish toys'<sup>40</sup> or "'still lifes" made of rubbish'.<sup>41</sup>

### 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...'.<sup>42</sup> 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'.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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).<sup>45</sup>

### **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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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 Pellan, 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 Pellan was one of the most important Quebec painters. In 1926 he went to study in Paris. Marked by its extravagant colours and forms, Pellan'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.<sup>48</sup> According to Součková he was Rykr's main point of contact.<sup>49</sup> 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'.<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup>

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'.<sup>54</sup> 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'.<sup>55</sup> 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'.<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup> 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'.<sup>58</sup>

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 Zdeňka 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 – Kristína 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.





*A(bs)traction:  
The Czech Lands  
Amid the Centres  
of Modernity  
1918–1950, Part 1:  
(Not Only) on  
the Relationships  
Between the Fine  
and Applied Arts  
[Introduction]*

HANA ROUSOVÁ

*Hana Rousová is a Czech art historian who has worked as curator of the Prague City Gallery and as main curator of the Modern and Contemporary Art Collection at the National Gallery in Prague. The two texts that follow are excerpts from Rousová's monograph A(bs)traction: The Czech Lands Amid the Centres of Modernity 1918–1950: Not Only on the Relationships Between the Fine and Applied Arts (A(bs)trakce: Čechy mezi centry modernity 1918–1950: Nejen o vztazích volného a užitého umění), published in 2015.<sup>1</sup> The first text, the book's introduction, establishes a highly-contextualised art-historical methodology based on ideas of connection and attraction. Rousová is particularly interested in the role of abstraction in the interrelation between fine art and industrial or applied art. 'The Decoration of Decorative Art' is a piece of investigative scholarship that uses two abstract artists to explore this interrelation. Its first 'story' concerns Czech painter František Kupka and the strangely little-noted fact that abstract work by him appeared in a display of interior design at the 1925 Paris International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts (Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes). Rousová writes of this use of Kupka's work as a case of painting seen as decorative object, an approach by no means limited to this example. The second 'story' concerns a music room designed by Vasilii Kandinsky and exhibited at the German building exhibition (Deutsche Bauausstellung) organised by Bauhaus in 1931. Noting the irony that this piece of applied abstraction has been celebrated as an important example of 'Kandinsky's art', Rousová situates the work in a wider concern among designers with private music rooms—with 'the culture of everyday life'—and yet shows how Kandinsky's cultivation of 'ornamentality' resisted the dominant design aesthetics of his era. (JO)*

***A(bs)traction: The Czech Lands Amid the Centres of Modernity 1918–1950, Part 1: (Not Only) on the Relationships Between the Fine and Applied Arts [Introduction]***

What I want to describe does not resemble truth. At the same time, it is pure truth, if by "truth" we mean something that was or is. If, however, we consider it useful to distinguish truth from fact, then of course it was not exactly thus.

Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1953<sup>2</sup>

**A(bs)TRACTION → ABSTRACTION / ATTRACTION / TRACTION**

**Abstraction:** An art form without *syuzhet* (subject) or correspondence to specific objects. It can be ambivalently attractive; can have the potential for meaning or decoration; be unique or easily imitated; be usable. Kazimir Malevich, 1913: 'In the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field'.<sup>3</sup> Paul Klee, 1914: 'The cool Romanticism of this style without pathos is unheard of. The more horrible this world (as today, for instance), the more abstract our art, whereas a happy world brings forth an art of the here and now'.<sup>4</sup> El Lissitzky, 1919: 'When the image is liberated by "pure", "abstract", "objectless" painting, it is thereby buried with finality. But the artist begins to reshape himself. Instead of one who reproduces, the artist is transformed into the creator of a new world of forms, a new world of objects'.<sup>5</sup> Robert Delaunay, after 1920: 'I make no dividing line between painting and sculpture. All is colour in motion; it is a construction of what I call simultaneous depiction'.<sup>6</sup> Sonia Delaunay expanded the territory of painting and sculpture to include fashion, Jean Fouquet added jewellery based on the principles of geometric abstraction, and Alvar Alto, together with anonymous factory designers, added objects with organic shapes.

Virtual reality, abstract, simulated. It means an illusion of the real world, enabling one to live someone else's life; a means of manipulation that existed long before electronic media.

**Attraction:** Sergei Eisenstein's montage of attractions. He wrote of montage: 'For me montage is a collision, a collision between two elements from which a meaning arises'.<sup>7</sup> The objective is to disrupt the plot construction and draw attention to parts of the whole. Attraction entails an internal contradiction and its unexpected disclosure.<sup>8</sup> Eisenstein wrote: 'I think the thing is that I was particularly captivated by the nature of the non-correlation of fragments which nevertheless, and often despite their nature, when combined with the will of the editor gave rise to "a third thing" and became correlated'.<sup>9</sup>

Using the montage of attractions as a method of art-historical work means bringing together works that ordinarily do not come together in the 'plot construction' of art history, and the coming together of words, not only about the works but citations of authentic thoughts from the past and present. It means connecting the unconnected across disciplines as well as across the flow of time; attempting to be screenwriter, director, and also editor; wandering through the landscapes of human creativity, defying systemisation and unequivocal comprehension; being 'captivated' by them without succumbing to blindness towards their social and political determination.

But it perhaps also entails the more contemporary tool, adopted from electronic media, of 'flipping'. To flip whole layers horizontally or vertically, or selections from them or paths to them, thus changing their sense. Similarly, as in the case of the montage-attraction, to wager on the potential openness of the process of creating new correlations.

**Traction:** Pull. Not only one-directional, in which the stronger pulls the weaker. The question is: who is actually the stronger? And is it necessary to ask that at all?<sup>10</sup>

### **The Czech Lands Amid the Centres of Modernity 1918–1950**

**Czech lands:** Lands within the area of the Czech Republic and also within the context of the former Czechoslovakia.

**Centres of modernity:** Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Moscow. Berlin and Moscow changed their positions during the totalitarian regimes, when they turned from places of inspiration into centres of invasive destruction.

**Modernity:** In contrast to the term 'modern', this term has a wider meaning and concerns the organisation of social life. It is linked to the certain time and place when and where it emerged. According to Anthony Giddens, modernity leads to the deconstruction of an evolutionary view of society: it 'means accepting that history cannot be seen as a unity, or as reflecting certain unifying principles of organisation and transformation'.<sup>11</sup> And, simultaneously, 'the advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction ... What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale conceals the distanced relations which determine its nature'.<sup>12</sup>

**1918–1950:** The period in which modernity fully revealed both its light and dark faces. Positive, prospective thinking that, despite opposing concepts, never ceases to fascinate us, and, paradoxically, the devaluation of humanistic values built on the same foundations. We reject this modernity and yet it remains potentially present. To grasp the past by a present method, to animate it for the present, is one of the main objectives of this work.

### **(Not Only) on the Relations Between the Fine and the Applied Arts**

In the beginning there was a story: a little comic, a little strange, in itself not particularly interesting. Yet in its details, or rather in their chance connection, it precisely illustrated the often-paradoxical geopolitical aspects of Czech history and the penetration of artistic styles across time, including sometimes improbable ones. It was this that gave me the definitive impulse to write a book about themes that I had previously dealt with several times, but only in a partial manner.

### Story

Some time ago, and purely by chance, I got hold of a copy of the French magazine *Art et Décoration* from 1929, which had come from the library of Stanislav Remeš. Remeš graduated from the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague in 1955, and later devoted himself to animated films. In the 1960s he also created several film posters. How he acquired *Art et Décoration* I do not know; most likely he bought it after the war in some second-hand bookshop. It interested him and proved useful to him. He left a direct testimony of this in the magazine itself: he inserted a letter and several small sketches into it. The letter is written on the headed notepaper of the Kavalier glassworks, a national enterprise based in Sázava, and is dated 8 February 1949. It is addressed to ‘Comrade Stanislav Remeš, soldier, Military History Institute, Prague 11, Husova 1600’. A certain Pavel, evidently a friend, asked Remeš (who was at this time spending his military service at the Military History Institute in the role of designer) in this letter to create a design quickly for a new and, crucially, more modern headed notepaper for the glassworks. Remeš attempted this and took inspiration from what he had to hand. He leafed through the *Art et Décoration* magazine, where, besides an article about Czech book covers,<sup>13</sup> he found a sampler of stylish fonts from the late 1920s by the famous designer Cassandre.<sup>14</sup> One font in particular appealed to him and, perhaps with a certain degree of mischief, he used it in several variations of his design. He drew it on the back of forms, printed in Gothic script, for the German health insurance system that operated in Prague during the protectorate. Such forms were available in countless numbers at protectorate offices and businesses. As far as I could ascertain, none of Remeš’s designs were put into print. It is more than probable that, to the ‘enlightened’ management of the recently-nationalised glassworks, they seemed too modern and suspiciously bourgeois. Of course, this was not far from the truth.

### Theme

I am concerned with the fine art of the 1920s to the 1940s, including abstract painting and sculpture. A long time ago I noticed an interesting phenomenon, which is the transfer of abstraction, especially in painted form, to the applied arts. If I use the word ‘transfer’ in this book, however, it is not one-sidedly, but in the context of mutual interaction between artistic disciplines. Art-historical research led me to a differentiation of the issue as well as to considerations of abstraction as a general principal, which, through a departure from the exclusive space of the studios and exhibition halls to other areas of social life, surpasses its morphological and authorial context and acquires new roles. It was these that opened up for me an almost infinite space of consequences and, with them, surprising relationships that often behave towards the standards of art history almost blasphemously, provocatively and insolently. I was afforded a view that fascinated me. Yes, a view, because at first these were visual encounters. It was only afterwards that there came the stress of questions as to how to name these encounters, how to deal with them within the bounds of the existing scheme of the art work, or how to transcend that scheme, and, last but not least, what socio-political and cultural-historical dimensions they have. I chose for this a concept whose fundamental theses are encapsulated in the title and subtitle of the book. This book is structured in accordance with the meaning of those words and, especially, with the contrapuntal rhythm with which they are phrased (abstraction – attraction).

### Choice

The choice of abstraction from the options of mutual relations between the fine and applied arts did not, however, sufficiently narrow the theme. It was necessary to specify it more closely. I did not find (and I confess that I did not really seek) some objective key. The selection of the phenomena I am examining is my personal choice. At the same time, I can imagine others, with differently posed questions and different demonstrations. All the more reason why I deliberately balance these phenomena on their edge and, in some cases, by means of apparently inappropriate excursions, disrupt their artificially-created construction. I want to give them a chance to return to an original space, unburdened by interpretations.

### Authorship and Anonymity

My research indicated that rather than interdisciplinary links between the original authors' conceptions, an aspect that is often more interesting is the loose reflections of these conceptions by serial production designers in the factory, namely, those who were regarded as ordinary workers and were obliged to remain anonymous. With growing factory production, a new, vigorous multiplicity appeared on the scene, with ambitions to oppose the preferential status of authorial performance and the sovereign status of the unique work of art. The emergence of consumer culture led to changes in assessment criteria and, alongside them, in marketing strategies, taking into account social position, cultural preferences and, last but not least, the purchasing power of the customer, the increasingly socially-significant middle class. Influence on the mentality and lifestyle of the broadest segments of the public was paramount. Therefore, it was in the field of industrial production that fundamental collisions occurred between the modernist and anti-modernist programmes.

### Contexts

Industrialisation (admired as well as condemned); its hopes and falls; the belief in a better future and disillusion; the power of the collective and the power of personality; historical events and their impact on society and on individual destinies. These constitute contexts without which cultural events (and not only these) would not have taken the direction they did. The theme of abstraction has something to say about all these things: sometimes a great deal, sometimes a mere footnote. This book, however, offers no construct that would exhaust, unconditionally classify, and systematise the symptoms of the chosen issue. It is an attempt to test the openness of the discipline called the history of art.

*English version edited by Jonathan Owen*

## ***A(bs)traction: The Czech Lands Amid the Centres of Modernity 1918–1950,* Part 2: The Decoration of Decorative Art**

Due to misunderstanding or even by mistake, the boundaries between fine and applied art have often become blurred in paradoxical ways. Decorative qualities have been attributed to pieces that were created for diametrically opposite reasons, while, conversely, pieces that were intended as decoration have been received as independent works. There are two stories that provide particularly vivid examples of both such situations. In the first, František Kupka's abstract paintings became decorations by chance and no-one noticed them. In the second, Vasilií Kandinsky programmatically applied the principles of his abstractions to a decorative work, whose aim moreover was advertising, and this latter work was written about by all the important European journals as a further significant example of Kandinsky's art.

### **The First Story: František Kupka in the Role of Interior Decorator**

In the library of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague there is a group of photographs by an unknown author who, in 1925, was entrusted with documenting the installation of the Czechoslovak pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative Arts (*Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*) in Paris. One shot shows a simulation of a smoking lounge, whose corner-centred layout is emphasised by Bohumil Kafka's bronze sculpture *Somnambulist* (*Somnambula*, 1905) and whose walls are 'decorated' by František Kupka's paintings *A Tale of Pistils and Stamens* (*Příběh o pestících a tyčinkách*, 1919–1920) and *Study for the Language of Verticals* (*Studie k Mluvě kolmic*, 1911) (Fig. 6.1). But, in contrast to the furniture and the small sculptures, Kupka's abstractions hang there without any identifying labels, quite anonymously.<sup>15</sup> It is true that a very observant spectator might possibly, on closer examination, notice Kupka's signature, but who would have had time for that whilst viewing this mega-exhibition?



My research into how such surprisingly-inappropriate treatment of his works has been assessed by existing scholarly works about Kupka led to a discovery that is perhaps even more surprising: none of these works mention Kupka's inclusion in this exhibition, even while biographies of Kupka have long claimed to be complete.<sup>16</sup> This makes more interesting the question of how Kupka, known for his sense of exclusiveness and his fusion of the principles of artistic creation with the laws of the cosmos, and whose confessional text *Creation in Visual Art (Tvoření v umění výtvarném, 1923)* had been published by the Mánes Union of Fine Arts (SVU Mánes) shortly beforehand, found himself at an exhibition of decorative art, yet was not invited to participate in an opposing exhibition, *The Art of Today (L'Art d'aujourd'hui)*, which was staged in Paris at the same time by the international avant-garde.<sup>17</sup> Finding the answer to this entailed an extensive investigation that, because of its detective story-like plot, is worth recounting in more detail. This is a story about a story.

First, I discovered that Kupka's name does not appear either in the catalogue for the Czechoslovak pavilion or in the huge list of awarded artists published by the exhibition's French organisers.<sup>18</sup> Nearly all the artists involved in the exhibition received medals, but nobody registered Kupka's participation, not even reviews in the Czech press. Several of these appeared almost immediately, and the most competent of them was probably Pavel Janák's extensive article 'The Exhibition in Paris, The Art Industry and Life', from the journal *Výtvarná práce (Art Work)*.<sup>19</sup> Janák devoted thorough and dedicated attention to the exhibition, with particular regard to stylistic trends in interior design, but, like other reviewers, he did not notice Kupka's abstractions. I therefore turned my investigations to Václav Vilém Štech, the chief curator of the Czechoslovak exposition, but this did not lead anywhere either. Štech expressed his opinions on almost everything, but Kupka clearly never interested him. It therefore seemed unlikely that it was he who had invited Kupka to exhibit his pictures, but given Štech's authoritative position he surely had to figure in this story somehow.

Both pictures were Kupka's own property at this time, and *Study for the Language of Verticals* from 1911 had not even been exhibited yet.<sup>20</sup> Kupka would thus have had to supply the pictures to the organisers of the Czechoslovak exposition himself. But why and at what stage of the preparations? We know that in the original conception for the exposition, as documented in its catalogue, these pictures were not included. The first constructive clues were ultimately offered



Fig. 6.1. The smoking lounge for the Czechoslovak exposition at the International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative Arts in Paris (1925). Black-and-white photograph. Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

by several of Kupka's letters to Jindřich Waldes.<sup>21</sup> These show that the story really began by chance, that it had its source in something of a misunderstanding, and that it was connected to Kupka's pedagogical work with Czech students studying on scholarships in Paris. Several passages in these letters give an authentic insight into the contradictory nature of Kupka's personality and enable us to grasp the reasons why he agreed to the use of his pictures as decoration.

On 12 December 1923 Kupka wrote to Waldes, a little emotionally:

My studio is serving as a classroom and such small acts of hospitality bring joy, as the majority of them [the students] are not wealthy. Of course this will all straighten itself out; in the meantime I am being paid back for all this in the sympathy and dedication of these good young souls, with whose help I am transmitting to Prague a sense of the recognition of individual dignity and, for the artists, a hatred of every plagiarisation of the latest fashionable phenomena ... Recently these artists have mainly manifested impatience at my scorning of publicity ... I am too much of a philosopher, and otherwise I am not too aware of all that I would bring upon myself if I engaged in open battle with rotten traditions and with all these rotten heads, for whom a revolution means a reversal of many comforts. People such as I get burned, so do not be surprised that I am in no hurry. Now, in my own concept of life, I stand tall enough: if I do not get to see these wider successes while still alive, I would not be hurt to know that this will happen only after my death. My "I" is not confined to my body, but already travels far into the universe.<sup>22</sup>

But, about a month later, an affronted Kupka changed his attitude:

Over the next year I'll be preparing an exhibition in which I will throw down my trump cards. Yesterday I was visited by this young Czech girl painter. She is a student of Fern[and] Léger and she spoke of him as though of a great Master. This Léger is unthinkable without me, but since he turns it all into something more marketable, even a stupid fly like her gets stuck as if on glue. I will endure this! ... For the truth always wins. Gleizes will get one on the nose and so will Picasso and others.<sup>23</sup>

### The Stupid Fly

Who was this 'stupid fly'? It could not have been any of Kupka's numerous female students of that time, who, besides the painter Milada Marešová and the sculptor Marta Jirásková, were so nondescript, and whose interest in painting was so short-lived, that they did not even make it into Prokop Toman's *Dictionary of Fine Artists (Slovníku výtvarných umělců)* (and that is saying something). It was Věra Jičínská. Not only was Jičínská not in any way stupid, but, as we shall see later, it was most probably thanks to her that Kupka got to exhibit his pictures at the Czechoslovak pavilion.

An open, lively, and educated girl, Jičínská began to visit Léger's school at the beginning of 1924.<sup>24</sup> She explained her attitude towards art schools in the following way to Vladimír Maisner, her friend at the time: 'I move between schools, I find it wonderfully interesting to get to know about different opinions and trends and I feel that I can learn something from each of them'.<sup>25</sup> In another part of this letter she describes her meeting with Kupka, who, incidentally, as is evident from his correspondence, still spoke Czech very well:

It will perhaps also interest you that I visited the painter Kupka. But to tell the truth, I was disappointed. I don't know, but many of my opinions were contrary to his and, though I was forced to speak in French, I got terribly incensed and I zealously (perhaps too much so) opposed his ideas to such an extent that we parted on rather unfriendly terms. He is doing very interesting things at the moment. His use of colour is very pretty and decorative, but I think this is more suited to paintings on walls than on canvases ... So this Kupka advised me to work independently (which I approve of), without academies, and doesn't grasp that I can change my teachers. Apparently I am supposed to remain with the same one and to retain my impressions from youth, these being the strongest ones (so perhaps my teacher should be Úprka forever!) ... I understood from all this that I should remain in Prague, not go to any school and work alone. This is all very nice, it is just that I don't understand why he accepted

a professorial post and why he is now living in Paris. I don't understand him then, but it is not only me, other Czechs have also been a little disappointed by him.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this mutual misunderstanding, which certainly also reflected a generational difference, Jičínská still visited Kupka's studio from time to time up until 1925. Maybe she was ultimately able to win Kupka's favour in some way. But she was seven years younger than him and definitely did not want to take up residence, as he had done, in some 'sacred ivory tower'.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, she was irresistibly drawn to the discordant features of modern civilisation:

I think that life today has little of the lyrical, and I love this awful rush, this bustle, this cry of the metropolis. This disharmony makes me feel terribly good. You know, to immerse myself sometimes in this din, among these automobiles, trams, buses, amid the cry, the racket, the honking horns. There someone fell down, here they ran over someone again, someone drowned, the Seine flooded, people move about, the Dixmude crashed, murder, fire and water, everything all together—this grand disharmony culminates in the despairing cry of the modern man. You know, I'm able to get caught up in all this, and yet if I am at a concert listening to Beethoven, Liszt or Chopin, I feel contentment, peace.<sup>28</sup>

As we can see, it would be a mistake to see Jičínská's letters only as evidential material. They have their own literary style, a distinctive imagination and a well-defined idea of the values of the modern era, which was in essence very similar to the one held by the leading artistic personalities of that time. These letters thus clearly formulate one of the principal reasons why Kupka's abstract work remained alien for other artists of Jičínská's generation (however diversely oriented), such as the members of the Czech avant-garde. Having its basis in the art of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Kupka's work was now simply incomprehensibly old-fashioned for the majority of young people. This also explains the seemingly mysterious and often-discussed fact that, among Kupka's numerous students, there was not one who would in some way build on his work.

### **Virtue from Necessity**

The International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative Arts in Paris began to be installed in the spring of 1925. This was a demanding task and the Czechoslovak pavilion became a welcome opportunity for young Czech artists living a modest lifestyle in Paris to earn some extra money. The most actively involved included Věra Jičínská herself, as well as Jičínská's then-roommate, the sculptor Marta Jirásková. Jičínská worked as a sign-painter, helped with the installation work, and later, during the exhibition, provided information and sold promotional material. She was able to communicate well with her superiors, which proves particularly important for the story of Kupka's inclusion in the exhibition. Jičínská sent photographs back home, and in these we see her with Václav Vilém Štech and with Adolf Cinek, the administrative secretary for the Czechoslovak section. As she wrote to Maisner: 'they like me here, they say I am always in a good mood, always cheerful!'<sup>29</sup> She also became friends with Rudolf Kepl, an employee of the Czechoslovak embassy in Paris (who, incidentally, became a cultural attaché after the Second World War, and who was close to the ambassador Štefan Osuský).

Osuský, a big promoter of Czechoslovak culture in France who organised, for instance, a performance of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*) at Paris's national Opéra-Comique theatre to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia, was one of the first collectors of Kupka's work. According to Emanuel Siblík, in the 1920s Osuský owned not only a number of Kupka's early works, but also some of his abstractions, including for instance all three variations of the composition *Lines, Areas, Depth* (*Čáry, plochy, hloubka*, 1913–1922).<sup>30</sup> The Czechoslovak embassy plays an important role in my further investigations: Jaroslav Šejnoha, the embassy's first secretary, was appointed as the representative of the Czechoslovak section's general commissioner, František Hodáč, and this means that the embassy certainly had a highly authoritative standing in the whole affair.

It is certain that Kupka's pictures were only included in the exhibition at the last minute, but this did not matter to Kupka, and neither did the purpose behind their usage. He evidently revised his opinion about the 'stupid fly', and was pleasantly surprised by what suddenly began to

happen: ‘my whole situation is taking on a shape that I would never have expected. This is ultimately something unprecedented. While I exercise absolute disregard for the external world, several of my young followers are taking care of things. In a way they are apostles. If things go on like this, I will be able to become a kind of Dalai Lama living in a sacred ivory tower’.<sup>31</sup>

But no such situation would ever recur. This was a one-of-a-kind action, a case of making a virtue from necessity. The Czechoslovak pavilion’s organisers, headed by Štech, had evidently not reckoned with the fact that they would also have to incorporate paintings into their choice of exhibits. Indeed the original French commission had referred exclusively to sculpture, architecture, ceramics, glassware, book illustrations and designs, metalwork, furniture, and fashion. Scenography was later added to these, but there was never any mention of paintings.<sup>32</sup> It was only when on site, during the installation itself, that they realised that the exhibition’s other national pavilions and thematic sections were full of them. They then had to quickly redress the situation. It seems that just at this moment it occurred to Jičínska, along with Jirásková perhaps—these two virtual ‘apostles’—to ask Kupka for some of his paintings. Thanks to her good social contacts Jičínska succeeded in realising this idea. She certainly saw Kupka’s abstractions as predominantly decorative, and this was not her opinion alone. It is probable that they were also seen as such by, for instance, the highly socially active Osuský, whose other favourite painter was the fashionable artist Veris (Jaroslav Zamazal), who painted portraits of Osuský’s family members.

### The Painting as Decoration

Emanuel Siblík, in his 1928 monograph on Kupka, thus considered it his duty to refute this evidently commonly-shared opinion. In order to support his views with those of a recognised authority, Siblík quoted the following passage from a text about Kupka by André Gybal, published in 1920 in the journal *Les Hommes du jour* (*Men of the Day*): ‘the arabesque is by no means merely decorative. These splendid compositions express the most varied, subtlest and rarest ideas’.<sup>33</sup> It was, however, quite common in the 1920s to consider a painting as a decorative object, and the International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative Arts took full advantage of this. The main issue was not the quality of a painting, but rather whether it fulfilled a basic function: to contribute, in an appropriate fashion, to the decoration of a specific type of environment. And as is ultimately shown by the wealth of documentary material produced about the exhibition by its French organisers, the majority of paintings here, even those by much more famous artists, were installed, as with Kupka’s work, without detailed identification, and thus as ‘mere’ decoration. Many of the pictures had been painted for the exhibition with this very aim. So, contrary to the starting assumptions of my investigations, in truth Kupka’s paintings had not been treated in an unusually-dismissive manner by this exhibition.

Moreover, why should Kupka not have been happy, when, besides the opportunity he was given to exhibit his abstractions within such a highly-visited forum, he also found himself in such very good company? In fact, the painter who really triumphed at the exhibition, and the only one who received a gold medal in the field of painting, was the ‘great Master’ himself, Fernand Léger. Because he then belonged to the Purists, Léger’s work was used predominantly to decorate the Le Corbusier-designed L’Esprit Nouveau pavilion with geometric abstraction. This comprised one of Léger’s first mural paintings. He also painted a giant orthogonal abstraction for the entrance hall of the so-called ‘French embassy’, intended to be the dominant element of French national representation at the exhibition.<sup>34</sup> Another wall of the hall was handled by Robert Delaunay, who added one of his numerous Eiffel Tower paintings, which was similar, for instance, to the one that had shortly before adorned a newly-opened chic Paris bar. The journal *L’Art vivant* (*The Living Art*) printed an admiring report about Delaunay’s piece.

Finally, I wish to comment on the startling fact that Kupka’s participation in the International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative Arts continues to be ignored by Czech art historians. This is possibly because these art historians—held captive to traditional evaluative criteria determining what is and is not art, criteria that a hundred years of discussion has not managed to shake—consider his participation as discrediting. And what of Kupka’s contemporaries? We need perhaps only add that Czechs were usually not too aware of their compatriots who were living abroad, and when

it came to it, did not even recognise their work. At least this was true in the 1920s, as is attested by another story, one that may be minor but is all the more indicative for that and reflects very strangely on the then-recent Art Nouveau style. In 1929, in the journal *Eva*, the 24-year-old Zdeněk Macek enthusiastically described his visit to the Paris shop of the famous jeweller Georges Fouquet. In his conclusion Macek boasted that ‘it was a delight to sit amid the musty gold of the Louis XV armchairs’.<sup>35</sup> All very nice, except that in reality Macek was sitting in an interior designed in its entirety by Alphonse Mucha in 1901. It is true that over the previous 20 years there had been radical changes in design (and not only in design), but how could the Art Nouveau image have fallen back several centuries in time and, with it, Macek’s still-living compatriot, even if Mucha now had his most attractive work behind him? Since restored and relocated, the interior of the shop is now among the important exhibits of the Carnavalet Museum.

### **The Second Story: Vasili Kandinsky and Ceramic Tiles**

When Pavel Janák reviewed the International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925, concentrating first and foremost on the housing strategies presented, what predominantly concerned him was their preference for luxury. Quality designers were, as they are today, generally dependent on wealthy clients. Their designs, expensive and complex to produce, were not suited to the large-scale factory production that would have made them accessible to the wider public. Prompted by the same reaction as Janák, the idea arose in Germany that year of organising another exhibition, opposed to the Paris one on the issue of exclusive luxury: an exhibition whose theme would be ‘the dwelling of our time’, or housing ‘for the many’ (the expanding middle class). This exhibition first took concrete shape thanks to the architects Hans Poelzig, an important exponent of German Expressionist architecture, and Martin Wagner, a designer of early, modernist-style Berlin housing estates. The organisation of the exhibition was ultimately taken over by representatives of Bauhaus in Dessau, led by Ludwig Mies van der Roh and Lilly Reich. As is evident from photographic documentation that follows the exhibition’s development from the initial building work up to its final form, the results must have been spectacular, and this is also attested by contemporaneous accounts. The exhibition lasted from May to July 1931 and its name was the German Building Exhibition Berlin 1931 (*Deutsche Bauausstellung Berlin 1931*). Although other countries were represented at the exhibition, German projects predominated. The exhibition featured interesting, graphically-designed and, in several places, interactive panels featuring diagrams and photomontages on the themes of housing, work, and environment, and expositions of clocks and books by Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, brothers Hans and Wassili Luckhardt, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Josef Albers and others. It was—according to the testimony of architect Jan Evangelista Koula, who confirms the impression given by photographs—a display of:

contemporary housing demonstrated with models, which were built in real size and placed inside the audacious construction of a hall of reinforced concrete ... The exhibition was not generally aimed at professionals; it was intended predominantly for the lay public, on whom it impressed important items of knowledge by putting these in a popular, and often very effective, form ... It seems to me that in Germany it is important that citizens be well-informed about everything connected with modern-day construction, and thus about architectural questions, economic questions, etc., and that they realise that this is a matter of their work and property, of their better future.<sup>36</sup>

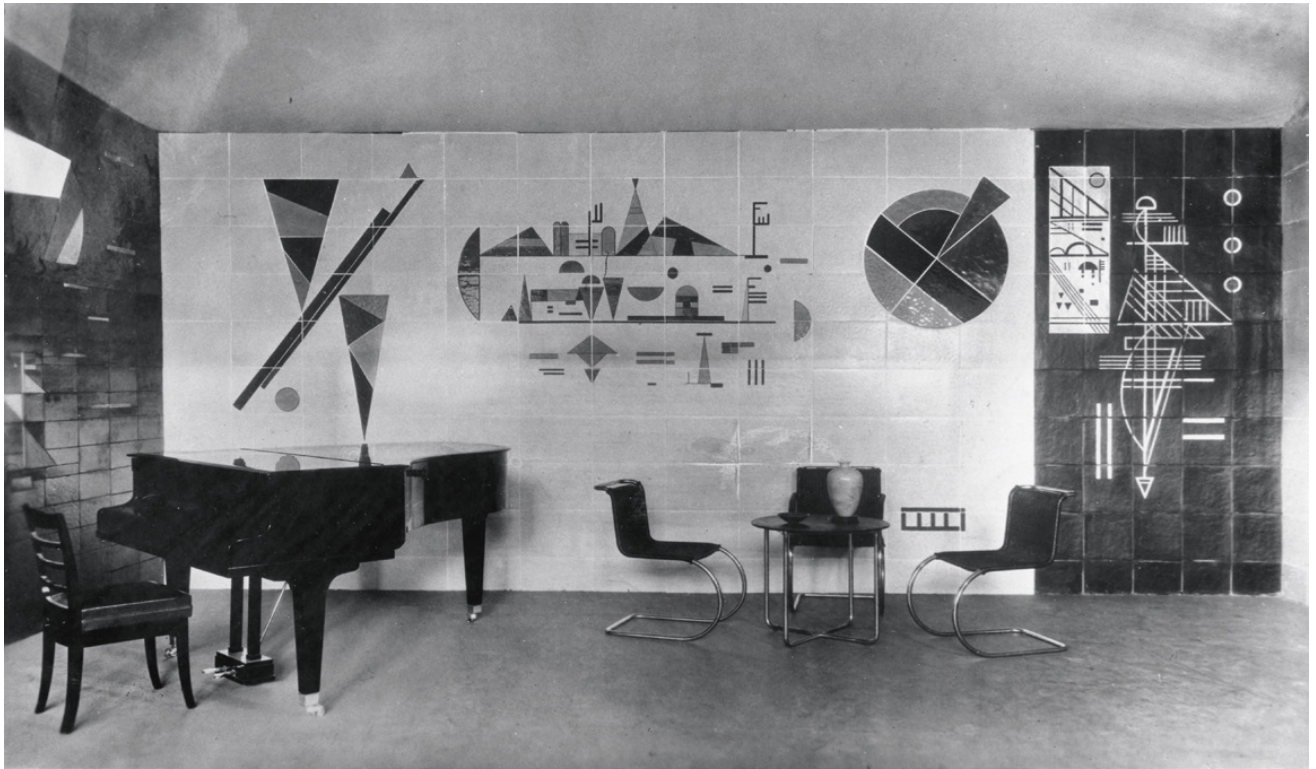
As another reviewer, this time German, wrote in *Keramische Rundschau* (*Ceramic Review*), ‘hall II at the Building Exhibition in Berlin was devoted to the theme “The Dwelling of Our Time”’. Here the floor was given to leading architects and interior designers, who presented a range of designs for apartments and living spaces, which deal with the present and future issues of habitation in its many-sided complexity’. Yet this reviewer also asserted in his article that ‘the so-called romance of the “cold wall” can only appeal to a few people outside the artistic circle in which this formulation originates’, and, in accordance with the magazine’s area of focus, stated that, ‘for the circle that has coined this term, ceramics can have no essential significance’. But he then noted: ‘it is thus all the more pleasing that ceramics provided the dominant element in at least one of these modern spaces:



in the music room designed by Professor Kandinsky and realised by Oranienburger Werkstätten Körting K.G. Berlin in collaboration with Saxonia AG in Meissen' (Fig. 6.2).<sup>37</sup>

### The Music Room Phenomenon

Before we continue our story about Kandinsky, it would be useful to look briefly at the music room as a phenomenon, one that has long ceased to be classed among the requirements of domestic space. By contrast, in the nineteenth century and afterwards, a music room was one of the 'regular' facilities of any bourgeois living quarters. It was used for domestic music production, in essence thus imitating the lifestyle of the nobility on a small scale. In Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, the idea that children (especially girls) from 'good' families should learn to play the piano still survived from the days of the First Czechoslovak Republic. The piano, which was usually a grand piano, had to be put somewhere, and there had to be a place where family members and friends could gather and participate in music production. Of course, this included not only children but also adults brought up in this tradition. Depending on the circumstances of the host, professional performers would even be invited too.



The question of how a music room should look was no minor issue for modernist architects. While they protested against the bourgeoisie, among whose relics the music room might to some extent be counted, they also emphasised the culture of everyday life and believed all forms of art should be an essential part of this. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as rented apartments began to get smaller and it seemed that their tenants were starting to prefer the passive experience of going to concerts, the Austrian writer and architectural theorist Joseph August Lux was particularly active in striving to cultivate the playing of music within the home. In a chapter of his book *The Modern Apartment and its Furnishings* (*Die moderne Wohnung und ihre Ausstattung*) entitled 'The Music Room' ('Das Musikzimmer'), he used drawings by several architects to demonstrate various ways of arranging a small apartment with this aim in mind; as a last resort he considered simply putting a small piano in the living room.<sup>38</sup> In his conclusion he added some aesthetic advice: 'if you have the desire and the means to create a music room, then deny yourself any kind of ornamentation ... any adornment, and particularly busts of musicians or portraits, because they bring nothing to the musical experience, and are much more likely to disturb'.<sup>39</sup>

Fig. 6.2. The music room at the German Building Exhibition in Berlin (1931). Black-and-white photograph. Bauhaus Archive, Berlin.



Modernist architects generally embraced opinions of this kind. For instance, the then-influential handbook *Spatial Art in Colour, 100 Designs by Modern Artists* (*Farbige Raumkunst, 100 Entwürfe moderner Künstler*), which was published in periodical form between 1911 and 1942 in Stuttgart, devoted itself regularly to designs for music rooms. These were always relatively large spaces with a piano, comfortable seating, and usually just one artwork, selected in accordance with the room's design. To realise these designs would of course have entailed considerable expense: certainly only a few people could have afforded them.

Nonetheless, the socially-critical, leftist architect Jiří Kroha included a not-exactly-modest design for a music room—or rather, as he called it, a 'cultural room'—in his project *A Humanist Fragment of Housing* (*Humanistický fragment bydlení*) from the years 1936 to 1947. Even though it still contained a grand piano, Kroha's conception of his cultural room also included a different type of domestic music production, which took people's individual social situations into account. In his article 'Art in the Apartment', published in the journal *Blok*, Kroha discussed the significance of the reproducibility of visual and particularly musical art, which could now be mediated in high-quality form through radio transmissions or gramophone recordings. He justified his aims in the following way:

These new reproductive methods enable a person to return to his apartment for his cultural experiences. Of course, his apartment must be fitted out for this. The conditions thus arise for a free social room as a socially-conventional facility and a higher version of otherwise obsolete historical forms: the palace ballroom, the bourgeois salon, the bourgeois parlour room, the petit-bourgeois occasional room, and the living room of present times, ultimately rationalised but still unsuited to cultural requirements.<sup>40</sup>

### **Back to Kandinsky**

Just like Kroha, the earlier avant-gardists of the Bauhaus circle also, surprisingly, did not consider the music room as a luxury, something not really befitting the social programme of the German Building Exhibition. They probably understood it in the same terms as the Dutch architect Johannes Martinus van Hardeveld, when he asserted: 'applied art has no social or economic importance outside of its moral influence, such as we find in music'.<sup>41</sup> Most probably, however, they were not all that consistent in their ideas and behaved pragmatically in taking up some exceptionally attractive offers. We learn some details in the previously-cited article, of unknown authorship, from *Keramische Rundschau*, which is interesting for, among other things, its critical evaluation of Kandinsky's abstractions, whose inflections are defined as 'ornamentality', and also of modernist concepts of the functional and above-all hygienic arrangement of living spaces.<sup>42</sup> These opinions can be considered, paradoxically, as 'the voice of the people', of those who, in theory, were meant to be the primary concern in all this:

It is thanks to Mrs. Körting, who has aroused an interest in ceramic material in our modern painters and has thereby helped oppose that unadorned coldness of modern spaces, which accompanies us throughout this exhibition, with the capacity of coloured ceramic material to decorate, enliven and tune the mood of a space. The formal methods of the painter Kandinsky do not, in themselves, have much to say, but it should be admitted that his ornamentality and colour palette, in being reconceived for ceramic material, present a new direction for the role of ceramics in the formation of spaces, and that in the realisation of this music room we find, beyond its individual approach, the fundamental foundations for collaboration between artists, ceramics workshops and the ceramics industry.<sup>43</sup>

The reviewer continued with a very detailed description of the surprisingly-complicated technology that ceramics factory workers had to use to produce the individual parts of this composition. Its base surface was created by what were essentially ordinary tiles, and this was taken apart during the exhibition itself. We should add that 'Mrs. Körting' was the wife of the owner of the Oranienburger Werkstätten Körting factory, and that, unlike the reviewer, she was no doubt well aware of why the factory had chosen Kandinsky in particular to realise its aims. As with other firms that were represented at the exhibition, its intention had been to use such a prestigious event to advertise

itself, and in a manner it considered attractive. This is attested partly by the choice of a music room, which corresponded to the social level in which the company moved, and partly by the way the exhibit was set up: the room's arrangement was only indicated, and relied exclusively on the use of walls with ceramic tiles, while the other interiors were generally constructed in full, as life-size models, which was emphasised by the exhibition's reviewers.<sup>44</sup>

This music room—or more precisely its fragmentary representation—was, besides its piano, furnished with three tubular chairs, which were at this time being serially manufactured by the company Berliner Metallgewerbe, after a design by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. They stood at a small table with a nondescript little vase. There is nothing surprising here given that the artist behind this interior arrangement was Mies himself. In comparison with other projects for music rooms, filled with upholstered lounge suites designed to ensure a comfortable listening experience, this one looked like a dentist's waiting room.

Between 1922 and 1925 Kandinsky led a mural workshop at Bauhaus, though he himself only produced one mural, shown at the *Jury-free Exhibition (Juryfreie Kunstschau)* in Berlin in 1922. Later he worked as a teacher of 'free' painting. Again he had only one experience of applying his abstractions to décor. This comprised a rather casual collaboration between 1920 and 1923 with the circle around Vladimir Tatlin, then working at the Dulevo porcelain factory. Two designs he produced for decorated teacups and saucers clearly indicate that his abstract-expressive style of that time, in contrast to the geometric minimalism of the Constructivists or the Petrograd-based Suprematists, was not very well suited to such ends.

At the German Building Exhibition Kandinsky set about his assigned task in a pragmatic spirit. His designs for the ceramic walls, employing the geometric-abstract style that now characterised his paintings, were produced, quite atypically, in the form of hanging oil paintings. This freed him from dependence on the manufacturing process and enabled him to make additional use of these works, including further commercial use. Future developments have shown this to be a farsighted move on Kandinsky's part. Today the paintings belong to the Strasbourg Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, to whom they were donated in 1975 by Societé L'Oréal, together with a replica of the music room itself. The replica was made by the company Villeroy & Boch, one of the few German ceramics factories that survived the war and continues successfully today. The original version of the music room had no such luck.

And how did Kandinsky settle the fact that he had broken Adolf Loos' fundamental rule of the 'bare wall', a rule that was still binding after 20 years (and not only for the Functionalist architects represented at the exhibition) and which remained an enduring topic of discussion? It could be said that he cleverly escaped censure. In the exhibition catalogue he justified his 'heretical' acts as follows:

During the great "revision" of construction methods the mural became an inessential (and thus harmful) addition. The bare wall seems to be the definitive method for demarcating space of any kind. This approach has basically arisen from a superficial attitude towards painting, which apparently has no meaning and is thus pure decoration. But only the external aspect of painting is being evaluated here. In fact painting is not decoration, but a kind of tuning fork. Spaces that are created for some definite end, and whose usage is not of an ordinary kind, must have a special power, in order for people to internally "harmonise" with these spaces and be meaningfully influenced by them. And it is painting that has the appropriate means for this. But at the same time it does not need to be emphasised that ordinary living spaces do not go together with "stationary" painting: the essential qualities of such spaces are change and the possibility of variation.<sup>45</sup>

Concerning the reasons why he had used ceramic technology specifically for his 'mural', against all commonly held rules, Kandinsky remained silent. It should nonetheless be emphasised that his complex lining of the walls with ceramic tiles was an approach that to this day remains unique, especially for a private space.

The music room's ceramic walls aroused great interest. Among foreign journals, the prestigious and exceptionally well-produced Italian journal *La Casa Bella (The Beautiful Home)*,

to take one example, devoted a stand-alone supplement to them.<sup>46</sup> At this time Kandinsky was, on the one hand, considered an important modern artist, and yet on the other hand he played a significant part, whether he wanted to or not, in the then-ongoing discussion within the ceramics industry, as led in particular by the painter and ceramicist Arthur Hennig, who was convinced that the same requirements should be applied to the decoration of mass-produced objects for everyday needs as to modern fine art. Kandinsky's ceramic walls basically found themselves on the border between these two disciplines, fine and applied art, painting and ceramics. While photographs of the music room were reproduced in international reviews that came out at the time of the exhibition, in Czechoslovakia this did not happen until 1934, when it appeared on the cover of *Bytová kultura* (*Housing Culture*). This was not, for once, the result of typical Czech tardiness, but rather of financial problems faced by the magazine's editors. The journal's exceptional standard attests that in other circumstances the editors would have responded immediately.<sup>47</sup>

If Kupka's unnoticed paintings *A Tale of Pistils and Stamens* (1919–1920) and *Study for the Language of Verticals* (1911) today deservedly belong to the important exhibits of the Prague National Gallery and the Thyssen-Bornemisiz Museum in Madrid, interest in Kandinsky's music room has inexplicably subsided. This is particularly evident when we observe the different degrees of attention these works have received from art-historical literature.

*Translated by Jonathan Owen*

1 Hana Rousová, *Abstrakce: Čechy mezi centry modernity 1918–1950: Nejen o vztazích volného a užitého umění* (Prague: Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (VŠUP)/Arbor vitae, 2015).

2 Oleksandr Dovzhenko, *Z deníků* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1964), p. 82.

3 Cited in Miroslav Lamač, *Mýšlenky moderních malířů* (Prague: Odeon, 1968), p. 206.

4 Paul Klee, 'Z deníku 1914', in Paul Klee, *Čáry* (Prague: Odeon, 1990), p. 126.

5 Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky (eds.), *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel, Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), p. 24.

6 Cited in Lamač, *Mýšlenky moderních malířů*, p. 138.

7 Cited in Jerzy Płazewski, *Filmová řeč* (Prague: Orbis, 1967), p. 4.

8 Viktor Shklovskij, *Ejzenštejn*, trans. Juraj Klaučo (Bratislava: Obzor, 1976), p. 189.

9 Sergei Eisenstein, *Kamerou, tužkou i perem*, trans. Jiří Taufer (Prague: Orbis, 1961), p. 119.

10 The book's title arose from a discussion with Tomáš Jirsa. Thank you.

11 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 5–6.

12 Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 18–19.

13 Louis Cheronnet, 'Quelques couvertures de livres Tschécoslovaques', *Art et Décoration* (1929): pp. 113–116.

14 Maximilien Vox, 'Typographie', *Art et Décoration* (1929): pp. 168–169. Cassandre, real name Adolphe Jean-Marie Mouron (1901–1968), was a Ukrainian painter living in Paris, where he became famous especially for his posters and his innovative typography. He created several influential typefaces and in 1929 his 'Alphabet Double Bifur' was published in the issue of *Art et Décoration* that 20 years later captivated Stanislav Remeš.

15 The photograph was reproduced in 1927, as part of an advertisement for Josef Polák's artistic workshop, in *Publication du Conseil Municipal de Prague* (Berlin: 1927), p. 316. Vojtěch Lahoda mentions it in 'František Kupka's Creation in Visual Art: "Organic" and Czech Connections', *Umění* 44/1 (1996): p. 23, where he discusses it in relation to the smoking lounge's furniture: 'an interior with two top pictures Kupka's making [a]

perfect match with the rather extravagant pieces of late decorative Cubism'. Polak's furniture company employed leading Cubist designers. Drawing on Rotislava Švácha's expertise, Lahoda suggests that the furniture could have been the work of Josef Gočár or Josef Stěpánka. But this advertisement does not make it clear that the photograph was originally documenting the installation of the Czechoslovak pavilion in Paris in 1925.

16 Hana Rousová, 'Dekorace dekorativního umění', in Lenka Bydžovská and Roman Prah (eds.), *V mužském mozku, Sborník k 70. narozeninám Petra Wittlicha* (Prague: Scriptorium, 2002), pp. 89–95. This article did not change the situation: Kupka's participation in the exhibition still went unmentioned in subsequent scholarly literature.

17 For more detail about the opposing exhibition and the activities in the Czech lands that led up to it, see: Anna Pravdová, 'V centru pařížského dění: Abstrakce 1924–1934', in Hana Rousová (ed.), *František Foljín 1891–1976, Košice – Paříž – Brno* (Brno: Moravská galerie v Brně, 2007).

18 Respectively: *Catalogue officiel de la section Tchécoslovaque. Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* (Prague: Comité d'exposition, 1925); *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes. Liste des récompenses* (Paris: Hachette, 1925).

19 Pavel Janák, 'Výstava v Paříži, umělecký průmysl a život', *Výtvarná práce* 4 (1926): pp. 207–233.

20 In contrast to the other exhibitions, the Czechoslovak pavilion, which was literally stuffed with widely-criticised display cases, included very few paintings. I explain the reasons for this further on in this text. The photographic documentation shows that paintings were used only in several simulated interiors: besides Kupka's paintings in the smoking lounge, Kremlíček's *Washerwoman* (*Myčka*, 1922) was hung above a bed in one bedroom, and one of Procházka's post-Cubist still lifes was hung up elsewhere. It is probable that these paintings had been hastily borrowed from several private collections belonging to Czechs living in Paris, such as Václav Nebeský, author of the book *L'Art moderne tchécoslovaque 1905–1933* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alvan, 1937).

21 Jindřich Toman, 'František Kupka – Jindřich Waldes, z korespondence 1919–1936', in Petr Meissner (ed.), *Kupka – Waldes, Malíř a jeho sběratel, Dílo Františka Kupky ve sbírce Jindřicha Waldesa* (Prague: Antikvariát Meissner, 1999).

22 Toman, 'František Kupka – Jindřich Waldes, z korespondence', p. 110.

23 Toman, 'František Kupka – Jindřich Waldes, z korespondence', p. 111.

24 Jičínská later studied under André Lhote and Othon Friesz. I included several of her paintings in the exhibitions *Czech Neoclassicism of the 1920s, Part Two: Between Classical Order and the Idyllic* (Prague City Gallery, 1989), and *Line, Colour, Form in Czech Visual Art of the 1930s* (Prague City Gallery, 1988). In 2001 Barbora Zlámalová reworked her doctoral thesis on Jičínská into a monograph: *Meziválečná tvorba malířky Věry Jičínské* (Brno: Seminář dějin umění FF MU v Brně, 2002). Most recently, Jičínská's work was presented at Martina Pachmanová's exhibition *From Prague All the Way to Buenos Aires: 'Women's Art' and International Representation of Interwar Czechoslovakia* (Galerie UM, Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design Prague, 2014).

25 Věra Jičínská, letter to Vladimír Maisner, 17 January 1924. Dobruška Museum (uncategorised).

26 Jičínská, letter to Maisner, 17 January 1924.

27 Toman, 'František Kupka – Jindřich Waldes, z korespondence', p. 112.

28 Jičínská, letter to Maisner, 17 January 1924.

29 Jičínská, letter to Maisner, 17 January 1924.

30 Emanuel Siblík, 'František Kupka', *Musaion* 7 (1928): p. 9.

31 Toman, 'František Kupka – Jindřich Waldes, z korespondence', p. 112.

32 Instructions for the preparation of the exhibition can be found in *Mezinárodní výstava moderních umění dekorativních a průmyslových v Paříži 1925* (Prague: 1925).

33 Siblík, 'František Kupka', p. 32.

34 *Une Ambassade française. Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes Paris 1925* (Paris: Hachette, 1925).

35 Zdeněk Macek, 'Georges Fouquet', *Eva* 2/1 (1 November 1929): p. 21.

36 Jan Evangelista Koula, 'Německá stavební výstava v Berlíně', *Eva* 3/20 (1931): p. 25.

37 All citations from: unnamed author, 'Keramische Raumgestaltung', *Keramische Rundschau und Kunst-Keramik* 39/32 (1931): p. 462. It is remarkable that this article, which remains interesting for several reasons, has not been mentioned in any of the scholarly literature dealing with Kandinsky, including that dealing with the music room. Most likely this is because the journal's disciplinary focus falls outside the normal scope of art-historical research.

38 Joseph August Lux, *Die moderne Wohnung und ihre Ausstattung* (Leipzig: Wiener Verlag, 1905), pp. 112–120.

39 Lux, *Die moderne Wohnung*, p. 120.

40 Jiří Kroha, 'Umění v bytě', *Blok* 1/8 (1946–1947): pp. 246–249. Citations taken from a reprint of the article in: Marcela Macharáčková (ed.), *Jiří Kroha v proměnách umění 20. Století* (Brno: Muzeum města Brna, 2007), p. 446.

41 Johannes Martinus van Hardeveld, 'Krása užitečnosti', *Bytová kultura, Sborník průmyslového umění* 1/1 (1924–1925): p. 26.

42 Unnamed author, 'Keramische Raumgestaltung', p. 462.

43 Unnamed author, 'Keramische Raumgestaltung', p. 462.

44 The information about the music room that appears in the scholarly literature is often extremely imprecise. For instance Annegret Hoberg, in her text on Kandinsky (published by the Guggenheim Museum in 2009 to coincide with a retrospective on the painter), mistakenly states on page 43 that the room belonged to a bachelor suite and was situated in the Radio Tower, one item in a small exhibition of Mies van der Rohe's work that formed part of the German Building Exhibition. Tracey Bashkoff (ed.), *Kandinsky* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009).

45 Vasilii Kandinsky, *Deutsche Bauausstellung Berlin 1931, Amtlicher Katalog und Führer*, exhibition catalogue, (Berlin: Bauwelt, 1931), p. 160.

46 *La Casa Bella* 9/4 (1931): unpaginated.

47 The journal *Bytová kultura* (*Housing Culture*) was published in Brno by Jan Vaněk, and the editorial board included Bohumír Markalous, Adolf Loos, and Ernst Wiesner. For financial reasons only two volumes were ever published, and between these there was a ten-year gap. The first appeared in 1924–1925, and the second in 1934–1935, but with only four issues.



The Magazine  
*Formiści* and the  
Early International  
Contacts of the  
Polish Avant-  
Garde  
(1919–1921)

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### **The Magazine *Formiści* and the Early International Contacts of the Polish Avant-Garde (1919–1921)**

In recent years, the study of modernism and the avant-garde has begun to tend towards a comprehensive approach to literary and artistic transformations and their relationship to the geopolitical changes that occurred after 1918. If past research focussed mostly on the study of the reception of particular exhibitions and the analysis and interpretation of the work of certain artists and tendencies, today the avant-garde is often considered in relation to collective plans for modernisation, leading to the creation of modern identities in the pan-European sphere. New research has turned to the nations of Central Europe, the so-called New Europe, in which the creation of the foundations for independent existence were associated with sweeping economic and cultural changes and the realisation of thorough programmes of modernisation.<sup>1</sup> Steven Mansbach's pioneering 1999 study *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans ca. 1890–1939* proposed a broad geography of the Eastern-European region and highlighted the significance of artistic exchange between its local centres.<sup>2</sup> Timothy Benson's ground-breaking 2002 exhibition at the LA County Museum of Art, *Exchange and Transformation: Central European Avant-Garde, 1910–1930*, can be seen as a development of this set of concerns, digging deeper in this new research direction.<sup>3</sup> Its key idea was to reveal the historical processes that led to the formation of local artistic circles, defining international artistic and intellectual exchange between particular cities and regions. The overarching idea of the cultural supremacy of a Western-centric 'Old Europe', with Paris as its centre, was called into question and contested after the creation of new nations after 1918, by the dynamic developing centres of the New Europe.<sup>4</sup>

In framing research in such a way, particular attention has been paid to the significance of magazines, which were a forum for circulating the modernist attitudes of particular groups. The third volume of *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, compiled by an international team of scholars and published in 2013, represented the first complex and critical analysis of pre-war European modernist magazines. The project leaders avoided writing the history of the avant-garde in the form of the study of particular 'isms' and foregrounded the need for deeper research into the process of the formation of particular groups, in view of the so-called sociology of modernisms.<sup>5</sup> In their introduction, the editors drew on Raymond Williams's and Alain Badiou's observations concerning the significance of friends and people with shared interests forming artistic groups to manifest their ideas through organised activities. Badiou argued that "the avantgarde" means a group, even if it is a handful of people, ... a group, motivated by strong personalities, which are not keen to share power'.<sup>6</sup> The vociferously-imposed opinions of the leader of a particular group could either cement its position in the international circuit, lead to its break up or result in the formation of splinter groups. Above all, magazines became

the principal medium of activity of avant-garde groups and a platform for programmatic statements and discussion, alongside individual works and exhibitions. They were tools for the popularisation of new ideas, a means for artists to enter into the field of public discussions and confrontations with the receivers of their art. Most importantly, they formed a network of artistic-intellectual exchange, the swiftest means available for the flow of information concerning the most recent avant-garde experiments.<sup>7</sup> The term ‘avant-garde’ itself, referring to the military meaning of the vanguard, suggests that a given group of artists and writers, sensing a shared affinity and solidarity, wished to take the lead in the field of theory and creative practice. The fulfilment of this desire was possible thanks to magazines, which effectively pointed to the vitality of given groupings.

The Oxford publication fills a gap in modernism studies, ascribing an important role to the magazines that formed avant-garde consciousness in particular societies, countries, regions, and urban centres, with special attention to the changes taking place in the geopolitical sphere of the first half of the twentieth century. In Poland, one of the first group publications and a first sign of the promotion of a new Polish art abroad, designed to make contact with other avant-garde groups, was the magazine *Formiści* (*The Formists*), published in Kraków between 1919 and 1921. Despite clearly paving the way for the appearance of subsequent avant-garde magazines and groupings in Poland (including Futurism, *Nowa Sztuka* (*New Art*) in Warsaw, and later *Zwrotnica* (*Railway Switch*) in Kraków and *Blok* in Warsaw), the magazine has not been the subject of deeper research to date.

The first mention of the Formist group and its contribution to efforts to reanimate artistic life in the first years of independent Poland was before the Second World War. In the catalogue of the *Salon Modernistów* (*Modernist Salon*) of 1928 in Warsaw, Władysław Strzemiński associated Formism with the birth of the Polish avant-garde.<sup>8</sup> In his text ‘On Modern Art’ of 1934, he clearly marked it apart from the contemporary search for new expression in Polish art: ‘The main postulate of Formism was pure form. This differentiated Formism from other contemporary tendencies in art and facilitated its successors’ relatively simple passage from object-based to abstract art’.<sup>9</sup> Four years later, in the March edition of *Głos artystów* (*The Artists’ Voice*), Jan Cybis introduced Formism to the canon of Polish twentieth-century art:

The editors of *Głos artystów* have been aware of the importance of Polish Formism from the outset. In the issue that follows, they can at last devote more space to it ... and at the same time create the most authentic of sources for future researchers—for we are sure that Formism will enter the history of Polish art as one of the most animated contributions.<sup>10</sup>

More substantial accounts, giving a holistic image of the work of the group (by Mieczysław Porębski, Joanna Szczepińska, Joanna Pollakówna, Stefan Morawski, Halina Stępień, Irena Jakimowicz, and Zofia Baranowicz), have, likewise, revealed the importance of the influence of Formism on the development of the Polish avant-garde and presented their relationship to Paris, which was, for them, the centre of European art.<sup>11</sup> This research is very valuable today and conforms to a certain traditional model of documentary studies of the avant-garde based mostly on local sources, tracing national and international influences and conflicting critical views as to the artistic value of young Polish art. Małgorzata Geron has noted the need for a new approach to research on Formism, however, and the need for studies to adapt to the latest research-trends, which might capture the activities of the group in the context of the parallel development of avant-gardes across Central Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Research on *Formiści* magazine is therefore particularly urgent today. Like the aforementioned art historians, Tadeusz Kłak and Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz, experts on avant-garde magazines in the literary field have also referred to the mouthpiece of the Formist group.<sup>13</sup> Marek Bartelik has been the art historian to pay most attention to *Formiści*, noting that it was an eclectic magazine and that it was not driven by any political aims.<sup>14</sup> Several decades separate Bartelik’s 2005 publication *Early Polish Modern Art* and the new comprehensive studies of the Central-European avant-gardes from the aforementioned Polish publications. The previous generation’s concerns—to determine the factors that influenced the creation of Formism, exhibitions organised, poetic works published—are now problematised, against the backdrop of geopolitical and social changes in the New Europe.

In view of new tendencies in avant-garde studies, the Kraków mouthpiece of Formism, published in the years 1919 to 1921, has proved even more significant than was previously thought.

### ***Formiści* in Search of International Contacts**

1917 has generally been taken to be the year of the birth of the Polish avant-garde: the date of the first artistic events of a programmatic nature and the date of the founding of the group of Polish Expressionists.<sup>15</sup> Before the outbreak of the First World War, its members—the brothers Zbigniew and Andrzej Pronaszko, and Tytus Czyżewski—wished to create a certain bridge between the Młoda Polska (Young Poland) tradition and the three most important groupings of art in Europe: Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism. The Polish Expressionists' name was a declaration of belonging to a broadly-conceived tendency of new European art, while also pointing to national consciousness on the eve of Poland's regaining of independence.

At their founding moment, the Polish Expressionists had no stable publishing outlet to enable them to popularise their efforts to renew Polish art. Reproductions of their work initially appeared in the Poznań magazine *Zdrój* (*Source*), and the first manifestoes and statements on Expressionism and Futurism were published in catalogues and in the Kraków artistic magazines founded after the First World War. The first issue of the magazine *Maski* (*Masks*), of January 1918, carried Zbigniew Pronaszko's article 'On Expressionism'. Leon Chwistek published his study 'The Multiplicity of Realities in Art' in the first four issues of the same magazine in 1918 and then as a book in 1921.<sup>16</sup> In 1919, the magazine *Wianki* (*Wreaths*) carried Tytus Czyżewski's article 'On the latest currents in Polish Art', in which the author noted that 'searching for new forms and the desire to create a contemporary style have become paramount in the minds of almost all the youngest artists'.<sup>17</sup> This 'contemporary style' was ultimately given the name Formism. The name appeared in 1919, permanently replacing the somewhat accidental term 'Polish Expressionists'.<sup>18</sup> It referred to a shared feature of Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism: a new approach to questions of form. This became the feature that allowed for the incorporation of all new artistic tendencies within the framework of one name.

With the official appearance of the term Formism, Zbigniew Pronaszko, Chwistek and Czyżewski ceased collaborating with *Maski* and *Wianki*. These magazines were published to a high standard, rich in content, and illustrated with Secession-style ornament in the spirit of Stanisław Wyspiański. Besides Formist drawings and paintings, *Maski* and *Wianki* also reproduced the work of the Młoda Polska artists Jacek Malczewski and Józef Mehoffer. Their graphic style referred to the tradition of pre-war literary-artistic publishing houses in Kraków: *Życie* (*Life*), *Rydwán* (*Chariot*) and *Museion*. They continued to use Secession-style forms, classicising and popular stylisations.<sup>19</sup> Their illustrations and ornamentation reflected the specificity of the Młoda Polska era and delivered little innovation in terms of graphic layout.<sup>20</sup> Both *Maski* and *Wianki*, with which the Formists had collaborated until the middle of 1919, were therefore anachronistic in relation to the artists' programme. The catalogue *Formiści. Wystawa III (Formists. Third Exhibition)* at the Association of the Friends of the Fine Arts in Kraków (Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie — hereafter TPSP), published in September 1919, was markedly different. It broke with modernist ornamentation and was characterised by less attention to the quality of the publication. It was to be the germ of *Formiści*, the magazine, which moved away from the graphic solutions adopted by Kraków magazines to date.

The editors of the new magazine, Czyżewski and Chwistek, wrote: 'Encouraged by the positive reception of the catalogue of our third exhibition, we have decided to publish a monthly magazine devoted to our work'.<sup>21</sup> The editing team of *Formiści* were initially based at 5 Czysa Street in Kraków, at Czyżewski's apartment. Czyżewski published the first two issues with Chwistek, and the rest with Konrad Winkler, a painter and theorist of the movement, author of a treatise on Formism in relation to new tendencies in art.<sup>22</sup> These were the only three editors to publish programmatic statements presenting the Formists' ideas against a backdrop of contemporary changes in Polish and European art. Not a single text by Zbigniew Pronaszko, the main theoretician of the 'pre-Formist' period, appeared in the magazine.<sup>23</sup> As of the publication

of the first issue, he no longer published his own theoretical deliberations, only presenting his sculptural works on the pages of *Formiści*. The magazine's profile was mostly shaped by Czyżewski, who was less interested in theoretical treatises on Expressionism.

The founding of the Kraków magazine was soon enthusiastically hailed by the *Zdrój* circle in Poznań, which had previously published reproductions of works by the Polish Expressionists:

A little magazine called *Formiści* has appeared in the displays of bookshops. This event, this bold, manly move, should be greeted with joy. A very humble beginning, a few pages in the form of a leaflet. But what does that matter? Despite technical problems, the issue carried three quite decent reproductions.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 7.1. Jan Hrynkowski, published cover for *Formiści* 1 (October 1919). Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

Fig. 7.2. Leon Chwistek, published cover for *Formiści* 2 (April 1920). Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

The first issue of *Formiści* (Fig. 7.1), sixteen pages long, was published by the Museum of Industry (Muzeum Przemysłowe) in Kraków in October 1919, with a similar graphic layout to the earlier catalogue. Its cost was five crowns. The magazine was intended to be issued monthly, but over the course of almost two years only 6 issues appeared. This state of affairs was the result of a lack of funds, already mentioned in the second issue of the magazine (Fig. 7.2), which consisted of just twelve pages, cost fifteen marks and appeared after a six-month interval, in April 1920.<sup>25</sup> The third issue, which probably also served as the catalogue of the fourth Formist exhibition (*Formiści. Wystawa IV*) held at the TPSP Kraków (January–February 1921), was the same length and price.<sup>26</sup> It was only with the last three issues, priced between fifty and sixty marks (issues four (April 1921), five (May 1921), and six (June 1921)) that *Formiści* turned into a monthly, mostly thanks to the patronage of the sculptor Feliks Antoniak, who returned to Poland from Paris in 1920.<sup>27</sup> It was officially noted that the magazine was published in an edition of one thousand, and its dimensions were increased from 17 x 12 cm (issues one and two) to 22.5 x 15 cm (issues four, five, and six).

The situation in ruined Europe after the First World War had a significant influence on the impoverishment of societies and artistic circles, and the first issues of *Formiści* serve as a clear example. Theoretical statements, poems, and reproductions of works were arranged in such a way as to fit as much content as possible onto the surface of the limited number of pages. According to Bożena Lewandowska, the layout of the magazine was clear and transparent, devoid of the vignettes and ornaments so generously lavished, for example, on the contemporary publication *Zdrój*.<sup>28</sup> In completely breaking with the Secession-style typography characteristic for *Młoda*

Polska magazines in Kraków, the editors of *Formiści* based their publication on French magazines under the patronage of Guillaume Apollinaire. It was not just the Formist covers, designed by the group members themselves (Jan Hrynkowski, Czyżewski, and Chwistek), that played a decisive role in the magazine's innovative appearance, but, above all, the graphic arrangement of certain texts, especially the poetic compositions of the editor-in-chief.<sup>29</sup>

Czyżewski had encountered the poetic work of Apollinaire when he visited France, before the First World War. Apollinaire published the journal *Chronique des grands siècles de la France* as of 1912, and was later involved in the journal *Les Soirées de Paris*, which was 'a grouping of several dozen poets, musicians and futuro-Cubist painters ... The poets who belonged were: Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Luc Durtain, Blaise Cendrars, Birot, Margotin and many others', as detailed by Czyżewski in his June 1919 article 'The Poetry of the Expressionists and Futurists'.<sup>30</sup> Czyżewski's text presented the new poetic centres that had emerged in Russia, Italy, and Germany, as well as in France. In addition to getting hold of *Les Soirées de Paris* during his stay in Paris, he was also able to see issues of the Florentine Futurist paper *Lacerba*, in which Apollinaire included the poems 'Final Chapter' and 'Snuff'. Czyżewski went on to translate these and to publish them in the catalogue of the fourth Formist exhibition, the third issue of the magazine, and the last issue of *Formiści*, respectively.<sup>31</sup>

The first issue of *Formiści* carried Apollinaire's poem 'Hunting Horns' in the original French, as well as texts by Czyżewski and an extensive theoretical treatise by Chwistek entitled 'The Enemies of Formism and their Psychology'. The text took up half the issue, which was also why little space was devoted to the reproduction of works of art or to literary works. The second issue was shorter, but richer in terms of content. It opened with a theoretical text by Chwistek entitled 'Formism', in which the author explained the difference between French Cubism and the enquiries of the members of the Polish group. In his opinion, the Cubists had been the first to recognise consciously that the perception of the real object can appear fluid, in this way creating their own, original style. He added that, 'in Poland, a different style is beginning to emerge, [one] which is ours alone', drawing on the words of Louis Marcoussis, who had been tasked with publicising Formism in Parisian artistic circles.<sup>32</sup> Czyżewski hoped by way of his intervention and mediation to make lasting contact with Paris, and so undertook to acquire him as foreign correspondent to *Formiści*. A letter from Marcoussis, written in December 1919, was published in the second issue of the magazine in April 1920. The correspondent described an array of events associated with post-war avant-garde circles in Paris. The text specifically mentions that he was personally informing these circles of the first experiments taking place in Poland: 'I told Polish and French colleagues about your efforts; they were very interested in them. I will send you news from here, as long as you continue to intend to publish *Formiści* from time to time'.<sup>33</sup>

The publication became an essential aspect of the group's activity for Czyżewski, promoting their work, making and maintaining contacts, as well as keeping up to date with artistic news from France. Marcoussis sent the editors of *Formiści* issues of the magazine *Nord Sud* (*North South*) as well as reproductions of his own work (one of these must have been the portrait of Apollinaire published in the second issue of *Formiści*) and of the Polish artists' community active in Paris: Alicja Halicka, Moise Kisling, and Henryk Hayden.<sup>34</sup> He also included translations of Pierre Reverdy's 'The Bell's Speech' and 'Wing', translated by Leopold Zborowski. These appeared alongside Czyżewski's translation of Apollinaire's 'Ocean of the Earth' in the second issue of the Kraków magazine.

The correspondence sent by Marcoussis devoted considerable attention to the artistic magazines published in Paris, among these *Nord Sud*, which appeared from 15 March 1917 to October 1918. As such, by the time he wrote, Marcoussis was writing about a magazine that had ceased publication a year previously:

Besides Roch Grey (Russian), Tristan Tzara (Swiss), [Vicente] Huidobro (Spanish), all the remaining contributors [to *Nord Sud*] were French citizens. Two of these, Apollinaire and [Georges] Braque, even had to have their skulls patched up, they had been so badly treated. The theoretician of the group (at least in verbal terms) was the youngest of all—Reverdy, while

the leader was Wilhelm Kostrowicki of the Wąż family, nicknamed Apollinaire ... of the other magazines that are out, there is also [Pierre-Albert] Birot's comic *Sic* ... There is the properly managed monthly, *Littérature*. In a few days' time an issue of *Action* which sounds promising is due to appear.<sup>35</sup>

The magazine *Sic* to which he referred, which appeared in the years 1916 to 1919, as well as to the first series of *Littérature*, published by Louis Aragon, André Breton and Philippe Soupault (1919–1921), promoted the poetry of the Dadaists and future Surrealists. *Action*, edited by Florent Fels between November 1919 and June 1922, was opposed to the Dada aesthetic. Marcoussis's article, penned at the end of 1919, did not yet take into consideration one of the most influential magazines of the French interwar avant-garde, *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Founded in 1920 and published by Paul Dermée, Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) *L'Esprit Nouveau* was the mouthpiece of the Purists, and more significant as a platform for statements about art than other magazines published at the time, bringing together innovative circles in French poetry.

In the first five issues of *Formiści*, the French poets Apollinaire, Reverdy, and Paul Éluard were the only representatives of new European literature. It was undoubtedly the poetic interests of Czyżewski that drove the choice of translations of poets from France. Their poems were to be found in the midst of a much greater number of works by young Polish poets, who were able to make an appearance in the literary circles of Kraków thanks to Czyżewski. Among others, Bruno Jasioński and Stanisław Młodożeniec established a close collaboration with *Formiści* as of the second issue, having returned to Poland from Russia following the Bolshevik revolution. They sought to make a breakthrough in Polish literature, and Czyżewski's magazine was the only place open to them for lasting collaboration and the publication of their works at that time. By mid-1921, Jasioński, Młodożeniec, and Czyżewski had begun to appear together as a group, calling themselves Futurists. However, they never formed their own independent magazine to serve as a platform for their presentation as a group, and they only published their programmatic manifestos as leaflets.

From the fourth to the sixth issue, the circle of collaborators of *Formiści* numbered over twenty people. The following were listed in the fourth issue: Feliks Antoniak, Leon Chwistek, Tytus Czyżewski, Henryk Gotlib, Ludgard Grocholski, Jan Hrynkowski, Bruno Jasioński, Muhamed Hilmy Kulenović, Ludwik Lille, Louis Marcoussis, Stanisław Młodożeniec, Tymon Niesiołowski, Artur Prędzki, Andrzej Pronaszko, Zbigniew Pronaszko, Władysław Skoczylas, Kazimierz Tomorowicz, Waław Wąsowicz, Konrad Winkler, Józef Wittlin, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Kamil Witkowski, August Zamoyski, Jan Zaruba, Leopold Zborowski, and Jan Żyznowski.<sup>36</sup> By the fifth issue, Skoczylas was no longer listed, while Michał Kucharski and Władysław Roguski had been added. The sixth issue also listed Tadeusz Peiper, Anatol Stern, Aleksander Wat, and Julian Rot-Czerwiński (Julian Rottersmann). Formists from Kraków, Warsaw, and Łódź were all involved in contributing to the magazine, along with young Polish poets and musicians, and collaborators from abroad: Kulenović, Marcoussis, and Zborowski. The list of collaborators did not include the names of all the authors of the works and poems published on the pages of the magazine. *Formiści* did, however, list the names of people who did not publish in the magazine, such as Andrzej Pronaszko, Roguski, Skoczylas, and Wat. Although a majority of collaborators were artists, the Polish poets were the ones who set the tone in *Formiści*, carefully selected by Czyżewski, the editor-in-chief, with responsibility for the profile of the magazine.

The first five issues of *Formiści* were basically consistent in terms of content. The editors wrote the theoretical section, the literary section was dominated by the work of the Kraków Futurists and French avant-garde poets, and the illustrations were mostly reproductions of works by the Formists themselves, as were the covers (designed, in turn, by Hrynkowski, Chwistek and, on two occasions, by Czyżewski). The sixth and final issue was different: Wat, Stern, and Peiper joined the community of collaborators. It was largely a review of developments in European literature, also containing discussions of the latest currents in literature and art. Issue 6 (Fig. 7.3) opened with a text by Winkler 'On the New Pathways of Art', concerning two different 'styles' of contemporary art. The first path was the experiments of the Cubists and the artists associated with



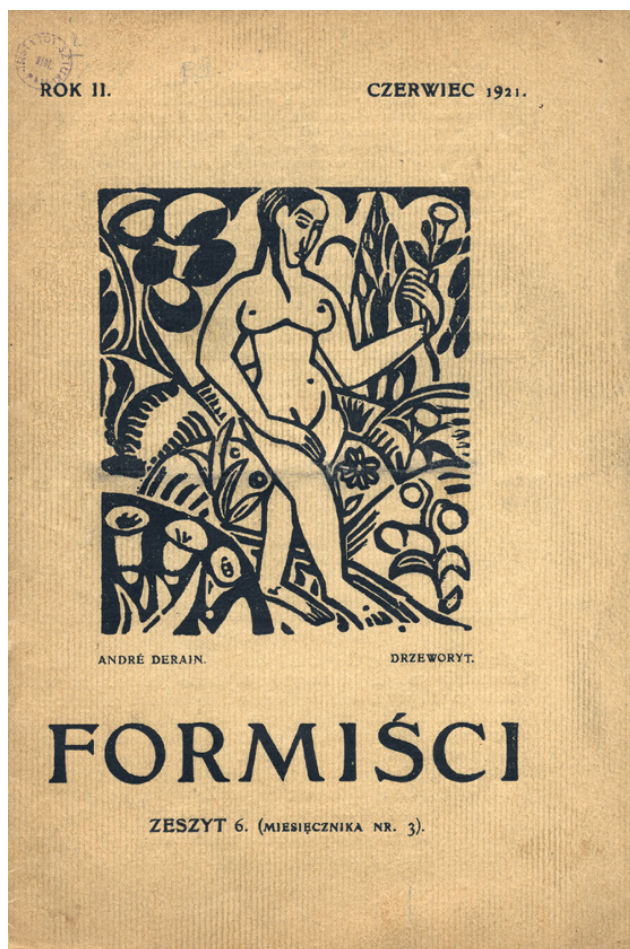


Fig. 7.3. André Derain, published cover for *Formiści* 6 (June 1921). Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

Valori Plastici, the second was the 'machine art of the Tatlinists', which broke with the idea of easel painting and adopted 'three dimensional machine forms'.<sup>37</sup> Winkler also referred to the interest aroused in Western Europe by the exhibition of the work of Russian artists:

The travelling exhibition of the latest Russian art which is creating such a sensation in Germany at present, reveals the sheer elemental force of creative instinct as well as a clear propensity for mysticism. Could this be a transfusion of young Russian art into the veins of the outmoded cultures of the West? In any case, the extraordinary tempo of the development of contemporary Russian art in conditions as difficult as the present is worth pausing to reflect upon. We find, in this art, the two opposite axes of all today's creative tendencies. And while the art of the Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin in search of aesthetic values discovers in the construction of the machine the logic of some sort of new beauty, Russian Expressionism represents a sincere return to the sphere of the anatomy of the spirit. The musical symbolism of colours in Kandinsky and many others is the extreme antithesis of the intellectual construction of form by the first branch of artists.<sup>38</sup>

It seems that Winkler took his information about Russian art from an article by Konstanty Umański published in the Munich magazine *Der Ararat* in January 1920. This emissary of Soviet culture presented the two axes mentioned by Winkler in the text 'New Artistic Directions in Russia: Tatlinism or the Machine-Art'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the article in *Der Ararat* was one of the first texts about the new Soviet art to be published outside Russia.

The text by the editor of *Formiści* presented new tendencies in art which only coincided to some extent with the choice of works reproduced in this issue of the Kraków magazine. The works presented in the magazine were by André Derain, Pablo Picasso, Aleksandr Archipienko, and Norah Borges, the painter and graphic artist, sister of Jorge [Luis] Borges. The literary section was much more developed and included a survey of new poetry from France (Apollinaire), Germany (Yvan Goll), Dada poetry from France and Germany (Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Hans Arp), Futurist poetry from Italy and Russia (Aldo Palazzeschi, Vladimir Mayakovsky,

Velimir Khlebnikov) and the latest poetry from Spain (Humberto Rivas). The authors of the translations were Tytus Czyżewski, Anatol Stern, Tadeusz Peiper, Julian Rot-Czerwiński and 'RO-dada' (the latter two both being pseudonyms of Julian/Julius Rottersmann).

Peiper's participation in *Formiści* proved to be significant for establishing foreign contacts. In 1921, he returned to Poland after years spent in Spain, returning via France and Germany, where he became familiar with the latest tendencies of the avant-garde there.<sup>40</sup> He most likely left Spain in the spring of 1920. On his return to Poland, he maintained contact with the editors of the magazine *Ultra*, the mouthpiece of the Madrid avant-garde. Among them were the aforementioned Rivas and the Polish artist Władysław Jahl. As of the tenth issue of *Ultra*, from 10 May 1921, Peiper featured as the Polish correspondent of the magazine. He received the fifth issue of *Ultra*, published on 17 March 1921, at his Kraków address. A woodcut by Norah Borges from this number, as well as Rivas's 'Ocean', were published in the last issue of *Formiści* in June 1921. Exchange between the Formists and the Ultraists also flowed in the opposite direction. The sixteenth issue of *Ultra*, published 20 October 1921, carried information about the issues of *Formiści* that had been received (the fourth, fifth, and sixth), characterised as 'the mouthpiece of Polish avant-garde artists' ('el órgano de los artistas polacos de vanguardia'). The eighteenth issue, published 10 November 1921, included an article by Peiper on Leon Chwistek's book *The Multiplicity of Realities in Art* (Kraków).<sup>41</sup>

Information about Formism was published in *Ultra* after the collapse of the Kraków magazine, which ceased its activities in June 1921. In November, the Warsaw-based *Nowa Sztuka* became the platform for nationwide exchange between the Polish and the Madrid-based circles of the literary avant-garde, leading to the integration of the Kraków and the Warsaw circles of new poetry. Its editors were, among others, Peiper and Stern, who met as translators of avant-garde works in the last issue of *Formiści*. After the collapse of the ephemeral *Nowa Sztuka*, which published only two editions, Peiper wanted to continue it in Kraków, though in the end, in its place, he founded *Zwrotnica*, in 1922 (Fig. 7.4).<sup>42</sup>

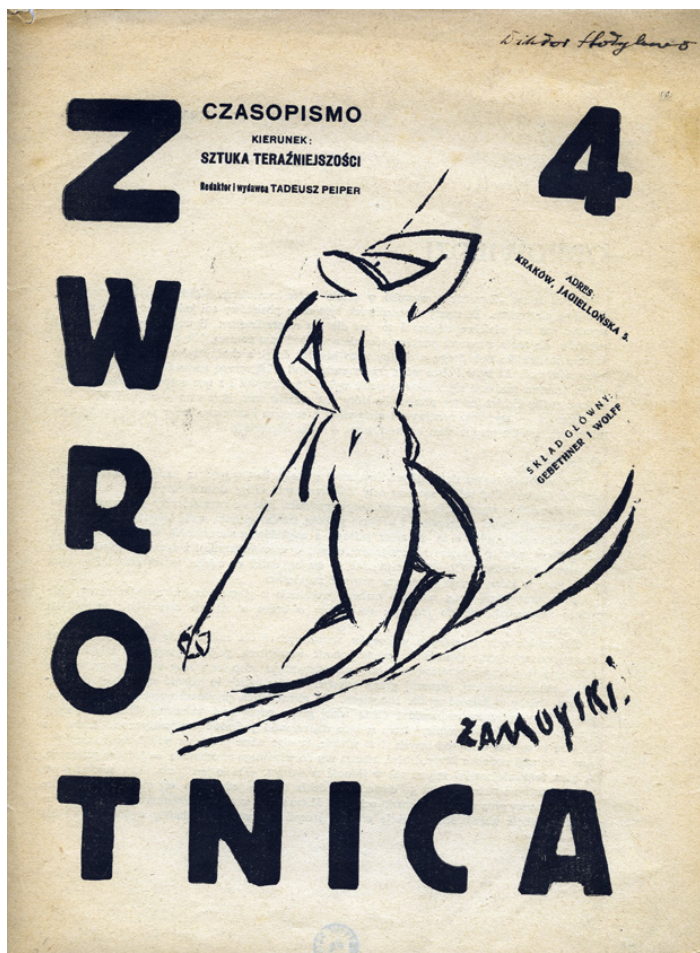


Fig. 7.4. August Zamoyski, published cover for *Zwrotnica* 4 (February 1923). Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

In November 1921, the same month as the founding of *Nowa Sztuka*, an article by Julius Rottersmann entitled 'Polish Formism' appeared in the Munich magazine *Der Ararat*. Rottersmann came from Kraków and was associated with German and Polish Zionist circles. After the end of the First World War, he wrote for the Viennese and Berlin-based magazine *Jerubbaal. Eine Zeitschrift der jüdischen Jugend* (*Jerubbaal: A Magazine for Jewish Youth*). His name could also be found on the pages of the Jewish youth monthly *Moriah*, published in the years 1919 to 1920 in Kraków. In one of his articles for *Jerubbaal* at that time, Rottersmann pointed out that the path of Zionist activists to the radical transformation of Jewry must lead in the direction of mythical Zion, which is not a 'copy of Europe with its lies, hypocrisy and imperialist-capitalist aims'.<sup>43</sup>

There is a good deal to suggest that Julius Rottersmann was connected with the Kraków Formists and concealed himself in the pages of the magazine under the pseudonyms Julian Rot-Czerwiński and RO-dada. His translations of new German poetry appeared in the sixth issue: Yvan Goll's 'Director of the Cine-Theatre', Hans Arp's 'Cloud Pump', and Aldo Palazzeschi's 'Afterlife'.<sup>44</sup> He also published an extensive text entitled 'The New Poetry and Theatre in Germany', in which he paid a considerable amount of attention to the work of Georg Kaiser, deeming him a master of new German theatre. Rottersmann prepared a translation of Kaiser's play *Gas* (*Gaz*) for performance at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre, directed by Teofil Trzciński, on 22 April 1922. This was one of the first few presentations of avant-garde theatre from abroad on the Kraków stage. It remains unclear whence Rottersmann received permission to translate the play. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that he maintained very good contacts with the literary and artistic avant-garde circles in post-war Germany. Thanks to these, he had a copy of the fourth issue of *Der Ararat*, from 1920, on the basis of which Winkler composed his article 'On the New Pathways of Art'. Rottersmann may have shown it to the editor of *Formiści*, when the latter was preparing his article.

*Der Ararat*, which initially appeared in the form of a political leaflet, had, by 1920, become an influential magazine presenting new European art. The title suggested a connection to Jewish culture, but the magazine was not radically engaged in propagating Zionism. The editor of the magazine, Hans Goltz, noted that it was 'above all Germany, which had created the elevated idea of world literature, which was called to once again lay the foundations for the international—or, better—supranational pathways of art and spirituality, diluted by war'.<sup>45</sup> Goltz was the owner of the gallery Neue Kunst, at 8 Briennerstrasse in Munich, which showed, among others, Lyonel Feininger, Hans Richter, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and George Grosz. The magazine he edited published materials devoted to German Expressionism from the Weimar Republic and, above all, new art from Czechoslovakia, France, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Russia, Spain, and Sweden. A notice about the magazine *Formiści* appeared in the list of foreign publications in the October 1921 issue of *Der Ararat*, subtitled *Organ der jungen Künstler und Dichter Polens* (*Mouthpiece of the Young Artists and Poets of Poland*).<sup>46</sup> In an article in the November issue, Rottersmann provided an outline of the Polish group, stressing that the young artists had initially been called Expressionists, but that in the autumn of 1919 they had taken the name Formists, because the earlier term did not fully reflect their research interests. He devoted most of the article to presenting individual artists:

Leon Chwistek, who was also the first theoretician of the whole movement and has recently published a new study on the multiplicity of realities, drew on the experiences of the Futurists in his first paintings, though using their achievements entirely independently ... He is more of a draughtsman than a painter, and is interested above all in formal questions, which, alongside the question of colour, are also those that absorb the new artists. Formism is another return to pure painting, which, according to Chwistek, has discovered and shaped a new reality, namely that of the imagination (in contrast to the reality of the impression in Impressionism).

Tytus Czyżewski is one of the most promising and engaged Formists. He was a Cubist before Matisse and Picasso (his Cubist head of Christ is from as early as 1905) ... He is the most abstract artist of the whole group, though not only as a painter, but also as a poet ... In searching for new forms, he has abandoned painting and the flat plane of the picture and creates—perhaps for the first time in the history of visual art—compositions on multiple planes which can be located between painting and sculpture. *Salome, Landscape with the*

*Sun (Krajobraz ze słońcem)*, *Study of a Head (Studium głowy)*, *Composition of Forms I and II (Kompozycje form)* are historical testimonies of the development of new art ...

Henryk Gotlib came to Formism, as he himself claimed, by way of architecture ... He is the only Formist who introduces Impressionist problems to art, and form is suffused with light.

Jan Hrynkowski is the best graphic artist among the Formists and is immensely accomplished in this field. A few lines can create unexpected effects. His painting is also extraordinary. Here and there we can discern the influences of German Expressionism, though these have been taken on board in an entirely individual manner.

Tymon Niesiołowski, the first spokesman of new art in Poland, is a first-class painter. He paints like van Gogh, Cézanne, Wyspiański, Botticelli, Puvis de Chavannes, or sometimes like Pechstein or Eberz ...

Zbigniew Pronaszko, the 'Polish Archipenko', is a first-class sculptor. One could write about the Cubist monumentality of his sculptures. He is also a wonderful painter, perhaps the first to introduce Cubism to Polish painting. His paintings are reminiscent of the art of Derain, though they have the powerful effect of sculpture.

Konrad Winkler is a real Polish Cubist, one of the youngest of the Formists ... Cubist studies of heads are typical of his work; he creates entirely new representations from elements of form which draw on incidental light and function in an abstract manner. There is something Dadaistic lurking at their heart. Winkler is also the author of the first Polish monograph on Formism and is currently preparing a work on Polish art in German. He is the organiser of the whole movement in Poland and edits the magazine *Formiści* with Czyżewski.<sup>47</sup>

In the remainder of the article, Rottersmann devoted most of his attention to Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), stressing his multifacetedness as a theoretician of art, a playwright, a philosopher, and an explorer.<sup>48</sup> Rottersmann mentioned the translation of Witkacy's plays into German by Lilli Marmorek, associated with Viennese Expressionism. Like Winkler's intended work on Formism in German, this collection was also probably never published. Rottersmann was very impressed by Witkacy's work and wrote an enthusiastic review of a performance of *The Water Hen (Kurka Wodna)* at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Kraków, which was published in the third issue of *Zwrotnica* in November 1922 (a magazine with which the Formists, and Witkacy, in particular, collaborated).<sup>49</sup>

Rottersmann concluded his article in *Der Ararat* by announcing his intention to publish an article about artists in Warsaw. This only ever proved to be an intention, as 'Polish Formism' was published in the penultimate issue of *Der Ararat*, and the editors devoted the final issue of the magazine to Asian art. Rottersmann's article was the only such extensive survey of the work of the Polish Formists to be published in a foreign journal at the time the group were active. It was illustrated with reproductions of works by Chwistek, Czyżewski, Gotlib, Halicka, Niesiołowski, and Pronaszko. Rottersmann played an important role in the exchange of information between the Polish avant-garde and the avant-garde abroad.

A list of all the articles published in the penultimate issue of *Der Ararat* was included in the Parisian *L'Esprit Nouveau*, but neither this magazine, nor any other of the mouthpieces of the French avant-garde ever published a fuller essay on the work of the Formists.<sup>50</sup> Rottersmann's publication was mentioned by Winkler in his 1927 book *Formiści Polscy (The Polish Formists)*, but there is not a word about it around 1921 in the new literary-artistic magazines *Skamander*, *Ponowa (Renewal)*, nor, interestingly, in *Nowa Sztuka*, whose editor was initially Chwistek.<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting, however, that, in 1922, the Lublin journal *Lucifer* announced:

Of the German magazines devoted to art, *Der Ararat* is particularly noteworthy. One issue of this magazine, from the end of the preceding year, carried a reproduction of our Formists, Pronaszko, Witkiewicz et al.: the above were accompanied by a very brief profile of the movement. *Der Ararat* is primarily interested in young artists and in artistic phenomena.<sup>52</sup>

Almost a year and a half after Rottersmann's article, information about the Formists appeared in the Belgrade literary magazine *Misao (Thought)* of 16 January 1923. An extensive article by Konstanty Perić was carried focusing on the work of Polish poets from three centres:



Warsaw, Poznań, and Kraków. The author had been living in Poland at the time, and a year later published a study in Lwów on Kazimierz Brodziński and Serbian folk song.<sup>53</sup> In his text for *Misao*, Perić devoted most attention to Julian Tuwim and to the Skamander group, as well as briefly introducing information about the mouthpieces of the Polish avant-garde, *Zdrój* and *Formiści*, neither of which still existed by 1923. Of the Formists, he named Chwistek, Hrynkowski, Zamoyski, and the Pronaszko brothers, and devoted most attention to Tytus Czyżewski. He noted that the magazine had stopped appearing, and that its place had been filled, in 1922, by *Zwrotnica*, which became the Formists' new tribune.<sup>54</sup> If Rottersmann had devoted most attention to artists and to the theatrical experiments of Witkacy, for Perić, *Formiści* was, above all, the mouthpiece of the latest Polish poetry. It is worth stressing, once more, that its editors took as their model foreign avant-garde literary magazines (initially *Nord Sud*, and then *Ultra*). Years later, in his memoirs, Czyżewski wrote that '*Formiści* was a model for and a breakthrough in Polish literature'.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Formiści* and its Role in the History of the Avant-Garde**

'Poland was fortunate in regaining her political independence at a time and in circumstances in which her revival coincided with the revival and birth of new social and aesthetic values in Europe', wrote Tytus Czyżewski in the fourth issue of *Formiści*, noting parallel tendencies in other countries, as they, too, progressed along the path to the rebirth of art and poetry.<sup>56</sup> The large number of groupings and avant-garde journals in Berlin, Dresden, Munich, and Paris testified to this. In Budapest, the Activists' magazine *MA* was founded, edited by Lajos Kassák, the leader of the Hungarian avant-garde; in Prague, the group Tvrdšíjní produced the magazine *Červen (June)*, which published Josef Čapek's translations of Apollinaire; in Serbia there was *Zenit*; in Spain, *Ultra*. Founded in October 1919, *Formiści* became a platform for the presentation of avant-garde poetry and art, in parallel with the activities of other European groups and magazines. It was not just a tribune for programmatic statements and for the work of the Formists, but also a site for the formation of international contacts and for the exchange of avant-garde thought between many centres. The axes of exchange planned by Czyżewski were intended, above all, to link Kraków to the Parisian literary-artistic avant-garde. Yet his ambition was not fully realised. The Parisian advocate of Formism, Louis Marcoussis, only contributed to the journal once. Although the Kraków artists maintained contacts with France and with the Paris 'colony' of Polish artists, they were not well known in Paris, and the exhibition *Jeune Pologne* at the Musée Clillon took place a year after the magazine had folded. Though the exhibition was important, as it represented the first demonstration of the achievements of the Polish avant-garde in Paris, it appeared repetitive and delayed, for, by then, Cubism was a thing of the past.<sup>57</sup>

At the time of the publication of *Formiści*, Paris still appeared in Czyżewski's eyes to be the centre of the most important and most innovative developments, not only in the domain of art, but also, above all, in literature. Captivated by the shadow of Apollinaire, he became the first leader of the Polish poetic avant-garde to unite, by way of his magazine, the entire progressive movement, mostly in the literary field. The future publishers of Futurist leaflets, Jasiński and Młodożeniec, and the publishers of the later avant-garde magazines *Nowa Sztuka* (Stern) and *Zwrotnica* (Peiper), were brought together thanks to him, on the pages of his magazine. Although *Formiści* emerged as the continuation of an exhibition catalogue, and also represented a group of painters and sculptors of the same name, there were very few reproductions of paintings and sculptures or statements about visual art published on its pages. The path chosen by Czyżewski, making contact with foreign centres and taking French literary periodicals as his model led to a break with the aesthetic of *Młoda Polska*, still present in the painting and sculpture of the Formists. The magazine itself, founded almost in parallel with *Littérature*, *Zenit* and *Ultra*, was in itself a manifestation of modern tendencies, and went some way towards transplanting avant-garde attitudes onto Polish soil. It was the sixth issue that proved to be ground-breaking, presenting the latest poetry and art from abroad, including the latest manifestations of Russian Constructivist art, still defined at the time as 'Tatlinism' and 'Machinism'. It was thanks to Stern, Peiper, and Rottersmann, who has been forgotten today, that intellectual and artistic exchange was established

between Kraków and Warsaw, Madrid and Munich. After the folding of *Formiści* in June 1921, the Warsaw *Nowa Sztuka* took on the task of establishing international contacts, followed by *Zwrotnica* in Kraków, which, paying attention to the emergence of Constructivism, laid the foundations for the birth, in 1924, of the Warsaw group *Blok*, with its magazine of the same name. Edited mostly by Mieczysław Szczuka, it published the so-called *Kurier Bloku*, carrying information on the latest developments in the art of the European avant-gardes.

Rising and folding, magazines in Poland constituted a platform for collaboration between individual groups in Warsaw and Kraków in the name of establishing a common front of new art in Poland. Another priority was to enter into the international network of progressive ideas, represented by European avant-garde magazines, as would be proved in a more advanced form by *Blok*, inscribing itself into the modernising programmes of the New Europe and propagating the leftist ideology of international Constructivism. *Blok* was a more mature publication in editorial terms, and more modern in its world-view than *Formiści*. Nevertheless, it was Czyżewski's magazine that was the first to make the case for the need to establish international contacts. Providing information about the latest tendencies in France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Spain, about the latest branches of international Futurism (Italy, Russia), international Dada (France, Germany) as well as 'Tatlinism', a foil for the phenomenon of Constructivism, the Kraków magazine deliberately promoted new literary and artistic tendencies, in order to persuade readers of the need for a revolution in Polish culture and an adjustment to its transformations after 1918. The significance of international exchange between different local centres was stressed, in line with the modernising plans of Central Europe, which, at the beginning of the 1920s, came to be known as a focal point for dynamic literary and artistic transformations, stimulating the development of the latest tendencies of the inter-war avant-garde.

*Translated by Klara Kemp-Welch*

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2 Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: from the Baltic to the Balkans, 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

3 Timothy O. Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation 1910–1930* (Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and MIT Press, 2002).

4 Sascha Bru, Jan Baetens, Benedikt Hjartrasson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ørum, and Hubert van den Berg, 'Introduction. Borderless Europe, Decentring Avant-Garde, Mosaic Modernism', in Sascha Bru, Jan Baetens et al (eds.), *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009), pp. 3–20.

5 Peter Brooker, 'General Introduction', in Peter Brooker, Andrew Thacker, Christian Weikop, and Sascha Bru (eds.), *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Europe 1880–1940*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 14.

6 Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 133.

7 In *Between worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes*, Timothy Benson and Éva Forgács use the term network in relation to the creation of mutual contacts and links between the various centres of the avant-garde in different cities.

'The avant-gardes of Central Europe are mapped here as a network of cosmopolitan cities in which art movements embodied the tension between the regional and the cosmopolitan: Bucharest, Budapest, Cracow, Dessau, Łódź, Prague, Poznań, Warsaw, Weimar, Zagreb – all of these had direct links to Amsterdam, Berlin, Cologne, Hannover, Moscow, Vienna, or Paris'. Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, 'Introduction', in Benson and Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2002), p. 22.

8 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Nasza wystawa...', in *Almanach. Katalog. Salon Modernistów*, exhibition catalogue (Warsaw: Drukarnia Robotnik, 1928), p. 1.

9 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Sztuka nowoczesna w Polsce', cited in Zofia Baranowicz (ed.), *W. Strzemiński. Pisma* (Wrocław, Warsaw, Kraków, and Gdańsk: Ossolineum, 1975), p. 206.

10 Jan Cybis, 'Polski formizm', *Głos Plastyków*, 5/8–12 (1938): p. 5.

11 Mieczysław Porębski, 'Dwa programy (z problematyki formalizmu w plastyce dwudziestolecia międzywojennego)', *Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji z Zakresu Teorii i Historii Sztuki, Krytyki Artystycznej oraz Metodologii Badań nad Sztuką* 1/1–2 (1950): pp. 51–76; Mieczysław Porębski, 'Formismo polacco', *La Biennale di Venezia* 8/32 (1958): pp. 26–36; Joanna Szczepińska, 'Historia i program grupy „Formiści polscy” w latach 1917–1922', *Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji z Zakresu Teorii i Historii Sztuki, Krytyki Artystycznej oraz Metodologii Badań nad Sztuką* 5/3–4 (1954): pp. 201–250; Joanna Szczepińska, *O polskim formizmie* (Warsaw: CBWA, 1973); Stefan Morawski, 'Ankieta o formistach polskich', *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 9 (1973): pp. 299–355; Joanna Pollakówna, *Malarze i podpalacze* (Warsaw: PWN, 1971); Joanna Pollakówna, *Formiści* (Wrocław, Warsaw, Kraków, and Gdańsk: Ossolineum, 1972); Halina Stepien, 'Formiści polscy', in Aleksander Wojciechowski (ed.), *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1915–1939* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974), pp. 563–567; Zofia Baranowicz, 'Formiści', in Baranowicz, *Polska awangarda artystyczna 1918–1939* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1975), pp. 19–72; Irena Jakimowicz (ed.), *Formiści*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie (Warsaw, 1989).

12 Małgorzata Geron, 'The Formist Group (1917–1923). Trends in research and the assessment of Polish avant-garde art in the 20th century', in Jerzy Malinowski (ed.), *History of Art History in Central Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, vol. 2 (Toruń: UMK, 2010), p. 162.

13 Tadeusz Kłak, *Czasopisma awangardy 1919–1931*, part 1 (Wrocław, Warsaw, Gdańsk, and Kraków: Ossolineum, 1979); Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz, 'Czasopisma i publikacje zbiorowe polskich futurystów', *Pamiętnik Literacki* 74/1 (1983): pp. 31–79.



- 14 Marek Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art: Unity in Multiplicity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 83.
- 15 The very titles of the first post-war studies of the avant-garde clearly signalled the year 1917. Helena Zaworska, *O nową sztukę, polskie programy artystyczne lat 1917–1922* (Warsaw: PIW, 1963); Andrzej Lam, *Polska awangarda poetycka: programy lat 1917–1923* (vol. 1: *Instynkt i Ład*; vol. 2: *Manifesty i protesty: Antologia*) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1969).
- 16 Leon Chwistek, 'Wielość rzeczywistości w sztuce', *Maski* 1/1, 2, 3, 4 (1918). Leon Chwistek, *Wielość rzeczywistości* (Kraków-Jasło: Zakł. Graf. Wisłoka, 1921).
- 17 Tytus Czyżewski, 'O najnowszych prądach w sztuce polskiej', *Wianki* 1/2 (1919): p. 11.
- 18 The first exhibition of Polish Formists was organized in Warsaw in April–May 1919, but the name Formists was defined in the catalogue of the third exhibition of Formists, held in Kraków in September–October 1919.
- 19 On the history of Młoda Polska artistic magazines, see: Katarzyna Kulpińska, *Szata graficzna młodopolskich czasopism literacko-artystycznych* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2005).
- 20 Bożena Lewandowska, 'U źródeł grafiki funkcjonalnej w Polsce', in Juliusz Starzyński (ed.), *Ze studiów nad genezą plastyki nowoczesnej w Polsce* (Wrocław, Warsaw, and Kraków: Ossolineum, 1966), p. 204.
- 21 The editors, 'Od formistów', *Formiści*, 1/1 (1919): p. 16.
- 22 Konrad Winkler, *Formiści na tle współczesnych kierunków w sztuce* (Kraków: Księgarnia Frideleina, 1921).
- 23 Before 1919, Zbigniew Pronaszko published the important theoretical treatise 'On Expressionism', which can be seen to prefigure the Formists' programme. See: Zbigniew Pronaszko, 'Przed wielkim Jutrem', *Ryduwan* 3/1 (1914): pp. 125–129; Pronaszko, 'O ekspresjonizmie', *Maski* 1/1 (1918): p. 15.
- 24 S.E., 'Z Krakowa', *Zdrój* 3/9/6 (1919): p. 126.
- 25 In Austro-Hungarian Kraków, crowns were used until the end of 1919. The Polish mark became legal tender on 15 January 1920 for the whole territory of independent Poland.
- 26 The third issue, supposedly published in November 1920, has not been found to this day. It seems that the third issue served as the catalogue of the fourth Formist exhibition, containing not only reproductions of works, but also, among others, poems by Guillaume Apollinaire, and was akin to the published journal in content and form. This is the view held by Tadeusz Klak. See: Klak, *Czasopisma awangardy*, p. 13.
- 27 Pollakówna, *Formiści*, pp. 94–95; Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art*, p. 90. Feliks Antoniak showed his work at the Fourth Formist Exhibition in 1921. The Formists also published a reproduction of one of his works. *Formiści* 2/4 (1921): p. 11.
- 28 Lewandowska, *U źródeł grafiki funkcjonalnej w Polsce*, p. 206.
- 29 Piotr Rypson, *Książki i strony. Polska książka awangardowa i artystyczna w XX wieku* (Warsaw: CSW, 2000), p. 15.
- 30 Tytus Czyżewski, 'Poezja ekspresjonistów i futurystów', *Goniec Krakowski* 2/153 (1919): p. 2–3.
- 31 Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Ostatni rozdział – Un dernier chapitre', in *IV Wystawa Formistów (I–II 1921)*, p. 2; 'Tytoń za dwa sous', *Formiści* 2/6 (1921): p. 5.
- 32 Leon Chwistek, 'Formizm', *Formiści* 2/2 (1920): p. 3. Before leaving for Paris, Marcoussis studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, in the years 1900–1902, in the studio of Józef Mehoffer. He may already have come across Czyżewski, who was beginning his studies in the same studio in 1902. Marcoussis settled in Paris in 1903.
- 33 Louis Marcoussis, 'Korespondencja z Paryża', *Formiści* 2/2 (1920): p. 12.
- 34 Marcoussis, 'Korespondencja z Paryża', p. 12.
- 35 Marcoussis, 'Korespondencja z Paryża', p. 12.
- 36 'Współpracownicy', *Formiści* 2/4 (1921): (back cover).
- 37 Konrad Winkler, 'Na nowych drogach sztuki', *Formiści* 2/6 (1921): p. 3.
- 38 Winkler, 'Na nowych drogach sztuki', p. 3.
- 39 Konstanty Umanski, 'Russland. Neue Kunstrichtungen in Russland. Der Tatlinismus oder die Maschinenkunst', *Der Ararat* 1/4 (1920): pp. 12–13.
- 40 Stanisław Jaworski, 'Przedmowa', in Tadeusz Peiper, *Tędy. Nowe Usta*, Teresa Podoska and Stanisław Jaworski (eds.), (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), p. 6.
- 41 Tadeusz Peiper, 'Cartas de Polonia. Una nueva teoría del arte', *Ultra* 1/18 (1921). See also: Emilio Quintana and Ewa Palka, 'Jahl v Paszkiewicz en Ultra (1921–1922). Dos polacos en el nacimiento de la vanguardia española', *RILCE* 11/1 (1995): p. 138.
- 42 Peiper wrote: 'I have decided to edit a magazine. When the publisher of *Nowa Sztuka* withdrew financial support after the second issue of *Nowa Sztuka*, I thought about continuing the magazine in Kraków, but besides external obstacles, this was rendered impossible by the unfortunate introduction [he is referring here to the introduction by Anatol Stern, *Nowa Sztuka* 1 (1921) – P.S.]. To prevent this from overshadowing my work, I created an entirely new magazine'. Peiper, *Tędy. Nowe Usta*, pp. 314–315.
- 43 Julius Rottersmann, 'Tätiger Geist. Zionismus und Aktivismus', *Jerubbaal*, 1/8–9 (1918): p. 302.
- 44 Originally published: 'Dyrektor Kinoteatru', *Die Aktion* no. 51–52 (1917); *Die Wolkenpumpe* (Hannover: Paul Steegemann, 1920); *Vedute dal Paradiso* in the collection *L'incendiario* (Milano: Edizioni di Poesia, 1910), respectively.
- 45 Hans Goltz, 'Der neue "Ararat"', *Der Ararat* 1/4 (1920): p. 1.
- 46 'Zeitschriften', *Der Ararat* 2/10 (1921): p. 267.
- 47 Julius Rottersmann, 'Der Polnische Formismus', *Der Ararat* 2/11 (1921): pp. 284–288.
- 48 Rottersmann, 'Der Polnische Formismus', p. 288.
- 49 Julius Rottersmann, 'Kurka Wodna – St. I. Witkiewicz (Teatr im. Słowackiego)', *Zwrotnica* 1/3 (1922): p. 83. Witkacy's archived correspondence shows that Rottersmann and he were in personal contact. This is one of the few traces in Poland enabling us to discover the identity of the *Formiści* collaborator. Janusz Degler wrote that Rottersmann was a Kraków tradesman, who engaged in theatre criticism and journalism on the side. He was among Witkacy's circle of friends. See: Janusz Degler, *Witkacego portret wielokrotnie* (Warsaw: PIW, 2009), p. 428; Degler (ed.), *S. I. Witkiewicz, Listy do żony (1923–1927)* (Warsaw: PIW, 2000), p. 242.
- 50 *L'Esprit Nouveau* 2/14 (1922): p. 1680.
- 51 Konrad Winkler, *Formiści Polscy* (Warsaw: Nakład Gebethnera i Wolffa, 1927).
- 52 J. L., 'Za granicą – Niemcy', *Lucifer* 2/2–4 (1922): p. 33.
- 53 Konstanty Perić, *Kazimierz Brodziński i serbska pieśń ludowa* (Lwów: Nakładem Towarzystwa Naukowego, 1924).
- 54 Konstanty Perić, 'Najnowsza Polska Poezja', *Misao* 2 (16 January 1923): pp. 123–130. See also: Stanislava Barac, *Avangardna Misao. Avangardne tendencije u casopisu Misao u vreme uredjivanja Ranka Mladenovica 1922–1923* (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 2008), pp. 119–121.
- 55 Tytus Czyżewski, 'Mój formizm', *Głos Plastyków* 5/8–12 (1938): p. 14.
- 56 Tytus Czyżewski, 'Pogrzeb romantyzmu – Uwiąd starczy symbolizmu – Śmierć programizmu', *Formiści* 2/4 (1921): p. 13.
- 57 Anna Wierzbicka, *We Francji i w Polsce 1900–1939. Sztuka, jej historyczne uwarunkowania i odbiór w świetle krytyków polsko-francuskich* (Warsaw: IS PAN, 2009), pp. 319–320.

Balancing  
'Absolute  
Painting' and  
Reality: Ľudovít  
Fulla and the  
Paradoxes of  
Slovak Modernism

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## **Balancing 'Absolute Painting' and Reality: Ludovít Fulla and the Paradoxes of Slovak Modernism**

### **A Painting Should Look Like a Painting**

The years 1928 to 1939 are considered to be the pinnacle of interwar modern visual art in Slovakia, the period in which Slovak art caught up with modernist developments in Western Europe and avant-garde trends become concentrated around the School of Arts and Crafts in Bratislava (ŠUR). In its ideas and pedagogical methods, the school was close to Germany's Bauhaus. The painter Ludovít Fulla was one of the crucial initiators and activating forces in this optimistic, albeit temporary, process of getting in step with Europe. As he later recalled, with a little irony, to all the younger prophets of the new art: 'there we were, chewing on our Oštiepok cheese and looking out at the world'.<sup>2</sup> The avant-garde reached Slovakia with a slight delay (in Europe and Russia it had started roughly a decade earlier), but, in spite of the typical lagging-behind that affected possibly every area of life in Slovakia, things were not so dramatic in this case, and the delay was made good. For Fulla, the time spent at the School of Arts and Crafts under the leadership of Josef Vydra was stimulating in every aspect; he was also full of energy and at the height of his creative powers.

Fulla's visual thinking at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s was shaped by a range of different inspirations of an artistic, but also an extra-artistic, nature. First and foremost these were inspirations that Fulla acquired and imported into his work while teaching at the School of Arts and Crafts. He readily found some affinities in the latest artistic currents and drew from those important works and ideas that flowed into the so-called 'crossroads of the avant-garde' that was Bratislava from the local environment, the Czech lands, or the more distant European context. Not only did these influences find their way into his own work—then heading towards its first experimental triumphs—but his intimate collaboration and discussions with his close friend Mikuláš Galanda, together with the rapid crystallisation of their personal artistic attitudes, also compelled them to try to formulate their theoretical understanding of the need to modernise artistic forms and their perception.

In 1930 a group of paintings appeared—*Summer Morning (Flowers)* (*Letné ráno (Kvetiny)*), *Balloons* (*Balóny*) (of which we know of two definitive variations and a gouache version) and *Toys* (*Hračky*) (with its lithographic copy)—in which, according to Radoslav Matušítk, Fulla invokes Cubism's discovery of the analysis of forms and of a disruption of the closed body that transcends its deformation and presents a new concept of the relationship between the physical body and space. This is not, however, a strict Cubist investigation of form and space, but an attestation of new possibilities for composition on a surface ... he does not combine different perspectives on a single thing, but multiple things seen from various perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Fulla heretically defied Cubist dicta, meaning that his 'Cubicising' stylisation was not founded on mathematical or geometric calculations, but was more intuitive, phenomenal, and natural; it was not derived from rational analysis or the perspectival breakdown of forms into



their different profiles. Besides, it does not hurt to acknowledge that Cubism was, by then, past its prime in its Parisian centre and that other, completely different tendencies in modern art were making themselves felt. We could describe Fulla's creative method as a selective one: no matter how up-to-date or fashionable a particular aspect of modern artistic developments was, Fulla always noticed and selected what most suited his own temperament, his mentality, his innate tendencies as a painter, and he never mechanically copied or repeated some known and attested model or formula. From his Cubist-style compositions there bursts an undisguised sensuality; they emit a passionate exhilaration of the senses, a playfulness, an optimistic view of civilisation and an energy (an energy typical of urban life at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, the atmosphere of which was gradually filtering through into Bratislava too). One feels in them the scent of a brightly sunlit summer morning or the unstoppable rise of balloons as they rapidly escape into the sky (Fig. 8.1). They give the impression of a cheerful, joyous 'Cubism' that is miles away from what Cubism had sought to be, and was known to be, in Paris or in Prague (which was then following one small step behind Paris). These paintings are a particularly eloquent example of how Fulla, in his heretical and unorthodox way, was able to adapt foreign 'models'.



Fig. 8.1. Ludovít Fulla, *Balloons* (*Balóny*, 1930). Oil on canvas, 40 x 33.5 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

Another side of Fulla's work at the end of the 1920s was its distinctive manner of combining and fusing stylistic approaches inspired by folk or primitive art, the artistic expression of children, and medieval painting. These three areas had something fundamental in common, based in a shared vision and a tendency towards the abstraction of reality: common to all is a language of symbols, a 'conceptual' form of representation, a surface-based, non-spatial manner of depicting a subject, an absence of perspective, a frontal viewpoint, and the development of a theme through narrative deviations. Europe's artistic environment was at this time still charged with the electrifying force of the discovery of the new, unbounded, and spontaneous sensibilities of primitive, 'exotic' art as well as of children's expression.

Children's artistic expression resounded closely with Fulla's feelings at the time, his concern with 'the destruction of old forms in anticipation of a new, liberated expression'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Fulla's turn towards 'the deliberate approximation of the artlessness and naivety of children's drawing' also had a practical context, linked to his pedagogical activity at the School of Arts and Crafts, where he worked directly with children in the painting department for the children's art courses (the Course for the Art of the Young), teaching flat colour drawing, montage, and pasting.<sup>5</sup> It is very likely that Fulla made artful use of the childish material with which he was working and that he took inspiration from it. His artistic estate contains a series of child-like colour serigraphs (using a stencil), one of which, a picture of a twelve-year-old boy, was published in Fulla and Galanda's journal *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu* (*The Private Letters of Fulla and Galanda*).<sup>6</sup> It is difficult now to judge how far the processes underlying such work were instinctive, subconscious; it is more plausible to conclude that he chose these sources of inspiration in a programmatic manner, on a highly-reasoned and rational basis. It suffices to recall Fulla's own words: 'these operations are conditioned by my emotional and rational disposition and attained with hard and conscious effort', even if, at the same time, he was stimulated by 'the pollen of childish naivety and its emotional vibrations'.<sup>7</sup> Other creative methods of Fulla's that probably came out of his pedagogical practice include techniques of pictorial collage and montage, such as the pasting together of pieces of coloured paper, a technique often used in children's artistic exercises. For Iva Mojžišová, Fulla's 'colour-fields' (*farboplochy*) evoked 'pieces of stuck-on coloured paper', while 'the use of pre-drawn and cut-out stencils was a method Fulla would retain for the rest of his life'.<sup>8</sup>

The child or medieval artist—that is to say the primitive, unschooled artist—paints what he knows about the world, not what he sees: 'Fulla speaks not only of what he sees in things, but also of what he knows about them'.<sup>9</sup> It should be added that Fulla also painted what he knew about art (including contemporary art), selecting from it those things that spoke to him personally. 'Drawings with childlike design', the elements of an intentional linear schematisation of the subject, are featured in paintings like *Children at the Sea* (*Deti pri mori*, 1929) and *May* (*Máj*, 1930), and in the lithograph *The Wizard* (*Čarodejník*, 1930).<sup>10</sup> But the surface-based, frontal drawing style in these pictures resulted not only from Fulla's observations of children's artistic methods but also, and principally, from the adoption of an artistic 'elementarism'. This latter method was derived, it seems, not from any contemporary artistic trends, but rather from the basic approaches of artistic propaedeutics, or preliminary instruction. Somewhere around this point Fulla's future formal repertoire comes into being, comprised as this is of basic geometric shapes—circles, dots, lines, triangles, squares, rectangles—and of their various combinations. The pictorial composition of *May* is dominated by the triangular form of the Slovak May Tree, a decorated ritual tree used in rural areas to welcome the spring symbolically, and Fulla extends this geometric, sign-like basis of the composition with further sign-like motifs, incorporating, for instance, abstract ornamentation characteristic of folk embroidery or a row of schematically-rendered childlike figures. In *Suburbs* (*Predmestie*, 1929), reality is simplified and—as in the destroyed painting *Porch* (*Pavlač*, 1929) or the small-scale *Composition (Angel)* (*Kompozícia (Anjel)*, 1930)—broken down into an abstract web, a system of glowing, multi-coloured fragments. The figurative content of *Madonna with Angel* (*Madona s anjelom*, 1929) becomes a kind of pretext for its own analysis, its transposition into a system of circles, triangles, and diagonals. In all of these works, in which Fulla operates with a rational, schematically-constructed core, those drawn, linear,

Constructivist webs 'compete' with another element of equal weight: with colour, with an expressively moulded surface of thick, paste-like paint matter. This presentation of thesis and antithesis, this counter-positioning and connection of two essentially different expressive values, are the basis of Fulla's stylistic originality as a painter.

In another group of paintings, colour and paint matter take on an independent role: using sensory associations as his basis, Fulla developed a series of autonomous painterly scenes. While *Fishermen (Rybári)* and the newly civic-minded *Devín*—in which we notice an untraditional biplane and a Czechoslovak flag (with an inverted colour scheme) flying over a venerable national symbol—retain an 'empirical', if strongly painterly and stylised core, in *Memories of Venice (Spomienky na Benátky)* the radiant, luminous, coloured matter simply melts, dissolves, and flows like plasma. In *Circus (Cirkus)*, painted, like the other pictures here, in 1930, all that remain are sensual and affective traces of memories of reality. Tending towards abstract expression, this painting is an 'energetic' *féerie* of massed colours: 'while external forces do not disappear from his soul, the object sometimes does disappear, in order that his rich imagination may melt it down and his soul infuse it with music and rhythm'.<sup>11</sup>

However, in the years around 1930, other paintings arose that were fundamentally quite different in conception: the Post-Impressionist *A Port in Marseilles (Prístav v Marseilles)* and the near-abstract *Suburbs* were both painted in the same year, 1929. They were produced together in a short time period, with Fulla working on each one alternately. They are proof of the fact that Fulla needed to search for, test out, and investigate various methods, and possibly that he was unable to decide which tendency to give preference to (more realistic methods would prove most successful socially). In *Kite (Drak)*, 1931 he combined two different approaches: a playful novelty of form, evocative of children's cut-outs or the parts of a construction set, is fused with the panorama of a realistic segment of landscape. In *Sunday Afternoon (Nedeľný popoludnie)*, 1931, we again find two distinct artistic approaches: a human figure, which retains an objective and somewhat heavy and burly physicality, and a playful, fanciful motif at the side. Here, however, an inversion occurs: in *Dragon*, the motif is central, but in this painting it is peripheral. Both these motifs—in the first case the main element, in the second an accompanying one—preceded the pictures themselves: they live an independent life in the colour lithographs *Kite* and *Moon (Mesiac)*, both 1930). This confirms the aforementioned fact that, for Fulla, small graphic forms were a natural field for experimentation, one in which he tended to operate more freely than when he stood before a canvas: he saw the painting as a definitive form, and his sense of the binding and serious nature of the completed work might be said at times to have bound his own hands. Other little gems radiate a similarly strong experimental spirit, for instance, *Still Life, Table (At Home) (Zátišie, Stôl (Doma))*, a preparatory study for the painting *Toys*, or *The Wizard*, subtle works of lithography that look like drawings. And this is in spite of the fact that their expression is wholly concentrated into a simple and clear line, capturing the crystal-clear form of objective systems. These were not simply 'minor studies'; Eva Šefčáková aptly described them as 'the first victorious arguments against empty bourgeois folklorism'.<sup>12</sup>

At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s the picture became, for Fulla, an independent composition of linear and colour elements, designated in *Súkromné listy* as 'line-forms' (*líniotvary*) and 'colour-fields' (*farboplochy*).<sup>13</sup> We can apply these two neologisms more readily to Fulla's work than to Galanda's. They seem like an attempt to describe the phenomenal qualities of his work. The essence of their interrelation and dialogue had already been noted by Vladimír Wagner in the very first monograph on Fulla, when he spoke of a line that 'is, for [Fulla], an expression of the intellectual component of creation', and of a colour that is 'an expression of an emotional culture', by which means the artist 'split into two the meaning of line and colour as parts of a synthetic expression and gave to each an individual role'.<sup>14</sup> Fulla's 'colour-fields' had an anti-illusionist, non-naturalistic character, and while they pursued elementary aspects of form, they exceeded the boundaries of their real-life models, filling the canvas with a field of pigment. Fulla considered these fields as 'living', not least because of his work with the coloured 'matter' of paint, this 'emotionally-defined coloured dough'.<sup>15</sup> Light, as a function of colour, was suppressed to



a minimal role (in Fulla's work we only rarely find a field illuminated with light, and for this effect he would make do with white, yellow, bright ochre). He was not yet working with the structure of the colour field he would use later: from the 1940s onwards the colour gains a more varied internal dimension, it is broken up by touches, strokes of the paintbrush, blotches, spots and splatters, but for now the colour was mainly clean, warm, laid out across a surface and devoid of obsolete tints. Fulla's colour derives its decorative value and its symbolic function from this style.

The 'line-form' was not only a standard field delimited by a contour, an outline, mechanically enclosing a defined form coloured inside the lines. Radislav Matuščík, making reference to a statement of Fulla's on the matter, spoke rightly of the divergence between two kinds of drawing, the 'dimensional and the thematic', of their dynamic interweaving and their different functions.<sup>16</sup> One of these two kinds rejected representation—it simplified and schematised the thing presented, at times disrupting and obscuring its character as object, and activating the silhouette form—while, conversely, the other kind constructed, defined, explained, and specified. Within the painting, both levels, that of colours and that of lines, were interlaced one through the other and they led apparently independent lives; though only apparently, because the ultimate effect of these paintings was founded precisely on the coexistence and interaction of colour and line. Oskár Čepan eloquently characterised this tension in Fulla's work, which, he argued, consisted 'in the unceasing contact, in the variants of relationship between two contrasting morphological sources: the object-based outline (the theme) and the autonomous colour-field'.<sup>17</sup>

Though we are accustomed to seeing Fulla as a high colourist, as an artist who expressed himself predominantly through colour, the genesis of the roles and relationships of his concepts of line and colour is a complicated issue. Once visual art became his profession, he needed to formulate his subjects first in line work, and yet beforehand, in his visual memory and his subconscious, he had probably seen these subjects in the form of colours.

In 1930, Fulla and Galanda decided to express their opinions on the modern picture not only in their artistic work but also in words. They formulated and, at their own expense, published that aforementioned manifesto of modern painting, *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu*. Many of the themes and ideas that passed over from *Súkromné listy* into Fulla's work, and vice versa, have already been mentioned. But let us turn to more general questions and to the genesis of this peculiar theoretical document.<sup>18</sup> The discussion surrounding the origins and degree of co-authorship behind this peculiar text has still not been satisfactorily resolved (and probably never will be, due to the insufficiency of sources). The text is a glossary of modernism, formulated in an incredibly extreme and exclusive way for Slovakia's cultural context, and to this day there has been no relevant, direct, or even indirect evidence to show that it was inspired by any other (foreign) text, even if several researchers presuppose that such a text exists. On the basis of critical and comparative analysis, such as has recently been conducted by Zora Rusinová, we might rather take the opinion that these 'private letters' represent a syncretic collection, a kind of compilation of foreign, transposed, preformulated (and simplified?) ideas.<sup>19</sup> These reflections are precisely targeted, clumsy, and at times naive, but also eloquent and metaphorical. Fulla and Galanda fused several stimuli from the theory, practice, and rhetoric of the contemporaneous avant-gardes both in Europe in general (the Bauhaus circle and the De Stijl movement) and in the Czech lands (Devětsil, Poetism). They could have acquainted themselves with some of these stimuli during their studies in Prague, and with some others during their first years of activity at the School of Arts and Crafts, which by means of its chief organisers, pedagogues, and guests sought to raise awareness and maintain connections with current developments in Europe.

Yet it is perhaps more important to comprehend the social and artistic function and value of Fulla and Galanda's theoretical gesture, which, even if it ended too soon (they only published two issues and one double issue, all of which they financed themselves), was certainly not lacking in courage and daring. Their aim of founding 'some kind of tribune arising from a basis of uncompromising battle for new artistic directions, for new painting in general' was mainly directed against false bourgeois tastes, against a deeply conservative community of admirers of realistic art.<sup>20</sup> Even if the authors never really delivered their intended slap in the face to such

taste, the Slovak public vaguely registered their manifesto as 'an advertising label for fashionable style'<sup>21</sup> and 'regarded them as *enfants terribles*, on the edge of madness', as Czech writer Zdeněk Hlaváček put it.<sup>22</sup> Though they ran up against the underdeveloped condition of Slovakia's cultural 'foundations', this does not in any way reduce the magnitude and significance of their efforts. Fulla and Galanda brought a new understanding of the function of the work of art, emphasising its autonomous status, and were the first to reject Slovak art's traditional paradigm, emphasising national struggle and revival, and its forays into ideological and conceptual stylisation. And what of art as 'play and delight' (another bold phrase from *Súkromné listy*)? To paraphrase *Súkromné listy*, Fulla's pictures from the turn of the 1920s and 1930s look like 'a picture and not a section of landscape': they are a direct attack on visual illusion and were probably responding, in the strongest possible way, to the new tendency of 'absolute painting', which, in the language of that era, referred to abstraction or non-representational, non-objective art.<sup>23</sup>

### **Beyond the Boundaries of the Object**

Fulla attained a goal that no other artist in Slovakia had yet reached: he was the first to devise and paint an abstract picture. Though he would never abandon the horizon of the 'physical model', he programmatically applied the postulates of non-objectivity in the sphere of applied art. In stating this, however, it should be noted that the strict distinction between 'high' (fine) art and 'low' (applied) art had lost its prior validity within avant-garde circles. The whole surrounding world of objects could—and did—become the target of the independent artistic gesture, liberated from all conventions. Those disciplines that served humanity and sought to fulfil its needs, most notably architecture, became the representatives of a new understanding of art's place in society. A very important role was given to typography, as it was seen as a means to visualise and propagate new changes in civilisation and society in the most forceful way possible.

At the end of the 1920s, another significant aspect of Fulla's talent came to the fore: the universality of his thinking on art. This was a quality deeply bound up with the integrative aims of the avant-garde in general. In Fulla's case it comprised 'a capacity to think in intermedial terms and to define the priorities of one's own artistic orientation within other media'.<sup>24</sup> This consisted not only in his ability to fulfil various assignments wholeheartedly, from miniature signs to designs for monumental pictures, from typographical settings for books, magazines, posters, invitation cards, stage designs, and toys and ceramic experiments that, sadly, have not been preserved. What seems fundamental here is Fulla's capacity for artistically-autonomous thinking, for the creative transformation of the central elements of his then developing artistic style, elements he transposed to the various fields of his interests and activities. He was not only able to grasp and respect the internal laws of this or that discipline, its technical or 'artisanal' rules, but also to preserve a rare unity in artistic perspective and the principles of artistic conception.

Among the various fields that enthused Fulla at the turn of the decade, typography was number one. Its 'functional' aspect was not, initially, important to him. In the words of Iva Mojžišová:

For a certain time (particularly 1929) Fulla became so captivated by typography that even its practical uses acquired a deeper meaning for him. Alongside a Constructivist-style book cover and the first application of lower-case type in Slovakia for Ján Poničan's poetry collection *Demontáž* (1929), together with his designs for the magazines *Slovenská grafia* (*Slovak Graphic Art*) and *LUK (BOW)*, he produced non-applied typographical compositions and pictures, which today we know, and only partially, from reproductions. Fulla reached a place where no Slovak painter had ever previously set foot: abstraction. The picture *Rose and Hillside* (*Ruže a svah*), later to be hidden by another image painted over it, was described by Fulla himself as abstract. And likewise his unpreserved kinetic folding book, which he characterised as a Suprematist or typographical poem or as an abstract film. He got to show this at the *Sub-Tatras Exhibition* (*Podtatranská výstava*) in Spišská Nová Ves (1929), but was not able, as he had planned, to make printed reproductions.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, today we can only get some idea of Fulla's free Constructivist works hypothetically, on the basis of the reproductions that formed part of his typographical designs, notably for the magazine *Slovenská grafia* (1929–1931), in which his Constructivist compositions *Picture (Obraz)* and *Elementary Composition (Elementárna kompozícia)* (1929) were published. *Typographical Illustration – Dragon (Typografická ilustrácia – Dragon)*, 1929, from the same magazine, had a similar character. He included a 'functionless' Constructivist linocut in the first issue of *Súkromné listy* (it somewhat evoked a building, perhaps a house) and in the second issue and the concluding double issue he included further abstract compositions, which, typically, were untitled (these had a more 'organic' form, freely evoking a figure in the first case, a tree in the second). Iva Mojžišová described these planar, geometric and non-representational typographic compositions, montages, and illustrations as 'joyful' (drawing an analogy with his paintings of that period).<sup>26</sup> With these works Fulla crossed the proverbial Rubicon, as the first Slovak artist with the courage to go beyond the boundaries of the object and create a non-objective picture.

Fulla would have been able to acquaint himself with the new ideas and achievements of the Russian Constructivists, the Dutch De Stijl movement and the artists and teachers of Bauhaus—and with the application of their ideas to a wide range of manifestations and everyday objects—through the active international connections of the School of Arts and Crafts, where the principles of modern synthetic Functionalist typography, for instance, were not only promoted but directly incorporated into pedagogical and artistic practice. Fulla could thus have come across the work of German designer Jan Tschichold, the pioneer of modern typography, as well as that of László Moholy-Nagy or El Lissitzky. Tomáš Štrauss has also drawn attention to the possible inspiration of the Hungarian Activists' circle led by Lajos Kassák, which was mediated to Fulla by his student Ludovít Kudlák.<sup>27</sup> Yet Fulla had become interested in typography before starting to work at the School of Arts and Crafts, when he was still a student in Prague, a city whose atmosphere was at that time electrically charged with the infusion of new avant-garde currents, embodied in the Czech lands in the rise of Poetism, the activities of Devětsil and the figure of that movement's theoretical spokesperson Karel Teige. Through Galanda, Fulla made contact with the circle of leftist intellectuals grouped around the review *DAV (CROWD)*, who in their printing and design were the first to espouse the avant-garde principles of the new typography. In an unrealised cover design for *DAV* from 1924, Fulla used, for the first time, an emblematic sign of the typographic avant-garde, the diagonal. In 1925 he produced a clean and monumental design for a page devoted to Kassák. Over time he refined his typographic methods, later using techniques derived from the teaching methods at the School of Arts and Crafts, namely stencilling. Sometimes he supplemented his abstract compositions with objective drawing, as with his book covers for *For the Freedom of the Homeland (Za slobodu otčiny)* and *Hot Morning (Horúce ráno)* (1928) or in the poster for his and Galanda's own exhibition at the East Slovak Museum (Vychodoslovenské múzeum) in 1930, while a number '2' subsequently appeared in one version of his painting *Balloons (Balóny)*, 1930). His design for Poničan's collection *Demontáž* marked his first use of exclusively lower-case letters, one of the characteristic features of the new typography (Fig. 8.2). He also created a dynamic, lightly-rendered style of composition using the core components of elementarism, as he designated them in *Súkromné listy*: circle, dot, line and cross. By contrast, his cover for Jožo I. Biskupický's *Clerics (Klerici)*, 1931) comprised a set of rectangular forms.

Fulla's design for the magazine *Slovenská grafia*, as well as his visual conception for *Súkromné listy*, are usually considered the peak of his Constructivist typography.<sup>28</sup> In designing his covers, particular pages, advertisements, invitation cards, and illustrations Fulla employed all the innovations of Functionalism and Constructivism: perpendicular lines of script, the alternation of horizontals and verticals, and a dynamic composition formed through the use of diagonals. He gave 'rhythm' to the compositional field through varying sizes of letters, through their arrangement, configuration, aggregation, or through ordering them into regular grid structures, while using the simplest and most modern types of font possible, mainly grotesque fonts. Besides the use of script he 'rhythmised' his surfaces through arrangements of geometric forms, which arise through the repetition of dots, lines, and crosses. He created his own style, characterised by a certain quality

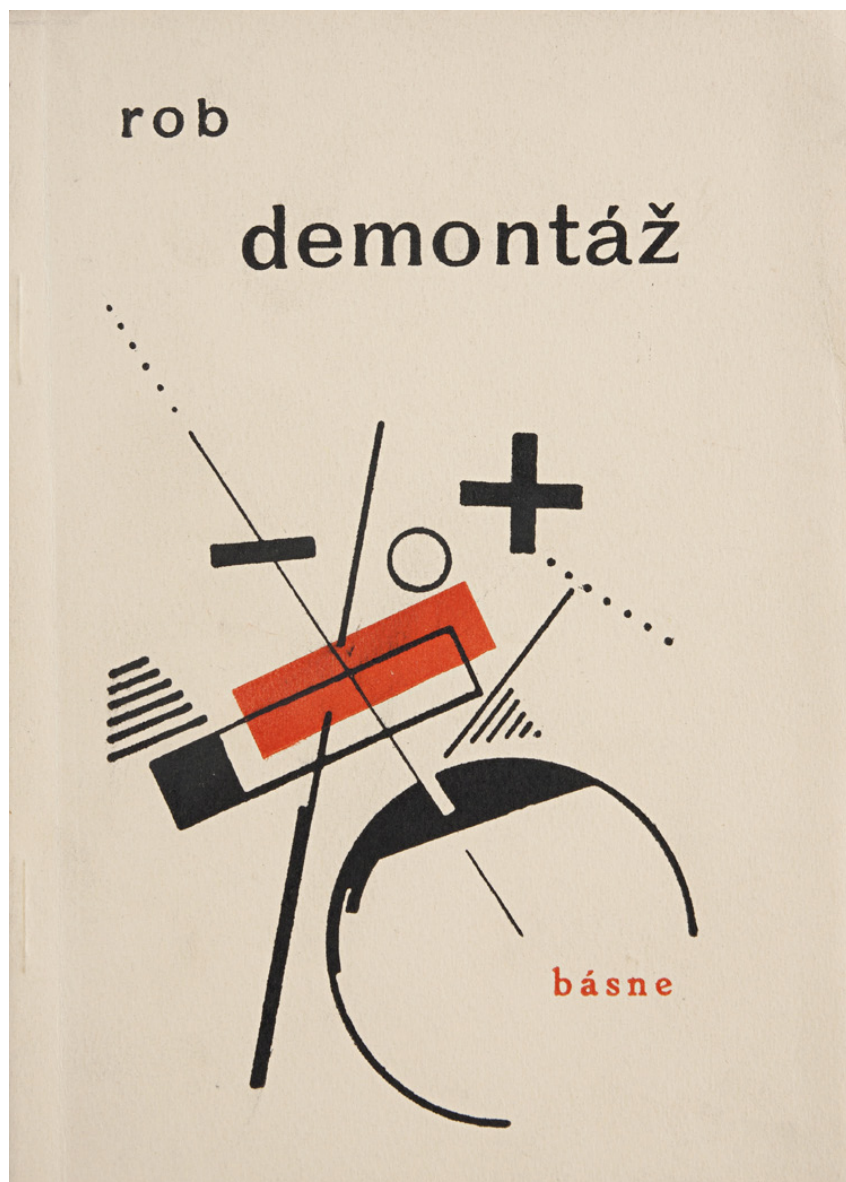


Fig. 8.2. Ludovít Fulla, *Jacket of Ján Rob Poničan's Dismantling* (*Obálka k Demontáži Jána Roba Poničana*, 1929). Paper, 21 x 13 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

of playfulness and decorativeness, still visible despite the overall moderation of the methods used. He preferred an 'artistic rendering' and his designs were described, in the spirit of that era, as 'typo-montages' or typographical poems. While he adopted Constructivism's traditional triad of colours—white, red, and black—he proved able to enrich it, incorporating yellow and blue accents into his typographical designs. Fulla created his own, personal version of Constructivist typography and worked with his models in an unorthodox and innovative manner, while preserving the clarity, transparency, and communicative power of the text. His use of minimalist, abstract, printed backgrounds beneath the text was considered an innovative act even in a wider, international context. Another typical method of the new typography—the combination of script, fields of colour and photography—was employed by a colleague at the School of Arts and Crafts, head of the typography department Zdeněk Rossmann, and also appeared in Fulla's work, although sporadically (for example, *Promotional Picture* (*Propagačný obraz*), in *Súkromné listy*, no. 2, 1930).

Fulla's fascination with typography was brief, and culminated between 1929 and 1931; his discoveries in this field were slightly ahead of those in his painting, as he pursued several different approaches simultaneously or in quick succession. In 1930, in the first issue of *Súkromné listy*, he and Galanda stated, paradoxically, that 'elementarism, the final stage in the development of painting, which has led through Cubism and Suprematism ... comes out of typographical elements, and it will possibly only continue to exist in typographical advertising and in commercial art. It will not remain part of the painting of pictures without further combinations'.<sup>29</sup>





Fig. 8.3. Ludovít Fulla, *Blessing the Cattle* (*Požehnanie statku*, 1932). Oil on canvas, 90 x 110.3 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

Together they thus ‘restricted the radius of action for elementarism’ and Fulla eliminated the function of the abstract painting in his own work.<sup>30</sup> Painting for him now truly became the result of complex interactions and the painting began to ‘combine’ a very diverse range of stimuli. But this has already been discussed.

Yet these were not wholly isolated spheres of interest, and several types of artistic stimulus penetrated from Fulla’s Functionalist typography into his well-known painting and graphic work. The ‘free’ artwork *Abstract Composition* (*Abstraktná kompozícia*, 1929–1930) is perhaps the sole preserved example of his ‘Constructivist’ attitudes expressed in painting, but even in this case Fulla was not entirely consistent: as though indicating his need to create some theme from this geometrical system of rectangles of colours and trapezoidal forms, the picture’s drawn elements add specifying details that refer to the concrete, objective forms of human dwellings. He created similar motifs in the aforementioned paintings *Suburbs* and *Porch* (1929) and in the small-scale *Composition* (*Angel*) (1930), but, typically for Fulla’s paintings from the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, in these cases the pictures’ Constructivist and geometric core could not withstand the blows of Fulla’s painterly temperament and the pressure of its emotionality. In the lithographs *Kite*, *In a Village Yard* (*Na dedinskom dvore*) and *Blessing of the Cattle* (*Požehnanie statku*) (both 1930), in the painted version of *Blessing of the Cattle*, and in the painting *Expulsion from Paradise* (*Vyhnanie z raja*, 1932), he used a different, iconic method to modify elements known from typography (Fig. 8.3). The diagonal compositional schemes are more chaotic, the coloured backgrounds of geometrised forms are changed in the paintings into seemingly independent fields of colour, while the abstract lines along the borders are composed of objective elements. Yet, with the aid of Fulla’s drawing, everything is arranged to ensure that the basic thematic subject is preserved and remains legible. In his typographical poems and montages Fulla may have radically disrupted the illusion of space and programmatically refused any subjective, stylistic trace of the artist’s hand, but in his painting he never pursued these principles to their natural endpoint, for that was simply not the artist’s aim. His approach was different: through his use of colour and his handling of the paintbrush, he always modelled the surface and substance of his paintings, even if in a non-illusory manner.

It was palpably clear that this type of 'non-objective' work did not receive an enthusiastic reception in conservative Slovakia. Though Fulla did exhibit his Constructivist and abstract compositions, for instance incorporating them into a selection of his works at a joint exhibition with Galanda at the East Slovak Museum in 1930, the response from the public's side was 'mildly' scornful and not without a degree of disrespect. For example, when carnival works by the teachers at the School of Arts and Crafts were auctioned off at a tombola, the students reportedly presented a picture by Fulla with the words: 'ladies and gentlemen, this here is suprematism! Have no fear, it is not a disease, suprematism is completely safe!'<sup>31</sup>

### The Slovak Myth

The opportunity for a large-scale artistic synthesis, which could assess and reveal the significance of Fulla's search for 'the new reality of the picture' and for 'absolute painting', arose when he was given the task of decorating a reconstructed twelfth-century Romanesque chapel in Klížske Hradište near Topolčany. The opportunity came about at the suggestion of the State Section for the Protection of Monuments, which envisaged murals, the decoration of the wooden ceiling (Fulla recalled that he had completed a design for this, though it was not preserved) and of the chancel railings. In his basic concept for the redecoration he refused the idea of any pseudo-historical imitation and attempted to reinterpret the assignment in terms of modern methods. Unfortunately, for reasons that remain unknown, the assignment was never realised. The original designs have not been preserved, except for some fragments, but from these preparations three pictures emerged that are rightly considered the very pinnacle of Fulla's work, as well as the beginning of a decisive turn in his ideas.

While both *Blessing of the Cattle* and *Expulsion from Paradise* arose in the same year, 1932, they differ from one another in several respects. The compositional layout and linear stylisation for *Blessing of the Cattle* had been tested out in two of Fulla's colour lithographs: *In a Village Yard* and *Blessing of the Cattle*. In their conceptual character and very concise composition, in which Fulla put into practice his theory of line-forms and colour-fields, they most closely resemble two other colour lithographs, *Moon* and *Dragon* (1930), though at the iconographic level they differ through their choice of a traditionally Slovak, agrarian theme. Yet the depiction and handling of that theme is new and non-traditional. The starting point for *Blessing of the Cattle* was a lithograph of the same name depicting a good husbandman. The graphic work, just like the painting that derived from it, has two focal points in terms of its composition and ideas: on the right-hand side there is a kneeling couple, a husband and wife praying for a good harvest while turned towards a floating calf, framed by bands that vaguely suggest ribbons or the braided edges of folk fabrics, on the left-hand side. In the painting, too, Fulla utilised his method of large, colourful, geometric planar forms that are given precise definition and demarcation by a line-based, drawn structure.

A notably more mature composition is *Expulsion from Paradise*. Two basic expressive elements are here merged into a strange, indivisible unity in which the leading role is played by colour: a colour that in certain places shines out with a contrastive effect, but is elsewhere varnish-like, translucent, or soft and pastel-shaded. Atypical of Fulla's work at this point, this white-ochre colour fusion with its rosy tints probably resulted from the fact that the picture was supposed to be produced using the fresco technique. A male-female pair, with lowered heads, weighed down with the gravity of original sin, is seen retreating into the unknown. God's punishment is embodied in the image of a hovering archangel who holds a sword in his hand and, like the Adam and Eve figures, is formed out of rectangular, triangular, and circular shapes. These resemble children's jigsaw puzzles and scrapbooks, montages of coloured cut-out paper, things by which the artist was apparently inspired at the time. Fulla took a traditional, Old Testament story and reembodyed it in a remarkable and original visual form, which, strangely enough, does not function in a tragic fashion at all. Fulla achieves his harmonic, compositional, and colour effects here without any kind of literary reference; rather these are defined by the internally concentrated force of the painter's artistic conviction. One further connection emerges, almost unwittingly, upon looking at this picture and its characters as they float in some kind of delicate pastel mist. Several years before the





Fig. 8.4. Eudovít Fulla, *Song and Labour* (*Pieseň a práca*, 1934–1935). Oil on canvas, 165 x 200.5 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

painter properly began working on it, he had given the following response to Ján Kostra's question as to who, among painters, was his 'darling': 'Giotto... Giotto—from across the centuries'.<sup>32</sup> With the distance of time Fulla himself came to consider *Expulsion from Paradise* as the starting point of his artistic creed: in his own personal rankings this picture was followed by *Blessing of the Cattle* and *Song and Labour*.

During 1934 and 1935, Fulla produced the pivotal and most expansive painting of his *Song and Labour* cycle (Fig. 8.4). Probably Fulla's most famous painting, it is considered by many art historians as one of the artist's masterpieces, a national hymn about the nation and its landscape. Fulla received well-deserved recognition for this mythic parable of the life and work of the Slovak people, in the form of the Grand Prix at the Paris International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life (Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne), 1937.<sup>33</sup> Here he attempted, for the first time, to fuse, within a single pictorial field, his advances to date in modern painting with traditional elements, derived this time from mediaeval painting. He dissected the picture field into three longitudinal zones, in the manner of the mediaeval mural narrative. Figures, objects, and scenes gain dimensions and proportions that do not correlate with reality but are based on the importance that the artist assigns them, while the iconic references—a flying musician, scenes with a ploughman and the digging up of potatoes, emblematic fragments of the landscape and of rural architecture—are more transparent and comprehensible in their symbolism than in any of the preceding pictures. Ruling over all this is Fulla's autonomous, subjective conception of colour, which emotionally and symbolically binds the work together:

The three zones that develop the central idea of Fulla's painting *Song and Labour* delineate, through their colouring, the colour composition of the whole. A composition of browns, reds, green-blues and bluish tones. Of yellows that permeate all three zones. The delicacy and richness of their transitions; their combination; the sensitive, contrastive placement of clean and jewel-like tones into sections of muted colour, keep the entire painting in a state of tension and density.<sup>34</sup>

Yet behind Fulla's large-scale pictorial conception was a desire to do more than simply present the achievements of his painting style and his other explorations. All the different elements of the composition undisguisedly refer back to the picture's fundamental, content-related intention: to become a mythic parable of the Slovak world, of its primary, pastoral-agrarian essence.

Directly connected with *Song and Labour* is another painting from this series, which emerged about a year later: *Madonna with Ploughman* (*Madona s oráčom*, 1936). The Madonna in Fulla's work is a model example of a whole range of possible artistic approaches and ideas. The *Revúcka Madonna* (*Revúcka madona*, 1926) of his early coloured linocut strikes us as a worldly figure, almost suggesting a peasant woman with a child in her arms. He underlined the religious nature of this motif in the painting of the same name, using painterly means of expression. Here we see the basic geometric mode of his future approach, which he developed in further variants both in graphic work (*Madonna*, 1929) and in painting. *Madonna with Angel* (*Madona s anjelom*, 1929) and the 'Parisian' *Madonna* (1931) are two crowning paintings, in which the Madonna motif becomes a mere pretext for the presentation of a purely visual conception. That conception is founded on the relationship of the compositional analysis of forms and shapes to the actual liberated dynamism of Fulla's handling of paint, brushwork and colour: a dynamism that relies on a very intricate geometric structure. Fulla stylises the figure by reducing it to circles, triangles, and diagonal lines (to allude to another famous, Cezannian, method). He soon abandons these stylistic rules for a more realistic conception of the figure in *Madonna in Red* (*Madona v červenom*, c. 1935), proceeding to enhance the motif lexically and augment its epic aspect with glorifying elements in the final variant of *Madonna with Ploughman*, following the intellectual and pictorial conception of *Song and Work*, though much less convincingly. The later *Madonna with the Angels* (*Madona s anjelmi*, also known as *Gingerbread Madonna* (*Perníková madona*, 1946), which reached back genetically to the 'Parisian' Madonna, had been used as the main image of the poster for the exhibition *Old Art in Slovakia* (*Staré umění na Slovensku*, 1937). This picture was part of a series of decorative, folk-costumed figures, painted in a sign-like, two-dimensional manner, with which Fulla, after 1946, once again illuminated his palette. Yet he always handled that first theme, one of the most widely used in his work, in a plebeian and secular fashion: the Madonna was for him always principally a mother and a country woman, a symbol of motherhood and of the healthy, vital roots of the nation and its people.

Let us consider two other sources of inspiration that infused Fulla's work and, to a large extent, set the tone for his intellectual and visual conception: the inspirations of folk art and mediaeval art that he both adopted and elaborated on. Fulla's relation to folk art had already been noted by art critics and historians upon his debut. Vladimír Wagner traced Fulla's visual gifts back to 'the primordial soil of Slovak artistic talent',<sup>35</sup> and the writer Jozef Cíger-Hronský, author of a monograph on Janko Alexy, expressed the view that 'he followed after the primitives of his region and seemed to be portraying the very stone or tree that he had first touched in his childhood'.<sup>36</sup> Zdeněk Hlaváček, in a later publication, paraphrased observations he had made about Fulla in the 1920s by describing traditional folk art—after the well-known metaphor of F.X. Šalda—as 'Fulla's mother language'.<sup>37</sup> According to Oskár Čepan, the most fundamental aspect of Fulla's work was the way it 'combines the morphology of modern painting with the archaic forms of folk art'.<sup>38</sup> The artist's relationship to folk tradition was, however, much more complex and structured than such comments suggest; as we shall see, it changed and developed over time, adapting itself to serve particular intellectual and sociological contexts. Besides this it also had its own psychological and temporally-specific, cultural-historical dimension. Fulla's unique contribution and his essential difference from older traditions of painting lies in the fact that, in his work, the inspiration of folk culture did not remain something external but entered the internal laws of his visual and artistic world.

Miroslav Lamač wrote of Fulla that he 'was surrounded by the things that he painted'.<sup>39</sup> Fulla was occupied his whole life by visual-associative memories from his childhood and youth, by memories of the Slovak countryside and the patriarchal environment of Orava and Liptov, then virtually untouched by civilisation. Such reminiscence probably played a primary role in forming

his conception of the image. His oft-cited, subsequently-stylised recollections and representations of the distinctive municipality of Liptovské Revúce, with its colourful female waistcoats and its abstract ornamentation, are one example of his peculiar artistic selectivity at the level of visual memory and perception.<sup>40</sup> It was above all the clean, unbroken signal colours (in their basic combination of red, yellow, blue, and green) and the linear, rudimentary, abstracting character of primitive folk art that Fulla adopted at the beginning of his career (though we should note that he applied these elements selectively). In his later work he found his own use for elements of folk decorativeness or ornamentation, as based on their capacity for abstracting as well as on the repetition and variation of a core motif. Alongside his reflection on his own past, Fulla's involvement with folk and mediaeval art in the 1930s might have been modified by another important cultural-historical circumstance. Within the broader consciousness, folk art—to the credit of both domestic and foreign specialists and intellectuals active in Czechoslovakia at the time—began to be seen as an important element of Slovakia's spiritual and also specifically its artistic, compositional tradition, as part of the artistic heritage that had developed in this territory since early mediaeval times. This was in fact principally to the credit of Karel Šourek, who conceived the monumental Prague exhibition *Old Art in Slovakia (Staré umění na Slovensku, 1937)*, in which the phenomenon of cultural heritage was extended to include rustic and folklorised artefacts.<sup>41</sup> Another proponent of these ideas was the art historian (and the first writer of a monograph on Fulla) Vladimír Wagner.

It would be very difficult, in view of the sources available, to trace precisely the path of inspiration leading to Fulla's use of the icon and aspects of mediaeval art. Though in his written reminiscences he only vaguely recalls noticing aspects of Eastern and Western culture during his studies in Prague, he did prove interested specifically in Byzantium and, above all, the Russian icon. The 'exquisite holy images', the icons of the famous Russian masters and the 'allure' of their 'radiant colours', enchanted him during a visit to Leningrad and Moscow in 1937.<sup>42</sup> Prior to that he had probably only known these images from reproductions. Yet motifs drawn from icon paintings had appeared previously in his work; he himself discussed these inspirations in regard to the picture *Song and Labour*. This artwork had been on display in Paris for several months when he came face to face with the icons in the Russian museums. A love for icons had been a feature of his youth, and his study of reproductions in Kondakov's work has been noted in relation to this.<sup>43</sup> Matušík has also mentioned Fulla's visits to 'the Ukrainian Academy, where he acquainted himself with the tradition founded by Bilibino'.<sup>44</sup> Yet it is worth noting that Fulla's relationship to the icon, which in its original orthodox and liturgical context always appeared as a cult object, was motivated primarily by its artistic aspects. On the other hand, it should be recognised that his personal inclination towards 'Christian' art was something completely natural for him. Indeed, besides the aforementioned Giotto, he also later acknowledged his love for the Renaissance, the Trecento, and Fra Angelico.

Dušan Buran, who has conducted the most detailed analysis of Fulla's relationship with mediaeval painting to date, has expressed the rather daring hypothesis that the icon made its way into Fulla's work via his knowledge of the work of the Russian avant-garde (Kazimir Malevich? Vladimir Tatlin? Vasilii Kandinsky?).<sup>45</sup> The stumbling block for this hypothesis is that it cannot be supported by any verifiable facts, even less so perhaps than could the possible parallels and analogies in his typographical work. Later, however, Buran espouses a different proposition about the primary role of Fulla's visual memory, about its selective character, about the capacity to synthesise the pictorial conception through the sophisticated elaboration of a whole spectrum of stimuli. In this sense Fulla was not one of those intellectuals who needed to elucidate these issues and questions conceptually or to classify them in actual scientific terms. He was above all an artist, and, as we know, artists generally have a tendency (a need?) to obscure or muddy any traces of origin, rather than owning up to them. Whatever the other aspects of his relationship to Byzantine and mediaeval art, he found in it a support for his personal worldview, his lifelong religious devotion and his ideas of a still-enduring pan-Slavism and a contemporised Slavophilia. Significant aspects of this art for him include: its archaic iconographic figures and its compositional schemes

(evident particularly in Fulla's variations on the Madonna and the Crucifixion); its arrangement of scenes into strips; the narrative organisation of cycles into registers, one on top of the other, that we see in mediaeval mural painting; later, the use of the triptych form; the emphasis on the sacral, hieratic frontality and statue-like character of the figures; the adoption of reverse perspective; the two-dimensional manner of presenting a subject; and the non-representational, expressive, and symbolic role of colour with gold effects. In the first half of the 1930s, Fulla was able to elaborate and integrate all this into his pictures partly in his own fashion, and partly also in the spirit of the postulates of modernism, whose aim was to suppress as much as possible the mimetic qualities of the picture, its realistic and objective discursiveness, in the name of its artistic autonomisation, while always simultaneously emphasising and preserving its intellectual message and the emotional unity of his art. And while Fulla, the reflective and serious modernist, could mediate such an aim through the form of his paintings, he always did so in relation to their content.

According to Ján Abelovský, the painting *Song and Labour* was the proverbial 'turning point' for Fulla, after which his chief ambition became the portrayal of the 'national myth in its traditional form'.<sup>46</sup> While, in Fulla's work up to that point, the Slovak theme had been one of a series of themes, among which civic and urban subjects dominated, from this moment on the inclination towards national issues became the determining one. Unlike his predecessors, however, Fulla sought to shift the Slovak theme to the level of modern painterly representation and to express it through formal and artistic means. He also now definitively settled on the compromising approach towards avant-garde conceptions of the picture that he maintained thereafter. We have already noted that Fulla's most radical sidestep away from the avant-garde took place in the applied disciplines; it is now time to mention, in regard to that fact, another hypothesis. The fact that Fulla did not continue in the realm of abstraction was not only the consequence of the conservative environment in which he lived and worked, or of the Slovak public's unpreparedness to understand a new method of artistic expression. This fact probably had much deeper and stronger motivations, internal and related to Fulla's personality. The artist grasped the picture as, in its own way, a sacred artefact, one that is supposed to have its own 'aura' and must communicate or be the interpreting medium for a specific ideational message. For Fulla it was essential that the picture remained bound to the concrete subject and to the expressed idea arising from it: 'For him, a step towards radical abstraction meant ... a step towards the abyss'.<sup>47</sup> It was in this way that Fulla's convictions triumphed over his artistic explorations, and that the more traditional aspect of his talent won out over a transitory avant-garde experimentalism (still sometimes seen as a 'timeless' element of his work even today).

### **Optical Reality and the Reality of the Picture**

So far we have examined Fulla's efforts and forays on the field of the avant-garde, but we cannot neglect another side of his work, one that to a greater or lesser degree concerns a more faithful manner of presenting reality. This stands as proof that there was another Ludovít Fulla: someone who was matter-of-fact, more conventional, perhaps even more conservative. The latter term seems too harsh a way to describe his work; it would not be entirely right to take those creative strivings and tendencies of thought that found expression in several works of a different nature, and set them simply and mechanically in antithesis to Fulla's other works. In the beginning, amid the formation of the new pictorial conception that upset traditional relations with the object and its representation, there arose several works in which Fulla preserved the unity and wholeness of external reality as mediated through sensory perception. Here he neither abstracted nor analysed reality, nor did he break it down into parts, yet he also did not attempt simply to copy it, subjecting it still to artistic deformation and stylisation. Simply put, the core agenda in creating these works was not experimentation with form.

Fulla remarked for the first time on so-called 'realistic' painting in 1934, in a well-known and oft-cited conversation with Jaroslav Zatloukal. To the extent that Fulla himself felt a need to explain his situation, he described one group of his works—the more abstract and 'artistic' ones—as 'compositional' painting as opposed to 'realistic' painting. 'Realistic painting has always

interested me and I really learned a lot from it. I later transposed it to the compositional manner of painting that is my own characteristic style. The results of my engagement with realistic painting, which I cultivated from time to time and developed virtually in parallel with my characteristic work, were never shown to the wider public for the simple reason that they depended more on nature and did not constitute for me an act of full expression'.<sup>48</sup> In this regard, Radislav Matuščík spoke of the 'tension between two aspects', of the polar relationship between 'the more concrete and the more abstracted'.<sup>49</sup> The presence of two different expressive standpoints in Fulla's work can be explained by his capacity to see and express the surrounding world in several, or at least two, different visual modes at the same time.

As a perceptive artist Fulla certainly grasped that he would not conquer any new territory of artistic thought with this style of painting. It might be asked then why he created pictures of this kind. Did these works comprise a 'privatissimo' that Fulla, as he suggested, did not want to make too public? In the late 1920s and early 1930s, this 'concrete' manner of expression began to appear especially in two genres of painting, and later graphic work as well: the portrait and the landscape. At the very time when he was producing his most radical experiments in painting, he also produced two portraits: the civically oriented *Likeness of P.P. (Podobizeň p. P., 1930)*, and *Girl from Ždiar (Dievča zo Ždiaru, 1931)*, which has a folkloric theme, depicting the head of a young girl in folk costume. According to Iva Mojžišová, Fulla used a photographic source here, which was certainly highly unusual for him.<sup>50</sup> We can add to these a slightly later work, *Portrait of a Lady (Portrét panej, 1934)*, in which Fulla depicted, in three-quarter profile, his future wife Juliana Klára. Yet it is difficult to describe these pictures as 'realistic' in the true sense of the word, though they retain a sensory and empirical basis. Fulla may adhere to the aims of portraiture—namely, to capture effectively and faithfully the concrete motion or position of the head and body (whether *en face*, or in half- or quarter-profile) and the psycho-physiognomic traits of the face of the subject—but he also submits these renderings to a visually expressive, painterly, and temperamentally-enlivening transformation. He moulds these likenesses with thick paints and strikes the canvas with powerful, not too 'groomed', and slightly disorderly brushstrokes. The artist certainly does not hide his inspiration by the formal approaches of Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, or Fauvism. In a similar vein, Fulla capitalised on what he had learned from these approaches in early landscape paintings such as *Barracks (Kasárne, 1927)*, *Port in Marseilles (Prístav v Marseille, 1929)*, *Winter Motif (Zimný motív / Zimný motív od Černovej, c. 1930)*, *Landscape from Liptov (Krajinka z Liptova, 1931)*, *Landscape from Donovaly (Krajina z Donovalov, 1934)* and *Kráľova hola* (small version produced in 1933).

To sum up and underline, the turn towards reality and concreteness was probably more the result of Fulla's luxuriant talent, which the artist felt the need to verify and test out with more than one approach. At the beginning, when his choice of artistic methods was by no means homogenous (as is quite natural for a young artist), this was about a process of searching, the fulfilment of creative curiosity and a taste for trying out the maximum number of possibilities. In the second half of the 1930s these factors were joined by other, extra-artistic ones: after years of struggling and battling for the avant-garde, which was no easy endeavour in conservative Slovakia, Fulla ascertained through his own art that one could also prove publicly successful with 'concrete' paintings. Indeed in 1936 he received an award for landscape painting with his picture *Landscape from Donovaly*, while the second, larger, more refined version of *Kráľova hola* (1937) probably originated in a commission. In this way, Fulla could attract the interest of the domestic market, even if the latter then only existed in a rudimentary form. His initial client was the state (as embodied in specific departments and institutions), along with various individuals who knew the artist, had some connection to his art, and came from the middle ranks of the intelligentsia (often the medical sector). Though Fulla certainly enjoyed being successful and recognised, he still did not like selling his pictures. This was something that he initially only did exceptionally, for personal reasons and perhaps as a means of livelihood (though it is difficult today to find the proof to either confirm or refute this hypothesis). Despite, or perhaps because of, his peculiarly 'speculative' character, he took great care to preserve and cultivate his legacy of artwork, the result being that



this work never got scattered among various private collections. In the 1940s Fulla made perhaps his most marked retreat from his established artistic positions. His painterly approach was now no longer concrete or objective, but aimed rather at an illustrative descriptiveness, while his work generally evinced a creative floundering, determined by personal and extra-artistic realities. In the 1950s it was still possible to find in Fulla's work some signs of the old style and brushwork, with their characteristic multiplicity of paths and tracks followed, though such signs tended to appear in works of a private nature that the painter had no intention of making public. By the turn of the 1950s and 1960s the characteristic style had weakened virtually to the point of disappearing, as Fulla's artistic stance became ever more homogenous.

*Translated by Jonathan Owen*

- 1 Katarína Bajcurová, *Ludovít Fulla* (Bratislava: Petrus/Slovart/ Slovak National Gallery, 2009).
- 2 Ludovít Fulla, *Okamihy a vyznania*, Ján Medved (ed.) (Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1983), p. 163.
- 3 Radislav Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla* (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo slovenského fondu výtvarných umení, 1966), p. 45.
- 4 Ludovít Fulla, 'O najmenších umelcoch', in *1934–1935. Výročná správa učňovských škôl a Školy umeleckých remesiel v Bratislave. Päť rokov práce v novej budove* (Bratislava: Nákl Správnej komisie učňovských škôl a kuratória Školy umeleckých remesiel v Bratislave, 1935), p. 21.
- 5 Fulla, 'O najmenších umelcoch', p. 21.
- 6 Reproduced in *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu*, 3–4 (1932), unpaginated (self-published).
- 7 Fulla, 'O najmenších umelcoch', p. 22.
- 8 Iva Mojžišová, 'Bratislavská utópia Josefa Vydru', in Ján Bakoš and Iva Mojžišová (eds.), *Kontexty českého a slovenského umenia. Zborník z konferencie Ústavu dejín umenia Slovenskej akadémie vied* (Bratislava: Správa kultúrnych zariadení Ministerstva kultúry, 1990), p. 48. On the history of the School of Arts and Crafts (ŠUR) see: Iva Mojžišová, *Škola moderného videnia. Bratislavská ŠUR 1928–1939* (Bratislava: Slovenské centrum dizajnu/Artforum, 2013).
- 9 Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla*, p. 46.
- 10 Vladimír Wagner, *Ludo Fulla* (Prague and Prešov: Československá grafická unie, 1935), p. 11.
- 11 Želmíra Duchajová-Švehlová, 'Tvorba Luda Fullu', *Živena*, 28/8–9 (1938): p. 216.
- 12 Eva Šefčáková, *Grafika Ludovíta Fullu*, exhibition catalogue, SNG (Bratislava, 1962), p. 4.
- 13 *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu*, 2 (1930), unpaginated.
- 14 Wagner, *Ludo Fulla*, p. 8.
- 15 Fulla, *Okamihy a vyznania*, p. 295.
- 16 Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla*, p. 40.
- 17 Oskár Čepan, 'Človek pred obrazom a obraz za človekom', *Slovenské pohľady*, 80/1 (1964): p. 137.
- 18 Fulla and Galanda intended to launch a magazine to publish their manifestos and views. However, there were only three issues (no.1, 2, and 3–4).
- 19 Zora Rusinová, 'Básnici s podviazanými krídlami', in Katarína Bajcurová (ed.), *Fulla 2002*, exhibition catalogue, SNG (Bratislava, 2002), pp. 120–130.
- 20 *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu*, 1 (1930), unpaginated.
- 21 Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla*, p. 55.
- 22 Zdeněk Hlaváček, 'Slovenské malífství přítomnosti', *Index* (25 May 1932), unpaginated.
- 23 *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu*, 1 (1930), unpaginated.
- 24 Dagmar Poláčková, 'Typografia 1924–1932', in Bajcurová (ed.), *Fulla 2002*, p. 145.
- 25 Iva Mojžišová, 'ŠUR a moderna', in Zora Rusinová (ed.), *Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia – 20. storočie* (Bratislava: SNG, 2000), p. 23.
- 26 Iva Mojžišová, 'Konštrukcia, pohyb, svetlo. Podnety a predchodcovia kinetizmu na Slovensku (1929–1939)', *MAD/ Art Periodical* 4 (2002): pp. 18–27.
- 27 Thomas Strauss, 'Das Handwerk, die Volkunst und die Vorkriegsavantgarde. Die Kunstgewerbeschule von Bratislava 1928–1939', in Susanne Anna (ed.), *Das Bauhaus im Osten. Slowakische und Tschechische Avantgarde 1928–1939*, exhibition catalogue, Städtisches Museum Leverkusen (Leverkusen, 1997), pp. 32–49. Strauss alerted us to the need for a thorough exploration of the relationship between Fulla and Kudlák, who was active around 1921 in the Ma-Kreis Viennese circle of Hungarian emigrants, and who as a student at the School of Arts and Crafts could have provided his teacher with 'some direct information about Kassák, Bortnyik and Moholy-Nagy, in all of whom Fulla had a deep interest'. For more information see: Thomas Strauss, 'Kassáki impulzus. Néhány rejtett összefüggés', in *Kassák 1887–1987*, exhibition catalogue, Magyar Nemzeti Galéria (Budapest, 1987), pp. 31–37.
- 28 The magazine *Slovenská grafia* came out between 1929 and 1933 and was dedicated to raising the standard of printing and to promoting beautiful examples of print. It was published by a Bratislava firm of the same name run by Karol Jaroň, and it published articles by progressive authors (Josef Rybák, Jaroslav Vodrážka, Karel Štika, Ladislav Sutnar, Zdeněk Rossmann, Vladimír Clementis, Adolf Loos). Fulla designed the journal's first volume (1929–1931).
- 29 *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu*, 1 (1930), unpaginated.
- 30 Harald Olbrich, 'Die Kunstgewerbeschule in Bratislava und das Bauhaus', in *Bauhaus im Osten*, p. 58.
- 31 Iva Mojžišová, 'Vydova nová škola', in Igor p. Meluzin and Vladislav Rostoka (eds.), *ARTSCHOOL. ŠUR + ŠUP + ŠÚV = 75* (Bratislava: Rabbit & Solution studio, 2007), pp. 49–50.
- 32 Ján Kostra, 'U maliara Luda Fullu', *Elán* 10/4 (1939): p. 5.
- 33 Fulla's works were part of the exhibition *L'Art Moderne Tchécoslovaque*, which was first held at the Gallerie Jean Charpentier, and later in the exhibition grounds of the just-built Palais des Arts under the heading *Exposition Internationale de Paris 1937*. The selection was prepared by Jaromír Pečírka a Václav Nebeský, the latter of whom incorporated these works into an opinion-forming publication: Václav Nebeský, *L'Art Moderne Tchécoslovaque (1903–1933)* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1937). Fulla's *Madonna* (1931) was acquired by the French state as part of a collection of Czechoslovak modern art, among works by Josef Čapek, Jan Zrzavý, Emil Filla, Otakar Kubín, Antonín Procházka, Otto Gutfreund and others, and originally belonged to the collection of the Musée Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris (today it belongs to the Musée National d'Arte Moderne Centre Georges Pompidou).
- 34 Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla*, p. 57.
- 35 Wagner, *Ludo Fulla*, p. 11.
- 36 Jozef Ciger-Hronský, *Janko Alexy* (Bratislava: Učiteľské vydavateľstvo slovenské UNÁS, 1934), p. 14.
- 37 Zdeněk Hlaváček, *Ludovít Fulla* (Prague: Nakladatelství československých výtvarných umělců, 1962), p. 9.
- 38 Čepan, 'Človek pred obrazom a obraz za človekom', pp. 135–137.
- 39 Miroslav Lamač, *Maliari o sebe a svojom diele* (Bratislava: SVKL, 1964), p. 440.
- 40 Lamač, *Maliari o sebe a svojom diele*, p. 440.



41 An extensive publication appeared in connection with this exhibition: Karel Sourek (ed.), *Umění na Slovensku. Odkaz země a lidu* (Prague: Melantrich, 1938).

42 Fulla was part of the delegation of artists sent to the exhibition of Czechoslovak art. But this did not take place at the Treťiakov Gallery (as he had expected), but at Moscow's State Museum of New Western Art (Gostudarstvennyi Muzei Novogo Zapadnogo Iskusstva). He published his observations in the essay 'O ruskom a našom výtvarnom umení', in *Robotnícke noviny* (5 December 1937). In his opinions at this time, Fulla was evidently leaning away from 'extremely modern directions' towards more conservative standpoints, and stressed the social function of ('comprehensible') art. At the time when he visited the Soviet Union, the concept of Socialist Realism, as established by Stalin's diktat, had already taken over.

43 Nikodim p. Kondakov (1844–1925) was an art historian, expert in Old Russian art, Byzantologist, and founding figure of modern Russian archaeology. After the October Revolution he emigrated and settled in Prague. Following his death, the Seminarium Kondakovianum (1925) was created in Prague in his honour, and this institution published his four-volume work *Russkaja ikona* (1928–1933). In 1931, the Seminarium was turned into the Archeological Institute of Nikodim p. Kondakov.

44 Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla*, p. 13. In 1923, the Ukrainian Artists' Studio, also known as the 'Ukrainian Academy', arose in Prague, and this offered a whole system of education in the field of fine art, applied art, and architecture. It was open to new European artistic currents and attracted the elite among the Ukrainian emigrants. It ceased its activities in 1952. In 1925, the studio established a museum collection, and after the studio's closure in the 1950s this was transferred to the Slavic Library.

45 Dušan Buran, "...v hľadání absolútna..." Niekolko úvah k téme Fulla a stredoveký obraz', in Bajcurová (ed.), *Fulla 2002*, p. 137. As to whether Fulla was aware of the work of the Russian avant-gardists, today we can only speculate. Little help is offered by overly general statements made by Fulla, like the following: 'My models? It is hard to answer this question. There were not just one or two models ... There was the whole breadth of modern French art, which reached us from the West, through all the different routes, like a swelling wave whose crest foamed with an absolute creative freedom. Names like: Braque, Matisse, Picasso, Rouault, Chagall, Dufy...'. Fulla, *Okamihy a vyznania*, p. 289.

46 Ján Abelovský and Katarína Bajcurová, *Výtvarná moderna Slovenska. Maliarstvo a sochárstvo 1890–1949* (Bratislava: p. Popelka and Slovart, 1997; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000), p. 403. English version: Beata Havelská and Kevin Slavin (trans.), *Art in Changing Times. Painting & Sculpture in Slovakia 1890–1949* (Bratislava: p. Popelka and Slovart, 2000).

47 Buran, "...v hľadání absolútna..."", pp. 131–140.

48 Jaroslav Zatloukal, in *Slovenský denník* (22 July 1934).

49 Matuščík, *Ludovít Fulla*, p. 44.

50 Private correspondence.

# Biomorphism as Avant-Garde Deconstruction

ANDRZEJ TUROWSKI

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## **Biomorphism as Avant-Garde Deconstruction**

Although Władysław Strzemiński allowed geometry to become a constructive feature in his series of *Architectonic Compositions* (*Kompozycje architektoniczne*, 1926–1929) the geometric rigour of the picture was not, strictly speaking, his central concern. He took 'the reality of abstract painting' as the basis for every artistic manifestation, in searching for 'organic construction' as an absolute creative principle, 'incommensurable with any vision of fragmentary nature'.<sup>1</sup> 'Just as illusionistic painting drew on plastic elements from surrounding objects of nature', he wrote, 'so the painting of concrete abstract realism draws its elements from plastic thinking, seeking to realise the picture as an organic entity, in line with other phenomena of life and based on the strict laws of plastic construction'.<sup>2</sup> Hans Arp was also against copying nature. He wanted to create without recreating, 'to produce as a plant which produces fruit'.<sup>3</sup> He wrote that 'nothing is less abstract than Abstract art', which is why 'Van Doesburg and Kandinsky have suggested that Abstract art should be called Concrete art', adding, in a spirit that was a long way from Strzemiński's materialism, that such works are 'constructed with lines, surfaces, shapes and colours. They reach beyond human values and attain the infinite and the eternal'.<sup>4</sup>

Jan Brzękowski notes that unlike most Frenchmen, Arp demonstrated a keen interest in what was happening in Poland in the fields of poetry and art. He had a good deal of respect for Strzemiński and Henryk Stażewski, and recalled 'that at one point [Arp] asked me to propose to Strzemiński on his behalf a mutual exchange of pictures, which—I believe—came to fruition...'.<sup>5</sup> Strzemiński came across Arp's work in 1929. The source of his first encounter were reproductions

included in *L'Art Contemporain / Sztuka Współczesna*. Strzemiński also received other European avant-garde journals in which works by Hans Arp and Sophie Tauber-Arp could be seen. At around the same time, via Brzękowski, Arp became interested in the international collection of the group 'a.r.' being created by Strzemiński; the French artist was able to help a good deal, and gathering works for the collection became a pretext for direct correspondence and an exchange of publications between the two artists. This was also how Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro became acquainted with the work of Sophie Tauber-Arp.

Despite his fascination with Arp's linear forms, Strzemiński's thoughts on 'concrete plastic realism' and on the aims of artistic creation did not coincide with Arp's idea of art, which was formulated differently, and emerged from different artistic and philosophical traditions. While the formal aspects of their work clearly began to resemble one another over the course of the 1930s, their ideological positions on fundamental questions remained different, despite appearing similar in some respects. I am not convinced that the artists had any broader awareness of one another's theoretical deliberations, besides being aware of one another's works. Their mother tongues were different (German and French / Russian and Polish), and they had different ways of expressing problems (prose-theoretical / poetic). Of course, Strzemiński was familiar with the Polish-language translations of Arp's text included in *L'Art Contemporain / Sztuka Współczesna* in 1930, just as Arp read the two texts by Strzemiński published in French in *Abstraction-Création* in 1933.<sup>6</sup> But this was not much, and was certainly insufficient to overcome the cultural differences that divided the two artists. The creators of 'concrete plastic realism' had arrived at an understanding based on an interpretation of form and its more biological-naturalistic than socio-physiological motivation, though this was never directly articulated in their pronouncements.

Strzemiński's artistic journey, begun in Russia, was firmly rooted in the debates around Constructivist formalism and the technical-Productivist modernisation of art in the socio-political context of the Bolshevik revolution. Like Aleksander Rodchenko, Strzemiński treated line, in material terms, as 'an element by whose exclusive means we can construct and create'.<sup>7</sup> As of 1915, Arp became strongly associated with early Dada, which was why he emphasised other things. For him, line always represented chance. In producing linear 'compositions of string attached to the canvas' or by tearing paper in his *découpages*, he sought to introduce the elements of chance and play into art. Arp was particularly sensitive to the ludic, born of Dada. He wrote 'amidst merriment by way of Tzara and by way of me'.<sup>8</sup> 'Dada is the mother earth of all art', he added; 'Dada is for senselessness and not for nonsense. Dada [is] without meaning, like nature and like life. Dada is for Nature and against "art" ... Dada is "moral" like nature and is for limitless meaning and limited means'.<sup>9</sup> Arp's art-theoretical position assumed that contemporary art had an ethical dimension, coloured by the specific spirituality embodied in nature. This inclination had been transmitted to Dada Zürich by the German artists formerly associated with Expressionism. The Primitivism and naturalism of these circles propagated slogans concerning the return to the bosom of nature. Expressionism saw the emergence of spiritual groupings seeking a renewal of values that had been lost through the mechanisation of life and bourgeois egoism. The Dadaist and Surrealist Arp proclaimed that 'paintings, sculptures, objects should remain anonymous and form part of nature's great workshop, as leaves do, and clouds, animals and men'.<sup>10</sup> One could also cite Strzemiński's imaginary dialogue with Arp: 'the irrationalism, biologism and primitivism which you oppose [to] the rationalisation of form and the industrialisation of art, are the expression of a general orientation towards the biologism of plants and cultivation on smallholding farms and replacing contemporary rationalised industry with products from small craft workshops'.<sup>11</sup> Speaking as though he were Arp, as part of this same, imaginary, debate, Leon Chwistek replied: 'The survival instinct relies on the discovery of a new reality, one that is as we wish it to be, one that we have a right to dream about, simply because we are certain that reality is born of imagination'.<sup>12</sup> If Strzemiński's *Architectonic Compositions* presented the utopia of 'art formed by life', then, according to the artist, his *Seascapes (Pejzaże morskie)*, likewise, were simply intended as 'leisure compositions', training the eye to be one with nature, in search of the physiological and social identity of man in the surrounding world. Strzemiński wrote that 'the plastic form

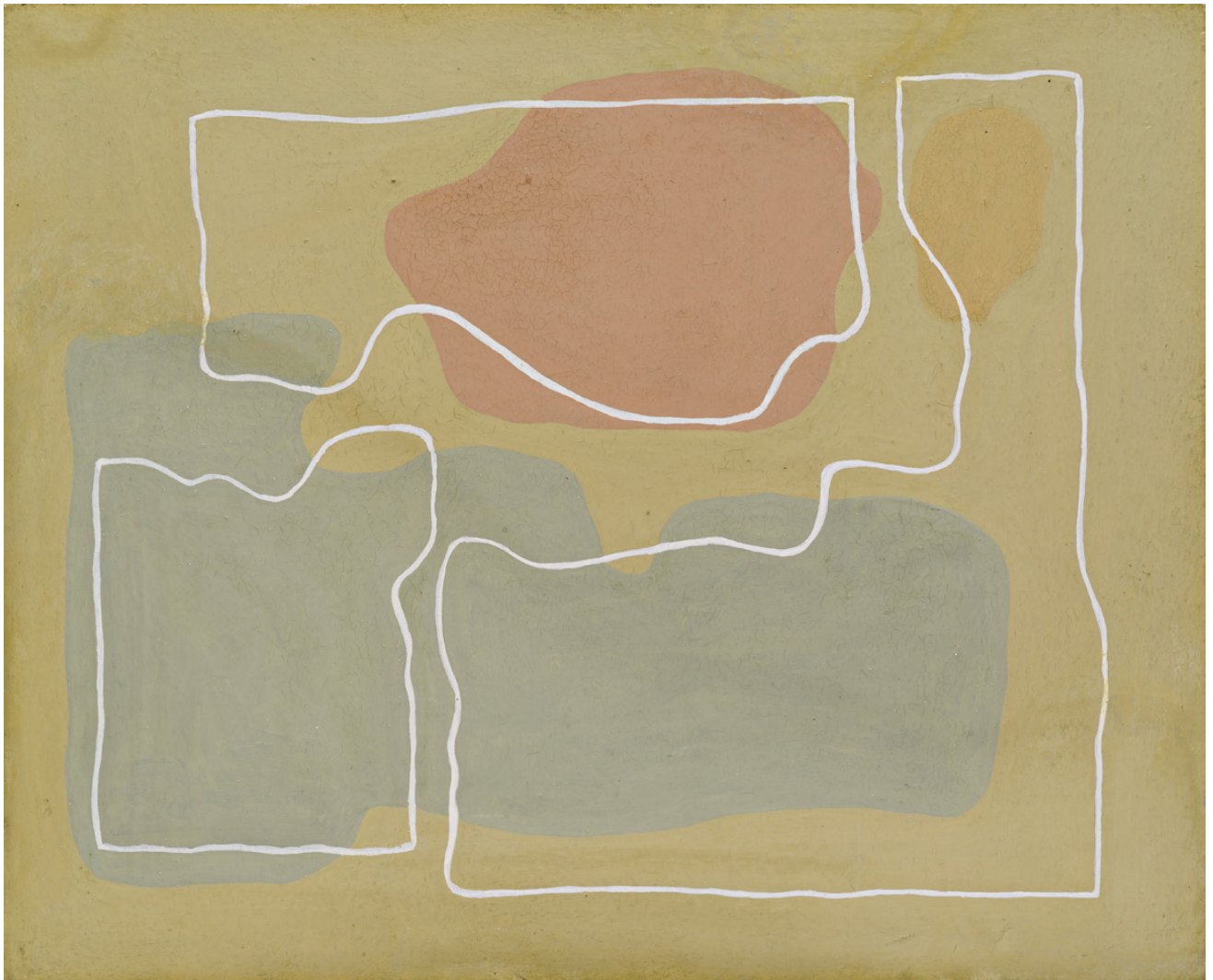


Fig. 9.1. Władysław Strzemiński, *Seascape (Pejzaż morski)*, 1934). Tempera on card, 21 x 27 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

characterising every epoch emerges from the foundation of the visual content attained in that epoch'. This may be why Arp's sincere conviction that 'concrete art wishes to transform the world. It wishes to render existence more tolerable' related to Strzemiński's faith,<sup>13</sup> expressed on the margins of his painted *Seascapes*, that 'the evolution of movements occurred by way of the power of the slogan of organic and unified composition. And human desires tend towards this same organic and unified organisation of life...' (Fig. 9.1).<sup>14</sup>

The beginning of the 1930s marked a breakthrough in Strzemiński's work. This was when he ceased painting *Architectonic Compositions* (1924–1929), based on the law of contrast and the mathematical calculation of forms, and began his series of *Unist Compositions (Kompozycje unistyczne)*, 1931–1934), in which he sought to unite form with the surface. This was also the time when his first tempera *Seascapes (Pejzaże)* appeared, with architectonic forms piled up on their surface, producing an impression of spatial resolution. They combined figurative forms with abstractions, over- or underlaid with transparent colour stains assuming curved oval forms (1931). These were the earliest biomorphic forms in Strzemiński's work, their spatial construction calling into question the flat character of Unism while also pointing in the direction of the series of stereoscopically-organised *Seascapes* (1932). The painted *Unist Compositions* tended in two directions. On the one hand the artist was searching for the materiality of the picture by way of the factual application of unified, repeated, identical small forms, and by way of colours, revealing the volume of paint and the luminous texture of the surface (1931–1932). On the other hand, the artist liberated forms from the surface by employing a curved line in the monochromatic compositions, giving the fleshy reels of pasty colour linear independence and ever-greater freedom (1933–1934). Strzemiński took advantage of the loosening of the coherence of compositional rigour within the Unist framework in his series of *Abstract Compositions (Kompozycje abstrakcyjne)*, 1933–1934).





The winding, non-geometric lines and flat, asymmetric forms in the *Abstract Compositions* produce an illusion of spatiality, as though transparently applied (Fig. 9.2). These works approached landscapes, producing the impression of studies of independent abstract forms, their figurative compositions flowing into the linear shapes of the city or seascape. Though they belong to a separate group, Strzemiński's figurative (anthropomorphic) temperas took as their framework similar formal solutions. Here, the biological line delicately delineated the contours of the bodies of figures, sometimes heads or torsos, while the surfaces of stains, painted in a unified way, arranged as though in several overlapping spatial planes, shining through one another, suggested the existence of volumes (1933–1936). The result of these works were series of drawings, beginning with the lithographic portfolio of 1936, produced on technical tracing paper and then printed onto soft drawing paper by outlining the contour of shapes. Unlike the tracing paper used in the seascapes, serving to construct stereoscopic space, in the anthropomorphic drawings, the artist worked out a certain repertoire of forms, which he used in various configurations in subsequent works, giving them various meanings (1936–1945).<sup>15</sup>

The last of the works mentioned, and in particular the figurative drawings and the *Seascapes* that were close to the conception of anthropomorphic or biomorphic construction, were the result of Strzemiński's formal research. Sensing a contradiction in the practical realisation of materialist Unism, he was seeking solutions that went beyond the absurd logic of the structural doctrine reducing a picture to a picture and realising his own theory in art. In the *Seascapes*, the infinite expanse of the blue of the sky and the water, underpinned by the horizontal format of the picture, stressing the unmarked line of the horizon, brought forth a transparent play of white and navy stains, as well as soft lines reminiscent of clouds flowing in many layers and configurations,

Fig. 9.2. Władysław Strzemiński, *Abstract Composition (Kompozycja abstrakcyjna)* 1933. Tempera on card, 20 x 24.5 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



and the waves of the sea approaching and receding in regular patterns, their crests twinkling in the sun. The introduction of the physiological spatiality of seeing in these works undermined the aesthetic of surface and reason that had been accepted unanimously to date. As a result, on the basis of theoretical considerations, the artist once again took up the problem of the organic construction of the work of art and the physiology of seeing in art. Alongside these, there emerged the aesthetic consideration of the laws governing visual consciousness and the dynamic of the biological rhythms of the eye penetrating space. The problems formulated in this way gave rise to a new theory of seeing, dependent on various aspects of reality and a new biomorphology of the image, taking into consideration the physiological and psychic conditioning of perception.

The key text introducing Strzemiński's new concepts bore the symptomatic title 'Aspects of Reality' and was published in the Łódź journal *Forma* (*Form*) in 1936. It had been preceded, the year before, by a short commentary on a *Seascape* of 1934, as regards which the artist wrote that:

form is the result of the stratification and mutual deformation of the individual elements of nature. The whiteness of waves and the curving line of the shore, merging with the shift of the gaze from one to the other, create lines with a rhythm common to the whole. My goal was the rhythm resulting from the mutual interaction of all the elements of the landscape, produced by the emergence of interdependences and influences, produced by every element of nature on all the others, the rhythm of the whole as a fluid continuum of irregular symmetry.<sup>16</sup>

In his discussion with Chwistek in May 1935 (published in the same journal), Strzemiński tried to defend his position, proscribing the elimination of time from painting, arguing that the existence of time in the form of the rhythm of shapes superseding one another resulted in a 'weakening of the degree of the organicity of the picture'.<sup>17</sup> A year later, in August 1936, perhaps under the concealed influence of Chwistek's idea of the 'multiplicity of realities in art' and his idea of 'Stratificationism' (*Stratyzm*), Strzemiński radically changed his mind and waxed eloquent about the various 'aspects of reality' in art and the changing 'visual content' associated with these as a result of the movement of the observer's eye, linking fragments of the reality in question into various wholes. Strzemiński wrote:

The movement of the eye, the character of the line drawn by the moving gaze becomes one of the main components in new visual content ... Every formal component visible in nature influences every other, transforming it. The movement of the eye, the trace of the gliding gaze, the biological life of the contracting and expanding muscles are connected with the shape of elements of form seen in nature, creating a common rhythm of form. This rhythm is to a great extent the rhythm of autonomous movements resulting from the muscular and nervous system. It is the rhythm of physiology, linking the contents of individual gazes. This rhythm of the rising and falling line of the vibrating pulse and the movement resulting from the individual and biological reaction of the muscles submits to itself the visual content of individual gazes—it transforms it, producing an ever-changing rhythm of irregular symmetry.<sup>18</sup>

It is hard to say to what extent Strzemiński's formulation of new problems, which clearly entered into the field of considerations relating to biomorphic and anthropomorphic compositions, was the result of his interest in Arp's art. The 'Aspects of Reality' article was illustrated with a reproduction of the Polish artist's own lithographic work *The Unemployed* (*Bezrobotni*) from the portfolio *Łódź without Functionalism* (*Łódź bez funkcjonalizmu*), representing the anthropomorphically-outlined forms of three figures, besides which Strzemiński positioned two drawings from 1932 by Arp scattered on a chance basis with biomorphic forms, as well as a photograph of a sculpture, whose reproduction was captioned *Human* (*Ludzkie*).<sup>19</sup> I am inclined to assume that, like Brzękowski, Strzemiński saw in Arp an unorthodox Surrealist, whose abstract work, breaking out of geometrism's contrasts, cleared a pathway to emotional art, building a poetics that had nothing to do with Expressionistic expression or Surrealist symbolism. Strzemiński saw in Surrealism the connection of emotions with the unconscious, which was the basis, as he stressed in the commentary accompanying *Seascape* cited above,

of the 'association of distant imaginings' that was so important in art. He explained this by way of the psychic connection, so important to Surrealism, between the feeling of human estrangement in the world and biological forms in art expressing the 'internal impulses of man' through 'the physical rhythms of the eye and the body'.<sup>20</sup>

It is hardly surprising then that, despite his sharp criticism of the ethics of Surrealism, as expressing the 'pulse and sound of blood' leading man to the 'depths of blind instincts and aggressive reactions, controlled, though not diminished, by the development of culture', Strzemiński's analysis of this tendency was surprisingly apposite for a Constructivist (or a former Constructivist) and of fundamental importance for the psychophysiological interpretation of the most recent art and for a biological perception of the world.<sup>21</sup> In light of this, it seems that, although he never said so directly, Strzemiński would have been happy to affiliate his series of *Seascapes* with the circle of associations to the biomorphic stylistics of the sea amoeba and the imagination approaching the Surrealist unconscious. He could not do so, however, while perceiving in Surrealism an existential tension which his physiological *Seascapes* were supposed to eliminate. Their biologism of form could be a 'desire to identify with nature', as in the work of Arp, but not one that 'dragged along grey sacks full of sombre sighs'.<sup>22</sup> Strzemiński would have agreed with Arp, who stressed: 'I showed with the suprarealists because I liked their revolutionary attitude to "art" and direct approach to life but not the condemnation [of] a "tragic existence"'.<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, too, Strzemiński's organic conceptualisation of art, expressing a direct approach to life, was the source of his approval for Surrealist naturalism, whose essence he saw in the biological evolution of form and in the physiology of visual sensations. Like Arp, he was resistant to the 'tragic existence' expressed by Surrealism. Strzemiński wrote:

Surrealism's experiential complex is the reality of man. Man stands before the world and recognises himself, listening in to his hidden reactions and undulations. This uncontrolled flow of associations connected with other associations—the flow of associations being interwoven with the undulation of physiological reactions and jolts—fills out the whole reality of sensations ... The world of Surrealism is the reality of man, listening in to himself, so as to know his essence, the truth about himself, as he is, in spite of that which has been created by centuries under the social yoke, the reactions of other people, adopted conventions, concealed injuries and self-denial. The liberation of one's impulses, stifled by society, and yet still there ... This is why almost the only form used by the Surrealists is the biological line, sketching out a hunched-up shapeless mass—an amoeba tossed out of the sea, a Galatea pulsating on the lonely coast beneath the sun and feeling uncoordinated sensations. Everything emerged from the sea. Organic being came into existence in the sea; it was there that the first organic cell came into existence and thence that the whole animal and plant world emerged, taking on its current forms by way of evolution. The sea is the source of existence and the amoeba is the starting point for all further variations of the one and indivisible being.<sup>24</sup>

Strzemiński's expression of approval for Surrealist emotion and for biological and, at the same time, sensual form did not fundamentally change his views on art and society, however. The similarity between his shapes and those present in the art of Arp, whose work Strzemiński perceived in his own manner as a physiological rhythm of the eye encompassing the natural world surrounding it in contemplative forms, was not sufficient to definitively abandon 'the productive utilitarianism of functional art in the service of a society organised into a system of unified purposefulness...'.<sup>25</sup> But he was no longer a Constructivist. Strzemiński's works of the second half of the 1930s, of the war period, the post-war series of photomontages devoted *To My Friends the Jews (Moim przyjaciółom Żydom)*, and, finally, his series of paintings of afterimages of the sun, offer clear evidence of this.

The dramatisation of pictorial space, along with subjectively experienced corporeality, that Strzemiński had eradicated in Unism, returned in the tempera city- and seascapes as well as in the silhouette outline figures of the 1930s and 1940s. Its return undermined the whole order of Constructivist practice and, above all, the purist imagination, to which the artist would not return.

Fig. 9.3. Katarzyna Kobro, *Spatial Composition 9* (*Kompozycja przestrzenna 9*), 1933. Metal, oil paint, 15.5 x 35 x 19 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



Fig. 9.4. Katarzyna Kobro, *Seascape* (*Pejzaż morski*, 1934). Plaster, bas-relief, 22.5 x 40.5 x 8 cm. Private Collection, France.



### From Biomechanics to Biomorphism

Nowadays it has become customary to interpret Katarzyna Kobro's sculpture within the categories of corporeality and sexuality.<sup>26</sup> The contemporary approach to Kobro's sculpture, however, seems unable to grasp the aesthetic principle of form (formalism) that was the foundation of all her work. The introduction of the concept of biomorphism to deliberations on the artist's work makes it possible to revise, once more, the state of research and to return to the question of the role of biological naturalism and biomorphic formalism (or neo-formalism) in the avant-garde art of the mid-1930s. To be more specific: it will not so much enable us to pose the question of Kobro's Constructivist formalism, as of neo-formalism being, in this case, a deconstruction of the Constructivist and biomechanical category of form conceived of in terms of the mathematical law of spatial rhythms, the logic of abstract space and the social aim of shaping man's surroundings (design). Neo-formalism accepted that which was hidden and incomplete in form, that which was hard to grasp clearly or to calculate precisely; it prioritised the curved line over the straight line, and the biological form over the mechanical. Kobro's biomorphism, characteristic of her gypsum nudes and, above all, her metal *Spatial Composition 9* (*Kompozycja przestrzenna 9*, Fig. 9.3) and sculptural *Seascape* (Fig. 9.4) of the years 1934 to 1935, fundamentally critical of geometrical and technical forms, played precisely this role.

The formal transformation occurred around 1933 to 1934, when Kobra made the startling oval-shaped metal sculpture, known today, probably incorrectly, as *Spatial Composition 9* and so unlike any of her work to date.<sup>27</sup> Its form was close to another sculpture, hitherto thought to be lost or destroyed but recently rediscovered, which was known from the artist's catalogues and monographs under the title *Nude 5 (Akt 5)*. Its existence was known from a reproduction in the Paris journal *Abstraction-Création: Art Non-Figuratif*.<sup>28</sup> The reproduction was not supplied with a title, though Kobra's surname was given. There has not been much written about this bas-relief. The only study devoted to it to date has been one by Agnieszka Skalska. In her deliberations, the author sought deep connections between the Constructivist compositions and the Cubistic nudes, perceiving in *Nude 5* 'the essence of "organic" structure so characteristic for the sculptor's work'.<sup>29</sup> She wrote:

I think that there is a link between the two types of Kobra's creative activity, an organic connection, relating to the principle of constructing the spatial—in the case of the abstract sculptures, and the bodily—in the case of the nudes. Kobra's nudes are abstract organic creations. They reduce the bodily to abstract identity. Their existence is particularly significant in the context of the arguments [advanced in] the *Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time Rhythm* and its sculptural manifestations.<sup>30</sup>

However, it soon transpired that it was not possible to clothe the body in pure form, while reducing the body to a spatial algorithm. The bioforms in both the works by Kobra in question did not smooth over cracks but rather illuminated them critically, revealing the profound change in attitude and conceptualisation of the world that had taken place in the circle of avant-garde artists in the 1930s.

Let us return to Katarzyna Kobra and her biomorphic modelling. The plaster bas-relief representing a *Seascape*, re-discovered in 2014, is of the utmost significance here.<sup>31</sup> In view of the original being unknown, its treatment as a nude, to date, has been based on free associations suggested by the shape reproduced on a relatively poor-quality slide. In the photograph, it seems as though it may be a vertically-positioned anthropomorphic form. Such a judgement was suggested by the human figure in Kobra's work referring to a series of figures from Arp's *Human Concretion (Concrétion humaine, 1935)* as well as to those in her own work. On the basis of this one reproduction, it was hard to determine whether the sculpture (or perhaps the bas-relief featured in the catalogue of one of her shows) was made of clay and then cast in plaster or cement. The possibility that it may have been cement was suggested by comparing it with sculptures by Arp, who cast his works (unusually, the larger ones) in this material. We know of the existence of one cement *Nude* by Kobra, from an exhibition catalogue.<sup>32</sup>

The bas-relief, the original of which is now known, is unique in the artist's oeuvre as a whole. It is characterised by a varied, yet rich, treatment of the profiled surface of the plaster, the subtle play of a soft and wavy line surrounding the whole form, and the fluid, slightly oval modelling of the flattened, convex form. It marks a departure from geometric and rationally-organised works, its non-geometric form belonging to organic, biomorphic abstraction.<sup>33</sup> Reference to the representation of the natural world lies at the very foundations of landscape art, while here, non-figurative deformation makes the abstract form of the bas-relief seem to emerge from nature, taking on biological forms. It was produced at a time when Kobra abandoned 'the mathematical composition of rhythms' and 'the functional straight line', and began, like Strzemiński, to construct forms in accordance with the 'physiological rhythms of the eye' observing the landscape.<sup>34</sup> The bas-relief is doubtless the last work Kobra made before the war and has no parallel in the artist's earlier work. It belongs to a series of seascapes that was begun but not continued, of which only two versions, painted in gouache on paper, are known.<sup>35</sup> We do not know of other sculpted bas-reliefs and can assume that there were none.

Kobra began working on plaster sculptures around 1925. She showed two *Sculptures in Plaster (Rzeźby w gipsie)* at the Modernist Salon (Salon Modernistów) in March 1928 in Warsaw.<sup>36</sup> The plaster nudes were not shown again until 1934.<sup>37</sup> Forms with curved lines, as though organic, appeared in the artist's work in the first abstract sculptures of the years 1921 to 1924.

We encounter them again in the 'cubistic' plaster nudes of 1925 to 1927 mentioned above and solely known from the reproduction of the 1933 work, and, finally, in *Spatial Composition 9* of the same year. Despite the fact that all the sculptures listed here reveal various formal similarities to the plaster *Seascape*, it is *Spatial Composition 9* that is closest to it in terms of style and subject matter. Despite its title, and, as opposed to the 'architectonic' spatial compositions, it was, for the first time, called a 'biomorphic sculpture' in the catalogue of Kobro's work by Zenobia Karnicka. Of *Spatial Composition 9*, Karnicka wrote: 'Its contour refers to the form of sea foam, synthetised is a continual wavy movement in Strzemiński's *Seascapes* and [Kobro's] analogous *Seascape (Pejzaż)*. It is also similar to the only bas-relief form known from this period ... like the architectonic compositions, open to space on all sides and unified with it by its own biomorphic rhythm'.<sup>38</sup> I entirely agree with Karnicka's remarks, stressing still more firmly the formal and constructive associations between the bas-relief plaster, the plastic lightness of the seascape painted by the sculptor and the spatial openness of the metal composition, and, thereby, closely associating the aforementioned works, and viewing them as a significant (biomorphic) stylistic turning point, as well as an attempt to break out of the existing model of formal biomechanics.

Like Strzemiński's landscapes and drawings of the 1930s, Kobro's biomorphic works, having as their formal basis their own earlier work, also clearly demonstrate stylistic similarities with the art of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Hans Arp. I have already mentioned their artistic connections and mutual interest in one another's work, mediated by Brzękowski.<sup>39</sup> One must also remember that the mutual familiarity of works by way of publications, or slides sent for publication, may have been reasonably effective.

The compositions with spherical forms that were popular in Sophie Taeuber-Arp's work around 1933 may have captured Kobro's imagination when planning her last *Spatial Composition 9* and, vice-versa, Arp and Taeuber-Arp's drawings from the end of the 1930s and the 1940s may have owed a good deal to the soft lines of the seascapes of the Polish artists. These, in turn, may have evolved in Strzemiński's work in the direction of his post-war series of *Afterimages (Powidoki)* thanks to Arp. Likewise, despite fundamental categorical differences and differences in scale and materials, Kobro's bas-relief undoubtedly demonstrated stylistic connections with Arp's sculptures. The distribution of proportions resulting from the relationship of concave and convex forms is similar, as are the outlining of the sculpture as though with a soft contour, flowing seamlessly over the form; the distribution of light on the receding surfaces, which appear open to space; and, finally, the general disposition of form, permitting the sculpture to maintain its equilibrium by way of the definition of just a few supporting points, as though independent of the plinth.

Of course, Arp's works were mostly sculptures rather than bas-reliefs. Kobro's bas-relief, intended to be mounted on a wall, was an attempt to separate three-dimensional form from its supporting base. By installing the work spatially in such a way as to deprive the three-dimensional form of weight, she went further than Arp. *Spatial Composition 9* was in the process of dispensing with the relationship between the surface (and the three-dimensional form) and the base that Arp maintained.<sup>40</sup> The *Seascape*, sculpted in bas-relief, now suspended on the wall without a support, seemed to materialise form, seemingly in spite of the spatial abstraction of the transparent compositions.<sup>41</sup>

In her *Spatial Compositions*, Kobro conceptualised sculpture. She defined the geometric proportions of surfaces, straight and curved lines, horizontal and vertical forms, by way of precise mathematical calculations and in accordance with numerical sequences and relations resulting from the Fibonacci sequence (though, in practice, corrected by eye). She constructed maquettes out of cardboard. She worked like an architect inscribing forms into space. She chose materials that were readily available and entrusted the production of the sculpture to a local tinsmith. It was the tinsmith who cut the metal sheets, bent the curves where necessary, joined the surfaces, cleaned the joins, and, in accordance with the plan, sought to realise the project as faithfully as possible. Kobro polished the sculpture and covered it in paint. How very different this was from the technique used for the plaster works. Here, Kobro produced the sculpture. There was more sensuality in the kneading of the soft, water-saturated clay, and more sensual imagination, as,

at any given moment, she could alter the form, whether handmade or made with a simple tool (a spatula or knife). This was a particular kind of physical experience of the material, either manual or with a simple tool, and not a mental calculation of relations.

Like the *Nudes*, the bas-relief-sculpted *Seascape* was modelled in clay, from which a plaster cast was made. Her daughter recalled how Kopro soaked and kneaded clay in order to give it the right consistency. Then the foundryman would come, she wrote, who 'prepared a plaster mould for the clay figure, removed it in pieces, joined it, and then filled with liquid plaster. After the interior had solidified, he removed the mould in pieces, revealing the plaster figure'.<sup>42</sup> Nika Strzemińska went on to recall that 'the sculpture was coarse, with rough parts at the joins. Then my mother set about smoothing and polishing the nude. She spent a long time doing this, very carefully. From time to time she would turn the sculpture around in the light, to check the results of her work, first by eye, then by touch'.<sup>43</sup>

Over the course of the whole sensual process of its creation, the sculpture would become ever more like a body. Agnieszka Skalska read the form of *Nude 5*, which is to say the *Seascape*, modelled in this way, as a primary ('embryonic') model for the artist's work as a whole. Skalska wrote:

Let us accept that *Nude 5* is a specific matrix of the bodily, in the same way as the abstract compositions represent a unit of measure for the space surrounding them. This identification occurs at the deepest level, in physical terms: that of the cell, of tissue. Repeated "n" times, multiplied, it would create a soft concave-convex construct of corporeality ... The lost *Nude 5* is a specific module, a code, in which the body is recorded, a cell, a model, describing the principle of the organism.<sup>44</sup>

I would put it differently. Agreeing with Skalska's biological interpretation of the sculpture, resulting from the perception of the sensory materialisation of the form with its soft concave-convex construction and its almost physically-perceptible corporeality, I do not see in this sculpture the tendency to generalise, to synthesise corporeality and spatiality, this module or code of the body and space. On the contrary, I think it represents a break with codifying rhythm and modular unity. Physiological seeing, making it possible to link fragments into the unity of a biomechanical structure at a glance, has given way to biological modelling, shattering a whole that has been petrified in its final form. The bas-relief gives the impression of an organism constantly transforming itself in its evolutionary perfectibility. It is reminiscent of the on-going process of the creation of life and of wasting away, birth and the uncertainty of survival. On the undulating surface we see traces of unfinished polishing (like shells smoothed by water); in the plasticity of the substance a susceptibility towards deformation (like the body beneath the touch of the finger); in the flowing of the oval form we see changeability (like the shape of a jellyfish); the purity of the plaster emerging from the material seems as though it has been sullied by oakum and reeds, producing an unnerving skeleton of a form (like that of a fragile mud-hut). There is no Dada chance in its form (as there is in Arp) but there is also no certainty as to the final form of the material, which is still alive, like an organism. The bas-relief is concerned with shattering the Constructivist whole, which could already be sensed in the analytical nudes, the concretisation of the process of lining fragments, the biological deformation of the organism, which is never the same: the organism which the module is incapable of grasping.

In my opinion, Kopro treated *Seascape* as a rupture and a critique of the biomechanical conceptualisation of the body, the utopia of the body as a spatial abstraction, as a departure from the physicality of 'pure form'. The bas-relief deconstructs the structural order contained in space. In the aforementioned article, Skalska wrote: 'If one can speak of abstraction here, then this sculpture is an abstract taken from the organic. Here is a scrap, a fragment, a part of universal anti-geometry, a shade of the lack of symmetry, a betrayal of the mathematically calculated world of Kopro's creative work'.<sup>45</sup>

The materiality of biological form, its aesthetic ambivalence and typological multiplicity, so hard to grasp speculatively, took the place of the transparent precision and physiological perfection of the biomechanical model in Kopro's creative work. The solidity of the dead structure



was replaced by the frailty of living material, its fragility, temporariness, frailty, susceptibility to change and disintegration, anticipation of death. It is not a matter of the formlessness of material (inform) but of the extraordinary form that emerges from chaos and undermines order (neo-form): a form whose existence calls into question the mechanical norm; form experienced as an inexpressible sublimity; form sublimated in abstract concretisation (as in Arp). In her response to an *Abstraction-Création* survey in 1933, Kobra wrote: 'Copying the machine is as harmful as copying the animal world. Both interfere in the development of pure art and abstract form'.<sup>46</sup>

At the same time as the *Seascape*, Kobra was sculpting a series of plaster nudes, whose forms she modelled according to a Cubist schema, with reference to her earlier work. These small works in plaster dominated the artist's exhibitions after 1934. It is difficult to say whether the nudes from this period carried on from or co-produced the biomechanical rhythms of her spatial compositions. The solid figure, surrounded by crooked lines and concave-convex surfaces, played an important role in these. Despite strong deformation and a degree of generalisation, the figurative corporeality of the forms rather than their abstract materiality could be read and sensed. Kobra wrote in the aforementioned survey that 'the process of sculpting the naked human figure arouses physiological or sexual emotions ... I like to play at correcting that which remained unfinished in one style or other of the art of the past'.<sup>47</sup> Like the seascape, the nudes broke out of the stylistics of 'mathematical calculation', calling into question, by their very presence, the incorporeal utopia of Functionalist society, which was still professed, though perhaps with less conviction. The crisis was evident; the end of social utopias was approaching. The body was regaining its subjective materiality in art. With reference to Kobra's nudes, Piotr Piotrowski wrote:

Art at the time of the end of utopias would thus be characterised by a particular kind of identity politics, the search for the subject and for that which was individual and irreducible within it, namely, corporeality. Thus, one could say that the turn away from the incorporeal and universal and towards the corporeal and individual in sculpture represents a remedy for the crisis of utopias. Referring to that which is personal and singular, to the body, instead of to that which is common and universal, is like a transition from abstraction to a strategy of identity founded on the ruins of modernism, on the ruins of Logos.<sup>48</sup>

The biomorphic *Seascapes* rendered space concrete by way of the perfect chiselling of the solid form and the elegance of interpenetrating lines and colour stains. They fragmented it, reducing it to the moments, spaces or even the spiritual state ('relaxing') in which it was experienced and seen (Strzemiński labelled his seascapes with the date each day). Their concrete and fragmentary character called into question the universal space of rhythms and the infinity calculated therein. Emerging from the curving lines covering their surfaces, the integrity of Strzemiński's last Unist canvasses was shattered both by the technique of stereoscopic seeing deployed, and by what Łukasz Kiepuszewski has referred to as the 'particular opening-disruption' of the whole pictorial form. In an interesting case study of one of Strzemiński's landscapes, Kiepuszewski notes that the picture could be

a record of a temporary and internal differentiation of the body, which would relate to a series of views from different angles. In this way, it would also be a projection of conflicting visual perspectives, simultaneously intersecting and dispersing in the hidden depths of the body. The asymmetry of the mechanisms of the body, perhaps also accentuated by Strzemiński's disabilities, bears a complex relationship to the character of the space produced by the painting.<sup>49</sup>

The dramatisation of painterly space and of the sculptural solid, along with corporeality, physiologically sensed and biomorphically represented, which had been cast out by Strzemiński and Kobra in Unism, devoid of tensions, and in the unity of the rhythms of spatial composition, became apparent in sculpture, in the tempera cityscapes and seascapes as well as in the drawings with figures outlined in silhouette. It disrupted the entire stylistic order of Constructivism and of the artists' practice and, above all, their purist imagination. Jean-François Chevrier correctly observed, with reference to Strzemiński:

The environment and the human figure returned, but as a trembling vision, uncertain of its limits. “The calming motive” of the picture could not participate in the game without a naturalistic referent. The painterly and the social organisms both shattered at the same time. Strzemiński’s painting thus logically approached Surrealism, and so a poetics based on the subversion of reality infused with hallucinatory discovery.<sup>50</sup>

It is certain that neither Strzemiński nor Kobra were Surrealists and their biomorphic landscapes not so much broadened the field of the Surrealist imagination as they deduced biological forms from the conceptual and historical contexts of this movement, seeking once more to locate biomorphism amidst ‘intellectual and rational impulses’, which, in Strzemiński’s case, also produced rather unexpected results in post-war painting, and in Kobra’s day-to-day and artistic circumstances led to silence.

Finally, it is worth refining the original question of the subversive character of biological forms in modern art, and asking: why was it that biomorphic form was able to resolve the critical and aesthetic crisis in which modern art was entangled? In other words: how could biomorphism, with its formal harmonies and dissonances, be a manifestation of the sublime beauty of nature while simultaneously enacting a critique of the sublimated aesthetics of reason, behind which a crisis was concealed?

The question has its roots in one of the antinomies of modern thought, indicating the contingency of human freedom upon the natural world. It relates to the dialectical entwining of art and nature that was key to twentieth-century critical thinking. Adorno wrote that the relationship between the man-made work of art and nature was condemned to the status of ‘pure antithesis ... each refers to the other: nature to experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy’.<sup>51</sup> No wonder, then, that the philosopher wrote elsewhere that ‘the task of art today is to bring chaos into order’.<sup>52</sup>

The aim is to find, within artistic order, that which escapes the ‘familiar’ order of culture (the marvellous); that which resists the objectified aesthetics of the commodity world (chance, detail); the beauty liberated in nature and the sublimity of nature, independent of man. Biological forms, as natural forms, have always astonished by their shapes, prompting amazement at the unimaginable inventiveness of nature, tainting the logic of forms created by man with anxiety. It is not a matter, then, of the sort of art that recreates nature in its spatial-objective forms, but of the sort of art, Adorno would say, which by way of the aesthetic structure of abstract forms touches that which is inexpressible yet concrete, the world of sublimated forms materialised in creativity. Biomechanics sought the beauty of organic harmony. Biomorph form was sublime in its astonishing shapes. The sublimity of artistic forms grasped in this way did not rely on arousing hedonistic pleasure similar to that delivered by the stereotypes of popular and mass culture, but, on the contrary, through the desire for the unknown, lingering in avant-garde art, it led to the destabilisation of the aesthetic order and social expectations, it undermined the beauty of harmonious creativity. There was a tension between anthropocentric biomechanics and ‘inhuman’ biomorphism. It was not chronological in character, though the narratives associated with it changed with time. The biological taxonomies of the nineteenth century were a search for the homogeneity of the natural world girded by the aesthetics of the biomorphic symmetry of forms and the infinity of colours and shades in plants and insects alike. The universalism of twentieth-century modernism linked the concept of biological beauty to the geometric module of the biomechanical body and the power of man mastering nature. The biomorphic neo-formalism of radical artists broke out of this framework, casting into crisis, by way of the desired perfection of biological form, the stable divisions of space presided over by the avant-garde: above all, the political space of biomechanics.

*Translated by Klara Kemp-Welch*

- 1 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Integralizm malarstwa abstrakcyjnego', *Forma 2* (1934), p. 10.
- 2 Strzemiński, 'Integralizm malarstwa', p. 10.
- 3 Hans (Jean) Arp, 'Abstract Art, Concrete Art' (c. 1942). Reproduced in Peggy Guggenheim (ed.), *Art of this Century* (New York: Art of This Century and Art Aid Corporation, 1942), p. 29.
- 4 Arp, 'Abstract Art', p. 29.
- 5 Arp, 'Abstract Art', p. 29. We know of two works by Strzemiński given to Arp, which were recorded in the catalogue of Strzemiński's 1993–94 monographic exhibition (Jaromir Jedliński (ed.), *Władysław Strzemiński 1893–1952. On the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his Birth* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995)). These are: *Kompozycja architektoniczna* (1929), now in the collection of the Marguerite Arp Foundation in Locarno, and *Kompozycja unistyczna* (1932), now in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo (catalogue references I.43 and I.55, respectively). Stażewski also gave Arp one of his works via Brzękowski: *Kompozycja* (1932), now in the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo. All these works were shown in 1937 in Basel at Georg Schmidt's exhibition *Konstruktivisten: Von Doesburg, Domela, Eggeling, Gabo, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Pevsner, Vantongerloo, Vordemberge, Kunsthalles Basel* (16 January–14 February 1937).
- 6 Hans (Jean) Arp, 'drogi panie, pyta mnie pan...', *L'Art Contemporain / Sztuka Współczesna 3* (1930): p. 104; Władysław Strzemiński, 'Là, ou il y a une division...', *Abstraction Création 1* (1932): p. 35; and Władysław Strzemiński, 'En peignant le nu...', *Abstraction Création 2* (1933): p. 40.
- 7 Aleksander Rodchenko, 'The Line' (1920). Reproduced in *Alexander Rodchenko*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art (Oxford, 1979), p. 128.
- 8 Arp, 'drogi panie, pyta mnie pan...', p. 104.
- 9 Arp, 'drogi panie, pyta mnie pan...', p. 104.
- 10 Arp, 'Abstract Art', p. 29.
- 11 Strzemiński, 'Dyskusja L. Chwistek – W. Strzemiński', *Forma 3* (1935): pp. 4–10.
- 12 Chwistek, 'Dyskusja L. Chwistek – W. Strzemiński', pp. 4–10.
- 13 Arp, 'Abstract Art', p. 30.
- 14 Strzemiński, 'Dyskusja L. Chwistek – W. Strzemiński', pp. 4–10.
- 15 The 1936 lithographic portfolio *Łódź bez funkcjonalizmu* contains 5 works. Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (inventory no.: MS/SN/Gr/1085/1-5). I presented the technical principle itself at the 2010 exhibition *Poutórka z teorii widzenia* at CSW Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw. Janina Ładnowska has written about the 'biological' interpretation of Strzemiński's drawings: Ładnowska, 'Rysunki – realizm rytmu fizjologicznego', in Janusza Zagrodzki (ed.), *Władysław Strzemiński in memoriam* (Łódź: Sztuka Polska, 1988), pp. 127–135.
- 16 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Rozwój jednostki...', *Forma 3* (1935): p. 17.
- 17 Strzemiński, 'Dyskusja L. Chwistek – W. Strzemiński'.
- 18 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Aspekty rzeczywistości', *Forma 5* (1936): p. 7.
- 19 Władysław Strzemiński, *Bezrobotni 1* (1936). From the portfolio *Łódź bez funkcjonalizmu*. Lithograph, 24 x 32 cm. Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (inventory no. MS/SN/Gr/1085/3). The ink drawings reproduced in the article belonged to a series donated by Arp to the 'a.r.' group's International Collection of Modern Art. They are currently in the collections of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź: Strzemiński, *Drawing* (1932). Ink on paper, 26 x 21 cm (inventory no. MSL/R/357); and *Drawing* (1932). Ink on paper, 26 x 21 cm (inventory no. MSL/R/359). They were similar to a well-known series of drawings reproduced under the title *L'Air est une racine* in the Surrealist journal *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution 6* (1933): p. 33. The sculpture by Arp reproduced in Strzemiński's text was one of the works defined by the artist as *Human Concretions*, perhaps the small bronze *Torso* of 1931, currently in the Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp collection of the Arp Museum, Rolandseck. There were also two further wooden polychrome reliefs by Arp in the a.r. group's International Collection of Modern Art, of which one was lost during the war. The other, entitled *Configuration* (1931), 39 x 31 cm, is currently in the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź collection (inventory no. M/365). There is also a work by Wanda Chodasiewicz-Grabowska, modelled after Arp: *Planimetric Composition* (c. 1931). Oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm (inventory no. MSL/M/369).
- 20 Strzemiński, 'Rozwój jednostki...', *Forma 3* (1935), p. 17.
- 21 Strzemiński, 'Aspekty rzeczywistości', p. 12.
- 22 Arp, 'drogi panie, pyta mnie pan...', p. 104.
- 23 Arp, 'drogi panie, pyta mnie pan...', p. 104.
- 24 Strzemiński, 'Aspekty rzeczywistości', p. 10.
- 25 Strzemiński, 'Aspekty rzeczywistości', p. 13.
- 26 This anthropomorphic and feminist aspect of the artist's work is well known and has been addressed in my earlier writings.
- 27 Katarzyna Kobro, *Spatial Composition 9* (c. 1933). Metal, oil, 15.5 x 35 x 19 cm. Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (inventory no. MS/SN/R/43).
- 28 The reproduction was carried in *Abstraction-Création: art non-figuratif 5* (1936), p. 15.
- 29 Agnieszka Skalska, 'O akcie, którego nie ma', *Rzeźba Polska 8* (1996–1997), pp. 95–101.
- 30 Skalska, 'O akcie, którego nie ma', pp. 95–101.
- 31 The title given to the bas-relief by the artist is not known; I refer to it here as *Seascape*. The work is not dated or signed. It was produced between 1934 and 1935. White plaster with oakum and sawdust, 40.5 x 8 x 22.5 cm. Private collection, Paris. Details concerning its provenance, history, and technical aspects can be found in the expert typescript: *Andrzej Turowski, Ekspertyza płaskorzeźby gipsowej Katarzyny Kobro*, in the archives of the owner of the sculpture.
- 32 *Nude-cement (Akt-Cement)*, no. 42 in *Katalog Wystawy Związku Zawodowego Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Łodzi*, exhibition catalogue (Warsaw and Łódź: Instytut Propagandy Sztuki, 1934). There was a cement bas-relief by Kobro produced in around 1920 to 1921 in Smolensk. We know nothing about its form, and the narrative description of it by Janusz Zagrodzki seems to me to be rather general. See: Zagrodzki, *Katarzyna Kobro i Kompozycja przestrzeni* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), p. 44.
- 33 Among others, Christian Bromig, 'Biomorphismus oder Anthropozentrismus?', *Kritische Berichte 19/2* (1991), pp. 92–107; Guitemie Maldonado, 'De la sphère au caillou (1)', 'Courbes et géométrie dans l'art européen des années 1930 (2)', *Les Cahiers du M.N.A.M 81* (Autumn 2002).
- 34 Kobro showed her *Spatial Compositions* in the summer of 1933 in Warsaw, at the exhibition of the Group of Modern Artists at the Institut Propagandy Sztuki, and then again, for the last time (and probably the same works), at the Salon of the Union of the Polish Artists (ZZPAP) in 1936; Władysław Strzemiński began painting the *Seascapes* in the summer of 1932, during the first holidays spent with Katarzyna Kobro in Chałupy na Helu. He returned to this subject over the course of subsequent vacations in 1933 and 1934, but painted no landscapes in 1935 and 1936.
- 35 One of these landscapes is in a private collection, the other in the collection of the National Museum in Kraków (Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie). It may have been these works that were shown at the ZZPAP exhibition in January 1936 (Catalogue of the 36th exhibition IPS no. 37–40) along with one *Bas-Relief – plaster* (no. 41). The *Seascapes* were also shown at the Łódź ZZPAP in January 1936 as well as in Lwów in December that same year (exhibition of the Łódź ZZPAP artists). We know from reviews that these were four painted *Seascapes*, most probably the last ones to be made (in November Kobro gave birth to a daughter and clearly began to limit her work). Kobro first became interested in seascapes in 1933. In her response to a survey, included in issue 2 of the journal *Abstraction-Création*, she mentioned the 'restful' works, among which Strzemiński counted the seascapes. She wrote: 'I sculpt from nature, just as one goes to the cinema in order to better relax'. Katarzyna Kobro, 'Odpowiedz na ankietę', *Abstraction-Création 2* (1933): p. 27. But I have no evidence to believe that such sculptures were already produced at this time. The aforementioned text by Kobro was illustrated with the earlier *Spatial Compositions*. One can assume that the first landscapes were produced after 1934, or the following year (the aforementioned *Seascape* from the private collection is dated 31 July 1935).
- 36 In the catalogue, *Almanach. Katalog. Salon Modernistów. Malarstwo, rzeźba, architektura, meble, wnętrza, grafika* (Warsaw: ZZPAP, 1928), they were recorded under the numbers 42 and 43. Perhaps the nudes in question were those known today as *Nudes 1–3* and dated 1925–1930. According to Nika Strzemińska they were first shown in 1930 at the Muzeum Historii i Sztuki im. J

i K. Bartoszewiczów in Łódź (the former name of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź). Nika Strzemińska, 'Katarzyna Kobro', pp. 124, 127, 130. However, I think it was earlier.

37 In January 1934 she showed the plaster works at the Winter Salon of the IPS in Warsaw and, a few months later in Łódź at the exhibition of the ZZPAP, under catalogue numbers 39–41 and 43 (*Katalog Wystawy Związku Zawodowego Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Łodzi* (Warsaw and Łódź: Instytut Propagandy Sztuki, 1934)). The aforementioned cement nude was number 42. The only known reproduction of the plaster nude is from the same time: *Forma 2* (September 1934), p. 14.

38 Zenobia Karnicka, 'Kalendarium życia i twórczości', in Elżbieta Fuchs (ed.), *Katarzyna Kobro 1898–1951. W setną rocznicę urodzin* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2005), p. 135.

39 An exhibition and catalogue of 1989 were devoted to these issues: Ryszard Stanisławski, Hans-Peter Kurten, Johannes Wasmuth, Gregor Laschen, Agnieszka Magdalena Lulińska, and Janina Ładnawska, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp und ihre Freunde mit der Internationalen Sammlung Moderner Kunst der Gruppe a.r. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź* (Rolandseck: Stiftung Jean Arp u. Sophie Taeuber-Arp, 1989). See also: Larie-Aline Prat, *Peinture et avant-garde au seuil des années 30* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1984).

40 Today, it has been destroyed by incompetent conservation, during which its stability was compromised. It has now, for the time being, been artificially reinforced by the addition of a base, which has inevitably changed the original conception of the artist.

41 In 1936, the sculptor signed 'The Dimensionist Manifesto', authored by Charles Sirató, in which artists demanded the 'artistic conquest of four-dimensional space', stating that 'creation consists of sensorial effects operating in a closed cosmic space' ('Manifeste Dimensioniste', *La Revue N+1*, 1936).

42 Nika Strzemińska, 'Katarzyna Kobro jako człowiek i artysta', in Fuchs (ed.), *Katarzyna Kobro 1898–1951*, p. 15.

43 Strzemińska, 'Katarzyna Kobro jako człowiek i artysta', p. 15. This description conveys well the technical process of Kobro's creation of the sculpture with clay and casts. Kobro finished the sculpture by hand and used a scalpel (or a knife). There are a few places on the reverse side of *Seascape* where one can see where the plaster has been added with a palette knife. Hidden traces of joins, careful polishing of surfaces, the reinforcement of the skeleton with oakum, and its hardening with sawdust were testament to the great care taken in execution, despite the fact that the modeling plaster used by Kobro was the sort of popular material used widely for the casting of artistic forms and also for decorative items.

44 Skalska, 'O akcie, którego nie ma', pp. 95–101.

45 Skalska, 'O akcie, którego nie ma', pp. 95–101.

46 Kobro, 'Odpowiedz na ankietę', p. 27.

47 Kobro, 'Odpowiedz na ankietę', p. 27.

48 Piotr Piotrowski, 'Sztuka w czasie końca utopii', in Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), p. 73.

49 Łukasz Kiepuszewski, 'Dryf obrazu', in Paweł Polit and Jarosław Suchan (eds.), *Władysław Strzemiński. Czytelność obrazów* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2012), p. 181.

50 Jean-François Chevrier, 'Obraz, obraz ciała, historia', in Polit and Suchan (eds.), *Władysław Strzemiński*, p. 140.

51 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (first published in German in 1970), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 61.

52 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life* (first published in German in 1951), trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 222.



Rytm, Sanacja,  
and the Dream  
of Modern Art  
Patronage  
in Poland  
(1922–1932)

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## **Rytm, Sanacja, and the Dream of Modern Art Patronage in Poland (1922–1932)**

Rytm (Rhythm) was a society of artists which exerted a strong presence in Poland between the years 1922 and 1932. While the aesthetic and political identities of the group continue to be debated, the role of its individual members in the Polish art world was exceedingly influential. Indeed, due to their links with the new political establishment after the First World War, the members of the group in time came to comprise the backbone of a new public artistic network within the recently-reinstated Polish state. Largely neglected after the Second World War, when the study of the artistic achievements of the interwar period were affected by anti-capitalist Communist propaganda, the group received only limited attention, and remains in need of study.<sup>1</sup> This article discusses Rytm's ideas on modern art patronage, in the context of its relationship with the Sanacja (Sanation) regime, the centre-left movement led by the charismatic Marshal Józef Piłsudski that overthrew, during a bloodless *coup d'état* in 1926, the government of the right-wing National Democratic Party (known as Endecja).<sup>2</sup>

### **Rytm and Sanacja**

For its contemporaries, Rytm's association with Sanacja formed one of the more characteristic marks of the group's identity. In this respect, Rytm has been contrasted with the well-established Warsaw Towarzystwo Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych, or Zachęta (Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts), which had connections with Endecja. The political disparity between the two was paralleled by an aesthetic one: to Zachęta's persisting attachment to the 'patriotic theme' and a picturesque, sentimental kind of Realism, widely perceived as outmoded yet continuously loved by wealthy patrons (see, for example, Józef Simmler's 1860 *Death of Barbara Radziwiłł* (*Śmierć Barbary Radziwiłłówny*) or Wojciech Kossak's 1935 *Vision of the Polish Army* (*Wizja wojska polskiego*, Fig. 10.1)), Rytm opposed the aesthetic ideas of harmony, clarity, and compositional rhythm inspired by the anti-Impressionist reaction they had witnessed in Paris.<sup>3</sup> Their works were distinctly different from what Zachęta's audiences had been accustomed to: anti-Impressionist and anti-Realist, they were characterised by a closed, well-structured composition, well-defined line, figurative yet simplified form and an abstract, decorative inclination. Instead of narrating particular historical events, they evoked the sense of a timeless myth, elusively suspended in space and time (see, for instance, Wacław Borowski's *After the Hunt* (*Po polowaniu*) or *Pastoral* (*Pastoral*), Tymon Niesiołowski's *Woman Picking Flowers* (*Zrywająca kwiaty*), Eugeniusz Zak's *Family* (*Rodzina*, Fig. 10.2), Władysław Skoczylas's *Fighting a Dragon* (*Walka ze smokiem*), or Henryk Kuna's sculpture *Rhythm* (*Rytm*), all displayed at Rytm's first show in 1922). Rytm's first exhibition, which took place in a designated area within Zachęta's building, was widely perceived as being of a new quality, different from what were seen as Zachęta's old-fashioned ways. Politically, Rytm's emergence from within Zachęta in 1922 and its subsequent secession from it in 1924 can be seen as an expression of the same civic impulse that in 1926 led to the establishment in Poland of the new Sanacja regime: the desire to construct a new, modern state, free from the ideological extremes of either Left or Right, and based on the idea of inclusivity and the ethos of a widely-understood community spirit.



Fig. 10.1. Wojciech Kossak, *Vision of the Polish Army* (*Wizja wojska polskiego*, 1935). Oil on canvas, 200 x 299 cm. Warsaw National Museum, Warsaw.



Fig. 10.2. Eugeniusz Zak, *Family* (*Rodzina*, 1922). Photograph, 16.5 x 22.1 cm (original lost). Warsaw National Museum, Warsaw.

While a recurring feature in studies of the group, Rytm's relationship with Sanacja has rarely been described comprehensively. Wiesława Dąbrowska's comments on the matter, included in her unpublished Master's thesis devoted to the group, are illustrative of this: 'The works of Rytm were not the apotheosis of the ruling regime, but they found within that regime a place that suited them; [the group] was content with that place just as the governing spheres were content with the activity of Rytm'.<sup>4</sup> This comment reflects an ambivalence about the degree to which the artists consciously 'served' Sanacja (arguably the main controversy around Rytm, one which continues to linger to this day). Indeed, the perception of Rytm's position with respect to the authoritarian system in power varies from one commentator to another. According to Urszula Kozakowska-





Fig. 10.3.  
Władysław  
Skoczylas, *Józef  
Piłsudski* (1920).  
Colour lithograph,  
38 x 29 cm.  
National Library of  
Poland, Warsaw.

Zaucha, for example, the members of Rytm ‘in the interwar period became effectively the official addressees of state commissions for monumental art designs’.<sup>5</sup> The author of a monograph on the group, Henryk Anders, on the other hand, was very eloquent in challenging what he saw as being the all too hasty labelling of Rytm as a pro-regime group. ‘The opinion that Rytm was Sanacja’s pro-regime group is, however, erroneous’, Anders claimed.<sup>6</sup> ‘It is overlooked, or perhaps concealed on purpose,’ he believed, ‘that the group had been constituted long before the May *coup d’état* and that it was precisely those early four years that were the period of the highest creative tension and of the greatest expansion of the members of Rytm’.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, although demand for public art increased during Sanacja’s rule, the members of Rytm had established themselves as recipients of private and public commissions before Piłsudski came to power in 1926 and it was before the coup that they received most teaching appointments.

In reality, the ambivalence of Rytm’s cooperation with the Sanacja-controlled state was irrefutably tied to the ambivalence of the regime itself, a political system which continues to divide historians to this day. As pointed out by the British historian of Poland Norman Davies, Sanacja ‘was not at all Fascist in its leanings, since the only Fascist sympathizers in Poland were to be found among Piłsudski’s opponents’.<sup>8</sup> As noted by another scholar, a Polish-Canadian historian of Poland, Piotr Wróbel, Piłsudski considered himself a democrat, advocated individual liberty and cultural and religious plurality, and tolerated the Polish parliament (the Sejm).<sup>9</sup> Brian Porter-Szücs explained this ‘soft’ character of Piłsudski’s regime in his chapter ‘The Ambivalence of Democracy and Authority, 1922–39’:

The Sanacja did not outlaw the opposition parties, close hostile newspapers, or disband the Sejm. They followed all the proper procedures to elect President Mościcki and to form successive governments. By all outward appearances, the Second Republic continued as before. Nonetheless, Poland was no longer a fully functioning democracy. The Sanacja employed fraud and intimidation to ensure that Piłsudski always got his way, and with each passing year the regime grew more heavy-handed.<sup>10</sup>

In the words of Porter-Szücs, moreover, ‘everything we might say about Piłsudski is qualified by “yes, but...” ... He kept both the communists and the radical right at bay—a major accomplishment for any leader in the 1920s and 1930s—but only by establishing a military regime that undermined democracy’.<sup>11</sup>

Although an in-depth comparison between Rytm and other European artistic groups supported by the state at the time, such as the Italian Novecento, for instance, is certainly overdue, it appears that Rytm’s relationship with Sanacja was quite unlike that of artists in other authoritarian regimes of the time, due to the distinctive nature of the Polish regime. While the political dictatorships of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy or Soviet Russia generally strived to control and censor the arts, Piłsudski was not particularly interested in regulating artistic production through censorship and, in fact, during his leadership artists continued to criticise the lack of state interest in art. Agnieszka Chmielewska wrote:

Unlike in totalitarian countries, in Poland the project of art involved in the service of the state and the society ... was initiated by the artists themselves. State authorities never really got involved in visual arts, nor did they create a system of commissions imposing or even just promoting the production of such art. It was the artists themselves who understood the need for adapting art to the needs of the state, of binding it with life, and of making it available to all the strata of the society ... It was they who pointed to the state’s tasks in the sphere of art and culture and to their advantages, and who proposed diverse models of state patronage.<sup>12</sup>

The Polish artists’ approach towards the government, discussed here, was more confrontational than submissive. According to Dąbrowska, they attempted to ‘take the initiative in the face of the state’s incompetence’, while in the words of Rogoyska they fought ‘for the position of art within the contemporary regime’.<sup>13</sup> The widely-felt expectation that the state should support the arts found expression in a series of debates and lectures, organised in April and May 1928, during which the artists put forward to the President of Poland a number of postulates, including those for increasing subsidies for crafts and artistic education, expanding the national art collection, and establishing new state grants for artistic periodicals, as well as the proposal to build a new exhibition space in Warsaw, which would provide an alternative to the one owned by the private patrons from Zachęta.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in what was described as ‘the very difficult period of economic crisis, political and national chaos’, some of Rytm’s members were the state’s fiercest critics in the field of art patronage.<sup>15</sup>

Still, there is no doubt that there were strong personal links between the supporters of Piłsudski and the artists belonging to Rytm, which must have contributed to these artists’ increasingly influential positions in public life from 1926 onwards. Many of these links were long-standing, often dating back to the period before the First World War, to studies in Kraków, shared journeys to Paris, as well as their past military experiences in the so-called Polish ‘Legions’ and in the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War. The latter military connection was confirmed in the many surviving political posters from the time designed by Rytm’s future members, such as Zygmunt Kamiński’s *Exhibition of the Polish Legions* (*Wystawa legionów polskich*, Lublin), Władysław Skoczylas’s *Józef Piłsudski* (Fig. 10.3), and Felicjan Kowarski’s *To Arms! Join the Polish Army!* (*Do broni! Wstępujcie do wojska polskiego!*). To put it in the most straightforward way, many members of Rytm and leaders of Sanacja were colleagues or acquaintances. The average member of Rytm fitted well Porter-Szücs’s description of ‘those who occupied leadership positions after the coup’: ‘most had distant ties to the left, had served in the military during World War I and the Polish-Bolshevik War, and had later become respected professionals in law or business, or else academics’.<sup>16</sup> In interwar Poland, the members of this group constituted a strong enclave of liberal and culturally-aware intelligentsia, sharing similar artistic, social, and political interests.

Being on good terms with Sanacja, Rytm skilfully used the national debate on the need for a new state patronage to take over the role as the planner and organiser of Polish artistic life (a role hitherto held by Zachęta). It was art's perceived propaganda potential which provided Rytm with a powerful argument in applying for governmental support and, most importantly, in their proposal to build an alternative exhibition space in Warsaw, which subsequently allowed them to stand up to the hegemony of Zachęta. Indeed, if ambivalent about subsidising contemporary, living art, for which it was bitterly criticised, the post-1926 government partly supported art restoration, much needed after the years of Poland's partition, and what became known as *sztuka reprezentacyjna*, a Polish term which can be translated as 'representative', 'ceremonial', 'monumental' or 'stately' art (suggesting at the same time its public and monumental nature and its propaganda objective of 'representing' the country). The government also funded international travelling exhibitions of Polish art, organised by Towarzystwo Szerzenia Sztuki Polskiej wśród Obcych or TOSSPO (The Society for the Dissemination of Polish Art Abroad), a new association set up specifically to promote Polish art abroad. The artists from Rytm certainly profited from these international projects, for, as noted by Piątkowska, their works constituted a 'mandatory part of almost all' of them.<sup>17</sup>

It was the aftermath of the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts (Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes) in Paris, that formed the key setting for Rytm's transformation from a band of activist campaigners to the country's new artistic establishment. Poland saw this event as an important arena for its self-promotion as a new state and Polish artists received the highest number of official awards (about one hundred and ninety, including thirty-five Grand Prix awards, two of which were presented to Rytm members Henryk Kuna and Zofia Stryjeńska).<sup>18</sup> Branded by what was perceived as its Parisian 'success', the eclectic stylistic formula generated for the 1925 exhibition, presented as Poland's own artistic 'style' grounded in Slavic folklore, was recognised by the new Polish state as appropriate for representing the country at other international exhibitions. Standing largely in contrast to the solemn, patriotic art based on the model of the French Academy, which was promoted by conservative-leaning patrons from Zachęta, this new style (today known as 'Polish Art Deco') fitted very well with the new government's diplomatic ambitions.

Regardless of its members' personal links with the government and of its appeal to the government's propagandist agenda, Rytm's relationship with it can be described as complicated, and not just due to the artists' confrontational attitude towards state authorities referred to above. It should be underlined here that Rytm does not fit straightforwardly into the category of 'state-forming' artists (*artyści państwowotwórczy*), a term used in Polish historiography to describe the large number of artists associated with the state structures of the interwar period, which supplied decorative and monumental art for public spaces, a category theorised in distinction to both the avant-garde and to another important group of Polish painters, the Colourists (Koloryści) of the 1930s. Rytm's relationship to the 'state-forming' artists was equivocal: while individual members of Rytm figured in Agnieszka Chmielewska's pioneering 2006 study of the subject, for example, the group as such was not among the artistic associations she discussed in more detail.<sup>19</sup> It emerged from Chmielewska's study, moreover, that the peaks of the activity of the 'state-forming' artists and that of Rytm were not synchronised. As she emphasised, the 'institutionalisation' of the 'state-forming' artists did not take place until the second half of the 1930s, when the state 'started to allocate more substantial funds for ... public edifices and their decoration', while 'the outbreak of the Second World War interrupted [their activity] at the time of its greatest *prosperity*', that is, a good few years after Rytm's dissolution in 1932.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, the expansion of the 'state-forming' artists appears to have coincided with the demise of Rytm.

It appears that Rytm's relationship with Sanacja was unfixed and that it changed, over time, in keeping with the swings in the political and ideological makeup of Sanacja, which altered from left-wing to right-wing.<sup>21</sup> It is reasonable to believe that Rytm as a group roughly identified with Sanacja's early, more liberal makeup, while its later, conservative leanings highlighted the differences between its members. And so Rytm changed its character, and also, it seems, its leaders.

Set up by Henryk Kuna, Waclaw Borowski, and Eugeniusz Zak, in the milieu dominated by the outdated *Zachęta* to champion the aesthetic ideas of harmony, clarity, and compositional rhythm inspired by the anti-Impressionist reaction they had witnessed in Paris, Rytm appears, in the later 1920s, to have been gradually steered more by such members as Władysław Skoczylas and Tadeusz Pruszkowski, who became increasingly involved with the state and its structures. Unlike other members of Rytm, these two artists could truly be called ‘state-forming’, and their increasingly ardent, socially-orientated writings largely superseded the group’s earlier, primarily aesthetic, concerns. The fact that only a minority of the members of Rytm later became ‘state-forming’ artists complicates any interpretation of it being an unwaveringly pro-regime group. The political differences within the group may have well been central in its dissolution.

### Discussing Art Patronage: *L’art social* for the Modern State

The members of *Rytm* were more willing to talk about art’s wider role in society than about their partisan loyalties. In this respect, the group was certainly the inheritor of the turn-of-the-century currents devoted to art’s link with life, such as those of William Morris in Great Britain (which influenced Guild Socialism and encouraged such cooperatives as the Omega Workshops of Roger Fry), the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus in Germany (inspired by the ideas of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* which, as noted by Amy Lynn Wlodarski, was posited by Richard Wagner as ‘both an aesthetic and social movement’), and *l’art social* of such critics as Roger Marx (1859–1913) in France.<sup>22</sup> Rytm also continued Poland’s own tradition of supporting applied and decorative arts, inspired by its Western counterparts, which before 1918 had been concentrated in Kraków and Zakopane.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, it differed from the Polish radical avant-garde of the time represented by such artists as Mieczysław Szczuka, who attacked art’s elitism by promoting its integration into the praxis of life rather than its equality with crafts.

It was the movement for the renewal of crafts which, after the First World War, provided the basis for the programme of the School of Fine Arts (Szkola Sztuk Pięknych) in Warsaw, known as ‘the first academy in Poland aimed at the simultaneous training in fine and applied art’, whose teaching staff included many members of Rytm.<sup>24</sup> The school’s promotion of applied arts, recently reviewed in the important 2012 exhibition entitled *Art Everywhere. The Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw 1904–1944 (Sztuka wszędzie. Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1904–1944)*, was part of a wider, socially-orientated agenda which encouraged students to ‘carry their art outside, to the streets of Warsaw’ (as it was phrased by the school’s director, Karol Tichy, in his speech given at the inaugural 1923 committee).<sup>25</sup> The same ideas provided a model for the programme of the Institute for the Propaganda of Art (Instytut Propagandy Sztuki), Warsaw’s long-awaited new art venue which symbolically ended *Zachęta*’s hegemony.<sup>26</sup>

Art’s social potential became the key subject of concern for Władysław Skoczylas and Tadeusz Pruszkowski. Perceiving art works beyond their status as autonomous aesthetic objects, operating within a detached sphere guarded by juries, shared tastes, and the market, these artists saw art as a social enterprise premised on the communication of public values. Art’s ‘public’ nature was especially underlined in the writings of Pruszkowski, whose exploration of the theme developed from 1930 onwards and culminated, in 1936, in his famous and powerful declaration:

I dream of public art, serving the community, encountered in all places where the countries citizens might be: in court in a town hall, in the Inland Revenue, at the post office, in a Market Hall, in a square, in a bathhouse, in the barracks, at school, even in prison and in a public convenience.<sup>27</sup>

Pruszkowski’s was not only a concern for the physical accessibility of art (its presence in public spaces), but also its intellectual accessibility. He believed art ought to be intelligible to a wide audience, largely unfamiliar with the increasingly-specialised discourse on contemporary art, and saw art’s accessibility for a wider audience as threatened by what he considered increasingly-elitist avant-garde tendencies. ‘Would it not be worth trying to create a kind of art’, he asked in 1930, ‘which, while preserving all the qualities of great art, would not scare the relatively sensitive people at large? A difficult task, for sure,’ he contended, ‘but all the more interesting and I have the





Fig. 10.4. Tadeusz Pruszkowski, *Veit Stoss* (*Wit Stwosz*, 1920). Oil on canvas, 69 x 79 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

impression that only art of this kind can contribute to the cultural education of the masses'.<sup>28</sup> 'To put this task daringly into practice', he added in another text on the subject, written four years later, 'appears to me to be a modern undertaking'.<sup>29</sup>

This sensitivity to art's wider social and community context was accompanied in the case of Skoczylas and Pruszkowski by a condemnation of the contemporary art market's influence on artistic production. One can detect resentment, for example, in Skoczylas's criticism of the 'set of operations much like the dealings on a stock exchange, which, in the field of art, have turned out to be very damaging'.<sup>30</sup> In his 1932 article, entitled, tellingly, 'The Twilight of the Parisian Art Market', Skoczylas described in some detail the speculative activity of the 'dealers' and the 'collectors', which contributed, according to him, to the art market's 'unhealthy relations' (a criticism widely voiced at the time).<sup>31</sup> 'The negative sides of such trade are far larger than the positive ones', he concluded, explaining:

When forced by contract into mass production, [even] the best 'brand' produces works of no value, which are subsequently advertised as masterpieces, involving a whole arsenal of propaganda measures available to the dealer. This situation misleads the opinion of the genuine admirers of art, unaware of these relations, but above all it misleads thousands of young artists, drawn to Paris from across the world.<sup>32</sup>

It is largely in the context of their critique of the art market that these artists expressed scepticism towards much of the radical avant-garde's experimental activity, considering it to be triggered by the artificially-stimulated demand for originality and for the 'brand' of a name-tag. Their renewed interest in craft (whose sources lay in the turn-of-the-century French debate on decoration as a modern social restorative, and which, in the early 1920s, could be compared to such famous statements as Giorgio de Chirico's 1919 essay 'Return to Craft') was less a manifestation of nostalgia for the past, or a reaction against experimentation in art, than an expression of protest at the fetishisation of fine arts and of a commitment to art's collective ideals, closely tied to a vision

of a future egalitarian society.<sup>33</sup> In this objection, they were surely inspired by similar, earlier ideas in operation in Paris, recorded, for example, in Gino Severini's account of an idea that made its way in the art circles in Paris, especially among the Cubists of the *Effort Moderne*: that of a collective and anti-individualistic art, in which anonymity was the rule, as in the time of the Greeks, the Roman Republic and the early Christians. But then this idea vanished, because with the development of the Parisian art market, artists were instead encouraged, indeed driven by the merchants to realise their own personality in the most distinctive and individualistic way; and on this line it came to excesses.<sup>34</sup>

It is in this context too that one can read the 1920 declaration of the Polish literary group *Skamander*, also, arguably, expressing Rytm's position:

We do not wish to be perceived otherwise than as people conscious of their poetic craftsmanship, and fulfilling it, within our means, without a fault. Assuming this part of human labours, and aware of our responsibility for it, we want to approach it earnestly; therefore, we do not scorn the workmanship [craft] involved in it, seeing clearly the large amounts of inspiration and of hard won legacy that it comprises.<sup>35</sup>

Here the poets declared their belief in the value and dignity of artistic labour as a physical and applied craft as much as an intellectual and theoretical pursuit, revealing a fascination with the model of an artist as a modest executor rather than an egocentric genius.

It was not unexpected that socially-aware artists, including those from Rytm, would become concerned with their own role in society. Indeed, the belief in art's public nature was accompanied by a vision of the modern artist that was inspired by the idea of a medieval guild, in which individual artists were to be skilled professional labourers working as part of the same union, whose ability and professional expertise were to grant them independence from the instabilities of the capricious art market. These ideas were best articulated by Pruszkowski and are marked in his 1920 painting *Veit Stoss (Wit Stwosz)*, a modern depiction of the German Gothic sculptor Veit Stoss, famous in Poland for his 1477–1484 altarpiece made for the St. Mary's Basilica in Kraków (Fig. 10.4). Wearing an apron, with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, and holding the sculptor's traditional tools, Pruszkowski's *Veit Stoss* communicates the physical nature of his craft and stands for its author's beliefs about the role a modern artist should assume in society. Skill, technical competence, and the workmanship invested in an artwork were to be its only objective criteria for Pruszkowski, who encouraged both methodical and stylistic diversity among his students.<sup>36</sup> 'Not boycotting any "method" in painting,' he appealed in 1930, 'let us judge it not by whether it "fits in" with the current fashion, but most objectively to look for the value of the talent and of the skill in each art work—irrespective of whether it is to our individual taste'.<sup>37</sup>

Pruszkowski's inspiration in the pre-academy, guild-based system was accompanied by a pragmatic wish to grant the next generation of budding artists a profession that they could rely on in providing their own daily subsistence. In a 1928 interview for *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*, he confessed that his 'main objective, which [he] constantly remember[ed] while teaching, [was] to train the students in the painterly craft sufficiently for them to be able to support themselves, no matter where life takes them, and not to need to count on the generosity and protection of the people'.<sup>38</sup> But there was also a more playful element to Pruszkowski's fascination with the guilds: in his Warsaw studio at the School of Fine Arts he revived a number of rituals inspired by the traditional artisans' guilds of the past.<sup>39</sup> In this spirit, he celebrated the end of each academic year with a special performative ceremony, in which the final year students were symbolically appointed qualified painters, and subsequently introduced by him into the local art world. This lighthearted, ironic manner in which Pruszkowski approached his profession was passed on to his students, generating amongst them an atmosphere of confidence and enthusiasm.<sup>40</sup>

Crucially, for Skoczylas and other artists involved in a similar debate in Poland, art's role in society was perceived primarily as educational. While art's educational function had been especially appreciated during the times of partition, with a strong sense of a duty to enlighten and to educate being an important part of the ethos of the Polish intelligentsia, this emerged after the First World War for the first time in the context of the responsibilities of the new state.



Fig. 10.5.  
Tadeusz  
Pruszkowski,  
*Self-Portrait*  
(*Autoritratto*,  
unknown date).  
Reproduced  
in Margherita  
G. Sarfatti, *Storia  
della pittura  
moderna* (Rome:  
p. Cremonese,  
1930).

'Nowadays,' Skoczylas wrote in his 1926 article 'Printmaking and its Significance', 'when every banknote and postage stamp, by reaching the furthest corners of the country, influences the moulding of an aesthetic taste of the widest social strata, the responsibility and the role of the state, or the government, for the level of artistic culture in the country, is decisive'.<sup>41</sup> Tadeusz Pruszkowski, too, called for increased support for artistic education, pointing to the 'inadequate preparation of people at large to understand visual arts principles. The fault is first of all that of the education system,' he argued, 'which omits the issue of aesthetic education'.<sup>42</sup>

State patronage of the arts was, therefore, envisioned by these artists as an educational enterprise for the whole society, and the programme of the School of Fine Arts and the Institute for the Propaganda of Art were likewise shaped in this spirit. 'In a democratic state', Skoczylas wrote in 1926, 'the government has no other way of influencing the development of art but to spread artistic culture among the masses'.<sup>43</sup> Two years later, he repeated that 'the vast majority of the efforts of the state ... should express itself in the propagation of art among wide masses, and not almost exclusively in backing individual artists'.<sup>44</sup>

Skoczylas and Pruszkowski's interest in art's role in society was thus accompanied by an apparent concern for democracy. In its contribution to the development of a democratic society, art was to be 'public', not only in the sense of being available to everyone, but also as capable of educating the citizen towards a more attentive participation in democracy. In Skoczylas's writings, democracy appeared as a key notion, especially in his texts devoted to the graphic arts, the rapidly-developing medium to which he was incessantly devoted throughout his career. This concern echoed, to some extent, similar ideas in operation in the post-revolutionary French Third Republic where the debate on social art was inherently linked to the promotion of democracy, reflecting the French republican tradition's commitment to the 'democratization, egalitarianism



and utilitarianism' of society, and of art's and culture's role in that process.<sup>45</sup> The members of Rytm would have surely been acquainted with this French tradition, as was made evident in Pruszkowski's self-portrait (now lost, but illustrated in a book published in 1930 by the Italian critic Margherita Sarfatti), in which the painter showed himself wearing an astonishing hat with the inscription *liberté égalité fraternité* (Fig. 10.5).<sup>46</sup> As Catherine Méneux has pointed out, in France, 'associated with a social state rather than a political regime, rooted in the memory of the revolutionary years, the idea of democracy irrigated discourses, referring to the ideal of free and egalitarian access to culture and an art for all'.<sup>47</sup>

### **Conflicts: State Art Patronage and Democracy**

So far, I have listed a number of key points raised in the writings of Rytm members Skoczylas and Pruszkowski, including their elevation of crafts; their belief in art's popular nature; their objection to its market commodification; and their concern for the artist's welfare and for art's educational role, seen as the carrier of democratic values. I have not yet explored, however, how exactly the artists perceived the state's role in artistic patronage. The issue is complex, because, upon closer inspection, there was a tension between the artists' views on state patronage and the free market, democracy, the postulate of 'widening participation', and their relationship with Sanacja. Indeed, one could argue that the inconsistencies embedded in Skoczylas's and Pruszkowski's writings, which I will now discuss, reflected the very 'ambivalence of democracy and authority' embedded in Piłsudski's regime.<sup>48</sup>

Sanacja's ideology was complex; political historians have often described it as 'vague', yet also, less frequently, as 'forceful'.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the right-wing Endecja, with its ideological convictions firmly articulated in its leader Roman Dmowski's theoretical writings, Sanacja's ideology was not articulated directly.<sup>50</sup> Its members 'made up a true mosaic of different political orientations', as it was pointed out by Kazimierz Zakrzewski in 1930, and, as it was put by Porter-Szücs, 'aside from devotion to Piłsudski and antipathy towards Endecja there wasn't much that held them together'.<sup>51</sup>

If not articulated in political terms, Sanacja's ideology was woven as a more wide-ranging movement of a moral, psychic, and (sometimes) even spiritual renewal, which Davies described as 'akin to Moral Rearmament' and one 'which imagined that the evil in men's souls could be scrubbed clean by military spit and polish'.<sup>52</sup> In this context, the 'community spirit' which characterised Pruszkowski's and Skoczylas's views on art, expressed in their attitude of self-organising despite obstacles, as well as their other postulates, including the elevation of committed work and personal effort, the value of education, and even the general optimism and vigour which characterised their writings and teaching, can all be seen as elements of the ideology of Sanacja.

The concept of education in particular had important ideological overtones for Skoczylas and other sympathisers of Sanacja. Writing about the pro-Piłsudski periodical *Droga (The Path)*, for example, Chmielewska noted that 'until 1926 [it] opposed art's involvement with politics, but after the May coup [it] promoted the claim that all branches of social influence: education, science and art, should support the system of national upbringing and should perpetuate the desirable models of character'.<sup>53</sup> This idea of 'national upbringing', also discussed by Krzysztof Jakubiak and Anna Radziwiłł, was in fact a specific kind of activism, linked to a belief in the decisive role of the elite in the shaping of the modern state.<sup>54</sup> 'The whole discussion about the role of art in the construction of the state', noted Chmielewska, 'was the derivative of the conception of activism. This is why [the authors] would constantly use such categories as "will" and "action", [and] underline the culture-producing role of the elite and the prophetic-educational character of art'.<sup>55</sup> This 'elite theory' saw the elite as circulating independently from the social strata, and as being autonomous from the government, and was informed by such authors as Vilfredo Pareto and Julien Benda.<sup>56</sup>

There was an essential conflict, then, in the activity of the 'state-forming' artists, including those from Rytm: on the one hand, they expressed collective and egalitarian ideals of employing art for the benefit of all; on the other hand, they were involved in the cult of individuality, and believed in the prophetic role of the elite. Hence the contrast between Pruszkowski's two

metaphorical visions of the artist: the humble, work-orientated craftsman, immersed in his work understood as a collaborative effort versus the artist as a more brazen, egotistical, and self-reliant personality. This conflict, reflective of analogous inconsistencies within the ethos of Sanacja, was expressed in Skoczylas's writings on art. These can appear problematic, because their repeated explicit references to 'democracy' stood in contrast with their author's tacit adherence to Sanacja's elevation of the 'culture-forming' elites, with its implicit negations of democracy.

Similarly-problematic is the relationship in Skoczylas's writings between democracy and propaganda, both of which are discussed by him in the context of the graphic arts. Today, the fact that artists openly pointed to art's propagandist potential as a strength might raise eyebrows. Yet, in Skoczylas's writings, 'propaganda' featured as a positive and progressive concept with the potential to improve society. In his articles Skoczylas repeatedly underlined that, thanks to its ability to multiply the image effectively, graphic art can educate. One could point to an apparent incongruity in Skoczylas's logic: was the state's direct contribution to the 'spreading of artistic culture among the masses', which he advocated, not a potential danger to the democracy which he so overtly promoted?<sup>57</sup> Much like in the case of campaigning for building the new exhibition space in Warsaw, Skoczylas reached for the 'propaganda argument': the graphic arts' propaganda potential was mentioned by him as an enticement for the state to invest in them. 'In this spreading of artistic culture graphic arts are the main tool of the state', he stated in one of his articles, 'this is why one of the state's main concerns should be the appropriate preparation of graphic artists and the appropriate level of graphic studios as workplaces'.<sup>58</sup>

It was Endecja that most consistently warned against the state's involvement in art at that time. The economist Roman Rybarski expressed this position in his major 1926 article published in the pro-Endecja periodical *Mysł Narodowa* (*National Thought*), when he wrote:

A lot is being written these days about the difficult situation of writers. Many questionnaires are being organised [with a view to] prove that the material conditions of writers and artists are severely destabilised ... The trade unions ... did not help. Can the state help? Some writers turn to the state with the charge that it cares about literature and art too little. But can the state really give effective help to the people working in this area? Even if we suppose that the state's financial condition allows for this, it would still be difficult to imagine a bigger nonsense than nationalising literature and art. They would immediately cease to be [based on] creativity but would become propaganda, politics, whatever one wants, and thus they would simply deteriorate. Real spiritual creativity requires freedom. A sponsored creativity, or one directly maintained by the state, must [then] serve the purposes of those who remain in power.<sup>59</sup>

In the context of the manipulation with which some European totalitarian states used art and art patronage for its political ends, Rybarski's caution against the state's involvement in art sounds almost like a premonition.

It did not appear to concern Skoczylas or other artists who shared his views, however. According to Agnieszka Chmielewska, it was 'very likely that the majority of Polish artists did not realise the existence of the danger of art becoming an element of the apparatus of social control—they wanted to work for the idealised state that was an embodiment of Polish national dreams and was to solve all the problems of the national society'.<sup>60</sup>

But Skoczylas's comment from 1926 shows he was not an 'unaware idealist', unconscious of the risks involved. Quite the opposite, he articulated the danger of the state's involvement in arts with relative lucidity: 'Direct influence on the activity of artists', he wrote, 'usually creates the danger of organising official art, which always places impediments in the way of new art'.<sup>61</sup> For that reason, Skoczylas believed, the state should, firstly, help create *consumers* of art, and secondly, subsidise *institutions* rather than individuals.

Skoczylas saw the 'education of the masses' as the means to invigorate art consumption, which in turn would widen participation in art and solve the problem of the maintenance

of individual artists. ‘In democratic times,’ he wrote in a 1928 article, ‘the expansion of artistic culture among the wider masses creates for artists such wide circles of consumers that the concern for the maintenance and development of individual artists is solved automatically’.<sup>62</sup> But Skoczylas’s policy of ‘widening participation’ in art by generating ‘consumers of art’ appears somewhat problematic when placed next to his aforementioned criticism of the operations of the capitalist art market. Surely, there seems to be considerable scope for conflict between art’s educational, propagandistic, and market values, a tension which Skoczylas does not seem to have recognised.

Instead, Skoczylas seemed to believe that the free capitalist market could coexist with the partial support given to the arts by the state, much in line with state control of business (so-called *etatyzm*), the socio-economic policy which gained considerable support in interwar Poland and which advocated the state’s partial interference in the economy and the market.<sup>63</sup> Endecja’s discouragement of organised state financial support for art, in contrast, was part of the more general free-market economic thought propagated by its supporters. Ultimately, then, the varying views on the state’s involvement with the capitalist art market between Sanacja and Endecja paralleled their divergent views on state art patronage.

Skoczylas’s ideas on the relationship between the state and the free market were further complicated, however, by his simultaneous references to stimulating art consumption and the art market on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the fact that he considered the state itself as one of the chief consumers of art. ‘The state is a huge receiver of applied graphic arts’, he wrote in 1932,

either by publishing, of its own accord, great amounts of prints, or by making small independent graphic studios to publish them for general state use. I mean here, generally, all kinds of government stock papers, that is banknotes, postage stamps, diplomas, attestations, school didactic aids and all sorts of advertisement used for the propaganda of tourism, state companies and monopolies.<sup>64</sup>

Skoczylas seemed to have followed the view expressed over a decade earlier by Lauterbach:

Instead of insecure grants and occasional philanthropy of patrons, among whom the state finds itself now and then, one should attempt and request that all the state buildings, ... uniforms, and guard booths, go through the hands of the artists. A healthy soil for national art is generated only by a real demand, not by philanthropy. If the Polish state ‘acquires’ from the artists, then Polish art will stand strong, the architects will stop sketching projects of [some] imaginary architecture and the painters will follow the path of monumental painting, instead of producing landscapes and still-lives for the markets of the ‘salons’. As an employer and a receiver of art, the state outgrows, with the scale of its demands and its means, all [artistic] societies and clubs of patrons ... The examples of art history show that the greatest masterpieces were essentially produced as commissions, and that art is alive [only] when it is backed up by a real demand’.<sup>65</sup>

Lauterbach’s comment revealed a call for ‘state art’ *par excellence*, and Skoczylas’s attempts to reconcile this with appeals to the free market and to democracy are really quite astounding.

In what appears to be another attempt to overcome the danger of an ‘official art’, Skoczylas expressed a view that the state should support institutions rather than individuals. He developed this view into what he saw as an innovative model for modern art patronage. ‘In the sphere of the state’s protection of arts we find today no good example in any country’, he stated in 1930, at the first meeting of the committee of the Institute for the Propaganda of Art, continuing: ‘There are many great and powerful countries, rich in many centuries of artistic tradition, but, despite that, having no good organisation system in the sphere of art protection ... Perhaps today is going to mark the beginning of a system of the state’s protection of arts which one day will become an example for other countries’.<sup>66</sup>

Skoczylas proposed a model of state patronage in which institutions played a key role: ‘The essence of that system is that a democratic country can better fulfil its task towards art by giving material and moral assistance to autonomous artistic institutions of a high level, rather than by offering dangerous and difficult protection for individuals’.<sup>67</sup>



In fact, a similar model, described by Catherine Méneux as a 'social project of small associations', had been proposed before 1906 in France, where the necessary reforms in arts administration were to be implemented not by the state, whose reforming capacity was disqualified, but by 'many small associations', allowing for the autonomy of intellectuals and artists.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, it appears that, at least in the minds of some of its members, Rytm aspired to be precisely such a specialised 'autonomous artistic institution' that could mediate between the state and the artists, acting in the interest of the latter. This emerges quite clearly from Mieczysław Treter's commentary on the group's last, eleventh exhibition in 1932:

It is a great shame that too narrowly perceived local interests prevent our most eminent visual artists from the creation via a careful and strict selection, of one shared association, of an explicitly artistic, and not unionist character; one which would actually constitute a central representation of our contemporary visual arts. In its organisation, it would be something similar to various scientific or literary academies, but without wages and without occupational titles, instead with the obligation of continuous steady work and of constant maintenance of the high artistic level.<sup>69</sup>

Surely, on the occasion of what was to be the group's last exhibition, Treter described the kind of institution that Rytm had once hoped to become.

In practice, however, the vision of a modern institution which would be self-governed by artists, rather than controlled by patrons, and which would support artistic production made for purely 'artistic', non-commercial reasons, evoked in the writings of Treter and Skoczylas, was largely utopian. Treter's nostalgia, for example, seems to have been fed by a number of incongruous wishes: he wanted a 'careful and strict selection', but 'one shared association' for all artists; 'no wages', but 'constant maintenance of a high artistic standard'.<sup>70</sup> The institution's impartiality also appears somewhat questionable: although he did not say so, Treter probably imagined the artists from Rytm (and perhaps from *Sztuka* (Art), another group of artists with 'representative' ambitions) as the gatekeepers of the new 'academy'. Although it may well have been with a concern for the fate of 'living art' that was at the heart of Skoczylas and Pruszkowski's involvement, among other artists, in the debate on modern art patronage in Poland and the state's responsibility towards it, the practicalities of devising such a system proved more challenging than they may have wanted. The idea of the 'modernist academy', as it were, was utopian not just because it was susceptible to political bias. In its wish to institutionalise 'living art' it was from the very start, one could argue, intent on the impossible task of institutionalising change.

In reality, despite the community-orientated and largely anti-commercial attitude of the artists discussed here, their activity was influenced by the ideological leanings of *Sanacja*. It was also conditioned by changes in the market. Although not to the extent of the Parisian art market, Poland too was influenced by a speculative attitude to buying art, which coincided with the beginnings of Rytm's activity, and was subsequently affected by a dramatic drop in the sales of works of art. This was observed by member of Rytm, Waław Husarski, in his sarcastic comment on the clients of the Salon Garlińskiego (the Garliński Salon) where Rytm exhibited on a regular basis:

Salon Garlińskiego went through a time of great success when the currency decline won us some truly unforeseen collectors and lovers of art, cleverly investing in the Borowskis, the Skoczylases and the Wąsowiczs whose prices grew comparatively more slowly than those of shares, or even of other purchasable commodities; at present [1925], there is a period of stabilisation, linked, in an extraordinary way, to those collectors' sudden indifference towards the problems of art and its trends.<sup>71</sup>

If this change in the market was observable in 1925, then after the financial crisis of 1929 the situation of the artists became even more difficult. In 1932 Skoczylas claimed quite openly:

How are paintings' sales doing [today]? They are [simply] non-existent ... As a result of the competition created during the times of inflation, today a large number of artworks are entering the market from owners who have no attachment to them. The artists [therefore] compete with their own paintings. The crisis in easel painting has been going on for a long time. Easel paintings continue to lose consumers.<sup>72</sup>

In another 1932 text, he stated again: ‘The sale of paintings ... today barely exists’.<sup>73</sup> The associated practical difficulties for the artists were described in 1966 by Maria Grońska: ‘The life of artists in these years was very difficult. Easel paintings, and especially good [ones], had fewer and fewer buyers ... The patronage of private people, which during partition had played such an important role, disappeared almost completely’.<sup>74</sup>

It was precisely during this considerable decline in the sales of easel paintings and in private patronage that Sanacja came to power. For Rytm, therefore, and other artists who accepted public commissions, the reality of politics and that of the market became very strongly intertwined. Through commissions, the state provided new opportunities for artists who had become less able to support themselves by selling their easel paintings. ‘After the collapse of the private art market in around 1925’, wrote Anders, ‘artists were forced to turn for help to the state’.<sup>75</sup> Seen from the perspective of the fluctuations of the art market, the shifts which marked the development of the activity of Rytm—from easel painting to applied and decorative arts, and from private to public patronage—appear primarily as pragmatic moves rather than aesthetic or partisan ones. It is in this practical context also that one ought to see the artists’ extensive pedagogical activity: not only an expression of their commitment to social ideals, but also a very down-to-earth means of providing for their daily existence.<sup>76</sup>

In taking on the role of planner and organiser of Polish artistic life, Rytm bound itself to the authoritarian political system of Sanacja. As we have seen, however, this relationship was not at all straightforward, and developed over time. It is highly possible that there was political disagreement within Rytm itself, though this has never been articulated. In any event, Rytm’s attitude towards the state was marked by tension, both in terms of what its members expected of the government, and in terms of how its members saw the role of art in the context of society. The inconsistencies embedded in Skoczylas’s and Pruszkowski’s writings corresponded with those embedded in Sanacja’s rhetoric, combining discourses on democracy, the prophetic role of the elites, and education. Today, these tensions and inconsistencies continue to generate a divergence in views on the extent to which Rytm was bound to Sanacja, with no consensus yet in sight.

All translations from Polish are the author’s.

1 See, for instance: Henryk Anders, *Rytm. W poszukiwaniu stylu narodowego* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1972); Katarzyna Nowakowska-Sito (ed.), *Stowarzyszenie Artystów Polskich Rytm 1922–1932* (Warsaw: National Museum in Warsaw, 2001); Katarzyna Nowakowska-Sito (ed.), *W kręgu Rytmu: sztuka polska lat dwudziestych* [a collection of conference papers, in Polish with English summaries] (Warsaw: National Museum in Warsaw, 2006). For a more comprehensive literature review on Rytm, see: Małgorzata Sears, ‘The Warsaw Group Rytm (1922–1932) and Modernist Classicism’ (PhD thesis, The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2018), pp. 27–29.

2 The name Endecja came from ‘N. D.’, the initialism for Narodowa Demokracja (‘National Democracy’).

3 For more on the relationship between Rytm and Zachęta, see the sections entitled ‘A New Political Voice’ and ‘Turbulent Outcome: Break with Zachęta’ in: Sears, ‘The Warsaw Group Rytm’, pp. 38–39 and 55–57 respectively. These also include more discussion of the sources of Rytm’s aesthetic ideas in the turn-of-the-century Paris.

4 Wiesława Dąbrowska, ‘Stowarzyszenie Artystów Plastyków “Rytm”’ (MA thesis, University of Warsaw, c.1960–1970). Archived in: ‘Zbiory Specjalne’ Archives, IS PAN, ref. 1624, p. 8. Elsewhere, Dąbrowska claimed that the artists from Rytm ‘agreed with the ruling regime, they never doubted it; though they did not worship it, because their fate as artists and as people was hard at that time, yet they supplied the kind of art which agreed with the intentions of the government, whether intentionally or unintentionally’. Dąbrowska, ‘Stowarzyszenie Artystów Plastyków “Rytm”’, p. 29.

5 Urszula Kozakowska-Zaucha, ‘Wawelska przygoda rytmistów’, in Nowakowska-Sito (ed.), *W kręgu Rytmu*, p. 150.

6 Anders, *Rytm*, p. 10.

7 Anders, *Rytm*, p. 10.

8 Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland’s Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 109. First published 1984.

9 Piotr Wróbel, ‘Poland’, in Richard Frucht (ed.), *Eastern Europe: An Introduction to the People, Lands, and Culture*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd., 2004), p. 26.

10 Brian Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 99.

11 Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World*, p. 101.

12 Agnieszka Chmielewska, *W służbie państwa, społeczeństwa i narodu. ‘Państwowotwórczy’ artyści plastycy w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2006), p. 232.

13 Dąbrowska, ‘Stowarzyszenie Artystów Plastyków “Rytm”’, p. 3. Maria Rogoyska, ‘Z dziejów mecenatu artystycznego w Polsce w latach 1918–1930’, *Materiały do studiów i dyskusji*, 5/3–4 (19–20) (1954): p. 146.

14 The debates and lectures took place in The Artistic Club (Klub Artystyczny), with Rytm’s members Pruszkowski and Skoczylas among the participants. After a few weeks of discussion, a special ‘memorial’ was composed which was subsequently signed by one hundred artists and presented to the President of Poland. Rogoyska, ‘Z dziejów mecenatu artystycznego w Polsce’, p. 142.

These postulates were subsequently summarised in Skoczylas’s article. Władysław Skoczylas, ‘Sztuka a państwo’, *Głos Prawdy* 244 (1928): pp. 295–96. Reprinted in Wojciech Włodarczyk (ed.), ‘Władysław Skoczylas – sztuka – szkoła – państwo’, *Zeszyty Naukowe ASP*, 4/10 (1984): pp. 28–30.

15 Dąbrowska, ‘Stowarzyszenie Artystów Plastyków “Rytm”’, p. 3. Immediately after regaining independence in 1918, the plans for national art patronage in Poland were quite ambitious. In

January 1919, the Prime Minister (and renowned pianist) Ignacy Jan Paderewski established Poland's Ministry of Culture and Art (Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki) with Zenon Przesmycki as the Minister. This, however, did not survive due to the burden of the new state's many expenses and became, in 1922, reduced to a 'Department of Art' in the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment (Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego). This reduction was widely perceived as a setback, and the government was criticised thereafter by the artists for its lack of interest in contemporary art.

16 Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World*, p. 98.

17 Renata Piątkowska, 'Ugrupowanie Rytm w zwiernicdle krytyki prawicowej', in Nowakowska-Sito (ed.), *W kręgu Rytmu*, pp. 154–55, p. 157. Among its founding members, TOSSPO's charter mentioned two members of Rytm: Władysław Skoczylas and Edward Wittig. *Statut Towarzystwa Szerzenia Sztuki Polskiej wśród Obcych* (Warsaw: Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 1926) (accessible from the National Library of Poland, item number: XIXA1a). In fact, Skoczylas was one of TOSSPO's principal founders, and also fulfilled the roles of the Manager of the Visual Arts Section and of TOSSPO's Vice-president. Maria Grońska, *Władysław Skoczylas* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1966), p. 48.

In the years 1927–1932 the Visual Arts Section of TOSSPO organised 24 artistic events, most of which were exhibitions of Polish art in various cities across Europe and beyond. Moreover, TOSSPO published catalogues in different languages. Anders, *Rytm*, p. 66.

18 A contemporary report from the exhibition (held, together with many other documents relating to the long preparations process, at the 'Special Collection' Archives of IS PAN) meticulously lists all the awards received by the Polish participants, with the final number ranging from 186 to 192, depending on the counting method. 'Nagrody dla Polski na Wystawie Paryskiej w r. 1925', Paris (14 November 1925). A report held at the 'Special Collection' Archives of IS PAN, ref. 'Archiwum Wystawy Paryskiej 1925', 808 – 18 a.

19 The 'state-forming' artists were reassessed in 2006, in a monograph by Agnieszka Chmielewska, entitled *In the Service of the State, the Society and the Nation. The "State-Forming" Visual Artists in the Second Polish Republic*, in which she contested their marginalisation in art-historical narratives and argued for the progressiveness of their social ideas. Until the publication of Chmielewska's study, this group of artists had received relatively little critical attention. See: Chmielewska, *W służbie państwa*, p. 5.

20 Chmielewska, *W służbie państwa*, p. 15.

21 Porter-Szücs, for example, noted that Sanacja was 'at first vaguely center-left in their policy preferences, but they vehemently eschewed any ideological pigeon-holes and would grow more conservative over time'. Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World*, p. 98.

22 Amy Lynn Włodarski, 'Exposing the Political Gesamtkunstwerk: Hanns Eisler's *Nuit et Brouillard*', in David Imhoof, Margaret Eleanor Menninger, and Anthony J. Steinhoff (eds.), *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), p. 118. In her survey of how art's place in French post-Revolution democratic society was discussed with relation to the market, the sphere of education, and the 'art for all' ethos, Catherine Méneux devoted special attention to the art critic Roger Marx (1859–1913). Catherine Méneux, 'Introduction', in Neil McWilliam, Catherine Méneux, and Julie Ramos (eds.), *L'Art social de la Révolution à la Grande Guerre. Anthologie de textes sources* (Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA), 2014), accessed 30 October 2019, <https://books.openedition.org/inha/5907>

23 The Polish movement for the renewal of the crafts was upheld by such Kraków-based groups as Towarzystwo Polska Sztuka Stosowana or TPSS (The Polish Applied Art Association), set up in 1901, and Warsztaty Krakowskie (Kraków Workshops), set up in 1913. A similar, craft-oriented profile had also been maintained at the Szkoła Przemysłu Drzewnego (School of Wood Industry) in Zakopane, opened in 1878, and after the 1925 Paris Exhibition at the new Warsaw association called Spółdzielnia Artystów Plastyków 'Ład' (The Ład Visual Artists' Cooperative) or simply Ład (meaning 'order'), 1926–1996.

24 Chmielewska, *W służbie państwa*, p. 193. The members of Rytm constituted a large proportion of the teaching staff of the School of Fine Arts, with Skoczylas, Pruszkowski, Kowarski, Wittig, and Breyer all being professors in their respective fields and heads of their individual practice studios, and other members teaching individual courses.

25 Quoted in Joanna Kania, 'Dziedzictwo Świętego

Projektusa. Program Kompozycji Brył i Płaszczyzn Wojciecha Jastrzębowskiego', in Maryla Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka Wszędzie. Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1904–1944* (Warsaw: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, 2012), pp. 180–81.

26 In the first draft of that institute's programme, written on the occasion of the opening of its new seat in 1931, Skoczylas wrote: 'holding no division between the so-called fine and applied arts, we shall treat equally all kinds of visual arts, that is, painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic design, and interior design with all its branches'. Władysław Skoczylas, 'Wstęp do katalogu wystawy dzieł sztuki pod nazwą Salon Zimowy', in *Materiały do studiów i dyskusji* 5/3–4(19–20) (1954): pp. 35–36.

27 Tadeusz Pruszkowski, 'Niewyzyskane siły plastyki', *Gazeta Polska* (24 May 1936): p. 5. Quoted in Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, p. 228.

28 Tadeusz Pruszkowski, 'O Bractwie Św. Łukasza i Szkole Warszawskiej' (1930). Reprinted in Irena Bal (ed.), 'Tadeusz Pruszkowski. Wybór Pism', published as an issue of the periodical *Zeszyty Naukowe ASP* (Warsaw: Zeszyt, 26 April 1989): p. 12.

29 Tadeusz Pruszkowski, 'O wielką Popularną Sztukę', *Wiadomości Literackie* 4 (1934): p. 2. Reprinted in Irena Bal (ed.), 'Tadeusz Pruszkowski. Wybór Pism', p. 18.

30 Władysław Skoczylas, 'Zmierzch paryskiej giełdy sztuki', *Gazeta Polska* 35 (4 Feb 1932): pp. 3–4. Online publication: Polish Digital National Library 'POLONA', accessed 30 October 2019, <https://polona.pl/item/gazeta-polska-pismo-codzienne-r-4-nr-35-4->

31 'The commercial dimension of the success of living art after the Great War was for many years ignored,' noted Christopher Green, for instance, 'but not at the time'. Christopher Green, *Cubism and its Enemies. Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916–1929* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 122–130, 134.

32 Skoczylas, 'Zmierzch paryskiej giełdy sztuki', p. 3.

33 Giorgio de Chirico, 'Il ritorno al mestiere', *Valori Plastici* (November–December 1919): pp. 18–19.

34 Gino Severini, *La vita di un pittore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1984). Originally published in 1946 under the title *Tutta la vita di un pittore*. Quoted in Francesco Mazzaferro, 'Gino Severini and the Sacred Art in a European Context: The Influence of Cennini's "Book of the Art". Part One', accessed October 2019, <http://letteraturaartistica.blogspot.co.uk/2016/05/gino-severini29.html>

35 Preface, *Skamander* 1 (January 1920): pp. 3–5.

36 According to a diary of his student Jan Zamojski, Pruszkowski used to say: 'There is no good painting painted badly. The most outstanding works of art are always accompanied with excellent craft'. Quoted in Chmielewska, *W służbie państwa*, p. 168.

37 Pruszkowski, 'O Bractwie', p. 12.

38 Tadeusz Pruszkowski, interview, *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* (18 Feb 1928). Quoted in Ireneusz J. Kamiński, *Kazimierz nad Wisłą. Miasto i ludzie* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1983), p. 116.

39 One of Pruszkowski's students, Felicja Lilpop-Krance, described them in the following way: 'He [Pruszkowski] was on friendly terms with his students and ran his studio as a guild association of novices acquiring the difficult craft. He was the master, and we were the apprentices. One would pass—in accordance with the custom—various levels of initiation, and several years' studies were concluded with a tragi-comic final ceremony ("Wyzwolenie)". Felicja Lilpop-Krance, *Powroty* (Bałystok: Zakłady Wyd. Versus, 1991), pp. 39–40. Quoted in Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, p. 229. See also: Włodzimierz Bartoszewicz, *Buda na Powiślu* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1966), pp. 161–64. The first evidence of this final-year ceremony in Pruszkowski's studio is from the year 1925 (10 December). Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, p. 231.

40 For more on these performative ceremonies, see: Felicja Lilpop-Krance, *Powroty* (Bałystok: Zakłady Wyd. Versus, 1991), pp. 39–40; Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, p. 231; Włodzimierz Bartoszewicz, *Buda na Powiślu* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1966), pp. 161–64.

41 Władysław Skoczylas, 'Grafika i jej znaczenie', *Grafika Polska* 2 (1926): pp. 1–4. Reprinted in Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, p. 276.

42 Tadeusz Pruszkowski, 'Niewyzyskane siły plastyki', *Gazeta Polska* (24 May 1936): p. 5. Reprinted in Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, p. 228.

43 Skoczylas, 'Grafika i jej znaczenie', p. 276.

- 44 Skoczylas, 'Sztuka a państwo', p. 28.
- 45 'Art and culture were also to be defined within this nexus of democratization, egalitarianism and utilitarianism, as encapsulated by the prevalence of the terms, "Social Art" (*l'art social*) and "Popular Art" (*l'art populaire*). Fae Brauer, *Rivals and Conspirators: The Paris Salons and the Modern Art Centre* (Cambridge: Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 282–83.
- 46 Margherita G. Sarfatti, *Storia della pittura moderna* (Rome: p. Cremonese, 1930).
- 47 Méneux, 'Introduction', unpaginated (paragraph 3).
- 48 'The Ambivalence of Democracy and Authority, 1922–39' is a chapter in Brian Porter-Szücs's book. Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World*, pp. 90–104.
- 49 For example, Davies, *Heart of Europe*, p. 109.
- 50 Roman Dmowski's main book was his nationalist manifesto *Mysli nowoczesnego Polaka* (*The Thoughts of a Modern Pole*), 1903, in many respects the basis for Endecja's programme.
- Roman Dmowski, *Mysli nowoczesnego Polaka* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Zachodnie, 1943). The book was based on a series of articles published in 1902, and its first edition was published in 1903 under the title *Mysli*.
- 51 Kazimierz Zakrzewski, 'Kryzys demokracji', 1930. Quoted in Krzysztof Jakubiak, *Wychowanie państwowe jako ideologia wychowawcza Sanacji. Kształtowanie i upowszechnianie w periodycznych wydawnictwach społeczno-kulturalnych i pedagogicznych*. (Bydgoszcz: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna w Bydgoszczy, 1994), p. 18. See also: Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World*, p. 100.
- 52 Davies, *Heart of Europe*, p. 109.
- 53 Chmielewska, *W służbie państwa*, pp. 32–33.
- 54 Jakubiak, *Wychowanie państwowe jako ideologia wychowawcza Sanacji*; Anna Radziwiłł, 'Ideologia wychowawcza sanacji i jej odbicie w polityce szkolnej w latach 1926–1939', *Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny* 1–2 (2014): pp. 227–306.
- 55 Chmielewska, *W służbie państwa*, p. 33.
- 56 See, for example, mentions in: Anders, *Rytm*, p. 137; Wojciech Włodarczyk, 'Niepodległość i nowoczesność', in Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, pp. 49–50. Włodarczyk pointed out that the Polish film director and producer Aleksander Hertz wrote about the theory of the elites in his 1931 book entitled *Ludzie i idee*. Aleksander Hertz, *Ludzie i idee* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Drogi, 1931).
- 57 Skoczylas, 'Grafika i jej znaczenie', p. 276.
- 58 Skoczylas, 'Grafika i jej znaczenie', p. 276.
- 59 Roman Rybarski, 'Obecne przesilenie a literatura i sztuka', *Mysl Narodowa* 6/13 (27 March 1926), pp. 193–94.
- 60 Agnieszka Chmielewska, 'Realism as a Solution to the Problems of Modernity', in Irena Kossowska (ed.), *Reinterpreting the past: traditionalist artistic trends in Central and Eastern Europe of the 1920s and 1930s* [conference papers, Warsaw and Kraków, September 2006] (Warsaw: Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2010), p. 200.
- 61 Skoczylas, 'Grafika i jej znaczenie', p. 276.
- 62 Skoczylas, 'Sztuka a państwo', pp. 27–28.
- 63 'Statism, as a programme of the Piłsudski-ites' camp, was formulated in opposition to the extreme liberal economic conception of *Endecja*'. Wojciech Włodarczyk, 'Niepodległość i nowoczesność', in Sitkowska (ed.), *Sztuka wszędzie*, p. 46. 'Endecja's programme opposed the state's involvement in the arts; this is why the right-wing critics protested against statism in the culture sector'. Piątkowska, 'Ugrupowanie Rytm w zwierniadle', pp. 154–55.
- 64 Skoczylas, 'Grafika – sztuka demokracji', *Gazeta Polska* 251 (10 Sept 1932): p. 3.
- 65 Lauterbach, 'Państwo a sztuka', *Świat* 46 (17 November 1917): pp. 30–33.
- 66 Władysław Skoczylas, 'Przemówienie Władysława Skoczylasa na posiedzeniu inauguracyjnym pierwszej rady Instytutu Propagandy Sztuki 18.VI.1930 r.', in Joanna Sosnowska (ed.), *Materiały do dziejów Instytutu Propagandy Sztuki (1930–1939)* (Warsaw: IS PAN, 1992), p. 29.
- 67 Skoczylas, 'Przemówienie Władysława Skoczylasa', pp. 29–30.
- 68 Méneux, 'Introduction', unpaginated (paragraph 3). These 'small associations' included Le Collège d'Esthétique moderne and the L'Art pour tous, among others.
- 69 Mieczysław Treter, 'Salon Wiosenny "Rytmu" w Instytucie Propagandy Sztuki (Garść uwag i refleksyj)', *Gazeta Polska* 160 (11 June 1932). Press cutting in the 'Zbiory Specjalne' Archives, IS PAN, ref. 70, folder 10. Mieczysław Treter was an art historian and a critic supportive of Rytm.
- 70 Treter, 'Salon Wiosenny "Rytmu"'.  
71 Wacław Husarski, *Przegląd młodej sztuki. Pamiętnik Salonu Czesława Garlińskiego obejmujący działalność od kwietnia roku 1922 do maja roku 1925: ozdobiony 24 ilustracjami* (Warsaw: Druk. Wł. Łazarskiego (Salon Cz. Garlińskiego), 1925), p. 58. Quoted in Rogoyska, 'Z dziejów mecenatu artystycznego w Polsce', p. 132.
- 72 Władysław Skoczylas, 'O stanie kultury w Polsce i położeniu artystów', *Głos Plastyków* 9–10 (1932): pp. 122–124. Reprinted in Włodarczyk (ed.), 'Władysław Skoczylas – sztuka – szkoła – państwo', p. 49.
- 73 Władysław Skoczylas, 'Z czego żyją dziś artyści', *Gazeta Polska* 357 (27 December 1932): p. 3.
- 74 Grońska, *Władysław Skoczylas*, p. 50.
- 75 Anders, *Rytm*, p. 61.
- 76 In the December 1932 issue of *Gazeta Polska*, in an article entitled 'What Artists Do for a Living Nowadays', Skoczylas claimed that '[a] large majority of visual artists, reaching 80%, maintains itself from teaching drawing', although he also claimed that these jobs were often insufficient for artists to maintain themselves. Skoczylas, 'Z czego żyją dziś artyści', p. 3.



# The Poverty of the Matriarchal Ornament and the Gleam of the Civilised Woman

MARTINA PACHMANOVÁ



*Martina Pachmanová is Associate Professor in the Department of Art History and Theory at the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague. Her chapter addresses the gendered nature of Czech discourses of design and applied art in the 1920s, examining how the promotion of modernist ideals of functionality and standardisation portrayed itself as a struggle against 'female' qualities of ornamentality and decorativism. Pachmanová links such discourses to demands that women be artistically re-educated, schooled in the virtues of rationalisation rather than the ornate tendencies of traditional handicrafts. Though this 'campaign against the ornament' had a seemingly emancipatory dimension in transforming women's lifestyles, Pachmanová questions how far this meant real professional empowerment for women. But the study also explores an alternative vision of design that sought to 'humanise' Functionalism. Often propounded by female writers, this other discourse envisaged a special role for women in creating living spaces that served inhabitants' psychological needs. This chapter is excerpted from Pachmanová's monograph *The Birth of a Woman Artist from the Lemonade Foam: Gender Contexts of Modern Czech Art Theory and Criticism (Zrození umělkyně z pěny limonády – Genderové kontexty české moderní teorie a kritiky umění)*, published in 2013.<sup>1</sup> (JO)*

## **The Poverty of the Matriarchal Ornament and the Gleam of the Civilised Woman**

Growing efforts within post-independence Czechoslovakia to exclude arts and crafts from modern design, which put the emphasis on machine production, also impacted on traditional female artistic activity. The latter was from this point on perceived as antithetical, or even an obstacle, to technological progress: just like other forms of handicrafts, it was rejected as a regressive force on the way to an industrialised and standardised lifestyle. This idea also became, particularly at the start of the 1920s, a leitmotif of modern aesthetics, which conceived itself as supremely anti-ornamental and, in the fields of housing, design, and architecture, as freed from the accretions of art and craft. Usefulness, standardisation, and purity of form were supposed to triumph over what the proponents of modernist progress asserted to be time-consuming, uneconomic, and, last but not least, unhealthy handicrafts and decorativism.<sup>2</sup>

Though, of course, it was not only women who upheld the handmade tradition and craft production, the conflict between modernism and decorativism was popularly portrayed in terms of sexual difference: on the one side, patriarchal moderation and uniformity cast as a progressive force, and on the other, matriarchal excess and ornateness cast as a reactionary one.<sup>3</sup> 'In today's era, when everywhere and in everything the desire is growing for simplicity and usefulness, there are, unfortunately, those, predominantly women, who adorn every object, whether produced by themselves or by others, in a laborious and wasteful manner', wrote the journalist Hana Cejnarová, commenting on the frenzied demand for unhealthy and uneconomic female handmade products during the mid-1920s.<sup>4</sup>

Yet while most representatives of the Czech avant-garde a priori rejected handicraft methods for the products of the modern lifestyle, less radical intellectuals called for the reform of craft and for its adaptation to the demands of the new era. Again it was female art education that found itself at the centre of contemporary discussions about the future of craft and handmade production. Josef Novák, in *Náš směr (Our Direction)*, a drawing and arts and crafts review, which had first appeared in 1910 and became a significant platform for issues of art education, formulated the most fundamental requirements for female handmade production in modern society along the lines of 'usefulness or reliable and efficient service, truthfulness or agreement between the material and its treatment, and the harmony or accordance of forms with their environment'.<sup>5</sup> He also declared one goal of the modern craft revival movement to be the elevation of women's handmade products 'from mere time-consuming hobby to the thoughtful, dedicated and responsible service of modern needs, and thus to the attainment of higher artistic qualities'.<sup>6</sup>

### Against Ornamental Non-Culture

A key role in these intense debates about efficiency and the modern lifestyle was undoubtedly played by the concept of the ornament; the disciples of Functionalist ideas declared open war on it and its existence was considered a brake on the development of humanity. As is attested by the words of Adolf Loos, the guru behind such ideas, the battle against ornament was also a battle against a proverbial 'eternal femininity'. Loos's proclamatory 1908 essay 'Ornament and Crime', while already known in Czech circles from the time of its original appearance, was only published in Czech in 1922, and, significantly, at a time when anti-ornamentalism was becoming an incantation of the emerging Devětsil generation and the proponents of Constructivism and Functionalism.<sup>7</sup> Loos's view of the ornament, as a manifestation of mental and social degeneration that had to be eradicated, had not lost its capacity to provoke even fourteen years after its original publication.

After a certain time, 'Ornament and Crime' was also published in *Náš směr*, which at the same time, in connection with Loos's text, announced a poll devoted to the ornament; the results were gradually published throughout 1924 and 1925. While the poll focussed primarily on the role of the ornament in aesthetic and artistic education, it also set its respondents more general questions concerning the role of the ornament in modern culture and society. Although the editors tried to formulate the poll's questions in a neutral manner, these questions nonetheless expressed their condemnation of the ornament as an anachronism: 'Should the ornament, as a manifestation of non-culture, be eradicated from life in general and from schools in particular?', the authors asked suggestively.

Among the poll's respondents was Adolf Loos himself. In his responses, he basically repeated those same opinions concerning the criminality and economic untenability of the ornament that he had first made public before the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup> His rhetoric was still just as combative and as expressive. By Loos's judgement, the modern person, as a 'person with modern nerves', inevitably hates the ornament, insofar as that person grasps that decorating with ornaments means a squandering of work, energy, time, and money, returning humanity to the level of savages and primitives. Loos perceived ornamentalism as part of an apparatus of power, a sadistic instrument that serves to commit violence against people, who are forced to work unnecessarily. Above all, however, he linked the pathological symptoms of the ornament to erotic instincts, which, according to him, manifest themselves most distinctly in women and which represent the antithesis of modernity as the manifestation of asceticism and the victory of the spirit over the body:

The utilitarian object lives on thanks to the durability of its material, and its modern value consists precisely in its solidity. When I abuse a utilitarian object by turning it into an ornament, I shorten its existence by consigning it to the early death of all fashion. Such murders committed against the material can only be caused by the whims and ambitions of woman—for the ornament in the service of woman will live forever. Objects of daily use, like fabric or wallpaper, whose durability is limited, remain in the service of fashion and thus become ornamental. Moreover, modern luxury gave priority to the durability and preciousness of the material over irrelevant embellishments. From an aesthetic standpoint the ornament thus barely comes under consideration. In the last analysis woman's ornament comes from the savages, it has erotic significance.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1920s, these ideas strongly influenced not only the views on artistic education espoused by the professional draughtspeople, whose platform was *Náš směr*, but also the woman question and the particular form it took. More specifically, many intellectuals connected the emancipation of the female sex and the establishment of a harmonious relationship between the sexes with the idea of the emancipation of women from decorativism and ornamentalism, as tokens of spiritual reaction, cheap superficiality, and erotic vulgarity. 'He who wishes to see a woman who is truly as free, as emancipated and as self-dependent as a man would surely not approve of her destroying her deeper sense of all that is truthful, honest and purposeful in the superficial decoration of every object', wrote the art educationalist Stanislav Matějček in his book *Visual Aesthetics and*

*Our Schools* (*Výtvarná estetika a naše škola*, 1927).<sup>10</sup> As with Loos, Matějček began with the assumption that women's cultivation of the ornament sprang from the female nature: it was proof of women's 'disquiet and weakness, their romanticism and sentimentality', and was instinctive in character.<sup>11</sup> The battle against decorativeness thus in a certain sense became a battle against nature: it was over this very nature, over the manifestations of its unrestrained and instinctual character, that modern culture had to triumph.

Amidst the dominant voices of these proponents of biological determinism, the contrasting opinion expressed by Jaromíra Mulačová remained somewhat exceptional. In an expansive essay covering the historical development of the jewel in human cultural history, Mulačová underlined the jewel's social and cultural contingency:

In one era after another, whole generations of women have been injected with many characteristics that may be termed moral diseases, and from which woman is only now beginning to free herself, in the period of her social and moral emancipation. One such moral disease, the one for which women are most reproached, is vanity and preoccupation with dress ... If, abandoning all biases, we trace the presence of these characteristics in terms of a line through history, we notice that the line reaches its highest point in those periods when woman assumes the role of slave towards man ... As soon as women's cultural and social standing rises, this line, representing their vain whims and fancies, starts to fall. Woman's spiritual and social ascent is strikingly reflected in the shifts in her taste and fondness for exterior effects.<sup>12</sup>

The debate about the ornament was thus inseparably fused with the woman question, and, as revealed by the poll in *Náš směr*, whose participants included significant personalities of artistic life, it was likewise fused with the issue of women's education in the fine arts.<sup>13</sup> The establishment of the right kind of artistic training in girls' schools was meant to contribute positively to the refinement of the female sex and at the same time to serve towards the elevation of taste in general, the progress of civilisation, and the democratisation of society:

It is work that has meaning, not decoration. Today work is honoured, and people triumph with work as they once did with finery and adornments. Is not the idle metropolitan peacock simply a laughing stock these days? At what levels of society are she and her appearance still certain to triumph? Do we not have greater respect for the woman worker than for the female clotheshorse who never works? ... Do we not clearly see two worlds here, a new one and a dying one?<sup>14</sup>

Art education in the middle and national schools became—as Bohumil Markalous, the foremost Czech aesthetician and expert in modern taste, asserted—a significant factor in the 'artistic construction of the entire state', and women played a particularly important role in this process.<sup>15</sup> As future teachers of art education, as mothers passing on the principles of taste to new generations, and, last but not least, as builders of the home, women were held responsible for the development of society and the culture of the new state in general. Although the male and female protagonists of modern artistic education advocated rationalisation and promoted liberation from 'idyllism and lyricism' and from 'all that is finicky and trifling', women were still consigned here to the activities of 'domestic science' and handicrafts, envisaged rather as educated dilettantes within the domestic sphere than as professional artists.<sup>16</sup> Yet women's importance to the process of raising the quality of lifestyle was not in any way reduced because of that.

Women were to be 'reeducated' according to a Functionalist model of simplicity and functionality; their artistic work had to be adapted to its requirements, as did their very lives. Drawing teacher Marie Dohnalová, in the *Náš směr* poll, held up 'purity, ... fluent and simple elegance of line, neatness and beauty without any decorative tendency', as well as 'forms determined by function', as the aim of contemporary artistic schooling for girls, and hereby referred, correctly enough, to the way many girls' schools cast their students' drawing and artistic formation into the 'sweet but deceitful dream' of the ornament.<sup>17</sup> Dohnalová's contribution to the poll drew on her own pedagogical experiences to argue strongly against

the idea of an inborn decorative instinct in children, and especially in girls, and also against the separation made in schools between boys' and girls' drawing training. She optimistically proclaimed the following consequences of eradicating ornamental superficiality from art education:

The benefits of teaching modern drawing methods lie in the joyful stimulus they offer towards work, but we hope there will be other benefits too. We hope that our drawing methods will one day appear as a powerful educational factor in both deepening and bringing to the surface the spiritual life of the future woman, in the values that her purified soul, rid of its naive ideas, is able to draw from its secret depths and place in the beneficial service of life, which, through her recognition of the beauty in functionality, she is always able, in whatever calling, to purposefully shape according to clear ideas of Good, Beauty, Truth and Humanity.<sup>18</sup>

The conception of art as the expression and the bearer of truth and goodness, reflecting the basic principles of Platonist aesthetics, linked questions of aesthetics, utility, and ethics. The formal asceticism of Constructivism and Functionalism thus became not only a dictate about artistic form (which was supposed to follow function), but also a moral imperative. Ornamentalism, as a kind of gilded surface masking the real essence of things, was a deception, a trick, a falsehood. In Markalous's words, it 'always tempts people, in social terms, to commit evil, it represents substitution by a lie, and nothing can possibly be created with it, except in the sense of exclusive, individually produced, and thus aristocratic or plutocratic and antisocial artworks'.<sup>19</sup>

Not only did the decorative function of art have to fall in the battle against the ornament, but so did individual handcrafting. Markalous's call for collectively and socially produced works of art aimed towards a standardised, machine-made aesthetic, such as was espoused by the Czech interwar avant-garde and in which there was no place for female handicraft products. Instead of individual creative acts for private (domestic) uses, what was advocated was work produced by the collective and intended for the collective. 'The modern person', wrote Stanislav Matějček, 'does not have time for, and cannot lose a single moment in, the devising of ornaments, for his duty is to work for the whole, for humanity—he is a collective being. He knows that he needs calm and strength—the ornament is disquiet and weakness, romanticism, sentimentality'.<sup>20</sup>

Through the second half of the 1920s, Matějček's reformist ideas played a key role in the field of aesthetic and artistic education. Matějček summarised his ideas in the book *Visual Aesthetics and Our Schools*, published at the expense of the Art Department of the Educational Union in Plzeň (Výtvarný odbor Osvětového svazu v Plzni).<sup>21</sup> In expounding his philosophy of 'desuperficialising', his term for the process of aesthetic and formal reductionism prescribed by the slogan 'form follows function', Matějček referred not only to Loos, but also to the German architect Bruno Taut and his book *The New Dwelling: Woman as Creator (Nové bydlení: Žena jako tvůrce)*.<sup>22</sup> Taut's principles of functionalised housekeeping, of a home governed by order, harmony, and a model cleanliness based on modern standards of hygiene, informed Matějček's principles of female education. In a chapter devoted to girls' drawing he wrote:

In my opinion it is wrong that drawing in girls' schools has to be of the decorative kind. The enlightened woman must surely call for liberation here too ... We do not want to see our women seduced into Richelieu embroidery, the perforation of costly material, the cutting apart of cloth and the wasting of time and money, and even their health, in the production of ornaments. He who wishes to see a woman who is truly as free, as emancipated and as self-dependent as a man would surely not approve of her destroying her deeper sense of all that is truthful, honest and purposeful in the superficial adornment of every object ... A sensitive eye, a bright brain, orderliness, model cleanliness and hygiene in everything that she touches and which passes through her hands, taste and delicacy and love for work—let these things adorn the woman of this century!<sup>23</sup>



Jan Vaněk

## Žena *konečně* civilisovaná

*Muž dosáhl v 19. století toho, že přeměnil svůj oblek v oděv, jehož formy se po dva lidské věky již téměř vůbec nemění. Móda ztratila svou vládu nad ním, neboť přišli-li jednou krejčí jinak knoflíky, uspořádali-li jinak kapsy nebo změnil trochu střih, je to tak nepodstatné, že to jen snob upozoruje. Tuto emancipace od módy uvolnila síly muže pro užitečnější věci. V dobách, kdy se muž také strojí, svět šel jen pomalu kupředu. Ve století, v němž muž s tím přestal, učinil svět větší pokroky než za tisíciletí před tím. Muž dnes nosí oděv, který by se mohl nazvat uniformou civilisace, tak všeobecně rozšířené jsou jeho látky, střihy a barvy po celé zeměkouli.*

Max v. Boehn.

Cítil jsem již dávno, a se mnou jistě i mnoho jiných kulturních lidí, že **ženy**, které mají stejné vzdělání jako my muži a přece se **oblékají vždy podle rozmarů módy**, musíme vzhledem k jejich exotickým oblekům počítati mezi exoty stejně, jako mezi ně počítáme pestrobarevné papoušky či ozdobně vybavené divochy. Již před čtyřmi roky cítil jsem potřebu věnovati této otázce výstavu, kterou teprve dnes pro různé okolnosti uskutečňuji, a knihu, kterou vydávám.

Fig. 11.1.  
Jan Vaněk and  
Zdeněk Rossmann  
(eds.),  
*Civilised Woman*  
(*Civilisovaná žena*,  
1929). Catalogue.  
The Moravian  
Gallery, Brno.  
© Pavel Rossmann

### The Mass Ornament of the New Womanhood

The campaign against the ornament, which accompanied Czech art theory and criticism for the whole latter half of the 1920s, may have blatantly linked an undesirable decorativeness with women and womanhood, but it also had its emancipatory aspect. Loos, Markalous, Matějček, along with other opponents of superficial decoration, trinkets, and personal curios, saw the death of the ornament as enabling the birth of the free woman: a rational, modern, and civilised woman who ‘successfully collaborates with us men on progress and human work’.<sup>24</sup> However, for the male champions of these opinions it was predominantly a matter of creating a woman who was standardised and ‘functionalised’. According to the promoters of Functionalist ideas, the precondition for the civilising of the female sex was, first and foremost, the transformation of female taste: besides the elimination of the ornament from girls’ art education, this involved a radical reform of female clothing and habitation, areas in which—in the words of Bruno Taut—woman exists ‘as creator’. Overcoming the slavery of ornament, fashion, and household would help achieve the desired cultivation of the female sex, but also a more economical means of living.





Fig. 11.2.  
Zdeněk Rossmann,  
view into the  
exhibition  
*Civilised Woman*  
(*Civilizovaná žena*,  
1929–1930).  
Black-and-white  
photograph,  
20.5 x 16 cm.  
Moravian Gallery,  
Brno. © Pavel  
Rossmann

In Jan Vaněk's book *The Civilised Woman: How Should a Cultured Woman Dress* (*Civilizovaná žena: Jak se má kultivovaná žena oblékat*), a manifesto-style volume published to accompany the holding of an eponymous exhibition in Brno at the turn of 1929 and 1930, the author accused fashion designers of abusing the inertia of female thought (Figs. 11.1 and 11.2). In place of so-called 'Parisian fashions', he called for a unitary and fixed style of dress for both men and women, and specifically advised practical and genteel trouser wear: 'As artists, adhering to rules of economy and functionality, we protest against the wastage of material, the impracticality, the lack of hygiene of modern female dress. As sociologists, we don't want to see Paris, with its fashionable get-ups, reducing our women to trollops, and we dare hope to see women's clothing democratised in the same way men's clothing has been'.<sup>25</sup> A woman's level of culture was measured by her degree of adaptation to the dictates of Functionalist style rather than by her degree of education or her actual professional and creative work.<sup>26</sup> The external traits of modernised femininity—appearance, style, media image—thus successfully overshadowed the professional and creative emancipation of womankind. Despite the androgynous aspects of current fashion trends, which were supposed to raise women to the same level as men and to 'the heights of the modern era', and despite the obsession of contemporary magazines and film production with the most diverse variations on



the theme of female independence, in reality the 'civilised woman' remained a formulaic mask of modernity: instead of an active and autonomous modern being she was an object of male ideology and a commodity.<sup>27</sup>

Ethical questions certainly also fed into the issue of women's lifestyles, since—as Milena Jesenská had written several years earlier—style is not only an expression of aesthetics and personality, but also of morality.<sup>28</sup> Yet it seems that, in the case of the battle for the civilised woman, form triumphed over function and that the outer attributes of civilisation and culture came to hold sway over the inner ones.<sup>29</sup>

Though the work of the 'new woman' was not neglected in debates about modern aesthetics, taste, and lifestyle, the predominant concern, paradoxically, was with modernised work in the home, which the leaders of the reform efforts presented as a means of attaining female autonomy. No matter whether the 'new woman' was dressed in a trouser suit, her supreme role remained to take care of her household and family. As Matějček tellingly wrote: 'Love for children, for profound humanity, for the dwelling that we might wish for her sanctuary—let all this have greater value for her than the ever so arduous and unnecessary embroidering of curtains!'<sup>30</sup>

Women's relationship to the household as a place of creative activity was affirmed in yet another publication connected to the exhibition *Civilised Woman*, initiated and edited by Jan Vaněk, again, and Zdeněk Rossmann. This publication, entitled *Woman at Home (Žena doma)*, focussed mainly on the streamlining and rationalisation of domestic activity, the achievement of which would wipe out any remaining prejudices about the perfection of older forms of life, domestic life in particular. The opinion was repeated here that Functionalist simplicity and usefulness are important means for the modernisation and cultivation of the female sex. Even Milena Jesenská could not avoid this contradictory fusion of the civilised woman and the nurturer of home and family. On the one hand she looked up to the civilised woman, as 'a woman with firm muscles and precise mental self-discipline, a critical and thoughtful person ... turning old conventions upside down, creating new values, spiritual ones'.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand she celebrated the humble female soul who realised herself through the management of her household: 'The main thing is the soul of a woman, the expression of her personality, her skill, the soft, quiet gift of being able to create within this world comprised of a few walls'.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the civilised woman, as an icon of modernity and emancipation and the incarnation of Functionalist principles of habitation and dress, had an opposing face: the face of a woman turning her gaze back to home and household. It is here that she was supposed to realise her inborn aesthetic sensitivities and artistic talents, here that she could be a real artist. The obsession with the new woman moreover prevented the more fundamental discussion of the question of 'new' manhood. Olga Stránská-Absolonová expressed her feelings about this discrepancy at the outset of the 1920s: 'We must not aspire to doing the same things as men, not least because today's man is hardly a shining example of a human being. Just as we want a new woman, so we also want a new man'.<sup>33</sup>

During the campaign against ornamentation, decorativism, and handicrafts as relics of the past, women working in the applied arts inevitably found themselves in an unenviable situation. Not only did they face attacks on the female artistic tradition, which was associated with decorative art, but they were also meant to surrender any possibility of ever reaching the position of autonomous creators; they were instead supposed to merge back into the anonymous collective, only this time within the realm of mass production. Had they wanted to unite with the adherents of modern life and become truly emancipated women, they would have had to come to terms with the aesthetic demands of the new womanhood: that is, to be not only creators of modern goods freed from all the accretions of history and decorativism, but also to be the consumers and wearers of these mass-produced goods. In other words, the new, non-ornamental woman, in accommodating these demands, paradoxically had to turn herself into a mass ornament.<sup>34</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, in regard to questions of the ornament and the potential of applied and decorative art, women proved to be far less strictly orthodox than their male counterparts. They criticised many of the premises of Functionalism as an expression of militancy, as an undesirable attack on human individuality and

as blind iconoclasm, and they correctly pointed out the contradictions and inconsistencies among the movement's more orthodox proponents. But above all they sought to defend the potential of the female artistic tradition and of handicrafts for contemporary culture and to disturb the boundary between high and low art, which to a large extent had been defined on the basis of gender difference, of division of labour, and thus of separate spheres of activity.

### Art and Life

In a contribution for the magazine *Přítomnost* (*The Present*) titled 'The Ornament and Life', the translator Božena Králíková-Stránská responded to lectures given in Brno by three leading modern architects: Le Corbusier, Amédée Ozenfant, and Adolf Loos. She commented wittily on the paradox of Ozenfant in particular railing against the ornament and decoration, when he was himself both the architect and the owner of a fashion salon:

How is it that this staunch enemy of the ornament can sustain this hysterical female abstraction—fashion—through his own work and ideas, and likewise permit fashion to sustain him? And judging by his conférencier's tuxedo, the neckline of his waistcoat against the brilliant white of his stiff shirt front, his faultless manner of wearing his tiny necktie, ... judging by this elegant exterior of Mr. Ozenfant, I doubt that his workshops are producing clothes *à la* Silénka in Těsnohlídek's delightful novel *Green Willow* (*Vrba zelená*).<sup>35</sup>

Králíková-Stránská herself took a firm stance against decorative trinkets in this text, and, just like the three architectural gurus, interpreted the question of the ornament as a social and economic question. Nonetheless, in her ironic gloss on Ozenfant's speech she revealed the double faces of several promoters of aesthetic asceticism. The battle against the ornament was, to wit, not only an economic question and not only a question of women, but also a question of social class, and Functionalist aesthetics should, among other things, contribute to the overcoming of social differences: 'modern culture does not tear down the prosperity of one class, but builds the prosperity of all'.<sup>36</sup> Králíková-Stránská thus touched on an issue that remained somewhat obscured within the passionate anti-ornamentalist discussions. While the critique of the ornament and of decoration in general in the proclamatory statements and texts of Loos and his followers mainly made reference to folk ornamentality and the decorative objects of folk art, which 'were made by the hands of simple country women, aware of their moral duty: to beautify and ennoble their life, their family and their whole society', or to the often derivative ornaments of urban middle-class households, the world of luxury connected with the higher social classes seemed to go overlooked.<sup>37</sup> But as Králíková-Stránská pointed out, there were preferable strategies to robbing people of a little piece of poetry, especially when that piece was economically harmless. It was more important, rather, to concentrate on the ornaments of the privileged elite, where the 'brilliant, luxurious fur, the costly but perishable fabric, susceptible to the whims of fashion', means 'dead, unproductive capital' and 'a dubious investment, bad for the individual, bad for the whole society'.<sup>38</sup> However, this critique of the aristocratic background of anti-ornamentalism, as preached by the authorities of modern lifestyle and architecture, did not lead in Králíková-Stránská's case to an orthodox commitment to aesthetic purism or to the vision of a uniform modernity, such as occurred with, say, several representatives of Devětsil and the Levá fronta (Left Front). On the contrary, she described the strategy of total annihilation of the ornament as a destructive and iconoclastic approach, one whose widespread application would not only not help raise the living standards of the working class, but would also involve sacrificing a large part of human cultural heritage, including the cultural production of women. Indeed, the ornament of the past, she wrote, was:

an element much more deeply rooted in the world of women than in the world of men. History and the discoveries of archaeologists give compelling attestation of this. If it was a woman's property, it was an ornament: her comb, clothing, furniture, tableware, tablecloth or flower vase. The young Slovácko lass, expressing a joyful mood, would paint birds and flowers over her porch, on jugs, and would embroider a decoration on every piece of linen or clothing.<sup>39</sup>

In place of the Loosian destructive method, she proposed what she saw as a constructive one. Her goal was not just the reform of lifestyle and fashion, but also the improved organisation of work,

the introduction of economy measures into production and above all raising the quality of mass produced-goods. The values of rationality, order, and availability, guiding the production of high-quality useful goods for all levels of society, should act as a remedy against the hysteria that was, for Králíková-Stránská, a side effect of the faddishness, extravagance, and sense of disproportion that were specific to the upper classes.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, individual artistic work should be retained, though not as a tool for the creation of luxuries, but rather as a means of enabling real art—that is, work that was individual and unrepeatable—to influence the everyday world in which we live. As against the extreme approach to the modernisation of life—which took the form of a rigorous application of mass machine production to the creation of lifestyle and environment—this method represented an attempt to break down the boundaries between art and life, as well as between art and production. This was a vision in which the artist's particular style could go on to influence lifestyle, even by means of factory-made products. Králíková-Stránská wrote of Loos's lecture that:

he damns the easy chair, that most comfortable of resting spots; he does not consider how to make the easy chair cheaper, or how to extend its production so that even the labourer, coming back from work, could have one in his home. To take Loos's arguments to heart would mean covering one's furniture in grain alcohol and setting fire to it, then burning the carpets, the pictures, the window frames—and finally the whole house. The essential message of his lecture was: artists—get your hands off everything surrounding us in this world. I therefore believe that the final word on these issues of far-reaching importance has not yet been said.<sup>41</sup>

Thus it was not just a matter of the ornament, but also of an attempt to found a relationship between handcrafting and technology (in a continuation of concerns pursued earlier by Karel Čapek). Among the Devětsil avant-garde support intensified for the death of handmade production, to be replaced by factory production and a uniform machine-made aesthetic.<sup>42</sup> There were nonetheless voices elsewhere that advocated the harmonisation and collaboration between both forms of activity. In the second half of the 1920s these calls for the reconciliation of handmade, artistic work and mechanised, machine work would play a substantial part in the discussions about the role of women in modern art and lifestyle: a justifiable position given the potential significance of design work for mass production. When Stanislav Matějček recommended innovations for girls' artistic education, he emphasised not only the elimination of the ornament but also 'a sense for the machine'. Machines and technology were perceived as male categories symbolising the progress of the modern century; 'the woman of this century must not step around them ... with a contemptuous sneer and naïve incomprehension. A mutual understanding will hereby be born between man and woman: men will come to understand women's work, and women will understand men's work'.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Humanisation of the Machine**

Changes in the content of hand-made production within the modern era were something stressed by leading Czech feminist Lola Hanousková in a piece devoted to the arts and crafts section at the exhibition *Woman and Art (Žena a umění)*, held in Prague's Radiotrň hall in 1927 and organised by the National Women's Council (Ženská národní rada).<sup>44</sup> 'Women's so-called handicraft work has long ceased to consist of making impractical trifles (embroidered slippers, suspenders, etc., crocheting, metres and metres of the same lace pattern, endless quantities of shawls and pairs of knitted stockings)', she wrote. 'Today's woman has left a large part of this mind-numbing labour to the machine and now devotes her energies and free time to the production of goods—things that are not only adornments for herself and her family hearth, but are also of practical use'.<sup>45</sup>

As 'women's' work, artistic efforts in the realm of housing and interior design continued to be seen as activities supplementary to architecture and furniture design, fields completely dominated by men, but gradually they stopped being considered antithetical to practicality, functionality, or purpose. Female journalists as well as female artists themselves—creators of modern, austere textile and ceramic designs—advocated not the elimination of individual creative work from production, but rather a greater investment of invention, originality, and individuality into modern design, as a means towards the 'humanisation' of purist and Functionalist aesthetics.

In her writings on applied art, textile designer Jaroslava Vondráčková emphasised the necessity of rehabilitating the authorial gesture, so as to balance the often cold and severe standardised aesthetic espoused by the foremost representatives of the Devětsil avant-garde. But for Vondráčková this was not just about formal and stylistic gestures but also about material and structural questions, which she saw as an important counterpoint to the ascetically smooth surfaces propounded by Functionalism. She emphasised 'getting inside the materials emotionally' and the need to free human perception from the dictates of uniformity and standardisation, extending it to the whole of reality and into 'an immediate relationship with things'.<sup>46</sup> These stresses can be seen not only as significant efforts towards the re-evaluation of some of Functionalism's more extreme postulates, but also as an important call for the emancipation of female artistic work and for the strengthening of the role of art in modern lifestyle in general.<sup>47</sup>

Similar ideas were heard at the time from other female writers, including for instance the translator and journalist Staša Jílovská. In an issue of *Věstník Kruhu výtvarných umělkyně* (*The Bulletin of the Circle of Women Fine Artists*) from 1924, this author appealed to female artists active in the field of interior design to work more with colour, which in its immediacy and directness could replace the obsolete ornament. Yet she put her main emphasis on the value of an art that she fundamentally distinguished from domestic handicrafts:

There are other arts besides painting, sculpture and music, arts that women have embraced and found satisfaction in: the petty arts of textiles, interior design and artistic home furnishings. There is enormous scope here for the artistically sensitive and talented woman. That this area is well-suited to her is attested by the many creations of both local and foreign female artists ... In today's era, as we slowly come to restrict ourselves to the simplest furniture and to the parts of that furniture that are the most necessary, our dwellings would feel very bare and unhomey without these artistic supplements. The more we limit ourselves in the quantity and appearance of the furniture, the more welcome is the variety of materials and patterns with which we add to our homes, and the greater is the need for care in selecting them. And who is more qualified to help us in this selection, to contribute her experiences and her arts, than a woman trained in this field, who can now demonstrate the results of her work, her artistic talents, her good taste?<sup>48</sup>

Like the majority of her female contemporaries, Jílovská did not question the idea that there was a bond between women and the art of interior design. Purposeful, function-driven art thus continued to be marked by the traditional division of labour that separated the public sphere, in which men carried out their immense responsibilities, from the private sphere, where women applied themselves in producing their 'artistic supplements'. 'Of course, under modern trends, working men ... aim at a grander scale, at more lavish applications of their abilities, as in the case of architecture etc., and thus time simply does not allow them to work in a concentrated, systematic way on specialised textile products or to explore the possibilities of textile technology. Thus it mainly falls on women to apply their capabilities in this field'. Thus wrote Vondráčková in an attempt to explain the absence of men in the textile industry.<sup>49</sup> Two years or so later, Jaroslava Klenková, a painter and the author of a chapter on professional work for women in the arts in *The Book of Women's Jobs (Kniha ženských zaměstnání)*, alerted her readers to the women's studio at the special architecture school of Prague's School of Applied Arts (Uměleckoprůmyslová škola). But her emphasis was precisely on the practical value of the studio's training 'for work in interior and furniture design, areas in which a talented woman could particularly excel, given that she is better acquainted with the household needs of women than any man is'.<sup>50</sup> However, in regard to those graduates of the special courses who chose to pursue a career in 'practically applied art', rather than following the path of the independent artist, Klenková was more sceptical. She pointed out, correctly, the limited opportunities that industrial plants (glassworks, ceramics and textile plants, mural painting companies, and such like) offered to women wanting to make practical use of their artistic education. 'The field is extensive enough, and yet despite this the prospects for women are poor. Since it is predominantly comprised of private firms, one cannot speak with certainty about the salary or promotion prospects. Both are generally dependent on the proficiency of the artist and the proficiency of the firm as a whole'.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the stigma of old-fashioned aestheticism that, in the 1920s, tarred the School of Applied Arts and the art industry in general, the oft-abused concept of craft turned out to have some life still left in it. Indeed, during the interwar years the art industry became the scene of a productive dialogue between high and low art, monumental and chamber works, and, to invoke Karel Čapek, the plastic and the picturesque, and this was also thanks to women's efforts. Craft gradually broke free of its mannered eccentricities. The lowbrow, the small-scale, the picturesque lost their stamp of backward-looking, self-sufficient decorativeness and frippery. Craft and applied art took an ever-greater role in practical life and were employed in architectural projects. Last but not least, women slowly began to undertake spatially-oriented design work, overcoming the traditional assumption that women are lacking in three-dimensional imagination. 'The art industry of today serves life alone, acting to beautify the surroundings of all those who long for art, and so we see a realisation of the principles that Ruskin declared more than half a century ago', wrote the ethnographer Drahomíra Stránská in 1935, evaluating women's work in the art industry.<sup>52</sup>

Everything that surrounds the human being should be endowed with an elegant form, freed of excessive embellishment but flawlessly executed from perfect material. Whether it be a factory-made product or a product made by hand, it should always be realised in a tasteful manner; mass-produced products are of course made according to different principles than handmade ones, which allow for more decoration and individuality. The long-enduring conflict between art and mechanical factory production has thus found its resolution, in this very initiative of providing specific designs for factory products, and specific designs for handmade products. Women artists participate more commonly in the second kind of work, but they apply themselves actively and fully to it, and thus have proved able to carve out a new path in several areas.<sup>53</sup>

In Stránská's writing too, then, the emphasis falls on the need for the humanisation of the modern person's living environment. The principle of functionality was interpreted not only in utilitarian terms, but also in a psychological sense. In her view modern aesthetics and craft should serve people's practical needs and at the same time evoke in them an emotional response. An artist could attain this response through 'an investment of feeling in technology' and 'a sense for the usefulness of things': qualities, Stránská writes, that enable women to surpass their male colleagues in several artistic fields.<sup>54</sup>

Stránská presented that investment of feeling as a specifically female capacity, a view that bears the trace of the notion of male and female psyches as a duality of reason and emotion. But this also shows how the concept of applied art as spiritual work comes back into play in the 1920s, serving now as a counterpoint to the narrowly 'technicist' dictate or to a Functionalist aesthetic cleansed of all psychology.

The male and female proponents of spiritual but usable goods were nonetheless linked to the orthodox Functionalists by a shared vision of progress in the structure and organisation of society. But while the second group saw the route to achieving this in the embrace of manufacturing production and standardised forms, the first sought to connect art with life by means of a dialogue between matter and spirit.

*Translated by Jonathan Owen*

- 1 Martina Pachmanová, *Zrození umělkyně z pěny limonády – Genderové kontexty české moderní teorie a kritiky umění* (Prague: Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (UMPRUM), 2013).
- 2 From this perspective, economic interests were defined in terms of the interests of society as a whole. What could seem uneconomic from the point of view of society as a whole was certainly not always uneconomic from the point of view of the individual. After the First World War handmade and craft work was very well-paid, which raised the living standard for many women and men active in these fields.
- 3 Here I am paraphrasing the term ‘patriarchal aesthetic’, which was used by Jacques Le Rider to describe Art Nouveau ornamentation of Viennese provenance. Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), p. 112.
- 4 Hana Cejnarová, ‘Ženské ruční a domácí práce’, *Náš směr* 11 (1925–1926): p. 65. Surprisingly, however, the author did not link women’s decorativeness, their pursuit of crocheting, sewing, and embroidery, with their maternal role, but on the contrary saw these things as hindering the successful fulfilment of that role. She appealed thus to her readers: ‘Let us spare our health, our time, and thus also our money, let us buy things that are cheaper, machine-produced, functional and tasteful, let us devote this precious time to our families and not, for the sake of our outdated whims, deny our children their right to a mum!’ (p. 67).
- 5 Josef Novák, ‘Dnešní obroda ženských ručních prací’, *Náš směr* 6 (1919–1920): p. 231.
- 6 Novák, ‘Dnešní obroda ženských ručních prací’, p. 231. On the unfavourable impact of long-term handmade production on physical health, see: ‘Márinko, háčkuj!’, *Ženský obzor* 17/6–10 (1920): p. 215.
- 7 Adolf Loos, ‘Ornament a zločin’, trans. ‘V. N.’, *Tribuna* 4 (15 June 1922): pp. 3–4. On the relationship between femininity and the ornament see also: Julius Klinger, *Das Weib im modernen Ornament* (Leipzig: Baumgärtner, 1900).
- 8 ‘The lower the culture, the greater the presence of the ornament. The ornament is something that needs to be overcome’, wrote Loos in an 1898 essay on female fashion. ‘The Papuan and the criminal ornament their skin. The Indian covers his boat and his paddle with ornaments, as many as he can. But the motorcycle and the modern steam-liner are free of ornaments. An advancing culture removes ornamentation from one object after another. Men who wish to emphasise their relation to earlier epochs dress themselves to this day in gold, velvet and silk ... But we are stepping into a new, more significant era, in which it will not be through the workings of sensuality, but through an earned economic independence, that a woman will achieve equal status with a man. And then velvet and silk, flowers and ribbons, feathers and colours will lose their effectiveness. Thank God they are disappearing!’ Adolf Loos, ‘Dámská módo, ty strašná kapitolo kulturních dějin!’, *Neue Freie Presse* (21 August 1898). Czech edition: *Pestrý týden* (1928). Reprinted in: Adolf Loos, *Řeči do prázdna*, ed. Bohumil Markalous (Prague: Tichá Byzanc, 2001), p.100, 102.
- 9 Adolf Loos, ‘Anketa’, trans. V. Bauer and Z. Louda, *Náš směr* 11 (1924–1925), p. 51. Right from the beginning, Loos’s opinions on the ornament presented the traits of an aesthetic Darwinism. Loos was influenced by, among other things, the then-popular writings of the founder of anthropological criminology and defender of eugenics, Cesare Lombroso, who was the first to label the adornment of the body a sign of criminality. For Lombroso, tattoos and other bodily ‘ornaments’ that belong to the traditions of savages are, when present in civilised society, a proof of racial and moral degeneration. He focussed not only on male tattooing, but also on female ornamentation. In his treatise *Criminal Woman (La Donna Delinquente)* he drew a direct parallel between the ornament, woman, and criminality; female criminality, according to him, most frequently arises precisely from a desire for adornment, beautification and luxury, for ornaments of one’s own. See: Cesare Lombroso, *La Donna Delinquente* (Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1903). An interesting parallel with these opinions can be found in German art theory: ‘A woman’s talent is good only for luxuriance, decorativeness and ornamentality; her taste is the child of instinctuality and is not critically organised. Given that [a woman] cannot independently develop a technique nor submit her artistic style to a decisive will, she remains nothing more ... than a wretched dilettante’. Karl Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst: eine Studie* (Berlin: Bard, 1908), p. 20.
- 10 Stáňa (Stanislav) Matějček, *Výtvarná estetika a naše škola* (Plzeň: Výtvarný odbor Osvětového svazu v Plzni, 1927), p. 47. See also: Stanislav Matějček, ‘Ornament – sakrament’, *Náš směr* 10 (1923–1924): pp. 153–156.
- 11 Stanislav Matějček, ‘Anketa’, *Náš směr* 11, 1924–1925, p. 84. He related the ‘Hydra’ of ornamentation to jungle savages, as well as to the moral weakness and frivolity of women: ‘Let the ornament, at most, retreat into bars and other such places where people want to have fun. Places where time and money and health are squandered ... There people can send themselves into a stupor looking at ‘ornaments’ in the movements of frivolous women as they dance their modern dances. There the ornament-entertainment will live and thrive, and the ornamentalist-creator can give vent to his unrestrained imagination in a stylised and spontaneous manner. But as for public life, the school and the family of the modern, progress-loving citizen—let the ornament not creep into these places’ (pp. 84–87).
- 12 Jaromíra Mulačová, ‘Šperky a ženy’, *Ženský obzor* 18/7 (1922): p. 97.
- 13 *Náš směr* was published in Brno between 1910 and 1926 as a platform for art education, craft industry, and hand production. This magazine was accompanied by a supplement called *Ornamenty (Ornaments)*, which served as a handicraft manual for women, presenting patterns for all kinds of decorations. ‘I believe’, Teréza Turnerová wrote enthusiastically in the pages of *Ženská revue (Women’s Review)*, ‘that no woman who ever looks through *Ornamenty* will then go back to handicraft works produced without any taste and lacking in artistic significance, when she knows that endless metres of formulaic work can be replaced by a single piece of tasteful work, inspired by an artistic spirit and giving witness to the artistic advancement of the understanding spirit’. Teréza Turnerová, ‘Umělecká výchova v oboru ženských ručních prací’, *Ženská revue* 9 (1913): pp. 105–106.
- 14 J. Hála, ‘Je zdobná tendence vrozená, či nikoliv?’, *Náš směr* 13/8–9 (1926–1927): p. 248.
- 15 Bohumil Markalous, ‘Anketa’, *Náš směr* 11 (1924–1925): p. 83 (the text of a lecture by B. Markalous at the meeting of the Association of Moravian Drawing Professors in Brno (Sdružení moravských profesorů kreslení v Brně), 11 September 1924). Bohumil Markalous was one of the most important promoters of Loos’s ideas, which he examined in the pages of the ambitious, though short-lived, modern housing journal *Bytová kultura (Housing Culture, 1924–1925)*, which was published by the Brno modern furniture producer, journalist and occasional architect and designer Jan Vaněk.
- 16 Markalous, ‘Anketa’, p. 83.
- 17 Marie Dohnalová, ‘Neodlišujme dívčího kreslení!’, ‘Anketa’, *Náš směr* 11 (1924–1925): pp. 13–14.
- 18 Dohnalová, ‘Neodlišujme dívčího kreslení!’, p. 14. When Olga Stránská-Absolonová advised female youth on how to attain the highest values of humanity, she drew on the same premises: ‘There is no beauty without good; it may not oppose it. It must grow from it. Beauty must inspire a love for life, for one’s fellow humans, for everything around us, and only thus does it become true. Beauty must be goodness, in order to be truth ... By harmonising beauty, truth and goodness in your being you will become a useful, balanced person and you will attain true, complete happiness in your life’. Olga Stránská-Absolonová, ‘K dívčí mládeži’ (1912), in Olga Stránská-Absolonová, *Za novou ženou* (Prague: B. Kočí, 1920), p. 154.
- 19 Quoted in Zdeněk Louda, ‘Proti ornamentu’, *Náš směr* 11 (12 February 1925): p. 72.
- 20 Matějček, ‘Anketa’, p.84.
- 21 Matějček, *Výtvarná estetika a naše škola*, p. 47.
- 22 Bruno Taut, *Nové bydlení: Žena jako tvůrce* (Prague: Orbis, 1926).
- 23 Matějček, *Výtvarná estetika a naše škola*, pp. 47–48.
- 24 Jan Vaněk and Zdeněk Rossmann (eds.), *Civilisovaná žena* (Brno: Jan Vaněk, 1929), p. 9.
- 25 Jan Vaněk, ‘Žena konečně civilisovaná’, in Vaněk and Rossmann (eds.), *Civilisovaná žena*, p. 11. On changes in women’s fashion adopting a boyish style, see: Milena Jesenská, ‘“Uličnické” šaty’, *Národní listy* 64 (27 March 1924): p. 5.
- 26 Discussions about the civilised woman—in contrast to the issue of the ornament—predominantly took place in male society; men themselves were supposed to show women the way towards the highest goals of modern civilisation. The exception here was Milena Jesenská. In the collection *Civilisovaná žena* she criticised the undesirable return to decorativeness in dress, which is a mark of ‘the upper crust’, a capitalist fashion for rich people, for the select few’, but also a mark of the cultural backwardness of primitive societies. There thus again appears—even from a woman writer—the Darwinian association between woman and savage, who represents a lower stage of human development.



'Clothes stop being dress and become an enticement. Glass pearls and coloured coral hang from the necks of civilised women as they do from the necks of black women. Woman is again a poor thing who has to be captured, not a free person who offers herself'. Milena Jesenská, 'Mají svobodnou vůli, ale šatů nemají', in Vaněk and Rossman (eds.), *Civilisovaná žena*, p. 33. See also: Milena Jesenská, 'Civilisovaná žena?', *Lidové noviny* 27 (1 December 1929): p. 20.

27 Jindřich Halabala, 'Rozhodnou ženy', *Žijeme* 1/1 (1931): p. 29. Jindřich Halabala's text, appearing in the newly founded journal of the Union of Czechoslovak Creative Work, concerned the relation between the woman consumer, or the woman who buys, and the modern household.

28 Milena Jesenská, 'Krásná žena', *Národní listy* 65 (1 October 1925): p. 6.

29 Milena Jesenská, 'Zvenčí a uvnitř', *Národní listy* 65 (1 October 1925): p. 6.

30 Matějček, *Výtvarná estetika a naše škola*, p. 48.

31 Milena Jesenská, 'Mají svobodnou vůli, ale šatů nemají', in Vaněk and Rossman (eds.), *Civilisovaná žena*, p. 32.

32 Milena Jesenská, 'O té ženské emancipaci několik poznámek velice zaostálých', *Národní listy* 63 (23 March 1923): p. 1.

33 Stránská-Absolonová, 'K dívčí mládeži', p. 137.

34 The concept of the 'mass ornament' originally comes from the 1927 essay of the same name by the German architect, sociologist, and essayist Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer used it as a symbol of mass production and entertainment, which had taken hold of German culture during the Weimar era and whose power would later be utilised for propagandistic ends by Nazi aesthetics. Kracauer linked the mass ornament with mass production, the entertainment industry, and life in the metropolis, where the unified and disciplined movement of bodies (in labour activity) creates spectacular abstract images: mass ornaments. Siegfried Kracauer, *Ornament masy*, trans. Milan Váňa (Prague: Academia, 2008). On the relationship between femininity, mass production, and modern consumer society, see: Andreas Huyssen, 'Mass Culture as a Woman: Modernism's Other', in Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 188–208.

35 Božena Králíková-Stránská, 'Ornament a život', *Přítomnost* 2 (5 February 1925): p. 54. The translator Božena Králíková-Stránská was the wife of Emil Králík, an architect and a professor at the Brno Technical University.

36 Králíková-Stránská, 'Ornament a život', p. 53. The fact that many proponents of Functionalism connected the new style not only with a cultivated, but also an affluent clientele is additionally affirmed by the opinions of Le Corbusier. In his key text 'L'Art Decoratif d'Aujourd'hui' (Paris: Editions Crès, 1925), concerning rationalisation and standardisation, he expressly wrote about formal purism as a feature of luxury objects.

37 Emil Pacovský, 'Žena v umění výtvarném', *Veraikon* 9 (1923): p. 121.

38 Králíková-Stránská, 'Ornament a život', p. 54. Although the most radical opponents of decorativism made an absolute demand of their call for the death of the ornament and did not take cultural, economic or regional distinctions into account, Králíková-Stránská helped infuse a less radical, but realistic, attitude into the *Náš směr* poll, an attitude that noted the cultural and social distinction between the city and the countryside as well as between industrial (mass) production and small-scale handmade (domestic) production. At the same time modernism generally established itself within the Czech context as a supremely urban concept, one that tended to swallow up the specificities of cultural and social life in the villages. For an analysis of the difference between rural and urban women and their relationship to female production, see: M. Tumlířová, 'Vliv domácích prací na život ženy', *Ženský obzor* 22/9–10 (1927): pp. 129–134.

39 Králíková-Stránská, 'Ornament a život', p. 54.

40 Hysteria, which according to Freud and Josef Breuer represented a somatisation of repressed sexuality, manifesting itself in a loss of self-control, and which they believed was only suffered by women, was, together with fetishism, a concept used to diagnose the 'sickness' of decorativism. While, for Freudian psychoanalysis, fetishism is not a disorder bound only to one sex, the representatives of modern architecture, housing, fashion, and lifestyle nonetheless generally connected it with women. Not by chance is the concept of 'civilisation', which found itself at the centre of debates about modern lifestyle, presented in Freud's writings as the antithesis of womanhood. Freud speaks explicitly about the antagonistic relationship between culture and women: 'The work of civilization has become more and more

men's business; it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable'. (Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth, 1963), p.103). Female fetishism was presented as a fundamental impediment in the reform of housing by, for instance, Bruno Taut in the book cited above: *Nové bydlení: Žena jako tvůrce*.

41 Králíková-Stránská, 'Ornament a život', p. 54.

42 Karel Teige, 'Poetismus' (1924), in K. Teige, *Výbor z díla*, part 1 (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966).

43 Matějček, *Výtvarná estetika a naše škola*, p. 48.

44 This exhibition, which according to National Women's Council statistics was seen by 8000 visitors, was one of the most significant actions in the effort towards female emancipation in art during Czechoslovakia's First Republic. While members of the Circle of Women Fine Artists played a substantial part in it, independent and unaffiliated women artists active in both the fine and applied arts also participated.

45 Lola Haňousková, 'Žena a umění' (Oddělení uměleckého průmyslu), *Ženská rada* 3 [yearbook of the National Women's Council (ŽNR)] (1927): p. 76.

46 Jaroslava Vondráčková, 'Bytová textilie', *Výtvarné snahy* 9/9 (1927–1928): p. 135.

47 It was in this period that the proponents of the factory aesthetic were demonstrating their radicalism by attacking art itself and calling for its liquidation. These iconoclastic demands, in which a similar rhetoric resounded as in the battle against the ornament, were usually accompanied by calls for the abandonment of individual authorship as a bourgeois relic and for the adoption of the collectivist principle of anonymity. And it was only in this same era that possibilities opened up for women, for the first time in history, to rise up from the nameless female mass and become autonomous professional artists. Understandably, then, the promotion of 'a style born from collective work', or the idea that 'the artist-professional is a mistake and to some extent an anomaly today' (Teige, 'Poetismus', p. 555), were either accepted with reservations or rejected entirely by women.

48 St. Jílovská, 'Žena umělkyně', *Věstník Kruhu výtvarných umělekyní* (April 1924): pp. 6–7.

49 Vondráčková, 'Bytová textilie', p. 136.

50 J. Klenková, 'Malířka a sochařka', in Juliana Lancová (ed.), *Knihy ženských zaměstnání* (Prague: Melantrich, 1929), p. 303.

51 Klenková, 'Malířka a sochařka', p. 301.

52 Drahomíra Stránská, 'Ženy a umělecký průmysl', in Anna Roškotová (ed.), *Sborník Kruhu výtvarných umělekyní* (Prague: Kruh výtvarných umělekyní, 1935), p. 68. Drahomíra Stránská was Olga Stránská-Absolonová's daughter. Between 1918 and 1924 she studied at the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague and in 1932 she habilitated there in the field of Czechoslovak and Slavic ethnography. See: Dagmar Kulviaková, 'Příběh ženské emancipace v rodině Jindřicha Wankla' (BA thesis, Historical Institute, Faculty of Philosophy, Masaryk University in Brno, 2008).

53 Stránská, 'Ženy a umělecký průmysl', p. 68.

54 Stránská, 'Ženy a umělecký průmysl', p. 60.

Modernity,  
Indifference,  
and Oblivion:  
Katarzyna Kobro  
and Maria  
Jarema

WALDEMAR BARANIEWSKI

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### **Modernity, Indifference, and Oblivion: Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema**

The tradition of modernity in Polish sculpture is ungrounded, fluid, and lacking in clarity. For the purposes of this essay, I will not seek to define the concept of modernity, but will refer instead to the way it has conventionally been interpreted in research on Polish twentieth-century art. With reference to two great figures of the Polish avant-garde, two great female sculptors, I would like to point out the frailty of this tradition, the problematic nature of a modernity that has been forgotten, despite having been neither adapted nor processed, and tends to be treated as though it were already in the distant past. This text is an attempt to sketch out the mutual relations between these two artists, associated with avant-garde artistic circles, and their ideas in the field of sculptural practice in Poland in the second half of the twentieth century. Emerging from diverse fields within the avant-garde tradition, the work of Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema represents the symbolic nucleus of a new understanding of sculpture, a new approach to space, rhythm, movement, architectonics, and deformation, a new language of sculpture. But this novelty was not universally acknowledged, neither in the interwar period, nor after the war; its understanding was fragmentary, vanishing, like the damaged, un-preserved sculptures themselves.

Janusz Zagrodzki, a respected researcher of Katarzyna Kobro's work, made an attempt to reattribute certain sculptures, previously attributed to Jarema, to Kobro. In so doing, he drew on the Formalist tools of art history: formal descriptions and their relations to their individual relationship to the author.<sup>1</sup> I do not take issue with this; I am simply interested in a specific, unclear aspect of the attribution of work. What is it based on? After all, we are not dealing with a pre-literate era; the period in question is quite recent. Why, as Zagrodzki claims, had Jarema been confused with Kobro? Carelessness, unconcern, ignorance, or indifference? Perhaps this is a significant point of reference for the history of modern Polish sculpture, significant to this day? Or perhaps it was immanent in ungrounded Polish modernity?

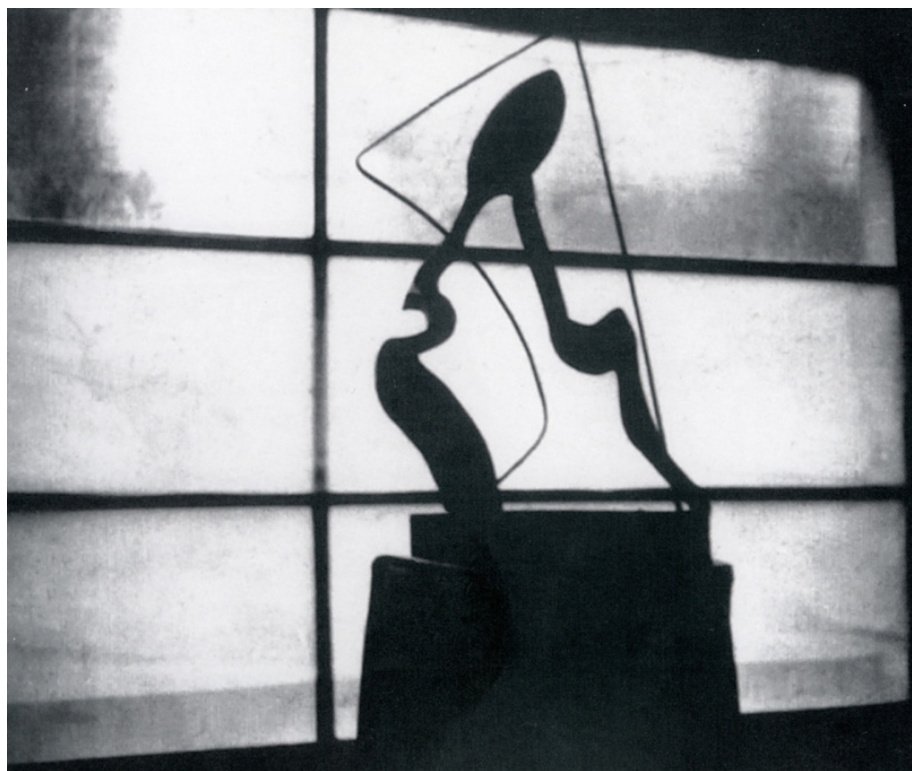


Fig. 12.1. Katarzyna Kobro, *Construction* (*Konstrukcja*, c. 1935). Metal, glass, height c. 70 cm. Lost (wrongly attributed to Maria Jarema). Reproduction from Janusz Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', in *Katarzyna Kobro. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki (Łódź, 1998–1999), p. 78. Originally reproduced in H. Weber, 'Grupa Krakowska w Domu Plastyka', *Nowy Dziennik* (1 March 1935).

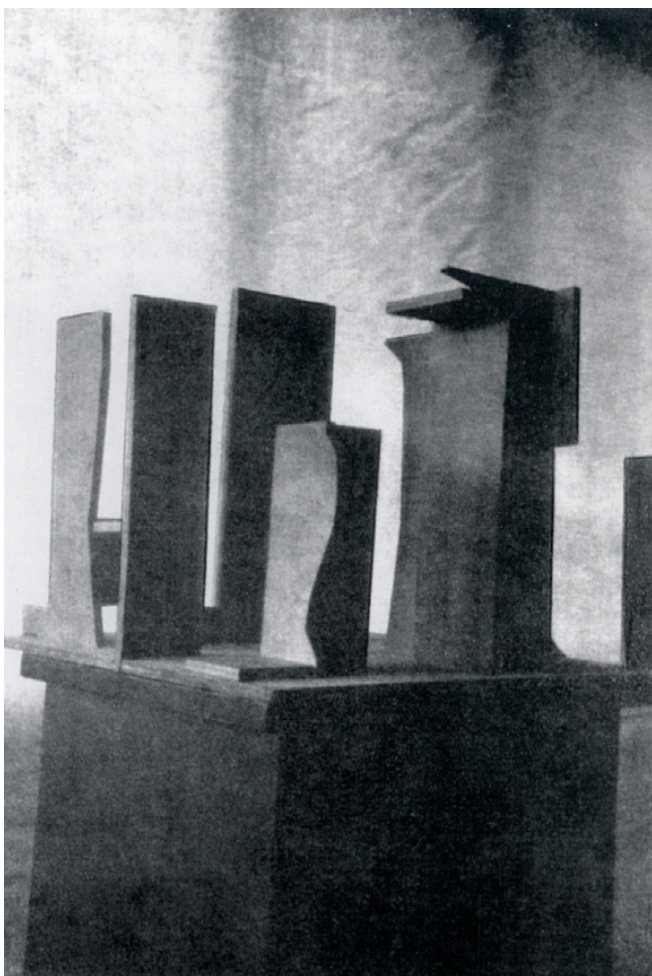
The works and fate of Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema, associated with Łódź and Kraków, two centres of the interwar-period avant-garde, condense within them not simply the main elements of the artistic agendas of these milieux, but, at the same time, indicate their singularly deliberate and lived indifference to one another (despite initiatives in common, such as the creation of the Grupa Plastyków Nowoczesnych (The Group of Modern Artists), or Grupa Krakowska's invitation to Władysław Strzemiński to co-organise an exhibition, which was held in 1935 in Kraków). Grupa Plastyków Nowoczesnych was mainly made up of artists who were younger than their colleagues from Łódź (Jarema was ten years younger than Kobro); this had a bearing on their ideological choices, which, while apparently similar in both cases, were less idealistic and less immersed in utopia in Kraków than in Łódź. Henryk Wiciński expressed himself clearly on this matter:

[There is an emphasis on] utilitarianism, of course, and on social meaning, but from the point of view of results. I believe that, for many, the period of spitting and impotent cynicism has passed. We have entered an era of the pathos of life. The task is to discover sensual forms of vision, the movement of a person in space, the sculpture of vision, and not of recollections of past fame of recollections of life. I cast aside historical pathos, but not the pathos of history. Form giving matter, which is the concentration of artistic energy. Sculpture becomes a starting point in the visual life of the viewer.<sup>2</sup>

These strong opinions were articulated by a man who was notably familiar with his home artistic milieu in Łódź and with its international contexts, and who was seeking out 'natural relations of actual connectivity' with Kraków.<sup>3</sup> He also attempted, tirelessly, to connect and to mediate between Kobro and Jarema. As Barbara Ilkosc wrote: 'Bringing diverse interests to light, Wiciński, from Łódź, brought to Kraków the latest information from the avant-garde circle there, represented by Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski'.<sup>4</sup>

But the works of the two artists were only ever exhibited together twice during their lifetimes: in February 1935, at the aforementioned exhibition of the Grupa Krakowska, and at the Warsaw Institute for the Propaganda of Art (Instytut Propagandy Sztuki) in 1936. Two of the works shown at the Kraków exhibition, known only from photographs (Figs. 12.1 and 12.2), were for years assumed to be the sculptures of Wiciński and Jarema. It was only in 1998 that Janusz Zagrodzki reattributed them to Kobro, claiming that Wiciński's sculptures 'referred to

Fig. 12.2. Katarzyna Kobro, *Model of a Spatial Composition* (*Model Kompozycji przestrzennej*, c. 1935). Wood, 40 x 64 x 40 cm. Lost (wrongly attributed to Henryk Wyciński). Reproduction from Janusz Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', in *Katarzyna Kobro. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki (Łódź, 1998–1999), p. 79. Originally reproduced in H. Weber, 'Grupa Krakowska w Domu Plastyka', *Nowy Dziennik* (1 March 1935).



man and to organic material' and that there was nothing to indicate their association with the spatial compositions of Kobro.<sup>5</sup> 'Whereas', according to Zagrodzki, 'even a cursory analysis of the sculpture [known only from photographs] imposed this identity'.<sup>6</sup> He also attributed the second composition thought to be by Jarema ('whose work', he wrote, 'was being formed at that time under the direct influence of Wyciński'), to Kobro.<sup>7</sup> Zagrodzki's arguments are weak, but are typical of the way in which relations between Jarema and Kobro have been perceived. Art historians have systematically excluded Jarema from the field of sculpture.

With reference to works from the later exhibition at the Institute for the Propaganda of Art, a reviewer from *Pion* stressed that

Wyciński's *Head* (*Głowa*) demonstrates Cubist assumptions, breaking up shapes into individual geometric form in order to intensify its representation. His and Jarema's compositions realise the postulates of the new sculpture, which forsakes the object and operates with elements of form intersecting one another and the surrounding space, as a constituent factor. Thanks to this the views achieve a multiplicity of perspectives and connections with the surroundings. The ambition to establish spatial relations in sculpture is best expressed in the abstract sculptures of Katarzyna Kobro, demonstrating great inventiveness and a constant desire to produce bold experiences.<sup>8</sup>

The critic, Jadwiga Puciata-Pawłowska, did not see any essential differences between the manners of treating sculpture of Kobro, Jarema, or Wyciński. She clearly stressed the abstract character of the works and that external space was the main point of reference for the compositions of the trio of artists (or rather, one could say, of two pairs of artists—Wyciński–Jarema and Strzemiński–Kobro—as this was how the situation presented itself). In relation to both pairs, contemporary criticism stressed the leading role of the men in introducing original ideas, dynamism, and creative ferment into the partnership. 'In truth ... we did not have many sculptors to whom the epithet of "modernity" could be applied without a stretch', Ignacy Witz said, in hindsight.<sup>9</sup>



He wrote: 'One could mention the early works of Maria Jarema, who was, after all dependent on Wiciński, and also Katarzyna Kobro', adding, 'but among the works of our avant-garde sculptors, the works of Kobro were inescapably ornaments, clearly aestheticized, dependent on Archipenko'.<sup>10</sup>

Mieczysław Porębski presented the issue differently in his conclusion to a conference devoted to Strzemiński in 1994. With reference to a paper by Ewa Franus—an excellent study of the artistic emancipation of Katarzyna Kobro and at the same time an attempt to address the question of the identity of the real author of the book *The Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time Rhythm* (*Kompozycja przestrzeni: Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*)—Porębski confessed that Maria Jarema 'was no longer the weaker side, set in motion by her partner. It was the partners that were weaker. It was Wiciński who was weaker ... She was the one who was the leading authority; she was the moral authority over the course of all those years in which she, and not Moses, led the Grupa Krakowska across the red sea. Everyone was afraid of her. Even Kantor'.<sup>11</sup>

Porębski's comparison once more highlighted the asymmetrical nature of the fate of both artists. On the one hand, Maria Jarema 'did not owe her place in history to the noble calamity that an individual can be subjected to by historical insanity. She owed it to courage and fidelity to her talent, which enabled her to overcome her circumstances, helping her to retain her human as well as her artistic dignity'.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, there was Katarzyna Kobro, over the course of whose life there unfolded a dismal scenario of progressive elimination from human memory. Her peak (and breakthrough) moment was a text by the French critic Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, who shared his discovery on the pages of *Art International*:

Leafing through the publications of *Abstraction-Création* of the years 1932–1933, one finds traces of the work of an extraordinary sculptor named Kobro [male], whose works are the precursors of contemporary English sculpture, and have the same manner of defining the volumes of surfaces, the same propinquity for curved, baroque and interrupted rhythm. Only the colour remains unknown from the black and white photographs. This encounter with an unknown artist makes one want to know more about the works of this [man] Kobro.<sup>13</sup>

This was in 1966, eight years after the death of Maria Jarema and also the year of her great exhibition at the Krzysztofory in Kraków, an exhibition whose catalogue opened poignantly with the following words of Helena Blum: 'The Kraków milieu remembers with gratitude those artists who lived and worked within it'.<sup>14</sup>

Why were the sculptures of Katarzyna Kobro so little present in Polish visual culture, then and, perhaps, also now? Why were the original and pioneering ideas formulated in the treatise on *The Composition of Space* not taken up by the next generation of artists? In seeking to answer these questions, Janusz Zagrodzki stated:

One of the reasons why the individual achievements of Kobro did not garner universal recognition, was the specific atmosphere which was created around the inquiries of the avant-garde and as a consequence produced a schematic principle of evaluating the achievements of individual artists through the prism of the artistic legend of Władysław Strzemiński ... In the general perception, Strzemiński's person towered above the other representatives of the avant-garde, and Kobro's art remained in the shadow of his personality.<sup>15</sup>

We might ask, here, while retaining a sense of perspective, whether Jarema met with a similar fate, in later years. For although, according to Porębski's testimony, even Kantor was afraid of her, her art has somehow fallen into the shadow of Kantor's. Theatre seems to triumph over sculpture. After all, Jarema herself, like Kobro before her, 'retreated' from sculpture. This was an astonishing act, given her engagement in sculptural work and the results she achieved. In the words of a direct witness, Helena Blum, who met with the sculptor in 1944: 'I remember that first visit to Maria Jarema's perfectly today. I asked Maria about her sculpture, as at that time I imagined her to be a sculptor. And her response is lodged in my memory, that she had abandoned sculpture, as it exceeded her physical strength. Then I asked her what she was painting. But she did not show me anything, and did not say anything on this subject'.<sup>16</sup>

The fact remains that, from that moment on, Maria Jarema concentrated all her creative activities on painting, graphic art, and scenography. The history of art of the first half of the twentieth



century has known many examples of artists who were as able with a chisel as with a paintbrush. The list is headed by Henri Matisse; Pablo Picasso occupies an important role in it, with his extraordinary imagination; also Amedeo Modigliani, Umberto Boccioni, the German Expressionists, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Theo van Doesburg, to name just a few. The boundaries between types of activity became blurred in their work, and the drive towards synthesis and interdisciplinarity seems to be one of the markers of avant-garde movements. This sort of blurring of typological differences was not a widespread phenomenon in Polish artistic life of the 1930s and 1940s. The norm was a rather rigidly-observed division between types of activity: the Capists did not sculpt; the students of Tadeusz Breyer did not reach for paintbrushes. This had an obvious bearing on social reception and critical strategies, where types of activity were also quite clearly divided, and artists were judged according to their degree of accomplishment in a certain, coherent typological agenda, with its own particular descriptive language. Polish sculpture of the 1930s did not push the boundaries of traditionally distinct spheres such as the monument, the portrait, the artistic representation of animals, and miniature sculptural ornaments. Katarzyna Kobro indicated these limitations and the provincialism of Polish sculpture with great incisiveness, consciousness, and courage. 'Contemporary Polish sculpture?' she asked: 'There was once Gothic sculpture, there was Baroque sculpture, there was impressionist sculpture ... The whole understanding and culture of those times has passed. Currently, here is bureaucratic sculpture and the savage howl of "national" art'.<sup>17</sup>

Besides Katarzyna Kobro, the only exception within Polish sculpture of the times was the work produced in the circle of the Grupa Krakowska. As Helena Blum recalls:

Henryk Wiciński was a strong creative personality, with the power to influence those around him ... Jarema's standing was close to Henryk's. Born the same year as he was, in the year below as a student, she inevitably took up the same slogans, and worked in a related spirit. In this work, however, she revealed her own features. Jarema had her own position, decisiveness and the courage of her convictions. She was able to agree certain shared positions with Wiciński, but she never forgot her own convictions.<sup>18</sup>

They formed something akin to a separate group within the Grupa Krakowska circle, absorbed by the problems of new art, the new language of sculpture, exceeding objecthood. "Abstractionism", incorrectly considered by some to be a movement, was a defence mechanism of art', Jarema wrote in 1947 in her memoir of Wiciński.<sup>19</sup> The memoir is a moving account of shared passions and struggles. She wrote:

Wiciński ... rejected subject matter, wishing to reveal the problems of art clearly. He imposed these on the viewer, depriving him of subject matter, which so often entirely absorbs his attention, but also makes art more intimate, more human. In presenting the pure construction of artistic forms, he showed how they operated in their own right. The power of their operation is one that is felt by every artist, in making art, even if he does not entirely understand this process. In the drama of the converging forms he senses the cosmic drama of the planets colliding with each other.<sup>20</sup>

In this description, the creative act becomes a force setting the mechanisms of a new universal order in motion, a new cosmogony of non-objective forms. It had to have been written by someone experiencing similar emotions and conscious of the direction of her own investigations and works, tending towards defining a new status of sculpture as a non-objective art, and created on the basis of free imaginary invention.

Jarema's sculptures from this period were constructed out of compact segments, referring to transformed figurative forms. They often departed considerably from the figurative, to produce vibrant organisms, with shifting dispositions and profiles. In the history of Polish modernist sculpture, these investigations (and here Jarema has to be seen in close relation to Wiciński) were extraordinary. They transcended all the traditions that had been naturalised in Polish art. It would be difficult to ascribe an external context to them. In their earliest works, while they were still in Xavery Dunikowski's studio, we see conclusions drawn from the lessons of Cubism and the sculptures of Matisse, in the disposition of the figure, the specific deformation, expression, and likeness.

A contemporary critic described this accurately: 'The Formism contained in her works reduces all real shapes to a harmonious, rhythmic synthesis, to a game of convexities and concavities, soft surfaces and sharp edges interrupted by a series of abstract voids enlivened here and there by the Cubist formative force of encroaching material'.<sup>21</sup> In later works, we can perhaps see a certain likeness to Otto Freundlich or Alexander Archipenko in the way abstract forms operate in the compositions.

Let us return once more to the aforementioned first visit of Helena Blum to Jarema's studio. This record of the first meeting after a 6-year interlude with the young art historian, whom she had met in Paris before the war, is a register of the fundamental change that took place in the art of the Kraków artist. Helena Blum had kept in mind the figure of the young sculptor, the student of Dunikowski, a friend of Wiciński. After the war, she found the artist declaring that she has parted ways with the field of activity and with her promising career, as though at a crossroads, as yet unsure of her future choices. Jarema was perhaps also unsure of the value of her artistic achievements to date and of the meaning of further activity, in relation to the experiences brought by wartime: not only lived, personal experiences but also those of an intellectual nature, dramatically confirming her faith in a refreshing and enriching universal culture, an international community of modern art. Her words in the *Głos Plastyków (Artists' Voice)* questionnaire of 1937—'art, like all knowledge, is international. Based on global achievements, the art of further problems and solutions, which in their intellectual sense have nothing in common with nationality or race'—sounded, in 1945, like a voice from another world.<sup>22</sup>

A faithful answer to the question of whether the reasons for abandoning sculpture given to Helena Blum were true and complete is essentially impossible. Asking why Jarema, having already achieved so much by the late 1930s, abandoned the sculpture to which she would return sporadically, Mieczysław Porębski stated: 'The artist is simply more-and-more-obviously tempted by painting. She instinctively avoids a premature exploitation of her earliest formulas, achievements and experiences. She refuses, consistently refuses, to habituate herself she refuses to build on her earlier achievements'.<sup>23</sup> These are strange words and hard to accept. While I understand the temptation to paint, this does not explain the radicalism of this step. Perhaps the decision to abandon sculpture was less influenced by the technical burden of the profession and the temptation for change, than by the death of Wiciński, to whom she was linked by a sincere friendship and a shared artistic vision. The deciding factors in her abandonment of sculpture were probably a lack of support and confirmation in her search for a 'sculpture of vision', a sense of loneliness and of being misunderstood. She felt less alone and apart in painting.

Jarema's decision to abandon sculpture had far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. In view of the destruction of the greater part of Wiciński's life's work, her withdrawal from sculptural work essentially put an end to 1930s efforts to formulate a tradition of Polish modern sculpture. The battleground was left to the *manualiści*: the conservative, 'realist' sculptors for whom the year 1949 marked the beginning of a new, Socialist-Realist, situation.

Jarema's move influenced the reception of her work, including that of her earlier sculptural works. Critics, educated and specialised in the analysis of paintings, essentially restricted their activity to the description of the painterly and graphic aspects of Jarema's work. One extreme instance of such an attitude was the aforementioned exhibition organised at Galeria Krzysztofory in 1966, eight years after the artist's death. There was not a single sculpture among the sixty works included in the exhibition, and even the catalogue essay made no mention at all of sculpture. This text is also a good example of the misunderstanding associated with the attempt to analyse Jarema's painterly and graphic works in the context of Kinetic art or Italian 'Spatialism'. The author wrote:

In today's art, movement is associated with spatial problems ... The continuation of the artistic thought of Mondrian has been undertaken in the West ... Not only have the problems undertaken by Vasarely and Mortens, and, here in Poland, by Maria Jarema, come to the forefront, but these ideas are also appearing in Italy. This is testimony to the currency and importance of these matters for modern art ... Other artists, meanwhile, are making new efforts, which are ultimately liberated in so-called op art.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the loss of a proper context for this art, namely, the sculptural experience of the fullness of space, led to entirely erroneous observations and conclusions.



Fig. 12.3. Maria Jarema, *Dance* (*Taniec*, 1955). Brass, height 26 cm. National Museum in Kraków. Photo: Waldemar Baraniewski.



Fig. 12.4. Maria Jarema, *Figure* (*Figura*, 1955). National Museum in Kraków. Photo: Waldemar Baraniewski.

Critics ignored the artist's many years of work on discovering the presence of material shape in three dimensions, which left a permanent trace in her thinking about form and space, determining the manner of organising the flat surface of the canvas. The failure to take into consideration this 'sculptural component' in analysis led to false interpretations. 'The subject of Jarema's paintings', wrote Julian Przyboś, 'is the movement of colours and forms. After years of studies and research associated with this subject, she arrived at results worthy of comparison with the most interesting achievements of contemporary painting'.<sup>25</sup> It seems that, contrary to Przyboś's intentions, there would be little to gain from such a comparison. Here one can refer to the testimony of Ryszard Stanisławski, who sought to present Jarema's work in a serious manner when organising exhibitions of Polish artists abroad. Foreign partners politely declined, for they saw and interpreted her works precisely in the context of what Przyboś would call the 'greatest achievements of contemporary painting; well known and realised somewhat earlier in their own countries'.<sup>26</sup> The imposed reading of Jarema's work as belonging to the painterly tendencies of abstraction, Kineticism, or Spatialism led to assumptions about the derivative nature of her works. Meanwhile, the correct context for the evaluation of the series *Rhythms* (*Rytmy*), *Filters* (*Filtry*) and *Penetrations* (*Penetracje*) should be sculpture, for the vision recorded in them is as though genetically shaped by sculptural, not painterly, thinking about space. We might say that Jarema was realising the instructions of Wiciński, who wrote, in a letter to her in 1937:

Organic sculptures are on an open path. I am working in the opposite direction to Cubism, neo-Plasticism as the crystallisation of Cubism and the composition of space, which entails the visual linking of Cubist form by way of a slight agreement between the sequencing of form in space. The most important issue is the means of linking form and its spatiality—leading the gaze; what I mean is the penetration of one form by another according to the laws of the physiology of vision.<sup>27</sup>

We might say that what we have here is a generalised description of the compositional principle of Jarema's paintings and graphics. The artist herself intuitively indicated the correct tropes to critics, creating two extraordinary sculptures in 1955: *Dance* (*Taniec*, Fig. 12.3) and *Figure* (*Figura*, Fig. 12.4), full spatial materialisations of her graphic works.

Now let us return to Kobro and to the question of why her artistic life's work would have to wait so long for an accurate evaluation. Without trivialising the aforementioned dominant role of Strzemiński as an artistic partner, it is worth noting two additional aspects of the question. The first is the result of the artistic strategy adopted by Strzemiński after 1945, whereas the second is a consequence of the phenomenon of retrospective revolution, which dominated the landscape of artistic changes after 1956.<sup>28</sup> The first case relates to Strzemiński's resignation from participating in the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* (*I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej*) in Kraków. As Kantor recalled: 'Some artists assumed a negative attitude to appearing at all ... Strzemiński and Kobro's position in relation to the actions of the artists from Kraków remained one of indecision. They did not participate in the December exhibition at all. Strzemiński was mistrustful of this avant-garde event' and went so far as to say to Kantor outright: 'Dear Sir, you are all mistaken'.<sup>29</sup> Kantor also named Kobro alongside Strzemiński in his account, but it is unlikely that the artist would have considered participating in the Kraków exhibition at all at this time (the end of 1948), in view of her personal circumstances.

Let us recall here the previously-cited words of Helena Blum concerning the Kraków milieu remembering those artists who had worked in the city. The mobilisation of the Kraków milieu and Strzemiński's refusal to participate in the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* meant that Kobro's work came to be temporally associated with the pre-1939 context, even before the introduction of Socialist Realism, when her work was considered degenerate. We might interpret the artist's donation of her surviving works to the museum in Łódź in this way (alongside the existential concern for her own life's work). Her works were intended to play the part of didactic exhibits within the exhibition programme of Marian Minich, when he was director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. Deprived of the status of works and of their own intellectual base they were to 'explain the successive stages of the development of art from Cubism to Constructivism'.<sup>30</sup>

A period of silence followed. Deprived of the possibility of artistic work and embroiled in day-to-day concerns, Kobro sank into obscurity. Her art was erased from the memory. Maria Jarema was also silent, and her silence, as she would admit years later, was one filled with self-doubt. Faith in artistic work relies on the conviction, which Kobro would surely have assented to, that 'the fundamental discovery of contemporary art is freedom, ... the right to arrive, without reservations, at the final frontiers of oneself'.<sup>31</sup> The political transformations of the mid-1950s lent her position (though not her art) a new dimension. Anna Markowska wrote: 'Clearly, the artist was able to serve as a model of morality in the fifties, but not as an artistic authority'.<sup>32</sup>

In order to shed further light on the situation of Kobro's art after 1956, by now without the participation of the artist herself, I will refer to the testimony of Jerzy Sołtan. 'Polish Modernism', the architect wrote, 'was rather influenced by the simplified, German but also Kandinsky-Malevich faction. It was in favour of complete non-representationalism in painting and sculpture. I personally, on the other hand, was attracted to modernism for its attempt to link modernity and tradition'.<sup>33</sup> Sołtan went on to recall a meeting at the Warsaw Klub Krzywego Koła to which he had been invited:

a meeting at which he understood that he was actually standing before a tribunal composed of the orthodox, invincible, hard Polish modernists of the twenties, formerly of *Blok* and *Praesens* ... Then I realised that they were starting to see me as someone who, defeated in cultural matters, was now plying a new incarnation of Socialist Realism. It was clear that that fellow Przyboś was unable to accept that modernism or architectural contemporaneity could encompass other, broader or deeper problems than those to which he and his colleagues were accustomed and which they had considered binding for so long. Przyboś clearly remained in the era of projects such as Kobro's *Functionalist Elementary School* (*Funkcjonalne przedszkole*) and Strzemiński's *Gdynia Train Station* (*Dworzec kolejowy w Gdyni*).<sup>34</sup>

It goes without saying that Sołtan referred to both these metaphorical projects as decidedly bad, with clear contempt. There are many similar testimonies that could be cited. More often than not, they also identify Kobro's sculptural works with architectural projects, thereby depreciating their role and positioning them in an entirely false context. It seems that it was precisely these 'architecturally' inclined readings of Katarzyna Kobro's sculpture that were to be one of the reasons for the meagre interest in her work among Polish sculptors. The problem of architecture was one of the most energetically-debated topics in the Polish socio-cultural press of the 1960s, against a real background of an acute shortage of apartments and exceptionally poor-quality building. The entanglement of Kobro's work in this argument, though accidental, played a decisive role in its being received incorrectly for many long years. Yves-Alain Bois's well known assessment of Kobro's work precisely conveys this situation: 'Some works appear too early and make a comeback too late, their very precocity interfering—and continuing to interfere—with their reception'.<sup>35</sup> This assessment refers to the 'work', thus, both to the material objects and to their theoretical and intellectual subsidiaries. But *The Composition of Space: Calculation of Space-Time Rhythm*, after all, led a life of its own as a work published in print, and did not necessarily require the potential reader to refer to the author's sculptures.<sup>36</sup> Is it possible to recover the traces of its reading in contemporary Polish reflection on sculpture and the ways it is taught?

In searching for the intellectual basis of art pedagogy, I looked through the (only partially-preserved) course materials for diploma-level studios in the Sculpture Departments of the Warsaw and the Kraków Academies of Fine Arts for the period 1960 to 1970. I was not in search of direct references to the tradition of the artistic avant-garde, but of some trace of a continuity of experience or a conscious contradiction of these experiences. The results of my survey were as I had expected. On the one hand, there was the traditionalism of the 'study from nature': 'Learning is based on the extensive and profound study of nature. Man is the fundamental object of this study. It entails systematic exercises in the field of the human figure, with attention to the gradation of the degree of difficulty'.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the superficial freedom of experiences, resonating with artistic slogans fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, referring, for example, to the artist as a creator and user of modern technologies of visual information. The one exception in the country were the courses formulated on the cusp of the 1960s and 1970s in the circle of Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in the studio of Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz and complementing Oskar Hansen's Solids and Surfaces studio. Without going into a deeper analysis of these here, it is worth saying, nonetheless, that the problems and exercises formulated by Hansen contained within them themes familiar from a reading of *The Composition of Space*, mainly in matters relating to spatial relationships.

Oskar Hansen published his 'experiences in creative practice' for the first time in 1959, in a laconic and not-particularly-specific text entitled 'Open Form'.<sup>38</sup> The concept itself, never entirely defined by the author, was an enormous success as of that moment. Hansen intended Open Form to be

a new, more organic art of our times ... It will create a sense of the necessity of existence in every one of us, it will help us to define ourselves in the space and time within which we live. It will be a space that is in accordance with our complex, and, as yet, unknown psyche. This will happen because we will begin to exist as the organic elements of this art. We will walk within it rather than walking around it.<sup>39</sup>

Hansen's definition of Open Form means the literal opening of sculptural form to space, to the surroundings, to create a spatial continuum between what is inside and what is outside. This theoretical perspective is reminiscent of the formulation expressed by Kobro and Strzemiński in *The Composition of Space*, when they wrote: 'Sculpture has no known natural boundaries and the result of this is the demand for its unity with the sum of infinite space ... Sculpture, created in a space that is not limited by any boundaries, should form a unity with the infinity of space'.<sup>40</sup> The poet Julian Przyboś, referred to by Sołtan, saw a clear similarity between Kobro's ideas and Hansen's. He wrote:

Kobro's artistic activity brings sculpture closer to architecture, but not at all in the way in which it has for so long been assumed. Her sculptures were not an addition or a component

part of architecture, but it was as though they were a sort of architecture: architects could take inspiration for their building designs from these compositions of pure space. I see the continuation of this idea in Oskar Hansen's idea of open architecture. And I see its final results in the sort of architecture, which, in the same way as Kobro's sculpture came to be a negation of solid form, came to oppose the idea of the home as a closed space; an architecture in which the walls would disappear.<sup>41</sup>

The convergence of these ideas has been noted by researchers many times, leaving unanswered the question of the originality of Hansen's theories and their dependence on the work of Katarzyna Kobro.<sup>42</sup> Oskar Hansen himself rather trivialised such associations. In his most substantial statement on this subject, he admits that the only thing linking him to Strzemiński is his working method, which is to say the 'holistic grasp of phenomena', though he saw a fundamental difference in their conceptualisation of the role of the artist, to whom, Hansen claims, Strzemiński accords the role of 'übermensch in the sphere of art'. According to Hansen: 'Strzemiński believes in the artist who teaches to see. Open form, however, is learning itself'.<sup>43</sup>

And so, the situation is rather paradoxical. Hansen's idea seems to be a somewhat simplified adaptation of Kobro and Strzemiński's treatise, but, given the scope of similar research into new definitions of space and spatial relations, being conducted in various circles in the 1930s, its originality cannot be definitively denied. Let us take into consideration that its author, somewhat naively explaining that he had been an 'unwitting student of the founder of Unism', had, at the end of the 1940s, come across the workshop of Le Corbusier, who, at that time, was concerned with the spatial relations of sculptural forms.<sup>44</sup>

One might have the impression that experiences, work, and discoveries somehow fail to add up, fail to be realised, in Polish art. Breaking with tradition is a more common topos than referencing related trends or creative continuity. Janusz Sławiński wrote: 'Tradition is a found system that is external to individual activity, while being the immanent norm of such activity ... In other words: it is as though the newly created work enters into tradition; but this happens to the extent that that the work internalises tradition'.<sup>45</sup>

The trouble with Polish sculpture is, among others, that its adherents rarely take the trouble to arrive at the 'genotype' of the work, which 'situates it in the system of traditional norms'.<sup>46</sup> Only exceptionally rarely do they take the trouble of undertaking and working through, or creatively rejecting, predecessors' works. Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema left us precisely this sort of work, whose significance for Polish art is indisputable, although by now, for the most part historicised: they serve as a domain for art-historical and museological exploration, for collection strategies, but not an artistic reference point.<sup>47</sup>

*Translated by Klara Kemp-Welch*

1 Janusz Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', in *Katarzyna Kobro 1898–1951. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (Łódź, 1998–1999), pp. 73–81. Earlier, a photograph of the sculpture by Wiciński was published as lost in *Henryk Wiciński 1908–1943. Wystawa rzeźby i rysunku*, exhibition catalogue, Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych (Warsaw, 1962).

2 Henryk Wiciński, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', *Głos Plastyków* 1/7 (1937): p. 46. Partially reprinted in Józef Chrobak (ed.), *Henryk Wiciński* (Kraków: Galeria Krzysztofor, 1990), pp. 45–46; and reprinted in full in Aleksandra Melbechowska-Luty and Irena Bal, *Teoria i krytyka. Antologia tekstów o rzeźbie polskiej 1915–1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2007), pp. 299–316.

3 Wiciński, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', p. 46

4 Barbara Ilkosz, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958. Między realnością i abstrakcją* (Wrocław: Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, 1998), p. 22.

5 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.

6 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.

7 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.

8 Jadwiga Puciata-Pawłowska, 'Salon Plastyków', *Pion* 5 (1936), p. 5. Reprinted in Józef Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema (wspomnienia i komentarze)* (Kraków: Stowarzyszenie Artystyczne Grupa Krakowska, 1992), pp. 25–29.

9 Ignacy Witz, *Obszary malarskiej wyobraźni* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967), p. 65.

10 Witz, *Obszary malarskiej wyobraźni*, p. 65.

11 Ewa Franus, 'Punkt równowagi w starym śnie o symetrii', in *Władysław Strzemiński 1893–1952. Materiały z sesji*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (Łódź, 1994), pp. 130–138; Mieczysław Porębski, 'Podsumowanie sesji', in *Władysław Strzemiński 1893–1952*, pp. 160–171.

12 Porębski, 'Podsumowanie sesji', p. 160–171.

13 Gérald Gassiot-Talbot, 'Lettre de Paris', *Art International* 7/10 (1966): p. 66. Cited in Janusz Zagrodzki, *Katarzyna Kobro i kompozycja przestrzeni* (Warsaw: PWN, 1984), pp. 118–119.

14 Helena Blum, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958* (Kraków: Galeria Krzysztofor, 1966), unpaginated.



- 15 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 7.
- 16 Helena Blum, *Maria Jarema* (Warsaw: Muzeum im. Xawerego Dunikowskiego, 1978–79). Reprinted in Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema (wspomnienia i komentarze)*, pp. 34–42.
- 17 Katarzyna Kobro, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', *Głos Plastyków* 1/7 (1937): page. Reprinted in full in Melbechowska-Luty and Bal, *Teoria i krytyka*, pp. 299–316.
- 18 Text reproduced from the partial remnants of a typescript, in Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema (wspomnienia i komentarze)*, p. 15.
- 19 Maria Jarema, 'Henryk Wiciński', *Głos Plastyków* 5 (1947): pp. 41–47.
- 20 Jarema, 'Henryk Wiciński', pp. 41–47.
- 21 Puciata-Pawłowska, 'Salon Plastyków'. Cited in Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.
- 22 Maria Jarema, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', *Głos Plastyków* 1/7 (1937): pp. 43–44. Reprinted in Józef Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema* (Kraków: Galeria Krzysztofora, 1988–1989), pp. 8–9. Reprinted in full in Melbechowska-Luty and Bal, *Teoria i krytyka*, pp. 299–316.
- 23 Mieczysław Porębski, *Maria Jarema* (Warsaw: PIS, 1958), pp. 10–11.
- 24 Blum, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958*, unpaginated.
- 25 Julian Przyboś, 'Widzenie ruchu', *Przegląd Kulturalny* 2 (1957): p. 7.
- 26 Ryszard Stanisławski in personal communication with the author, 22 October 1998.
- 27 Jarema cited Wiciński's letter in her memoirs of him. Jarema, *Henryk Wiciński*, p. 15.
- 28 Janusz Sławiński, 'Rzut oka na ewolucję poezji polskiej w latach 1956–1980', in *Teksty i teksty, Polska Encyklopedia Niezależna* (Warsaw: publisher: PEN, Polska Encyklopedia Niezależna, 1990), p. 99. The author's account of the dynamic of literary life describes the specific situation of Polish art in the second half of the 1950s: 'this whole enlivening energy, both of the poetry of those times, and to no smaller degree that of its readers, remained, if one is allowed to say such a thing, to a serious extent at the mercy of the retrospectivist revolution. For the move to abandon the socialist realist past was at the same time a move towards literary pasts that had been accursed in the Stalinist years, towards literary experiences that had been erased, silenced, deemed null and void or enemy; it was a move to create to the poetics, styles and eras with which the ties had been brutally torn up. For both poets and poetry critics, the most important task seemed to be to return to the present day its lost past' (p. 99).
- 29 Wiesław Borowski, *Tadeusz Kantor* (Warsaw: WAiF, 1982), pp. 36–38.
- 30 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 110.
- 31 Typescript 'Zapiski Marii Jaremy', created from manuscripts and made available to the author by Józef Chrobak, from his personal archive.
- 32 Anna Markowska, *Dwa przelomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2012), p. 69. The author offers an innovative reading of the position of female artists in the Grupa Krakowska circle, including Maria Jarema. See chapter 6, 'Artystki Grupy Krakowskiej', pp. 209–232.
- 33 Jerzy Sołtan, *Rozmowy o architekturze. Rozmawiał Andrzej Bulanda* (Warsaw: Muzeum ASP, 1996), p. 65.
- 34 Sołtan, *Rozmowy o architekturze*, p. 65.
- 35 Yve-Alain Bois, 'Sztzeremiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation' in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1993), p. 123.
- 36 Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego* (Łódź: Biblioteka "a.r." no.2, 1931), p. 113.
- 37 'Programy pracowni Wydziału Rzeźby Stanisława Słoniny i Stanisława Kulona z 1974', archives of the Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, Warsaw.
- 38 Oskar Hansen, 'Forma Otwarta', *Przegląd Kulturalny* 5 (1959): p. 5.
- 39 Hansen, 'Forma Otwarta', p. 5.
- 40 Kobro and Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni*, p. 6.
- 41 Julian Przyboś, 'Rzeźba napowietrzna', *Poezja* 1 (1966), p. 75.
- 42 Marcin Lachowski, Magdalena Linkowska, and Zbigniew Sobczuk (eds.), *Wobec Formy Otwartej Oskara Hansena. Idea – utopia – reinterpretacja* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2009), p. 63.
- 43 Oscar Hansen, *W kręgu Formy Otwartej* (Warsaw: Muzeum ASP, 1986). In a conversation with Wojciech Włodarczyk, Hansen defined his relations with Strzemiński in the following way: 'The more immersed I become in what Strzemiński wrote, and I have not much time for this, the more strongly I feel myself to be his student. I never met Strzemiński or Katarzyna Kobro. I came to know Strzemiński's ideas, and probably mostly his, not Kobro's, at the end of the forties by way of his student Lech Kunka ... Nowadays I recognise that I was an unwitting student of the founder of Unism, as Julian Przyboś later labelled me'. *W kręgu Formy Otwartej*, p. 22.
- 44 The first full, monographic treatise on Open Form bears no traces of a reading of *The Composition of Space*. Kobro's surname does not appear and Strzemiński is only mentioned in the context of memories of Lech Kunka, from 1948: 'He [Kunka], meanwhile, shared with us all that which he had learned from Strzemiński, who was his master. And there was a great deal of it'. Oskar Hansen, *Ku Formie Otwartej*, ed. Jola Gola, (Warsaw and Frankfurt: Fundacja Galerii Foksal and Revolver, 2005), p. 172.
- 45 Janusz Sławiński, 'Synchronia i diachronia w procesie historycznoliterackim', in Sławiński, *Prace wybrane*, vol. 2 (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), pp. 11–32.
- 46 Sławiński, 'Synchronia i diachronia', p. 20.
- 47 See: Barbara Ilkosz, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958. Między realnością i abstrakcją*, exhibition catalogue (Wrocław: Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, 1998); Janina Ładnowska and Zenobia Karnicka (eds.), *Katarzyna Kobro 1898–1951. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1998).

# The Hungarian Prinner

JÚLIA CSERBA

*In today's terminology, Anton Prinner was a cross-dresser: born Anna Prinner in Budapest in 1902, s/he immigrated to Paris in 1927, where s/he started to pose as a man and maintained an androgynous identity for the rest of her/his life. Through her/his way of dressing and behaving, as well as creating large statues requiring considerable physical strength, Prinner consciously conveyed a male persona and described himself as a homosexual man: 'I think, I have a certain homosexual drive in me; I had to realise that I'm attracted to men'.<sup>1</sup> The essay below is taken from the catalogue of a retrospective of Prinner's work held in the Ernst Museum (Budapest) in April 2007 (curated by Júlia Cserba and Gabriella Uhl). Even while Prinner was well connected to the avant-garde in Paris, he fluctuated between artistic idioms: he was one of the earliest artists of Constructivist abstraction, but later (re)turned to figurative sculpture and showed a keen interest in the occult, mysticism, and transmutation. His oeuvre might thus demonstrate how stylistic hybridity and mixing, or the inventive adaptation of styles, are not exclusive trademarks of the periphery (as it is often suggested in relation to East-Central Europe's stylistic plurality) but can well happen in the centre(s) as well. (BH)*

## The Hungarian Prinner

It is impossible to make categorical, unambiguous statements about Anton Prinner's art, personality or life. As we shall see, this complexity also extends to the artist's relationship with his homeland. The many contradictions mean that a true picture of Prinner is elusive; he had many friends, yet beyond a certain point, he was unapproachable and inscrutable. He built a protective wall around himself to deliberately mislead others, but this could only protect his inner world; in other respects he was defenceless, which is why he was often badly hurt by others. If he started telling a true story, he ended it with a made-up tale. Prinner wrote carefully-worded letters in Hungarian and French, while 'adorning' his copperplate etchings with short, primitive texts full of the most egregious spelling mistakes. He declared that he had never picked up a book, yet could recite long poems by heart. Prinner often quoted the classics at the same time as 'propagating' the claim that Goethe was Hungarian. He was always entertaining company even when he was submerged deep in thought, preoccupied with questions of this world and the next, and wracked by mental pain. As he put it: 'To appear foolish is the secret of the Wise'.<sup>2</sup> His male dress, pipe-smoking, and deliberate deep voice concealed much more than his actual sex. He only revealed his true face in his sculptures, easily recognisable for the attentive observer in the dignified *Beggar (Le mendiant)*, in whose hands Pablo Picasso often discretely left money on his frequent visits to Prinner's studio, or in the *She-Bull (Femme-taureau, 1937)*, combining male strength with gentle femininity, or in the mystical *Totem (1946)*, yet he revealed something of himself in almost all his sculptures.

At the very end of 1927, aged 25, Prinner left Hungary, never to return, except for a flying visit in 1930:

I came here in 1928 for a two-week visit and stayed, telling everyone: "Paris nailed my feet to the ground". I languished away for four years, battling with starvation, but couldn't manage to get my feet out from under the "nails", because the symbolic "nails" were all-powerful, just like a magnet...<sup>3</sup>

However, his departure from Hungary only seems to represent a total break: in Paris, he wanted to escape his limitations, but not his roots. This certainly included changing his gender. The presumption that his unconditional artistic calling might explain both his departure from Hungary and the gender shift is strongly supported by a story from Mária Peterdi. In 1943, during the first bombing of Paris, Prinner ran home at breakneck speed, and upon reaching his studio:

[he] started shouting: "My drawing! ... My drawing! I must finish my drawing!" He sat down at the table, and started drawing with clenched teeth. He did not raise his head the entire time ... How instructive it was for me to see him, someone who valued his work even more than his life.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 13.1. Colomb Denise (Loeb Denise), Portrait of Anton Prinner in his studio (Portrait d'Anton Prinner dans son atelier, 1947). © Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Denise Colomb; © RMN-Grand Palais – Gestion droit d'auteur. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022.

Anna became Anton, and although he was physically small and delicate, he managed to convince his new acquaintances and new surroundings that he was a man. For a long time, it was perhaps only his closest friend, Árpád Szenes, who knew that 'Monsieur Prinner attended the Academy with two braids'.<sup>5</sup> This remark also helps us understand his 1939 wooden sculpture *The Braided Woman* (*La femme à la natte*) (Fig. 13.1).

In Hungary in the 1920s, young women and men were still taught separately at the Academy of Fine Arts, and women had no hope of being considered serious artists, even if they were exceptionally talented. Looking at the names of female students who studied at the Academy the same year as Prinner, we see that none of them became established artists; most of them have been completely forgotten. As Mária Peterdi wrote in a 1946 newspaper article: 'Prinner didn't leave Hungary eighteen years ago to make a career. He simply wanted to be able to work...'.<sup>6</sup>

Nor was the situation easy for women artists in France. To some extent, this is underscored by the fact that Prinner, aptly termed the George Sand of sculpture by Maurice Huleu, was not the only woman pretending being a man in Paris at the time.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the best-known example from the interwar years is the writer and photographer Claude Cahun (1894–1954), a greatly respected member of André Breton's surrealist group, whom Prinner could have known.

At the end of 1927 or in early 1928, Anton Prinner arrived in Paris empty-handed, but not without valuable spiritual provisions for the journey, partly from his family and partly from the Academy of Fine Arts. The origins of the Prinner family can be traced back to Johann Jacob

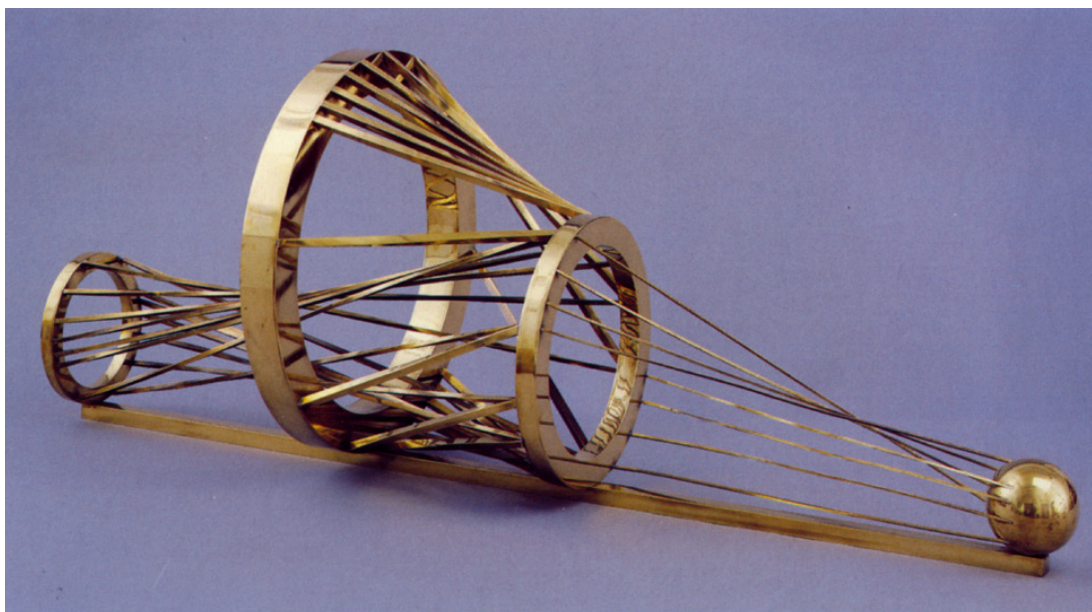


Fig. 13.2. Anton Prinner, *Construction in Brass* (*Construction à cuivre*, 1935). Brass and copper, 50 x 50 x 135 cm. Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022.

Prinner (1624–1694), a composer in Salzburg.<sup>8</sup> His earliest known relative was also, therefore, an artist, and his more recent ancestry included several architects. Anton Prinner's mother and father were not average parents, and nor can this be said of their children.

As he wrote in his autobiography, Prinner enjoyed maximum freedom during his childhood. Upon starting school, his father, an 'extravagant' book connoisseur who spoke four languages, taught him how to forge his signature so that he could excuse his own absences.<sup>9</sup> His pianist mother, a 'strange, incorporeal abstraction', brought four children into the world.<sup>10</sup> Of her three sons, István became a composer, Vilmos a painter and recluse, Zoltán a philosopher. (Vilmos, a hermit, only learned that the Second World War had broken out in 1943 when he left the forest in Pilis for a nearby village.) Anna was born on New Year's Eve in 1902. As the youngest and only girl child, she enjoyed an advantageous position within the family, but she also viewed her older brothers with wonder and some envy. Prinner left the loving, somewhat eccentric family nest in 1920 and entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest just as the institution was starting its process of intellectual renewal. Many decades later, he remembered his alma mater and its teachers with great respect and gratitude: 'The Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest was the greatest art school in the world, and may still be today'.<sup>11</sup> Under the leadership of Károly Lyka, and in opposition to the conservative cultural policy of the government at the time, Academy art students could learn in an environment that was more modern than it had been for their predecessors: instead of copying plaster statues, they began drawing from nature, and in summer, they had the opportunity to work outdoors in artists' colonies. Some of the teaching staff, themselves practicing artists, taught in a style based on Hungarian painting traditions, but with a modern approach. Among these teachers was János Vaszary (1867–1939), who studied in Munich and then at the Académie Julian in Paris, and whose painting was permeated by the influence of Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy, and most of all, Kees van Dongen. Vaszary directed his students' interest towards modern French painting of the first half of the twentieth century. It is mostly thanks to this focus that his painting students, including Prinner, craved to reach Paris, the capital city of the arts. Prinner's desire was all the stronger since his friend Árpád Szenes had already been living there since 1925. Alongside Vaszary, Prinner also owed much to another of his teachers, Gyula Rudnay. While Vaszary underscored artistic freedom, Rudnay's emphasis was on moral bearing, humanism, and the importance of high standards. Prinner never forgot Rudnay's teaching that 'you can only become true artists when you become real people, and not before!'<sup>12</sup> Throughout his life, Prinner helped countless individuals, and his doors always remained open to those in need. For example, Endre Rózsa lived in Prinner's flat for almost a year upon his arrival in Paris in 1956. As sculptor István Kilar recalls, 'He was such a good person that he even domesticated the rats in his studio'.<sup>13</sup>



Prinner had not even thought of becoming a sculptor in Budapest; he trained as a painter. He painted his first picture at seventeen, the *Blind Girl* (*Vak leányka*), later carving it into stone in 1944 as ‘a reminiscence of the very first artistic way of seeing’.<sup>14</sup> Sadly, few of his early works remain: we only know of *Blind Girl* from his autobiographical writings. But as his *Landscape with Dim Lights* (*Táj derengő fényekkel*) shows, with its symbols of mystery, he was already making pictures that drew on Hungarian pictorial traditions in the early 1920s.<sup>15</sup>

Paris brought about a fundamental change in Prinner’s art, although he was more preoccupied with his survival during the first years of his stay. Árpád Szenes writes in his memoirs that:

my first friend here was Prinner, whom I already knew from home. We discovered Paris together. We lived a double life. By day we painted in Montparnasse and debated with our friends, and by night, we drew caricatures for money in Montmartre, made friends with boxing champions, played chess with Chinese chefs, and got to know *artistes de profil* and many other peculiar figures.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 13.3.  
Anton Prinner,  
*Large column*  
(*Grande colonne*,  
1933). Wood,  
paint, 149.86 x  
50.17 x 50.8 cm.  
Dallas Museum  
of Art, Dallas.  
Image courtesy  
of Brad Flowers /  
Dallas Museum of  
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In the meantime, they both attended the Académie de la Grande-Chauière, and in 1932, turning towards abstraction, Prinner made his first Constructivist works. He gained serious recognition with his wooden carved reliefs, ‘statue pictures’, and copper compositions (Fig. 13.2). Newspapers started writing about his art, and he was invited to take part in important exhibitions. In 1936, Károly Sirató Tamkó included Prinner’s spatial constructions in his plan for the first international Dimensionist exhibition, alongside works by Pablo Picasso, László Moholy-Nagy, Joan Miro, Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst.<sup>17</sup> (Sadly, as is well known, the exhibition never took place.) Prinner later claimed he had no idea what Constructivism was at the time, that he had never heard of it nor seen any similar works, but this claim is probably one of his many contradictory statements mentioned earlier. What is the reason for doubting the truth of this statement? As a result of 1920s conservative cultural policy, the nascent avant-garde remained isolated outside the walls of the Hungarian Academy; most of its representatives had fled the country after the collapse of the Republic of Councils. The centre of the Hungarian avant-garde movement moved to Vienna, but journals, albums, and books published by Lajos Kassák and his circle nevertheless reached Budapest, frequently featuring works such as Kassák’s image architectures, Sándor Bortnyik’s geometric compositions, or László Péri’s Constructivist concrete reliefs. Prinner was still living in Hungary when Kassák, who played such a significant role in the revitalisation of artistic life at the time, returned from his Austrian exile. It is difficult to imagine that the young painting student would not have heard about Kassák from his circle of friends interested in the avant-garde. Yet in his memoirs, Prinner wrote that in the early 1930s, when he himself was making Constructivist-style works, he first heard about the concept of Constructivism from his friend Gábor Peterdi: ‘I was happy that what I was doing actually had a name’ (Fig. 13.3).<sup>18</sup> Whereas we cannot say for sure what sort of prior knowledge of Constructivism Prinner had at the time when he made his reliefs and engravings, we do know how he became immersed in the study of Egyptian art and culture.

To restore the antecedents, we need to go back to 1932. On Gyula Rudnay’s encouragement, Gábor Peterdi, a student of painting, arrived in Paris at the age of seventeen, and rented a studio, either coincidentally or on someone’s recommendation, in the same building as Prinner’s. They became inseparable friends: Prinner cooked for them both, usually Hungarian food, while Peterdi was in charge of shopping, mostly on credit. ‘If one earned money, neither went without. They’d walk across hot coals for one another. The enormous Peterdi and the tiny Prinner were known in Montparnasse, and if someone dared make an insulting remark about Mafu [Prinner’s nickname], they’d have a problem with “Monsieur Gros”’.<sup>19</sup> Together, they visited the Closerie des Lilas, the Dôme, and many coffee houses popular with local artists. They studied at Stanley William Hayter’s studio, Atelier 17, where they mastered graphic reproduction procedures, especially the various techniques of copperplate engraving. These were later applied by Prinner in his *Bible*-series and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (*Le Livre des Morts des anciens Egyptiens* (Fig. 13.4), while Peterdi used them in his 1938 etching album, the *Black Bull*, and his 1959 book *Printmaking: Methods Old and New*.<sup>20</sup> Five years after Peterdi arrived, his younger sister Mária also moved to Paris to continue her studies in Egyptology at the Sorbonne. From that point on, Prinner and Mária shared a flat together. This was shortly after Prinner, in complete opposition to the dominant trends of the time, made a radical break with Constructivism and turned towards figurative depiction with his *She-Bull* (*Femme-taureau / Bikaasszony*) and *Double Personage* (*Kettős alak*) sculptures. If we compare these works to *Woman with Braids* (*La Femme à la natte / Copfos nő*) from two years later, we see a fundamental change in the conspicuous influence of Egyptian depictive art. The explanation for this is obvious: Prinner’s prior interest in ancient Egyptian culture was deepened while living with Mária Peterdi, as her studies brought all the beauty and secrets of this art even closer to Prinner.

Alongside Gábor Peterdi and Árpád Szenes, Prinner was also close friends with the painter Zsigmond Kolozsvári and his wife, the artist Aurélia Val, as well as the pioneer of photo-reporting, Robert Capa. Capa often used Prinner and Mária Peterdi’s bathroom as a laboratory; it was here that he developed his Spanish Civil War photos. (In 1937, Jeanne Bucher organised an exhibition to support Spanish children, to which many Hungarian artists offered their works: Béla Czóbel,



Fig. 13.4. Etched engraved plate by Anton Prinner, illustration to *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (*Le Livre des morts des anciens Egyptiens*, 1948, Paris: Robert J. Godet), 36 x 22 cm. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022

Étienne Hajdú, Zsigmond Kolozsvári, Árpád Szenes, Gábor Peterdi, Géza Szóbel, and naturally Anton Prinner too.)

When the war reached Paris, many of Prinner's friends of Jewish origin had to flee. Mária Peterdi, the painter Endre Rozsda, and the sculptor Lajos Barta arrived in Budapest on the last train out, while Zsigmond Kolozsvári and Aurélia Val were caught and arrested at the Swiss border and interned in Gurs. Árpád Szenes and his wife Vieira da Silva had already been living in Brazil for some time. Robert Capa and Gábor Peterdi settled permanently in the USA, but despite the great distance between them, the fraternal bond between Prinner and Peterdi remained fast. For many years, 'Monsieur Gros' regularly provided 'Mafu' with much-needed material support: he was covering Prinner's rent even into the early 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, there were others who could not or did not want to leave Paris, among them the Hungarian painter Sándor Heimovits.<sup>22</sup> In German-occupied Paris, during the most difficult and dangerous period, Prinner did not hesitate for a second to help Heimovits, hiding the painter and his children in his flat for a time. Earlier, in a similar gesture of friendship and humanity, he had taken in a refugee, someone seriously injured in the Spanish Civil War; we could list further generous deeds, about which he never spoke. His discreetly-concealed humanism was also embodied in his art.

As some of his friends who survived the war returned to Paris, Prinner was once again surrounded by Hungarians, whose circle was now greatly expanded with émigrés fleeing the Communist dictatorship. In 1947, one of the Hungarians' favourite meeting places was the Select

café, which Prinner visited frequently. The regulars at his table were István Beöthy, Anna Beöthy-Steiner (a particularly close friend of Prinner's),<sup>23</sup> the photographers André Rogi and Ergy Landau, the sculptor József Csáky, the painter György Csató, Misztrik de Monda and Lancelot Ney, as well as recent arrivals from the younger generation, Pál Kallós, Vera Molnár, and her husband Ferenc Molnár.<sup>24</sup> But Prinner's favourite spot was La Coupole, where Hungarians gathered around his table every evening, and the new arrivals could listen intently to his enthralling stories that the old hands already knew by heart. He often told personal stories as if they had happened to his imaginary sister. Prinner loved speaking Hungarian so much that he often used Hungarian phrases while speaking to French people. (Even today, his French friends like to cite 'barbarian' words they learned from him.) According to the recollections of István Kilar, a sculptor who lived in Paris from 1956, Prinner was particularly fond of citing long passages from the epic poem 'Toldi'. Perhaps the last great friendship of his life was with the painter Béla Birkás, whom he got to know relatively late, in the early 1960s. After Prinner's sudden death in 1973, Birkás was so shaken that he never regained his earlier all-pervasive good mood and buoyancy.

If we examine the group exhibitions held in Hungary of artists based in France, we see that although Prinner never personally attended these events, he was always happy for his works to be included. In 1936, at the exhibition organised for representatives of the Musicalist movement at the National Salon, three Prinner cuts were on display (*Composition*, *Incubus*, and *Flirt*), while in 1938, two of his Constructivist works, *Plastic Spirals* and *Black and White Triangles* were exhibited at the *Parisian-Hungarian Artists (Párizsi magyar művészek)* show at the Tamás Gallery.<sup>25</sup> This latter show, the very first group exhibition of abstract art in Hungary, was a milestone in the history of modern Hungarian art, later influencing the work of many Hungarian artists. Ferenc Martyn, an active member of the Abstraction-Création group in Paris, began working as early as 1935 on an exhibition in Budapest of Hungarian abstract painters and sculptors working at home and abroad.<sup>26</sup> His plan, which was worked out together with István Beöthy and Jenő Gadány, was realised in January 1938.

In between these two Budapest exhibitions, Hungarian artists in Paris, including Prinner, enjoyed one further significant appearance. The Rainbow (Arc-en-Ciel (Rainbow) theatre company, founded by Géza Blattner, produced Imre Madách's 1861 play *The Tragedy of Man (Az ember tragédiája)* for the 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris. The sets and puppets were designed and operated by, among others, István Beöthy, József Csáky, Zsigmond Kolozsvári, and Árpád Szenes, while Anton Prinner helped build the set for the final dream scene, set in a future ice age. The performance was a massive success, garnering praise from both audience and jury and winning the gold medal in the theatre section.

At the 1970 *Les Hongrois de Paris (The Hungarians of Paris)* exhibition in the Galerie Zunini, Prinner was among the forty-three artists on show; his works were also included the same year in a major exhibition of *Twentieth-Century Artists of Hungarian Origin Abroad* at the Budapest Kunsthalle, organised and curated by Krisztina Passuth. This was the first time after the war that a large group of artists of Hungarian origin living in the West could be exhibited in their home country. According to the exhibition catalogue, a significant number of Prinner's works were on show from five different periods of his life: a bronze statue; the *Sunflower Woman (Napraforgónő)* carved out of wood; his Picasso plaquettes made for the Monnaie de Paris; and the *Book of the Dead* copperplate etchings. Although he donated works to the Fine Arts Museum, Prinner did not visit Budapest for this occasion either.

It is probably not inaccurate to compare Prinner's relationship to Hungary to the kind of bond connecting him with his close friends, among them Picasso and Victor Brauner: a mixture of sincere affection and diffident circumspection. Yet it may be taken as a fact that neither his personality nor his art can truly be understood without taking into account his Hungarian origins, his experiences and the knowledge gained during his youth in his home country.

- 1 Quoted in Hedvig Turai, 'Hiányzó történetek: Vajda Júlia, Anna Margit, Vaszkó Erzsébet', in Katalin Keserü (ed.), *Modern magyar nőművészettörténet. Tanulmányok* (Budapest: Kijárat, 2000), p. 48.
- 2 Anton Prinner, typed autobiography, written in Paris after 1965 (exact year unknown), unpublished. Private collection.
- 3 Anton Prinner, letter to his cousin Mrs. Ilonka Hársi, December 1967 (signed 'your brother Tóni').
- 4 Zseni Várnai and Mária Peterdi, *Mint viharban a falevel* (Budapest: self-published, 1944).
- 5 Endre Rozsda (1913–1999), painter and mutual friend of Szenes and Prinner, in personal communication with the author, c. 1995.
- 6 Mária Peterdi, 'Párizs legfrissebb szenzációja: A. Prinner, a nagy magyar szobrász', *Szívárvány* (9 November 1946): 13.
- 7 Maurice Huleu, 'L'autre gloire de Vallauris: Anton Prinner', *Nice-Matin* (4 October 1981).
- 8 Ernő Prinner and his family, in personal communication with the author, 2006.
- 9 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 10 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 11 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 12 *Prinner 1965 parle de Prinner 1935*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Yvon Lambert (Paris, 1965).
- 13 Kilar is referring here to the unpleasant environment in which Prinner worked in his damp basement studio.
- 14 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 15 Tamás Kieselbach (ed.), *Modern Magyar Festészet 1919–1964* (Budapest: Tamás Kieselbach, 2004).
- 16 Árpád Szenes, untitled, *Bulletin* (the Hungarian-language publication of the Democratic Association of Hungarians in France) (April 1949): unpaginated.
- 17 The poet Károly Tamkó Sirató (1905–1980) published his Dimensionist manifesto in Paris in 1936, signed, besides Hans Arp, Vasilii Kandinsky, and Camille Bryen, also by Prinner.
- 18 Prinner, autobiography, unpaginated.
- 19 Várnai and Peterdi, *Mint viharban a falevel*, pp. 265–266. Prinner's Hungarian friends called him Mafu because of his favourite turn of phrase, as described here by Zseni Várnai: 'He didn't give a damn about anything, except art. To everything that existed outside art, he said: *Je m'en fous!*' (Translation G. Jones).
- 20 Gabor Peterdi, *Printmaking: Methods Old and New* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).
- 21 Gaby Saade, one of Prinner's close friends, in personal communication with the author.
- 22 Heimovits, born in Budapest in 1900, was deported from Hungary in 1944.
- 23 Christine Dufour-Beothy, in personal communication with the author, c. 2000.
- 24 Vera Molnár, artist, in personal communication with the author, 1990s.
- 25 'Plasztikus csigavonalak (Spirales plastiques)' was also reproduced in the 1938 January 30 issue of *Pesti Napló* (*Pest Journal*).
- 26 Ferenc Martyn, letter to Lajos Török, 1936. Private collection.



Old Worlds and  
the New Vision:  
The Ethnographic  
Modernism of  
Karel Plicka's *The  
Earth Sings* (1933)

JONATHAN OWEN



*Jonathan Owen is an independent researcher specialising in Czech and Slovak cinema. His chapter examines Czech artist Karel Plicka's 1933 documentary *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*), a film that fuses modernist and poetic qualities with an ethnographic interest in Slovak folk culture. Owen situates the film in a wider relationship between avant-garde filmmaking and ethnography in Czechoslovakia at the time, and suggests how the fields of ethnography, cinema and the avant-garde were connected by the context of industrial modernity as well as by a shared concern with expanding everyday vision and revealing 'unknown worlds'. Owen shows how the film's celebrated editing techniques—the work of noted avant-garde filmmaker Alexandr Hackenschmied—accommodate the dynamic aesthetics of the New Vision to an affirmation of unchanging traditional life. He also explores how to reconcile the film's modernism with critical characterisations of Plicka as an exponent of 'Heimat' aesthetics and an artist who exoticises his rural subjects. This essay appears for the first time in the present volume. (JO)*

## **Old Worlds and the New Vision: The Ethnographic Modernism of Karel Plicka's *The Earth Sings* (1933)**

### **The Rural Face of Modernism**

In a contemporary review of Karel Plicka's widely-known 1933 ethnographic documentary film *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*), Jiří Jeníček, writing in *Fotografický obzor* (*Photographic Horizons*), informs us that this 'is not a film of the streets and of coffeehouse intellectuals, because this is a film about simple people, still living just as their ancestors had done centuries ago'.<sup>1</sup> As a characterisation of the film's content this is undeniably correct, for Plicka's film is a portrait of the seemingly-timeless customs and traditions of peasant life in rural Slovakia. Yet the constituency that best appreciated the film upon its original release would doubtless have counted 'coffeehouse intellectuals' among its numbers. As Martin Slivka recounts in his 1982 study of Plicka, *The Earth Sings* received an enthusiastic response from 'the artistic community' and the more 'erudite and well-informed critics', even as much of the rest of Czechoslovakia's viewing public failed to be enticed.<sup>2</sup>

Several laudatory notices from the Prague press contrasted Plicka's film with the films that *were* popular, 'the soulless products of good commercial practice' then packing in 'the cinemas of our metropolises'.<sup>3</sup> *The Earth Sings* stood out above all others as proof of 'what cinema could be when the moving shadows are not simply a commodity'.<sup>4</sup> Not only did Plicka's work have the distinction of being the first Slovak sound film (albeit one by a Czech director), it was also 'the first Czechoslovak film' that pursued a purely artistic end, 'without compromises or regard for public tastes and distastes'. In other words, *The Earth Sings* was upheld as a work at the forefront of national film art, one that exploited the rich possibilities of image and sound. References abound to the film's formal qualities, its range of photographic tones, and the matching of František Škvor's musical score to the wordless flow of images. It was common to liken the film to non-narrative art forms, to describe it as a 'symphony' or a 'film poem'.<sup>5</sup> Such descriptions might suggest that Plicka had realised the ambitions of the Devětsil avant-garde a decade earlier to create a 'pure' cinema, a cinema that forsook narrative elements for poetic effects and 'lyrical associations'.<sup>6</sup> Stanislav Ježek compared Plicka to French impressionist filmmaker Louis Delluc, an important theoretical influence on Devětsil.<sup>7</sup>

In view of these appraisals it seems consistent that Plicka, in *The Earth Sings* and his earlier film work, should have attracted attention from figures close to the Czechoslovak avant-garde, including the above-cited Jeníček, a proponent of progressive photography and later a pioneer of avant-garde army film.<sup>8</sup> Plicka's earlier film account of rural Slovak life, *Over Hill and Dale* (*Po horách, po dolách*), was enthusiastically reviewed in *Index*, a journal linked to the Brno branch of Devětsil, where critic Petr Denk describes the film as 'a hectic dynamic of forms and colours,

a rhythmic discipline of movement' and, in later coverage of the revised version of the film, explicitly classes it among 'avant-garde films'.<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to read these rapt reports of pioneering aesthetics and formal dazzle in the light of other (and latterly perhaps dominant) views that have tended to cast Plicka's work, at least in the realm of still photography where he more frequently employed his talents, as 'normally traditionalist' in subject matter and form, a standard against which one might measure the innovations of more experimentally-inclined photographers like Irena Blühová.<sup>10</sup> Even the standing of *The Earth Sings* itself as an avant-garde work has been questioned in more recent analysis.<sup>11</sup> If nothing else, the contemporaneous reception of Plicka's films indicates the diversity of the material that avant-garde artistic circles could embrace and even find their own likeness in. Certainly, in many ways, a film like *The Earth Sings*—let alone the less 'artistic' and stylised *Over Hill and Dale*—are not Czechoslovak avant-garde cinema or culture as we know it. The Devětsil movement is known as a cult of modernity that celebrates the utopian possibilities of new technology and the enchantments of the twentieth-century metropolis, an attitude that underpinned the group's very preoccupation with the modern entertainment of film. The actual Czech avant-garde films that followed after Devětsil also tended to be visions of metropolitan life or paeans to the achievements of modern industry, sometimes directly functioning as industrial promotion (as in Svatopluk Innemann's *Prague Shining in Lights* (*Praha v záři světél*, 1928), a 'city symphony' made for the Prague Electric Company). By contrast, Plicka's work, as a return to the 'timelessness' of rural folk tradition, seems to signify a rejection of modern life. Yet Plicka realised his enamoured cinematic accounts of the pre-modern under the conscious influence of Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein and the political modernism of montage theory.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, *The Earth Sings*, as Plicka's most celebrated return to traditional life, was a voyage accompanied by the major Czech avant-garde filmmaker of the time, Alexandr Hackenschmied, who served as the film's editor.

Plicka was not the only artist, or the only filmmaker, from Czechoslovakia at this time to apply modernist or avant-garde aesthetics to rural settings and an interest in folk traditions. Michal Bregant has argued that the concern with rural life is a distinct feature of the Central-European version of modernism in the 1930s, a reverse side to the more familiar urban imagery exemplified by the city symphony films.<sup>13</sup> Two examples that Bregant provides from the world of photography and film are the work of the important avant-garde photographer Jaromír Funke, who documented the wild landscapes and rural communities of Czechoslovakia's less explored regions in his photographic cycles *Primeval Forests* (*Pralesy*) and *Subcarpathian Ruthenia* (*Podkarpatská Rus*) (both 1937–1938), and a feature film by experimental writer and Devětsil founding member Vladislav Vančura, *Faithless Marijka* (*Marijka nevěrnice*, 1934), a blend of folk ballad, naturalism, and Soviet-style modernism also set among the Ruthenian community. Other examples come from the context of ethnographic exploration in which Plicka himself, whose initial professional standing was principally that of a folklorist and collector of folk songs, conducted his 'artistic' endeavours. Though the tradition of ethnographic film was still fledgling in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and 1930s, this era saw several other striking, if now little-remembered works that also apply montage principles or formalist aesthetics to the documentation of rural environments: notably Tomáš Trnka's *Storm Over the Tatras* (*Bouře nad Tatrami*, 1932), another experiment in combining film and music, and Vladimír Ůlehlá's *The Disappearing World* (*Mizející svět*, 1932), which is part fictional narrative, part ethnographic musical study.<sup>14</sup>

While using Plicka's work and especially *The Earth Sings* as its main focus, this essay will also draw on the examples above to explore the relationship between the avant-garde and ethnographic films about rural life in interwar Czechoslovakia. I will address the common preconditions and preoccupations that enabled the worlds of ethnography and avant-garde art to coexist and interact with one another in this context. I will also analyse the presence of avant-garde aspects in relation to other, seemingly opposing generic labels that have attached themselves to ethnographic representation and to Plicka's work specifically. He has been characterised as a purveyor of idylls in the vein of German 'Heimat', or, alternatively, attacked for exoticising and

idealising the rural Slovaks who appear in this Czech artist's films and photographs. Are such claims accurate? Are any of these qualities consistent with, or even 'recuperable' within, an avant-garde project or sensibility?

### **Unknown Worlds: Ethnography and the Avant-Garde**

As I shall explain in this section, the impulse to document folk culture in the Czech, Moravian, and Slovak regions was propelled by the onset of modernity and industrialisation, and then given further impetus by the experience of new nationhood in the wake of the First World War. Local ethnography of course shares such contexts and determinations with the rise of modernist and avant-garde movements, even if, in many obvious ways, the response to modernity by ethnographers and by avant-gardists went in contrary directions. At the same time, I will suggest that the ethnographic films discussed subscribe to what we might call an avant-garde culture of vision: a desire to expand the limits of the normally visible, an interest in visualising otherness, and a highly dynamic approach to representation. My examples here will be *The Earth Sings* and Vladimír Úlehla's feature *The Disappearing World*, films whose overtly avant-garde stylistic tendencies and at times self-reflexive qualities help to reveal wider and deeper affinities between the ethnographic and the avant-garde 'eye'.

It has been argued that the experience of industrial modernity has fuelled the aims and assumptions of ethnographic exploration as much as it has the visions and programmes of the avant-garde. Catherine Russell, tracing the connections between ethnography, avant-gardism, and the origins of cinema, described cinema and ethnography as 'two aspects of a colonial modernism', tied together by 'a logic of primitivism'.<sup>15</sup> For Russell, primitivism is a 'construction of Western modernism' that arose 'in conjunction with an industrialized society that began to see itself in terms of a loss of innocence'.<sup>16</sup> James Clifford has written in similar terms, arguing that the 'authenticity' sought by classical ethnography in 'primitive' cultures is a relational concept, defined by reference to the very modernity that seemingly endangers it.<sup>17</sup> Russell even draws specific parallels between the ethnographic logic of a primitive innocence in need of 'salvaging' and Walter Benjamin's avant-garde notion of a lost pre-industrial 'aura'.<sup>18</sup>

The notion of 'colonial modernism', if it can be applied to the films discussed in this essay, must be qualified by the fact that these ethnographic projects, unlike much of the work examined by Russell or Clifford, were not explorations of distant lands but studies of cultural phenomena from within the same state borders, and sometimes within the ethnographer's own region (as is the case with the Brno-based Úlehla's explorations of rural Moravia). If these texts are guilty of 'colonial' exoticism—a charge that has been levelled at Plicka—then this is a colonialism turned inward. Helping to enable this self-exoticising view after 1918 was Czechoslovakia's specific identity as a new state composed of regions with very uneven levels of development, with the Eastern provinces of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia then still predominantly agrarian regions.<sup>19</sup> Yet, in this context too, the disciplines of ethnography and folkloric study grew from the same development towards modernity, as the social and economic upheavals of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries inspired, here as elsewhere, a romantically-tinged fascination with 'the people', folk culture, and rural life.<sup>20</sup> Particularly decisive was the epochal year 1848, when the abolition of serfdom across the Austrian empire impelled a new regard for the significance of rural culture and a trend towards collecting folk songs, stories, and proverbs.<sup>21</sup>

In the context of the nineteenth-century Czech and Slovak national revival and then of independent Czechoslovak nationhood in 1918, the investigation of indigenous folk culture took on added importance as part of the quest to discover and define the specific traits of a national culture and identity. In Slovakia, the project of nation-building gave rise to the founding of the Slovak Cultural Association (*Matica slovenská*), an institution that would support the documentation of local culture and, after its re-establishment in 1919, become an extensive sponsor of Plicka's work, including *The Earth Sings*.<sup>22</sup> According to Hana Dvořáková, 'the social climate' in Czechoslovakia after 1918 set an emphasis on "national" culture' and thus provoked 'a wave of folklorism', of folk festivities and parades, across the new republic.<sup>23</sup> With specific reference to film, Lucie Česálková



Fig. 14.1. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still.  
© Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

wrote of the concern to capture 'national representativeness' that provided a framework for the production and exhibition of ethnographic studies, as evident in initiatives of the 1920s like the Film Commission of the Exhibition of National Development (Filmová komise pro Výstavu národního rozvoje), which sought to collate films and photographs portraying Czechoslovak life in all its diversity, from folklore to images of industry.<sup>24</sup>

Plicka once wrote of his admiration for the 1929 Soviet documentary film *Turksib* (directed by Viktor Turin), describing its depiction of 'the encounter between the old and the new' as one of the qualities he found 'exciting' and close to his own interests.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, *The Earth Sings*, like Úlehla's *The Disappearing World*, are films framed by an awareness of Czechoslovakia as a land of old and new, of rural tradition and urban advancement. But where *Turksib* depicts the establishment of modern technology (the titular railway) in the Kazakh desert in positive and harmonious terms, Plicka and Úlehla's work is founded in a sense of the negative and destructive encroachment of modernity.<sup>26</sup> Úlehla tended to privilege folk traditions as the authentic expression of national culture, and hence deplored their imminent eradication: 'Our culture, that which is called folk art, its customs and experiences, is rapidly disappearing, as the countryside stops being the countryside and blindly imitates the city, which has virtually no life of its own, nothing that grows out of tradition.'<sup>27</sup> *The Earth Sings* directly incorporates this preferential opposition of country to city into its urban-based opening sequence (Fig. 14.1). The message rings clearer in the original version of the film, which features an introductory sequence shot in Prague (this was replaced, during the Occupation years, by a sequence shot in Bratislava). After an initial reverential survey of some of the city's well-known historical monuments, the film shifts focus to 'modern Prague', revealed as a disorienting bustle of cars and pedestrians.<sup>28</sup> As Martin Slivka writes, the 'musical accent' accompanying a shot of a female flower-seller isolates 'an intimate detail' from the fleeting, chaotic life of the city and evokes 'a secret desire for the beauty of more permanent values'.<sup>29</sup> This is the metropolitan throb familiar from the avant-garde city film, as witnessed by a less ecstatic eye. Yet while Plicka, or Úlehla, may thus look less fondly on the modern metropolis than their avant-garde counterparts, their ethnographic studies are also the product of modernity

in the most concrete and pragmatic sense: it is the inexorable expansion of modernisation that motivates the need to document and thus preserve a disappearing folk culture.

In spite of the cult of traditionalism of which both Plicka and Úlehla generally partake, *The Earth Sings* and *The Disappearing World* both contain tributes of a sort to the modern technology that facilitates the ethnographic endeavour. In *The Disappearing World* this is the phonograph technology used to record the songs of the Moravian village community among whom the film is set. The gramophone is revealed shortly after the arrival of the film's (fictional) protagonist Stana, an ethnographer from the city, who gathers the community in a village hall to demonstrate the functions of the unfamiliar technological device. As a moment of cultural encounter between the 'primitive' and the technologically-advanced, this scene is strikingly comparable to a famous (or notorious) scene from Robert Flaherty's pioneering ethnographic film *Nanook of the North* (1922), in which Nanook reacts with comic mystification upon hearing a phonograph play music. If Úlehla's scene has much less of a crudely 'colonialist' air, it remains a tribute to technological magic as revealed anew by the response of the pre-modern villagers, and amplified visually by close-ups that fetishise and defamiliarise the phonograph. In *The Earth Sings* the technology implicitly celebrated is modern transportation. If the automobiles of the city evoke a sense of transience and chaos, the train proves a means of deliverance from urban life, as, following the opening city scenes, Plicka's camera adopts the viewpoint of the train traveller and propels the viewer on a scenic journey towards the film's main subject matter.

In both cases these technologies can be seen to stand in for the modern, technological implement that is the ethnographer's film camera. The analogy is more literal and direct in *The Disappearing World*, not only because the gramophone, like film technology, is a means of recording and reproduction, but also because Úlehla was himself a collector of folk music: the recorded song in the scene just mentioned plays out to corresponding images of nature, a suggested alignment between Úlehla's different ethnographic activities, between the musicologist who preserves songs and the filmmaker who 'records' images. The analogy in *The Earth Sings* is more abstract but also more interesting. The train itself has barely any onscreen presence in the sequence mentioned, as though the film camera has fully absorbed its role as an agent of boundless mobility. The film camera does for perception what the train does for the physical body, liberating us from our 'human immobility'.<sup>30</sup> As the world opens up before Plicka's travelling camera, yielding a succession of images in which rockface looms above us and rivers swell below, in which industry gives way to farmland and wild mountain, this journey is a testament to the kaleidoscopic power of cinema, to the film camera as extension of human vision.

The idea of cinematic point of view as a new, omniscient form of perception, 'liberated' from the normal constraints of seeing, was most famously articulated in Dziga Vertov's conception of the 'kino-eye'.<sup>31</sup> If Vertov's influence on Plicka's work appears to have been limited, simply one part of the overall impact of Soviet avant-garde film, the extension of vision seems in any case to have been a concern of the avant-garde in general, including in Czechoslovakia, and one of the qualities that attracted avant-gardists to cinema.<sup>32</sup> According to Catherine Russell, traditional ethnography wielded the camera as a 'scientific instrument of representation', and in the milieu of avant-garde film this alignment is closer still: capable, as Vertov put it, of seeing 'that which the eye does not see', of making 'the invisible visible', the movie camera *is* a scientific instrument for penetrating reality, an idea fully literalised in Jiří Lehovc's film *The Magical Eye* (*Divotvorné oko*, 1939), an educational short, made within the avant-garde, that demonstrates a new microscopic camera lens by means of wondrous, defamiliarising close-ups of everyday objects.<sup>33</sup> To borrow Vertov's metaphors, the cinema is both microscope and telescope, a means to make manifest what was either present but hidden or absent and impossibly remote; as such the camera unites the aims of science and ethnography and puts both in contact with the avant-garde. As if in attestation of that natural unity, science, ethnography and the avant-garde were fused personally in the remarkable Renaissance-like persona of Vladimír Úlehla himself. Besides his ethnographic pursuits, Úlehla was a professor of botany at Masaryk University and a founding member of the Czechoslovak Society for Scientific Cinematography (*Československá společnost pro vědeckou*

kinematografii), an organisation that had links with the Brno Devětsil group and which at one point even took over the film activities of the artistic coalition the Levá fronta (Left Front).<sup>34</sup> As a maker of scientific films Úlehla had exploited the vision-extending properties of the camera-eye by utilising inherently cinematic techniques like time-lapse photography, used to portray the 'invisible' growth cycle of plants. But *The Disappearing World* is Úlehla's ultimate interplay of seen and unseen, of present and absent, a vivid presentation of an unseen culture produced in anticipation of its ultimate, total absence.

An undeniable part of the appeal of Plicka's cinema to the 'coffeehouse' audience mentioned at the beginning was the unfamiliarity of the hitherto-unseen world his films captured, the 'exoticism' afforded by Czechoslovakia's cross-regional diversity. Characteristic of the appreciative response to *The Earth Sings* in the Prague press is a review by Karel Čapek entitled 'Two Unknown Worlds'. Čapek tellingly compares Plicka's film to another, unnamed film released at the same time, a documentary about marine life. Having praised this latter film for 'bringing to the surface' the 'secrets' of the ocean's depths, Čapek remarks that Plicka's film, while lacking the popularity of the other, reveals the 'secrets of a land' that is 'no less mysterious'.<sup>35</sup> Čapek's status as an avant-garde writer is debatable, but his alignment here of a popular-science documentary and an ethnographic film as confrontations with a mysterious otherness is consistent with avant-garde perspectives and suggests the affinities both types of films had with avant-garde works, not least Surrealism. As James Clifford writes, common to Surrealism and ethnography was 'the belief that the other', whether manifested in the world of dreams or in pre-modern cultures, 'was a crucial object of modern research'.<sup>36</sup> The overlapping of avant-garde and scientific spheres of investigation, or the unifying concern with unknown worlds, is evident in other artists' work. Úlehla, the ethnographer and botanist, developed an unrealised film project exploring the surrealistic territory of dream life, while, in France, the marine biologist Jean Painlevé made films that consciously invested the ocean's 'secrets' with surrealistic and mythic overtones.<sup>37</sup>

### Stasis and Motion: The Aesthetics of the New Vision

The particular affinity between *The Earth Sings*, above Plicka's other film work, and contemporaneous film and photographic works of the avant-garde of course rests not only on the exotic novelty of its pro-filmic content, its expansion of *what* we see onscreen, but also on the way it controls our perception of the folk realities depicted, its artful manipulation of *how* we see. This marks a more precise point of connection, perhaps, with Vertov's kino-eye, which, after all, derived its aesthetics from the notion that cinema's capacity to capture an invisible reality, as described, required intensive re-organisation of the shot material by means of film's unique technical possibilities, from optical tricks to editing.<sup>38</sup> Plicka, in his own thoughts on cinema, rejected the idea that film must content itself with the mere description or reportage of reality, a tendency he mistakenly attributed to Vertov himself.<sup>39</sup> Aligning himself instead with Pudovkin's theories, Plicka insisted that a film should be an *artistic* record of reality.<sup>40</sup> Yet precisely in allowing the medium a certain autonomy to create its own reality, film reflects exterior reality all the more authentically. Indeed, for Plicka, the very beauty of form in a film like *The Earth Sings* had documentary value, as a mimetic reiteration of the world it depicts: a beautiful depiction of beautiful lives.<sup>41</sup> In this section we consider the relation between cinematic form and ethnographic object in more detail.

The beautiful form of *The Earth Sings* is rooted in tradition and yet deeply unconventional, with the filmed footage structured into a depersonalised 'narrative' of the passing seasons, and then edited and scored to achieve that celebrated rhythmic and 'symphonic' form. As Plicka's most noted example of artistic stylisation, *The Earth Sings* is a clear departure from the more straightforwardly informative or descriptive model of 'culture film' (*kulturní film*) that his earlier film work had suggested. Roman Jakobson, in a short essay on ethnographic filmmaking, could even define the earlier *Over Hill and Dale* as scientific data while describing Úlehla, the scientist by profession, as the artist (a pair of judgements that have later tended to be reversed).<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding Karel Čapek's comments, the distinction of *The Earth Sings* was perhaps less in the novelty of its images than in the striking way this documentary material (which had in part been amassed prior to this





Fig. 14.2. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still. © Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

specific project) had been arranged. Plicka himself was not slow to credit the final form of the film in large part to Alexandr Hackenschmied and his bravura editing work. In fact, Hackenschmied's involvement exceeded the traditional role of editor, and the marks of his intervention are clear if one compares *The Earth Sings* to other films on which he worked. It may be no coincidence that one finds an uncanny resemblance between the opening of *The Earth Sings* and that of Hackenschmied's Surrealist-tinged avant-garde short *Aimless Walk* (*Bezúčelná procházka*, 1930), which also begins with a train ride that takes the protagonist, and the spectator, from the city into the countryside (or at least to its edges), with the literal mobility of viewpoint again acting as prelude to an expanded vision of reality (though here the revelation is of psychological duality, the alien 'other' the protagonist's own double self).<sup>43</sup>

To what extent, then, does *The Earth Sings* exemplify not only Hackenschmied's technical skills but also his own artistic vision? As both a theorist and a practitioner of film, Hackenschmied emphasised the medium's dynamism and fluidity: as Jaroslav Anděl puts it, through his varied film work of the 1930s and 1940s Hackenschmied exploited the potential of both camera movement and editing to create a highly 'dynamic conception' of 'film space'.<sup>44</sup> This cinematic aesthetic had been forged in Hackenschmied's exposure to the international movement in photography known as the 'New Vision'.<sup>45</sup> Quintessentially and self-consciously 'modern', the New Vision responded to the fast-paced urban and technological world with a proliferation of close-ups, diagonal compositions and unusual points of view, designed to approximate the 'dynamism' of the film image itself.<sup>46</sup> For László Moholy-Nagy, the influential artist who had coined the term 'New Vision', the 'defining feature of modernity' was 'the constancy of motion'.<sup>47</sup>

*The Earth Sings* is itself a film of constant and conspicuous motion. Movement is made a tangible presence firstly through the emphasis on collective and repetitive motions such as the children's dances and games that occupy the particularly vigorous 'spring' sequences at the film's beginning and end (Fig. 14.2). The camera amasses large, coordinated units or 'blocks' of movement—the linked dancers, the laterally-spinning wooden pole to which the children cling, the line of girls holding up the sacrificial 'Morena' figure—and the shot sequencing adds an extra dynamism to this by cutting between separate movements going in the same direction, thus pushing the action towards an abstract impression of rhyming dynamic shapes, or else making these activities seem like various incarnations of some all-encompassing spirit of motion. While Plicka's film footage was produced with fairly primitive equipment that prohibited much camera

movement, Hackenschmied's editing creates a powerfully dynamic effect of its own through rhythmic cutting and the alternation of contrasting angles and distances. Is this a case of an aesthetic originally conceived in the euphoria of modernity simply being transposed to a bucolic setting? Is the film's ethnographic subject matter incidental to the pre-formed avant-garde sensibility of the versatile Hackenschmied, capable of turning his talents to a diverse range of assignments from documentaries to advertisements?

I would argue that the film's dynamic aesthetic language, for all that this was largely the work of Hackenschmied, does relate organically to Plicka's vision of Slovak rural life as a world of music, dance, and movement. The film is informed by ideas of movement down to its overarching structural conception, which follows the cycle of seasonal transformation, the governing 'movements' of nature. Movement is one of the principles that links humanity to nature, not only because both embody that all-embracing force of vitality—as the film emphasises with its cuts between human activity and the movements of clouds and streams—but also because it is natural movement that activates and directs human movement. Once the film's true, rural setting has been established, an intertitle reads: 'The sun awakens life—spring is joy and movement'. Spring is the privileged season in the film, the one with which the film introduces this folk world and the one to which all the other seasons lead, with a joyously lively finale that resumes and intensifies the dances and games of the beginning. For Plicka, joy, vitality, and musicality were clearly the qualities that essentially characterised the Slovak and Ruthenian rural cultures he devotedly documented, and thus movement was an important facet of the visual representation of these cultures, not only as a means to portray their vitality but also as a way to give physical shape to the music that defined these worlds, to approximate the aural flow of melody in images. As Plicka once remarked in interview, 'static photography does not respond to a musical line'.<sup>48</sup> He would even recall that his principal motivation in branching out from still photography into film was the appeal of making images move.

Thus, with *The Earth Sings*, Plicka, Hackenschmied, and composer Škvor created a perfect rural counterpart to the avant-garde city symphony, a work that is similar yet distinct, using the same aesthetic language to support different values and a different tone. This is not the frenetic, clamorous kineticism of the modern metropolis, but rather a harmonious and controlled display of movement akin to the choral harmonies of folk song. This sense of control is foregrounded in the film by shots of youthful 'conductor' figures cut into scenes of dance and game-playing;



Fig. 14.3. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still.  
© Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

in the closing example of this, the young boy is presented alone, seemingly standing at a higher point than his fellows and projected against sky and mountains, as he appears to direct the others' activities with vigorous cracks of his whip (cracks that are mimicked by the score for extra emphasis) (Fig. 14.3). In Plicka's world, moving spectacle serves a reassuring message of stasis. Just as the children spin round in relentless, dizzying motion while remaining in the spot, and as the flowing water of the streams is constantly replenished, so does the movement of the seasons always repeat itself, bringing us back to the same point. In this way the film successfully integrates its avant-garde aesthetics with its vision of a 'timeless' rural and traditional life. This fusion of style and subject is achieved more successfully than in *The Disappearing World*, whose flights of modernist technique appear less motivated and jar with the pedestrian 'Realist' style that predominates in the film's narrative sections. Yet if *The Earth Sings* has, rightly, proven aesthetically satisfying for many, this has not exempted it from criticism over the accuracy of its representations.

### ***Heimat*, Primitivism, and the Avant-Garde: From Kitsch to Myth**

Alongside the fulsome praise *The Earth Sings* received, from critics enthused by its aesthetic virtues or those metropolitan viewers thrilled by the exotic world it revealed, the film also met with numerous disapproving responses. As Martin Slivka has informed us, much of the hostility to the film came from Slovak critics, who objected to what they considered a vision of their native region as a backward territory, a place of 'poverty and primitivism'.<sup>49</sup> Plicka, it was argued, had given a misleading representation of Slovakia's rural areas that exaggerated their archaic character and banished any traces of modernity. One Czech critic, J. Tůma, even attacked the film for peddling 'folkloristic kitsch', likening it to an institutional display of preserved relics designed to evoke an 'idyll of past times'.<sup>50</sup> Tůma also described the film as an 'unintentional cartoon', a work that had turned its attention away 'from reality and from the contemporary life of a country that has no reason to sing'.

Such criticisms are, to a large extent, an overtly negative version of the established interpretations of Plicka's career as a whole, at least as regards his (more extensive) career as a still photographer. As Simona Béréšová revealed, Plicka's work is commonly associated with the genre of '*Heimat* photography' popular across Germany and other Central-European countries.<sup>51</sup> *Heimat* connotes sentimental or idyllic representations of one's native countryside that seek to affirm national pride, traditionalism, and the virtues of simple, rural living. *Heimat* art is usually considered antithetical to the aesthetics and values of the avant-garde, even if its Slovak variant in photography has tended to lack the explicit association with *völkisch* ideology and right-wing politics that *Heimat* has had in Germany. Plicka has also been linked to the related but nationally specific mode that art historian Aurel Hrabušický has termed 'beautiful Slovakia photography' (*krasnoslovenska fotografia*), identified with the 'quiet celebration' of rural Slovak life.<sup>52</sup> Generally speaking, then, Plicka appears as a staid and artistically-conventional presence in twentieth-century Czech and Slovak culture, his photographs lacking either the avant-garde's Formalist manipulations of the image or the Realist exposure of poor conditions as practised by Slovakia's social photography (*sociálna fotografia*) movement. Hrabušický explicitly distinguishes the bulk of Plicka's output from the avant-garde.<sup>53</sup>

It is true that, in style as in other things, *The Earth Sings* is an exceptional work in Plicka's career and that Plicka generally did not try to apply the dynamic sensibility of the New Vision to the form of his photographs as he and Hackenschmied did with their 1933 film. An illuminating comparison could be offered with the photographs that Jaromír Funke took of similar subject matter in his *Subcarpathian Ruthenia* cycle. Funke's photographs infuse a sense of dynamism into the static form of the photograph through the diagonal compositions that were such a characteristic feature of Funke's work. Funke also adopts a 'snapshot' approach, capturing his human subjects in offhand moments, mid-speech or blinking at the camera. This imparts a sense of spontaneity, of moments arrested from the flow of life. Even speaking solely in aesthetic terms, it is harder to align such photographs with *Heimat* than is the case with Plicka's more conventional, more visibly posed compositions. But if, as we have seen, *The Earth Sings* does enact this 'avant-garde' dynamism,



Fig. 14.2. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still.  
© Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

it also undeniably exhibits the primitivist and idealising qualities that have earned the labels of archaic kitsch or, in regard to Plicka's other work, *Heimat* and 'beautiful Slovakia' photography. For instance, the contemporaneous charge of exaggerating the archaism of the rural environments portrayed, to the exclusion of anything modern, is borne out by Plicka's decision to avoid showing much of the male population of these Eastern Slovak villages, who by the early twentieth century were already wearing modern clothes. In itself, Plicka's selective focus on women and children, with the latter especially given a privileged and symbolically-charged role, carries additional primitivist associations of an infantile and virginal state of pre-modern innocence (Fig. 14.4). The type of 'otherness' Plicka documented in Slovakia may of course differ from the further flung objects of colonial-style exploration, but his choice of subjects reveals a strange affinity with the exoticist or Orientalist strain in much classic European ethnography, for which 'the other' is often a 'feminized and childish' figure.<sup>54</sup> The emphatically-cyclical structure referred to earlier, which passes through the adult affairs of labour and mortality only to bring us back to the radiant springtime vision of childhood with which the film started, acts further to close off, or insulate, the film's subjects in a primitivist fantasy of 'mythic time', a condition of timelessness outside history. Through its emphasis on nature's eternal capacity for renewal, this structure also helps Plicka to idealise his subject matter, and while there are references to the arduous toil of cultivating the 'merciless earth', and to the men who have had to leave the villages to look for work, these seem like minor shadings, even stray notes, in a dominant tone of elation and affirmation.

Do these issues of representation disqualify *The Earth Sings* as an avant-garde work? Can the film exemplify the sensibilities of the New Vision and of *Heimat*? Can it be both progressive and primitivist? For Catherine Russell, such oppositions might to some extent seem false, as classical ethnography's fantasies of pre-industrial innocence and 'the alterity of the primitive' are seen to be shared by incipient 'experimental film practices' too.<sup>55</sup> The convergence of modernist or avant-garde aesthetics with the construction of primitivist rural idylls can also be found elsewhere in Czech ethnographic (or ethnography-related) films, as for instance in Vladislav Vančura's aforementioned feature film *Faithless Marijka*. This film has a high avant-garde pedigree as well as strong politically-progressive credentials, as a film originated by two members of Czechoslovakia's



Fig. 14.5. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still. © Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

1930s Levá fronta, Vančura and scenarist Ivan Olbracht. The two artists' Marxist beliefs, together with Olbracht's expert, first-hand knowledge of life in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, help to root this film in the realities of poverty and economic exploitation that Plicka's film ignores. But if these political realities occupy one thread of the narrative, concerned with a cheating boss and a subsequent rebellion by the workers, the parallel story of young peasant woman Marijka and the affair she pursues while her husband is labouring in the mountains arguably still endorses the primitivist vision, constructing Subcarpathian peasant life as a world of primal passions. Marijka herself, for instance, is an image of guileless simplicity: a characterisation that carries over into the account Olbracht later wrote about the actress playing the role, a non-professional peasant woman actually from the region. During an official discussion in the film following a labourers' riot, a man laments that 'this land is still in the Middle Ages'. There is a cutaway to an ornamental sculpture of a wolf, an image of natural ferocity that hints in 'Orientalist' fashion at the region's fundamental alterity, its inhabitants' intractable and deep-rooted 'animal' passions. In an essay accompanying the published script of the film, Olbracht even demonstrated how a Marxist political consciousness and the construction of primitive innocence may go hand in hand, writing of the 'incursion' of 'capitalist civilisation' into regions of 'old orderliness and good, old morals'.<sup>56</sup>

Like Olbracht in such fictional works as *The Bandit Nikola Šuhaj* (*Nikola Šuhaj loupežník*, 1933), Plicka can be seen as adopting a consciously mythic, archaising and archetypal form of representation. Like Olbracht, Plicka too was interested in legends and folk heroes: following the success of *The Earth Sings* he attempted to mount a feature film about the legendary Slovak bandit Juraj Jánošík, and would ultimately lend his ethnographic expertise, as well as casting assistance, to a separate production that actually was completed, Martin Frič's 1935 *Jánošík* (itself, like *Faithless Marijka*, a fusion of socially-conscious folk ballad and modernist technique, with clear debts to Eisenstein and Soviet montage).<sup>57</sup> Plicka's description of *The Earth Sings* as, 'above all, my song about a lost paradise' invites us to read the film at an archetypal, non-literal level rather than in documentary terms.<sup>58</sup> Catherine Russell acknowledged that primitivist representations, for all their distortions of actual cultures, can contain a utopian dimension, and Plicka's work, with its defiance of technological modernity, can be seen as an attempt at constructing redemptive myths

by reference to the 'primitive', folk traditions of Eastern Slovakia.<sup>59</sup> *The Earth Sings* presents a world of social and natural communion in which art is integrally woven into life, society, and work. Plicka's signature images of clumps of prepared flax, which form a pleasing, harmonious pattern as they stretch across the mountainside, can of course be critiqued for ultimately privileging visual beauty over the realities of toil (with this fetishisation of form more marked in the still photograph that Plicka produced of the same scene) (Fig. 14.5). Alternatively, such images may be said to represent a reconciliation of art and labour, beauty and necessity.

In this sense, too, *The Earth Sings* is both a contrast and a counterpart to the emphatically modern visions of the contemporaneous avant-gardes. To take a local example, the Czech Devětsil movement, as represented by its chief theoretician Karel Teige, also adopted a utopian perspective that claimed an integral and extensive place for aesthetic and sensual pleasures within the living of everyday life, even if Teige's visions were inspired more by circuses and slapstick comedy films than by folk art, and premised on technological innovation. Interestingly, Jennifer Jenkins has seen the concern to 'have art and life speak to one another'—articulated in the work of modernist but highly locally-embedded artists like Rilke and Heinrich Vogeler—as a key point of contact between avant-garde aspirations and a progressive version of *Heimat*.<sup>60</sup> One later example of avant-garde utopianism that invoked the pre-modern or 'primitive' other as a model is the ethnographic studies of Haitian voodoo rituals by American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, exemplified in her documentary film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (shot between 1947 and 1954 and 'completed' in 1981, after Deren's death). As fixated on dance as was Plicka's film, *Divine Horsemen* presents voodoo as a 'cohesive' force of community, 'a sacred energy connecting humans, sacrificial animals, and living gods through a sensuous choreography'. Similarly to Plicka's implicit rejection of the metropolis at the beginning of *The Earth Sings*, Deren opposes the 'thick, multisensory human choreography' of the Haitian ceremonies to 'the flat, disembodied life in industrial cities'.<sup>61</sup>

*The Earth Sings* is, as we suggested earlier, a work founded on a spirit of enquiry into the unknown, on that urge towards expanded vision that unites the traditions of ethnographic and avant-garde filmmaking from which Plicka's film derives. But if this is poetry as pedagogy, it is also 'scientific' investigation put in the service of myth, a visualisation of unseen dimensions of reality in which the kino-eye is trained inwards as well as outwards.

1 Jiří Jeníček, 'Zem spieva', *Fotografický obzor* 61/10 (1933): p. 156.

2 Martin Slivka, *Karol Plicka – básnik obrazu* (Bratislava: Osveta, 1982), pp. 132–133.

3 Stanislav Ježek, 'Zem spieva', *Lidové noviny* (27 September 1933): p. 14.

4 Josef Polák, 'A ještě Plickův film', *Lidové noviny* (8 December 1933): p. 14.

5 Miroslav Rutte and 'J. Hr.' [sic], in Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 213 (no title given).

6 Jaroslav Anděl, 'Artists as Filmmakers', in Jaroslav Anděl, Anne Wilkes Tucker, Alison De Lima Greene, Ralph McKay, and Willis Hartshorn (eds.), *Czech Modernism 1900–1945* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1990), pp. 167–169.

7 Ježek, 'Zem spieva', p. 14.

8 Alice Lovejoy, *Army Film and the Avant-Garde: Cinema and Experiment in the Czechoslovak Military* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 42–52.

9 Petr Denk, 'Slovenský film', *Index* 2/7 (1930): p. 54; Petr Denk, 'Nový slovenský film', *Index* 3/3 (1931): p. 31.

10 Aurel Hrabušický and Václav Máček, *Slovenská fotografia 1925–2000: moderna – postmoderna – postfotografia / Slovak Photography 1925–2000: Modernism – Postmodernism – Postphotography* (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2001), p. 77.

11 Michal Bregant, 'Avantgardní tendence v českém filmu', in Ivan Klimeš (ed.), *Filmový sborník historický 3* (Prague: Československý filmový ústav, 1993), p. 164.

12 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, pp. 220–221; Karol Plicka, 'Poznámky o filme', *Slovenské pohľady*, 48/9–10 (1932): pp. 594–595.

13 Michal Bregant, filmed commentary for the DVD release of *Marijka nevěrnice*. Filmexport Home Video, 2010.

14 This rural variant of modernism even outlasted the 1930s, enjoying a kind of renaissance in the 1960s with the emergence of a specifically-Slovak vein of ethnographic documentary. This vein was pioneered by Martin Slivka, who used overtly avant-garde elements, including 'Cubist'-style editing. A former student of Plicka and the author of various studies of his work, Slivka consciously placed himself in Plicka's legacy.

15 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 35.

16 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 35.

17 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 12.

18 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 7.

19 Frederick M. Barnard, 'Political Culture: Continuity and Discontinuity', in H. Gordon Skilling (ed.), *Czechoslovakia 1918–1988: Seventy Years from Independence* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 154.



- 20 Petr Farkaš, 'Nářeční prvky v českém hraném filmu 30. a 40. let' (MA Thesis, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, Prague, 2012), p. 10.
- 21 Farkaš, 'Nářeční prvky', p. 12.
- 22 Peter Petro, *A History of Slovak Literature* (Montreal & Kingston, London, and Buffalo: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997), p. 87.
- 23 Hana Dvořáková, 'Etnograf a filmař: Příklad Františka Pospíšila', in L. Fasora, J. Hanuš, J. Malíř, and L. Vykoupil (eds.), *Člověk na Moravě v první polovině 20. století* (Brno: Centrum pro stadium demokracie a kultury, 2006), p. 411.
- 24 Lucie Česálková, 'Kinematograf z fyzikálního ústav: Československá společnost pro vědeckou kinematografii aneb Popularizace vědy kinematografií a kinematografie vědou', *Illuminace* 20/3(71) (2008): p. 137.
- 25 Plicka, quoted in Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 221.
- 26 Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 105.
- 27 Vladimír Úlehla, quoted in Lucie Česálková, 'Obraz venkovské idylly – Film Mizející svět Vladimíra Úlehly', *Dějiny a současnost* 30/6 (2008): p. 35.
- 28 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 163.
- 29 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 163.
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# Derkovits: The Artist and His Times

## Introduction

KATALIN BAKOS AND ANDRÁS ZWICKL

# Fade-ins: The Art of Gyula Derkovits and Interwar Hungarian Social Photography

ÁGNES KUSLER AND MERSE PÁL SZEREDI

*Although Gyula Derkovits has long been considered an important artist of interwar Hungary, literature on him is scarce both in Hungarian and other languages. His explicitly Communist conviction both benefitted and compromised the reception of his oeuvre in his lifetime and after. Derkovits's art drew on Expressionism, Cubism, and Constructivism until, towards the end of his short life, he created a style of his own uniting strict composition and lyrical colours with portrayal and depicting radical social subject-matters. A monographic exhibition of his oeuvre in the Hungarian National Gallery in 2014 set out to revisit Derkovits's creative output from a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches; the curators' 'Introduction' to the catalogue, re-printed below, details the general aims of the show. Enigma, Hungary's leading journal of art history and theory also accompanied the exhibition with a two-part 'reader'; the essay by Ágnes Kusler and Merse Pál Szeredi, discussing the integration of photographic vision in Derkovits's painting, was selected from this issue. (BH)*

## **Derkovits: The Artist and His Times**

### **Introduction**

From the mid-1980s onwards, the Hungarian National Gallery held a series of monographic and epochal exhibitions on the great figures and phenomena of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hungarian art. Therefore, the exploration of the interwar period now became a timely task, the due overture of which is the show on Gyula Derkovits, a prominent artist of that era. The duties of a museum include the introduction of younger generations to the emblematic figures and great accomplishments of Hungarian fine arts through their constant reinterpretation. At present, Hungarian art history writing aspires to connect to advanced research done on the period in the related disciplines of history as well as cultural and literary history, and the exhibition organisers indeed intended to draw on such scholarly models. Beside presenting Derkovits's outstanding work from an aesthetical perspective, the exhibition also provides an opportunity to address how the evaluation of his art has changed over time.

Derkovits's significance was already recognised by the critics and middle-class art collectors of his time; at the same time, he also received support and commissions from the illegal Communist movement. The artist, too, professed his political commitment to Communism and himself contributed to his own mythicised image of a destitute proletarian artist, even though his exhibitions enjoyed great success and offers of help came pouring in. However, posthumous debates about Derkovits became pronouncedly polarised, one-sidedly valuing or criticising either the aesthetic value of the oeuvre or the painter's political commitment only, and this sort of pigeonholing has persisted until today. Although Éva Körner's 1968 monograph still remains an inevitable starting point for discussions of Derkovits, a critical reevaluation of this study, written almost half a century ago, is nevertheless required since it too is part of the history of Derkovits's reception.<sup>1</sup>

More broadly, our show attempts to grasp the unique characteristics of Derkovits's art, which both conform to and transcend the painting of his time. Although he is one of the few Hungarian artists of this period whose work has been indexed in a catalogue raisonné, our exhibition does not present his work in its entirety. Accordingly, we do not intend to publish an updated version of the catalogue raisonné from Körner's monograph in our own volume. Instead, we present Derkovits's most notable works, grouping together and commenting on the pieces in a way that gives a clear insight into their novelty and special quality that not only won over eminent experts of his time, but also engaged the artists and art historians who defended him in the post-1945 debates. The show is not about a lonely genius or autotelic primordial talent, but a well-informed creator who was versed in the fine arts of his time, and who consciously drew from both contemporary and traditional sources. Derkovits was unique in incorporating

the tools and ways of seeing from the visual culture of his day—photography and film, caricatures and posters—into his painting and graphics. For the viewer of today, and especially the younger viewer, an awareness of Hungary's interwar historical background makes it easier to understand Derkovits's work. This is the reason why our monographic exhibition draws on approaches that are increasingly widely accepted in Hungarian art historical research, such as reception theory and the mapping of the broader cultural context.

The structure of the exhibition and the choice of works are not broken up into typical chronological-stylistic or thematic blocks. Our point of departure is that the strength of Derkovits's works lies not in their stylistic or thematic innovation, but in the unique way he addressed the viewer by adopting the characteristic modes of artistic expression in use at the time. Here we rely on a twentieth-century adaptation of the theory of the modes, a concept from antiquity later revived in the seventeenth century. The theory of the modes applied concepts initially used in literature and music to describe the fine arts so that the moral intention and rhetorical character of a picture is easier to grasp. Accordingly, our show is constructed around identifiable tonal modes in Derkovits's works. We use literary terms as titles to define the characteristics of each section of the exhibition and catalogue, where the accepted terms from art history would be rather onerous and imprecise.

Using this approach, we can identify five modes in Derkovits's life work: elegiac, dramatic, satirical, essayistic, and hymnal. These literary expressions designating the tone of the works are not strict technical terms, but are rather used as metaphors to better facilitate an understanding of the impact of the artist's intention and artistic tools. Derkovits's typically Central-European oeuvre is characterised by a frequently-overlapping use of the widest possible range of styles, also seen in the Cubo-Expressionism of the Hungarian Activists, the neo-Classicism and Verism of the 1920s, the spatial exposition of Cubism and Constructivism, or the kind of pictorial conversions in Post-Impressionism. In Derkovits' work, the unique fusion of earlier painting and graphic techniques is heightened by the visual world of caricature, newspaper cartoons, political agitation, and social photography, and their ability to address the viewer directly. We have shaped the main chapters of the exhibition and catalogue around the five modes, within which we define thematic groups. This classification allows for a more refined exploration of what Derkovits's world was like: through his paintings, we come to know the society in which he lived, the metropolitan working class and the impoverished peasantry, the middle classes and the artist, work and poverty, Budapest, the outskirts, and the Danube.

First, Derkovits's early paintings and drawings, deriving from his experiences at the Nyergesújfalu free school, express the absence of and desire for harmony through the melancholic voice of *elegiac* poetry. In these pastoral compositions, the motifs of music and bathing appear alongside the idyll of peasant work. These are followed by depictions of war and everyday struggles in explosive, dynamic works imbued with exceptionally *dramatic* tension. The figures in these pictures are refugees, mourners, the lamenting masses, labourers at work, and peasants, while the stage is the city, the teeming main streets, the coffee house, the railway, the embankment, and the suburban cinema. The *satirical* works make it particularly clear that Derkovits was not a passive observer of life, but rather its relentless critic. His targets were the wealthy middle class, the priesthood, gendarmerie, judges, executioners, and prostitutes. The *essay* uses the expressive force of literary language, but above all the intellect and the laws of logic, to uncover contradictions, clarify thoughts and draw conclusions. Montage offered Derkovits, as a painter, a similar tool for illustrating complex correlations. A *hymnal* voice characterises the life-affirming pictures of Derkovits's last period depicting the most familiar everyday scenes—such as work, the marketplace, the wintry street, railways, or a mother embracing her child—in an exalted, celebratory tone.

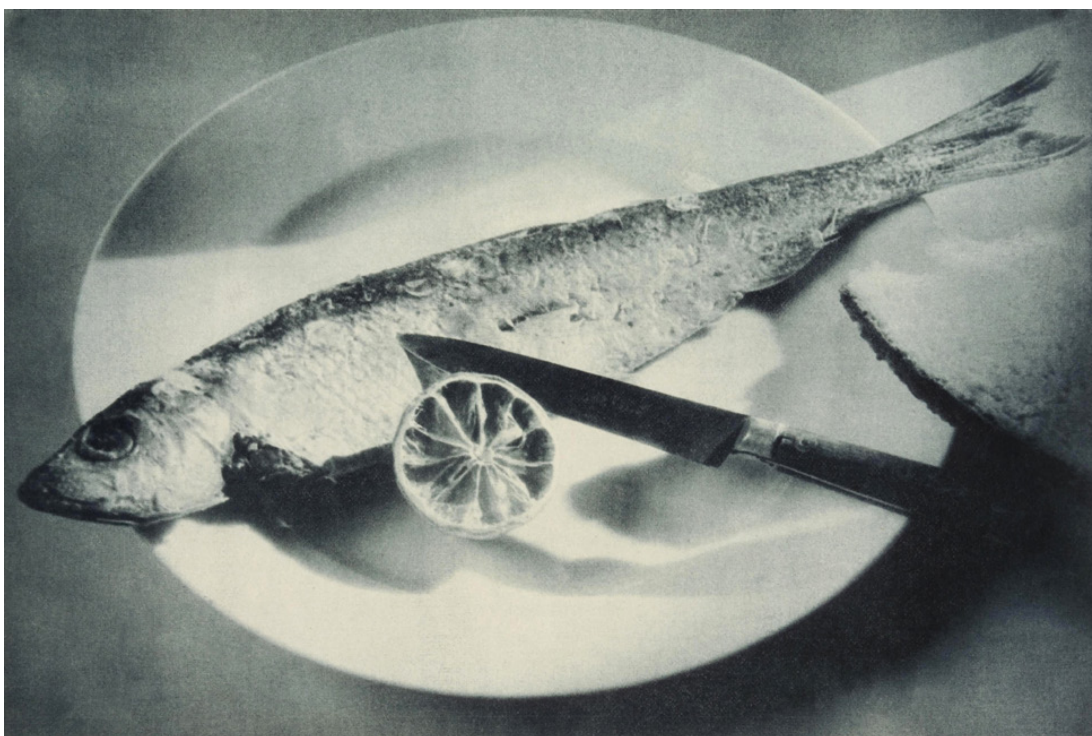
As well as emphasising Derkovits's individuality, we also show the many ways his works connected to the art of his time. His works are therefore exhibited alongside similarly-inspired graphics, paintings, and photographs by his contemporaries, while emblematic examples of contemporary official and avant-garde Hungarian art are presented in a separate section as analogies or counterpoints. The broader Central-European context is provided by German,



Fig. 15.1. Gyula Derkovits, *Still Life with Fish I.* (*Halas csendélet I.*, 1928). Mixed media on canvas, 42 x 57.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, inv. no.: 56.246 T. © Museum of Fine Arts / Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2018.



Fig. 15.2. József Pécsi, *Fish with Lemon* (*Hal citrommal*, 1928). Oil press on paper, 37.6 x 26.7 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét, inv. no.: 69.133. © Hungarian Foundation of Photography, 2018.



Austrian, Polish, Slovak, and Czech paintings and graphics. Turning the unfavourable layout of the Hungarian National Gallery's 'A' Building to our advantage, and rather than following a linear structure, we envisage a show organised by modules. Using both levels of the exhibition space, we dedicate a separate section to the *Dózsa* series, Derkovits's 1928 graphics exhibition held at the Etchers' Association, and a selection of documents presenting the life and cult of the artist. Each modal chapter in the series encompasses an emphatic unity organised around a key work. Directly next to them are graphics and photographs from Derkovits's contemporaries. Documentary and biographical films and photos illustrate the history and visual culture of the era, as well as the afterlife of Derkovits's oeuvre.

The accompanying catalogue follows the structure of the exhibition. From the outset, we have endeavoured to forge a form of cooperation with the contributing experts that is closer than usual, with frequent meetings to exchange information, and participants presenting their thoughts and research findings to a broader public. These debates and feedback also helped shape the final form of the exhibition.

The two-volume reader, a special issue of the journal *Enigma* represents a further stage in the years of academic work to prepare for the exhibition. It is the first time that these sources, documents, contemporary writings, and press reports, which have offered us new observations and helped enrich our image of Derkovits and his era, have appeared in print.

## **Fade-ins: The Art of Gyula Derkovits and Interwar Hungarian Social Photography<sup>2</sup>**

One evening in March 1928, I bought a smoked fish for supper. I laid the table with a clean tablecloth and set out the plates, the knife and the fish. In the lamplight, the scales of the fish glowed golden from the smoking process. Gyula gazed transfixed, and I could already see in his eyes that he was composing a work.

Viktória Dombai, Gyula Derkovits's wife<sup>3</sup>

One of the most striking figures of interwar Hungarian painting, Gyula Derkovits, painted his *Still Life with Fish I (Halas csendélet I)* the same year as József Pécsi's well-known photograph *Fish with Lemon (Hal citrommal)* (Figs. 15.1 and 15.2). Although Pécsi was barely five years older than Derkovits, he enjoyed a much greater degree of existential security. At first glance, the similarity between the motifs and composition of both works is striking.<sup>4</sup> The fish provides promising material for the artist; the play of light on its scales interests the photographer as much as it does the painter. The configuration is practically a matter of course, yet there are substantial differences between the two pictures. The fish with lemon in the photograph is a gourmet dish which, following its careful studio presentation, may not have ended up in a human stomach. By contrast, the fish on the Derkovits' table ended up 'modelling', never turned into supper, and instead the couple ate salted bread with paprika, the symbolic cliché of the worker's existence, the fodder of the poor man. However, their comparison is not arbitrary. The works demarcate two poles, perhaps the most dissimilar poles in terms of the artistic tools used that year to elaborate on a motif. Their juxtaposition reveals differences not in form, but rather in artistic approach. From among countless similar compositions, we shall select yet another iconic item: Lajos Lengyel's photograph from the photo-book *From Our Life (A mi életünkéből)*, published by Lajos Kassák's journal *Munka (Work)* (Fig. 15.3).<sup>5</sup> Cut off at the wrist, a hand lies on rough cloth, cramped yet lifelessly clutching a tiny fish. Here, the fish motif is even more forcefully associative, a symbol of the painful struggle for existence. Although we find no clear-cut similarities in the configuration, the unspoken, obvious conceptual bond between Derkovits's painting and Lengyel's photograph is much closer than with Pécsi's photo described above.

The example above poses a whole set of questions, first raised by Éva Körner in her 1968 monograph on Derkovits. In Körner's opinion, Derkovits's last, socially-aware works from around 1930 until his death in 1934 were unmatched in contemporary Hungarian painting, although they did have analogies in the 'more trivial, more brutal branches of representational art forms', primarily photography.<sup>6</sup> Körner here emphasises the primary influence of social photography, which not only 'sought the same raw material as Derkovits', but at the same time pursued 'the demand to explain', thus yielding a great similarity between their works. The photographers and the painter 'often coincided not only in their choice of subject matter, but also in an astonishing correspondence in their compositional solutions'. This study aims to concentrate on the last four years of Derkovits's life in order to explore and structure the proposition raised by Körner: the parallels between Derkovits's painting and Hungarian interwar social photography.



Although we cannot talk of a documented relationship or any consciously-absorbed influence, nobody among the Hungarian artists of the interwar period lends themselves better to such a juxtaposition than Derkovits. To the best of our knowledge, his working methods did not include the use of photographic prototypes, and we have no evidence that would suggest that he visited photography exhibitions. Körner mentions two examples: the photo-reporter Károly Escher, and the social photographers in Lajos Kassák's Munka Circle. These two examples indicate the major directions of our enquiry: the illustrated press and avant-garde-influenced early photography, whose 'fade-ins' justify a more concentrated analysis. Our aim however is not to register the formal similarities, but to seek visual parallels that also connect to Derkovits's painting on a conceptual plane: cases in which the struggle between 'emotion and reason' in tackling social issues resembles that of Derkovits.<sup>7</sup>

The last four years of Derkovits's life and creative work were defined by sensitivity towards social issues, which entailed the visual mapping and artistic depiction of the problems and pains of those at the edges of society. Around 1930, the spectacle of devastating economic crisis, unemployment, and material and moral exploitation that kept Derkovits in a state of distress induced an ultimate transformation of his value system. On 1 September 1930, a large workers' demonstration was held in Budapest, and one year later, he experienced a personal tragedy of eviction and condemnation; both exerted a catalysing influence on his work.<sup>8</sup> Abandoning his earlier formal repertoire and subjects, Derkovits embarked on a new path, submerging himself in the 'fated life structure of the suffering parts of society'.<sup>9</sup> In his pictures, one sees 'not human examples of harmonic beauty, but worn-out proletarian women and the unemployed', who do not stand for their own fates alone.<sup>10</sup> The artist's aim was rather to typify, to seek symbols,<sup>11</sup> to establish on the basis of the 'individual' the 'truths and laws that apply to the whole'.<sup>12</sup> According to Körner, Derkovits had 'no models who spontaneously presented themselves', but rather 'repeating types', which he shaped 'according to their social role'.<sup>13</sup> We feel, however, that the 'individual' can nevertheless be found in the works from his last period. One senses the hesitating uncertainty of the first glance in his mature paintings, the fruits of multiple compositional variations. Péter Molnos argued that 'one of the inimitable virtues of Derkovits's work is inspirational



**LENGYEL LAJOS**

Fig. 15.3. Lajos Lengyel, *Still Life with Fish* (*Halás csendélet*, 1931). Reproduced in Lajos Kassák (ed.), *From Our Life. The First Photo Book of Munka* (*A mi életünkéből. A Munka első fotókönyve*) (Budapest: Munka Folyóirat, 1932), Figure 38. Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no.: KM-2979. © Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, 2018.

uncertainty, the productive confusion of interpretation'.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, Derkovits's paintings are photographic, or more precisely, they are composite snapshots compiled from mosaic fragments of reality through the use of montage. Derkovits created a spectacle that appears genuine, yet the moment depicted is typified by subordination to its own symbolic system. One of the most striking manifestations of the painter's revised perspective is his lower point of view. In the 1920s, he still depicted the maelstrom of Budapest from some distance above,<sup>15</sup> whereas in 1930, he paced the city's streets and placed the paintings' perspective at eye level, forming compositions from the experiences of his cultural, anthropological meanderings.<sup>16</sup> The characters lined up in his earlier paintings as reference points in the maelstrom of the street became the permanent personnel of Derkovits's symbolic microcosm. They can be seen as the main actors of their own stories in compositions created as part of a socially-committed painting project. The characters typifying the middle class and proletariat come to life in close-up before appearing again, broken into pieces in montages projected onto a plane. However, there is a fundamental difference between Derkovits's photographic way of seeing and the reality segment inherited from the camera's objectivity. 'By virtue of its nature, the photograph maintains a close relationship with constantly changing reality,' wrote the Hungarian photography theorist Iván Hevesy in 1934, 'and thus finds it difficult to condense that relationship into figurative meaning'.<sup>17</sup> In Hevesy's opinion, photography 'must be content with the picture-like statement and recording of signs and phenomena', and could only express openly 'social content by emphasizing certain motifs in the picture'.<sup>18</sup> The photographer has no opportunity to condense snapshots dramatically, to transform them into composites. Hevesy recognised that the photographer had two options: to record reality by following the whirl of events, or to give up the appearance of spontaneity in favour of emphasising the message of the symbolically-composed photos.

When systematically comparing Derkovits's art to contemporary photography, it is worth starting with the works that immortalised the most important moments in his socially committed turn: the drawings and paintings of the great Budapest workers' demonstration of 1930. The protest against general poverty ended in a clash between the authorities and demonstrators; during the scuffles, many were injured and one worker died. The gendarmerie's violent charge left a strong impression on the history of the Budapest workers' movement. Derkovits's works are reportages in which mental images are developed into a montage.<sup>19</sup> None of the well-known photographs of that day's events contain such dramatic force as Derkovits's paintings.<sup>20</sup> The painter's point of view is much closer than that of the reporters: the pictures memorialising the horrors come alive on his paper with photographic focus, while he stands at the epicentre of events. In *For Bread (Kenyérért)*, a mercilessly-verist depiction of a victim of oppression, the snapshot quality combines perfectly with forceful symbolic content.<sup>21</sup> The picture is a memorial to a constructed moment. It is as if we, fleeing the chaos of the clash between protestors and gendarmerie, see the unforgettable tragedy through a pair of eyes looking at the ground. At the same time, the artist renders this as timeless, completing it with the static figure of a soldier representing oppression, and a loaf of bread signifying the reasons for the riot.

It would be difficult to find similar motifs and ideals in Derkovits's paintings and 1930s Hungarian press photos. A brief survey of the illustrated press, which primarily served the purpose of entertainment, reveals that the number of pictures on social themes is insignificant. According to Béla Albertini, Hungarian illustrated magazines covered topics 'from American actresses, shapely legs, and charming viscounts, to a *völkisch*-romantic image of Hungary, to popularising technical innovations, sport and fashion'.<sup>22</sup> Pictures of working-class daily life captioned by the photo-reporter only rarely transcended the level of illustration. When this did happen, it was in the service of left- or right-wing political propaganda. In 1930, the *Nemzeti Magazin (National Magazine)*, a supplier of conservative propaganda to the Horthy regime, published photos of a cartman snoozing on the street and an American construction worker smoking under the caption 'sweet idleness' (*dolce far niente*), even though it was obvious that the workers were not enjoying a rest during the economic crisis, but waiting for day-labourer jobs.<sup>23</sup> The prime example of social photography being subordinated to left-wing propaganda is the prodigious output of

photo-reporter Árpád Szélpál, published every week in the social democratic daily paper *Népszava* (*People's Voice*) from 1929 to 1939. Szélpál sought his subject matter with a social sensitivity resembling Derkovits's, however, unlike the painter, he did not intend to make symbolic use of his subjects. He documented acute problems: poverty, exploitation, and social injustice. His pictures accompanied suitably raw and acerbic reports in the opposition dailies, and complemented the emphatic nature of the texts with their visual shock impact.<sup>24</sup> Szélpál's true ability lay in his capacity to perceive destitution almost everywhere; his approach was therefore opposite to Derkovits's. There is a striking difference in their approaches to the subject of disabled war veterans, for example. Much like in the paintings of Berlin by George Grosz and Otto Dix, the streets of Budapest were full, even in the 1920s, of crippled, blind, and amputee veteran soldiers. In his 1930 etching *The Unknown Soldier* (*Ismeretlen katona*), Derkovits placed the exposed veteran at the centre of a complex symbolic system.<sup>25</sup> The blind newspaper-seller stands on Heroes' Square in Budapest, where governor Horthy had unveiled a monument to First World War victims the same year. This 'heroes' memorial stone' then became the site of regular, pompous state commemorations that naturally excluded the suffering, destitute survivors. By contrast, Szélpál published portraits of invalids and an anti-militarist propaganda report in a photo-report on 1 November 1930, the day of the dead, entitled 'Living Corpses'.<sup>26</sup> In a later interview, Szélpál emphasised that 'the camera filled exactly the same mission in my hands as the pen'. In other words, he regarded photography as a tool of journalism, just like the left-wing photo-reporters who worked for the Weimar-era German *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*: 'I photographed reality, which is not a "model", but "material"', noted Szélpál.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of subject choice, there is a connection between one of Derkovits's paintings and Szélpál's report on the melon season by the Danube banks.<sup>28</sup> Greengrocers at the central market hall in Pest would throw out the leftover melons at closing time; for many unemployed, this would be their only daily bite to eat. They ate the melons on the riverbank, throwing the skins into the water. In his report, Szélpál presents the melons as the most wretched fodder. Yet Derkovits and his wife had often visited the riverbank when they were unemployed, and their experiences form the basis of *Melon Eater* (*Dinnyevő*).<sup>29</sup> In Körner's analysis, the painting was the 'low point of degradation', a key work in Derkovits's plan that took shape in 1932 to contrast 'humiliated destitution' with 'humanity bourgeoning through work'.<sup>30</sup> The emaciated worker on the steps became a topos of Hungarian socio-photography, appearing in countless pictures. A photograph by Sándor Gönci-Frühof with a similar composition appeared in the first Hungarian socio-photography album mentioned earlier, *From Our Life*. Gönci-Frühof asked in one of his theoretical texts why it was the urban unemployed who were most frequently portrayed and elevated to an iconic level among socio-photography circles.<sup>31</sup> The urban destitute, beggar, or navy had already lost his pride, wrote Gönci-Frühof, and was thus easy to photograph in his everyday life, since his misery was already publicly visible on the streets. By contrast, slum dwellers were mistrustful. Fearful of official organisations and repeated evictions, they chased away any photographer attempting to document their lives. It is no coincidence that we only know of these settlements' micro-worlds through pictures taken by photo-reporters who accompanied the police during official raids.

Since Derkovits the painter had declared loyalty to the proletariat rather than the middle class, he also often ended up at the other end of the reporter's lens. The best-known portrait of Derkovits was taken by photo-reporter Károly Escher for a 1931 interview (Fig. 15.4). The reason for the interview was not an exhibition or a demonstration, but because the painter and his wife had recently been evicted for accumulated rent arrears.<sup>32</sup> The photograph exemplifies our assertion well, since the photographer took his portrait of the starving painter, turning him into a popular subject for the gutter press, with exactly the same curiosity with which he shot his other photo-reports from around the same time. One of these reports presented the middle-class readers of the *Pesti Napló* (*Pest Journal*) weekend illustrated supplement with the faces of homeless night-shelter dwellers in Budapest.<sup>33</sup> Visiting eviction sites provided Escher with a number of outstanding subjects. One series on the tragedy of an unemployed family living in the Mária Valéria colony also



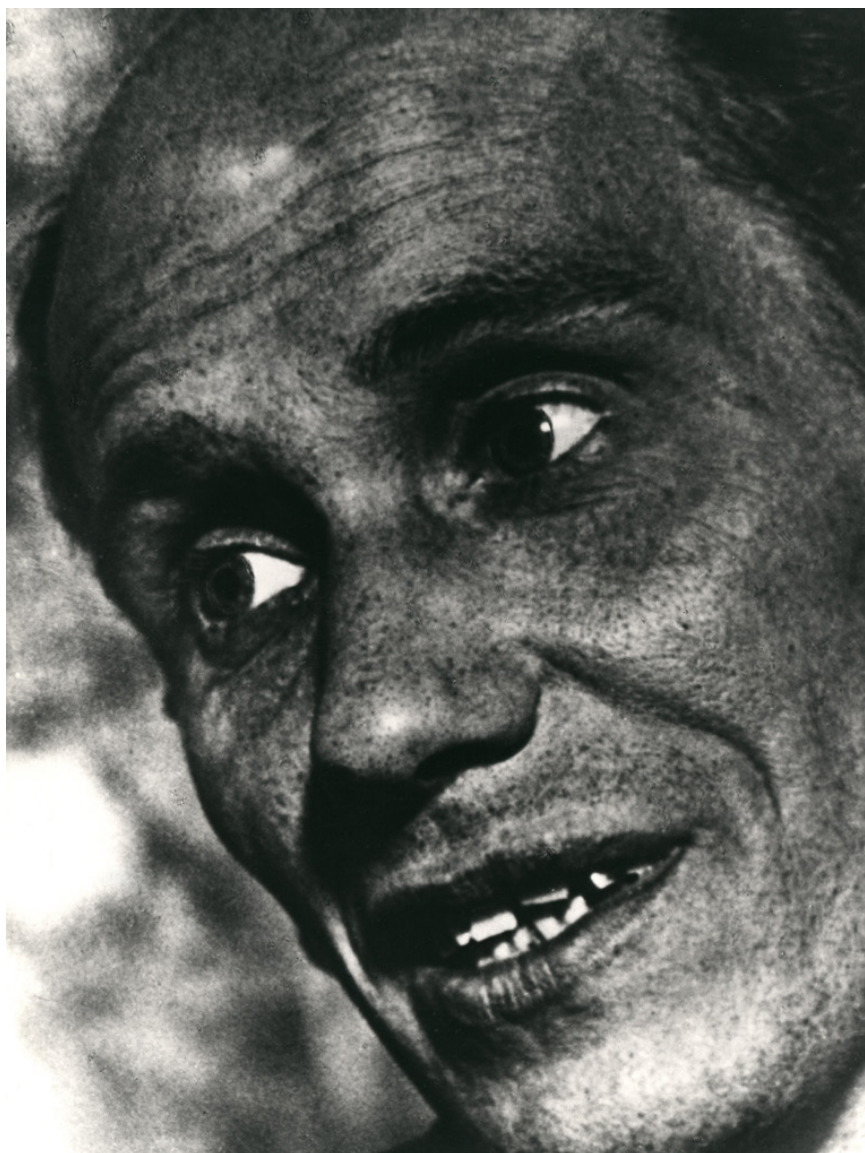


Fig. 15.4. Károly Escher, *Gyula Derkovits* (1931). Silver gelatine print, 18 x 24.1 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét, inv. no.: 2004.7756. © Hungarian Foundation of Photography, 2018.

documented the direct precursors to their state of affairs; his photograph mirrors their resignation and hopelessness.<sup>34</sup> The photographer Escher did not take a portrait of Derkovits as an artist, but degraded him into an element of sociological measurement. He could not have done any differently: Derkovits was accompanied by this time of his life by the public image of a 'self-aware defiant worker' with an 'arrogant aloofness' who rejected all offers of help out of 'pathological suspicion'.<sup>35</sup> It is well-known today that this became some sort of role for Derkovits, who was 'deliberately destitute so that his life and art would become one'.<sup>36</sup> His asceticism was largely self-imposed, much like Franz Kafka's starving artist in *A Hunger Artist* (*Ein Hungerkünstler*).<sup>37</sup> At the allegorical climax of Kafka's short story, a new spectacle appears in the dead artist's cage: a young panther surrounded by a throng of viewers, even though they can 'barely stand his gaze'. In 1934, at the lowest point of his destitution, Derkovits painted a self-portrait that was later destroyed, the inspiration for which could just have been Kafka's piece. According to a contemporary description of the painting, it depicts 'a tiger greedily and happily guzzling a piece of meat. Before the tiger's cage stands the painter, we see his pale face, his burning eyes mesmerised, jealously eyeing the meat'.<sup>38</sup>

Of all the 1930s Hungarian photo-reporters, only Károly Escher stands out today for his social sensitivity and unique way of seeing. Although Éva Körner also emphasises the similarity between Escher's photography and Derkovits's painting, we must admit that, in retrospect, we are somewhat irritated.<sup>39</sup> Escher is best known today as a socio-photographer, yet this is based on a distorted, selective presentation of his work, typical of photo history produced in the

state-Socialist era. First and foremost, it was Ernő Mihályfi, who had worked with Escher for the largest bourgeois newspaper publishers during the interwar years, who then tried (in part also to legitimise his own work) to establish Escher's photo-reporting as socially committed, declaring him to be a 'revolutionary without wanting to be one, and without knowing that he was one'.<sup>40</sup> Escher's most dramatic, socially-sensitive pictures were not printed in the 1930s, since *Pesti Napló* only published pictures of workers in entertaining montages. Although Escher was interested in social themes, we still cannot unambiguously call him a socio-photographer. In Iván Hevesy's definition, socio-photography is 'the photographic expression of the life, figures and faces of the peasant and proletarian, the rural and urban workers'.<sup>41</sup> Depiction of these themes, he continues, 'only qualifies as socio-photography when the pictures captivatingly manifest the photographer's solidarity and spiritual identification with the people he depicts, their feelings and fates'.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, Derkovits and Escher's pictures do complement one another well. At the end of the 1920s, both had discovered the compositional possibilities in the rhythmic movements of workers.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Escher's famous portrait *Banker at the Baths* (*Bankigazgató fürdik*) is a relative of the full-bodied, grand-bourgeois that Derkovits often pictured from 1930 to 1931 either in comic or dramatic contexts.<sup>44</sup> Throughout the 1930s, Escher's photo-reportages on the Horthy regime's 'neo-Baroque' celebrations frequently portrayed the same figures as Derkovits's satirically-inspired series of drawings: from uniformed gendarmes, marching nuns and fat capitalists, to conservative functionaries strutting in traditional Hungarian dress.<sup>45</sup> Even if Escher's pictures are quite remote from the disillusioned Derkovits's biting satire, their gentle humour was driven by similar impulses. Although Escher did not have the classic formal techniques of caricature at his disposal, his unexpected juxtapositions and choice of perspective—perfectly exemplified by his well-known 1937 photograph *Sitting on the Fence* (*Várakozási állásponton*)—nevertheless achieved the desired impact.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, like Derkovits, Escher was struck with empathy and lyricism by the sight of a female beggar camped out on the street with her children.<sup>47</sup> But Escher was not political; he only showed, and in this sense, he was not an ally in Derkovits's analytic, value-assigning social art.

By contrast, the activities between 1930 and 1932 of the Munka Circle of photographers offer a salient analogy to Derkovits's paintings, both in terms of concept and form.<sup>48</sup> The Munka Circle was formed around the independent left-wing journal *Munka* published by the avant-garde poet and writer Lajos Kassák from the late 1920s on. Their photographic work enjoyed great publicity even when compared to other contemporary photographers who also systematically tackled social themes in the service of the new spirit of photography that originated at the Bauhaus.<sup>49</sup> Körner wrote that Derkovits was captivated by 'characters afflicted with depression, hunger and problems', yet 'he was drawn to his subjects by some restless will within'.<sup>50</sup> It is precisely this tendency that we also recognise in the Munka Circle's socio-photography. They were not satisfied with presenting poverty merely as a tool of political propaganda, but just like Derkovits, set about creating symbols.<sup>51</sup> In Lajos Kassák's words, 'they were not pursuing atmospheric pictures with their cameras, but striving for conscious composition and solutions to formative tasks'.<sup>52</sup> One of the most important theorists of the movement, Lajos Gró, wrote in his first manifesto that a workers' photographer 'must record the phenomena of everyday life from a Socialist point of view' so that these photos would become 'the expression of a new human vision', 'tools of class war', and 'historical documents of the workers' movement'.<sup>53</sup> In a text introducing the Munka Circle's third exhibition, Gró later wrote that the 'aim of workers' photography is to uncover some deeper truth and increase the power of the proletariat'.<sup>54</sup> The May 1932 photo album *From Our Life* was a lionised montage of the working class and 'the worker', drawing on aspects of sociography, avant-garde formal techniques and New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). The album registered symptoms of the economic crisis at the same time as presenting possible ways out, aiming to 'encourage the viewer towards their own class consciousness and strength ... and help the reader to "see"'.<sup>55</sup> A duality of poverty / oppression and liberation through work defines the sociographic montage of pictures that speak for themselves even without titles or commentary. In his introduction to the album, Lajos Kassák situated photographic technique, the most fitting





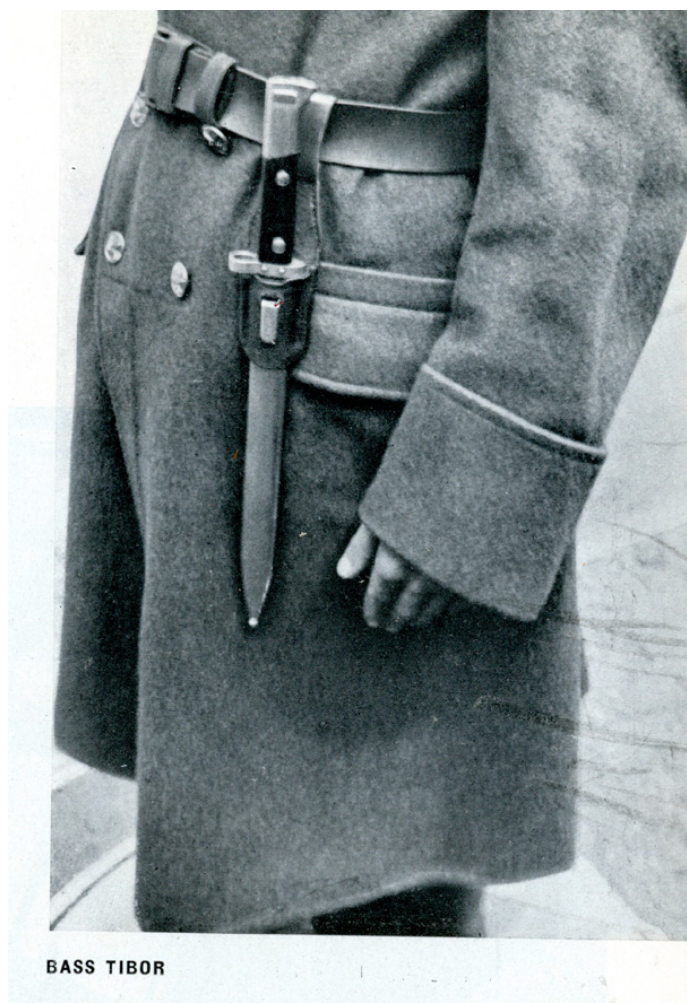
Fig. 15.5. Gyula Derkovits, *The Hungry in Winter* (*Éhesek télen*, 1930). Oil, tempera and silver dust on canvas, 76 x 64 cm. Gallery of Szombathely, inv. no.: K. 76.57. © Gallery of Szombathely, 2018.

representative of the 'new civilisatory era', above 'individualist' painting. According to Kassák, photography as a tool was much better suited to documenting an era striving for 'collectivity and strict constructivity'.<sup>56</sup> Yet Kassák also emphasised that the composition resulting from the creative process not only documents, it also analyses and characterises; in other words, Kassák and Derkovits used an identical scheme to think through their worlds, which were identical, too, since they were based on shared class belonging. The photo-montage quality comes across most strongly in Derkovits's 1930 painting *The Hungry in Winter* (*Éhesek télen*), certain details and reality elements of which correspond to photographs in *From Our Life* (Fig. 15.5).

The proletarian mother protecting her child also appears in many photographs, while Tibor Bass's photograph *Torso of a Soldier* seizes the uniformed figure from almost exactly the same perspective, and in the same configuration: faceless, with only the lower quarters of the body depicted (Fig. 15.6). In the photos included in *From Our Life*, the Munka Circle's symbolic vision is perhaps best exemplified when representatives of oppression are being portrayed. The cavalry in Lajos Lengyel's photo *Violence* (*Erőszak*) right on the first plate, or the frequently-captured silhouette of nuns (also one of Derkovits's frequent motifs) are cases in point, and while these are subjects Escher typically addressed as well, the context, motivation, and eventually the choice of viewpoint strengthen the critique in the former cases. The mother figure, a desired ideal exalted as the Madonna, was a frequently-recurring topos both in socio-photography



Fig. 15.6. Tibor Bass, *Torso of a Soldier* (*Katonatorzó*, 1931). Reproduced in Lajos Kassák (ed.), *From Our Life. The First Photo Book of Munka* (*A mi életünkéből. A Munka első fotókönyve*) (Budapest: Munka Folyóirat, 1932), Figure 32. Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no.: KM-2979. © Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, 2018.



BASS TIBOR

and in Derkovits's last period. We know the 'proletarian' Madonna from Károly Escher, and the host of picturesque 'village' Madonnas, but the Munka Circle's 'Angyalföld' (a working-class district in Budapest) Madonna also serves as an outstanding example.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, countless thematic and concrete formal parallels can be found between Derkovits's last great project, a lionised, monumental depiction of work and the worker, and pieces by the Munka Circle as well as socially-sensitive modern Hungarian photographers. The depictions of the hopelessness of poverty and urban destitution in *From Our Life* are defeated by proletarian labourers at work. Derkovits's *Bridge Builders* (*Hídépítők*) and Sándor Gönci-Frühof's *Glazier* (*Üvegező*) are notable analogies, but figures of construction workers, day labourers, quayside workers, and coal-carriers span both *From Our Life* and Derkovits's entire life work.<sup>58</sup> The figure of the proletarian is elevated into a timeless symbol: the composition of *Danube Sand Carriers* (*Dunai homokszállítók*), the apotheosis of Derkovits's depiction of workers, finds a direct formal and ideological analogy in the Munka Circle's socio-photography.<sup>59</sup>

Departing from propositions raised by Éva Körner, we have traced a number of compositional and conceptual synapses in our exploration of the hypothetical connection between Derkovits and photography. Finally, we posit the possibility of his life 'fading in' into that of another well-known artist, one who has not yet been mentioned. André Kertész was born the same year (1894) as Derkovits and, like the painter, he volunteered as a young man to fight in the First World War. Like Derkovits, he soon left the war following a serious arm injury that would impact his entire life and impede his creative work, and he too pursued his (photographic) art almost as a deflection mechanism. However, their lives parted ways in the first half of the 1920s. Both left Budapest: Derkovits went to Vienna for a short time, where he had several successful exhibitions, before returning to Budapest. Kertész travelled further and built his great international reputation in Paris. Kertész's path led him to the Pantheon of photographers, while Derkovits ended up

as a ‘hunger artist’. Kertész’s world existed very far away from Derkovits’s. This was also even the case when both men documented a world they found alien: the circus.<sup>60</sup> Derkovits immediately identified with his subjects, and through incorporating a self-portrait, himself becomes a member of the circus troupe, while Kertész views the audience from far away beyond the fence. The latter uses the crowd to create a distance between himself and the milieu which Derkovits inhabits and which brings to mind, even if voluntarily, the dual watchword of the ancient proletariat: *panem et circenses*.

*Translated by Gwen Jones*

- 1 Éva Körner, *Derkovits Gyula* (Budapest: Corvina, 1971).
- 2 This essay summarises the research conducted around the Hungarian National Gallery’s 2014 exhibition *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times*. It was originally published in Hungarian in the journal *Enigma* 20/74–75 (2013): pp. 60–73. The complete illustrations accompanying the essay as originally published are available in the online version of the journal at <http://real.mtak.hu/10421> (accessed 30 October 2019). Subsequent references to images in notes below refer to this issue of the journal and the corresponding URL.
- 3 Viktória Dombai, *Derkovits Gyuláné: Mi ketten: emlékezés Derkovits Gyulára* (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Alap, 1977), p. 54. First edition: Budapest, 1954.
- 4 Lenke Haulisch, ‘Pécsi József életműve’, *Fotóművészet* 13/3 (1970): pp. 46–7; Mihály Simon, *Összehasonlító magyar fotótörténet* (Kecskemét: Magyar Fotográfiai Múzeum, 2000), p. 143.
- 5 Lajos Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkben. A munka első fotókönyve* (Budapest: Munka Folyóirat, 1932).
- 6 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 175.
- 7 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 174.
- 8 Péter Molnos, *Derkovits. Szemben a világgal* (Budapest: Népszabadság Zrt, 2008), p. 54.
- 9 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 202. See also: Katalin Bakos, ‘An Œuvre with the Power to Engage’, in Katalin Bakos and András Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits. The Artist and His Times*, exhibition catalogue, Hungarian National Gallery (Budapest, 2014), pp. 26–47; Anna Kopócsy, ‘Inside and Outside. Gyula Derkovits’s Mature Period’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 76–87.
- 10 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 222.
- 11 György Várkonyi, ‘“Hagyomány” és “lelemény”. Archetipikus elemek Derkovits késői korszakának kompozíciós megoldásaiban’, *Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve* 40 (1995): pp. 185–210.
- 12 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, pp. 202–203.
- 13 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 280.
- 14 Molnos, *Derkovits*, p. 58.
- 15 For example: Gyula Derkovits, *Street (Ucca, 1927)*. Oil on canvas, 148 x 144 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table II.
- 16 Derkovits’s widow wrote that he often took long, exhausting walks. Viktória Dombai, *Derkovits Gyuláné: Mi ketten*, pp. 81–82.
- 17 Iván Hevesy, *A modern fotóművészet* (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1934), p. 63.
- 18 Hevesy, *A modern fotóművészet*, p. 63.
- 19 Gyula Derkovits, *Demonstration (Tüntetés II, 1930)*. Indian ink on paper, 18.4 x 24 cm. Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table VII.
- 20 See for example: ‘A véres szeptember 1.’, *Tolnai Világlapja* 32 (1930), p. 37. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table VIII.
- 21 Gyula Derkovits, *For Bread (Kenyerért I. (Terror), 1930)*. Tempera, paper, 46.5 x 53.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table IX.
- 22 Béla Albertini, *A magyar szociófotó története a kezdetektől a második világháború végéig* (Kecskemét: Magyar Fotográfiai Múzeum, 1997), p. 43.
- 23 *Nemzeti Magazin* (6 July 1930): p. 16.
- 24 Béla Albertini, *Szélpál Árpád, a szociófotós* (Kecskemét: Magyar Fotográfiai Múzeum, 2005).
- 25 Gyula Derkovits, *The Unknown Soldier (Ismeretlen katona, 1930)*. Etching, paper, 12.4 x 10 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See also: Katalin Bakos, ‘The Unknown Soldier’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 212–15.
- 26 Árpád Szélpál, ‘Élő halottak’, *Népszava* (1 November 1930): p. 10.
- 27 Béla Albertini, ‘Levél-interjú Szélpál Árpáddal’, *Fotóművészet* 26/2 (1983): p. 10.
- 28 Árpád Szélpál, ‘Dinnyeszüret a Dunaparton’, *Népszava* (2 August 1931): p. 10.
- 29 Gyula Derkovits, *Melon Eater (Dinnyevő, 1932)*. Tempera, paper, 69.9 x 50 cm. Private collection. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table XV.
- 30 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 196.
- 31 Sándor Gönci-Frühof, ‘Munkásfotó’, *Munka* 3/19 (October 1931): pp. 525–526.
- 32 Ernő Mihályfi, ‘Művész az uccán. Derkovits Gyula és a háziúr elmondja egy szomorú kilakoltatás történetét’, *Magyarország* (26 August 1931): p. 7.
- 33 Károly Escher, ‘Fejek a budapesti éjjeli menedékhelyen’, *Pesti Napló képes melléklete* (24 January 1932), pp. 6–7. Reprinted in: *Enigma* 74–75: p. 66.
- 34 ‘Gyermeknyomor a két világháború között. Escher Károly szociófotói’, *Budapesti Negyed* 1/:1–2 (2002): 45–67.
- 35 See multiple testimonies by Lajos Kassák, Aurél Bernáth, Ernő Mihályfi, and György Bálint in the ‘Derkovits-Reader’ of the journal *Enigma* 20/74–75 (2013).
- 36 Péter Molnos, ‘Success and Money in the Life of Gyula Derkovits’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 88–105.
- 37 Franz Kafka, *Ein Hungerkünstler. Vier Geschichten* (Berlin: Verlag Die Schmiede, 1924).
- 38 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 201.
- 39 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 175.
- 40 *Exhibition of the photographer Károly Escher, Hungarian National Gallery, 1965*. Introduction by Ernő Mihályfi. Budapest: Kossuth. On the Socialist-era analysis of Gyula Derkovits’s art, see: Éva Standeisky, ‘Appropriations. Derkovits in Times of Change’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 122–135.
- 41 Iván Hevesy, *A fényképezés nagy mesterei* (Budapest: Hatschek és Farkas, 1939), p. 126.
- 42 Hevesy, *A fényképezés nagy mesterei*, p. 126.
- 43 Gyula Derkovits, *Carrying Plank (Gerendacipelők, 1926)*. Indian ink, paper, 48.8 x 28.6 cm. Szombathely Gallery, Szombathely; Károly Escher, *Migrating Builders (Kubikusok, 1930)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 39.4 x 28.5 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XIII–XIV.
- 44 Károly Escher, *Banker at the Baths (Bankigazgató fürdik, 1938)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 17.9 x 23.6 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. Inv. No.: 65.120; Gyula Derkovits, *Telephone (Telefon, 1931)*. Tempera, gold and silver paint, paper, 52.7 x 43.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. Inv. No.: 10.035. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XIX–XX. See also: Katalin Bakos, ‘The World of the Powerful’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 200–205.

45 Katalin Bakos, “Proletarian, how long will it remain this Way?!” in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 206–207.

46 Károly Escher, *Sitting on the Fence (Várakozási állásponton, 1937)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 17.8 x 13 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét.

47 Escher's photographs are reprinted in *Budapesti Negyed* (see note 37); Gyula Derkovits, *Trouble* (Gond, 1932). Tempera, paper, 96.8 x 72.3 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table XXII.

48 On the Munka Circle of socio-photographers, see: Béla Albertini, ‘The Munka Circle and Hungarian Social Photography’, in Jorge Ribalta (ed.), *The Worker Photography Movement 1926–1939: Essays and Documents* (Madrid: Museo Centro De Arte Reina Sofia, 2011), pp. 284–303.

49 The most important source for the theory and practice modern photography is László Moholy-Nagy's concept of ‘new vision’ (*neues Sehen*). See: László Moholy-Nagy, ‘A fényképezés megújulása’, *Munka* 1/2 (October 1928); pp. 45–7; Ferenc Haár, ‘A Munka fotókiállításához’, *Munka* 3/17 (February 1931): p. 470.

50 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 196.

51 Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, pp. 9–10.

52 Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, p. 7.

53 Lajos Gró, ‘A munkásfényképész’, *Munka* 2/14 (June 1930): p. 425.

54 Lajos Gró, ‘III-ik fotókiállításunk’, *Munka* 4/22 (February–March 1932): p. 623.

55 Gró, ‘III-ik fotókiállításunk’, p.623.

56 Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, p. 8.

57 Gyula Derkovits, *Anyá* (1934). Oil, silver paint, canvas, 64.5 x 56 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest; Sándor Gönci-Frühof, *Exasperated / People–Destinies 2 (Elgyötörve / Emberek-sorsok 2, 1930)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 13 x 18 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét; Gyula Ramháb, *Maternal Joy (Anyai boldogság, 1935)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 29.9 x 40 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XXV–XXVII.

58 Gyula Derkovits, *Bridge Builders (Hídépítők, 1932)*. Oil, silver paint, canvas, 119.2 x 82.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest; Sándor Gönci-Frühof, *Glazier (Úvegező, 1930)*, as reproduced in Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, Figure 7. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XXVIII–XXIX. Further examples of such subjects include: Gyula Derkovits, *Stevedores (Rakodómunkások (Zsákolók), 1932)*. Lino cut, paper, 15.3 x 9.2 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest; Lajos Lengyel, *Loading Coal (Szénbordók, 1932)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 12.9 x 17.6 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XXX–XXXI. See also: Anna Kopócsy, ‘The World of Labour’, in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 256–261.

59 Gyula Derkovits, *Danube Sand Carriers (Dunai homokszállítók, 1933)*. Oil, canvas, 148 x 142 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See also: György Várkonyi, ‘Sand-Carriers on the Danube’, in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 262–263.

60 Károly Tóth compares the two respective works: Gyula Derkovits's *Circus Artists (Artisták, 1933)* and André Kertész's *Peeking / In front of the Circus at Népliget (A népligeti cirkusz előtt / Leskelődők, 1920)*. See: Károly Tóth, “Yet suffering is also life”, in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 250–255.

# Modernism and the School of Arts and Crafts in Bratislava

IVA MOJŽIŠOVÁ

*Iva Mojžišová was a major Slovak art historian who was based at the Slovak Academy of Science between 1963 and 1997. Her essay charts Bratislava's School of Arts and Crafts (ŠUR) from its establishment in the early 1930s until its politically-impelled closure at the end of that decade. Contextualised with references to the history of artistic education and to such contemporaneous, like-minded institutions as Bauhaus, the study shows how the School of Arts and Crafts emerged primarily in response to economic needs and yet soon became a centre for artistic innovation. Mojžišová discusses the important artists who worked there and the range of media that was taught and researched, including interior design, typography, and metalwork. She examines the school's concern to modernise Slovak culture, its belief in the equal status of fine and applied art, and its principles of functionality and respect for the materials used. This text first appeared in the edited collection Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia – 20. storočie (The History of Slovak Fine Art: 20<sup>th</sup> Century, ed. Zora Rusinová) in 2000.<sup>1</sup> (JO)*

## Modernism and the School of Arts and Crafts in Bratislava

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

### Genesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Story of the School of Arts and Crafts**

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Modernisation and Modernity**

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Translated by Jonathan Owen*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Looking Forwards  
or Back? Shifting  
Perspectives  
in the Venice  
Biennale's  
Hungarian  
Exhibition: 1928  
and 1948

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## **Looking Forwards or Back? Shifting Perspectives in the Venice Biennale's Hungarian Exhibition: 1928 and 1948<sup>1</sup>**

From 1895 to 1948, it was self-evident that Hungary would take part in the Venice Biennale. During this period, the country too kept in step, more or less, with the artistic and conceptual changes that governed the Biennale, virtually the sole major international exhibition opportunity for Hungarian artists then and now. This is perhaps why, for the 124 years since the first participation, the question of the Hungarian Pavilion has remained at the centre of domestic art-scene debates.

Comparing nations has always been a facet of the Venice Biennale. In Hungary's case, this comparison took place on a variety of planes. In the early years, during the era of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Hungarian exhibitions were defined by cultural rivalry with the Austrians.<sup>2</sup> As cultural politicians came to comprehend the potential of the Biennale to shape the national image, the relevance of Hungarian participation and, with it, political interference in the selection process became greater. Hungary first took part in Venice independently from the Austrians in 1901. The separate Hungarian Pavilion, built in 1909, represented the apex of this process of separation and self-positioning. The Pavilion was remarkable not just for its size, patriotic decorations and building costs totalling two hundred thousand crowns (with which it remained the most expensive Giardini pavilion of the pre-First-World-War era), but also because it was erected twenty-five years earlier than the autonomous Austrian Pavilion that first opened in 1934.

After 1918, international recognition and the maintenance of a positive image abroad were of paramount importance for Hungarian political leaders. The Italian host's positive attitude towards Hungary and Hungarian art helped make the Biennale the major international forum to showcase Hungarian art. Italian-Hungarian political relations continued to fundamentally define Hungary's participation and Hungarian success in Italy in the interwar years. Nevertheless, the changes in Italian politics after the summer of 1943 (the overthrow of Benito Mussolini, the formation of the Salò counter-government, and finally the country turning against its former ally Germany) indicate that Hungarian political leaders frequently deluded themselves thinking that Hungary was anything more than just one player within broader Italian aspirations in Central Europe. In the light of the above, it is difficult to assess realistically the goings-on in the realm of art. Dismissing Italian enthusiasm for Hungarian art as mere political tool is just as one-sided and incorrect as an uncritical acceptance of their 'adoration'. In any case, the truth lies somewhere in the middle, between political interests and the appreciation of genuine artistic quality. To take but one example, the fact that Benito Mussolini awarded the first prize of the 1940 Biennale to Vilmos Aba-Novák's painting *The Village Festival (Lacikonyha)* neither detracts from the work's artistic merit, nor adds to it.

Undoubtedly, the 1909 Pavilion was the greatest sensation in the entire history of Hungarian participation. The building was devised by architect, sculptor, interior and industrial designer Géza Maróti, the most sought-after 'pavilion designer' of his age, who had planned countless Hungarian exhibition halls at various international exhibitions (Fig. 17.1). (These included the internationally-successful Pavilions at Turin in 1902 and Milan in 1906.)



Fig. 17.1.  
Hungarian Pavilion,  
Venice. Built in  
1909, architectural  
design by Géza  
Maróti. © Forteapan  
/ Frigyes Schoch.

The Hungarian Pavilion was the second to be built after the Belgian one in 1906; its early construction date and distinguished position in the vicinity of the Central Pavilion offer examples of how political relations were mapped onto the Giardini. Austrian-Hungarian rivalry notwithstanding, Italy also had close relations with Austria. Hungary and Italy struggled for similar goals—achieving national independence and ending Habsburg oppression—and thus Hungarian-Italian friendship was strengthened by sharing an ‘opponent’. The concrete outcomes of this alliance were often seen at the Biennale, with Italian public and private collectors purchasing Hungarian works, and the publication of exorbitantly positive reviews of Hungarian exhibitions.

Hungary’s political relations and geopolitical situation underwent many transformations until the early 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Although exhibiting artists and exhibition organisers altered over the years, nothing fundamentally changed as far as the general outcome and operational mechanisms were concerned. Indecision, conflicts of interest, late-stage flip-flopping, hasty preparations, and professional incompetence remained constant over the decades. Events were only successful when a good professional happened to be in charge. Although Hungary regularly took part in the Biennale, no standard procedures were in place: they participated sometimes with a curator, sometimes without; sometimes with an artistic director, sometimes without. Lacking any clear decision on who was responsible for selecting the materials, it seemed that Hungarian leaders were surprised each time an exhibition had to be organised. Only in a few instances was there any precise artistic or cultural policy concept concerning participation in Venice.

Hungarian exhibitions were, especially after the First World War, essentially determined by conflicts of interests between artists. The official leadership could have had the power to solve these conflicts, yet given the lack of a definite, comprehensive Biennale concept, no ‘good’ solutions were ever found. While a small number of works (more) in sync with contemporary trends somehow ended up on show, Hungary usually represented itself with retrospective selections and national-themed works: the countryside, portraits of the elite, and so on. Although Biennale organisers expected the inclusion of both most recent works and overviews of past achievements, Hungary tended to accomplish only the latter.

Following the 1926 Biennale, the art historian and liberal art critic Máriusz Rabinovszky summarised his impressions in *Nyugat (West)*, diagnosing the ills of the age in his article ‘The Stagnation of Artistic Life’:



Ignorance and a degree of cluelessness in artistic life are a global phenomenon ... Yet there are certain aggravating circumstances peculiar to Hungary I would like to address. *Our artists* do not form groups according to their inner artistic orientation; they have no shared platform as a group. The life-giving struggle of ideas is absent. The *audience* is disorganised and ignorant, largely capricious and thus reluctant to either acknowledge or dismiss. *Criticism* too generally functions without definite points of view. Acknowledgement is granted to everyone, and hardly anyone expresses themselves for or against this or that idea. Our *art trade* is insignificant, our exhibition halls function haphazardly or based on prestige. Our *authorities* engage in diplomacy without any concepts at all, driven instead by personal opinions.<sup>4</sup>

Rabinovszky regarded the lack of a struggle of ideas between the generations and particular camps as the greatest problem.

The problem underlying exhibitions organised both at home or abroad was that fine arts had actually ceased to be a public concern, as Rabinovszky asserted in his text. Whenever a Hungarian year in Venice was relatively successful, there was not necessarily a well-thought-out plan in the background, but rather an outstanding artist or theorist who had ‘accidentally’ landed in the directorial position. One such positive exception to the rule was the exhibition of 1928, conceived and organised by János Vaszary. Vaszary, himself an artist, was a pro-modern advocate of progressive artistic tendencies, a key figure in the Hungarian art world respected for his creative work and teaching activities. No wonder therefore that the most discussed exhibition of the interwar years was, in the domestic context, this ‘Vaszary Biennale’, one of the most successful and most modern Hungarian exhibitions of the pre-1948 period and, at the same time, the show most loudly criticised by the Hungarian authorities.<sup>5</sup>

### **János Vaszary and the Students (1928)**

It is possible that Vaszary was appointed to this role because, in 1924, the then Minister for Religion and Public Education, Count Kunó Klebelsberg, had spoken approvingly of his art. Klebelsberg was a defining figure of Hungarian cultural policy in the 1920s who, despite his essentially conservative outlook, advanced many progressive cultural development measures. In 1926, Vaszary had criticised the Hungarian display in Venice, and this may be why Klebelsberg granted him, a Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts lecturer acknowledged as the leader of free-thinking education, the opportunity to choose who should be exhibited and represent the country in the international realm.

It is worth mentioning here another article by Máriusz Rabinovszky, published in 1928, on the system of exhibition applications and judging.<sup>6</sup> For Rabinovszky, the greatest problem was that juries generally consisted of artists who could not possibly remain objective, leading to a lack of appropriately qualified, informed, and unbiased art critics or experts on the juries. He felt that a better solution would be:

to appoint a commissioner with full powers alongside a council of experts. This one individual would be responsible for all decisions, although of course only morally responsible. At the same time, he would take advice from a range of experts, artists, technicians and public figures. Yet this decision would alone belong to him, the appointed art expert, who is neither a practicing artist, nor someone bound by their official post, nor a layman. The advisory body would consist of representatives from the broadest range of artistic currents, who argue in favour of their selection to the unbiased expert. Thus, it would not be a majority that decides, but the better argument.<sup>7</sup>

Rabinovszky considered this ‘all-powerful commissioner system’ valid not only for the applications process, but also for the organisation of all publicly-funded domestic and international exhibitions, as well as state purchases. In the debates over applications and international exhibitions, he viewed the greatest problem as the lack of ‘shared taste, shared culture, common spirit and a shared worldview’ within the Hungarian scene.<sup>8</sup> Rabinovszky’s model was ahead of its time, and to this day, his proposition has only been applied in a very small number of cases. The position of the all-powerful art-expert commissioner did in fact take shape by the mid-1930s, but was



Fig. 17.2. János Vaszary, *Barges at Pirano (Bárkák Piranóban, 1928)*. Oil on canvas, 81 x 101 cm. Museum of Fine Arts / Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, inv. 58.178 T. © Museum of Fine Arts / Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2018

not complemented by an advisory body, and thus a series of one-sided, authoritarian decisions unfolded which would remain in place for decades.

Vaszary was granted full powers in 1928: he was chair of the exhibition committee, the artistic director and organiser of the show, as well as an exhibiting artist, but as such, did not quite qualify as 'objective' either. He preferred to exhibit works by his own students, most of whom had 'already moved beyond naturalist depiction and sought to connect with the new formal experiments of the time'.<sup>9</sup> In addition to works by his students and modernism-oriented painters and sculptors, Vaszary also selected fifteen paintings and fourteen watercolours and pastels of his own as a small individual show. The exhibition enjoyed great international success, receiving particularly high praise in the Italian daily papers who commended the show in its entirety and the new emerging artists.<sup>10</sup> None of the Hungarian artists who took part in the 1926 Biennale were re-invited by Vaszary in 1928. The latter exhibition featured a completely new selection, a completely different segment of Hungarian art in Venice: these were 'rougher' works showing new spatialities with looser brushwork, painted by more open-minded artists who had abandoned the attempt to imitate the world, striving instead for a more 'abstract' sort of vision.

Ugo Nebbia, a leading Italian art critic of the time, dedicated six pages to introducing and appraising the Hungarian artists in his book *The Sixteenth International Art Exhibition in Venice (La XVI Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Venezia)*.<sup>11</sup> Despite the decidedly-subjective reference to 'my Hungarian friends' with which Nebbia opened the piece, his text can be regarded as a valuable, critical document of the time. Nebbia too welcomed the exhibition's narrower focus on one group of 'lively avant-gardists' over a comprehensive attempt to give a full overview. Coordinated 'in the spirit of the new', the Hungarian exhibition was brave and unified, which Nebbia felt paralleled the spirit of the Biennale. He called Vaszary a 'trendsetter', a 'most forceful voice' whose influence defined the works by other Hungarian artists both spiritually and physically (given that the main wall of Hungarian Pavilion's central lounge only featured pictures by Vaszary) (Fig. 17.2). Nebbia identified Henri Matisse as a source of inspiration for Vaszary, whose painting was also influenced by his time in Paris (illuminated backgrounds, more relaxed brushwork, and enhanced expression),



yet he also declared him to be a great individual personality who was able to maintain a distance from Matisse. Vaszary's fiery colours stemmed, as it were, from the Hungarian's character and not exclusively from Parisian influence.<sup>12</sup> Nebbia emphasised that all the Hungarian artists had been influenced by Paris, but then swiftly moved to point out the distinctive, un-Parisian, 'Hungarian' character of some. At times, he contradicted himself by stating that the Hungarians were merely 'Paris-epigones', yet then again, that they also created their own style beyond Paris. Nebbia clearly regarded Vaszary as the most unique of all, able to reconcile 'sudden objectified visions and elements of reality' in his 'skilful robust brushwork', astonishing the viewer with the 'swiftness of his brushwork and the freshness of his colour and expression'.<sup>13</sup> With respect to Vaszary's students, Nebbia placed stronger emphasis on their pursuit of certain patterns. Vilmos Aba-Novák was a 'sensitive colourist'; József Egrý's works were imbued with Cubist expressivity but nevertheless distinctive; while Ödön Márffy followed the trail of Constructivism. He highlighted Károly Patkó's 'weighty nudes' and 'humble landscapes', emphasising the artist's rich colour palette throughout these different forms of depiction. Nebbia termed Károly Kernstok's art unclassifiable, praising his diverse modes of expression, weighty shapes and facture. Róbert Berény's 1928 painting *Woman Playing the Violoncello* (*Csellózó nő*) was awarded special praise (Fig. 17.3). Of the painters, Nebbia found Pál Molnár C.'s depictions and Jenő Medveczky's religious paintings the least convincing.



Fig. 17.3.  
Róbert Berény,  
*Woman Playing  
the Violoncello*  
(*Csellózó nő*, 1928).  
Oil on canvas,  
135 x 102 cm.  
Museum of Fine  
Arts / Hungarian  
National Gallery,  
Budapest,  
inv. 63.70 T.  
© Museum of Fine  
Arts / Hungarian  
National Gallery,  
Budapest.

He addressed works on paper (watercolours and pastels) separately, declaring the entire section animated and expressive. After examining the sculptural works, he turned to the applied arts section which he described as 'full of life', emphasising the 'popular Expressionism' and wit realised in the various tapestries and maiolicas.

The reaction from domestic anti-liberal academician circles to the compilation of 'new' Hungarian works at the 1928 Biennale was predictable. Oszkár Márffy, a conservative literary historian, expert on Italian-Hungarian cultural relations and respected university lecturer, only gently criticised Vaszary's exhibition, noting that although he had 'presented a prestigious collective series', 'this exhibition, while designed to be representative, omits countless outstanding values of our art'.<sup>14</sup> Far harsher criticism came from Nándor Gyöngyösi, editor of the *Képzőművészet* (*Fine Art*) journal (the arbiter of official artistic taste), in his letter to K. Róbert Kertész, one of Klebelsberg's closest men and head of the Art Department at the Ministry of Religion and Public Education. Kertész was, in other words, the highest-ranking cultural official at the time who was, until 1934, responsible for overseeing the Hungarian participation in Venice. Gyöngyösi was outraged that the Hungarian Pavilion featured exclusively the 'extremist, newest Hungarian art', and asked that the minister bring an immediate end to this one-sidedness.<sup>15</sup> In Gyöngyösi's view, only two smaller groups, the young Academy of Fine Arts students and the Pál Szinyei Merse Society, who represented a distinctly liberal, middle-class antidote to the art favoured by the state, were granted a larger platform at international exhibitions, even though they were the smallest in number. In other words, Hungarian art exhibitions abroad were the least representative of Hungarian art as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Led by himself and painter Imre Knopp, academician artists demanded that the National Arts Council of Hungary International Exhibitions Executive Committee undertake 'reforms' aimed at eliminating the 'one-sided composition of the jury'.<sup>17</sup>

It transpires from Knopp's letter, and the subsequent amendments to the original list of works submitted for the Biennale, that the academic conservatives wanted to change the contents of the exhibition until the very last minute. While it is possible that a few items were indeed not included as a result of their vehement protest and pressure, they failed to change the overall composition of the 1928 exhibition. It remains unclear whether it was the National Arts Council of Hungary or Vaszary who yielded to this pressure to modify the exhibition. Knopp wrote: 'I find it pertinent to mention that certain mistakes were made concerning the Venice exhibition; I only need mention that the Ministry had to implement certain corrective measures in Venice which, however, could no longer produce the requisite result'.<sup>18</sup> After the Biennale and the 1928 exhibition of Academy students at the Budapest Kunsthalle, attacks against Vaszary intensified. No voices of defence could make themselves heard, even if the views expressed were far from being ultramodern, like this opinion published in the daily *Pesti Napló* (*Pest Journal*): 'We must do away with the outmoded and obstinate belief that the artist can only become 'established' at a certain age, having traversed a bitter path of disappointments and blunders! The most certain promise for the art of the future is always the strong and dynamic talent of youth'.<sup>19</sup> Under constant attack, Klebelsberg and K. Róbert Kertész yielded to pressure, announcing that 'students and extremists' would not be included in large Hungarian exhibitions abroad.<sup>20</sup> The upshot was that János Vaszary was forced into retirement in 1932 for supporting his students who endorsed progressive art and cultural openness.<sup>21</sup>

For the purposes of comparison, it is worth examining which artists featured in other countries' pavilions at the time when Vaszary's selection was subjected to harsh criticism in Hungary. The German Pavilion held large, monographic retrospectives for the two greats of Expressionism, Franz Marc and Emil Nolde, as well as for Lovis Corinth. Also on show were representatives of Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter groups, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.<sup>22</sup> The French Pavilion dedicated a retrospective to Paul Gauguin alongside paintings by Henri Matisse and sculptures by Antoine Bourdelle. The Dutch Pavilion featured works by Piet Mondrian. The Italians organised a comprehensive exhibition of Ottocento art and dedicated a special exhibition space to the Futurists. *Der Cicerone's* critic singled out Hungary and Holland as joyful exceptions to the average that year: both placed 'young art at the forefront'

of their Pavilions. He regarded the Swiss, American, Romanian, Swedish, and Austrian Pavilions as the most underdeveloped.<sup>23</sup> The critic from the London-based *The Studio* was less enthusiastic about the Hungarian section. Acknowledging that the artists themselves were good, highlighting Kernstok and Vaszary in particular, he nevertheless noted with regret that in his opinion, all in all they were unable to break away from the French model, and as a result, their works did not truly express a Hungarian spirit.<sup>24</sup>

On this note, it is worth briefly turning to the dichotomy of the fundamental duality underlying the Venice Biennale as cultural phenomenon: it is a platform for both technical internationalism and cultural regionalism. Since its founding, the Biennale has pursued a shared (Western, later global) standard and, at the same time, aspired to offer a framework for the presentation of specific, distinct national characters and 'styles'. To this end, an *international* biennial exhibition of separate *national* participants was created—the only international mega-exhibition to preserve this structure to this date. The Venice Biennale therefore has represented a form of 'bridge' providing an opportunity to lift regional works into an international context, thus placing local artistic particularities in broader perspective. However, for over a hundred years, the duality of internationalism and national distinction has not always remained static, oscillating between contradiction and harmony. For example, Italian art was over-represented during the Biennales of the Fascist era, during which a clear differentiation between national arts was also an express aim. With the current dominance of thematic shows (Arsenale, Central Pavilion, external pavilions and the *eventi collaterali*, and so on), it is the international, global character of the Biennale that prevails. Italy's attitude towards the Biennale has also changed over the decades: while the 1895 Biennale aspired to emphasise and ameliorate the situation of Italian art, placing it in the international canon, the concept of today's organisers is, conversely, that Italian art should be presented on much smaller terrain in comparison to other countries.<sup>25</sup> Although the Biennale was 'international' in name at the time of its founding, this internationalism was, for a long time, only understood as referring to Western Europe and the United States, within which the 'European track' dominated: from 1895 to 1952, only European artists were awarded the Biennale prize. The presence of non-European artists only really gained strength after the Second World War, and continues to grow from year to year.

The 1928 Biennale still offered a survey in which the art of the past dominated, with a view, however, to retrieve modernity in the past. Meanwhile, Antonio Mariani and Benito Mussolini wanted to foreground the art of the 'new Italian future' both in the Giardini and across Italy.<sup>26</sup> The contradiction and struggle between the easy, viewer-friendly salon art of the past, and a combative, more opaque Futurist art also intensified at the Biennale. Vaszary himself reported on the Biennale as a whole, the various national exhibitions, and the opposition between academy and modern art:

When we walk through the glassy pavilions of the *Giardini Pubblici* [*sic*], ... calm, balanced academy forms are disrupted by the restless experiments of modern man, flowing around the foundation stone for a new art world. The neat rows of works have been unsettled. By raising a new question, the Venice Biennale has tried to surgically rejuvenate flabby, ageing, repetitive and self-regarding conservative art. They wanted to see a progressive, modern art.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Vaszary set out why the Biennale cannot possibly succeed in presenting only the most progressive art, despite all efforts. He located the problem in the enormous exhibition space which was impossible to fill every two years with exclusively modern, high-quality works. Thus the 'art of the last century' also had to be always invoked, next to which 'we are happy to welcome an emphasis on the modern as the indisputable force and urgent present of this art'. Next, Vaszary listed the more important exhibitions:

From the Academy students to Novocento and the Futurists, the Italian initiative and achievement is so absorbing that it can make its own individual dynamics felt, which is frequently different and independent from the methods and foundations of Europe ... The French pavilion was directed by Massan, the conservationist at the Luxemburg art gallery. It is unlikely he selected the pictures himself; these are hung in typical museum style where

everything is explained and nothing is emphasised. *The museum of modern painting ...* The British remain inside their own world of conservative taste ... The German pavilion, like the Hungarian, emphatically stresses progressivity. Painters were grouped according to school ... Emil Nolde, displayed with a collection of works, represents the most extreme painting, seeking strong impact with his exaggerated forms and dazzling, decorative colours ... Although they had authoritative, progressive works at their disposal, the Dutch preserved the impression of conservatism by way of the show's arrangement.

Vaszary then turned to the Belgians ('clearly bringing Naturalists who remind us of the French'), the Spanish ('as if they knew nothing of what sparks interest in painting today'), the Czechs ('who exhibited etchings reminiscent of Rembrandt, but otherwise had nothing to do with new art'), and the Russians ('the exhibition delivers an impression of isolation, and most of their attempts end in fatal error. Eruptions and slumps. Enormous, academician pictures of Soviet history with the victorious military staff and way-larger-than-life figures ... If we are looking for a booming tendency, the Russians do not seem to be able to provide it').

At the end of his article, Vaszary addressed the Hungarian exhibition (of works by him and his students), establishing that it is:

undoubtedly harmonious, since only the newest tendencies are represented, and thus it most thoroughly fulfils the Italian call. Compared to the Western nations in terms of its progressivity, we can firmly establish that its *progress is unified, it is fresh and direct and, above all, colourful*. The Hungarian Pavilion is easy to overview since it focussed on bringing together a varied material, the pieces of which nevertheless belong together. Not every pavilion succeeded in realising this intention.<sup>28</sup>

It is clear from Vaszary's report that he sought 'the progressive' everywhere, viewing an exhibition positively wherever he found it.

This first Biennale under Antonio Maraini was not a success, attracting a record low number of visitors (172, 841). Maraini and Mussolini made every effort to remove the Biennale away from regional Venetian city control, and achieved this by 1930.<sup>29</sup> Since it was now a state responsibility, it is no surprise that 'in a totalitarian state, it became a representative affair of the state rather than an art event', as Anna Bálványos has shown.<sup>30</sup> Mussolini wanted to expand the Biennale into a world-leading cultural and political event, continually adding new genres, and intending to attract the attention of every political and diplomatic leader whom he regarded as important and to whom the new Italy was to demonstrate its greatness.<sup>31</sup> Following an ostensibly-administrative reorganisation in 1930, political interference in the exhibition grew stronger. The official invitation for the 1930 Biennale requested Italian-inspired works from participants. The show was then sharply criticised in the international press for its pre-set theme, which most participants thought was guided by something other than artistic principles. Most national exhibitions could not (or did not want to) conform to the stipulations; exhibits thus became 'inconsistent and uneven'.<sup>32</sup> It was only the Hungarian Pavilion that fully complied with the programme. A key figure here was Tibor Gerevich, an outstanding art historian, internationally-renowned scholar of the Italian Renaissance and ambitious cultural organiser. He was director of the Hungarian Historical Institute in Rome from 1924, the first head of the 'Collegium Hungaricum'<sup>33</sup> and the Rome scholarship established by Klebelsberg in 1928, and the conceptual architect and international advocate of the circle which became known as the 'School of Rome'.<sup>34</sup> Due in part to his excellent contacts in Italy and strong negotiating skills, Gerevich was granted a decisive role in selecting Hungarian materials for the 1930 Biennale. He viewed the request for 'Italian-inspired art' as a favourable opportunity to present Hungarian fellows currently affiliated with the Rome institution.<sup>35</sup> The leader of the School of Rome was Vilmos Aba-Novák, whose work also dominated commissions for murals in public buildings during the interwar period. One can trace the gradual unfolding of Aba-Novák's artistic and Gerevich's theoretical repertoire in their Biennale involvement between 1930 and 1942, progressing together from attempts to rejuvenate artistic form to aspirations of directly representing the state.<sup>36</sup> The increasingly-strained political atmosphere in Hungary from 1938 onwards, the introduction of anti-Jewish laws and the emergence of the extreme right,



as well as Hungary's ever closer relations with Germany impacted little on Hungarian participation in Venice.<sup>37</sup> This was mostly due to Gerevich's determined anti-German stance. A number of progressive artists who had been most vilified by the extreme right were exhibited in Venice in 1940 and even in 1942, even if in significantly smaller numbers than 'the Romans'.

In these two years, ever fewer countries engaged in the Biennale; participation reached its lowest historical point in 1942, when only ten countries (Bulgaria, Denmark, Croatia, Hungary, Germany, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia, and two neutral states, Switzerland and Sweden) took part.<sup>38</sup> The Biennale organisers 'filled' the empty pavilions with Italian military art: separate pavilions were dedicated to works depicting the strength of the army, air forces and navy. In the middle of the war, the Biennale became a curious assortment of militant and pro-peace art.

Organisation of the next Biennale continued right up until the first bombings of Porto Marghera and Mestre in May 1944. This was followed by an official cancellation of the event, and in 1944 and 1946, no Venice Biennale took place at the Giardini Pubblici. When the Allies attacked Venice and its environs, the historical part of the city was left entirely intact, including the Giardini, the centre of the Biennale. This meant that, by and large, the Biennale could continue anew, almost without interruption or major reconstruction, after the Second World War. This was of course also facilitated by the Biennale's steadfast structure. As Jan Andreas May put it: 'Any ideology was able to use this stage and preserve, together with participating marionette states, the appearance of its public character, indeed its internationalism'.<sup>39</sup> For post-Fascist Italy, the 1948 Biennale was of exceptional political and cultural importance, as the pre-eminent British art historian Douglas Cooper summarised it in *The Burlington Magazine*: this was the first truly large-scale event in Italy since the end of the Second World War, at which Europe's leading politicians could assemble together with the most prominent contemporary theorists, art historians, and artists.<sup>40</sup>

The twenty-fourth Venice Biennale opened its doors in 1948 with Giovanni Ponti as its new president, and Rodolfo Pallucchini, a well-travelled expert on the Venetian Renaissance and modern art, one of the greatest art historians of the twentieth century, as its general secretary. Preparations began in 1947, initially within the pre-war structure. The main aim was to secure the highest possible number of participants. Since most countries were struggling with social and economic problems after the war, many pavilions either remained empty in 1948, or were furnished by the Italians with various temporary exhibitions: the Yugoslav Pavilion housed a retrospective show of Oskar Kokoschka's works, and a large selection from Peggy Guggenheim's private American collection was shown in the Greek Pavilion, which turned out to be the greatest sensation of that year.

After 1948, addressing the Biennale's future, its long-term transformation, structural modernisation, and the conceptualisation of its new artistic profile became due. The new geopolitical alignment brought about by the Iron Curtain confronted the Biennale as an institution with a string of new situations and challenges, in terms of national pavilions and national participation.

### **Three painters and one sculptor:**

#### **József Egrý, Ödön Márffy, István Szőnyi, and Béni Ferenczy (1948)**

After the Second World War, Hungary belonged to the Soviet-occupied zone. For the three years between 1945 and 1948, it remained undecided whether the country would seize the post-war historical turn and restart as a democratic state or turn into a Soviet-style one-party dictatorship. After the democratic elections of 1945, the Hungarian Communist Party rapidly demolished the multi-party system and gradually eliminated its middle-class opposition. By 1948 to 1949, a total Communist dictatorship was in place under Mátyás Rákosi, who remained in power until the outbreak of the 1956 revolution.

Despite the material difficulties, the cultural administration of the provisionally-coalition-based state did everything to secure participation at the first post-war Biennale. Much like it had done after losing the First World War, the country attempted to use art to improve and augment its image abroad. After many years of disuse, the Hungarian Pavilion had fallen into such poor condition that the standard annual maintenance was not enough to restore it for exhibition

purposes. Since the cultural budget had no separate funds for reconstruction and renovation, Hungary used the Romanian pavilion for the 1948 exhibition, as Romania stayed away that year.

That year's Hungarian exhibition took an explicitly-art-historical approach. Almost every show that year featured a retrospective 'rehabilitation' of *fin-de-siècle* modernism, and the modern and avant-garde tendencies of the interwar years and early 1940s.<sup>41</sup> Among others, the Central Pavilion featured the masters of French Impressionism, a retrospective of Paul Klee, as well as larger, comprehensive exhibitions which included Pablo Picasso's works or artists who had been banned for their 'degenerate art' in Nazi Germany. Even prior to the founding of the state of Israel, Israeli artists were exhibited in the Venice Pavilion for the first time. The French Pavilion showed works by Marc Chagall and Georges Braque, the Austrian Pavilion exhibited Fritz Wotrube and Egon Schiele, while the British Pavilion featured works by Henry Moore and William Turner. The 1948 Biennale attracted over two hundred thousand visitors, representing a great success for Italy after the low numbers in 1940 and 1942, and its popularity was largely due to the European avant-garde's entry to Venice.<sup>42</sup>

Since the various official structures of the pre-war art world and international exhibition planning had fallen apart, the 1948 Hungarian Pavilion was realised as the effort of new participants. Gerevich was not reappointed to an organisational role in the new system. He had lost his decisive official role in shaping art policy, and it was clear that the new culture department would seek a replacement Biennale commissioner. Gerevich had also been forced to leave the Collegium Hungaricum in Rome before it completely ceased operations in the 1950s. After 1945, he only retained his university professorship in Budapest, a post he held until his death in 1954. His earlier anti-German sentiment somewhat exonerated him after the war.<sup>43</sup>

Just as the School of Rome stopped functioning after the war, the pro-modern Képzőművészet Új Társasága (New Society of Artists) also ceased its activities. Nor was any attempt made to relaunch the conservative Képzőművészeti Társulat (Fine Arts Association). Meanwhile, it was out of the question for international exhibitions of Hungarian art to include works by young artists from the new emerging groups, in particular the Európai Iskola (European School), formed with great anticipation in 1945 to emulate modern European tendencies and become their Hungarian parallel, or the group that splintered from them in 1946, the Elvont Művészek Csoportja (Group of Abstract Artists).<sup>44</sup> The 1948 Biennale in fact took place in something of a vacuum without any distinct exhibition concept. It is therefore no surprise that most works shown in Venice originated from museum or private collections.

In 1946, the Hungarian state liquidated its consulates in Venice, Trieste, and Fiume (now Rijeka). Gyula Ortutay, the new minister for religion and public education, appointed the linguist and Italy expert Pál Ruzicska to oversee the selection of Hungarian works for the 1948 Biennale; Ruzicska had left Hungary in 1945 before the Soviet occupation and settled in Milan, where he was appointed as director of the Hungarian Institute. The result of Ruzicska's appointment was three quasi-solo exhibitions clearly intended as retrospective shows.<sup>45</sup> Three painters from the older generation were selected in acknowledgement of their respective bodies of work: József Egry (aged sixty-five), Ödön Márffy (seventy), and István Szőnyi (fifty-four) (Fig. 17.4). Moreover, all exhibited artists had recently been awarded various official state prizes.

The 1948 Hungarian exhibition in Venice virtually echoed the 1934 show, which also included all three artists. Based on the list of these and other participants, it is fair to assume that the main aim was to grant, as a form of 'compensation', exhibition opportunity at a large international event to those who had been excluded from, or marginalised in, other surveys of the 1930s, and particularly those in 1940 and 1942. If that year's selection had a cultural, political, or representational ambition at all, it was to demonstrate in the international arena that Hungary was now a different country, one that guaranteed a prominent place to artists at whom the 'previous' Hungary balked. National-conservative idioms were explicitly avoided, as were political, historical, or biblically-themed pictures; instead, the halls were filled with 'neutral' landscapes, still lifes, portraits, and nudes. After the politicised show of 1942, Hungary now exhibited humanistic conversation pieces, and instead of political content and historical references, the focus was on pure pictorial issues.



Fig. 17.4. István Szónyi, *My Mother* (*Anyám*, 1930). Oil on fibreboard, 100 x 55 cm. Museum of Fine Arts / Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, inv. FK 2202. © Museum of Fine Arts / Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

Interwar paintings by Egrý, Márffy, and Szőnyi were given individual halls, where sculptures and medallions by Béni Ferenczy were interspersed through the room.<sup>46</sup> Essentially, this was a 'best of' selection of works by the Képzőművészet Új Társasága and members of the 'Gresham circle', a band of oppositional artists and intellectuals who had regularly met at the Gresham coffee house in the 1920s. After 1945, the interwar 'Gresham' artists were appointed to leading roles, including teaching posts at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts and other significant positions in the arts. Szőnyi, for example, was nominated as president of the newly-formed Hungarian Arts Council. At the same time, Aba-Novák's frescoes in public buildings were overpainted after 1945, and he himself was dubbed, until the 1960s, the negative embodiment of the Horthy-era 'regime painter', while his former colleagues at the School of Rome 'adapted seamlessly to the new system's thematic and aesthetic principles', and went on securing opportunities to exhibit their works.<sup>47</sup>

The international press was broadly intrigued by the first post-war Venice Biennale, and this interest also extended to the Hungarian Pavilion. A critic in *Das Kunstwerk* described the exhibitions of smaller countries (specifically Belgium, Holland, Hungary, and the geographically-larger but geopolitically-'redrawn' Poland) as surprisingly superior, emphasising that they stood their ground not only in comparison to their earlier selves, but also according to international standards.<sup>48</sup> Max Eichenberger, the editor of the Swiss *Du Kulturelle Monatschrift*, highlighted the Hungarian and Polish use of an international formal language that came to replace their earlier emphasis on national character.<sup>49</sup> He declared that Ferenczy had transferred August Rodin and Antoine Bourdelle's sculptures from Paris to Budapest with considerable success, assimilating local specificity into his art and thus creating a unique formal world. Precisely the same 'successful transplant' also characterised Márffy's Paris-Budapest and Szőnyi's Rome-Budapest connections, both of which Eichenberger regarded as representing a harmonious combination of post-Impressionism and 'pre-Expressionism'. Although this statement was correct insofar as both had studied in these Western-European cities and were undoubtedly inspired by what they had seen and experienced there, it is nonetheless simplistic to speak of a mere 'transplantation' of Western elements. Márffy, Egrý, and Szőnyi's pictures not only moved beyond post-Impressionist landscape depiction and figuration towards geometric abstraction, but also surpassed the material in favour of individual spirituality. Their canvases addressed serious social problems as well: poverty, loneliness, the emptied-out individual and his disappointment in society. One constant factor in curating national pavilions is the need to connect to the country of origin and its contemporary problems; naturally this was accomplished somewhat differently in the post-war years than in today's globalised world.

How then were the Hungarian materials compiled to create a whole in 1948? The show can perhaps be best understood as an exploration of the relations between man and nature. Spectral waterside landscapes by the 'cosmic, transcendent' Egrý, and Szőnyi's 'intimate, humanistic' landscapes of the Zebegény region and genre paintings of peasant life were accompanied by Márffy's lakeside landscapes, still lifes, and portraits.<sup>50</sup> Despite the subject matter, the works transcended faithfulness to nature or the recording of mere impressions. Just like the self-portraits of his inner struggle, Egrý's landscapes are full of tension, drama, and vibrant colours, while Szőnyi's pictures radiate the bleakness of rural life, and Márffy's earlier decorative, colouristic style was replaced by a 'denser, more fixed, more rational' formal language.<sup>51</sup> Alongside the nature pictures, Béni Ferenczy's expressive figurines (mostly his nudes)—closed, solid yet dynamic in form—imparted man's true, plastic presence in the Hungarian Pavilion.

As a consequence of Hungary's Soviet-style Communist turn and the establishment of a one-party system in 1948 to 1949, many hopes for freedom and democracy were completely dashed by 1949.<sup>52</sup> After the 1948 show, Hungary's participation witnessed its greatest turn: in accordance with Soviet policy and under Soviet occupation, Hungary did not join the event between 1950 and 1956.<sup>53</sup> However, the country's absence did not bring about a total lack of discourse on the subject. On the contrary: with an intensity never seen before, discussions were conducted over the 'correctness' of partaking, and whether to retain or discard the Hungarian Pavilion.

From the enormous number of written documents that have survived, it becomes clear that the directors of the Venice Biennale took every opportunity to formally invite Hungary during its period of abstention, and instructed the country to maintain the upkeep of its Pavilion building.<sup>54</sup> From 1949 on, official discussions on the 'Biennale matter' involved three participants: the Foreign Office, the Institute of Cultural Relations (Kulturális Kapcsolatok Intézete, formed in 1949), and the Ministry of Public Education. Debates revolved around two fundamental questions: (1) what should happen to the Pavilion building (whether it should be restored to its original condition; whether the existing building should be rebuilt with Italian or Hungarian architects; whether it should be knocked down and replaced with a new building at a new location; or whether it should be 'handed over' to another nation); and (2) whether Hungary should contribute to future Venice Biennales. The Italian directors clearly prioritised swift repairs, since the sight of a partly ruined building was detrimental to the image of the Biennale itself. The Italians made direct contact with the Foreign Office and the Institute of Cultural Relations via the Hungarian Embassy in Rome, urging the Pavilion's rapid restoration and Hungary's continued cooperation. However, the Ministry of Public Education was directly responsible for the building's maintenance, and there was no clear position or decision taken on the Biennale until 1956. At times, the decision followed the non-participation policy of the Soviets and the other 'fraternal' countries'. At others, preparations were cancelled by decree from 'the highest levels' and without justification one month before the opening, even though the General Department of Fine Arts (Képzőművészeti Főosztály) had supported taking part (as was the case in 1952 and 1954), and a list of recommended artists had already been compiled, with specific works named.<sup>55</sup> The documents also illustrate other cases, when Hungary first confirmed its participation in writing to the Biennale directors (19 February 1952), but then withdrew one month later (22 March 1952), citing 'technical reasons'.<sup>56</sup> This long series of delays and 'prevarications' lasted until February 1956, until a change of heart from Mrs. Ernő Berda, then head of the General Department of Fine Arts. She had otherwise said on a number of occasions that 'for my part, I see no reason to concern ourselves with [the Hungarian Pavilion] building', yet this time she announced in favour of participation.<sup>57</sup> She justified her decision with the following:

Progressive artists in capitalist countries who seek realism [and not abstraction] would benefit from acquainting themselves with our best works. It should be noted that the reactionary cultural policy of the former system recognised the importance of regular participation in international exhibitions. Our prolonged absence might currently invite cultural political attacks both from our artists and the capitalist countries.<sup>58</sup>

This 'reasoning', and not least the Soviets' return to Venice in 1956, proved influential. Thereafter, the pace of change accelerated concerning both the fate of the building and (renewed) participation at the Biennale.

*Translated by Gwen Jones*

1 This text is a reworked version of two chapters of my doctoral thesis: Kinga Bódi, 'Hungarian Participation at the Venice Fine Arts Biennale 1895–1948' (PhD thesis, ELTE University, 2014), accessed 30 October 2019, <https://edit.elte.hu/xmlui/handle/10831/30842>

2 The Austro-Hungarian Empire (or Austria-Hungary), established in 1867, produced a dualist state confederation that was politically, economically, socially, ethnically, and culturally exceptionally complex. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the great European nation-states had already been formed, while the Austro-Hungarian monarchy still represented a multi-ethnic political formation in the region. In legal terms, the dualist system was a constitutional monarchy. Its two halves, the Austrian Empire and the Hungarian Kingdom, were connected by a shared ruler, and common foreign policy, military, and financial affairs. The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 undoubtedly increased the monarchy's international political and economic weight within Europe while, at the same time, it did not grant Hungary full independence. The monarchy (and within it Hungary) had to handle and solve an increasing number of political, economic, and social problems towards the end of

the nineteenth century, such as relaxation of the rigid social order and hierarchy, fresh government crises, and intensifying demands from national minorities. All the while the Hungarian government continued to regard culture as a crucial fertile soil to nurture a positive national image. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy finally came to an end with its defeat in the First World War in 1918. The 1920 Peace Treaty of Trianon redrew Hungary's borders and heralded the monarchy's final disintegration.

3 The successive forms of state were: the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (1867–1918); the First Hungarian Republic (1918–1919); Republic of Councils (1919); the Hungarian Kingdom, a constitutional monarchy under governor Miklós Horthy (1919–1945); the Hungarian Republic (1945–1948); and the Hungarian People's Republic, a Soviet-style one-party system under Mátyás Rákosi (1949–1956).

4 Máriusz Rabinovszky, 'Művészeti életünk pangásáról', *Nyugat* 19/11 (1926): pp. 1023–24.

5 On the role of Biennale Commissar János Vaszary see Emese Révész's outstanding publication on his years at the Academy of



- Fine Arts, and Katinka Borsányi's text on the 1928 Italian press coverage of the Hungarian show: Emese Révész, 'Csók István és Vaszary János a Képzőművészeti Főiskolán 1920–1932', in Szilvia Köves (ed.), *Reform, alternatív és progresszív műhelyiskolák 1896–1944* (Budapest: Magyar Iparművészeti Egyetem, 2003), pp. 11–26; Katinka Borsányi, 'L'arte ungerese nella stampa italiana alla Biennale di Venezia, 1928–1930', *Rivista di Studi Ungheresi* 8 (2009): pp. 141–153.
- 6 Mária Rabinovszky, 'A művészeti pályázatok problémájáról' *Nyugat* 21 (1928): pp. 631–633.
- 7 Rabinovszky, 'A művészeti pályázatok problémájáról', p. 633.
- 8 Rabinovszky, 'A művészeti pályázatok problémájáról', p. 633.
- 9 Emese Révész, "'Modern művészetet – az ifjúságért!' Vaszary János művészetpedagógiája", in Mariann Gergely and Edit Plesznivy (eds.), *Vaszary János* (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, 2007), p. 126.
- 10 For more detail on the Italian press coverage in daily papers, see: Borsányi, 'L'arte ungerese'.
- 11 Ugo Nebbia, *La XVI Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Venezia* (Milan and Rome: Alfieri, 1928), pp. 98–103.
- 12 International critiques later echoed this sort of explanation of the lively, intense, and animated colours in modern Hungarian painting with reference to ardent 'Hungarian blood and race'. In the introduction to the catalogue for the 1931 exhibition *Modern Hungarian Paintings* at the Silberman Galleries in New York, these exact same attributes and phrases are used to describe the art of Vaszary, Berény, Márffy, Czöbel, and Aba-Novák. See: Malcolm Vaughan, 'Modern Hungarian Paintings', *Parnassus* 8/3 (1931): p. 9. The exhibition was open from 1 to 19 December 1931.
- 13 Nebbia, *La XVI Esposizione*, p. 99.
- 14 Oszkár Márffy, 'A nemzetközi képzőművészeti kiállítás Velencében', *Képzőművészet* 2/12 (1928): p. 178.
- 15 Nándor Gyöngyösi, 'A külföldi kiállítások ügye 1928-ban. Nyílt levél Kertész K. Róbert államtitkárnak, mint a Képzőművészeti Tanács elnökéhez', *Képzőművészet* 2/12 (1928): pp. 145–148.
- 16 Nándor Gyöngyösi, 'A külföldi kiállítások ügye', *Képzőművészet* 2/10 (1928): pp. 115–118.
- 17 Imre Knopp, 'Az Országos Képzőművészeti Tanács Külföldi Kiállításokat rendező Bizottságának reformja', *Képzőművészet* 2/15 (1928): p. 239.
- 18 Knopp, 'Az Országos Képzőművészeti', p. 239.
- 19 Béla Iványi-Grünwald, 'A magyar művészet huszonegyedik órájában', *Pesti Napló* (11 November 1928): p. 33. Zoltán Farkas also expressed his faith in youth and objected to their exclusion from international exhibitions. See: Zoltán Farkas, 'Visszafelé megyünk', *Nyugat* 22/15 (1929): pp. 180–185.
- 20 Anonymous, 'Fordulat a külföldi kiállítások ügyében. A Kultuszminisztérium letiltotta a növendékeket és a szélsőségeket a külföldi kiállításokból', *Képzőművészet* 3/22 (1929): pp. 155–160. Reprinted in Révész, 'Csók István és Vaszary János', p. 13.
- 21 Emese Révész, 'Az iskola és a nyilvánosság', in Katalin Blaskóné Majkó and Annamária Szöke (eds.), *A Mintarajztanodától a Képzőművészeti Főiskoláig* (Budapest: Magyar Képzőművészeti Egyetem, 2002), p. 136.
- 22 Ursula Zeller (ed.), *Die deutschen Beiträge zur Biennale Venedig 1895–2007* (Stuttgart and Köln: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen and Dumont, 2007), p. 194.
- 23 Among the Dutch artists exhibited were Alfred Wiegmann, Jan Sluijters, Willem van Konyenburg, and Lodewijk Schelfhout. See: L. Brosch, 'Die XVI. Biennale in Venedig', *Der Cicerone* 20/18 (1928): p. 601.
- 24 Raffaele Calzini, 'The Sixteenth International Exhibition of Modern Art at Venice II. The Non-Italian Sections', *The Studio* 96 (1928): p. 127.
- 25 Today, Italy has no separate national pavilion in the Giardini, only a smaller, thematic exhibition in a separate space at the Arsenale.
- 26 Between 1926 and 1942, Antonio Maraini was the secretary general of the Venice Biennale. He enjoyed the full trust of Benito Mussolini throughout and, by 1930, had in effect annexed the Biennale to Italian Fascist politics. As Jan Andreas May has shown, Mussolini's support for Futurist art (founded in 1909) between the wars was grounded in nostalgia, however, he was never able to elevate it to the level of official state art. Instead, it was the more populist Novocento, with its classicising orientation, that succeeded in addressing the broader masses. See: Jan Andreas May, *La Biennale di Venezia. Continuität und Wandel in der venezianischen Ausstellungspolitik 1895–1948* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009), p. 111.
- 27 János Vaszary, 'A veneziai kiállítás', *Pesti Napló* (13 May 1928): p. 37.
- 28 Vaszary, 'A veneziai kiállítás', p. 37.
- 29 May, *La Biennale di Venezia*, p. 125.
- 30 Anna Bálványos, 'Magyar részvétel a Velencei Biennálén 1895–1948', in Péter Sinkovits (ed.), *Magyar művészet a Velencei Biennálén* (Budapest: Új Művészet Alapítvány, 1993), p. 47.
- 31 The first Venice Music Festival (Festival Internazionale di Musica Contemporanea) was in 1930, the first Venice Film Festival (Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica) was in 1932, and the first Venice Theatre Festival (Festival del Teatro della Biennale) was held in 1934.
- 32 'Tárlatok. A Velencei Nemzetközi Kiállítás', *Képzőművészet* 4/32 (1930): p. 165.
- 33 Klebelsberg placed great emphasis on the development of Hungarian cultural and academic international relations, and following the opening of a Collegium Hungaricum in Berlin and Vienna, a Hungarian academy was also established in Rome in 1928 on the Palazzo Falconieri. The building was purchased in 1927 and housed the Hungarian Historical Institute before its remit expanded to include the Collegium Hungaricum. There were already plans under way to open a similar institute in Paris. All this appeared pioneering at the time, with even the London-based *The Studio* reporting on the opening of a Hungarian institute in Rome. See: A.E., 'Budapest', *The Studio* 96 (1928): pp. 146–49.
- 34 The term 'School of Rome' originates from Gerevich, and later entered accepted use in the specialist literature. In 1928, Gerevich circumvented the standard application process and invited Vilmos Aba-Novák, Károly Patkó, and István Szőnyi to work in Rome. The literature uses this date as the starting point of the School's history. (See also Julianna Szűcs's essay in this volume – *The Editor*)
- 35 Csilla Markója, 'Gerevich Tibor és a velencei biennálék – katalógusbevezetők 1930 és 1942 között', *Enigma* 16/59 (2009): pp. 79–107.
- 36 Gerevich's preferred formal characteristics after the Italian model were: 'simplified lines, calm surfaces, large-scale forms, decorative impacts'. See: László Százados, *A két világháború közötti művészetpolitika és tudományosság kérdése Gerevich Tibor munkásságának tükrében* (MA thesis, ELTE BTK Art History Department, 1989), pp. 40–41.
- 37 For an English-language summary of Hungary's interwar political situation, see: Thomas L. Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 38 In this new geopolitical situation, the former Czechoslovak pavilion was used to exhibit artists from independent Slovakia.
- 39 May, *La Biennale di Venezia*, p. 216.
- 40 Douglas Cooper, '24th Biennial Exhibition, Venice', *The Burlington Magazine* 90/547 (1948): p. 290.
- 41 Peter Joch, 'Die Ära der Retrospektiven 1948–1962. Wiedergutmachung, Rekonstruktion und Archäologie des Progressiven', in Zeller (ed.), *Die deutschen Beiträge*, pp. 89–106.
- 42 Enzo Di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale 1895–2005. Visual Arts, Architecture, Cinema, Dance, Music, Theatre* (Venice and Turin: Papiro Arte, 2005), p. 118.
- 43 Csilla Markója, 'Gerevich Tibor görbe tükrökben', *Enigma* 16/60 (2009): p. 9.
- 44 On the European School, see the essays by Gábor Pataki and Péter György in this volume. (*The Editor*)
- 45 'Padiglione dell'Ungheria', in *XXIV. Biennale di Venezia*, exhibition catalogue (Venice: Serenissima, 1948), pp. 321–7.
- 46 Because of Ferenczy's cultural role during the Republic of Councils, he was forced into exile for two years after 1919. He was only appointed as a teacher at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts a long time after his return, in 1945.
- 47 Péter Molnos, 'Újrafestve. Gerevich Tibor és Aba-Novák Vilmos', *Enigma* 16/59 (2009): p. 34.
- 48 Max Peiffer-Watenphul, 'Biennale di Venezia', *Das Kunstwerk* 2/3–4 (1948): pp. 35–41.



49 Max Eichenberger, 'Panorama der modernen Malerei und Plastik im Spiegel der Biennale Venedig 1948', *Du: Kulturelle Monatschrift* 8/11 (1948): p. 17.

50 Máriusz Rabinovszky, 'Szőnyi', *Nyugat* 22/3 (1929): p. 215.

51 Zoltán Rockenbauer, *Márffy Ödön. Monográfia és életmű-katalógus* (PhD thesis, ELTE BTK Art History Doctoral School, 2008), p. 166.

52 For an English-language summary of contemporary Hungarian macropolitics, see: Tibor Valuch and György Gyarmati, *Hungary under Soviet Domination 1944–1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

53 After an absence of 22 years, the Soviet Union returned to Venice in 1956. Nikolai Molok (ed.), *Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale 1895–2013* (Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2013), p. 352.

54 The relevant documents on this subject are to be found among the Hungarian National Archives' (MNL MOL) post-1945 holdings on the Foreign Ministry (XIX-J-1), the Institute of Cultural Relations (XIX-A-33), a Ministry of Public Education (XIX-I-3), the Ministry of Culture (XIX-I-4) and the Kunsthalle (XXVI-I-10).

55 'We hereby announce that the Political Committee does not consent to our participation in the "Biennale" fine arts exhibition in Venice in 1954'. Zoltán Komáromi (Central Leadership of the Hungarian Workers' Party), letter to Ferenc Jánosi (Ministry of Public Education). Budapest (11 May 1954). MNL MOL XIX-I-3-1 (Ministry of Public Education 'TÜK' [Top Secret] documents 1950–1957) 072/7/1954.

56 Iván Kálló, letters to Giovanni Ponti, Budapest (19 February and 22 March 1952). ASAC, Venice 'Scatole Nere. Padiglioni' Box no. 30 (1952).

57 Note for László Erdei, Budapest (1 December 1952). MNL MOL XIX-I-3-1 (Ministry of Public Education 'TÜK' documents 1950–1957) 038/3/1952.

58 Note on the Venice Biennale exhibition, Budapest (2 February 1956). MNL MOL XIX-I-3-1 (Ministry of Public Education 'TÜK' documents 1950–1957) 072/3/1954.

Cyprián Majerník:  
From the  
Grotesque to the  
Tragic

ZSÓFIA KISS-SZEMÁN

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

## **Cyprián Majerník: From the Grotesque to the Tragic**

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

### **Studies and Early Work**

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



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

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

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

Like virtually every young artist at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, Majerník felt a strong desire to acquaint himself with Paris, its atmosphere and its art. He decided on studying in Paris and requested a study grant from the Academy of Fine Arts. The rector of the academy did award him a grant, though in the end he did not receive it. Majerník nonetheless travelled to Paris in December 1931 and in spite of great poverty he stayed until around May 1932.<sup>8</sup> This was his only sojourn abroad for study, and it brought him valuable experiences and, literally, visible results. These were most clearly manifested in an individual approach to painting and the formation of his own style. Of course, he could not avoid being inspired by several world famous painters: besides getting to directly experience the work of Matisse and Derain, the work of Marc Chagall proved a great discovery, and Chagall's influence alternates with the impact of the two aforementioned painters (whose form-creating elements in particular shaped Majerník's painting). Chagall's work evidently made him realise the power of narrative and the effectiveness of storytelling, while reinforcing his interest in a modern and meaningful manner of narration. The work Majerník produced in Paris went through three fundamental changes: he developed a bravura control of paint colours, achieving a purer tone; he liberated forms and broke free of descriptiveness; and he began to work with the grotesque, which gave to his work a greater looseness and freedom. He discovered a city, and the lives of its people, to portray in his work, and this led him to transcend Slovak painting's clearly sanctified theme of country life. In this respect, Majerník's work proved truly exceptional in the context of Slovak art in the interwar years.

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

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

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

### **The Visual Grotesque in Cyprián Majerník's Early Work**

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

### **Majerník's Surrealist Intermezzo**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Circus and Theatre in Majerník's Work**

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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





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

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

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

### **Forced March: Majerník's Requiem**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

““Do You See  
Anything?” Asked  
Poussin’: The  
Informe, Bataille  
and the Czech  
Surrealists

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### **“Do You See Anything?” Asked Poussin: The *Informe*, Bataille and the Czech Surrealists**

In Honoré de Balzac's story *The Unknown Masterpiece* (*Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, 1831), the young Nicolas Poussin longs to see a supposed crowning achievement by the old master Frenhofer, who 'sees higher and farther than other painters', but who, with his endless deliberations over colour and line, is also consumed by many doubts.<sup>2</sup> When, after a long effort, Poussin finally succeeds in gaining entry to Frenhofer's studio, together with the famous court painter Frans Porbus, both are astounded by the ravishing paintings which hang on the walls and which, to their amazement, the artist declares to be the errors of youth. But still they do not see the promised masterpiece, *The Beautiful Troublemaker*, even after examining, from every angle, the painted canvas that Frenhofer proudly shows them.

“Do you see anything?” Poussin whispered to Porbus.

“No. Do you?”

“Nothing”

Frenhofer first assumes that they are unable to distinguish this perfect picture, on which he has worked with complete dedication for ten years, from reality, but then his friends lose patience:

“The old fraud's pulling our leg,” Poussin murmured, returning to face the so-called painting.

“All I see are colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint.”

“We must be missing something,” Porbus insisted.

Coming closer, they discerned, in one corner of the canvas, the tip of a bare foot emerging from this chaos of colors, shapes, and vague shadings, a kind of incoherent mist; but a delightful foot, a living foot! They stood stock-still with admiration before this fragment which had escaped from an incredible, slow, and advancing destruction.<sup>3</sup>

Balzac's story would become subject to various interpretations in relation to key personalities of modern art, and notably in reflections by Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso.<sup>4</sup> The story can also be connected to the 'undercurrents' of twentieth-century art: according to Balzac's description of the painting in question, it is indeed possible to see Frenhofer, who is 'as much a madman as a painter', as having unwittingly entered the realm of formlessness, in which the legibility of the world of perceptions and concepts disappears, and as thus having hazardously exceeded the existing boundaries of art.

If one were to look at Toyen's 1929 painting *Night Party* (*Noční slavnost*) from the point of view described by Balzac in *The Unknown Masterpiece*, it would also seem that there is no painting to be seen on the canvas: a dense, relief-like build-up of black, Parisian blue, and dark greens in many places hermetically covers over the original sequence of thick, coloured vertical lines, which are blurred by a transverse series of translucent stripes and seem to drown in the dark background





Fig. 19.1. Toyen, *Night Party* (*Noční slavnost*, 1929). Oil on canvas, 92 x 65 cm. Private collection.

(Fig. 19.1).<sup>5</sup> The rule in Artificialist painting was for the picture’s title to guide the spectator’s flow of emotions and associations. In this case the title *The Night Party* refers to the favourite subject of fireworks displays, which had long been part of the Devětsil movement’s iconographic arsenal and had appeared in various fields of Devětsil activity, in poetry and visual art as well as in theory. Photographs of fireworks had been featured in the celebrated exhibition *The Bazaar of Modern Art* (*Bazar moderního umění*) in 1923; at the end of the 1920s Karel Teige reproduced these pictures in the journal *ReD*; in 1926, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen emphasised the erotic subtext of this motif in their cover for Vítězslav Nezval’s poetry collection *The Lesser Rose Garden* (*Menší růžová zahrada*); and Teige, in his *Second Manifesto of Poetism* (*Druhý manifest poetismu*) from 1928, presented fireworks as one of his main examples of a dynamic poetry for sight, or liberated painting.<sup>6</sup> While in Teige’s conception the image of fireworks stood for a joyous *féerie*

of light effects, for dematerialisation and an intoxicating upward movement, Toyen, in *The Night Party*, turned this motif into the exact opposite: a morass of dark formless matter seems to have spilled out across the radiant lines, and so, rather than the suggestion of a weightless ascent into the heavens, our main impression is of a descent into nothingness. The painting is distinguished by exceptional daring in its embrace of formlessness, though in this it was not alone among Toyen's works of this period.<sup>7</sup>

In 1927, at the height of her Artificialist period, she revealed the same tendency in *Solitude* (*Samota*), which resembles *Night Party* in its colouring. *Solitude* presents a confrontation between dark geometric forms and a disorganised world of spontaneous lines, indeterminate spots of colour and random brushstrokes. 'The luminescent swamp entices me...', wrote Vítězslav Nezval in a poem inspired by *Solitude*.<sup>8</sup> He was speaking here for Toyen too, who in 1928 again employed a very free style—down to the pouring of paint over the canvas—in her remarkable picture *Swamp* (*Bažina*). From the beginning, Artificialism displayed a marked fascination with the element of water—with limpid lakes or ocean depths—and this was soon joined by an interest in mud, in its guise as all-consuming formless matter. In the work of both Toyen and Štyrský, these interests are evident in the paintings' very titles (for example, Štyrský's *Peat* (*Rašelina*), 1927, and Toyen's *Swamp* and *Mire* (*Močál*), 1931), and, in Toyen's case, they had further importance as inspiration towards new methods of expression. In many pictures from the late 1920s, which can be seen as depicting abstract landscapes or details of such, she trickled the paint across the canvas, mixed it with sand, added it in layers, like sediment, to form a relief effect, and generally heightened the works' haptic qualities. 'With closed eyes, oriented by statocysts, she pliantly feels the space around herself and commits murder', Nezval asserted.<sup>9</sup> Though she did not at all limit herself to this tendency and again began to favour solid forms at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, from the point of view of her further development it is important to note that she had already experimented with the extreme possibilities of a form of painterly expression to which she returned in later years. She revived this approach with a new urgency in her Surrealist paintings from 1934, which were presented at Prague's first exhibition of Surrealism. They are generally characterised by an amorphous background, recalling tree bark or the weathered surfaces of walls. One of her most radical works, *Handclasp* (*Stisk ruky*, 1934), which in Nezval's poetic interpretation evoked the idea of a crushed and bleeding hand caught between two doors, shows an outright disruption of forms by the painterly gesture.

An independent parallel to the innovative activity of Toyen can be found in several reliefs by Vincenc Makovský from the first half of the 1930s. If an orientation towards formlessness can be risky in painting, the same is doubly true for sculpture. Nonetheless Makovský, who was at this time concurrently developing a number of expressive approaches from the most contemporary and avant-garde to a traditional sculptural style, embarked on experiments that had no counterpart in the European sculpture of this time. In a relief from 1933, known by the name *Woman with Vase* (*Žena s vázou*) (though Makovský originally exhibited and reproduced these works under the generic title *Relief*, thus omitting any reference to the initial figurative subject), he created a human figure composed, like its background, solely out of 'second-rate', banal materials (coloured cork, tar, pieces of corrugated cardboard, thin sackcloth, rags, twine, matchsticks, melted wax). He handled these with great freedom, smothering the original subject matter through a forceful emphasis on the materials used, their textures, colours, and, in places, their runniness. Favourably-minded contemporary critics characterised the work as 'a monstrous relief that really excels through its firm grasp of structure and matter', while conservatives claimed, with a certain justification, that 'it looks something like the corner of a scrapyards'.<sup>10</sup> Makovský took a different but again surprising approach in a relief later known as *Female Figure with Footprints* (*Ženská postava se stopami kroků*, 1934), which has not itself been preserved but which was captured in a contemporary photograph and reproduced in Nezval's 1936 anthology *Surrealism* (*Surrealismus*), in a concluding pictorial section that juxtaposes work by members of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group (Skupina surrealistů v ČSR) with the work of the most important foreign Surrealists. Jiří Šebek added a description of Makovský's picture in which he evoked associations with gravestones:

‘the delicate modelling, starkly outlining the torso of a crouching female nude, which strongly evokes Josef Šíma’s *Vampire (Upír)*, looks like it has been violently disturbed by the deep imprints of bare feet’.<sup>11</sup> The artist’s harsh intervention has made it impossible to gauge the relief’s real spatial orientation: based on a comparison with Šíma’s picture it seems that it should be presented width-wise, but in *Surrealism* it is reproduced length-wise. The imprints of the foot soles challenge our vertical perception of this relief, denying it the privileged status of the artwork hanging on the wall at eye level. The horizontal position seems to be the defining one here: the relief lies on the ground and the sculptor is able to step straight into it, carelessly vandalising his earlier composition. This negative imprint of human body parts on a sculpture also foreshadowed an important theme in modern art, one recently revisited by the exhibition *The Imprint (L’empreinte)*, which Georges Didi-Huberman organised for the Pompidou Centre.<sup>12</sup>

The examples above suggest how these two representatives of the avant-garde, Toyen and Makovský, here chose a different tactic from attacking the traditional fields of art with an external revolutionary gesture, such as Karel Teige had done in the early 1920s when, in a spirit of avant-garde iconoclasm, he had declared the liquidation of the traditional ‘tabular’ picture, to be replaced by new forms of creative activity. Instead, in their individual ways, Toyen and Makovský decomposed painting and sculpture from within, through the denial of form and subject matter. They reached a dangerous extreme, to which their own artistic field provoked them, but they did not pursue this point exclusively or without reservations (Toyen continued to work with this principle in several other works, and Makovský soon distanced himself completely from such adventures). Their approaches were distinct in character from the favoured techniques of Surrealism, such as frottage and later decalcomania, in which, by contrast, it was typical to try to read forms and stories into the heterogeneous surfaces or the random spots and marks, and thus to give to the latter a poetic value, to ‘elevate’ them artistically and save them from formlessness.<sup>13</sup> In frottage the perceived form is graphically highlighted, or integrated into a determinate image, while decalcomania acquires meaning thanks to the interpretation of an accompanying verbal commentary.<sup>14</sup>

The tendency that we can trace in these works by Makovský and Toyen had no equivalent in Czech theory. This tendency arose at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, when the avant-garde found itself faced with a choice between two different conceptions of modern art. On the one side there was the purely modernist conception, founded on a logical development (‘progression’) of form and aiming towards pure opticality, a conception that had been developed in the Czech context by Karel Teige in his programmes of Poetism. On the other side, drawing ever more attention to itself, there was Surrealism, previously unassimilable for the Czech avant-garde, and representing an antithetical approach to modern art by means of its emphasis on content (in common with Symbolism and Expressionism) and its indifference to form. Within this situation of conflicting approaches, a situation open to the most diverse suggestions and stimuli, ‘unclassifiable’ works appeared that demanded a different method of interpretation. One possible way of conceptualising these works is offered by a particular alternative view of art history that Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois chose to refer to by Georges Bataille’s term *informe*, a concept first introduced in 1929 as part of a ‘Critical Dictionary’ published in the journal *Documents*.<sup>15</sup>

Appearing between the years 1929 to 1930, *Documents* formed an intellectual centre in which a group of excommunicated and rebel Surrealists collaborated with reputable researchers and art historians (one name that appeared in a list of the journal’s collaborators, published in the second up to the fifth issue of the first volume, was that of Vincenc Kramář, although he never published anything in *Documents*).<sup>16</sup> Bataille, the journal’s co-founder and chief editor, contributed numerous articles, in which he worked out his theories for the first time (and, to the alarm of several ‘more conservative contributors’, ‘often violated the general orientation of the review’).<sup>17</sup> As Denis Hollier has shown, *Documents’* campaign of anti-aestheticism was initiated by the ethnographers, who stressed that ethnography (like archaeology and the study of prehistory) should study everything that helps shape civilisation, and should not neglect any object, no matter how banal, primitive, or formless it is:<sup>18</sup> ‘Just as the psychoanalyst must give everything



equal attention, just as the surrealist, in automatic writing, must let everything come through, so must the anthropological collector ... never privilege an object because it is “beautiful”, never exclude another because it seems insignificant, or repugnant’.<sup>19</sup> *Documents*’ aforementioned ‘Critical Dictionary’, from December 1929, not only featured two short articles dealing with spit, by Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule, but also included Bataille’s entry ‘Informe’, according to which the world resembles nothing and is formless, ‘something like a spider or spit’.<sup>20</sup> While the ethnographers wanted to create a continuum and reconstruct the contexts in which everything would seem to be in its right place, Bataille provocatively destabilised the distinction between the thing and the world, the part and the whole; he disrupted all hierarchies and any kind of system. As a concept negating the Aristotelian opposition between form and matter, the *informe*, for Bataille, is an operation that consists in ‘declassing’, calling into question, all categories and structures. According to Krauss the *informe* could be conceived not as the antithesis of form, but rather as an active possibility contained within form and capable of disrupting it from the inside, and thus as a kind of entropy within form.<sup>21</sup>

Czech authors knew of Bataille’s journal. The Paris-based Czech painter Josef Šíma had a particular connection to it, as the members of the *Le Grand Jeu* (*The Big Game*) group, to which Šíma belonged, were in contact with *Documents* and often published there. Like Bataille, the members of *Le Grand Jeu* were in disagreement with André Breton, even though they held different philosophical standpoints from Bataille. A reproduction of Šíma’s 1929 *Picture* appeared in the second volume of *Documents*, with reference to an exhibition of Šíma’s work at the Povolozky Gallery in Paris. This image, a highly abstracted landscape featuring indeterminate and unidentifiable shapes, was accompanied by a text by Roger Gilbert-Lecomte called ‘What Sima [*sic*] Sees and Makes Us See Today’.<sup>22</sup>

In June 1929, Karel Teige wrote a report for the journal *ReD*, ‘From Paris’, in which he devoted considerable attention to the magazines that were responding to the current situation of the Surrealist movement (in particular the Belgian monthly *Variétés* (*Varieties*) and the Paris reviews *Le Grand Jeu* and *Bifur*). Yet *Documents*, which had been appearing since April of the same year, went without mention.<sup>23</sup> At the beginning of 1930, however, the fourth issue of *ReD* brought some stand-alone information about the magazine, accompanied by several reproductions of Alberto Giacometti’s work taken from it:

*Documents*, a new, big review from Paris—a journal for fine art, archaeology, ethnography and aesthetic curiosities, managed by a large editorial committee whose secretary is Georges Bataille—is in large part a focal point for those surrealists who have abandoned Breton and Aragon’s group. In this magazine we find essays and criticism signed by well-known names close to the surrealist movement, such as Robert Desnos, Roger Vitrac, Jacques Baron, M. Leiris, Hans Reichenbach etc., and reproductions of work by surrealist painters like Hans Arp, André Masson, Gaston-Louis Roux, Salvador Dali and the photographer Eli Lotar.<sup>24</sup>

Teige then focussed specifically on Leiris’s study of Giacometti, whose work was then developing in close contact with the *Documents* circle.<sup>25</sup>

Nezval included two items from *Documents* (both from the fifth issue of the second volume, where the article about Šíma also appeared) in the first issue of his monthly review *Zvěrokruh* (*Zodiac*) from November 1930. One of these involved a reproduction of Grandville’s drawing *First Dream: Crime and Atonement* (*Premier rêve: Crime et expiation*), which was originally published in 1847 in *Magasin Pittoresque* (*Picturesque Magazine*) and which Bataille had used as visual accompaniment for the entry ‘Eye’ in the ‘Critical Dictionary’. The commentary in *Zodiac* took from Bataille’s text a description of Grandville’s dream about ‘a hideous and all-seeing eye, which pursues a murderer to the bottom of the sea, where it turns into a monstrous fish and devours him’, a dream that also influenced Victor Hugo’s poem ‘La Conscience’.<sup>26</sup> Also briefly mentioned were Bataille’s comparisons of the drawing to the symbol of the eye in detective literature (specifically in the illustrated weekly *L’Oeil de la Police* (*The Eye of the Police*)) and to the famous opening scene of *An Andalusian Dog* (*Un Chien andalou*, 1929), in which an eye is sliced in half by a razor. Nezval further added a reference to Odilon Redon’s lithographs that take the

eye as their subject, which are described as ‘surréalisme avant la lettre’ (Nezval reproduced several of these in *Zodiac*). A kind of free postscript to this topic was offered by Jindřich Štyrský’s 1930 drawing *Eyes (Oči)*, which appeared in the second issue of *Zodiac*.

The second item that Nezval took from *Documents* concerned an English publication from 1911, *What a Life!*, which was illustrated with montages of engravings from a department store catalogue; in a foreword its authors noted that, among the catalogue’s ‘facts and prices’, they had found ‘a deeply-moving human drama.’<sup>27</sup> *Documents* had reprinted several pages from this book, with an accompanying text written by Raymond Queneau. Nezval chose one of these pages for his magazine, gave a brief summary of the information from *Documents*, and compared this nearly 20-year-old book with Marx Ernst’s 1929 collage novel *The Hundred Headless Woman (La Femme 100 têtes)*, from which an excerpt was also provided. Thus Nezval gave an early indication of his passion for collages created from various catalogues, something he expressed in *The Chain of Fortune (Řetěz štěstí)*, written in 1935 and published in 1936:

For years I have been including among my dearest memories of life several catalogues, which it is presumably not so difficult to find. Foremost among these is a catalogue of surgical trusses and, right behind this, a catalogue of seeds and one of musical instruments. Starting particularly from the times when I secretly wished to utilise them for the production of collages, there has not been a day when my thoughts would not come to dwell on them.<sup>28</sup>

In the same period that Teige registered the existence of *Documents* as one more journal of the Paris avant-garde, and that Nezval perceived in it one of the many sources from which he could freely draw ideas without preserving their original contexts, there existed a journal in Prague that, while never explicitly mentioning *Documents*, devoted much more concentrated attention to its content and published translations of important texts from it, though of course without naming their source. This was the anthology *Kvart (Quarto)*, an unorthodox periodical open to various currents of thought.<sup>29</sup> In *Kvart*’s very first issue, published in spring 1930, one entry from the ‘Critical Dictionary’, ‘Crustaceans’ by Jacques Baron, appeared on its own, as though intended to pass by unnoticed, in a translation by Jan Zahradníček. The second issue, from the summer of 1930, followed this with the ‘Methodological Aphorisms’ of Carl Einstein. In the third issue, which appeared in 1931, this interest resulted in the publication of two essays from leading personalities of *Documents*: Bataille (erroneously referred to in *Kvart* as Charles rather than Georges) and Michel Leiris.<sup>30</sup> *Kvart* thus reprinted both Bataille’s key study ‘Base Materialism and Gnosticism’ (‘Le bas matérialisme et la gnose’, in Tříška’s translation titled ‘Hrubý materialismus a gnóse’), which opened the second volume of *Documents*, and Leiris’s essay ‘Man and His Interior’ (‘L’homme et son intérieur’, in Žantovský’s translation titled ‘Člověk a jeho vnitro’).

Bataille, in the text just mentioned, linked his concept of materialism to the gnostic understanding of matter as ‘an active principle’, which has ‘its own eternal autonomous existence as darkness’.<sup>31</sup> He rejected a materialism founded on a visual notion of matter and not on bodily experience. Likewise, he refused the Classical, and also the modernist, fetishism of form, which was too dependent on visual distance:

The specific reactions of Gnosticism led to the representation of forms radically contrary to the ancient academic style, to the representation of forms in which it is possible to see the image of this base matter that alone, by its incongruity and by an overwhelming lack of respect, permits the intellect to escape from the constraints of idealism. In the same way today certain plastic representations are the expression of an intransigent materialism, of a recourse to everything that compromises the powers that be in matter of form.<sup>32</sup>

In this approach to materialism lies one of the disagreements between Bataille and Breton. In his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism (Second manifeste du surréalisme)* from 1929, Breton responded to Bataille’s earlier ‘Materialism’ entry in *Documents*: ‘In M. Bataille’s case ... what we are witnessing is an obnoxious return to old anti-dialectical materialism, which this time is trying to force its way gratuitously through Freud’.<sup>33</sup>

Bataille maintained the view that materialism (particularly of the dialectical sort) is usually fundamentally idealist: ‘Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with

all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist'.<sup>34</sup> Bataille was disdainful of the Surrealists' adoption of the Hegelian notion of transcendence.<sup>35</sup> He characterised Breton's Surrealism as an Icarus-like movement, seeking out heterogeneous and transgressive material only so as to transform it along idealist lines.

The antagonism between Breton and Bataille had other causes besides these intellectual disagreements. Breton clearly identified those causes in the conclusion of the *Second Manifesto*, in which he devoted a surprising amount of space to Bataille; surprising because Breton himself, in spite of all his quarrels and schisms, was at this point recognised as one of the most important personalities of the interwar avant-garde, whereas Bataille was still basically an unknown librarian working at Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale.<sup>36</sup> Yet the grouping of lapsed (apostate) and expelled Surrealists around the *Documents* journal confirmed Breton's suspicions that Bataille wanted to challenge him, as the leader of a rival group. Breton reproached Bataille for his hypocrisy, evident in the contrast between his vigorous defence of revolt against all conventions on the one hand and his 'staid' existence sitting for hours in a library on the other.<sup>37</sup> A further reason for this animosity was Breton's personal disgust with Bataille's pornographic and excremental obsessions: 'M. Bataille professes to wish only to consider in the world that which is vilest'.<sup>38</sup> As Denis Hollier has remarked, there was a gulf between the two men in terms of their life experiences and, specifically, in their relationship to psychoanalysis: while Bataille submitted himself to it as a patient under Adrien Borel, Breton put himself in the position of the psychiatrist, authorised to do so by his study of medicine, his experience as an orderly at the Saint-Dizier psychiatric centre during the war, and his trip to meet Sigmund Freud in Vienna in 1921.<sup>39</sup> When he criticised Bataille in his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, his wording made it sound like he was presenting a diagnosis.

Bataille, together with others who had been similarly attacked, responded to this with the excoriating pamphlet *A Corpse (Un Cadavre)*, which featured a prominent photographic montage comprising a portrait of Breton with closed eyes, originally from *The Surrealist Revolution (La Révolution Surréaliste)*, to which were added bloody tears and a crown of thorns. Here Bataille described Breton as a 'false revolutionary with the head of Christ', and Surrealism as a 'religious enterprise'.<sup>40</sup>

The Czech avant-garde kept track of all these activities. A translation of the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* was published in *Zodiac* in December 1930, and just prior to this, in the November issue, Adolf Hoffmeister's article 'Autumn in Paris' appeared, in which he unequivocally took Breton's side: 'Breton is rearing his lion's head. He's no carcass! What an error this pamphlet [*A Corpse*] has made!'<sup>41</sup> Karel Teige, at this time still retaining a critical distance towards Surrealism, summed up his view of Breton's polemic with the Surrealist 'apostates', and of the *Corpse* pamphlet, in his essay 'Surrealism and Le Grand Jeu', published in 1930 in *ReD*. The Paris controversies, on which he took no personal position, were considered as 'a case of the crystallisation of ideas and the classification of minds within the ranks of the international avant-garde'.<sup>42</sup> He saw in these conflicts a clear parallel with 'the debates among the Prague avant-garde', which Jindřich Štyrský had provoked with his incendiary article 'A Generation's Corner' (and which had resulted in a split between Teige and Štyrský of several years).<sup>43</sup> The main problem both with Breton, and with the groups that had splintered off from his movement, was defined by Teige, from a political perspective, as their 'undefined opinions', in the sense that none of them had unequivocally embraced dialectical materialism.<sup>44</sup> Although Breton had referred in the *Second Manifesto* to Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin, Teige was (rightly) convinced that:

Surrealists of all shades, at their intellectual and temperamental core, are really Communist anarchists (rather than Marxists), and in many cases even romantic, individualist anarchists ... Whichever journal they are grouped around, whether this is *La Grand Jeu*, *Bifur*, *Variétés*, *Documents* or *La Révolution Surréaliste*, they are all romantics, and also revolutionaries, because, like all romantics, they are in irreconcilable conflict with the bourgeois world.<sup>45</sup>

In Teige's opinion, however, 'cultural revolution cannot succeed simply through its romantic ideological arsenal, its protests and anarchistic proclamations!'<sup>46</sup>

In the years that followed, Teige would re-evaluate his views about Breton's relation to

dialectical materialism and about Surrealism itself. A similar process occurred, though in a more dramatic fashion, with Štyrský and Nezval, who around 1930 went through a period of wavering and self-contradiction: while explicitly rejecting Surrealism in various verbal declarations, they were nonetheless influenced by it in several of their artworks. The shift towards Surrealism thus took place first at the level of artistic creation; only subsequently was it theoretically ‘justified’, although this justification had a retroactive reach. As soon as the Czech artists explicitly adopted Surrealism, they began reinterpreting their own artistic development during the 1920s. Poetism and Artificialism, which they had originally set in antithesis to Surrealism, were now recast, in the mid-1930s, as movements that, though autonomously created, had been a logical step on the road to Surrealism.<sup>47</sup>

Czech Surrealism in the 1930s oriented itself firmly towards André Breton, with whom the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group maintained personal contacts that were further strengthened during Breton’s very successful lecture tour of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1935. Breton’s charismatic personality also won admiration from members of the younger generation who became interested in Surrealism during the 1930s. It is nonetheless evident that there was a range of different stimuli feeding directly into the work of the Czechoslovak Group’s protagonists, stimuli that in several cases had links back to Breton’s adversary, Georges Bataille.

The figure closest to Bataille’s opinions was Jindřich Štyrský. It seems almost symbolic that the complete cycle of Štyrský’s 1929 drawing series *Apocalypse (Apokalypsa)* was directly inserted, as a special supplement, into the translation of Bataille’s study in *Kvart*.<sup>48</sup> Štyrský’s texts from the early 1930s affirm his interest in the *informe*. In 1930 he declared that the contents of a spittoon can have greater value, as far as spectacle is concerned, than the panorama spreading out before a window in which pelargoniums are growing.<sup>49</sup> Around three years later he expressed his fascination with mould and putrefaction in his book *Emily Comes to Me in a Dream (Emilie přichází k mně ve snu)*, in which he described gazing at a sealed aquarium containing the remnants of beloved objects: ‘I looked with satisfaction at the putrefying state of my dreams, until its walls grew covered with mould and it was impossible to see anything’.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Emily’s beauty has been created so that it can rot. Štyrský presented similar ideas in several photographs from 1934, for instance in a picture showing a recess or corner cluttered with cast-off items and dominated by a broken glass tank, whose murky front compounds the difficulty of identifying its bizarrely formless contents, or a photograph capturing the details on a gravestone, which bears the inscription *Růžka* and, inside an oval medallion, a woman’s portrait that seems to gradually disappear until it merges into the surface of the stone.<sup>51</sup> Štyrský took a more expressive approach to the latter theme in his oil painting *Delicate Stuffing for a Coffin (Jemná nádivka do rakve)* from the same year.

Štyrský’s imagination drew to a significant extent on scatological themes, and thus on an area to which Breton overtly expressed his hostility but in which Bataille revelled. There is a story often cited in regard to this topic revolving around Salvador Dalí’s painting *The Lugubrious Game (Le Jeu lugubre, 1929)* and dating back to the time when Dalí first made contact with Breton’s group. Dalí himself, in both *The Diary of a Genius (Journal d’un Génie)* and *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí (La vie secrète de Salvador Dalí)*, described with relish (and probably a degree of exaggeration) how Éluard and Breton were shocked by the scatological and anal elements of the depicted subject, and commented ironically on several ‘taboos’ that had been established in line with the taste of the Surrealist group.<sup>52</sup> Bataille was understandably enthused by the picture and wrote a celebrated study of it for *Documents*. Yet Dalí, for whom it was then more advantageous to side with Breton, at least temporarily, withheld his permission to reproduce the painting, so that ultimately the article was accompanied only by a specially drawn diagram of the work discussed.

In his book *Dreams (Sny)*, compiled shortly before his death, Štyrský himself included a specific section on scatological dreams, which was dated 1934. The section features no text, but contains a whole series of drawings and several paintings that obviously arose from the same inspiration: *The Liquid Doll (Tekutá panenka)*, *Man Carried by the Wind (Člověk nesený větrem)*, *Sodom and Gomorrah (Sodoma a Gomora)*. The degradation of the human figure in these works is often linked to the evocation of a violent act: *Man Carried by the Wind* suggests the image of



Fig. 19.2. Jindřich Štyrský, *The Liquid Doll* (*Tekutá panenka*, 1934). Oil on canvas, 110 x 59 cm. Bernard Galateau Collection, Paris.

a hanged man turning into excrement, while the runny mass of matter in *The Liquid Doll* has streams of blood trickling down it (Fig. 19.2). The first version of *The Liquid Doll*, as captured in Josef Sudek's photograph, strikingly resembles *Man Carried by the Wind* in its composition (indeed, the preparatory drawings for both pictures are almost interchangeable), for here the chosen scenario was narratively 'followed through' to the point of a further scatological element at the bottom of the painting; but in the picture's second—preserved—variation, this follow-through has been abandoned in the interests of a more abstract feeling for the work. Various, multicoloured, scatological motifs are scattered about in the background of the painting *The Head That Thinks* (*Hlava, která myslí*, 1934), which can be connected to the group of works just mentioned; from out of a strange, completely shrouded head, which more closely resembles an inanimate natural formation, there grow thin shoots topped off by amorphous coloured splotches.

Bataille's conception of scatology, as approximated in the work of Jindřich Štyrský, relates to the question set by Plato in his fictional dialogue between Parmenides and the young Socrates, during a famous passage in which Socrates accepts without hesitation the ideas of similarity, unity,



multiplicity, justice, beauty, and good, but doubts whether there also exist ideas of man, fire, or water. Parmenides then puts another question to him, concerning a series of ‘scatological things’:

“And would you feel equally undecided, Socrates, about things of which the mention may provoke a smile?—I mean such things as hair, mud, dirt, or anything else which is vile and paltry; would you suppose that each of these has an idea distinct from the actual objects with which we come into contact, or not?”

“Certainly not,” said Socrates; “visible things like these are such as they appear to us, and I am afraid that there would be an absurdity in assuming any idea of them...”<sup>53</sup>

Socrates is afraid of falling into the ‘bottomless pit of nonsense’ to which such reflections may lead him, and prefers to occupy himself in thinking hard about those things that do have ideas, but Parmenides assures him that when philosophy takes a ‘firmer grasp’ of him and he stops paying attention to the opinions of others, he will realise that none of these things are really worthless. Thus, Parmenides, within Plato’s text, calls into question the evaluative conception of ideas. His mentions of mud and dirt can be compared with Bataille’s reference to spit and spiders in his entry on the *informe*.<sup>54</sup> Plato and Bataille both draw our attention to things that are trivial, laughable, or repulsive and which have nothing to do with visual, theoretical perception, but rather with direct physical context.



Fig. 19.3. Toyen, *Man of Glue (Muž z klišu)*, 1934). Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm. Private collection.



*The Head That Thinks* emerged in the same year as a František Hudeček's *Phaedrus and Socrates or On Beauty (Faidros a Sókratés čili O kráse)*, a relief made of rags which parodically refers to another of Plato's dialogues and formally approaches/resembles several scatological drawings by Jindřich Štyrský.<sup>55</sup> Yet despite the outward similarity we might note a difference in the basic approach. Hudeček, along with Gross and Zívř, was experimenting at this time with the most diverse refuse materials and decrepit objects, inventing special techniques in order to create, in a Bretonian spirit, striking lyrical metaphors from out of this heterogeneous material and to define anew the concept of beauty. Zívř's polychromatic plaster relief *Three Figures (Tři postavy, 1937)* relates to the practice of moulage, with its runny and fluid forms suggesting 'bodies hung up as though on a roasting spit, run through with a wooden dagger', and recalls both Štyrský's scatological pictures from 1934, particularly *Man Carried by the Wind*, and Toyen's *Man of Glue (Muž z klibu, also from 1934)* (Fig. 19.3).<sup>56</sup> According to the author's own account, the picture 'arose from a concrete imaginative experience, but subconsciously there was a philosophical subtext added to it in reaction to the Spanish Civil War'.<sup>57</sup> Štyrský and Toyen responded to the dramatic events of the end of the 1930s with different expressive means.

Further 'Batailleian' inspirations appeared in Štyrský's work, even if these were indirect and combined with other influences. As is demonstrated by a picture like *Palmette (Palmeta, 1931)*, Štyrský was working at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s with images of bodily fragments torn out of their original contexts, similarly to the way Bataille treated his entries in *Documents' 'Critical Dictionary'*, which were generally accompanied by Boiffard's photographs: each entry breaks down the body, isolates the organ or its parts, refuses to respect the hierarchy of relations, and gives precedence to the newly autonomous part, which cannot now be used to reassemble the original organic whole. The *informe* leads here to the distortion of the original form of the body, to an attack on the architecture of the body as man's first prison.<sup>58</sup> In Hollier's words, 'man's revolt against prison is a rebellion against his own form, against the human figure'.<sup>59</sup> Organs are liberated from their functions (just as words are liberated from their lexical order) and are considered in and of themselves, so that an eye, for instance, appears without reference to a system of seeing (it is now the eye that is seen and not the eye that sees). The subject of the eye, an exceptionally popular one among the Surrealists, from Ernst to Dalí and Buñuel, had a notable presence in Štyrský's work, culminating in the cycle *The Omnipresent Eye (Všudypřítomné oko)* from 1936 to 1941; Toyen also used the motif of eyes as independent elements grouped into new configurations, and the most striking example of this is *The Remainder of the Night (Zbytek noci, 1934)*, where the eyes have a heavily cracked surface.<sup>60</sup>

As shown in Roland Barthes' 1963 study, Bataille's famous novel *The Story of the Eye (Histoire de l'oeil, 1928)*, which was published under a pseudonym, dethroned the eye from its privileged position within the hierarchy of the senses and linked it to objects and functions associated more with 'lower' human behaviour.<sup>61</sup> Martin Jay refers to Bataille's critique of the superior status of vision with regard to Freud's thesis (still unpublished at this time, but already known among psychoanalysts) that within the development of human civilisation there is a connection between human beings' upright posture, linked to the raising of sight to the leading position, and the repression of the sexual and aggressive instincts, leading to a radical division of the 'higher' mental capacities from the 'lower' functions of the body.<sup>62</sup> Bataille considered the refusal of our animal nature as a form of oppression. According to Bataille, man is split between two axes: the biological axis, created by the polarity of mouth-anus, is vertical, while the intellectual axis, as given by the field of vision, remains horizontal.

Fluctuations between civilisation and animality, as well as between a vertical and a horizontal axis, are evident, in a distinctive fashion, in a group of works by Jindřich Štyrský, which relate to his *Dream about a Bearded Head (Sen o vousaté hlavě)* from 1936. In the first of these studies, a strangely hirsute head hangs on a vertically-oriented construction of lines, stretched tight between the ground and a crooked tree. Another drawing shows a face that retains an anxiety-filled human expression and yet is covered with fur; it has an open mouth and is 'threaded' on a horizontal line, along with a female torso in drapery that appears to fit together with the face.



Fig. 19.4. Jindřich Štyrský, *Untitled (Oedipus) (Bez názvu, Oidipus, 1940)*. Oil on canvas, 26.5 x 20 cm. Benedikt Rejt Gallery, Louny.

What becomes clear on a closer examination, however, is the impossibility of any kind of harmonious fusion between the two fragments. Štyrský elaborated further on *Dream about a Bearded Head* in his 1937 painting *Tribute to Karl Marx (Hold Karlu Marxovi)*, which basically repeats the composition of the previous study, with the key difference that the formerly half-animal-like head now bears the features of the German philosopher.<sup>63</sup>

The first study for *Dream about a Bearded Head* could be seen as a kind of obscured precursor to a small picture from January 1940—*Untitled (Oedipus) (Bez názvu (Oidipus))*—one of Štyrský’s final oil paintings (Fig. 19.4). Surprisingly, this painting on pasteboard has been mounted in a gilded rococo frame, whose ornamental decorativeness contrasts with the rawness, Primitivism, and drastic expressiveness of the painting itself. This juxtaposition at first evokes rustic depictions of the suffering Christ. The frontally-presented face, with its roughly-painted black hair and beard and its open mouth formed into a convulsive grimace, has two bleeding wounds in place of eyes, and the body is submerged in water beneath the shoulders. Bright red paint has been splattered in formless blotches over the whole head (the motif of dripping blood was especially typical of Toyen’s work, but it occasionally appeared in Štyrský’s work too, particularly dramatically in the first two versions of his drawing *Woman Frozen in Ice (Žena zamrzlá v ledu)* from 1939, in which a girl’s profile is marked by large gashes in the skin). Similar motifs were presented in well-known cinematic images of faces with bleeding eyes, whether it be Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*

(*Bronenosets Potemkin*, 1925) or Luis Buñuel's *The Golden Age* (*L'Âge d'Or*, 1930). The mouth opened in an unarticulated scream of pain or ecstasy is also a motif with a rich iconographic background, one that includes Boiffard's photographs of opened mouths with protruding tongues, which accompany Bataille's entry in *Documents*. Among Štyrský's work of the 1930s it also appears in the painting *Palmette* (*Palmeta*, 1931), in his illustration for *May: Long Is My Journey, Calling in Vain* (*Máj. Dalekát cesta má! Marné volání!*, 1934–1936), and in the second study for *Dream about a Bearded Head*.<sup>64</sup> Štyrský's small picture from January 1940 shocks above all with its theme of blinding, which orients the image towards the Oedipal myth so popular among the Surrealists.

By means of deliberately-distorted allusions both to Christian iconography and to ancient mythology, and through a highly individual approach that oscillates between anxiety and frivolity, Štyrský addressed the subject of the victim in modern art, something with which Bataille had also concerned himself in his study *Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh* (*La Mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh*), published in *Documents*.<sup>65</sup> Here Bataille explored the connection between painting and the mutilation of the body in the act of 'sacrificial madness', in the gesture that, in his opinion, fulfils the basic, archaic function of art. He considers self-mutilation as a painterly act, for painting is nothing if it does not attack the architecture of the human body (he judged the most intense form of the sacrifice to be Oedipal enucleation). According to Bataille's theory, when art first arose in the dark caves of prehistoric painters—the first occupiers of the labyrinth—it was not as 'an act of self-duplication', of mankind reproducing itself, but as a representation of sacrifice, a symbolic supplement to the self-mutilation performed on the human body.<sup>66</sup> Bataille points to the difference between the visual tradition, which was created after mankind had left the cave and begun painting 'in the clarity of sunlight', and the original tradition of the labyrinth, governed by darkness and the unknown.<sup>67</sup> In this account it is not Narcissus but the Minotaur who is present at the birth of art (it was indeed Bataille who in 1933 proposed to Tériade the name *Minotaure* for his new review).<sup>68</sup> From such a conception of the origins of art there are particular consequences that ensued for modern painting. In all his *Documents* texts, Bataille himself dealt with the issue of modern pictorial space, which, in the spirit of his critique of anthropomorphism, he characterises as the refusal and destruction of the human figure in action: the space of painting is the space through which he who, like Oedipus, has blinded himself feels his way.<sup>69</sup> In this context it is possible to see Štyrský's picture *Untitled* (*Oedipus*) as a disguised self-portrait and at the same time as an idiosyncratic response to Poussin's question.

*Translated by Jonathan Owen*

1 Lenka Bydžovská, "Vidíte něco?" zeptal se Poussin...: Informe, Bataille a čeští surrealisté, *Umění* 45/5, 1997, pp. 477–488.

2 Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000), p. 27.

3 Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, pp. 40–41.

4 Balzac's story became famous thanks to, among other things, Émile Bernard's 'Memories of Paul Cézanne', where it was set in opposition to Émile Zola's *The Work*: 'And one evening, when I spoke to [Cézanne] of [*The Unknown Masterpiece*] and of Frenhofer ... [h]e got up from the table, stood before me, and striking his chest with his index finger, he admitted wordlessly by this repeated gesture that he was the very character in the novel. He was so moved by this feeling that his eyes filled with tears. Someone who had lived earlier, but whose soul was prophetic, had understood him. Oh, there was a great distance between this Frenhofer, who was blocked by his very genius, and Zola's Claude, born without talent, whom Zola had unhappily seen in Cézanne himself!' Émile Bernard, 'Memories of Paul Cézanne', in Michael Doran (ed.), *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 65.

Miloš Jiránek was so taken with the scene described by Bernard, that in 1908, in *Volné směry*, he gave a detailed retelling of Balzac's story, whose first Czech translation would only appear a year later. After making clear that Zola had actually drawn more on Manet than on Cézanne for his character, Jiránek ended his

article with the following words: 'For all the story's romantic allure, Balzac surmised more about modern art than Zola, an art critic and friend of the major impressionist painters, proved able to grasp some forty years later'. M. Jiránek, 'Honoré de Balzac, Neznámé arcidílo', *Volné směry* 12 (1908): pp. 275–276. Bohumil Kubišta also mentioned Balzac in his essay 'Nicolas Poussin', *Volné směry* 16 (1912): pp. 201–222.

The *Unknown Masterpiece* remained a topic of interest in later years. Critical literature often makes reference to Picasso's illustration for the story, falling as this does within the artist's obsessive theme of 'the artist and his model'. The illustration captures the painter observing his female model intently, as he converts the human body into an abstract tangle of lines on canvas. At the same time, Picasso was also interested in the opposite of this situation, in which the abstract figure of the painter converts an abstract model into a naturalistic image.

5 Toyen (born Marie Čermínová) exhibited *The Night Party* in March 1930 in Aventinská mansarda, Prague, and the following year she presented it as a wedding gift to Konstantin Biebl and his wife Marie. The picture appears in a photograph from the time showing the interior of the Biebls' flat in Louny, a flat designed in 1931–1932 by the Devětsil architect Josef Špalek. See: Rostislav Švácha, 'Devětsil Design: Five Interiors', in Rostislav Švácha (ed.) *Devětsil* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art/London: Design Museum, 1990), pp. 48–49.

6 In his book *Film*, Teige writes about the reflected light

- plays conducted at the Weimar Bauhaus: ‘The possibilities of this dynamic spectacle are broader than the limitations of the objectless tabular picture. This is modern fireworks and fireworks were always allowed to be abstract and objectless; they broke no conventions in being so...’. Karel Teige, *Film* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1925), p. 120.
- 7 Rita Bischof, who in her monograph on Toyen described pictures like *Swamp* and *The Night Party* (translated into German as *Feuerwerk*) as ‘Informel avant la lettre’, also saw *The Night Party* as a radically abstract portrait. In her opinion this picture unintentionally suggests the indistinct imprint of a face, thus recalling the Veil of Veronica, in whose name André Chastel discovered the words ‘vera icona’. See: Rita Bischof, *Toyen* (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1987), p. 27. The nature of Toyen’s fine artworks of this period prove somewhat resistant to such interpretation, but Bischof is right to observe that in Toyen’s later works, produced within the context of Informalism, hints of figures and faces do emerge as though from cracks in the walls (in this regard we could compare *The Night Party* with, say, *A Look into the Void* (*Pohled do prázdna*) from 1934). As regards the connections pursued in the present article, it is worth noting that Bischof herself deals with Bataille in her oft-cited book *Souveränität und Subversion: Georges Batailles Theorie der Moderne* (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1984).
- 8 Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige, *Štyrský a Toyen* (Prague: Borový, 1938), p. 106.
- 9 Nezval and Teige, *Štyrský a Toyen*, pp. 12–13.
- 10 Adolf Hoffmeister and František Muzika, ‘Látka k úvaze o kritice’, *Vlně směry* 31 (1935): p. 102.
- 11 Jiří Šebek, *Ze sochařského díla národního umělce Vincence Makovského*, exhibition catalogue, Museum and Art Gallery of the Horácko Region (Nové Město na Moravě, 1970), p.21. See also: Karel Srp, ‘Sochařství dvacátých a třicátých let’, in Vojtěch Lahoda (ed.), *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění IV/2* (Prague: Academia, 1998), p. 376.
- 12 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’empreinte* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).
- 13 In this respect, Surrealist experiments related to pareidolic perception and link back to a long tradition of discovering specific forms in stains and marks, something that was mentioned by Pliny and which interested such artists as Leonardo da Vinci and Piero di Cosimo.
- 14 This was the position taken by Jan Mukařovský in his analysis of the ‘Decalomania’ cycle in Nezval’s collection *The Absolute Gravedigger* (*Absolutní hrobař*), in which Nezval reproduced his own decal together with poems interpreting them. Mukařovský stressed that in such cases the creation of meaning takes place only through the juxtaposition of picture (the decal) and poem: ‘the poem without a picture loses its purpose just as the picture does without a poem’. Jan Mukařovský, ‘Sémantický rozbor básnického díla: Nezvalův Absolutní hrobař’, *Slovo a slovesnost* 4 (1938): pp. 1–15.
- 15 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *L’informe: mode d’emploi* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996). For more on Surrealist dictionaries, see: Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*. (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 27–31.
- 16 Kramář was probably embraced by this circle of collaborators because he was an expert on, and collector of, the work of Picasso, one of the *Documents* group’s favourite artists. At the same time, Kramář’s work fitted in well with the trend towards the respectably scientific, in which *Documents* also partook to some extent.
- 17 Allan Stoekl, ‘Introduction’, in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 11.
- 18 Denis Hollier, ‘La valeur d’usage de l’impossible’, in *Documents*, 1 (reprint) (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), pp. 7–34.
- 19 Denis Hollier, ‘The Use Value of the Impossible’, in Carolyn Bailey Gill (ed.), *Bataille: Writing the Sacred* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 142.
- 20 Georges Bataille, ‘Informe’, *Documents* 1 (1929): p. 382.
- 21 Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1993), p. 167.
- 22 Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, ‘Ce que voit et ce que fait voir Sima aujourd’hui’, *Documents* 2 (1930): pp. 301–302.
- 23 Karel Teige, ‘Z Paříže’, *ReD* 2 (1928–1929): pp. 322–323.
- 24 *ReD* 3 (1929–1931), p.107. Other members of the *Documents* circle included Artaud, Queneau, Callois, Boiffard, etc.
- 25 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 43–85.
- 26 *Zvěrokruh* 1 (1930): p.43; Georges Bataille, ‘Eye’, in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 19 (modified translation).
- 27 *Zvěrokruh* 1 (1930): p. 45.
- 28 Vítězslav Nezval, *Dílo* 32 (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1980), p. 205.
- 29 For more on the specific character of *Kvart*, see: Karel Nábělek, ‘Kvart – Sborník poesie a vědy’, *Umění* 44 (1996): pp. 74–92.
- 30 When Jindřich Chaloupecký presented texts from Bataille’s book *Le Coupable* in *Listy* after the Second World War (*Listy* 1 (1947): p. 526), he made the assumption that the French author was being translated into Czech for the first time. As an aside on the fate of Bataille’s Christian name in the Czech lands, we might further note that in the index to the third volume of a collection of Teige’s work he was alternatively given the name Gaston.
- 31 Georges Bataille, ‘Base Materialism and Gnosticism’, in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 47.
- 32 Bataille, ‘Base Materialism and Gnosticism’, p. 51.
- 33 André Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’, in Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 183.
- 34 Georges Bataille, ‘The Language of Flowers’, in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 15.
- 35 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 236.
- 36 Allan Stoekl, ‘Introduction’, in *Visions of Excess*, p. 11.
- 37 Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’, p. 183.
- 38 Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’, p. 183.
- 39 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 108.
- 40 The pamphlet’s title referred to a pamphlet of the same name that Breton had published in 1924 on the occasion of the death of Anatole France. The crisis of 1929–1931 within the Surrealist movement is charted by Maurice Nadeau in *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964).
- 41 Adolf Hoffmeister, ‘Podzim v Paříži’, *Zvěrokruh* 1 (1930): p. 35.
- 42 Karel Teige, ‘Nadrealismus a Vysoká hra’, *ReD* 3 (1929–1931): p. 253.
- 43 Karel Srp, ‘Ediční komentář’, in Jindřich Štyrský, *Každý z nás stopuje svoji ropuchu*, ed. Karel Srp (Prague: Thyrus, 1996), pp. 142–151.
- 44 Karel Teige, ‘Nadrealismus a Vysoká hra’, p. 253.
- 45 Karel Teige, ‘Nadrealismus a Vysoká hra’, p. 254.
- 46 Karel Teige, ‘Nadrealismus a Vysoká hra’, p. 254.
- 47 Růžena Hamanová, ‘Surrealistický most Praha- Paříž’, in Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp (eds.) *Český surrealismus 1929–1953* (Prague: Prague City Gallery/Argo, 1996), pp. 22–27, 94–105; Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp, ‘Fragmenty snu’, in Bydžovská and Srp (eds.), *Český surrealismus*, pp. 28–47.
- 48 Josef Vojvodík examined the *Apocalypse* cycle in detail in his study “‘No Apocalypse, not now’: Symbolika a sémantika cyklu *Apokalypsa* (1929) Jindřicha Štyrského”, *Umění* 45 (1997): pp. 259–279.
- 49 Jindřich Štyrský, ‘Poznámka k výstavě Štyrského a Toyen’, *Musaion* 1 (1929–1930): p. 243.
- 50 Jindřich Štyrský, *Emilie přichází ke mně ve snu* (Prague: Edice 69, 1933), p. 7.
- 51 Karel Srp, ‘The Philosophy of the Recess’, *Umění* 44 (1996): pp. 41–52; Srp, ‘Images without Grammar’, *Umění* 43 (1995): pp. 551–567.
- 52 Salvador Dalí, *Deník génia* trans. Jan Vaněk (Olomouc: Votobia, 1994), pp. 16–19. Dalí, *Tajný život Salvadora Dalího*, trans. Ludmila Vaňková (Prague: NLN, 1994), pp. 246–254. See also: Dawn Ades, *Dalí* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1982), pp. 70, 74.

- 53 Plato, 'Parmenides', in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. and ed. B. Jowett (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. 48.
- 54 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 99.
- 55 For an interpretation of this work, see: Vojtěch Lahoda, 'Surrealismus z děř', in Bydžovská and Srp (eds.), *Český surrealismus*, pp. 239–240.
- 56 Jaromír F. Typlt (ed.), *Konfese Ladislava Živra* (Brno: Host, 1997), p. 45.
- 57 Typlt (ed.), *Konfese Ladislava Živra*, p. 45.
- 58 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, pp. 11–12.
- 59 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 11.
- 60 For a discussion of the motif of the eye in Štyrský and Toyen in the context of international Surrealism, see: Bydžovská and Srp, 'Halucinatorní, virtuální a mentální objekty', in Bydžovská and Srp (eds.), *Český surrealismus*, pp. 154–159.
- 61 Roland Barthes, 'La métaphore de l'oeil', *Critique* 195–196 (1963): pp. 772–777.
- 62 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 211–262.
- 63 Karel Srp, 'Slastná spojení: Krutosti koláží', in J. Machalický (ed.), *Česká koláž* (Prague: National Gallery in Prague, 1997), p. 116.
- 64 This drawing, which also has a painted version from 1935, is also interesting for the long, deep, backward tilt of the head, an ecstatic posture in which, according to Bataille, humanity's division between bodily axes is disturbed.
- 65 See: *Documents* 2/8 (1930): pp. 10–20.
- 66 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 82.
- 67 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 230.
- 68 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 83.
- 69 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 79.

# A 'Modern' Official Art: The School of Rome

JULIANNA P. SZÜCS



*While art history writing, including most selected texts in the present anthology, has long focussed on the avant-garde when studying the interwar decades, the essay below revisits another, less-discussed current of interwar art and culture. It was only in the past ten years or so that the existence and near-equal relevance of neo-Classicism, neo-Realism, and similar traditionalist tendencies have also earned the attention of scholars in East-Central Europe. Their explorations propose that both the avant-garde and its counterpart had a wide transnational reach, both with a range of local variations, traditionalism growing to be the de facto artistic mainstream of the period. The Hungarian art historian Julianna P. Szűcs was an early harbinger of the research direction investigating conservative aesthetics in the 1920s and 1930s. Her writings on the School of Rome date back to the 1980s, and the essay selected for our reader was originally published as 'Egy "modern" hivatalos művészet: a római iskola', in Valóság 5 (1981): pp. 35–44. The School of Rome designates a group of artists who held scholarships from the Hungarian state to spend a year or two at the Palazzo Falconieri, the Hungarian Academy (Collegium Hungaricum) in Rome, from the late 1920s on. (BH)*

## A 'Modern' Official Art: The School of Rome

The debate is naturally always the same: should politics manifest itself in art, or should art enter politics?

Giuseppe Bottai, Italian Minister of National Education, 1941

Giuseppe Bottai's question was one frequently asked in interwar totalitarian dictatorships. It was a logical consequence of the historical role adopted by organisations that controlled culture in non-bourgeois democracies, Fascist states, and states in the process of becoming Fascist. In 'ideal circumstances' then, art and politics would mutually influence one another. The annexation of Trieste was not only celebrated by black-shirt loyalist Futurists; the March on Rome was itself a Futurist gesture. And it was not only three-storey statues by Adolf Hitler's official sculptor Josef Thorak that outgrew the traditional size of memorials; earlier ceremonial conventions were also surpassed by the Nuremberg Party days' *Gesamtkunst*-style mystery plays.

And what of the visible memories of Admiral Miklós Horthy's reign, 1920 to 1944? Events commemorating the 1526 Battle of Mohács, the nine-hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Imre in 1930 to 1931, or the Eucharist World Congress of 1938? Precisely! According to contemporary sources, artistic representations were homogenous neither in the post-Trianon state nor within the church of that state, often referred to as the 'Country of Holy Mary'.<sup>1</sup> The reason behind this was the pseudo-aristocratic taste of a neo-Baroque society, a chauvinist atmosphere that fostered an artificial feeling of community, and, most of all, a sort of conservatism that forced stylistic backwardness on the fine and applied arts, especially in comparison to other art forms.

The official art of counter-revolutionary Hungary was pluralist. Therefore, if we wish to examine the fate of the School of Rome (Római Iskola), the official art that appeared the most modern in Hungary at the time, we also need to reckon with the *whole* within which it was created, in which it flourished, and in which it fought for its existence. The School of Rome represented, in the eyes of many contemporaries, an art that was part of a 'universal' phenomenon emphasising a new consciousness above and beyond the nation, a new European attitude towards life; it stood against both liberal bourgeois cosmopolitanism and the internationalism of revolutions. The body of this 'new Europe-consciousness' was the Latin legacy, its spirit was Christianity, and it operated through the rehabilitation of traditional values. This qualified as the tendency's relative stylistic unity.

The School of Rome had to struggle for its existence, fighting against art representing the wealthy class (*art pompier*); against the art of revolutions (avant-garde); the representational regimes of the 'historically-dominant classes' (academic art, neo-Baroque); and, later, against the nationalistic representational forms of Turanism emphasising racial characteristics.

It was largely in retrospect, in compendiums published in the 1930s, that the School of Rome was referred to as a school. Crucially, however, this designation as a school meant more of a tendency, rather than an association or group of people. Moreover, it was a consciously-constructed tendency, one that demonstrated a relative stylistic unity on the one hand and, on the other, an aesthetic platform that had repercussions for the oeuvres of individual artists. Its main characteristic was thus the artists' behavioural and methodological affinity. The circle of artists around the school was, however, not identical to those who had been awarded fellowships in Rome. The School of Rome was a consciously-built, institutionally-sponsored tendency, not the result of any spontaneous gathering.

The 'career history' of this official art cannot have been as bright as the politicians, ideologists, and cultural critics imagined it, due in part to the fact that only one side of Bottai's question was applicable in Hungary under the circumstances: politics manifested itself in art. But the art discussed here did not enter politics, or not directly. The following study analyses whether this was unfortunate or lucky.

Part of the generation of artists that came of age after the 1920 Treaty of Trianon loathed all forms of revolution or avant-garde. Yet the style of 'yesterday' did not fit their worldview either: they rejected both the *Kunsthalle* type of painting and the neo-Baroque, associated with the Habsburgs. Rather, they sought traditional values, a search typical across Europe at the time.

Art history has regarded the neo-Classicism of the 1920s as a universal phenomenon, one that relied on the continuity of traditional values on the one hand, and on the other, certain proto-avant-garde currents that had not yet radically demolished centuries of aesthetic conventions. In France, neo-Classicism emerged partly from synthetic Cubism and partly under the influence of Art Deco, a style fundamentally more respectful towards tradition. In Germany, neo-Classicism trickled down on the figural accomplishments of the Bauhaus and manifested itself as an outcome of New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), and Classicist tendencies could be found in the art of almost all European countries at that time.

These tendencies were most prominent in Italian art, in the style comprehensively referred to as Novecento. When launched in 1926 by Massimo Bontempelli, *Novecento* as a journal and movement declared a 'return to order', and while its tone resembled the manifestos of the 'isms', it attempted to convene post-revolutionary cultural forces amenable to the reactionary consolidation underway. Their anti-Bolshevism remained in the shadows for a long while, producing no authentic or impressive official art. Following the Fascist takeover, for some years still, the spectacular battles continued to be played out between Futurism and Ottocento (in other words, between revolution and tradition). But as the Mussolini regime accomplished its finest move of 'modernisation' and made its pact with the church and even its European competitors, neo-Classicism could be immediately promoted into the ranks of official art.

The Italian example of accommodating a certain form of modernism held special significance for Hungarian official art. On the one hand, it was tempting to take the art of a country also 'betrayed' by the 'Trianon Peace dictators' as a cultural political reference point, notwithstanding that the former was their ally.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Italian modernity was particularly adept at counterbalancing another type of modernity, the one committed to Socialist revolution. However self-evident this thesis may seem, the administrators of Hungarian art world only start to rely on it belatedly and even then inconsistently. It took a long time, essentially the entire 1920s, until any other tendency than the one represented by the Fine Arts Society and *Képzőművészet* (*Fine Arts Journal*) could come to represent official Hungarian art.

The first moment of this change in attitude was undoubtedly expressed by Tibor Gerevich's writing, notably in 1922: 'At the Venice Biennale opening in May, let us be prepared to encounter a completely different Italian art than the one we knew before the war. Let us endeavour to use what we learn there to the advantage of Hungarian fine arts, because we are not setting off for Venice just for prizes ... but also to learn for ourselves'.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, at this point in time, private collectors and official representation still demanded both conservatism and the peacetime norms of the *fin-de-siècle*, even if the liberal bourgeoisie, the state, and the church

understood these differently. Gerevich had identified the weakest link in this chain of demands: the church. The economic and moral basis of Horthy's Christian Socialist counterrevolution was in the hands of the Catholic church. This was the era of de-secularisation: church investments rose significantly in Budapest and elsewhere, particularly to the west of the Danube, although this was not, however, accompanied by an improvement of the quality or quantity of religious art, where skill levels stagnated throughout the 1920s. It is only in this context that we can understand how the School of Rome, the style and aesthetics of which formed alongside secular and Fascist Novocento, eventually turned into a religious and bourgeois trend in Hungary.

Initially, the notion of the School of Rome was an undoubtedly 'administrative' one: its founders meant to integrate all those who had studied in the Palazzo Falconieri into a coherent group. One indicator of Hungarian-Italian political and cultural cooperation was the re-opening of the Hungarian Academy in Rome. The building fell under Italian ownership after the Treaty of Trianon, and was later returned to Hungary by Benito Mussolini as a friendly gesture in 1923. In a similar gesture of friendship in 1927, the year of the agreement between Mussolini and Hungarian prime minister István Bethlen, the Hungarian Academy was officially opened as a permanent facility for postgraduate academic and artistic training. But, as a newspaper critic pointed out, artists who benefitted from this opportunity to experience art not only via an intermediary, but to actually see the cultural monuments produced and developed by Italian civilisation, did not start out as equals among themselves. This diverse group included established painters such as István Szőnyi; artists who had already abandoned avant-garde influences despite their Parisian education, for example Jenő Medveczky; and recent graduates of the Budapest Fine Arts Academy, such as László Rozgonyi and György Kákay-Szabó. The selection was heavily influenced by elements of cultural policy. The Italophile Gerevich, a devotee of sacred art, wished that 'the foundations [would] begin concurrently in every field (architecture, sculpture, painting and applied arts), in parallel and interwoven with one another, so that the desired new style and new spirit will take shape from mutually influencing branches of art'.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the occasional differences in style among the grantees of the first years were irrelevant. Vilmos Aba-Novák and Károly Patkó may have painted in the spirit of Paul Cézanne, and Gyula Hincz may have had to be 'rescued' from 'excessive Parisian and Berlin trends', just as goldsmith Mária Molnár's over-adorned Hungarian style may have been reminiscent of the bygone *fin-de-siècle*: all were selected in the hope that they would become the creators of a new *Gesamtkunst*.

However, the communication and acceptance of this endeavour did not proceed smoothly. While exhibitions counted on the presence of middle-class buyers, sacral commissions were issued as a result of skirmishes between the conservative but quality-oriented Central Bureau of Church Art (Egyházművészeti Hivatal) and the equally conservative but less quality-conscious clergy. With the exception of Béla Rerrich's plans for the cathedral square in Szeged and the 1926 *Exhibition of Christian Art (Egyházművészeti Kiállítás)*, hardly any initiatives of the 1920s could provide inspiration for a reinvigorating religious art. (The 1926 exhibition did feature, however, new talents, such as Pál Molnár C., Henrik Heintz, György Kákay-Szabó, and many iconographical elements that would later become central for the School of Rome.) Apparently, the new creative tendency could only gradually fill the airless vacuum that had existed before.

Tibor Gerevich, as Biennale commissioner, first introduced the fellows of Palazzo Falconieri on the international stage in Venice. In 1928, he only displayed works from a few promising artists. These included Vilmos Aba-Novák, the envisioned headmaster (or *caposcuola*) of the guild-like school; István Szőnyi, the promising neo-Classicist; and Kálmán Istókovits, a flexible continuer of earlier traditions. In 1930, however, an unexpected opportunity provided itself to Gerevich, the school's convener: that year the Biennale's general programme ran under the title *Italian Influence in the Art of Various Nations*, and this allowed for a more complete presentation of works by the first years' intake. Alongside recurring Biennale participants such as Lipót Hermann, Béla Iványi-Grünwald, and Adolf Fényes, a group of young artists also now appeared, whose new voice struck a sharply-different tone from the masters of pre-war, liberal, *grand bourgeois* Impressionism. The press focussed mainly on works by Vilmos Aba-Novák, Jenő Medveczky,

Pál Molnár C., Dezső Erdey, and Ernő Jalics, and questioned the justification for the selection. A statement from Nándor Gyöngyösi, representing the journal *Képzőművészet* in particular, and the conservative Hungarian art scene in general, is a case in point: 'We would be most delighted had Professor Tibor Gerevich been able to assemble such a good survey of the works of Collegium Hungaricum fellows that merits the distinction. As every visitor could have seen at first glance, however, young art students were disproportionately represented'.<sup>5</sup> In 1930, the group appearance and the accomplishments of the School of Rome still upset the old-school representatives of art administration. The successes in Italy, the praise regularly published in *Popolo d'Italia* (*The People of Italy*), or the generous analyses in Gio Ponti's paper *Casabella* (which resembled the Hungarian *Tér és Forma* (*Space and Form*)), were not yet sufficient to provide a basis for securing commissions. The first cohorts were mainly characterised by their indisputable anti-conservatism; this in itself aroused expectations among a more open-minded section of the Hungarian middle class, and animated a relatively large band of artists ... If we examine the list of students from the first three years, it becomes clear that the only thing they shared was a lack of commitment towards artistic trends. Their attraction to religion, Italian Fascism, or spirituality was a mere consequence of an overall feeling of uncertainty and non-belonging.

At the same time, they could not possibly extricate themselves from the spirit of Rome. Excerpts from various progress reports read as follows: 'Under the influence of old and new classical art, the light-dissolving technique of painter Vilmos Aba-Novák became more enclosed and plastic'. It was written of Alfréd Bardon that 'as well as ancient monuments, he also studied modern Roman architecture'. The sculptor Livia Kuzmik made busts of Mussolini and Monti, and 'the Italian Prime Minister honoured her on many occasions by sitting for the bust'. Pál Pátzay's work 'made room for a calm, expansive, minimalist, almost Classicist concept under Roman influences'. The ceramicist Ferenc Szuchy aimed to 'gain an understanding and practical mastery of contemporary Italian majolica methods as well as those of the Etruscans, the ancient Romans, and the della Robbia family'.

This new voice, new subject matter, and most of all the new approach to art made their debut for the Hungarian audience at the 1931 National Salon (Nemzeti Szalon). The opportune timing of the joint appearance was corroborated by reviews in the liberal press. In this era, a particular emphasis was still discernible: 'Italophilia', 'Catholicism', and 'modernity' coincided in the works of the best artists in a way that could win praise from both the bourgeois liberal intelligentsia and circles closer to the establishment. This shared position was mirrored in the moderate *Pesti Hírlap* (*Pest Journal*), in which László Kézdy-Kovács wrote that 'those who left for abroad, worked honourably for Hungarian culture. Many of them also reaped great success'.<sup>6</sup> But he also warned: 'We must nevertheless take care that the "Roman regulars" also make space for new talents'. The critics in *Újság* (*The Newspaper*) and *Budapesti Hírlap* (*Budapest Courier*) dispensed with even such subtle objections, stating that the School of Rome's debut was indeed a revelation.

What drove observers of these emerging new values into the same camp when it came to the School of Rome? First and foremost, it was the aforementioned relative stylistic unity. In what was now an 'ism'-free Hungarian art world, Aba-Novák's city sketches were intriguingly novel; albeit carefully, and somewhat idiosyncratically, they utilised techniques pioneered in post-Futurism, the dubious innovations of the Aeropainters (*Aeropittori*) who painted 'from aeroplanes'. Pál Molnár C.'s *Annunciation* (*Angyali üdvözlés*) captivated both viewers who had not yet experienced first-hand a graceful ease in painting like Raoul Dufy's, and those fascinated by the depiction of deserted cityscapes reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's works (Fig. 20.1). Ilona Vég's gently S-shaped *Woman in Bathing Suit* (*Fürdőruhás nő*), wearing the neo-frivolous facial expression in vogue at the time, equally won over critics who missed the Art Deco elegance of the 1920s in the works of other School of Rome pupils, and those who regarded neo-Gothic Lehmbruck-style proportions as the only path to be followed. This duality was integral to the sociology of the School of Rome's reception, which reflected the taste of a disorientated Hungarian interwar middle class, yearning for refreshment, rather than the actual character of the works themselves, the latter being far more complex.





Fig. 20.1. Pál Molnár C., *Annunciation* (*Anyali üdvözlés*, c. 1940). Oil on canvas, 100 x 70 cm. Gallery Kieselbach, Budapest. © DACS 2019

In most cases, the public encountered double-layered works. Paintings by more significant artists (such as Aba-Novák's *Musica in piazza* and *Circus* (*Cirkusz*), Károly Patkó's *Motherhood* (*Anyaság*) and *Still Life* (*Csendélet*), István Szőnyi's *My Mother* (*Anyám*) and *Bathers* (*Fürdőzők*), and Pál Pátzay's successful *Dada* (*Nanny*) and *Sadness* (*Szomorúság*)) represented, on the one hand, the virtues bequeathed by Cézanne and Aristide Maillol's neo-Classicism to Hungarian art scenes deprived of a revolutionary left, 'going as far as possible' in an era of institutionalised conservatism and, on the other, virtues that were the result of 'studying the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento, an advanced depiction of space, the elevation of vital aspects of reality, solid plasticity and healthy formalism' (Fig. 20.2).<sup>7</sup> Yet the selection and organisational concept of the National Salon could only mirror a retouched and one-dimensional image of the School of Rome.

Nevertheless, this balancing attempt itself was capable of breaking up prejudices. For the purposes of a new emerging official art, the close connection between Italianness and Futurism had to be eliminated, the connection between Italianness and sacred art established, and finally the notions of the church and modernism entwined. These unnatural acts of loosening and tightening won support from both Tibor Gerevich and Minister of Culture Bálint Hóman. The first major step was the strong representation of School of Rome apprentices in the 1931 Padua *International Exhibition of Modern Sacred Christian Art*, which also brought the first international recognition for Aba-Novák (grand gold prize) and Pál Molnár C. (graphics prize). In the wake of this exhibition, Gerevich could claim for the first time that modern art was 'creative and not imitative, spiritual and not materialist', and that religion would play a new, larger role in modern art 'not only because tormented humanity yearns for God, but also because in today's global economic crisis, the church will become the main patron of the arts once again'.<sup>8</sup> From here on it was only a small step to Tibor Gerevich's 1932 statement in the *Nemzeti Újság* (*National Newspaper*):

Fascism has done away with not only the politics but also the entire ideology of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, and liberated the Italian spirit from the rule of alien, materialist, positivist and Marxist theories ... It was clear from the start that Fascism would seek rapprochement with the church, because both are based on the principle of authority and fight for spiritual and moral ideals.<sup>9</sup>

The 'de-ideologisation' of modernism was officially acknowledged by Minister of Culture Bálint Homán himself, directly upon assuming office: 'I find it desirable that our artists pursue their activities in any artistic field united in respect for the great traditions of the past ... There is no direction towards left or right, only art'.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 20.2. Károly Patkó, *Motherhood* (*Anyaság*). Tempera, board, 90 x 66 cm. Gallery Kieselbach, Budapest.



As contemporary sources reveal, the National Salon exhibition could only present one side of the School of Rome: the stylistic affinities. This was a moment in art history when a form of relation could be posited between the illustration-like affectation of Ferenc Dex's *Self-Portrait*, for example, and Béla Kontuly's *Street Dancers in Tivoli*, and which brought Kákav-Szabó's cool-mannered *Portrait of Miss Signorelli* into proximity with Pál Molnár's *Portrait of Lady Amalfi*. However, the confines of an exhibition that otherwise observed bourgeois structures allowed no room to reveal anything beyond stylistic resemblance. The aspiration towards total art could only come forth in larger scale commissions that could testify to the existence of the trend more effectively than occasional shows abroad, temporary exhibitions, and theoretical articles. Therefore, the most important junctures in the history of the School of Rome were commissions for churches and their interior design, or the participation at festivities which exceeded the possibilities offered for the average middle-class artist.

The first impressive proofs to testify to the viability of the propositions of the School of Rome were the Heart of Jesus church and the Saint Antal church, in the Budapest districts of Városmajor and Pasarét, respectively, as well as the chapel at Balatonboglár. All three buildings (erected in 1932) represent symptomatically-fleeting moments in the history of official art. In one sense, they clearly demonstrated the sort of stylistic shifts that could be mastered while in Italy; their relative isolation, however, suggests that this type of 'Europeanising' Novecentism found it difficult to put down roots in Hungary. We should not forget that Mussolini's Italy could rightly claim to have mastered modernism, just at the time when the 'Soviet style' started to elicit negative assessments. Theorists also drew on the formal experiments imbued with new content. In this respect, we should note Tibor Gerevich's art historical overview in the volume *The New Paths of Hungarian Historiography (A magyar történetírás új útjai*, edited by Bálint Hóman): 'Naturally, the Russians' Soviet official art is first and foremost a propaganda art, it is conservative, the most outdated and boring academic art; while in anti-Communist Italy, Futurism is the government-fostered official art, its political arsenal, so to speak'.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Futurism was meant to be used as a collective term for modernism, just as Constructivism had been used earlier on the political left. Another article contrasting the 'Italian style' with 'Soviet style' was penned by Virgil Bierbauer in his journal *Tér és Forma*, an author who was also first to defend the related outputs of a total art.<sup>12</sup>

What were the decidedly 'de-ideologised' modern properties of the churches built? First of all, the basic cuboid form of the building. So much so that the consecration of the Városmajor church in 1932 provoked a press debate over its 'almost Soviet' style, while the Pasarét church prompted parliamentary interpellations. Only one of the Városmajor architects, Bertalan Árkay, had received a scholarship to Rome. The other architects, Gyula Rimanóczy and Iván Kotsis, at best comprehended the spirit of Italian architecture which 'allowed artists to use decorative statues and wall paintings, and to give expression to such skills'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, all three architects built decidedly-Mediterranean-style buildings, with Italianesque bell towers and window shutter structures, and even more Italianesque interior decor. As accomplishment, the Városmajor church was of the highest quality, not only because it was designed by father and son, Ákos and Bertalan Árkay, or because Róbert Folly's novel, reinforced concrete construction was itself one of the most remarkable achievements of Hungarian interwar architecture, but also because the School of Rome disciples regarded it as their own and, with their contributions, endeavoured to retain its stylistic unity. Upon encountering Pál Pátzay's statues of the Apostles, Lili Sztehló's stained glass windows for the apse or, a few years later, Béla Ohmann's *Saint Ladislaus Altar (Szent László oltár)*, Aba-Novák's panel and shrine paintings, and István Pekáry's decorative works, the general public first grasped that 'the transformation and the new way of life demands a new art, even if official circles keep dreaming of a Hungarian baroque'.<sup>14</sup> These sacral compositions enjoying a permanent public made it clear—clearer than the School of Rome's temporary exhibitions (*New Art from Rome*, National Salon, 1936, or the *8 Painters–8 Sculptors* series)—that the dry painting style, the primacy of content over emotions and the various archaic exercises dressed in modernist garb would only truly bring home their message when they could unfold outside the constraints of genres catering to traditional middle-class demands.



Fig. 20.3. Vilmos Aba-Novák, fresco for the church of Jászszentandrás, Hungary (1933). Photograph © Zoltán Bagyinszki.

Such a *pro forma* anti-bourgeois stance was a constant feature throughout the history of the School of Rome. Both painters and sculptors could fall back on it, since the general poverty in which artists lived, regardless of whether they were left-wing or not, turned young talents against bourgeois patrons. It also worked well for the school administrators, since this anti-liberal phraseology echoed that of Italian Fascist art. Finally, it could also speak to certain cultural politicians whose opinions on artistic representation differed from those of their predecessors. Nevertheless, the three churches mentioned earlier, the Klebelsberg memorial exhibition's interior design (1933, also delivered by Roman fellows), and Aba-Novák's controversial frescos in Jászszentandrás (1933), were still too richly imbued with precisely those modernist stylistic characteristics that filled non-bourgeois commissioners with anxiety (Figs. 20.3 and 20.4).





Fig. 20.4. Vilmos Aba-Novák, fresco for the church of Jászszentandrás, Hungary (1933) [detail]. Photograph © Zoltán Bagyinszki.

For the time being, commissioners granted larger projects to artists like Andor Dudits and Gáspár Fábián (frescoes at the National Archive and the church on Budapest's Lehel Square, respectively), rather than to the 'Romans' who tended to sidestep the bureaucratic procedures of the Central Bureau of Church Art. Somewhat dissenting from the school's founding concept, these artists exhibited at the National Salon and Ernst Museum between 1931 and 1932 (including Pál Molnár C., Vilmos Aba-Novák, Károly Patkó, Pál Pátzay, György Kákay-Szabó, and others), already attracting a new group of buyers with their more acerbic, drawing-like, mythical panel paintings rich in neo-frivolity, or with their heavily outlined woodcuts and voluminous copperplate etchings. (Whereas Károly Patkó, the Basilides brothers, Kálmán Istókovics, and the artists who would become regular members of the artists' colonies of Szolnok or Zebegény generally remained on conventional terms of artist-audience contact and the corresponding, supposedly traditionally-'Hungarian' forms of expression.)

The controversial churches, the new and excessively bold frescoes, and a religious art decried as 'liberal' could only gain acceptance in Hungary with support from an indisputable authority. Such an opportunity presented itself at an exhibition in Rome that was meant to reflect Pope Pius XI's edicts on Christian art, and, for similar reasons, the Hungarian hall at the *Second International Exhibition of Sacred Art (II mostra internazionale d'arte sacra, 1934)* could win cultural political significance, even if the works on view were not necessarily among the most important of the respective oeuvres. The Italian press highlighted Béla Ohmann's *Crucifix (Kereszt)*, Vilmos Aba-Novák and Ferenc Chiovini's fresco design for Jászszentandrás, and Lili Sztehló's *Annunciation (Angyali üdvözlet)* (the latter purchased by Mussolini himself).<sup>15</sup> The same unified style was represented by Ernő Jeges and Béla Kontuly, Lívia Kuzmik and Aurél Emőd, and, the most modern of all, Jenő Medveczky and László Mészáros.

But it was not individual accomplishments that caused a sensation. Having garnered international experience with the Padua exhibition, Tibor Gerevich had a compact environment designed within which samples from the commission-hungry Hungarian pack would be displayed.

It was thus Bertalan Árkay's design of an imagined, ruined, Roman chapel that finally secured the success and authority required to overcome remaining opposition and procure commissions to construct new churches in the countryside towns of Csorna, Győr, Mohács, or in Budapest's Pozsonyi Road. This was the turning point that also brought individual recognition for some Roman scholarship holders. From 1934 onwards until the end of the Second World War, Budapest's József Ferenc prize was awarded grantees of the Roman scholarship almost every time.

A gradual reassessment of the School of Rome as phenomenon dates back to this time. As relative stylistic unity receded, an aesthetic programme came to the foreground around which formed the base of cultural political intentions and which, however, the artists themselves did not quite fully recognise. The first half of the school's history was characterised by a decidedly international style, a formal language that also raised high expectations among quality-conscious observers of any new endeavour. They hoped that the 'objectivity and concrete language' that this style possessed 'would gradually improve the relationship between the art work and its public'.<sup>16</sup> The harvest was eventually reaped by those who managed to combine, and even occasionally substitute, neo-Classicism with the requirements of monumentalism. This was the reason why, in the second half of the decade, Szőnyi, Pátzay and others who had only occasionally received a share in large-scale state and church commissions parted with the school's conceptual framework. Meanwhile the school's core disciples now had to conform to the specific demands of the official commissioners.

This new demand became visible on several occasions: in 1937 at the Hungarian Pavilion of the Paris International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life (decorated by School of Rome apprentices) and at the *Modern Monumental Art (Modern Monumentális Művészet)* exhibition of the National Salon; at the visual arts programmes of the festivities around the Year of Saint Stephen or the Eucharistic Congress (both in 1938); as well as in the 1941 *Exhibition of Hungarian Church Art (Magyar egyházművészeti kiállítás)*, where the relative stylistic unity of the school became ultimately subordinated to the dictates of cultural policy.

At the start of this deterioration, Vilmos Aba-Novák, Pál Molnár C., and Jenő Medveczky's Parisian panels seemed to illustrate the demise of art for art's sake and other gratuitous experiments unfolding in front of our very eyes: the various branches of decorative painting and sculpture are about to triumph, and they are consigning to the background the type of easel painting and sculpture that lacks large, unifying tasks and relies instead on the artist's fleeing inspiration. Works like the ones depicting *Franco-Hungarian Historical Relations (Francia-magyar történeti kapcsolatok)*, *The Land of Trianon (A trianoni ország)*, or *Hungarian Agriculture (Magyar mezőgazdaság)* announced that they were 'preserving the good international reputation of our art and culture and even elevating us higher: promoting the sons of the little country and oppressed nation into the ranks of the fortunate, happy sons of the great powers living in prosperity'.<sup>17</sup> For the time being, Hungarian attributes attached to an international neo-Classicism still proved sufficient to accentuate the national element.

This 'national turn' in the School of Rome's style and the ambition to represent the state were first clearly seen at the National Salon in 1937. This show still included familiar altar paintings by Pál Molnár C. deploying Trecento and Surrealist overtones (*Madonna*), and artistic sculptures for church use with fine drapery and an archaic smile (Jenő Grandtner's *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (Magyarországi Szent Erzsébet)*). Novelty, however, was to be found in other works. 'The absorption of folk-like elements is one of the most pressing questions of modern Hungarian art, to which the exhibition offers healthy answers', as Zoltán Nagy wrote.<sup>18</sup> Examples included works by School of Rome pupils who did not limit themselves to mastering the Italian lesson, but went on to adapt and re-invent the principles of neo-Classicism for the Hungarian context: István Pekáry, Antal Diósy, and Hajni Kontuly. Beside applied arts, a number of sculptors also struck a new tone. Among them, perhaps the strongest personality was Zoltán Borberek-Kovács, in whose style 'we find no trace of the influence of either ancient Roman and Italian, or modern Italian sculpture'.<sup>19</sup> Instead, exhibition-goers could encounter those proportional and iconographic shifts which could authentically express, as it were, the alleged racial characteristics of the Hungarians.

A pure form of Novecentism proved equally unviable when included in auxiliary artistic programmes celebrating the marriage between church and state. Ensembles marking the Year of Saint Stephen already sought to display Christianity furnished with vernacular motives a sort of Christian-Hungarian archaism. The stylistic attributes of neo-Romanticism were now discernible in the reconstructed ruins of Székesfehérvár (Géza Lux's work), on Dezső Erdey's statue *Captain Varkocs* (*Varkocs kapitány*), or on the memorial for *Domonkos Kálmáncsehi* (by Béla Ohmann), as well as in many other works produced for the anniversary, such as Károly Antal's *Saint Stephen Relief* (*Szent István relief*) in Esztergom, Endre Domanovszky's tapestry in Pécs, and Ferenc Dex's fresco in Komárom.

During this period, the Rome fellows enjoyed a sizable portion of church and state investments. They produced not only Eucharistic memorial altars, but also smaller-sized graphics, medals, nativity cribs, and posters in line with Gerevich's original vision. True, later scholarship holders in Rome no longer fed on that form of orthodox neo-Classicism that had so captivated their predecessors. They had neither the authority nor the experience, and in line with domestic expectations, they relied on emphasising Hungarian elements, adopting at best a handful of compositional schemata learned in Italy, from Ferruccio Ferrazzi's frescos, to Ercole Drei's sculptures, and the Italy-wide popular Mannerism of the Scuola d'Arte (Béla Czene, János Czene, Erzsébet Hikády, Mária Kovács, Frigyes Matzon, and Eszter Mattioni).

This loss of direction and malleability of style were mirrored in the great church art exhibition of 1941, even if it is remembered today as the School of Rome's most convincing success. Unmistakable Árkay-style church interiors were still present, as well as a number of 'Italianesque' sculptures, but these were supplemented by other sorts of endeavours. Alongside Classicist works that already seemed to belong to art history, the younger generation showcased a *Hungarian Pietà* (*Magyar Pietà*, by Zoltán Borberek-Kovács), *Hungarian Madonna* (*Magyar Madonna*, by Ilona Szörédy), and even Hungarian vestments from the Kalocsa Folk Art House collection.

Monumentalism and neo-Classicism had ultimately parted ways. This was partly due to the fact that an orientation towards Germany had eclipsed the focus on Italy, that the most prominent masters died unduly early (both Vilmos Aba-Novák and Károly Patkó died in 1941), and that nationalist attacks were on the rise: the original 'stylistic unity' of the School of Rome came under fire from both the left (as in Ernő Kállai's articles in *Korunk Szava* (*Voice of Our Time*)) and the right. In the notorious far-right periodical *Egyedül vagyunk* (*We are Alone*), Tibor Gerevich's work was judged excessive in its efforts to promote the often pretentious artistic positions of a neo-Classical painting school that imitatively rehearsed the formal language of Trecento and Quattrocento. The individual successes enjoyed by some of the new church artists and new monumentalists also indicated that innovation-thirsty Christian art and new monumentalism did not exactly take shape according to Gerevich's ideals. The most representative attainments of the 1940s, such as Béla Kontuly's frescos in the Domonkos church, or the many works in the 1942 group exhibition, already bore witness to the neo-neo-Baroque and neo-folkish upswing (Fig. 20.5).

Although naming one year as the endpoint of the School of Rome would be just as arbitrary as marking its birth, and although the impact of neo-Classicism would be felt in Hungarian fine arts for decades to follow, it is fair to assert that the School of Rome ceased to exist as a cultural-political and complex art historical phenomenon at the start of the 1940s. It was not made to disappear by administrative means; rather, time ran out for the representational regime it subscribed to. Official art no longer aspired to tame the avant-garde or use it for its own ends, but to exploit the possibilities offered by emerging folkish and national endeavours.

*Translated by Gwen Jones*





Fig. 20.5. Béla Kontuly, fresco for the Assumption Cathedral, Vác, Hungary (1947). © DACS 2019. Image courtesy Globetrotter19 / Wikimedia Commons.

1 The Treaty of Trianon (1920) regulated the status of the Hungarian state after the First World War. It left Hungary as a landlocked country, covering barely one-third of the territory of the pre-war Kingdom of Hungary (the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy). It lost more than thirteen million inhabitants and 31% of Hungarian nationals were left outside the borders of post-Trianon Hungary. Five of the pre-war kingdom's ten largest cities were drawn into other countries. (*The Editor*).

2 Italy joined the Allied Powers in the First World War at the last minute, hoping to gain land after winning the war. Yet, it had a weak position at the peace conference and failed to achieve most of its major war goals. (*The Editor*).

3 Tibor Gerevich, 'A modern olasz művészet', *Új Nemzedék* 3 (1922): p. 19. (On Gerevich's activities, see also Kinga Bódi's essay in this volume – *The Editor*).

4 Tibor Gerevich, 'Római magyar művészek', *Magyar Szemle* 11 (1932): pp. 235–40.

5 Nándor Gyöngyösi, 'A velencei nemzetközi kiállítás', *Képzőművészet* 9 (1930): pp. 164–67.

6 László Kézdy-Kovács, *Pesti Hírlap* (12 May 1931).

7 Tibor Gerevich, 'Római magyar művészek', *Magyar Művészet* 4 (1931): pp. 189–212.

8 Tibor Gerevich, 'Újabb egyházművészeti törekvéseink a páduai és nürnbergi kiállítás tükrében', *Nemzeti Újság* 9 (1931): p. 17.

9 Tibor Gerevich, 'A fasizmus szellemi élete', *Nemzeti Újság* 4 (1932): p. 14.

10 Statement published in *Magyar Művészet* (1932): pp. 314–15.

11 Bálint Hóman (ed.), *A magyar történetírás új útjai* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1931).

12 Virgil Bierbauer, 'Sztálini architektúra', *Tér és Forma* 6 (1938): p. 2081.

13 Virgil Bierbauer, 'Új építészet Olaszországban', *Magyar Művészet* 11 (1935): pp. 330–38.

14 János Jajczay, *Mai magyar egyházművészet* (Budapest: Révai, 1938).

15 Mario Meneghini, 'Le Cosidette Arti Minori alla II. Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Sacra', *Osservatore Romano* 4 (1934): p. 12; Leone Gessi, 'La sala dell'Ungheria alla Mostra d'Arte Sacra', *Illustrazione Vaticana* (1934): pp. 206–8.

16 István Genthon, *Az új magyar festőművészet története* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1935), p. 273.

17 Jenő Kopp, 'Művészeink a párizsi világkiállításon', *Pesti Napló* (1937): pp. 328–32.

18 Zoltán Nagy, 'Modern monumentális művészet', *Magyar Szemle* (1937): pp. 329–36.

19 Zoltán Nagy, 'Az "1942" csoportkiállítás', *Szépítőművészet* 1 (194): pp. 85–7.





# Two Important Czech Institutions, 1938–1948

LUCIE ZADRAŽILOVÁ AND MILAN PECH

*Lucie Zdražilová (Skřivánková) is a curator at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, while Milan Pech is a researcher at the Institute of Christian Art at Charles University in Prague. Their text is a detailed archival study of the activities of two Czech art institutions, the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague and the Mánes Association of Fine Artists, during the Nazi Protectorate era and its immediate aftermath. The larger aim is to reveal that Czech cultural life was hardly dormant during the Protectorate, and to trace how Czech institutions negotiated the limitations, dangers, and interferences presented by the occupation. The Museum of Decorative Arts cautiously continued its independent activities and provided otherwise unattainable artistic information by keeping its library open. The Mánes Association of Fine Artists trod a similarly-careful path of independence, managing to avoid hosting exhibitions by representatives of Fascism and surreptitiously presenting modern art under the cover of traditionally-themed exhibitions. This essay first appeared in the collection *Konec avantgardy? Od Mnichovské dohody ke komunistickému převratu (End of the Avant-Garde? From the Munich Agreement to the Communist Takeover) in 2011.*<sup>1</sup> (JO)*

## Two Important Czech Institutions, 1938–1948

In the light of new information gained from archival sources and contemporaneous documents it is becoming ever clearer that the years of the Protectorate were far from a time of cultural vacuum. Credit for this is due to, among other things, the endeavours of many people to maintain at least a partial continuity in public services and to achieve as much as possible within the framework of the rules set by the Nazi occupiers. By looking at the inner workings of two important Czech institutions, the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague (Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze) and the Mánes Association of Fine Artists (SVU Mánes), we will be able to grasp the essence of those mechanisms that together created the culture of the Protectorate and which hitherto have only been drily described from the outside. Both institutions selected here followed similar aims in their relation to the public, although they used different means to fulfil them. The same is true in their methods of dealing with pressure coming from the occupying power, for here too we find a range of similarities and differences, revealing the true nature of Protectorate realities.

### The Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague

The attempt to find a *modus vivendi* amidst the ever-intensifying demands from the occupying power led the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague to some necessary concessions and compromises. While these may have led to the penetration of Nazi propaganda into the museum's exhibition halls, at the same time they enabled its employees to continue in their professional field, albeit in difficult conditions, and to build on the results of this activity after the war. A number of these employees saw their activity as a form of protest against the occupying power.<sup>2</sup> Of course this did not remain without response and on 22 August 1944 the Nazis ordered a stop to the activity of museums.<sup>3</sup> Several museum activities continued even in spite of this ban. After the war these activities came to fruition over a hopeful two-year period, following which this arduously-defended continuity was violently interrupted by the Communist takeover.

During the war the main priority was the protection of collections, whether from mechanical damage during bombings and military operations, or from the greed of the new administrators.<sup>4</sup> In September 1938 the employees had already packed up all their exhibition objects and hidden them in the building's cellar, and about a year later they concealed the rarest exhibits from their glass collection. In 1941 several groups of German historians of art from across the Reich came to Prague to look for bases for their future activity, but mainly to divide up the museum collections and prepare their transportation to Germany. The collection most threatened at the Museum of Decorative Arts was the city's pride: the Lanna glass collection. All the participating groups showed an interest in it, and at Karlštejn Castle, where it was stored from 1942 onwards, the collection was supervised by the German leadership of the Heritage Institute



Fig. 21.1. Part of the Czechoslovak exposition for the New York World's Fair, with a model of the pavilion, as displayed at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague (1939). Black-and-white photograph. Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

(Památkový ústav). In 1942 the necessity arose of building shelters for museum objects both in and outside Prague.<sup>5</sup> The leadership of the museum left nothing to chance and up until May 1945 relocated the most valuable collections to places about which only a select few people knew.

The museum's scholarly work continued very quietly through the whole of the Protectorate era, resulting in large retrospective exhibitions dedicated to significant Czech and European figures—Jan Koula (1939), Josef Mánes (1940), Jan Štenc (1941), and Zdeněk Rykr (1941)—as well as thematic exhibitions of miniature portraits and of old Italian book art (both 1941). Long preparations were also demanded by the extensive exhibition *1000 Years of Czech Photography* (*Sto let české fotografie*, 1939), and in 1940 all the museum's halls and even its garden were filled with the exposition *Towards a New Architecture* (*Za novou architekturu*), which mapped out the birth and development of modern architecture and urbanism in the Czech lands.<sup>6</sup> Exhibitions like *Antonín Dvořák, His Effects and Works* (*Antonín Dvořák, památky a dílo*) or the *Competition for a Monument to Božena Němcová* in Prague (both 1940) were intended to raise national self-esteem. There was, likewise, a political subtext to the exhibition *1000 Years of Norwegian Art* (*1000 let norského výtvarného díla*, 1938), which expressed the support of the Norwegian people for the Czech lands after the Munich Agreement, and in March 1939 the display of that part of the Czechoslovak exposition for the 1939 World's Fair in New York that never reached its intended place, due to intervention by the German occupiers, offered a memento of political events (Fig. 21.1).<sup>7</sup>

The museum also continued its collaboration with the School of Decorative Arts (Uměleckoprůmyslová škola) and in 1941 it organised an exhibition of work by the school's students in all disciplines from the past three years, an event that exceeded the normal scope of end-of-year art shows with its ingenious installation extending over three large exhibition halls (Fig. 21.2). Yet the press of the time was able to turn even this exhibition to propagandistic use: 'This is a revolutionary exhibition, because today's artists are finally, finally attaining reason and are attempting to create things that are comprehensible to the eyes and heart, truly beautiful things—not those insane realisations of wild avant-garde dreams in which a woman's body looked more like a crumpled haystack that is due to give birth'.<sup>8</sup> The museum connected back to pre-war discussions about new forms of living with its exhibition *Prague Crafts in the Service of New Living* (*Pražská řemesla ve službách nového bydlení*, 1940), which sought to offer a handmade alternative

Fig. 21.1. Part of the Czechoslovak exposition for the New York World's Fair, as displayed at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague (1939). Black-and-white photograph. Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.



to factory-produced, standardised furnishings. This exposition, very interesting from an installation perspective, aroused varying reactions in the press of the time, from enthusiastic acceptance to judgements about how the manufacturers 'are thinking far more about the tastes and satisfactions of individuals than about the needs of people in general', and it made both the professional and lay public engage once again with the question of modes of living.<sup>9</sup>

An invaluable role was played by the museum's public library, which functioned throughout the whole occupation era; in 1944 it attained a record number of visits since the library was founded in 1885, with almost forty thousand readers that year.<sup>10</sup> Visitors were not even discouraged by German inspections at the entrance or the threat of being reported to the Department of Labour, for during the Protectorate the library was such a necessary source of the information, difficult to access elsewhere, that artists and theoreticians were seeking after. Most of the then-students at professional art schools, including the School of Decorative Arts, spent a lot of time here, as did artists of the older generation. Surprising though it is, foreign periodicals and publications about such topics as Italian avant-garde art were available here; of course these were among the materials most in demand.<sup>11</sup> The most frequently-borrowed Czech journals were *Volné směry* (*Free Directions*) and the review of the Artists' Forum (*Umělecká beseda*), *Život* (*Life*).<sup>12</sup> Karel Herain alluded to the library's lending practices in his statement that 'banned literature, particularly English and French, was regularly lent out here to trustworthy people'.<sup>13</sup>

The key question is the extent of interference by the Nazi authorities into the museum's activities. The year 1940 saw the appointment of the German curator Karl Maria Swoboda,<sup>14</sup> who for 'cultural-political reasons' would not allow the opening of a display room for a model lighting system, designed by the architect Zdeněk Pešánek in collaboration with the Municipal Power Stations of the City of Prague.<sup>15</sup> It could be assumed that pressures greatly intensified at the time of Reinhard Heydrich's assassination, but it was actually August 1943 that made a mark on the institution's affairs, when the role of museum curator was taken by Sigfried Asche (until September 1944), the new director of the City of Prague Museum (*Muzeum hlavního města Prahy*).<sup>16</sup> What also made this year a negative turning point was the fact that the Central Union of Industry, governed by the Germans from the Czech border, then designated museums as purely peacetime institutions, whose interests had to be sacrificed for the benefit of wartime needs. The attempt to reduce and control exhibition activity was thus propagandistically presented



as the protection of collections, which should wait out the war as safely as possible packed up in boxes. Independent areas of public life were now really surrendered to wartime objectives, and so the Museum of Decorative Arts became, from November 1943 onwards, the seat of the German management of the former Czechoslovak military factory Letov, incorporated into the Junkers firm as Flugzeugwerke Letov A.G., which continually required a larger and larger space.

A look at the balance of Protectorate-era exhibition activities at the museum shows that exhibitions oriented to German propaganda were, up until 1944, in the minority.<sup>17</sup> Then, the new curator Sigfried Asche began to govern the museum's activities by directive and to give them a purely German character; as the museum's director Karel Herain accurately remarked, in this way 'were the real intentions of the Reich within its so-called protectorate best documented'.<sup>18</sup> Writing about three exhibitions of contemporary German handicrafts, which took place first in the borrowed premises of the Municipal House and in the last case at the so-called Braun's Shop (Braunův krám) on Na Příkopě 12, the Protectorate press spoke in superlatives, even though the exhibits were really only of average quality.<sup>19</sup>

The outcome of one initiative, in which the museum partook alongside the Institute for Work Science (Institut für Arbeitswissenschaft) during autumn 1942, can be described as an act of inconspicuous sabotage. For the Ministry of Economy and Work these institutions were supposed to design an effective recruitment poster that would increase participation by Protectorate members in work for the Reich. The poster was supposed to be symbolic, but also generally comprehensible.<sup>20</sup> 17 artists in total were invited to participate, among them Cyril Bouda, František Muzika, Josef Kaplický, Jaroslav Šváb, Jiří Trnka, and Karel Svoboda. The reward for each design was set at fifteen hundred koruna, and the author of the winning design was supposed to receive five thousand koruna. Considering the tense character of the period after the assassination of Heydrich, one can assume that it would have been very risky to refuse to participate. Given that the design that 'won', by painter Alexander Vladimír Hrska, had to have both its colour scheme and, more crucially, its slogan changed, and given that the artist himself claimed to be ill and incapable of further work on the design for so long that, to avoid complications, museum director Karel Herain finally had to come and speak to him personally, it is clear that the organisers did not receive any high-quality designs.<sup>21</sup> A similar initiative, this time for the recruitment of women, took place about a year later. Judging by the opinion expressed by senior councillor Heinrich Rieber in a letter to Karel Herain—that 'the majority of the designs submitted do not correspond to the given aims either artistically or intellectually; I hope that the unsuccessful result of this latest prize contest will not hinder our further collaboration'—the boycotting of this Reich initiative was even more effective.<sup>22</sup>

The Reich and Protectorate authorities used the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague for various kinds of propagandistic exhibitions. Besides the presentation of works by artists supported by the Nazi regime, such as the neo-Classical sculptor Fritz Klimsch or the painter Ernst Vollbehre, works documenting the wartime successes of the Reich, there was an intensive promotion of tourism and of hospitality and spa culture.<sup>23</sup> In Germany (and, following the Reich's model, in the Protectorate too) these themes were politicised: certainly, according to the Führer, good health should belong to all, not only to the chosen few. In May 1941 the Central Union for [Foreign] Tourism launched the exhibition *Photography for the Promotion of Tourism (Fotografie ve službách propagace cestovního ruchu)*, and on 21 March 1941 it launched *Recreation and Hospitality in Bohemia and Moravia (Erholung und Gastlichkeit in Böhmen und Mähren)*, an exhibition that toured the Protectorate's cities. Within the framework of the New Europe these lands were to be transformed into a recreation centre, and so the priority, following the model of the Reich, was to develop spa culture and increase sports grounds; it was necessary to 'apply all efforts in order that everything within the economy of tourism be prepared for responsible tasks in the future'.<sup>24</sup> In the light of this covert propaganda, a fervent inaugural statement by the author of the travelling ethnographic exhibition *Germany in Folk Costumes (Deutschland in Tracht)*, the German Marie Kerkmann, did not seem at all surprising. In it she referred to the unbelievable social and cultural advancement of the German people during the new regime, to the perfect organisation



of domestic industry and to the fact that countryside-dwellers in the Reich now lived, in their own words, in a virtual paradise.<sup>25</sup> The display of 150 costumes from all territories of the Greater German Reich recalled the National Socialists' esteem for folk traditions.

After the end of the war one of the museum's priorities was the renewal of disrupted connections with other countries, achieved first through the supply of specialised foreign periodicals and publications back into libraries, and later through the establishment of direct contacts with museum institutions in, particularly, the USA, Britain, Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, and France. In 1949 the museum became a member of a British museum organisation.<sup>26</sup> Through its choice of theme for its first post-war exhibition, the museum symbolically returned to the war period and its horrors, evoking the memory of painter Vojtěch Pressig, a member of the resistance organisation 'Into the Fight' ('V boj'), who had died in the Dachau concentration camp.<sup>27</sup> About a year later, on 9 February 1946, the collections were again made available in a brand new installation, while at the same time the museum set out its aims for its first two-year season: 'There will be a particular concern with preparing for a higher level of mass living, then with implementing the principles and preconditions of quality in production, and finally with mass education of an economic-cultural persuasion'.<sup>28</sup> The concrete fulfilment of these ideas was meant to take the form of a permanent exposition of samples of high-quality Czechoslovak and international production.<sup>29</sup> It is clear that, alongside its attempt at retaining continuity with the past and contacts with other countries, this institution was intending to focus more on actively helping to shape the form of contemporary applied art.<sup>30</sup> However, by the spring of 1948, social developments already began to be reflected in organisational changes at the museum. From 25 February onwards, leadership of the institution was entrusted to the art historian Emanuel Poche, who had worked at the museum since 1933. After his appointment Poche strove to weaken the influence of the Chamber of Commerce and Trade on the working of the museum and authored a proposal for the expansion of the museum's activities. He 'enhanced' the established programming with the exhibition of a representative selection of various kinds of artistic production, graphics, painting, and sculpture. Through the restoration of the unity of art and through steering away 'from the exclusivity of abstract and egocentric creations to a fruitful social function', the museum was supposed to contribute to the construction of the new Socialist Czechoslovakia.<sup>31</sup> These objectives attest well to a change in the thinking about this institution; indeed things were now only one step away from the nationalisation of the museum and the opening of a new chapter in its history.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Mánes Association of Fine Artists**

The political events connected with the Munich crisis also strongly impacted on the functioning of the Mánes Association of Fine Artists. If, during the first half of 1938, its exhibition programme had unfolded as in earlier years, when its priorities had included the confrontation of Czech art with foreign art, in the second half of that year substantial changes took place. Mánes still attempted to arrange an exhibition of its members in New York, and an exhibition of Czech modern art in London, but these were politely declined, no doubt in view of political tensions in Europe.<sup>33</sup> Also unrealised was an exhibition of 'Banned Art', which was supposed to come over from London and which had arisen in reaction to the *Degenerate Art* (*Entartete Kunst*) exhibition in Munich. Mánes had already shown an interest in it at the end of 1937. Negotiations failed over exhibitions of Swedish art, contemporary Italian art, and so on. During the course of the Protectorate there was not a single international exhibition organised by Mánes. The impossibility of making contact with other countries was compensated for after the war, when a continuous series of international exhibitions took place: in 1946 of contemporary French and Spanish (Republican) art; in 1947 of Yugoslav and Dutch art; in 1948 of English and Spanish art; in 1949 of Austrian and Belgian art (Fig. 21.3).

In 1938 the leadership of Mánes resolved the moral dilemma of whether to hold agreed-upon exhibitions of German and Hungarian art when both Germany and Hungary had shared in the annexation of Czechoslovakia's border regions. Finally it was decided that the exhibitions be cancelled and a letter bearing the same message was sent to both the Prague Secession

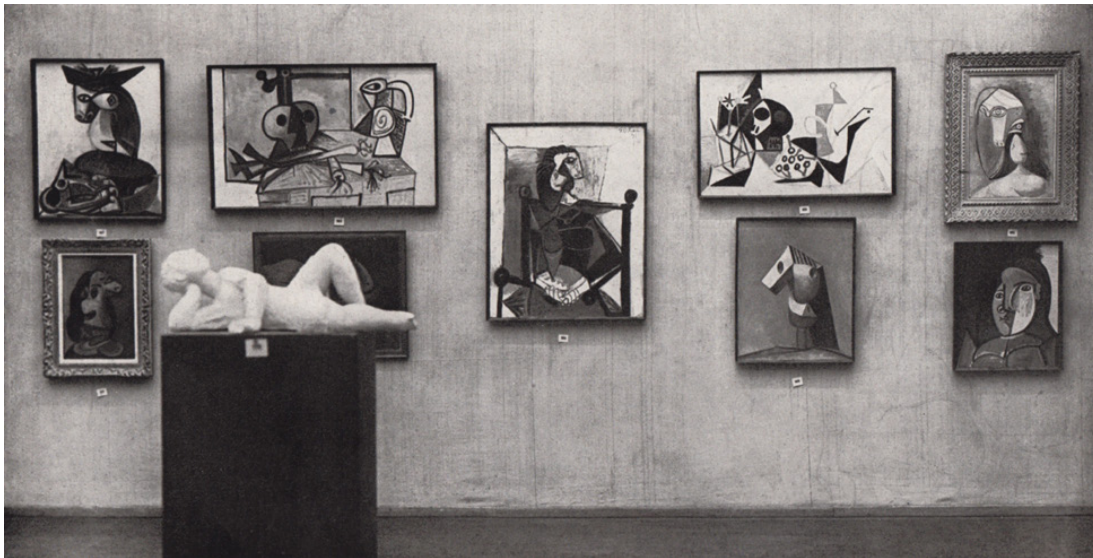


Fig. 21.3. *The Art of Republican Spain (Umění republikánské Španělska)* exhibition (1946). Black-and-white photograph. Reproduced from *Volné směry* 39 (1947): p. 243.

(Prager Sezession) and the artistic division of the Hungarian Society for the Sciences, Literature and Art: ‘Dear Sirs, we must regretfully inform you that the Mánes committee decided at its last meeting that, due to the current situation, we cannot hold your exhibition as we had discussed. You must yourselves recognise, dear sirs, that holding it at Mánes today would not be possible, that this would not be popular. Please accept, dear sirs, this expression of our sincere respect’.<sup>34</sup>

The following year Mánes had to resist pressure from the nationalist-fascist journal *Vlajka* (*Flag*), which wanted to use its exhibition spaces for the showing of the exhibition *The Jew—the Enemy of Humanity* (*Žid—nepřítel lidstva*). But for the date requested an exhibition of work by members of the Aleš Association of Fine Artists from Brno (SVUM Aleš) had already been prepared. Thanks to the fact that Aleš insisted on holding its exhibition, the anti-Semitic exhibition did not take place at Mánes. *Vlajka* was also evidently dissuaded by the sum it would have to pay to SVUM Aleš to compensate for the lost profits incurred by the cancelled exhibition. The exposition *The Jew—the Enemy of Humanity* was ultimately staged at the Pictura gallery.<sup>35</sup> Had it been held at Mánes, this would have seriously harmed the society’s good name. Even after the war the society sought to maintain its clean record. That is why on 23 May 1945 it set up a committee of inquiry composed of Sláva Tonderová, Václav Žalud, Vojtěch Tittelbach, Josef Grus, and Arnošt Paderlík, which, ‘in regard to the purification of national life’, demanded that Mánes’s members sign a virtually unheard-of declaration of moral impeccability. The committee further demanded of members that, by the end of eight days, they should make known the names of anybody from among the society’s members, its employees or based outside it ‘who had, through their dealings, potentially damaged [its] good reputation’.<sup>36</sup>

From the spring of 1939, the Mánes Association of Fine Artists worked to establish a school for drawing and painting. After this had opened as the Mánes School in the autumn of 1940, its name was changed at the request of the Cultural Council of National Partnership (Kulturní rada národního souručenství) to the Art School of Painter Vladimír Sychra (Umělecká škola malíře Vladimíra Sychry). The council was against this educational institution making use of the society’s name. The existence of the school was defended in the Cultural Council with the claim that this would be a case of private activity by several of the society’s members, and that in its purposes it would be no substitute to any of the other fine art schools. Nevertheless it was perceived as an alternative to the closed universities. The participants in its courses were normally students, laypeople interested in art, or working people from various fields. Besides practical skills (taught by Vladimír Sychra, Vojtěch Tittelbach, František Janoušek, Josef Liesler, Richard Wiesner) part of the tuition consisted of theoretical lectures on aesthetics and anatomy (provided by Václav Nebeský, Jaromír Pečírka, Josef Zrzavý). In 1944 the school’s first graduate show took place. A laudatory report about this exhibition from the pen of a cultural officer at the Ministry of Education and Popular Enlightenment, intended for Emanuel Moravec, is proof

of the chaotic state of artistic criteria that reigned during the time of the Protectorate: 'The exhibition is a pleasing proof of the honourable and serious work being done at the School and of the, generally speaking, good supervision (Bauch, Liesler, Tittelbach, Ježek)'.<sup>37</sup> For in this same period, at the very ministry just mentioned, there existed a 'List of Czech Degenerate Painters' on which both Tittelbach and Ježek appeared. After the war two more exhibitions by the students of the Mánes School took place, in the years 1945 and 1947. Many of them later studied at the Academy of Fine Arts or at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. The school's graduates, besides perhaps Karel Teissig, had no further significant presence in the development of Czech art.

The social situation during the Second Republic and then the Protectorate compelled the Mánes Association of Fine Artists to re-evaluate the conceptions it had hitherto held. Within the given situation it was understandable that the group abandoned any intention of organising an exhibition of artistic 'isms' in 1938 and that it preferred to demonstrate its patriotic feelings, with a range of exhibitions that showed the society in a 'better' light, as a grouping of artists who respected national traditions and were aware of their duty towards the nation at this moment. At the same time they were supposed to raise the population's spirits in a time of national tragedy and an uncertain future. Shortly before the Munich crisis, from May until August, Mánes organised the exhibition *Figures from Czech History (Postavy českých dějin)*, recalling famous Czech historical personalities. In the autumn of the same year Mánes prepared an exhibition called *Czech Tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Česká tradice v 19. století)*, consisting of works by artists of the National Revival (Fig. 21.4). This was a plea for the organising group to be seen as the bearer of traditional artistic values, and at the same time it was supposed to lead 'to critical investigation and to further treatment of artistic issues, one of which is the issue of 'Czechness' [českost] and of domestic tradition'.<sup>38</sup> The exhibition *The Face of Prague (Tvář Prahy, 1939)* was also in a nationalist spirit, concentrating on Prague motifs in Czech art. Exhibitions of this kind disappeared from the Mánes Association of Fine Artists' programme after the accession of Acting Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich, who put an end to a former two-track approach in politics and culture that had revolved around the promise of Czech 'autonomy' during the establishment of the Protectorate. This is why, for the remainder of the war, Mánes's further activities focussed predominantly on retrospective, group, or individual exhibitions of its members' work. However, because the work of many of them could not, for ideological reasons, be presented during the occupation, a series of exhibitions occurred after the war that attempted to partially redress these wrongs. For that reason Mánes's first post-war exhibition was an exhibition of drawings and paintings from 1938 to 1939 by an important member, Emil Filla, who had survived being imprisoned in Buchenwald concentration camp. Exhibitions followed of artists who had died in the concentration camps (in 1945 there were exhibitions by Jiří Jelínek, Bedřich Fritta, and Jaroslav Král), and ultimately of those who died during the occupation (there was an exhibition of Jindřich Štyrský in 1946, and exhibitions of Alois Wachsman and František Janoušek about a year later).

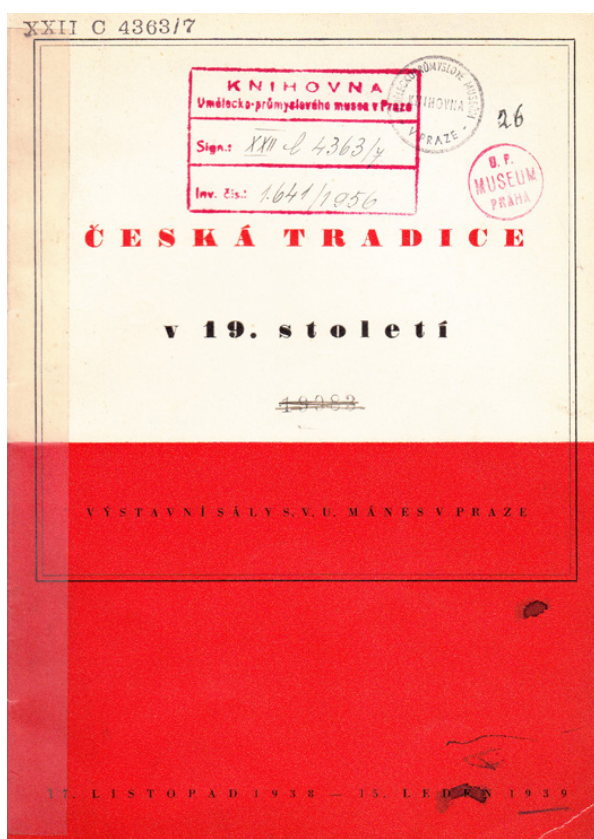


Fig. 21.4. Cover of the exhibition catalogue for *Czech Tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Česká tradice v 19. století)*, held at the Mánes Gallery, Prague, November 17–January 15, 1939.





Fig. 21.5. *Trust Art* (*Důvěřujte umění*) exhibition (1940). Photograph. Reproduced from *Pestrý týden* 15/6 (1 February 1940): p. 3.

When looking at the exhibition activity by the Mánes Association of Fine Artists during the war period, we are drawn to how the society tried to find themes which would, in the eyes of the censors and the public, justify the presence of modern art. The 1941 exhibition *The Face of the Czech Landscape* (*Tvář české krajiny*) belongs to this category, fusing as it did a nationalistically-coloured theme with the members' modernist conception of landscape painting. The society chose a different approach when, at the turn of 1939 and 1940, it organised the exhibition *Trust Art: Examples from the Past—The Work of the Members of Mánes from the Last Two Years* (*Důvěřujte umění. Příklady z minulosti—Práce členů Mánesa za dva roky*) (Fig. 21.5). Works by painters and sculptors from the society here appeared side by side with the work of Josef Mánes, Karel Purkyně, and Mikoláš Aleš. This strange combination of contemporary art with classic Czech works of the nineteenth century was explained by Jaromír Pečírka in his introductory address at the vernissage. According to him, the advanced work of several artists, today considered as essential representatives of national tradition, were in their time vehemently rejected. The distrust of these artists' contemporaries 'towards new art prevented the formation of a beneficial and natural tradition'.<sup>39</sup> Because of this, according to Pečírka, Czech artists had had to go and train their skills abroad. Thus, in his conclusion, he addressed those present: 'In one sentence: let's not be scared to trust art'.<sup>40</sup>

From 1939 Mánes lent exhibition spaces to the Cultural Council of National Partnership, which used them to hold the large official exhibitions *The Nation to its Artists* (*Národ svým výtvarným umělcům*, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942) and *Artists to their Nation* (*Umělci národu*, 1943). These were meant to have an educational character, and a similar aim was also pursued by two Mánes exhibitions in 1940: *From the Sketch to the Sculpture* (*Od náčrtku k soše*) and *The Picture and the Sculpture in the Apartment* (*Obráz a socha v bytě*). The first illuminated the process of the emergence of the artwork, while the second gave instruction on how and with what to decorate one's living space. Mánes met the needs of those interested in buying works of art by holding relatively-frequent selling exhibitions of affordable drawings, graphic art, and small sculptures.

The question of financial security for artists and the problem of artistic education for the population could be solved, according to the thinking at the time, through state artistic commissions,

which would bring works of art into the public space: 'That is why we must exclaim: more large public sculptures, more large monumental frescoes, mosaics, pictures composed from glass; ... give important projects to sculptors and painters!'<sup>41</sup> In response to contemporary thoughts on this issue, Mánes organised an exhibition in 1940 called *Monumental Art (Monumentální umění)*. A continuation of such thinking was the 1947 exposition, organised by Mánes, *The Monumental Task of Contemporary Artistic Design (Monumentální úkol současného výtvarnictví)*. Yet during the second half of the 1940s the conviction was strengthened among Communist-inclined artists and critics that it was not possible to combine the artistic individualism of the avant-gardes with the needs of Socialism.<sup>42</sup> Their expectation was that, under the influence of social changes invoked by a 'unitary will' and the 'common interests of society', fundamental changes would also occur in art. As the future would show, these did occur, though of course under the pressure of the official institutions of the Communist regime, and paradoxically even members of the Mánes Association of Fine Artists would take part in that process. Nevertheless, this artistic association, just like all other artists' societies, was dissolved in 1956.<sup>43</sup>

Translated by Jonathan Owen

1 Lucie Zdražilová, Milan Pech, 'Dvě významné instituce 1938–1948', in Vojtěch Lahoda, Lenka Bydžovská, Hana Rousová, Anna Pravdová, Milan Pech, Lucie Zdražilová, *Konec avantgardy: Od mnichovské dohody ke komunistickému převratu (České umění 1938–1948)* (Řevnice: Arbor vitae, 2011), pp. 83–98.

2 The Prague Chamber of Commerce and Trade (OŽK) founded the Museum of Decorative Arts in 1885 and until 1948 administered it and shared in decision-making about museum operations. During the Protectorate, the Third Reich's offices made a number of interventions into the functioning of chambers of trade and commerce. They attempted to centralise them through the establishment of compulsory organisations (The Central Union of Industry for Bohemia and Moravia and The Central Union of Commerce). The OŽK continued to subsidise 'its' museum, but the German authorities had a substantial influence on decision-making.

3 Karel Herain, 'Obrázek jeden z mnohých', *Umění 17/3–4* (1945): p. 126.

4 To give an idea of the institution's size we should add that by the end of 1944 the museum had over twenty-nine thousand items in its collections and almost forty thousand volumes in its specialised public library.

5 In Prague, collections were stored in anti-aircraft shelters in the building of the Živnostenská Bank, in a restaurant building in Slavonic Island, and in the monastery of Saint Markéta in Břevnov. Karlštejn Castle and the chateaux of Štířín, Lázně Bělohrad, Miletín, Milíčeves, Konárovice, Kopidlno, and Mníšek pod Brdy served as shelters outside of Prague.

6 Lucie Zdražilová, 'Za novou architekturu', *Prostor Zlín*, 14/3 (2007): pp. 40–47.

7 Immediately after the establishment of the Protectorate the German occupation authorities tried (unsuccessfully) to block participation by the now non-existent Czechoslovakia at the World's Fair. While the Czechoslovak pavilion was opened in May 1939, this was only because of the efforts of emigrants, especially Ladislav Šutnar. They were only able to use those exhibits that they had been able to export out of the country in time.

8 Kuzma, 'Mladí, kteří se jistě dostanou vpřed', *Pražský ilustrovaný zpravodaj 27* (3 July 1941): pp. 12–13.

9 Soňa Kozelková, 'Bydlení na cestě zpátky?', *Lidové noviny 48/14/4* (1940): p. 4. The exhibition had no shortage of positive responses. Compare: *Věčerní České slovo 22/72* (27 March 1940): p. 3.

10 The number of visits in this period never fell below thirty-four thousand readers a year (by comparison, during the late 1920s and early 1930s the number of visitors was fifteen to twenty thousand a year). One contributing factor to this was evidently the fact that the occupying powers interfered less in the activity of specialist libraries than in that of, for instance, the National and University Library, which was from 1941 (until 1945) renamed the Country (*Zemská*) and University Library. We thank Lukáš Babka for this information.

11 Overwhelmingly predominant were periodicals from Germany and Italy; also represented were magazines from Denmark, Finland, Holland, Hungary, Norway, Slovakia, the former Yugoslavia, Sweden, Switzerland, Greece, and the USA. See: 'Reports about Activities in 1941', Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections (uncategorised). About a year later Greece and the USA were missing from the museum summaries, and from 1943 even the former Yugoslavia is missing. The periodicals had been prepaid for or obtained as a gift. As in the later normalisation period, the library comprised the one place in the country where foreign periodicals were available to the public.

12 We thank Jiří Šetlík for this information.

13 Karel Herain, 'Obrázek jeden z mnohých', *Umění 17/3–4* (1945): p. 128.

14 Karl Maria Swoboda served as an art historian at a German university in Prague and during the Protectorate he was also an estimator for the Property Office at the Office of the Reich Protector and for the Centre for Jewish Emigration.

15 In November 1942 an exhibition opened called *Old Lamps (Stará svítidla)*, which formed the historical part of Pešánek's project. In 1943 the permanent display room had to be liquidated completely due to reasons of space. 'Letter from Karel Herain to Zdeněk Pešánek' (15 October 1943). Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 136.

16 In this period only a few kinds of activity were prohibited, such as a cycle of lectures about art. From the beginnings of the occupation the manuscripts of all lectures and their pictorial accompaniment were of course submitted, via the museum, to the Police Directorate for approval. Whoever did not pass through censorship could not lecture. See: 'Letter of the Directorate of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague to Mrs. Marie Tarantová concerning the Lecture Cycle *Božena Němcová and Her Times*' (8 February 1941). Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 142.

17 1939: thirteen exhibitions, one of which was German (*Exhibition of German Architecture and Memorial Buildings in Bohemia and Moravia*); 1940: twenty-three exhibitions, one of which was Japanese (*Japanese Functional Objects*); 1941: a record thirty exhibitions, two of which were German (*Ernst Völlbeh: On the Western Sconce in Poland and in France; Fritz Klimsch: A Complete Exhibition*); 1942: fourteen exhibitions, including three German exhibitions (*Germany in Folk Costumes; Exhibition of National Socialist Care for the Welfare of People in the Sudeten District; German Commodity Science*); 1943: twelve exhibitions, of which two were Japanese and two were German (*The Art and Art Industry of Japan; Japan in Pictures; The Training, Retraining and Incorporation of the Workforce; The Work of Pupils: A Week of Creative Youth*). A total number of 501, 294 people visited the museum in the years 1939–1944. For precision's sake let us add that while at this time there were generally several exhibitions running simultaneously across several museum spaces, from 1970 to the present there has been only a single exhibition hall reserved for the Museum of Decorative Arts' exhibitions, due to insufficiency of space.

- 18 Karel Herain, 'Obrázek jeden z mnohých', *Umění* 17/3–4 (1945): p. 131.
- 19 The curator of these was Karl Maria Swoboda.
- 20 'Letter from Director of the Department of Labour Jan Doležal to Representatives of the Museum of Decorative Arts with Competition Conditions' (16 October 1942). Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 136.
- 21 'Letter from Karel Herain to Alexander Vladimír Hrska' (10 November 1942). Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 136.
- 22 Translated by Lucie Zdražilová. 'Letter from Heinrich Rieber to Karel Herain' (23 March 1954). Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 136.
- 23 See: Lucie Zdražilová, 'Propaganda v protektorát', in Hana Rousová, Lenka Bydžovská, Vojtěch Lahoda, Milan Pech, Anna Pravdová, and Lucie Zdražilová (eds.), *Konec avantgardy? Od Mnichovské dohody ke komunistickému převratu* (Prague: Galerie hlavního města / Arbor Vitae, 2011), pp. 162–181.
- 24 *Věnkov* 37/69 (22 March 1942): p. 7 (no author or title given).
- 25 *Moravská orlice* 80/27 (1 February 1942): unpaginated (no author or title given). The exhibition took place from 26 January to 8 March 1942.
- 26 'Note about the XXII. Meeting of the Advisory Board of the Museum of Decorative Arts of the Chamber of Commerce and Trade in Prague, Held in the Museum Building on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> April 1947', pp. 1–2. Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 122.
- 27 The exhibition entitled *V boj*, which opened in November 1946, was dedicated to the activities of the organisation of the same name.
- 28 Karel Herain, 'The Museum of Noble Production', reprint (1946), p. 3. Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 121.
- 29 This idea connected back to pre-war attempts by the museum to present to the public the contemporary arts and crafts production of European countries, as for instance with the successful exhibition *Contemporary Swedish Artistic Industry and Homemade Production*, from 1938.
- 30 In this the museum anticipated one of the big post-war themes, which was 'the artist in manufacturing'.
- 31 'Letter from Emanuel Poche to the Presidium of the Chamber of Commerce and Trade' (2 April 1948). Centre for the Documentation of the Museum of Decorative Arts' Collections, Collection A, Box 123.
- 32 In 1949 the Museum of Decorative Arts was nationalised and incorporated into the department of the Ministry of Education.
- 33 'Exhibition in London, 1938/IV', Mánes Association of Fine Artists (SVU Mánes) Collection, Prague City Archives, Box 81, Sign. 4.1, Inv. no. 4240.
- 34 'Prager Secession exhibition', Mánes Association of Fine Artists (SVU Mánes) Collection, Prague City Archives, Box 81, Sign. 4.1, 1938/IV. This concerns a draft of the letter by the society's president Václav Špála and Emil Filla in his role as secretary.
- 35 'The International Jew – Through the Eyes of the Artist, Concerning the Exhibition of the Master K. Rélink', *Vlajka* 9, 12 December 1939: pp. 1–2. Karel Rélink committed suicide in May 1945.
- 36 'Mánes School 1939–1940', Mánes Association of Fine Artists (SVU Mánes) Collection, Prague City Archives, Box 38, Sign. 3.11.1.
- 37 'Reports of Cultural Officer', Moravec Collection – AMV 39, National Archive of the Czech Republic, Box 74, Sign. 39–19.
- 38 *Czech Tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Česká tradice v 19. století)*, exhibition catalogue, Mánes Association of Fine Artists (Prague, 1939), p. 8.
- 39 'Address of Dr. Jaromír Pečírka at the opening of the exhibition *Trust Art*, 12.12.1939', Mánes Association of Fine Artists (SVU Mánes) Collection, Prague City Archives, Box 85, Sign. 4.1., 1939/II.
- 40 'Address of Dr. Jaromír Pečírka at the opening of the exhibition *Trust Art*'.
- 41 E.V. Mokřý (František Viktor Mokřý), 'O výtvarnou kulturu národa', *Brázda* 21/41, 9 October 1940: pp. 489–490.
- 42 SOL, 'Individualismus a monumentální umění', *Severočeská Mladá fronta* 3 (3 September 2005): p. 4. First published 1947.
- 43 'O S.V.U. Mánes', accessed 30 October 2019, <http://www.svumanes.cz/2017-07-04-11-05-9/napsali-o-nas>.





22

# Strzemiński's War

LUIZA NADER

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## Strzemiński's War

Władysław Strzemiński's war drawings comprise at least seven cycles of works. I will focus on those in the collection of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, many of which were donated in person by Strzemiński in November 1945.<sup>1</sup> There is limited scholarship on these works. The first to refer to them was Julian Przyboś, in 1956, noting in a brief passage the peculiar suspension of the drawings between abstraction and realism, their syntheticism, unusually expressive qualities, and their focus on the concrete.<sup>2</sup> The poet interpreted a number of works as relating to the Holocaust. At the end of the 1980s, Janina Ładnowska perceptively pointed to the emotional content of the war works and to the importance of emotions in Strzemiński's writings, examining the drawings primarily in relation to the artist's 1936 article 'Aspects of Reality', which was devoted, among other topics, to a critical reading of Surrealism.<sup>3</sup> The artist's friend Stefan Krygier also stressed the role of sensation (in addition to form and seeing) and the sensitivity to the suffering of others that he believed the drawings expressed.<sup>4</sup> Ładnowska interpreted these works as a reaction to the 'horrors of war', a 'dramatic expression of the fate not of the individual but common to humankind as a species', synthesised in the postwar cycle of collages *To My Friends the Jews (Moim przyjaciołom Żydom, 1945–1947)*.<sup>5</sup> In a similar spirit, Krygier stressed the presence in the drawings of the universal experience of the human tragedy of war. He emphasised the interpretative importance of the title and linked the works, in this respect, above all, to Surrealism. The first and only researcher to date to interpret and attend to the aforementioned works has been Andrzej Turowski, in a passage of his chapter on war in the book *Constructors of the World (Budowniczości świata)*, his comprehensive take on avant-garde and modern art history in Poland.<sup>6</sup> He noted the presence of biographical experience in the drawings, and connected them (as did Ładnowska) to the cycle *To My Friends the Jews*, analysing them in relation to ideas such as trace, shadow, and emptiness.<sup>7</sup> Most of the aforementioned authors (with the exception of Przyboś), associate the *Deportations (Deportacje)* series with the deportation of the Polish population from Łódź, as do Zenobia Karnicka and Eleonora Jedlińska.<sup>8</sup> The latter has aligned the *Cheap as Mud* cycle in a rather general manner with the 'terror of the events of the Holocaust being played out in Łódź, in Poland, in Europe ... beyond history, as represented', referring principally to Turowski's text and to Nika Strzemińska's book *Art, Love and Hate. Concerning Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński (Sztuka, miłość i nienawiść. O Katarzynie Kobro i Władysławie Strzemińskim)*.<sup>9</sup> Although a decided majority of authors consider Strzemiński's wartime experiences to be key, a universalising perspective pervades all these articles.<sup>10</sup> In his book on the relationship between visual arts and neuroaesthetics,

Łukasz Kędziora devotes a few sentences to the drawings in question and calls the artist a 'conscious neurobiologist'.<sup>11</sup> In the text that follows, I draw on these analyses and interpretations, while simultaneously proposing a somewhat different direction of inquiry. While I also acknowledge Strzemiński's biographical experience as the starting point for the production of the drawings, rather than seeing them as universalising and abstracting war and the Holocaust, I propose, on the contrary, to view them as the direct response of a feeling eyewitness, who was emotionally, almost physically involved in the scenes of expulsion, suffering, cruelty, and death taking place in three very different contexts: West Belorussia, Łódź (incorporated into the Third Reich), and the Łódź ghetto. In the interpretation of Strzemiński's war drawings which follows, I introduce the concept of neurotestimony, by which I understand a report on the empirical, polysensory experiences of the artist/observer, which affects both his/her ways of seeing and the work's subject matter, while, at the same time, intensively stimulating the spectator's visual brain.

### Positioning

Strzemiński was not a victim of the Second World War. His subject position can perhaps best be described by the category of the observer and by concepts such as fluidity, transitoriness, and un-groundedness. No doubt understanding the real danger of being shot by the Einsatzgruppen, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, Strzemiński, his wife Katarzyna Kobro, and their young daughter Nika managed to leave Łódź for Wilejka Powiatowa in Eastern Poland. On 17 September 1939, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Poland was invaded by the Soviet Union. Wilejka Powiatowa became a part of West Belorussia, incorporated into the USSR on 2 November 1939. It is unclear what national identity the artist adopted in the months that followed. All that is known is that he taught in a secondary school in the autumn and winter of 1939 to 1940,<sup>12</sup> and that he designed the small district town's decorations on the occasion of the 1 May celebrations in 1940.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the Strzemińskis survived the autumn and winter of 1939 to 1940 in Wilejka Powiatowa, and that they reached Łódź (renamed Litzmannstadt by the Nazis) relatively safely in one of the last transports in May 1940, borders on the miraculous. Perhaps the decision to leave Wilejka was an attempt to escape Soviet citizenship and was connected with the increasingly-intensive 'passport operations' underway in the first half of 1940 on these territories which were absorbed into the USSR. Katarzyna Kobro commented on the problem in her diary, with reference to the winter of 1939 to 1940: 'Strzemiński advised me to register myself as Polish. I registered myself as Russian. When the expulsions came, after Christmas, and searches were underway next door, in a flash he burned my birth certificate stating that I was born in Moscow and our marriage certificate from Smolensk'.<sup>14</sup> How did Strzemiński and his family survive two major deportations primarily targetting the Polish population (as a representative of the Polish intelligentsia and a defector from Central Poland)?<sup>15</sup> How was it that he was able to teach in a school and why was he allowed to design propaganda decorations? Could it be that the artist accepted a Soviet passport?<sup>16</sup> If not, then it seems more likely that when, a year later, Strzemiński signed the Russian List in Łódź, the decision must have been all the more humiliating and shameful for him. Perhaps the source of Kobro and Strzemiński's later bitter conflict lurks in this little-known thread of the biographies of the two artists between autumn 1939 and spring 1940 in West Belorussia. Questions concerning national (as well as other forms of) identity in this period became a matter determining life and death. In mid-May 1940, the Strzemińskis returned to Łódź, which at that time was in the *Wartheland*, a part of the territory of Poland created and incorporated in October 1939 by Nazi Germany into the Reich, and subject to intense Germanisation.<sup>17</sup> To make this possible, as their daughter wrote, the artists made a case on the basis of Katarzyna Kobro's German origins.<sup>18</sup> Theirs was one of the last transports to reach Łódź. As early as June 1940, refugees from central Poland declaring a desire to return were deported deep into the USSR.<sup>19</sup> The incorrect transliteration of Strzemiński's surname from the Russian to the Latin alphabet (Strschemid[ń?]ski) saved his life, and the artist hid behind this somewhat accidental identity for the duration of the war.<sup>20</sup> This was probably also why the Strzemińskis did not return to their apartment on Srebrzyńska Street. To begin with they lived with their friends,

the Krauzes (Jerzy Krauze declared as an ethnic German (*volksdeutsch*), and helped Katarzyna Kobro and her sister Wera to save Strzemiński's pre-war oeuvre), then they moved to Karolew (a district of Łódź). A year later, in Łódź, both Strzemiński's work and the International Collection of Modern Art (Międzynarodowa Kolekcja Sztuki Nowoczesnej) founded by the artist were deemed 'degenerate art' and were publicly denounced.<sup>21</sup> In July 1941, Strzemiński / Strschemid[ń?]ski, like Katarzyna Kobro, signed the Russian List, which guaranteed some benefits.<sup>22</sup> His subject position was characterised by uncertainty and a lack of stability. As an avant-garde artist, whose anti-Nazi views were widely known before the war, as a famous representative of 'degenerate art', and as someone with severe disabilities, he could well have been a victim (and executed like Karol Hiller) had he been discovered.<sup>23</sup> Signing the Russian List, on the other hand, positioned him dangerously close to the Nazi perpetrators. A novel written after the war points to Strzemiński's acute sensitivity as regards national lists and changes in national identity, even to fixation on the question, as well as to the sense of guilt associated with this.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, as the artist's works from the war period indicate, Strzemiński expressed sympathy for the victims of the scenes of violence and crime he witnessed, such as the victims of the deportations from the eastern part of Poland, the Poles expelled from Łódź, and the Jewish population murdered in the Łódź ghetto. His drawings take up the challenge of bearing specific witness to violence, injustice, and crime.

Like Kazimierz Wyka, whose situation has been described by Aleksandra Ubertowska, Strzemiński was an observer with an extremely narrow field of vision.<sup>25</sup> First in Wilejka Powiatowa, then from May 1940 to the end of the war in Łódź, the artist was cut off both from information and from his artistic milieu. Nevertheless, he lived in the sphere of the empirical facts of constant danger, terror, and death. He observed the destruction of statehood and terror on the territories occupied by the USSR in the years 1939 to 1940, and then the extreme suffering and death of the Jews in Łódź ghetto. Strzemiński's drawings, carried out contemporaneously with these inconceivable realities, reveal the destruction and the lawlessness under both the Soviet occupation and the German occupation, without, however, making these equivalent.

The Holocaust does not occupy a central place in Strzemiński's war-time work. Created somewhat on the margins, visual notes accumulate like waves, before being recognised as events that radically break the meaning of history, humanity, and aesthetics in the postwar series *To my Friends the Jews*.<sup>26</sup> Earlier, the proximity, not of the victims of the Holocaust, but of its observers seems to appear in all its ambivalence in some of the war cycles, particularly in the works *Cheap as Mud* (*Tanie jak błoto*, 1943–1944). The significance of this marginality is, I believe, similar to the case of the writing of Kazimierz Wyka summarising the war period, as Aleksandra Ubertowska has perceptively noted. She defined the strategy of the author of *Imaginary Life* (*Życie na niby*), in this particular case the essay 'Two Autumns', as a means of 'positioning': 'The author very carefully describes the spatial position from which he observed the Warsaw uprising, for he was conscious of the fact that this position also defined his judgement and attitude [to it]'.<sup>27</sup>

Both in Wyka's case and in Strzemiński's, this 'spatial position' assumes a certain distance from the events being described. Nevertheless, their distance should not be understood as a sign of objectivity, but of a conscious self-criticism of their position in relation to the atrocity taking place, a position that is always already embroiled in the scene of the crime, devoid of innocence and neutrality. In the case of Wyka the location was Krzeszowice, in Strzemiński's it was Wilejka Powiatowa, then occupied Łódź. Ubertowska referred to Wyka's essays as an 'autobiographical account of the experience of war and the Holocaust'.<sup>28</sup> I see Strzemiński's drawings in a similar way, while maintaining the specificity of the visual medium of drawing. In his drawn records, the artist reported first from West Belorussia, then from Łódź, recording repressive measures against the Polish civilian population, and then addressing the progressive extermination of the Jews in Łódź ghetto literally taking place before his eyes. The three events intersect, become entangled, but without obscuring one another. The destruction of the rule of law, the fall of reason, the abyss of violence and death that opened up, seemed to result in drawings, which in all likelihood referred to the Holocaust, emerging from the margins to become the central event. At around the same time, Kazimierz Wyka wrote: 'The means by which the Germans liquidated the Jews falls



on their conscience. Reacting to these means, however, falls on our conscience'.<sup>29</sup> Strzemiński's drawings, constituting such a reaction, represent an important contribution to the history of the Polish conscience.

### Neurotestimony

The drawings were carried out in pencil on thick, soft paper, using stencils made of technical tracing paper. As Janina Ładnowska has noted, the artist drew the outline of the form on tracing paper, which he then pressed onto cardboard and traced around.<sup>30</sup> In these works, Strzemiński was referring to his artistic experiences involving a so-called organic or biological line, which appeared at the beginning of the 1930s in the *Seascapes (Pejzaże morskie)*, and then, more forcefully, as researchers have noted, in the cycle of lithographs *Łódź without Functionalism (Łódź bez funkcjonalizmu, 1936)*.<sup>31</sup> Strzemiński also devoted a short, but unusually striking fragment of the *Theory of Seeing (Teoria widzenia)*, written between 1945 and 1952, to the war drawings:

When I set about making these works (most of which were burned by the Hitlerites during the Occupation) I subjectively experienced them as being realist and empirical, demanding a far greater degree of observation than paintings considered realist. But I was weighed down by the bias that "realism" is sixteenth century. I was also weighed down by false theories that every departure from this "realism" is a departure towards deformation and abstraction. From these theories it transpired that anything demanding considerable attention and concentration and thorough observation is a "deformation," anything resulting from superficial observation is realism ...

Only by examining the visual base, by defining the components of visual consciousness, was I able to position them accurately: these are works based on the empirical method, and their aim is to incorporate into visual consciousness the effects of internal physiological rhythms. Thus, this is impressionism (physiological seeing) that differs from historical Impressionism (such as it formed in history) by way of the fact that it allows for a new component of visual consciousness (physiological rhythm, which Impressionism had not usually allowed for). Historical Impressionism developed problems related to the visual content of *gazes* themselves as cast. The *reception* of these gazes, however—the way in which our organism reacts, receives these gazes—generally remained outside the scope of the Impressionists' interests, despite being a component of the physiological process of seeing.<sup>32</sup> What did Strzemiński have in mind when he wrote about his drawings in terms of the 'reception of gazes'? Or, to take this question further, what are the bodily experiences corresponding to 'receiving the gaze' of a victim of deportation, hunger, cruelty, a person in despair, condemned to death, for these are the scenes to which the drawings refer? What sort of 'transaction' is associated, in Strzemiński's case, with the exchange of gazes between the victim of violence and the observer of the victim's distress, humiliations, and death?

In the aforementioned citation from the *Theory of Seeing*, the specific interpretation of visibility is striking, as is the multifaceted, sustained observation embodied in Strzemiński's drawn accounts (their 'empirical method'). The second point emerging from the artist's words can be described as attributing to the works from the war period the status of accounts of inner feeling, bodily response ('the effects of internal physiological rhythms') accompanied by the intensive work of thought and the multifaceted analysis of reality, leading to the transformation and complication of forms ('anything demanding considerable attention and concentration and thorough observation is a deformation'). The pictures are thus one consequence of the attempt to reflect the scenes seen, as well as a bodily, affective reaction to the event perceived ('the reception of these gazes ... the way in which our organism reacts'). I would therefore propose that in his cycles the artist is not referring to abstract imaginings or to a universalised experience of war, but to specific events, which he had either observed directly or knew of. I would like to propose the concept of neurotestimony as a way to define this phenomenon present in Strzemiński's war drawings.

Aleksandra Ubertowska summarises the most important conceptualisations of the idea of testimony as an amalgamation of several features: '1. an ethically conditioned referential order; 2. a forcefully signalled authorial / autobiographical signature, to which the qualities of authenticity and trustworthiness are ascribed; 3. the category of voice, orality as a model of "source communication" (which may, though does not have to, filter into the structure of the written text)'.<sup>33</sup> Strzemiński's drawings contain referential and autobiographical allusions (of which more below), but as visual representations, they include not oral but another type of primary experience: the ability of the brain to see and to create images. They are both literal and visual. As neurotestimonies, the artists' drawings unite the notation of external, often liminal events, neurophysiological processes of seeing, and the inner, visceral response to the scenes captured by the retina of the eye associated with these. The drawn record does not, therefore, relate solely to visual observation and to the multi-faceted observation of the scenes observed, subjects and objects, but also to the bodily experience of the specific event and the reactions of the observer associated with these. Representation becomes a screen for the recording of reality experienced, the body of the observer (its physiological reactions), as well as its conscious, unconscious, and unwitting response. In Strzemiński's drawings, the observer is not only intertwined with what is observed, but also vice-versa: under the influence of the observed scenes, the observer inevitably succumbs to the risks of opening and to continual change. It is precisely this phenomenon recorded in the drawings (which, interestingly, are formally similar to writing) to which I give the name neurotestimony.

### ***West Belorussia, 1939***

The 1939 series *West Belorussia* (*Białoruś Zachodnia*) was executed on 38 x 31 cm, white, rectangular card. The artist draws in synthetic outline, characterised by its precisely-driven, concretely-curving line. This line serves several purposes: it allows for the separation of form from ground, as well as immersing form in ground (it is the active ground of the grainy paper alone that fills all the forms); it defines volume and distance; it constructs the perspectival ground; and lends expression to shapes.

The drawings in this series are defined (with one exception) by a thick, dark contour, marked in soft pencil. Strzemiński represents the local rural population, which is to say the Belorussian peasantry. The figures of women and men are large, massive, ungainly. In *Man and Woman* (*Mężczyzna i kobieta*), the figure of the peasant woman is signalled by a headscarf, wide skirt, and disproportionately-vast boots. The man has a prominent nose, a traditional hat, and high boots with wide trousers tucked in. Their surroundings are sketched with the help of a poured horizontal stain: an index of an inhospitable, muddy yard or field. The figures represented in other works from this series, such as in the drawing *Woman's Figure* (*Postać kobieca*), are also less at home in the landscape than dependent on it: they shuttle and quiver in a seemingly resistant, empty, white space. Strzemiński seems to convey, by way of these few interventions, the landscape of the exceptionally cold winter of 1939 to 1940, when temperatures plunged to minus forty-five degrees Celsius.

Line defines subjects, objects, and elements of the landscape alike. The drawings define a strong dependency between man and habitat. The autonomous shapes sketched are in close proximity as though attracting one another. Houses take on soft, uncertain, pasty forms. Some are revealed to be empty, recently abandoned, as in the drawing *Village* (*Wieś*); in others, such as *Man and Landscape with Houses* (*Człowiek i pejzaż z domami*), returning home is a struggle. A process of disintegration is underway, a melting of both people and things. Even the trees quake. With its organic passage, line equalises people, objects, and nature, and its pulse defines all the elements of the world represented here. In the drawing *Two Figures* (*Dwie postacie*), in which Strzemiński used a hard pencil, which gives the effect of a fine grey line, a man with a small child on his right has been drafted in the central space. The heads of the man and the child are captured in profile, while their bodies face forwards. The former extends his arm to the left, in a supplicating gesture, begging. Their complex, protruding forms, as though slowly escaping the ground (the grey colour

of the fine line) diverge from the massive forms represented in other works. Is this a record of hunger and poverty?

Strzemiński gave his drawings the somewhat unexpected, un-Polish-centric title *West Belorussia* (Poles rather referred to this region as *Kresy Wschodnie*, the Eastern Borderlands). Anarchy and violence engulfed these territories after the Soviet invasion of 17 September 1939. It was to such peasants as those depicted by Strzemiński that the Red Army addressed its slogans of liberation from the 'oppression of the Polish overlords, landowners, capitalists', promising at once freedom, equality, and prosperity.<sup>34</sup> The new, Communist, authorities rapidly undertook the appropriation of the vast properties belonging to estates, the nationalisation of factories, the parcelisation of land, as well as intensive arrests and deportations. Among the 'enemies of the people' were, above all, the representatives of the Polish national administration, Polish settlers and landowners, the intelligentsia, members of religious orders, as well as wealthy peasants.<sup>35</sup> Małgorzata Ruchniewicz notes that:

when considered in relation to the total number of inhabitants of the occupied territories, the extent of the Soviet repression may not appear to be of a mass nature ... If, however, we consider those subjected to repressive measures in terms of national structure and relate these figures to the position of particular national groups within these territories, we ascertain that the number of casualties among the Polish population was high ... The Soviet occupation of 1939–1941 certainly weakened the Polish presence in these territories, destroying groups associated with the pre-war State apparatus, the old social hierarchy (historical classes such as the landowning class), in broad terms the leading groups at various levels (social and political activists, the intelligentsia) as well as threatening the remaining population, destroying traditional social ties.<sup>36</sup>

The Belarusian peasantry depicted by Strzemiński was soon subject to the Stalinist apparatus of terror too: while their modest living conditions initially improved (through agricultural reform), within a few months they took a dramatic turn for the worse (as a result of the imposition, among others, of the requisitioning of agricultural produce in December 1939, and then compulsory labour for the state and collectivisation in 1940).<sup>37</sup> As Małgorzata Ruchniewicz has observed, this social group was also a target for a multitude of arrests and deportations in the years 1939 to 1941.<sup>38</sup> The local peasant population is represented in a manner more grotesque than demonising in Strzemiński's drawings, arousing a form of sympathy, rather than fear. Poverty, the daily struggle for survival, and the frailty of existence are revealed. Despite their solid build, the figures seem to be reduced to the level of bare life, or (to use the words of Kazimierz Wyka) 'vegetative continuity', oscillating 'between the hen-house and the cemetery'.<sup>39</sup> The figures are singular, suspended in space, isolated. Poverty, unrest and degradation affect people, their humble property and environment alike. There is a noticeable accumulation of redrawing in the *West Belorussia* cycle, producing a grotesque effect. In the remaining cycles, biologism takes centre stage.

### ***Deportations, 1940***

We do not know the precise dates, nor even the month when the cycle *Deportations* was produced, though, both in this case and in the case of the cycle *Cheap as Mud*, the date is particularly important. In comparison with the earlier works, the human figures are more slight, carried out with a variegated, calculated outline. The contour line in them is more varied both in terms of density (carried out in some places with a hard, elsewhere with a soft pencil, sometimes silver, sometimes black graphite) and complexity, which affects the expressive qualities of the works. The line defines not only perspective, but also movement, the action in which Strzemiński's figures are engaged, as well as their 'vitality'. One of the drawings, entitled *Evicted (Wyrzuceni)*, was carried out in hard pencil. The forms subtly stand out from the ground, arranging themselves into a figure (perhaps a woman) hurrying along to the right, and a child accompanying her. They form a tangled, almost decorative shape, with softly-flowing folds and angles, related to the drawing *Two Figures* (from the cycle *West Belorussia*), although *Evicted* is more complex. The representations of the woman and the child are accompanied by smaller forms located beside them and beneath their

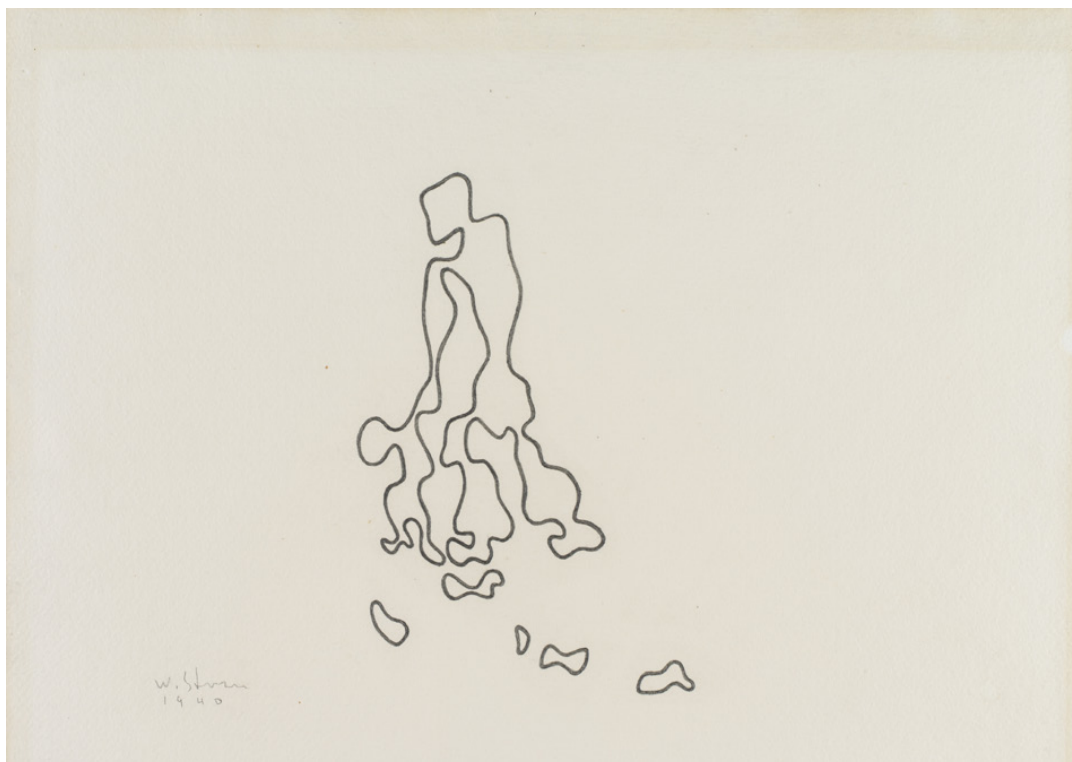


Fig. 22.1.  
Władysław  
Strzemiński,  
*The Only Trace*  
(*Deportation series*)  
(*Jedyny ślad*, cykl  
*Deportacje*), 1944).  
Pencil drawing on  
paper, 30 x 38 cm.  
Muzeum Sztuki,  
Łódź.

feet, as though lost, detached, ‘expropriated’ from the bodies of the figures. In other drawings, a soft pencil was used, articulating the shape of a man by way of a meaty fat line, as in *On the Pavement* (*Na bruku*). Although this still refers to biological, cellular shapes, these are far less complex. An adult figure holding the hand of the small figure of a child is discernible in three of the six drawings from the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź collection. An organic line, sometimes thicker and sometimes thinner, defines the figures’ gender (among other means, by way of its thicker or more decorative use), but it also draws attention to the frailty of the bodies of women, men, and children, the precarity of their lives. They could burst open, killing them at any moment.

This group of drawings relates, I think, to two types of deportations, both of which Strzemiński observed directly.<sup>40</sup> The first is the dramatic deportation of the local and alien population of the so-called Eastern Borderlands (among these West Belorussia) in the first half of the year 1940. After the invasion of the Red Army, the brunt of the Stalinist apparatus of terror (arrests, executions, deportations) in these lands was directed at Polish institutions and elites, then at civil servants, landowners, wealthy peasants, Jews, and the Belarusian population.<sup>41</sup> The Strzemińskis witnessed the first two (of four) deportations. The first wave of deportations took place on 10 February 1940, targetting representatives of the Polish state apparatus, employees of the Forestry Corps (along with their families), and Polish settlers.<sup>42</sup>

Of the four deportations, the first, which affected 50, 224 people, resulted in the highest number of fatal casualties. The next major phase of deportations, on 13 April 1940, also mainly affected Poles. This was when the families of those imprisoned or sent to labour camps by the NKVD (including civil servants, landowners, ‘counter-revolutionaries’) were deported, as well as refugees from central Poland, among them Polish Jews: altogether around 29, 699 people.<sup>43</sup>

The drawing *The Only Trace* (*Jedyny ślad*, Fig. 22.1) shows two figures from behind—one large, one very small—holding hands and heading towards the left of the space represented, in thick black line. They look like a grown man holding a child tightly by the hand, almost flowing into a single shape. A few amorphous forms are visible in the lower part of the picture, like footprints melting in the snow. In more metaphorical terms, these figures could be seen as defenseless people without any hope, alone in their misery, condemned to death, and yet connected by an affective tie. This drawing may be the only visual trace of the silhouettes that Strzemiński saw at the time, looming in the distance. *The Only Trace* seems to refer to one of the aforementioned waves of deportations, perhaps the one in February, the worst of these. As Jan Tomasz Gross wrote,

people were taken from the streets, entire families were evicted from their homes, irrespective of their age or the state of their health, and entire districts of towns and villages were depopulated overnight.<sup>44</sup> A vast number of those deported, particularly children, perished of hunger and cold during transportation. The temperature reached minus fifty degrees Celsius. Dead bodies, mostly frozen children, were thrown out of the wagons straight into the snow by the guards. There was a train station in Wilejka Powiatowa where Strzemiński might have witnessed these sorts of scenes in February 1940. The author of one of the testimonies read by Gross, who was twelve years old at the time of these events, recounted:

It is the eve of 10 February, it is night, 1 o'clock, screams can be heard in the street, and the things I saw! A whole string of sleighs went on endlessly, with mothers and children seated in them, older ones but also some as young as a few weeks old. On one of the sleighs, I saw a woman with six children, two of them twins a few weeks old. The mother had wrapped the poor children in a blanket and was taking them to the station like that. But sadly, to the mother's great despair, the children froze on the way to Russia, and because there was nothing else to be done, they were thrown out of the window. Seeing this, the NKVD [man] said with a contemptuous smile: "miorznut Polskije sobaki" [Polish dogs are freezing].<sup>45</sup>

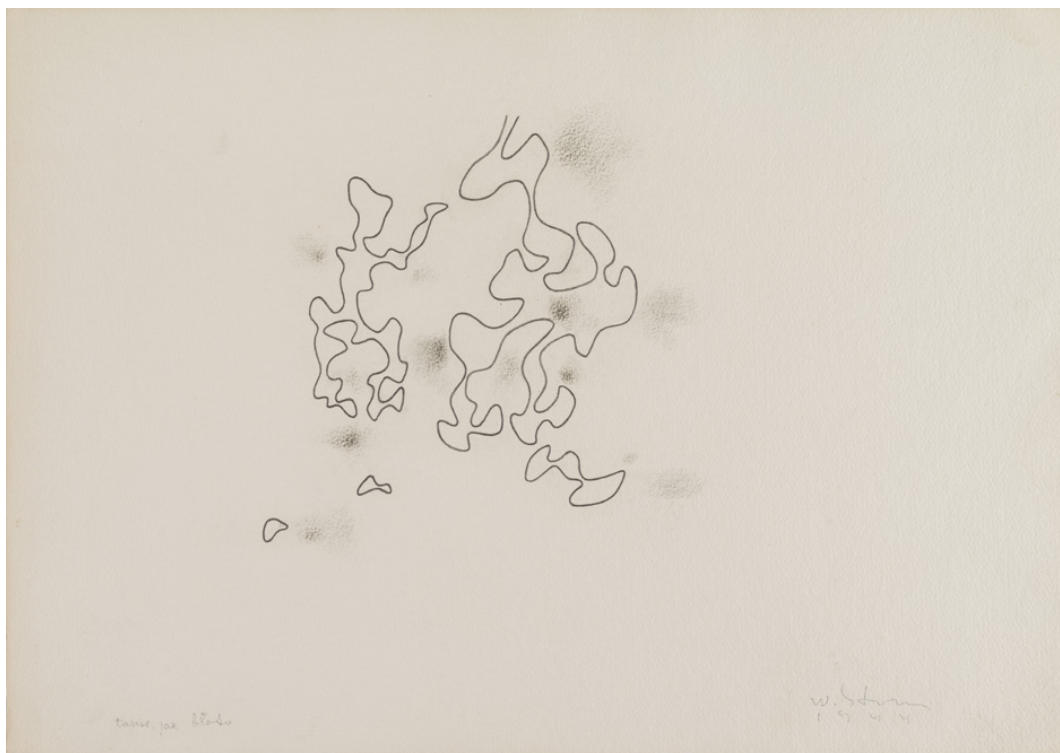
The figure in the drawing *A Gazing Woman (Patrząca kobieta)*, located in the centre of the composition, facing to the right, seems to be holding something in her arms. Perhaps a bundle, perhaps a small child. She is captured in a tense, waiting position, while also presenting herself and what she has in her arms. This could be a representation of a mother with a small child awaiting deportation, or it may refer to another scene that was common at that time: women standing for hours with their children in front of overcrowded jails in order to give their family members or friends packages with food and clothing, women looking for their loved ones. In Wilejka Powiatowa, where Strzemiński and his family were living at the time, there was a jail that was at least five times more full than it should have been at the time. Jan Tomasz Gross has cited shocking testimonies relating to the prisons in the region at the turn of 1939 to 1940.<sup>46</sup> As he has pointed out, people went to prisons to see whether their loved ones were still alive, but also to show a sign of life, since besides torture, during interrogation, people were threatened with the imprisonment or deportation of family members.<sup>47</sup> It was mostly women and children who spent ours waiting outside the jails, trying to give food to the prisoners.

The second type of deportation relates to occupied Łódź. The deportations affected the Polish population of Łódź and were accompanied by an intensive campaign of Germanisation. They lasted from the beginning of December 1939 to March 1941. 76, 599 Poles were deported from the Łódź region, which was incorporated into the Third Reich as part of the Wartheland.<sup>48</sup> Poles were removed to transit camps with only a small bundle of belongings, and then, after a few months, transported to the General Government, a territory occupied by Nazi Germany in the central part of Poland, or for forced labour in Germany. The expulsions of Poles from Łódź were described dramatically in the memoirs of Marian Minich.<sup>49</sup> After returning to Łódź in May 1940, Strzemiński, his wife, and child lived for a time in the Karolew district of Łódź, but one can assume not as Poles but as Russians with German roots. According to Andrzej Rukowiecki, several hundred Polish families were expelled from Karolew the night of the 30–31 August 1940, mostly workers, their lodgings taken over by Germans from the Baltic states and from Wołyń.<sup>50</sup> The Strzemińskis may have witnessed these expulsions. Did they move into one of the abandoned apartments?

The two versions of the drawing *On the Pavement*, as well as *Paving Stones (Bruk)*, and *Evicted* seem to correspond to the deportations from Łódź. In the first three drawings, we see a human figure (undoubtedly a man) drawn with a crisp black line. The cobblestones that give the piece its name have been marked with a few amorphous stains. The emptiness dominating the space represents not only the dispossession of material goods, abandonment, but also symbolic loss and degradation. The forms in the drawing *Evicted*, showing a woman and a child, are convoluted, as though conveying the emotions of perturbation, despair, and anger, both of the represented figure and the observer representing her situation. All the drawings from the cycles *Deportations*



Fig. 22.2.  
Władysław  
Strzemiński,  
*Untitled (Cheap  
as Mud II series)*  
(*Bez tytułu, cykl  
Tanie jak błoto  
II*), 1940). Pencil  
drawing on paper,  
29.5 x 41.7 cm.  
Muzeum Sztuki,  
Łódź.



and *West Belorussia* are characterised by a certain marked distance between the observer and the event recorded. Although the observer is emotionally engaged in the representation (showing sympathy, compassion, empathy for the outrage and despair), he remains on the outside. This situation changes in the cycle *Faces (Twarze)*, which are marked by an almost intimate proximity, particularly in the four drawings from the cycle *Cheap as Mud*, in which the observer and the observed scene literally melt into one another in the drawn representation.<sup>51</sup>

#### ***Cheap as Mud, 1943–1944***

The drawings in the series *Cheap as Mud* were carried out on decidedly grainy paper. In the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź there is a collection of fourteen drawings, three of which, with the specific title *On the Trenches (Na okopy)*, seem either to belong to a separate series, or to posit one, as they differ from the rest. They are all signed and dated. One of these, the earliest (*Untitled, 1943, 29.7 x 41.8 cm*), was carried out in hard pencil and the most delicate of contours on a lightly-enriched paper. The impression of graininess, almost smudging the texture, is increased. In this drawing, which is also the only one in portrait orientation and rectangular in shape, we see two figures holding hands: one larger, one smaller; a woman (suggested by the highly decorative nature of the form) and a child. They are positioned in the centre of the picture space, turning slightly left; the woman leans protectively towards the child, the child's head is raised, looking into the woman's face, and the child's legs flow into one. It seems that we are witnessing the child asking a question. Or else, perhaps the child and mother (?) are turning their heads away from something, turning to the right. The left side, gaping with emptiness, in such an interpretation, serves to bracket the literal distance, dividing the figures from the terrifying scene. The figures drawn with a bulging contour are represented in such a way that we cannot be sure whether they are approaching or receding from the spectator. They are accompanied by graphite fingerprints, though these do not touch the figures holding hands tightly, heading in an unknown direction. The use of a hard pencil gives the impression that the shapes are vanishing behind the smudges; by comparison with the strong fingerprints, they seem fragile, light, delicate.

Organic line describes complex shapes by way of flowing folds and angles in all the works in this cycle. However, in this cycle, certain forms are also interrupted, opening onto the emptiness of the ground: there is no stable point of perspective. The flat imprints of fingers covered in graphite, probably Strzemiński's, can be found in four works. Three of them are versions of three

others (the placement of the fingerprints differentiates them from one another), and one can be treated as a synthesis of two drawings. This is the one that I will describe and analyse.

It is the only one to have been not only dated and signed (on the bottom right), but also supplied with a commentary or title in the artist's hand (on the bottom left): 'cheap as mud' (Fig. 22.2). The drawing has been in the collection of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź since 1974, when it was purchased from Bolesław Hochlinger (a friend of Strzemiński's). It is rectangular and has a landscape orientation, with the dimensions 42 x 30 cm. It can be read from at least two angles: as a frontal view or as an aerial view. Read frontally, the centre of the composition has been positioned slightly to the left of the central axis of the picture. Two forms in outline, three smaller shapes positioned at the bottom and the constellation of rounded stains accompanying them: large graphite finger prints. The two larger outlined forms do not touch, though they are close to one another. The smaller form resembles a child caught in the gesture of extending its hand to an adult. This expression of fear or of the need for protection, support, and togetherness, is especially moving. The larger, much more amorphous figure, its upper part partially melting away, is open, and does not respond to the child's gesture. The only detail indicating that this is a person are the deformed feet. In its positioning and also the particularly-developed, blurred, central part of the figure extended to the right, the form comes to suggest movement towards the right. The graphite fingerprints underline the transparency of the forms as well as their smudging. We have the impression of an interference in the field of vision, fine particles irritating our eyes.

Julian Przyboś, a well-known Polish avant-garde poet and art critic, who was a close friend of the artist's, saw these drawings as referring to the Holocaust. Przyboś discussed the theme of the Holocaust in Strzemiński's work in 1956, though he confused the *Deportations* cycle with *Cheap as Mud* (possibly also overlaying his memories with the cycle *To my Friends the Jews*):

These are abstract but figurative pictures, made with the most general of syntheses of line and colour, and they give things a particular, unique expressive quality. For example the drawings from the *Deportations* cycle, representing the tragedy of the ghetto, or the cycle of drawing *Ruins (Ruiny)*. The artist was able to give his human figures a startlingly expressive quality (without indicating eyes, mouths or facial features) with one waving line defining the outline, a line which seems alike in each individual drawing. Exhibited in Łódź immediately after the war, these drawings—why should I not say so?—made a stronger impression on me than Picasso's *Guernica*.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps Przyboś heard a reading along these lines from his friend Strzemiński. I would like to develop and somewhat complicate it.

In the case of the drawing from 1943 and the works from the following year, Strzemiński may have been working on scenes of which he had not been just an eyewitness, but also an audio or even a 'poly-sensory' observer. Between mid-January and the end of July 1942, the Germans deported around fifty-five thousand Jews from the Łódź ghetto to the extermination camp at Chełmno nad Nerem (Kulmhof am Ner). They were all killed. Earlier, in January 1942, the Nazis liquidated the gypsy camp, killing four thousand three hundred Roma and Sinti, also at Chełmno nad Nerem.<sup>53</sup> Heinrich Himmler took the decision to liquidate the ghetto in occupied Łódź at the beginning of 1944.<sup>54</sup> Between 23 June and the end of August, over seventy thousand people were deported to the extermination camps at Chełmno nad Nerem and Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>55</sup> It may be that these events, as well as the extreme conditions of life in the ghetto—widespread hunger, illness, and terror—served as a reference point for the *Cheap as Mud* drawings. The dominant presence of the figure of the small child is, nevertheless, striking in this cycle. It is found in as many as seven of the eleven drawings that can, strictly speaking, be linked to this cycle. I am inclined to believe that the drawings in which the figures of children appear, two in particular, refer, above all, to the tragic events of the great deportation action, known as the *Wielka Szpera* (from the German *allgemeine Gehsperr*, meaning general curfew) of September 1942. Children under the age of ten, persons over the age of sixty-five, and all those who were weak or sick: altogether 15, 681 people were transported to Chełmno nad Nerem and killed.<sup>56</sup> The *Wielka Szpera* was accompanied by murders and executions; the ghetto was filled with crying, screaming, and terror. First the security

guards, and then divisions of the Nazi police searched the ghetto, quarter by quarter. The selection was often made in an arbitrary manner. Desperate people tried to hide their children, but their opposition was met with the perverse cruelty of the Gestapo. Children were murdered before their parents' eyes, parents before their children's. The Nazis murdered several dozen or several hundred people who resisted. There was no one in the ghetto who did not lose a loved one. People were also aware that certain death awaited the victims of the *Wielka Szpera*.<sup>57</sup> In her monograph on the Łódź ghetto, Andrea Löw wrote that:

Judel Kleiman was the driver of one of the vehicles and recalls that some of the children sang during the journey. Others tried to escape by jumping from the lorries; they were shot down on the spot. The same thing happened to the older people who had been selected for deportation and tried to escape, as well as to parents trying to get their children out of the vehicles. Several mothers and children were shot by German police as they tried to escape from the yard of the surrounded tenement building.<sup>58</sup>

The figure of the child in *Cheap as Mud* is represented in three simple forms: in two cases alone (the same composition, the only difference in the second case being the addition of finger traces); and in the remaining five drawings, paired with an adult figure (three of these have the same formal composition, the images are distinguished from one another by way of their format, the addition of fingerprints, or the thickness of the line). If we view the figures from above, we see human forms in them, or rather human remains: a stream of blood, a form imprinted in a soft, muddy ground. By applying two perspectives simultaneously, frontal and aerial, the child in the drawings is shown as both still living and already dead, on the border between life and death. Either someone accompanies the child in this liminal situation (represented paired with an adult figure) or else the child dies utterly alone.

The stains and fingerprints in four drawings of the cycle *Cheap as Mud* neither give the figures volume nor construct perspective, as Strzemiński had tested out in the still life studies in 1943. The observer sees the scene taking place nearby, and remains at a certain distance, but nevertheless participates in it. The drawings from the cycle *Cheap as Mud*, stained with fingerprints, are an exposé of the collapse of the boundary between the representation of the subject and object, the observer and the observed. These drawings not only testify to events, but also to a process of gradual disintegration. In Ewa Domańska's terms, they are an expression of the 'transhumanation' ('*transhumanacja*') of the subject, who, at some point, in some way, identifies with the scene represented, while at the same time reveals symptoms of a subjective breakdown triggered by the observed, liminal situation.<sup>59</sup> The remains of the person represented are traces of existence trodden into mud, evidence of a humanity soiled by crime. The finger prints, meanwhile, are a sign of life, whose value has been levelled with mud, in view of the catastrophe taking place. At the same time, the fingers touch the trace left of the person in an extraordinarily-tender, close way. We might say that this is a substitute for an action associated with mourning, a symbolic burial of the dead. The union of the observer with the observed is almost literal. Strzemiński not only wrote his affective reaction, the engagement of the observer in reality, the tremors of his heart, into the drawings, but also his own disintegration as a subject.

### **Drawings: A neuroaesthetic analysis<sup>60</sup>**

In its suspension between abstraction and Realism, Strzemiński's line stimulates free associations, as though fulfilling the function of the Rorschach test.<sup>61</sup> This is because Strzemiński's drawings deploy, among others, Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein's 'peak shift' principle, that is to say that they differentiate the basic characteristics of an object, intensify basic shapes, and draw our attention to the representation of overemphasised anatomical poses.<sup>62</sup> The arrangement of lines is characterised by gentle interruptions, the circularity of the shapes reminiscent of the structure of cells, marking a vertical stance, legs, comparisons between the lower and upper parts, meaning that, as viewers, we see first the human figure, and then the adult or child, woman or man, an attitude of resignation, sadness or agitation. Strzemiński also applies the principle defined by Ramachandran and Hirstein as 'perceptual grouping': binding figures on the basis

of correlations (all executed in an energetic winding line), which activates individual modules of seeing, the segmentation of the visual field, and, ultimately, the attainment of the unification and separation (as well as the differentiation) of individual figures. It also activates contrasts: black-white, outline-surface, vertical-horizontal, decorative-ascetic, and, on a metaphorical level, living-dead. Contrast, as the authors of the concept of neuroaesthetics write, particularly activates the visual pathways: 'Cells in the retina, lateral geniculate body ... and in the visual cortex respond mainly to edges ... so a line drawing or cartoon stimulates these cells as effectively as a half tone photograph'.<sup>63</sup> Strzemiński's drawings are somewhat reminiscent of a visual puzzle, though one in which the final result is not predetermined. The visual apparatus is forced to look for solutions, what Ramachandran and Hirstein call the 'perceptual problem solving' principle.<sup>64</sup> Primary forms, their grouping, and the contrast making it possible to distinguish figure from ground are based on the arousal of the nervous system associated with seeing. With it, Ramachandran and Hirstein argue, the process of perception is activated, as is the limbic system responsible for, among others, affects and emotions. So these drawings are not only a testimony of real events and at the same time a record of the affective reaction of the artist; they also activate various parts of the brain of the viewer on every occasion. If, as I have argued, they are a neurotestimony, they force the engagement of attention, and, with it, an emotional reaction as well as conscious processes associated with memory and understanding, both on the part of the artist and the receiver.

In contemporary neurological accounts the term 'visual brain' is used. Semir Zeki argues that: it is becoming increasingly evident that the entire network of connections within the visual cortex, including the reentrant connections to V1 and V2, must function healthily for the brain to gain complete knowledge of the external world. Yet as patients with blindsight have shown, knowledge cannot be acquired without consciousness, which seems to be a crucial feature of a properly functioning visual apparatus. Consequently, no one will be able to understand the visual brain in any profound sense without tackling the problem of consciousness as well ... It is no longer possible to divide the process of seeing from that of understanding, as neurologists once imagined, nor is it possible to separate the acquisition of visual knowledge from consciousness. Indeed, consciousness is a property of the complex neural apparatus that the brain has developed to acquire knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

Strzemiński had an exceptionally modern view of the connection between the work of the brain and the visual apparatus. Somewhat like Semir Zeki, though of course using completely different terminology and driven rather by artistic experiences, he claimed that it is precisely thought that poses the questions to which the eye replies. Seeing, then, is a continual process of work and exchange between the eye and the brain. Conceived of in this way, seeing is visual consciousness; it constitutes the activities of seeing, understanding, and producing knowledge. The pulsating and rambling body, entangled with the mind, and radiating in the eye (observing the world), brings us closer to humanity.<sup>66</sup>

Strzemiński's neurotestimony reveals images that not only posit the active process of seeing, but also of understanding, though initiated at an unconscious, neurological level. In the war drawings, for the first time, the intricate process of seeing taking place between the organ of sight and the brain allows for the emergence of figures, objects, and scenes from the drawings. They refer to the world of things, and take on life and movement at the moment of perception, making it possible to recognise the flash of a painful history. Strzemiński constructed his visual consciousness in an effort to protect the remains of his humanity. Its results were works that I define as neurotestimony.<sup>67</sup> This visual record of inconceivable, extreme events, and of their effects, imprinted on embodied subjectivity and returning as an echo in representation is the basis of the most important theoretical work defining modernity in Poland: *Theory of Seeing*. The slivers of its core theoretical concepts and categories, so important for the artists of the Polish neo-avant-garde, were defined by an unheroic observer, in the shadow of a world falling apart.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Prof. Ewa Domańska and to Prof. Jacek Leociak for their valuable comments of this article, as well as to Dr Klara Kemp-Welch for her wonderful translation. (The translated text was slightly revised and supplemented by the author – *the Editor*).

1 Some of the drawings are in the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, some in the National Museum in Warsaw and in Poznań, and some in private collections. Their exact number is unknown and not all of them are signed and dated. The artist donated the following body of works (among others) to the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in November 1945: *West Belorussia (Białoruś Zachodnia)*; *Deportations (Deportacje)*; *War to Houses (Wojna domom, given as Civil War (Wojna domowa) in the inventory)*; *Faces (Twarze)*, *Landscapes (Pejzaże)* and *Still Lifes (Martwe natury)*; *Cheap as Mud (Tanie jak błoto)*; *Hands, Which are Not with Us (Ręce, które nie z nami)*.

2 Julian Przyboś, 'Przedmowa. Nowatorstwo Władysława Strzemińskiego', in Władysław Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1974), p. 8.

3 Janina Ładnowska, 'Rysunki – realizm rytmu fizjologicznego' in Janusz Zagrodzki (ed.), *Władysław Strzemiński. In memoriam* (Łódź: Wyd. Sztuka Polska, 1988), p. 127–135, Władysław Strzemiński, 'Aspekty rzeczywistości' (1936), in Grzegorz Sztabiński (ed.), *Władysław Strzemiński. Wybór pism estetycznych* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), pp. 134–145.

4 Stefan Krygier, 'Władysław Strzemiński – artysta, pedagog. Wspomnienia', in Zagrodzki (ed.), *Władysław Strzemiński*, p. 40.

5 Ładnowska, 'Rysunki – realizm rytmu fizjologicznego', p. 133.

6 Andrzej Turowski, *Budowniczość świata. Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), pp. 222–234.

7 Turowski, *Budowniczość świata*, pp. 222, 225.

8 Przyboś situates the cycles *Deportations*, *War on Houses* (which he calls *Ruins*) and *Cheap as Mud* in the context of the Holocaust. Zenobia Karnicka, 'The life and work of Władysław Strzemiński – chronology', in *Władysław Strzemiński. On the 100th anniversary of his birth*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki (Łódź, 1994), p. 85; Eleonora Jedlińska, 'Cykle wojenne: rysunki i kolaże Władysława Strzemińskiego z lat 1939–1945. Doświadczenie wojny – żal i melancholia', in Grzegorz Sztabiński (ed.), *Władysław Strzemiński. Uniwersalne oddziaływanie idei* (Łódź: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Władysława Strzemińskiego, 2005), pp. 91–97. Another work devoted to Strzemiński's drawings is the small catalogue: A. Wesołowska (ed.), *Warsztat Władysława Strzemińskiego* (Łódź: Galeria Anny Wesołowskiej, 1985).

9 Jedlińska, *Cykle wojenne*, p. 94.

10 Nika Strzemińska, *Sztuka, miłość i nienawiść. O Katarzynie Kobro i Władysławie Strzemińskim* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2001). The first fragments of the book were serialised at the end of the 1980s in the journal *Sztuka (Art)*. The first (incomplete) edition was in 1991 (Warszawa: Res Publica)

11 Łukasz Kędziora was the first scholar to have noticed neuroaesthetic strands in Strzemiński's work. His MA dissertation offered an interesting neuroaesthetic analysis of selected works from the 1930s and 40s by the artist (while entirely omitting the war drawings, *To My Friends the Jews*, and the *Theory of Seeing*). Łukasz Kędziora, 'Neuroestetyka jako nowa metoda analizy obrazów' (MA thesis, Instytut Historii Sztuki, Department of History UAM, Poznań 2012), pp. 59–69. Kędziora rightly refers to Strzemiński in his work as a 'conscious neurobiologist', as well as indicating the 'empathetic impulse' in *To My Friends the Jews*. See: Łukasz Kędziora, *Wizualność dzieła sztuki: ocena potencjału neuroestetyki w badaniach historyczno-artystycznych* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2016), p. 120.

12 Kędziora, *Wizualność dzieła sztuki*, p. 81.

13 Julian Przyboś, 'Strzemiński przed śmiercią', in Przyboś, *Zapiski bez daty* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1970), p. 331. Przyboś referred to this event on the basis of Jerzy Putrament's account.

14 Katarzyna Kobro, diary extract. Cited in: Strzemińska, *Sztuka, miłość i nienawiść*, p. 81.

15 As Eugeniusz Mironowicz noted, the first two deportations in West Belorussia, to which I refer, took place on 10 February and 13 April 1940. Eugeniusz Mironowicz, *Białoruś* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2007), pp. 168–169.

16 The acceptance of a Soviet passport was treated by Polish citizens as a highly ambiguous act. However, refusal was linked to harsh repressions: arrests, tortures, and the deportation of family members. The answers to the above question require in-depth research in Russian and Belorussian archives.

17 For more information see: 'The Łódź Ghetto – Historical Background', accessed 30 October 2019, <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/the-lodz-ghetto-historical-background.html>

18 Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, p. 83.

19 Timothy Snyder, *Czarna ziemia. Holokaust jako ostrzeżenie*, trans. Bartłomiej Pietrzyk (Kraków: Znak Horyzont, 2015), p. 168. Małgorzata Ruchniewicz wrote that this deportation affected refugees from Central and Western Poland, who did not have Russian passports. The decision as to this deportation was taken in March 1940. Małgorzata Ruchniewicz, *Więź zachodniobiałoruska 1944–1953: wybrane aspekty* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2010), p. 85.

20 See Strzemiński's document issued in Łódź. The eighth letter of the surname in the document is not clear, it could be read as a 'd' or 'ń'. Akta w sprawie Władysława Strzemińskiego, Prokuratura Sądu Specjalnego Karnego w Łodzi, Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi, reference R. 3087/45, 2013 (no. 1/81).

21 Adolf Kargel, 'Internationale Kunst', *Litzmannstadter Zeitung* 82 (1941).

22 See Strzemiński's aforementioned document from Łódź, Akta w sprawie Władysława Strzemińskiego. The privileges consisted of, for example, larger portions of food or the possibility of living in a larger apartment. However, Władysław Strzemiński's daughter Nika stated that her parents used only a very small part of these privileges, such as bigger portions of food, sharing it with others in need. Strzemińska, *Sztuka, miłość i nienawiść*, p. 55, 57.

23 During the First World War, Władysław Strzemiński fought on the front line of the Eastern Front as an Officer in charge of a Platoon of Sappers. He received many awards for his bravery and courage. Most probably as a consequence of chlorine poisoning, the infections resulting from this, and the amputations that followed, or as a result of an accident in the trenches, he lost part of his left arm and right leg, and sustained seriously-impaired vision in his left eye (all that remained, his daughter Nika Strzemińska wrote, was a 'feeling of light'). See: Iwona Luba and Ewa Paulina Wawer, *Władysław Strzemiński. Zawsze w awangardzie. Rekonstrukcja nieznannej biografii 1893–1917* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2017), pp. 149–226. An accident in the trenches was previously mentioned by Nika Strzemińska, *Miłość, sztuka i nienawiść. O Katarzynie Kobro i Władysławie Strzemińskim*, *Sztuka, miłość i nienawiść*, p. 59. According to Luba and Wawer, they found no archival evidence for this, and his life-changing injuries must have been sustained in some other way.

24 Władysław Strzemiński, 'Fragment powieści', in Jarosław Lubiak (ed.), *Powidoki życia. Władysław Strzemiński i prawa dla sztuki* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2012), pp. 347–395.

25 Aleksandra Ubertowska "'Tchnienie małostkowej nekrofilii". Zagłada w eseiście Kazimierza Wyki', in Ubertowska, *Holokaust. Auto(tanato)grafie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 2014), p. 98. Kazimierz Wyka (born 1910 in Krzeszowice, died 1975 in Kraków) is one of the most renowned and significant figures in Polish culture; he was a literary critic, literary historian, and essayist, and, after the Second World War, was Professor of Polish at the Jagellonian University as well as co-founder of the Institute of Literary Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences (Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk).

26 This is the title by which the cycle is widely known in the available literature. However, I believe that Strzemiński gave his cycle a slightly different title: *Pamięci przyjaciół – Żydów / In Memory of Friends – Jews*. For more on this subject, see: Luiza Nader, 'Wunderblock Strzemińskiego. Pamięci przyjaciół Żydów',

- RIHA Journal* (October–December 2014), accessed 30 October 2019, <https://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2014/2014-oct-dec-special-issue->
- 27 Ubertowska, “‘Tchnienie małosłkowej nekrofilii’”, pp. 97–98.
- 28 Ubertowska, “‘Tchnienie małosłkowej nekrofilii’”, p. 94.
- 29 Kazimierz Wyka, ‘Gospodarka wyłączona’, in Wyka, *Życie na niby* (Kraków: Universitas 2010), p. 293.
- 30 ‘The sketches, or rather models for works, were drawn on tracing paper, then the artist printed them on mostly soft paper, after which he outlined the print in pencil. Strzemiński worked out a particular alphabet or “dictionary” of forms. Sometimes the same sheet of tracing paper has forms-drawings made at the same time, employed in works produced several years apart. Combinations of forms occur. Some forms can be traced in many drawings across the space of several years. The method used gave the artist the possibility of an almost infinite configuration of forms ... This manner of working helped the author achieve a maximum synthesis of form, an optically unified, yet variable, whole’. Ładnowska, ‘Rysunki – realizm rytmu fizjologicznego’, p. 130
- 31 Ładnowska, ‘Rysunki – realizm rytmu fizjologicznego’, p. 129.
- 32 Władysław Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia* (1958) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1974), pp. 240–241.
- 33 Aleksandra Ubertowska, ‘Pomiędzy torturą a “krajobrazem ruin”. O “podmiocie po Auschwitz” w esejście Jeana Amery’ego’, in Ubertowska, *Holokaust. Auto[ta]nato[gr]afie*, p. 22.
- 34 Cited in Ruchniewicz, *Wież zachodniobiałoruska*, p. 63.
- 35 Ruchniewicz, *Wież zachodniobiałoruska*, p. 65; Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, pp. 150–151.
- 36 Ruchniewicz, *Wież zachodniobiałoruska*, p. 89.
- 37 Marek Wierzbicki, *Polacy i Białorusini w zaborze sowieckim. Stosunki polsko-białoruskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II RP pod okupacją sowiecką 1939-1941* (Warszawa: Fronda, 2007), pp. 360–363.
- 38 Ruchniewicz, *Wież zachodniobiałoruska*, pp. 80–81.
- 39 This was how Wyka described his immediate neighbourhood, Krzeszowice. Kazimierz Wyka ‘O świecie’, in Wyka, *Życie na niby*, p. 151.
- 40 Almost all the authors mentioned at the beginning (see notes 3, 4, 6, and 8) associate the cycle *Deportations* with the deportation of Poles from Łódź, with the exception of Przyboś, who mistakenly connects the *Deportations* with the Holocaust. Dr Hab. Iwona Luba mentioned to me in conversation in October 2015 the connection between the *Deportations* cycle and *West Belorussia*. I have found no textual references to this topic.
- 41 Snyder, *Czarna ziemia*, p. 168.
- 42 Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, p. 168.
- 43 Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, pp. 168–169.
- 44 Marian U, ‘1928/powiat dziśniejszy’, in Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross (eds.), “W czterdziestym nas matko na Sibir zesłali...”: *Polska a Rosja 1939–1942* (Kraków: Znak, 2008), p. 193.
- 45 Cited in Gross and Grudzińska-Gross (eds.), “W czterdziestym nas matko na Sibir zesłali”, p. 7.
- 46 Gross and Grudzińska-Gross (eds.), “W czterdziestym nas matko na Sibir zesłali”, pp. 51–57. The account relates to conditions in the prison in Wilejka Powiatowa, p. 52.
- 47 Gross and Grudzińska-Gross (eds.), “W czterdziestym nas matko na Sibir zesłali”, pp. 54–55.
- 48 Andrzej Rukowiecki, *Łódź. 1939–1945. Kronika okupacji* (Łódź: Dom Wydawniczy Księży Młyn, 2012), p. 84.
- 49 Agnieszka Minich-Scholz, ‘Marian Minich – pod wiatr’, in *Marian Minich – pod wiatr / Wspomnienia wojenne, Szalona galeria* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, 2015).
- 50 Rukowiecki, *Łódź*, p. 69.
- 51 Due to considerations of length, I am not able to discuss this cycle here.
- 52 Julian Przyboś, ‘Introduction’, in Strzemiński *Teoria widzenia*, p. 8. Przyboś continued this strand in the text ‘Realizm rytmu fizjologicznego’, in *Linia i gwar* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1959), p. 143.
- 53 Sławomir M. Nowinowski, Adam Sitarek, Michał Trębacz, Ewa Wiatr, ‘Zarys historii getta łódzkiego’, in Julian Baranowski and Sławomir M. Nowinowski (eds.), *Getto łódzkie / Litzmannstadt Getto* (Łódź: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej Oddział w Łodzi, 2009), p. 30.
- 54 Baranowski and Nowinowski (eds.), *Getto łódzkie*, p. 38.
- 55 Janina Podolska, ‘Litzmannstadt Getto’, accessed 30 October 2019, [http://www.lodzgetto.pl/litzmannstadt\\_getto\\_w\\_datach.html.2-42](http://www.lodzgetto.pl/litzmannstadt_getto_w_datach.html.2-42).
- 56 Podolska, ‘Litzmannstadt Getto’.
- 57 Andrea Löw, *Getto łódzkie/Litzmannstadt getto: warunki życia i sposoby przetrwania*, trans. M. Półrola and Ł. M. Plęś (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2012), pp. 231–242. See also: Nowinowski, Sitarek, Trębacz, and Wiatr, ‘Zarys historii getta łódzkiego’, pp. 32–33.
- 58 Löw, *Getto łódzkie*, p. 241.
- 59 Ewa Domańska, ‘Hermeneutyka przejścia (Wspomnienia z Rosji Jana Żarno)’, in Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006), pp. 131–160. Ewa Domańska analyses the ‘transhumanisation’ of the ‘civilised person’ into a ‘prisoner of the gulag’, a monstrous creature based on the diary of Jan Żarno and the ‘extraordinary story’ in it about a female cannibal, who is, in her view, an ‘existential trace’ of the liminal condition of the author himself. See pp. 142–144.
- 60 In the text I propose an analysis of the drawings from a neuroaesthetic position, which is, nevertheless, in the case of Strzemiński’s war drawings, different from the view proposed by Łukasz Kędziora in his book *Wizualność dzieła sztuki*.
- 61 The Rorschach test is one perhaps the most famous of the projective tests used in psychology to assess personality. As the authors of *Essentials of Psychology* claim: ‘all the tests and procedures labeled ‘projective’ offer the subject an ambiguous or vague stimulus of some kind—inkblots, sentences to complete, photographs of people interacting—and ask the subject to talk or write about the stimulus. Since the original stimulus is so vague, the assumption is that the subject ‘projects’ his or her own attitudes or problems onto the stimulus material’. The Rorschach test ‘uses black and white and colored inkblots as stimuli ... The interpretation of subjects’ responses to the Rorschach is both complex and controversial’. John p. Houston, Helen Bee, Elaine Hatfield, and David C. Rimm, *Essentials of Psychology* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, San Francisco: Academic Press Inc., 1981), p. 401.
- 62 Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, ‘The Science of Art. A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6/6–7 (1999): pp. 15–51. I am aware of the apparent anachronism of this conception in relation to Strzemiński. Nevertheless, the neurophysiological mechanisms described by the authors had been known in the empirical practice of artists for centuries. For more on the ‘peak shift’, see: pp. 17–21.
- 63 Ramachandran and Hirstein, ‘The Science of Art’, p. 25.
- 64 Ramachandran and Hirstein, ‘The Science of Art’, p. 23.
- 65 Semir Zeki, ‘The Visual Image in Mind and Brain’, *Scientific American* (September 1992): p. 76.
- 66 Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*.
- 67 The concept of neurotestimony, as Ewa Domańska has pointed out to me, already exists in neuropsychiatry, legal psychiatry, and is associated with the forensic turn, and this is the direction in which I seek to develop this category.





'The Joy of New  
Constructions  
in Times of  
Homelessness':  
Marian Bogusz's  
Art of the 1940s

AGATA PIETRASIK

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### **'The Joy of New Constructions in Times of Homelessness': Marian Bogusz's Art of the 1940s**

In her pioneering monograph on the Polish artist and organiser of artistic life Marian Bogusz, Bożena Kowalska argued that his artistic trajectory was heavily determined by his war-time experiences.<sup>1</sup> Art historian, art critic and a vocal advocate of modern art in the post-Stalinist period, Aleksander Wojciechowski shared this opinion, noting in his introduction to the catalogue of the artist's 1982 posthumous exhibition in Poznań that 'it was in Mauthausen that Bogusz the social worker was born, in addition to Bogusz the painter'.<sup>2</sup> Wojciechowski explained that the future that the artist was incessantly planning, throughout the course of the Second World War, became an escape from brutal reality. This essay examines the beginnings of Bogusz's artistic practice, which coincided with the dramatic period of the war and its aftermath, focussing on his architectural plans for an International Artists' Settlement (Międzynarodowe Osiedle Artystów), produced in Mauthausen concentration camp where he was imprisoned from 1942 to 1945. I will argue that these raise questions about the status of home in a world in which the experience of homelessness was widespread, as well as concerning the place of modernist utopias in dreams of reconstruction following war-time destruction.

One of the widely-discussed questions of the mid-1940s concerned the role artists were to play in the reconstruction of the intellectual life of the country. As early as 1944, Adam Ważyk, a Polish-Jewish writer and influential member of the left-wing literary avant-garde, published an article in the newly-founded Lublin magazine *Odrodzenie* (*Rebirth*) entitled 'The position of the artist', in which he described how war had changed not only the geopolitical situation in Europe, but also intellectuals' ethos.<sup>3</sup> The author located the question in a clearly-defined political framework, thereby equating the issue of the post-war ethos of the artist with the issue of the political engagement of art. Interestingly, he pointed to 'Western' rather than to Soviet Socialist Realists as the example that Polish intellectuals should follow, particularly French, left-wing writers and artists, whose art, in his view, was already making headway along the path of progressive political engagement. Ważyk did not discuss the tragedies of war and did not lament the ruin of Warsaw. On the contrary, on the smouldering ruins of the old world he was already dreaming of a new order and a new culture, rooted in the needs of the proletariat, rather than an art of 'crazy aesthetes', which would reach a wider audience than had any previous art. 'It may sound almost banal [but] war changes human characters', he stated.<sup>4</sup> Later, however, he explained the mechanisms of this process: 'Total war destroyed houses and penetrated cosy offices. Stay-at-home and office-working intellectuals, wrenched from their familial and social bonds, and from the atmosphere of bourgeois life, turned to the universal cause and many of them became somewhat activist'.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the author of the ‘Poem for Adults’ referred to the destruction of homes as an example of the ultimate displacement of the separation between the private and the political sphere, by way of which both outsider artists and those that had hitherto avoided political engagement were unwillingly sucked into the whirlwind of history and politics.<sup>6</sup> In the text, the home served not only as a rhetorical figure, bringing to mind a sense of comfort and security devastated by war, but was also understood as a space connected with a defined, and in this case, bourgeois, social habitus. The destruction of this space had major impact in symbolic terms, for it rendered it impossible to reproduce the behaviours and interpersonal relations with which it was associated. Wążyk’s text, as can be surmised from its clearly-stated ideological message, poses the question of the consequences of war-time devastation, the destruction of homes and the environment in which one lives.

The war destroyed cities all over Europe, leaving as its legacy millions of roving, homeless refugees and displaced people.<sup>7</sup> Recollecting his return to Warsaw in 1945, prominent writer and a Communist politician Jerzy Putrament wrote of the ‘human torrent’ flowing in the direction of the city and asked: ‘Where are they going to live, amidst these burned-out tenement buildings? Who will feed them? Who will keep them warm?’. Yet he went on to express his peculiar fascination with the determination of this crowd returning to the capital, of which he, too, was a part: ‘I am becoming conscious of an absurd and idiotic admiration for the endurance of the human species and the force of the instinct propelling man towards his patrimony. Not to property, not to home. Simply to a spot on the globe, the now abstract concept “Warsaw”’.<sup>8</sup>

The specificity of the post-war condition, marked by the experience of homelessness, was to have a far-reaching impact on European philosophy. Hannah Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno elaborated their influential philosophical concepts around it. According to both thinkers, the war-time destruction resulted, above all, in the loss of a common space, which, as intellectuals, they conceived of as being one in which ‘speech and action acquired meaning’. The brutal rupture of existing social structures and of ‘human catastrophes such as Auschwitz’ directly influenced the philosophers’ positions, forcing them into emigration and living and working in another cultural sphere and in another language.<sup>9</sup>

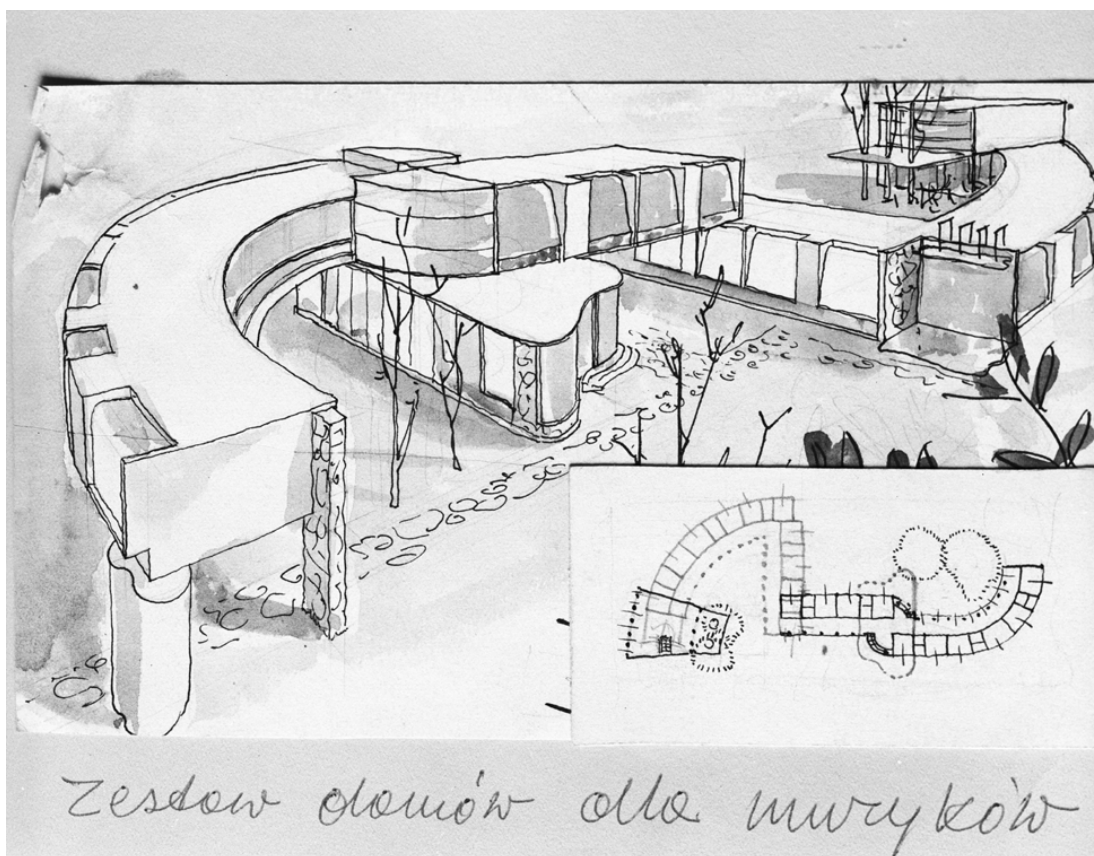
The question of what living and home become after the cataclysm of war was also posed by Martin Heidegger in the famous lecture ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, delivered in Darmstadt in 1951 to an auditorium full of architects.<sup>10</sup> In comparing Adorno and Heidegger’s positions, Samir Gandesha has noted that for both philosophers the return home, also conceived of as the return of the subject to himself, was an impossible move to make. According to Heidegger, the real housing question (*Wohnungsfrage*) was not of a utilitarian nature, for, as he claimed in the aforementioned lecture:

however hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the *proper plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in the lack of houses. The proper plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars and their destruction ... The proper plight of dwelling lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*.<sup>11</sup>

According to Adorno (and Arendt, likewise), though, exile, homelessness, and the impossibility of returning home were the result of other motives: of the actual material and symbolic destruction of the community they lived in. Linking the, in many respects divergent, philosophical projects of Arendt and Adorno, Gandesha refers to both as ‘homeless philosophy’ which subjects the possibility of the return of the subject to himself to critical reflection and in so doing recognises that ‘genuine experience, then, is openness to what is different, and is thus steadfastly in opposition to the Hegelian concept of Spirit unburdening itself of otherness on its tortuous journey home to itself, and equally to the Heideggerian *topos* of ontological uprootedness’.<sup>12</sup>

In his short story *House on the River*, published in 1947, Kornel Filipowicz recounted the story of a concentration camp prisoner who often returns in his mind to the image of his family home: ‘How permanent and untouchable that house seemed to me at that time, from the perspective of dreaming and longing. I never permitted a vision of the destruction of its image for long. The survival, intact, of this house became a sort of condition for me, some sort of a point of reference, to which, after the end of the war I would be able to link my interrupted life’.<sup>13</sup>

Fig. 23.1. Marian Bogusz, A set of houses for musicians. Drawing from the album *Buildings of the Mauthausen camp site* (1943–1945). Ink, watercolour. Photo: Witalis Wolny, 1973 (negative number 109030. Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.



Marian Bogusz, who was a prisoner in Mauthausen during the war, also wove dreams of houses. He recorded their form in sketches produced in around 1945. Bogusz's houses were part of a project for an international settlement of artists, which, according to the artists' design, was to be created on the smouldering embers of the camp. Architectural drawings showing visions of the settlement were not publicly presented until several decades after the war, in 1979, on the occasion of Bogusz's exhibition at Galeria ZA in Rawka. The artist often stressed that the experience of the camp had left its mark on his artistic position and that, though it might seem paradoxical, it was this that was at the basis of his engagement in social art.<sup>14</sup> Bogusz's futuristic visions have a Janus face because of their rooting in the past of the camps: they look both forwards and backwards. The idea of an international settlement of artists and its reappearance in Rawka thirty years after the war, in a completely different context, provides the clearest evidence for this. Besides the architectural projects from the camp, the artist also presented a plan of a settlement for artists which was to be realised in the local setting in Rawka, a small town in central Poland located between Warsaw and Łódź. The houses that Bogusz conceived for Rawka were to be located close to nature, within the surrounding forests, and host around fifty artists. Underneath the plan of the colony the artist wrote a reminder 'No trees should be felled', expressing his concern for the surrounding landscape.<sup>15</sup>

The project for Rawka provided Bogusz with an opportunity to present his original designs from Mauthausen, which were reprinted in the catalogue. There are only a few drawings by Bogusz that present the vision of the settlement in Mauthausen, and these exist only as photographic reproductions made in the 1970s. The are held in the archive of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. The drawing depicting an imagined house for musicians (Fig. 23.1), which was published in the catalogue of the Rawka exhibition, stands out as an example of modernist, Bauhaus-inspired architecture. The long and rounded form of the house is stretched along the forest and split into two levels; parts of the upper level are suspended on tall columns, other parts rest on the lower story of the building. The architecture conceived by Bogusz has a particular flow: its soft edges and tall square windows set the form in motion and render it similar to a river effortlessly meandering through a forest. Similar qualities are present

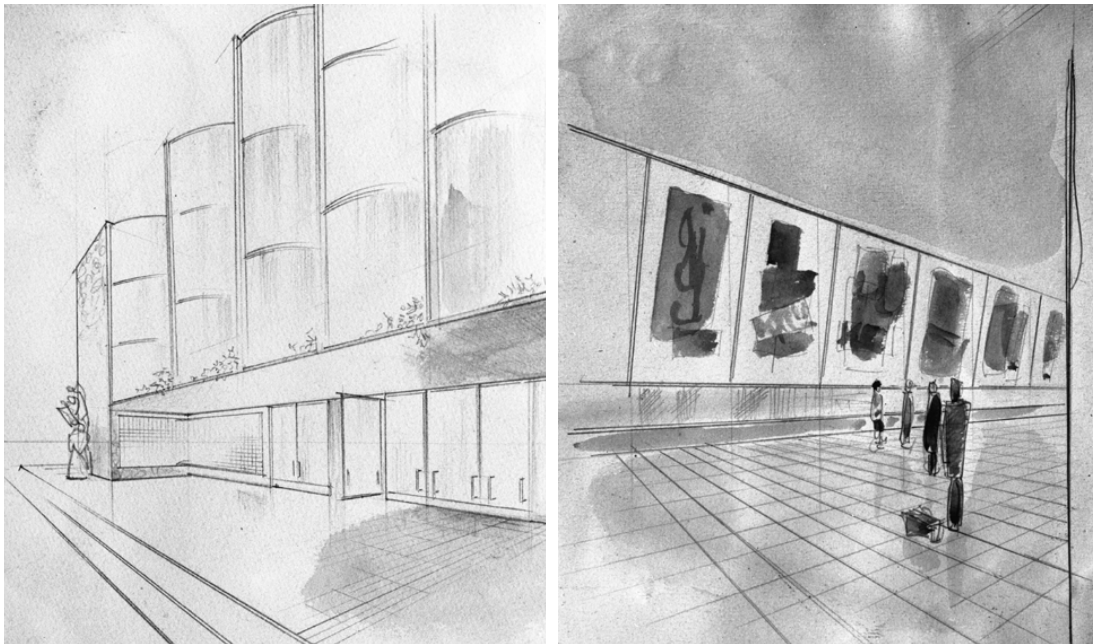


Fig. 23.2. Marian Bogusz, Reading Room – entrance. Drawing from the album *Buildings of the Mauthausen camp site* (1943–1945). Pencil, watercolour. Photo: Witalis Wolny, 1973 (negative number 109036). Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

in the drawing of a façade of an unspecified building (Fig. 23.2): big glass windows open up the space of the building while rounded corners evoke motion. Another drawing preserved in the archive (Fig. 23.3) presents an exemplary interior of the imagined building—a grand exhibition space. There are two aspects of this drawing that are particularly interesting: firstly the generous amount of space designated by Bogusz for the display of artwork reveals the utopian character of the whole enterprise, secondly the model artworks placed in the room are all large scale abstract paintings, and can be interpreted as testament to the fact that a particular type of practice was tied to the idea of the international settlement for artists.

The possibility of decontextualising the project and its ready adaptability to new conditions cannot, however, blur the specificity of Bogusz’s idea, which was, after all, rooted in Mauthausen. The artist made a point of this in a letter addressed to his deceased friend the Spaniard Emmanuel Muñoz, a fellow prisoner and co-creator of the settlement (reproduced in the 1979 catalogue):

Dear Muñoz, at last I am showing publicly the whole vision of our International Artists’ Settlement. We did not have time to consult on the placement of individual studios or the whole spatial and urban concept before the liberation of the camp (9 May 1945). I did this without your consultation immediately after the liberation, when it was possible to move around the space in its entirety. I remember your enthusiasm when you saw the first sketches on scraps of paper. I think it was in the spring of 1944 ... Months passed, and we ‘created’ our settlement. This vision enabled us to survive.<sup>16</sup>

The settlement of artists erected on the terrain of the former camp reveals the extent to which Bogusz’s thinking was rooted in his war-time past. In the next part of the letter, the author describes the placement of the houses for artists which were to be built near the so-called *Russenlager*, the part of the camp constructed especially for Russian prisoners of war, beside the quarry that was a site of forced labour and the death of many of the prisoners of Mauthausen camp. According to Bogusz, this area of the settlement, which was on a hill, was to consist in houses for writers and musicians, meeting rooms, exhibition rooms, and even an amphitheatre. The whole could be connected with the lower area by a system of terraces. The administrative centre of the settlement was planned in place of the administrative centre of the camp, the construction office (*Baubüro*) where Bogusz himself worked as a prisoner. Among other tasks, he was to work on technical drawings of the camp’s planned extensions.<sup>17</sup> The driving of cars was to be forbidden within the pale of the settlement, and the passage between different buildings was to be made simpler by mobile walkways. A few humble drawings presenting the vision of the settlement show a fascination with modernist architecture, featuring long, spiral walls fitted with windows opening out onto the woodland in the middle.

Fig. 23.3. Marian Bogusz. Exhibition rooms. Drawing from the album *Buildings of the Mauthausen camp site* (1943–1945). Pencil, watercolour. Photo: Witalis Wolny, 1973 (negative number 109037). Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.



The drawings produced by Bogusz are decidedly different from many other works produced in concentration camps, above all because they are not documentary in nature: they do not speak directly of life in the camp but are the record of a dream of a different life in the future. However, in order to fully grasp the meaning of Bogusz's imaginary houses, one has also to try to imagine them in the context of the place on whose ruins they were to be constructed: Mauthausen concentration camp.

Marian Bogusz spent three years in Mauthausen. In February 1941, he was transferred there from prison in Poznań. He was twenty-one at the time and had some experience in the artistic field, acquired over the course of his studies at the Poznań State School of Decorative Arts and Artistic Industry (Państwowa Szkoła Sztuk Zdobniczych i Przemysłu Artystycznego).<sup>18</sup> He had already begun drawing, mostly portraits of his fellow prisoners, in Poznań Fort no. 7. He spent his first year at Mauthausen working in the quarry but was then allocated to work in the camp administration in 1942, in the construction office, where he was allocated work on technical architectural drawings associated with the expansion of the camp. Bogusz used his position to help other prisoners.<sup>19</sup> In 1943, the Nazis organised a craft workshop at the camp, engaging several artists, among them Bogusz. During working hours, the artists had to produce items ordered by the camp personnel. Besides affording the prisoners a significant improvement in their material conditions, their artistic work also gave them access to materials, which they used in their illegal work.<sup>20</sup>

Information concerning this period in Bogusz's life is piecemeal: with the exception of the above-cited information collected by Janina Jaworska, there are no further recollections relating to the period spent in the camp. After the death of the artist in 1980, one of his friends described the atmosphere when Bogusz spoke of his camp memories, while admitting that there was no audience for these stories at the time and that they were not taken very seriously:

During the evening chats we had in the studio of our artist friend, Bogusz recounted things that I have only begun to believe to have been true now, many years later. For at the time I put down much of what he said to the Schnapps to which he was partial ... at the time, I quite mistakenly thought that some of what he was saying was just general drunken fantasy. For instance, that for his twenty-second birthday he received four crayons as a gift from an SS man from the concentration camp personnel: red, blue, green and black, as well as a drawing pad of good quality card.<sup>21</sup>

At present, we can only collate the recollection above with Bogusz's works. The four colours referred to can be seen in the watercolours created in around 1943 in Mauthausen. The work entitled *Without Hope (Bez nadziei)* depicts a man, who in a gesture of resignation buries his head in his hands, resting on a table. The palms of the figure's hands are unnaturally enlarged, making the figure seem massive and indifferent. The colours, applied in thick brushstrokes, underline the all-encompassing sense of weight and merge into a dark, muddy mass of shades. Dark blue and green are the dominant colours. The colours flow into one another, creating stains, which are disturbingly reminiscent of the colour of murky, polluted water. The work translates onto paper and transforms into the language of colour a mood of exhaustion, despair and hopelessness in an extraordinarily suggestive way.

The association of the colour of the picture with the colour of the murky water is connected to the context of the forced labour carried out by the artist, for, as of 1943, working in the camp artistic workshop, Bogusz specialised in painting seascapes in oil, ordered by the guards in the camp.<sup>22</sup> He received an additional portion of food for every painting produced.<sup>23</sup> The Italian painter Aldo Carpi, who was sent to Mauthausen in 1944, recalled that there was often a brutal struggle to get work in the workshop. For example, when his fellow prisoners found out that Carpi was a professor of painting, they began to fear for their positions, since losing their job would mean being 'allocated to work outside the camp, and so to be sentenced to death'.<sup>24</sup> One of the prisoners took Carpi's food and paints for this reason.

Bogusz recalled that, along with other artists, among them the aforementioned Muñoz, and the Czech artist Zbynek Sekal, they would go through rubbish bins in search of newspapers

and books containing reproductions of artworks. Next, they would cut out pictures and put them together in book form: ‘In this way we made albums, among others of Holbein and Rembrandt, with text in Polish, Czech and German ... Poetry was often included in these albums’, recalled Bogusz.<sup>25</sup> Another Pole joined this group of artists in 1944: Zbigniew Dłubak, hiding behind the adopted name Andrzej Zdanowski, who was transferred to Mauthausen from Auschwitz.<sup>26</sup>

Bogusz, Dłubak, and Sekal co-organised several ‘exhibitions’ in the camp.<sup>27</sup> Small works by artists, affixed to a blanket, were presented on the wooden bunks of several barracks. Artists also produced small posters for the exhibitions. One of these, designed by Bogusz on the occasion of Dłubak’s exhibition in March 1945, represents the silhouette outline of a prisoner holding a hammer in one hand and a palette in the other. The double character of the figure is additionally highlighted by the use of a red background on the right-hand side of the drawing. In the context of the camp, the hammer can be read as a reference to prisoners working in the quarries, who split blocks of granite with similar hammers. The drawing may therefore relate to the double status of the artist-prisoner. The colour red, meanwhile, may be an allusion to political engagement in the leftist movements active in the camp, in which both Bogusz and Dłubak were involved.<sup>28</sup>

Similar tropes, weaving together Socialist rhetoric glorifying the proletarian struggle with the situation of the prisoner in the concentration camp, are evident in another series of works produced by Bogusz in Mauthausen: illustrations for the famous *proletkult*-style poem entitled ‘The Ballad of the Stoker’s Eyes’ by the Czech poet Jiří Wolker.<sup>29</sup> Wolker’s work, focussed on describing the struggle and exploitation of the working class, resonated in a new way in the context of the concentration camp. It became a space, or even a certain framework, within which one could also perceive a reflection of the prisoners’ struggles.

The poem ‘The Ballad of the Stoker’s Eyes’ tells the story of Antoni, the boiler-room worker referred to in the title, who loses his sight as a result of exhausting work and devastating health conditions. Throughout the poem, the author stresses that the modern conveniences that the bourgeoisie benefit from are paid for by the exploitation of the working class, and that this is inscribed in the comfort of modern city life. Antoni works at night, while other inhabitants of the city sleep:

The factories have gone quiet, so has the street  
 The stars have gone to sleep round the moon  
 And in the city there’s only one place  
 That has not closed its eyes so late...  
 In this house work roars night as it does day  
 And at night you hear the engines  
 THE STOKE-HOLD IS HUNGRY  
 The flames call  
 FOR COAL TO STOKE!  
 And men rush in their effort of labour  
 Not counting the long years of suffering,  
 They melt their hatred in the flames of the stoke-hold  
 Into the red lights of the street-lamps...<sup>30</sup>

The disturbing blurring of boundaries and the unification of man and object returns as a theme in subsequent verses of the work, and the reification of the bodies of the workers develops in two main directions: the workers turn their bodies into tools, becoming machines, or else the products of their labour, such as electricity, contain elements of bodily suffering. The worker forced into inhuman labour is thus a contemporary Prometheus, engulfed in his effort, and like the Greek god has to pay the highest price for the gift he delivers to mankind. In the end, Antoni loses his sight, and the electricity produced by the work of his muscles illuminates the streets and houses of the city:

Along with the coal,  
 Antoni throws part of his eyes into the furnace  
 He makes the flames red with his own blood

It's well known:  
 The result was born of man,  
 Of man too, light on earth.<sup>31</sup>

Bogusz made ten small drawings illustrating the individual verses of the poem.<sup>32</sup> As in the poem, the motif of the eye serves as a linchpin. In the opening drawing of the series, we see a collage composed of images of the city and eyes. The next drawing, entitled *House (Dom)*, shows an empty room, at the centre of which there is a table with a lamp shining above it, and the form of the lightbulb resembles a pair of eyes. The poetic metaphor of Antoni, who 'melted his eyes into the blueness of the flame', is illustrated rather literally, and yet the great strength of the work lies precisely in this literalness.<sup>33</sup> In one of the last illustrations, the reality of the camp seems to enter into the space of the poem with ever greater force: an emaciated figure, reminiscent of a skeleton, can be seen in the picture, with arms outstretched in a gesture of helplessness, revealing black holes of empty eye sockets. 'I am blind', announces the sentence written beneath in capital letters. I have nothing, adds the gesture of the hopelessly dangling hands. The effect of Bogusz's drawings relies on their simplicity and synthetic character. The motif of blindness and of the injured eye was echoed in later works, such as the 1947 drawing entitled *Covered Eyes (Przestonięte oczy)*, in which the artist represented himself in the form of a bust, once again exchanging subject and object positions. His left eye is covered from above by a hand that seems to be none other than the hand of God.<sup>34</sup>

Of all the surviving works by Bogusz from the period when he was in Mauthausen, none refers directly to camp life. Those described above undoubtedly come closest to documenting life behind barbed wire, such as *Exhausted (Zmęczony)* or *Without Hope*, but even these drawings do not contain direct references that would immediately identify the figures represented in them as camp prisoners. Bogusz did not talk about his experience directly, but as though only when the occasion presented itself, while getting to the bottom of other stories. Georges Didi-Huberman claimed that images produced in concentration camps are only legible from an appropriate ethical perspective, which—in spite of all—allows for the unknown to be situated in time by the use of other words and images.<sup>35</sup> Looking askance, rather than looking directly, positioning pictures in unlikely contexts or creating new constellations out of them, is the ethical challenge with which Didi-Huberman presents the contemporary viewer. In light of these considerations, the story about the worker losing his sight in Wolker's poem, as interpreted by Bogusz, contains the experience of the concentration camp and is perhaps also a testimony of the powerlessness of the author of the drawings, who was unable to recount directly on the one hand, while, on the other, was unable to remain silent. The mutual dependency between Wolker's and Bogusz's narratives is not a straightforward relation based on substitution, in which one story takes the place of another, but rather they are told together, seeping into one another. The illustrations for Wolker's poem were provided with an inscription, legible at first glance—'Mauthausen 1944'—whose presence on the margins of the drawing has the effect of making it immediately lose its innocence. If we read the poem askance, from the perspective of Mauthausen, the story of the exploitation of the workers refers to the key question of forced labour in the socio-economic system constructed by the Nazis. Together with the Third Reich's war effort, which engaged a majority of men in battle on the front, there was an increased need for workers able to strengthen strategic branches of the German economy such as farming and heavy industry. This was why, over the course of time, the SS began to transform itself into an organisation that incorporated genocide into its modern business model.<sup>36</sup> All these factors were woven together in relation to the problem of architecture in Bogusz's aforementioned utopian vision. The Mauthausen camp was not only strongly associated with German industry, but, more importantly, its operation was directly linked to the ambitious architectural projects undertaken by the main architect of the Third Reich, Albert Speer. Building materials, particularly granite, marble, and limestone, were prized ideological markers in Nazi aesthetics, as they evoked imperial splendour and suggested associations with ancient Rome, coveted by the Nazis.<sup>37</sup> Construction was one of the most dynamic sectors in the Third Reich's economy.<sup>38</sup> According to research carried out by Paul Jaskot, under Adolf Hitler's government, the construction trade developed at a faster pace than the economy as a whole.<sup>39</sup> This was also why it came to be a strategic focal point for combatting

unemployment: ‘In 1932, two million marks were invested in the construction industry, a figure which had increased to nine million by 1936, with the number of employed workers [rising to] two million’.<sup>40</sup> As a result of such a swift increase in production, by 1936 it was a shortage of workforce, rather than unemployment that became the burning problem, which was resolved during the war by the exploitation of the prisoners of concentration camps for forced labour.<sup>41</sup> The need for building materials rose accordingly.<sup>42</sup> The system whereby building materials, mostly stone, were delivered by concentration camps such as those in Flossenbürg or Mauthausen had been institutionalised at the time of the founding of Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH (DEST) in 1938.<sup>43</sup> The company was responsible, among other things, for producing and managing stone extraction. The organisation’s report of 1940 claimed that the main objective of DEST was to put the prisoners of concentration camps to work producing building materials.<sup>44</sup> The growing need for stone was doubtless the cause for the sudden visit made by Heinrich Himmler and other high-ranking Nazis to the quarries surrounding Mauthausen almost immediately after the Anschluss of Austria in 1938, and the decision to establish a camp there.<sup>45</sup> The granite and marble quarried by the prisoners of Mauthausen and Gusen was to provide material for Speer’s monumental projects, such as the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg and the planned remodelling of Berlin.

The architecture of Mauthausen was itself a means of prisoner oppression. The camp’s monumental stone ‘security’ gate expressed the crushing ideological message of fortified architecture with a show of symbolic force. Moreover, the prisoners were forced into deadly work on the construction of the camp. In collages published shortly after the liberation of the camp in 1946, Mauthausen survivor Simon Wiesenthal represented it from the perspective of a prisoner, whose sensitive and mindful gaze transformed the stone blocks of the camp tower walls into the skeletons and skulls of murdered prisoners.<sup>46</sup> As in Wolker’s poem, here too, objects become the bearers of human suffering.

In aesthetic terms, the architecture proposed by Bogusz in his International Artists’ Settlement, light, modern, and functional, was the decided opposite of the oppressive, fortified architecture of the camp. Faith in modernity was, for the artist, not only an aesthetic but also an ethical credo. The modern architecture proposed by Bogusz—sparing in its expressive means and, above all, open to the surrounding nature—implied liberation from the weight of history. The settlement was planned in such a way as to both stimulate creativity and sensitivity, as well as to facilitate the construction of new interpersonal relations. In this respect, Bogusz’s project relates to the modernist utopias of the beginning of the twentieth century. It was just this sort of architecture—modern, constructed of steel and glass, making it possible to cut oneself off from the past and to begin life anew, from zero—that was also the object of reflection in Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Experience and Poverty’, published in 1933. Benjamin compared two types of interiors: the excessively comfortable bourgeois salon, oversaturated with meanings; and the modern, transparent home, representative of an architecture that enables one to liberate oneself from the stigma of past habits, fulfilling Benjamin’s reading of Brecht’s dictum: ‘Erase the traces!’<sup>47</sup> More than a decade later, Bogusz harboured similar dreams, though he took as his negative point of reference the oppressive architecture of the camp in Mauthausen, rather than bourgeois home furnishings. Considering the project for the artists’ settlement from a contemporary point of view, marked strongly by debates about the forms of representation appropriate to concentration camps, the imposition of life and creativity in a place of death and genocide—this Brechtian ‘erasure of traces’—may seem inappropriate. But one can also see the project from another perspective. The situation of the settlement for artists on the site of the former concentration camp connects two archetypal functions of architecture: as tomb and as home.<sup>48</sup> An ambivalence connecting death and life can be seen in all Bogusz’s camp work.

Though the power of the artist’s imagination recorded on sheets of paper is striking, one nonetheless wonders how it was possible to dream the dream of a modernist utopia in a concentration camp, a place whose existence erased the very meaning of utopian thinking, for many. In recalling, by way of his sketches, the dreams of the pre-war avant-garde, Bogusz was pursuing dreams that were not so much anachronistic as universal (notably predating the

avant-garde itself): dreams of emancipation.<sup>49</sup> And even if we find traces and echoes of the past, often already defeated postulates of the first avant-garde, these were not simply the same propositions, for the reality in which they came into being was entirely different. Nevertheless, it is significant, particularly from the perspective of the later development of the artist's creative practice, that it was specifically the language of modernity that became the language of emancipation for him.

In the aforementioned letter to Munoz, Bogusz wrote of the project:

These everyday conversations awakened an imagination that was distant from the daily roll-call, the smell of the crematorium. It was a tank, which made us resistant to psychic breakdown and being flattened into a state of slavish torpor and bestiality. Leaving nothing but the chimney. But we did not forget how to think. We were 'superhumans', because we had our own internal life, our own idea ... and they could not destroy it, even though they destroyed life physically, because, within our idea of an international artists' settlement was man, humanity—thinking about everyone.<sup>50</sup>

Seeking to describe the role that art played for concentration camp prisoners, Brett Kaplan coined the term 'esthetic survival'.<sup>51</sup> The scholar cited, among others, the example of Charlotte Delbo, who, while a prisoner in Auschwitz, exchanged her ration of bread for a Molière play. Delbo was worried she might lose her memory, and so she read the play as many times as it took for her to learn the entire text, which she would then recite in her mind during the camp roll-calls.<sup>52</sup> In a manner similar to Bogusz's case, artistic activity was not only a way to break out of the brutal routine of camp life but also a space for establishing one's humanity.

Alain Badiou has cited Wałarłam Szałamow: man, as opposed to the horse, is an example of an animal whose strength of resistance lies not in his fragile body but in his determination to remain who he is, which is 'something other than a mortal being'.<sup>53</sup> In the framework of Badiou's philosophical conception, man 'goes beyond the condition of the animal', remaining faithful to the event, in so far as the event is understood to be a supplement that cannot be inscribed into the framework of the given situation (the French Revolution or the music of Arnold Schönberg are examples of events for him).<sup>54</sup> Fidelity to the event means the pursuit of the ethics of truth, whose principles the French philosopher formulates in the following terms: 'Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance'.<sup>55</sup>

Bogusz remained faithful to art, to the postulates of modern art, and it was in accordance with these that he sought to reorganise post-war reality after his return to Warsaw, through the House of the Polish Army (Dom Wojska Polskiego) and the newfound institute the Club of Young Artists and Scientists (Klub Młodych Artystów i Naukowców), which became a platform for understanding and discussing questions of modern art. One of his best-known works of this period is entitled *The Joy of New Constructions* (1948); it radiates what Mieczysław Porębski once called the Cubist 'joy of constructive activity'.<sup>56</sup>

In 1948, Felicjan Szczyński Kowarski, an artist connected to the older generation of Polish post-Impressionists, set out to work on the unfinished series *Ghetto* (*Getto*). One of the surviving sketches from the series, entitled *On the Threshold of the House* (*Na progu domu*), represents a ruined brick house with empty window panes hanging down from their frames, with a broken-down door, which can be seen as a kind of inverse of the utopian visions of Bogusz. Impeding the entrance is a dead body lying on the threshold of the house, represented in abrupt foreshortening, all but reduced to a stain. The picture is constructed in such a way that the viewer somewhat instinctively adopts the position of the person entering the house. But it is unclear who the victim lying on the floor might be. Is it the owner of the house, or a casual passer-by? And who, then, is the person standing on the threshold: a returning inhabitant, or a new occupant? Faith in a new world, indispensable in the construction of homes, was an expression of the victory of life over death. Kowarski's drawing is a reminder that all new houses are also the houses of the dead. In this sense, it complements the vision of Bogusz, whose imagined settlement of artists was to be erected on the site of the death of the prisoners of Mauthausen.

- 1 Bożena Kowalska, *Bogusz – artysta i animator* (Pleszew: Muzeum Regionalne w Pleszewie, Pleszewskie Towarzystwo Kulturalne, 2007), pp. 13–14. Marian Bogusz’s creative activities spanned many fields. He was not only an artist but also, and perhaps above all, an organiser of artistic life, and his legendary temperament was the driving force of many artistic initiatives from below: *plein-air*s, symposia, galleries, and clubs. Bogusz’s legacy is extraordinarily rich and multi-faceted, consisting in painting, drawing, sculpture, as well as architectural projects and numerous graphic and theatre designs. A posthumous monographic exhibition of Bogusz’s work was held in 1982 at the National Museum of Poznań; its organisers were the first to try to unite the artist’s heterogeneous oeuvre. Maria Dąbrowska and Irena Moderska (eds.), *Marian Bogusz (1920–1980). Wystawa monograficzna*, exhibition catalogue (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1982).
- 2 Aleksander Wojciechowski, ‘Introduction’, in Dąbrowska and Moderska (eds.), *Marian Bogusz (1920–1980)*, unpaginated. Aleksander Wojciechowski (1922–2006), was an art historian and art critic. From 1950 to 1991 he was the director of the Modern Art Research Atelier at the Institute of Art in the Polish Academy of Science (Pracownia Plastyki Współcz. Inst. Sztuki PAN). In the years 1979–88 he was also the director of the Polish section of the International Association of Art Critics, AICA.
- 3 Adam Ważyk, ‘Pozycja artysty’, *Odrodzenie* 8/9 (1944): p. 6.
- 4 Ważyk, ‘Pozycja artysty’, p. 6.
- 5 Ważyk, ‘Pozycja artysty’, p. 6.
- 6 The poem by Adam Ważyk titled ‘Poem for Adults’ (‘Poemat dla dorosłych’) was published in the journal *Nowa Kultura* (*New Culture*) on 28 August 1955 and is considered one of the first public critiques of Stalinism and Socialist Realism in Poland.
- 7 Tony Judt, *Post War. A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2007), pp. 22–40.
- 8 Jerzy Putrament, ‘Warszawa w lutym’, in Jan Górski (ed.), *Pamięć warszawskiej odbudowy 1945–1949. Antologia* (Warsaw: PIW, 1972), pp. 83–84.
- 9 Dirk Auer, ‘Theorists in Exile: Adorno’s and Arendt’s Reflections on the Place of the Intellectual’, in Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha (eds.), *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 239.
- 10 Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2000), p. 162.
- 11 Martin Heidegger, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 363. Also quoted in Samir Gandesha, ‘Leaving Home: On Adorno and Heidegger’, in Tom Huhn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 121.
- 12 Samir Gandesha, ‘Homeless Philosophy: The Exile of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Exile’, in Rensmann and Gandesha (eds.), *Arendt and Adorno*, p. 279.
- 13 Kornel Filipowicz, ‘Dom nad rzeką’, in Filipowicz, *Krajobraz nieuwzruszony* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1947), p. 150.
- 14 Bogusz also produced works on the theme of war, including: *Ściany kul kwiitną twarzami* (1965–1966), mixed media, 48.5 x 72 cm. Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, Lublin; from the series *Listy z Getta – Wspominam ściany synagogi* (1965–1966), mixed media, tin, wood, 114 x 166 cm. Muzeum Ziemi Lubuskiej, Zielona Góra. See: Bożena Kowalska, *Bogusz – artysta i animator*, pp. 95–96.
- 15 *Wystawa Mariana Bogusza: Wzjęcie architektoniczne 1944–1945. Projekt osiedla artystów 1979*, exhibition catalogue, Galeria Autorska „ZA” (Rawa, 1979), p. 13.
- 16 Marian Bogusz, letter to Emmanuel Muñoz. Reprinted in *Wystawa Mariana Bogusza*, exhibition catalogue, p. 6.
- 17 My account of Bogusz’s war-time fate is from Janina Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę... Twórczość plastyczna Polaków w hitlerowskich więzieniach i obozach koncentracyjnych 1939–1945* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1975), pp. 65–66.
- 18 Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę*, pp. 65–66.
- 19 ‘As I already mentioned, the camp to which they brought those who were sick was in an unfinished state. Bringing particular buildings and the terrain itself to a useable standard demanded many interventions, which were, in turn, associated in some way with organisation. The *Baubüro* was best positioned to help. Promoted to the position of Kapo ... Henryk Matuskiewicz, a Pole [along with] Marian Bogusz and Mieczysław Ładno ... helped the employees of the camp for the sick to amass materials. Paving curbs to mark out the streets in the camp, paint, finishing materials flowed into the camp from their stores’. Stefan Krukowski, *Nad pięknym, modrym Dunajem. Mauthausen 1940–1945* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1966), pp. 254–255.
- 20 Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę*, p. 65.
- 21 Henryk Waniek, ‘Absolwent Mauthausen’, *Twórczość* 7 (2009): pp. 145–46.
- 22 Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę*, p. 65.
- 23 Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę*, p. 65.
- 24 Aldo Carpi, *Dziennik z Gusen* (Warszawa: Replika, 2009), p. 48.
- 25 Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę*, p. 65.
- 26 Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę*, p. 69.
- 27 Bogusz recalled three exhibitions, Dłubak two. See: Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę*, p. 69; Zbigniew Dłubak and Piotr Filipkowski, ‘Wywiad ze Zbigniewem Dłubakiem’, *Obieg* 1 (2006): pp. 52–60.
- 28 Political activity in the camp was recalled by another Mauthausen prisoner: Kazimierz Rusinek, ‘Introduction’, in Jiří Wolker, *Gorączka zielone ślepie ma* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1985), pp. 8–9.
- 29 Jiří Wolker (1900–1924) was one of the best-known Czech poets, author of poems that were politically engaged and inspired by folklore and the Romantic tradition. Citations from ‘The Ballad of the Soldier’s Eyes’ (‘Balada o očích topičových’) given here are from Wolker, *Gorączka zielone ślepie ma*.
- 30 Wolker, ‘Balada o očích topičových’, p. 16–18.
- 31 Wolker, ‘Balada o očích topičových’, pp. 30–31.
- 32 The sketches are now in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw (Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie).
- 33 Wolker, ‘Balada o očích topičových’, p. 38.
- 34 *Covered Eyes (Przesłonięte oczy, 1947)*, ink, paper. Muzeum Okręgowe w Radomiu, Radom.
- 35 ‘Den Bildern der Konzentrationslager l..t sich ihre Lesbarkeit trotzdem nur zurückgeben, wenn wir einer Ethik folgen, die da lautet da. Wir vor dem Unbenennbaren, Namenlosen unermüdlich weiterschreiben, mit anderem Worten: es immer wieder verzeitlichen’. Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘Das öffnen der Lager und das Schließen der Augen’, in Ludger Schwarte (ed.), *Auszug aus dem Lager: Zur Überwindung des modernen Raumparadigmas in der politischen Philosophie*, trans. Eveline Passet (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007), p. 24.
- 36 Michael Thad Allen, *Business of a Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 58–72.
- 37 Paul B. Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression: The SS, Forced Labor and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 17. See also: Alex Scobie, *Hitler’s State Architecture. The Impact of Classical Antiquity*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990).
- 38 Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression*, p. 11.
- 39 Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression*, p. 11.
- 40 Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression*, p. 16.
- 41 Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression*, p. 16.
- 42 Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression*, p. 19.
- 43 Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression*, pp. 21–29. See also: Allen, *Business of a Genocide*, pp. 58–71.
- 44 Cited in Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression*, p. 22.
- 45 Rudolf A. Haunschmied, Jan-Ruth Mills, and Siegi Witzany-Durda, *St. Georgen – Gusen – Mauthausen: Concentration Camp Mauthausen Reconsidered* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2007), p. 49.
- 46 Simon Wiesenthal, *KZ Mauthausen* (Linz: Ibis Verlag, 1946).
- 47 Walter Benjamin, ‘Experience and Poverty’, in Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Vol. 2 1927–1934* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 734. See also: Esther Leslie, *Derelicts: Thought Worms from the Wreckage* (London: Unkant Publishers, 2013), pp. 21–22.



48 'But if tombs themselves are always forms of architecture, so too is the womb, the very cradle of life. And if architecture is associated with death, it is also associated with life'. Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 220.

49 Leslie, *Derelicts*, pp. iii–vi.

50 Marian Bogusz, letter to Emmanuel Muñoz, cited in *Wystawa Mariana Bogusza*, exhibition catalogue, p. 6.

51 Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty. Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

52 Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty*, p. 39.

53 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 11.

54 Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 11.

55 Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 47.

56 Cited in Piotr Juskiewicz, 'Powrót do innej przyszłości. Zmiana koncepcji obrazu w myśli Mieczysława Porębskiego (1948, 1957)', *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 38 (2013), p. 54.

Artist Among  
the Ruins. Art  
in Poland of  
the 1940s and  
Surrealist Subtexts

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### **Artist Among the Ruins. Art in Poland of the 1940s and Surrealist Subtexts**

This essay is an attempt to view art in Poland of the 1940s of the immediate post-war period through the lens of Surrealism and the methodology that it inspired. There will be two levels of analysis weaving their way through the text. The first is the question of why and how the worldview of Surrealism as well as forms and techniques of Surrealist art were attractive in Poland in around 1948. The other relates to the contemporary language of art history, which owes a good deal to Surrealism. The history of art in question is one that goes beyond the terms of a discipline focussed on the style and form of representation, and is inspired by structuralism, anthropology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and neo-Marxism. It was born, to cite Andrzej Turowski, 'in an age of madness', at the intersection of the ideas set in motion by Aby Warburg, on the one hand, and by the Surrealists (André Breton as well as Georges Bataille), on the other.<sup>1</sup>

A certain working hypothesis may be advanced: for artists in Poland, around 1948, the most attractive aspect of Surrealism was its approach to the picture. This approach made it possible to construct an idea of modernity as a third way, aside from the blind alleys of Socialist Realism and 'Capism' (Kapizm, a name derived from the 'Parisian Committee' founded by a group of Polish painters in 1923, a version of Post-Impressionism that developed into the 1930s and 1940s), which offered no further possibilities for development. Surrealism was translated into Polish as *surrealizm* or *nadrealizm*, the latter being comparable to the German *Überrealismus*.<sup>2</sup> Surrealism was understood in capacious terms at the time: not as a style, but as a worldview,

a certain philosophy of life, and a specific view of painting, liberated from the duty to imitate nature, and geared towards the observation of an 'inner model'. Its relationship to political orientation was interesting. Here we come to the most difficult question, for there is no way to extract the essence of pure politicality from a worldview that also includes views on painting. The position which interests me can be defined as left-wing, and may, though it does not have to, mean belonging to the Communist Party. Mieczysław Berman does not form part of my study because, despite being left-wing, his artistic position in the new political situation after 1945, did not go beyond reconstructing a pre-war model of engaged art. On the other hand, Zbigniew Dłubak, who was associated with the Polish Workers' Party (PPR), sought to construct a new model of representation by way of his art, one based on the tradition of Surrealist art.

Such are the various dimensions interwoven throughout my text, anachronistic, perhaps, but consciously so. As Georges Didi-Huberman has shown, there is always a dose of anachronism in our interpretations, and our own projections are unavoidable: the only way to resolve this problem is to be aware of it oneself.<sup>3</sup> As I examine the artistic and textual formulations of the second half of the 1940s in Poland, I also take into consideration what could not be said, what was potentially there but was impossible to express due to censorship or self-censorship. I try to see what one could not say, but could 'paint', declaring artistic independence from the advance of Socialist Realism. I read the specific recourse to Surrealism as being more than a purely formal gesture: as a specific political gesture. The essay that follows is in part an outline of this issue, and in part an attempt to interpret particular works. It is also a first formulation of a project in progress, which elaborates on the art of the late 1940s in Poland in relation to Surrealism, Realism, and Marxism. Towards the end of the text I will propose a reading of a particular group of works produced in the circle of the Kraków and Warsaw 'modernists'. My perspective derives from the creative development of ideas contained within Surrealism itself.

### Attraction and Repulsion

More than forty years ago, the art historian Juliusz Starzyński ironically claimed that 'Surrealism was never able to find an outlet in Poland'.<sup>4</sup> This does not just mean that there was none or that there was too little of it, but that it met with resistance. It is worth looking more closely at its reception, the interest in it, and the rejection it occasioned. In the Socialist-Realist period, for instance, Surrealism came to represent something along the lines of a *part maudite*. It became a reference point for artistic positions, a variety of 'degenerate art', an enemy which was indispensable for Socialist Realism to construct a positive image of art. According to Jan Kott, writing in 1950, Surrealism, as an 'ideological weapon of imperialism' was one of the most serious threats to collective Socialist culture at that time.<sup>5</sup> The author of the aforementioned claim, Starzyński, who was an active participant of the artistic field in the 1950s and sided with official cultural policy at that time, himself did a good deal to oppose Surrealism.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth excavating the individual stages of the acceptance or non-acceptance of Surrealism in post-war Poland. What determined these responses? How was it, for example, that a book published in 1969 could go so far as to mention the reasons for Breton's departure from the French Communist Party? I refer here to the ground-breaking survey of the tendency in Poland, *The Surrealist Worldview (Światopogląd surrealizmu)* by Krystyna Janicka.<sup>7</sup> And why, later on, in the 1970s, was this no longer really possible, as shown in the two most important publications of that decade: Adam Wążyk's edited anthology of Surrealist writings and Piotr Łukaszewicz's monograph on the *Artes* group?<sup>8</sup>

The reception of Surrealism in Poland was undoubtedly connected by way of delicate, though strong, threads to actual events in political history, against the backdrop of the complex relationship of the Socialist state to the Western Left. There are two diachronic axes that the researcher has to take on board, and many points of intersection: the axis of the development of Surrealism, which embraced the conceptual and political evolution of the groups that gathered around André Breton, and the axis of political evolution in Poland after 1945, during different phases of which the components of the Surrealists' worldview were viewed differently. The situation

was immensely complex. The Surrealists themselves modified the reception of Surrealism. Louis Aragon erased his Surrealist 'origins' to assent to the Stalinist version of Communism in 1932. Later, Paul Éluard broke with the Surrealist group on the same grounds, and, after 1945, endorsed Stalinist policy in the Eastern bloc, where he was reintroduced as a representative of the engaged poetry of the Spanish Civil War and Resistance. After 1989, Poland was faced with a new scenario: the problem of addressing the legacy of Communism, Western Communism included. In these new circumstances, Aragon and Éluard all but disappeared from the literary horizon. There has been only one reprint of a single book by Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (*Le paysan de Paris*, first published in 1926), since, and only one new title, *Irene's Cunt* (*Le Con d'Irène*), despite his having previously been one of the most popular French authors in Poland.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, only one volume of Éluard was published after 1989.<sup>10</sup> We are confronted with a whole set of about-turns, stiflings, and repressions. The contemporary scholar has to take this chaos on board and test which parts of it form the background of the Socialist era, which parts derive from the pre-war period, and which belong to today.

Is the fact that both popular and academic perceptions of Surrealism tend to foreground *form* a result of censorship and the cultural policy of the People's Republic of Poland? This might mark a hangover of sorts from the Socialist era: one that goes unrecognised as it appears irrelevant and harmless, but also, perhaps, one that goes unnoticed because we are not sure how to address it.

The issue of the autonomy of the work of art in the Socialist period has been analysed on multiple occasions. In his 1999 book *The Meanings of Modernism* (*Znaczenia modernizmu*), Piotr Piotrowski proposed a binary model of perceiving the relationship between art and power, according to which the avant-garde and modernism play the part of polar opposites.<sup>11</sup> In this model, the avant-garde is characterised by engagement, and modernism by autonomy, by the attempt to rip the meaning of art apart from its immediate political context, and, perhaps somewhat complicating this schema, by the conscious exploitation of autonomy with the aim of achieving artistic freedom.<sup>12</sup> Surrealism played a double role in Piotrowski's discourse: historical Surrealism was located on the side of the political avant-garde, but when the author referred to later usages of Surrealist language—such as, for instance, to the work of Erna Rosenstein—he placed it on the side of modernism, despite the fact that Rosenstein's art bore a truly political message, especially when seen in terms of the reworking of the memory of the Shoah as a form of engagement. Yet, two years after publishing *The Meanings of Modernism*, Piotrowski published the essay 'The Surrealist Interregnum' (2001), devoted to the political dimension of Surrealist artistic manifestations after the Second World War in Central Europe. There, he identified Surrealism as being, in the first instance, a worldview, and only in the second instance a painterly phenomenon, confirming the thesis proposed by Krystyna Janicka's ground-breaking publication that Surrealism was above all a worldview.<sup>13</sup> Piotrowski treated Surrealism as a means to understand the avant-garde in the region rather than as an essential historical notion. Andrzej Turowski's book on Jerzy Kujawski, published in 2005, in turn, shed light on the connections of this important Polish painter with Breton's group and with its new, post-war, anti-totalitarian variant.<sup>14</sup> Such publications have been the exception rather than the rule, however: art-historical literature in Poland has produced, whether inadvertently or deliberately, a situation in which, generally-speaking, 'Surrealism is Formalism'.

The history of our unsuccessful relations with Surrealism can and should be linked to the history of Polish art history's fraught relations with Marxism. In the Western hemisphere the reclamation of Surrealism (by authors such as Rosalind E. Krauss, Hal Foster, T. J. Demos and Michael Löwy) from among twentieth-century art 'movements', and the accentuation of its traumatic, erotic, and political aspects, was in part inspired by Marxism and neo-Marxism, spurred by a series of returns to the dissident spirit. In view of the complex relationship to Marxism in the Socialist period, an open interpretation of Surrealist positions was impossible in Poland before 1989, and the attitude to Surrealism was suffused with a particular ambivalence. Paradoxically, it was its Marxist heritage which appeared the most controversial. In stressing class struggle and relations between base and superstructure, official Marxism tended to overlook the issue of emancipation. 'Trotskyism' was considered a serious threat long after Lev Trotsky's death,

and every form of 'revisionism' was condemned. In 'The Surrealist Interregnum', Piotrowski reconstructed the apparently illogical position adopted by Mieczysław Porębski in 1948, when he declared in his introductory talk at the opening of the *Exhibition of Modern Art (Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej)* in Kraków in December 1948, that the younger generation of artists 'should reject Surrealism in the name of Socialist reality, while also advocating for modern art, which was, to a great extent, based on the tradition of Surrealism'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Porębski, a key figure in the Polish critical reception of Surrealism, was also to be one of the critics who expressed a profound understanding of the Surrealist approach to painting. He was faithful to Breton's metaphor of the painting as a decalcomania for at least forty years, from his draft for the unpublished catalogue of the *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kraków in 1948, to his 1980s publication *Sztuka a informacja (Art and Information)*.<sup>16</sup>

Porębski was initiated into the essence of Surrealist revolt, and intuitively understood that Surrealism originated in the same impulse that had been a source for the emergence of Constructivism in Russia, that these were not radical opposites, but, on the contrary, that these positions were close to one another, connected by a 'conviction as to the need for the self-annihilation of art'.<sup>17</sup> There is also a biographical basis for this propinquity: Surrealism, as event, had made an impression on Porębski's life, a particular shock to the consciousness, a turning point.

In the late 1980s, he made a confession concerning the early encounter of the young artists in Kraków with Surrealism, during the war. He recalled in a conversation with Krystyna Czerni: 'In this period [1943] an issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* which we had discovered at the home of one of the Kraków artists made a great impression on me'.<sup>18</sup> He remembered that it had had a pink cover, and that the issue in question was from 1926; he also recalled a photograph with the subtitle 'Our collaborator Benjamin Péret insulting a priest'. He was referring to issue 8 of *La Révolution Surréaliste* of December 1926, dedicated to blasphemy and its representations. Two other images reproduced in this issue strike the contemporary reader: Max Ernst's painting *The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Infant Jesus Before Three Witnesses A.B., P.E., and the Painter*, and a reproduction of a fragment of the painting *The Profanation of the Host*, by Paolo Uccello, which depicts a Jewish family having thrown the Host into the fire, and is accompanied by Antonin Artaud's text 'Uccello, the Hair'.<sup>19</sup> The picture from which the fragment reproduced in *La Révolution Surréaliste* had been clipped shows a blood legend: a Jewish family are struck by panic after the blasphemous act of burning the Host. Blood pours from the Host, lying in a pan. On the right side of this picture we see a regiment of the army bearing sickles and lances banging on the door. In one of the six paintings devoted to this event (originally predellas of a church altarpiece, now in a museum in Urbino) the blasphemers, together with small children, are burned at the stake. In the context of the year 1943, in occupied Poland, with the annihilation of Polish Jewry and the ambivalent position of the Church towards the Nazi persecution of Jews, images that connoted violence and blasphemy would have been read as highly provocative. The same issue also carried texts mocking religion and the church as well as texts devoted to the work of the Marquis de Sade (Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes's 'La Saison des bains de ciel', and Paul Éluard's 'D. A. F. Sade, écrivain fantastique et révolutionnaire').

The relationship of these paintings and texts to the post-war work of Jerzy Nowosielski, whose drawings and paintings of the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s featured tortured women, remains an open question. In 1987, in a conversation with Krystyna Czerni, Nowosielski explained that he had first encountered Surrealism before the war, by way of a Ukrainian-language artistic almanac published in Lwów, admitting that 'to this day I retain a great spiritual connection with all that Surrealism delivered'.<sup>20</sup> Nowosielski was a painter of Ukrainian origin who belonged to the circle of Porębski and Tadeusz Kantor in war-time Kraków. When the war broke out, in early September 1939, he moved to Lwów with his parents, but due to the Soviet invasion of Poland (17 September 1939) they escaped back to Kraków. There, he became a student of the German Arts and Crafts School (*Kunstgewerbeschule*), where he befriended Porębski. Between October 1942 and summer 1943 he was back in Lwów, where he was a novice monk at the Ukrainian Greek Catholic seminary and trained as a painter. As his biographer Krystyna





Fig. 24.1 Jerzy Nowosielski, *Untitled* (1947). Mixed media on paper, 45,6 x 21,6 cm, Grażyna Kulczyk Collection.



Czerni remarked, he was a witness to the annihilation of the Lwów Ghetto. Czerni interprets the painting *Cry* (*Krzyk*), from 1943, in this context.<sup>21</sup> I suggest also reading the numerous images of tortured women that he produced at the turn of 1940s and 1950s in light of this.

The earliest dated scene of this kind is an untitled work on paper (1947, Grażyna Kulczyk Collection, Fig. 24.1), another is *Execution* (*Egzekucja*, 1949, National Museum in Kraków), followed by *Beatrix Cenci* (1950, Collection of Maria Potocka in Kraków). The theatricality of Nowosielski's scenes is curious, the potential to call the viewer into being as a witness. One might pose the question of their relationship to Nowosielski's wartime experiences, and not solely to the 'politics of the body' in the Socialist-Realist period, as Paweł Leszkowicz has done.<sup>22</sup> Having seen the photographs taken by German soldiers at the time of the July 1941 pogrom in Lwów, it is hard not to draw parallels. The photographer captured the delight of the lynching crowd: women are photographed in the most humiliating moments, undressed, beaten.

Andrzej Wróblewski's *Executions* (*Rozstrzelania*) can also be viewed in light of Nowosielski's *Executions*, especially his *Surrealist Execution* (*Execution VIII*) (*Rozstrzelanie surrealistyczne* (*Rozstrzelanie VIII*), 1949, National Museum in Warsaw, Fig. 24.2). Using the word 'Surrealist' in the title was a specific challenge to Polish cultural policy, a provocative signalling of difference: Surrealism against Socialist Realism. However, it might also have been an indication that the scene of death is played out at the intersection of the gazes of perpetrator, victim, and witness. The ironic undertone in the title of this painting (does the author suggest that death itself could be a 'Surrealist' experience?) should be understood as a refutation of heroic and nationalist readings of history rather than an expression of cynicism. Inverting values, art returns to Surrealist cruelty at a crisis point in culture. The artist is the one who inflicts violence in Hans Bellmer's tangled female bodies, in Nowosielski's drawings and in Wróblewski's paintings.

It is not my intention to talk Surrealism's way into Polish art. Evidence for the existence of Surrealism in Poland is weak, if only by comparison with how vibrant Surrealism was in the 1930s in Prague, where The Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia was active. Toyen (Marie Čermínová) and Jindřich Heisler took part in the exhibition *Le surréalisme en 1947* at Galerie Maeght in Paris, as did Jerzy Kujawski, and Poland is represented, alongside Czechoslovakia, among the countries

Fig. 24.2 Andrzej Wróblewski, *Surrealist Execution* (*Execution VIII*) (*Rozstrzelanie surrealistyczne* (*Rozstrzelanie VIII*), 1949). Oil on canvas, 130 x 199 cm. National Museum, Warsaw / Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation.



listed in the exhibition catalogue. All the same, a modified version of the exhibition travelled to Prague in 1947, but not to Kraków.<sup>23</sup> Breton was in direct contact with Yugoslav Surrealists such as Marko Ristić, whom he met in Belgrade in 1926.<sup>24</sup> Surrealism was most intensely present in Romania in the years 1940 to 1947, when the Romanian Surrealist Group was active. It is worth citing Maria Hussakowska-Szysko's view that, in the pre-war period, 'in truth, the achievements of Surrealism filtered into our culture in an anonymous manner'.<sup>25</sup> The pre-war group Artes (active in Lwów from 1929 to 1935) could not lay claim to belonging to this global network, and, as Piotr Słodkowski wrote, interest in Surrealism was already waning during the first phase of the group's activities.<sup>26</sup> An analysis of the reception of Surrealism in the 1930s would necessitate a separate study, and so, without entering into the complexities of the period, let us try to look more closely at the artistic production of the second half of the 1940s with a view to potential associations.

Słodkowski has proved that it makes no sense to connect the spatial installation of the 1948 *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kraków with Surrealist exhibitions, as there is no evidence that Kantor (one of the Kraków exhibition curators) saw the Surrealist exhibition at Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1947.<sup>27</sup> Two myths are refuted in one fell swoop: the first, that the important Kraków exhibition was influenced by Surrealism; the second, that the development of Polish art of the second half of the 1940s was directly dependent on Paris. Despite this refutation of myths, there remain further questions. One key question is the issue of what Hussakowska-Szysko meant by 'achievements'. If we try to forget about the somewhat traditional concepts of style, form, and artistic movement, the question of Surrealism begins to look rather different.

One fundamental question, often raised in the history of art, is unavoidable here: how exactly to approach Surrealism. In his article 'On Ethnographic Surrealism' (1981), James Clifford noted that, for Breton: 'Surrealism was not a body of doctrines, or a definable idea, but an activity'.<sup>28</sup> In 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism' (1981), Rosalind Krauss proposed the category of linguistics for studying Surrealist photographs, and arrived at the conclusion that 'what unites all surrealist production is ... not a morphological coherence, but a semiological one'.<sup>29</sup> In *Armor Fou* (1991), and then in *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), Hal Foster presented Surrealism according to Freudian categories, as a traumatic reaction to the shock of the First World War.<sup>30</sup> In *The Morning Star. Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia*, Michael Löwy (2009) foregrounded the 'Marxist Romanticism' of Surrealism, referring to political position-taking rather than to particular artistic formulations.<sup>31</sup>

Without deciding, for the time being, which of the contemporary recuperations of Surrealism provides the best angle for the study of art in Poland, one can only surmise that there are at least five: ethnographic, Marxist, Psychoanalytic, semiological and post-colonial. In the first, Surrealism is treated as the component of an ethnographic paradigm shift; in the second as a component of a Marxist utopia; the third powerful, recuperation of Surrealism takes place on psychoanalytic ground; the fourth treats Surrealism as a language, and asserts that the mechanism that it set in motion led in the longer term to changes in the language of art, which bore fruit in phenomena such as Conceptualism; the fifth, makes use of the aforementioned post-colonial reversal of perspectives. One has to admit that this is quite some legacy. Without choosing which of these is most useful, I will leave this toolbox open for the time being and turn to artistic production in Poland in the second half of the 1940s.

### Ideologies

The exhibition *Just After the War (Zaraz po wojnie)* at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, curated by Joanna Kordjak and Agnieszka Szewczyk in the autumn and winter of 2015, provided an interesting testing ground for these issues.<sup>32</sup> One of the rooms they curated was what I would like to call Surrealist. It housed works such as: Jerzy Skarżyński's painting *Portrait of an Inquisitor (Portret inkwizatora, 1947, National Museum in Kraków)*, Tadeusz Kantor's drawing *Figure and Construction (Postać i konstrukcja, 1949, National Museum in Poznań)*, works on paper by Jerzy Kujawski (1947, National Museum in Kraków), Marian Bogusz's paintings *Mr Brown Salutes Struggling Palestine (Mister Brown pozdrawia walczącą Palestynę, 1948, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź)*

and *Five to Twelve in Nanking* (*Za pięć minut dwunasta w Nankinie*, 1948, private collection). It also included photograms by Zbigniew Dłubak: *I Suddenly Awake in the Night Thinking of the Far South* (*Budzę się nagle, myśląc o dalekim Południu*), from the series *The Magellan Heart* (1948, National Museum in Warsaw), *Daydreaming I* (*Zamyslenie I*, 1948, National Museum in Warsaw) as well as an untitled work of 1947–1950 (Foundation of the Archaeology of Photography, Warsaw). An attempt to view these works in the context of Surrealism immediately takes us to the very heart of the most difficult question associated with this tendency: the problem of definition.

I will remain for a moment in the realm of free association ‘of the eye’, maybe illicit, but nonetheless present: Bogusz’s painting *Five to Twelve in Nanking* is strikingly similar to Joan Miró’s *The Harlequin’s Carnival* (1924–1925, Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo), even in terms of colour, the distribution of forms across the picture space, their breaking up and the mimicry of a childlike painterly imagination; Kujawski’s decalcomanias refer to the technique discovered by Oscar Domínguez, and employed by Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy and others; Kantor’s compositions, *Woman with Parasol* (*Kobieta z parasolką*, 1948, National Museum in Warsaw) and *Composition with Standing Figure* (*Kompozycja ze stojącą postacią*, 1949, National Museum in Kraków) are similar to Roberto Matta’s work of the time. One might make yet more analogies between French Surrealism and other Polish works of the period, not included in the exhibition: Teresa Tyszkiewicz’s red ink drawing in the collections of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (1950) seems to have been inspired by Surrealist automatic writing; Janina Kraupe-Świdorska’s autolithography *Fear* (*Strach*, 1949, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź) is reminiscent of the collages and drawings of Max Ernst; the photographs of Andrzej Strumiłło from the series *Sails* (*Żagle*, 1947, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź) refer to the photographic experiments of Man Ray, in which the use of smudging and blurring leads to a dissolution of the boundary between the biological and technical, the human and non-human. The inquiries into the nature of the image and the experiments in photography and book graphics conducted in the circle of the Club of Young Artists and Scientists (Klub Młodych Artystów i Naukowców) in Warsaw, are also worth considering in relation to Surrealism.<sup>33</sup> The book *Romantic Gesture* (*Gest romantyczny*, 1949) by Stanisław Marczak-Oborski, with photographs by Zbigniew Dłubak, may seem like a modest implementation of the Surrealist model, but it is one that remains clear, nevertheless.<sup>34</sup> The photographs interact with the text by way of surprise juxtapositions and in a similar manner to Jacques-André Boiffard’s photographs in André Breton’s novel *Nadja* (1928) or of those by Brassai, Dora Maar, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Henri Cartier-Bresson in *L’Amour fou*, 1937.

Yet, besides the formal similarities to Surrealism there were also deeper connections. The draft for the unpublished catalogue of the *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Pałac Sztuki in Kraków from 1948, preserved in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków, took André Breton and his call to reject control over the painterly gesture as its main point of reference. Co-curator of the exhibition and co-editor (with Tadeusz Kantor) of the unpublished catalogue, Mieczysław Porębski, cited his writings:

Apply black gouache to a sheet of white, high sheen, paper with a thick brush, thinly in some parts, more thickly in others, and then immediately cover with another sheet and press down gently with the palm of your hand, slowly lift it off beginning with the upper edge of the top sheet as though making a print and repeat the applying and removing until the pages are nearly completely dry ... to be sure that you have expressed yourself in the most personal and appropriate manner it suffices to give the image produced a title in accordance with whatever it is you see in it, after waiting a while.<sup>35</sup>

Porębski, the author of the texts for the catalogue, clearly considered these words of Breton’s to be key. He subsequently repeated them for many years. That which could not be published in 1948 remained a point of reference in his texts from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> The idea that painting imitates a certain inner model rather than external or historical reality, emerging without the conscious participation of the artist, was at first a means of neutralising the ‘epistemological Realism’ imposed by the authorities from above. The Bretonian tendency, contextualised in different ways, returned in Mieczysław Porębski’s thinking on art later on, proving too constant, too enlivening for the construction of anti-mimetic thinking about the picture, to be ignored.

To sum up, then, even if we have to agree that the *Exhibition of Modern Art* had little in common in visual terms with the exhibitions organised by Breton and by Marcel Duchamp, or their spatial organisation by Frederic Kiesler, there existed some deeper affinity between the ideas of the Polish artists and the Surrealists. The lack of ‘influences’ convincingly demonstrated by Słodkowski, does not preclude the possibility of communication and the flow of ideas. The moment of political ‘heresy’ is extremely important. Where, if not in Surrealism, were young artists to embed their scenarios for the future of art in Poland? Post-Impressionist and Realist art seemed equally exhausted and uninteresting to them; they were looking for new means to express the specific historical moment in which they found themselves, the time after the horrendous shock of war, the extreme experiences of the Shoah. For the circles of young modern artists in Kraków and Warsaw, Surrealism—as a worldview and an attitude—provided a possible means to imagine a pathway to modern art in the years 1947 and 1948.

Besides Porębski, the other person involved in rethinking the Surrealist heritage was Zbigniew Dłubak. Dłubak (born in 1921) was a young painter and photographer from Warsaw, where he was active in the second half of the 1940s in the Club of Young Artists and Scientists. During the war, he was in the Communist underground army, in 1944 he was captured and sent to Mauthausen concentration camp. Porębski’s trajectory had been similar: he was also born in 1921 and participated in the anti-Nazi conspiracy, for which he was imprisoned in Gross-Rosen and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. In a 1948 text published in the journal *Świat Fotografii* (*The World of Photography*), Dłubak also announced a third way. He wrote that the passage to modern art could only take place by way of bringing together the strands of the whole avant-garde: Constructivist, as well as Surrealist.<sup>37</sup> It seems that this may have also been a political decision at the time.

It is worth asking what sort of Surrealism Porębski and Dłubak encountered in 1948. It is crucial that Surrealism found itself at a particular historical point in its development at that time. The *coup d’état* of February 1948 in Prague had already occurred. Toyen and Jindřich Heisler had emigrated to France in 1947 and an attempt to resurrect the Surrealist movement in Czechoslovakia had already been quashed. There had also been a Communist coup in Bucharest, marking an end to avant-garde movements there. Was the tempestuous history of the relations between the Surrealist movement and the French Communist Party and the Comintern known to Polish intellectuals? We can assume that it was. Jerzy Kujawski was among the signatories of the Breton group’s anti-Stalinist manifesto ‘Inaugural Rupture’, published in June 1947 in Paris as a leaflet for the international movement *Cause*. Given the frequent contacts between the Kraków and Warsaw circles and artists living in Paris, we can assume that there was a flow of ideas. At this time—at the turn of 1947 and 1948—Erna Rosenstein was living in Paris, and visitors included Maria Jarema, Tadeusz Kantor, and Ewa Jurkiewicz. The Breton group’s manifesto was directed against the politicisation of art in the form proposed by the ideologues of the French Communist Party.<sup>38</sup> An intense debate around Surrealism was on-going in France, in which it was criticised, among others, by Jean-Paul Sartre, for the supposedly bourgeois nature of its rebellion. This was met with responses from Tristan Tzara and Breton, but a rift between former allies Tzara and Breton was also already afoot. Tzara was ready to reconcile Surrealism with Socialist Realism, but Breton defended the autonomy of artistic gestures as regards ideology. Another Polish connection was Bogusław Szwacz, who was in Paris on a Polish government scholarship from the end of 1947 to mid-1948 and was close to the Revolutionary Surrealist movement. The group, formed, among others, by Noël Arnaud and Christian Dotremont, was founded in February 1947 in Brussels and based on the connection of Surrealism with Communist ideology, declaring itself in opposition to Breton. Szwacz was therefore in the opposite camp of the Surrealists to Kujawski for a certain time.<sup>39</sup> To conclude: if the Communist Party had an enemy in the form of an artistic movement in the West, it was Breton’s Surrealism, against which the accusation of ‘Trotskyism’ was levelled with particular facility.<sup>40</sup> Referencing Breton in Poland was thus a political declaration, and this is probably the reason why the proposed version of the Kraków exhibition catalogue, with the citation from Breton, did not appear.

Breton's branch of French Surrealism had been under fire from heavy-calibre departments of the Comintern since the 1930s. The first phases of this campaign took place in 1933, when Breton, Paul Éluard, René Crevel and others were removed from the French Communist Party and a pamphlet defaming them by Ilya Ehrenburg was published in Paris. In 1935, Breton was not permitted to speak at the Paris International Writers' Congress for the Defence of Culture (Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture). He cemented a de facto alliance with Trotsky in 1938, while in Mexico, co-writing the manifesto 'For a Free, Revolutionary Art' (although it was Diego Rivera's name that appeared beneath the text). That same year, in Prague, Vítězslav Nezval, a member of The Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia, announced a lampoon on the Czech Surrealists and the dissolution of the Group, probably executing an order he had received from Moscow. The campaign call was undertaken by the Communist as well as the Fascist press of Prague: the Communist press accused the Surrealists of being 'Fascist agents', and the Fascist press accused them of propagating 'degenerate art'.<sup>41</sup> The accusation of Trotskyism was bandied about without restraint and, after the war, was often levelled at modern art as a whole.

It is not surprising that references to Surrealism in 1940s Poland had to be accompanied by countless qualifications. Mieczysław Porębski was no exception in this respect. In 1946, he cautioned that in connecting various tendencies, modern art would have to make allowances for the 'ravings of Surrealism'.<sup>42</sup> As Piotr Piotrowski noted, though, the discourse surrounding Surrealism was rather different to artistic practice itself, which was not subordinated to the same litany of restrictions, reservations and prohibitions.

### Far-off Lands

Finally, I will consider Zbigniew Dłubak's 1947–1948 photographs from the point of view of Surrealism understood as a third way and a creative method. His titled works from that period, such as the illustrations for 'The Magellan Heart' by Pablo Neruda, *Children Dream of Birds* (*Dzieci śnią o ptakach*), *Torture of Starvation Haunts Us At Night* (*Nocami straszy męka głodu*), and numerous untitled prints, negatives, and contact prints from the collection of the Foundation of the Archaeology of Photography, represent close-ups of un-identified fragments of plants, stones, sand, or bodies. Within them, proximity destroys the object, while rendering it extremely tactile and sensory. They are reminiscent of the opening lines of Breton's 'Surrealism and Painting', according to which 'the eye exists in its savage state' and the 'wild eye' tears itself away from the body and is able to raise itself a hundred feet above the earth or see 'the marvels of the sea a hundred feet deep'.<sup>43</sup> However, what matters in Surrealist photography, as Rosalind Krauss argued, is the process of seeing, and not only the vision of the Bretonian 'marvellous': a particular representational game. She wrote:

Surreality *is*, we could say, nature convulsed into a kind of writing. The special access that photography has to this experience is its privileged connection to the real ... The photographs are not *interpretations* of reality, decoding it, as in Heartfield's photomontages. They are presentations of that very reality as configured, or coded, or written. The experience of nature as sign, or nature as representation, comes "naturally" then to photography.<sup>44</sup>

The *The Magellan Heart* series occupies a special place among Dłubak's photograms as a whole. Shown at the *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kraków, in 1948, they broke away from the current model of photography in Poland, manifesting a shift from representing objects to an interest in representation itself. They are loosely connected to the Neruda poem. The interventions by the author into the images captured on camera were rather minimal: inversion, solarisation, and last but not least, titling. The meaning is produced through the interplay of text and image, which is especially interesting in *The Magellan Heart* series, when poetic titles bring us far from the here and now: *I Suddenly Awake in the Night Thinking of the Far South, I Recall the Solitude of the Strait* (*Przypominam samotność cieśniny*, Fig. 24.3), *The Discoverers Appear and of them Nothing Remains* (*Odkrywcy zjawiają się i nic z nich nie zostaje*).<sup>45</sup> There is also a particular function to the reference to Neruda's poem, since it was dedicated to the failed project of colonisation.





Fig. 24.3 Zbigniew Dłubak, *I Recall the Loneliness of the Strait* (*Przypominam samotność cieśniny*, 1948). Black and white photograph. 30.2 x 40.2 cm. Illustration for Pablo Neruda's poem 'The Magellan Heart'. © Armelle Dłubak / Archaeology of Photography foundation, Warsaw.

Its title, *The Magellan Heart*, referred to the unhappy end of a Portuguese conquistador: killed on the Mactan Island in the Philippines and his body dissected. Translated into Polish and printed in the literary weekly *Odrodzenie* in 1948, Neruda's verses and the romantic topic of an overseas voyage, meshed with the colonial oppression and cruelty that it inflicts, could have had double meaning. Neruda's oneiric verses, narrating Magellan's conquest, acquired new meaning in the context of early post-war Poland, which had recently experienced one of the most brutal of wars, in which military, economic, and cultural oppression went hand in hand with racial segregation. European culture had been questioned by the most outstanding authors in Poland at that time, among others, in the writings of Tadeusz Borowski, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, in the years 1945 to 1947. In his pessimistic diagnosis, European ideas of humanism and progress had been stripped bare by the Nazi system of slave labour and the extermination of whole nations.<sup>46</sup> Culture as a whole had been called into question.

As James Clifford noted, the Surrealists, proposed to take their own culture as an object of ethnographic study, particularly in the journal *Documents*.<sup>47</sup> What is important is the nature of this undoubtedly utopian calling; whether they succeeded in doing so or not is another matter.

Thus, when an African or a Mexican mask appeared on the pages of *La Revolution Surréaliste*, and a reportage from a Paris slaughterhouse appeared in *Documents*, the point was to undermine a Eurocentric point of view: to show the strangeness at the very heart of one's own culture. If a mask is both a bearer of beauty and of cultural violence, what are European artefacts? A shifting of meanings occurs with the revelation of familiarity as otherness, one's own culture as an alien culture, the self as oppressor. Surrealism transformed ethnography, Clifford revealed, and without the participation of ethnographers it would itself have been incomplete.

I want to refer here to Polish literary scholar Kazimierz Wyka's expression of a strong sense of the alien nature of his own, European, culture in his text *Faust on the Ruins* (*Faust na ruinach*), written the year after the war. Wyka debuted as a literary critic in the 1930s, and lived through the war in the small city of Krzeszowice near Kraków. After the liberation, he became the editor-in-chief of the literary monthly *Twórczość*, where, in 1945, he published the essay 'Isolated economy', which was to be crucial for what was much later called post-colonial discourse. There, he captured the way in which the post-war everyday ethics of Poles had been devastated by six years of Nazi economic and racial-segregation policies.<sup>48</sup> The essay on *Faust* focussed on the cultural aspects of colonisation.

The scene is Kraków, 1946: night, rain, autumn. Wyka's narrative has a somewhat Surrealist mood: a lost car's lights are reflected in the windows. The narrator is holding a worn copy of *Faust* marked 'Der Stadthauptmann in Warschau. Deutsche Bücherei'. According to the reading-room label, it had last been borrowed on 17 June 1944. The author found it in the spring of 1945, amidst the ruins of Warsaw. We go straight to the heart of the ambivalence of culture. This is great German literature, but also a book belonging to an occupier, which 'cannot simply be read as a copy of Faust'.<sup>49</sup> The essay is dreamlike, the narrator is unable to sleep, and he has nightmares, tormented by a vision that develops into a fantasy, followed by sounds, smells, and colours. The sound of a passing carriage splashing through the rain evokes an image of the atoll from an undetermined movie, and soon afterwards the image of a Tahitian young woman from Gauguin's painting *Noa Noa*. As Wyka explains, this means 'very fragrant'.<sup>50</sup> One can say that the painting by Gauguin flows through the Kraków rain metaphorically like the haunting memory of slavery and subjugation. The next image that comes to his mind, from the darkness of the night, is Gauguin's *The Judgement of Paris*, which, we read:

betrays in an embarrassing way, how Gauguin understood his position on the idyllic Tahitian islands. The goddesses subjected to this judgement are three naked Tahitian girls. An angel with wings judges them: not a Tahitian angel but an angel in the form of a young white male. Gauguin was not a cynical colonialist conqueror, and yet the hubris of the white man in relation to coloured peoples has rarely been expressed so eloquently in art.<sup>51</sup>

For Wyka the picture serves to construct an analogy between Gauguin's excesses and the twentieth-century ethnographic expeditions, and goes on to develop into an argument condemning the atomic testing in the Marshall Islands in June 1946. Faust looms large here, too: the risky playing fast and loose with technological progress, which leads to disaster. But even this is ambivalent. Progress can also lead to salvation. And so, in parallel with the aporia conveyed by the figure of Gauguin, escapee and coloniser in one, Wyka referenced contemporary events such as the victory over Japan, at the expense of the 'experiments' on the Japanese.<sup>52</sup> Finally, there is also another ambivalence that is addressed in this text by Wyka, namely the shift in geographical awareness brought about by the war.

In a small town in former Galicia and Lodomeria, fingers traced their way between the Don, and the Volga and Caucasus on an old atlas (produced by mapmakers Justus Perthes in Leipzig). Later they opened the map of Polynesia and Melanesia. The islands of Ysabel, Choiseul, Bougainville, Guadalcanal, always lie, for me, along the rivers Kubań, Terek, Manycz, and Kama.<sup>53</sup>

Wyka was writing about his virtual war-time travels, visiting the map as a means to trace the movements of armies. War is ambivalent: it sows destruction, but opens up the world, it is a pretext to travel, albeit a perverse one.

In light of *Faust on the Ruins*, let us now turn to Dłubak's photograms with captions from Pablo Neruda's 'The Magellan Heart', exhibited in 1948 at the *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kraków. Dłubak's choice of these verses entailed transferring the Warsaw of 1948 to the Strait of Magellan. The poem 'The Magellan Heart' now forms part of Neruda's epic poem 'Canto General', written in the years 1939 to 1949.

As a member of the Communist Party persecuted in Chile after the *coup d'état* of 1947, Neruda was already of hero of the world behind the Iron Curtain by this point. In May 1948, *Odrodzenie* published several of his poems, translated by Czesław Miłosz, among them 'The Magellan Heart'.<sup>54</sup> 'Canto General' was not yet finished at that point, and was only published in 1950, in Mexico. 'The Magellan Heart' became a fragment of Part Three, entitled 'Conquistadors'. 'Canto General' is made up of fifteen parts. The beginning is the 'genesis' of South America, from the creation of mountains, rivers, animals, plants ('I light the Earth'), then the history of the continent is developed, with the appearance of man ('The Heights of Machu Picchu') and of the European 'Conquistadors'. The poem is full of cruelty: American land takes the form of a violated woman, flowing with blood. After Magellan, Neruda describes Cortez, Valdivia, Balboa and other conquistadors, obsessed with the vision of loot of American gold. European culture has very little to recommend it. This is the context for dreamlike or even erotic-sounding verses such as 'I Suddenly Awake in the Night Thinking of the Far South' or 'I Recall the Solitude of the Strait'. These are episodes in a sea voyage over unknown waters. The poem is dark; it shows a path leading nowhere, seemingly to the discovery of the world, but also to death, iniquity, and violence. It is also the path of progress, curiosity, and knowledge: the path of Faust. Progress is ransomed by blood: these cannot be separated.

Three photographs, with added citations from Neruda, were shown at the *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kraków in 1948: *I Suddenly Awake in the Night Thinking of the Far South* (Pablo Neruda, 'The Magellan Heart'), *I Recall the Solitude of the Strait* (Pablo Neruda, 'The Magellan Heart') and *The Discoverers Appear and of Them Nothing Remains* (Pablo Neruda, 'The Magellan Heart'). There is also a fourth work with a citation from Neruda—*He Reaches the Pacific*—but it was probably produced after the show, since it was not mentioned in the exhibition catalogue. The oneiric world, the micro-cosmos revealed in the photographs, is transformed when juxtaposed with the text, and becomes a sign of the depths of the unconscious, conceived of as being like leaving one's own shores and that which is familiar, and entering into the depths of a foreign culture. There may also be associations with a journey into the depths of the body: the penetration of the organism by the eye, which sets off into the distance with the aim of knowing, and returns with material that it can neither represent nor comprehend. It comes back as a 'barbarous' eye, cast out of civilisation and unable to return to it.

There are interesting parallels between these extraordinary photograms and compositions by Marian Bogusz, such as *Five to Twelve in Nanking*, *The Paths of Whites Force their Way onto Black Shores* (*Drogi białych wdzierają się w Czarny Ląd*, 1948, Muzeum Pomorza Środkowego, Słupsk), *Mister Brown Salutes Struggling Palestine* and Jerzy Nowosielski's *The Battle for Addis Ababa* (*Bitwa o Addis Abebę*, 1947). The ambivalent, personal experience of witnessing the violence of the war lurks within the pictures, but also the sense of dislocation. In order to be able to speak of it, those who survived the war had to transplant images into another place, literally and geographically. And so, Dłubak organised a Surrealist expedition along the coast of the Tierra del Fuego, Bogusz visited Nanking and besieged Palestine. Krystyna Czerni has written that the almost abstract and seemingly-idyllic painting by Nowosielski, *The Battle for Addis Ababa*, a Coptic city destroyed at the time of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, served as a metaphor for the destruction of Ukrainian villages during the so-called Operation Vistula (Wisła action) undertaken in 1947 by Polish authorities. Nowosielski's protest against anti-Ukrainian policy was encrypted in his painting.<sup>55</sup> The war had not ended, but it had been transferred into the present, and into a past that revealed itself afresh in light of it. The same could be said of the painting *Five to Twelve in Nanking* by Bogusz. The massacre of Nanking was on-going, and the real subject of the painting only emerged in the work of interpretation. The massacre of the civilian population and prisoners of war

by the Japanese army in Nanking in 1937 was one of the most atrocious crimes against a civilian population in the twentieth century, seen as prefiguring the German pogroms and mass killing of the Jewish population in East-Central Europe in 1941 to 1943. So, for Bogusz, Nanking could also have been Warsaw. The image itself appears calm, like a mask for the traumatic events.

Polish modern art of the late 1940s may not have shown war directly, but it touched on the problem of the violence of war by way of geographical transfer. If, as Michael Rothberg observes, Aimé Césaire equated colonialism with Nazi violence in his 'Discourse on Colonialism' of 1950, the work of Polish artists presented Nazi violence as colonial.<sup>56</sup> These codes seem decipherable in light of Surrealism. The question begging to be answered here, which should at least be signalled, is the problem of the representation of war and the Shoah in Polish art. By adopting an ethnographic perspective, one hears the echo of war in places where it may not, at first, have seemed to be represented. Surrealist techniques and positions, for their part, enable us to come closer to the most difficult of experiences. As Breton wrote in his 'First Manifesto': 'Surrealism will usher you into death, which is a secret society. It will glove your hand, burying therein the profound M with which the word Memory begins'.<sup>57</sup>

*Translated by Klara Kemp-Welch*

1 Andrzej Turowski, 'Historia sztuki w dobie szaleństwa', *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 2/3 (293/294) (2011): pp. 11–14.

2 On the German adaptation of the word, see: Jan Bürger "Paris brennt". Iwan Goll's "Überrealismus" im Kontext der zwanziger Jahre', in F. Reents (ed.), *Surrealismus in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), p. 89

3 Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism', in Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (eds.), *Compelling Visuality. The Work of Art in and out of History* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 31–44.

4 An anecdote recounted to me by Professor Maria Poprzęcka, to whom I express my thanks.

5 Jan Kott, 'Wstęp', in Paul Éluard, *Wybór wierszy*, trans. and ed. Adam Ważyk (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1950), p. 7.

6 I discuss the issue of the relations of Socialist-Realist criticism to Surrealism in the chapter 'Surrealism and Politics', in Dorota Jarecka and Barbara Piwowarska, *Erna Rosenstein. Mogę powtarzać tylko nieświadomie / I can Repeat Only Unconsciously* (Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, 2014), pp. 271–283.

7 Krystyna Janicka, *Światopogląd surrealizmu. Jego założenia i konsekwencja dla teorii twórczości i teorii sztuki* (Warszawa: PWN, 1969).

8 Adam Ważyk (ed. and trans.), *Surrealizm. Teoria i praktyka literacka. Antologia* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1973); Piotr Łukaszewicz, *Zrzeszenie Artystów Plastyków "Artes" 1929–1935* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo PAN, 1975).

9 Louis Aragon, *Wieśniak paryski*, trans. Artur Międzyrzecki (Warsaw: PIW, 2015). Louis Aragon, *Cipa Ireny*, trans. J. Waczków (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1994).

10 Paul Éluard, *Ogrody moich oczu*, trans. A. Gronczewski (Warsaw: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Anagram, 1996).

11 Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznań: Rebis, 1999), pp. 80–81.

12 Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu*, pp. 79–85.

13 Janicka, *Światopogląd surrealizmu*. See also: Piotr Piotrowski, 'Surrealistyczne interregnum', in Tomasz Gryglewicz and Maria Hussakowska-Szysko (eds.), *Mistrzowi Mieczysławowi Porębskiemu uczniowie* (Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2001), pp. 297–326.

14 Andrzej Turowski, *Jerzy Kujawski. Maranatha* (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 2005).

15 Piotr Piotrowski, 'Surrealistyczne interregnum', p. 310. Piotrowski rephrased here the passage from: Mieczysław Porębski, 'O sztuce nowoczesnej', in J. Chrobak and M. Świca (eds.), *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej. 50 lat później* (Kraków: Fundacja Nowosielskich, Starmach Gallery, 1998), p. 106.

16 Mieczysław Porębski, *Sztuka a informacja* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), p. 84.

17 Mieczysław Porębski, 'Sztuka a informacja', in Porębski, *Pozegnanie z krytyką* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1966), p. 184.

18 See: Krystyna Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce. Rozmowy z profesorem Mieczysławem Porębskim* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1991), p. 30.

19 See: Antonin Artaud, 'Ucello, włoski', in Ważyk (ed.), *Surrealizm*, pp. 266–268.

20 Krystyna Czerni and Jerzy Nowosielski, 'Sztuka nie boi się propagandy. Z Jerzym Nowosielskim rozmawia Krystyna Czerni', *Res Publica* 9 (1988).

21 Krystyna Czerni, *Nietoperz w świątyni. Biografia Jerzego Nowosielskiego* (Kraków: Znaki, 2011), pp. 86–87.

22 Paweł Leszkowicz, 'Seks i subwersja w sztuce PRL-u', *Ikonotheka* 20 (2007): pp. 51–57.

23 Breton wrote an introduction to the catalogue, entitled 'Druhá archa'. See: *Mezinárodní surrealismus*, exhibition catalogue, Topičův salon (Prague, 1947).

24 Jakub Kornhauser and Kinga Siewior (eds.), *Głuchy brudnopis. Antologia manifestów awangard Europy Środkowej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2014).

25 Maria Hussakowska-Szysko, 'Stosunek do nadrealizmu w polskim dwudziestolecu międzywojennym', *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace z Historii Sztuki*, Folder 11 (1975): p. 83.

26 Piotr Słodkowski, 'Polskie surrealizmy i idea historyi sztuki', *Miejsce. Studia nad Sztuką i Architekturą Polską XX i XXI Wieku* 1 (2015): p. 113.

27 Piotr Słodkowski, 'Partylarne znaczenia nowoczesności. Wizualność I Wystawy Sztuki Nowoczesnej (1948) w świetle "Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme" (1947)', *Artium Quaestiones* 22 (2011).

28 James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23/4 (October 1981): p. 539.

29 Rosalind E. Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', *October* 19 (Winter 1981): p. 31.

30 Hal Foster, 'Armor Fou', *October* 56 (Spring 1991): pp. 64–97; Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

31 Michael Löwy, *Morning Star. Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

32 *Zaraz po wojnie*, Zachęta National Gallery of Art (Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki), Warsaw, 30 October 2015–10 January 2016. Curated by Joanna Kordjak and Joanna Szewczyk.

33 The Club of Young Artists and Scientists was founded in 1947. It was a relatively-independent body of left-wing writers, painters, musicians and scholars, who organised exhibitions, discussions, and published a literary magazine *Nurt* (*Tendency*).

34 Stanisław Marczak-Oborski, *Gest romantyczny* (Warszawa: Klub Młodych Artystów i Naukowców, 1949), with photographs by Zbigniew Dłubak.

35 Cited in André Breton 'D'une décalcomanie sans objet préconçu', *Minotaure* 8 (June 1936). A. Breton, 'Oscar Dominguez: Concerning a decalcomania without preconceived object (decalcomania of desire) (1936)' in: A. Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, Mass.: MFA Pub., 2002).

36 Mieczysław Porębski, *Kubizm* (Warsaw: PWN, 1966), pp. 164–165; M. Porębski, *Sztuka a informacja*, p. 84.

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38 Turowski, *Jerzy Kujawski*, pp. 41–42.

39 Turowski, *Jerzy Kujawski*, pp. 42–43.

40 Turowski, *Jerzy Kujawski*, p. 43.

41 Barbara Mytko, 'Vitezslava Nezvala spór z surrealistami', *Slavia Occidentalis* 33 (1986): pp. 87–97.

42 Mieczysław Porębski, 'O sztuce malarskiej', *Kuźnica* 22 (1946): pp. 4–6.

43 André Breton, 'Surrealism and Painting', in Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, Mass.: MFA Pub., 2002), p. 1.

44 Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', p. 29.

45 Neruda's subheadings given from Pablo Neruda, *Selected Poems. A Bilingual Edition*, ed. Nathaniel Tarn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1990), pp. 203–209. 'The Magellan Heart' was translated by Anthony Kerrigan.

46 Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Michael Kandel (London: Penguin Books, 1992); Janusz Nel Siedlecki, Krystyn Olszewski, and Tadeusz Borowski, *We Were in Auschwitz* (New York: Welome Rain Publishers, 2000).

47 James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32/4 (October 1981): pp. 548–553.

48 Kazimierz Wyka, 'Gospodarka wyłączona', *Twórczość* 1 (1945): pp. 146–170.

49 Kazimierz Wyka, 'Faust na ruinach', in Wyka, *Życie na niby* (Kraków and Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984).

50 Wyka, 'Faust na ruinach', p. 211.

51 Wyka, 'Faust na ruinach', pp. 211–212.

52 Wyka, 'Faust na ruinach', p. 216.

53 Wyka, 'Faust na ruinach', p. 214.

54 Czesław Miłosz, 'Pablo Neruda. Przekłady', *Odrodzenie* 18 (1948): p. 2.

55 Krystyna Czerni, *Nietoperz w świątyni. Biografia Jerzego Nowosielskiego* (Kraków: Znak, 2011), pp. 127–129.

56 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 66–107.

57 André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924), in Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 32.

Film Montage  
and the Principle  
of Montage in  
Non-Cinematic  
Media:  
The Early Collages  
of Jiří Kolář

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### **Film Montage and the Principle of Montage in Non-Cinematic Media: The Early Collages of Jiří Kolář**

What is the relationship between non-cinematic artworks whose structure evokes the principles of film montage, and actual works of cinema? If we take as our example certain types of collage from the mid-twentieth century, can we possibly relate these to the film theory and practice of that era? To what extent is it possible to show or consider such inspiration as conscious and what does this reveal to us about the connections between various artistic media in that era? What led me to these questions was my exploration of the collage work of Jiří Kolář from between 1947 and 1953.<sup>2</sup> This extensive body of works on paper is based around the compositionally-simple arrangement of picture cut-outs from popular magazines on a sheet of paper. Most of these works present two, three or more pictures of the most diverse content, generally arranged along a horizontal or vertical axis. The cut-outs do not overlap but are placed side by side. They come from different places and different times. They do not create a single pictorial space, but rather a sequence of scenes.

Marie Klimešová, in her book *The Years in the Days (Roky v dnech)*, offered an initial interpretative framework for this series of Kolář's works.<sup>3</sup> Klimešová relates the concept of 'confrontage' ('konfrontáž')—Kolář's own term, one we can apply to the majority of his work—to the principles of narrative figuration and serial painting, as in the work of West-European and American exponents of Pop Art. The viewer's perception of Kolář's collages from the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, according to Klimešová, occurs in two phases. It consists first of 'the pleasure of reading the individual compositional elements, and then of the search for the cryptic meaning of the whole'.<sup>4</sup> At the same time Klimešová emphasises the formal principles behind the organisation of the cut-outs, which, according to her, anticipate minimalist or conceptual art. This particular series of works by Jiří Kolář can be considered as just one among the possible examples of that period's search for new approaches to the language of visual art. A range of other artists, both Czech and international, worked in a surprisingly similar spirit at roughly the same time, though for the most part independently of one another.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Jiří Kolář's artistic methods from the turn of the 1940s and 1950s can be related not only to as-yet-unformed artistic directions of the future like minimalism or conceptual art. The more I examined these collages, the more they provoked the kinds of reflection indicated in the introduction to this text. The meaning of Kolář's pictorial sequences is not at all created by the sum of the individual pictures' contents, but rather—as Klimešová wrote—arises from their mutual confrontation. Such a method is also typical of film language. The possible parallel with film editing, where individual shots are set into mutual relation so as to create a greater meaningful whole, struck me as more substantial than any possible basis in the compositional principles of fine art. It seemed to me that Kolář was far more concerned with new possibilities for the creation of content than with the formal aspect of these (at the time) difficult-to-classify works.

Today, Jiří Kolář is undoubtedly perceived as a key figure in modern Czech culture. From the perspective of the artistic and literary values of their time, his collages from the turn

of the 1940s and 1950s present a dubious and not-entirely-successful undertaking.<sup>6</sup> In them we find an echo of several Surrealist methods ('exquisite corpse' (*cadavre exquis*), automatism, *découpé* or cut-up techniques), yet it is difficult to grasp them either as independent art works or as a fully formed series of pictorial poems. Given that they elude fine-art and literary traditions and that their chief aim is to experiment with the creation of meaning by means of the sequence, is it perhaps necessary to refer to another artistic medium: film? To what extent is it possible to support and argue out this comparison between Kolář's collages and film editing? Does not this comparison nevertheless offer—even if we do not discover any direct relationship—an insight into the contemporary conception of the image and of the expressive possibilities enabled by sequential arrangement?

It must first be stated that the principle of sequentially-ordered images does not apply to all Kolář's works in the period discussed. In several cases, which the artist described as found collages, only a single picture is placed on the background paper. Within the picture we then observe a scene that in itself suggests a coexistence of discordant elements: a real head and a wax head, a real human being and a mechanical being, a city and the backdrop of a city. To achieve the desired confrontation of elements, which together lead to a higher meaning, the author thus did not necessarily need a sequence of images, such as would evoke the ordering of film shots. One suitable example of a work by Kolář that, to my mind, offers up a connection with film montage could be found in an undated and untitled collage from between 1948 and 1952.<sup>7</sup> On a square of paper there appear a total of eight cut-out pictures of identical size, evenly organised into two columns in such a way as to leave strips of empty paper visible between the individual panels. With one exception, all the pictures are connected by the motif of winter. Two pictures derive from reproductions of historical artworks: a section cut out from a Dutch Renaissance painting and a detail of the exalted face of a woman from a religious painting. Three pictures depict winter outdoor or sporting activity, another an exotic snowy landscape with a stream, and another an improvised woodland altar. One picture shows a London policeman controlling road traffic in very low-visibility conditions.<sup>8</sup> We intuitively read this set of pictures like a text, i.e. from top to bottom and from left to right. In the gaps between the individual images we also tend to infer mutual connections and continuities. Even though the pictures come from different publications and different contexts, they are arranged into a single dream-like story about a wintry world in which unusual, contrasting, and perhaps apocalyptic phenomena occur, leading to a scene of piety at the end. Kolář's apparently mechanical, unartistic method of arranging his pictures is able to evoke an emotional response and create a new, connected meaning, even if this is a little enigmatic. The whole does not create an unambiguous story; different viewers can read this series of photographs in different ways. But they would clearly agree on the fact that it is not possible to consider the individual elements of the collage independently, but only in terms of their mutual connections. Of course we can find examples of artistic works that construct meaning from their different parts all through the history of fine art. However, in the case of collages composed of geometric sequences of photographs, it is easy to perceive the whole work as paraphrasing the language of film or of film montage specifically.

At the same time, Jiří Kolář himself never mentioned being influenced by film montage or by film as such in any of the existing sources about his work. He did recall the influence of literary collage, such as appears in the work of T.S. Eliot, above all in 'The Waste Land'. Zdeněk Urbánek, in a memoir, described the emergence of a specific form of collage within the Czech art scene at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s: spontaneously, without conscious reference to any aspect of film, he began experimenting with the juxtaposition of pairs of pictures, or of a greater number, so as to allow relationships of contrast to develop between the realities depicted. Urbánek's methods, according to Urbánek himself, were adopted by others and even turned into group activities.<sup>9</sup> Whoever was the true initiator of this approach, the several hundred preserved collages by Jiří Kolář present a fascinating collection whose semantics allow for repeated comparisons with film.

A group of Soviet film directors began using the term montage in the 1920s to describe a method of cinematic narration based on the techniques of film editing.<sup>10</sup> By means of differently-

composed sequences of shots they expressed complex ideas that exceeded the contents of the individual shots. They not only developed these techniques in their own films, but in parallel to this they attempted to analyse them in their journalistic activity and in their mutual polemics. Thus, there emerged a deeper, if far from systematic or unified, set of theoretical reflections on montage. While fine artists approached collage or photomontage for the most part in an intuitive manner, or in the context of traditional artistic disciplines, Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, and above all Sergei Eisenstein established a specific theory of film montage, which remains influential to this day.<sup>11</sup> Even if the individual exponents of Soviet film theory parted company in many specific aspects of their opinions, they agreed on the idea that film's principal means of expression is editing. This conviction derived from these artists' own practical experiments and experiences. At the turn of the 1910s and 1920s, Lev Kuleshov had already discovered the ambiguous character of the film shot: even if each individual shot, through a photochemical process, captures the filmed reality, its meaning is only created through editing, that is through its combination with the other shots in the work as a whole. This was illustrated by the so-called 'Kuleshov effect'. Kuleshov showed his viewers a film in which shots of a bowl of soup, a coffin, and a voluptuous woman lying on a bed were alternated with the same shot of the face of popular pre-revolutionary actor Ivan Mozzhukhin, showing a neutral expression. With this repeated, completely identical shot, the audience interpreted the actor as giving a masterful performance of, alternately, hunger, sorrow, and desire.<sup>12</sup>

According to Dziga Vertov, montage was capable of transcending the space and time of the individual montage elements. If shots of waving workers filmed within a particular time and place are connected, through editing, with a shot of different waving workers, filmed elsewhere and at another time, we can evoke within the film's viewers the impression of a mutual greeting between both groups, even if this did not and could not actually happen.<sup>13</sup> This example not only concerns the mere fact of a greeting between two groups of people, but also represents an expression of the global solidarity of the working class, a solidarity that overcomes all obstacles. Montage has a great potential to arouse emotion and the capacity to convey complex ideas. The Soviet montagists grasped editing not only as an artistic technique, but also as a mechanism for enhancing human cognitive abilities. Vsevolod Pudovkin, in reference to his own conception of montage, stated: 'If we define montage in its most general form as the revelation of internal connections, we thereby make an equation between montage and any process of thought in whatever field'.<sup>14</sup> Film art thus becomes a collective act of cognition of reality and of the revelation of its internal relationships.

For Sergei Eisenstein the principle of montage consisted in the reality that 'two pieces of any kind, placed beside one another, unavoidably combine into a new idea, which arises from this juxtaposition as a new quality'.<sup>15</sup> In his no-less-important continuation of this widely-familiar quote Eisenstein stated: 'However this is by no means some purely cinematic matter, but rather a phenomenon that we must inevitably encounter whenever we are dealing with the juxtaposition of two facts, scenes or objects'.<sup>16</sup> According to Eisenstein the revolutionary character of the principle of montage must be seen in its unprecedented universality. We can thus observe that during the twentieth century the term montage was indeed applied to words, sounds, images, and objects: in other words, to media traditionally belonging to different forms of art. These various media could suddenly be treated in similar terms, with the construction of the whole governed by related rules regardless of the character of the compositional elements. Pudovkin too was convinced that it was possible to apply the starting points and principles of film montage to any kind of art and even to thought as such.<sup>17</sup>

Such far-reaching conclusions were not limited only to these Soviet revolutionaries of filmmaking: we also encounter them in the period under consideration, and even in the present day. Film and its formal methods are here not only perceived in relation to the concrete development of audio-visual technology, but they also become synonymous with a wider realm of phenomena. Perhaps this can be attributed to a single word—montage—a term derived from French that originally meant assembly or connection. With the onset of the twentieth century, the term montage abandoned the realm of industrial production and was promoted to a method

of cultural production, and even, as we shall see shortly, to a means of theoretical reflection on the latter. Elements of montage are thus ascribed not only to film, but also to literature, music, graphic design, and fine art. The poets Guillaume Apollinaire and T.S. Eliot are associated with literary montage, montage elements are discerned in the musical compositions of Claude Debussy and Leoš Janáček, and E.F. Burian himself designated part of his work as montage for the stage. In the 1930s, other avant-garde artists, primarily from the Soviet Union and Germany, explicitly linked their work in the fields of collage and photomontage to film montage.<sup>18</sup> Thus film montage became a symbol of the modern age, and not only for artists but also for art theoreticians and the wider public.

One example of the identification of film montage with the modern age in general could be found in a classic work by art historian Arnold Hauser, first published in 1951 (in other words at the same time when Jiří Kolář was producing his collages in Prague). In his still-cited book *The Social History of Art (Sozialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur)*, Hauser attempted an ambitious overview of the relations between society and art from prehistoric times to the present day. He designates the first half of the twentieth century as ‘The Film Age’ and traces dramatic changes back to film techniques, changes that impacted not only on modern theatre, literature, and painting, but also on such areas as philosophy and human perceptions of time and space. Thanks to film, the world presents itself to modern humankind as a discontinuous and kaleidoscopic vision and art responds by making ever greater use of montage technique.<sup>19</sup> According to Hauser, montage quickly established itself in the history of film as the medium’s fundamental means of expression, and deeply influenced the culture of its era. Cinematic effects (narrative ‘cuts’, temporal discontinuities) appeared in the novels of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, in avant-garde visual art and elsewhere.

This kind of generalising reflection was not only to be found in the 1950s, though of course the arguments rarely went as deep as Hauser’s. At the very end of the millennium the art historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh set about such a project. His analysis of montage in the culture of the last century, devoted primarily to the German artist Gerhard Richter, was even presented with reference to the extension of montage principles into the realm of the social sciences. He recalled that Walter Benjamin likened his *Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk)* to montage. He confirmed that art historian Aby Warburg engaged with montage techniques at the end of the 1920s. Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* presented a series of shifting constellations of heterogeneous pictorial material, of cut-outs from classical paintings, the art of tribal societies, archaeological artefacts, modern art, and imagery from popular culture. Warburg’s ambition was to use these ensembles of pictures to construct a model for the continuity of historical memory. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh further associated montage with the approaches of the Annales School. History, in the school’s conception, is not interpreted as a chain of mutually-connected, clearly-defined events, but is rather perceived as a decentralised historical system, which which, according to Buchloh, qualified it for entry into the ‘montagists’ club’.<sup>20</sup> Connections between the *Mnemosyne Atlas* and film montage were also considered evident—even if, for me, these connections were not satisfactorily explored—by the curator of the Pompidou Centre’s film collection Philippe-Alain Michaud.<sup>21</sup>

Montage principles have thus been historically applied to a whole range of non-filmic phenomena. Yet I cannot get rid of the feeling that the more the term montage is applied outside the realm of the film, the more such usage loses its explanatory value. The broad conception of montage, such as we find in Eisenstein or Vertov, was undoubtedly justified in its time: in this conception filmmaking was defined as the most progressive art, an art that not only subjectively reflects the world but also shares in the revelation of its internal connections, an art that is an integral component of a new world. Montage represents the application of the principles of materialist dialectics to film.<sup>22</sup> No matter whether this conceptual basis, at the time of its emergence, was really intended sincerely or was merely an obligatory decoration, it would be difficult to find such a basis outside the world of leftist avant-gardists. I began to perceive the use of the term montage outside the world of film as similarly problematic. Such usage easily becomes a matter of mere



Fig. 25.1. Photo layout from *Pestrý týden* (*Colourful Week*), no. 12 (1928).

comparison or of loose reference to a specific cultural practice. I became aware of this in relation to my primary interest here, the analysis of Jiří Kolář's early collage work. Simply asserting these collages' affinity with film technique seemed inadequate to me, and I could not establish a more precise connection with film. While these collages do not constitute typical fine-art or literary works, they do remain tangible, pictorial artefacts far removed from the nature of film. The image may play an important role in film too, but we are dealing with an audio-visual and temporal art with its own specific effects. The creation of a new idea by means of the confrontation of two film shots or of two photographs is, despite a certain similarity, a very different process. How would I find a way out of such difficulties?

My liberation came in the form of a concept that the art historian Walter Grasskamp had recently used in his analysis of André Malraux's book *The Imaginary Museum* (*Le Musée imaginaire*). At the beginning of the 1950s, Malraux had attempted, by means of a book of full-page photographic reproductions, to tell the story of world sculpture. Given its use of photographic sequencing this text represented a further candidate for entry to the montage club. Grasskamp did mention that, according to art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, Malraux's work with photographic reproductions was influenced by film aesthetics, such as he knew them from the films of Sergei Eisenstein, and yet he went on to add the following important sentence: 'At the same time, one wonders whether the design of the *musée imaginaire* in fact needs to be explained at all in terms of the genealogy of film aesthetics or montage, and whether the short tradition of illustrated art books was not in itself quite sufficient as a source for the aesthetics



of Malraux's books'.<sup>23</sup> This is to say that, for Grasskamp, linking pictorial works to film montage overlooks the important source of books and magazines and their culture of the printed picture, and thus damages the overall argument by drawing too straightforward a connection between pictorial and cinematic art. In bravura fashion Grasskamp later revealed which models Malraux drew on from the field of book design and in what ways he modified them.

The investigation of the influence of film on other, predominantly print-based media, comprises a relatively new direction in academic research, connected with the need for an interdisciplinary approach to modern cultural phenomena.<sup>24</sup> This perspective must at the same time remain aware of the specificities of the media being compared. The expansion of film technology strongly influenced the whole of Western society, including newspapers and magazines. These media changed their form, but they still remained newspapers and magazines. In France, changes in the paradigm of printed reportage took place almost in parallel with the first film presentations. While in more traditional pictorial magazines like *L'Illustration* the composition of the accompanying illustrations derived from conventional methods of presenting fine art—the illustrations here were perceived as a means of presenting standalone artworks—by the end of the nineteenth century, periodicals of a new kind were already gaining in popularity, as represented by the weekly *La Vie illustrée (Illustrated Life)*. This journal put a greater emphasis



Fig. 25.2. Photo layout from *Světovzor (World-View)*, no. 13 (1928).





1930s, *Pestrý týden* had become a particular platform for the new concept of photojournalism and for a form of graphic design that emphasised pictorial reportage. The organisation of *Pestrý týden*'s so-called 'photo-saturated' pages, in its diversity, lived up to the periodical's name and at the same time referred back to film (Fig. 25.3). Jindřich Toman discussed a double-page spread in the second issue of the first volume of *Pestrý týden*, where we find a 'scrum' of twenty-five illustrations. Without any clear hierarchy, political reportage here alternated with information from the worlds of culture and celebrity, and even with shots from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*, 1925), a conscious reference to film montage techniques.<sup>26</sup> The covers and even the inside pages of these magazines were constructed as pictorial sequences and the more extensive photo-reportages suggest a film in photograph form. In interwar film and popular periodicals we find material that consciously sought to remediate cinematic works by means of graphic design. Surprisingly, however, Jiří Kolář was not drawn to this kind of magazine design and did not choose to imitate it in his work. The compositional style of his collages is much closer to the layout of the illustrated pages in the more conservative *Světobzor*, specifically in its issues from the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> For the most part, this style consisted of simple symmetrical arrangements of two, three or four photographs on a piece of paper, the material Kolář then preferred to use for his collages. He thus looked not to compositions that evoked a sense of cinematic construction, but rather to the more traditional pictorial model of this older magazine. It is also impossible not to notice that, insofar as we do find cinematic principles at work in Jiří Kolář's collages, the author responsible was often not Kolář himself. The contrasts were found ready-made within the frame of the individual source photographs. These found 'cuts' were then presented as standalone cut-out images or within more complex collages. Kolář was struck, for instance, by a photograph of a giant promotional bottle in the middle of a town square; by the confrontation of a mechanical human figure and a real person; by a pair of compositionally-identical shots depicting turtles on a beach and the movement of tanks across a landscape; and by other similar material, with which the magazines were then richly stocked. In the case of these cut-outs Kolář was presenting 'cuts' that he had found ready-made in the magazine.

Alongside the designs of the popular magazines, the first half of the twentieth century was also rich in conscious attempts at translating film art to book format. In 1925 László Moholy-Nagy, in a section of his book *Painting, Photography, Film* (*Malerei Photographie Film*) called 'The Dynamics of a Metropolis', created a counterpart to avant-garde cinema in book form. Hans Richter and Werner Gräff, in their 1929 book *Enemy of Film Today—Friend of Film Tomorrow* (*Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen*), reconstructed the so-called Kuleshov effect with photographs: instead of film shots they simply used a sequence of photographs. El Lissitzky in his 1928 book *Japanese Film* (*Japonskoe kino*) as well as Varvara Stepanova and Alexander Rodchenko in their 1935 publication *Soviet Film* (*Sovetskoe kino*) mediate film works or the techniques of film language. Such avant-garde experiments to create films by means of print media did not bypass the Czech context either.<sup>28</sup> But neither did Kolář respond to these radical experiments of the interwar period. If we were to try and find some book that foreshadowed his collages from the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, the closest equivalent would be the typographically-conventional book *Film Photos as Never Before* (*Film-Photos wie noch nie*) from 1929.<sup>29</sup> This book gathered together twelve hundred photographs relating to various aspects of film art. The films selected were presented by means of individual photographic sequences capturing the most important moments of the story. Other pages used series of photographs to demonstrate selected film techniques or to recall the roles created by famous actors. Even these functional pictorial arrangements succeed in building tension between the individual images and force us to think about their mutual relationships. The pragmatic layout of this book corresponds to the later practices of Kolář.

In the case of those books that consciously attempted to remediate the formal practices of film, historian François Albera asserts that the author must partly surrender control over how the work is read. The perception of such a work cannot be programmed in its entirety as a film shown in a cinema can, and the viewer is given greater choice in the way he or she consumes and interprets the work as a whole.<sup>30</sup> We find a similar approach in Kolář's work at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s.

In his poems and his collages he proved to be fascinated by the act of citation; in his conception the artist is a mere eyewitness and it is left to the viewer to decide how to take the artist's testimony, how to fit together its individual parts and what kind of significance to ascribe to it. With the exception of such collages as the one described at the beginning, depicting a winter environment, the majority of Kolář's work resembles card-filing systems, archives for the classification and preservation of pictorial information. Seen in relation to the fine art of the period, the monotony and often even randomness of the majority of Kolář's pictorial compositions problematises the very use of the category of collage. At this time the collage was perceived predominantly as a pictorial work and not as an aid for the cognition of reality, an aid demanding that the viewer engage his or her own intellect in connecting the individual components, in 'reading' the whole as presented. Kolář was not interested in this period in creating an aesthetically-pleasing display, nor in simply amassing and organising pictorial material. His ultimate aim was not simply to create an archive, but rather to analyse of the image content of modern reportage, an intuitive attempt to critically reflect on its function in modern society. Kolář was no idealistic montagist combining the meanings of his chosen images and of their sequential arrangements; rather he was calling the message of these images into question and unmasking them for his viewers. This is affirmed by the predominant themes of his works from this period: war, human brutality, intellect-numbing visual sensation, and photography's capacity to manipulate the viewer's consciousness.

Kolář was not, then, influenced by progressive film techniques and their theorisation as such. Rather he was influenced by popular culture as found embodied in the pictorial magazines and, in a secondary fashion, by those cinematic methods that had penetrated into it. For that reason I feel the questions posed in the introduction to this text have proven too narrowly defined and at root essentialist. They sought to find a causal relationship between the form of a specific series of artistic works and montage, a stylistic element of film language. Yet this relationship was assumed to have existed within a context itself already saturated with references to film. I am convinced that Kolář was not using his collages to realise his secret filmmaking ambitions. He was not interested in the technical aspects of film montage and he felt no need to remediate his found images into film form. Above all he was drawn to the ideological impacts, functions, and possibilities of the visual language of modern society. His early work is an artist's reaction to the world as it is apprehended through weekly film journals and above all through pictorial magazines and their changing graphic formats. In this sense I believe his work resembles that of other artists of the international neo-avant-garde, who were concerned with a similar type of collage.

Kolář's collages from the turn of the 1940s and 1950s emerged in close relation to his literary work, the result of his search for new poetic instruments at a time when the word 'poetry' had lost its original power. The nature of these collages anticipates our 'post-medium condition'.<sup>31</sup> The author arranged pictures on a page in the same way he would prepare a text. He transposed pictorial practices or adapted film techniques into a literary discourse, the result of which is a work of visual art. In our attempts to describe and interpret Kolář's early work it may be impossible to establish a direct connection with film, but a wider field emerges here in which Kolář's work and film montage are both situated. Film, as one of the defining phenomena of the modern era, made its mark on the form of twentieth-century culture. Film, or approaches influenced by film, were the basis of the mass communications media of the mid-twentieth century. Kolář was fascinated by the latter but at the same time took a critical stance towards it.<sup>32</sup> In this sense we can perhaps regard Kolář's collages as part of a wider apparatus of cinema: twenty-first century viewers might see Kolář as using his work to investigate cinematic codes of perception, which have entered into the relationships between the world, its representations and their spectators.

*Translated by Jonathan Owen*

- 1 Tomáš Pospiszyl, 'Filmová montáž a princip montáže v nefilmových oborech. Případová studie: rané koláže Jiřího Koláře', *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny* 22 (2017): pp. 42–61. Available at: [http://vvp.avu.cz/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/2017\\_22\\_Pospiszyl.pdf](http://vvp.avu.cz/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/2017_22_Pospiszyl.pdf), accessed 30 October 2019.
- 2 Tomáš Pospiszyl, 'Koláže mezi generacemi. Jiří Kolář jako svědek modernosti a jeho současní pokračovatelé', in Tomáš Pospiszyl, *Asociativní dějepis umění* (Prague: tranzit.cz, 2014), pp. 14–50.
- 3 Marie Klimešová, *Roky ve dnech. České umění 1945–1957* (Řevnice: Arbor vitae, 2010), pp. 300–320 and elsewhere.
- 4 Klimešová, *Roky ve dnech*, p. 306.
- 5 The artists in question, while associated with many different artistic tendencies from Dada and modernism to Pop Art, created similar cut-out ensembles. Examples include Czech artists such as Zbyněk Sekal and Vladimír Fuku, the Germans Hannah Höch and Gerhard Richter, the British artist Eduardo Paolozzi, the Austrians Gerhard Rühm and Oswald Wiener and many others.
- 6 Such a conclusion might be derived from the fact that Kolář himself made no attempt, even in periods or contexts more favourable than Stalinist Czechoslovakia, to exhibit this extensive series. After 1954 he employed this principle of sequential pictorial narration only in a minor way. Several of Kolář's collages from 1948–1952 moreover strike one as unfinished, as mere sketches or preparatory material for possible later work.
- 7 See reproduction at: Tomáš Pospiszyl, 'Filmová montáž a princip montáže v nefilmových oborech', p. 44. Marie Klimešová, in her aforementioned book *The Years in the Days (Roky ve dnech)*, reproduced this work under the name *Ice Age (Doba ledová)* and gave the date of its production as 1952. As distinct from Kolář's other collages from this period this is a work containing an uncommonly large number of individual photographs, arranged within a geometric compositional matrix. For these very reasons it evokes a movie storyboard or a photo comic strip. The intriguing connection between Kolář's collages and comics, a related cultural form based around sequences of pictures, one that moreover had attained great popularity in Czechoslovakia between 1938 and 1948, must remain unexamined in this text for reasons of space.
- 8 In the case of the last scene mentioned, the hypothesis has been made that the photograph relates to the so-called Great London Fog of December 1952, which would enable us to date this work back to the winter of 1952–1953, and thus to the very end of the period when Kolář was experimenting with this type of collage.
- 9 Zdeněk Urbánek, *Ztracená země* (Prague: Nakladatelství Franze Kafky, 1992), pp. 481–482.
- 10 We do, however, already find elements and descriptions of montage techniques more than 10 years before the Soviet directors, in the work of one of film's pioneers, Georges Méliès, and even in the proto-cinematic apparatuses of Thomas A. Edison.
- 11 For example, Jan Kučera's *Editing Techniques in Film and Television* (Prague: NAMU 2016, third edition), the classic practical guide to editing within the Czech context, may seek to revise many of the approaches of the Soviet montage school, but a number of its own approaches remain drawn from that school's legacy.
- 12 The film described, assembled quickly by the director from various fragments of pre-revolutionary films, has not been preserved, and thus this first presentation of the Kuleshov effect has the air of an orally transmitted legend. Only later reconstructions of this experiment now exist.
- 13 Dziga Vertov, 'Revoluce Kinokú', in Antonín Navrátil, *Dziga Vertov. Revolucionář dokumentárního filmu* (Prague: Československý filmový ústav, 1974), p. 181.
- 14 Vsevolod Pudovkin, 'O montáži', in Jaroslav Brož and Ljubomír Oliva (eds.), *Film je umění. Sborník statí* (Prague: Orbis, 1963), p. 90.
- 15 Sergei Eisenstein, 'Montáž' (1938), in *Kamerou, tužkou, perem*, trans. Jiří Taufer (Praha: Orbis, 1961), p. 328.
- 16 Eisenstein, 'Montáž', p. 328.
- 17 Pudovkin, 'O montáži', p. 96.
- 18 Maud Lavin, 'Photomontage, Mass Culture, and Modernity', in Matthew Teitelbaum (ed.), *Montage and Modern Life. 1919–1942* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 54.
- 19 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 4: *Naturalism, Impressionism, The Film Age* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 226, 240–244.
- 20 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's Atlas. The Anomic Archive', *October* 88 (1999): pp. 117–145.
- 21 Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 282–287.
- 22 Pudovkin, 'O montáži', p. 91.
- 23 Walter Grasskamp, *The Book on the Floor. André Malraux and the Imaginary Museum* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016), p. 79.
- 24 David Campany's book *Photography and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008) can serve as an example of such attempts. In it the author looks at historical examples of the mutual relationship between photography and film, as represented by, among other things, photomontage, the design of photographic books, and even contemporary photographic and video work. Another inspiring approach is offered by a pair of film researchers, François Albera and Maria Tortajada. Albera and Tortajada's starting point is the investigation of historical apparatuses ('dispositifs'), that is of wider networks of relationships, which of course exceed the boundaries of the classical categories of art theory and other disciplines. This methodological approach thus enables them to productively examine phenomena at the interface of art, science, and technology, including chronophotography, early film, and even modernist literature.
- 25 He thus uses the term montage to describe material that predates the first use of this word for a form of editing composition, applying it to the earliest cinema presentations in general. See: Thierry Gervais, 'The Little Paper Cinema. The Transformations of Illustration in Belle Époque Periodicals', in Laurent Guido and Olivier Lugon (eds.), *Between Still and Moving Images* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing Ltd., 2012), pp. 152, 159, 164.
- 26 Jindřich Toman, *Foto/montáž tiskem* (Prague: Kant, 2009), pp. 264, 267.
- 27 Of course we also find more conservative, 'non-filmic' designs in numerous issues of *Pestrý týden*, whose graphic ambitiousness was most evident at the start of the journal's existence.
- 28 Karel Čisář discussed cinematic effects in the book designs of Zdeněk Rossmann, Ladislav Sutnar and František Kalivoda and related them to the ideas of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Karel Teige. Karel Čisář, 'Tenká červená linie. Typografie a instalace výstav v Rossmannově Písmu a fotografii v reklamě', in Marta Sylvestrová and Jindřich Toman (eds.), *Zdeněk Rossmann. Horizonty modernismu* (Brno: Moravská galerie v Brně, 2015), pp. 151–157.
- 29 Edmond Bucher and Albrecht Kindt (eds.), *Film-Photos wie noch nie* (Giessen: Kindt und Bucher Verlag, 1929).
- 30 François Albera, 'From the Cinematic Book to the Film-Book', in Laurent Guido and Oliver Lugon (eds.), *Between Still and Moving Images: Photography and Cinema in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing Ltd., 2012), p. 198.
- 31 The term 'post-medium condition' was coined in 1999 by Rosalind Krauss in *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson 1999). The term is used to describe the situation of art in the 1970s, when the modernist concept of individual art forms as fields defined by a specific medium was falling apart.
- 32 We might talk today in a similar vein about the internet and its influence on culture and social life.



# The European School and the Group of Abstract Artists

PÉTER GYÖRGY AND GÁBOR PATAKI



*The European School (Európai Iskola) came into being in October 1945, at the beginning of a brief, amorphous period immediately following the end of the Second World War, when the Soviet takeover and the concomitant strictly-limiting cultural policy was not yet in place. Among the founders were art critics Árpád Mezei, Imre Pán, Ernő Kállai, and Lajos Kassák as well as physician and art collector Pál Gegesi Kiss. Pán summarised their programme as follows: 'Europe and the old European ideals are in ruins ... A new Europe can only emerge out of the synthesis of West and East ... We need to create a living European school giving shape to the new relation between life, the individual, and the community'.<sup>1</sup>*

*In 1945, the group was full of hope for a new beginning. Its theorists and artists were reaching back to the modernist tendencies of the interwar years; some of them had been members of Kassák's Munka Circle (Munka Kör) in the late 1920s. The painters (Margit Anna, Jenő Barcsay, Endre Bálint, Béla Czóbel, József Egry, Jenő Gadányi, Tihamér Gyarmathy, Dezső Korniss, Tamás Lossonczy, Ödön Márffy, Ferenc Martyn, Ernő Schubert, Piroska Szántó) and sculptors (Lajos Barta, Dezső Bokros Birman, Erzsébet Forgács-Hann, József Jakovits, Tibor Vilt) found inspiration in artistic trends like Fauvism, Constructivism, and Surrealism. The members organised exhibitions (thirty-eight during their three-year existence), lectures, and debates as well as authored books, reviews, and pamphlets. They also arranged for showing foreign artists; the exhibitions of Paul Klee and the Czech Surrealists were realised upon their initiative.*

*Although the group's name contains 'school', this rather denoted a shared intellectual approach among artists with differing styles and artistic concepts. Surrealism or abstraction was a frequent response to the horrors of the war, and an exclusively abstract direction was considered within the European School, too. Those opting for this form of expression splintered and, under the leadership of theorist Ernő Kállai, founded the Gallery of the Four Directions (Galéria a Négy Világtájhoz).*

*The essay 'Between the Ramparts: The Critical Reception of the European School and the Gallery to the Four Directions' reconstructs the press debates on art between 1945 and 1948. These public contests well reflect the dynamism and undecidedness of those four years, before the Zhdanov Doctrine subordinated cultural policy to the party line and made Socialist Realism the only acceptable artistic expression. The second text, 'Broken Dolls', inserts the artistic programme and activities of the European School and the Gallery to the Four Directions into a broader East-Central-European context. Both pieces are chapters from the monograph *Az Európai Iskola és az Elvont Művészek Csoportja* (Budapest: Corvina, 1990). (BH)*

## **The European School and the Group of Abstract Artists**

### **Between the Ramparts:**

#### **The Critical Reception of the European School and the Gallery of the Four Directions**

In order to provide a veritable picture of the role played by the European School (Európai Iskola) and the Gallery of the Four Directions (Galéria a Négy Világtájhoz) in Hungarian post-war art, outlining the political situation from 1945 to 1948 by means of evidence from the contemporary press appears to be a correct strategy.

The media dedicated a relatively large amount of space to the fine arts, with papers reviewing almost all contemporary exhibitions and publishing texts engaging in theoretical ruminations or even polemics. This increased interest was partly justified by the abundant opportunities and new tasks Hungarian fine arts were newly presented with, as well as by the many urgent questions these raised. In actual fact, it was often broader issues that exerted tension in the background to such artistic debates. The participants—art historians, critics, and politicians—were not merely expressing their opinions on the interpretation and analysis of non-figurativity, but at the same

time they were discussing the future path of Hungarian art, and, in doing so, they went beyond immediate concerns of art theory and policy to a dialogue on the possible fate of the nascent Hungarian democracy. From the turn of 1947 and 1948, such dialogue gradually gave way to regrettably-final statements and judgements.

Accordingly, in the writings, subjective aesthetic reflections came to be mixed with covert and (from 1947 onwards) overt political expositions and attacks, often evidently tied to the cultural policy of a political party. At the start of this era, the topic of abstract versus non-abstract art arose, together with theories explaining or advancing the given tendency, primarily discussed in artistic-aesthetic terms. Later, however, and parallel to the upheavals in cultural and public life, all this became a pretext, allowing participants to express their own (or their party's) cultural policy ideas against those of their opponents. In this context, Ernő Kállai and other theorists affiliated with the European School could only wage a rear-guard action: the demagogic question 'whether abstraction is justified in a people's democracy' offered easy spoils when it came to the European School and the Gallery of the Four Directions.<sup>2</sup> The European School and the Gallery of the Four Directions unwittingly became a foil for an increasingly intolerant critical machinery to level measured blows at modern art and thus to demonstrate their own ideological loyalty. In this context, the reception of the European School and the Gallery of the Four Directions increasingly became a function of the gradual changes in cultural policy and political expectations towards the fine arts.

In 1946, many were still full of hopes and expectations; at this point it seemed that it was going to be the artists themselves who would have the final say over disputed issues. In general, the new art was well received by critics.<sup>3</sup> It still appeared sufficient to ward off the occasional savage attack with 'a gentle response to a sharp tongue'.<sup>4</sup> Even the following year seemed to be a battle between equal forces. This year was the most productive period of the European School and the Gallery in terms of output, even though they too faced attacks from many sides, first against their theory, and then their practice. The 'turning point' of 1948 shut down all discussion for many years to come, without solving any of the questions that were forcefully suppressed and continued to burn, deep underground.

The inception of the European School in 1946 marked an end to the prewar distance between Hungarian art and Europe, and in this sense, the school carried out real tasks and satisfied real needs over the course of its mission. Among other factors, this was the reason why the new group could effortlessly position itself within the post-1945 artistic vacuum: from the outset, it undertook something entirely *different* from the finally officially-endorsed Szinyei Society (Szinyei [Merse Pál] Társaság) or the Socialist Artists' Group (Szocialista Képzőművészek Csoportja, 1934–1944) that was only very slowly recovering from the losses suffered under Fascist times.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in 1946, the first attacks came primarily from representatives of marginalised tendencies. The most bellicose opponent was János Andrásy Kurta, the leading advocate of a Turanian-inspired, *völkisch*, racially-pure art. While Andrásy appeared to be speaking on behalf of 'manual labourers' when he directed artists' attention towards 'the ubiquitous problems grinding down real people's lives',<sup>6</sup> he was in fact attempting to protect an audience with 'healthy taste' from 'the spirit of impure urban life, far removed from the national character'.<sup>7</sup> His opponent in a debate over whether 'Picasso and the Mona Lisa are boring', Ernő Kállai responded with a biting, satirical caricature of Andrásy and his followers: 'Nothing could be easier than transposing his Fascist "worldview", cobbled together from the remnants of all sorts of worn-out bourgeois traditions, onto the contours of our people's democracy, retouching heroic racial pathos into social compassion for the workers'.<sup>8</sup>

Real, serious attacks against the European School and the Gallery of the Four Directions only really started in 1947. This was also when a type of conceptual frame crystallised in which the term abstraction was deployed as a catchphrase, a 'general equivalent' against any new phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the strongest objection to modern art was its alleged untimeliness. Its detractors could not stomach the fact that 'politically, and in other spheres of social life, the overwhelming majority of formalist or formalism-influenced artists belong to the most progressive stratum of the intelligentsia'.<sup>10</sup> Some critics tried to resolve this contradiction by acknowledging

the pioneering role modern art had played before the Second World War, while also emphasising that it was now, in (purportedly) changed circumstances, out of date. A typical example is Károly László Háy's article 'Art and Progress', in which he formulated the following directive: 'Artists must be made to understand that proud detachment, the guarantor of intellectual freedom and artistic progress under reactionary rule, becomes an obstacle to precisely this progress in a people's democracy because it disconnects the arts from society's upsurging development'.<sup>11</sup> Countless similar statements could be listed here; their essence remains the same. These critics believed that modern art and a progressive worldview were ultimately incompatible, and denied artists the opportunity to prove that the example of Lajos Kassák's Activism could be repeated in post-war Hungarian art, that the coupling of artistic and social revolution was feasible.<sup>12</sup>

Yet being outdated was not the only criticism levelled against the European School and the Gallery. Post-war society palpably sought to deny what had come before, and thus we should not be surprised that its worldview was unambiguously fixated on a happy, illustrious future that would wipe away the past. Paradoxically, this future-orientation was accompanied by the fact that the nascent people's democracy only seemingly attempted to come to terms with history; in fact, it dismissed the indigestible remnants of the disastrous recent past like an unpleasant memory. This hurrah-optimism mixed with denial characterised the theorists of the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP) as much as it did the representatives of Gresham Circle.<sup>13</sup> Márton Horváth's 1945 article 'The Workers and Art' prefigured this view. Horváth lambasted one of the exhibitions put on by the party unit of Budapest's District Four, where 'we see nudes that inevitably remind us of the exhumations in Buda ... it came as a real relief to see one or two pictures where one could guess that water is water and wood is wood'.<sup>14</sup> He noted ironically that one of the exhibition's young organisers 'points to a white spot swimming in grey fog in the right-hand corner of a picture: this is hope'.<sup>15</sup> Horváth thus rejected a work he thought evoked the exhumations in the name of an aggressively-sought vision of the future, which regarded the past as conclusively defeated and destroyed, and whose shadows he did not want casting a pall over the one-sided heroic pathos of the new era. This pathos was in many respects understandable, arising as it did from the nascent society's expectations, yet, from the end of the 1940s, it turned into an officially-prescribed idyll. For what Horváth felt as artistic abstraction from reality was in fact reality itself. In the spring of 1945, water indeed did not simply denote itself or eternally rejuvenating nature, but also the Danube bank of the winter of 1944 to 1945 [where Jews were shot, by Fascist militiamen, at the edge of the river so that their bodies fell into the water – *the Editor*]. Similarly, the tree was not merely an enchanting experience either, since the fatigued viewer of the time was justified in linking it to the gallows and the accompanying inferno of executions and butchery. And, naturally, this is also precisely why the small white spot shining out of the fog could, for the young exhibition director, represent a way out of the apocalypse. It was simultaneously universal and a snippet of particular, tangible reality; both abstract reassurance and the concrete promise of freedom. Notably, György Lukács, too, questioned Béla Hamvas and Ernő Kállai for their lack of timely optimism, although the artists of the European School and the Gallery wanted all along to be active participants in the building of the new society and could not have been accused of pessimism.<sup>16</sup> They hoped that 'searching would be a fundamental life-movement', and that this search would be characterised by the trinity of humanism, radicalism, and freedom;<sup>17</sup> that the pictures created would very much reflect 'the era, but not its chaos that corrupts man', as these 'will no longer be enunciations of the seeker but those of the happy man who has already found a heavenly order'.<sup>18</sup> They also summoned, however, the unburied shadows of the past and the irrational depths of the psyche and so represented the belief in 'classlessness and freedom', in 'pure human existence', in a more oblique fashion.<sup>19</sup>

Aversion to the unpleasant, dark sides of reality also typified the spirit of Gresham critics. Lajos Vajda's art faced rejection because of the 'joyless attitude' emanating from his works,<sup>20</sup> whereas 'even the ugliest topics may become beautiful; indeed, they must become beautiful under the painter's brush'.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Aurél Bernáth's approach was irreconcilable with the views of European School theorists. Bernáth drew on the idea of 'castra' and believed in the taming

and transforming force of art, while European School members preferred evoking mirages rather than actual sights, and in their cosmic-utopian imaginings regarded both idealism and materialism as equally limited.<sup>22</sup> The optimism of Imre Pán, Árpád Mezei, Kállai, and Hamvas was built on the rigour of ‘cruel humanism’,<sup>23</sup> revealing a notable parallel with the thinking of poets and writers of the Újhold Circle.<sup>24</sup> These literati were willing to take on pessimism and doubt, too, instead of ‘the idyllic or benevolent humanism of the elderly or the detractors’.<sup>25</sup> In the words of Ottó Major: ‘we go to war (armed with the weapon of pure, murderous truth) ... against malicious alarmism and shallow optimism’.<sup>26</sup> Although their anti-Romanticism and distrust of psychoanalysis distinguished them from the European School theorists, they did share a desire for unsparing self-scrutiny.<sup>27</sup> In the circumstances, however, many critics interpreted this behaviour as the artists and aesthetes turning their backs on the era, as if the strides taken by the nascent people’s democracy had not brought about any specific shift in their perspectives. (Even their highest-calibre critic, György Lukács, argued in this fashion.)<sup>28</sup> This increasingly official and dogmatic approach did not solicit a responsible reckoning with the past, nor did it want any inconvenient blemishes spoiling the radiant face of the future: ‘It looks as if this tragic youth cannot move beyond the ruins, conserving [them] in their souls and in their art. We can only humbly suggest ... [that they] throw open the windows and their hearts; the sun shines on everyone’.<sup>29</sup> Yet the sun that Anna Oelmacher promised for everyone only shone for those who conformed to the narrow frames of Socialist Realism prescribed by cultural policy. The members of the European School were enveloped in clouds.

It is striking how little the overwhelming majority of attacks against the European School and the Four Quarters touched on aesthetic questions. Only a scant number of texts engaged in actual aesthetic argumentation, notably Aurél Bernáth’s study ‘The Szinyei Society and The Future of Our Art’, which prompted great debate and was heavily disputed in artistic circles.<sup>30</sup> The Szinyei Society, which generally treasured the value of visuality, now arrived at a turning point, reckoned Bernáth in his article: the artists now had to choose between committing themselves to an art ‘originating in vision’ or following a path of painting that transcended sensualism, one that ‘originated in consciousness’. Bernáth felt that Béla Czóbel stood on the dividing line between the two, and hence he regarded the European School as representing endeavours that ‘originate in consciousness’. In his (in)famous 1910 text ‘The Ways Have Parted’, György Lukács argued that ‘European art has reached a turning point and the forty years of unbridled demotion of form cannot continue indefinitely’.<sup>31</sup> In the atmosphere of the time, in which aesthetic arguments became arguments of political power, the greatest problem with Aurél Bernáth’s art-historical reflections was that they could possibly turn against the author’s intentions. Bernáth’s article was indeed written in the spirit of parting ways but, writing in 1947, he could not yet have anticipated that his own actions would be used to justify closing down the path leading in one of the two directions. But after all there were certain commonalities among the concepts proposed by Bernáth on the one hand, and Kállai or other European School theorists on the other, that could have served as basis for a thinking collective, even if not a thinking community. After the article’s publication, Ernő Kállai expressed just this idea in a letter to Bernáth: ‘If you substitute painterly ideals and cognitive ideals with visual perception and visual ideals, as is in any case the point, then the rigid distinction between a figurative and abstract pictorial language promptly vanishes’.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, however, the opportunity for forming a thinking community became impossible during precisely this period, to the great detriment of both groups. István Genthon’s unbiased and intelligent text ‘Generations in the Budapest Art Scene’, gave voice to this very impression in that he solicited more tolerance from representatives of the Gresham Circle, whom he regarded as excessively small-minded:

It is impossible to ignore that young artists are organising themselves independently from their more established colleagues ... I can confirm that some groups enjoy large and enthusiastic audiences. The fact that Picasso’s formidable, magic gaze at times blazes through in their pictures, and especially their graphics, is not necessarily the proof of a lack of independence, but rather indicates that they know who to learn from.<sup>33</sup>

Among the attacks launched ‘from various positions, with various justifications, in the name of aesthetics or the principles and doctrines of the natural sciences, ideology or politics’,<sup>34</sup> by far the most significant was György Lukács’s study ‘Hungarian Theories of Abstract Art’.<sup>35</sup> This article is a prime example of the direct politicisation and instrumentalisation of aesthetic thought, practiced on however high a level. Lukács’s prejudiced analyses of books by Béla Hamvas, Katalin Kemény, and Ernő Kállai were shockingly insensitive both towards the writings themselves and the theories they engaged with.<sup>36</sup> He regarded abstract art as a malformed, one-sided, and therefore defunct and reactionary response to Fascism, and he inevitably approached treatises written on the subject from the same perspective. Departing from this ideological starting point, Lukács regarded Béla Hamvas, Katalin Kemény, and Ernő Kállai as advocates of sorts for petty bourgeois and decadent art, thus *a priori* rejected their aesthetic considerations as ahistorical.

For Lukács, the historical-philosophical applicability of these works and theories was minimal; there was no way they could serve, even in partisan fashion, what he regarded as a correct approach to art. Reflecting the tragicomedy of the situation, these works indeed contained nothing of what Lukács demanded of them (and what he himself considered as the only relevant aspect), while they contained everything else that Lukács could not, as a slave to his own vantage point, possibly appreciate in them.

If, in the given social environment, Aurél Bernáth’s article may have had an impact so contrary to the author’s original intentions, this was even more so the case with Lukács’s study. As it transpires from the recollections of his contemporaries, Lukács’s article was interpreted as a declaration of cultural policy; its readers felt that a new era was coming in which their existence would be discredited, and not just in an aesthetic sense. Lukács’s article was followed by the publication of Márton Horváth’s study ‘Taking Stock of the Literary Life in Democratic Hungary’, which banished all illusions regarding the fate of progressive Hungarian art.<sup>37</sup>

Amidst diminishing opportunities and increasingly-aggressive press attacks, the last sources of refuge for the European School were the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the journal *Kortárs* (*Contemporary*), edited under the SDP’s auspices by Lajos Kassák and Pál Justus. Space was provided here for writers who were otherwise slowly being silenced: studies by Ernő Kállai,<sup>38</sup> Imre Pán’s refined writings, essays and poems by Pál Kiss,<sup>39</sup> and Pál Justus’s brave, determined text ‘Art, Worldview, Reality’,<sup>40</sup> which surely provoked displeasure from Márton Horváth, providing him with an excellent opportunity to pass judgement on the ‘Weimaresque phantoms’ of ‘isms’.<sup>41</sup>

Viewed from today, Pál Justus’s bravery was nothing more than an otherwise healthy amount of patience and openness towards new developments in art. He knew that ‘reality ... is more than and different from surface reality: dreams, entrancement, surging instincts, the movements of form-destroying forces are equivalent to reality. Particularly in the era of changes...’<sup>42</sup>

Máriusz Rabinovszky’s journalism was characterised by moderation and the spirit of mediation, a demeanour so tragically absent in the public life shredded by conflicts and insults.<sup>43</sup> Rabinovszky himself belonged to neither tendency, while neither did he enjoy the luxury of observing events from the outside. He did believe that abstract art should be accorded a place in the new society, and thus sharply denounced the ubiquitous criticism of the era, according to which:

these extreme tendencies represent the forgivable but nevertheless morbid flight from reality on the part of a disintegrating bourgeois society. Since today we are building a new society and a reality worthy of life, the retreat of art is now obsolete, reactionary behaviour, even if it was legitimate in the recent past. Every honest democrat can now exhale: he is exonerated from heaving to deal further with these phenomena of modern society that smell of rotting corpses.<sup>44</sup>

Concurring with Ernő Kállai, Rabinovszky submitted that there was no forced, compulsory, either-or choice between imitative and abstract, but rather that both were viable artistic methods, burdened by values and questions alike. Although Rabinovszky might have disputed certain

statements of the European School theorists,<sup>45</sup> he nonetheless viewed abstract art itself as one of the possible forms of expression in the new society.<sup>46</sup> In February 1948, the very same Máriusz Rabinovszky still believed that ‘it may in the end transpire that abstract art is not so anti-social, and not the private affair of a rotting social stratum’, yet, a few months later, under the impact of accelerated change, he was pressed to modify his opinion: ‘From the point of view of the entire society, the current value of abstract art is almost nothing, or in terms of propaganda directed at the masses, it may have a decidedly harmful impact’.<sup>47</sup>

The above overview of the contemporary press makes it amply clear today that the struggle of the European School and the Gallery of the Four Directions was already hopeless in 1946 to 1947, since every opportunity created by the nascent democracy during these years already represented, for the Stalinists in the Hungarian Communist Party, merely facets of the complete seizure of power. Ernő Kállai, Imre Pán, Árpád Mezei, and the painters thought in aesthetic categories, but they were facing an exclusively-political reality, tougher and even more merciless than they had imagined.

### **Broken Dolls: Central-European Parallels and Connections**

‘We have always understood the ideal “European” to mean “Western European”. From now on, we must think of “Entire-Europe”. A new Europe can only be built on the synthesis of West and East’.<sup>48</sup> This statement, part of the European School’s programme, not only represented a demand for the formation of a Hungarian art based upon a certain synthesis, but also a half-utopian, half-realistic possibility: the creation of an organic Central-European art. The task was to piece together the tattered internationalism of the 1920s avant-garde in a fundamentally-transformed environment, drawing on a sort of cruel humanism, sceptical optimism, and the ‘dialectics of dialectics’.<sup>49</sup> Admittedly, the differences between like-minded Central-European artistic movements were now greater than in the first decades of the century, the strands connecting them were flimsier and more ephemeral, and collaboration did not go smoothly, often consisting of nothing more than taking up contact. Because of the narrow timeframe available (between 1945 and 1948), and the ever-more-ubiquitous, dogmatic cultural policy offensive in Central Europe, the bulk of artists’ plans frequently remained just that. Nevertheless, an intense, unique, and variegated art emerged distinctly from the local milieu in the second half of the 1940s.

The founding experience of this art was the First World War. Accordingly, its most important elements came from Surrealism, coloured with pathos-free, no-nonsense neo-Realism, growing expressive currents, and the non-figurative tendencies that emerged in parallel. Naturally, the proportion of these components varied in each country and movement, but beyond the stylistic differences, one can nevertheless discern intellectual and aesthetic specifics which ultimately made them parts of a shared, coherent movement.

For example, Czech artists, whose ambitions resembled those of the European School, spoke the language of Surrealism much more naturally, almost as a mother tongue. Surrealism had significant traditions in Prague: for artists emerging in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval, Jindřich Štyrský, Jindřich Heisler, Toyen and other Czech Surrealist figures represented tradition and guarantees of continuity. The strength of the Czech movement was signalled in the decision of the ‘younger Surrealists’ at the 1937 Prague exhibition *D 37* to depart from orthodox Surrealism.<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, they moved towards a coldly objective, ‘Realist Surrealist’ art of ‘civilisation’ (the 1942 Group (Skupina 1942)), and on the other, towards a more political, ‘combative Surrealism’, one that declared the inadequacy of humanism alone.<sup>51</sup> The latter faction, which included artists who would later join the Ra Group (Skupina Ra) (the poets and aesthetes Ludvík Kundera and Zdenek Lorenc, the painters Bohdan Lacina, Josef Istler, Vilém Reichmann, and Václav Tikal, and the photographers Miloš Koreček and Václav Zykmond), published an entire series of illegally-mimeographed collections during the German occupation. These anthology-like collections wanted to ‘oppose the horrors of the age of monstrosity, when the focal point of psychic cognition becomes impossible’ since it had ‘encountered the permanent



spark of the light of dread'.<sup>52</sup> In the early 1940s, Czechoslovak artists too struggled with demons that had emerged from the depths of the underworld. Josef Istler's *Figure* (*Figura*, 1945), Václav Tikal's *Apocalyptic Landing* (*Přistání v Apokalypsii*, 1944), *Last Human Thing* (*Poslední věci člověka*, 1941), and *Fear* (1944), Václav Zykumund's *Spiderwebs* (*Pavučiny*, 1944) or, from a member of the previous generation, Toyen's *Marsh* (*Bažina*, 1941), evoke Lajos Vajda's monsters and gnomes, Béla Bán's ancient women frozen in spasm, and Imre Ámos's painful visions.<sup>53</sup> Stylistic analogies did not exist to such an extent between Czech 'young Surrealism' and Hungarian 'pre-Surrealism', although Václav Zykumund's etched expressive surfaces are reminiscent of Dezső Korniss's dramatic compositions from the early 1940s, and Josef Istler's monotypes and abstract Indian ink drawings may be compared to Dezső Korniss's *Illumination* (*Illumináció*) or Tamás Lossonczy's graphics (Fig. 26.1). The occasional analogous traits rather derive from the analogous circumstances in which the artists found themselves, and from their similar reckoning with reality. Just as a 'new Romanticism' emerged in Hungary from expressive-dramatic elements mixed with Surrealist inspiration during an era of 'broken dolls',<sup>54</sup> so would the illegal album edited by Josef Istler and Zdenek Lorenc bear the title 'Romanticism of the Twentieth Century'.<sup>55</sup> After 1945, the central task of both cohorts would be to compel the indelible trauma caused by the Second World War into artworks, as evinced by the Ra Group's 1946 publication *And Meanwhile The War* (*A zátim co válka*).<sup>56</sup>



Fig. 26.1.  
Dezső Korniss,  
*Cricket Wedding*  
(*Tücsöklakodalm*,  
1948). Oil  
on canvas,  
122 x 300 cm.  
Ferenczy Museum  
Center, Szentendre.  
© DACS 2019.

Thus, when the Ra Group and the European School met via the French aesthete Claude Serbanne (his mediation being a bitter grimace of Central-European art's isolation), we can rightly speak of a true meeting of minds.<sup>57</sup> This remains the case even if Ra's consequent Surrealism diverged from the European School's conscious incorporation of various stylistic tendencies, and even if we can discern differences in their interpretation of Surrealism itself between the Czech writers and aesthetes (Ludvík Kundera and Zdenek Lorenc) and Árpád Mezei and Imre Pán. Paradoxically, the European School, and Árpád Mezei in particular, were more closely connected to 'classical Surrealism' via their stronger connections to André Breton and Marcel Jean than the Czech group, which was partly raised on the Surrealist school. Ludvík Kundera and colleagues sought the path of renewal for their movement in other directions. Rejecting what they viewed as an excessively mechanistic adaptation of psychoanalysis, they returned to the 'heroic' Surrealist period of 1927 to 1933 and connected the artistic revolution firmly to social revolution, endorsing dialectics as the central pillar of their thinking. Consequently, they did not take part in the Surrealists' 1947 world exhibition in Paris (*Surréalisme en 1947*, Galerie Maeght), but instead enthusiastically joined the international movement of 'Revolutionary Surrealists', which broke with Breton to embrace both Surrealism and Socialism. At the 1948 International Conference of Revolutionary Surrealists in Brussels, Czechoslovakia was represented by Josef Istler and the poet Zdenek Lorenc, who became an editorial board member of the movement's short-lived journal, *Le surréalisme révolutionnaire* (*Revolutionary Surrealism*).<sup>58</sup> The interesting episode from early 1948,

when the European School almost joined the Revolutionary Surrealists, is worth mentioning here. Tibor Tardos, the Hungarian correspondent, acted as an intermediary between the Revolutionary Surrealist leader Dotreméon and Árpád Mezei. The attempt ultimately failed.<sup>59</sup> The Second Revolutionary Surrealist Congress, planned for 1949 in Prague, did not take place as the group had disintegrated by then. Nevertheless, the two years of the movement's existence exerted a significant influence over the Ra Group. These artists thus came into contact with members of the later Cobra group, including Asger Jorn, whose pre-Art-Informel expressive abstraction was related on a number of points to the Ra Group's non-figurative Surrealism, Josef Istler's torn structures, and Václav Zykmond's writhing streaks of colour. No European School members had yet embarked on the path of Abstract Expressionism at this time, although the sensory Elementarism seen in contemporary works by Karel Appel, Henry Heerup and Pedersen was already palpable in Béla Bán's graphics and Margit Anna's Primitivism (Fig. 26.2).<sup>60</sup>



Fig. 26.2. Margit Anna, *Girl with a Red Bow* (*Piros masnis leány*, 1948). Cardboard, oil. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. © Szépművészeti Múzeum / Museum of Fine Arts, 2019. © DACS 2019





Fig. 26.3. Tamás Lossonczy, *Grief and Hope (Fájdalom és remény, 1945)*. Oil on canvas, 78 x 200 cm. Janus Pannonius Múzeum, Pécs, inv. no.: KM.97.1. Image courtesy Janus Pannonius Múzeum. © DACS 2019

The close connections that existed between the platforms of the various groups at the time are further demonstrated by an increased interest across the board in folk art, or rather its more archaic strands. Hungary was not alone in holding exhibitions devoted to folkloric practices, or publishing articles on the peasantry's role as a vehicle of culture: all this also occupied the Czech Surrealists. Vladimír Bouček wrote a study on the atavism preserved in Czech, Moravian, and Slovak peasant culture and the automatism that may surge from it. To complete the circle, his article was published in the *Cobra* periodical.<sup>61</sup> André Tamm's study on the connection between folk art and modern art was also published around the same time, and there was a group whose fundamental source of inspiration was instinctual, raw nature and primal, collective art.<sup>62</sup> Their primary point of departure was folk art and the art of archaic cultures: this group was the Cobra.<sup>63</sup>

These changes that came to fruition from the early 1940s added further colour to the art of the Ra Group. The early days were frequently characterised by a hallucinatory Verism (Istler, Reichmann, Tikal), one that drew continually from the horrors experienced at close hand, and whose dramatic, heroic symbols distinguished it from the archetype, Salvador Dalí's method built on paranoia. Over time, this Verism became more closely connected to the non-figurative and predominantly its oneiric-associative variant. In one of his letters, Ludvík Kundera rightly speaks of 'secondary post-Surrealism', a technical description not to be limited to Czech wartime art only, since the connection between a visionary non-figuration and Surrealism had become common across Europe.<sup>64</sup> The activities of the Hungarian group The Gallery of the Four Directions (in particular Tamás Lossonczy and Tihamér Gyarmathy) gravitated in this direction (Figs. 26.3 and 26.4). Of course, in every country, this connection bore local particularities according to local traditions and circumstances: in Czechoslovakia, montage featured as a predominant method of picture creation, while Hungarian artists tended to preserve their predecessors' pantheist concerns. This is one of the reasons why propositions about a 'hidden face of nature' enjoyed greater resonance. But works by the Ra Group also revealed some distant parallels with this approach: photographs and '*fokalk*' works by Reichmann, and Koreček in particular, similarly surmise the possibility of a preoccupation with the eternal variety of nature.<sup>65</sup>

This is why, when the Ra artists made their debut in Hungary in the second half of 1947, their audience not only appreciated the friendly gesture of making contact but could also witness the realisation of an artistic platform that resembled the European School in many ways. The exhibition also demonstrated that the European School was not alone, and that in the wake of similar experiments, a new art could come into being in Central Europe, one that could transcend national borders.

Yet the realisation of such an art was hindered by history. The Czech Surrealists' debut in Budapest could not be reciprocated in Prague or Brno: from the end of 1947 onwards, Zhdanovite dogmatism asserted itself increasingly strongly in Hungary's northern neighbours, too. Intolerant cultural policy did not spare Czech Surrealism either: Štyrský and Toyen had been forced into





permanent exile and settled in Paris. The year 1949 saw the cessation of *Blok*, a modern art journal comparable in terms of both character and high quality to the Hungarian *Alkotás* (*Creation*), while Ra group members were increasingly excluded from their country's artistic life. Sadly, Karel Teige's suicide to escape police persecution brought one of the greatest eras of Czech art to a close, both metaphorically and literally.

The European School made contact with the Romanian Surrealists once again through the intermediary of Claude Serbanne.<sup>66</sup> Much like in the case of the Czech movement, Bucharest already saw a second Surrealist generation playing a decisive role. The diverse activities of this 'second group' between 1944 and 1977 are perhaps only comparable to those of the European School: even their publishers' names were Surrealist-inspired, with Oblivion Press (Edition l'Oublie) and Infra-Black Press (Edition Infra-Noir) regularly publishing texts, poems, and studies by Dolfi Trost and Gherasim Luca, the two leading figures, and by Paul Păun, Gellu Naum, and Virgil Teodorescu.<sup>67</sup>

Naturally, this enthusiastic flurry of creative and organising activity (exhibitions, book series, and publications), attesting to the abundant energies of Romanian Surrealism, was based on avant-garde traditions stretching back to the 1920s. Just as in Czechoslovakia, Surrealism was also at home in Bucharest representing, from the 1930s onwards, the continuity of the Romanian avant-garde, even if only at a subcultural level. The journal *unu* (*one*), edited by the 'Romanian Breton' Saşa Pană from 1928 to 1932, was first published as early as 1928, the same year as the debut of *Urmuz: vitrină de artă nouă* (*Urmuz: new show-window for art*), to which Tristan Tzara and Victor Brauner both contributed. This was followed in 1930 by the relaunch of the pronouncedly Surrealist-derived *Alge*, edited by Aureliu Baranga, which lasted for five issues.<sup>68</sup> The *unu* publication series outlived the journal itself, lasting until the early 1940s. The series included Surrealist works by Ilarie Voronca and Geo Bogza, and non-Romanians, including

Fig. 26.4. Tihamér Gyarmathy, *Lights and Shadows* (*Fények és árnyékok*, 1947). Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm. Janus Pannonius Múzeum, Pécs. Image courtesy Janus Pannonius Múzeum. © DACS 2019

Paul Éluard, with illustrations by prominent artists such as Victor Brauner, Max Hermann Maxy, Jules Perahim, Marcel Janco, and Man Ray.<sup>69</sup> It was within this milieu, so radically different from conservative artistic life in 1930s Hungary, that the two defining figures of post-war Romanian Surrealism reached maturity: Gherasim Luca and Dolfi Trost.

Like other Romanian Surrealists, they too directly drew on the French movement. As flesh-and-blood Surrealists, their works displayed almost all the characteristics of the movement: playfulness, a dreamlike quality, an inexhaustible curiosity towards the unknown and a desire to discover, dark humour, attraction to sexuality, and the inclination, an inheritance from Dada, to shock.<sup>70</sup> Their works wove together fine arts and literature, with brutal and exotic dreams coming to life in oneiric prose poems, and the automatic cascade of their language use occasionally reminiscent of Lettrism.<sup>71</sup> Their fine-art works relied on the reign of the accidental and instinctual as well. The starting point of their method, which they called 'surautomatism', was the 'objective accidental'.<sup>72</sup> Trost painted, or rather splattered pictures with his eyes closed or blindfolded (this came to be called 'vaporisation'), while Luca's 'cubomanias' incorporated unforeseeable, unrationalisable momentum into a Max Ernst-style collage technique.<sup>73</sup> Their works combined a boundless desire for freedom, a permanent, unceasing revolution of the imagination, in which values and phenomena held to be stable and enduring were inverted and turned inside out; in their words: 'the negation of the negation of a negation'.<sup>74</sup> This was why they were simultaneously attracted to Karl Marx and black magic, to Vladimir Lenin and the world of bizarre phenomena. Their works concealed a general loss of values caused by uncertainty and the shock inflicted by the Second World War. They regarded themselves as the 'great shipwrecked', while their heroic experiment aspired to sweep away the last remaining, by now entirely meaningless, taboos that endured in a world without secure moorings.<sup>75</sup> The statement Árpád Mezei made in relation to the Ra Group perhaps even better describes the Romanians: 'Surrealism has come to the point of doing away with the differentiation between beautiful and ugly, true and false, good and bad, and thus making this world finally inhabitable'.<sup>76</sup> Trost, Luca, and their associates returned to the great Surrealist experiment of the late 1920s, the merger of social and artistic revolution, flying the flag for both Marx and Breton, and announcing the concept of permanent revolution in the summary of their ideas, *Dialectic of the Dialectic (Dialectique de la dialectique)*.<sup>77</sup> Correspondingly, their position drew closer to that of the Revolutionary Surrealists, yet the Romanians never split with Breton. As participants at the 1947 Paris exhibition, they announced their anti-Oedipal revolution, 'the sexual liberation of the proletariat', in their manifesto published as part of the exhibition catalogue.<sup>78</sup>

Having made contact with the European School, Luca insisted on behalf of the Bucharest group that as well as maintaining personal contacts and exchanging publications, the Hungarians also should actively join the international Surrealist movement.<sup>79</sup> To that effect, the first reciprocal exhibitions were planned for 1948, in the rapidly-changing political situation, however, time ultimately ran out. In the meantime, conflicts grew between Trost and Luca and other members of the group (Teodorescu and Naum) who gradually turned away from Surrealism towards Socialist Realism.<sup>80</sup> These clashes caused the movement to finally split and for Trost and Luca to emigrate. En route to Paris, they visited Árpád Mezei in Budapest, but this meeting marked the end of their relationship.<sup>81</sup>

Although these factors account for significant differences between the European School and the art of the Romanian group, with its attraction to the absurd and a 'Surrealist Mannerism', we nevertheless encounter numerous notions in works produced by the Bucharest group that were 'in the air in Central-Eastern Europe' at the time, equally occupying artists in Budapest, Brno, Warsaw and other artistic centres of the region.<sup>82</sup> In line with this, the Romanians' writings addressed problems which also became of fundamental importance for the European School, such as the relativity of values, the 'poeticisation' of the natural sciences, and a possible synthesis of scientific findings and art. 'On both objective and subjective grounds we accept those discoveries ... which exert such a compelling influence over us, such as non-Euclidean geometry, the fourth dimension, Brownian motion, the space-time quantum and, at the same time, we are in favour

of non-Pasteurian biology...'.<sup>83</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, these ideas are in agreement with Ernő Kállai's concepts and Hamvas's perception of the sciences.<sup>84</sup> Despite the discrepancies, there did exist points of connection, on the basis of which the various groups, departing from different starting points and operating under different circumstances, could have cooperated, whether through argument or agreement, in a creative fashion.

A synthesis promising exciting results was thus underway but could not eventually come about. Our assumption is that in more auspicious circumstances, and with the participation of Austrian and Polish groups with similar aims, a specifically Central-European post-Surrealist art could have come into existence, one that in many senses would have recalled avant-garde co-operations of the 1920s.<sup>85</sup> These movements, among them the European School, had already embarked along the path of Revolutionary Surrealism flanking Abstract Expressionism, but they could not fulfil their promises: the 'broken dolls' of the Second World War were not reunited through art.<sup>86</sup>

*Translated by Gwen Jones*

1 Manifesto of the European School, reprinted as blurb on the inner cover of the booklet series 'Library of the European School' ('Európai Iskola Könyvtára') and 'Index Library for Pamphlets' ('Index Röpirat és Vitairat-Könyvtár') (Budapest: Művészbolt, 1946–).

2 János Andrassy Kurta, 'Absztrakt művészet a népi demokráciában?', *Szabad Szó* (1 June 1946). Reprinted in Zoltán Nagy (ed.), *Kritikák és képek. Válogatás a magyar képzőművészet dokumentumaiból, 1945–1975* (Budapest: Corvina, 1976), pp. 43–44.

3 For example: '(–a)' [*sic*], 'Európai Iskola', *Világ* (17 March 1947); 'sz. s.' [Sándor Szerdahelyi], 'Kiállítás', *Világosság* (March 1946); 'd. m.' [Mária Dutka], 'Európai Iskola: új művészcsoporthoz első kiállítása', *Független Magyarország* (11 March 1946); Márta Jacobi, 'Az Európai Iskola kiállítása', *Független Magyarország* (25 November 1946); 'K. G.', 'Az Európai Iskola csoportkiállítása', *Szabadság* (22 November 1946); 'H.', 'Az Európai Iskola kiállításához', *Szabad Nép* (28 November 1946).

4 Ernő Kállai, 'Szelíd válasz egy csipős kritikára', *Közársaság* (27 June 1946). Besides János Andrassy Kurta's article mentioned in note 2, see also: 'O. A.' [Anna Oelmacher], 'Az "Európai" Iskola kiállítása', *A Tett* 4 (18 March 1946); Lajos Hollós Korvin, 'Európai Iskola', *Közársaság* (25 June 1946).

5 Szinyei Society (Szinyei Merse Pál Társaság), 1920–1949, had a pivotal role in the art scene of interwar Hungary. It represented a sort of modernism that was more conservative than the avant-garde 'isms', but served as a bourgeois liberal counterpoint to the official art of the far-right regime in the 1930s and early 1940s. (*The Editor*)

6 János Andrassy Kurta, *Korszerű művészet és népiség* (Budapest: Magyar Népi Művelődési Intézet, 1947), p. 16.

7 Kurta, *Korszerű művészet és népiség*, p. 17.

8 Ernő Kállai, 'Vigyázat, Műcsarnok!', *Szabad Szó* (23 June 1946). Reprinted in Nagy (ed.), *Kritikák és képek*, pp. 45–47.

9 In the simplifying terminology of the time, anything beyond naturalistic reproduction (Fauvism, Expressionism, Surrealism) was qualified as 'abstract'. This phrase was used so pervasively in the press between 1945 and 1948 that it should not be surprising that even Máriusz Rabinovszky used it in this sense. Máriusz Rabinovszky, 'Európai Iskola', *Magyarok* 6 (1946): pp. 333–35.

10 See: Kurta, 'A képzőművészet időszzerű kérdéséről', *Új Szó* (23 September 1946). Reprinted in Nagy (ed.), *Kritikák és képek*, pp. 36–38.

11 Károly László Háy, 'Művészet és haladás', *Szabad Művészet* 142 (1947): p. 4.

12 Activism, initiated by Lajos Kassák, was an avant-garde movement in Hungary. Its supporters clustered around Kassák's journals *MA (Today)* and *A TETT (The Act)*, and shared radical views on society and the arts. The Activists took part in reforming art during the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (Republic of Councils) in 1919.

13 The theorists of the Communist Party were Márton Horváth, József Révai, and, first and foremost, György Lukács and György

Vértés. From the younger generation we might mention György Somlyó and Imre Keszi. Gresham theorists included Aurél Bernáth, Pál Pátzay, Jenő Kopp, Béla Újvári, and even Pál Szegi and Milán Füst.

14 Márton Horváth, 'Munkásság és művészet', *Szabad Nép* (4 May 1945): p. 9.

15 Horváth, 'Munkásság és művészet', p. 9.

16 György Lukács, 'Az absztrakt művészet magyar elméletei', *Fórum* 9 (1947): pp. 115–27.

17 Lajos Szabó, 'Irodalom és rémület', response to Imre Keszi, *Diárium* 1 (1946): p. 36.

18 Ernő Kállai, 'Lossonczy Tamásról', manuscript, MDK-C-1-11/523.

19 Ernő Kállai, 'Ember a művészetben', *Kortárs* 10 (October 1947). Reprinted in Éva Forgács (ed.), *Művészet veszélyes csillagzat alatt. Válogatott cikkek, tanulmányok* (Budapest: Corvina, 1981), p. 357.

20 Béla Újvári, 'Az Európai Iskola XXVI. kiállítása, Vajda Lajos', *Magyar Művészet* 1 (1948): p. 22.

21 Aurél Bernáth, 'Jegyzetek a művészetről (Elbeszélni, de festő módján)', *Magyar Művészet* 3 (1948): p. 132.

22 'Castrum' (lat. 'fortress') was Bernáth's own term to describe dense visions—extraordinary or trivial visual memories—that are stored in the subconscious, but may occasionally burst into the surface with compelling force. (*The Editor*). See: Aurél Bernáth, *Így éltünk Pannóniában* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1956), p. 129.

23 Ottó Major, 'Kegyetlen humanizmus', *Újhold* 1 (January 1948): p. 5.

24 This circle included Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Iván Mándy, János Pilinszky, Ottó Major, and Balázs Lengyel. (*The Editor*).

25 Major, 'Kegyetlen humanizmus', p. 5.

26 Major, 'Kegyetlen humanizmus', p. 5.

27 See: Sándor Tóth, 'Eidolosz, a kettősképlet', *Újhold* 2 (June 1947): p. 66; Ottó Major, 'Kulisszák között', *Kortárs* 10 (October 1947): p. 45. 'This is why I find every manifestation of romanticism outrageous: the pleasant moss and the fragrant weeds, for which I am willing to forget about the wreckage; the diverting operetta, the pulsating tam-tam of jazz which warns of death in its vulgarity, and my own fallibility too, with which I am not infrequently taken in by these easy beauties ... if I get a bunch of flowers, that's what I think of: I have a bomb in my hands'. As explicated in Major's essay, Újhold's anti-Romanticism pertained to a form of extraneous Romanticism, and not Kállai's concept of the eternal romantic.

28 Lukács, 'Az absztrakt művészet magyar elméletei'.

29 Anna Oelmacher, 'Tragikus ifjúság (A Fővárosi Képtár kiállításáról)', *Nagyvilág*, 15 (January 1947).

30 Aurél Bernáth, 'A Szinyei Társaság és művészetünk útja', *Válasz* 3 (1947): pp. 255–63.



- 31 György Lukács, 'Az utak elváltak', *Nyugat* 1 (1 February 1910): pp. 190–93. Reprinted in György Lukács, *Ifjúkori művek* (Budapest: Magvető, 1977), pp. 280–87.
- 32 Ernő Kállai, letter to Aurél Bernáth (9 April 1947). MTA MKCS, MDK-C-I-111/131, p. 1.
- 33 István Genthon, 'Nemzedékek a budapesti művészetben', *Budapest* 10 (1946): pp. 365–66.
- 34 Ernő Kállai, *Zajlás az absztrakt művészet körül*, manuscript, MTA MKCS tul. MDK-C-I-11/511, 2. l.
- 35 Kállai, 'Lossonczy Tamásról'.
- 36 Béla Hamvas and Katalin Kemény, *Forradalom a művészetben. Absztrakció és szürrealizmus Magyarországon* (Budapest: Misztótfalusi Kiadó, undated [1947]); Ernő Kállai, *A természet rejtett arca* (Budapest: Misztótfalusi Kiadó, 1947).
- 37 Márton Horváth, 'A magyar demokrácia irodalmi életének mérlege', *Csillag* 4 (March 1948).
- 38 Ernő Kállai, 'Ember a művészetben', *Kortárs* 10 (1947): p. 10; and 'Művészet és tömeg', *Kortárs* 11 (1947): pp. 100–102.
- 39 Pál Kiss, 'A művészet "lélektana"', *Alkotás* 1 (1947).
- 40 Pál Justus, 'Művészet – Valóság – világnézet', *Kortárs* 2 (1947): pp. 38–39.
- 41 Horváth, 'A magyar demokrácia irodalmi életének mérlege'.
- 42 Justus, 'Művészet – Valóság – világnézet', p. 39.
- 43 On Rabinovszky's work and character, see also Kinga Bódi's essay in this Reader. (*The Editor*).
- 44 Máriusz Rabinovszky, 'Az absztrakt művészet körül', *Magyarok* 4 (1947): p. 317.
- 45 For Pál Kiss, for example, 'art is not a substitute religion, but religion itself... If Freud rationalised the irrational, such theories reduce Freud's reason back again to irrationalism'. 'Európai Iskola', *Magyarok* 6 (1946): p. 334.
- 46 Máriusz Rabinovszky, 'Levél Martyn Ferenchez az absztrakt festészetről', *Sorsunk* 2 (1948): pp. 98–102.
- 47 Máriusz Rabinovszky, 'Harc az absztrakt művészet körül', *Politika* (22 May 1948). Reprinted in Rabinovszky, *Két korszak határán. Válogatott művészeti írások* (Budapest: Corvina, 1965).
- 48 The manifesto of the European School: see note 1.
- 49 Gherasim Luca and Dolfi Trost, *Dialectique de la dialectique. Message adressé au mouvement surréaliste international* (Bucharest: Surréalisme, 1945).
- 50 Ludvík Kundera, 'Mladší surrealisté', *Blok* 2–3/1 (1946): p. 77.
- 51 The most important members of the 1942 Group (Skupina 1942) were: the painters Fr. Gross and Fr. Hudeček, K. Souček, the photographers M. Hák and L. Zivř. See: J. Vykoukal, 'Skupina Ra', *Umění* 5 (1972): pp. 453–469, especially p. 463.
- 52 J. Řežáč, *Grafické listy Otty Mizery*, exhibition catalogue, Grafický kabinet (Prague, 1946). Cited in Vykoukal, 'Skupina Ra', pp. 453–454.
- 53 Josef Istler, *Figure* (oil on canvas, 130 x 94 cm. Collection J. Puchmertl); Václav Tikal, *Apocalyptic Landing* (oil on canvas, 61 x 47 cm. Krajská Galerie, Hrádec Kralové); Tikal, *Last Human Thing* (oil on canvas, 72 x 99.5 cm. National Gallery, Prague. no. 0.10.438); Tikal, *Fear* (oil on canvas, , 43x38 cm. National Gallery, Prague. no. 0.11.052); Václav Zykumund, *Spiderwebs* (oil on veneer, 55 x 80 cm. National Gallery, Prague. no. 0.9642); Toyen, *Marsh* (oil on canvas, 53 x 44 cm. National Gallery, Prague. no. 0.11.561).
- 54 With reference to the title of the illegally-distributed collection *Broken Dolls (Roztrhané panenky, 1942)*.
- 55 Josef Istler and Zdenek Lorenc, *Romantismus 20. století*, 1943 (illegal self-publication in 30 exemplars).
- 56 Václav Zykumund (ed.), *A zatím co valka* (Brno: Edice Ra, 1946) (with works by J. Istler, M. Koreček, L. Kundera, B. Lacina, Z. Lorenc, O. Mizera, J. Puchmertl, V. Reichmann, V. Tikal, and V. Zykumund).
- 57 Ludvík Kundera, letter to Árpád Mezei (14 April 1947) (property of Árpád Mezei, Budapest).
- 58 *Le Surréalisme révolutionnaire* 1, (March–April 1948).
- 59 Christian Dotremont, telegram to Árpád Mezei (11 October 1947), (property of Árpád Mezei, Budapest): 'I ask the European School and personally you to send a quick report about the intellectual and aesthetic situation of Hungary'. See also: Tibor Tardos, letter to Árpád Mezei and Imre Pán (undated, c. second half of 1947), (property of Árpád Mezei, Budapest): 'Dotremont wrote me about Mezei; he has received his letter. In Paris, they are organising a surr.-rév [Revolutionary Surrealist] world congress and he asked me whom to invite from Budapest. What would you [Mezei] say to attending?'
- 60 On the Cobra group's connection to Surrealism, see: Édouard Jaguer, 'Le moment Cobra et le surréalisme', *Bulletin de liaison* 15 (1982): pp. 3–15; Agnès Angliviel de la Beaumelle, 'Cobra', in *Paris-Paris 1937–1957*, exhibition catalogue, CNAC Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1981), pp. 1946–1956.
- 61 Vladimír Bouček, 'L'art populaire et l'époque actuelle', *Cobra* 1 (1948): p. 14.
- 62 André Tamm, 'Die deutsche Volkskunst und ihr Verhältnis zur experimentellen Kunst', in Laszlo Glozer (ed.), *Westkunst, Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1938* (Köln: DuMont, 1981), pp. 168–69.
- 63 Jaguer, 'Le moment Cobra et le surréalisme', pp. 4, 148.
- 64 'We are at the start of a new development, and this is secondary post-Surrealism. It is possible that all this is epigonism and of poor quality, but it is also possible that it will be the high-point of Surrealism – or maybe it is no longer Surrealism but something different, it's difficult to say'. Ludvík Kundera, letter to Árpád Mezei (25 May 1947) (property of Árpád Mezei, Budapest).
- 65 The Surrealist photogram, aptly named 'fokalk', refers to Dominguez's method used in Surrealist painting, 'decalcomania'.
- 66 Gherasim Luca, letter to Árpád Mezei (12 February 1947) (property of Árpád Mezei, Budapest).
- 67 A non-exhaustive list is as follows: Gherasim Luca, *Quantitativement aimée* (Bucharest: Les Éditions de l'Oubli, 1944); Trost and Luca, *Dialectique de la dialectique*; Luca, *Le vampire passif* (Bucharest: Les éditions de l'Oubli, 1945); Gellu Naum, *Medium* (Bucharest: Polirom, 1945); Paul Păun, *Marea Palidă* (Bucharest: Editura Moderna, 1945); Virgil Teodorescu, *Butelia de Leyda* (Bucharest: Tipografia Bucovina, 1945); G. Naum, *Spectrul longevității, 122 cadavre* (Bucharest: Colectia Suprrealista, 1946); Gh. Luca, *Le secret du vide et du plein* (Bucharest: Edition Infra-Noir, 1947); V. Teodorescu, *Au lobe du sel* (Bucharest: Edition Infra-Noir, 1947).
- 68 For more detail on Romanian avant-garde journals, see: Vladimír Udrescu, 'Les avant-postes de l'avant-garde', *Revue Roumaine* 10/12 (1981): pp. 140–51.
- 69 For example: St. Roll, *Moărtea vitea Eleonorei*, 1930 (with illustrations by Brauner); Ilarie Voronca, *Zodiac*, 1930 (with illustrations by Maxy); A. Zaremba, *Desciderea*, 1933 (with illustrations by Perahim); Sasa Pană, *Sadismus adevarului*, 1936 (with illustrations by, among others, Brauner, Janco, and Man Ray).
- 70 The sole 1932 issue of *Muci* (*Snot*) may be regarded as a Dada-Surrealist gesture of the work. Contributors included Păun, Luca, J. Perahim, Freddy Goldstein, and A. Baranga.
- 71 For example, Luca, *Le secret du vide et du plein* (Bucharest: Edition Infra-Noir, 1947); V. Teodorescu, *La provocation* (Bucharest: Edition Infra-Noir, 1947). For more detail on Romanian avant-garde poetry of the time, see: Ion Pop, *Avantgardismul poetic romanesc* (Bucharest: Ed. pentru Literatura, 1969), especially pp. 237, 276; Valentin F. Mihăescu, 'Suprrealismul romanesc contexte și interpretari', in V.F. Mihăescu, *Țimp și mod* (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1983), pp. 139–81.
- 72 Trost and Luca, *Dialectique de la dialectique*, p. 17.
- 73 Trost and Luca, *Presentation de la graphiés colorée, de cubomanies et d'objets*, exhibition catalogue, Sala Brezoianu (Bucharest, 1945).
- 74 Trost and Luca, *Dialectique de la dialectique*, p. 17.
- 75 Trost and Luca, *Dialectique de la dialectique*, p. 17.
- 76 Árpád Mezei, 'Introduction', in *Skupina Ra Czechoslovak Surrealists* (the 20<sup>th</sup> Exhibition of the European School), exhibition catalogue (31 August–14 September 1948).
- 77 Trost and Luca, *Dialectique de la dialectique*, p. 17.
- 78 André Breton and Marcel Duchamp (eds.), *Le surréalisme en 1947* (Paris: Maeght Editeur, 1947).
- 79 'The idea of a steady contact and exchange between Budapest

and Bucharest as well as between New York and Tokyo matches entirely our way of thinking about the international activity of the Surrealist movement. As far as the essence of this activity is concerned, it seems to me that until today we have put too much emphasis on the artistic or political side of our revolutionary language and that we have almost completely neglected the resources of our power over the world that are strictly surrealist (unpredictable, indefinite, wildly surprising). Gh. Luca, letter to Árpád Mezei (March 1947) (property of Árpád Mezei, Budapest).

80 Gellu Naum and Virgil Teodorescu, 'Inventatorii banderolei', in Gellu Naum (ed.), *Teribilul Interzis* (Col. suprealista) (Bucharest: Văcărescu, 1945), pp. 87–95.

81 Research interview with Éva Erdélyi, August 1982 (manuscript).

82 Members of the Kraków group Młodych Plastyków (T. Brzozowski, Z. Grochot, T. Kantor, J. Skarzynski) could also be associated with this trend. See: Aleksander Wojciechowski, *Młode malarstwo polskie (1944–1975)* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1975), pp. 5–41.

83 Trost and Luca, *Dialectique de la dialectique*, pp. 30–31.

84 Kállai, *A természet rejtett arca*; Béla Hamvas, 'Martyn Ferenc gyűjteményes kiállítása a Képzőművészeti Főiskolán', *Sorsunk* 6/2 (November 1946): p. 102.

85 The Ra Group contacted the group around the Austrian Surrealist journal *Plan*. Ludvík Kundera, letter to Árpád Mezei (1 September 1947) (property of Árpád Mezei, Budapest).

86 A 1942 illegal publication by the Czech Surrealists was entitled *Broken Dolls* (*Roztrhané panenky*).



The Embodiment  
of Communist  
Utopia: Socialist  
Realism in  
Slovakia,  
1948–1956

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### **The Embodiment of Communist Utopia: Socialist Realism in Slovakia, 1948–1956**

A man on a combine harvester is as great a subject as a man in armour or in princely robes was for the Renaissance painter ... Instead of portraying our former, diseased inner world, we must now express the joy of a liberated life. We must express all this in comprehensible language, we should strive to reach the widest possible public ... To try to do this is to fulfil our cultural norm, to try to do better is to exceed that norm, and to try to do the best we can is to work like a Stakhanovite.

Štefan Bednár<sup>2</sup>

After the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, visual art—like all other areas of artistic production—became a propaganda instrument of Communist ideology, an idealised image of its aim of building a new society. The idea of Socialist Realism, now quickly transplanted to this context, had already found ardent Czech and Slovak supporters among a section of the left-oriented intelligentsia in the 1920s. But these supporters would prove to have a different idea about the form the 'socialisation' of artistic production should take. Into the 1940s the hope still survived among artists of a concrete possible variant of Socialist Realism that would draw on the achievements of the avant-garde, but that faith was shown to be in vain.<sup>3</sup> In other words, everything that then happened in Czechoslovakia, whether in the realm of economics or culture, was decided by Joseph Stalin's advisers, enforcing the Soviet model. Thus, as there could not exist any particular (non-Soviet) path to Socialism, neither was any freely-developed artistic production permissible.

After the Ninth Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party the doctrine of Socialist Realism as formulated by Andrei Zhdanov was officially established. This began to impose itself widely through the institutional pressure that headed downwards from the Communist Party Central Committee to the Ministry of Culture and from there to the centrally-controlled apparatuses of the artists' unions. The suppression of any kind of free artistic manifestation was now a matter of little time. In the same year, 1948, a Czech translation appeared of a collection of Zhdanov's writings, *On Art* (*O umentí*), in which the implacable Soviet ideologue supplemented Vladimir Lenin's thesis of Party-mindedness in art with the need to picture reality in its revolutionary development, outline visions of the future, reveal new perspectives, and acquaint the masses with these, referring also to Stalin and his assertion that art must be Socialist in content and national in form. His dogmatic form of Realism rejected the art of the European avant-gardes as Formalist, decadent, and ideologically hostile, and insisted on a return to the Realist traditions of nineteenth-century Russian art. The aim was to transmit ideas to the masses in as unambiguous a form

and as comprehensible a language as possible, to grip them emotionally on a first viewing, pull them in through the chosen content, convince and arouse in them an optimistic zeal for Socialist construction and a faith in a new society.

In its essence, Socialist Realism, as an approach to reality, was above all a means of replacing reality with an idealised projection of society, conceived to resemble a Communist utopia. On the other hand, as a socially-critical construct it was the product of an uncompromising ideology, so it also had to be a weapon of class struggle. Transformed into vehicles and symbols for political ideas, works of art were not primarily supposed to contribute to the satisfaction of spiritual or aesthetic needs, but rather to become a homogenous component of the ideological mechanisms of state power. They were conceived programmatically, in such a way as to suppress any creative remoulding of reality through the artist's inner vision, to negate the artist's freedom of spirit, critical thinking, subjective interpretation of themes or search for new methods of expression. They were supposed to offer an uncomplicated and succinct visual image of the class-oriented, pre-established mythology of the proletariat as the leading social force, and they were meant to express the collective euphoria of Socialist development, the optimism, joy, and élan of the dedication to construction, but also the unceasing 'battle for peace', because while the war had ended, the Western 'ideological enemy' remained.

This ideological implacability was notably demonstrated publicly in intensely-politicised posters and drawn caricatures in the daily press. Among the foremost creators of both was the painter Štefan Bednár, a devout leftist with significant connections to the Slovak National Uprising, who from the beginning had been a passionate theorist of the new art.<sup>4</sup> In one of his early essays devoted to Socialist Realism he asserted that it was not a matter of a specific style, but only of a 'general line of artistic production' (in an analogy with Klement Gottwald's general line of direction for the Czechoslovak Communist Party).<sup>5</sup> The painter Ladislav Čemický, a close friend of Bednár's, was one of the first painters to attempt to formulate the characteristics of Socialist Realism, even prior to the publication of Zhdanov's text in Slovak translation in 1950. Čemický argued that Socialist Realism was the only artistic method capable of capturing and expressing the period of transition from a class-based to a classless society. The Realists of the past had still not been able to reveal the revolutionary nature of the proletariat, the only class that can play the leading role in the development of humanity. Čemický developed the thesis that the planned system of Socialism should also involve consciously-planned and controlled artistic production, while in regard to the relationship between form and content he argued that 'in contrast to the decadent perversity of formalism ... content is here the dominant component of the artistic work and form is only secondary. The criteria for the evaluation of a work of art is based on its relation to objective reality'.<sup>6</sup> The artist is free to choose the means and manner of representation; it is essential only that conflicts be 'expressed truthfully, which means emphasising their progressive socialist elements'.<sup>7</sup>

Let us pause for a moment at this point, for it is Čemický's definition that captures the fundamental paradox of Socialist Realism, which is founded on the one hand on Lenin's 'theory of reflection' (in which the artist does not present a mere 'dead' copy of reality as though seen in a mirror, but rather an image based on a specific, mentally-produced generalisation) and on the other hand on Party-mindedness. The professed attempt to 'truthfully express' something, and yet not thereby to assume an objective position and to 'emphasise' *a priori* certain elements, reveals the fictive core of the whole method of Socialist Realism and its deceitful, simulacrum essence: it is a method of conscious and programmatic beautification that presents itself as the portrayal of reality.

Socialist Realism's proclaimed ideological function also lies behind the predominant emphasis that was placed on propagandistic forms of art designed for public spaces. This model of visual imagery that would impact directly in the streets and in public squares was adopted from the Soviet monumental propaganda connected with the Great October Socialist Revolution, and among its first examples in the Slovak context was the realisation of a number of works for the fifth anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising in 1949.<sup>8</sup> Produced to a common measurement of 3 x 5 metres, these works decorated the place of celebration, at the main square in Zvolen,



and formed part of a larger architectural design in which they alternated with photographic documentation. Subsequent monumentally-conceived public displays for various significant political and social anniversaries employed an iconography of motifs, symbols, and emblems that had already been validated by Soviet use. Themes of the past, particularly the revolutionary tradition of the proletariat and the history of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, were joined by motifs from the Slovak National Uprising, which Communist ideology appropriated and interpreted as its own victory. Pictures with this theme were stabilised into a kind of pictorial scheme based around winding crowds of partisans in long, hooded rain-capes marching across a landscape with a distant horizon, while in the foreground more detailed figures of partisans appeared carrying machine-guns. These motifs were integrated with the theme of liberation by the Red Army, which was celebrated for its irreplaceable leading role in achieving victory over Fascism. Such celebration served to remind Slovaks of why they belonged to the camp of nations building Socialism. That message was symbolically reinforced not only through monuments, but also through drawings, paintings, and sculptures that depicted the pairing of Slovak partisan and Soviet soldier (the latter shown in an *ushanka*-hat, military jacket and rain cape, and high boots), a pairing that expressed tight brotherhood, fidelity, and dedication to the Soviet Union as well as an enduring bond of alliance against the social enemy.

Contemporary themes were bound in their content to directives from the resolutions of Communist Party congresses and to political buzzwords. An important role in all this was also given to smaller-scale painting and sculpture, which was bound to the so-called target actions that provided artists with groups of prescribed themes; this art was then circulated among the workers, chiefly through travelling exhibitions held directly in work plants. Besides themes concerning the revolutionary traditions of the proletariat and the struggle against Fascism, a preferred theme was the depiction of that which was called 'life today' (*'dnešok'*). The depicted subjects should above all comprise images of the reconstruction of burnt-out partisan villages, the collective élan of volunteer work brigades, and the process of the planned industrialisation of Slovakia, especially scenes of large-scale Communist construction (for instance the building of the Track of Friendship (Trať družby), of dams, power stations, hydroelectric plants, metallurgical works, and industrial plants), the successes of collectivisation and the mechanisation of agriculture (with motifs from such settings as farming cooperatives, machine and tractor stations and state farms, and images of harvested fields). These works were supposed to arise from artists' stays at the 'place of action' itself, with the intention to produce an optimistic, 'truthful representation' with a certain share of celebratory pathos. The works were judged by committees of art theoreticians, and a selection of them would be presented every year at exhibitions representing artists from all across Slovakia, and every two years at showings in Prague representing artists from across the whole Czechoslovak state.

Thus, the demand was mainly for paintings with thematic and figurative compositions. The mythical peak of this genre was the depiction of the beauty of work, the energetic activity of the collective, and the exceptional achievements of the individual for the good of the whole, and all this was to be expressed in the name of the motion and positive energy characterising a process of social rebirth, the transformation of the old into the new. But even this did not suffice: an emphasis was put on the 'living' treatment of a theme, in which all the different elements of a picture form a balanced relationship to support the complex articulation of an idea. The chief model for this kind of 'living' treatment of themes was considered to be the Soviet painting of the 1930s and 1940s, work that had an easily-discernible educational aim. Through a stress on epic narrative elements, these genre compositions were supposed to present some kind of parallel with literary storytelling, though at the same time they were not supposed to be descriptive. Themes of interpersonal relationships, private life, or the subjective feelings of the individual were considered unacceptable. What took hold instead was the repeated use of generalised 'types' of human figures set into fixed, formulaic images of work environments, which were depicted with conventional, realistic methods, and often featured posters of political leaders on the walls.

The Socialist person was represented solely as a positive hero, a conscious and progressive agent of history and a powerful element in a dynamically-productive relationship that would transform existing reality. Individualised portraits tended to apply only to the depiction of Communist leaders, while the representation of ordinary people was typicalised according to social class (as we see in the many work-related portraits which present shock workers, farmers, and even members of the Pioneer youth organisation, union members, and soldiers). The elements of typicalisation, by which artists homogenised or de-individualised the figures represented, included first and foremost the presentation of figures in their work clothes and with their work tools. This enabled a subject's class and professional belonging to be identified at first glance. A kind of fetishisation of tools and machines can be observed here; in themselves these things were not only a symbol of the importance of manual labour (as with the mining lamps, hammers, and drills), of the collectivisation and mechanisation of large-scale agricultural production (the tractors and combine harvesters), or of the system of five-year economic planning to build the new society (the emblem of the tooth wheel): they were also a token of the social and class superiority of the labouring class over the intelligentsia.

An exceptional degree of attention was given to the depiction of miners with burner mining drills, especially during the expansion of heavy industry in Slovakia's immediate post-war years. This was consistent with the self-confident slogan of the time: 'I am a miner, and who is anything more?!' Artists were also sent to observe mining production directly, to get an immediate impression of the heavy labour in the mines, 'to stand where life pulsates at its most vigorous and fascinating'.<sup>9</sup> But the question was how long artists could remain truly fascinated by these themes; how long, in other words, before their enthusiasm exhausted itself and these motifs began to be soullessly repeated, overused, and reduced to an imposed formula?

Miners were followed in order of importance by metallurgists and welders (especially in sculpture), who mainly appeared as typicalised figures representing the priority status of heavy industry in accordance with the economic plan. Since the expansion of industry demanded an increase in the labour force, the state undertook an intensive recruitment of women into production. This was even incorporated into the pictorial promotion of individual professions within art and the mass media: photographs appeared in the newspapers of young female miners, as well as of female welders, captured in their professional dress with heads dipped down among the shooting sparks of their welding operations, of women shock workers at industrial and textile plants, and of emblematic 'types' of new woman such as the female tractor driver (*traktoristka*). But despite this, painting and sculpture maintained a more traditional image of women, depicting them as mothers or as peasants working in the fields. Occasionally a portrait of a female partisan would appear, connecting back again to Soviet art and its depictions of women as warriors. While such images would show the female partisan with a weapon in her hand, their composition would also make them resemble the traditional image of the village woman holding a bunch of wheat ears (as in a painting by Ján Mudroch, *Partisan Woman On Guard Under Rozsutec Mountain (Partizánka na strážu pod Rozsutcom)*, 1954).

The core iconographic model for the image of paired figures was Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina's monumental sculpture from the personality-cult era, *Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Rabochii i kolkhoznitsa, 1937)*, which depicts the pride, unity, and uplifted attitude of its two noble representatives of work, who are shown striding forward in matching step and looking somewhere into the horizon, at a vision of the happy future. Pairings of worker and peasant, often male worker and female peasant, were exceptionally popular, especially in drawn illustrations and on posters, for they represented class unity, and in the case of differently-gendered pairings they also demonstrated an equal and harmonious relationship between man and woman. This 'archetype' of the times was sometimes situated in a symbolic setting against a vista of work plants with factory buildings, chimneystacks, and the abundant fields of a fertile land. That this was not a matter of actual equality but rather of established gender roles—in which women are identified with nature and men with culture and the city—is reflected in the fact that we never encounter this scenario's inversion, in which the depicted couple comprises a man in the role of a peasant beside a woman in the role of a worker.

The official portrait, whether situated in a real or an imaginary setting, also enjoyed exceptional popularity among this repertoire of imagery. Most often this would be an image solemnly representing the Party, a portrait of one of the leaders of the proletariat, presented in a frontal view. Such images took inspiration from a tradition of portrait typology that went back to imperial Rome, and drew especially on the ritualistic aspect of the monumental figure, of the saint or monarch as depicted with a dutiful smile and an expression of determination, decisiveness, and wisdom. Portraits of the chief proletarian leaders Lenin and Stalin, but also of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—whether of their heads, upper bodies or whole bodies—appear in painted form as well as in busts, graphic art, mosaics, posters, and individually as well as in pairs, trios, and quartets. The President and General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Klement Gottwald was also often depicted alongside them. In such collective portraits the figures were shown in three-quarter profile and their faces often nestled one behind the other like a fish's scales, suggesting a 'genetically' kindred bond through their literal shared direction, their marching in file, so to speak, towards the same goal. The arrangement of heads and figures in profile one behind the other to form a single diagonal line became a popular compositional scheme for depicting different class or professional types grouped together: workers, soldiers, and so on.

It is as though everything was copied according to the same narrow range of artistic models. And thus the same compositional schemes that bound the fine arts—involving positive characters of unambiguous class status shown in their work environments, stooping over their productive tasks or upright and engaged in weighty discussions that would change history—were also applied to the composition of shots in films, to the staging of plays, to the arrangement of actors onstage, and the use of props. The thesis of the time declared that the typical is not only that which we most frequently encounter, but also that which most fully and most expressively captures the essence of a given social force, and stated that 'the problem of typicality is also always a political problem'.<sup>10</sup> In consequence of this, we see everywhere a typicalisation of characters according to their class belonging, the same eloquent gestures, the same outfits, and the same exaggerations of expression that resemble the deceptively-lifelike quality of wax figures.

The hitherto popular modes of landscape and still life painting found themselves in a marginal position within the Slovak art of the 1950s. Still life painting was judged to contain 'the most conspicuous remnants of old tastes and ideas', and for that reason it was deployed only to supplement other subject matter, or, when appearing as an independent genre, it had to feature ideologically-unambiguous elements that would allow it to be identified as set in the present day (fluttering red flags, books by Communist leaders, contemporary press material).<sup>11</sup> For instance, in a still life of a vase of flowers by Peter Matejka, *Flowers for a Celebration (Kytica na slávnosť*, 1951), the colour scheme is symbolically derived from the tricolour flag, an example of which is seen partially covering the table under the vase, and there is also the tiny motif of a waving red flag which appears on top of a building far on the horizon. Likewise, the genre of landscape painting now had to be understood in terms of important settings for social events. The only landscapes that were supposed to be painted were those connected with the Slovak National Uprising, the victory of the Soviet army over Fascism, or else those landscapes that had been fertilised by the work of collective farmers for a good harvest, or that had been transformed by intensive industrialisation. Nature was thus presented as mere pliable material, as a place that provided shelter for the partisans, a witness that bore the traces of victorious battles or the material for great feats of Socialist construction; in each case nature had to be shown bearing the impact of positive human activity. In general, however, landscape painting was perceived as an escape from contemporary lived reality, and its presentation at exhibitions belonged to the most criticised areas of contemporary artistic production.

An example of a landscape painting that did fit the parameters of the time is a 1951 picture by the aforementioned Ladislav Čemický, symptomatically entitled *A New Era Has Come (Nastali nové časy)*, which comprises a work of propaganda to promote the mechanisation and collectivisation of Socialist agriculture (Fig. 27.1). Set in a field of ripe corn, the scene depicted presents a symbolic meeting between the past (in the form of a typical Slovak peasant with



Fig. 27.1. Ladislav Čemický, *The New Times Have Arrived* (*Nastali nové časy*, 1951). Oil on canvas, 117.3 x 150.3 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

a scythe, who might have been cut out of a painting from the turn of the century) and the present (represented by a member of an agricultural cooperative in overalls, whose work has been lightened by the use of a tractor).

With regard to showing the transformation of the landscape through the gradual socialisation of the village, photographic representation was also considered important. A halt was called to ‘photographs of chance occurrences, of all manner of playthings, or of fabricated novelties’; instead, what should now be depicted were ‘the wide collectivised fields, in contrast to the little fields that had characterised the private farming of the past’.<sup>12</sup>

The depiction of the naked human body also disappeared from artistic production. As late as 1956, in response to letters from photographers interested in why the nude had disappeared from local art and especially from photography, the editors of the journal *Československá fotografie* (*Czechoslovak Photography*) replied that

the naked human body is only rarely the bearer of an idea—shots of nudes are more or less solely concerned with producing an emotional effect; but this is not sufficient to a modern understanding of the requirements of photography. If we want to avoid this mistake, we must necessarily connect the body to some kind of context; it is very difficult to find such a context, one that would be natural, tactful and tasteful. That is why today’s art does not take the nude as its principal concern. We do not in any way exclude the possibility of publishing photos with this subject matter, as long as they are truly in accord with the principles of the new photography.<sup>13</sup>

The vague way in which the method of Socialist Realism was defined, with all its postulated norms, on the one hand enabled arbitrary restrictions and and, on the other, aroused uncertainty among artists. Propounded through the evaluative measures of the target actions and thematic contests that chiefly prescribed themes with a clear political delineation, this vague definition led right away to the unchallenged victory of descriptively-Realist, schematic, and thesis-driven works with an easily-legible content, works in the spirit of the tried-and-tested, clear-cut symbolic opposition of good and evil. In practice then, Socialist Realism presented a kind of indiscernible point on the horizon, a target that many artists strived to reach but which only a few lucky ones succeeded in at least ‘touching’.

In principle the application of Socialist Realism to the realm of art should not have been a problem for Slovakia at this time. In comparison with the art of neighbouring regions, Slovak art was less marked by the avant-garde; in many areas conservative tendencies still survived and even the turn towards abstraction in the first half of the twentieth century was more a case of episodic deviations and only impacted on painting and graphic art (Anton Jasusch, Ester Šimerová, Ľudovít Fulla, Mikuláš Galanda, Ladislav Guderna). Sculpture in particular—at this point still mainly bound to public commissions, portraits, memorials, and monuments—was much more firmly anchored in traditionalism and could thus be seen as better prepared for the arrival of Socialist Realism. One of the main reasons why Socialist Realism did not fulfil its ideological expectations in the Slovak context and why, as was repeatedly stated, Slovak Socialist-Realist painting, above all, seemed ‘lifeless’ in comparison with the works presented at exhibitions of Soviet art, was the fact that Slovakia had no tradition of grandiose historical painting, of art swollen with pathos over the commemoration of national history. This genre of painting, a typical feature of nineteenth-century art in nearly all the European countries then coming to national consciousness, could have provided a formal starting point for the execution of multi-figure scenes that were not only technically proficient but also expressive and compositionally assured, and which had a strong ideological charge. While a Realist tradition already existed in Slovakia, this was either a matter of graphic art oriented to the critical depiction of the life of the urban proletariat, or of painting focussed on rural folk life (with a certain share of idealisation), and these tended to be chamber works produced in small formats. The sole artist to achieve the required pathos and heroic representation of characters in the realm of rural-themed painting was Martin Benka. With its idealising and idyllic style and its national content, Benka’s work from the 1920s onwards was able to be utilised by any regime that celebrated patriotism. Although his heroisation of the common person was grasped in the commentary of the time as a precursor to the image of the Communist ‘new man’, his paintings continued to remain at odds with the emphasis on class struggle, despite featuring the new accoutrements of Socialist construction such as factory chimneys. The heroes of his compositions, though dressed in contemporary work clothes, seemed to remain stuck in the nineteenth-century world of Slovak national revival poetry.

If we look at the artistic production of that era through the criteria of the time, then the artist who could be said to come closest to the respected Soviet model in thematic, compositional and expressive terms was the painter Mária Medvecká. Her various paintings set in her native region of Orava always readily connected to the required themes, but among all the other artists of this time she also perhaps best succeeded in capturing a landscape transformed by industrialisation, in investing the characters depicted with that proclaimed ideal of ‘living truthfulness’ and in typicalising them in their essential features. In addition, she was able to use the figures’ gestures, movements and faces to expressively convey specific feelings, above all, the preferred feelings of collectively-shared optimism and faith in a happy future. Her first celebrated work, the triptych *The Construction of the Orava Dam (Stavba Oravskej priehrady)*, reflected the thematic concern with the grand construction projects of Socialism and the successful transformation of the formerly-backward region of Slovakia. One aspect of her work that was considered particularly important is the presence of ‘typicality and the selection of a hero who is truly a new, positive hero, a typical representative of the workers’ class, a politically conscious worker with a new relationship to work’.<sup>14</sup> In 1952, for the painting *Delivery of the Quota in Upper Orava (Odovzdávanie kontingentu na hornej Orave)*, Medvecká won the State Prize, Second Grade, because, as critics asserted, she had vividly captured ‘the typical qualities of the Orava women, who joyfully hand over their crops and poultry for the public food supply, and despite some minor errors—such as the picture’s weak lighting—*Delivery of the Quota* is a strong picture, realistically capturing the new people of our villages’.<sup>15</sup> The picture was even celebrated by Soviet critics when, on the occasion of a reciprocal exhibition of representative Czechoslovak art in Moscow in 1954, they declared that in Slovakia there are ‘few examples of developed thematic painting’, but that Medvecká specifically had proven able, with this picture, ‘to depict Slovak peasant women in such a passionate and heartfelt manner that the viewer is permeated with a sincere affection for these good, simple women with an open





Fig. 27.2. Mária Medvecká, *Children of Peace* (*Deti mieru*), 1952). Oil on canvas, 165 x 202 cm. Orava Gallery, Dolný Kubín. © DACS 2019

soul and a kind, gentle character'.<sup>16</sup> From today's perspective, that era's conception of Socialist-Realist representation is perhaps most closely approximated by Medvecká's painting *Children of Peace* (*Deti mieru*) from 1952, which can be read as an allegory of a utopian new society and the birth of the new man (Fig. 27.2). In this painting Medvecká portrayed two groups of children in a meadow. The group in the foreground is comprised of Pioneers, representatives of politically-conscious youth, who are shown wearing glove puppets on their hands and presenting a puppet show for the second group, comprised of village children sitting nearby in the grass. The stage of the puppet theatre overlays a panorama of the Orava landscape seen in the background of the picture, and this stage motif, with its open proscenium space, symbolically suggests a window giving onto a view of the happy future. Through her depiction of play in connection with the attributes of education (such as the book that one of the girl Pioneers is holding), Medvecká thus outlines the prescribed non-violent transformation of the 'old' into the 'new'. This group of young Pioneers represents the hopes of Socialism: it represents youth as the unequivocal bearer of new ethical values, values to which we must unavoidably subscribe. This group not only heralds a world of purity and innocence, but also an optimistic future of new horizons, unencumbered by the past. Medvecká endows this metaphor of ideological re-education with an epic-style gaiety, enabling us to read the pictorial composition in a circular fashion as we move from one childish figure to the next. Each child is depicted with an individual expression of enthusiasm and captivation on its face, and together their portraits create an integrally-connected system of elements and a homogenous expressive unity bound by a commonly-espoused idea. Through this fusion of typicalisation and the individualisation of the portrayed figures, depicted on a larger-than-life scale, the picture has an exceptionally-vivid effect, which was precisely one characteristic of the multi-figure genre compositions of Soviet Socialist Realism.

Medvecká returned to the theme of children in her composition *Michurinites* (*Mičurinky*, 1954), which depicts a young girl in a headscarf and, beside her, a female Pioneer. (A variation of this motif would later appear on a ten-koruna state banknote from 1960, on whose reverse side we see this same pairing of girls holding flowers, set amidst a landscape divided up





Fig. 27.3. Ctibor Belan, *The Last Winter* (*Posledná zima*, 1955). Oil on canvas, 134.5 x 184 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

by factory buildings and chimneystacks.) The name of the picture refers to the Soviet scientist Ivan Vladimirovich Michurin, who used cross-breeding to cultivate crops for the Communist economy; it refers more specifically to the then-significant phenomenon of small circles of young naturalists, or ‘Michurinites’ (*Mičurinci*, ‘followers of Michurin’), and thereby also to the cult of belief in humanity’s boundless capacity to reshape the world according to its needs. The frequent use of the motif of children in such a context is hardly surprising.

Medvecká’s husband Ctibor Belan can be considered another successful exponent of the genre scenes of Socialist Realism. His pictures also enjoyed a positive reception, although in his choice of themes he preferred the ‘male’ genre of painting, concerned with the revolutionary tradition of the proletariat and using motifs connected with the battle against Fascism. His work approaches Medvecká’s in its frequent method of intimately depicting a motif from up close, and in its ethically-focussed portrayal of the simple person as positive hero. But he also knew how to balance these aspects of his compositions with a bellicose enthusiasm and pathos, qualities admired by critics at the time. His painting *The Krompachy Uprising* (*Krompašská vzbura*) was considered as the first serious attempt at an historical composition, because, beside the required degree of drama, the artist also achieved the truthful and correct typicalisation of the positive and negative participants in this event, and ‘showed that in this crowd of workers there is both defiance and pride, as well as a brutal, spontaneous force, a sense of social and historical right’.<sup>17</sup> Belan’s war scenes—such as *The Last Winter* (*Posledná zima*, 1955), with its depiction of two brave young boys who do not want to betray information about the Partisans to the Germans—were also valued for their multi-layered and non-schematic means of portrayal, as well as for their capacity to elevate ‘individual fate and the individual person to embodiments of significant social ideas and forces’ (Fig. 27.3).<sup>18</sup>

Ladislav Guderna belonged to those artists who accommodated themselves to Socialist-Realist doctrine in their own way. As a member of the generation of wartime artists who in the 1940s had built on the inspiration of the avant-garde, Guderna was unable to renounce his Formalist experiments. While turning from Surrealist-Cubist compositions to realistically-depicted works, he retained a distinctive stylisation. He did not avoid socially-engaged themes; on the contrary, he accepted these as his own, as though he wished to show that a work’s content does not in any



Fig. 27.4. Ladislav Guderna, *The Newly Constructed Machine Station in Galanta* (*Novostavba stroj. st. v Galante*, 1949).  
Tempera, card,  
60 x 84.6 cm.  
Slovak National  
Gallery, Bratislavas.  
© DACS 2019

way influence its formal approach. Despite the fact that his works of the first half of the 1950s are fundamentally realistic, and thus legible on a first viewing, there seems to be a kind of cryptic message concealed inside them; something alien to the art of Socialist Realism, which divests itself of all mystery. Guderna's 1949 painting *Construction of a Machinery Station in Galanta* (*Novostavba strojovej stanice v Galante*) is anchored, in terms of subject matter, in the motif of work and thus it fulfils the era's aesthetic requirements to the letter (Fig. 27.4). If, however, we look at Guderna's sophisticated perspectival work with distant vanishing points, at the geometric lines that clearly and authoritatively outline the painting's compositional scheme, as well as at the painted figures and tractors, we perceive a peculiarly-rational distance assumed by the artist towards his theme. His play with reduced forms and the dark windows of the buildings recall the paintings of Giorgio di Chirico, while the tractors that Guderna presents as geometric ornaments strike us as more alive than the depicted figures of the workers. The fact that Guderna succeeded here in partially outwitting Socialist-Realist principles represents a personal victory for his intellectual approach, which also manifested itself in his handling of other 'prescribed' themes. As he proved in his dual portrait *Little Sisters* (*Sestričky*, 1954), which focusses on the tender relationship between siblings, he was also unafraid to work in a more intimate vein and could endow a character with an expression of personal emotion that lacked any ideological attributes. Even in a work from the same year entitled *Partisan* (*Partizán*), a portrait of a man's head and chest that evokes the figure of a monk in the vestments of his order, there is none of that desired typicalisation that defines the positive hero figure of Socialist Realism; even the standard accoutrement of the weapon is missing. On the contrary, we are gripped by the man's individualised, realistically-depicted, and 'living' face, which seems as though it is drowning in the hood of his light-coloured cape, which is a strange mass of material whose abundant folds offer a play of chiaroscuro against the picture's dark background. The depth of feeling from which this passionately-human and realistic portrait emerged was no chance phenomenon, for this was a portrait of Guderna's own brother, whom he lost in the Slovak National Uprising. This face could have come from Guderna's *Farewells I-II* (*Lúčenie I-II*) compositions, which take the uprising as their theme.

Yet in Guderna's case another model symptom of this era comes to the fore: the painful situation of those young artists, poets, and theorists formed in the 1930s and 1940s whose previous

affiliations had set them on the path of modern art, but who had only had a short time in which to pursue it. While they had stood in opposition to the Fascist regime and while several of them had been convinced leftists who had supported the idea of building a new society, neither their art nor their opinions were considered properly revolutionary, for these 'did not relate to the workers' struggle'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, at a Party meeting in 1950, prior to the Ninth Slovak Communist Party Congress, these artists, just like other representatives of the 'old intelligentsia', were forced to reflect critically on their own activities and deny their own past, even if this meant their recent past. An excerpt from Guderna's own act of self-criticism can be used to stand for all the other cases, for among all the painters of his generation Guderna was perhaps the one who had espoused modernist tendencies the most doggedly:

As the revolutionary forces fought on in illegality, my view of this struggle was hazy. I came into contact with opportunistic forces. I had an ardent attachment to Western culture ... My lack of resistance led me to alcoholism, anarchy ... Only the gradual evolution of our society and the trust of the [Slovak Communist Party], which I did not at all deserve, enabled me to participate in the Congress of National Culture, where I came to realise the wrongness of my behaviour, my thinking and my distorted character.<sup>20</sup>

(He also declared how he realised that it is not the workers who must establish a relationship with art, but rather artists who must forge a relationship with the workers.) We need only add that, in this same year, all other 'engaged' artists, critics, and theorists with a 'Formalist' past had to undergo similar acts of 'self-criticism' at congressional meetings if they wished to continue professionally in the field of culture.

A noticeable turn away from schematism in works of art and dogmatism in their assessment began to occur after the important exhibition *Contemporary Art of the Soviet Union (Současné výtvarné umění SSSR)*, which took place in January 1954 in Prague, in the riding hall of Prague Castle, and was then reprised in Bratislava. After this exhibition, which had the paradoxical effect of showing that contemporary Soviet art was hardly less barren than its Slovak counterpart, other themes and approaches began to appear, the range of artistic subjects started to expand, and the interpretation of Socialist-Realist principles became more stylistically diverse. Pictures enlivened by a freer, impressionistic hand or by expressive strokes of the paintbrush now simply felt more convincing than a dry, descriptive Realism bound to the nineteenth century.

The monumental products of Soviet art, connecting back to a rich tradition of Russian nineteenth-century painting and celebrated at the time as works of vivid truthfulness and genre-style social diversity, remained a more or less unattainable model. In both form and content they were fundamentally alien to the Slovak context and its specific artistic heritage. As something implanted from a differently-structured cultural environment, something that unavoidably disrupted the existing culture and the specific logic of its domestic development, the methodological dictates of Socialist Realism (amounting in any case to 'the discovery of the already discovered') could never have resulted in an adequate and enduring artistic programme. This would have been the case even without the violent mechanisms of ideological power that prepared the ground for Socialist Realism in this context.

There are other reasons why the phenomenon of Socialist Realism began markedly to 'wither away' from inside after the mid-1950s, persisting from then on as a mere empty façade, an outdated cliché. The experience of the political show trials, which revealed the false basis of the notion of Communist utopia, also put paid to the original guarantee of a socially-progressive, revolutionary ethics. An ever-greater distaste with the Communist system spread through the ranks of artists and art theoreticians, as did their attempts to escape its directives. Gradually and with a varying degree of intensity, such efforts began to appear in all fields of art. Additional factors behind this situation were the rise of younger artists at the end of the decade as well as the fact that Slovakia also had an older, modernist tradition with which artists could once again forge connections.

- 1 Zora Rusinová, *Súdržka moja vlast: Vizualna kultúra obdobia stalinizmu na Slovensku* (Trnava: Trnava University Philosophy Faculty (FF TU), 2015).
- 2 Štefan Bednár, 'O záväzkoch umelcov', *Nové slovo* 5 (1949): p. 79.
- 3 On 8 April 1948 a *Manifesto of Socialist Humanism* was launched at a meeting at the Bureau of Trade (Obchodné grémium) in Bratislava, an event initiated by the Council of Arts and Sciences (Umelecká a vedecká rada) and attended by Slovak cultural representatives from the ranks of both Communists and non-Communists. In addition to the need for the 'socialisation of art', this manifesto also proclaimed its belief in creative freedom. The new art, whose 'form must be adequate to its new content', had to emerge from a creative process that 'does not reject all that was created in the past, but which finds its point of departure in previous art and acts as its organic continuation'. Quoted in: A. Matuška, 'Umelci vystúpili', *Kultúrny život* 8 (1948): p. 1
- 4 Bednár himself recounted the activities of many artists during the uprising: 'A whole range of them passed through the torture chambers of prisons and concentration camps, and three artists sealed their loyalty to their nation in blood. The graphic artist Janko Novák fell in battle as a partisan at Martinské hole, the painter Ludovít Varga was killed, along with hundreds of other patriots, by the Nazi murderers in the Mauthausen concentration camp and another painter, A. Weiss-Kubínčan, also disappeared, never to return, into the torture chambers of Hitler's Germany'. Štefan Bednár, 'Slovenské národné povstanie vo výtvarnej tvorbe 1944–1954', in *Slovenská univerzita – výstavné miestnosti Slovenskej sekcie UZČSVU*, exhibition catalogue, Šafárikovo nám. 7 (Bratislava, August–September 1954), unpaginated.
- 5 Štefan Bednár, 'Socialistický realizmus. Generálna línia umeleckej tvorby', *Nové slovo* 50 (1948): p. 766.
- 6 Through his emphasis on content, Čemický thus distinguished himself from the opinion of Communist Party Central Committee member Václav Kopecký, as expressed at the Ninth Communist Party Congress. A fanatical devotee of Soviet imperialist politics, Kopecký asserted that Socialist Realism does not want 'any kind of "formlessness", but instead wants clear forms and firm shapes ... it does not want content and attitude without form, it wants a unity of content and form, seeing this as a fundamental requirement from the perspective of a work's artistic value'. Václav Kopecký, 'Záznam z prejavu na IX. Zjazde KSČ, máj, 1949', in *Slovenské výtvarné umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu* (Bratislava: TVAR, 1950), p. 35.
- 7 Ladislav Čemický, 'Čo je socialistický realizmus?', *Umenie. Mesačník pre výtvarnú kultúru* 1 (1949): pp. 73–75.
- 8 For more information see: Anatolii Lunacharskii, 'Lenin i iskusstvo', in Lunacharskii, *O Vladimire Il'iche* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1933), pp. 46–51.
- 9 Štefan Bednár, 'Súčasná situácia výtvarnej tvorby na Slovensku', *Výtvarné umění*, 2 (1950–51): p. 34.
- 10 Zoltán Rampák, 'Niektoré otázky našej pôvodnej dramaturgie', *Pod zástavou socializmu* 3 (1953): p. 173.
- 11 Marian Városov, *Slovenské maliarstvo 1950–1952* (Bratislava: TVAR, 1954): pp. 10–13.
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- 14 Radislav Matuščík, 'K základným otázkam boja za socialistický realizmus vo výtvarnom umení', *Pod zástavou socializmu* 4/5 (1952): pp. 179–182.
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- 19 Ľudovít Kudlák, 'Z uznesenia plenárneho zhromaždenia výtvarných umelcov' *Kultúrny život* 31 (1951): p. 2.
- 20 Alongside Guderna, other artists engaged in harsh self-criticism, including the avant-gardist Ľudovít Kudlák, who condemned his own long-dead Dada past in the following terms: 'As a young man I was a terribly destructive element. In the years 1919–1922 I showed occasional tendencies towards a Dadaist worldview, something that grew out of my personal characteristics as well as my artistic activity—as a poet ... It was only after studying historical materialism and philosophy that I came to understand the great promise of art's role ... I must therefore go to some factory, live there for some time among the people and the machines, and from this I will gain a further stimulus to create for a Socialist society...'. See: 'Z aktív slovenských výtvarníkov – komunistov. Ohňom sebakritiky k novej tvorbe v duchu socialistického realizmu', *Kultúrny život* 11 (1950): p. 9.





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# A READER IN EAST-CENTRAL-EUROPEAN MODERNISM 1918–1956

This *Reader in East-Central-European Modernism 1918–1956* makes secondary literature on East-Central-European art available in the English language with a view to contributing to the on-going process of re-unifying European art history, on the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In addition to commissioning and publishing new work, the editors' aim has been to identify previously un-translated materials, presenting some of the most interesting scholarship in the field produced in the past decades. Taking as its timeframe 1918 to 1956, the reader calls into question European modernism's usual framing, deliberately including periods of national autonomy, radical and conservative moments, democratic as well as state Socialist periods. It acknowledges the centrality of war and of the Holocaust, often erased in an art historical division of modernism into 'interwar' and 'post-war'. European cultural production has always been closely bound up with the history of shifting borders and patterns of migration. The contributions to the reader demonstrate the region's diversity of cultures to discover the critical debates in aesthetics and politics they occasioned, positioning these in relation to today's art historical concerns. Contributors to the reader examine the projects of modernism and modernity from a range of East-Central-European perspectives, combining the consideration of major 'isms' of art such as Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism with research on artists' particular, local aspirations. The fluid interpretation of the modernist idiom and its intermixing with local twists gave rise to a particular creative power in the region. Promoting critical reflection on the interlinked, interactive nature of art-historical processes and relationships, the reader recognises cross-border flows, connections, and itinerant biographies as a constituent part of national art histories. The overarching ambition of the publication is to go beyond existing frameworks and to offer pathways to rethinking European modernism as an interdependent whole, from the starting point that it cannot be thought properly without a deeper understanding of the art of East-Central Europe.

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