

Rediscovering the European Cultural Heritage

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Figurative art in Bulgaria from the 1920s and 1930s: The School of Kyustedil, Kiril Tsonev and Boris Elisayeff

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present those realistic tendencies in Bulgarian painting from the 1920s and 1930s, that echoe contemporary West European ones, like the New Objectivity in Germany. Among others, it will be shown how Bulgarian artist's paintings are inspired by the folklore primitive from the past and reflect the assiduity of cultural administration to renew the idea of a modern artistic school of art with a defined national character.

Keywords: Boris Elisayeff, modern painting, realism, folklore, national tradition

Introduction

The following article aims to give a general idea of the development of figurative art in Bulgaria in 1920s and 1930s by focusing on the role of the local group of artists called School of Kyustendil¹. The emergence of this community of Kyustendil born painters is a result of the influence of two polar but exceptional artists whose creative

¹ "School of Kyustendil" refers to an informal group of young people born around 1900, such as - Asen Vasiliev (1900-1981) - painter, art historian and teacher, Vasil Ivanov - Shanata (1897-1959) - painter and professional singer, Mordohai Benzion (1898-1941) - an extremely talented Jewish Bulgarian painter, who died at a very young age, Vasil Evtimov (1900-1986) - painter, Ivan Nenov (1902-1997) - painter and ceramist, and others.

work is fundamental for Bulgarian art – Kiril Tsonev², with his analytical and theoretical approach, and the intuitive and sensitive nature of Vladimir Dimitrov, known as The Master³. Unlike the latter one, however, and besides being an artist and teacher, Kiril Tsonev was one of the first art theoreticians in Bulgaria whose researches into the technology of art and his reviews as an art critic have preserved their scholarly and aesthetic value to this day. This text argues that the work of a myriad of remarkable artists, who later set the trend in Bulgarian art almost until the end of the 20th century, notably that of Boris Elisayeff⁴ in the 1920s and 1930s, is unthinkable without the educational intervention of the ideologist of the School of Kyustendil Kiril Tsonev whose pedagogical role has still not been sufficiently appreciated.

Boris Elisayeff was one of the prominent representatives of the 'third generation' Bulgarian artists working in the 1930s, who was a particularly impressive member of the School of Kyustendil (Mavrodinov 1947, 74-87). The reason for his lack of presence in the corpus of Bulgarian art history is the fact that he spent the second half of his life in the USA. Of particular importance to art history today is the short period of 1925-1937, that is, after the completion of the Art Academy until leaving Bulgaria, in which he succeeded in establishing himself as a modern master painter whose work fulfills the dream of commensurate with Western European modern Bulgarian art, combining academic and folk traditions.

1. Bulgarian painting until the 1920s

The beginning of modern art in Bulgaria was set when the need for academic secular education in painting and sculpture became apparent in 1888, and when the first foreign teachers like Boris Schatz⁵ and Jan Václav Mrkvička⁶ settled in Bulgaria. Until that time, visual arts in Bulgaria were limited to primitive forms of iconography and religious wall painting, goldsmithing and woodcarving manufactured in the traditions of the Late

² Kiril Tsonev (1896-1961) was one of the very cosmopolitan figures in Bulgarian culture.

³ Vladimir Dimitrov - The Master (1882-1960) was an extraordinary figure, who gained international recognition for his art.

⁴ Although the common transcription of the Bulgarian name is Boris Eliseev in the text the painter will be referred to as Boris Elisayeff because that was his official signature.

⁵ Boris Schatz (1866-1932), Lithuanian born Jewish artist and sculptor known as the "father of Israeli art" and founder of the Bezalel School in Jerusalem. He was the first professor in graphic arts at the new established Sofia Academy and lived in Bulgaria between 1895 and 1905.

⁶ Jan Václav Mrkvička (1856-1938), a Czech born painter who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich and was one of the first professors in painting in Bulgaria between 1881 and 1921, at first in Plovdiv, and then in Sofia.

Byzantine period by families of artisans in local schools around the country. The first decades after the Liberation of Bulgaria were marked by intensive pioneering attempts at catching up with western art. Initially, the norm was set by the academic and historical realism from the end of the 19th century in the traditions of which the first Bulgarian artists were taught abroad. Historicism was the main instrument for detaching from the local art tradition and folklore primitivism. The descendants of the big iconographic families also turned their eyes to art academies and secular painting. There was practically no continuity between iconography and modern visual art because at the beginning of the 20th century, temples and icons began to be painted by academically schooled artists (Ivanova-Tsotsova 1990, 23-40).

Stylistically, the first decades of Bulgarian art were marked by the ethnographic naturalism of the representatives of the first post-liberation generation. Mrkvička, Ivan Angelov⁷ and Anton Mitov⁸ worked in the traditions of historical realism they were educated on in European academies. Landscape lyricism was the only alternative to documentarism and it developed in a range of post-impressionistic variations and in the '20s and '30s it established itself as a genre of choice for the general public. What more progressively-thinking Bulgarian artists, however, saw in the so called local and trivial post-impressionism was a banal replication of reality and a superficial attitude acting as an obstacle to reaching a unique artistic outlook and a national Bulgarian style in painting.

The institutional artistic life took place in several separate societies whose history reflects not only generation conflicts, but also the invasion of western influences, as well as the idea of genesis of national art. In the 1920s, Bulgarian art still experiences the short manifestations of impressionism, symbolism and the Secession. The interest towards native culture was limited to ethnographic documentation of features of clothing of the ethnically diverse population. With Bulgaria establishing itself as a young independent country, there emerged an even more pressing need of reflection of its own history and identity and studying of its cultural layers. With the opening of the Archaeological Museum in 1892, the beginning was set of a museum and art collection, that modified the attitude towards antiquity and folklore and influenced artists as well (Turchin 1993, 28). The most prominent movement in art in the 1920s was the Native Art Movement with Vladimir Dimitrov - The Master as a main representative.

⁷ Ivan Angelov (1864-1924) He studied applied arts in Munich and after his return to Bulgaria became a professor in painting at the Academy of Fine Arts.

⁸ Anton Mitov (1862-1930) strongly influenced Bulgarian cultural life, not only as an artist but also as a promoter of art and teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts.

2. Trends in new art realism

Individual or group consolidated artists' aspirations for order and restoration of deconstructed form after cubism, could be seen in all European art centres after the First World War. In France, the reaction against cubism was manifested in art movements like purism (Ball, 1981, 80) and neoclassicism – intellectual and imaginative artistic styles bound with abstract formulations and rules but built upon the clarity, orderliness and unity typical of the classical conception of realism⁹. Epic nature, monumentalisation of forms, anthropomorphism of natural realia in characteristic pantheism, romantic references to the idyllic Arcadian landscapes with the mystical presence of antiquities, were also found in the art of the representatives of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in Germany (Roehrl 357). This turning to tradition and antiquity was also experienced in Italy with the *Valori Plastici* magazine at its epicentre (Morris 1998). The principal apologist of Italian metaphysical painting was Giorgio de Chirico, born and bred in Greece, who was obsessed with antiquity and Greek mythology and who was convinced that reinterpretation of the past was imperative (Folkwang 2018). These modernistic poetic visions of art shared the view that an image must tell about reality hidden behind the visible and the external representation, and the images of man and inanimate objects must signify the eternal life outside the present time and epoch. In such an artistic process adopting classical tradition, the visible reality and presence gave way to atavistic laws of artistic will, whose invariability allowed the artist to realise and create a super reality which was more real than the actual reality (Breton 2000, 19). The next step in that direction was taken namely by the surrealist painters.

In Bulgaria, the 1930s were also considered as an era of the new artistic realism (Tsonev 1936, 10). The new orientation towards realism aimed at rationalising art, giving it a new direction in life, and strengthening its shaken positions. In the 1930s, artists began to react even more strongly against stereotypical taste and held retrograde movements responsible for the destruction of the Bulgarian plastic art tradition. They believed that imitation of trendy European tastes broke away from "the inborn feeling of decorative equilibrium in Bulgarians". (Tsonev 1969, 141) The conviction arose that for Bulgarians it would be easy in principle to join the spirit of modern post-avant-garde view of colour, if they referred to their still close relationship with nature, whose recovery was called for by popular reformist, environmental and religious movements in Western Europe. The term "synthesis" is used as a counterbalance of standardised and conventional art (Obreshkov 1949) The artist

⁹ The most detailed explanation of the term, as well of the varieties and differentiations in realism in the visual arts with special attention to Eastern Europe was given by Boris Röhl in 2013 in his book *World History of Realism in Visual Arts 1830-1990*. Georg Olms Verlag: Hildesheim, 2013.

uses nature to extract subjective impressions from it and then synthesises them in a brand-new logical construct with unique painting value. The term 'synthesis' means a constructive assignment not simply to copy nature, but to remodel their impressions by increasing expressiveness of the image and reformulate the material nature of objects or forms. In this way, artists provide the public with the unique opportunity to see the surrounding world in a new and unusual way. According to the most discerning art critic at the time, Sirak Skitnik, the revolutionary aspect of Kiril Tsonev's art is, namely, the fact that it '...conveys a new outlook on things, that mystifies the viewing public with its concepts of image and painting'. (Skitnik 1933, 445)

The technical improvement and mastering of artistic techniques opened the dimensions of the metaphysical, idyllic and supernatural (Coutts-Smith 1991, 20). In Bulgaria, and in particular for artists of Boris Elisayeff's generation, the fundamental criticism of imitation of nature and the introduction of poetic expression and creative imagination as its antipode also rose after the First World War. It was probably also caused by the high level of professionalism the academical education offered. This peculiar romantic crisis also reverberated in the attempt at different interpretation of antiquity because of the new classicism and the beginning of new mythology and quasi-religion with the modern mind breathing life into ideals from distant past. Though this was not explicitly formulated, it was already possible to bring in themes like psychology of style, stating that formal features were revealed as expressions of inner values. In correspondence to a well-established belief in the western world that stated that meta-realistic breaks in painting coincided with the emergence of formalism in art history (Bichev 1936, 4) the question about the relation between form and content acquired a new meaning. The interest in past cultures became especially strong during the 1930s and progressive artists also shared it. Synthesising historical substrate and translating of tradition into the formal language of the absolute modernity turned the newly created artwork into a key to the past. With its pretence for super-historicism, the artwork reconfirmed the creative power of art and made references to the propaganda role it was saddled with later. From that point on the language of art started to be used as propaganda at different psychological levels (Karshovski, 1936, 26).

From pure empiricism and monotone descriptiveness to an active position and social function – this underlay the view of the role of art of Kiril Tsonev – the principal apologist of artistic realism. To a certain extent he saw the realisation of his ideas in the achievements of Vladimir Dimitrov – The Master (Tsonev 1969, 1) - the emotional pole of the School of Kyustendil who was truest to himself and to the native. But Tsonev believed that the unique monumental pathos of The Master must be expanded to a national style and system of painting and be specified additionally. Having received his education in Vienna and Mu-

nich and attended big European museums, Tsonev placed special emphasis not only on the in-depth training of the artist, but also on the knowledge of the classical examples from the history of art. Besides reference to the ancient Bulgarian traditions of plastic arts, he saw an opportunity for defining the national identity mostly in the revival of the craft. To him, this key concept signified the set of technological knowledge and skills preserved in the ancestral memory, that kept alive the link to heritage and ancestors. It was no coincidence that in his letters he referred to his younger Kyustendil colleagues and artists as 'The Masters', and the nickname of Stoyan Venev, one of the artists who joined the group later, was 'The Little Master' (Tsonev 1969, 1, 13).

After the economic crisis of the 1930s, the social existence of artworks was also shattered. Displaced by reproductive techniques and photography, the so called 'static' painting went out of fashion and turned into a luxurious commodity in need of a renewed identification. A type of viewer came to the fore – the general public with their specific educational or user needs. Industrialisation and household items raised the question of the 'usefulness and the applicational value' of art, or of its practical use. Therefore, attention was given to the negative consequences of the separation of art from craft, and the still existing connection between the two was considered as positive, unlike in Europe where it was broken much earlier (Karshovski, Tsonev 1936). This process coincided with the political course from the 1930s in setting the goal to strengthen the national unity and self-confidence and posing the question 'How much of what characterises a people as a single national unit can be reflected in the artworks of the visual arts?' The main question whose answer was also sought after at a political level was 'What must Bulgarian art look like? What must Bulgarian spiritual culture be like?' (Filov 1936, 5). Even though Bulgarian artists used to associate ethnographicity with the dismissed position adopted by the first foreign artists in Bulgaria, the cultural self-colonisation of the past of the 1920s and the 1930s already allowed them to raise it to a different level. They realised that in order to stand out with its own unique nature within the polymorphic European culture, Bulgarian art had to turn to itself and to the origins of its own cultural vitality. Artists began looking for the 'eternal in the ethnographic element' and the people's spirit in the 'style' of the old art (Lazarov 1936, 8). There was awareness that international contemporary art schools were based on different plastic concepts and that modern Bulgarian art could distinguish itself as one only if it was a conscious bearer of its specific blend of eastern and western culture (cf. Spasova 2007, 2016, 2018). In this regard, the eminent Bulgarian sculptor, painter and art critic Ivan Lazarov¹⁰ noted: 'If today there is anything joyful in the artistic life in Bulgaria,

¹⁰ Ivan Lazarov (1889-1952).

it is that the contemporary Bulgarian artist, while expanding his artistic culture through studying the achievements of western peoples, increasingly senses and discovers the values of the great stylish art of his ancestors.' (Lazarov 1936). In this way, though with a delay, primitivism played its role for the redefinition of modernism, as well as for the image of the high art (Morizot, Pouivet 429).

The European culmination of the attempts for consolidation of modern national schools in visual arts between the two world wars took place at the World Exposition in Paris in 1937, where each of the participating countries had to present the best and the highest of its achievements in the fields of technologies, sciences and arts. The national pavilions were designed by famous artists like Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Le Corbusier, and some of Bulgaria's most prominent artists like Dechko Uzunov and Tsanko Lavrenov were also commissioned to design the Bulgarian pavilion. A telling fact about the political situation in Europe was that the works of Bulgarian artists received many accolades at this Fair. Boris Elisayeff received a silver medal for his *Girl in a Chair*.

The role of the Society of the New Artists to unite artists with a particular affinity for theorisation and left-wing political beliefs, also proved to play an important role in the search for a national style. The art society was established the latest, in 1931, and gathered artists and sculptors with the strongest drive for modernism. Compared to European modernist attempts their moderate manifestations at the time were the desire to embody idealism in art, to achieve social expressionism and to focus on technical tools and materials, while orientation toward cubism was considered as a nonproductive attempt at being original. Moreover, in 1936, the issues of the form and the content of the work of art, their limits and their significance, developed into a particularly heated discussion among progressive authors on the pages of the *Kormilo* newspaper (Dimitrova 1988).

3. Boris Elisayeff's metarealism

Boris Elisayeff was born in 1901 in the village of Prekolnitsa, located near the town of Kyustendil and 80 km to the west of the capital Sofia, and he completed his secondary education in Kyustendil. The town is still one of the living bearers of the ancient heritage - its look is dominated by a 'huge medieval watchtower, mineral water rapids tucked away in solid pipes since as far back as Thracian, Roman and Paeonian times, deep excavations of big old buildings with multi-coloured mosaic floors...' (Konstantinov 1969, 149-150). Especially important for the artist's early development were the vivid visual memories from childhood - scenes of village celebrations and rituals with their epic mystique and crude and

primitive aesthetics (Elisayeff 1960). Together with his classmates Asen Vasilev¹¹ and Vasil Evtimov¹² and others, he developed an interest in painting from an early age and met Kiril Tsonev, several years his senior. Tsonev did not only encourage their attempts, but over the next years actually mentored them, albeit from a distance in letters, and was in fact their window to the world and European art. They had a long-lasting teacher-student relationship and Tsonev's assessment remained the decisive factor for artists of that circle. In their artistic quests, the artists from Kyustendil were influenced by the work of Paul Gauguin, André Derain, Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Maurice de Vlaminck, Arnold Boecklin and others whose works at that time only Kiril Tsonev could see in the original.

In 1925, Boris Elisayeff graduated from the National Academy of Art in Sofia. His professor in painting techniques was one of the most prominent saloon painters Nikola Ganushev¹³, an Italian graduate, whose teaching methods reflected his eccentricity. His is the unfulfilled idea of studying the naked figure plain-air and other whims that ran counter to the times. Even so, his students left the Academy with solid training in the realistic representation and careful examination of nature and the habit of developing a clear composition scheme meticulously with many sketches and preliminary drawings. In his senior year his teacher was Nikola Marinov¹⁴, one of the most prominent Bulgarian watercolour artists. During his studies, Elisayeff won a number of student awards and in 1923 he went on a trip to Italy organized by Nikola Ganushev. The whereabouts of most of his early works done in the spirit of academia, like the paintings *Bate Yorde* (1918), *A Food Spread* (1926), *A Portrait of My Mother* (1928), bearing the influence of Vladimir Dimitrov – *The Master's*, *A Portrait of G. P. Stamatov* (1925), that he valued a lot because he had managed to depict the writer's emotional state, and many others, is unknown. One of the most original portraits of Vladimir Dimitrov - *The Master* from 1932 is also only known to us by photo. Another important piece for both the author's work and the development of Bulgarian art has luckily survived to the present day – the *Factory* landscape from 1925 was one of the earliest industrial landscapes in Bulgarian art.

After initially taking part in the annual joint art exhibitions organised by the Native Art Movement, in 1931 Boris Elisayeff was persuaded by Kiril Tsonev to join the Society of the New Artists. Over that decade, the artist reached his stylistic maturity and created works of art that, however small in number, took their place in the history of Bulgarian art.

¹¹ See footnote 1

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nikola Ganushev (1889-1958) studied painting at the Accademia Albertina in Turin in the class of the famous Giacomo Grosso.

¹⁴ Nikola Marinov (1879-1948) another outstanding student of the Academy Albertina.

He managed to instil his typical meta-realistic style imbued with subtle poetry and his paintings were met with surprise and interest by the critics and the public. Such are the paintings *Spring* (1932) and *Portrait of a Woman* (1932), as well as some of those that have not survived to the present day like *By the Sea* (1937) and *A Girl with a Ball* (1933), that break the mould in portrait painting and composition. These works remain almost unsurpassed in portrait painting of the interwar period and only the portraits and figural compositions and nudes of Sultana Surujon¹⁵ can rival them. In 1933, he quit his job as an art teacher in his native Kyustendil and settled in Sofia working as a free artist but most of his time in Bulgaria he spent working as a high-school teacher in painting (Elisayeff 1960).

Boris Elisayeff's artworks followed and set the principles of the new realism and the first thing that strikes in them is his attempt at changing positions and viewpoints. This distinguishes the *Portrait of Ana Goleminova* (1933, Ruse Art Gallery), as well as the famous *Girl in a Chair* (1937, National Gallery). His still life paintings stand out with their high viewing point so the objects depicted are arranged in a panoramic composition and the shapes get monumental and material characteristics, a treatment to become a typical technique. The pure, solid and simplified colours also allude to neoclassicism. The motifs include trivial scenes of daily life filled with timeless silence - interiors with flowers, landscapes with monumental forms and an undefined source of light, a *Ficus Plant in a Pot* (1937, National Gallery) represents a non-typical composition with contrasting colors. A special emphasis is placed on the material, its autonomous meaning and expressive power. Of all the plastic arts, painting is the one with the strongest emphasis on physical materials and media (Tsonev 1969, 1, 153). Artists aim at constructing clear and massive shapes preserving the objective tangibility of the material. The primary importance of these ideas is corroborated by Kiril Tsonev and his followers' attention to ancient art monuments and engagement in cultural heritage preservation. Especially, they worked on restorations at the Boyana Church, Zemen Monastery and others. Boris Elisayeff had also an artistic and professional interest in religious painting and after being licensed by the Holy Synod as an iconographer, he created icons for the St Mina Church in Kyustendil in the 1930s (Elisayeff 1934, 2).

4. The lessons of the new realism

In order to systematise the specific characteristics and painting methods of modernisation of artistic expressions in the 1930s, we can refer to the perception by contemporary

¹⁵ Sultana Surujon (1904-1962) was a Bulgarian Jewish painter who studied in Sofia but spent her life in Israel.

observers and subsequent analyses. The generation of artists like Boris Elisayeff, who felt the influence of both Kiril Tsonev and modern European art, is often referred to by critics as 'synthesizers', 'constructionists', 'neoclassicists', 'neorealists' and 'stylists'. Their aspirations for purified and synthesised images and patterns inspired from rough nature and converted into artistic formulae are noted. According to the new standards adopted in painting, the image must be strictly subordinated to visual laws and adhere to logical formulations. In order to create an architectonic structure, the artist refers to the ancient, undamaged by industrialisation and unspoilt visual perception that he is obliged to restore in contemporary people's reception. The perceptive perspective allowing differentiation between compositional elements and new 'non-academic' correlation between them (Elisayeff 1934) leads to 'shifts' in plans and allows to highlight secondary elements in the painting. The principles of decoration known to us from the works of Ivan Milev¹⁶, Vladimir Dimitrov - The Master and Nikolay Raynov¹⁷ from the previous decade began being treated realistically with an emphasis on construction, form stabilisation and return to three-dimensional forms. Other merits of young painting noted by critics are achieving a balance of figure arrangement on the canvass highlighting their organic relation, as well as their existence in a unified artistic space. Nevertheless, the differentiated silhouettes express vivid individual characteristics and contribute to the rhythmic unification of the main formative elements. The compositional and visual plain must convey the structure of the 'essential levers of the individual movements'. As regards colour, highly appreciated were the complex harmonies and nuances corresponding to the emotional structure of the narrative and creating a colourful unison (Tsonev 1969, 1, 212).

Today, we are familiar with the subsequent development of many Bulgarian authors, who were among the first representatives of synthetic style in the 1930s, and we know what stylistic transformation they undergo. In Boris Elisayeff's case, this logical line was broken by his departure to the USA and his practically complete detachment from the problems of the local art scene. Nevertheless, he did not lose his connection with his native country altogether. In the winter of 1938, Boris Elisayeff organised an exhibition of Bulgarian artists in New York, and later helped for the participation of our graphic artists in joint exhibitions in America. Elisayeff took active part in exhibitions together with world-famous names, but he gradually quit his professional engagement in painting for his work as a teacher, technical draughtsman and designer. Later, after the end of his professional career

¹⁶ Ivan Milev (1897-1927) is known for his decorative stylizations in a modernized version of folklore.

¹⁷ Nikolay Raynov (1898-1954) is a complex figure in Bulgarian culture working in the field of decorative art and art history, as well as a writer and poet.

as a designer, he returned to painting and committed himself to experimenting with non-figurative art and materials, thus achieving pure abstraction. The artworks from the second period are exceptional attempts to reproduce the shapes and elements from traditional Bulgarian ornament, inspired by weaving and rugs with nuanced colouring created with *drop-technique*. The artist defined them as a meditative attempt to weave threads of the past, and titles speak of this unambiguously – most of them are variations on the Mother's Rug theme. The reconstruction of this artistic destiny with its characteristic features is still an ongoing project. Only part of the artworks of the Bulgarian artist Boris Mitov Elisayeff, who worked and lived for most of his life in the USA, has been known so far. His primary archive is in his second mother country in possession of his heirs and we can only hope that it will be provided to researchers in the future.

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