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Nikolay Raynov – Beauty with a crystalline structure

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to give a glimpse of the syncretism and complexness of the work of Nikolay Raynov and to propose an approach that would show his methods of implication of artistic historical ideas into paintings and works of decorative art. Furthermore, it is a reflection about the 130th anniversary exhibition of Raynov's paintings at the Sofia City Art Gallery¹ from the perspective of its historical place in European art and its actual insight.

Keywords: Nikolay Raynov, Art History, Fine Art, Decorative Arts, Painting

Nikolay Raynov is perceived as an enigmatic figure by his contemporaries, a figure with unique and universal talent. His mysterious silhouette manifests itself in parallel universes: as a priest of written speech among the painters, capable of expressing the silent thinking in form, color and space; as a thinker, gifted with providence beyond the image, in perfect command of the laws of beauty. Even though he never received recognition as the founder of Bulgarian art theory, his *History of the Plastic Arts* has made him the first teacher of several generations of fine artists (Raynov 1931-1939). Yet, his role remains unclear: some art historians and critics see in his work a pantheistic monolithic force, animating literature and visual arts with its strive for transforming nature into a decorative style and escape from reality towards a distant realm of harmony and beauty (Avramov 1974), while other calls him "a wise sorcerer" and "wizard of words" (see Beshkov 1984).

As a theoretician of art, he stands outside of exact science, whose basis has been laid long before, by the German school. He builds his system of the evolution of arts and styles in an encyclopedic manner, offers new concepts in his mother tongue and implements it in

¹ The exhibition is open from February 28 until April 7, 2019. It is accompanied by a bilingual catalogue with authors Adelina Fileva, Yvanka B. Raynova, and Stanislava Nikolova.

his own artistic-decorative work. He intuitively uses a biological metaphor, although it brings him closer to a transcendent morphology and cosmology rather than to the natural sciences (Kubler 1962, 8). He classifies art styles in the paradigm of evolution, all of which are governed by physical processes – coming to life, flourishing, dying. Each natural event reflects the universal order in its own terms. The rejection of imitation, the escape from mimesis brings him closer to the contemporary theories of the ornament – in stylization, Raynov sees the highest achievement of art. Already in the 19th century, Alois Riegl glorified the ornament as a purist form of the beauty, created by humans, as it transforms dead nature by force of its strict physical laws (Riegl 1893, 224). Later, in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin considered the cubistic manifestations of the decorative as well and the decomposition of color and shape as the end of art (Benjamin 1995, 377). Complemented by the theological or spiritual substratum of the study of shapes, Raynov's flat theory, i.e. "universal" history of art of cultures, generates a modernist eclectic secular religion, in which art is the true means for social and "spiritual revival". Although the most utopic versions of this artistic ideology were partially realized during Socialism, its research lies ahead. This context probably divides Nikolay Raynov's audience into believers and sceptics. In any case, such an exhibition faces us with a determination to seek our own point of view: "You look. However, looking is not only a means by which the inner motion becomes possible. The real hard work is not to look, not to 'contemplate', but to experience. A man does not experience through his eyes." (Raynov 1931, 19)

The exhibition in Sofia City Art Gallery consists of over 120 art pieces by Nikolay Raynov, lend by diverse Bulgarian galleries and by private collections. The first part combines paintings, created during the 1920s and the 1930s of the 20th century. The second part exhibits a small portion from Nikolay Raynov's graphic art, in view of the fact that he was extremely productive and illustrated far more Bulgarian and foreign publications than we know today.

The process of how Nikolay Raynov created his paintings is very interesting. The experimentation with materials (varnish, tinfoil, colorful paper) and a miniature technique, the geometrization, which demands concentration and analytical thinking, was in clear contradiction to the intensive intellectual work that turned him into one of the most productive writers between the two wars. The search for symmetry and order in the world of non-organic forms, their simplification to art signifiers is a decorative task, whose possible solutions demand separate algorithms. The composition is fixed as a decorative picturesque – an ideal nature view intended for enclosure between the covers of a book. The choice of subjects (trees, wild flowers, etc.) also denotes far more than mere curiosity for nature and its role as a source of inspiration. It reveals the atavistic relation to the mountains, the

home, the land and especially the forest (see Heidegger/Jaspers 1990, 63). Raynov pays special attention to the forest as a biotope, as well as to specific plants, making up his own theory about the Bulgarian ornament as a metaphor for the forest. But in the context of his teleology, the forest seems to be, above all, a place for initiation. It is not by coincidence that the European Modern style from the beginning of the 20th century, its floral tendency in particular, is connected to escapism and eroticism. However, if Raynov's art is connected in its beginnings to *Art Nouveau*, it has also its roots in analytical Cubism and Neo-Naivism. Another common feature of these variations of Modernism is the specific look towards the past – a romanticized search for inspiration in historical images, close to retrospective dreaming. In that sense, precisely Raynov's historic visionaries from the post-First World War period makes his allocation, both as painter and as writer, so difficult.

Delivered in a close viewer's distance with patience and punctuality, Raynov's paintings are devoid of space, light and perspective. Their perception needs to be in an immediate proximity, in a tactile, almost tangible manner. The image is usually one-dimensional and subdued to a hierarchical perspective – the stylized plant is typically at the front and takes up the whole pictorial field, distinguished with a mere contour by its surroundings, which is present in the shape of an unfolded one-dimensional background. The natural world is represented in a geological incision with indications of the sky, clouds, horizon, earth lines, vegetation – a pictorial grammar of nature, implementing the whole arsenal of ornamentation and simplification in a rather complicated stylization task.

The characteristic feature of these compositions is that they do not construct the ornament in the way described by the theoreticians, i.e. as aligning of all viewers' points towards the object (Mavrodinov 1947, 71). As the preliminary drawings, included in the exhibition, very well illustrate, at the basis of Raynov's compositions is observation. Drawn from life, the sketches are characterized by a vivid line and a realistic punctuality. The purpose of "stylization" in this case is to bring the foreground and the background in the shape of a colorful interweaving, delimiting the zones into equal two-dimensional color spots with a clear contour without any shade, without tones, without depth and complexity². Raynov's stylized plants are schemes of spiritual or empirical processes and realia, which are interpreted in some of his texts available to us today. Each element in them is a signature with a universal meaning and function. Their interpretation demands both, the author's narrative and the aggregate of his philosophical system.

² György Lukács correlates space in visual arts and the complexity of human relations and states that ornament cannot depict evil, neither can it hint to its presence (Lukács 1963).

In front of these landscapes of the intimate and the sublime, the question arises whether and when in Bulgaria, along with the New Age, happens a spiritual turn in art, and what is its reflection in social engineering from the second half of the twentieth century, for example. The approach, chosen 2013 by Massimiliano Gioni, the curator of the 55th Venetian Biennale, seems to me helpful for the purposes of a contemporary reception (Gioni 2013). Under the motto *The Encyclopedic Palace*, representations of spiritual doctrines and spiritual teachings, which are not part of the canonical history of art, were included in the central exposition in *Giardini*. Among the exposed works were *The Red Book* by Carl Gustav Jung, drawings from Rudolf Steiner's lectures, Aleister Crowley, a.o. Except for expanding the dictionary of art, the exhibition's purpose was to actualize the initiating function of depiction. In Gioni's words, this can happen by stage representation and models of one's own initiation, as well as through a symbolic regression in performance and body-art. The case of Jung's *Red Book* is of particular interest (Jung 2013). It is an impressive handwritten codex, where the texts are combined with images. Carl Gustav Jung has documented a long-standing experiment with himself in it, known as *Confrontation with the unconscious* (*Auseinandersetzung mit dem Unbewussten*). It contains texts, imaginative situations, awake fantasies, reflections and illustrations. He never published it, because he thought it was incompatible with his scientific work, so it became known to the public 50 years after his death. The idea of the historians was to formulate these principles so that the artists of the respective countries could incorporate them into their works. It is believed that this congress is a formal expression of the political battle for influence and cultural *Lebensraum* ath. The exhibition could have very well included paintings by N. Roerich, branded by him as theosophical icons with healing power. And, undoubtedly, Nikolay Raynov's work could also have been included.

In 1933 Raynov was invited as chairman of the Eurasian section of the 13th International Congress of the art historians in Stockholm, where he could not go because of political hinderence (Tiholov 1948, 146). The main themes of this congress were the national styles in art and the national attribution. The tasks of the congress were in line with the current trends in art studies – based on a study of primitive customs, racial ideas, etc., to construct a new European national history of art and its alternative geography according to the major cultural spheres (Kaufmann/Pilliot 2005, 15). The idea of the historians was to formulate these principles in such a way, so that the artists of the respective countries could incorporate them into their works. It is believed that this congress was a formal expression of the political battle for influence and cultural *Lebensraum* (living space).

Later on, in 1939, another key event happened in Nikolay Raynov's life, which he evaluated later as positive – the church and different associations prevented the celebration

of the 50th anniversary of his birth. This only further strengthened the audience's impulse to enter "Nikolay Raynov's realm" and marked the apogee of his fame (Petkov 1939).

But let us go back to Nikolay Raynov's ornamental art. His earliest pieces date back to around 1910, the time when he attended the Drawing School. Later, from 1925 to 1927, he studied at the *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers*. During these two years in Paris he worked mainly as a framing artist and after his return to Bulgaria he continued in this direction. He was among the founders of the Applied Artists Association in 1930, became later its chairperson as well as chair of the Union of Bulgarian Artists in 1944. All of these events turn Nikolay Raynov into a pioneer and a main figure of the Bulgarian movement for the establishment of applied arts as equal to fine arts.

The exhibition on the occasion of the 130 anniversary of his birth gives us reasons to contemplate not only Raynov's place in European context, but also Bulgarian peculiarities of the European style of the 1920s. In addition to the many existing publications, I find it worthwhile, in regard to further research on this topic, to take into account the *Europeana* project from 2012, *Partage Plus* (<http://www.partage-plus.eu/>), involving 25 institutions from 17 countries (Museum of Design – Gent, MAK-Vienna, Museum of Arts and Crafts – Zagreb, the National Museum – Warsaw, etc.). Each of them creates its own web content and delivers artefacts, digitalizing during 24 months works of applied arts, posters, and architectural objects. In this way, an archive of more than 75 000 units was created, including 2500 3D models, accessible through the *Europeana* portal. The positive effects of the project highly exceed its specific purpose, which is to create a virtual archive of *Art Nouveau*, allowing many of the participating museums to buy digitalization equipment, to systematize and take stock of their funds. Many exhibitions with works, never shown before, were organized. Scholars may take a great advantage in the unified and the systemized terminology for the applied arts. A great benefit for scholars is the unified and systematized terminology of applied arts. In this context, the theoretical developments by Nikolay Raynov could be the basis for a specific Bulgarian contribution.

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