



1883-1943

Sirak Skitnik and the Synthesis of Arts

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The works of Sirak Skitnik (pen-name Orphan Wanderer of Panayot Christov) embody the major modernist idea of synthesis of all arts which dominated the interwar period. His achievements in pictorial art, literature, theatre and criticism make him a significant figure in Bulgarian culture at that time.

Sirak Skitnik was well versed in the Russian Silver Age, the peak period of Russian modernism, which succeeded the classical Golden Age in the nineteenth century. Kiril Kristev's monograph *Sirak Skitnik the Man, the Poet, the Artist, the Literary and the Drama Critic* is a valuable source of information about his life and career. In 1908, Sirak Skitnik went to St. Petersburg to study painting, where he fell in with the circle of the Russian symbolist poets Konstantin Balmont, Andrey Bely, Zinaida Gippius, Fyodor Sologub and Dmitri Merezhkovsky. His earliest literary attempts saw light in the first almanac of Russian and Slavic authors *Veles* and the leftist periodical *Vestnik Znanya* which also published works by Maxim Gorky and Alexander Blok. Skitnik was also a fan of the productions of Sergei Diaghilev, founder of the famous aestheticist circle *Mir Iskusstva*, Leon Bakst's fantastic scenography, the works of architect, art historian and scenographer Alexander Benoit and the artists Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Kazimir Malevich, Nikolay Roerich. His participation in the youth exhibition of 1910 was praised by Roerich and Benoit.

Sirak Skitnik is a bridge between the Russian Silver Age and Bulgarian modernism which is attested to by his achievements in painting, decorative art, book illustration and scenography. At the same time, he was open to European modernist trends as well, albeit refracted through a Russian prism. He believed that Russian culture was capable not simply of translating, but also of producing originals from translations. His impressions from the remarkable exhibition "A Hundred Years of French Painting" held in St. Petersburg in 1910 and published in the first letter of the series "Literary Letters" in the journal *Democraticheski Pregled* demonstrate knowledgeability about the latest European trends and pre-

sent his views about the relationship between European and Russian modernism in the early twentieth century. Western Europe was the primary source of modernist ideas, but Russian culture developed them in much greater depth leading to mysticism. Thus, the difference between the two cultures could be compared to that between implication and revelation.

The Russian trend *Moderna* left a characteristic mark on Skitnik's poetry and its symbolist and secessionist style as well as on his first landscapes and scenographic works. Also, it influenced his presence in the Bulgarian *Native Art* movement in the 1920s, when he worked mainly as critic and painter.

Sirak Skitnik is chiefly known as an art historian, yet his poetic works have also allotted him a visible place in the Bulgarian literature of the first decade of the twentieth century. His poems decorated with vignettes and drawings feature him as a pictorial and verbal artist. They appeared in the magazine *Hudozhnik* (Artist), a periodical which emphasized the connection between symbolism in literature and secession in art. The secessionist vignettes and illustrations were not an end in themselves; rather, they served as a background of the literary and critical articles. Some of the texts became manifestoes of Bulgarian modernism. Sirak Skitnik's contributions to the magazine drew attention to his synthetic temperament. A good example is his poem "She Faded Away" published in *Hudozhnik* in 1905. The two stanzas are separated by a melancholy drawing. The secessionist frame usually surrounds and decorates the verbal text. Here, however, it is the text that frames the drawing and the latter stands in the centre of the poetic space lending additional graphic dimensions to the whole. In the drawing, horizontal lines of a water surface intersect with vertical twigs with leaves pointing down to the water's depths. (One is reminded of Pencho Slaveikov's poem "The Lake Is Sleeping.") Skitnik's synthetic work is reminiscent of the oriental miniatures with accompanying texts whose function is to stimulate meditation rather than express or suggest the author's reflections.

In 1910, Sirak Skitnik published his only collection of verse titled *Confessions*. They have strong symbolist and secessionist connotations. In that same year Dimcho Debelyanov and Dimiter Podvarzachov selected seven of his poems for their anthology *Our Poetry from Ivan Vazov Onward*. The anthology aims to introduce the readership to the modern Bulgarian poetry after the Liberation from Ottoman domination in 1878. It is noteworthy that critic Vladimir Vassilev, with whom Sirak Skitnik worked as a co-editor of the journal *Zlatorog* after 1920, vehemently rejected its modernism and even its poetic value asking the stunning question, "What does this poetry have to do with modernism, what does it have to do with poetry in the first place?"

The poetics of *Confessions* makes a kind of synthesis between Pencho Slaveikov's lyrical pieces, Yavorov's poetry after 1906, Theodore Trayanov,

Dimcho Debelyanov and, according to Vladimir Vassilev, Trifon Kunev's poetry as well. From the Russian culture Skitnik borrowed the secessionist aesthetics visible in his paintings; his poetry drew on the verbal clichés of Bulgarian modernism of the early twentieth century.

What makes Skitnik' poetry special is its painterly vision. His decorative style shows through the recurrent image of rays cutting through the poetics of the soul's wilderness. The dominant colours in his poetry – white and purple – characterize his later paintings as well. Vladimir Vassilev shows preference for the “purple” effect which contains “rays, happiness, stones and everything that one can think of.” It is interesting to compare the colours of the urban landscapes “Winter Landscape” (1913, 1919); “City-Spring” (1919), “Frost” (1919), “Monastery” (1921), “Self-Portrait” (193), the landscapes from Germany created in the 1930s, and the colours in the verse collection *Confessions*:

“White angels bearing a white godspell// flew above us on a early white morning” (“Godspell”); “And it bloomed in a burning purple flame// and it bloomed – the azure heart of my snowy dream” (“Heart”); “The winged silhouettes of doves against a pink sky” (“Burning away”).

The early morning hues dominate here and the dark colours do not evoke resignation; rather, they provide the background of the white colour and are far from Yavorov's scary and all-engulfing night.

The title “Winter Water Colours” unites five verbal landscape fragments. For example, fragment 2: “A lantern on the corner// and white butterflies// madly flying round the fiery ring;” fragment 5: “Blackened pipes – a line// Pink – a little hand reaching out// and doves perched on it.// The sun is laughing at the white roofs...” These examples show why Sirak Skitnik the painter is attracted to the poetics of the objective detail, which however did not become fashionable until the 1920s and 1930s, i.e. after Skitnik stopped writing poetry.

It is interesting to note that some titles in his poetry were developed in his later paintings, e.g. the title “Godspell.” Thus Skitnik's poetic works became the foundations of Skitnik's pictorial art.

Sirak Skitnik's involvement in the cultural life in Bulgaria after World War I attests to his desire to be at once a conveyor and a builder of culture in Bulgaria. After the drawings for *Hudozhnik* Sirak Skitnik continued to work for other avant-garde periodicals and collections, e.g. *Harvest* and *Vezni*. Also, he illustrated Edgar Allan Poe's poems (1920), Chavdar Mutafov's *Marionettes* (1920), Theodore Trayanov's *Bulgarian Ballads* (1921); Christo Yasenov's *The Knight's Castle* (1921); Angel Karaliichev's *Krali Marko* (1925).

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ence of *Mir Iskusstva*. A good example is his composition “Mothers” published for the first time in the journal *Vezni*. The return to one and the same subject may be interpreted in the way Sirak Skitnik himself sees Vladimir Dimitrov – the Master, “...they are not failed attempts; rather, they are completed stages in a deepening search for the secret that makes a painting immortal.”

Sirak Skitnik’s drawings are not mere visualizations of literary texts. They are autonomous graphic reflections which lend parallel visibility to an inner experience. With him the book becomes a harmonious expression of the writer and the artist, which was in line with a dominant trend in Western Europe. This is exemplified by his drawings to Ran Bossilek’s collection of tales *The Unborn Maiden*. Sirak Skitnik showed them as a separate cycle in the *Native Art* exhibition in 1926.

The drawings to Chavdar Mutafov’s *Marionettes* stirred up a heated debate much to the surprise of even the most free-thinking avant-garde artists who considered themselves products of secession modernism as early as in 1920. Geo Milev could not accept the writer and his artist in one book, “Opposite the curved lines of Chavdar Mutafov’s style stands the square format and script of the book, to say nothing of the heavy angular lines and the broad (black and ultramarine) spots of Sirak Skitnik’s illustrations. The harmony is completely lost.”

In the 1930s, Sirak Skitnik was mainly involved in designing book covers and his interest in the text as a synthesis of the artist and the writer had subsided. He was more focused on his paintings and the irrational depths of his images. As a critic remarks, “His paintings feature him as a dark, confused, irrational and inaccessible artist. What he depicts matters much less than the expression itself. With him being has neither time nor space; it sways wearily back and forth on loose contours and in heavy and colourless revelations attainable only by the spirit and not by the eye – as mysterious and powerful as Nothingness itself.”

The artist’s “literariness” determines his peculiar imagery. It accounts for the emphasis on the synthetic image-idea. The very titles of Sirak Skitnik’s paintings are literary: “Witches,” “Godspell”, “Judas” etc. His works rely on legends, myths, and fairy tales because they blend the universal with the native. The departure from time inevitably leads to myth. Skitnik is fascinated with the medieval Bulgarian icons and murals. Their subjects are conventional and in being so they are detached from ethnographic and everyday descriptions and details; rather, they are connected with what is essentially native and universal. Thus, interest in national themes (so characteristic of the *Native Art* Movement) in the 1920s was quite compatible with European modernism. On the contrary, it produced a modernist synthesis of Bulgarian and European culture. In fact, the *Native Art* Movement itself was nothing less than accession to European and world standards through the native and the national.

The city in Sirak Skitnik's works has no specific temporal and spatial dimensions. The urban landscapes feature a city which, in Geo Milev's words, "exists only in the artist's mind." It is hard to say whether it is St. Petersburg, Sofia or Paris. The title of one such abstract landscape is quite telling: "Landscape in Green." Skitnik's comment on Vladimir Dimitrov – the Master seems to apply to his own landscapes as well, "As though they were created to the sound of orchestral music and under the flame of an unknown sun."

In his article "Our Landscapes" (1927) Sirak Skitnik claims a deeper meaning of the landscape genre, "The landscape as composition, as monument and outlook, is alien to our painting tradition. The creative landscape expresses the artist's vision and the magic of the earth. In the longer article "On Landscape Painting" (1933) he associates his views on the genre with romanticism and impressionism. The revival of landscape as composition is the only expression of that "perennial message imparted to us by nature". That message is mythological and therefore the mythological view of nature is the starting point of the landscape painter. "The mask of the earth presents a deeper and more complex mystery than the mystery of man: we need the eyes of a god or a savage to be able to get near the mysterious forces that change its features and govern its life... The earth has its own inner life and psyche determined not only by the changing times of day and night, but also by the operation of the forces which make it an inseparable part of the Cosmos." The examples he gives refer to the ecstatic movements of the earth in spring and the fascination of the centuries-old forest. What Sirak Skitnik particularly values in the artist Nikola Petrov is his impressionist quest for the feeling of the earth. He calls Ivan Milev's art "atavistic," "primal," "ritualistic." This is a neo-mythological approach that lends new dimensions to the representation of the native.

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Sirak Skitnik is an important critic of Bulgarian modernism between the two world wars. In Kiril Kristev's words, "his thought had the breadth of the art expert". Skitnik published over 400 articles that won him the respect of his contemporaries. Of the Bulgarian artists only Nikolai Rainov could compete with him in terms of number of publications. Kiril Kristev, by far the most competent authority on Sirak Skitnik, thinks that the painter's vision dominates in him, "he sees, thinks, judges and expresses himself as an artist." This accounts for his peculiar manner as critic.

Skitnik's "Literary and Artistic Letters" published in the periodical *Demokratischeski Pregled* during his St. Petersburg period reveal an affinity for criticism. However, it was not until 1920 that he asserted himself as an authoritative critic

becoming co-editor of the journal *Zlatorog*. His contributions to the columns “Art Week,” “Art and Audience” in the newspaper *Slovo* as well as the biographical portraits in the magazine *Balgarska Rech* developed his critical talent.

Skitnik’s earliest critical essays were written in a secessionist and impressionist style quite different from the mainstream Bulgarian criticism at that time. His article “Do We Have Art Criticism?,” written in St. Petersburg, sounds like a poetic invasion of the artist into the territory of criticism. Worth particular mention are the comments on the absence of art criticism in Bulgaria, “It’s scary. Not a single free soul capable of feeling and understanding the soul of the artist, this terrible labyrinth of ups and downs, creation and destruction, not a single free soul capable of seeing the artist’s efforts as a deliberate creative act and an expression of ideas, as the last of the thousands of stairs the soul has climbed spattering blood all around. It’s scary.” This sounds like a poetic diary.

Articles such as “Old and New Art,” “The Artist and Visibility,” “The Secret of the Primitive” sound as manifestoes mapping out the direction of Bulgarian cultural life between the two wars. If the paintings “Monasteries,” “Godspell,” and “Judas” are emblematic of the *Native Art* Movement, the essays of that period raise Skitnik to the status of an ideologist. He is fully aware that the new art needs a new kind of perceiver who should be educated by art, and not vice versa; “we should think of the artist as a chronicler of the ordinary feelings of the audience, if we require from him to assert his humanistic ideal of pictorial art.”

Today, in the twenty-first century, the *Native Art* artists are mythologized and have become textbook names; for their contemporary Sirak Skitnik, however, they looked like kids trying their hand at art. Results were yet to come; there were only hopes. Says Skitnik, “The quest is the most blessed tragedy of the artist, because it is the most productive of tragedies.” In the critical reviews of the *Native Art* exhibitions Skitnik puts a special emphasis on the quest. For example, he defines the crisis Vladimir Dimitrov – the Master went through as a quest, “What is most terrible is that he could have created wonderful portraits without any tragedies whatsoever; he could have been satisfied with himself as much as the others could have been happy with him.” In the 1920, Sirak Skitnik referred to Dechko Uzunov as another “searching artist.” “He is even more valuable and amiable in his anxiety and confusion than when he is officially prudent.” As for the artist Boris Denev, Skitnik appreciates not so much his self-confidence as “his hidden dismay” that “only helps him deepen his understanding of human nature.” In Iliya Petrov’s rambling hesitations he saw potential for growth and evolution. According to Skitnik, Ivan Lazarov was the only one of his contemporaries who had achieved a harmonious balance between idea, external expression and silent tragedy. All the rest were like “eager kids showcasing their whims, blunders and achievements.” Sirak Skitnik sees *Native Art* as the spring season, as the

future rather than as an accomplished aesthetic product. The “native” in *Native Art* exists in the form of a recipe and a manifesto.” The fur cap and the peasant’s sandal do not make art native. It is not the subject but the sincerity of the artist that make art native.

The recipes concern the interpretation of mythological and folklore subjects,” the imagery of ordinary vision bars the access to the legend. The visible form needs to be destroyed and recreated, so that it may live again as part of a legend. There is hardly another art that so badly needs systematic and documentary knowledge as legend art.” Ivan Milev best exemplifies the sublimation of the ethnographic elements into real mythology. The artist turns real life into a ritual transmitted as a sacred tradition.

According to Skitnik, the sense of modernity is a supreme criterion of aesthetic worth. His desire to catch the pulse of the times can be called “a thirst for modernity.” It is felt in all his articles.

Sirak Skitnik brought the word “contemporary” from St. Petersburg, the circle *Mir Iskusstva* and the style “*Moderna*. ” For Skitnik “contemporary” is an aesthetic rather than a chronological category: “Isn’t it strange that these people, albeit detached from life and its daily routine, could feel the contemporary more deeply than those that burned away in it. However, there is no trace of the anxiety of contemporary man in these canvases. The sense of the contemporary is still missing in the latest and most talented works of young artists.”

The contemporary is a category that Sirak Skitnik uses to describe Vladimir Dimitrov – the Master, “He has the soul of a contemporary man and the lifestyle of a hermit... there is hardly any other artist with such a natural sense of the contemporary as the Master.” His sense of the contemporary, according to Skitnik, has something to do with clairvoyance. “In his paintings it does not come from the outside; rather, it comes from within; not from the easy formula to keep pace with the present day but from the deep awareness valid for all times that genuine art does not slavishly express visibility, but recreates it in a unique manner following the laws of creative individuality.”

The distance between the native and the European is measured by the stylistics of the contemporary. What could be the price of reaching established and belated West-European models? They could be used for training, but the contemporary artist should be able to choose his own path” Even though Sirak Skitnik’s view on Bulgarian art after World War I is far more optimistic than Pencho Slaveikov’s, especially with regard to the maturity of the Bulgarian poetry around 1910, it does contain critical implications as well, “The importance of the Master lies not only in his talent and originality, but also in the way his primitive artistic instinct brings together two pictorial cultures – the West-European and the Bulgarian. It will take some time before they establish permanent contacts.”

At the end of the 1920s, Sirak Skitnik still argued that it was hard to apply the European standards to Bulgarian art, “Even in the latest and most talented works of our young artists, the genuine and conscious sense of the contemporary is still missing. Bulgarian art still lacks direction and established schools. Yet there are quite a few names of artists that promise to live up to European standards: Ivan Milev, Vladimir Dimitrov – the Master, Dechko Uzunov, Bencho Obreshkov, Nikolai Dylgerov (a futurist in Italy), Ilia Petrov and Vassil Stoilov.

In his article “We and Bulgarian Art” (1929), Sirak Skitnik further elaborates on his view about Bulgarian art against the European background. Despite the absence of art schools, he acknowledges the achievements of the Bulgarian artists. The struggle for emancipation from schools and from the “grip of raw matter” Skitnik calls “struggle for individual creative freedom.” For him painting should work without “formulae and labels.” On the other hand, he comments on the way our national talents and achievements have been underestimated. This, according to him, betrays the many complexities of the young nation. He concludes his article on the Master by saying, “We mock at our own work, devalue our wealth, poison the fallow where we will plant our seed; we destroy in order to indulge in patronage later on. Later on, when the sight of high peaks will be unable to irritate our envious eyes and the capable living hand will be no more.”

In the 1920s, Sirak Skitnik commented on the burden of centuries-old traditions, culture, conventions and authorities; about the weariness coming from the “complexities and artificialities of life;” about the modern man who had lost his ability to converse with God, to be a creative child, “all this oppresses the natural man and turns him into a manufactured and standardized product.” Hence the critic thirsts for primitive art, “mankind is weary of itself; it is like a man who has drunk too much seasoned wine and his dry lips are thirsty for a glass of clear water.”

There are a few more concepts that are important for Skitnik’s critical vocabulary and they can be found in his programmatic article “The Artist and Visibility” written in 1921. The human soul is the first and foremost category, “Things may have their own forms that are the object of positive science ... Yet, we can have direct knowledge about them only through the mutable states of the soul which are not liable to formulae and measurement. Thus, without insisting that the world and things are only a “notion,” we should nonetheless agree that for the human soul they have no value outside it; they live and die through it.”

To differentiate between the vision of ordinary souls and the artist’s vision, Sirak Skitnik uses the term “creative spirit.” “If the ordinary man sees things through the changing spectrum of what is happening inside the soul, for the creative spirit visibility has the significance of an ongoing trial and process of cogni-

tion.” In fact, the terms “soul,” “spirit” and the “artist’s heart” are interchangeable. The illogical creative soul is Skitnik’s fundamental aesthetic category. It is part of his definition of art, “art is not representation; art is immurement of the human soul in colour or marble.” This category occurs in Sirak Skitni’s art discourse in the very first articles he wrote, sometimes even twice in one and the same sentence... “our literary critics have weak critical souls; they have no intuitive knowledge of the soul which borders on revelation, which protects and predicts.” He makes use of the same category to explain away art after World War I: “Never before has art been so little aesthetic, so little humane, as it is today. It is loth to create a new aesthetics; all it cares about is the emancipation of the human soul. There is only one art, ever regenerating itself: ever new and ever old – just as the creative soul is ever young and ever old. The world – visibility that the soul mirrors; art – a reality created by the soul. Hence, art is first and foremost a piece of soul and then represented visibility.”

Having made a differentiation between creative talent and ordinary human abilities, Sirak Skitnik goes on to differentiate between the creative artists themselves through the concept of “creative individuality,” or “creative nature.” Even in art schools, where artists are united by their ideology and culture, the power of individual talent opens a chasm between the separate individualities. “In the creative nature the inner feeling is stronger than external impressions... The stronger the creative temperament, the more original and unique the works of art are.”

Sirak Skitnik can hardly be called the most expressive of the art critics of the 1920s and 1930s. His style gravitates towards the literary essay. On the other hand, the complexity of the phenomena he studied precluded the use of ready formulae. What is important however is that his critical texts raise questions that are relevant even today. Here are some of them picked from the articles “Art Tomorrow” (1931) and “Art and the Street” (1937): “What will the art of tomorrow be like? Will it be individualistic or collective? Class or Supraclass? Poster or Painting? The sound of a trumpet or a lullaby? A return to the past? Will art tear down the walls of museums and go out on the streets and squares?”

The above-mentioned articles are also indicative of the critic’s concern about the trend towards a convergence of high and low, elitist and popular, aesthetic, ethical and commercial art. This can easily be applied to the problems facing postmodernism. It is interesting that to Sirak Skitnik interwar art looked like “youthful yet exceptionally talented studies on a work of art that will be created tomorrow. It lacks humanness, it is short of love and humanness in the treatment of suffering and misery.” The critic is convinced that “sooner or later the art of tomorrow will realize its disastrous emptiness.”

More than half a century later, I can say that our visit to the world of the Bulgarian modernists of the 1920s and 1930s has revealed the most humane world of

Bulgarian art in the twentieth century. I am sure that Sirak Skitnik did cross the devil's threshold, as he calls it in "Old and New Art" in order to achieve freedom for the soul and the breadth and depth of a clairvoyant's vision.

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