

MODERN ART IN BULGARIA:  
FIRST HISTORIES AND  
PRESENT NARRATIVES  
BEYOND THE PARADIGM  
OF MODERNITY

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Modern Art in Bulgaria: First Histories and Present Narratives beyond  
the Paradigm of Modernity

First Edition in English

ISBN

New Bulgarian University Press

Sofia 2013

Firs Edition in Bulgarian: New Bulgarian University Press

Sofia 2011

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## Women and Modern Art Institutions

The inclusion of women in the modernisation of artistic life can be viewed as overcoming boundaries - entering the territories of the then “male” professional education as well as “male” public artistic manifestation, which was associated with prestige and economic status. In Bulgaria, there were some other boundaries beside the social ones – cultural and geographic ones – a borderline situation in terms of the modernising Europe and the long transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Due to the late establishment of art institutions of the modern age in Bulgaria (after its establishment as an independent state), our country did not witness a long period of women fighting for access to secular professional education<sup>1</sup>. In Bulgarian culture, which had developed for a long time in a paradigm different from the European one, there were no conditions for separate female art education, outside the prestigious academies. Women’s realisation in the field of the free artistic profession was never seen as socially obstructed.

The creation of the Women Artists Society in 1928<sup>2</sup>, however, as well as the regularly held women exhibitions in the 1930s indicated an existing social need for a differentiated female participation in the artistic life.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reputation of the artists was based on their formal education, regular participation in exhibition halls and collective exhibitions (the interest in solo exhibitions arose later), and their public commissions. The artists’ recognition by the art critics was also related to those manifestations.

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<sup>1</sup> I quote and maintain Cornelia Klinger’s view: “The first and foremost incentive for the feminist discussion concerning the arts and culture comes, as is the case in all spheres of social life, from the exclusion of women from the field of a certain activity: a centuries-old and having almost no exceptions denial of access to the formal and institutionalised education and professional practice as well as persistently existent discrimination which women still suffer even after the termination of their formal exclusion.” (Klinger 2000: 69).

<sup>2</sup> The Women Artists Society was founded in Bulgaria in 1928 as a section in the Society of Women with Higher Education. The Bulgarian Women Union was established in 1901.

## **The Integration of Women in the Modernisation of the Artistic Life in Bulgaria till the World War I – Acquisition of the Experience of the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Sofia State Arts School opened on October 14, 1896. It comprised two departments: I. for artists-teachers; II. for applied arts and industry. There was one female lecturer at the School<sup>3</sup>.

The Arts School in Sofia admitted women students from its very beginning. There were 46 male and 3 female students admitted to the School in the first year and 45 male and 4 female students - in the second year<sup>4</sup>. Male and female students followed the same curriculum but the classes were held in separate rooms. At the beginning, women were not given access to the evening classes in the study of the nude.

At that time, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., the denial of the access of women to the nude was common in European academies and higher art schools. If we have a look at the Balkans, for example, we find out that the School of Arts at the Athens Polytechnics accepted the mixed classes, with both male and female students, in 1901 under the permission of the Minister of Education. Women students were allowed to attend study of the nude after 1903. Another feature of the School of Arts in Athens is the fact that there were only male models, which complicated the debate on women's access to the nude and further provided its opponents with arguments<sup>5</sup>.

Soon after the establishment of the State Arts School in Sofia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a feeling of discontent arose among the women students when they were denied access to the evening classes in the study of the nude. Elisaveta Konsulova, who entered the school in 1897 in Jaroslav Vešin's class, became the exponent of the women students' demands. She insisted on meeting the Director of the School, Prof. Ivan (Jan-Vaclav) Mrkvička. According to memoirs, as a result of that meeting the School's regulations were changed and women students were allowed to attend the study of the nude (Nikolova, Lavrenov 1956: 10). In contrast to Athens, the models at the School in Sofia

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<sup>3</sup> In the applied arts department in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. Tereza Holekova taught embroidery and lacing. Jubilee almanac of the State Arts School. (On the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation). Sofia, 1906, p. 4,6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 4, 6.

<sup>5</sup> The data comes from Glafki Gotsi – Women's access to the male nude at the School of Arts in Athens. 1998. Essay in the MA course Feminism in the Visual Arts (supervisor Griselda Pollock). Extracts of the text are published in: Arts Studies Quarterly ( Gotsi / Гоци 2002: 22-28).

were male and female. The conditions for art education of men and women alike were formally equalised.

It is interesting to mention, as a comparison, that no women students were given access to Sofia University at its foundation in 1888. The first petition for the access of women to the University was submitted at the National Assembly in 1896 (the year of the opening of the State Arts School). The petition was rejected but the campaign continued until the final solution of the problem in favour of the women's demand in 1901 (Daskalova 1999:191).

It was not until 1914 that women were allowed to attend the academies of arts in Paris and Berlin. The only exceptions were the Academies of Kassel and Breslau and the School of Arts in Weimar. The Academy of Stuttgart admitted a limited number of women in separate classes and under conditions differing from those for men (Sauer 1990: 20-21).

In 1912, Ferdinand von Miller, Director of the Academy of Art in Munich and an MP in the Bavarian Parliament, said in an answer to a women's petition asking for access to the Academy: "hundred years ago young girls had to sew and knit; now the machines do all these [...] Quite naturally, today they also want to find something to do and often choose the arts. Even if their aspirations are serious for 10% of them, for the other 90% this is only passing the time until a lucky husband comes to carry them away from their artistic activities" (Sauer 1990: 20-21).

While pointing out the fact that women could study at the Arts School in our country at that particular time, we should not ignore the difference in the education that it offered and the one offered in the classical European academies. Neither should we ignore its different status till the beginning of the 1920s. The State Arts School in Sofia (named Industrial Arts School in 1909) became a State Academy of Arts in 1921 by virtue of a bill passed by the National Assembly.

Because of its eclectic structure and curriculum including applied disciplines (embroidery and lacing, ceramics), women's education at the Arts School was not perceived as a violation of social conventions. The public clash in the field of art education was not so openly manifested as it had been in the old European academies. In the Jubilee report on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State Arts School, its Director, Professor Ivan Mrkvička announced with enthusiasm: "From all our alumni, 56 students are women. The State Arts School is the first Bulgarian high school that has given women

access to higher education, on equal terms with men.”<sup>6</sup>

With the existing liberalism at the School in Sofia, there was no need for the creation of private academies for women. In comparison with Paris, Munich, or Athens<sup>7</sup>, where the private academies and schools for women painters were part of the art education system in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., such a lack of similar necessity in Sofia cannot but impress us. The situation is ambiguous – women could study together with men even in the study of the nude. At the same time, however, the women who were among the lecturers and professors at the School taught only applied arts, namely those connected with the decoration of the home interior.

Many women artists from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century acquired their professional education and went on specialisation abroad<sup>8</sup>. The art education and specialisation in European cultural centres provided sound professional background as well as access to large-scale art events. It also boosted the self-confidence of the women artists.

Women were able to specialise because their parents or families financed their studies. As a rule the first women who chose to pursue art education and career in Bulgaria came from the middle or upper classes, from well-educated families<sup>9</sup>. It became possible, in the environment of well-educated parents, to overcome the patriarchal view of the limited role of women in society and the family<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Jubilee almanac of the State Arts School. (On the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation). Sofia, 1906, p.43.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Konta. From Drawings to Art. Greek Women Artists and Few Examples, Significant Work. Manuscript 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Some examples: Elena Karamihaylova (1875, Shumen – 1961, Sofia), after graduating from Robert College in Istanbul in 1895, studied painting in Vienna from 1895 to 1896. Later, between 1898 and 1910, she continued her art education in private academies in Munich. Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova (1881, Plovdiv – 1965, Sofia) studied at the State Arts School in Prof. J. Vešin's class from 1897 to 1902. Afterwards, she specialised in portrait painting in Munich, in the Academy of the Women Artists Society, in Professor Heinrich Knirr (1909-1910). Aneta Hodina (1880-1941) graduated from the State Arts School, Prof. Vešin's class (1897-1902). She specialised in painting in Munich and Paris. (cf.: Elisaveta Siderova. Aneta Hodina's Life and Work. Bachelor's thesis. Art History Department. New Bulgarian University 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova's father – Georgi Konsulov – was a well-educated merchant who participated in the national liberation war and after the liberation, took part in the construction of the new state; Vera Lukova's father was a general and her mother had graduated from a French college; Vera Nedkova's father was a diplomat and her mother had studied music in Geneva – there are many examples.

<sup>10</sup> More generally, the situation of the women artists was connected with the

However, the issue of the authorities, of the economic and power positions of women in the art institutions during that early period remains unformulated. Women artists did not participate in the decision-making process concerning public issues (art juries at exhibitions, public commissions, decision-making concerning which works of art were to be bought, juries for grants, etc.) They could not manifest their professional artistic competence beyond the boundaries of the private space until the 1930s, when the first precedents in this respect occurred.

Women's position in the teaching sphere is quite significant when describing art education in Bulgaria. Many women artists worked as teachers<sup>11</sup>, but there were no women lecturers in fine arts (painting, sculpture, and graphic arts) at the Fine Arts Academy. This state of affairs remained unchanged throughout the period in question until the World War II (and much later). It was closely connected with the view of the hierarchy within the types of art, the applied arts being given a secondary position.

Western Europe also witnessed discussions of the horizontal and vertical segregation of men and women. Horizontally, women were admitted to specific artistic areas, underestimated artistic branches, the crafts and the industrial design (it is well-known that in Bauhaus in Weimar women were encouraged to enroll in the textile classes)<sup>12</sup>. Vertically, women artists were to be found in the professional spheres of the least prestigious and poorly paid vacancies and only few chosen ones made it to the top of the hierarchical ladder. That makes it clear why, in Bulgaria as well as elsewhere at that time, women artists came from relatively well-off families – they had to have guaranteed incomes from outside the profession.

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In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century our country saw works of women artists in joint exhibitions. Art critics responded adequately and there were hardly any examples of their ignoring and underestimating women's achievements in terms of form and style.

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modernisation processes in Bulgaria. The first societies of the Bulgarian Women Union were mostly in the cities – from 77 societies in 1931 only 10 were founded in larger villages (Todorova 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Konsulova-Vazova, Karamihaylova, etc.

<sup>12</sup> That practice has been pointed out in lots of publications, among which (Droste 2006:28-29).

Women artists' works, however, had thematic accents that differentiated them from those of men. There could be noticed certain differentiation in the representation and self-representation – in portraits, self-portraits and home interiors. It was in the nude that the close-up and the interpretation of the works overtly showed the differences. The first generation of women artists in Bulgaria did not show any nude (male or female) compositions despite the fact that women had access to the study of the nude during their education. The nude appeared only in the images – allegories and metaphors – of the child / angel innocence<sup>13</sup>.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women from affluent bourgeois families in Western Europe traditionally acquired painting as well as music skills. Sometimes they practised those skills all their life as an amateur occupation that did not have manifestation outside the home or family environment (Duby, Perrot 2002:311).

In Bulgaria such a practice was missing until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the historical context – the lack of social environment. The appearance of secular institutions in our country coincided with that moment of European modernity development in which women raised the question of their professional artistic education. In Bulgaria, women's occupation with painting had been linked with professional education since its very beginning. What was problematic was the realisation of the women who had acquired such education. In most cases their artistic manifestations did not go beyond the family environment and, in this sense, they did not go beyond the status of amateur occupation.

Similarly to the amateur women painters from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe (Duby, Perrot 2002:312-313), the first generation of women painters in Bulgaria represented the family environment in their paintings – family members, friends (mostly female), and the home (figure and still life interiors). The portraits were mainly self-portraits and portraits of other women. There was also a multitude of child portraits – an interest showing the overestimation of maternity in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, brought about by the widely held idea of the prosperity of the national state. Speaking in terms of themes and genre, both professional and amateur female paintings, displayed in the parlour and the home art albums, were far from the traditions of the academic “high” art.

In terms of their form and style characteristics, however, the paintings of

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in the paintings *Optimism* (1919) and *Spring* (1920) by Elena Karamihaylova.

the first Bulgarian women artists differed from the amateur ones – in the use of oil painting and the large formats which fitted well in the exhibition hall space as well as in the professional attempt at recognisable style features. In a critical review of the *Lada* Society exhibition in 1912, V. Dimov said that Elena Karamihaylova's paintings “clearly show the influence of the German art culture” and that in terms of “her technical jargon” she was “synthetic, with a liking for the down tones”. Further on he said: “A single portrait, yet excellently painted and of great chromatic merits, makes Konsulova-Vazova, who [...] has participated in our exhibition for the first time, stand out” (Dimov 1914: 6). Vasil Dimov, a critic and a painter, commented on the “way the works are created”, on the form and style merits of the women artists' paintings.

Is it possible for the brave declaration for artistic career to become acceptable by means of the traditional “female” topics? Let's not forget that Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, the two most renowned representatives of the modern art from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, worked on conventional female topics from the amateur tradition<sup>14</sup>.

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Between 1900 and 1930, the number of women artists participating in art societies and joint exhibitions as well as of the women having organised their own solo exhibitions significantly grew in Europe.

In Bulgaria the number of women who had art education and who participated in art societies increased after the World War I, in the 1920s and especially in the 1930s.

The functioning of the institutions and the economic conditions for artistic realisation were usually peripherally mentioned in the historical narratives of those decades. In his book “Fifty Years of Bulgarian Art”, which was discussed in part IV of the present study, Andrey Protich dedicated to them a chapter “Creating conditions for artistic realisation” (Protich 1933:11-31). The author expressed the opinion that art career needed an institutional support; however, he did not even mention the problem of the participation of professionally educated women in the institutions of the artistic life.

The inclusion of women in Bulgarian exhibitions abroad was rather a rarity in the first decades of the century (till the First World War).

The first art collections, presented within the framework of world

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<sup>14</sup> For further comments see: Anne Higonnet – Femmes et images. (Duby, Perrot 2002: 332).

exhibitions (Paris 1900, Saint Louis 1904), did not include women artists. Neither were there women artists in the Bulgarian section of the Balkan exhibition in London in 1907 or in the first Bulgarian participation in the Venetian Biennial in 1910.

In Munich, in the X International Art Exhibition in 1909, two women artists participated – Aneta Hodina and Anna Yosifova. The International Art Exhibition in Rome in 1911 included Anna Yosifova and Elena Karamihaylova. Relatively more women artists participated in the exhibitions of the *Lada* South Slavic Society in 1904, 1906, 1908 and 1912<sup>15</sup>.

### **Women and the Modernisation of Artistic Life after the World War I – Entering the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

In Bulgaria after the World War I and especially towards the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s, the number of women with art education and actively participating in the artistic life grew significantly. Their social background began to widen as well, but it was still more limited compared to that of men. Women artists came mainly from big cities.

It is not an easy task to gather exhaustive data for the social background of the women artists from that period. Because of the intentional suppression of this problem in the conditions of the new political order after the World War II, all the cases in which the background was not “working class” or “poor rural”, but “urban” and “bourgeois” require further research today. The relative widening of the social background of the women artists was synchronous with the tendencies in other European countries. Thus, for instance, the social structure of the women artists in England began to diversify in the 1920s (Deepwell 1997:86).

From the 1920s onwards, competitions for state-funded grants, designed for specialisation abroad, began to be run. The study of those competitions shows that it was only men who obtained the grants<sup>16</sup>. The issue of the quality of presentation can always be raised. Yet, the subjectivity concerning the

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<sup>15</sup> Aneta Hodina participated in all the four exhibitions; Anna Hähn-Yosifova – in Sofia in 1906, in Zagreb in 1908 and in Belgrade in 1912; Mara Lazarova - in Sofia in 1906 and in Zagreb in 1908; Elena Karamihaylova – in Zagreb in 1908 and Belgrade in 1912; Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova – only in Belgrade in 1912. Cf.: (Georgieva / Георгиева 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Data for the competitions are kept in the Ministry of Education archive in the Central State Archives, f. 1047k.

evaluation of the quality is inevitable. In 1931, on the occasion of a competition for an annual grant for studying abroad, Sirak Skitnik, an art critic and an artist, wrote: “This is a competition for encouraging the talented artist, not the talented student. Such an artist, having taste, clear objective and self-evaluation ability, is found in the works of Masha Uzunova, the rejected competitor. Her free compositions and studies do not lack shortcomings. But they reveal the painter and possess a fresh creative outlook that surpasses the school one.”<sup>17</sup> This is just another case in which the subjective predisposition of the jury was not in favour of the woman artist despite her convincing participation according to Sirak Skitnik.

In the 1920s a large number of women artists<sup>18</sup> specialised abroad, but, as was the case in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their parents financed almost all of them.

The women artists in Bulgaria were encouraged to create mainly in the field of crafts and applied arts. In the 1930s, on the occasion of one of the female exhibitions, Sirak Skitnik wrote: “it is a pity that the female artist does not show a keen interest in the applied arts – this is the sphere in which she could really express her taste, her resourcefulness [...]”<sup>19</sup>. In many art criticism reviews women were often given advice on what was suitable for them to paint in accordance with the conventional view of “female nature”.

We encounter the same situation in England, France and elsewhere in Europe<sup>20</sup>. From a pragmatic point of view, the home-related arts were considered to be the most probable field for finding a job. At the same time, the social stereotypes linked the artistic manifestations of women with the home interior and the decorative arts<sup>21</sup> that were at the lower levels of the art hierarchy.

The establishment of the Applied Arts School called IZA (an abbreviation from arts and crafts) by Rayna Rakarova<sup>22</sup> in 1932 met the social requirement for and predisposition to the arts of the modern interior. It also corresponded

<sup>17</sup> Sirak Skitnik. Competition exhibition. In *The Slovo* [Discourse] newspaper, 1931, issue 2570 from January 12.

<sup>18</sup> Binka Zlatareva studied in Prague; Tsana Boyadzhieva – in Paris; Zoya Paprikova – in Florence; Masha Zhivkova – in Munich; Vera Nedkova – in Vienna; Todorka Burova – in Berlin, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Sirak Skitnik. The Women Artists Exhibition. In *Zlatorog* [Golden Horn] magazine, 1937, issue 5, p. 233.

<sup>20</sup> Cf.: Deepwell. *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Rayna Rakarova (1889-1964) studied applied arts in Prague, Berlin and Paris.

to the interest in applied arts and design, which had been growing widely popular on the international scale since the World War I. The four-year course of study was acknowledged as secondary vocational education. The study was organised in five departments: fashion, decoration, ceramics, textiles and shape design. The students at the school were mostly women.

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According to “History of Women”, the female identities multiplied at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe (Duby, Perrot 2002: 14). Along with the images of the wife and mother, new ones appeared – the images of the working, emancipated and single woman. The actual acquisition of those identities as well as their representation in art often generated tension and conflicts.

What is impressing is that most of the Bulgarian women artists, actively involved in the exhibition life from the end of the 1920s and the 1930s, did not marry nor did they have children. It seems that the women, having chosen the artistic career, realised that it would not be possible for them to share the professional life and the private one with the same ease as men did.

In Western Europe the image of the unmarried woman, happy with her status, appeared in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was associated with the western “modernity”. The woman from a well-off background, who manifested her interests in different art spheres, travelled a lot and acquired different foreign cultures. The model of a woman’s autonomous life first developed in England and the USA, and was fostered by legislative changes<sup>23</sup>.

In Bulgaria this image emerged in the painting from the 1920s – in the paintings of Vera Nedkova, Vera Lukova, Zoya Paprikova, Todorca Burova and Nevena Gancheva. The professional identity and confidence of the women were expressed in the self-portraits showing them with the artistic profession attributes – brushes, palette, etc. The modern city was the new frame of the representation of the woman – either in self-portraits or portraits of women with modern dresses, with short-cut hair immersed in the scenery of high buildings and electric street lamps.

After the World War I, the presence of women artists in the representative exhibitions both in Bulgaria and abroad became more tangible. At that time new art societies appeared such as Native Art (1919), Independent Artists

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<sup>23</sup> Cecile Dauphin discusses those changes in *Femmes seules* (Duby, Perrot 2002: 529).

(1920) and North-Bulgarian Artists (1920) and more women joined those societies and began to exhibit their works. However, it seems that the interest of the women artists in participating in the institutions of the artistic life remained unformulated till the end of the 1920s, when, in 1928, the Society of the Women Artists was established. We can assume that the joint societies did not suffice to solve the problem of women's art socialisation. Another, maybe more substantial, reason was the activation of the women's movement at that time in Bulgaria.

The retrospective exhibition "A Hundred Years of Bulgarian Painting" (1820-1920), organised in Sofia in 1935, displayed the works of two women artists – Elena Karamihaylova and Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova<sup>24</sup>. This participation in the retrospective, representative of Bulgarian art, was recognition of their position in the artistic life and the history of modern art.

### **Women Artists Society Exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s**

In 1924 Bulgaria saw the foundation of the "Women with Higher Education Society". It launched the first female exhibition in 1928, which turned into an annual event in the 1930s. It was in relation to those exhibitions that the art critics focused their attention on the issue of the female presence in the artistic life.

The first Bulgarian female exhibition was held from 1 to 14 January 1928 in the Fine Arts Academy. What was displayed were oil paintings, drawings, etchings, sculptures and ceramic works. Among the participants were: Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova, Nevena Gancheva, Vera Ivanova, Ekaterina Savova, Nataliya Futekova, Olga Shehanova, and Vaska Emanuilova.

The female exhibition caused different reactions. There were views concerning the social meaning of the woman's artistic manifestation: "we saw the woman's talent and her creative power in the field of arts, which was an already known fact as we had rarely had a joint exhibition without the participation of women artists. [...] however, this exhibition made it possible to realise the results and the efforts of women in that particular field of art on a much larger scale as well as to broaden our notion of what women really are."<sup>25</sup> Such reviews stated the fact that women attended exhibitions on equal terms with men, but

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<sup>24</sup> This fact is mentioned in the article "On the First Bulgarian Women Artists" (Kamenova, Taseva / КАМЕНОВА, ТАСЕВА 1988: 18).

<sup>25</sup> From the world of art. *Hudozhestvena Kultura* [Art Culture] magazine, 1927-1928, iss. 5-6.

they pointed out that it was a much more effort-consuming activity for women and therefore, should be regarded as a great success. Exhibitions like the one in question, differentiating women's presence in art, had to consolidate that presence and make women feel proud of their achievements.

In artistic terms, "the exhibition was diversified by techniques and topics, and, to some extent, by certain trends"<sup>26</sup>. In this case, the concise comment of that art critic meant that the artistic manifestation was characterless or "nothing special".

Very indicative are Ivan Lazarov's, a sculptor and lecturer at the Fine Arts Academy, notes in his diary. "The Women Artists Exhibition. By initiating such an exhibition, the Society of Women with Higher Education aims, it may be assumed, to achieve different goals from the ones men have when they launch their own art exhibitions. Is this really the case? [...] It is imitation in the very sense of the word. Imitation mostly of the technical ways and means achieved by men. The choice of topics and their presentation is the same as the male ones. [...] Is the initiative of women with higher education sensible, do they not misdirect the Bulgarian woman artist by satisfying her ambition but not fostering the full swing of her true artistic creativity? It is a crime to plough the virgin soil of the female gifts and talent and sow the arid seeds of European culture."<sup>27</sup>

The view of the lecturer at the Fine Arts Academy was that within the academic European tradition, within professional art, the female artistic manifestation was more or less dilettante because men so far had created everything. It is understated that the domain of female creativity was the traditional and applied arts.

Nikola Balabanov, in his article on the Women Artists Society exhibition in 1935, also commented on the similarity of their works with "male art" and considered it inferior. "The Society's attempts [...] could not strengthen the image of the woman artist. Her art is still the traditional art of our times: looking for directions, adapting to social conformities, searching for Bulgarian nature, which the lyrical soul of the Bulgarian woman painter fails to feel in a different way."<sup>28</sup>

On the occasion of another exhibition run by the Society, Sirak Skitnik raised the central question: "Do men and women experience and perceive things in the same way? It is in the specific atmosphere determining the female

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> 12 February 1928. Ivan Lazarov Archive. Private property.

<sup>28</sup> Nikola Balabanov. Women Artists Society. *Zaveti* [Legacy] magazine, 1035, iss. 4-5.

attitude to the world that female art, no matter how imperfect it is, will acquire new intrigue, new value.

It is true that the Bulgarian woman artist goes through the period of study, orientation and learns from male artists' works of art because of necessity. However, this does not prevent her from consciously keeping her own identity, from imposing her particularity on her artistic works..."<sup>29</sup>

Similarly to Lazarov, Sirak Skitnik maintained the view that the specific gifts of women artists were best shown in applied arts. What underlined both the approval and art criticism and the recommendations to female art on behalf of men was the belief in the specificity of female nature and female abilities.

In 1938 Bulgarian women artists exhibited their works in Belgrade and Zagreb (there were 45 women painters and sculptors altogether and approximately 180 pieces of art). The exhibition was followed by an article in *Obzor*<sup>30</sup> [The Review], a Zagreb newspaper, raising the issue of the necessity for expressing "the peculiarities of the nature and mentality" of the female artist. The Bulgarian women artists were reproached for showing works that were "not specifically female or marked by any new abilities" and for not being "strong or individual enough" to present their own perception of the artistic problems ("different from the male perception" is what was read between the lines).

The professional merits and shortcomings of the women artists were defined through their "natural" qualities<sup>31</sup> in the language of the above quoted articles. This phenomenon was the common ground for the process of female professionalisation in the modern epoch<sup>32</sup>. That is why the criticism of the language, the focus on the texts has become so important for the history of women.

The opinion of a Czech female critic concerning the exhibition of Czech women artists in Sofia, namely that there were no reasons to look for essential differences between male and female art, was a rarity in the 1930s. N. Melnikova-Papoushkova wrote: "the Czech women artists have gained rights and opportunities [...]; today, they do not create female art, but art of women – art, which turns into all-human art"<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Sirak Skitnik. Women Artists Exhibition. *Zlatorog* [Golden Horn] magazine, 1937, iss. 5, p. 233.

<sup>30</sup> Contemporary Art Museum's archive, Belgrade.

<sup>31</sup> In Bulgaria, possibly elsewhere on the Balkans, there were artists like Vera Nedkova who refused to participate in women artists exhibitions to avoid finding themselves in the context of "female art".

<sup>32</sup> Cf.: Genevieve Fraisse, Michelle Perrot – *Ordres et Libertés*. (Duby, Perrot 2002: 15-17).

<sup>33</sup> N. Melnikova-Papoushkova. Contemporary Czech Women Artists. *Zlatorog* [Golden Horn] magazine, 1936, iss. 9, p. 427.

The above mentioned comments contain contradictions and ambiguities, similar to the positions of women in the artistic life. After the formal institutional inclusion of women in education, exhibition-hall life and art criticism reviews, it appeared that their manifestations were not obstructed. The situation in Bulgaria seemed liberal, but women still had to overcome the boundaries of the institutions, of the public and private space, of the profession connected with the financial security and of the amateurism that did not bring in profits. Women's problems used to aggravate in periods of economic crises.

### **Women write about art**

Today, when female names among those writing for magazines and books on art are numerous, we rarely have occasions to discuss the possible differences between the male and female status in the profession. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's names did not commonly appear in art criticism discourse. In terms of historical narratives women were an exception up to the World War I and even later.

Over the recent years, the status of the women involved in art criticism has been discussed in various forums<sup>34</sup>. That provoked me to look at the early narratives about modern art in Bulgaria with a view to studying the role of women.

In this part I will draw the attention to the art critical reviews and translations of Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova and Evdokiya Peteva-Filova's book about Ivan Milev as an attempt at widening the scope of the discussion on the formation of the *art history* discipline, the main interest being in modern art in Bulgaria.

### **Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova's articles and translations – their role in the modernisation of culture in Bulgaria**

Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova actively wrote, translated and published texts on art as an irrevocable part of the formation of the artistic life of modernity in Bulgaria from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century till the World War II.

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<sup>34</sup> One of these was the international colloquium "Les femmes écrivent sur l'art" (Women write about art) in Burgundy University in April 2008. [http://mshdijon.u-bourgogne.fr/msh\\_cnrs/Multimedia/Textes\\_Contextes/2007-2008/Femmes%20et%20Arts/Femme%20et%20art1.html](http://mshdijon.u-bourgogne.fr/msh_cnrs/Multimedia/Textes_Contextes/2007-2008/Femmes%20et%20Arts/Femme%20et%20art1.html)

The publications on art events and artists in Bulgaria and elsewhere as well as the studies of historical character were a major institution of modern artistic life, together with the art societies, art salons, art schools and academies, and exhibitions.

I will go through some biographical facts and circumstances: Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova was born in Plovdiv, in a highly educated family<sup>35</sup>. Her father was an important figure in the national independence movement. Aged 24, after graduating from the State Arts School in Sofia, she married Boris Vazov, who had studied law in Paris and worked as a diplomat. Boris Vazov was a younger brother of the writer Ivan Vazov, an acknowledged classic of Bulgarian literature. Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova and Boris Vazov had three daughters.

Born five years after the establishment of the modern Bulgarian State, Konsulova-Vazova realised her diverse talents during the creation of a culture based on a European model – different from the inherited one. She enrolled at the State Arts School, a year after its foundation. Konsulova-Vazova was one of the first women artists in modern Bulgarian art. She was a member of the first art society in Bulgaria and participated in the early presentations of modern Bulgarian art abroad. She was the first woman artist to launch a solo exhibition in Bulgaria.

She published articles on foreign artists like Giovanni Segantini<sup>36</sup>, Constantine Meunier<sup>37</sup>, and Jean François Millet<sup>38</sup> in the most significant Bulgarian art magazine from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – *Hudozhnik* [Artist]. The texts had a broad referential character and, without specifically referring to other articles, conveyed knowledge and impressions gathered mainly from publications abroad in a literary manner and with an artistic bias. At the same time, Konsulova-Vazova's articles were fostered by her impressions from her first tour round Europe – Munich, Rome, Milan and Venice – in the summer of 1905. Her early art criticism publications on art in Europe had an overt enlightening underpinning.

Konsulova-Vazova was the first Bulgarian to translate an art history narrative on European art – the then topical “History of Painting” by the prestigious German author Richard Muther (1860-1909), published in Leipzig

<sup>35</sup> The most thorough edition about Konsulova-Vazova is: (Nikolaeva / Николаева 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Giovanni Segantini. *Hudozhnik* [Artist] magazine. 1906-1907, year II, iss. 4-5, p. 14-18.

<sup>37</sup> Constantine Meunier. *Hudozhnik* [Artist] magazine. 1906-1907, year II, iss. 3, p.21-22.

<sup>38</sup> Jean François Millet. *Hudozhnik* [Artist] magazine. 1906-1907, year II, iss. 9-10.

in 1900-1902. The library series of *Hudozhnik* [Artist] magazine (Sofia) issued part one of the two-volume work<sup>39</sup> in Bulgarian in 1907. The edition was used by students and lecturers in art history classes as well as by writers, artists, and different educational milieus.

E. Konsulova-Vazova was aware of her own mission in the building up of modern art culture in Bulgaria. The formation of artistically-educated milieus in Bulgaria required knowledge of art history narratives of European art as well as of contemporary art practices. Belonging to a small country with a national language almost without any use outside its boundaries made the acquisition of big European languages an irrevocable condition for the acquisition of European models and for the formation of modern culture. (I will point out that the norms of the modern Bulgarian language were actively being devised during the same decades after the establishment of independence.)

E. Konsulova-Vazova learned six foreign languages. She had been among the first active translators of European fiction since her youth. I do not specify “woman translator” here as there were few qualified male or female translators at that time and there is no reason for whatever differentiation. She translated novels and stories from a number of languages, among which French, German and English. She translated famous writers and works such as “New World” by Knut Hamsun<sup>40</sup> and “Three Men in a Boat” by Jerome K. Jerome<sup>41</sup>, which were well accepted.

Apart from that, E. Konsulova-Vazova translated texts on art and published them in periodicals.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were few people who wrote about art, as mentioned earlier. Most often, those were artists, educated in European artistic centres. Sometimes journalists wrote about exhibitions. There was only one Bulgarian art critic who had had specialised education in art history – that was Andrey Protich, whose early articles have already been discussed in this chapter. He became the first curator of the first art department at the National Museum (archaeological and artistic)

<sup>39</sup> *Geschichte der Malerei*, 5 b., Leipzig 1900-1902. The English edition – London and New York – was in two volumes and came out in the same year, 1907, when the first of the two volumes was published in Bulgarian. Cf.: *The Dictionary of Art Grove*. 1996, vol. 22, pp. 385-386.

<sup>40</sup> Knut Hamsun. *New World*. Translated from German to Bulgarian by E. Konsulova-Vazova. Plovdiv, Sofia, 1917.

<sup>41</sup> Jerome K. Jerome. *Three Men in a Boat*. Translated from English to Bulgarian by E. Konsulova-Vazova. Sofia, 1923.

Elisaveta Konsulova-Vazova. Self-portret. 1919. Sofia City Art Gallery.



Richard Muther. History of Art. Sofia 1907. Translated by E. Konsulova-Vazova.



Cover of Issue 4, 1935 *Beseda* [Talk] magazine issued by E. Konsulova-Vazova.

of Bulgaria and wrote an art history entitled “50 Years of Bulgarian Art”, which will be discussed in chapter IV.

Till the end of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were few publications on art by Bulgarian authors and so were the translated articles. That situation changed tangibly after the World War I.

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When E. Konsulova-Vazova went to a big European cultural centre for the first time, in Munich, she was 23 (1905). Four years after her first short-term stay, in 1909, she returned to the city to specialise painting in the Dame Academy at the Women Artists Society<sup>42</sup>.

It was in Munich, during her first long-term specialisation, that her view of her own mission – to be a mediator between the achievements of European modernity and the cultural milieus and practices in the new Bulgarian State – was formed.

E. Konsulova-Vazova began to publish her critical articles on art in Bulgaria after she was thirty (the first one was from 1912), when she had acquired enough experience and confidence in the big museums, libraries and exhibition halls of Munich, Rome and elsewhere.

Her critical observations and assessments were always made from the position of an artist – she discussed the practical skills and got inspired by the process of art creation.

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One episode from E. Konsulova-Vazova’s life – outside her experience in art and art criticism – makes us consider the local specifics that influenced the value system and behavior of that exceptional person.

During the Balkan wars in October 1913, E. Konsulova-Vazova, aged 31 and already a mother of three kids (the youngest of whom was aged two at the time), enrolled as a volunteer Samaritan. She worked in military hospitals on the Bulgarian-Turkish border – in Yambol and Lozengrad, and in the cholera epidemics zone in Chataldzha. Her memories from those weeks were appalling<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> On this Academy see: Yvette Deseyve. *Der Künstlerinnen-Verein München un seine Damen Akademie*. Herbert Utz Verlag, München, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Those memoirs entitled “Troubled Days” were published in: (Nikolaeva / Николаева 2002: 50-56).

It is two questions that make me go back to her war experience.

Which is this sense of duty – patriotic, historic, to the national state – that can be stronger than the affection for the nearest and dearest, for one's own children and that can drive one to join the war risking one's life? Is it appropriate in this case to see the idealistic national drive from the National Revival period – a period of both the Enlightenment and the emerging modernity<sup>44</sup>? Isn't it also an aspiration for equalising the modern woman to the man in terms of the traditional notion of his bravery?

The second question is why the shocking experience from the war did not find any representation in E. Konsulova-Vazova's work. The second wave of Expressionism in Germany, whose culture the artist knew very well, Futurism in Italy as well as all the manifestations of the avant-garde at the time were deeply marked by the traumas of the war. Konsulova-Vazova did not change her preferred topics and motifs, did not alter abruptly the style of her painting. Her art seems to have been untouched by her life experience from the war.

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It is important to know that Konsulova-Vazova did not write on avant-garde works from either abroad or from Bulgaria. Although she had a second long stay in Germany in 1920-1922, she did not publish any articles on either Expressionism or Bauhaus experience.

In the article "Today's Art" in *Slovo* [Discourse] newspaper from 1922, we read the following, bewildering from today's perspective, comments on contemporary avant-garde practices:

"Today the art of the west is ailing. There is a strong yearning for the primitive, for getting closer to the child (...) Others struggle to draw the abstract (...). There are even some – going even more to the extreme – who do not acknowledge even the ordinary means of painting and use coloured patches of textile, pieces of board, tin-foil, nails and glass – Dadaism. And their kin Cubism, Infantilism, Futurism – which tries to express all the moments of a movement in a single image (...). We cannot explain in short the peculiarities of every one of these movements but they have one thing in common: the breaking away from everything, totally ignoring, even hating past values."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> On the overlapping experience from these periods in West-European history see: Rumén Daskalov. *How to Conceive the Bulgarian National Revival*. (Daskalov / Даскалов 2002).

<sup>45</sup> "Today's Art", in the rubrics "Art Week". The *Slovo* [Discourse] newspaper. 1922, 24 June, issue 60.

The conservative predisposition in these observations can only be put down to the specific circumstances of the artistic life in Bulgaria. The short-term acquisition of modernity in Bulgaria – within a couple of decades only – predetermined the lack of prerequisites for sharing the pathos and energy of the avant-garde. The total negation of inherited experience on the part of the avant-garde movements was unacceptable in a milieu for which the traditional experience of the European modernity was a new value hard to achieve – “(...) never has a new movement been so totally negating the past as the new latest ones” – she wrote<sup>46</sup>.

E. Konsulova-Vazova never left the position of the enlightenment, which she had chosen since the very beginning, and she stated that those, otherwise great and significant artistic movements, could only disrupt the consistent development of a poorly prepared milieu. “We cannot have big waves in shallow waters. But even the smallest ripples can be harmful, not so much for the artists themselves as for our common art education.”<sup>47</sup>

In an article from 1923 on the occasion of Ivan Krilov’s exhibition<sup>48</sup>, E. Konsulova-Vazova pointed out that there was *almost nothing* from the rebellious spirit of the West in our art exhibitions. In the 1920s she still showed preference for a touch of the late Impressionism and Symbolism, which appeared in different variants in different European centres together with the avant-garde till the World War I. The conservative view of the artist’s mission as a national enlightener was opposed to the manifestations of the avant-garde in Bulgaria.

What can this “almost” contain related to the avant-garde experience in Bulgaria? Which were the artistic practices and phenomena that did not find a place in E. Konsulova-Vazova’s articles? In Bulgaria in 1919-1922 and 1923-1924 Geo Milev issued *Vezni* [Scales] and *Plamak* [Flame] magazines and there were other more short-lived magazines like *Crescendo*, which showed influential avant-garde movements and were part of them, even though more remotely. The exhibitions mentioned as significant in those magazines did not draw the attention of E. Konsulova-Vazova.

In the 1920s the art elite in Bulgaria began to stratify tangibly for a short while. The avant-garde-oriented small societies rejected the art-enlightening mission at the expense of an elite understanding of topical art. The highly

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ivan Krilov’s exhibition. The *Slovo* [Discourse] newspaper. 1923, 10 March, issue 272.

educated bourgeois milieus continued to maintain the national-enlightenment view from the first decades of modernity in Bulgaria, according to which the achievements of European art had to be acquired consistently and that the time for their complete acquisition had not come yet, thus they could not be negated. E. Konsulova-Vazova could not overcome the educated conservatism of her milieu.

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From 1927 to 1933, E. Konsulova-Vazova stayed in Prague together with her family due to the diplomatic position of her husband, Boris Vazov, there. During that period she launched solo exhibitions in Prague, Bratislava and Plzen. On her return to Sofia, E. Konsulova-Vazova resumed her activity of translating and writing critical reviews. In 1934, she began to issue *Beseda* [Talk] – a magazine about the home with a target audience of educated urban women – which came out until 1940. There she presented her views of culture, social life and the family.

The roles of the woman in modern society and family from the second half of the 1930s were in the centre of the publishing and social activities of the artist. Keeping her enlightenment pathos but also aware of the topical idea of modernising the everyday life, E. Konsulova-Vazova presented the changes in the material environment and the everyday life activities as a prerequisite for a new type of family relationships. She carried out her mission chosen in relation to the European models by publishing numerous materials, which she translated herself from German, French and English, as well as articles from Bulgarian authors (doctors, architects, etc.) who had been educated in European cultural centres. *Beseda* [Talk] magazine propagated the rational and comfortable furnishing of the home, which had to save time and to facilitate the everyday life activities to the maximum – keeping the hygiene, nutrition, bringing up the children, etc. The time free from household chores could be spent on education, social involvement and art by the woman. Among the articles published by E. Konsulova-Vazova in *Beseda* [Talk] there were texts raising the issue of the participation of women in the Parliamentary elections (The Bulgarian Woman Votes, 1936), the right of men and women for equal access to higher education (The Internal Guard – the Woman, 1938) and the rationalisation of household labour (The Housewife as a Social Factor, 1939).

In this environment of texts in the magazine, there were published articles on art too – most often art criticism of exhibitions in Sofia. Together with E. Konsulova-Vazova, other authors published critical reviews, even though less frequently.

It is impressive that the jubilee issues of the magazine included a large number of articles on women artists' exhibitions. E. Konsulova-Vazova wrote about and published reproductions of all the exhibitions of the Society of Women Artists in Bulgaria as well as of guest exhibitions of foreign women artists. Her critical reviews were informative, paying attention to the form and style, without any remote comparisons.

The active critical career of E. Konsulova-Vazova ended before the World War II (she was 59 years old in 1940). Her role in Bulgarian art criticism and cultural milieu was mainly in terms of the accomplished mission of modernising our culture and establishing the equal participation of women in it.

### **Evdokiya Peteva-Filova's Monograph on Ivan Milev**

In this part I will study Evdokiya Peteva-Filova's book because of a twofold interest: on one hand, this was the first significant monograph on a modern art artist from Bulgaria, and on the other, the author of this narrative was a woman.

The book about Ivan Milev by Evdokiya Peteva-Filova was written at the end of the 1930s and was published in 1940 as a premium of *Rodina* [Home Land] magazine, among whose contributors was Evdokiya Peteva-Filova.

Evdokiya Peteva-Filova graduated in philosophy and art history in Germany – Wurzburg and Munich, and then she specialised in Paris<sup>49</sup>. She was the first woman in Bulgaria who had had professional art history education. Her monograph on Ivan Milev was published at a time when there were few books on Bulgarian artists and those on foreign artists were mostly translated. Even in terms of the type of study – a monograph on a modern Bulgarian author – her work contributed to the establishment of the “art history” institution and to the historicising of modern art in Bulgaria.

In his article on the formation of the biographical history of art, Greg Thomas (Thomas 2002), giving France as an example, claims that biography was essential in terms of importance in art history narratives in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cf.: Encyclopedia of Fine Arts in Bulgaria, vol. II, p. 357.

century. Even when new methodologies appeared, such as the study of form and style or iconology, the biographical discourse was still the predominant one (Thomas 2002: 260).

Today, when reading the book on Ivan Milev, we should not forget that E. Peteva-Filova belonged to the same generation as she was born only four years after him. For her, Milev's art was contemporaneity, which had to turn into history after the artist's early death.

In most cases the first biographical narratives about artists – in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and before that - were written immediately after their death (Thomas 2002: 266). E. Peteva-Filova decided to write about I. Milev because his work impressed her – there were achievements in his work that had been highly appreciated not only in the Bulgarian artistic milieu. In Chavdar Mutafov's words they “could sustain any competition in any European exhibition” (Chavdar Mutafov, 1927). What's more, Ivan Milev was no longer alive, which made his work “closed’ and clear.

The choice was also undoubtedly influenced by the pre-war atmosphere at the end of the 1930s, when the topic of the national had once again become central. This time it was discussed in a relatively new and unacceptable today language, which contained words / notions such as “race”, “tribe”, “roots”, “national spirit”, “a healthy sense of form” and others, forming a clearly recognisable nationalistic discourse.

In the above mentioned article, Greg Thomas points out that the narrative about the artists, their lives and experience could link the unique work of art with the idea of the unified national culture (Thomas 2002: 260). That was one of the main reasons for the topicality of biography for art history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the time of the formation and establishment of the national states in Europe. E. Peteva-Filova pointed out the national belonging of the artist several times: “His talent seemed to be specially designed to serve the love for the Bulgarian...”; “He felt most of all Bulgarian, the son of his tribe...”; “Together with the individual talent of the artist, his nationality, his race and, in general, the time when he lived were also very important” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 18; 21; 113), etc.

However, the choice of artist could have been different had it been determined only by the social predispositions and political agendas. The suggestions of the “grandeur of Bulgarian history”, “Bulgarian character” and “Bulgarian nature” would have been easier with authors and works that had not

been part of the modernist wave in the country in the 1920s, as was Ivan Milev. What is important, however, is that E. Peteva-Filova chose to write about an artist who was of great significance for modern art in Bulgaria.

The luxury edition of the book makes an impression – with its high quality print and paper, with the 71 reproductions, eight of which were colour supplements. The circulation of the monograph was 4 000 copies<sup>50</sup>. Such a circulation of a book on art would be impressive even today. Most probably, though, that was the circulation of the magazine, with which the edition was connected. *Rodina* [Home Land] magazine propagated the ideology of the national state among its middle class target audience and had a relatively wide distribution. The favourable conditions of publishing the book were connected with the political conjuncture – the author’s husband, Bogdan Filov, was Minister of National Education in 1938-1940, and Prime Minister and Minister of National Education<sup>51</sup> since February 1940.



Cover and a page from: Ivan Milev. Sofia 1940 by Elisaveta Peteva-Filova.

<sup>50</sup> Cf.: Bulgarian Books 1878-1944, vol. IV.

<sup>51</sup> Cf.: Bulgarian Governments. Chronology of Political Life. Encyclopedia.

The book consists of five parts, entitled “Life and Character”, “Decorative Style”, “Captured by Impressionism”, “Milev’s Creative Process” and “Ivan Milev and His Time”.

The biographical narrative about Ivan Milev has a factual and a legendary aspect. When the biographical narrative about artists spread at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was most often a mixture of a positive account of facts and a captivating novel plot (Thomas 2002: 262). The events from I. Milev’s biography were close in time and there were many personal memoirs of his friends and colleagues intertwined in the narrative. After the family history, the images of his mother and father, and the romantic memory of “the antique night” of the high school students from Kazanluk, there followed the legend of the rich foreigners who wanted to buy the student’s works and how he refused to sell them. One can even hear the voice of I. Milev, quoted by memory by his nearest and dearest.

The ideological line of the connection of I. Milev’s work with “native art” as a sole and only source of inspiration – “Europe did not give him anything” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 11) – is manifested particularly clearly in the first part of the book. In the last, fifth part, in which E. Peteva-Filova made some conclusions, we read the following: “Milev was almost self-taught.” Not only “Europe” but also the art education of the Academy in Sofia failed to contribute significantly to “his so independent, so lightning-like art” (Peteva-Filova 1940: 107). The modern myth of the artist as an absolutely original figure that had been self-created here distinctly stands out. Along with that, however, the fundamental significance of the national belonging is clearly stated: “All that Milev has created [...] comes as a natural result of his original character, [...] of his Bulgarian race” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 119).

Outside the legend of the power of the natural talent and the uniqueness of the artist, however, the author gave a critical evaluation of the degree of development at which the work and life of Ivan Milev ended. It is mentioned several times in the text that as an artist I. Milev remained “immature and incomplete” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 14, 17, 110-111, etc.).

In her specific analysis, the author made comparisons with Expressionism (p. 35 – “expressionist drawing”, p. 36 – “Expressionism”, p. 66 – “decorative Expressionism” and again on p. 118, p. 120, and p. 130). Impressionism is mentioned in part three, entitled “Captured by Impressionism”, though it does not mean the movement of Impressionism in the historical sense.

E. Peteva-Filova did not use Expressionism and Impressionism in the sense of the known European art tendencies. Contrary to Chavdar Mutafov or Geo Milev in the 1920s<sup>52</sup>, the author did not try to define them as notions but used them only to define the specifics of the style peculiarities and changes in I. Milev's works.

In the comparison / contrast of the *decorative* and *impressionist* works of the artist in the second and third parts of the book, E. Peteva-Filova defined the former as *linear* and *expressive* and the latter – actually she meant the water colours - as *pictorial* and *impressionist*. The definition “impressionist” was used as a synonym of “pictorial”, or “non-decorative” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 78). In this hierarchy, “pictorial” stood higher than the “decorative” and “constructivism” – a definition which, like “impressionism”, did not have anything in common with the term used for the specific artistic movement (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 94).

The word / notion “style” in the book is a central one. It is present in the title of part two – “Decorative Style”. The form and style definitions *linear* and *pictorial*, used in E. Peteva-Filova's book (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 71), are one of the five basic pairs in Heinrich Wölfflin's study “Basic Notions in Art History”, published in 1915. That study had a strong impact on the disciplinary field of art history and E. Peteva-Filova, as a German graduate, was undoubtedly familiar with it, even though she did not quote it. Her interest in the study of I. Milev was, to a great extent, concentrated on form and style issues. At the same time, however, she interestedly told plots in connection with some of the compositions.

The use of the word “expressionism” in E. Peteva-Filova's monograph, even though it did not refer to specific manifestations of German Expressionism, Fauvism in France or other related European phenomena, makes an impression because of the political context of the appearance of the book. I will remind you that in 1937<sup>53</sup> there was an exhibition, called Entartete Kunst, in the Archaeological Institute in Munich. Entartete Kunst showed as non-art paintings by modern artists, of Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, etc., which, after the exhibition, were burned in public (more than 4 800 works) in Berlin,

<sup>52</sup> See chapter III of the present study – the part discussing the idea of “Expressionism” in the texts by the two authors.

<sup>53</sup> In the same year, in 1937, there was a Universal Exposition in Paris – the last one before the World War II.

in the Fire Brigade yard<sup>54</sup>. After that public retribution with modernisms in Germany, the use of words like “expressionism”, “fauvism”, “futurism” and all kinds of “-isms” could only have a negative connotation. In the last, summarising part of her book, E. Peteva-Filova stated: “Undoubtedly, Ivan Milev is in many respects a modernist” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 118-119). The unproblematic use of the attributes “expressionist” and “impressionist” and the positive connotation of the use of “modernist” in the book, published, as mentioned already, with generous financial support and with relatively large circulation by *Rodina* [Home Land] magazine, representative of the cultural policy in Bulgaria at that time, can only convince us that the negation of the modernist tendencies was not declared officially in our country.

The fourth part, called “Milev’s Creative Process”, is the shortest of all. There, E. Peteva-Filova discussed the drawing “by nature” / “among nature itself” and “drawing by imagination” which I. Milev had chosen. She mentioned the importance of the “memory” in his paintings (Peteva-Filova 1940: 107-108). According to the author, his art was not affected by any “sensitivity” and that’s why it was “abstract”. Again, like the style definitions that we have already discussed, “abstract” did not connect with certain trends in European art. The hidden references to H. Wölfflin in the opposition of the “linear” and “pictorial” beginning are easily recognisable.

As other narratives from that time presenting modern art in Bulgaria, E. Peteva-Filova’s book on I. Milev lacks any references whatsoever to either foreign art historians or to Bulgarian authors who had been writing about the artist. And they were not few. Before her monograph, there were longer texts or shorter articles on I. Milev’s art written by: Geo Milev in *Zarya* [Ray], *Vezni* [Scales], and *Plamak* [Flame] magazines (Milev / Милев 1920; 1924); Chavdar Mutafov - on I. Milev’s exhibition in 1920 and shortly after the artist’s death in 1927 (Mutafov / Мутафов 1920; 1927; 1927b); Sirak Skitnik – also after the artist’s death (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак Скитник 1929b; 1929c); Andrey Protich – in “Fifty Years of Bulgarian Art” (Protich / Протич 1933: 72-91; 1934: 146) and others. She did not quote either the articles by Geo Milev, Chavdar Mutafov and Sirak Skitnik or the two volumes of Andrey Protich’s history.

The monograph did not reproduce documentary materials –catalogues of exhibitions in which Ivan Milev participated, letters, etc. The book begins with a full-length photographic portrait of the artist and ends with a list of the

<sup>54</sup> Cf.: *Entartete Kunst. The Dictionary of Art*, Grove. 1996, vol. 10, p. 413.

reproductions. The list contains only titles and none of the usual catalogue data – size, materials, location, etc. The lack of an archive and catalogue are a feature that differentiates this biographical presentation from the European practice formed in the modern times<sup>55</sup>.

The last, fifth, part – “Milev and His Time” presents the author’s idea summarising the development of art in Bulgaria after the Liberation with a view to defining Ivan Milev’s place in it. E. Peteva-Filova did not mention many names of Bulgarian artists. She pointed out Nikola Tanev, Konstantin Shturkelov and Boris Denev as important predecessors of I. Milev and that exhausted the specific names on the Bulgarian scene. Despite the unsatisfactory attitude to the artistic milieu, the terminological inaccuracies and some inadequate enough generalisations, the significance of the artist was clearly stated: “Undoubtedly, Ivan Milev is a modernist in many respects. Maybe because after the war modern art turned to the East, to primitivism, to primary expressivity” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 118-119). The author’s confidence in her judgement is among the main merits of the monograph.

What is of greatest interest to me in this final part are the pages where E. Peteva-Filova compared I. Milev’s works with those by Gustav Klimt – a central figure of Viennese Secession. In that comparison, she focused on numerous details and made a number of observations. Together with what E. Peteva-Filova called “psychological similarities” – we can consider the keen interest in psychology and psychoanalysis in the cultural milieus of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s - the author looked for the unifying cultural and historical link as well. She concluded: “The link between Milev and Klimt is the Orient” (Peteva-Filova / Петева-Филова 1940: 125). E. Peteva-Filova categorically stated her finding and argued it by giving specific supporting analyses.

In the final lines, the author concluded that I. Milev’s art was exceptionally original and set a great example in modern Bulgarian art. At the same time, she did not turn the artist into an idol: “Milev was a warrior for a new path, even though that path was not clear to him.”

That first Bulgarian monograph on a modern artist, written by an author with professional background, together with the concessions to the official ideology and the terminological hesitations and inaccuracies gave a clear assessment of I. Milev’s place in the history being created of modern art in Bulgaria.

<sup>55</sup> I have in mind the publishing of monographic studies catalogues with commentaries (catalogue raisonné) and long biographical introductions.