

# Art

CEU PRESS

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**Artistic Exchange in  
Communist Europe  
[1945–1989]**



## The Graphic Arts Biennials in the 1950s and 1960s: The Slim “Cut” in the Iron Curtain— The Bulgarian Case

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The biennials were initially created with the aim of promoting the national states—similar to the international exhibitions of the second half of the nineteenth century, but in a specialized art field. The first of these was the Venice Biennale, which started in 1895. The Biennial in San Paolo (1951) was based on the same principle, however, in combination with international curators' exhibitions, which were later introduced in the Venice Biennale.

After the Second World War, in the 1950s, the policies of the biennials took into consideration the situation of the Iron Curtain. In the second half of the twentieth century, periodical forums appeared putting forward alternatives to the national presentations. Among the most prestigious was *documenta*, founded in Kassel in 1955 and showing selected artists. In terms of form and style, the Iron Curtain in the second half of the 1950s seemed to separate the freedom of abstract art, whose main protagonists were artists from the United States and, in another variant too, *Art Informel*<sup>1</sup> in West-

1 “Art Informel” is a term designating a multitude of practices in painting after the Second World War till the beginning of the 1960s, mainly in France. What unifies all of those practices is the nonfigural image and spontaneity as well as the differentiation from the constructive abstraction (for example, Piet Mondri-

ern Europe, from the dogmas of socialist realism, forged in the USSR. The question of abstract art acquired a distinct political aspect.

In Bulgaria in the 1960s propaganda texts were published "targeting" abstract art. Among them, the book with the highest ideological rating was Atanas Stoykov's book *Criticism of Abstract Art and Its Theories* (Sofia, 1963, published by Nauka I Izkustvo [Science and art]). It was followed by *After the Decline of Abstractionism* by the same author (Sofia 1970, an edition of the Bulgarian Communist Party). These publications, with their vulgar ideologization of the artistic differences and peculiarities of nonrealistic images, would be of interest for a special commentary. In terms of form and style, "abstract" is used as a synonym of "decadent," "reactionary" and "hostile" from the positions of communist ideology. As far as Pop art is concerned, the opinion is that "the artist turns into a common copyist and combiner." He is "new clear evidence of the decline of contemporary western bourgeois painting."<sup>2</sup>

Today, it is surprising that, during the same years, works that were created, shown and given awards in forums in the West, beyond the Iron Curtain, were well known, at least from reproductions, to artists in Bulgaria. Stoykov's book from 1963, for example, includes reproductions, sometimes in color, of works by Jackson Pollock (p. 181), Antoni Tàpies (p. 190), Alberto Burri (p. 191), Alexander Calder (p. 203) and others.<sup>3</sup> Many of those who got hold of the book looked at the illustrations without reading the text in depth. It turns out that the myth of the artists being uninformed was to some extent due to deceptive memory or it was possibly created so as to defend the certain distancing of Bulgarian artists from what was happening on the artistic scene elsewhere. ("We did not have access to information about the topical tendencies.")

During the rule of the Communist Party, Bulgaria last participated in the Venice Biennale in 1964. ~~There was also the business that~~ the USSR participated, with a large group of artists representative of realism—including Alexander Deyncka, Vladimir Favorski, etc. In the same year, the award for foreign participation went to Robert Rauschenberg. In *After the Decline of Abstrac-*

an and De Stijl). The name, which turned into a general term, was first used by the French art critic Michel Tapié in 1952.

2 Atanas Stoykov, *Sled zanika na abstrakcionizma* (Sofia: Bulgarian Communist Party, 1970), 93.

3 The book had a circulation of 2,080 copies, which is quite a large circulation for Bulgaria, and the price of 2.50 leva made it affordable.

tionism, Stoykov exclaimed: “In the Venice Biennale of 1964 they went as far as to give first prize to Rauschenberg.”<sup>4</sup> The American Pop art in that edition of the Biennale was represented by Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg. The European media criticized the choice of the winner of the first prize. There was a strong reaction against American art in publications of the Soviet press. Stoykov, in the capacity of commissioner of the Bulgarian collection, published an article in *Izkustvo* magazine, in which the Biennale was presented as “captured” by American Pop artists.<sup>5</sup> After describing in detail the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Frank Stella, referring to the statements of the commissioner of the American presentation, Stoykov concluded that “today, there is not a trace of protest in the American Pop art trend.” That’s why, according to the ideologist of “socialist art,” Pop art did not deserve to exist.

Today, the reproductions in Stoykov’s article on the Biennale are of exceptional interest—they show works by American, European and Japanese artists and eight reproductions from the Bulgarian collection. The works of the Bulgarian authors looked archaic, as if they came from the decade prior to the Second World War and could be connected, especially the sculptures, with the ideological requirements—regarding theme, form and style—of “socialist realism.” At the end of the article, the commissioner concluded that Bulgarian art did not imitate Western art, but “confidently followed its own path—that of socialist realism.”<sup>6</sup>

In his book *In the Shadow of Yalta*, Piotr Piotrowski points out, not without grounds, that there has never been any real thaw in Bulgaria.<sup>7</sup> There were no alternative art groups and alternative art, in contrast to the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or Poland. There were no Bulgarian participants in art networks of artistic exchange that provided alternatives to the official channels.

Indeed, the invitations for participation in exhibitions abroad were sent not only through the official society—the Union of Bulgarian Artists; the graphic arts biennials, in particular, invited individually renowned artists. However, the international art forums themselves were not part of the field

4 Stoykov, *Sled zanika na abstrakcionizma*, 77.

5 Atanas Stoykov, “Sled zanika”, *Izkustvo* 9–10 (1964): 65–72.

6 Ibid.

7 Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 63 and 97.

of alternative manifestations. Yet, even in this situation of state control, there was a certain stir in the art milieu.<sup>8</sup> There were debates mostly concerning the form and style features of contemporary art. The look was directed to other artistic milieus from the socialist camp.

In the West, the motivation behind the periodical art forums was no longer the national comparison but the manifestation of the political will for promoting liberal art practices, the world competition between ideologies and places. In a short text on the topic, “Art and the Cold War” in the book *Art since 1900*, Rosalind Krauss points out: “With Germany, the battlefield of the capitalist-communist confrontation, the desire to flaunt the rewards of West German postwar reconstruction in the face of East Germany led to the establishment of an international exhibition, documenta, in Kassel, an industrial city in the northeast corner of the FDR, just a few miles away from an installation of international ballistic missiles pointed at the Soviet Union.” And further on: “The American entries in the early years stressed the importance of Pollock and the other abstract expressionists as well as the commercial splendor of Pop art.”<sup>9</sup>

Central and Eastern Europe rose to the challenge by launching their international art forums. The most important forums in the first decades after the Second World War included the newly founded graphic arts biennials (such biennials were also founded in the West in the 1950s and 1960s).

In the years after the Second World War, within the context of the Iron Curtain, graphic arts biennials were of particular significance. It is no accident that from the middle of the 1950s until the beginning of the 1970s, international graphic arts biennials seemed to mushroom. Graphic arts travel easily and the resources needed for graphic arts exhibitions are fewer compared to other cases. The graphic sheets, even with their increased sizes, were intended for small exhibitions and did not require big storage depots. Furthermore, the interest in the technical mastery and resourcefulness in the graphic prints protected them from the expectations/requirements for direct ideological connectedness.

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8 In 1961–62, there were heated discussions of exhibitions in the Union of Bulgarian Artists. The minutes from those discussions were partially published in *Izkustvo* magazine, issued by the Union of Bulgarian Artists.

9 Rosalind Krauss, “Art and the Cold War,” in *Art since 1900*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 424.

Today I am surprised to discover that in the Graphic Arts Biennial in Ljubljana in 1963, the first prize was awarded to Robert Rauschenberg, and in compliance with the regulations of the biennial he launched a solo exhibition there in 1965, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the forum and a year after his award at the Venice Biennale. It is interesting that Rauschenberg owes his first international distinction to Ljubljana. Both editions of the Biennial in Ljubljana—in 1963 and 1965—saw the participation of large groups of Bulgarian artists. They were able to present next to art figures such as Serge Poliakoff, Karel Appel, Gerhard Wind, etc. This is how the common exhibitions of artists from two politically separated worlds came about—this time in Central Europe.

I am trying to imagine whether Bulgarian artists knew beforehand about the (Western) European and American scenes and what exactly they knew. How did they combine in their minds the ideological requirements for the artistic image, most often set by Soviet art criticism, with the autonomy of art propagated in the American periodicals?

The most active artistic exchange in the first decades of the twentieth century, until the Second World War, carried out by the art milieus in Sofia, was with Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana. At the beginning of the century the artistic contacts were realized within the framework of Lada, the Society of South Slavic Artists. At the end of the 1920s—and particularly in the 1930s, in the period between 1928 and 1938—a lot of visits and joint exhibitions were organized. The exchange with the cultural centers of the Yugoslavian Kingdom happened at a time of favorable political conjuncture.

Together with the political circumstances, what was also important was the linguistic closeness with Western neighbors, which undoubtedly facilitated communication. The situation with the other neighbors was different. Even though on the territory of the Ottoman Empire there was some kind of exchange of a different character, in the twentieth century communication in the Romanian, Greek, and Turkish languages became more difficult and even impossible without special training. Communication was mainly held in other European languages (e.g., French).

Belgrade, and especially Zagreb and Ljubljana, were perceived by the Bulgarian art milieus as linking the “Eastern Slavs” with the modernisms of the West. When the very first exhibition of Lada was held in 1904, the Bulgarian

art historian Andrey Protich wrote in an article in *Misul* (Reflection) magazine that the Croatian section had “the biggest perfection and absolute independence in terms of form.” According to him, the Croatian artists had acquired the composition and the line, light, perspective, etc., to such an extent that “the visitor was captivated and dazzled by the joint impact of these form factors.”<sup>10</sup> We can find many more examples to support the significance of the modern art of the “western” Slavs for the Bulgarian artists and art critics, as well as examples of the coverage of the Bulgarian exhibitions in our neighbors’ press.

In 1928–29, Peter Morozov and Vasil Zahariev presented their prints at the graphic arts exhibition in Zagreb. Their participation was noticed and elicited many comments. Later, their participation was mentioned again by the critic.<sup>11</sup> In 1930, Morozov participated again in the graphic arts exhibition in Zagreb. In 1933, Bulgaria and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia drew closer together politically, and in this situation some reciprocal societies were founded: the Yugoslavian–Bulgarian League in Belgrade and the Bulgarian–Yugoslavian Society in Sofia. The initiatives of artistic exchange in that period were supported by these societies.<sup>12</sup> In December 1934, Georges Papazoff launched a solo exhibition in Zagreb. In Ljubljana, on the occasion of the exhibition (mainly of graphic art works) of the New Artists in 1936,<sup>13</sup> the critic of the *Jutro* (Morning) newspaper reminded the readers of V. Zahariev’s graphic art. The list of exhibitions and participations of the Bulgarian artists in Belgrade and Zagreb, and to a lesser extent in Ljubljana, as well as that of artists from those cities in Sofia is a long one. Except for the officially organized exhibitions, financially supported by the state—as was the case with the *Exhibition of Seven Bulgarian Artists* in Belgrade in 1933—all the rest of the presentations showed mainly graphic prints and drawings.

The Second World War and the ideological crisis in the newly formed camp of communist states at the end of the 1940s brought about the break in the relationship between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. In 1953, with the mutual

10 Andrey Protich, *Misul* 14.7 (1904): 392.

11 Mihaylo S. Petrov, *Pravda*, 26 September 1933.

12 Krustyoy Manchev, *History of the Balkan Nations 1918–1945* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2000), 184.

13 On the artistic exchange with Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana in 1934–36, see Irina Genova, *Modernism And Modernity: Difficulties for Historicizing: Art of Bulgaria and Artistic Exchanges with the Balkans during the First Half of XX c* (Sofia: Ed. IDA–Krasimir Ganchev, 2004), 177–211.

cooperation agreement between Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey, Yugoslavia temporarily got closer to the West. This agreement fell apart in 1956.<sup>14</sup> The relationships between Yugoslavia and the states from the Soviet Bloc, Bulgaria included, began to normalize in 1955 with Nikita Khrushchev's historic visit by train to Belgrade in May–June. However, Yugoslavia did not enter the Warsaw Pact and strived after an independent policy. Following Tito's initiative, it became one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Nations Movement<sup>15</sup> in 1955.

For Bulgaria the artistic exchange with Yugoslavia became a fact at the beginning of the 1960s. In 1955, the Bulgarian graphic artist V. Zahariev (1894–1971) participated in the First International Biennial in Ljubljana; however, it was in 1963 that a large group of Bulgarian artists participated in the Biennial for the first time. In the 1960s, the former Yugoslavia maintained active contact and exchanges with Western Europe. For Bulgaria, on the contrary, such contact was for the most part limited to an exchange with communist countries.

As far as the limitations of artistic exchange are concerned, the graphic prints were very much an exception. Bulgarian artists and their graphic works successfully participated in a number of exhibitions in different cultural centers in Europe and the United States from the beginning of the 1920s into the 1930s.<sup>16</sup>

After the Second World War, Bulgarian artists presented graphic art works in the biennials in San Paolo (founded in 1951), and in specialized graphic arts biennials in Ljubljana (founded in 1955—the same year as documenta was founded in Kassel), Banska Bistritsa (a biennial for wood carving, founded in 1968), Krakow (founded in 1966), and Florence (from 1968 to 1978). The graphic arts biennial in Ljubljana was just one of many examples, but it was of great significance in the 1960s. The change in artistic problems after the war and the topicality of the abstract image generated more interest in the graphic print, and in the possibilities of the different graphic techniques in terms of color and texture. The number of the artists involved

14 Maurice Vaisse, *Les relations internationales depuis 1945* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990).

15 Manchev, *History of the Balkan Nations*, 220.

16 Irina Genova, "Vasil Zahariev and Bulgarian Graphic Arts Abroad between the Two World Wars," in *100 Years of Vasil Zahariev's Birth*, ed. Dimiter Balabanov (Sofia: DIOS, 2000), 46–57.



in graphic arts grew not only in Bulgaria but elsewhere, too. In Bulgaria at the end of the 1950s and during the 1960s graphic artists were defined professionally. In that period the focus on the specifics of graphic arts was to some extent a kind of protection against the ideological requirements for an expanded plot and illusory object, and space representation. Many of those who started their career as graphic artists later tried to break away from these types of restrictions.

Graphic prints in Bulgaria showed different form and style origins: one of those was decorativism, going through ornamental stylization—rhythm, symmetry, etc. Another one was linked to the experience of Western art (from the point of view of Bulgaria, Ljubljana, and Krakow were also to the West) in the multitude of abstract forms. Combining stylization methods, the artists looked for points of contact both in traditions—that were seen as national—and in the contemporary art of the West.

Graphic techniques lead to new surface qualities. Purely material prerequisites turn into an integrating factor of the artistic impact. In Bulgaria, this broad movement was not consistently thought of and theoreticized, but it happened in the artistic practice. Yet, figurative aspects were in one way or another always present in Bulgarian graphic arts.

Decorativism in Bulgaria, just as elsewhere in the “socialist camp,” was manifested under the auspices of the declared tradition. Every time that, from the positions of the official ideology, doubts were cast over the realistic character of the graphic images, the critical discourse referred to the “democratic” and “national” traditions. In graphic prints—similar to popular arts, medieval book decoration, and the “Bulgarian National Revival”—line, color, and rhythm were more or less emancipated from nature; they were autonomous.<sup>17</sup>

Articles by Bulgarian critics pointed out that, because of the multistep creation of the printing cliché and the character of the print itself, the object-space and tonal modeling with color was not inherent in graphic arts (in contrast to painting and drawing). The graphic techniques, despite their differences, required the flatness of the color spot and of the composition as a whole, etc.

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17 Maximilian Kirov, “National Features of Graphic Arts in the Exhibition (Exhibition of the Artists from Sofia ’65),” *Izkustvo* 2 (1966): 17–23.

In this respect, in the best examples from the 1960s, the graphic technical executions and the materiality of the work were integrated in a complex overall artistic suggestion.<sup>18</sup> The artists and critics in Bulgaria from the 1960s showed an interest in the expressiveness and possibilities of the material. Some characteristic aspects of the modernisms were manifested in the graphic arts tendencies. The aspiration for the work was not to provide meaning and represent, but to create suggestions analogous to those of mountains, terrains, and bodies. Clement Greenberg wrote: “content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”<sup>19</sup> This inclination could be called an interest in the “material” abstract.<sup>20</sup>

Among the works that synchronized best with some international art milieus were the graphic prints by Todor Panayotov (1927–1989), Borislav Stoev (1927), and Rumen Skorchev (1932). Panayotov’s graphic works attract with their aspect of nature’s creations and geological forms with embedded memories. Landscapes and terrains, human figures and faces—concentrated, tense and at the same time seemingly permanent traces and layers in the prints—throw the viewer out of the conventions of everyday life. For Panayotov, as well as for other artists in the field of graphic arts, the act of creating the print turned into a study and transformation of the materiality, of the printing cliché and paper. The new surface qualities in the 1960s and developments in intaglio printing and lithography techniques, and the material peculiarities of the print itself generated new meanings and impact. The complexity of the print and the large scales were a common tendency in the international graphic arts biennials, which were on the increase in the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. In the artist’s archive we can see the notes he made on the catalog pages regarding his foreign colleagues’ works.

The fast acquisition of more complex technological processes and the use of color began to be manifested in Bulgaria in exhibitions from 1962. The same year, Panayotov and Stoev presented color lithographs. In 1963, a large

18 Irina Genova, “On the Drawing and the Graphic Print from the 1960s,” *Izkustvo* 2 (1988): 28–34.

19 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

20 Arthur Danto opposed this form of the abstract, as discussed by Greenberg, to another kind, which he called “formal abstract,” for example, in neoplasticism. A. C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 72.

number of etchings were shown at a joint art exhibition in Sofia. The size of the graphic prints in the exhibition halls grew bigger.

On the international scene, at the Biennial in San Paolo, Panayotov received a diploma for *Head*, done with a litho-etching technique. He also participated in the international graphic arts biennials in Ljubljana (1963, 1967) and Krakow (1966, 1968). Stoev was a regular participant in the biennials in Ljubljana (1963, 1965, 1967) and Krakow (1966, 1968). Skorchev first appeared on the international scene a bit later, in 1969, and in 1970 he was awarded a gold medal at the Second International Graphic Arts Biennial in Florence.

The graphic art works of the above-mentioned artists from Bulgaria excluded mimetic representation, but not figurative representation. They seemed not to have felt the need to radicalize abstraction. In graphic art the impact of the gesture, of the body, the creation of the print as an object was different from that in painting. The creation of the matrix and the making of the print were analytical activities, divided in stages and abstracted as gestures from the surface, created as a result, of the graphic sheet.

In Panayotov's landscapes and "terrains," done as intaglio prints in 1965–66<sup>21</sup> (and later as series of variations), the print creates a texture, complex color spots, and intense forms (Plate 24.1 and Plate 24.2). The graphic work has a strong impact with its rhythm, with the deep black and dazzling white cuts, with the tension between the neutral sheet and the repeatedly corroded plate, which transforms the paper. His works show figurative elements, but the materiality of the prints has been abstracted from them. The eyes are tempted to get a close-up. The tactile sensations, caused by the color, spot and texture, lead us to become "optically unaware."<sup>22</sup> The dramaticism of the image lies in the relationship/clash of the positive/negative; in the harmony/juxtaposition of forms, lines, and colors; in the preservation/deletion of traces. There is no history, subject or detail that is susceptible to a verbal narrative. There is a clear horizon and substances reminding us of rocky surfaces and soil. Orange-red inks erupt like lava. It is not the object but the spot that matters,

21 Two of them, done as color etching and aquatint, were presented at the International Graphic Arts Biennial in Ljubljana in 1967, and another one at the International Graphic Arts Biennial in Krakow in 1968.

22 The term was used by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction" (1936).

with its color, texture, and relations. The stimuli, as before, in the early works of the artist, boil down to impressions and states caused by the tangible reality, but they seem to have been mapped by the print in color, light, and tactility. “The graphic moment” turns into one of meaning.

Is the question of the essence of the print, of the figurative and the abstract, of materiality and meaning an aspect of the modernist paradigm? Are these problems universal, deprived of social and local dimensions? Is it sufficient to interpret Panayotov’s works or those by any of the above-mentioned Bulgarian artists in the common European perspective, or in the cultural context of the society of that time in Bulgaria—communist/socialist? I am aware of the “dual” presence of the works—in the closed locality and in the open environment of the international biennials. Can we then consider a duality of meanings?

The modernist paradigm—transforming the form and the work’s materiality itself into meaning—began to be perceived as conservative and even retrograde in Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s. In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in the “socialist camp,” the study of one’s own expressive means—of graphic or any other arts—at the end of the 1950s and 1960s, as mentioned at the beginning, had not only artistic but also political dimensions. However, the political aspect is situational, and today it is difficult to give an account of how and why the complication of the print techniques, the denial of the narrative, and the interest in abstraction were perceived as an emancipation from ideological power.<sup>23</sup> The missing art of the resistance was compensated for by universal and antinarrative images.

The founding of the International Graphic Arts Biennial in Varna in 1981 confirmed the role of this kind of forum in the contacts of the Bulgarian art milieu abroad during the early period of almost complete isolation. The Biennial in Varna became possible due to the contacts and long-standing experience of the Bulgarian artists from graphic arts biennials in Europe and elsewhere. Although it was a bit late with regard to the common interest in graphic arts, later than its peak, and away from the contacts between the al-

23 I cannot retain myself from recalling the famous lines of Jaroslav Hašek, the name of the political party founded by his character, the Good Soldier Švejk: “The Party of Moderate Progress within the Bounds of the Law.” This expression became a folklore refrain in Bulgaria as well as a humorous explanation of any nonradical attempt at emancipation from the constraints of ideological dogma.

ternative art milieus in the communist countries, the Graphic Arts Biennial in Varna was the first and only forum in Bulgaria from the time of the rule of the Communist Party that presented a wide range of artistic tendencies and artists from Cuba to Japan, without proclaimed thematic and form and style restrictions.<sup>24</sup>

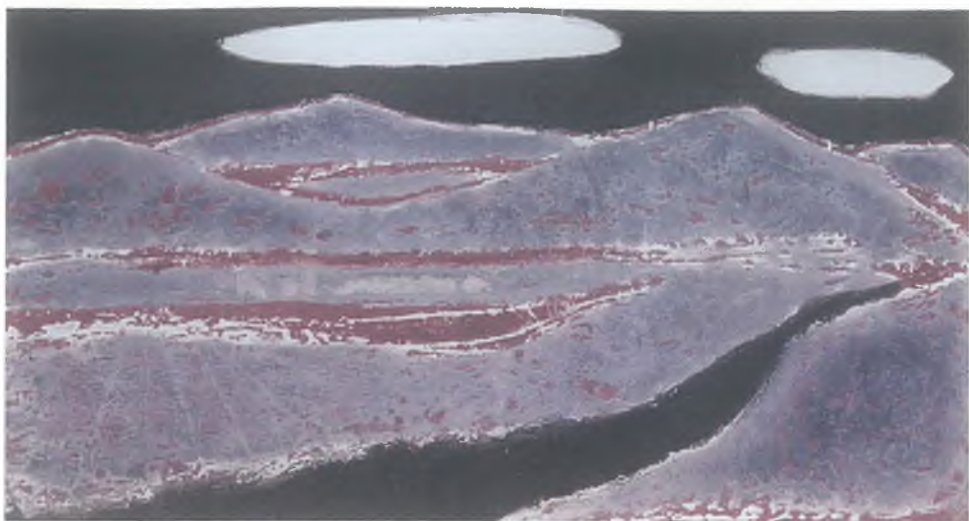
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<sup>24</sup> The other international forum from this period was the Engaged Painting Biennial in Sofia.



*Plate 24.1.*

Todor Panayotov, *Landscape I*, 1966, etching. Courtesy of Elena Panayotova.



*Plate 24.2.*  
Todor Panayotov, *Landscape II*, 1966, etching. Courtesy of Elena Panayotova.