

LUDMILA PEIERAJOVA' (CZECHOSLOVAKIA)

From the Avant-garde till the Present

(ALEXANDRA EXTER AND ESTER ŠIMEROVÁ)

~~Ladies and Gentlemen,~~

(and Tbilisi)

On the occasion of the AICA Congress in Moscow I would like - in this short contribution of mine - to draw attention to the, till today little known, routes along which modern art and the overgrowing of its sprouts reached the developed forms of art at the end of the twentieth century. As a matter of fact I am thinking of two painters - teacher and pupil - the Russian cubo-futurist and constructivist Alexandra A. Exter, who had been active in Paris since the mid-twenties - and the Slovak painter Ester M. Šimerová, the Nestor of the Slovak art avant-garde, till today active and one of the prominent personalities of contemporary Slovak painting.

While the more advanced Czech culture created mature forms of modern art as early as in the time before World War I, objective reasons caused the retarding of this development in Slovakia. Only the establishing of the Czechoslovak republic made possible a quick catching up on this delay. Since the beginning of the twenties influences of modern art appeared in Slovakia in the form of offshoots of impressionism, re-shaped into an expression of a specific character. The mediator of the majority of these and further contacts was Prague. There were very few direct connections to Paris and other centres. It was, before all, Chagall, Matisse, to a lesser extent Picasso, or some other artists who influenced the forming of the modern Slovak painting. It is true that the then peripheral situation of the Slovak painting was not harmful to its autochthonous development. On the contrary, it perhaps protected its originality from mere imitatorship. Painters like Martin Benka, Miloš Bazovský, Ľudo Fulla, Mikuláš Galanda and other founders of modern Slovak art managed to join both the national and the world art in their works and thus contributed to the European art development.

This goes in a high degree for the artist whose way to her own expression was to a great extent different. Ester M. Šimerová / born in Bratislava in

1909 / is the only Slovak artist who owes all her art education to Paris. If we say Paris - it does not comprise all because after a short stay at the Académie Julien, she joined the Académie d'art moderne at the head of which was Ferdinand Léger. Here she studied Composition under Alexandra Exter. In spite of the fact that among her teachers were also other very attractive personalities - like Léger, Marcoussis, Ozenfant - the traces of whose influence are obvious in her early works - she finally decided to continue her studies as a private student of Alexandra Exter. Those were the years 1930 - 32. On her return home she maintained contacts with her teacher regularly visiting her in Paris. Last time it was after the war when Ester M. Šimerová was one of the Czechoslovak delegates at the UNESCO Conference.

The impulse for preparing this contribution was not only the double jubilee - the 80-ieth birthday of Ester M. Šimerová and the 40-ieth anniversary of the death of Alexandra Exter, whose deserted grave lies in Fontenay - aux-Roses near Paris, but - above all - the real import of their relation.

The publication of documentary materials and artistic works of Alexandra Exter, so piously preserved by her Slovak pupil in her studio in Liptovský Mikuláš, is at a preparatory stage only. But at present the name of Alexandra Exter is repeatedly mentioned in chapters about the Russian and Soviet avant-garde and at exhibitions in many countries of the world. Her exhibitions were held in the seventies in Paris and New York and in 1986 there was a small exhibition of her theatre designs ^{in Moscow}. Her work has also been shown at recent exhibitions of Soviet revolutionary art. We are right to say that interest in her work has been growing from year to year. After studies at the art school in Kyjew, where she prepared the first modern exhibition under the name Zveno in collaboration with David Br-Burljuk, Alexandra A. Exter left for Paris to stay there for long. In 1908 - 1914 she divided her activities between Kyjew, Paris and Moscow.

She exhibited works with cubists and futurists in Moscow and Rome and took part in exhibitions in Paris. She was regarded as the official emissary of Parisien cubism. But the artful and aesthetising cubism did not appeal either to her or to the majority of the Russian avant-garde painters and that is why they transformed it into forms of cubo-futurism. Alexandra Exter was able to accomplish the symbiosis with futurism due to the fact that in 1914 she shared her studio in Paris with Ardeng Soffici. At that time she was seeking the rules of a rhythmic and dynamic composition in her paintings and collages. She was the first to use the term of a "compositional construction" in her article published in Kyjew in 1912. She rejected the cubistic "contemplation" in favour of an "active dynamic construction" as it appeared later in the works of her Russian associates - the constructivists. We cannot deal more thoroughly with the works of this artist because we follow a different line of correlations. But still we want to mention her numerous designs of decorations and costumes for the theatre, that was indisputably her most important creative field. Since 1916 she had been working for the director Alexander Tairov. Constructivistic creations based on geometrical forms, on light and motion - were used in a new way on the stage. The same principles were applied to her costume designs. The climax of her work as costume designer were costumes designed for the utopian film *AELITA* made in Moscow in 1924. In the same year she took part in the exhibition of Soviet constructivists at the bienale in Venice but immediately afterwards she left for Paris to settle there for ever.

Her pedagogical activity was of great importance: in the revolutionary years she guided experimental courses of painting for children, in the years 1918 - 1920 she was the head of the school of art in Kyjew and she educated a number of constructivists, especially stage designers. She also participated in the development of monumentality in campaigning, her pupils decorated the town of Kyjew and the agitator trains. Eventually she was the head of Studio 8 at the VCHUTEMAS in Moscow where she

devoted herself to the research and teaching of constructivistically perceived painting.

On her arrival in Paris she taught composition and stage designing at the Académie d'art moderne, founded by her friend of long ago - Fernand Léger. It did not take long before she opened a private painting school of her own. Among several foreign students there was - as the only Mid-European - a Slovak painter. After many years Ester M. Šimerová evaluates as follows: "For me this school was and still is of an invaluable importance ... Its rationality gives an excellent support in times when intuition and phantasy are ~~in~~ damping or when they temporally disappear... The school did not limit personal development, but always protected the painter from a feeble liability to modishness." She also owed impulses to the studies of the vast fields of culture and art history and modern social sciences to Alexandra Exter's school. The education was orientated not only to painting, but also to glass and china decorating, modelling, illustration and of course to stage designing. Ester M. Šimerová ~~fully~~ has fully exploited and applied in her lifelong art activity the universalism of this constructivistic methodological orientation that was innovated in the sense of the period and the Parisien setting and combined with synthetic cubism, purism, in applied art with Art-Deco.

In her painting she continued where her teacher broke off. At the beginning of her stay in Paris Exter tried to restore the picture in the sense of purism against the constructivistic negation of it. Her pupil, Ester M. Šimerová, started from this stage and from the beginning of the thirties she had been introducing new values, principles of the Russian-French avant-garde into the Slovak painting, transforming and expanding them and sensitively reacting to the changing conditions of the period and the surroundings.

Her work of a painter has grown to impressive greatness during the dramatic events of the past decades. Her original starting points were enriched in several directions. Before all in stressing the contents and the meaning-

fulness of the picture. In her presentation the art construction is the bearer of her life credo. In her sign figures of man and in the objects of her still lifes. Her relation to nature is a significant amplification of her original programme. Šimerová continually enriches the too speculative principles of composition by a sensitive study of nature. She extracted many harmonies of forms and colours out of the Slovak mountaineous landscape. She interprets the dynamics of nature phenomena, the aesthetic values of nature structures. She also actualized original starting points of civilization by depicting real constructions in progress and other changes of the landscape. Her painted paraphrases are inspired by classical and other remote cultures. They are the confirmation of the continuity of the humanizing mission of art.

Making full use of her all-round art education, Ester M. Šimerová, has created several monumental works during her long artistic career.

Let us mention the ceiling painting in the concert hall of the Bratislava castle, tapestry designs- for instance the tapestry " View out of a spaceship" for the House of culture in Banská Bystrica and the design of the textile curtain for the theatre in the House of culture in Liptovský Mikuláš. She devoted herself to painting on china and on other objects, to collages, to painting on stucco cameos - these are free illustrations to quotations of world poetry, to theatre costume designs and illustrations.

Concluding we can confirm that the case, the outlines of which could be only briefly presented, is an extraordinarily interesting phenomenon of cultural reception and its creative innovation in concrete historical and social conditions. The Slovak painter is an isolated example of a consequent developing of the heritage of the avant-gardes at the level of a new period, contemporaneity, its spiritual contents and of art sensibility reflected in the art of today.