

Lithuania

I. Art during the search for national Identity

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Art Collecting in Lithuania: Every End is a new Beginning

Nevertheless, as the national movement was expanding, there grew the layer of Lithuanian intelligentsia, where the representatives of more profitable specialities – lawyers, doctors, engineers – joined the ranks who, having realized the importance of art in the process of national rebirth, actively supported young studying artists. In 1907 the first Lithuanian Art Exhibition was opened where the artists who had formed the art policy and artistic directions of up-coming Independent Lithuania took part – Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Petras Kalpokas, Pertas Rimša, Kajetonas Skliūrius, Adomas Varnas, Juozas Zikaras, Antanas Žmuidzinavičius and others, – who later on for thirty years consolidated in those ranks. Though the latter declared that they were representing democratic layers of Lithuanian inhabitants, but they really supported traditional – gentry – intelligentsia views, following artistic and aesthetic traditions of the 19th century without going into avant-garde experiments.

When the situation in Lithuania drastically changed – after the World War I when Lithuania regained its independence and Poland occupied Vilnius – the capital of the state was moved to Kaunas. There started the formation of cultural, social, economic and political life and the identity of the young country. The artists moved from Vilnius and actively joined those formation processes by founding artistic societies, educational institutions and also working themselves as officials, getting directly involved into the political life. In the beginning of the third decade of the 20th century the country authority could hardly support the development of artistic activities and at the same time they were, maybe, the only sponsors of art, because the population being impoverished during the war, could not afford to buy the goods 'not- of the - first- necessity'.

The aristocrats who were the main sponsors up till that time sold for a trifle their valuable collections accumulated during histories of families and those pieces of arts were usually bought by the farmers who could hardly understand anything in art. Namely for the latter the same as for the industrialists the economic initiative belonged and their attitude towards art was purely commercial. They were in a hurry to turn the money they gained (honestly or by machinations) to luxurious pieces of art, therefore, they used to buy the antique values most of all – copies of old pictures, statuettes, canopies and art of the East. In Kaunas there were opened several antique shops and the main suppliers of them were the Russians who retreated to the West via Lithuania and they tried to sell part of their belongings to earn for their journey. In this way a lot of valuable antique things appeared in the hands of Kaunas collectors and not only the pieces of art that later on, when the soviet occupation started, either because of poverty or because of fear to be exiled lots of collectors sold them for almost a trifle.

Collecting campaign acquired a new form, significance and scale when they started to get interested into the historical heritage of the country in order to form the guidelines of new national identity. They started to gather and collect everything that was connected with Lithuania – coins, post stamps, post-cards, pieces of arts and archaeological fossils. Everybody tried to collect – beginning with schoolchildren ending with priests, doctors and officials and also the artists themselves. Quite often independent agents were hired for the search of valuable things who even reached the far distant corners of Lithuania.

But this collecting had nothing to do with the passion for art: this collecting was based on patriotic, educational or commercial incentives. There can be separated only several single collectors – such as Vladas Daumantas, who had accumulated a valuable collection of the old art, books and furniture – who were quite well educated and truthful admirers of art gifted with a good taste. But even they could hardly accept the creation of their contemporary artists.

When visiting their art exhibitions typical viewers paid only for the ticket to enter the exhibition, but to their homes they used to select those pieces of art that were more suitable for their specific taste and their pocket. The artists could also hardly make their living from the state orders, and the state dictated traditional, academic aesthetics, monumentality and the ideas glorifying the nation and the authorities.

In the end of the third and the fourth decades, when the economic situation of the country became better, more and more rich visitors of the exhibitions used to purchase one or other piece of art during the *vernissages*. It became a peculiar etiquette that was even followed by the president Antanas Smetona, as well as simple officials, lawyers, doctors and priests. The houses of some buyers were famous of the abundance of the pieces of art, including the classic of Lithuanian poetry and the priest Maironis' house where next to antique pieces there were the works of the famous painters of those days Kazys Šimonis, Sofija Römerienė, Adomas Varnas, and also the sculptures of Kajetonas Skliūrius and Apolinaras Šimkūnas. But they did not become the real collectors as they formed the prototype of „occasional“art admirers by their single acquisitions.

At the same time the pieces of art were more often purchased by different managing institutions, stock companies and it was a sign of economic strength and cultural progress. Nevertheless, all the buyers gave priority to the elder generation artists, not the younger, much more into avant-garde artists, especially the to artists' group *Ars* – Antanas Gudaitis, Adomas Galdikas, Juozas Mikūnas, Antanas Samuolis, and Viktoras Vizgirda. Among the first ones, the most popular was Kazys Šimonis, the painter, as his art resembled the works of the classic of Lithuanian art and music M. K. Čiurlionis. Šimonis works depicted the modern *art deco* creation principles in the then society: decorativeness, superficiality and simulated deep symbolic content. In the field of commissioned art, there prevailed the genre of a portrait which did not reveal itself either by plastic or ideological novelty or

courage but it was predetermined by the taste of the clients.

Though in the third and fourth decades Lithuanian society had overcome the peasant like conservatism, became more modern, dynamic and open, but its youth, non-maturity and out of it coming non-determination, did not allow to freely developing the tendencies of avant-garde and modernism in art. Due to permanent efforts of the nation to survive, it had to investigate and base folk art and historical heritage, therefore, the traditions of vanguard developed together with traditionalism. Moderate avant-garde became an exceptional feature of Lithuanian modernism of the beginning of 20th century.

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Adomas Galdikas, Portrait of an old woman, 4th decade 20th century, oil on canvas, 57,8x45,5 cm, courtesy: collection Prof. Algimantas Miškinis presented to the National Art Museum of M.K. Ciurlionis in Kaunas



Petras Kalpokas, Front Yard, 1911, oil on canvas, 24x32 cm, courtesy: collection Prof. Algimantas Miškinis presented to the National Art Museum of M.K. Ciurlionis in Kaunas

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Printed: 2012-05-20 16:05