

Lithuania

## II. Some for the State, some for friends, some for oneself: art life during the Soviet occupation

**Neringa Cerniauskaite**

*Art Collecting in Lithuania: Every End is a new Beginning*

The World War II and the soviet occupation which lasted for almost fifty years, started the continuous, complicated and controversial period of Lithuanian art history.

Firstly, the new authority at the beginning of its 'reign' practically destroyed any collecting rudiments of private art collections – in soviet system there could not be any private art collections. 1945 – 1956 were the most difficult years and the period of the greatest repressions. Soviet power wished to centralize and monopolize the art market: there were founded the organizations controlling and executing functions for this mechanism – The Artists' union and all the professional artists were to belong to it, Art Fund and 'Art' centres. The authorities gave official orders via Art Fund and those orders were fulfilled by 'Art'centres and members of the Artists' union. Practically all valuable pieces of art of those days were taken to the state Art fund. Of course, the authorities controlled not only the movement of the pieces of art but also the pieces of art themselves: their themes and artistic language. Those artists, who did not wish or were not able to satisfy this system, disappeared from the exhibition life at all and created their pieces of art in the margins of life.

When the Stalin cult in 1956 was disclaimed, the period of the so-called 'melting' in Lithuania started – the artists started to look for modern plastic solutions more actively and make experiments, but the themes of their works changed slightly: war and victory topics were changed by maternity, techniques and achievements in science and urbanization topics. The artists looked for inspiration from the Lithuanian art of the fourth decade, especially *Ars* group plastic searching as they considered the group to be the most modern of the time. But the experiments of such artists as Silvestras Džiaukštas, Vytautas Gečas and Jonas Švažas were rather moderate, only Vincas Kisarauskas, Valentinas Antanavičius and Kazimieras Zimblytis distinguished themselves by more radical plastic and topical solutions.

In this way a tradition developed to present for the acquaintances, friends or colleagues such works that could not be accepted by the soviet system. Gradually there appeared double, schizophrenic way of life of the artists: being afraid to lose social guarantees, destroy the future of their families and themselves, the artists produced ingratiating pieces of art for the ideology, but at the same time in their studios they were involved in artistic experiments. These pieces of art that were created not for the public life, they used to present for their colleagues artists, art critics, actors, musicians, architects and other actors of culture. So, there slightly personal collections were started that later on became as the background for the most famous Lithuanian modern art collections.

In the end of the seventh decade the authority of the Soviet Union turned towards more conservative and strict policy which predetermined more vigilant control of liberated art. In this way the artists as if separated themselves into two camps: those serving for the ideology and others – despising it and disappointed in its future. The latter consciously avoided the representatives of official art, exhibitions and events. Going into their internal world and personal environment, they formed the phenomenon called by the art critic Elona Lubytis as 'The Silent Modernism' – a silent riot against soviet ideals and dictated artistic expression. The artists of the young generation did not follow the principles of Lithuanian *Ars* group – go deeper into and get the inspiration from the folk art – but from the means of expression created by eg. the German expressionists in the third decade. Others, at the same time, looked for the way out in abstract painting. The examples of this 'Silent Modernism' can be the most often found in private collections, the representatives of which were such artists as Algimantas Kuras, Kostas Dereškevičius, Povilas Rindas Vaitiekūnas, Algimantas Švėgžda, Arvydas Šaltenis, Antanas Martinaitis, because their pieces of art rarely went to the state centralized Art fund. As the new and unfavourable for the ideology artistic expression works were not accepted to the state exhibitions (and the artists were not in a hurry to show them), those pieces of art were directly bought from the studios by the intellectuals who started to collect art. This tradition of purchasing directly from the studio – is strong in Lithuania up till now –, and it distorts the art market greatly if it is possible to name it in such a way. But in the centralized environment of art market of those days it was the only way to acquire the pieces of art of the favourite author and most often those admirers of art were active players of cultural life – actors, film critics, artists and art critics. It is an exceptional feature of art collecting history of the countries imprisoned in soviet system, as in the Western world collecting was the occupation of the richer layer of society.

The collectors of antique pieces of art in soviet times were considered to be profiteers and one famous Lithuanian folk artist Nijolė Gružauskienė-Birgėlienė was even sentenced for that by the soviets. Therefore, even having big and significant old art collections from Europe or collections from Asia and India, they hid them from publicity.

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Sofija Remerienė, Portrait of a girl, 1932, oil on canvas, 40x32,5 cm, courtesy: collection Prof. Algimantas Miškinis presented to the National Art Museum of M.K. Čiurlionis in Kaunas.

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**KnollGalerieWien**

Gumpendorfer Strasse 18 – 1060 Wien – T: +43/1/5875052 – M: +43/664/1810848 – F: +43/1/5875966 – office@knollgalerie.at – www.knollgalerie.at  
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