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Picasso and the European School after 1945

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After the Second World War, Central Europe saw a rise in the number of artistic groups which, largely inspired by modernist trends from the first half of the 20th century, strove to become involved in the process of organising the post-war society under communist rule at the time. Until 1948, intellectual and artistic elites benefitted from the liberal cultural politics adopted by the communist authorities in an attempt to create the illusion of a democracy in the making. Pablo Picasso, a modernist who had recently embraced communism, became an authority invoked by many communist ideologists. Painters, too, treated him as an important figure in both artistic and social circles. References to Picasso and his work appeared in several art journals as well as in numerous works of art.[1]

1. The European School

The European School (Európai Iskola) founded in Hungary in 1945 is a clear example of such a modernist group. Despite being established in the 1940s, the group was deeply rooted in the previous decade, when Lajos Vajda and Dezső Korniss settled in Szentendre, a small village near Budapest.[2] These artists were mainly interested in blending local folk motifs – the inhabitants of Szentendre were a mix of Hungarians, Serbians and Germans – with contemporary avant-garde trends such as surrealism and constructivism. They perceived their art to be closely related to the Middle European context and believed it constituted a bridge between the East and the West by combining influences from both Russian and French art. The second important source of inspiration for the European School was the expressionist-surrealist movement that developed from the post-expressionism associated with the Gresham Circle active at the end of the 1920s. Painters such as Béla Czóbel, Jenő Barcsay and József Egry were described as 'the New Romantics' by art critic Ernő Kallai. In 1945 the artists linked with these circles formulated their official programme:

> Europe and the Old European ideal are both in ruins. Until now, by European ideal we understood the West European ideal. From now on, the whole of Europe must be considered. The new Europe can only be built from a synthesis of the East and the West. Everyone has to decide for himself, in AD 1945, whether they can bear the designation 'European' with justification … We are looking for the philosophers' stone, but we know full well that it is not a chemical, but a vital idea which can only be produced in man and in society.[3]

The group, thus, was united not only by artistic preferences (modernism), but by ethical ones as well. It brought together artists who rejected Hungarian pre-war authoritarianism and supported democratic changes which guaranteed individual freedom and independent thought. They also aspired to put an end to the crisis in the European culture and to purify the human psyche, which in their opinion was an essential war-preventing strategy.

Apart from the artists themselves, theoreticians (Imre Pán, Ernő Kállai) and philosophers (Béla Hamvas) were important supporters of the group. Stylistically, the European School combined trends such as cubism, fauvism, constructivism, surrealism and abstraction (the Group of Abstract Artists was established in 1946), all of which had existed in the artistic periphery since 1919. At the same time, it stressed the importance of its Hungarian roots, and Lajos Vajda and Imre Ámos were posthumously granted honorary membership. The group wanted to be radically innovative while remaining traditional in its relation to Hungarian art. Even though the European School did not adhere to a unified style, the works its artists produced were clearly oriented to surrealism, both in theory and practice. In 1947, a clutch of surrealists emerged within the School. They expressed and exchanged ideas with Breton as well as Czech, Austrian and Romanian surrealist circles (including the Czech RA Group, the Austrian journal *Plan*, whose name derived from Paul Celan, and the Paul Luc Group).[4]

One of the key subjects addressed by these artists was the human figure and the confrontation of humanity with the inhumane.[5] Artists frequently employed the motif of the mask,which could hide, modify and eventually offer a new identity. Another theme regularly developed in the works of Margit Anna, Béla Bán and the early output of Lajos Vajda was the metamorphosis of the face. The most interesting painter in this context, however, is Dezső Korniss, the instigator of the group from Szentendre in the 1930s. In 1944–45 he returned to a style developed from constructivism as well as post-cubism, based on the use of geometrically-shaped patches of pure colour. At the same time, Korniss often referred to the work of Pablo Picasso, not to copy it but to establish an artistic dialogue with it. Korniss's painting *The Chanters* from 1947, which invokes Picasso's *Les Trois Musiciens* from 1921, is an example of just such a dialogue. The post-cubist style was transformed into post-constructivist abstraction. What is more, the picture was heavily inspired by traditional wooden tombstones made for Hungarian peasants.[6] One can observe a clear use of the Szentendre programme – a combination of westerntrends, represented by Picasso, with the eastern geometrical and constructivist style and the local folk context.

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[1] Piotr Bernatowicz, *Picasso za żelazną kurtyną* (Picasso behind the Iron Curtain), Kraków, Universitas, 2006..

[2] Gabor Pataki, 'The European School', in *Cricket Wedding: The European School, the Hungarian Avant-Garde 1945–1949*, Amstelveen, Cobra Museum voor Moderne Kunst, 2002, p. 11.

[3] Ibid., p. 15.

[4] Krisztina Passuth, 'Between East and West: The European School of Budapest (1945–1948)', in *Cricket Wedding* (see note 2 above), pp. 29–31.

[5] Pataki 2002 (see note 2 above), p. 21.

A key work in this context is the surrealist painting inspired by a traditional children's folk song titled *The Cricket Wedding*, in which human characters are metamorphosed into insects. Firebugs become human masks, a cricket mutates into a groom and beetles transform into wedding guests. According to Gabor Pataki, the painting symbolises the vision of 'the world after culture, after men'.[7]

2. Picasso 'La Joie de Vivre'

Let us analyse Korniss's *The Cricket Wedding* from 1948 in the context of Picasso's *La Joie de Vivre* from 1946, to which it certainly is a direct response. Picasso painted his work between August and November during his stay at Chateau Grimaldi in Antibes. It is part of a collection of twenty-two plywood and wallboard paintings titled Antipolis after the ancient name for Antibes, which was a Greek colony.[8] The picture, in an extended rectangular format, depicts three characters with a marine landscape in the background. Its main axis is constituted by the figure of a red-haired, naked woman (identified as Françoise Gilot), who is dancing with a tambourine, holding both hands in the air. On the left side, a centaur is playing a flute and on the right, two goats and a satire are playing a Greek aulos. Picasso thus depicted his lover side by side with figures from Greek mythology.

The decision to seek inspiration in the pre-classical period may be interpreted on several levels. It might be construed as a search for the roots of European civilisation. Christian Zervos associated the pre-classical period with childhood, interpreting the antique motives as references to the age of innocence of human society.[9] An obvious context is the recent war with all its atrocities – the fiasco of the European community. There is a distinctive reversal of meanings – civilisational maturity and Apollonian classicism denote barbarianism, whereas the era of dark beginnings and semi-savage bacchanal rituals becomes a symbol of civilisational rebirth, a return of ancient purity. This was not the first time Picasso employed the bacchanal motif – he also used it in 1944 when he painted his version of Poussin's *The Triumph of Pan*. Similarly to *La Joie de Vivre*, the painting depicts a Maenad with a tambourine above her head. The paraphrase of Poussin's painting was directly related to the post-war context: the end of the occupation is accentuated by the drunken, orgiastic dance of Dionysus's procession which seems to anticipate the subsequent countercultural 'make love not war' ideology. Picasso appears to suggest that the new order derives from socially liberated womanhood.

The painting also expresses the Arcadian myth.[10] Its title, *La Joie de Vivre* (The Joy of Life), reflects the traditional function of the myth in European, and especially French, art. In this context it is necessary to mention two paintings by Matisse, the first one from 1905, with the same title as Picasso's piece, and the second from 1904, *Luxury, Peace and Pleasure*, also painted in southern France, depicting a group of naked women by the seaside. Leaving post-war Paris to settle on the shores of the Mediterranean can be perceived as a return to Arcadia, the place where one can forget the recent civilisational catastrophe and enjoy the pleasures of a simple life.

However, as Gertje Utley points out, Picasso's move to the Mediterranean coast has yet another meaning.[11] French identity and culture had become the subject of lively debate in post-war France. Within that discourse, French culture was identified with the very essence of European culture and opposed to the influences coming from Eastern, Slavic and Iberian cultures. Those views were popular not only with nationalist and conservative groups, but also with the French Communist Party, which stressed national values. Occasionally, Picasso would also be a part of the discussion, which was somewhat problematic in view of his Spanish roots.

His public presence, orchestrated mainly by the communists, was highly controversial at the time. The public contested not only his attendance at the major exhibitions, but primarily his role in the French cultural panorama in general.[12] Picasso followed the discussion and was fully aware of the problem. Therefore, both the aforementioned paraphrase of Poussin's painting and the fact that his works were exhibited in the Louvre in 1947 can be perceived as a form of dialogue with the great French artists. Utley suggests that works such as *La Joie de Vivre* may be interpreted as a reference to the Mediterranean region, which being the origin of both the French and Spanish cultures, is a place where the notion of nationality seems to fade away.[13] Inhabiting this sphere enabled Picasso to escape from uncomfortable questions about his own identity.

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[6] Gabor Andrási, Gabor Pataki, Gyorgy Szucs and Andras Zwickl, *The History of Hungarian Art in The Twentieth Century*, Budapest, Corvina, 1999, p. 128.

[7] Pataki 2002 (see note 2 above), p. 21.

[8] Gertje Utley, 'Picasso and the French Post-war "Renaissance": A Questioning of National Identity', in Jonathan Brown, ed., *Picasso and the Spanish Tradition*, New Haven–London, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 95–118.

[9] Christian Zervos, 'Braque et la Grece Primitive', *Cahiers d'Art*, nos. 1–2, 3–4, 1940, pp. 3–6.

[10] Gertje Utley, *Picasso: The Communist Years*, New Haven–London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 89.

[11] Ibid., pp. 90–93.

[12] Ibid., p. 94.

3. La Joie de Vivre (Antipolis) and The Cricket Wedding

Our interest in the aforementioned set of interpretative issues connected with *La Joie de Vivre* and the *Antipolis* cycle stems from the fact that they are both related to the concerns of the European School artists: establishing a common ground for the different identities functioning within European culture, a combination of French and Eastern culture in the case of the European School and of French and other Mediterranean cultures in that of Picasso; dealing with the civilisational catastrophe of World War II; searching for ways of rebirth. In artistic terms, reliance on modernist, post-cubist and surrealist aesthetics connects Picasso's oeuvre with that of the Hungarians, who were also influenced by Picasso. They both sought inspiration in primitive as well as children's art. The work of Hungarian artist Margit Anna is a clear illustration of this.[14] What is more, the central theme developed in the work of the Hungarians, namely the perception of human beings and their transformation, is also present in Picasso's painting, where humans are distorted and transformed into creatures from the pre-classical era.

However, juxtaposing Picasso's picture with that of Korniss, which in a sense symbolises and summarises the work of the European School, one finds a whole set of fundamental differences which all together account for the original voice of the Hungarian artist, as well as his arguments in discussion with Picasso.

As in Picasso's painting, the focal point of *The Cricket Wedding* is a female character in the shape of a prolonged rectangle with distorted proportions – the bride. Unlike the tambourine player in *La Joie de Vivre*, however, her feminine attributes are hardly recognisable; rather, she resembles a geometrical idol. There are musicians on either side of her: a bagpiper on the left (he can be identified because of his previous appearance in a painting titled *Bagpiper*) and the contrastive, angular figure of a flautist on the right. The flautist is accompanied by the creature in the title, the cricket which is close to the edge of the picture. The painting is characterised by a bright range of colours. The azures and warm-greys of the background contrast with the vivid, unitary colours of the insect-like characters filling the space between the axial figures (constituting the vertical axis of the painting). Unlike Picasso's painting, there are no mythological figures in Korniss's work; instead the picture is filled with newly created, geometrical insect-like entities. The three masks in the centre of the composition – two of which are situated by the focal figure's legs, the other falling one against the drapery in the background – clearly point to the severing of ties with the human world. These masks make reference to the aforementioned painting by Poussin, to which Picasso also alluded. Poussin uses the three masks to symbolise three theatrical genres: drama, comedy and tragedy. They also connote liberation from discipline and etiquette during the bacchanalia, removing masks and revealing untamed drives at the ecstatic feast. Korniss uses them as a symbol of the fall of humanity. The central mask is situated in such a way as to suggest this downfall, while the navy blue patch against which it rests may denote the deep void that grows in this part of the picture.

The composition depicts the marriage of two different worlds, the world of humans and the world of insects, which produces hybrid creatures like the cricket on the spectator's right hand side, who seems to be umbilically connected to the bride. This beetle-like creature corresponds to the two goats in *La Joie de Vivre*. It has the same proportions, is situated in the same area of the painting, and appears to be as lively as they are, for it seems to jiggle about to the rhythm just as the goats follow the melody issuing from the flute and the tambourine. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the creature is wearing a kind of corset with arrows clearly pointing up and down. Unlike the freely moving goats, the newly created being jiggles on one, clearly defined axis. It is a limited, one-dimensional entity.

It is this element that reveals the tension between the overtones of these two artists' works. The clearly feminine figure of a dancing woman which in Picasso's painting symbolises vitality and fertility is replaced in Korniss's picture by a geometrical shape, only vaguely alluding to femininity. According to Atilla Horányi it is an angel of memory expressing the space of nostalgia, symbolised by the house motif.[15] The character is therefore oriented towards the past, not the future – unlike the dancing woman from Picasso's painting, who seems to herald the new life.

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[13] Ibid., p. 95.

[14] Andrási, Pataki, Szucs and Zwickl 1999 (See note 6 above), p. 127.

[15] Attila Horányi, 'Taten und Einsaetze: Der Modernismus der Európai Iskola (Europeischen Schule)', in *Die Zweite Offentlichkeit: Kunst in Ungarn im 20. Jahrundert*, Dresden, H. Knoll, 1999, p. 131.

4. Surrealism – communism – socialist realism

While Picasso's *La Joie de Vivre* depicts the rebirth of civilisation by means of pre-classical sources, the return to Arcadia – the place where all contemporary cultural conflicts seem to trail away – Korniss's *The Cricket Wedding* establishes a disturbing version of a new world no longer inhabited by people but by strange, inhumane, insect-like creatures. Despite the bright and vivid colour scheme and the rhythmical composition denoting a wedding dance, the main idea of the work resembles that in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, where the main character mutates into a giant insect. It is not a journey to the past, to the origins where the source of a new beginning may be found, but a prophecy of what is to come, with a crack disclosing the dark past. The cheerful and colourful depiction of an inhumane world inhabited by insect-like, mechanical constructs creates a dissonance in the reception of the painting, strengthening its surrealistic character. Surrealism, according to the theoreticians of the European School, denoted a higher and better reality, just as the term *surhomme* does not refer to an overman but to a higher level of humanity.[16] Is Korniss's vision of the new human a *surhomme*? Perhaps the unidimensional character from *The Cricket Wedding* is its forerunner, however pessimistic it might seem.

The founders of the European School did not have a set opinion on the matter of surrealism. They avoided defining themselves as surrealists, mainly for political reasons. They did not like Breton's anticommunist views because, according to Béla Bán, they were all communists.[17] Notwithstanding, they appreciated the work of the surrealists and perceived it as important in the search for a new artistic method to unify European culture. For that reason, they cherished Picasso, a communist whose work could, in that sense, be qualified as surrealist. Establishing a dialogue with his paintings stressed the unity of the language it used, despite differences in opinions.

According to Piotr Piotrowski, the European School's conception of surrealism was an alternative to the socialist realism promoted at that time by Hungarian communists and theoreticians such as György Lukács.[18] It is worth mentioning that there were no ideological differences between them. That is why the transition from surrealism to socialist realism in 1948, when it was commanded from above, ran smoothly and even involved such artists as Béla Bán. In 1949 an exhibition titled *Soviet Painting* (opened in the National Salon, Budapest) presented the work of Soviet socialist realism. By then the European School was no longer active. The majority of its artists rejected the proposition of a unifying style and decided to seek work in puppet theatres. The new Stalinist reality matched Korniss's vision – it illustrated the happiness of a unidimensional human, despite the curtain adumbrating darkness and the downfall of humanity. The new reality found a place, too, for Picasso; this time, however, it condemned nearly all of his work for being far removed from socialist-realist standards and left space only for the one creation that was omnipresent behind the Iron Curtain – the dove of peace.

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[16] Ibid., pp. 125–26.
[17] Passuth 2002 (see note 4 above), p. 37.
[18] Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989*, Rebis, Poznan, 2005, p. 45.