

SHORT LOAN

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# central european avant-gardes: exchange and transformation, 1910–1930

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It is only in the last few years that scholars have begun to recognize that the aesthetic production in Eastern Europe was as crucial to the evolution of modern art in the West as it was essential to the emergence of modern culture in the East.<sup>1</sup> Yet for more than a half century the history of modern art has been presented in the West—and mostly accepted in the East—as if twentieth-century advanced culture had been almost exclusively created in and defined by a succession of styles in Paris, Munich, New York, or Berlin. The narrative resulting from this now-canonical perspective has constrained the practice of art history and restricted the appreciation of the scope of modern art in general.<sup>2</sup> Through focusing narrowly on the Western centers of aesthetic creativity, a more historically accurate perception of the richness, diversity, and complexity of the classical modern art created through the entirety of Europe (and beyond) has been foreclosed. Moreover, privileging Paris, Berlin, and other Western cultural capitals has compromised the assessment of the seminal role played by artists active in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, from where modern art derived much of its authority and originality: Constructivism from the empire of the Romanovs, Dadaism from royal Romania, and unique forms of Cubism from Habsburg Bohemia, among other creative impulses.<sup>3</sup>

The limited appreciation of modern art's creative complexity was paralleled in the West by a towering insistence on modernism's universality. By insisting that advanced styles could be comprehended absolutely without acknowledging the determining factors of local traditions, indigenous reference, and contingent meanings stripped art of its deeper resonance and deprived it of its less obvious meanings. Indeed, much of the critical apparatus developed in the West—to assess the art created there—was incapable of seeing in the modern art of Eastern Europe its most distinctive character: its effective negotiation between the universal and the particular,

between the local and the transnational. Because modern art in the West was created in an environment so different from that prevailing on the margins of industrialized Europe, critics in France, England, and especially the United States were unprepared to see in the modern styles from the East strategies of communication that departed decisively from those current at home. This restricted vision had a dramatic impact not only on the reception of Eastern European modernism in the West but also on the evolution of advanced art and avant-garde aesthetics in the East.<sup>4</sup>

A restricted and, ultimately, partisan perspective was not confined to Western Europe and North America, although the belief in modernism's pervasiveness was most avidly promoted there. In the East as well there was a commensurate narrowing of scope and critical perception, though it was often animated by different concerns and with differing consequences. Local social conditions and political agendas, as well as indigenous aesthetic expectations, positively shaped the language, content, and context for modern art from the Baltic North to the Balkan South. By attending to the specificity of place, one may grasp the creative ways in which transnational styles and avant-garde strategies were selectively adapted and inventively transformed. To do so, however, one needs to set aside prevailing paradigms.

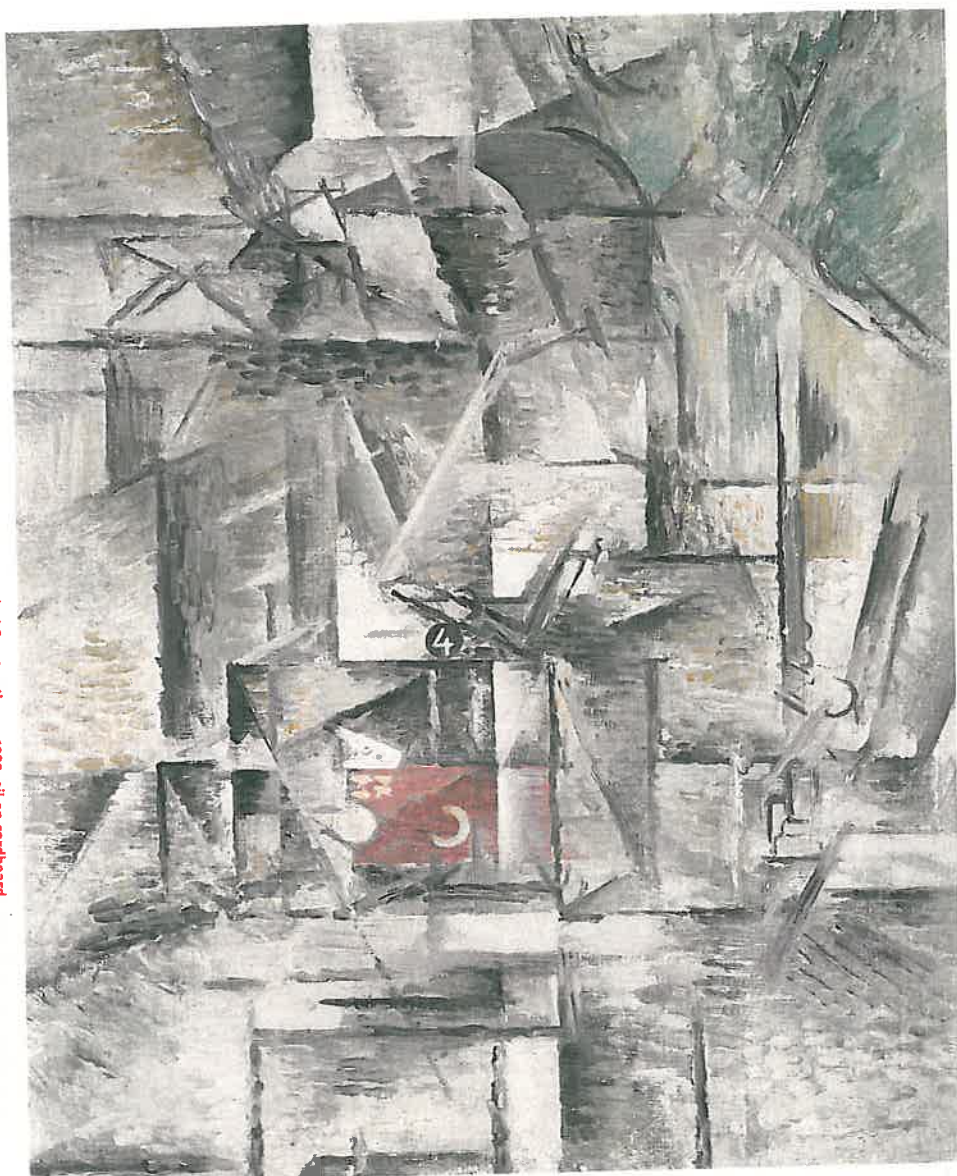
Within the last few years, several publications have begun to rechart the intellectual geography of modernism.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the present project provides a timely stimulus for a further reassessment of the achievements (and failings) of artists active in this complex region. By attending to the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which Eastern European modern art has been heretofore presented and received, the present volume may overcome the partiality and partisanship that has limited its appreciation and compromised the understanding of the modernist enterprise in general.



■ Victor Brauner, *Portrait of Marcel Janco*, 1924, ink on paper



■ M. H. Maszy, *Vertical Construction*, c. 1923, oil on cardboard



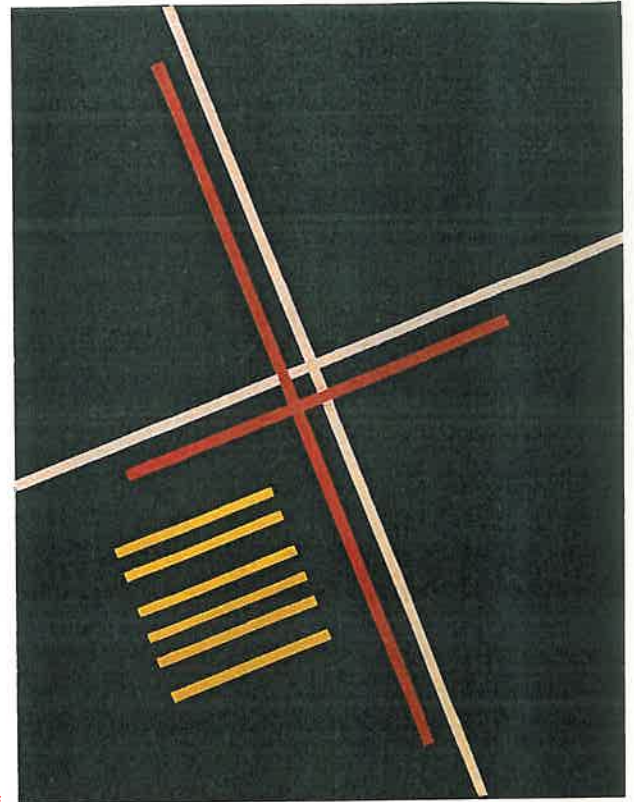
■ Vincenc Beneš, *Tram, No. 4*, 1911, oil on canvas

Scores of painters, sculptors, and designers in Central, East Central, and Southeastern Europe audaciously and creatively defined the nature of modern visual expression and its social aspirations. Well into the 1930s—and then again beginning in Poland in the mid-1950s and in Hungary a decade later<sup>6</sup>—leading artistic personalities forged new visual cultures and educated new audiences in revolutionary ways of thinking, seeing, and behaving. Nevertheless, for the last seventy years a succession of mostly political developments, commencing with the rise of authoritarian regimes during the 1920s and 1930s and continuing to the close of the Cold War in the early 1990s, made access to Eastern European modern art difficult for Westerners and often politically precarious for Easterners.<sup>7</sup> As a result, awareness of the major modern monuments, their authors, and their contexts has been partial at best, and the discussion of modern art in the scholarly literature all too doctrinaire, both in the West and the East.

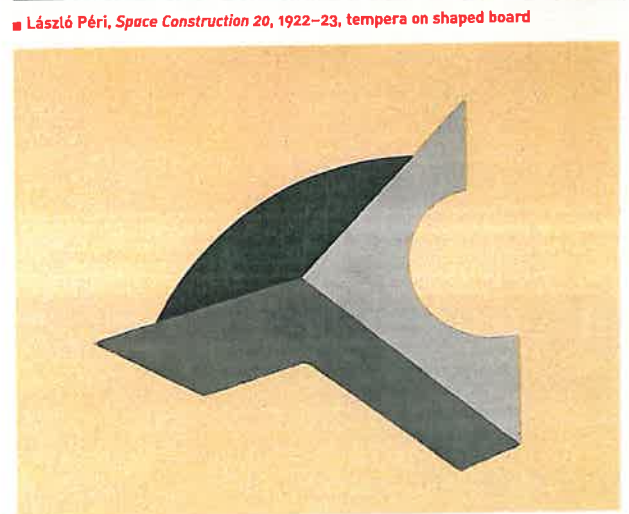
The cultural, political, and physical geography treated here should have been resistant historically to simplistic reductionism and deceptive uniformities. The complex record and diversity of the region—its range of nationalities, scope of cultural and linguistic traditions, and breadth of political experiences—might have been approached over the last seventy years with an appropriate multiplicity of viewpoints and addressed open-mindedly. Yet the region as a whole has been the victim of Great Power politics, cultural chauvinism, and shortsighted presuppositions. As a consequence, over time many in the West have been persuaded to adopt the misleading monolithic label of “Eastern Europe” to characterize as a whole those lands whose subtleties of culture and history could not easily be accommodated under the reigning (Western) paradigms. Thus instead of perceiving distinction and individuality, critics chose to see generality and uniformity; in lieu of acknowledging deep structural differences between “East” and “West,” commentators promoted consistency and parallelism.

The motivation for this simplification and its resultant distortion was not purely political, although deeply held ideological and moral attitudes were decisive. Complementing the political, whether or not promoted by the state, was an equally significant aesthetic ideology, one inextricably linked to modernism itself.<sup>8</sup>

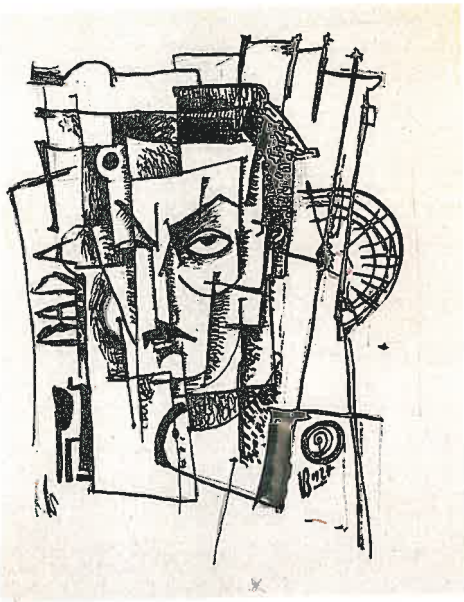
The traditional focus of modern art studies has been the visual culture in the industrialized nation-states of Western Europe and North America: the Low Countries, Italy, Germany, the United States, Great Britain, and especially



■ László Moholy-Nagy, *Color-Trajectories, No. 1, 1922*, oil on canvas and board



■ László Péri, *Space Construction 20, 1922-23*, tempera on shaped board



■ Victor Brauner, *Portrait of Marcel Janco*, 1924, ink on paper



■ Vincenc Beneš, *Tram, No. 4*, 1911, oil on canvas



■ M. H. Masý, *Vertical Construction*, c. 1923, oil on cardboard

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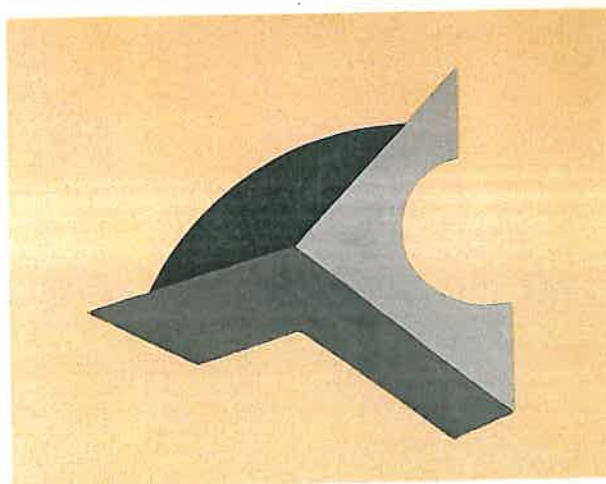
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■ László Péri, *Space Construction 20, 1922–23*, tempera on shaped board



a modernist narrative based on a teleology of style lent itself to the nature and practices of the academy

■ János Mátis-Teutsch, *Composition*, 1923, oil on board



■ Aurél Bernáth, *Crossroad*, 1922, stencil, india ink, gouache, and gold paint on paper



France. Other countries' art production has, of course, figured in the academic account, but most often as secondary considerations or as comparanda. But even within "Europe"—understood conventionally as ending culturally somewhere between the Oder or Bug Rivers on the east, the Baltic Sea to the north, and between Milan and Rome to the south—a hierarchy was well established by the eighteenth century, with Paris functioning consistently as the originary source, or primary locus, of authentic creativity. By the tenets of the resulting narrative, Paris was celebrated as the absolute cultural capital; and from this consummate City of Light progressive styles were perceived to radiate to the far reaches of the globe.<sup>7</sup> Artists resident in other European centers were to be judged on the basis of their faithful emulation of Parisian styles and their work's congruence with what was understood as the aesthetic standards, interests, and "audiences" found on the Seine.

The problem with the canonical perception of Paris as the international capital of modern art is twofold: first, of emphasis, and second, of effect. There is little doubt that Paris played both a pivotal and seminal role in the generation, reception, and criticism of modern art. From Diderot through Derrida, David to Delaunay, successive waves of artistic originality, marketing inventiveness, and critic perspicacity made the city a mecca for modern artists, their dealers, and much of their public. Other locations—cities, riverside or seaside towns, mountain villages, and artists' colonies—from New York to Nagybánya contributed decisively to the mainstream of modernism, as all recognize. Yet the primacy awarded Paris too frequently skews the relative balance of other locations, deprecating many other consequential crossroads of modernism to mere byways,<sup>10</sup> and on occasion attributing to Paris achievements that originated elsewhere. This issue of assigning a just emphasis belongs to a larger concern with setting aside a historical prejudice in favor of Paris for a more considered assessment of other dynamic sites, places that may come less readily to mind but were nonetheless crucial to the creation of modern art.

Paris's primacy is not the principal issue, nor is the establishment of a more accurate balance among artistic centers a principal objective, even though such an adjustment might be a beneficial result of new lines of scholarly enquiry. A quarter century ago academic and museum-based scholars began the process of publicly questioning the notion of Paris as the absolute center of modernism.<sup>11</sup> For most investigators, the relationship between the French capital and other cultural centers can no longer be accepted uncritically as one

between a dynamic metropolis and a passive periphery. Academics in general, and art historians in particular, have been increasingly sensitive to the reciprocal influences and creative interactions that prevailed among modern artists throughout the entirety of Europe, and well beyond. For our present purposes, then, the "problem" of Paris is not its physical place or absolute value in the geography of modernism, but rather the ideological consequence for comprehending Eastern European art of the long identification of Paris as the center of the aesthetic universe.

As a result of a more critical perspective, today's historian might attribute the high estimation of Paris to a combination of social, economic, and political forces or events, rather than exclusively to aesthetic ones.<sup>12</sup> A nuanced understanding of extra-artistic criteria in constituting "Paris" would necessarily establish a methodological framework for assessing the art created, displayed, and marketed there, just as it would enable one better to understand the conditions of artistic production elsewhere. Nevertheless, for more than two centuries a legion of perceptive critics fastened upon artistic style as the most revealing sign of meaning. Moreover, the succession of styles in Paris led many to attribute to it a profoundly indicative function. For the founding figures of art history as a discipline, style was affirmed as the most efficacious index by which to chart and ultimately to assert the development of a national character,<sup>13</sup> an artist's maturation,<sup>14</sup> an age's essential character,<sup>15</sup> or even humankind's spiritual evolution.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, by the early twentieth century, style—and most emphatically the styles that critics chronicled in Paris—was invoked as an indicator of progressive thinking, a proof of creative achievement, and even as a barometer of society's spiritual or cultural health. But for critics concerned primarily with the art of their own times, style was endowed with an even deeper function. From Roger Fry to Clement Greenberg, Alfred Barr to Władysław Strzemiński, a work's formal characteristics—composition, surface treatment, method of application or construction, and so forth—were vested with the signal authority of prognostication. By the lights of Paris-oriented modernism, style not only illuminated the current state of culture, but it also could reveal the path toward future development.

Drawing upon nineteenth-century philosophies of history, both materialistic and metaphysical, style became for modernist figures—critics, aestheticians, and, significantly, artists, too—a kind of aesthetic motor force by means of which art was seen to "advance" ineluctably: Impressionism to Postimpressionism, Cubism to Futurism, Dadaism to



Surrealism, and so on. Although essentially derived from a subjectively retrospective interpretation of art history, style was nevertheless affirmed by modernism's advocates as a teleological process. Adherents of this view thus presented style as a powerful, formal unfolding of "visuality," moving ever progressively toward ultimate self-realization (pace Greenberg). In essence, the "mind-spirit" (*Geist*) that Hegel had recognized as historically immanent was transposed to the aesthetic realm, where modernism incarnated the process of style becoming the ultimate fulfillment of art.

By vesting style with consummate authority, other aspects of art's generation and reception were necessarily downplayed—or at least revalued to serve the dictates of style's imperative. But then the "style-as-process" and "style-as-essence" of modernist theory was structured primarily to satisfy several self-affirming needs. First, style could be presented as a coherent narrative, an effective way of making sense out of a welter of artworks. Museums might then exhibit objects that could be intelligibly integrated into a visible story, one whose promotion was in the institution's own interest of further acquisitions and prestige. In such manner has New York's Museum of Modern Art effectively manifested (and acquired) a canon



Oskar Schlemmer, *Bauhaus Staircase*, 1932, oil on canvas

■ Hugo Scheiber, *Amusement Park*, 1920s, oil on cardboard



Eastern European modernists were obliged to reconfigure progressive styles to accommodate local needs

of modernist masterpieces, and a compelling art historical narrative through which its own primacy of place has been confirmed.

Second, a modernist narrative based on a teleology of style lent itself to the nature and practices of the academy, where ideologies of art history are easily transformed into institutional pedagogy. Since the mid-1920s, schools of art and design (and, to an extent, architecture too) have constructed curricula that integrate their characteristic technical and conceptual instruction with "mainstream modernism," a blend which elevates style to an idealized model toward which predominating academic preferences are directed. In this regard, it is not surprising that many of the leading American and European institutes of art and design orient their instruction toward the Bauhaus, which has been reconfigured conceptually and reinterpreted historically into a practical ideology through which the inexorability of modernism is validated. In this manner pedagogy perpetuates the primacy of style as the visible expression of progress.

One must stress that the canonical modern art taught, exhibited, and celebrated in the West rightfully enjoys tremendous respect; moreover the objects created in conformity with its precepts frequently embody great intelligence, discrimination, and beauty. The reservations raised here, therefore, should not be understood as objections to the aesthetic quality of modernist art. Nor should the observations made above be misconstrued as a denigration of the perspicacity of modern critics or of the analytical powers of art historians. Rather, the point to be developed here is an acknowledgment of the (negative) consequences for a fuller understanding of modern art's richness, its creative complexity, and its remarkable inventiveness that the canonization of style as the consummate standard of evaluation has produced. By looking at classical modern art with a broader perspective, a different

focus, and a more nuanced methodology, one might not only better appreciate the unique forms of creativity that took place on the periphery of Europe, but also reclaim the rich foundation of modern art generally.

In the advancement of modernism as the consummate transnational style of art and philosophy of contemporary cultural life, Western art historians have too often ignored or dismissed the many and varied ways in which artists of Eastern Europe have essentially embraced local cultural legacies, national conventions, and individual character in creating a "style" simultaneously modern in its formal display and highly topical in its references. Whereas the classical Western avant-garde and its apologists advocated an aesthetic uniformity—as, for example, Neoplasticism or Purism—which would transcend national boundaries and historical references, Eastern modernists readily embraced a multiplicity of progressive styles through which to accommodate the very literary, political, or historical associations disdained by their colleagues in Holland, France, Germany, and elsewhere. Thus, not only did modernist movements in Eastern Europe depart from the mandate of Western absolutism by encouraging diverse formal expression, but they also sanctioned levels of reference abjured in the West as inappropriately individual, national, or otherwise extra-aesthetic.

In part, the differences in origin, function, and meaning between Eastern and Western classical modern art of this period stem from the singular forces—historical and cultural—to which artists felt obliged to respond. From Estonia to Slovenia, the makers of modern art were subject to pressures (and opportunities) that differed from those affecting artists in the West. As a consequence of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century constraints on the free exercise of political, economic, and personal liberties in Romanov-

Hohenzollern-, Habsburg-, and Ottoman-dominated regions of Eastern Europe, the visual arts assumed a primary responsibility as cultural custodian for the respective subject nations—or at least their self-appointed representatives. Hence, artists of these regions often elected to emphasize national individuality rather than universality. They responded variously to a public demand for expressions of national self-consciousness through which an emerging nation might stake its claim simultaneously to singularity and to membership in a modern world. Such profession of national identity by means of avant-garde art was a cultural phenomenon as widespread in Eastern Europe as it was rare in the West. Among the developed political states of Western Europe (and in the United States), modern national identity has been primarily the province of politicians and statesmen and only incidentally the concern of progressive artists; but then the nations of the West have often been free to express their identities politically. In the East, by contrast, before the collapse of empires in the ashes of World War I, the political, economic, and spiritual restrictions imposed by supervening powers meant that only through cultural expression could the national self-consciousness of the “subject people” be preserved, developed, and manifested. And in these circumstances, so different from those prevailing in the West, legions of modern artists rushed to enlist their talents in service to their respective nations—as well as to the perceived demands of universal modern aesthetics as they understood them, mostly at second hand.<sup>17</sup>

An instrumental stimulus for the development of these currents of modern art in Eastern Europe came initially from the various mid- and late nineteenth-century movements of “national awakening.”<sup>18</sup> Promoting cultural expression and preservation rather than the revolutionary political action and social reconstruction that was advocated in the West—particularly in Germany and Italy—informal groups of

writers, poets, ethnographers, and musicologists originated the revival movements from the Baltic North to the Adriatic South that only then inspired visual artists to their expressions of a distinctively national modern character.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the specific local inflection of the national cultural revival, each movement affected visual artists profoundly and often prompted painters, sculptors, graphic designers, and architects to reshape neo-Romantic references into modernist aesthetics. To appeal to the interests of the awakening national partisans and their local patrons, Eastern European artists introduced onto their canvases, in their graphics, and into their sculpture essential narrative, literary, and even folklorist dimensions. As ethnographic reference has invariably been a building block of a modern national expression, allusions to historical myths, events, heroes, and folk styles are as common in Eastern avant-garde design as they are rare in Western progressive art. Eastern artists creating within the context of national modernism have thus moved easily and without contradiction between, say, Constructivism and folkloric patterning, or between canvases depicting Cubist still lifes and heroes from the national mythology.<sup>20</sup> In its reconciliation of literary reference and abstraction, narrative context and nonobjective styles, the modern art of Eastern Europe has departed fundamentally from the absolutist purity espoused by most Western modernist artists and demanded by their apologists.

An example here might assist in better visualizing the strategies typically pursued in the East and characteristically abjured in the West. Although one might select a building, monumental sculpture, or a painting as an effective incarnation of national identity, one should not ignore the decorative arts as expressive vehicles to harmonize transnational modernity and local reference. In furniture and theater design, and especially in ceramic ware, the pressures of local

events and the influence of international styles were as decisive as they were for the fine arts. For Latvian artists,<sup>21</sup> in particular, the decorative arts proved to be an ideal medium in which to manifest the creative synthesis between international modernist aesthetics and national cultural formation that lay at the core of Eastern European objectives during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Prompted by painters and sculptors who had produced innovative designs for the Latvian opera, theater, and ballet stages, a porcelain manufactory was established in the mid-1920s. The intention of the founders was to disseminate as broadly as possible modernist-designed articles of everyday use. Inspired both by the nativist Art and Crafts movement—which advocated the medium of ceramics to promote awareness of the national folk culture—and by the inventive Suprematist porcelain being produced by Russia’s modernists (Kazimir Malevich, Nikolai Suetin, and Ilya Chashnik, among others), Romans Suta (1896–1944), Aleksandra Beļcova (1892–1981), and Sigismunds Vidbergs (1890–1970) made effective use of ceramic ware to propagate the evolving Latvian culture. Indeed, the name “Baltars” was coined for the porcelain works in order to signify a melding of Baltic tradition and the new art forms then being articulated from England to Estonia. Of all the artists who contributed to Baltars’s



■ Béla Kádár, *Mother with Child*, late 1920s, tempera on paper

■ Béni Ferenczy, *Portrait of Noémi Ferenczy*, 1920, bronze



creative synthesis of local traditions and international style, Romans Suta's efforts are among the most germane to the present discussion. A cofounder of the manufactory in 1924, he remained active in its affairs until its closing in 1928. His work for the factory during the four years of its existence provides a barometer for measuring the success of the decorative arts as a medium for the expression of national folk traditions in a field of modernist engagement. Suta's first works in porcelain reflect the embrace of Cubism and Constructivism that is evident in his contemporaneous painting (and in Latvian sculpture). In two works from 1926 one can witness the versatility of his fusion of folkloric and modernist elements. In *Young Woman with Bird* the sweeping arc of the figure's right arm, the repeated curving folds of her native costume, and the sophisticated use of color to suggest motion all demonstrate Suta's skillful orchestration of geometrical forms, spatial planes, and rhythmic cadences. But the forceful centrality of the figure predominates, and even the color rings on the edge of the plate function more as a decorative pattern than as part of an abstract composition.

In a ceramic plate from the same year, the folkloric theme of a Latvian wedding, though taking center stage, is carefully balanced compositionally and coloristically by the abstract forms along the rim. Here Suta invokes not just the modernist geometry of Suprematist circles and Constructivist parallelograms; he makes reference through geometrical forms—combined with glyphs of animal forms—to Latvia's contemporaneous preoccupation with native origins. As excavators, ethnologists, and anthropologists were revealing the primitive sources of the young republic, artists were re-presenting their findings in a modern visual language. The earthen tones, abstracted forms, and intentionally primitivist figuration are intended to connote for a local audience the nation's origins. Yet these same forms could be and were affirmed as proof of Suta's modernist credentials. Thus the abstract forms were intentionally handled ambiguously: on one level they were readable as original syntactic codes of indigenous language, religion, and community; and on another these simple forms participated in the international modernist discourse of geometrical abstraction. By looking simultaneously domestically and externally, Suta and his confederates provided Baltars with a repertory of forms and themes that allowed the ceramics to be praised abroad for their international contemporaneity while at the same moment servicing a domestic market with essentially native fare.<sup>22</sup>



Romans Suta, *Latvian Wedding*, 1926, ceramic



Romans Suta, *Young Woman with Bird*, 1926, ceramic



■ Pavel Janák, *Covered Box*, 1911, earthenware with white glaze and blue decoration

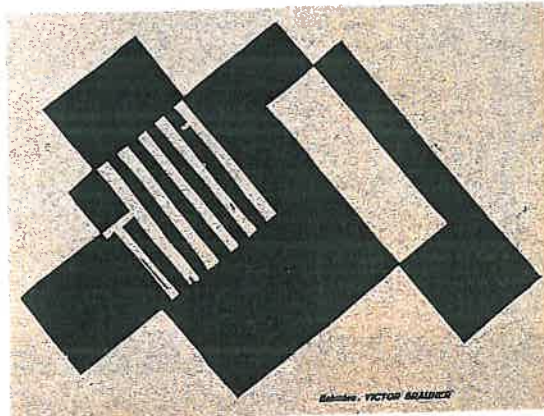
The originality evident in the decorative arts, sculpture, painting, and architecture not just in Latvia but throughout Eastern Europe attests not only to creative solutions for aesthetic problems. Modernism in this part of the world ventured to transcend conventional formal considerations in order to cope with a profound communal challenge: projecting a vision of the nation with which the populace might readily identify. From Estonia to Macedonia, modern artists adapted progressive styles to accommodate indigenous traditions and references. By exploiting the capabilities of Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, and other languages of abstract form and composition to allude to native themes and contemporary issues, the makers of modern art were thus able to negotiate a remarkable synthesis of the local and universal, the traditional and progressive. Consequently, a consideration of the culture of Eastern Europe needs to employ strategies that can penetrate the surface plane of images and the superficial category of style.

In order to promote progressive seeing and thinking at home, and to establish cultural credibility abroad, Eastern European modernists were obliged to reconfigure progressive styles to accommodate local needs, just as they endeavored to conform to international expectations of how modern art should appear. Moreover, artists had to balance external perceptions with the often pressing internal need to articulate and represent a national self-image, one that could allow the citizenry to recognize themselves culturally, if not always politically. This dual aspect differentiated artists (and audiences) in Eastern Europe from those in the West, where the combination of modernism and nationalism was more the exception than the rule,<sup>23</sup> and where local references were subsumed by transnational aspirations. Whereas international modernism promoted universal visions (as seen from Paris, New York, and other cultural capitals of the industri-

alized West), Eastern European modernism necessarily perceived the function of art bifocally: looking simultaneously at the distant world while concentrating on imagery close to home.

In their desire to be taken seriously as fellow modernists by their Western colleagues,<sup>24</sup> Eastern Europeans embraced Western styles critically, freely adapting them to suit local conditions. More often than not, however, the adaptations took place in the meanings each style conveyed rather than in the formal attributes displayed. What this widely held strategy suggests for those attempting to understand Eastern European modern art is the need to guard against relying too heavily upon interpretive models imported from outside. Rather, one might best bracket customary interpretive paradigms in favor of alternative methods more suited to comprehend the functions, understand the reception, and assess the implications of artworks, both individually and corporatively. Thus, instead of censuring artists who moved freely between abstraction and representation, or between narration and nonobjectivity, one might set aside Western archetypes to allow that such shifts were in no way perceived as inconsistent with or oppositional to the objectives of Eastern European modern art. To the contrary, local needs, traditions, and references were frequently affirmed by employing creatively the language and authority of international styles. In opening one's eyes to this common practice, one might then recognize that Kazimir Malevich, for example, was only following regional convention by pursuing both Suprematism and figuration; and his constant shift between abstraction and representation (often criticized in the West as a "retreat") should not be judged by Western expectations of consistency.<sup>25</sup> Like legions of his contemporaries from the Baltic to the Balkans, Malevich likely saw no contradiction in taking seriously primitive or native folk imagery and geometrical abstraction, as each addressed essential issues for

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Victor Brauner, illustration for Punct, 1925 (no. 6-7), linocut



Wladyslaw Strzemiński, cover design for Six Hours!, by Tadeusz Peiper, 1925

Victor Brauner, illustration for Punct, 1924 (no. 1), linocut



Integral, 1925 (no. 3)



which style served less as an index of universal meaning than it functioned as a strategy to signify locally and communicate internationally.<sup>26</sup>

Just as methodological distinctions must be drawn between approaching the modern art in the West and East, comparisons stand out between assessing analogous styles within the Eastern region as a whole. As opposed to the Baltic Surrealist variant of Eduard Wiiralt, which had been designed as a conservative counterbalance to the collectivist programs of Constructivism, the Czech Karel Teige advocated a progressive Surrealism (in part) as a means to promote Communist systems of art and social life. Likewise, Constructivism in the East manifested a diversity of meanings beneath its restricted formal vocabulary. Believing in “using the streets as a school for aesthetic and moral education,” the Poles Mieczysław Szczuka and Władysław Strzemiński turned to the organizational principles of the factory and regularized urban planning for socialist cities for their collaborative prescriptions. In contrast to their formal purity and moral rigor, the Romanians Marcel Janco and M. H. Maxy exploited the irregularities and stimulating cacophony of Romania’s urban capital as a model for contemporary art. Both the playful dose of Dada irreverence introduced into Constructivism in Bucharest by the Integral group and the abstract lyricism promoted there by the Punct formation were eschewed by the avant-garde in Warsaw.

Similar juxtapositions can be drawn for Expressionism and Cubism—for instance, the Czech manifestation of Expressionism, through which to register the existential anxiety and spiritual decline of the Habsburg imperium, versus the Hungarian variant, which perceived Expressionist aesthetics as an effective vehicle for promoting social regeneration with the empire of the Dual Monarchy. What these examples force one to acknowledge is the methodological danger in seeing uniformity within the geographically immense



■ Mieczysław Szczuka, *Self-Portrait with Palette*, 1920, oil on canvas





■ M. H. Maxy, *Nude with Idol*, 1924, oil on canvas

■ Otto Gutfreund, *Viki*, 1913 (cast 1960s), bronze



and culturally diverse region of Eastern Europe. The perception of stylistic affinity should not lead one to an assumption of parallel meaning or analogous reception.

If style must be dethroned from its imperial status by which modernist art is recognized and validated, what should take its place; or, at the least, what methodological considerations should modify its role? Moreover, what is gained by revaluing the canonical standards by which modern art has been measured?

By realizing the limitations of style as the dominant mode of approach, the way can be opened for alternative methods. These methods must not and perhaps cannot be the same for each area or even for artists who emerge from the same region; for the generation of art—just as is true for its reception—is conditioned by a host of forces and events, both social and personal. Thus, the questions posed and the approach taken to understand the Expressionist art of the Jewish-Polish Jung Idysz may not be productive for comprehending the uses of Expressionism by such Czech figures as the Bohemian-Jewish Otto Gutfreund or Bohumil Kubišta. As a result, one should recognize the contingency of all methods and the need for flexibility and inventiveness. A familiarity with the distinctive native histories, social traditions, and political conditions can well sensitize one to the decisive role of indigenous forces on the choices available to the Eastern European artist. Moreover, an awareness of local geography—social, political, cultural, and personal—will enable one better to appreciate how these artists chose to be influenced by the “foreign” artistic forms they encountered directly through exhibitions or, more frequently, at second hand through periodicals. By means of an awareness of what was expected of artists in Eastern Europe and of the choices available to them, one might better comprehend how styles were appropriated and then adapted to correspond to domestic needs (which often included achieving external recognition).

These observations on methodology and cultural geography, although set forth within the context of understanding the classical modern art of Eastern Europe, should not be understood as limited to a single region. Ultimately, an exhortation to open-mindedness, methodological inventiveness, and liberality of spirit applies to art history generally. The purpose here is to urge the historian, the critic, and the public to look beyond formal characteristics in order to understand how style was actually used: to communicate local (often literary or historical) meanings, to signal participation in a broad international movement, and to avow ideologies—

social, political, and national. With sensitivity to local developments, references, and meanings, the observer might begin to recapture the rich complexity and occasional contradictions that characterized modernist aspirations in Eastern Europe. But to take this conscious methodological step, one must restore “history” to the practice of modern “art history.” A keen eye is essential, but it alone is insufficient without an equally sensitive grasp of the historical matrix from which artistic work emerges and in which it communicates its deepest meanings to its multiple audiences. In the context of Eastern European developments, this means preparing ourselves to recognize the diversity of meanings—as well as the miscellany of forms and compositional motifs—that have for too long lain outside the canonical vision of modern art. Moreover, by divesting ourselves of the belief in an absolutist progression of modernist aesthetics—defined too narrowly by the art created in Paris, Berlin, and New York, and defended too ideologically by generations of critics—we might be rewarded with a richer and more complex modernism. Diversity, complexity, and contradiction may then be understood as strengths rather than liabilities—and as productive means to comprehend the lofty ambitions of modern art universally.