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The Odesa Society of Independent Artists

The art life of 19th-century Odesa had a measured, somewhat lazy flow, with only a few exhibitions and the occasional visit by a celebrity. The Society of South Russian Artists (SSRA), founded in 1890, was determined to change that. Up until 1919, the Society staged the annual autumn exhibition, featuring works by its members – Yevhen Bukovetskyi (1866–1948), Kyriak Kostandi (1852–1921), Petro Nilus (1869–1943), Leonid Pasternak (1862–1925) and others. Non-member artists such as Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900), Mykola Pymonenko (1862–1912), Illia Repin (1844–1930) and Valentin Serov (1865–1911), were also allowed to exhibit, as was the next generation of painters – Nathan Altman, Mykhailo Andriienko-Nechytailo (1894–1982), Wladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, Volodymyr Burliuk and Davyd Burliuk.

The founders of the SSRA were largely influenced by the *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers), but their southern nature called for brighter colours, an abundance of light and complete freedom in painting. Their *plein air* explorations, therefore, were reminiscent of French art – the Barbizon School and Impressionists. The Society's exhibitions were not limited to realistic paintings and routinely featured works that explored new ideas in art.

The Society continued to dominate the city's art scene, but their monopoly on organizing exhibitions and the dictatorship of the selection committee displeased many. At the beginning of the 20th century, young artists started slowly to break away. The reviews frequently pointed out the 'sluggish tone,' 'lifelessness', and even 'amateur' quality of artworks at the SSRA exhibitions, suggesting that 'the only way for local audiences to learn about current trends in visual art is from newspapers and magazines'.¹ Such a situation remained almost unchanged in Odesa, as well as in many other provincial cities of the time, until after the first decade of the new century.

In 1908, a travelling exhibition of modern art organized by the Kyiv journal *V mire iskusstv* (In the World of Arts) opened at the Odesa City Museum. The local audience saw works by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878–1939) and Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947), as well as a posthumous showing of paintings by Victor Borisov-Musatov (1870–1905). The Odesa art critics reacted with enthusiasm, noting the 'new horizons' and 'invigorating, joyful experience'. Four exhibitions staged by *V mire iskusstv* between

spring 1908 and winter 1911 laid the foundation for Odesans' understanding of the latest artistic trends and prepared them for the reception of new art. The latter came to Odesa courtesy of the Izdebskyi Salons – international art shows of 1909–10 and 1911 organized by the local sculptor Volodymyr Izdebskyi. The Salons introduced artists and the general public to a wide range of movements in contemporary art, especially French, while also presenting artists from across the Russian Empire and members of the Munich group.² The press attention was immense with local newspapers running full-page reviews, where enthusiastic remarks in support of the Salons alternated with indignant criticism. 'This is the first non-partisan exhibition in Russia, so rich and generous.'³ 'It is an orgy of beauty and power; an extravagance, captivating and fazing at the same time.'⁴ 'Faint-hearted and expecting women should take precautions when visiting.'⁵ The Salons challenged the local creative youth's understanding of artistic paths and pursuits, showing new opportunities for professional development, thus becoming the most significant event in the art life of the city in the two hundred years of its existence.⁶

Before the launch of the Izdebskyi Salons, a Circle of Young Artists emerged in Odesa, staging its inaugural event, the 'Spring Exhibition of Paintings', in April 1909, at the flat of the poet Kostiantyn Podovodskyi (1868–after 1929) on Deribasivska Street, right in the centre of the city. It can be discerned from newspaper reviews that the art exhibited was by no means avant-garde, but the list of participants remains unknown to this day even to art historians. The only known name is that of Pavlo Volokydin (1877–1936), portrayed by the local press as a 'downright decadent'.

More is known about the Circle's subsequent exhibitions in 1913 and 1914. The second 'Spring Exhibition of Paintings of the United' of 1913, again held at Podovodskyi's apartment, was organized by Volokydin, Pavlo Nitshe (1885–1950) and Volodymyr Krykhatskyi (1877–1942). Like the first show in 1909, it was designed to support young artists and, therefore, had no selection panel. The art critics noted that this was an attempt to replicate the Paris Salon des Indépendants: '... artworks, similarly to the Salon in Paris, were accepted without a selection committee, at the sole responsibility of the artists'.⁷ While there was no notion



Fig. 65 Aristarkh Kobtsev, the 'Spring Exhibition of Paintings', catalogue cover, Odesa, 1914

of any stylistic unity among the displayed works, the appearance of the word 'united' in the exhibition title was not coincidental. The journalist Borys Raiskyi (1897–1985) wrote, 'the term "united" was coined very well. The exhibition definitely unites artists from diverse backgrounds, artists whose faces differ from one another, like "ice and fire"'.⁸

The 'Spring Exhibition of Paintings' in 1914 (fig. 65) was the most significant of the three since it featured works by members of Moscow's Jack of Diamonds and the Munich group led by Wassily Kandinsky. The so-called Impressionists – Volokytin, Aristarkh Kobtsev (1884–1961), Krykhatskyi, and Modernists – Mykhailo Hershenfeld, Amshei Nurenberg (1887–1979) and Sigismund Olesevich (1891–1972) represented the local art scene (pls 110, 113). While not everyone understood the experiments with the formal language, the overall reception was noticeably positive. One critic wrote, '... overall the exhibition makes one believe in the triumph of new forms in art'.⁹ This was echoed in another review: 'it is gratifying to see that the core of the exhibition is made up of local young artists, whose works present

no less interest than those by members of the Jack of Diamonds and other international exhibitors.'¹⁰

There was no spring exhibition in 1915 because of World War I, but its next iteration in the autumn of 1916 included artists already known to the public from the previous shows, as well as brand new names, such as Samuil Adlivankin (1897–1966) and Israel Mexin (1896–1937). The ideas that brought these artists together were outlined in Hershenfeld's article 'On Art and Joy' in the foreword to the catalogue of the 1916 exhibition. It was their manifesto – 'we go to theatre to see our hidden desires come true, and if it does not meet this need, we say that this is not art. [...] We go to an art exhibition to experience the same emotions, to look at the embodiment of our cherished ideas, to feel a transformation of our spirit in the atmosphere of pictorial and rhythmic perceptions. And [if] these perceptions remain on the level of everyday life and do not rise above it, we will say that there is no art here. Here, the soul does not rejoice and is not intoxicated by the charms of the unknown. For we need art that is light, cheerful, wise, and strong, which would ignite us with raptures of joy and convey the most elusive sensations in new and unknown forms.'¹¹

The 1916 exhibition heralded the appearance of a new art group – the Society of Independent Artists with Hershenfeld (fig. 66) as its chairman and Krykhatskyi as secretary and treasurer. The Society's inaugural show, called the 'Exhibition of Paintings by the Society of Independent Artists', opened in November 1917, a month after the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd. The ensuing political situation did not stimulate the flourishing of artistic life. Odesa was seething with disquiet as armed police and self-defence regiments tried in vain to restore order. Anarchists and robbers of all stripes went wild, looting and destroying various places and businesses in the city. At the same time, as one observer put it, 'In those days when bullets whistled in Odesa, it seemed that the entire population hid in their homes, and went outside only out of extreme necessity. However, it only seemed that way... some, or even many did come to the art exhibition by the "independents"'.¹²

The make-up of the exhibition was diverse: young artists, members of the Society of South Russian Artists, and some completely random participants, such as Princess Volkonskaya and county school teacher Yakubovich. The visitors could not help but notice a complete apathy and lack of creative response to the political situation of the day. One reviewer wrote: 'In the whirlpool of our days that are poisoned with madness and stained with the blood of fratricidal slaughter, art seems to have died ... Those tired psychologically can temporarily escape from the nightmares of current events by visiting the recently opened art exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists. [...] All exhibited works are far removed from the contemporary realities – *The Garden of Aphrodite, Carnival in Venice, By the Sea, Roses, Summer*'.¹³

The Society of Independent Artists, or the Comradeship as it was sometimes called, functioned until 1920, holding two more



Fig. 66 Mykhailo Hershenfeld, 1900s, photograph.
Serhii Lushchyk Family Archive

Fig. 67 The Society of Independent Artists at the 1918 exhibition, photograph.
Seated (left to right): Mykhailo Hershenfeld (3rd), Theophil Fraierman (5th),
Polina Mamicheva (6th), Amshei Nurenberg (7th). Private archive, Moscow



independent exhibitions in 1918 and 1919 (fig. 67), and a joint one with the Society of South Russian Artists in June 1918 under the auspices of the Odesa Society of Fine Arts. Young artists sought to break the established, habitual way of provincial art life, the isolation of which was aggravated by the outbreak of World War I, when all ties with international art centres were severed. Revolutionary events in the country made artistic exchange even more challenging as communication with Moscow, Petrograd and even Kyiv became accidental and unreliable. But it should be noted that the independence proclaimed in the Society's name was relative – its members were taught at the Odesa Art School by the older generation from the Society of South Russian Artists and while the youngsters opposed the teaching method and style of older masters, many 'independent' artists still failed to fully overcome their influence. The heterogeneity of the Society of Independent Artists, with its mixture of artistic styles and the absence of a single theoretical platform were all inherited from SSRA, whose exhibitions for many years showed the Wanderer Nikolai Kuznetsov (1850–1929) alongside the experimental works by Kandinsky.

Interestingly, the young Odesan artists were criticized not so much for their experiments, but for imitating the French and Russian Cubists. Exemplary in this regard is the following remark by Nilus: 'I still cannot accept that our young society of artists self-identifies as independent. I would say that the society is entirely dependent on Western art trends.'¹⁴ At the same time, however, all critics unanimously singled out a group of painters whose work they rated higher than that of others – Heorhii Bostrem (1885–1977), Amshei Nurenberg (pl. 111), Theophil Fraierman (1883–1957, pls 114, 115), Olesevich (pl. 113), and Sandro Fasini (1892–1942). These artists, together with the Society's chairman Hershenfeld, formed the core of the 'independents'. But there was no unity among them, neither aesthetic nor theoretical, and the clash of their ambitions was aggravated by the political situation. Led by Amshei Nurenberg (fig. 68), some of the artists joined the new government with the arrival of the Bolsheviks in Odesa in the spring of 1919.

The first important task, which was almost like a test of the artists' loyalty to the new regime, was to decorate Odesa for the May Day celebrations. Nurenberg recalled later:

Two teams of artists consisting of Olesevich, Fasini, Alexandra Exter and myself made sketches that were turned into posters and panels for all Soviet and party organizations. For three weeks we worked non-stop, often forgetting to eat. By 1 May, the work was completed. [...] Under the guidance of artists, portraits of Lenin, posters and panels were hung all over Odesa. The city vibrated with bright colours of unprecedented power. Crowds of Odesans gathered around the posters, animatingly discussing our art. We saw them take photos of our work, heard them say joyfully "Well done! Well done, artists!"¹⁵



Fig. 68 Amshei Nurenberg, 1910s, photograph. Private archive, Germany

It is interesting to compare this report with the memoirs of Vera Muromtseva-Bunina (1881–1961), who had a different political view. She wrote:

All the houses have red flags and carpets on the balconies... [...] There is a poster on the Cathedral Square: a fat bourgeois is standing and holding a worker by the collar, signed 1918. Next to it is a poster with a worker looking at a bourgeois sweeping the streets, signed 1919. At the corner of Deribasovskaya and Ekaterininskaya streets, there are posters on the same topic: the difference between 1918 and 1919. In 1918, a bourgeois and a German soldier are standing

over a worker; in 1919, a worker and soldier are standing on a bourgeois, whose fiery tongue is sticking out of his mouth. [...] At the former Robin's coffee shop there is a huge poster: a worker, soldier, and sailor are squeezing a bourgeois' enormous stomach with money pouring out of his mouth. People stop, silently look at it and move on. [...] Very young artists make the posters, in most cases. Among them are some children of wealthy bourgeois, who are poorly versed in politics and do not seem to understand what they are doing.¹⁶

In the summer of 1919, Nurenberg organized the 'People's Exhibition of Paintings, Posters and Children's Art'. The show seemed to have no underlying theme, with the catalogue listing a somewhat random selection of works, including those by professional artists from the Society of South Russian Artists and The Society of Independent Artists, as well as amateur drawings by workers and children. The exhibition also included paintings requisitioned from the collection of Oleksandr Russov (1847–1908), notably by such artists as Karl Bryullov (1799–1852) and Repin. In general, it seemed that participation in the exhibition was forced on many as a way to show loyalty to the new regime. The catalogue opened with Nurenberg's article 'Art and Its Current Tasks,' written in the slogan-like style of the revolutionary years, with calls to 'shape a new viewer-worker, who should replace the departed viewer-bourgeois'.¹⁷ Unfortunately, apart from a somewhat chaotically compiled catalogue and short notes in the press, no further information about the exhibition is available. There was not a single reputable review by which one could judge the quality of the show and individual works.

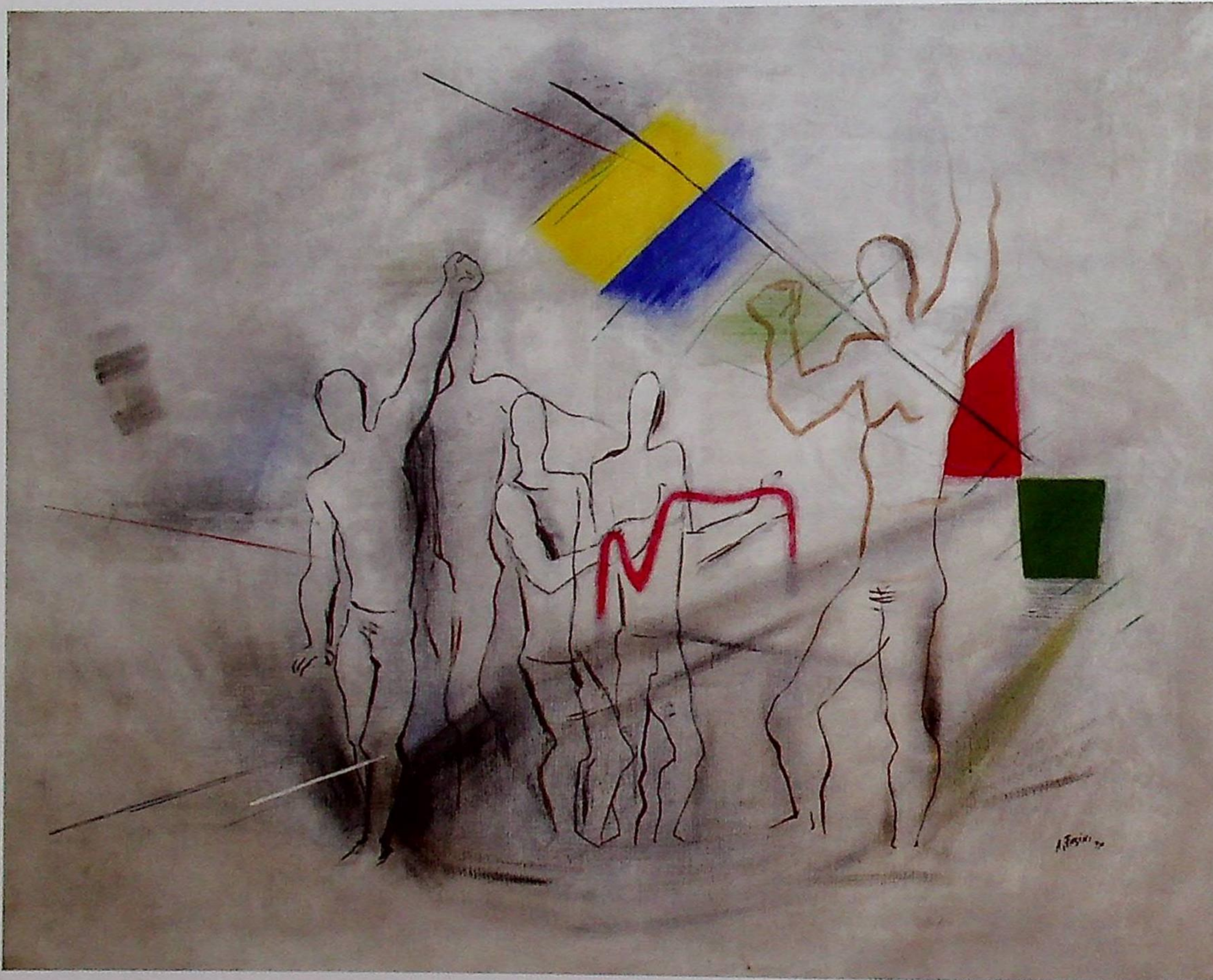
The headlines of the Bolshevik newspapers cheerfully called, 'Art to the streets!' and 'Artists to Work!' Numerous meetings of art professionals and art trade unions were held. Competitions for political propaganda posters were organized. All publications that were not in line with the new ideology were closed down, as well as many small theatres. On 9 June 1919, the Department of Arts of the local Department of Education issued a report prohibiting the staging of farces and plays close to them in content, as well as satirical songs, since they 'corrupted the proletarian masses'.¹⁸

By the autumn, however, Odesa came under the control of General Denikin's army. Many newspapers and magazines that were shut down by the Bolsheviks resumed their work, as did theatres and cabarets. One columnist in his article 'Waking Up' expressed the emotions of many, writing 'for five months I did not pick up my pen ... five months of silence ... and such terrible months! [...] A European city with almost a million people left without water, without bread, without light. Ah, let's forget about politics – after all, we suffocated every day, every hour in the arms of the death. Do you know how our life was different from before during these months? – Our laughter died. Yes, yes, we have forgotten how to laugh.'¹⁹ Newspapers were filled with stories



Left. Fig. 69 Amshei Nurenberg, *Untitled*, oil on plywood, 50 × 132 cm. Museum of Odesa Modern Art

Below. Fig. 70 Sandro Fasini, *Athletes*, 1930, oil on canvas, 115 × 146 cm. Museum of Odesa Modern Art



about victims of the Red Terror. People suspected of connections to the Bolsheviks were subject to public condemnation, and often to trial, even Nurenberg was forced to flee Odesa.

But despite the political unrest and hardship of everyday life, the Society of Independent Artists held another autumn exhibition in the winter of 1919–20. Several leading members of the Society did not take part for various reasons, including political. The exhibition also featured works from the collection of Andrei Drahoev (1854–1928) by artists from such groups as The World of Art, Jack of Diamonds and Blue Rose.

The political upheavals interrupted the natural course of events in everything, including art. The Independents were just at the beginning of their journey and there were uniquely gifted artists

among them: Bostrem, Hershenfeld, Nurenberg, Olesevich, Fasini, Fraierman. The vast majority of the Society's members, however, were twenty-year-old boys, who lacked experience and knowledge even if they had talent. They were desperate for something new and had their own idols to worship – Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso ... It was not without reason that critics so often accused the Independents of being secondary, of imitating famous French artists. However, one of the harshest Odesa critics, Nathan Inber (1887–1957), wrote: 'Despite their works having a dangerously large share of copying, and even though some of their attempts to "rediscover America" are very naïve, it is gratifying, nevertheless, that they imitate exemplary and beautiful art styles, and travel the seas, rather than staying on a barren shore.'²⁰ (figs 69, 70)

Both the Society of South Russian Artists and the Society of Independent Artists ceased to function in 1919–20, when many artists emigrated, some died, and the rest were forced to adapt to the new reality. Many younger artists, however, enthusiastically embraced the new Soviet regime and went to work for its government, but this made their fates no less tragic. For many years, the Society of Independent Artists in Odesa was not seen as worthy of research since it propagated avant-garde art and counted among its members many so-called formalists and emigrants. The limited number of works that survived from the revolutionary years presented yet another obstacle for research. Until recently, just a few paintings and drawings by the Independents were known.

The Tel Aviv Museum of Art staged a large exhibition in the summer of 2002, showing works by Odesan avant-gardists for

the first time in many decades. These paintings came from the collection of Yakov Peremen (1881–1960), the Odesan Jew, who owned two bookshops and supported young artists by buying works from their exhibitions. By the time of his departure from Odesa in December 1919, he had a fairly representative collection of over 200 paintings and drawings by the Independents.²¹ In 2006, The Museum of Russian Art in Ramat-Gan held the exhibition ‘The Parisians of Odesa’ that showed very nearly all the works in Peremen’s collection. It also included materials and documents that had been preserved by the artists’ heirs. The topic certainly deserves attention and further research, since without knowing the history of local avant-garde groups, such as The Society of Independent Artists in Odesa, it is impossible to offer a comprehensive overview of the Ukrainian art scene of the early 20th century.

Notes

- 1 S. Zolotov, ‘Khudozhestvennaya zhizn’ (Artistic Life), in *Odesskiy listok* (Odesa Leaflet), 14 November 1916.
- 2 For a more extensive description of the Salons, see Olena Kashuba-Volvach’s essay ‘The Beginning: The First Avant-Garde Exhibitions in Ukraine’ in this volume.
- 3 P. Pylsky, ‘V krasnom vikhre (“Salon”)’ (In a Red Swirl [The Salon]), in *Odesskie novosti* (Odesan News), 16 December 1909.
- 4 Nathan Inber, ‘Privet krasote’ (Hello to Beauty), in *Odesskie novosti* (Odesan News), 4 December 1909.
- 5 *Odesskie novosti* (Odesan News), 5 December 1909.
- 6 Serhii Lushchik, *Odesa ‘Izdebskyi Salons’ and Their Creator*, Odesa, 2005, p. 5.
- 7 Mtsyri, ‘Vystavka kartin “obedenennykh”’ (The Art Exhibition of the ‘United’), in *Odesskie novosti* (Odesan News), 21 April 1913.
- 8 Borys Raitskiy, ‘Vernisazh vystavki kartin “obedenennykh”’ (The Vernissage of the Art Exhibition of The ‘United’), in *Odesskiy listok* (The Odesa Leaflet), 21 April 1913.
- 9 M. Bialkovskiy, ‘Vesenniyaya vystavka kartin’ (The Spring Art Exhibition), in *Yuzhnaya mysl* (Southern Thought), Odesa, 24 March 1914.
- 10 M. Simonovych, ‘Pismo iz Odessy: Vesenniyaya vystavka kartin’ (Letter from Odesa: The Spring Art Exhibition), in *Muzy* (Muses), Kyiv, no. 7, 1914, p. 14.
- 11 Mykhailo Hershenfeld, ‘On Art and Joy’, in *Katalog vystavki kartin* (The Art Exhibition Catalogue), Odesa, 1916, pp. 4–5.
- 12 ‘Khudozhestvennaya zhizn’ (The Art Life), in *Odesskiy listok* (The Odesa Leaflet), 25 December 1917.
- 13 I. Zlatogorov, ‘Vystavka kartin “nezavisimyykh”’ (The Art Exhibition of The ‘Independents’), in *Yuzhnaya mysl* (Southern Thought), 23 December 1917.
- 14 Petro Nilus, ‘Vpechatleniya: Vystavka kartin “obshchestva nezavisimyykh khudozhnikov”’ (Impressions: The Art Exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists) in *Yuzhnoe slovo* (Southern Word), Odesa, 14 January 1920.
- 15 Amshei Nurenberg, *Odesa – Paris – Moscow*, Jerusalem, 2010, p. 217.
- 16 *By The Bunins: Diaries*, vol. 1, Moscow, 2004, p. 202.
- 17 Amshei Nurenberg, ‘Art and its Current Tasks’, in catalogue of the ‘People’s Exhibition of Paintings, Posters and Children’s Art’, Odesa, 1919, p. 3.
- 18 ‘News of the Odesa Union of Workers, Army and Navy’, appendix to issue no. 82, 09 June 1919.
- 19 *Odesskaya pochta* (The Odesa Post), evening issue, 1 September 1919.
- 20 Nathan Inber, ‘Vystavka “nezavisimyykh”’ (The Exhibition of the ‘Independents’), in *Odesskie novosti* (Odesa News), 03 December 1918.
- 21 For a detailed overview, see L. Voiskun, ‘“Independents” in a Foreign Land: Yakov Peremen and His Collection of Odesa Avant-garde Art in Israel’, in *Evreyskiy knigonosha* (The Jewish Bookseller), Moscow–Jerusalem, no. 2, 2003, pp. 46–54.