

# MODERN ART IN BULGARIA: FIRST HISTORIES AND PRESENT NARRATIVES BEYOND THE PARADIGM OF MODERNITY

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## Contents

### **SITUATING THE STUDY'S FIELD OF RESEARCH – introduction**

Discussing Modern Art – Between Historical Synthesis and Literary Interpretation.....	9
Case Studies and Comparative Studies.....	11
Centres and A-centres: Beyond Modernity Motivations for Narratives in the Present.....	15
Conceptual Field: Concepts and Uses.....	19
Historicising.....	20
Archive.....	21
Narrative.....	24
Art – Modern Art.....	28
Modernism / Modernisms and Modernity.....	30
Modernism and Avant-garde in Central and Eastern Europe.....	32

### **Chapter I. ART INSTITUTIONS, THEIR FORMATION AND SIGNIFICANCE FOR MODERN ART IN BULGARIA**

Introductory Notes.....	40
Art Institutions according to Art Publications in Bulgaria in the First Decades of the Modern Epoch.....	41
Art education, art exhibitions and art museum. The role of the Fine Arts Academy in Sofia.....	42
The Importance of the Experience from the Fine Arts Academy in Munich for the Acquisition of Cultural Modernity in Bulgaria at the End of the 19 <sup>th</sup> and the Beginning of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century.....	65
The Role of Photography in Art Education and Art History.....	79
The Institutional Presentation of Bulgarian Art in the International Cultural Space.....	83
Women and Modern Art Institutions.....	105
The Integration of Women in the Modernisation of the Artistic Life in Bulgaria till World War I – Acquisition of the Experience of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century.....	106
Women and the Modernisation of Artistic Life World War I – Entering the 20 <sup>th</sup> century.....	112
Women Artists Society Exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s.....	115
Women write about art.....	118
Concluding Notes.....	133

**Chapter II. REPRESENTATION / EXPRESSION  
OF MODERNITY BEFORE WORLD WAR I**

Introductory Notes.....	136
General Premises.....	136
Representation, Pictorial Modernity, Style.....	138
Cases and Conventions of Early / Enlightenment Pictorial Modernity	
Images of the Man and of the Woman.....	143
Images of Modernity: The Experience of the City and Nature.....	169
Images of Nature.....	170
Images of the City.....	177
A Digression: Representing the Village – Realism and Modernity.....	186
The Absent City in Early Art Criticism.....	188
Concluding Notes.....	190

**Chapter III. MANIFESTATIONS OF MODERNISMS IN BULGARIA  
AFTER WORLD WAR I**

Introductory Notes.....	192
Modernisms and the National Idea.....	194
The Marginality of Modernisms.....	202
“The Traffic” of Images in the Avant-garde Magazines – the Participation of Bulgarian Magazines from the 1920s.....	203
Views on Expressionism shared on the Pages of <i>Vezni</i> Magazine and Almanac.....	215
The Difficult Names – An Obstacle for the Integration in a Historical Synthesis.....	236
Georges Papazoff – an impossible style classification.....	236
Nicolay Diulgheroff – the Multiple Artistic Identity.....	245
The “High” and “Low” – Sirak Skitnik’s Views on Art in the Spaces of Everyday Life.....	260
The Return to the Picture in the 1930s – Problems of Historicising.....	268
Concluding Notes.....	271

**Chapter IV. HISTORIES OF MODERN ART IN BULGARIA  
UNTIL WORLD WAR II**

Introductory Notes.....	274
Fifty years of Bulgarian art by Andrey Protich and The New Bulgarian Art by Nicola Mavrodinov.....	276
Concluding Notes.....	291
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	293
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	298
<i>Index of personal names</i> .....	316
<i>Index of places</i> .....	323

## The “High” and “Low” – Sirak Skitnik’s Views on Art in the Spaces of Everyday Life

The theme of art in the everyday environment, of “high” and “low” art/culture was central for modern art in Europe. The previous part dealt with it in connection with N. Diulgheroff’s artistic manifestations.

With the development of the industrial production a number of questions can be formulated:

What was the impact of mass culture on the manifestations of modern art? What forms and topics of mass culture influenced modernisms? Which advertising tactics of exerting influence, for example, were appropriated by the avant-garde? How were modernisms and avant-garde perceived and reflected in the mass press and in other mass media?

Another group of questions refers to the extent to which the impact of modernisms and avant-garde were determined by the changes in the big city of the industrial epoch, by consumption and consumer culture. What were the peculiarities of the avant-garde and modernisms in those parts of Europe where capitalism developed less quickly?

Last but not least, we can study how, in what milieu and to what extent the artistic avant-garde and modernisms became part of the mass culture of consumption.

We can discern, approximately and conditionally, two accents in Sirak Skitnik’s interest in the impact of arts on the everyday.

In the 1920s, his articles discussed mostly the role of the artist in terms of the object environment and the products of polygraphy (book design and the children’s book, the post stamp, etc.), the decorative arts and design.

In the 1930s, the critic’s interest was mainly in the mass media, in the media for collective impact / perception such as the cinema, radio, and the streets of the big city, which themselves turned into a field of information and advertising, into a means of mass impact.

Sirak Skitnik’s critical reviews are a convincing example of the modern understanding of the roles of the artist in the epoch of the developing industry. In the article “International Decorative Exhibitions” (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак СКИТНИК 1924), we read the following: “Many, who are unfortunate enough to have been measuring things by the same yardstick all their lives, divide art into high and low, attributing decorative arts to the latter.” The author made

the observation that in Bulgaria there was no “contemporary decorative style” and no “established modernised Bulgarian exterior and interior architecture”, neither was there any design of the objects of the everyday.

With a view to this task, Sirak Skitnik called for the reformation of the educational system at the Fine Arts Academy.

In the panoramic presentation of Bulgarian art in the English magazine “The Studio” in 1938, entitled “Bulgarian Art of Today” (Sirak Skitnik 1938), Sirak Skitnik did not fail to mention, even though briefly, the so-called applied arts, distinguishing between “the craft modern” and “the industrial”. He stated: “The machine production is limited, actually it does not exist in Bulgaria and most of the factory-produced products are imported.” The notion of design cannot exist where there is a lack of developed industry. Yet, Sirak Skitnik presented a modern vision, beyond the local context to a great extent, of the roles of the artist in modern times.

Among the objects of the everyday, children’s toys took on particular importance in his critique. In an article, “On Children’s Toys” (Sirak Skitnik 1926), the new toy was presented as a new world for the child – a promise for “new surprises and riddles”. We learn from the text that, during the First Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, the author had the opportunity to see a whole children’s village with a “surprising variety of forms, which the children’s toy has acquired.” Sirak Skitnik insistently advised the producers to attract artists in this significant, because of the crucial importance of the toy in a child’s life, activity.

The same concern for the object world of the child, for the formation and education through the artistic qualities of the objects was expressed in Sirak Skitnik’s publications on the children’s book and in his manifestations as an artist in this field (Genova 2002: 158; 167-168).

I will not focus on Sirak Skitnik and the book here – this has been discussed in a lot of publications<sup>1</sup>. I will only mention his interest in the specificity of the post stamp, expressed in the article “A Stamp Competition” (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак Скитник 1927). At the end of the text, Sirak Skitnik recommended bearing in mind the specific requirements of this type of graphic arts.

The interest in and the attitude to the artistic aspect of the book and of the polygraphic objects as a whole are indicative of one’s belonging to modern culture. Their discussion appeared first in the critical discourse and much later

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<sup>1</sup> For information about these publications see (Genova 2002: 158).

in the histories of modern art. In Bulgaria, these fields of artistic manifestation entered historicising and were presented at research exhibitions as late as the 1990s.

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Since the beginning of the 1930s, the mass arts and media had been at the centre of Sirak Skitnik's interest. In the article "Art for Everybody" (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак Скитник 1931), his attention was drawn to the circus. The visit of a circus "stirred Sofia citizens of all walks of life" in such a way that it managed to compete even with the cinema, "the cinema halls were deserted", "the miracle of the talking movies faded" in front of the circus primitive. Entertainment began to appear as a variety of social behaviour, which Benjamin pointed out in the famous study from 1935-1936 (Benjamin 1968 [Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968]).

The radio as a mass medium, even though non-visual, was part of the critic's interest in the media of social impact. For Sirak Skitnik, it was part of his professional career too (1935-1943), in his capacity of the first director of the national radio in Bulgaria. I will just mention his article "Stage and Radio-Stage" (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак Скитник 1937b), which discussed the specific means of expression of the radio play.

Sirak Skitnik's articles on issues connected with the cinema, his comparisons between the cinema and the theatre lead me to W. Benjamin again. However, Sirak Skitnik did not have sinister premonitions for the manipulative use of the means of public impact and was more than enthusiastic towards the means of the cinema. In "Stage and Screen" (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак Скитник 1934b), insisting on the autonomous significance of the theatre, Sirak Skitnik pointed out that "the methods and means of film production cannot be the same as those of the stage art". Further on he said: "The theatre will never catch up with the mechanical and trick ingenuity or with the expressive dynamics of the cinema."

Sirak Skitnik underlined the peculiarities of the film image; he talked about the frame, the complexity of the montage: "the film picture consists of thousands of bits and pieces, shown from different angles (...)."

In *New Bulgaria* magazine Sirak Skitnik again compared the theatre and the cinema in an article entitled "What the Theatre Can Do" (Sirak Skitnik



Sirak Skitnik. Drawings.  
Ca 1932-1933. Central  
State Archive, Sofia, F. 44k.



/ Сирак СКИТНИК 1934b). Actually, the text presented to the same extent the possibilities of the cinema as a mass art, art for the mass public: “In the darkness of the narrow cinema hall, ordinary people feel such a surge of feelings that they become bewildered – so intensive feelings that they are upset by their immoderacy. What is happening to them?” We can again think of W. Benjamin, especially of the last parts of the already-mentioned study, which discussed the mass propaganda and the cinema.

Contrary to W. Benjamin, Sirak Skitnik insisted on the propaganda possibilities of the theatre and its usage: “In its new construction, Soviet Russia well understood the power of the stage and used it well as a safe means of activation of the spirit, despite the extremes to which it had taken it.” And further on: “It is not accidental that the theatre has been taken out in the street, in the square. Today, all these public gatherings and demonstrations of the masses in Russia, Italy, and Germany are nothing else but an organised square theatre (...). In these countries the organised theatricality (in its broadest sense) is entirely aimed at creating a collective will (...) – a national pathos so necessary for a national construction.” Let’s remember the final sentence in W. Benjamin’s study: “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicising art.” (Benjamin 1968).

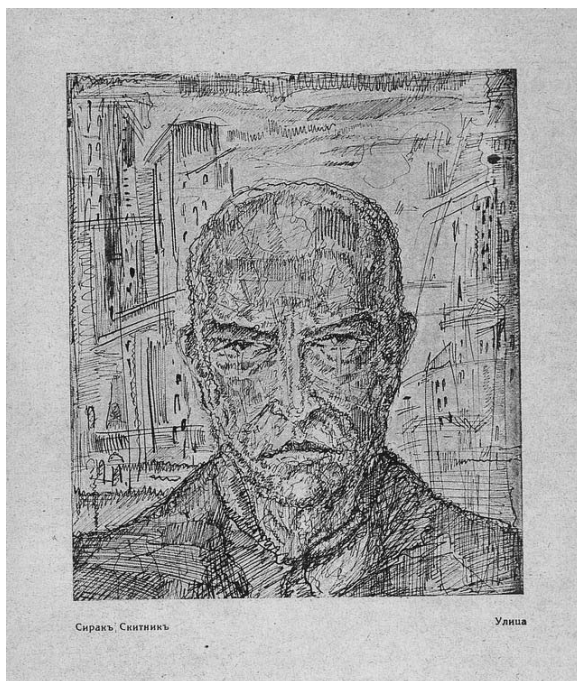
In 1934, in Bulgaria, Sirak Skitnik did not see any danger in using this potential for mass impact, what W. Benjamin warned against in 1936 judging by his experience from Germany.

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The city, the big contemporary city constantly drew Sirak Skitnik’s attention. In the article “Painting. Sofia and the Artists” (Sirak Skitnik 1940), he discussed our artists’ attitude to Sofia as a landscape object. His call for presenting the modern city in painting makes us remember another article by W. Benjamin – “Paris – the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (Benjamin 1968 [Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968]) as well as the famous, already mentioned essay by Charles Baudelaire “Artist of Contemporary / Modern Life” (Baudelaire .....), in which, in a different way and different time, appear artistically acquired images of the city of the modern epoch.

Sirak Skitnik made the observation that “Sofia is an accidental, absolutely accidental object in the work of Bulgarian artists” and if the capital appeared

in their paintings it was the image of Sofia before its turning into a modern city – “old-time provincial Sofia”. And further on: “even today almost all our artists who draw Sofia are looking for the provincial in the Capital, not for its present-day image, its present-day rhythm”. The author gave as examples Atanas Mihov, Konstantin Shturkelov, Boris Denev, and Vasil Zahariev. For him, it was only Nikola Petrov who left landscapes of the modern city. “The city with its architectural piles, streets, and traffic remains foreign”, wrote the critic with dissatisfaction (Sirak Skitnik 1940).



Sirak Skitnik. A Street. 1929. Published in Hyperion magazine 1929. iss 5-6.

The modern artist, according to Sirak Skitnik, should look for and emphasise “the rigidity, dynamics and linear strictness of the urban landscape”, should feel “the new rhythm” and “the new spirit of the city”. He should be “the artist of modern life”; if we use the famous title and following Baudelaire, the artist in us, as it happens elsewhere, should present “modernity”.

“The citizen of Sofia already tries to feel the rhythm of the big city”, wrote Sirak Skitnik, “and quickly adjusts to its requirements both in the street and at home. Clothing, furniture, lifestyle, entertainment...” (Sirak Skitnik/ Сирак СКИТНИК 1940).

In “Paris – the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, W. Benjamin followed the peculiarities of the big city at the beginning of the industrial epoch, the main changes in architecture and the way they influenced life and communication in the big city as well as commented on the separation of public and private spaces. Also, what is of interest to him are the changes after the appearance of photography in the field of the visual image and communications.

Sirak Skitnik did not write on photography in particular although he was interested in the arts of the image connected with the circulation and in the products of polygraphy. However, he wrote a text on aero photography, on photographs taken from an airplane (The *Slovo* [Discourse] newspaper 1927, Central State Archives, f. 44). “The airplane brought a new perspective, a new viewpoint”, enthusiastically pointed out Sirak Skitnik. His enthusiasm towards the technologically expanded opportunities for perception preceded the futurists’ “aero painting”. Like them, Sirak Skitnik did not make gloomy forecasts for the usage of technology, in contrast to W. Benjamin, who constantly did so. In 1936, W. Benjamin wrote: “Only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today’s technical resources while maintaining the property system.” (Benjamin 1968).

Together with the artistic acquisition of the big city, Sirak Skitnik also discussed architecture itself. In an article entitled “Hopes’ (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак СКИТНИК 1936), he heatedly defended his position in terms of the architect’s responsibility due to the huge public significance of architecture. Architecture had to be discussed competently and in public.

“In our country, even abroad, it is more common to write and talk extensively about a public painting exhibition, about a mediocre book than about a successful architectural work.

And it should be just the opposite. A bad book, or a bad painting, can easily be destroyed, but an architectural edifice remains for long – durable, constantly exposed to the public’s view, creating good or bad taste.

This lack of strictness towards the architectural work contributed to a large extent to filling Sofia with architectural senselessness. (...)

Architecture is an art like any others, the only difference being that it does

not tolerate the irresponsibility of other arts. It cannot be a whim; it cannot be a passing fancy. (...) Even the most original and successful architectural work is subject to main canons, which even the centuries could not shatter.

It seems that it is only the majority of Bulgarian architects that has broken them down so as to give our capital the most preposterous architectural appearance that could ever have been conceived.”

I have included that long quote because the issues and the pathos of the discussion are still topical today.

We associate Sirak Skitnik's figure with our self-awareness of our cultural mission and responsibility. The protagonists of contemporary art in all its forms, especially in those of mass impact, should not allow it to be used for ideological, political or any other purposes beyond its own.

In “Art and the Street” (Sirak Skitnik / Сирак СКИТНИК 1937a), Sirak Skitnik polemically discussed the role of mass art, mass expectations and mass taste in the contemporary cultural situation: “The street takes on a great part of the tendencies in modern art.” However, artists should not form their outlook “on the street”. The end of the article calls for contemporary art to “outline the borders of its territory and to establish its self-value. It has to fight for its rights, just as the street bravely fights for its own [rights]. It has to become a master, whose word weighs and whose crown is heavy. It has to remember that while the street is irresponsible, it [art] is held accountable in the centuries to come.”

Thus, in his critical articles, Sirak Skitnik clearly outlines the growing tension and interpenetration between art, becoming self-aware of its autonomy, and the forms of mass culture, with their different potential for impact. This new significant cultural and artistic problematics of the industrial epoch will enter much later the historicising narratives of modern art with the contextual approaches from the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s onwards.