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The Art of Stasys Krasauskas

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Recommended Citation

Sluckis, Mykolas and Krasauskas, Stasys (2017) "The Art of Stasys Krasauskas," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 9 , Article 19.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol9/iss1/19>

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The Art of Stasys Krasauskas

During the last fifteen or twenty years Lithuanian art has made rapid progress in all fields — in poetry, music, the representational arts, architecture, the theatre and the cinema. At no other time in the history of Lithuanian culture has there been such unity and interaction between the arts. Lithuania's present cultural upsurge began with literature, and more especially with poetry, capable of expressing man's perpetual yearning for beauty and truth undivorced from the demands of society, from the concrete tasks of historical development. This is what Lithuanian poetry was attempting to express in the work of two extremely talented modern poets, Eduardas Miezelaitis and Justinas Marcinkevicius.

The philosophical interpretation of time, of man's being and of his place in history formed a basic theme of Lithuanian poetry, and indeed of Lithuanian literature as a whole. This found a powerful response in the art of the country, and above all in the representational arts. Painting, sculpture and especially graphic art were always close to the world of literary ideas. If in the early days, however, graphic art was essentially illustrative, today the relationship that exists between the literary work and the drawings that accompany it is one of mutual influence and enrichment. It is precisely this complex link between two closely associated spheres of art that accounts for the importance of Stasys Krasauskas, one of Lithuania's most famous graphic artists, widely known in the Soviet Union and abroad.

In the first period of his creative development Krasauskas was concerned with finding his own individual means of expression, a task to which he would devote much attention in later years. His early works present no evidence of any distinctly original complex of problems or themes, and in fact the young artist contented himself with the more fleeting forms of illustration. But even then barren, stereotyped depictions were anathema to the rich inner world of this gifted youth from Kaunas — the "White City" of the poetess Salomeja Neris, the very appearance of which possessed something of the poetic enchantment peculiar to the monochromatic world of graphic art. Krasauskas's first book illustrations (1954-57) are interesting for their inner freedom and their daring composition, which verges at times on improvisation. He

would refuse to supply merely a picture adding little details to the given situation, and would propose instead a situation of his own, going beyond the limits of the written text. To stand as an independent continuation of the poetic or prose text, to use an idiom peculiar to the laconic nature of graphic art and not to literature — these soon became principles of Lithuanian graphics, and Krasauskas was the first to put them into practice.

While he was still a student, Krasauskas was fascinated by the art of Frans Masereel. There is nothing in common between Krasauskas's melodious lines and the deliberate coarsening of things and people typical of Masereel. But the young Lithuanian artist was attracted by the originality of Masereel's attitude to the world, by his independence from the literary work in hand and, what was most important, by the wealth of themes his illustration contained. These did not attempt to retell the text but became rather works in themselves, possessing their own life outside the book. In this way began Krasauskas's own attempts to provide an original interpretation not only of literary works, but also of the phenomena in life which had inspired them.

At the very beginning of his career Krasauskas was faced with the problem of national traditions in art. One answer to this question was to follow the well-worn path of one's predecessors, repeating their work and imitating stereotyped national images and stylistic conventions. The second course, much more complex and difficult, leads one to search for original means of expression, for an inner synthesis between what is of distinctly national and what is of universal significance. The young Krasauskas chose the second path, and although his first major work, a series of woodcuts for the classic Lithuanian novel *Uncles and Aunts* by Vaizgantas, was entirely based on folklore material, he was able to combine what was uniquely individual in the work with themes of a wider human interest. The love story of two obscure peasants, Mykoliukas and Severiute (the main characters in Vaizgantas's novel), who suffered from the cruelty of their superstitious neighbours and feudal law, becomes in his interpretation something more than a national and social tragedy. The novel is full of protest against everything which tends to destroy the good instincts of man.

In his later works Krasauskas achieves an increasingly organic synthesis between national feeling and wider human aspirations. At the same time the artist does not lose his link with the roots of his country's ancient culture. His works express this in their fluidity of line, their rhythm and their compositional peculiarities (obliging him to "fill out" as it were the whole sheet of paper), as well as in their lyrical treatment of images. What is purely national in Krasauskas is the constancy of his

love for poetry, as well as his intimate, and at the same time powerful, interpretation of poetic works.

It was precisely his deep understanding of the national element in art, involving the free adoption of tradition without being fettered by it or obliged to indulge in mere imitation, that helped Krasauskas to make so bold an entry into the world of wider human problems, to draw upon the major achievements of Soviet and world literature, to enrich his work with the humane ideas of socialist unity, which have done so much to elevate the purpose and content of art. This marks the second period in Krasauskas's work, notable for his novel perception of phenomena apparently long familiar to us. One might justly call this his lyrical, poetic period, characterized by his magnificent illustrations to Marcinkevicius's *Blood and Ashes* and the outstanding cycle of poems entitled *Man* by Miezelaitis, the Lenin Prize winner. Krasauskas's other cycles are also distinguished by the high quality of their artistic execution and by their subtle feeling of universal harmony. It is as if Krasauskas were consummating the concepts of his poet friends. In this artistic "contest," Krasauskas's elegant contours attain almost limitless possibilities of visual and musical resonance.

The productions of his second period, varied in theme, stylistic peculiarities and manner of execution, are distinguished by their delight in the beauty and strength of man. Possessing an acute musical ear, Krasauskas has a remarkable feeling for the plasticity of the human body, whether it is pictured in athletic movement, motionless contemplation or strenuous struggle. So certain is the artist of the human body's expressive qualities, of the significance, spiritual as well as physical, of bodily movements, that he often thinks it unnecessary to provide any accompanying background or setting. In his work it is only a poetic metaphor that links man and nature, a metaphor that the artist handles brilliantly. "My creative endeavour," the artist says, "has clearly been associative in nature, and associations are not something that can be expressed in a concrete and material form." Despite their symbolic value, however, his images are of realistic origin in the broadest sense of the word.

Freeing the image of man from its routine associations, from the petty concerns of everyday life, speaking to us, in a language of expressive plasticity, of the destiny of man — of his struggle to gain Prometheus's Fire and Icarus's wings, of love and childbirth, of youth and maturity — Krasauskas entered his next period, which began with the engravings for *The Era* by Miezelaitis, continued with illustrations to Marcinkevicius's *The Wall* and reached a culmination point in the work he did for Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Song of Songs.

In this third period Krasauskas's gentle lyricism and radiant purity are transformed into a dramatic upsurge of passion, and we are more clearly aware of the passage of time not as a unifying factor but as a tragic struggle. In attempting to express this dramatic quality, Krasauskas's elegant contours become more tense, being drawn not against an evenly black surface, but against a peculiar and, at first sight, chaotic background of interlacing lines reminding one of the artist's early works (e.g. *Blood and Ashes*). His latest works, however, reveal a more profound understanding of the world, a more acute awareness of the connection between the individual and his place in society and history. Here, as at any other period, each work is distinguished by its own characteristic features: an expression of sorrow and sympathy in *The Wall*, a poem evoking man's struggle with the hideous reality of war; wisdom and a subtle understanding of human passions in the treatment of Shakespeare's Sonnets. He evokes an intense image of the power of love as a gift of nature in the cycle of autozincographs which accompany the Song of Songs. According to Krasauskas's intention, the figures depicted in *The Wall* are neither "beautiful" nor "graceful": the inhuman terrors are shown through metaphors of repellent hideousness, whereas the dramatic forces underlying the Sonnets are represented through images of outward tranquility, born from a wise understanding of the vicissitudes of human life. The Song of Songs, on the other hand, depicts two youthful bodies of remarkably harmonious proportions, intoxicated with their own perfection — a treatment which surrounds their intimacy with an aura of spiritual sublimity.

MYKOLAS SLUCKIS

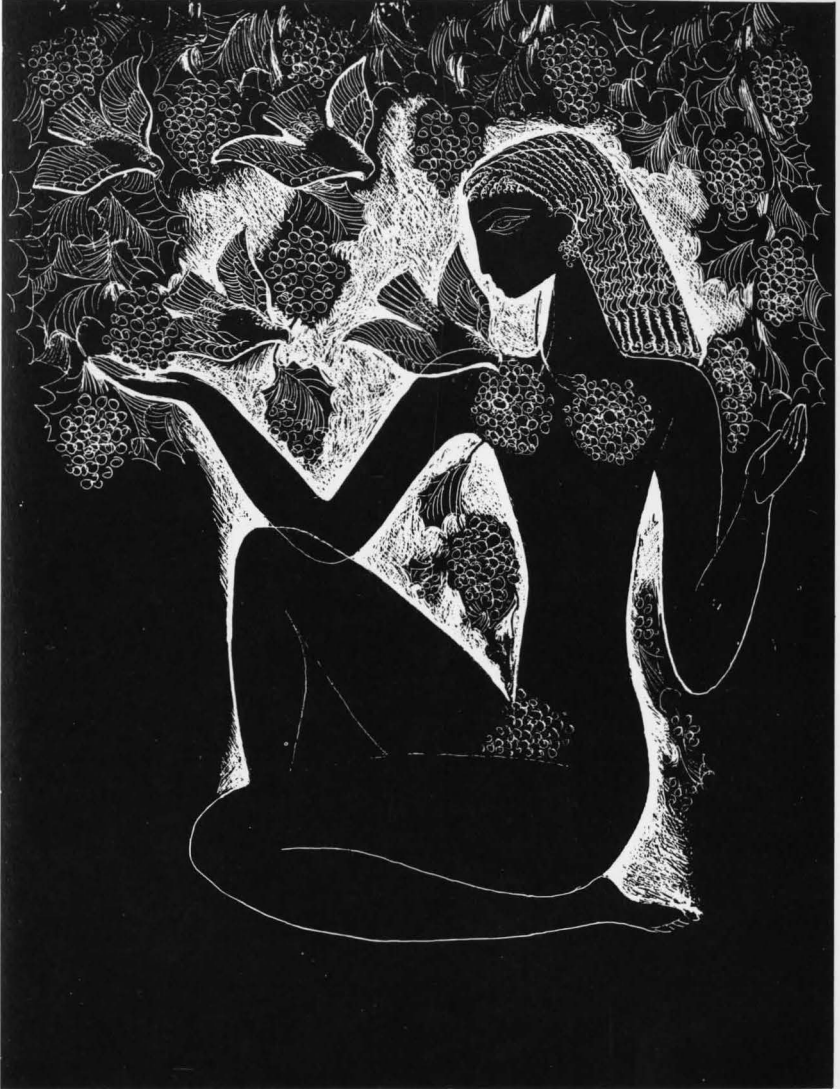
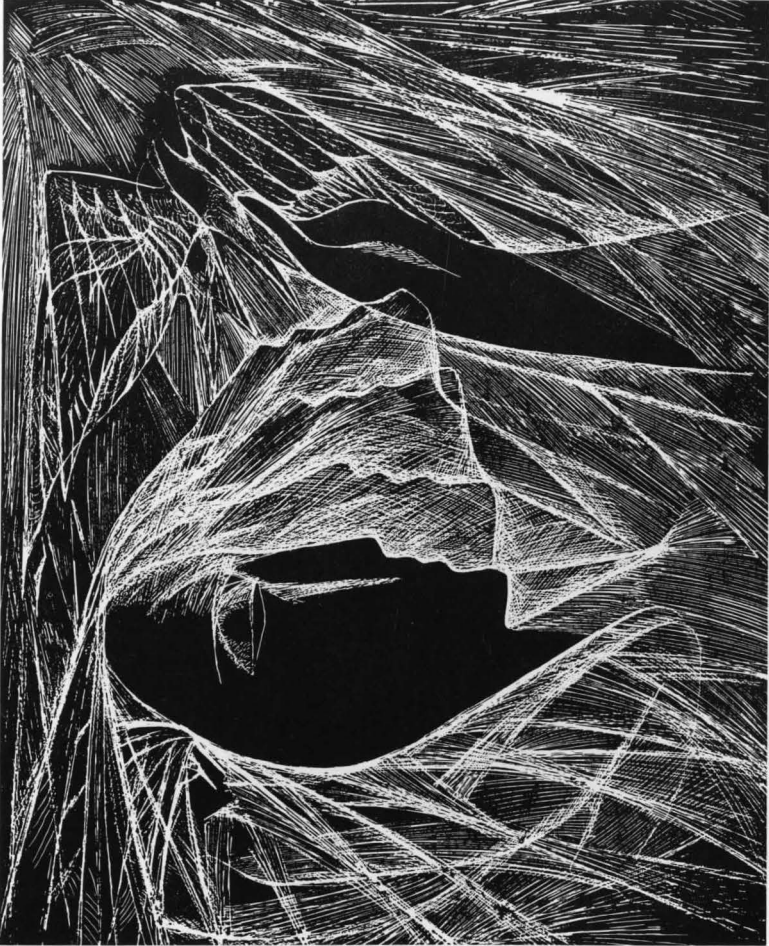


Illustration for the Song of Songs 1966
17.4 x 13.5 cm autozincograph



“The Lips” Illustration for *The Era*
by E. Miezelaitis 1967
13.2 x 16.6 cm autozincograph



"The Lips" Illustration for *The Era* 1967
13.4 x 17 cm aut zincograph



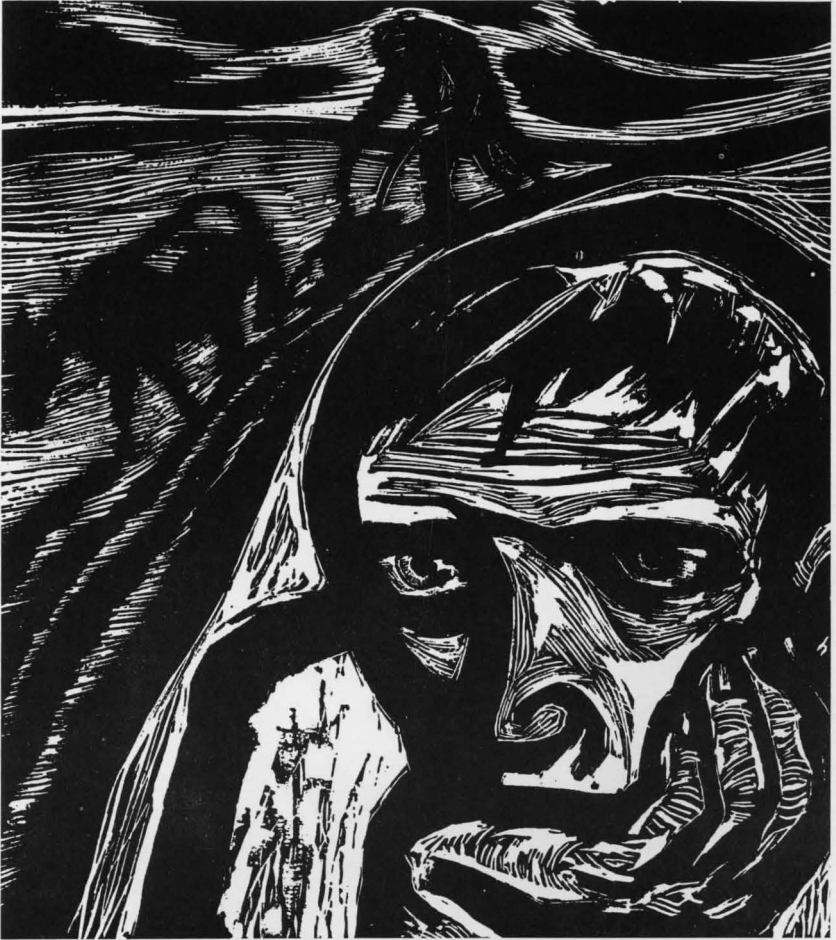
"The Dream" Illustration for *The Wall*
by J. Marcinkevicius 1968
15 x 12 cm autozincograph



"The Indifference" Illustration for *The Wall* 1968
15 x 12 cm autozincograph



"Child and War" Illustration for *Blood and Ashes*
by J. Marcinkevicius 1960
10.3 x 9 cm xylograph



"Marcius" Illustration for *Blood and Ashes* 1960
10.3 x 9 cm xylograph

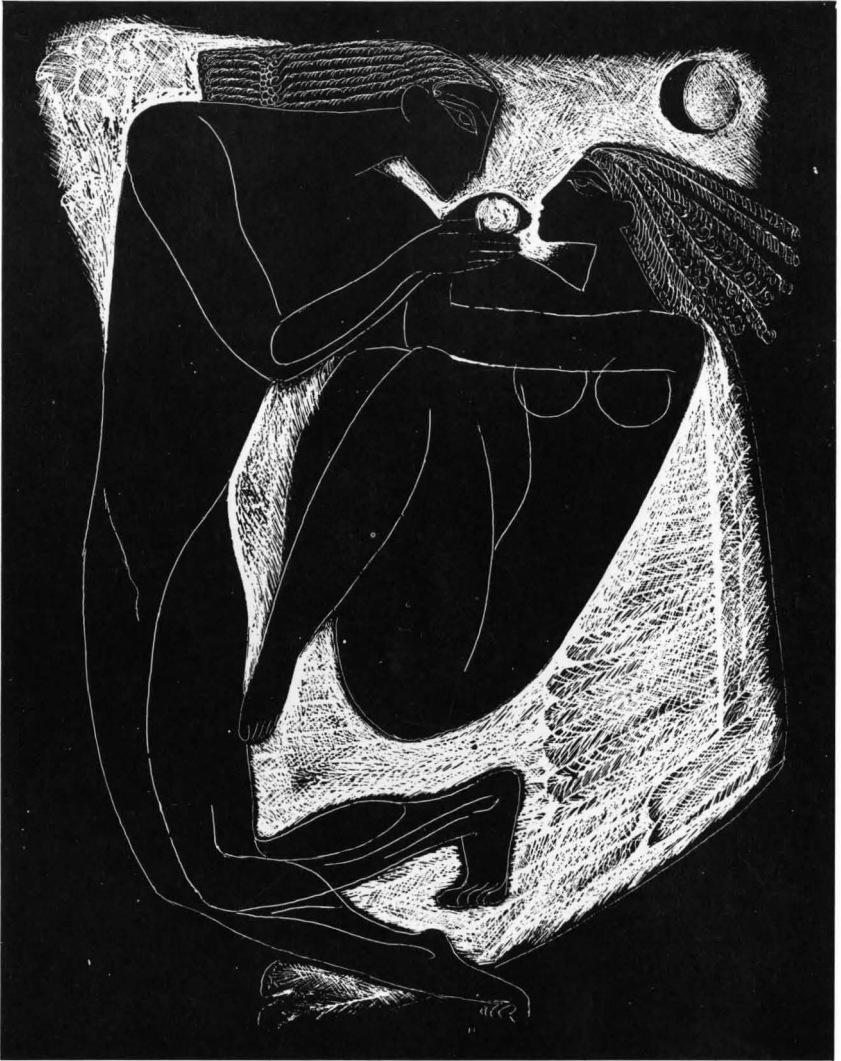


Illustration for the Song of Songs 1966
17.5 x 13.3 cm autozincograph