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The Impact of Historic Events on the Formation of the Creative Method of Ernest Kontratovych in the Early Period (1930s-1940s)

Abstract

The article focuses on the early works of Ernest Kontratovych (1912-2009), one of the founders of the cultural and artistic centre in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. His period of creative formation occurred between the 1930s and the 1940s. At that time, Subcarpathian Ruthenia, as part of the Czechoslovak Republic, suffered from the effects of irregular agrarian reform and the Global economic crisis that has affected all of Europe. The mountainous areas of Verkhovyna, where government action and the crisis have led to poverty and famine, have suffered the most. After graduating from the Uzhhorod Singing and Teaching Seminary (1932), Kontratovych was sent to remote villages in mountainous areas for pedagogical work. There he witnessed the events that led to the choice of themes for his early works. Tragedies, such as the depopulation of villages, famine, and impoverishment of the people of Verkhovyna, and resulted in a picturesque series with images of the disadvantaged people, the cripples, the beggars. These experiences made a lasting effect on Kontratovych's work. He peculiarly interpreted the theme of war. The lack of images of military activity is compensated by images of war victims – the orphaned children, crippled people, beggars.

The study examines Kontratovych's expressionist style in the context of the tasks perceived by the artist as his responsibilities to recreate and convey to the audience the tragedy of the contemporary situation. Exaggeration and deformation of form, as well as displacement of objects, emphasized the emotional intensity of the works. At the same time, he frequently turned to the daily life of the people of Verkhovyna, which created a counterbalance to these dramatic works. Traditional events such as wedding processions, preparations of the bride, and dances are shown in an optimistic, joyful palette in a similarly expressionist style.

Keywords: Ernest Kontratovych, Transcarpathian school of painting, Subcarpathian Ruthenia, expressionism, genre painting of Transcarpathia, an image of women.

In 1919, under the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, the territory of Transcarpathia under the official name of Subcarpathian Ruthenia became a part of Czechoslovakia. The process of transition was complex, controversial on many issues, including the granting of autonomy to the new part, the political self-government and the establishment of borders, and so on. The important fact was that after the Austro-Hungarian rule, Transcarpathian land was at an extremely low economic level, the region was experiencing impoverishment and lack of cultural component. All this allowed the Prague government to manipulate the governor and officials of Subcarpathian Ruthenia and postpone the moment of secession of Transcarpathia, because according to President Tomas Masaryk: “Czechoslovakia supports the territorial organization of its state based on the federal principle, but until all the lands of the republic reach an almost equal level of economic and cultural development, the federalization will be premature”.¹ Therefore, it was important to raise the level of economy, culture, education to the national level. “The strategy of the policy of the president of the Czechoslovak republic towards Transcarpathia provided for the modernization of all spheres of life in the region, which in Masaryk’s view meant democratization of public life, integration with Czechs, economic development, education, and health care”.² To raise the economic, social, and cultural level of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, the Prague government carried out several reforms, which had both positive and negative results.

Among the positive aspects of the development of the economic condition of Transcarpathia is the banking sector (the opening of the first bank in the region, the receiving of subsidies from the government for the development of institutions, cooperative lending, etc.),³ tourism industry (the issuing of tourist guides, the opening of new hotels, the paving of mountain routes for walking tours, the popularization of visiting the historical places of Transcarpathia).⁴ The negative effects of the reforms were in the industrial and agricultural sectors. Local enterprises could not compete with the Czechs, which led to their closure and job losses. The agrarian reform has to correct the issue of the distribution of the landholdings. It was carried out in two stages (1919–1925; 1925–1929). At the first stage, the surplus land was sold to landless or land-poor peasants. Only 24% of the total land was sold. Other lands either remained with the old landowners (mostly Czech landowners) or passed to the state in the colonization fund for Czech colonists in the lands of Subcarpathian Ruthenia. At the second stage, the land was not confiscated but bought from the landlords for further division. However, at the same time, there was speculation to circumvent the law. In particular, in 1928 the Count of Schon-

1 A. Panov, *Masaryk i Zakarpattia* [Masaryk and Transcarpathia], Uzhhorod, 2010, p. 137.

2 O. Kravchuk, “Natsionalna polityka Chekhoslovachchyny na Zakarpatti v otsinkakh Tomasha Masaryka” [National policy of Czechoslovakia in Transcarpathia in the assessments of Tomas Masaryk], *Ethnic history of the peoples of Europe* 2009, no. 28, pp. 65-71.

3 M. Tokar, “Bankivska sprava ta kredyтуvannia” [Banking and crediting], in: M. Vehesha, F. Chedynets, eds., *Zakarpattia 1919 – 2009 rokiv: istoriia, polityka, kultura* [Transcarpathia 1919–2009: history, politics, culture], Uzhhorod, 2010, pp. 67-69.

4 F. Shandor, “Turyzm” [Tourism], in: M. Vehesha, F. Chedynets, eds., op. cit., pp. 69-72.

born sold his lands at a reduced price to the Bignon conglomerate, which formed the Latorytsia company for their operation. One of the main shareholders of the company was the count himself.⁵ Due to the incomplete implementation of the reform, it proved ineffective and caused the suffering of the population.

In the late 1920s, Czechoslovakia was hit by the Global economic crisis, which began in the United States. The crisis affected most industries, reducing production and jobs, due to the closure of some factories. "The number of unemployed people in Czechoslovakia reached 1 million, 100 000 of which were Transcarpathians".⁶ Unemployment, impoverishment, and famine began in the villages. The population of Verkhovyna, the most backward region of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, was particularly affected. Reforms in the fields of tourism, finance, and administrative and territorial reorganization of the system were aimed to bring the structure and way of life of Subcarpathian Ruthenia closer to the standards of Czechoslovakia, but most of them were colonial. According to Marian Tokar, "Colonial features of the economic policy of Czechoslovakia in the region were manifested in all spheres of economy. Speculation, embezzlement of natural resources (especially in the forest industry), the introduction of uneven tariff systems, deliberate underestimation of raw material prices, etc. have become commonplace".⁷

It is important to note the qualitative changes in the development of the culture of Subcarpathian Ruthenia after the integration into the Czechoslovak Republic. The educational reform carried out at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s contributed to the opening of new schools (from 475 primary schools, 321 were with the Ruthenian language of teaching), and the introduction of new subjects and books, and the provision of primary education. The development of the educational sector led to the quantitative growth of the intellectuals. "The statistics of that time show that the number of people in the intellectual work of Transcarpathia has doubled. In the late 1930s, 2 200 specialists were employed in the sphere of public education alone. A complete brilliant assemblage of prominent teachers, scientists, writers, artists, and public figures successfully worked among them".⁸ The raising of the level of literacy and education in the Transcarpathian lands affected the increase in the number of intellectuals. The institutions for the training of the teachers of urban schools played a significant role. In particular, the Uzhhorod singing and teaching seminary annually graduated 40-50 clergymen, who were also teachers.

5 S. Fedaka, "Sto rokov Pershii Chekhoslovatskii respublitsi" [One hundred years of the First Czechoslovak Republic], *Ekzyl*, vol. 11-12, Oct-Dec 2018, <http://1939.in.ua/general/serhiy-fedaka-100-rokiv-pershiy-chekhoslovats-kiy-respublitsi/> [accessed 20 December 2020]

6 M. Tokar "Hospodarska polityka chekhoslovatskoi vlady ta problemy sotsialnoho rozvytku" [Economic policy of the Czechoslovak authorities and problems of social development], in: M. Vehesha, F. Chedynets, eds., *Zakarpattia 1919 – 2009 rokiv...* [Transcarpathia 1919 – 2009...], pp. 63-67.

7 Ibid.

8 V. Zadorozhnyk, "Osvita i shkilnytstvo" [Education and schooling], in: M. Vehesha, F. Chedynets, eds., op. cit., pp. 69-72.

Given the formation of the cultural and artistic environment of Subcarpathian Ruthenia in the 1920s and the 1930s, the seminary is notable for the activities of two teachers of art – Adalbert Erdeli and Yosyp Bokshai. They were graduates of the Hungarian Royal Art Institute, so they sought to create a local cultural centre that would have a clear national identity in the art world. In the 1920s and 1930s, they made several attempts to organize a centre of Subcarpathian art. The first task set by Adalbert Erdeli and Yosyp Bokshai was to provide quality art education. To achieve this, they founded the first educational institution for talented young people – “Public Art School” (1927). The school operated on weekends in the seminary. Seminarians with a knack for drawing were invited to classes. The program of the three-year course of study was based on the academic training of those art academies: students attended the lectures on art history, worked with plaster, nude, studied composition, drawing, and painting.⁹ A feature of the training was *en plein air* painting - hiking in the mountains to master the technique of creating a landscape in the open air. Today, the landscape with a mountain panorama of the majestic Carpathians is a kind of regional feature of the representatives of the Transcarpathian school of painting.

The first graduates of the school became famous artists - Adalbert Boretskyi, Andrej Dobosh, Ernest Kontratovych, Andriy Kotska, Zoltan Sholtes. Their creative development took place in the 1930s when living conditions in the Transcarpathian lands were difficult for the population and the political and historical situation had an undeniable influence on the formation of their worldview and artistic principles. They were a cohort of young teachers who, in addition to their main work in the pedagogical sphere, found time to develop their artistic talent and the traditions of the local painting school.

In 1931 the first organization of local artists “Society of Fine Artists in Subcarpathian Ruthenia” was founded. It included Subcarpathian artists (Yosyp Bokshai, Vasyl Dvan-Sharpotoki, Adalbert Erdeli, Ivan Erdeli, the graduates of the Public Art School), as well as those who actively collaborated with them on the territory of Transcarpathia - Milada Beneshova-Spalova, Yulii Iyas, Ladislav Kaigl, Bedrich Ozdijan, Inna and Boris Romberg, Josef Tomaszek, Jaromir Tsupal, and others. “They became the nucleus, not on a national – Ruthenian - basis, but purely artistic and ideological arguments: they accepted with all their might the idea - to find the soul and style of their people and land”.¹⁰ The first exhibition of works of the members of the organization took place on December 13-20, 1931 at the Uzhhorod Jubilee Czech Folk School named after Tomas Masaryk. In 1936, with the support of “Society of Friends of Subcarpathian Ruthenia”, an exhibition of works of the artists of

9 I. Nebesnyk, *Khudozhnia osvita na Zakarpatti u XX stolitti: istoryko-pedahohichnyi aspekt* [Art education in Transcarpathia in the XX century: historical and pedagogical aspects], Uzhhorod, 2000, p. 28.

10 A. Izvorin, “Suchasni ruski khudozhnyky” [Contemporary Ruthenian artists], *Zoria-Hajnal* 1942, 2 (3-4), p. 399.

the Society was held in Bratislava, presenting 95 works by nineteen artists.¹¹ In the following year, the exhibition “Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia - their people and the land in fine arts” took place in Prague. The local Subcarpathian school was represented by Yosyp Bokshai, Vasyl Dvan-Sharpotoki, Adalbert Erdeli, Ivan Erdeli, Andriy Kotska, Zoltan Sholtes.¹² Ernest Kontratovych also took part in the exhibition activities of the Society. “Becoming a member of “Society of Fine Artists”, Kontratovych performs at art exhibitions in the second half of the 30’s-first half of the ’40s with works of such a social and exposing orientation that he is called one of the sharpest exponents of rebellious sentiments among Transcarpathian artists”.¹³

In the 1930s, the graduates of “Public Art School” began their exhibition activities. Andriy Kotska wrote about himself: “In 1931 I started working as a teacher at a public school in the village of Verkhovyna. Here I painted some paintings from the life of the people and landscapes from which in 1933 and 1935 the exhibitions were organized in Uzhhorod”.¹⁴ Adalbert Boretskyi exhibited his works at the exhibition in 1933 together with the works of Andriy Kotska. Zoltan Sholtes organized his first personal exhibitions in 1932 and 1933 in Uzhhorod. Since 1935, Ernest Kontratovych began his exhibition career. “In 1935 he became a full member of the Union of Artists of Transcarpathia. Within the framework of this Union, he took part in all exhibitions”.¹⁵

The works of Ernest Kontratovych were certainly commented on already at the time. His original painting style, the use of expressionist mode, and the social themes gained him the reputation of an “exponent of the life of the people from Verkhovyna”.¹⁶ A Hungarian critic, Aba Josef, wrote the following lines about Ernest Kontratovych: “Kontratovych, leaving the natural observation of reality, rather turns to convey reality, passing it through himself, through his world and is expressed expressively; has a future, because this expression is evolving”.¹⁷ This definition describes the young artist as an expressionist in the best way. The first Ruthenian critic, A. Izvorin (Nedzelskii), also noted the truthfulness in the works of Ernest Kontratovych and noted that he was the first to try to show “the social poverty of the common people, which was hidden behind the external colour of ‘our picturesque Motherland’”.¹⁸ Also, Izvorin noted the influence of Adalbert Erdeli on the creative manner of his student, which he saw manifested in a special interpretation of the pointed top houses of Verkhovyna and the limited attention to

11 I. Nebesnyk, *Adalbert Erdeli*, Lviv, 2007 [in Ukrainian].

12 Ibid.

13 V. Myshanych, “Pamiati patriarkha kraiovoi shkoly maliarstva” [In memory of the patriarch of the regional school of painting], *Cultural sources* 2010, nos. 1- 2, p. 64.

14 Kotska’s Autobiography. The personal file of Andriy Kotska is kept in the Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Arts of Ukraine, stock 581, anagraph 2, case 723, p. 6.

15 A personal sheet on personnel accounting of Ernest Kontratovych, Current archive of A. Erdeli College of Arts of the Transcarpathian Academy of Arts, p. 4.

16 V. Martynenko, *Ernest Kontratovych*, Kyiv, 1973 [in Ukrainian].

17 Ibid.

18 A. Izvorin, op. cit., p. 275.

the greenery in the paintings.¹⁹ Ernest Kontratovych was a representative of the Transcarpathian school of painting and began his career in such contradictory political and historical conditions. The coming from a teacher's family, after receiving the primary education at school in Velykyi-Bereznyi village, entered the Uzhhorod singing and teaching seminary (1928). After graduation, he became a teacher at public schools and, under the terms of his studies, was granted a scholarship of 1 500 CZK and a commitment "to act as a teacher in public people's schools in the Czechoslovak Republic for at least six years".²⁰

The teacher and artist he taught in remote villages of Verkhovyna - Luh (1932–1934), Uzhok (1934–1938), and Sukhyi (1938–1944). The chronological framework from 1930 to 1945 limited an early period of the artist's work. Periods are defined by Kontratovych himself, who used historical events in the Transcarpathian land as the markers for dividing his creative path into stages. The thematic and genre diversity of the works of the artist, which had certain differences in different stages of creativity, was also taken into account. His stay in the villages of Verkhovyna, which suffered because of the crisis, made a strong impression on the artist's worldview. He painfully perceived the events that surrounded him, sincerely experienced with the local population their grief and suffering. The influence of what he saw and felt was manifested, first, in early creative attempts and artistic means of expression. These early series had an impact on all of his creative work – the explored theme of the peasants' labouring in the field, series of images of a woman with a child ("Transcarpathian Madonnas"), images of the daily routine of mountaineers. These themes always excited his imagination and he created versions of existing works.

According to Kontratovych, the main purpose of the artist was to document the world around him. His works are stories about the poor on the roads, beggars near the church, lonely orphans, destroyed houses and burned villages, gloomy landscapes with rural nooks in the mountains, and more. The main genres to which the artist turned in the early period were landscape and genre painting. It is also possible to distinguish clearly the topics addressed by Kontratovych in the 1930s and 1940s, where the influence of the surrounding life is certainly noticeable. The theme of begging, death, and famine combines works that illustrate the tragic consequences of the Global economic crisis. It is the leading in the works of this period. The images of the beggars were taken from life and the young artist could not ignore them. Therefore, following the selected themes, the genre for their coverage was determined - genre picture.

To express his inner emotions, his attitude to events, the artist chose expressionism, which best met the objectives. The expressionist artist first intends to express himself, his attitude to social injustice, his emotions, and reactions in response to real events. A similar goal is achieved by the method of exaggeration, primitivism

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Certificate of maturity of Ernest Kontratovych, issued on July 1, 1932. Personal file of Ernest Kontratovych from the Current Archive of the Transcarpathian regional organization of the Union of Artists of Ukraine, p. 4.

or fantasy, deformation of the form of objects, through bright colouring and expressive strokes. The works of Konratovych are his “cry from the heart”, the desire to convey to the world the tragedy of the situation and its outrage. Artistic and expressive means of expressionism are suitable for this. As for colouring, the artist chose the colour as an aid to increase the emotional tension. The colour system is based on contrasts of opposite shades (e.g. purple and yellow) or the harmonious contraposition of convergent dark black or blue-violet tones, creating an almost monochrome range. This choice of colouring significantly distinguishes the method of Ernest Konratovych from the European expressionists. However, it should be noted that the colour difference is inherent in the works only of this social and exposing series, as the works dedicated to the ritual life of the mountaineers are solved in a bright, pure colour.

Konratovych was close to the ideas of German Expressionism, which developed in parallel with French Fauvism and had many similar features. In particular, the position of active opposition to the realities of contemporary art, the expression of the artist’s feelings through the prism of experience, emotional tension. The similarity of expressionism of Ernest Konratovych with the German one is manifested in the ideas of style, in particular, in the expression of personal emotions, reactions as the responses to the surrounding situation and events. The colour constituted the difference. Bright and sonorous colour contrast to enhance the emotional effect of tension, which is presented in the European expressionist artists, in the works of Konratovych became almost monochromatic, built on the harmony of dark colours. This flair emphasized the depressing feelings, helplessness, by enhancing the overall impression.

The artist was impressed by ideology, genre orientation, and some formative means of expressionism. The main ideas of German expressionism are clearly stated in the work of Lionel Richard “Encyclopaedia of Expressionism”, which quotes the words of Wassily Kandinsky: “Expression involves the implementation of the background experienced in the depths of the soul, with the help of selected colours. The object, the reason acts as a pretext for emotion, which, being the main component of reality, should enter the picture ‘in its true colours’. Thus, the purpose of creativity is to interpenetrate the external reality, which is perceived as sensitive, and internal reality of the artist’s experiences, i.e. to achieve “artistic synthesis”.²¹ The main genres were the domestic picture – the plots were taken from life, modern events, etc., the landscape, which reflects the cruelty, ruthlessness of life. At the origins of the style were Paula Modersohn-Becker, Christian Rohlf, and Emil Nolde. At the heart of their creative work was a kind of perception of the surrounding landscape. Their achievements, in particular, the use of a strict, rude form, the creation of a rhythm with a broken line, the expressive pattern that conveys the emotional impulse, the spiritualization of natural forms - had a great influence on the group “The Bridge”

21 L. Rishard, *Enciklopediya ekspressionizma* [Encyclopaedia of Expressionism], Moscow, 2003, p. 26. [in Russian, my trans.]

(1905). The group included well-known representatives of the style - Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Max Pechstein, and others.²²

His teacher Adalbert Erdeli, who was known to feel attracted to the avant-garde trends of Europe in the early XX century - post-impressionism, Fauvism, and Expressionism, could introduce the young artist to the ideas of German Expressionism. From 1922 to 1926, Adalbert Erdeli travelled to Germany, worked in the creative studio of the artist Francke in Munich, and took an active part in the creative life of the association of Bavarian artists "Chiemsee".²³

For the young Ernest Kontratovych, the teacher's painting style was indicative. In the early works, the influence of Adalbert Erdeli is noticeable, in particular in the technique of drawing, the interpretation of the forms of objects. Expressionist methods such as generalization, schematic lines, construction of space with coloured spots allowed to convey the emotional mood of the work as best as possible. However, it should be noted that for Ernest Kontratovych were important, first of all, the ideas of German expressionism, which allowed to convey the emotional state of the soul and embody them through deformations, substitutions, hyperbole et cetera. The colours of the early works differ from the German Expressionists - the use of dark, gloomy tones allows us to talk about the possible influence of the Hungarian school of painting. It is known that during his studies at the seminary, Ernest Kontratovych visited Budapest, where he was acquainted with the masterpieces of European art.²⁴

The images of the poor and unemployed people are embodied in paintings with different plots. They reveal the difficult situations and the efforts of the population to cope with them. In particular, how the old woman does not lose hope and brings a skinny goat to the pasture, where the burned area is instead of it ("Old woman with a goat", the 1930s); a mother with a child who understands that there is no more hope, so they gathered their things and maybe go in search of a better life ("Poor Verkhovyna", 1936 (Fig. 1)); some people have come to terms with unemployment and this way of life ("Unemployed tramp", the 1940s). The works of Ernest Kontratovych should be interpreted precisely in the context of the above-described historical events, and then they acquire deep meaning.

The crisis has led to such horrible consequences as famine and the extinction of entire villages. The work "Famine in Verkhovyna" (1939) creates an appropriate atmosphere, known to the people of Verkhovyna, and especially to every Ukrainian.

The man with a swollen stomach from hunger and a glassy gaze stand in the middle of the house, in the light of a lamp. Unhealthy thinness and earthy green complexion catch the eye. Near the stove, there are large empty pots for food, and on the stove - the thin legs of another person.

The arrangement of objects and people is somewhat theatrical - the main character seemed to be deflected from the search for the last drop of food and he looked

²² Ibid., p. 39.

²³ I. Nebesnyk, op. cit., p. 27.

²⁴ V. Martynenko, op. cit., p. 7.



Fig. 1. Ernest Konratovych, *Poor Verkhovyna*, 1939. Cardboard, oil. 63–71. From the collection of the Transcarpathia region art museum named after Yosyp Bokshai.

up at the viewer. Directed light pulls an exhausted person out of the darkness of the room, thus focusing attention on it. The man's white shirt is a remarkable sign of the beggars of Ernest Konratovych. He always dresses them in white clothes to separate them from the total mass of the composition. The lack of individual facial features of a man symbolizes the collective image of starving people from Verkhovyna of those years.

According to art critic Valentyna Martynenko, the author of the only significant monograph on the creative work of Ernest Konratovych, this ascetic composition is the result of many years of work. "The first sketch (1931) conveys the extreme tension in the exhausted figure of a man and the terrible misunderstanding of the situation by a child. Then there are a few pencil sketches of a multi-figure composition, where the interior of the house is presented: a woman sits above the dying child with another child in her arms, and then there is a sullen figure of the father".²⁵ The final version differs with compactness and lack of extra details to convey the main essence of the artist's idea.

25 V. Martynenko, op. cit., p.11.



Fig. 2. Ernest Kontratovych, *Famine in Verkhovyna*, 1939. Cardboard, oil. 69,4-58. From the collection of the Transcarpathia region art museum named after Yosyp Bokshai.

The theme of begging is closely intertwined with the theme of the consequences of military actions because in the war the problems remained the same - famine, unemployment, death. Numerous works are devoted to the fate of orphaned children: a girl standing over a coffin ("Orphan", 1943), a couple of children begging by singing ("Orphans", the 1940s), a blind musician with a sighted girl who are begging in the village ("Sad melodies", 1940 (Fig.3)).

The most famous painting of the early period of the development of Ernest Kontratovych is "Funeral of the poor" (1939), (Fig. 4). A tragic event - a farewell to another dead resident of Verkhovyna appears before the audience through beaten pots hung on a sloping fence. A funeral procession unfolded against the background of an old, pointed house. A crowd of sullen peasants stands over the coffin, there is a woman in the middle, in whose sloping position the utter grief can be guessed. "The atmosphere of depression and silent despair is intensified by black



Fig. 3. Ernest Kontratovych, *Sad melodies*, 1940. Cardboard, tempera. 73-59. From the collection of the Mykolaiv region art museum named after V. Vereshchahin.

banners, spread over people, and the heavy roof of an old house, bulky, endless and indifferent mountains behind them".²⁶

The close colouring scheme in dark tones enhances the emotional sound of the work. The lack of bright accents creates a sense of mundaneness of the event. However, the skill of technical execution, well-chosen colour scheme, and depth of nested feelings give the work a monumental design and emphasized the tragedy of the worldview.²⁷ Ernest Kontratovych remembered that with this work he passed a kind of exam in the teacher Adalbert Erdeli, who wrote him a letter where he welcomed the appearance of works on social issues at the exhibition and advised him to work hard in the future.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

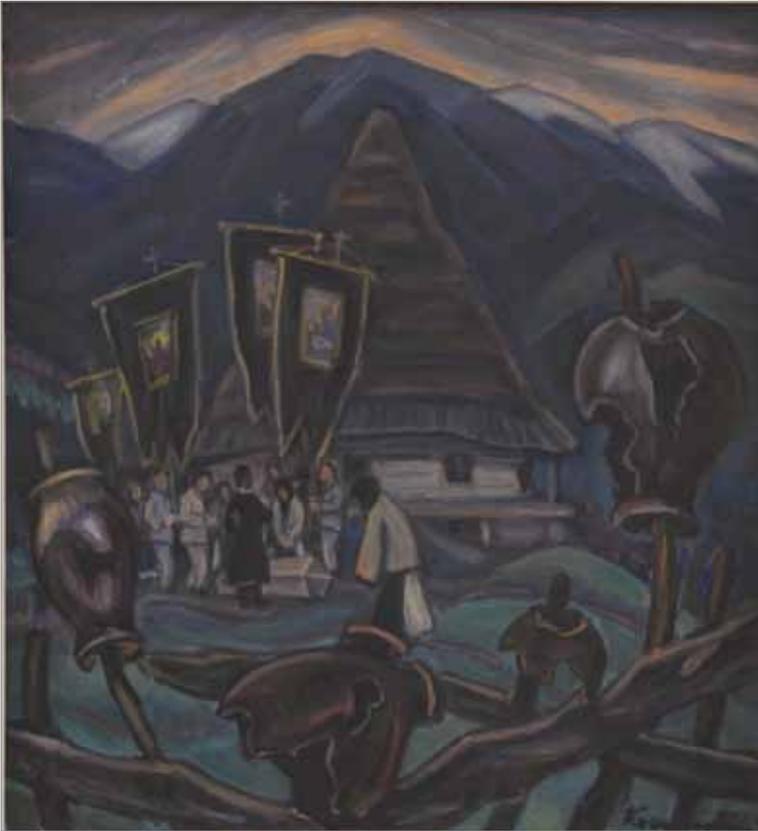


Fig. 4. Ernest Kontratovych, *Funeral of the poor*, 1939. Canvas, oil. 71–64. From the collection of the Transcarpathia region art museum named after Yosyp Bokshai.

Another topic related to begging is the military. In 1942, Ernest Kontratovych was called into the Hungarian army and served at the front until 1944. During his years of service, he created many sketches in his diaries. The war is depicted symbolically, without a hint of specific military action. The artist is interested in the fate of injured people and orphaned children. Images of huge crosses and crucifixes outside the village, symbolizing human suffering (“Crucifixion outside the village”, 1938), uprooted trees against the background of bunkers, which will remind of the tragic events for a long time, “Old tree with a bunker” (1943) (Fig.5), show the terrible consequences of the war in the Transcarpathian lands.

Given this range of interests may get the impression of pessimism and hopeless worldview of Ernest Kontratovych, but in such a situation he could not create cheerful landscapes. However, it was in the 1930s and the 1940s that the artist found the only optimistic and comforting theme – the ritual life of the inhabitants of Transcarpathia Joyful events, traditional holidays, of which they have quite

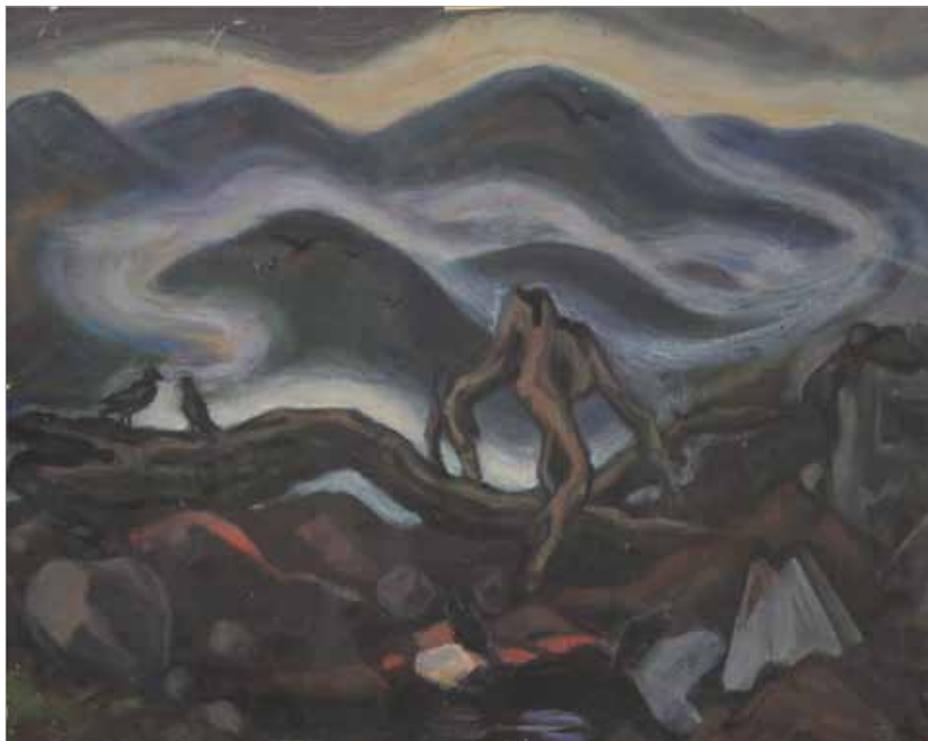


Fig. 5. Ernest Konratovych, *Old tree with a bunker*. 1943. Canvas, oil. 64x82. From the collection of the Transcarpathia region art museum named after Yosyp Bokshai.

a few, required the appropriate artistic and expressive means. In particular, the colour scheme of works noticeably changes and becomes bright and warm. There are dynamics inherent in moving processions; the shape of objects is solved with emphasized decorativeness, which will continue to be one of the typical characteristics of domestic works. In the early period, Ernest Konratovych created sketches and the first versions of works, which he will improve in the next stage of his work. These are the works “Dances in Verkhovyna” and “Procession”, which will be modified in the compositional solution with the same ideological idea.

The theme of work and workers of Transcarpathia developed similarly. The artist will develop the plots of the works “Drying of linen” (Fig. 6) and “Picking of potato” in further years. In particular, the plot of the picking of potato will gain popularity during the prosperity (1946-1990), when the main artistic doctrine will be socialist realism.

The series “Reapers” is dedicated to the work of women in the field started in 1940 with the canvas “Knitting of sheaves” (Fig.7). Before creating the final composition and conceptual work in 1970, the artist created many sketches and author’s versions of the work.



Fig. 6. Ernest Konratovych, *Drying of linen*, 1940. Cardboard, oil. 81x101. Private collection.



Fig. 7. Ernest Konratovych, *Knitting of sheaves*, 1940. Private collection.

The series “Transcarpathian Madonnas” is connected with this topic. This is an ode to motherhood, a celebration of the collective image of the mother from Verkhovyna. The series began with the work “Mother with a child” (1939) (Fig.8), which emotionally agrees with the mood of the works of the early period. On the face of the mother who holds the child, is a frozen expression of misunderstanding and alienation. The woman is wearing a white long shirt, with outerwear thrown over it, which is too big for her. A stick with a package placed next to it hints at wandering and need. The reproduction is preserved in black and white, so it is difficult to determine the colour of the work, however, taking into account the time of creation, we can assume that dark colours predominate. The pose of a woman and a child in her arms resembles icons of a similar type.

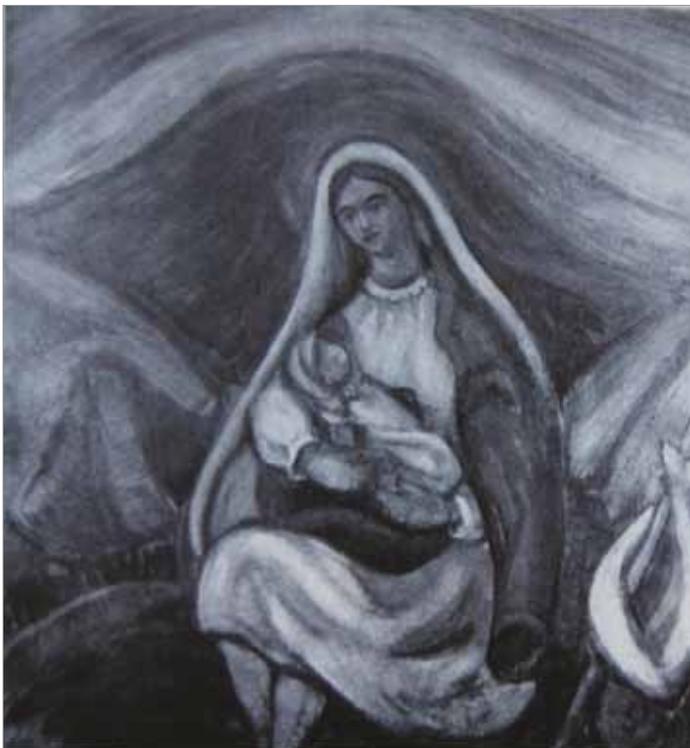


Fig. 8. Ernest Kontratovych, *Mother with child*, 1939. Cardboard, oil. 65x61.

The artist rested in the world of mystical legends and myths from an early age. Enthusiasm resulted in several works, in particular, the enigmatic portrait of “Fortune teller” (1942-1943), the response of children’s fascination with the Gypsy theme – “Witch” (1939-1940) (Fig.9) - a pale and snarling woman who steals from the village at night with a jug in his hands and an allegory of the arrival of spring – a childish naive watercolour “Vesnyanka” (the 1940s).



Fig. 9. Ernest Konratovych, *Witch*, 1930-1940 Cardboard, oil. 68x96. Private collection.

During his formation, the artist tried himself in the genre of landscape, which will remain dominant throughout the artistic path. He began with small landscapes, painted in oil, unpretentious in the plot. He depicted village streets with Verkhovyna's pointed houses against the background of mountains ("Winter in Sukhyi", "Uzhok", "Winter landscape" (the early 1930s), "Old peak" (1931) (Fig. 10), "Volosyanka" (1932)). In the early landscapes, the artist's typical way of depicting snow appears - the verges, softly drawn between the snow and the ground, give the effect of light, melted snow. In the winter landscapes of the next period, the snow will be early or last, always with thaws. It is difficult to find images of landscapes of the 1930s because they are either in private collections or have not survived. Therefore, the only analysis is given in the monograph of Valentyna Martynenko, who saw them live. The author writes that the works were drawn sketchily, in one session, with a soft stroke, always very "watercolour".²⁸

"Autumn in Uzhhorod" (1949) is a typical work for the landscape genre of Ernest Konratovych (Fig.11). Working in the open air, the artist invents a quick method of creating landscapes. He wrote the main central part of the composition, and later in the studio, he finished the foreground and the sky. Small, small strokes, with which are painted the outskirts of the village and unevenly falling light, which snatches parts of the roof, fence, and long shadows prove that the artist wrote from nature in the morning. Attention to detail - clearly drawn fence, roofs of houses, crowns

²⁸ Ibid, p. 8.



Fig. 10. Ernest Konratovych, *Old peak*, 1931. Canvas, oil. Private collection.

of autumn trees contrast with soft strokes of different colours in the foreground. The blurred edges between the wide strokes in the foreground formed an autumn grass cover without undue details. The artist also decided to do the same with the slope of the mountain behind the village, which smoothly turns into blue mountains, merging with the sky. This method of *plein air* painting was dominant in all creativity. The convenience of it was that the artist could draw a considerable number of works on one trip out of doors. The artist worked differently with genre compositions. The future work was crystallized in small sketches by the pencil. Then, mostly in watercolour, he worked on the compositional construction and finding a colour solution.

In 1946, the territory of modern Transcarpathia was annexed to Soviet Ukraine. From this time, a new stage in the work of Ernest Konratovych began. It was a period of prosperity. This is the longest and most productive creative time in the artist's career, where the influence of historical events on the choice of themes and plots also clearly traces. The main artistic doctrine of the Soviet Union was socialist realism, where the main thing was to cover the lives of happy working people, glorify the policies of the party and its leaders. Artists were required to work in



Fig. 11. Ernest Konratovych, *Autumn in Uzhhorod*, the 1940s. Canvas, oil. 64x85. From the collection of the National Museum in Lviv named after A. Sheptytskyi.

the domestic and portrait genres of a specific thematic direction. Due to oppression and restrictions on the choice of themes, plots, etc., Transcarpathian artists chose a “neutral” genre - landscape. Ernest Konratovych created numerous landscapes of mountain ranges and valleys during the period of prosperity, trying to avoid devastating criticism from the ruling elite. Besides, he responded thematically to the requirements of socialist realism - the scenes of labour, as the most neutral, became typical for his genre works of this period. “During the reign of the totalitarian era, the artist used the scenes depicting washing, picking (potatoes, apples, raspberries, blueberries, and sunflowers), and harvest time. Most of the works that cover the work of peasants were created in the 1960s and 1970s”.²⁹ The late period of creativity lasted from the time of the independence of Ukraine - from 1991 to 2009. At this time, the artist turned to ritual themes, repeating early works, drawing flowers in the field, mountain landscapes, and the outskirts of Uzhhorod city.

²⁹ A. Cheipesh, “Zhanrovi ta tematychnyi diapazon tvorchoi spadshchyny E. Konratovycha” [The genre and thematic range of the artistic legacy of E. Konratovych], *Newsletter of the Transcarpathian Academy of Arts* 2019, no. 12, p. 149.

Historical events that took place in Transcarpathia in the early XX century were reflected in the works of the early period of Ernest Kontratovych. The works are devoted to the consequences of the policy of the Czechoslovak government and the Global economic crisis, and later to the war. Ernest Kontratovych, who taught in the remote villages of Verkhovyna in the 1930s, set a goal to show the poverty, unemployment, and suffering of the people. This determines the choice of genre – the genre picture. These are compositions with images of beggars, orphans, funeral ceremonies, which have a sharp social and revealing character and impress with their artistic features. To reproduce the tragic emotions, the artist chose an expressionist style, which is characterized by exaggeration, deformation of objects, displacement of forms, and more. The colour scheme is built on close gloomy and dark tones, designed to emphasize the emotional colour.

The artist turned to other topics, creating a contrast to the dramatic works with images of beggars. These are scenes from the everyday life of the people from Verkhovyna, the embodiment of mystical images from the myths of the Carpathians, the celebration of motherhood - a series of “Transcarpathian Madonnas”, and stories with working peasants. He wrote works without nature, based on pencil sketches and watercolour sketches. Themes, which he started in the early period, became the leading one for all creativity. Developing one plot, he created variants, repetitions, changing the composition and colouring, and finally came to a holistic, complete embodiment of the artistic idea. In the early period, he also began to work in the genre of landscape. While working *en plein air*, he invented a method of quick creation of landscapes, when in the open air, he wrote the central part - the main idea, and in the workshop, he finished the sky and the foreground without excessive detail.

The first works do not give grounds to speak of Ernest Kontratovych as an independent master, in technical terms, the influence of Adalbert Erdeli is visible. Soon the artist begins to experiment with colour, the technique of applying paint, which has achieved a characteristic feature of its landscapes - blurred edges of snow, which create a clear image of the first or last snow. Genre works are also characterized by some typical characteristics, in particular, the contour extraction of the outline of a beggar among another mass of forms, white, similar to traditional Transcarpathian clothing, deliberately approaching the foreground, which allows the audience to feel a direct participant in the event. The choice of theme and genre in the early period was due to the direct impact of historical events on the life of Ernest Kontratovych and his environment.

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