



Julia SECKLEHNER

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Birmingham,
PhD in Art History, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London

First Seminar (May 6 – 14, 2019)

Košice Modernism Reframed
New Perspectives Through the Integration of Local Art Histories

As part of the ERC project ‘Continuity or Rupture? Art and Architecture in Central and Eastern Europe, 1918-1939 (CRAACE)’, my research focuses on the dialectic between ‘nostalgic’ or ‘vernacular’ modernism and the avant-garde in three of the Habsburg follow-up states between 1918 and 1939: Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. By examining the tension between metropolitanism and regionalism, it casts a critical gaze on artistic and cultural sites outside traditional cultural centres of Central Europe, Vienna, Prague and Budapest. With few exceptions, regional centres have tended to be the domain of local histories with little wider significance. My project, in contrast, examines their place in the broader conflicting currents of interwar artistic practices and in current scholarship in order to destabilise the dominant narratives of Central European modernism in place. As a counterweight to the culture of the capitals, regional centres such as Brno, Košice and Szeged developed modernist tendencies that appear ‘anachronistic’ to traditional narratives of Central European avant-gardes. Nonetheless, they have formed an integral part of the cultural landscape and played diverse and significant roles in the development of national, metropolitan and regional identities.

For the seminar series, I propose a case study of this extended research with the re-evaluation of so-called Košice modernism, which has gained attention through a series of exhibitions in

Slovakia and Poland since 2013.¹ Their focus emphasised Košice's exceptionally productive art scene in the early- to mid-1920s, facilitated by its particularity of place as a border town and its multi-ethnic cultural heritage, with Slovak, Hungarian, German, Jewish, and Czech influences. Eugen Krón's private art school and the East Slovak Museum, headed and remodelled by Josef Polák, led to a flourishing and outward-looking cultural scene at the newly drawn eastern border between Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Given the diversity of its representatives, ranging from Anton Jasusch's existentialist expressionism to the constructivist graphic designs by Sándor Bortnyik, a member of the Hungarian avant-garde around Lajos Kassák, artistic production in Košice was as multifaceted as the origins of its producers. Trained in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and Budapest, the city's artists arrived from across Central and Western Europe and stayed in Košice for varying periods of time – in the case of the Hungarian avant-gardists only a few months after the crushing of the Hungarian Republic of Councils in August 1919; in the case of Jasusch, his entire life after returning from Russian imprisonment after the Great War.

While there was no programme that could have represented Košice modernism as a united group, the city's pluralist culture was united by a shared enthusiasm for modern life and urban culture, as well as the blurred the boundaries between modernity and tradition most of its artists followed. In effect, Košice modernism represents a forward-looking 'vernacular modernism', in which a formal variety ranging from post-impressionism to constructivism and magical realism is joined with the social and political realities of the city and its environment: working with, rather than against, tradition, avant-garde tendencies largely remained foreign to Košice modernism, and its close engagement with contemporary life never lost contact to the visual traditions of the Habsburg Empire.²

Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, who has produced extensive literature on Košice modernism, has defined the city as 'one of the centres of Central European modern art' in the early- to mid-1920s.³ In lieu, parallels have been drawn between the idea of a pluralist, united Europe and the city's social fabric, as Jacek Purchla writes: 'the phenomenon of Košice is the phenomenon of the European Core – a Europe of diversity, multiculturalism and multiple meanings'.⁴

Accordingly, the authors agree, Košice's internationalism is also the reason why the city's regional history of art has long been omitted from a 'grand narrative' of modern Slovak art, which had a strong nationalist framework. In effect, Košice modernism, defined by its geographical location rather than a unifying programme or formal direction, has gained status of the 'exceptional' in the history of modern art in Slovakia.

¹ See: Lena Lešková and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán eds., *Košická moderna: Umenie Košíc v dvadsiatych rokoch 20. storočia/Košice Modernism: Košice Art in the Nineteen-Twenties*. Košice: East Slovak Gallery, 2013; Natalia Žak and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán eds. *Koszycka moderna*. Krakow: International Cultural Centra, 2016.

² Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, 'Košice Modernism and Anton Jasusch's Expressionism', in Isabel Wünsche ed. *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context*. Routledge Handbooks Online, accessed 26 November 2018, <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315200088>

³ Kiss-Szemán, 'Košice Modernism and Anton Jasusch's Expressionism'.

⁴ Purchla, 'Košice and Košice Modernism in Kraków' in *Koszycka moderna*. Ed. By Natalia Žak and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, (Krakow: International Cultural Centra, 2016), 13.

Looking closer, however, the current narrative has a proverbial elephant in the room, which holds the potential to reframe Košice within the wider project of Czechoslovak interwar modernism. It goes by the name of Josef Polák. Born to Jewish parents in Prague in 1886, Polák was a lawyer, who had also attended private art history seminars and was an active member of the Czech-Jewish movement.⁵ He settled in Košice after the Great War and, officially entrusted with the task to promote the new Czechoslovak state, first became the manager and then the director of the East Slovak Museum. Leading the institution until 1939 and curating a series of ground-breaking exhibitions there, Polák held a central role in the cultural politics of Košice modernism, inviting and supporting artists from across Czechoslovakia and Hungary to contribute to the city's cultural life.

Yet while acknowledging Polák as an important figure, publications on Košice modernism neither assess his position nor his social and ideological origins closely, placing focus instead on local artists, most notably Jasusch, who lived in Košice for most of his life. The present narrative of Košice modernism thus pronounces the city's importance in the history of Slovak national art, while avoiding the difficult issue of Czech-Slovak cooperation in Slovakia after 1918, which may be raised by focusing on Polák.⁶ As a Czech of Jewish origin, active in a Slovak town long dominated by Hungarian cultural policy, Polák at once represented the social and political legacy of the Habsburg Empire, as well as 'Europe's new Switzerland', as Czechoslovakia was to be presented officially.⁷

I propose that an analysis of Polák's position as a cultural actor would allow for a reconsideration of the exceptional status that has been accorded to Košice modernism within the history of Slovak art, and help to integrate it into a wider narrative of East-Central European modernism. With a focus on Polák as the facilitator of a network that spanned across Czechoslovakia – and beyond – the regional particularities of Košice modernism emerge as part of a wider project which had the aim to present Czechoslovak culture as multi-faceted and 'innately democratic'.⁸ As a strategy of cultural politics, this was of particular significance in a newly established border town such as Košice, which had been occupied by Hungary in 1918 and was only fully ceded to Czechoslovakia in the following year.⁹

Changing the trajectory of inquiry to Polák, Košice modernism opens up new perspectives, in which it serves as a cultural legitimisation of multi-ethnic Czechoslovakia, continuing on from the Habsburg Empire. Uniting tradition with progress, centre with 'periphery', and mediating

⁵ See: Veselská, Magda. *The Man Who Never Gave Up: The Story of Josef Polak (1886-1945)*. Prague: Jewish Museum, 2004.

⁶ See Veselská, *The Man Who Never Gave Up*.

⁷ Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914-1948*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 94.

⁸ Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 2.

⁹ Purchla, 'Košice and Košice Modernism in Kraków', 14.

international influences with the realities of the new nation state, Košice provided an ideal ground for explorations of a multifaceted 'Czechoslovak' culture.

In light of the seminar series' aims to establish a framework for researching art historical narratives in East-Central Europe on a comparative basis, the reframing of Košice modernism, as a case study, has the potential to broaden our current understanding of modernism through the incorporation of isolated, local histories. On the one hand, its inclusion into a wider history of art challenges established norms of periodisation, and advocates a horizontal approach, which favours pluralism, rather than national, top-down frameworks. On the other hand, Košice modernism challenges ideas that modernism developed 'organically', suggesting that it was part of a carefully constructed programme, which served national political ends. By facing the contradictions that such local narratives entail and by incorporating them into East-Central European art history, studies of the region avoid reduction by acknowledging difference, while supporting the comparative and transnational approaches that a contemporary history of art should move towards.

Selected Bibliography

Abelovský, Jan and Katarína Bajcurová. *Art in changing Times. Painting and Sculpture in Slovakia, 1890-1949*. Bratislava: Slovart Publishing, 2006.

Barriová, Katarína. *Jozef Polák (1886-1944) a Východoslovenské múzeum v Košiciach v rokoch 1919-1938*. Košice: Štátna vedecká knižnica, 2006.

Hrabušický, Aurel, ed. *Slovak Myth*. Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2006.

Kiss-Szemán, Zsófia. 'Košice Modernism and Anton Jaszusch's Expressionism', in *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context*, edited by Isabel Wünsche. Routledge Handbooks Online (2018), accessed 26 November 2018, <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315200088>

Lešková, Lena and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, eds. *Košická moderna: Umenie Košíc v dvadsiatych rokoch 20. storočia/Košice Modernism: Košice Art in the Nineteen-Twenties*. Košice: East Slovak Gallery, 2013.

Piotrowski, Piotr. 'Towards a Horizontal Art History', in *Crossing Cultures. Conflict Migration, and Convergence*, edited by Jaynie Anderson. Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2009, 82-85.

Skalnik Leff, Carol. *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation versus state*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1996.

Štrauss, Tomáš. *Anton Jaszusch a zrod východoslovenskej avantgardy dvadsiatych rokov*. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Slovenského fondu výtvarných umení, 1996.

Veselská, Magda. *The Man Who Never Gave Up: The Story of Josef Polak (1886-1945)*. Prague: Jewish Museum, 2004.

Žak, Natalia, and Zsófia Kiss-Szemán, eds. *Koszycka moderna*. Krakow: International Cultural Centr, 2016.