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Avant-garde Repercussions and the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava, 1928–1939

At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, art in Slovakia made an energetic attempt to free itself of provincialism and to gain space within the central European and the broader international context. Unfortunately, for various reasons—especially political ones—this activity, whose centre was Bratislava and the local School of Applied Arts, has remained at the margin of interest on the part of art historians and the acquisition policies of museums and galleries. A few lectures on this topic have been delivered at conferences abroad and at times during more favourable climates in Czecho-slovakia as well,¹ but no book on the phenomenon has been published to date. The first minor exhibition, entitled ‘School-Experiment’, took place in Bratislava as recently as the autumn of 1991. This paper, which for the sake of conciseness does not go beyond essential information, has been written as a contribution to the preparation of a more extensive publication.

The School of Applied Arts in Bratislava became a legend, even during its short period of existence. Its fame as a sort of ‘Bratislava Bauhaus’ reached as far as Walter Gropius. If we pose the question whether there was any truth in that fame, the answer will be both yes and no. Although the founder and director of the school, Josef Vydra (1884–1959)² was in contact with Joseph Albers and Johannes Itten, and although such prominent personalities as László Moholy-Nagy, Jan Tschichold, Ernst Kállai and Hannes Meyer gave lectures at the School, this does not suffice to make its claim to that fame.

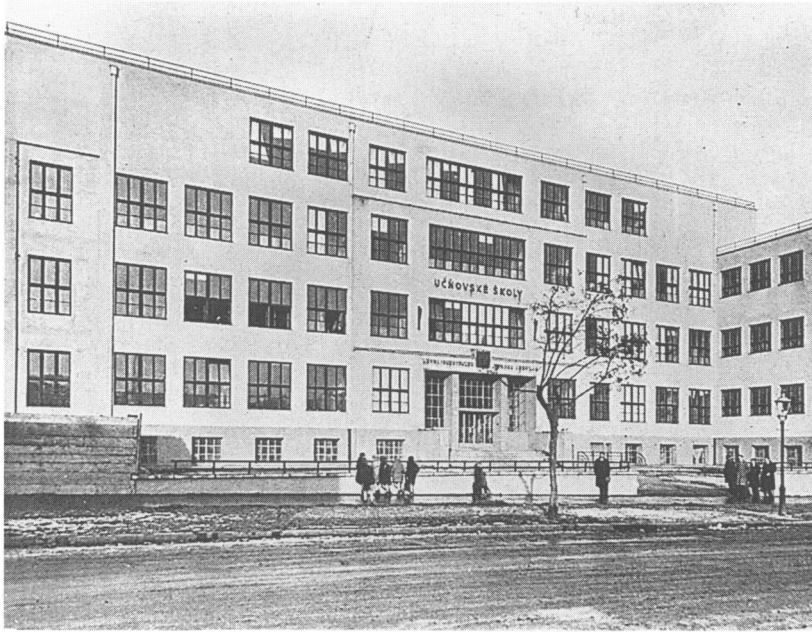
The School of Applied Arts was not an academy or an institution of higher learning, as the Bauhaus was. It was born under different conditions and within a different context. Bratislava in the 1920s was a town in which institutions were being founded in the new Czechoslovak state. Many things were started from zero. Of primary importance in art was the need to obtain a clear view of national traditions.³ The yearning to open the windows to Europe simultaneously brought in a scent of avant-garde movements. It was a period of ‘accelerated time’ in

which Slovak modern art was searching for its identity.

The School of Applied Arts was the first public establishment in Slovakia for teaching the visual arts. It was founded in 1928 and originally provided evening courses in drawing and advertising. But it soon set itself a higher goal—that of raising domestic manufacture to the international standards of modern industrial production. That meant setting simplicity of design, elementariness of shape and authenticity of material against decorativism, purposefulness and economy against luxury and team work against individualism. These principles were to be applied to the mode of dwelling and house furnishing, to dress, to typography and advertising graphics and to photography, stage design and film.

It was in this spirit that Vydra also conceived the various departments of the School—not according to technologies, but according to materials and functions. Hence there were departments for textiles, metal, wood, ceramics, photography, typography, decorative painting and window-dressing. Study in specialized departments was preceded by preliminary basic elementary courses in drawing, surface and space composition, colour harmony, modelling and lettering. In reality, this already involved an application of the Bauhaus method. When Vydra acquired rooms in the newly-built Apprentice Schools designed by the architects Alois Balán (1891–1960) and Jiří Grossmann (1892–1957), artisans’ workshops were also available [1]. Both the schools were connected, under Vydra’s direction, and the School of Applied Arts became a master school for the most talented pupils.⁴ Creative designing was combined with craftsmanship, and ultimately also with industrial production.⁵

As an outstanding teacher and a first-class organizer, Vydra knew that he could build up a school capable of responding readily to the needs of the times, with people possessing creative minds and modern views on educational practice. He therefore invited two of the most assertive young painters to



1 Alois Balán and Jiří Grossmann, façade of the Apprentices School and School of Applied Arts in Bratislava, 1930

teach at the school—Ľudovít Fulla (1902–80) and Mikuláš Galanda (1895–1938)⁶—an experienced textile designer and painter František Malý (1900–80), the ambitious ceramics artist Júlia Horová (1906–78), a member of the Devětsil in Brno and former Bauhaus pupil Zdeněk Rossmann (1905–84), as well as the eminent avant-garde photographer Jaromír Funke (1896–1945). Later, when a department for window-dressing was set up in 1933–4, further experts joined the teaching staff: František Reichental (1895–1971) who had studied painting in Petrograd and had taught for some time in Irkutsk; and the architect František Tröster (1904–68) who had worked on Le Corbusier's project for a new quarter in Algiers, and who was put in charge of the metal-working department at the School. During the last years of the School's existence, further experts came in: the sculptor and designer Josef Vinecký (1882–1949) from the famous academy of Wrocław, the architect Josef Emanuel Margold (1889–1962) from Berlin, a former member of the artists' colony in Darmstadt, and finally Karel Plicka (1894–1987) who founded, here in 1938, the first film school in Czechoslovakia.⁷ The last to join the teaching staff in the film department during Vydra's directorship was the architect František Kalivoda (1913–71)⁸ from Brno, but that was in the unfortunate autumn of 1938.

Vydra did not quite give up hope even when

Czech professors were forced to leave Slovakia. He persuaded Fulla to take up the direction of the School after him in the hope that continuity would thus be preserved. It was for a very short time only—ten months. In October 1939 the School of Applied Arts was closed.

If the School went beyond the boundaries of an educational institution, it was not thanks solely to the modern organization of its teaching⁹ and its international orientation.¹⁰ Likewise the fact that it became one of the principal centres of struggle against inherited provincialism was not uniquely due to the clear-sighted and integrating personality of its director. The surplus of creative energy in the young professors, which the School could not consume, radiated outwards and manifested itself in the way the artistic avant-garde did elsewhere in Europe, not in just one sphere of art, but in all.

It was a period of shifting values.¹¹ The concept of 'art' declined in dignity and doubt was cast on the term 'applied arts'. No essential difference was made between designing a house and a chair, typography and photography became art, with design acquiring the decisive role.

Fulla and Galanda, two of the greatest rebels in Slovak painting, preachers of an 'uncompromising fight for new artistic movements'¹² and propagators of absolute painting which 'does not intend to imitate or portray objects, but to create a picture of



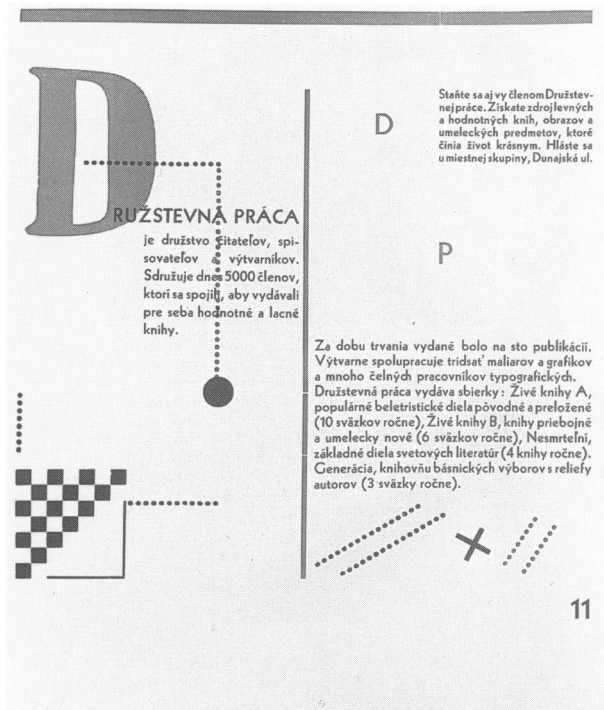
2 Ľudovít Fulla, typomontage on the title-page of the journal, *Slovenská grafia*, 1929. Black and brick-red lettering

lines and colour forms',¹³ designed advertising prints, posters and installation projects for industrial exhibitions.

In 1929, the magazine *Slovenská grafia* was launched, intended to promote the modernization of polygraphy and applied graphics. It was edited by Antonín Hořejš (1901–67), who gave lectures at the School of Applied Arts on contemporary taste, and Fulla designed the typographic layout [2–3].

When in 1931 Rossmann¹⁴—the graphic designer of such avant-garde Czech magazines as *Pásmo*, *Disk* and *Index*—came to Bratislava direct from Dessau, he brought the functionalist conception of typographic design to a downright ascetic form. A constructivist diagonal was replaced by a horizontal and the bearer of optical information became the square or the oblong of photographic detail. Soon it became evident that the School's impact had grown considerably and within two years its influence had penetrated several Slovak printing presses.

In collaboration with Hořejš, Fridrich Weinwurm (1885–1942) and Daniel Okáli (1903–89), Rossmann edited the review *nová bratislava* which, with its

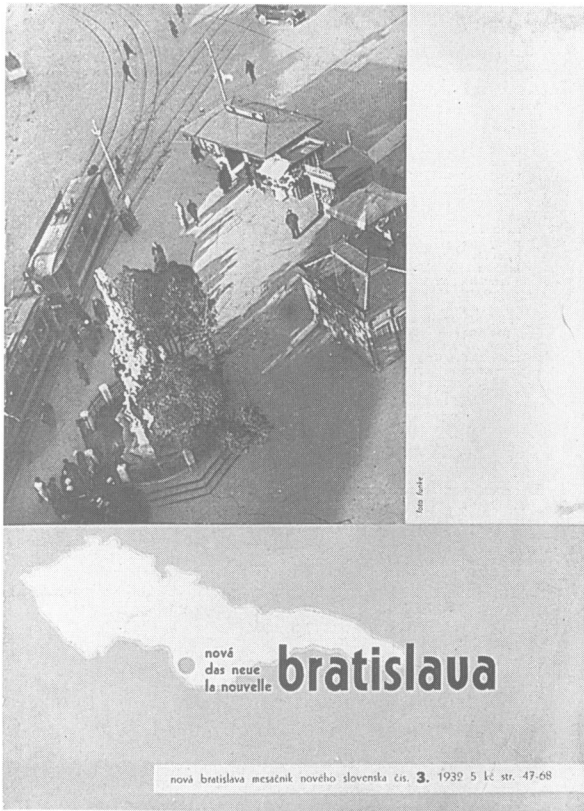


3 Ľudovít Fulla, typographic illustration, 1929. Print, black and brick-red

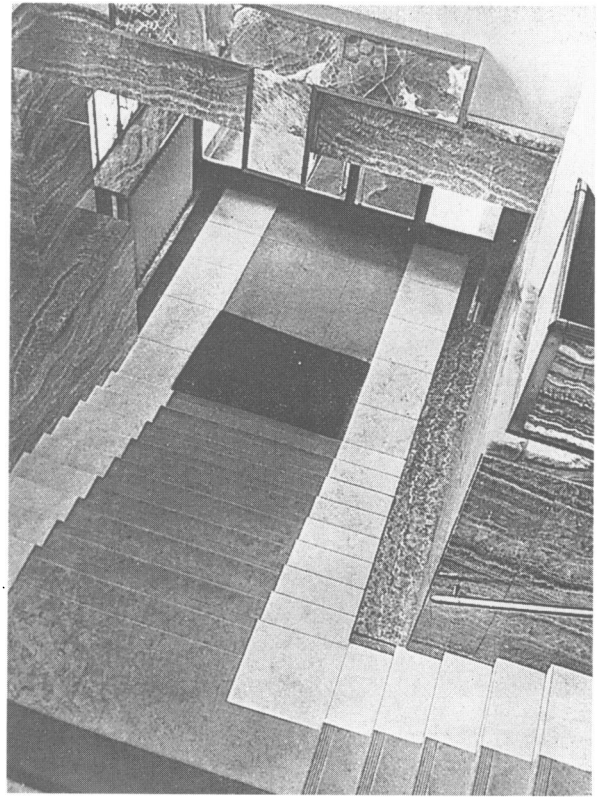
sociological and international contents and its functionalist layout, was already in step with the European avant-garde trends of the early 1930s [4]. Rossmann and Hořejš also published monographic notes on the architectural work of the period in Bratislava.

It was Rossmann who stimulated Funke¹⁵ to photograph architecture, and not solely modern façades and interiors [5]. The objective of this abstract photographer was for the first time focused in Bratislava, also on the 'utilization of contrasts—wealth and poverty, luxury and misery—where precisely photography speaks in a direct and uncompromising language'.¹⁶

Social photography had already taken firm roots in Slovakia in the 1920s. The development of the work of its protagonist, Irena Blühová (1904–91),¹⁷ who studied first under Peterhans at Bauhaus and later at Plicka's film school in Bratislava, took the opposite direction. It was in Dessau that she became convinced of her concept that the social document is most forceful and effective when it is produced simultaneously with good photography [6].



4 Zdeněk Rossmann, cover of the journal *nova bratislava*, 1932. Print, blue ground tint



5 Jaromír Funke, view of the staircase of the Municipal Savings Bank in Bratislava, 1932. Photograph

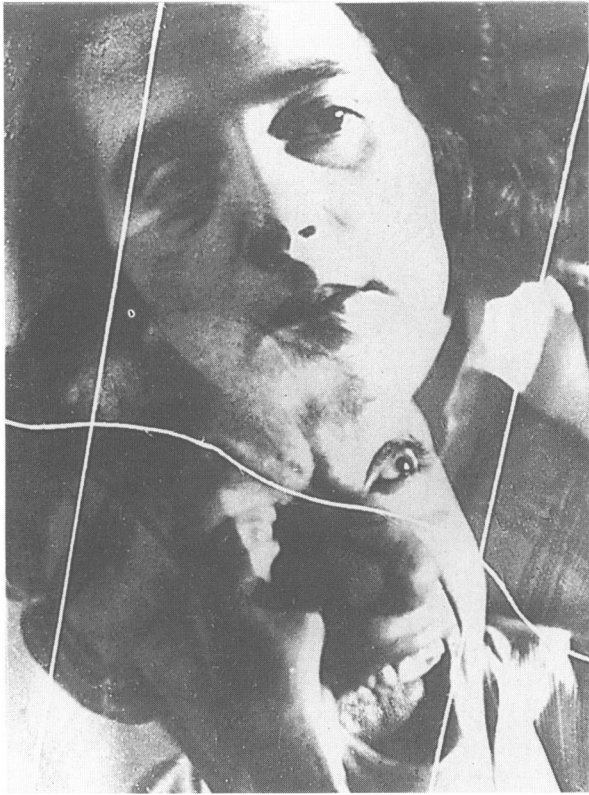
An active relationship between architecture, applied arts and industrial production was realized through the design of interior furnishings for dwellings. Horová with ceramics and Malý with textiles also made designs for serial production. Their intimate knowledge of folk material culture gave rise to a spontaneous and undeclared pendant of functionalism, based on a respect for the usefulness and simplicity of forms and for the rightness of materials [7–8].

A domain that had always attracted the interest of the avant-garde was theatre design. The combination of artistic creativity and dramatic expression and the possibility of an architectonic or plastic experiment in the living space of a stage proved unusually attractive to painters, sculptors and architects. Fulla, Rossmann, Galanda and Malý all worked with the theatre, but it is particularly Tröster¹⁸ who, by his

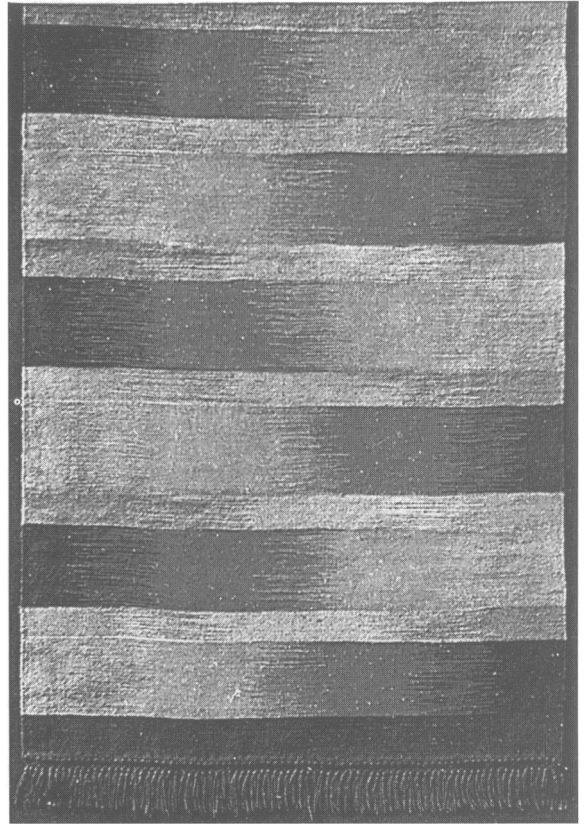
‘dramatic projections’, his ‘angles set to the drama’ and showing ‘the actor in stressed views from above and from below’,¹⁹ has left his mark on the history of modern European scenography.

To speak of the avant-gardes or of their repercussions in connection with the inter-war art of Slovakia may still seem somewhat presumptuous. We admitted that there were traces of them here, but they appeared to us until now to be heterogeneous, little evident and unduly spiritually bound to narrow local contexts and moulds.

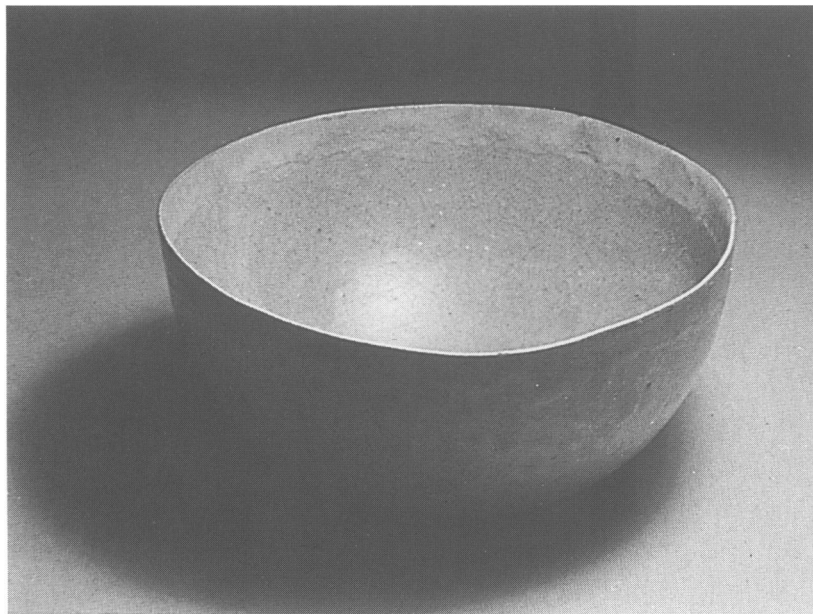
An old English adage says that ‘one finds what one looks for’. Yet, were we to look for common achievements by authors with sharply defined and lucidly formulated programmes, we would certainly fail to find them. If, however, we view the works of certain artists and the activity of centres such as the School of Applied Arts in a mutual interconnection,



6 Irena Blühová, double portrait, 1932. Photograph from two negatives



7 František Malý, woven carpet, 1931. Wool



8 Júlia Horová, dish, 1936. Glazed earthenware

if we search for central European affinities, then we realize that to speak of avant-garde endeavours is quite justified.

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Notes

This article is based on a paper given at the international symposium 'Modern architecture of the 1920s and 1930s in Slovakia', organized by the Society of Architects of Slovakia, held at Piešťany, 20–27 November 1991.

- 1 See 'Avant-garde and the Present', International Conference at Smolenice near Bratislava, 12–14 June 1968 (papers by Irena Blühová, Julia Horová, Iva Mojžišová, František Reichenthal, Tomáš Štraus, Eduard Toran, Marian Városov, Hans Maria Wingler, et al.), published by the Institute of the Theory and History of Art, Slovak Academy of Sciences, *Ars*, Bratislava, 1969, no. 2. See also: Iva Mojžišová, 'A Slovak Contribution to Avant-garde Movements', in *Actes du XXIIe Congrès International d'Histoire de l'Art*, Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 1969, vol. 2, pp. 347–9; Tomáš Štraus, 'Die Slowakische Variante der Moderne', *Bauhauskolloquium von 27. bis 29. Juni 1979 in Weimar*, *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen*, Weimar, vol. 26, nos. 4–5, 1979, pp. 405–13; Mária Pötzl-Maliková, 'Die Kunstgewerbeschule in Pressburg 1928–1939. Zur Ausstrahlung der Bauhaus-Ideen in der Slowakei', in *Vorträge der Tagungen des Collegium Carolinum in Bad Wiesse vom 23. bis 25. November 1979 und vom 28. bis 30. November 1980*, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich/Vienna, 1982, pp. 201–324; Iva Mojžišová, 'Die persönliche Beziehungen zwischen den Angehörigen des Bauhauses und der Kunstgewerbeschule in Bratislava in Lichte neuentdeckter Dokumente', 4. internationales Bauhauskolloquium vom 24. bis 25. Juni 1986, in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar*, vol. 33, nos. 4–5–6, 1987, pp. 335–8; idem: 'Škola umeleckých remesiel v Bratislave a Bauhaus', *Ars*, Bratislava, 1990, pp. 43–54; idem: 'The First Wave of Avant-garde: Bratislava 1930', in *Niedzica Seminars VI. October 19–22, 1989*, Association of Polish Art Historians, Cracow, 1991, pp. 47–51; František Foltýn, *Slowakische Architektur und die tschechische Avantgarde. 1918–1939*, Verlag der Kunst, Dresden, 1991, pp. 90–4.
- 2 Josef Vydra, painter, art historian and author of several books on folk art, devoted all his life to the theory and practice of art education. He edited the reviews *Náš směr* (1910–14) and *Výtvarná výchova* (from 1935), both oriented to the teaching of the visual arts. He was secretary general to the Sixth International Congress for Drawing, Art Education and Applied Arts in Prague in 1928, from 1937 he was a member of the international bureau of the congress, and from 1931 he was an honorary member of the Art Teachers' Guild, London.
- 3 The growing Magyarizing pressure following the Austro-Hungarian compromise in 1867 exposed the Slovak nation to the threat of a total national and cultural assimilation. Therefore, after break-up of the Hapsburg monarchy and the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, national self-awareness and a search for its own cultural context figured on the programme of the day. This was connected with efforts to strengthen and actualize the ethnic artistic traditions of the Slovak people, both in the application of formal procedures and themes.
- 4 In the mid-1930s the Apprentice Schools had 2,500 pupils and over 100 teachers. The School of Applied Arts was attended by 200 students and the teaching staff counted some twenty members. The School also included a Psychological Institute which investigated pupils' dispositions for various crafts and selected the most striking talents. After the model of the famous school of František Čížek in Vienna, courses in drawing, painting, modelling and fancy weaving were available for children aged 8–14 years.
- 5 Contacts with local artisan traditions were established by the textiles department with the Detva society in Bratislava, and by the ceramics department with the art workshops of the Slovak Ceramic Works at Modra. The metal-working department designed metal table utensils and mannequins for window-dressing for the Sandrik firm at Dolné Háme. The footwear producer Bat'a at Zlín, the Schicht factory for soap and cosmetic preparations at Ústí nad Labem, and the printing office Slovenská grafia placed orders with the School of Applied Arts for posters and promotional prints in the form of competition by tenders.
- 6 Fulla and Galanda undertook a radical step in Slovak painting from portraying perceived reality to the creation of the autonomous reality of the picture. After a short period of abstract painting in the spirit of elementarism in 1929, Fulla arrived at an original symbiosis of primitivistic compositional and iconographic principles with a post-cubist decomposition of form. Galanda's style at the beginning of the 1930s took the form of a lyrical neo-classicism. For more details see Ján Bakoš, 'Dielo a svet moderného slovenského maliarstva', *Slovenské pohľady*, Bratislava, vol. 85, no. 1, 1969, pp. 103–18; Ján Abelovský, 'Svetonázorová dialektika slovenského moderného maliarstva', *Ars*, Bratislava, no. 1, 1983, pp. 25–40.

- 7 A request for information on Plicka's film school was sent from London through the intermediary of the architect Antonín Heythum by the theatre director Edward Gordon Craig. See *Archív mesta Bratislava, Fund: Škola umeleckých remesiel, Correspondence protocol, 5.5.1938, no. 4913.*
- 8 Kalivoda was the editor and co-author of *Telehor*, one of the basic publications on Moholy-Nagy, with a preface by Siegfried Giedion. See L. Moholy-Nagy, *Telehor/international revue of the new vision*, ed. F. Kalivoda, Brno, vol. 1, nos. 1–2, 1936.
- 9 Francis A. Taylor, director of the Hackney Technical Institute, set down his impressions of a visit to the Bratislava School in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, no. 4332, 1935. His article also appeared in a Czech translation; see Francis A. Taylor, 'Současné školy umění a řemesel na kontinentě' (Contemporary School of Arts and Crafts on the Continent), *Výtvarná výchova*, Prague, vol. 2, no. 3, 1936, pp. 11–29.
- 10 Besides efforts at leading students towards achievements that would be up-to-date and would hold their own in international confrontation, Vydra had a further, more audacious plan. He intended to set up an internationally open school. The primary chance to do this was provided by the very character of Bratislava itself as a four-language town. The pupils of the school were of Slovak, Czech, German and Hungarian nationalities and, in time, students also came from Poland, Yugoslavia, Germany and Bulgaria. During the course of the 1930s when Czechoslovakia remained the last island of democracy in the midst of countries with totalitarian regimes, hopes rose that the numerous international contacts would deepen and the school would attract interest on the part of teachers and students from abroad. However, financial difficulties and the depression from the impending war turned this ambition into a utopian one.
- 11 The period aestheticization of life outside the traditional boundaries of art was reflected in Czechoslovakia by Karel Teige in several theoretical essays. 'The epoch of our civilization is a stage when various types and professions of art have relinquished the roles to which they have been subservient in the past, when the aesthetic activity is disengaging itself from the utilitarian character of former crafts in order to live a self-standing life, and when these emancipated artistic professions are coming closer together and are becoming so bound that they can no longer be differentiated according to the categories of former aesthetic systems'. See Karel Teige: 'Manifest poetismu', *ReD*, Prague, vol. 1, no. 9, 1928, pp. 317–36. Cit. according to idem: *Svět stavby a básně. Studie z 20. let. Československý spisovatel*, Prague, 1966, p. 343.
- 12 See *Súkromné listy Fullu a Galandu* (Private Letters of Fulla and Galanda), Bratislava, 28.2.1930, no. 1.
- 13 *Ibid.*, Bratislava, 30.4.1930, no. 2.
- 14 During his stay at the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava, Rossmann prepared a book on the utilization of lettering and photography in advertising in which he reproduced international material from this domain. See Zdeněk Rossmann, *Pismo a fotografie v reklamě*, Index, Olomouc, 1938.
- 15 See Ladislav Sutnar, 'Jaromír Funke: Fotografie vidí povrch' (Photography Sees the Surface), *Družstevní práce*, Prague, 1935. Ref.: Daniela Mrázková and Vladimír Remeš, *Jaromír Funke: Fotograf und Theoretiker der modernen tschechoslowakischen Fotografie*, VEB Fotokinoverlag, Leipzig, 1986; further bibliography therein.
- 16 'Fotografie. Jaromír Funke odpovídá na otázky redakce' (Photography. Jaromír Funke Replies to Questions of the Editors) *nová bratislava*, Bratislava, vol. 1, no. 4, 1931, p. 77.
- 17 Ref. Václav Macek, Iva Mojžišová, Dušan Škvarna: *Irena Blühová*, Vydavatel'stvo Osveta, Martin, 1992; further bibliography therein.
- 18 Ref. 'František Tröster', *Scénografie*, no. 47, Divadelní ústav, Prague, 1984; Jiří Hilmera, *František Tröster*, Divadelní ústav, Prague, 1989; further bibliography therein.
- 19 Věra Ptáčková, *Česká scénografie XX. století*, Odeon, Prague, 1982, p. 123.