

## **VASSIL IVANOV: EYEING NATURE AND VISUALISING THE COSMOS**

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Vassil Ivanov was one of the most idiosyncratic and inimitable Bulgarian artists. A great part of his art has no analogue in his home country. A versatile talent, besides drawing and painting, he played the violin, and was also in philosophy, cosmology, astrology, palm reading and yoga. Ivanov was attracted to the teachings of Petar Deunov, and in his way followed some of Deunov's fundamental principles, both regarding his *Kunstanschauung* and his *Lebensphilosophie*.

Ivanov's selfmaking as artist was anything but trivial. In 1971-1974 he lived in Paris, and, aperiodically, in Switzerland. At that time his opus became known to Picasso and Chagall, and he must have encountered Giacometti. He had shows in various places, from Europe to Australia.

Boyan Atanassov's collection of Vassil Ivanov's art has been meticulously selected and balanced, spanning periods and trends in order to present the artist as fully as possible. Besides the oil paintings, there are works in colored chalk and water colors, drawings in ink, charcoal and black pastels – of landscapes, still lifes, figural motifs, nudes, abstract pieces. Plus, needless to say, the famous Cosmic Cycle: striking shapes against a black or white background, the main formants of Ivanov's personality as artist.

As a matter of fact, the first show of Ivanov's, comprising works from that Cycle, was opened in Sofia in 1964. A while after that, the New York Encyclopaedia of Visual Arts described him as the progenitor of a new direction in art, called Cosmic Graphic. This cosmic moment is the main reason why Ivanov remained separated from the Bulgarian art mainstream of the 20th c. An artist of his kind and calibre demonstrated that Bulgarian art in the near past could have surprising and unsuspected dimensions. As early as 1962, Petar Uvaliev said in his rubric on the BBC that Ivanov was practically the only representative of modern Bulgarian art in the West. Ivanov's creative impulses and realisations grip the visual form and rip it out of the *Lebenswelt* with its daily drudgery, petty personal problems and social stratagems. His imagination soars high,

seeking out the spiritual sub-stance; it radically changes the scale, the viewpoint and the perspective, as if overcoming gravity and the limits of the senses.

Before arriving at his cosmism and its visuality, in the beginning of the 1940s Vassil Ivanov had established himself in the tradition of cameral art. His early works reveal an artist's eye looking at nature in poetic contemplation and peaceful immersion. His landscapes and still lifes were not stamped with the immediacy of impressionism or the monovision of curiosity. Their motifs were habitual, not to say banal: Sofia and its surroundings, meadows, dirt roads, terrains enlivened by a shabby house, a look from the land out to the sea... Yet they had their significant features, distinguishing them from painted photography. One can discern in the vision that produced them the panteistic refrain of an all-permeating spirituality and enlightened contemplation, equidistant from both the forced expression and high-flown romanticism. The line of the horizon divides the canvas or sheet in almost equal parts, separating earth and sky, so that the landscape begets a panoramic appearance. The frontal composition does produce an impression of outward stillness; however, through the use of special brush strokes or crayon lines, or texture, or visual accents, the artist brings to life and dynamises the motif, establishing its unity-in-diversity.

*Ivanov is not manacled by cliché formulae: in his thinking and doing he is always striving to achieve and retain the feeling of naturalness and uninhibitedness that he believes should be communicated by that kind of opus.*

The special atmosphere results from complicated structuring of masses of color and zones of attraction and repulsion of warm, cold and intermediary derived hues, tinges and shades. In most cases the human figures play the role of staffage; however, even when the composition endows them with a more weighty presence, their main function is to stress the unity of man and nature. Oftentimes the painter would prefer to hint and suggest rather than depict details, giving the viewer considerable associative freedom. Such traits, characterizing Ivanov's painting, are to a large extent to be seen in his drawings too, mostly from the 1950s. A landscape motif, for example, is developed through a series of sketches and studies, some of them nearing a formal finish. In the more finished works one observes the softness of the grading, the fine and varied stroke, the sfumato of the spots and the pliancy of the lines that go hand in hand with the outward simplicity of the subject matter.

Vassil Ivanov's second period came in 1960-1970. It was marked by searches and achievements, driven by serious evolutionary changes in his entire Welt- and Kusntanschauung. These innovations became focused in his Cosmic Cycle.

One could note in parenthesis that cosmism, as theme and worldview complex, was linked to the visual arts in the 20th c. We could start with the Lithuanian painter and musician Mikalojus Čiurlionis, go on to Nikolay Roerich and Russian cosmism (the Amaravela group in 1920-1930 in particular) and reach Kazimir Malevich and constructivism. Such thematic tendencies reveal shifts within some layers of artistic culture, triggered off by the enormous, "tectonic", contemporary social processes. So what is specific about vassil Ivanov's cosmism against that background?

*The Cosmic Cycle is a series of drawings, mostly done in white chalk against a dark, almost black, background, that have become emblematic. They suggest improvisation, but due to the seriousness of the artistic problematique they impact one as seriously thought-out and finished opuses. The artist uses not only the point, but the whole body of the piece of chalk. There is some symbolism in the very choice of technique and materials used. Ivanov identifies the yet untouched black surface of the sheet as the bottomless and barren pit of space, from whose loins the image is to be born. The artist's act of touching that cosmic matter and moulding the elements of the image out of it is sen as analogous to a creation by a demiurge.*

*The structure of the image reminds one of an all-encompassing, intricate net, akin to a spider web - or a labyrinth, which the main thread of the composition navigates to produce the impression of a whole. Matter and space interact in a miraculous way, matter becomes dematerialised while we look, and space acquires the immensity of the Universe, incommensurate with the capacity of human senses and understanding. We should note, however, that Ivanov's approach has nothing to do with hybris, ego-hypertrophy and the internal drama of the modern artist. For Ivanov in-spiration is rather a manifestation of humility and wonder at the point of beholding the rhythms and cryptic laws of the created world. His "visionism" is neither arbitrary nor subjective. It flows from a deeper understanding of cosmic unity and of the in-spiration of matter which is the bones of the universe. Whence these strange imaginary forms, these elongated unearthly figures, complicated rhythmic and spatial*

*interrelations, objects and substances defying gravity – all of them done via wonderfully simple means of expression. And that is just a small part of Vassil Ivanov's World. His art today continues to be as impactful as ever, enigmatic as it is in its wonderously idiosyncratic and unique poetry.*