

# IN THE TIME OF TRUE ART

Kalin Nikolov

Beyond or within the temporality of art! He kept in step with the quests of the current tendencies; he followed a profound and risky course for his oeuvre; he was the first Bulgarian abstractionist; and he was easily distinguishable in by reason of his entirely individual philosophy and manner of working.

The artist Vasil Ivanov was born in 1909. But, look and compare: Arshile Gorky was born in 1904, Barnett Newman—1905, Jackson Pollock—1912, David Smith—1906, Willem de Kooning—1904, Herbert Ferber—1906, Franz Kline—1910, Philip Guston—1913, Nicolas de Staël in 1914. That is to say, the active group of American and European post-war abstractionists—the Action Painters—were his coevals. Ivanov's art, completely contained within the trends of the global avant-garde, progressed in parallel with that of the leading world figures of his generation...

Our renowned filmologist, Georgi Stoyanov – Bigor, recounted<sup>1</sup> that, while staying with Louis Aragon<sup>2</sup> in Paris in the 1960s, he visited the poet at the editorial office of *Les lettres françaises*, the famous literary newspaper. There, Aragon introduced him to some of his good friends and adherents—among them Picasso and Chagall—and Bigor showed them some drawings by Vasil Ivanov. The reaction of the two greats was emotional, and sincerely positive. These works of a colleague previously unknown to them bore authentic artistry and suggestions that reminded them of the statues on Easter Island. In a case such as this, the widely used expression that Bulgarian creators of whom these two artists had given any assessment at all could be counted on the fingers of one's hand, is inaccurate. Because, in fact, the 'finger' is only one—and we have not a single shred of evidence of any other Bulgarian artist to have attracted the attention of Picasso.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Our prominent filmologist's anecdote is taken from the documentary about the artist, 'Pictures at an Exhibition', directed by Docho Bodzhakov, script by Maria Ivanova, cinematography by Ivan Varimezov, 1996. Bigor later confirmed the story to me.

<sup>2</sup> The poet Louis Aragon (1897–1982), along with André Breton and Philippe Soupault, co-founded the group of Surrealists in 1924. He was an iconic figure in 20th-century French literature.

<sup>3</sup> This authoritative cultural publication covered one of Vasil Ivanov's exhibitions during his stay in France, using succinct but complimentary words, which we find in Boris Delchev's diary:

'Monday, 3.07.1972. A brief review by H[enri] A[dam] of Vasil Ivanov's exhibition in Paris (Transposition Gallery).

'Here it is:

'Here, in his first exhibition in Paris, Vasil Ivanov shows only pastels and miniatures. If the former are halfway between the figurative and the abstract, the miniatures are entirely figurative—ink landscapes. Pastels make an

Amid the opportunities seized upon by Socialism in Bulgaria to prevent artistic individuality from standing out distinctively, Ivanov proved to be an exception. As the poet Lyubomir Levchev said: *'He did not seek fame for himself; he had it.'* It is by asserting oneself that one builds tenacity and character, with no alternatives. *'A dark, almost black shadow lay on his face, and his eyes stared sharply and mournfully at the same time.'*<sup>4</sup> Lyubomir Levchev remembered him having the face of a tormented person who consciously wanted not to make an impression. Sculptor Velichko Minekov: *'He defined himself as a loner.'* Artist Ivan Filchev described him as *'a person who is nothing like the others'*<sup>5</sup>.

But conversations about him and his popularity went beyond the limits of his art, which was inseparable from his spiritual views as an erudite, philosopher and psychologist who informed himself extensively about the achievements of science while, at the same time, remaining a mystic; a follower of Beinsá Dounó, founder of the religious and philosophical teaching known as Deunovism; a connoisseur of classical and modern cultures; proficient in several languages; a skilled violinist; a yogi of profound experience; and celebrated for his abilities as a palmist.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding that he lived

---

impression with their originality and their fantastic appearance. The painting of this Bulgarian artist, born in Sofia in 1909, is the painting of hints.

*'Vasil Ivanov has talent and a rare individuality.'*

<sup>4</sup> Svintila 1978: Svintila, Vladimir, *An Artist of the Cosmos, Savremennik* [The Contemporary], 1978, issue 2, pp. 514–518. Whenever I quote this author, this is the source—a meaningful and penetrating narrative on the artist's creative essence. Vladimir Georgiev Nikolov, a.k.a. Svintila (1926–1998) was a Bulgarian writer, literary critic, publicist, journalist, and translator from the Italian, French, Spanish, English, German, Ancient Greek, and Latin languages.

<sup>5</sup> Levchev and Minekov's statements in the passage were taken from *'Pictures at an Exhibition'*, a documentary about the artist directed by Docho Bodzhakov, script by Maria Ivanova, cinematography Ivan Varimezov, 1996. That of artist Ivan Filchev was cited by the *Svobodna kniga* [Free Book] newspaper, in a special issue dedicated to Vasil Ivanov (Sofia: National Centre of Museums, Galleries and Figurative Arts). Year 5, issue 7–8, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> This was what the following note from Boris Delchev's diary brought to mind: *'Saturday, 25.03.1978 (...) I dialled Milanov's number: We spoke mostly on literary topics. But also about... clairvoyance in general and especially the clairvoyance of the late Vasil Ivanov (the artist).'* I, too, had the chance to converse on the same topic with Alexander Milanov, who had retained a shocking recollection of precisely this feature of the artist, which he considered absolute. He was working as an editor for the *Narodna mladezh* [People's Youth] Publishing House and had to accompany the Soviet writer Leonid Volinsky (also a gifted artist), who was visiting Bulgaria. Volinsky is also remembered for organising the rescue of the Dresden Gallery and, later, as the author of wonderful books on Van Gogh, the *Peredvizhniki* [The Itinerants], French Impressionism, and masterpieces of Russian architecture. He was a close friend of the dissident writers Nekrasov and Solzhenitsyn. Alexander Milanov took Volinsky to the Izgrev neighbourhood to meet Ivanov, who read his hand and advised him to concentrate only on the most important matters in his life. Shortly afterwards, Milanov received a letter from his Russian colleague, informing him that, unfortunately, Ivanov had hit the mark—they had detected a tumour, and he really did have to concentrate on his most basic intentions...

Dimitar Pampulov published a similar recollection in his book, *'Dimitar Kazakov – Neron, Intimately'*. Immediately after marrying before the registrar, Kazakov and his wife visited Ivanov. *'For Neron, this artist is not only a kindred soul, but also above all others. In some mysterious ways, they are akin in the connection with that afterworld from where they both, fully consciously, draw energy and cognition...'* Milka Kazakova recollected the exciting moments of her life. Dimitar Kazakov entreated Ivanov to read Milka's hand. For a long time, Vasil refused trying

on the periphery of one-time Sofia, in a small house his friends called ‘the shack’, he shared a deeply mutual, emotional marriage with one of the most beautiful women in Bulgaria at that time—ballerina Elka Yosifova. And even so, outside the city, far removed from the quotidian, and not at all easily accessible, he was much sought after and surrounded by many people; he was also visited by notable figures from the Eastern European elite, intellectuals... Do I even need to explain that, following the Stalinist era, the thaw spreading throughout the Eastern Bloc again became controlled; free thinking and, above all, manifestations outside the canon built up hope, and supported the trust of honest-minded circles in the power of art over than historical givens. The Bulgarian, Vasil Ivanov, occupied a particular place in this conspiracy of hope. His admirer-guests, for example, included the conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, the violinist Leonid Kogan (the two talked about Shostakovich), and the cosmonaut Alexei Leonov, who wrote in the book of impressions at one of Ivanov’s exhibitions: *‘He has been There!’* They say that a French connoisseur fell on his knees in front of his works...<sup>7</sup> They also say that, at the 1967 Trieste Film Festival, the film *‘The Way to the Pleiades’* excited such interest in his art that one of Salvador Dali’s collectors gave the keys to his car in exchange for making contact with Ivanov and his works.

I have copied out several of the reactions from books of impressions at his exhibitions. *‘Dear Comrade Ivanov, I am fascinated by your exhibition, where all colours intersect in one exquisite song! All I can say to you is that you have solely yours, a Vasil Ivanovian, style! I bow before your talent and genius!’* (Konstantin Kisimov, one of the greatest Bulgarian artists of all time.) *‘I am happy that I was introduced to great art through you...’* (Raina Kabaivanska, world-famous operatic diva.) *‘Today I touched genius! Thank you!’* (Savva Kulish, the great Russian film director, whose work includes *‘Take-off’*, about Tsiolkovsky). *‘Your oeuvre is genius! Thank you!’* (Leonid Kogan, one of the century’s virtuosic violinists.) *‘To the great master of the singing drawing, to the true artist, with respect and admiration.’* (Gennady Rozhdestvensky, a renowned conductor.) *‘It is very pleasing that, in Bulgaria, the theme of ‘COSMOS’ is broadly reflected, and, for that, great credit goes to Vasil Ivanov.’* (Alexei Leonov, the first cosmonaut in world history to conduct a spacewalk, and himself an artist.)

---

to brush off the request; but, when he finally took her palm in his, one of the things he ‘saw’ was a change when she turned forty-five. Milka would later recall this—she was widowed at that very age.’ I think both remembrances are amazing!

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to his wife, dated 3 February 1973, Ivanov wrote: ‘I am specially invited to take part in the Great Autumn Exhibition in Pontoise, where my first exhibition opened. A few days ago, Basan called me over to meet an art critic who, according to him, had knelt in front of my cosmic drawings like nothing ever seen before... It is just a shame that I’ve now turned sixty-four.’

The nature of his renown ran counter to contemporaneous models of the way the circumstances of that time produced popular or great artists. He was not (and still is not) represented in museums; he was seldom to be found at exhibitions; he was positioned on the periphery; there were no monographs on him during his lifetime. Our 'eminent' critics never wrote extensively about him while he was alive (and, half a century after his death, they still steer clear of so doing); they keenly felt they risked compromising themselves before the creative controllers ranking above them. Nevertheless, articles on Ivanov were still written and his exhibitions opened by none other than the art critic Kiril Krastev, whose opinion—'*It is indisputable that French painting, for more than a century, has led the development of world painting*'—was published in 1948, and was considered to have escaped the censor; for decades to come, it would be cited as an act of sabotage, an ideologically untenable mix in favour of decadent bourgeois culture. Moreover, Krastev exerted an influence on Ivanov's understandings and creative essence. Indeed, Ivanov himself professed the same credo about the leading role of modern art to make his way and create his oeuvre in France (and partly in Switzerland, when he was commuting between the two countries in 1971–74).

Thus, with the local environment unsupportive in practice of his drive to become an artist (but with supportive, loving friends in awe of his commitment to the spiritual), his works, in many cases irrespective of any permission, found their way to different parts of the world, either legitimately or unofficially. In accordance with all the rules, or regardless of them, the artist somehow managed to add Budapest, London, Beirut, Leipzig, East and West Berlin, Geneva, Neuilly, Paris (we shall see how), to his professional palmarès. In addition to those places, his works are known to have appeared in New York, Sydney, Düsseldorf, Tokyo, Trieste, Melbourne, and Moscow. He held several exhibitions in Poland alone, and a film based on his drawings and directed by Jerzy Vaulin was followed by a similar, Bulgarian production, 'The Way to the Pleiades', by Dimitar Griva.<sup>8</sup> Bulgarian writers, too, used his drawings as illustrations, in an additional form of support and promotion.

What do we know of his biography?

Vasil Ivanov was born in Sofia on 7 May 1909. On the paternal side, his roots emanated from a family of means in the town of Sevlievo. The artist's father had passed an examination to become a postal worker, so, owing to the nature of his work, the family moved to various places around Bulgaria. The artist's mother came from a family of Kalofer merchants: enterprising people, producers of rose oil, they had eight stills installed in their home, which bespoke one of the large rose oil distilleries of the time.

---

<sup>8</sup> Dimitar Griva (1914–1994) was an eminent composer and a follower of the teachings of Peter Deunov.

Unfortunately, the mother of the future artist unexpectedly passed away before her time, at the age of only thirty-three. Suicide was suspected. On returning home from school, Vasil, a secondary-school boy, was told...

His younger years were spent in Kazanlak. One of his teachers was that great Bulgarian writer and artist, Chudomir.<sup>9</sup> At the outset of his career, Ivanov seemed to dream more about fulfilling himself through his musical activities as a violinist. *'I wanted to be a musician,'* he used to tell his future wife, Elka. He read extensively from early childhood; even as a pupil, he had a large personal library—his attraction to books remained for life.<sup>10</sup>

Vladimir Svintila wrote. ‘

*He read widely. Not in a disorderly way, as one might think. He was very well acquainted with both classical and modern world literature. He considered Tolstoy's story, 'Three Deaths' to be 'a cosmic drama'. He knew by heart Balabanov's translation of 'Faust' and recited many of Lermontov's poems. Vasil loved spiritual finesse and sought to acquire it himself. He consciously worked on the cultivation of his sensitivity.*

Music accompanied him to his final days. I have heard from people close to him that, outwardly, he tried to resemble Beethoven. He painted while listening to the music of Chopin, whom he worshipped. His wife, Elka Ivanova, told me that they were both in love with Chopin's music and listened to it constantly. A music in which the meaning of art merged with the basic idea of immortality.

His ability raised him in the estimation of his coevals. Visibly so, for when Nenko Balkanski, the future outstanding artist and professor of painting, produced one of his

---

<sup>9</sup> This great writer and artist never ceased to take an interest in him. ‘Vasil Ivanov—an artist, a pupil of mine in the secondary school—has built himself a shack among the Deunovists and lives there, while his wife, a ballerina, lives in the capital. Wondrous, lyrical things that he draws from memory. I bought 2 for the museum. He gifted one more and, to me, separately, 2 smallish ones. He draws his subjects in their surroundings—you see the scenery around his shack and around the garden; he plays the violin.’ Ivanov was widely acclaimed. The established artist and writer Svintila already felt his pupil to be worthy of the town's gallery and its meticulously assembled collection, which included Ivan Milev, Zlatyo Boyadzhiev, Tsanko Lavrenov, and Zdravko Alexandrov.

<sup>10</sup> The artist's nephew, Nikola Penchev, who temporarily worked in Sliven and lived in Ivanov's family home (as already mentioned, the artist's father's place of employment as a postmaster was successively in several towns, Sliven being one of them), happened on a veritable mountain of books, all signed by their owner and devoted reader, Vasil Ivanov... works by Euripides, Aeschylus, Pascal, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Zola, Merezhkovsky, Balzac, Maupassant, Walter Scott, Edgar Poe, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Hamsun, Chekhov, Vazov, Yovkov, Botev, Nikolay Raynov, Prishvin, Balmont, Sologub... According to his nephew's testimony, even before he had commenced his studies at the Academy, Ivanov was, while living there, appointed as a temporary drawing teacher in one of the schools in Sliven; proof of his acquired culture and a revelation of his talents.

first self-portraits, he depicted himself alongside his secondary-school friend and colleague.

In 1939, Ivanov enrolled in the Academy of Arts, Sofia, in the painting class led by Prof. Nikola Ganushev.<sup>11</sup> After graduating from the Academy, he joined the Society of New Artists,<sup>12</sup> while on his way to becoming one of the modern Bulgarian artists.<sup>13</sup>

By virtue of his close relationship with the painter David Peretz, the young artist joined the so-called Baratsi Group, with which, according to some written sources, he is still associated. The group's history is as follows: as early as the 1920s, Zlatyu Boyadzhiev, Vasil Barakov and David Peretz had made each other's acquaintance at Geo Mirchev's signwriting studio in Plovdiv; their friendship continued at the Art Academy, and they shared lodgings in Sofia. The name 'Baratsi' was coined by the great painter Tsanko Lavrenov. Although not united by an identical creative programme, these artists did work in a community. A considerable part of the intelligentsia at the time had heard of their 'common pot of beans', as well as of their commitment to individuality in painting. Ivanov explored issues of form in a manner quite similar to theirs: nature, its constitution, the light in which something seems to exist independently of the visible, and which can be recreated through a progressively sophisticated, increasingly synthetic colour scheme. It is important to emphasise the significant impact these artists exerted on the development of Bulgarian art.

Ivanov's career was certainly influenced by another, later turn of events. In 1940, the 'Contemporary French Painting' exhibition opened in Sofia. The paintings on display accorded unexpectedly well with the general state of Bulgarian art and the desire of the country's artists for change. Young painters were positive in their perception of the exhibition—man and landscape together spoke in a deep mode of expression, using language that was calm and at the same time modern, although not as revolutionary as in the epoch of Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism. At the opening of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Nikola Ganushev (1889–1958) worked in France between 1923 and 1928 and took part in exhibitions of the Society of French Artists, receiving high critical appraisal. He opposed the *modus operandi* of Socialist Realism, so Komsomol activists included him in their 'programme' for criticism.

<sup>12</sup> Its members included Alexander Zhendov, Alexander Stamenov, Bencho Obreshkov, Boris Eliseev, Boris Ivanov, Boyan Petrov, Vasil Barakov, Vaska Emanouilova, Vera Nedkova, Veselin Staykov, David Peretz, Donka Konstantinova, Ekaterina Savova-Nenova, Ivan Nenov, Ivan Funev, Kiril Petrov, Kiril Tsonev, Lyubomir Dalchev, Mara Georgieva, Mara Tsoncheva, Marko Behar, Nikola Shmiregela, Pencho Georgiev, Petar Mladenov, Petar Karshovski, Stoyan Venev, and Stoyan Sotirov.

<sup>13</sup> I should explain that the participation [in exhibitions] of Bulgarian artists up to 9 September 1944, that is, until the beginning of the country's Socialist history, was under the auspices of several different artists' societies associated in a common union. Established at various times, these societies had distinct creative platforms. The goals of the generation of artists towards which Ivanov oriented himself, were to bring about changes in and tackle current issues of Bulgarian art, to adopt new and modern means of expression that corresponded to the spirit of the time in which they lived, to elaborate and apply styles that stimulated artistic language to achieve topicality.

exhibition, the young art historian Georges Huisman, who was later to found the Cannes Film Festival, stated that:

*'Indeed, the older artists today exert an undeniable influence on the young. Without Cézanne, Bonnard, Matisse, Braque, Derain, Dunoyer de Segonzac, without Roger de La Fresnaye, younger artists would not be what they are. But it seems to us that we should rather admire these great revolutionaries in art than follow them. The examples bequeathed from the past were too diverse, composed of the most contradictory elements, to be able to create true disciples. The manifestations of courage, so necessary in the past, when the magnificence of French painting was being formed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, have today lost much of their right to exist. While not denying what they have inherited from the immediate past, nor rejecting the wonderful conquests of their predecessors, we must admit that our young artists discover, in their creations, a powerful sense of order and moderateness. And the most superficial look at these creations will establish how much the artists are sensitive to the combinations of colours and to the subtle oscillations of the play of light; but still, they turn to the ancients when they want to penetrate the secret of the formation of essential rhythms and the harmony of forms. They thirst to build on the old and persistently look for the new.'*<sup>14</sup>

But then, modern European schools featured extensively in the works and lectures of Prof. Nikolay Raynov, Ivanov's teacher in the history of art at the Academy, and a remarkable artist in his own right. His twelve-volume history of the plastic arts contains innumerable examples of art in its profundity. There, we find multidirectional references and analyses of artists and their works. Auguste Rodin was quoted:

*'The landscape painter... It is not only in living beings that he sees the reflection of the universal soul; it is in the trees, the bushes, the valleys, the hills. What to other men is only wood and earth appears to the great landscapist like the face of an eternal being.'*

As were Maurice Denis' words:

*'Van Gogh and Gauguin resumed with vigour this epoch of confusion and of renaissance. Next to the scientific impressionism of Seurat, they stood for barbarity, revolution, and fever—and finally docility... For them, as for their*

---

<sup>14</sup> Georges Huisman, *Exhibition of Young French Art*, catalogue of the 'Contemporary French Painting' exhibition, 1940.

*predecessors, art was the rendering of sensation, it was the exaltation of individual sensibility.*<sup>15</sup>

We should mention—that, as a result of his belief in himself, his early maturity, and undoubtedly encouraged by Barakov and Peretz, Ivanov submitted a number of his works—only two years after his admission to the Academy—to the 1937 Twelfth General Art Exhibition. He was approved, and his paintings were displayed on an equal standing with other, established artists. Following that success, such episodes followed one after the other in his creative career. He took part in later general art exhibitions and, in 1943, was included in the group exhibition of Bulgarian artists in Budapest. At that time, such opportunities for Bulgarian figurative artists did not occur often—the selection of artists was meticulous and exacting. There was another development: at the Sixteenth General Art Exhibition, Vasil Ivanov, Vera Nedkova, Georgi Pavlov – Pavleto, and Naum Hadzhimladenov displayed drawings alongside their paintings. In so doing, they encouraged the viewer to pay attention to the drawing as an equally important creative result and genre, equal in value to other serious forms of artistic expression and a necessary testimony to a complete and valid artistic perspective.

In the summer of 1945, the Syndicate of Romanian Artists opened its latest traditional Salon in Bucharest. The Romanian School had progressive traditions that had deeply penetrated the current aesthetic environment while being assimilated into the trends of European cultural development. And, on an impulse—wonderful and perfectly natural after the war, demonstrating how cultures should abandon their previous borders and become part of unrestricted and primarily aesthetic processes—the Romanian artists invited their Bulgarian colleagues to take part in their exhibition.<sup>16</sup> Forty artists were involved in this remarkable initiative—among them, Vasil Ivanov.<sup>17</sup> He showed ‘Still Life’, a magnificent composition of a vase and flowers, books and three paintings featured behind the foreground table and its objects. Everything in the canvas contains symbols: the overall composition with its arrangement of items structurally typical of the great Cézanne; the impressionistic landscape with haystacks in a magnificent frame (haystacks are an emblematic element in Monet’s landscapes); as well as two reproductions—one of the ‘Profile Portrait of a Young Lady’ by Antonio

---

<sup>15</sup> Ivanov maintained this deep interest in the French School and its strengths until the end of his life, as evidenced in a letter to his wife in 1971 from Switzerland: ‘Yesterday I visited the museum-gallery, the Petit Palais, where I saw very good works by Renoir, Utrillo, Chagall, Picasso, Kisling, and other artists of the School of Paris—the major thread is: poetry, delicacy, tenderness, nobleness of feeling and great precision of execution, something that our artists lack.’

<sup>16</sup> This opening of the borders—a dream of artists after the years of war—was one of the most curious aspects of Bulgarian artistic life: the meeting of two schools. However, the initiative was to be blocked by the advance of dogmatism with its normative, Stalinist aesthetics.

<sup>17</sup> The Bulgarian paintings were selected by a jury headed by Prof. Iliya Petrov, with members Georgi Popov and Petar Mladenov.



Pollaiuolo (the purity, stylishness and abstractness of the form in classical art), and the other by Gauguin<sup>18</sup>. The painted books he included, one of which consisted of French ballads, imparted further signification. As we may appreciate, the artist created his manifesto, through which he addressed us, revealing to us who he really was, as well as the founts of his art, which he recreated through his personal painting methods, immersing them as parts of his own consciousness.

Towards the end of 1945, only a few months after the event in Bucharest, the Nineteenth General Art Exhibition in Sofia extended the synergy between the Bulgarian and Romanian artists, with Ivanov again among its participants. Once more, he fitted into the circle of the artistic and innovative in recreating imagery. There is absolutely no doubt that he had already proven himself to be on the same level as his colleagues; his name and oeuvre were objects of attention and high appraisal, as exemplified by a reference to him along with a reproduction of his work to close the book, 'The New Bulgarian Painting. Bulgarian Art from the Age of Paisius to the Liberation and Bulgarian Painting from the Liberation to the Present Day', 1947, by Nikola Mavrodinov, a prominent art historian and, at the time, director of the Archaeological Museum. In other words, Ivanov was regarded as one of the few younger artists definitely destined to play a critical role in the future of Bulgarian painting.

What do Vasil Ivanov's early works evince? In his practice, it seems he was increasingly and ever more profoundly following Cézanne's words: *'Art—this is a revelation of an exquisite sensitivity.'* And: *'What the painter needs first of all is a personal perspective, which can only be obtained through obstinate contact with the vision of the universe,'* again a legacy of Cézanne's. His works are momentary contemplations, the results of having absorbed the artistic impulses through some difficult-to-capture moments of the visible. To add to this characterisation of his works, we should also quote Vladimir Svintila: *'He worked on landscapes—not large in size—in a bright polychromy of broad colour strips, with enormous purple accents, in which infinite depths burned.'*

In 1946, Ivanov opened his first solo exhibition at the Forum Gallery. He published a catalogue in which the reproductions were the work of the remarkable violinist and

---

<sup>18</sup> Although in a footnote, I would especially like to draw the reader's attention to Ivanov's treatment of Gauguin and his 'Still Life with Head-shaped Vase and Japanese Woodcut', 1889, in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, Iran. Ivanov rearranged the objects and reworked the composition, not horizontally (as it was originally), but vertically.

photographer, Stoyan Sertev<sup>19</sup>. The author of the introduction, Yosif Yosifov<sup>20</sup>, was not an art historian; he was an artist, had graduated in philosophy, and published articles in *Zlatorog* [Golden Horn], the most renowned cultural magazine in the country up to 9 September (after that date, it was condemned as the prime bearer of bourgeois culture). Yosifov had a grasp of the works of his colleague and friend (with whom, some years later, Ivanov would become related through his marriage to Elka Yosifova, the ballerina) and communicated most faithfully the paintings' common feature: an intimacy towards what Ivanov depicted in his landscapes. It is interesting to read the entire narrative.

*The distinctive features that Vasil Ivanov's works bear point to a type of painting that, through sensitivity, restraint and measure, approaches nature, the figure and the objects, a painting that is therefore also widely comprehensible. Comprehensibility, however, harbours many dangers that must be overcome. A problem, as personal as it is common to our new painting, has been brought up—the elimination of the danger of naturalism and academism, which, with its impersonality, banality, and peculiar formalism, threatens all comprehensible art.*

*Vasil Ivanov solves this problem in a spontaneous way, without imitating or without serving any formulas. Maintaining his sensitivity to the great masters of modern art who broke down form in a revolutionary way to discover the subtlest imagerial correlations, he creates a painting that returns to nature and objects, enriched with a greater sense of rhythmicising the proportions; a painting that is not satisfied with the impression but, by eliminating the details, is elevated to the general, the typical.*

*The means are simple, without external glitter, without virtuosity or routine—the brush does not outstrip feeling and thought, nonetheless the works are filled with intimacy.*

*Internal drama and external calm bring out the romantic side of nature, where man is small, but expresses his organic bond with it as a characteristic ingredient of the landscape.*

*The poetic, lyrical feeling of the artist is expressed in a clear and natural pictorial language. This feeling brings us back to the purity and freshness of*

---

<sup>19</sup> The violinist Stoyan Sertev (1906–1974) was one of the greatest, and most intriguing, of Bulgarian photographers. As a musician, he played with the Lechev and Avramov quartets. His son, Alexander Sertev (1937–2021), was an artist who graduated under Iliya Beshkov. We owe credit to both for their remarkable photographs of Vasil Ivanov.

<sup>20</sup> Yosif Yosifov (1908–1991) was a practitioner of the applied arts; he was the brother of Mara Yosifova (1905–1996), who greatly contributed to the development of artistic textiles in Bulgaria.

*sensation that we have preserved as a memory from childhood to that thirst with which we have perceived every new sight.*<sup>21</sup>

The effect of these paintings, so imbued with intimacy, in his first exhibition was fascinating, as reflected in Petar Ouvaliev's<sup>22</sup> words: '*Landscapes by Vasil Ivanov are in some famous Western collections, such as that of the renowned French writer Romain Gary,*' an aspect that should not be neglected—the reference by Ouvaliev to Romain Gary as the owner of paintings by Ivanov. Here, we are speaking of one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century; what is more, he won the Prix Goncourt twice, something that was absolutely in violation of the prize's statute. He did this under two different names—the only double laureate of the prestigious Goncourt literary prize: once in 1956, under his already established pseudonym of Romain Gary; and a second time, in 1975, as Émile Ajar<sup>23</sup>. Gary held a diplomatic position in Bulgaria at the time.

However, the ruthless ideological interventions in the arts after 9 September 1944 gradually began to conflict with Ivanov's aesthetic credo, as well as the views of some of his colleagues from the former<sup>24</sup> Society of the New Artists, and altogether those of the more modern artists in Bulgaria. The Baratsi, in company with others manifesting different expressions of contemporary artistic language—progressive, free-thinking, all seeking creative individuality—were given notice that the epoch had no need of them. It began to eradicate them as unnecessary and even dangerous. This excerpt is from a letter written by the artist to his sister's husband, Mihail, and dated 1 December 1949:

*Recently, I was busy preparing my works for the General Art Exhibition. But, as I discovered, my works, together with those of many of my friends and colleagues, had not been accepted, because we were from the school of Western modern art. In short, a commissars' purge of Bulgarian painting. There is nothing left for us except, humbly and without objecting, to collect*

---

<sup>21</sup> Catalogue to accompany the artist's exhibition at the Forum Gallery. Introduction by Yosif Yosifov, Sofia, *Graphia*, 1946.

<sup>22</sup> Petar Ouvaliev (1915–1998), one of the most notable of Bulgarian intellectuals, spent the majority of his life in emigration as a diplomat, film producer, screenwriter and director, theatre director, art theorist, semiotician, university professor, writer, translator, radio journalist and critic. He worked with Michelangelo Antonioni and Carlo Ponti and was the producer of some of their most famous films, including 'Blow-up' and 'The Millionairess'. Whenever I have quoted Ouvaliev, the source was either his book, *Conversations About Bulgarian Artists*, Sofia, *Anubis*, 2003, pp. 44–50, or a catalogue of Vasil Ivanov's exhibition, UBA, Ministry of Culture, Sofia, *White Brotherhood Society*, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> The truth about his literary incarnation only came to light some six months after Gary's demise, on 30 June 1981, when his son and his publisher decided to print his deathbed confession, *The Life and Death of Émile Ajar* (*Vie et mort d'Émile Ajar*), written on 21 March 1979. He wrote: 'Everything can be explained with depression. But in my case, it should be noted that it has continued since I became an adult, and that was what helped me become a famous writer.' And, 'I had a lot of fun. Thank you, and goodbye!'

<sup>24</sup> I have used the term 'former' because, shortly after that fateful date, all the artists' societies were shut down, then amalgamated.

*our little paintings, which are no eulogy to 'today's happy day' presented to us by the deities of the newly built world of 'brotherhood and equality'. Useless beauty has no place here. Nothing should be reminiscent of it any more. Dostoevsky did not have many things in mind to have once dared utter the thought that 'Beauty will save the world', although, according to some, he passed for a prophet of Bolshevism. Certainly (without any doubt), the era of Socialism in our country, or anywhere else, will reveal a new beauty that the world has not yet seen.*<sup>25</sup>

His irony in the finale is self-evident.

And so, Ivanov simply sank into his own beauty, so incongruous in the situation, sank into the silence of the Izgrev neighbourhood with the Deunovists, his like-minded kinsfolk, and began living in a shack that became both a studio and his home. How did he survive those years of isolation? By planting vegetables, living as a total ascetic, roaming the forest almost naked, and taking exercise; instead of in the sea, he bathed in the marshes and rivers at the foot of Vitosha Mountain.<sup>26</sup>

'Sank' does not in any way mean that he hid, effaced himself, agreed to withdraw, or resigned himself to the conditions of the epoch. On the contrary! Deeper and deeper, the artist was sinking into himself. Vladimir Svintila quoted Ivanov as explaining:

*I learn plasticity from plants. I sit on the wicker chair in the garden and watch one blossom for a long, long time, every hour. Blossoms perform hardly noticeable movements; they slowly bend towards or turn away from the sunlight. But this can only be noticed if you watch continuously for half a day. Then I dream. But I don't dream of flowers. I try to recreate something by analogy. I also receive perceptions from space. Our earthly space is habitual and does not exist for us. We perceive it only in the darkness. Not just any kind of darkness, for example the pitch-black. There is nothing in it but our own blindness. However, there is a kind of translucent gloaming at*

---

<sup>25</sup> From the archive of Diana Vezenkova, the artist's niece, with my tremendous gratitude for the copy she provided. Never, and before no one, did Ivanov remain silent about his pessimism regarding the rigour and depth of political intervention in the arts. As the journalist Tenyo Stoyanov recalled, Ivanov visited him regularly (Stoyanov held managerial positions in the press), argued with him, requested information about modern trends, and declared that art under dictum and confined within limits could not develop normally. Tenyo Stoyanov admitted that it was not he who influenced Ivanov in their close relationship, but the opposite. The author of a propagandist book on Traycho Kostov's trial, and later declared a dogmatist (his colleague Dareva had labelled him as such using an offensive word, because of which they turned to the law), Stoyanov became a staunch supporter of the artist, helping him and fighting against his being banned. I should like to express my gratitude for all that he did for Vasil Ivanov.

<sup>26</sup> This was the kind of lifestyle he would have preferred to lead when he was living in France. 'Through Yuri's garden, there runs the creek from the neighbouring mill, with a small waterfall. I am in my true realm. Magnificent forests and meadows around, wonderful air. I don't care about any Paris now. I am growing corn, potatoes, mowing grass...'

*nightfall. I like to watch the thickening dusk through the branch of a blossoming tree. Thus, twilight appears material. This is not the materiality of the air, of the plain air. This is another reality, another materiality, that seems to me substantive. Here, in the translucent gloaming, I have a perception of the universal depth. And I reason like this: with the dying away of the sun, the cosmic picture is established—the one that rules in the universe. But then, I wonder, this translucent gloaming, this colourful night clothed in ultramarine and Prussian blue, are they not the antechamber of cosmos? Are we not one step before cosmic space? And then I ask myself: are we too not cosmic beings?*

*‘We can see in nature what we are. A man wanting to find out how he should see himself? To see himself, he, passing through [the process of] the grain of wheat, will see what he is,’* Deunov told his disciples. *‘Let us enter nature, to get to know it from the inside.’*

Deunov attracted quite a few of our august artists: Boris Georgiev, Tsvetana Shtilyanova, Boris Sharov, Tsvetana Gateva, Georgi Gerasimov, Preslav Karshovski, Mihail Vlaevski, Sotir Kostov, and possibly several others. However, Vasil Ivanov was somehow distinct from all the above-named—he was a modern artist. Where symbols were present in his work, they were not mystical metaphors, but forms that sought their translation in the cosmic sound of nature and the visible. The artist was more creative, aesthetically more homogeneous in the sphere of pure painting, which was the opposite of all that flirting with various messianisms, literary and moral exaltation, and showing off some ‘superpowers’. Instead, Ivanov was preoccupied with the connections between the spiritual and scientific perspectives; in art, he saw that the role of freedom of imagination, interpretation and emotional reaction, which was not based on the literal or descriptive, but rather on the abstract quality which the painting—still dependent on the depiction of the visible world—could not provide unless bold steps were taken towards something truly novel. Nikola Penchev, the artist’s nephew, described how Vasil Ivanov used to express his acclamation of Einstein as though he were talking about Christ. Seeking wholeness in Einstein’s treatment of theoretical concepts was one of the distinctive features of his thinking—it went beyond physics, entering the realm of humanism, of a humanity based on dynamically changing horizons.

His very art, but also his psychic predetermination and sense of self-preservation—his desire for autonomy—attracted him to the practices of Deunov and his supporters. They did not call themselves Deunovists, as artist Alexander Sertev explained to us, but one thing was characteristic of these people in general—they did not agree with such a label and did not like to be referred to by that name. We know that in his early creative years, Ivanov had already become acquainted with Petar Deunov’s teachings,

and had joined him. In fact, at first, this did not seem to have occurred deliberately, but he found a place on an elderly woman's property where he lived with almost no money. And, according to the recollections of the artist's wife, the Master's followers were already settled nearby; the artist, curious, contacted and joined them. *'Anyway, we are overpious saints through art,'* as he used to say.

In 1950, Ivanov married the ballerina, Elka Ivanova. After signing their nuptials, the 'complete ritual' consisted of a long walk in the woods in the close proximity of Izgrev neighbourhood. It turned out that, nearby, a Deunovist who had vowed not to talk was waiting for the artist. And Vasil stayed with him, telling Elka to go to the 'little shack' and wait there until he came. He never called her Elka, but 'Elizabeth', as he believed that her real name was acting as an impediment to life. As already quoted from Chudomir's diary in an earlier footnote, they lived separately, a situation that did not prevent them from constantly being together—with their correspondence figuring among the most beautiful in our epistolary literature.<sup>27</sup>

According to Ivanov's convictions, the peculiar elevation of the spirit to a plane higher than the worldly accorded with his adoption of yoga with its physical, mental, and spiritual practices. The first books to appear in Bulgaria on this subject were illustrated with poses of Ivanov himself performing various complex exercises. It was not an athlete, but he, the artist, that appeared in the photographs published there. He was constantly close to nature. On the coldest days, he would put on only a scarf, gloves, and something more protective around his waist. He used to say he could not swim, but he swam for miles and miles. Possessed of a strong intuition, Ivanov was also renowned for his ability to read palms. People often visited him for that purpose. His friend, the artist Ivan Filchev, recalled that many people went to him and then left relieved after their conversation, and the foresight they had received. He always said he had a foreboding of earthquakes.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> 'He was certainly born to be a husband,' Elka Ivanova told me. 'If there is reincarnation, I shall be a ballet dancer,' the artist used to say. He frequently accompanied her to the theatre and shared in the suffering of her many hardships. For a long, time, 'they' did not let her play good roles, imposing certain obstacles because of her background, which was considered as unacceptable. 'They cannot tell us how to have faith. They tell us that there is nothing there, and this is the worst,' Vasil used to advise her. And why were 'they' so obstructive to her? The Soviet artist Boris Babochkin— who played Chapayev in the famous film—was sent to Sofia to contribute to the building of our theatrical practices based on Socialist Realism. He pointed her out as a prima ballerina, as an artiste capable of responsible solo performances. The famous Margot Fonteyn gifted her with her left flat, her ballet pump, as a keepsake.

'It is not a small thing to be loved by such an artist and to be portrayed in thousands of drawings,' were the words of Elka Ivanova's that I recorded. 'I shall be your friend in this world and in the next.'

<sup>28</sup> A letter from 1950 to his wife fills us in on his daily life: 'Around me, it has completely quietened down: visits have stopped, and I go to Simeonovo by bicycle every morning. There I am, with my villagers, with fresh raw milk, with wheat bread; and then I clamber up along the river. I lie in the sun on the heated rocks, fine clear waters gush and flow around me; I bathe and then, for hours, I lie in ecstasy, forgetting the worries of the world, while

*Extremely poor (monetarily), he lived in a small wooden house, which filled with water in rainy weather, and he had to bale it out so it wouldn't damage his paintings. He loved nature and people and never said an insulting word about anyone. He enjoyed giving away his works, even to strangers. He was a generous man—always helping if he could, and he did it selflessly. He was in love with Deunov's teachings and often read his volumes. They, although 'not tolerated' by the authorities, abounded in the neighbourhood... Bai [Uncle] Vasil had won the fame of a magician and an eccentric. He greeted the sunrise; when it rained, he undressed to bathe in the rain—that was his bizarreness, but they came to him for advice, for a kind word that would heal tormented souls or physical defects. His atelier was full of people seeking help; not a day passed without visitors, and it seemed that everyone left disburdened and relieved. We younger ones could not explain it to ourselves; he seemed to us even more mysterious and very human.*

*Bai Vasil often got along without money. For months, he would not leave Izgrev in Sofia. And he rarely went to the UBA [Union of Bulgarian Artists]. From time to time, they purchased something from him—private patrons from Bulgaria and abroad—but more often it was he who gave away, generously, but there was not even a hint of doubt that he suffered from parting with the gift. He painted a lot, mostly in the evenings; he worked on new techniques and, as a reward for his generosity, many friends supported him by bringing chalks, paints, paper, or various tiny knick-knacks: a Japanese box that vibrated and drove mosquitoes away out of his atelier.*

*I suppose I forgot to say—there were minutes when no one could enter the atelier. Those minutes were when Bai Vasil was doing his breathing exercises... total self-absorption was required.*

*He was a respected artist, and that angered some of the Cerberus watchdogs,' declared his colleague Ivan Filchev, introducing us so wonderfully to the everyday life of the artist.<sup>29</sup>*

In 1955, Ivanov held an exhibition of drawings at the now defunct gallery at 62, Gurko Street, the UBA's Graphic Art premises. With his having accumulated numerous graphic drawings and paintings—small format, frequently on paper, and related in terms both of genre and style—his exhibitions followed in 1956, 1957, 1958, 1961... There were no obligatorily ideological works on display, but only nature as expressed

---

the field below—slowly collecting its fruit—oscillates like a huge straw hat in the field's midday swelter. Sometimes in the evening, returning home from the town, I pass along our favourite paths and garden avenues, where we left so many happy hours of cordial and spiritual accord.'

<sup>29</sup> Ivan Filchev's recollection appeared in the *Svobodna kniga* [Free Book] newspaper, in a special issue dedicated to Vasil Ivanov (Sofia: National Centre for Museums, Galleries and Figurative Arts). Year 5, issue 7–8, 1994.

through the heart of an artist who *'draws in the snowy wood in a jacket, bareheaded, with a scarf wrapped around his neck,'* recalled Svintila.

But then, towards the end of the 1950s, a change began to take place in Vasil Ivanov's depicted world. At first, it seemed to consist of free forms above the horizon, resembling a visualisation of sounds and their vibrations. Later, an inclination emerged towards concepts that could be defined as his cosmic works.

Vladimir Svintila quoted a direct testimony expressed in the artist's own words:

*Why do I say 'cosmos'? To dissociate ourselves from it? But we are in it. There is nothing outside the cosmos. Nor is our quotidian world. And our daily life is cosmic. We toil under the powerful rays of a cosmic luminary, of a star we call the sun because we are close to it. We are an element in this cosmic beginning.*

As did the art historian Maximilian Kirov:

*For me, the cosmos is nothing but a metaphysical idea of the unboundedness of being.' While he was saying this, the artist was drawing, producing ten or twenty drawings a 'session'. He would take a perfectly sharpened pencil and, holding it close to the long piece of graphite, would turn it. An absolutely regular form of spinning mill sails—which were translucent at that—took shape. And then, a translucent butterfly-like shape also appeared next to them. And, at lightning speed, he applied delicate strokes above and below. There was the immediate effect of a 'cosmic object', of something infinitely distant, behind which raged spaces unbridled by the imagination.<sup>30</sup>*

In 1958, he was invited to arrange an exhibition in Budapest, where he showed a work predominantly plastic in character and with abstract forms. For the first time!

Vladimir Svintila testified:

*It depicted an endless, clear sky, inside which a figure like a spinning windmill and, at the same time, a huge pansy, stood like a flower and some unimaginable mechanism. Long, extremely gentle and clean strokes outlined endless depths, beyond which it felt that there were new ones, and others. When I asked him what this represented, he replied:*

*'This is your tomorrow.'*

*'My tomorrow?'*

---

<sup>30</sup> Maximilian Kirov's recollection was taken from the *Svobodna kniga* [Free Book] newspaper, in a special issue dedicated to Vasil Ivanov (Sofia: National Centre for Museums, Galleries and Fine Arts). Year 5, issue 7–8, 1994.



*'Yours and everyone's. This is an idea of the cosmic space.*

A genuinely new dimension had appeared in Ivanov's art, but it is obvious that it resonated in a way that is familiar to us in those artists from Eastern Europe whom we know as non-official. In our small country of Bulgaria, true abstract art was being created! Ouvaliev, from the BBC, could not conceal his amazement on seeing Ivanov's works in London in 1962, about which he wrote: *'And today Vasil Ivanov appears in London with a new maturity and unexpected depth.'* The exhibition took place at the Grosvenor Gallery, after the artist had been visited in Bulgaria by Eric Estorick, one of the great, world-renowned specialists studying the Futurist movement in Italy and a connoisseur whose art collection included works by Amedeo Modigliani, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, Umberto Boccioni, and Giorgio Morandi.

The artist had already found ways to mount exhibitions in various countries worldwide—sometimes officially, at other times, not. His London exposition consisted of drawings—they were easily transported, and Customs never did discover them. His work gained the respect of two authoritative specialists of world renown: Eric Newton, a former professor of art history at the University of Oxford, and Charles Spencer, a critic from the famous *ArtReview* magazine. Newton published his own review in *The Guardian*. *'He pointed out the particular sophistication of the Sofia artist, who was then completely unknown in the West,'* as Ouvaliev had already testified.<sup>31</sup>

What Ivanov displayed in his London exposition was substantial. To quote Ouvaliev again:

*Perhaps their reviews would be even more laudatory if they could recognise Vasil Ivanov's place in the development of Bulgarian painting. Then the originality would be even more apparent in these landscapes of imaginary cities, filled with huge buildings that more resemble ancient temples than modern skyscrapers, sculpted in the strange light of some other world where time does not flow with maddening speed, but as if with the solemn dignity of the slow gestures of priests and soothsayers.*

---

<sup>31</sup> Eric Newton (1893–1965) was a leading British art historian, who had initially worked as an artist. His books on art included several revised and reprinted studies of the war through the eyes of British artists; British sculpture; a collection of essays; the Romantic Rebellion; and his monographs on Christopher Wood, Stanley Spencer, and Wyndham Lewis. He was one of the first to deliver art lectures on radio. He held a professorship at Oxford and then at a prestigious London art school. I encountered some difficulty in attempting to identify Charles Spencer (because there were several matching names), so I turned to writer Brigita Tempest, living in London and close to Ouvaliev, the author of two books about him: *'As for the critic Charles Spencer, he was the author of wonderful books on Art Deco. He also wrote about Léon Bakst and his connection with Ancient Greece (about the unusual colours of his costumes for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and their connection with Greece). He was editor-in-chief of the Art and Artists magazine for many years. A big name in England.'*

Ouvaliev perfectly accurately accentuated the artist's creative development, which had begun with the influences of Impressionism and Pleinairism, later entering abstract plasticity with his surprisingly monumental configurations, reminiscent of Henry Moore's magical giants. Indeed, it was a major evolutionary change, truly progressive, and realised, at that, under circumstances that were emphatically negative towards form-origination (any comparative analysis of what was being produced in Bulgaria at the same time would prove this—it is obvious). In other words, Vasil Ivanov conducted his searches entirely in parallel with the epoch in which he was destined to participate. He was born, as mentioned, in 1909. But look and compare: Arshile Gorky was born in 1904, Jackson Pollock—1912, David Smith—1906, Willem de Kooning—1904, Herbert Ferber—1906, Franz Kline—1910, and Philip Guston in 1913. Which is to say, the active group of American and European post-war abstractionists—the Action Painters—were his coevals. In this respect, we can apply the same analogy to European artists.

The change in Ivanov's development, as well as his violation of the customary practice of presenting Bulgarian artists abroad, did not go unnoticed by the authorities. In 1963, Stoyan Sotirov, Chairman of the Union of Artists, made the following accusation in an official report:

*What, for example, does it mean that, lately, the Bulgarian artist Vasil Ivanov, loved and respected at home as a realist, is exhibiting abstract art in Lebanon and London? Perhaps he enjoys the praises he has received, perhaps he considers them as his own success—and, who knows, perhaps also the success of Bulgarian art? But if one can really speak of any success, it is only the success of the enemies of Socialism, who, exploiting the naïvety and ideological confusion of an artist, have managed to force a wedge, though small, but still a wedge, into our creative life.*

Criticism, however scathing, did not cause the artist to take a step back. Journalist Tenyo Stoyanov, then a BTA correspondent in the USSR, recalled:

*It must have been around 1960 or during the heroic feat of the first Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin... Vasil Ivanov unexpectedly visited me. He showed me the book, 'Astronomy and Religion',<sup>32</sup> told me that he regularly followed my reports, and asked me for information. He was burning with desire to paint the pervasion into the infinities of the mysteries. I showed Vasil the*

---

<sup>32</sup> I should like to note that the book, 'Astronomy and Religion' (1962), was the work of Prof. Marin Kalinkov, DSc Phys. (07.06.1935, Sliven—02.11.2005, Sofia), who gained worldwide renown for his research in the field of extragalactic astronomy and cosmology; he was the discoverer of 'superclusters' of galaxies and the co-author of one of the largest catalogues on superclusters, listing more than 900 objects, which are now referred to as 'KK' and have been cited hundreds of times.

*books by Soviet authors, 'Artificial Satellites' (1958) by Ario Sternfeld, 'Guided Missiles' (1959) by Marisov and Kucherov, and others, too.*

The cosmos! When cartoonist Panayot Gelev and writer Kolyo Nikolov visited the artist, he jokingly told them how he had arrived at the subject. Because the ceiling was low, and with his being so wrapped up in his work, he kept on forgetting it, banging and banging his head until he broke through the roof and saw the stars. In 2018, I had the opportunity to correspond with Kolyo Nikolov, who lived in Los Angeles, and he confirmed what had happened, regardless of the time long gone: *'For example, I wrote in the "Narodna mladezh" [People's Youth] newspaper mostly about [his] chalk drawings; I hope I'm not wrong, but I had no idea how great a man I had met then; Geleto, as an artist, knew.'* Plus, something else—Nikolov had been in close contact with Ray Bradbury: *'It's a pity I didn't have these drawings to show Ray Bradbury. But he was an inquisitive man, and he cannot but have seen his works.'*<sup>33</sup>

Another detail we should not overlook: the artist's wife told me that in his studio—the shack—there was very little decoration: two portraits, one of Van Gogh and the other of Einstein.

In 1964, Ivanov decided to present his cosmic graphics to Bulgarian viewers. The gallery at 62, Gurko Street was again placed at his disposal. Days before the official opening of the exhibition, the rumour spread throughout Sofia that something novel and unsuspected in Bulgarian art was about to be presented. Even while Ivanov was still arranging the seventy panels, his friend Tenyo Stoyanov brought along a group of Turkish writers, who could not hide their admiration that Bulgarian culture was finding unconventional ways to shake off dogmatism. The opening date of the exhibition had been announced—2 June. The invitations had been printed and sent out. But, unexpectedly, only hours before the official opening, the gallery was visited by representatives of the leaderships of the UBA and the CC of BCP, the Chairman of the UBA, Nikola Mirchev<sup>34</sup> himself and the former editor-in-chief of *Rabotnichesko delo* [The Workers' Cause] newspaper, Atanas Stoykov. They were ferocious in their criticism, acting uncompromisingly towards the artist, and they ordered the closure of the exposition. The reaction was not long in coming: Vasil Ivanov was urgently summoned to the CC of BCP, and then to the UBA, where, with undisguised malice, they demanded he renounce his pursuits, explaining that he had become the talisman for an ideologically wavering group of young people. But the artist would not accept

---

<sup>33</sup> From my personal correspondence with Kolyo Nikolov.

<sup>34</sup> An example of Ivanov's character: Mirchev was already ill, and there was a tree in front of the room where he was lying, whose branches got in his way. His friends consulted Ivanov, who came, concentrated, embraced the trunk, and pulled it out of the ground. Not to mention the strength that required! And then he planted a linden tree on the bare spot, which still stands today... Recounted by Nikola's son, Prof. Ivaylo Mirchev.

these edifying words and accusations. Instead, he sent an acerbic enquiry to the leadership of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, asking why such drastic measures were being taken.

*I think I was treated extremely rudely and unfairly. After several meetings and reviews, some 50 panels were selected and approved. I ordered posters and invitations. I arranged the salon. As a result of a new review, I was recommended to change two or three pictures and some inscriptions. I objected but obeyed. And just before the hour for opening, I found the door to my exhibition locked.*

*Is this supposed to be an expression of our new morality and new attitude towards art? Is all this in the spirit of the latest Party plenum?*

*I cannot understand what made the commission ban my first exhibition...*

*Helpless before this unjustified force, I turned to Comrade Todor Zhivkov with a request that my exhibition be opened and freely discussed. If this is inconvenient, let it be preserved as it stands and discussed by a narrow circle of specialists.*

*I want to hear a reasoned criticism of my oeuvre, of my searches, which, I am deeply convinced, have a solid, contemporary, realistic basis.*

*I appeal for more ethics and objectivity.*

In his approach to Todor Zhivkov, the head of state, he complained:

*For a complete week now, in the exhibition hall at 62, Gurko Street, my exhibition of graphic panels dedicated to the heroic feat of the Soviet man in the conquest of space has been set up, but locked down.*

*The exhibited [works] are only a small part of many paintings, the fruit of creative fantasy, fuelled by the most substantial achievements of modern philosophy, astronomy, cybernetics, and cosmonautics.*

*As a member of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, I showed in advance, in several meetings of the Union's commission of specialists, what I had picked out of the extensive cycle, 'Cosmos'. The commission gave their approval. On that basis, I printed posters and invitations. I arranged panels in the Union hall allotted to me. At a new review of the commission, I agreed to replace two or three pictures unfairly judged unsuitable. I thought everything was in order. But shortly before the opening of the exhibition, after the invitees had gathered at the entrance, the commission of the UBA surprised me with this unexpected and terribly insulting decision: of the already admitted 60-or-so panels, to leave only ten, and to replace all the others with old works already displayed in other exhibitions: landscapes, aquarelles, etc. This means a*

*complete banning of my first exhibition of the 'Cosmos' cycle. This means a most crude and unjustified ban on works created under the inspiration of modern epoch-making discoveries of science and technology. It means a crude compulsion to abandon my creative conscience, my efforts to walk the path of true relevance. All this is an attempt to push me back, to make me give up my works dedicated to cosmic discoveries, which mark a new period in my oeuvre.*

*Why am I being treated like this?*

*Could this course of action be an expression of the Party's policy of persuasion rather than administration in the field of art?*

*I am bewildered, deeply shocked.*

*I stand in front of my locked-up exhibition, and my thoughts lead me to you.*

*My request is that my exhibition be kept as originally approved. Let it be open for free discussion by our aesthetic and societal think tank. If hesitation prevails, let my cosmic panels be debated by a limited circle of specialists in the atmosphere of a relaxed, friendly discussion, in which the members of the commission, and specialists invited by me, take part.*

However, no one replied, and Ivanov once again wrote to the Union leadership:

*As a Union member, I think that I could and can appeal for more objectivity in the assessment of works that I dedicate to one of the epoch-making modern discoveries. I was convinced then, as I am now, that I have acted fully in the spirit of the Party and state policy since the 20th Congress of the CPSU and the April Plenum of the CC of BCP.*

*It is known that I also wrote to Comr.[ade] Todor Zhivkov, insisting that my cosmic panels be debated in the atmosphere of a calm friendly discussion, in which members of the commission, and specialists invited by me, take part.*

*As more than six months have passed since then and I have not received a reply to my letter, I am forced to appeal to you again for permission to exhibit paintings dedicated to the Soviet achievements in striving for the conquest of space. I urgently plead to be understood. I am convinced that I am on the right track in my efforts to create something novel for our modern times. I stubbornly continue to draw panels on the cosmic theme. But I have to live and eat, don't I? If in truth I am wrong, don't Union ethics allow my work to be discussed so that I can be openly and amicably told of the flaws?*

*I am not sure whether my letter to Comr. Todor Zhivkov reached him...*

Again, they pretended that Ivanov and the problem did not exist, a stance that caused him to turn to Zhivkov a second time.

*From 2 June up to today, more than six months have passed. So far, I have not received a response to my letter to the Union leadership. I do not know whether my letter to Comr. Todor Zhivkov reached him. The ban on my cosmic exhibition was commented on in the most diverse ways by artists and cultural figures. Conjectures were made and incorrect conclusions reached. I remained silent and waited. I thought it was all due to some misunderstanding and undue fear of something that held no dangers for the development of our Socialist art...*

*In spite of what had happened, I did not become angry with the Party and did not give up working. I have created new panels and am waiting for an opportunity to display them. But I live very meagrely. Following the ban on my exhibition, I cannot find any official support. Please, can something be done for the dispersal of the atmosphere [that has been] created.<sup>35</sup>*

No reaction whatsoever! But still, things just happened, unexpectedly at that. Alexei Leonov, the Soviet cosmonaut, visited Bulgaria in 1965. The son of a repressed father; himself an artist; a pilot with extensive experience; the cosmonaut who became the first in the world to exit the capsule and spend time in space—this fact alone places him among the most iconic figures of the twentieth century—but who was also trained in the Soviet programme to land on the Moon as the man chosen to walk on our satellite... He needed no explanation as to whether Vasil Ivanov's painting was imbued with Western influence and religious mysticism, or whether he had discovered previously unseen horizons of cosmic boundlessness. Leonov spoke out positively about the Bulgarian artist's works shown to him.<sup>36</sup>

Paradoxically, Ivanov was almost late for his meeting with Leonov, which was to play a positive role in his creative destiny. Todor Zhivkov himself took an unexpected interest in what the two said to each other, and it was even covered in the press. The outcome was that Ivanov's 'dubious' oeuvre would be put on display in the auditorium of the *Salza i Smyah* [Tear and Laughter] Theatre. There was no doubting that, through his persistence in exhibiting his 'cosmic' works, Ivanov had achieved a considerable success in the establishment of modern art, especially in Bulgaria.

---

<sup>35</sup> Sofia's Cavalet Gallery preserves this valuable example of Ivanov's correspondence and made it available to me, for which I am cordially grateful.

<sup>36</sup> If the reader were curious about the personality of the wonderful man, Leonov, he would see that he had always been known for his distinct, dissenting opinion. President Putin did not attend Leonov's funeral, unlike 89-year-old American astronaut Thomas Stafford, who was supported as he walked to the coffin, where he uttered his heartfelt words: 'Alexei, I will never forget you!'

Art historian Kiril Krastev opened the exhibition with a speech:

*The people who are to apprehend the world and matter in a new way—as a mathematical function—who, by means of the electronic brain would have hundreds of new solutions to logical truths, who would fly at the top speed of the photon rocket and would measure time with the functional clocks of flying systems or would stop its course—these people would have a new aesthetic.*

*But why cannot we, who live at the dawn of the Space Age, also come closer to its emotionality? This is exactly what the artist Vasil Ivanov has done: with an amazing creative intuition, he has peered into the spirit of the coming cosmic reality and, through his imaginary but plastically convincing images, he makes us immerse ourselves in the aesthetics of the new and future world cognition.*

*Like all great and true art, these drawings, which any constructor, engineer, or geometer would envy, are a function of the Spirit, based on the real indicators of modern life. They are projections of spiritual aesthetic experiences. They are merely artistic equivalents of the spirit of the age, its content, dynamics, quests, and achievements, of the new human thinking and perception of the world. His paintings tune up our senses, mind, and feelings to the register of the victorious music of human achievements, of the super-humanism of our future cosmic citizenship. The art of Vasil Ivanov is serious and sublime.*

*To the first cosmonaut in the aesthetics of the new cosmic art—a good lift-off!*

That lift-off became fact. On accepting the position of Chairman of the UBA (replacing Nikola Mirchev, who had personally directed the shutting down of Ivanov's exhibition), Dechko Uzunov helped the artist obtain a studio—it was found near 'the shack'—in the same building as the ateliers of sculptor Velichko Minekov and Mihail Simeonov. That was all very well, but not at all a happy ending. Ivanov held an exhibition in East Berlin, and they helped him arrange a parallel exhibition in West Berlin. In East Berlin, the artist and his wife stayed at the home of the parents of the remarkable Bulgarian, Norbert Randow, who had recently been released from prison. What had happened, here? In 1962, just one year after the Wall was erected, Randow was arrested on charges of 'anti-state defamatory activity' and 'aiding an escape from the Republic' and ordered to serve a three-year sentence. It was in their home that Ivanov was waiting to be granted permission to attend the opening of his West Berlin exhibition.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> It was via artist Yosif Yosifov, who worked on commissions for the design of commercial, industrial, and spatial sites, that Ivanov joined his business and developed relations with Bulgarian sales representatives. Among them was Konstantin Zhekov who, thanks to his command of several languages and his financial acumen had managed

Randow spoke about the tense atmosphere that day—the waiting, and being dependent on the decision of the authorities. Eventually, matters played out as follows: staff at the Bulgarian Embassy contacted Ivanov, apologising to him that he would not be granted the permission he had requested; they informed him that an employee would be sent to represent him, officially entrusted with expressing regret that the ‘star’ of the exhibition was unwell, with a high fever, and that the official would have the honour of greeting the public on the artist’s behalf.<sup>38</sup> Complications and vicious mockery of this kind seemed destined to accompany Ivanov,<sup>39</sup> interspersed with exciting empathies and breakthroughs. The reason for this was obvious: the remoteness and societal differences associated with the general state of Bulgarian culture. And although he had succeeded with his cosmic cycle, it would be firmly impressed on him that he had undertaken *‘too risky a task towards an artistic resolution, where it is of particular importance to preserve the connection with reality and its contemporary perception’*.<sup>40</sup>

However, Ivanov’s 1965 exhibition in the GDR attracted the attention of modern-minded German artists. For example, a drawing of his was reproduced on the cover of issue 11, 1965, of the *Neue Werbung* [New Advertising] magazine, a publication that promoted leading trends in applied graphics and industrial design throughout Eastern Europe. Again, in one of its later issues, a portfolio of the artist was published along with his photograph and a meaningful explanation of his art, which, according to the

---

to hold on to his job despite not being a Party member. Moreover, he had the courage to attract artists to work for him and was helping with this particular exhibition through his Western partners.

<sup>38</sup> Norbert Randow remembered Ivanov well and was really curious to learn details about him. In our meetings, we spoke at length about Ivanov.

<sup>39</sup> In Boris Delchev’s diary entry on 9 August 1964, we find something significant—showing both the reality of ‘autonomy’ in creative life at that time, but also a specific attitude towards Ivanov himself:

‘I met Bigor by chance on the street; we brought up the subject of cinematography and he told me the following (which I knew, but it was interesting to hear it from him personally): “For the month of August, a Bulgarian film week is being organised in Brazil. On this occasion, a delegation of ours will be sent, led by me, in which the artist Vasil Ivanov was also initially included. He was included because a film about his art is to be shown, and in addition, at the request of the Brazilians, an exhibition of his paintings from the “Cosmos” series is planned. And indeed, a few weeks ago he was summoned by the militia to go and collect his passport. He went, but no passport—they turned him down without any explanation.

Some days later, Venelin Kotsev personally phoned me. The delegation to Brazil was to leave, Vasil Ivanov was also going to leave, but I should issue an order for his exhibition not to take place. In a couple of days, after Venelin Kotsev had failed to attend the Moscow meeting, his wife, Yonka Kotseva, also called. Vasil Ivanov’s art was abstract, and, at that specific moment, presenting him abroad could have adverse repercussions. Anyway, in order not to trip up, I undertook the task assigned to me and thought that I had managed to see it through to a good end. But what happened? Vasil Ivanov was again summoned, and again denied a passport. And now the matter is in a pending state. In order not to discredit ourselves, I shall make another effort to fix it, so we’ll see. But it’s clear that the hold-up and irresolution are coming from somewhere high up. That’s where high winds fight.’

<sup>40</sup> From Todor Mangov’s review of Ivanov’s 1965 exhibition, *Narodna kultura* [People’s Culture] newspaper.



article's authors, was closely aligned to the great Henry Moore's principles of form and rhythm, and to the remarkable French painter and philosopher, Georges Mathieu<sup>41</sup>. Because Vasil Ivanov's drawings had nothing in common with the profile of the specialised advertising magazine, they explained that the reason for presenting a prominent Bulgarian artist in the magazine was that he was innovative in terms of form, and therefore of significance.

Ivanov was similarly renowned for the speed of his work, for which he too was criticised<sup>42</sup>. Even his admirer, Svintila, who observed him during his working process, found that:

*... there was something 'technical' in the execution of his drawings. He used pencils and graffiti rather like geometry sets. But it turned out that none of those who tried to use them in the same way, succeeded. Because these regular circles, these spread-out arched planes, as though borrowed from Lobachevsky and Riemann's geometry, were in his mind, he could see them and therefore he could reproduce them. In his case, nothing ended fortuitously; thanks to this 'technicism', he controlled his drawings absolutely. And besides, in this regular poetic stereometry, there were irregularities that were volitional and deliberate, purposeful and carried through, something only he could do.*

In 1966, Ivanov was invited to present his cosmic drawings in Poland. Professor Janusz Bogucki, one of the leading figures in modern Polish figurative art, and whose personality, utopias, visions, efforts, and philosophy strongly influenced the Polish culture of that time by directing it away from official political doctrine, wrote:

*Vasil Ivanov's oeuvre is an extraordinary phenomenon. It stands out against the background of contemporary Bulgarian art with its bold imagination, while the originality of forms and expression assign the artist a special place among the ever-changing manifestations of contemporary figurative art... Ivanov's graphics, drawn on black paper with white chalk, possess such*

---

<sup>41</sup> Who was Georges Mathieu? He was one of the European representatives of so-called Action Painting, identifiable by his works in Lyrical Abstractionism and Informalism. He is regarded as the founder of 'historical abstract painting' (his definition), trying through his works to express his own attitude towards the most important historical developments. The artist's characteristic themes encompassed the struggle of dynasties, popular movements, and architectural construction. A theoretician of modern culture, he was also the author of studies on Tachisme and other modern trends. He was notable for the speed of his painting gestures: for example, in 1956, on the stage of the Sarah Bernard Theatre, Paris, he painted a canvas measuring 12 x 4 m in just 20 minutes and, in 1957, at his exhibition in Tokyo, which included 21 works, he completed a 15-metre fresco in three days.

<sup>42</sup> The criticism that he painted quickly can today be deciphered in a completely different way: the artist sublimated his energy and imparted it to the process. At one of his posthumous exhibitions, I was speaking to a technician on Griva's film, who told me that, in fact, Ivanov had painted one kilometre of paper for that production.

*extreme precision and sensitivity of execution that it is simply impossible to give credit to the ordinary effect of the chalk. It may rather be said that pure imagination, employing rays of light, has left its traces on the black screen of nothingness. The remarkable musicality of the drawings, their rhythm and organisation, are not accidental. For many years, Ivanov played the violin, but he acquired an exceptional sensitivity of the eye as a painter of impressionistic landscapes, which he remains to this day. He doesn't like the city.*

Professor Ksawery Piwocki also offered a critique of Vasil Ivanov's exhibition:

*The mania that haunts the contemporary artist and critic makes me ask: is Ivanov's art modern? ... This original artist stands out distinctly against the background of the circles in which there dominated, until recent years, the cult of superficial realism, under the strong influence of the pompousness of the 20th century. His works remind me—not in their forms, but in their state of mind—of Blake and the later Romanticists.*

Polish newspapers reported that '*a number of the works on display will remain in the country, having been reserved by the museums in Łódź and Warsaw...*'

Ivanov's cosmic drawings also began to appear in the Bulgarian press. Some were used to illustrate Stefan Tsanev's 1967 book, 'Perigees, or the Closest Approach to the Earth'. In 1968, Vera Mutaftchieva included drawings by the artist in 'The Čem Case'. In the same year, another graphic work served as the cover of the sci-fi novel, 'Heliopolis', by Haim Oliver. Artist and photographer Alexander Sertev designed the Sofia office of the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits* company, covering an entire wall with a drawing by Ivanov, but rendered as a negative image.

In 1968, Vasil Ivanov again held an exhibition in London, without his being there, and without its being completely official. '*It may be a coincidence, providence, or merit—let others judge that. But the fact remains a fact: Vasil Ivanov is the only Bulgarian artist whose name recurs in the columns of the British press,*' Petar Ouvaliev would comment emotionally in a discourse for the BBC.

At the beginning of 1971, following an invitation by the great pianist Yuri Boukoff, Ivanov left for France. Boukoff welcomed him as one of his own family—so the artist had the opportunity to work there for four years. '*Vasiliy's departure,*' Boukoff recalled, '*was very difficult to accomplish, although he had a personal invitation from*

*me. I used all my possible acquaintances and contacts, in truth, I must say that [it was] thanks to Venelin Kotsev that we were able to lead Vasiliy out of Bulgaria.'*<sup>43</sup>

In this way, Ivanov changed his milieu, venturing on a new beginning in his artistic biography, opening several exhibitions in France and Switzerland, painting, and building his social circle.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, Max-Pol Fouchet<sup>45</sup> wrote about Ivanov's exhibition at the Hexagram Gallery, Paris:

*His unique art is only a means, because it is at the service of poetry, thought, vision, which goes beyond the simple achievement of the aesthetic by revealing a unique depth, reducible to nothing else.*

*We watched Vasil Ivanov in front of his black sheet, holding a piece of white chalk. His handling of it was with the astonishing rapidity of lightning. As the sudden light illuminates the night in streaks of traces, which allows us to discover for a moment even the vastest landscape, Vasil Ivanov's hand revealed on the black background, signs and shapes, their outlines and their intertwinements...*

*Vasil Ivanov's images arise from the world that the artist carries within himself. They are forms from a long-borne and meditated-on universe. The creator imparts to the image of his visions some property—objective and non-objective, real and unreal, so that between them there always lies a path, a passage to enthrall us as well.*

*It is obvious that we are witnessing a sacrament—the most sublime, beyond doubt: the desire for the other, the desire for union with others, the hope of becoming one, the elimination of distances and opposites in love. In other words, to the search for unity, physical and metaphysical, drainless, inexhaustible.*

---

<sup>43</sup> That time would come. *Svobodna kniga* [Free Book] newspaper, in a special issue dedicated to Vasil Ivanov (Sofia: National Centre for Museums, Galleries and Figurative Arts), Year 5, issue 7–8, 1994.

<sup>44</sup> In a meeting with David Peretz, Boris Delchev gained a good idea of Ivanov's life in France and noted in his diary: 'Monday, 18.06.1973. Concerning the artistic successes of Boukoff and Ivanov (Vasil was sheltered by Boukoff in Paris). One artist abroad does more work to the benefit of Bulgaria than a whole crowd of diplomats. Why is this not understood? About these pointless barriers.'

<sup>45</sup> One of the most popular and highly regarded radio and television journalists in the field of culture. Creator of popular French TV art programmes. Poet, writer, and art historian. As a young man, he was close to Camus and Emmanuel Mounier, and later he associated with creative figures such as Antonin Artaud, Jean Val, Aragon, Paul Emmanuel, Paul Éluard; he became involved in the intellectual resistance for the democratisation of the social environment in the media, and against the death penalty, torture and censorship.

He needed to draw intensely to come into his kingdom, having won the opportunity to do so. He wrote to his wife:

*There is no time for dallying. I have worked all my life for what is now being given to me as an opportunity. It is now or never, I am like a soldier on the battlefield, and not even a single step backwards. Better shot in the chest than in the back—thank you!—I’m sick and tired of petty existence. Consider that you are walking by my side; you have lost nothing; your artistic spirit, which fools could not comprehend, and your soul too, have saturated my art with their substance... For us, life and our ideals are not ephemera... The clapping and ovation of the entertained audience sooner or later fade away for all stage celebrities, and woe betide them if they meant everything to them.*

Paris brought him fulfilment, new opportunities—and sorrows.<sup>46</sup> In 1994, Boukoff wondered:

*What can I say about the success that Vasiliy had as an artist in Paris? On the one hand, he had the greatest success among a circle of connoisseurs, people from the artistically intellectual world. And on the other hand, incomprehension and indifference on the part of the public and the press... I suppose Vasiliy suffered all this deeply in himself, but he did not say and showed no sign that it was so... But Vasiliy’s health was beginning to decline... he started complaining of a very bad headache. I’m not sure, but I suppose it happened after one of his exercises, when he used to stand on his head for more than 30 minutes.*

There are other versions of Ivanov’s collapse. Isa Gershon-Peretz saw it as a result of Ivanov’s unsuccessful, even seemingly sabotaged, exhibition at Basan’s gallery.

Ivanov returned to Bulgaria in a critical mental state. ‘*He would utter few articulate words, had lost his sense of direction, and stood with his back to the window and the light. The last conscious words he said were “I” and “door”.*’ No doubt Vladimir Svintila ‘found’ a symbolic connection in these words, and it was by mere chance that he

---

<sup>46</sup> We can judge the years spent in France and Switzerland by another letter to his wife: ‘Dreams are one thing, but reality is another. I have always known that, and that is why I stayed where I was born. In fact, at first glance, I am doing fine: wonderful lodgings, good food, a car, walks by Lake Geneva... I keep drawing and I am snowed under with very good drawings (that no one wants)... Today, I decided to wander around the streets of Geneva and look in shop windows... You want to buy everything, but what with? You just feel insignificant and humiliated. At most, I may decide to at least buy illustrated postcards and write to my friends... I constantly think about you and the good days we spent together, although not being rich and dressed like the people round here, but full of dreams, love, and affection. Now, why chase the wind? Life itself is better than anything. You know what my way of thinking has always been, and what I have put in first place... Providence puts man in all kinds of circumstances to discover and gauge the true values of the life that has been given to him as the supreme blessing. Everything else is illusions...’

shared them with us. The artist Ivan Filchev saw things like this: *‘Vasil Ivanov came home from France as a wreck, a mummy, an unwrapped mummy—a shocking memory.’* Elka Ivanova asked the sculptor Velichko Minekov to take Vasil in his car to ‘the hospital at the fourth-kilometre intersection’. Ivanov was wearing a beautiful suit, and ‘went off as if to a wedding’. He only uttered the word ‘dark’ in front of them. He had stopped eating; and was in a completely calm, rational state, at that. It was obvious that he was drifting towards the conscious cessation of his life. Elka Ivanova was with him every single moment but, on his last day, the doctors met her with the words, *‘He was so badly waiting for you’*—so that, at first, she even thought he had died. Vasil looked at her and gently invited her to sit on the bed. *‘You are so tired—take a rest!’* And he moved aside to make room for her... A few moments later, however, he began to breathe increasingly heavily... his suspiration stopped, it became inaudible, it disappeared... What was he to leave her, what was there altogether to leave behind? To believe and remember *‘the happy hours of our unforgettable nights under the festive orgies of the hushed trees, above which open the endless paths to the stars in the fathomless crystal-clear sky of the summer night... It seems to me that these were moments gifted by heaven to enrich our human imperfection with more beauty, to fill our disillusioned hearts with more faith and gratitude.’*<sup>47</sup>

The magnitude of Vasil Ivanov’s creative work lies not only in the fact that he transformed painting into an act of constant, decades-long manifestations of independence and freedom of thought. For what greater recognition could there be than the Universe endowing you with a sense of itself, something to which a number of foreign and Bulgarian people of the arts, of the spirit, of culture, testify? Alexander Karapanchev, a writer, interviewed art historian Kiril Krastev in the small *One Week in Sofia* magazine:

*I shall emphasise that this art, the only Bulgarian school ‘Cos[mique]-art Bulgare’, was created long before the cosmonauts’ flights. It encompasses our prehistoric cosmogonic images and signs; Nikolay Pavlovich’s illustrations to Dr Petar Beron’s space atlases; the series of paintings, ‘Man and the Cosmos’, by Georges Papazoff; Vasil Ivanov’s magnificent graphics, Ilya Beshkov’s drawings for ‘Astronomy for the People’, by Georgi Tomalevski; the starry and galactic painting of Iliya Peykov, living in Rome; and the works of the fine abstract cosmogonist, Hristo Simeonov. Our [Bulgarian] cosmic art is not illustrative or utopian, it is creatively insightful.*

---

<sup>47</sup> The quotation is from his letter of 16 July 1950. She remained true to him as the most valuable bearer of his memory. Thanks to her, recollections and details of the personality, ideas and art of Vasil Ivanov were brought back to life. The creative circles, the leadership of the Union of Bulgarian Artists deservedly appreciated this, and when Elka Ivanova died in 2015, this strictly professional organisation published an obituary in her memory—something not done before for a close relative of any artist.

*It was proclaimed by me as a school back in 1967 in Paris, in front of a group of art critics in the home of the film-maker Nikola Velez.<sup>48</sup>*

Of course, there are signs to be found in all cultures, but also contemporary artists whom we can define as ‘cosmogonists’. Yet such a generalisation is valuable, because we can immediately picture the significant place Ivanov occupied among those figures; how far ahead his thinking had advanced; and what a colossal mark he left behind.

Vasil Ivanov is not only among the most significant of Bulgarian artists; he is an international phenomenon. His sense of absolute individual freedom combined with his conviction that nature and the world were something other than the visible, but within our reach. As Leonov said, ‘He was There.’

Having begun with works in which nature was dominant, and as if having logically reached the cosmological structures, and with those forms conveying a particularly strong association of unity between matter and spirit, Ivanov’s oeuvre takes us back to essential philosophical fundamentals. In his ‘Inaugural Dissertation’ of 1770, Kant described space as an ideal, a construct of perception: *‘Space is not something objective and real, nor a substance, nor a relation; instead, it is subjective and ideal, and originates from the mind’s nature in accord with a stable law as a scheme, as it were, for coordinating everything sensed externally.’* Broadly speaking, this was the case with Vasil Ivanov: he discovered precisely this plausibility of the idea of what our spirit sees: the identity of the cosmic in us. It has always seemed to me that his ‘cosmic’ graphics bear this label as a concession to the times; but it is also beyond the possibility of definition in any other way. If we call art ‘production’, then here the earthly develops and finds its own mature form, also belonging to consciousness, not easily definable in words, but existing in ourselves—and we know it, we feel it. Such is the artist’s genius, phenomenal and powerful: do we need to look for it beyond the emotion and wisdom with which his works influence us?

---

<sup>48</sup> From the archive of Alexander Karapanchev, provided by the author. Karapanchev (1951–2021) was a writer and journalist, one of the leading figures in Bulgarian science fiction movement. Along with the editors of *Argus* Publishers, he won the Graviton Prize, and as a contributor to *FEP* [Fiction, Heuristics, Prognostics] magazine, he was awarded by the international jury at the EUROCON conference, Plovdiv, 2004.