

# VASSIL IVANÓV, AS CREATED BY HIMSELF

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## *The antiopportunist*

In 1971 Vassil Ivanóv\*, visual artist, went to Paris from his native Sofia. For an artist from the People's Republic of Bulgaria, as it styled itself at the time, Paris was not only a place where one could meet world art: it was also part of the West, where art was seen differently, both esthetically and as market value. In terms of market value Vassil Ivanóv's visit was not a success. Allegedly, Picasso met him and bought one of his works; but it is a fact that Ivanóv wasn't able to sell his art and become rich and famous. As to meeting world art, contemporary and older, Ivanóv definitely did that, walking through galleries and museums. But he was not influenced: his unique style had already taken final shape.

Conventional thinking in artistic (and not only artistic) circles in Bulgaria at that time would be inclined to view Ivanóv's escapade to the West as the missed opportunity of a lifetime. But Vassil Ivanóv was a person who escaped conventionality in all its forms, especially because he did not see life in terms of opportunities: he was a non-opportunist to the point of being antiopportunistic. Quite the reverse: he built himself as artist and human being by opposing opportunities. Before the advent of communism in Bulgaria (Ivanóv was 35 then) he had the intelligence and the skill to imitate at will the European and American visual art, both mainstream and avant-garde. (Let's remind ourselves that there was no Iron Curtain then, and Bulgaria was part of a common information space: world art was known in Sofia.) But Ivanóv didn't want to imitate, so he didn't do it. Then, under communism, he could have become a leading figure in socialist realism, imitating Soviet art, and building a career on his oeuvre, definitely realistic, as well as his leftist political inclinations. He did the opposite, developing his

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\* In Bulgarian Ivanov is pronounced with the accent on the last syllable.

art in a non-realistic direction, which duly prompted a stigmatization by the regime. Ivanóv was not a dissident type and didn't attack the regime and its prescribed art head on: he just excluded himself from it. So, in return, the regime excluded him from the state manger. Yet that palpable social failure did not make him renounce his heresies and play the prodigal son's penitent return. It is not that he liked leading a marginal existence, but apparently he liked artistic and moral compromises even less.

And a final point risqué: Vassil Ivanóv, judging by photographs and by what people who knew him have written and some have shared with me, he must have been a very attractive heterosexual: handsome rough-cut features, muscular, well-proportioned body (he was a renowned yogi), various interesting skills besides his art (he was a good violinist), exotic and esoteric knowledge... He would have been fun to be with and no doubt he would be propositioned repeatedly. Yet during the last 25 years of his life he loved the woman whom he married and who stuck with him through thick and thin.

Would that be antiopportunism carried too far? Wrong: for Vassil Ivanóv nothing went too far. He was a man always on a crossing to the beyond.

#### A career failure explained

Vassil Ivanóv's unsuccess story both on the world stage and in his native land was based on his integrity. He wanted his work to resolve problems posed by the normal, i.e. free development of Bulgarian visual art through means new to it. But after 1944 Bulgarian art was not supposed to develop freely, but politically correctly, with a correctness that had nothing to do with PC. And as for world art, in the 1960s and 1970s it had other problems to resolve which required other means. Pablo Picasso, for one, could understand Vassil Ivanóv's art, and appreciate the talent, but he would not follow him: for Picasso, Ivanóv was treading ground not necessarily already covered, but already uninteresting. On the other hand, Picasso could

probably understand why Ivanóv could not follow him, and respect his creative autonomy.

What kind of innovations in Bulgarian art were made by Ivanóv and why were they unpalatable to the communist party art apparat? There was an event which both poses the problem abruptly and directs its explanation.

In 1964 Ivanóv was allowed to hold a personal exposition in a gallery in downtown Sofia. All went well, when a couple of hours before the opening some people came and locked the doors of the gallery: the exhibition had been cancelled “from above”. It was not because of Ivanóv’s politics, it was because of the art he was trying to present. It was art not in the Soviet-imposed style of socialist realism, but it did not belong to the traditional Bulgarian realism either.

Bulgarian realism had to deal with the same existential problem that loomed before visual art in general after the introduction of the daguerreotype in the 1840s: how to remain art without being representative. Only, when Bulgarian art joined that world process, it was late by half a century, i.e. two generations (the sociological convention being that a generation is equaled to 25 years, the average reproduction age). Bulgarian artists were drawn into a common process only after 1878, when the modern Bulgarian state was created and started to sponsor mundane art (before that Bulgaria had been for centuries a province in the pre-modern Osmanic Empire). Until 1878, all visual art was chained to the iconographic tradition of the Orthodox Church, as it had been during the Medieval Ages. Artists were supposed to follow codified images, or they wouldn’t get commissions from the Church, which was practically a monopolist in artistic matters. In the last decades of Osmanic rule there appeared three, yes, only three artists, who had received contemporary academic education and started non-religious painting: two in St.

Petersburg and one in Vienna.<sup>†</sup> Unfortunately, what these three propagated was the academic realism of the time, a school that would just not address the inevitable consequences of the advent of photography. Yet for Bulgaria it was an improvement on the previous iconography, which would not deign to even consider the surrounding world an object worthy of artistic representation, but painted imaginary images of abstract ideas, instructed to mechanically obey the canon.

In that context it was to be expected that when the Bulgarian high school of art was established by the state (1896), it started teaching a Bulgarian version of that same academic realism. By Bulgarian society then it was considered “the thing”. Firstly, because academism still ruled in European and American capitals and the dramatic turning point of 1863, marked by the *Salon des refusés*, was still widely remembered by established institutions with the accent on *refusal*. Bulgaria was striving to catch up on established institutions, so 33 years after the eruption of impressionism, photographic realism would be admired and taught!

Secondly, if it took long for artists, and art critics, and connoisseurs, to accept non-photographic visual art, it took longer for societies. In comparison to other European countries, Bulgarian society was smaller, poorer and less well educated; it takes certain self-confidence and freedom in treating contemporary culture to adopt a not-yet-mainstream kind of vision. In the 66 years from the establishment of the Bulgarian state to the advent of communism that adoption did not happen. And the communist society which came was even less culturally sophisticated. Besides, that brave new world showed masochistic enthusiasm for cultural self-mutilation, insistently abusing the hammer and sickle of its ideology!

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<sup>†</sup> There was a fourth painter, Dimitar Dobrovich (1816-1905), alumnus of art schools in Athens and Rome. However, he spent almost all his life in Greece and Italy and had some influence on Bulgarian art only posthumously.

It is counterintuitive why in the academies of the USSR and the European “people’s democracies” it was taught that impressionism was a good thing: by rights it should have been denounced as non-photographic, hence “not understood by the working class”. Well, judging impressionism as “good”, it was stressed that it was good only historically. Should a contemporary “socialist country” artist experiment with impressionism, he would have been persecuted for renouncing “socialist realism” (all experiments in art were called “formalism”, for some reason used as a swear word). On the other hand, accepting impressionism gave an excellent basis for denouncing *all* contemporary non-socialist art as decadent, proof of the general decadence of the West. Exceptions were made for admittedly political reasons: the above mentioned Picasso got away with his non-realistic art, for he was a *progressive*, and allegedly, “a great friend to the Soviet Union”.

It should be more understandable in that context why Vassil Ivanóv didn’t want to do the things he didn’t do. Time to try understand what he did do, and speculate on the reason why.

### The self-made artist

Artistic freedom Vassil Ivanóv eventually achieved himself; artistic unfreedom was thrust upon him by his education in the Bulgarian visual arts academy. He graduated from it in 1939. In the entre-deux guerres period the most daring young painters had formed a circle, whose motto could be formulated as “Get help from the development of world art with the aim of developing national Bulgarian art”. This, of course, entailed plenty of self-limitation in the name of the “organic” development of Bulgarian art: inventions like abstractionism or artistic cosmopolitanism would be deemed “unhelpful”. Organic was a key word, which pointed to evolution, not revolution; in practice this meant putting on the breaks to a process that had started late and gone slowly in the first place. But for these gifted, and also patriotic young fellows that seemed the right thing to do. (And at that juncture it just might have been the right thing to do, if one compares their

achievements of the outcome of the quasi-absolute freedom, bestowed upon Bulgarian artists after the fall of communism. With a few talented exceptions, they ran to “catch up” with world artistic fashion, thinking only of personal positioning, and ending up as poor producers of parrot-art. Speedy change comes at a price, often exorbitant.)

Ivanóv joined that drive for patriotic artistic evolution and started painting realistic landscapes and portraits. His well-composed landscapes, were endowed with a quiet calm all his own. Yet he was one of many, and more of a traditionalist than many; so he could survive on his art, though barely.

Probably the main outside factors that prompted him to start on a quest away from realism were his reaction to the human sacrifice in Second World War, coupled with the feeling of the communist strait-jacket that came after. Surely, the Moscow-imposed “socialist realism” was blatantly not a next stage in the organic evolution of Bulgarian art! And, being a person of principles, he would rebel. But he arrived at the concrete form of his artistic rebellion in slow steps: it took him more than ten years.

Meanwhile, the new art authorities would praise him for the realism of his work, but chastise him for its lack of socialist mobilization content. All right, if these dictators in art and life would praise him for something – then down with it! Down with his own past of serene realism! And – down with evolutionism, too! (Which was probably not very logical intellectually, but most logical emotionally and understandable psychologically.) Thus Ivanóv started intense work on his own revolution as artist, curtains drawn. He freed his imagination of his own past and present, and from the bucolic earth found himself in outer space, no more no less. It was the beginning of what later became known as his “Cosmic cycle”, and prompted The Arts encyclopedia, New York to list him as the creator of cosmic graphics. The forbidden exhibition of 1964 was Ivanóv’s first attempt to show that newly created world to the public; the almighty Party hid it.

But this time Ivanóv decided to fight – not for himself, but to risk himself for his artistic discovery. He wrote, repeatedly, to the Union of Artists and to

Zhivkov, the dictator, asking that the show be opened to the public, or, as a compromise, open to art specialists – some of them invited by him personally, he stipulated! – to discuss his pictures and explain to him why were they not acceptable. His letters are written in beautiful Bulgarian: succinct, incisive, conveying disdain and even irony. To my knowledge no other artist had dared to act similarly; the accepted practice was to repent, or at most, not to react. But this time it was the regime that did not react – for they had no approved pattern. Then, after months of silence, the unthinkable happened: the communist regime gave in. They allowed Vassil Ivanóv to have his show! - albeit in a smaller place, the foyer of a central Sofia theater.

Vassil Ivanóv, his own man

To call Vassil Ivanóv his own man is not a statement of fact: it is praise. Probably only someone who has lived under a communist dictatorship can really understand, nay, feel in their bones, how difficult it was to practice personal independence and how dangerous – to manifest it. It is to be wondered which is of a greater cultural value in a totalitarian environment: the creation of a novel form of art or the creation and maintenance of an autonomous lifestyle.

He would have been an odd man in any society, but oddity in the “socialist society” meant “individualism”, and that was politically suspect. What was officially promoted was “collectivism”, which in reality meant conformism. Non-conformists were abnormal, both statistically and morally. But just look at that man! He calls himself a painter, yet he claims that painting to him is music, and that to draw a graphic it took him just the time that it would take to play a piece on the violin! (Before turning to painting, he had wanted to be a violinist, and had shown promise.) But normal painters do not play, and normal musicians do not paint! His wife was among the leading ballerinas of the Sofia ballet, and they were supposed to love one another – but he would see her only occasionally, as he went to live and work as a recluse in

a ramshackle cabin in the woods at the outskirts of the capital! There he associated with remnants of the White fraternity, an officially forbidden meditative spiritual sect, honoring Nature and the Sun – instead of being soldiers on the march to Communism! Besides, practiced yoga, seriously enough to be photographed for the illustrations of the first Bulgarian guide to yoga gymnastics. Now, in Stalinist and post-Stalinist Bulgaria, closed to the world, yoga looked so outlandish that it had to be reduced to “normal badness”, thus Ivanóv was accused of using yoga as a cover for religious practices, a major breach of the totalitarian behavioral code. On top of all, he became a palm-reader of some renown, plus people close to him cited instances of clairvoyance. No doubt there were enough voluntary informers to inform the authorities on such misbehavior: in the Soviet Union he would have seen Siberia – or the inside of a special asylum. But in Bulgaria, after Stalin’s death in 1953, the regime opted for buying the artistic and intellectual elites, rather than repressing them. However, with his self-marginalization, Ivanóv was probably seen as not important enough to bribe.

Still, he was the object of envy, both on the part of artists and non-artists: he behaved the way he chose, and got away with it! Moreover, this “internal emigrant” wanted to make his art immigrant abroad – and somehow pulled it off! Opposed by his government and society, he had gained personal friends at home and abroad, and they helped him show his new art. He had several small, praised exhibitions in communist and non-communist countries, like Poland and the UK. A case in point: in 1965 he was allowed to go to East Berlin for a one-man exhibition, but German friends arranged to show it in West Berlin, too. Official Bulgaria did not manage to prevent that, but revenged itself by denying him permit to cross into West Berlin to open his show; instead, they sent a secret service man in the guise of diplomat to lie that Ivanóv was sick in bed and was sorry for not attending...

Finally, Vassil Ivanóv gained access to “the free world”: he spent the last four years of his life in France and Switzerland. That was made possible by

Yuri Boukoff, a classical pianist from Bulgaria, naturalized in France and tolerated by the regime; Boukoff persuaded the authorities to let Ivanóv come to Paris and stay with him. Ivanóv had several one-man shows in galleries and some of his art was bought. Popularity never came, though; I hope that above I have explained why. Writing to his wife, he complained of missing his primitive life in the woods: it was an environment in which he thrived, while Western urban surroundings were stifling. Abruptly, he fell ill, and was sent back to Bulgaria, where he died at the age of 66.

In one of his letters from abroad Vassil Ivanóv asked his wife, rhetorically “What is success?” OK: he was the only Bulgarian artist who succeeded to create a new artistic space, a Cosmic World, all by himself; and one of a very few Bulgarian artists who succeeded to defend their personal space of moral freedom. And all his life he did what he believed he should do: he worked for his soul and let it work through him. I believe respect and white envy are in order.

Hats off to Vassil Ivanóv!

(Obsolete call, hats no longer ubiquitous; plus sexist overtone. Should an appeal for a momentary switching off of smartphones be more relevant?)