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Two Painters — One Passion

The Lusatian Series in the Work of Ludvík Kuba and Ante Trstenjak

It would be impossible to discuss Ante Trstenjak's work without addressing another artist who included the Sorbs in his work: Ludvík Kuba was a Czech musicologist, ethnographer, and painter. Both painters' names stand for not only two essential sources of inspiration contributing greatly to the formation of an independent Sorbian visual art at the turn of the 20th century, but also for two uniquely complete series of works dedicated to the Sorbs. Despite the fact that the two men were more than thirty years apart in age, their lives intersected in a remarkable way, considering that they had never met.

The Sorbian scientific association Maćica Serbska established a folklore section in 1889, with a work programme that emphasised the preservation of traditional Sorbian customs and national attire.¹ Paintings were to depict the diversity of Sorbian folk costumes.² However, back then there were no academically trained Sorbian artists. At the time, the Maćica Serbska had just two painters, one of which was the Czech, Ludvík Kuba. Kuba was then not unknown to the Sorbian intellectuals, having established a reputation for himself through his work on the collection of Slavic songs. As a result, Arnošt Muka, an ethnographer and the founder of the Sorbian Museum, strongly urged him to paint scenes from Sorbian life.

Ludvík Kuba never stopped learning about painting. While most of Kuba's colleagues studied painting at the then European art centres in Munich, Vienna, or Paris, Kuba travelled to France in 1893 to enrol at the exclusive Académie Julian in Paris. This was a watershed moment in his life, and he decided to pursue a career as a visual artist.³ In Paris, he saw that the arrival of impressionism signalled the beginning of a whole new period in painting and, as a result, he shifted his focus to learning oil painting. Up to that point he had primarily worked with watercolour painting and drawing. Despite his Parisian training, he felt he had not yet fully grasped oil painting and enrolled in another school, this time in Munich at the renowned private art academy of the Slovene Anton Ažbe.⁴

In 1911, Kuba returned to live in Prague permanently. During this time, he met Josef Páta, a grammar school professor and Sorbian language lecturer at Charles University in Prague, who encouraged him to join the Adolf Černý Czech-Wendish Association.⁵ From 1921 onwards, Josef Páta and Vladimír Zmeškal—Kuba met the latter in 1920—worked tirelessly

¹ Sigmund Musiat, *Sorbische/Wendische Vereine 1716–1937. Ein Handbuch*, Bautzen 2001.

² Ibid.

³ Marie Klára Prchalová, *Ludvík Kuba a Paříž* (unpublished lecture on the occasion of the scientific colloquium from 18 to 19 September 1993 accompanying the exhibition "Ludvík Kuba a Lužica. Ludvík Kuba und die Lausitz" [Ludvík Kuba and Lusatia] from 23 May to 19 September 1993 in the Sorbian Museum in Bautzen), Czech manuscript in the Sorbian Museum.

⁴ Katarina Ambrozić, Die Ažbe-Schule 1891–1905, in: *Katarina Ambrozić, Wege zur Moderne und die Ažbe-Schule in München. Pota k Moderni in Ažbetova šola v Münchnu*, exhibition catalogue Wiesbaden, Recklinghausen 1988, pp. 87–110.

⁵ Vladimír Kristen, Ludvík Kuba a Lužičtí Srbové v období mezi světovými válkami, in: *Lětopis. Jahresschrift für sorbische Volksforschung. Reihe D – Kultur- und Kulturwissenschaften* 3, 1988, pp. 78–82.

to secure financial support for a study trip to Lusatia by Ludvík Kuba, which was finally successful thanks to the Ministry of Education.⁶

Kuba's study journey to Lusatia in late June 1922 signalled the start of a prolific decade in his life, which included the creation of the Lusatian series of paintings. Unlike his previous episodic ethnographic efforts, his Lusatian sojourns in 1922/23 were dedicated entirely to anthropological documentation. Kuba was now focused on documenting all of the various types of traditional costumes worn in the area at that time. Simultaneously, he produced scientific material that has no parallel in his work or that of other European artists of the period. Kuba was particularly enthralled by the wide range of costumes found within a single region. This, he believed, illustrates the uniqueness of Sorbian costumes in comparison to other Slavic costume groupings. Kuba used an impressionist technique when creating his paintings. He only painted a few village vistas or genre scenes during his two Lusatian research visits. On each of the two journeys, he created about 35 paintings. The painting series was well received both in Sorbian Lusatia and in his native country. The Czechoslovakian state purchased the works for Prague National Museum's ethnographic section. Ludvík Kuba's first exhibition, held in the Sokol building in Prague in 1922, was a huge success. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of the Czechoslovak state, was among the visitors. More than two thousand people attended the exhibition. Ante Trstenjak, a 28-year-old Slovenian student of the Prague art academy, was one of the guests. This event had a significant impact on his future life.

Ludvík Kuba was already studying painting in Paris when in 1894 Ante Trstenjak was born in Slamnjak, near Ljutomer. He received his artistic education in Vienna, Graz, and Zagreb. Trstenjak was dissatisfied with this and desired to continue his studies in Munich, one of Europe's most important art centres at the time. While Ludvík Kuba was able to continue his creative education there, Trstenjak was denied the option to do so due to the high expense of living. He chose Prague and enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied under Vojtěch Hynais, a painter who had encouraged Ludvík Kuba three decades earlier in Paris. Of course, the circumstances Ante Trstenjak encountered when he arrived in Prague in 1920 were vastly different to those of Ludvík Kuba in the 1880s. Impressionism, cubism, symbolism, and art nouveau were the dominant art movements during that time. In 1926, Trstenjak became a member of the Adolf Černý Czech-Wendish Association, which Ludvík Kuba had been a member of for several years. Trstenjak was so taken with the motifs in Kuba's Lusatian series of works that he decided to travel to Lusatia himself to make something similar.

After his years of study in Prague Trstenjak lived in Paris until 1927, initially through the Yugoslavian embassy's mediation and with a French scholarship. He finished his education at the prestigious private Académie Colarossi, where Ludvík Kuba had previously studied from 1893 to 1895. During his art studies in Prague, Trstenjak favoured portraiture, but when he moved to Paris, he focused on landscape painting. Up until that point he had been influenced by impressionism, and he was particularly fascinated by the phenomenon of light. From 1926 onwards, his paintings began to show more expressive characteristics, which can

⁶ In 1918 and 1922, František Mlčoch was the Association's chairman who strove to generate funds. Cf. Musiat 2001, p. 292 ff.

be considered as a reflection of his enthusiasm for painters like Maurice de Vlaminck, André Derain, and Henri Matisse. In Paris in 1927, he met Marie de Vaux Phalipau, the vice-president of the Paris Association of Friends of the Sorbs and an employee of the International Anthropological Institute. She supported Trstenjak's aim of establishing a collection of paintings depicting traditional costumes from all of Lusatia. Her attempts to secure funding for the project, however, yielded no results. Ante Trstenjak left for Lusatia in September 1928, without financial stability but with the best contacts to Sorbian students of the Adolf Černý Czech-Wendish Association. Trstenjak's goal was similar to Kuba's, but he also intended to devote himself to painting the Lusatian landscape in addition to documenting traditional costumes. With its vast stretches of water with trees mirrored in them, as well as vivid colour reflections, the Spreewald in Lower Lusatia corresponded to his predilection toward a poetic vision of landscape. As a painter, he was enthralled by the ever-changing colour and light settings, as well as the various atmospheric moods. Trstenjak, like Kuba, created a series of portraits of Sorbian intellectuals as well as numerous ethnographic paintings. The contacts came via Měrćin Nowak-Njechorński (Martin Nowak-Neumann), a Sorbian painter and graphic designer, and Dr Jan Cyž (Johann Ziesche), a lawyer and publisher. But it was between the two artists that a life-long friendship blossomed.

Unlike Ludvík Kuba, who painted his models directly on canvas in oil and finished them in one or two sessions, Ante Trstenjak just sketched them and completed the paintings later in his Prague studio. Whereas Kuba, who focused solely on traditional costumes that, at the time, were still worn in everyday life, Trstenjak painted traditional costumes that were no longer worn at the time. He completed 30 paintings, as well as countless sketches and drafts, during his first visit to Lusatia. He enlarged the Lusatian collection to 48 pieces after his return. The most important of these is the large-format triptych *Homage to the Sorbian Patriots*, which he made at the request of the director of the Wendish People's Bank in 1929/30.⁷ The triptych allegorically represents Upper and Lower Lusatia's tribute to notable Sorbian scientists, artists, and cultural figures from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A wedding procession in Burg in the Spreewald, indicative of Protestant Lower Lusatia, is depicted on the left wing. A pilgrimage of Catholic Sorbs to the statue of Our Lady in Rosenthal is shown on the right wing, metaphorically representing Catholic Upper Lusatia. The painting is the artist's plea for the Sorbs, highlighting their strong religious-national identity, which is the foundation of their extraordinary cultural achievements⁸

The Sorbian public reacted very well to Ante Trstenjak's works. In addition, he also exhibited his Lusatian series in Prague, Hradec Králové, Maribor, Osijek, and Zagreb. In 1929, the Association of Lusatian-Wendish Students issued postcards with ten motifs from Trstenjak's Lusatian collection, and in 1930, the Circle of Wendish Writers issued a postcard with the triptych *Homage to the Sorbian Patriots*.

Trstenjak's works have not survived as a whole collection, unlike Kuba's Lusatian series. The Czechoslovakian state bought his "Sorbian gallery", as Kuba liked to refer to his works, and it

⁷ The Wendische Volksbank AG [Wendish People's Bank] was founded in Bautzen in 1919, with Dr Blažij Posedel, a Czech, as its director. Cf. Musiat 2001, p. 363 f.

⁸ The triptych *Homage to the Sorbian Patriots* has been in the possession of the Sorbian Museum since 1986 and is part of their permanent exhibition.

has been almost entirely maintained. On the other hand, it is unclear what will happen to some of Ante Trstenjak's works. During the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the majority of the works were kept by the Společnost přátel Lužice Association, as the Adolf Černý Czech-Wendish Association was known from 1932.⁹ In the face of increasing reprisals by the Gestapo, the Association ceased its work in 1939 and its property, including Trstenjak's works, was confiscated. After the end of World War II, the search for the lost works has remained unsuccessful.¹⁰

The Prague National Museum's Ethnographic Department now owns a total of 12 watercolours¹¹ and gouaches by Ante Trstenjak as well as 56 paintings by Ludvík Kuba, all of which were created during the travels in Lusatia. They are not only culturally and artistically significant to the Sorbs, but are also a testament to and mirror of a bygone past, rich in original traditional costumes and customs. Similarly, they are a vital source of Sorbian national pride and a driving factor in the development of an independent Sorbian visual art.

⁹ Timo Meškank and Jurij Łuščanski, *Freundschaftsgesellschaften*, in: Franz Schön and Dietrich Scholze (Eds.) *Sorbisches Kulturlexikon*, Bautzen 2014.

¹⁰ Sorbian Institute, Bautzen, Sorbian Cultural Archives, Bequest of Dr. Jan Cyž, File N IV/18 D.

¹¹ Maja Vetric, *Ante Trstenjak. Akademski slikar – življenje in delo*, Murska Sobota 1998.