

ANTE TRSTENJAK from the Maribor Art Gallery collection

Andreja Borin

The artistic path of the painter Ante Trstenjak (1894–1970) began in tune with the modest conditions in his home village in Prlekija, continued in the cosmopolitan European centres of the time (Graz, Zagreb, Vienna, Paris) and ended in Maribor. He studied painting in Vienna, Zagreb and then in Prague, where he graduated and lived for two decades. At the end of the 1920s, he - similar to the Czech painter Ludvík Kuba - found inspiration in the rich culture of the Sorbs and the motif of Sorb women, which he continued to paint over the next thirty years. He focused mainly on vedute, landscapes and portraits and never truly resorted to modernism. In the 1920s and 30s, he occasionally came close to one contemporary art movement or another, but in the end, he always returned to his own style of painting. The exhibition is set up as an overview of the artist's creative work, the most memorable stages in his opus and a selection of his most characteristic works. All the exhibited artworks belong to the Maribor Art Gallery collection, which keeps 270 works by Trstenjak: paintings, watercolours, graphic prints, drawings, sketches and illustrations.

At first, Ante Trstenjak studied painting at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts after which he continued his studies at the Zagreb Academy, from which he transferred to the Academy in Prague in 1920, which left the deepest mark on him artistically. Pre-war Prague was the cultural centre of Central Europe, a lively multicultural and university city, which also included a large Jewish community. Other Slovenian artists also studied at the Prague Academy at the same time as Trstenjak: Stane Cuderman, Jaro Hilbert, Ivan Kos and Božidar Jakac (with whom Trstenjak shared a flat for three years). The exhibition includes graphic prints depicting motifs of Prague created during his study years, which reveal a fine light-shade relationship and a flowing drawing. The study of light and in-depth characterization is also in the forefront in his *Self-portrait* and *Portrait of My Mother* from that time. In some of his works dating to this period, we can find echoes of expressionism, however, he did not develop this further. Following the completion of his studies, Trstenjak visited Paris and Brittany and travelled through Italy. On these trips, he mainly focused on furthering his skills in watercolours. In 1933 he married the dentist Eugenie Heřmanova with whom he had a child the following year. He became involved in the Prague art life, became a member of the *Uměecká beseda* fine artists society and set up his studio. The painter's life, filled with art and travel, was interrupted by the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Because he did not want to be separated from his wife (of Jewish origin), he was interned in a labour camp in 1944, which he was incredibly lucky to survive. After the war, he became the vice-president of the People's Front of Yugoslavia in Prague and was a part of the delegation that handed Josip Broz Tito Trstenjak's painting of Prague. As a result of the inform-bureau, he was deported from Czechoslovakia as a Yugoslav citizen in 1950. He returned to Maribor, where he kept his studio all the time.

As a student in Prague, Ante Trstenjak visited the exhibition of the Czech painter Ludvík Kuba (1863–1956) in 1922. At the time of Trstenjak's studies, Ludvík Kuba was a well-known and versatile artist: he was a musicologist, painter and collector of folk culture created by Slavic nations. Kuba exhibited his paintings of Sorb women in national costumes for the first time at this exhibition. Losatia is situated in the north-east of today's unified Germany, and is home to the smallest Slavic minority in Europe - the Sorbs. In the 1920s, girls and women still wore traditional costumes that were exceptionally diverse and luxurious. As costumes had already been abandoned in the countryside during this time, painters found depicting them a documentary and artistic challenge. Ludvík Kuba's paintings impressed the young Trstenjak to such an

extent that he decided to visit Losatia and create something similar. His first visit to the region took place in 1928. Unlike Ludvík Kuba, who depicted his models directly in oil on canvas and completed his work in one or two sittings, Trstenjak only sketched them in situ. He kept returning to his sketches in the decades to come, creating graphic prints and paintings in his studio. The influence of Ludvík Kuba can be seen in the motif, but not in the style. While the images of Ludvík Kuba can be classified as post-impressionist, Trstenjak's works remained anchored in realism.

“My first visit to Losatia was in 1928 ... I travelled along the Upper and Lower Losetia by bus, train, bike and foot. At first, I found the people of Losetia extremely untrusting, but when they learned that I came from Yugoslavia, they became hospitable, especially in Upper Losetia. Initially, I had a problem with models, as I wanted to paint girls in folk costumes. However, this did not seem to work. It took a lot of effort and negotiation to convince a girl to sit as a model, because at the time there was a widespread superstition that a girl who posed for a painter would never get married. When Jurij Henčl persuaded his two sisters, both exceptionally beautiful, to pose for me and the other girls saw the results, they started asking me to paint them. [...] I created approximately 30 paintings, most of them depicting people in Sorb folk costumes, however, I also created some landscapes ... I also created a lot of sketches in Losatia. For the most part, I painted in situ, but sometimes I created merely a study in situ, and completed the painting in the studio later.”¹ Trstenjak remembered his visit to Losetia in a 1965 interview for the newspaper Delo.

Thirty years later, while living in Maribor, he began creating a series of Sorb women in the monotype technique. This is a graphic technique created by drawing or painting on a smooth plate that does not absorb colour. The image painted on the plate is transferred to paper by hand or with the help of a graphic press. As a rule, a single print is created, hence the name monotype (mono = one). Various tools such as brushes, painting blades, sponges, etc. are used to apply colours. As a whole, Trstenjak's monotype series varies in execution and quality. Monotyping is a technique in which the final result cannot be repaired or planned in its entirety. Its charm is found in the combination of the painting approach and a graphic print, which always contains an element of surprise. Trstenjak's Sorb women depict classic portrait poses. For the most part, women are sitting (only occasionally standing) in front of a dark background. They rarely establish eye contact with the artist, mostly gazing somewhere in front of them, or looking at themselves. Most commonly they are holding a book in their hands. The painter is a foreigner, and the Sorb culture is traditional and very closed. Religion also plays an important role. The dress is therefore a form of identification and reveals the status of a girl or woman (married or unmarried) and the area from where she originates. The restraint of these women is also reflected in Trstenjak's works. Trstenjak created his monotypes from sketches and watercolours he created thirty years ago, but he strictly adhered to his studies for both, the elements of the costume as well as the individual characteristics of the portrayed. In some cases, he neglected to depict the correct posture of the hands, thus it seems that ethnographic documenting was in the forefront of his efforts, however, his best monotypes certainly exceed the documentary aspect. The virtues of his best works are ease, virtuous depiction of fabrics, headgear and jewellery, and broad, restless background strokes that place the portraits into a timeless frame.

Around 1928, Trstenjak painted the oil painting of his future wife Eugenie Heřmanova. The painting titled *My Wife* is her only known portrait. According to its clear contours, rounded volumes and restrained

¹Tone Glavan, Delo, 31. 10. 1965

colours, the painting could be stylistically defined as one belonging to New Realism. The bust shows a confident young woman with a short fashionable hairstyle posing on a bed with her hands resting behind her head, while her gaze focuses on the painter. She is wearing only a negligee or underwear. The portrait is exceptionally sensual, one of the most sensual in the Maribor Art Gallery collection and differs greatly from the Sorb women depicted during the same period. The portrait was probably created during Trstenjak's studies in Paris, where he was visited by Eugenie. The intimacy of this excellent portrait stems from the personal bond between the two protagonists, and Trstenjak managed to capture a similar feeling in his series *Evening Dress* created in approximately 1934, in which he tested his skills in drawing, graphic printing, watercolours, gouache and oil. Although the watercolours, gouache and oils depict a blonde, the sketches reveal that he used his wife as the model. This series clearly reveals the artist's attitude towards the various techniques. While he is slightly rigid in his oils, he shows a lighter approach in his watercolours and drawings, in which the quickly applied colours transmit freshness and light. In the gouache technique, he applied the background in broad surfaces and with prolonged brush strokes, which is otherwise uncharacteristic of his painting. A similar example is the excellent gouache *Woman with a Cat*, also created in 1934. In this excellent work, the artist probably came closest to the modernist expression, but unfortunately, he did not stick to this method of painting. Obviously, Trstenjak was much more unburdened in gouache and watercolours than in oil painting and found it easier to leave space for natural relaxation. He seems to have created these little masterpieces almost on the fly.

Trstenjak's oeuvre is exceptionally diverse and extensive. The Maribor Art Gallery acquired only a part of his oeuvre, and some of it was recorded in the preparation for the 1966 retrospective. The artist also created numerous paintings especially for the market. Most of his works are stylistically categorised as a soft version of realism; as a painter, he tended to focus primarily on colours. In 1953, the art critic dr. Fran Šijanec wrote about Trstenjak exhibition in the Small Gallery in Ljubljana: "Trstenjak is a painter of subtle and discreet emotions, tiny and carefully used observations that have their origin in a poetic experience of nature, a romantic sensation of the motif ... [...] His works do not reach into exciting, intellectual issues of painting, which would oppose the leisurely and conventionally designed painting composition, however, they reveal a picturesque balance between drawing and colours with a light and natural spirit of exceptionally sophisticated painting flexibility, (which is) the fruit of maturation that has already taken place [...] and various technical skills (oil, watercolours, various painting and graphic techniques)."²

I agree with the afore stated. It is a fact that Trstenjak's oeuvre is exceptionally diverse and that he came close to some of the art movements of his time during his studies and trips, however, he always returned to his well-known form of realism. While painting, he (especially on his travels) often resorted to watercolours and drawings. He achieved a high degree of professional knowledge and excellence in his watercolours. In his best watercolours, he reveals his virtuosity with skilled and relaxed colours and compositions. In this sense, he can be ranked among the masters of this genre in Slovenian fine art of the twentieth century. Because he mainly exhibited paintings, this segment of his work remained mostly overlooked. Trstenjak used watercolours for his studies for the Prague Veduta, but he truly evolved in this technique in the motifs of Paris, where he was studying between 1924-1925 and 1927-1928. The Paris watercolours from his first visit are mostly limited to brownish green tones and closed surfaces, while his 1925 travels throughout Italy introduced significantly more light, vibrant colours and transparency. He also put these elements to good use in his later works. He was also extremely relaxed in drawing that he

²Dr. Fran Šijanec, "Ante Trstenjak v Mali galeriji v Ljubljani", Nova obzorja VI, 1953, pp. 393-394.

practised for his sketching and quick recordings of travel impressions. The drawings are characterized by fluent and sovereign strokes that encompass the spatial and light impressions of the landscape or city. The small format drawings clearly indicate a sensitive observer with a skilful hand, and the fluent line reveals the artist's softness that is sometimes lacking in his paintings.

In the Slovenian territory Ante Trstenjak was viewed as a cosmopolitan, who moved in large European centres and nevertheless stayed strongly connected to the Slovenian land, especially his native Prlekija, which inspired him throughout his creative life with its typical countryside motifs. Art critics considered him to be a relevant artist who created in a neutral style, touched upon one of the major art movements from time to time, but always returned to his own way of painting, which was fed by a sense of mood and a tendency for a unified whole. Interestingly, some of his great works were created alongside his painting, but all of them followed the credo: "Harmony and more harmony."