

Sedlář, Jaroslav

Summary

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S U M M A R Y

Modern biology classes living systems with the so-called open systems capable of autoreproduction and adaptation to external conditions, and collecting information from the environment to be able to create its model or image. They possess a certain stability enabling them to retain this information and transmit it to succeeding generations. They also have a certain degree of lability, however, allowing mutations, and, accordingly, changes of collected information (J. Charvát). This roughly corresponds to the idea of the historical determination of man professed by the humanities. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century man was regarded as a synthesis of history and myth. Today we are of the opinion that man is the intersection point of historical relations, and that structure of his life is determined not only by the present, but also by the past and by future expectations. In fact it is equally impossible to sever the contact with the past as to annihilate thoughts about the future. There is something in us which forms part of the backbone of human dignity, and this is the desire of continuity. Not simply continuity of existence, but an urge of the human spirit to bring to life what has long been buried under the debris of ages or pushed back into the subconscious. The essence of life – motion – generates tension, or struggle between the ephemeral and the eternal. This is the problem of the constant and the variable. In 20th century art the relation between the constant and the variable became a major problem. Stylistic convention disappeared from the art of that period, giving way to what appears to be a whirl of contradictory doctrines and isms ruled by the principle of change, often for the sake of change alone. This, of course, reflects the new upheavals of civilization engendering an inner uncertainty of the individual, the oblivion of existence and its substitution by intellectual and visual stereotypes. In this situation art no longer influences the course of the ordinary day. Through offshoots art turns elsewhere, to nature, to the individual and his feelings, to the utopian world of hopes and desires, or to myths. It reposes on the past to point to the future, taking continuity for one of the certainties. Such art becomes a corrective factor in the alienated technical world, and, not being able to avoid this world, art draws from it the variables as dictated by the principle of experiment derived from technology. The significance of this orientation is first and foremost in the effort to reach balance between the constant and the variable, a balance representing the richness of life. This, after all, is one of the fundamentals of all art from its very origin.

CONSTANTS

Apart from the constant of artistic expression in itself, we may qualify as constant in Lacina's work what may be comprehended in the term „continuity“ – the metaphorical message of his works. Originally a metaphor was a figurative locution or symbolical analogy, a figurative expression meaning something else than what was literally said. In Lacina's works this „something else“ assumes a general meaning by its reference beyond the depicted object. This serves as vehicle for expressing a conception of life depending on tradition and being a product of personal experience,

feelings, and dreams. The world of imagination merges here with the world of our senses, with the material world, in a sort of symbiosis, in which the painter gives preference to open form, a fragment, an aphorism, a torso. This is an indirect challenge to perfectionist tendencies. This art is justified in that it enables man to give expression to the diquieting yet tangible relation between life and death. After all, it is „the symbolical conception of the world that distinguishes man from beast, as man does not exist exclusively in the physical universe, but also in a symbolical one.“ (Giedion)

Constant in the general sense of the world is a certain meditateness and magic in Lacina's works, and the problem of time as a given fact. And also light as a metaphysical experience, and the problem of motion linked with problems of space. Time features in them in the form of cosmogonical and cosmogonical meditations, or as an individual time unit limited by birth and death.

On the signification plane Lacina's pictures keep the continuity of historical human experience. They even roughly coincide with the traditional genres, although in untraditional creative transmutations. These are: 1. figures (portraits, heads, faces), 2. landscapes, 3. still life paintings, 4. pictures without a subject. In the first three groups the human figure mostly merges with birds, or the figures and objects merge with the landscapes. They never accurately define anything. In these pictures the unique is not the aim, but the means. They have a general human signification. They are a testimony of life in general. The fourth category comprises pictures of extrasensory origin – images of space fantasy, canvases with musical themes, and numerous works based on geometry. But even in this case the representation always means something else. This end is achieved only by means of the line and form, but especially by colour and its transformations.

A prominent position among the figures is occupied by the human figure (and its substitutes – hands, heads, faces), particularly the torso, the caryatid, and hybrid formations such as *The Messenger*, *The Mourner*, *Ecce Humanum*, etc. Lacina's torsos often introduce us into a vague world of indefiniteness, similarly as music. The torso represents the creation of the imperfect. It tends to dematerialize, being an abstraction from natural entirety. It is, therefore, a typical means of obscuring the form. In Lacina's work as elsewhere it represents scepticism to any possibility whatever of perfection. It expresses the belief that all man creates is incomplete, a fragment of creation, in the same way as every piece of scientific knowledge is but a part of the totality of knowledge. Art thus becomes an object of desire and consequently an object worthy of creation. In this connection let me quote Achim von Arnim: „That which is perfect is dead, and can no longer gratify desire.“ On the contrary, that which is imperfect, suggested only, incites to mental completion, to the establishment of the objectivity of what is suggested, the point of crystallization becoming subjective experience. A poetic indefiniteness pervades Lacina's pictures, from the private drawing entitled *An April Night* (1929), through the *Silhouettes*, *The Meeting*, *The Pilgrim*, *Concrescence*, *The Caryatides*, *The Torsos*, *Niobe* to canvases like *The Hybrid*, or *Anadyomene*, *Un-coordinate Doublets*, or *An Indefinite Square*.

There is a close connection between the torso and the fragment, which, in the art of this century, grew in importance as a gratuitous substitute for the whole. Being accentuated in significance, the fragment is more intensive and immediate in its effect than a lengthy description of the whole. In the works of Lacina it is represented for instance by the sculpture *The Couple* (1914), or paintings like *A Landscape for Two Dead Hands*, *A Locked House*, and numerous *Solitudes*. The imperfection, the incompleteness of *The Couple* is emphasized by its realization in plaster, and the idea of the fragment as „possibility of perfect creation“ is represented by a hand shaping an indefinite form half hidden yet in the bulk. Whereas the hand can be conceived as the male principle,

the indefinite mass is giving birth to the female principle. In this we find a symbol of the original unity of the shapeless mas from which man came into being. This is the *materia prima* giving birth to life. The symbol of the hand is very ancient, and it is connected with the origin of art. Later it was the life-giving force that was ascribed to the hand, and the hand also represented the creative soul, with which it was frequently identified.

Substitutes for the whole are, in a similar sense, also Lacina's heads and faces. Simplified to fundamental contours and features, they are endowed with the identification power of man's psychic traumas, particularly in times of war and stress. The Imaginary Portrait of Trakl, the Poet, Injured, The Blind Man, The Lunatic, Lidice, The Evil Eye, Primitive Faces, Veiled Women, or The Silent Girl, The Vigil, The Non-Mask, The Non-Face, and others may be classed as masks, masks covering up sorrow, desolation, and grief. But even the ancient masks were not simply masks, but fragments of the whole man, and implied contact with supernatural powers. The signification of a mask is ambiguous till the present day. A mask means the loss of individuality and makes its bearer unidentifiable. Nevertheless, the way to the exposure of the human face passes through the mask. It may be the artist himself who is hiding behind it. It is perhaps the mask in which the real and the imaginary blend most intimately.

Besides heads and faces there appeared compositions inspired by poetry. As early as 1935 Lacina put down in his notebook a couplet from Pasternak's *Summer*: „Thunderstorms raised their antlers high, raising from hay, and feeding from the hand.“ The paintings *The Head – a Lamp*, *The Window – a Coffin*, *A Landscape – Pool of Blood*, etc. utilized the metaphorical syntax of baroque poetry which revived in the thirties. Already at that time Bohdan Lacina sketched his pictures *The Woman – a Violin*, *The Woman – a Lamp*. The joining of poetical images offered him inexhaustible possibilities. The primary impulse was emotional and always sprang from reality. Chains of other images, often quite imaginary ones, were annexed according to the principles of association. Their meaning, therefore, is often highly subjective and apparently undecipherable. Nevertheless, the connection of a female figure, for example, with a thing determines, for the most part, the direction of interpretation. We can, therefore, interpret *The Woman – a Cradle* (and likewise the sculpture *Girl with Child*) as the motherly woman symbolizing, besides, time and fate. Solicitude is an aboriginal emotion relative to the future, and any solicitude is motherly.

Besides the human figure it is birds and hybrid formations of birds and people or birds and landscapes that interest Lacina. They appear already in his first surrealist canvases. In *The Injured Pendulum* and *A Girl in Bleck* we find a dead bird signifying soulfulness, the symbol of psychic pain. Psychoanalysis, of course, takes the bird for a phallic symbol, like the fish. Lacina used the bird in this meaning in the *Nocturne* (dry point) and in *A Grotesque of Things and Feeling*. On the contrary, in the grotesque *The Superpatriot* he drew on popular tradition. He endowed a political bawler of the late thirties with a bird's beak. The signification of *The Raven Landscape* from the beginning of the war is derived from the *Apocalypse*, representing Babel as a cage containing repulsive birds. In the forties and later, the meaning of the bird in Lacina's works reverts to soulfulness, entirely in the spirit of Egyptian and Indian tradition. Metaphorically the birds in his landscapes can also be understood as the incarnation of the element of air. A group of birds, as plurality in symbolism generally, connotes menace. This can be seen in *The Birds I*, *The Birds II*, and also in the *Frontier Landscape II*, *The Landscape of Icarus*, *The Cuckoo*, *The Ballad I and II*, *The Bird of Misfortune* (*Neither Bird nor Man*), *The Bird's Landscape*, *The Shot Bird*, *The Portentious Landscape*, and others. As may be seen in several variants of the pictures *The Bird of Misfortune* (*Neither Bird nor Man*), *The Bird Woman*, *The Angel of Death*, etc., they serve

to express, as in the primitive ages, the analogy of the fate of the bird and the fate of man. This can also be considered heritage of the romantic period, its dreams of the common origin of the human and animal worlds, and or a cult of the animal as mediator between the world of the imagination and that of reality. As in the case of the mask, these hybrid creations oscillate between the two extremes of magic and materialism.

If it had been said that Bohdan Lacina was the twin brother of poetry, there is no need of changing anything in this statement, as he converted into metaphor even the landscape, not excepting the Highland. With Lacina, the landscape was the means, and not the aim. Memories, nature in general, childhood, and traditions naturally played their role here. The graphic vividness of a remembrance based on visual perceptions was transformed into indefinite uncapturable objectivity, often modified by this very poetry. It can be said that Lacina conceived landscape here as cosmos – infinite silent space in which everything is born and decays – The Primeval Landscape, The Frontier Landscape, The Landscape That Had Been Sea, The Conception of a Landscape, The Peat-Bog, The Open Country. It is in this silent space, however, that the mysterious encounters of the elements take place – The Windy Landscape, The Lake Landscape, The Pregnant Landscape, The Portentious Landscape. Or Tympan Playing, Harping, which are a transition from these sensually conceived pictures to the almost abstract cosmogonical paintings such as The Beginning of Space, The Earth, The Intersection of Spaces, The Boundary Line, The Oscillation of the Horizon. The cosmological paintings, on the other hand, register the events in the world – the rotation of seasons, which were traditionally ascribed special significance: Autumn in Bohemia, A Spring Landscape, The Autumnal Equinox, The Vernal Equinox, Time over the Stubble Fields. It is in these, but also in the cosmogonies and solitudes, that we meet with melancholy and elegiac contemplation of the constant passing of things. The origin, existence, and decline – nature, life, and death are expressed by the space of the landscape, the dynamism of forms, and light. Lacina's „mill-stone“ of life is associated here with the cycles of nature similarly as his nudes in the form of caryatidssmerge with the eternal motion of universal space, with the rise and downfall, with growth and decline, with life and death – The Caryatid Nike, The Doleful Caryatid, The Buoy Caryatid, The Necrofore Caryatid. Even plants, grasses, and bunches of flowers are parables of the greatness of nature. There are also paintings with a plurality of panels – diptychs and triptychs – modified by Lacina in the so-called “monodptychs”, in pictures of double landscapes, pregnant landscapes, and gravitationless landscapes. This appears also in canvases with musical motifs, where a cord corresponds in its metaphorical meaning to a triptych, as has already been noted by Pinder. In spite of all this, however, real landscape mirroring in the water of ponds, is Lacina's starting point in all his landscape painting.

Linked with romanticism is also his series of parables of loneliness. His Solitudes painted since the beginning of the forties indicate man's subjection to the elementary forces of nature. The gables of secluded highland cottages are logograms representing the reality, often the only security – the home. In these pictures Lacina employs green, blue, and white in the meaning strictly defined by tradition. Landscape here is not landscape to all intents and purposes. Besides a memory of childhood, it often reproduces the author's state of mind. It becomes a representative of human feeling, human commensurability. To speak with Schelling: “You come to know nature in man, man in nature.” The problem of the eternal run of life, growth and decay, merging and regeneration is represented by numerous still-life paintings – Hamlet, Hamlet's Still Life, The Gradle, Shells, The Shell, etc.

The uniting element of all this is transparence and simultaneousness. In many cases even

colour is based on these two, and Lacina examines colour with a scientist's meticulousness. Transparency and simultaneousness, just like abstraction and the symbol, are constants in art since the primeval ages. In Lacina's works it is mostly the second principle of transparency that is employed – the transparency of objects. In this case transparency serves, on the one hand, to project internal experience, and on the other hand it becomes the means of expressing space conceptions. At the very beginning of his career as artist, Lacina strove to express "immaterial" space, the "void", surrounded with transparent shells, for instance in the pencil illustrations of Mácha's *May* or in sculptures. In this space man has a secondary existence as the one who perceives, which is emphasized by the fact that he belongs to the space limited by the shell which he inhabits and which his eye can encompass. Beyond lies infinite space, accessible only to desire. This follows from the immediate character of contrasts – from confinement to a place and yearning after far-away, from the romantic feeling of "inside and outside", from Lacina's conception of the family world and the wide world.

"Inside" is where the scenes of human life are enacted. In the works entitled *The Womb*, and *Solitude* (1965), for instance, these scenes are represented in the traditional way – by a child. The heart in *The Ticking Skeleton* signifies life. The "line of life" also passes through *The Open Country*, ending in the obligatory attribute in the form of an irregular circle. Action in the paintings *Among the Leaves of Grass*, *The Earth*, *Scherzo*, *The Core*, and others shows through forms of closed contour. All things here exist inside themselves and beside one another, whether it be in *The Shells*, *The Concrecence*, *The Lamp of Love*, *The Bird of Disaster*, *Antitheses*, *Harping*, *Tympan Playing*, *The Solitudes*, and the *Double Landscapes*. The picture turns into a psychogram. Heterogeneous elements combine here to form a vision which strikes your eye at the moment of penetration of light and darkness, with penetration as it were reciprocal, giving rise to sudden inspiration, a rebirth of inner melody terminating in a deep expiration.

VARIABLES

The metaphorical signification of Lacina's pictures implies what may be called collection of information which, while constant, displays certain mutations, particularly on the plane of intensity and expression. This is substantially due to changes in the method of his work. His method, his painting technique, developed, roughly speaking, in three lines, the steps of development changing sometimes from picture to picture: 1) seeking and struggle for his proper expression, 2) tendency to homeochromatic painting, 3) polyvalence of colour and experimentation with colour. The initial period is characterized by the effort to reproduce the reality to which the artist is tied by his senses in the spirit of Schiller's type of naive poet. Lacina studies the applicability of the creative techniques of Antonín Slavíček, Otakar Coubine, Raoul Dufy, cubism, etc. His landscapes of 1932, for instance, is disciplined in forms and composition. In soft colours and calm large areas, imperceptible transitions of light and shade resounds Coubine's variant of classicism. In *A View in the Direction of Křížánky* of the same year there appeared some cubist formulae squeezing the whole nature into irregular polygons which fit into one another or overlap in different ways. The frigidity of the forms is moreover emphasized by deep greens and blues. In two variants of a view of *Sněžné* of 1934, Lacina makes use of the creative experience of modern French painting. In the spirit of Raoul Dufy, the painter "drew" them so to speak with his brush; what is particularly conspicuous are the stimulating sensual hues and the dynamism of masses. We find here, side by

side, the reproduction of a concrete object (e.g. the bark of a tree) and a smooth, almost abstract area. Later on Lacina made this practice almost a principle of his creative technique.

The pictures of this period reveal talent, a talent defined some-times as an ability to imitate and kept under conscious control, which is not, as yet, paramount creative activity. In these pictures Lacina only takes account of "art", as in the period of the surrealist lecture in the late thirties, when he flirted – involuntarily – with Salvador Dalí's verism. This is evident in several pictures, few in number, like *The Nocturne*, *The Injured Pendulum*, *The Chrysalis*, illustrations of Mácha's *May*, and grotesques produced in the thirties actually deriding the surrealist doctrine. He uses the perspective to build illusory space and paints with bright oil colours.

In spite of this Lacina can also be identified at an early stage with Schiller's second type of sentimental poet, whose imagination is his reality. This is solely found in his private illustrations of the poetry of Otokar Březina, Charles Baudelaire, Karel Hlaváček, František Halas, Fráňa Šrámek, J. A. Rimbaud, and others. The only technique of these illustrations, consisting frequently of a single figure, is soft pencil in combination with black, chalk, rarely the pen in combination with pastel. Emphasis is laid on the line, which, however, does not only define the contour and the proportions, but characterizes the painter's emotional relation to the subject. Soft pencil in particular serves him to express the incompleteness and indefiniteness of a lightly sketched torso, as is best evident in his drawing of 1929, *An April Night*.

At the beginning of the war and in its course, the metaphorical character of the illustrations came to mark all that Lacina created. First in the oil painting *An Imaginary Portrait of Trakl, the Poet*, of 1938–1939, the artist abandons verism and illusionism, employing instead an expressive method in which the major items are a trace of the general form and a colour spot made with rough strokes of the brush. Lacina deforms the lightly sketched form only to stress it, on the other hand, by the contour, which strikes an even louder note in the picture entitled *Injured* of 1939. Soon after this, however, he produced two small *Solitudes* – an oil and a distemper – in which the cramped style is suddenly superseded by a calm balance of areas and forms, colours, and lines. The colour scheme narrows down almost to homeochromy. The prevailing colours are violet, blue, or brown, or similar colours. Gay colours also make their appearance, but they serve the painter for the most part to mutate the violets, the blues, and the browns. Homeochromy thus harmonizes with signification, which, in effect, conditions it.

An important alteration of the creative means is the employment of distempers as antithesis to the oil colours of the preceding period. This implies the elaboration of the possibilities of expression this technique offers on the one hand, and on the other hand it is a symptom of departure from surrealism and its gestures of revolt. This change can also be regarded as adherence to the traditional methods, which makes itself felt also in graphic works, where the woodcut and the copper engraving take place of the pencil. Even the sculptures which, few in number, appeared at the turn of the decade were modelled in plaster or in wax. Lacina shoved the surrealist practice of multiplying things on the principle of objective contingency aside by the diptych and triptych.

The distemper technique represents a rather complicated method of painting, and the distemper far more than the oil colour is "colour in itself". It is more difficult to work with, and, being primarily a hiding paint, it does not allow of smooth transitions, halfshades, and reflexes. These can at best be achieved by auxiliary methods – by hatching, tugging, etc. The distemper also gives a limited possibility of creating illusive space, and it almost excludes verism. The optical difference between the results of the two techniques plays an important role here: the distemper is less capable of producing the visual effect of depth. It is more brilliant but flatter. This in

itself reduces space, which can be built up for the most part only by placing colour areas beside one another, or behind one another, or over one another, i. e. by contrast of different planes. This can best be seen in Lacina's pictures of solitary houses and frontier landscapes. Contrast generates a certain tension, which Lacina also achieves by alternating pastes and thin colours, smooth and structured areas, or dry and varnish distempers in various pictures (A Frontier Landscape II, The Pipes I). This can be regarded as a substantial plasticization of painting. We find a proof of this in Lacina's exclusive employment of the technique derived from distemper painting in oil painting, which dominates in the late forties. It may be said that only here Lacina's work has become fully authentic, provided we disregard some slight indications in his pencil illustrations from the late twenties and early thirties.

In the last period, painting method variations grew both in breadth and in depth, whereas the lyricism of the paintings produced in the forties remained unchanged, except for a slight reduction. Besides polyvalence of colour there is evidence an experimental investigation of the expressive possibilities of black, and more particularly white. The tendency towards colour polyvalence was influenced by the "interperiod" of the late fifties characterized by the semiimpressionist technique of the Sparrow, May, and Blackthorn flower bunches, of The Lovers, The Swallow Landscape, The Landscape on the Hay-Racks. Illusionism and naturalism predominate here, to be soon cast off by Lacina. This technique lit up and warmed up his palette, particularly by ochres and most varied shades of red.

Even now Lacina builds his pictures by means of the contrast of planes or the contrast of cool and warm colours, rough pastes and smooth surfaces. He brings his contrasting elements into acute opposition so that they strike hard against one another, dynamizing the masses, with a resulting growth of tension. The canvases radiate extraordinary intensity, differing substantially from the melancholy tranquillity of his pictures from the forties, which feature a more or less mutual balance of areas and adaptation of the working method to the content. Now the tendency to treat the subject purely formally often makes its appearance. But even here colour is not a pure abstraction: at a certain point it is always defined by form, or is at least in antithesis to local colour. Colour, even in a polyvalent configuration, retains its metaphorical function. Radiant in certain cases, it only plays up in other situations, or it is decidedly in the background. Lacina achieves this by variation of techniques – application of a single layer, of several layers, with paste or glazes often laid in the manner of old masters on white ground. The aim is to obtain colours of maximum radiance. This end is achieved also by combination with black, as in The Polyphonic Square, or The Bell, etc. Here Lacina bases his effect on the principle of simultaneousness, according to which the same colour in a different configuration has a different effect. The variation of configurations produces a constant variation of colours and even tones.

Besides polychromy Lacina practices monochromic painting in white, primarily for its capability of creating space relations (the optical effect of distance). White colour contains special dense material space. Other colours end in it or they merge with it. The artist, therefore, quite deliberately studies the extinction of space in white colour. In the centre of his picture he works his way to the void, to a negation of space, to an "absolute" white in which other colours dissolve as in white light, or to an immaterial core melting away into immateriality. He achieves this by contrasting black and yellow in a white field, as can be seen in the canvas The Vanishing Point of Man, and elsewhere. Finally he studies the same properties and capabilities in chromatic colours. In his Pietà he tries to substitute the space-creating properties of white with blue, in which already Goethe saw the capability of the "pull" into the distance.

The painting and space-creating possibilities of white without the aid of the methods of illusionism undoubtedly attract Lacina in connection with the "magic" appeal of white to man. The problem of work with colour and also that of work with form are contingent upon the composition, which, in its turn, is conditioned by signification. All Lacina's works can practically be divided into two groups. pictures of closed composition defined by forms frequently derived from the exact sciences, and pictures of open composition with an elaborated centre – a core – petering out into flat space, or forming rows without beginning or end (e. g. musical pictures). These two composition methods in the given scheme correspond to two propensities of modern art: one to expression, the other to rational form. Lacina sought the possibility of their synthesis.

Recently Lacina returned to plastic art. He reduced his original idea of the shell to a simultaneous doubling of concave and convex formations, which, according to his opinion, is required by matter itself. In 1968 he exhibited picture objects in which he meditated on space and light. Sunk into them were metal sheets and wires as in a similar work produced in 1936. Their meaning is evident. The aim was, on the one hand, to enrich the pigments of the background by reflexes of the real world which make them appear different when viewed from different directions, and on the other hand to delete the boundaries traditionally separating painting and sculpture. The work of art has become the conveyance of a complex view of the world, as is evidenced especially by the large wood sculptures Bohdan Lacina began to cut towards the end of the sixties. Colour, staining agent, and gold foil, besides form, play a role here in imparting meaning. And here again we see that the treatment of the subject matter is determined by the signification aspect, and vice versa. Bohdan Lacina apparently sought in this a balance between the constant and the variable, which represents the richness of life.