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Litvak Art in the Context of the *École de Paris*

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Abstract

In the early part of the 20th century, Litvak artists from the Vilnius School of Drawing invaded Paris as the so-called second wave of the *École de Paris*, and left deep traces in the history of Western modern art. The author points out that Lithuania's contribution to world culture is often associated not only with ethnic Lithuanians but also with famous Jews like Marc Chagall, Chaïm Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz, Jascha Heifetz, Bernard Berenson, Meyer Schapiro, Emmanuel Lévinas, Arbit Blatas, and many other Litvaks. In Paris, these artists from closed communities with Orthodox views regarding the fine arts were anxious to join the process of modern Western art and experienced a painful conflict between modernity and the influence of their tradition. This painful duality, according to the author, is reflected in their works.

Introduction

Some studies, like this one, begin as fragmentary thoughts recorded on various occasions: they are born naturally and imperceptibly when the time is right. In my childhood, while wandering with a fishing pole outside Veisiejai near Lake Ančia, I slipped, and my feet disturbed a thick layer of moss under which was buried a dark stone with strange characters in an unknown language. My elders later told me that these were vestiges of the Lithuanian Jewish culture that had once existed here. That was my first contact with the culture of Lithuanian Jews, the Litvaks. I learned that before World War II, in Veisiejai, a small town in Dzūkija, there had been a large Jewish community. The inventor of Esperanto, L. L. Zamenhof, had also lived here. When I moved there with my parents after the war, at the age of six, there were no Litvaks left in this town. The entire community was mercilessly annihilated.

Much later, in my travels, I continued to encounter, in various contexts, manifestations of Litvak culture – works in Parisian exhibition halls and galleries with the names of Jewish Litvak artists who represented the third generation residing abroad. Next to their names I often saw the words *litvak* or *juif d'origine lituanienne*. It greatly intrigued me that in Paris so many people identified themselves with – and had roots in – my native Lithuania. When teaching in Japan, I noticed that my Japanese colleagues saw no difference between Lithuanian and Jewish names, whether written in Japanese characters or in Latin letters. For them, the Lithuanian contribution to world culture is often associated not only with ethnic Lithuanians like Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Jurgis Mačiūnas, Jonas Mekas, Jurgis Baltrušaitis (son), Algirdas Julius Greimas, or Marija Gimbutas but also with famous Jews born in Lithuania like Chaïm Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz, Jascha Heifetz, Bernard Berenson, Meyer Schapiro, Emmanuel Lévinas, Arbit Blatas and others.

When I was an intern at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, the original paintings and sculptures that I saw at various museums in Paris stimulated my interest in the works of these Litvaks who had been students at art schools in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Vitebsk. Subsequently, for a quarter of a century, I studied the works of many masters of the *École de Paris*. I reflected not only on the aesthetic value of their works but also on the reasons that impelled such a large group of Litvaks to become a part of the artistic life of Paris, the leading center of Western civilization in the early 20th century.

This fact forced me to reflect upon the history of Lithuanian culture and art in general and the narrowly nationalistic vision of historiography drilled into my head during childhood and at the Kaunas School of Art, where I studied. When I began to transcend ethnocentric attitudes and cast a wider glance at the richness and diversity of the multi-ethnic, poly-confessional culture of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it became clear to me that Lithuania and her capital Vilnius occupy a singular place in the history of European civilization. In this broader vision of Lithuania, ethnically Lithuanian culture does not stand isolated. It includes the unique heritage of the many other peoples who enriched the polyphonus diversity of the historic Grand Duchy of Lithuania – Jews, Poles, Belarussians, Russians, Tartars, Karaites, and others, without whose contributions we cannot adequately understand the changing historical processes in the centers of this vast cultural space.

Recently, we have begun to take a different, broader, more sensitive look at the complex cultural history of our country. We have sensed that it is vitally important to integrate the heritage of these peoples into Lithuanian cultural history. In this respect, the history of Litvak culture is of special interest. This ethnic group formed during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, in the territory of present-day Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Its members followed the precepts and cultural traditions of Judaism more strictly than other Jewish groups, and they devoted great attention to education and learning. For centuries, the dominant atmosphere in multicultural Lithuania was far more tolerant than in other Western European countries: the coexistence of different peoples and religions was legally established by the Lithuanian statutes, which were unique in Europe, and through various privileges granted by the rulers. At that time in history, the tolerance found in Lithuania for the religions of other peoples did not exist in any other European state. Thus, Jewish arrivals quickly put down roots and regarded Lithuania as their second fatherland, where for centuries their rapidly growing communities were able to cultivate their cultural and religious traditions. In the Jewish world, the cultural space of the original Grand Duchy of Lithuania was traditionally called *Lite* (in Yiddish) or *Lita* (in Hebrew), i.e. Lithuania, and the Jews who lived here were Lithuanian Jews, or *Litvaks* – people who spoke a Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish. In the huge multicultural and poly-confessional territory, they zealously sought to preserve the centuries-old traditions of Judaism and of their own Litvak culture. Among Eastern and Central European Jews, the Litvaks had perhaps the greatest national consciousness and were tenacious in observing their cultural traditions and religious precepts. This is probably the answer to why even third-generation descendants of these Jews, when reflecting on their cultural identity, invoke the concepts *Lita*, *litvak*, *juif d'origine lituanienne*.

In the early 20th century, Litvak artists invaded the main center of Western modern art as the so-called second wave of the École de Paris. Their long-suppressed creative energy exploded in the fine arts and extended to the main cultural centers of Western Europe, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Munich, where these emigrants became an active part of the artistic avant-garde. They also laid the foundation for professional national Jewish painting and sculpture in the twentieth century. Thus, the story of Litvak art and its contribution to Lithuanian and world culture is one of many narratives flowing from the depths of our history.

In Lithuania, in recent years, more and more research is appearing by authors who seek to look at our cultural history more expansively, without ethnocentric stereotypes, and to acknowledge that other peoples have also made important contributions to the history of our art. This belated interest has painful repercussions for scholars eager to work in this field because so much valuable archival material has disappeared during times of upheaval, war, occupation, and changes in national borders. Persons who could provide authentic information have already departed from this world.

When I began to delve into the question of the role of Litvaks in French modern art, I was amazed to learn that most of the famous Jewish artists came from the famous Vilnius School of Drawing, from Yehuda Pen's School of Painting and Drawing in Vitebsk, and from the Kaunas School of Art. Yet this topic has remained largely unexplored by Lithuania scholars. To date we have only one doctoral dissertation in 2005 by Vilma Gradinskaite¹ dealing with this subject.

Litvaks in the Pale of Settlement

After the dissolution of the Republic of the Two Nations through the three partitions of Poland and Lithuania in 1772, 1793, and 1795, the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania became part of the Russian Empire, and the Russian tsars issued many discriminatory edicts that changed the status of one of the world's largest Jewish communities. Most devastating were the edicts of 1772 and 1779, which forbade Jews in the former GDL and Poland to leave their native lands, thus establishing strictly demarcated boundaries for what became known as the Pale of Settlement. In 1791, there were about 1.5 million Jews living in the Pale of Settlement, of whom around 95-97 percent spoke Yiddish and considered themselves a separate ethnocultural group – Litvaks; on the eve of the Russian Revolution there were about seven million. A distinctive Jewish culture developed where Yiddish was spoken – a culture whose main center was the territory of Lita and whose spiritual nucleus was Vilnius. This territory was often referred to as Yiddishland, a cultural concept that took shape under the influence of Yiddish.² Yiddishland had a winged proverb: To earn a living, go to Łódź, Warsaw, or Odessa, but to gain wisdom, go to Vilnius.

The growing external oppression and discriminatory laws and edicts made the Jews in the Pale more inward-looking than in western Europe, which was experiencing rapid democratization. Favorable to the inwardness was the well-established conservative system of Jewish religious education in cheders and yeshivas. Education, culture, and art were the areas in which Litvaks achieved substantial success. Children living in Vilnius and other Litvak communities began early to study the Torah and, later on, the Talmud. They learned about the history of the Jewish people but also about civilization in

general. Their studies included principles of ethics and interaction with other people. The respect for scholarship and their own cultural, religious, and artistic traditions became an inseparable part of the Litvak identity.

Vilnius: Center of Litvak Culture, Religion, and Art

After the uprising of 1831, the closing of Vilnius University in 1832 was a severe blow to the culture of the Lithuanian capital, but artistic life with its old traditions did not disappear from the city. In the early 19th century, when the Romantic Movement blossomed, Vilnius with its creative cultural energy even overshadowed Warsaw. Jews played a very important role in the cultural life of Vilnius. By the 18th century, the old capital of Lithuania had, in comparison to other cities in Eastern and Central Europe, the most vibrant intellectual and cultural life. It was the seat of the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), a repository of Jewish books, unique manuscripts in Hebrew and Yiddish, the center of rabbinical scholarship and home of famous publishers and libraries, including the Strashun Library, one of the most famous in the Jewish world. In the eyes of Litvaks and worldwide Jewry in general, Vilnius was the Jerusalem of the North.

At the turn of the 19th century, as control by tsarist institutions weakened, educated Litvaks of various ideologies exerted their powerful cultural influence on the creation of secular cultural organizations and numerous artists' groups and movements. Two of the most influential modern movements among Eastern and Central European Jews were born in Vilnius: Zionism and the Bund. Art exhibits were organized. In 1912, the Society of Lovers of Jewish Antiquities was formed and a Jewish museum established. A branch of the Culture League was active here, and Jung Vilne (Young Vilnius), a society for writers and artists, was founded. In 1925, the Institute for Jewish Research opened – the largest and most important institute of this kind in the world.

The first famous pre-modern artists who trod the path from Russia to the main artistic centers in the West began to emerge in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They had received an excellent education at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Art or at prestigious art academies in the West, and many of them worked as teachers and trained, or in other ways influenced the new wave of Litvak artists which was to become such an important part of the *École de Paris*. They also shared a commitment to a national Jewish art and formed the strategy for Jewish art schools in Vilnius, Vitebsk, and Jerusalem's Bezalel.

A Litvak artist with widespread international recognition and the first to advocate the establishment of a Jewish art school in Vilnius was the sculptor Mark Antokolsky from Vilnius (1843-1902). Born into a poor Litvak family, this extraordinarily talented youth grew up in the Jewish cultural environment of Vilnius and succeeded in gaining acceptance to the Saint Petersburg Academy of Art. Quickly emerging as a uniquely gifted sculptor, he associated closely with Ilya Repin and other prominent Russian artists, yet Antokolsky did not forget his roots. His works *A Jewish Tailor* (1864), *Poverty* (1864), *The Miser* (1865), and *The Head of a Jew* (1869) reflected the impoverished reality of everyday Litvak life. He also created other important works with Jewish themes: two sculptural busts entitled *Talmud Dispute* (1867) and a bas-relief – *The Spanish Inquisition Attacking the Jews During Passover* (1868-1869). Provoking fierce criticism from the Saint Petersburg faculty, Antokolsky moved to Italy and Paris, where he won many awards for his work and continued to promote a national orientation in the work of local Jewish artists.

Antokolsky's idea of establishing a Jewish art school was realized by two of his followers: Yehuda Pen and the sculptor Ilya Ginzburg. In 1897, Yehuda Pen founded a new private school of painting and drawing in Vitebsk. In 1905, at the facilities of the Vilnius Jewish Trade School, the M. Antokolsky School of Industrial Art opened its doors and eventually developed various forms of Litvak folk art. Alongside the Józef Montwiłł Trade School for Drawing and Painting, which was founded in 1893, this was the third important art school in Vilnius.

The main reason why Vilnius did not have a Jewish art school until then is probably because it already had an excellent art school: The Vilnius School of Drawing. Moreover, this rebellious region, with its influential cultural tradition centered in Vilnius, was under the constant and increased surveillance of repressive imperial structures of control.

The Vilnius School of Drawing

In the Russian Empire, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were several basic schools of drawing and art (in Vilnius, Warsaw, Kiev, Odessa, and Moscow), all of which provided contingents of graduates for the only art academy in Saint Petersburg. Warsaw suffered much less from the waves of tsarist repression following the two insurrections, but Vilnius had in professional terms a better art school, acknowledged by Polish art historians too:

At that time, Warsaw did not have a great art school. The state drawing school had long since lost in prestige, even though around 1900 Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Eli Nadelman, and Witold Wojtkiewicz studied there. The city's art life was dominated by the conservative attitudes of the Society to Promote the Fine Arts.³

The Vilnius School of Drawing was founded in 1866 in the buildings of the former Vilnius University by Ivan Trutnev (1827-1912), a graduate of the Saint Petersburg Academy of Art and an academician. Trutnev quickly revealed himself to be an excellent organizer and teacher, and ran this school from its foundation to his death. Under his guidance, the Vilnius School of Drawing became one of the strongest artistic institutions in this part of the Empire, with a well-planned coherent

methodology of instruction and levels of professional training. His school acquired a good name at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Art, which accepted the most talented graduates from the various art schools in the Empire.

Trutnev had traveled much in Western European countries and was well acquainted with their educational systems. In 1866, after returning to Russia from Europe, he was appointed teacher of drawing and calligraphy at the Vitebsk School for Boys, which belonged to the Vilnius Educational District, and from there he was invited to Vilnius to establish a school of drawing. Trutnev's appearance in Vilnius was not accidental. The initial impulse for establishing this school was connected with the wide-scale Russian tsarist policy, developed after the insurrections, of Russifying Lithuania. After two insurrections and the closing of Vilnius University, the Russian Empire had many repressive regulations, one of which permitted only reliable people from the *guberniyas* of central Russia to teach in Lithuania. Trutnev, however, did not yield to imperial chauvinism but primarily concerned himself with the material facilities and programs of the school, and with the training and recruitment of professional teachers. The faculty included recent graduates with progressive views from the Saint Petersburg Academy of Art. Their aesthetic attitudes were oriented toward the new Western European and especially French artistic processes, and toward the progressive art journals of the time that supported them, such as *Mir iskusstva*, *Apollon*, and *Zolotoye runo*. Contrary to the stereotypes found in Western art-historical literature, after 1905 the Vilnius School of Drawing was clearly oriented to French impressionist and post-impressionist art. These attitudes were also characteristic of the most popular instructors – Ivan Rybakov and Sergei Yuzhanin, who started working there in 1899 immediately after graduating from the Academy, and another excellent teacher, Nikolai Sergeyev-Korobov, who started there in 1912.

In the Jewish community, the cultural status of this school was so high that graduates who had emigrated to the West occasionally emphasized its importance in their recollections by referring to it as the Vilnius Academy of Art. Moreover, it was famous for its democratic attitude. In the words of the Polish art historian Jerzy Malinowski:

In the history of Jewish and European art this school is phenomenal; therefore, researchers sometimes call it the Art Academy. Young Jews, mainly from the eastern lands of the former *rzeczpospolita*, for whom schools were often inaccessible because of various government quotas, came to Vilnius to study under Trutnev. They became the most eminent graduates of this school and occupied high positions in art in France, Germany, and America.⁴

Thus Vilnius was like a magnet to Jewish artists from Belarus and Ukraine, the cultural space of the old Grand Duchy of Lithuania. At the Vilnius School of Drawing, Jews comprised, along with Catholics of noble backgrounds, the greatest part of the student body.

The number of students (which varies greatly in the sources – for example, 60 to 100 during the first year) grew together with this school's material facilities and influence. According to various sources, more than 4,500 people attended this school throughout its existence, but diplomas were awarded to only 193 of the best students who had completed the entire compulsory program. (We do not have any other detailed documented information about the number of students at this school). Of these, about 50 enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Academy of Art, and others – in academies in Berlin and Munich, the Stroganov School in Moscow, and various advanced schools of art in Paris. Still others undertook private study.

With anti-Semitism widespread in the Russian Empire, a great stream of Jews, educated as well as uneducated, flowed westward from the territory of Lita – seeking refuge from pogroms and repressions in the democratic countries in the West. This process of emigration lasted for many years and assumed various forms, from the legal and voluntary to the forcible. Some consciously severed their ties with their homeland forever; others were torn for a long time between a new and an old home; still others, tormented by nostalgia, later returned. On a hitherto unseen scale, involving about two million people, this was an exodus of biblical proportion. A significant number of the emigrants consisted of well-educated and socially and culturally organized Litvaks, among them artists with long-suppressed creative energies that exploded in the fine arts.

In the early 20th century, the Vilnius School of Drawing was attended by Chaïm Soutine, Michel Kikoïne, Pinchus Krémègne, Emmanuel Mané-Katz, Jacques Lipchitz, Léon Indenbaum, Lasar Segall, Jehudo Epstein, and others who became famous in Paris and occupied high positions in art in France, Germany, and America.⁵ After the 1905 Revolution, young Litvak artists at the Vilnius School of Drawing flowed to Paris, the most liberal, cosmopolitan center for art at the time. According to Jolanta Širkaitė, who has studied the archival records, the exact number is difficult to establish, but at least 200 names have been verified.⁶ In Paris, the Litvak artists comprised the nucleus of highly talented and nationally committed Jewish artists, and their dominance was obvious in practically all fields of artistic expression. Their original contribution left deep traces not only in the history of French art but also in the entire history of 20th century art.

The École de Paris and the École juive

The *École de Paris* can hardly be called a school in the conventional sense. The term was coined in 1925 to give a name to the great number of avant-garde artists who were working in Paris during the period from 1900 to World War II and belonged to different aesthetic positions, together creating one of the most significant movements in Western art. The school is named after the city of Paris, but the great majority of the artists who contributed to its fame were immigrants

from various corners of the world and primarily from Central and Eastern Europe. Most art historians set the lifespan of the Paris School to the period between 1900 and 1930. In French art history, and later in that of other countries, there eventually appeared another term: the *École juive* (Jewish School). It denoted the second wave of the *École de Paris*, emerging around 1912, one of the most important phenomena in 20th-century modern art.

During the early 20th century, Paris was the greatest manifestation of a new regrouping of the forces of international modern art. In the talent-rich international art scene, the first wave of the *École de Paris* began around 1900 and was dominated by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. The young Picasso evolved through his Blue and Rose periods into cubism, which was marked by the strong influence of Paul Cézanne's analytical and synthetic tendencies, while Matisse, by revealing the importance of color, formed the principles of fauvist aesthetics. The most significant contribution to the second (post-1912) wave of the *École de Paris* was made by the Litvak artists from various art schools of Vilnius, Kaunas and Vitebsk. In the world history of art we will find very few examples in which the interaction of the center and the periphery was as fruitful as in the School of Paris.

The young Litvaks plunged into the international Parisian artistic community and like sponges absorbed the diversity of cultural and artistic trends. Upon arrival, they discovered the impact of the Spaniards Picasso and Juan Gris, the Mexican Diego Rivera, the Italian Amadeo Modigliani, the Russians Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, Tsuguharu Foujita from Japan, and many others. This international artistic diversity did not destroy their individuality but, on the contrary, helped them understand the importance of local traditions and styles, so that they too could emphasize their own individuality and promising creative features. What was progressive but less perceptible in one's own artistic field often revealed itself in the language of another art form. And finally, we must not forget the more or less constant opportunity to develop, systematize, and transmit aesthetic and creative principles – an important factor in the formation of many movements, trends, groups, and schools in modern art, and in the growth of individual artists.

The Litvak artists arrived in Paris at a time when the creative powers of modern art were being consolidated. French artists were beginning to lose their dominant position to immigrants arriving from the far corners of Europe and filled with incredible creative energy. Litvak painters were taking some significant new steps in their competition with neo-romanticism, symbolism, naturalism, neo-and-post impressionism, pointillism, and various other movements that had already exhausted their creative potential, and whose influence the followers of fauvism, cubism, futurism, and many other movements in modern art were seeking to limit. The new arrivals studied works by great masters of the past and by their contemporaries, and interpreted their own relevance and place in a new hierarchy of values. They participated in the development of various schools and trends in modern art, and created their own vision of a new, modern art.

Montparnasse and the Immigrants of la Ruche

In Paris at the beginning of the century, one of the most important centers for independent avant-garde artists whose programmatic attitudes were closely related to the aesthetics of classical modernism was in the colorful Montmartre, which surrounds a huge hill. Here began the reaction of independent artists against stagnant academism.

On the other side of the Seine from Montmartre, on the Left Bank, there is another center that was popular with the artistic avant-garde: Montparnasse. Its heart consisted of a huge artists' colony called *la Ruche* (the Hive). This round building was originally designed as the Wine Pavilion of the 1900 Paris World's Fair. Later, in 1902, the patron, sculptor, and philanthropist Alfred Boucher set up about eighty art studios here, for which he charged a nominal annual rent of fifty francs. Located at the center of this colony, the three-story *la Ruche* was surrounded by one-story buildings. Along the corridor that encircled each floor were small studios that narrowed toward the center of the building, and were each equipped with a cupboard for pictures, a bed, and a stove to keep warm. The round shape of this building and its honeycomb-like studios inspired its name – the Hive. Artists and critics ironically called it the *Villa Médicis de la misère* (Médici Villa of Destitution) or the Second Babylon – because so many artists of various nationalities and from different lands, as well as poor artists from the provinces of France, lived and worked under one roof there. From here emerged many of this wave's great masters, who overshadowed other groups of artists with the force of their talent and the suggestiveness of their canvases.

As Suzanne Pourchier aptly observes in her study "De Vilna à Montparnasse":

...in Paris between the two world wars there was such a significant concentration of Litvaks there that it was the art capital for them. Here they sought new ways of expressing their individuality drawing on other art forms.⁷

About the atmosphere at the Hive, Marc Chagall wrote:

That was the name given to a hundred or so studios surrounded by a little garden and very close to the Vaugirard slaughterhouses. In those studios lived the artistic Bohemia of every land. ...I sat alone in my studio before my kerosene lamp. A studio jammed with pictures, with canvases which, moreover, were not really canvases but my table napkins, my bed sheets, my nightshirts torn into pieces.⁸

Most Jewish immigrant artists at that time lived and worked in *la Ruche*. As immigrants, they lived humbly in their communes, in a closed circle of other émigrés. Robert Falk writes:

In Paris, artists live in their studios. A room with one window, a cupboard for bedding, and a stove that was heated with coal or anthracite.⁹

Most of these artists who came to Paris from the Jewish ghettos in the Pale of Settlement, from Vilnius or Vitebsk, spoke the Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish among themselves and had a poor command of any other language. Chagall, who had spent three years in Saint Petersburg, was ahead of Soutine, who learned some Russian only at the age of twelve, and never perfected his knowledge of that language. As a result, even though they lived in Paris for a long time, the Litvaks were not able to fully adapt there. They came into direct contact with many of the leading figures in modern art, but they stayed away from noisy groups and remained secluded in a world of their own inner experiences. Paris enchanted them with the signs, symbols, and values of culture and art. Parisian life – rich, colorful, carefree – unfolded before them, but the door to it was locked. When examining the factors that determine the specific nature of Litvak art, we should not forget that during their early years in Paris, the new arrivals lived in poverty and isolation and encountered indifference, insensitivity, and lack of communication with their surrounding world. An important link between them and spiritually allied groups of artists in Montparnasse and la Ruche was provided by Amadeo Modigliani, who befriended the Litvaks and was at that time already an exceptional figure in the Parisian modern art community, greatly admired for his originality and aesthetic refinement.

The influences the newcomers absorbed were many and various and had a tremendous impact on their creative potential, means of expression, and aesthetic priorities. At night they gathered at the nearby Café du Dôme where they passionately discussed art and their impressions from museums and galleries, where new ideas were born, and where they found their idols in painting. Arbit Blatas remembers:

This café was like a synagogue for us, something similar to a gathering place for Talmudists, for Jews from the ghettos of such countries as Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, who came together after a hard day's work in Paris, because artists did not live as well then as they do now; at that time, collectors did not yet buy pictures in order to speculate in them.¹⁰

The Litvak artists arrived in Paris at a time when the creative powers of modern art were being consolidated. French artists were beginning to lose their dominant position to immigrants arriving from far corners of Europe and filled with incredible creative energy. Jewish artists had to find a place for themselves in the centers of modern art. Their unique contribution to the history of French modern art during the first half of the 20th century is best revealed when comparing their style, poetic imagery, and the particularities of plastic language to the earlier expressionist art of French and Scandinavian countries. Some tendencies close to Litvak expressionism can be observed in the works of Vincent van Gogh, Kokoschka and the group *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), in Picasso's Blue Period (1901 – 1904), and in paintings by Valadon, Utrillo, Rouault, and others. However, the artists from Lita introduced many distinctly new aspects not present in earlier French painting, such as, for example, in the works of van Gogh or Toulouse-Lautrec. They expanded and enriched the stylistic panorama of French art with their own unique experience: their original sense of color and form and many new dramatic and tragic motifs that had not been seen in earlier traditions of French art. The Litvak artists brought elements of the Judaic tradition to the expressionist tendencies in French art. Hence followed the maximalism of their artistic goals, their longing for true, authentic art, and their endless devotion to creative work.

Many of the Litvak artists, seeking to join the process of Western modernist art, consciously distanced themselves from the Judaic religious tradition and broke away from its influence. However, another group – Michel Kikoïne, Indenbaum, Lipchitz, Segall, Band, and Arbit Blatas – looked at their cultural tradition from inside, expanded its limits, and enriched it with universal contents. Foremost to contribute their own original ideas and concepts of color and form to the cosmopolitan Parisian art scene were Chaim Soutine and Marc Chagall. The power of their talent belongs to the most significant events not only in modern painting but also in the Western artistic tradition as a whole.

Chaim Soutine (1893-1943) came to Paris from Vilnius and remained until the end of his life an outsider, a unique introvert whom his colleagues referred to as a *juif lituanien* and *juif maudit*. "Indifferent to everything except painting, everywhere a stranger, Soutine," wrote Jean-Paul Crespelle.¹¹ Soutine developed a highly personal vision and painting technique. He painted incessantly, spontaneously, to the point of exhaustion, driven by an obsessive energy, without preliminary studies, using broad brushstrokes and pure vibrant colors. Disregarding established concepts of beauty and harmony, he painted jumbled elements of a landscape, bloody carcasses of butchered animals, grim faces and bodies deformed by a life of hardship and disappointment.

Until his first exhibition in Paris in 1924, Soutine lived in extreme poverty and survived only with the help of close friends who understood and admired his unique talent. Soutine's worldview remained tragic and pessimistic throughout his life. At the outset of World War II, Soutine was in constant hiding from the Gestapo and died of a bleeding ulcer in Paris in 1943. Soutine, in my opinion, was a true genius – one who quickly burned up his talent.

Marc Chagall (1887-1985) is the very opposite of Soutine. Born in Vitebsk, he grew up in poverty but surrounded by the mystical worldview of the Litvak Hassidism dominant in his native town. He took his first steps into art in 1906 at the Yehuda Pen School of Painting and continued in St. Petersburg, where he was greatly influenced by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky. After arriving in Paris in 1910, he began to take a nostalgic look at the Hassidic culture that became his main source of

inspiration. Hassidism arose in reaction to Talmudic legalism, teaching a joyful, mystical, personal relationship with God. Chagall's work, likewise, is marked by a childlike and dreamlike mood. Abandoning rules of gravity, Chagall depicted floating images of people and farm animals of everyday village life as filtered through the prism of his fantasy and intertwined with folkloric themes. His work is characterized by vivid color and a special lightness and musicality.

Chagall was a universal master of various forms; he participated in many cultural movements and traveled to many countries. In the 1930s, Chagall's interest turned to the Holy Land, and his subject matter became biblical themes and images from the Old Testament. In the latter half of his life, he did large-scale paintings for the Paris Opera and stained-glass windows for cathedrals, the United Nations, and in Israel. He lived most of his life in France, except for the war years 1941–1948, when he sought refuge in the United States. The first book illustrated by Chagall – I. L. Peretz's *The Magician* – was published in Vilnius in 1917 by Boris Kletzkin, and in 1924 he had a successful exhibition in Kaunas, Lithuania. He stands out for his unbelievable productivity. Chagall has been called the most Jewish of Jewish painters.

Litvaks and the Search for National Art

The problem of national identity, which spread throughout Europe in the early 20th century, was characteristic not only of the Central and Eastern European peoples. Seeing the disintegration of old empires and the formation of new states, Jews of various ideological persuasions more and more often confronted the problem of their own nationhood and their own national art. Influenced by Mark Antokolsky's ideas, many Jewish artists were interested in the creation of a national art even before World War I, collecting and systematizing examples of Jewish sacred and folk art in the Pale of Settlement. El Lissitzky and Naum Aronson often used ethnographic material in their work.

In Paris, the Litvaks in the la Ruche environment understood profoundly the importance of giving artistic form to their own culture, and sought to explain the relationship between their work and the artistic traditions of France, Germany, Russia, and other countries. They constantly disputed how much the works of Rembrandt, the father and son Ismael Israel, Anton Raphael Mengs, Joseph Israels, Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Max Liebermann, and other artists could justifiably be considered sources of Jewish national painting. On the other hand, if some Jewish artists of the *École de Paris* (Modigliani, Kisling, Pascin, Zadkine, Pevsner) employed few or no themes, motifs, or stylistic features specific to Jewish art, by what criteria – apart from ethnic origin – could they be identified as Jewish? The question arises: why did a special role in the appearance of professional Jewish art fall to Litvak immigrants from huge Jewish communities held together by conservative Judaism? How can we explain why artists from the periphery and traditional Eastern Europe massively invaded and dominated Paris, the unquestionable center of modern Western art?

The reasons were many and various. This dominance by Jewish immigrants in the second wave of the *École de Paris* was probably determined by the creative and largely unspent energy of a people liberated from their ghettos through the processes of democratization, and by the passionate desire of Jewish artists to find a place for themselves in the centers of modern art. Modern Jewish art could not fully develop under the powerful influence of Orthodox Jewish traditions. In the cultural space of Lita, sacred architecture and all applied arts achieved great heights, but all art forms preserved their traditional sacred characteristics and observed the Second Commandment, which prohibits the depiction of living creatures and human forms. Litvak artists who had grown up in an Orthodox environment and had chosen the “sinful calling” of a painter or sculptor could not freely develop secular fine arts. Artists who decided to pursue artistic careers were forced to sever their ties with the Jewish community and convert to other religions. However, the processes of democratization in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century forced Litvaks from the Pale of Settlement into increasing mobility, and resulted in a breakdown of the traditional way of life that had taken centuries to form. In Paris, Jewish artists from closed communities with traditional views regarding the fine arts found a cultural environment and a freedom of expression that they could barely imagine in their native land. Paris – rich in liberal traditions and cultural values, open to innovation and to various artistic styles and trends, became fertile ground for these talented artists from the periphery of Europe to release their pent-up creative energy and understand the aesthetic value of their work.

Arbit Blatas, who was born in Kaunas, often wrote with pride about the contribution of the immigrants from the cultural space of Lita to the history of Western art, connecting his Litvak roots with his “Lithuanian nationalism,” as he called it. Discussing the role of Litvak artists in Parisian artistic life during the early decades of the 20th century, Blatas wrote in his article “Montparnasse, capitale de la Lituanie des Arts”:

At the beginning of this history there was Lithuania. It is impossible to forget her landscapes, her lights, her climates...¹²

An obvious duality manifested itself in their work since Litvaks joined the School of Paris movement and painfully experienced the problematic relationship between tradition and modernity in the variegated context of the *École de Paris*. Their work is inseparable from their heritage and the baggage of tragic existential experience that they brought with them. Despite their efforts to break free, the Litvaks could not escape their childhood memories or their dependence on their tradition, whose social, mystical, and poetic influence inspired their works. A dramatic worldview filled with nostalgia for a homeland left behind, a sense of tragedy, a choice of distinctive subjects, and an unusual perspective that determined the unique palette and imagery of the Litvak style of painting – all these things flowed from their early life experience in the closed Orthodox community of Lita and from elements of Jewish mysticism acquired through the study of the Talmud. They were tormented by an inner conflict with the restrictions of Orthodox Judaism, and subconscious guilt of being under a

curse for violating the Second Commandment. These were surely some of the reasons that determined their aggressive challenge to earlier traditions of realistic art and the adoption of the most radical forms of modern art: abstraction, cosmopolitanism, intellectuality, psychologizing, and emphasis on temporal structures.

The paradox is that the Litvaks, with their well-preserved national identity, were able to fully realize their talents only in the rich cultural and artistic environment of Paris. In the opinion of this writer, if the great Litvak masters of the École de Paris had remained in their native country, their talent would probably never have blossomed so powerfully as in this international cauldron, to which immigrants brought their colors and artistic traditions and fused them with the latest trends in modern art. This unbelievably strange encounter between the center of Europe and tendencies from the fringes turned out to be the most fruitful and important phenomenon in twentieth century art.

Notes:

- 1 Gradinskaitė.
- 2 Silvain; Minczeles, 7.
- 3 Malinowski; Brus-Malinowska, 45.
- 4 Malinowski, 59.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Širkaitė, 196.
- 7 Pourchier, 217.
- 8 Chagall, 102-103.
- 9 Falk, 12.
- 10 Blatas, 42.
- 11 Crespelle, 40-41.
- 12 Blatas, 33.

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