

## THE 1910 EXHIBIT OF PAINTINGS BY ČIURLIONIS IN PARIS

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The St. Petersburg-based World Art group organized an exhibit of Russian theatre and costume designs in Paris, France, in 1910. V. Landsbergis incidentally mentioned in one of his articles the possibility of M.K. Čiurlionis's works being in this show [1](#). Further research led to Donald E. Gordon's book which indeed lists seven paintings by Čiurlionis in this exhibit [2](#). Moreover, in his illustrations, Gordon included this exhibit's catalogue reproduction of one of Čiurlionis's paintings [3](#). Whether these works were actually exhibited in Paris, is the subject of this paper, Although this exhibit would be of extreme interest to scholars of Čiurlionis, especially in regards to the exposure of his works in European art centers, a discussion of Čiurlionis's participation in this show has not been previously published.

The exhibit was entitled "Les Artistes Russes, Decors et Costumes de Theatre et Tableaux" and was shown from June 20 to July 9, 1910, at the Bernheim Jeune gallery-Gordon gives a detailed listing of the show using the exhibit catalogue as his only source [2](#). Theatre stage sets and costume designs clearly dominated the exhibit. He lists 39 works by Bakst, 21 by Dobužinskij, ten by Sudeikin, seven by Čiurlionis, and one each by Benois, Krimov, and Petrov-Vodkin. Čiurlionis's works were entitled "Contes Fan-tastiques" (Fantastic Stories; catalogue nr. 132-137) and "Le Fantome" (The Phantom; nr. 138). Apparently the catalogue carried reproductions of two paintings: one by Benois entitled "Projet de Decor pour 'le Pavillon d'Armine', ballet" (Set design for the "Armine Pavillion," ballet; catalogue nr. 40) and one by Čiurlionis, now known under the title of "Paradise" [3](#).

The identity of the other six paintings is uncertain, but some clues can be found. In the years 1904-5, Čiurlionis completed two cycles of paintings, of 8 and 10 works each, which he called "Fantasies" [4](#). The subsequent disposition of these works is discussed by V. Landsbergis [5](#). Apparently, a good number have been lost, and the surviving ones are now known under a variety of other titles. In 1908-9 Čiurlionis also did a triptych entitled "Fantasy" which is illustrated in Gytis Vaitkūnas's book on Čiurlionis [6](#). Three works entitled "Conte Phantastique" were reproduced in the St. Petersburg art magazine *Apollon* in 1914 [7](#). These paintings are now known under the titles "Ballad of the Black Sun", "Fairy Tale of the Castle", and "The Demon" [8](#). One painting entitled "Fantasy" was shown in 1911 in Minsk as part of a Polish art exhibit [9](#); and three works, also called "Fantasy", appeared in the 1911 St. Petersburg and Moscow retrospective showings of Čiurlionis's works [10](#). Whether any of these works were shown in Paris under the title "Contes Fantastiques" is not known.

Information about the only named painting, "Fantome", was easier to gather. It was reproduced in *Apollon* in 1911 [11](#) and is included in Vaitkūnas's book [12](#). The same picture was probably shown under the title "Horseman" in at least four exhibits of 1911-12 in Moscow and St. Petersburg and under the title "The Knight" in London. The illustrated picture "Paradise" was equally popular and was included in at least two exhibits in 1910 and 1911.

The inclusion of these works in many exhibits and magazines indicates their popularity at the time. Nevertheless, it certainly seems strange that they were considered for the Paris show, since they hardly were stage sets or costume designs. This seeming contradiction can in part be resolved by an analysis of Čiurlionis's circumstances in St. Petersburg.

One of the main reasons that Čiurlionis went to St. Petersburg was precisely because of the possibility of working on theatre set designs. A friend of Čiurlionis living in St. Petersburg, M. Dobužinski, had done a good number of these designs [13](#). Čiurlionis's wife, Sophia, recalled that "Konstantinas dreamed of painting stage sets for the Stanislavski Theatre" [14](#). Čiurlionis's interest in the theatre is seen again both in his 1908 stage set for the Lithuanian opera "Jūratė", and in his 1909 project for a theatre curtain [15](#). Furthermore, the general excessive decorativeness of Čiurlionis's later works, such as "Sonata of the Stars. Allegro", "Sonata of the Stars. Andante", "Rex" and numerous drawings, are

reminiscent of the extremely ornate theatrical sets of the time [16](#). Thus it is not unreasonable that Čiurlionis's works may have been in this show, even though they were not theatre designs.

Nevertheless, it was necessary to search for collaborative evidence that Čiurlionis's works were shown. Catalogue listings are not always accurate. Things already seemed a little suspicious since in Gordon's listing, a good number of entry numbers are unaccounted for. After an exhaustive search of Parisian magazines and newspapers, two reviews of this show were found. In neither one was Čiurlionis mentioned.

In the semi-monthly Parisian art magazine, *Le Bulletin de l'Art Ancien et Moderne*, Prince d'Arenberg glowingly reviewed the show [17](#):

"...it is necessary to thank them (the Russian painters—A.P.) since they have contributed to remaking theatre the marvelous spring board of a dream that it can be... their realization, often perfect, has enchanted our evenings for many weeks."

He discussed works by Bakst and Benois that Gordon had listed; but he also mentioned works by Bilibine, Golovine and Roerich that had not been listed. Perhaps these works filled the gaps in Gordon's list

In the monthly Parisian art magazine, *L'Art et Les Artistes*, Leandre Vaillot wrote a much more thorough review which even included five reproductions of works by Bakst [18](#). After a lengthy discussion of the Russian opera and ballet, he turned to the show. Works in Gordon's list were discussed, but again Bilibine, Golovine, Roerich, and here also Stelletski, were mentioned that were not on the list. Significantly, in neither review were the works by Krimov, Petrov-Vodkin, nor Čiurlionis cited.

In the newspapers of the time, only one mention of this show was found. *The New York Herald—European Edition* of June 23, 1910, page 6, carried a three line announcement of this show; no artists were named.

Were Čiurlionis's works really there? In neither of these thorough reviews was Čiurlionis mentioned. Nevertheless, the catalogue entries, and especially the fact that one of his paintings was reproduced in the catalogue, argue very strongly that his works were there. Possibly the catalogue was printed in advance, and due to difficulties in transport his works did not arrive in Paris. Maybe the works arrived late, after the reviewers had seen the show. Or, what is probably the most likely explanation is that the works were indeed exhibited, but the reviewers did not comment on them precisely because they were not theatre or costume designs. It seems that a definite answer to this question will be very difficult to find. Hopefully, this article will encourage further investigation of this topic.

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1 Landsbergis, V. "Čiurlionio Paveikslai Londono Parodoje" in *Literatūra ir Menas*, Vol. 30, July 23, 1966, p. 8, Vilnius, Lithuania.

2 Gordon, Donald E., *Modern Art Exhibitions 1900-1916*, Vol. 2, pp. 415-6, Prestel-Verlag, Munchen, 1974.

3 *Ibid*, Vol. 1, p. 175.

4 Čiurlionis, M.K., *Apie muziką ir dailę*, p. 178. Vilnius, Lithuania, 1960.

5 Landsbergis, V., "Ankstyvieji M.K. Čiurlionio Paveikslai ir Ciklai" in *Pergalė*, nr. I, 1975, pp. 123-5.

6 Vaitkūnas, Gytis, *Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. Dresden, 1975*, illustration nr. 149-51.

7 *Apollon*, vol. 3, 1914, St. Petersburg.

8 "Ballad of the Black Sun" is illustrated in Etkind, Mark Grigorevich, *The World as a Large Symphony* (translated from Russian), Iskusstvo pub., Leningrad, 1970, page 132; "Fairy Tale of the Castle" and "The Demon" are illustrated in Vaitkūnas, G., *op. cit.*, illustration nr. 147 and 190, respectively.

9 Čiurlionytė-Karužienė, Valerija, et. al., *Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis: Bibliografija, Vaga*, Vilnius, 1970, entry number 1180.

10 Gordon, D.E., *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 518, 543.

11 *Apollon*, Vol. 5, 1911, p. 24, St. Petersburg.

12 Vaitkūnas, G., *op. cit.*, illustration nr. 153.

13 One of Dobužinski's stage sets was reproduced in *Apollon*, Vol. 5, 1910.

14 *Laiškai Sofijai*, Vilnius, 1973, entry dated August-September, 1908. The Stanislavski Theatre was in Moscow, for which M. Dobužinskij had done set designs.

15 Both are reproduced in Etkind, M.G., *op. cit.*, p. 113.

16 Fulop-Miller, Rene, et al., *The Russian Theatre, its Character and History*, J.B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia, 1929. Figure nr. 46, 58, 80 and 94 show these extremely ornate designs by Bakst, Sudeikin and Vasnetzov. See also footnote nr. 13.

17 Prince d'Arenberg, "Artistes Russes" in *Le Bulletin de l'Art Ancien et Moderne*, July 9, 1910, pp. 206-7, Paris, France.

18 Vaillot, Leandre, "Les Decors Russes" in *L'Art et les Artistes*, August, 1910, pp. 223-7, Paris, France.

\* Lithuanian translation of this article appeared in *Draugas* (Chicago, ILL, Aug. 27, 1977).