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Two Important Anniversaries in Lithuanian Art

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Abstract

The Čiurlionis Gallery was founded in 1957 on the south side of Chicago, where the majority of post-World War II refugees from Lithuania were settling, as a cultural center for the community and repository for Lithuanian art during a period when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union. During the fifty years of its existence the Gallery collected and preserved hundreds of art works that would otherwise have been lost. Stasys Goštautas, reviewing the mission and the activities of the Gallery, draws a parallel between the 50th anniversary of the Gallery and the 100th anniversary of a historic exhibit held in Vilnius in 1907, when Lithuania was under occupation by Tsarist Russia.

In 1907, over one hundred years ago, the First Lithuanian Art Exhibition took place in Vilnius, organized with all the enthusiasm of youth by nineteen young artists, among them M.K. Čiurlionis, A. Žmuidzinavičius, P. Rimša, P. Kalpokas, A. Varnas and J. Zikaras. Their intent was to prove that Lithuania, which since 1795 had lain culturally dormant under Russian colonial rule, had a viable artistic life of its own and deserved freedom like any other nation. Ten years later, in 1918, Lithuania indeed proclaimed its political independence to the world. During the subsequent interwar period the arts were flourishing until Lithuania again fell under Russian occupation in 1940 and many of the leading artists of the time left the country, gathered in Displaced Persons [DP] camps, and eventually emigrated to the United States. A sizeable émigré community developed in Chicago, among them artists, writers and intellectuals who desired to continue their activities, and in 1957 formed the Lithuanian Artists Association (*Lietuvių Menininkų Sąjunga*). They wrote poetry and novels, staged plays, painted canvases, composed music and designed churches and other buildings, among them the Jesuit Youth Center (Jaunimo centras), on the South Side of Chicago. Within its walls, on 20 October 1957, the Čiurlionis Art Gallery and Museum was founded, the first Lithuanian art gallery/museum in Chicago. Today there are four galleries and/or museums.

This year we celebrate two unique anniversaries – the centennial of that first exhibition of Lithuanian art in Vilnius and the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of the Čiurlionis Art Gallery in Chicago. Each had a function to fulfill in its time and place and both shared a common goal: continuation of and support for the arts during Lithuania's occupation.

To comprehend the significance of the Čiurlionis Art Gallery, we have to discuss what was accomplished during its existence. Over the fifty-year period, the Gallery has hosted some 500 art exhibits as well as other cultural events. Among the first painters, sculptors, and graphic artists who supported the Gallery and exhibited and donated their work were people who had already made a name for themselves in Lithuania or had studied after the war in Germany, specifically in Freiburg, within the French Zone of occupation, where the enterprising Vytautas K. Jonynas established his studio and trained about fifty students who became part of the later so-called Chicago School. Still younger artists, having finished their studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, turned to the Čiurlionis Art Gallery for their first chance to show their work. Among them were Kęstutis Zapkus, Vytautas O. Virkau, Dalia Kolbaitė, Jonas Kelečius, Vida Krištolaitytė, and others. All of them wanted to be accepted and recognized by their own community. Everyone dreamt to eventually have his or her work recognized in the homeland.

The Čiurlionis Gallery's mission was spelled out in its statutes: to collect and preserve the best of each artist's work and eventually return it to Lithuania. The Gallery would acquire art on its own, accept donations, and expect to receive a gift of a work from each artist it exhibited. This principle was strictly adhered to by all subsequent directors and curators (Mikas Šileikis, Zenonas Kolba, Viktoras Petravičius, Adolfas Valeška, Bronius Macevičius, Petras Aleksa, Vanda Balukienė, Regina Jautokaitė, Marytė Gaižutienė, Vanda Aleknienė, Vincas Lukas, and Algirdas Janušas). Over the fifty years of its existence, the Čiurlionis Gallery collected and preserved hundreds of art works that may otherwise have been lost. Nobody

expected the return to Lithuania to happen in the foreseeable future, but all cherished the hope that it would come to pass one day. When the unexpected dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union occurred twenty years ago, a good part of the museum collection indeed left for Lithuania.

After Lithuania regained its independence, the Gallery continued to function as an important center of Lithuanian art, presently under the leadership of Laima Apanavičienė. It is of special significance to a new generation of artists from Lithuania to have the opportunity to exhibit their work in Chicago. Among the recent prominent visiting artists were Vytautas Ciplijauskas, Rimantas Dichavičius, Povilas R. Vaitiekūnas, Nijolė Šaltenytė, and this year Petronėlė Gerlikienė.

The lasting significance of the Čiurlionis Gallery is its museum function. In the thirty-eight years between 1957 and 1995, the Gallery collected 380 objects from 116 artists. Today it houses over 500 works by some 130 artists. The numbers speak for themselves. The Čiurlionis Gallery has made a very substantial contribution to the life of the Lithuanian-American community, funding all cultural activities itself. At present, the Gallery is in urgent need of renovation. It is time to involve the community and search for support from state and national organizations supporting the arts.