

# Collaboration and Social Engagement in Bulgarian Printmaking in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## ABSTRACT

The article examines how artistic collaboration and social engagement are present in 20th-century Bulgarian printmaking. It traces its footsteps from its academic inquiries, through its avant-garde and expressionist periods, to its development in conditions of ideological thematic and stylistic restrictions behind the Iron Curtain. Conclusions are drawn about the possibilities and forms of joint artistic activities of printmakers and the terrains print offered for experiments, research and engagement in diverse political and sociocultural contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary research, in the context of the problems of art from the last half-century, printmaking has often been connected with collaborative and social practices. Printmaking has been taking social and expanded territories, such as public space, installation and participatory art, for decades. Moreover, different researchers of printmaking have pointed out that it immanently contains social paradigms in connection with its mass history, the collaborative nature of the creation of print, questions of authorship and originality, semiotics and psychoanalysis (Genova, 2013; Gilmour, 2008; Pelzer-Montada, 2018; Reeves, 1999). Collaboration and social engagement in print could assume different forms. Collective activity is most often expressed in terms of the specificity of the print studio and the sole processes of creating a fine print; printmaking processes require complex and multi-component facilities and often a skilled master printer to collaborate with the artist. The social aspects of print can be presented either in the form of depicted social themes, which has prominent examples in the history of Western art or, for example, in participatory forms of art, as part of socially oriented workshops, installations and performative practices. Collectivity and social engagement in art have a history in

the 20th century in the actions of different civil movements, in times when art became sensitive to the consequences of global wars and later in the ideological tools of totalitarian regimes. Collectivity and engagement are necessary elements of totalitarian art, where genuine socially engaged artistic manifestation could be sought in protest or anti-status quo initiatives.

If print contains immanent qualities related to collaboration and social engagement, in what ways are they expressed in the practice of Eastern European print, more specifically in Bulgarian print? How did these medium qualities develop in conditions of wars<sup>2</sup> and the evolving aesthetic system in Bulgaria in the first half of the century? How did they later manifest themselves in a totalitarian system, where art was not autonomous? The text pays attention to the style and aesthetic directions of print of the specified timeframe. The researched period shows opposing phenomena of such practices during political and sociocultural sea changes.

The research is developed in chronological and thematic order. The period from 1920 to 1944 is considered first, followed by the period from 1945 to 1989<sup>3</sup>. The two are divided thematically, focusing on the topic of collaboration and then on social engagement. At the time of writing, no research focuses specifically on these two aspects of Bulgarian printmaking. Genova I. pays brief but concise attention to the social aspects of printmaking from the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> She shares original insights into the experimental and modernist approaches to print from the 1950s to the 1970s as a way to escape aesthetic norms<sup>5</sup>. Krastev, K. has dedicated several articles to the aesthetics of social engagement and critical realism in Bulgarian art from the 1930s to the 1970s<sup>6</sup>. Vasileva, S.<sup>7</sup>, Popov, Ch.<sup>8</sup>, Marinska, R. have researched the union activity of artists in Bulgaria after the Liberation<sup>9</sup>.

A brief introduction to the development of printmaking technologies in Bulgaria is necessary to outline the boundaries of print advancement and its stylistic and thematic periods in the 20th century. The Revival Period<sup>10</sup> featured an established printmaking tradition from Revival engraving families, schools and print workshops in monasteries, where the main production was religious images, maps, school books, and newspapers. However, that experience was not transmitted, and for decades printmaking was rarely practised, although other forms of fine and traditional art continued to be developed<sup>11</sup>. After the First World War, the techniques of printmaking spread among more artists and prints began to appear in exhibitions, along with painting and sculpture. The 1920s are regarded as the time when a strong interest in print among Bulgarian fine artists was cultivated. The decade was characterised by eclectic practices in printmaking and great stylistic diversity, and in the 1930s more lasting trends were established with less stylistic heterogeneity (Genova, 2002, pp103-114). As photo-reproductive means were widely used in Bulgaria at the time, printmaking could start its new life as an independent fine art form. The notion of a “graphic”<sup>12</sup> work of art in Bulgarian, combines works executed in both printed technology and graphical drawing materials like ink or pen, and caricature as a specific type of graphical drawing<sup>13</sup>, and by the mid-20th century, artists were still working with printmaking techniques along with other forms of graphic means. Print was the main art form for only a few artists. Not until the 1960s did printmaking become broadly executed in the specific printing technologies and whole generations of artists working solely or mainly with print appeared.

## **I. ARTISTIC COLLABORATION, SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND PRINT FROM 1920 TO 1944**

After the Liberation in Bulgaria at the end of the 19th century, an academic European tradition developed in the field of art. A key role in this process was played by collective creative organisations in the form of unions, artistic groups and associations, which despite their often different contradictory aesthetic and ideological demands worked to spread modern and contemporary aesthetics and ideas on Bulgarian soil and to popularise and support artistic and cultural activity in Bulgaria. Among many other national and local collectives were the Union for Contemporary Art (founded in 1903), the Circle of Native Art (founded in 1912), the Union of Independent Artists, known as the Independents (founded in 1920), the Union of Women Artists in Bulgaria (founded in 1928), and the Union of New Artists, known as the New (founded in 1931). In 1931, one of the largest professional and culturally educated organisations among the Bulgarian artistic intelligentsia was established: the Alliance of the Unions of Artists in Bulgaria<sup>14</sup>. This structure combined most of the other active unions, each retaining its relative independence. With its main goal to gain systematic support from the government in the process of arranging exhibitions and holding competitions, it developed active relations with the state on legislative initiatives, regulation of the competition system

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of monuments and historical paintings, conducting social policies and providing for its members.

This model of development and support of art in Bulgaria was significantly different from the Western one, based on economic and market principles. The limited artistic production and the establishment of the state as the most certain and in many cases the only patron of works of art were among the main differences between the conditions in which the fine arts were created in Bulgaria and the institutional and market mechanisms of developed European countries (Vasileva, 2012, pp9-11). Union artistic activity played a key role in the development of art and culture in Bulgaria after the Liberation (1878), and this role continued to be vital until the 1944 coup d'état. The participation of the government as a supporting factor in these unions and associations was essential. Among the main actors in the most important Bulgarian art unions were the printmakers. In three unions, the Circle of Native Art, the Independents and the New, print artists were a dominant presence<sup>15</sup>.

## COLLABORATION AND PRINTMAKING

The first printmakers of national importance who developed print in aesthetic and conceptual terms were related to a circle called Native Art<sup>16</sup>. These artists were strongly influenced by German Expressionism and Art Nouveau, and influences of Late Impressionism, Symbolism, and Post-Impressionism were present in their work (Dimitrova, 2012). Though not deliberately, modernist trends in Bulgarian art were for some time concentrated in Native Art, as it attracted the most modern and progressive artists of the time<sup>17</sup>. In addition to printmakers, painters and sculptors, the circle was joined by poster and decorative artists, who deepened the direction of modernist stylistic influences, and by caricature and illustration artists<sup>18</sup>. One of the prominent leaders of the Union, Vasil Zahariev, today considered one of the fathers of Bulgarian printmaking, was also a scholar, a writer in the field of art studies and a teacher. The members of this union were highly active in social and cultural life<sup>19</sup>. They organised the first Bulgarian graphic art exhibition (1927), consisting of drawings and prints (Dimitrova, 2012).

## THE INDEPENDENTS

Among the founders of this union were famous Bulgarian printmakers<sup>20</sup> and associates of Geo Milev, the Bulgarian poet, writer, publicist and representative of the expressionism movement in Bulgarian literature. The cornerstone for the Independents was the principle of free development of artists and art and to exhibit without jury and awards. Their name was inspired by the Society of Independents<sup>21</sup>, and like the principle of the French, the Independents assembled on the premise that their members did not work in one stylistic direction but with very different artistic styles, each following their individuality, seeking to reveal the unique and tolerant of the demands of their colleagues (Marinska, 2012). These values made them inconvenient for the regime,

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and most artists from the Independents were forced out of artistic life and politically repressed after 1944. Many remained isolated from artistic life and for decades were the subject of criticism, left unknown to new audiences.

## **THE NEW<sup>22</sup>**

The Union of New Artists was conceived on the initiative of the already illegal Bulgarian Communist Party<sup>23</sup>. However, this fact was deliberately concealed by the New so they could receive state legalisation and attract a wider circle of the left intelligentsia. At the core of the union were radical artists and members of the Communist Party, which strongly desired to direct and encourage the development of fine arts in a certain class direction (Vasileva, 2012b, p91). Despite the political-ideological core, the Union was joined by many artists with solely aesthetic visions, who had pure aesthetic goals for the modernization of art. With this colourful collaboration between ideologically oriented and other purely aesthetically focused artists, all of them young, the New is considered to have visually and conceptually elevated Bulgarian fine art. It is believed that the 1930s and the time of activity of this union were the years in which modernist styles were formed in Bulgaria. The Union was active in socialising art and society<sup>24</sup>. Important printmakers and graphic artists from this union included Veselin Staykov, Preslav Karshovski, Pencho Georgiev, Alexander Zhendov, and Bencho Obreshkov.

## **SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

Early examples of social themes and critical realism in Bulgarian fine art can be found in the painters of the 1910s. Such works, although sporadic, are grouped around themes related to native life or mythology and carry a charge and a spirit completely different from later socialist realism. These works are aesthetically in the spirit of classical academicism, influenced by Impressionism<sup>25</sup>.

The foundations of socially engaged Bulgarian art with a political character were partially laid by caricaturists. In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, generations of prominent caricaturists had strongly leftist visions. One of the first was Alexander Bozhinov, followed by R. Aleksiev, Beshkov, B. Angeloushev, and D. Uzunov. Some of them were among the most active figures of the New and the socialist ideologies and were working with a wide medium and genre frame: caricature and satire drawings, printmaking, and academic drawing. After the 1944 coup d'état, despite their huge contribution to the establishment of communist ideologies in society, many of them were repressed by the Party.

The modern artistic course of the time led Bulgarian artists to seek the expressive qualities of print technologies. In the 1920s, ideas of modernism in the form of expressionist, symbolist and impressionistic influences were leading, and in the 1930s and 1940s, social engagement and social realist urban themes were of interest. In the 1930s, examples of strong social engagement in Bulgarian art appeared more

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broadly, and the main practised genre was social realism, manifested through images of urban poverty and landscape. Prominent Bulgarian printmakers and artists working with print were developing works dedicated to social issues, like those in Germany and France<sup>26</sup>. Locally, the Communist Party had taken root deeply and, despite being banned by law, continued to broadcast structures that targeted left-wing intellectuals. Left-wing artists and the mastery of artistic life in fine arts and literature were among the main targets of the Party. At the time, Bulgarian printmaking had reached visual maturity through already well-mastered graphical aesthetics and print techniques. Social themes were widely presented in printmaking, drawing and, most consistently, with political aspects, in newspaper graphics. Many oppressive work scenes, workers, and images of poverty, rural and especially urban, appeared in printmaking<sup>27</sup>.

Artists from the Union of the New made a significant contribution to socially engaged art in Bulgaria from both thematic and aesthetic aspects. The New showed innovation in two directions. The first was the social theme: rural and romantic themes were stepping aside for themes of urban life; more attention was paid to the personality of the characters; significant attention was paid to social issues and the working class. The second was the innovative art forms that acquired a style in the European spirit. Social themes were depicted by progressive artists through generalisation and monumentalisation<sup>28</sup> of the form, following the example of Paul Cézanne (Krastev, 2021, 156-304). This union created socially engaged art at a high aesthetic level.

A unifying feature among progressive artists active after the 1920s was their association with printmaking, graphic design and caricature. Artists who actively worked in a social direction both in their works and in public and cultural activities worked with the mediums of print, graphic design and illustration for books, magazines and the unions' editions, posters and caricatures for the mass press. Artists used the available techniques for creating graphic images in both the fine and the applied arts. What attracted them was the expression of graphic imagery, the accessibility of the techniques and materials, and the possibility of replication in print and its relation to mass printing, which allowed the dissemination of the artists' ideas to a larger audience.

## **II. THE UNION, FORMS OF FREEDOM AND PRINTMAKING FROM 1944 TO 1989**

### **JOINT ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES**

The art from the socialist regime is conditionally divided into three periods: 1944 to 1946, 1947 until the April plenum (1957), and 1957 to 1989, between the April plenum and the fall of the Berlin Wall (Krastev, 2021, p365). In the first period, genres like portrait, landscape, and still life were still practised but would soon become inappropriate by the aesthetics of socialist realism. In the 1940s, the appearance and development of art in Bulgaria were completely reshaped according to the Soviet model. The Bulgarian Communist Party occupied all power

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structures and merged with the state, and the State Party directed all processes in the field of fine arts and imagery. The largest Alliance of the Unions of the Artists in Bulgaria was reorganised and a new unified Union of the Artists in Bulgaria<sup>29</sup> was created in its place, with the federal principle of membership replaced by an individual membership and all previous artists' unions liquidated. Its Board of Directors worked with an Art Council, and the Political Bureau, approved by the People's Committee of the Patriotic Front, determined the directions of the 'ideological reorientation' (Popov, 2012). All the power of the management, production, and consumption of artworks was concentrated in the Union of Bulgarian Artists. In the period from 1947 to 1957, a photo-documentary, illustrative and academic interpretation of the ideological and artistic tasks of the time of the cult was practised (Krastev, 2021).

In 1956, at the April plenum of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the need to expand what was permissible in the fine arts was recognised. This thawing of aesthetic norms was the aftermath of Lenin's death and the renunciation of the ideologization of his persona. Art that developed in these new conditions was later considered an evolution, continuing the traditions and basic stylistic devices of the 1920s and 1930s. In addition, a new generation of artists developed their aesthetics in the synthesis and monumentalisation of form (Krastev, 2021, 365-370). Printmaking of the time had already reached maturity in technological terms and had become a main and official artistic genre.

Art unions and groups, with exception of the official Union of Bulgarian Artists and its affiliations, were still forbidden after the April plenum and became present on the art scene only after 1989. Even so, from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, the support, financial and otherwise, of the Union of Bulgarian Artists and its derivatives was strong. The art life of the country lived through a thriving period in terms of the number of group and personal exhibitions of state-acknowledged authors and artworks bought for state collections. Artists who were not following the acceptable norms could not take advantage of government support and were not allowed to exhibit. In 1961, the Association of Young Artists was established as a substructure of the Union of Bulgarian Artists to support artists under 35 years of age. They performed social functions, organising exhibitions and creative business trips, mediating participation in national and international events, concluding contracts with institutions and industrial sites, discussing youth creativity and maintaining the ideological thematic and aesthetic norms. No unions, open studios or presses were specifically formed around printmaking, but printmaking was one of the official genres that benefitted from state support, with regular exhibitions dedicated solely to print.

## **SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

Clear countercultural movements in Bulgaria during the regime were absent, compared to other countries in the region (Piotrowski, 2009, cited in Genova, 2013). If sociality in art was a mandatory subject,

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then true sociality, which comes by necessity, was possible precisely through the creation and participation in countercultural and protest activities in art. After the 'April generation'<sup>30</sup> and the thawing in aesthetic norms and themes, a generation of social artists worked in print. From an aesthetic point of view, this generation was important for the development of Bulgarian art. Along with other aesthetic trends of the time – decorative and abstract – it continued the achievements from the 1930s. However, artists working inside the totalitarian frame are not of particular interest to the research.

Print of the time had already reached formal maturity, and several generations of printmakers were active. International print biennials of the 1950s and 1960s were seen as a 'gap beyond the Iron Curtain' and were a major factor that allowed the travel of works and the exchange of ideas outside the Iron Curtain (Genova, 2013). International print biennials crossed the boundaries of both stylistic trends and political walls. The first decades after WWII in Central and Eastern Europe corresponded to the promotion of culture from the USA, West Germany and other capitalist countries, by creating their own art forums. Of particular importance to that exchange were the printmaking biennials, which became a scene for the meeting and exchange of both Eastern and Western artists. Leading figures of postmodernism and artists from Central and Western Europe and the USSR took part in these forums (Genova, 2013).

In the 1960s, technical knowledge of printmaking in Bulgaria deepened and the technological bases in the Art Academy developed further. Biennials provided an exchange for Bulgarian artists, who were introduced to Western art trends. Bulgarian printmakers developed an interest in the purely formalistic possibilities of the material, colour and texture of print. Prints from the time showed a desire to move away from academicism and realism and invest in expressiveness and artistry (Genova, 2013).

Genova makes another important observation about artists' attention to form as a bearer of meaning. The interest in technical mastery and ingenuity in prints protected them to a certain extent from direct ideological commitment. She notes that artists and critics of the 1960s were interested in the possibilities of the material and that the works of the period showed a desire for suggestion through form, colour and texture, instead of the work merely representing, carrying a literal meaning<sup>31</sup>.

In the early 1980s, the first printmaking biennial was held in Varna, thanks to the contacts and many years of experience of Bulgarian artists in biennials of printmaking in Europe and elsewhere. In Bulgaria, it was the first and only space, since and during the time of the communist government, which allowed and presented a wide range of artistic trends and artists from different continents without thematic and stylistic restrictions (Genova, 2013).

The second half of the 1980s was marked by the thawing of the

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regime, which created soil for the rooting of various art practices that go beyond traditional forms of painting, sculpture, and monumental art. Performances, sculptural installations and happenings, informal carnivals and parties were of interest. Nevertheless, this period showed no examples of the creation of openly socially and politically engaged art. Among the first examples of breaking the boundaries of traditional forms of exhibiting was the exhibition Artistic Proof<sup>32</sup>, which was new in two respects. First, the artists were invited to participate rather than being selected by a state jury, and second, print works were exhibited as installations, along with a performative action of collective creation of large relief print with audience participation.

In two ways, printmaking had provided artists with means to go beyond the totalitarian boundaries in art. First, it allowed an experiment with the materialistic formal qualities of the printed work made in technology, which, although untimely to the aesthetic and conceptual directions of the West at the time, spoke of a modernist view of colour and form. Second, the international presence of printmaking allowed the exhibiting and exchange of intercultural ideas beyond the countries of the Soviet Union. The immanent characteristics of the medium provoked material and formal artistic research, whereas proof on paper could travel and thus cross physical and ideological boundaries more easily than painting or sculpture did.

## IN CONCLUSION

The joint activity between artists in the country from the first half of the 20th century took place naturally and by necessity, but in the subsequent period, the free affiliation of artists was prohibited by law and all collective societies were directed by the Party. The collaborative practices in Bulgarian art connected to printmaking in the period were not provoked by the specificity of the facility or print processes. The interest in graphic means of expression, their inherent expressiveness and their connection to mass media, like printmaking, caricature drawing, graphic design and illustration, united important figures of Bulgarian art. What drew those artists to printmaking was the medium's ability to convey certain ideas and aesthetics.

The 1920s and 1930s showed ever-increasing interest among artists in social topics, and socially engaged art was closely linked to groups of graphic artists. In the 1940s, the social theme was already taking a significant part in art production in painting, sculpture and printmaking. In the second half of the century, art became a tool for the totalitarian regime. At that time, printmaking experienced technological progress and modernist aesthetic pursuits towards the specificity of the medium that allowed artists of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to circumvent the imposed aesthetic thematic model. International print biennials and forums contributed to the exchange of new freely expressed ideas on the Bulgarian art scene.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> PhD student, Department of Printmaking, National Academy of Arts, Sofia, Bulgaria.

<sup>2</sup> Balkan war, Inter-allied war, World War I.

<sup>3</sup> The socialist regime in Bulgaria lasted from 1944 to 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Genova, 2002, pp103-140.

<sup>5</sup> Genova, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Krastev, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Vasileva, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Popov, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Liberation from Ottoman Rule - 1878.

<sup>10</sup> XVIII-XIX century.

<sup>11</sup> These included painting, sculpture, ceramics, and woodcarving. The years of the Balkan and Inter-allied wars delayed artistic development.

<sup>12</sup> The term for printmaking in Bulgarian [grafika] is translated as 'graphic art'.

<sup>13</sup> Genova, I. distinguishes two beginnings of Bulgarian graphic art: journalistic graphics (posters, cartoons, newspaper drawings) and fine engraving. Genova, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> From 1931 to 1944.

<sup>15</sup> Prominent printmakers from these unions include from Native Art - Vasil Zahariev, Pencho Georgiev, Nikolai Raynov, Ivan Milev, Sirak Skitnik, Stoyan Venev; from The Independents - Vasil Zahariev, Sidonia Atanasova, Preslav Karshovski; from The New - Veselin Staykov, Alexander Zhendov, Preslav Karshovski, some of whom changed unions or were in two at the same time.

<sup>16</sup> Rodno Izkustvo.

<sup>17</sup> Like Milev, Skitnik, Penkov, and Zahariev, Bulgarian Middle Ages and folk art were being rethought in the spirit of modernist pursuits, with iconic, decorative, and expressive stylistics, and with inspiration from Revival icons and print, old carvings, and manuscript books (Dimitrova, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Artists from Native Art working prominently in printmaking included Vasil Zahariev, Pencho Georgiev, while artists working in the field of

cartoon and ink drawings included Dechko Uzunov and Sirak Skitnik.

<sup>19</sup> The most prominent authors, like Sirak Skitnik and Vasil Zahariev, wrote art criticism, participated in music troupes, balls, and themed evenings, and created the "Gallery of the Six", through which they organised exhibitions and performances of other artists and presented their own works.

<sup>20</sup> Vasil Zahariev, Petar Morozov, Preslav Karshovski, Sidonia Atanasova. Marinska, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Societe des Independants, founded in 1884.

<sup>22</sup> Novite.

<sup>23</sup> Here later referred to as BCP.

<sup>24</sup> For example, they created the first common exhibition of children's paintings and drawings, with a published catalogue, celebrated the centenary of Cezanne's birth, issued a Jubilee Newspaper and were active in publishing art criticism, the last of which was true for representatives from all mentioned unions.

<sup>25</sup> Ivan Angelov, paintings 'Oath for Earth' and 'Hail'; Atanas Mihov, painting 'Poor pickers of forest sticks', Hristo Stanchev, painting 'On the fields', Boris Denev, paintings 'Burial' and 'The Sufferings of the Righteous Job'. Krastev, 2021, p200.

<sup>26</sup> This was a period in which social realism was becoming relevant throughout Europe. As a result of economic crises and the aftermath of the First World War, artistic groups and artists engaged in printmaking emerged in Germany and France, e.g., German Expressionists and Frans Masereel in France.

<sup>27</sup> Such printmakers were Veselin Staykov and Pencho Georgiev. Genova, 2002, p116.

<sup>28</sup> The term 'monumental art' is used in Bulgarian art studies to mark artworks that relate to public art forms such as sculptural, ceramic, or mural ensembles. The mixing of these genres was possible and carried a certain moral narrative. The term is also used to describe decorative or non-public art and relates to the stylistic and formal qualities of an artwork. Atanasova, 2006, p77; Angelov, 1995, p139.

<sup>29</sup> Later renamed the Union of Bulgarian Artists.

<sup>30</sup> The first generation of artists who developed after the April plenum was working with new aesthetic directions and with wider boundaries in terms of thematic and subject interpretation.

<sup>31</sup> About the material abstract of Bulgarian printmaking see Genova, 2013 and Genova, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> 1987, by idea of Kiril Prashkov and Philip Zidarov. Nozharova, 2018, p32.

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