

## **Giedrė Jankevičiūtė**

### **Vilnius- Old Port of Jaffa and The Galilee Mountains-Vilnius**

The exhibition of Moshe Rosenthalis *The Colour of Freedom* hosted by the City Hall in Vilnius and after in the National Museum of Art in Kaunas, appears part of the cultural programme “The Homecoming” that has been running quite a while in Lithuania with the goal of introducing local art lovers to the artistic achievements of their compatriots based and working abroad. It is very sad that the artist himself was not destined to attend the opening of his solo exhibition in the town of his youth... Moshe Rosenthalis passed away only several months ago, on 23 August 2008.

Small has been rendered the once numerous and vigorous circle of those who worked hand in hand with Moshe Rosenthalis in Vilnius and saw the star of the talented painter rise. Only two of his former close friends, the patriarchs of Lithuanian painting, Algirdas Petrulis and Augustinas Savickas contributed to the catalogue of the exhibition sharing their memories from the mid-twentieth century. Their words appear of yet higher significance, given the fact that this exhibition in Vilnius is first one to give such a comprehensive picture of his early work illustrated through examples from the state-run and private collections thoroughly researched by the co curator Violeta Juškutė.

The exhibition embraces not only Rosenthalis Vilnius period, but also the work created by the artist in Israel. Displayed are the works painted in his winter studio in Jaffa and his summer studio in Safed, overlooking, in winter, the Mediterranean Sea and the Old Port of Jaffa, in summer opening onto the Mountains of Galilee and the magic Mount Miron, Rosenthalis' Mont Sainte-Victoire looming over the approaches of Cézanne's native Aix-en-Provence. The paintings from Israeli collections have been selected and brought over (shipped??) to Vilnius by the son of the painter, Avner Rosenthalis – the historian, personal manager and public relations representative for his father since 1980. The Vilnius exhibition was also arranged on his initiative. Avner is the curator of the show.

The visitors unfamiliar with the person of Moshe Rosenthalis and his artistic career may find themselves challenged by the display. It is, indeed, hard to believe that naturalistic portraits in subdued colour schemes and the vibrant, decorative paintings of trees, sea, mountains, musical instruments and attractive nudes, radiating with joy of life, are the work of the same brush, and even the abstractions of enchantingly fascinating colour harmonies are also produced by the same person. It is one additional aspect that makes the exhibition of Moshe Rosenthalis unique to Lithuania. So far not a single of Rosenthalis' contemporaries has admitted Social Realism as part of his or her creative output and part of one's identity that cannot be denied, just as we should not deny our memories, pleasant or disagreeable.

Moshe Rosenthalis was born on 18 November 1922 in Mariampol. As a boy, he attended a Jewish school in his native town. The painter related the circumstance and story of his first encounter with real painting. He was watching his neighbour, Levas Mergashilsky – several years his senior art student, back home on a holiday from art school in Kaunas practicing. Upon seeing the younger boy's interest in art, the student taught him hold the brush and work in layers of paint. The sculptor Vytautas Kašuba, also of Mariampol, taught the budding artist self-confidence. He was the one to see little Rosenthalis sketching, alongside Mergashilsky, for the portrait of the same person and became interested in the boy's work. He took a closer look at the drawing, and most likely, intentionally teasing the art student, said "The little boy's work is better than yours". He indeed was the first professional artist to recognize the future painter's talent. Moshe Rosenthalis carried the approving words in his heart throughout his lifetime.

In 1940, Moshe Rosenthalis started his art studies in Kaunas, at Institute of Decorative Arts, the former Kaunas Art School. He managed to graduate from his first year course. The wave of Nazi occupation that pushed the Lithuania-occupying-Soviets east, claimed, with the withdrawing army, the young student of art. He only returned to his native Lithuania in four years, wearing a Soviet military uniform (he was in the Lithuanian Division). Moshe Rosenthalis disliked recalling the military. Otherwise than mentioning that after he got wounded in the Front he had to draw propaganda posters, he

spoke of the experience in no other way as efforts to survive. He did not find all of his family in Lithuania – His father and his hunt with all her family became Hollow coast victims. They were killed at the very start of the war and buried in unmarked graves. The discharged soldier settled in Vilnius and enrolled into painting course at the State Institute of Art of Soviet Lithuania. He was an achieving student, and was awarded twice for his projects in drawing. He graduated in 1950 with a final project *The Liberation of Political Prisoners from Kaunas Prison in 1940* (page ), painted under supervision of Vytautas Mackevičius. Today the canvas is displayed at the Soviet Art Gallery of Grūtas Park. Those who selected the artwork, made no mistake as during Stalin's epoch this painting was found to provide sufficient proof of the painter's abilities and paved him the way into the Artists' Union of LSSR.

The union membership provided strong impetus to his career. His paintings were started to showcase at the annual overviews of Lithuanian artists' work in Vilnius and Kaunas and featured by the exhibitions from Soviet Lithuania in Moscow and Riga, passing a strong competition. The folio edition entitled *Lithuanian Art*, dedicated to the representation of Soviet Lithuania in Moscow includes a composition by Rosenthal *Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky at a Clandestine Meeting in Vilnius* (pages ). This canvas was on display at Moscow Art Academy, key exhibition venue of the former Soviet Union. It was the kind of acknowledgement that led to his work being purchased by museums. The collections of Lithuanian and Moscow museum-type establishments acquired, besides his figure compositions, landscapes showing mostly the Old Town of Vilnius and the Baltic Sea. At the time, the artist lived in the Old Town of Vilnius and spent his holidays on the coast of the Baltic Sea.

Portrait painting for the young artist was an additional source of income. Given the widest representation at Vilnius exhibition, his portraiture painting reveals, with prominence, the shortages and strong sides of his early work. The official images of high-profile figures immediately alert the viewer to the restrictions imposed on art by the doctrine of Socialist Realism. However, when portraying children, close friends or attractive women, the artist managed to display his ingenious talent, and, like in his landscapes, we see him relish in his unrestrained ability to render nature. Occasionally, vivid, bright colours burst through the veil of subdued tones foretelling the future

development of a strong colourist. It is obvious that in painting these canvases, the artist felt unhindered by the observation of a censoring eye.

Speculations as to what direction the painter's path would have taken, had not he made a defiant decision to repatriate to Poland, and via Poland, to travel back to the faraway land of his remote forefathers – Israel. The family used the right of his wife Sarah, born and raised in Polish Vilnius to leave for Poland.

Sarah and Moshe Rosenthalis left Vilnius in 1957, and already the next year they set off from Warsaw to the unknown, leaving, behind the Iron Curtain, the land of their youth and friends and, what seemed to be a promising career.

The start was far from easy. The cares of settling in a new country did not exhaust the artist's problems. In the process of making of the 2006 biographical film *Self-Portrait*, the artist admitted having realized, already when in Warsaw, the desire to paint differently from Vilnius period but having no clue where to start.

The hot sun of Israel burned out the greyness of his canvases and the subdued semitones of his early art, bringing contour into prominent relief, giving body to his brushwork. Yet should one say that it sufficed to Moshe Rosenthalis to follow in the footsteps of the giant modernist colourists, Gauguin or Matisse, for his own eyes to open, one would be simplifying the story. In order to “break the ice” of his palette, Rosenthalis needed the Mediterranean. Yet of even higher significance was the immediate contact with Modernism, impossible under soviet regime. The most what soviet art establishment afforded art students, Rosenthalis and his course mates including, was a glimpse at the collection of Impressionist painting at the Hermitage in Leningrad, otherwise closed to the general public. It was a revealing experience, yet far from sufficient to realize the potential of painting as medium.

The avalanche of Modernism in Israel made the painter feel immature and naive. It took time to dissociate from the single concept of painting that had been hammered into his head for many years. One of his senior colleagues predicted it would take no fewer than ten years. Rosenthalis hoped that three years would suffice for his liberation. It actually took him seventeen. He gave his first exhibition of new paintings in Jaffa in 1966. Later he admitted that it was not until the 1973 and 1974 exhibitions in Paris that he showed the art which he created after having shed his old self. These works are not included into

Vilnius exhibition; most of them have long ago found their way into different collections around the world. It would be interesting to see them, though on the other hand, chronology is not necessarily helpful when one attempts to grasp the entirety of Rosenthalis' work. The artist's method changed radically just once, in the 1970s, after the self-set three-year period, but prior to the later established dividing line of seventeen years. It is interesting that he followed the direction similar to his contemporaries in Lithuania who pursued the most avant-garde trends. Some of the paintwork clearly partakes of Post-Cubist, Fauvist trends. It is obvious in the selection of motifs – of musical instruments, bowls of fruit, female bathers, as well as in the treatment of form tending towards geometrical, in the role assigned to contour and colour. Yet Moshe Rosenthalis walked a much longer way, compared to Augustinas Savickas or modernists of younger generations, like Vincas Kisarauskas who was attracted by Post-Cubist experiments, Teodoras Kazimieras Valaitis, the admirer and follower of Picasso. Rosenthalis was aided not only by the opportunity of seeing the actual work of Picasso, Dufy, Mirò, the abstract painting of Wassily Kandinsky – their art, of course was a powerful transforming force, even in the vortex of the cutting edge artistic experiments. Of yet greater significance than lessons in Modernism was the freedom to paint the fun way and the subjects he found interesting.

The footage of interviews with the artist reveals his preoccupation with the opposition of “figurative” and “abstract” art. Several generations of artists in the countries of Socialist experiment fought cultural battles over this dilemma. “Figurative” art became synonymous with the constraints of the freedom of expression and compromise. Moshe Rosenthalis held the same belief; though once, however, he admitted that even rethinking of the heritage of classical Modernism and immediate contact with contemporary Western art had not altered his way of looking which remained rooted in Realism.

The non-weakening importance of the link with the real world as part of Rosenthalis' artistic rationale emerges in his drawings and multiple small scale life studies in oils. This link, however, was important only in initial stages of his work. When observing nature – a panorama of Galilee Mountains opening from his Safed studio, or drawing life a full-bodied female model standing still on the studio platform, or scenes of the town market – the artist quickly caught all these forms and colours committing them, in the same breath,

to small pieces of cardboard. It is Realism – the approach of a man who responds to the flux of life around him openly, with joy and excitement. This attitude is far from being naive, though it might strike as such. One of the critics of Rosenthalis' art pointed out that the world emerging in his art was beautiful and good, yet too narrow, small and closed. Indeed it is. This world partakes of no politics, no distant lands, it is alien to human drama. There is no room for pain, sadness, fear, injustice or anger, ugly feelings or actions, as the artist had more than enough of that in his life. Yet there is plenty of art preoccupied with war, ecology, social problems and human drama in general. Therefore the ability to enjoy, sincerely, the beauty of a woman, a child, an arrangement of flowers or some lovely artefact is a sign of wisdom and grace. Of yet greater importance is the ability to communicate this joy in painting which is vibrant and resonant and grows in time like music. For this very reason the art of Moshe Rosenthalis will enrich and expand the world to the viewer who is ready to appreciate it and accept his art.

There is a shocking (Stuning) scene in the earlier referred to film *Self-Portrait*.

Rosenthalis. The artist is about to complete a canvas showing two models – two nudes (page). It takes just a second critical look for a decision to be made: he must change the colour scheme. Without any hesitation, in free and precise movements, the artist starts covering pink background in thick white paint. In several brushstrokes, he alters the shape of the body. A black semicircle close to the canvas edge. New colour harmonies, different relationships of forms result in a different painting. Now the relationship of the human figure, the object and abstract forms is rendered with greater prominence. Trivial reality is transformed, without any apparent effort, into a painting of rare beauty. The painting abounds in fantastic, refined aestheticism radiating with life and passion that are there for everyone to feel and to see.

What else should we add? Maybe encourage everyone not to miss the exhibition of painting of Moshe Rosenthalis. One also has to admit that the mature work of the painter renders art critic reluctant to think in terms of art history and criticism. However, the current Vilnius exhibition is not only a feast for the lovers of painting. It is also a class in the history of the 20th century-Lithuanian art offering opportunity to reassess the cultural distance that separated the artistic life on this – and the other side of the Iron Curtain...