

# WILHELM KOTARBINSKI, THE FORGOTTEN GENIUS OF UKRAINIAN MODERN

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My article is devoted to the analysis of the artistic heritage of Wilhelm Kotarbinski (1848-1921) in the context of contemporary mass visual culture. W. Kotarbinski worked mainly in the genre of historical, religious and mythological painting, and he was popular during his lifetime; his large painting *Orgy* (1891) was acquired by the Museum of the Emperor Alexander III (the present-day State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg). Kotarbinski became widely known after painting murals in St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kiev, in which he participated together with Viktor Vasnetsov, Mikhail Nesterov, and other famous artists. The relevance of my paper is due to the insufficient study of Kotarbinski's legacy at the level of both art history and philosophical and aesthetic analysis. For a long time, Kotarbinski's painting was neglected by art critics, and his contribution to the development of Ukrainian Modern Art and Russian Symbolism was not analyzed in the Soviet period. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kotarbinski's paintings were rediscovered, a number of articles and albums on Kotarbinski's art were published in Ukraine, Russia, and Poland, which is indicative of a comeback by images created by Kotarbinski, and his style's relevance to contemporary mass consciousness. Now Kotarbinski is considered one of the founders of Ukrainian Modern, and his paintings are kept in museums in Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Sumy.

The goal of my analysis is to investigate the reasons behind the revival of relevance of Kotarbinski's the artistic heritage. My research methodology includes historical, cultural and comparative analyses, the gaze theory (Laura Mulvey), gender criticism in line with the

approaches of Linda Nohlin and Teresa de Lauretis. The novelty of the research lies in comparing the aesthetics and philosophy in V. Kotarbinski's painting with the images of today mass culture and identification of cross-cultural dialogue in the works of W. Kotarbinski. (Fig. 1. Portrait of Wilhelm Kotarbinski).

Wilhelm Kotarbinski was born in Poland (a part of the Russian Empire at that time), lived in Italy for a long time, and spent the last twenty years of his life in Kiev. Artistic training Kotarbinski took place at the Warsaw Academy of Arts, after which he graduated from the Academy of St. Luke in Rome. Before the October Revolution of 1917, Kotarbinski was a popular artist, recognized and treated kindly in the highest circles of the Russian Empire: in 1897, he was awarded the Order of Stanislav, and eight years later he became an academician. During his life in Kiev, Kotarbinski was close friends with many Kiev-based artists and art critics, in particular with the family of art theorist Adrian Prakhov, artists Pavel and Alexander Svedomsky, with Mikhail Vrubel, whose portrait he painted just before Vrubel's death. In addition to St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kiev, Kotarbinski painted Orthodox and Catholic churches in Ukraine and Belarus<sup>1</sup>, namely St. Nicholas Church in Radomyshl (Zhytomyr Region, Ukraine), the Cathedral of Three Anastasias in Glukhov (Sumy Region, Ukraine), St. Alexander Nevsky Church in Kiev.

Despite his success, the poetics of Kotarbinski's paintings was underappreciated by Soviet Revolutionary art<sup>2</sup>. Some authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century published works on Kotarbinski's art in the context of his participation in Ukrainian art associations<sup>3</sup>. The revival of interest to

1 ДОБРИЯН, УДОВИК, Вильгельм Котарбинский, 2015.

2 САВИЦКАЯ, На пути обновления, 2003

3 КОВАЛЕНКО, 3 історії художніх об'єднань, 1972

his fate and creativity began in the last decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>4</sup>, with the emergence of academic studies into Kotarbinski's works<sup>5</sup>, numerous web blogs devoted to Kotarbinski's painting<sup>6</sup>. In the 2000s, exhibitions and albums dedicated to W. Kotarbinski were published in Ukraine and Russia<sup>7</sup>. In 2014, Kharkiv-based journalist Irina Potanina produced a documentary, in which she focused on the mystical themes in Kotarbinski's paintings<sup>8</sup>. I want to consider the reasons of such interest in Kotarbinski's painting in the course of the last twenty years.

The main theme of Kotarbinski's paintings was the historical genre with intriguing compositions, mainly on mythological motifs, ancient Rome and the Middle East. The plots of many ancient Roman and Oriental Kotarbinski's paintings are closer to the Orientalist painting of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, some art critics called Kotarbinski the continuer of the traditions of the remarkable 19<sup>th</sup> century orientalist artist Heinrich Semiradski<sup>9</sup>. However, there was also a difference due to the fact that Kotarbinski lived at the end of the century and he appropriated the artistic ideas of the Orientalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the prism of aesthetics and philosophy of European modernity. In addition, Kotarbinski was a Pole educated as a professional artist in Italy and, due to which his contemporaries viewed him as a representative of the "Polish" and "Italian" schools of painting<sup>10</sup>. I can say that Kotarbinski introduced European motifs of orientalism into Ukrainian painting: Russian Orientalists V. Vereshchagin, V. Polenov, S. Shchedrin represented images of biblical Palestine, Central Asia, India, China as the samples of the Orient<sup>11</sup>, W. Kotarbinski represented exotic images of Ancient Egypt and the Late Roman period as the "Orient" in his paintings, which

undoubtedly enriched Ukrainian artistic thought<sup>12</sup>. (Fig. 2. Kotarbinski *Orgy*) Kotarbinski expanded the "artistic geography" of the East, including not only the "East" of the Russian Empire, but also the "East" of Europe, and not the geographical East, but the "imaginary"<sup>13</sup> and exotic East of the distant past.

The exotic images and fantastic plots of Kotarbinski were distinguished by bright decorativeness, sophisticated plots, exhibiting closeness not only to Symbolism (popular in the Russian arts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), but also to the aesthetics of German and Austrian Modernism, respectively, that is, Jugendstil and the Secession. I see the impact of decorativeness and female images from Alphonse Mucha and Franz Stuck on the paintings of Kotarbinski. This is due to the fact that Kotarbinski lived in Europe and, undoubtedly, was influenced by the aesthetics of European Modernism, which manifested itself in two features of his painting: mystical plots and erotic female images.

Interest towards female sexuality was spreading in Modernism in general. One of the symbols of European Modernism was the famous painting by Franz Stuck *Sphinx* (1904) preserved in the State Museum in Darmstadt (Germany): The painting shows a beautiful mature woman with a perfect body, lying naked in the pose of the Egyptian Sphinx, looking into the distance (Fig. 3. F. Stuck *Sphinx*). Theorists of poststructuralism<sup>14</sup> and visual theory<sup>15</sup> argue that the image of nudity in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century indicates a low social (gender) status of a woman in a male (patriarchal) society and status of a naked woman as a potential "victim" of sexual violence<sup>16</sup> in a painting, as an "accessible object" for male gaze and, therefore, for relations<sup>17</sup>. However, in Stuck's painting *The Sphinx*,

4 САВИЦКАЯ, Геній, котрий знав, 2009

5 ДРОБОТЮК, Вільгельм Олександрович Котарбінський, 2010.

6 ДЬЯЧЕНКО, Хрупкий декаданс, 2013.

7 МАРІНИНА, КРУЖКОВА, Вільгельм Олександрович Котарбінський, 2010.

8 ПОТАНИНА, Вільгельм Котарбинский, Харьков, 2014.

9 ДОБРИЯН, Участь Вільгельма Котарбінського, 2015.

10 ФЕДУРУК, Українсько-польські мистецькі взаємини, 2009.

11 СУКОВАТАЯ, ФИСУН, Женские образы, 2013.

12 SOSIK, Ancient Egyptian, 2020.

13 NONLIN, The Imaginary Orient, 1989.

14 ЛАУРЕТИС, В зазеркальє, 2001.

15 МАЛВИ, Визуальное удовольствие, 2000.

16 СУКОВАТАЯ, ФИСУН, Восток и женственность, 2013.

17 СУКОВАТАЯ, ФИСУН, Женские тела, 2014.

the undisguised eroticism of the female body is combined with an amazing calmness, even arrogance of the heroine in relation to spectators of her body, and due to it the female body, from a source of vulnerability, turns into a weapon of seduction and demonic power over the viewer. Interestingly, the pose of the sphinx in the center of Stuck's painting is also used in several of Kotarbinski's paintings: *The Song of the Female Slave* (Fig. 4. Kotarbinski *The Song of the Female Slave*) and *Cleopatra* (Fig. 5. Kotarbinski *Cleopatra*). However, the emotional content of Kotarbinski's paintings allows to speak only of external, decorative similarities: If Stuck used the idea of a naked woman as a way to establish power over the viewer's gaze and dreams, Kotarbinski's external eroticism of the female body loses its imperious arrogance and is combined with the motives of suffering, sorrow, unsatisfied expectations, which were characteristics of the poetics of Russian Decadence. Thus, I can say about the combination of the motives of Western European and Eastern European modernism in Kotarbinski's images: If Western European Modernists emphasized the bestial component of human sexuality, demonized female eroticism, the same in Kotarbinski's compositions serves a decorative principle, while the inner meaning of his paintings is connected to the fatality of death, destroying the emotional sphere. Although Kotarbinski created many pictures with naked and half-naked women in oriental decorations, they were more infernal than sexual or "demonic."

Notably, a significant part of Kotarbinski's paintings was devoted to the images of the netherworld, as evidenced by the titles of his works: *The Grave of a Suicide*, *Kiss of Medusa*, *The Angel of Sadness*, *The Wounded Vampire*, *Satan*, *Wandering Lights*, *Columbarium*, *Medusa*, *Martyr*, *Mermaid*, *Angels of the Pyramids*, *After Death*, *The Angel of Sadness* (Fig. 6. Kotarbinski *Medusa*). On one hand, some authors argue that the "melodramatic element" in Kotarbinski's images is due to his Polish and Catholic origins<sup>18</sup>, since religious exaltation is characteristic of Polish artistic "imagery." On the other hand, it is known that interest in mysticism and the otherworldly was part of the culture of modernity, both Western (Symbolism, Art Nouveau) and Russian (Russian philosophers and poets of the Silver Age),

and therefore it was naturally manifested in the works of Kotarbinski. In my opinion, the mystical part of Kotarbinski's creative heritage is relevant to today's mass culture. I believe that the mystical images of Kotarbinski (mavka, mermaids, angels, demons, sphinxes, drowned women, and others) are visually very close to the fantasy genre which is popular in the contemporary mass consciousness. The repertoire of Kotarbinski's motifs ("meeting after death", "visiting a cemetery", "a deadly kiss", "feeling of death", and others) are largely consistent with the motifs of the contemporary genre of horror (Fig. 7. Kotarbinski *The Dark Star*), which is unsurprising because both Kotarbinski in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and modern-day creators of film and literary horrors draw on the same source: "dark" romanticism, Gothic and medieval mysticism with descriptions of incubi, succubae, erotic visions of nuns recorded in European literature. Images of Kotarbinski, unclaimed in the atheistic Soviet culture with industrialization and science as priorities, became in demand during the period of critique of scientism, rehabilitation of individualism and introversion.

In summary, Kotarbinski significantly enriched Ukrainian Modernism and Russian art with motives and images dominant in European Modernism. The influence of German Jugendstil is clear in Kotarbinski's painting, especially in the choice of plots, in Kotarbinski's interpretations of female and mystical themes. Kotarbinski's paintings can be viewed as the embodiment of cross-cultural dialogue in painting, as the transfer of European visual ideas to the soil of Russian religious philosophy and Ukrainian mysticism of everyday life.

Representatives of various artistic communities ranked Kotarbinski as a Polish artist (due to his origin), and as "the first Russian Symbolist" (due to his citizenship of the Russian Empire), and as the first Ukrainian Modernist (based on his long life in Kiev and his contribution to the painting of St. Vladimir's Cathedral). In my opinion, Kotarbinski can be called a "citizen of the world," as he naturally combined in his painting the pictorial traditions of several cultures.

18 САВИЦКАЯ, Вильгельм Котарбинський, 2000.

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