

## SUMMARY

### *The Painting of Vilko Gecan (1894-1973)*

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Vilko Gecan belongs to the generation of artists who won full recognition immediately after the First World War. Very important for their development was an earlier generation of artists from the first decade, who tended towards pure painting, painting freed from symbols and allegories, stories and history. A special place in this first generation of Croatian modernity was held by Miroslav Kraljević (1885-1913), who died early. His work was an accumulation of many very topical and stimulating ideas. He introduced into Croatian painting a structural doctrine close to Cézanne's sense for the thickness of the painting, and an intensified expressiveness somewhat reminiscent of the art of the German group *Die Brücke*. Artists of the second generation of modernity learned about the ideas of expressionism from periodicals like *Der Sturm*, by travelling and working abroad, and from the general art climate that made expressionism very widespread in Croatia.



Vilko Gecan got his first art training at the Banja Luka grammar school, together with Milivoj Uzelac with whom he remained friendly all his life and in whose shadow critics unjustly placed and evaluated his work. Gecan began to study art in Munich in 1913. but left after the first year because he was drafted. He was captured in northern Italy at the end of 1914. and spent the rest of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp on Sicily. The war experience left deep traces in his life and surfaced in much of his work between 1919. and 1921. After the war Gecan spent a short time in Prague, where Uzelac had spent all the war years continuing his education. With Uzelec, Marijan Trepše and Vladimir Varlaj, Gecan formed a compact nucleus which affirmed expressionism and Cézanne's manner of building a painting at exhibitions of the *Spring Salon*. In the early post-war period landscapes and portraits by these four painters, named »the Prague Four« by critics, showed traces of Miroslav Kraljević's painting, which they interpreted in a mature and impressive way. This was an important period in Gecan's work, when he made the cycle of drawings *The Clinic* (1919/20), a folio of drawings *Enslaved on Sicily* (1921), and many paintings, a special place among which belongs to *The Cynic* (1921). In it all the key elements of Croatian expressionism can be recognized, but also Gecan's inept hand.

In 1922. (the painting *In the Tavern*) Gecan freed himself from expressionism and accepted the eclectic form of cubism nurtured by the pupils of André Lhote. In the early twenties this hybrid cubism, which critics called cubo-constructivism, was present in Croatian art among artists close to Gecan, for example Sava Šumanović and Milivoj Uzelac. In the following year Gecan painted an interesting self-portrait (*Self-portrait with Factory and*



*Palette*, 1923) which reflected the influence of magic realism («Neue Sachlichkeit«).

A turning point in Vilko Gecan's career and life came in 1924, when he and his wife Anka née Vragović went to the USA and lived in New York and Chicago until 1932. The first four years in America were devoted to diligent studies of the nude, as if he wanted to make up for what he had never learnt in his youth when he left school. Those artistically unpretentious drawings gave Gecan confidence. In 1928 he visited his friend Uzelac in Paris for a short time and his work showed complete maturity and superior mastery of the medium. The many paintings and drawings he made then (self-portraits, portraits, vedutas, still lifes) divulge a completely new sense of expression. This »second expressionism« in Gecan's opus may be connected with similar eclectic events in European painting in the twenties and thirties when a diversity of influences from earlier times were connected, like Van Gogh's expressiveness with Vlaminck's, Derain's and Dufy's fauvism.

Returning to America, Gecan continued what he had started in Paris but this fertile and happy period lasted only for several years. In the early thirties the painter contacted Parkinson's disease which started as meningitis. The result was a strong tremour of the right hand which grew progressively worse. In 1931, when his illness began, he had not even lived half his life. He was only thirty-seven, and he lived until 1973, to the age of seventy-seven.

The greatest and most productive part of Gecan's extremely interesting and diverse opus was condensed into thirteen or fourteen years, in the period between 1919 and 1933.



Gecan continued to paint despite his illness, but its serious nature came to expression with relentless cruelty. Few of his paintings made after 1933. deserve to be placed among those he magnificently started after the First World War. In his short productive period Vilko Gecan touched on various poetical principles that could sometimes be recognized in only a few relevant works. However, his work always confirmed a high degree of individual expression which gives all his art an important place in Croatian painting in the first half of the twentieth century.