

# Fighting for Visibility: Lithuanian Artists in Argentina

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——— The paper analyses the role of the Lithuanian diaspora and its artists in the art field of Argentina in the 30's and 40's, and overviews their input into the development of the nativist discourse. The paper employs social art history to show the impact the transatlantic migration had on the social mobility of migrant artists and their careers in South America and Lithuania.

*Keywords:* migration, Argentinian art, Art Deco, Nativism, Lithuanian artists.

Over the last decade, the discipline of art history experienced a migratory turn. The rising interest in the migration of artists, artworks, artefacts, ideas, and art historians is indicative of the general desire to approach art history more globally, and thus rethink its geography and entire canon. Increasingly utilised as a conceptual tool, the notion of migration facilitates the renewal of the historiographic and theoretical foundations of art history. However, the attempts at rewriting the 20th-century art history not only correct and expand the epistemic field, but also distort it. First, the global art history is usually written exclusively as the history of the privileged countries and city centres. The research focuses primarily on the poly-centricity of the international avant-garde spread around the multiple metropolises, while research on the relation between the centre and periphery remains rather selective. The cultural entanglements between the Baltic states and South America happen to belong to such an “invisible” periphery. Second, the migration research is interested primarily in artists who belong to the social, economic and cultural elites, and thus are a useful addition to the narrative about the transcontinental network of artists. Meanwhile this narrative is receptive neither to artists with limited recognition who come from the lower social strata, nor to various hybrid migratory phenomena.

In the light of these shortcomings, I will present the case study of the prominent Lithuanian sculptor Matas Menčinskas (1897–1942), also known as Mateo Menchinskis, who lived in Buenos Aires during the period of 1927–1934. The Lithuanian side of the artist’s biography has been researched rather well (Skirmantė Smilingytė-Žeimienė, Irena Kostkevičiūtė, Rita Melinskaitė<sup>1</sup>), while the Argentinian period of his life, particularly his links with the local art field, are still in the early stages of research<sup>2</sup>. This

1 See, for example, Skirmantė Smilingytė-Žeimienė, *Lietuvos bažnyčių dailė. XX a. I pusė*, Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2009; Skirmantė Smilingytė, “Kalvarijos bažnyčios šventoriaus vartai”, in: *Liaudies kultūra*, 1997, No. 3, pp. 31–35; Eadem, “Keletas duomenų ir prielaidų Mato Menčinsko biografijai”, in: *Kultūros barai*, 1996, No. 8/9, pp. 73–79; Irena Kostkevičiūtė, “Matas Menčinskas”, in: *XX a. lietuvių dailės istorija 1900–1940*, Vol. 2, ed. Ingrida Korsakaitė, Vilnius: Vaga, 1983, pp. 190–200; Eadem, “Prie menininko ištakų”, in: *Pergalė*, 1971, No. 9, pp. 140–148; Rita Melinskaitė, “Prisimenant skulptorių Matą Menčinską”, in: *Kauno laikas*, March 18 1992; Eadem, “Matas Menčinskas ir bažnytinė dailė”, in: *Dienovidis*, November 22 1996; *Matas Menčinskas 1896–1942*: catalogue, ed. Rita Melinskaitė, Kaunas: M. K. Čiurlionis Museum of Art, 1996 etc.

2 Laura Petrauskaitė, *Matas Menčinskas ir jo amžininkai: menininkų migracijos reikšmė 20 a. pirmos pusės Lietuvos dailės modernizacijai / Matas Menčinskas and His Contemporaries: The Significance of the Migration of Artists for the Modernization of Lithuanian Art in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, doctoral dissertation, Vilnius: Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, 2019; Eadem, “Iševystės patirtis modernėjančioje Lietuvoje: Mato Menčinsko atvejis”, in: *Menotyra*, 2015, Vol. 22, No. 4: *Migracija ir kultūra*, ed. Aistė Palušytė, pp. 338–354.

paper aims to reconstruct the Argentinian period of Menčinskas' biography and understand the reasons behind his emigration, the circumstances of his life in Buenos Aires, his links with the local artists, his artistic inspirations and, last but not least, what impact, if any, migration had on his artistic career. In the telling background of this case study, the phenomenon of migration appears in a new light, so as the power relations between the periphery and the global centre, and the nuances behind the interconnections between the Eastern Europe and South America.

### Kaunas–Madrid–Buenos Aires

Menčinskas began his artistic career in Kaunas in 1922, when he entered the Kaunas Art School under the leadership of Justinas Vienožinskis<sup>3</sup>. Previously he has been learning the craft of a furniture maker and working in a number of famous ecclesiastical design workshops in Lithuania and Poland. While living in Kaunas, he taught in a private school of trades which was providing free education for orphans and children from poor families. Kaunas Art School offered classes of drawing, watercolour, ornamentation, graphic design, painting, moulding and art history. Upon graduating from a rich four-year programme, students were able to enrol in the specialised courses where they could further develop their skills in painting, graphics and, starting with 1928, sculpture<sup>4</sup>. Menčinskas did not complete his programme as he got tempted by the studies abroad.

In the 1920s, Lithuanian government decided to grow its pool of various professionals and started funding the education of young specialists abroad. Aspiring artists were among those who qualified for the stipends. They often chose Paris as their destination, as well as the art academies and schools of Germany, Austria, Italy and Czechoslovakia<sup>5</sup>. Witnessing many of his colleagues depart abroad, Menčinskas came to appreciate the idea himself. Studies abroad were tempting – it was a chance to expand the horizon, learn from the famous sculptors, experience the spirit of art centres, and take part in the bustle of cultural life. The youthful energy and agility of Menčinskas' efforts are rather charming. It is evident from

<sup>3</sup> Kaunas Art School examination sheet, Autumn Semester, October 2 1922, in: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 61, folder 1, doc. 16, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Dailė ir valstybė: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940*, Kaunas: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2003, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178–197.

the wide geographical range of his potential studying destinations that he was willing to abandon the usual itinerary of Lithuanian artists. After the Ministry of Education declined his stipend claims for Paris and Rome, Menčinskas got interested in going to the USA. The loan from US Central Manufacturing District Bank for his studies in Chicago Academy of Fine Arts<sup>6</sup> promised a dream-come-true start, but due to the bureaucratic problems, artist's claim remained unapproved<sup>7</sup>. This did not stop Menčinskas and he decided to self-fund his studies in Spain: after studying marble sculpting in a private studio of (Lorenzo? Domingo?) Corroselles, he enrolled in Madrid School of Arts and Crafts (Escuela de Artes y Oficios de Madrid) in 1926. However, due to the lack of funds, he was forced to terminate his studies half a year later and return to Lithuania. At this point, anyone else would have given up but, thanks to his determination, Menčinskas soon made an even bigger and bolder step by moving to Buenos Aires – one of the major international metropolises.

The case of Menčinskas might seem like a unique micro-history of an exceptional character determined entirely by his personal circumstances, however it points to a much wider phenomenon of global modern migration. During the end of the 19th and throughout the first half of the 20th century, nearly every continent experienced unprecedented levels of migration. During this time, 60 million Europeans and 10 million Asians<sup>8</sup> left their native continents and settled in many places, including the USA, Argentina, Brasil, Uruguay and South Africa. Lithuanian migration made up a significant portion of these flows. This phenomenon has been explained by the economic factors, particularly emphasising the static and unproductive agricultural system in East and South Europe, along with the growth of rural population, bad harvest and poverty. Meanwhile latest research shows the complexity of reasons behind mass migration, including the epistemological revolution, sharp rise in social expectations, and the strengthening of the entrepreneurial spirit<sup>9</sup>.

6 Letter of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts to Foreign Department of Central Manufacturing District Bank, March 15, 1925, in: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 396, folder 1, file 1, p. 81.

7 Letter of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts to Metchislav Mentchinski, August 15 1925, in: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 396, folder 1, file 1, p. 80.

8 José C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers – Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1930*, Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998, p. 13.

9 Laura Petrauskaitė, *Matas Menčinskas ir jo amžininkai*, pp. 34–61.



1.  
Matas Menčinskas, c. 1930, Buenos Aires,  
Remigijus Knystautas' personal archive, Kaunas

It is important to note that Menčinskas was the first Lithuanian artist to settle in Argentina [Fig. 1]. Which means that, upon his arrival, there were no established artist communities capable of facilitating the process of integration or, on the contrary, creating competitive tensions. In the 1930s, there were merely six Lithuanian artists in Argentina: Menčinskas, Jonas Rimša (Juan Rimsa, 1903–1978), Ona Draugelytė-Kučinskienė (Ana Draugelyte de Kucinskas, 1904–1972), Zoma Baitler (1908–1994), Jonas Pogoreckis (1901–?) and Robertas Feiferis (1911–1997). Still unknown in Europe and Lithuania, at that time they were ambitious youth with art education and diverse social backgrounds. Menčinskas introduced himself to the immigration officers as the drawing teacher [Fig. 2], Baitler and Feiferis as students, Rimša as a tailor, and Pogoreckis as an agricultural worker<sup>10</sup>. They were all 19–30 years old when they arrived, and at such a young age it is relatively easy to adjust to the new environments socially, economically and culturally, and them not having been married also meant that they were responsible only for themselves. The only female artist was in an entirely different situation. Draugelytė-Kučinskienė came to Buenos Aires not as a migrant but as a diplomat's wife. In 1932, Jurgis Kučinskas was appointed as Chair of the South American Consulate at the Lithuanian Embassy and took his family with him<sup>11</sup>. The newcomers were not equally successful in

<sup>10</sup> Los Registros del Embarque de Inmigrantes 1882–1950, *Dirección Nacional de Migraciones*, [online], [cited 19-09-2020], [cemla.com/buscador](http://cemla.com/buscador):

<sup>11</sup> Povilas Gaučys, *Tarp dviejų pasaulių: Iš mano atsiminimų 1915–1938*, Vilnius: Mintis, 1992, p. 183.



2.

Matas Menčinskas' identity card No. 1500502 issued by the Argentine Republic, Lithuanian National Museum, Vilnius

integrating in local communities and finding their footing in the new country. Some of them became famous artists, while those less talented and less lucky remained outside the canon and public discourse.

### Academic Studies and First Shows

Just like many of his Eastern European peers, Menčinskas chose to depart to Argentina from Bremen, the popular Northern European sea port. On a scorching summer day of 1927, Menčinskas boarded the transatlantic liner *Werra* and arrived to Buenos Aires on July 23. He was greeted by the first contrast – the South American mild winter with its typically windy and humid weather.

For Menčinskas, the metropolis of Buenos Aires was the source of curiosity and confusion, and he found its heterogeneous art world rather difficult to navigate. During the first years of emigration, he chose the safest path that seemed most reliable and dignified: studies in the academy, shows in the state salons, and participation in official art competitions. This served as a warmup before he started making some bolder moves.

In 1928, Menčinskas entered the National School of Decorative Arts (*Escuela de Artes Decorativas de la Nación*)<sup>12</sup> which was also known under its old name – Academy of Fine Arts (*Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes*). In the early 20th century, as part of an attempt to raise the prestige of the applied and industrial arts, the profile of the Academy got adjusted accordingly, and the fourth-year students were now able to study graphic design, scenography, ceramics and other areas of applied arts, however the Academy retained its focus on the general artistic education. Entry-level students learned drawing from plaster models, perspective and ornamentation, while the upper course students drew from live models and painted outdoors. In other words, under the leadership of Pío Collivadino, the school maintained a rather traditional educational orientation. Creative autonomy and freedom were reserved to the graduate students with exceptional talent. The lucky few who passed the demanding exams would enter the Ernesto de la Cárcova School of Fine Arts (*Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes 'Ernesto de la Cárcova'*), also known as “heaven”, where they enjoyed the atmosphere of complete creative freedom.<sup>13</sup> Higher education strengthened Menčinskas’ sense of professional competence and the feeling of belonging among other artists. He was surrounded by professional tutors and ambitious peers. In September 1930 Menčinskas enjoyed his first success as an artist as one of his nude drawings was displayed in the annual student show. The annual shows organised by the Academy on Alsina Street would be visited by the Minister of Education, members of the National Art Committee and other high-ranking state officials. A diary entry testifies to Menčinskas’ euphoria: “I feel triumphant among the artists.”<sup>14</sup>

Menčinskas kept developing his artistic talent as an auditing student at the Ernesto de la Cárcova Superior School of Fine Arts<sup>15</sup>. Since its establishment in 1923, the School has been offering courses in practical skills as well as aesthetic education and art history. The School’s Museum featured a rich exposition of the casts of the ancient sculptures of the

12 Matas Menčinskas’ diary (1927–1932), in: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 396, folder 1, file 1, pp. 3–4; Certificado No. 2419 de la Escuela de Artes Decorativas de la Nación, 1931, in: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 61, folder 5, file 31, p. 3.

13 Laura Malosetti Costa, *Collivadino*, Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 2006, p. 145.

14 Matas Menčinskas’ diary, p. 4.

15 Certificado de la Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes de la Nación, 1931, in: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 61, folder 5, file 31, p. 4.



3.

Matas Menčinskas (on the right) next to Pedro Zonza Briano's sculpture *The Flower of Youth* (*Flor de Juventud*), Tres de Febrero Park, Buenos Aires, before 1933, Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius

Mesopotamian, Ancient Egyptian and later historical periods<sup>16</sup>. The School also organised regular excursions to the National Art Museum where students were able to study the plaster casts of the famous works from Antiquity and Renaissance displayed there for educational purposes. Because classical arts played a significant role in his development as a young artist, Menčinskas remained a sympathiser of Classicism all his life.

The prestigious school of postgraduate studies was organised as a *bottega* – a school-workshop which aimed at developing professional and technical skills and was focused on close connections between students and their professors<sup>17</sup>. Under the leadership of Cárcova (who was succeeded by Carlos Ripamonte in 1927), art education represented a fusion of traditional and modern ideas. In addition to the rich curriculum, the School had a

<sup>16</sup> Part of this collection of plaster casts is on display in the permanent exposition at the Museo de la Cárcova set up on the premises of the legendary school on 1701 España Street.

<sup>17</sup> *Las bellas artes de la Cárcova*: catalogue, curator María Isabel Baldassare, [Buenos Aires]: Universidad Nacional de las Artes, Museo de Calcos y Escultura Comparada “Ernesto de la Cárcova”, 2016, p. 12.

diverse collective of educators. Menčinskas has likely had an opportunity to learn from the senior modernisers of the Argentinian sculpture, such as Rogelio Yrurtia, Albert Lagos and Ernesto Soto Avendaño.

Menčinskas left no written memoirs on his idols of the time, but there are photos where we see him next to the works of the famous Argentinian sculptor Pedro Zonza Briano – an expressionist bust of Lucia Correa Morales<sup>18</sup> and an allegorical composition *The Flower of Youth*<sup>19</sup> [Fig. 3]. The bust of Morales was installed in the Tres de Febrero Park in 1928, and a year later the park's exquisite rosary was adorned with a bronze sculpture of female nude on a black marble pedestal. When the first public park in the city was being established at the end of 19th century, it had to answer to high social and cultural demands: help improve on the physical health of the citizens, and develop their good taste through the beauty of nature and art. Shaped under the influence of Art Nouveau, Impressionism, Auguste Rodin, Aristide Maillol, and particularly the Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso, Briano turned out to be a perfect sculptor to fulfil these demands.

Menčinskas was also inspired by the public sculptures of his professors. In the late 1920s, Soto Avendaño, the chair of the sculpture studio at the Cárcova's School, started designing the monument *Heroes of Independence* (1928–1950) in the Northern Argentinian city of Humahuaca. According to the design, the top of the hill in the city centre was to be adorned with an impressive monument – a 9 metre sculpture of an indigenous warrior that was meant to commemorate the heroes of the Independence Wars. The nativist aesthetic recognisable in this monument first emerged during the commemoration of Argentina's first centenary (1910). In opposition to the cosmopolitanism of the older generation, the young cultural elites offered a nationalist direction in art that was meant to express Argentinian identity through the representation of national landscapes and regional ethnic types<sup>20</sup>. One can identify certain formulas typical of the nativist landscapes and figurative compositions: they are all deprived of particular

<sup>18</sup> A photograph from the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 396, folder 1, file 24, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> A photograph from the Lithuanian National Museum of Art, inv. no. Fi-1601.

<sup>20</sup> See Miguel Angel Muñoz, "Un campo para el arte argentino. Modernidad artística y nacionalismo en torno al Centenario", in: *Desde la otra vereda. Momentos en el debate por un arte moderno en la Argentina (1880–1960)*, ed. D. Wechsler, Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Jilguero, 1998, pp. 43–82.

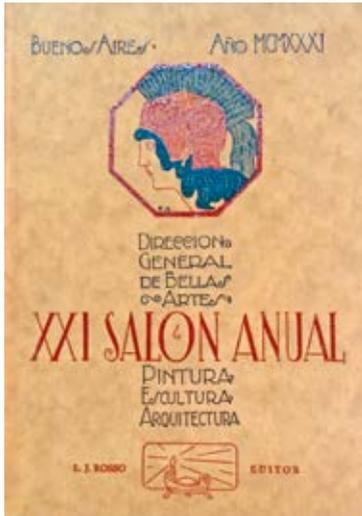


4.  
Matas Menčinskas, *Chinese Woman*,  
c. 1935–1936, wood, 50 × 30 × 26 cm,  
Lithuanian National Museum of Art,  
Vilnius

identities or representations of particular localities; they bear no signs of time, nor do they depict social conflicts. Their subjects merge with their environment, as if trying to be its continuation<sup>21</sup>. As far as one can tell from the artworks displayed in the Argentinian salons of the time, Nativism was a powerful trend that remained throughout the entire first half of the 20th century. In his classical work *Argentinian Art*, José León Pagano attributed Avendaño's sculptures *Altiplanian's Sadness*, *Fox Hunter*, *Aymara Indian* and other similar works to a separate thematic group which he named "racial types"<sup>22</sup>. At that time, the ideas of racial typology were popular, and this also reflected on Menčinskas' work, as we can see from the works such as *Young Caucasian* (1931), *Chinese Woman* (c. 1935–1936) [Fig. 4] and *Negrito's Head* (1938).

21 Diana Wechsler, "Impacto y matices de una modernidad en los márgenes. Las artes plásticas entre 1920 y 1945", in: *Nueva historia argentina. Arte, sociedad y política*, ed. J. E. Burucúa, Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999, pp. 269–275.

22 José León Pagano, *El arte de los argentinos*, Vol. 1, Buenos Aires, 1937, pp. 435–440.



5. XXI National Salon Catalogue, Buenos Aires, 1931



6. Matas Menčinskas next to his sculpture *Fisherman (Pescador)*, 1931, Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius

The studies at Cárcova School gave Menčinskas an opportunity to show his work to a wider audience. In 1931, Menčinskas' sculpture *Fisherman* was selected for the XXI Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes that featured over 200 artworks<sup>23</sup> [Figs. 5–6]. Situated in the spaces of Palais de Glace, the show was traditionally focused on the conservative art, although it featured some avant-garde artists too. For a young art graduate, participation in the National Salon along with the acknowledged authors was a significant achievement. Menčinskas got noticed by the fellow artists and thus expanded his social circle. Most likely convinced that the author of *Fisherman* was actively interested in the lives of workers and was socially conscious, the *Camuati* group, an informal gathering of leftist artists, invited Menčinskas to celebrate the opening of the salon and join their ranks<sup>24</sup>.

#### The Artists of Boedo and Menčinskas' Practice in Erzia's Studio

Menčinskas was familiar with some of the elite artists of that time such as Aquiles Sacchi, the Italian-Argentinian sculptor winner of the 1931

<sup>23</sup> XXI Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes: catálogo ilustrado, Buenos Aires, 1931.

<sup>24</sup> Matas Menčinskas' diary, p. 26.

National Salon Prize, however he found the artists from the working-class neighbourhood of Boedo more accessible. The influential literature and arts magazine *Claridad* was published in this area and it was an important hub for many socialist writers and artists inspired by the ideas of social transformation – Agustín Riganelli, Adolfo Bellocq, Guillermo Facio Hebequer, José Arato, Abraham Vigo and Santiago Palazzo, to name a few. The so-called “people’s artists” (*Artistas del Pueblo*) were renowned as working-class social revolutionaries that used art as political tool to address social problems. The “people’s artists” chose graphic prints as their main means of expression to depict the suburban life and the exploitation of workers, migrants, street children, poor indigenous people. Aiming to draw the masses into social change and appeal to their social consciousness, artists chose figurative art which was easier to understand than the abstract art. Their exhibitions were held in factories, trade union halls, and the local neighbourhood associations. The artistic movement of Boedo inspired many artists, including the renowned documentalist of harbour life Benito Quinquela Martín, and the young immigrants – Italian Antonio Sassone and Spaniard Francisco Reyes. Stepan Dimitrijovich Nefiodov-Erza, the Russian socialist sculptor who came to Argentina in 1927 under the invitation of the President Marcelo Torcuato de Alvear, chose to live in this area too<sup>25</sup>. Ideologically Menčinskas was not a sympathiser of socialist activism, but being in the democratic environment of his socialist peers allowed him to partially integrate into the community of Argentinian artists.

The migrants that have been settling in Argentina since the second half of the 19th century were now comprising a third of the population, which became a significant challenge for a young country. Immigration brought massive changes in social structure, culture, customs and values. Up until the 1940s, workers’ rights were lacking in protection, which lead to growing discontent among the poorest, continuous strikes among workers, and the popularisation of the ideas of anarchism. The social watershed was reflected in the city’s geography: Buenos Aires got divided into the wealthy North and the poor South. Farther away from the city centre, in the areas occupied mostly by immigrants, tradespeople,

25 Catalina Fara, “Stephan Erzia en la Colección del Museo de Bellas Artes de La Boca “Benito Quinquela Martín”, in: *El escultor ruso Erzia y la Argentina*, Moscú: Fundación Internacional Erzia, 2010, pp. 39–44.

teachers, doctors, and other practitioners of liberal professions, the atmosphere was predominantly that of neighbourly communality, and it was widely supported by cafes, clubs, public libraries and other public places of socialisation. Populated with intellectuals and artists, Boedo stood out with its cultural initiatives.

In the early 1930s, Boedian dramatist and director José González Castillo brought theatre professionals, writers and artists into an informal club (*peña*). Named as “Pacha Camac”, it was based at 868 Boedo Street, in the premises of the cafe Biarritz. During the Interwar period, many cafes in Buenos Aires had their own peñas – literature and art clubs. Similarly to the Parisian cafe culture, such gatherings were attended by the city residents from different social classes but with similar interests. Pacha Camac stood out with its democratic atmosphere and its role of a mediator that would bring the young poor painters, sculptors, musicians and writers into the art world<sup>26</sup>. In the covered terrace of the cafe Biarritz, the enthusiasts were organising the drawing, sculpture, drama and poetry workshops, as well as concerts, exhibitions and competitions, stage plays and public lectures. The *peña*’s title “Pacha Camac” was a reference to the figure of the Creator of the World worshipped in the Inca empire, and it signified a programmatic turn towards the indigenous heritage. It was not accidental that the *peña*’s logo depicted the historical site of indigenous culture – The Gate of the Sun in Bolivia – that harkens back to the Tiwanaku civilisation. The members of this peculiar club were not only the Argentinian but also artists from Andean countries – the Peruvian painter Alejandro González Trujillo and the Bolivian sculptor Marina Núñez del Prado.

Menčinskas was not personally acquainted with the famous Indigenists, but their ideas were known to him and had an effect on his work. His close acquaintance with Erzia, the co-founder of “Pacha Camac”, was a strong creative impetus for Menčinskas. After contacting Erzia during one of the shows, he got invited to practice in Erzia’s studio. At that time, the Russian sculptor’s studio was located in the Flores area, under the address of 780 Boyacá Street<sup>27</sup>. Until his arrival to South America Erzia lead

<sup>26</sup> See Luis Alberto Romero, Anibal Lomba, *Pacha Camac. Una peña nacida en Boedo para toda la ciudad (1932–1957)*, Buenos Aires: Academia porteña del Lunfardo, Junta de Altos Estudios Históricos de Boedo, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Ignacio Gutiérrez Zaldívar, *Erzia*, Buenos Aires: Zurbarán Ediciones, 2003, p. 48.

a typical life of a migrating artist and wandered between Russia, Italy and France. While living in Paris during the period of 1910–1913, Erzia was close with the artists from the Auguste Rodin's circle. Having previously worked predominantly with concrete and marble, during his Argentinian period Erzia transitioned to the quebracho hardwood, although his sculptures retained their expressive plasticity, rough surfaces and inchoate forms. The sculptor regularly showed his work in the state salons and renowned galleries of Buenos Aires, and had many a cultural figure of renown among his close friends. During his time in Erzia's studio, Menčinskas was able to witness the birth of the remarkable works of his teacher, and learn the subtleties of hardwood sculpting. Menčinskas' turn from Realism to Expressionism came as result of the strengthening of his professional competences and the widening of horizons. Lithuanian sculptor's attention to texture, material and emotion, which became part of his creative identity, were inspired by Erzia and – indirectly – Rodin. The expressiveness in Menčinskas' sculptures came from the use of compositional techniques, sudden gestures and textural contrasts. The 'academic' works – such as the life-size sculpture *Fisherman* and the nudes created during his studies – were now in the past. Menčinskas started making refined sculptures intended to tickle the viewer's senses and imagination.

In the art field of Buenos Aires, the significance of Erzia, whom Menčinskas admired, was evident not only from the sheer number of exhibitions, but also from the scope of his state-funded projects. In the 1930s, despite the ongoing economic crisis, the state government decided to fund art and promote the image of a prosperous country. The impetus was the visit of the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueira in 1933, which had caused a widespread cultural and political resonance and interest<sup>28</sup>. The Argentinian muralist movement in the mid-1930s was inspired by the Mexican socialist muralism, and the emergence of the modern wall painting in the Fascist Italy and the United States, where the Lithuanian émigré Ben Shahn has already been working away for the New Deal government<sup>29</sup>. During this period, ministries, schools, libraries and underground stations were

<sup>28</sup> Cecilia Belej, "Benito Quinquela Martín y el muralismo argentino. Imágenes del Riachuelo y sus trabajadores portuarios", in: *Historia y Espacio*, 2014, Vol. 10, No. 42, pp. 11–12.

<sup>29</sup> See Diana L. Linden, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005.

decorated with murals and reliefs made of ceramic and polychrome concrete. The Cárcova School professors Alfredo Guido, Soto Acébal and their fellow artists who were the recipients of the major commissions from state, focused on the country's history, legends, heroes, landscapes and motifs that represent the prosperity of Argentina. Among the trademark topics in the muralist projects of the Quinquela Martín circle were harbour, factories, scenes of labour, workers' physical power and motherhood<sup>30</sup>. Around 1933, Erzia's close friend Martín planned taking on a gigantic project – the bust of the Argentina's national hero José de San Martín set in rock in the Andes. However, the idea was never realised<sup>31</sup>.

In an effort to make a living and gain recognition, Menčinskas too tried to secure some profitable state commissions. His first attempt was the project of the Argentinian 50 cent banknote<sup>32</sup>. Later in 1931, the artist took part in the medal design competition dedicated to the military coup of September 6, 1930, thus inscribing his name into the “revolutionary” mythology of the general José Félix Uriburu. During the state coup staged by the general Uriburu, the democratically elected President Hipólito Yrigoyen was substituted with the oligarchy of the landlords, which was followed by the dismissal of the state legislative organ and the change of the Constitution. Paradoxically enough, being an immigrant himself, Menčinskas ended up making art for the reformist government that was attacking its ‘inner enemies’: socialists, immigrants, Jews, etc. According to the extensive account by Federico Finchelstein, in the 1930s the cult of Uriburu had reached such a degree that the priests were holding Holy Mass and performing memorial rituals at his grave<sup>33</sup>. The aforementioned medal project too contributed to the commemoration of the coup participants as “martyrs”. Menčinskas' project was never realised although the state thanked him for the “poignantly expressed spirit”<sup>34</sup> – in other words, for his loyalty towards the ultra-nationalists which Finchelstein compares to the German and Italian fascists. However, it is evident that the artist's motives were financial

30 Cecilia Belej, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

31 Adrián Merlino, *Diccionario de Artistas Plásticos de la Argentina: siglos XVIII–XIX–XX*, Buenos Aires, 1954, p. 135.

32 *Matas Menčinskas 1896–1942*, p. 17.

33 Federico Finchelstein, *Fascismo, liturgia e imaginario: El mito del general Uriburu y la Argentina nacionalista*, Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 2002.

34 Letter of Alberto C. Besse to Matas Menčinskas, October 26, 1931, in: Lithuanian National Museum, R-14124.

rather than political – he simply saw this as a way to make some money, just like many of his peers at that time.

Menčinskas was having a hard time establishing himself in the competitive art field of Buenos Aires, however his contacts with the local artists served other Lithuanians who sought recognition in Argentina. During his time in Buenos Aires, Menčinskas stayed in touch with the painter Jonas Rimša who arrived to Buenos Aires a few years later. Due to Menčinskas' connections, Erzia became a frequenter in Rimša's exhibition openings and Quinquela Martín even bought a few works by Rimša for the Museum of Argentinian Artists (Museo de Bellas Artes de La Boca de Artistas Argentinos 'Benito Quinquela Martín'). Established in 1938, the Museum houses one of the most exclusive collections of the Argentinian figurative art of the first half of the 20th century.

### The Quebracho Sculptures and the Nativist Discourse

Quebracho sculptures comprise the most mature and valuable part of Menčinskas' Argentinian period. His artist colleagues were primarily admiring his craft and his excellent technological background. According to his contemporaries, upon seeing the girl's head which Menčinskas sculpted from a piece of quebracho wood, Erzia "took his time to examine it thoroughly, feeling its features with his hand, evidently pleased with the work of his disciple."<sup>35</sup> In order to understand the significance of these sculptures in the context of the Argentinian art of the first half of the 20th century, I propose to employ the notions of Art Deco and Nativism.

Menčinskas used tree stumps and branches as a material, and loved leaving some segments untouched by the chisel, thus allowing the natural shapes to complement the artistic image. Due to this effect, the sculpture *The Head* (c. 1932) [Fig. 7] depicts a young woman hiding her hair under a remarkable hat. True to the spirit of Art Deco, such a piece could have easily found its way to the living room of a middle-class urbanite craving for sensuality and romantics. Or it could have appealed to an aristocrat looking for a yet another touch of luxury to his house interior. During the epoch of Art Deco, rich bourgeoisie loved acquiring artworks made of materials

35 Vytautas Kazakevičius, "Pažinoję tris klajūnus", in: *Kultūros barai*, 1977, No. 10, p. 60.



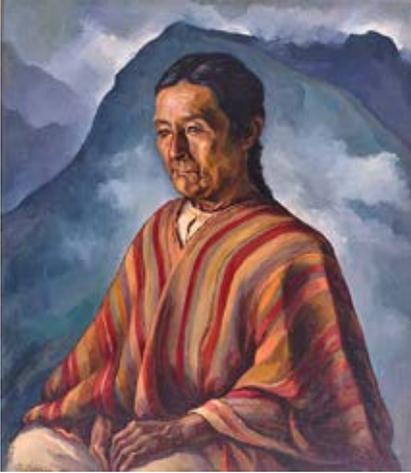
7.  
Matas Menčinskas, *The Head*,  
c. 1932, quebracho (?),  
51 × 35 × 23 cm, Tartle  
collection, Vilnius

such as the rarest and most expensive sorts of wood, lazurite, malachite and ivory. Just like other subtropical trees such as urunday and algarroba, Menčinskas' favourite quebracho is famous for its extraordinary hardness, which is also why this wood is known as "black marble". Its colour palette varies from yellowish brown to dark red. When finished, this hardwood acquires an extraordinary and luxurious gloss, and it fitted right in with the refined aesthetics of Art Deco. As is evident from the work of the renowned Argentinian proto-feminist photographer Annemarie Heinrich, Menčinskas' and Erzia's sculptures resonated closely with the aesthetic expectations of the modern society. In her albums of experimental photography, we see how Erzia's sculptures are used alongside the photos of nudes and dancers to create the impression of an unexpectedly expressive dance of wood and body [Fig. 8].

Today Art Deco is widely acknowledged as a cosmopolitan and an "immensely flexible style that elegantly accommodated the many media in



8.  
Annemarie Heinrich, photos from the album No. 8, 1910-1940, Archivo IIAC 07-1-2-08, Buenos Aires



9.  
Jonas Rimša, *Portrait of Indian Woman*, 1936, oil on cardboard, 92 × 79 cm, Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius



10.  
Jonas Rimša, *Portrait*, 1943, pastel, paper, 64 × 49,5 cm, private collection, Lithuania

which it appeared.”<sup>36</sup> However, in the Argentinian art historical tradition, it is recognised mostly as a movement in architecture and design, while the Art Deco sculptures and paintings are considered mostly as the examples of Neotraditionalism (*retorno al orden*), Futurism, Regionalism, Indigenism or Nativism. In the national discourse of art history, artists such as Menčinskas are significant not so much as the representatives of Art Deco, but rather as nativists.

As has been mentioned above, Nativism was born in beginning of the 20th century as a response to the call for national art, national school and national aesthetics. Inherited from the 19th century, Argentinian identity was based on two paradoxical negations: the Spanish part of identity rejected indigeneity, while the American part was turning away from Spanishness. The nativist turn was seeking to reconcile those two contradictions, offering land, its peoples and its heritage as unifying elements. The nativist ideologues held that their country was best represented not by the cosmopolitan cities, but by the northern rural provinces that preserved the very soul of the Argentinian land: “In the Northwest, different attractive

<sup>36</sup> Teri J. Edelstein, “Chicago Encounters Art Deco”, in: *Art Deco Chicago. Designing Modern America*, ed. Robert Brueggemann, Chicago: Chicago Art Deco Society, 2018, p. 34.

elements were combined for this new search of ‘*argentinidad*’: a complex landscape in visual terms, a set of human types around which the definition of ‘native’ or ‘creole’ could be reconfigured, and a past stratified in multiple layers: pre-Columbian, colonial and Hispanic American”<sup>37</sup> [Figs. 9–10]. After having held France and Italy as role models, Argentinian artists were now gradually turning their attention back to their own continent. The change came with the World War I that put an end to the artist studies in Europe, as they were all forced to return to Argentina. The trend continued throughout the entire Interwar period. In the 1930s, the northern provinces of Jujuy, Salta and Chaco became the points of attraction for the artists with different aesthetic perspectives. Some joined the local archaeological expeditions, others had built their own workshops and spent months drawing on the “spirit of Argentinian race”.

Among the pioneer artists whose itinerary was not limited to the North of Argentina and included the Andean region, were the Lithuanian painter Rimša and the French painter Leonie Matthis. In 1936, seeking to learn about the “depths of America”, Rimša left for Bolivia where he spent over a year. This creatively productive period was concluded with the exhibition in the La Paz Town Hall. Eventually, Rimša decided to remain in this country<sup>38</sup>. Matthis’ Andean itinerary of 1939 included various archaeological sites and cities of Bolivia and Peru. The *Zeitgeist* had caught up with Erzia too. While looking for wood in the wooded province of Chaco, Northern Argentina, Erzia got close with the locals and created their idealised and poeticised portraits. For the sculptor Luis Perlotti, the impetus for his interest in the “local types” was his acquaintance with the ethnographer Bautista Ambrosetti, and his work in the Ministry of Agriculture where he had to anthropologically document the physiognomies and daily lives of the indigenous people. Later his interest in the Andean imagery was further strengthened by his travels around the region. The anthropological approach led Perlotti to create the series depicting the Andean autochthon types (*Yungueno*, 1926; *Acuyico* 1926; *Quechua*, 1939; *Guaraní* 1941; etc.)

<sup>37</sup> Pablo Fasce, *Del taller al Altiplano. Museos y academias artísticas en el Noreste argentino*, San Martín: Unsam Edita, 2021, p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> See Laura Petrauskaitė, “Jonas Rimša’s Paintings in Public and Private Art Collections: Exotica or an Inconvenient Heritage?”, in: *Art History Studies*, Vol. 9: *Uncomfortable Heritage*, ed. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, 2021, pp. 71–106.



11.  
Luis Perloti, *Arrow Dance* (*La Danza de la flecha*), 1925, artificial stone, Museum of Luis Perloti's Sculptures, Buenos Aires

and their rituals. According to Pablo Fasce, Perloti's gaze was prone to exoticisation: as we can see from the sculpture *Arrow Dance* (1925) [Fig. 11], the representation of indigenous people is associated with idealised beauty, erotic undertones and mystic trance.<sup>39</sup>

Menčinskas too found Nativism attractive. In reaction to *Zeitgeist*, Menčinskas was making the portraits of archetypic Argentinians [Figs. 12–13] and interpreting the traditional topic of motherhood. His sculptures represented the notion of the inclusive Argentinian identity that included the peasants of the pampas, gaucho cattle-keepers, and the Andean indigenous people. The Nativism in Menčinskas' sculptures was evident not only iconographically but also materially. It is significant that he was using the local material – quebracho – which he would bring from the local forests. Before Menčinskas and Erzia, quebracho wood was used primarily

<sup>39</sup> Pablo Fasce, *op. cit.*, p. 33.



12.  
Matas Menčinskas, *Gaucho*, c. 1982, quebracho, 36 × 34 × 25 cm, Michael and Ona Ayre's collection, Vilnius



13.  
Matas Menčinskis, *Indian*, c. 1932, quebracho,  
31,5 × 17,8 × 29,3 cm, Michael and Ona Ayre's  
collection, Toronto

as a construction material for bridge girders, sewage pipes and railroad ties. These artists were among the first to demonstrate the beauty of this wood, its plastic and aesthetic qualities. Instead of using the traditional – cosmopolitan – materials such as marble and bronze, they chose a typically Northern Argentinian tree instead and showed its potential as a mediator of the Argentinian identity. The critics have noted that, in this case, it was not so much the sculptors as the Argentinian nature itself that was the true artist: “He pulls a human profile out of the primitive stump of hardwood and reveals a silhouette that seemed to have been hidden inside. It seems that it was nature itself – sun, wind and rain – have created these figures.”<sup>40</sup> It was this particular material chosen by these sculptors that have determined the aesthetic choices of some of their clients. In the 1930s, Erzia carried out an exclusive commission for the family of the famous South American dramatist and poet Horacio Quiroga and created a bust-shaped urn (1937) from algarroba, the writer’s favourite jungle tree.

<sup>40</sup> *El Mundo* (Buenos Aires), June 1 1931.



14.  
Jonas Rimša,  
*The Indigenous Street*  
(*Calle Indígena*),  
undated, oil on canvas,  
Museo de Bellas Artes  
de La Boca de Artistas  
Argentinos 'Benito  
Quinquela Martín',  
Buenos Aires



15.  
Jonas Rimša, *Indian  
Rite*, before 1945, oil on  
canvas, 90 × 101 cm,  
private collection,  
Lithuania



16.  
Matas Menčinskas, *Woman's Head*,  
before 1933, quebracho, 35 × 14 × 14 cm,  
Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius

It is likely that, due to their distinctly Argentinian character, Menčinskas' works might have easily found their way to various art collections – if not national, then at least private ones. Particularly having in mind that the nativist work of his close friends Rimša and Erzia are part of the national art canon. The Benito Quinquela Martín Museum of Argentinian Artists in Buenos Aires has acquired to its collection Erzia's sculpture *Chaco Man* (1939) and three works by Rimša: *The Last Farewell* (1937), *The Indigenous Street* (undated) [Fig. 14] and *The Nocturnal Feast (Jujuy)* (1941). Another variation of the latter artwork is known as *Indian Rite* (before 1945, Fig. 15), and it is part of the private collection in Lithuania. Knowing that the Northern provinces of Chaco and Jujuy are known to this day for their numerous indigenous population, the nationalist grounds for putting such a collection together are quite evident. Such a collection could easily include Menčinskas' *Gaucha* (c. 1932), *Indian* (c. 1932), *Woman's Head* (before 1933) [Fig. 16], *Sorrow* (1938) [Fig. 17], and other similar works that



17.  
Matas Menčinskas, *Sorrow*, 1938, oak, 54.5 × 52 × 39 cm, M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, Kaunas

embody the positive values of the epic past – strength, resilience and serenity that point to the “autochthon nature” of the local people.

Paradoxical, but even in the context of Argentina’s large scale immigration policy, Menčinskas and other Lithuanian émigré artists were not particularly welcome members of the “imaginary society” (to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term). The national dreams of modern Argentina were embodied by a wide range of Europeans, although while Italians, the French, and Spaniards were enjoying the most privileged positions, Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, Russians and other Eastern Europeans were regarded with suspicion. However, the Lithuanian immigrants in South America did have a certain advantage. Like all other European immigrants, they were privileged in Argentinian society compared to the immigrants from the Southern hemisphere or even the local indigenous population<sup>41</sup>. In this sense, I would argue that the fact of Menčinskas and other Europeans settling in Argentina partially contributed to the ongoing social, economic and cultural marginalisation of the indigenous population, as well as its exoticisation and objectivization in art.

### Art Market and Its Consumers

The process of integration of the Lithuanian sculptor into Argentinian society is closely related to the questions of distribution and commercial success of his work. Therefore, I propose to take a closer look at how Menčinskas was able to introduce his work to the public and whether he managed to find his own niche in the highly competitive art market of Buenos Aires. In his diary, Menčinskas mentions that he took part in the show organised by the Asociación Amigos del Arte. The society was active during the period of 1924–1945, and its initiators were women from the upper class who grew up under the influence of the French culture and now sought to contribute to the country’s intellectual and artistic development<sup>42</sup>. This was the first private organisation that took up an institutional responsibility for the development of Argentinian art. All their exhibitions, lectures and music performances were held on the prestigious Florida Street, in the

<sup>41</sup> For some reflections on the sense of Polish supremacy over the indigenous see Witold Gombrowich, *Diario argentino*, Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> *Amigos del Arte 1924–1942*, eds. Patricia M. Artundo, Marcelo E. Pacheco, Buenos Aires: Fund. Eduardo F. Constantini, 2008, pp. 13–14.

premises of impressive proportions. Apart from the ego documents, there are no other sources that would confirm that Menčinskas held a show at the Amigos del Arte. Meanwhile we cannot help but wonder why Menčinskas seems not to have used his chance to showcase his work in the institution that played such a significant role in the modernisation of Argentinian art. This might have been due to the fact that Amigos del Arte had double standards for showcasing artists: in contrast to all the foreigners, Argentinians could use the premises free of charge.

In 1934, the audience in Buenos Aires had a chance to see Menčinskas artworks when the recently established Lithuanian Embassy to South America<sup>43</sup> organised a retrospective of Lithuanian art in the premises of the “La Peña” – the Society for the Argentinian Writers and Artists. Alongside the most renowned Lithuanian artists of the Interwar period – Kazys Šimonis, Antanas Žmuidzinavičius, Mislav Dobužinskis, Petras Kalpokas and Adomas Galdikas – the exhibition also featured the representatives of the local Lithuanian diaspora: Menčinskas, Rimša and Draugelytė-Kučinskienė<sup>44</sup>. In other words, Menčinskas was exhibited in the prestigious context of the canonical Lithuanian art. The same year, the Lithuanian diplomat Povilas Gaučys donated a volume of *Lart Lithuanien* to the Argentinian National Museum of Art. Originally published in French, this book served as an introduction to the professional and folk art of Lithuania<sup>45</sup>. Two other copies of this book went to the Public Library of the Argentinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Another significant moment in Menčinskas’ career was his acquaintance with the famous German immigrant merchant and gallerist Federico Carlos Müller. His gallery was based in the very centre of the city, under the address of 335 Florida Street<sup>46</sup>. This luxurious and elegant promenade of Buenos Aires was the home for Witcomb, Van Riel and other notable

<sup>43</sup> Lithuanian Embassy to South America was established in Buenos Aires in 1932.

<sup>44</sup> “Lietuvių menininkų parodos”, in: *Argentinos lietuvių balsas* (Buenos Aires), December 6, 1934.

<sup>45</sup> *Lart Lithuanien*, Un recueil d’images avec une introduction par P. Galauné, Malmö, 1934. The label reads: “Biblioteca del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. Sección obras generales. Donación Povilas Gaučys”. Courtesy of Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.

<sup>46</sup> Laura Karp Lugo, “Alone Together: Exile Sociability and Artistic Networks in Buenos Aires at the Beginning of the 20th Century”, in: *Arrival Cities. Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century*, eds. Burcu Dogromacı, Mareike Hetschold, Laura Karp Lugo, Rachel Lee, Helene Roth, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020, p. 37.

Argentinian art galleries. It is known that Müller's gallery had Menčinskas' works on sale, although their collaboration was rather short-lived<sup>47</sup>. After World War I, Argentinians became so obsessed with accumulating the European art, that soon enough Buenos Aires became a major dealer in the transatlantic art market, second only to New York. Local artists, particularly the up-and-coming ones, found it difficult to compete with the market of European antiquities, which was why, even a decade later, Müller was still trying to mitigate the risk of showing the works of his contemporaries with the selections of the 18th century Japanese prints and ceramics from the "Far East"<sup>48</sup>. For artists, their commercial success depended on the social and economic factors that governed the art market. Polish Jewish artist Maurycy Minkowski's exhibition in the Müller's gallery in 1930 is a notable example. Minkowski, who brought over 200 of his artworks to Buenos Aires, was greeted as "the first-class artist". The exhibition was opened and patroned by the Polish ambassador in Argentina Władysław Mazurkiewicz, the show was followed by the continuous public campaign in the Jewish press, however in terms of actual sales the show was unsuccessful<sup>49</sup>. Although widely renowned in Europe and with the exhibition history in Vilnius, Lodz, London, Berlin, Paris and other European cities, the artist inadvertently became the victim of the deepening global economic crisis.

Aiming to support their artist compatriots, the elites of Lithuanian diaspora became the main buyers of their work. The diplomat Povilas Gaučys added three sculptures by Menčinskas to his growing collection of books, cartography and artworks<sup>50</sup>. The Lithuanian Embassy employee Anatolijus Grišonas acquired a few of Menčinskas' sculptures too. The sculptor had also gifted the girl's head made of quebracho to his friend Rimša<sup>51</sup>. The interest among the fellow compatriots in Menčinskas' work would be kindled by the periodical shows dedicated specifically for the Lithuanian diaspora. One of such shows took place in the summer of 1932, in a salon on 1537 San Juan Street, and it was held by the Society "Lietuva", a charity and culture

47 Matas Menčinskas' Curriculum Vitae from April 15, 1941, in: Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fund 61, folder 5, file 31, p. 13.

48 Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, "Salones y Marchantes de Arte en la Argentina (1890–1925)", in: *Archivo Español de Arte*, 1999, Vol. 72, No. 286, p. 168.

49 Zachary M. Baker, "Art Patronage and Philistinism in Argentina: Maurycy Minkowski in Buenos Aires, 1930", in: *Shofar*, 2001, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 107–119.

50 Povilas Gaučys, *op. cit.*, pp. 239–240.

51 Vytautas Kazakevičius, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

hub for the Lithuanians in Argentina. Menčinskas' art was known to the Lithuanians based in the neighbouring Uruguay too. During Menčinskas' short stay in Montevideo, his newest artwork was put on display in the Club of Uruguayan Lithuanians based in the neighbourhood of Cerro, under the address of 87 Rio de Janeiro Street<sup>52</sup>.

For Menčinskas, the highest level of recognition came in 1932, when his sculptures *Philosopher*<sup>53</sup> and *Motherhood* were chosen as the representative gifts from the Lithuanians in Argentina to the highest-ranking officers of Lithuanian government. The Chaplain of Lithuanian diaspora Juozas Janilionis brought them to Lithuania and presented to the Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona and Prime Minister Juozas Tūbelis<sup>54</sup>. In South America, his Lithuanian compatriots saw Menčinskas as a notable artist in the local art field of Buenos Aires, however the acknowledgment among the elite of Lithuanian diaspora was not enough for Menčinskas to fully find his footing in emigration. During the first half of the 20th century, the majority of the Lithuanians in Argentina were either factory workers in the cities or farmers deep in the rural areas who were struggling to get by. Prosperity came only during the 1950s and 1960s, when the second generation of immigrants started launching their own businesses.

However, there was another factor that proved to be decisive. Menčinskas' creative potential happened to have peaked during the time when Argentina was suffering from the Great Depression: for many Argentinians, art became a luxury they could no longer afford. Unable to establish himself in the Buenos Aires art field and live off his art, Menčinskas made a decision to return to Lithuania. During the Great Depression the problems of rising unemployment and poverty forced the governments of Argentina and Uruguay to start financing the return of the sick immigrants back to their homelands, while the transatlantic shipping companies were asked to bring part of the immigrants back to Europe free of charge. As he was suffering from tuberculosis – an illness widespread among the poor immigrants, – Menčinskas took this opportunity and, with the help of the Lithuanian diplomats, returned to Kaunas in 1934.

<sup>52</sup> Matas Menčinskas' diary, pp. 30–31.

<sup>53</sup> Menčinskas made two sculptures under the same title: one in Buenos Aires (before 1932), currently regarded as missing, and another one in Kaunas (1935), currently in the collection of M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art.

<sup>54</sup> Matas Menčinskas' diary, pp. 30–31.

## Conclusions

The competitive artistic environment in the metropolis of Buenos Aires was clearly not propitious to the immigrant artists from the lower classes. Particularly if they were Eastern Europeans represented by the relatively small immigrant communities that had no access neither to the social safety nets nor key financial resources. Argentina was not always hospitable even towards the renowned European artists, so the up-and-coming artists who arrived here without any symbolic capital had rather slim chances to establish themselves. Out of the six Lithuanian artists mentioned at the beginning of the paper, only two became part of the Argentinian art canon: the painter Jonas Rimša and the watercolour artist Ona Draugelytė-Kučinskienė. Their paintings are now part of the Argentinian museum collections, and a biography of Draugelytė-Kučinskienė's is included in the Adrián Merlino's canonical *Dictionary of the Argentinian Artists*.<sup>55</sup> However, this recognition has to do not only with her artistic talent, but also with the fact that, being a diplomat's wife, Draugelytė-Kučinskienė belonged to the social elite, which only proves the point about the hardships her less lucky compatriots had to endure. The Lithuanian artists who came to Argentina during the Interwar period spent years looking for ways to gain recognition and launch their careers. Re-emigration was used as one of the strategies. In this context, Menčinskas' decision to return to Lithuania can be seen as his attempt to reinvent himself and take advantage of the environment that privileged the artists returning from the international art centres, thus finally becoming part of the cultural elite. In other words, and rather paradoxically, it was Buenos Aires that acted as a springboard for his career after his return to Europe.

As the impoverished and sick artist returned back home, he brought many advantages of his apparently unsuccessful emigration experience. First, during his emigration Menčinskas shaped his aesthetic attitudes and style, and thus returned as a mature artist. With all the artistic influence he soaked up in Buenos Aires, he contributed to the Lithuanian sculpture of the Interwar period iconographically, stylistically and technologically.

The years spent abroad contributed to his social and cultural status and gave him greater opportunities for self-realisation in his homeland. The

international experience was regarded as an unquestionable advantage, and Menčinskis quickly found his feet in the Lithuanian cultural life of the 1930s. His artworks were selected to represent Lithuanian art in the national exhibitions in the neighbouring countries of Latvia and Estonia. His sculptures were a constant object of analysis for the art critics of the Baltic states, they were reproduced in the cultural press, and the best artworks were added to the national museum collections. Furthermore, in his homeland Menčinskis became an authoritative expert in sculpture: he was invited as a panellist in the exhibitions and monument projects, while Vytautas Magnus Museum of Culture asked for his opinion regarding the formation of the national collection of art and the acquisition of new artworks. However, one should not idealise Menčinskis' recognition and career in Lithuania. The artist has been torn by the tension between creative and pragmatic impulses all his life. As many other Lithuanian artists of the Interwar period, Menčinskis was unable to live off his art, thus he also lectured at the Kaunas Art School and the Craft School of the Society of Child Jesus, and carried out commissions for private clients, public organisations and Catholic Church.

Furthermore, all those years spent in Buenos Aires had a significant impact on Menčinskis' identity. It was emigration that turned the arts and crafts teacher into a professional and recognised artist. His acquaintance with the artistic life of the megapolis contributed greatly to the formation of his character, which helped him to retain the stance of an independent artist and preserve his artistic autonomy. Menčinskis' interactions with journalists and cultural workers revealed his managerial talents and his ability to present himself as a successful, accomplished and educated artist of the highest level. Back then, the communication between the different parts of the earth was not as extensive as it is today, so nobody was able to fact-check his slightly doctored creative biography. Upon his return from the international megapolis, Menčinskis with his sombrero and 'exotic stories' managed to kindle the curiosity of the Kaunas bourgeoisie and thus become an instant celebrity.

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Santrauka

## Kelias pripažinimo link: lietuvių menininkai Argentinoje

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*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* migracija, Argentinos dailė, *art deco*, nativizmas, lietuvių menininkai.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas iki šiol nei Argentinos, nei Lietuvos dailėtyrininkų neliestas plačiai tyrinėjamo menininkų migracijos reiškinių aspektas – iš Lietuvos atvykusių menininkų integracija ir veikla XX a. 3–5 deš. Buenos Airių meno lauke. Remiantis archyviniais šaltiniais, rekonstruojamas kolektyvinis socialinis menininkų portretas. Akcentuojama, kad tarpukariu į Argentiną atvykę pradedantys dailininkai ir skulptoriai buvo pirmieji lietuviai menininkai šioje šalyje. Milijoninis didmiestis, kuriame dėl dėmesio ir pripažinimo varžėsi daugybė dailininkų, nebuvo palanki terpė iš žemesniųjų visuomenės sluoksnių kilusių pradedančių menininkų imigrantų karjerai. Ypač jeigu jie priklausė sąlyginai nedidelėms imigrantų bendruomenėms ir negalėjo kliautis išvystytu savitarpio pagalbos tinklu, be to, stokojo finansinių resursų. Vieni lietuviai imigrantai tapo žinomais menininkais, kiti, mažiau talentingi ir sėkmingi, liko už kanoninio diskurso ribų. Įsitvirtinti meno lauke labiausiai padėjo užmegzti ryšiai su vietos menininkais, dailininkų sambūriais, galerijomis, taip pat visuomenės lūkesčius atitikusios nativizmo kaip nacionalinio meno krypties plėtojimas. Remiantis skulptoriaus Mato Menčinsko atvejo studija, atskleidžiama, kad Buenos Airės paradoksaliai tapo tramplinu dailininkų karjerai ne Argentinoje, o Europoje. Po septynerių Pietų Amerikoje praleistų metų grįžęs į Lietuvą, Menčinskas įgytą patirtį pavertė simboliniu kapitalu, padėjusiu tapti kultūrinio elito, kuriam skulptorius nepriklausė Argentinoje, dalimi. Šiame tyrime atsiskleidžia nauji migracijos fenomeno niuansai, išryškina- mos netikėtos galios slinktys tarp periferijos ir globalaus centro, galiausiai,

į Rytų Europos ir Pietų Amerikos meninių ryšių tyrimų lauką įvedami nauji kūrėjai ir kūriniai.