

Dark Times: Art and Artists of Vilnius in 1939–1941

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—— The aim of this paper is to discuss and reconstruct in general features the reality of the Vilnius artistic community from late autumn 1939 to June 1941. This period of less than two years significantly changed the configuration of the artistic community of the city, the system of institutions shaping the art scene as well as the artistic goals. It also brought forth new names and inspired new images. These changes were above all determined by political circumstances: the war that broke out in Poland on 1 September 1939; the ceding of Vilnius and the Vilnius region to Lithuania; two Soviet occupations: in the autumn of 1939 and June 1940, and the subsequent Nazi occupation a year later. The influence of politics on the art scene and the life of artists has been explored in institutional and other aspects by both Lithuanian and Polish art historians, but the big picture is not yet complete, and the general narrative is still under construction. A further aim of this paper is to highlight some elements that have not received sufficient attention in historiography and that are necessary for the reconstruction of the whole. Some facts of cooperation or its absence among artists of various ethnicities are presented, and the question is raised on the extent to which these different groups were affected by Sovietisation, and what impact this fragmentation had on the city's art scene. The timeline of the activity of the higher art school and the Art Museum has been detailed.

Keywords: art scene, museums, nationalism, occupation, exhibitions, Sovietisation, Vilnius.

In the second half of the 1930s, changes were imminent throughout Europe. Even though there were certainly signs of the approaching explosion, as is usual in everyday life, both people and states were unprepared for the onset of changes. This is how a lecturer of Stephen Báthory University, painter Tymon Niesiołowski, remembered the outbreak of World War II and the arrival of the Soviets, then Lithuanians in Vilnius:

I used to go sailing on my little boat on Lake Drisviaty. The weather was a vacationer's dream. All the residents of the holiday house had only swimming, bridge and the hopes that the Germans would not attack Poland on their mind. The radio tried to keep everyone calm and nobody lost a night's sleep. Then the vacationers started leaving, and finally our turn came. And then the war broke out. <...> With clenched teeth, I was sculpting a sitting woman from artificial stone – a tombstone sculpture for my aunt Anna. A bomb fell close to my studio. When the Lithuanians entered the city, I had already finished the sculpture.¹

While the artist was hiding from the turmoil, immersing himself in his work in the remote Antakalnis district, the Soviets who became allies of the Nazis in the war against Poland were ravaging the city, and refugees were fleeing to Vilnius from the depths of Poland. Niesiołowski's tombstone sculpture for his aunt Anna Dzikowska created during these dramatic days still stands in Saulės cemetery.

While this new work intended for the low-key cemetery space and dedicated to the memory of a dear relative was being created in Vilnius, in Warsaw, a much anticipated sculpture meant for the public space of Vilnius – a sculptural image of Adam Mickiewicz, cast after Henryk Kuna's model in the middle of 1939 and prepared for a journey to Vilnius – was being destroyed. Reminders of the failed construction of this monument are granite slabs with the motifs of the poem *Dziady*, placed at the foot of the monument to Mickiewicz created by Gediminas Jokūbonis at the end of the Soviet era. According to Kuna's project, the slabs were to decorate the base of Mickiewicz's monument, but the war did not allow the monument to be finished. For many years the slabs lay at the wall of

1 Tymon Niesiołowski, *Wspomnienia*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1963, pp. 117–118.

the State Art Institute of the LSSR, until they were placed at Jokūbonis's monument in 1984.

Niesiołowski's tombstone sculpture for his aunt and Kuna's Miciekiewicz destroyed at the beginning of the war are two sculptural works that symbolise the changes in the situation of Polish artists of Vilnius that started in the autumn of 1939. At the beginning of World War II, Polish artists had to forget their status of central art figures in Vilnius – they became marginal in the city, which was either their birthplace or acquired home, and which they loved and cherished. The process gained momentum, and in 1945 it culminated with an exodus of the Polish residents of Vilnius – a mass relocation of Poles to Poland, planned and implemented by politicians. The war affected other groups of artists as well – Lithuanians, Belarusians and Jews, the latter most painfully. Their drama started a year and a half later than that of the Poles and brought death.

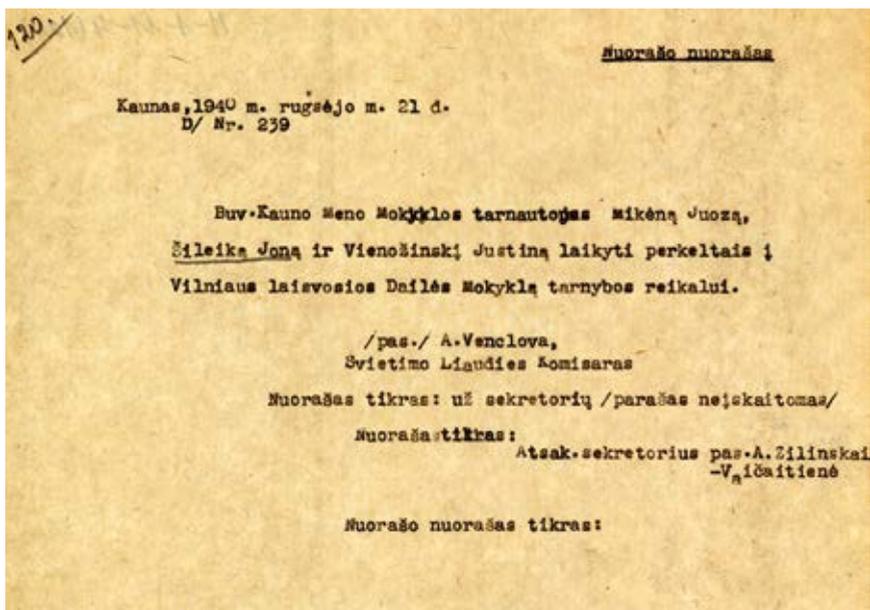
From June 1940, the Soviet regime marginalised all artists of Lithuania who did not want, could not or were unable to adapt themselves to the Communist regime, and regardless of their nationality, brought those who were useful and favourable to the regime into the limelight. In 1941, the Nazis declared Poles to be “Untermensch”, people of an inferior race, and Jews were not even considered people and had to be isolated and killed. The only group of Vilnius artists that had a place in public life were Lithuanians, and this turned Vilnius into a satellite of Kaunas: the activity of the Dailė cooperative that ran the network of art shops was controlled by the Lithuanian Artists' Union from Kaunas, the most important exhibitions were brought from Kaunas, and the commissions implemented with the funds of the German authorities were coordinated with Kaunas, even though the institution in charge, the Education Board, operated in Vilnius. The possibilities of somewhat freer development did not save Lithuanian art: the occupation paralysed creativity, and the exodus at the end of the war flung to the West most of the most gifted and creative Lithuanian artists, among them those who had moved to Vilnius, such as the painters Adolfas Valeška, Viktoras Vizgirda, and the talented art historian and critic Mikalojus Vorojovas. After World War II, the art scene in Vilnius had to be reassembled

piece by piece by the efforts of the disempowered artistic community on a feeble institutional basis, which was hurriedly formed during less than a year and a half, from the beginning of 1940, as the previously functioning network of art institutions and organisations had been disrupted.

The Soviet invasion in September 1939 was a short prelude to their longer stay in Vilnius, which had already been given back to Lithuania, and Lithuania itself, from June 1940 to June 1941. As was noted by the historian Timothy Snyder, the Soviet occupation laid the foundations for the implementation of Hitler's demonic plan to create societies made up of individuals without citizenship, state and rights, thus making it easy and simple to destroy them². Yet the situation in Vilnius had been already destabilised before the Soviet and Nazi occupations by the drastic attempts of the Lithuanian authorities to make the regained historical capital Lithuanian³. Jewish autonomy was respected, which cannot be said about the approach to the Poles, who constituted the majority in Interwar Vilnius and were the dominant power. Attempts were made to degrade them to a secondary and inferior ethnic group: in issuing personal identification documents, Polish names were given Lithuanian forms, employees were ordered to learn Lithuanian as soon as possible, and the Polish language was eliminated from the public space, and it became problematic for the majority of citizens to have dealings with officials. A cause of great panic and distrust was the decision of the authorities to grant Lithuanian citizenship only to those who could prove that they or their closest family members lived in Vilnius before 1920, while the rest were turned into people without citizenship or a state. Various institutional reforms also forced Poles to quit their former dominant positions. In the field of artistic life, two basic reforms were implemented: the suspension of Polish artists' organisations and the closure of Stephen Báthory University and its Art Faculty.

² Timothy Snyder, *Juodžemis. Holokaustas kaip istorija ir perspektyvas*, Vilnius: Jotema, 2018, pp. 113–137; translated from: Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: the Holocaust as History and Warning*, New York: The Duggan Books, 2015.

³ Cf.: Piotr Łossowski, *Litwa a sprawy Polskie, 1939–1940*, Warszawa: Państwowe wydawnictwo naukowe, 1982; Regina Žepkaitė, *Vilniaus istorijos atkarpa: 1939 m. spalio 27 d. – 1940 m. birželio 15 d.*, Vilnius: Mokslas, 1990; Dangiras Mačiulis, Darius Staliūnas, *Vilnius – Lietuvos sostinė: problema tautinės valstybės projekte (XIX a. pabaiga – 1940)*, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2015 (I am grateful to my dear colleague Dangiras Mačiulis for sharing a pdf file of this book during the COVID-19 quarantine).



1a.

Copy of the order from September 21, 1940 by the Commissaire of People's Education Antanas Venclova about the transfer of former teachers of Kaunas Art School Juozas Mikėnas, Jonas Šileika and Justinas Vienožinskis to Vilnius School of Free Art. Archive of the M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas

Liaudies švietimo komisaro Antano Venclovos 1940 m. rugsėjo 21 d. įsakymas apie buvusių Kauno meno mokyklos mokytojų Juozo Mikėno, Jono Šileikos ir Justino Vienožinskio perkėlimą į Vilniaus laisvųjų menų mokyklą

The former Art Faculty of Stephen Báthory University was placed under the jurisdiction of the Kaunas School of Art on 20 November 1939⁴. On 22 December, authorised by the Minister of Education of the Lithuanian Republic, the artist Adomas Varnas, with the future head of the Vilnius School of Free Art Juozas Mikėnas and the former dean of the Art Faculty of Stephen Báthory University Ludomir Sleńdziński, took over the remains of the faculty's property held in the former painting studio. The activity of the higher art school, disrupted for two semesters – the autumn of 1939 and the spring of 1940, – was renewed in the autumn of 1940, i.e. with the arrival of the Soviets, though the legal basis for the operation of the Vilnius School of Free Art had been built already in independent Lithuania. The law of higher art education was adopted on 15 May 1940⁵, and on 14 June 1940,

4 See LLMA (Lietuvos literatūros ir meno archyvas – Lithuanian Archive of Literature and Art), f. 61, ap. 1, b. 201; f. 63, ap. 1, b. 8; LCVA (Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas – Lithuanian Central State Archive), f. 391, ap. 4, b. 301.

5 Law on art schools (1940 05 15), in: *Vyriausybės žinios*, 1940 05 25, No. 706/5459.



1b.

Joint party of Polish and Lithuanian artists at the Vilnius School of Free Art, the former Art Faculty of Vilnius Stephen Báthory University. From the left: Tymon Niesiolowski, Juozas Mikėnas, Viktoras Vizgirda, Jerzy Hoppen, Petras Aleksandravičius. September, 1940. Private archive

Jungtinė Lenkijos ir Lietuvos menininkų grupė Vilniaus laisvųjų menų mokykloje – buvusiam Stepono Batoro universiteto Dailės fakultete. Iš kairės: Tymonas Niesiolowski, Juozas Mikėnas, Viktoras Vizgirda, Jerzy Hoppenas, Petras Aleksandravičius, 1940 m. rugsėjis

proceeding from that law, the Minister of Education Kazimieras Jokantas signed two decrees, by which two higher art schools were founded in Lithuania: the School of Applied Art in Kaunas and the School of Free Art in Vilnius, scheduled to start operating from 1 September 1940⁶. On the same day as the minister signed the decrees, the Soviet army invaded Lithuania. The Soviets did not really interfere in the reform of art education, except for staff issues. Sovietisation touched and radically changed all fields of life of the former Republic of Lithuania and correspondingly corrected the directions and methods of teaching art.

Vilnius cultural institutions were placed under new management – first Lithuanian, then Soviet, and not all former undertakings were abandoned: archaeological excavations on Gedimino Hill started by the Poles

⁶ Copies of decrees of the Minister of Education No. 82, 83 (1940 06 14), in: LLMA, f. 61, ap. 1, b. 214, l. 41.

continued with the involvement of Lithuanian specialists, and so did the excavations of Trakai Castle; Cathedral Square was rapidly reconstructed according to the project of Polish urbanist Romuald Gutt and his group, which was taken over by the newly appointed chief architect of the city of Vilnius Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, and constructions were continued and further planned in the city's strategic locations⁷. Polish artists were integrated in the process of art education also: several experienced teachers of Stephen Báthory University, such as Jerzy Hoppen, Tymon Niesiołowski and Alexander Szturman, started the new school year at the Vilnius School of Free Art together with the teachers, mostly young, who had arrived from Kaunas [illus. 1 a, b]. This decision was determined by practical needs – those invited were Polish specialists who could not be replaced with Lithuanians, as those who were satisfied with their position in Kaunas were not in a hurry to move to the regained historical capital.

Certainly, there was enough hostility and tension between Polish and Lithuanian artists. However, there were some attempts to overcome it. When the Art Faculty of Stephen Báthory University was closed and Polish artists' organisations were suspended, the Polish art scene shrank to several small islands of marginalised public life of Poles – Polish drama theatre and cafés. For example, in March 1940, former graphic arts students of Stephen Báthory University held an exhibition in the foyer of the Polish Theatre on Wielka Pohulianka Street, and a spring exhibition of graphic art took place in two cafés of the Sztrall brothers – The White Sztrall on Pilies Street and The Red Sztrall on the corner of Totorių and Gedimino Streets⁸. These exhibitions caught the attention of the new organisers of the city's art scene, Lithuanians, who even tried to buy some works for the collection of the Vilnius City Museum which was being actively expanded⁹. The activity

7 Karolis Kučiauskas, *Prieškario Vilniaus urbanistinis modelis ir jo recepcija karo ir pokario metais (1932–1956 m.)*: Doctoral dissertation, Vilnius: VU Istorijos fakultetas, 2016; Rasa Butvilaitė, „Vilnius 1919–1939 metais: naujo architektūrinio tapatumo kūrimas“, in: *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, Vilnius, 2019, t. 94: *Menas valstybėje – valstybė mene*, editors Lina Michelkevičė, Aušra Trakšelytė, pp. 84–119; Rasa Antanavičiūtė, *Menas ir politika Vilniaus viešosiose erdvėse. 20 a. pirma pusė*, Vilnius: Lapas, 2019, pp. 245–268.

8 These facts are mentioned by Svetlana Chervonaya; see: Светлана Червонная, “Польский Вильно – литовский Вильнюс и тень Советского Союза: от сентября 1939 до июня 1941 (история и её отражение в искусстве)”, in: *Europa Orientalis*, [Toruń], t. 1, 2009, pp. 115–163.

9 Cf. a rough copy of the announcement of the Vilnius City Museum about the acquisition of Tymon Niesiołowski's paintings – landscape *Winter* and still life *Fruits* – from the artist's solo exhibition in The Artists' Sztrall on Pilies Street (1940 07 27), in: Lithuanian National Museum of Art (LNAM) archives, f. 1, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 22.



2.

Poster of the survey exhibition of Lithuanian art in Vilnius, 2 June – 2 July 1940, designer Vytautas Kazimieras Jonynas. The exhibition was held in the Wróblewski Library, but the designer represented the building of the Town Hall, in which the City Art Museum headed by Adolfas Valeška was established in the same year. M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas

Vilniuje 1940 m. liepos 2 d. atidarytos apžvalginės Lietuvos meno parodos plakatas; Vytauto Kazimiero Jonyno dizainas. Paroda buvo surengta Vrublevskių bibliotekoje, tačiau dizaineris plakate pavaizdavo miesto rotušę, kurioje tais pačiais metais buvo įkurtas Adolfo Valeškos vadovaujamas Miesto dailės muziejus

of the Vilnius branch of the Lithuanian Artists' Union with headquarters in Kaunas also testified to cooperation plans. Yet, the situation changed in the early summer of 1940: the "spontaneous" development of art and the art scene, artistic work and its functioning, as well as any "natural processes" had to be forgotten – everything was subjected to the aims and needs of the policy implemented by the Soviet authorities and orders "from above" had to be obeyed. The artistic community remained ethnically fragmented, and even a stronger distinction on the basis of political views and inclination to collaborate with the regime appeared. The changes provoked by the Soviet invasion are vividly illustrated by the course of the survey exhibition of Lithuanian art that ran at the Wróblewski Library from 2 June 1940, as described in the correspondence of the organisers [illus. 2].

The exhibition was intended to become a launching ground for Lithuanian artists in Vilnius. It was its original concept, and contemporaries also saw it that way. On 7 June 1940, several days after the opening, the library head Antanas Valaitis addressed the Department of Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Education with a request to buy from the exhibition several works representing the Lithuanian state and culture, which would help to introduce Lithuanian art to visitors to the Library and to show them that it existed. He also asked to place on deposit several works from the collection of national art, which was part of the collection of the Vytautas the Great Culture Museum in Kaunas. He wrote:

The Wróblewski State Library that occupies a huge and spectacular palace does not have in its collections any artworks created by Lithuanian artists, which could decorate at least those halls that are more frequently visited by the public. People of many nationalities attending the library may have an impression that there is no art and artists in Lithuania. I kindly ask you to acquire the following works from the art exhibition staged on the premises of the Library for our needs:

- 1) President's bust by Pundzius – 500 litas – to the lobby¹⁰;
- 2) Daukantas's sculpture by Grybas¹¹ – 1,500 litas – to the lobby;

¹⁰ It was a bust of actual President of the Republic Antanas Smetona.

¹¹ Probably it was a model of the head for the monument of Lithuanian historian and classic of the national literature Simonas Daukantas in Papilė, created in 1928 by one of the first professionally trained Lithuanian sculptures Vincas Grybas.

- 3) *A Samogitian Farmstead* by Varnas – 600 litas – to the director’s office;
- 4) *Vilnius Environs* by Murinas – 100 litas – to the administrative office;
- 5) *Night Lights* by Šimonis – 200 litas – to the newspaper reading room;
- 6) *Zarasai Environs* by Kalpokas Rimas – 500 litas – to the general reading room;
- 7) *At Sunset* by Žmuidzinavičius – 400 litas – to the catalogue room.

Besides, perhaps the Ministry could send several works from the storage of the Culture Museum to decorate the Library.¹²

There was no time for the ministry to respond to Valaitis’s proposal to strengthen the propaganda of Lithuanian art in Vilnius, as a new player – the Soviet army – appeared in the historical capital, and in its wake, local communist and USSR sympathisers became more active. The curator of the survey exhibition Bronius Murinas, having realised what way the wind was blowing within a week, asked Kaunas for instructions in the new circumstances. “We have removed two pages from the catalogue, in which Smetona and other members of the honorary committee were mentioned. We have kept Smetona’s bust, though I am not sure if it’s fine. I think perhaps we can keep it as an artwork. I moved Bekeris’s paintings (2) to a more appropriate place”, he informed the heads of the Lithuanian Artists’ Union in Kaunas on the morning of 24 June 1940¹³. The name of Zalė Bekeris, a Jewish painter from Kaunas, was mentioned not by accident: this painter was always vocal about his sympathies for the political left and his dreams about putting into practice the ideals of communism, though his vision was above all related to the founding of the Jewish state in Palestine. Naturally, the subject of social criticism was predominant in his work and acquired a special significance in the new political circumstances. In the afternoon of the same day, Murinas sent to Kaunas another letter about the changed moods of the visitors: “I’m writing again regarding the exhibition, Smetona’s bust specifically. It turns out that there is no possibility to leave this sculpture on display anymore, as people get indignant and scribble various inscriptions and drawings on the sculpture. Today, the attendants removed the bust from public view”¹⁴.

¹² Letter of the head of the Wroblewski State Library Antanas Valaitis (1940 06 07) to the Department of Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Education, in: LCVA, f. 396, ap. 4, b. 1790, l. 26.

¹³ Note of the curator of the survey exhibition of the Lithuanian Artists’ Union in Vilnius, Bronius Murinas (1940 06 24), to the board of the Lithuanian Artists’ Union, in: LLMA, f. 33, ap. 2, b. 57, l. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 10.

The signals sent by Murinas rather unambiguously confirmed that the new political situation would soon demand artists to prepare for changes, to get to know and understand the new requirements of the authorities and to fulfil them. On the other hand, this correspondence with Kaunas was quite symptomatic – it is from Kaunas rather than Vilnius that the directives were sent and the relations with Moscow were maintained.

At that time, none of the Lithuanian artists – participants of the survey exhibition – permanently resided in Vilnius; they would come from Kaunas when needed. For example, one of the most active reformers and “Lithuanianisers” of the local art scene, Adolfas Valeška, was registered as a resident of Vilnius only on 27 June 1940. At first, he found accommodation in the former building of the University’s Art Faculty at 4 Šv. Onos St. (today, the central building of the Vilnius Academy of Arts), and on 7 September 1940, he moved to 16–6 Kalvarijų St. A year later, on 20 September 1941, Valeška moved to the almost adjacent house at 20–2 Kalvarijų St.¹⁵, where he lived until the end of World War II and his exile to Germany. Antanas Gudaitis, who is considered the leading teacher of painting at the Vilnius School (later, Academy) of Free Art, settled in Vilnius even later, though at the same permanent address – having arrived from Kaunas at the end of summer, on 23 August 1940, with his family (his son Andrius was born on 25 May 1940), he moved into flat no. 2 at 7 Kaštonų St., where his daughter Eglė Gudaitytė-Kunčiuvienė was born on 20 December 1941 and still lives¹⁶.

While the exhibition of Lithuanian artists was still running in the Wróblewski Library, there were plans to hold a symmetrical event: an exhibition of Vilnius artists, intended to present the work of the city’s multi-ethnic artistic community. At the same time, this exhibition had to symbolically integrate the art of Vilnius into the art scene of Lithuania. The preparations were disrupted by the changes caused by the political situation, e.g. the Lithuanian Artists’ Union had to be urgently restructured into the Artists’ Union of the LSSR, and its membership and management structure was reviewed. Finally, the exhibition was opened on 15 September 1940. Vilnius did not have a dedicated exhibition venue, but

¹⁵ Card of identity document issue to Adolfas Valeška (b. d.), in: LCVA, f. R-643, ap. 6, b. 141630, l. 2.

¹⁶ Card of identity document issue to Antanas Gudaitis (1940 09 26), in: LCVA, R-643, ap. 6, b. 44320, l. 1.

it was decided to use the premises of the defunct City Museum – the halls of the former palace of Countess Maria Ogińska on Sniadecki St. (today, the head office of the Lithuanian Writers' Union on Konstantino Sirvydo St.). In 1938, the magistracy acquired the palace with the plan to adapt it for the city's museum, but its opening was indefinitely postponed due to lack of funds for repair works. The exhibition presented the city's art scene in its full diversity – the work of Polish, Belarusian, Russian, German and Jewish artists; the latter were represented by Bencion Michtom, Natan Korzeń, Moze Prezm, Jakub Szer and Roza Suckever¹⁷. Previously, Jewish artists were only a fragmentary part of the general art scene of Vilnius and were mainly active and known in their own community. Thus, their participation shows that efforts were taken to make the exhibition more comprehensive and representative of the general situation of Vilnius art. Speaking about the integration of Vilnius Jewish artists into the art scene of the Republic of Lithuania, the efforts of Meyer Yelin should not be overlooked. Already before the Soviet occupation, in early 1939 or, quite possibly, in the summer or autumn of 1938, Jewish cultural figures from Kaunas made contact with Vilnius artists for the first time. This is testified by the reproductions of works by the Vilnius artists Roza Suckever, Bencion Michtom and others in the cultural almanac *Naje Bleter* (New Leaves) published in Yiddish in Kaunas¹⁸. Its editor Yelin wrote that he became familiar with the work of Vilnius Jewish writers by reading the almanac *Literariše bleter* published in Warsaw, and met them in person when he went to Vilnius after Lithuanian–Polish diplomatic relations were re-established following Józef Beck's ultimatum. He returned to Kaunas laden with material – both literary texts and reproductions of artworks¹⁹. Among Vilnius artists, Yelin mentions Rafael Chvoles, Bencion Michtom and Roza Suckever in his memoirs. It is quite likely that the further exchange between Vilnius and Kaunas Jewish artists would have encouraged a more active involvement of the Vilnius artists in general exhibitions of Lithuanian art, in which Kaunas Jewish

17 *Vilniaus dailininkų dailės paroda: 1940 IX 15 – 1940 X 15*, Vilnius: Lietuvos Tarybų Socialistinės Respublikos dailininkų sąjunga, 1940.

18 *Naje Bleter: Zambuch fer literatur. Nauji lapai: Literatūros rinkinys*, Kaunas, 1939. I am grateful to Lara Lempert for the reference.

19 Meyer Yelin, "Yung-Vilne un di yidishe literatn-grupe in Lite", in: *Di goldene keyt*, t. 101, 1980, pp. 122–130. I am deeply thankful to Akvilė Grigoravičiūtė for the reference to the source and the translation.

artists were constantly and quite actively represented, but these processes were disrupted by the Soviet occupation.

It is difficult to say if the aim of the exhibition of Vilnius artists was to appear democratic or to follow the newly promoted principle of “proletarian internationalism”, but in the formation of the steering committee, the equality of national representation was maintained: besides the Poles Tadeusz Godziszewski and Tymon Niesiołowski, the Lithuanian Rapolas Jakimavičius, the Belarusian Piotr Serghiyevich and the Jewish Roza Suckever were included. However, the exhibition catalogue was published only in Lithuanian, and the credited official patrons were the members of the executive board of the Artists’ Union of the LSSR approved by the Soviet administration, either from Kaunas or having recently moved to Vilnius: Mečislovas Bulaka, Petras Kalpokas, Povilas Kaufmanas, Juozas Mikėnas and Stepas Žukas. From the autumn of 1940, Mikėnas was appointed as head of the Vilnius School of Free Art, and Bulaka was invited to teach there, but at the time of the preparation of the exhibition of Vilnius artists, they both still lived in Kaunas.

So that the exhibition would encourage communication between artists of different national groups, it was promoted in the multi-national – Polish, Russian, Lithuanian and Jewish – press of Lithuania and, above all, Vilnius. It was presented in the Lithuanian daily *Vilniaus balsas* (Voice of Vilnius) by one of the most remarkable representatives of the intellectual elite of interwar Lithuania, a journalist and former editor of the influential cultural magazine *Naujoji Romuva* (New Pagan Shrine), Juozas Keliuotis. His review is a series of rather general descriptions of the works that the author found the most remarkable. Yet the foreword is written precisely following the rules of Soviet rhetoric. Having started with a statement that Vilnius “is becoming a hub of cultural activity of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania”, and having presented several proofs of this joyous process, Keliuotis bombastically concludes: “It seems that with time, Vilnius will become the Florence of Lithuania”²⁰. Perhaps this comparison was not merely a tribute to Soviet pompousness, but was intended to counterbalance the author’s further criticism of the eclectic style, indifference to the

20 Juozas Keliuotis, „Vilniaus dailininkų paroda“, in: *Vilniaus balsas*, 1940 09 29.



3.

Leon Kosmulski, *A Red House*, 1935, coloured woodcut. It was bought for the collection of the Vytautas the Great Culture Museum in Kaunas from the exhibition of Vilnius artists in the Oginski Palace on 24 October 1940. M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas

Leonas Kosmulskis, *Raudonasis namas*, 1935, spalvotas medžio raižinys. Kauno Vytauto Didžiojo kultūros muziejus darbą įsigijo 1940 m. spalio 24 d. Vilniaus menininkų parodoje Oginskių rūmuose

issues of the day and, even worse, “insistent clinging to the past” of some participants of the exhibition, and to give hope to the criticised that by putting some effort, sooner or later they might catch up with the Kaunas artists who are more modern and better aware of the spirit of time.

The efforts to integrate the Vilnius artists into the country’s art scene and view their work as part of the national heritage are confirmed by the fact described in the country’s multilingual press that having arrived from Kaunas to Vilnius, a competent jury bought some works from the Vilnius exhibition for the national collection held and displayed at the Vytautas the Great Culture Museum in Kaunas²¹. As many as twelve works were acquired, among them the colour woodcut *A Red House* by Leon Kosmulski (1935) [illus. 3] and the still-life *Phloxes* by Tymon Niesiołowski (circa

²¹ Besides other publications, the acquisition was thoroughly described by a correspondent of the new Russian-language newspaper *Novaya zhizn* (Ф. Л., “На выставке вильнюсских художников-пластиков”, in: *Новая жизнь*, 1940 10 01).



4.
Tymon Niesiolowski, *Phloxes*, ca. 1939, oil on canvas.
It was bought for the collection of the Vytautas the
Great Culture Museum in Kaunas from the exhibition
of Vilnius artists in the Oginski Palace on 24 October
1940. M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas

Tymonas Niesiolowski, *Fliokasai*, apie 1939, aliejus,
drobė. Kauno Vytauto Didžiojo kultūros muziejus
darbą įsigijo 1940 m. spalio 24 d. Vilniaus menininkų
parodoje Oginskių rūmuose

1939) [illus. 4] – today, both are reproduced in representative publications of the M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum among its valuable acquisitions²². There were also intentions to buy works from the exhibition at the Oginski Palace for the Vilnius City Museum, as its head Valeška sought to convert it into an art museum. A proof of these intentions is a letter of the Artists' Union of the LSSR to the Vilnius burgomaster (at that time the museum was under his jurisdiction rather than that of the Ministry of Education) with a request to assign funds for that purpose, making a note that “the exhibition was held to support the Vilnius artists, after [the Artists' Union] became aware of their difficult material conditions”²³.

The selection criteria of the works that were bought for the Kaunas collection are not completely clear. Most likely the choice depended on how much their authors were known to the jury members or their environment. For example, already in the period of independence Niesiołowski's work was presented by Kaunas cultural publications, even the authoritative *Naujoji Romuva*²⁴. Because of his contacts with Lithuanians, from the beginning of the Soviet occupation this artist was involved in organising the country's artistic life, and was the only one to represent the Vilnius artists on the board of the Artists' Union of the LSSR formed in January 1941, chaired by the Kaunas communist and underground figure Stepas Žukas. The board members were: the deputy chair – an artist of the older generation, recognised authority Justinas Vienožinskis, the secretary – a young sculptor Petras Aleksandravičius, the assets manager – a leftist printmaker Vytautas Jurkūnas and, besides Niesiołowski, a communist sympathiser, a Jewish painter from Kaunas Zalė (Zalmanas) Bekeris²⁵. The *Vilniaus balsas* daily published an announcement about the new members of the board of the Artists' Union of the LSSR with the comment: “Recently, thirteen Vilnius artists have become full members of the Union. Thus, in total the Union has 77 full members and 35 candidates”²⁶. Vilnius artists constituted

22 Cf. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, „Suiručių blaškomi. In the Whirlwinds of Turmoil, 1940–1941“, in: *Istorijos štrichai: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus 1921–2011*, edited by Daina Kamarauskienė, Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2011, pp. 69–93, fig. on pp. 86 and 91.

23 Letter of the Artists' Union of the LSSR to the Vilnius burgomaster (1940 09 26), in: LNAM archives, f. 1, ap. 1, b. 3, l. 29.

24 Cf. reproductions of the works *Kaltanėnai* and *A Girl (A Portrait of Daughter Dorota)* in: *Naujoji Romuva*, 1940, No. 16, p. 319, 326.

25 V. V., „Naujoji LTSR dailininkų sąjungos valdyba“, in: *Vilniaus balsas*, 1941 01 22.

26 *Ibid.*

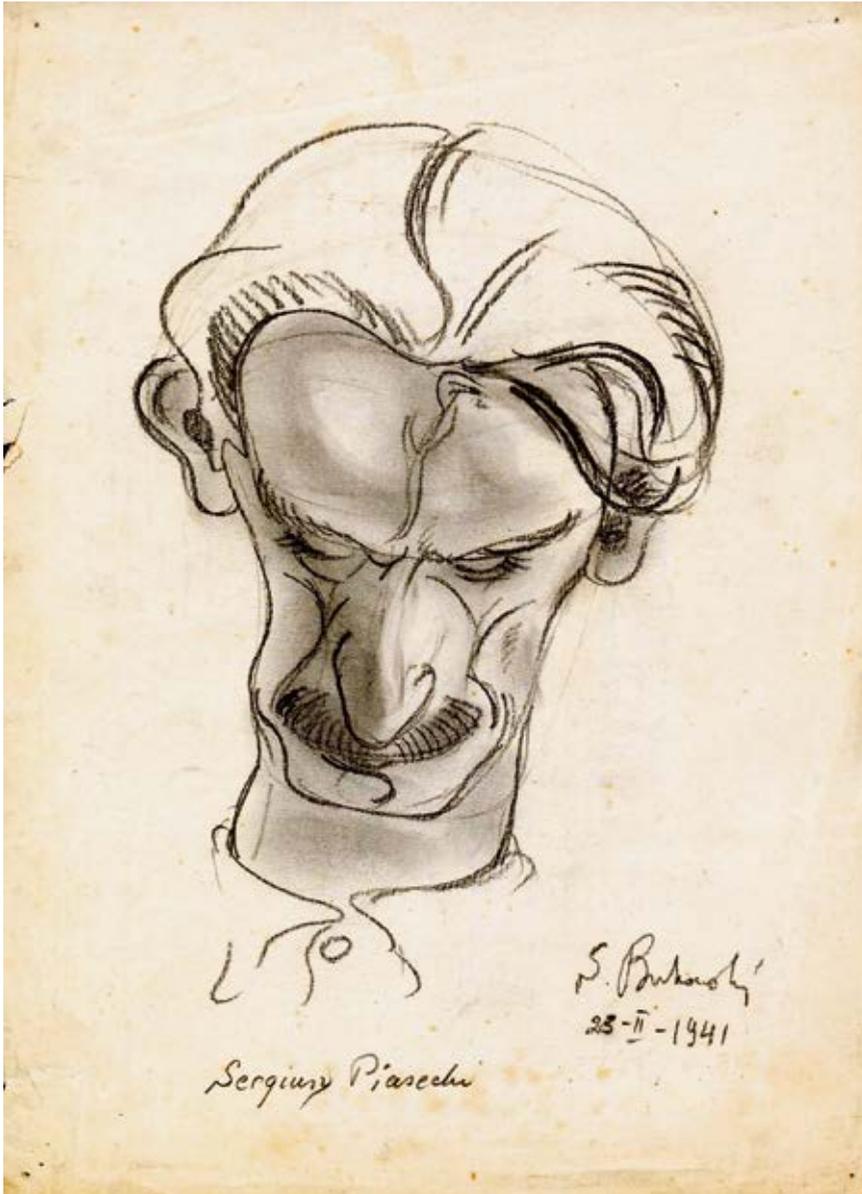
approximately a sixth of full members. This proportion reflected not so much the actual ratio of Kaunas and Vilnius artists, but rather their cautiousness and distrust of one another: Vilnius artists were not in a hurry to join the Artists' Union, and the Kaunas board hesitated to accept them. Tension was increased by residual passions following the struggle for Vilnius, and the general situation in the country did not encourage trust. Lithuania, including Vilnius, was convulsing with threats, complaints, arrests, poverty, evictions from houses and flats, hiding, shrinking of the living space as new residents were being moved in, uncertainty about the future, fear and anxiety.

There are very few direct testimonies about the reality of Vilnius art and artists of that time, but its reconstruction is not as complicated as it may seem. Much can be learned from documents, press publications, artefacts and their reproductions, as well as fiction that offers an incisive personal view. For example, the autobiographical novel *A Man Turned into a Wolf* (*Człowiek przemieniony w wilka*) by Sergiusz Piasecki [illus. 5], still little known in Lithuania, contains an interesting episode about the experience of the main character, the writer's *alter ego*, working as a sitter at the Vilnius School of Art. Piasecki's character, just like the author of the book in reality, took up this job while hiding from the Soviets and trying to earn at least some income. According to Piasecki, some of the sitters were refugees from Poland, and among the students, there were Lithuanians, Jews, Poles and Tatars, with Lithuanian predominantly spoken²⁷. This is confirmed not only by documentary sources, but also by a still unpublished and never exhibited poster for a student exhibition of the Vilnius School of Free Art designed by Helena Lebkowska-Gecewicz with only a Lithuanian text, held at the Lithuanian National Museum of Art²⁸ [illus. 6]. Piasecki's character also mentions a friend, a Polish painter, who unscrupulously multiplied Stalin's images for chunky fees; this is excellent proof that one could adapt to the circumstances regardless of one's national origin and place in the former artistic hierarchy.

It would probably be relatively easy to identify the actual prototype of this opportunist or collaborationist, though in the multi-national community of Vilnius artists there was no lack of artists sympathising with

²⁷ Sergiusz Piasecki, *Człowiek przemieniony w wilka*: Powieść z cyklu *Wieża Babel*, cz. 1: *Wilno 1939–1942*, Warszawa: LTW, 2000, p. 112 and further.

²⁸ The poster is held in the graphic collection of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art (inv. No. G-19920); I am grateful to my colleague Ilona Mažeikienė for the reference.



5.
Stanisław Bukowski, *Portrait of Sergyusz Piasecki*,
1941 02 23, pencil on paper, Słędziński Gallery in
Białystok, The deposit of Joanna Lempicka

Stanisławas Bukowski, *Sergejus Piaseckio
portretas*, 1941 02 23

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė —

Dark Times: Art and Artists of Vilnius in 1939–1941



6.
Exhibition poster for the student exhibition of the Vilnius School of Free Art in Lithuanian, designed by the Polish student Helena Lebkowska-Gecewicz, June 1941, Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius

Lietuviškas Vilniaus laisvųjų menų mokyklos studentų parodos plakatas, sukurtas lenkų studentės Helenos Lebkowskos-Gecewicz, 1941 m. birželis

the ideological left, particularly among the young, such as, e.g., the sculptor Tadeusz Godziszewski who made his name with pro-Soviet works and together with his colleague Edward Nowicki built a temporary monument to Lenin and Stalin in Town Hall Square in Vilnius for 7 November 1940²⁹. The artist's biographer Maria Sadurska writes that Godziszewski's sculptures *A Gardener* and *A Reaper*, as well as Stalin's bust, created according to the iconography of socialist realism, were acquired by the art museums of Vilnius and Kaunas³⁰. Some senior artists also did not shun collaboration with the new authorities. The collection of the National Museum of Lithuania contains images of Lenin and Stalin painted by the recognised and popular Karaime portraitist Bari Egiz in 1940 on commission from the Academy of Sciences of the LSSR³¹. The artist was most likely driven by pragmatic interests or perhaps simply by the fear of annoying the important client, from which he could expect more commissions.

Piasecki describes how his character, tempted with extra pay, agrees to sit for Professor G., who painted the composition *The Shooting of the Four Communards* as an official commission. The subject of the painting was the execution of four members of the illegal Lithuanian Communist Party sentenced to death for their participation in a coup d'état, on 27 December 1926 in the 6th fort of Kaunas. Professor G., obviously, is Antanas Gudaitis, who won the competition to create this painting or, more precisely, a panel painting of impressive size (310 × 200 cm) for the participation of the Baltic republics in the Moscow Decade³². For two hours of sitting Gudaitis paid the sitter – most probably Piasecki himself – 10 litas, when the customary hourly rate was two litas, and also offered him tea with cookies.

29 Edward Nowicki's participation in creating the monument to Lenin and Stalin in Vilnius is confirmed by his letter to the Lentvaris dean Kazimierz Kułak (1940 11 17), held in the Church Heritage Museum of Vilnius archdiocese, in which the sculptor apologises for not having time to cast from cement a 90 cm high sculpture of the Mother of God for the Lentvaris chapel, as he has to hurry to finish a six metre high cement monument on commission from the new authorities. Cf. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Lentvario bažnyčia ir jos dekoras. Koščiūt w Landuwarowie i jego wystrój. The Lentvaris Church and Its Décor; 1905–1943*, Vilnius: Bažnytinio paveldo muziejus, 2012, p. 23.

30 www.gdanskstrefa.com/tadeusz-godziszewski-rzeźbiarz-konserwator-zabytkow/, [cited 2019-11-09]. The history of the acquisition of works is not fully clear, as I have not been able to identify them in the present collections.

31 For the reproductions, see Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Po raudonąja žvaigžde. Lietuvos dailė 1940–1941. Under the Red Star. Lithuanian Art in 1940–1941*, Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2011, p. 77.

32 Jeronimas Cicėnas, „Pas draugus, dekadai kuriančius“, in: *Vilniaus balsas*, 1941 02 12; „Dailininkai gyvai ruošiasi Maskvos dekadai“, in: *Tarybų Lietuva*, 1941 03 01.

The professor's generosity and friendliness did not stop the writer from making a biting remark in the voice of his character: "Well", thought Józef when he left professor G., 'I work for bread and papers, and the professor does it for bread with bacon and a good social standing'"³³ Probably the words would have been even harsher, had Piasecki and his Józef thought about the purpose of the painted work³⁴.

All commissions for prestigious showings in Moscow were given to Lithuanian artists, with the exception, for the purposes of our discussion, of the Jewish Zalė Bekeris. He received a commission to create the composition *The Strike of Stevedores*. Yet in this case Bekeris's nationality did not really count – more important were his political views and his old contacts with the communists; besides, he was a long-term member of the Kaunas artistic community and the Lithuanian Artists' Union, a constant participant of local exhibitions famous for the subjects of social critique. The key artists of the decade exhibition were Gudaitis, the recognised classics of national art Petras Kalpokas and Justinas Vienožinskis, and the alumnus of the Latvian academic school Povilas Puzinas³⁵. Participants of another important display of Lithuanian art together with Latvians and Estonians at the All-Union Exhibition of Agriculture in the MOPR (МОПР, Международная организация помощи борцам пролетарской революции – The International Relief Organisation for Fighters of the Proletarian Revolution) pavilion at the Ostankino Pond were the painter Vytautas Mackevičius who created the panel painting *Parcelling Out a Landowner's Land for Peasants* directly in Moscow, the sculptor Bronius Pundzius, who sculpted Lenin's bust, and Stasys Ušinskas, famous in the field of decorative art, who created a panorama of the Lithuanian SSR [illus. 7]. The long-time communist Stepas Žukas supervised the decoration works of this pavilion, and the young talented

33 Sergiusz Piasecki, *Człowiek przemieniony w wilka*, p. 121.

34 Official decree regarding the presentation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in Moscow was announced in early September 1940 ("Декады национального искусства Литвы, Латвии и Эстонии", in: *Правда*, 1940 09 07). The presentation decade was scheduled to take place in the autumn of 1941. In October 1940, the decade committee headed by Antanas Venclova was set up. Out of its twenty-six members, five were in charge of art affairs: Mečislovas Bulaka, Paulius Galaunė, Juozas Mikėnas, Antanas Rūkštelė and Irena Trečiokaitė (Letter of the People's Commissar for Education (1940 10 25) to the chair of the Council of People's Commissars of the LSSR, in: LYA (Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas – Lithuanian Special Archive), f. 1771, ap. 1, b. 220, l. 1.). For more on the preparations, see *XX a. lietuvių dailės istorija*, t. 3: *Lietuvių tarybinė dailė, 1940–1960*, compiled by Ingrida Korsakaitė et al., Vilnius: LSSR MA Kultūros ir meno institutas, 1990, pp. 16–22.

35 Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Po raudonąja žvaigžde. Under the Red Star*, pp. 66–67.



7.

27th pavilion of the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy in Moscow, former MOPR (МОПР, Международная организация помощи борцам пролетарской революции – The International Relief Organisation for Fighters of the Proletarian Revolution), assigned to the new Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1941, is waiting for exhibits. Private archive

Tarptautinės proletarinės revoliucijos kovotojams paremti organizacijos patalpose įkurtas ir naujosioms sovietinėms Estijos, Latvijos ir Lietuvos respublikoms skirtas 27-asis Šalies ekonomikos laimėjimų parodos paviljonas Maskvoje laukia eksponatų

sculptor Vytautas Kašuba created two reliefs on the subject of “work and struggle”³⁶. It is unlikely that Vilnius artists disapproved of such distribution of profitable commissions important for their career; only a few young Lithuanian artists related to the Soviet propaganda organisation, Agitprop, dared to protest³⁷.

On the other hand, the conditions of the Soviet regime were highly favourable for informing on people and squaring accounts. For example, in early 1941, an article by one A. Mikhailov published in the Russian-language newspaper *Novaja zhizn* (New Life) provoked a scandal in Vilnius and caused quite a stir in Kaunas. The article titled *Wash Your Dirty Linen at Home* strongly denounced the attempts of the head of the Vilnius School of Art Juozas Mikėnas to suppress the criticism expressed by the students; Mikėnas allegedly tried, with the help of a student, to seize a letter of complaint written by the students to the newspaper editors, in which

³⁶ *XX a. lietuvių dailės istorija*, t. 3, p. 22; Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Po raudonąja žvaigžde. Under the Red Star*, p. 87. For more on the décor of the pavilion, also see Ilze Konstante, *Staļina garā ēna Latvijas tēlotājā mākslā, 1940–1956*, Rīga: Neputns, 2017, pp. 94–95.

³⁷ Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Po raudonąja žvaigžde. Under the Red Star*, p. 66; V. Rinkėnas, „Platus pasitarimas meno dekadros reikalais“, in: *Tarybų Lietuva*, 1941 04 01.

they exposed the flaws in the school's management³⁸. The Lithuanian cultural elite came to Mikėnas's defence. Several of Mikėnas's non-Lithuanian subordinates also became involved in this activity. Letters of explanation, statements, clarifications and personal letters with signatures of the important local figures of the Soviet regime Petras Juodelis, Petras Cvirka, Kostas Korsakas, Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius, Juozas Banaitis, Teofilis Tilvytis, Kazys Boruta, Balys Sruoga and, certainly, artists Justinas Vienožinskis, Antanas Gudaitis, Irena Trečiokaitė, Stepas Žukas, Aleksander Szturman were sent from Vilnius and Kaunas to the Board of Artistic Affairs and the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party³⁹. Finally, the Vilnius City Bureau of the Lithuanian Communist Party was placed in charge of investigating the complaint. It was established that Mikėnas and his administration, however, were in serious violation of the principles of Leninist-Stalinist national politics, as: 1) despite the fact that 70 per cent of the students did not speak Lithuanian, all theoretical subjects, among them the Constitution of the SSRS, were taught in Lithuanian; art history and theory was also taught in Lithuanian⁴⁰; it was also noted that all the records were kept in Lithuanian; 2) grants were supposedly given mostly to children of wealthy parents rather than students from poor families, which resulted in the rise of national tension, as 64 per cent of grant recipients were Lithuanian, 30 per cent – Poles and Russians, and only 12.5 per cent Jewish (it is not clear what this mathematical jugglery was based on)⁴¹. Other statements of the article were dismissed as unconfirmed or false, and the editor of the local Russian-language newspaper *Krasnoje znamia* (Red

38 А. Михайлов, “Сор из избы не выносят”, in: *Новая жизнь*, 1941 01 21. The efforts of the female student O. Petrovich, (supposedly or actually) sent by Mikėnas to the editorial offices to seize the complaint from the editorial staff, is described very vividly in the article. According to the author of the article, when threats and blackmail did not work, Petrovich fell into hysteria and started talking in a raised voice, flinging around her gloves, tucking at her muff etc.

39 Minutes of the session of the teachers' council of the Vilnius School of Art (1941 01 27), No. 57, in: LYA, f. 1771, ap. 2, b. 378, l. 33–33ap; letter of Vilnius and Kaunas artists (1941 01 28) to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party (b), in: LYA, f. 1771, ap. 2, b. 378, l. 36 and other documents pertaining to the same issue held in the same file in the Lithuanian Special Archives.

40 Interesting detail, as the main teacher of this subject Mikalojus Vorobjovas aka Nikolai Vorobiov, one of the undersigned of the teachers' letter in support of Mikėnas, was a Lithuanian-born Russian who moved from Kaunas to Vilnius in the autumn of 1940 and himself had only recently learned to speak Lithuanian.

41 Decree of the session of the Vilnius City Bureau of the Lithuanian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on the article in the newspaper *Novaja zhizn* of 21 and 26 January 1941 (in Russian), in: LYA, f. 1771, ap. 2, b. 378, l. 41–42.



8.
Juozas Mikėnas, *Girl Combing Her Hair*;
1939, plaster, photo by Antanas Lukšėnas,
Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius

Juozas Mikėnas, *Mergaitė, besišukuojanti
plaukus*, 1939

Flag) Kozlov was given orders to rectify the mistake and publish a denial of the ungrounded accusations. Despite the violations, Mikėnas was allowed to continue working as the head of the school. He could not be replaced, as a more suitable candidate was not found among the Lithuanians who had moved to Vilnius, and the officials in charge of art and education affairs did not want to see a person of another nationality in this position. It seems that things remained as they were at the school, the issue of grants might have been revised, but probably there was no time for that, as with the start of another semester, Germans came into power, bringing significant changes and new challenges.

The Vilnius artistic community responded to the changes very differently. The majority of old-timers saw them as a catastrophe and the end of normal life, while for young talented Kaunas artists who had recently moved to Vilnius, at least in the beginning, when they were appointed to new

and, apparently, promising positions, it was an optimistic start of a new career. The founding of the Vilnius School of Free Art made Gudaitis's, Mikėnas's and Vizgirda's dreams of becoming higher art schoolteachers come true, and the news that the much anticipated City Art Museum was finally taking shape did not leave anyone indifferent. Some Polish culture figures also approved of the activity of the Art Museum and, invited by its head Valeška, agreed to work there. At the end of the Soviet rule, Valeška and his supporters managed to achieve a change in the museum's status from a municipal to a state institution specialising in the field of art. After various twists and turns, the Vilnius Executive Committee transferred the City Museum that already operated in the Town Hall under the jurisdiction of the Board of Art Affairs under the Council of People's Commissars of the LSSR on 30 March 1941⁴². The larger part of the museum's exhibits at that time consisted of the property of nationalised manors, and the collection was constantly supplemented with valuable items acquired from impoverished residents⁴³. Artists did

42 Delivery and acceptance certificate of the Vilnius City Museum (1941 03 30), in: LNAM archives, f. 1, ap. 1, b. 3, l. 9.

43 Cf., e.g., the records held in the Torun University Library: "On 8 May 1941, in the Vilnius Art Museum, the Commission consisting of the head of the V[ilnius] A.[rt] Museum A.[dolfas] Valeška, art inspector V[ytautas] Mackevičius, artists A.[ntanas] Gudaitis, J.[erzy] Hop[p]en, dr. M.[ikalojus] Vorobjovas, dr. P[iotr] Sledzew[w]ski and prof. M.[arian] Morelov[w]ski decided to buy from Vytautas Modzeliauskas [Witold Modzelewski], residing at 2a–4 Labdarių St. in Vilnius, the oil painting *Madonna with Child* for 4,000 roubles. There were different opinions about this painting by an unknown author: Artist Hop[p]en said that at first sight he thought that the painting was from the Flemish school, but later, his opinion changed and now he thinks that it is the Italian school heavily influenced by Spanish, probably a work of Murillo's school or his successors, judging from the painting's tones and texture. Prof. Morelov[w]ski said that the painting shows the influence of two trends, Baroque and resurging Renaissance, and most probably it comes from the early 18th century with prevailing elements of the Italian school. Dr. M. Vorobjovas does not see a Madonna of the Murillo type, but rather that of the Van Dyck type, though he agrees with the opinion of the artist Hop[p]en that the Spanish influence is quite obvious, though even more obvious is the Italian one, and the painting is most likely from the middle of the 17th century. The artist Mackevičius agrees that a touch of various schools and two or more masters are felt and thinks that separate parts of the painting are painted in a different manner. The artist Gudaitis thinks the same, but all the members of the Commission agree that the painting is very good, despite several damaged places, is valuable and suitable for the museum's collections. The painting was relined once, its canvas is very old, and the yellowness is probably a result of an old varnish.

The contents of the painting: on a dark background representing a landscape with a column, the Madonna lightly supports the naked infant lying on a white shroud with her left hand, and her right hand is extended towards the flowers in a basket at her side (the basket with flowers, in the general opinion of the members of the Commission, is a much inferior work from a later period). The Madonna is wearing a blue robe with a red tunic, her hair is covered with a veil, and her eyes are half closed. The Commission agrees that the painting has a high artistic value and is suitable for the museum's representative collections." Minutes of the Commission for the Acquisition of Artworks (signed by Valeška and other members on 20 May 1941), in: Manuscript Department of the MKU Library, Rps 2522 / IV, Akc. 14 / 88, l. 22.

not doubt that soon enough their time would come as the museum would be obliged to represent their work. And it did happen. Yet the basis of the new art collection was built firstly from works by Lithuanian artists. Certainly, in the long run, works by the former residents of Vilnius – Poles, Jews and others – would have been added to the collection, but priority was obviously given to the artists who had arrived from Kaunas. Jews came second. It is difficult to say what provoked the attention to their work; most likely it was the political agenda. Priority was given to those Jewish artists of Vilnius who sympathised with the leftists and who were loyal and useful for the new authorities. In that respect it is important that one of the museum's last shows before the Nazi occupation was an exhibition of paintings by the Vilnius Jewish artist Jakub Szer, in which, incidentally, views of the Vilnius Old Town outnumbered works promoting Soviet ideology. The archive of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art contains "A list of works by Jewish artists in the storage of the Vilnius Art Museum" compiled in 1943 at the Nazis' request and testifying to the rudiments of the section of Jewish art in the museum's collection⁴⁴. The list included 36 landscapes by Szer, fifteen paintings and a lithograph *The Red Guard* by Rafael Chvoles (the name Chvoles or Chvoles is misspelled as Kvoles), and two paintings by Bencion Michtom. The art of Kaunas Jews is best represented by Estera Lurjė (Esther Lurie) – there are as many as twenty of her works on the list; there are several works by Zalė Bekeris, Chaimas Mejeris Fainšteinas and Černė Percikovičiūtė. Unfortunately, this collection did not see the end of the war in Vilnius: it was either destroyed or taken to Germany⁴⁵.

The aim of turning Vilnius into a Lithuanian city that underlay many decisions of not only the Lithuanian, but also the Soviet administration undoubtedly brought Lithuanian art into the limelight. In the spring of 1941, the Board of Artistic Affairs bought several dozen works of Lithuanian artists who had moved to Vilnius, and distributed them between the Vilnius Art Museum, the Academy of Sciences, the Writers' and Artists' Club, and the People's Commissariat for Education⁴⁶. The majority of these

⁴⁴ List of works by Jewish artists held in the storage of the Vilnius Art Museum (1943), in: LNAM archives, f. 2, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 1–2.

⁴⁵ This hypothesis was advanced by the historian Raimundas Klimavičius; for more, see Raimundas Klimavičius, *Tarp Scilės ir Charibdės. Lietuvos kultūros vertybių transpozicija Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais*, Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2011, p. 92.

⁴⁶ LCVA, f. 146, ap. 71, b. 5, l. 29–34.

works were created in independent Lithuania and thus had to be symbolically “integrated” into the new culture. Newspapers explained that this art, appealing to the Soviet individual, was created “back in those times” by artists who were sensitive to the nation’s life and expectations, and finally became accessible not only to the elite. The *Tarybų Lietuva* (Soviet Lithuania) daily, with the help of a young historian Juozas Jurginis who worked on the Board of Artistic Affairs, invited the public to the exhibition of the Vilnius Art Museum in the Town Hall. Praising the concern for art and artists of the Soviet state, the budding Soviet ideologist wrote:

In the centre of the hall of modern painting stands a girl fixing her hair on the neck with both hands, created by the sculptor Mikėnas [*A Girl Combing Her Hair*, 1938–1939, Lithuanian Art Museum, inv. No. S-28; illus. 8]. The walls of [the hall of] modern painting are white, covered with coarse textured plaster. They are not upholstered with canvas. 35 pictures are hung there. Visitors of art exhibitions might have seen some of them before, as some of them travelled from one exhibition to another, gathered dust in the artists’ studios, and now finally have found a proper place to be displayed. Here you will see an old man from Žemaitija carving wooden spoons by Gudaitis [*An Old Artisan*, 1939, Lithuanian Art Museum, inv. Nr. T-750; illus. 9], Vienožinskis’s landscape with a cabin and a crooked birch tree, village folk going to work by Vizgirda, and other works by our artists.⁴⁷

The picture of the Vilnius art scene in 1939–1941 might look deceptively calm and free of conflict, if we try to reconstruct it referring to bare historical facts and artworks. The surviving images do not show any radical changes: the teachers of the Vilnius School of Free Art pose against the background of the eternally present St Anne’s Church, and their works depict neoclassical figures of young women and men at work or at rest and idealised urban life – a classical idyll projected into the present, like in the heyday of Stephen Báthory University [illus. 10]. In that respect, the art of Lithuanian artists who had moved to Vilnius doesn’t differ much from that of the local Polish artists.

⁴⁷ Juozas Jurginis, „Dailės muziejus Vilniuje“, in: *Tarybų Lietuva*, 1941 05 11.



9.

Antanas Gudaitis, *An Old Artisan*, 1939, oil on canvas,
photo by Antanas Lukšėnas, Lithuanian National
Museum of Art, Vilnius, LATGA, Vilnius 2021

Antanas Gudaitis, *Senas meistras*, 1939, LATGA,
Vilnius 2021

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė —

Dark Times: Art and Artists of Vilnius in 1939–1941



10.

Lithuanian artists in Vilnius at the School of Free Art with St Anne's Church in the background, 1941. From the left: Leonardas Kazokas, Adolfas Valeška, Petras Lukošius, two unidentified persons, Antanas Gudaitis, Liudas Vilimas, Petras Aleksandravičius, Private archive

Vilniaus laisvųjų menų mokyklos lietuviai menininkai pozuoja Šv. Onos bažnyčios fone, 1941. Iš kairės: Leonardas Kazokas, Adolfas Valeška, Petras Lukošius, du neatpažinti asmenys, Antanas Gudaitis, Liudas Vilimas, Petras Aleksandravičius

The Nazi occupation did not disrupt the fragile contacts between Lithuanians and Poles that were built in 1940 and the first half of 1941, but neither did it make them stronger. The looming danger did not lessen the rift of mutual distrust between these two large groups of artists. Certainly, there were individual cases of solidarity, such as the ingenious and timely intervention of the Lithuanian Statyba building company that enabled a team of Polish painters amassed and led by Jerzy Hoppen to implement two large church art projects in the Lentvaris and Perloja churches in 1943⁴⁸. The Vilnius Art Museum acquired several works by Polish artists in the war years, e.g., in February 1942, an excellent work *Nude of a Standing Woman* (1936) by Tymon Niesiołowski was bought for 300 RM – today it is one of the highlights of the permanent exhibition of the National Gallery of Art⁴⁹. On the museum's commission, Polish artists and architects created colour drawings of monuments of Vilnius architecture and their copies, e.g., in early 1942,

⁴⁸ For more, see Dalia Vasiliūnienė, „Sienų tapyba Perlojos bažnyčioje“, in: *Menotyra*, 2004, vol. 36, pp. 41–49; Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Lentvario bažnyčia ir jos dekoras. Kościół w Landwarowie i jego wystrój. The Lentvaris Church and Its Décor, 1905–1943*.

⁴⁹ Minutes of the session of the commission of the Vilnius Art Museum (1942 02 20), in: LNAM archives, f. 2, ap. 1, b. 26, l. [9].

Piotr Bohdziewicz received several payments for taking the measurements of St Casimir's Church and making a drawing of the reconstruction of its pediment, description of the measurements and "outlining" the drawings in Indian ink⁵⁰, and in the winter of 1944, on the museum's commission Bohdziewicz drew plans of the Trinitarian church⁵¹ and implemented several other similar tasks of heritage preservation; in February 1942, Walenty Romanowicz received a small fee for a copy of a drawing of Vilnius castles by the engineer Zygmunt Mieczysław Czajkowski⁵², and in the same year, Czajkowski's drawing itself was bought. Yet these acquisitions were relatively small compared to the large one-off acquisition of works by Lithuanian artists from the survey exhibition that was brought from Kaunas to Vilnius in the spring of 1944: in total, nineteen paintings, sculptures and prints were bought. Sums of 1,000, 2,000, and even 3,500 RM were paid for paintings and sculptures (*Landscape* by Justinas Vienožinskis, *Portrait of Mrs. O. T.* by the head of the museum Adolfas Valeška and the gypsum bas-relief *Rest* by Juozas Mikėnas fetched the largest price), and the price of prints varied between 100 and 250 RM (the most expensive were Telesforas Valius's woodcut *Tragedy at Our Seaside*, Jonas Kuzminskis's landscape *Vilnius* and Vytautas Kazimieras Jonynas's landscape *The Zapyškis Church*)⁵³. The fees of Lithuanian artists, both from Vilnius and Kaunas, despite the low rate of the mark, were several times higher than those of Polish artists in 1942. Apparently, it was a case of "like drawing to like".

In Lithuanian sources I have not come across any regrets about the fact that at the very beginning of the Nazi occupation, the head of the Vilnius Art Museum Adolfas Valeška on the orders of the Germans, had to dismiss all Poles from his permanent staff – not only the technical staff, but also specialists who were vitally important for the museum's activity – the erudite and art expert Euzebiusz Łopaciński and the art historian, priest Piotr Śledziewski⁵⁴. The news that from the autumn of 1941 Tymon Niesiołowski would no longer

⁵⁰ Invoices issued to the Vilnius Art Museum, 1942 01 11; 1942 01 31; 1942 02 23, in: LNAM archives, f. 2, ap. 1, b. 26, l. 1, 2, 10.

⁵¹ Invoice issued to the Vilnius Art Museum, 1944 02 01, in: LNAM archives, f. 2, ap. 2, b. 40, l. 6.

⁵² Invoice issued to the Vilnius Art Museum, 1942 02 03, in: LNAM archives, f. 2, ap. 1, b. 26, l. 7.

⁵³ Minutes of the session of the Commission for the Acquisition of Artworks for the Vilnius Art Museum (1944 03 25), in: LAM archives, f. 2, ap. 1, b. 40, l. 15–15ap.

⁵⁴ Notification for the head of the Art Department, 1941 06 22, in: LNAM archives, f. 2, ap. 1, b. 24, l. 5.

teach at the Vilnius Academy of Arts was received with silence; certainly, the head of the academy Viktoras Vizgirda might have been simply thrown into a dilemma: a good Polish artist Niesiołowski, or a talented Lithuanian Algirdas Petrulis⁵⁵. Midway through the spring semester of 1942, Vizgirda received new instructions from the head of the Art Department of the Education Board Stepas Vykintas: “Acting on the decree of the General Counsellor for Education, all Polish students of the academy must be ordered to stop their studies immediately and must be removed from the student list. The list of such students is to be sent to the Art Department as soon as possible”⁵⁶. There was no time for considerations or to look for another solution: the process of destruction of higher schools had gained momentum, involving also the teachers, Poles and Lithuanians alike. A month and a half after the order to expel Polish students from the academy, the Counsellor for Education ordered: “Due to downsizing, from 1 March of this year, the employment of the following employees of the Vilnius Art Academy must be terminated: 1) senior teacher Aleksandras Šturmanas [Alexander Szturman], 2) teacher Jerzy Hoppen, 3) junior teacher Adolfas Valeška, 4) junior teacher Viktoras Petravičius, 5) museologist Mečislovas Bulaka, 6) secretary Izabelė Rasiulienė”⁵⁷. In fact, it was a death sentence for the Vilnius Art Academy whose further activity became hardly possible even without an official order for closure.

Certainly, in these conditions, the life of not only Polish, but also Lithuanian artists increasingly moved from the public to the private space. It was only personal relations and solidarity that helped many of them to live through this time and not drop the paintbrush or chisel. For example, it was only thanks to the support of friends and colleagues that the former dean of the Art Faculty of Stephen Báthory University, the leader of the so-called Vilnius school of neoclassicism Ludomir Sleńdziński survived through the war years in Vilnius. Having returned to Vilnius in June 1940, the Soviets evicted him from the flat in Teatro Street, in which the Sleńdziński also accommodated the Nowieski family, refugees from Warsaw, probably relatives

55 Letter of the head of the Vilnius Art Museum Viktoras Vizgirda (1941 09 20) regarding the discharge from office of the freelance teacher Tymon Niesiołowski, in: LLMA, f. 64, ap. 1, b. 43, l. 21.

56 Letter of the head of the Art Department of the Education Board Stepas Vykintas (1942 03 11) to the head of the Vilnius Art Museum regarding the Polish students, with a “highly urgent” mark, in: LCVA, f. R-629, ap. 1, b. 829, l. 493.

57 Copy of the decree of the general counsellor for education Pranas Germantas F/no. 34 (1942 04 30), in: LLMA, f. 64, ap. 1, b. 44, l. 5.

or friends – six people in total⁵⁸. Deprived of his home, the professor was given shelter by his colleague, artist Władysław Oskierka, who had a small wooden manor in the remote Pakalnės Street. Formally the house belonged to Oskierka's nephew, his twin sister Ewelina Oskierczanka's son, engineer Antoni Forkiewicz, who lived there with his wife and children. Sleńdziński and his wife, daughter and his wife's sister Helena Dobrowolska who was living with them moved in with the Oskierkas⁵⁹. According to witnesses, on cool days the artist would sit inside and draw, and on warmer days he would carve reliefs and high reliefs from soft linden wood, sitting on the veranda. This precarious idyll ended when the Nazis took Sleńdziński and other prominent Vilnius intellectuals hostage in September 1943 and sent them to Pravieniškės, which was turned into a forced labour camp. His wife visited him in captivity, and he managed to return to Vilnius quite quickly. However, this experience badly shook the artist and pushed him towards mysticism, to which he had already been inclined. A puppeteer and astrologist, a wartime friend of Sleńdziński's favourite student and protégé Leon Kosmulski, Jadwiga Badowska, remembered long hours of conversations with Sleńdziński and his family about the stars and their impact on human fate⁶⁰. Sleńdziński

⁵⁸ From 1 August 1932, Sleńdziński with his wife and daughter were registered at 4–7 Teatro St. (ul. Teatralna). The house owner was Maria Obertyńska. The Sleńdzińskis moved to Teatro St. from 1 Ukmergės St. From 1935, a maid was registered at the same address. On 29 September 1939, Zofia Wenjaminowa moved in from 2–17 Kaštonų St., but she died on 24 January 1940. For some time, the artist Leon Kosmulski lived with the Sleńdzińskis, having moved from 6–27 Jogailos St. From October 1939, the Nowieski family (six persons), having arrived from Warsaw, were also registered in the flat. See the tenant register for the house at 4 Teatro St. in Vilnius, in: LCVA, f. 64, ap. 6, b. 11351, l. 25ap–26.

⁵⁹ Sleńdziński with his family (wife, daughter and wife's sister Helena Dobrowolska) in the war years was registered at 8–1 Pakalnės St.; the house owner was Antoni Forkiewicz. Władysław Oskierka also lived at the same address. See LCVA, f. R-743, ap. 1, b. 24, l. 51–52.

⁶⁰ "I first met prof. Liudomir Sleńdziński in person in the period of occupation, around late 1943 and early 1944, when he invited me to visit him in his lovely house near the Vilija River on Pakalnės Street. <...> Certainly, Leon Kosmulski accompanied me on my visit to the professor. <...> I entered the patrimonial house reminiscent of a manor on a street descending to the river. So appropriate for such a connoisseur of architecture and beauty! <...> The manor porch, naturally, was supported by columns. Having entered through a swing door, I encountered a tall *Sappho* and another sculpture, whose title I don't remember – it was a moment of epiphany for me. Before the war, my father, lawyer Kazimierz Szafkowski, being fond of Romanticist literature, music and painting, which he studied in his spare time, would take me to museums, painting exhibitions and concerts since I was eight. I was well familiar with the art and culture of my city since my childhood. Yet at that moment, in the house of the famous artist I felt astounded. I was also introduced to his family, and we had a wartime dinner, but most important was what I saw around me. In the meantime, I talked about the mysteries of fate, and the stars in which I believed and still believe. They follow us (and all planets) into the endless space. It was for these conversations, for my astrology that I was invited there". Jadwiga Badowska, *Miedzioryty. Wiersze i wspomnienia o Leonie Kosmulskim*, Białystok: Nauczycielski Klub Literacki, 2003, p. 49.

kept his experiences hidden deep inside him, and his works – portraits of family members and friends, Oskierka among others, figures of classical antiquity and characters of fairy tales (in the war years he created a series of fantasy images *The Day of the Princess* dedicated to his daughter (1943) – do not betray what he really felt⁶¹.

In the war years, the moods of escapism permeated Polish and Lithuanian art alike, though the period of Polish administration in Vilnius ended in the autumn of 1939, and that of Lithuanians – a year later, in June 1940. Both artistic communities felt these moods very strongly during the Nazi occupation. Many artists simply tried to wait till the war was over without losing their professional skills. This does not mean that this waiting period did not produce any remarkable and gifted works. Their analysis, as well as the magnitude of the experienced trauma, its consequences and impact on the development of Vilnius art after World War II, is beyond the object and scope of this paper.

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⁶¹ Among his works of the war years, an important place is occupied by the reliefs *Dawn* (*Jutrzenka* or *Eos*, 1940, 210 × 135; Muzeum Podlaskie in Białystok), *Summer* and *Autumn* (1942, both 242 × 51; Sleńdziński Gallery in Białystok), *Tais* (1942, 211 × 46,6; Sleńdziński Gallery in Białystok), and the composition *Time* (1942, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie). See Katarzyna Renata Hryszko, “Ludomir Sleńdziński, Życie i droga twórcy”, in: *Galeria im. Sleńdzińskich w Białymstoku: Aleksander, Wincenty, Ludomir i Julitta Sleńdzińscy*; Katalog, Białystok, 2004, p. 38.

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Dark Times: Art and Artists of Vilnius in 1939–1941

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Santrauka

Negeri laikai: Vilniaus dailė ir dailininkai 1939–1941 m.

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė

Reikšminiai žodžiai: dailės gyvenimas, muziejai, nacionalizmas, okupacija, parodos, sovietizacija, Vilnius.

Straipsnio tikslas – aptarti ir bendriausiais bruožais rekonstruoti Vilniaus dailininkų bendruomenės tikrovę nuo 1939 m. vėlyvo rudens iki 1941 m. birželio. Šie nepilni dveji metai pakeitė meninių pajėgų išsidėstymą mieste, dailės gyvenimą formuojančią institucijų sistemą, meninius orientyrus, iškėlė naujus vardus, inspiravo naujus vaizdus. Permainas visų pirma lėmė politinės aplinkybės: Lenkiją 1939 m. rugsėjo 1 d. užklupęs ir naikinęs karas; Vilniaus ir Vilniaus krašto prijungimas prie Lietuvos; dvi sovietų okupacijos: 1939 m. rudenį ir 1940 m. birželį; po metų pastarąją pakeitusi nacių okupacija. Kaip politika veikė dailės ir dailininkų gyvenimą, instituciniu ir kitais požiūriais yra tyrę ir lietuvių, ir lenkų dailės istorikai, tačiau visumos vaizdo vis dar neturime, vieningas pasakojimas tik pradedamas kurti. Straipsnyje siekta išryškinti kai kuriuos istoriografijoje iki šiol nepakankamai akcentuotus, tačiau visumos rekonstrukcijai būtinus elementus. Atskleidžiami pavieniai įvairių tautinių grupių dailininkų bendradarbiavimo ir nebendradarbiavimo faktai, keliamas klausimas, kiek šias skirtingas grupes paveikė, įtraukė sovietizacija, kaip susiskaldymas veikė miesto dailės gyvenimą. Patikslinta aukštosios dailės mokyklos ir dailės muziejaus veiklos chronologija, tarp simptominių dailės gyvenimo įvykių išskirtos dvi didžiosios 1940 m. parodos: Lietuvių dailės apžvalginė ir Vilniaus dailininkų kūrybos. Trumpai aptartas nacionalinės politikos poveikis muziejų taikytai kūrinų pirkimo strategijai.

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė —

Dark Times: Art and Artists of Vilnius in 1939–1941