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Jonas Rimša's Paintings in Public and Private Art Collections: Exotica or an Inconvenient Heritage?

Keywords: South American art, Argentina, Bolivia, Modernism, Indigenism, Primitivism, Jonas Rimša, exhibitions, Lithuanian reception, migration of artists and artworks

The exhibition *Aboriginal and Papuan Art*, presented to the Latvian audience in 2016, was conceived and curated by neighbouring Lithuania as an introduction to Australian and Oceanian indigenous art.¹ A peculiar collection of “primitive art” owned by the Lithuanian National Museum of Art was alluded to and compared with “the prized collections of the former colonial empires”.² Whilst remarkably versatile, the collection lays bare the complexities and sensitivities inherent in presenting and discussing such artwork. With the inception of the 21st century, the perceptions of colonial objects of former imperialist countries shifted towards the formulation of an inconvenient heritage concept, recasting and reshaping the discourse in new terms as part of the process of reflection. France, the Netherlands, Great Britain and other former colonial powers concurred that colonial art held by European museums is a product of imperialist power and coercion.

Extracted from their natural sociocultural environment, artefacts hailing from Oceania, Asia, Central and South America have been deprived of their distinct, meaningful value. Critical reflection on the

¹ Exhibition *Aboriginal and Papuan Art* (curated by Julija Mušinskienė and Vita Birzaka), The Art Museum Riga Bourse, February 13–April 17, 2016.

² See *Lietuvos dailės muziejus Rygoje pristato unikaliuos kolekcijos iš Australijos parodą* [The Lithuanian Art Museum presents in Riga a unique collection from Australia], http://old.ldm.lt/LDM/aborigenai_rygoje_2016.htm (11.02.2020).



Jonas Rimša in his studio, Buenos Aires. 1938. Maironis Lithuanian Literature Museum, Kaunas

presentation of art has highlighted its potential to entrench a Eurocentric mindset and construction models. In response to these developments, some countries returned the artifacts to their original owners.³ Others

³ The recent French policy regarding the restitution of the artefacts, pillaged or appropriated while infringing the local traditions and customs of its former colonies, was exemplified in 2019, when France returned to Senegal a sword, formerly the property of the 19th century West African political leader of anticolonial revolt, Omar Saidou Tallui. In 2020, the French parliament took legal steps to return, temporary or permanently, approximately 90,000 artefacts, currently hosted by French museums, to African countries. Intense discussions are held in respect to returning

are altering their presentation and exhibition models by expanding the contextual narrative accompanying artwork and inviting non-European artists to collaborate with museums and respond to their ethnographic collections. Alternatively, art objects are redefined and recast in relevant terms, seeking to foster discussions about climate change and sustainable development.⁴

Whilst Lithuania did not have overseas colonies like other European countries, this is not to say that the country has not been affected by or precluded from developing a colonial mindset; such a mindset was reflected in various exhibitions in the presentation of the artwork of Jonas Rimša (Juan Rimça, Ivan Rimsa, 1903–1978), a Lithuanian artist who lived and worked in South America. The communication track record surrounding his shows gave contours and created resilient pathways for the colonial mindset to take root in society.

This article aims to identify new perspectives and angles in the analysis of Rimša's paintings. As I will argue, his artwork is discerningly an inconvenient heritage due to the coded tensions inherent in his work between “us” and “them”, nationalism and colonialism, and representation and appropriation. His artwork raises important questions and forces us

artefacts hosted by the UK, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and the U.S. to Nigeria. Debates regarding the restitution involve the public and museum professionals alike. Some perceive restitution as potentially damaging to the coherence of art collections and therefore defend the idea of a universal museum with global collections. Their opponents claim that power disbalance is entrenched due to the lack of concrete actions, pointing out that Europeans should return the artefacts to their legal owners, in this respect redefining the borrower/lender positions. See the article by the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Tristram Hunt: Should museums return their colonial artefacts?, *The Guardian*, and the interview with the German historian Dr. Jürgen Zimmerer: Germany is returning Nigeria's looted Benin Bronzes: why it is not nearly enough, *The Conversation*, 02.08.2021.

⁴ For example, the exhibition *Bottled Ocean 2016, Te Ao Māori* (curators George Nuku, Elise Patole-Edoumba; Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie, La Rochelle), 2017; the project *Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the museum* (The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge), 2016; the exhibition *From Samoa with Love?* (curator Hilke Thode-Arora; Museum Fünf Kontinente, München), 2014. For more about the history of development and presentation of ethnographic collections, see *Pacific Presences*, vol. 1: *Oceanic Art and Museums*, eds. Lucie Carreau, Alison Clark, Alana Jelinek, Erna Lilje & Nicholas Thomas, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018.

to reflect on the image of South America in the Baltic States, as well as reveals certain aspects of Lithuanian culture.

The South American image built in exhibitions

Rimša was born in Lithuania and emigrated to South America in the interwar years. During his lifetime, he maintained strong ties with his home country, earning himself the name of a Lithuanian and Bolivian artist. From the 1930s until the 1960s, Rimša's artworks became part of Argentinian and Bolivian museums and private collections. In 1938, the artist sent three oil paintings to the Autumn Art Exhibition in Kaunas, and in the 1970s, donated some of his works to the Lithuanian National Museum of Art, which preceded a resurgent interest in diaspora artists when Lithuania gained independence in 1990. The first decades of the 21st century saw private collectors or corporations, e.g., Tartle and Lewben Art Foundation, assembling rigorous collections of Rimša's artwork through their active work in the Americas.⁵

Due to the great distance, both geographic and mental, transferring and presenting Rimša's art in Lithuania disconnected the artwork from its historical context, which resulted in it being interpreted wrongly by Lithuanian audiences as simplistic, plain and coarse. Reinforcing earlier manifestations and projections of an image of South America defined using preconceptions characteristic of "exotica" led to losing sight of the momentum created for relevant, valuable interactions and meaningful parallels. Standing alone, isolated from other South American artists' work, Rimša's art was exhibited as acontextual, and his artwork was presented without his letters, photographs, excerpts from press releases and similar valuable documents and artefacts, thus depriving the main narrative of its depth and gravity. Oft-repeated and bandied around by the press, the description of Rimša's art exhibitions as "exotic" solidified the image of South America as mythical and immutable throughout history,

⁵ In 2020, the Lithuanian National Museum of Art owned thirty-eight works, the Lithuanian Art Centre Tartle – twenty-three works, and the Lewben Art Foundation – seventy-four paintings, watercolours and drawings, and three bas-reliefs by Jonas Rimša.

epitomized by portrayals of otherworldly, untraversable jungle, far-flung villages and people engaged in festivities, dancing, singing and playing taking centre stage in life, untrammelled by convention. This image had little in common with the urban culture, fast-advancing industrialization and Cold War realities of mid-twentieth century Europe. It engendered a stronger mental, emotional and experiential distance, further alienating the image of South America from its accurate depiction. As evidenced by the exhibition titles over the last forty years, Rimša's artwork was designated and emphasized as "the call of the tropics", "the magic of the jungle", "bronze people" and "disclosure of the Indian spirit".⁶

In 1977, when the first exhibition was held, fascination with the expressive interplay of colours, tropical plants, "exotic Indians" and associated linguistic flamboyance was understandable as Lithuanian society, exhausted by the strict control of the culture field and government-imposed dull Socialist Realism, eagerly sought an alternative. Rimša's art acted as a form of psychological compensation for audiences who travelled from painting to painting inside the Vilnius Picture Gallery, immersing themselves in venturing to such far-flung lands beyond their reach. The experience was effectively comparable to armchair tourism, harnessing the immersive power of art masterpieces in place of travel literature or television. In contemporary Lithuania, this passive, unassertive narrative does not hold ground as the word "exotic" signals racial stereotypes, calling for the disruption of the entrenched power balance. Conscious members of society raise the questions: how should Rimša's portraying of indigenous groups be interpreted? What was his view of indigenous culture? Is indigenous culture accurately represented or appropriated in his paintings? Who are they addressed to? Can I

⁶ Jonas Rimša (1903–1978). *Ugnies ir džiuunglių magija* [The Magic of Fire and Jungle] (curator Nijolė Tumėnienė), Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vytautas Kasiulis Art Museum, 2015; *Bronziniai žmonės. Atskleidęs indėnų dvasią* [The Bronze People. The Disclosure of the Indian Spirit], M. K. Ciurlionis National Museum of Art, 2013; *Gyvenimas klajonėse* [Life in Wanderings], Anykščiai Chapel – World Anykštėnai Creative Centre, 2013; *Tropikų šauksmas: Argentina – Bolivija – Taitis* [The Call of the Tropics: Argentina – Bolivia – Tahiti] (curator Nijolė Tumėnienė), Vilnius Picture Gallery, 2010; *Exhibition of Jonas Rimša's artworks*, Vartai Gallery, 1999; *Exhibition of Jonas Rimša's artworks*, Lithuanian National Museum of Art, 1977.

myself relate to the intended audience? What is my relation with this artistic and sociocultural heritage?

Providing a comprehensive response to these questions requires us to revisit Rimša's art and to resituate it in a broader political, historical and sociocultural context, through the introduction of concepts such as Indigenism and Primitivism, rarely drawn on in Lithuanian fine art studies.

European interest in "primitive" art

"Primitive art" is a fluid concept. Historically, it designated art produced prior to the Renaissance; however, at the end of the 19th century, the concept was employed to define non-European (often colonized) art and objects. The discourse accompanying the concept conveyed the "Western" gaze towards "inferior", "underdeveloped" and "backward" Central and South American, African, Asian and Oceanian cultures. Europeans perceived representatives of "primitive" cultures as uncivilized, irrational "savages" stirring both fascination and fear.

An impulse running underneath this visceral interest in non-European art was disseminated via multiple channels. Archaeological expeditions to the sites of "ancient" cultures were reported in the popular press; ethnographic museums, with their collections of materials brought by explorers, attracted wide attendance in Paris, Berlin, Oxford and other cities, and indigenous art was traded in many metropolitan antique shops and flea markets. At first these artefacts were of keen interest to avant-garde artists; however, they were shortly followed by the bourgeois who developed a taste for collecting African ritual masks and Nasca pottery. Surrealists, Dadaists, Cubists and Fauvists were rarely familiar with the authentic meaning and function of these artefacts and, therefore, appraised them exclusively for their aesthetic value. Spontaneity, coarse expression, brutality and flamboyant colour combinations, forming the core principles of "primitive" visual representation, were capitalized on in the production of "new art", competing against the reigning Academic rigor.

Primitivism as the gaze at the “other” and oneself

European ethnocentricity had a defining role in formulating an image of Europe as a modern continent, simultaneously reducing Central and South America to an “uncivilized” continent defined by its “strange” people, “exotic” nature and hidden treasures. European imagery of the “New World” formulated a specific discourse which influenced the perception, reception and assessment of South American art.

This narrowly defined concept of what constituted South American art became embedded in society in the 19th century with the advent of the first international exhibitions. The first international exhibition was arranged by the British Empire in 1851 in Crystal Palace, which was specifically constructed for the event, and within four years, France picked up the baton. Setting its sights on becoming the world's cultural leader, France broadened the very concept of exhibitions to include art alongside industrial achievements. Art pieces on display came from twenty-eight countries and more than 2,000 artists were represented. However, Southern and Central America was represented by only three artists who were obliged to comply with an entirely different set of criteria than their “Western” counterparts.

At the Parisian exhibition in 1855 it became clear that the discrepancy between the European imagination and reality defied acceptance. The attendees expected to encounter different “national schools”; however, artworks displayed in the Mexican and Peruvian sections reflected generic Modernist trends, which fell short of the audience's expectations who had come to see “exotica” and “otherness”. Modernism, defined as a transnational phenomenon, was unacceptable at that time. Peruvian art historian Natalia Maljuf aptly noted that art critics concerned themselves exclusively with “the motives”, representing a distinctive and unique culture, self-contained and coherent.⁷ “What was primarily valued in the painting was not the artist's ability but the fact that it satisfied certain demands for difference that, even if only at the content level, the painting

⁷ For more information, see Natalia Maljuf: *Ce n'est pas le Pérou* (The Failure of Authenticity), *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1997, vol. 23), 868–893.

could be claimed as an ‘authentic’ work.”⁸ For instance, Francisco Laso’s painting *The Inhabitant of the Peruvian Highlands* was valued solely for its “Peruvian specificity” rather than its inscribed critique of colonialism. The demands for authenticity set a pattern for the reception of all Central and South American art in the “West” and influenced artistic production itself in South America for the following centuries.

Gazing at ourselves rather than the “others” defined Primitivism in South America, revealing itself paradoxically in its quest for national identity. Redefining identity became crucial in the newly independent South American countries: Indigenism was born in the countries with indigenous majorities, primarily Peru, Bolivia and Mexico, and as an ideology was premised on the pre-Columbian cultural heritage with a pivotal role assigned to the rustic identity. South American Indigenists were familiar with the authentic culture through their immediate links with native inhabitants and their living environment, which placed them in sharp contrast to European Primitivists who derived their expertise from ethnography exhibitions, private collections and antique markets. Indigenists perceived an idealized rural world inhabited by indigenous groups as the foundation for national culture. Pivoting on “Primitivism” served a dual purpose (internal and external): it aided and encouraged the consolidation of the nation and represented the country’s “authenticity” to the international community.

Rimša’s integration in Argentina

Painter Jonas Rimša was born in 1903 in the town of Svėdasai, Lithuania, lived in Russia during the First World War, and after the Russian Revolution returned with his family to the interwar Lithuanian capital Kaunas.⁹ In his youth, Rimša was drawn to new opportunities on offer across the Atlantic, conforming to the trend set in the late 19th – early

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Laima Laučkaitė: Jonas Rimša, *Lietuvos dailininkų žodynas* [The Dictionary of Lithuanian Artists], vol. 3: 1918–1944, ed. by Lijana Šatavičiūtė-Natalevičienė. Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2013, 320.

20th century among Lithuanians, Jews, Poles, Hungarians and other Eastern Europeans. Recent research has revealed that Lithuanians moved to South America incentivized by growing expectations with regard to higher education, careers and a quest for adventure, setting aside the formerly prevalent view that poverty and precariousness were the main factors at play.¹⁰ The motives driving Rimša to emigrate were multifarious with his departure offering an escape from family quarrels and a route to emancipation. The future painter was on bad terms with his stepmother and had a conflict-ridden relationship with his father caused by his disinterest in becoming a tailor. Imagery of an “exotic” and prosperous South America, conjured up by shipping companies’ agents, became intertwined with an entrepreneurial mindset, illusions of enrichment and swift career prospects.¹¹

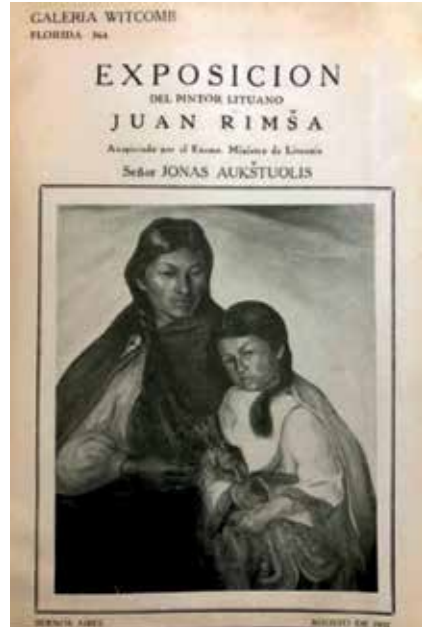
Rimša’s life and work in various South American countries spanned more than twenty years, and at the time of his arrival in the southern continent in 1926, at the age of 23, he was keen to learn, curious and adaptable. During his first few years, Rimša undertook onerous physical work in Brazilian coffee plantations and sawmills, eventually moving to neighbouring Argentina where he studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts for two years. The Academy, led by Pío Collivadino, focused on teaching academic drawing skills, with early Modernist, primarily Impressionist, paintings lauded as the ultimate example of art. As one of the first Lithuanian painters in Argentina, Rimša lacked the financial support of patrons and, with artist networks yet to be set up by his countrymen, connections and introductions that could have helped him in this respect were yet beyond reach. Rimša did not make his way into the Buenos Aires artistic elite; nevertheless, he managed to enter the local artistic field with Benito Quinquela Martín, Miguel Carlos Victorica and

¹⁰ For more information, see 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 (supervisor Prof. Dr. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė), Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2019.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.



Jonas Rimša, *Untitled*. 1937.
National Archives, Buenos Aires



Catalogue of the exhibition of Jonas Rimša's works in Witcomb Gallery, Buenos Aires. 1937. *The Motherhood Idyll* is depicted on the cover of the catalogue. Together with another two of his works, this oil painting was sent by the painter to the 4th Autumn Art Exhibition in Kaunas in 1938. The artwork was acquired by the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Museum of Art (Kaunas) after the exhibition

other La Boca artists becoming his good acquaintances.¹² An informal artist community gathered in the industrial part of Buenos Aires in close vicinity to the port, notorious for its brothels, ill-reputed bars, petty shops and barber salons often run by Italians. Whilst some of the artists were attracted by economic livelihood, a more liberal, democratic atmosphere within what was otherwise an untainted social reality acted as a source of creative inspiration to others.

¹² Francisco Espina: Juan Rimsa, El pintor de la selva, *Esto es* (Buenos Aires) 88 (02-08.08.1955).

Rimša formed natural bonds with other La Boca artists, including many Italian migrants, as he experienced first-hand the difficulties of settling in the city of many millions. Growing numbers of Italians, Spanish, Germans and other nationalities were “transplanted” from Europe to South America following the establishment of the independent Argentinian state. Endowed with a vast territory, Argentina established immigration propaganda bureaus in European cities; among other things, this was to attract a workforce capable of cultivating large swathes of land. The arrival of more than 55 million people between 1870 and 1929 marked the peak of immigration and bore witness to the colossal scale of this phenomenon, which gave rise to the complex socio-political problems Argentina had to address in the aftermath of a massive influx of new settlers. In relation to the question of national identity, the “typical” Argentinian landscape was reified and disseminated through an idea of a nation linked together by its territory, with infinitely diverse and plentiful nature, sprawling from the fertile cultivable plateaus, called *pampas*, to the Andean highlands. The mountainous terrain became the designated “national landscape” *tout court*.¹³

During this era, Rimša discovered landscapes depicting the Argentinian highlands and lakes to be a commercially viable genre, securing a modest revenue to make a living. In Rimša's life, this period is marked by extended travel, including to neighbouring Bolivia, affiliated to northern Argentina and feted for its landscapes unaffected by excessive human intrusion and local traditions preserved by its larger communities of indigenous peoples. In the 1930s, Rimša presented his artworks in the prominent exhibition halls of major Argentinian cities: Buenos Aires City Hall,¹⁴ Witcomb Gallery in Buenos Aires, *Salón de Otoño* in Rosario, *Salón de Arte* in La Plata, and Museo Rosa Galisteo in Santa Fe.¹⁵

¹³ Diana B. Wechsler: Impacto y matices de una modernidad de los márgenes. Las artes plásticas entre 1920 y 1945, *Nueva historia argentina. Arte, sociedad y política*, vol. 1, ed. by José Emilio Burucúa. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999, 269–313.

¹⁴ On the exhibition by young Argentinian painters in the municipality of Buenos Aires in 1934, see *Argentinos lietuvii balsas* [Voice of the Lithuanians of Argentina] (Buenos Aires), 12.06.1934.

¹⁵ Georgina G. Gluzman: “Cruzando el país en sus infinitas direcciones”: instituciones, obras, imaginarios (Argentina, 1920–1950), *Ciencia y Cultura* (La Paz) 43 (December 2019), 263–264.

Argentinian society and prominent patrons alike were highly receptive to artworks with the national discourse running as their major thematic thread. Argentinian colonel, writer and historian Evaristo Ramírez Juárez was fortuitously immortalised sitting in the honorary front row in the photo of the opening ceremony of Rimša's exhibition in 1937.¹⁶ In his Army Officer days, Mr Juárez took part in military exploratory missions in the Chaco province and published a series of historical publications after he was appointed Director of the Military History Archive in 1931.¹⁷ The historical painting *The Battle near Obligado* (*La Batalla de la Vuelta de Obligado*)¹⁸ was allegedly inspired by conversations held in the living room at the colonel's house. The painting depicts the battle of the Argentinian confederation against the united English and French forces on the waters of the Paraná River and its surrounding areas on 20 November 1845. Whilst the Europeans proved to be tactically superior, the resilience of the Argentinian troops and catastrophic losses experienced by the British and the French compelled Europeans to recognize Argentinian sovereignty over its territorial waters, heralding an important diplomatic victory. Battle painting was always intrinsically linked with the discourse of national history, vehemently lending itself to the artists harbouring the idea of achieving the nationally acclaimed grand master status; therefore, Rimša's thematic decisions were not fortuitous.

Rimša's significant role in the Argentinian art history is confirmed by the fact that some of his works were purchased by the Benito Quinquela Martín Museum of Fine Arts: established in 1938, the museum owns one of the most extensive Argentinian figurative art collections from the first half of the 20th century. Rimša's oil painting *Nocturnal Feast (Jujuy)* (*La Fiesta Nocturna. Jujuy*)¹⁹ was purchased by the museum in 1941, followed

¹⁶ See The reception at the Lithuanian Consulate in honour of the inaugural exhibition of Jonas Rimša's artworks at Witcomb Gallery, 1937. Photo by S. Antonovas. Kaunas University of Technology, Manuscripts Department.

¹⁷ Lidia Polich de Calvo: *Hombres y Mujeres que Hicieron Chaco*. Encarnación, 1996.

¹⁸ Dailininko J. Rimšos nauja tendencija [A New Tendency in the Work of Artist Rimša], *Tiesa* (Buenos Aires) 1 (1936), 17.

¹⁹ Solicitud de adquisición de obras, 11.09.1941, Archivo de Museo Benito Quinquela Martín.

by the drawing *The Last Farewell* (Último adios) produced in 1937. Another oil painting *The Indigenous Street* (*Calle Indígena*)²⁰ became the museum's property in the 1980s. The three paintings depict a dignified, idealised everyday life with small indigenous communities gathering for festivities, funerals, or simply performing daily rituals. Viewing these paintings heightens the sense that one is looking at fragments of the national epic: a serene and nearly magnificent feeling is amplified by the colossal, spectacular view of the mountains framing the festive and the funerary scenes. The first painting was produced when Rimša visited the Jujuy province located in northern Argentina, whereas the second was plausibly painted in Bolivia.²¹ In the 1930s, Argentinian artists shifted their gaze inwards to their native continent, thus drifting away from the European art centres, i.e., Paris, Madrid and Rome. Rimša's own journeys aligned with these trends. Internships and tours around Western Europe were superseded by trips to northern Argentina and the Andean countries, Bolivia and Peru, which were home to the largest group of indigenous peoples who allegedly preserved "the spirit of the land". The famous artist couple Raquel Forner and Alfredo Bigatti, for example, embarked on their honeymoon to northern Argentina and Bolivia in 1936. In the 1940s, a zeal for studying the nature and culture of the region led painters Rimša and Armando Sica onto a common path. One of the reminiscences of this acquaintance is a portrait of Rimša painted by his Argentinian colleague, held by the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Rome.²²

Rimša in the circles of Bolivian Indigenists

Seeking new sources of inspiration, in 1936 Rimša moved to Bolivia where he lived for fifteen years. His arrival coincided with the ongoing sociopolitical transformation caused by the defeat in the vicious Chaco war fought with Paraguay from 1932 to 1935, when nearly 50,000 men

²⁰ Solicitud de adquisición de obras, 30.10.1964, Archivo de Museo Benito Quinquela Martín.

²¹ The location where the painting was created is indicated in Jorge Suarez: Bolivia palpita en la pintura de Juan Rimsa, *La Nación* (La Paz), 16.06.1963.

²² Noticias breves del exterior, *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 25.11.1958.

perished (including many Quechua peasants and craftsmen), forcing the ruling class of Mestizos-Criollos reformers to revisit the concept of the nation. Reflections on the national identity led the reformers to exploit Bolivian writers of the early 20th century, distinctive in their idealization of the “indigenous race” and nature, who played a crucial role in the aesthetic exploitation of the mixing processes of racial and ethnic groups. *Mestizaje*, the processes of cultural, ethnic and racial mixing, became a major social force,²³ an instrument in the construction of the unified nation and state after the war, displacing the ruling class attitude towards indigenous peoples as subject to eradication. In other words, the revolutionary *mestizaje* ideology shaped a diverse population into a nation. In this context, the need to establish the national identity through artwork became apparent. The concept of Indigenism, suggested by the Peruvian journalist and political philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui as a political, literary and artistic ideology in 1925,²⁴ spread in Bolivia and other Andean countries.

Mariátegui conceptualized indigenous peoples as a unique feature of South America, and something to be explored by educated and politically engaged elite writers and painters. A prolific writer clearly perceived the political function and constraints of such creative work: “Indigenist literature [and art – L.P.] cannot provide a rigorously truthful version of the Indian. It must idealize and stylize the Indian. Nor can it evoke the Indian’s own voice, or own soul. It is still mestizo literature [or art – L.P.]. That is why it is called Indigenism and not Indian literature”.²⁵

Weekly publications consistently presented the Bolivian Archaeological Society’s explorations and pre-Colombian cultures, and published works by the Indigenist writers Augusto Céspedes, Alfredo

²³ Javier Sanchinéz C.: *Mestizaje Upside-Down, Aesthetic Politics in Modern Bolivia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004, 17.

²⁴ José Carlos Mariátegui: Hacia el estudio de los problemas peruanos, *Mundial* (Lima), 10.07.1925, and Nacionalismo y vanguardismo en la ideología política, *Mundial* (Lima), 27.11.1925.

²⁵ José Carlos Mariátegui: El indigenismo en la literatura nacional, *Mundial* (Lima), 21.01.1927, 04.02.1927 and 28.02.1927. The quotation in English can be found in Michele Greet: *Beyond National Identity: Pictorial Indigenism as a Modernist Strategy in Andean Art, 1920–1960*. Pennsylvania: Pen State University Press, 2009, 17.



Jonas Rimša, *The Gate of the Sun (Puerta del Sol)*. C. 1936. Private collection, Bolivia

Sanjinés and Fernando Diez de Medina.²⁶ The formulation of this public discourse underpinned and framed the movement of Indigenism from the 1920s onwards. Grasping the cultural undercurrents, Rimša sought to visit the Gate of the Sun, a prominent symbol of the pre-Columbian capital of the Tiwanaku State, Cusco, the historical capital of the Inca empire, Machu Pichu, hidden in the mountains since its flourishing in the 15th–16th centuries, and similar relevant archaeological sites in the Andean region. The artist was particularly interested in the culture, religion and traditions of the Aymara ethnic group.

²⁶ Silvia Arze: Arte y público. Espacios para el contacto en La Paz (1930–1950), *Ciencia y Cultura* (La Paz) 43 (December 2019), 319.



Jonas Rimša, *The Indian Market*. C. 1944. Private collection, Lithuania

Fulfilling his contemporaries' expectations, Rimša's art and pedagogical work neatly fit into the discourse of Indigenism. The portrayed native inhabitants with their traditions, festivities and daily scenes were recognizable to Bolivians as their indigenous compatriots fighting in the Chaco war. The painted landscapes of the highlands, the jungle and the monuments of the pre-Columbian era expressed their identity and were compatible with the ideals of Indigenism as a national style. Bolivians



Jonas Rimša, *Saint John's Eve*. C. 1937. Private collection, Lithuania



Jonas Rimša, *The Andes*. Undated. Lithuanian National Museum of Art, Vilnius



Jonas Rimša, *Afternoon Meal (Apthapi)*. 1937. Private collection, La Paz

were able to cast a new glance at their cultural heritage, nature and land through Rimša's innovative stylistic lens, employing bright colours, subtle chiaroscuro, and the power of French Fauvism and Expressionism. In 1937, after more than a year of his residence in Bolivia, Rimša organized an exhibition of his artworks in La Paz, which resulted in "a great success and strengthening of his material position".²⁷ In later years, Rimša presented his artworks to audiences in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Peru, and was supported by the patronage of Lithuanian diplomats. During his exhibitions, he crossed pathways with Bolivian officials, and in 1943 accepted their offer to lead the Academy of Fine Arts in Sucre, sealing his position as a nationally endorsed authority. Rimša's combined pedagogical and organizational talents contributed to and shaped the Bolivian system of art education. After leaving his position as director

²⁷ See Nijolė Tumėnienė (ed.): *Tropikų šauksmas* [The Call of the Tropics], exhibition catalogue. Vilnius: Lietuvos dailės muziejus, 2011, 23.



The opening ceremony of Jonas Rimša's exhibition at the City Hall of La Paz.

1937 04 25. Photograph, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, Vilnius.

Rimša is standing at the centre with his paintings lined up from the left to the right in the background:

Fiesta nocturna (Jujuy) (before 1937, Museo de Bellas Artes de La Boca de Artistas Argentinas

„Benito Quinquela Martín”), *Retrato de Yolanda Bedregal* (1937, private collection) and

Afternoon Meal (Apthapi) (1937, private collection)



Luis Perloti, *The Dance of the Condors* (*Danza de los cóndores*). 1936.

Museum of Luis Perloti's sculptures, Buenos Aires

of the Academy, Rimša began holding private art courses *Curso Superior Rimša* initially in Sucre and, later, in La Paz, training an entire generation of Indigenists: Mario Eloy Vargas, Juan Ortega Leyton, Josefina Reynolds and Graciela Rodo-Boulanger, to mention just a few.

A significant impact on Rimša's worldviews, work and status in society was made by a circle of prominent Bolivian intellectuals: Roberto Prudencio, who was a senator and the rector of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature of

La Paz University in the 1940s, the writer, sociologist and diplomat Gustavo Adolfo Otero,²⁸ as well as the writer and the rector of La Paz University Juan Francisco Bedregal with his daughter and prominent poet-to-be Yolanda Bedregal.²⁹ For some time after his arrival in the country, Rimša found home at the Bedregal family's residence in Goitia street and was a frequent guest on their farm in Incapampa, located in the mountainous Yungas area.³⁰ An Argentinian sculptor and Rimša's close friend Luis Perloti together with his peers created an amenable, intellectually and artistically stimulating environment with the support of their connections and recommendations.³¹ The Bedregals welcomed

²⁸ Maria Isabel Alvarez Plata P.: La mirada moderna de Juan Rimša, *Ciencia y Cultura* (La Paz) 43 (December 2019), 183.

²⁹ Vytautas Kazakevičius: Kieno gi tu dailininkas, Chuanai Rimša? [Whose Artist Are You, Juan Rimša?], *Literatūra ir menas* (Vilnius), 29.03.1975, 05.04.1975.

³⁰ Alejandra Echazú Conitzer: Nuestro domingo: crónica epistolar entre Yolanda Bedregal e Iván Rimša, *Ciencia y Cultura* (La Paz) 43 (December 2019), 225–239.

³¹ Jonas Rimša's letter to Yolanda Bedregal, 25.04.1938, private archive, La Paz.



Marina Núñez del Prado, *Andean Flowers (Flores de los Andes)*. 1945. Private collection, location unknown

Rimša into their family, when Rimša and Yolanda became a couple and Yolanda introduced him to some of her friends and renowned personalities of the first part of the 20th century, including the Peruvian intellectual Alejandro González Trujillo (Apu Rímoli) and the Bolivian Modernist sculptor Marina Núñez del Prado.

Yolanda's departure to study in New York was followed by a frequent exchange of love letters containing pieces of Lithuanian forest moss or Bolivian national flower *quantuta*, melding and interlacing the elements of Rimša's Lithuanian and Bolivian identity. The romantic feelings for the Bolivian woman and her parents' hospitality strengthened from "within"



Jonas Rimša (on the left) at the studio of Cecilio Guzmán de Rojas, Abdón Saavedra St. 2221, La Paz. 1937. Cocó Larrañaga's archive, Buenos Aires

Rimša's embrace of the local culture and leavened his desire to incorporate it into his identity. Deeply rooted in the local culture, Rimša was led by the ideas of the Indo-American movement spread in South America and liaised with the continental artists. At one point he considered moving to Peru for a year in his quest to meet the *Grupo Indigenista* artists José Sabogal, Julia Cidesido, and Enrique Camino Brent.³²

It is noteworthy that Rimša became friends with Cecilio Guzmán de Rojas who was an iconic personality in Modern Bolivian art, lending himself to an intelligible explication of some of the nuances, aesthetic expression and functions of Indigenism (as it evolved) in Bolivia in the first half of the 20th century. One of the founders of Bolivian Indigenism, Guzmán de Rojas lived in Madrid in the 1920s and during his years in Europe became acquainted with the ideas of Primitivism, increasingly promoted by his European peers. They expressed a keen interest in African, Asian and American autochthonous art, as well as artworks

³² Pintor boliviano recorre el Perú buscando fuentes de inspiración, *La Nación* (Lima), 29.01.1954.

Postcard sent by Lithuanian writer and traveller Matas Šalčius to his wife Bronislava Šalčiuvienė from Cochabamba (Bolivia) to Kaunas (Lithuania).

1936 06 18. Martynas Mažvydas

National Library, Vilnius.

Cecilio Guzmán de Rojas's work

Iurack-Puito depicted on the front of the postcard published by Salón del Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid



Cochabamba 18.6.1936. Rašau Jūnui
 Bronislavai, kur išbuvoau apie
 mėnesį laiko. Labai graži ir šviesi
 šalis. Aplankiau Bolivijs, Tupiza,
 Uyuni, Oruro La Paz, Titikakos
 ežerą ir Kuechambę. Iš ora skry-
 sui į Santa Cruz ir Puerto Suarez
 lėktuvu virš pusaujo miestų,
 iki Corumbos Brazilijoje, kur
 yra Synovausis dešmantis kasyb-
 los. Bolivijs labai maloni šalis
 gyvenanti ir jo veldžius nori atvykti
 iš Lietuvos. Iš lėktuvų gerai
 la Paiz buvo žrėms labai malta.
 Tai man buvo maloni atraina.
 Pradėjau vesti savo kuringi iš-
 pantiškai per pusį metų manau
 bus gatavas. Rašau tau per po-
 stą, nes negaliu būti Amerikoje. Jūs
 vis dar galite Palangėje. Gerai pasi-
 vylkite sveikatos. Mūsų laukia, jus
 visus! Labai dejuo visoms prognozoms.
 Mūsų artys ir šventėms. Mūsų!





Cecilio Guzmán de Rojas, *The Triumph of Nature* (*El triunfo de la naturaleza*).
1928. National Museum of Art, La Paz

produced by children, people with mental illness and village craftsmen. Guzmán de Rojas well grasped and reflected contemporary trends in his first artworks exploiting “autochthonous” Bolivian motives of pre-Columbian pottery, cult sites and nature landscapes, winning acclaim from Madrid art critics who recognized “barbarism” in his works and thus affirmed his position in aesthetic Primitivism in Bolivia. Referring to his painting *The Triumph of Nature*, Margarita Vila poignantly remarked that the artist’s depiction of the indigenous peoples is inherently related to Western academic symbolism and, I would say, the refined *art deco* style, setting him further apart from pre-Colombian art.³³

In Guzmán de Rojas’s case, inherent interlinkages between Primitivism and Indigenism permitted his smooth transition into Indigenism. Artworks perceived by the Europeans as “barbarism” in Bolivia were

³³ Margarita Vila: La influencia de las vanguardias en el arte boliviano del siglo XX, *Ciencia y Cultura* (La Paz) 4 (December 1998), 12.

interpreted as a multifarious patriotic message through references to the Andean world creation myths, the cult of the Sun or a metaphor of the birth of a country. According to Michele Greet, "Indigenism can be understood as resulting from a process of transculturation, since it was a new cultural form that employed the language of the dominant culture to assert a nativist agenda".³⁴ During his tenure as the head of the Hernando Siles National Academy of Fine Arts in La Paz, he concertedly guided his students and some of his colleagues, including Rimša, in the direction of Indigenism.

The Bolivian authorities greatly encouraged the development of capable Indigenist artists, and Rimša sought to establish himself as an authoritative painter. His personal correspondence reveals that he maintained high prices for his paintings in order to keep them inaccessible to wider society; however, he was ready to make concessions to state institutions in order to institutionalize his artwork and create added value.³⁵

Rimša not only was entrusted with the training of Bolivian artists, but also was responsible for official art and representation of Bolivia through his artistic work, which speaks volumes of Rimša's recognition reaching well beyond his fellow artists and intellectuals into the political domain. Commissioned by the president of Bolivia, Rimša produced the painting *The Founding of La Paz* (1948) for the quadricentenary of the capital.

We could state that Rimša became an ambassador of Bolivian culture and art abroad. The Bolivian authorities initiated and funded monograph publications about Rimša in the Spanish and English languages³⁶ and continued to organize his exhibitions in Argentina and Brazil after he left the country.³⁷ Rimša gained the highest national recognition in 1950 when he was awarded the Order of the Condor of the Andes and became

³⁴ Greet, op. cit., 10.

³⁵ Jonas Rimša's letter to Yolanda Bedregal, no. 30, 30.04.1937, private archive.

³⁶ Karolė Pažėraitė: Dailininko Jono Rimšos gyvenimo bruožai [Features of the Life of Artist Jonas Rimša], *Draugas* (Chicago), 16.08.1952.

³⁷ Tumėnienė, op. cit., 27.

the fourth member of the selected artists' delegation at the first Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte.³⁸ In terms of exhibitors' diversity and art critical reviews, the Madrid Biennial held in 1951 made its mark as the first genuinely international Spanish American exhibition.³⁹ Although due to unknown reasons Rimša's artworks were not presented, his position in the cultural domain was ultimately cemented when the same year his painting *Adolescence* (*Adolescência*) made its way to the São Paulo Biennial, an event which gained international recognition and prestige in later years. Rimša's artworks were presented in the main exhibition with indication of his nationality as Brazilian, which emphasizes his status as a nomad artist. Rimša was determined to confirm his title of "the jungle artist", assigned to him by the Argentinian and Bolivian press, in any South American country.

Rimša in the South American press: from mystifying to reconnecting

Rimša exhibited in various South American countries, as evidenced by Argentinian, Peruvian, Brazilian and Chilean art critics and reviewers, and was lauded and positioned as an "authentic American artist".⁴⁰ His artwork was regarded as an invaluable documentation of an "authentic landscape" and "autochthonous races"⁴¹, and the artist was revered for his lengthy presence in the continent. In the 1950s, the art critic Ismo P. Aimi and his colleagues shaped a public perception of artists being formed not by fine art academies or professional practice but by the jungle

³⁸ La Exposición Preparatoria de la Bienal, *Menorca* (Mahón), 17.02.1951.

³⁹ See Miguel Cabañas Bravo: Introducción a la I Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte, *Relaciones artísticas entre España y América*. Madrid: Consejo superior de investigaciones científicas, 1990, 365–431; Miguel Cabañas Bravo, *La Primera Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte: Arte, política y polémica en un certamen internacional de los años cincuenta*, tesis doctoral (dir. Enrique Arias Anglés), Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1991.

⁴⁰ See Juan Rimsa expondrá en la Galería del T. Opera, *El Mundo* (Buenos Aires), 23.06.1959; Notas de arte, *El Hogar* (Buenos Aires), 05.08.1955.

⁴¹ Juan Rimsa expondrá en la Galería del T. Opera, *El Mundo* (Buenos Aires), 23.06.1959.

(*la selva* in Spanish) and wild nature.⁴² Fostering the legend of Rimša's life in the jungle leading to the apogee of his artistic career, Aimi accentuated clichés characteristic of the discourses of Indigenism and Modernism. He referred to Rimša as "the jungle artist" and "a grown child", describing his art as supposedly "natural, child-like, intuitive". The legend of his exceptionalism was supported by designating him "an apostle", "a master" and "a spirit fostering the holy light and dignifying human existence". As suggested by Ramón Antonio Chas, Rimša's Nazarene beard and small stature bore similarities to Indian mystics and apostles. He elaborated further on



Jonas Rimša, *The Prayer of the Tropic*.
C. 1950. Martynas Tinfavičius collection, Vilnius

Rimša's search for a refuge in the American jungle, which was perceived as a symbol and locus of innocence and absolute chastity. According to the art critic, "Rimša finds spiritual purification in the jungle, and every time returns to his true self, bringing paintings of edifying beauty and

⁴² Ismo P. Aimi: Rimša en Muller, *Los Principios* (Córdoba), 22.07.1953; Ismo P. Aimi: Presencia del "Pintor de la selva", *La Capital* (Mar del Plata), 25.06.1959. Later this description was repeated in the articles published by different authors: Juan Rimša. Pintor de la selva. *El Comercio* (Lima), Suplemento dominical, 14.02.1954; Francisco Espina: Juan Rimša, El pintor de la selva, *Esto es* (Buenos Aires) 88 (02-08.08.1955); Ramón Antonio Chas: Rimša: El Gauguin de la selva americana, *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), Suplemento literario, 28.06.1959 etc.

power”.⁴³ Chas’s and his contemporaries’ views threaded a story which described Rimša responding to the Amazonian forest spells and painting whilst immersed in a mystified state: “inebriated by tropical flora and healing his brush in the purity of hidden sites”.⁴⁴ Austrian art historians Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz provided a compelling description of the mystification of a painter’s profession rooted in the Renaissance, weaving strands of otherworldly clarifications of isolated gestures and deification of artistic vocation, transfixing the reality.⁴⁵

The hybridity and complexity situated at the core of Rimša’s identity are exemplified by several paradoxical descriptions which appeared in exhibition reviews. Allegedly surpassing his American peers in his truthful and accurate portrayal of American nature, Rimša was admired as a personality embedded in national culture. In parallel, Rimša’s arrival to South America was presented as an act reminiscent of “a missionary, venturing to the depths of new forms and ambience”.⁴⁶

Whilst based in South America, Rimša was often featured in the continental press and radio broadcasts; however, interest in his work abated after he moved to the United States in 1965, receding and nearly disappearing from the realm of art history.

A research paper delivered by the author of this article at the international conference in Buenos Aires in 2017 shed light on the pioneering Lithuanian migrant painters in South America, Jonas Rimša among them.⁴⁷ Academic discussions incited a renewed interest in

⁴³ Ramón Antonio Chas: Un misionero de la pintura: Juan Rimsa, *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), 30.07.1961, republished by Bolivians and Lithuanians: Ramón Antonio Chas: Misionero de la pintura: Juan Rimsa, *La Nación* (La Paz), 27.08.1961; Ramon Antonio Chas: Jonas Rimša – tapybos misijonierius [Jonas Rimša, A Missionary of Painting], *Draugas* (Chicago), 19.08.1961.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ See Ernst Kris, Otto Kurtz: *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979.

⁴⁶ See Chas.

⁴⁷ Laura Petrauskaitė delivered a research paper “Significance of Artists’ Migration for the Modernization of Lithuanian Art” at the international conference *Mobility: Objects, Materials, Concepts, Actors* held in Buenos Aires (Argentina) on September 30 – October 8, 2017. For more information on the conference programme, participants and research papers, see *Mobility: Objects, Materials, Concepts, Actors*. Program and Abstracts, [Berlin], 2017.

Rimša's personality, and new research on Jonas Rimša's work placed the artist in a wider cultural context. Art historian and critic Laura Malosetti Costa wrote an article about the painter and the rector of the National Academy of Fine Arts Pío Collivadino⁴⁸ as the main character and the protagonist of her research, including an excursus about a young migrant Jonas Rimša. The formative role played by the Argentinian Academy became exemplified by his personality. Georgina Gluzman presented the artist to the South American audience widening the historical context and encompassing developments in the political and arts field.⁴⁹ Rimša was portrayed as a well-known artist of his time who exhibited in the salons of Buenos Aires, Rosario and La Plata. Still, the reception of Rimša's artistic legacy has not been critically analyzed and the meaning of his artworks has not been revisited in the Bolivian and Lithuanian contexts until the recent research, new factual and contextual material created preconditions for such an endeavour.

Ambivalent artwork

Coincidentally, Rimša's Bolivian art period occurred between the historically significant years 1931 and 1952. In 1931, a political and intellectual elite association *Amigos de la Ciudad* organized *La Semana indianista* (*The Indian Week*) in the Bolivian capital, La Paz. The event encompassed conferences centred around the "autochthons theme" (broadcast on the radio and covered in newspapers),⁵⁰ excursions to the historical Tiwanaku cultural sites, music and dance performances by its "successors" the Aymara,

⁴⁸ Laura Malosetti Costa: Pío Collivadino y la Academia de Bellas Artes en Buenos Aires, *Ciencia y Cultura* (La Paz) 43 (December 2019), 283–295.

⁴⁹ Gluzman, op. cit., 261–270.

⁵⁰ Two groups of intellectuals can be distinguished in the broadest sense. Both considered "the Indians" a relevant part of the Bolivian nation; however, one group regarded "the Indians" as threatening and their integration as a pedagogical issue. The other group, which included a significant number of Marxists, placed "the Indians" at the heart of national progress and suggested solving "the Indian issue" through an agrarian reform. See Cecilia Wahren: La creación de la Semana indianista. Indianidad, Folklore y Nación en Bolivia, *Universitas Humanistica* 77 (January-June 2014), 169–195.

crafts and art exhibitions. The latter was acclaimed as a national art show. *La Semana indianista's* purpose, as described by one of its main organizers Alberto de Villegas, was to “glorify national folklore”, to “magnify the soul of the race” and to “forge an authentic Bolivian culture with Indo-American traditions”.⁵¹ This Indigenist trend reached its apogee in 1952 with the start of the National Revolution, and a specially designated Department of Folklore was set up at the Ministry of Education. Indigenous dance and music festivals were arranged concurrently with robust socioeconomic reforms, which were supported by visual propaganda. Reverberating far beyond the national boundaries, these developments were pointedly described by the muralist Diego Rivera: “A great example. I am proud as an American [...] if I had to choose a place of birth, it would have been Bolivia. The most Indian country in the whole continent”.⁵² The above assessment allows us to understand the role played by Indigenism in Central and South America with Bolivia acting as a desired homeland and a particular sign of prestige. Jonas Rimša called himself an “Americanist”,⁵³ fittingly suggesting his well-established integration into local society. His artwork, alongside that of his contemporaries Cecilio Guzman de Rojas and Marina Núñez del Prado, lent itself to the formulation of Bolivian identity. As early as 1937, when Rimša’s first exhibition was organized, his paintings encouraged people to be proud of their autochthonous past, traditions and their native land, and became functional in national consolidation. Reactions to Rimša’s landscapes expressed by the exhibition attendees are aptly encapsulated and preceded by the comment made by Roberto Prudencio: “a geographic phenomenon more than sufficient to produce a crucial, special and exceptional feeling”.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 175.

⁵² Diego Rivera habló de la lucha de Nuestros Pueblos, *El Diario*, 21.05.1953. For more information, see Robert Matthew Gildner: *Indomestizo Modernism: National Development and Indigenous Integration in Postrevolutionary Bolivia, 1952–1964*, dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2012.

⁵³ Juan Rimsa, pintor nacido en Lituania, expondrá en abril en la Galería de Lima, *La Cronica* (Lima), 29.01.1954.

⁵⁴ Roberto Prudencio: Ideas sobre el sentido de la cultura altioplánica, *Última Hora* (La Paz), 29.12.1931.

With the benefit of hindsight and changes in historical perspective, the movement of Indigenism appears as a distinct form of nationalism, which strives to create a homogenous society and at the same time ignores its diversity. *The Indian Week* events, concerts and art exhibitions disenfranchised indigenous peoples, rendering them as a valuable although politically “innocuous” folklore. *The Portrait of Yolanda Bedregal*, painted by Rimša, is a poignant revelation of attitudes expressed by the cultural and political elite and their perception of “the Indians” as a fashionable attribute of nationhood and mundane life rather than fellow citizens with equal rights. The portrait depicts the poet donning a black European-American style dress, sitting on a spread decorated with Andean patterns.

The development of the critical discourse leads to a recognition that the devaluation of the indigenous was strengthened by the elevation of the landscape as a natural and cultural phenomenon and a painting genre. The highlands of La Paz became a national symbol *par excellence* with a respective depiction of indigenous as objectified, not surfacing beyond their role as a detail.

Reflecting the *esprit* of their time, Rimša's contemporaries appreciated his landscapes the most. The painter himself valued portraits more,⁵⁵ as they allowed him to reveal the personality, character, and individual traits of the poser. In contrast, landscapes and group compositions of indigenous peoples emphasized their commonality. By design or default, the painter contributed to the stereotyping of the Indigenous. According to Cecilia Wahren, the 1930s witnessed the birth of “a new stereotype of an Indian placing him in a predetermined position: as a part of the highlands landscape, reminiscent of the past, or simply as a decorative element subject to the process of stylization in its conversion to the national”.⁵⁶

At this point the reader might find herself/himself presented with a conventional piece of critique addressed towards the *indigenistas*

⁵⁵ See Kazakevičius.

⁵⁶ Wahren, op. cit., 192.



Jonas Rimša, *Portrait of Yolanda Bedregal (Retrato de Yolanda Bedregal)*.
1936–1937. Private collection, La Paz

and, to be more precise, with the fact that *indigenistas*, as urban bourgeois artists, blatantly ignored the ongoing developments in the lives of indigenous peoples and their accurate reality: advancements made in the farming methods, urbanization, unemployment and poverty it engendered, as well as emergent social inequality and the lack of political rights. As is often observed, pre-Colombian religious traditions and customs were preserved; however, more frequently than not, they lost their primary meaning, becoming a tourist spectacle and, as such, this criticism is only partially applicable to Rimša. First and foremost, what needs to be understood is that the Bolivian new settler joined an already established intellectual and epistemological tradition. In this sense, he was not an artist who transcended his time, offering what was emerging as a postcolonial discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, but a typical person of his generation. The second relevant point is that the Lithuanian-Bolivian artist was not oblivious to the reality of the Indigenous peoples and in one of his interviews he foresaw criticism from the future generations: "People might blame me in the future for not depicting working Indians in Bolivia. It was painful to see them labouring, therefore I painted their festivals, customs and what still bore an imprint of the Inca history".⁵⁷ The decision to accentuate the positive over the negative side of life was conscious and, as will be explained shortly, politically motivated.

Rimša's personal correspondence shed light on his familiarity with the socialist (communist) trend of the Indigenist movement and, among others, with the artwork of the Mexican muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera. Marxist ideas made their mark in the Bolivian art field as well: Yolanda Bedregal was interested in communist ideas; painter Cecilio Guzman de Rojas, as well as poet Viscarra Fabre and writer Carlos Salazar, took part in the activities of the Bolivian Workers Socialist Party (Socialista Obrero de Bolivia, P.S.O.B.).⁵⁸ More than others, Rimša was familiar with the situation in the Soviet Union: his

⁵⁷ Marija Macijauskienė: *Žemės dvasios ieškotojas* [The Seeker of the Spirit of the Land], *Literatūra ir menas* (Vilnius), 02.08.1972.

⁵⁸ Andrey Schelkov: En los umbrales del socialismo boliviano: Tristán Marof y la Tercera Internacional Comunista, *Revista Izquierdas* 5 (July 2009, vol. 3), 1–24.

first-hand experience of the Red Terror in his youth made him bluntly reject socialist and communist ideas. It is worth reminding that in the aftermath of the Revolution, Bolsheviks strived to impose the communist regime and undertook repressions on a massive scale which, according to some estimates, in just several years between 1917 and 1922 took the lives of 100,000-200,000 people. 40 million people became victims of a massive terror exerted on every stratum of society throughout the entire existence of the Soviet Union. In the first half of the 20th century, Bolivia (like other Central and South American countries) witnessed social issues being articulated and amplified by adepts of socialism/communism. Rimša did not want to participate in the construction of communist art; his letters reveal that he called Siqueiros an enemy and that he laughed openly at sculptor Fausto Aóiz for his comment that “you have to be a communist in order to paint an Indian”.⁵⁹

In summary, Rimša’s decision to portray romanticized Andean inhabitants – shying away from the social issues some Indigenists grappled with – was prompted not so much (or not solely) by exoticizing, which is characteristic of Primitivism. Rather tellingly, his decision was to distance himself from Mexican Indigenism and Socialist Realism, which were intrinsically interlinked with the ideas of the global proletarian revolution.

The new (post-colonial) reading of Rimša’s artwork not only revises the image of South America prevalent in Lithuania, but also dislodges a long-standing attitude vis-à-vis a crucial part of the national art canon. The artworks produced by Adomas Galdikas, Viktoras Vizgirda, Antanas Gudaitis and other painters are considered classical in the Lithuanian Modernist tradition. Could we state that their artworks depicting the Lithuanian rustic culture – refracted through a Primitivist lens and thus appropriated – bear witness to the displacement and desacralization of religious heritage? In their paintings, wooden sculptures of Catholic

⁵⁹ Jonas Rimša’s letter to Yolanda Bedregal, 13.12.1936, private archive, La Paz. Quotation from Echazú Conitzer, *op. cit.*, 236.

saints made by craftsmen – inherently sacred objects – were assigned a “primitive” function, removing the representation of the liveliness of faith, celebrated by villagers. Modernist artworks reflected a general sociocultural trend: certain cult objects were converted into trendy elements of bourgeois home décor during urbanization and cultural modernization.

Quite tellingly, at the inception of his career and before moving to study in Paris in 1929, painter Gudaitis packed in his rucksack several statuettes of *dievukai*.⁶⁰ Rather than devoutness, his decision was driven by his feeling that Lithuanian “primitive” figurines would attract the attention of the international public in Paris, which would help the painter to become famous. Gudaitis used the sculptures of saints as a Lithuanian “motive” in various compositions. Another narrative characteristic of rustic life – a cemetery with wooden crosses – was appropriated by artists as a “typical” national landscape rather than a representation of the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. Concurrently with the South American newfound interest in the indigenous culture as the “soul of the race”, European countries turned to their peasants and their “primitive” life, “more spiritual” and “purer” rustic culture. Uncoupled from the practice of faith, religiousness was regarded as an “exotic” relic of village customs. In historiography, Lithuanian secularization is customarily linked with Soviet atheization. It is plausible that secularization commenced earlier and was facilitated by the cultural appropriation of traditional devoutness and associated artefacts; however, it calls for thorough research.

⁶⁰ Tomas Sakalauskas: *Antanas Gudaitis. Septyni vakarai su dailininku* [Antanas Gudaitis: Seven Evenings with the Artist], Vilnius: Mintis, 1989, 57.

Laura Petrauskaitė

Jono Rimšos tapyba valstybinėse ir privačiose kolekcijose: egzotika ar nepatogus paveldas?

Straipsnyje, pasitelkus Lietuvos menotyroje kol kas retai naudojamas indigenizmo ir primityvizmo sąvokas, naujai, iš pokolonijinės perspektyvos interpretuojami Argentinoje ir Bolivijoje kūręs lietuvių menininko Jono Rimšos (1903–1978) darbai, atskleidžiamas jo kūrybos perversiškumas. Išryškinama, jog gyvendamas Bolivijoje Rimša aktyviai dalyvavo įtvirtinant indigenizmą kaip nacionalinį stilių, atliekantį politinius tautos tapatybės kūrimo ir nacijos vienijimo tikslus. Kartu Rimšos kūryba parodoma kaip indigenu romanzavimo ir mitologizavimo praktika, neigusi jų subjektiškumą ir kultūrinį, socialinį bei politinį svorį valstybės gyvenime. Skirtingai nei kitų Bolivijos ir apskritai Pietų Amerikos indigenistų atveju toks menininko pasirinkimas siejamas ne tiek su egzotizuojančiu žvilgsniu į „indénus“, kiek su atsivežta specifine gyvenimo Rytų Europoje patirtimi, antikomunistinėm nuostatom ir siekiu atsiriboti nuo Meksikos muralistų. Šiame kontekste Rimšos meninis palikimas konceptualizuojamas kaip nepatogus paveldas, kuriame užkoduota įtampa tarp „savo“ ir „svetimo“ žvilgsnio, tarp nacionalizmo ir kolonializmo, tarp reprezentacijos ir apropiacijos.