

# The Mystical Language of Ernst Neizvestny

MILENA KALINOVSKA

Ernst Neizvestny, born in 1926 in the USSR, is the first visual artist from the Soviet Union since 1920 to be acknowledged in the West as a leading sculptor. He is known for his courageous confrontation with Khrushchev in 1962 when a large exhibition held by nonconformist artists in Moscow was closed down only a few days after it had opened. Now, after months struggling with the Soviet authorities Ernst Neizvestny is in the West. He left the USSR because for 20 years he was denied creative freedom, refused permission to hold an exhibition of his own works in the Soviet Union and not permitted to accompany his sculptures abroad for exhibitions. Nor was he given a visa to meet Western artists in order to study their works. This he felt was necessary for his further creative development.

Ernst Neizvestny has been compared with sculptors such as Ossip Zadkine, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Jacques Lipchitz, born in Lithuania, who found his inspiration in mystical, Christian traditions, and Henri Gaudier-Brezska who, like the Polish Jew Jacob Epstein, was attracted by primitive art and expressive disproportion. All these were active after the First World War and Ernst Neizvestny's technique resembles theirs. In addition, he has been influenced by Henry Moore, he is an admirer of Rodin and Michelangelo and has been inspired by Siberian wooden folk sculptures.

He has worked on large constructions such as stadiums or schools, he has made sculptures like *Cosmonaut* and *Machine Man*, and painted pictures like *Lovers* and *Whirlwind*. Some of his works like *The Prophet* and *Crucifixion* have a deeper philosophical impact. This variety of subject shows the variety of Neizvestny's interests. Yet behind his sense of the monumental and his search for intimate images and symbols lies a concern for the history of Russia and a preoccupation with human destiny. This concern for human destiny links him both with the major novelists of 19th century Russia and with the main stream of Christian thought.

The frequent reappearance of a religious element in the nonconformist

Soviet art of today raises questions. Yevgeny Barabanov in his article "The September Exhibition of Moscow Artists in 1975" asks whether this reflects a serious interest in Christianity, or a reaction to a "forbidden theme", or whether it is some profound turning-point in the creative consciousness of artists. He considers the nonconformist artists' use of religious motifs to be a witness to the present day's acute fear for the destiny of man.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Neizvestny, his studies of the Crucifixion seem to recreate the link between the human condition and Christianity. Though Neizvestny is not a religious believer and creates outside denominational boundaries, the Cross lies at the centre of his system of images, expressing the Russian experience in spiritual terms. Crosses as men, crosses as plants, crosses in families, crosses as people are all interconnected and form crowns out of trees or bushes. The Cross expresses suffering and humiliation in symbolic language. The image of the Cross comes to symbolize the interrelation between the Creator and his creatures and expresses a mystical link between suffering and joy, death and birth.

Neizvestny was often said not to have mastered the formal side of his spiritual theme, so that his works did not always fully correspond with his intention. This is evident in the external gestures and expressions of his subjects, which John Berger in his book on Neizvestny<sup>2</sup> calls "short-cuts". Such "short-cuts" he sees in the superficial elements of sculptures like *Orpheus* or *The Prophet*. Nevertheless, in the context of the Cross, the formal expression is adequate to its subject. Though there is melodrama, movement towards the abstract is attained by stylization and the Cross joins the human shape in a unified whole. The artist is in control of his media.

Yet, there is something disturbing in religiously oriented art: as Barabanov states,<sup>3</sup> its aims are literary rather than pictorial. Igor Golomshtok, a Soviet art historian now resident in Britain, has explained the situation of nonconformist artists in an article on unofficial Soviet art.<sup>4</sup> According to Golomshtok, because of the years of "non-culture"—the culture imposed by totalitarianism—Soviet nonconformist artists were faced with an artistic vacuum. In reaction they reverted to traditional values. They are not concerned with differing concepts of art nor do they concentrate on purely formal innovations in visual art. They are fighting for their lost culture, its values and its meaning. This historical situation determines the creative position of Soviet nonconformist artists and their stylistic devices. Igor Golomshtok adds, that beside avantguard cultures, such as those of the West, there exist other cultures, which have transformed old traditions into a new language. This, it seems, is true of Soviet unofficial art. Ernst Neizvestny is one of those artists who, according to Igor Golomshtok,<sup>5</sup> succeeded in preserving some of the old values while establishing a new culture. Thus, Neizvestny's crosses while re-creating the world of religion in visual art establish a new aesthetic norm.

His archaic interpretation of the role of art reflects the paradoxical novelty of the Soviet nonconformist artist's vision of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Yevgeny Barabanov, "The September Exhibition of Moscow Artists in 1975", *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 116, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *Art and Revolution*, London: Penguin Books, 1969, pp. 139-142.

<sup>3</sup> Yevgeny Barabanov, "The September Exhibition of Moscow Artists in 1975", *Vestnik RSKhD* No. 116, p. 242.

<sup>4</sup> Igor Golomshtok, "Paradoxes of the Grenoble Exhibition", *Kontinent* No. 1 pp. 194-195.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

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