

1918

Bohumil Kubišta (1884 – 1918)

Circus, 1911

The painting *Circus* ranks to the “chef-d'oeuvres” held by the Karlovy Vary Gallery of Fine Arts. It is by one of the most prominent co-founders of Czech avant-garde art of the early 20th century, Bohumil Kubišta. The painting was executed in the spirit of Cuboexpressionism, with great emphasis laid on thoughtful composition and color scale. The equilibrating figures of the acrobats take up a position on the painting's axis, and thus steal the viewers' attention, while at the same time loosen this strict arrangement by moving their arms sideways. The circus arena with the spectators is divided by horizontal boxes, whose orientation balances the aforementioned vertical accent.

The stylization of the figures not only in the foreground (the red clown on the right is a shining example) and their faces and hats refers to Cubist principles. Or, better put, to the stage of early Analytical Cubism, when shapes are formed by geometrizing elements – squares, triangles, circles, rectangles, trapezoids, and so on. All this is supported by a perfectly elaborated alternation of only two colours, the basic and complementary one – red and green, and their modelling with dark shades. Such an exaggeration, truly expressive, was a new phenomenon unprecedented in Czech painting until then. (It, however, attracted many other artists, such as Josef Čapek and Václav Špála.) It added an extraordinary impressiveness to the circus scene. Bohumil Kubišta applied a rigorous analysis of all artistic components in the construction of each of his works. He was not only a painter; he also wrote critical and theoretical essays. He was part of two exhibitions of the Osma [Eight] art group, held in 1907 and 1908, which signalled the arrival of new artistic generation.

Kubišta had a troubled fate. Being an illegitimate son, his path to education was very difficult. Material poverty and constant hardship eventually forced him to become an active officer in the Austro-Hungarian army in 1913. Not all Czech artists understood his decision. Kubišta spent the historic day of 28 October 1918 with his friends, Jan Zrzavý, Václav Špála and others, on Wenceslas Square. He was present at the proclamation of the Czechoslovak Republic. He had many plans. Soon after, his colleague and friend Jan Zrzavý began to miss him. A month later, he found his body in the morgue of the Prague Military Hospital. The great artist Bohumil Kubišta died of Spanish flu on 27 November 1918.

A year later, in 1919, the painter and graphic artist Josef Istler was born. In the arc of time, he and Bohumil Kubišta shared a similar interest in the formative principles of construction of a painting. The exhibited canvas *The Picture* of 1965 dates to his second period, when he turned away from his Surrealist-oriented work. From the late 1950s onwards, he pursued Structural Abstraction, characteristic of its detachment from the visible existence of the world and solely focused on the universal surface of painting. And yet there are analogies between these so different paintings – the mysterious flashes of reds and greens in Istler's oeuvre respond to the striking color scale of painting by Kubišta.