

**Ján Mathé** was born in Košice on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1922. He completed his secondary school studies at the outbreak of World War II, and in 1943 he was sent as an ordinary soldier to the Eastern Front, where he was badly wounded. During the five years following the war he studied at the Academy of Visual Arts in Prague under Professor Otakar Španiel. After graduation, he returned to Košice, where he lives and works.

This publication is intended to place Ján Mathé within the context of the development of Slovak and European sculpture. If in the introduction to this monograph we plot the development of his protest and opposition against the pseudo-art of socialist realism, then in the conclusion we find his positive, joyful creation of parallels and harmony with the world. In this spirit we trace the evolution of Mathé's work up to the beginning of the new millennium, to the point where, through its expression and significance, it developed. Even if we discount the years in the late 1960s and early 70s following his serious, almost fatal accident, we still find that he has spent over half a century in intensive creative work.

We would like to emphasize the authentic purity of Ján Mathé's artistic and human approach. Sorely tested by the crises that war brings to young idealists in particular, he grew during his studies at the Academy of Visual Arts in Prague into an enthusiastic "warrior" against the deformations of the period, so closely linked with the demise of democracy in Czechoslovakia. Now armed both professionally and spiritually, Mathé returned to Košice in 1950. He quickly came into conflict with the dogmatic teachings of Communism. He resisted the socialistic tendency to devalue artistic creativity. He gained an advantage from the fact that he was the first academically-trained sculptor in East Slovakia, and his presence in Košice could not simply be ignored.

Mathé grew up "between a rock and a hard place", between the faith and hope instilled in him at his excellent Hungarian church school, and the death and murder of the Second World War, and between the dreams of a young man deciding on a career in the arts, and the reality of the prosecutor's office, where his father worked. Taken together, these conditions molded his spirit. He had his secondary-school diploma, but he was unable to proceed with his studies because he was called up to fight. His experience of the horrors of war was particularly intense. He found himself in a situation where he was directly threatened with death. So he deserted and returned home, more mature from his experience of the proximity of death which he had lived through, and he decided to express the message stemming from this experience in his sculptural works. Without stopping to find out the

dates of the entrance exams, he set out for Prague and the Academy of Visual Arts. His path led him to Professor Otakar Španiel, the great sculptor, who saw his own ideas reflected in the neo-classical approach to relief and sculpture. Apart from his work in the Academy studio, he also spent time with Růžena Vacková and Josef Zvěřina, who devoted their time to the philosophical and spiritual development of young undergraduates.

During his studies at the Academy, Mathé met Kulich and others being groomed for careers as Social Realists in Slovakia. In contrast, Mathé is identified by his increasing closeness to Professor Španiel and his activities within the Christian apostolic tradition. Mathé's courage saved Španiel's position at the Academy, and his activities were also remembered fondly by his fellow students. After graduating from the Academy in Prague, Mathé was determined to lead an active life, serving others in the surroundings of his home town, Košice. The city had a long cultural and artistic tradition. From 1921 to 1928 the East Slovakian Museum, under the direction of Josef Polák, hosted the Eugen Krón School of Graphics and Paintings which became the intellectual focus of an avant-garde movement in art and produced such important painters as Koloman Sokol, Anton Jasusch and Július Jakóby.

Initially Mathé continued to follow the approach of the school of Otakar Španiel. He concentrated on two thematic areas, the first theme being *woman*. His first figure, fitting comfortably within his neoclassical realistic education, is *Woman from the Surroundings of Košice* |16 (1951). In 1953 Mathé found a simpler synthetic expression and form in *Mother and Child I* |34. From here it is but a step to *Woman Combing Her Hair I* |129 from 1962, which completes this first phase in his development. We can observe a similar process in his second theme of *portraits*. The *Portrait of Janko Borodáč* |35 was made in 1953. Towards the end of that decade he outgrew the "model and example" of his *alma mater* and embarked on a freer and more dynamic creative approach. This culminated in his portrait period and a personal style inspired by art nouveau, which ultimately found its full expression much later in the *Fruit of Life* cycle. His further progression led to an individual style composed of basic rotated forms, sharp angles and a circular movement, and even to the replacement of some convex forms with delineated concavities.

This period represented the first clear culmination in Ján Mathé's work, characterized by an intentional and determined development. The years between 1962 and 1968 were spent in a diligent search for a new, modern expression. Mathé closely followed the developments in modern sculpture around the world.

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He started out from his experience with the figure *Woman Combing Her Hair I* |129 (1962). This developed through the use of geometrical perception into *Woman Combing Her Hair VI / Woman* |183, created in 1965. Proceeding through *Movement IV* |258 in 1967, this path was forcefully interrupted due to Mathé's accident and injury, but began again with *Growth II / Germination II* |282 in 1973. The work was no longer compact but monumental by design, resulting in pieces with dimensions reaching more than three metres in height.

Another path led from his original portrait of *Benedikt Kisdý* |60 (1956) through *Welder II* |157 (1963) and *Doctor* |170 (1964) to the figures *Twosome I* |190 and *Threesome I / Standing Family I* |199 (1965). Once again the initial modesty of the figures developed in a monumental direction: in 1967 Mathé installed the sculpture group *Threesome IV / Standing Family IV* |244 (280 cm) among the tower blocks of a suburban housing estate. In 1974 he worked on the half-metre tall wooden figure *Twosome VI* |309, in which the stylization approaches the principles of *Growth II / Germination II* |282 (1973), *Cradle of Life* |306 (1974) and *Dynamic Curves II* |316 (1975). Following several breaks and reassessments, the almost two-metre high *Fruit of Life V* |339 was completed in 1977. We can find a continuation of the stylization of this figure in the work after 1977 as well. In Josef Zvěřina's books *Mária* (1988) and *Teológia Agapé* (1994), in the chapter entitled *The Image of Mary in Art History* in which he examined the evolution of the Marian theme from early-Christian art up to the present day, Mathé's figure *Fruit of Life V* |341 is presented as an exceptional abstract work on the Mariological principle: *Ave, María, grátia plena, Dóminus tecum: benedícta tu in muliéribus, et benedíctus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.*

In his third and last period from 1980 onwards, Mathé has returned to his principal themes. He is attracted by wire. He mainly works in stone, either marble or travertine, using the "taille directe" method without a model, working directly on the block of stone. As well as continuing to work on the themes of motherhood and the foetus, during this period he has produced sculptural creations which cross the border between depiction and

non-figuration. In these works Mathé abandons the abstraction of the figure, striving instead for a pure non-figurative form. From positions close to synthetic cubism, he has progressed towards post-cubist non-figuration.

It is thanks to Mathé that modern Slovak sculpture is maturing towards its foundations. He represents a late, but essential and original assessment of the potential of Cubism, also suggested by Rudolf Uher, and of the power of non-figurative art. We can recognize the latter especially in the organic and spontaneous, but not geometrical or constructed, forms in his work. In this way Mathé has aligned the evolution of sculpture with the earlier achievements of painting and graphics.

Ján Mathé's oeuvre distinguishes itself from the groping and blundering efforts of his peers who studied with him under Otakar Španiel at the Academy of Visual Arts in Prague. In his work with archetypes he comes closer to the work of Rudolf Uher. He overcomes the influences of his education, changing faster than even Uher himself, and moreover he moves beyond the descriptive approach of his younger successors. The difference must surely lie in the depth of Mathé's selfless spirituality, and in his keenness for teaching, for which he has an almost apostolic enthusiasm.

The period of subsequent searching for modern expression also reveals some widespread claims about the beginnings of modernism in the work of Kostka and Uher. Mathé's current focus leads us to the example of Ján Koniarek. It appears that the experiences of the 20th century must be traced back to the movement developing from art nouveau to the tension between the schools of Rodin and Maillol.

Ján Mathé's principal contributions to the art of sculpture stem from two periods of his work, the period of the *Fruit of Life* cycle and the period of his final non-figurative sculptures. These works stand in contrast with some of the constructivist non-figurative compositions by Alexander Trizuljak and other younger artists. Mathé maintains his non-figurative position, but does not restrict himself to a strict geometrical conception. His work is distinct from the later pieces by Vladimír Kompánek, whose non-figurative (or semi-figurative) approach is rooted in folk wood-carving, because Mathé finds his strength in Gothic influences, albeit theologially reassessed, on the stances towards the modern world.

In this sense it may be said that in the 1960s Ján Mathé discovered the starting-point for the abstract expression of his religious conviction. In recent decades he has taken up positions which are not only particular to himself, but which he considers as being much more universal, representing a problem which has

so far been ignored in the area of sculpture. With his work, Mathé associates himself with the principle of *agape* (Greek for spiritual love) and with the artistic need for a modern and non-figurative expression, an expression which does not objectify the human being, but which requires the human being as its creative subject. It is one who forms and who expresses by this. Convincing power...

*The number following the name of each work corresponds to its number in the Inventory of Sculptural Work.*

**Ján Mathé** est né le 14 juin 1922 à Košice. C'est dans un lycée de sa ville natale qu'il a passé son baccalauréat. Enrôlé en 1943 et envoyé au front oriental, il y fut grièvement blessé. Après la Seconde guerre mondiale, entre 1945 et 1950, il a étudié à l'Académie des Beaux-Arts à Prague chez le professeur Otakar Španiel. Une fois ses études terminées, il est revenu à Košice où il vit et travaille.

Le présent ouvrage vise à inscrire Ján Mathé dans le contexte de la sculpture slovaque et européenne. Si dans l'introduction nous avons „mesuré“ la part de ses protestations, à savoir son opposition au pseudo-art du „sorela“, abréviation désignant le réalisme socialiste, dans la conclusion de la monographie nous constatons que l'artiste, qui crée de joyeux parallèles positifs et affirmatifs avec le réel, est en harmonie avec le monde. C'est dans cet esprit que nous suivons l'évolution de l'oeuvre de J. Mathé jusqu'aux premières années du nouveau millénaire où, par le biais de ses formes faisant sens, l'artiste passe incontestablement. Si nous faisons abstraction des années qui ont suivi son accident presque mortel, c'est-à-dire de la fin des années soixante jusqu'au début des années soixante-dix, nous notons que l'artiste a consacré à la création intense un demi-siècle.

Nous tenons à mettre l'accent sur l'honnêteté des attitudes et des déterminations de Ján Mathé, homme et artiste. Soumis aux épreuves auxquelles la guerre expose surtout les jeunes idéalistes, il devient, pendant ses études à l'Académie des Beaux-Arts à Prague, un „militant“ plein d'enthousiasme qui élève sa voix contre les déformations de l'époque causées par la fin de la démocratie en Tchécoslovaquie. Muni sur le plan professionnel et théologique, Ján Mathé quitte en 1950 Prague pour retourner à Košice. Il est aussitôt en conflit avec la pensée dogmatique du communisme. Il résiste à la dévaluation socialiste de la créativité artistique. Il bénéficie de sa position du premier sculpteur originaire de la Slovaquie de l'Est ayant acquis une formation académique; sa présence à Košice ne peut donc pas être ignorée.

Ján Mathé grandit entre „deux pierres“ qui forment son âme: la foi et l'espoir inculqués au prestigieux lycée religieux hongrois, d'une part, et la mort et l'hécatombe de la Seconde guerre mondiale, de l'autre part; les rêves du jeune homme obligé de trancher entre l'art et la réalité de la morgue où travaille son père. Après le baccalauréat, il ne peut pas poursuivre ses études, car il est conscrit. C'est avec une intensité extraordinaire qu'il découvre l'horreur de la guerre et frôle la mort. Déserteur, il rentre à la maison, marqué par la mort à laquelle il a résisté: à partir de cette expérience, il décide de formuler des messages sculpturaux. Il se