

SHIMON OKSHEYN: AN INNOCENT IN AMERICA

When I first spoke to Shimon Okshteyn about how I planned to discuss his art, I happened to mention, if only as an opening gambit, that I had already known of a number of other artists or writers of talent who came originally from his native city of Chernovitz or from other cities of the formerly Austro-Hungarian provinces of Bukovina and Galicia which, after World War I, were Rumanian or Polish before ultimately becoming parts of the Soviet Republic of the Ukraine. Very modestly, Okshteyn answered me by remarking that the general public in the world's major intellectual and artistic centers, such as New York, Moscow, Paris or London, generally assumes that no art or literature of real significance can be produced by those who hail from the more distant provincial centers that gravitate around them like the many satellites around some great planet.

I then remonstrated that Ezra Pound was but one of the many major American writers who, like Mark Twain too, came originally from the Mississippi Valley or even more distant Idaho and whose works display little influence of Manhattan. This led me to add that I have personally known at least two outstanding writers who happen also to have been born in Chernovitz, though in the years when it was still the capital of one of Rumania's northernmost and more recently acquired provinces: Paul Celan, who is now widely claimed to have been German literature's greatest postwar poet, and Aharon Appelfeld, the equally remarkable Hebrew novelist and story-writer. To these two names of personal acquaintances I might well have added those of a number of other distinguished writers or artists whose works I have long known and admired and who also came originally from Chernovitz or from other such cities of Bukovina or Galicia: the German poet Rose Auslaender, likewise a native of Chernovitz, the Hebrew poet Dan Pagis, who was born in a smaller town of Bukovina, the great Austrian novelist Josef Roth, originally a native of Galicia, the outstanding turn-of-the-century graphic artist E.M. Lilien, who was born in Drohobycz, made a great career in Germany and became one of the founders of Jerusalem's prestigious Bezalel Academy of Fine Arts, the hauntingly strange Polish story-writer and draftsman Bruno Schulz, likewise a native of Drohobycz, and the Galician-born "School of Paris" painters Aberdam and Artur Kolnik, of whom the last-named was at one time known as "the Chagall of Galicia".

Such are indeed but a few of the more remarkable literary or artistic talents that have arisen from these distant and all too often despised provinces of Eastern Europe and whose names come to my mind as I consider how much each of them in turn has contributed to the intellectual life of Austria, Germany, Poland or France and now, in the case of Shimon Okshteyn, to that of the United States too. They all happen moreover to be of strictly Jewish origin, although I might also add, to this long list, the names of two German-language writers recruited from the lower ranks of the Austro-Hungarian nobility of these provinces: the novelist and story-writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, who was born in the Galician city of Lemberg (Lvov), where his father was the Austrian Chief of Police, and the satirical writer Gregor von Rezzori, whose first two books offered his German readers humorously nostalgic descriptions of his youth spent in the multi-racial and multi-cultural environment of Chernovitz.

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch appears, however, to have also been at least of partly Jewish origin, like many other nineteenth-century members of the more recently ennobled Austro-Hungarian aristocracy such as, among others, the Rothschilds. As for Rezzori, he has more recently caused a mild scandal by proclaiming himself, though perhaps in a tongue-in-cheek manner, an anti-Semite.

Although remembered today almost exclusively as the author of the oddly erotic fiction which earned him the reputation of being the first self-confessed masochist, Sacher-Masoch might well deserve to be the more widely respected as a pioneer of the kind of literature founded on Polish-Jewish folklore for which Peretz and Martin Buber, among others, later became famous.

Only Bruno Schulz, among these many writers and artists from Bukovina or Galicia, chose to spend most of his life in his native Drohobycz, where he was ultimately murdered by a Nazi war-criminal. All the others emigrated and then displayed in their works a remarkable adaptability to their new cultural environment in Austria, Germany, France, Israel or elsewhere, while at the same time still managing to express a peculiar genius of their own that was never smothered by the choices or chances of their emigration.

Two other characteristics appear moreover to distinguish some of the more remarkable works of many of these writers or artists: a nostalgic preoccupation with the recent or more distant past, above all in the works of E.M. Lilien and the fiction of Josef Roth, and a frequently obsessive interest in woman as seductress, *femme fatale* or sex-object. Because this last interest is so clearly and constantly expressed in *The Venus in Furs* and

some other more popular fictional works of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, it has come to derive one of its names from his own and to be generally known as *masochism*. In much the same form as in the writings of Sacher-Masoch, it reappeared later in the stories and drawings of Bruno Schulz, and some critics now detect its presence, in a less overtly neurotic and more quizzically satirical form, in the recent American paintings of Shimon Okshteyn, who offers us there his own critical commentary on various aspects of contemporary American manners and modes rather than any revelations of his own intimate psyche.

As long as Okshteyn remained in Soviet Russia, where he was born in 1951 and studied drawing and painting at the Odessa Academy of Fine Arts, his paintings indeed tended to express, with a kind of nostalgic tenderness, mainly his quite filial attachment to the landscapes and city-scapes of his native Bukovina. Until he emigrated to the United States in 1980, he painted all these in a kind of "School of Paris" idiom, vaguely reminiscent at times of Utrillo and other Montmartre painters. Only since he has been living in the United States has the fascination exerted on Okshteyn by women and high fashion come to the fore in his art. His paintings of recent years have thus been frequently compared to those of another immigrant American painter, the late Richard Lindner, who came here as a refugee from Nazi Germany, but also to those of a more specifically American artist, Tom Wesselmann.

No critic of Shimon Okshteyn's American paintings, as far as I know, has yet thought of pointing out their curious psychological affinities with some of the works of two older American-born painters, Walt Kuhn, who had originally seceded more or less from the so-called "Ashcan School" in order to develop a very personal idiom of his own in his realistic portraits of women almost as characters drawn from the novels of Crane or Dreiser about "girls of the streets", and Paul Cadmus, whose works as a kind of disciple of the American Precisionist master Charles Demuth often appear to express an equally obsessive interest in the male body as a sex-object. Nor has this all-pervading interest in the human body as a sex-object been increasingly displayed, in the course of the past fifty years, only in American "high art". It is even more widely and blatantly displayed in advertisements for both male and female underwear and swimsuits, often in a manner that would have shocked our grandmothers and that still shocks most tourists from the more prudish Soviet Union.

It is perhaps worth pointing out, in this general context, that the discovery of many of the more brash but often unconsciously or implicitly erotic features of American life appear to have had a similar impact on the work of at least three artists who came to the United States as immigrants: on George Grosz, in the first few years of his life in New York, on Richard Lindner throughout his American career, and now on Shimon Okshteyn. But an acute awareness of the same erotic implications of our American environment can also be detected in the works, as previously stated, of such American-born artists as Walt Kuhn and Paul Cadmus and now more and more in many of the works of Tom Wesselmann, of Andy Warhol and, above all, in the paintings of the Chicago artist Ed Paschke.

The women often depicted by Walt Kuhn and nearly all those depicted by Wesselmann and Paschke suggest however, like many of those depicted by Lindner and Okshteyn, a deliberately provocative aggressive-ness that can remind one of the mannerisms of transvestites. Reduced to types, they cease to exert an appeal as individuals or else assume some of the characteristics of the opposite sex and thus remain fraught with often disconcerting ambiguities. For this reason, it is interesting to undertake, however briefly or superficially, a psychoanalytical interpretation of some of the details of Shimon Okshteyn's iconography.

José Pierre already pointed out somewhat coyly in 1985 that, "in the absence of any other weapons", Okshteyn's women "conspicuously brandish a cigarette from which, as if by a miracle, the ash remains intact even though it is pointing slightly downward," in fact like a wearied penis after the sex act. But one also discovers, in another Okshteyn painting, an even more pathetic-looking cigarette-stub that lies on the pavement, suspiciously close to the pointed heel of a woman's shoe which appears to have just trodden on it as if thereby to mutilate a discarded lover. Shoes, gloves and hats seem moreover to exert a peculiar fascination on Okshteyn, to such an extent that these articles of apparel for the less explicitly phallic human extremities even begin to lead an independent life of their own in his still-life compositions, where one often discovers an empty glove holding a lighted cigarette or a pipe.

Rather than Okshteyn's somewhat terrifying women with the eyes and mouths of ghoulishly elegant but rapacious dolls, his most puzzlingly suggestive paintings remain, in my estimation, his often oddly assorted still-life compositions. Here he handles such articles of human clothing as hats, shoes, gloves or a man's whole suit with much the same kind of magic realism as the Italian masters Giorgio de Chirico, Carlo Carrà and Giorgio Morandi at the height of their *Pittura metafisica* period or as later the gifted younger Italian painter Gnoli in the works that immediately preceded his untimely death. But Okshteyn introduces into his still-life compositions a very personal sardonic element which is heightened by the few texts interjected among these



*"Cover Girls", Oil on canvas, 50" x 66", 1984.
Private collection, Minnesota*

few objects like comments on the haphazard nature of their grouping, so that one is then reminded of the remark of the great French poet Lautréamont, a precursor of Surrealism, about "the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing-machine on an operating table." Okshteyn's still-life compositions appear indeed to depict a world which has lost all its human population in a catastrophe similar to that which destroyed Pompeii but allowed later archaeologists to discover its various artifacts and, from these, to reconstruct a vanished city's whole economic, social and artistic life.

The ambiguities of Okshteyn's representations of women are here reversed. Dolls, lay figures, display busts and articles of human clothing appear to have acquired a life of their own, so that their satirical intent, as comments on the artificial nature of contemporary metropolitan life, becomes all the more striking, while Okshteyn's women, the three middle-fingers of whose elaborately manicured hands are nearly of equal length, suggest that, if one asked them why they happen to be endowed with such remarkable hands, they might reply, almost like the wolf disguised as the grandmother in the tale of Little Red Riding Hood: "All the better to tear you apart, my dear!"

Rigorously trained in the art institutes of the Soviet Union, Okshteyn had acquired, before coming to the United States, a great mastery of the techniques of drawing, composition and painting. Although one can observe a notable difference between the earlier "School of Paris" canvases that he painted in the Soviet Union and the women and still-life composition that he now paints in America, the impact of his new American environment on his art was not immediate. His first few years in America are thus represented in his work by a brief but rapid period of transition, which appears to have ended in 1983, when he began to depict some of those women whom I might be tempted to call, according to an old American popular song, his "Hard-hearted Hannahs."

In several New York subway stations, a new poster for Virginia Slims already looks suspiciously like a plagiarism inspired by Okshteyn's paintings of such elegantly sinister chain-smoking young women. But advertising art has constantly, in recent decades, sought inspiration from the works of such major contemporary artists as Salvador Dali or Andy Warhol, so that Shimon Okshteyn thus finds himself already in the company of those very few masters of contemporary art whose sardonic comments on our economy of consumption and of what Thorsten Veblen once called "conspicuous display" and "conspicuous waste" lend themselves readily to the more commercial art of advertising; and in this too there exists an ambiguity or an ambivalence that might well deserve more ample critical investigation.