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The Representation of Melancholy in the Visual Arts, Today and in the Past

Abstract

The concept of melancholy is woven throughout the history of Western art and thoughts as an imaginary Ariadne's thread that links the perceptions and thoughts of ancient Greece with the present day. At the same time, it could be interpreted as a sign that refers to the endless road to human self-knowledge. Over the course of history, this process of cognition has taken many intricate and crooked paths, linking melancholy with a number of different definitions and interpretive viewpoints as well as diverse visual renderings. The paper focuses on presenting the idea of melancholy from an aesthetic-cultural point of view. It sees it as a phenomenon reflecting various cultural and historical aspects, which were subsequently transformed into the visual art of the given time. Although the portrayal of melancholy was typical of historical periods, of which Albrecht Dürer's depiction of Melancholy is the most famous, 20th-century art also reflected on it, for example, the work of Pablo Picasso or Giorgio de Chirico. In the Slovak visual arts of the 20th century, we can find

several interesting depictions of melancholy, for example in the work of L. Mednyánszky, Mikuláš Galanda, or Jozef Pospíšil. However, the paper sufficiently analyses the work of contemporary Veronika Rónaiová, who has returned to portraying the idea of melancholy again.

Key words

Melancholy. Theory of Art. Veronika Rónaiová. Visual Arts.

Veronika Rónaiová, who has occupied a firm position on the map of Slovak art since the 1970s, painted the picture *Osamelá (Autoidentifikácia)* (Lonely (Autoidentification))¹ in 2006. It shows a woman sitting alone, introspective and lost in thought, oblivious to her surroundings. The middle-aged woman leans her heavy head on her hand and its only support is the backrest of the chair. The other arm loosely hangs along her body and suggests a lack of movement. It merely hangs there unmoving, as if that were its only task. The woman's look is focused on the floor, shaded by dark glasses. The position of her body multiplies the impression of isolation and introspection, a state where she is buried in her own inner feelings. It radiates absolute passivity. One look at the woman clearly shows that it is a self-portrait, ergo Veronika Rónaiová. There have been a number of different interpretations within Slovak art theory². These interpretations have usually drawn attention to the formal language and principle of quotation and

1 See: RÓNAIOVÁ, V.: *Osamelá (Autoidentifikácia)*, 2006, 100x120cm. [online]. [2023-04-19]. Available at: <https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:NGN.O_2107>.

2 RUSINOVÁ, Z.: Mapovanie priestoru. In RUSINOVÁ, Z., KICZKOVÁ, Z., GREGOR, R.: *Veronika Rónaiová*. Bratislava : Publisher J. M. Press, 2004, p. 16; See also: RUSINOVÁ, Z.: Od zlyhaní utópie k veku simulakra. In RUSINOVÁ, Z. a kol.: *Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia – 20. storočie*. Bratislava : Slovenská národná galéria, 2000, p. 53; JANČÁR, I.: Figurálne tendencie v malbe 1965 – 1985. In RUSINOVÁ, Z. a kol.: *Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia – 20. storočie*. Bratislava : Slovenská národná galéria, 2000, p. 87.

self-quotation, as this particular painting was preceded, in 1972, by an untitled drawing and a painting on canvas bearing the same title *Osamelá* (Lonely). Both works show a young woman in the same seated position, again with her head leaning on her hand and the backrest of the chair. Her position and expression are identical to those of the woman in the 2006 painting. It is not only the author and the motif – a lonely woman sitting in a chair – that these works have in common, it is above all the theme of melancholy, embodied in the figure of the sitting woman. This motif, or rather phenomenon, has exercised its appeal from earlier historical periods up to more recent times and even today. It has attracted the attention of artists and art theoreticians throughout this period and they have analysed it from various interpretive viewpoints.

The reason for this transhistorical interest in the concept of melancholy is rather obvious. It is an expression of a deep mental state that is often linked to limitless feelings of sadness and hopelessness. It is, likewise, a manifestation of great artistic genius, this is the way Marsilio Ficino, a Renaissance theoretician of art, neo-Platonic philosopher, and astrologist, referred to it³. Both these extremes are linked by the effort to penetrate more deeply

3 For more detail see: NEJESCHLEBA, T., HLADKÝ, V.: *Marsilio Ficino. Tři knihy o životě (De vita libri tres)*. Prague : Oikoymenth, 2000, pp. 17-27.

into the essence of human existence and the secret recesses of the soul, to reveal the possibilities for new experiences and intellectual creativity in these depths of the unknown and the exciting. These are the reasons why artists and thinkers alike return over and over again to the motif of melancholy and ponder on the options for visual representations and language references. Therefore, it could be said that the motif of melancholy is woven through the history of Western art and thought. It is like an imaginary Ariadne's thread that links the perceptions and thoughts of ancient Greece to the present times. At the same time, it could be interpreted as a sign that refers to the endless road of human self-knowledge.

Over the course of history, this process of cognition has taken many intricate and crooked paths, linking melancholy with a number of different explanations and interpretive viewpoints as well as diverse visual renderings. The diversity of the portrayal and perception of melancholy throughout history was highlighted by the exhibition *Melancholy: Genius and Madness in the West*, curated in 2006 by the leading French historian and art theoretician Jean Clair⁴ for the *Galleries Nationales du Grand Palais* in Paris. The approach

4 Author's note: Jean Clair (1940) held the position of Director of the Picasso Museum in Paris for many years. He is the author of a great number of specialist studies and monographs and in particular deals with modern art.

followed by the exhibition was to summarise the concept, over 250 works were included and were divided into 8 topics: Melancholy and Antiquity (Devil's Bath), Middle Ages (children of Saturn), Renaissance (anatomy of melancholy), Age of Enlightenment (light and shadow), 18th century (death of God), Romanticism (naturalization of melancholy), Angel of History and Melancholy and Contemporary Life. The exhibition itself, as well as the extensive catalogue⁵ that accompanied it, presented melancholy as a topic that is of equal interest to physiologists, psychologists, philosophers, and artists. Although the perception of melancholy has changed over the course of history, it is the portrayal of a despondent figure, lost in themselves, leaning their heavy head on their hands, either open or closed, with their eyes lowered to the ground, with an attitude and gesture that suggests an absence of peace of mind, that has become the commonest representation of the motif of melancholy. The Paris exhibition, *Melancholy: Genius and Madness in the West*, together with its catalogue has become an archive of broody melancholics from the history of Western culture, from which we can draw and perceive the transformations in the way it has been rendered. At the same time, this archive is constantly open to

new visual portrayals of melancholy, the number of which has increased, especially over recent decades.

1 Iconographic Attributes of the Depiction of Melancholy

The iconographic attributes firmly entrenched in the visual representation of melancholy go back to both Albrecht Dürer and his engraving *Melancholia I*, from 1514, and the theoretical text *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa from 1593⁶. The attitude and gesture of the melancholic implied an internal dive into the depths of the human soul. The understanding and portrayal of melancholy changed and acquired new meanings over the course of centuries. These portrayals did not emerge by mere chance but were a reaction to the philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural context of the period. In L. F. Földényi's words: "*The Antiquity wrapped its understanding of melancholy in myth and philosophy and the Middle Ages in theology; in modern times, starting with the Renaissance, the interpretation of melancholy finds a new 'home' in the aesthetic sphere. The art takes over the role of the interpretation of being*".

The story of melancholy was born around 400 BC thanks to the ancient philosophers for whom the internal world of humans formed

part of the great macrocosm. But it was only when Hippocrates, who stood at the birth of medicine, came on the scene that the human body began to be viewed as a mixture of the four humours: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. In each person, these humours combine in different ways, making up their temperament: sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, or melancholic. These are the four temperaments that influence human behaviour. For an individual with a melancholic nature, black bile (*humor melancholic*) dominates, which is cold and dry. It was not only viewed as a physical matter but also as an internal source that affected an individual's spiritual state. Unlike other bodily humours, black bile was the bearer of various spiritual transformations. Its fundamental manifestations included depression, anxiety, and even madness⁸. But at the same time, from the viewpoint of ancient astronomy, each temperament came under the influence of a specific planet, as humans were part of the great macrocosm. For melancholics, it was the planet Saturn. The role of the physician who cared for an ill melancholic was to harmonize the internal spiritual balance of the patient with that of the cosmos. This interpretive framework persisted until early modern times when certain changes occurred in the way the idea of melancholy was

5 CLAIR, J. (ed.): *Melancholie. Genie und Wahnsinn in der Kunst*. Ostfildern-Ruit : Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005.

6 See: RIPA, C.: *Iconologie*. Prague : Argo, 2019.

7 FÖLDÉNYI, L.: *Melancholie. Její formy a proměny od starověku po současnost*. Olomouc : Malvern, 2013, p. 119.

8 KLIBANSKY, R., PANOFKY, E., SAXL, F.: *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*. Nendeln : KrausReprint, 1979, p. 14.

viewed. Marsilio Ficino, mentioned above, stood at the beginning of them. In his book *De Vita*⁹ from 1489 he linked black bile with the planet Saturn. The attributes of a sad old man, lost in thought – a melancholic, as this celestial body was viewed, began to apply to the attributes of a man. Its contemplative nature became a characteristic symptom of a melancholic. The existence of melancholy began to be connected with physical causes within a particular person, but the celestial causes linked with Saturn also played an important role. The neo-Platonic concept¹⁰ linked Saturn with intellect and a lonely contemplative life. Although Saturn was perceived as the most powerful and most noble celestial body¹¹, Ficino nonetheless emphasized its two-faced aspect: on one hand it supports activities related to intellect, and on the other deep contemplation. Saturn, the celestial body of deep thought and divine contemplation, as a consequence has a particular influence on those “*who ardently dedicate themselves to studies of philosophy and withdraw their mind away from the body and physical matters and bind it to incorporeal things ... That is why the body of philosophers often finds*

9 See: FICINO, M.: O zdravém životě. In FICINO, M.: *Tři knihy o životě*. Prague : Oikoymenh, 2020.

10 KLIBANSKY, R., PANOFSKY, E., SAXL, F.: *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*. Nendeln : KrausReprint, 1979, pp. 151-153.

11 FÖLDÉNYI, L.: *Melancholie. Její formy a proměny od starověku po současnost*. Olomouc : Malvern, 2013, p. 93.

*itself in some kind of half-alive and melancholic state*¹². In Ficino’s view, melancholy is linked with genius and intellectual activity in those people who have an extraordinary talent in the fields of philosophy, politics and art. Melancholy is a symptom of great genius. Ergo, Ficino elaborated a concept of melancholy based on the mutual interaction of two conflicting powers, resulting in polarity. Two intense forces: intellect and contemplation, melancholy and genius, are drawn into a mutual battle which is infinite and repetitive throughout the history of humanity, thought, art and culture. A visual rendition of the teaching of Ficino is Dürer’s famous engraving *Melancholia I*, 1514, which represents man’s desperate battle against the contrary forces of Saturn, to which he must eventually succumb, notwithstanding his internal state of being torn apart. He must accept all the impulses which lead him to artistic creation and intellectual thought, talents which he has as a melancholic. Contrary to the medieval perception of a melancholic enclosed within the walls of a “divine kingdom”, the Renaissance concept was different. A certain kind of representative figure of a melancholic was born, usually linked with art, because the artist, albeit lost in thought, may fully display his infinite creative energy in art itself. “*And thus, the melancholic gradually becomes a*

12 FICINO, M.: O zdravém životě. In FICINO, M.: *Tři knihy o životě*. Prague : Oikoymenh, 2020, p. 4.

*creator. Melancholy will serve as the source of imagination, fancy, and as a symptom of genius. It is the period of the rebirth of the Aristotelian understanding of melancholy: melancholy once again is an identification sign of excellent people.*¹³ The engraving, whose thorough iconological interpretation, which also included the extensive cultural-social contexts, was made by Erwin Panofsky¹⁴, has been, in Keith Mexey’s opinion, the most discussed work in contemporary art history¹⁵, partly because Panofsky believed that Dürer’s understanding of melancholy had been influenced by the ideas of the Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino. But this was not the only visual work of art that developed the concept of melancholic depiction created in early modern times. Others included, for example, St. John the Baptist in the Desert, 1480 – 1485, by Gérard de Saint-Jean, and Portrait of Henry Percy, 1594, by Nicholas Hilliard. These works may not have generated such a degree of interpretive interest as Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, but are still part of the discourse on the visual depiction of melancholy in the art of early modern times and point

13 FÖLDÉNYI, L.: *Melancholie. Její formy a proměny od starověku po současnost*. Olomouc : Malvern, 2013, pp. 129-130.

14 See: PANOFSKY, E.: *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1955.

15 MOXEY, K.: Melancholie Erwina Panofského. In KESNER, L.: *Vizuální teorie: současné angloamerické myšlení o výtvarných dílech*. Jinočany : H&H, pp. 211-226.

to a different view of melancholy. It may just as equally be linked to a winged feminine figure sitting in a thoughtful position as with the brooding figure of John the Baptist sitting on a rock. His meek expression poses a number of questions, one of them concerning the portrayal of melancholy, which is not only described in his overall passive posture but also by him sitting leaning his head on his hand. The most extensive modern treatise on melancholy comes from Robert Burton (1577 – 1640). At the time of its writing in 1621, his *Anatomy of Melancholy*¹⁶ became a milestone in the view of the concept of melancholy. The work, which consists of a number of quotations, paraphrases and commentaries from various fields of scientific exploration, was a reflection of the state of research of the time. Thus, it became both a critical reflection of existing opinions and a sort of recommendation for readers for whom the wearing state of melancholic depression had become a lifetime companion. In the introduction to his treatise on melancholy Burton declared that the whole world was mad and ruled by melancholy and madness¹⁷. This “epidemic” of melancholy, in his opinion, had seized the world in the 16th and 17th centuries. But, considering the developing medical science, Burton also attempted

to approach melancholy from a scientific viewpoint, thereby crossing the strict non-scientific borders of the earlier times. Many modern opinions of melancholy were naturally enough reflected in the visual arts. Inspired by Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, Lucas Cranach (1472 – 1553) created a series of three paintings *Melancholy*; two in 1532 and one in 1533. An engraving by Jacques de Gheyn II, *Air (Melancholicus)* (1596 – 1597) once again returned to the connection between melancholy and Saturn. The Enlightenment, which promoted rationality and intellect, pushed melancholy to the margins; as it also did those people who suffered from melancholic states of mind. It was only in the 19th century, especially with the culture of Romanticism, that a great deal of interest in the concept of melancholy again arose. Internal suffering, loneliness, physical and mental forlornness as well and brimming over with creativity, all became symptoms of melancholy in the upcoming modernism. Goethe’s novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, (1774) was not merely a symbol of Romanticism but also an iconic sign of a reclusive melancholic, just like the painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, by Caspar David Friedrich, a leading representative of German Romanticism.

2 Modern Depictions of Melancholy

Modernism built on this transhistorical narrative with the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche

(*Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, 1872; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1896), and later with the thoughts of Walter Benjamin (*Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 1916), who approached melancholy from the viewpoint of cultural transformations, in particular those which had taken place in the German Baroque *Trauerspiel* – a 17th-century tragic drama. Art developed in parallel with the theoretical discourse; a perfect example of the looming modernism and its strong inclination to emotionality was provided, for instance, by the works of Edvard Munch, who between 1891 and 1896 painted several versions of his work *Melancholy*. The lonely figure of a man supporting his head sits alone on the shore, lost in his own thoughts. His thoughtful posture and brooding are emphasized by the undulating shoreline. These works enable the viewer to experience the various aspects of loneliness, including melancholy. Heavy, unending sadness is the feeling which characterizes Munch’s portrayals of melancholy. Other modernist depictions of melancholy include *The Disappointed Souls*, a painting from 1892 by the symbolist Ferdinand Hodler, which may be perceived as an allegory of melancholy, frustration, and being lost in deep thought from which there is no escape. The despondency of the five men is accentuated by the contrast between the whiteness of their bodies and the black robes they are wearing. Although the men are sitting next to each other,

¹⁶ BURTON, R.: *Anatomie melancholie*. Prague : Prostor, 2016, p. 340.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

there is no relationship between them that suggests closeness or interaction. Their expressive gestures merely convey a resigned desperation. In the period of the early avant-gardes, this interest in melancholic immersion continued, for example, in the work of Pablo Picasso, *Melancholy Woman*, 1902, which belonged to his Blue Period and works by the Italian metaphysical artist, Giorgio de Chirico, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914, and *Melancholy*, 1912. They show deserted areas within Italian cities, whose atmosphere makes a metaphysical impression. De Chirico analyses a different variation of melancholy, as humans have completely disappeared from his paintings. In a deserted, metaphysical world where there is no place for humans, only for unmoving, silent statues and mannequins, the idea of the loss of human identity is developed. There is no longer any room left there to deal with feelings of melancholy. With his paintings, De Chirico crossed the border of that which is human and entered a de-personalized space. All the above paintings depict thoughtful figures lost in themselves with an emotional gesture that expresses despondency and loneliness. These gestures refer to a strong emotionality, internal resignation, as well as apathy towards life. Therefore, in the words of Peter Wittlich, “*artists from the turn of the 20th century, rightfully viewed as the founding figures of modern art, depicted psychological contents which they considered*

essential not merely for themselves but also for the fateful situation of the modern man as such”¹⁸.

Melancholy is a topic that periodically returns especially in times when there is a greater focus on the analysis of our own internal life and emotional experience. It provides a systematic conceptual framework, not only typical of the cultural discourse of the turn of the 20th century, but also for the first decades of the 20th century. A depiction of mental states, existential heaviness, the internal state of being torn apart, and tragic resignation was synonymous with the overall state of modern life and became a new area of cultural research. Within the scientific research of melancholy, several areas of the cognition of emotionality simultaneously began to develop during this period; theoretical explorations that walked side by side in their considerations, but each of them following its own path. What they had in common, in particular, was emotionality and melancholy.

The first great outcome of this scientific interest was Freud’s psychoanalysis and his book *Trauer und Melancholie*¹⁹ from 1917, in which he proposed a scientific basis for melancholy and emphasized its important place in modern

psychology. Freud blazed a new trail for melancholy, convinced as he was that the preceding theories had not understood the true causes of melancholic states. He made an effort to see melancholy as a new science of the soul which could be explained by modern scientific knowledge. Therefore, he liberated melancholy from the shackles of black bile, from romantic creative genius and mourning, with which it had been synonymous. Whereas mourning, in the opinion of Freud, is a conscious activity, a healthy grieving process that has a specific purpose, he includes melancholy with the unconscious processes. Freud explained this phenomenon using a simple example: whereas a grieving person has lost a part of the earthly world, a melancholic has lost a part of him/herself. In his opinion, melancholy was not merely a result of a diseased body or soul, but it was a state of mind caused by a great loss. A melancholic experiences the world as a process of continuous loss. It is a hopeless state from which there is no escape. These and other medical theories related to the unconscious mind, hysteria, hidden sources of the human psyche, and an intense interest in emotional as well as sexual expressions of humankind influenced both art and artistic terminology; terms such as repression, sublimation, the unconscious mind, and melancholy entered the vocabulary of the visual arts in a wholly natural way. In contemporary discourses, the concept of melancholy has moved from the arts to psychology and

¹⁸ WITTLICH, P.: Duše a mysl v umění find-de-siècle a časného modernismu. In KESNER, L., SCHMITZ, M. C. (eds.): *Obrazy myslí – mysl v obrazech*. Brno : Moravská galerie v Brně a Barrister Principal, 2011, p. 149.

¹⁹ See: FREUD, S.: *Trauer und Melancholie*. Berlin : Henricus-Edition Klassik, 2012.

psychiatry. In 1984, the American psychiatrist, Norman Rosenthal²⁰, moved melancholy out of the conditions diagnosed as depression, where it was ranked, and defined it using a new term – seasonal affective disorder (SAD). In his opinion, it was a mood disorder that regularly returned in the autumn and winter months. Among its characteristic symptoms, he listed a tendency to overeat, to sleep for too long, fatigue, a lack of energy, and difficulty concentrating. With this combination of symptoms, sufferers become depressive and no longer feel there is any joy in life. Often melancholy is also referred to as the “winter blues”.

The fact that psychology began to view melancholy in a new scientific way, conditioned above all by extensive research, does not mean that this topic is no longer of interest to the visual arts. This is demonstrated, for example, by hyper-realistic sculptures that make a very real impression, which is, indeed, their chief essence. One of the artists engaged in the creation of hyper-realistic works was Duane Hanson (1925 – 1996), who dedicated himself to the creation of such sculptures from the 1960s. His ability to include the smallest details of the human body was so convincing, and fascinating at the same time, that his hyper-realistic sculptures are able to produce an emotional reaction

in the viewer. Viewers will believe that the sculptures they are viewing are real people. It is common people that Hanson portrays in his hyper-realistic sculptures; with a little exaggeration, we might even say uninteresting. An example of this is the hyper-realistic sculpture of an older man, sitting alone on a bench. The title of the sculpture does not carry any metaphorical meanings. It is as simple, brief, and common as its motif – *Man on a Bench*, 1977²¹. The quiet melancholy of the lonely man sitting calmly on a bench is not merely a continuation of the melancholic depictions that follow a firmly defined historical line but is above all a symbol of the loneliness of a contemporary person. Another hyper-realistic statue, by the Australian artist Ron Mueck (1958), *Untitled (Big Man)*, 2000, has a similar character. It is the oversized figure of a naked man sitting in a corner, his head is bent, and he leans on his hands like he has a heavy lot in life. Similar to Hanson's sculptures, Mueck's sculpture also shows meticulous detail. Every scar and wrinkle on the face and neglected male body seem to endow the sculpture with a soul. Despite being physically oversized, the statue evokes an impression of fragility and vulnerability which is also characteristic of other sculptures by Mueck. The statue of the big naked man has become

a symbol of melancholy for our times. This was also the reason that Jean Clair installed it in his Paris exhibition as a crucial work that characterizes the modern feeling of melancholy.

3 Melancholy and Slovak Visual Arts

The motif of melancholy has also resonated in Slovak visual arts. Especially during modernism²² when, as was the case in Western European art, our artists attempted to find an internal solution to a number of existential problems and crises. László Mednyánszky was indisputably one of our most profound artists of the period. He was knowledgeable about theosophy, which at that time was rather fashionable, and the theoretical writings of L. N. Tolstoy. In many of his figurative works, he depicted the theme of melancholy. The atmosphere of his figurative and portrait works, which depict outcasts from society, is melancholy in its essence. Even his painting from 1895 bears the title *Melanchólia* (Melancholy)²³; iconographically it is not a thorough depiction of a lonely figure lost in themselves, but the overall atmosphere of the

²⁰ For more detail see: ROSENTHAL, N. E.: *What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?* [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <<https://www.normanrosenthal.com/about/research/seasonal-affective-disorder/>>.

²¹ For more detail see: HANSON, D.: *Man on a Bench*. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <<https://www.wikiart.org/en/duane-hanson/man-on-a-bench-1996>>.

²² Author's note: The Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava also has an older work in its collections – a statue of a woman who is leaning her head against her hand. The statue is the work of Ľudovít God, from the second half of the 18th century – approximately from the years 1770 – 1790 – and is named *Melanchólia* (Melancholy).

²³ For more detail see: MEDNYÁNSZKY, L.: *Melanchólia*, 1895, 25,5x36cm. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK.SNG.K_10520>.

painting displays a melancholy mood. By the 1920s there were a number of interesting explorations of the topic. Peter Július Kern created a pair of paintings during that time – the landscapes *Slovenská balada* (Slovak Ballad), 1920–25 and *Osamelá* (Lonely), 1923²⁴. Zsófia Kiss-Széman aptly described them as “romanticizing melancholy”²⁵, as they depict lonely women sitting surrounded by natural scenery. A 1930 painting, *Smútok* (Sadness) by Mikuláš Galanda – one of the founders of Slovak modernism, also depicts a village woman in a white bonnet who is “resting” her tired head, heavy with everyday worries, in both hands. Two large tears flow down her face. The way Galanda depicts her includes elements of a modernist visual language with clear overlaps with minimalist paintings. Although he approaches the characteristic features of melancholic portrayals with similar simplifications, we can still include this in the open archive of melancholic works created using the visual arts together with another work of his, *Zamyslená* (Lost in Thought), 1938. The sculptor Jozef Pospíšil, who particularly dedicated himself to the creation of monumental works, crafted a bust of a young girl, unique in the context of his work. His *Zadumaná*

24 For more detail see: KERN, J. P.: *Osamelá*, 1923, 86x121 cm. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SGO_5603>.

25 KISS-SZEMÁN, Z., OBUCHOVÁ, V., PAŠKO, P.: *Galéria Nedbalka. Slovenské moderné umenie*. Bratislava : Calder, 2012, p. 151.

(*Melanchólia*) (Lost in Thought (Melancholy)), 1933²⁶, is a sculptural expression of the fragility of a female being. The face of the young girl reflects various forms of female sadness, ranging from thoughtfulness to melancholy. Likewise, Rudolf Uher, who entered the Slovak artistic scene in the 1940s, dealt with female busts, in his early works, which radiate sensitivity, meditation, and lyricism. An example is the statue, *Schúlená (smútok)* (Curled (Sadness)), 1946, which represents some kind of imaginary symbol of the female emotional world. The simple rendering of a woman in the foetal position is a reflection of her entire spiritual world. Other modernist melancholic works include the following paintings: Vincent Hložník – *Zamyslená* (Lost in Thought), 1940; *Melanchólia* (Melancholy), 1947; *Osamelá* (Lonely), 1957; Július Lörinz – *Strach* (Fear), 1944; Ján Mudroch – *Smútok* (Sadness), 1940; Imro Weiner Král – *Smútok* (Sadness), 1965; Ladislav Gudern – *Melanchólia* (Melancholy), 1946; Ervín Semian – *Melanchólia* (Melancholy), 1950–1958; and Ernest Špitz – *Osamelý* (Lonely), 1958.

Slovak art has also returned to the topic of melancholy in more recent years. In particular artists active from 2000 on have approached the topic of melancholy with a fresh view and a new urgency rooted

26 For more detail see: POSPÍŠIL, J.: *Zadumaná (Melanchólia)*, 1933, 45cm. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SGP_2083>.

in the current issues of the new millennium. The issue of female melancholy has been vigorously explored by Veronika Rónaiová with her series *Osamelé* (The Lonely) and by another female artist Jana Farmanová²⁷. All her life, her oeuvre has been linked with various variations of a woman seeking herself, coming to terms with her life and relationship with loved ones. The paintings may be perceived as silent companions within the female world, not only filled with joy but also deep sadness. One of the reasons for the woman’s sadness is the feeling of loneliness which was portrayed in the work *Osamelá* (Lonely), 2009. At the turn of the 21st century Maroš Rovňák, a contemporary multimedia artist, introduced a new topic and the feeling of melancholy that arose from it in his cycle of digital photographs *Byť ženou je byť blízko bolesti* (Being a Woman is Being Close to Pain)²⁸. It is the issue of gender identity that each of us has to deal with in our lives.

Conclusion

As is obvious, melancholy is

27 Author’s note: The Nitra Gallery in Nitra has prepared an exhibition of Jana Farmanová’s works entitled “Jana Farmanová – Memory”, curated by Barbora Kurek Geržová. It is open to the public from 13th March 2023 to 28th May 2023. The exhibition was built around the repetition of identical motifs which are present in Farmanová’s works; such as female issues connected with growing up, maturity and ageing.

28 For more detail see: ROVNÁK, M.: Z cyklu ‘Byť ženou je byť blízko bolesti’, 1999-2000, 100x70cm. [online]. [2023-04-20]. Available at: <https://www.webumenia.sk/dielo/SVK:SGB.UP_215>.

one of those themes of the history of art that repeats itself cyclically, especially in periods more focused on the analysis of one's own interior and strong emotional experience. So it is a systematic conceptual framework. Depictions of psychological states, existential hardships, internal ruptures, and tragic resignations were synonymous with the overall situation of human life and became a new area of cultural research, whether in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or in the modern era. It was during this period that interest in melancholy also moved into the scientific sphere, where it acquired a completely new context. Visual art, however, continued to adhere to the iconographic attributes of the idea of melancholy, which had already developed in the early modern period. Veronika Rónaiová's works have thus become proof that melancholy has its unquestionable place in contemporary visual art and can move this ancient idea into future thinking. So it is clear that the idea of melancholy has not yet said its last word.

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Image Attachment

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