

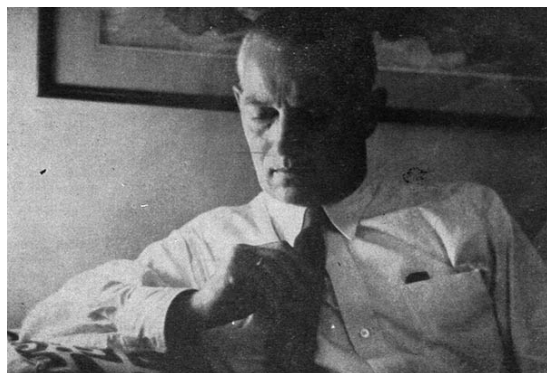
PETRAS KIAULĖNAS AND THE ART OF MODERN COLOR

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The distinguished Lithuanian painter, Petras Kiaulenas, continued to explore the possibilities of color up to his death in 1954. Were it not for the developments in his methods of coloring achieved in the United States, where he spent the final years of his life, it would be presumptuous to add anything to the important body of criticism already built up around his work by Parisian art critics in the 1940's. Kiaulenas' ideas and achievements in the domain of color go beyond impressionism, as it was formerly understood, and fairly demand a new critical treatment.

The possibility of creating a modern school of impressionism has always seemed intriguing. Kiaulenas has laid the foundation for such a development. To-day, scientific color theory has been reconstituted and new ideas are in the air. A similar situation existed when the older impressionism appeared simultaneously with new developments in the theory of color. According to Paul Signac, the influence of the French scientist Chevreul was decisive on the work of Seurat, Cross, and Signac. Chevreul's book appeared in 1839, many years before Monet or Picasso ever exhibited. The real artistic contemporary of Chevreul was Eugene Delacroix, who inspired impressionism and developed his own color theories independently.



PETRAS KIAULĖNAS

(Last picture before the artist's death in 1954).

It is not surprising that, parallel to contemporary scientific developments, an artist of the stamp of Kiaulenas has appeared. Without reference to any books he is making his own empirical discoveries. Most amazing to me has been his finding that the direction or curvature of brush strokes influence the hue, intensity and value of color. Of course, this phenomenon takes place when the strokes are visible and separated, as they always are in Kiaulenas' work. If I may be pardoned a continued emphasis on science, I should like to point out a parallel to Kiaulenas' use of curving brush strokes. Plate XII in Faber Birren's recent book, *MONUMENT TO COLOR*, shows how the pure colors of the spectrum laid out in waving bands, one above another, appear to overlap, when seen at a distance, and to develop a glow approximating the luminosity of the rainbow. Now it is precisely this spectrum glow, obtained with the merely material colors and stains of the painter, that marks the style of Petras Kiaulenas and makes his work different from that of any other artist. Here I may safely appeal to the observations of any one standing before a Kiaulenas original. His reds and oranges really do glow to an unusual degree.

It will be found that any given red area in one of Kiaulenas' paintings is generally composed of different kinds of reds, some veering toward orange and others toward violet. To-day we know that a glow, such as Kiaulenas obtained, comes from just such a juxtaposition of similar hues and not from the juxtaposition of nearly complementary hues. This latter type of juxtaposition was considered basic by the older impressionists, since they believed that all colors derived from mixtures of red, yellow and blue, which are different rather than similar colors. Such juxtapositions they usually obtained. Nevertheless, there is some truth in the impressionist idea that pure colors, laid side by side in the form of dots, create a lively effect. At the risk of going into too much detail, I may say that the juxtaposition of approximately complementary colors is lively only when viewed close up while a longer view of the whole appears dull. This longer view is the one obtained when, for example, you look at a whole picture by Claude Monet. Kiaulenas almost invariably used his reds as dominants and these have a luminosity impossible to obtain by blindly following the principles of Monet, Pissaro and

Seurat.

To sum up, both Kiaulenas and modern color science use the principle of similar hues and wavy lines rather than dots to produce maximum luminosity. But unlike the scientist, Kiaulenas has enlisted all the other resources of the painter's craft to produce his glow. If necessary, in order to subordinate certain areas, Kiaulenas has resorted to the older impressionist method of complementary juxtaposition. In this way he interweaved his reds with the cool colors throughout the canvas so that the picture as a whole radiates with extraordinary warmth. His dazzling effects have been largely developed from the very materials he used. It is as if the pigments and the brushes had talked to him and he had followed their suggestions, always taking into consideration his own personality and way of handling his tools. Kiaulenas' art of color developed spontaneously and creatively from his own way of seeing and feeling paint rather than from the application of any arbitrary and limited scientific theory. For this reason the parallel with the modern scientific viewpoint seems even more surprising.

Yet such parallels constantly confront the art historian. The various cultural manifestations of an epoch, however independent of one another they may seem at first glance, almost always converge towards an historically determined ideal. Thus, Kiaulenas' art has been partly determined by the course of history. His style has evolved from historic impressionism in response to a continued interest in color and light in our own times.

But the changes that Kiaulenas has wrought in the impressionist style require a more complete enumeration. Compared to Monet, his brush strokes are freer and more active. Compared to Seurat, his style is less determined by A PRIORI rules or preestablished points of view. Compared to either, his color is more luminous. Moreover, Kiaulenas technique is more complex and varied than that of the older impressionists. Seeking greater purity and freshness, he often used touches of impasto which barely graze the canvas or perhaps, transparent, fluid strokes which let the canvas show through. All this gives the light and airy quality of film color to his pictures. Above all Kiaulenas sought for clear color whereas the average impressionist canvas, with its monotonous repetition of solid, similarly shaped brush marks, appear heavy and opaque. Kiaulenas thus obtained a purity of effect whereas, for Monet and Seurat, purity meant intensity of hue and the absence of dirty mixtures. Kiaulenas, of course, also used the concept. At times, too, he will crush a heavy Impasto onto the grain of the canvas, obtaining either solid or crumbling effects. His varied touches are usually criss-crossed since he used curved, horizontal, vertical and diagonal strokes. I have mentioned his idea that the direction of those strokes affect the color. Hence, Kiaulenas has consciously integrated calligraphy and color. Whereas classical painting used line to get contour. Kiaulenas used line to get color. This gives a new twist to a 300 year old argument over the respective merits of line drawing and of color, which was formerly the chief preoccupation of the eminent members of the Royal Academy of Painting in Paris. Kiaulenas would have shocked the older academicians for he avoids contour lines in the ordinary sense of the word. It is not contour but beautiful relationships between an infinity of tones and colors that Kiaulenas sought.

This extraordinary variety, particularly in kinds of brush strokes contributes to his luminous glow. We have already seen that waving lines of spectrum colors produce an overlapping in the eye of the spectator looking at Plate XII in Faber Birren's book. The spectator's eye is confused and he sees what really is not there, an optical rather than a physical mixture of printing inks. In similar fashion, Kiaulenas varied brush strokes produce an artful confusion and feeling of overlaps. Such is the variety of his touch that his color indicates, not the color of an object, but the color of light itself, which is intangible. In this way, Kiaulenas continued impressionism with a modern feeling that is essential for the colors to overlap in the spectator's eye in order to obtain maximum stimulations and effect of glow.

The following incident shows that Kiaulenas was interested in optical mixtures which have to be seen at a distance: While at Kiaulenas' home, I began inspecting a picture hung in a narrow hall. Kiaulenas immediately opened the door into still another corridor so that I could step outside to obtain a long view. At the proper distance, the picture produced something of the effect of light, itself, through the fusion of many colors. We must remember that light is composed of many colored rays, corresponding to different wave lengths. Kiaulenas' overlapping brush strokes and bewildering variety of paint textures emit reflected rays of different colors which are responsible for the dazzling effect he produces. But these brush strokes do more than create the effect of glow.

Relying as usual on multiple means, he employed brush strokes in three ways. 1) He sometimes used the strokes to follow the turning of the form. This is a traditional method and is characteristic of Kiaulenas' first works. 2) His strokes often follow the direction of the light or, at least, indicate atmosphere rather than form. This, again, is traditional in the sense that Massaccio and Leonardo were aware of the method. The impressionists adhering to strokes formed like dots or dashes, certainly painted light rather than form. This method appears in Kiaulenas' work in the 1940's. 3) Kiaulenas used strokes which create an arabesque interesting in its own right and contributing to the drama and emotional quality of the picture. This method is one of the keys to Kiaulenas' final style.

Through his use of this last method Kiaulenas seems related to Van Gogh, also a man of the north. With his brush strokes Van Gogh created a rhythm which, at times, seems almost a separate system from the pattern of the contours. Some critics have even baptised this separate system of strokes the "cosmic rhythms". Certain it is that they convey a sustained emotional excitement throughout the picture. Kiaulenas' last landscapes seem to follow the principle of the exciting brush stroke but they do not resemble Van Gogh's paintings in any ordinary sense of the word. Kiaulenas, moreover, eliminated the contour which Van Gogh habitually retained. However, I think we can say that both Kiaulenas and Van Gogh use the impressionist technique to further essentially expressionist aims. Where Van Gogh induced a strong rapid movement, with

brush strokes leading the eye quickly from one area to another, I find that Kiaulenas' strokes have a lingering quality. Kiaulenas certainly loved each curve that he made and, particularly, the manner in which an individual stroke may begin with vigor and gradually dwindle off into nothingness. This lingering quality combined with the nostalgic effect of his light and atmosphere and with a feeling of timelessness induced by the emphasis on light, which here suggests the eternal aspects of nature. The faces and attitudes of the personages, if depicted, are characterized by deep introspection. All this seems to me expressionist, though in an entirely different way from Van Gogh. However, in some of Kiaulenas' last landscapes where he approached a shorthand system and confined himself to the notation of essentials, the movement is more rapid. On the whole, Kiaulenas' lingering, thoughtful style seems to be more characteristic of his work during the 1940's. His final tendency was to concentrate on the calligraphic arabesque and on scintillating color at the expense of form. It is almost inevitable that an artist interested primarily in color as light, should destroy form. While it is true that light falling on objects reveals form, light, as a thing in itself, has no form. We are, for example, less aware of the three-dimensional form of the sun or of an electric light bulb than of ordinary objects, partly submerged in the darkness of shade. It is understandable that Kiaulenas, the painter of glow, cared less and less for the rendering of solidity.

Seeking always to give the impression of light, Kiaulenas has increased the sparkle by letting more and more blank canvas show through, thus setting off each individual stroke. More and more Kiaulenas relied on the isolated stroke to convey the essential relations between color tones. His notations became increasingly briefer as the logical outcome of a carefully thought out painter's philosophy.

This credo can be summed up as follows; working always with the model before him, the artist must feel all the elements of the picture at once. It is useless to tackle such elements as light, local color and planes in an analytical fashion at separate sittings. It does no good arranging and changing the composition. If the artist does not feel the subject the picture will be a failure any way. In order to keep this feeling the picture must look finished. After one minute of painting, an artist has revealed his mastery. Kiaulenas, himself, began with a few simple relations. These spare touches suffice to show certain carefully selected aspects of the model which interested him. If necessary, all the rest was sacrificed.

Such a shorthand method places the emphasis on freshness and spontaneity, two qualities that Kiaulenas valued not only in color, but in the form of the stroke. One wonders whether the rapid pace of American life had not encouraged such an abbreviated technique, as in the case of John Marin. Kiaulenas, however, has denied any American influence.

This question of influence has been rather fully treated by previous writers. It has been pointed out that Kiaulenas admired Titian's old age style, where light for the first time appears atomized into its color components. But Kiaulenas also liked an entirely different artistic type, Alessio Baldovinti, for the purity and freshness of his effects. Maurice Scherer, in his book on Kiaulenas, lays some stress on Bonnard as an influence. I see this only in a similar use of brilliant reds to define the local color of drapes or fruits. Kiaulenas did not attempt to get the effect of flat color patterns on the surface of the picture, as Bonnard does, except in a different way in his last pictures. In these Kiaulenas used linear arabesques instead of the flat areas of Bonnard.

I am surprised that no one has mentioned Cezanne as an influence, at least in print. The color schemes of Kiaulenas' "Trois fillettes" and of the last landscapes resemble Cezanne far more than Bonnard. Still another artist could have been mentioned, at least to my mind. Kokoschka's work, like Kiaulenas', utilizes the impressionist technique, has a somewhat similar preoccupation with brush strokes and is likewise expressionist. I do not feel that there is any influence but only that the two men are similar in temperament and both have the northern spirit.

When Scherer speaks of Renoir as an influence, I am fully in agreement. Nevertheless, I feel that the French critics like to see everything as an example of the "rayonnement francais". Therefore I make distinctions between what is French and what is not French.

Certainly Kiaulenas' impressionism is often of the French variety. This is especially true of works produced during his actual stay in France. His "Trois fillettes" does have some resemblance to a Renoir and the delicacy of touch may possibly come from that source or from Cezanne's water colors. The whole paraphernalia of impressionism including the division of light into its component colors, letting the bare canvas show through in parts and the joy in color for its own sake, all this I suppose should be called French.

On the other hand, impressionism was really invented by Englishmen such as Constable and Turner. It is true that these men did not influence Kiaulenas directly. Yet it is surprising how the northern temperament shows in Kiaulenas' work, so that there is an affinity between his landscapes and those of P. Wilson Steer, an English follower of Constable and Turner. Certainly Kiaulenas' landscapes are much nearer to Kokoschka and Steer than to any Frenchman, except at times, Cezanne. The breeding quality in Kiaulenas' work is definitely northern. It is something that one expects to find in, say, Lithuanian born Chaim Soutine rather than in the work of a Frenchman. The French, too, have a tendency to search for "pure" forms, preferably geometrical ones. Renoir's forms, for example, are well rounded and classical. Kiaulenas may have looked for pure color but his planes are jagged and rough. In short, they are barbarian, in the good sense of the word, rather than classical. In general, Kiaulenas' forms are suggestive and even ambiguous. He hints to some inner turmoil of the soul, while the French are invariably clear, definite and unambiguous.

Nevertheless, it was in Paris, after two years of intensive painting, that Kiaulenas first revealed his mature talent in an exhibition at the Chardin Gallery. Kiaulenas had several successful shows in Paris and quite evidently thrived in its congenial atmosphere. The Visconti Gallery, for example, showed his work along side of paintings by Matisse, Ut-rillo de Segonzae and Suzanne Valadon. During this period, Kiaulenas' paintings showed an almost complete break with his academic studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts at Kaunas and at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, where he was graduated in 1937. The change in his art was, of course, in the direction of impressionism, but a preoccupation with volumes, due, no doubt, to his early training, persisted in his work throughout the 1940's, despite the fact that Mont, himself, had abandoned the third dimension in his late works. A more complete emancipation from academic rules is evident in Kiaulenas last works.

One other event in Kiaulenas' life is worth mentioning. In 1942, he received a diploma in architecture, after studies at l'Ecole des Art Deco-ratifs and l'Institut d'Urbanisme de l'Univrsite de Paris. This training must have fortified Kiaulenas' feeling for structure, an exceedingly valuable asset for a painter. In a sense, Kiaulenas' work became more and more architectural since he emphasized the arabesque on the plane surface of the canvas, thus truly expressing the flatness of the material. Similarly, a good architect always expresses his materials and the way his building is constructed. There is less and less emphasis in Kiaulenas' work on solid volumes, which are foreign to the actual two-dimensional nature of a picture. These volumes seem to me to correspond in painting to the applied ornaments which architects are currently abandoning. While Kiaulenas did not affirm volumes, it is also true that he did not deny them. They are, in fact, implicit in his final work. Hence, a traditional feeling for the structure of solids was valuable to him. The wrong note, the wrong value on a given object in the picture could still cause his whole structure to collapse. Hence we reach the paradox that in order to eliminate form you first have to know it thoroughly. I have always held that Matisse, who paints successful flat pictures, must possess a good knowledge of chiaroscuro modeling to accomplish his aim. This knowledge is, in fact, shown in many of Matisse's charcoal drawings.

Although, as in the case of Matisse, Kiaulenas' work is grounded on tradition, he affirms that his primary aim is a search for pure beauty. Hence, he makes exactly the same claim as the average abstractionist. Kiaulenas' ..defense of his ..position is worth careful consideration. He says that the artist who invents pure forms out of his own head tends to repeat himself. On the other hand, his careful observation of nature, which forms the basis of his own work, stimulates infinite variety, novel forms and all the powers of invention. Moreover, Kiaulenas asserts that his inventions have the advantage of being comprehensible. Some abstract painters would reply that they are exploring a different phase of natural phenomena requiring a new grammar and vocabulary for expression. If the argument was pursued further it might obscure the fact that there are always different schools of painting. The essential thing is that one be a good painter.

But let us refer briefly to still another contra-versy. Here, again, it is worth listening to both parties in the dispute. The fact that Kiaulenas has achieved excellence without immersing himself in a study of Lithuanian folk art does not mean that some painters are not succeeding in perpetuating the folk art tradition. Kiaulenas' way lies in another direction equally significant for the development of Lithuanian art. Relying mainly on intuition, he feels the changes that have taken place in the world and in art and has adopted himself to new conditions which certainly affect the Lithuanian nation. His heart is Lithuanian even though his technique is at times French, at times simply European. Essentially, he speaks as a man of the north, expressing his own times with particular sensitivity to new directions m the art of luminous color. In this he chose the right road to artistic salvation.

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A volume of fullcolor reproductions by Kiauli-nas, suitable for framing, has recently been published and is available. Ed.



Still Life



Flowers



Still Life



The Girls



Trees



Portrait



Sunset