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**TENSION. EXPRESSIONIST ARTISTIC  
STYLE IN STAGE DESIGN AND ORIGINAL  
ARTWORKS OF THE FIRST HALF  
OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

**INTRODUCTION**

In the 2000s, next to theatre as an institution, the repertoire, the work of directors and actors, there is an increase in interest in the visual-decorative side of theatre. In 2005, a generously illustrated work *Kunstnikuraamat (The Artist's Book)* was published, containing interviews with scenographers. Recent years have seen publications of compendiums on the life and work of living legends of Estonian scenography – Ingrid Agur (2017), Kustav-Agu Püüman (2017), Jaak Vaus and Mari-Liis Küla (both in 2021).

Despite the aforementioned, the history of Estonian scenography, and the connections of its developments and modes of expression with the rest of the art scene, is an inadequately studied subject. Traditionally, the preparation of scenographers in Estonia has been more or less connected to painting studies, and most artists creating scenic designs for theatres in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – time of fast modernisation of Estonian culture – were not educated as decoration artists, but experienced and competent creators of the liberal arts. As theatres were increasingly knowingly looking for spatially well-organised stage worlds with a consistent visual aesthetic, the artists' curiosity and interest in the modernist-

expressionist modes of expression that had quickly become established in the theatre, and a desire to expand their creative range, brought many Estonian painters of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to experiment with stage design.

The only compendium of the history of Estonian scenography is *Eesti teatri lavapilt (The Scenic Art of Estonian Theatre)* by Fritz Matt, published in 1969. Today, the use of this book is complicated by the poor print quality of the illustrative material, and the judgemental attitude towards historical appearances of the avant-garde in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, owing to the socialist-realist artistic canon of the day. A sharp and sensitive approach to stage design was provided by Evi Pihlak in her chapters on scenography in the compendium *Eesti kunsti ajalugu kahes köites (The History of Estonian Art in Two Volumes, 1970–1977)*. The most recent work, *Eesti teater. Ülevaateos (Estonian Theatre. A Compendium, 2011)* by Jaak Rähesoo, presents examples of reception of stage design in contemporary journalism, but it does not aim for comprehensive descriptions or comments on spatial-decorative modes of expression. The publications that celebrate the anniversaries of Estonian theatres, *Estonia esimene sajand (Estonia's First Century, 2007)* and *Draamateatri raamat (The Book of Drama Theatre, 2010)*, provide vivid pictorial material, and annotated and commented historical information. The contributions by different artists to stage design have been mentioned in thematical treatments and exhibition catalogues, such as Peet Aren's decorative artistic style in Ene Lamp's monograph *Ekspressionism. Ekspressionism Eesti kujutavas kunstis (Expressionism. Expressionism in Estonian Visual Art, 2004)*, and the theatrical activities of Henrik Olvi at the Kumu Art Museum's exhibition and the accompanying book *Geomeetriline inimene. Eesti Kunstnikkude Rühm ja 1920.–1930. aastate kunstiuuendus (The Geometrical Human. A Grouping of Estonian Artists and the Artistic Innovation of the 1920s–1930s)* in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

1 Sources mentioned in the introduction in order of appearance: *Kunstniku raamat* (Tallinn: Eesti Lavastuskunstnike Liit, 2005); *Ingrid Agur: elu kolm vaatust* (Polli: Kiivita talu, 2017); *Intervjuu teatrikunstnikuga: Kustav-Agu Püüman* (Tallinn: Tallinna Linnateater, 2017); Jaak Vaus, *Alevipoiss* (Tallinn: Tallinna Linnateater, 2021); *Mari-Liis Küla* (Tallinn: Tallinna Linnateater, 2021); Fritz Matt, *Eesti teatri lavapilt* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1969); Evi Pihlak, 'Lavakujundus', *Eesti kunsti ajalugu, I* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1977); Jaak Rähesoo, *Eesti teater: ülevaateos* (Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliit, 2011); *Estonia esimene sajand: artiklite kogumik kutselise Estonia ajaloost* (Tallinn: Rahvusooper Estonia; Kultuurileht, 2007); Ain Jürisson, *Draamateatri raamat: teatrist ja teatriperest aegade voolus* (Tallinn: Eesti Draamateater, 2010); Ene Lamp, *Ekspressionism. Ekspressionism Eesti kujutavas kunstis* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2004); *Geomeetriline inimene: Eesti Kunstnikkude Rühm ja 1920.–1930. aastate kunstiuuendus* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuuseum, 2012).

In 2019, the exhibition *Laval ja lõuendil (On Stage and on Canvas)* in the Adamson-Eric Museum, a filial of the Art Museum of Estonia, and its extended version in 2020 in the Tartu City Museum provided an opportunity to compare other works of the artists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with their theatre stage creations. In theatre anthologies, any new trends (incl. developments in design) are usually studied by theatres and seasons – this affords a good overview of changes and developments in the context of a specific theatre. However, for the studies of the works of a single author, this approach is not conducive to observing the coherence of the author's activities in different techniques and modes of expression. The artists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century realised interesting artistic challenges and applied new stylistic techniques very bravely not only in their original artworks, but also in scenography.

This article relies on materials from the exhibition *On Stage and on Canvas* and from the author's publication 'On Stage and on Canvas. Expressionism and Geometrism in the Theatrical and Other Artworks of Estonian Artists of the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century'<sup>2</sup> in the anthology *Teatrielu 2020 (Theatrical Life 2020)*. The article offers a short introduction to the theatrical circumstances in Estonia in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: what were the material capabilities and substantial expectations on scenography. The focus will be on expressionism, which appeared as one of the new directions within the process of modernisation of theatrical and visual art, and its manifestation in the theatrical and independent artworks of selected artists. The description of the case of attribution of stage design sketches illustrates how the study methods of art and theatre can be combined for acquisition of new knowledge. Nonetheless, at the centre of this discussion is the artist – the expression of their artistic convictions, creative nature and artistic style in their theatrical and other original artworks.

## THEATRICAL IDEALS AND THE REALITY OF THEATRES

'Not any hotchpotch, like the little decorative pieces (*Ausstattungsstücke*) that are brought on stages now, but concrete picturesqueness and architectonics, which fit the optics of theatre and primarily the

2 Kerttu Männiste, 'Laval ja lõuendil. Ekspressionism ja geometrism 20. sajandi alguse Eesti kunstnike teatri- ja vabaloomingus', *Teatrielu 2020* (Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliit, 2021). To be published.

character of the play and performance, which the stage designer has created with the director, where even the smallest errors have been eradicated, – to offer this overarching aesthetic spectacle, is a demand for the future of every stage considering itself an artistic theatre.<sup>3</sup>

Having originated in singing and drama societies, the theatre became professional in Estonia in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in 1906 Estonia Theatre in Tallinn and Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu become professional theatres, in 1911, Pärnu gets its own professional theatre in Endla. In the rapid social and cultural development of the 1920s, Estonian theatre landscape also includes Drama Theatre (1920–1924), Drama Studio Theatre (from 1924, in 1937 it is renamed Estonian Drama Theatre), Tallinn Workers' Theatre (1926–1944) (all three in Tallinn), and in 1926 Ugala in Viljandi also turns professional. The professionalisation of Estonian theatre also made new demands on the productions: productions were expected to be stylistically cohesive, with justified aesthetic and functional choices in design.

The literary group Young Estonia, who significantly broadened Estonian mentality and culture, in their *Teatri-raamat (Book of Theatre)* in 1913 sharply criticised the amateurish scenography and the dilettantish lag behind European and Russian standards: they stressed the need for modern, stylised and symbolic scenography which would complement the direction, support the production's ideological message and aid the play's development towards an artistic entity.

Next to artistic talent, the development and artistic maturation of scenography as a field also requires a rather strong material and technical base – the playhouses of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not comply with the expectations and demands placed on modern theatre, neither spatially nor technically. Professional theatre troupes had grown out of societies, and until the completion of professional theatre buildings plays were performed in buildings belonging to the societies, whose multifunctional halls with level floors (adaptable as auditoriums or dance floors) and stages permitted political meetings and some less-demanding performances, but in terms of acoustics, lighting and stage-technical capacities they were not sufficient for more challenging material. The new building for the Vanemuine

3 Bernhard Linde, 'Näitekunst', *Teatri-raamat* (Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliit, 2002), 26.

society and theatre, designed by Finnish architect Armas Lindgren, was completed in 1906 and was one of the biggest theatre buildings and stages in Estonia at the time, but with its impractical division of space, lack of workshop areas and poor lighting, it received criticism straight after opening.<sup>4</sup> The Estonia Theatre building was completed on the design by Armas Lindgren and Wivi Lönn in 1913. The Estonia society's old building became a long-term home for the Tallinn Workers' theatre, Drama Studio Theatre used the rooms of Tallinn German Theatre.

In the initial years of the professional theatre, stage design used a lot of painted stock scenery: ready-made decoration sets (mostly town streets, natural settings, interior views), which were used to represent locations from production to production. The decoration sets and single décor elements had accumulated in theatres over the years, purchased from various decoration workshops or commissioned from various painters. Thus, the painted elements often bore varying artistic styles, were often tritely executed, dry and uninteresting. Combining stylistically different elements of the fundus decoration, it was difficult to achieve the décor's temporal or aesthetic unity or its suitability for a given production. Having briefly worked in Estonia Theatre, one of the founders of the Art Museum of Estonia and Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, artist August Pulst has recorded in watercolour the fundus decorations of Estonia Theatre as of 1916.<sup>5</sup>

At the time of completion, this 40-page watercolour set probably helped systematise the décor sector. In addition, it documents the stage design tradition of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and mediates the work of mostly unknown authors of fundus decoration, whose original sketches and other materials have not survived. An important milestone in the development of scenography in Estonian theatre is *Hamlet* – the opening production of the new Estonia building in 1913, whose scenographer Roman Nyman created special stage sets which corresponded to the content and concept of the play.<sup>6</sup>

4 Fritz Matt, 'Eesti teatri lavapilt', 33.

5 E.g. Eesti Teatri- ja Muusikamuuseum [Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, ETMM], M 234:2.

6 Matt, 'Eesti teatri lavapilt', 54.

Plastic and theatrically conditional scenography appeared in Estonian theatre only in 1919, in the works of Eduard Poland and Ado Vabbe.<sup>7</sup>

The stage-technical capacities improved during the first half of the 1920s: Estonia Theatre (1922) and Vanemuine (1925) started using cycloramas, which allowed to forgo the perspective scenery, which blocked off the entire upstage area, and presented wider opportunities for creating special effects with lighting. The use of painted decorations continued in a much more varied form, combined with plastic elements and projection. Estonia and Vanemuine receive their revolving stages in 1935.

### CONNECTIONS. EXPRESSIONISM ARRIVES ON CANVAS AND STAGE IN ESTONIA.

Theatre historian Jaak Rähesoo has called expressionism the final movement of high modernism to permeate Estonian art life as a whole.<sup>8</sup> While the influences of pre- and post-WWI expressionism reached Estonian theatre more or less simultaneously in the 1920s, Estonian artists had been able to experience the avant-garde trends of German artistic towns during the preceding decade.

In 1911–1914, Nikolai Triik trained and studied in Berlin, and Ado Vabbe, Anton Starkopf and Peet Aren in Munich. Out of these, Ado Vabbe and Peet Aren subsequently contribute to the expressionist developments in Estonian scenography, as does Aleksander Möldroo, who studied decorative painting at the Tallinn Industrial Art School and supplemented his education in Ado Vabbe's studio at Pallas Art School in Tartu.

Thanks to the gallery and magazine *Sturm*, Berlin had become the centre of expressionism of *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*. During Ado Vabbe's sojourn in Munich, in 1911 at the *Galerie Tannhäuser*, *Der Blaue Reiter* held its first exhibition. A more substantial exhibition, which included avant-gardists from Paris (Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Maurice de Vlaminck) and Russia (Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich), took place a year later, in 1912 at the *Goltz Gallery*. Ado Vabbe's expressionism experience was framed by an exhibition in *Salon Strindberg* in Helsinki in

<sup>7</sup> Tõnu Tammets, 'Peet Aren stsenograafias', *Kunst*, 2 (1989), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Rähesoo, *Eesti teater: ülevaateos*, 142.



FIG. 1. PEET AREN, *STREET (TOOMPEA MOTIF)* (OIL ON CANVAS, 1920). ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

1914, where next to *Der Blaue Reiter* authors, *Die Brücke* artists were showcased. Ado Vabbe's encounters with abstract art and his acquaintance with Wassily Kandinsky have been dated to different periods in his life, potential opportunities occurred both around 1912 in Munich and 1916 in Moscow; a visit to a Russian avant-garde exhibition and W. Kandinsky's personal exhibition were also possible in Helsinki in 1916.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to the rise of the avant-garde art in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the German exhibition scene also featured a lot of more moderate modern art, inspired by post- and neo-impressionism and art deco. Peet Aren, who was also in Munich in 1914, has mentioned visiting exhibitions at the *Alte* and *Neue Pinakothek*, as well as the *Glass Palace*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lamp, *Ekspressionism. Ekspressionism Eesti kujutavas kunstis*, 47–48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Post-WWI inflation made travelling to Germany advantageous for Estonians until 1923, and therefore influences of German theatre were not only textual or written, but the creatives were also able to experience performances in situ. In 1920–1922, Edmund Arnold Blumenfeldt studied at the A. Reimann Theatre Design School in Berlin, in 1922–1923 Hanno Kompus supplemented his directing studies at the Dresden Opera. Both men's German experience later made a mark on Estonian theatre. Regarding this period in theatre, it is worth remembering that the position of the director had not yet been established in the theatre, and repetitions and imitations of production schemes and scenography were normal, accepted practices.<sup>11</sup>

The ideological foundations of expressionism were mediated to the Estonian audience by writer Hugo Raudsepp in his 1921 piece based on German sources in the *Tallinna Teataja* newspaper. A year later, Raudsepp published a book *Ekspressionism. Uue kunsti teooriast ja praktikast* (*Expressionism. The Theory and Practice of New Art*). In Raudsepp's view, expressionism is a world view and a mindset, whose central concept is the idea of humanity. People were hoping for a new, just and humane society to replace the old, ruined world after the political and social shock of World War I. Therefore, for Raudsepp, expressionism is primarily an ideological and affective-perceptive phenomenon, and only thereafter a collection of characteristic methods of style and form.<sup>12</sup>

In Estonian theatre, expressionism primarily meant enthusiastic productions of plays by authors of modern German drama – Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, Walter Hasenclever. The first expressionist play on Estonian stage is Georg Kaiser's *Gas I* in November 1920 in Estonia Theatre.<sup>13</sup> Although the director Hanno Kompus imitated what he had seen in the Volksbühne, *Gas I* functioned as an introducer of a new style and ideology, rather than a mature artistic production. The expressionist style was better captured by actor-director Erna Vilmer, who produced Walter Hasenclever's play *The Son* in Estonia Theatre in 1921.<sup>14</sup> Visually and stylistically, Eduard Poland's laconic

11 Luule Epner, 'Aated ja stiiliotsingud: ekspressionism 1920. aastate eesti teatris', *Tallinna Ülikooli eesti keele ja kultuuri instituudi toimetised = Proceedings of the Institute of Estonian Language and Culture*, 17 (Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikool, 2016), 291.

12 Ibid., 293–294.

13 Premiered on 02.11.1920 at Estonia Theatre.

14 Premiered on 19.04.1921 at Estonia Theatre.

stage design and the dramatic wigs and make-up of the performers were a step closer to the modes of expression of expressionist theatre, the acting style however remained largely traditional. Even though ideological dramas conveying the expressionist world view were produced, the larger theatres, such as Estonia and Vanemuine, were more interested in refreshing the theatrical language, new visual and scenographical solutions, and stylised acting style, than in the socio-critical content and ideological dimension of the plays.<sup>15</sup>

The ideological plane of expressionism was central in the activities of Morning Theatre. In 1921–1924, a troupe of young amateurs, who had gathered around the ideological leader and director August Bachmann and dramaturgist Nigol Andresen, staged four productions. The name Morning Theatre stemmed from the fact that they performed their plays in professional theatres on Sunday mornings when resident troupes were not using the space themselves. The messages of their produced material varied from allegorical anti-war content and leftist critique of class society to pathological declarations of humanism and (Christian) brotherly love. While Morning Theatre's first production, Alfred Brust's *The Eternal Man or Drama in Christ*,<sup>16</sup> among its generally positive reception also earned comments on stylistic inconsistency and tumbles into impressionism and sentimentality,<sup>17</sup> Ernst Toller's *Man and the Masses*,<sup>18</sup> premiered in 1922, and Walter Hasenclever's *Humanity*,<sup>19</sup> staged in 1923, showcased stylistically purely expressionist stage and acting solutions as well as direction: they used carefully composed mass scenes, cold, hacked or music-entangled speech, stylised pantomime-like movement, exalted expressions. Morning Theatre's final production, *The Earth* by Valery Bryusov<sup>20</sup> turned into an homage to the late Bachmann's theatrical quests, and made it to the audience directed by Hilda Gleser after the death of Bachmann. Morning Theatre's laconic stylised stage designs supported the productions and contributed greatly to the move of

15 Epner, 'Aated ja stiiliotsingud: ekspressionism 1920. aastate eesti teatris', 295–296.

16 Premiered on 13.03.1921 at Drama Theatre.

17 Hugo Raudsepp, *Ekspressionism. Uue kunsti teooriast ja praktikast* (Tallinn: Rahvaülikool, 1922), 52–53.

18 Premiered on 22.02.1922 at Drama Theatre.

19 Premiered in February 1923 at Estonia Theatre.

20 Premiered on 06.04.1924 at Estonia Theatre.

the everyday and detailed scenography prevalent in Estonian theatre towards more conditional and artistic stages.<sup>21</sup>

### PLAYS WITH COLOUR AND FORM. PEET AREN

Peet Aren's (1889–1970) stage designs brought expressionist experiments with form and an explosion of colour into Estonian theatre. Having studied in St Petersburg, and trained in Vienna, Berlin and Munich in 1914, Aren returned to Estonia in 1915 as an already mature artist, whose creative style mixed influences from Russian modern painting and experimental scenography with his experience of German expressionism. For Aren, the fast-changing fields of art and theatre of the 1920s were not platforms for explorations and experiments, but rather for his own unique mode of expression and creative self-actualisation. From 1919, his original artwork is dominated by expressionist methods: the images have tension and restlessness, disjointed perspectives and deformed shapes add dynamism to his compositions. At the same time, Aren's colouring is extravagantly vibrant, contrasting and bright. In the 1920s, the mutual influence of these characteristics gives birth to his expressionist cityscapes, which seem anxiety-inducing and spectral with their disjointedness and deformed, bloated shapes; however, the bright colours add to them a dream-like and theatrical quality.

These artistic qualities, characteristic of Aren's style, were also present in the scenography for *Androcles and the Lion*, which premiered at Estonia Theatre in 1922.<sup>22</sup> Tõnu Tammets, historian of Peet Aren's work, distinguishes two trends among the artist's stage designs.<sup>23</sup> The first includes stylised designs, whose location-demarcating elements have a recognisable or at least adumbrative connection with real objects. Even though they are strongly geometrically stylised, with fragmented forms and therefore abstracted, the viewer recognises in them organic natural shapes or man-made environments. In his colouring, Aren prefers intense tones (red, blue, black, pink, green), and creates maximum contrasts and disharmonies by juxtaposing

21 Männiste, 'Laval ja lõuendil. Ekspressionism ja geometrism 20. sajandi alguse Eesti kunstnike teatri- ja vabaloomingus'. To be published.

22 Premiered on 07.03.1922. Author of the original Bernard Shaw, director Hanno Kompus.

23 Tammets, 'Peet Aren stsenograafias', 31.



FIG. 2. PEET AREN, STAGE DESIGN SKETCH FOR THE PRODUCTION OF AUGUST STRINDBERG'S *GHOST SONATA* AT ESTONIAN DRAMA STUDIO (INK, PENCIL, GOUACHE ON PAPER, 1923). ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

them. The impression produced by the rhythms generated by the contrasting colours and shapes, and the articulated stage space, is excessively lavish, overwhelming for the viewer.

The somewhat strange, esoteric-seeming tropical atmosphere of *Androcles and the Lion* is achieved by the geometrical stylisation of natural forms and abundant colourfulness in the decorations. As an expressionist element, the artist uses jagged motifs to frame the stage portal: an intense red zigzag ornament on a black background, which breaks the unity of the stage and auditorium, emphasises the line between the stage and audience and highlights the conditionality and theatricality of the actions on stage. The exotic plants were also styled in a similarly angular, zigzag fashion, and the upstage area was made intense and dynamic.

Restless and tense, but also colourful is Aren's stage decoration and costume solution for *The Ghost Sonata* by August Strindberg in 1923 in the Drama Studio.<sup>24</sup> The stage set of street views is comparable

24 Premiered on 12.12.1923. Director Paul Sepp.

to Aren's expressionist cityscapes: perspectives are disjointed and bent, shapes and dimensions are curved and arched, the atmosphere is hallucinatory. In stage interiors, the darker and more anxious notes are entwined with the explosive colourfulness of the exotic elements. The result was not Strindbergian enough, according to critics: 'Even the decorations created an idyllic (act 1) and ball-like (act 3) atmosphere, instead of exuding a dark, poisoned, ghostly atmosphere.'<sup>25</sup> Aren also used the expressionist stylistics of his scenography in his costume design, where angularly shaped costumes manipulated the human figure by geometricizing and stylising it. The costume design sketches that are stored in the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum<sup>26</sup> are stylistically closer to realism, the costume sketches found in the Art Museum of Estonia<sup>27</sup> are made in a boldly stylised, angular manner. The photographs in the photo collection of the National Archives of Estonia<sup>28</sup> confirm that in contrast to the expressionist stage designs, which were realised in a somewhat streamlined manner, the costumes were bravely made based on the more avant-garde sketches.

Jags, steps, stairs as the favourite elements of expressionist stage design are repeatedly used in Aren's decorations, both as spatial elements, which facilitated the actors' movements and plastic compositions, and as ornamental decorative motifs. Conditional, plastic and spatial stage architecture comprises the second trend of Aren's scenography. The stage design of monumental architectonic constructions is generalising and symbolic – there are practically no details referring to concrete locations or time. In those designs, Aren's use of colour is more laconic: they are dominated by large local-toned surfaces, livened up and rhythmised by dynamic diagonal ornaments, broken lines and dimensions, and articulations with lights and shadows. This kind of relinquishing of surfaces and frontality, organisation of the stage space through plastic and

25 Artur Adson, *Vilet ja loobereid. Kakskümmend aastat eesti teatrit jälgimas* (Tallinn: Loodus, 1938), 38.

26 Peet Aren, costume design sketches for the production of August Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* (ink, pencil, gouache on paper, 1923). ETMM, T 31:2/14:1–3.

27 Peet Aren, costume design sketches for the production of August Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* (ink, pencil, gouache on paper, 1923). Eesti Kunstimuuseum [Art Museum of Estonia, EKM], G 30282–G 30295.

28 E.g. Rahvusarhiiv [National Archives of Estonia, EFA].712.A.543.7.



FIG. 3. PEET AREN, STAGE DESIGN SKETCH FOR THE PRODUCTION OF *ELECTRA* BY SOPHOCLES/HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL AT ESTONIA THEATRE (MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 1923). COLLECTION OF ESTONIAN THEATRE AND MUSIC MUSEUM (ESTONIAN HISTORY MUSEUM).

architectonic elements, whose generalising metaphoric means carried the production's atmosphere, while at the same time practically contributing to the creation of movement schemes and dynamic compositions, became realised in the scenography for Ludwig Fulda's comedy *The Donkey's Shadow*.<sup>29</sup> The main elements of the stage design were monumental colourful columns, awry in different directions, which broke the harmony of the composition, and brought both weird jollity and restlessness to the milieu.

The best example of Aren's conditional, expressive stage design is *Electra* by Sophocles/von Hofmannsthal.<sup>30</sup> Aren's hitherto style, the somewhat vainly decorative playful design technique, is replaced by

29 Premiered on 26.10.1922 at Estonia Theatre. Author of the original Ludwig Fulda, director Ants Lauter.

30 Premiered on 24.04.1923 at Estonia Theatre. Authors of the original Sophocles/H. Hoffmannstahl, director Erna Vilmer.

a more laconic scenographical solution, a powerful and functional construction of the stage. The design was created by spatially arranged painted surfaces; stairs and podiums allowed various movement schemes both with regard to the height and depth of the stage; apertures in the central area of the stage provided opportunities for effective mise en scenes. The elements of décor lacked any recognisable connections with real objects or places (except the sculptures resembling fantastical animals with open jaws on the side elements of the stage décor). The atmosphere of alienation and restlessness was amplified by effects created with red and purple lighting, and dynamic tenebrism to highlight decoration elements or characters. It was a completely conditional imaginary environment, whose abstraction and annoyingly bright colour contrasts equally supported the actors' expressionist acting techniques and directorial methods.

Besides his original artwork and creative scenography, at Tallinn (later National) Industrial Art School (1920–1925) and in the drawing class of the Drama Studio's Drama School (1921–1926) Aren directed his students towards searching for new expressive principles of design, in order to make stage design a rightful constituent of theatrical productions and equal to other components of the production with regard to meaning creation. Out of Aren's students, Bernhard Rosenthal (later Päären/Pärn Raudvee, 1906–1964), Uko Halla (1906–1966) and Aleksander Möldroo (1902–1991), who was already involved with Morning Theatre during his studies, specialised in scenography.

#### ARTISTIC LEGEND. PEET AREN AND ALEKSANDER MÖLDROO

Today, Morning Theatre's ideologically expressionist visual-decorative side still provides material for study. In his memoirs, Nigol Andresen, Morning Theatre's dramaturgist, emphasises the role of August Bachmann's creative and powerful integral vision in all aspects of production, from sound design and decoration concept to compositions of mass scenes and the voice usage of single actors.<sup>31</sup> Because the freelance troupe of self-taught amateurs and theatre enthusiasts (the only professional actor in the troupe was Hilda

31 Nigol Andresen, *August Bachmann ja Hommikiteater* (Tallinn: Eesti NSV Teatriühing, 1966).

Gleser) worked in the spirit of co-creation, the names of participants were concealed – their programmes do not contain names of actors or creative directors. Thus, in theatre historical literature, Morning Theatre's stage designs have been attributed to Peet Aren and the young artist Aleksander Möldroo alternately; on the theatre's final production, *The Earth*, under Gleser,<sup>32</sup> different sources mention Aleksander Tuurand (1888–1936), Albert Vahtramäe (1885–1965) or Mart Pert (1898–1993) as artists.

Tõnu Tammets, in his article 'Scenography of Peet Aren',<sup>33</sup> has perhaps gotten the closest to the source of the attribution problem of Morning Theatre's first production *The Eternal Man*. Tammets points to the theatre agency's announcement prior to the play's premier in 1921, which states that decorations are made by a well-known artist. This wording of the announcement has led researchers to associate Morning Theatre's stage designs with the work of an already established professional artist Peet Aren, whose work was persistently expressionist in the 1920s, while the artist Aleksander Möldroo, although associated with Morning Theatre, was still a student at the Tallinn Industrial Art School, a young and developing author. As a second argument, Tammets refers to Aren's charcoal drawings, which the art audience might have seen, and which could have been similar to the production's black-and-white set design.

Aleksander Möldroo studied at the Tallinn Industrial Art School and in 1922–1923 at Pallas Art School under Ado Vabbe (1892–1961) and Konrad Mägi (1878–1925), and his earlier creative period's linocuts and stage designs were expressionist in style. Möldroo's developing artistic style is obviously influenced by the expressionist manner of Aren, who taught drawing at the Drama Studio's Drama School. Möldroo's theatrical activities did not end with Morning Theatre: in 1924–1925 he worked at the National Kaunas Drama Theatre, in 1926–1928 at Pärnu Endla, in 1928–1930 at Drama Studio Theatre, 1930–1931 at the Belgrade National Theatre, in 1936–1946 at Viljandi Ugala. From 1930, the expressionist style in his stage designs as well as his original city- and landscapes, is replaced by a more realistic approach – a trend which characterised European artistic developments in

32 Premiered on 06.04.1924 at Estonia Theatre. Author of the original Valery Bryusov.

33 Tammets, 'Peet Aren stsenograafias'.



FIG. 4. ALEKSANDER MÖLDROO, SKETCH FOR POSTER OR DROP CURTAIN FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ALFRED BRUST'S *THE ETERNAL MAN* AT MORNING THEATRE (MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 1920). COLLECTION OF ESTONIAN THEATRE AND MUSIC MUSEUM (ESTONIAN HISTORY MUSEUM).

general. Romantic-lyrical undertones are further amplified in the artist's original artwork of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum there are four sketches in the personal collection of Aleksander Möldroo for the Brust play *The Eternal Man* at Morning Theatre: by name, one street scene and

three sketches at different stages for posters or drop curtains. The street scene sketch is signed 'Aleks Möldro(o) 1920'. Aleksander Möldroo has acknowledged Peet Aren's significant influence on the development of his artistic principles; however, as we compare the sketches, we discern two very different artistic styles. While Aren uses emphatically theatrical and at times humorously playful expressionism, Möldroo's designs are characterised by dark, subdued, single forceful colour accents in his colouring, which creates a dark and passionate atmosphere. In terms of painting technique, Aren's smoother style, which achieves vivacity and inner tension with larger, brighter colour surfaces and deformed shapes, differs clearly from Möldroo's painting style of more bubbling emotional expressiveness, which alongside the dark colouring bestows a heavy appearance on the sketches. The design for *The Eternal Man* can be described by all of the abovementioned characteristics. The culmination of that period's mode of expression is the design for *Humanity*.

In 2017, a selection of Peet Aren's stage design sketches were added to the Graphic Art Collection of the Art Museum of Estonia. The largest part of the addition comprised sketches at various stages of completion for the Drama Studio's *Ghost Sonata* in 1923. Five small pencil drawings of stage design on brown paper<sup>34</sup> were accepted without establishing links to concrete productions. Comparison with photographic material in the collection of the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum confirms that one of those drawings (EKM G 30319) depicts a prison cell in Morning Theatre's 1922 *Man and the Masses*. The other four drawings still need to be determined: they do not fit the rest of the scenes in *Man and the Masses*, but appear to be depicting single images from a production. The character of the drawings is laconic and documentative. The coincidence between the photographic material and the sketch does not seem to be speaking of Aren's authorship, but of the drawings having been made of already complete stage decorations. Perhaps Aren wished to commemorate Morning Theatre's expressionist stage designs – an ideology and aesthetic close to his heart.

Often in theatrical literature based mainly on written sources there is a tradition to associate Morning Theatre's first production's stage

<sup>34</sup> Peet Aren, stage design sketch for the production of August Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* at Estonian Drama Studio (ink, pencil, gouache on paper, 1923). EKM G 30318–G 30321 a/b.



FIG. 5. ALEKSANDER MÖLDROO, STAGE DESIGN SKETCH FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ALFRED BRUST'S *THE ETERNAL MAN* AT MORNING THEATRE (PENCIL ON PAPER, 1920). COLLECTION OF ESTONIAN THEATRE AND MUSIC MUSEUM (ESTONIAN HISTORY MUSEUM).

design with the name of Peet Aren: this is done by both Luule Epner in her article on expressionist theatre<sup>35</sup>, as well as by Tõnu Virve in his article inspired by *On Stage and on Canvas*.<sup>36</sup> Morning Theatre's designs for subsequent plays as examples of cohesive artistic thought through the theatre's repertoire, are not covered by those authors. Among art historians and theorists all of Morning Theatre's stage designs are attributed to Aleksander Möldroo: in her monograph *Ekspressionism. Ekspressionism Eesti kujutavas kunstis (Expressionism. Expressionism in Estonian Visual Art)*<sup>37</sup>, Ene Lamp alludes to the article by Tõnu Tammets, art historian Liis Pählapuu also supports the authorship of Aleksander Möldroo.<sup>38</sup> It is intriguing that the theatre or art historians do not mention any familiarisation with original sketches, which are accessible to researchers in the collection of the

35 Epner, 'Aated ja stiiliotsingud: ekspressionism 1920. aastate eesti teatris', 298.

36 Tõnu Virve, 'Mis lõuendil, see laval', *Sirp*, 31.05.2019.

37 Lamp, *Ekspressionism. Ekspressionism Eesti kujutavas kunstis*.

38 Liis Pählapuu, 'Eksperimendid 1920. aastate laval', *Sirp*, 20.12.2012.



FIG. 6. ALEKSANDER MÖLDROO, STAGE DESIGN SKETCH FOR THE PRODUCTION OF ERNST TOLLER'S *MAN AND THE MASSES* AT MORNING THEATRE (TEMPERA ON CARDBOARD, 1922). COLLECTION OF ESTONIAN THEATRE AND MUSIC MUSEUM (ESTONIAN HISTORY MUSEUM).

Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, and in digitalised form in the Estonian Museums Public Portal (MUIS) since 2021.<sup>39</sup>

With Morning Theatre's conditional, symbolic stage designs, removed from everyday realism, Estonian scenography took a significant step towards a modern, artistic stage. Stage design that constructed and structured the space instead of using surface-based decorations allowed to realise thought-out movement schemes and mass scenes, and with its artistic message it rose to be an equal component of the production entity, next to directorial concept and acting.

The attribution of the stage design sketches described in this article is an example of the importance of studying and contextualising empirical material (sketches, drawings, original artworks) in parallel with textual sources. The painting and technical idiosyncrasies and colour schemes are elements of artistic style, which provide

39 Eesti Muuseumide Veebivärv = Estonian Museums Public Portal [MUIS], <https://www.muis.ee>.

supplementary knowledge and encourage cohesive treatment of an artist's work from both theatre and art historical points of view, and aid the placement of the artist's work within the sphere of visual culture. Yes, theatre is a collective art form, but the authors of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interested in modern trends, expressed their artistic views and style boldly in their original artwork as well as stage design. Today, familiarisation with the materials in different museums is facilitated by the Estonian Museums Public Portal (MUIS). The sketches for stage designs, the artists' original work and the historical photographic material discussed in this article are available via MUIS to all researchers and interested parties.

**KERTTU MÄNNISTE:** TENSION. EXPRESSIONIST ARTISTIC STYLE IN STAGE DESIGN AND ORIGINAL ARTWORKS OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**KEYWORDS:** SCENOGRAPHY; MODERNISM; EXPRESSIONISM; *HOMMIKTEATER* (MORNING THEATRE); ESTONIA THEATRE

### SUMMARY

Despite turning professional in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the material and practical capabilities of Estonian theatres initially remained modest. This hindered the development of stage design – a field dependent on the creative ideas of artists as well as on technical resources. The stage designs that used stock scenery, were stylistically uneven and often not suitable for a play's material, received criticism from viewers-critics who were familiar with the modern developments in European and Russian theatre, especially from the members of the group Young Estonia.

While Estonian artists were already familiar with the avant-garde trends in the European, and specifically German cultural life prior to WWI, in Estonian theatres expressionism appeared in the 1920s, both in terms of ideas, ideals and stylistic methods. Larger theatres were able to refresh their theatrical language with the expressionist, stylised acting methods and new visual and scenographical solutions. The stage designer for Estonia Theatre's

innovative productions was Peet Aren, who had already established himself as an expressionist artist by the 1920s. On the stage, he also realised his unique artistic style: by luxated perspectives, deformed shapes, excessive colourfulness and playfulness.

The ideological plane of expressionism was central in Morning Theatre (*Hommikteater*), active in Tallinn in 1921–1924. Morning Theatre's troupe of amateurs under the direction of the visionary August Bachmann brought out three plays which were expressionist in their message and style. Although in theatre history the stage designs of Morning Theatre have been associated with Peet Aren, the study of original sketches in the archive of the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum confirms that the author of Morning Theatre's stage designs was artist Aleksander Möldroo, a representative of the more powerful and robust style of expressionism. With Morning Theatre's laconic, stylised scenography, Estonian stage design made an important developmental leap from commonplace stage design towards a theatrically conditional and artistic stage décor.

### CV

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