

Pictorial Photography in Bulgaria: Origins and Development

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Bulgaria entered the 20th century as a country with a specific motley atmosphere – a mix of Oriental and Western European influences. This was just two decades after it regained its independence (1878) and the state was still building its political, social, and cultural life. For many years before that, Bulgaria was an internal province of the Ottoman Empire and its cultural and trade relations with the Western European countries were much more difficult than those of the other Balkan states. This was one of the reasons why photography became known relatively late here and why it spread slowly and unevenly in the Bulgarian towns. The first photo studios were owned by foreign photographers. Most Bulgarian practitioners did not have properly equipped premises and travelled with their entire photographic equipment. They offered their services for a reasonable price to the people outside the big cities, who were mainly poor and not very demanding with respect to the quality of the images. In the period between 1912 and 1918, Bulgaria was involved in three consecutive wars: the First and the Second Balkan wars and WWI. The majority of the photographers were mobilised and some joined the troops as war photographers. The wars stopped the economic development of the young state; its intelligentsia was engulfed in gloomy thoughts, hopelessness and fatigue, and became full of doubts and hesitations.

After WWI many technical innovations appeared which led to the massive spread of the photography – the cameras became small and convenient, the glass plates were replaced by films which were much easier to operate, and the photographic materials became more light-sensitive. Some modern “European-style” photo ateliers emerged. They assumed not only a refined atmosphere, but refined visitors as well (those who have studied and travelled



Pencho Balkanski.
Worries.
Mixed technique,
1936.
Collection of the
Bulgarian Photo Club.

abroad, elegant, well off, and fashion-conscious). The photographers became an integral part of any social event, gathering of intellectuals, or picnic organised by public figures and people from the art world. Despite the growing interest in the new representational method during this period, it is difficult to point out any significant artistic achievements – photography was still seen primarily as a lucrative craft or supplementary means of the artists. Amateur groups consolidated around tourism and landscape photography, both of which were practiced with equal enthusiasm. Although many of the artists and photographers had spent time abroad where they became familiar with the achievements of European culture, both fine art and photography in Bulgaria lacked the confidence for any daring attempts.



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Bulgarian artists had a somewhat conservative and restrained attitude to the new directions in European art, but the wars and their serious consequences triggered the processes that could be called “Bulgarian Modernism”. By that time, Bulgarian culture was heavily influenced by German culture – many artists, architects, writers, musicians, and photographers studied in Germany. This explains the fact that a major role in this “Modernism” was assigned to Expressionism. The other more extreme movements, like Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, did not gain acceptance in Bulgaria. The modern (at that time) means of expression in photography – photogram, collage, foreshortening, motion, detail, and abstraction – were completely absent from Bulgarian practice. Preferred instead was something moderate, pleasing, appealing to everyone, something that does not take extreme risks, neither aesthetic nor conceptual.

the writers but many Bulgarian artists as well. Famous works of Western European occult and diabolic literature were translated and interest in mysticism and secret and unknown forces was on the rise. Although Symbolism was gradually fading out in Europe, in Bulgaria it survived a series of transformations and remained, for many years a leading factor in artistic life. It introduced new emotions in art, extended opportunities for artistic impact, and enriched plots with themes of love, suffering, despair, hopelessness etc. Symbolism admired especially statics, peace, timelessness, frozen gestures – all of which are characteristic of images born by light. Bulgarian photography began absorbing symbolist aesthetics and turned to Pictorialism¹ when it was already out of date in both America and Europe. While worldwide photographers were discovering the beauty of sharpness and detail and becoming interested in reportage and social documents, the best-educated Bulgarian photographers, on the contrary, started to pay increasing attention to laboratory work. Here the documentality was considered an obstacle to the achievement of high artistic results, and therefore the photographers turned to staged situations and to additional processing of the images, mainly through the so-called *noble*² photographic processes – gum dichromate, bromoil, pigment printing, etc. – which make the photographic works appear like watercolour, drawings, or graphics. These authors were not satisfied with the classical photographic processing only, but applied brush, paint, Indian ink, pen, rubber, and wax as well. These were the first “well-bred”, “moderate” and “beautiful” photographic experiments in Bulgaria, practiced by a limited group – mostly members of the Bulgarian Photo Club³. This first organised photographic movement, founded in 1920, brought together professionals and amateurs. Their photographs were

Georgi Georgiev.

Sea.

Gum bichromate print,
1922.
Collection of the
Bulgarian Photo Club.

At the very beginning of the 20th century, the foreign symbolist literature gained popularity in Bulgaria and influenced strongly not only



Boncho Karastoyanov.
The beautiful stranger.
 Gum bichromate print, 1932.
 Private collection.



full of foggy landscapes, scary unsurmountable rocky shores, dramatic skies, majestic trees, and dreamy figures admiring the horizon. The themes included also the image of the seductive woman, the naked body. The

theme of the “native” became very popular – there is an abundance of photographs of shepherds, ploughmen, peasants in the field, girls in national costumes, etc. The photographers, like the painters, tried to capture the true image of the Bulgarian (as a national type) and to depict the eternal virtues and moral foundations of the nation. These attempts to praise the idyllic patriarchal life continued even after its destruction by the major economic changes and social upheaval in Bulgaria. Bulgarian photography found its main source of inspiration in the imaginary, poetic landscapes or in the village, while other Balkan nations focused their attention mainly on the city and its dynamic rhythm. The history of photography shows, as a rule, the same path of development almost everywhere – Pictorialism and its aesthetics gave way to new, truly *avant-garde* trends in photography. However, as long as there were no other experiments attempted in Bulgaria in the first half of the 20th century, we have to consider pictorial photography as the *vanguard* here.

Three names in Bulgarian photography stand out among the others with their experiments in the field of the manipulated photographic image – Georgi Georgiev, Boncho Karastoyanov and Pencho Balkanski – all of them members of the Bulgarian Photo Club. It is becoming more and more difficult to outline the entire photographic heritage of Georgi Georgiev⁴, since a big part of it is already in private collections and is not accessible to researchers. Almost all photographic prints and negatives of Boncho Karastoyanov⁵ from the 1920s and 1930s were destroyed in WWII during the bombardments of the capital Sofia and are known only by descriptions and reproductions. Only the legacy of Pencho Balkanski⁶ is preserved, although it is not accessible to the public. The fact that in





Bulgaria there is neither a museum of photography nor a permanent photographic collection creates serious problems. Even the few authors with a personal style, who introduced new technical and aesthetic ideas in Bulgarian photography, remain unknown. There is no way for photography to meet the other arts, and no way to maintain continuity along the generations.

The main cause for the end of the development of pictorial photography and for the loss of the traces of many photographers and their works was the change of the political (and consequently the artistic) situation in the country after the end of WWII. In 1944, important changes took place in Bulgaria that determined the direction of its economic, social and cultural development in the coming decades. The socialist revolution in the country marked the beginning of the Communist regime. This was the beginning of a period of strong Soviet influence. The method of socialist realism was proclaimed as the only acceptable way in the development of all kinds of arts. Due to its technical nature, which makes the individuality of the photographer less recognisable than the individuality of the painter, photography was easily accepted in socialist society as a realistic technique. It was assumed that the camera can document the world truthfully, objectively, and impartially. Reportage photography was declared the only official genre in photography and the concepts of landscape, portrait, still life, etc. became rare and undesirable. The topics and aesthetics of pictorial photography were labelled “formalistic”. The pictorialists were made to either accept the new situation and start producing socialist photography (Georgi Georgiev), or to abandon photography and to find refuge in other arts (Boncho Karastoyanov turned to cinematography and Pencho Balkanski to

painting and graphics). Regardless of several stages of “thaw out” of the socialist regime – in 1956, in 1962, and in the 1970s – the return of Pictorialism in Bulgarian photography remained impossible. Only in the 1980s, the aesthetic influence of other socialist countries (mostly East Germany) and a number of internal political and cultural factors led to the reinstatement of the value of blurred images resembling watercolour, painting or graphics. The resemblance to Pictorialism was mostly formal – the motives of the photographers of this time had essentially no relation to the ideas of subtleness, authenticity, and symbolic richness. Therefore the techniques employed to achieve “pictorial” effects were also different – manipulations in the processing of negatives, use of old, defective films or highly sensitive films in order to achieve granularity, photography on paper negatives, rasterization, etc.

Only now are we witnessing the true return of Pictorialism and the “noble” processes in Bulgarian photography. More and more young photographers are turning to the history of this movement and becoming interested in its conceptual foundations and its links with literature, painting, and graphics. It is significant that exactly in the last years – for the first time in seven decades – exhibitions of noble prints took place – Georgi Georgiev and Modern Authors in 2009 and The Photography of Pencho Balkanski in 2010. Undoubtedly, of great importance for the revival of this interest are both the accessibility of the information and the possibility to travel and to become familiar with the photographic originals. But the most important factors are the development of digital photography (both in art and in everyday life), the accessibility of the photographic process, the striving for a perfect image, completely controlled by the human intention, clear of mistakes, coincidences, and



Veneta Zaharieva. *Until we meet again*. Cyanotype print, 2009.

Aleksandar Bogdanov. *Birds*. Salt print, 2008



secrets. A natural reaction to this is the appearance of small closed groups of artists who prefer live contact when sharing values and ideas and who have specific skills and profound knowledge in the history of photography. Most importantly, they are not afraid to confront the conservative and inflexible audience and are not afraid of the lack of understanding and appreciation of the manual photographic techniques by professional and gallery circles. Both the failure of the fragile

attempts in noble photographic techniques and the difficulty of achieving continuity between generations determine the complex situation of such alternative practices in Bulgaria. Despite the difficulties, the existence of the other, different experimental point of view, is important and necessary because it generates discussions, wakes up emotions, provokes passion, and does not allow some indifferent “whatever” to overcome both artists and spectators.

1. Pictorialism is an ideological and aesthetic movement in photography that originated in the late 19th century under the influence of Symbolism and Secession. It was a reaction to the simplification and the popularization of the photographic process. Pictorialists believed that only the subjective view and the creation of unique photographic works bearing a direct imprint of the photographer's hand can bring photography closer to the fine arts. Sharpness was considered an obstacle to the achievement of high artistic results and therefore professionals turned to various photographic processes such as gum bichromate, bromoil etc., which make photographic prints produce effects similar to watercolor, drawings or graphics.

2. The term *noble photographic processes* was borrowed from German and came into use in Bulgaria in the 1920s. Nowadays it is believed that it occurred in connection with the use of noble metals – silver or platinum, but it is more plausible that the naming was related to the pursuit of the pictorial photography to resemble paintings. The additional interventions “ennoble” the photographic image by removing its inherent sharpness and detailness and making it a unique work of art.

3. The Bulgarian Photo Club was established in 1920 at the initiative of Georgi Georgiev and with the help of his friends, amateur photographers, who were mostly members of the Sofia Aero Club. Its objectives were clearly defined in its first regulations: *to help amateur and professional photographers in the country monitor and discuss current photographic tendencies in Europe and worldwide, to participate in international photographic competitions and salons*. In 1922 the Bulgarian Photo Club organized the first semiannual photographic courses at the Sofia University. They conducted photographic field days outside the city of Sofia and carried out the first nude photographs. In 1938 the club members organized their first exhibition in Sofia. Later they took part in big international exhibitions in Paris, Munich and Zagreb as well.

4. Georgi Georgiev (1881-1959) was a second-generation photographer, longstanding head and honorary chairman of the Bulgarian Photo Club. He authored both small and extensive works on the theory and practice of photography, initiated the creation of the State College of Cinematography and Photography, served as its director and teacher and organized the first national exhibition of artistic photography. Up to the middle of the 20th century he worked entirely in the field of noble photographic processes.

5. Boncho Karastoyanov (1899-1962) was a third generation photographer – son of Dimitar Karastoyanov and grandson of Anastas Karastoyanov. In 1920 he studied photochemistry in Berlin and was trained in one of the biggest photo studios there. In 1925 he went to Paris where he worked as a photographer. In 1927 he returned to Bulgaria and became a member of the Bulgarian Photo Club. He worked in the field of studio photography and noble photographic processes.

6. Pencho Balkanski (1908-1985) was a photographer and artist. He attended courses in painting and sculpture at the Academy of Arts in Sofia. He owned the famous *Luna* Photo Studio in Sofia. His photographs have the tinge of graphics. Pencho Balkanski worked in the field of noble photographic processes and in mixed techniques. He exhibited in Belgrade, Vienna and Zagreb. In the second half of the 20th century, he worked in lithography, monotype and painting.