

**Sigrid Faltin: Die Baronesse und das Guggenheim. Hilla von Rebay, eine deutsche Künstlerin in New York;** Langwil: Libelle Verlag 2005; ISBN 3-909081-45-2, € 23,80

From cover to cover Sigrid Faltin's biography of the German artist Hilla von Rebay reads like an engrossing novel. Thematically the story of a German general's daughter who emigrated to New York in the year 1927 is like a sequel to Faltin's doctoral dissertation dealing with German emigrants to the United States. The actual merits of Faltin's heroine lie in her unremitting commitment to the vision of a „temple of non-objective art“. Without Hilla von Rebay there would be no Guggenheim Museum.

The long incubation period of this museum was about two decades. It began with America's „copper king“ Samuel R. Guggenheim retaining a flamboyant and charming German portraitist. After a few sittings the ageing gentleman began to prick up his ears. A new age of fine art was dawning, he was told, and the hallmark of the future would be non-objective painting. Guggenheim decided to rise to the occasion and to expand his own collection accordingly. It was his pleasure to take the advice of this eccentric German baronesse who obviously knew the ropes and was still well connected with the European avant-garde. By this route many a fine piece of contemporary art were added to the Guggenheim collection, mostly at bargain prices, with a noticeable preference for Kandinsky.

In 1937 Guggenheim's private collection was legally turned into a foundation and housed in comparatively modest premises meant to serve as a temporary half-way house and styled „Museum of Non-objective Art“. The principal actors in this venture were Samuel Guggenheim, his confidant Hilla in her role as curator and a character with the name of Rudolf Bauer, Hilla's erstwhile lover, who was assigned the role of Guggenheim's European agent and purchasing manager. After the Great Depression and the Second World War the time had come to search for an architect who would be up to the task of realizing the trio's vision. The short list included names such as Grotius and Mies van der Rohe, but it was America's celebrity Frank Lloyd Wright who eventually embarked on this rather unusual and bold architectural venture. As we may recall, the Guggenheim Museum looks like a snail shell turned upside-down so as to stand on its top, without any windows and instead of stairs a kind of ramp winding its way like the thread of a screw to higher and higher spheres of the sublime.

Guggenheim and Wright had already passed away when the edifice opened its doors to the public in 1959. The third conspicuous absentee was Miss Rebay to whom no invitation had been extended. After the death of her friend „Guggi“ she had fallen into disgrace with some members of the Guggenheim clan. Of course, there were intrigues and minor scandals in abundance, but perhaps more damaging was Rebay's administrative incompetence, which Faltin does not fail to point out. There were also grounds for taking exception to the liberal amassing of works by Rudolf Bauer, a not quite successful emulator of Kandinsky. At best her obstinate preference for this lesser talent may be pardoned as an error of judgement.

The declared purpose of Faltin's study is the rehabilitation of Hilla von Rebay. An extraordinary lady certainly she was, an artist in her own right, dashing through New York's bohemian scene like a „whirlwind“ (Faltin), admired and envied as the „Queen of Art“, unbearably arrogant at times and yet capable of exuding genuine feelings of empathy and compassion, always ready to give needy talents a leg-up: Léger, Chagall, Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy figured prominently at the receiving end of her or in fact Guggenheim's patronage.

The relationship between Rebay and Bauer, a story about lovers turned business partners, is likely to attract the attention of historians. Although occasionally a bit anecdotal and gossipy this novel-like narrative reports significant episodes, which historians may appreciate as being at least illustrative. Take the year 1916 as an example: Baron von Rebay, Commanding Officer of an artillery brigade, was seeing action in the battle of Verdun while his daughter Hilla was making a splash as a dedicated Dadaist in Zürich. Or 1938: After having played up to the National Socialist cultural bigwigs, former „armchair Bolshevik“ Rudolf Bauer, now self-styled „intellectual aristocrat“, found himself ostracized as a „degenerate artist“ and was awaiting his transfer to a concentration camp; eventually he was released thanks to the intercession of Hilla's brother, a middle-ranking SA-functionary; a handful of American dollars might have helped as well. In the nick of time he managed to cross the Atlantic. Once more Guggenheim proved to be no miser. He provided Bauer, whom Rebay kept praising as the „Johannes Sebastian Bach“ of modern art, with a posh villa and expensive cars although it began to dawn on him that he was enjoying an embarrassing monopoly as an investor in the works of his still frustrated and not particularly grateful protégé.

PETER STINGELIN

Basel

**Theo Bergenthal, Joachim Stracke (Eds.): Emil Cimiotti;** Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag 2005; 300 p.; ca. 200 ill.; ISBN 978-3-936-636-54-3; € 48,00

In 1974, the German art historian and ex-director of the Dusseldorf Art Academy, Eduard Trier, coined the term „Informelle Plastik“ (sculpture of Informel) and in doing so gave theoretical grounding to what had been previously visible in several exhibitions: the parallels between the formal vocabulary of European abstract painters and European abstract sculptors.<sup>1</sup> The elements of the so called „Informel“ art movement in Europe after the Second World War, spontaneity, structured patterns, and emphasis on painting as „action“, could also be found in the abstract sculptures of the period. With his concise book on Modern sculpture titled „Moderne Plastik von

1 In 1974, Eduard Trier used the term „informelle Plastik“ in a series of lectures on sculpture of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, see: KATJA BLOMBERG: Zur Plastik des Informel in Deutschland, in: *Plastische Erkenntnis und Verantwortung. Studien zur Skulptur und Plastik nach 1945; Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 23 (1993), 43–54, here especially: 43, Footnote 4.