

Petr Kitzler

From Královské Vinohrady Around The World And Back : Life and work of the painter Josef Kitzler

ANNOTATION

The following article is the first more detailed up to date text dedicated to the academic painter Josef Kitzler (1891–1965?), born in Královské Vinohrady, who spent many years of his life travelling, working and exhibiting in a number of European, American and African cities. Today an almost forgotten artist, painter and illustrator, his work generally belonged to the broader stream of classical modernism of the First Czechoslovak Republic. However, Kitzler's paintings inspired by his repeated stays in South Africa, often depicting local natives as well as lush exotic vegetation, thematically significantly diverge from the main stream and do not lose on attraction even today. This article cannot contain complex art historical analysis of Kitzler's work or a relevant evaluation of his place in interwar Czechoslovak art. The aim is, for the first time, to factually fill in at least some blank spaces in the life story of Josef Kitzler, with the help of newly discovered or revised information, and on the basis of contemporary reviews to expound how his work was accepted in interwar Czechoslovakia. Attached coloured plates represent the range of his paintings, which are kept in private collections, with only two exceptions according to current findings.

SUMMARY

Academic painter, draughtsman and illustrator Josef Kitzler (* November 26, 1891 Královské Vinohrady – † 1965?) belongs to artists about whom we lacked even the most basic information until recently. The only information were few lines in Toman's *New Dictionary of Czechoslovak Visual Artists*, mentioning Kitzler's studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, his exhibitions in Switzerland, London and South Africa, as well as the Prague exhibition in 1938, where Kitzler exhibited paintings inspired by his South African sojourns (TOMAN 1993, 486). After many decades, Ivo HABÁN (2015) was the first to try to at least partially fill this information vacuum in his study, presenting three German-speaking artists, including Josef Kitzler. Their exhibitions held in the 1920s and 1930s displayed to the Czechoslovak audience their work depicting exotic overseas locations, the local culture and inhabitants. Habán was also the first to review two of Kitzler's letters stored in the Archives of the National Gallery in Prague (ANG MG) as well as other contemporary archival evidence, on the basis of which he was able to provide more detailed information about the painter's stays abroad as well as his work and exhibitions. He reprinted three of Kitzler's paintings with South African themes and also drew attention to Kitzler's only painting known to him in Czech public institutions, *Transkei boy*, deposited in the Klatovy/Klenová Gallery (fig. 11).

The present text significantly expands Habán's findings, and fills in a number of hitherto blank spaces in Kitzler's life story, although many of its essential moments and connections remain unknown due to the lack of preserved sources. The first significant new finding is the fact that Josef Kitzler came from a Czech, not a German-Czech family (his father Karel, himself an academic painter, was, among other things, a member of the Vinohrady municipal council and other municipal bodies) and, despite his studies at the prestigious Munich Academy, he remained firmly connected with the Czech cultural environment at least in the 1920s. In the time of the First World War he was friends with Václav Špála, in 1918 Karel Teige mentions him as a possible collaborator of the planned, unrealized *Praha* magazine, and from 1918 he is listed as a member of Mánes Association of Graphic Artists (S. V. U. Mánes), with which he also exhibited. Partially documented was also his illustration collaboration with various Czech periodicals, especially with the humorous *Smích republiky* (*Laughter of the Republic*), for which he created several dozens brilliantly executed full-page drawings, often placed on the cover.

Discovered were circumstances of his travels in the 1920s and 1930s: his first trip to Johannesburg in 1921, where he exhibited in 1922 and left for New York the same year. Much attention is subsequently paid to his two large exhibitions in Prague in 1937 and 1938, for which a number of reviews in the contemporary press was found, also reproduced in the article. On the other hand, Josef Kitzler's extremely interesting ties to the German-speaking cultural environment of Prague, which Ivo Habán had already discovered, remain unexplained: despite his Czech origin, Josef Kitzler communicated in 1935 with the German curatorial department of the Modern Gallery in Prague about the possible purchase of his paintings. Around the same time he was applying apparently for a scholarship to the German Society of Sciences and Art (later the German Academy of Sciences in Prague), and in 1941 the contemporary press even ranked him among "German artists". Whether this penetration of his into the German

environment was politically motivated and could even lead to Kitzler's later collaboration under the protectorate, which would partly explain the almost complete absence of information about his person after the Second World War, cannot be decided due to the state of the preserved evidence.

The text also significantly expands our knowledge of Kitzler's paintings known today, the number of which can be estimated at roughly thirty or forty. The coloured plates reproduce a total of twenty one Kitzler's paintings, mostly oils, as well as three of his drawings for the First Republic magazine *Smích republiky*. They are mostly published for the first time and the themes of South Africa predominate. Above all, another previously unknown painting by Kitzler was newly discovered, which is now in the possession of the Regional Museum in Vysoké Mýto (*Coast near Port Elizabeth*, fig. 19). Finally new information was revealed about the end of the artist's life, and with a certain degree of probability it can now be concluded that Josef Kitzler died in 1965 and is buried at the Olšany Cemetery in Prague.

Fig. 1. Painters Václav Špála (left) and Josef Kitzler (centre) and dancer of the Municipal Theatre in Vinohrady Joe (Josef) Jenčík on the Hungarian front in 1916 (unknown photographer, taken from *sine* 1916).

Fig. 2. Josef Kitzler, 1913: *Cows with a wagon*. Oil on cardboard, 44 × 58 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 3. Josef Kitzler, about 1918: *Bath*. Chalk, 40 × 32 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 4. Josef Kitzler, about 1910–1920: *Snake Girl*. Oil on plywood, 63.5 × 47cm; on the back, an exhibition label from Topič salon with the date 1944 (Jennmaur Gallery, San Francisco CA, USA, sign. HY61; available at <<https://www.jennmaur.com/pasubjectindex/paartistpages/KITZLERfeaturedartistpage2.htm>> [vid. 2022-08-30]).

Fig. 5. Josef Kitzler, 1920: *Memories of Prague*. Signed "Jos Kitzler London 20". Attached anecdotal text in Czech and Croatian: "Áda: 'Have you ever been to the National Assembly? It's terrible how many of those deputies are bald!' – Žofi: 'Don't be surprised, it can't be any other way when they keep having a brush with each other!'" (adapted from KITZLER 1921a).

Fig. 6. Josef Kitzler, about 1920: *Higher culture*. Signed "Jos Kitzler Mlnncols [?] South Africa". Attached anecdotal original text next to the picture (adapted from KITZLER 1921b).

Fig. 7. Josef Kitzler, 1920: *Social gossip*. Signed "Jos Kitzler London 20". Attached anecdotal original text next to the picture (adapted from KITZLER 1921c).

Fig. 8. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *African motif (A)*. Oil on plywood, 56 × 48 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 9. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Motif from Africa (B)*. Oil on plywood, 65 × 48 cm (private collection of the author; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 10. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *In the Jungle (A)*. Oil on cardboard, 44 × 35 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 11. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Transkei [sic] boy*. Oil on canvas, 31.5 × 33.5 cm (© Galerie Klatovy/Klenová, inv. no. O 62).

Fig. 12. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Black woman*. Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 13. Josef Kitzler, 1937: *In the Jungle (B)*. Oil on plywood, 58 × 49 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 14. Josef Kitzler, 1935: *Rest under the palm trees (Port Elizabeth)*. Oil on canvas, 91 × 37 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 15. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s / before 1922?: *Spaniard [Spanish Dancer?]*. Oil on panel, 41.5 × 39 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 16. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Dancer*. Oil on cardboard, 44 × 36 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 17. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Port*. Oil on cardboard, 45 × 37 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 18. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Port (Loading)*. Oil on plywood, 71 × 100 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 19. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Coast near Port Elizabeth*. Oil on canvas, 38 × 30 cm (© Regional Museum in Vysoké Mýto, inv. no. 19A-818).

Fig. 20. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Clouds in Cape Town*. Oil on canvas, 50.5 × 40 cm (private collection of the author; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 21. Josef Kitzler, 1940s?: *Port (Tankers in front of city silhouette)*. Oil on canvas, 75 × 40.5 cm, signed "J. Kitzler-Ivenet", dated by HannoVerum auction house (private collection; adapted from *sine* 2015b online).

Fig. 22. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Ballerinas*. Oil on plywood, 50 × 39.5 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 23. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *Village*. Oil on plywood, 23 × 23 cm (private collection of the author; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 24. Josef Kitzler, 1947?: *Cottages in winter*. Oil on cardboard, 40 × 48 cm (private collection of the author; photo archive of the author).

Fig. 25. Josef Kitzler, 1920s or 1930s: *View of Lipnice nad Sázavou Castle*. Oil on plywood, 23 × 23 cm (private collection; photo archive of the author).

Translation by Linda Foster