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**The Austrian Artist Maria
Biljan-Bilger (1912-1997).
On the 100th Anniversary of her
Birth, 21st January 1912**

Alice Reininger
Lecturer
University of Applied Arts Vienna
Austria

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
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An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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Abstract

Maria Biljan-Bilger was one of those strong innovative characters who worked tirelessly and creatively in the background. She lived simply, demonstrating kindness and generosity to her fellow humans, and left behind a tremendous body of work. She was not only a painter but also a sculptor, graphic designer, worked with ceramics and created large textile works. She displayed great sensitivity and feeling to both material and technique. Her works convey a sense of humour and fun and are original creations in colour and form.

She was a founding member of the Austrian representation of the International Arts Club which emerged in Vienna after 1945, took part in many international exhibitions, and for many years managed the Sculptor Symposium in St. Margarethen in Burgenland. Maria Biljan-Bilger also led the master class for ceramics at what is now the University for Applied Arts in Vienna. She was presented with many awards for her artistic endeavours.

The artist was born in Radstadt on 21st January 1912. The father was a potter and the mother came from a family of barrel makers. Shortly after her birth the family moved to Graz where her father opened a workshop and became self-employed. He was a great influence on his daughter Maria. In 1962 Maria acquired a former chapel in Sommerein in Lower Austria, which was in need of repair. She transformed this into a home and workshop for herself. After her death in 1997 her husband Friedrich Kurrent's architectural plans were taken and an exhibition hall for her works was constructed out of this home and opened in 2004.

In my lecture I wish to discuss the importance of this artist, who because she did not work for the commercial market (a fact of which she was proud of) has unfortunately today been mostly forgotten.

Contact Information of Corresponding author:

*In my daydreams I wander around a country garden, between stone walls bearing tablets of clay and brick, pillars and recesses, the floor a puzzle of clay and stone pieces entwined together by meadow flower The stones from the quarry and the cobalt blue, rusty red and the manganese black painted objects fired in the kiln could serve to encapsulate the surrounding animal and plant life into the complete picture.
.....Swarms of birds threading their way through the sky falcons on the hunt owls sweeping by with a silent beat of their wings thick stemmed thistles with their funnel shaped violet blue scoops, flowers in their thousand pleated forms bushes blossoming above all of this that fiery red ball of the sun.....¹*

This passage is from Maria Biljan-Bilger from her writings 'Bemerkungen zu meinem Leben' ('Notes on my life').

Maria Biljan-Bilger was one of those strong and original characters who worked tirelessly and creatively in the background. She lived humbly and simply, had a hugely generous spirit towards her fellow human beings, and left behind a tremendous body of work. She worked with ceramics, was a sculptor and graphic designer and created great works with textiles. Her art conveys, naivety, charm, humour and fun, and are original in their colour and form.

The artist was born on 21st January 1912 in Radstadt, a small town in the province of Salzburg, at a time when the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was still intact, albeit showing signs of disintegrating. She was the youngest daughter of a potter and stove setter. Her father originally came from the Lika, a province in what is today Croatia. Her mother came from a barrel making family from Slovenia. They were a typical family from the multi cultural states which made up the Austrian Empire at the beginning of the 20th Century. The father was a great influence on his daughter, she compared him to an eagle whose great wings spread wide and whose eyes never missed a thing. Daniel Bilger was an extraordinary man who had a burning interest in life and the questions the world would throw out. Maria would later often tell of how he was involved in his researches and his inventions. In several of her graphic works she commemorated him by setting an eagle in the central point.

Soon after her birth the family moved to Graz where Maria later started school with her elder sister. The father ran his own potter and stove setting workshop here in Graz and Maria spent a lot of her time here. At the age of 15 Maria went to the School of Applied Arts on Ortweinplatz, where she joined the department for ceramics. Here Maria, coming from a working class family, would make the acquaintance of a circle of young people who came from a more upper social class than herself. At the age of 21 she married Ferdinand Bilger a lecturer from the

¹Biljan-Bilger, Maria (1987). 'Bemerkungen zu meinem Leben.' In: F. Kurrent (ed), Maria Biljan-Bilger. Keramik-Plastik-Textil. 6-18, Salzburg: Verlag Galerie Welz, p. 6

department of Chemistry at the University of Graz. Her first child, a boy, died in tragic circumstances, this almost led to a breakdown for Maria.

The young couple were closely connected with the intellectual scene in Graz. Artists, writers and scientists regularly passed through their house, and these people had a clear standing and opposition to the growing strength of the National-Socialists. One could foresee the terror that the future would bring, and when the Spanish Civil war broke out in 1936, Ferdinand Bilger quit his post at the University and went to Spain with many of his friends as a freedom fighter. Maria wanted to go with him, but her entry into the country was refused on the grounds that she had no proof of medical training.

Austria was annexed to Germany Maria Biljan-Bilger did not try to get recognised as an artist by the Third Reich's Cultural Office. Instead she promptly left Graz and went underground in Vienna as a relief assistant. She found work in a small ceramic firm, and in the Karlsgasse near the Charles Church, she found an atelier. Reflecting on this time, she said

At that time there was continuous talking and vague muddled opinions about the daily occurrences, unconscious tendencies to fascist thinking and disguised anti-semitism. I moved into my own atelier in the Karlsgasse. This way I could escape the changing atmosphere which followed each time after news of war victories.¹

Through an Italian student at the Arts Academy on Schiller Platz in Vienna, she found out about a labour camp for foreigners, where Italians were interred and forced to work. She helped two young people - a 15 year old girl and a young man (Wander Bertoni, who later became an internationally recognised sculptor) to escape, and she hid them in her apartment. The girl managed to return to Italy, and the young man stayed in Vienna. During the last days of the war Maria and Wander fled to Upper Austria and found refuge on a farm. Wander Bertoni, with the help of the Red Cross returned to Italy and Maria returned to her atelier in Vienna.

Despite the difficult circumstances of life after the war, with the daily fight to survive, the artist was full of optimism and energy and ready to start living again. Maria said of this time '*Vienna blossomed despite the bombed out houses*'. In 1946/47 she became a founding member of the Austrian Arts Club, a platform for painters, sculptors, writers and musicians. The first exhibition was organised. From Paris Maria received oxides and glazes organised by Maurice Besset who was manager of the French Cultural Institute in Vienna and who greatly admired her work. In a kiln in a workshop in the Prater she fired small ceramic figures. The sculptor Fritz Wotruba and his wife returned from exile in Switzerland to Vienna (he was given an appointment at the Arts Academy on Schiller Platz) and a growing circle of artists developed around him '*... one was often invited to dine and the air was filled with animated conversation and ideas. My life began to flow*

¹ *ibid.*, p. 8

*from all sides.*¹ wrote Maria in her 'Bemerkungen'. Wander Bertoni also returned to Vienna and began to study with Wotruba.

In 1950 Maria gave birth to her daughter Daniela. The father of her child was Peter Perz, a painter and graphic designer whom she later married. The marriage did not, however, last long. There followed years of intensive work with clay, stone and textiles with many contracts for the public. The local government of Vienna and private institutions such as f. e. Bank Austria (now known as Unicredit) were among those who sought her work. Despite the varying lines of work Maria Biljan-Bilger remained true to her principles. She did not work or produce for the art market. She was proud to be independent and working independently. In the 1950's she took part in international exhibitions presenting her works at exhibitions in places such as Venice in 1954, several times in Milan, the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1958, and in Sao Paulo in 1959.

In a technical ceramics factory in Vienna Maria found the possibility to complete large ceramic objects. The factory produced high grade stone material, acid tubs and drains and waste pipes, as well as clinker bricks. She was able to manage this work by using pre formed objects around her that the factory offered, and she then re-modelled them. Using a hard brush, she painted the engobe colours onto the bits and pieces of material, and then set on the handles and base and neck of the objects she was making. The finished receptacles were then transported to large rooms where they would be fired on coal heated kilns. It was exhausting work and took its toll on her health but for all the pains it took, the finished pieces were worth it.

At the beginning of the 1960's, while looking for a suitable workshop, Maria came across a run down, former chapel in the small village of Sommerein in Lower Austria. It stood at the edge of a stone quarry that was not used anymore. She purchased the building which was listed as a protected monument. Together with her new partner, the architect Friedrich Kurrent, they adapted it into a home for themselves and a workshop for Maria. She now had environment to work in where she could spread her creative wings. The house was open to artists, writers and musicians who filled many a day or evening with animated conversation.

During this time she was invited to the yearly Symposium in St. Margarethner Steinbruch in Burgenland in Austria. The first large sculpture work, her first sandstone painted with colours, called 'Creation of the World', was completed. During sculptor symposiums in Oggelshausen (Germany), Tivoli near Rome, or Labin in the Istria, Maria worked with materials such as sandstone or travertine (a form of limestone). From 1969 until the mid 1980's Maria took over the management role of the Sculptors Symposium of St. Margarethen in Burgenland. There followed collaborative work with many international artists especially those from former east block countries such as Poland, Romania, ex- Yugoslavia and Czech Republic.

¹ *ibid.*, p. 10

Maria Biljan-Bilger organised meeting with artists in Tirgu Jiu in Romania. These took place around the 'Table of Silence' by Brancusi. The talks that were led by the artists at these meetings revealed a unity of thought and ideas amongst them and reinforced how important it was re-awaken and carry on with sculptor symposiums. The meetings were recorded on film by the director Robert Dornhelm. The talks also encouraged the idea to participate in municipal works as well. The project to re-design the Saint Stephen's Square in Vienna in preparation for the new underground station did however fail, due firstly to the slow negotiations with the city council, and to the disagreements between the artists themselves. Maria Biljan-Bilger was one of those involved in this project. She planned a large fountain in the square and the new paving stones for the ground in front of the cathedral.

In 1978 Oswald Oberhuber, rector of the Advanced School for Applied Arts in Vienna (now known as the University of Applied Arts Vienna) appointed Maria as professor and head of the master class for ceramics and production design. For four years she led this master class on the Stubenring. She was fully committed to her students, organising exhibitions and excursions. She was relieved of her post in 1982 on the grounds of her age. Her replacement was the Italian designer and architect Matteo Thun-Hohenstein. Today the master class in ceramics and production design no longer exists. It was turned into an open studio for all students.

In 1985 she married her long time partner Friedrich Kurrent, a man much younger than herself, and professor at the technical University in Munich. Maria, undeterred, carried on working and bringing to life her ideas, There followed huge figures and forms, pillars, graphic works and the design of a mountain chapel in Ramingstein in Salzburg.

In the years towards the end of her life she saw the foundations laid to the exhibition hall to be known as the 'Maria Biljan-Bilger Exhibition Hall Sommerein' which her husband Friedrich Kurrent, designed for her and which was to be annexed to her home.

In 1995 Maria had a stroke which resulted in the paralysis of her left side and ended her work as an artist. She spent the last two years of her life in a nursing home in Munich where she died on 1st May 1997. She was buried a few days later in the local cemetery in Sommerein. The memorial put on her grave was a sandstone that she herself produced in the 1960's. The exhibition hall was opened in Sommerein on 1st May 2004.

In the autumn of 2006 I began to work my way through the artists' estate in Sommerein and to build up a depot. Two of the rooms in her former atelier were converted into an archive. Thanks to generous grants from the government of Lower Austria I was able to purchase the necessary furniture to store things. Unfortunately in the preceding years number of works were irretrievably destroyed by careless storage, and water and damp resulted in mould damage. The rest however could be maintained through 'emergency rescue'. Here it must be noted that some of the artists' works which were purchased by the Austrian Republic,

have over the years, disappeared out of the hands of the buyers. The private society 'Freunde der Maria Biljan-Bilger Ausstellungshalle Sommerein' (Friends of the Maria Biljan-Bilger Exhibition Hall Sommerein) manages the costs of running the exhibition hall through donations and membership fees and also manages smaller acquisitions for the depot there. There would be a lot more to do, but unfortunately, it must be said, there is not only a lack of money but also a lack of understanding from the owner of the hall.

The 21st January 2012 was the centenary of the birth of Maria Biljan-Bilger. Written requests to those in authority and to various cultural studios saw no response to this event. In neither the Austrian television nor in the newspapers was there any reference to this great Austrian artist. Maria Biljan-Bilger has simply been forgotten. Nobody showed any interest in making a short report about her, despite there being enough material about her in the archives of Austrian Radio and Television. There do exist enough interviews, films and radio material which just needed to be re-worked and used to create a small report. Also in the art scene itself Maria Biljan-Bilger has been forgotten. Amongst the younger generation of artists, critics, art traders and art historians her name results in the shrugging of shoulders and shaking of heads.

The publication of 'Maria Biljan-Bilger' which is to be publicly presented on 1st July 2012 in Sommerein will hardly do much to publicise her name widely or preserve her memory. Only a small group of admirers who gather every year on 1st May in Sommerein to open the exhibition hall manage to keep the memory of this great artist alive. Only a small number of visitors manage to stumble and find their way into the exhibition hall in Sommerein during the months of May to October, and find themselves looking at the works of Maria Biljan-Bilger.

Supply and demand steer the art market, as much as trends. Artists who hesitate to work according to the conditions of this speculative and heady market find themselves written off. It is completely irrelevant what sort of quality their work shows, and this is reflected in the price put on a piece of work produced.

Maria Biljan-Bilger belongs to that first group of sculptors and artists to rise after the re-birth of Austria in 1945. Her work is distinguished by their magnificent colours. They are fresh and warm-hearted clay figures and forms. The art historian Wieland Schmied referred to her as the 'Grand Dame' of Austrian small figure forming. There is an intense connection between form and colour. The expressive interpretation and representation of her work encompass the innocence, fun, cheeriness and charm of folk art. Her works express the archaic. All her works whether they be in clay or stone, glass, textile or graphics are marked out with a naturalness and a matter of fact. Maria Biljan-Bilger made no compromises, neither in her life nor in her work

Translated by Tracey Bernhard, Vienna, Austria

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Wallcarpet (1956), multicoloured lamb's fur, in front: the artist Maria Biljan-Bilger.

H 240 cm x W 240 cm. Maria Biljan-Bilger Exhibition Hall, Sommerein, Lower Austria.

Photograph: Photo-archive at the Austrian National Library, Vienna, Austria



Meander (1959), Wall decoration made of plaster, and smalt and natural stone.

H 2,90 m x L 34 m.

Location: North foyer of the Stadthalle, 1150 Vienna, Austria

Photograph: Margeritha Spillutini, Vienna



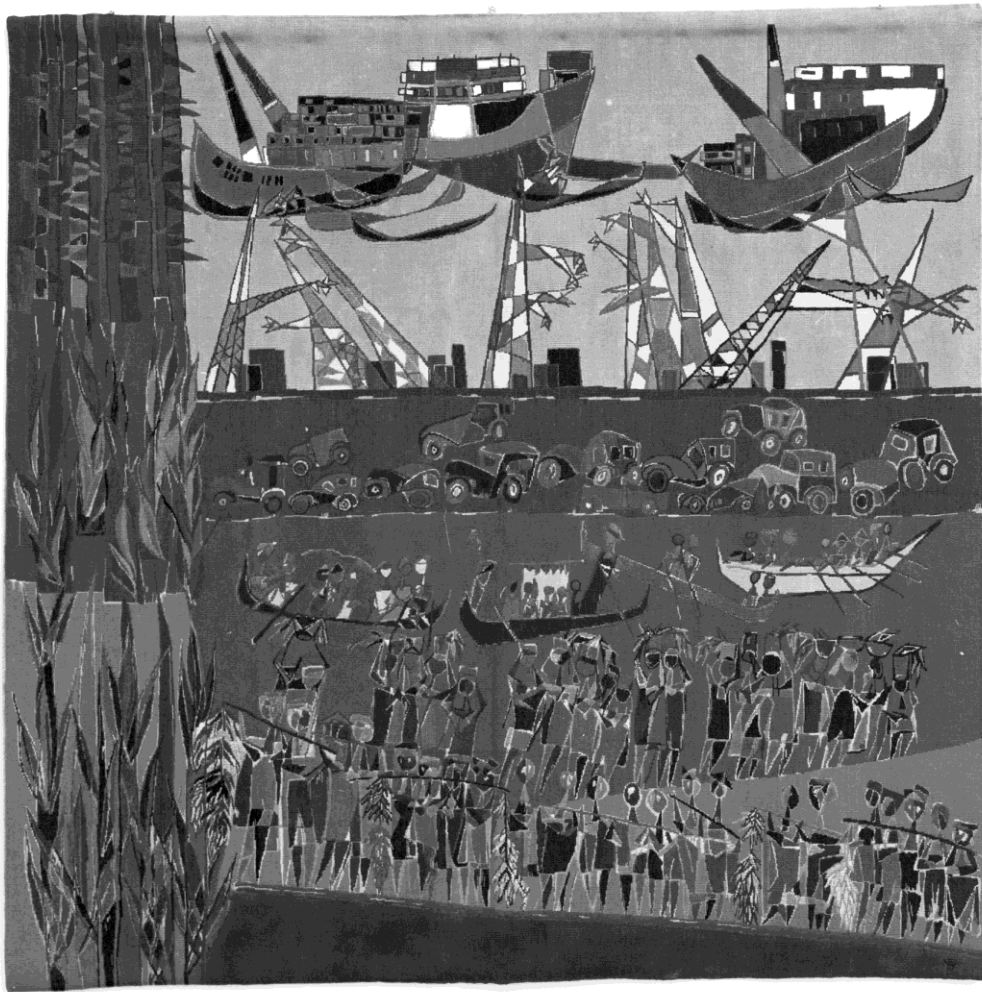
Mother with two children. Bronze figure (1973/74), Casting: Lipovsek, Vienna.
H 240 cm x W 280 cm. Original location at The Child's Town, Vienna, Austria.
Current location: Sommerein, Lower Austria
Photograph: Maria Biljan-Bilger Exhibition Hall Sommerein, Sommerein, Lower Austria



Leather Application (1971), inlaid and applied goats' leather.
H 204 cm x 204 cm. Commissioned by the Austrian State Ministry for
Education and Art. Owner: Artothek of the Austrian Federal Government.
Photograph: Maria Biljan-Bilger Exhibition Hall Sommerein, Sommerein,
Lower Austria



,'Godess of Fertility' (1980), Stoneware, slip painted, completed in two parts.
Lower part: H 71 cm, 58 cm ø, upper part: H 130 cm



Transportation of Exotic Plants (1953), Gobelintapestry.
H 200 cm x W 200 cm, woven by the Viennese Gobelintapestry Manufactures.
Owner: Museum for Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria



Three Norns (around 1980), Stone ware, slip painted. Total width: 150 cm, H 117 cm. Location: Maria Biljan-Bilger Exhibition Hall Sommerein, Sommerein, Lower Austria.

Photograph: Maria Biljan-Bilger Exhibition Hall Sommerein, Sommerein, Lower Austria.