The Dawn Drawings of Anna Zemankova

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Anna Zemánková (1), née Veselá, was born August 23, 1908 in Olomouc, Moravia. Although interested in drawing from a young age, she was discouraged by her father, a hairdresser, who wanted her to follow a more lucrative career. At his suggestion, she studied dentistry from 1923-26 and then worked as a dental technician until 1933. At age 25, she married First Lieutenant Bohumir Zemanek and stopped practicing; in those days it was not socially acceptable for her to continue to work after her marriage. The young couple moved to the town of Brno, a major manufacturing center, and had four children. Although one son died at age four, two sons and one daughter are still living.

The war years, with the Nazi occupation, were difficult; by 1948, with the Communists in firm control, the Zemaneks moved to Prague. Anna spent her time caring for her family, generally ignoring the external political turmoil. Her passions were listening to classical music and reading; she preferred mysteries and, above all, the von Daniken books about aliens visiting earth. During the 1950s, as she approached menopause, her personality changed: she began to have ‘fits’ and periods of severe depression. In 1960, her son Bohumil, an artist, suggested that she should try a hobby to take her mind off her troubles and refocus her energies now that her

1. My deepest appreciation to Shari Cavin and Randall Morris for their assistance and support during the writing of this essay.
Jo Farb Hernandez examines Zemankova's unique and mysterious works, all produced in the peace and solitude of the early hours.

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children were grown. Knowing she lacked art training, yet remembering reports of an earlier interest, (2) he brought her pastels and paints. She ignored the latter, but began drawing, and immediately impressed him with her efforts. He encouraged her, and brought her quality materials with which to work.

Zemankova went to bed very early each evening, awakening at around 4 a.m. in order to draw. She would begin by setting up, in the kitchen or living room, a special diagonally-mounted drawing table that her son made for her. After completing her work each day by 7 a.m., she dismantled it and re-arranged the room to its regular state.

Family members characterized her as a 'normal mother and housewife' who spent all day caring and 'doing' for them; night was the only time she could concentrate and 'be at peace.' (3)

Zemankova focused on one drawing at a time, often completing it in one sitting, although occasionally she would enhance or elaborate upon a finished piece at a later date. Her favorite work was always the one she had just completed, and she was excited by the process even more than by the product: 'by the next day she forgot about the finished one, and was already working on the next one.' (4)

It has been said that she worked in a condition of trance or exaltation, heightened

2. She apparently attempted some landscape paintings in the 1930s, although none of these are known to be extant. Jiri Vykoukal, Pani Zemankov (Cheb, Czechoslovakia: Galerie Vytvoreho Umeni v Chebu, 1990).


4. Ibid. This focus on process is also symptomatic of the work of schizophrenics or those suffering from other mental illnesses.
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by listening to classical music, a ritual that served to ‘transport’ her from the routine circumstances of her rather ordinary daily life. She rarely had preconceived ideas about the form her work would take, and implied that she was merely a conduit for its inspired expression: ‘[There was] no need to reflect or to erase, the drawing drew itself in a very delightful manner. Everything went by itself. In getting up this morning, I knew only that today I would draw in purple.’ (5)

Statements such as this have led certain commentators to speculate on the existence of ‘creator spirits’ which guided Zemánková’s hand, (6) and have classified her work as ‘mediumistic.’ The less visionary family members reject such speculation, however, and insist that the critics formulated this theory in an attempt to romanticize Zemánková’s oeuvre. (7) In fact, the state of concentration characterizing her work-periods is not alien to any truly inspired artist, who may slip into a semi-unconscious state as s/he succumbs to the force of the creative process. (8) Similarly, Zemánková’s ability to move back and forth from her ‘world’ of aesthetic realization to the real world of being a housewife is not inconsistent with the necessary functioning of numerous other serious artists who have regular constraints on their time—from Minnie Evans to contemporary artists who must support themselves by waitressing or driving a cab.

Intriguing synchronicities exist between the mode and manner of Zemánková’s work and that evidenced by more mainstream, academically-trained artists who explored aspects of Spiritualism. Around the turn of the century and into the early 1900s, numerous artists and intellectuals investigating such burgeoning fields as theosophy, the occult, suprematism, and anthroposophy flourished in those regions now included in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Zemánková’s drawings appear to correlate with certain creative manifestations of concepts such as synesthesia, in which senses were believed to be intermingled such that, for example, musical tones could produce visual results. (9) or the ideas of the theosophists that the ‘essence of nature was manifested as a rhythmic geometric force.’ (10) Although an educated woman, it is unclear how aware she was of those intellectual/aesthetic trends, or whether there might have been any direct connection between these concepts and her drawings.

Traditional folk art is also likely to have served as inspiration for Zemánková. She was clearly familiar with these traditions, and apparently even collected some examples of folk costumes. Her drawings reveal many elements in common with emboideries, paintings on church pews and doorposts, and ornamental ceramic glazes dating from the 18th-20th centuries; it is tempting to suggest that these intriguing parallels might have been the result of an internalized communal design sense. Zemánková’s own use of embroidery techniques on her later drawings further emphasizes this similarity. Any debt that she had to this cultural tradition was probably subconscious, however, as she reworked those motifs in a manner unfamiliar to and divergent from that tradition.

Zemánková never described herself as an artist, and, in fact, she sometimes appeared surprised and/or shocked by her

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7. ‘It is very likely,’ writes Roger Cardinal, ‘that the explanation of intervention on the part of spirit voices or supernatural forces amounts to an alibi invented as a defense against ridicule. If other people do not recognize the activity of artistic creation as legitimate, personal “inspiration” may escape this social stricture if its products can be attributed to a more distant agency.’ Outsider Art (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 30.

8. Modern art history is replete with reports of artists who have pursued this trance-like state: the Surrealists, for example, practiced automatism in which they deliberately attempted to effect their conscious selves in order to receive and transmit symbolic ideas emanating from the depths of their psyches; later artists delved heavily into psychotropic drugs in an effort to reach a state of subconsciousness.


10. Ibid., p. 36.
11. Interestingly, she was not included in the major international exhibition of naive art held in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1970; her work may have been too aggressive and not 'folksy' enough.


14. She also specifically verbalized her dislike of her son's sculptures because so many depicted nudes. Pavel Opocensky, telephone interview with author, March 23, 1994.

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own work. She was eager for recognition, however, so beginning in 1964 her son arranged an open house for her artwork every two years, inviting her friends and neighbors. She delighted in talking about her work to others, emphasizing the process of creation rather than the symbolism of or inspiration for her work, and she enjoyed the comments and compliments she received. Her first solo public exhibition, in 1965, was at a theatre in Prague, and after that she began to be included in exhibitions of 'naive' artists. (11)

In the mid-1960s Zemáneková developed diabetes; her legs became paralyzed, and were amputated in 1982-3. Nevertheless, she worked prolifically, creatively, and without interruption from 1960 until the amputation of her second leg, when her work began to decline in parallel with her health, three years prior to her death in 1986.

Her earliest drawings are flat and somewhat constructivist; after she became more facile with her media, she moved towards the biomorphic. Mid-career, she began to explore inventive techniques such as piercing (1969), intentionally crimping the paper (1971), and enhancing her drawings with textile techniques such as embroidery, silk applique, drawing or pointing on top of the collaged materials, and using beads (1973-75). In all periods, her gestures are precise, assured, and demonstrate striking skill. Throughout these years she was encouraged by her son; he and other friends contacted Jean Dubuffet, who purchased several pieces (now part of the collection of the Musee de l'Art Brut in Lousanne), and her work was also collected by the Outsider Archive in London and the Musee Art Brut L'Aracine.

“I am growing flowers that are not grown anywhere else,” Zemáneková stated. (12) That her images recall the familiar while diverging from it so thoroughly is one reason her works are so hauntingly evocative. Many of her images are presented floating in the middle of an otherwise blank page, in a style reminiscent of botanical illustrations of exotic species. Some works are vaguely anthropomorphic, others make obscure reference to insects, marine life, cellular forms, or other viscera. She had the ability to recast 'nature' into purely formalist motifs, while concomitantly allowing these forms to reference nature's often mystical side, a way of objectifying her apparent belief in a continuum which joined humans with other natural forms, including plants. (13)

The spontaneity of her manner of working is evidenced in dynamic, rhythmic forms, which often almost vibrate with the intensity and inner compulsion of her creativity. Stylized, detailed, and for the most part asymmetric, the lack of narrative content assures the viewer's focus on the works' formalist qualities. Many of her drawings appear to allude to fertility and fecundity, elements commonly implied by natural forms; however, she vehemently denied any suggestions of eroticism in her work. (14)

Although most of her images are benign, a few seem almost menacing, creating aesthetic tensions exacerbated by their other-worldliness.

We may never be able precisely to determine the sources of Anna Zemáneková's inspirations or obsessions, nor, perhaps is it of ultimate consequence. Although the initial impetus for her art may have been to relieve psychological or even physical distress, the compulsion with which she worked for over two decades reveals a unique and idiosyncratic expression that extends far beyond therapy into the realm of a pure, and visionary art.